

# Time to Love 1 — Weekend in Smallville

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Rated PG-13

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**Summary:** When Lois Lane is dispatched to Smallville, Kansas, she is confident it will not eventuate into anything other than a futile waste of her weekend. Then she meets Clark Kent.

A/N — This was the first story I posted on the Lois and Clark Fanfic Message Boards. I'd like to thank all those whose feedback helped make this a stronger story. Also my grateful thanks to IolantheAlias for doing such a wonderful job betaing this fic. And lastly, my sincere appreciation to Erin Klingler, the GE.

This is the first story in a series of six.

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The look on Perry White's face corroded a considerable hole in Lois Lane's good humour.

"It's a big story and I need my best reporter on it," he said.

Lois recognised the tone and tried to claw back some ground. "But Perry, it's ... it's ..." She scanned the brief he'd given her. "... Smallville. Smallville," she repeated with contempt. "Is it even in the known world?"

"No, it's in Kansas." Perry paused, waiting for her reaction to his joke. When it didn't come, he leant forward, undaunted, and tapped the side of his nose. "Apparently there was a very-hushed-up UFO sighting in Smallville in 1966," he said in a low, furtive tone.

Lois rolled her eyes. "That's not news, Perry, that's history."

"It might develop into news, Lois, and your career will be history if you don't get yourself to Smallville."

Lois could feel her plans for the weekend being sucked into the black hole that was Smallville, Kansas. "Perry," she said, trying to strike the delicate balance between reasonable and resolute, "You have a newsroom full of reporters. Send one of them."

"I have a name for you."

Anything less than the President and she wasn't interested. "Who?"

"Franklin Hodge."

Her eyes darted to his face. "Franklin Hodge?" she breathed. "The Invisible Aide?"

"The man with no official position, no job description ... "

"... no mention in any government correspondence."

"The man who has turned inconspicuous into an art form."

"But who is always there when anything big goes down."

"Always ..." Perry patted Lois's hand. "Here's your plane ticket and accommodation."

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Lois, a bag on each shoulder, a suitcase in one hand and details of her hotel in the other, struggled across the main street of Smallville. Her mind was ticking over with all the reasons why she shouldn't be here — reasons she should have used to deter Perry from banishing his ace reporter to the backwoods of Kansas.

She stopped on the sidewalk and gratefully set down her suitcase. Ahead was an antiquated building that even in its prime

would not have warranted a second glance. Perry's scrawl on her piece of paper confirmed what she already suspected — this was her hotel.

The woman at Reception was about as unremarkable as a woman could get. "Lois Lane," Lois said.

The bland woman consulted a battered book. "Who?"

"Lois Lane."

"We don't have a booking for that name."

Lois sighed as she adjusted the bag strap that was cutting most painfully into her shoulder. "Let me simplify this for you," she said, doubting the woman would even detect the barely-contained disdain weaved through her words. "My office made the booking earlier today. Lois Lane. Daily Planet."

"Daily Planet? Is that some sort of environmental group?"

Nope — this woman didn't have the slightest notion that she was tramping on ground the entire Daily Planet work force would have recognised as treacherous. "What's my room number?" Lois asked.

"You don't have one," the woman said starkly. "We don't have a booking."

"Can I look?" Lois snatched the book and scrolled down the guest list. No Franklin Hodge. That didn't surprise her. She committed every name and room number to memory and returned the book with a feigned smile. "Could I have a room, please?"

"For when?"

"Tonight," Lois said between gritted teeth.

"We're fully booked," the woman said with satisfaction.

"Why?" Lois asked, as the reporter surfaced above her personal inconvenience.

The woman's shock couldn't have been greater if Lois had sprouted another set of ears. "It's the Smallville Sunflower Celebration this weekend."

"Oh, of course," Lois chortled, realising her sarcasm would fall on barren land but was unable to resist. "How could I have forgotten? Could you check again? Please?"

The woman gave the book a cursory glance. "We're completely full," she said in a tone that finished the matter.

Lois picked up her suitcase in resignation. "Where's the nearest hotel?" she asked. "Other than this fine establishment?"

The woman lifted her head with something like pride. "There isn't one," she said. "We are the only accommodation in Smallville."

With a sigh that could have flattened an entire field of sunflowers, Lois left, slamming the door behind her. Once outside, she pulled her cell phone from her bag and started to dial Perry. She stared at her phone in shock. She had no signal!

How could *anyone* live in this place?

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"There's one hotel and it's 'completely booked out,'" Lois told Perry, imitating the bland receptionist.

"Leave it with me, Lois. I'll organise something."

"Can't I just *leave*, Perry?" Lois asked, hitting the exact tone she knew was most likely to work with her Editor-in-Chief. "This place is killing me. Hodge is w-a-a-ay too smart to come to Smallville."

"There's a story here, Lois, and you'll be glad you stayed when that Pulitzer hits your desk."

She doubted that. In fact, she'd bet her entire career against it. There was absolutely nothing in Smallville that held the slightest interest for her.

"Where are you?" Perry asked.

"In the pay phone. I'm outside the cafe in the main street."

"Which cafe?"

"There is only one cafe, Perry."

"Oh. OK, Lois, sit tight. I'll see if I can pull some strings."

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Perry replaced the phone.

Smallville. He had contacts everywhere, but *Smallville*? A vague memory wafted through mind. A résumé. From a now name reporter in ... Smallville.

Perry shuffled through a pile of papers and at the bottom found the letter — just another of the dozen or so unsolicited employment applications he received every month.

Clark Kent. Smallville.

This letter did have one thing to distinguish it from the masses; one of Clark Kent's listed referees was Professor Carlton — an old friend of Perry's.

One phone call later, he'd ascertained that the Kents were decent people.

Two phone calls later, a friendly woman called Martha Kent had assured him that Lois would be looked after.

You couldn't beat country hospitality.

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After waiting with mounting impatience for twenty minutes, Lois was approached by a woman in her fifties. "Lois Lane?" she enquired.

"Yes," Lois said. "You're from the hotel?"

"No. I'm Martha Kent. I live here."

She admitted it! Lois wouldn't have. Not for a million dollars.

"I understand you need somewhere to stay," the woman said.

"Well, ah, yes."

Martha smiled. "You come with me, honey. You can stay with us."

Stay with her? "No, really," Lois said. "I just need a room in the hotel. Any hotel."

"It's the Sunflower Celebration this weekend," Martha said. "It's full."

"But I can't impose on you," Lois said. "I don't know you."

"What difference does that make?"

Lois studied the older woman for a moment, trying to gauge if she really were as naive as she appeared. "Do you have the internet?"

"No, but the library does, and I can drive you into town any time you need."

No internet! Lois shook her head in disbelief. "How did you know about me?" she asked.

"Mr White called me," Martha replied. "He said I'd find you here."

With less than gracious acceptance, Lois picked up her bags and followed her unlikely hostess.

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"Our son, Clark, is away, so you can have his room," Martha said as she led Lois into a neat and spacious room. It was mostly white, but the sparingly-used touches of blue conveyed welcome.

"Thank you," Lois said.

"The sheets are clean and the bathroom is down the hall. Get yourself settled, have a bath if you want. We'll eat in about an hour."

Martha turned to go. "Mrs Kent?" Lois said.

"Call me Martha, please."

"Martha." Lois summoned a weary smile. "If I didn't seem very appreciative before, I'm sorry. It's been a long day."

Martha patted her arm. "That's fine, honey. See you soon."

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The evening meal was surprisingly pleasant. Martha's husband, Jonathan, was a big man who hadn't aged as well as his wife, but he was easy-going and friendly. The food was simple, but beautifully cooked and presented. "I love cooking for company," Martha confided.

"There's not much challenge in cooking just for two," Jonathan added with a smile to his wife. "But when Clark is home, she excels herself."

Clark. The son. His name came up a lot. Clearly he was the centre of their lives. Lois glanced to the bureau and the photograph of a young teenager — dark hair, glasses, intense. He didn't look like either of his parents.

They hadn't said where he was — school maybe, or college. She'd be long gone when he came home.

Lois thanked them for the meal and offered to help wash the dishes. They declined, saying it was their nightly ritual and gave them time to communicate. Lois headed for her — well, his — bedroom, conscious she was more than a little relieved to escape the need for social niceties.

She jotted notes — the names of the people fortunate enough to have a room at the hotel — and then changed into her pyjamas. Despite her weariness, Lois didn't feel ready for sleep, so she turned off her light and sat on the window ledge as twilight fell around her.

There was movement between the trees, and a moment later Martha and Jonathan emerged. They were deep in conversation, punctuated with occasional laughter. Jonathan's arm was draped across Martha's shoulders.

As Lois watched, they stopped and turned to each other as if they were puppets controlled by a single puppeteer. Jonathan lifted Martha's chin with a gentle hand and dropped a kiss on the end of her nose.

Lois scurried to the bed, uncomfortable at having intruded on a private moment. She stared into the gloom, as the barrenness inside her seeped from its tightly-locked chamber. She swallowed down the tears that pushed for release. Had her father ever kissed her mother's nose? Lois doubted it. During the meagre moments her father had been home, they had been too busy trading insults and accusations to leave time for ... for what? Love? Tenderness? Appreciation of what they had?

Jonathan Kent sure didn't look like any sort of Casanova. But he'd managed to take a simple kiss and turn it into one of the most romantic moments Lois had ever witnessed.

This Clark guy, wherever he was, was one lucky yokel.

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Clark Kent landed in his back yard, careful to avoid damaging his mother's tomato plants. It was only just past dawn, but the aroma of fresh coffee drifted tantalisingly from the farmhouse.

The kitchen was empty. His parents were probably in the barn doing the farm chores. His hunger could wait. What he really needed was a shower.

Two minutes later, he came out of the bathroom and headed for his bedroom, wearing only his glasses and a towel carelessly slung low across his hips.

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Lois had just awakened. She checked the time and decided she could spare a few moments to simply listen to the silence. Her mind replayed Jonathan's kiss and her thoughts wandered to the son who completed this family triangle. What was he like?

Probably overweight by now, she concluded. Anyone living with Martha Kent would be well fed. Was he brash and arrogant? Or one-dimensional and dull?

Lois thrust away the blanket and sheet, sat up and stretched.

The door swung open. Her yawn froze as her brain registered a chest ... ah, a man with a chest, a flawlessly muscled chest, still glistening with a sheen of moisture. Her gaze wavered enough to add to the picture — an impressive pair of shoulders, glasses, a towel, and damp black hair with one lock collapsing across his forehead.

They stared at each other as shock sizzled between them.

"Excuse me," he managed eventually. He'd coloured slightly, and one hand clutched the overlap of his towel.

"You're Clark?" Lois squeaked.

"Yes. Who are you?"

"Lois Lane, Daily Planet."

He swallowed. "You're a long way from home."

"Tell me about it," she muttered.

"But that doesn't explain why you're in my bed ... room."

"The hotel was booked out and your mother invited me to stay," Lois said hurriedly. She tried to surreptitiously pull the sheet across her lower body. "I didn't know you'd be home today. I'll be out within an hour."

He raised one hand — the one not holding his towel — as if to stop her leaving. "No, no, it's OK. I have a bed on the porch. I often sleep there in the summer. You're welcome to stay as long as you like." He backed through the doorway. "I'm very sorry, Ms Lane. I hope I didn't cause you any embarrassment."

He certainly hadn't run to fat.

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Lois walked towards the Kent kitchen, irritated that little tremors of apprehension continually plagued her stomach. She'd interviewed Presidents, for goodness' sake. How could she be nervous about breakfast with a couple of Kansas farmers and their son?

It wasn't nervousness, she told herself firmly. It was the certain knowledge that she would be subjected to the snide amusement in Clark Kent's eyes and his double-meaning comments alluding to their encounter.

She walked into the kitchen and he stood up. She assumed he was making a quick getaway until he sat again when she took the one remaining place at the table. He was dressed now — in well-worn jeans and a checked shirt. Martha and Jonathan welcomed her with smiles, and somehow the awkwardness dissipated amidst the practicalities of what she'd like for breakfast.

Clark Kent asked her to pass the sugar — he had three in his coffee! — but otherwise seemed content to let his parents do most of the talking. They clearly adored him, but it was far from a one-way relationship. He stopped Martha from getting him more toast with an "I can get it, Mom. You sit and eat yours," and a loving touch on her shoulder.

They included Lois in their conversation, but asked nothing about her work, nor why she was in Smallville. Clark, it seemed, was going to help his father paint the barn. Martha had a morning art class. They gave her a spare key to the house — how did they know she wasn't a crazed killer? — and told her to make herself at home. Martha offered her a lift into town which Lois accepted.

As Lois packed her notebooks into her bag, she resolved to check the hotel again and refused to admit that she wouldn't be totally disappointed if it was still booked out.

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In the Smallville library, Lois emailed the names of the hotel's guests to Jimmy Olsen and asked him to check them.

Then she went to the cafe and eavesdropped on surrounding conversations while she sipped her coffee. The people of Smallville talked about the weather and the harvest. They marveled at the number of visitors to the town and eagerly anticipated the Sunflower Celebration that evening.

Lois was at something of a loss. In Metropolis, this was so instinctive. She hunted down a lead, she followed it, she questioned and hounded and harassed until she got to the truth, then she wrote the story. Easy.

But Smallville had dammed her writer's juices.

And they certainly weren't helped by the tranquility that pervaded the entire town. She couldn't help wondering if anything newsworthy ever happened here. Other than the incomparable excitement of the Sunflower Celebration, of course.

