

Trusting Me, Trusting You

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Rated PG — 13

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Summary: Clark Kent has been trapped in a cell for seven years. Government agent Lois Lane is tormented by grief and traumatic memories. She is assigned to guard the alien prisoner, and together, Lois and Clark find the strength to travel the long journey to healing, trust, love, and freedom.

Disclaimer — Recognisable characters from the Lois and Clark universe are not mine.

Warning — The PG 13 rating is for implied violence, adult themes, and occasional mild language. There are WHAMs.

Thanks to my trio of wonderful BRs — IolantheAlias, (who read this entire story for a second time as the GE!!) Deja Vu, and Lynn S.M. — thank you for your time, thoughts, insight, and encouragement. Also many thanks to the readers of the Fanfic Message Boards for their enthusiasm and interest in this story.

A/N — I know nothing about how a secret government agency works. (If I did, I probably shouldn't have written this fic!) It could be that you will read something in the story and figure it wouldn't work that way. However, it's also possible that you could read something that did actually happen in real life and draw the same conclusion! Please realise that I'm not trying to accurately portray any government agency (good thing, that!) — I'm trying to tell a story that I hope will prove enjoyable to other FoLCs.

Trusting Me, Trusting You Prologue

~ August 2, 1987 ~

Jason Trask stepped into his office. Directly ahead of him, the wide one-way viewing-window beckoned him forward, but he paused long enough to lock the door behind him before advancing. He slipped the bunch of keys into his pocket, reflecting on the magnitude of his achievement.

Vindication tasted so very sweet.

His work, his dedication, his belief had led to this triumph, and he intended to savour every second of it.

He moved to his desk — positioned centrally in front of the window — and looked down into the prison below. It was a small rectangular room, bleak and eminently inhospitable. There were no windows to the world outside. There was no furniture. The walls were dirty off-white, and the bare concrete floor was dull grey.

The only aberration was the shoulder-height stub of wall that jutted into the room on the far side of the door. It gave a modicum of privacy to the tiny area jammed into the corner that housed the only 'amenity' — a toilet; nothing more than a bowl — it didn't even have a seat.

Until today, this cell had been empty.

Ready. Prepared. Waiting.

But empty.

Until today ...

The capture had been meticulously planned and flawlessly executed.

Two years of dedication and determination — beginning the day Jason Trask had been assigned to investigate the discovery of a small spaceship — had led to this.

Trask had overseen the transportation of the spaceship — under

the cover of darkness — to the innocuous-looking and remote farmhouse in Nevada that had become his home during the long months of research. He had examined every inch of the alien craft and catalogued it in exacting detail.

From the start, he had been convinced that the spaceship had brought alien life to Earth. But finding evidence of that life had proved frustratingly difficult. As the days had stretched to futile weeks and the weeks to barren months, Trask had come to the realisation that he was pitted against an evil and insidious enemy. Alien forces had sent an infiltrator — someone to live among humans, to pretend to *be* human — while they collected information and developed a strategy for the successful invasion of Earth.

The size of the spaceship had indicated a young passenger. In order to establish the approximate age the alien would appear now, Trask had needed to determine when the spaceship had landed on Earth.

His most significant clue had been a wildfire that had devoured miles of land to the north of Smallville back in 1957. Initially, Trask had wondered if the spaceship had started the fire, but that path of investigation had closed down when old newspaper reports had revealed the cause to be a spark from a backfiring tractor.

However, the fire had razed the field where the spaceship had been subsequently found. The lack of burn marks on the craft was inconclusive — it had entered the earth's atmosphere undamaged — but the fact that he had found no trace of ash anywhere on the craft had led him to believe that its arrival had been within the past thirty years.

Therefore, his most likely target was someone who looked like a man in his twenties. A man in his prime. A man grown and ready to strike.

The successful outcome of his previous mission had given Trask sufficient credibility that when he took his conclusions to the higher-ups they had listened. Over the years, he had perfected the art of helping others to see the truth, and he'd convinced those in authority that alien occupation of Earth was a far more pressing danger than any posed by recalcitrant foreign nations. After some debate, the higher-ups had allowed the assignment to continue.

A year and a half into the operation, Trask had had to accept that the spaceship held no definitive clues to the identity, whereabouts, abilities, or appearance of the alien.

By then, he had been hoping that the superiors had all but forgotten about the existence of his operation. It was the ideal situation for him — he received his pay, and he was free to pursue the most urgent issue facing his planet without being bothered by demands for updates or asked probing questions about the exact nature of his discoveries.

However, Trask hadn't known how long the status quo would remain, and every day, he had dreaded the call that would summon him to headquarters to be informed that his mission had been discontinued.

In desperation, he had returned to the site where the spaceship had been recovered — a field in the boondocks of Kansas — and had begun a solitary and painstaking search of the area.

And then, he'd found it. Or rather, them. Multiple rocks — green in colour and glowing eerily as if lit from within.

With great excitement, Trask had taken them back to his lab, and by the time the call had finally come, he had proven that the rocks were alien in origin.

The higher-ups had issued stern warnings that his time was limited, but they had allowed him to continue.

The rock had no effect on any human, but over the months, Trask had formulated the hypothesis that it might affect the alien. Fearing that the impatience of the higher-ups would result in him being re-assigned and the spaceship and rock being relegated to a forgotten depot, he had decided on his boldest move.

Despite his inclination to work alone, he'd recruited Neville Moyne — a ruthless and uncompromising man Trask had known from a previous mission — and together they had begun canvassing the area

near where the spaceship had landed.

Trask couldn't predict the effect of the rock but — if the alien had taken on human form — it possibly represented the only way to distinguish the invader from the people of Planet Earth.

And how simple it had been.

At the fifth house, a farmer's wife had answered their knock and invited them in for coffee. They had previously devised a cover story that they were conducting a survey on opportunities for America's youth. The friendly woman had called in her husband and the son who was home from college for the summer. The moment the son had stepped into the room, he'd collapsed, writhing and clutching his chest in agony.

The woman had rushed forward, and Moyne had restrained her. Despite his pain, the alien had lurched at Moyne. Trask's gun was out and fired in less than a second. He knew his aim had been true, but the bullet had been ineffectual.

In that moment, Trask had been sure of his triumph. He had uncovered a beast who was impervious to bullets and who experienced a severe reaction to the alien substance — together, they provided abundant evidence of his identity.

The three of them — the alien and the two traitors who had sheltered him — had been hauled away, leaving the half-full coffee cups on the table.

Trask had cast off the traitors to someone else; he had no interest in them. His business was with the alien.

Now, Trask stared down into the formerly empty cell as the intoxicating rush of victory sluiced through his veins. The alien lay in the middle of the concrete floor — exactly where Moyne had dumped him.

Traditional weapons — Trask carried a variety — had been useless against the alien, but the green substance reduced him to a quivering pile of weakness. As they had travelled to Metropolis in the back of a white van, Moyne had more than justified Trask's decision to include him in this mission. The assistant had been unrelenting in ensuring the alien had no possible opportunity for escape.

After many long hours of travel, they'd arrived at Bessolo Boulevard in Metropolis. Tucked behind the warehouse was an unused — and mostly forgotten — compound that had been grudgingly provided in response to Trask's demands.

Moyne had dragged the unconscious alien into his new — and final — abode. Certain that he held every advantage, Trask had ordered that the green substance be removed from the cell. He wanted the alien to recover enough to be aware of his vanquishment.

The evil invader *would* die — there could be no other outcome if the people of Earth were to be saved. But Trask, having spent two years searching for the savage alien, now intended to make his death long and slow and agonising.

He sat at his desk, opened the brand new logbook he had prepared in anticipation of this moment, and picked up a pen.

The alien still hadn't moved.

August 2, 1987

I have prevailed against the alien threat to the people of Earth. Today, I found, captured, and conquered the monster who was sent here as a precursor to the invasion of our planet. As I write these words, I observe him through the viewing window. His body glistens with still-damp blood from the wounds that were necessarily inflicted to guarantee our safety during the precarious business of transporting him to his cell.

Of pressing importance is the need to deny him any opportunity to communicate with his co-conspirators in this evil plot. I must find answers to the questions regarding the scope of his powers. I must know my enemy thoroughly.

I will show him no mercy. He is not human. He is an animal — a dangerous, vile, depraved animal — who knows nothing but brutality and violence.

His mission was to conquer. His destiny is defeat.

Junction

Part 1

September 28, 1994

~~ Wednesday ~~

There were fifteen minutes until the agreed meeting time.

Fifteen minutes for Daniel Scardino to gather his thoughts.

Although it wouldn't be completely unexpected if she arrived early.

He'd never met her, but he knew her by reputation. Even in an organisation so secret that people had died rather than admit to its existence, it was hard for someone so brilliant to remain anonymous.

She wasn't yet thirty — but her string of accomplishments was long and impressive.

She was bold, intuitive, assertive, single-minded, uncompromising, and fearless.

In short, she was the consummate secret agent.

She had needed all of those qualities just to survive her previous assignment.

She should be dead.

The first indication that something had gone awry was the non-appearance of a communiqué scheduled at the halfway point of the twelve-week operation. They had waited and hoped — hamstrung by distance, the volatility of the situation, and the need to ensure that their enquiries did not increase the danger to their agents.

Then, a month later — when there had seemed no possible outcome other than a double tragedy — they'd received information that one of their agents was alive and had reached a US embassy.

Daniel shook his head in disbelief. She'd escaped. She'd survived. Unaided, she'd gotten herself to safety.

And — thanks to the protocol that families were not to be given any information until either the conclusion date for an operation had passed or a body had been recovered — her viability had been preserved.

She still had her life *and* she still had her career.

She'd been back in the States for a month now and was insisting that she was ready to return to work — hence their meeting.

It was precisely because of the standing of the woman that Daniel had doubts. The assignment he was going to offer her wasn't worthy of her abilities. She could do so much more.

But, for reasons she had chosen not to divulge, she had requested a Metropolis assignment. Perhaps she was tired of the constant travelling. Perhaps the recent events had subdued her compulsion to flirt with danger. Perhaps she no longer felt the need to test herself against the most evil and ruthless of people.

Whatever her reasons, she had been firm in her resolve that she wished to remain in Metropolis for an indefinite period.

Currently, there was only one such assignment available.

Daniel wasn't convinced she would take it. What possible motivation could there be for her to accept? It was nothing more than one of those embarrassing situations that happened in an organisation such as theirs. Jason Trask had — in the uptight and borderline-neurotic world of secret government agencies — detected something he believed represented a significant threat. He had followed through, and now, with the passing of time, they were left with a situation that was impossible to annul but had been all but forgotten by everyone except those directly involved.

This morning, Daniel had spoken to Anstruther — who had been the assistant to the higher-up who had authorised this mission nearly a decade ago. Anstruther hadn't liked it then, and he wanted nothing to do with it now.

He'd been unusually candid in his condemnation of Trask as a man who took delight in the less savoury — although sometimes unavoidable — aspects of their job.

But none of that mattered now.

Two nights ago, Trask had stepped between two parked cars and onto a busy city street. He'd been hit by an oncoming bus and had died at the scene. There would be an investigation — that was standard procedure following the death of an agent — but from what Daniel

had heard, it was a straightforward case of a lack of concentration leading to a disastrous outcome.

Daniel's intercom buzzed, and his secretary informed him that Lois Lane had arrived.

He stood from his chair and opened his office door to greet her. She was beautiful.

And strikingly feminine.

He shook her hand, said all the right words, and inwardly concluded that looking so petite and delicate was probably an advantage she had learned to exploit.

She sat in the chair, folded one impeccably shaped leg over the other, and faced him with a polite, aloof expression. Daniel became aware of how long the silence had stretched, and he smiled, hoping to ease into their discussion. She was the sort of woman who captured your attention and didn't let go easily. His knowledge of her achievements intensified his fascination.

She didn't return his smile. "Do you have an assignment for me, Mr Scardino?"

"Please," he said. "Call me 'Daniel'."

She nodded, but her face remained impassive. It was easy to see how she could be so effective in what she did. She looked like a soft, gentle, easy-target woman that most men in this business would believe didn't represent any sort of challenge to them.

Her list of successful missions suggested they were rarely any sort of challenge to her.

"I have an assignment," Daniel began. "But I have reservations about offering it to you."

"Do you think it is beyond my abilities?" she asked coolly.

"No," he quickly assured her. "Far from it. In fact, I believe it would be a waste of your talents. But there is nothing else available that would accommodate your request to be stationed in Metropolis for a lengthy period of time."

Daniel paused, giving her the opportunity should she choose to reveal the reasons behind her request — a request that she had to know would stall her career.

She said nothing, so he continued.

"Some time ago, one of our agents, Jason Trask, believed that Earth was under threat from an alien invasion."

Her expression didn't flicker with even a hint of reaction.

"His investigation was extensive — some would say extreme — and he eventually succeeded in capturing the alien."

"Is the prisoner an alien?" she asked. "Or merely someone different enough to elicit prejudice?"

"I have never seen the prisoner," Daniel admitted. "He's locked away, and no one goes there other than Trask and his assistants."

The perfect arches of her eyebrows lifted. "It is possible that we have an *alien* being, but no one is interested?"

"There was interest when Trask first started sprouting his theories, but over time, many in authority have dismissed it as nothing more than his overactive imagination."

"How did he get authorisation for the capture?"

"Trask's convictions were unshakeable. He could be a very persuasive person. And fear of the unknown is a great motivator."

She eyed him steadily, as if she'd discerned that there was more to the story.

"There was an incident early in Trask's career," Daniel said. "He was given an assignment that was beyond his capabilities and skills, and the results were ... unfortunate. For him."

"So, because of that, those in authority kowtowed to his whims?"

"That's probably a reasonably accurate assessment," Daniel admitted.

"How do we know that the person locked away isn't a human being who provoked Trask's bigotry?"

"You don't believe in alien life?"

"What I believe is irrelevant."

Daniel gestured to a tattered and bulging folder that lay on his desk. "According to Trask's notes, the prisoner displayed

characteristics that cannot be considered human."

"Such as?"

"He's phenomenally strong. He can levitate. He can see through walls. He can move faster than the eye can follow."

"Did anyone else witness these things? The levitation, for instance?"

"No other witnesses are mentioned. Trask noted the incidents during the early days of the incarceration. They aren't mentioned in later notes."

"So either Trask believed they were no longer worth noting, or the phenomena stopped?"

Daniel nodded and then continued. "The prisoner is impervious to bullets. According to an early entry in Trask's log, the alien attacked Trask, and Trask's men shot him. The bullets merely ricocheted off him."

"Was he wearing a vest?"

"No. He was naked at the time."

Ms Lane gave no evident reaction to this information. "Anything else?" she asked.

"Trask writes of the prisoner as if he's more beast than human. He's feral, dirty, animalistic, uncommunicative, and unintelligent."

"Has he been studied? Have we tried to learn from him?"

"Trask believed there was nothing to learn from such an unevolved barbarian ... that he has no aptitude other than a fundamental instinct for destruction."

"But surely, if he *has* come from another planet, he must know of, or have access to, technology in advance of ours."

"Trask was unsuccessful in obtaining anything useful from the alien."

"We haven't even tried to study him ... to study his physiology?" Ms Lane asked. She'd leant forward a few degrees, as if something had sparked her interest. "To see if he can communicate, albeit in another language? To test his abilities? To discover how he can be bullet-proof? We haven't tried to work *with* him?"

"Trask's only objective was to ensure that the captive didn't use his frightening strength and extraordinary speed to attack the Earth and its people."

"So, on the one hand we believe he is smart enough to defeat six billion humans, and on the other, we believe there is nothing we could learn from him?"

Daniel felt the sting of her question — as he was sure was her intention. "Trask believed that he is the infiltrator — the first of many."

His answer was weak, and they both knew it. "Surely *someone* was interested enough to bypass Trask and find some answers?"

"Only a handful of people are aware of this operation," Daniel said. "It was added to my portfolio two years ago when O'Brien retired. From the little I've managed to establish, it seems that every research proposal was quashed by Trask's belief that the alien is an ignorant and dangerous savage."

"How long since he was captured?"

Scardino swallowed uncomfortably. "Seven years," he said.

For the first time, the woman's response was spontaneous and unbridled. "*Seven* years?" she exclaimed. "He's been in custody for seven years?"

Scardino took refuge in the notes, not wanting her to detect his annoyance that a predicament of someone else's making had been dumped onto him, meaning he now had to try to justify it to the very cool — and very beautiful — Ms Lois Lane. "It's become one of those problems that plague this agency," he said. "No one knows exactly what to do now. No one really cares. Only Trask was totally convinced that he posed a threat, but he has killed two men, so he can never be released."

"The prisoner has killed?" she asked evenly.

"Yes, twice. Both were assistants who went into his cell without protection."

"What sort of protection?"

Daniel picked up a notebook and flitted through it. “There’s a substance that Trask refers to as ‘Achilles’. He believed that it originates from the alien’s home planet.” He looked up from the book. “This is the log that Trask kept since the capture in 1987. The loose papers in the folder are Trask’s speculation and theories post-capture. There are three boxes of research notes from before then — detailing how he concluded that there was an alien on Earth and how he tracked him down. If you’re interested, I can get them to you.”

She nodded tersely. “What are the logistics of his imprisonment?”
 “There are three assistants — Moyne, Longford, and Shadbolt. They work nine-hour shifts around the clock, with the overlapping hours used to do anything requiring two people. The remaining time, they guard his cell.”

“Do they actually enter his cell?”

“Yes — to take him food and other necessities. After the first death, Trask made a rule that no one was to enter the cell without the alien substance.”

“Achilles?” Ms Lane questioned, and Daniel thought he detected a hint of possible amusement in her lovely brown eyes. “How does it offer protection?”

“It has a debilitating effect on the alien — it reduces his strength and nullifies his other abilities. The men carry it with them when they enter his cell — and that ensures their safety.”

“What would be my role?”

“You would oversee the operation. Your primary responsibility would be to ensure that the alien remains in captivity. The three assistants would be directly answerable to you. Also, you would be expected to cover a shift should they be unavailable for any reason.” Scardino closed the notebook and returned it to the folder. “You would have complete control over the alien — if you wanted to make an attempt at communication, it would be your call.”

“But, really, all I have to do is keep him in his cell?”

“Yes.” Daniel winced internally at her tone. As he’d thought, this was way below her level of competence. Perhaps now was the time to emphasise the hazards of the mission. “Although I should warn you that the alien is not to be taken lightly. I have seen the photos of the men he mauled to death. They provide conclusive evidence to support Trask’s belief that, without the Achilles substance, the alien reverts to a frenzied killer.”

“But with the Achilles, it’s safe?”

“I wouldn’t advise entering the cell at all — even with the Achilles.”

“Sounds like a cushy job.”

She wasn’t going to take it. She was probably offended that he had even offered it to her. “If he were to escape, the ramifications could be horrific,” Daniel said. “It is imperative that we avoid the scenario of a deranged and powerful killer bent on revenge.”

“Why has Trask left the assignment?”

“He died two days ago.”

She paled, but tried to make it less conspicuous by pushing her hair behind her ear. “Did the prisoner kill him?”

“No. Trask walked onto a road — and was hit by a bus.”

That information brought no reaction. “When do I start?”

“You’re going to accept the assignment?” Daniel asked, trying not to sound dumbfounded.

She nodded. “I need to be in Metropolis for personal reasons for the foreseeable future. If this is the only assignment that allows me to stay here, I’ll take it. Where is the prisoner kept?”

“There’s a disused warehouse on Bessolo Boulevard. Behind the warehouse is a small compound.”

Ms Lane stood and held out her hand for the file. “Thank you, Mr Scardino.”

“I don’t need to tell you that everything in this file is highly confidential — that even the suggestion of alien life on Earth would create a public panic.”

“And the suggestion that we have imprisoned an innocent man without trial for seven years would create a media frenzy,” she noted

dryly.

“Unfortunately ... yes.”

She took the file and walked from the room.

Daniel sighed. She was far too good to be babysitting a monster.

~ Sunday ~

Lois lurched, her breath ripping from her lungs in short stabs, and her heart pummelling a tattoo against her sternum.

She stood from the couch and slowly scanned her apartment, needing to assure herself that she was here.

Not there.

Since she had returned to the States, it had been happening a lot.

She would suddenly awaken — not from sleep, but from an almost trance-like state where the horrors lurked on the edges of her consciousness.

Then would come the moment when they would burst through her fragile barriers and swamp her with paralysing fear.

Lois took one pace forward and then another.

She put her hands on her hips and swivelled slowly, stretching her neck and back muscles.

She ran her hands through her hair, knowing she would mess it, but not caring.

Her breathing had almost returned to normal. Her heartbeat would follow. Eventually.

She needed something to occupy her mind.

It was too early for bed. Although time wasn’t the deciding factor in determining when her day ended — exhaustion was.

Without sufficient levels of exhaustion, sleep would turn away like a rejected suitor.

And she would lie awake ... vulnerable and unprotected against the ferocious attack of her memories.

She needed something to do.

The offerings on television were too inane.

Books required a level of concentration she no longer possessed.

Friends ... she grunted bitterly. Friends were a luxury not afforded to people in her job.

And anyway ... she didn’t want to think about friends.

Because that would lead to thoughts of her best friend ... and those memories were tightly locked away, chained and bound in the furthest, darkest compartment of her mind.

Lois snatched the tattered folder from her counter and sank into her couch.

She forced herself to open it.

It held many loose sheets of paper — all covered with small intense handwriting. It looked as if someone had hastily scooped up the haphazard contents of a desk drawer and bundled them into the folder.

There was also a thick notebook — labelled ‘Log — August 1987 —> ‘.

Lois put the folder and sheets on the couch, trying to ignore that her paltry dregs of interest were draining away like a dam with broken banks. Clearly, this whole subject had enthralled Trask and driven him to devote his time, energy, and thoughts to the oppression of the captured individual.

Lois had no such interest.

For the first time in her career, this was merely a job — a way to pay the bills while she gave some attention to what her mother had termed ‘her long-neglected family responsibilities’.

She had hoped for a desk job — preferably a position requiring minimal contact with people and little in terms of commitment or emotional involvement.

A position where she could try to recover. Gain some perspective. Decide whether her overwhelming lethargy was a passing phase or whether she really had lost all desire for the challenge of the job.

If she were honest, she’d lost all desire for life.

She was bone-weary.

Drained.

Dry.

Callous.

She opened the cover of the notebook.

The first page contained a list of the significant events since the alien — if indeed he were an alien — had been captured.

Lois ran her finger down the page.

Deller killed — November 2, 1988.

And ten or so lines further down ...

Bortolotto killed — February 15, 1992.

Lois flicked through the log to November 1988.

November 2, 1988

He killed today.

Deller and Moyne entered the cell, and the animal attacked Deller.

Despite the valiant efforts of Moyne, the kill was swiftly and expertly accomplished.

Deller had become lax in obeying the rules — fatally so. He entered the cell with Moyne, but only Moyne was armed with the Achilles rod.

The monster saw his chance and took it.

A picture formed in Lois's head — a graphic picture of a victim's lifeless body being mauled in a fury of manic hatred.

She strangled the image until it finally faded away. She took a calming breath. She flicked further into the notebook and found the entry dated February 15, 1992.

He killed again.

Moyne and Bortolotto entered the cell to take him food. As they placed the food on the floor; he sprang on them from behind, killing Bortolotto instantly. Moyne ran for his life — and watched, horrified and helpless, as the beast mauled the broken body of his prey.

I will take revenge for the deaths of two fellow humans. I will be untiring in pursuing justice. The animal must suffer and die for what he has done.

Revulsion swirled through Lois's stomach and pushed bitter tendrils into her throat. She swallowed them down. She couldn't let them win ... couldn't let the evil and destruction and hatred and violence overpower her.

She must be aloof. Distant. Unaffected. Detached.

She wouldn't let them win.

She opened at a random page near the front of Trask's log and continued reading.

December 22, 1987

The ceiling, walls and viewing window of the cell were lined with lead today. Now, I can observe him, but he cannot observe me — or anything beyond the four walls of his prison.

He is trapped.

The savage brute continues to be openly hostile and opportunistic when looking for means to harm humans. Our attempts to interact are met with surly and rebellious rejection. I have ordered that no one is to enter his cage alone or without the protection afforded by the Achilles rods.

He continues to fight us and clearly seeks a way to escape and resume his mission to conquer the Earth. Means of control include limiting his food and water and withholding all mental stimulation.

Regular discipline sessions are deemed necessary.

His body might appear to be invulnerable, but I am confident that his spirit can be broken.

Lois turned a few more pages.

March 1, 1988

Today, I strengthened my position over the enemy. We exposed him to the Achilles for a full twelve hours overnight, leaving him weak and defenceless this morning. The surgery was performed by Moyne and Shadbolt.

January 13, 1989

The slow tide of victory continues to turn my way. The beast no longer attempts to attack the assistants when they enter his cage. At the sound of the door opening, he turns towards the far wall and cowers like a frightened kitten.

He hasn't given up his daily physical exercise, and consequently, his body remains in sound condition despite the ignominy of his life.

I will not rest until his spirit is broken and his body is beaten to a pulp. The safety of the human race depends on the emphatic defeat of this alien invader.

December 6, 1991

The battle to overcome the threat to our planet continues. The brute is a despicable beast — his ability to survive such squalor confirms that he is nothing more than a dirty, contemptible animal. He doesn't deserve to live.

His body is haggard, and death is slowly advancing. His stamina and will to dominate are frightening, but justice will prevail, and our planet will be saved from this alien aggressor.

Although he hasn't shown even a spark of resistance in many months, I have ordered the resumption of discipline sessions. This battle against evil has consumed almost ten years of my life, but it is a worthy fight, and victory is both necessary and much-anticipated.

September 19, 1994

Victory draws ever closer.

Through a planned and precise program of mental and physical disintegration, the monster has been reduced to little more than a shell. His heart still beats, but surely that cannot continue for much longer.

His resistance is broken. His death is near.

I am confident I have won.

Lois shut the notebook.

Actually, you didn't win, she thought. *You're dead, and the one you worked so fervently to overpower is still alive.*

Why was that?

How could any individual still be alive after seven years of the sort of treatment documented by Trask?

Had Trask tried to kill him and failed?

Or had Trask relished his position of absolute power so much that he'd deliberately prolonged the assignment?

Lois had heard of Trask before. His name was whispered among agents occasionally — he was considered a loose cannon whose scant achievements had been embellished enough that, when spoken of in high places, they had impressed those who made the decisions. On the ground though, there were few who wanted to work with him.

Flicking through the papers, Lois found one with a floor plan that probably represented the area that was to be her domain until her future became clearer.

It contained three rooms. One half of the floor plan was designated as the 'cell'. It was rectangular in shape with the only irregularity being a stub of wall that jutted into the room a few feet from the only door. There was no external window — only one into the 'viewing room', which was on the mezzanine level and doubled as her office.

Under the office was a small room labelled the 'staffroom'. The door of the cell opened into this room, and Lois surmised that it was probably where her three assistants passed the time as they guarded the alien.

She tossed the sheet of paper onto the coffee table and moved to her fridge. She took the chocolate fudge ice cream from the freezer and plucked a spoon from the drawer.

Tomorrow, she started her new assignment.

She wasn't looking forward to it.

She wasn't dreading it.

It was just something that needed to be done.

She would ensure that the prisoner did not escape — that definitely would not look good on her record — but beyond that, she had no interest in him, or his predicament, or discovering exactly what he'd done to cause such hatred in Trask.

~ Monday ~

The next morning, Scardino met Lois on Bessolo Boulevard and took her behind the warehouse to the much smaller structure squeezed into the alcove created by the surrounding tall buildings. Scardino

unlocked the door, and they proceeded past a small flight of steps and into the room where her three assistants awaited her.

Scardino made the introductions, and Lois nodded, instinctively assessing each man in seconds. Shadbolt was cool and distant. His grip was limp when they shook hands. She figured he objected to having a woman as his boss. The fact she was half his age just made it worse.

Longford was apathetic — he wanted to avoid anything requiring effort, collect his pay cheque, and mark time until his retirement.

Moyne was a small, wiry man in his mid thirties. He smiled. Welcomed her. Offered to help her with information — or anything else she needed in acclimatising to her new position. Offered to take her into the cell now — or any time she wished.

Lois didn't trust him.

Not for one moment.

He smelled of stale cigarette smoke.

Once the introductions were done with, Scardino gave her a bunch of four keys, and made a hasty departure for another appointment. Lois climbed the stairs and unlocked the room that would be her office. She stepped in, turned on the light, and surveyed her new workplace. The top half of the far wall was one-way glass — giving her an unrestricted view into the cell.

To the right was a padlocked closet that ran the length of the side wall; to the left were three rows of shelves, positioned about head height. Above the shelves was a long, narrow window — the only avenue for enticing natural light into the room.

It was covered by a thick, black curtain.

Lois put her bag on the floor, dragged the chair backwards, and clambered onto it. She pushed back the curtain, and a cloud of dust drifted into the air.

She dropped lightly to the floor and looked around the room. The desk, the shelves — even the trashcan — had the appearance of having been untouched since Trask had walked out for the final time. He hadn't been a particularly tidy man. Three cups — all with dark coffee stains around the rim — stood like guards amidst the clutter of papers that covered the desk.

Although someone — probably Scardino — had come to get the folder.

The office had the same heavy miasma as a funeral home.

Or perhaps that was just her.

With a long, slowly released breath, Lois lifted her head and looked forward. She could see the far wall of the cell, but not the occupant.

She stepped forward, wishing this didn't feel so much like gawking at a carnival freak show.

The room was stark and bare.

Nothing.

No bed. No table. No books. No blankets.

Behind the shoulder-height stump of wall was a tiny area that she guessed housed the toilet.

But there was *nothing* else.

Lois's hand covered her mouth as her eyes were drawn to the prisoner.

He was striding towards her along the side wall of his enclosure.

Was that what he did to fill the empty hours? Walk to nowhere?

Regardless of his state of mind seven years ago, it was entirely possible that by now, his imprisonment had damaged it beyond repair.

And that was without Trask's other 'efforts' to break the spirit of his captive. The 'discipline sessions'? What did they entail?

The prisoner wore nothing but a pair of ragged, ill-fitting shorts.

His hair was long and reached down his back in a matted mess.

His beard was straggly and hung from his face like a dark shag carpet.

His body was gaunt. His bones protruded from under skin that almost seemed translucent.

He reached the corner and turned. Lois gasped at the sight of his back. A large, oval-shaped blotch covered the area from between his shoulder blades to the lower levels of his rib cage.

It was red and angry-looking. Lois wasn't sure if it were a burn or

a graze, but she was sure that he hadn't done it to himself. If he had been driven to self-harm — and she'd seen that sort of behaviour in people who had endured far less than he had — his wounds would be on his legs, forearms, or perhaps his stomach.

His cell was empty. He had no means to inflict damage on himself.

He reached the back wall and turned again. Lois leant forward. On closer inspection, she could see that his body was covered in welts, gashes, and other signs of physical abuse.

Lois sank heavily into the chair, closed her eyes, and grappled for some perspective.

She had witnessed torture before.

She had seen the results.

But this ...

There was something appallingly perverse in what Trask had done here.

She needed to observe dispassionately. Lois rubbed her eyes, hooked her hair behind her ear, and forced herself to look again.

He was very tall. His posture was straight and his shoulders broad. That, and the lack of grey in his hair, gave him an illusory impression of youthfulness. He was probably over fifty, but in different circumstances, he could have appeared to be a decade younger.

His hair hung limply over his forehead, and his beard covered his cheeks and jaw, making it difficult to distinguish individual facial features.

She hadn't known what to expect. Trask hadn't included a physical description in his notes. The prisoner *looked* surprisingly human. Uncivilised and unkempt ... but still human.

Once, her natural inclination would have been to leap in — to go down into the cell just to see how he reacted to her presence. Would he identify her as being a new person? Could he differentiate between human faces?

Would he be aggressive? Indifferent? Cautious?

Once, she would have burned with curiosity and been unable to rest until she had ferreted out the answers to a myriad of questions.

Not now, though.

Was that good thing? Was that what her mother would have called 'common sense'? Or 'maturity'?

Or had despair and disillusionment and cynicism crept upon her years before their time?

Lois didn't know.

She probably *should* care, but she didn't have the energy.

She probably *should* have accepted their offer of counselling.

She probably *shouldn't* have pulled off such a convincing act of wellness during the compulsory session with the shrink.

Should she go into the cell now? The prisoner was awake.

She decided against it.

That was another change.

The young, carefree version of Lois Lane hadn't thought too much about risk — not until after the event, anyway. But now — she certainly didn't want to end her life and her career on the floor of a cell at the hands of an alien. Possible alien.

So, she would observe — from the distance and safe sterility of her office.

Part 2

An hour later, Lois had divided the contents of the shelves and desk drawers into two categories — personal and business. She packed Trask's belongings into boxes, reflecting how much could be deduced about a person from his possessions.

Trask had kept only one photograph in his office. It was a snapshot of a humble house with a neat, if uninspiring, garden. The camera — she presumed — had been held at an angle. Either that, or the house was in mortal danger of sliding down the slope.

He liked a drink — bourbon whiskey being his preference.

He read books. His collection included fiction of the murder mystery genre and non-fiction books about medieval times.

He enjoyed crossword puzzles. He'd hoarded at least ten books of puzzles. All the puzzles he'd attempted had been completed — except

for one — presumably the one he had intended to finish the following day.

There was something unspeakably sad about the solitary unfinished puzzle. Sad — and disconcerting. Death had lurked at arm's length for years, but nothing had ever rammed home her own mortality as definitively as a crossword puzzle half-completed by a man she'd never met.

Lois shut the book and added it to the box.

She straightened and glanced through the viewing window.

The prisoner was lying on the floor on his stomach. As Lois watched, his arms straightened, and his upper body — ramrod straight — lifted.

He was doing push-ups?

An alien? Doing push-ups?

That suggested a whole lot more 'humanness' than anything she'd read in Trask's notes.

It suggested a fundamental knowledge of the body — that it required exercise. It showed an understanding of cause and effect. Could it be indicative of the ability to plan ahead? Was it possible that, despite all of Trask's efforts and the length of time that had passed, the prisoner hadn't given up the hope of freedom?

Or perhaps, by now, it had become his habit to cling desperately to anything that even hinted of normalcy.

He suddenly stopped, lumbered to his feet, and shuffled to the back left corner of the room. He sat down — with his right shoulder propped against the wall. His head turned, and his eyes fixed on the door of his enclosure.

Lois leant forward and looked down and to her right. The door opened, and Shadbolt entered. He carried a thick rod in one hand. It was about four-feet long, and it had a roughly hewn chunk of glowing green rock secured to the top of it. In his other hand, he held a small plastic mug containing a liquid that looked like water.

Lois's eyes swung to the prisoner.

His shoulders had curled inwards, and his head had dropped into his hands. Lois grabbed the binoculars she had found in Trask's drawer and put them to her eyes.

The prisoner's fingers were buried in the entanglement of his hair. His knuckles protruded like snow-capped mountains, and the muscles of his forearms bulged with tension.

Shadbolt placed the cup on the concrete floor and left the cage.

The door shut, but the prisoner didn't move. Lois waited, her eyes trained on him, her breath stalled. Finally, his shoulders heaved, and his head slowly lifted from his hands.

Lois raised the binoculars again and focussed on his face.

Pain was engraved into his posture, seeded in the tightness of his mouth, etched into the strained muscles of his neck.

His skin was slightly flushed. His eyes were dark as they peered out from their sunken pits, giving an impression of eeriness that seemed almost ...

Almost *alien*.

Lois dropped the binoculars to the table.

Scardino had said that the Achilles rod was necessary to control the prisoner. Trask's notes had confirmed this. Neither had mentioned that the rod caused him pain.

But having witnessed a single occurrence of the rod entering his cell, Lois had no doubt.

Being exposed to it didn't just disable him — it *hurt* him.

Trask had insisted that the Achilles rods were a necessity.

The prisoner had killed twice already.

But this was ... Lois pushed the word away before it could form in her mind.

It snuck back.

Inhuman. This was inhuman.

Trask had believed that the prisoner wasn't human — that he'd come to Earth to destroy and conquer. But did that mean he deserved to be treated with abject cruelty?

The prisoner hauled himself to his feet and stood for a moment

with one hand on the wall to assist his balance.

He walked unsteadily towards the mug, picked it up, and drank eagerly. He lowered it to chest level and stared at the liquid.

Lois leant across her desk and looked down at him. He was only a few yards away, and she could see his face clearly. The skin of his cheeks was mottled and scaly. His lower lip — almost hidden by the fringe of facial hair on his upper lip — was cracked and dry.

He raised the cup, but before it reached his mouth, he lowered it again.

He plunged his other hand into the water and ran his dripping fingers across his eyes and cheeks.

He was washing!

He dipped his fingers into the water again and cleaned the rest of his face.

Then, he carefully placed the cup on the ground, swept back the hair from his forehead, and washed under where it normally fell. He continued to his neck and throat.

The cup was almost empty. He poured the remainder of the water into his palm and then quickly splashed it onto his chest.

After rubbing vigorously — though surely with limited effect — he dried his hands on his shorts and then attempted to dry his face with his hands.

Lois picked up Trask's notebook and searched for one of the entries she had read the previous night. She found it.

December 6, 1991

The battle to overcome the threat to our planet continues. The brute is a despicable beast — his ability to survive such squalor confirms that he is nothing more than a dirty, contemptible animal. He doesn't deserve to live.

Dirty?

He certainly looked dirty — and Lois didn't even want to think about what he smelled like — but from what she'd witnessed, his filthy state seemed to be something that had been imposed on him rather than his own choosing.

Had they given him toiletries early in his imprisonment, and he hadn't used them?

Or had he somehow found a way to turn soap and water into a weapon?

Or was this just another aspect of Trask's plan to 'break his spirit'?

Lois frowned. What possible danger could there be in simple grooming items?

Should she order that he be provided with a bowl of water?

That would mean exposing him to another dose of the Achilles rod.

She paused. Undecided.

What would he want?

Was he capable of *wanting* anything? Anything beyond basic instincts?

Sudden realisation erupted in her mind.

He had wanted to drink the rest of the water!

He was thirsty, but he had chosen to wash himself instead of satisfying his thirst.

He was dehydrated! That explained the sunken eyes and the rough skin.

Lois lurched from her seat and tore out of her office. She stopped, returned to pick up her keys, and locked her door.

She forced herself to walk sedately down the short flight of stairs and into the staffroom. Shadbolt was there, drinking coffee and reading a magazine entitled *Astronomy*.

He looked up sullenly.

"Why did you take a cup of water into the prisoner?" Lois enquired.

He gestured to a piece of paper pinned to the corkboard. She crossed to it and saw it was a timetable. Today, the prisoner was to be given water at ten in the morning and food at eight o'clock this evening. The next four days were listed — the times changed inexplicably, but most days involved only the provision of food and

water. Yesterday’s program had included a discipline session, and another one was scheduled for Wednesday.

Lois turned to Shadbolt. “Who ordered this?”

“Trask.”

She didn’t want to ask, but she had the feeling that a verbal description would be preferable to witnessing it unfold before her. “What’s involved in a ‘discipline session’?”

“Two of us beat the alien with the Achilles rods.”

His tone — so unaffected, so blasé — churned bile through her stomach, but Lois leached all disgust from her tone as she asked, “How often are these discipline sessions deemed necessary?”

“Twice a week. Sometimes more.”

“What dictates their frequency? The behaviour of the prisoner?”

“No,” Shadbolt said. “How quickly his wounds heal from the last one.”

He was deliberately trying to shock her, but Lois had seen too much to be overtly affected by someone like Shadbolt. “When does he get soap and water?” she asked.

“He doesn’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’s not here for a vacation.”

“I want you to get a bowl of water, some soap, a washcloth, and a towel, and take them into the cell.”

Shadbolt made no effort to hide his contempt. Lois wasn’t sure if it were directed at her or at the prisoner. “Why?”

“Because they are my orders.”

His upper lip curled. “So, you’re either a do-gooder or a megalomaniac who gets a cheap thrill out of exploiting her power?”

“I want it done now,” Lois directed.

“Trask made a strict rule that we are not to enter the cage alone.”

“You were alone when you took him the cup of water.”

“That was my choice,” Shadbolt said. “I cannot be forced to risk my personal safety.”

His experience of the job was clearly *very* different from hers. “Are you refusing to comply with my instruction?” Lois asked.

“Are you going to stand here and watch me to make sure I do as Madam has ordered?”

Lois pinned her gaze straight into his pale blue eyes. “Will that be necessary?”

He took a long slow swig from his coffee. “I know you can see into the cage from your office.” He stood and walked past her. “But I also know that if I don’t comply, there is very little you can do.” He turned to her and smirked. “Because we both know you will never enter the cage.”

“A bowl of water, soap, a washcloth, and a towel,” Lois said. “I want the water clean, the bowl almost full, and the towel dry.”

Shadbolt’s eyes narrowed to an unpleasant squint, but he said nothing.

“Don’t mess with me,” Lois said in a low voice. “If you do, it won’t be me who loses.”

He didn’t respond verbally, and she watched as he sauntered away.

Twenty minutes passed after she’d returned to her office. The prisoner spent the time sitting on the concrete, his back against the wall, one arm draped across one raised knee. He stared ahead, his face blank. What did he think about?

Escape?

After all this time, could his mind still stretch beyond these walls to the world outside?

Did he remember his life before?

Did he dwell on revenge?

Did he ever think about the men he had killed?

Lois had just about decided that Shadbolt wasn’t going to do as she had directed when the prisoner’s head suddenly jolted towards the door.

He turned away, and his upper body collapsed over the arch of his knees.

Shadbolt walked in, carrying a bowl and a rod. He carefully placed

a full plastic bowl — slightly larger than a dinner plate in diameter — on the floor. He straightened and slid his hand into the pocket of his jeans. He withdrew an old, hardened cake of soap and positioned it next to the bowl.

“Hurry up,” Lois muttered urgently as she glanced to the prisoner. “Can’t you see what this does to him?”

Shadbolt withdrew a rag from his shirt pocket and folded it before laying it next to the soap.

Finally, he lifted the towel that was slung across his shoulder. He spread the towel on the concrete and then knelt next to it and ran his hand across it to flatten it.

“Just get *out* of there,” Lois muttered.

Shadbolt picked up the cup, stood to his feet, saluted insolently in her direction, and took himself and the rod out of the cell.

The extended exposure had compounded the effect on the prisoner. The muscles of his back were twitching, and it was almost five minutes later when he unfolded from his position. He stood shakily, steadied himself, and then looked up.

Even his beard couldn’t hide the depth of his astonishment.

He scanned the room.

Then, with swift jerky steps, he crossed to the bowl.

He sank to his knees.

He cupped his hands together and leant over.

For almost a minute, he drank. His actions were restrained and deliberate. Was that just his way? Or was he being careful not to spill even a drop of the water? Or did he understand the importance of rehydrating slowly?

After he’d finished drinking, he wet the cloth, brushed the soap across it, and washed his face and beard. He hung the rag on the side of the bowl, soaped his hands, and proceeded to wash his hair.

He leant over the bowl and dipped his hair into the water, splashing water through it. He picked up the towel and patted his dripping face. He vigorously dried his hair, leaving it spiked like a woolly hedgehog. Lois felt a smile tug at her mouth. Now he *really* looked like a Wildman.

He worked down his body — arms, chest, sides — methodically soaping, rinsing, drying.

He was familiar with the items.

And he had the desire to be clean.

Having finished his upper body, he stood and undid the button of his shorts.

Lois turned away.

Human or not, he deserved a scrap of privacy.

Half an hour later, she ventured a peek into the cell — and gasped.

The bowl was empty. The cloth was in the bowl, with the soap resting on top of it. The towel was neatly folded and placed next to the bowl.

The prisoner — dressed in his shorts — had returned to sitting against the back wall.

He was certainly cleaner.

He didn’t look so ... tormented.

Lois picked up a marker and hovered above Trask’s December ‘91 entry. She put a thick red line through the word ‘dirty’, slapped the book shut, and reclined in her chair.

For the first time in weeks, she didn’t have to search for something to occupy her mind.

She had made the most fundamental mistake possible.

She had assumed something.

She’d assumed that before the prisoner had been captured, he had lived in the wilds like ... an animal.

Lois picked up the notebook and turned to the first entry.

August 2, 1987

I have prevailed against the alien threat to the people of Earth. Today, I found, captured, and conquered the monster who was sent here as a precursor to the invasion of our planet. As I write these words, I observe him through the viewing window. His body glistens with still-damp blood from the wounds that were necessarily inflicted

to guarantee our safety during the precarious business of transporting him to his cell.

Of pressing importance is the need to deny him any opportunity to communicate with his co-conspirators in this evil plot. I must find answers to the questions regarding the scope of his powers. I must know my enemy thoroughly.

I will show him no mercy. He is not human. He is an animal — a dangerous, vile, depraved animal — who knows nothing but brutality and violence.

His mission was to conquer. His destiny is defeat.

The phrase ‘dangerous, vile, depraved animal’ had painted a picture of a beast living in the woods, probably terrorising local communities.

But wild beasts did not know how to use a washcloth and towel. Wild beasts did not use soap. Wild beasts did not value cleanliness.

He *must* have — at some point — lived with humans. Or, at least, observed them.

She needed to know more. She needed to know about his life before Trask had captured him.

Lois picked up her phone and dialled.

“Daniel Scardino.”

“Mr Scardino, it’s Lois Lane.”

“Please,” he said. “Call me -”

“You said you had boxes of Trask’s notes.”

“Yes. I was told that, following the capture, he brought them to headquarters as evidence for alien life on Earth. He insisted that they remain here because he believed there was safety in having the ‘proof’ stored off-site.”

“Could you send them over to me, please?”

There was the slightest hesitation. “You’re not calling to tell me you have reconsidered taking this assignment?”

“No,” Lois said. “But I need some background information.”

“OK,” Scardino agreed. “I’ll have the boxes retrieved from storage and sent to you.”

“Thank you,” Lois said. “Also, there are some personal items here belonging to Mr Trask. Should I send them to headquarters?”

“Ahh ... there have been some difficulties in finding Mr Trask’s next of kin. The person he listed on his personnel file passed away five years ago. We haven’t been able to locate any other family members.”

“What do you want me to do with his belongings?”

“Can you stow them in a corner for a day or two?”

“OK.”

“How’s the job going, Ms Lane? Is everything OK?”

“Everything’s fine, Mr Scardino,” Lois said. “Thank you for arranging to send the boxes.”

She hoped he would hear the implied conclusion in her tone. If he didn’t, she was probably going to be rude. “If there is anything else -”

“Thank you, Mr Scardino. Good-bye.”

Lois slammed down the phone as if it had stung her hand. The ability to engage in polite, meaningless conversation was essential out in the field. But she wasn’t on assignment — not really. She wasn’t undercover. She wasn’t pretending to be someone other than Lois Lane.

And in her darkest moments, she doubted she ever would again.

Lois looked through the viewing window. The alien was lying on his side on the concrete, his back towards her. She winced. It was clear why he wasn’t lying on his back. The cold, hard concrete would be almost unbearable on his wounds.

Had *anyone* ever tried to interact with this individual?

Had *anyone* ever tried to discover if he would respond to clemency instead of cruelty?

He’d killed two men.

Had *anyone* ever attempted to meet his basic needs? Soap? Water?

He’d killed two men.

Had *anyone* ever considered the possibility that, even if he were an alien, he might not be an animal?

He’d killed two men.

Or had they just assumed — right from the first day — that Trask’s postulations were correct? That the prisoner was nothing more than a violent, mindless brute deserving the harshest of treatment?

He’d killed two -

And I would kill, too, Lois screamed in her head. *In his circumstances, I would kill, too.*

She almost had.

She’d come within a few seconds of killing a man.

Not in self-defence.

But in anger.

In retribution.

In hatred.

Lois’s eyes rested on the disfigured back of the prisoner as her tears carved hot streams down her cheeks.

She hated this job.

She hated what it had done to her.

She hated the creeping cancer of justification that distorted the line between right and wrong.

She hated the violence and the merciless supremacy of the strong over the weak.

She hated the never-ending struggle — the choice to kill or be killed, control or be controlled, dominate or be dominated.

Most of all, she hated herself.

Hated the hardened brittle shell that she had become.

At two o’clock that afternoon, Longford arrived for his shift, and for the next hour, the prisoner would be officially ‘guarded’ by both him and Shadbolt.

Lois wondered if they would ignore Trask’s schedule and enter the cell, thereby inflicting more pain on the prisoner. She decided that — after a mere half dozen hours in the job — the time for limiting her involvement to observation was finished. This was her operation now, and it would be best if everyone understood that Trask’s ways were no longer in vogue.

She locked her office door and took the steps two at a time.

Shadbolt and Longford looked up as she entered the staffroom.

Longford was sitting at the table, and Shadbolt was at the coffee machine. She’d heard muffled laughter as she’d approached, but it had silenced at her footsteps.

“Good afternoon, Longford,” Lois said. Without waiting for a reply, she strode to the corkboard and ripped the timetable from its pins. “If necessary, there will be a new schedule posted,” she informed them. “However, nothing — I repeat, *nothing* — is to be done for or to the prisoner without my prior authorisation. Is that clear?”

Longford nodded, but Shadbolt put his hands on his hips and looked towards the ceiling, a supercilious smirk contorting his features.

“Do you have something you wish to say, Shadbolt?” Lois asked in a cold voice.

He slowly lowered his gaze. “Do you really think that a barely-out-of-high-school girl can come in here and tell us how to run this show when we’ve been doing it for seven years?”

“Yes, I do,” she replied coolly. She included Longford in her gaze. “Any further questions?”

“No, Ms Lane,” Longford said, taking care not to look at her.

Lois eyed Shadbolt, and when he didn’t speak, she continued.

“And to make it perfectly clear, this includes the discipline sessions.”

“Without the discipline sessions, it won’t be safe for us to enter the cage,” Longford said.

“Your safety comes from carrying a rod with you.” She hated what she was about to say, but the ethos of protection of those who were her responsibility was too deeply ingrained for her to remain silent. “No one is to enter the cell without a rod. Is that clear?”

“If you’re going to stop the discipline sessions, you might as well feed us to him on pretty pink plates,” Shadbolt noted bitterly.

“If you would prefer, I can request that you be transferred out of this operation,” Lois said.

Shadbolt sniggered. “Wouldn’t you just love that? Then there’d be no one to stand up to your prissy ideas of indulging murderous invaders.”

“The offer stands,” Lois said. “One word from you, and I can talk to Scardino about discontinuing your involvement in this operation.”

She turned from the staffroom and climbed the steps. Her words to Shadbolt could be taken as an offer, but she was sure he would discern the threat inherent in them.

Lois pushed the key into the lock of her office door with a grim, humourless laugh. She’d met plenty of Shadbolts in her career.

If only the rest of her life could be as simple as dealing with an insignificant man suffering from Inflated Male Ego Syndrome.

At six o’clock, a catering company delivered two meals to the compound behind the warehouse. Lois figured they had no idea they were feeding a never-charged, never-trialed prisoner of the United States government.

She came down the stairs to see Longford accepting the two plastic containers of food — one larger than the other. He firmly shut the door to the outside world and walked with a slightly uneven gait into the staffroom. Once there, he stood, looking uncomfortable. “I think Trask’s meal order was cancelled,” he said.

“That’s fine,” Lois said quickly. “I’ll eat after I leave here.” She gestured to the containers. “Are you going to take one to the prisoner?”

Longford ripped the lid from the larger plastic bowl, releasing a cloud of steam. “No,” he said as he picked out a fork from the cutlery tray on the counter. “He eats at eight o’clock on Mondays.”

“Why?”

Longford glanced longingly at his meal.

“It’s OK,” Lois said quickly. “You eat. But do you mind if I ask you some questions?”

Longford sat down and paddled the fork through the food. It looked like something Chinese. Chow mein, perhaps. It smelled good enough that Lois’s stomach reminded her of how little she had eaten that day. “Go ahead,” he said.

“Why is he fed at eight o’clock on Mondays?”

“Trask kept to a schedule. Most weeks followed the same pattern.”

“For routine?”

Longford put a piece of meat in his mouth and chewed hungrily. “No,” he said after he’d swallowed. “Trask liked to set the routine and then suddenly throw in a Wednesday routine on Saturday. He figured it would mess with the alien’s mind.”

“From everything I read in the log, Trask believed the prisoner to be less than human,” Lois said. “Yet he considered he had the intelligence to keep track of days?”

Longford shrugged and took another mouthful. “I don’t know what Trask thought. I just did what I was told.” He leant back in his seat, reached to open the fridge door, and took out a can of Coke. “He’d also order that water be taken to him at ten in the morning for days on end and then suddenly change it to four in the afternoon.”

Given the level of thirst Lois had witnessed today, making him wait an extra six hours was close to torture. “Has the prisoner ever attacked you?”

Longford popped the can as he shook his head.

“He’s never tried to hurt you?”

“No,” he said. “But I always take in a rod.”

“Doesn’t everyone?”

“Moynes used to boast that in the middle of the night when everything was real quiet, he’d go in there without a rod.”

“Did you believe him?”

“Dunno.”

And he didn’t care. That was obvious. Lois went to the coffee machine and poured herself a cup of the dark liquid. She frowned at it, wondering if it were drinkable. She decided to add milk and went to the fridge. She managed to dawdle long enough over the simple task of making coffee to ensure that Longford’s container was empty when

she turned from the counter.

“Now that you’ve finished, would you take the meal to the prisoner, please?” she asked.

“Now?”

She gave him a smile — it was rigid and artificial, but she hoped it would encourage him to defer to her order without engaging in a confrontation. She didn’t have much time. “Yes. Then you won’t need to go in again when you’re here by yourself.”

“Moynes’ll be here in a few hours.”

“The meal?” Lois pressed. “Could you take it to him?”

With an exaggerated sigh, Longford dragged himself from his chair and peeled the lid from the small container. A stale smell invaded the air.

“What *is* that?” Lois said from behind her hand.

“His food,” Longford replied as if it were obvious.

“Who ordered the food for the prisoner?” Lois asked, although she was sure she knew the answer to the question.

“Trask, I assume.”

She knew the nature of her first task tomorrow morning, but there was little she could do tonight. She peered at the food. It was a cold, congealed mass that resembled dog food. Actually, Lois amended, she wouldn’t even feed it to a dog. “Take it to him,” she said. “I’ll wait here. Go in, and come back quickly.”

A rare flash of humour lit Longford’s face. “Are you scared of him?” he taunted.

Lois reached into the tray, took out a fork, and offered it to Longford.

He shook his head. “Animals don’t need no fork,” he said. “Trask never let him have anything he could use as a weapon.”

Lois replaced the fork and decided that she didn’t need to witness the pain inflicted by the rod, or the prisoner’s efforts to eat the dross that was his supper.

Longford took one of the four rods from the closet. He unlocked the door to the cell, picked up the food, and disappeared.

He was back within seconds. He re-locked the door and replaced the rod.

“All done?” Lois asked.

He nodded. “Anything else? Or can I finish my Coke?”

“Finish your Coke,” Lois said. “I’m leaving now.”

Longford picked up a newspaper and his Coke and grunted in farewell.

Part 3

Lois walked through the hushed, dimmed common area.

In the corner, the television emitted sporadic flashes of light into the gloom, but there was no accompanying sound. All but two of the twenty or so chairs were empty.

Lois kept her eyes forward as she passed them.

The door to the third room on the right was open. As usual.

She brushed a soft knock as she entered.

The light was on. Her father was in the bed, awake, his eyes fixed on nothing.

Lois pulled the chair closer to the bed and looked into his vacant face. “Hi, Dad,” she said in a tone that she hoped sounded as if she expected an answer.

He turned slowly in her direction and stared blankly at her. She smiled — although the spasms in her chin probably ruined her efforts.

Would her dad notice?

Lois took her father’s hand — the good one, the one that wasn’t paralysed — and flattened it between both of hers. She ran her fingertips down the length of his fingers, between his knuckles, and along the back of his hand.

His fingers began to curl, and she positioned their hands in an arm-wrestle hold. She placed her elbow next his on the bed and softly rubbed the back of his hand against her cheek.

“How are you doing, Dad?” she asked.

There was no indication that he’d heard the question ... understood it ... was answering her on the inside.

And, according to the best medical advice, there was no way to predict how much ground — if any — her father would recover from the overwhelming effects of the stroke.

The silence stretched. And stretched.

Lois Lane used to have the ability to babble her way through wet cement.

But no more.

She desperately searched her barren mind. There had to be *something* she could talk about. Why hadn't she planned ahead?

The weather.

"It's been unseasonably mild for October, Dad."

It was fall. Leaves. Had they started to turn yet? She hadn't noticed.

"The fall leaves are beautiful. Can you see them out of your window? The nurses have told me that sometimes they take you into the garden during the afternoons."

In her mind, she saw her dad — slouched in his wheelchair, his useless arm lying in the trough that was attached to the left armrest, his face suggesting that he wouldn't have known if he were sitting in a heat wave or a blizzard.

"I started a new job today, Dad," Lois said. "It means I'll be in Metropolis for an extended time. I can come and visit you. I have my own office. With a big window.

"Mom sends her best wishes." Lois never knew whether she should mention her mother or not. Her parents hadn't been on speaking terms for years, but did her dad remember that? Did he wonder why Ellen didn't visit him? Did he remember who Ellen was?

"I called Lucy yesterday. She's going for a job in a diner. She doesn't know when she'll be able to come back east to see you, but she's going to try. Maybe for Christmas."

Lois feigned the need to cough and turned her head away to glance at the clock on the wall. She'd been here for less than five minutes. She loved her father, but every minute spent in his room in the nursing home felt like an hour.

She couldn't leave yet.

Her meagre store of ideas had run dry. It wasn't as if she could talk about her world.

Perhaps she could try *his* world.

"I hear you've been doing physiotherapy, Dad. The nurses told me that it will help with your balance. I know they work your arms and legs — to keep your muscles supple."

Lois stopped. Did the efforts to rehabilitate him look as hopeless from inside his prison as they did from outside? Was it as hard to find hope that he would regain anything the stroke had callously stolen from him? It had been nearly two months now, and there hadn't been the slightest sign of improvement.

It had taken his ability to speak.

And it had robbed all feeling and movement from the left side of his body.

How much did he understand?

Was her dad still present inside this ravaged body? Or had he gone, leaving only a crust that was kept alive — not by a heart but by a beating pump?

Lois could feel the rigid lump of grief crawl up her throat.

She stood from the chair and awkwardly put her arms around her father's shoulders. He felt so thin ... so frail. As if he would crumble if she hugged too hard.

She put a trembling hand on each of his shoulders and looked into his eyes, desperate for a hint of connection. Something that would say he knew her. Remembered her. Loved ...

There was nothing. Lois used the last of her resolve to mould her mouth to a smile. "I love you, Dad," she said. "I'll come and see you again on Wednesday evening."

Lois kissed his cheek and hurried from the room, shadowed by her own hopeless inadequacy.

She didn't know what her father needed ... didn't know how to be what he needed ... didn't know if anything she did made any

difference at all.

She held her emotions in check long enough to have a short conversation with the nurse. The various therapies — aimed at developing a form of communication, maintaining the movement he had in his right side, and helping to re-establish his sense of balance — were continuing, but little had changed since Lois had visited two days ago.

It was dark, cold, and wet as Lois walked from the nursing home to her car.

As she drove home, the raindrops surged down the windshield, and her tears cascaded down her cheeks.

~ Tuesday ~

Lois gaped, horror-stricken.

She closed her eyes.

She opened them.

Nothing had changed.

She spun around, charged through the door of her office, and took the steps in one leap.

"What happened?" she demanded loudly before she had even reached the staffroom.

Shadbolt's head jerked up from the newspaper he was reading. Moyne lifted his eyes with deliberate sluggishness. "What happened when?" he asked politely.

"What happened to the prisoner?" Lois said coldly.

Moyne twisted his face to a show of confusion. "The prisoner?" he echoed.

"Someone bashed him." Lois speared Moyne with her eyes.

He gave a derisive chuckle. "No, Ms Lane," he chirped. "No one *bashed* him. I went in there during the night. Someone had left a bowl and a towel in there." He gestured to the bowl that was sitting on the drainer with the towel roughly thrown across it.

"How did you know it was in there?" Lois said.

"I was doing a patrol," Moyne replied. "We can't see the prisoner from here. I wanted to check on him. I saw the bowl and attempted to remove it. He attacked me."

"Did you take a rod?"

"Yes."

"And you used the rod to bash him?"

"It was self-defence," Moyne said nonchalantly. "Him or me." He smirked in evident self-satisfaction. "I chose me."

"You are not to enter the cell without my permission."

Moyne's lower jaw dropped. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me," Lois said. The anger that had boiled at the sight of the prisoner had now cooled to a more controlled — but equally dangerous — level. "You do the night shift, Moyne. There is no need for you to enter the cell."

He shrugged. "Suits me."

"No one goes in there without my authorisation," Lois said. Her glare swung to Shadbolt. "Understand?"

Shadbolt nodded dourly.

Lois turned from the staffroom and climbed the stairs.

Once in her office, she locked the door behind her. It seemed important that she did — not so much for her privacy but for his.

She put her hands on her desk and leant forward.

The prisoner hadn't moved from where he'd been when she'd first looked through the viewing window a few minutes ago. He was crumpled in a heap on the concrete. She could see one shoulder, part of his lower thigh, and about half of his back.

Lois turned away — unable to look a moment longer.

She wanted to cry.

She wanted to cower in the corner of her office and weep with helplessness and anger and frustration. She wanted to scream her protest at the sheer ugliness of the world.

She hung her head, closed her eyes, and inhaled to the full capacity of her lungs.

She released the breath slowly.

She had a job to do.

She would do it.

She had been brought low many times before. It was an occupational hazard of her job. But she knew what to do — when the big picture was simply too horrendous and too overwhelming to grasp, you took refuge in the detail. You found something that was small and doable.

She picked up the phone and dialled her uncle Mike. When he answered, the sound of his cheery voice felt like a cool cloth on a fevered brow.

After the initial greetings, their conversation turned to her dad. Lois knew her uncle had visited his brother every morning since the stroke.

“Have you seen any improvement?” she asked. “Nothing’s changed at all in the month since I’ve been back in Metropolis.”

“It might take some time,” Uncle Mike said gently. “We’ll keep visiting him; they’ll keep doing all the different therapies. They’ve been putting his favourite music through headphones for him. They’ve asked me to record some stories about the things we did when we were kids so he can listen to them.”

“Do you think he knows us?” Lois whispered. “Do you think he knows it’s us?”

Uncle Mike sighed. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “But for his sake, we have to keep going as if he does know us. Maybe one day, he’ll be able to tell us how much it meant that we were there for him.”

Lois hoped so — but, much as she wanted to, she couldn’t coax that flimsy hope into solid belief.

In her heart, she believed that her father would never recover. In her heart, she believed he had gone forever.

“Was there another reason for your call?” Uncle Mike asked.

“Have you started your new job yet?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s great that they were able to find a desk job for you.”

“Yeah.” Uncle Mike — and everyone else in her family — thought that she worked on a cruise ship as a singer. It explained her long absences from Metropolis, and the difficulties in contacting her when she was ‘away’. She hadn’t known about her father’s stroke until almost three weeks after it had happened. “Uncle Mike,” Lois said.

“Would you do something for me, please?”

“Anything for my favourite niece,” he said.

“Do you know Bessolo Boulevard?”

“Yep.”

“There’s an old warehouse on the south side of the street.”

“They used to sell office furniture.”

“My job is to take bookings over the phone and via the Internet. Because many of our passengers are from other countries, I need to work in the evenings to fit in with their time zones.” She hated lying to Uncle Mike, but this was insignificant compared to the whoppers she’d told regarding the missing month of her life.

Uncle Mike chuckled. “And you’d like me to send a meal around for you?”

“Would that be all right?”

“Of course it’s all right,” he replied. “I’ll be glad to do it. How many nights a week? And what time?”

“Every night — if that’s OK. About a quarter past six.”

“Every night?” There was concern in her uncle’s voice. “You’re not going to be working too hard, are you, Lois?”

“No, Uncle Mike,” Lois said. “My shifts are only for a few hours, but I need to be at work every day.”

“Will you come to the front? I’ll get one of my delivery boys to bring it.”

“Tell him to leave it on the doorstep of the warehouse. I might not be able to be there right on 6:15 if I’m on the phone to a client.”

Uncle Mike chuckled. “Are you sure you don’t want those cooking lessons I’ve been offering you for years?”

“I’m sure,” Lois said with a laugh she hoped passed as reasonably genuine. “But I do appreciate you doing this for me, Uncle Mike.”

“Anything for you,” he said. “Hey, Lois?”

“Yes?”

“It’s great that you’re going to be in Metropolis for a while. I’ve missed you.”

“Thanks, Uncle Mike.”

“Come to the cafe for lunch one day.”

“OK. Thanks ... Oh, and one more thing. I’ve ... ah ... I’ve had a bit of a stomach bug the past few days. Could you send really simple foods for a while, please? Nothing too spicy. Nothing too rich. Just chicken or fish and a few vegetables or some salad.”

“Easily done,” he said.

“Thanks, Uncle Mike.”

Lois replaced the phone.

She hadn’t changed the world.

She hadn’t healed the injuries Moyne had inflicted on the prisoner during the night.

She hadn’t struck a blow for good against evil.

But at least the prisoner would no longer have to eat dog food.

He still hadn’t moved.

Trepidation squeezed her heart.

What if Moyne had killed him?

She couldn’t even go to him.

She couldn’t see if he were OK.

She couldn’t check his wounds.

Dress them.

Would that help, anyway?

Did the wounds of aliens get infected?

Did aliens understand compassion?

Was he an alien?

Did it matter?

He was ... something. Someone. Someone who felt pain. Someone who could be hurt. Someone who — despite having been forced to live in complete deprivation for seven years — still remembered how good it felt to be clean.

She couldn’t go to him. She couldn’t send someone into the cell. If anyone went in, the prisoner would be exposed to another dose of the Achilles rod, and she couldn’t do that to him.

She was staring at him. She couldn’t look away. She was willing him to move ... but he didn’t.

Lois jerked from her chair, turned away, and perched her butt on the edge of her desk.

There was a digital clock on the wall. Under it was a sheet of paper, handwritten by Trask.

Moyne — 10pm to 7 am

Shadbolt — 6am to 3pm

Longford -2pm to 11 pm

The clock showed that it was after seven. Moyne should have gone by now.

He would be back tonight.

Alone.

And with keys to the cell.

Lois had banned Moyne from entering the cell, but she had no faith that — alone and unsupervised — he would comply with her order.

What had Trask done to keep control of Moyne?

Or had he encouraged his vile tendencies?

Had Moyne always behaved like this? Or was he testing the mettle of his new female boss?

Lois doubted Trask would have had any concerns about the treatment the prisoner received in his absence, but it didn’t seem in character for him to simply clock off and walk out.

Surely, he couldn’t have been unaware of Moyne’s appetite for violence.

Lois turned back to the window.

The prisoner still hadn’t moved.

To her right, there was a padlocked closet. Lois reached into the pocket of her jacket and pulled out the keys Scardino had given her

yesterday. There were four keys on the key ring.

One was for the outside door, one for her office, one for the cell. The final one — she hoped — would open the padlock on the closet. It did.

The door swung open ... and revealed the answers to at least two of Lois's questions.

A camera was mounted above the top shelf, pointing through a hole and into the cell. A VCR was next to it, and below that was a closed circuit television.

Lois turned on the television and the VCR and pressed 'play'.

A black and white picture came onto the screen. The date and time in the top right corner showed that this footage was from last week — recorded at eight o'clock in the evening. It was the day of Trask's death. He'd probably programmed the tape to record in his absence and then left the compound, never to return.

On screen, the prisoner jogged along the far wall. Back and forth. Mindlessly.

Lois pressed 'fast forward' and watched as he sprinted in jerky strides. He slowed to a walk.

He placed his hands on the wall, angled forward, and appeared to be stretching the muscles along the back of his legs.

Lois's thumb hit 'pause', and she stared at the still image.

His back was relatively unmarked. The injury she'd seen yesterday must have happened sometime between Trask's departure and her arrival.

She remembered Trask's timetable — there had been a 'discipline session' ordered for Sunday. Perhaps that was when he'd received the injury to his back. However, Shadbolt had said that the discipline sessions involved two guards beating the prisoner. That damage had been less than what had been caused by Moyne last night — presumably working alone.

It explained the prisoner's state this morning. Two beatings in less than two days had taken their toll.

And all the evidence pointed to Moyne's assault last night having been particularly vicious.

Did the assistants know about this camera?

Did they know that every interaction with the prisoner could be recorded?

Had Trask and the assistants used it so they would have evidence if the prisoner killed again?

Or had Trask used it to spy on his assistants?

Lois glanced through the window. There was still no sign of life. She continued with the tape, skimming through it at accelerated speed.

The prisoner had slept ... walked ... stretched ... done sit-ups ... push-ups ... slept ... stared into the nothingness ... walked ... stretched ...

How did someone who existed on so little food manage to keep active?

Was it instinct? Or self-discipline?

Did it indicate a mind that had deteriorated to mechanical ritual? Or a mind so strong that it still fought to exert some control in a world of total suppression?

Lois paused the tape again and studied him.

He was excruciatingly thin. His ribs looked like rough corrugations jutting over the cavern of his stomach.

Lois had thought he was tall, but now that she looked more closely, she realised that the impression of height had probably come more from limbs that seemed disproportionately long due to emaciation.

Had Trask been trying to starve him to death? Or had he purposely supplied just enough food that the captive's hell continued?

Lois fast-forwarded through the rest of the tape. In the eight hours it covered, no one had entered the cell.

When the tape reached the end, it rewound automatically.

Lois picked up the remote and flicked through the instructions for setting the timer for recording. She set a perpetual daily program to

record the first eight hours of Moyne's shift.

From now on, she would arrive at the compound before six o'clock each morning.

She hoped to prevent Moyne from ever attacking the prisoner again. But if he did, she would have the proof she'd need to have him dismissed from the operation.

Lois ran her eyes down to the lower shelves of the closet in search of other tapes. There were none. The middle shelves were empty — but she did find the answer to another question. A rolled-up camp mattress and a limp pillow had been shoved onto the bottom shelf.

Trask had slept here. In his office.

Did that mean he hadn't trusted Moyne and had been trying to curb his violent excesses? Or had Trask encouraged — either implicitly or openly — Moyne's abuse?

Lois pulled the mattress and pillow from the closet and added them to the pile of Trask's possessions. She shut the closet door, sat down, and picked up a sheet of Trask's notes from the folder.

The questions were banking up in her brain, demanding answers.

She figured there were two ways to find out what she needed to know.

She could read Trask's notes.

And she could give the prisoner access to everyday items and see how he responded.

By noon, the prisoner had crawled — with agonising slowness — towards the wall, probably in search of a more comfortable position on the hard concrete.

He wasn't dead.

Lois winced every time she looked at him and couldn't bring herself to dwell on his suffering ... but he wasn't dead.

She activated the camera, checked that the tape was recording, locked her door, and went down the stairs to the staffroom.

Shadbolt had his feet up on the table, his magazine in one hand and a can of beer in the other. He took a slurp of his drink and eyed her, daring her to make an issue of the beer — or anything else.

What he did to pass the hours of his shift was of little concern to Lois. "Do you have a key to the cell?" she asked, although she knew he did.

"Yes."

"Could I have it, please?"

He sniggered. "Don't you trust me?"

"How long have you been on the job?"

The top layer of his animosity peeled away. "*This* job? Or *the* job?"

"The job."

"Thirty-three years."

Lois gave a low whistle. "That's a long time. Were you on this job from the time of the capture?"

"I came in one week later."

"Did you ask for it? Or were you ordered here?"

Shadbolt grunted resentfully. "Both."

He clearly didn't want to continue the discussion, so despite the ambiguity of his reply, Lois decided not to probe any further. "If you've been on the job that long, you know that trust is a luxury we can't afford." She held out her hand. "Can I have your key, please?"

He only hesitated for a short moment before standing and rustling through his pockets. He took out a key ring containing two keys and handed it to her. "Why don't you want me to go into the cell?"

"Because of the beating Moyne gave the prisoner last night," Lois replied. "You can't go in there without a rod, and if you go in there with a rod, it's going to hurt him more."

Shadbolt laughed cynically. "There's no way I'm going in there without a rod. I did Bortolotto's body recovery."

"Were you on-site during either of the attacks?"

"No. Trask called me in. He and Moyne were too shaken to go into the cell again." Shadbolt grimaced. "But we couldn't just leave Bortolotto's body in there with that animal."

Lois took the cell key off the ring and handed the external door key back to Shadbolt. “I’m going out,” she said. “I won’t be long.”

He took the key in a churlish manner. “Take as long as you like,” he said. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Lois walked into the weak sunshine. The air smelled fresh — washed clean by last night’s rain. From the damp ground rose a sweet, musty smell.

Did he miss that?

Did he miss the smells of the outside world?

Did he miss the scent of flowers, or the freshly mown grass, or the baked smell of the summer heat on the road, or the alluring waft of brewing coffee?

Lois walked two blocks, seeing things she didn’t usually see, hearing things she didn’t usually hear. The kaleidoscope of colour. The orchestra of sound. Was the cell sound-proof? Even if it wasn’t, she doubted that many outside sounds would permeate the thick walls.

What was it like living for seven years in a place with no colour, no sound, no seasons, no fluctuation, nothing to mark the passing of time?

Lois’s job had taken her to places she never wanted to go again.

It had shown her things she never wanted to see again.

It had forced her to experience things she wished she could eradicate from her memory.

But there was something horrendous about being locked away with nothingness.

She arrived at a small cluster of shops and went into the drug store. She lingered at the shelf of soaps. She smelled every one, and then — being unable to decide — chose a natural one with very little scent. She added a tube of Neosporin, a soft washcloth, a toothbrush, toothpaste, and a half-gallon bottle of drinking water to her basket and went to pay.

Then she went into the fruit store and bought two apples and two oranges.

She ate one of the apples as she walked back to Bessolo Boulevard.

For the first time in months, she felt ... *something*. It wasn’t contentment. It certainly wasn’t enjoyment, but it was as if the cloud of hopelessness that had surrounded her for so many weeks had thinned ... just a little ... just enough for her to glimpse a future that might — possibly — offer something other than pain and despair.

Walking in the cool air and gentle sunshine of fall, eating a sweet apple — it was so simple.

So normal.

So sane.

So unremarkable.

So taken-for-granted.

But not for him.

Note — Neosporin is antibacterial ointment.

Part 4

Back at the compound, Lois sprinted up the steps and hurriedly unlocked her office door.

The prisoner was sitting up.

He was crouched forward, facing away, giving her an unrestricted view of the patchwork of abrasions that marred his back. He seemed to be working on his legs — perhaps massaging them to ease away some of the soreness and stiffness.

Lois glanced to the clock and the list of times for the assistants’ shifts. It wasn’t yet one o’clock. Longford would be here at two.

Every entry into the cell would be planned beforehand to minimise the prisoner’s exposure to the Achilles rods — starting today.

She could get Shadbolt to take in the water and the fruit now.

Or wait until Longford arrived and send them both in to shorten the length of time. That would mean two rods. There definitely seemed to be a time factor — the longer the rods were in the cell, the longer the prisoner took to recover. Did a greater number of rods also increase the effect? She didn’t know. For now, she would work on what she did

know and minimise the time of his exposure.

She slipped into the gap between the closet and the desk and looked down on the alien.

His head was draped over his knees, and he wasn’t moving. Perhaps he’d reached the limit of his pain tolerance and was resting in preparation for the next effort.

Lois opened the closet, stopped the recording, and rewound the tape.

She played it. The prisoner had moved a little — in robot-like staccato — but Shadbolt hadn’t entered the cell.

When it was over, she went down to the staffroom. Shadbolt was reading *Sky and Telescope* magazine. His eyes didn’t leave the page, and he made no comment.

Lois made herself a coffee, took it back to her office, and picked up another handful of notes from the folder.

So far, she’d read about a quarter of them. Much of it was endless — and seemingly baseless — speculation about what the alien intended to do. Lois noted grimly that if Trask had ever had the mind to take control of the world, he already had a detailed, well-advanced plan.

But Trask’s ambitions were less lofty than world domination.

It seemed all he craved was absolute power over an individual — an individual who just might be an alien.

Or not.

At one o’clock, Lois heard the external door open. Longford had arrived.

She laid Trask’s sheet of notes on the ‘read’ pile and leapt from her seat.

By this time, the prisoner had made it to his feet and was limping around the extremities of his cell.

Lois rustled through her bag for the toothbrush, toothpaste, and soap. She peeled away the packaging and replaced the items in her bag. She hesitated over the Neosporin. If he didn’t know what it was — and couldn’t read the label ... What if he *ate* it?

Deciding not to risk it, she left the tube on her desk. After activating the camera, she picked up her bag and left the office.

At the bottom of the stairs, she slipped into the bathroom and removed a clean towel from the closet.

She continued to the staffroom, where Longford and Shadbolt were involved in a game of cards. “You’ll both be going into the cell in a few minutes,” she informed them as she spread the towel on the table.

Longford’s eyes left his cards long enough to nod. Shadbolt didn’t respond.

Lois unpacked the soap, toothpaste, toothbrush, washcloth, orange, apple, and bottle of water from her bag and placed them in the middle of the towel. She added a plastic mug to the pile and then folded the end of the towel over the variously sized bumps and made a secure bundle. She took the bowl to the sink, rinsed it out, and filled it with tepid water.

“Do you have a pink bow to go with that?” Shadbolt scoffed. “Or perhaps a pretty posy of flowers?”

Lois turned on him, pouring pure contempt into her look. He didn’t back down, meeting her with a patronising smile and cold, hard eyes.

“You will get a rod each,” Lois said, not breaking eye contact with Shadbolt. “I will unlock the door to the cell. Shadbolt, you will take in the bowl of water. Longford, you will take in the towel and its contents.” Her attention swung between the two men. “You will complete the task quickly but carefully. There are to be no ‘accidents’, no spilling of the water, no dropping of the towel.”

“Why are you doing this?” Shadbolt said with clear disdain. “He’s not human.”

“But I am,” Lois replied.

Shadbolt snorted. “Someone will pay for this,” he said ominously. “If you loosen the screws ... if you allow him to regain his strength, he

will kill again.”

“I take responsibility for my decisions,” Lois said.

“Responsibility ain’t worth squat if we’re dead,” Longford noted.

Lois took the keys from her bag. “Get the rods,” she directed.

The chairs scraped loudly across the floor as both men stood. They went to the closet and took out two rods. When they had picked up the bowl and the towel, Lois unlocked the door. “Ready?” she asked.

Longford nodded.

Lois pushed the door away and stood back to allow the men to pass her. Unable to restrain her curiosity, she stepped into the doorway, and her eyes volleyed between the collapsed, turned-away figure of the prisoner in the far corner and her two assistants.

They placed the bowl and towel on the concrete and returned to the door. Lois hustled them forward and closed it quickly. “Everything OK?” she asked.

“No,” Shadbolt said. “He was upset because we couldn’t stay long enough for him to write you a little thank-you note.”

Lois ignored him. She locked the cell door and sprinted up the stairs to her office. Once there, she went straight to the window.

The prisoner had collapsed against the wall. He was in pain — she recognised the hunch of his shoulders and the droop of his head.

And she had caused it.

The rods had been taken into the cell on her orders.

She waited, her eyes riveted to the half-naked, traumatised figure of the prisoner. Finally, he unfurled and clambered to his feet.

Lois grimaced at the agony inherent in his movements. She didn’t know exactly when Moyne had bashed him, but by now, his bruised muscles and broken skin must have seized up.

And another dose of the Achilles rods — albeit short — would have compounded his suffering.

He swayed a little, one hand extended as if trying to overcome dizziness. Slowly, he straightened to his full height and looked towards the door. Recognition lit his face when he saw the bowl and towel.

He limped to them, sank to his knees, and drank from cupped hands.

When he had finished drinking, he dried his hands on his shorts and cautiously unrolled the towel.

When the contents were revealed, he stopped.

Stared.

His hands — nicely shaped with long fingers — shook as they hovered above the towel.

He rocked back, and his hands drifted to his thighs without having touched any of the items.

He didn’t move for a long moment. Lois began to wonder if his hesitancy indicated a lack of familiarity. He’d understood the soap and washcloth yesterday. Could that have been instinct? Instinct that didn’t extend to toothpaste?

Finally, his head lifted slowly and deliberately, and he looked directly at the centre of the viewing window. He raised one hand in an unsteady gesture.

Lois’s throat thickened. She swallowed, and it felt like she was trying to push down a golf ball.

The prisoner lowered his face and again examined the contents of the towel. He took the apple and cradled it in both hands. His thumbs slid over the smooth skin. After a minute of holding it, he carefully placed it on the concrete and reached for the orange. He brought it to his nose and inhaled deeply.

Once he had placed the orange next to the apple, the prisoner picked up the toothbrush and toothpaste. He uncapped the paste, slid a carefully measured amount along the bristles, and replaced the lid.

Then, he brushed his teeth.

Lois watched, deductions flying through her brain like arrows.

Human or not, he had definitely *lived* as a human.

He was familiar with regular objects.

He knew how to use them.

He *wanted* to use them.

How had Trask determined that this man was an alien?

How had Trask justified taking his freedom and reducing him to the life of an animal?

He’d killed two men.

Lois backed into the chair and sat down — still watching the prisoner as he began washing his face and neck.

What had come first? Trask’s cruelty? Or the prisoner’s aggressive behaviour towards his captors?

She’d seen no evidence of aggressive behaviour.

She’d seen no evidence of ‘powers’ either. She had seen nothing to suggest that the individual Trask had feared so vehemently could actually take over the world even if that had been his goal. The only noticeable difference between him and other humans was his reaction to the Achilles rods. Could Trask have implanted something that was activated by the rods? Something that caused pain? Electric shock perhaps?

Lois snatched at the notebook and rifled through it, looking for a particular entry.

She found it.

March 1, 1988

Today, I strengthened my position over the enemy. We exposed him to the Achilles for a full twelve hours overnight, leaving him weak and defenceless this morning. The surgery was performed by Moyne and Shadbolt.

Surgery?

Performed by Moyne and Shadbolt?

Lois steered her mind away from the sickening thought of two agents performing surgery as the prisoner had lain on the concrete floor of the cell. If necessary, she would deal with that later.

For now, she needed to consider the effects. The ‘surgery’ had happened seven months after the capture. Lois flicked back a few pages and found earlier reference to the rods adversely affecting the prisoner.

Had they found a way to attach something to him? Before eventually implanting it in him?

Lois dropped her face into her hands.

What if he were human?

What if he were just a man?

An agent who had clashed with Trask?

Or perhaps just a man living a normal life — probably with his wife and a couple of kids — until Trask had sucked him into this vacuum of torment?

Lois’s head shot up.

She needed more information. The boxes hadn’t arrived yet. They promised information about the time prior to the capture, but over half of Trask’s loose notes were still unread. With new purpose, she picked up a sheet and began scrutinising it for anything that would give a clue to the prisoner’s former life.

Every word she read seemed to push Trask’s portrayal and her observations further apart.

Lois glanced through the window.

He’d gone!

She lurched from her seat and rushed to the window. She looked straight down — just in time to see him drag his shorts up his legs and fasten them at his stomach.

It wasn’t the fleeting sight of the uncovered male buttocks that had her mind reeling — it was the fact that he wanted privacy.

Clearly, he knew he could be watched through the window. He had signalled his acknowledgement for the items in the towel.

Yesterday, he had dropped his shorts without thought of being observed. Today, he’d tried to squeeze against the wall. What had changed?

As Lois watched, the prisoner picked up the bowl of water and — struggling a little under its weight — took it behind the wall that screened the toilet.

After he’d tipped out the water, he returned with the empty bowl. He slanted it against the wall and arranged the towel across the top of it — presumably to facilitate drying.

Then he picked up the fruit and the bottle of water, went to his favoured place against the back wall, and sat down.

He slowly eased backwards, and as he touched the wall, he grimaced.

Once settled, he unscrewed the cap and drank from the bottle.

Then, he replaced the lid, put the bottle on the floor, and picked up the fruit — one piece in each hand.

He held them.

Gazed at them.

As if he couldn't believe. As if he couldn't decide which one to eat first. As if he wasn't sure whether to eat them or savour the anticipation.

Lois had intended to watch him. She had wanted to know whether he was familiar with them. Whether he knew not to eat the orange peel and the apple core. Whether he ate them the same way a human would.

But she couldn't watch anymore.

The depth of his reaction to such simple things as two pieces of fruit had demonstrated the impoverishment of his life more graphically than any of Trask's notes.

Lois opened the log, picked up her red marker, and began reading.

She started with the day of his capture.

He is not human. He is an animal — a dangerous, vile, depraved animal — who knows nothing but brutality and violence.

She put a line through 'depraved', and 'brutality', and 'violence'.

She put three emphatic lines through 'animal'.

Then she turned the pages, getting rid of 'openly hostile' and words such as 'unintelligent' and 'uncomprehending'. 'Beast' was scattered liberally through Trask's log. She struck out every instance she saw.

The page opened at November 2, 1988.

He killed today.

Lois lifted her eyes from the notebook to the prisoner. He had begun peeling the orange.

He was not the dangerous savage that Trask described in his notes.

Not now.

Had he been once?

Was it, as Shadbolt claimed, the regular beatings that kept him manageable?

Perhaps the discipline sessions could control his malevolence, but they couldn't instil the desire to be clean.

He was familiar with human foods. He knew how to unscrew a top from a bottle. He tidied up after himself.

And ...

And he'd shown gratitude ... or at least recognition.

Lois was absolutely convinced that the tentative wave had been meant to express his thanks.

That was not the behaviour of a ferocious brute.

It wasn't even the behaviour of someone who had become twisted and bitter at the gross injustice metered out to him.

Lois thumped both fists onto the desk in anger and frustration.

How the hell had this situation been allowed to continue for seven years?

Three boxes of Trask's research notes arrived later that afternoon.

Lois carried them into her office and stared despondently. It was possible that somewhere in there was the information she needed regarding how the prisoner had lived prior to his capture.

But she suspected that it was going to be like searching for an oasis in the desert — very long, very dry, and very difficult to find what she wanted.

She opened the nearest box. It was filled with notebooks. She lifted them out and counted them as she placed them on a pile on the floor. Ten.

Ten notebooks filled with Trask's small, cramped ramblings.

None of them had titles on the front.

None of them was numbered.

Trask had dated the entries in his post-capture log but everything

else he'd written about this operation was chaotic and disorganised.

With a sigh, Lois picked up the nearest book and sat at her desk.

The prisoner had eaten half of his orange. She watched as he carefully eased away a section and popped it into his mouth. His head went back, his eyes closed, and he chewed slowly as if determined to relish every morsel.

Lois tore her eyes away. She found herself watching him way too much. This was a just a job — a job that kept her in Metropolis so she could regularly visit her father.

The prisoner's situation was regrettable — but it wasn't of her making.

She would ensure that he did not escape. She would ensure that he didn't harm any human. She wouldn't allow him to be hurt unnecessarily.

But that was the extent of her responsibilities.

Except ... she really wanted to know more about him. Not about *him* specifically, but about how he had come to be trapped in a cell and condemned to live like an animal.

And how Trask had concluded that he was an alien threatening the existence of the human race.

And why, despite everything he had endured, he hadn't deteriorated to become what Trask had asserted at the start — a wild, feral animal.

Lois lowered her eyes to Trask's notebook and continued her search for information.

Half an hour later, she'd finished the first book. It was filled with mathematical formulae, scientific terms, and pages of rambling notes where every sentence seemed to contain at least thirty words. If it had *anything* to do with the capture of an alien, the significance was too obscure for Lois to grasp.

Movement in the cell caused her to look up. A narrow strip of sunlight — from the window above the shelves — had splashed onto the floor of the cell.

The prisoner had positioned himself so that the meagre late afternoon rays fell on his broad and blemished back.

He liked the sun.

Having been locked away with continuous artificial light for so long, that was hardly surprising.

Was that why Trask had kept the black curtain across the window? To prevent even the smallest amount of sunlight from reaching the cell?

Lois pushed her chair backwards and climbed onto it. The curtains were drawn back but still blocked the extremities of the glass. She yanked the material and the rod slid easily from the brackets.

Back on the ground, she tossed the rod and black curtains on to the boxes containing Trask's possessions.

In the cell, the scrap of sunlight, although still small, had widened.

And her office was brighter, too.

At a quarter past six, Lois went to the front of the warehouse and found a bag on the doorstep. She peered at the plastic container inside the bag, unable to subdue the feeling of anticipation it evoked. How long had it been since he'd eaten a meal that looked fit for human consumption? A month? A year? Seven years?

She doused her eagerness with a stern reminder that as soon as her father was well enough, she would be leaving Metropolis, relinquishing this assignment, and resuming her career.

But as she walked behind the warehouse to the compound where the prisoner was kept, she couldn't resist peeling back the lid of the container and peeking inside. There were three thick slices of roasted chicken breast, a baked potato, peas, and carrots. Simple food.

She inhaled. It smelled great.

And she was pretty sure it was going to taste great.

She entered the staffroom as Longford was finishing his meal.

On the table was the unopened smaller container that Lois knew was meant to be the meal for the prisoner. Inside, she felt a flash of triumph.

It was a tiny victory, but she felt as if she was clawing back an inch of ground from the miles that been snatched by the bad guys.

“Have you finished?” she asked Longford politely.

“Uh huh.”

“Will you take this to the prisoner now, please?”

He said nothing — merely went to the closet and took out a rod.

“There’s no need to go into the room,” Lois said. “We’ll open the door, put the meal on the ground, and use the other end of the rod to push it into the cell.”

Longford nodded, but Lois thought she detected genuine uneasiness in his eyes — as if he really did believe that her efforts to improve the life of the prisoner would lead to tragedy.

Lois reached into her bag and withdrew the tube of Neosporin. His injuries were healing. Did he need the antiseptic cream? Would he know what to do with it?

“You’re not thinking of giving him that, are you?” Longford said. “He’ll probably eat it and poison himself.”

“If it were that easy to poison him, I’m sure it would have been done by now,” Lois said. But she returned the tube to her bag. She unlocked the door; Longford leant through the doorway, deposited the meal on the floor, and then pushed it with the non-Achilles end of the rod.

As soon as he was out of the way, Lois closed the door without looking into the cell. She locked it and removed the key. “Thanks,” she said to Longford.

She picked up the meal from the caterer, dumped it in the trashcan, and then hurried up the stairs.

When she arrived at the window, the prisoner was walking across the cell towards the meal. His body still bore the signs of Moyne’s attack and his steps were slow and measured, but his capacity to heal was extraordinary.

Perhaps, over the years, he had learnt ways to minimise the effects of being regularly bashed. Perhaps he knew that massage helped.

About four yards from the door, he hesitated. Was he worried that this was a trap? Had the change in routine spooked him?

He took the final few steps quickly and dropped low to pick up the container. Lois saw a little jolt that looked like surprise. Was that because it was hot? When was the last time he’d been given hot food?

Carrying the container, he walked to the area under her window and looked up. Lois knew he couldn’t see her because his eyes were focussed on the centre of the window and she was standing to the side. He lifted one hand in a gesture that was clearly meant to convey gratitude.

Lois turned away.

Trask had written about a vicious brutal animal. A killer.

Yet in less than two days, the prisoner’s behaviour had challenged just about every one of Trask’s assertions about the ‘alien’.

Had imprisonment changed him that much? Had it changed him from a ferocious murderer to a quiet, civilised man? Had Trask drugged him? Did the regular exposure to the rods — however they worked — have a long-term effect?

Lois didn’t know.

But she sure intended to find out.

It was half an hour before midnight, and Lois was in a quandary.

The prisoner — in the never-changing light of his cell — was asleep on the concrete.

How had he known it was nighttime?

Could he hear movement in the staffroom? Even if he could, it didn’t explain how he would know the time of day. There was someone in the staffroom twenty-four hours a day.

Regardless, he was asleep.

And Lois was exhausted.

She had spent the evening tackling more of Trask’s research. She’d found a book that was devoted to a study of a spaceship — the vehicle Trask believed had brought the alien to Earth. He had painstakingly studied every possible aspect of it, noted his findings, and speculated

wildly on possible ramifications. Lois had pored over every page, but had found nothing useful in trying to build a picture of the prisoner’s former life.

Now it was late, and she was tired.

But Moyne was here, and would be for the remainder of the night.

Lois couldn’t sleep here.