Lois idly glanced out of the window and what she saw jolted her to her feet. A man was crossing the road, walking away from her. Even from behind, his sandy-coloured curls and easy gait were instantly recognisable. She abandoned her coffee and

dodged around two tables before chasing him across the road.

"Mr Hodge! Mr Hodge! Franklin!"

He turned and frowned. "Ms Lane," he said, not bothering to hide his displeasure. "What are you doing so far from Metropolis?"

"I could ask you the same question," she retorted.

He was dressed in jeans, not his usual business suit.  
"Fishing."

"Fishing?" Yeah, right.

He laughed scornfully at her expression. "Yes, fishing. You know, hook, line, sinker, fish, supper."

"I've heard there's a top secret meeting regarding a UFO sighting in the sixties," Lois said, her ideas materialising as she spoke.

"Really?" There was nothing in Hodge's face to give the slightest hint as whether her conjecture had landed anywhere near the mark.

"What do you know about it?" Lois persisted.

"Not a thing, thankfully," Hodge said. "I'm here to fish, Ms Lane. It's called leisure time. You should try it occasionally."

"So you're not here on national business?"

"I'm here because there's nothing quite like the taste of brown trout and no place like Smallville Lake for brown trout."

"Where are you staying?"

He smiled, but it wasn't far from a grimace. "There's a choice?"

"Your name's not in the book."

"That would be because one has a much greater chance of catching trout when one is not accompanied by a pack of nosy reporters." He turned, shoved his hands into his jeans pockets, and sauntered away.

Lois watched, not sure whether she believed him or not.

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Clark Kent was painting the barn, a job made infinitely easier by his ability to hover. His immense strength helped too. If he'd used his incredible speed, the job would have been finished an hour ago. But he didn't — he liked working with his dad, just like a regular guy.

Also, this way gave him time to think — and his mind was chock-full of Lois Lane. He'd been reading her work for a long time. She was brilliant. She inspired him. She was the foremost reason why he had sent a résumé and examples of his work to Perry White. She was why he wanted to work for the Daily Planet — just being in the same newsroom would make him a better reporter.

But he hadn't known she was beautiful. He realised now that he had subconsciously formed an image of Lois Lane as he'd read her work. He'd been way, way off track. She was younger, smaller, and more feminine than the visual in his mind. And amidst the resourcefulness and drive that had to be fundamental to her success, he thought he saw a dash of vulnerability. At least that's how she'd looked in her pyjamas waking up in his bed.

Clark needed a distraction from his thoughts. He dropped down beside his father. "How's it going, Dad?"

"Great," Jonathan replied. "We should be finished by lunch. Wanna go fishing this afternoon?"

"Good idea." Clark tried to inject his usual enthusiasm into his reply. He loved fishing with his dad, but it would give him unlimited think time. And maybe that was not necessarily a good thing. Not today. Not with Lois Lane resident in his bed and relentless in his thoughts. "I noticed the roof has worked loose in a couple of places," he said. "I'll fix them."

"OK, son."

Clark returned to the roof with a hammer, some nails, and the firm intention to concentrate on the job at hand. His resolve lasted less than a second.

She was beautiful.

She must be here on a story, but what in Smallville could possibly be of interest to the great Metropolis newspaper? In particular, its top reporter? It could *not* be the Sunflower Celebration.

His very first sight of her was burnt into his memory — arms stretched upwards, hair mussed, lithe body slightly arched and wearing shiny pink sleep shorts and a skimpy grey sleeveless top. It had granted him an accidental snippet of intimacy — one he had no right to ponder.

Again, Clark dusted her from his mind and purposefully turned his attention to the hammer and nails.

She was back instantly.

And he was powerless to keep her away.

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Clark and Jonathan ambled towards the farmhouse. Clark could smell fried chicken and hear the sounds of his mother preparing their lunch. Then she spoke.

He lowered his glasses and looked through the wall. He saw his mom at the oven and Lois Lane setting the table.

"Jonathan, Clark." His mom smiled her usual welcome as they entered. "Go wash up, we're almost ready."

Lois Lane caught him looking at her, and Clark tried a friendly smile. She quickly returned her attention to the table, busily adjusting knives and forks that were already in place.

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"We're going fishing this afternoon," Jonathan announced.

"Fishing?" Lois Lane said, with immediate interest. "Fishing in Smallville Lake?"

"Why, yes."

"Could I come with you?" she asked. "Please?"

Clark watched her while his father said they would love to have her come along. Fishing didn't fit either of his profiles of Lois Lane, but her interest seemed genuine. "Do you enjoy fishing, Ms Lane?" he asked quietly.

"Love it," she enthused. "There's nothing quite like the taste of brown trout and no place like Smallville Lake for brown trout."

Clark heard his father's small cough and studiously avoided meeting his eyes. They both knew that not one brown trout had been pulled out of Smallville Lake in living memory.

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Perry was getting impatient.

"You've been there nearly twenty-four hours, Lois. What in the Sam Hill is going on?"

"Franklin Hodge is here," Lois said. "I've talked to him. He denied everything. He says he's going fishing."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I'm going fishing too."

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Lois looked from the wriggling worm she held in one hand to the hook clasped in her other. She knew what she was supposed to do, but ...

"Can I help you, Ms Lane?"

Clark was looking at her, the ghost of a smile playing on his lips. Rejection of his offer sprang automatically, but there was no superiority in his tone, so Lois shut her mouth and handed him the worm and the hook.

His fingers brushed against hers as he took them. While he threaded the worm, she had the opportunity to study him from close range. He smelled great — a hint of coconut, but definitively male. He was freshly shaven. His fingers were long, his hands strong and masculine, his nails surprisingly clean for a farmer.

He handed her the hook, the worm now secured.

"Thanks," she said.

"You're welcome, Ms Lane."

"Now you've hooked my worm for me, I think you should

call me Lois."

He smiled. He had a heart-stopper of a smile. "OK, Lois."

Moments later, Jonathan lurched, and Lois watched as he landed the fish. It was smaller than she'd expected, but Jonathan and Clark seemed pleased.

"It's more gold than brown," Lois mused. She saw the look that telegraphed between Clark and his father. "It's not a brown trout?" she guessed.

"Not this one," Jonathan said.

"I don't fish much," she confessed.

"There are no brown trout in here," Jonathan explained kindly. "The water's not clear enough and it's too warm. But there are a lot of yellow perch."

"So if someone said he caught brown trout in this lake, you'd think ... "

"He didn't know a whole lot about fishing," Clark finished for her.

Or he was lying.

"Is that why you came here?" Jonathan asked. "To fish for trout?"

"No," Lois said, her attention already way past fish. She needed to find Franklin Hodge. She thrust her rod at Clark. "This has been great. Thanks." She marched off, her feet heeding the urgency of her mind as it sorted through a thousand competing ideas.

"Hey, Lois?" Clark called. "Where are you going?"

"Smallville." Lois didn't bother stopping. Hodge was here — in the most humdrum place imaginable, he didn't want her to know why, he didn't know anything about fishing, he hadn't caught trout in Smallville Lake. She heard a step behind her and felt a hesitant hand on her arm. "What?" she barked, annoyed that her train of thought had been broken.

"Smallville's that way," Clark said, pointing in the direction opposite to the one she'd taken.

She searched his face for derision, but found none. "Oh."

"It's three miles away. How about I drive you?"

"What about your father? You shouldn't leave him."

Clark smiled conspiratorially. "What he'd really like is the chance for an afternoon nap."

Still Lois hesitated. She didn't want a Kansas farmer bumbling along behind her if she got anywhere near Franklin Hodge. Kent probably saw this as his big chance to get his name in the paper.

But walking three miles would hold up her investigation, and it seemed she couldn't rely on her sense of direction to actually get her to Smallville.

And she had no doubts about her ability to flick him off should the need arise.

He was, after all, nothing more than a small-town hick.

In a nice package, she had to admit that.

But still a guileless innocent whose experience probably hadn't stretched much further than the boundaries of Smallville, Kansas.

Lois wiped all traces of annoyance from her face and offered him a smile. "Thanks," she said.

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Clark stopped the car on the edge of Smallville. "Do you mind if we talk for a minute?" he asked.

Lois had been thinking about what she needed to ask Franklin Hodge. "I have important business to attend to."

"This won't take long."

She sighed. "OK. What is it?"

He twisted in his seat to face her more directly. "Firstly, I know who you are ... I mean, I've read your work."

Lois couldn't help being pleased, but her gratification was easily masked by her impatience.

"And I know you get so many front page stories, you

wouldn't be here unless it was something big," Clark continued.

"Reporters take vacations."

"Not to Smallville."

She conceded that point. "Do you have a specific question?"

"Two, actually," he said. "Firstly — whatever your story, could it possibly involve my parents?"

"How could it?"

"I've racked my brain," Clark said. "And I can't come up with any realistic reason as to why you're here." He faced her directly, his brown eyes grave. "But if you're after someone and there's any chance he could follow you to the farm, I'd like to know about it beforehand."

"It's not that sort of story." Not that she was admitting to, anyway.

"So your story is nothing that could adversely affect my parents?"

"No."

Clark deliberated for a few moments. "OK, my second question — is there anything I can do to help you?"

Lois stifled her desire to snigger. Help her? Right! She worked alone, always had, always would. And if her brain ever degenerated enough that she considered the possibility of a partner, it certainly wouldn't be a corn-fed clodhopper from Kansas. "I have it under control. Really."

"You could tell me as much or as little as you wanted," Clark offered. "But I have local knowledge. I know the people, I know the history, I know how things work around here. The people are honest and friendly, but guarded with strangers. They know me — that could be useful."

That was true. But if this became a story, it was her story. And hers alone. "I'm not a team player."

"This wouldn't be a team. It's your story."

She was tempted. Just his car would be handy. And his sense of direction.

Clark cleared his throat. "There's something else I should tell you."

He wanted her autograph? A date? His bed? Credit in her story? "Oh?" Lois said, hoping her tone would be enough to dissuade him.

"I'm a reporter with the Smallville Press."

Comprehension flooded her mind. "Nice try, Kent," Lois sneered. "But you're not getting your hands on my story."

"I'm not trying to get my hands on your story."

This time she did snigger. "Then you're not much of a reporter."

Lois could see that had stung him. "If I give you my word," he said, "I won't go back on it."

Clark's gaze didn't waver. It was a nice line, she had to admit, but no one, certainly not an even half-decent reporter, would swallow it. "You'd put your word ahead of your story?"

"Always."

"That's why you're working for the Smallville Press."

She'd stung him again, but this time, Lois felt mild regret. It was too much like mocking a big, docile puppy. She looked away.

Clark started the motor and they drove into Smallville in silence. When they had parked, Lois hesitated before opening the door. "How well do you know the receptionist at the hotel?" She braced for a comeback — a cutting comment about her now requesting his help, or a straight-out refusal. She got neither.

"Her name is Jane; I went to school with her."

"I know the names of the guests, but I need to know when they booked and how long they're staying."

"OK," Clark agreed easily. "Anything else?"

"Does the hotel have internet access?"

"I think so. I'll find out."

"See if you can get me a room," Lois directed. "I really need

the internet."

"You're welcome to use my desk at the Press."

"Does it have internet access?"

"Yes," he replied, without the slightest tinge of indignation.

"Anything else you need to know?"

"Not at the moment."

"I'll meet you in the cafe in half an hour?"

"OK," Lois agreed.

Clark Kent was quite possibly the nicest person she had ever met.

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Clark was already in the cafe, talking to a female sheriff, when Lois arrived after a fruitless search for Hodge. When he saw Lois, Clark picked up two take-away coffees and gestured for her to follow him to the car.

He offered her one of the cups. "I had to guess what you'd like," he said. He unlocked the passenger door and held it open for her. "I went with no fat, decaf, and no sugar, but you're welcome to some of mine."

"I take three sugars."

He got into the driver's seat. "You do?"

She nodded and held out her hand. Clark dropped the three little packages into her hand and sipped his coffee. Lois chuckled inwardly as he tried to cover his distaste.

"I lied," Lois said. She opened all three sachets and poured them into his coffee. "I don't have sugar. I just wanted to see if you would give me yours."

He seemed puzzled. "Of course I would."

She tried her coffee — it wasn't too bad at all. "What did you find out?"

He took a piece of paper from his shirt pocket. "Here's the list of guests, when they booked, when they arrived and when they're leaving."

"Do you know any of these people?"

Clark leant closer as he pointed to the list. "I put a cross next to the names of the people who have stayed at the hotel during past Sunflower Celebrations."

There were five names without crosses. "Any of them book recently?"

"This one. Buddy McGlynn. He booked yesterday afternoon."

"And he has a room?" Lois demanded hotly.

Clark didn't recoil at her tone. Half of the staffers at the Daily Planet would have. More than half. "Yes."

"My room was booked yesterday morning."

Lois could see the smattering of amusement behind his glasses. She felt an answering smile press for release. Instead, she pushed on with the story. "I don't suppose you thought to get a description?"

"Jane couldn't recall too much," Clark replied. "She said McGlynn sort of faded into the background. He has light-coloured hair with curls and he brought a fishing rod, but hasn't been fishing yet and doesn't seem particularly interested in the local fishing spots."

Lois threw her arms around his neck in spontaneous delight. With dawning horror, she realised that not only had she hugged a man she barely knew, she'd spilt her coffee down his back.

She withdrew. "Sorry," she stammered, knowing her face was scarlet. "Did I burn you?"

Clark laughed easily. "No. Would you like another coffee?"

She shook her head and asked the first thing that popped into her head. "Any spare rooms at the hotel?"

"Nope," he said. "Looks like you're stuck at the Hotel Kent."

Lois refused to acknowledge the total absence of any disappointment. "Is that OK?" she said. "I feel bad taking your bed."

"Don't," Clark said and smiled. "I'm perfectly comfortable

on the porch." He glanced over his shoulder at the hotel. "Buddy McGlynn left his room an hour ago — without his rod — and drove out of town."

"But they expect him back?"

"Yeah, he left his luggage." He smiled the smile that was coming very familiar. "Where to now?"

"I think we should pick up your father," Lois said. "And take him home." She ran light fingers down his sleeve. "And get you a dry shirt."

Clark grinned as he started the engine. He drove them out of town towards the lake. Lois said nothing. Every man she knew would have made a crack about sharing his bed. And another about her burning him. Clark Kent hadn't. He'd said nothing, either directly or indirectly, about their encounter when he, almost naked, had come into his bedroom and caught her in less-than-modest pyjamas. He opened car doors for her. He found information for her even after she'd said he wasn't much of a reporter. He bought her coffee and willingly gave her his sugar.

Clark Kent was a relic from another time.

It wasn't something she could stomach long term of course, but for now it was some compensation for having been sentenced to a weekend in Smallville.

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The drive to Smallville Lake passed in a blur for Clark. He knew little about packing away the fishing gear or congratulating his father on four fine perch. He wasn't too sure how they got to the farmhouse. The only thing he knew with certainty was the proximity of Lois Lane.

She'd hugged him. She'd lowered her guard. For an instant, she'd allowed her feelings to surface on her face and show in her actions. He realised, of course, that what she'd felt had everything to do with his information and nothing to do with him, but it was a memory he'd treasure.

He'd pleased her ... and made her happy ... and it was totally addictive.

"Lois," he said across the kitchen. "I need to go into my room for a clean shirt. Is that OK?"

He was rewarded with a small smile. "Sure."

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Later that afternoon, Clark took Lois to the office of the Smallville Press. He unlocked the door and she looked around the deserted newsroom. "Where is everyone?" she asked.

"It's Saturday."

"Oh," she mouthed. "That explains everything."

They shared a smile. "I guess it's nothing like your newsroom," Clark said.

"It smells the same. It's just smaller, emptier and a lot quieter."

Clark showed her to his desk and logged on to his computer. "I've got some notes to write up," he said. "Feel free to use the phone. Let me know if you need anything." He sat down at a nearby desk. First she'd taken his bed, now his desk.

Jimmy had replied to her email. He'd compiled a list of possible home addresses and phone numbers for some of the guests. For Buddy McGlynn, there was an address in Nebraska. Lois picked up Clark's phone and called the suggested number.

"Hello."

"This is Lois Lane, Daily Planet. Could I speak with Buddy McGlynn please?"

"Speaking."

"Buddy, have you ever been to Smallville?"

"Where's that?"

"Kansas."

"Never heard of it."

"OK. Thank you." Lois replaced the phone, sure now that Buddy McGlynn was the name being used by Franklin Hodge. Which proved nothing, nor got her any closer to why he was in

Smallville.

She noticed Jimmy had sent a later email, so she opened it.

[[Hey Lois

Just discovered that two of the hotel guests, husband and wife team, Max and Sheridan Sewell worked for EPRAD until two years ago. The EPRAD archive describes them as 'brilliant, cutting-edge scientists, pioneers in their chosen field of genetics.'

I can't find any employment records for the past two years. Their photos have been removed from the EPRAD site, and for such high-profile people, there is very little of their work on the net.

This is the third consecutive year they have visited Smallville for the Sunflower Celebration, so it could be nothing. Couldn't find a home address for them, though.

Jimmy]]

Lois checked back to his first email — it was blank next to the names Max and Sheridan Sewell. "Clark?"

He looked up from his work. "Yes?"

"Could you call Jane and find out whatever you can about Max and Sheridan Sewell?"

"Sure," he agreed. He picked up the phone.

A few minutes later he was at her desk with notes. "Early forties, regular visitors for the last three years, they're currently out, but Jane's expecting them back any minute. They're going to the Sunflower Celebration tonight."

He wasn't completely inept at this. "Thanks, Clark."

So the Sewells said they were going to the Sunflower Celebration. But was it merely a cover? A cover for what? Why would brilliant scientists come to a place like Smallville three years in a row? If they had family here, it was unlikely they would stay at the hotel.

Could it possibly involve Hodge? If anything was going to happen, tonight would be the obvious time — with everyone's attention squarely on the Sunflower Celebration.

"Clark?"

Again, he looked up immediately. Lois was conscious that she kept interrupting him, but he didn't seem to mind. "This Sunflower Celebration? It's tonight?"

"The main event is tonight. A dance. Stalls selling foods and local produce. Fireworks."

"Are you going?"

"I had planned to, but I don't mind missing it."

"Do you have a girl waiting for you to pick her up?"

"No."

"Do you have a girl?" Not that it was any of her business.

"No."

A triad of reactions swirled through her. A guy who looked this good without a girl? That caused a jangle of alarm bells. What dark secret was he hiding?

Or was it that Smallville girls were blind? And way, way too interested in sunflowers?

The third strand Lois firmly boxed into the far corner of her mind. No, she wasn't pleased he was single. What possible relevance could it have to her?

He would be available to run errands for her without getting distracted by Little Sally Smallville, Lois told herself. That's why the information pleased her. "While you're at the Celebration, could I borrow your car?" she asked.

"Sure. But I really don't mind missing it."

She was tempted. "Are you sure?"

"I'd rather be with you."

Lois hurriedly turned back to her computer screen. "Ever been on a stake-out?" she chirped over her shoulder.

Clark's phone rang and he came over to answer it. He listened, thanked whoever and then replaced it. "Lois," he said. "I need to do something. Will you be OK here?"

"Sure."

As soon as he'd gone, Lois opened his internet history. All guys had secrets and she meant to discover his.

He visited the Daily Planet site every day. He'd opened every story she'd written in the past month. She glanced over the rest of the sites — many looked like research. They even followed logical paths — she could guess the gist of his story from the trail of sites. He also visited sports sites. Nothing unusual there.

He did visit an extraordinary number of local information sites in numerous foreign countries — restaurants, movie sessions, maps, events.

So Clark Kent dreamed of travelling. If that was his biggest secret, she had him figured already.

Lois leant back in his chair and chewed on her pencil. I'd rather be with you, he had said. What did that mean? He'd said it evenly, without emphasis on any individual word.

I'd *rather* be with you would mean the Celebration wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

I'd rather *be* with you would mean he was thinking there might be a chance for something other than work. But nothing Lois had seen so far suggested he thought that way. He's a *guy*, she reminded herself wryly. OK, he thought that way and would seize any opportunity he imagined she offered.

Wouldn't he?

Honestly, she wasn't sure.

I'd rather be *with* you would mean he didn't trust her to stay out of trouble.

I'd rather be with *you* would mean he —

The truth, Lois, she told herself decisively, was that he was a reporter who sniffed a story.

The door opened and she quickly closed the history as Clark entered. "The Sewells arrived back at the hotel," he said. "I gave them free tickets to the Celebration, courtesy of the Smallville Press."

"You met them?"

"Yep," he said, grinning.

"Would you recognise them again?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Lo-is."

He wasn't inept at all.

\*\*\*

Clark parked fifty yards before the hotel. He watched Lois as she watched the people flock to the Sunflower Celebration.

Then, quite suddenly, the flow stopped. "It's very quiet," Lois commented.

"Everyone's at the Celebration by now."

"Not quite everyone, I bet."

"Lois?"

Her concentration didn't shift from the hotel. "Yeah?"

"I'll be more useful if I knew what might happen here."

She did glance to him then, but her attention was back on the hotel before she spoke. "I'm here because of the man who is calling himself Buddy McGlynn."

"Do you have a link between him and the Sewells?"

"Not yet."

"Are we going to follow them?" Clark asked. "Do we stay together? Or do we split?"

"We'll stay together for now," she told him. Why, Clark wondered. Because she didn't trust him not to steal her story? Perhaps Lois read his face, because then she added, "I'll get lost if I'm left alone."

I would find you, Clark thought. Wherever you went, I *would* find you. "What do you think McGlynn will do?"

"I don't know, but I'd bet my press badge he won't go to the Sunflower Celebration."

A couple emerged from the hotel. "That's them," Clark murmured. "The Sewells."

"They're coming this way."

"They'll recognise me!"

Lois had been craning forward trying to get a good look at the approaching couple. She turned with the swiftness of a tornado and the next thing Clark knew, her mouth had captured his, her body had covered him and her hands were thrusting through his hair.

Incapable of coherent thought, Clark responded automatically, his hands on her back, his mouth dancing with hers.

Time stopped and there was only Lois.

Then her head lifted and her mouth was gone, leaving him bereft. "Have they passed?" she asked.

Clark couldn't have manufactured a meaningful answer if his life had depended on it. Not with Lois still draped across a good half of his body. She stared out of the back window of his car.

He searched her face, hoping for a sign that their shared kiss had been something ... *anything* ... more than investigative exigency. He found nothing and his hopes crumbled.

She slipped from him and landed back in her seat with a soft thud. "They've gone."

The sensation of her mouth lingered on his. Clark slid his tongue across his top lip. She tasted delectable. "They're not going to the Celebration," he said, aware that he stated the obvious, but was happy enough that his voice actually obeyed him.

Lois shot him a 'told you' look.

"Should we follow them, or wait?" he asked.

"Wait," Lois said. "It's McGlynn I'm interested in. Unless their non-attendance at the Celebration has something to do with him, it's probably not relevant."

After five long minutes of silence, a man left the hotel and nonchalantly strolled in their direction. "That's McGlynn," Lois hissed. "We can't let him see me." She twisted herself into Clark's chest. He pulled his jacket around her, nestling her into his warmth and shielding her from view. He rested his cheek on the top of her head and wished he dared drop a kiss into her sweet-smelling hair.

Despite the unhurried nature of McGlynn's gait, he passed far too quickly for Clark. Lois scrambled up and watched McGlynn walk away. "Let's go," she said a few moments later. She jumped out and had already moved away when Clark turned from locking the car. He floated after her, not high enough to startle her should she turn around, but off the ground. One set of footsteps would be less likely to be heard.

McGlynn left the road and drifted in and out of sight between the trees. He stopped in a small clearing. Lois gestured for Clark to stay put. She continued. He followed. She went closer than he considered prudent and crouched just a few yards from McGlynn.

Max and Sheridan Sewell appeared from the depths of the far trees.

"What do you want?" McGlynn asked, his voice carefully neutral.

"We have information regarding a matter of national security," Max Sewell said.

"Go on."

"Two years ago, we found a space ship partially buried in a field just out of town," Sheridan said. "We took it to our lab and analysed it in every detail. We have ironclad evidence that an alien was in the capsule. We also know he was very young, too young to have survived without assistance."

Clark's breathing froze as chilled horror hacked through his insides.

Max Sewell continued. "We have a hair sample and skin cells. We have mapped his DNA. We know he is male and estimate he would now be in his mid to late twenties."

"Have you identified him?" McGlynn asked.

"We can prove he is here — on Earth — and has been for over twenty-five years," Max said. "Identification and steps to

control the threat to humankind — that is the responsibility of the government.”

Clark’s fear snaked around his imploding heart.

“This is a community service?” McGlynn asked, a thread of sarcasm evident in his tone.

“Of course,” Max Sewell responded in a likewise oily tone. “But information has a price.”

“What sort of price?”

“A million dollars, guaranteed untraceable, in our bank account.”

“What do you give?”

“The space capsule, the hair sample, the skin cells, our research notes and, most importantly, our silence — thereby averting widespread panic were the people to realise there is an alien on Earth whose very presence is a danger to us all.”

A spiral of alarm and indignation twisted through Clark. He clamped his mouth and remained silent, thankful none of the other people present were capable of hearing the thundering of his heart.

“You’ll hear from me,” McGlynn said noncommittally.

“Before noon tomorrow,” Max Sewell said firmly. “Quick business is good business.”

McGlynn turned and was swallowed by the darkness.

Max and Sheridan Sewell waited in silence before also slipping away.

Clark tuned in his hearing and picked up a heartbeat from deeper in the trees. When Lois began to rise from her crouched position, Clark stalled her with a touch to her shoulder. She glanced at him and he nodded in the direction of the heartbeat.

Seconds later, a man appeared from the covering of the trees. He walked through the clearing and towards Smallville. “Hi, Lois,” he sniffed, without even a glance in their direction.

Clark heard Lois groan and his apprehension intensified. He lowered his glasses and scanned three hundred, sixty degrees. They were alone now.

As they walked back to the car, Clark continued monitoring the four others who had shared their rendezvous. The Sewells continued past the hotel, presumably to the Sunflower Celebration. McGlynn went into the hotel. The fourth man went into the cafe.

At his car, Clark opened the door for Lois before settling into the driver’s seat. “Who was that?” he asked when both doors were firmly shut.

“Leo Nunk,” Lois replied. “The National Inquisitor.”

“The National Inquisitor?” Clark said, hoping he’d managed to make his despair sound like distaste.

Lois smiled grimly at his tone. “Trashy publication. I can’t even call it a newspaper.”

“I’ve seen a few of their so-called stories. Big on fiction, low on fact.”