The camera would record everything that happened in the cell during her absence, but it wouldn’t prevent Moyne going into the cell.

Lois picked up her bag and took a deep breath.

It just wasn’t feasible for her to be here all the time. She had to visit her father. She had to go to her apartment to sleep.

Lois checked that the camera was recording and secured the padlock on the closet door. Then she locked her office and strode down the stairs and into the staffroom.

Moyne looked up with a smile that putrefied her stomach. He had piggy-shaped eyes and a sharp pointy nose. “You’re here late, Ms Lane,” he said in an oily voice. “Would you like to share a cup of coffee with me? I’ve just made a fresh batch.”

“No,” she said. “Thank you, Moyne.”

Her refusal didn’t dent his smile. “How are you settling in?” he asked as he stirred sugar into his coffee.

“I want you to give me your key to the cell,” Lois said.

He looked taken aback, and his thick eyebrows knitted together above the bridge of his nose. “My key to the cell?” he said. “Weren’t you given one?”

“I was given one,” Lois said. “But I don’t want you to enter the cell when you are here alone.”

“You’re concerned for my safety?” he said. “How sweet of you, Ms Lane.”

“Give me your key.”

Moyne took the bunch of keys from the pocket of his brown pants and held them towards her. Towards her, but not within reach. Lois reached to take them, and Moyne snatched them away.

“Give me your key,” she said.

“Come and get it,” he drawled.

Forcing herself to remain calm, Lois took a controlled step forward and grasped the keys where they dangled from his finger. Moyne didn’t release them. His other hand folded around hers. His face came so close that the stench of stale cigarette smoke assaulted her nostrils.

“It’s a lonely life,” he said. “You have to take a bit of companionship when it’s being offered.”

“It’s not being offered,” Lois said through gritted teeth.

He smiled. “There will be plenty more nights.” His words sent an icy river snaking up Lois’s back.

She jerked the keys from his hand and stepped out of his reach.

He smiled knowingly, and Lois felt an urgent compulsion to slap the expression from his face.

She removed the cell key from the ring and tossed the external key onto the table. “You are not to enter the cell under any circumstances,” she said.

“How can I?” Moyne asked with slimy innocence. “You have my key.”

Lois spun around and left the staffroom.

“See you tomorrow night, Ms Lane,” he called after her. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

The nightmare had returned.

It was dark, so very dark.

The darkness amplified every sound. Every gut-wrenching sound drilled through her ears, and invaded her brain, and painted explicit visual detail on the panorama of her memories.

She heard the scream.

And the partially muffled grunts of pain. And effort. And disgust. And horror. And fear.

She heard the sound of clothing being torn.

And the smash of bone into flesh.

She heard the trickle of blood — the drip ... drip ... drip ... drip as it landed on the floor.

Lois screeched.

She awoke as the last gush of breath whistled past her gaping mouth.

She clawed for the lamp and fumbled in her haste to turn it on. She found it, flicked the switch, and blessed light chased away the darkness.

She stared around the room — checking every corner, every cranny — as the stampede of her heart roared through her ears.

She was alone.

Alone.

The nightmare was over.

It was over.

It would never be over.

She would live with that night for the rest of her life.

She would never, ever escape its terror. It was inside her. Stuck in her head. Weaved through her memory. Poisoning her from within. It surrounded her. Closing in on her. Suffocating her. Stalking her.

There could be no escape.

There had been no escape for her friend.

Her partner.

The shaking began slowly as it always did.

It escalated.

Within minutes, uncontrollable convulsions shook her entire body. Her stomach muscles gripped painfully. Her shoulders cinched tight into her neck.

She didn't fight it.

She couldn't fight it.

All of her will to fight had been sapped in the effort to survive.

In getting out of the hell.

She had saved herself.

But she hadn't saved her friend.

Not from death.

Not from what had happened before he had finally released her to the sanctuary of death.

And for that, Lois would never forgive.

Part 5

~~ Wednesday ~~

As she walked to Bessolo Boulevard the next morning, Lois's entire body felt as if she'd been pummelled by a fully loaded freight train. It was her third day on the job.

Day one, she'd been apathetic. Expecting nothing. Wanting nothing. Caring nothing.

Day two, her piqued interest in the prisoner had transformed into horrified shock when she had discovered his motionless and beaten body on the floor of the cell.

Day three, and she couldn't muster either interest or solicitude. If Moyne *had* entered the cell overnight, the video recording would alert her. If he'd disabled the recording, she would know that he'd broken into her locked office. That should be enough — in an organisation primarily concerned with the safekeeping of information — to have him removed from the operation.

It wasn't yet six o'clock when Lois arrived at the compound behind the warehouse. She pushed the key into the external door and — much to her annoyance — her heart began to race. Moyne didn't scare her. She doubted their simmering conflict would turn physical. She'd met his sort before. He wouldn't initiate anything unless he could be sure of the outcome.

However, there was something about him — something she'd discerned in the moment of their meeting. He was sly. Cunning. Her gut feeling was that he was the sort of person you could know for a decade and never come to trust. The sort of person who might just be the mole working for the other side.

But it wasn't just thoughts of Moyne that crowded into her consciousness.

The door creaked loudly as Lois pushed it open. She locked it

behind her and hurried up the stairs. In her office, she scanned quickly for any signs of disturbance. Everything looked exactly how she had left it just a few hours earlier.

Her heart was now thumping crazily in her chest. Was he all right?

She stepped to the window and sighed with relief.

He was OK.

He was sitting against the far wall, one knee bent, one leg stretched out in front of him, his eyes staring forward.

But something was wrong. There were no signs of another attack, but something was wrong.

Lois snatched the binoculars and focussed on his face.

He looked ... desolate. Sad.

That was ludicrous. How could he be anything other than sad?

Deranged was a possibility. So was demoralised.

But this looked as if he had lost something that was precious to him.

He had.

He'd lost everything that was precious to him.

But he'd lost it seven years ago.

So what had caused such despondency now?

Lois stepped into the gap between her desk and the closet and looked around the cell.

The bowl, the towel, the plastic mug, and the empty water bottle were neatly arranged against the wall next to the door. The pieces of orange peel and the apple core had been left in the otherwise empty food container.

Everything looked fine.

But it wasn't.

What had happened?

Her gaze swung back towards the prisoner, but stalled abruptly before reaching him.

The toothpaste tube was lying in the middle of the floor. Flat. Crumpled. And with a dollop of hardening toothpaste blistered around the opening.

The cap was a few feet away — and beyond that was the toothbrush, its bristles buckled and discoloured.

What had happened?

Lois slowly scoured the room. Near the door, toothpaste had been smeared on a large portion of the wall — its whiteness stark against the surrounding grimy pallor.

Why had the prisoner done that?

He knew how to use a toothbrush. She'd seen him brush his teeth. Had he had some sort of breakdown?

Surely, this couldn't have been triggered by the changes she had instituted. Surely, he couldn't survive years of torment, only to be pushed over the edge by a hint of compassion.

Her gaze swung back to the crestfallen figure. What had happened? Lois didn't understand — but she would. And she would start with Moyne. She turned away from the window, hesitated long enough to lock her door, and descended the stairs.

Moyne was in the staffroom, eating a large meal of greasy bacon and almost-raw eggs.

"How was your shift?" Lois asked casually.

"Fine," he said with a mouth full of sloppy egg.

"Did you go into the cell?"

He chortled. "You took my key. How could I get into the cell?"

"Did you hear anything from the prisoner?"

Moyne's eyebrows dived. "There was a lot of movement." He shrugged. "Dunno what he was doing. It didn't sound like that running he does sometimes." He met her eyes, his face slicked to guileless.

"Have you been up to the office and looked? Is he OK?"

"Yeah, he's OK."

"So? No problems, then?"

"Nothing I can't handle." Lois poured herself a cup of strong coffee and returned to her office. She unlocked the closet, turned off the camera, and rewound the tape. Once it reached the beginning, she sipped her coffee as she watched the speeding images slide across the

screen.

A minute later, she jumped and snatched the remote control from the shelf. She slowed the tape to normal speed and watched.

Moyne was in the cell. The prisoner was huddled into the corner, suffering and incapacitated from exposure to the rod carried by his tormenter.

Moyne sauntered to where the prisoner had left his scant possessions. The assistant swung his foot through them, and they scattered. He followed up and landed a vicious kick on the water bottle. It skimmed across the concrete and slammed into the side wall.

He picked up the toothpaste, ripped off the cap, and squirted the contents of the tube onto the wall in long white streaks. Then, he retrieved the toothbrush and used it to spread the white paste across the wall.

It took him over a minute to complete the defacement to his satisfaction. He flung the empty tube and the ruined toothbrush across the cell and left.

Lois whirled through the tape until there was movement from the prisoner. She slowed to normal speed and watched as he struggled to his feet. He stood, shoulders low, crouched over with his hands on his knees.

His head rose, and he surveyed the cell, his face so clearly etched with despair that Lois couldn't help the sob that escaped from her mouth.

He hobbled around the cell, tidying the mess that Moyne had made.

He picked up everything — the orange peel, the apple core, the soap — and arranged them neatly together. Everything except for the toothbrush and toothpaste.

Why?

Did he feel they had been contaminated by Moyne's vandalism?

Did he think this would be perceived as confirmation that he didn't deserve even the most basic things?

Was he worried that this would mean a return to how life had been under Trask's regime?

Had he sensed a change in the person who dictated his life from the other side of the window?

Or was she drawing way, way too many inferences from his reaction to what Moyne had done?

Lois glanced at the clock. Shadbolt should be here any minute. There wasn't time to talk to Moyne privately. And anyway, she wasn't sure yet how she was going to deal with him. Should she tell him she knew he had another key? That would alert him to the presence of the camera — if he didn't know already.

Moyne knowing about the camera could provide the prisoner with some protection.

Moyne not knowing about the camera could give her the opportunity to gain enough evidence to take to Scardino.

Moyne had made no effort to keep outside of the camera's range. Did that mean he didn't know he was being recorded? Or did it mean that he was well aware that a ruined toothbrush was not going to be enough to dismiss him from the operation?

Lois heard the external door open and poked her head out of her office. "Shadbolt?"

He looked up, his expression not encouraging at all.

"Could you come up here for a moment, please?" Lois asked.

He lumbered up the steps. Stood at the top and waited.

"How do you feel about swapping shifts with Moyne?"

"I can't."

"You can't? Or you don't want to?"

"I can't."

Lois gave him a moment to elucidate, but he said nothing. "OK," she said.

He turned, walked down the steps, and disappeared into the staffroom.

"Lois Lane is here to see you."

Daniel Scardino felt a strangely mixed reaction to the news of an unexpected visit from Ms Lane. Pleasure, certainly. Who wouldn't look forward to the presence of such a beautiful and fascinating woman? But his original uneasiness hadn't faded. There was a real possibility she'd come to tell him that she wanted out of the Alien Operation.

And that would leave him with three problems — finding an assignment for her, finding someone to take on the debacle that Trask had left behind, and having to explain his inept handling of this operation to the higher-ups.

That was too much trouble and unpleasantness for an operation of such insignificance. If Lois Lane wanted out, he would have to convince her to stay. Her insistence that she remain in Metropolis could prove very helpful. If she wouldn't see things his way, he would threaten her with a long-term assignment in a faraway place.

"Good morning, Ms Lane," Daniel said as he opened his door and gestured for her to enter. He waited until she was seated before slipping behind his desk and sitting down. "How are you?" he asked with a smile.

"I need to discuss several aspects of my assignment with you."

"Of course."

"What do you know about the prisoner's life before he was captured?"

Daniel had *not* been expecting that question. He could only give her the truth. "Nothing."

"Nothing?"

He deflected the implied criticism in her question. "This operation has only been in my portfolio for the past two years. When it was assigned to me, I called in Trask, and he assured me that everything was fine. I asked him about the history of the operation, and he directed me to his boxes of research." Daniel tried another smile. "Did you receive the boxes?"

"Yes, thank you. Did you ever study Trask's research?"

Again, the truth was all Daniel had. The operation was local, small, and — despite Trask's vehement assertions — not considered globally threatening. "No."

"Who did the prisoner live with before he was captured?"

Daniel shot her a questioning look. "Live with?"

"Yes. Live with."

"I was led to believe that he was living in the wild like an ... like an animal."

"So was I," she said tightly.

"He wasn't? You've communicated with him?"

"Not with speech," Ms Lane said. "But mere observation is enough to determine beyond doubt that the prisoner has lived with humans. And — unless you know of a string of unsolved murders — presumably without harming them."

Her eyes were fixed on him with such intent that it felt as if she were pulling apart his defences and laying him wide open. The truth was that Daniel hadn't given the slightest attention to this operation. He didn't care. But — apparently — Lois Lane did. And suddenly, it felt as if she was the superior, and he was the junior being chastised for negligence to duty.

"What have you observed?" he asked.

"He understands cleanliness," Ms Lane said. "He is familiar with soap and toothpaste. Evidently, he managed to restrain his naturally murderous tendencies long enough to learn personal hygiene."

Her line was delivered with lashings of sarcasm.

"I read some of Trask's log," Daniel said, trying not to sound defensive. "He portrays the alien as being dirty and -"

"If you were put in an empty cell and not given enough water to drink, let alone wash, you'd be dirty, too," she fired at him.

Daniel waited until the emotion of her broadside had dissipated. "Ms Lane," he said. "You're an experienced agent, and normally I wouldn't say this, but I feel I must caution you against getting personally involved with this situation. The prisoner has killed two agents. He has no possible future outside of that cage."

Ms Lane regarded him with cool detachment. “Why isn’t this a normal situation?” she asked.

“Because you should still be on leave,” he replied. “After what happened on your previous assignment, you are entitled to three months -”

“Do you believe I am unfit for this assignment?”

“No. No, of course not.” Daniel had begun with a smile, but it collapsed under the chilliness of her gaze.

“I want you to find out what happened to the people he was living with at the time of his capture. It’s possible he had a wife ... children, perhaps.”

A *wife*? Children? Was she suggesting there were other aliens on earth? “Whatever the situation, it won’t be reversible,” Daniel said. “Not after all this time.”

“We both know that anyone who witnessed the capture would have been taken as well,” Ms Lane said. “We also know they would have been silenced — very effectively. This has been going on for seven years, and there hasn’t been even a hint of it reach the outside world.”

“I will try,” Daniel conceded.

She nodded the briefest of acknowledgements. “I also wish to discuss one of the assistants — Moyne.”

Daniel cast his mind back to the notes he’d read. “Moyne — I believe he was a part of the operation from the beginning.”

“Was he at the capture?” she said.

“You haven’t asked him?”

“I don’t trust him.”

Daniel subdued his sigh. He had the definite feeling that this operation was going to be taking more of his time than it warranted. “Are there reasons why you don’t trust him?”

“He disobeyed a directive.”

“This is your third day,” Daniel said, trying to appease. “A satisfactory relationship takes time. The assistants have worked with Trask in a small, tight group for many years. It’s not surprising that they would need a period of adjustment.”

“And if he continues to challenge my authority?”

“Are you suggesting he be dismissed from the operation?”

“Yes.”

This time Daniel’s sigh couldn’t be repressed. “Ms Lane,” he said. “You know the protocol.”

“The protocol shouldn’t be used as an excuse to keep agents in jobs for which they are not suited.”

“Ms Lane ... Lois ... this operation is particularly delicate. It’s not the sort of assignment that can have a revolving door. We can’t allow people who have been privy to this information to simply leave.”

“I’m not saying he should leave the job,” she said. “I’m saying that it’s time he was given another assignment.”

“The higher-ups won’t like it,” Daniel said. “I doubt they will agree.”

“Did Trask ever request that one of the assistants be released from the assignment?”

“Not in the last two years.”

“Before that?”

“I’m unaware.”

“Would it be recorded?” she asked.

“For security reasons, the specific details of this operation are kept strictly confidential.”

“So, basically Trask was given a free hand to do as he wished — knowing that there would be no one checking on him and that his records would be the only available account of what happened?”

“He didn’t have a ‘free hand,’” Daniel said. “This isn’t the only operation that works like that. You know that some things cannot be acknowledged officially.”

“Do you find it significant that the only two people who have left this operation did so in a coffin?”

An icy chill of trepidation brushed across Daniel’s heart. “You’re not suggesting that you could be in physical danger?” he said. “I’ve already strongly advised you not to enter the cell.”

“I think that when an operation is based on such unrestrained lust for power, the despicable becomes the norm, and anything is possible.”

“You make it sound like a House of Horrors,” Daniel said, trying to lighten the mood.

Ms Lane didn’t smile. “There’s no way you could find another position for Moyne?”

“Even assuming the higher-ups agreed to him moving on — which they won’t — I would have to find an assignment for Moyne, and I’d have to find someone to replace him at the compound.”

Ms Lane shook her head. “I don’t need three assistants,” she said. “Two are sufficient. They do little other than sit next to a locked door.”

“The assistants can’t work twelve hour shifts.”

“I’m not suggesting that. I’m suggesting there is no need for an assistant to be there when I’m in my office.”

“What happens when someone needs time off?”

“We can cover that in the short term.”

“Do you think it’s safe for you to be there alone with the prisoner?” Daniel asked.

“I’d hardly be alone with the prisoner,” she corrected crisply.

“There would be a locked door between us, and I would have the rods for protection should I need to enter the cell.”

“I don’t want you to go into the cell when you’re there by yourself,” Daniel said firmly. The memory of Deller’s torn and mangled body flashed through his mind. “I don’t want you to go into the cell at all.”

Ms Lane stood. “Do what you can to get Moyne moved on,” she said.

Daniel hurried to stand, too. “I can’t make any promises.”

“And find out what happened to the prisoner’s family.”

Family? “Ah ... we’re not even sure he ever lived with anyone.”

“I am,” she said. She strode to his office door and opened it. “And I want to know where they are now.”

She strode out of his office.

Daniel watched as she walked away.

She had the perfect figure for a woman. Sensational legs. Curvy hips. An exquisitely shaped bottom.

He closed the door and slowly returned to his desk.

She was going to be a problem. He just knew it. She was definitely going to be a problem.

Lois walked back to Bessolo Boulevard from Scardino’s office. The sun was reluctant to peep out from behind the clouds, but the slightly leaden hue wasn’t enough to persuade her to hail a cab.

Did he ever think about the outside world?

What had he enjoyed doing? Had he played sports? Had he liked camping? Fishing? Hiking in the woods?

It was easy to imagine him having had an active, outdoorsy lifestyle.

Lois stopped at a cafe and ordered two chicken, lettuce, and tomato wraps, and two bottles of water — one large, one small. At the newsstand, she bought the morning edition of *The Daily Planet*.

When she arrived at the compound, she ran up the stairs to her office, unlocked it, put her bag on the chair, and went to the window.

The toothpaste tube and toothbrush were still in the middle of the cell.

The prisoner was crouched on the ground — almost like a frog. As Lois watched, his feet lifted from the ground, and he balanced on his spreadeagled hands.

He was strong.

His body looked gaunt and malnourished, but he was startlingly strong.

He held the pose for almost half a minute. Then he began to shake and dropped gently to his feet.

He stretched out his legs and began doing push-ups.

Lois took the binoculars from the desk and zoomed in on him. The muscle tone through his arms and shoulders was surprisingly defined — not bulging, but definitely defined. She slowly drifted from his

shoulder and along his flexing, pumping arm. She wandered sideways — past his ribs and to his tightly bound stomach.

She snatched the binoculars from her eyes and dropped them onto the desk with a loud clatter. Without a backward glance, she picked up her bag and exited her office.

Shadbolt was in the staffroom, reading another space magazine.

He didn't look up when she entered.

"You'll be going into the cell in a few minutes," Lois said.

He didn't respond.

Lois searched under the sink and found a plastic bucket. She half filled it with water and added a cleaning cloth, hoping that the prisoner would realise that it was for cleaning the toothpaste off his wall, not for washing his body.

It seemed important to give him the means to erase the reminder of Moyne's invasion.

She put the bucket near the door and then positioned the wrap, the larger bottle of water, and the copy of *The Daily Planet* on the table. "Ready?" she asked Shadbolt.

His eyes lifted from the magazine and hesitated on her stash before rising further to meet her face. "You're playing a deadly game," he said ominously. "He seems compliant and easily controlled now, but you haven't seen the other side of him. Trask had good reason for the way he ran this operation."

"He's locked in a room," Lois said. "Whenever he's exposed to the rods, he suffers crippling pain. Regardless of how strong he is, I can't see how he could possibly present a danger to anyone with a rod."

"Deller thought that. So did Bortolotto."

"You said you brought out Bortolotto's body," Lois said.

"I did."

"Did Bortolotto have a rod with him?"

"Moyne and Bortolotto were in there together."

"Did they have rods?"

"Moyne did."

"Don't you think that the presence or otherwise of the rods is crucial in establishing exactly what happened?"

Shadbolt's eyebrow rose in query. "What do you mean?"

"Has there been a noticeable change in the effect of the rods over the years?"

Shadbolt shook his head. "No. Nothing's changed."

"From what I've seen, one rod is enough to completely disable him." Lois squeezed into the chair at the table. "Let's assume that one of two men went into the cell without a rod."

"And the animal saw his chance and killed."

"OK," Lois said. "But the question would have to be asked why anyone would go in without a rod. Particularly the second time — when Moyne and Bortolotto already knew what had happened to Deller."

"Bortolotto replaced Deller. He heard about it, but he didn't see it with his own eyes."

"Either way, that's unforgivably lax for men who have been trained to know that one mistake can be fatal."

"The worst thing about this job is the boredom," Shadbolt said. "It's worse than being out in the field with a guerrilla army on your tail."

"Boredom doesn't excuse carelessness," Lois said. "But that's not the point. Let's assume they took in at least one rod. How did the prisoner overcome his pain enough to be able to kill one of them?"

"Hatred is a powerful motivator."

"Then why hasn't he done it since? Why did he find the spur to override the effects of the rod twice, but no other time?"

"I just hope that the next time he decides to do it, it's not me who's in the cell."

"You think he'll kill again?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Then why loiter in there when you took in the bowl of water?"

A micro-smile touched Shadbolt's mouth. "I was being a jerk," he said. "I knew you were watching me, and I was trying to rattle your

cage." He shrugged, and the hint of levity dissolved. "And there had been a discipline session on Sunday — that subdues him for a few days."

"Do you really believe the discipline sessions are needed to minimise the danger?"

Shadbolt stared at her for a long moment. "Yes, I do," he said.

"Do you believe that if you went in there now without a rod, he would attack you?"

"Without a doubt," Shadbolt said with disturbing certainty. "I know that if I ever walk in there without a rod, I won't walk out."

"How can you be sure?"

"I've been here seven years."

"Other than the two deaths, has he ever acted in a threatening manner?"

"Yes!" Shadbolt cried, looking incredulous that she would ask that question.

"You've seen him? You've witnessed it directly?"

"I always take in a rod. He directed most of his hostility towards Trask and Moyne."

"Ever wondered why?"

"No," Shadbolt said. "Even though I take in a rod, I never forget that he is a scheming evil animal, awaiting his chance."

Lois shook her head in bewilderment. "I just don't see that in him."

"You didn't see the bodies," Shadbolt said grimly.

"Have you ever heard him speak?"

"No."

"Have you seen anything that could be considered an attempt to communicate?"

"You mean like a dog wags its tail?" Shadbolt mocked.

Lois's need for information was greater than her desire to remonstrate with her assistant. "Anything?" she persisted. "Did he make hand signals? Any noises at all?"

"The only hand signal I ever saw was the one used to pulverize Deller and Bortolotto to pulp."

Lois stood from her chair. "Get a rod," she said. She placed the bucket near the door, and picked up the newspaper, wrap, and bottle of water. "Put these just inside the door," she said. "I'll hand them to you. Also, there's a container with trash in it and the empty bowl — bring them back with you."

"What's the paper for?" Shadbolt asked. "And the bucket?"

Lois hesitated. "There's a mess in there."

Shadbolt grunted in disgust. "That's what happens when you suddenly change his diet."

"Not that sort of mess."

"Whatever sort of mess it is, I'm not staying in there long enough to clean it up."

"I'm not asking you to."

Shadbolt's scorn turned down the corners of his mouth. "You're expecting *him* to?"

"I don't know," Lois said honestly. "But I'm going to find out."

"You think he'll know to use the paper to clean up?"

"Actually, I was wondering if he'd read it."

"Read it?" Shadbolt spluttered. "Lady, you've lost the plot."

Lois unlocked the door and swung it open. Shadbolt carried the bucket into the cell and then reached back for the other items. A few seconds later, he retreated with the bowl and food container.

Lois locked the door. "Thanks," she said.

Shadbolt put the rod into the closet while Lois put the bowl on the drainer and dropped the container into the trash. She headed for the stairs.

"Ms Lane?"

She stopped and turned.

"Moyne told me that the alien did speak," Shadbolt said. "In the first few days."

"Why did he stop?"

"Because every time he tried to communicate in any way, they

belted him with the rod. By the time I came, he'd stopped trying."
 "Thank you," Lois said in a tight, strained voice. She hurried up the stairs before Shadbolt could see the tears that had flooded her eyes.

There was someone new.
 The realisation had come slowly as he'd recuperated from the attack two days ago.
 He'd heard tiny snatches of her voice.
Her!
A female voice.
 He hadn't heard a female voice since these four walls had become his prison.
 He'd thought he was dreaming at first ... or hallucinating ... it was so faint ... no words ... just tone ... too high-pitched for a man.
 He'd thought that perhaps his mind had begun to slide into insanity.

But then he'd heard her again.
 What was a woman doing here?
 This was no place for a woman.
 There was something terribly disconcerting about a woman being here.

A woman.
 Had she been here when Moyne had come in and attacked with maniacal ferocity?
 He didn't know.
 But when he'd awakened ... as he'd been trying to bring some relief to his battered body ... she'd been here then.
 He'd *felt* her.
 Felt a ... *difference* ... in the atmosphere.
 Trask had gone.
 Things had changed.
 She'd given him fruit. Given him a meal of chicken and vegetables. Given him a washcloth and soap. Given him ... He scowled at the toothbrush and toothpaste still on the floor where Moyne had thrown them.
 He forced his eyes away.
 That was nothing.
 He'd endured far, far more than the destruction of a toothbrush.
 But ... somehow, it was symbolic of everything that had been taken from him ... its loss felt as if he were being knifed deep inside him.

Deep, deep inside — the place where he went to escape. The place he had shored up so thoroughly he'd thought it was impenetrable.
 It was a stupid toothbrush.
 Insignificant.
 He dropped his head into his hands and fought back his tears.
 He wouldn't let them see how much this hurt him.
 He wouldn't.
 He wouldn't be brought down by a toothbrush.
 He heard the click of the lock and tensed, knowing his body was about to be hammered with exposure to the poison.
 The door opened. The pain whipped around him. He scrunched his eyes shut as the anguish clawed through his chest and across his heart.
 It was mercifully brief.
 The pain receded.
 The door shut.
 The lock clicked into place.
 Before the pain had fully faded, he stood and turned towards the door.

He saw a bucket and hurriedly strode across the prison.
 There was another bottle of water and something that looked like a rolled-up sandwich.
 But ...
 There was something else.
 He fell to his knees and picked up the newspaper.
 A link.
 A link to the world outside.

The first one since his capture.
 His eyes searched for the date.
Wednesday, October 5, 1994
 Seven years and two months.
 He'd been here seven years, two months, and three days.
 He'd tried to count the days as they'd passed, tried to mark the seasons. He'd reached 2559 days and thought it was midsummer. He'd lost a couple of months.
 Actually, he'd lost seven years.
 He scooped up the food and the bottle and took it away from the door.
 He sat down against the back wall, arched his knees, unfolded the paper ...
 ... and began to read.
 Absorb.
 Devour.

And above him, Lois watched through a deluge of silent tears.

Part 6

Lois turned away from the window to snatch a fistful of tissues from the box. She dabbed at the spreading sogginess, but her eyes didn't move from the figure sitting against the back wall of the cell.
 He didn't look significantly different from any worker who could be seen around the city at lunchtime. He had carefully unrolled his food from the plastic wrap — another indication that he was fully cognisant of the practicalities of Western culture — and was eating while engrossed in the pages of the newspaper.
 It looked so normal.
 And it was so abhorrently *abnormal*.
 Could she be sure that he was actually reading?
 Lois picked up the binoculars and peered through the pelt of his shaggy dark hair, trying to track the movement of his eyes.
 He certainly appeared to be reading.
 His eyes darted back and forth as if he were skimming rather than reading for detail. However, that was what she would expect. That was what she'd do if she'd been out of touch with the world for seven years.
 If he were reading, that changed everything.
 Even if — she quickly skipped over the thought — even if the repeated bashings to his head had impaired his ability to speak, the logical conclusion of him reading was that she could communicate with him.

Could he also write? Is so, he could communicate with her.
 He could answer her questions — questions about his life before he'd been condemned to this hellhole.
 Questions about Trask. And Moyne. And what they'd done when no one else was here.

Lois picked up another of Trask's books of research. So far, she had skimmed through four of them and found nothing. It was astonishing that a man could write so much and say so little.

This book wasn't scientific — in fact, as Lois quickly realised, it was the delusional ranting of a too-active imagination. This book was devoted to a treatise on the alien's 'powers'. Flicking through, she discovered a catalogue of bizarre claims.

The prisoner could — according to Trask — fly.
 He could see through walls — unless they were lined with lead.
 He was strong enough to bend steel with his hands.
 And could move fast enough to be just a blur when he crossed a room.

He could float — in utter defiance of gravity.
 And he intended to use all of these extraordinary powers in his Big Plan To Conquer The World.

Which begged the question — how had mere men managed to keep this super-powered modern-day Goliath under lock and key for seven years?

According to Trask, that was where the Achilles — an alien substance — came in mighty handy. It stripped the invader of his

powers and reduced him to a substantially weakened state.

Lois tossed the book onto the desk in disgust.

Trask's conjecture was neither original nor particularly inspired. Depict the enemy as being less than human, impute him with strange and frightening powers, mix them with the rabid intention of evil, sprinkle liberally with paranoia, and convince yourself — and others — that the sordid concoction excused the most repugnant of atrocities.

But Trask was dead.

And Lois's mission was to ensure that the prisoner remained locked in his cell.

Regardless of truth.

Or justice.

Or human rights.

Her training had schooled her to believe that her primary responsibility was to follow orders — that the big-picture rights and wrongs were not the concern of the individual operative. In most cases, the agent on the ground knew only one small part of a complex and far-reaching operation.

It was foolish to make decisions based on limited facts.

Foolish ... and sometimes fatal. Fatal for you. Fatal for those who worked alongside you.

But this ...

This was barbarous.

The prisoner had finished eating. His forearm was draped over his bended knee. The water bottle hung from his hand, and he periodically sipped as he continued reading *The Daily Planet*.

Who was he?

She knew what she'd witnessed in the past three days.

She also knew that making a judgment based on incomplete information went against every precept of being a good agent.

And a long-lived one.

It was imperative that she find out more.

Because this was not something that she could simply walk away from when the time came to resume her active career.

This was something she would never escape — it would stay with her.

There would come a time when she would have to make a stand.

To fight for his rights. Or to accept that — for the safety of humankind — he had to remain caged like an animal.

But she couldn't do either without knowing more.

And it wasn't just knowledge that she needed. It was truth.

Who had the truth?

Who could she trust to give her the truth?

No one.

The precepts of being a agent ...

Trust no one.

Gather information systematically.

Assume nothing.

Give nothing away.

This had become far more than an assignment. This went deeper.

This transcended him and became about her.

And about whether, this time, she could get it right.

Lois walked into the staffroom and went to the coffee machine without comment to Shadbolt, whose nose was buried deep in the *Sky and Telescope* magazine.

She added the milk to her coffee, stirred it, and sat down across the table from Shadbolt.

She sipped from the hot strong liquid — and the sound of her swallowing resonated loud in the silence.

After a minute of uncomfortable noiselessness, Shadbolt looked up with a scowl. "Do you want something?"

"Yes. I want information."

"Ask Moyne. He was tighter with Trask than anyone else."

"I want to ask you."

Shadbolt slapped his magazine onto the table — which Lois took to be agreement.

"You've been here since one week after the capture?"

He nodded.

"What was Deller like?" she asked. "When did he join the operation?"

"He started a week after me. He was here for just over a year."

"What was he like?"

Shadbolt shrugged. "He did his job."

Lois sent him a frown of disbelief tempered with a glint of amusement. "You're an agent," she said. "And you're still alive after thirty-three years. You *have* to be better at reading people than that."

He didn't smile, but the animosity of his scowl diminished a little. "Deller was like an angry dog. He never backed down, he had an opinion on everything, he always knew best, and he thought anyone who disagreed with him was an imbecile."

"Oh," Lois said with a wince. "How did that work with Trask?"

"Like gasoline and a naked flame."

"Would it be fair to say that Trask's job became easier after Deller's death?"

Shadbolt's scowl returned with full force. "No matter what Deller was, he didn't deserve to die like that."

"What about Bortolotto?" Lois asked. "Was he like Deller?"

Shadbolt reached forward and straightened the folded-over corner of the magazine page. "He was the exact opposite."

"How so?"

"Bortolotto was a quiet man — serious, introverted, anxious. I don't know what possessed him to get into this job. An even greater mystery is how he survived as long as he did."

"Why?"

"He had a fatal flaw — he believed the best of everyone. Moyne got great entertainment out of setting him up — stupid things like hiding his glasses or putting toy bugs in his sandwiches — but Bortolotto never once believed that Moyne meant him any ill."

"What did Bortolotto think of the prisoner?"

"He hated the job — you could tell. He hated using the rods because of what he thought they did to the alien. In some ways, he was a bit like you. He wasn't convinced of the need to keep the alien weak and submissive." Shadbolt lifted his gaze and met her eyes. "He paid for that oversight with his life."

Ice-cold foreboding trickled the length of her spine. "Do you think that Bortolotto tried to communicate with the prisoner?"

"If he did, he was more stupid than I realised."

"Why?"

Shadbolt shuffled in his seat. "I believe that the beast on the other side of that door is an alien," he said solemnly. "I believe that he came here to kill and destroy."

"Trask believed all of those things."

"But the difference between us is that Trask wanted to believe that the alien is fundamentally a dumb brute. I don't believe that at all. I believe he is cunning ... sly ... manipulative. You asked me how he could have killed if Moyne had the rod. I'll tell you how — I'm not convinced that the rods have any effect on him. I think there is a good chance that he fakes the agony to lure us into thinking we have the upper hand. I think he saw Deller's anger and Bortolotto's indulgence as weakness and struck where he perceived vulnerability."

"Did you tell Trask any of this?"

"Yes — but he couldn't stomach the idea that he'd been outsmarted by an alien. He wouldn't even consider the possibility of the rods being ineffectual. The alien's reaction to the rods was crucial in proving he's not one of us, and nothing was going to convince Trask otherwise."

"Why would the prisoner allow himself to be beaten if he could stop it?"

"Are you certain that aliens feel pain?"

"Yes," Lois asserted.

"Or he acts well."

"That doesn't explain why he would allow Moyne to attack him if he can stop it."

“He knows his fellow aliens are coming.”

Lois clamped down on the grunt of ridicule that almost escaped. “You think more of them are coming?” she said, managing — she hoped — to make it sound like a serious question.

“I’m sure of it. And their first port of call will be here.”

“Do you think they will take revenge?” Lois said, deliberately stifling the fear that wanted to fester in her tone. “For how we’ve treated one of them?”

“I don’t think it will matter,” Shadbolt said. “I think they will kill indiscriminately.”

“If you believe that, why are you still here?”

“Because I have no choice.”

“You could go to Scar -”

“What are *you* doing here?” Shadbolt challenged. “I’ve heard of the great Lois Lane. This operation is so mediocre compared to your usual assignments, I can only conclude that the higher-ups have finally realised the seriousness of this threat.”

“That’s not the reason,” Lois said. “I have to be in Metropolis for personal reasons.”

Shadbolt held her gaze for a long moment. “Then you should understand when I say I have no choice.”

“Personal reasons?”

“Private reasons.”

In other words, don’t ask. Lois changed the subject. “What if he’s just a human being who got caught up in Trask’s web?”

Shadbolt’s face creased with alarm. “I can assure you he is *not* human,” he said vehemently. “I have seen him levitate. I know he could see through these walls before Trask had them lined with lead. Despite the way he lives, he heals quickly — and none of his wounds ever leave scars.”

“You’ve *seen* him levitate?”

“Trask called me up to his office one day. The alien was asleep. He’d risen off the floor and was hanging in the air.”

“You *saw* him hang in mid-air?” Lois said.

Shadbolt was deadly serious. “If you make the mistake of thinking he is human, if you even consider the possibility that he can be trusted, it will be the final blunder of your life.”

Shadbolt believed it.

He believed every word he was saying.

He stood abruptly and faced the door to the cell. “What the alien did to the bodies of Deller and Bortolotto was the work of a depraved animal.” He turned, his face knotted with memories. “I don’t want to have to drag your torn body out of that cell. What he’d do to you would make a horror movie look like Sesame Street.”

Lois shot from the seat, almost spilling her coffee. “Thanks for the warning,” she said as she backed away.

She climbed the stairs and went into her office.

The prisoner was washing the dried smears of toothpaste from the wall. He worked steadily and with purpose. Lois watched until he’d finished. He wrung out the cloth and used it to mop up a couple of little splashes near the base of the bucket.

Then he crossed to the middle of the cell and picked up the discarded toothbrush and tube. He continued to the far wall where he’d eaten his lunch and picked up the plastic wrapping. He put the three items in a neat pile near the door.

He picked up the bucket and took it behind the shoulder-height screen to empty it. Once he’d placed it near the door, he stood for a moment and perused the newly cleaned wall.

Apparently satisfied, he returned to the back wall, picked up *The Daily Planet*, sat down, and began to read.

In her office, Lois re-read Trask’s claims about the extraordinary powers of the alien with new perspective. Could it be possible?

He could *fly*?

If he did have all of those powers, the plan to take over the world wasn’t so farfetched anymore. Particularly if there were others of his kind — equally powered — either here already or planning an

invasion.

As she ate her lunch, Lois watched him. It was no longer just observation, but study. Not just noting what he did, but also formulating possible reasons behind his actions.

The running, the exercise, the push-ups . . . did they represent a strategy of survival or a strategy of groundwork for future domination? He was still scouring the newspaper — working through page after page, leaving nothing unread.

Was it merely interest in a world he had been forced to leave? Or something more menacing?

Longford arrived, but Lois waited until she heard Shadbolt leave the compound before going down the stairs to the staffroom. “Hi,” she said.

Longford looked up from the book he was reading. “Hi, Ms Lane.”

He didn’t immediately return his attention to his book, so Lois paused next to the table. “How long have you been with this operation?”

“Two and a half years.”

“You replaced Bortolotto?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you mind me asking why you were given this assignment? Did you ask for it?”

Longford twisted in his seat, straightened his leg towards her, and pulled up the material of his pants.

Lois saw the prosthesis and gasped. “What happened?”

“Tried to stop a bullet with my leg,” he replied easily. “It took a long time to get to a hospital, and by then the wound was too badly infected to save the leg.”

Lois grimaced in sympathy. “Were you happy to get this assignment?”

Longford shrugged. “They figured I was too much of a liability to be given a real assignment, and my elderly mother lives about an hour away. It could be worse; I go and see her a couple of mornings a week.”

“Have you ever had any problems with the prisoner? Has he ever attacked you?”

“No,” Longford replied. “But I never go in there without a rod.”

“Do you think the rods do actually incapacitate him? Or do you think he’s faking his suffering?”

Longford folded his leg under the table again. “You’ve been talking to Shadbolt.”

“Yes. What do you think?”

“I don’t know,” Longford said. “Moyne and Shadbolt have told me plenty — enough that he can’t be anything except a savage killer.”

“But?”

“But I’ve never seen any evidence of it.”

“Have you ever seen any evidence of special powers?”

“No.”

“Are you worried about the way I’m running this operation?” Lois said. “Do you think that stopping the discipline sessions will increase the risk to your safety when you go into the cell?”

Longford thought for a moment. “I don’t know,” he said. “I really don’t know what to think.”

“Would you go into the cell without a rod?”

“No,” Longford said decisively. “Because I figure that by now, he has to have a lot of hatred built up. One day, it’s going to explode.” He gazed at the cell door for a long moment and then turned back to Lois. “Shadbolt said you took his key.”

“Yes.”

“Do you want mine?”

“Yes, please.”

He reached into his pocket and removed the key ring.

“Do you trust Moyne?” Lois asked.

“No.”

“Shadbolt?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because Shadbolt says what he thinks. You might not like what he says, but he doesn’t play games.”

“And Moyne?”

“Moyne has been here a long time. He’s seen a lot of things.”

“But you don’t trust him?”

“No, I don’t.” Longford slipped the cell key from the ring and offered it to Lois.

“Thanks,” she said as she took it. “How would you feel about swapping shifts with Moyne?”

Longford glanced sideways to the bed that was built into the area under the stairs. “It’s OK with me, but he won’t do it.”

“How do you know?”

“Trask wanted us to swap. Moyne refused.”

“Trask was supposed to run this operation.”

“In theory — yes.”

“Are you saying Moyne ran it?” Lois asked.

“I’m not saying anything other than I’m willing to swap shifts with Moyne — or Shadbolt for that matter. My mother doesn’t care what time of the day I visit her.”

“Thanks.”

Longford picked up his book, and his eyes returned to the page.

“I’m going out for about an hour,” Lois said.

“OK.”

“I’ll be back before his meal is delivered.”

Longford grunted, but his eyes did not leave the book.

Lois left the compound. The camera was recording, but she was confident that Longford posed no threat to the prisoner.

She wished she could be equally confident that the prisoner posed no threat to humanity.

“Hello, Ms Lane. You’re here early.”

Lois managed a synthetic smile. “I’ve started a new job. I can get away during the afternoon sometimes.”

The nurse was probably in her fifties, although her steely grey hair made her look older. Her smile, however, had a vibrant youthfulness. “That’ll work well with the winter coming. It’s not pleasant being out on cold dark evenings.”

“How’s Dad?”

“He came back from his physiotherapy about ten minutes ago. I was about to go into his room to bathe him.”

“Oh,” Lois said. “Ah . . . I can come back later.”

“There’s no need,” the nurse said.

“No. Really. I wouldn’t want to disrupt your routine. I know you’re busy.”

The nurse stepped closer. “Ms Lane,” she said, flashing that warm smile again. “I’ve watched you coming to visit your dad for a month now.”

“I come as often as I can.”

The nurse laid a hand on Lois’s shoulder, and Lois had to control the instinct to flinch. “You’re a wonderful daughter, and Sam is lucky to have you,” the nurse said. She took her hand away. “But I can’t help noticing that you seem so very uncomfortable when you visit.”

“Isn’t that normal?” Lois said with a spark of defensiveness. “This place takes some getting used to. Everyone is old or sick; some of them don’t even know where they are.”

“It’s completely normal,” the nurse said. “But my job is not just about helping the residents but also their families.”

“I’m fine. Really.”

“Most people find visits difficult at first,” she said, continuing as if Lois hadn’t spoken. “There’s so much to become accustomed to . . . the new surroundings, your father’s changed condition, the nurses always hovering around, the lack of privacy. The period of adjustment is hard for everyone.”

All Lois could do was nod. If she’d tried to reply verbally, she would have burst into tears.

“I have a suggestion,” the nurse said. “How about we go into your father’s room together, and we -”

“I couldn’t,” Lois said quickly.

“— and we give him some pampering? We could wash his hair; give him a shave . . . a manicure, even.”

“My father has never had a manicure in his life.”

The nurse didn’t seem offended by the sharpness of Lois’s tone.

“Would you feel up to doing one of those things?”

“Why?” The question was barked out before Lois could stifle it.

“Because doing something helps break the ice. It makes it this more normal.”

“I don’t normally wash my father’s hair.”

“It’s hard to hold a conversation when the other person isn’t saying anything,” the nurse said. “Achieving something together can fill in all those gaps.”

And there were always so many gaps.

The nurse leant forward with a girlish grin. “I have some lovely shampoo that will leave his hair soft and sweet smelling.”

“He doesn’t have much hair.”

The nurse chuckled. “All the more reason to indulge what he does have.”

Lois’s defences crumbled, and she managed a not-completely-forced smile. “That sounds nice,” she conceded.

“Oh, good,” the nurse said with infectious enthusiasm. “I’m Veronica, by the way — ‘Ronny’ to my friends.”

Lois wasn’t sure if she counted as a friend, but she did know that the nurse’s manner made her feel more relaxed than she had in the longest time.

“You go and see your dad,” Veronica said. “I’ll get the dreamy shampoo.”

Lois went into her father’s room, pulled up the chair, and sat beside his bed. “Hi, Dad,” she said.

His head turned slowly in her direction. She looked into his slightly watery eyes.

“How are you?” she asked as she rubbed her fingers gently along his forearm.

The silence was back.

What to say next?

“Guess what, Dad?” Lois smiled — almost as if she believed he would smile back. “We’re going to give you a makeover. We’re going to wash your hair with some lovely shampoo, and you’re going to feel great.”

There was no response — nothing she could detect anyway.

Until now, Lois had avoided pretending to be cheery. She’d worried that it would seem as if she was minimising the gravity of his situation. It seemed unfeeling to breeze in, say a few happy words, and breeze out again to continue her life when his life had been reduced to so little.

But was a little light-heartedness exactly what he needed? Could it bring some sunshine to his closed-in world?

His eyes were on her face, and Lois smiled. She put her hand on his cheek and looked directly into his eyes. “We’re OK, Dad,” she whispered. “The road ahead looks hellishly hard, but you’re not alone.”

Perhaps there was a response in the blink of his eyes.

Perhaps there wasn’t.

Veronica breezed in like a splash of exuberance. “All set?” she asked. “Good. I’ll get you a bowl of lovely warm water, and we’ll start.” She smiled at Sam. “You’re going to smell so good and look so dashing, you’re going to be dangerous,” she predicted.

Lois looked at her dad.

And gave him a smile that was almost natural.

Lois stayed at the nursing home for nearly an hour. Veronica showed her how to wrap a towel around her dad’s neck so the water wouldn’t seep down his back. The nurse did most of the talking — easily blending instructions for Lois into a steady stream of entertaining chatter while she cut and filed Sam’s fingernails. Lois added a few comments, but mostly she concentrated on her task. In a

surprisingly short time, her initial reservations had faded, and Lois discovered she was enjoying being able to connect with her dad in such a practical way.

Enjoying it.

Lois thought about it as she drove back to Bessolo Boulevard.

She hadn't enjoyed anything in so long that she could hardly remember what it felt like.

She'd smiled a little — even chuckled once or twice.

And if she'd had to make a guess, she'd say that her dad had enjoyed it, too.

She arrived back at the warehouse just as Uncle Mike's delivery guy pulled up with the prisoner's meal.

Lois accepted it from him with instructions to pass on her thanks to her uncle and then went into the compound.

Longford was in the staffroom, eating his meal.

He looked up as she walked in. "Do you want me to take that to him?" he asked.

"Finish your meal first," Lois said. "I have a few things to get ready before you go in."

He nodded and continued eating.

Back at her desk, Lois picked up a pen and paused. She wanted to say something to the prisoner, but what?

Give nothing away.

She didn't want to give him any information that he could use against her.

She didn't want him thinking — like so many men in this business — that because she was a woman, she was a soft target.

She had to be careful. She had to ensure that she didn't even hint at the possibility of dissension between those who were — supposedly — working together on the side of good.

She couldn't condemn Moyne or his actions.

Lois postponed the writing of the note while she took out the new toothbrush and tube of toothpaste she had bought on her way from the nursing home. She had also bought a tin container with a hinged lid. She opened it and placed the toothbrush and toothpaste inside. She picked up the sample bottle of shampoo she had bought and added that.

She put the Neosporin in, too. Some of his wounds had almost healed, but some — the ones on his back where Moyne had pounded abrasions that hadn't yet recovered from Sunday's discipline session — were still looking sore.

She picked up the roll-on deodorant. Should she? How far was too far? Where was the line between supplying his basic needs and indulging him to the point where he began to feel a psychological advantage?

Was he looking for an advantage?

Or was he simply trying to survive a situation that would have crushed most people a long time ago?

Lois sighed deeply.

Every time she looked at the prisoner — he was reading the newspaper again — she was overwhelmed with uncertainty.

Could he possibly be an alien?

An alien committed to the destruction of the human race?

Could he have special powers that made it plausible for him to even contemplate such a plan?

Did he have allies? Allies who were coming? Were they the hope that had sustained him through Trask's years of abuse?

Lois put the deodorant back in her bag. She picked up the pen and scribbled a note — *Will collect after use*. She put the sheet of paper in the little box and closed the lid.

On the way to the staffroom, she collected a clean towel and then filled the bowl with hot water.

Longford got the Achilles rod from the closet, and Lois unlocked the cell. He took only one step into the cell, delivered what needed to be delivered, and collected the empty bucket and cleaning cloth from where the prisoner had left them near the door.

Longford was out of the cell, and the door was locked less than

twenty seconds after it had been opened.

Lois couldn't restrain herself from sprinting up the stairs. When she arrived at the window, the prisoner was crossing the cell towards the door.

He picked up the two containers and moved away from the door. He seemed wary of being near the door. Did he fear it would open at any moment to reveal someone wielding a rod?

He opened the lid of the tin container and immediately looked up towards the window. He waved in her direction — more explicit this time, less diffident.

What did that mean?

That he was becoming more confident she was going to treat him humanely?

Or that he was becoming more confident she was no threat to his plans?

She needed to know more about his life before Trask had captured him. If she could discover his identity, she could check for birth records. *Human* birth records. She could try to locate someone who had known him before Trask had condemned him to life in a cell.

But she had to be careful. She knew so little. She was working in the dark with limited and unreliable information. There was such potential for damage.

If she concluded wrongly that he wasn't a threat, she would put the assistants' lives in danger.

Perhaps all the citizens of Earth.

If she concluded wrongly that he was a threat, she was going to perpetuate a terrible injustice.

She had to get it right.

This time, she had to get it right.

Lois picked up another of Trask's books and began to read.

Later, when she glanced through the window, the prisoner, having finished eating his meal, was leaning over the bowl, washing his hair. Next to the bowl was the uncapped bottle of shampoo.

Lois returned to Trask's research. Somewhere amongst the manic scrawl, there had to be some information that would actually be helpful.

He'd finished washing. He'd brushed his teeth. He'd replaced the soap, the washcloth, the shampoo, the new, undamaged toothbrush, the toothpaste, and the antiseptic ointment in the box.

He closed the lid and placed it in the bowl near the door.

It was such a simple adjustment — to leave his rations just inside the door, thereby curtailing the need to enter his cell and, in consequence, reducing his exposure to the poison.

Simple ... yet no one had done it.

Until now.

Of course, Trask and Moyne had deemed regular exposure an indispensable part of maintaining their supremacy over him.

He slipped his hand into the pocket of his shorts, and his fingers closed around the piece of paper.

Will collect after use.

Did that mean she didn't think he could be trusted to keep the box overnight?

Or did it mean she knew it had been Moyne who had plastered the toothpaste on the wall?

Her office had been in darkness when Moyne had come into the prison and inflicted his mindless destruction. It seemed unlikely that she had witnessed it.

What had Moyne told her?

Did she trust Moyne?

She'd replaced the ruined toothbrush.

And for that, he wanted to thank her.

But how?

Then, he had an idea.

He went to the newspaper and ripped out eight letters from the various headlines.

He went back to the door and arranged the scraps of paper across

the bottom of the box — *THANK YOU*.

He closed the lid and carefully placed the box in the bowl, just a few inches from the door.

He moved to the opposite corner of the prison and lay on the concrete.

He wriggled a little, trying to get more comfortable. He closed his eyes and waited for sleep to come.

For the first time since he'd walked into his mother's kitchen and collapsed in excruciating pain, he felt the timid approach of an almost-forgotten emotion.

Hope.

Part 7

The next time Lois looked up, the prisoner was lying on his side, facing away, presumably asleep.

She took the binoculars and examined his back. It was healing remarkably well. A smear of Neosporin marked a faint arc across his spine — presumably tracking the limit of his reach. Stepping closer to the window, Lois looked down. The tin box was in the bowl next to the door.

She went down the stairs. Longford was writing something — perhaps a letter. He looked up. "I wondered if you were still here," he commented. "I didn't hear you leave."

"Yeah," she said. "Still here."

His expression showed he didn't understand why she would choose to spend her evening here, but he didn't ask further questions.

"I want you to go into the cell," Lois said.

"OK."

"Just inside the door is the bowl. All you have to do is reach in there and get it."

Longford stood and went to the closet.

"Would you consider doing it without the rod?" Lois asked.

"Not a chance." Armed with the Achilles rod, he waited for her to unlock the cell door.

Lois pushed in the key. "I'll get it," she said. "You stay there with the rod."

She saw his quick, reflexive movement towards her, but his hand dropped before making contact. "Ms Lane," he said uneasily. "I really don't think you should do that."

Lois was not going to allow his anxiety to pollute her own perceptions. "He's asleep on the far side of the cell."

She didn't wait for Longford to continue arguing; she pushed the door half open, crouched low, and reached around the corner. Glancing up, she saw the recumbent figure of the prisoner, motionless on the floor. She grasped the bowl with the box in it, pulled them through the door, scrambled to her feet, slammed the door, and quickly locked it.

Lois looked at Longford, hoping he couldn't hear the pounding of her heart. He turned away and replaced the rod without comment.

"Thanks," Lois said breathlessly. She took a steadying breath. "See you tomorrow."

"Good night."

She carried the box up to her office and put it on the shelf.

As an afterthought, she unclasped the lid and opened it.

Everything she'd expected was in there. But ... there were little scraps of the newspaper littered throughout the items. She picked up one, checked both sides, and realised it had been intentionally ripped out around a letter 'K'.

Lois gathered the rest of the fragments and placed them on her desk with the letters face up. For a few moments, she rearranged them and then, there it was.

Staring right back at her.

THANK YOU

Nausea coursed a bilious path through her stomach.

He *wasn't* an animal — certainly not in one sense.

He could read.

He could write.

He was educated.

He understood the etiquette of expressing gratitude.

He was strong in body. Stronger than he had any right to be considering the way he had been forced to live.

And he was strong in mind. Strong enough that not even the worst of Trask's and Moyne's abuse had turned him into a monster.

But was it all an act? Lois was certain now that he'd realised there was someone different on the other side of the window. Was he working her? Working to gain her trust? Did he sense weakness in her? Did the things she'd supplied — the food, and the toothpaste, and the soap — depict her as easy quarry?

Lois collapsed into her seat as the nausea continued to eke its way through her stomach.

Was he the victim? Or was he playing the role of a victim with frightening credibility?

How was she going to determine the truth?

Moyne and Shadbolt had been utterly prejudiced by Trask.

Longford admitted he wasn't sure.

Scardino knew almost nothing and cared even less.

The prisoner knew ... but could she trust him?

He didn't owe her anything.

Certainly not his honesty.

Or his trust.

Would he trust her?

Could she trust him?

If this was a ploy to work her over psychologically, he was good. Darned good. The fact that he had used his first communication to express his thanks — rather than trying to proclaim his innocence or make a request — stamped him with ...

Something.

Decency.

A level of decency that was hard to disregard.

But ... if this were psychological chess, he was no novice.

Lois picked up another one of Trask's books. This one detailed the alien's planet of origin. Somehow — by extrapolating his knowledge of the spaceship — Trask had managed to write a thesis on an entire society — its values, traditions, culture. Shaking her head in disbelief, she flicked through the pages, stopping only long enough to read a few words to ascertain that the subject hadn't changed.

She put the book on her desk and looked out of the window.

The prisoner still appeared to be asleep.

She heard Moyne arrive at ten o'clock.

The prisoner slept on.

She heard Longford leave at eleven o'clock.

Lois looked at the pile of so-far-unread books that were filled with Trask's theories. The log he had kept since the prisoner's capture had proven to be grossly unreliable. She stood from her chair and quickly packed all of his books — including the log and the loose sheets — into the boxes.

It was possible that they contained useful information, but in getting it, she risked Trask's prejudices poisoning her judgment. He wrote powerfully and with staggering fervour. If she studied his books, it would be difficult to avoid subconsciously attributing some authority to his claims.

Whether she got this right or wrong, she would do it on her own convictions — not on the back of second-hand hokum from the pen of a hate-filled bigot.

Lois pushed the boxes into the corner — next to the boxes of Trask's personal possessions — and went down the stairs.

Moyne was making himself coffee. "Would you like a drink?" he asked.

"I know you have another key to the cell."

He turned from the coffee machine with a smug smile. "But, Ms Lane, you took my key."

"It wouldn't have been hard to have a copy made."

He spread his arms wide, and his smile turned rank. "Wanna search me?"

Lois turned abruptly to the closet. She hauled out the four rods and marched them out of the staffroom and up the stairs to her office. She

loaded them into the corner, checked that the camera was working, locked the closet, and picked up her bag.

After a final glance to the sleeping figure in the cell, she exited and locked the door.

Moyne was waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs, all traces of self-satisfaction wiped from his face. “You can’t leave me here with the alien and no access to the rods,” he bleated.

“The cell door is locked,” Lois said. “So long as it remains locked, you’re perfectly safe.”

He glowered at her. “You’ll pay for this.”

Lois brushed past him. “Good night, Moyne.”

She got into her car but hesitated before starting the engine. Her strained association with Moyne had just blistered into open hostility. He was not the sort of man to back down gracefully. The only possible outcome was one of them leaving the operation.

And it wasn’t going to be her.

~~ Thursday ~~

Lois arrived at the compound before six o’clock the next morning. She closed the external door with enough force that Moyne had to hear and then went up to her office without detouring into the staffroom.

The prisoner was jogging around the extremities of his cell. He was moving easily — in fact, with surprising athleticism for a man of his age. As he ran away from her, Lois checked his back and saw that only a few small patches of slight redness remained to bear testament to Moyne’s attack.

She watched as he circled. He’d picked up speed — his stride was long and powerful. There was something mesmerising about how he moved. He had a natural grace; he looked fit, looked as if he had been born to run. He looked primed.

Primed for what?

Lois turned away and opened his tin box. She tore a single piece of paper from a notepad and took a black crayon from her bag. After a lot of consideration, she had decided that she was going to give him the chance to communicate — but not too much. She didn’t want a long correspondence. Nor did she want to imply that she would respond.

She didn’t want anything that would suggest an affiliation of any sort.

But she did wonder what — if anything — he would write. Would he assert his humanity? Would he accuse Moyne of smearing the toothpaste? Would he request particular foods? Would he decry the injustice of the treatment he had received? Would he ask to speak to her? Would he try to flatter her with compliments about how she’d run the operation so far?

This time, she did add the deodorant to the tin box. She told herself that it was experimental. Would he know what to do with it?

But in her heart, she knew it wasn’t experimental. Either he was human, or he had lived with humans. Deodorant was not going to be outside his experience.

She took out the two blueberry bagels she had bought on her way to Bessolo Boulevard this morning. She hadn’t given him breakfast before. When Trask was alive, the prisoner had been supplied with one — disgusting — meal a day. Yesterday, she had included lunch.

He wouldn’t be expecting anything so soon in the day.

A tiny snippet of gratifying anticipation broke free from the dark cloud that permanently cloaked her disposition. She snuffed it out quickly and turned her attention to reviewing the tape of the night.

Moyne hadn’t entered the cell. Nothing of note had happened.

Lois allowed herself a moment of satisfaction.

She waited in her office until she heard Moyne leave and then went down to the staffroom, taking the tin box, the bagel, and the morning edition of *The Daily Planet* with her.

“Good morning,” she said to Shadbolt.

““Morning.”

She filled the bowl with hot water. Without waiting for her to direct him, Shadbolt went to the closet. She heard his squeak of surprise.

“The rods!” he exclaimed. “They’re gone.”

“I took them,” Lois said casually. She moved the bowl from the sink to the table and began to make two cups of coffee from the machine.

Shadbolt closed the closet door and leant against it, his arms folded across his chest. “I am *not* going in there without a rod,” he stated firmly.

“OK.”

“You shouldn’t either.”

For a moment, Lois considered tossing back a light comment about not having realised he cared for her safety, but he looked so antagonistic that she said nothing. When the coffees were made, she put them on the table and went to her office to get one rod. Back in the staffroom, she offered it to Shadbolt. He took it, but said nothing.

“Here’s how we’re doing this,” Lois said in a tone that didn’t leave room for any dispute. “I’m going to open the door. You’re going to stand behind me with the rod and pass me the stuff. I’ll put it inside the cell, and when it’s done, we shut the door.”

Shadbolt wasn’t happy — she could see it in his expression.

Lois unlocked the door. “Ready?”

He nodded grimly.

She swung the door away and took half a step forward. As she’d expected, the prisoner was crouched into the far corner, facing away from her.

She took the full bowl from Shadbolt and placed it on the floor of the cell. She added the tin box, then the bagel, and the newspaper.

Shadbolt stopped handing her things.

“And the coffee,” Lois said, indicating the cup.

“You’re giving him coffee?” Shadbolt asked with disbelief. “*Hot* coffee?”

“Just give it to me.”

He did, and Lois placed the steaming cup next to the tin box.

She glanced up. The prisoner hadn’t moved, but there was no tension across his back or shoulders to indicate that he was suffering.

“Come on,” Shadbolt said desperately from behind her.

Lois moved out of the cell and closed the door. After she’d locked it, she looked at Shadbolt. “Easily done,” she said, trying to sound as if she had had no doubts.

He shook his head. “You have no idea what you are doing,” he said in a tone that shivered up her spine.

“He hasn’t done one thing to suggest he is a threat.”

“Would you like to see the photos of Deller and Bortolotto?” Shadbolt demanded bitterly.

“That won’t be necessary.” Lois put out her hand, and he gave her the rod.

“It would give you a reality check that might just save your life.”

“Thanks for your help.”

Carrying the rod, Lois climbed the stairs and went into her office.

The prisoner had approached the door and was staring — dumbstruck — at the little collection of things on the floor. He dropped to his knees and picked up the cup of coffee. His hands surrounded the cup. He lifted it and inhaled deeply. His eyes closed, and his pleasure was palpable.

Lois felt something react inside her.

That a simple cup of coffee could bring such a depth of reaction . . .

Lois sat at her desk so he wasn’t directly in her line of sight.

In the United States of America, criminals who had committed the most heinous of acts were still granted basic human rights.

The right to dignity.

The right to food.

The right to a speedy trial.

He killed two people, her cautious side reminded.

Did he? her gut challenged.

Did he?

Lois drank her coffee and ate her bagel as, below her, the prisoner did the same. After he had finished, he placed his empty cup near the door with the paper bag that had contained the bagel.

He picked up the tin box and opened it.

Immediately, his head jolted up towards the window. He took out the paper and crayon, closed the lid of the box, and used it for support as he quickly wrote a few words.

Whatever he wanted to say was obviously of great importance to him.

Lois wondered what it could be.

After seven years of enforced silence, what would she say first?

She acknowledged grimly that there was every chance some of her first words would probably not be considered the language of a lady.

What would he say?

Below her, the prisoner was washing himself with a speed and purpose that he didn't usually display.

Why?

He was, after all, an individual who had nothing if not eons of time and very little to do.

When he had finished — including applying the deodorant — he packed everything into the box, carefully added the paper and crayon, closed the lid, and positioned it in front of the door.

He picked up *The Daily Planet* and went to the corner furthest from the door. He sat down — facing into the corner — and unfolded the paper.

He wanted her to collect the box!

He'd taken himself out of the way so she could collect the box without feeling threatened by him and without him being too affected by the rod.

Had he felt *any* pain earlier when they'd kept the rod behind the door?

Even if he had, he was willing to suffer again to convey his message.

Was the distance he so carefully put between them for her? Or him?

Was he aware of how much fear he had engendered?

Suddenly, Lois had to know what he'd written. She picked up a rod and went down to the staffroom. Shadbolt eyed her with surprise. "You're going in again?" he said.

"Just for a second," she replied. She gave him the rod and unlocked the door.

"How can you be sure he's not lying in wait for you?"

"I'm sure."

Shadbolt wasn't sure at all. Lois could feel his apprehension. She opened the door, crouched low, and reached into the cell. She seized the box and pulled it towards her body.

Then, she paused.

Looked up.

His head had turned.

Their eyes met.

Lois felt a tug on her shoulder as Shadbolt dragged her backwards. As soon as she was out of the doorway, he pulled the door shut and drove home the lock.

"What on earth were you doing?" he demanded angrily. "Are you *trying* to get yourself killed?"

She removed the key from the lock and looked into his red, agitated face. "Thanks."

"Thanks for what?" he exploded. "What was he doing?"

"Nothing. He just looked at me."

"Looked at you how?"

"No way. Just looked."

"Did he look angry? Threatening?"

Lois put the bowl on the drainer. "Neither," she said. "He didn't look like he was in any pain."

Shadbolt thrust the rod at her. "This is going to end with a funeral," he predicted.

She took the rod and went up the stairs, taking the tin box with her. In her office, she looked through the window.

The prisoner had turned around — he was now backed into the corner. His knees were arched and the newspaper lay across them as he

read.

Suddenly, he looked up. Looked directly at the window. Stared at her, his face unreadable.

Lois quickly opened the lid.

The paper was lying on the top of all the other items.

Are my parents OK? Jonathan and Martha Kent from Smallville, Kansas.

Lois stared at the note as her breath rasped through her airways.

Eleven words, and they changed everything.

He had a name.

Mr Kent.

Mr Someone Kent.

He had parents. People who were worried about him. People he worried about.

His parents must be old by now. In their seventies, probably older.

Were they aliens? Or humans?

He had a hometown.

Smallville, Kansas.

Wherever that was.

He hadn't mentioned a wife or children. That probably meant he wasn't married.

Had he been living with his parents at the time of his capture?

If so, why?

Were they infirm? Did they need him? Or did he need them?

Had they been captured, too?

Where were they now?

Lois sank into her seat, her eyes glued to the black crayoned words.

He hadn't used his chance to communicate to say anything about himself.

He'd enquired about his parents.

How awful not to know.

She could only imagine the terrible possibilities that must have plagued him during the last seven years.

Lois picked up her bag and locked her office.

She stopped briefly at the staffroom. "I'm going out," she told Shadbolt. She was gone before he had a chance to reply.

"You *what*?"

"I want to know where his parents are now."

"Ms Lane, it's been seven -"

"I know it's been seven years," she snapped. "And I figure he knows it's been seven years. And every day of those seven years, as well as having to deal with his own problems, he's probably been worried sick about what they were doing to his parents."

Daniel took a breath and tried to claw back some equanimity. "I had no knowledge of anyone else involved in this," he said.

Ms Lane stood abruptly. She'd only been sitting for a minute. "You need to get some knowledge," she said. "Jonathan and Martha Kent from Smallville, Kansas."

"We can't just turn up and start asking questions," Daniel said. "This mission has the highest possible secrecy rating."

"At the very least you can find out if they were captured at the same time as their son."

Son. Daniel swallowed roughly. Son. That word brought a distressing connotation of humanity to a situation that he'd been trying to view only as a matter of national — even international — security. That made it personal. And pressing. "I'll do what I can," he said.

"Will you?"

Daniel paused, debating with himself whether he should speak or not. "There are complications."

"Such as?"

He'd known she would ask that. "Mr Moyne has friends in high places."

"What does that have to do with finding out what happened to the prisoner's parents?"

"After you left yesterday, I received a call."

“Go on.”

“Your handling of this assignment is being questioned.”

She stared blankly at him. “In what way?”

“It’s been suggested that you are getting too personally involved.”

“You told me that all I had to do was ensure that he stayed in the cell. I’ve done that.”

“Ms Lane ... Lois ... you told me that you wish to remain in Metropolis.”

“I do.”

“Then my advice is to tread carefully.”

“What are you going to do about his parents?”

“I’ll do what I can. But it must be done discreetly.”

She nodded, but Daniel didn’t know whether she understood the full implications of what he was saying.

“Jason Trask’s funeral is on Monday at 2pm,” he said.

“Why wait so long?”

“We had to explore every avenue to try to find family or friends.”

“And?”

“None. No one. Do you know if any of the assistants wish to attend?”

“I haven’t asked them.”

“If all three wish to be there, I will try to find a suitable substitute to guard the prisoner.”

“If they all wish to attend the funeral, I will guard the prisoner.”

“There’s no need for you to do that,” Daniel said quickly. “I can -”

“There are no issues with safety,” Ms Lane said. “When exposed to the Achilles rods, the prisoner becomes weak and suffers great pain. He is no danger in the presence of the rods.”

“Ms Lane,” Daniel said, hoping she would recognise the warning in his tone.

“I will inform the assistants of the time of the funeral,” she said.

“You should expect all of them to be there.”

Daniel nodded. He didn’t want Ms Lane to be alone with the alien, but he realised there was little to be gained from arguing with her.

“Call me as soon as you know something about the Kents,” she said.

He nodded.

She strode out of his office.

Daniel sighed as the door slammed. Lois Lane shouldn’t be worrying about aliens, or Moyne, or prisoners, or the need for rods.

She should be lazing on a beach somewhere.

Trying to forget.

The pen poised, Lois waited for inspiration.

What could she say?

He would be waiting for an answer. She’d arrived back in her office twenty minutes ago and while she’d been trying to work out what to write in a note — and continually realising that she was staring at him — he had been reading the newspaper — and continually glancing up towards the window.

Have made inquiries re parents. Will inform.

That was short. Formal. It didn’t invite extraneous dialogue. But it was enough to let him know that she had received his note and was attempting to act on it.

Should she add a caution that he shouldn’t allow his hopes to be raised?

No. Hope was probably in short supply in the cell.

She opened a paper bag containing a ham and tomato sandwich and slipped the note inside. She gathered up a pear, a bottle of water, and one of the rods, and went to the staffroom.

When he saw her, Shadbolt stood and held out his hand for the rod.

She unlocked the door, opened it, and put the bag, the pear, and the bottle on the concrete. Then she closed the door. It was done in less than five seconds.

Shadbolt placed the rod against the wall and looked at her uncomfortably. “I’m sorry if I hurt your shoulder before,” he said. “It wasn’t my intention to be rough.”

Lois shrugged. “You didn’t hurt my shoulder,” she said. “And I appreciate what you were trying to do.”

He moved to the coffee machine. “Would you like one?”

“Sure. Thanks.”

He poured her coffee.

“Was Moyne there when the prisoner was captured?” Lois asked.

“Yes. He and Trask did it.”

“Did either of them ever say anything about it?”

“Both were really guarded about giving away any specifics.”

“What impression did you get?”

Shadbolt put the coffee in front of her and sat down. “My assumption was that they tracked him down over a long time — probably in the woods or some other equally remote place. I figured they’d set a trap for him — like you would for any animal.”

“Did Moyne or Trask ever confirm that specifically?”

“No. I asked Moyne once. He asked how I thought they’d caught him, and when I said something about trapping him, he just smiled and wouldn’t admit to anything.”

“Did they mention any other people?”

“You mean others helping with the capture?”

“No,” Lois said. “Others who were with the prisoner.”

“Other aliens?”

“Or humans.”

“No,” Shadbolt said. “They didn’t mention anyone else.”

“Did they ever refer to the prisoner by name?”

“No. Trask usually referred to him as ‘the brute’ or ‘the animal’.”

“Did he have the beard when you first saw him?”

“No.”

“Clean-shaven?”

“Stubble.”

“Short hair?”

“Yeah, short and neat.”

Lois picked up her coffee. “Thanks,” she said.

“Ms Lane?”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve seen this happen before. Bortolotto asked questions similar to the ones you’re asking now. Questions that raise the possibility that he is human. Questions only one step away from believing he’s an innocent man who had done nothing to deserve being caught up in this. He’s *not* human. And he’s *not* harmless.”

“I’m just trying to find out who he is,” Lois said. “I haven’t come to any conclusions yet.”

“Trask already found out who he is,” Shadbolt said. “He’s an alien whose intentions are to conquer the earth and destroy the human race.”

Lois nodded tightly and picked up the rod.

She sprinted up the stairs and went to the window. The prisoner was sitting next to the wall, eating his lunch.

There was no sign of the note. Had he read it? How had he responded? Had he tried to gesture something of meaning towards the window?

He wouldn’t know that she hadn’t seen.

Inexplicably, she felt like she’d missed something important.

But she wasn’t sure what.

That evening, Lois came down to the staffroom at half past nine, planning to retrieve the bowl and tin box — which she’d placed in the cell with the prisoner’s evening meal — before Moyne arrived.

To her surprise, Moyne was already in the staffroom, and there was no sign of Longford.

“Where’s Longford?”

“He wasn’t feeling well, so he called me in early.”

Lois wasn’t sure she believed him, but it wasn’t worth making an issue out of it. However, the box would have to stay in the cell for the night. She wasn’t going to open the cell door — not with Moyne here.

“Has he attempted to communicate with you yet?” Moyne asked.

Lois turned from where she was washing her cups in the sink. “What do you mean?”

Moyne nodded towards the cell. “Has he attempted to communicate with you yet?”

Lois felt her stomach knot. Could Moyne possibly know about the notes? “How could he communicate?”

“Notes. Hand signals towards the window.”

“Why do you ask?”

“Because it’s the first sign.”

“The first sign of what?”

“The first sign that his killer instincts are coming out of hibernation and that he’s chosen his next victim.”

The cup clattered loudly in the sink, and Lois grabbed at it. She heard Moyne snigger. “There’s not much he can communicate about,” she said, trying to sound casual.

“He usually begins with something close to home,” Moyne said. “Family. Friends. Anything to make him appear human.”

Lois turned quickly and snatched at a tea towel to dry her hands. “What exactly are you trying to say?” she demanded.

“I’ve been here a long time, Ms Lane,” Moyne said in a tone that stopped just short of being patronising. “You’ve been here less than a week. I’m trying to assist you because I figure it is unlikely that you would recognise the warning signs.”

“Warning?”

“Deller and Bortolotto. Both tragedies began with what seemed like innocent attempts to communicate. Both ended with mutilated bodies in the morgue and grieving families.”

“Did you witness the attacks?”

“Yes,” Moyne said. “I saw it all. They didn’t stand a chance.”

“And the prisoner did it?”

Moyne laughed — hard, and cold, and slimy. “Who else could have done it?”

Lois dried the cups and replaced them on the shelf above the coffee machine. “Thanks for the warning,” she said.

“It’s the least I can do,” Moyne said. “Just make sure you watch your back.”

Lois — almost out of the door — spun around to face him. “Is that a threat?”

His insolent grin widened — as if in reaction to some secret thought. “Just simple advice,” he said. “Although people rarely listen.”

“I’m leaving now,” Lois said. “Don’t go into the cell.”

“He hasn’t had a discipline session for three days,” Moyne said.

“Anyone who goes in there now is unlikely to come out alive. Another couple of days, and you’ll have an uncontrollable monster on your hands.”

“Trask wrote in the log that he had *resumed* discipline sessions,” Lois said. “That suggests to me that he stopped them for a while.”

“He did,” Moyne agreed. “But then he realised the foolishness of showing mercy to a crazed animal.” He considered her with his black eyes. “The question is whether you will realise it before it’s too late.”

Lois was done with his hints and insinuation. “Good night, Moyne.”

She left the staffroom, stalked by his sniggering laughter.

~ Friday ~

The blackness closed in on her.

Pierced with screams.

They were her screams, Lois realised as wakefulness slowly pushed away the terrifying images.

She turned on the lamp and listened as her tortured breaths echoed loudly around her silent bedroom.

The blackness had separated her from her friend. Her partner. The one person she trusted above all others. The person who had shared all of her secrets. They had worked together. Laughed together. They had trusted each other implicitly. Trusted each other with their lives.

Literally. They had gone into dangerous situations together. Come out of dangerous situations together. Made a pact to stick together. No matter what.

Except for this time.

The last time.

They had gone in together.

And only one of them had come out.

Lois had *left* her partner.

They had promised to never leave.

But Lois had.

Death had come slowly.

But she couldn’t think about that.

It was too raw. Too agonising.

She looked at the clock. It was ten to four.

Sleep would not be possible again.

Lois tried to push away the horror of that night.

She couldn’t merely empty her mind. She had to fill it with something to stop the memories flooding back.

Mr Kent.

Mr Kent of Smallville, Kansas.

Son of Martha and Jonathan.

A sinister shadow of foreboding crept from the darkness and settled on her.

Moyne.

He was planning something.

He was planning it now.

She knew.

Her gut was sure.

Last time, her gut had known.

But Lois had ignored it.

Her friend had died.

Lois had failed her. Badly.

Because she had ignored the warning of her gut.

But this time ...

Lois sprang from the bed, checked her weapon, strapped her gun holster to her ankle, pulled on jeans and a sweater, and grabbed her bag. Five minutes later, she was speeding through the dark streets of Metropolis towards Bessolo Boulevard.

Part 8

Lois paused at the external door of the compound.

She was here ... and she hadn’t really thought too much about what happened now.

The wall of the warehouse loomed large behind her, but there was nothing explicit to support her instinctive feeling that something was wrong.

She calmed her tattered breaths and pressed her ear against the door.

The compound was silent.

Did that mean she was too late?

Should she enter quietly?

Or burst in and claim the advantage of surprise?

Raising her knee, she slid her hand down her leg to feel the comforting bulk of her weapon strapped to her ankle.

She slipped the key into the lock and turned it very slowly. She pushed the door open and winced as it creaked loudly in the silence.

From the staffroom, there was the sound of a chair scraping across the floor, and the silhouette of Moyne appeared in the doorway. “Ms Lane,” he said. “What are you doing back so soon?”

Lois shut the door and carefully locked it. “Is everything OK?”

“Yep,” he said easily.

Lois climbed the stairs and let herself into her office. Once she’d locked the door, she stood in the darkness and looked into the brightly illuminated cell.

The prisoner was asleep on the floor. He was lying on his back — which was unusual. However, it wasn’t necessarily indicative of trouble; it could simply be that he’d healed enough to allow a greater variety of sleeping positions.

She lifted the binoculars to her eyes. His chest rose and fell in steady rhythm.

Lois released a deep sigh. Her gut had gotten it wrong.

She was losing her edge.

Had lost it.
 She switched on the light and sank into the chair.
 She'd been so sure. She'd *felt* the danger. Felt it like a clinging presence.
 She'd felt it many times before.
 Linda had always said that the Lois Lane gut was more reliable than any barometer.
 Linda.
 Her partner.
 Her friend.
 Lois missed her so much.
 They'd worked on so many assignments together that they had often joked about how they thought as one, acted as one, advanced as one, retreated as one.
 And it was true. Lois had known what Linda was thinking before Linda did. Linda had known what Lois was going to do before Lois did it. *That* had saved them more times than bore thinking about.
 They had shared an unshakeable belief in Lois's gut feelings.
 More than once, they had risked everything on the strength of Lois's intuition.
 And then had come the night ... *that* night.
 Linda had wanted to go — she had argued that there was no reason to believe there was any danger.
 Lois had agreed. But her gut had protested.
 Linda had insisted.
 Lois had been torn.
 Torn between her friend and rationality on one side and the nagging insistence that something was amiss on the other.
 They'd gone.
 The only thing that transcended their faith in Lois's gut was their sworn pact that they would never split.
 So, they'd gone together.
 And strolled straight into the trap like two naive schoolgirls.
 They'd been gagged, tied up, and locked in a dark room.
 They'd managed to communicate a little — through grunts and the uncanny ability to predict how the other was likely to react. They had shuffled awkwardly until they'd managed to position Lois's bound feet under Linda's bound hands.
 Slowly, tediously, painfully, Linda had worked at those knots.
 Ultimately, that perseverance had saved Lois's life.
 Linda had saved Lois's life.
 But not her own.
 "Ms Lane?"
 Lois jumped as the sound of the voice on the other side of her door dragged her out of the desolation of her memories.
 "Yes."
 "There's something I think you should see."
 Lois stood and glanced into the cell. The prisoner hadn't moved.
 She approached the door. "What is it, Moyne?"
 "I think you need to see this."
 She couldn't cower in her office until the end of Moyne's shift.
 "Ms Lane?"
 And, whatever the problem was, it was her responsibility.
 Lois unlocked the door and cautiously opened it.
 Moyne was there — looking tentative.
 "What is it, Moyne?"
 He gestured down the steps. "You need to see this."
 Lois leant out of the office door and looked down the stairs.
 With a sudden flash of movement, Moyne's arm snaked across her throat and seized her upper arm, twisting her and ramming her back against his chest.
 Lois reacted — trying to free her arm, trying to pull air into her crushed lungs, trying to bend enough to reach her gun, trying to land a kick on his legs.
 Her efforts achieved little — such was the strength of his grip.
 Her training clicked in and overpowered her adrenaline-fuelled impulses. With one concerted effort, Lois inched her left arm forward

and then thrust her elbow back into Moyne's ribcage.
 She heard him grunt and felt the swoosh of air explode from his mouth.
 Lois sensed her moment to attack. She jolted her arm again. This time, his hold gave way, and the sudden release caused her elbow to smash into the doorframe. Excruciating pain flared up her arm, and she gasped.
 Moyne re-tightened his chokehold and dragged her towards the stairs.
 Numbness was spreading through her left arm as it hung uselessly at her side. Lois clawed at his forearm with her right hand as her lungs began to crave unrestricted oxygen.
 He pulled her towards the stairs.
 He reeked of stale cigarette smoke.
 "Let ... me ... go," Lois panted.
 "Sure," Moyne puffed. "Once we get to the cell."
 The cell? He was taking her to the cell?
 What would the prisoner do to her?
 Had Trask been right? Was the alien a vicious killer?
 Halfway down the stairs, Lois swivelled the lower portion of her body enough to kick at Moyne's lower legs. He retaliated with a vicious blow that landed on the point of her left ankle.
 She stumbled, and her ankle twisted sharply, shooting a second rocket of pain up her leg.
 Lois bit down on her scream and tried to clear her mind.
 Physically, he was stronger.
 If she were going to overcome him, she had to plan.
 The cell door.
 That would be her chance.
 He would have to unlock it.
 That's when she would strike.
 At the bottom of the stairs, Moyne turned them into the staffroom and hauled her backwards towards the door to the cell.
 His left arm tightened its grip. He reached past her with his right hand and picked up a key from the table.
 "I didn't expect you would give up so easily," he sneered. "Given your reputation."
 Good. Let him think he'd beaten her.
 "Wanna know what's going to happen to you?" he taunted.
 "You're going into the cell — without a rod. The brute hasn't had a taste of the Achilles for three days ... and he hasn't seen a woman in seven years. When he's had his turn, I'll be down — with a rod — to finish the job."
 Lois closed her eyes as the blackness crowded in on her.
 Linda!
 Linda had been raped.
 And then he'd killed her.
 Lois hauled in a breath, and her scream echoed around the staffroom.
 Moyne's fist swung and grazed her left cheek.
 In the moment of her confusion, he heaved her to the door of the cell. He buried the key into the lock and kicked open the door.
 Ahead was the cell. The prisoner's domain. She couldn't let Moyne lock her in there.
 Moyne pressed his weight into the centre of her back and edged her forward.
 Lois clamped her good foot against the doorjamb.
 His foot crashed into the area behind her knee, and her resistance crumbled.
 Moyne released his hold across her throat. Lois twisted and grasped blindly with her right hand, managing to seize a fistful of his shirt.
 Moyne shoved her forward.
 Lois clung to his shirt.
 She fell into the cell. She hit the concrete, and his shirt slipped from her grasp. The weight of Moyne crashed on top of her. He clasped her hair and jerked her head backwards. Lois swung her good

elbow, flailing blindly as all technique was lost in the blizzard of battle.

His weight squirmed. She felt his hand on her right leg and kicked frantically.

He clamped her leg against the concrete and slid her gun from its holster.

His weight left her, and the mayhem of movement stopped abruptly.

Lois rolled onto her back. Moyne stood over her, gun poised.

Blood was streaming from a cut on his lower lip. He squinted at her, his eyes dark and filled with fury.

“You’re gonna die for that, bitch,” he snarled.

“This time, they’ll know it was you,” she said defiantly.

Moyne sniggered. He lifted the gun and pointed directly between her eyes.

She stared at his finger on the trigger. It squeezed slowly, with deadly purpose and chilling certainty. The explosion shattered the air

...

... but the pain didn’t come.

Lois opened her eyes ... and saw a pair of shorts and a bare back below the hem of bushy dark hair. The prisoner was standing over her, one foot on either side of her body. Her view of Moyne was restricted, but she could see enough to know that they were facing each other like two gladiators.

They were going to fight over her.

Fight for the right to kill her.

Abuse her.

With an angry roar, Moyne sprang at the prisoner.

There was a blur of movement, and Moyne collapsed with a dull thud next to Lois’s legs. Her gun shot from his hand and slewed across the concrete.

There was stillness.

And silence.

Except for the pounding of her heart as it thrashed hysterically against her sternum.

Moyne didn’t move.

The prisoner raised his foot and stepped over her.

He turned towards her, and his eyes slammed into hers.

Lois’s breath stopped.

What was he going to do?

The door was too far away. He was standing — she was flat on her back. If she tried to make a run for it, she doubted she would even make it to her feet.

Would he try to escape?

If he did, she had no chance of stopping him.

He still hadn’t moved.

He still watched her.

Moyne hadn’t moved either. He must be unconscious.

Her gun!

Was too far away.

She had thought that Moyne had fired.

From close range.

But Lois was sure she hadn’t been shot.

There was no expanding puddle of blood.

The prisoner wasn’t bleeding either.

She could feel a sluggish drizzle oozing down her cheek.

But it wasn’t enough for a gunshot wound.

The prisoner hadn’t moved. Could he possibly be waiting for her?

Waiting to see what she was going to do?

She pressed the hand of her good arm into the concrete and struggled to a sitting position.

The prisoner didn’t react.

Her left arm felt like it was encased in a cast of heavy steel.

Her ankle hurt like crazy.

The prisoner stood like a statue, his eyes riveted to her.

She glanced down his body. His right fist was clenched, but he had no signs of any injury. His former wounds had healed — without

evident scarring.

He was less than a yard from her.

The cell door was wide open.

The rods were in her office.

Moyne was unconscious on the floor.

And her gun was out of reach.

The prisoner’s left hand began to move. It lifted in agonising slow motion.

Her breath froze, and her throat convulsed.

His hand stopped ... suspended in the air ... his forefinger slightly adrift of the others.

It didn’t *seem* threatening. Had it been anyone else, she would have thought he was trying to reassure her.

Without releasing her from his gaze, the prisoner moved slowly towards Moyne.

Lois gulped.

Was he going to kill Moyne in another horrific attack?

Was this his moment of retribution?

He reached Moyne and looked down at the unconscious figure. The prisoner crouched low, reached under Moyne’s shoulders and knees, and lifted him with ease. He carried Moyne and laid him perpendicular to the doorway — with his head pointing towards the staffroom.

Then, the prisoner picked up the tin box.

He swung open the lid and rustled through the contents.

He removed something, closed the lid, and returned the box to the floor.

His eyes sought Lois again.

He took a step towards her. Then another. And another. He bent forward, and his left hand continued towards her. His fingers uncurled. In his palm was the Neosporin.

Lois’s eyes leapt from his outstretched hand and to his face.

His eyes were deep brown.

His unruly beard made it impossible to read his facial expression with any certainty.

In Moyne’s eyes, hatred had burned.

In the prisoner’s eyes, there was ... Lois didn’t know.

But it wasn’t hatred.

They were within touching distance; they weren’t touching, but the distance between them was bridged by the fusion of their eyes.

Time stopped.

Then, his other hand lifted, his forefinger unfurled from his fist, and he ran his fingertip along his cheek, as if signalling the place of her injury.

Lois pulled her gaze from his eyes and took the ointment from his palm.

He straightened.

Hesitated.

His eyes veered to her gun, and icy fear shivered through Lois.

But he turned away and walked in the opposite direction — to the far corner of the cell.

He sat down against the wall, arched his knees, and perched his forearms on them. He stared ahead — not looking at her, although Lois was sure he could still see her.

She scrambled to her feet and gingerly placed her ankle on the concrete. Pain shot up her leg. She limped to her weapon, picked it up, locked it, and slipped it into the holster.

When she reached Moyne, she hopped over his inert body and through the doorway.

She bent over to drag him into the staffroom, but then she hesitated.

Leaving him there in the open doorway, she turned, hobbled up the steps with more speed than her ankle appreciated, grabbed her bag, and returned to the staffroom. Moyne was still motionless. She peered into the cell. The prisoner hadn’t moved either.

Lois sat on the table and lifted her ankle onto the seat of the chair. She took the cell phone from her bag and called Scardino’s private

number.

His drowsy voice answered a few moments later. “Daniel Scardino.”

“It’s Lois Lane,” she said. “You need to get to the compound now.”

She heard the alarm in his swiftly inhaled breath. “The prisoner?” he said. “Has he killed again?”

“No,” Lois said. “But I think that was the plan.”

2. Bridge

Part 1

~~ Friday (continued) ~~

She had come into his prison.

A woman.

The woman.

She had come in ... forced against her will by Moyne.

Just like the other times.

She was beautiful.

Petite. Feminine. Stunning. Young. Beautiful.

Fiery. Strong. Courageous. Spirited.

Moyne had had the advantage of physical strength, but she had fought valiantly ... until Moyne had stolen her gun.

Moyne had hurt her.

Moyne was a killer.

He shouldn’t be near her.

She was a woman.

A beautiful ...

He had watched them wrestle on the floor of the prison — utterly torn.

He’d known he couldn’t allow the monster to continue hurting her.

But if had he intervened, he risked Moyne bringing in the poison.

Then he would have been incapable of protecting her.

Moyne had shot her.

And he’d leapt into the path of the bullet. Caught it before it reached her. It was in his pocket now. He’d cleaned it on his shorts and put it next to the two notes she had written him.

He opened his right hand and stared at the gouge caused by the bullet.

He wasn’t at full strength ... hadn’t had enough sunlight ... still weak from the poison. He wasn’t at full pace either ... but he’d been fast enough.

Fast enough to intercept the bullet.

He stretched out his leg and slid his hand into the pocket — the empty one — of his shorts. He flattened his palm against the material to wipe away the drizzle of blood.

He withdrew his hand and checked it. The bleeding had stopped.

He closed his fist to continue applying pressure and winced at the pain.

It would heal.

She wouldn’t have.

He’d stood over her, determined to defend her until his last breath if Moyne brought in the poison.

Moyne’s anger had flared, his temper had exploded, and he’d charged. Moyne’s head had cannoned into his shoulder. The monster had dropped, unconscious.

He’d turned his attention from Moyne to the woman.

The memory of the fear on her face felt like a knife twisting through his stomach.

Every instinct had been to offer his hand — not the one holding the bullet — to help her up ... but he was sure she would have recoiled at the thought of touching him.

He had considered returning the gun to her ... but if he’d made even the slightest move towards the weapon, he was sure she would have freaked out completely.

All he had been able to do was give her the Neosporin.

It had been a pitiful gesture.

But anything else would have terrified her.

And she’d been scared enough already.

Moyne had hurt her.

Her cheek had been oozing blood.

Moyne was still unconscious; still in the cell, still visible.

Unconscious, he couldn’t hurt her.

The woman had struggled to rise from the concrete. She’d limped to her weapon and picked it up. She hadn’t even looked at him as she’d gone through the door and disappeared to the outside.

When he’d seen the obvious pain that movement caused her, he’d wanted to spring to his feet, rush over, and help her.

But that would have terrified her.

And her reaction to his nearness would have hurt him more than the poison did.

He’d given her the only thing she would want from him — he’d taken himself as far away from her as possible.

She had fought so frantically to avoid entering his prison.

What had she thought he would do to her?

She had touched him.

Before he’d walked away — she’d touched him.

When she’d taken the antiseptic ointment from his hand, her fingertips had lightly scraped across his palm.

He stretched open his left hand and examined it. There was no evidence of her touch ... but it was forever inscribed into his memory.

Would he ever see her again?

She had looked so frightened.

Would she leave now?

Why would she stay?

He was nothing.

Less than nothing.

An animal.

That was what they all thought.

That was what they would have told her.

She was everything he was not.

Free.

Human.

Beautiful.

Lois bent low, took a firm grip of Moyne’s shirt with her right hand, planted her right foot, and pulled.

He moved a few inches, but the effort-to-progress ratio was disheartening.

He was heavier than he looked.

She bent low again and readied herself for another effort.

There was movement and noise at Moyne’s feet.

She looked up and gasped.

The prisoner was there.