“You got it.” Lois wrinkled her nose, thinking. “Nunk being here suggests the Sewells’ story is a beat-up. But anything involving McGlynn has to be taken seriously.”

“If Nunk heard what we heard ...” Clark said.

“He’ll print before he has the whole story and simply fill in the gaps with speculation dressed up to look like fact.” Lois took her tape recorder from her pocket. “Clark, can you let me into your office? I need to write up this transcript and put together some notes.”

“You believe them?” Clark asked, trying to portray nothing more than professional interest. “You really think they found a spaceship and have analysed the DNA of an alien?”

“I don’t know,” Lois admitted. “That would be a monumental story, of course — a guaranteed Pulitzer — but at this stage I have nothing but the word of two scientists who left EPRAD in possibly acrimonious circumstances and are demanding a million dollars for their story.” She smiled suddenly. “But I do know they

are trying to blackmail the government — and that *is* a story.”

“Lois,” Clark said. “I need to get back to my folks. Will you be all right alone at the office?”

If his sudden desire to abandon the story surprised her, Lois didn’t show it. “Of course, Clark. I’ve already taken too much of your time.”

In the office, Clark settled her at his computer and gave her his car keys. “Drive yourself home when you’ve finished,” he said. “Mom and Dad are at the Celebration. I’ll go home with them.”

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Martha and Jonathan were enjoying the fireworks when Clark arrived. “Clark, you made it,” Martha greeted. “Come and sit down. Where’s Lois?”

Clark leant in close to them. “Mom, Dad, I need to talk with you. Now.”

They followed him to a dark, deserted corner and he flew them home.

“What’s wrong, Clark?” Martha said as she sat at the kitchen table. “You look awful. Is Lois all right?”

“She’s fine.” Clark swallowed, staring at his tightly clenched fists and trying to control his rampaging fear. He took a long, unsteady breath and looked at his parents, wishing he could spare them. “Two scientists are claiming they found a spaceship buried in a local field. They have analysed it. They say they have proof there was an alien baby in it. They found a strand of hair and some skin cells.”

The trepidation on his parents’ faces clawed at Clark’s heart. This had been their fear since the moment they had first lifted him from his spaceship. “They found it?” Jonathan said, his shock tightening his voice.

Clark nodded. “Two years ago, they said.”

Jonathan shook his head. “The night we found you, I went back later and it was gone.”

“I know, Dad,” Clark said gently. “This isn’t anyone’s fault.”

“We thought that being seen around there would only raise suspicion,” Martha said. “So once the spaceship had gone—”

“I know, Mom.”

“Is there anything to link this to you?” Martha asked.

“Not as far as I know.”

“How do you know about this, son?” Jonathan asked.

“I was helping Lois with a story and we witnessed a meeting between the scientists and the person Lois came here to investigate —”

“Lois knows?”

“She’s at the Press now, writing her story.”

“It’s going in the papers?” Martha shrieked.

“Lois is just doing her job, Mom,” Clark said, trying to keep the anxiety from his words. “She has no idea this involves me.”

“You didn’t tell her anything?”

“No, of course not,” Clark said. “Anything I said would be like releasing a dam — she would deluge me with questions.”

Martha rested her hand over Clark’s. “Perhaps now would be a good time for you to go away for a few days.”

“I can’t do that,” he said quickly. “The scientists asked for a million dollars for their evidence and their silence. Now Lois knows—”

“They aren’t going to publicise what they know?”

“They say they won’t — if they get the money.”

“Why can’t you go away?” Martha asked. “It seems that would minimise any chance of—”

“I’m not running away and leaving you to—”

“We would be fine, Clark.”

“It’s not just you,” he admitted.

Realisation curved Martha’s mouth to a soft circle. “Lois?” she said.

“She’s already too deep in this,” Clark grated. “If the

scientists or the agent find out she was there and heard them ... ”

Martha studied her son for a long moment. “If Lois follows this through and it leads to you, will she print what she knows?”

The answer chiselled a crevice into his heart. “She’s a reporter, Mom,” Clark said. “This is her job. I’m nothing to her. I can’t ask her to choose between me and her work.”

His mother’s eyes settled in his. Clark could see her fear. “Are you sure?” she asked.

Clark dropped his head into his hands and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. “It’s not just Lois,” he said despairingly. “There’s another guy, Nunk, from The National Inquisitor. It’s not hard to imagine what they will do with this.”

Martha stood and wrapped her arms around Clark’s shoulders.

“We’ve always known this was a possibility,” Jonathan said quietly. “We’ve had a long time to prepare for it.”

“You’ve never needed any medical treatment,” Martha added. “There are no records anywhere. Even if they have DNA from the spaceship, they still have to prove it is yours.”

Clark caught the hope they were offering him and tried to reflect it back with a smile.

“We’ll be all right,” Martha said. “We’re together. We’ll be all right.”

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Lois finished an outline of what she knew and saved it, but didn’t send it to Perry. She didn’t think Nunk could get anything into tomorrow’s Inquisitor, but even if he did, what she had was too incomplete to submit.

She rose from Clark’s desk and left his office, locking it with the keys he had given her. Once on the street, she went in the direction of the music. She spent half an hour at the Celebration, wandering through the milling crowds, searching for the Sewells. Or Hodge. Or even Nunk.

She found none of them.

She turned away from the Celebration and returned to the deserted main street. Could the Sewells be telling the truth? Could there be an alien living on Earth? An alien who had lived here for over twenty years? Had grown up here?

On the balance of probabilities — she doubted it.

Space buffs worldwide searched relentlessly for any indication of alien life. That an alien could arrive, be human enough in appearance to remain undetected and live on Earth for years — it seemed highly unlikely.

So ... why would the Sewells lie? What if they *had* left EPRAD acrimoniously? What if the bad feeling became public in scientific circles and made it difficult, or impossible, for them to find reputable employment elsewhere? Two years later, money would be becoming scarce.

And if they got the untraceable million dollars, would it matter if, at some point in the future, their story was proven to be a fraud? They would already have the money.

What were they offering? A spaceship. Having worked at EPRAD, they should know something about spaceships — even if their specialty was genetics. And why were DNA specialists working at a space exploration facility anyway?

With minimal research, they would have discovered the UFO sighting at Smallville in 1966 — it was probably discussed over coffee in EPRAD’s staffroom. How hard would it be to make a spaceship — a small one? And being small, that would make the *alien* a baby in 1966 — which put him in his late twenties now.

They were also offering DNA — but that shouldn’t be hard given their area of expertise. How big was the leap from human genetics to alien genetics? If they’d altered human DNA in a way never before seen, could they claim it was alien?

And the strand of hair. Had they discovered a way to clone hair, but alter the DNA?

If this were a hoax, none of the elements seemed beyond

what would be possible for two disgruntled, impoverished, unemployed, brilliant scientists.

Lois came to the hotel and stepped into it. Reception was unmanned. She snuck past it and reached the rows of rooms. She stopped at number 12.

It was locked, but a minute later she was in the Sewells’ room. For twenty minutes, she rummaged through everything, but found nothing to suggest they were anything other than a regular couple enjoying a weekend away.

After a final scan to ensure she’d left no tell-tale sign of her presence, Lois slipped from the room. She crept along the corridor to room 21. Her knock wasn’t answered.

She took her tools from her bag and began to pick the lock. It wouldn’t budge!

Lois removed her tool and began again, but with the same result. Hodge must have some sort of gadget to make his lock secure.

She turned away from the door. Back in Reception, Lois flipped the book and found the Sewells’ names. Their home address was in Wichita. She committed it to memory and then moved further down the list to ‘Buddy McGlynn’.

Despite her frustration at hitting a dead-end, she had to laugh. Hodge had given them the address ... 1898 Tumnus Drive, Lewisfield, Narnia.

At least he’d saved her from taking the time to check it out.

Lois replaced the book and left the hotel, her thoughts returning to the case.

The Sewells? Were they reporting the most phenomenal find ever? Or peddling a hoax?

Still, her gut said a hoax.

But ... Franklin Hodge was here. So someone somewhere took this seriously.

Of course, having worked for EPRAD, having been lauded as experts, if the Sewells claimed there was an alien living on Earth, it could cause panic and alarm — even if it were pure fabrication.

And that was their most telling leverage.

Lois entered Clark’s office, sat at his desk, opened the internet browser and began with the UFO sighting in 1966. It was just one episode in a multitude of unproven stories. She then moved to Max and Sheridan Sewell. As Jimmy had discovered, they were surprisingly unrepresented on the EPRAD site. Their work seemed to have slipped through the web. She found references to them, but nothing from them. For leaders in their field, they were highly anonymous.

Then Lois moved to the latest research on DNA. There was nothing to suggest alien DNA had moved beyond the realm of science fiction.

Of human DNA research, there was plenty — but it was laced with long scientific words and written with little effort to make it easily understandable or interesting.

And it was getting late. Very late.

Lois glanced to the clock on the wall. It was after one o’clock. She should get back to the Kents’ farm. She yawned and stretched, trying to ease the stiffness from her back. She folded her arms on Clark’s desk and lowered her head, deciding she would rest for a few moments. Then she’d feel more like driving home in an unfamiliar car on dark, unfamiliar roads.

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Clark stared into the darkness as he stood on the porch.

Lois should be home by now.

He and his parents had talked long into the night — swinging like a pendulum between abject despair and carefully constructed hope. He’d hugged his mother before she went to bed and pretended that her assurances had allayed his fears. But now, they engulfed him again. As he looked into the shadows of darkness, he could still see the trepidation on her face.

What if?

It was the question he had lived with since before he could remember. He'd always known he was different. Always known he didn't really belong here. Always known that protecting his secret was imperative.

What if ... what if it became known he was the alien? How would Lois react? Would she be horrified? Disgusted? Would she look at him like he was a science experiment gone horribly wrong? Would she feel sorry for him? Would she see him as nothing more than a story?

Lois. He would never forget kissing her in the car tonight. Every one of his senses had been tuned to her nearness, but no way had he been prepared for that.

Then, as McGlynn had walked by, Lois had nestled into him — her body fitting so perfectly with his, it felt like she was coming home. At the time, he'd thought he was in paradise. Now he knew it was a bitter-sweet false dawn to a day that could never be his.

Even if the Sewells' story could never be proven; even if there was never any suggestion of a link to him ... entertaining thoughts of anything with Lois Lane — that was sheer lunacy.

If only ...

For maybe the thousandth time he thought, if only ... if only I were normal. I could take my chance, ask her out and succeed or fail based only on what I am — not on what I am not.

Clark groaned as he remembered again his parents' faces tonight. If they took him away, it was Mom and Dad who would suffer the most.

And Lois should definitely be home by now.

\*\*\*

The phone rang and Lois woke with a start. Her neck and shoulders were cold and sore. Briskly rubbing her eyes, she picked up the phone and tried to recall the name of Clark's newspaper. It wouldn't come. "Hello," she said.

"It's Jane here. Can I speak to Clark, please?"

"He isn't here."

"Oh. OK. Thank you."

"Hold on! Jane!" Lois said, shedding all vestiges of sleep. "Clark and I are working together on a story. If you have information for him, it would be really helpful if you would tell me."

Jane hesitated. "No. It's nothing. Thank you."

She hung up and Lois slowly replaced the phone. She checked the clock on the wall. It was past five-thirty.

There was only one reason Jane would call Clark at this time of the morning. Lois grabbed her tape recorder and headed out of the office. On the table near the door was a camera. She picked it up, checked it was loaded with film and put it in her bag.

When she peered out from the front door, Lois saw Franklin Hodge walking out of town in the dim light of the otherwise empty street. She followed at a distance, careful to keep glancing behind in case either Nunk or the Sewells were on the move too.

Hodge left the road and headed into the treed area where he'd met the Sewells last night.

Lois followed him.

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Clark followed Lois.

On the porch of the farmhouse, he'd stared into the darkness. Then he'd paced.

Finally, when his worries for her had overwhelmed his worries for his own future, he'd flown to Smallville in the darkness.

And he'd found her — asleep on his desk.

He'd floated high above his office — watching her even breaths, wondering if he should go and wake her, wondering how he'd explain why he'd come to her in the middle of the night.

He'd hovered in indecision and couldn't help taking advantage of the opportunity to stare at her — to study her face

and catalogue the delightful upturn of her nose and the beguiling curve of her lips. Lips he had kissed.

Sleep smoothed away the veil of defensiveness she raised when she was awake. It made her seem younger. More vulnerable. More needing of his protection.

He'd yearned to brush the wayward strands of hair from her cheek and feel her softness under his fingertips.

Then the jangle of his desk phone had startled both of them. Clark had listened to the conversation and then dropped silently onto the main street.

And when Lois had emerged, he'd followed her, careful to maintain a distance that allowed him to watch her ... and protect her ... without being seen.

\*\*\*

It was cold, crouched behind a scratchy shrub watching Franklin Hodge wait. Cold enough that Lois wished more than once that she'd had the forethought to take her jacket as she'd dashed from Clark's office. She risked rubbing her palm down her upper arm and stifled a shiver. The soft whisper of the breeze in the leaves above was interrupted by another sound. A sound to her left — and much lower to the ground. Sheridan and Max Sewell appeared and purposefully approached Hodge. Lois turned on her recorder and removed the lens cover from the camera.

Unfortunately, this time they gathered too far away for her to hear more than murmurs. Lois raised the camera and began shooting. She was concentrating so hard on making out distinct words and capturing usable photos, she was caught completely off guard when first Max, then Sheridan silently collapsed. Four figures, dressed in black, materialised from the shadows of the trees.