He dropped to his knees and planted his hands around Moyne’s ankles. He glanced up, their eyes met for a brief second, he pushed, she pulled ... and Moyne’s inert body slid into the staffroom. When only the lower portion of Moyne’s legs remained in the cell, the prisoner quickly withdrew his hands and rolled backwards onto his haunches.

The momentum, together with Lois’s continued efforts, took Moyne to within inches of clearing the threshold.

Lois slowly lifted her head. The prisoner was still crouched low. Their eyes were on the same level.

He stared at her.

She stared at him.

Why had he shrunk back from the doorway?

Could it be that years of incarceration had made him fear the outside world?

Had he been locked away for so long that now the cell gave him a sense of security?

Lois broke from his gaze and put all of her concentration into dragging Moyne the final few inches. She tugged, the pain in her left ankle reared in protest, but she gained the ground she needed.

Again, Lois looked at the prisoner. She opened her mouth to thank him, but before her words had formed, he stood abruptly and faded away.

She went to the doorway and shoved Moyne's legs aside. The prisoner was walking across the cell — away from her. She closed the door.

And locked it.
It had to be locked.

She pulled Moyne's copied key from the lock and put it in her pocket.

Moyne showed no signs of regaining consciousness.

He was breathing.

Lois turned away, indifferent to his fate.

She'd seen better men than Moyne die.

She took a mirror and a cloth from her bag and surveyed the damage to her face. There was an abrasion across her cheek and darkening puffiness around her eye.

At the sink, she turned on the faucet and waited for the water to heat up. When it was pleasantly warm, she put the cloth into the flow.

He'd given her the tube of Neosporin.

His eyes ... The memory of them was vividly etched across the screen of her mind.

He'd said nothing ... but she couldn't shake the feeling that he had wanted desperately to communicate.

Don't be afraid.

He could have killed Moyne.

He could have killed her.

He could have escaped — with her gun.

She and Moyne had been in the cell without protection. The rods had been in her office — inaccessible.

Perhaps the prisoner hadn't known the rods were out of easy reach.

But he'd known they weren't in the cell.

Every advantage had been with him. Height. Strength. Position. Speed. Motivation.

He had to have noticed that she was incapacitated. Had to have known she was powerless to defend herself.

Shadbolt had been steadfast in his belief that entering the cell without a rod would result in certain death.

It hadn't.

He'd given her the Neosporin.

And then — instead of escaping or doing anything that might be expected of the savage they had portrayed him to be — he'd moved away so she would know she had nothing to fear from him.

When he'd approached her again, it had been to help her move Moyne.

Was he alien? Or human?

Suddenly, it didn't matter anymore.

It didn't matter at all.

Unless ...

What if others of his kind were coming?

Lois realised that her hand was still under the running water. She quickly turned off the faucet and wrung the excess water from the cloth. Peering into the little handheld mirror, she patted at the blood seeping from the graze on her face.

When the wound was clean, she uncapped the Neosporin and dabbed a little onto her face.

Moyne still hadn't moved.

How had he been knocked out? Her view had been blocked by the body of the prisoner. Had the prisoner done it?

If he had, it had been self-defence.

Moyne had been the aggressor.

She'd seen that much.

Lois sat on one chair and lifted her injured leg onto another one. She looked down into Moyne's vacuous face. What had happened to Deller and Bortolotto?

It was possible that Moyne's version was correct, but her doubts — which until now had been little more than nagging speculation — were bellowing through her brain.

Had Moyne killed them?

Had they voiced concern about Trask's methods? Had Moyne

silenced them ... permanently?

And used the prisoner as a convenient scapegoat?

A knock on the external door shattered the silence.

Lois heaved herself to her feet and limped to the door. "Who is it?"

"Daniel Scardino."

She opened the door, and Scardino entered in a brisk, business-like fashion.

"What happened?" he said. He saw her face, and his apprehension deepened. "What the hell happened?"

Lois didn't answer. She shuffled into the staffroom, and Scardino followed her.

She went to the table and hitched her thigh along the edge to take the weight from her ankle. Scardino was gaping at Moyne. "The alien did this?" he said, his voice punctured with alarm.

Lois swallowed down her resentment. "No," she said. "Moyne forced me into the cell."

"He *forced* you?" Scardino shrieked.

Lois nodded. "He said that he was going to let the monster take what he wanted." The wave of fear rolled through her again ... but it was propelled more by her resident memories of the night Linda had died than by what had happened here.

Scardino laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Have you called an ambulance?"

Lois recoiled from his touch. "No."

Scardino removed his hand, took his cell from the pocket of his coat, and made the call. "They'll be here soon," he said. "Do you have any other injuries?"

"Nothing serious."

"Nothing serious?" he questioned anxiously. "What else?"

"A few bumps and bruises. Nothing that won't heal."

Shock had leached the colour from Scardino's face. "We could have lost both of you," he said shakily. "Where are the rods?"

Lois felt outrage seethe up her throat. "You still think *he* did this, don't you? You still think *he's* the danger?"

Scardino flinched at her tone. He shook his head in dismay. "We were lucky."

"This ..." Lois gestured angrily towards her face. "This wasn't *him*. This wasn't the prisoner. This was Moyne."

Scardino gulped. "Moyne?"

Lois pressed her fingers into the rock-hard strap of muscle across her neck and grappled for composure. "This prisoner didn't touch me," she stated vehemently. "Moyne did this when I was trying to stop him hurling me into the cell."

"*Moyne* did it?"

"Does that surprise you?" she demanded.

"Yes!"

Lois shook her head but avoided succumbing to the temptation to itemise the deficiencies in Scardino's handling of this operation.

"Moyne knocked on my office door," she said flatly. "When I opened it, he grabbed me and hauled me down the stairs and threw me into the cell."

Scardino's eyes volleyed from her to unconscious figure on the ground. "So how did *that* happen?"

"The prisoner put himself between Moyne and me. Moyne flew at him ... I'm not exactly sure what happened then."

"So the prisoner did this to Moyne?"

Lois eyed Scardino, knowing her lip had curled with disgust. "I expect that is how Moyne — and all the other bigots — will depict this."

"Where were the rods?"

"They were in my office," Lois replied coolly. "I don't know whether Moyne felt he didn't need a rod because he didn't intend to go into the cell or whether he realised that he would need both hands to overpower me."

"Why were the rods in your office?" Scardino asked. "Trask insisted that they be kept near the cell door."

Obviously, Scardino was more acquainted with Trask's practices

than he'd previously admitted. "I moved them into my office because it was the only way to prevent Moyne bashing the prisoner during the night when no one else was here."

"You left him here without access to a rod?" Scardino gasped in alarm.

Lois shrugged nonchalantly. "The door was locked."

Scardino thrust his hands into the pockets of his coat and looked away. Lois had a sudden inkling of what he was going to say. "Trask had ways of ... curbing the extremes of the alien's behaviour."

"I have ways, too."

"You're going to order a discipline session?"

She shot him her most potent look of contempt and was gratified when he wilted under her gaze.

Scardino shuffled uncomfortably. "I'll ... ah ... I'll call Shadbolt and get him to come in early."

"There's no need to do that."

"We can't leave the cell unguarded."

"It won't be unguarded," Lois said. "I'll be here."

"Once the ambulance arrives, you and Moyne will be going to the hospital."

"I won't be."

"Ms Lane -"

Lois stood from the table and choked down the pain of her foot touching the floor. "Let's get this straight, shall we?" she said. "You may be the higher-up in this operation, but it's *my* operation. You offered it to me. I took it. Unless you have tangible evidence that I have been negligent in my duties, you can't remove me from this operation. No revolving door, remember? I know too much ... *way* too much for you to -"

"Are you trying to intimidate me?" Scardino asked. He seemed more surprised than offended.

"No," Lois replied. "I'm speaking straight so there will be no misunderstanding. This is my operation, and I intend to continue with it. I haven't failed; the prisoner is still in his cell. And I'm not going to the hospital because there is no need to."

Scardino gave the barest of nods, but it was enough for Lois to know that she had won this round. She'd known she would be able to talk him down — the one who cared the most invariably prevailed in battles of this sort.

"What about Moyne?" Scardino asked.

"I don't want him back," Lois declared. "Take him to the hospital. When he has recovered, decide what you want to do with him. But he is not to come back here."

"Do you intend to pursue this?"

"You mean in-house? Or outside?"

"Either."

Lois paused. The one who was most vulnerable here was Mr Kent. If this went further, more people would have to know about the existence of the operation. If that happened, there was a chance that someone would step up and try to right the wrongs. But there was also the possibility that someone would decide there were more advantageous ways to benefit from an alien captive.

They could insist on all sorts of tests.

They could decide that his existence threatened humanity to such a degree that he must die.

It was inconceivable that Trask had managed to keep this operation under wraps for seven years. But in doing so, had he actually protected Mr Kent from the whims and prejudices of the higher-ups?

Had Trask's tyranny — horrific though it had been — actually delivered a better outcome for Mr Kent than if someone else had been calling the shots?

Would his life have been better or worse with someone else in control?

If there seemed a good chance that publicising this operation would provoke outrage at Mr Kent's treatment, there was reason to insist that Moyne be held accountable for his actions.

But Moyne had friends in high places.

"No," Lois replied. "I don't want to be dragged through being questioned by the police."

"There will be an in-house inquiry."

"There's no need," she said quickly. "And that's what I'll be saying if they call me in."

Scardino nodded, and although Lois was convinced that he lacked even the most basic understanding of her reasons for wanting to put this incident behind her, she chose not to enlighten him.

"Do you want another assistant?"

"No," she said with certainty. "Longford, Shadbolt, and I can cover it." She glanced at her watch. It was half past five. "Shadbolt will be here soon. Later, when Longford arrives, I'll talk to both of them, and we'll work out a new roster."

Scardino looked set to argue, but she was saved from his objections by a knock on the door. Scardino opened it, and two paramedics entered the compound.

"I want you to get checked out," Scardino told Lois.

She nodded submissively. She'd fought the important battles. The less important ones, she could let slide.

Lois allowed them to prod and strap her ankle, manipulate her arm, and apply another layer of antiseptic cream to the abrasion on her face.

"Is she all right?" Scardino asked uneasily.

"She'll be fine," the paramedic said. "She should stay off that foot for a day or so."

Scardino looked pointedly at Lois. "Let me know if you need more help."

The paramedics lifted the stretcher, and they carried Moyne from the compound. While they loaded him into the ambulance, Scardino hovered in the doorway.

"Go," Lois said. "You need to be with Moyne."

"Be careful," Scardino said. "I don't want any more agents getting hurt."

He turned away, closing the door behind him.

"Then keep Moyne out of here," Lois muttered.

Leaning heavily on the handrail, she swung up the steps on her good foot and went into her office. The prisoner was jogging listlessly around the cell. His face was set; his eyes were fixed straight ahead.

What was he feeling?

Why hadn't he spoken?

Did he regret that he hadn't taken his chance to escape?

Why hadn't he run through the open door?

Did he assume there would be layers of security? Other locked doors? Armed security guards? Had he been conscious when Trask brought him into the cell? If not, he wouldn't know what lay beyond the door of his cell. He wouldn't know that he'd been so close to freedom.

Perhaps he assumed that his cell was in a high-security prison.

Lois shrugged.

Whatever his reasoning, his actions today — although baffling — made her feel as if she had been privy to a glimpse of the person that languished under the captivity-hardened veneer.

The question of his humanity or otherwise was irrelevant.

He was *him*.

A person.

Not an animal.

Not a monster.

Not a savage.

A person.

Mr Kent.

A noise sounded loud in the quietness, and her heart did a frantic circuit around her ribcage before realisation kicked in and curbed her fears.

Lois took a twenty-dollar bill from her purse, shoved it in her jeans pocket, locked her office door, and clumped down the steps.

Shadbolt was in the staffroom. He saw her, and his face darkened. "You went into the cell, didn't you?" It sounded like accusation.

Lois nodded.

Shadbolt's breath exploded with frustration. He turned to the coffee machine.

"I didn't *choose* to go in there," Lois amended.

He spun around. "What?"

"Moynes attacked me and threw me in there."

All colour left Shadbolt's face, and he slumped heavily into the seat. "Moynes *forced* you in there?" he asked unsteadily. "Physically?"

Lois nodded. "He pulled me down the stairs, opened the cell door, and tried to shove me in there."

"I thought you took his key away from him."

"He had a copy."

Shadbolt swallowed. "What ... what did the alien do?"

"Very little. He didn't touch me." Lois gestured to her cheek. "Moynes did this."

Shadbolt slid his hands backwards through his hair and halted them on the back of his head. "Did you have a rod?"

"No," Lois said. "When we reached the cell, I managed to cling to Moynes's hair. He tried to push me in, but I held on. We ended up wrestling on the floor. He ripped my gun from my ankle holster and threatened to shoot me."

Shadbolt was looking sick. "What happened?"

"The prisoner positioned himself between Moynes and me."

"Did he hurt Moynes?"

"Moynes got knocked out. I couldn't see exactly what happened because I was behind the prisoner."

"So the alien attacked Moynes?"

"If you want to call what was — at most — a single blow an 'attack', then, yes, I guess the prisoner attacked Moynes."

"He didn't continue? Didn't tear Moynes's flesh from his bones?"

"No. He walked away."

Shadbolt shook his head, his face a warren of confusion.

"Will you do something for me, please?" Lois asked.

He managed to nod.

"I'm not very mobile, or I'd do it myself. Would you go and get some breakfast?" She pulled the bill from her jeans and held it towards him. "A few bagels. Or biscuits. Sandwiches. Anything."

His eyes lingered on the bill and then leapt to her face. "For you? Or him?"

"Both. I'm hungry. I'm responsible for him. I have no intention of starving him."

"Are you worried about what happens when he reaches full strength and fitness?" Shadbolt asked.

Lois didn't sense any animosity in the question. "No," she said.

Shadbolt took the bill and left.

"Thanks," Lois called after him.

With Shadbolt gone, Lois hobbled around the staffroom. The washing bowl was still inside the cell, so she rinsed the bucket and filled it with hot water.

She clambered up the stairs to her office. She picked up a pen and wrote on a piece of paper from the notepad — *THANK YOU*. She stared at the words. They didn't seem to be enough.

Moynes had meant for her to die tonight.

Lois put the pen to the paper again and added two words. Now it read, *THANK YOU, MR. KENT*.

That was better. It was still short. It was still impersonal. But he had saved her life, and she wanted to acknowledge that. She wanted him to know that she appreciated what he had done for her.

Lois slipped the note into her pocket and returned to the staffroom. Just as she finished making two cups of coffee, Shadbolt let himself in. He put two bags, some bills, and a few coins onto the table.

"Thanks," Lois said.

"Do you want me to take them into the cell?" he asked.

"Are you willing to go in there without a rod?"

"No."

"Then I'll do it."

He nodded tersely. "I want a rod here — just in case."

"OK."

"Is your office unlocked?"

"Yes."

"Do you want me to get the rod?" Shadbolt asked. "Or will you?" Lois paused, remembering how difficult it had been to negotiate the stairs on one foot. "Would you mind getting it?" she asked. "They are just inside the door."

He turned, and she heard his footsteps echo up the stairs.

Lois picked up one bag and looked inside it. It contained two toasted bacon-and-egg sandwiches. The other bag held two bagels. Clearly, Shadbolt had expansive ideas about breakfast.

Lois put one bagel on a plate. She took the note from her pocket and added it to the bag with the remaining bagel.

Shadbolt returned with the rod, and she unlocked the cell door. She swung it open and hopped forward. He handed her the two bags, which she placed on the cell floor. Next came the cup of coffee. She gestured to the bucket, and he handed her that, too.

As she straightened from placing the bucket on the floor of the cell, Lois looked up.

Mr Kent was sitting on the far side of the cell. He wasn't turned away. He wasn't cringing in pain. He was looking at her.

Lois lifted her hand in a tiny gesture of greeting.

A moment passed as she awaited his response.

Then slowly, his hand rose a few inches from where it had been positioned on his knee.

Lois hopped backwards, closed the door, and locked it.

Shadbolt eyed her — a smattering of unexpected amusement in his expression. "How are you going to get up the stairs with a rod, a bagel, and a cup of coffee?" he asked. "On one foot?"

Lois pushed a lock of hair behind her ear. "One at a time?"

"The coffee could be a challenge."

She gave him an embryonic smile. "Could I impose on you one more time?"

He didn't reply. He picked up her cup of coffee, the bag containing her bagel, her change, and — still carrying the rod — he went up the stairs.

She was halfway up when she met him coming down. "You OK?" he asked.

"Yeah. Thanks."

Shadbolt stood aside to let her pass, and Lois continued her rather awkward progress up the stairs. In her office, she shut the door but didn't lock it.

She sat at her desk, elevated her foot, ate her bagel, drank her coffee.

And watched Mr Kent.

He was eating one of the bacon-and-egg sandwiches. He was so clearly relishing it that she felt a smile tickle her mouth.

However, much as he seemed to be enjoying the toasted sandwiches, she had a feeling that what he found in the second bag would mean more to him.

She watched him intently — determined not to miss the moment.

When he had finished both sandwiches, he wiped his fingers on his shorts, opened the second bag, and looked in. His hand dived into the bag, and when it emerged, it wasn't the bagel he held but the note.

He stared at it for a long time.

It was difficult to ascertain his expression through his beard and falling-forward hair, but Lois found it heart-wrenchingly easy to empathise with what he was feeling.

His hand lifted and dove under the cloak of his hair.

Perhaps he was brushing a few stray strands out of his eye.

Or perhaps it was something else.

Lois wiped her own eyes. But it wasn't hair that had caused moisture to pool in them.

It was him.

Just before lunchtime, Scardino arrived at the compound.

Shadbolt let him in, and Lois looked down on them from the top of

the stairs.

After a very brief exchange with Shadbolt, Scardino climbed the stairs. When he reached the top, he said, “I need to speak to you privately.”

Lois gestured for him to go into her office, followed him in, and shut the door. There was only one chair. She offered it to him.

Scardino shook his head. He looked uncomfortable. Lois noticed that he was careful to avoid looking through the viewing window.

“What’s up?” she asked.

“Moyné has regained consciousness,” he said.

Lois didn’t respond.

“He has spoken about the events of this morning,” Scardino continued.

“What’s the problem?” Lois asked, although she had an idea of what was coming.

“His version of events is different from yours.”

“OK.” That wasn’t unexpected.

“He says you insisted on going into the cell. He says the scuffle came about because he was trying to prevent you from risking your life.”

“I suppose he also has a story to explain how he ended up unconscious?”

“He remembers the alien charging at him, but nothing beyond that.”

“Convenient.”

“Mr Moyné was most insistent that I pass on his gratitude to you for rescuing him. He figures that you must have gotten the rod to nullify the powers of the alien.”

“Nice story.”

“You don’t sound too perturbed about this,” Scardino said. “You do realise that it’s your word against his?”

“I’m the superior.”

“Yes, and that will probably be enough to prevent any action being taken against you,” Scardino said. “However, the suggestion that your ill-advised actions put a member of your staff into mortal danger could be enough to have you removed from this operation.”

Lois looked at him scornfully. “Have you spoken to Shadbolt?”

“Not yet. But I called Longford.”

“And he would have said that I’m unsure the rods are necessary.”

“Yes.”

“Shadbolt will confirm that, too,” Lois predicted dryly. “I haven’t made a secret of my disgust at the way things were done before I took over this mission.”

“Ms Lane,” Scardino said quickly. “No one is blaming you. I shouldn’t have allowed you to take on another assignment so soon. This won’t even appear on your record. We’ll put it down to the unfortunate consequences of not having recovered from the trauma of your previous assignment.”

“When you said it was my word against Moyné’s, you didn’t mention that you had already decided to believe him.”

“Ms Lane,” Scardino said. “I have been concerned that you are getting too personally involved with this assignment. I think you have allowed your judgment to be impaired. It happens to all of us in this job.”

Lois reached into her pocket for the keys.

She thrust one into the padlock on the closet door and opened it.

She sensed Scardino’s surprised reaction to the set-up inside the closet.

“Watch this,” Lois said. “I’m sure you’ll find it very illuminating.”

Part 2

Lois watched the counter whirl backwards as the tape rewound. A few seconds later, she pressed ‘play’ on the remote control and waited.

Slightly to the left of the picture, Mr Kent was lying on the ground, presumably asleep.

Lois contemplated voicing the snarky thought about how frightening he looked, but she controlled herself.

Scardino leaned forward to study the figure on the screen.

She paused the tape. “Why don’t you look through the window?” she suggested. “You’ll get a much better view of him.”

Scardino gasped, swallowed, and then slowly turned towards the window. Mr Kent was on the ground, doing push-ups. Again, a caustic comment sprang all too easily to Lois’s mind, and again she managed to restrain herself.

After a few seconds, Scardino’s attention returned to the small screen. Lois began the tape again. They waited for a minute — watching the prisoner do nothing more menacing than breathe.

Suddenly, he jolted to a sitting position, his eyes fixed in the direction of the door. With an agile movement, he leapt to his feet. Lois looked to the right of the screen and could see nothing. A wave of apprehension flooded her.

What if it hadn’t been within range of the camera?

She tried to recall how far they had ventured into the room. She wasn’t sure. She hadn’t exactly been taking note of their position when she had been embroiled in the battle with Moyné.

Then, a flicker of movement came into view — the jostling edge of two entwined bodies.

Her dismay deepened. So far, the tape didn’t disprove Moyné’s story. He *could* have been fighting to stop her from entering the cell.

What was comforting was that the picture clearly showed Mr Kent — standing a few feet from the fight, poised but passive.

Moyné twisted — revealing his face clearly to the camera. He pinned down her legs and yanked her gun from its holster.

He stood and aimed it at her.

There was a blur of movement — it looked as if the tape had jumped a dozen frames — and Mr Kent was standing over her, confronting Moyné and the gun.

Moyné ran at Mr Kent, ricocheted off him, and crumpled to the ground.

Mr Kent’s right hand was clearly visible hanging at his side — it hadn’t moved.

Scardino reached for the remote in Lois’s hand and paused the picture. “Neither you nor Moyné mentioned the gun,” he said grimly.

“You think Moyné was keen to admit that he pulled a gun on a superior?” Lois asked incredulously.

“Does he know about the camera? Does he know that everything that happens in the cell can be recorded?”

“I don’t know,” Lois said. “It was already set up when I arrived.”

“Trask didn’t say anything about it to me.”

“Trask was paranoid.”

Scardino gave back the remote control and looked intently at the floor for a long, silent moment. “If Trask had this camera here a long time ago, there’s a chance he had concrete evidence about what happened when Deller and Bortolotto were killed.”

“Uh huh,” Lois said, hoping Scardino would actually be able to draw a conclusion from what he’d said.

“If the alien did kill them, Trask could have proven it beyond doubt.”

Lois stared at him, allowing time for his words to permeate deep into his mind. “I think they thought they had proven it beyond doubt,” Lois said resentfully. “No one seemed to question their version of events.”

“Are there any other tapes?”

“Not in this office. Did anyone check his home?”

“Yeah,” Scardino said. “We went through it looking for anything that could possibly be sensitive.”

“Nothing?”

“No. He kept his home and job separate.”

“What happens now?” Lois asked.

“The tape doesn’t disprove Moyné’s contention that you went into the cell of your own volition and he tried to stop you.”

“He stole my weapon and threatened me with it.”

“But he didn’t shoot.”

Didn’t he? Lois had been sure she’d heard gunfire. But Moyné couldn’t have missed — not from that range.

She could push this. She could demand that the tape be analysed. She could hand over her gun to forensics. She could insist that Moyne be tested for gunpowder residue.

If Moyne had fired, that was attempted murder. That was enough to put him in prison.

But if they proved he had fired the gun, what conclusions would they reach concerning Mr Kent?

If they analysed the tape, they would have verification of the ‘frightening powers’.

They could order that the ‘discipline sessions’ be resumed.

If Lois set the ball rolling, she would have no control over where it stopped.

Scardino let loose a breath that seemed to go on forever. “Ms Lane,” he said. “Moyne has an imposing record. He has done jobs no one else was willing to do. If I pursue this, we will lose an operative who is greatly valued by the higher-ups.”

Lois stared at him for a long moment. She understood what he was saying. It was in her hands. She could insist on an official inquiry — but there would be ramifications. The tape evidence probably favoured her story, but it wasn’t definitive proof that Moyne had forced her into the cell.

He had aimed the gun at her — but he could say that he was trying to get her out of the cell and protect them both from the alien.

If he had fired, that could be proved — but he could claim it had been an instinctive reaction to the alien running at Lois.

And Moyne had friends in high places.

If she pushed this, it was probably going to be her against them.

And while she was fighting that battle, who would be brought in to guard Mr Kent?

What she’d witnessed in this compound reinforced what she’d known since her earliest days as an agent. The end justified the means. In this job, the end always justified the means.

And if the end was the perceived deliverance of the human race, the means employed to achieve it were not going to trouble the consciences of too many people.

Her best option was to try to broker a deal. Clearly, Scardino wanted this entire episode to die a quiet and dignified death. That was understandable — if it came out that she’d asked him to remove Moyne, there would be awkward questions regarding his handling of the operation.

But if she agreed to let this slide, she wanted assurances in return.

“You do know that I could take this tape and go way above your head?” Lois said.

“I know you could,” Scardino said sombrely. “But if there’s an inquiry, there will be consequences. Is it still important that you remain in Metropolis?”

“It’s imperative. I have to be in Metropolis at least until the end of the year.”

Scardino said nothing. He didn’t need to. She understood.

“I keep my assignment here — without interference,” Lois said in a voice as cold and hard as steel. “Moyne is given an assignment that takes him a long way from Metropolis.”

“And the events of this morning are forgotten?” Scardino looked pathetically hopeful that this could be brought to a speedy — and, for him, satisfactory — conclusion.

“Do I have your word that Moyne will never return to the compound?”

“Yes.”

“How can you be sure?”

“I’ll have him transferred from the hospital in Metropolis and to a government hospital. He’ll stay there until he’s ready to begin a new assignment.”

“If he leaves — for any reason — I want to know.”

“OK.” Scardino nodded towards the television. “What did the alien do next?”

Lois re-started the tape. They watched as Mr Kent walked over to Moyne and picked him up. He disappeared from view and then

returned empty-handed. They watched from behind him as he stood next to Lois. She figured there was no need to inform Scardino that Mr Kent had given her the Neosporin. “He took Moyne to the door,” she explained. “He realised that Moyne was too heavy for me to lift.”

“And he didn’t keep going through the door?” Scardino exclaimed.

“No.”

“Was it open?”

“Wide open.”

It took Scardino a moment to recover from the realisation of how close they had come to having a rampaging alien killer on the loose. “What is he doing now?” he asked.

“I think he is trying to make it clear that I have nothing to fear from him.”

“Did he say anything?”

“Not a word. According to Shadbolt, he hasn’t spoken since about a week into his imprisonment.”

Scardino grimaced but quickly tried to hide his reaction. He was probably wondering what Trask had done. Shadbolt had said that Mr Kent’s desire to speak had been beaten out of him, but Lois couldn’t help wondering if there were more grisly reasons for his silence.

On the screen, Mr Kent turned and walked away from Lois. He arrived at the back wall of the cell and dropped to a sitting position.

“There’s the savage brute in action,” Lois said, unable to keep silent any longer. She stopped the tape. “It may not prove conclusively *how* Moyne and I ended up in the cell, but it does prove that even if I had intended to go into the cell, I was never in any danger. Not from the prisoner.” Lois ejected the tape from the VCR. “When you are considering Moyne’s new assignment, you should make sure he has no contact with women.”

“Why?”

“He threatened to lock me in the cell. He mentioned that the prisoner hadn’t seen a woman in seven years. He gleefully anticipated what the prisoner would do to me. He said he would watch from up here, and once the prisoner had finished, he would come down and take his share.”

Scardino swallowed roughly and held out his hand for the tape.

Lois paused.

“I give you my word that the tape won’t get destroyed,” Scardino said earnestly. “It won’t get lost. It won’t be used against you to support Moyne and his claims.”

“Will it be used against the prisoner?”

“I don’t see how that would be possible. He didn’t do anything.”

That statement was a victory — a minor one, but a victory nevertheless. Lois gave the tape to Scardino. “I want a copy.”

He took it with a nod.

“Shadbolt and Longford will be at Trask’s funeral on Monday,”

Lois said.

“You’ll be here by yourself?”

“Yes.” She said it firmly, hoping he wouldn’t slide into his ‘I want you to be safe’ spiel.

“Will you be OK for the rest of today? You should go home.”

“I will,” Lois said. “Did you find out anything about Jonathan and Martha Kent?”

“No. Nothing yet.”

“Keep asking. Someone has to know what happened to them.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

“You’ll excuse me if I don’t see you outside.”

Scardino walked to the door of her office. “If you need anything ...”

Lois nodded. After he’d gone, she shut the door, returned to her chair, and lifted her throbbing ankle onto her desk.

Mr Kent was running laps of the cell.

Not running, but sprinting. He had a long, smooth stride and moved with effortless grace. He reached the side wall, abruptly changed direction, and charged the length of the cell.

“I hope I’ve done the right thing,” Lois muttered. “For both of us.”

At two o'clock, Longford arrived at the compound. Lois — having sent Shadbolt out to buy lunch — had eaten hers while watching Mr Kent eat his. Now, she left her office and limped into the staffroom.

Shadbolt rose and pulled out a chair for her. She collapsed into it with a nod of thanks and faced both men across the table. Longford looked uneasy. Shadbolt was doing a good job of looking unruffled.

"Do either of you have any questions about what happened this morning?" Lois asked.

Shadbolt shook his head.

"Longford?"

"Mr Scardino called me and asked a lot of questions about whether correct procedure has been followed when we have contact with the alien," he said. He fidgeted with the handle of his cup. "I told him there have been some changes."

"Moynes and I ended up in the cell together without the rods," Lois said. "Moynes is saying that I insisted on going into the cell and that he attempted to physically detain me. I am saying that Moynes forced me into the cell with the intention that I would come to the same ending as Deller and Bortolotto."

Longford's head shot up, his mouth dropped open, but he said nothing.

Lois shrugged. "There isn't going to be an inquiry, so I doubt either of you will be asked any further questions."

"No inquiry?" Shadbolt said sharply.

"No," Lois said. "It's my word against Moynes's. The only other person here was the prisoner, and I'm sure they would never even think to ask an alien, so no resolution is possible."

"Is Moynes coming back?" Longford asked.

Lois studied his face. His attempt to look unconcerned didn't hide the anxiety in his eyes.

Watching closely for his reaction, Lois said, "No, Moynes won't be coming back. He has been transferred to another assignment."

Longford almost smiled. He pulled his face into line quickly, but he'd revealed enough. "Will we be getting someone else?"

"No. Not in the short term."

Shadbolt was gently tapping on the table with his fingers. "We'll need a new roster," he said.

Lois nodded. "I'm thinking we could have eight hour shifts. I can't see the need for three hours a day when there are two of us here."

"Us?" Shadbolt asked.

"I'll be doing the third shift."

Shadbolt nodded as if that confirmed his conjecture.

"We'll do eight hour shifts," Lois continued. "But if there is something that requires two people, someone will have to stay a few extra minutes."

"No problem," Shadbolt said gruffly. "But I can't change my hours."

"OK," Lois said. "You do the 6am to 2pm shift."

Shadbolt nodded.

Lois looked at Longford. "Do you want the eight hours overnight or the eight hours of the afternoon and evening?"

"I'd like the overnight hours," Longford said hesitantly.

"Done," Lois said. "You do from ten in the evening to six in the morning. I'll do from two until ten."

Both men nodded, although Longford looked as if he had more to say. "I have a commitment tonight," he said. "Can we start the new arrangement tomorrow?"

"Sure," Lois said. "I'll go home soon and be back at ten to take over."

"Thanks," Longford said.

Shadbolt shuffled in his seat. "Will you leave a rod with us when you're here not here?"

Lois had known that this would have to be raised. She looked at Longford. "During your shift overnight, there should be no reason to go into the cell," she said. "The door will be locked. I will give you my home number. If you feel you need to enter the cell, I want you to call me first."

Longford nodded. Looked relieved even.

Lois figured he liked the idea of sleeping away the hours of his shift.

She turned to Shadbolt. "The prisoner needs breakfast early in your shift and possibly lunch late in your shift."

He nodded.

"I will give you a key and one rod. I don't want you to actually enter the cell. Put everything just inside the door. Have it prepared beforehand and have the door open for the shortest time possible."

"OK."

"I have a suggestion," Longford said.

Lois tried to stifle her surprise. "Go ahead."

"We could put breakfast in there before I leave. If Shadbolt steps into the doorway, I'll stand behind him with the rod. That will cut down the time he's in there; he will have both hands free because he won't have to hold the rod."

Lois's attention swung to Shadbolt. "Is that all right with you?"

He nodded. "And we could give him lunch the same way when you arrive at two."

This was working out better than Lois had hoped. "I want to reiterate that no one is to enter the cell unless there are extraordinary circumstances," she said. "I can't think of any reason why you would need to open the door other than at the scheduled times, but if you do, I want to know about it beforehand."

They both nodded. She thought she detected relief — perhaps neither of them had liked going into the cell.

Or perhaps they really were worried about what the alien might do now that he wasn't being regularly 'disciplined'.

"Do you want us to give him the bowl of washing water when we put his breakfast in there?" Shadbolt asked.

"Would you be willing to do that?"

"Yes."

"OK," Lois said. "Good. I'll get the bowl out of the cell the night before and leave it on the drainer for you."

Shadbolt tapped the table again. "Are you going to wait until ten o'clock when Longford gets in to give the alien his evening meal?"

"No," Lois said.

"You're going to open the door even though you're here alone?"

"I will use the rod," Lois said, not knowing whether her words were the truth or not.

"Are you worried about being alone with him?" Longford asked.

"I'm sure anything could wait until I get here at ten."

Lois felt genuine appreciation for the willingness of both men to cooperate. "Thanks," she said with a small smile at Longford. "If I have any doubts about safety, I'll wait for you to arrive."

Shadbolt looked up at her, his face tight.

"What are you thinking, Shadbolt?" Lois asked. She could guess, but couldn't see any harm in encouraging him to be open.

"He hasn't had a discipline session for almost four days. He's barely had any exposure to the rod in that time."

"There hasn't been a change in his behaviour," Lois said evenly.

"He hasn't become more aggressive. He can anticipate when someone is going to open the door, yet he's always on the other side of the cell."

"Perhaps he's trying to lure you into carelessness."

"What makes you say that?"

"Bortolotto decided that the rods weren't needed ..."

... *And he's dead.*

The completion of Shadbolt's sentence hung in the air more tellingly than if he'd spoken aloud.

"I haven't decided the rods aren't needed," Lois said.

"I've seen what he can do," Shadbolt retorted.

"So have I," Lois said.

His eyebrows shot up. "You've seen the photos of Deller and Bortolotto?"

"I've seen enough," she hedged.

"I don't want to have to do any more body recoveries," Shadbolt said grimly.

“I don’t want that either,” Lois said, trying to inject a little levity into the conversation. It fell flat. “I’m going home for a few hours to get some sleep. I’ll be back before ten tonight.”

“What happens with his meal tonight?” Longford asked.

Lois hesitated, thinking through the logistics. “We’ll give it to him when I get here.”

“OK.”

“Trask’s funeral is on Monday at two o’clock,” Lois said. “I’ve told Scardino that you’ll both be there.”

Their nods of agreement held no trace of any emotion.

“On Monday, I’ll be here by mid-morning so you have enough time to get ready,” she told Shadbolt.

“Thanks.”

“Anything else you wanted to ask? Discuss?”

“What happens to that tin box you gave him?” Shadbolt asked.

“Do you want it taken from him?”

“No,” Lois said. “It can stay in there permanently now. Any further questions?”

Both men shook their heads.

Lois returned to her office and looked through the window. Mr Kent was reading one of the copies of the Daily Planet. She wondered how many times he had read them. She wished there was a way to get a note to him telling him that his evening meal would be delayed ... telling him that things were going to be better from now on ... telling him that not everyone outside the cell feared and hated him ... telling him that she was convinced he hadn’t murdered Deller and Bortolotto.

But she shrunk from giving him a note now. If she did, Longford would know.

Never give anything away.

Her respect for the power of knowledge had been hard-won. And if Shadbolt knew that she was communicating with the prisoner, he would worry. It was possible he would be so worried that he would go to Scardino.

So there could be no note. Not now.

“Sorry, Mr Kent,” she muttered as she picked up her bag. “Your meal will be a little delayed tonight.”

She couldn’t activate the camera because she had no tape.

At the bottom of the stairs, she called to Longford. “I’ll be back before ten. Call me if there are any problems.”

“OK.”

Lois exited the compound and walked past her parked car, past the warehouse, and onto the sidewalk, where she hailed a cab.

She probably could have tolerated the pain of trying to drive her car, but she just wanted to get home and crash into bed.

In the cab, she called Uncle Mike.

She postponed tonight’s delivery and asked for two meals at 9:30.

“Nine-thirty?” Uncle Mike said. “You won’t be eating until then?”

Lois, are you looking after yourself properly?”

Lois clamped down on her bleak chuckle. Would Uncle Mike deem that the events of this morning — tussling with a man she believed was a cold-hearted killer in the cell of a supposed alien with a rap sheet that included two murders — constituted ‘looking after herself’?

“I’m fine, Uncle Mike,” she said.

“Two meals?” he said. “Are you expecting to be hungry? Or do you have a friend?”

“I have a ... a friend,” Lois said, hoping there would be no further questions about the ‘friend’.

“You haven’t dropped into the cafe yet.”

“I will,” she promised, glad to move away from the topic of the second meal. “I’ll try to get there over the weekend.” She hung up the call and sank back into the seat of the cab.

Her ankle hurt, her arm was stiff, and her face had an uncomfortable tightness that made it feel as if it was beginning to swell. But she was exhausted — exhausted enough that sleep should come painlessly.

And for that, Lois was grateful.

In her apartment, she slipped the holster from her ankle and took out her weapon. She unloaded it and gasped.

It *had* been fired.

Moyne had fired it.

How could he have missed from a few feet away?

The alien is bulletproof.

They’d said that the alien was bulletproof.

They’d said he’d been shot before ... and survived.

Was he impervious to bullets?

Had he taken the bullet that Moyne had meant for her?

Lois locked the weapon in her safe and slipped into bed.

Tiredness enveloped her body.

Questions stormed her mind.

The tiredness won, and she slept.

It was after eight o’clock when Lois awoke that evening. She had slept dreamlessly, and when she tumbled from her bed, she felt more refreshed than she had for a long time.

After showering and adding more ointment to the graze on her face, she took out her rolled-up camp mattress, her sleeping bag, and a pillow. She put her toothbrush, toothpaste, moisturising cream, hairbrush, and a blank videotape into her bag.

It didn’t feel completely different from the times she had packed for a Girl Scout camp.

The feeling was heightened when she put a Snickers bar into her bag.

And then added another one.

Lois called the nursing home and asked the nurse to pass on a message to her father that she had been detained at work and would visit him the next morning. She hoped she would be able to walk without noticeably limping by then — and that makeup would be sufficient to reduce the abrasion to little more than a scratch.

She left her apartment, caught a cab, and as the brightly lit streets of Metropolis whizzed past, she couldn’t totally dispel the slightly adventuresome feeling invoked by the presence of her sleeping bag.

Lois punched her pillow into the junction of the seat and the door and reclined into it.

She’d been working on her new assignment for five days.

She had been determined to remain aloof ... to avoid getting involved ... to do the duties assigned to her like a robot ...

On that front, she’d failed dismally.

She’d made an enemy.

An enemy who had tried to kill her.

She’d arrived at a working relationship with Longford and Shadbolt. Sometimes, she even found Shadbolt almost affable — in crusty and curmudgeonly sort of way.

And then there was Mr Kent.

When Moyne had pushed her into the cell, Mr Kent had instantly chosen to help her.

He could have stayed in the far corner of the cell. He could have run through the open door. He could have attacked both her and Moyne. He could have assisted Moyne. He could have raped her.

But he’d instantly and unequivocally sided with her.

He’d stood over her ... not to threaten but to guard.

Was that because she was a woman, and he still maintained old-fashioned ideas of gallantry? Or was it because he knew about Moyne — had witnessed the killings that had been perpetrated in his cell?

Were his actions an expression of his hostility towards Moyne?

Or were they indicative of his attitude towards her?

Was it possible he had figured out that she was responsible for his improved conditions? He knew that someone lurked, unseen, behind the window. He seemed to realise that whoever was behind there controlled his life.

Had he connected the unknown figure behind the window with the person who had been pushed, rather ingloriously, into his cell?

Had he worked out that she was the one with absolute authority over his life?

And, therefore, that she was the one to work on to gain an advantage?

And if he were manoeuvring for an advantage, was it simply to try to keep the small improvements she had begun?

Or did he have a much bigger — and more sinister — agenda?

Why hadn't he escaped when the door was open?

The cab pulled up outside the warehouse, and Lois paid the driver and hauled her things to the compound. She unlocked the door, and Longford came from the staffroom.

"Is everything OK?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"His meal will arrive soon," Lois said as she began to climb the stairs. "We'll put it in the cell, and then you can go home."

Longford looked at the array of articles she carried. "It's difficult for me to climb stairs if I'm carrying something," he said. "But I can stand at the bottom and throw your things up to you."

"OK," Lois said. She dropped everything except her bag and slowly mounted the stairs.

At the top, she turned and caught the three individual bundles as Longford tossed them up to her.

"Thanks," she said.

He nodded and returned to the staffroom.

Lois unlocked her office, entered, and went directly to the window. The alien was sitting against the wall. The newspapers were next to him, but he wasn't reading them; he was staring ahead with a blank look on his face.

Actually, it wasn't blank.

It was the same disheartened look that he'd had after Moyne had destroyed the toothbrush.

Like he'd lost something.

Lois groaned in self-recrimination.

Of course, he was going to wonder about the outcome of what he'd witnessed that morning.

Of course, he was going to fear how it would affect him.

Since then, two meals had been pushed into his cell — and a note of thanks — but now there had been nothing from the other side of the door for over seven hours.

A week ago, that was probably the normal — and most desirable — situation for him.

But things had changed.

Lois experienced a small trickle of satisfaction. Things had changed. She had changed them. And she intended to continue changing them.

But first, she had to reassure him that his life wasn't going to return to how it used to be.

Was he surreptitiously watching the door, wondering if someone armed with a rod was about to burst through it and start attacking him? Was he awaiting Moyne to come and take revenge?

Mr Kent's face — what she could see under the beard — seemed to indicate that he thought it was a possibility.

Within her rose a compulsion — a strange compulsion considering she was just about convinced that he'd survived a bullet.

She had to protect him.

She had been assigned to ensure that he didn't escape.

That he didn't hurt the world.

But now ... now she was much more driven to ensure that the world didn't hurt him.

And to do that, she had to stay.

She had to stay long enough to safeguard his future.

And that meant she had to be careful. If it somehow got back to Scardino that she was forging any sort of association with the prisoner, the higher-ups would get antsy and rip her off the assignment.

Particularly Moyne's 'friend' — whoever he was.

Despite all the advancements, the higher-ups were usually male. And they usually believed that a woman was more susceptible to a clever story than a man was.

If she protested Mr Kent's situation too loudly, it was more likely

that she would lose respect than it was that he would gain it.

Lois groaned.

She had asked Scardino about Mr Kent's parents.

That was — potentially — a mistake.

In order to ensure that she remained on this assignment, she needed to break all communication with the prisoner. She had to be impersonal, remote, and unequivocally professional.

Scardino had already made a couple of comments about her becoming too involved.

She'd ignored him because she had known that — other than her curiosity regarding how Mr Kent had ended up as Trask's prisoner and showing some basic compassion for someone who'd been treated so appallingly — Scardino's concerns were unfounded.

But that was before this morning.

That was before he had stood over her to protect her from Moyne.

Before he had given her the Neosporin.

Before he had looked at her with his eloquent eyes that communicated on a level so much deeper than mere words could have done.

She could still see those dark brown eyes ... staring at her ... speaking to her ...

In the cell, the prisoner hadn't moved.

His shoulders were slumped. His hands were lying listlessly on his thighs.

Either the communication between them had to stop ...

... Or she had to ensure that Scardino believed it had stopped ... And keep Shadbolt and Longford from suspecting it had started.

Lois gave a small smile. Work in secret? Maintain a charade to cover what she was really doing? Lie when necessary? Appear detached? She could do that.

She walked out of her office and retrieved her bedding from the landing.

Then she went downstairs to await the arrival of their meals.

Part 3

Lois had been waiting outside for five minutes when Uncle Mike's delivery guy arrived with the meals. She accepted them and hurried back to the staffroom as quickly as her still-tender ankle would allow.

She lifted the lid of the container. It was a pasta dish — a creamy chicken sauce redolent with a rich, tangy aroma.

Back in the staffroom, Lois gave Longford the rod she had brought from her office, unlocked the cell door, and peeped around the corner.

Mr Kent hadn't moved from his position against the back wall. However, his head was turned in her direction. His face was deadpan, but some of his air of abject hopelessness had lifted.

Lois put the hot container on the floor and added a new bottle of water. Then, she turned back to Longford and raised her hand. "Pass me a fork," she said.

"A fork?" he replied with a level of incredulity that wouldn't have seemed out of place if she'd asked for a machine gun.

"Yes," she said urgently. "A fork."

He took one from the tray on the counter and gave it to her.

Lois placed it on top of the container and looked Mr Kent.

Their eyes met.

His fingers unfurled in greeting.

Lois lifted her hand a few inches in response.

Then she stood and retreated into the staffroom. She shut and locked the door. "Thanks," she said to Longford. "You can go home now."

He handed her the rod, but didn't move towards the door. "Ms Lane?" he said.

Was he going comment about her treatment of the prisoner? "Yes, Longford?"

"I wasn't being difficult about not doing the shift tonight. My mother has an appointment with a specialist tomorrow, and she is staying at my apartment. She would be nervous being alone overnight in the big city."

"That's fine, Longford," Lois said. "Thank you for explaining.

Will you be able to do your shift tomorrow night?”

“Yes,” he said, looking relieved. “I will take my mother home tomorrow morning after her appointment and be back in Metropolis well before my shift starts.”

“I hope your mother does well,” Lois said. “Good night, Longford.”

“Thank you. Good night, Ms Lane.”

He walked out of the staffroom and into the dark of the night. Lois took the rod to her office and hurried to the window.

Mr Kent was eating.

He was using the fork with deftness — she wouldn’t have expected anything less.

He was hungry.

She was, too.

Lois pulled back the lid of her container and inhaled appreciatively.

As she drove the fork into the pasta, she couldn’t help thinking about what it must have been like to receive food only once a day — and for that food to be a cold, disgusting mess.

Tomorrow, she had to remember to call the caterers and cancel the orders.

From now on, both she and Mr Kent would be eating Uncle Mike’s food.

She finished her meal about the same time as Mr Kent finished his. He returned the lid to the empty container and then used some water from the bottle to wash the fork. He placed the container next to the door and put the clean fork on top.

Lois picked up a pen and hovered above the notepad.

She wanted to write something, but what?

Mr Kent:

Good. That was nicely formal.

Sorry for

No. She ripped the paper from the pad, tore it into little pieces, and threw it in the trashcan.

Mr Kent:

The unfortunate incident this morning caused several disruptions to the routine today. Moyne has been permanently removed from this operation.

“So, you no longer have to worry about being bashed in the middle of the night,” she muttered.

Lois chewed on the end of the pen as she read the words she had written.

She had so many other questions.

What really happened when Deller and Bortolotto died?

How did you survive seven years of Trask’s abuse?

Are you an alien?

Did you stop the bullet Moyne meant for me?

Why didn’t you escape when the door was open?

Do you intend to take over the Earth and kill all humans?

Why don’t you speak? What did they do to you?

Can I trust you?

Lois tapped the pen on her desk.

Could she trust him?

That was more important than all the other questions put together. If she couldn’t trust him, nothing else had relevance.

She looked up to where Mr Kent was again reading one of the editions of the *Daily Planet*. She needed to remember to get tomorrow’s edition and give it to him.

A sudden vision flashed into her mind.

Mr Kent, reading the paper, drinking coffee ... and munching on a chocolate bar.

She folded the vision into a box in her brain and firmly closed the lid.

Giving him a chocolate bar definitely crossed the line.

So far, she had done nothing more than take reasonable care of someone who was her responsibility. She would have done the same for a dog.

But *chocolate*?

That was indulgent.

Fun, though.

How would he react?

Did he like chocolate?

Stupid question.

Everyone liked chocolate.

It would mean unlocking the door when no one else was here.

Was she willing to do that?

She’d told Shadbolt that it didn’t concern her.

Did it?

She looked again at Mr Kent.

When was the last time he’d spent an evening reading the paper, drinking coffee, and eating chocolate?

At least seven years ago — she knew that for sure.

Had he spent quiet evenings with his parents?

If she made him a cup of coffee, she could give him the note.

She should just go to bed. It was after ten-thirty.

But she wasn’t tired at all. And she knew too well the perils of trying to sleep before her mind was ready to succumb to exhaustion.

Coffee ... was a dumb idea.

It was too late.

But tea?

Did he drink tea?

Before her mind could descend further into the whirlwind of indecision, she stood abruptly. She picked up the unsigned note and pulled one of the Snickers bars out of her bag.

She went down the stairs, careful to tread gingerly on her sore ankle. She set the kettle on the stove to boil, put a tea bag in each of two mugs, and waited.

This was silly.

But she was alone.

With him.

Mr Kent.

Who had saved her life this morning.

That was it — he’d saved her life this morning. This was nothing more than a way to express her gratitude.

If he hadn’t stepped in, neither of them would be drinking tea or eating chocolate tonight.

The kettle boiled, and Lois poured the water into the mugs.

How did he have his tea?

After all these years, he probably had it however she gave it to him.

Milk?

Sugar?

Strong?

Weak?

She removed the bags when the tea was of moderate strength and then added milk to both mugs.

She hesitated over the sugar. She never used sugar, but Linda had liked two teaspoons in her tea. On the occasions when Lois had accidentally picked up her partner’s drink, she had almost gagged at the taste.

No sugar, she decided.

She looked at the door and removed the keys from her pocket.

All the rods were still in her office.

She should go up there and get one.

She fidgeted with the keys.

It would take a minute to get a rod ... perhaps longer ... climbing the stairs was still a laborious process.

She could have the door open; the tea, the chocolate bar, and the note in there; and the door locked in less time than it would take to get the rod.

While she was wallowing in uncertainty, the tea was getting cold. Lois put everything within easy reach and thrust the key into the lock.

She turned the key, pushed open the door, put the tea on the floor

so roughly that a little slopped onto the concrete, dropped the chocolate bar next to it, and added the note.

She backed away, slammed the door, and locked it.

Her heart felt like a herd of buffalo was rollicking through it.

She picked up her cup and eagerly climbed the stairs, ignoring the objections from her ankle.

When she arrived at the window, Mr Kent was walking across the cell — approaching the door with caution.

When he reached it, he crouched there — right next to the door — and picked up the note. After he'd read it, his head turned towards the window. He lifted his arm and waved in her direction.

His attention returned to the floor, and he picked up the chocolate bar.

He held it in both hands and stared.

Much to Lois's frustration, she couldn't see his face clearly. She had wanted to share in his reaction. Then his head turned, and he looked up.

From the midst of his scrubby facial hair, she saw movement.

A smile?

It was brief.

Fleeting.

But his mouth had appeared to move.

And it *could* have been a smile.

Lois found herself answering him.

Even if he hadn't smiled, she was smiling.

He picked up his cup of tea and took it back to the place against the wall where he had been sitting.

He read the newspaper.

He sipped the tea.

He slowly and luxuriously nibbled the chocolate bar.

Lois sipped her tea.

Nibbled her chocolate bar.

And watched him.

The nightmare was back.

She screamed.

Hauled in a breath and screamed again.

Her eyes shot open.

Where was she?

She wasn't in her bedroom.

Where was she?

It wasn't dark — there was light behind her.

She couldn't be back in the room where he had killed Linda. That had been black.

Where was she?

She turned towards the light ... and realisation seeped through her.

She was in her office.

She was guarding Mr Kent.

Lois stood from the mattress on the floor and looked into the cell.

He was sitting up. He was looking directly at the window.

Had he heard her screaming?

He looked concerned.

Unsure.

Suddenly, he leapt to his feet and rushed to the newspapers. He picked up one and began ripping it into strips.

He placed the strips on the floor.

A word appeared — written in roughly torn newspaper strips positioned on a concrete floor.

ARE

He moved to the right and continued.

YOU

Lois could easily guess what would be next.

OK

Yes, she was OK. But did she want to admit to the nightmare? Even if she didn't go into details -which she most certainly wouldn't — did she want him to know that she had her own demons that haunted her?

No, she didn't.

She didn't want him to know about her weaknesses. Her insecurities. Her pain.

She didn't want anyone to know about them.

She hadn't admitted them to Scardino. When the shrink had probed, Lois had insisted that she enjoyed long and uninterrupted sleep every night.

She wasn't about to start unburdening to a prisoner who must already have more than his share of nightmare material.

She took the pen from the desk and scribbled on the notepad.

'I'm fine.' Then she added, *'Go to sleep.'*

She took the note down the stairs, opened the door, and slid the note into the cell. The mug was there — she grabbed it, stepped back, and then shut and locked the door.

Inside the mug was the Snickers wrapper.

Lois put the cup on the drainer and took the wrapper upstairs to deposit in her own trashcan.

When she arrived back at the window, Mr Kent was already standing by the door and reading her note.

He put the note in his pocket, waved towards the window, and returned to the place on the floor where he usually chose to sleep.

He lay down, shuffled a bit, and then settled to stillness.

Lois watched the steady rise and fall of his chest as the creeping claws of the nightmare slowly receded from her mind.

He lay on the concrete, facing away from the window.

The window that hid her from his sight.

She'd brought him tea. And a chocolate bar.

Chocolate!

If he had to list the top one hundred things he had pined for most, chocolate wouldn't have made the list.

Tea would have been there, but not chocolate.

And yet ... it was the chocolate that had gripped his heart and pushed a lump into his throat as he had pretended to read the paper.

She'd given him chocolate!

It was such a normal ... extravagant ... sweet ... totally unexpected thing to do.

He might never taste chocolate again. But if he did, he knew it would always cause heady memories of her.

After he'd finished his cup of tea and the chocolate bar, he'd washed the cup, brushed his teeth, and settled onto the concrete to sleep.

Moynes was gone. Forever.

That knowledge rolled through him over and over again, each time bringing fresh relief.

Trask was gone.

Moynes was gone.

Suddenly, from a place of no hope, there was hope.

From a place of abject terror, there was mercy.

From a place of dread, there was compassion.

From a place of darkness, there was light.

And it was because of her.

It *was* her.

He didn't know her name.

When she'd opened the door, she'd waved to him. The next time, she'd responded to his wave.

What did she believe about him?

Did she believe he was a savage brute?

Did she believe he had killed?

Did she believe he deserved to be caged like an animal because he wasn't human?

Her actions suggested that she didn't despise him.

Did she pity him? Did she think of him as she would think of a pet?

He tried to go to sleep ... but it was so hard not to think about how the events of today would affect his future.

For so long, he hadn't permitted himself to think about the future.

Surviving each day had been difficult enough ... to think ahead to the endless years of torment ... to dwell on what was to come ...

But now ...

He was pragmatic enough to know that the extent of his hope was that life would become bearable. That the exposure to the poison would be minimised. That he would be spared the regular beatings. That he wouldn't have to endure constant hunger and thirst. That he would be given sufficient water to clean himself.

There was no hope of freedom. He knew that. There was no hope of a normal life.

They knew too much about him. About what he could do.

But if she stayed, her presence would shine a light into his cell — a clear, warm, soothing light.

Which birthed a new fear.

What if she left?

She'd brought him a cup of tea.

Tea!

He hadn't tasted tea for seven years.

He had drunk numerous cups of tea in his mom's kitchen.

Usually accompanied by her homemade chocolate chip cookies.

Since his capture, he hadn't been able to think about his parents without pain slicing through his insides.

Tonight, even that had been different.

The fear, the sorrow ... both of those emotions were still there ... but they had been assuaged by hope. She was going to try to find out what had happened to his parents.

He'd been thinking about that earlier when the scream had pierced the silence, and he had sprung to his feet.

His immediate thought was that Moyne had come back.

Come back to finish what he'd started that morning.

The screams had stopped, and he'd strained to hear. He'd closed his eyes, centred every ounce of concentration onto her ... and had picked up the muffled roar of her heartbeat. It had been tearing along at a frenetic pace, but he couldn't hear any other sounds. No low and menacing words, no thumps of violence.

He'd doubted she would respond, but he'd had to try to find out if she were OK.

He couldn't just lie there, not knowing.

He'd laid the strips of newspaper on the floor.

Would she see them?

Would she bother replying?

She had. She'd given him no explanation, but he hadn't needed that. All he'd needed to know was that she was OK.

That Moyne hadn't come back.

Perhaps her screams were due to a nightmare.

He closed his eyes ... and listened intently.

Her breathing was regular.

Her heartbeat was back to normal.

She was OK.

His relief was profound ... because he knew with awful certainty that he was powerless to protect her.

While they had the poison, he would always be powerless to protect her.

Then a harsh, cruel thought occurred to him, and his heart felt like it wanted to curl up and die.

What if the nightmare had been about him?

What if — in her dreams — he had done something to her ... something brutal ... something savage? Something that had scared her so badly, she had screamed with terror?

What if being forced into his cell had brought to life all the stories she had been told? Things they said he was capable of doing? More than capable ... things that were innate to him ... inborn.

What if — in her dreams — *he* was the monster?

~~ Saturday ~~

Lois awoke the next morning and was surprised to realise that — after the nightmare — she had fallen asleep quickly and slept

peacefully.

She slipped from her sleeping bag and checked on Mr Kent.

He was kneeling in the far corner of the cell — facing away from her. Naked.

What was he doing?

She scanned the cell and realised the bowl was missing.

Then she realised.

He must be washing his shorts.

Without looking back to the corner, she turned away and checked the clock. It was twenty to six. She should slip down to the bathroom before Shadbolt arrived.

Her ankle had improved enough that she was confident she would be able to walk into the nursing home without eliciting any questions.

If anyone noticed her face, she would fall back on the old excuse of running into a door.

Her thoughts returned to the previous evening.

She'd given him chocolate!

Lois shook her head.

What had she been thinking?

Despite the sleeping bag and the camp mattress, this wasn't a camp for giggly, chocolate-devouring Girl Scouts.

This was her job.

She needed to remember that.

Ten minutes later, Shadbolt came through the door as Lois was making the coffee. He plonked two paper bags on the table with a grunt.

Lois turned from the coffee machine. "What are they?" she asked casually.

"Breakfast," he grunted. "And lunch."

"Your breakfast?"

"No. I've had mine. They're for the alien." The look on his face told her that if she made a fuss, he would never do anything like this again.

"Thanks," she said.

"I figured that now I'm only working eight hours a day ... " He picked up one bag. "This can be his lunch."

"What is it?" Lois said, trying to make her question sound like interest and not mistrust.

"Nothing much. Ham-and-cheese sandwich."

"Thanks," Lois said. "When the coffee is made, you can give him the breakfast."

Shadbolt put one bag in the fridge. "You want me to give it to him?"

"If that's OK," Lois said. "I'll hold the rod and pass you the stuff."

Shadbolt shrugged. "Do you want me to get the rod from your office?"

"Yes, please."

When the coffee had brewed, Lois unlocked the door and held the rod while Shadbolt put one paper bag — containing another toasted bacon-and-egg sandwich — on the floor of the cell. He added the cup of coffee and retreated quickly.

"Thanks," Lois said as she locked the door. "I'll be back at two, and we'll give him lunch then." She paused long enough to give Shadbolt the opportunity to ask about having access to a cell key and a rod, but he said nothing as he made himself a cup of coffee.

"See you later," she said.

"Bye."

Lois took the rod to her office. She rolled up the bedding and stashed it under her desk in case she needed to do the night shift again.

After a final glance into the cell — Mr Kent was eating his breakfast — she turned on the camera and left the compound.

After stopping at her apartment for a shower, Lois drove to the nursing home.

As she walked in the door, she was greeted by Veronica. "Ms Lane," she said cheerily. "I'm so glad you're here."

"What's wrong?" Lois said quickly.

“Nothing’s wrong,” the nurse replied. “I got your dad up first this morning because there was a note saying that you would visit.” She smiled. “I’m glad he doesn’t have to wait. I think he’s looking forward to seeing you.”

That her father could look forward to anything seemed highly optimistic to Lois. However, she didn’t comment as she turned towards his room.

“Ms Lane?”

“Yes?”

“Does your dad own any sweatpants?”

“Ah . . . no,” Lois said. “He was more a tweed jacket type of guy.”

“We’re going to see how he copes with being out of bed for a few hours each day,” Veronica said. “It might be nice for him to be able to get dressed. Wearing pyjamas during the day is so depressing.”

Lois’s instinctive reaction was that it was a lot of extra bother for very little benefit, but Veronica’s earnestness stopped her from voicing her doubts. “Would you like me to get him some casual clothes?” she asked.

“That would be wonderful,” Veronica said with a happy smile.

“Something smart but loose enough that he can do his physiotherapy.”

Lois nodded. “I’ll bring something next time I visit.”

“You’re a sweetie,” Veronica said. “Sam is lucky to have you.”

The ‘sweetie’ grated a bit, but Lois couldn’t deny that it felt good to have someone voice appreciation what she was trying to do for her dad.

She walked through the common area, trying not to catch the eye of the few residents as they sat in the chairs and watched the *Wizard of Oz* on the television. She swung into her dad’s room and smiled across to where he was sitting up in bed. “How’re you doing, Dad?” she asked.

She pulled up the chair and sat next to his bed. His head had turned in her direction. She took his hand in hers and looked into his eyes. She resisted the compulsion to speak. She just looked into his eyes and waited . . . perhaps it would be possible to communicate without words.

Her dad’s gaze wavered a little, but when it settled in hers, Lois felt a wisp of recognition. Deep in his eyes, she could almost find her dad . . . the man who had come — sometimes — to her school concerts. The man who had always told her that she could do anything she wanted to. The man who hadn’t tried to hide his disappointment when she’d told him she was going to work as a singer on a cruise ship. “Lois Lane,” he’d said. “You can do so much better than dress up like a streetwalker and warble to overindulged, overfed passengers on a floating hotel going nowhere.”

In her heart, Lois had agreed. But she couldn’t tell him that. Not then. Not now.

Without breaking the link of their eyes, Lois said, “I’ve started a new job, Dad. I’m not working on the ship anymore.”

It was entirely possible that she imagined the tiny gleam in her dad’s eyes. But it felt as if he’d answered. As if he’d spoken his approval.

“I’m working with a man from another place,” Lois said. “I think he knows a lot, but there’s a . . . a language barrier. He’s very fit, and he loves to run. And he misses his parents a lot.”

Her dad’s fingers trembled in her hand.

“Anyway, I have my own office, upstairs. It has a big window, and he’s in the room next door. Yesterday, I got this little graze on my cheek — it’s nothing serious, I should have been more careful — but he gave me some antiseptic ointment for it.

“I wasn’t expecting to enjoy the new job, Dad. I didn’t think it would be very interesting, but I’m learning more than I thought I would. Other people work there, too. One man has a prosthetic leg. He got shot and was too far away from a hospital to save the leg.”

He dad *could* have been listening. His eyes hadn’t moved from her face.

“We had a bit of excitement yesterday, Dad. One of the men at my work . . . I didn’t like him right from the start. He had shifty eyes. I

didn’t trust him, and I thought he might be bullying the man from the other place. Yesterday, they caught him, and he was dismissed. It’s going to be a much better place to work now that he’s gone. I think the foreign man will be much happier, too.”

Her dad’s mouth twitched. Lois smiled.

“You always did say that I talk too much, Dad,” she said.

“Remember how you used to say, ‘Lois, if you were to actually stop to draw breath, someone else might get a chance to use their mouth, too?’”

Impulsively, Lois leant forward and dropped a kiss on her dad’s cheek.

“After our visit, I’m going shopping, Dad. I’ll buy you some new clothes. They want you to start getting out of bed during the day. Do you mind if I get you some bright colours? Perhaps some greens or blues? Or a sweater in fiery red? This place could use a bit of colour. You could brighten it up a bit.”

Lois looked directly into his eyes and smiled. Perhaps he smiled back — not with his mouth, but with his eyes.

“Uncle Mike will be in to see you, soon, Dad,” Lois said. “I’m going to leave now so I can get the shopping done before my shift starts at two o’clock.” She stood, slowly eased from his grasp, and replaced the chair to the corner.

“I love you, Dad,” she said. “I’ll be back tomorrow.”

Lois kissed him again and then walked out of her dad’s room. She was halfway across the common area when she saw Uncle Mike. He hurried over to her, and she slipped into his embrace.

“How are you, Lois?” he asked as he drew back. His hands stayed on her shoulders, and he examined her face. “What happened?”

“Carelessness,” she replied. “It’s nothing.”

He looked closer for a moment, and then his eyes lifted. “Did you get the meals last night?”

“Yes, thanks,” Lois said, glad the subject of her injured face had been passed over so easily. “My friend loved your cooking. Can we order two meals from now on?”

“What time? Nine-thirty? Or back to six-fifteen?”

“Six o’clock would be wonderful,” Lois said. “Keep the tab, and I’ll come in every Sunday to pay you, and we’ll have lunch together.”

Uncle Mike beamed. “Aw, Lois love, it’ll be great to see you regularly.” His hand lifted from her shoulder and pointed at her. “It’s a date. Sunday lunch. Every week. My place.”

Lois smiled. “Thanks, Uncle Mike. It was lovely to see you.”

“We’ll catch up properly, tomorrow.”

She nodded, gave him a kiss, and walked out of the nursing home — and for the first time, it didn’t feel like she was running away.

Part 4

Lois stared numbly at the endless assortment of male underwear. How could there be so many variations on what surely had to be a standard article of clothing?

And that was before she even got to size.

Or colour.

She’d already chosen two sweatsuits — one green, one blue — for her dad. They had been easy. She’d bought clothing for him before . . . birthday presents, Christmas presents . . . enough to know his size and have some idea of his taste.

But even as she’d been looking at the sweatsuits, she hadn’t been able to dismiss another idea from her mind.

A ridiculous idea.

An unrelenting idea.

She’d been heading determinedly to the checkout. She had been. Then she’d noticed the rows of boxers and briefs and hadn’t been able to stop herself from looking.

There was no harm in looking, right?

As she stared at the jumble of choices, the idea continued to bubble away with exasperating insistency.

It was a stupid idea that deserved to be swept away without consideration.

And yet . . .

She'd given Mr Kent food.

And chocolate — although she'd made a pact with herself not to think about that.

He had one pair of shorts. She remembered this morning when she'd looked into the cell and caught him washing his shorts. Had he put them on again while they were still wet?

That would not be comfortable.

It didn't have to be extravagant.

A pair of briefs, a tee shirt, a pair of shorts. That was all that would be required.

The temperature had been quite mild in the cell when she'd been in there. At least, she hadn't noticed that it was particularly cold.

She could always get a sweater later — when winter was more established.

The briefs came in packets of two.

She had never bought male briefs before. Working around the world as an agent just wasn't conducive to a relationship developing to the point of buying intimate apparel for each other.

What size?

30?

40?

Somewhere in between?

A young man — probably in his early twenties — walked into the aisle and began perusing the rows of briefs. Would he think she was ogling the half-naked male bodies on the packaging?

Lois snatched at a packet of size 34-36 — one pair blue, one pair red — hid it under her dad's sweat pants, and scurried away.

A tee shirt. That should be easier.

She found a long row of plain tee shirts and picked one from the rack. It was navy blue and looked about right for his size. She checked the label. Large.

That would do.

Shorts.

She found a pair of black shorts that looked like lopped-off cargo pants. She held them up and tried to visualise Mr Kent's hips. These should fit.

Maybe.

If they were too small, she could return them to the store.

If they were too big, she could buy him a belt.

Feeling satisfied — if not with her purchases, then at least with having overcome her indecision — Lois went to the checkout. On her way through the department store, she noticed a box of cute stress balls. They were shaped like rounded dogs — with a squished-in bulldog face that was so ugly Lois had to chuckle.

On impulse, she picked one up and decided she would buy it for her dad. She was sure they would have things like this for him to use when he went to the therapy sessions, but maybe the dog could make his room a little cheerier. Perhaps he could squeeze it with his good hand.

As Lois waited at the checkout, she realised exactly how much she dreaded the cashier asking about the clothes.

Surely, other women bought male clothes. Surely, wives bought male underwear.

But she wasn't wearing a ring.

If the cashier said anything, Lois would say they were for her brother.

Did sisters buy their brothers' underwear? She gulped. Probably not.

It was her turn to be served before she'd come up with an adequate excuse.

The young cashier giggled.

Lois felt herself begin to blush.

"Awww, that doggy is so cute," the girl said.

Lois manufactured a nervous smile.

"I love dogs," the cashier continued. She processed all the articles of clothing while telling Lois about the dog she'd owned as a child. She kept the stress ball until last. "I'm going to have to get one of

these."

Lois smiled again and paid.

Then, she gathered up her bags and escaped from the store.

That hadn't been too hard.

He stared glumly at the ham and cheese sandwich.

He should be grateful.

He was grateful.

Just a few days ago, a ham and cheese sandwich would have been beyond his dreams.

But *she* hadn't given it to him.

She hadn't given him breakfast.

He didn't mind that.

He was in no position to ask for food, let alone dictate who gave it to him.

But since she had put the note in the prison last night telling him that she was fine, he hadn't seen her.

That was OK.

What scared him ... petrified him ... depressed him ... was the possibility that she was gone. Forever.

They were still feeding him.

If she had left, perhaps her legacy would be that he would receive food. Given enough water to drink and still have some for washing. Not be bashed with the poison rods.

The soap and toothpaste she had given him would last a few weeks. Perhaps longer if he used them sparingly.

Food ... water ... That was more than he would have dared to hope for just a few days ago.

But now ...

Now he felt as if the most precious thing in his life had been ripped away.

Had her nightmare been about him?

Had contact with him freaked her out completely?

He'd tried so hard not to scare her.

He was being stupid. Allowing himself to mope over something so far outside of his control was stupid.

Perhaps it was her day off.

She probably hadn't given him another thought.

She was probably off with her friends, her family, her husband, her children, having a great time and not expending one thought on the alien being she was paid to keep locked away.

He had no rights.

Certainly, he had no say in who pushed the food through the door of the prison.

Perhaps she would be back tomorrow.

He finished his sandwich and swilled it down with the water from the bottle.

Then — because he needed something to keep his mind from descending into a dark slush of dejection — he spread out the strips of newspaper that he'd previously tidied and began putting them together like a jigsaw puzzle.

It was something to do.

But it didn't dislodge the beautiful woman from his thoughts.

Nor did it soothe the ache in his heart.

Lois stared at the little pile of clothes on her desk.

Buying them — she'd now discovered — had been the easy bit.

She had returned to the compound and held the rod as Shadbolt had pushed the bag containing the sandwich into the cell.

If he wondered at her sudden desire to avoid any contact with the prisoner, he hadn't voiced his questions.

The details of the way forward were becoming clearer in her mind.

All of her interaction with Mr Kent would happen during the eight hours of her shift — the time when they would be alone. Whenever someone else was here, she would be the aloof, professional boss.

But that left her with two problems.

She could easily hide her contact with Mr Kent. Much more

difficult would be hiding the results of that contact.

Shadbolt and Longford couldn't see into the cell unless they opened the door. Fortunately, their concerns about the possible dangers posed by the alien meant that they were unlikely to linger when the door was open.

However, when pushing the food or washing bowl into the cell, they would check on him. And some changes were going to be obvious.

If she gave him the clothes, should she ask him to change back into the tattered shorts whenever Shadbolt or Longford opened the door to deliver his breakfast or lunch?

It had been less than a week but already, Lois had already begun to notice changes in his physique. He wasn't so gaunt. His skin was smoother. His lips were no longer crusty and dry. He walked with more energy. His shoulders were straighter.

He was clean.

Those changes couldn't be concealed.

However, food and water were just the beginning of the ever-growing list of ideas that were flourishing like daisies in her mind.

Things to make the cell seem less like a prison — a mattress, a pillow, blankets, a chair, a small table.

Things to bridge the yawning chasm between him and the rest of the world — newspapers, a clock, a calendar, perhaps even a radio.

Things to give him back a small scrap of self-worth — a haircut, socks and shoes, the means to shave if he wished to, scissors so he could cut his nails instead of having to bite them off.

If she implemented those changes very gradually, perhaps Shadbolt and Longford would accept them without threatening a mutiny. After what had happened with Moyne, she couldn't risk them running to Scardino claiming she was putting their lives at unnecessary risk.

The second problem was deciding what level of interaction was appropriate between her and Mr Kent?

Giving him chocolate had been a mistake.

Her impulsive action now seemed overly ... intimate.

She wouldn't do it again.

Except ... she couldn't push away the lingering feeling of how much she had enjoyed witnessing his pleasure.

He had suffered so much. He had been abused and neglected to such a degree that she couldn't comprehend how he hadn't died. Not only was he alive, but he had also shown a remarkable ability to recover. And not just physically — his body was no longer marked with any mementos of Moyne's brutality — but in every other way.

In fact, she was in awe of his emotional resilience.

The thing that shocked her most was that he seemed to have accepted her without prejudice. He hadn't automatically assumed she was another despot who had come to inflict further pain and suffering.

When he looked at her, it wasn't with hatred but with cautious curiosity.

And, startlingly quickly, he seemed to have come to trust her.

Was it really trust? Or was trust easy when, realistically, he didn't have anything to lose? How could he show a lack of trust?

Refuse to eat the food that had been supplied?

That was possible but, in the circumstances, highly impractical.

Refuse to approach the door for fear of what might lurk behind it?

Again, possible, but it would hurt him the most.

He seemed to have accepted that the reason for putting his food and water near the door was not about luring him into a trap but limiting his exposure to the rods.

He had stopped turning away whenever the door opened.

Was he being deliberately non-threatening because he wanted her to trust him? Because he had a plan? Either to kill her — as Moyne had suggested — or to somehow lead, or be involved in, a coup aimed at world dominion?

She didn't believe that.

The epiphany rocketed through her, wringing the breath from her lungs.

She didn't believe that his intentions were for evil.

She didn't.

She just didn't.

Her gut said he wouldn't hurt her.

Her gut said he wasn't evil.

Her gut said he had done nothing wrong.

And this time ... *this* time ... she would listen.

Lois released a long groan of frustration.

Knowing what she believed was only the first step.

What should she do now?

She couldn't go to Scardino and demand justice on Mr Kent's behalf.

If she did, she would be shipped off to another assignment so fast she wouldn't have the time to push a final cup of tea into the cell.

That brought another pressing consideration into this chaotic mess.

She couldn't stay here forever.

Eventually, she would feel strong enough to end her sabbatical and return to the field.

What would happen to Mr Kent then?

For his sake, she had to be circumspect in her association with him because when she moved on, he would still be the supposedly evil alien they believed had killed two men.

Perhaps that would be the time — knowing that she was leaving — for her to confront the higher-ups and demand justice.

With a sigh of exasperation, Lois stood from her chair and looked at the clock on the back wall. It was nearly three o'clock. Shadbolt had gone home ... and Longford wouldn't be here for another seven hours.

She was alone with Mr Kent.

On her desk — next to the small pile of clothes — was today's edition of *The Daily Planet*. She'd bought it this morning but had chosen to give him nothing except the sandwich and a bottle of water when she and Shadbolt had unlocked the cell door earlier.

She looked through the window.

Mr Kent was sitting — listlessly — against the back wall. He'd meticulously arranged the torn strips of newspaper back together.

He'd done it without much enthusiasm, though.

Why had he done it?

Surely, his proclivity for neatness didn't extend to -

Lois groaned as comprehension rolled through her brain. He was bored.

Of all the things he had suffered under Trask, boredom had probably been the least of them.

Now that he wasn't fighting hunger, or thirst, or injuries, or exposure to the rods, time hung heavily.

What was he going to do?

For that matter, Lois wasn't sure how she intended to fill the next seven hours.

But she could start with giving him the newspaper — and a notepad and pen.

The pen would enable him to do the crossword puzzle in the paper if he so desired. It would allow him to write ... draw ... it would open up possibilities to occupy his time.

Lois picked up the pen and paused.

Last time, she had given him a crayon — because a crayon couldn't be used as a weapon.

A pen could be used to stab ... but ... he wouldn't do it.

She was sure he wouldn't do it.

And she was tired of jumping at every possible shadow.

She picked up the newspaper and the notepad, lingered for a moment at the door as she looked at the rods, and then continued down the stairs without one.

She unlocked the door.

She pushed it open.

She crouched low and looked around the doorjamb.

He hadn't moved from the back wall, but he was looking directly at her.

She put the newspaper on the floor, and added the pen and the

notebook.

Lois lifted her head, and her gaze scooted across the yards of concrete that separated them and locked on him.

She stood. She waited, watching him, her hands on the doorjamb, one foot just inside the cell, the other in the staffroom.

Mr Kent didn't move for what seemed like a long time.

Then, his hand flattened against the wall, and he rose slowly to his feet.

He made no move towards her.

What would he do if she stepped into the cell?

Lois shuffled back and leant against the open door. She ran her hand down the edge of it. As she had expected, there was neither a lock nor a handle on his side of the door. If she stepped in, she would have to leave the door open.

She definitely couldn't risk it locking behind her.

She couldn't go in. The rods were upstairs in her office.

She would be defenceless.

But he wouldn't hurt her.

She was sure he wouldn't hurt her.

Her mouth had gone dry.

Her heart was racing.

She raised her hand in farewell and retreated into the staffroom.

She closed the door, locked it, and hurried up the stairs, noting that the pain in her ankle had diminished to an occasional twinge.

In her office, she went to the window.

Mr Kent had picked up the things she had left at the door and was returning to his place against the wall.

He carefully placed the newspaper on the floor, sat down, rested the notepad against his raised thigh, and began to write.

Above him, Lois watched.

A minute later, he stood, took the pen and notepad to the door, and left them on the floor. Then he returned to the wall, sat down, and picked up the newspaper.

Lois descended the stairs, unlocked the cell door, and opened it. She gathered the pen and paper, and looked up at Mr Kent.

He was watching her, as she knew he would be.

She wrested her eyes from him and looked at the top sheet of the notepad. It read, *Thank you for everything you have done for me.*

The word 'everything' was underlined twice.

His handwriting was neat and flowing.

She could almost imagine his voice ... saying these words.

Thank you for everything you have done for me.

Would his voice be gentle? Deep? Melodious? Somehow, she couldn't imagine it being harsh or cold.

Would he look at her with those expressive brown eyes as he said the words?

Why didn't he speak?

Had Trask and Moyne done something to ensure that Mr Kent would never speak again? To guarantee that he could never tell of their atrocities?

Lois stared at Mr Kent, wondering so many things.

Was he hoping she would respond to his note? After the years of not being able to communicate, did he shrink from it? Or welcome it?

She wrote, *Keep the pen and notepad.*

It was formal and cautious. It allowed for the possibility of further communication, but without assuming he would want to.

Lois put them on the floor, waved to him, waited for the response she knew would come, and then shut and locked the door.

Back in her office, the pile of clothes seemed like an affront to her indecision. She turned away from it and watched Mr Kent instead.

He had retrieved the notepad and pen and was back in his place, reading the paper. The pad and pen were on the floor next to him.

Did he understand the need to take this slowly?

Was he — just as she was — hesitant about what to say? What to admit? What to ask?

Lois checked the time. It was twenty past three.

What was she going to do to in the hours that stretched ahead?

She wasn't prepared at all.

Now she understood why Trask had filled his office with books and crossword puzzles.

Her glance fell to the boxes shoved in a rather haphazard pile in the corner. Two of the boxes held Trask's possessions, and the other three held his notes and research.

Should she try to read the notes again? Should she search for any information that might give her answers to her many questions?

She turned to Mr Kent.

And then back to the boxes.

Reading Trask's notes seemed like an act of treachery.

She knew that they contained inaccuracies. She suspected that some of his reports were blatant lies.

If she wanted information about Mr Kent, shouldn't she ask him? In doing that, she risked being given the opposite — yet possibly

equally unbalanced — view of what had happened.

But she trusted Mr Kent more than she trusted Trask.

She hadn't spoken one word to Mr Kent. She had exchanged only a few notes. Yet her gut said he was likely to give her the truth than Trask.

If she wanted information, she would ask Mr Kent.

Should she simply write out a list of questions and put them in his cell? How would he respond if she did that?

Would he answer her openly? Or would it overwhelm him?

There was another possibility ...

A possibility that played around her mind like a wilful child.

A possibility that she knew she should reject without further thought.

And she had rejected it. Repeatedly. And — like a child's swing — it kept coming back.

The harder she pushed it away, the more forcefully it came back.

She could go into the cell.

She could open the door.

Walk in.

Walk right up to him.

And say, "Hello, Mr Kent."

How would he react?

She was sure he wouldn't hurt her.

She was *almost* sure he wouldn't try to escape.

But, beyond that, she couldn't settle on the most likely scenario.

Would he speak?

Would he cower into the corner?

Would he try to gesture to her?

The notepad and pen were in his cell. If he didn't seem able to respond verbally, she could put them in his hand and suggest he write something.

Would he be scared of her?

She knew her heart would be pounding almost to the point of exploding in her chest.

Who would be the most apprehensive?

Him?

Or her?

It might just be dead even.

Should she do it?

When?

Perhaps more notes first?

But what?

Should she tell him something?

Or ask him something?

The notepad still lay next to him.

Was there a reason why he hadn't written anything else?

Was it just that he didn't know what to say either?

Lois took another notepad from the desk drawer and wrote two words:

Tea

Coffee

Next to each of the words, she drew a little box.

Then, underneath, she wrote:

Milk

Sugar

And two more accompanying boxes.

Then she paused.

Was this too much like he was the patron in a restaurant? Or was this just making simple adjustments that would cost her nothing and might mean a lot to him?

She'd do it. If only because then she wouldn't have to think of something else to write.

She ripped the paper from the pad, hurried down the stairs, opened the door, took half a step over the threshold, and bent low to put the paper on the concrete.

From nowhere, an idea washed over her like a breaking wave.

It rekindled a spark of youthful vitality that she'd thought had gone forever.

And engulfed her with playfulness. Frivolity.

It was powerfully persuasive ... and Lois found that she didn't want to resist.

She lifted her hand, palm towards Mr Kent, in a gesture that she hoped he would take as, 'Be back in a minute,' and went into the staffroom. She shut the door, but didn't bother locking it.

She put the piece of paper on the table and quickly folded it into a paper airplane.

This was ridiculous.

But, ridiculous or not, she suddenly couldn't stop grinning like a cheeky schoolkid planning a silly prank.

She hadn't felt this alive since the last time she and Linda had laughed together.

Lois straightened her face and pushed the door open.

Mr Kent was still sitting, but he'd removed the newspaper from his lap and had picked up the pen and notepad.

Lois lifted her right arm — loaded with the paper plane — paused long enough that a sudden missile invading his cell wouldn't startle him, and then thrust the plane forward.

It glided, dived, and landed about three feet short of where Mr Kent was sitting. He stared at it — his eyebrows lost in the tangle of his hair. He needed a few seconds to recover, and Lois had to restrain the giggles that were threatening to explode. Finally, he looked from the airplane to her. He pointed at it with a long forefinger, and Lois nodded.

Mr Kent rose from the concrete and took two slow steps towards the paper plane. After he'd picked it up, he retreated to the wall, unfolded it, and read it.

He picked up the pen and wrote more than the expected couple of checks. Then he slipped the pen into his pocket and faced her, poised like a spear thrower.

He lobbed the plane forward. It glided in a perfect arc and executed a smooth landing at her feet.

Lois looked up to him and gave a slight grin of surprise and delight.

She picked up the plane and unfolded it.

He hadn't checked her little squares, but he had written, *Either: Tea — milk, no sugar. Coffee — milk, 2 sugars. Thank you.*

She took two steps into the staffroom, picked up the pen from the table, and wrote, *I'm having coffee. Suit you?*

She quickly refolded the creases and moved into the cell.

Mr Kent hadn't moved.

She energetically launched the paper jet, hoping to match his effort. It barely lifted above head height and then suddenly nosedived with a spectacular lack of grace. It came to rest on the concrete, its front portion crumbled like a concertina.

It had split the distance between them.

What now?

Lois looked at Mr Kent.

He looked at her.

Did she move further into the cell?

Or did he move towards the door?

Neither.

He retreated ... into the far corner of the room.

He slid down the wall and sat.

Lois's legs felt like hardened concrete. Her heart was pulsating in her eardrums. Her lungs couldn't seem to get enough oxygen.

Did she walk into the cell?

Or did she walk away?

If she walked away, the message would be clear: *I don't trust you.*

If she walked forward, she would be putting herself into a perilously vulnerable situation.

A situation so vulnerable that death was a possibility.

Deller and Bortolotto had died horrible deaths in this cell.

But the man she believed had killed them wasn't here.

Trust your gut, Lane.

Linda's voice echoed through her mind.

Lois pushed the door all the way open and took half a dozen shaky steps forward. She kept her eyes on Mr Kent. He didn't move. She picked up the plane, hurled it towards him, and then backed steadily towards the door, fighting the impulse to turn and run.

He didn't move until she had reached the haven of the doorway.

Then he stood, picked up the plane, and read her message.

He turned over the paper and wrote a few words.

He refolded it, carefully straightening the damaged cockpit, and launched it.

Again, it landed within inches of her feet.

He was good at this!

Lois picked it up. His message read, *Perfectly. Thank you.*

Her pounding heart needed a reprieve. She dropped the plane to the ground and hurried into the staffroom. Once the door was shut, she leant against it, her head flopped back. Every muscle in her body was strained to rigid tightness.

She'd been into the cell — and walked out unharmed.

He had done nothing more threatening than lob a paper airplane in her direction.

Lois brewed the coffee, poured his, added two sugars, stirred, and put it just inside the cell. Mr Kent waved his appreciation.

She locked the door and went slowly up the stairs with her coffee.

Things had changed.

In just a few minutes, things had changed. They had communicated ... but so much more than that had happened. He understood her caution ... her lack of trust. He *expected* it ... and that ripped a little hole in her heart.

Why hadn't he spoken?

Could he speak? She had third-hand information through Shadbolt that Mr Kent had spoken in the early days. Was that true? What if he couldn't speak? He could read and write. He looked human. But what if his particular kind of alien was mute?

Or had Trask and Moyne done something unthinkable?

She hadn't spoken either.

Was he wondering about that?

Lois slumped into her chair and sipped at her coffee as her mind spun itself into a dizzying hodgepodge of questions that had no answers.

Mr Kent spent the afternoon hours reading the newspaper.

Lois spent the afternoon hours reading one of Trask's murder mysteries. It didn't seem right to do one of the crosswords from his books. Reading a book seemed less intrusive.

She had chosen the one that looked least dreary, but it wasn't able to hold her interest for longer than a few minutes at a time. For reasons that she decided not to examine too closely, watching a man read a newspaper was more riveting than the story in the pages of Trask's novel.

Tomorrow, she would be better prepared.

She thought she had come prepared today. She glared at the little pile of clothes as they sat in silent condemnation.

Why was she so undecided?

Perhaps she could give him the tee shirt and the shorts but keep the underwear. Would that seem less personal?

She unlocked the closet, shoved the clothes into the shelf under the television, and shut the door with a sharp bang.

A few minutes later, Mr Kent rose from the floor and began to run. For the next half an hour — while he ran, and did push ups, and sit ups, and stretches — Lois managed to read not one word of the book.

It was five-thirty five when he finished. There was just enough time for him to wash up before supper. Lois hesitated over whether she should write him another note.

Eventually, she decided to.

She wrote, *I will be in the staffroom until dinner arrives in half an hour. You will have privacy.*

She stared at the note. Was it the height of gullibility to alert him to the fact that he wasn't going to be watched? No — she had warned him that she would be in the staffroom, which shut down any possibility of escape.

Pointedly ignoring the pile of clothes, Lois checked that the camera wasn't on, went to the staffroom, and filled the bowl with hot water.

She placed it in the cell, put the note next to it, and lingered just long enough to meet his eyes and acknowledge him with a slight wave of her hand.

Lois locked the door and slumped onto a chair as regret rolled over her. This would have been the perfect time to give him the clothes. But she couldn't do it now. If she went back up to her office, she would be breaking her word to him. He would probably never know, but it seemed important that if she promised him something, she didn't renege.

And if she tried to give him the clothes, there was always the chance that she would open the door to the cell and catch him in a compromising position.

She tidied the staffroom — wiped down the table and drainer, washed the few cups that had been left there, and waited for their supper to arrive.

At six o'clock, she exited through the external door, locked it, and went to the sidewalk to wait for Uncle Mike's delivery boy.

He arrived half a minute later, and she returned with the two meals.

Removing the lid revealed roast beef, roasted potatoes, broccoli, carrots, and beans — all covered in thick gravy.

Lois reached into the tray and picked out a fork *and* a knife. A small part of her questioned the wisdom of giving an accused killer a knife, but she refused to be swayed.

He needed a knife to cut the beef.

He needed a knife ... and he would have a knife.

Lois unlocked the door and pushed it open a few inches. She peeped in and saw the empty bowl next to the doorway. Good — he'd finished.

She placed the meal on the concrete with the knife and fork. There was a note there. She picked it up, took the washing bowl, and glanced up to Mr Kent. He was sitting against the back wall.

She read what he had written. *Thank you for giving me privacy. I hope your injuries are recovering well.*

Fighting down the lump that had suddenly flared into her throat, Lois gave him a small wave and moved back into the staffroom.

She shut the door, locked it, and picked up the other container.

As she climbed the stairs, Lois made a decision.

If he returned the knife and fork after he'd eaten, she would get them out of the cell, and then she would step in.

She would walk into the cell — without a rod — and she would speak to Mr Kent. Face to face.

Part 5

When Mr Kent had finished eating his supper, he used his bottle of water to rinse the knife and fork and then placed them on top of the container near the door.

As Lois watched him, half of her insides plummeted downwards with nervous apprehension, and the other half surged upwards in excited anticipation.

He'd given back the 'weapons'. He'd used the knife — for exactly the purpose she had intended — and returned it.

That had been her litmus test. Now, there was nothing to stop her from going into the cell. It was just before seven o'clock. Longford wasn't due for another three hours.

Should she go into the cell at twenty minutes to ten? That way, if anything did happen, there was a chance that Longford would realise she was in trouble.

Lois quelled that idea almost immediately.

If she didn't trust Mr Kent, she shouldn't go into the cell. Period.

If she did, she shouldn't be thinking about possible means of escape.

She opened the closet and removed the little pile of clothing. She put it in a bag. She took it out of the bag. If she walked into his cell holding a bag, he was going to wonder what was inside it. She would freak out if he approached her holding a bag.

She put the clothes back in the cupboard.

Entering the cell was enough. Once they had negotiated that, it would be easier to give him the clothes.

So ... going into the cell.

How exactly was she going to do it?

Unlock the door. Walk in. Walk right up to him.

And then what?

Speak?

OK. Then what?

Well, that would depend on what he did.

Should she take in a cup of tea? Should she give it to him instead of leaving it on the floor?

Lois threw up her hands in frustration.

She didn't know what to do.

She hadn't worked alone in such a long time. She really needed her partner right now. This would be so much easier with Linda.

They would discuss it from every angle. They would propose ideas and counter ideas. They would come to a conclusion and implement it together.

Lois pushed aside those thoughts. She worked alone now, and that wasn't going to change.

What was she going to do about Mr Kent?

She couldn't imagine doing this job for a considerable length of time and *not* going into the cell. Much as she had determined to remain detached, this wasn't a job that could be done from a distance.

But doing it ... Actually going into the cell ... The first time ...

It wouldn't be the first time — she'd been in there before.

Mr Kent wasn't going to hurt her.

He wasn't.

She was sure of it.

Lois leapt from her chair, strode purposefully to the door, and stopped as indecision ensnared her again.

The rods?

Leave them here?

Take one to the staffroom?

She had to lock her office. She was relying on the creak of the external door to alert her if Shadbolt or Longford arrived unexpectedly. However, if one of them came in quietly and realised she was in the cell, she didn't want them to be able to watch her undetected from the window in her office.

But if she locked the rods in her office, she would be completely without any means of defence.

"Agggghhhh." Lois's exasperation erupted into a long groan.

She took one rod out of her office. She placed it at the top of the stairs and then locked her door.

She went down the stairs, her heart thumping so loudly that it reverberated through her brain cells.

She went into the staffroom.

Pushed the key into the cell door.

Turned it.

Pressed -

From behind her, the external door creaked loudly into the stillness.

She frantically pulled the door shut, thrust the keys into her pocket, and scuttled to the sink.

The footsteps approached, and Lois spun around, knowing that if she looked one quarter as startled as she felt, she deserved to face a firing squad of questions.

It was Longford.

“L ... Longford,” she said.

He smiled guardedly as he put a pillow and duvet on the bed that was tucked under the stairwell. “My mother thought it was very nice of you to do my shift last night. She said I should come in early and do a few extra hours.” He shrugged. “And as I intend to sleep, I didn’t mind.”

“Ah ... thanks,” Lois said. “I ... ah ... I was just about to make myself coffee.”

“You can go if you want to.”

Lois was pretty sure that Longford wanted her to leave so he could settle into the bed and sleep away his shift. “OK,” she said. “Thanks.”

She left the staffroom and ducked into her office to activate the camera. She was confident that Longford’s plans for the night hours included nothing that required more energy than slumber, so she set the tape to begin recording at six the next morning. Then she locked the closet — with Mr Kent’s clothes safely inside — locked her office, picked up the rod, and went down the stairs.

Longford was making the bed.

“Longford,” Lois said as she put the rod in the closet. “Are you aware that there is a camera in my office that records everything that happens in the cell during my absence?”

He straightened from the bed, and his eyebrows rolled together. “A camera?”

Lois nodded. “Trask set it up.”

“Oh,” he said slowly. “Ah ... no ... I didn’t know that.”

“I don’t want you to go into the cell without calling me first,” Lois said in a calm, cool tone. “If you do, I will know, and I will have you removed from the operation.”

He nodded vigorously. “I understand.”

“When Shadbolt gets here at six o’clock tomorrow morning, you can give the prisoner the bagel that is in that container.” Lois pointed to the shelf above the fridge. “If you wish to include a cup of coffee you can. If you don’t want to, that’s all right.”

“OK.”

“One of you must hold the rod while the other puts the food into the cell.” She took one of the cell keys from her bag and put it on the table. “That key is not to be taken from the premises.”

Longford nodded again. “How long has Trask had the camera?”

“I don’t know.”

“But it’s possible he had it when those men were killed?”

“Yeah,” Lois said. “It’s possible.”

Longford said no more.

“Good night,” Lois said. “Remember, other than for breakfast, the cell door isn’t to be opened without my prior authorisation.”

“Yes, Ms Lane,” Longford said. “Goodnight.”

She turned from the staffroom and left the compound — feeling oddly like she was abandoning a friend.

He’d heard the click of the lock and had been anticipating the door opening and the woman appearing.

Would she have another message for him? Another plane?

A lot of shocks had come through that door, but a woman brandishing a paper airplane probably topped them all.

In terms of shock factor, maybe not.

In terms of making him want to smile, it was unequalled.

He remembered the last time he had smiled.

It was when this same woman had given him candy.

Before that, he doubted he had smiled in over seven years.

She had walked in, her arm lifted high above her head and a look on her face that said she knew this a crazy thing to do, but she was going to do it anyway.

He shook his head and touched his fingers to his mouth.

Yep, he was smiling.

It felt strange. Like entering a room that had been shut off for a long time.

When the lock had clicked, he’d thought she was coming in again.

But then, the door had shut abruptly.

He’d managed to turn up his hearing enough that he’d heard voices — nothing distinct — but voices. Someone else had arrived.

He picked up the now dilapidated plane and ran his fingers along its wings. He unfolded it and relived their ‘conversation’.

Her handwriting was large and loopy — as if her habit was to write quickly.

He knew she wouldn’t come into his cell now.

But he had hope that she would come back tomorrow.

And that meant everything.

~ Sunday ~

Lois had gone to bed early.

She’d fallen asleep easily ... thinking about paper airplanes.

She’d awoken feeling refreshed and ready for whatever the day would bring.

Her first thought had been the compound ... and whether Shadbolt and Longford had gotten the breakfast into the cell without incident.

After showering, she paused over her choice of clothes.

Eventually, she decided on her dressiest jeans, a plain white tee shirt, and a red sweater.

She spent twenty minutes searching through the boxes that she’d had no inclination to unpack since she’d moved into her apartment three weeks ago. She found two novels she had been meaning to read. She found an unopened jigsaw puzzle that Lucy had given her for Christmas five years ago. And, after a lot of rummaging, she pounced on the tennis racket she had last used when she was in college. She thought she had kept it. She even found a tennis ball — it was a bit worn in places and slightly flat, but it would work just fine.

She put her dad’s new sweatsuits into a bag and loaded everything into her Jeep. She placed the doggy stress ball in the passenger seat and drove to the nursing home.

“Ms Lane,” Veronica greeted as Lois walked into the common area.

“Good morning, Veronica,” Lois replied. The brightness in her voice sounded strange in her own ears. The nurse, however, didn’t seem to notice anything awry.

Her smile was reminiscent of sunshine after a storm. “Call me ‘Ronny,’” she said.

“I got Dad some casual clothes,” Lois said.

Ronny’s face lit with excitement. “That’s wonderful,” she said. She moved closer and lowered her voice. “I forgot to mention it, but did you remember to put his name on them?”

Lois shook her head. It hadn’t occurred to her that it would be needed.

Ronny patted her shoulder. “It’s OK. I have a permanent marker that will do the trick.”

“Do you want me to take them home and label them?” Lois asked.

“No,” Ronny said. “But if you can remember next time, that would be really helpful. It’s my fault. I forgot to tell you.”

“I wasn’t in Metropolis when Dad moved in here,” Lois said. “I missed all those little details.”

Ronny smiled. “It’s easily fixed. But it would be awful if Sam’s lovely new clothes went to the laundry and got lost, wouldn’t it?”

Lois nodded.

“Your dad is still in bed,” Ronny said. “He’s had breakfast, and I’ll be in there in about thirty minutes to get him up.”

“I’ll go and talk to him,” Lois said.

Ronny gave her another motherly pat on the arm and turned to talk to a resident.

Lois took the bag into her dad’s bedroom.

After greeting him with a kiss, she took the sweatsuits from the bag and held them up for him to see. There was no noticeable response to the first one, but she continued with the second undaunted. Her dad had never had much interest in clothes.

Lastly, she took the little dog from the bag and showed him it as she sat next to his bed. “Look at this, Dad,” she said. “Isn’t he cute?”

His eyes moved slowly from her face to the dog. Lois took his good hand and laid it flat on the bed, palm up. She placed the dog in his hand and helped his fingers curl around it.

“Squeeze, Dad,” she encouraged. “It will help keep the muscles in your hand and arm strong.”

His hand didn’t move, so Lois moved her attention from the stress ball to her father’s face. “How are you, Dad? Ronny told me you’re getting up today. That’s exciting. Being in bed all day is so demoralising. And today, you have some new clothes to wear. Tell you what. I’ll come a bit later tomorrow so I’ll be able to see you in your new gear.”

Lois ran her fingertips along his lower arm and tried to imagine what question he would ask if he could.

“Work’s going well, thanks, Dad,” she said. She smiled. “You’ll never guess what we did yesterday. I made a paper airplane — you know, just the way you taught me. We flew it from one side of the room to the other. It worked really well for a few flights, and then it crashed ... wheeeeeeee ...” She demonstrated the plane’s demise with her hand. “... nose-first into the floor. It looked a bit crumpled after that, but that man I told you about — the one from the place far away — he still managed to make it fly well. He probably knows a lot about things that fly.”

Her words stopped as ideas zipped through her mind. Mr Kent had shown extraordinary skill with the paper plane. Had it been luck? Or did he really have knowledge of air ... *spacecraft*?

Lois pushed away what was just another question without an answer and continued chatting. “Anyway Dad, I’m going to Uncle Mike’s for lunch today. Ronny didn’t say if he’d been in to see you yet. He probably has — I know he comes early. After lunch, I’ll be going to work. Maybe we’ll fly paper planes again, although I don’t think so, because I have other plans for today — something I wanted to do yesterday.”

Her gaze drifted from her dad’s face to his hand. His fingers were tightly clasp the stress ball. She eased them away. “That’s great, Dad,” she said. “Now, squeeze again.”

His fingers curled around the ball.

Lois smiled. It was such a tiny step forward, but it felt so significant. The ball was in his right hand — which wasn’t paralysed — but she felt as if they had achieved something together.

“Let go, Dad,” she said.

His fingers straightened.

“Squeeze, Dad.”

His fingers closed around the dog.

Lois stood and gently folded her arms around his shoulders.

“That’s great, Dad.” She withdrew and looked into his face. “I know it doesn’t seem like much,” she said. “But we have to start somewhere, and this is fantastic. I’m so proud of you.”

She touched her nose against his and then kissed his cheek.

Tears were pushing up into her eyes. Lois wasn’t sure if they were happy tears because of the progress or sad tears because she’d gotten so excited over such a miniscule event. She didn’t want to end today’s visit with tears, so she kissed her dad again. “I’ll be back tomorrow,” she promised. She replaced the chair against the wall. “I love you, Dad. Keep squeezing that dog.”

She left his room, unable to hold back her tears any longer.

Lunch with Uncle Mike buoyed Lois’s spirits. They ate together

next to a wide sunlit window. The food was great — Lois had ordered the lasagne with a creamy tomato sauce. Uncle Mike was upbeat about Sam, believing that his brother had made definite progress during the past week.

Lois asked for a serving of lasagne to take away and couldn’t help thinking ahead when she accepted the container from Uncle Mike and paid her tab.

She gave him a big hug and then left for Bessolo Boulevard.

As she let herself into the compound, Lois felt a strange assortment of emotions. There was some nervousness — she was going to *meet* Mr Kent today. The nervousness was blended with a touch of anxiety. She hadn’t heard anything from either Longford or Shadbolt and had managed — with considerable difficulty — to refrain from calling them. She hoped everything had gone smoothly in her absence.

But mostly, she felt confident.

Good.

Assured.

She had been through the vacillation yesterday and had no intention of repeating it today.

She was going into Mr Kent’s cell.

Her gut said it was the right thing to do.

Lois entered the compound. “Hi, Shadbolt,” she called, hoping to deter him from coming to investigate the sound of her entering.

She took her bag — with the racquet handle sticking out rather obviously — up to her office and shut the door behind her. Mr Kent was sitting against the back wall. He had folded *The Daily Planet* over his knees and, pen in hand, looked to be doing the crossword puzzle.

She glanced around the cell — everything seemed to be exactly as it should be.

Lois went down to the staffroom, carrying the takeout container of lasagne and a bottle of water. “Is everything OK?” she asked as she went to the closet and took out the rod.

Shadbolt stood from the table. “Yep.”

Lois added a fork to the top of the container lid and handed it to Shadbolt. He eyed it doubtfully, but made no comment. She unlocked the door and stood back for Shadbolt to deposit the meal and water in the cell.

It was done quickly and efficiently.

Lois put the rod in the closet. “Any problems during your shift?” she asked as she went to the coffee machine.

“No,” Shadbolt said. “We gave him the bagel at six. He stayed on the far side of the cage.”

Lois managed a tight smile. “Good,” she said. “You can leave now if you want to.”

“It’s not even half past one yet,” Shadbolt said.

Lois shrugged. “Whatever. I’m here. It doesn’t need two of us.” She poured milk into her coffee and headed for the stairs. “See you tomorrow.”

She went into the office.

Five minutes later, she heard Shadbolt leave.

Lois took a deep breath. As soon as Mr Kent had finished his lunch, she was going into his cell.

He ate the meal, knowing it was delicious but barely tasting it.

She was back.

He was sure he’d heard her voice just before Shadbolt had opened the door and put the lunch on the floor.

She was here.

Shadbolt would go soon.

Then, maybe, she would come in and put a message on the floor. If she didn’t, he would wait awhile, and then he would put a piece of paper near the door. She would see him do it. If Shadbolt was gone, she might come to collect his message.

He’d already made a new plane. Just in case.

While Mr Kent ate his lunch, Lois skimmed the tape from the

morning.

He did the usual things. It started with breakfast — they didn't give him coffee, but he got the bagel — and then he washed with the water in the bowl that Shadbolt and Longford had provided. When Mr Kent started washing, Lois stopped the tape and forwarded it without watching.

Once it had whirred through half an hour, she hit 'play' again and continued fast forwarding. He did the usual things — stretching, push ups, reading the paper. Then ...

She slowed the tape to normal speed.

She watched as Mr Kent tore a piece of paper from the notepad and carefully folded an elaborate version of a paper airplane.

Once it was done, he spent half a minute gazing at it, and then he hid it under one of the old newspapers.

Lois continued to the end of the tape. Nothing of note happened.

She rewound it to the beginning and turned off the television.

Mr Kent had finished his lunch. He brushed his teeth and used water from his bottle to wash his face and hands. He even tried to finger-comb his hair but gave up when it became apparent that he was achieving very little.

It was almost as if he were preparing for company.

He couldn't be expecting her ... surely.

Once he'd finished his 'preparations', he went to his place against the back wall and continued with the crossword puzzle.

Lois filled her lungs and slowly released the air.

She felt good.

Ready.

"Let's do it, King," she muttered as she locked her office door.

When she reached the bottom the stairs, she checked that the external door was locked.

She went to the cell door and slipped the key into the lock.

She was sure about this.

And it felt so very good to be sure. Confident. Decisive. Strong.

She turned the key, pushed the door open and dragged a chair into the doorway.

When the door had been secured by the chair, Lois looked across the cell.

Mr Kent was watching her.

Their eyes collided.

The newspaper slid from his lap, unnoticed.

Lois stood still, her heart exploding, and her breath coming in short jabs.

She took a step. Then another one. And another.

Mr Kent hadn't moved — not as much as a fingertip. His eyes were wide and fixated on her.

She reached the middle of the cell. About where the plane had crash-landed.

She saw him swallow and, without meaning to, she copied his action.

It had little effect. Her mouth felt as if she sucked in a sand dune.

Lois took another step. She estimated that she had four more to go.

Three.

Two.

One.

She stopped a few inches from his feet. He was looking up at her, his eyes dark, his shoulders rigid, his forearms flexed, his knuckles gnarled, his face — what she could see under the beard — a frozen mask.

He wasn't smiling.

He looked stunned. As if he couldn't believe she was here.

Lois wasn't sure she believed it either.

She took a craggy breath.

She swallowed.

Opened her mouth.

"I'm Lois," she said.

He blinked a couple of times. He swallowed again — rough and scratchy — and hauled in a quivery breath.

"I'm Clark," he said.

Part 6

Clark.

Clark Kent.

Lois stared at Clark.

He stared at her.

Was he doing the same thing she was? Rolling her name around his brain and fitting it with the person who — until now — had been unidentified?

Actually, 'Clark' was perfect.

Clark.

Strong ... yet gentle.

His eyes were 'Clark' eyes.

His hands were 'Clark' hands.

Clark.

The silence was becoming awkward. Looking down on him wasn't comfortable either.

"Would you like to stand up?" Lois asked hesitantly.

He rose to his feet in a lithe movement. Once he was standing, however, all his fluency dropped away. His hands hung by his side as if he didn't know where to put them. His eyes rested on her but seemed poised to rear away if she did anything unexpected.

His height surprised her. She had assumed that his gauntness made him look taller. She hadn't expected him to be four or five inches taller than she was.

He was significantly broader as well. His shoulders were wide, and his chest — what wasn't hidden by the long beard — spoke of the potential for power.

For his age, he was in good condition. If she factored in all the neglect and abuse he had suffered, his physique was incredible.

In difference circumstances, he could have been anything.

He appeared to be scrutinising her just as closely as she was scrutinising him.

Was what Moyne had said true? That Clark hadn't seen a woman in seven years? It seemed likely.

This felt awkward for her. How much more must it be for him?

Someone had to speak.

He was waiting for her. That was understandable. She had come to him. She had come into his place. She had initiated this.

Her inclination was to ask questions. Hundreds of questions, all fired at him with breath-taking swiftness.

But she couldn't do that to him.

If their positions were reversed, what would he say to her?

He would ask if she were OK. He'd torn up strips of paper to ask exactly that when he'd heard her screaming during the night.

"Are you all right?" Lois asked.

His head jolted slightly.

"Does it hurt you to talk?"

"Not m...much."

His voice was scratchy. Jagged. It reminded her of a piece of machinery being coaxed back into operation after years of rusted immobility.

The questions were going to have to wait.

If he had felt able to talk freely, what would he ask?

The answer was obvious.

"I've made inquiries about your parents," Lois said gently.

His eyes widened; he was preparing himself to face the worst of news.

"I haven't heard anything yet," she said. "It might take some time."

He nodded with acceptance, and Lois felt an almost overwhelming need to reach out and touch him. To lightly run her palm down his upper arm.

"As soon as I know anything, I'll tell you."

"Thank you."

What else would he ask?

"Trask is gone," Lois said. "He won't be coming back."

His reaction was remarkably subdued. Perhaps he'd already concluded that. Or perhaps he was not a man to exhibit his hatred openly.

"Moyne has gone."

"You ... you said that ... in the note."

The notes. That reminded Lois of something. "Do you still have the notes that we wrote to each other?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Where are they?"

"In my pocket."

"Would you mind giving them to me, please?"

Something flickered in his eyes. It could have been disappointment. He didn't say anything, but pushed his right hand into his shorts pocket and fumbled for a few seconds. As his hand emerged, a small object fell from his pocket and clattered onto the concrete.

His hand froze.

Apprehension set like a granite mask on his face.

Lois tore her eyes away from him and searched the floor. She saw it — a small bullet. Dented at the end. A *fired* bullet.

It had hit something. What?

She bent low and picked it up. She rolled it between her thumb and fingers and then lifted her eyes to meet his. "Is this the bullet Moyne shot at me?"

Clark nodded.

"Do you know what it hit?"

His eyelids fell shut as if he wished there was a way to avoid her question. When his eyes opened again, he gave her a taut nod.

"Hold out your hands," Lois requested softly.

Clark put forward both of his hands, palms up. Lois took the notes and the now-limp airplane from him and shoved them into her pocket. Being careful not to touch him, she leant slightly forward and examined his hands.

There was a small blemish in the middle of his right palm. If she hadn't been looking for it specifically, she probably wouldn't have noticed it.

She nodded downwards, indicating his hand. "Is that where you caught the bullet?"

His breath hissed, and his eyes dived. "Yes."

Lois — who avoided physical contact whenever possible — thrust both hands into her pockets to restrain the urge to reach for him. Touch him. She yearned to reassure him. To ease away the nervousness so evident in his eyes.

"Clark?"

His head jolted up, and his eyes shot into hers. Fear burned in them. He had paid such an incredibly high price for being different.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you for stopping Moyne from hurting me."

He gulped. Gritty resolve pushed back the fear. "I ... I ... couldn't ... let him ..."

His hands dropped, and he slid them into the pockets of his shorts. He stared at his feet.

Lois figured he was close to the end of his endurance. She could only imagine how difficult this had been for him. She smiled. He probably wouldn't see it, but she hoped he'd hear it in her voice.

"Would you like tea?" she asked. "Or coffee?"

His head rose. "Tea?" he said with gratitude that she knew was in response to far more than her offer of a drink. "Please?"

"I'll make it."

Even as she said the words, Lois realised the problem inherent in her offer. To make the tea, she had to go into the staffroom. To go into the staffroom, she had to either turn her back on Clark or walk backwards — thereby clearly demonstrating that she didn't trust him.

He turned, walked back to his corner, and sat down.

Lois watched him for a second and then turned away and ambled across the cell. At the door, she waved to him.

He lifted his hand a little.

She pushed the chair out of the doorway and shut the door. She

filled the kettle and put it on the stove.

How could a man who had been starved of human interaction for seven years retain the ability to read the uncertainties of others and the grace to respond with such humility?

He always seemed able to anticipate what she needed from him.

She wanted to do the same for him.

Leaving the kettle to heat, Lois ran up the stairs to her office. Mr Kent ... Clark was sitting against the wall, staring forward.

He looked shocked.

He looked as if he had just survived a monumental ordeal.

Perhaps she should have warned him that she intended to come into the cell — given him some time to prepare emotionally.

She had tried to consider this from his viewpoint, but the truth was that she couldn't even imagine how he must feel.

Was he hoping she wouldn't linger when she returned with his tea? Or was he hoping she would?

There was every chance that he was too stunned to know what he wanted.

They had been very kind at the US embassy when she had arrived after a month of being on the run in hostile territory. They had tried to help her ... tried to anticipate her needs ... tried to provide anything she needed. She had wanted to be alone, yet being alone had felt so chillingly remote. She had shrunk away from the company of others; yet their presence had blunted the terror of her darkest memories.

She had found it impossible to give answers to even the simplest of their well-meaning questions.

And that was after weeks of trauma.

Clark's suffering was measured in years.

Lois took the scraps of paper from her pocket. He had kept them. Kept them in his pocket. She was about to rip them to shreds and drop them into the trashcan when she paused. She put them in a compartment in her bag and added the bullet that could have ended her life.

She took the pile of his clothes from the closet and took them down to the staffroom.

The kettle was boiling vigorously.

She made the two cups of tea as her mind replayed her conversation with Clark.

She remembered looking at his hands ... and seeing his fear that she would respond negatively to his admission that he could stop a bullet.

The tea was ready. Should she take the clothes and the tea in together? And then drink her tea in the staffroom so he could change?

That would give them both much-needed time to regain some equilibrium.

Lois opened the door and pulled the chair into the doorway. She picked up his cup of tea and the clothes and crossed the threshold.

Clark was standing next to the back wall.

She smiled as she approached him. It felt awkward, and — as far as she could tell — he didn't respond. When she reached him, she squatted to put the tea on the concrete.

She straightened and smiled again.

He was so still that she wasn't completely sure he was breathing.

With the pile of clothes between her palms, she held them towards him.

His eyes leapt from the clothes to her and then dived back to the clothes. His throat jumped, and she figured he was going to struggle to speak.

Lois took half a step closer. "I'll drink my tea in the staffroom," she said.

"Th ..." He gulped and stopped.

Her emotions erupted inside her. If she didn't get out really soon, she was going to dissolve into a bawling clutter of tears.

She was probably going to do that, anyway.

Lois shoved the clothes into his hands and turned away. She ran to the doorway, pushed the chair away, and slammed the door shut.

She leant against it and wept immense body-shaking sobs.

She wept for her friend, Linda.
 She wept for her father.
 She wept for herself.
 But mostly, she wept for the man on the other side of the door.
 What Trask and Moyné had done to this man was horrendous.

Sickening.

Small excerpts from Trask's log assaulted her mind.

He is an animal.

He killed today.

The beast mauled the broken body of his prey.

Regular discipline sessions are deemed necessary.

The brute is a despicable beast.

His spirit can be broken.

Each memory drove her tears harder. The pressure clutched her stomach and pinched the muscles of her neck.

Clark had suffered so much.

It was a long time before the tide of her emotions began to turn.

Slowly, her resolve overcame her raw fury.

She would *not* allow them to win.

She would stand and fight.

If only she could go back seven years and prevent this from happening.

She couldn't.

She couldn't restore the stolen years.

But she could make a difference now.

She wouldn't rest until Clark had the best life possible.

She wasn't sure what that would entail or how it could be achieved, but she was determined to do it.

Because there was something about Mr Clark Kent that had touched her in a way no other person ever had.

Clark held the clothes in hands that shook.

His head felt as if it was reeling.

His heart felt like a cold, numb clod.

He hadn't expected anything like that.

He'd hoped she would write him a note — perhaps carried by a paper jet.

But she'd walked into his cell. She'd walked right up to him as if she neither saw his differences nor feared them. She'd spoken to him. She'd asked him about the bullet.

Never before in his life had he been so tempted to lie.

He was desperate to hide.

To hide what he'd done.

More importantly, to hide who he was.

Particularly from *her*. He so desperately wanted her to keep liking him.

Well, she didn't *like* him. How could she? But he had been hoping she would continue to tolerate him.

He'd told her the truth. He couldn't lie to her. He just couldn't.

So, he'd admitted to being a freak that could catch a bullet.

And she'd *thanked* him.

There had not been even a hint that it had occurred to her that normal people didn't catch bullets fired from guns.

She hadn't recoiled in disgust.

He knew he must look like something inhuman. He'd admitted to bizarre abilities, and she'd thanked him.

She'd *thanked* him.

Then he heard her.

From the other side of the door came the sound of her weeping — weeping as if her heart was shattering. It enveloped him like a cloak of dismay.

Who had made her cry?

Please, he begged. *Please don't let it be something I did.*

Should he have taken the clothes more quickly?

In the end, she'd had to push them onto him.

Did she think he wasn't appreciative?

He hadn't even managed to thank her.

If she looked into the prison and found him still wearing the old shorts, she was going to be sure that he was an ungrateful ruffian.

Every sob felt like a vice tightening around his heart.

He moved into the corner under the window. He laid the pile on the concrete and then lifted the tee shirt and slipped it over his head. He pulled his hair and beard out from under the shirt and stroked the material.

It was soft.

He didn't feel so exposed.

His eyes fell to the pile.

Briefs?

He gulped.

She had brought him briefs?

Two pairs?

Had she bought these clothes? Personally? Or had she sent someone else to do it?

He didn't know whether he was touched or mortified.

But he was sure of one thing ... she ... *Lois* was the most amazing person he had ever met.

Over an hour passed before Lois felt composed enough to think about going back into the cell.

She had cried until there were no tears left.

Then she had drunk hot, very strong coffee and cleaned away the mass of soggy tissues — running up the stairs to put them in her own trashcan, but not even glancing through the window.

She went to the bathroom and splashed some cold water on her puffy eyes. She dabbed them dry and peered into the mirror. She applied a little makeup and decided that she looked almost human.

What now?

Go back into the cell?

Stay away?

She decided she would go in again. If she stayed away, he would wonder why. She would try not to overwhelm him with questions. She would just try to be there for him. If she just went and sat with him, he could talk if he wanted to ... or be silent if he chose.

She pulled the chair to the door, unlocked it, and opened it. She wedged the chair against the door and looked up.

Her breath jammed in her throat.

Clark was standing against the back wall. He was wearing the clothes she had brought.

He looked ... wow!

Lois walked over to him and smiled. "You look good," she said.

He pushed his hands into the pockets of his shorts and looked down as he dragged his toe across the concrete. "Thanks." He cleared his throat. "Thanks for everything."

"Perhaps we could sit down," she said, hoping to ease him through the awkwardness. "You sometimes sit in the sunshine at this time of the day."

Clark gestured towards the little patch of sunlight on the floor of his cell, and Lois walked over to it.

She lowered herself to the floor, leaving most of the light for him. She folded her legs and hooked them in the ring of her arms.

Clark sat — facing her.

"Are there any questions you'd like to ask?" she said.

He nodded. "Two."

"OK," she said, curiosity searing a path through her brain. "First one."

"Was it something I did that made you cry?"

Lois felt her mouth fall open. She knew she was staring dumbly, but she couldn't get beyond her surprise at his question.

His eyes were fixed on his hand, which was draped over his arched knee. He must be continually fighting the compulsion to hide. She was staggered at how often he had managed to meet her eyes.

"It wasn't you," she said softly and sincerely.

He looked up. "It wasn't?"

She shook her head. "No," she said firmly. "It wasn't you."

Some of the anxiety faded from his eyes.
 Had he been worrying about that?
 Suddenly, she knew his second question. “And when I screamed the other night, that wasn’t anything you did either.”
 More anxiety ebbed away.
 Trask had called him a monster.
 Did Clark believe that? Had he internalised all the lies they had told him?
 “It wasn’t you,” she repeated with emphasis. “Was that your second question?”
 “No,” he said, although the word got lost somewhere and was never quite vocalised.
 “What’s your other question?”
 He took a moment before speaking. “Why did you take the notes?”
 Lois hesitated. There was a long answer and a short answer.
 “Because, in my job, it’s a good idea not to leave anything behind that could be used against you if it got into the wrong hands.” She saw his look of confusion. “And I don’t mean yours.”
 He didn’t respond for a moment, and then a glimmer of insight lit his brown eyes. “Do you want me to change back into the other shorts whenever someone else opens the door?”
 Lois smiled at the ease with which he had understood. “I can probably justify a few clothes,” she said.
 “Can you justify coming in here?”
 “No,” she said. She smiled to soften her reply. “No, I can’t. But if no one knows, there isn’t going to be a problem.”
 “Will you get into trouble if they find out?”
 “Not trouble exactly,” she said. “I’m just being careful. It becomes a habit after a few years.” Not for anything was she going to tell Clark that the most likely form of ‘trouble’ would involve her being removed from this operation.
 “Are you worried about someone coming and catching you in here?”
 “I’m listening,” Lois said. “The outside door creaks. I’m hoping I’ll hear it and be able to get back into the staffroom before anyone realises.”
 “I’m listening, too.”
 She smiled. “Thanks.”
 “You shouldn’t do anything that might cause you trouble.”
 The remnant of her tears huddled again for another assault on her emotions. She smiled, hoping he wouldn’t notice the dampness in her eyes. “I’ll be fine. You don’t need to worry about it.” But somehow, she thought he probably would worry — not for himself, but for her.
 Silence fell again. Lois took the opportunity to study him — although she tried not to be too obvious. She had the feeling he was doing exactly the same.
 It was possible he was a few years younger than she had surmised. The skin around his eyes was smooth — perhaps the lack of sunlight had been good for that, at least. Dark lashes framed his brown eyes — eyes that kept drawing her back to them. In them, she could see so much — pain certainly, but tenacity and resolve, too ... as if they had encapsulated the ravages of his battle.
 His lips were no longer chafed and rough. His teeth were nothing short of a miracle — they carried no hint of the years of neglect.
 “They told me that you don’t talk,” Lois said.
 She knew immediately that it had been the wrong thing to say. His face closed.
 “I guess that was just another one of their lies,” she said.
 His eyes shot into hers. “You don’t believe them?”
 “No,” Lois said before her agent training could step in and smother her declaration.
 His mouth opened, only to close again. He had wanted to ask something. She needed to try to guess what he was thinking.
 “What happened to those two men?” she asked gently. “The two men who died in here?”
 “Didn’t they tell you?”
 “I’m asking you.”

“Moynes killed them.”
 Lois let out a long breath. This was a major fork in the road of their association. If he was an alien with plans for escape and slaughter, admitting she believed him over the word of other humans was going to be a huge fillip to his plans. But if she said she wasn’t sure, it was going to crush him. And he had already been crushed so much. Her gut was screaming at her — crying out with clenched-fisted-red-faced-insistent screams. She obeyed. “That’s what I figured happened,” she said.
 Clark’s eyes closed, and his throat wobbled tremulously. He needed some time alone.
 Lois stood. “I’ll be back soon with supper,” she said. She walked out of the cell as her tears rose again.

 Clark slumped against the wall, unable to believe that after all he had suffered, the thing that was coming closest to bringing him completely undone was not the beatings, not the hours and hours of lying in pain and wondering if, this time, he was going to die, not the days of hunger and thirst, not the hatred so evident in the jailers as they had beaten him ... but a beautiful woman saying she believed that he wasn’t a killer.
 She didn’t think he had killed anyone.
 She believed him.
 Lois believed him.
 She didn’t know him. They must have told her awful incriminatory things about him ... but she believed him.
 He’d been petrified when the bullet had fallen from his pocket. Her presence had made him so nervous that it had been difficult to stop his hand from shaking as he’d tried to retrieve the pieces of paper. Then, the bullet had hit the concrete, and he’d known that she would know.
 She would know that he was different.
 Alien.
 Someone to be feared.
 Shunned.
 Hated.
 Despised.
 But ... she had thanked him.
 He scrunched his eyes shut, but it was in vain. His tears flowed ... flooding down his cheeks and soaking his beard.
 He turned away, towards the wall, away from Lois — and wept.

 Lois locked the door to the cell. That way, before she went in, she had to unlock it, giving Clark notice that she was coming.
 She climbed the stairs, her steps slow and heavy. At the top, instead of going into her office, she slumped onto the top step and leant back against the wall.
 She felt like a dry rag that had had every possible drop of moisture squeezed from it. But the avalanche of tears had washed away some of the grime that had clogged her heart since she’d abandoned Linda’s dead body and made her dash for freedom.
 Lois felt as if she could sleep for a week.
 But in the oppressive exhaustion, there was a quickening of hope — hope that sleep would usher in a new dawn on a world that was no longer completely shadowed in darkness.
 Sleep wasn’t possible now, and Lois needed to pull herself together.
 He’d already shown his dismay at her distress.
 If he was — as she assumed — a bachelor, he might not have had a whole lot to do with women. He hadn’t had any contact with people — not of a good sort — for seven years. No matter how distraught she felt because of his situation, he needed her to be calm and in control.
 He definitely didn’t need her dissolving into an emotional mess every time she went into his cell.
 No wonder he’d thought he had caused her tears.
 In a way, he had.
 One thing she could give him was calm composure.

Some semblance of normalcy.
 She had half an hour to settle herself.
 Lois hauled herself to her feet and entered her office. Out of habit, she looked through the window.
 Clark was hunched into the wall.
 His shoulders were shaking.
 Her eyes skidded through the cell, searching frantically for a rod.
 There was nothing.
 Then she realised.
 This time, his pain wasn't physical.
 Within her rose a swell of empathy and an urgent longing to fly down the stairs, storm into the cell, and surround him with her arms. To hold him while he wept. To comfort him. To pledge to him that his fight had become her fight, too.

She wanted to ... but what would he want? What did he need?
 Probably privacy, she realised.
 And, if she went to him, he would almost certainly feel compelled to try to control the release of his anguish.
 She would probably embarrass him.
 Like her, he would probably feel better if his tears ran their course.
 Lois turned away from him and went back to the staffroom.
 Privacy was another gift she could give him.
 And it was one that probably meant more to him that she could ever imagine.

Part 7

By the time Uncle Mike's delivery boy handed Lois the two meals, she had settled on her plan for the evening ahead.

After a chain of thoughts that had coiled in an ever-tightening loop, she had concluded that making Clark uncomfortable by being with him was preferable to leaving him in solitude to ponder why she preferred to stay away. She was hoping to stay for at least an hour — longer if he seemed to be adjusting having company.

She knew it was going to be harrowing for him. Her initial thoughts about entering the cell had centred on her own safety. Gradually, her focus had shifted from herself and to him — so much so that when she had finally stepped in, she had done so with a partial understanding that it wasn't going to be easy for either of them.

But now that she had glimpsed the destruction wreaked by Trask's brutality, she'd realised that, for Clark, recovery was going to be just as gruelling as survival had been.

She hoped she would know what to do to help him. To know when to gently push and when to retreat.

This evening, she intended to push by going into his cell with two meals. She'd decided not to ask him if it were OK for her to eat with him. Sometimes — when your brain felt like it was being inundated with new and unfamiliar circumstances — being asked just made everything harder. Sometimes, being told was such sweet relief.

As she carried the containers back to the compound, Lois was aware that another telling moment loomed. She was going to take a meal into the cell to Clark — with a knife and fork.

It would only be a butter knife, but it was still a knife.

Lois foraged through her feelings in search of any uneasiness — any possible squeak of dissent from her gut. She found none.

There was something about Clark Kent.

Something that reassured her.

Something that steadied her.

She was confident that she could go into the cell with an entire cutlery tray of knives and be perfectly safe.

The external door creaked as she opened it. In the staffroom, she placed two knives, two forks, and a bunch of napkins on the top container and unlocked the cell door.

She deliberately paused. They needed a signal. She didn't want to go into the cell at an ill-timed moment. And it couldn't be ideal for Clark's peace of mind to be constantly listening in case she was about to appear.

Having waited a few seconds, Lois opened the door. Clark was sitting in his place against the back wall.

"Are you ready for supper?" she called.

He got to his feet — diffidence cloaking him like a mantle of misgiving.

Yep, this was going to tough. He'd had time to think about it. Time to let his apprehension permeate through him like yeast through dough.

Lois lodged the chair in the doorway and crossed the cell. She reached Clark and smiled. "Hungry?"

He nodded.

She picked up one knife, one fork, and about half of the napkins and held them towards him.

He looked up, his eyes ablaze with questions.

"Take them," Lois said.

"Are you s...sure?"

She heard the tiny wobble in his voice and saw his desperate attempt to cover it. "I'm sure," she said, saturating her words with calm assurance in the hope that some of it would reach across the divide between them and light his way through this.

He clasped the little bundle.

Their eyes made contact, and she smiled. *We can do this*, she telegraphed. She held one of the containers towards him.

He took it and waited for her to determine what they did next.

She lowered herself to the floor. Clark copied her, and they sat side by side on the concrete.

"I don't know what we have," Lois commented. "I haven't looked yet." She pulled back the lid to reveal breaded fillets, creamy mashed potatoes, broccoli florets, and sliced green beans.

Clark opened his container and placed the lid on the floor.

"Do you think the fillets are chicken or fish?" she asked conversationally.

He gazed into the container for a few seconds. "Chicken," he said. It sounded more like knowledge than speculation.

Lois put her container on the floor and cut a piece from the end of the fillet. She held it up to examine it. "You're right," she said. "It's chicken." She cut up the fillets into bite-sized pieces and then discarded her knife, picked up the container, and began to eat with her fork.

Clark put his container on the floor and did likewise.

He speared a piece of chicken and dunked it into the mountain of potato. "Did ... did you cook this?" he asked.

Lois laughed loudly. "Me?" she exclaimed. "No, I can't cook."

Her laughter had cinched tension through his shoulder muscles, but they relaxed again at her explanation. "You can't cook?" he asked in a soft voice that held no hint of reproof.

"Nope," she said easily. "Uncle Mike — he owns the restaurant that provided our meals — has been offering to teach me for years, but I've never had either the time or the inclination."

"I ... can ..." His fork paused on the way to his mouth. "I ... thank you ... for the food." He captured her eyes again. His words were simple and understated. The depth of his gratitude was not.

Lois dropped her gaze to her food. "Which meal did you like the best?"

"Probably the first one," he said.

"The chicken and vegetables?"

He nodded. "Just because it was the first."

The first in such a long time.

Neither of them said it, but Lois figured they were both thinking it.

Lois chewed slowly as she contemplated her next question. It was slightly precarious, but she decided to ask anyway. "Is there any food you really, really miss? Any particular food you crave?"

She could see that he had an answer but wasn't sure about saying it.

"Go on, Clark," Lois prompted with a small chuckle. "Tell me."

"I ..."

"You what?"

"I like it when you say my name."

He'd done it again — touched her with his words. "You haven't

called me by my name yet,” she pointed out.

“I don’t know your surname.”

“If I tell you what it is, will you call me ‘Ms’?”

Her question had stumped him. “Ah . . . yes?”

“Then I won’t tell you,” she declared with a smile.

“You want me to call you . . .”

She pointed her fork at him and laughed. “You have forgotten my name, haven’t you?”

“No,” he said solemnly. “I will never forget your name.”

Clark’s earnestness nearly undid all of her resolutions to keep her emotions under control when she was with him. “Prove it,” she challenged.

“Lois.”

He said her name with such utter softness that something stupid happened to her heart. Lois put all of her concentration into stabbing multiple green beans. She shovelled them into her mouth and told herself that whatever had just happened had everything to do with her heightened emotional state and nothing to do with the man sitting next to her on a concrete floor. “You never told me what food you’d really like,” she said after she’d swallowed.

“Why do you want to know?”

That was easier. “Well, if it’s something exotic, I can’t make any promises, but Uncle Mike can usually provide just about anything.”

“Apple pie.”

She chuckled. That was so unexpected but so exactly right. “Apple pie,” she repeated. “With whipped cream or ice cream?”

He hadn’t finished his meal, but he put the container on the floor.

“I . . . I shouldn’t have said that,” he said in a voice infused with regret.

“Why not?” Lois said with equal gravity.

Clark shrugged and stared at where he was listlessly pushing his fork into a piece of broccoli.

“I can guess,” Lois said gently.

He didn’t say anything.

“I figure it’s because someone you love used to make you apple pie. Or you once ate apple pie with someone special. And — much as you love the food — you’re not sure if the pain of remembering will be worth it.”

Clark was still for a long minute. She heard him clear his throat.

“How do you know?” he asked thickly.

“Because I love pizza,” Lois replied. She brushed at the moisture drizzling from the corner of her eye. “But I can’t eat it. There are days when I figure I’ll never eat pizza again.”

His eyes slowly rose. She could see the questions burning in them. He didn’t ask. He just picked up his container and continued eating.

“Can I ask a personal question?” Lois said.

He nodded.

“Was it your wife who made you apple pie?”

He gasped with surprise at her question, but Lois wasn’t sure if it signified more than the obvious fact that he’d hardly been in a position to be married for the last seven years. “No,” he said.

“Never married?”

“No.” So, the apple pie maker was probably his mom.

Clark stared at his last piece of chicken. “Are you?” he muttered.

“No.”

Lois placed her fork in her empty container, picked up a napkin, and wiped her mouth. Clark did the same, carefully wiping his dark beard — although he hadn’t spilt any food in it.

“Does that get in the way when you’re eating?” Lois asked.

“Yes,” he said, scrubbing even harder. “But, until now, it hasn’t mattered.”

“You didn’t drop any food in it,” Lois told him.

He looked relieved and wiped his mouth.

“Would you like tea?” she asked. “Or coffee?”

“Tea, please.” He put the cutlery and used napkins into the containers and stood up. When Lois was standing, he gave them to her. “Thank you,” he said. “And not just for the food.”

Lois gave him a quick smile and took the containers. “I’ll be back

with the tea.”

She walked to the door. He didn’t follow.

Lois put the kettle on the stove and took the trash from their meal to her office. She picked up the jigsaw puzzle. She intended to go back into Clark’s cell, and — just like at the nursing home — they would need something to do. Something to smooth over the silences.

The jigsaw puzzle picture was of a double-storey house with a wide porch, a thatched roof, a lush lawn, and colourful — if slightly rambling — garden beds. Would this be OK? Clark had come from Kansas. Lois had never been to Kansas. What had his home looked like? This? She checked the back. This house was in the Cotswolds in

England. Hopefully, it would be all right.

Lois paused as an idea lit up her imagination. She decided not to invest any time into debating its merits.

She was just going to do it.

She hauled her camp mattress out from under her desk, gathered Trask’s mattress from the top of his pile of boxes, and juggled them well enough to be able to pick up the jigsaw puzzle box. She lumbered down the stairs and dragged them into the cell.

She approached Clark who was looking askance at the camp mattresses. She thrust the box at him. “Do you like doing jigsaw puzzles?” she asked.

He took the box and glanced at it absently, still eyeing the mattresses.

Hopefully, his lack of reaction to the photograph meant that the English house didn’t elicit any negative emotions.

“We have a couple of hours to fill before Longford comes. I’m not sure I want to sit on the concrete much longer.” Lois smiled. “And it seemed a bit rude to only bring a mattress for myself.” She dropped them onto the floor. “Do you want to lay out some sheets of newspaper for the puzzle and set up the mattresses next to them?”

Clark nodded.

“I’ll be back with the tea.”

The kettle hadn’t boiled yet. She skipped up to her office to collect the pillows and the block of chocolate she had stashed in her desk drawer.

Coming down the stairs, she refused to admit that this felt exactly like a scout camp-out.

It was going to be fun.

Other than the paper-plane-flying episode, there had not been even a whisper of fun in her life since the fateful night when she and Linda had decided to trust the wrong person.

As for Clark — ‘fun’ had probably vanished from his vocabulary a long time ago.

Lois took the pillows into the cell, dumped them on the floor, and scurried to the staffroom for the tea and chocolate without stopping to linger on Clark’s stunned expression.

When she returned, he’d recovered enough that the mattresses were stretched out at right angles next to the sheets of newspaper. Lois grinned at him. “Good job,” she said.

She put the mugs on the floor next to the two mattresses and plonked herself down, intentionally choosing Trask’s mattress.

A few minutes later, the jigsaw box was open, and the first few pieces scattered on the paper. Lois peeled back the wrapper from the chocolate and held it towards Clark. “Want some?” she said.

His eyes dropped to the chocolate and then rose. By the time they reached her face, a half-formed smile had split his beard.

He was smiling.

Clark was smiling.

His beard limited her view, but Lois felt a surge of excitement sweep through her.

She answered his smile, hoping it would encourage him to extend his smile just a little more.

He did.

She laughed.

She just couldn’t help it.

He looked a bit bashful, and Lois controlled her laughter. “Help yourself to the chocolate,” she said. “And please do it before I eat it all.”

He took some and slipped it into his mouth.

Lois broke off a piece, too and then turned her attention to the puzzle. “Are you an ‘edge’ person?” she asked. “Or a ‘sky’ person? Or a ‘most distinctive feature’ person?”

“Sky,” he replied, reaching for a blue puzzle piece.

Yeah, he probably yearned for the blue expanse of sky. Lois sipped from her tea ... waiting ... giving him the opportunity to say something ... anything.

He didn’t.

“I’ll push all the sky bits in your direction,” she said as she replaced her cup on the concrete. “I’m going to start with this crimson rose bush.”

“OK.”

They worked for a time — the quietness only broken by occasional comments regarding the jigsaw puzzle or a quick word of congratulation when a piece found its place.

Lois’s attention was only three-quarters on the puzzle.

Surreptitiously, she watched Clark. There were little signs that he was slowly unwinding. There was the chocolate. She’d felt like dancing with celebration the first time he’d cautiously reached for the chocolate and broken off a piece without her specifically offering him some. And there was the puzzle. He seemed to be absorbed in it ... Perhaps, just for a short time, he could forget that he was locked in a cell.

“Clark?”

“Uhhh?”

“We need some sort of a signal.”

“Uhhh.”

Lois rotated a piece one-hundred-eighty degrees in an effort to make it fit. “How does this sound?” she said. “If — for whatever reason — it’s not convenient for me to come into your room, you take the box containing the toothpaste and soap away from the door? I’ll open the door a few inches, and if I see the box right there, I’ll know it’s all right to come in.”

“OK.”

Lois grabbed Trask’s pillow, swung onto her stomach, pushed the pillow under her arms, and rested on her elbows. She scanned the pieces, looking for one where the deep red of the rosebush met the lush green of the lawn.

She saw a piece that was a possibility and swooped on it.

Clark’s fingers arrived a millisecond before hers did, and they clashed. His hand jolted back as if he’d been stung. “Sorry,” he said quickly.

Lois picked up the piece and offered it to him with a smile. “Is this the piece you wanted?”

“I was going to give it to you,” he said. “I think it fits into the part you’re working on.”

“Thanks,” Lois said. She slipped the piece into its place and pressed it home. She looked up at Clark with another smile. “Good job.”

He responded with a ripple of movement through his facial hair. Shadbolt had said that Clark had been clean-shaven when he’d been captured. Did he like the beard? Or would he get rid of it if he could?

His attention returned to his steadily growing expanse of sky.

Lois picked up a piece of green and absently tried to fit it into the lawn. In her mind, she replayed the moment when her fingers had brushed against his.

He’d pulled back. Apologised immediately.

How would it feel to have been starved of touch for so long?

The effects of what they’d done to him had gone so very deep.

Was he wary of touching her?

Or did he assume that she didn’t want to touch him?

Lois gave up on the piece and swung to a sitting position. “Clark?”

He also put down his piece and looked up at her.

She smiled. “I’m trying to understand how extremely difficult this must be for you, but I need your help to know how best to do this.”

He nodded, and his eyes met hers for a moment before dropping back to the puzzle.

“I know it was really hard for you to admit that you had caught the bullet, and I think I understand why. I want you to know that I appreciate your honesty.”

His eyes rose cautiously. “I wouldn’t ... I wouldn’t lie to you.”

Lois smiled. “I know,” she said. “I’m not talking about lying; I’m talking about trying so hard to do what someone else wants that you don’t think about what you want.”

He seemed to understand. He nodded slightly.

“I’d like to come in here again tomorrow. I’d like to keep doing the puzzle with you, and I have other ideas, but I don’t want to push too hard. If I go too fast, I need you to tell me to slow down. If you need some time alone, I want you to tell me.”

“I’ve had a lot of time to be alone.”

“I know,” she said softly. “But I want you to know that we can take this at exactly the speed you need us to.”

Clark looked down to where his right hand was clenched around his left. “How long will you be here?” he asked. “Days? Weeks? Longer?”

“I’ll be here for as long as it takes to work out something better for you than what you’ve had.”

“You’ve done that already,” he said, and his voice shook.

“I haven’t finished yet.”

His clenched fist pressed against his mouth, and his eyes slid shut.

Lois waited, wishing she had a wand she could wave over him, magically healing all of his hurts.

His hand dropped, and his eyes opened. “You say that we can take this at exactly the speed I need, but I don’t know what you mean by ‘this’.”

Lois smiled sadly. “The truth is that I don’t know exactly either,” she admitted. “That’s why I need your input. I need to know what helps and what doesn’t. If there’s a day when you need to be alone and take stock of what’s happening, just tell me to stay away.”

“I can’t ever imagine doing that,” he said.

Lois chuckled.

His brown eyes pulsed gently into hers. “Are there people who don’t agree with what you’re doing?”

She had to be honest. “Yes.”

“And you’re worried that if anyone finds out that you’ve come in here, they’ll force you to leave?”

“Yeah,” Lois said, wishing that he wasn’t quite so perceptive.

“I won’t say anything,” Clark vowed. “Whatever they do, I will never say anything.”

She couldn’t dwell on the ‘whatever they do’. She was sure that, for Clark, that phrase came with graphic images. “It won’t come to that.”

He didn’t reply.

“There’s a lot I don’t know,” Lois said. “I’ve been told that Moyne has friends in high places. I have to be cautious. That’s why I haven’t pestered them more about your parents.”

“I understand.”

She smiled, hoping to disperse the gloominess that had crept into the cell. “We have made a few small steps of progress. The big steps might require more time.”

“The ‘small’ steps seem enormous to me.”

She had done so little — food, water, clothing. Just everyday items. Her tears threatened again, and she pushed through them to give him another smile. “How do you feel about Winnie the Pooh?” she asked.

“Excuse me?”

Lois giggled, easing the build-up of emotional pressure around her heart. “Would you mind using a Winnie the Pooh sleeping bag?”

His eyebrow raised just enough to suggest a speck of amusement. “Pooh Bear is definitely preferable to bare concrete.”

Lois smiled. “I’ll leave my camp mattress and pillow here and go and get the sleeping bag. You can decide where you’d like to set up.”

“Is this going to cause a problem?”

“It shouldn’t.”

“I’ve slept on concrete for seven years,” Clark said without a trace of self-pity. “It’s not worth risking problems.”

But *he* was. He was definitely worth the risk. “I’ll take these other things away and bring back my sleeping bag,” Lois said. She picked up Trask’s camp mattress and pillow.

“Whose are they?” Clark asked.

“Trask’s,” Lois said coldly. “You’re not having them.”

Her tone caused Clark to shrink back.

“I don’t want anything associated with that man coming near you again.”

Clark gaped at her as if she had just crossed the line from implausible to unbelievable.

Lois winked at him. “I’m sure that sleeping with his stuff would give you nightmares,” she said lightly as she turned towards the door.

In the staffroom, she shut the cell door — just in case Longford arrived early again — but didn’t lock it. She hauled Trask’s bedding up the stairs and threw it onto the pile of his boxes. She bent low to retrieve her sleeping bag from under the desk and glanced through the window.

Clark was still sitting next to the unfinished jigsaw puzzle. Her pillow was on his lap. His hand was resting on her pillow, and the side of his thumb was absently gliding across it.

Lois set the camera to begin recording at six o’clock tomorrow morning and locked the closet. She emptied her trashcan into a plastic bag, put it in her bag, and quickly tidied her desk.

The next time she looked, Clark was positioning the camp mattress against the back wall.

She locked her office and went down to the staffroom with her sleeping bag. Poking her head into the cell, she called, “This is for you.” She tossed it towards him.

“Thanks.”

Lois filled his washing bowl with hot water and took it into the cell. Clark was standing next to his ‘bed’. She stood beside him, and they gazed at it together. “Looks good,” she said.

He turned to her, and suddenly, they were only a few inches apart.

His eyes settled in hers. “Lois ...”

She knew what he was going to try to say. And right now, she couldn’t take it. She would burst into tears, and that would upset both of them.

“Clark.” She interrupted before he had the chance to form his words. “I need to take the chocolate with me, just in case one of the others sees it.”

“OK,” he said.

“I understand,” she murmured.

“Thank you,” he murmured back.

She broke away from the invisible bonds that were holding them together and gathered up the chocolate.

“Are you leaving the puzzle here?” Clark asked.

Lois nodded. “You can keep working on it if you want to.” She pointed to the bowl near the door. “I’ve left you some water. I’ll be in the staffroom. If you knock on the door after you’ve finished, I’ll know I can come and collect the bowl.”

“OK.”

“See you tomorrow, Clark,” she said lightly.

“See you,” he replied.

Suddenly, she had to get out. She hurried to the door and shut it behind her. She turned on the coffee machine and began making the coffee — not because she wanted coffee, but because she needed something to do.

Had she done the right thing?

Had she gone too far?

Would she be able to complete what she had started today?

She had to. For Clark’s sake, she had to.

It was so hard to believe that she had walked into the cell only a few hours ago. Walked in and faced a stranger.

Tonight, she had walked out on a ...

A what?

He was more than an acquaintance.

Tonight ... just minutes ago ... when they had stood together ... their closeness had seemed to transcend the tangible.

When ... if ...

She had realised that when the time came for her to leave, it was going to be difficult for Clark.

But Clark wasn’t going to be the only one affected.

She was going to be devastated.

She couldn’t leave him.

She couldn’t leave him.

Until now, she had thought that she could walk away, content in the knowledge that she had made a difference ... that she had righted some of the wrongs inflicted by Trask.

Until this morning, she had been working towards obtaining the best life possible for Clark.

How wrong she had been.

Even if she did manage to secure a reasonable life for him — safety, dignity, provision of his needs — even then, she wouldn’t be able to walk away knowing he was still imprisoned.

She couldn’t leave unless he did.

And she had no intention of spending the rest of her days in a compound behind a warehouse on Bessolo Boulevard.

This was no longer about making prison bearable.

This had become about preparing him for the outside world.

And getting him out.

Legally, if possible.

Or otherwise, if not.

Clark lay on the mattress.

His head was on a pillow.

Her pillow.

He’d awoken this morning, not knowing that his entire world was going to be turned upside down by a beautiful woman with mesmerising brown eyes and a laugh that was the sweetest sound he had ever heard.

The mattress felt strange.

The sleeping bag — Winnie the Pooh, no less — felt weighty.

The pillow pressed into his cheek.

It felt weird not to have to use his arms as support for his head. He couldn’t find a position for them that felt natural.

He wasn’t tired.

That was good.

He didn’t want to sleep.

He wanted to think. To relive. To dwell. To experience again every second he had spent with Lois. Once simply wasn’t enough.

He’d awoken this morning with anticipation. Hoping that ...

maybe ... she would come into his cell and fly planes with him again.

They hadn’t flown planes. The one he had made was still hidden under one of the newspapers.

But they had talked. They had eaten. They had shared the jigsaw puzzle.

They had smiled.

She had smiled more than he had.

And he treasured every single smile she’d given him.

He’d wanted to smile but it had felt so awkward that he had wondered if the result had looked like a grimace. And he’d known that even if he did manage to smile, it would be mostly covered by his beard.

He had been so nervous that his stomach had felt like tangled knots of turbulence.

He’d been so scared that he would say something to frighten her away.

Or do something that caused her to make a quick excuse and hurry

back to her world.

The day was brimming with highlights, but one . . . one he hugged close to his heart and replayed over, and over, and over again.

See you tomorrow, Clark.

She'd said, "See you tomorrow, Clark."

She was coming back.

Lois was coming back.

That was enough to wrap his heart in a soft blanket of anticipation.

What would they do? Continue with the jigsaw puzzle?

Whatever she did, whatever she brought, Clark doubted she would be able to exceed what she'd done for him today.

He'd been careful not to touch her. And he'd noticed that she hadn't touched him. Except for when their fingers had lunged for the same piece of jigsaw.

He'd apologised quickly.

She hadn't seemed perturbed at all.

His throat felt dry and raspy. He'd managed to speak without too many squeaks. He had been so worried that the first time he tried to speak to her, nothing would come out. Or worse, that he would make an inhuman grunt.

The muscles of his jaw felt a little achy. But it was such a good soreness.

The best gift she had given him was not the food, not the bedding, not even the clothes. The best gift was how she had treated him as if he were just a regular guy. Not a monster. Not a killer. Not an alien. Not a prisoner. Not an animal. Just someone to hang out with.

Someone to share chocolate with.

She'd been so careful to show him respect. So careful not to intrude.

See you tomorrow, Clark.

Part 8

~~ Monday ~~

Lois had a wonderful morning.

She visited her dad, arriving in his room just as Ronny finished combing his hair. He was in his wheelchair, dressed in one of the sweatsuits Lois had brought for him.

"Ms Lane," Ronny greeted with a wide smile. "Just in time to see how wonderful your father looks this morning."

He did. Ronny had been right — getting him out of his bed and dressing him made him look more like a person and less like a patient.

Lois hugged him — and she didn't have to pretend to smile. When she saw the doggy stress ball in his right hand, her smile widened further.

Ronny tidied up the few things she had been using and left with a cheerful directive for them to enjoy their visit.

Lois positioned a chair next to her father. "You look great, Dad," she said.

He wasn't looking at her — he was looking at his hand. She followed his gaze and saw his fingers tighten around the stress ball. As he did, the bulldog's face bulged grotesquely, and Lois laughed.

The sound startled both of them. Lois met her dad's eyes, and she smiled. "Do it again, Dad," she encouraged.

He did.

When his hold loosened, Lois rotated the dog so her father would be able to see its distended face. He squeezed again, and Lois's eyes jumped to his face to see his reaction.

The right side of his mouth twitched, and his eyes rose slowly from the dog to meet those of his daughter.

You seem happy this morning.

He hadn't said it, but Lois felt it.

"I am happy," she said, realising it was true. She felt good.

Buoyant. As if she had managed to rise above the dark turbidity of hopelessness to find both air and light. After so long, it felt intoxicating. "I had a great day yesterday," she continued. "Things are settling in my new job, and I really enjoy it. I'm getting to know the people there, and one man is particularly nice. We ate dinner together last night."

There could have been interest in her father's face. His right hand — still holding the stress ball — lifted slowly and swung horizontally for a few inches before collapsing onto the tray of his wheelchair.

Lois wasn't sure if it had been an involuntary movement, or if he had been trying to communicate something and his arm had lost strength. She paused, unsure how to respond.

He repeated the action. This time she was sure it was deliberate.

Suddenly, she understood.

She grinned at him. "The paper planes, right? You want to know if we crashed them again?"

He blinked. Was that how he said 'yes'? The first time she had visited the nursing home, they had told her so much. She had met with a variety of specialists, and one had spoken about forms of communication other than speech, but Lois had been too numb to take in anything.

"We didn't fly them," she said. "Actually, that was my fault. The nice man went to a lot of effort to make an elaborate plane, and I think it would have flown like a bird. But I wanted to do a jigsaw puzzle, so we did that instead."

Her dad seemed to be listening.

Lois delved back through her memories to her childhood. She had done jigsaw puzzles with her dad. Mom and Lucy had despised them; they'd never had the patience, and at times, Lois had found them tedious, too. But her dad had enjoyed them, and Lois had enjoyed being with him.

An idea floated into her mind and settled like a falling snowflake. Maybe . . .

"I have to go into work early today, Dad," Lois said. "One of the men who used to work at the place died, and I didn't know him, so I'm going to work while the others attend the funeral. I'll try to remember to bring the plane the nice man made so I can show you."

She told him about her lunch with Uncle Mike yesterday. Which led to the chicken fillet dinner. Which — in her thoughts — led to Clark.

She told her father she'd had to spend a night at work. Which led to the camp mattress. Which led to recalling a father-and-daughter scout camp they had attended together. Which led to the Winnie the Pooh sleeping bag. Which — in her thoughts — led to Clark.

Lois checked the time and was stunned that over half an hour had passed. "I have to go," she said with genuine regret. "I'll be back tomorrow," she said. She stood, kissed his cheek, and smiled. "I love you, Dad."

His hand tightened around the stress ball, and Lois was smiling as she left his room.

She drove to the department store.

Overnight, the ideas had rolled into her head like waves on a surf beach. Things she could give Clark. Things she could do for him. Things they could do together. Ways to ease the world into his room to prepare him for life outside again.

She didn't intend to implement all of her ideas today. This was going to take time. Despite him appearing astonishingly normal, seven years of suffering had to have wreaked untold damage. She had to remember that.

She was going to have to be patient, and patience had never been her strong point.

However, this wasn't about her — this was about Clark.

Lois trekked through the various departments, gathering an odd assortment of things that included a tennis racquet that was bigger and heavier than hers, a tin of white paint, and a wall mirror. As she added each item to the cart, her excitement inched a notch higher.

This was going to be fun.

Patience, she reminded herself as she stowed them in the Jeep. Don't kill him with kindness.

But if anyone deserved an attempt made on his life with kindness, it was Clark Kent.

She kept telling herself it was entirely possible that Clark would be withdrawn today — that he would need time to recover from the

upheaval of yesterday. But all of her caution couldn't dampen one plan in particular — one plan that she so, so, so, soooooo hoped they would be able to do today.

Lois figured this particular idea would push the boundaries of Clark's comfort zone, but she was hoping he would trust her enough to allow her to do it.

But if he really didn't want to, she would accept that.

She would.

Even if her impatience jangled frenetically on the very edge of detonation.

She would wait for him. She would give him all the time he needed.

Because what he needed more anything else was the chance to exert some control over his own life.

And she was going to give him that.

"Good morning, Shadbolt."

"Good morning, Ms Lane."

"Is everything OK?"

"Yeah. Longford and I gave him breakfast and a bowl of hot water at six."

"Did he seem OK?"

"Yeah ... although ..."

Lois halted her progress to the coffee machine — empty mug in her hand — and looked at him. She might as well get this over with now. "Although?"

"There seems to have been some changes in the cage."

"Oh. Such as?"

"He has a bed."

"A bed?"

"A mattress. A pillow."

Lois smiled. "He used them? Oh, good. I wondered if he would."

"You put them in the cage?"

"Yeah." Lois casually poured her coffee. "Anything else to report?"

"There seems to be something else in there."

"Any idea what?" Lois said. "I haven't been up to my office yet."

"It looks like a jigsaw puzzle."

Lois smile widened. "So he got that as well? Wonderful." She opened the fridge and took out the milk. "Anything else?"

"He's dressed."

She paused, her hand on the fridge door, her expression one of puzzlement that he would comment on something so fundamental.

Shadbolt shook his head. "I'm not sure about this."

Lois pushed the fridge door, and it thudded shut. "I know," she said as she poured milk into her coffee. She lifted her gaze to centre on the man sitting at the table. "But are you disconcerted because you really think he's going to be a threat to your safety? Or are you disconcerted because you've realised that the way things were done around here violates just about every human right our country holds as important?"

Shadbolt shuffled in his seat and stared at his magazine. "Trask said he wasn't human."

"And you believed him."

"I've seen the alien do things that aren't human."

"I've seen humans do things that aren't human."

Shadbolt tossed his magazine onto the table and scowled at it.

Lois sat down. "Can I ask you something?"

"OK."

She took a breath and tried to prepare herself for an assault of horror. "What surgery did you do on the prisoner?"

Shadbolt's jaw dropped. "Excuse me?"

"The surgery you and Moyne did? What did it entail?"

Shadbolt shook his head. "I didn't do any surgery," he stated.

"Are you sure?" Lois said. "In Trask's log, there's an entry that says you and Moyne did some sort of surgery on the prisoner."

Shadbolt shook his head again. "I didn't," he said emphatically.

Lois stood. "Wait here." A minute later, she returned to the staffroom and pushed the open logbook across the table.

March 1, 1988

Today, I strengthened my position over the enemy. We exposed him to the Achilles for a full twelve hours overnight, leaving him weak and defenceless this morning. The surgery was performed by Moyne and Shadbolt.

Some of the colour faded from Shadbolt's cheeks as he read. "This ... this didn't happen," he said, pointing to the entry. "I wasn't involved in any surgery."

"Could it have been a procedure that you don't think of as surgery, but Trask did?"

"No," Shadbolt declared indignantly. "I'm not a doctor. I was never involved in *anything* that could have been construed as surgery."

"It was over six years ago," Lois persisted. "Do you remember anything out of the ordinary? A day when Trask told you not to go into the cell?"

"No! Nothing." Shadbolt read the entry again, his annoyance obvious. "Is this an official record?"

Lois shrugged. "I don't think there are any official records of this operation."

"I *didn't* do this," Shadbolt reiterated.

"Do you have any thoughts about what the surgery could have entailed?"

He grimaced. "Plenty ... but I hope for everyone's sake that I'm way off base."

"Uhhh," Lois said, fighting against the nausea that wanted to rise into her throat. She picked up the logbook and snapped it shut.

"Are there other things in there that I am supposed to have done?" Shadbolt asked, eyeing the logbook with distaste.

"Some."

"I don't suppose you'd let me read it?"

Lois considered for a moment. "OK," she said. "You can read it, but it's not to leave the premises."

"Thanks."

"I'll leave it in the closet with the rod tonight. You can read it tomorrow after Longford has gone."

"What if he finds it?"

Lois smiled. "I don't think Longford does anything other than sleep."

Shadbolt smiled, too. "Do you want me to put the prisoner's lunch in there before I leave?"

Lois shrugged. "Sure. Thanks. I have it here." She reached into her bag and drew out a prosciutto and coleslaw sandwich. "I'll get the rod."

Shadbolt unlocked the door and pushed it open while Lois stood there with a rod providing the 'protection' that she knew with absolute certainty was not needed. He put the sandwich inside the cell and shut the door.

"Thanks," Lois said as she put away the rod.

"It's OK if I leave now?"

"Yep," she said. "I deliberately came early enough that you would have plenty of time to get ready for the funeral."

"Thanks," Shadbolt said. "I appreciate it."

Lois returned the milk to the fridge, picked up her coffee, and headed for the stairs. "See you tomorrow," she said.

"Bye."

Clark was pacing along the far wall. He was wearing the clothes she had given him yesterday. The puzzle was almost done — he had made great progress since last night.

Lois watched him for a few moments. The clothes fitted well. The tee shirt -

She snatched the binoculars from her desk and zoomed in on Clark's arm.

The sleeve of the tee shirt was stretched slightly across an alluring mound of bicep muscle.

She banged the binoculars onto the desk and spun away as her

heart thumped and self-reproach rose like pungent steam.

Lois perched on her desk, gripped it tightly with her hands, and stared at the door of her office as she rounded the rooms of her mind and slammed shut every door that wanted to entice her to places she knew she couldn't go.

She sprang from her desk and busied herself with dusting and tidying her office, refusing to allow herself to even peek through the window.

A few minutes later, she heard the external door open and close, and then she watched the digital clock tick over two minutes to ensure Shadbolt was truly gone.

She hurried down the stairs and outside to her Jeep. As she carted her purchases up to her office, she couldn't help envisioning Clark's reaction to her initiatives, and little scraps of her excitement returned.

Finally, all of her purchases were on or under her desk.

What first?

She picked up the rectangular wall mirror she had bought. For the next fifteen minutes, she connected a strong cord to the mirror and hung it from the closet. She positioned it at the correct angle for the sunlight to reflect into Clark's room.

She glanced into the cell and smiled. A shaft of sunlight outshone the artificial light to create a patch of brightness on the side wall. Clark was still sitting at the jigsaw puzzle, but his attention had moved to the beam of natural light.

He looked up to the window and waved.

He smiled — tentatively — but it was a smile.

Lois smiled and waved, even though she knew he wouldn't be able to see her.

She gathered the things she would need for her 'big plan' and left them where they would be easily accessible on her desk. Then she ran a comb through her hair, checked her makeup in the mirror, locked the door to her office, and went down the stairs.

At the staffroom, she paused. "Patience, Lane," she muttered. "One step at a time."

Clark had been listening for the lock for a couple of hours. He knew it was too early, but that knowledge hadn't been enough to curb his anticipation.

He could hear the clunk of the lock with normal hearing. The temptation to use his extra hearing abilities was strong — to try to hear her voice, or her footsteps, or anything that would alert him to her presence. So far, he'd managed to resist.

He had no right to try to track her movements.

She had every right to arrive without notifying him.

And Shadbolt wouldn't have left yet.

Shadbolt wouldn't be going for a few hours.

But the waiting had become unbearable.

She *would* come. She had said, "See you tomorrow, Clark."

He tried to straighten his unruly hair with his fingers. He'd already washed his body and brushed his teeth. There wasn't much else he could do to ready himself for her company.

The lock clicked, and every muscle in his body tensed.

But it wasn't Lois who appeared at the door; it was Shadbolt.

Clark turned away quickly.

A paper bag that probably contained his lunch was pushed into his prison. Did that mean Shadbolt was leaving soon?

He hoped so.

It was so hard to wait.

He had spent seven years in this room, and right now, the next hour seemed to stretch longer than all of those years.

He wanted to see her so much.

Would she come in as soon as Shadbolt left?

If she did, what would they do?

He'd almost finished the jigsaw puzzle.

Clark hurried over to the puzzle and dropped next to it. He started to pick out some of the pieces — being careful not to disrupt the rose bush that Lois had put together — and spread them randomly on the

newspaper.

He picked up the box and looked at the picture. Was the sky really that blue? It reminded him of a crisp summer morning on the farm with his dad. His attention moved to the house. It was nothing like the farmhouse where he'd lived, but it was too easy to imagine his mom sitting in the shade of the porch — knitting, or reading, or shelling peas, or painting her latest masterpiece.

He had to push away thoughts of his parents. He knew they were suffering. The best he could hope for was that their suffering was limited to knowing nothing of what had happened to him. If he thought about all the other ways they could be hurt ... If he thought about the fact that their love and acceptance of him had brought such heartache and disruption to their lives ... He *couldn't* think about that. He knew that if he dwelt on them, his pain would become intolerable.

Then, his prison brightened suddenly. He looked up from the puzzle and saw an irregularly shaped splash of sunlight on the side wall — a place where the sun had never shone before.

It was Lois.

Clark felt himself smile. Lois shining light into his world was so symbolic.

He looked up to the window and waved as the knowledge that she had arrived simmered through him like a boiling kettle. He wasn't sure whether that made him more patient or less.

He checked again that the tin box was next to the door, right where she couldn't possibly fail to see it when she opened the door.

Then, he went to sit in the sunshine that Lois had provided for him and waited for her.

He didn't have to wait for long.

A few minutes later, the lock clicked, the door opened, and Lois peeped into his prison. She glanced down to the box and then fully opened the door and pulled the chair against it.

Clark stood, his heart rollicking around his chest in a wild dance of anticipation.

She walked over to him with steady steps and a welcoming smile.

"Hi, Clark," she said when she reached him.

"Hi, Lois."

They didn't say anything for a few seconds, but that was OK because Clark needed some time to try to settle insides that were romping like children on Christmas morning.

Lois didn't seem to mind the lull. "It's good to see you again," she said.

Oh, yes. "It's good to see you."

"Did you sleep OK?"

Clark glanced to the mattress and hoped she wouldn't perceive the truth about how difficult it had been to readjust to real bedding. But he wanted to be honest with her. "It might take some time to get used to it again," he said.

"That's OK," she said with an understanding smile. "I wanted to give you the choice. If you choose to sleep on the floor, that's fine."

"Thanks," he said.

"You haven't eaten your lunch yet."

"No."

"I haven't either. Would you like us to eat together?"

That was precisely why he hadn't begun to eat.

Lois grinned, probably realising why his lunch was untouched.

"I'll get us some drinks," she said. "What would you like? Coke? Or a hot drink?"

"Coke, please," Clark said. "Thank you."

While she was out of the room, Clark removed the sleeping bag and pillow from the mattress and pulled it to a place against the side wall where the sunlight fell.

"Would you like to sit here?" he asked when she returned.

"Sure," she said.

Clark waited until she had sat down, and then he sat next to her, his body turned towards her.

"Are you doing all right?" Lois asked.

He nodded.

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Because yesterday was huge,” Lois said as she lifted her sandwich from the bag. “I thought about it later. If I was too ... much ... yesterday, I’m sorry.”

“No,” he said quickly. She had thought about him later. “You got it exactly right.”

“Really?”

She looked pleased by his words. As if his approval meant something to her. There was so much more he wanted to say. That she was amazing. And breathtaking. And beautiful. But he didn’t. He just nodded.

He was an alien.

A prisoner.

A nothing.

“I think I might today,” Lois said.

She might what? Clark scrambled back through their conversation and still couldn’t grasp her meaning. “Excuse me?”

“I might push too hard today.”

He wasn’t sure if that pleased him or petrified him. “Why?”

“Because I’m going to suggest we do something that I think you’ll find really difficult.”

Uh oh. What was she going to ask of him? Now, he was definitely petrified. He couldn’t refuse Lois anything.

Could he?

“If you don’t want to do it, that’s OK,” Lois said. “It’s your decision. If I’m going too fast, you need to tell me. And if there’s anything you’d like us to do, please say so.”

Clark nodded. He took a bite of his neglected sandwich.

“Sometimes I see you finger-comb your hair.”

He had hoped — inately — that she wouldn’t have noticed his unsightly hair and ugly unkempt beard. “I ... I was trying to get around to asking if it would be possible to have a comb.”

Lois nodded. “I thought so.” She looked at his mass of long, black hair, and Clark had to control the urge to push it off his shoulders to try to hide it. “It’s not going to be easy to comb out after all this time.”

“I tried to keep it from getting too knotty, but ...”

“But that would be close to impossible with no comb and limited water.”

And — until she came — no soap. He nodded.

“Would you prefer that it was cut?”

“Yes,” he said. “But you can’t do that.”

“I know,” Lois said. “Not yet. It would be impossible to hide something as drastic as a haircut from the others. And there would be no way to explain it other than by saying I’d come in here and done it, or I’d given you scissors — both of which would cause a commotion that would be best avoided.”

Even with scissors, she probably wouldn’t be able to cut it. Not now that his powers were coming back. Clark chewed slowly to give himself some time. “What do you have in mind?” he asked after he’d swallowed.

Lois smiled. “I’d like to wash your hair — I have some shampoo and some detangling lotion, so after I’ve washed it, I’d like to comb it out.”

Clark felt his throat constrict as if a string laced through it had suddenly been pulled tight. Touch him? Touch his hair? His hideous, knotty, uncared for hair? He couldn’t let her. He just couldn’t. That she’d seen it was bad enough. To have her *touch* it, feel it. “I ... I couldn’t ...”

“Why not?”

“Because ... because ...” He had washed it. More than once since she’d given him the shampoo. But the thought of her soft hands touching the ratty mess just didn’t bear thinking about.

“Because?” she prompted with a gentle smile.

“Because ... because someone might come.” The final few words had come in a rush. He hated that he didn’t have the courage to admit to the real reason.

“No one will come,” Lois said decisively.

“How can you be sure?”

“Because they’re all at Trask’s funeral.”

Funeral? “Trask’s dead?” Clark asked in a strangled voice.

Lois nodded.

“Did ... did Moyne kill him?”

“No,” she said. “He walked under a bus.”

Clark put the remainder of his sandwich on the paper bag. “He’s really dead?”

“Yes. He’s really dead. He can’t hurt you anymore.”

Clark brushed back his hair and shuddered a long sigh. “I ... I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything.”

He picked up his sandwich and ate it without speaking.

Lois finished her lunch as well.

Clark slowly sipped his Coke and tried to concentrate on the all-but-forgotten taste. Nothing, however, could detract from the revelation that Trask was dead.

He was dead. Gone. Never to return.

More than once, Clark thought Lois was about to speak, but she said nothing.

Was she thinking about Trask?

Or was she disappointed by his refusal to allow her to wash his hair?

Why would she want to touch him?

He didn’t understand.

Clark drained his Coke and put it on the floor. It clattered as it hit the concrete. Lois waited, smiled.

“L...Lois?” he said.

“Yes?”

“About my hair ... I’m sorry.”

Her smile didn’t waver, but something vital ebbed away. “That’s OK,” she said. “I understand.”

“I ... I ... “He had nothing to give her except his honesty. “It’s bad enough that you saw my shame in the way I lived -”

“That is Trask’s shame, not yours.”

“It’s too ...” Too much. Too soon. Too close. Too intimate. Too humiliating. Too indicative of how low he had sunk.

“I’m sorry,” Lois said.

“Please,” he said hastily. “Please don’t be sorry. I’m the one who’s sorry.”

“The offer stands,” she said. “Anytime you want to take it up, just say so.”

He nodded, but he couldn’t imagine ever being comfortable enough around Lois to allow her to do something as personal as washing his hair.

She’d gone quiet.

He’d disappointed her.

She’d given him so much.

And he’d disappointed her.

But ...

Perhaps if they did something else first. He gathered up the empty cans and put them into one of the bags. “The jigsaw puzzle?” he suggested.

“OK.” She took the trash and walked slowly out of the prison.

She left the door open, Clark noticed. He could hear her as she moved around the adjoining room. He picked up the mattress and placed it near the puzzle. Unless Lois came back with Trask’s mattress, they would have only one.

He would sit on the concrete.

She wasn’t carrying anything when she returned. Clark gestured for her to sit on the mattress. She sat down and shuffled over.

There was sufficient room that he could sit there without risk of touching her.

He sat, too, but he didn’t pick up a puzzle piece.

Lois chose a piece, tried to fit it in three different places, and gave up on it. She selected another piece.

All of Clark's interest in the puzzle had faded away.

He'd hurt her.

It was just washing his hair ... no big deal.

Any other man would be honoured to have her wash his hair.

But he wasn't a man.

He was an alien.

He could let her do it. He could grit his teeth, and close his eyes, and take himself to the place where he'd gone so often when they'd beaten his body with the poisoned rods.

Except ... that was the place he went when he was hurting.

And Lois would never hurt him.

Clearly, it meant a lot to her.

Was it because he hadn't managed to wash his hair properly?

Despite his efforts, was his hair truly disgusting? He hadn't seen it — but he could imagine how horrendous it must be.

"Clark?"

He jumped at the sudden sound of her voice. "Yes, Lois?"

She checked her watch. "It's almost one o'clock. The funeral starts at two. There's no chance of us being interrupted now."

"OK." Was she going to ask again?

"I have an idea for something we could do."

"You do?"

"I do," she said. "Tennis. Well, it will probably be more like squash."

Clark looked around the prison, seeing the possibilities. "Squash?"

She nodded. "I know you've kept fit with running and other exercises. I have a ball and two racquets. Would you like to?"

He sprang to his feet. Squash he could manage.

Part 9

Lois stormed up the stairs and only just refrained from slamming the office door into next week.

She was an idiot.

She had allowed her impulsiveness to override her common sense. In pushing too hard, she had bulldozed over all the progress they had made yesterday.

Poor Clark!

He'd tried so valiantly to conceal his dismay.

He was a bachelor. And probably not one of those bachelors who revelled in their 'freedom' to sashay from woman to woman but one of those bachelors who felt self-conscious around women. Add to that seven years of being treated as a subhuman monster, and how could she have expected anything else?

Why hadn't she taken it slowly?

Lois wanted to scream. But she couldn't — Clark would hear.

She wanted to punch something. But she couldn't — he would hear that, too.

She snatched up the two racquets, the tennis ball, and a large piece of chalk from her desk.

She forced herself to pause. Take a breath. Calm down.

This was redeemable, her rational side insisted in a small voice.

But now he'll be on edge, she argued. He'll worry that I'm going to suggest something else that will be too difficult for him, he'll obsess about declining, he'll wonder if I'll back away, he'll fear that his refusal will have ramifications.

She'd put him in such a difficult position.

If he agreed now, the reasons would be all wrong.

Stuck in her mind had been how washing her father's hair had seemed to break down barriers between them. And she hadn't been able to forget how Clark had recoiled when their fingers had brushed yesterday.

She so wanted to make up for seven lost years.

How did it feel to not know the touch of a friend for seven years?

He must feel so isolated.

Lois grated out a silent groan of frustration.

The longer she stayed away, the longer he would agonise over what had happened.

It was vital that he trusted her. He had to trust her enough to give

her the information she needed to ascertain the best way to procure his freedom.

Trust took a long time to build up. And seconds to break down.

Linda had always provided the steadying hand in their partnership. She had been the word of caution that perfectly balanced Lois's impetuosity.

But now, that hand had gone, and Lois was working alone.

On the most challenging, most important assignment she'd ever had.

Perhaps the situation with Clark could be restored through their game of squash. At least it was going to be physical. She could keep her mouth firmly shut — and that was a good thing. Unless she accidentally whacked him with the racquet, she wasn't going to be able to do much damage.

Lois walked purposefully down the stairs, telling herself that it would be good to get active again. Since returning to the US, she hadn't felt any motivation to exercise. Then her ankle had been hurt in the incident with Moyne.

She should be feeling great — this was one of the ideas she had looked forward to most.

She arrived back in the cell — not in the greatest frame of mind — and dropped the racquets onto the concrete.

They discussed a few rules for their game as they used the chalk to draw some lines on the floor and along the side wall.

"Let's just hit for a while," Lois suggested. There was no enthusiasm in her voice.

"OK," Clark said. There was none in his either.

When Lois handed him a racquet, she didn't meet his eyes.

Clark hit the ball against the wall, and it ricocheted to her. It sat up, and she swiped at it. It flew back towards the wall — faster than she'd intended.

Clark stuck out his racquet and returned the ball, moderating its speed enough that it lobbed back to Lois.

She pounded it at the wall.

He muted it.

She slugged it.

He slowed it.

She thumped it.

He tamed it.

She charged at it, absolutely determined to either belt the cover off the ball or blast a hole in the wall. She drew back her racquet -

And excruciating pain seared through her left ankle.

Her leg crumbled.

The concrete rushed towards her.

Lois dropped the racquet and put out her hand to cushion her fall.

Before she crashed, two arms surrounded her and lifted her.

Clark carried her — one arm under her shoulders and one arm under her knees. He dropped smoothly to the concrete, gently lowered her onto the mattress, and slipped his arms out from under her.

"Lois?" he said.

Her ankle felt as if it were being consumed by raging fire. She bit down on her lip and closed her eyes.

She felt Clark's hands on her leg. Her eyes shot open to protest. Movement ... touch ... anything was going to compound the pain.

Before Lois could object, he had raised her foot and was cradling it in his hands. He breathed in and blew a zephyr of air onto her ankle. It felt cold against her skin, but it smothered the fire and brought instant relief.

Clark's breath finished, and his eyes lifted from her ankle to her face. "Is that any better?"

She nodded.

He inhaled, and the cooling breeze whispered across her ankle again. Lois closed her eyes. The pain had subsided enough that it was possible to concentrate on other things.

The way her foot was nestled into his large, gentle hands.

And the memory of the concern so vividly expressed in his brown eyes.

She heard him inhale. His out-breath coincided with another flutter of pulsing air on her ankle. It was becoming numb, and the searing pain had faded to a dull throb. Lois lowered herself from her elbows and lay on her back. Clark placed her leg on the mattress, and she felt the prickle of disappointment that he was leaving her.

When she opened her eyes, he was offering her the pillow. She took it from him and slipped it under her head. “Thanks.”

“How’s your ankle?”

“It felt better when you were holding it.”

He crouched at her feet, and his long fingers slid around her lower calf and lifted her ankle. “How’s that?”

“It still hurts, but it sure feels better than it did.”

“More ice?” he asked as nonchalantly as if he were offering an everyday icepack from the freezer.

She nodded.

He breathed in again and blew across her ankle. At the end of his breath, his eyes connected with hers. “I think it might be best if your shoe came off now,” he suggested quietly. “In case your ankle swells.”

“Is it going to hurt?” Lois asked with a grimaced smile.

He gave her a little smile of assurance. “I’ll try to make sure it doesn’t.”

“Thanks.”

He placed her foot on his thigh, and Lois watched as he undid her laces with such care that he didn’t jolt her foot at all. He loosened the shoe and grasped it. “Ready?”

Lois nodded.

Clark eased off the shoe and placed it on the concrete. Then his hands returned to her foot to steady it as it perched on his thigh.

“Do you want to get more comfortable?” Lois asked. “I’m not going to feel like moving for a while.”

He dropped to the mattress with a smooth and effortless movement. “Do you want me to keep your foot elevated?” he asked. “Or would you prefer that I put it on the mattress?”

Maybe they could achieve through a sprained ankle what they hadn’t been able to achieve through a hair wash. “It feels better when it’s elevated.”

“OK.” He adjusted his hands slightly so they provided a sling of support. “How’s that?”

“That’s great,” Lois said. “Thanks.”

“What happened?”

“I think my ankle must still be weak from when I twisted it a few days ago. It just gave way under me.”

“There are no broken bones,” he stated.

He waited ... probably preparing for a barrage of questions. Lois decided there were more important things at stake than knowing how he could ice her ankle with his breath.

Or react so quickly that he’d caught her before she hit the floor.

Or know with certainty that her ankle wasn’t broken.

“Thanks for helping me,” she said, hoping to move them away from the gulf of looming questions.

“How’s it feeling?” he asked.

“OK. Perhaps a little more ice?”

Clark breathed in, and his breath cooled the lingering coals of pain.

They were silent. Lois closed her eyes as the last vestiges of discomfort ebbed away. When she opened them again, Clark was gazing at her, deep in thought.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked.

“How sorry I am that I made you mad.”

“You didn’t -”

“Yes, I did,” Clark said. “I made you mad when I wouldn’t let you wash my hair.”

“I wasn’t mad at you.”

“You were mad,” he said. His beard twitched, and for a fleeting moment, Lois was sure his eyes glistened with amusement. “And you were taking it out on that ball.”

“True on both counts,” Lois said. “But I wasn’t mad at you.”

He glanced around the room. “There are only two of us here,” he noted.

“Yep — and it’s not you.”

“Oh.” He looked down to where her foot hung in the haven of his hands. “I guess that leaves you.”

“I was so mad at myself for pushing too quickly and destroying all the progress we -”

“You didn’t do that,” Clark said.

“Yes, I did.”

His eyes settled in hers. “You must have questions,” he said.

“You, too.”

“You weren’t the one blowing your icy breath everywhere.”

“You weren’t the one trying to blast an innocent tennis ball through a brick wall.”

Clark smiled. Lois couldn’t see much of his mouth, but she sure could see the humour in his eyes.

They said nothing. She was smiling. He was smiling. She was drinking in his smile.

“I’m sorry, Clark,” Lois said. “I was an idiot over the hair-washing.”

He slowly shook his head. “You could never be an idiot.”

“You hardly know me yet.”

“I know enough to know that.”

“You don’t know some of the things I’ve done. You don’t know some of the incredibly stupid decisions I’ve made. Decisions that ... hurt people ...”

“Was your intent to hurt them?”

Lois closed her eyes and was transported back to the putrid place where Linda had been raped and killed.

“You don’t have to say anything,” Clark said quietly. “I know the answer.”

His voice had the power to drive away the blackness. Lois opened her eyes. “Thank you,” she said.

He looked down, as if her thanks had discomfited him. “It hurt you a lot, didn’t it?”

Was he being deliberately ambiguous? Lois nodded. “But your ‘ice’ was wonderfully soothing.”

He lifted her foot a few inches and blew on it again.

It felt good.

“I have a suggestion,” Lois said at the completion of his breath.

Clark’s eyes crinkled. “Does it involve my hair?”

Lois managed to keep her reaction to a restrained chuckle. Clark was *teasing* her. How could a man who had been locked in a cell for seven years still have even a scrap of humour left to draw upon? “No,” she said, smiling on the outside as her admiration for him surged on the inside.

“Squash?”

Lois shook her head. “I don’t think I’ll be playing squash again for a few days.”

He winced, and his thumb slid across the curve of her ankle. “Does it still hurt?”

“Not much,” Lois said. “Not if I don’t think about having to stand up.”

“We can stay here for a while,” he said. “There’s no hurry.”

Somehow, staying here with Clark — as he held her foot, and talked to her in his soft voice, and looked at her with those sometimes-smiling brown eyes — seemed like the best idea Lois had ever heard. “Here’s my suggestion,” she said. “We both have questions, but neither of us wants to ask them in case the other doesn’t want to answer.”

He nodded. His thumb was still gliding across her skin.

“What if we answer questions?” Lois said. “What if I guess which questions you would ask and answer the ones I’m willing to answer? And you could guess which questions I would ask and answer anything you feel comfortable telling me.”

“OK.”

He didn’t sound completely sure. “If there’s nothing you feel you

want to tell me, that's OK," Lois said.

Clark nodded slightly. His thumb had stopped. Did that mean he was tensing up? Perhaps he needed a reminder of how much he had helped her.

"My ankle's starting to throb again," she said. "Would you mind?"

He inhaled and blew the cool breeze across her ankle. "Better?" She nodded. "Thanks."

"Who goes first?" Clark asked. "With the answers?"

"I will," Lois offered. She had hundreds of questions she wanted to ask him and very little that she was sure she wanted to say, but it would be unfair to ask him to go first.

"OK."

Lois searched through her mind. "I work as a secret agent," she said.

Clark's thumb slid across her skin in an arc of encouragement.

"When you spend so much time pretending to be someone else, it's very easy to forget how to be you."

"Yep."

She hadn't realised how aptly her statement could apply to him. Part of his survival technique must have been to hide and protect the real Clark. "The only way to stay grounded is to have a friend," she said. "Someone who knows you, and accepts you, and allows you complete freedom to be yourself. Who you really are."

His thumb cruised back and forth across her skin.

"I had a friend," Lois said quietly.

Sympathy budded in his eyes. He — who had lost absolutely everything — could feel the pain of her loss. "I'm sorry about your friend," he said.

"He raped her before he killed her," Lois said with such raw anguish that it didn't sound like her voice. "He raped her, and he hurt her, and he hit her, and he violated her, and ... and ... and ... there was *nothing* I could do to help her."

His eyes had deepened to dark brown — deepened to such a level of feeling that it was like a physical blanket of support being wrapped around her.

"I heard it all," Lois whimpered. "I heard his evil triumph, and I heard her fear, and I heard his cruelty, and I heard her pain." A tear squeezed from her eye and rolled down her temple, leaving a damp trail. "And I heard her die. I heard her final breath."

"Lo -" The word was chopped off as Clark swallowed jaggedly. "Lois," he said. "Aww, Lois."

She could see that he wished he had words for her, but she didn't need his words. His empathy was so pure that words would have cheapened it.

Lois brushed away the trail of her tear. "Your turn."

Clark took a breath, and his thumb stopped on the protrusion of her anklebone. His mouth opened ... and then closed.

"Take your time," Lois said. "You can say something as frivolous as whether you prefer coffee or tea, and why."

"That would seem to trivialise what you told me."

"I know you wouldn't mean it like that."

"I like coffee in the morning and tea in the evening," he said.

She smiled a wobbly smile. "I like tea in the morning if I've slept well and coffee if I haven't."

"I'm an alien," he said. "I don't belong here."

Where are you from? How did you get here? How can you look so human? Are you going back? Are there other aliens here? Why did you come here? The questions jostled around her mind. With a colossal effort, Lois subdued them and gave him time to choose his answers.

"I came here as a baby," Clark continued. "My planet was about to self-destruct. My biological parents figured this was my only chance."

A baby? She'd read an entire notebook filled with information about a spaceship, but if Trask had mentioned that it had carried a baby, she'd missed it. "Did they -" Lois slapped her mouth shut. "Sorry."

"Ask," he said. "It's OK."

"Did they come, too?"

"No. Only me."

"Why did they send you to Earth?"

"Because they thought I would be enough like humans that I could be ..."

"Accepted here?"

He nodded. "Two Kansas farmers — Martha and Jonathan Kent — found my spaceship. They lifted me out, and took me home, and gave me a name, and raised me as their own son."

And Trask had ensured that they had paid an enormous price for their kindness.

Clark looked down, his eyes blinking rapidly. When he looked up, they were damp with unshed tears. "I can't talk about my parents," he said. "I'm sorry."

"I think it's my turn again," Lois said.

"Thanks." The gratitude in his eyes drilled deep inside her.

She searched through her mind. There had been wonderful release in the little she had told Clark about Linda, but Lois wasn't sure she wanted to tell him any more.

Not now.

His thumb began coasting over her ankle again.

What could she tell him?