Lois continued frenetically taking photos as the black figures scooped up Max and Sheridan and cleared them away. It was over in a matter of seconds and reminded Lois of the unfeeling competence of ants clearing away the crumbs from a picnic.

Hodge turned in her direction — in staccato through the camera lens. She got two clear shots of his face.

"Lois Lane."

She lowered the camera and was locked eyeball to eyeball with Hodge. She slipped the camera into her bag. "Franklin Hodge."

"Lois Lane," he countered. "What are you doing out so early?"

He didn't sound angry or threatening, but she saw he held some sort of a gun. "Fishing?" she squeaked.

"Give me the camera and your tape recorder."

Lois tightened her grip on her bag. "I know about the Sewells' attempt to blackmail the government."

"Give me the camera."

"I know they are claiming they have a spaceship and DNA evidence of an alien living on Earth."

He stepped closer. "Lois, Lois," he crooned. "A life lesson for you. Knowledge isn't power."

"I have evidence."

"Oh, Lois," he said in a patient tone he would use to address a cute, but extremely naive child. "What you know cannot hurt me or anyone I protect. Go ahead, write your story. But you will not have any evidence that involves me."

His calm certainty inflamed her. "How are you going to stop me?"

"Another life lesson, Lois," Hodge continued mildly. "There are three kinds of people. Those who have power — like me. Those who think they have power — like you. And those who don't even realise that power is the only viable currency — like your friends the Kents."

Lois shot him a look that she hoped left him in no doubt about where she'd like to shove his 'life lessons'. "What have

you done with the Sewells?"

"That is not your problem," he said. "Your problem is that I have one shot left in my tranquiliser gun. Either you give me the camera and the recorder and walk out of here to continue your life as a highly decorated reporter, or I use my last shot and Lois Lane simply ceases to exist."

"How do I know you won't shoot me even if I give you what you want?"

"Because there will be no need. You will have nothing of interest to me."

"I know you were here," she flared. "I know you are responsible for having the Sewells ... removed."

"But without the evidence, you can't prove it," Hodge said. "And by the time your little story hits the newsstand, I will have, again, crawled into the murky underground pit that harbours people such as me when we are not specifically needed to clean up someone else's mess." He stepped closer. "Now, give me the camera."

"But I *know* you were here," Lois asserted. "It will be in my story."

Hodge sighed. "And I will have a multitude of important people — from the White House down — who will testify that I was ... anywhere else."

Lois knew she was cornered. Hodge was armed. She was not. If she tried to run, he was probably faster. If she tried to fight, he was probably stronger. And he might just have more of the creepy black figures in the shadows waiting for his signal to dispose of her as they had disposed of the Sewells.

She reached into her bag, hating being forced to fold. Then, from nowhere a figure appeared and cut between her and Hodge. "Clark," she breathed.

"Stay behind me, Lois." Clark stepped closer to Hodge. "Give me the gun."

Hodge lifted the gun and aimed at Clark. "I *will* shoot," he threatened.

"No, you won't," Clark countered. "If you shoot me, you'll have no shots left and Lois will still have her evidence."

The two men confronted each other for a long, suspended moment.

"Lois," Clark said, his voice low and steady. "Turn around and walk out of here. Don't be afraid."

Lois started to argue, wanted to argue, but something in Clark's tone stopped her. Instead she forced her legs to carry her away from the refuge of his body and step towards the road.

]From behind her came the sounds of a scuffle. She turned.

Hodge had lowered his gun. Clark hadn't moved. "It's all right, Lois," he said. "He missed."

"He shot at you?" she shrieked.

"Go back to my office," Clark said in calm contrast to the panic coursing through her. "I'll meet you there."

\*\*\*

By the time she reached Clark's office, Lois was shaking enough that it took multiple attempts to get the key into the lock. Finally inside, she collapsed into his chair and closed her eyes. She could still see the black figures eradicating the limp bodies of Max and Sheridan Sewell. She bunched several tissues from the box on Clark's desk and dabbed at her eyes, grimly aware that she'd probably irreparably damaged whatever remnant of her makeup had survived the night.

The door swung open and Clark strode in. "Lois! Are you all right?"

She hurled herself into his arms.

He held her snugly, his arm cocooning her while his hand cradled her head against his shoulder. "You're OK," he soothed. "You're safe now."

His embrace calmed her. After a few moments, she managed to still her trembling and he released her. She ran her palms down

his shirt, giving in to the need to assure herself he hadn't been hurt. "You're OK?" she asked tremulously. "He really missed?"

Clark nodded.

"Where's Hodge now?"

"He went back to the hotel."

"How did you manage to be there? At exactly the moment I needed you?"

He shrugged with an almost-smile. "You hadn't come home."

"So?"

"So ... I was concerned."

She stared into his face, trying to discern if this fell under the auspices of country hospitality. Or if it were something more. She didn't know ... but she did know she still shuddered at the thought of what might have happened if Clark hadn't come looking for her. She wasn't sure she believed that Hodge would take the film and recorder and simply watch her walk away with a story to tell.

It seemed the most natural thing in the world to fall into Clark's arms again, and cling to him as she recalled how he'd stood between her and Hodge, how he hadn't flinched, even when threatened. She was so, so inexpressibly grateful that Hodge had missed.

Only when the length of time she'd been in Clark's arms was starting to stretch into awkwardness, did Lois back away. He sat her on his chair and gave her an encouraging smile as he crouched beside her. "Feeling better?" he asked.

Lois nodded. She reached into her bag and took out the camera. She rewound the film, removed it and handed him the camera. "I borrowed this," she confessed. "I hope that's OK."

Clark put the camera back where it belonged. "You'll need to write up your story," he said. "Do you feel like breakfast while you work?"

"I'm starved," she admitted.

"What would you like?" he offered. "I can get anything you want."

"In Smallville? This early?"

"You'd be surprised."

"I'd like coffee and something with chocolate."

Clark grinned. "I'll get it." He paused on his way out. "Lois, lock the door after me and stay here until I get back."

She'd cultivated a reputation built around her aversion to taking directions from anyone, but Lois was too tired to argue and too eager to begin her story to be tempted to make an issue of it. "OK." She stood and followed him to the door.

Clark waited for her and they met at the doorway. "Thanks," he said.

He closed the door, but no movement sounded until Lois had pushed home the lock.

Despite her eagerness to begin her story, Lois remained at the door until Clark's footsteps had faded away.

Clark Kent.

Undoubtedly, he was different to every man she'd ever met.

He treated her with absolute respect, but didn't cower to her.

He faced her head on, but he did it without threatening whatever it was inside her that had to prove she was in control.

But it was more than that.

It was how he affected her.

How she could no longer dismiss his gentlemanly manner as merely old-fashioned gallantry.

How, when he smiled at her, she could feel her insides slowly melting in his warmth.

Perhaps it was a good thing he lived in Smallville and she lived in Metropolis.

A very good thing.

\*\*\*

Clark was back before Lois had finished the draft of her story.

The coffee he carried filled the office with its aroma. She

leant back in Clark's chair and let the warmth from the cup seep into her hands.

It restored her equanimity.

And, if she were honest, so did Clark's presence.

He was staring into his coffee, deep in thought. He looked up. "Lois?"

"Uhm?"

"Do you trust me?"

She didn't trust anyone. But to say so would seem churlish. And she had a steadily growing suspicion that if any one person on earth could be trusted, Clark Kent might be that person. "Why do you ask?"

He leant forward, elbows propped on his knees, his expression grim. "McGlynn is desperate. He wants that roll of film and the tape and you have them."

Lois couldn't see what that had to do with trust. "So?"

"So you won't be safe while you have them."

"And?"

"And I'm not going to let him hurt you, but it's difficult when I don't know what's going on."

Lois looked past the glasses and into his brown eyes. Was this genuine concern? Or a play for her story, sweetly disguised as country naiveté? "You're a reporter, Clark."

"It's not your story I want."

"Then what do you want?"

"Your safety."

"Clark, no offense, but I don't trust anyone."

"I gave you my word I wouldn't take your story."

"But you're a reporter, Clark."

"I'm a person first and a reporter second."

Her dread of trusting anyone reared within her but, Lois realised with a jolt, her apprehension was less about losing the story and more about the inevitable disappointment when she discovered Clark was just like the rest. She started to speak, planning to brush him off, but somehow her words spilled out.

"McGlynn's real name is Franklin Hodge. I think he's a high-level government agent. I have investigated him for a long time and never been able to nail him. I still don't know if he's truly a good guy or a bad guy with terrifying power."

"He's always there, but you only notice him if you're actually looking for him. He ties up loose ends. Cleans up messes. All with ruthless, understated efficiency. Perry calls him the Invisible Aide."

"He was sent here to deal with the Sewells' blackmail threat?" Clark said.

"That's my take." Lois took a bite of the chocolate croissant Clark had brought for her. It was deliciously light and sweet. She chewed slowly, partly because it warranted her appreciation and partly because it gave her the opportunity to think. "You know," she said after she'd swallowed, "This smacks of a money-grab from two people who think they're a whole lot smarter than they are."

"They're not in Hodge's league?"

Lois shook her head. "Few are," she said. "But the fact he was sent here ... that gives credence to a story that otherwise shows every sign of fizzling into nothing more than a brazen ruse that was quickly and easily extinguished."

Clark stretched his legs forward, crossed them at his ankles and leant back. "You don't think there is anything to their story?" he asked.

"My gut says it wouldn't be impossible for DNA scientists who have worked at EPRAD to produce a spaceship and mutated genetic material."

Clark didn't respond for a long moment as they sipped their coffee in companionable silence. Then he looked up at her. "Why didn't you come back to the farm?"

"I did a pile of research and when I finished, I was so tired I

thought I'd rest a little," Lois said. "The next thing I knew, the phone rang and it was Jane. She wanted you but wouldn't say why, so I figured either Hodge or the Sewells had left the hotel. I saw Hodge in the main street."

"You followed him?" Clark asked, almost masking the tinge of rebuke in his tone. "Alone?"

She nodded, choosing not to respond to his disapproval. "The Sewells arrived, and they talked but I couldn't hear much. Then ..." She faltered, wrestling down the still-hovering memories. "Then they just dropped. Hodge must have shot them although there was no sound. Four people dressed completely in black carried them away."

"Did they give Hodge anything? Notes? Samples?"

"No, nothing. I couldn't hear what was said, but I taped it, so maybe Jimmy will be able to lift something useful."

"What are you going to do with the film?"

"Get it to Jimmy to develop it."

Clark straightened in his seat. "Lois, I want to hold them for now."

She sucked in a quick breath as every instinct screamed in protest. "Why?" she said, more sharply than she'd intended.

"Because Hodge wants them and if you have them, you are in danger."

"Give me your word you won't get the film developed."

"You have my word." Clark held out his hand.

Lois stared into his unwavering brown eyes. Then, she dropped the film into his palm. She took her recorder from her bag, released the tape and gave him that too.

"Thank you," Clark said as he put them in his pants pocket.

She glanced away, rattled by the relief so clearly evident on Clark's face. "I need to write my notes."

"I have to work on a story about the Celebration." He walked to the neighbouring desk and sat down.

"Clark?"

"Yes."

"Why did you stand between Hodge and me?"

Now she'd made him uncomfortable. Clark turned on the computer with far more deliberation than the task required. "Where else was I going to stand?" he said finally.

That settled it. He was definitely the nicest person she had ever met.

\*\*\*

Clark finished his story in less than two minutes. It was a fluff piece — not substantially dissimilar to what he'd written for the Sunflower Celebration last year — and for that, he was grateful. His mind was full of things far removed from festivities.

He'd detoured to Metropolis on his way to get their breakfast. He'd checked the Daily Planet and the National Inquisitor editions and to his overwhelming relief had found no mention of spaceships, aliens or blackmail.

He took a deep breath. Lois had the tapes and the film, but they proved only the attempted blackmail. There would be frenzied speculation, but without the Sewells or the capsule or any genetic evidence, it seemed possible that their story could, perhaps, be reduced to nothing more than an elaborately-concocted scam.

Publicly, anyway.

Privately was another matter.

Whoever Hodge worked for had the Sewells. It seemed likely they would have ways of forcing them to surrender their information. And that could include his spaceship and his DNA. If they believed there was an alien living on Earth, they wouldn't rest until they had found him. "Lois?"

"Yeah?" She continued clicking on her keyboard for a few seconds, then turned to face him.

"Do you know the home address of the Sewells?"

She hesitated, probably still weighing whether she could trust

him with another detail of her story. "Jimmy couldn't find anything," she said.

"Thanks," he said.

Lois slowly turned back to her work and Clark resumed his contemplation.

Had the Sewells' hotel room already been cleared?

He could go now. If anything implicated him, he could destroy it.

But that would mean leaving Lois alone.

Clark folded his fingers around the roll of film in his pocket, incredibly grateful she had agreed to let him hold it and the tape. Someone would come for the evidence — of that he was sure. He had to stay with Lois until they were delivered to Jimmy.

But that was going to involve some fast talking and extensive persuasion.

A sharp knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. "Package for the Editor," a voice called.

Clark glanced to Lois; she was engrossed in her work. And, in her world, a package arriving on Sunday morning was probably not worth so much as a raised eyebrow.

But it didn't happen in Smallville.

He opened the door. The package sat on the doorstep and whoever had delivered it was no longer in sight. Clark looked through the box and saw a bomb.

It was small, and from his quick inspection, not particularly powerful.