Something light — but what? All of the best parts of her life had disintegrated. She'd had some fun times with Lucy ... who'd moved to the West Coast and whom Lois hadn't seen in two years. Her relationship with her mother became more strained every year. She'd had a good — if at times turbulent — relationship with her father ... who was now in a nursing home paralysed from a stroke. She'd had a friend, a partner — someone she loved and trusted ... who had died a horrible and violent death.

The stark truth was that the best thing in her life right now was the prisoner she was supposed to be guarding — the man she had spoken to for the first time only yesterday.

The pressure of Clark's thumb increased a tiny amount. "It's OK," he said. "You don't have to say anything."

"Thanks."

"Would you mind if I asked a question?" Clark said. "I don't think it will be intrusive, but if it is, you don't have to answer."

"OK."

"Other than your ankle, whatever else Moyne did to you ... are you OK?"

She nodded. "I'm fine."

His hand left her ankle and rose to his face. He brushed his fingertips across the top of his beard, along his cheekbone. "I've been watching the graze you had here. It has almost faded to nothing."

"The Neosporin you gave me helped," Lois said with a smile.

"I wanted to do so much more," Clark said. "But I knew that anything I did would scare you more — and you already looked so frightened."

"I was," Lois admitted.

"Did ... did Moyne use me to scare you?"

"Yeah."

Clark flinched as if she had hit him. "Sorry," he mumbled. She waited for him to look up before answering. "It wasn't your fault."

"No wonder you were screaming that night."

"That was *not* about you — it was about the ... the night my friend died."

There was such depth of understanding in his eyes that Lois felt irresistibly drawn to him. What would it feel like to have his arms around her? To lean into his chest and -

"Having been there ... that must be tough," Clark said.

Lois nodded, and tears flooded her eyes.

His thumb continued to work her ankle. She stared up at the high ceiling. Was he aware of what he was doing? Was he doing it to comfort her? Or because human contact felt so good after the years of segregation?

Did he know how amazing it felt?

Lois looked back to Clark. “Do you know why Moyne forced me into your cell? Did he really think you would hurt me?”

“That’s what he did the other two times.”

“He forced Deller and Bortolotto in here?”

“Yeah, he locked them in here, and then he returned with the poison and a knife. Because of the poison, I couldn’t do anything while he attacked them.”

“They weren’t able to escape?”

“The second one wasn’t a fighter. He wasn’t very strong.”

“What about the first one?”

“Trask helped Moyne that time.”

That definitely hadn’t been in Trask’s log. “So, you think Moyne’s plan was to leave me here with you ... although he probably knew you wouldn’t hurt me? Then, he planned to return with the rod, kill me, and say you’d done it?”

“Yeah.”

“But he pulled my gun on me,” Lois said. “He tried to shoot me.”

“If he said you walked into here with a gun, and you ended up shot, who do you think they were going to blame?”

That question didn’t need an answer.

The grim silence fell again, and Lois could imagine too well the horrific things that had happened in this place.

“I’m sorry I believed — just for a few moments — that you might hurt me,” Lois said.

“You don’t have to be sorry,” Clark said. “You had no reason to think I was anything other than what they said I was.”

“Yes, I did,” she countered. “I had plenty of reason.”

“But reason gets easily lost in the heat of the moment.”

“Thanks,” she said. “Thanks for being so understanding.”

“And two days later, you walked in here unarmed.” Clark shook his head in wonderment. “I could never have imagined such an act of trust.”

“Trust?” she said, smiling. “Or stupidity?”

“What do you think?”

“Trust,” she said decisively. “Even then, I knew there was something about you.”

He smiled cautiously. “There’s plenty about me,” he said. “Mostly it makes people terrified and suspicious.”

“Was it always like that? When you were younger?”

“No one knew. I didn’t tell anyone. I just tried to blend in.”

Lois had thought a lot about the trauma of his imprisonment but nothing of the lifelong anguish of being so different. She didn’t know what to say. And ... she was going to have to get up.

“Clark?” she said. “I need to use the ...” She glanced to the door of the cell.

He carefully placed her sore foot on the mattress and removed her other shoe. “Would you like me to help you to your feet?” he said. “Or carry you to the door?”

He had carried her to the mattress, but she had been in so much pain, it was nothing more than a blurred memory. “Would you mind carrying me?” Lois asked.

Clark knelt beside her, slipped his arms under her body, and lifted her as easily as if she were a child. As he walked across the cell with smooth, even strides, the bottom of his beard tickled her arm.

They arrived at the door, and he lowered her to her feet. His hands loosely circled her waist as he steadied her. Lois grasped his shoulders and put her foot to the ground. She gingerly transferred her weight from her good foot to the injured one.

The expected shot of pain didn’t come.

It was sore, but not unbearably so. She smiled up at Clark. “It’s OK,” she said.

He seemed suddenly conscious of their closeness. He lifted his hands from her, but they hovered, ready if she should need him again.

“I’m fine,” Lois assured him. She squeezed her fingers into his shoulder, smiled into his eyes, and then turned and walked into the staffroom.

Daniel Scardino escaped from the funeral home as soon as was seemly.

Funerals overflowing with raw emotion made him uncomfortable, but this had been infinitely worse. It had the feel of a stilted business meeting. A small group of strangers — a few men in suits and one woman — had gathered. None had wanted to be there. None had cared. All had hoped that it would be over as quickly as possible.

It had been mercifully short.

There had been no eulogy and only the sparsest of detail regarding the life that had ended.

In fact, more had been said about the manner of his death than the years of his life.

Daniel had been asked to be a pallbearer. He — who had met Jason Trask exactly three times and knew nothing about his life outside of the job.

Thankfully, his duties had involved nothing more than moving the casket from the front of the tiny room, through the door, and into the waiting hearse.

The body was to be cremated.

Scardino hoped no one would contact him about what to do with the ashes.

He reached his car with a sigh of relief.

“Scardino!”

His heart sank as he turned.

As he’d expected, it was Menzies.

The tall man hurried over to him. “I’m Eric Menzies,” he said gruffly.

Scardino had known that — although the men had never met. “Daniel Scardino.”

“I want to know everything that is happening in the operation Neville Moyne just left,” Menzies said. “Be at my office, eight o’clock sharp, Wednesday morning.”

Daniel nodded, hoping his apprehension wasn’t obvious.

“From what I’ve heard, it’s a complete fiasco,” Menzies said. His eyes narrowed, and he leant forward. “What in heaven’s name possessed you to appoint a *woman* to the position?”

“Ms Lane is a highly competent operative,” Scardino said.

Menzies snorted. “She’s still a woman.” He turned and strode away without a backward glance.

Daniel slipped into the driver’s seat of his car.

Eric Menzies was not just a ‘higher-up’. He was one of the ‘highest-ups’.

He was a man feared for his inflexible austerity and sharp, scything tongue.

He had recently returned to the job after a yearlong absence that had evoked a legion of rumours, but no one Daniel knew had dared to ask the man himself.

And he was married to Moyne’s aunt.

Part 10

As soon as Lois stepped out of his prison, Clark moved away from the door.

He’d said the scariest three words in his vocabulary.

I’m an alien.

The three words that had haunted him before his capture and condemned him since.

But Lois ...

Lois hadn’t recoiled. She hadn’t flinched. She hadn’t bombarded him with a million questions.

She’d probably suspected before his admission. They would have told her. But even so, her reaction to his bald statement confirmed what he had already known.

Lois was an extraordinary woman.

Her easy acceptance reached deep inside him and squarely confronted all of the hate, and the animosity, and the suspicion, and the fear. And in the face of her support, all of their repugnance crumpled to insignificance.

He could stand against the hostility of the whole world if she were

standing beside him.

He'd let her see his speed and his freezing breath. He hadn't given one thought to how she would react. All that had mattered was that she was in pain, and he'd known exactly how to help her.

Only as his first cooling breath had floated across her ankle had he realised that her most likely reaction would be to yank her foot away in shock. She hadn't done that. She'd thanked him — just as with the bullet, she'd thanked him.

In the distant past, when he'd still allowed himself the luxury of dreams, he had dreamed of someone who could learn to overlook his oddities.

But Lois ... she *embraced* them.

He had to fix his concentration on his weird powers.

Because that would keep his mind from giving licence to the thoughts that were poised like athletes on the starting block, just waiting for a signal that it was OK to break free and revel in all the other memories.

Holding her.

Clark closed his eyes as every inch of skin on his arms quivered with the remembrance of her.

Holding her in his arms ...

Had been ...

His heart accelerated. She had been tucked so close to his heart that it might never recover its normal rhythm.

Touching her.

Her skin was so soft.

His thumb. He could still feel her skin under his thumb.

She smelled like the first flush of spring flowers after a long winter.

She was so soft.

So strong.

So womanly.

So beautiful.

And he needed to think about something else.

Anything else.

Because no matter how she reacted to his disturbing disclosures or how tolerant she seemed of his peculiarities, two facts were immutable.

He was a prisoner. Worse than that, he was an alien.

And, one day, she would leave.

He would remain.

Clark's heart splintered.

He'd already lost everything once.

Could he lose everything again and still fight on?

He didn't know.

He shoved his hands into his pockets and leant his shoulder against the wall, his head low, his eyes locked onto his bare feet. In the first months of his imprisonment, he'd thought that deprivation came in the denial of freedom. Then, he'd realised that it came in the dearth of food, and water, and dignity.

Now he knew better.

Deprivation ... true deprivation ... came in being separated from Lois.

And that was his inevitable destiny.

He had to decide.

Should he fight to re-establish a distance between them? Should he withdraw from her the way he had withdrawn from Trask and Moyné in order to keep them from desecrating his soul?

Should he hide away and refuse her entry into his world?

Would that make her departure any less painful?

He doubted it.

Or should he accept what she seemed to be offering? Should he talk to her, allow her to pervade his world? Should he open up to her? Allow her to be the first person — other than his parents — to see him as he really was?

A discordant thought struck him with such power that he almost toppled over.

What if this was just an act? What if Trask wasn't dead? What if they had decided that the beatings were never going to get him to admit that others of his kind were coming? What if they were trying a new tactic? Sending in a beautiful woman to ply him with her kindness? To treat him humanely so that he would spill the secret of the marauding army of aliens?

There *was* no army.

Trask had done everything in his power to get Clark to admit to knowledge of the alien army.

If there were an army — Clark had no knowledge of it.

But saying that had only provoked Trask's paranoia and goaded Moyné's anger.

What if Lois asked him about the coming armies?

What would he say?

Clark shrugged slightly.

All he could give her was the truth.

That — as far as he knew — he was the only surviving Kryptonian.

But that didn't answer what he should do about Lois. Should he cower away in the dark shadows of his mind? Or continue to allow her to awaken and invigorate the vestiges of what had once been his life?

Then he remembered.

Lois had been hurt, too.

She had witnessed the death of her friend, and buried deep inside her, she still carried the oppressive burden of grief. He had sensed guilt there, too.

And ... perhaps even ... Was there more? What else had she endured?

The thought of it felt like a blade lacerating his heart.

How could he even contemplate withdrawing from her?

He couldn't.

He could do nothing to help her ... not in a practical sense. He had nothing to give her. Nothing of worth to offer. But he could be there for her ... He could listen if she wanted to talk. He could be the safe sounding board that she might need before she reconnected with the outside world.

That was probably why she had taken this job. To escape. To recover.

He heard a footstep and turned.

Lois was there — holding two cups of tea. She offered him one. "It's closer to the evening than the morning," she said. "I figured you'd like tea."

He reached for both cups. "You shouldn't have done that," he scolded lightly. "You should be resting your ankle." He put the cups on the floor. "How can I help?"

She looked around the prison. "You could bring the mattress over here," she said. "And we'll lean against the wall while we drink our tea."

Clark hurried to position the mattress as she had suggested. Then, he hesitantly raised his hand towards her and waited for her to decide if she wanted or needed his help.

With a little smile that lassoed his heart, she took his hand and lowered herself onto the mattress.

And Clark accepted his powerlessness.

Her touch. Her hand in his. Her smile. In that moment, he knew that it didn't matter that heartache was coming as inescapably as an avalanche rolling down a hill. In that moment, he knew that he could hold nothing back from this woman.

She had shown such trust in him.

He wasn't going to allow the poison of doubts to steal these few transitory days with Lois. He was going to store up every memory he could so that when she was gone, he would have memories to help him through the endless nights and the lonely days.

He sat beside her and handed her one of the mugs. "How's your ankle?" he asked.

"It barely hurts at all," she said. "What you did was wonderfully effective."

“I’m glad,” he said.

“I was able to go up the stairs to my office.”

Was she going to tell him she had looked through the window and seen the moroseness of his stance? Was she going to question him?

Lois sipped from her tea, and then with a smile, she nodded to the door. “I got the shampoo and the comb,” she said. “I’ll leave them for you, and you can do your hair whenever you want to.”

Clark stared into the brown liquid of his tea.

Was he going to spend the rest of his life regretting his gaucheness? Or was he going to dislodge a few bricks from his wall of isolation and give himself a memory that would remain with him forever?

“Lois?”

“Uhhh?”

“I know we can’t do it today, but maybe ... maybe ... you ... we ... could ...” He couldn’t bring himself to actually ask her.

He didn’t have to.

She smiled. Smiled as if he had given her something of immense value. “That’s great, Clark,” she said. “Dinner will be here soon. We’ll do it after we’ve eaten.”

“You can’t do it tonight,” he said quickly. “Not with your injured ankle.”

She thought for a moment. “We could if you were OK with lying on the mattress. I’ll sit behind you while I wash your hair, and then we’ll both sit on chairs for the combing. It won’t hurt my ankle at all.”

“Are you sure?”

Totally sure.” She grinned. “Assuming you’re willing to help me up from the floor.”

That would mean holding her hand again. Clark nodded as anticipation sparked fire inside him. He needed to move on. Quickly. He had a question. But he could frame it as a statement. “I don’t understand why you want to do this so much.”

Her eyes tugged at his for a moment. “It’s not that easy to explain,” she said. “There’s someone else, and it was really difficult with him, and then someone suggested that doing something practical was a great way of connecting, so I washed his hair, and ...” She shrugged. “It seemed to work.”

“Why do you want to connect with me?” His question was out before discretion could contain it.

Lois didn’t seem bothered by his directness, although she did hesitate before answering. “Because I noticed how you were so careful to avoid any contact between us. And I thought that if it happened in a mundane and everyday circumstance, it would be less awkward and not seem like such a big deal.”

She *wanted* to break down his barriers. She *wanted* entry into his world. As that revelation swept over him, Clark smiled and hoped it looked natural. “Did you fake your sprained ankle?” he asked.

Lois chuckled. “No,” she said. “But I would have if I’d thought of it.”

She took his breath away — not once, but over and over again until his lungs felt oxygen-starved and his head floated with delicious buoyancy.

She smiled over the top of her cup. “I’ve answered your questions,” she said. “I think you owe me a couple.”

His shutters flew up instinctively, but Clark determinedly pushed them back down. He didn’t want his memories to be full of half-conversations, and unanswered questions, and missed opportunities.

“I do owe you,” he agreed, trying desperately to sound unconcerned.

“After Moyne was knocked out, why didn’t you speak to me? I sensed that you wanted to communicate, but you didn’t say anything.”

Clark thought for a moment before replying. “Silence is a hard habit to break,” he said. “I spoke to Trask and Moyne in the first few days, but then they stopped me. After that, I didn’t speak for so long that it didn’t seem natural anymore.”

“I guess having me thrust into your room was a rude shock.”

“I didn’t know what to do,” Clark said. “I didn’t know -”

“Yes, you did.”

“I couldn’t think straight. I was -”

“You didn’t need to be able to think straight to know what to do,” she said with what sounded astoundingly close to admiration.

“I didn’t speak,” Clark said. “I was awkward. I was flustered. Thinking back now, I’m surprised I didn’t completely terrify you.”

“Whatever Moyne did, you were going to stand between him and me, weren’t you?” Lois asked gravely.

Clark could feel the warmth rise from the upper echelons of his beard to become — he was sure — visible on his cheeks. He nodded.

Lois gave a little half smile that tightened her lasso around his heart. “Is that the only reason why you didn’t speak?”

No, it wasn’t. But to admit to the other reason would require knocking down a few more of the bricks and exposing another piece of his soul. Clark shook his head.

“What was the other reason?”

He gave a nervous chuckle. “You’re asking a lot of questions.”

“You know you don’t have to answer,” Lois reminded him.

“I was scared that if I tried to speak, I would either squeak like a teenager whose voice is starting to break or sound like a wild animal.”

“When you did speak, it sounded fine.”

He nodded. “I’d practised by then.”

“You were expecting me to come back?”

“No,” he said. “I was sure that you would never come back, but if you did, I wanted to be ready.”

She smiled. “You are ...”

He felt himself answering her smile. “I am what?”

Her lovely brown eyes burned warmth into his soul, and he felt his heart go into freefall. Right when he was sure that he couldn’t maintain eye contact a moment longer without risking permanent damage to his heart, she broke away and looked at her watch. “You are hungry,” she said. “And our food should be here soon.”

Clark jumped to his feet and picked up her shoes. “Will you need these?”

“Yeah. I have to go outside to get the food.”

He gave her one shoe and carefully eased her right foot into the other one and tied her laces.

“Do you have a child?” Lois asked.

“No.”

“A kid brother or sister?”

“No. Why?”

“Because you seem pretty good at that.”

“My mom ...” Clark said in stilted explanation.

“Is she disabled?”

“No,” he said hurriedly. “I was thinking back to when she used to tie my shoelaces.” He rose from his crouched position and offered her his hand. She took it, and he gently pulled her to her feet. “Would you like to be carried to the door?” he offered.

“There’s no need,” she said. “Really, my ankle feels fine.”

“OK,” Clark said, telling himself that he should be relieved but unable to blunt the sharpness of his disappointment. He handed her the empty mugs.

“I’ll be back soon,” Lois said.

He watched as she walked to the door — her limp barely noticeable.

One day, she would walk away from him — just as she was walking away now. Except then, she wouldn’t come back.

Clark pushed away that certainty. *This* time, she was coming back. He would concentrate on that.

As Lois walked past the warehouse, her mind was embroiled in a battle.

Her gut was insisting that time was limited. Insisting that she needed to push forward with Clark, needed to get the groundwork done, needed to establish enough trust that it would withstand the onslaught of whatever opposition they faced.

But against that rose her memory of his reaction to her suggestion

that she wash his hair.

She paused at the street and waited for Uncle Mike's delivery boy.

She needed to sort her questions. Those driven by mere curiosity could wait. What did she *have* to know?

His parents.

She didn't know the exact circumstances of how Clark would leave his cell, but she did know that his first thoughts were going to centre on his parents.

If the news were bad, it would be preferable that he knew before being propelled into the outside world.

If the news were good, that would give him impetus and much-needed support in recovering his life.

Except ...

Could that be why he seemed to have dismissed the possibility of escape? Was he convinced that if he broke out of the cell, there would be consequences for his parents?

Was that why, when the cell door had been open, he had refused to go through it?

Or was it that he believed that life outside of the cell wouldn't be significantly better than in it? Did he shy away from being chased like a criminal? Being hunted down like an animal? Being hated and feared for being different?

If his parents were alive, would he go to them?

Or would he believe that by going to them — even if he could — he would put them in danger?

She needed to find out what had happened to Jonathan and Martha Kent.

And to do that, she had to question their son.

And that was going to require trawling through memories that would hurt him.

When she had been hurt, he'd carried her. Seemingly without any effort at all. She wasn't exactly a heavyweight, but he must have great physical strength to be able to lift her with so little effort.

Being in his arms ...

It had felt ...

Whatever it had felt, it had been enough to make her decline his offer to carry her again.

Why?

Well, she hadn't needed to be carried.

And yet ...

A car pulled up to the kerb, and Lois stepped forward to take the two containers. "Thanks," she said.

She walked back — almost painlessly — to the compound. Clark *did* trust her. He'd let her see some of the things he could do. Some of the things that made him different. He'd admitted that he wasn't from Earth.

But she needed more — she needed to know about his capture.

Lois locked the external door behind her and stopped in the staffroom long enough to pick up the cutlery and napkins. As soon as she'd stepped into the cell, Clark approached her. "What can I do?" he asked. "Take the meals?"

Lois gave him the containers. "Thanks."

They reached the mattress, and Clark put the meals on the ground and stretched out his hand to help her. She took it with a smile and lowered herself onto the mattress.

He sat opposite her.

"What do we have?" Lois asked.

Clark paused, his hand on the still-closed lid of the container. "Is that a loaded question?" he asked.

Lois grinned. "Only partly."

Under the beard, he was grinning, too. "How can a question be 'partly loaded'?" he demanded.

Neither of them had opened their containers. Whatever the food was, it couldn't compete with Clark's smile. "You could take it as an oblique way of asking whether you can see through the container," she said. "Or you could take it as just a conversation-filler."

He pulled off the lid. "We have what looks like chicken curry and

wild rice." He picked up his fork, but didn't begin eating. "I *can* see through things," he admitted with a wry smile.

"Thought so," Lois said. She lifted her container to her nose and inhaled deeply. "It smells great."

Clark ate a piece of chicken. "Uhm," he said. "Tastes great, too."

Lois slowly ate her meal, trying to decide how to work around to the subject of his parents. It was encouraging that he hadn't been perturbed by her allusion to another of his abilities. Would it be easier if they spoke while eating? Would that help them through any rough spots?

She put her food on the mattress and looked at him.

He paused, his fork halfway to his mouth. He put the fork in the container and the container on the mattress.

"Clark," Lois said. "I need to talk to you about your parents."

He paled, and his eyelids slowly dropped.

She placed her fingers on his forearm. "No," she said. "I haven't heard anything."

He opened his eyes. "You don't know if they're OK?"

"No," Lois said. His forearm muscles were hard and taut. "I don't. But I want to find out, and to do that, I need your help."

"Anything," he said. "I'll do anything I can to help you."

She reluctantly removed her hand from his arm. "It could be that we have lots of time," she said. "It could be that now Trask is buried and Moyne has left, the higher-ups will forget about this operation again, and we will have a long time to find out what we need to know."

"But?"

"But it's also possible that this has unsettled them — and that someone is going to start asking questions and demanding answers."

"That would be bad?"

Lois scrunched her nose. "It could be good," she said hesitantly. "But it could be bad."

"They could take you away?"

She could see the smouldering fear in his eyes. She wanted to hold him. Wanted to assure him that if they forced her to leave, she wouldn't leave without him.

She had done that once — left her partner. She would never do it again.

"I don't know," Lois said. "That's why we have to deal with some things now."

He nodded.

"I have asked about your parents," she said. "But I've received nothing back. I could ask again, but that might only agitate things."

Clark rubbed his forehead. "Is it possible that asking questions could make things worse for my parents?"

Lois had been hoping he wouldn't realise that. She nodded slightly, knowing her admission would distress him but not wanting to mislead him.

"Do you have any ideas?" Clark asked. "About what we *can* do?"

"I have one," Lois said. She picked up her meal and loaded some rice onto her fork. "But I don't know how you'll react."

"I'm willing to do anything," he said desperately.

"You were raised in Smallville, Kansas?"

He nodded.

Lois picked up his meal and handed it to him. "Eat," she said softly. "Don't let it get cold."

He took it with a little smile. "I was raised on a farm just north of Smallville."

"I think I should go there."

He didn't react immediately. "Why?" he asked after a few seconds.

"There's a chance your parents were allowed to return home," Lois replied. "We don't know what they were told. If they think you are dead, that would stop them looking for you."

"I ... I hadn't considered that possibility."

"Surely that would be the best we could hope for?" Lois asked. She dug her fork through the curry and lifted it to her mouth.

"Yes," he agreed. "But I don't think that's what happened."

“Why not?”

“Trask and Moyne used the poison to get me here,” Clark said. “But once I was here, they took it away. When I’d regained consciousness and recovered a bit, Trask came into the prison and asked me a lot of questions. He said that if I cooperated, my parents would be unharmed.”

“He came in here? And asked you questions? Without the rods?” Clark nodded. “You seem surprised.”

“Everything Trask wrote suggested that he believed that you would kill if anyone came in here without protection.”

“He knew that wasn’t true,” Clark said. “He came in here without the poison many times in the first few days.”

Suddenly, Lois understood something. “In one of his books, Trask wrote about things you are able to do,” she said. “Is that how he knew?”

Clark nodded. “He asked what I could do. I wasn’t sure it was wise to tell him, but he said that if I answered truthfully, he would ensure that my parents were treated well.”

Lois braced herself for the answer to her next question. “What happened then?”

“Once he had asked about what I can do, he started asking about how I planned to use those abilities.” Clark stopped and waited for her response.

“What did you tell him?”

“The truth — that as far as I know I am the only person left from my planet — and all I wanted to do was live peaceably.”

“Did you tell him you arrived here as a baby?”

“He already knew that,” Clark said. “My spaceship wasn’t big enough to hold an adult.”

“He didn’t think that fact was important enough to mention in his records.”

“Perhaps the idea of a baby wasn’t terrifying enough for him.”

“But an army of super-powered alien invaders was,” she said darkly.

“Lois ...”

“You don’t have to say it,” she said quickly.

“Say what?”

“You don’t have to tell me that you aren’t here to conquer us and take over our planet.”

An indecipherable expression sprawled across his face. “Why?” he asked in a strangled voice.

“Because nothing you say will change what I believe,” she declared with a slight lift of her chin that defied him — or anyone else — to challenge her.

He looked to be on the edge of a smile. “What do you believe?”

“I believe that you have enough strength and speed that you could do almost anything,” she said. “But I believe that your heart could never be for destruction.”

“H ...” He stumbled over his word. He closed his fist and pressed it against his mouth. When he looked up to her, his eyes were damp again.

Lois stood. “I need another drink,” she said. “Tea?”

He nodded from behind his fist. As she walked towards the door, she heard him roughly clear his throat. Every instinct implored her to turn back to him. To hold him as he fought to free himself from the dungeon of hatred where Trask and Moyne had entombed him.

But he wasn’t ready for her to get that close. She knew he wasn’t ready.

She was willing to wait.

Willing to give him as much time as she could.

She just hoped that circumstances would give him the time he needed.

Because it was going to be a long and arduous road back.

Clark fought against his tears.

That woman.

That beautiful, incredible, astonishing, remarkable woman.

She had brought him to the brink of tears more often than Trask and Moyne combined. It was as if she had reached in and touched his heart — his hard and calloused heart that had become accustomed to pain but was finding kindness to be almost unbearable.

He had to subdue his tears.

He couldn’t dissolve into a mess in front of her. She would be gone in a few hours. He could do it then — when he was alone.

But for now ...

He took a deep, deep breath and steadied himself as it rattled through him.

Through the open door, he heard the kettle boil and then the sound of water being poured into the cups. She would be here soon.

He watched the door for the first sign of her appearance. Not because he was worried that she would catch him crying, but because she brightened his world simply by stepping into it.

He heard her footsteps and knew she was going up the stairs. He glanced to the window and saw the hazy light go on. A few seconds later, the light disappeared, and he heard her footsteps on the stairs again.

He quickly zapped her cooling meal with heat from his eyes.

Then, she was at the door, carrying two mugs and the chocolate leftover from last night.

Clark rose to meet her. He took the mug she offered him. “Thank you, Lois,” he said, hoping she would comprehend that his gratitude went far beyond the cup of tea.

Her smile said she understood.

She sat down and picked up her meal.

He watched to see if she reacted to the temperature of the container.

She did. Her eyes rose to him, her smile budding. “You are full of surprises, Mr Kent.”

He pointed at her, smiling because that helped alleviate the bound-up tightness across his chest. “*That* is most unfair,” he said with mock severity.

“Unfair?” she questioned, although the sparkle in her eyes made him think she knew exactly what he meant.

“Yes,” he insisted. “*Ms* ...” His hands rose in question. “*Ms* Who?”

She grinned but didn’t answer him. He almost told her that she didn’t have to answer, but her expression assured him that she wasn’t disconcerted by his question.

“Lane,” she said.

“*Ms* Lane? *Ms* Lois Lane?”

She nodded.

“That is a very pretty name,” Clark declared.

“Thank you,” she said. She loaded her fork. “And thank you for re-heating my meal.”

“Any time,” he said.

She finished her chicken curry and settled back against the wall with her hands wrapped around her mug of tea. “How do you feel about me going to Kansas?” she asked.

“I’m not sure.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want you going into a dangerous situation.”

“Clark! You make Smallville, Kansas, sound like Suicide Slum.”

“Where?” he exclaimed.

“I’ll be fine, Clark.”

“What will you do?”

“I’ll go to Smallville. If I find out that your parents aren’t at the farmhouse, I’d like to go there.”

“You won’t try to contact them?”

“Probably not,” Lois said. “It’s always a good idea to obtain as much information as possible before showing your hand.”

“You can trust them,” Clark said earnestly.

“I know that,” Lois said. “But I have to make sure that I don’t do anything that puts them in danger.”

He nodded. “I guess that if someone is expecting an invasion, it

would make sense to watch the farm where they found the alien.”

“We should be careful, Clark,” she said. “But we shouldn’t get jumpy over every possibility. We don’t know anything yet.”

“It’s hard not to think about the possibilities.”

“I know,” she said softly.

“You said you’re a secret agent. You said that you often pretend to be someone you’re not.”

“Yeah.”

“So, I’m guessing you won’t go as Lois Lane.”

“No,” she said. “I’ll think up a cover story.”

“When will you go?”

“As soon as possible. This week.”

He was going to miss her. He would count down the hours until her return — and not only because she might bring the long-awaited news of his parents but also because he would worry. He would worry every second because he was locked away and powerless to help her.

“Would you like me to draw you a map?” he offered.

“Yes, please.”

Clark stood and brought the notebook and pen back to the mattress. He drew two maps, refusing to allow his mind to be hindered by the memories of things that were once so familiar. After a few minutes, he gave the first map to Lois. “You’ll fly to Wichita,” he said. “You can hire a car there. This is the road to Smallville.” He flipped to the second map. “This is Smallville. You take this road to the north. Along here. And that’s . . . that’s our farm.”

She examined the paper. “Are there roads from the farm back to Wichita without returning to Smallville?”

“Yes. But it’s a few miles out of your way.”

“That’s OK. Could you add them to the map, please?”

He drew two alternate routes.

Do you have neighbours?” Lois asked.

“Yes,” Clark replied. “The Irgs. They are good people. They live here.” He added a square to the map.

Lois studied the map again, and when she looked up, she rested her hand on his arm for a tiny, exhilarating second. “Remember, Clark,” she said. “This is what I do. I go into places, I find information, and I get out.”

“I just can’t stand the thought of you being hurt,” he said.

“I won’t get hurt,” she said.

He took a deep breath. “Lois,” he said. “I wish I had the words to thank you for all you’re doing for me.”

“I don’t need words,” she said.

“What do you need?” His question surprised him almost as much as it had surprised her.

“Well,” she said. “I needed someone to stop me crashing into the concrete, and then I needed someone to ice my ankle, and then I needed someone to heat my dinner.”

He smiled. And suddenly, more than anything else in the world, he wanted to touch her. He couldn’t bring himself to do it. He couldn’t force himself to lift his hand and reach for her arm. But he could remind her about the hair washing. “You said your offer is always open,” he said.

She chuckled. “I’ll get the water.”

“Are you sure about this?” he asked.

“Absolutely,” she said firmly.

“Is your ankle hurting?”

“No. It’s fine.”

“OK,” Clark said, feeling disoriented at the speed with which their conversation had leapt from Smallville to Lois washing his hair. “You . . . ah, get the water, and I’ll move the mattress away from the wall.”

Part 11

Lois stepped into Clark’s room carrying the bowl of hot water.

He saw her and hurried over to take the bowl. His steps jarred. His eyes skimmed across her face without pausing to connect.

He was nervous.

“Wh . . . what do you want me to do?” he asked.

The little stumble in his words caught at her heart. He had qualms

about this, but he was trying so hard to overcome them.

She wished he were more confident.

No, she didn’t.

If he were more confident, more sure, less hesitant, he wouldn’t be Clark.

His confidence would return slowly. And she intended to celebrate every tiny step forward.

“You could roll up the sleeping bag so we can use it as support for your shoulders to raise your head off the ground,” she said, trying to sound as if this was something she did every day.

Clark moved towards the Winnie the Pooh sleeping bag, and Lois slipped into the bathroom to collect a bundle of dry towels.

They met back at the mattress — him on one side, her on the other. Uncertainty draped him like a dark cape.

“Clark?” Lois said.

His eyes lifted to meet hers.

“There is so much about you that I respect,” she said. “Right now, I’m in awe of your willingness to do this. If it were me, I don’t think I’d ever let anyone touch me again.”

His throat leapt; his eyes dropped. She’d embarrassed him. But pleased him, too. “Thanks,” he mumbled. “I’ll lie on the concrete. You sit on the mattress.”

“There’s room for both of us,” Lois insisted. She took the sleeping bag from him and placed it on the mattress.

Clark didn’t move. If anything, he looked even more uncomfortable. “Do you want me to take off the shirt?” he asked falteringly.

“It’s up to you,” Lois said. “It might get a bit damp if you leave it on, but that’s OK if you don’t mind.” She turned and walked away to gather the shampoo and conditioner, conscious that it would give him the chance to settle on the mattress without her hovering over him.

At the door, she bent low to pick up the bottles and peeked back to Clark.

He looked like he was being stretched between indecision and uncertainty. Perhaps she shouldn’t have offered him a choice about his shirt. But it wasn’t as if she hadn’t seen him topless. Until yesterday, she hadn’t seen him in a shirt.

Suddenly, she realised something. If he could heat a meal, he could dry a shirt.

Lois hastened to the mattress to rescue him. “A few splashes of water aren’t going to matter,” she said easily. “Leave your shirt on.”

He sat down, looking about as awkward as it was possible to look.

Lois knelt behind him and wrapped the towel around his shoulders. She freed his hair and then positioned the rolled-up sleeping bag behind him. “Lie back,” she directed.

“Lois,” Clark said as he reclined. “If my hair is totally disgusting, you don’t have to do this.”

“It’s fine now,” Lois assured him. “And by the time I’m finished with it, it will be totally cool.”

He didn’t smile. His fingers clutched the towel.

“How about we set some guidelines?” Lois said in a chatty voice. She hurried on before he had the chance to answer. “You can stop this whenever you want to. We can stop and keep going later. Or we can stop, and I can go into the staffroom while you finish it.”

His long hair hung over the sleeping bag like a bushy rug.

“If you want to, you can close your eyes,” Lois said. “You don’t have to talk. Just try to relax.”

As Lois pushed the bowl towards his flowing hair, Clark suddenly lurched to a sitting position. “Lois . . .” he grated. “I’m making such a mess of this.”

She draped her hands on the edge of the bowl, and her fingers dangled in the water. “Are you worried about something specific?” she asked. “Or everything?”

Self-consciousness suppressed his attempt to smile. “Specifically, I’m worried that if I relax, I’ll lift off the mattress and freak you out completely.”

Lois nodded slowly as if considering that scenario. “Does it hurt

you to ...” She raised one dripping hand from the water.

“No.”

“Then do it now,” she suggested. “Let’s both get over being freaked out, and then we can wash your hair.”

He slowly lifted from the mattress and hovered about a foot in the air. He gazed at her, awaiting her verdict.

Lois pinned her jaw together and nodded. “OK,” she said casually. “We both survived.” She grinned at him. “Now, Clark, will you *please* just lie on that mattress, and let me get started?”

One clenched fist opened, and his hand covered his mouth — thumb on one cheek, fingers on the other — as he slowly dropped back to the mattress. Above his beard, his eyes shimmered with amused relief.

“I can see that you’re smiling,” Lois told him. “You can’t hide as easily as that.”

He removed his hand, and they grinned at each other.

“We should get started,” Lois said. “Lie down — or I am going to push you down.”

Her threat widened Clark’s smile, but he obediently turned around and settled into position on the sleeping bag.

Lois lifted the hanging sheet of his hair and slid the bowl under it. She plunged her hands into the warm water, wet the washcloth, and wrung it out loosely.

“OK,” she said. “I’m going to wet your hair.”

She put the washcloth on his forehead. A rivulet of water broke free and trickled between his eyebrows and down his nose into his eye. Lois snatched the towel and used the corner of it to dab away the moisture. “Ooops,” she said. “Sorry.”

He looked up at her. “It’s OK.”

“Here,” she said, pushing the towel into his hand. “It might be better if you were armed in case of more leaks.”

“Thanks,” he said.

She used her hand to sweep the water back from his forehead.

She’d touched him. Skin on skin contact. He seemed OK. That was one obstacle cleared.

Once his hair was thoroughly wet, Lois squirted the shampoo into her palm and applied it in creamy streaks. With feathery touches, she used her fingertips to disperse it and then scooped up some water from the bowl and tipped it on his hair to increase the lather.

Her fingers dived into his foaming hair, and she began a leisurely massage of his scalp.

Clark’s eyes had closed. The towel was threaded loosely though his slouched fingers. Lois doubted he was asleep, but he *seemed* to have quit obsessing and become relaxed enough that he could enjoy this.

She felt a little spurt of satisfaction. This had been a risk ... but, so far, it seemed to be working.

Her eyes coasted the length of his body. His feet were quite large, and his ankles sharply defined. His lower legs were covered in a thin sprinkling of dark hair.

Lois cupped her hands and scooped up some water. When she released it, a stream of bubbles flowed into the bowl. She reloaded with a second dose of shampoo and continued her slow dance through his hair.

Clark’s hands lay across his chest. They were large ... definitively masculine ... with long fingers. Her eyes fixed on the thumb of his right hand.

The thumb that had caressed her ankle.

Her *ankle*.

It had been one of the most sensual acts she had ever experienced.

The memory had taken up residence in the forefront of her mind.

She could still see his thumb gliding over her skin. She could still feel his touch.

It was so soft ... so ...

She gulped.

So loving.

Her fingers froze. Lois forced them to regain their tempo and

glanced at Clark’s face to see if he had noticed.

His eyes were still closed — his face still impassive.

Lois stared ahead at the wall and concentrated on keeping the momentous nature of her thoughts from playing out in her fingers.

This man.

Clark.

It was completely inappropriate, but she was attracted to him. Really, *really* attracted to him.

It was wrong on so many levels.

He was way too old for her.

He was a prisoner.

Her job was to guard him.

He was damaged. Hurt. Broken.

He was strong.

And kind.

And gentle.

And steadfast.

And trustworthy.

An array of paths rolled out before her, all enticing her forward into places she shouldn’t go — even in the privacy of her mind.

If ... and that was the biggest ‘if’ of her life ... if anything like that were to happen, it couldn’t happen until they were out of this cell.

She was the guard; he was the prisoner. While that situation continued, she couldn’t even contemplate the slightest hint of anything like that between them.

And that was a good thing.

That was the boundary she needed to rein in her impetuosity.

For all his immense strength, he was the vulnerable one here. He was the one most likely to get hurt.

He was the one whose future was shrouded in dark uncertainty.

Getting him out of the cell was not going to be the end, but the beginning. Once he was on the outside, he would face the enormous task of readjustment. How much of his old life was redeemable?

There were still so many questions about his parents.

Did he have other family?

Friends?

Or had being alien meant that he’d lived a life set apart?

Did he have a career?

Would it be possible to return to that career?

Was there anything in his old life that he could pick up again?

Or would he have to start everything anew?

All of those questions were immaterial if the price of freedom was a life of being hunted and hated.

Aww, Clark, she thought.

At least in the cell, the future had been certain. Horrible, but certain. Once he was out, it all became horribly uncertain.

And once he was out, would he want to be with her?

If he could ever re-establish any sort of life, would she just be a terrible reminder of things that he would want to forget?

Lois scooped up the water again and allowed it to drizzle slowly into his hair.

She couldn’t stop what she had started. She had to keep going. She had pushed him into this. She had insisted. She couldn’t let her silliness adversely affect him.

And it *was* silliness.

Mentally, she stepped away, searching for perspective.

She was vulnerable, too.

She was broken, and grieving, and insecure.

And then she’d met Clark. It was so obvious that she should have expected it.

And guarded against it.

But who would have expected that an alien could be so understanding? Supportive? Comforting?

Who would have thought that a man who had been imprisoned for seven years could have anything left to give to someone else?

Lois put a generous amount of the conditioner on her palm, lifted it to her nose, and inhaled. It had a lovely scent of freshly picked

apples. She smeared it through the long strands of his hair and began to gently finger-comb his tangles.

She looked at his face and discovered that his eyes were open. She leant forward and smiled calmly, fervently hoping that nothing of the passage of her thoughts had leaked into her expression. “Are you OK?”

“Yeah,” he said.

She began to massage the conditioner into his scalp, and his eyes closed again.

After the tragedy of Linda’s death, it was to be expected that she would gravitate towards the first person who made her feel needed.

Appreciated.

Linda’s passing had left such a huge hole in Lois’s life.

She had to be careful.

But she couldn’t back away.

With any other man, she would back away. Make a few lame excuses and disentangle herself from the web before it closed around her too tightly.

But she couldn’t do that to Clark.

She just couldn’t.

She was the one who had initiated contact.

She was the one who had tried to gain his trust.

Her long finger-sweeps gradually restored order where there had been chaos. When she’d worked through every section, Lois wrung out his hair. “OK, Clark,” she said, hoping her voice didn’t betray the disconcerting ramblings of her mind. “Can you sit up, please?”

As he rose, she bundled his hair into the towel.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” she said. She stood and lifted the bowl of water.

“I can carry that to the door,” Clark said.

“No,” she said firmly. “You sit there. I’ll do it.”

He didn’t argue.

As she refilled the bowl at the sink, Lois took a steadying breath.

If — however this ended — her heart got shattered, so be it. But she couldn’t risk that happening to Clark.

She had to protect him.

She had to give him a chance at the best life possible. And if that didn’t include being with her, she would accept that.

For now, she wouldn’t even think about how much that was going to hurt.

When the bowl was full, Lois returned to the cell. She unwrapped the damp towel and replaced it with a dry one. He lay back again, and she doused his hair as it squeaked under her fingers.

She was done.

His hair was clean. All traces of the shampoo and conditioner had been rinsed away.

And yet ...

Lois put her hand on his forehead and gently slid her palm over his pulled-back hair.

With her fingers, she traced the path from his sideburns, around the top of his ears, and down towards his neck.

His eyes were open, and he was staring up at the ceiling.

Had he sensed anything of her thoughts?

Has he felt anything in her touch? Anything beyond the practicalities of washing his hair?

With a smothered sigh, Lois folded the towel across his forehead. “OK, Clark,” she said brightly. “You can get up now.”

He rose and turned to her with a hesitant smile. “That was ... good,” he said shyly.

Maybe he had felt it, too.

This bond between them.

Or maybe he was just trying to come to terms with simple human contact.

Either way, now was not their time.

Perhaps it would never be their time.

“I’ll get the chairs,” Lois said.

Clark came with her to the doorway, but as always, he was careful

not to cross into the staffroom. Lois checked her watch. It was just after half past seven. They still had plenty of time before Longford was due to arrive.

“It’s OK,” Clark said. “I’m listening.”

“Can you hear really well?” she said. “Better than the rest of us?”

He nodded.

“That’s good to know.”

They moved two chairs into the cell, and Lois pushed a third into the doorway. Clark sat on the front chair, and Lois sat behind him. As she unrolled the towel from his shoulders, she realised that he probably hadn’t sat in a chair in a long time.

It was another little step back to normalcy.

She squirted the de-tangling lotion into his hair and heard a slight murmur.

“What’s up?” she asked.

Clark chuckled. “I wasn’t expecting it to be so cold.”

Lois hesitated, again fighting her impetuosity.

She lost.

She leant over his shoulder and held the bottle in front of him.

“Warm it then,” she challenged lightly.

He paused just long enough to incite panic within her, but then Lois felt warmth spread from the bottle and into her palm.

She laughed. “That would be very useful on a cold day.” She squirted some more and began working through the thick dark hair. It was very thick. Did aliens go bald? Clark certainly had a full head of hair.

“Lois?”

“Uhhmm?”

“Do you want to know how I heat things?”

“I’d love to know,” she said. “But only if you want to tell me.”

“I do it with my eyes.”

She chuckled, and his shoulders pulled square.

“What’s funny?” Clark asked quickly.

“Well, sometimes in romance novels, the hero is said to have ‘smouldering eyes’. I guess you really do.”

His tension ebbed away, he didn’t comment.

“Do you use it to dry your clothes after you’ve washed them?”

“Yeah. When I can.”

She kept working through strand after strand, releasing knot after knot.

“Lois?”

“Uhhmm?”

“I have a question that is definitely none of my business.”

“OK.”

“You don’t mind me asking?”

No, Lois realised. Clark would never demand answers. “No,” she said. “I don’t mind.”

He chuckled, but it sounded a little forced. “I figure that as you’re holding huge clumps of my hair, you could just yank it hard, and that would tell me I’d crossed the line.”

Lois smiled. There was something wonderfully encouraging in Clark using humour to ease them through difficult patches. “Ahh,” she said. “But even if I yanked really hard, would that hurt you?”

“Not physically, no.”

He’d said it in a quiet way that made her wish she could see his face — to know for sure that there *had* been underlying meaning to his words. There was, she decided. She was sure of it even without seeing his expression. He was acknowledging that she could hurt him.

Hurt him where he was truly vulnerable ... his emotions. His feelings. His heart.

She pushed away her ever-deepening feeling of connection with him. “Ask away,” she said lightly.

“Whose hair did you wash?” Clark asked. “Who was it that you wanted to connect with?”

“My father.”

“When you were a child?”

“No. Just a few days ago.”

Clark didn't ask any more questions.

"He had a stroke," Lois continued. "He's in a nursing home now."

Clark spun his head to look at her. There it was again — such profound sympathy. "Aw, Lois," he said. "I'm so sorry."

"It happened a couple of months ago."

"Is it bad?"

"Paralysis on one side of his body. No speech. For a long time, I wasn't sure my dad was still actually there."

"It that why you took this job?"

She nodded. "I need to be near him for a while."

Clark gave her a little smile — fuelled not with humour, but with compassion. "He's lucky to have you."

"Thanks."

He paused, not saying anything, just waiting. He was so good at that — waiting, waiting without any pressure, willing to listen if she decided that she wanted to speak.

Lois reached for his hair again, and Clark turned around.

He'd pushed the door ajar with his question. Lois decided to prise it open a little further. "How did your parents explain suddenly having a child?"

"They said there had been a death in the family, and I was an orphan."

"So no one in Smallville knows the truth about how you arrived?"

"No," he said. "We were worried that ... you know."

Yes, she knew. And what had happened was probably all of their worst fears rolled into one appalling nightmare. "So as far as anyone knew, the Kents adopted you?"

"Yeah."

She wanted to ask if that meant everyone had assumed he was human, but that sounded too blunt, so she rephrased. "If you were just a baby when you arrived, how do you know so much about your planet? How do you know it was going to be destroyed? Did your biological parents leave notes with you?"

"Not notes. They put a globe in my spaceship. It gave me information."

"A globe?"

"Like a little model of a planet."

"Did Trask find it?"

"I don't think so," Clark said. "My father hid it in the loft of the barn."

"But Trask found your spaceship?"

"Yeah. Dad and Mom figured that if they found a spaceship on our farm that was going to be hard to explain. A globe — that most of the time did nothing extraordinary at all — was easier."

"How did the globe give you information?"

"It spoke to me. It was a recording of my parents telling me why they were sending me to a faraway planet."

"Did the globe translate? Or are you bilingual?"

He chuckled. "I can't speak Kryptonian."

"Was that the name of your planet? Krypton?"

"Yeah. And, yes, the globe translated my parents' messages into English."

That was *some* globe. "Was that hard? Discovering you hadn't come from this planet?"

Clark sighed. "Not really," he said. "By then, I already knew that I was very, very different. I knew that I didn't fit in here, and it was a relief to know why."

Yeah, it would have been.

And as for being different ... he was right. Clark Kent was very different. Different in ways that just kept sneaking into her heart. And each one drew her closer to him.

A few minutes later, Clark's hair lay in a long, smooth sheet down his back. Lois unhooked the towel from his shoulders and slipped it from under his hair. She rounded the chair and faced him.

"You look great," she said with a smile.

"It feels great," he said. "Thank you."

"I'll leave the comb and everything here for you to use."

"Thanks."

"Your shirt's a bit damp at the back." Lois crouched low to pick up the bowl, but movement from Clark caused her to look up.

He'd turned away and peeled the shirt over his head. His back was a broad expanse of pearly skin. Had it always been that muscular? She'd scrutinised it ... checking for wounds. Now that there were no injuries to distract her ...

Lois swallowed down the rough lump in her throat.

Clark spun around and caught her looking at him. "Leave that," he said with a nod to the bowl. "I'll carry it to the door."

"Thanks."

Clark pushed his hair off his shoulders, held up his shirt, and focussed his eyes. Seconds later, a little cloud of steam rose from it. Then, he turned it around for her to see.

It was dry.

Lois grinned.

Clark shrugged.

Lois's eyes felt like they had a weight pulling them downwards — down to his chest. She trained them on his hair, his face, but they slipped anyway.

Then she saw something.

There was a small protrusion just above his right collarbone — about half an inch across.

As he positioned the tee shirt to pull it over his head, Lois checked his other shoulder and saw that his left collarbone had no corresponding bulge.

Was it an old injury?

Or was it a physical difference between Kryptonians and humans?

Clark's head squeezed through the neck of the shirt, and he released his beard and hair from under the material. He smoothed down his hair at the back and smiled at her. "That feels fantastic. Thanks."

Inexplicitly, the tide of awkwardness flowed back now that the task of washing his hair no longer provided a distraction.

Lois pointed to the door. "We should get these chairs out of here," she said. "Longford will arrive soon."

Clark picked up both chairs and took them to the door. Once all three chairs and the bowl were back in the staffroom, they faced each other — Lois in the staffroom, and Clark in the cell. She handed him the bowl filled with hot clean water.

"I won't go up to my office," she said. "Knock on the door when you're finished, and I'll collect the bowl."

He paused, looking at her with those brown eyes that had the power to melt every sinew in her body. "Thank you," he said softly. "For everything."

His words were soft, but their power was dynamic.

Lois managed a wobbly smile. She had to get out from under the warmth of his eyes. If she didn't, she was going to capitulate and reach up to hug him. She *couldn't* do that. That crossed just about every line of propriety that existed. And — more importantly — it would freak him out completely. "Good night, Clark," she said. "See you tomorrow."

He took the bowl and walked away.

Lois closed the door and locked it.

She sank into the nearest chair.

She had suggested that she wash his hair because she wanted to give him something he would enjoy. She wanted to find a non-threatening way to ease him back to being comfortable with human contact. In that, she figured she had succeeded. He had seemed relaxed. He seemed pleased that his hair was smooth and untangled.

But what she hadn't reckoned on was how much she would enjoy it. How much she would enjoy touching him. How much she would enjoy the physical contact.

How much it would bind them together.

How right it would feel to be with him.

She missed him.

He was on the other side of the door, and she'd spent most of the

day with him, yet she already missed him.

When the time came for him to be free ... to begin the rest of his life ... she wanted to be with him.

More than anything, she wanted to be with Clark.

Clark emptied the bowl of water and knocked on the cell door. He heard her approaching footsteps, and the door opened.

He held the bowl towards her, knowing that he was never going to be able to express his appreciation of what she had done for him tonight. If he tried, it might sound as if he was only referring to her washing his hair.

But it was so much more than that.

Lois took the bowl.

She didn't seem to know what to say either.

"Goodnight, Lois," he said.

"Goodnight, Clark."

He turned and walked away from her.

Freeing her to return to her world.

A world where he would never be welcome.

Part 12

Lois shut the cell door and locked it. She put the bowl on the drainer and went up to her office.

Clark was unrolling the sleeping bag. He looked different with smooth, straight hair.

It was very dark — almost black.

She could still feel its thick silkiness.

Lois picked up Trask's logbook and found March 1988 — the day of the surgery. She quickly turned the page and read the entries from the following days.

Among the expected vitriol, she found a passing comment that the alien had recovered enough to 'require' a discipline session four days later.

However, there was no further reference to the surgery.

Lois closed the book as biting nausea engulfed her.

Reading Trask's record of abuse had been gruelling enough when Clark had been an unknown stranger.

It was so much worse now that she knew him as a person.

A good-hearted and considerate person whose only crime was being different.

She knew that some of Trask's 'records' were lies. All she could hope was that the abuse hadn't been as bad as described in the log. From what she knew of Trask and Moyne and from what she'd observed when she'd first arrived, that didn't seem likely.

She forced away her too-vivid imaginings and took the logbook down to the staffroom to put it in the closet for Shadbolt to read tomorrow. Back in her office, she checked that the camera was set to record the next morning. Ten minutes later, when Longford arrived, she locked her office and went down the stairs.

"Ms Lane," Longford said as she entered.

"Longford," she greeted. "How is everything?"

"Good," he replied. "Is there a bagel in the fridge for the alien's breakfast?"

"Yep," Lois said. "And, Longford, I need to attend to some personal business this week. Would it be possible for us to swap shifts on Thursday?"

"I can't on Thursday," he said. "My mother has an appointment."

"Wednesday? Friday?"

"Wednesday would be all right."

Lois smiled. "Thanks, Longford. You take over from Shadbolt at two o'clock, and I'll get here as soon as I can."

"What time will that be?"

"I'm not sure," Lois said. "Probably in the evening some time."

"OK," he said.

"Thanks. See you tomorrow."

Lois was pleasantly tired when she arrived at her apartment. Tired enough that she was hopeful she would fall asleep quickly, but not so tired that her body ached.

She pulled off her socks and shoes and examined her injured ankle. It was a little bit puffy, but from the time Clark had nestled it in his large, capable hands, the sum total of her discomfort had been a few minor pangs.

As she prepared for bed, Lois planned the following day.

She intended to be at the travel agents when they opened. She needed to book a seat on the first airplane to Wichita on Wednesday morning and a return flight during the afternoon. She estimated she would have three hours in Smallville. It was a lot of travelling for such a short time, but she couldn't leave Clark for longer than a day.

After booking her flights, she intended to visit her dad and then go to his home to collect a few things for an idea that had been fermenting for a couple of days.

By then, she hoped it would nearly be time to go to the compound.

Lois slipped between the sheets, and the simple act of closing her eyes crumbled all the dams and allowed thoughts of Clark to sweep into her mind. Was he asleep? Was he thinking about the day they had shared?

He would be.

He had so little else to occupy his thoughts.

The aborted game of squash, her sprained ankle, sharing their meals, washing his hair...

Lois gave a little sigh as she recalled the feeling of gliding sudsy fingers through his thick, dark hair.

She would never forget the feel of him. Touching him. The joy of restoring another small fragment of what Trask had stolen.

She knew she had to be patient.

She knew she had to give him time.

She knew that if she moved too quickly, it would difficult for Clark to adapt to life outside. The damage from seven years of imprisonment and abuse couldn't be wiped away in a few days.

She didn't know how she was going to get him out.

She didn't even know enough to begin to plan.

Was it going to be possible to successfully appeal to the higher-ups? Or was she going to have to break him out?

She had been a fugitive for a month after the death of her partner. She had hidden, and stolen, and bartered, and lurked, and haggled, and lied, and skulked until — finally — she had gained her freedom.

And that had been in a foreign country where her language skills were no more than adequate.

She could do it again if that was what was required.

It would be best for Clark if those in authority freed him so that he could live like any other regular guy.

But in even alluding to that, she risked a backlash. They could determine that she didn't fully appreciate the dangers inherent in an alien invader. They could attempt to remove her from the operation and stop her contact with Clark. One misplaced question from her could alert them to the possibility of an attempted escape.

There was so much she didn't know, but she did know that the alternative — that Clark spend the remainder of his life in that room — was unthinkable.

And — once he was out — if he chose to be with her ...

It was a long time later when sleep finally calmed the bustle of her mind.

~ Tuesday ~

The peal of her phone awakened Lois the next morning.

She clambered out of bed as trepidation coursed through the fog of her sleepy mind. Had something happened to Clark? Or was it the nursing home?

"Lois Lane," she said into the phone.

"Ms Lane. It's Shadbolt." Her dad was OK. But was Clark?

"Shadbolt." Lois checked the time — it was a few minutes past six. What had happened? Was Clark all right? "What's up?" she asked, requiring every ounce of her expertise in duplicity to sound unconcerned.

"Is it possible for you to come to the compound?" he said.

“Longford is here, and we would both like to speak with you.”

He sounded resolute, but not overwrought. “Are you both OK?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Is everything OK in the room?” she asked as a slither of fear crisscrossed her gut.

“Yes,” Shadbolt replied. “Are you able to come now? Or should I tell Longford to come back at two o’clock?”

“I’ll come now,” Lois said.

“Thanks,” Shadbolt said. “See you soon.”

As Lois sped to Bessolo Boulevard, her anxiety escalated with each passing mile. What had happened? She knew Shadbolt couldn’t give her more details over the phone, but not knowing felt like an attack of prickly heat spreading through her insides.

She parked the Jeep. At the external door, she took a steadying breath.

Assume nothing.

Give nothing away.

She opened the creaky door and walked casually into the staffroom.

Both men were sitting at the table.

“What’s wrong?” Lois asked briskly.

Shadbolt stood from the chair and leant back against the sink. He folded his arms across his chest.

Longford was staring at his tightly clenched hands.

Lois controlled the compulsion to look at the door to the cell. Was Clark OK?

“We have concerns,” Shadbolt said.

“Specifically?” Lois said.

“During the night, Longford heard a low pounding noise coming from the cell.”

“Pounding?” Lois said, her eyebrows lifting. “He was probably running.”

“When we pushed the bagel into the cell, we saw a tennis racquet in there.”

Lois’s eyelids wanted to slide shut in dismay. She’d forgotten all about the racquets. “That explains the pounding,” she said evenly.

“A racquet could be used as a weapon,” Shadbolt said.

“Did he threaten you when you put his breakfast in there?”

Longford’s head jolted up, and she saw the fear pitted on his face. “No,” he admitted. “But you’ve stopped all exposure to the rods. He’s probably close to full strength. And now you’ve armed him.”

Had something else happened? Was she missing something? Lois glanced to Shadbolt, but there was nothing in his expression to give clarification.

Lois slid into the seat across from Longford and looked at him directly. “You told me that you’d never seen anything from the prisoner to suggest he is a danger,” she said in a tone that she hoped would encourage him to speak openly. “I don’t understand what has changed.”

“Until now, he *couldn’t* attack,” Longford said. “He was weak, and underfed, and always recovering from the latest beating.”

“And now?”

“And now, an attack is possible,” he said. “And when I heard the thudding, that’s what I thought was happening.”

It sounded as if he’d heard an unexpected noise, and his imagination — fuelled by Trask’s lies — had done the rest.

His fears were unfounded, but the last thing Lois needed was Longford taking his concerns to Scardino. She leant back in her chair and laced her fingers on the table. “What is your greatest concern? Your short-term safety? Or the long-term safety of humankind?”

“Both,” Longford said.

“But?”

“Mostly, I’m concerned about opening the door. And it’s not just about me. I don’t want either of you getting hurt because you took risks for me.”

“What do you suggest?” Lois asked.

Longford faltered under her steady gaze. “I ... I think that regular exposure to the rods sends a message,” he persisted. “A message of strength.”

“Assuming someone is listening,” Lois muttered dryly. She felt as if she were hurtling down a hill at an ever-increasing speed. She grappled for a subtle way to realign their perspective. “OK,” she said in calm voice. “I’ve given him food. I’ve given him water for washing. I’ve given him a tennis racquet and a jigsaw puzzle to help pass the time. I’ve stopped the regular torture sessions. Let’s be reasonable here. I’ve done nothing that isn’t done in our highest security prisons.”

“Those prisoners aren’t aliens,” Longford said.

That was probably the driving factor here — fear of someone who was different. Fear — not of what he’d done — but what he *could* do. Nothing she said was going to change that. Lois nodded thoughtfully. “Can you give me some time to work this out?”

Longford looked to Shadbolt, and Lois saw a small nod pass between them.

“OK,” Shadbolt said. “A day. Two at the most.”

She sensed warning in his agreement.

“What about his meals?” Longford asked.

“You don’t have to open the door if you have concerns about your safety.”

“So, he doesn’t get fed?” Shadbolt said.

“I’m sure he’ll be all right,” Lois said dismissively. “He survived for a long time with only one meal a day.”

A heavy silence fell. Longford shuffled uneasily to his feet. “I’m sorry to have caused such a bother,” he said.

“If you’re worried about something, it’s important that you speak up,” Shadbolt said.

Longford looked relieved. “I ... ah ... have an appointment. Is it OK if I leave?”

Lois nodded, and Longford returned his empty coffee cup to the sink and left the room.

When the external door had closed, Lois stood from the chair and faced Shadbolt squarely. “OK,” she said. “What gives?”

“What do you mean?”

“I told you that when Moyne pushed me into the cell, the alien did nothing to me. You’re a smart guy — you must have questions about some of the things you’ve been told.”

“What’s your point?” His tone hinted at bemusement, but Lois wasn’t buying it.

“You told me that your biggest concern was that you would have to haul my body out of that cell,” she said. “I was thrown in there, and I walked out, unharmed except for what Moyne did to me.”

Shadbolt’s expression didn’t waver.

“So why the one-eighty?” Lois demanded. “Why are you suddenly so twitchy again?”

He glanced down. When he looked up again, the phony confusion was gone. “Longford was in a state when I arrived,” he said as if that explained everything.

“Just because of a few noises?”

“Longford’s concerns needed to be taken seriously.” Shadbolt went to the closet and took out Trask’s logbook. “While we were waiting for you, I read some of this,” he said.

Lois fought down her frustration. He’d been swayed by Trask. *Again.* “And?”

“I know that some of it isn’t accurate, but it makes for compelling reading.”

“Compelling?” Lois echoed, struggling to keep her voice from exploding with indignation. “It’s supposed to be an official document, not the script of a horror movie.”

“Trask believed it.”

“Trask was a lunatic.”

Shadbolt’s left eyebrow edged upwards, and most of his sternness melted away. “I think you could be right about that.”

Lois wasn’t sure if that were jest or an admission, so she waited

for him to continue.

“But nothing changes that you need to find a way to placate Longford — you do *not* need him going to Scardino.”

OK, that sounded more hopeful. “Any ideas?”

“I have one idea,” Shadbolt said. “But I don’t think you’ll like it.”

He was going to demand that Clark be exposed to the rods. Lois smoothed her face to a mask. “Go on.”

“A pet door would enable us to get food into the cell without having to open the door.”

Lois pushed back her hair and secured it behind her ear. “I have been thinking along the same lines,” she said. “But I’d thought of a chute.”

“How would you handle the installation?”

“I’d have to use the rods.”

Shadbolt nodded. “That’s the bit I expected you to resist.”

Lois’s mind was surging forward at breakneck speed. “My first responsibility is the safety of the humans working here,” she said. “If the installation of a pet door means Longford can do his job, it’s worth considering. Scardino isn’t going to be happy if Longford quits.”

“Simply using the rods isn’t enough,” Shadbolt said. “You would need to keep the prisoner out of sight.”

“Yeah.”

“How would you do that?”

“I thought I’d watch him from my office, and when he goes behind the wall, I’ll go in with a rod. He’ll collapse there, meaning I wouldn’t have to move him. Someone working on the door wouldn’t be able to see into that part of the cell.”

“You’d have to stand there with a rod while he’s working on the door,” Shadbolt said. “How would you explain that?”

“I’ve thought about that,” she said. “I’ll go in and pretend to be another worker — probably a painter would be easiest. I’ll paint the wall, keep the rod close, and watch the prisoner.”

“Are you absolutely sure that the rods incapacitate the alien?”

“Yes,” Lois stated firmly.

“Sure enough that you’re willing to risk your life? And the life of a civilian?”

“I don’t think there’s a risk,” Lois said. “Not with the rods.” She expected Shadbolt to remind her that the presence of the rods hadn’t saved Deller and Bortolotto.

He didn’t. “Do you want me here? When the pet door goes in?”

No, she didn’t. “I’ll make the calls,” Lois said. “It can’t be tomorrow — Longford and I are swapping shifts.”

“So you’ll try to get someone to come today?”

“Guess so.”

“Get them to come this morning.”

“I’ll try,” Lois lied.

Shadbolt rubbed his hand across his newly-shaven chin. “There’s something that doesn’t add up.”

If he’d been reading Trask’s logbook, there was probably a lot that didn’t add up. “What?”

“Why didn’t he escape when the door was open?”

“I don’t —”

But then she did.

The surgery.

The little lump just above Clark’s collarbone.

His careful avoidance of the doorway.

She couldn’t process the ramifications now.

With a hand that shook just a little, Lois reached for the logbook.

Shadbolt gave it to her. She found the March 1988 entry and quickly turned the page to look at the preceding days.

February 29, 1988

The cage was fortified today. During the installation, Moyne guarded the unconscious alien in my office. Later, we dragged him back into the cage.

Tomorrow, I will ensure that he never leaves again.

Lois offered the open book to Shadbolt.

He took it, read it, and looked up.

“The surgery was the next day,” Lois said.

Shadbolt turned the page and read again. “Do you know what the surgery entailed?”

In her mind, she had to keep Clark distanced from this conversation. She had to pretend that they were discussing an unidentified stranger. “I think so.”

“What?”

“I think Trask put something around the doorway to act as a trigger. The next day, he and Moyne implanted something into the alien which, if activated, will kill him.”

“A piece of the Achilles?”

“Probably. But if that is what Trask used, it means he knew the Achilles is poison to the prisoner.” Lois leant forward and pointed to the entry. “Trask says he strengthened his position over the enemy. He already had him locked in a cage. He already had the rods. This had to be something more.”

Shadbolt’s eyes leapt from the book to Lois. “Did the alien tell you this?”

“No,” Lois said. “Trask left binoculars in his office. I noticed there is a lump just below the alien’s shoulder. One shoulder only. It explains why he didn’t escape even though the door was open.” She paused to give emphasis to her next statement. “I think Trask was the sort of person who covered every possible eventuality. As he says, he guaranteed the alien can *never* leave the cell.”

Shadbolt slammed the book shut as his face contorted with doubts.

Lois waited.

“If the rods really do totally incapacitate the prisoner ...”

Lois continued to wait.

“What do you think happened to Deller and Bortolotto?” Shadbolt asked bleakly.

“I don’t have any evidence for what I believe.”

“Do you think the alien did it?”

“No,” Lois said. “I don’t.”

Shadbolt pulled his hand through his hair and muttered an expletive. “Why kill them?” he demanded.

“Perhaps they were causing problems. Perhaps they were threatening to draw attention to what was going on here. Perhaps it was felt that they needed to be silenced.”

Shadbolt shook his head vehemently. “That wasn’t being *silenced*,” he said. “That was perversion.” He swallowed, and his throat jagged roughly. “Do you think there is an alien invasion coming?”

“I don’t know,” Lois said. “But if Trask was right, and the alien initially believed supporting armies were coming, don’t you think that by now, he’d be totally demoralised? Don’t you think he’d have realised that he’s on his own?”

Shadbolt slammed the logbook onto the table. “I knew Trask was driven,” he said, as if speaking to himself. “I knew he was obsessive. But I was sickened by the state of the bodies ... I didn’t want to believe that a fellow human being had done it.”

“You’ve been an agent for a long time,” Lois said gently. “You must have seen some awful things.”

“I have,” Shadbolt agreed. “But there was something intrinsically evil about these murders. Something inhuman.”

Lois figured she’d said enough. It was best now to leave Shadbolt to draw his own conclusions. She took a step towards the door. “I have to go,” she said. “See you later. I’ll call you if I can get someone to do the pet door this morning.”

“Are you going to check with Scardino first? Get him to OK the finances?”

“No,” Lois said. “This is my operation. I make the decisions.”

Shadbolt nodded distractedly. “OK. Bye.”

Lois went through the external door. Once outside, she released a huge breath.

What was happening with Shadbolt? Was it possible that he was finally questioning some of the things he had accepted as truth?

Or was he feigning his change of heart in the hope she would

disclose information about her contact with the prisoner?

Had Scardino asked Shadbolt to watch her and report back to him?

Had someone higher than Scardino — Moyne's *friend* — talked with Shadbolt?

Why had he suggested the pet door? It fit perfectly with Lois's partly developed plans for concealing the gradual changes that she intended to bring to Clark's life, but what was Shadbolt's motivation?

Was he genuinely worried about Longford?

Was he concerned that if they lost another agent, the operation would be closed down, and he would no longer be able to do whatever was so important every afternoon?

Lois's mind was churning as she walked to her Jeep.

She had to be careful. She couldn't trust anyone. She had to work alone.

She smiled suddenly as she started the motor.

No, she wasn't alone.

She had Clark.

Lois was waiting outside the door of the travel agents when they opened. Half an hour later, she had booked an early morning flight to Wichita and a mid-afternoon return for the next day.

She returned to her apartment, searched through the directory, and called a company that supplied and fitted pet doors. They had what she needed — a one-way pet door for a small dog — at a price she thought was reasonable ... and could come next week.

Lois thanked them and called the next number in the directory.

Three calls later, she found someone who was willing to come late that afternoon. She gave the address, thanked him profusely, and hung up.

She hurried to her Jeep and drove to the nursing home. Her dad was dressed and sitting in his wheelchair. She talked, and he listened, but all the time, Lois was wondering how it would affect him if she suddenly had to leave. Not just leave the nursing home but also leave Metropolis. Perhaps be out of contact. Again.

She could try to give him some sort of explanation. But not today. The future was too hazy. She didn't know enough yet.

Lois told him about the game of squash, not getting too conscience-stricken when she knew it sounded as if the game had gone longer than a few hits.

"Then I twisted my ankle pretty badly, Dad," she said. "But that nice man looked after it."

Her dad lifted his arm and swung it for a few inches before letting it drop onto his tray.

"Ah, Dad," Lois said with regret. "I forgot about the airplane. I'm sorry. I'll ask him to make one for you."

Her dad's hand rose from the tray and moved to the centre of his chest.

Was he in pain?

Lois scrutinised his inert face in alarm. "What is it, Dad?"

He slowly curled his fingers to a clenched fist and patted his sweatshirt.

"I don't understand," Lois said regretfully. "I'm sorry."

His forefinger straightened, and he pointed at her.

"You love me?" Lois asked uncertainly. She knew he did, but she wasn't sure at all that that was what he was trying to say.

He returned his hand to the tray.

This must be so frustrating for him.

She would have to guess.

"If you're saying that you love me, Dad, I know that," she said with a smile. "I've always known how much you love me."

His eyes blinked twice.

Did that mean 'no'?

It couldn't mean that he didn't love her. She would never believe that. It must mean that she had interpreted wrongly.

Lois hugged him. "I'm sorry, Dad," she said. "I'll think about it and try to work it out. OK?"

He blinked once.

She talked about a few more subjects — the awesomeness of Uncle Mike's food and how nice apple conditioner smelled — encouraged by the fact that her dad appeared to be listening.

Then Lois rose from her seat next to his wheelchair. She put the doggy stress ball in his hand and kissed his cheek. "I can't come tomorrow, Dad," she said. "But I'll be back to see you on Thursday."

By Thursday, she might know something about Clark's parents. She might know something about what had happened to them. The future might be just a little clearer.

After leaving her dad, Lois drove to his home and let herself in. His cleaner had kept it from becoming dusty, but nothing could expel the feeling of empty abandonment.

She went into his garage and passed his late-model Buick. It probably hadn't been driven in months. Decisions were going to have to be made about what happened to his house ... his car ... his finances ... his share of the medical practice where he had worked.

At the back of the garage, Lois rustled through her dad's tools. She collected a hammer and a bag of small nails. She found a flat piece of wood about the size of a broadsheet newspaper and a couple of lengths of half-inch-square moulded lumber. She added a small saw and carted it all to her Jeep.

It was midday.

She wanted to go to Clark.

But she couldn't appear too eager. She didn't want it getting back to Scardino that she couldn't keep away from the compound.

She drove to a strip of stores and meandered along the sidewalk in the soft fall sunlight. She walked into most of the stores — even those that held very little interest. Every article she looked at evoked thoughts of Clark. Would he like this? Did he miss that? Had he used those?

Did he have a favourite colour?

What made him smile?

Did he buy only what he needed? Or did he occasionally splurge on extravagances?

Lois regularly checked her watch — and grew increasingly frustrated at time's torpid pace.

Finally, it was one-thirty, and Lois decided she had waited long enough.

She went into a cafe and bought two shaved ham and havarti cheese herbed rolls. She added two tubs of strawberry yoghurt topped with granola and a bottle of fresh orange juice.

Then, with mounting excitement, she drove to the compound. So much had happened since he'd left him yesterday. How much of it could she discuss with him?

All of it, she realised.

All of it.

She could trust him.

There was no need for secrets between them.

She didn't want secrets.

Except for one thing.

She wouldn't tell him outright that she intended to get him out of the cell.

If he asked, she wouldn't lie. But if he didn't ask, she wouldn't tell him.

If she told him, he would worry. He would worry about how they were going to overcome whatever Trask and Moyne had implanted in his shoulder. He would worry about her. He would worry about his parents.

She would tell him about the pet door.

And how it seemed as if Shadbolt was questioning some of the things he'd been told. Clark might have some insights on Shadbolt. Had he been overly cruel? Or had he just done what Trask had ordered?

She would tell Clark about her trip to Kansas tomorrow. How would he feel about that? Excited? Apprehensive? Hopeful?

As Lois parked her Jeep, she realised how wonderful it felt to have someone she could confide in again. To have someone to work with.

To not feel so alone.

She let herself into the compound and went into the staffroom. Shadbolt looked up from where he was reading Trask's logbook. "No luck with the pet door?" he asked.

"Not for this morning," Lois said. "Is everything OK here?"

"Yep. I didn't open the door. Did you bring him lunch?"

She nodded. "I'll get the rod."

Lois ran up to her office. She deposited her bag on the floor and turned towards the window.

Clark was there, leaning against the back wall, his hands deep in the pockets of his shorts, his hair falling straight and neat past his shoulders.

He was waiting.

Waiting for her.

"Hold on, Clark," she whispered. "I'll be there soon."

Once she was downstairs again, Lois held the rod while Shadbolt deposited the ham and cheese roll into the cell.

"Thanks," she said as he pulled the door shut.

"What's going to happen with his evening meal?" Shadbolt asked.

"The pet door will be in by then," Lois said.

"They're coming this afternoon?" he asked with surprise.

"Yeah."

"What time?"

"They're going to try for four o'clock."

Shadbolt looked conflicted. "I *can't* stay," he said. "I have to be gone by three."

Lois had relied on that. "That's OK," she said casually as she put the rod in the closet. "There won't be a problem. I have two rods here."

Shadbolt seemed more resistant to the idea than he had been earlier. "Perhaps you should call Longford and get him to come in."

Lois shook her head. "Longford is already nervous," she said. "We don't need the installer picking up any vibes about this place."

Shadbolt nodded. "Are you sure you'll be OK?"

"I'm positive," Lois said.

"I wasn't expecting that you would do it alone."

"When he said he could come this afternoon, I accepted," Lois said. "It can't happen tomorrow, and Thursday is too long to wait."

"Do you know how long it will take to install?"

"Half an hour."

That piece of information seemed to disperse his worries a little. "Be careful."

"I will," Lois said, wishing she could open the external door and push Shadbolt through it.

He picked up the logbook and offered it to her. "Thanks for letting me read it," he said.

Lois took it from him. "I'll put it back," she said. "It's not something that should be left lying around — not with civilians coming in. See you Thursday."

"Bye."

Lois walked up the stairs to her office, reflecting that it might be a good thing that she wouldn't see Shadbolt for a couple of days. If he were reporting back to someone, distance was a good thing.

She tossed the book into one of Trask's boxes and looked into the cell. Clark was combing his hair. Lois smiled at his technique. He ran the comb down the back of his head to the limit of his reach. Then he removed the comb and started again at the top.

Clearly, when he had had a choice, his hair had been kept short.

Once the pet door was installed, a haircut might be possible.

His lunch lay near the door, untouched.

As she watched Clark return the comb to his tin box, Lois listened intently. Waited.

Finally, she heard the creak of the external door, and she looked at the clock. It was 1:51. She would wait until 1:55.

Four minutes. Four long minutes.

Part 13

While she waited for the time to pass, Lois checked the assortment

of things she had bought yesterday. She had prepared well. She had known she would need some of these things ... she just hadn't thought it would happen so soon.

A sense of urgency pressed in on her again, and she thought of Clark.

If things happened quickly, how was he going to cope? Physically, he would be fine. Emotionally ...

How could she best prepare him?

Lois waited the four minutes, and then, with a smile she couldn't repress, she took her herbed roll, both of the yoghurts, and the bottle of orange juice from her bag. She glanced into the cell. Clark was still waiting.

She locked her office door and ran down the stairs. Her ankle hadn't given her any trouble at all. Clark's 'ice' had worked amazingly well.

She stopped briefly in the staffroom to collect two spoons and two glasses, and then she unlocked the door.

As she stepped into the cell, she stooped low to add Clark's roll to her bounty. He was already halfway across the room. He stopped when he saw her, smiled hesitantly, and then hastened forward, his hands outstretched to help carry their lunch.

Lois's heart gave a little leap to see him again. "Hi, Clark," she said brightly.

"Hi, Lois."

His voice was so soft and so full that it felt more like an embrace than a greeting. It would have felt so natural to step up to him, place a hand on his shoulder, and drop a little kiss on his cheek. That wasn't possible, so she made do with running her eyes across his face. "Your hair looks great," she said.

"Thanks. How's your ankle?"

She smiled. "It feels fantastic. Thank you for what you did for me yesterday."

"You're welcome." He shrugged slightly, and his eyes fell to the food they carried. "Shall we eat? I waited for you."

They sat on the mattress he had placed against the wall. "How was last night?" Lois asked as she removed the plastic wrap from her roll. "Did you sleep any better?"

"A little. The mattress and bedding didn't seem quite so unnatural."

Something told her that it was more than the unfamiliar bedding that had kept him awake. Could it possibly have been thoughts of her? Memories of her washing his hair, perhaps?

"Is something wrong?" Clark asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I ..." He winced apologetically. "I thought I heard your voice early this morning. I didn't hear anything that was said, but ... Sorry."

Again, Lois wanted to touch him — to reach across the small divide of the mattress and brush her hand on his arm. She smiled and hoped that would suffice. "You don't have to be sorry," she said. "I was here. Shadbolt called me in. And it doesn't matter if you heard because I intend to discuss it with you anyway."

His reaction — a little flicker of his eyelids and a ripple through the whiskers around his mouth — reminded her of how something as small as not being excluded meant so much to Clark.

"Is there a problem?" he asked.

"Nothing that can't be fixed," she said.

"What happened?"

"Longford got a bit anxious."

Clark understood immediately — understood that the cause of the anxiety was something they thought he might do. Lois saw the pain streak across his face. How awful to believe that people always thought the worst of him — always thought he was capable of violent and brutal behaviour. "What are we going to do?" he asked.

Lois halted her herbed roll halfway to her mouth and gave him a lingering smile.

"What?" he asked, his puzzlement showing in the quirk of his eyebrow.

“You,” she replied.

“Me?”

“I love that you asked what *we* are going to do.”

Instead of smiling, he glanced around the room. “Realistically, there is very little I can do,” he said somberly.

“There’s a lot you can do,” Lois corrected. “You can discuss ideas with me. You have unique insight into Shadbolt and Longford and how they are most likely to act. I need you to help me decide the best way to do this.”

It was true, but Lois’s primary reason for her words was the need to counterbalance the little dip in Clark’s spirits.

Instead of the reaction she had hoped for, an outbreak of questions plagued his expression. He placed his roll on the paper bag and stared at it. “Lois,” he said in a voice wrapped in anguished uncertainty.

“What’s wrong, Clark?” she asked.

“Why are you doing this?” he grated hoarsely.

Lois smiled at him, but he didn’t raise his eyes. “Do I need a reason?” she asked.

“Where do you see this ending?”

“Where do you see it ending?”

Clark lifted his head, torment burning in his eyes. “It can’t end outside this prison,” he stated dully.

His words hacked through her plans. “Why not?”

“I can’t leave here.”

Lois studied him for a moment, perceiving the vast depths of his fear and hopelessness. She guessed it was fear for his parents and hopelessness for himself. She waited for him to raise his lowered eyes. He didn’t.

Lois put down her lunch and laid her hand on his right shoulder. Under her fingers, he stiffened.

With her thumb, she traced the line of his collarbone — lightly skimming over the protrusion that could be felt under his shirt. The point of his shoulder curved forward, pushing her away. Lois raised her thumb, but didn’t remove her hand.

“Because of that?” she asked.

His reply was a stunted nod.

“Clark,” Lois said. “We are not going to let a little lump stop us from doing what is right.”

His head slowly rose, and solemn brown eyes drilled into hers. “I accepted a long time ago that I can’t have a life outside of this prison.”

“I have *not* accepted that.”

“Lois,” he said wretchedly. “They put granules of the poison inside me. If I go through the door, the lead shell bursts open, the poison spreads through my body, and I’ll be dead within minutes.”

“We’ll bulldoze the wall if we have to,” she said with quiet resolve. “We’ll find whatever Trask put there to activate the poison, and we’ll destroy it. We will find a way.”

A slender thread of hope weaved through the despair so apparent in his face.

Lois gently curled her fingers into the hard slope of muscle. “But we don’t have to think about that yet,” she said. “We need to plan other things first.”

Her hand slid from his shoulder.

Clark picked up his roll.

And Lois realised that she had just crossed the line from which there could be no return. She had planted hope. Acceptance of his situation probably hadn’t come quickly or easily, and she had brushed it aside in a moment.

She had to nurture that hope. Protect it. She couldn’t allow it to wilt or be uprooted. If she did, her cruelty would be greater than Trask’s had been.

Clark had resumed eating his roll. Lois took that as a good sign. “I’ve been concerned about how Shadbolt and Longford will react to some of the changes we’ve made,” she said, keeping her tone casual.

“Yeah, I’ve wondered about that, too.”

“I figure we need a way to give them access to this room while limiting how much they can see.”

“A small chute in the wall?”

Lois smiled. “That was my thought,” she said. “But a pet door will work just as well.”

Clark slowly chewed a mouthful of his roll and then looked at her. “What happens when the man is here to work on the door?” he said.

Lois grinned. “I have that all worked out.”

A tiny suggestion of a smile pushed through his despondency. “What?”

“In my office, I have a pair of coveralls.”

“OK,” he said hesitantly.

She grinned again. “I also have a pot of paint and a brush. You put on the coveralls; you paint the wall; you just look like another worker.”

He couldn’t hide the wave of his relief.

“Clark!” Lois exclaimed. “What were you thinking?”

His eyes darted away. He didn’t want to tell her.

But she knew. And she was horrified. “Clark! You weren’t thinking that I would bring one of the rods into the cell, were you?”

That was exactly what he had been thinking. It was as clear as a neon sign on his face. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

Lois reached across the short distance between them and laid her hand on his for a tiny moment. “The rods are never coming back,” she promised. “Not if I can help it.”

“I didn’t think you would want to,” he said. “I just couldn’t see any other way.”

“As far as the door man is concerned, you will be just another labourer working on the renovation of this place.”

His smile came haltingly. “Thanks.”

She looked around the room. “After we’ve eaten, we should get rid of some of this stuff. It would be hard to explain tennis racquets and a mattress in a room that’s being painted.”

“Ah, no,” Clark said suddenly. “Did they hear me hitting the ball against the wall? Is that why they called you in early this morning?”

She nodded. “But it doesn’t matter.”

“It was the middle of the night,” Clark explained. “I couldn’t sleep, and I hadn’t heard any sounds for a long time. I figured the guard was asleep. I hit the ball really softly, hoping he wouldn’t hear.”

“Maybe the acoustics in here are weird,” Lois said. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter.”

“What did you tell them?”

“Not much,” she said with a grin.

“I’m sorry,” he said ruefully. “I should have realised. I didn’t mean to make everything more difficult for you.”

“Clark, it worked out well. Shadbolt suggested the pet door — that meant I didn’t have to.”

“Why do you think Shadbolt suggested it?” Clark asked.

“I don’t know,” Lois said. “I don’t know if he was trying to be genuinely helpful, or if someone has asked him to report back on how I run this operation.”

“Does he know you come in here?”

Lois grinned. “Only two people know I come in here.”

His answering smile began but was aborted before it acquired full strength. “Lois, you need to be careful.”

“I am being careful,” she said. “I’m avoiding all contact with Scardino and hoping he will forget about this operation again.”

“Scardino?”

“The one above me in the chain of command.” Lois picked up a sliver of cheese from where it was perched on the edge of her roll and slipped it into her mouth. “What do you know about Shadbolt?”

“They made him come in here and get the bodies.”

“Did he have anything to do with the murders?”

“No. Nothing. But he was the one who had to clean up the mess.”

“Did he seem affected by it?”

“Very. He had to run for the bathroom once.” Clark’s eyes clouded with a memory. “He is sure that I killed them.”

Again, Lois fought against the compulsion to reach forward and connect with Clark. There was such hurt in his eyes. Why was she

noticing it so clearly today? Because of the things they were discussing? Or because he was letting down his guard and allowing her to see his suffering?

Was he beginning to trust her?

Or had something happened inside her that meant his pain was becoming her pain?

Suddenly, there was a flash of movement, and Clark was on his feet. “Someone’s coming,” he said. He swept her into his arms, and the next thing Lois knew she was at the doorway. She stepped into the staffroom and locked the cell door. She put her half-eaten lunch on the table and began pouring a cup of coffee.

A knock sounded on the external door.

She went to answer it. “Who is it?”

“Daniel Scardino.”

Lois opened the door. “Come in,” she said. She walked into the staffroom and left him to follow. “Coffee?”

“Ah, no. Thank you.”

She turned, coffee mug in hand, and leant against the counter as she waited for Scardino to speak. On closer evaluation, he seemed nervous. She wasn’t sure if that were good or bad. Why had he come to the compound?

Lois sipped from her mug, and then her patience dissolved. “Are you here for a particular reason?” she asked lightly.

“I’ve been summoned by a higher-up to answer questions about this operation,” Scardino said.

Her gut had been right — it was doubtful they were going to be able to fade into obscurity after the mayhem with Moyne. “With regards to what?”

“I’m not sure exactly,” Scardino said. “But if I had to guess, I’d say that he wants to know about the changes you’ve implemented.”

Lois took her key from her pocket and held it towards Scardino. “Do you want to go into the cell?” she asked.

He quickly shook his head. “No,” he said. “But I’d like to go to your office and look through the window.”

“OK,” Lois said nonchalantly. She picked up her coffee and lunch and headed up the stairs, working overtime to keep her edginess concealed.

She entered her office and allowed herself a fleeting glance into the cell. Inside, she smiled. Outside, she crossed to her desk, set down her mug, and turned her attention to Scardino.

He stepped into the little alcove between her desk and the closet and peered through the window. Lois spun around and took the opportunity afforded by Scardino’s turned back.

The cell didn’t look significantly different from the first time she had looked into it. The thin camp mattress was lying in the corner. His tin box was placed near the door. Clark was sitting against the back wall, listlessly eating the roll.

She was sure that he had messed the front and sides of his hair.

Scardino turned to Lois. “You gave him a mattress.”

“Yeah,” Lois said as if it was what anyone else would have done.

“And he has clothes.”

Lois dropped her head and squeezed her forefinger and thumb along the bridge of her nose.

“Are you all right?” Scardino asked.

As she looked up, Lois swept the back of her hand across her eye. “My partner was raped and killed,” she said in a voice that shook. “I wanted him clothed.”

Scardino visibly recoiled. “Sorry,” he said. He intently scanned the cell, probably to give her some time to compose herself. “What other initiatives have you introduced?”

Lois indulged in a steadying breath. “I feed him — usually three times a day. I give him enough water so that he can wash.”

“Anything else?”

“I’ve stopped the discipline sessions.”

“Why?”

“Because his behaviour doesn’t change whether he has them or not, and I can’t justify the risk of sending the assistants into the cage

when there is no benefit.”

“You asked about his parents.”

“Yeah.” Lois picked up one of her novels from her desk and absently flicked through the pages. “I found something in Trask’s notes — a couple of names. I figured they could be his parents.”

“Why did you want to know?”

Lois returned the book to the desk with more force than was necessary. “Have you any idea how boring this job is?” she said. “I was sitting here with nothing to do except watch a man in a cell, and I was reading Trask’s notes and came across two names. It seemed it would be interesting to find out if they were the real names of real people. I’m an *agent*, remember? It’s usually my job to find out information.”

“I got the impression it was more than that,” Scardino said carefully. “You seemed to care what had happened to his parents. It seemed to be becoming personal.”

Lois pushed back a lock of her hair and took a deep breath. “It was personal,” she admitted quietly. “But it wasn’t about him. My own dad is really sick.”

“I’m sorry,” Scardino said. “If you need time off . . .”

“Thanks,” Lois said. “But for now, I want to work. It gives me something else to think about.”

Scardino looked as if he didn’t know what to say next. “I need to take Trask’s notes.”

“Good,” Lois said. “Could you take his personal possessions, too, please? They take up a lot of room.”

Instead of looking at Trask’s pile near the door, Scardino’s eyes skipped over the assortment of things under her desk. “Are they Trask’s?” he asked.

“No,” Lois said. “They’re my dad’s. I went to his home this morning. I didn’t want to leave them in my Jeep in case they got stolen.”

Scardino nodded. His eyes fell on the mirror, but he didn’t comment.

Lois gestured to the boxes. “Let’s get rid of these, shall we?”

Scardino paused before picking up a box. “How’s your ankle?”

“It’s fine,” Lois said. She picked up the first box and headed down the stairs with it.

A few minutes later, they had removed all remnants of Trask’s presence from her office. Lois handed the pillow to Scardino, and he put it in his vehicle. “When are you meeting with the higher-up?” she said.

“Tomorrow morning.”

“Longford is doing my shift tomorrow. I have some personal stuff I need to do.”

Scardino nodded. He didn’t ask any questions about the nature of her ‘personal stuff’. That saved her from having to lie.

“Should I tell him to expect you to visit?” Lois asked.

“I don’t know,” Scardino said. “I’ve been summoned to Menzies’ office. I don’t know if he’ll want to actually come here.”

Menzies.

The name alone was enough to dump icy trepidation onto her heart. “I thought he was on leave.”

“He was.”

Lois swallowed down the expletive and instead fixed chilly unwavering eyes on Scardino. “What possible interest could he have in this operation?”

Scardino looked at the ground. “Menzies is married to Moyne’s aunt.”

The ice burned gouges deep into her heart, and Lois steadied herself against Scardino’s vehicle. By the time his head had lifted, her face contained — she hoped — no more consternation than would be expected. “What has Moyne said to him?” she demanded coldly.

“I expect that is what I will find out tomorrow.”

“Any questions raised now will highlight the deficiencies of those who should have investigated this operation a long time ago.”

Scardino sucked in a quiet breath, and Lois knew that her barb had

hit home.

“Don’t expect that I will move on quietly,” she warned. “I need to be in Metropolis for my father. I’m not going to be forced to leave him because of someone like Moyne. Or Menzies.”

“You wouldn’t have to leave,” Scardino said. “I would approve at least two months of leave with full pay.”

“Perhaps you didn’t understand the severity of my father’s condition,” Lois said coldly. “Two months is not going to be enough.”

Scardino grimaced. “I’m sorry. I ... ah ... I didn’t realise.”

“I have done nothing wrong,” Lois said. “And nepotism, sexism, and unlawful imprisonment would make for a tantalising combination.”

“Lois,” Scardino cautioned quietly. “Threatening to go public will not help you.”

Lois gestured towards the compound. “Was there anything else you wanted while you’re here?” she said. “My coffee’s getting cold.”

“No. That’s all.”

“Bye.”

Lois closed the external door and collapsed against it as she heaved in a long breath and tried to settle her jangled nerves.

Tomorrow. Scardino was meeting with Moyne’s uncle. Tomorrow. She would be in Kansas.

Should she postpone her trip?

If she did, they would ask questions.

Would her presence be enough to protect Clark? If Menzies demanded to go into the cell, they would use the rods.

And Lois wouldn’t even be able to protest.

Should they go? Her and Clark? Tonight? Now?

They couldn’t.

She didn’t know enough. Didn’t know enough about how to disable the implant Trask had embedded in Clark. Didn’t know what had happened to his parents.

Clark’s best chance ... their *only* chance ... was if she kept this assignment for as long as possible.

At this stage, that had to be her highest priority.

On reflection, it might be better if she were in Kansas. It seemed likely Moyne had talked to Menzies. If she sensed any negativity in Menzies’ attitude towards Clark... On numerous occasions, Linda had kept Lois’s mouth from getting them both into trouble.

Now Linda wasn’t here.

Lois opened the door and peeped outside. Scardino had gone. After locking the door, she returned to her office to collect the remains of her lunch. She paused and looked into the cell.

Clark had reduced his room to starkness. He’d thought of everything. There was no sign of tennis racquets, or Winnie the Pooh sleeping bags, or jigsaw puzzles, or tubs of strawberry yoghurt.

If Scardino had talked to Shadbolt and Longford, would he think they had been exaggerating the extent of her amendments? Or would he think that the cell had been cleared for his viewing?

She’d had no warning of Scardino’s visit. She could only hope that what he’d seen would carry more weight than anything he’d been told.

But what Scardino believed was no longer the most telling consideration. Not with Menzies in the equation.

She rewound the tape, covered the camera lens with the black curtain, and pressed ‘record’. She needed to be more careful about leaving any evidence that she had been into the cell. She couldn’t add credibility to Moyne’s story that their scuffle had been because he had been trying to stop her entering the cell.

Clark was eating his lunch. He looked disconsolate, but not distraught.

Had he been able to hear what had been said outside the compound?

She reviewed the conversation. She would tell Clark about the meeting and hope that his questions would indicate whether he’d heard about Menzies.

She hated the thought of keeping information from Clark.

But Menzies had links with Moyne, and Clark thought Moyne had

gone. Clark had made so much progress the past few days — she couldn’t put that in jeopardy.

After locking her office, Lois used the time as she walked down the stairs to decide exactly what she would tell Clark.

And exactly what needed to be kept from him. For now.

Clark sat alone in his cell, eating his lunch.

It didn’t taste as good now Lois wasn’t here.

He knew he shouldn’t have listened to what was being said on the other side of the door, but that would have required more self-discipline than he possessed. Particularly as he couldn’t banish the fear that Moyne would return, seeking retribution.

He’d heard most of it — enough to know that the visitor wasn’t Moyne, but Scardino.

Enough to know that Lois was working without the support of those above her. Enough to know that questions were being asked by someone with a lot of authority.

From what she’d said earlier, she didn’t have the support of Shadbolt and the other assistant either.

She was alone in this.

And he had no way to help her.

When she came back, he needed to try to talk to her about minimising the risks.

He’d heard her statement about her partner. Was that really why she had bought him clothes?

He’d heard the footsteps up and down the stairs before the few minutes when everything had gone silent. When he’d heard Lois’s footsteps return alone, Clark had turned off his extra hearing. He would not track Lois. Not unless he believed someone was trying to hurt her.

But even then, what could he do?

He heard the click of the lock and jumped to his feet as his heart did a little dance inside him.

The door swung into his cell, and Lois entered.

He always found it hard to breathe in that first second when he saw her again.

He crossed the cell, revelling in the freedom to approach her without being worried that he would frighten her. He studied her face. Despite Scardino’s surprise visit, she didn’t look unduly concerned.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

She smiled, magically lifting some of the heaviness from his spirits. “We’re OK,” she said as she looked around the prison. “Where is everything?”

Clark pulled back the mattress to reveal the two tubs of yoghurt, two glasses, and the bottle of juice.

Lois laughed. “From up there, I didn’t even notice that your mattress was a bit lumpy. Where’s the rest of it?”

“Behind the little wall,” Clark said. “Because of the angles, there’s a bit of space that can’t be seen from the window.”

“You did an amazing job of clearing the cell,” she said.

His worries receded further — unable to stand against the impetus of her approval.

Realistically, Clark knew that there was very little chance he could have any sort of life on the outside. He knew that those who had power on this planet knew too much about him to permit his freedom. He knew he was too different ... too alien ... too unacceptable.

But ... being with Lois made the impossible seem possible.

Being with Lois made him want to believe.

Impulsively — even though he knew her ankle wasn’t troubling her anymore — Clark offered his hand to steady her as she lowered herself onto the mattress.

Her responding smile set off fireworks in his heart. She put her small soft hand into his and tightened her grip as she lowered herself onto the mattress. Her hand slid from his grasp, and she collected the remains of their lunch.

Clark sat next to her, hoping she couldn’t detect the tingling across the skin of his palm.

There was something he needed to tell her. “Lois?”

She unscrewed the top of the juice bottle. “Yes?”

“I listened,” Clark said. “When you were with Scardino. I listened.”

She poured orange juice into both glasses. “Did you hear about the meeting?”

He nodded.

That’s good,” she said. “That saves me from having to repeat it all to you.”

“When it is?”

Lois handed him a glass of juice. “Tomorrow morning.”

“Are you concerned?”

She picked up her juice and sipped. “It could amount to nothing more than a higher-up getting puffed up with self-importance,” she said. But there was a little crease on her forehead.

“What are you worried about?” Clark probed.

She sighed. “The meeting is to take place in an office, but Scardino doesn’t know whether they will come here.”

“OK.”

“And if they do come here, it’s possible they will come into the cell.”

And that meant they would bring in the poison. Clark faced her steadily. “That’s OK,” he said.

Concern had clouded the lovely brown of her eyes. “It’s not OK,” she said with a tiny tremor in her voice. “But I can’t do anything to stop it. I’m still hoping they will forget about us again, but that’s not going to happen if I remonstrate against something that was standard practice for seven years. I’ll lock my office — and the rods will be in there — but I’m pretty sure Scardino will have a master key.”

“It will be OK,” Clark quietly assured her.

As Lois turned her head, Clark saw her blink away a pool of tears.

If she started crying, he was going to feel even more inept than he usually did.

But her being upset about something that might happen to him was infinitely better than her being upset by something he had done.

That thought strengthened him. He could take another dose of the poison if he knew that Lois -

His thoughts stopped and clattered around his mind.

If he knew that Lois cared about him.

Did she? Of course, she didn’t. He was being ridiculous.

“I’m so sorry, Clark,” she said as she gazed at him with still-glistening eyes. “I wish there was another way.”

“It’s OK,” he said. “With Moyne and Trask gone, it’s doubtful it will be anything more than exposure.”

The anguish blazed in her eyes. “But it still hurts, doesn’t it?”

Clark shrugged. “Don’t worry,” he said. It wasn’t the thought of exposure to the poison that terrified him; it was the thought that the meeting might result in Lois being taken away. He would gladly suffer hours of pain if it meant that he could still see her.

“I won’t be here tomorrow,” Lois informed him quietly.

His fears surged.

“I’ll be in Smallville,” she said.

A medley of competing thoughts darted through his mind. His parents. His home. The farm. The neighbours. And a day without Lois.

“I’ll try to find out whatever I can about your parents,” she said.

“Will you be gone all day?”

“Most of it.”

Clark felt as if he was being tossed around in a violent sea. He had yearned for news of his parents, and now it seemed he was on the cusp of discovering something of their fate. He knew it could be bad news. He knew it was possible that the tiny flame of hope he had nurtured for seven years would be snuffed out forever. Or it could be good news — maybe they had been allowed to return to the farm — perhaps believing him to be dead, but in all other ways untouched by Trask’s savagery.

A whole day without Lois.

It would feel like a day of darkness.

Clark didn’t know what to say. He slowly peeled back the lid from the tub of yoghurt.

When he raised his eyes, Lois was looking at him.

“I’ll be back in the evening,” she said.

“Will you come here?”

She smiled, and her fingertips grazed over his bare arm. “Of course I’ll come here, Clark,” she said. “I’ve swapped shifts with Longford, so we’ll have plenty of time to talk about Smallville.” Her smile died. “And whatever happens if Scardino comes here.”

From the din of blaring questions, one rose to ascendancy. He had to ask. He knew the answer, but he had to ask. “What if they order you to go?”

She didn’t answer for a moment, and Clark’s heart sank as he figured she was trying to find a way to tell him that today could be their last day together.

Still, she didn’t speak.

He couldn’t fathom the expression on her face, but he knew it scared him.

But then, she held out her hand towards him in an unmistakable invitation.

Clark stared at her outstretched hand. It seemed symbolic. It seemed to convey so much more than inconsequential contact between two people who had been thrown together temporarily.

He wiped his hand on his shorts and then slowly edged forward to meet her. When they touched, her fingers closed around him. He stared at their joined hands.

When his eyes leapt to hers, he saw that she was staring intently at him. “Clark,” she said in a steady voice. “I’m not leaving you.”

Mixed-up hope and disbelief hurtled around his brain. “Lois,” he said. “I can’t let you do that. You have a life. You’re human. You belong on this planet. You -”

Her fingers tightened around his, and it choked his words.

“I’m not leaving you,” she vowed.

He had to try again. He was being sucked into the swirl of hope by the unwavering certainty of her eyes, but he had to try to free her. “Lois. You’ve only known me for a few days. I’m an alien. I can’t let you throw away your life on a hopeless cause ...”

Her thumb began to slide over his knuckles. “I’m not leaving you,” she said again.

He stared at their joined hands. Stared at where her thumb was setting fire to his skin.

“I can’t give you any real answers yet,” Lois continued in a soothing, steady voice. “I don’t know exactly how this will work out. I don’t know what we will need to do. I don’t know how much opposition we will face or the form it will take.”

“Then how can you say so unequivocally that you won’t leave me?” he said. The brusqueness of his question shocked him but it didn’t seem to unnerve Lois.

“I made a deal with Scardino. His part is to leave me on this operation.”

“Will he honour that deal? Will he be allowed to honour it if someone above him orders you off this operation?”

“I think Scardino will try to honour the deal,” she said. “I know this has to be incredibly unsettling for you, and as soon as I have answers, I’ll give them to you.”

She put her other hand on top of his, enclosing him, and Clark was sure there was a good chance his hand was going to melt away and slither between her fingers.

“I need to ask you a question,” she said. “And I need you to answer me honestly.”

Her solemnity carved deep chasms through his hope. He nodded.

“I probably should have asked you this before now,” she said with a shy smile.

The heat from her hands had climbed up his arm and parched his mouth.

Lois took a breath. “Is this what you want?” she asked. “If there’s even a small chance that you can get out of here and go back to having

a life on the outside, is that what you want?"

He wanted to be with her.

Lois.

But that wasn't going to happen.

A beautiful woman like Lois Lane would never choose to spend her life with an alien.

She had already committed to more than he had any right to expect by saying she would stay until she procured his freedom.

Three times, she had said she wouldn't leave him.

Clark nodded. "Yes," he said. "For so long, I've believed it wasn't possible, but if you think there is a chance, that is what I want."

Her smile repaid him a thousand times over, even as his heart crumbled with the knowledge that his freedom from this prison would inevitably mean her freedom from him.

She had given him so much.

That would be his gift to her.

It would be the most difficult gift he had ever given.

But this was Lois ... and there was nothing he wouldn't do for her.

In reality, nothing had changed.

He'd always known that their time together would be limited.

He wanted to enjoy every second, to store up every memory against the certain loneliness that was coming — whether he was physically imprisoned or physically free, life without Lois would feel no less desolate than the past seven years.

But he would know that she was free.

He would gather memories as a farmer gathers wheat, and he would store them away for the famine that was surely coming.

Sweet memories of Lois — her smile, and her touch, and her blindness to all of his anomalies.

Memories so sweet and so strong that whatever happened, he would always have the essence of her to carry with him.

Part 14

"Finished?"

Clark's single word question sliced smoothly through the comfortable silence that had followed in the wake of their discussion.

The unexpected hint of chirpiness in his tone caused her to look up. Lois took in his smile and felt her own spirits lift. "Yeah, thanks," she replied. She drained the last of her juice.

Clark scanned the room. "We should clear this stuff away."

"Yeah," she agreed. "A few of these things would be really hard to explain."

"Like the Winnie the Pooh sleeping bag?" Clark said, his tone suddenly imbued with a definite tinge of light-heartedness. "And the apple-scented conditioner?"

Lois checked his face and, seeing no warning trace of shadow, said, "What the almost-finished-and-then-pulled-apart-again jigsaw puzzle?"

Clark tried to rein in his smile, and the effect — eyes that were lit with amusement and a mouth that hovered alluringly on the precipice of laughter — was electric. "Have you been spying on me, Ms Lane?" he asked.

His feigned sternness called to something within her. Something alive and joyful. Something she thought had been left in the dark place where Linda had died. Something that couldn't help but respond to him. "Absolutely," she said with a jaunty grin.

His response elicited a grin, but he tried to hide it with pursed lips and a sucked-in breath. "I'll have to be more careful around you." Before she could think up a reply, he sprang to his feet and offered her his hand.

Just two days ago, their fingers colliding over a jigsaw puzzle piece had been enough to discomfit him. His progress was remarkable. There *had* to be damage, Lois reminded herself. Alien ... human ... it didn't matter. *No one* could suffer what he had suffered and not be terribly wounded.

She slid her hand into his, knowing that his gesture — and her response — would not be trivial and insignificant to him.

He smiled as his large hand closed around her smaller one.

She'd never met anyone who appreciated the tiny things the way Clark did.

He pulled her to her feet. She didn't withdraw her hand, he didn't loosen his, and suddenly, they were standing together, connected.

She stared into his brown eyes.

His beard parted, and he smiled.

He nodded towards the window. "Are you going to hide the stuff in your office?" he said.

She forced her mind to his question. "Yeah."

"We should get it done."

"We should," Lois said. But she didn't want to. She wanted to stand here, holding his hand and drinking in the balminess of his eyes.

Then one of them moved, and they were apart.

"I'll bring everything to the door," Clark said.

There wasn't a trace of negativity in his tone, but Lois sensed an unspoken complement to his statement — regarding what he *couldn't* do.

"Have you painted before?" she asked as she picked up the trash from their lunch.

Clark nodded. "Dad and I painted fences and the barn. We even painted Mom's kitchen one summer."

"Did you do other jobs?" Lois asked. "Like with a hammer and nails?"

"Sure," he said as he began to roll up the camp mattress. "Is there a reason why you're asking? Does it have something to do with your trip to Smallville tomorrow?"

"Nothing to do with Smallville," she said. "I'm wondering if you'd do something for me."

"Of course, I will," Clark said. Again she heard the unvoiced postscript: *If I can.*

"I told you about my dad and how he's in the nursing home."

His compassion was swift and palpably sincere. "Yeah."

"He used to enjoy doing jigsaw puzzles, but I think it would be hard for him now, particularly if the pieces got swept off the table."

"How about a sort of large, flat tray?" Clark said. "With raised edges to keep the pieces where they belong?"

Lois smiled. "That is *exactly* what I was thinking."

"If you can get the materials, I could make it easily," Clark said.

"What would you need?"

Clark leant his knee into the half-rolled-up mattress and lifted his hands to indicate size. "A flat piece of wood — probably chipboard or something similar. I'd also need some moulded lumber for the edges. And some nails. That's it."

"I have all of those things in my office," Lois told him.

Clark glanced to the window, his face lit with happy surprise.

"That is *some* office," he said appreciatively.

She shrugged a little self-consciously. "I've been planning to ask you."

His gaze settled on her. "Hey, Lois," he scolded gently. "If I can do anything for you, please don't hesitate to ask me."

"Thanks," she said, pausing to look at him as she said the word so he wouldn't miss the fullness of her gratitude.

"Thank you," he said softly. "I'll make it after the pet door guy has left."

For the next ten minutes, Lois traipsed up the stairs with the surprisingly large number of objects that had accumulated in just a few days, but her mind didn't leave the cell.

They had negotiated some potentially hazardous topics during their interrupted lunch — and more than once, she had held her breath, fearing that she had steered them into turbulent waters.

And then had come his comment about the sleeping bag and the conditioner. His good humour had felt like the first rays of sunshine after the freeze of winter.

It had felt so good.

And it confirmed her decision not to tell him about Menzies.

Since then, his mood had brightened perceptibly as each item was removed from his room.

Was it simply because he had something practical to do?

Was it the satisfaction of working together? Was it the anticipation of making the tray for her dad?

Or did it go deeper than that?

Was he relieved that they had touched on the subject of the future?

At first, her assertion that she wouldn't leave him hadn't seemed to reassure him at all. Had he assumed she'd meant she would stay until it was possible for him to leave, too? Or had he assumed her pledge extended further than that?

Either way, could that have possibly contributed to his cheerfulness?

Or was he optimistic that tomorrow he would hear something about his parents?

Regardless of the cause, Lois decided to enjoy it.

There was something invigorating about Clark Kent with a ready smile and a buoyancy in his voice that just intensified its sexi-

Lois stopped mid-step, her hand half-reaching towards Clark for the racquets.

He smiled at her, but this one held a tinge of concern. "You OK?" he asked in that voice that was *definitely* sexy.

She nodded, hastily took the racquets from him, and hurried across the staffroom.

In her office, Lois deliberately turned away from the window and forced herself to take a moment to curb the headstrong thrust of her thoughts.

She was attracted to Clark — she'd accepted that.

She was determined that he would get a happy ending.

She couldn't deny that a happy ending for her included him.

Being with him.

As friends.

Partners.

And — Lois sighed as she remembered the stretched seconds when they had stood as if their hands had been glued together — and so much more.

Say it, Lane.

Linda's voice elbowed itself into Lois's mind.

Say it, you big wuss. Admit that you're hopelessly smitten.

Lois felt a smile tug at her mouth.

She missed Linda so much.

If Linda were here ...

... This would be so much easier.

Linda would give her perspective.

Linda would give her balance.

Linda would show her a way through the minefield of falling in love with an alien from another planet who had been horrifically imprisoned for seven years and was probably almost old enough to be her father.

When put like that, it sounded laughable.

It *was* laughable.

And crass.

And grossly unprofessional.

Except ...

She turned and looked out of the window.

Clark was kneeling on the concrete rolling up her Winnie the Pooh sleeping bag.

Except this was not about an alien.

Or a prisoner.

Or a man too old for her.

This was about Clark.

And when she was with him, nothing else mattered.

In the last few minutes, he'd been as happily relaxed as she had ever seen him. She was going to enjoy it. She knew there were difficult times ahead. She knew that getting him out legally was going to require something close to a miracle. She also knew there would be far-reaching consequences if they broke out of the compound and ran away together.

So why not enjoy whatever time they had together before they had

to tear through the murky curtain and enter a future doused with uncertainty?

Why not simply enjoy being together?

And ... if she caught herself dwelling too long on the ripped muscles of his forearms or the curves of his calves or the breadth of his back ... well ... she was a woman, and he was a man.

Lois chuckled.

She was sure that was what Linda would have said.

You're a woman, Lane; he's a man. Everything else is an unnecessary complication.

In the cell, Clark had bundled up the sleeping bag and was waiting for her return. He would be wondering what was taking her so long.

She skipped down the stairs and sped through the staffroom.

"Everything OK?" Clark said.

She paused before reaching to take the bedding. She smiled at him, and her heart did a pirouette when he smiled back. "Everything's fine," Lois said. "I just needed a few moments to get some things straight in my head."

Understanding filtered into his smile. "You, too, huh?"

She nodded.

Clark picked up the pillow and handed it to her.

"Thanks," she said as she became lost in his eyes again.

She broke away and took the bedding to her office. On her return, she brought the coveralls, the tin of white paint, and the brush, and she gave them to Clark.

"Thanks," he said.

Lois pointed to the side wall beyond the screened area. "You need to paint that bit of the wall," she told him.

"OK," he said easily.

She picked up several editions of the *Daily Planet* and took them to her office to deposit in the trashcan.

When she returned, Clark was wearing the coveralls and had removed the lid from the paint tin. He looked up from his crouched position. "Do you have something to stir the paint, please?" he asked. "Something broad and flat?"

"A knife?"

He chuckled. "I've never stirred paint with a knife before, but it should work fine."

Lois took a knife from the tray and gave it to him. "Thanks," he said with a smile.

She sat next to him and watched as the knife glided through the thick white liquid, hoping that her next comment wouldn't jeopardise his good mood. "Clark? I ... ah ..."

His eyes rose from the paint to meet hers, and he waited for her to continue.

"I don't want to embarrass you, but I wondered if you'd like something to tie back your hair. To keep from getting paint in it."

"That seems to be more practical than embarrassing," he said with a puzzled look.

"I wondered if you might think that only females tie back their hair." She shrugged, now feeling uncomfortable that she had brought up the subject. "I don't know the fashions in Smallville for men with long hair."

"Not many men in Smallville have long hair," Clark said. "It's too dangerous when you're around farm machinery."

"Oh." She had a question she wanted to ask, and now seemed like a good chance to use it to move them away from the subject of hair accessories. "Do you mind how long your hair is? Even now it's clean and untangled, do you dislike it?"

The knife stilled in the paint.

"Just tell me the truth," Lois said.

"It seems such a petty thing," Clark said as he began stirring again. "But I hate it. I hate having long hair, and I hate the long, scraggly beard." He glanced up at her. "I know it's silly to get so hung up on something that, in reality, isn't important, but it's ... it's like my hair and beard are somehow representative of everything else."

Lois nodded. "As if your lack of control in making decisions about

your personal appearance is a small part of a much bigger picture where you can't control anything in your life."

"Yeah," he said. He rallied a smile for her. "It's only a small thing. I shouldn't have mentioned it."

"I asked," she reminded him.

His smile gained strength as some of his good humour flowed back. "It's silly," he said. "It's only hair." He grinned at her suddenly, and her heart jiggled in response. "And anyway, having long and knotty hair meant I needed someone to untangle it for me."

Until that moment, Lois hadn't been sure if he'd enjoyed or endured her washing his hair. Now, she had no doubts. She smiled with jubilant satisfaction. "And then, we both would have missed out."

He smiled but tried to hide it by studying the swirling paint.

"How about — once the pet door is in — I cut it for you?" Lois offered eagerly. "I'm not sure I will do a great job, but I can cut it short. And I can get you a razor so you can shave off the beard. Once we are out, you can go to a —"

"Lois!"

The suddenness of his exclamation checked her outburst but not her smile. Enthusiasm was coursing through her, and that hadn't happened for such a long time. "Yes, Clark?" she asked.

"You can't cut my hair."

"Oh," she said, her elation subdued. "OK."

"You physically can't cut my hair," he explained. "It's too ... strong. From the time I was about ten years old, no human could cut it."

"Oh." She hadn't even considered that possibility. "So, how ...?"

"I used to do it myself. With two mirrors."

Mirrors? "So ... if I were to give you two mirrors, you could cut your hair to whatever length and style you wanted?"

Clark nodded.

"That's ..."

"Weird?"

She chuckled. "No, I was going to say 'cool'. That's really cool."

Clark lifted the knife out of the paint and held it while it dribbled into the tin. "Would you mind washing the knife?" he asked. "We shouldn't leave it out — real painters don't stir their paint with a knife." He picked up the lid and put the knife on it.

"Sure," Lois said as she rose to her feet.

"Thanks."

Lois took the lid and the knife to the sink in the staffroom and turned on the faucet. As she rubbed the sticky white paint from the knife, she couldn't help trying to imagine what Clark would look like clean-shaven and with short, neat hair.

As soon as the pet door had been installed, she could give him the mirrors.

Except ... Lois grunted with impatience. They would have to wait until after tomorrow — just in case the Menzies did demand to see the alien.

A knock sounded on the external door as Lois finished cleaning all traces of the paint from the knife.

"Hi," the young man said when she opened the door. "I'm Jake. I'm here to install the pet door."

"Hi, Jake," Lois said. "Come in." She showed him through the staffroom and gestured to the cell door.

"You ordered a one-way door?" he asked as he put the carton that he'd been carrying on the table.

She nodded. "I want it going into the next room."

"Easily done," Jake said. "I'll bring in a few things and get started."

When he was gone, Lois looked into the cell and gazed at Clark's back as he swished the brush from side to side along the wall. She watched until she heard Jake's footsteps and then turned quickly.

"Would you like coffee?" she asked, hoping to forestall any questions about the specifics of why they had ordered the pet door.

"Thanks," Jake said as he began to remove the screws from the door hinge. "No milk, one sugar."

Lois leant past him and poked her head into the cell. "Would you like coffee?" she called to Clark.

"Thanks," Clark replied, without even turning towards her.

"How do you have it?"

"Milk, two sugars."

Lois picked up the novel she had left on the shelf and pretended to be engrossed in it while the coffee brewed. When it was ready, she poured three mugs, put Jake's on the corner of the counter, and took another one through the doorway.

She placed it on the floor next to the paint tin. "Here's your coffee," she said in a detached tone.

"Thanks," he said, giving her no more than a passing glance.

Lois stepped back and stood for a few seconds, pretending to examine his progress. In reality, she was infinitely more interested in the worker than his workmanship.

"Looking good," she muttered as she turned away.

She slipped through the doorway and returned to her novel as she sipped her coffee and pretended to be oblivious to the sounds of Jake's labour.

Half an hour later, he replaced the door and used a powered screwdriver to refasten the hinges. When he'd finished, he swung the door a few times, and then closed it. Crouching low, he pushed the flap and grunted with satisfaction when it opened easily. "All done," he said as he jumped to his feet.

"Thanks," Lois said.

"The boss will send the bill."

"OK."

Lois returned to her book while he packed away his tools and downed the remainder of his coffee. "Would you sign this, please?" Jake asked.

She dragged her eyes from the novel and scrawled her name in the book he held. He tore off a copy and handed it to her.

"Thanks," she said as she followed him to the door. "Bye."

After Jake had left, Lois locked the external door and hurried back to Clark, feeling as if they had secured the first step of his freedom. Now, their preparations could progress without being immediately obvious to Shadbolt and Longford.

There was still the possibility of someone — Scardino, if he had a key — looking through the window in her office, but they had bought some protection. Clark's everyday needs could be met without anyone else opening the door. Without anyone observing him.

If only something else distracted Menzies and kept him away tomorrow.

Clark was still painting the wall. The movement of his arm caused the material of the coveralls to stretch across his butt.

He turned. "All finished?"

"Yep. All done."

He crouched low and wiped the brush on the edge of the tin. "Could you bring me a bowl of water, please?" he asked. "I need to wash the brush."

Lois would have thrown it in the trash, but it wasn't surprising that Clark would clean up after a job. And it was possible that they would need this ruse again. She filled the bowl with water, and took it back to him.

"Thanks," he said with the quiet and sincere gratitude that was his standard reaction to everything she did for him. "Would you like to get the materials for your dad's tray while I finish up here? I can probably have it done before supper."

"Be right back." As Lois mounted the steps to her office, she smiled at Clark's eagerness. She'd glimpsed something else in him ... the farmer ... the capable man, used to practical tasks.

And that facet of his personality was no less attractive than all the others.

As she picked up the flat piece of wood, Lois chuckled.

If she could find something excitingly attractive in a farmer, she had it bad.

She should be struggling to bring cold rationality to her situation.

She should be fighting to suppress this attraction.

But if she did ... if she were successful in smothering her feelings ... if she freed Clark and then walked away from him ... what would she have?

A job — but no partner.

A family — a sister she never saw, a mother she never agreed with, and a father whose future was perilously uncertain.

A life — but no one to share it with.

Compared with that, the prospect of being with a kind, caring, patient man seemed eminently enticing.

And his body wasn't too bad either.

Lois carried the board down the stairs.

She wanted to be with Clark.

There were enough impending problems without her adding a few extra by complicating something that — on the inside — should be simple.

If she wasn't already in love with him, she was within one smile or one lingering gaze from those luscious brown eyes of being completely smitten.

There you go, Lane. That wasn't too hard, was it?

Lois chuckled. "Shut up, King," she muttered. "Who asked you?"

She was still smiling when she went into the cell.

Clark straightened from where he'd been washing the brush in the bowl. He wiped his hands on the coveralls and smiled.

And there it was.

The smile that pushed her over the edge.

He took the board, apparently completely unaware of the monumental upheaval happening inside her heart.

Clark perused the board as Lois perused him.

"Perfect," he said.

"That's what I was thinking," Lois said.

"Have you got the nails?" he asked. "And the lengths of lumber?"

"Yep. I'll ... ah ... I'll get them." With difficulty, Lois turned away.

In her office, she loaded up the hammer, nails, and two sticks of lumber. Running down the stairs, an idea hit her.

She couldn't do it.

But it was sooooo tempting.

If she were to trip ... just a little ... and wrench her ankle.

She couldn't do it.

She had to be honest with Clark. Totally honest. She had to be honest in the little things because she was going to need his trust in the big things.

But she couldn't dissolve the lingering feeling that if she were to tweak her ankle just a little — nothing serious, but enough to require some special attention from Clark — he wouldn't be too disappointed.

She walked into the cell, and handed him the tools and lumber.

"Exactly what I need," Clark said, looking like a kid who'd just been given his first bike.

"Oh," Lois said. "I forgot the saw."

Clark shook his head. "I don't need a saw," he said.

"You don't?"

He picked up the stick of square lumber and peered at it.

A few seconds later, a tiny piece dropped from the end, and Clark held up the stick — grinning broadly — to show Lois a perfect forty-five degree cut.

She put her hands on her hips and grinned right back. "It seems I have underestimated the skills of Kansas farmers," she said.

"Lois," Clark said with a half-mast grin that curled her toes. "You do realise that your reaction to my weirdness is even weirder than the things I can do?"

"You're an alien," she said lightly. "I expect you to do things differently."

"Yes, but expecting and accepting are worlds apart."

"Not for me," she said.

"Does it bother you that I could ...?" He gestured towards his eyes. "... hurt someone?"

"Would you do anything like that? Would you use your abilities to hurt an innocent person?"

"No."

She shrugged. "It's not your abilities that I see," she said. "It's your heart."

The warmth in his eyes turned to liquid fire — and seared through her.

They stared at each other. Lois's breath was rough, her heartbeat was erratic, and her muscles felt like molten lava.

Finally, Clark eased his eyes away. "I ... I should get on with the tray for your dad," he said.

His voice sounded as if he'd been starved of oxygen, too.

"You should," she said. "I have a couple of things to do in my office. Wave or call if you want me to come down."

"OK," he said as he dropped to his knees next to the flat piece of wood.

Lois climbed the stairs and slumped into her chair.

She had been sure.

Sure of what she wanted.

But ...

... What about him?

What did *he* want?

She had been so wrapped up in trying to analyse her own feelings, she hadn't spent too much time thinking about his side of this.

Life on the outside was going to be a phenomenal adjustment for him. Would being with her make it easier? Or more difficult?

Did he have someone else? She knew he wasn't married, but did he have someone that he hoped was waiting for him?

If she said she wanted to be with him, he would agree — out of misplaced gratitude if nothing else.

He was the sort of guy who would put his own feelings to one side.

How could she find out what he really wanted?

It wasn't as if she could just stroll up to him and inquire nonchalantly if he wanted her to stick around once he was free.

He probably didn't know what he wanted.

For seven years, he had believed there was no hope of a future outside of the cell. She'd only just introduced that possibility. She had to give him time to get used to that.

Patience.

There was that word again.

She had to be his friend first.

He had to trust her.

Then, once he trusted her enough to walk out of the cell with her, perhaps he would begin to trust her with his heart.

A heart that *must* be calloused and damaged.

A heart that must be wary of being hurt again.

With a huge sigh that Lois hoped would magically infuse her with patience and wisdom, she looked down into the cell.

The tray was finished already.

She hurried through the door, down the stairs, and into the cell.

Clark held out the tray for her to see.

It was exactly what she had envisioned.

She took it from him. "Clark," she said. "It's perfect. Thank you."

He looked pleased by her reaction. "You're welcome."

She ran her fingers over the smooth board. "After I left my dad's place, I realised that I should have brought some sandpaper."

"No need." His fingers split to form a 'V', and he pointed at his eyes.

Lois caressed the smooth surface of the wood again. "You did a great job, Clark."

"I'll put everything in a pile near the door," he said.

"And I thought we should check what can be seen through the pet door. So you'll know when you're out of sight."

"OK."

She took the tray into the staffroom and placed it carefully on the table, imagining her dad sitting in his wheelchair and working on a

jigsaw puzzle. She would buy one to give to him on Thursday.

Lois closed the cell door and dropped to her stomach on the floor. She wriggled forward and pushed the flap open. Clark's bare feet came into view. "Clark?"

"Right here. I'll go over to the back wall."

As he walked away, more of him came into view. "Go to the furthest corner," Lois called through the pushed-open screen.

He did.

When he was standing in the corner, she could see far enough up his body that the lowest tendrils of his beard were visible. Lois smiled with triumph. "When you are standing, any changes to your hair and beard won't be obvious," she called.

His legs walked towards her, and a few seconds later, his face appeared on the other side of the narrow tunnel, and he held up the flap. "So, if I remain standing, no one will be able to see my face and head?"

"That's correct, Mr Kent," Lois said. "When I get back from Smallville tomorrow, I might need somewhere to keep my mirrors."

"My place is available," he offered with a wide grin.

"Then that's what I'll do."

His smile radiated with happiness. "Could you tell me when I'm out of sight, please?" he asked. "I'll position the mattress so that most of my body is in view, but not my head and shoulders."

"OK." She watched his feet walk away at a forty-five degree angle. "Step right," she directed.

He did.

"I can't see you now."

A few seconds later, Clark's feet appeared, and then he lay down on the concrete, his chin resting on his arms and a smile lighting up his face.

"I have an idea," Lois said. It was an idea that had been romping around her mind for the past few hours, becoming more insistent as she had thought about how difficult tomorrow would be for Clark. She hadn't known how to suggest it, but for reasons she wasn't even going to examine, it seemed easier to bring it up while they were lying on their stomachs and staring at each other through a hole in a door.

"What's your idea?" Clark asked.

"How about tomorrow evening, we have a little celebration?"

"A celebration?" he said hesitantly.

"The pet door is in, and that gives us the freedom to make some changes." She paused and was encouraged when he didn't immediately oppose the idea. "So to celebrate, I could bring in a camp table and two chairs, and we could pretend we were in a restaurant. I'll get a nice bottle of wine and ask Uncle Mike to provide a dessert as well as a main course."

Clark's smile had rolled out slowly as she had expounded on her idea.

"Sound good?" she urged.

"Lois ..."

"Whatever tomorrow brings, we'll deal with all of it together tomorrow night."

"That is a wonderful idea," Clark said, his eyes firing little darts of excitement that shot directly into her heart.

"I'll give you the mirrors as soon as we're alone, and then I'll stay away to give you the time to use them."

Excitement invigorated his expression. "I can't wait," he said.

"Neither can I," Lois replied.

Part 15

Uncle Mike's seafood risotto was delicious, but Lois wasn't sure if there was another reason for the silence that had fallen as she and Clark had eaten.

Perhaps it was that Clark's transitory high spirits had been no match for the sobering realisation of the impending news of his parents' fate.

He must feel as if he were being torn in numerous directions. Wanting to hope, but not daring to. Trying to be realistic, but not willing to acknowledge — even to himself — some of the worst of his

fears.

Lois wondered if he were giving any thought to the possibility of being exposed to the rods tomorrow. He had tried to gloss over it, but she wasn't sure if that had been an attempt to prevent her from worrying.

The thought of it whipped dread through her stomach.

But she couldn't afford to let that fear paralyse her. They had to discuss Smallville and his parents — and the need was becoming more pressing as their time slipped away. She had said nothing so far, hoping to give Clark the chance to raise the subject when he felt ready to do so.

When they had both finished eating, Clark started to clear away their empty containers.

"Leave it," Lois said with a smile.

He put down the containers and wiped his hands on the napkin. "Is there something specific you'd like to do?"

Lois retrieved the pillow from where she'd thrown it and lay on her back on the mattress — her head on the pillow, her knees bent, her eyes fixed on Clark. Beyond her feet, he leant against the wall and settled into his favourite position — one long leg arched, one wrist resting on the point of his knee.

He smiled across at her. "Are you tired?"

"A bit."

"You should rest this evening. You'll be doing a lot of travelling tomorrow."

So, he *was* thinking about Smallville. "Yeah."

He stared at his hand. "For a long time, I have tried not to think about my parents or the farm or anything else related to the life that used to be mine."

A spasm of pain rippled across his cheek.

"They gave me everything," he said in a voice humming with anguish. "And Trask made them pay for their kindness."

Lois could feel the pain radiating from him like heat from a wildfire. She wished there was a way to alleviate it — to lift away some of the despair and guilt that had burdened him for seven long years.

She wanted to say something — but every possibility she dragged from her mind risked sounding trite.

Clark sighed and turned his head. "What do you need to know?"

Inside, she felt the need to connect with him. The right words remained frustratingly elusive, so Lois stretched out her left leg and plonked her foot next to him.

He scooped up her foot and placed it on his thigh.

"I plan to go into Smallville first," she said. "Before doing anything else, I need to find out if they ever went back to the farm."

Clark undid the knot of her laces and slipped off her shoe. "And if they did?"

She wasn't sure how he was going to react to her reply. "I think I should just come back to Metropolis."

Clark's thumb did a long sweep of her ankle. "I agree," he said. "It is safer for them if you don't approach them."

The turmoil that must be raging inside him hadn't blunted his insight. "I'm so sorry, Clark," Lois said. "This must be heart-wrenching for you."

"If they are both all right ..." His voice cracked as his throat jumped. "... that will be enough."

But the other — more likely, in Lois's opinion — circumstance was they had been taken from Smallville and never returned.

"What is your plan?" Clark asked. "You mentioned that you work undercover sometimes."

"I work undercover most of the time," Lois said.

His thumb pressed into one side of her ankle while his fingers stroked the other. "Do you need any local knowledge?"

"Where would be the best place to go?" Lois asked. "Is there someone who loves to talk about what is happening around Smallville?"

"You should go into the cafe in the main street," he said. "There

are two women who work there — Maisie and Audrey. Either of them would love to talk to you. And they will know everything there is to know about Smallville.”

“Is there a nearby town?” Lois asked. “A place that always competes with Smallville — in sports or whatever?”

“Granville.”

Lois smiled at the speed of his reply. She glanced to where her foot disappeared into his large competent hands. “That feels amazing,” she said. “Thank you.”

Clark’s smile made another brief appearance. “I assume you will try to avoid mentioning my parents by name?”

“Yes,” Lois said. “That would be too risky. If it got back to Scardino that a stranger had been in your hometown asking about the names I gave him, I think he would definitely conclude that I was too involved.”

She wondered if Clark would ask for clarification about her being ‘too involved’, but he didn’t. “What are you going to say?”

Lois rose onto her elbows, and Clark’s fingers stilled on her foot. “I need you to understand that sometimes, in order to get information, you have to use ways that seem a bit heartless,” she said.

“I just want to know what happened to them,” Clark said desperately. “But without putting them at further risk.”

She smiled, hoping it would reassure him.

He continued spreading relaxation through her ankle. Lois knew he was waiting for her — waiting for her to decide if she wanted to enlighten him. And if she didn’t, she knew he wouldn’t push her.

She settled back into the pillow. “My plan is to go into the cafe and say that I’m a junior reporter for a city newspaper. I’ll say that I have one chance to impress my editor, and he’s given me a story about mysteries in small country towns.”

Clark’s fingers slid along her foot towards her toes.

“I’ll say I’ve heard that Granville has a big mystery,” Lois continued. “Hidden treasure or something equally unprovable. I figure that if your parents never returned, someone will try to convince me that Smallville’s mystery is more newsworthy than Granville’s is.”

Clark nodded. To her relief, there was nothing in his face to indicate he was distressed by her reducing his parents’ plight to a contest between rival towns for the attention of a big city paper. “I think that will work,” he said. He glanced to her other foot.

Lois moved it closer to him.

He carefully laid her left foot on the mattress and picked up her right. “About ten years ago, one of the farmers in Granville bred a promising colt. It’s not really horse country, and there was a lot of ridicule — particularly in Smallville. But the stories coming out of Granville were all about how this colt was going to win the big races — the Kentucky Derby and so on. Then, one morning, the colt was found dead in his stable.”

“What happened?” Lois asked.

“No one knows. There was no sign of injury, and the most persistent rumour was that he had been poisoned, but the autopsy didn’t support that.”

“Did they suspect someone from Smallville?”

“Probably,” Clark said. He slipped her shoe from her foot. “It certainly did nothing for neighbourly relations.”

“So, it was a mystery?” Lois said. “And one that the people of Smallville would probably not want re-visited in case the glare of suspicion swung to them?”

Clark nodded. “They are not going to want it in a big city paper.”

“Thanks,” Lois said. “It’s sad about the horse and the bad feeling between the towns, but it works well for us.” She wondered if having his attention on her foot was helping him through this. She was certainly enjoying it. “Clark?”

“Uhhmm?”

“Are you OK with me going out to the farm? I’ll only go if I know for sure that your parents aren’t there.”

“What if someone catches you there?” Clark said as his fingers skimmed across her ankle. “They’ll think you’re trespassing.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“Do you intend to go into the house?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t have a key.”

Lois hadn’t expected he would have a key. “That’s OK,” she said.

“I know something about picking locks.”

She sensed his amusement, but when he spoke, it wasn’t evident in his voice. “That makes it worse,” he said. “That means the charge will be ‘breaking and entering’.”

“We could get a lot of information,” Lois said. “We could find out if anyone has lived there in the past seven years. I’ll look for anything that might give us a hint about what happened to them. I think it’s worth the risk.”

Clark turned his attention to delving into the slopes of her ankle. His touch was amazing. Her other foot was still tingling. “There’s a woman called Rachel Harris,” he said. “She was a junior police officer seven years ago. She’s probably the sheriff by now. If you get into big trouble, try to talk to her.”

“And tell her what?”

“If you can talk to her alone, you could tell her that you know Clark Kent. Tell her that I asked you to go into the house. I trust her.”

Lois shook her head. “I can’t do that,” she said. “This operation has the highest possible security rating. If I were to divulge information to anyone — even a sheriff — that would be the end of my career.”

“What if you’re about to be charged?”

“That’s a part of the job.”

“But this trip hasn’t been authorised,” Clark said. “Doesn’t that mean you won’t have anyone to pull the strings to get the charges dropped?”

“I won’t get caught,” Lois said.

Clark’s fingers stilled on her ankle, and he stared at them.

“What are you thinking?” Lois asked softly.

He looked up at her. “That a lot could go wrong. That I should be protesting more about you doing something so potentially dangerous.” Lois grinned. “Protesting probably wouldn’t work,” she told him.

He nodded with grim acceptance. “I figured that.”

“Clark,” Lois said. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine. Just try to think about tomorrow night, and us having a lovely meal together.” Except every time she thought about tomorrow night, her stomach tightened. Would Clark feel like eating if he’d been exposed to the rods?

The mention of their meal didn’t recover Clark’s mood. “Near the end of the driveway, there’s an old eastern red cedar,” he continued. “If you park behind that, no one will be able to see the car from the road.”

“OK, thanks.”

“Go past the maples to the back of the house and enter through the kitchen door.”

She nodded.

“The bedrooms are upstairs.”

“Which room was yours?”

“On the left at the top of the stairs.”

His uneasiness hovered like a dark cloud. “Whatever happens, we will deal with it together tomorrow evening,” Lois said. An image shot into her mind — an image of Clark, coiled in pain. Nothing that might happen in Smallville worried her as much as Menzies coming to the compound.

Clark stared at where his fingers had stilled on her ankle. “If Trask did kill them seven years ago, that wouldn’t be the worst outcome.”

Lois swallowed, as another series of gruesome images crowded into her mind.

Clark turned fully to her. “Will you promise me two things, please, Lois?”

She nodded.

“Be careful. I know this is your job, but *please* be careful. We don’t know what happened. We don’t even know if the farmhouse is being watched.”

“I doubt it has been watched all these years.”

“But you don’t *know* that.” He took a deep breath and looked down at his hands. “And second, whatever you find out, please be honest with me. Please don’t try to spare me by not telling me. Regardless of how bad it is.”

“Whatever I find out, I will share with you,” she promised.

“Thanks.” The concern was still in his eyes. “And you’ll be careful?”

“I’ll be very careful.”

Clark jolted suddenly, and his face closed.

“What is it?” Lois asked.

“Nothing.”

Lois sat up and moved into his line of sight. “That’s probably the first lie I’ve ever heard you tell,” she said with a little smile.

“It *is* nothing,” Clark stressed.

“But?”

“I don’t want to scare you.”

“Clark, I’ve been to scarier places than Smallville, Kansas. If you’ve remembered something, it could be important.”

“It’s not anything like that. It was just a horrible thought that occurred to me.”

“Tell me.”

“Do you know where Moyne is?”

Her heart stalled. “Moyne?”

“He was with Trask when they came to the farmhouse. He knows where I used to live.”

“He’s in the hospital.”

“He only had a concussion, didn’t he?”

“I haven’t heard.” She hadn’t cared enough to inquire.

“But it’s possible he’s been released from the hospital.”

“Scardino said he would ensure that Moyne went directly from the hospital to his next assignment.”

Clark settled back against the wall. Lois could see the disquiet simmering in his eyes.

She put her hand on his forearm. “I’ll be OK, Clark,” she said. “I’ll only be there for a few hours.”

“I . . . I’m sorry,” he said. He put his other hand on top of hers. “It’s just that I can’t stand the thought of you being hurt. And I hate that I’m stuck here and I can’t do a single thing to help you.”

“I’ll be fine,” Lois said with a reassuring smile. “This is what I do. I go into a place, and I find out information. I know the risks. I’ve been trained. And I’ve gotten out of places far worse than Smallville, Kansas.”

Clark looked down and seemed to become aware of how intimately his hand was clutching hers. He lifted it away.

“In those first few days when Trask was interrogating you about your abilities, did you ask about your parents?” Lois said.

“He wouldn’t tell me anything. He said they had forfeited their right to freedom by their traitorous act of harbouring an alien.”

Lois tightened her grip on his arm. “Aww, Clark,” she said.

He stared ahead, and Lois could see the tension straining through his face and neck.

“Did he give you any specific information?” she asked. “About where they were? About whether they were well?”

“No. Nothing.”

“No messages? Nothing from them at all?”

“Moyne told me a few things. Things he said my mom had asked to be passed on to me.”

“Do you think they came from her?”

“No,” Clark said. “I’m sure they weren’t from her. Not unless they forced her to say them.”

His fear for his parents was palpable. It resonated through his face. His voice. The tension across his shoulders. Lois figured Trask and Moyne had seen it, too and had used that knowledge as the cruellest of weapons to coerce Clark into cooperating.

As much as she wanted to reach out to him, Lois reclined onto the mattress and returned her foot to his thigh.

His hands cupped her ankle. “Lois?”

“Uhhh?”

“I’d like to ask you a question.”

“Go ahead.”

His head turned, and his eyes crashed into hers. “You’ve seen the things I can do. You’ve seen me float. You’ve seen me heat food. You’ve seen me cut wood with my eyes. You know that I caught a fired bullet and only sustained a small graze.”

She waited.

“Your easy acceptance of my differences astounds me even more than those differences astound you.”

Lois gave him a sad smile. What he’d said was probably true — and it broke her heart.

“Why aren’t you scared that I will hurt you?” Clark asked.

His expectation that people would fear him ripped through her, leaving a trail of regret and indignation. “Because I know you won’t.”

“Of course I won’t,” he said. “But how do you *know* that?”

“You didn’t have to save me when Moyne fired my gun,” Lois said. “You could have hurt me when Moyne was unconscious and I was lying helpless on the concrete. You’ve had multiple opportunities, and you’ve done everything possible to avoid scaring me.”

“But you seemed to *know*,” he said. “Before you’d even spoken to me, you seemed to know that I wasn’t a threat.”

“I did.”

“How?” he persisted. “How can you be sure that I won’t zap you with my eyes and incinerate you? How do you know that I won’t snap your ankle as I rub it? Why aren’t you concerned that I won’t — even accidentally — injure you?”

Lois smiled as the answer sharpened to crisp clarity. “Because I don’t see the things you can do,” she said.

“Then what do you see?”

“I’ve already told you — I see your heart.”

His mouth fell open, but drifted shut without uttering a sound.

Lois sat up and put her hand on his. “I see your heart, Clark,” she said. “And I am sure that you will do *everything* in your considerable power not to hurt me or anyone else.”

His throat jumped a few times, and Lois wasn’t expecting him to reply.

“You’ve spoken about getting me out of here,” Clark said, his voice steady but toneless.

“Yes.”

“I can only assume that you have no concerns about the safety of any human — even if the alien was free again.”

Lois tightened her hold on his hand. “I am sure that the world will be a safer place with you in it,” she proclaimed.

His eyes burned into hers. “No doubts?”

She stared right back. “Not for one second.”

Clark hauled in a deep breath. “I wish that I had the words to convey how you make me feel,” he said.

“I don’t need words,” she said. “I can see it in your eyes.”

He pulled back a little, loosening the unseen bond between them. “That’s a good thing,” he said with a small smile. “Because I don’t think I’ll ever be able to express my appreciation for what you’ve done for me.”

He’d done so much for her, too. “Clark,” she said. “I’m not ready to talk about some things yet, but I want you to know that when I am ready, you will have played a big part in that.”

He looked confused. “I haven’t done anything,” he said.

“You’ve done plenty,” she said. “You trusted me, and that helped me to begin to trust myself again. You showed me your strength, and that helped me to get up and keep going when I didn’t think I could. You showed me that the darkness can only overcome light if I let it.”

His surprise melted her heart. He swallowed again. “It feels to me as if you are my light,” he said.

Lois quickly blinked back her surging tears. “We should clean up this mess,” she said. “Because if I don’t move, I’m going to cry. And this time, it *will* be your fault.”

“Ah ...” He stopped, flailing between his discomfort at her threatening tears and his pleasure at her response to his comment. “Perhaps we should get the bedding into your office before Longford arrives.”

“We can leave the mattress here,” Lois said, following his lead in taking refuge in the practical. “Scardino’s seen that.”

“OK.” His smile came tentatively. “But I think Winnie the Pooh has to go.”

“You’re probably right.”

Clark reached for her shoes, put them on her feet, and tied the laces. Lois resisted the urge to help. “Thank you, Clark,” she said when he’d finished.

“You’re welcome.” He rose from the mattress and held out his hand to help her up.

Once she was standing, she tightened her grasp on his hand. “Try not to worry about tomorrow,” she said.

He nodded, but Lois knew that nothing she said was going to make the long hours of waiting more bearable for him.

She reluctantly slipped her hand from his. “I’ll get the water for you to wash

“Thanks.”

Ten minutes later, only the jigsaw puzzle, a bottle of water, the tin containing his toiletries, and the mattress remained in the cell.

Lois and Clark stood together — her in the doorway, him inside the cell.

“Do you want the pillow?” Lois said.

“Do you think it will matter if they see it?” Clark asked.

“No,” Lois said. “Shadbolt has already seen the pillow and mattress.” She pushed it at Clark, and he took it.

His arms hung limply by his sides, and the pillow drooped against his leg.

What to do now?

Hug him?

Hold him?

Wave?

What?

The journey they had travelled today had been too momentous to conclude with a simple ‘goodbye’.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“I want you back safely tomorrow,” he said.

And he wanted to know what had happened to his parents.

Lois managed a sad smile. “I meant now,” she clarified.

A rueful smile broke out from his awkwardness. “You want *me* to decide?”

“Would you be horrified if I hugged you?”

He looked down. He looked sideways. Finally, he looked at her, his expression a medley of just about every emotion possible. “Is that what you want to do?”

Lois decided that her impulsiveness might just be the answer here. She stepped forward and put her arms around his neck. She tightened for a fleeting second and then drew away. His arms hadn’t moved, but she wasn’t fazed. She smiled to show him that everything was OK. “I promise you that I will be back tomorrow evening,” she said.

“Thank you.”

“I’ll come here directly from the airport, I’ll get rid of Longford, and then I’ll be in here as quickly as possible.”

“Thank you.”

“Goodnight, Clark.” She wanted to say that she hoped Scardino stayed away. She wanted to say how much the thought of him being exposed to the rods tore at her heart, but he looked as if this goodbye had gone as long as he could endure.

“Goodnight, Lois.”

She stepped back into the staffroom. “I will see you tomorrow.”

He nodded.

Lois closed the door and locked it.

She pressed her ear against the door and heard the slow, sad rhythm of his footsteps walking away from her.

Lois scanned the staffroom for anything else that needed to be removed. There was nothing. She went to the closet and collected the rod.

In her office, she put all the rods into the corner — there was more room now that Scardino had taken Trask’s boxes.

She hesitated for a long moment, pondering what to do with the camera. The tape could stay — she had effectively wiped it clean by recording a black screen. She pulled the curtain away and threw it onto her desk.

Should she set the camera to record tomorrow?

No — she decided. Whatever happened, she could ask Clark about it. And if her fears were realised and Scardino and Menzies went into the cell, she wouldn’t be able to endure watching Clark suffer.

Longford arrived just before ten o’clock, and Lois went down to the staffroom. He looked at her diffidently, and she wondered if he were embarrassed by the events of the morning.

“Hi, Longford,” Lois said brightly.

He nodded and then looked at the door to the cell.

“Situation fixed,” she said.

“I ... I was probably too hasty in some of the things I said this morning,” Longford said.

“Don’t worry about it,” Lois said. “It worked out well because now the door doesn’t need to be opened.”

“What about his washing bowl? That won’t fit through the pet door.”

“I’ll get a hose, and we’ll run water directly from the faucet at the sink through the pet door and into the bowl.”

“You don’t have the hose yet? You don’t want me to give him water?”

“Not yet,” Lois said. “All you have to do is push his breakfast in there tomorrow morning. He’ll be subdued anyway; I used the rods so the door guy was safe.”

Longford nodded as if that answered an unvoiced question.

“Could you tell Shadbolt there is the possibility of a visit from Scardino and a higher-up tomorrow?” Lois said nonchalantly.

“OK,” Longford said. “And I’ll be back at two o’clock to do your shift.”

“Thanks,” Lois said. “I’ll get here as soon as I can, and then you can go home.”

“I ... I don’t mind doing the full shift,” Longford said. “I can stay until ten.”

Lois smiled, and with a lowered voice, she said, “Actually, after the day I’m expecting tomorrow, it will be a relief to get here for some peace and quiet.”

Longford nodded with understanding.

“His lunch is in the fridge,” Lois continued. “But his evening meal won’t be delivered here. I’ll pick it up when I get something for myself.”

“OK.”

“I’ll just get my bag from upstairs and be out of here.” She entered her office and stood next to the window, looking at Clark. He was lying on the mattress, facing away from her. His bushy hair covered a lot of the pillow, and she felt a spike of excitement at the thought of seeing him clean-shaven and with neat, short hair.

“Stay safe,” she muttered.

He turned over abruptly, sat up, looked at the window, and raised his hand in greeting.

Lois grinned. She was going to have to remember how well he could hear.

“I’m going now,” she said. “I’ll be back tomorrow, and we’ll spend the evening together.”

He waved again.

Lois turned away as the thought of being separated from Clark for so many hours chipped a lonely chasm through her heart.

~ Wednesday ~

Lois got out of the rental car and looked along the sprawling main

street of Smallville. A few people were dotted on the sidewalk, but it felt decidedly sedate after the bustle of Metropolis. Twenty yards to her left was a cafe.

She bent low to glance in the side mirror and adjusted her spiky blonde wig. It made her appear younger — well, maybe not younger, but definitely someone desperately trying to look younger.

Younger — she'd discovered — worked well. If you were female *and* young, the general perception was that your head was filled with little more than fashion and the love lives of celebrities.

Which usually worked to her advantage.

Lois sauntered along the sidewalk and into the cafe. It looked as if it were still hopelessly stuck in the sixties. She gazed around her, wide-eyed.

"What can I do for you, love?"

Lois slowly turned towards the voice. "I think I'm lost," she said with a not-quite-suppressed giggle.

The older woman smiled. "You're in Smallville, Kansas," she said.

"Smallville?" Lois said plaintively. "But I'm supposed to be in Granville."

The woman snorted. "Why would you want to go to a hole like that, love?"

Lois stepped up to the counter. "I'm a reporter," she said with another little giggle. "Well, I *want* to be a reporter, and like, I've been given a try-out with a big city paper, and like, the editor gave me a story about unsolved mysteries, and he told me there was something about a horse, and it had happened in Granville, Kansas."

The older woman wiped her hands on her apron. "That would be the racehorse poisoning in the eighties," she said. "Can I get you a drink? Something to eat?"

"A cup of tea, please," Lois said. "No milk, no sugar."

The woman dropped a tea bag into a cup. "I'm Maisie," she said with a friendly smile. "And if you want a story that is really going to impress your editor, you shouldn't go chasing a dead horse in Granville; you should look right here in Smallville."

Lois glanced outside and wrinkled her nose. "Ahhh ... thanks, but I think I should just do what my editor said. This is my big break. If he likes my story, I might have a chance to get a permanent position."

Maisie put the cup of tea in front of Lois. "A dollar, thanks, love," she said. "But if you surprise him with a bigger, more interesting story, he'll know that you have initiative."

Lois paused in the act of taking the bill from her purse. "Well," she said doubtfully. "It's going to take a few minutes to drink my tea, so if you really want to ..."

Maisie smiled as she placed the bill in the register. "Come and sit down, love," she said. "And I'll tell you a story that'll really get your interest."

Lois took her tea to the square Formica table and sat down. Maisie slid into the opposite seat with a loud sigh.

As Lois sipped her tea, memories of Linda came flooding back. Lois only ever drank tea without milk when she was undercover. The bitter, pungent taste worked as a reminder that she wasn't Lois Lane but someone else.

Maisie plonked her elbows on the worn Formica. "Do you have paper?" she asked.

"Tell me about Smallville's big mystery," Lois said. "And if I think there's like, a story in it, I'll take some notes."

"Well," Maisie said. "Just over seven years ago, a local family, the Kents, disappeared."

Lois cocked one eyebrow. "They disappeared?" she said. "Like ... gone?"

Maisie nodded eagerly. "They simply disappeared. Here one day. Gone the next."

"What? Like, the entire family? Mom, Dad, and all the kids?"

"The parents, Martha and Jonathan, and their son, Clark."

"And then what happened? Did they come back?"

"Nope," Maisie said triumphantly. "Never heard of 'em ever again."

Lois slowly sipped from her tea, pretending to consider the information while, in the deep recesses of her heart, she grieved for what this would mean to Clark. "What happened to them?" she asked.

"That's the mystery," Maisie said. "Nobody knows."

"This would have been in all the papers," Lois said. "I really don't think there is a story here after all this time."

"It was in some of the papers," Maisie admitted. "But when the police found no clues about their whereabouts, the interest died."

"Did they find the bodies?"

Maisie vigorously shook her head. "Nothing," she said. "Not a trace."

"I think the Granville story is better," Lois said. "At least they have a body."

Maisie leant across the table. "The rumour is that they were abducted by aliens."

Lois stared in open-mouthed, jaw-suspended shock. "Aliens?" she gasped. "Do people around here believe in aliens?"

Maisie didn't flinch. "Old Jack Wetherly from out that way swears he saw a spaceship in the field years ago."

Lois gulped down the rest of her tea and rose from the table. "Thanks, Maisie," she said.

Maisie stood. "Are you going to investigate? It makes sense, you know, that the government would cover it up. I mean, can you imagine the uproar if it were proven that they'd been taken by aliens?"

"I think -"

"Would you like to know how to get to the Kents' place? The neighbour, Wayne Irig, has been working the farm — someone had to look after the animals — but no one's touched the house in seven years."

"Which way to Granville?" Lois said.

"You're not even going to follow it up?" Maisie asked, disappointment drizzling from every word.

Lois shook her head. "I get one shot at this story," she said. "If I take my editor a story on an alien abduction, that's going to finish my career before it even starts."

"OK," Maisie conceded. "Granville's that way." She pointed south down the quiet street. "About half a mile out of town, there's a turn off to your left."

Lois nodded. "Thanks," she said.

She got into the rental car and drove out of Smallville on the road towards Granville.

Part 16

Daniel Scardino stepped away from the drab and inauspicious office block, unable to determine which of his competing emotions — relief and annoyance — was ahead in the battle for precedence.

He was relieved that his meeting with Eric Menzies had been short and relatively painless.

He was annoyed that, despite Menzies' edict that the meeting was to begin at eight o'clock sharp, the higher-up hadn't seen fit to arrive until after ten. And when he had arrived, whatever had delayed him — he hadn't seen the need to enlighten Scardino or offer an apology — had put him in a more-objectionable-than-usual mood.

He'd barked a few questions demanding details of the changes Lois Lane had implemented at the compound. Scardino had answered simply and accurately, and to his relief, Menzies hadn't pushed for in-depth explanations.

Daniel had handed over the boxes of Trask's notes, Menzies had grunted a dismissal, and Daniel had left, rueing a wasted morning but acutely aware that it could have been worse.

Although he assumed his reprieve would be short-lived.

Menzies was not one to let things lag. He would read Trask's notes, draw his own conclusions, and make a decision about what happened now.

And that decision would be final.

Scardino had given his word that he wouldn't take Lois Lane off the alien operation. And he wouldn't. But if Menzies decreed that she was to be removed, Daniel would be powerless.

Lois Lane, however, would fight it. She would.

And that would put Scardino squarely in the middle of the ensuing confrontation.

Daniel sighed as he unlocked his vehicle. He guessed it was too much to hope that whatever had taken Menzies out of the job for over a year would make a convenient reappearance.

That would be just too easy.

Clark had been awake a long time before the first glimmer of sunlight brought subtle changes to the hue of the window.

From his first moment of consciousness, thoughts of Lois had filled his mind. There was so much to think about — his parents, the farm, and Lois in Smallville; whether Scardino would come into his prison with the rods; the outcome of the meeting; and if the higher-up would decide that Lois had to leave.

If he did, what would she do?

Clark sat up and put her pillow behind his head as he leaned against the wall.

Tapping away in his brain was a possibility that he had repeatedly refused to contemplate.

It was unthinkable.

But from what he had gleaned about Lois Lane, there seemed to be every chance that *she* was thinking about it.

She knew about the implant.

That should have been enough to convince her that he could never leave this prison.

But it hadn't been — she had simply threatened to bulldoze the wall.

Despite the gravity of the situation, Clark felt himself smile.

If anyone ordered a bulldozer, it would be Lois.

He looked at the wall surrounding the door. Trask had had it lead-lined, and since then, Clark hadn't been able to see beyond the plasterboard even during the fleeting intervals when he hadn't been weakened by exposure to the poison.

Now, he felt close to fully recovered — although it was difficult to judge accurately when there was no real way to test his strength and speed.

He concentrated his vision on the wall surrounding the door.

There were a few small gaps in the lead, allowing Clark patchy visual access into the interior of the wall. He saw some wires and tracked the disjointed network. Within seconds, he realised that they appeared to converge on one spot about a foot above the door.

He followed a wire through the breaks in his vision as it snaked towards the window. It separated into several strands that surrounded the large pane of glass.

Trask had been so vigilant in maintaining levels of exposure that Clark hadn't considered the window to be a means of escape. Now, he was almost sure he would be able to fly up to the window and crash through it.

Except for the presence of the wires.

He should have expected that.

Trask had been nothing if not thorough.

But Lois intended to get him out.

Clark wasn't exactly sure how he felt about that.

He wanted to get out of this prison ... obviously.

But to what?

Nothing was going to change that he was an alien in a suspicious and hostile world.

Freedom wouldn't be freedom if he were being hunted like a feral animal.

If they were chasing him, what would happen to Lois?

Would she face the same fate as his parents?

He couldn't let that happen again. Not to Lois.

And, anyway, what sort of life would it be for her? Always running. Always hiding. Always having to be careful about leaving any clue as to their whereabouts.

That was no way for her to live.

If he were to escape, it had to be done in such a way that Lois was not implicated.

And that meant they couldn't be together.

But when Clark searched the depths of his heart, he wasn't sure he could face life on the outside without her.

She had hugged him.

She'd stepped up to him and taken him into her arms.

He'd been dumbstruck.

And petrified of doing something that would cause her to pull back.

So, he'd just stood there. Like a statue.

Last night, he'd mulled over it for a long time. He'd tried to split it into fractions of seconds and relive them individually. Had it meant anything? If so, what? That she liked him? That she thought he would face the poison and had wanted to comfort him? Or had it been meant as confirmation of her commitment to getting him out of the prison?

If he escaped, what would it mean for his parents? He couldn't do anything that might jeopardise them.

But Lois seemed determined.

Conflict was coming. Clark could feel it as surely as he used to be able to feel the onset of a big storm as it rolled across the fields.

Even with Trask dead, there was no chance that the authorities were going to allow him back into the world to live as a normal person. It just wasn't going to happen. They believed he was a killer. They knew about his phenomenal strength, his lightning speed, and some of his other weird abilities. They were convinced he was an unacceptable threat to a vulnerable human race.

And that meant Lois was going to want him to break out. He could not take her with him. And he wasn't sure he could do it without her.

When it came to eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation, he was ominously sure that he and Lois were not going to agree.

He would prefer to stay in the prison if the alternative was to ruin Lois's life.

Would she accept that?

Clark sighed.

Her opinion of him was going to plummet if he said he didn't want to leave the prison. But that was preferable to her dutifully staying with him after they had run away.

What possible future could they have?

None.

The authorities would never stop looking for him.

He and Lois might be able to steal a few hours ... a few days at best ... but then what? Certain capture. Perhaps with Lois being hurt or killed. They would bring the poison, and he would be powerless to protect her.

And then, he would be returned to captivity.

But infinitely worse — Lois's life would change. Perhaps she would be imprisoned. Perhaps she would suffer whatever fate had befallen his parents.

Clark could not allow that.

He would prefer Lois think of him as a coward than live with the certain knowledge that he had ruined her life.

He had no future outside of the prison.

And somehow, Clark had to find a way to convince Lois of that.

Lois ... where was she now? Had she arrived in Kansas safely?

Had she rented a car?

What would she find when she got to Smallville?

The flap of the pet door lifted, and a paper bag was pushed into the cell. Clark rose to his feet, collected it, returned to the mattress, and ate with stark disinterest.

The morning, the afternoon, the entire day stretched ahead of him like a long, never-ending highway.

He wanted Lois. He wanted to be with her so much that the ache in his heart radiated through his ribcage, causing physical pain. He tried to think ahead to this evening. He'd guessed that the real motivation behind her suggestion had been to give him something to take his mind from everything else.

He would enjoy the evening. It would be incredible. It would be the closest thing he'd had to a date in such a long time.

A date.

Neither of them had used that word, but that was what it would be.

A date.

A date with Lois.

It should have been enough to overwhelm him with joyful anticipation. And it did ... except, he found it impossible not to look beyond the evening to the time when his separation from Lois wouldn't be measured in hours, but in foreverness.

He had experienced excruciating pain, but he couldn't even imagine the agony of knowing he would never see her again.

Never was such a long time.

The morning crawled past. Clark watched the indistinct changes of the window and tracked the passing of time.

It was only mid morning. He *had* to do something. He could run. Exercise.

He leapt to his feet and began jogging slowly up and down the length of the cell. If he did one hundred laps, that should eat away at least half an hour.

He ran, feet pounding, mind hurtling from Lois, to his parents, to Smallville, and back to Lois again.

He stopped after a while — worried about how his vigour would be interpreted if anyone were silently watching him from Lois's office.

If they still believed Trask's allegations, they would think he was training to take his place in the alien invasion of Earth.

Trask had spent hours trying to get Clark to admit to an obsession with world domination.

But all Clark had ever wanted was to live like a regular guy.

That was until he met Lois.

Now all he wanted was to be with her.

Lois drove south towards Granville for five miles and then navigated a wide circle back to the area north of Smallville. She followed the map Clark had drawn and found the gate to the farm where the Kent family had lived.

She stepped out of the car and listened intently. She could hear the sounds of the birds and the rustle of the leaves, but there was no low hum of an approaching car.

She hurried forward to open the gate, drove through it, and closed it behind her. At the top of the long and curvy driveway, she nosed the rental car between the huge cedar and the grove of maples that fanned out behind it. She killed the motor and got out of the car.

Through the vibrant foliage, she could glimpse the little white farmhouse where Clark had been raised. What had once been a garden in front of the house was now overgrown — weeds flourished in the midst of the spindly shrubs. The lawn had spread its scraggly edges onto the path.

Lois reached into her bag and took out her filed-down Allen key, a small screwdriver, and a pair of thin white cotton gloves. She lifted her small suitcase from the back seat and pulled on the gloves as she slipped between the trees and behind the house.

A minute later, the lock gave way to her steady pressure on the Allen key, and she pushed open the door. The kitchen was neat — the chairs were pushed against the table, the counters and sink were clear — but a film of dust covered everything, a cobweb was stretched between the plain white light fitting and the top of the bureau, and the pervading odour strongly suggested the presence of mice. Lois stepped to the bureau, placed her suitcase across her feet, and opened the first drawer.

She discovered multiple sheets of blank paper; a few old pamphlets about things like seed, and calf food, and farm equipment; some pens; and two yellowed copies of the *Smallville Press* that were dated July 1987.

She opened the second drawer, already suspecting that the house had been cleared of everything personal — there were no photos, no shopping lists, no handwritten recipes, no letters, no greeting cards, no

envelopes addressed to the Kents. There was nothing to point to the people who had lived here.

Lois opened the final drawer. It contained more of the same — papers, some pages torn from a gardening magazine, a crumpled packet of flower seeds, and a pair of scissors, but nothing personal. She shuffled the papers aside and uncovered a man's pair of glasses.

She shut the drawer, picked up her suitcase, and continued through the house into the living room. The chairs — worn and well-used — formed a forlorn semi-circle around the fireplace. On the mantle was a clock that had stopped at twelve minutes past seven. A painting of an ice-capped mountain hung on the wall. There were other nails in the wall — surrounded by faint rectangular shadows where the pale blue paint had been protected from the smoke particles.

Lois crossed to the foot of the wooden stairs and tiptoed up them. At the top, she opened the door on the left and entered cautiously.

Clark's room was dim — the blue curtains covered most of the window, shutting out the sunlight. The bed was made — the once-white sheets were folded down over a blue quilt. An alarm clock, two pens, and a copy of *National Geographic* hunkered into the dust on top of the little table next to the bed. Lois carefully lowered her suitcase onto the blue quilt and opened the lid. Inside were five hardcover books bought for their weight rather than their words, a few pieces of clothing she had used when working undercover as a streetwalker, her favourite cherry-red dress, and matching shoes. She pushed the shoes into the corner of the suitcase and laid the dress on the lid. She rolled up the remaining clothes into an untidy bundle and turned to the closet.

The door was painted white. Inside, the clothes were arranged in neat rows and orderly piles. Six pairs of shoes lined the floor of the closet. Lois pushed the bundle of clothes and the books into the back corner with a muttered apology to Clark. She crouched low, chose a pair of sneakers and a pair of black leather shoes, and placed them in the suitcase.

She selected the two newest pairs of jeans, added two white cotton shirts and two checked shirts, and laid them all in the suitcase. She took three sweaters from the pile, and packed them as well. She took down the formal-looking grey pants and maroon jacket and laid them across the top of the other clothing.

After closing the closet door, Lois opened the drawer under the bedside table. She reached in quickly and grasped a handful of the bundled pairs of socks and another handful of the folded briefs. She shoved them into the gaps around the edges of her suitcase.

Then, she scrutinised Clark's bedroom.

It had been cleared more comprehensively than the other rooms. The bookshelves were empty apart from the layers of dust that marked the passing years. There were nails in the wall, but whatever had once been proudly displayed was gone.

Lois skirted around the bed, went to the desk under the window, and rifled through the drawers. Two were empty, and the third contained a handheld mirror and a small, threadbare reindeer that was probably a Christmas tree decoration.

She picked up both items and shut the drawer. Back at the bed, she slipped them between the folds of one of Clark's sweaters. She placed her dress across the contents of the suitcase and fastened the lid.

She lifted it and thumped the quilt a few times. A dark cloud of dust rose, and Lois turned away, leaving it to settle on the place where she had put her suitcase.

After shutting Clark's door, she hesitated.

Should she go into his parents' room?

She carefully turned the knob and stepped in.

There was a dark stain on the pastel-green bedspread. Lois figured that whatever had caused it had happened after the family had been forcibly removed from their home.

She opened the closet, hoping it would be empty.

It wasn't.

Lois perused the hanging row of clothes. Clark's mom was about Lois's size. Clark's dad was tall and large.

On one hanger, there was a lady's coat made from creamy wool.

Around its neck was a silk scarf in vibrant reds and blues with splashes of rich yellow. Lois ran her fingers along its softness. Should she take it to Clark?

How would he react? Would it upset him?

She wasn't sure. But if she took the scarf, she could choose the right moment to give it to him. And there was always the possibility that someone might come and clear away the clothes, and then they would be lost forever. How long could a house sit here — abandoned? Wouldn't someone eventually decide that something had to be done with it?

She slid the scarf from the hanger and pushed it into the pocket of her jacket.

On the dresser, there was a hairbrush and some bobby pins. Had it once displayed a photo of Clark? Perhaps as a baby?

If it had, there was nothing now. Nothing to bear witness to the couple who had lived their lives in this little farmhouse. Raised their son. Dreamed their dreams. Shared their hopes.

Lois closed the closet, stepped from the room, quietly shut the door, and crept down the stairs with her suitcase.

In the kitchen, she paused. She had the scarf that belonged to Clark's mom; should she also take him something of his dad's?

Stepping around the table, Lois opened the drawer of the bureau and took out the pair of glasses. She slipped them into her pocket and folded the scarf around them to protect them.

After a final glance to ensure there was no telltale evidence of her visit, she left the farmhouse and carefully locked the door.

Five minutes later, she was driving north, putting more miles between herself and Smallville. She would have to do a wide circle to avoid the town but she estimated she would reach Wichita in good time for her flight back to Metropolis.

Her thoughts scampered ahead to Clark.

He would be wondering.

Wondering about her.

Wondering about his parents.

Wondering what she had discovered.

Hoping she would bring good news of them.

She had so very little to give him, and her disappointment sat like a lump of cold stone in the pit of her stomach.

But this was just the beginning — and, as she knew, it was rare to strike gold in the first place you looked.

Something had happened to Jonathan and Martha Kent, and Lois intended to find out what.

This was just the first step in what she expected to be a long journey.

But she wished she had something more promising to take back to Clark. Something that would ease the worry from his eyes and cast a smile upon his face.

It had reached mid-afternoon in what was definitely the slowest day in Earth's history.

The guards had changed. Clark had heard a few minutes of voices, and then an egg salad sandwich had been pushed into his cell.

Hope that Scardino wouldn't come was growing steadily. Or perhaps he'd come already and hadn't requested entry into the cell.

Clark knew that Lois would be relieved.

He was, too — not only at having avoided the pain of exposure but because he really didn't want to be still feeling the effects of the poison later this evening.

Would Lois be on the airplane by now?

She hadn't told him the exact time of her flight — and anyway, he had to guess the time from the amount and angle of light behind the window.

Was she on her way back to him?

What had she found out?

Did he dare to believe that Trask had allowed his parents to return to the farm?

Clark wanted to. But somehow ... hoping for that seemed to be the

forerunner of certain disappointment.

But he could hope that Lois would arrive soon.

That wasn't empty hope.

She had promised him that she would get back as soon as she could.

Was she safe?

He wished it had been possible to go with her.

He sat down next to the jigsaw puzzle and determined that he was going to finish it. That should eat up another half an hour.

As Lois pushed the key into the external door of the compound, her emotions were a patchwork of contrast.

There was excitement — very soon, she would be with Clark. Clark, who had probably spent the entire day awaiting the moment she would walk into his room.

There was regret — she wished she had more information regarding his parents. Something to buoy his hope. Something to alleviate his fears for them.

There was foreboding — what if, right now, Clark was collapsed on the floor, recovering from a dose of the rods?

And there was gleeful anticipation. She hadn't mentioned to Clark that she hoped to bring him some clothes. Tonight, he could cut his hair, shave off his beard, dress in his own clothes, and eat a meal at a table.

Her heart bounced every time she thought of what tonight would mean to Clark.

She hoped it would be enough to overcome his disappointment that her trip to Smallville hadn't produced more definite and happier news.

She hoped it would be enough to overcome her distress if he had been hurt.

As Lois walked into the staffroom, Longford looked up from the table. "You're back early," he commented.

"Am I?" Lois looked at her wristwatch — although she was very aware that it was a few minutes before eight o'clock. She gave Longford a weary smile. "It was a long day."

"Did it ... did everything work out OK?" he asked. "With ... ah ... everything you had to do?"

"Yes," she said. "And thank you so much for taking my shift."

"You're welcome."

"Did Shadbolt say if Scardino came?" she asked casually.

"No one came," Longford said.

"No one?" Lois echoed as she tried to calm the hope carousing through her heart.

He shook his head. "Shadbolt said nothing happened. No one came. There was very little noise from the cell. It was just another quiet day."

Lois's relief congregated in her knees, and she grasped the chair.

"You really are tired," Longford said.

"Yeah," Lois said. "The evening meals will be delivered soon. I'm going to push one into the cell, eat the other, and then I'm going to bed."

"Do you want to go home?" Longford offered. "I can stay here tonight."

"No, thanks," Lois said. "To be honest, I don't have the energy to go home. I just want to crash here." She yawned and made a feeble effort to cover it with her hand. "See you tomorrow."

Longford took the hint and stood from the table. He replaced his coffee mug on the sink and picked up his bag. "Goodnight."

Lois forced her feet-that-wanted-to-dance to plod slowly up the stairs. She unlocked the door to her office and stepped in. She didn't turn on the light, but she slammed shut her eyes anyway. She didn't want to see Clark before he had the chance to see her.

Scardino hadn't come!

They hadn't used the rods!

No one had hurt Clark while she was away!

Lois stood in the dark room with her eyes closed and counted

slowly to one hundred as her impatience crashed over her like waves against a cliff.

She reached one hundred and started again, counting to the beat of her thumping heart. When she reached eighty-eight, she couldn't wait a moment longer. She opened the door, took the stairs in two leaping strides, opened the external door, and peered out.

Longford's vehicle was gone.

She was alone with Clark.

After locking the external door, Lois sprinted through the staffroom, and pushed the key into Clark's door.

As soon as she turned the key, Clark would know she was here.

Actually, there was every chance that he knew already.

He'd probably heard her voice.

Lois turned the key and pushed open the door.

He was standing, just a few yards away.

His face was split wide open with an unbridled grin of welcome.

Lois stepped up to him. In his eyes, there were questions, but for now, the potent cocktail of relief and excitement overshadowed them.

"Lois," he said, and in that one word, he managed to portray the anguish of waiting for the hours to pass.

"Clark," she said.

"I'm so glad you're back," he said emphatically.

Lois had so much to tell him, and it all wanted to tumble out in an incoherent mess. She had to consider Clark — this was going to feel like an emotional roller coaster for him. "You speak," she said. "I'm too jittery."

The tide of his anxiety flowed back. "My parents?"

All of her excitement was swept away like twigs in a flooded river. "I'm sorry, Clark," she said. "I wasn't able to find out much at all."

"They're not at the farm?"

"No," she said. "All I was able to establish is that they disappeared and have not returned."

His expression mirrored her feelings — it could have been worse, it could have been better, and they still knew so little.

"I'm so sorry, Clark," Lois said.

He slowly shook his head. "It's what I expected."

"But not what you hoped?"

"No."

Was now the right time to give him the scarf? Would it ease his disappointment? Or intensify it? Lois put her hand into her jacket pocket. "I brought something for you ... but ..."

"But?"

"But I'm not sure if now is the right time."

He waited, and Lois knew he would accept her decision.

Lois freed the scarf from the glasses. With a quick movement, she withdrew her hand from her pocket and held it — palm open — towards Clark.

His throat jumped, and his hand shook as he reached for the scarf. "My mom's," he said hoarsely.

Lois nodded. "It was in her closet."

"Only this? Or other clothes as well?"

"Other clothes."

Clark enclosed the scarf in his big hand. He looked beyond her, his eyelids flickering and his face set.

Lois couldn't watch his distress any longer.

She stepped into the sphere of his pain and wrapped her arms around his neck. She held him closely, burying her fingers into the softness of his hair.

His arms eased out from between their bodies and hesitated before loosely encircling her waist.

Lois inched closer and placed her cheek alongside his.

He held her.

She held him.

"You OK?" she whispered.

She felt him nod, and his arms fell away.

Lois slipped back, and her hands came to rest on Clark's shoulders. He gave her a hard-pressed smile. "Thank you," he said.

"I ... ah, got something belonging to your dad, too."

That seemed to surprise him, and Lois felt a ray of excitement as she imagined the moment when she would give him the suitcase of clothing. She took the glasses from her pocket and held them out to him.

This time, Clark's reaction was different. He chuckled as he took the glasses from her hand. "Thanks," he said.

"Am I missing something?" Lois asked.

"I'll show you later."

"OK." She smiled at him, feeling as if they had weathered the most difficult components of their reunion. "I have some things for you," she said, unable to wait a moment longer.

"Oh?"

"I'll have to go outside and get them from the Jeep. I didn't want to bring them in while Longford was here."

She skipped outside and hurriedly returned with the suitcase. She laid it on the table, removed the cherry-red dress and matching shoes, and placed them on the bed. Then she quickly refastened the suitcase and carried it into the cell.

Clark watched her, a half-smile filtering through his bafflement.

Lois put the suitcase on the floor, undid the clasp, and threw open the lid.

She heard Clark gasp as he knelt beside her. "Lois," he breathed.

"Do you recognise anything here?" she asked with a smile.

He picked up the maroon jacket and stared at it. "Lois," he said. "I didn't expect ..."

"I didn't want to say anything just in case it wasn't possible to get into your house ... or I got in there, and everything had been taken." She slipped her hand into the sweater and brought out the mirror and the little reindeer. "Here's your mirror," she said. "And I didn't know if this little guy means anything to you, but I found him in your bedroom."

Clark took the reindeer and smiled. "This was mine to put on the Christmas tree," he said. "I always put him as high as I could reach, and we watched him slowly climb the tree year after year, until finally, he was sitting right at the top."

Lois put her hand on his hand where he held the reindeer. "I'll bring down another mirror," she said. "And then I'll leave you alone for a while. Our meals will be here in about half an hour."

"Did you get a camp table?"

"Uh huh."

"If you bring it in here — and the chairs, too — I'll set it up for us."

"Thanks," she said. "And I thought about something else, too. About cutting your hair."

"Oh?"

"If someone notices that you've shaved, I can probably explain it by saying I gave you a shaver. However, short hair means scissors — and that could be a problem."

She saw him try to suppress his disappointment. "OK."

Lois smiled. "But, I had an idea. On the way home, I bought a bathing cap. Would it be possible for you to melt it a bit and stick your hair into it? Then, if we really need to, you could put on the cap — and it will look like your hair hasn't been cut."

Clark smiled. "Do you think that would fool them?"

"It probably won't stand up to really close inspection, but from the window or the pet door, it might be enough."

"That's a great idea," Clark said with obvious admiration.

"Thanks." He seemed poised to say something else.

"Yes?" she prompted with a smile.

"Would you mind not looking?" Clark said with a dash of self-consciousness. "While I'm getting ready?"

"Of course I won't look," Lois said. "I need to freshen up in the bathroom. I won't go into my office."

"Thanks," he said.

"I'll bring everything in — and then I'll leave you to it."

"Lois?"

She paused.

“Thank you for going to Smallville,” Clark said. “And thank you for coming back.”

She chuckled. “See you soon.”

Lois walked through the door and shut it. She leant against it for a few moments as her excitement bubbled over.

This felt like a real date.

She was going to dress up. She had ordered a special meal and bought a bottle of wine. She was looking forward to a wonderful evening.

With the man she loved.

Yep, it felt exactly like a real date.

Part 17

Lois took a final look in the mirror in the bathroom. It felt strange to be so concerned with how she looked.

She hadn't dressed up in such a long time.

She smiled. She'd always liked the cherry-red dress.

She was looking forward to Clark's reaction.

A minute later, the heels on her shoes were tapping a clipped rhythm as she passed the warehouse to collect their meals.

What would Clark look like?

Was he apprehensive about her reaction?

Did this feel like a date to him?

Did he have any inkling about her feelings for him?

Did he feel anything for her?

Anything beyond gratitude?

He couldn't ... He wouldn't ... not while he was locked in a prison with little realistic chance of freedom.

The delivery guy pulled up against the kerb, and Lois took the two bags. “Thanks,” she said.

Back inside the compound and with the external door firmly locked, Lois hauled in a deep breath.

She was nervous!

She hadn't had a date in six months.

How must Clark feel?

He hadn't had a date in at least seven years.

He must be feeling everything she was feeling, but magnified exponentially.

Did his clothes still fit?

Had he been able to shave? To ‘cut’ his hair?

It would still be shaggy. Surely.

Lois put the dessert container into the fridge and took two dinner plates from the shelf.

She opened the largest container and smiled. She'd asked Uncle Mike for his best cuts of steak — one large, one smaller. She put one on each plate. Next came the golden baked potatoes — two for Clark and one for herself — and butter-sautéed Portobello mushrooms. Lastly, she arranged a few curly lettuce leaves, tomato wedges, and thin slices of cucumber.

There was nothing to use as a sauceboat, so Lois decided to leave the béarnaise sauce in its small round container.

The meals looked great, and she sent silent thanks to Uncle Mike. He had questioned her about how her ‘friend’s’ appetite seemed unusually large for a woman. Lois had admitted nothing, and Uncle Mike had chuckled knowingly.

The time had come. The food was on the plates, and the bottle of wine was open.

Lois sighed around a big smile.

Was Clark ready?

She tapped loudly on the cell door.

“Lois?”

He sounded the same. “Can I open the door?” she called.

There was a slight hesitation — and her ears filled with the thundering of her heart.

Then his answer cut through her anticipation. “Yes.”

Lois unlocked the door and reached behind her for a chair. Once it was secured in place, she looked up.

Her heart swooped.

Her jaw flumped.

Her breath tangled.

Clark smiled tentatively. “You look beautiful, Lois.”

Lois cranked her mouth shut and gulped. “C...” She jerked her eyes from the allure of his face and swept them down his body, past the maroon jacket and white shirt to the grey trousers and black shoes.

The world tilted, and Lois groped the air for something solid. Clark's hand found hers, and he guided her to a chair and steadied her as she collapsed into it.

He put one hand on the back of the chair and one on the table as he crouched beside her. “Are you all right?” he asked.

He was wearing the glasses she had brought from Smallville. Lois peered through them and locked into those familiar brown eyes. *They* were Clark. The rest of him — except for his voice — the rest of him was a stranger.

But she knew those eyes.

They were — as always — filled with understanding. And gentleness. And concern for her.

“Are you all right, Lois?” he asked again.

She managed to nod, although she wasn't sure if it were a lie. She wasn't sure she would ever be all right again.

Clark was ...

Stunning.

Stunningly handsome.

Tongue-cleaved-to-the-roof-of-your-mouth gorgeous.

She had fallen for prime beefcake thinking it was aged rump.

There was *nothing* aged about Clark.

He was young, and he ... Lois gulped ... he smouldered with an understated virility that beckoned to every single female hormone currently searing through her body.

Clark moved his hand an inch, and two fingertips landed gently on her arm. “It's still me,” he said with a smile that — although hesitant — was powerful enough to melt her insides.

His beard had concealed a national treasure.

“Cl...”

She snatched his forearm. She needed something to hold on to, and he was it.

His smile unfurled further, intensifying the havoc inside her.

OK. Deep breath.

It was time to pull herself together.

She *had* to stop gawping at him.

Clark was more than a face ... a lot more than a face. She knew that better than anyone did.

He was ... well, it didn't matter how mind-numbingly good he looked, he was still Clark, and he still needed her.

And she had to pull herself together. For him.

She would.

But she *had* to ask one question first. “How old are you?” Lois blurted.

“Twenty-eight.”

Twenty -eight!

“I'm twenty-seven,” Lois said — which was inane, but she was too busy congratulating herself on putting two words together to care that he hadn't asked, and it wasn't usually information that she tossed around like confetti.

Two dark eyebrows rose as if to direct attention to his hair — now short. Neat. Immaculate.

Except for one little lock that had broken away and fallen forward onto his forehead.

Her fingers ached to reach forward and touch it. She tightened her grip on Clark's hand.

“You seem surprised,” Lois said — aware that Clark's level of surprise was the equivalent to one small piece of space rock compared with her galaxy of shock.

“I ... I thought you looked younger, but when I thought about you being given this job ... I figured you must be a few years older than

you look.”

At any other time, Lois would have paused long enough to enjoy the compliment, but right now, it washed over her ineffectually.

“I’m sorry if I surprised you,” Clark said.

Lois dragged her eyes away from the smooth naked curve of his jaw. “I ... I don’t think ‘surprised’ is quite the right word,” she said.

“Well, I *am* sorry,” Clark said. “I should have done it one thing at a time ... the hair, and then the beard, and then the clothes, and then the glasses. I should have given you some time to become accustomed to the changes.” He looked down shyly. “But I wanted our meal together to be special. You said we were celebrating.”

“We are celebrating, Clark,” Lois said. She was still grasping his arm, but he didn’t seem to mind ... and it wasn’t as if she could damage him no matter how hard she squeezed. “I was just a bit ... dazed. I’m fine now.”

His smile reassured her — although Lois reminded herself that she was supposed to be reassuring him. She breathed in until her lungs could take no more and then let out a long, slow, steadying breath.

He was still the Clark that she knew. He looked poised and confident, but he was still a prisoner who carried so many emotional wounds and insecurities. He was still vulnerable. She had to be careful.

She smiled at him as she had smiled at him so many times before — smiled to assure him that everything was OK. “Would you mind if I did something?” she asked.

“No,” he said — with just a tinge of indecision.

Before he had time to worry about what she intended to do, Lois let go of his arm and reached forward to lift the glasses from his face. She laid them on the table and smiled into his eyes.

That was better. Now she could connect with him properly.

“I’m sorry, Clark,” Lois said. “I needed to find you again.”

“I understand,” he said. “But it’s still me.”

They shared a smile. “You look so different,” Lois said. “I wasn’t prepared at all.”

“I was shocked the first time I looked into the mirror.”

“Please don’t be offended if I stare at you all evening.”

“I won’t be offended at all.”

“Thanks,” she said. “And I don’t think I ever actually said it — but you look amazing.”

She saw his pleasure. “So do you,” he said.

Lois felt herself being drawn into his eyes and knew that she would have been content to lose herself in them while time marched on unnoticed.

Clark cleared his throat. “We should eat,” he said.

They should. Having something to do would help cover all of the gaps, because Lois was sure that her brain was going to be in a flap for quite some time yet.

He rose from where he had been crouching next to her chair and offered her his hand. Lois felt the warm river of familiarity flow through her. *That* was Clark. *That* was her Clark.

Lois accepted his hand and then went into the staffroom to get the meals. When she returned, she noticed Clark’s little smile of appreciation. “Do you like steak?” she asked as she handed him the bigger meal.

“Yes. Very much. Thank you.”

They put the plates on the table, and Lois returned with the glasses, the bottle of merlot, and the tub of béarnaise sauce.

Clark stood behind Lois’s chair and waited for her. As he pushed in her seat, she realised something — he had been only twenty-one when Trask had taken him.

His age had come as a shock.

But it made his poise and his steadfastness so much more incredible.

Clark sat opposite her and smiled.

He *must* be nervous. This was only the fourth day since she had walked into his cell. He was having a first date with a woman — which was enough to freak out more than a few men. And, instead of

him having the years of experience that she had assumed, his life had gone into forced hibernation when he had been only twenty-one.

He poured the wine into both glasses and handed her one. “A toast?” he suggested.

She nodded.

“To what?” he asked.

“The future,” Lois said.

“The future.”

As their glasses clinked together, Lois realised that she wanted only one thing from her future.

To be with Clark.

She wondered what he was thinking. What did he want in his future?

“Would you like me to re-heat your steak and potato?” he asked.

“Yes, please,” Lois said.

He gazed at her meat, and a few seconds later, a little wisp of steam rose from it.

“Thank you,” Lois said.

“You’re welcome.” Clark stared at his meat until it also began to steam.

“Would you like to put your glasses back on?” Lois asked as she poured some sauce on her steak.

“Do you mind?”

“No.”

Clark picked them up and slid them onto his face.

Lois offered him the sauce. “I’m sorry I thought they belonged to your dad.”

“That’s OK.”

“I’m surprised you need glasses. I never noticed that you couldn’t see too well.”

He reached for the sauce. “I can see fine,” he said.

“Then ... why?”

He meticulously poured the sauce over his thick steak. “You know I can see through things,” he said without looking up.

“Unless they’re lead-lined?”

“Yeah,” he said. He put the sauce on the table and met her gaze. “How did you know that?”

“It was in Trask’s notes,” Lois said.