But still a bomb.

Hands a blur, Clark undid the package, lifted out the bomb, clasped it to his abdomen and waited. A couple of heartbeats later, it exploded.

"What was that?" Lois shrieked from behind him.

He quickly dropped what was left of the bomb into the box and brushed off his shirt. "Somebody's idea of a practical joke," he said, trying desperately to sound as if this were a normal part of Sunday morning in Smallville. "Probably left over from the fireworks last night."

He heard Lois's footsteps closing in on him and felt the warmth of her hand resting on the slope of his back. "Clark, are you hurt?"

He turned and saw her concern. "I'm fine."

Her eyes dropped from his face. She grasped his wrists and examined his hands. "Shouldn't you be burnt or something?"

Clark was torn between letting her hold his hands forever and constructing a response. "You think I held it?" he said.

She grinned and released his hands.

"How's your story going?" he asked.

She sat at his desk and swirled her chair to face him. "I'm stuck," she said dramatically.

"Stuck?" he said, allowing his amusement at her expression to lift his right eyebrow.

She responded with a grin. "It's possible the Sewells' story is total fabrication. It's possible it's part fabrication — they could have found something, a bit of metal or something that could be of alien origin. It's possible they believe what they are saying, but they've got it wrong. Or it's possible they got it right and there really has been an alien on Earth for nearly thirty years."

"Uhmm."

"I've never spoken with them. I have no way of locating them — not now. I have no way of knowing if their research is legit. I don't know if the government is taking them seriously because they believe the story or because they know that if their claims come to light, there will be some people who will believe it."

"Which makes it hard to write your story."

"Yes," Lois said. "It's hard to write what I know — the blackmail attempt and how Hodge dealt with it — without slanting the story one way or the other. If it's a hoax, what the

Sewells said is just another whacko space fantasy. If there is any truth to it at all, well, frankly, the blackmail story fades to insignificance."

A sudden idea hit Clark. "We could check out their hotel room," he suggested.

She shot from the chair. "Good idea!"

Clark lunged to reach her before she reached the door. "Together," he said firmly. "We could go together."

She turned to face him and Clark quickly removed his hand from her arm. She stared at him for a stretched moment as he waited for her to rip a couple of pieces from him for daring to interfere. Then she broke into a smile. "You sure you don't want my story?" she teased.

"I don't want your story," Clark reiterated. "But I don't trust you not to check to see if Hodge is in his hotel room."

She shot him a grin before turning and walking away.

\*\*\*

The door to the room the Sewells had occupied was unlocked. Clark followed Lois in and softly shut the door behind them. She quickly rustled through the empty drawers and closet; he scanned. Both came to the same conclusion. The room had been cleared.

"Let's try Hodge," Lois said.

"He's in Room 21," Clark said.

"I know," she said.

Lois knocked on Hodge's door. There was no response. She reached into her bag. Clark saw what she brought out and put a restraining hand on her arm. "No, Lois."

Her eyes flashed with defiance. "If it offends your precious country ethics, you can leave," she said.

"We can't break in — he could be in there."

"Then why hasn't he answered?"

"He doesn't want to talk to us."

"All the more reason why we should break in." Lois faced him squarely. "You had no problem with going through the Sewells' room," she challenged.

"We knew they weren't there."

"Look away," Lois instructed as she turned to the door. As she began to insert the tool into the lock, the door opened and she sprang back.

"Lois Lane," Hodge said wearily. "And Clark Kent."

"Franklin Hodge," Lois said, hand behind her back. "I have some questions."

Hodge sighed. "Why doesn't that surprise me?"

"Where are Max and Sheridan Sewell?"

"They have been taken to a government facility where their claims can be properly investigated ..." His eyes narrowed on Lois. "... by people authorised to do it."

"Is there a spaceship?"

"I don't know."

Standing behind Lois, Clark couldn't see the look she gave Hodge, but he guessed it could have withered steel.

Hodge, however, didn't flinch. "Any more questions?" he asked.

"Is it true what they said about there being an alien on Earth?"

"I don't know."

Clark heard Lois snigger with disbelief. "If you did know, would you tell me?"

"What would be in it for me?"

"You want those photos, don't you?"

"I will have those photos," Hodge said with calm certainty. "And the tape — before your story is printed."

"No, you won't."

"You know, Lois, your reputation is one of a savvy woman whose instincts for a situation are flawless. But this time, you're off — way off."

"You think I'm going to just hand you my evidence?" she sneered.

"I think you have no idea of the resources at my disposal and the lengths I will go to ensure I am not implicated in this situation."

"I'm not scared of you, Hodge."

"You should be," he said with a calmness that cinched Clark's stomach.

Lois turned so abruptly, she only just avoided crashing into Clark's chest.

She stormed down the corridor. Clark quickly followed.

Before he could be tempted to totally disgrace himself in Lois's eyes by handing the roll of film and the tape to Franklin Hodge.

\*\*\*

"What now?" Clark asked when they were back in his office.

"I need a shower," Lois said shortly.

"OK." Clark began to shut down his computer.

"And I need to book the earliest flight to Metropolis," Lois said. "I have to get the film and tape to Jimmy."

There was no way Clark was letting her get on a plane with the evidence. "The airport doesn't even open for another hour," he said. "You can call from home."

"OK."

As they walked to his car, Clark surreptitiously x-rayed, checking for any possible danger. Lois didn't seem to take Hodge's threats seriously, but Clark did. Whatever happened, he intended to protect her.

Lois was quiet as they drove home, which allowed Clark to crank up his hearing. He continued to scan visually, unable to shake his disquiet. They turned the last corner before the farmhouse and a large truck loomed ahead, travelling so fast, a collision was inevitable.

Clark reached for the roof of the car and lurched himself up and sideways, taking the car with him. They landed on the grass verge and bounced a few feet down a small dip. The truck passed in a haze of dust and small stones.

He turned to Lois, relieved she had no signs of obvious injury. "Are you all right?" he breathed.

She nodded, pale and shaken.

He fleetingly brushed his fingers down her arm. "Sure you're OK?"

She tried a shaky smile. "Just a few bruises. Are you hurt?" "No."

"What happened?"

Clark wished he dared take her hand and hold it. "I don't know, it happened so fast."

"I thought he was going to hit us for sure."

"So did I."

"How did we get off the road?"

"Must have hit a pothole."

"Must have been a monster pothole."

He manufactured a smile. "That's country roads for you." But his light tone covered a mountain of apprehension. Hodge was not a man to be taken lightly. "Lois, I don't think this was a coincidence."

"What do you mean?"

"We have the film and the tape," he said. "Someone tries to run over us."

She blanched. "You don't think it was an accident?"

"He was on our side of the road and going way too fast."

"But only Hodge knows ..."

Clark raised his eyebrows, inviting her to connect the dots.

Lois put her hand to her mouth, then laughed nervously.

"You're reading way too much into this, Clark," she said. "The driver simply wasn't concentrating. I'm flying back to Metropolis today. And I'm taking the film and tape with me."

"I think you should give them to Hodge."

"Don't be ridiculous, Clark," she snapped. "That might work in Smallville, but the Daily Planet doesn't just ... capitulate. Neither do I."

"Please, Lois."

"Drive, Clark," she said in a tone that finished the conversation. "I have bags to pack and a plane to catch."

\*\*\*

Leo Nunk wasn't sure if he'd finally developed a reporter's instinct ... or if today was simply the luckiest day of his life.

It had started with an idea.

Check the birth details of everyone on Smallville's electoral roll. If an alien *had* arrived in the supposed spaceship, his birth wouldn't be recorded.

Nunk doubted the story of the crazed scientists had even a grain of truth. But a few thinly-veiled allegations would give his story the zest his editor demanded.

On a whim, he'd started with Clark Kent — the two-bit reporter from the local rag. The young upstart who had somehow managed to attach himself to Lois Lane like a teenager fuelled by a testosterone overdose.

Five minutes ... five minutes of research later and he'd discovered there were no records of Clark Kent's birth. No records of Martha Kent ever having given birth.

There was almost certainly an explanation — he was adopted, or had been born in another country. But run-of-the-mill explanations were not Nunk's style. Not when he had precisely the sensationalistic angle he needed.

]From the cafe, he'd seen Lois Lane enter the hotel ... with her lapdog trailing two steps behind.

He'd ordered himself a coffee and watched the front of the hotel as he drank it.

When Kent had emerged from the hotel, Nunk had taken photos. Kent had looked around, which had given Nunk several opportunities to get clear shots of him.

Then, coffee in hand, he'd taken his brand new Apple QuickTake camera and uploaded the photos onto his computer. An hour of creative butchering had resulted in a shot that was still recognisably Clark Kent, but indistinct enough that it could be computer rather than camera generated.

Nunk then wrote the story of how a middle-of-the-night meeting in the hotel room of Max and Sheridan Sewell had allowed him to procure the predictive picture the scientists had developed from the alien's DNA.

Leo Nunk hit 'send' and sat back with great satisfaction.

Undoubtedly, his story would totally eclipse anything Lois Lane had.

And, as a nice little bonus, he had put the lapdog back in his small-town kennel.

Nunk's only regret was that he wouldn't actually get to witness the moment Mad Dog Lane realised she had been scooped.

Unless ... he still had an hour before his flight home to Metropolis.

\*\*\*

Lois packed her suitcase in Clark's room. She'd left him on the porch. He'd said very little since they'd arrived at the farmhouse. She figured he was sulking because she wouldn't give Hodge the film and tape. And because she'd wanted to pick the lock of Hodge's hotel room. And because she wouldn't agree to delay her flight home.

She heard the phone ring and a moment later, Martha knocked on the door. "Lois, it's for you."

"Thanks."

Lois took the phone. "Lois Lane."

"Leo Nunk."

"What do you want, Nunk?"

"I have some very interesting information for you."

"Why would I be interested in any information you had?" she said disdainfully. "And if, by some fluke, it was legit, why would you be telling me?"

"Because I've already done my research," he sneered. "So my story will be in tomorrow's paper while you play catch-up." He laughed, heavy with scorn. "I love it when the Inquisitor scoops the Planet."

Lois sighed. "Spill it, Nunk."

\*\*\*

Lois leant against the bedroom wall, her head reeling, her heart racing and her mouth arid. It could not be true.

It could not be true.

It could not be true.

But Nunk had been so infuriatingly certain of the mind-blowing revelations he had casually dropped on her.

If he were right, this story had just exploded way beyond big. It was bigger than anything she'd ever written. Bigger than anything *anyone* had ever written.

But it was Nunk.

Nunk, who rarely bothered to include a sliver of truth in his scurrilous snatch for headlines.

But what if it *were* true?

What if she proved it to be true?

Would she print it?

She was Lois Lane ... she stopped at nothing to get the story.

But this one would come at a price. A price so big that for the first time ever, she wasn't sure she was willing to pay.

Lois walked unsteadily to the farm gate. Nunk had said he would meet her there with proof — a low-quality copy of his 'original'. She wanted to believe he wouldn't come. She wanted to believe that his evidence was fabrication.

Moments later she was holding a copy of the predictive computer image generated from the DNA of the alien. It was grainy and low-resolution, but one thing was undeniably clear.

It was Clark Kent.

\*\*\*

Clark's heart constricted whenever he thought about Lois flying home. He was convinced Hodge would ensure the film and the tape never reached Metropolis.

At some stage — between the farm in Smallville and the Daily Planet office in Metropolis — Hodge would strike.

Clark considered insisting he accompany Lois. He was reasonably confident he could keep her safe, but less sure he could do it without blowing his secret.

He also considered offering to fly it to Metropolis himself. But she wouldn't let him go without her — not if she thought he was using conventional air travel.

Clark rolled his fingers across the film, still in his pocket. One quick clench of his fist and all the evidence would be gone ... destroyed. But Lois had trusted him to keep it safe.

He realised he was cornered. He had find a way to tell Lois he could fly her and her evidence to Metropolis and guard the Daily Planet office until her story hit the newsstands.

She would know his secret. She would have the power to expose him. She would know he wasn't normal.

But it was the only way to guarantee her safety.

Clark heard a sound at the door and turned to find Lois staring at him with an unreadable expression on her face. "Lois," he said. "What is it?"

She didn't answer.

He looked into her eyes and what he saw there escalated his terror. "I need to tell you something, Lois," he said.

"Get your parents," she said. "I need to talk to all of you."

\*\*\*

Martha Kent sat at her kitchen table. It had been the scene of many of the happiest moments of her life. It was here she had

held baby Clark, such a short time after they had lifted him from his spaceship. It was here they had celebrated so many of his birthdays. It was here she had listened as he'd told them about school, and sport, and college, and work.

To her left was Jonathan; to her right, Clark. Across the table was Lois Lane.

Under the table, Martha's hand was buried in Jonathan's much bigger hand. She could feel his tension. She looked at her right hand, clenched to a fist, on the table. Deliberately, she relaxed it, watching as her fingers uncurled.

Martha trained her eyes on Lois, but she could see Clark on the edge of her vision. His face was bleak.

The younger woman took a big breath. As it expired, Martha had a sudden thought — [just get on with it] — propelled by a burst of nervous impatience.

"Leo Nunk of the Inquisitor says he got to the Sewells last night, sometime between their two meetings with Hodge," Lois said. "He says they sold him a picture. This is a copy." She took it out of her bag and unfolded it. "He says the Sewells claim it is a predictive image of how the baby in the spaceship would look now."