“Oh.” The mention of Trask’s name chilled the atmosphere.

“I stopped reading his notes after a short time,” Lois said. “I wanted to know the truth about you, and I realised there was very little truth to be found in those notes.”

Clark’s smile dispersed the frostiness.

“Do you mind if I ask why you wore glasses if you can see fine?” she asked.

He picked up his knife and fork. “It’s a bit embarrassing,” he admitted.

“If you want to, we could swap embarrassing stories,” Lois said.

“I doubt your story could be as embarrassing as mine,” Clark said. He was smiling, though, so Lois felt confident to continue.

“You want to go first?” she asked.

“No,” he said with a restrained smile that reverberated through her already tightened muscles. “But I will. The glasses mean I *can’t* see through things — they’re lined with lead. My parents got them for me when I was a teenager.”

Lois wanted to laugh — not at what she could see would be a discomforting situation for a teenager who was already trying to deal with some major identity issues, but with unfettered joy that he was willing to confide such information to her.

She smiled, choked down the laughter, and said, “Thanks for telling me.”

Clark couldn’t hide his relief that she didn’t ask more questions. “Your turn,” he said.

“Do you know why I was so flabbergasted when I saw you earlier?”

“I think so,” Clark said. “I was shocked myself when I first looked in the mirror. I didn’t dare do it while you were in here. When I looked

... it was even worse than I had imagined. It's not surprising that you were shocked that I could look ... normal."

His reasoning speared into her heart. Sometimes, the way he thought, what he expected, affected her so deeply. "No," she said with quiet certainty. "That isn't why."

"Lois," he said. "When Moyne pushed you into this prison, you must have been petrified. I looked like I was capable of doing anything."

"I try not to judge people's likely actions by how they look," Lois said.

His eyes melded with hers. "I know that," he said solemnly.

She smiled to loosen the moment. "There was another reason I was so shocked tonight. You looked very different — that was a big part of it, but not all."

"Then what else?"

She smiled, encouraging him to enjoy her story. "Before that moment, I'd thought you were old enough to be my father."

Now, it was his face that froze with shock.

Lois giggled — taking the opportunity to release some of the build up of tension.

"That's why you asked how old I am?"

She nodded. "I was stunned by your hair — you did a great job, by the way — and actually being able to see your face, and seeing you dressed so smartly ... it was a shock. But finding out that you are so young ... that just blew me away. I still can't believe it."

"Why not?"

"Because I've realised how young you were when Trask captured you. I've realised how little life experience you've had ... and yet ... from your actions, your behaviour ... you ... you're astounding."

He stared at her. "I always feel so awkward and uncertain," he said. "Surely you must have noticed?"

"Not often," Lois said. "Most of the time — as I've said before — I'm in awe of you."

His eyes just about melted in hers. "And ... I'm in awe of you," he said.

The room had heated and was on the verge of erupting. "We ... we should eat," Lois said. "Before it gets cold again."

"Yeah," he said.

Clark cut off a piece of steak and put it in his mouth. Lois decided to stay quiet and give him the opportunity to choose the subject.

Or to enjoy his meal.

But while she ate, she couldn't keep from continually looking at him.

The jacket accentuated his broad shoulders.

He had a tear-shaped dimple that peeked out of his left cheek when he smiled.

His jaw line and chin looked like the work of a master carver.

And — to Lois's surprise — his glasses didn't detract at all. Now that she'd had the opportunity to study him, she realised that, without the glasses, he looked about twenty. With them, he looked more mature.

But not as *mature* as she had imagined.

She smiled, and Clark caught her. "What?" he enquired gently.

"I'm still thinking about how — the first time I saw you — I figured you were in your fifties."

His mouth pursed, although he still managed to convey his amusement through the sparkle in his brown eyes. "Fifty?" he said with gentle teasing.

"After I'd watched you run, I lowered it a bit ... forty-five, perhaps."

The uncertainty crept back into his eyes. "Does it matter? Does it change anything?"

"No," she said. "It changes nothing."

His relief pushed away his doubts. "That's good." He wiped the mouth that could turn a smile into a piece of art. "Have you thought about what we should do next?" he asked.

"About finding your parents?"

"Yeah."

"I figure there were two people who might have known something at the time," Lois said.

"Trask and Moyne."

She nodded. "Trask is dead. It's possible he left a clue in his notes, but I didn't find anything that mentioned people being with you. I could ask for the notes back, and we could go through them together."

"Would they give them to you?"

"There's no reason not to," Lois replied. "This is my operation. It's reasonable that I should have access to all prior information."

Clark put down his knife and fork and picked up the glass of wine. "Moyne was there when I was captured. There's a good chance he knows what they did with my parents."

"Moyne has gone away," she said as her thoughts wandered to Menzies. Was it possible that Moyne had told him anything? "And I think he'd get sadistic enjoyment out of not telling me."

Clark stared into the red liquid as he slowly swirled it. "Lois?"

"Yeah?"

He looked up into her eyes. "This is one of those questions that feels a lot like stepping off a cliff."

Lois leant forward. "Clark," she said. "I know that you would never deliberately hurt me. If you want to know something, ask."

His eyes shone with such pure appreciation that it enveloped her heart like a velvet cocoon. But it still took him a moment to gather himself enough to ask his question. "Did Moyne threaten to rape you?"

Lois nodded tightly.

Clark's face hardened. "I don't want him near you," he grated. He met her eyes and retreated. "Not that I can tell you what to do," he added quickly.

Lois chuckled — partly to evade the subject of rape and partly to entice Clark's smile to return. "You can try," she said.

He gave her a sombre smile. "But I doubt I would be very successful."

"Probably not," Lois said with a grin. "But, in this instance, I agree with you. Trying to chase down Moyne involves a lot of risks and has very little chance of giving us anything useful."

"Is there anyone else who might know? Or might be able to find out?"

"Scardino is a possibility."

"Are you sure about him?"

"No, I'm not," Lois said. "I will try to find out about today's meeting, but I don't want to appear too eager. I'm going to try to gauge if we can trust him. Whether — if I push him to find out more about your parents — he will run straight to the higher-ups or whether he'll try to find out information discreetly."

"What's your feeling?"

Lois sighed. "I'm not sure. His main objective is that this operation doesn't cause him any inconvenience. But it's only been in his portfolio for two years. There's a possibility that his predecessor knows something."

"He's not dead? The predecessor?"

"Scardino said he'd retired."

"Do you know his name?"

"O'Brien."

"First name?"

Lois searched through her memory. "I don't think Scardino mentioned it," she said. "But I'm sure I've heard of him before."

"If he's still alive, would it be worth trying to locate him?"

"I don't know," Lois said. "He would be sworn to secrecy, of course. It would be a part of his retirement contract."

"But?"

"But he's not going to want his retirement disrupted with a nasty story in the papers."

Clark's eyes shot her a volley of questions. "You're not thinking of going to the press? If this became public, it could hurt my parents."

"I realise that," Lois said. "But sometimes you only need to

threaten.”

Clark ate a wedge of tomato and said nothing.

Lois sipped on her wine and continued trying to remember O’Brien’s first name.

“You said that Moyne has friends in high places,” Clark said.

Lois stifled her grimace, dipped her final piece of steak into the last of the sauce, and gave him a circumspect smile. “He does,” she said.

“Do you know their identities?”

“I know of one.”

“And?”

“I was hoping you wouldn’t ask.”

“Why?”

“Because it will worry you.”

“Are you worried about it?”

“Yes.”

“Then you should tell me, and we’ll worry together.”

Clark’s expression was one that spiralled the strands of concern and gravity together, but with just a smattering of light-heartedness. As if he, too, was starting to believe that, together, they could find a way through the most treacherous situations. “Moyne has an uncle,” she said. “By marriage. Eric Menzies.”

All traces of the light-heartedness melted away. “Was Scardino’s meeting with him?”

Lois had been hoping Clark wouldn’t make that connection. She didn’t want to admit it to him.

She didn’t have to.

On Clark’s face, the fledgling seeds of hope withered and perished.

Lois put down her fork and slid her hand across the table towards him. He looked at it but didn’t move towards her.

She nudged the table with the back of her hand.

Still, he didn’t respond. His newly shaven cheeks had lost all colour.

“Clark?”

“Lois,” he said desperately. “I’ve always known that there was very little chance of any sort of future outside of this prison. With Moyne’s uncle involved, there is no way I will ever get out of here.”

Lois tapped her knuckles on the table again. “Give me your hand,” she said.

He looked as if he were going to refuse.

But then, very slowly, his hand crept into hers, and her fingers closed around him.

“Clark,” she said. “I am not going to accept that you have to stay here. I am not going to do it. I will fight -”

“What’s the point of fighting, Lois?” he said. “When there is *no* possible chance of success and every chance that trying will hurt people that I care about.”

“Your parents?”

“Yes,” he snapped.

“And me?”

His head lurched away.

“And me?” she repeated.

“Of course ‘and you’.”

Lois pressed her thumb into the back of his hand. “And I care about you, Clark,” she said. “I care way too much to give up.”

His eyes slowly fastened on hers. “You are considering breaking out?”

She nodded staunchly. “If we have to.”

His breath expelled with a swoosh. “For what? To spend a few days running and hiding before finally being hunted down?”

“I’m pretty good at running and hiding,” she said.

He ignored her attempted levity. “I won’t let you give up your life and your freedom on a half-baked -”

“It wouldn’t be half-baked. It would be meticulously planned and brilliantly executed.”

“Lo-is.”

His tone caused her to smile. “Can you fly, Mr Kent?” she asked casually.

“Yes, I can.”

“Can you carry something when you fly?”

“Something?” he demanded suspiciously. “Or someone?”

She grinned, working to break down his negativity. “Someone.” “Yes.”

“That’s going to be more effective than running.”

“I can’t fly if they bring the poison.”

“They have to find us before they can expose you to the rods.”

Clark shook his head and stubbornly refused to smile.

“I’m not saying it will be easy,” Lois said. “And I’m not saying that’s what we will do. But I do think it’s silly to reject any possibility.”

“You’ve rejected one.” Now he sounded grumpy.

“If you’re talking about you staying here for the rest of your life, then, yes, I’m not willing to accept that. Anything else, I’ll consider.”

“I don’t want you to get hurt, and I don’t want to risk further danger to my parents.”

“Clark.” Lois tenderly brushed her thumb across his knuckles.

“I’m not going to force you into anything. I want to work with you. I think we can do this if we work together.”

His gaze burned into her eyes. “You *really* think so?” he asked with raw intensity.

“I really think so.”

“You’re not going to give up on me?”

Lois shook her head. “I’m not going to give up on you.”

“Why? I don’t understand.”

“Because ... because there’s something about you that touches me ... heals me ... completes me ...”

A labyrinth of questions lined his face.

“You don’t have to understand it,” Lois said gently. “And I realise that trusting anyone is going to be extremely difficult for you, but can you just go with me for now? Can you just work with me?”

“Lois, I can’t ...”

“I think you can.”

The tiniest hint of his smile imbued her heart with hope. “I *can’t* ... refuse you anything.”

Lois grinned. “Then, we’re agreed?”

He nodded.

She squeezed his hand. “Shall I get dessert?”

“What do we have?”

“Tiramisu.”

“What’s that?”

“A coffee, cake, cream, and chocolate mix that tastes divine.”

“It sounds wonderful.”

“I’ll get it.”

Clark nodded but didn’t make any move to disconnect his hand from her grasp. “Lois,” he said, and it wasn’t a word, but a caress.

“Thank you.”

Love for him infused her heart. But it was a love that she couldn’t speak out ... a love she couldn’t act on.

Not yet.

Part 18

Eric Menzies checked the time.

It was too early to think about going home. Phoebe had made it very clear that she found his presence intolerable.

He knew that being alone all day — and all night, too, since she had moved into the spare room — wasn’t good for her, but he had no desire to incite her certain fury.

He trudged to the boxes that Scardino had brought this morning and picked out the first book from the top box. It was the logbook. Menzies took it back to his desk, pulled out a drawer, perched his feet on it, and picked up his glass of scotch.

He glared at the cover as if it were somehow responsible for everything.

This was going to end in trouble. He could feel it in his bones.

Anything involving Phoebe's nephew always brought trouble. But if Eric looked through this logbook, he would be able to answer truthfully if Phoebe inquired.

Thankfully, Neville had had enough sense to speak in riddles when Phoebe had been with them. Even so, she had comprehended enough of Neville's righteous indignation at his removal from the operation, to make it very clear that she expected Eric to exact retribution on the unnamed woman who had dared to mistreat her nephew.

Eric's focus swung from the book, and he gazed — as he did so often — at the photo of the little curly-haired boy that adorned his desk.

The whisky glass was empty when Eric finally broke from his contemplation of the photograph. He opened the logbook and began to read.

Clark rested the spoon in his empty bowl.

"Did you like it?" Lois asked. She knew he had — and she had savoured his enjoyment.

"It was delicious," Clark said as he dabbed his mouth with the napkin. "The whole meal was perfect, Lois."

"What would you like to do now?"

"Do you have any ideas?" Clark asked.

"Some," Lois said with a smile. "But I'd like your thoughts first."

He gestured to the table. "Lois, this is just so far beyond anything I ever expected to have again." He smiled with gracious appreciation. "We can do anything you'd like to do."

No. They couldn't.

"How about a movie?" Lois suggested quickly.

Surprise lit his eyes. "A movie?"

"I have a small television and a VCR in my office."

"A VCR? That's a machine to play video tapes, right?"

"Yeah. Have you seen them before?"

"I've seen them," Clark said. "Mom and Dad didn't have one on the farm, though."

Lois stood from the table. "I'll clear this stuff away. Then could you move the table, please? We'll set up the television on it."

"Will we sit on the floor?" Clark asked.

Lois paused at the door. "I dropped into my dad's place on the way home from the airport and took his camp mattress and sleeping bag and an extra pillow. We should be very comfortable."

"Are you sure?"

She could see his regret at the deficiencies of their surroundings. "Clark, it's not about where we sit." She smiled at him. "It's about the company."

He opened his mouth to respond and then let it relax into a smile.

Lois waltzed into the staffroom in a swirl of happiness.

She was in love with Clark.

Totally.

Utterly.

Wholeheartedly.

In love with the man.

But the face ... the smile ... She hadn't expected *that*.

The memories of their meal ... the promise of the movie ... it was enough to push away the cold harsh reality of their situation.

She would enjoy this evening. She would enjoy basking in the warmth of his smile. She would delight in restoring another little piece of what Trask had taken away.

And tomorrow — tomorrow, she would decide how they were going to find answers to their questions.

But she wasn't going to allow the shadow of tomorrow spoil their time together tonight.

"There," Lois proclaimed. "Almost like being in a movie theatre."

Clark's eyebrows arched as he sat next to Lois on the springy thickness of two mattresses. "A movie theatre?"

She gestured to where the small television was positioned on the table. "We're looking up to the screen," she explained. "Just like in a

theatre."

Clark chuckled as he put one pillow behind his back and hunkered to get comfortable. "If you have a *lot* of imagination."

Lois shoved her pillow behind her and tried not to look too longingly at Clark's broad shoulder. Would he notice if her head slipped sideways during the movie?

"What movie do we have?" Clark asked.

That hadn't been an easy choice. Lois hadn't consulted Clark — she hadn't wanted to highlight the seven-year gap in his knowledge of the world. She had avoided anything violent, anything romantic, and anything particularly heart-wrenching involving families. But she also hadn't wanted to insult him by choosing a movie squarely aimed at very young children. "Do you like dogs?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "Of course."

"I thought you would — being a farmboy." She picked up the video case and handed it to him. "Beethoven."

"Beethoven," Clark said as he perused the cover. "I figure *not* the composer?"

"No," she said. "The dog." Her doubts rose again. Perhaps it was too juvenile. "Do you think it will be all right?"

Clark smiled. "I think it will be exactly right," he replied. "As you said, it's about the company."

Lois pressed the remote, and the movie began. Three minutes in, she readjusted the pillow and inched closer to Clark.

Twenty minutes after that, her head made first contact with his shoulder.

He looked down at her with a smile. "Tired?"

She nodded — and the movement settled her even further into his shoulder.

As the movie played out on the little screen, Lois filtered everything through Clark's reactions. She smiled when he chuckled. She laughed when he laughed. She tried to discern the things that had changed from the world he remembered.

Too soon, it was over.

And Lois no longer had an excuse to recline on Clark's shoulder. It was late.

As they had watched the movie, Lois had given some thought to how they were going to end a date that couldn't finish as most first dates did — on her doorstep.

She couldn't kiss him.

A hug stayed — just — on the right side of the line.

Friends hugged each other.

Friends did not kiss — mouth on mouth. And it wasn't fair to Clark to hint at such intimacy with a peck on the cheek.

It opened all sorts of possibilities that couldn't be opened yet.

Not until he was free.

So — Lois promised herself — whatever she felt like doing, however much she was captivated by those brown eyes and that mouth that begged to be explored, she wouldn't kiss him. Not while she was still his guard and he was still her prisoner.

But once they were free ...

Clark waited until she lifted her head from his shoulder. Then he stood and offered her his hand.

He pulled her to her feet, and they stood together — their hands still attached.

She was only a few inches from his face — a face no longer concealed behind the bushy beard.

Clark pushed his free hand into the pocket of his grey trousers and looked at his feet.

"What are you thinking?" Lois asked.

He smiled self-consciously. "I'm not sure whether I should offer you your sleeping bag back. You can have it — of course — but I'm not sure if you ..."

Lois put her hand on his elbow. "Dad's is bigger. Would that be more comfortable for you?" She grinned. "Or have you become accustomed to Winnie?"

"I'd like to keep yours ... if you don't mind."

She gently squeezed through the material of his jacket. “I don’t mind at all.”

“Thanks.”

“We can’t leave your suitcase in here,” Lois said wistfully. “And you’ll have to get changed back into your shorts and tee shirt.”

“That’s OK,” Clark said.

“I’m sorry,” Lois said. “I wish it could be different.”

“It is different,” Clark said. “It is so different.”

“Thanks for understanding.” She looked around the cell. “Did you make the ‘wig’?”

Clark released her hand and went to the corner of the cell. He returned with a hairy object that made Lois want to laugh aloud. She restrained herself — until she saw the grin on Clark’s face.

“Would you like to see it on?” he offered.

“No,” she said with a giggle. “I like you just the way you are now.”

Her words choked their shared amusement and intensified the feeling in Clark’s eyes as they meshed with hers.

You like me?

His mouth didn’t move, but that in no way lessened the impact of his question.

Lois smiled and rubbed her hand down his arm. “Yes.”

Wonderment laced his smile, and for a moment, they stared at each other.

“I ... I like you, too,” Clark said.

Lois had to look away. She didn’t trust herself to keep her recklessness in check if she kept drinking in the ocean of feeling in those spectacular brown eyes.

She took the bathing cap-wig from him and laughed. “You did a great job,” she said. “It looks almost real.”

“Yeah.” Clark looked down at her with solemn appreciation.

“Thank you,” he said. “Thank you so much for an unforgettable evening.”

“Thank you,” Lois replied. “I had a wonderful time, too.”

Before she could be tempted to drown in his gaze again, Lois pushed the wig into his hands and picked up her dad’s sleeping bag.

For the next few minutes, they worked together to remove all evidence of their date from the cell. On one of her return trips, Lois brought down her sleeping bag for Clark and gave it to him with a cheerful, “Here’s Winnie.”

He grinned and thanked her, and as she took the VCR back up the stairs, she reflected on how she and Clark were getting more adept at negotiating potentially awkward situations.

Did that say something about him?

About her?

Or — her heart did a happy dance — about *them*?

She felt such certainty about Clark. He was exactly what had been missing in her life. He was someone who gave her the freedom to be exactly the person she had always wanted to be.

Herself.

With Clark, she could be Lois.

No pretence. No hiding. No deception. No charades.

Linda had given her that, too.

But with Clark ... it was so much more.

He filled her heart in ways it had never been filled before.

And she loved him.

Eric Menzies stared at the hand-written words as a horrified revelation crashed over him.

Neville had killed again.

Eric flipped back to the start of the book.

He skimmed through it — reading a sentence here and there — whenever he saw the words ‘Achilles’ or ‘rod’.

In every instance, the presence of the rods was enough to disable the alien. They had been used at his capture. They had been used to enable the surgery to be performed. Trask had documented his order that no one was to enter the cage without the protection of the rods.

And then came this ...

He killed today.

Deller and Moyne entered the cell, and the animal attacked Deller. Despite the valiant efforts of Moyne, the kill was swiftly and expertly accomplished.

Deller had become lax in obeying the rules — fatally so. He entered the cell with Moyne, but only Moyne was armed with the Achilles rod.

And a few more pages later, this ...

He killed again.

Moyne and Bortolotto entered the cell to take him food. As they placed the food on the floor, he sprang on them from behind, killing Bortolotto instantly. Moyne ran for his life — and watched, horrified and helpless, as the beast mauled the broken body of his prey.

Eric turned back to the page where it had all become so gut-wrenchingly clear.

March 1, 1988

Today, I strengthened my position over the enemy. We exposed him to the Achilles for a full twelve hours overnight, leaving him weak and defenceless this morning. The surgery was performed by Moyne and Shadbolt.

The rods ... whatever they were ... weakened the alien to such an extent that two men had been able to perform surgery on him.

Menzies knew enough about Jason Trask to suspect that no anaesthetic had been used.

Yet two men hadn’t been able to stop the alien from killing. In the first death, Trask had noted that Neville had a rod — which, according to everything else Eric had read in the log, would have rendered the alien weak and debilitated.

Deller had died.

Neville had killed.

Again.

Probably twice.

Why hadn’t he, Eric, followed up?

He’d known Neville had a vicious streak.

He’d strongly suspected that Neville had killed during his previous assignment.

But Eric, fearing recriminations from Phoebe, had used every ounce of his authority and the full measure of his ability to bluster through a situation to turn the glare of suspicion away from Neville. The next thing Eric had heard, Neville had been assigned to the bizarre and very hush-hush assignment that involved guarding a monster believed to be a depraved and dangerous alien.

Eric had sighed with relief. This assignment would keep Neville occupied, and it would keep him in Metropolis, which, in turn, would placate Phoebe. Eric had given no thought to whether the captive was actually an alien — but he did know that even the suspicion that he was not human would be enough that, should he die, his death would raise barely a rustle of questions.

Never once had it entered Eric’s mind that Neville’s victims would be fellow agents.

Eric sank his head into his hands as self-condemnation clawed at his insides.

Phoebe wouldn’t cope. She wouldn’t. For reasons Eric had never understood, she’d always had a particular fondness for her sister’s son. Perhaps it had begun when Neville was a child, and Phoebe had been facing the heartache of not being able to conceive a baby of her own.

Then — when they had just about given up — Phoebe had become pregnant, and their son, Malcolm, had been born. For seventeen years, life had been good. Phoebe was happy. Eric had enjoyed the time at home between assignments. Malcolm had grown up — he had been indulged by his mother, but Eric’s attempts at discipline had never been vigorous enough to cause any real ripples in the harmony on the home front.

Then, as unexpectedly as his conception, the veil had lifted on Malcolm’s drug abuse, and their lives had been thrown into turmoil as their son had fought his heroin addiction.

Eric had taken leave from work to try to save his son.
 It had been for nothing.
 Malcolm had died from an overdose two months ago.
 Phoebe was inconsolable.
 She hadn't left the house since the day of Malcolm's funeral.
 Every one of Eric's suggestions had been met with hot tears and
 enraged accusations that she would still have her son if Eric had stayed
 at home and been a father.
 He'd failed his wife.
 He'd failed his son.
 And now this with Neville ...
 It would kill Phoebe if anything happened to Neville.
 After he'd come whining about his removal from the alien
 operation, Eric had investigated the details of the new assignment
 Scardino had given Neville. It was perfect. He would be working
 alone. He would be working in one of the most volatile and dangerous
 places on earth. He would be working in a situation where death was
 an everyday occurrence.
 Neville would survive. Eric had no doubt about that.
 And he probably couldn't get into any sort of trouble that was
 likely to follow him back to the US.
 But ... something had to be done to guarantee that no one
 reopened the case of the two agents who had died on Bessolo
 Boulevard. Not while Phoebe was so fragile.
 Eric closed the logbook and stared at the photo that had been taken
 on Malcolm's fifth birthday — the first such occasion that Eric had
 been home.
 He hadn't been able to save his son.
 But he would save Neville.
 And to do that, he had to ensure that the alien operation was
 terminated and obliterated from every record.

Clark knew that sleep was not going to come quickly.
 His mind was overflowing with the events of the day. That seemed
 to happen a lot lately.
 Since he'd met Lois Lane.
 His parents weren't at the farm. There was some disappointment in
 that, but he'd never believed that Trask would have allowed his
 parents to return to Smallville.
 Scardino had met with Moyne's uncle today. Would anything
 come from that meeting? What would it mean for Clark? More
 importantly, how would Moyne's continuing involvement affect Lois?
 Would she be in any danger from him?
 Clark couldn't think Moyne near Lois without needing to jump up
 and begin pacing. And he couldn't do that with Lois on the other side
 of the window.
 He pushed his fears to the dark recesses of his mind and opened up
 the book of memories that he and Lois had written today.
 There were so many of them.
 The movie.
 Lois's choice had been perfect. He'd laughed more than once.
 He'd glimpsed the world as it was now — he noticed slight changes to
 the cars, and the clothes, and the fads of language, and the
 advancement in technology.
 He'd relished everything. Those things so mundane that he
 doubted anyone else would have noticed — the grass, the flowers, the
 animals, the trees, the stores, the sky, the people ... everything.
 But his overwhelming memory was ... would *always* be ... the
 feel of Lois's head leaning against his arm. When she had first touched
 him, he had hardly dared to breathe. He hadn't wanted to do anything
 to make her think he didn't like her being there.
 He did.
 He loved the feel of her against him.
 There was so much else to recall.
 The meal ... He would never forget the meal. They had sat at a
 table — it had been a foldaway table with no cloth, and they'd still
 been in a grimy concrete cell, but none of that had mattered.

The food. The wine. The dessert. Sitting on chairs. At a table.
 Using plates and cutlery. Sharing a meal with someone.
 And not just anyone, but with a woman who took his breath away
 every single time he looked at her.
 And that was when she was dressed in jeans and a sweater.
 Tonight ... Lois's dress had been exquisite. It was modest in style,
 but the soft material had lightly clung to her body, emphasising her
 curves.
 She'd worn shoes of the same colour — with heels high enough to
 shape her calves and accentuate the slight swing of her hips when she
 walked.
 Lois Lane was a beautiful and sophisticated woman.
 And she'd chosen to spend the evening with him.
 She had given him freedoms he'd thought would never be his
 again.
 Being able to dress in the clothes of his choice.
 Wearing socks and shoes.
 Clark ran his hand over his short, neat hair.
 From tomorrow night, he would wear the cap while he slept.
 Tonight there was no need — it was Lois who was 'guarding' him.
 Lois.
 Every moment spent with her made him more certain that a life
 without Lois wouldn't be a life.
 And yet ... he couldn't get past the certain knowledge that it
 would end.
 It *had* to end.
 Why would a woman like Lois choose to spend her life with an
 alien?
 She wouldn't.
 He wouldn't let her.
 She was young, and beautiful, and free, and one day she was going
 to meet someone and fall in love with him, and there couldn't possibly
 be a place in her life for an alien prisoner from another planet.
 "Are you still awake, Clark?"
 Her voice floated across the silence. He sat up and looked towards
 the window.
 "I'm tired, but I don't feel sleepy at all," Lois's voice said.
 Neither did Clark. He still had far too many memories to relive to
 want to waste time on sleep. But what was keeping Lois awake? She
 must have caught an early flight to Wichita. She should be asleep.
 "Thank you for a lovely evening, Clark."
 He smiled and waved to her and hoped she would realise he was
 trying to say that he had had a wonderful time, too.
 "Goodnight, Clark."
 "Goodnight, Lois."
 He lay down again, turning to face the back wall so Lois would
 assume he was going to sleep and wouldn't be distracted by his
 wakefulness.
 He was a long way from sleep.
 There were two memories of the night that he had deliberately left
 until last.
 There was the moment when they'd been laughing together over
 the ridiculous sight of his bushy hair exploding out from the bathing
 cap. The moment when she'd said, "I like you just the way you are
 now."
 Her declaration had ravaged his ability to speak. He'd stared at her
 like a dumbstruck doofus, and she'd answered his unvoiced question
 with a resounding affirmation.
Lois liked him.
 And later had come the moment that would be forever carved into
 his mind.
 The moment when their date had ended.
 Actually, the minute before that.
 She had stood just inside the cell at the door.
 He had stood and faced her — with absolutely no idea of how to
 bring closure to what had been the most unforgettable evening of his
 life.

Clark had been on a few dates. He'd taken the girls home. He'd stood on their doorsteps. Mostly, they had parted with a hug. On four occasions, the girl had reached up and kissed him — once on the cheek and three times on the mouth.

All of the kisses had been quick.

All had surprised him.

All had left him wondering how the girl would react if she knew she had kissed an alien.

But tonight ... Lois was no girl. She was a beautiful woman.

And she *knew*.

Clark had known she wouldn't kiss him.

But he'd wondered ... hoped ... obsessed over whether she would hug him again.

She'd smiled up at him ... he loved her smile so much ...

particularly when she looked directly at him with those soft brown eyes.

She'd thanked him for a lovely evening.

As she said the words, her eyes and her smile had told him with certainty that she wasn't just being polite; she wasn't just playing a role.

She had truly enjoyed his company.

Clark didn't understand how that could be possible, but she had already told him that it was all right if he didn't understand why she did the things she did.

With anyone else, his suspicions would be rampant.

With Lois ... he believed her.

She *had* enjoyed being with him.

He had managed a few bumbling words about how much he had enjoyed being with her, and then he had waited ... his breath snagged ... to see if she would do anything before she turned around and walked away.

She had paused. He wasn't sure for how long, but it had felt like many minutes. Then she had risen onto her toes, placed her arms around his neck, and hugged him.

The thing he remembered most vividly was the touch of her fingers as they had made contact with his neck. Perhaps the years of being covered with hair had made the skin there more sensitive.

Or perhaps it was just Lois.

Her touch had made his neck tingle.

He could still feel it.

He had looped his arms around her, loosely enough that she could have avoided their bodies making contact if that was what she'd wanted. But she had leant into his chest. She had nestled her head into the curve of his shoulder.

Then, after a much-too-short time, she had backed away, bid him goodnight with a soft smile, and stepped into the staffroom.

Clark adjusted his position on the camp mattress.

Lois was just a few yards away.

Was she asleep yet?

She'd said she would come to see him for a few minutes before Shadbolt arrived tomorrow morning.

And then she would be back for her shift in the afternoon.

What would they do?

Would she be able to find O'Brien? Would he give her any information?

For so long, Clark had despaired of ever knowing the fate of his parents.

But Lois ...

Lois brought hope to the most hopeless of situations.

But now Moyne's uncle was involved.

Clark didn't want to think about Moyne.

He wanted to think about Lois.

And he had so much to think about.

Her head on his shoulder.

The rose scent of her perfume.

The feel of her fingertips on his neck.

Her smile.

Her laugh.

Her head on his shoulder.

The rose scent of her ...

Part 19

"Clark?"

He dragged himself from sleep and sat up. He was alone in the prison.

"I'm in my office, but I can't sleep. Would you mind if I came down to you?"

Would he *mind*? He loved being with Lois ... but in the middle of the night? What was she wearing? Nightwear? What sort of nightwear?

"It's all right. I'm being silly. Good night, Clark."

Clark hastily raised his hand and beckoned to the window. "Come on down," he said, although he didn't know if she would hear him.

"Are you sure?"

He nodded vehemently.

He heard a series of shuffling sounds, and a few moments later, the door opened, and Lois walked in — dressed in modest mauve pyjamas and with a few strands of her dark hair endearingly tussled — clutching her pillow and sleeping bag under one arm and her camp mattress under the other.

Clark rose from his bed, glad that he had decided to wear the tee shirt as well as the shorts. "Hi," he said when he reached her.

"Sorry if I woke you."

"It's OK."

"Were you asleep?"

He smiled. "Don't ask personal questions."

She smiled, too. "Sorry," she said.

Clark slid her mattress out from under her arm. "Where do you want this?"

She pointed to the space next to where he'd been sleeping. "There?"

He placed it on the concrete, and Lois stepped into her sleeping bag and lay on her side with her head perched on her flattened hand.

Clark slipped back into his bed and faced her. "You OK?" he asked.

She nodded. "I couldn't sleep. I was trying to remember O'Brien's first name — I knew I'd heard it once."

"Did you remember it?"

"Yep," she said with a satisfied smile. "Reuben. I kept thinking it was Benjamin, but Ben O'Brien just didn't sound right."

"Reuben O'Brien," Clark mused. "Did you remember anything else about him?"

"Only that he was in the job long enough to be considered a living legend, and this operation was a part of his portfolio before Scardino took over."

"Do you think it's worth trying to find him?"

"Yes, I do," Lois said. "I'm just not sure about Scardino."

"If Menzies ordered you to leave, do you think Scardino would challenge that decision?"

"No," she said. "I don't."

She was so desperately alone in this. And Clark was powerless to help her. Or protect her. "You should try to get some sleep," he said. "You must have caught an early flight this morning."

"Yeah," she agreed. "But I can't sleep when my mind is wrestling with something."

"Well, you can rest now that you've remembered his name," Clark said.

She grinned. "Are you trying to get rid of me, Mr Kent?"

"I would never try to do that, Ms Lane."

"That's what I called you, you know?" Lois told him. "Before I knew your name was Clark, in my mind, I thought of you as 'Mr Kent'."

Clark remembered the note. He'd thought the paper bag would contain food, but there had been so much more. Four unforgettable words ... *'Thank you, Mr. Kent.'*

Four words that had shone like a beacon into his bleakness.

Four words that would never fail to resonate through his heart.

Lois was smiling as if she, too, were reliving a pleasant memory.

He sent her an unspoken question.

“The paper airplane,” she answered. “You must have thought you were being attacked by a madwoman.”

“I was a little surprised,” he admitted. “But I was impressed by your resourcefulness.”

“We never did fly the plane you made,” she said.

“Where is it? Did you take it away when we cleared this place?”

“Yeah,” Lois said. “It’s on my desk — a bit crumpled, but still a magnificent example of aerospace technology.”

He raised an eyebrow, and she giggled in response.

“Well, you could fly my rather pitiful effort with amazing skill,” she said. She adjusted her pillow and resettled her head onto her palm. “You cheated, didn’t you?”

“Does using a few extra skills count as cheating?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then, yes, I cheated.”

She laughed. “I thought so.”

“Sorry.” Except he wasn’t. He wasn’t sorry about anything he’d done that had inexplicably led them to this moment — when, unbelievably, a gorgeous woman was chatting to him as if the time, and the place, and their entire association were nothing out of the ordinary.

“Actually, that reminds me,” Lois said. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you. Would you make a paper airplane for me to take to my dad?”

“Of course I will,” Clark replied. “I still have the notepad you gave me.”

“We used to fly them together when I was a kid. He liked the elaborate ones, too.”

Did that mean Lois had spoken about him to her father? “I’ll make it first thing tomorrow,” Clark said.

“Thanks. I’ll take it to him. And I have the tray you made for him as well.”

Clark fell quiet as a parade of Lois-memories marched through his mind — the plane, and the candy, and the food, and the clothes, and the water, and all the other things she had given him.

They were wonderful ... but they were *things* — things anyone could have given him.

His greatest treasures — the memories that would always have the most-visited place in his inventory — were more obscure. Like her smile. And her openness. And the fact that she’d never, ever recoiled from him. She had never done anything in word or deed to make him feel as if he were different.

Or strange.

Or unacceptable.

Lois sighed suddenly. Her head had fallen onto the pillow, and her eyes were closed.

Clark smiled.

Someone would have to stay awake to ensure that they were not still here when Shadbolt arrived.

That someone would be him.

He could relive his memories. And watch her sleep.

As he settled more comfortably into the sleeping bag that belonged to Lois, he marvelled at the profound depth of her trust in him.

She was here ... asleep. Totally vulnerable.

He was strong enough that he could do anything to her, and she would be powerless to defend herself.

They were alone. It would be hours before anyone else came.

Clark knew that if he queried her trust, she would say that although he *could* hurt her, he never would.

And she would be right.

Her trust meant everything to him.

There was nothing in his life that he valued more.

~~ Thursday ~~

“Lois?”

Lois groaned and hoped that whatever was intruding into her sleep would have the good grace to fade away and leave her alone. It could *not* be time to get up yet.

“Lois?”

She accepted her fate and prised her eyes open.

Clark was smiling at her. “You have to wake up,” he said.

“Shadbolt will be here soon.”

Lois lurched to a sitting position and looked around the cell. “Uh oh,” she said. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep here.” She turned to Clark and giggled. “Can you imagine the look on Shadbolt’s face if he’d walked into the staffroom and found the door open and both of us asleep in here?”

A gleam of amusement sustained Clark’s smile. “You should get all of your stuff out of here before that happens.”

A dusting of dark stubble shaded his chin and cheeks. Lois wriggled out of her dad’s sleeping bag to evade the temptation to run her finger along the rugged terrain of his jaw line.

“Take your sleeping bag and pillow,” Clark said. “I’ll bring the mattress to the door for you.”

“Thanks.” She bent low to gather her bedding and met his eyes. “If I embarrassed you by falling asleep in here, I’m sorry. I did intrude uninvited.”

“You didn’t intrude,” he said. “And I wasn’t embarrassed.” But it was what his expression said that gave her heart its first tremor for the morning. He appreciated her trust. He valued it. He didn’t expect it, and it hadn’t gone unnoticed.

“I should go,” Lois said — before she could get lost in the vista of his brown eyes.

Clark nodded, and she walked away.

In her office, Lois changed into jeans and a sweater. Her red dress lay across the desk, a conspicuous reminder of the previous evening and her date with Clark.

It had been in a cell.

Sitting at a foldaway table.

And on camp mattresses.

Watching a tiny screen.

With a prisoner.

Who was also an alien.

It had been the best date of her life.

And — Lois thought with a wry smile — it had finished with her sleeping next to her date.

She should be mortified by her indiscretion.

Falling asleep *in* the cell, with the door wide open, and the prisoner right there next to her.

But it had been a long time since she’d thought of Clark as a prisoner.

And she knew with certainty that if she were with Clark, she would always be safe.

Knowing that Shadbolt would be here soon, Lois hauled her thoughts away from Clark and hurried back to collect the mattress.

When everything was safely stowed in her office, she returned to the staffroom and filled the bowl for Clark.

He met her with an outstretched hand that held a paper airplane.

“This is for your dad,” he said.

She put the bowl on the concrete, took the airplane from him, and examined it. “Thanks, Clark. It’s great.”

“Thanks for the water.”

“I’ll be back this afternoon. Hopefully I’ll have a lead on Reuben O’Brien’s whereabouts.”

He smiled — although it didn’t hide his despondency at their parting. Even though it was only a few hours until she would return, the time apart must seem like a canyon of emptiness to Clark. “See you, Lois.”

“Thanks for waking me,” she said. “See you soon.” She left him, locked the door, and turned on the coffee machine.

Ten minutes later, Shadbolt arrived. He was scowling as he entered the staffroom. “Everything OK?” he said gruffly.

“Everything’s fine,” Lois said mildly. “The pet door is in. His breakfast is in the fridge. And I’ve just turned on the coffee machine.”

Shadbolt grunted in reply.

“Do you want me to be here while you push the breakfast through the door?”

“I thought that’s why you had the door installed,” Shadbolt said grumpily. “So we can do it without needing someone else here.”

Lois figured now was a good time to leave. “See you later,” she said.

She detoured to her office, but only stopped there long enough to pick up her bag and lock the door. Then she slipped back down the stairs and into the cool Metropolis morning.

“Reuben O’Brien.”

The woman behind the desk at the Vital Records office looked at her askance. Lois pulled out her purse and handed over the card that usually facilitated her access to whatever information she needed.

The woman stared at the card as if unconvinced of its legitimacy.

“Reuben O’Brien,” Lois repeated.

With a puckered expression, the woman returned the card and began tapping on her computer keyboard.

“There are three,” she said after a silence of close to a minute.

Lois took out her pen and notepad. “Born in which years?”

“1856, 1878, and 1915.”

“The last one,” Lois said. “Could I have his full name, please?”

“Reuben Robert O’Brien.”

“Current address?”

“I am not at liberty to divulge that.”

“Could you check the deaths register, please?” Lois asked.

The woman tapped again. “There is no entry of his death,” she said.

“Thank you.” Lois turned and walked away.

1915.

That would have made him seventy-seven when he’d retired two years ago. It wasn’t unheard of to retire at that age, but it cast significant doubts on whether this was the Reuben O’Brien she needed.

Lois had driven halfway to her father’s nursing home when she remembered that the paper airplane was still on the counter in the staffroom at the compound.

She groaned in frustration. She’d promised her dad that she would bring it. It was such a small thing — something he possibly wouldn’t even remember — but she’d learnt from Clark that small things could hold great importance.

She couldn’t risk disappointing her father. She would have to go to the compound and get the plane.

Lois stepped into the staffroom and stopped.

Shadbolt was sitting at the table — with the frame of a sewing machine towering over a sprawl of disassembled parts.

His head shot up as she entered, and his expression darkened.

“I forgot something,” Lois said in hurried explanation. She glanced past him and saw the plane on the counter — untouched and undamaged. She edged past Shadbolt and picked it up, trying to hide it in her hand as she headed back towards the door.

“You came all the way back here to get a paper airplane?” Shadbolt said scornfully.

“I made it for someone who’s in the hospital.”

“You couldn’t just make another one?”

“It’s quite complex,” Lois said as she held it up for him to see. “I followed pages of instructions. It seemed easier to come back and get this one.”

Shadbolt grunted and returned his attention to the scattered components of what had once been a sewing machine.

“Do you ... ah, need any help?” Lois said.

“Do you know how to put this contraption back together again?”

“No.”

“Then you’d be no help at all.”

Lois slid into the seat at the table and ignored the cold stare that Shadbolt flung in her direction. “Is it your wife’s?” she asked timidly.

“I don’t have a wife,” he retorted.

“Oh.” She made a vague gesture towards the muddle of gears and cranks and circuit boards. “Do you know how to put this back together again?”

“Nope.”

“What are you going to do?”

Shadbolt pushed back in the chair and glared at the table. “I don’t know. It stopped working, and I said I’d have a look at it ... but I think I’ve destroyed it completely.”

Lois decided to take a risk. After all, Shadbolt’s mood couldn’t get any worse. “Who does it belong to?”

He said nothing for such a long time that Lois became convinced he intended to disregard her question. “My daughter.”

“You have a *daughter*?” Lois said before she could mute her surprise.

Shadbolt’s gaze slowly switched to her, and he nodded. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

“Is that why you can’t swap any shifts? Because you have to be there for her?”

“She’s seventeen.”

“Then why?”

“My other daughter. She’s only four years old.”

Lois’s surprise sharpened to shock. “You have *two* daughters?”

“Is there a law against that?”

“I ... I didn’t know. I assumed ...”

Shadbolt exhaled as if he was giving up trying to keep his private life private. “I have two daughters,” he said stoically. “One is seventeen. This is her sewing machine, and she needs it working by this afternoon because her college entrance submission is due tomorrow. My younger daughter is four. She is the reason why I won’t change my hours. She needs routine, and I need to be with her every afternoon.”

“You’re a single father?”

“Two daughters, no wife,” he said caustically. “I guess that makes me a single father.”

“Shadbolt,” Lois said. “Why didn’t you tell me? I would have under-”

“I didn’t tell you because it doesn’t affect my ability to do my job.”

“When I asked you if you’d requested this assignment or if you’d been ordered, you said ‘both’. Was that because of your daughters? Because you can’t work an assignment that would take you away from home?”

“You ask a lot of questions.”

“Sorry.” Lois stood from the seat and looked at the parts. “I hope you manage to fix it.”

“Not much chance of that.”

Suddenly, Lois had a thought. It was another of her ridiculous, outlandish ideas. One of those ideas that probably should have been suffocated before it had a chance to draw its first breath. “What are you going to do?” she said.

“I can’t even put it back together,” Shadbolt said disconsolately. “I have no hope of fixing it.”

“I have a friend who could probably do it.”

His face lit with immediate interest. “You do?”

“If you go and get lunch for the prisoner — I forgot to — I’ll make a call, and then I’ll pack away all of the pieces and drop it off on the way to the hospital.”

Shadbolt only hesitated for a moment. Then he sprang from the seat. Lois took a ten-dollar bill from her purse and offered it to him.

He shook his head. “If you can get that machine fixed, I’ll buy him lunch for a week,” he said as he scurried towards the door.

As soon as Shadbolt had gone, Lois took an old plastic container from the shelf above the fridge and packed all the bits of the machine and Shadbolt's meagre supply of tools into it.

Then, she unlocked the cell door.

Clark hurried over to her, concern on his face at her unexpected appearance.

"Do you know anything about sewing machines?" Lois asked.

"I know a bit. Mom had one."

"And you could see into it and locate the problem, right?"

"Yes."

"And if any wires were broken you could ..." She gestured towards his eyes.

"Yes."

Lois pushed the container at him and then darted back to get the frame. "Could you try to fix this, please?"

Clark took a few seconds to peruse the pieces before shrugging easily. "I should be able to."

"Thanks." Lois squeezed his arm. "I have to go. See you later."

"Bye, Lois."

Lois locked the cell door. As she sat down to wait for Shadbolt to return, doubts assailed her.

Had she helped someone who needed it?

Or had she done something that — if Shadbolt asked difficult questions — could lead to jeopardising her association with Clark?

Lois — the tray under her arm and the paper airplane and jigsaw puzzle in her bag — crossed the common area of the nursing home. As she passed, an elderly woman looked up from her knitting.

"Good morning," Lois said.

The lady smiled. "It's a moighty foine mornin'," she responded in a broad Irish accent.

"It is," Lois agreed. With a smile, she continued to her dad's room.

He was sitting in his wheelchair, wearing the green sweatsuit.

"Hi, Dad," Lois said as she bent down to kiss him. "How are you?" She covered his hand with hers and smiled. "I missed you," she said.

He blinked once.

Lois put her bag on the ground and then lifted her dad's inert left arm and slid the wooden tray onto his wheelchair. "This is for you, Dad," she said as she gently lowered his arm. "Remember how we used to do jigsaw puzzles together?"

She pulled up a chair, took the box out of her bag, and held it up for him to see the picture of a 1950s Ford Thunderbird parked under a towering oak tree. She opened the box. "Do you want to start with the edges?"

Her dad was looking at the tray.

"I'll get them out for you, and you can start putting them together." She picked out three pieces and put them on the tray.

Her dad didn't move — and Lois had an awful feeling that she had misjudged his level of ability. She kept searching through the pieces. "Ooh, Dad," she said with feigned enthusiasm. "Here's a corner."

For the next few minutes, Lois surreptitiously watched her dad's hand as she picked edge pieces out of the box and placed them on the tray. His lack of response caused a rocklike lump to expand into her throat. She had pushed too hard. She had expected too much.

Lois looked up into her father's face, an apology ready on her lips. It was detained by movement — movement of his hand as he shakily approached a piece and clasped it between his thumb and forefinger.

Lois smiled and returned her attention to the box.

By the time she put the next few edge pieces on the tray, two bits of the puzzle were hanging precariously together.

"Well done, Dad," Lois said with a smile.

She continued searching for the pieces, deliberately slowing her pace so as not to overwhelm him with too many. "Hey, Dad?" she said. "Guess what I did yesterday? I went to a lovely little farmhouse. The leaves on the trees are turning — I saw so many beautiful golden yellows and flaming reds. It was nice to get out of the city for a while.

It was a long day, and I should feel tired today, but I don't."

Her dad — a piece of puzzle in his hand — lifted his arm, moved it horizontally and then let it drop onto the tray where the jigsaw puzzle was just beginning to take shape.

Lois grabbed her bag from the floor and brought out the paper airplane that Clark had made. "I brought this for you, Dad," she said. "I remembered."

Her dad opened his hand, and the jigsaw piece dropped from it. Lois put the airplane in his palm. He turned his hand so the plane fell onto the tray, slowly clenched his fist, and tapped it against his heart. Then his forefinger gradually unfurled, and he pointed at Lois and then at the plane.

And, this time, Lois understood. She smiled.

"You're asking if I love the man who made the paper airplane?"

Her dad blinked once.

"Yes," she said, her smile irrepressible. "Yes, I do love him, Dad."

It felt so good to say it aloud. To admit it.

Her dad straightened his fingers, and Lois put her hand in his. His hand folded around hers.

"You seem happy about it, Dad."

He blinked once.

"This man is different from anyone I've ever met," Lois said. She tried to identify the questions her father would ask if he could. "He's kind, and he's caring, and he's strong, and he has such a good heart. Yes, Dad, it did happen quickly, but I know it is right. When I'm with him, I feel like I'm exactly where I'm meant to be. He makes me feel ... secure ... grounded ... happy. When I'm with him, everything is all right even when it's not." She looked into her dad's eyes. "Does that make any sense?"

His eyelids dropped once.

Lois squeezed his hand. "Thank you, Dad," she said. "Thank you for understanding."

As they worked together on the puzzle, Lois chatted about the movie 'Beethoven'. Other than her father's total silence, it didn't feel significantly different from the times they had shared in her childhood.

Half an hour later, a patch of pieces expanded out from the corner piece. "We've done well, Dad," Lois said. She placed the box on the end of his bed within easy reach of his chair and bent to kiss his cheek. Her dad's hand lightly gripped her arm. Lois paused, and in his eyes, she saw the essence of the man who had always been there for her. In them, she saw his love.

Lois swallowed down the rising lump in her throat. "And I love you, too, Dad," she said. "I'll come back tomorrow to see how you've done with the puzzle."

Ronny was at the nurses' station when Lois walked by. "Ms Lane," she said cheerily.

"Call me 'Lois'."

"How is your dad this morning, Lois?"

"He's great. I brought him a tray and a jigsaw puzzle."

Ronny's face lit with enthusiasm. "What a wonderful idea," she said. "How's he doing with it?"

"It's going to be slow, but I think he'll be able to manage. It's only one hundred pieces, and they're larger and thicker than normal. I thought I could get him another one — either harder or easier — depending on how he copes with this one."

"I'll watch him and let you know."

"Thanks." Lois scanned the large open area. "Ronny, do you know any agency nurses? Someone who fills in whenever one of the regulars has a sick day?"

"I know a few," Ronny said. "In fact, we have one here today. She's just over there, talking to the two men playing checkers."

"Is it OK if I go and talk to her?"

"Of course. Would you like me to introduce you? She's very friendly. You don't really need an introduction. Her name is Angie."

"Thanks. I'll just go over there." Lois walked over to Angie. "Hi," she said. "I'm Lois."

"I'm Angie," she said.

“You work in different nursing homes and hospitals?”

Angie nodded. “Mostly nursing homes, but occasionally I do a hospital shift.”

“I was talking with a friend who knows that I come here to visit my dad,” Lois said. “She asked if someone called Reuben O’Brien was in this nursing home. I don’t think he’s here, but I wondered if perhaps you knew of him.”

Angie smiled. “Reuben’s at Everglen House — the nursing home on the east side of town, just off Central Avenue.”

Lois wondered if this was just too easy. “Can he have visitors?”

“Of course,” Angie’s smile died. “But warn your friend that Reuben might not remember her — he suffers from dementia.”

Lois let out a soft groan. “Oh, no,” she said.

“It came on quickly,” Angie said. “I’ve been told that he was still in full-time employment only a couple of years ago.”

“Thank you,” Lois said. “I’ll pass that on to my friend.”

Lois walked from the nursing home, her thoughts tumbling over each other. Was this the Reuben O’Brien who had worked as an agent? How much did he remember? Would the dementia work in her favour and loosen his tongue? Or would it render his information unreliable?

It was almost midday when Lois climbed into her Jeep. She had a couple of hours to get to Everglen House and be back in time for her shift. It would be tight.

Perhaps she should leave it and go first thing tomorrow morning.

No. Deep inside her, the feeling was strong that Clark didn’t have much time.

Lois reversed out of the parking bay and turned east.

Part 20

Lois waited outside the locked front door for someone to respond to the buzzer. Her initial impression of Everglen House was that it was more austere than the familiar atmosphere of her dad’s nursing home.

“Yes?” came a tinny voice from the speaker.

“I’d like to visit Mr Reuben O’Brien.”

“Are you a family member?”

“No. I’m visiting Metropolis, and my father asked me to call in and see his old friend.”

Lois heard a clunk, and a green light appeared next to the speaker. She pushed open the door and proceeded along the short corridor towards the reception area.

The young woman shoved a visitors’ book towards Lois. “Sign here, and print your name and address,” she said.

Lois took the pen and wrote: *Linis Aneki, 67 Royal Lane, Altoona, Pennsylvania*. She added a signature that included no recognisable letters.

As the receptionist examined the latest entry in the visitors’ book, Lois’s thoughts tumbled back to the hilarity she had shared with Linda whenever they had added to their inventory of names to be used in situations such as this. They had devised numerous aliases over the years, but Linis Aneki — one of their first — was still Lois’s favourite.

“He will be in the sunroom,” the woman informed Lois. “Through the door and on your left.”

“Thank you,” Lois said with a synthetic smile.

She walked into a large room where the towering ceilings and elegant decor made it feel more like a showpiece mansion than a home where people lived. To her left, there was a small cosy room with wide south-facing windows. Four people were seated around a large table — three women and one man. Lois entered the room and walked up to the man. “Mr O’Brien?” she asked.

He smiled with warm recognition. “Sit down,” he said. “How lovely of you to visit me.”

Lois sat next to him. “How are you, Mr O’Brien?”

He chuckled delightedly. “Call me ‘Reuben’,” he said. “You’ll make me feel old if you call me ‘Mr O’Brien’.”

Lois smiled as hope rose within her. So far, he seemed cognisant. And accommodating. And possibly the Reuben O’Brien who had been in the job.

“What has brought a lovely young lady like you to visit an old

man like me?” Reuben asked.

Time was short. Lois didn’t feel she had the luxury of building up with small talk. “I’m hoping you will be able to answer some questions,” she said.

“Are you writing a book?” Reuben asked eagerly. “If you are, I have a plethora of great stories.”

“Oh?” Lois said, adding a smile to her question. “Why is that?”

“Because my life was a series of stories.”

Inside, Lois nodded in concurrence. That was a perfect description of the life of an agent — entering into a scenario for a time, playing a role, and then sliding out of it. She leant forward and lowered her voice. “What is your most incredible story?”

Reuben grinned. “Well, there was the time I was invited to dine with the President,” he said in a loud whisper.

“Really?” Lois said, hoping she sounded suitably impressed. She checked the three women. None of them seemed to be taking any notice. Perhaps they had heard Reuben’s ‘stories’ before.

“You don’t have to worry about them,” Reuben said with a dismissive nod towards the women. “Two of them are deaf, and the other one wouldn’t know her own name.”

Even so, Lois would have been more comfortable if she could have been alone with Reuben. However, she didn’t want to do anything that might damage her prospects of procuring information. “Anything else?” she said. “Anything truly unbelievable?”

Reuben’s forehead wrinkled, and he stared into the distance.

Lois waited, willing him to recall something about the capture seven years ago.

“I have a story about aliens,” he said. “Would that qualify as ‘truly unbelievable’?”

Aliens! That definitely sounded encouraging. Lois scanned the room. There had been no reaction from the women. “That sounds like a fascinating story,” she said. “I would love to hear it.”

Reuben beamed. “I’m not sure I’ll remember all of it,” he said. “My memory isn’t what it used to be.”

“Tell me what you can remember,” Lois said.

He paused through several raspy breaths while Lois held hers. Surely, she couldn’t have found Reuben O’Brien only to be thwarted by evaporating memories.

“We captured him,” Reuben said.

That was progress. “Why did you capture him?” Lois asked, looking enthralled.

“Because the rest . . . were coming.”

Uncertainty had crept into his words, and Lois reined in her impatience. She had a strong feeling that she needed to get to the crux quickly, but it was imperative that she avoid planting ideas in his mind. “Were they with him when he was captured?”

“The capture was swift and . . .” He looked at her questioningly. “Someone was with him?”

“Was someone with him?”

“No,” he said. “I don’t remember anyone being with him.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“He didn’t have any family? Brothers? Sisters? Parents?”

Reuben’s head lifted, and his eyes blazed. “Parents! Why didn’t you say so? Of course, I remember them.”

“What happened to them after he was captured?”

Reuben’s eyes glazed over, and his bony fingers tapped an intermittent rhythm on the table.

Lois lightly touched the back of his hand with the pads of her fingers. “What happened to his parents, Reuben?”

He jolted and refocused on her. “We knew that when the invasion happened, they would be a target. They were American citizens, and despite the ease with which the alien had been able to coerce them into treason, it was our duty to protect them from the wrath of the raiders.”

“They were taken into protective custody?”

“Naturally.”

Lois quashed her surprise. “Do you know where?”

“That was on a strictly need-to-know basis.”

Lois groaned silently at the advent of the too-familiar obstacle. She decided to evade rather than confront. “What do you think happened to them? Are they well?”

Reuben’s gaze drifted out of the window. “It’s a lovely day for January,” he said.

Lois deepened her contact with his hand. “Do you know if they are all right?”

“The man ...” Reuben sighed, and his mouth slowly closed.

“The man?” Lois prompted.

Reuben’s eyes searched for her. “I’m sorry,” he said. “What were we talking about?”

“The man,” Lois said, trying to smooth the urgency from her voice. “The man who was with the alien when he was captured.”

“He died,” Reuben stated blankly.

“He died?” Lois gasped.

“Years ago.”

“How did he die? Was he ki-”

“Heart attack.”

Aw, Clark, Lois thought. *I’m sorry.* “Are you sure?”

Reuben grinned suddenly. “It’s a good story, huh?”

Lois stifled her desire to take his scrawny shoulders and shake the truth from him. “The best stories have an element of truth,” she said, hoping she’d managed to keep the impatience from sneaking into her tone.

He nodded as if considering her statement. “Very true, my dear,” he said.

“Did the man really die?”

“He was a man of weak will and poor judgement. He should have protected his wife from the schemes of the alien invader. He should have notified the authorities. He should have chosen the safety of his own planet instead of harbouring the vile brute. But he paid a high price for his foolishness.”

Lois nodded in agreement, straining to keep her inner turmoil concealed. “That would have avoided a lot of trouble.”

“Absolutely right,” Reuben said gravely. “But I suppose they were victims, too, in a way. Victims of their country simplicity. Victims of wanting to believe that those of lesser bearing hold to the high human values of justice and truth.”

Lois could feel a tirade poised inside her, demanding release. Instead, she smiled — tightly, but with the hope that Reuben would be too engrossed in his story to notice her indignation. “What about the woman?” she asked.

Lois could hear the barely contained outrage in her voice, but Reuben appeared to be responding to her words rather than her tone. “I ... I ...” He slowly rubbed his hand over his cheek. “I seem to remember hearing something about her. I can’t recall what.”

“Please try,” Lois said. “The story isn’t complete without knowing what happened to her.”

He grinned. “No loose ends, huh?”

“No,” Lois said. “No loose ends in the best stories.”

“Perhaps she died, too.”

“Perhaps?”

“I can’t remember,” he grated. “It is so frustrating. There was something. She was ill. Or something. No ... perhaps she died.”

Anguish for Clark seized her heart. “You’re sure she died?” she asked in a small voice.

Reuben hesitated for a stretched moment. “I’m not sure. *Something* happened to her ...”

“Are you sure about the man? Are you sure *he* died?”

“He was a large man, I think. The woman was much smaller.”

“Are you sure the man died?”

“Yes,” Reuben said firmly. “I’m sure the man died.”

“Did you see them? Did you ever visit them?”

“No. I saw photos in the file before it was destroyed.”

“The file was destroyed?”

“Yes. We had to ensure that the aliens wouldn’t be able to locate

them. They were given a new life. Untraceable identities.”

“So it was more than protective custody?” Lois asked. “You changed their identities?”

“Of course. If the aliens found them, anything was possible ... captivity, deprivation ... torture. They knew too much.”

Lois nodded as the sickening irony crawled through her. Was it worth trying to bring clarification? Or would that just confuse him further? She accepted that she wasn’t going to be able to find out anything regarding location, but she still needed to try to ascertain whether they were alive.

“Do you know where he’s buried?”

“No.”

“Do you know where she’s buried?”

Reuben’s long bristly eyebrows rose. “She’s dead? The woman is dead?”

“I don’t know. What did you hear?”

“I heard the man had passed away. The woman became ill, but I can’t remember ...”

Lois waited.

Reuben’s eyes — clear and sure — fastened in hers, and Lois held her breath.

“Will you call the nurse, please?” he said. “I’m feeling tired.”

A tall thin woman swept through the door of the sunroom. “Thank you for visiting Mr O’Brien,” she said crisply. “He is tiring, and he becomes extremely vexed when he can’t remember.”

Lois stood and smiled down at Reuben. “Thank you for telling me such a wonderful story, Mr O’Brien,” she said.

He smiled vacantly. “I’m so glad you enjoyed it, my dear. Perhaps you will come again and listen to more reveries from an old man’s imagination.”

Lois nodded and retreated from the sunroom. In the corner of the big room, another nurse was busily writing behind an imposing desk. Lois approached her. “I’m Linis Aneki,” she said. “My father used to be friends with Mr O’Brien. Thank you for allowing me to visit him.”

The nurse looked up. “How was he?”

“Very confused,” Lois said, shaking her head. “Is he always so confused?”

“He has moments of lucidity, but they are becoming less frequent.”

“Does he have many visitors?”

“His family — two sons and a daughter visit regularly.”

“How much of what he says is real?”

A sudden smile graced the expression of the nurse. “Did he tell you about the coming alien invasion?” she asked.

Lois nodded.

“Don’t worry,” the nurse said. “That’s his favourite story.”

“At the beginning, it sounded so real,” Lois said with a sideways glance — as if she half expected the alien army to be storming down the corridor. “But by the end, it was very confused.”

“That has been happening a lot lately.”

“Did the story used to have a more definite end? The man? The woman? Were they always dead?”

The nurse grinned, and Lois reflected that she would probably never realise the inappropriateness of her response. “He’s killed the woman, too, has he?”

“So the story doesn’t always end with her death?”

“No. Usually, she’s living happily ever after in her new identity.”

“And the man?”

“Reuben always killed off the man.” The nurse tapped her nose. “If you ask me, I think Mr O’Brien has a bit of the thing for the woman. In his mind, of course.”

“He seemed so sure the man was dead.”

“He is always sure,” the nurse said. “The story has grown over the months he has been here. At first, he would make odd comments and then stop mid-sentence as if he hadn’t devised the next bit yet. Slowly, he added in more detail — the human couple who adopted the alien baby, the certainty of an alien invasion, the necessity to protect the parents.”

“So ... no one believes him?”

The nurse chuckled. “An *alien*?” she scoffed. “Who looked *exactly* like a human? And was sent to Earth as a baby to lead an attack on all humanity? Who would believe *that*?”

“How did he know it was an alien if it looked just like the rest of us?” Lois asked.

“Reuben hasn’t filled in that detail yet.” The nurse smiled. “Perhaps that’s coming next.”

“It’s sad, isn’t it?” Lois mused.

“It’s very sad. I believe Mr O’Brien was a very successful businessman. Now, he’s reduced to telling stories about aliens.”

“Thank you again,” Lois said. She walked past the woman in reception and out into the weakly shimmering sunshine, her mind in turmoil.

How much of what Reuben said was truth, and how much was the product of a mind slipping into confusion?

Some of his story was accurate. The baby. The farmers. The capture. Where was the line where fact became fantasy?

Had Clark’s father died? Lois had to admit that it seemed likely. But what had happened to his mother?

Lois let herself into the compound and hurried up the stairs before Shadbolt could come out of the staffroom. Once in her office — with the door locked behind her — she went to the window. “Clark?” she said under her breath.

He looked up immediately from where he was writing on the notepad resting on his raised knee. He put it down and stood up.

“Were you able to fix the sewing machine?” Lois asked.

He nodded and pointed to the area behind the half-wall.

“I’ll be there in a minute,” Lois said.

She hurried down the stairs, and Shadbolt jumped up from the seat. “What’s happening with my daughter’s sewing machine?” he asked.

“It’s fixed and ready for you to pick up,” Lois said as she walked to the coffee machine and began pouring herself a drink.

“Where is it?”

“Do you know the arcade off Westborough Street?”

“Yes.”

“My friend works in the sewing store there. I had to go over to the east side of the city this morning, and I didn’t have the time to drop in. But I called him, and it’s ready. Can you go and get it?”

Shadbolt glanced at his watch. “I have to pick up my daughter in less than an hour.”

“Go now,” Lois urged. “The guy’s name is Angus. Ask for him.”

“You sure it’s OK if I leave now? It’s not two o’clock yet.”

“Yep.”

“OK,” Shadbolt said. “Thanks.”

He picked up his magazine and left the compound. Lois waited a few moments, although she was reasonably sure that he would be too concerned about the sewing machine to return unexpectedly. She opened the door to the cell. Clark was there, holding the put-back-together sewing machine.

“Hi, Clark,” she said. “What was wrong with it?”

“A couple of broken wires.”

“Did it take you long to fix?”

“About thirty seconds. It took about five minutes to put it back together again, though.” He deposited it at the doorway. “I couldn’t test it.”

Lois lifted the sewing machine onto the staffroom table and plugged in the cord. The little light came on, and she looked sideways at Clark. “What happens now?” she said.

“You need to connect the pedal.” He pointed to the bed on the far side of the room.

Lois attached the pedal to the machine.

“Press down on the pedal,” Clark advised from the doorway. “Lightly.”

She did. The machine sprang to life, and the needle whirred up and

down. Lois lifted her foot and looked through the door to Clark.

“Great job,” she said. She took her cell phone from her bag. “I’ll just be a minute.”

Back in her office, Lois found the paper where Trask had written the details of the assistants, and she punched in Shadbolt’s number. He answered a few seconds later.

“Evan Shadbolt.”

“Shadbolt,” Lois said. “It’s Lois Lane. There’s been a misunderstanding. Angus just delivered the sewing machine to the compound.”

“It’s there?”

“Yep. It’s here.”

“Is it OK?”

“Better than OK. Angus said it was just a few loose wires. He fixed it, and you’re all ready to go.”

“I’ll be there in five minutes.”

“OK,” Lois said. “See you then.” She sprinted down the stairs to where Clark was waiting on the other side of the doorway. “Shadbolt is coming back to get the sewing machine. When he’s gone, we’ll have lunch.”

“OK.”

“I have to shut the door,” she said. “Sorry.”

“I know,” Clark said in that quiet voice that always caused mayhem in her heart. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

Five minutes later, Shadbolt came through the external door like a tornado, and his eyes leapt to the machine. His urgency dissipated, and he moved towards it in a more circumspect manner, eyeing it as if he couldn’t quite believe that it had been resurrected. He reached for the pedal with his toe and smiled with relief when the machine responded. “Your friend is a miracle worker,” he said. “How does he want to be paid? Will he send a bill?”

“He said not to worry about it,” Lois said. “It only took him a few minutes.”

“You sure?”

Lois shrugged. “That’s what he said.”

Shadbolt shot another glance at the machine. “How did he manage to put it all back together again?”

“Don’t know,” Lois said nonchalantly. “But it’s all ready for you to take, and your daughter will be able to get her project done.”

“Thank you,” Shadbolt said gratefully. “This is really important. It’s a part of her portfolio for entrance into college. She has her heart set on getting into fashion design.”

“Creative young lady,” Lois commented.

Shadbolt disconnected the power cords. “Thank you,” he said again. “I had given up hope.”

“Why didn’t you take it to someone?” Lois asked. “Why did you try to fix it yourself?”

“It stopped working late last night,” Shadbolt said. “There aren’t too many repairers open before six in the morning.”

“You could have called and asked me to stay a bit longer,” Lois said with mild reproach.

“I didn’t think about that.”

Lois smiled. “Or did you just not want anyone to know that you have daughters?”

“I keep my home and my job separate.”

“Yes, but it’s hardly a national secret that you have two daughters,” Lois said pragmatically. “And now that I know, should you need to miss a shift — if one of the girls is sick — it won’t be a problem.”

Shadbolt picked up the sewing machine. “Thanks,” he said again.

“I hope your daughter’s project goes well,” Lois said.

He nodded. “Bye.”

“Bye, Evan.”

A half smile almost escaped before Shadbolt turned and hurried through the door.

Clark couldn’t help feeling on edge as he awaited Lois’s return.

Something was wrong. He'd known the moment she had unlocked the door and walked into the prison. She hadn't been able to meet his eyes. She hadn't looked at him.

What had she discovered?

What had they told her?

Had Menzies ordered that she be replaced?

Clark knew that Shadbolt was coming back. That explained her haste. But it didn't explain why she wouldn't look at him.

Had something happened to her father?

Or had she discovered something about his parents?

And what did the sewing machine have to do with anything?

She'd only been gone a few hours, but something had changed.

Something was wrong.

And Clark couldn't control the fear clawing at his heart.

Lois waited at the external door. Shadbolt's motor started, and she tracked the noise of his engine until all trace of it had faded away.

She could no longer put off deciding what to do. She had toyed — very briefly — with the idea of not telling Clark what Reuben O'Brien had told her. But Clark would ask. And although she was a consummate liar when she needed to be, she didn't like lying to people she cared about.

She wasn't sure that her information was correct.

And yet ...

Her gut said that Reuben had been telling the truth about Jonathan Kent.

If Jonathan were dead, Clark was going to find out one day.

She had to tell him.

If she didn't, it was going to develop into a barrier between them.

Clark would wonder why she had suddenly closed up. He would detect her evasiveness. And, being Clark, he would probably decide that he was the cause.

She couldn't allow that to happen.

She had to be honest. Even if she hurt him. Even if Reuben's information was wrong, Lois had to tell Clark what he had said.

Their relationship — whatever it was — had to be built on trust.

She couldn't lie to him.

She couldn't.

But she hated the thought of hurting him. He had been hurt so much already.

But if his father *had* passed away ... there was nothing she could do to save him.

Lois checked that the external door was locked, and with heavy steps, she went into the staffroom.

She had to tell Clark. They had eight hours before Longford was due. She had to do it now.

She couldn't stay away from Clark, and she couldn't go in to him and pretend everything was all right. She had to tell him now.

But it felt as if she were raising a dagger to plunge into his heart.

From her bag on the chair came the sound of her cell phone. She considered not answering — except she didn't want repeated calls interrupting her time with Clark.

She picked up her cell phone. The caller was her dad's nursing home. Sudden tension squeezed her heart. "Lois Lane."

"Lois." She recognised Ronny's voice. There was nothing in her tone to suggest an emergency.

"Ronny," Lois said. "Is Dad all right?"

"Sam had a wonderful morning, Lois," Ronny said cheerfully.

"He's almost finished the first puzzle. I'm calling to ask if it would be possible for you to bring in another one for him to do."

"He's almost finished?" Lois gasped.

"Yep," Ronny said triumphantly. "When I went into his room, he was totally engrossed."

"When I was there, he was struggling to pick up the pieces."

"Yeah," Ronny agreed. "But we have thin corrugated foam that makes it easier to grasp things, so I put the single pieces on that."

"Oh," Lois said. "Thanks, Ronny. That's great."

"The wooden tray is perfect," Ronny enthused. "Did you buy it or make it?"

"A friend of mine made it."

"Is there any chance your friend would be willing to make some more for the nursing home's general use?"

"Ah ... yeah," Lois said. "That shouldn't be a problem."

"We'll pay for them — whatever's fair for materials and labour."

"OK. How many?"

"Six? Could your friend manage to make six?"

"That should be fine," Lois said. "I'll check with him."

"Thanks, Lois. See you soon."

"Bye, Ronny. Thanks for calling me."

Lois replaced the cell in her bag. Was it too much to hope that giving Clark something to do would ease his pain? Just a little?

Lois didn't know.

Her only experience of the death of someone she loved was Linda.

And that death had been so draped in horror that Lois didn't know if her feelings were typical. She had been shocked, and angry, and guilty, and traumatised. And she had had to stifle her mourning in the effort to survive.

Clark would have hours and hours to think about it.

And he *still* wouldn't know for sure.

Did that make it easier? Or harder?

Either way, she needed to tell him. And she needed to do it now.

And then, she needed to find a way to help him. To be there for him.

Clark sat against the back wall, one knee bent, his arm lying listlessly across it.

As each minute passed, he became more convinced that something was wrong.

Lois hadn't come back into his cell.

He wouldn't listen through the walls. He wouldn't.

Why hadn't she come back to him? Was she avoiding him? Or was she avoiding having to tell him something?

Was she leaving him?

The lock clicked, and Clark sprang to his feet. He waited against the wall — not moving towards the door.

It opened, and Lois appeared. She dragged a chair forward and wedged it against the door.

Then she slowly turned to him.

It was there on her face ... in her eyes that still wouldn't look at him.

Something was wrong.

Clark pushed off the wall and walked towards her, his eyes glued to her face. "Lois?" he said in a voice that sounded less substantial than the first time he'd spoken to her.

Her eyes were burning with something that reached inside him and incited his fears.

He couldn't wait any longer. "Are you leaving?"

Surprise spread over her face, and she quickened her steps towards him. When she reached him, her hand curved around his upper arm and stayed there. Her eyes converged with his. "No, Clark," she said. "I'm not leaving."

Lois wasn't leaving. "Then what's wrong?"

"I found Reuben O'Brien."

A tidal wave of awareness swept over him, and the world reeled as the horror of his fears assaulted him anew. Lois put both hands on his shoulders, stabilising him. He scanned her face, and he knew.

His parents.

"Tell me," Clark gasped.

"Clark, you need to understand that O'Brien is in the early stages of dementia."

"What did he say?"

Her chin wobbled. "Your dad," she said in a quiet voice.

His dad? Did that mean his mother was all right? Did that mean they hadn't both been killed? "Dad?" he gulped.

“I’m so sorry, Clark.”

“What did he say?”

“He said that your father passed away.”

Memories swarmed into Clark’s mind. Memories of the man who had been the only father he’d known. The quiet farmer who’d taken in a strange child, loved him, raised him, taught him ... and then been repaid with suffering.

“O’Brien told it like it was a story he’d made up,” Lois said. “But he said some things that were accurate — he talked about a baby who was raised by farmers. The nurse said that his story varies a bit ...” Her fingers splayed along Clark’s neck — just below his hairline. “... but that the man — the father — always dies.”

Clark gulped. “How? Did ... did they k...kill him?”

“No,” Lois said gently. “Reuben said it was a heart attack.”

“And Mom?”

“He said that they were both taken into protective custody. He said they were given new identities to protect them from being found by the alien invaders. He was really confused about your mom. The story kept changing.”

Chaotic fragments of thoughts zigzagged through Clark’s brain. If this were true ... if no one had hurt his parents ... That was better than he had ever dared to hope. But if his Dad had passed away ... his mom would be alone.

Lois slid her arms further around his neck and drew him into her embrace, as if she had tracked the passage of his thoughts and known instinctively how to be what he needed. Her forehead nestled into the side of his neck, and her head lay on his shoulder.

Clark wrapped his arms around her back and clung to her.

He let her presence surround him.

Let her pervade him.

Let everything that was Lois answer the cry of his heart.

And, for the first time in his life, Clark didn’t feel alone.

Part 21

Many minutes passed, but for Clark, they blended into a timeless realm that felt like the mellow oasis of the eye of a storm.

His mind whirled with the first news of his parents in seven years.

His heart squeezed with grief — for a father who had probably died and for a mother who had lost both of the people she loved most.

Lois lay on his chest.

With her arms around his neck.

And the sweet scent of her hair in his nostrils.

Her body relaxed in the circle of his arms.

Her steady, calming breaths infused him with tranquillity.

Every thought, every feeling, every emotion started with Lois.

Finished with Lois. Centred on Lois.

And because of her, the pain of his fear and loneliness and isolation melted away.

Neither of them had spoken since she had answered his question about his mom. Lois hadn’t moved, and Clark began to wonder if she had fallen asleep. And if she had, whether it would be acceptable to sit down ... and perhaps settle her onto his lap.

“Lois?” he whispered.

She lifted her head and looked at him with eyes that glistened with sympathy.

What should he do now? He should try to ease out from her embrace. But how? He slackened the pressure of his arms a few degrees.

Lois didn’t back away. “How are you?” she said.

The sincere compassion that enveloped her simple inquiry weaved through his heart, causing further impairment to his ability to think clearly. He didn’t know what he was feeling — other than the certain comprehension that Lois had become as vital to his existence as the air that he breathed.

“Would you prefer to be alone?” she asked.

That was something he *did* know. “No,” he said. “Unless you would prefer to go.”

Lois shook her head. “No,” she said. “I would like to stay with

you.”

That was what he wanted. It was what he would always want.

“Thanks.”

“Would you like to stay here?” she asked. “Like this? Would you like to sit down? Would you like me to get us a cup of tea?”

“Do you have lunch?”

“Shadbolt got something for you.”

“Yeah, he pushed it through the door. I haven’t even looked at it.”

Lois lifted from his chest, and his heart whimpered with the loss of her. His hands dropped from her body, and his arms hung at his sides like clumsy appendages. She turned towards the door. “I’ll make us some tea.”

She moved, and suddenly, they were apart, and coolness flooded where her warmth had been. Clark followed her to the door and waited there, watching while she filled the kettle and put it on the stove.

She looked up and caught him staring at her. She smiled.

“Did you get some lunch for yourself?” Clark asked, thankfully grasping at a practicality.

“Nope. I didn’t have time.”

“You can have mine.”

“We can share it,” she said.

That was even better. He would have willingly given her his entire lunch, but sharing it emphasised their ... affinity? Was that overstating it? Rapport? Was that what they had?

“I have some chocolate in my desk drawer,” Lois said. “We can have that, too.” She went out of the room, and her footsteps reverberated on the stairs. When she returned, she was carrying two candy bars. She put them on the table and stepped up to the doorway. “Clark?”

Her stride had been purposeful, but doubt clouded her eyes. “Yes?”

“I’m floundering here,” she said with a little smile that sought his understanding. “I can’t imagine how you’re feeling. I don’t know what you need. I’m not sure how to help you.”

Whatever he was feeling was such a turbulent clutter that the words to explain it were going to be unattainable. But Lois had sensed what he’d needed without words and simply held him. With his thumb, he gestured over his shoulder. “That ...” He cleared his throat. “That was exactly ...”

She gave him a shy smile. “We have some time before Longford comes,” she said. “If you want to be quiet, that’s what we’ll do. If you want to talk, we can talk about anything. Or we can do something. I have a pack of cards if you’d like to play a game.”

“Thanks. How about we have lunch first and then see how we feel?”

Lois moved to the counter and poured the boiling water into the cups. “There is something I should tell you,” she said. “But I don’t know if you’ll want to even think about it now.”

“What?”

“I took the tray to my dad, and it was such a great success that they’ve asked if you can make six more.”

Six more? Clark didn’t know what to say.

“Would you mind making others?” Lois asked as she reached into the fridge for milk. “Not today, but sometime.”

“I’d really like to make more,” Clark said, realising it was true. To make something. To achieve. To gain satisfaction from a job well done. That hadn’t been possible for such a long time.

Lois gave him one mug and picked up the candy bars.

“Tomorrow? Or today?”

“It couldn’t be today,” Clark said. “I can’t imagine that you would have enough lumber in your office for another six trays.”

Lois threw him a smile over her shoulder as she walked towards the mattress at the back wall. “I don’t,” she said. “But there’s a hardware store about fifteen minutes from here. If you make a list of what you need, I can go after we’ve eaten.”

Clark took her hand to steady her as she lowered to the mattress. “Would that be OK?”

“Perfectly OK. It won’t take long.”

Clark sat next to her and opened the bag that Shadbolt had pushed into the cell. It contained two roast beef and tomato sandwiches. He offered the bag to Lois.

She took one of the sandwiches with a smile. “Thanks.”

“How is your father?” Clark said, hoping it would be a safe subject.

“He was better this morning than at any time since the stroke,”

Lois said. “He still can’t speak, but we’re slowly learning how to communicate.”

“It must be very difficult for you.”

Lois stared at her sandwich for a moment. “It was,” she said. “The stroke happened when I couldn’t be contacted, so the first I heard about it was a couple of weeks later. When I got home, I felt as if I’d been thrown into a dark and menacing world, and I had no notion of what to do or how to help him.”

“Did he like the paper airplane?”

“Yeah. Thanks.” She smiled as if remembering something, but said no more.

“And he was able to do the jigsaw puzzle?”

“Yeah. When I spoke to Ronny later, she said that he’d nearly finished it.”

“Ronny?”

“One of Dad’s nurses. She bubbles with energy and optimism.”

Lois grinned at Clark. “It was her idea that I wash Dad’s hair.”

Clark felt himself begin to smile. “And because of that, you coerced me into allowing you to wash my hair?”

She responded to the lightness in his tone with a radiant smile.

“Coerced, Mr Kent?” she said. “I *coerced* you?”

“You did,” he said firmly. “And I loved every minute of it.”

Her eyes dropped and then lifted. “So did I,” she murmured.

If he hadn’t been an alien and a prisoner ... He could almost have believed that she felt more for him than pity. Almost. Clark took a bite of his sandwich, using it as a way of camouflaging the absurdity of his thoughts.

They finished their meal in silence, and then Lois stood and gathered the trash and empty mugs. “I’m going to wash my hands,” she said. “And I’ll bring you back some water.”

“Thanks.” Clark closed his eyes, and immediately his mind filled with the memory of Lois leaning against him. The last time anyone had held him so closely was probably his mom when he’d arrived home from college.

If he’d had time to prepare — if he’d known it was going to happen — he would have imagined he would feel incredibly awkward. But he hadn’t. Lois had made it seem natural. On one level, it was. On another level, it was unbelievable that any woman would want to be so close to him — knowing everything about him.

As she had held him, it had seemed as if the furthest thought from her mind had been that he was an alien. And because of her attitude, it hadn’t mattered to him either.

In her arms, it had been almost possible to forget.

He heard her footsteps and broke from his memories. She put the bowl on the ground, and Clark knelt to wash his hands.

“Would you like me to go and get the materials for the trays now?” she asked.

From the haze of his indecision, something definite emerged. “No,” Clark said. “I’d like you to stay with me.” In fact, what he’d really like would be to go back to how they were before lunch — when her physical closeness and unqualified acceptance had chased away his segregation and lit his way back from exile.

But Clark knew that even if he were able to find the right words to ask if he could hold her again, he would never be able to build up the courage to voice those words. He tried to wrench his mind from the memory of her touch. He dried his hands, and followed Lois back to the mattress.

“Do you think Reuben O’Brien was telling the truth about my dad?” Clark asked when they were seated.

Lois breathed out. Then she slowly nodded. “There is no way to be sure,” she said. “And I’m so sorry that all of my digging didn’t get you any certainty, but yes, my gut feeling is that he was convinced about your dad.”

Clark had accepted that already, but somewhere in a heart that had become used to harbouring the most forlorn of prospects, hope had still flickered. Now it was gone. And it felt as if his heart was being impaled.

With a swift movement, Lois was kneeling next to him, facing him, her thighs alongside his. “I’m so sorry,” she said.

Clark nodded, trying to force down the tears that were pushing into his eyes. “What exactly did he say about my mom?”

He saw the flash of sorrow his question had caused, and apprehension reared inside him.

“His story kept changing,” Lois said. She reached for Clark’s hand and took it in hers. “Once, he said that perhaps she’d died, but he denied it really quickly, and every other time I asked, he said that something had happened to her, but he couldn’t remember what it was.”

“So she could be dead, too?”

Lois’s hand tightened around his. “He only said it once, Clark,” she insisted. “And then he denied it. Later, I asked if he knew where your dad was buried, and he said he didn’t. Then I asked if he knew where your mom was buried, and he looked shocked and asked me if she’d died.”

Clark stared at where Lois’s hand covered his as all the grief and uncertainty and fear rose again. If his dad were dead, who was looking after his mom? He realised now that there had been some small comfort in hoping that they were together.

“There’s something else,” Lois said.

He looked up into her eyes, preparing for another onslaught of bad news.

“O’Brien said that all records were destroyed. It could be that Scardino did actually look for them, and that’s why he came up empty.”

Clark nodded.

Lois leant forward, her face kindled with hope. “But that’s good news in a way, Clark,” she said. “Because if your mother can’t be located, it means that nothing we do is going to adversely affect her.”

But it also meant that he might never find her.

“Yes, you will,” Lois said. “Once you’re out of here, I’m sure you will be able to use your speed, and your vision, and your hearing to track her down. I’m sure you’ll find a way to do something that means so much to you.”

Perhaps she was right. If he were able to search for his mom, Clark knew he wouldn’t rest until he’d found her. But staying with Lois meant everything to him as well, and he was confident that all the strange abilities in the world were not going to make that happen. “About them being put somewhere for their protection? Do you think that was true?”

“I think that is what O’Brien thought happened,” Lois said.

“But?”

Her hand slid up his arm and around his neck, and her fingers slipped into his hair.

“But there’s Trask,” Clark answered his own question.

“I wish I had something more definite for you.”

“Thank you for telling me,” Clark said. “Thank you for not shutting me out.”

“I wanted to,” she admitted, and her eyes fell to her lap. “I would have done anything to avoid hurting you.”

“It did hurt,” Clark said. “But ...” ... *somehow you made it bearable.*

He couldn’t speak those words. He couldn’t let her know how close he felt to her ... how much he yearned to be even closer.

He already didn’t know how he was going to survive when she left him. If he got any closer to her, it was going to be worse than all the years of Trask’s torture.

Her gaze rose and spilled into his eyes. “Would you mind if I did something?” she asked.

“No.”

“It’s something I have wanted to do for a while.”

Clark gulped. She *wasn’t* going to kiss him. She wasn’t. He nodded as tension cinched through every muscle in his body.

“I noticed that you shaved since this morning,” she said.

Clark nodded, his throat relentlessly dry.

“Your face looks so different without the beard. I still do a double take every time I see you. Would you mind if I just ...” Her hand lifted from his shoulder and hovered in front of his face.

“I ... don’t ... mind,” he said through a strangled throat.

Her hand approached him and landed on the curve of his cheek. Her touch was exquisite — soft and warm and yet electrifying all at the same time. “You do this with a mirror?”

“Uh huh.”

Her fingers slid down his cheek and past the line of his jaw to his throat. Then, they curled and the upper side of her forefinger swept forward to the point of his chin and rested there.

It felt *exactly* like the precursor to a kiss.

Clark awaited his fate, unable to think, unable to breathe, unable to move.

Her eyes were on his mouth, or perhaps it was his chin. His gaze fell to her mouth. It was slightly open. Open enough that he could almost imagine what it would feel like if the impossible happened.

Then, her hand slipped away and dropped into her lap.

Clark felt a wave of light-headedness assail him.

“I’ll ... go and get the stuff you need for the trays,” Lois said.

Her voice was neither steady nor strong, and Clark didn’t know if that made him feel better or worse.

“OK,” he said. “I’ll write you a list.”

“I’ll have to lock the door while I’m away.”

“That’s OK.” He rose to his feet, and before he could talk himself out of it, he offered Lois his hand.

She took it without any noticeable hesitation, and he helped her to her feet as he had done so many times before. Perhaps the only significance to her touch on his chin had been in his own hopelessly compromised mind.

“Do you have a pen and paper?” Lois asked.

“Yep.”

“I’ll be back in a minute.”

“OK.”

Clark picked up the pen and notepad and began to write out the list of materials he would need to make six jigsaw puzzle trays. It should have been a simple task.

It would have been a simple task.

If he’d been able to wrest his mind away from the enthralling memory of Lois’s hand on his chin. Lois’s mouth just a few inches from his. Lois’s breath mingling with his.

Clark closed his eyes and refocused.

He was being completely illogical. Lois was his guard. Lois knew he was an alien. Lois knew that, even if he did escape from this prison, he had no realistic chance of long-term freedom.

Lois *wouldn’t* kiss him.

Ever.

He was sure that no thought of anything like that had ever entered her mind.

And yet ...

If he wanted to remain sane, he had to stop thinking about that moment ... that indelibly etched moment when a kiss had seemed such a viable possibility that he had almost felt her mouth on his.

And he also needed to stop thinking about what it had felt like to have her in his arms.

Clark opened his eyes and forced his attention to the list.

Lois getting the materials for the trays meant he would have something to concentrate on this evening. That was good.

Lois going to get the materials meant that he would be alone with

his memories for a time. That wasn’t so good.

When she returned, she was carrying a small rectangular device that he didn’t recognise. She held it out to him. “It’s a cell phone,” she said. “If anything happens, if anyone comes, you can call me.”

Clark took the cell phone and examined it. “This is a *phone*?” he said.

“Yep.” She took it from him and unfolded a flap. “Press that button, and it will speed-dial my other cell.”

“You have two of these?”

“Yeah. This one belongs to Lois Lane. The other is for work purposes.”

“Does everyone have these now?”

“Not everyone, but they are becoming more popular all the time.”

“And I can call you without it being connected via a cable?”

She nodded. “No one should come — and I won’t be gone for very long. But if you hear anything, just press that button, wait for me to answer, and speak into it like a normal phone.”

“OK.”

“Keep it in your pocket,” Lois said.

Clark slipped it into the pocket of his shorts, wondering what other changes he would have to deal with if he ever left this prison. He had never felt as if he fitted into this world. Now he would be even more estranged from it.

“You’ll adjust quickly,” Lois said with an encouraging smile. “I’ll help you.”

She always seemed to know exactly what he was thinking. “Here’s the list,” Clark said.

Lois took the paper and skimmed over it. She looked up at him with a smile. “You have nice handwriting.”

“Thanks.”

“I’ll be back soon.”

“See you.”

She walked out of the door, and it closed. Clark heard it lock.

And he was alone.

Alone with a jumbled labyrinth of thoughts that elicited the whole spectrum of emotions ... grief, despair, guilt, hope, bewilderment, awe.

And ...

The word became jammed in the wringer of his mind.

And ...

Love.

He loved Lois.

Part 22

At the hardware store, Lois gave Clark’s list to an eager-to-help assistant and let him collect the items for her.

It wasn’t that she couldn’t have found everything on the list, but this way gave her time to reflect on the moment in the cell when she had come within a whispered breath of kissing Clark.

The electricity from their curtailed encounter still sizzled through her veins.

She’d held his chin in the curve of her forefinger. She’d focussed on his mouth — which had opened as if it were issuing captivating encouragement. Her heart had been pounding heat through her body — heat that had razed almost every barrier of common sense.

And she’d nearly done it.

She’d nearly kissed him.

And now, she was in utter turmoil. She knew that she should be submerged in self-recriminations for having come so close to something so foolhardy. She knew she should be relieved that, somehow, she had managed to extricate herself from the situation without inflicting too much damage.

But she wasn’t.

She wished she had kissed him.

She regretted not leaning forward and imprinting her mouth on his. What would have happened then? How would Clark have reacted?

Lois didn’t know, but she would like to know.

Would he have been embarrassed? Flabbergasted? Or had he felt

the growing attraction between them? She understood why he hadn't made even the suggestion of a move on her. He would feel that he was in no position to offer her anything, and Clark would never be someone who would take without a thought of what he could give back.

The chemistry between them was so strong it was conceivable that Clark felt it, too. And if he did, a kiss would have helped him glimpse that whatever they had could survive beyond his cell. It would have helped him realise that she was hoping for a future with him.

Lois paid for the goods and followed the assistant to where she had parked the Jeep. She opened the hatch, and he started loading it for her.

Was Clark, right now, thinking about that moment? He *must* have felt something. He must have realised what logically followed.

But did he?

He had been twenty-one when Trask had captured him. Some men had plenty of experience with women by that age, but Lois wasn't sure that Clark would have been one of them. He would have been restrained by his differences. He probably would have been wary of getting involved with any woman unless he felt able to tell her his secret.

From what he'd said, he hadn't told anyone about himself before his capture.

Lois shut the Jeep and tipped the assistant. "Thanks," she said.

He didn't move away.

She brushed past him towards the driver's door.

"Ah ... would you consider going on a date with me?" he asked.

Lois looked at him — seeing him for the first time. He was passably good-looking and had a nice manner about him. In other times, she might have been tempted to give him her number. Now, she smiled, hoping to soften her rejection. "No," she said. "I'm with someone. Sorry."

His face fell, but he recovered with a good-natured smile. "Pity."