She flattened it on the table and pushed it towards them. Martha saw the image of her son and closed her eyes as horror carved a crevice through her heart. She heard Jonathan's quick intake of breath. She opened her eyes, needing to see Clark — his only response was a dismissive glance towards the picture.

What did Lois want? Was she asking for a price to kill the story? How much could they raise against the farm? But it wasn't only Lois. Nunk already knew; Nunk already had the photo.

The photo of her son.

"Nunk says there is no record of Clark's birth," Lois continued. "He says there are no records of Martha Kent ever giving birth. No adoption papers. No change-of-name papers. Nothing to prove Clark Kent exists."

Martha felt Jonathan's hand grip tighter. Many times through the years, they had talked about exactly this; had worried and fretted that one day, this storm would hit them, threatening everything they held dear. But neither of them had any idea how to obtain a birth certificate for a birth that had never been registered.

"What are you going to do?" Martha said. "What is Nunk going to do?"

"Nunk is going to publish this picture in tomorrow's Inquisitor with the allegation Clark is the baby alien who came to Smallville in a spaceship in 1966."

Clark looked like a man whose world had crashed around him. He regarded the table with such intensity, Martha couldn't help checking for smoke.

Jonathan stared ahead. Martha met Lois's eyes. It was time to make a statement. "My son is *not* an alien," she said with quiet certainty.

"Why wasn't his birth registered?" Lois asked. She appeared interested; concerned even. Martha could see no sign of a rabid reporter who thought she was closing in on the biggest story of her career.

Was it possible she didn't believe Nunk? Even with the photo as evidence?

"Lois," Clark rasped, his voice almost unrecognisable. "I have to tell you —"

"Clark!" Jonathan scythed across his son's words. He put his hand on Clark's shoulder. "It's time to tell the truth," he said gently.

"I know," Clark ground out. "I'll do it."

"No," Jonathan said, in a tone that defied argument. "I'll do it."

Jonathan met Martha's eyes and gently squeezed her hand. He faced Lois directly. "I went to school with a girl called

Chrissie. She came from a poor family; her parents were alcoholics. She was bullied at school and I tried to stand up for her when I could.”

Martha felt the nervous tension pull across her temples. They had planned this — her and Jonathan. They had spent hours discussing and analysing and pulling apart and reconstructing. Now she felt like it was the opening night of a big production — the night when you truly discovered whether all of the preparation was going to stand or fall.

“Her family moved away when she was sixteen,” Jonathan said in his slow, gentle way. “I left school, married Martha, worked the farm. We had everything, except for one thing. We couldn’t have children.”

Martha felt a tear erupt and threaten to plunge down her cheek.

“A few years later, in the middle of the night, someone came banging on our door,” Jonathan said. “Chrissie was there, holding a small bundle in a blue blanket. She was hysterical with fear. She said her life was in danger, that bad men wanted her dead and she was terrified they would hurt her son.”

Jonathan glanced sideways to his wife. His face said, ‘Do you remember that night, honey?’ His eyes said, ‘We’ll get through this.’

“What happened?” Lois asked.

“She begged me to take him and say he was ours,” Jonathan said. “She had birthed him by herself in an alley. She didn’t register his birth because she was afraid any link with her would lead these ‘bad men’ to him. She didn’t even name him. She’d spent two months hiding and running to me where she felt her son could be safe.”

“We tried to talk Chrissie into staying,” Martha said. “We begged her to let us help her, but she was adamant that her son could only be safe if he had no connection to her.”

“How did you explain suddenly having a baby?” Lois asked.

Martha scrutinised Lois, searching for a clue as to whether she was finding this believable.

“We made up a story about a distant cousin and his wife being killed in a car wreck,” Jonathan said.

“Clark was the impossible gift we had desperately hoped for,” Martha said, real emotion thickening her words.

“Where’s Chrissie now?” Lois asked.

Jonathan hauled himself from his chair and went to the bureau. He opened a drawer and took out an old book. From it he withdrew a yellowed news clipping and offered it to Lois.

As Lois read the 1969 story from the Smallville Press, Martha sifted the words through her mind — in sketchy detail, it reported that former Smallville resident, Chrissie Dawson, had been brutally bashed and murdered, and her body found in a New York dumpster.

“Our son is *not* an alien,” Martha repeated.

“But we can’t prove it,” Jonathan said. “Because, as Nunk discovered, Clark has no official identity.”

Lois turned to Clark. He seemed oblivious to everything. “How have you managed to get this far?” she asked him. “Do you have a passport? A driver’s licence?”

He dragged his eyes from the table. The life had drained from him, leaving only a shell. He opened his mouth, but no words came out.

“He has both,” Martha said, a tinge of defensiveness creeping into her tone. “Identity wasn’t such a big issue in the sixties. Not in Smallville.”

Lois toyed with the clasp of her watch. Martha would have given much to know what she was thinking. But to seem too eager for Lois’s acceptance of their story would only incite her reporter’s instincts.

Eventually, Lois spoke. “The Sewells’ story, factual or not, has much greater impact with a tangible threat to inflame

people’s paranoia,” she said. “They needed a face, an identity — a male about the right age, living in Smallville. What if, with a little research, they discovered Clark was the perfect target?”

“Did they mention this photograph to the government agent?” Jonathan asked.

“Not that I heard,” Lois said. “So there is also the possibility that Nunk fabricated this to glitz up his story. It certainly wouldn’t be the first time he’s embellished the facts.”

Lois picked up the picture and studied it. The tight bands of tension pulling through Martha’s head loosened just a little. There was nothing yet to suggest Lois found their story unbelievable.

“We know it is possible to work backwards from a photograph,” Lois said. “I didn’t think it was possible to work forwards from DNA. Of course, the Sewells’ reputation is such that it *might* be possible for them.”

“What are we going to do?” Martha asked, aware her breath was caught in her throat.

Lois didn’t answer at first. “We could print the truth now,” she suggested. “I doubt whoever killed Chrissie is still a threat to Clark.”

Martha strangled the relief that was flooding through her. Lois believed their story. If a top city reporter believed them, there was a chance others would too.

“That might be best,” Jonathan said slowly.

“But why would anyone believe us?” Martha said. “We have nothing to prove what we say.”

“Too many years have passed to try to find someone who knew Chrissie,” Jonathan said. “Someone who could corroborate our story.”

“They can’t actually take Clark away,” Martha said. “Can they?”

Clark said nothing. He still stared at the table. Martha could see the ripples of tension through his cheek and jaw.

“When it comes to protecting your family,” Jonathan said with conviction, “You do whatever needs to be done.”

Martha saw Lois glance at Clark. With what? Concern? Empathy? Martha wasn’t sure.

With an abrupt movement, Lois snatched her bag and took a pen and paper from it. “Write down the details of your story about your cousin,” she said as she pushed them across the table. “Their names, the date of Clark’s birth, the place of his birth, the date and place of their deaths, your names and the date you adopted Clark.”

Martha sensed Jonathan’s hesitation. Then, he took the pen and wrote for a few moments. She watched over his shoulder. When he was done, Jonathan returned the paper to Lois.

She stood and her chair on the wooden floor grated through the morose atmosphere. “Mind if I use the car?” she asked. Lois paused long enough to smile encouragingly at Martha and Jonathan. “If anyone asks you anything, say nothing,” she said. “I’ll be back soon.”

The door closed behind her. The motor roared loud in the silence of the kitchen.

Jonathan squeezed his wife’s hand. And together, they waited.

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Clark had been glaring at the table for what seemed like forever. He knew Lois had driven to Smallville — he’d tracked the sound of the motor. She was probably writing her story right now.

The story about the alien living in Smallville.

She was an investigative reporter; she wasn’t going to swallow his father’s feeble attempt to cover the truth.

Not that she had much to investigate. His father had *written* the details of their first fake story and *handed* them to her.

For the first time in his life, Clark was angry with his father. So angry he didn’t trust himself to speak.

That they had lied to Lois sat leaden in his gut. She would know. He doubted she would ever speak to him again. Which might be a good thing. Her scorn would be intolerable.

And if she never realised the Chrissie story was a lie? It would be one more secret to add to the mountain of reasons why they could never be together.

He felt trapped like a wounded, dying animal.

“Clark?” his mother said gently.

Eventually he was going to have to say something. “Mom, would you leave? Please. I need to speak with Dad.”

His mom paused. In his peripheral vision, Clark saw his father nod to her. Quietly, she stood and left the room.

“Why?” Clark groaned, knowing he was frighteningly close to the edge of control.

“Because we were pushed into a situation where we had no other options.”

“It’s not the truth.”

“I *did* have a friend called Chrissie,” Jonathan said. “She *did* have a tough childhood. She *did* leave Smallville. She *was* murdered.”

“But she *wasn’t* my mother!”

“She was —”

“You had this planned, didn’t you?” Clark accused darkly.

“Since the day I read about Chrissie’s death.”

“So her death was nothing more than a convenience for you?”

“Of course not.”

“Then why?” Clark demanded, knowing his anger was becoming more apparent in every word.

“What’s the alternative, Clark?” Jonathan asked quietly. “We tell them we found you in a spaceship?”

“At least I wouldn’t have to live with lies and secrets.”

“You wouldn’t *live* at all, Clark,” Jonathan said. “Not really. You would lose your life and your mother ... your mother would lose her son.”

Clark heard the emotion snag his father’s voice and his anger melted like butter on a hot griddle. Clark looked up, wanting eye contact and was startled to see tears glistening in his dad’s eyes. “Aw, Dad,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

Of all the people who could have found him, none could have loved him more profoundly than Jonathan and Martha Kent.

“I’m sorry too, son,” Jonathan said. “I should have been able to protect you from this.”

“But Dad,” Clark said gently. “We don’t have any more proof for this story than we had for the first one.”

“That’s not the point, Clark.”

“Then what is?”

“This one can’t be disproved ... and that might just be enough to tip the balance in our favour.”

“It makes you and Mom look like liars.”

“Do you think I care about that, son?” For the first time, there was a flare of emotion in his father’s voice. “Do you think I care one iota what anyone thinks of me?” he demanded. “I want you and your mom happy and safe. Nothing else matters.”

They were silent for a long time.

“This is going to be big, isn’t it?” Jonathan said and Clark heard the fear vibrate through his words.

“Yeah,” he replied. “But Dad, whatever happens ... wherever this goes ... we protect Mom as much as we can.”

His dad smiled ... actually smiled. “You got it, son.”

\*\*\*

Lois paused after parking Clark’s car in front of the hotel. Her immediate reaction had been to believe Jonathan Kent’s story. He ... and Martha ... and Clark ... they all seemed so genuine ... so trustworthy.

But now, away from the quiet resolve of Jonathan’s gaze ... now her reporter’s cynicism kicked in and she wasn’t so sure. If it

were that simple, why had Clark looked so distraught?

Although, she did acknowledge that having his history dissected like that would have been agonizing.

Lois remembered how Clark had stood between her and Hodge. She doubted he had given a second thought to defending her. Perhaps he just wasn’t so good at defending himself.

Martha had looked like her life depended on Lois believing their story.

But it couldn’t be proven one way or the other.

What was clear was that Clark and his parents were about to have their lives completely changed by Nunk’s allegations.

Unless ... and that was where Lois came in.

Hodge had said she didn’t have any real power. She would show him she could deal with the likes of him.

She reached to open the car door, but stopped abruptly as realisation erupted through her mind.

Clark had met the Sewells. He had gone to their hotel room and given them the complimentary tickets to the Sunflower Celebration. If they had that photo — if they had developed it — they would have recognised him.

They would have told Hodge that not only did they have evidence there was an alien living on Earth, but they could identify him.

Therefore ... it was very unlikely Nunk’s photograph had come from the Sewells. Not originally. Perhaps, wanting to shore up their blackmail attempt, they had taken the photo after meeting Clark. Or perhaps Nunk had.

Either way, Nunk’s *evidence* proved nothing.

With a smile, Lois opened the car door.

The Kents were honest country people. They — all three of them — were innocent victims caught up in someone else’s greed.

But she could get them out of it.

Lois smiled and went into the hotel.

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Lois knocked on Franklin Hodge’s door at the hotel, not completely able to believe that she was about to give away her proof that the Invisible Aide had been right in the middle of this.

Within seconds, it opened and he faced her. “Ms Lane,” he said with lilting sarcasm. “This is a surprise.”

“About the life lesson,” she said without preamble. “You said power is the only viable currency. You also said you have it.”

His blue eyes flickered with interest. “Go on.”

“I have something you want,” Lois said. “If you really do have power, you can get something I want.”

“What do you want?”

Lois handed him the paper with the details Jonathan had written. “Make this official.”

Hodge read the paper.

Lois continued. “I want a birth certificate, parents’ death certificates, adoption papers, hospital records changed. I want it water tight.”

“And I get the photos? And the tape?”

“Yes.”

“How would I know you don’t have copies?”

“The film hasn’t been developed yet. I don’t have the facilities here to copy the tape.” Lois eyed him. “But ultimately, you’re going to have to trust me.”

Hodge hesitated for only a second. “Be here at five o’clock today.”

“How do I know you’ll have the documents?” Lois asked.

“There’s no reason not to have them.”

“Are the Sewells dead?”

“No. They will be debriefed and then be assisted to build new lives.”

“With new names?”

“That would seem expedient.”

"Can I quote that?" Lois asked. "The bit about being helped to build new lives?"

"If you quote Buddy McGlynn, not Franklin Hodge."

"Is there a spaceship?"

"Quite possibly there is *something*. I don't have any details."

"Did it bring an alien to Earth?"

"Do you have any evidence that he exists outside the minds of the Sewells?"

"No," Lois said. "Do you?"

"No."

She turned to leave, but stopped. "Did you organise for a truck to kill me this morning?"

"I already told you that you would not have evidence for your story. At least, no evidence involving me."

"So you *did* try to kill me?"

"I did what needed to be done to serve the greater good," Hodge said mildly.

"What would *need to be done* if I were to take the film to Metropolis?"

He shrugged. "The options are many. A plane disaster. A car-jacking as you drove to the airport. A fire at the Kents' farm."

Lois felt the nausea billow through her insides. "You are evil."

"No, Ms Lane. I just do what—"

She turned from him and stormed away, hating his cool composure, abhorring his indifference to the methods used to achieve his ends.

If it weren't for Clark, she would find a way to get those darned photos published just to put a dent in Hodge's smug superiority.

\*\*\*

The door to the office of the Smallville Press was unlocked. Lois walked in and found it a buzz of activity. A tall woman came over to her. "Can I help you?" she asked pleasantly.

"I'm Lois Lane, Daily Planet. I'm working with Clark Kent on a story and I've been using his computer."

"Ms Lane, I've read your work." The woman smiled. "Sit down, I'll log on for you."

Lois completed her story. How a brilliant, but misguided couple expounded the reports of a UFO sighting in Smallville in 1966 into an unsubstantiated story of a baby alien who, now grown, lived amongst us. How they speculated he had unknown intentions and possibly frightening means. How they attempted to blackmail the government into securing their silence for one million dollars. How their supporting evidence — spaceship, strand of hair, DNA — had not been located.

She completed the story with a quote from Buddy McGlynn, government agent.

She gave the byline as 'Lois Lane, with Clark Kent (Smallville Press)' and sent her story to Perry.

Then, Lois wrote a separate story detailing how Leo Nunk, reporter for the National Inquisitor, was claiming he had acquired a predictive image from the Sewells and used it to fabricate an easily-refutable story claiming Clark Kent had no proof of identity.

"Hodge had better get those papers," she muttered as she hit 'send'.

It wasn't going to win her a Pulitzer.

It might not even make the front page.

She doubted Perry would consider it fair recompense for her trip.

But the Kent family would have the proof they needed and Clark ... Lois smiled. Clark would no longer look so distraught.

And, as a not-insignificant bonus, she had trumped Nunk.

\*\*\*

Martha and Jonathan were still at the kitchen table when Lois came in. They looked up with a thousand questions, but she asked

hers first. "Where's Clark?"

"On the porch," Martha replied.

Lois went to the porch. He was leaning against the post, head forward, shoulders slumped, both hands deep in his pockets.

"Clark?"

He jumped and turned.

"Give me the film and the tape," she said.

"No, Lois," he said. "You don't realise how dangerous Hodge is."

"Oh, yes I do." She held out her hand. "Trust me, Clark."

"Lois, Hodge will kill you to stop you using those photos."

"Oh, I intend to use the photos," she said. "But I promise I will not let him kill me."

Clark looked like he was ready to beg her not to take the film and tape to Metropolis. "Lois," he said unevenly. "I can't stand the thought of you being hurt."

Lois felt herself being drawn to him. She wanted to hold him so badly, her arms ached. She remembered how he had looked at the table when she had told his family about the picture. He must have hated that, Lois thought. Must have hated being so forcefully reminded that before Martha and Jonathan Kent, he had such scant knowledge of his heritage.

And now, his lack was being used to set him up as a target for any paranoid space buff or whacko astronomer.

Clark had looked like a condemned man.

He still did.

The injustice hit her. Hard. He, of all people, didn't deserve this.

And she so wanted to hold him.

With considerable effort, she maintained her distance. "If I promise I won't get hurt, will you give me the film?"

"Only if I can come with you."

"You can't." No way was she going to risk spooking Hodge by doing anything he wasn't expecting.

Clark stared at her stubbornly, his hands firmly entrenched in the pockets which, as far as she knew, still held the film and the tape.

OK, she was going to have to be brutal. The only question was which weapon.

She could use intimidation — involving both barrels of a Mad Dog Lane special. But anger was the last thing she was feeling. She wasn't even sure she could fake it.

She could use the fact that she was a woman and he was a man. But Clark was so principled he would probably look away if she undid a few blouse buttons.

She could use his conscience — combined with a few feminine wiles for good measure. Lois mustered her tears — not difficult, particularly when she took in the pain on his face — and looked at him soulfully. "I *trusted* you, Clark," she said. "You *promised* you wouldn't steal my evidence."

With a look of crushed surrender, he lifted the film and tape from his pocket and dropped them in her outstretched hand.

"Promise me you won't follow me," she said.

He didn't want to give his word. Lois stood her ground.

"Promise me," she demanded.

"Lois—"

"Promise me," she said, her tone hard and cold.

She saw him yield. He nodded, his face distorted with fear and anguish.

Lois put the tape and film in her bag and started to go, but hesitated. She couldn't just walk away from him and leave him looking the way he did.

She stepped to him and gently cradled his face with both hands. She slid past his jaw, down his throat and stopped on the ridges of tight muscle at the base of his neck. She massaged him gently. "Trust me, Clark," she whispered. "I have a plan — and it doesn't involve getting hurt."

She waited until his brown eyes had found hers and smiled her assurance.

Then she reached up and placed a soft, lingering kiss on his cheek.

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Franklin Hodge gave Lois the envelope. She removed the documents and checked them. They didn't feel new. In fact they looked and felt like they had been carefully stored away for over twenty years.

She took the film and tape from her bag and gave them to him.

Hodge closed his fingers around the evidence. "Nice doing business with you, Ms Lane."

She couldn't say the same.

"Ms Lane?"

"Yes?"

Hodge contemplated her, looking less assured than she'd ever seen him. "I'm not evil," he declared. "But my job is to protect the bigger picture."

It was a cop-out and didn't merit a response. She had more important things to do than salve Hodge's conscience. Hugging the envelope to her body, Lois turned away and hurried to Clark's car.

Her 'Invisible Aide' story had dissolved into the Smallville dust.

But right now, she felt not the slightest regret.

\*\*\*

Martha was making coffee when Lois rushed into their kitchen. "Where's Clark?" she asked breathlessly.

"Still on the porch," Jonathan said.

"Get him," Lois said. She went to a surprised Martha and wrapped her in a big hug.

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Clark Kent's mind was in turmoil. He was simultaneously trying to deal with the stark reality of the front page of tomorrow's Inquisitor and the dreamlike memory of Lois's hands and lips on his face. One would break his mother's heart. The other would probably break his.

Then he heard the return of his car.

Lois was home. He felt a portion of his apprehension ease away. She was safe.

A few moments later, his father's voice echoed from inside the house. "Clark! Clark! Lois is home and she wants to see you."

Clark followed his father into the kitchen. Lois was hugging his mother, whose wobbly smile shone through her tears.

Lois seemed to float across the floor to him. She held out an envelope with a look of triumph that lodged in his heart with such force, he could deny the truth no longer.

He was in love with Lois Lane.

He'd known it ... of course he'd known it. But now he could no longer push it, unexamined, to the far compartments of his mind.

He loved her.

And it was a love that had fired quickly, but would burn for the rest of his life.

He took the envelope she offered.

"Open it," she urged with a glorious smile.

He didn't want to open it — he wanted to indulge in a careful exploration of her eyes, her smile, her cheeks, her throat ...

Clark forced himself to drop his eyes to the envelope. He pushed back the flap and took out the documents. He saw a birth certificate with the names CLARK JEROME and felt the unfamiliar sensation of pooling tears.

He blinked furiously and managed to refocus. He sifted through the documents. When he saw the adoption papers and the names Jonathan and Martha Kent, his eyes swam again.

Lois gently eased the papers from him and handed them to

Martha. Clark registered his mother's unbelieving delight before Lois descended upon him bodily and he was captured in her hug. His parents embraced before moving as one to him and Lois. He reached over and kissed the top of his mother's head and met his father's eyes.

"Thank you," he mouthed.

Jonathan stretched his arm around Lois and pulled his son closer.

When the hug dissolved, Lois's hair was dishevelled and her cheeks were damp and her mascara had smudged a little. Her brown eyes shone with exhilaration. "Amazing what can be achieved with a roll of film and an audio tape," she whooped.

So she had done a deal. "You gave up your evidence?" Clark said, dazed. For me?

Lois shrugged. "The story didn't need Franklin Hodge."

Clark needed to thank her, but mere words just wouldn't be enough. He wanted to hold her ... hold her so incredibly close and promise her his heart forever.

But ...

"Give me two minutes to freshen up," Lois said. "Then we're out of here."

He mindlessly returned her smile. "Going where?" he asked, knowing he would willingly follow her to the ends of the earth.

"We have a story to write."

"We?"

"I'm not going to write your story for the Smallville Press by myself."

"What about your story for the Daily Planet?"

"Already done," she said. "Perry said he was willing to share with the Press."

Clark chuckled sedately. Inside, he was dancing rapturously to the music of her smile. "So long as we're home for supper," he said with mock severity. "Mom's making apple pie."

"Is it good?" Lois asked.

"I used to think it was the best taste in the world."

\*\*\*

Early the next morning, Clark landed in a deserted alley in Metropolis and walked to a newsstand. He bought the morning editions of the Daily Planet and the National Inquisitor. He unfolded the Planet. He registered the headline and the story, but it was the byline that captured his attention.

He grinned.

She was incredible.

\*\*\*

Lois woke, stretched and smiled as her memories of last night floated back. It had been one of the most wonderful nights of her life.

Martha had outdone herself with supper. The apple pie was as good as Clark had promised. But as delicious as it was, the food came a poor second to the love-filled atmosphere of family togetherness. And that atmosphere had stretched to encompass Lois. She hugged her pillow tighter.

Later, after Lois was in bed, Martha had come in. Her words of gratitude still brought a lump to Lois's throat. She knew they were not empty words. These people didn't feign family. It was too important to them, too central to their very existence.

A knock sounded on her door. "Lois, it's Clark. May I come in?"

She pulled a sweater over her pyjamas and sat up. "Come in, Clark."

He entered with a tray and a bundle of newspapers. He put the tray at the foot of the bed and handed her the National Inquisitor.

"How did you get this?" Lois asked.

"I know someone who flies between here and Metropolis."

She looked at the front page. The computer image of Clark shared equal prominence with the headline 'ALIEN INVASION'.

Lois skimmed the story. As she had expected it was long on speculation — how did this alien plan to take over the world? Were there others? Was everyone in Smallville a part of the conspiracy? Why had Martha and Jonathan Kent been chosen by alien powers to bring up the alien baby?

"Oh, Clark," she said. "This is awful."

But he didn't seem too upset. He handed her the morning edition of the Daily Planet.

"SCIENTISTS' BLACKMAIL ATTEMPT FOILED, by Lois Lane with Clark Kent (Smallville Press)," she read.

He sat on the bed. "I thought you told me to keep my hands off your story."

She smiled happily. "I figured you deserved a mention."

"Thanks," he said with a big grin.

She liked him. A whole lot. She wanted to bask in the brilliance of his smile. But she was going back to Metropolis today. "Is that breakfast I see?"

He handed her the tray. "Coffee and your favourite chocolate croissant."

"I never would have believed Smallville had such wonderful croissants."

"There's more to Smallville than is immediately obvious."

"So I've seen."

"Lois?" Clark's husky tone caused her heart to somersault.

"Uhm?"

"Thank you." He raised his hand, hesitated, then lightly stroked her cheek with the back of his fingers. "It's not nearly enough ... but I want you to know I mean it with my whole heart."

His sincerity was something she would remember later ... when she was alone ... when she wasn't being bombarded by gentle, eloquent eyes. For now, she needed an out. "You're not happy about the lie though, are you?"

His mouth tightened. "No, I hate that we lied. Lois ..." He enfolded her hand in both of his. "Lois ... I'm so sorry."

"For what?"

"That we lied ... that we involved you in the lie."

She put her other hand on top of his. "The truth couldn't be proved and you needed to counter Nunk's story yesterday or it would have seemed credible. People would always have questions about you."

"I don't care what other people think."

"Your parents have lived in this small community all their lives," Lois said. "If we have saved them from conjecture, the lie was worth it."

She could see he still wasn't convinced. She lifted the jumble of hands and fingers to her mouth and kissed the back of his hand. Clark smiled. He had one powerful smile. Lois looked beyond his glasses. It would be so, so easy to lose herself in those melting-chocolate eyes.

But she was a hard-nosed reporter from Metropolis.

He was a soft-hearted farmboy from Smallville.

She would slowly and painfully suffocate in Smallville.

He would be eaten alive in Metropolis.

She didn't have time for romance.

She certainly didn't have time for a long-distance relationship.

She extricated her hands from their combined web. "Eat your breakfast, Kent," she said with a smile to soften her words. "I have a plane to catch."

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Clark watched as the plane receded to a dot, taking Lois back to Metropolis.

He'd known her three days and his life would never be the same.

If only he could have taken her into his arms and flown her to Metropolis. If only he could have said, "I am from another planet.

I can fly and do other unusual things, but I love you, Lois Lane and I'm desperately hoping what I feel matters more than what I do."

Clark turned away. If only ...

There was so much he couldn't do.

But one thing he could do — he could call Perry White and ask if he had read his résumé.

Because Clark knew one thing with absolute certainty.

Without Lois Lane, his life was empty.

THE END