"Thanks."

He walked back to the store, and Lois climbed into the Jeep.

I'm with someone.

In one sense, that wasn't quite the truth.

In one sense, it was as far removed from the truth as was a schoolgirl crush on an unavailable man who hadn't shown the slightest interest.

But in every other sense, it was exactly the truth.

Lois wanted to be with Clark.

She loved him.

And it couldn't be this powerful if he felt nothing for her.

Could it?

Clark heard a faint noise and tuned in his hearing.

It was Lois. That was her heartbeat.

He hurried to the door and dropped low to the tin box. He ran the comb through his hair, picked up the mirror, and lasered away his film of stubble.

A minute later, the door opened, and Lois walked in carrying a piece of chipboard. "Hi," she said. "Everything OK?"

"Hi, Lois. Everything's fine." He took the board from her and looked at it. "This is exactly what I need. Thanks."

"I'll get the rest."

She brought in all of the materials, and Clark placed them in neat piles near the back wall.

"Are you hungry yet?" Lois said as she stood next to him.

"No."

"I think I'll call Uncle Mike and ask him to hold off our meals for a couple of hours. Is that OK?"

"Sure."

"Do you want to get started?" she asked with a sweeping gesture towards the sticks of lumber and slabs of chipboard.

"Do you want to do something else?"

Her smile held a tinge of self-consciousness. "Actually, my lack of

sleep last night has caught up with me, and I'd like to crash for a while. Is that OK with you?"

"Of course." He controlled the impulse to drop a light touch on her shoulder by burying his hand in his pocket. "You get some rest."

"I'll make the call."

Clark withdrew the cell phone from his pocket and gave it to Lois. He listened while she spoke to her uncle, hardly able to believe that she could make a call without a cable connection to the telephone network.

As she hung up, she smiled at him. "All done." Then she glanced sideways. "Do you mind if I stay here with you while I sleep?"

"Won't I disturb you? With the hammering?"

"I doubt it. I feel tired enough that I could sleep in the middle of a kid's birthday party." She turned around and slipped away, returning shortly with a pillow and her dad's sleeping bag. "Would you wake me in a couple of hours, please?"

Clark nodded. "Sleep well." He crouched next to the pile and pretended to be examining a piece of chipboard as he watched Lois settle onto the mattress and pull the sleeping bag over her shoulder. She seemed to *like* being with him. Even when she could be somewhere else, she chose to be with him.

When she couldn't sleep last night, she'd asked to come to him.

And now — she could have slept in the bed in the next room, or even in her office, but she'd brought her pillow and chosen to be with him.

Clark glanced up to the open door.

It wasn't because she felt the need to guard him.

He loved her.

He'd never been in love before, but that in no way diminished his conviction that that was what had happened.

He was inescapably in love with Lois Lane.

It was hardly surprising. A beautiful woman had entered the black hole that had been his life, provided him with everyday practicalities that released him from having to live like an animal, exhibited jaw-dropping trust by walking into his cell, and proceeded to treat him with unwavering respect.

He hadn't stood a chance. It was inevitable.

But now that he'd realised, what was he going to do about it?

They couldn't have a future together.

Even if the authorities allowed him to go, all it would take was another Trask — or another Moyne — to decide that the alien was an unacceptable threat to the people of Earth, and Lois would be in danger.

Clark extricated himself from the web of his thoughts and picked up the first piece of chipboard. He'd looked forward to making the trays, but now, much of the pleasure had drained away.

He had to talk to Lois.

He had to be honest.

He had to ensure that they both understood that there could be no forever for them.

Lois awoke and opened her eyes. Clark was kneeling on the floor, working on one of the trays. He was wielding the hammer, but with such subdued power that she figured he had to be using some other skills to minimise the noise.

Perhaps he had already bored a hole in the wood, and the hammer was only needed to tap home the nail.

Five finished trays were lined up against the wall.

Lois smiled. Ronny was going to be pleased.

And hopefully, making the trays had proven therapeutic for Clark.

She sighed softly. He must be devastated. He must have feared that his parents were dead. In fact, he'd probably feared much worse than death from a heart attack, but that wouldn't assuage his grief now. He would be mourning the lost years that could never be restored.

When they had been in each other's arms, the flow of support and empathy between them had been tangible. Lois had never liked physical contact much, but with Clark, it was different. With Clark,

despite all the reasons it should be awkward, it wasn't. She could have stayed like that — leaning into his broad chest — for hours.

It had helped her. It had soothed the distress of having to tell Clark the news of his father's probable passing. And inexplicably, it had alleviated some of her buried heartache over Linda's death.

And it had helped Clark — she was sure of that. He had needed her.

They had needed each other.

This evening — after they had eaten — would there be any way to manoeuvre them into some sort of physical contact? Her head on his shoulder, perhaps? Or she could inch her foot towards him and hope he would massage it again ...

Clark stood with the completed tray in his hand. He looked in her direction, and he smiled when he saw her open eyes. "Did you sleep well?" he asked.

Lois sat up and stretched. "Uh huh. Now, I'm hungry." She checked the time on her watch. "And our meals should have been delivered five minutes ago."

"That's good."

She went to the row of trays and picked up the nearest one, admiring the quality of his craftsmanship. "These are great," she said. "Ronny is going to be ecstatic."

Clark added the final tray to the row, but he didn't respond to her compliment. Perhaps making the trays had been ineffectual in taking his mind from his parents.

"I'll bring in some water for you, and then I'll get our meals," Lois said.

"Thanks."

"Would you like me to bring down your suitcase so you can get into some of your own clothes? Jeans, perhaps?"

"Yeah. Thanks." His attempt at a smile didn't dispel the sombreness that clung to him.

It was to be expected, Lois told herself as she brought his suitcase down the stairs. His life had been static for seven years. Unchanging. Hopeless. Futile. Empty.

Now, in less than two weeks, everything had changed.

And he would be mourning his father and worried about his mother.

She handed him the suitcase. "I'll go and get our meals."

"Thanks," he said. "Will jeans be OK?"

"Jeans will be perfect," she said with a smile that she hoped would hearten him.

He smiled in reply, but it seemed little more than an expected gesture.

As Lois stepped outside, she groaned audibly as comprehension illuminated her mind. Yes, Clark was upset about his parents, but she hadn't detected any detachment when she had held him. *This* was about the almost kiss. She had freaked him out. She had pushed too hard ... *again*. And this time, she wasn't sure how she was going to redeem it.

Ten minutes later, they had settled onto the mattress and were eating the roast chicken and fried rice supplied by Uncle Mike.

Clark had said very little.

He did look stunning in his jeans and one of the checked shirts, but Lois had allowed herself only the briefest of glances before turning her wayward concentration to the food. He had donned the glasses again, and the overall effect was of a slightly serious young man whose bearing hinted at an alluring combination of grace and power.

She wanted to delve into his thoughts — her questions were straining for release, but Lois was determined to give Clark the time and the space he needed.

Before he had finished his meal, he put down the cutlery and container and leant against the wall with a long sigh. "I need to talk to you about something."

Her heart roared into frenzied overdrive. "You know you can talk to me about anything."

"This ... this is going to be ... precarious."

Yep, she had panicked him. Lois cast aside her food and hunched her knees into the circle of her arms. "We're friends," she said. "And friends can say anything to each other."

"Friends?"

She nodded. "We're friends."

Clark's head swung away, and he seemed to be gathering the impetus to continue. "Lois," he said as he looked back at her. "There probably isn't a twenty-eight-year-old male on this planet who knows less about women than I do ... but ... did you nearly kiss me before?"

A disconcertingly large part of Lois wanted to laugh ... and then lean forward to answer his question with a kiss. "Yes," she acknowledged. "I nearly did."

Shock thrashed across his face. "Why?" he gasped.

"Because I wanted to."

"Lois ... Lois ..." He lifted his hand and then let it drop, as if the words he was grappling for were out of reach.

Lois leant towards him. "Clark," she said. "I like you. You're single. I'm single."

"You're human. I'm alien."

"So?"

"So!" he exploded. "Lois — there can *never* be anything like that between us."

"Do you find me unattractive?"

Disbelief filled his expression.

"Do you?" she repeated.

"No," he said tightly. "You're beautiful."

Now wasn't the time, but Lois couldn't help taking a millisecond to process his compliment. "Are you committed to someone else?"

Clark looked around the room that had been his prison for the past seven years. "What do you think?" he said harshly.

"Is there someone you'd like to be committed to?"

"I'm an alien, Lois."

She laid her hand on his arm. He flinched at the contact but didn't draw away. "Are there any Kryptonian women on Earth?"

"No," he said, again looking as if her question was the last thing he'd expected.

"Then you're limited to human women," Lois said pragmatically.

"Lois," he hissed. "Even before Trask captured me, I'd realised that marriage ... family ... anything like that ... probably wasn't going to be possible for me."

"Is that what you want? To be alone? Always?"

"What I want hasn't been important for a very long time."

"It's important to me," she said.

"Lois," he said as agony carved across his face. "We can't do this. We've started all wrong. I'm a prisoner with no realistic chance of getting out of here. You're a guard who has a life that will continue long after you've left this operation. If you feel anything at all for me, it's because we've been thrown together at a time when you're still vulnerable because of the death of your friend."

"I don't believe that," she said staunchly.

"What *do* you believe?"

She drew her fingers over the tautness of his arm muscles. "I believe that, regardless of the circumstances of how we got together, you would still be you, and I would still be me, and you would still make me feel different from the way anyone else has ever made me feel."

Clark threw back his head and stared at the ceiling.

She slid down his arm and hooked her hand in his. "Can you tell me honestly that you've never noticed this feeling that's between us?"

"I can't *stop* feeling it," he said in anguished tones.

Lois dropped her head to hide her smile. When she'd clawed back a shred of control, she said, "Look at me, Clark."

His head turned slowly, and his tortured eyes met hers.

"We can't do anything about this yet," she said. "And that's the only reason why I didn't kiss you. But every time we talk about the future, you seem to accept that soon after you're out, I'll leave you. That isn't what I want. I want to be with you. I want to help you."

“Lois, I need your help. I need it now, and if I ever get out of here, I’m going to need you more than ever. But if all I am is a project to you ...”

“From the moment I met you, you’ve been far, far more than a project to me,” she declared.

“Lois, I can’t let you waste your life trying to achieve something that isn’t possible.”

“Clark, you need to understand something. It might be hard for you to accept, but I want you to try.”

He nodded.

“I need you.”

He grimaced. “Perhaps it feels like that now ... you’re grieving for your friend ... but one day, you’ll heal, and you’ll be ready to meet someone who can be everything you need.”

“I’ve already met him,” she said forlornly. “But nothing I say convinces him that my feelings are real.”

He released a long breath, and at its end, it birthed a hesitant smile.

“There are no guarantees for me, either,” Lois said. “In fact, the guy at the hardware store today asked me for a date. When you get out of here, you are going to meet hundreds of women. You might feel differently about me -”

“What did you tell him?”

Lois considered gently teasing Clark about being jealous, but she wasn’t sure he was ready for that yet. “I told him ‘no, thanks,’ and I said I was with someone.”

Clark made a gallant effort to nod sombrely, but the corners of his mouth lifted. “Lois,” he said, still fighting the grin. “Are you *seriously* telling me that you would choose to be with me instead of a regular guy?”

She nodded. “Yes, I am.”

His smile unfurled like petals in the spring sunshine. His eyes were soft and clear, and for the first time, there was no cautionary veil to mask his feelings. “How are we going to do this?” he asked in a low voice that melted her insides.

“I don’t know the practicalities,” Lois said. “But I know how I feel, and I know it will never change.”

“I have nothing to offer you,” he said.

“Yes, you do,” she corrected.

He looked at her hand, still clasped in his. “Lois, what you have done for me blows my mind. That you would want ... It’s a lot to take in.”

“I won’t rush you,” she said. “I know you are going to need to readjust to so many things, and you can have as much time as you need.”

“I want to trust you,” Clark said. “But I can’t see how I can get out of here. I just can’t see how I could have any sort of life on the outside.”

“I found out that Shadbolt has daughters,” Lois said. “On the weekend, I’ll tell him that I will cover his shift so he can take them on an outing, and that will give us all day -”

“To do what? If I walk out of here, I die.”

“Did Trask tell you that?”

“No, Moyne did.”

“Do you believe him?”

“Yes, I do. He constantly left the door open during his shift and tried to lure me into going through it.”

Whether it was true or not, Lois wasn’t going to risk Clark’s life on the word of scum like Moyne. “We can dress you as a painter again and have you working on the back wall,” she said. “And we’ll bring in labourers to strip the wall.”

“It’s not just around the door. The wires are all through the wall.”

“Does your presence in here stop it from reacting? Or does it work like a tripwire?”

“A tripwire. If I go through that network of wires, the lead shell inside me disintegrates, and I’ll be poisoned.”

“Whatever Trask had put in the wall, we can have taken out.”

“And once we’re out of here?” Clark said. “We’ll have to run and

hide, won’t we?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted.

“That is no life for you, Lois,” Clark insisted. “I can’t let you live like that. And if they catch us ...” Pain flared into his eyes. “If they catch us, they’ll take you away from me.”

Just as they had taken away his parents.

Lois didn’t have any assurances to ease his anxiety. “The alternative is that we both stay in here.”

His jaw dropped a little. “You’re saying that if I can’t get out, you’ll stay here with me?”

“Yes,” Lois said. “But that is problematic because of the possibility that I will be removed from this operation. But when we’re out there — no one can tell me that I have to leave you.”

“This is sounding like a crazy, improbable dream,” Clark said in a voice cloaked in disbelief.

“You have time,” Lois said. “You have some time to think about it.”

He grinned suddenly but said nothing.

“What?” Lois asked.

He shook his head.

“What?” she demanded.

“I have a question that I probably shouldn’t ask.”

“Ask it.”

“Are you going to kiss me?”

She chuckled lightly. “No,” she retorted. “I’m going to wait for you to kiss me.”

He looked down and adjusted his glasses. When he looked up, he was grinning. “Lois, I don’t think we should ... not until ... not until I’m free.”

“I agree,” she said quickly. “I had decided that, too ... but then I nearly succumbed to a weak moment.”

Clark shook his head, his face draped in wonder. “You are the most extraordinary woman imaginable,” he said.

“You’re pretty extraordinary yourself.”

He nestled her hand in both of his. “I have so very little,” he said. “But everything I have is yours.”

“I need your strength, and your humour, and your steadfastness,” Lois said. “I need you.”

He stared at their joined hands. “It seems superfluous to say that I need you.”

“The strength of what we have is exactly that,” Lois said. “We need each other. We just seem to fit together — and I don’t think our circumstances have anything to do with it.”

He looked into her face, his eyes solemn. “It’s not going to be easy.”

“I know,” she said. “But we can work together to prepare for a life outside.”

“How much time do we have?”

“I’m hoping for a couple of weeks.”

“Have you heard anything about the meeting yesterday? Scardino and Menzies?”

“Nothing.”

“Is that a good thing? If Menzies had ordered any changes, wouldn’t you have heard by now?”

“Maybe.” Lois looked at her watch. “We have half an hour until Longford arrives.”

“What do you want to do?”

Lois smiled. “I’d like to turn around and lean back against you. Would that be all right?”

Clark cleared his throat. “Yes,” he said. “That would be all right.”

“Good,” Lois said with a satisfied sigh.

She spun around and reclined against him. His arm came across her shoulder as if it were natural for it to be there. Lois laced her fingers through his, and silence fell.

They stayed like that until it was time to clear the cell in preparation for Longford’s arrival. Then Lois put the trays in her Jeep and returned the hammer and leftover nails to her office while Clark

changed into his shorts and tee shirt. After she'd brought in a bowl of hot water, they stood together, facing each other.

"I'm so sorry about your dad," Lois said. "I wish it could have been different."

"Thank you."

"Try to remember all the good times. It does help ... a little ... if you can cling to the happy memories."

"Yeah."

She reached up and put her arms around his neck. His arms widened to receive her and closed around her back.

I love you, Clark.

They had covered so much ground ... progressed so far, but she couldn't say those words. Not yet. She had promised she would allow him to set the pace. But she could hope that the essence of her feelings would seep into Clark and help him through a long night when, she was sure, his grief would fester and claw at his heart.

After Linda had died, the nights had been the worst.

Lois wished she could stay with him. Wished she could bring down her mattress and sleep with Clark.

But she couldn't.

She put her hands on his shoulders and drew back. "Good night, Clark," she said.

"Good night, Lois. I'll miss you."

She would miss him, too. "See you tomorrow." She pulled away before she could even think about how much she wanted to fall back into the haven of his chest.

She stepped into the staffroom and closed the door with a sigh.

Leaving him was not getting any easier.

Eric Menzies had had a tornado of a day.

He'd slept through his alarm, rushed through his shower, and cut himself while shaving. He'd sprinted down the stairs, still pulling on his jacket, grabbed his coat, and hurried towards the garage.

Then, he'd seen Phoebe.

She was on the couch, her arms flung wide, and her face deathly pallid.

He'd found a pulse and nearly collapsed with relief. He'd called the ambulance and pushed enough meaning into his garbled words that they had understood it had been an emergency.

From there, the day had passed in a whirl of doctors, nurses, and psych consults as the health workers had tried to piece together what had led to Phoebe's attempt on her life.

Now it was late.

He'd left her in the hospital. She hadn't responded to him all day. He'd sat next to her bed hour after hour and silently begged her forgiveness for all of his mistakes, but if she'd sensed his presence, she had ignored him.

He had been such a failure as a husband that his wife had chosen death instead of life with him.

Eric put down his glass of scotch and picked up the phone. He dialled Scardino's home number.

"Daniel Scardino."

"Scardino," Eric barked. "It's Menzies."

"Good evening, Mr Menzies. Is everything all right?"

"I've read Trask's records and realised that there is absolutely nothing that can be salvaged from such a woeful and incompetent mess," he growled. "The entire operation is to be wound up and all records are to be destroyed."

"Yes, sir."

"You have until Monday."

"Monday?"

"The alien is to be killed and his body cremated. The compound behind the warehouse is to be demolished. I want *nothing* left. Do you understand?"

He heard Scardino swallow. "Killed?"

"Yes," Eric said, his impatience rising. "Killed. It's the only way."

"How?"

Menzies snatched at his glass and took a gulp of the scotch. It burned down his throat. "Expose him to the rods until he is sufficiently weakened that a bullet will end his life."

"Are you sure about this?" Scardino asked.

His hesitation ignited Eric's simmering temper. "Yes, I'm sure," he exploded. "If the rods could make him weak enough that surgery could be performed, I'm sure they can make him weak enough that a bullet can penetrate him — thereby killing him."

"Are you sure this is the correct outcome for this operation?"

Eric poured himself another large scotch. "There is no other option," he said firmly. "The longer the operation continues, the more chance there is of a nosy reporter finding out about it. I'm surprised it hasn't happened already. It has to be terminated, and all traces that it ever existed have to be destroyed."

"What about the agents?"

"Longford is useless. Retire him with a generous pension, and make sure he understands that he is never to even think about the last few years. Shadbolt has spent too long sitting on his butt doing nothing of note. He used to be a good operative. Find him a challenging assignment away from Metropolis, and get him back into the field."

"And Ms Lane?"

"Do what you should have done in the first place. Insist that she take three months compassionate leave, and don't let her wheedle you into anything else."

"Yes, sir."

"Monday," Eric said. "By Monday, none of this ever happened."

"But -"

Eric slammed down the phone.

Whatever Neville had done to those two agents, there would be no record of it. There would be nothing that could come back and upset Phoebe.

He had saved her from that.

She would never know that he'd done it for her.

But Eric was sure that if the trouble with Neville blew up, Phoebe would try again — and next time, she wouldn't fail.

Part 23

~ Friday ~

Lois slept immersed in memories of Clark.

Good memories. Memories alive with hope and blooming with promise.

When she awakened, it was a few minutes past seven.

She lay in bed as thoughts of Clark lingered like the waning final notes of a beautiful song.

He had felt it, too.

He was more circumspect than she had been, but that was to be expected. If she had been in his position, she would have been haunted with similar uncertainties, similar fears that everything would be taken away ... again.

But Lois knew she wasn't going to walk away.

What she felt for Clark was unlike anything she had ever felt before. She wanted to be with him — but it was so much more than that. When she was away from him, her world faded to sepia.

She missed him. Suddenly, her thoughts converged, birthing an idea. Lois lurched from her bed. She didn't want to wait the long hours to see Clark again. She would go to the compound and into her office. She was sure she could concoct a viable excuse.

Shadbolt might think she was checking on him if she arrived unexpectedly two mornings in a row.

But ...

Any concern for where Shadbolt's ponderings might lead didn't come close to matching her desire to see Clark.

Lois showered, dressed, and drove to Bessolo Boulevard.

She unlocked the external door and stopped long enough to poke her head into the staffroom. Shadbolt was relaxed in the chair with his feet perched on the table as he read a space magazine. He looked up but didn't adjust his position.

"Hi, Evan," Lois said. "I have to sort out some notes for

Scardino.”

She didn’t wait for him to respond before hurrying up the stairs. She opened the door to her office and locked it behind her.

Then, she crossed to the window. Clark was on the ground, doing push-ups — the wig jostling on his back with each movement. The muscles of his upper arm swelled under the sleeve of his tee shirt in a way that captured her eyes and held them spellbound.

Lois gulped.

It seemed that Clark’s body was being sculpted daily. Was it because he hadn’t been exposed to the rods for over a week? Was this how he was supposed to look?

She wrenched her feasting eyes from his body. “Clark?” she said.

He leapt to his feet, pulled the wig from his head, and looked in the direction of the window.

“Good morning,” Lois said.

He smiled and waved.

“Would you come over here, please?”

He walked to under the window and looked up. His forefinger pointed skywards.

“Yes,” Lois said.

He slowly rose until he was level with her, his feet dangling.

“Good morning,” Lois said, being careful to keep her voice to a whisper. “How are you this morning?”

He smiled and nodded.

“You can obviously hear me,” she said. “Can you see me?”

Clark shook his head.

“Is it safe for you to put your hands on the window?”

He scanned the edges of the window and then placed his palms flat on the glass.

Lois matched her hands to his. “My hands are against yours,” she said.

He looked at his hands and smiled. His mouth moved, but Lois wasn’t concentrating sufficiently to catch his meaning.

“It’s OK,” she said. “You can hear me, and I can see you. That is enough.”

His answer was a smile of agreement.

“Did you sleep well?”

He nodded.

“Are you OK with what we talked about?”

Clark’s lower jaw dropped in a precise and deliberate movement, and Lois chuckled softly. His smile evolved from amidst the layer of shock.

“It was kind of mind-blowing,” she said.

He nodded emphatically.

“I’m going to Scardino this morning. I’ll try to find out what transpired at the meeting.”

She read the concern in Clark’s eyes.

“I’ll be careful. Don’t worry.”

The broad, bulging-under-his-tee-shirt muscles of his shoulders lifted.

“I know you think you can’t help,” Lois said, smiling and hoping he would hear it in her words. “But just concentrate on later this afternoon when we’ll have eight hours to be together to discuss everything.”

His mouth moved, and Lois was able to decipher his words.

“I’m looking forward to it, too,” she said. “I couldn’t wait to see you — that’s why I came now.”

His grin broadened.

Lois gazed at him — his face, his hair where the wig had left ripples of disorder, his large hands. Then she remembered that his only link to her was through her spoken words.

“Sorry,” she said.

His expression was quizzical.

“If you must know, Mr Nosy, I was looking at you.”

His eyebrows jumped.

“Yes, really.”

His expression floated between surprise and pleasure. The words

sprang into Lois’s mind, and she opened her mouth. Now wasn’t the time, but the compulsion was too strong to be denied.

“I love you, Clark.”

His reaction was something she would treasure for the rest of her life. His eyes opened wider and blinked rapidly, his mouth fell apart, and his fingers twitched.

Lois was sure speech wouldn’t have been possible for him even if they hadn’t been separated by a pane of glass.

“I love you,” she repeated.

Then, she remembered. She was supposed to be waiting for him to take the lead.

“I’m sorry, Clark. I should have -”

His head shook wildly, and his mouth formed the word ‘no’. She continued watching his mouth.

“I love you, Lois.”

She smiled, and her eyes blinked against the sting of tears. “You can’t see me, so I’ll describe for you — my eyes are damp with a gush of tears, and my heart is thumping around my chest . . . and I can’t remember a moment in my life when I’ve felt like this.”

A fragment of the moisture in his left eye broke away and skittered down his cheek.

Lois chuckled and tried to bridge the gulf with words. “I just want to stare at you,” she said. “You look so happy, and incredulous, and it appears as if you’re almost daring to believe. When I look into your eyes, I can see there the euphoria that I am feeling. I wish I could touch you.”

“Your words touched me.”

“I can lip-read some of what you’re saying, but even with limited words, you touch me, too — with your eyes and your smile.”

His smile came again.

Lois wanted to gaze at him forever, but the outside world impinged on her consciousness, and she realised that it was going to be hard to explain a prolonged time in her office.

“I have to go,” she said, hoping he would hear her regret.

She could see his disappointment.

“I will be back at two o’clock.”

Clark nodded.

And then, his hand lifted from the window and went to his mouth. His kissed the pads of his fingers and blew towards her.

Lois laughed, and she saw that he had heard her.

His tinge of self-consciousness transformed into a wide smile.

“Does that count as a kiss?” Lois asked.

His shrug was so transparently flirtatious that giggles burst from her mouth. His eyebrows narrowed in semi-serious reminder to keep quiet, and she stifled her outburst.

“You are a tease,” she whispered.

He grinned.

“And as much as I’m enjoying flirting with you, Mr Kent, I need to get out of here.”

His smile died.

“Bye,” Lois said. “See you soon.”

He nodded and dropped onto the floor.

Lois picked up a handful of blank sheets of paper and shoved them into her bag. With a parting glance to Clark, who — bewigged again — had returned to his push-ups, she exited her office and locked the door.

When she arrived in the staffroom, Shadbolt was sipping a mug of coffee. A second mug was steaming in front of a vacant chair.

Lois looked from the coffee to Shadbolt.

“I made a drink for you,” he said.

Why? Lois tried to iron the questions from her face as she slipped into the seat at the table. “Thanks,” she said as she picked up the mug.

There was silence as Shadbolt took another gulp from his coffee.

“I figure I owe you some sort of explanation,” he said, his eyes not venturing in her direction.

“You do?”

“You got me out of a real fix yesterday,” he said. “It was

imperative that Layla finish the dress last night. It had all this elaborate stitching on it, and she said that even if I got another machine for her, there was every chance that the stitching would look different from what she had already done.”

“Layla?” Lois said. “That’s your daughter’s name? It’s very pretty.”

The stiffness in his expression loosened a little. “Yeah,” he said. He waited a few moments as if thinking about something ... or probably someone. His eyes refocussed, and he looked across the table to Lois. “You must be wondering how a cantankerous old grump like me ended up with two daughters.”

“It’s none of my business.”

Shadbolt rubbed his fingers down his cheeks. “I wasn’t very fair to you in the beginning,” he said. “In general, I don’t like women.”

Lois couldn’t help smiling at his directness. “I discerned that.”

“Sorry,” Shadbolt’s smile flickered. “I can appreciate the irony,” he said. “Me, a chauvinistic dinosaur, single-handedly raising two daughters.”

“I would *never* have guessed.”

He drank from his coffee and then set the cup on the table. “I was on assignment in a foreign country,” he said. “And I met a woman.”

Lois sipped her coffee and waited.

“Shanti,” Shadbolt said, and bitterness tainted the word. “I’d met women before. I was always honest. I always made it clear that I would be moving on. But Shanti ... Shanti was different. I fell for her so hard that I believed every word she said ... everything about the man who had gotten her pregnant and left her, everything about how her family had rejected her and Layla because she wasn’t married. When the assignment was over, I came home, pulled some strings, and got them into the US. I married her three days after she arrived.”

It sounded like a story that should have had a happy ending.

“I was away a lot in the early years, and it soon became obvious that Shanti wasn’t happy. I applied for any position that would keep me in Metropolis, and a few months later, I got this assignment. I missed being out in the field, and things didn’t really improve with Shanti. I had the afternoon shift then, which meant I could be there for Layla in the morning and take her to school. Shanti told me she got a job working at night, so we only saw each other for a short time each day.”

But there was another daughter.

“Then, Shanti announced she was pregnant — five months pregnant. I wondered how she hadn’t realised earlier, but my entire knowledge of pregnancy could have been written on a postage stamp, so I believed her. A couple of months later, she stopped working, and we saw a bit more of each other, and things weren’t too bad for a while. I discovered that I was looking forward to the baby arriving and hoping that perhaps we could revive what we’d once had.”

Shadbolt’s expression turned sour.

“What I *thought* we’d once had,” he corrected bleakly.

Lois grimaced but said nothing.

“Anyway, the call came while I was here that Shanti had gone into labour, and I was to go home to be with Layla when she came from school. I had offered to be with Shanti, but she said that in her culture, it was considered perverted for a man to be at a birth. The next morning, the hospital called.”

“Your daughter had been born?” Lois guessed with a little smile.

“That was partly why they called,” Shadbolt said with no discernable pleasure. “But mostly, they wanted me to come and get my daughter because her mother had left the hospital without her.”

“Left?” Lois gasped.

“Shanti told the nurses that she had wanted a boy and she had no interest in another daughter. The nurse told me that a man came to get her and they left together. She’d already completed the paperwork — although she left the name part blank — and listed me as the father.”

“She just *left*?” Lois asked. “She left her baby?”

Shadbolt nodded. “Looking back, I realised that her work — all those night shifts — probably wasn’t a job but an affair. The nurse had

thought that the man who came to pick her up was the baby’s father.”

“Oh, Evan,” Lois said. “That must have been a terrible shock.”

He released a harsh breath. “So there I was — a man most suited to the life of a bachelor with a newborn baby and a teenage daughter.”

“Shanti didn’t come to get Layla?”

“No. About a year later, I received divorce papers from her lawyer, but other than that, the girls and I never heard from her again.”

“You didn’t try to track her down?” Lois said.

“Nope,” Shadbolt said. “The girls deserve better than a mother who doesn’t want them.”

“I think their dad cares about them a lot,” Lois said.

He shrugged with a self-conscious smile. “Except that I don’t like women.”

“We’re not all the same.”

“I wouldn’t know,” he said. “I avoid women whenever possible.”

“You wouldn’t have had much time — between working here and looking after the girls.”

“Not much time,” he agreed. “And absolutely no inclination.”

“You must be very proud of your girls.”

He nodded, and the austerity of his features softened. “I am,” he said. “They are the joy of my life — and despite the unconventional way we were thrown together, I wouldn’t change a thing.”

“I can tell that you’re a wonderful father.”

“Most of the time, I feel totally overwhelmed,” he said. “Totally unprepared and unsuited for what I need to be. That’s why I got so agitated about the sewing machine. I hate to think that either of the girls misses out on anything.”

“What is your younger daughter’s name?”

Shadbolt half smiled. “Abi,” he said. “Short for Abigail. Do you know what that means?”

“No,” Lois said.

“Father’s joy.”

“You chose her name?”

Shadbolt nodded. “It seemed important for her to know that someone wanted her.” A strange expression twisted across his face.

“I’m not completely naive, Ms Lane,” he said. “I do know there is every chance that Abi isn’t my biological daughter. But my name is on that birth certificate, and nothing else matters.”

“It doesn’t matter at all,” Lois agreed.

Shadbolt stood abruptly from the chair and took his empty cup to the sink. “I would appreciate it if none of this went any further. I try to keep my work and my home separate.”

Lois drained her coffee and added her mug to the sink. “I should go. I have a few things to do before my shift.”

“Don’t worry if you’re half an hour late,” Shadbolt said. “I’ll still be in time to pick up the girls.”

“Thanks for telling me about them.”

“See you later, Ms Lane.”

“Lois.”

He grinned. “Lois.”

She picked up her bag and left the compound, her mind awlirl.

Clark loved her.

And — more momentarily — he seemed to believe that she loved him.

And Shadbolt ... who would have thought?

Lois carried three of the trays into the nursing home and gave them to Ronny.

The nurse’s face lit with excitement as she examined at them. “Lois! These are wonderful. They are exactly what I was hoping for. Your friend is brilliant.”

“They are fairly simple.”

“The best things are,” Ronny said.

“I’ll go and get the other three,” Lois said. When she returned with the rest of the trays, Ronny held out an envelope.

“What’s that?” Lois asked.

“Payment. Three hundred dollars.”

“Three hundred dollars?” Lois gasped. “That seems too much.”

Ronny vehemently shook her head. “No,” she said. “Good work deserves good pay. Look at these mitre cuts — they are perfect. These trays are the work of a master craftsman. I can’t believe they are finished already. Your friend deserves every dollar. Let me know if it’s not enough — I would happily pay more.”

Lois slipped the envelope into her bag, mentally picturing the moment she would give it to Clark. It would represent another step back into the real world, and give him hope that there would be ways he could earn a living when he was outside of the cell.

“Thanks, Ronny,” Lois said. “I’ll go and see Dad. I’ve brought him three more jigsaw puzzles.”

“Three?” Ronny said. “That’s fantastic. He really enjoyed doing the first one.”

Lois walked to her father’s room, smiling at the other residents as she went. “Hi, Dad.”

She admired his completed puzzle and showed him the three boxes. When she asked if he wanted her to disassemble the completed puzzle, he blinked once. Lois chatted as she pulled apart the pieces of the Thunderbird. Then her dad indicated which puzzle he wanted to do next — a picture of woodlands — and they began.

Lois had put about a dozen edge pieces on the tray when she noticed that Sam was making the diving plane movement.

Lois grinned. “You want to know about the man I love?”

He blinked once.

“Well, I told him that I love him, and he said that he loves me.”

Her dad blinked once again. Lois took that as approval.

“He’s amazing, Dad,” she said, knowing the joy of her earlier encounter with Clark was bubbling in her voice. “He’s honest, and caring, and gentle, and so very strong.”

Her dad stared at her, and Lois could guess his question.

“I think what we have is real, Dad,” she said earnestly. “I know that we met at a time when we were both vulnerable, but I honestly believe that whenever we had met, we would have fallen in love. We are meant to be together. I want to be with him. And I believe he wants to be with me.”

Her dad reached for her left hand and rested his thumb on her third finger.

Lois understood immediately. “Marriage?” she said.

He blinked once.

Lois didn’t have to think about her answer. “That is what I want, Dad. This is serious. This is forever. I want to marry him.”

The right side of her dad’s mouth twitched — the closest thing she had seen to a smile since his stroke.

“It might take some time,” Lois said. “He’s been through some difficult times. His dad died recently.”

Her dad stared at her with eyes that seemed full of concern.

Lois rose from her seat and hugged him. “Thanks for understanding,” she said. “Thanks for being my dad.”

From Lois’s bag came the shrill of her cell phone. She unfolded from the embrace and smiled an apology as she took her cell from her bag. Her heart dived when she saw that the call was from Scardino.

“Lois Lane.”

“It’s Daniel Scardino,” he said. “I need to see you.”

His tone and lack of build-up reached into Lois and snaked a path of trepidation through her heart. “I’m visiting my father,” she informed him coolly.

“When can you be here?”

Much as she dreaded what he would say, Lois knew she wouldn’t be able to relax until she had found out why Scardino needed to see her. “Less than an hour.”

“See you then.”

Lois replaced the cell as fear scorched through her insides. The meeting. The meeting with Menzies. He had probably ordered her from the operation.

In her mind, she listed the things she needed to do and then formulated her plan.

At the top of the list was her dad.

She put down the puzzle box and turned to him. In his eyes, she could see his apprehension. She covered his hand with her own. “Dad,” she said. “There is something I need to tell you.”

He nodded slowly.

“The man I love has to go away. I have to go with him. I don’t know when I’ll be back, but I want you to know that he will always look after me. I’m sorry that you weren’t able to meet him, but I’m asking you to trust my judgement here. I trust him, and I know that he would never let anyone hurt me. I’ll be with him. I’ll be safe. And as soon as I can, I’ll come back to Metropolis and visit you.”

Her father blinked once, and Lois’s tears rose.

“I’m sorry, Dad,” she said brokenly. “I have so enjoyed spending this time with you, and we made such great progress in learning to communicate again. I want that to continue. I want to come back and keep going. But I can’t give you any idea when that will be.”

He blinked again.

“Hold me, Dad,” Lois said as she stood from the chair and wrapped her arms around her father. His right arm lifted and grasped her back.

When she pulled away from him, her cheeks were wet with tears. “I love you, Dad,” she said. “You do the puzzles, and keep working at the therapies, and I’ll visit you as soon as I can.”

He blinked once, and his hand made a slow path to his heart. “I know you love me,” Lois said. “I will never forget that. I wish this could be different. I wish . . .”

His hand reached for her face and clumsily swiped the tears from her cheeks. She looked deep into his eyes and saw his acceptance of her decision to leave. He knew so few of the details, but he trusted her. She felt a gush of love for her dad and hugged him again.

When she straightened, she arranged the foam pad in the bottom of the box and put the pieces on it. Then she placed it on the bed where her dad could reach it.

“See you, Dad,” she said, fighting down her tears.

He lifted his right hand in farewell.

“I’ll be back as soon as possible.”

He blinked once; then his face turned away, and his hand moved towards the box.

Lois gasped at first, but then she realised that he was telling her to go — to go and do what she needed to do.

“Dad?”

He looked up.

“Could I borrow your car, please?”

He blinked once.

“Thank you.”

His focus returned to the box, and Lois left his room, her tears flowing freely.

Lois let herself into her dad’s home and sprinted up the stairs. She went into his study, pulled out his hardcover copy of *The Great Gatsby*, and found the little key she wasn’t supposed to know was hidden behind there.

She used the key to unlock the deep drawer in his large wooden desk and took out his black doctor’s bag. She opened it and rustled through it, quickly finding what she needed. She took out a single-use scalpel, a syringe and needle, and a vial. She checked the label and recognised a brand name of prilocaine. Next, she found five packages — a laceration repair pack, a sling, a sterile pad, gauze squares, and butterfly clips. She pulled a handful of gloves from the box and added them to the steadily growing pile.

Did she have everything? Lois closed her eyes and worked through her memories of the time she had watched her dad treat Lucy’s badly gashed leg.

Skin disinfectant!

She searched through the compartments of the bag and found the small packages of disposable wipes. In her mind, she went through the procedure, checking off what might be needed for each step. Confident

she had everything, she snapped the bag shut, and replaced it in the desk drawer.

She gathered everything into her own bag, and a few minutes later, the key had been returned, and Lois stood at the door, inspecting the room for telltale signs of her visit.

Satisfied, she crossed the wide hall to the bedroom that had been hers when she had stayed with her father after he had separated from her mother. She entered, chose a few items from the clothes she had left languishing in the closet, and shoved them into her rapidly filling bag.

She rummaged through her drawers and found one of her early wigs. It was hideous crimson in colour and looked more like a stuffed toy than something anyone would actually wear. Linda had dared her to buy it and double dared her to wear it.

As Lois pushed it into her bag, its shagginess reminded her of Clark's wig, and from the nebula of her assorted plans, one crystallised. It wouldn't change anything long-term, but it might buy them some time.

And every minute might be important.

Her idea expanded, taking on a life of its own. Despite the direness of the circumstances, she couldn't help the spurt of amusement that teased her mouth into a smile. She scurried back into her father's study and walked up to Jonas, the skeleton her dad had inherited from his uncle, who had been an orthopaedic surgeon.

"You're coming with me, Jonas," she muttered. She disconnected him from his stand and hunched him over her shoulder. After collecting her bag from her room, she went down the stairs and took the spare car keys from the hook in the entrance hall. In the garage, she unlocked her dad's Buick, lay Jonas in the trunk, and folded his legs onto his cavernous ribcage.

Upstairs again, she went into the bathroom and was pleasantly surprised to find her old toothbrush, a pot of moisturiser, and a rudimentary collection of make-up essentials — all in passable condition.

In the kitchen, she opened the pantry and crammed several packets of cookies, a handful of candy bars, and some cans of soda into her overflowing bag.

She put her bag next to Jonas in the trunk of the Buick and then checked the oil and water levels. The gas was over two thirds full. She wouldn't need to go to a gas station in Metropolis and risk someone connecting her with her father's car.

The Buick started easily despite the length of time since it had been used, and Lois drove it into the street before parking her Jeep in her dad's garage.

She locked the Jeep and the garage and then got into the Buick and drove to Scardino's office.

Part 24

Scardino was nervous.

The moment he opened the door to his office, Lois knew that he was nervous.

"Ms Lane," he said in a choked-off voice.

His nervousness confirmed Lois's suspicion. This was the end. They were taking her from the operation. Her focus now had to be about ensuring they allowed her one final shift.

Scardino sat on his side of the desk and fidgeted with a pen before gathering enough poise to look in her direction.

"Is this about your meeting with Menzies?" Lois asked.

Scardino took a moment to compose his reply. "It's about the outcome of that meeting," he admitted.

Yep, Menzies had ordered her removal.

"Go on," she said.

Scardino withered under her gaze.

Lois felt the rise of her impatience. Why wasn't he just telling her? These weren't his orders; he had at his disposal the perennial excuse of anyone in a chain of command when delivering unpalatable orders.

"What is it, Scardino?" Lois demanded. "I'm due at the compound soon."

"Menzies wants the operation terminated."

"Terminated?"

"He's ordered that all trace of it be destroyed."

Lois's heart telescoped on itself. "What is to happen to the prisoner?" she asked, managing to bully her voice into steadiness.

"He is to be killed."

The telescope twisted violently, and Lois gasped. "Killed?"

Scardino nodded, his eyes shifting back and forth and never coming close to connecting with her.

"How?"

"Menzies has ordered that he be exposed to the rods until he is vulnerable enough — and then he is to be . . ." Scardino had paled. In fact, he looked within a hiccup of vomiting.

"He is to be *what*?"

"Shot."

Lois's brain cells felt like an unruly mob threatening to riot. "Can he do that?" she asked, toning down — but not completely eliminating — her disgust. "Can Menzies order that someone be murdered?"

"It isn't murder," Scardino said. "It's national security. The prisoner is an alien. Human rights don't apply."

"I can't believe this," Lois said slowly.

"The compound is to be demolished. By Monday, there will be nothing left to show that any of this happened. There will be no record of his existence."

"And no record of his death," Lois said bitingly.

"Death is an inevitable part of this job."

"When done in self-defence."

"Not always."

He was right, but it did nothing to diminish her outrage.

"The assistants are to be deployed elsewhere," Scardino said quickly. "You are to be offered three months of compassionate leave with full pay."

The blueprint of Lois's plan was already in the throes of adapting to this development, but she needed to try to act as if it had caught her unprepared. "Is Menzies in any mood for an appeal?" she asked.

"Has Menzies ever been in the mood for an appeal?" Scardino asked.

Lois grimaced. "OK," she said. "But I want to be the one who supervises the final day of this operation."

Scardino's eyes cannoned into hers. "There's no need for that," he said. "I'm higher up; I don't expect you to do the dirty work."

"Are you saying that because I'm a woman?" Lois asked scathingly.

"No," he said, too quickly to be believable. "I can't give orders unless I'm willing to carry them out."

"Then shouldn't Menzies be the one doing it?"

Scardino's acerbic look said plenty.

"I want you to call Longford and tell him not to come for his shift tonight," Lois said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Longford freaks out when he has contact with the prisoner. I had a pet door installed so he could push food into the cell without having to open the door."

"OK," Scardino said. "I'll call Longford and tell him."

"What has Menzies ordered for him?"

"Retirement."

"A pension?"

"Yeah. A generous one."

"Good," Lois said. "And Shadbolt?"

"He's to be given a foreign assignment."

"No," Lois said. "He needs to stay in Metropolis."

"Why?"

"He told me things in confidence," she replied. "But I stress that he must remain in Metropolis. If you force him to leave, you will lose him."

"It's *that* important to him that he stay?"

Lois nodded. "I can guarantee it. He's a fine man and a good

operative. You need to find him an assignment that allows him to stay here.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

“And I accept your offer of three months’ leave,” Lois said. “I’m going to do what I should have done in the first place — I’m going away for a long vacation.”

“What about your father?”

“My father’s condition isn’t going to be resolved quickly. If I go away and get some perspective, I’ll be more able to assist him when I return.”

Scardino nodded with obvious relief. “I ... I thought you might be more ... resistant.”

Lois pinned him with a cold stare. “I think this is a cowardly and despicable way to solve a problem caused by Trask’s paranoia and bigotry. But after having witnessed the situation firsthand, I think it could be argued that keeping him alive is just as inhuman as finishing this.”

“Have you had any contact with him?” Scardino asked. “Have you communicated with him at all?”

Lois looked unwaveringly into his eyes. “No,” she said. “I’ve made a few improvements to his conditions because I cannot tolerate needless cruelty, but I quickly realised that the damage is too severe for rehabilitation to be possible.”

“So, you’ll do it?” Scardino said. “You will expose him to the rods?”

“Yes.”

“And you definitely want to go back?” Scardino’s fingers tapped a jerky rhythm on his desk. “You can just go home and begin your leave now if you want to.”

Lois pretended to consider his offer. “No,” she said. “This was only a short assignment for me, but I feel the need to see it through to completion.”

Scardino leant forward, his elbows on his desk, his hands melded together. “Ms Lane,” he said. “Lois, I think you seeing it through to completion will be unnecessarily distressing for you. After what happened in your previous assignment, I don’t think -”

“It is *because* of my previous assignment that I need to do this,” Lois said, her voice rising. “I deserted my partner. I never want that feeling again.”

“Linda had passed away,” Scardino said gently. “You didn’t desert her.”

“Yes, I did,” Lois countered. “And I will never do that again.”

Scardino leant back. “OK,” he conceded. “You can be there until he has become sufficiently vulnerable. Then, you’re to call me. Understand?”

Lois eyed him as she silently counted to ten. “All right,” she agreed grudgingly.

“I ... I’ll be unavailable during some of tomorrow morning. How long do you think it will take ... until he is weak enough?”

“At least twenty-four hours,” Lois said. “Earlier than that, and you risk it going horribly wrong.”

Scardino blanched. “OK,” he said. “My appointment should be completed by noon.”

“I’ll call you ...” Lois nervously brushed her hair behind her ear. “I’ll call you when ... when it’s time.”

He nodded, looking like a man who wished he were somewhere else.

“I’ll go to the compound now and explain the situation to Shadbolt,” Lois said.

“You’ll start the exposure as soon as possible?”

“Yes.”

“Will the alien resist? Is there a chance that implementing these orders could be dangerous for you?”

Lois shook her head. “No,” she said. “The rods have a totally debilitating effect on him.”

Scardino nodded uncomfortably. “Menziez says everything is to be done by Monday. That will give us two days to have the compound

demolished.”

“You’ll organise that?” Lois asked, accepting his steering them towards the practical aspects of the orders.

“Yes.”

“And the disposal of the body?”

“Yes.”

Lois stood.

Scardino stood also and offered her his hand. “I appreciate the way you have accepted this,” he said.

“I wish to reiterate my revulsion,” Lois said solemnly. “But way too much time has passed for this situation to be redeemable. Although perhaps there is a lot to be learnt about keeping people like Trask accountable.”

Scardino made no comment. “If you need *anything* - if it gets too hard, if you need a break — call me.”

“This is my operation,” Lois stated firmly. “I need to do this. I need to see it to the end.”

Scardino opened the door, and Lois walked through it without even glancing in his direction.

Lois drove to the compound, stopping only once — to withdraw eight hundred dollars from an ATM. As she drove, her anger seethed. How could Menziez reduce Clark’s life to a nuisance that needed to be eradicated? Had Moyne poisoned his thinking? Was this Moyne’s idea?

She would probably never know.

She hated their callousness. She hated their bigotry. She hated their lack of conscience simply because Clark was different.

And all of that hatred fired her determination.

In a really weird way, this was a better outcome than them ordering her removal from the operation. This way, no decision was required. If they didn’t escape, Clark would be killed.

She was going to get him out of the cell. Today. As soon as possible. His readiness or otherwise to rejoin the world was no longer a consideration. It had to be today.

And hopefully, they would have close to twenty-four hours before anyone discovered they were gone.

Lois parked the Buick and let herself into the compound. Shadbolt was in the staffroom. He looked up as she entered.

“You’re early,” he said.

Lois knew that if she told him that the prisoner was to be killed, he would insist on staying while they took the rods into the cell.

Whatever she told him had to hasten his departure.

“Can we sit down?” she asked.

His face immediately creased with concern. “What has happened?”

“They’ve decided to pull all of us from this operation.”

“All of us?”

“Yeah,” Lois said. “I’ve told Scardino that you are to be given something so you can stay in Metropolis.”

Shadbolt scowled. “What do you think are the chances of that?”

“Good, if you stick to your guns,” Lois said. “Scardino always does what is easiest. You just have to threaten him with more trouble than anyone else, and he’ll give you what you want.”

“You make it sound easy,” Shadbolt said dubiously.

“Emphasise that you’ve served in this difficult and important operation for seven years. I know you don’t like mentioning your daughters, but if that is what it takes to keep you here, use them.”

“If I can’t get something suitable, I’ll resign.”

“That’s what I told Scardino,” Lois said. “And I also told him that you’re a valuable operative and they’d be idiots to let you go.”

The scowl eased. “Did you really?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that.” Shadbolt gestured to the cell. “What happens to him?”

“Scardino wouldn’t say,” she said.

“Do you think they’ll kill him?”

“They couldn’t, could they?” Lois said. “Surely that violates human rights conventions.”

“They’ll say he isn’t human.”

She sighed shakily. “You’re finished here — as of now. Scardino will contact you.”

“That’s it?” Shadbolt said. “It’s finished? Just like that?”

“It happens,” Lois said. “I’m wondering if any reporters have been sniffing around, asking questions. Perhaps they are going to move him to a more remote location.”

“When do you finish?”

“This is my last shift — I’m staying overnight. I thought it would be easier that way. I don’t need Longford getting spooked.”

“So ... tomorrow morning, you hand over to Scardino ... and it’s finished?”

“Yep.”

“What will you do?”

“I’ve been offered leave.”

“And Longford?”

“I shouldn’t say too much.”

“Will he be looked after?” Shadbolt demanded.

Lois nodded. “That was the impression I got.”

“Good.”

“You can go,” Lois said. “I wouldn’t contact Scardino today — he’s being pressured by the higher-ups to have this dissolved by Monday.”

“Monday?”

“Yep. This place is to be demolished, so you should take anything that is yours.”

Shadbolt rummaged through the cupboards and packed a few items of crockery into his bag. He added the magazine from the table and then looked around the staffroom. “That’s it,” he said. “Nothing else is mine.”

“I haven’t been here for long, Evan,” Lois said. “But if we ever get paired up on an assignment, I wouldn’t have any reservations about working with you.”

Shadbolt grinned and tried to hide it by scratching his neck. “But I don’t like women,” he reminded her.

“Tough,” she said with a smile. “You’ll survive.”

“Seriously,” he said. “I would gladly work with you again, too.”

Lois put out her hand, and Shadbolt shook it. “Thanks, Lois,” he said.

“Bye, Evan.”

Lois watched him walk out of the compound for the last time. She waited until the sound of Shadbolt’s vehicle had faded and then turned to the cell door.

How much had Clark heard?

Lois took a deep and fortifying breath and unlocked the door to the cell.

Clark was halfway across the room, striding towards her. His welcoming smile drained away when he saw her face. “What’s wrong, Lois?” he said.

The sight of him evaporated her carefully maintained veneer of control, and hot tears of fury erupted in her eyes. Lois reached for Clark, and he swept her into his embrace. His arms closed around her, holding her tightly against his strong chest.

He held her for long moments as his support and understanding soaked through her.

Her tears ebbed.

And still he held her. His large hand moved higher to cup her head.

Lois could have stayed in his arms forever, but she eased back from him. His arms dropped immediately.

She pulled a tissue from her pocket and dried her eyes before looking up at him.

“Lois?” Clark said. “What happened? Is it your father?”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I just ... it was a shock ... and I couldn’t let anyone see how shocked I was ... and I was holding it all together ...” She gave him a wobbly smile. “... until I

saw you.”

His confusion deepened. “What happened?” he repeated.

“I was summoned to Scardino’s office. Menzies has decided that they are going to terminate this operation.”

Clark’s shoulders drooped, his eyes slid shut, and the colour washed from his cheeks. “They’re taking you away.”

Lois clasped his hand. “No,” she said. “They are closing down this operation. We have to go. We have to get out of here. We have to go now.”

“Lois. I *can’t* go. I -”

“Yes, you can,” she cut across him. “We don’t have time to pull down the wall, so we’re going to have to get that implant out of you. I have the things we’ll need.”

Clark grasped both of her shoulders and levelled his eyes in hers. “Lois,” he said quietly. “You don’t understand. I’m invulnerable. I haven’t been exposed to the poison for days. No one can take out that implant.”

“You can,” she said. “You’re strong. You’re so strong, you can do anything. I got a scalpel -”

“Lois, the scalpel will break.”

She stared at him. “You can’t do it?” she gasped.

“No,” he said. “I can’t cut my own skin. I’ve healed from the effects of the poison.”

“There’s *nothing* you can do?”

“No, nothing.”

Panic was threatening to overwhelm her. “You have to be able to do *something*,” she squeaked. “Can’t you use your eyes?”

“No,” he said. “Nothing will penetrate my skin.”

And then she understood what he was trying to tell her. She forcibly smothered the volcano of panic and refused to think about anything other than how they were going to get Clark out of the cell. She looked directly into his eyes. “Tell me how we can get that implant out,” she demanded.

“Lo-is.”

“Tell me.”

He took a deep breath. “There’s only one possible way.”

“How long will it take?”

“Hours.”

“How many hours?”

“I’m not sure. At least six. Maybe eight. Maybe longer.”

Lois pressed her fist against her mouth to stop her tears from exploding into an uncontrollable blizzard of despair. There had to be another way. There had to be. “We’ll cut the wires,” she said, her words tumbling out. “You can fly up there, put a hole in the wall, and cut the wires.”

“Lois.” Clark’s hands squeezed her shoulders. “Lois. Trask was not the sort of man to make it that easy.”

“What do you mean?”

Clark stepped sideways and ducked his head to look through the door. He gazed for a long moment and then grunted with frustration.

“What?”

“There is another system of wires around the next door,” Clark told her.

“We’ll cut them, too.”

“That wall isn’t lead-lined, so I can see ...”

“See what?”

“There’s a back-up system that activates the implant if the connection is broken.”

Lois closed her eyes as the reality pummelled her.

Clark’s hand gently lifted her chin so that when her eyes opened, they locked with his. “There is only one way,” he said. “I understand if you don’t want to do it. It’s not too late. You can -”

Lois jolted from his touch and glared at him. “Don’t offer me a way out now,” she said in a shaky voice. She pointed to the window. “Just a few hours ago, you told me that you loved me. You can’t retreat from that now.”

“I’m not retreating,” Clark said, clearly taken aback by her

outburst. “I’m offering you the chance to -”

“Didn’t you hear what I said to you?” Lois cried. “Or did you think I didn’t mean it?”

“I’m sorry,” he said. His shoulders drooped further, and his head hung low. “But this is too much to ask you ... It’s too much to ask anyone.”

“Either we walk out of here together, or we wait for them to come and get us.”

He seemed to be considering that as a viable alternative.

Lois put her hands on his arms and squeezed. “Clark,” she said. “I’ve already left one partner. I’m not leaving another one.” She shot into his eyes, daring him to contradict her statement about them being partners.

He chose not to. “Have you thought about this?” he said. “Really thought about this?”

“No,” she admitted. “I don’t want to. But I do know that I can’t face the alternative.”

“If we do this ... it’s going to be *you*. You are going to have to do most of it ... and I will be powerless.”

“I know that.” She moved her hands up his arms and slid them onto his neck. Her thumbs reached for his jaw and caressed his smooth skin. “We can do it,” she said. “We have to do it.”

Clark took a breath that lifted his shoulders, and his brown eyes filled with purpose. “I have to ask you just once more,” he said. “Are you sure? Are you totally sure about all of this? From beginning to end?”

Lois nodded resolutely. “From the beginning to the end — I’m sure. I want to be with you. I’m willing to do anything so we can be together.”

“I hate asking you to do something that I don’t think I could do.”

“What do you mean?”

“I couldn’t watch you in pain,” he said. “I just don’t think I could do it. This is going to be harder on you than on me.”

Lois closed her eyes and drew strength from every reservoir she had. “We have to,” she muttered. “We have to.”

“Is there anything we should do before we begin? Anything I can do to help before -”

“Are you hungry? Do you want to eat?”

“No.” He looked around the room. “Is there anything we should take? Do you want my help to move it?”

“What do you want? Do you want me to be with you all the time? Or would it be all right if I leave you for a few minutes to get things organised?”

He paused as he glanced around the cell. “I think we just need to get started. We need to leave as quickly as we can.”

The moment she dreaded crawled closer.

“Do you have a marker?” Clark asked.

“Yes.”

“Could you go and get it, please?”

Lois turned and ran up the stairs to her office. She unlocked it and hurried in. If she was really going to do this, she couldn’t think about it. She couldn’t think about the long hours when she would have to watch Clark suffer. That would be the worst. That would be worse than actually cutting the implant out of him.

She snatched a black marker and ran down the stairs with it.

Clark had taken off his tee shirt and was holding his mirror. He looked so robust with bulging curves of muscle, but now, that just accentuated the horror of what was to come. He held out his hand for the marker and looked into the mirror.

“I can’t pierce my skin,” he said. “But I can see through it.”

“Could you try?” Lois asked in a hopeful voice. “Could you just try and see if it were possible to cut it out? Like you cut the wood?”

Clark’s gaze swung from the mirror and to her. “I already have tried,” he said sombrely. “I can’t do it.”

He needed her reassurance, and that was easier than dwelling on her own fears. “Thanks for trying.”

“I wish ...”

“I know.”

Clark looked back into the mirror and used the marker to draw a line above the protrusion in his shoulder. “The lead casing could be quite soft,” he said. “We don’t want to risk damaging it.” He lowered the mirror. “If you cut along that line, you will avoid the lead.”

“What ...” Lois regathered her strength. “What should I do after I’ve made the cut?”

Clark took her hand and laid her fingers on the lower curve of the lump above his collarbone. “I think it would be best to push here and try to get it to pop out.”

“Is there only one?”

He nodded. “It’s about the size of a walnut. Once it is out, just position the skin back together again. It will heal by itself when the poison is taken away.”

“It won’t need stitching?”

“No,” he said.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“OK.” Lois felt as if she were caught in a swiftly flowing river that was pushing her towards a huge drop. She had to keep clawing her way back. If she stopped scrambling for just a moment, she would go over the edge and disintegrate into a blubbing mess. “If we use four rods, will it happen more quickly?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Is that what you want to do? Use four rods? Or just one?” Lois couldn’t believe they were discussing this so calmly. Her questions were valid, but she knew that her real reason for asking them was to push away the moment when she would have to walk into the cell carrying a rod.

“Four,” Clark said. His hand lifted to her face, and his thumb swept tenderly over her cheek.

Lois had to push ahead. She couldn’t dwell on his touch. “Is there any benefit to putting them close to your shoulder?”

“I don’t think so,” he said.

“How will I know? How will I know when you’re ... ready?”

“I’ll know. My abilities will slowly diminish. You’ll be able to cut through my skin about an hour after I can’t float anymore.”

“How do you know?” It was an irrelevant question, but it was out before Lois could stop it.

Clark looked away. “Moyne did tests,” he said.

The memories carved into Clark’s face pushed Lois closer to the edge. She fought her way back again with a deep breath. She had to do this.

“We need to discuss what happens after,” Clark said.

“I get the rods out of here as quickly as possible,” Lois said firmly.

“And then?”

“Then we get into my dad’s car, and we start driving.”

“When will they realise we’ve gone?”

“Hopefully not until tomorrow afternoon.”

“We’ll try to go during the night?”

Lois nodded.

“Where do we go?”

“I figure west ... possibly south-west. There’s a lot of country to hide in.”

“Lois ... they’ll hunt you down.”

She gripped his hand. “Let’s not even think about that yet,” she said. “By then, we will have the implant out of you, we’ll be out of this cell, and you’ll be starting to recover.”

“It might take a few days before I’m stronger than normal humans,” Clark warned.

“OK.” Lois searched through her flustered mind for another question. Another clarification. Anything.

Clark looked into her face with a small smile. “Thank you, Lois,” he said. “Thank you with my whole heart.”

She could feel herself edging perilously close to the drop. “I wish ... I wish there was another way.”

The ends of Clark’s fingers grazed over the skin of her cheek.

“Once ... once we get started, I won’t be able to help you much. I’m sorry.”

“We need to do it,” Lois said. Her stomach heaved.

“Go and get them,” Clark said with gentle resolve.

“Are you ready?”

He nodded.

Lois couldn’t stand there looking at him any longer. It felt like the most terrible treachery — it felt like the heartless betrayal of a beloved friend.

She hauled her shaking body up the stairs in a blur. She had to get two rods and take them into the cell. She had to do it quickly. It wasn’t fair to Clark to keep him waiting.

She had to do it.

She picked up the two instruments of torture and used them to steady herself as she stumbled down the stairs.

She crossed the staffroom in a daze.

She reached the door and peeped through it, holding the rods behind her.

Clark was sitting on the mattress against the back wall. In his hands, he held the wig. When he looked up, his expression was not one of fear for himself, but concern for her.

She had to do this. She had to do it for Clark. She had to remember that by hurting him, she was giving him his only chance of life.

She had to remember that Menzies had ordered Clark’s death.

“It’s OK,” Clark said. “We can do this.”

Her heart was thumping, pushing bitter dread into her throat. Her stomach was churning. Clark was about six yards away. Six yards. She had to go to him. She had to close the distance between them.

She clutched the rods and forced her right leg forward into the cell.

Then, she was walking towards him. She saw the moment he was hit by the poison, and it took every ounce of self-control not to turn and run, taking the rods with her.

She dropped the rods next to him and sprinted away to get the other two.

Her journey passed in a haze of torment. All she could think of was Clark, suffering and alone.

She was helpless to ease his suffering, but she could be with him.

She ran across the cell and placed the two rods with the first two.

He was lying down now, curled up, his hands clutching at his chest.

Lois fell to the mattress. She lifted his head onto her lap and looked down into his face.

A face that was contorted with pain.

Part 25

For a long time, Lois sat on the mattress with Clark’s head on her lap. She stroked his hair; she ran her fingers down his neck, across his forehead, along his jaw, over his cheek, past his temple.

She didn’t know if anything she did brought Clark relief, but being absorbed in him helped guard against her leaping from the mattress, seizing the rods, and expelling them from Clark’s presence.

She couldn’t do that. She couldn’t even give him respite from the agony. If she did, they would lose ground — ground that would have to be recovered.

They had started this — they had to see it through.

Clark was suffering, and it was splintering her heart, one shard at a time.

His breaths were ragged; each marked the passing of a small portion of time and inflicted a reckoning of pain. His fingers clutched at his chest, his knuckles ivory peaks above rigid welts of muscle.

Lurking in the shadows of her consciousness was the knowledge that she would have to leave him to finalise their preparations. She didn’t need to think about it yet. There was still time.

Too much time.

Lois checked her watch. One hour had passed.

One hour.

It felt as if that hour had been plucked from reality and transported to an ethereal realm with neither beginning nor hope of an end.

Lois ran her fingers through his hair again. “I’m here,” she said.

She closed her eyes and rested her cheek against his head.

Clark jerked suddenly. “S...someone ... s’coming.”

Lois shuffled sideways, placed Clark’s head on the mattress, and sprinted across the staffroom. As she closed the cell door, she heard the click of the lock from the external door. She poured herself some stale-smelling coffee from the machine and clasped the mug, hoping its warmth would steady a heart that was threatening to buckle.

Eric Menzies strode into the staffroom. He was a mountain of a man, and it was instantly obvious how he had gained the reputation of a tyrant.

“Lois Lane?” he barked.

“Yes,” she said. “Mr Menzies?”

He nodded curtly. “Where’s the alien?”

“In the cell.”

“Is he being exposed to the rods?”

“Yes.”

Menzies pointed to the cell door. “Through here?”

“Yes.”

He shoved the door. It swung open, and his footsteps hacked heavily through the stillness. Lois closed her eyes, trying to track Menzies over the thundering of her heart. Silence came abruptly, and Lois held her breath, praying that Menzies wouldn’t inflict further pain on Clark.

After a prolonged moment, the footsteps sounded — coming closer — and Lois breathed again.

Menzies towered in the doorway. “I’ll be back tomorrow afternoon,” he said. “I expect that by then, he’ll be weak enough that the necessary measures can be implemented.”

Measures?

Lois leached the disgust from her face as she looked at him. “I’ll leave the rods in there overnight,” she said. “I don’t know how long it will take.”

“If you hadn’t been so slipshod in maintaining the proper level of exposure to the rods, this could have been accomplished much more efficiently,” he said wrathfully.

Lois didn’t comment. She couldn’t afford to allow herself to comment. She just had to think about the fact that when Menzies arrived tomorrow afternoon, she and Clark would be a long way from Metropolis.

He strode to the external door, exited, and slammed it behind him.

Lois waited.

Waited until the last strains of Menzies’ motor had faded away.

Then she rushed through the door and crossed to Clark.

He had turned towards the wall, and his body was coiled into an arc. He had donned the bathing cap wig, and its tresses straggled from his head and onto the mattress.

Lois knelt against his back and put her hand on his shoulder.

“Lo ...”

“I’m here, Clark,” she said. “It’s OK. He’s gone.”

Clark’s arm lifted a few inches, and Lois reached over him to slip her hand into his. His fingers tightened around hers.

“Is there *anything* I can do to make this easier?” she asked desperately.

“Just ... stay. Stay with ... me.”

“I will,” she promised.

She removed the cap and shuffled forward so that her thighs provided support for his head. She drifted her fingers through his hair — a long sweep from the bristles of his sideburn to the satiny black waves higher on his head.

“That’s ... good,” Clark muttered.

She continued making slow tracks through his hair as she forced her mind to prepare for their escape. If Clark’s estimation had been accurate, they should be able to get out under the cover of darkness. She would drive until tiredness overtook her, and then she would look for somewhere to stop.

What should she take from the compound? What should she leave? If she decided now, it would minimise the time she needed to be away

from Clark.

When the first tingles of numbness started to climb up her legs, Lois leant forward and brushed the back of her finger across Clark's cheek.

"Lo ... is."

"I'm here," she said. "But I need to get ready for us to leave."

"K."

"I won't be long."

"Come ... back," he said as his hand briefly squeezed her fingers.

"Always."

She reached for the pillow and gently lowered his head onto it.

For the next fifteen minutes, Lois carried things between the Buick and the compound. She took Clark's suitcase of clothes, his box of toiletries, her father's camp mattress, one pillow, and both sleeping bags to the car.

She opened the suitcase; selected one of Clark's checked shirts, his jacket, a pair of socks, and his sneakers; and laid them on the back seat. After placing his glasses in the safety of the glove compartment, she returned to the trunk and unpacked her clothes from her bag. She spread them on top of Clark's clothes and squeezed the suitcase shut.

Next, Lois draped the Winnie the Pooh sleeping bag over Jonas, hauled him into the staffroom, and stashed him in the closet. On her final trip outside, she collected her bag. Then she locked the Buick and hurried back to the staffroom.

Once there, she put the medical supplies into the bowl and hid it with Jonas in the closet. She flew up the stairs to her office with her bag and removed the tape from the VCR. She had wiped it of data, but she didn't want to risk some advanced technology lifting anything from it. On her desk was the paper airplane that Clark had made. She pushed it into the side compartment of her bag.

Lois scanned her office for anything that might be useful. Her eyes fell on the coveralls, and she slung them over her arm. She locked the door and raced down the stairs. In the staffroom, she laid Jonas on the table, and with hands made clumsy from an overdose of nervous energy, she pushed his bony limbs into the legs and sleeves of the coveralls.

Once Jonas was dressed, she deposited him and her bag in the closet, shut the door, and took a moment to calm her jitteriness.

Had she remembered everything?

She would review her plans again, but now, she needed to get back to Clark.

His eyes opened when she arrived. "OK?" he croaked.

"All done," she said, making a feeble attempt to instill a dash of optimism into her voice. "Now I can stay with you for a while."

She sat against the wall and lifted Clark's shoulders so that some of his upper body sagged onto her lap.

"Too ... heavy," he protested weakly.

"No, you're not," she said.

His head lolled against her arm, and Lois touched a kiss into his hair.

And so another eon began.

A time when his agony was inscribed in ravages across his face. Lois swept back his hair.

The drone of her voice seemed to soothe him, so she kept up the flow of words. It didn't matter what she said — the meaning was lost as they inched through time together.

The next time she looked at her watch, it was after five o'clock. "Three hours done, Clark," she said, hoping that would encourage him.

It was too early to hope that he'd lost the ability to lift from the ground.

Perhaps he had discerned her thoughts because his weight decreased for a few seconds before settling back down onto her.

"Too ... heavy?" he murmured.

"I'm fine for now," she said. "Do you want anything? Water?"

His head rolled to one side and back again.

The minutes ticked by ... and stretched into hours.

Clark was becoming noticeably weaker. All trace of colour had drained from his face. His grip on her hand had dwindled. His sporadic movements had slowed.

A long time later, Clark shifted again. "L ..."

She bent low against his mouth. "What, Clark?"

"I ca...can't lift."

Never had such simple words had the power to bring such overwhelming relief. "One hour," she said. "It's twenty past seven now."

"Go ... stretch ... your legs."

"Will you be OK?"

He nodded faintly, and Lois eased out from under him.

"I'll be back soon," she promised.

She ran out of the compound and collected the meals Uncle Mike's delivery boy had left at the door of the warehouse. Back inside, she put them in the fridge. Then, she called Uncle Mike on her cell phone.

"Lois," he said. "How lovely to hear from you."

"Uncle Mike," she said. "My job is sending me away again."

"Ah, no, Lois," he said with obvious disappointment. "I'm so sorry to hear that."

"Yeah," she said. "I'm leaving tomorrow. I won't have the time to come in and fix up what I owe -"

"Don't worry about that," he said. "I'm just sorry you're leaving us again. Sam is going to miss you."

"I know," Lois said. "I told him today."

"How did he take it?"

"OK, I think," she replied. "Thanks for the meals tonight. I'll contact you as soon as I get back to Metropolis."

"Bye, Lois," Uncle Mike said. "You take care."

"I will. Bye, Uncle Mike."

Lois hung up and slipped her phone into her bag.

In the cell, Clark was lying on his back. Lois knelt beside him. His eyes didn't open, but his fingers tapped against his chest. Lois stretched out beside him and lightly rested her head on him. His arm slowly rounded her and collapsed onto her hip.

His heartbeat seemed alarmingly sluggish. She had to remind herself that they wanted his bodily systems to be shutting down.

"Hang in there, Clark," she whispered. "We're nearly there."

The minute hand of her watch climbed towards the apex and then began its slow descent. She had spent the past hours willing time to speed by, but now, she felt grossly unprepared.

Lois waited — marking each second — until the minute hand of her watch was suspended between the two and the three. She sat up, fighting a potent fusion of relief and dread.

"Clark?"

His only response was a soft grunt carried on a serrated breath. His condition seemed to have deteriorated dramatically in the past half an hour.

"I think it's time," Lois said. "I'll get what we'll need."

He didn't reply, and Lois felt sickening fear scorch through her. What if they had miscalculated? What if Clark had had too much exposure?

She couldn't think about that now. The implant had to come out, and she had to do it. Once that was done, they could concentrate on Clark's recovery.

A minute later, she was back with the bowl, and soon, she had set out everything within easy reach.

Clark's eyes were closed. She put her hand on his chest. "Clark?"

His eyelids peeled back. "Is ... it ... time?"

"Yes."

He looked dreadful. She had to get the rods away from him. But if she took them away, how quickly would his skin become impenetrable?

Lois lurched to her feet, swept up all four rods, and ran with them to the staffroom. She thrust them in the corner, away from the door.

In the bathroom, she lathered her hands and forearms and then used the hottest water she could tolerate to rinse off the soap. After

drying her hands with a clean towel, she returned to Clark and knelt beside him, conscious that she had to work quickly. That helped. That meant there was no time to think. No time to worry. No time to reflect.

She opened the sterilised pad and unfolded it on the concrete.

First, she needed the local anaesthetic. She opened the syringe packet and assembled it as she had seen her father do many times. Then she pushed the needle into the vial and drew the liquid into the syringe.

“OK, Clark,” she said as she leant over him. “You’ll feel some burning. Try not to move.” That was exactly what her father had said to Lucy.

The end of the needle quivered above his skin. Lois closed her eyes and tried to calm her rattled nerves. When she opened her eyes, Clark was looking at her.

His left hand crept across his stomach and gripped her elbow. His eyes sent a silent message of support: *You can do this.*

Lois positioned the syringe near one end of the black line that Clark had drawn. She gradually increased the pressure, and to her relief, it slid easily into his flesh. Clark’s breath came in a gush, but he didn’t flinch. When about a third of the liquid was gone, she withdrew the needle and inserted it near the middle. Then she injected the final third at the far end of the line.

She snapped the needle from the syringe and put it in the small capsule. When she looked back at Clark, his eyes were fixed on her. His mouth fluttered to the ghost of a smile.

“Are you in any pain?” Lois asked.

He shook his head. “I just feel totally powerless,” he said. “I’m not sure I could even stand up.”

Lois managed a fragile smile. “We’ll get this out, and then you’ll start to feel better.” She tore open one of the sterilised wipes and ran it over the area around his collarbone. Then she opened the laceration repair pack, took out the drape, and placed it over Clark’s shoulder, positioning it so that she could see the black line above the lump.

She opened three packets of gauze squares and placed them in readiness on the pad.

Clark’s smile flickered again. “You’re doing great,” he said in a raw, rough voice.

“We need to wait a moment for the local to take effect,” she said.

“Are you OK?”

“We’re nearly there,” she said. “You’ll be out of here soon.”

“Lois,” he said. “Lois ... you are ... amazing. I ... I didn’t think ...”

She pressed her fingers into the area near his collarbone. “Can you feel that?” she asked.

“A little.”

“OK, a few more moments,” she said as she wiped him again with the disinfectant.

“Is everything ready for us to leave?”

“Nearly. Once this is done, we can be out of here within a few minutes.”

“Thanks ... thanks for staying with me ... while ...”

“It was awful,” Lois said, and her voice shook.

“You being there ... not being alone ... knowing there was a reason for it ... It wasn’t too bad.”

It had been horrific, but Lois knew she couldn’t think about that now. She took one of the gloves and put it on her right hand. It was too big, and the ends ballooned on her fingertips. She tried to push the excess towards her palm. It wasn’t ideal, but hopefully it wouldn’t affect her dexterity too much.

After pulling a second glove into place on her left hand, Lois prodded Clark’s shoulder. “Can you feel that?”

“No.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

“OK.” Lois tore open the package and lifted out the scalpel. She removed the cover, and the sight of the sharp blade brought home the chilling reality of the task that was being demanded of her. She looked

at Clark for reassurance.

“You can do this,” he said quietly. “I know you can.”

Lois took a deep breath and picked up a gauze square with her left hand. She placed the tip of the scalpel on the end of the black line.

Clark’s hand gripped her thigh. “You can do it, Lois,” he said. “I trust you.”

Slowly and steadily, she drew the scalpel along the black line. A small stream of blood oozed behind it, and she mopped it up with the gauze. She came to the end and put the blood-tipped scalpel on the pad.

“Did I hurt you?” she asked anxiously.

“No,” Clark said. “Just push it out.”

She touched her fingers on the underside of the protrusion, and a grey orb squeezed out, rolled down Clark’s shoulder, and thudded softly onto the mattress.

“It’s out,” she announced as relief surged through her.

The walls of this prison could no longer hold Clark.

He stared at her with admiration. And wonder. And disbelief. And such intense gratitude that Lois had to remind herself that the job wasn’t done yet. “I’m going to leave it there,” she said. “I don’t want to risk touching it until I’ve finished this.”

“OK.”

“Are you sure there’s only one?”

“Yes, only one.”

Lois used clean gauze to wipe up the little trickle of blood, then positioned both sides of the wound and secured them with a row of butterfly clips. She covered it with another square and moved Clark’s left hand to his right shoulder. “Can you hold that?”

He nodded.

She peeled the gloves from her hands.

“You did it,” Clark said in awe. “You did it.”

“*We* did it,” she said with a tremulous smile.

“What do you want me to do now?” Clark asked.

“Lie there for a moment,” Lois said. “I’ll clean up this mess and take the rods to my office.”

“OK.”

Lois put the cover over the scalpel and rolled all of the used medical supplies securely into the pad. She picked up the little ball of lead-encased poison, went behind the half-wall, and flushed it.

A minute later, the trash from the surgery was securely tied in a plastic bag, and the rods were locked in her office.

Lois washed her hands and hurried back to Clark. She knelt beside him and peeped under the gauze. There was a little blood, but not enough to cause concern. “How does it feel?”

“It’s still numb,” he said. “But Lois, you were amazing.”

“So were you,” she said. “I came so close to taking those rods away. I would have given up if it hadn’t been for you.”

“No,” Clark said, shaking his head. “You would never give up.”

“I have a couple of other things to do,” she said. “Will you be OK here?”

He nodded.

Back in the staffroom, Lois removed the skeleton from the closet and pulled the blanket off the bed. She carried Jonas into the cell and wedged him between her knees as she stretched Clark’s wig over his skull.

“Do you think you can sit up?” she said when she was crouching beside Clark again.

He nodded, and she grasped his good arm and helped him to a sitting position.

“OK?” Lois asked. He was still very pale.

“A bit dizzy.” Clark leant back against the wall.

“Just relax.” She brushed his hair back from his forehead.

“I’m OK,” he said. “Do what you need to do.”

Lois moved to the end of the mattress and clasped it in both hands. “Could you lift your butt, please?”

Clark did, and she slid the mattress out from under him.

She laid it in the back corner of the cell and arranged Jonas on it,

facing him into the wall. She arranged the blanket over him and pulled it up to his shoulder. She draped the strands of the wig onto the mattress.

Yep, that looked pretty authentic.

She turned back to Clark and saw the look of incredulity on his face. Even better than that, his mouth had stretched to a suggestion of a smile.

“It might buy us some time,” she explained as she gathered up the unused wipes and butterfly clips and put them into her bag. “When someone — probably Scardino — arrives, the first thing he’s going to notice is that I’m not here. He might glance into the cell, think you’re here, and spend half an hour trying to contact me.”

“But if he looks in here and it’s empty, he’ll know straight away that we have both gone?” Clark said.

“Yep.”

“You are truly amazing.”

“Thanks,” Lois said. “Have I forgotten anything?”

“The rods?”

“They’re locked in my office,” Lois answered. “I wish I could have destroyed them or hidden them, but we don’t have time, and they certainly can’t come with us.”

“Should we leave them in here?” Clark asked. He nodded towards Jonas. “Next to him?”

“They’ll have keys to my office,” she said. “So locking them away doesn’t achieve much in that sense.”

“If Scardino or Menzies looked in here and saw no rods, it might be enough to make them investigate further.”

“Good thinking,” Lois said. “Once you’re in the car, I’ll put them next to poor Jonas.”

“Jonas?” Clark asked.

“He’ll die for a good cause,” Lois said. She took the sling from its package and deftly slipped it between Clark’s arm and his body, and then leant in close to tie it behind his neck. “How does that feel?”

“Good,” he said.

Her instinct was to haul him to his feet and rush him out of the compound, but she tempered her impatience. They had made good time. It was still early evening. She could afford to give Clark a few extra minutes of recovery time.

Lois looked around the room that had been Clark’s prison for seven years. In the corner under the window was a small pile of things, including a newspaper and a pen. “Is there anything else you want to take?” she asked.

“The notepad,” he said.

Lois walked over to the corner and retrieved the notepad. She took it back to Clark, and he held out his hand. She gave it to him, and he slipped it into the space in his sling. “Anything else?”

“No.”

“Do you feel strong enough to get up? I’ll help you.”

“Yeah.”

“Be careful of your shoulder.”

Clark flattened his left hand against the wall and staggered to his feet as Lois steadied him. “Just ... give me a minute,” he said as he leant against the wall.

He was swaying slightly. Lois put her hands on his hips and waited. After a few steadying breaths, he straightened.

“OK?” Lois asked.

He nodded.

Lois picked up her bag and slipped under Clark’s left arm, placing it across her shoulders. She put her arm around his back.

Slowly, they crossed the cell for the final time.

At the doorway, Clark stopped.

Lois waited, realising how momentous this had to be for him. She stepped through the door and turned.

“Lois ...” he said.

“Come with me?” she said. “Come and be a part of my life?”

“Is that what you truly want?”

“More than anything.”

He gulped ... and stepped from his prison.

Lois looked into his face, wanting to share their victory.

But Clark was staring ahead, his eyes fixed on the external door.

He was physically free. He was out of the prison. But in that moment, Lois realised that true freedom would not be achieved so simply.

“Ready?” she asked gently.

He wrenched his eyes from the door and mouthed ‘yes’.

Lois wrapped the Winnie the Pooh sleeping bag around Clark’s bare shoulders. Outside, it was dark and cold, and despite the sleeping bag, he started shivering violently. “This way,” she said. She slipped under his arm again and led him to the Buick. “Do you want to sit in the front seat or lie down in the back?”

“The front.”

She opened the door and helped him in. After fastening his seatbelt, she tucked the sleeping bag around him. “Better?”

“Yeah. Th... thanks.”

But his shivering hadn’t subsided. And his face was lined with shock. She wished she could stop and hold him. Comfort him. Reassure him. But she couldn’t — they had to keep moving.

After positioning the four rods around Jonas, Lois picked up Clark’s discarded tee shirt and ran from the cell. In the staffroom, she took the meals from the fridge. At the external door, she locked it for the final time and sprinted to the Buick.

Lois started the motor and turned on the headlights. She glanced across at Clark.

His head was back, and his eyes were closed. He looked exhausted.

She slipped the Buick into reverse and backed out of the parking bay. She turned the car, drove past the warehouse, and waited for a break in the traffic.

Her career was in tatters.

Never again would she work as a government agent.

She was now a fugitive — on the wrong side of the law and without the protection of her job.

She glanced again at Clark, and this time, he was looking at her.

“Second thoughts?” he asked sombrely.

“Not one,” she said decisively.

His eyes slid shut, and Lois pulled onto the road.

She had no doubts. No second thoughts.

Clark was more important than a job, than a career, than her reputation.

And he always would be.

3. Trail

Part 1

~~ Friday (continued) ~~

The world was dark.

And noisy.

And crowded.

And constantly moving.

Other vehicles came at them.

Shot past them.

His shoulder throbbed.

And he was thirsty.

He felt as if every ounce of strength had been squeezed from his body and every morsel of resistance had been pounded from his heart.

Inside, he was numb. Lethargic. Broken.

Outside, movement bombarded him relentlessly.

The lights whizzed by — stabs of piercing brightness in the sea of darkness.

Clark pulled the sleeping bag higher.

This was not his world.

He didn’t belong here.

He never would.

As each mile passed under the hood of the Buick, Lois’s uneasiness increased.

They had reached the western fringes of Metropolis, and Clark hadn't said one word.

The traffic light turned to red, and she slowed to a standstill. She looked to her right, taking advantage of the muted glow from the streetlights.

Clark's eyes were closed, but the rigidity of his posture indicated he was not asleep.

Was this how he typically reacted to having endured hours with the rods?

Or was he worrying about the enormity of what they had done?

They had wagered everything on this roll of the dice.

But, as Lois knew, this was their only chance. Going to Scardino or Menzies and pleading for Clark's life would have achieved nothing other than getting her banished from the compound.

And *not* getting Clark out of the cell would have meant his certain death.

They were together.

For better or worse.

The lights changed, and her eyes shifted forward, but her thoughts stayed with Clark. Tension had chiselled tight ridges through his cheek and jaw. He'd pulled the sleeping bag high on his body. Was he cold? He had finally stopped shivering about half an hour ago. Lois turned the heater to a higher setting.

She wrested her thoughts from Clark and forced herself to think about what they needed to do now. She wished she had had the time to decide on a destination, plan a route, and research hotels and campgrounds before leaving the compound. But now, she was going to have to plan on the run.

When she became too tired to drive safely, should she simply pull over so they could sleep in the car?

A fleeting glance towards Clark dispelled that idea.

Was he huddled into the sleeping bag for cover, not warmth?

After all the years of being confined, did this feel like being thrust into a huge unfamiliar expanse?

Tonight, Clark needed to stay in a hotel room. It would be impossible for him to adequately rest if he felt open and exposed. He needed a quiet and private place where he could begin to acclimatise to life outside the cell.

Unable to keep her eyes away, Lois looked at Clark again. He was terribly pale. Anxiety sharpened the dull ache of hunger in her stomach. What if they had left the rods in the cell for too long? Surely Trask and Moyne had exposed him for longer periods. Perhaps the sudden exposure coming after more than a week of respite had compounded the effect.

After another sideways glance that heightened her fears, Lois decided to stop at the next motel displaying a vacancy sign. She had hoped to drive for longer tonight, but that wasn't as important as getting Clark settled. She wanted to be able to see him in the light and check his shoulder.

Hopefully, they could be on the road early tomorrow, getting far away from Metropolis before anyone discovered they had left the cell.

Clark had told her that sunlight helped him recover. Perhaps that was why he was still looking so pallid. Perhaps tomorrow there would be signs that he was beginning to regain his strength. Normal strength first, then the super-normal stuff.

Her task was to keep them hidden until then.

Once Clark could fly ... once he could move quickly ... once he was strong enough to resist anything that threatened their freedom ... once he was invincible enough to catch fired bullets ... once his mind was well enough that he could help her plan ... then they would decide together how they were going to do this.

Where to live?

What role to play?

What story to tell?

It would be just like another assignment.

The lights of a motel sign glimmered in the distance. As they passed it, Lois decided it appeared big enough that two late-night

travellers wouldn't cause much of a stir and mid-range enough to be comfortable without eating too far into their cash reserves.

Two miles later, they came to an intersection, and Lois turned right. She drove another mile before pulling over.

"Clark?"

His eyes opened, but he didn't turn towards her.

"We're going to stop for the night soon."

"Already?" he asked anxiously.

"We'll start early tomorrow. Right now, we both need food and rest."

He said nothing else, and Lois's fears tightened another notch.

She gathered her hair into a ponytail and checked it in the mirror. She opened the car door onto the cold night air and went to the trunk to find the bland sweater that had been a gift from an aunt nearly a decade ago. She put it on — over her current sweater — and then slipped off her pumps and replaced them with sneakers.

She took Clark's checked shirt from the back seat and opened his door. "Can we put this on?"

He held out his left arm, and she slipped it into the sleeve and then threaded the shirt between his back and the seat and arranged it over the sling

Back in the driver's seat, Lois turned the car, and five minutes later, she parked in front of the motel reception. "You stay here," she said to Clark. "I'll get us a room."

She took her purse from her bag and locked the Buick.

The reception area was brightly lit but empty. Lois rang the bell and reviewed her story. A short dumpy woman with grey speckled through her hair appeared at the door behind the counter.

Lois smiled wearily. "Do you have a room, please?"

"Double or twin?"

"Double, please. My husband is in the car."

The woman eyed her questioningly for a few seconds before lowering her attention to the open book on the counter.

"My husband isn't well," Lois said quickly. "I am taking him to Metropolis for an appointment tomorrow."

When the woman looked up from the book, her expression seemed to have softened. "Is he going to be all right?"

"I hope so," Lois said with timorous smile. "He was kicked by a cow, and he tore some ligaments in his shoulder. Our local doctor sent us to a specialist in the city."

"Room Fifteen is available," the woman said. "It's sixty dollars for the night; payment in advance."

"Does it have a microwave?"

"No."

"OK. Thank you." She took the bills from her purse and gave them to the woman.

"I need your names," the woman said. "For the register."

"Charlie and Linda King."

The woman jotted down their names. "You're not wearing a ring," she noted.

Lois sadly rubbed her thumb over the place where a wedding ring would go. "It's been a hard year on the land," she said. "Low prices, poor harvest, bills piling up ... you know how it is."

The woman nodded with genuine sympathy. "And now your husband has hurt his shoulder?"

Lois sighed. "Perhaps tomorrow will bring good news," she said. "Perhaps he won't need surgery."

"Why did you ask about a microwave?"

"Because we haven't eaten yet, and I was hoping to be able to warm up the meal I packed for us."

The woman crossed out something in the book and wrote another number. "Room Five is also available," she said. "It's bigger, and it has a microwave oven."

"Does it cost more?" Lois asked.

"No," the woman said. She turned abruptly and went through the door. When she reappeared, she was carrying a carton of milk. "The room has instant coffee and tea bags, but we don't usually supply

milk.”

Lois reached for the proffered carton. “Thanks.”

The woman gave her a key. “Park your vehicle in front of the door to the room.”

“Where should I leave the key tomorrow?” Lois inquired. “We have to make an early start.”

“There’s a key deposit box behind you.”

Lois turned to leave before the woman could think of any more questions.

“I hope your husband is OK,” she said.

“Thank you.”

In the Buick, Clark’s eyes were open. “Is everything all right?”

Lois took the time to give him a smile. “Everything is fine,” she said with a brightness she had to manufacture. She started the motor. “How are you feeling?”

“OK,” he said.

“Is your shoulder hurting?”

“A bit.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? I have pain pills in my bag.”

“I’ve never taken pain pills before.”

Lois drove at walking pace towards the row of rooms and parked outside Number Five. She twisted to reach into the back seat for her bag and said, “If anyone asks, we are Charlie and Linda King, farmers travelling to Metropolis to see a specialist about the ligament damage in your shoulder.”

She hooked her bag on her shoulder and stepped from the Buick. After unlocking the door to their room and switching on the light, she returned to the car to help Clark.

“Put your good arm around my shoulder,” she said.

As they shuffled forwards, Lois glanced across to the reception building and saw the woman standing at the door, watching them.

The motel room was clean and neat, with a hint of lavender hanging in the air. It wasn’t overly spacious, but it contained a double bed, a small round table, two chairs, a sink, and the promised microwave oven. “Do you want to sit on the chair?” Lois asked Clark. “Or lie on the bed?”

“Chair,” he replied.

When Clark was seated, Lois smiled down at him, trying to penetrate the shroud of despair that hung over him. “You stay here,” she said. “I’ll bring in the stuff from the car.”

He nodded.

Lois brought in the suitcase, Clark’s tin box, his jacket and sneakers, the carton of milk, and the containers of food. Every time she entered the room, her eyes veered to Clark.

He hadn’t moved.

He looked lost.

Disoriented.

Shell-shocked.

Was it physical? From the exposure to the rods? From the surgery? Or was it emotional?

Was it the upheaval of leaving the cell?

She’d known these first hours in the shadow of captivity would be difficult for him, but she hadn’t been prepared for such wretchedness. Such remoteness.

After locking the door, she sat with him at the table. “Clark?”

His glassy eyes slowly focussed on her.

“Can you tell me how you’re feeling?” Lois asked. “Is your shoulder still hurting?”

“It’s OK.”

“Are you hungry?”

“I’m thirsty.”

Lois stood from the table and brought him a glass of water.

“Thanks,” he said.

When the glass was empty, Lois refilled it, put it in front of him, and sat down again. Indecision overwhelmed her. In the cell, she had mostly relied on her instincts. She had done whatever had felt right. And even though that meant she had been a little impulsive at times,

Clark had responded well.

Unbelievably well.

Now, it felt as if that rapport — that connection — had been swept away.

Inside Lois, panic threatened. What if it had gone forever? It had flourished in the artificial environment of the cell. What if it couldn’t be transferred to the real world?

She looked at Clark.

He was staring at the table. Unmoving. Detached. Withdrawn. Inaccessible.

It was only when she *didn’t* receive a response that she realised how much she had come to rely on his swift perception and unstinting support.

Lois mentally transported herself back to the first time she had walked into the cell. Only five days had passed since then, but time was a poor measure of the depth of their relationship.

It was a relationship that *had* to survive.

She stood and put one container of food in the microwave. While it heated, she found two plates and the cutlery. She spooned the steaming food onto one of the plates and pushed it across the table to Clark. She put a fork next to his left hand.

“I think it’s beef stroganoff,” she said.

By the time Lois had heated her plate, Clark had picked up the fork and dug it into a chunk of meat. That gave her some comfort. Her own hunger gripped her stomach, and she realised she hadn’t eaten all day.

The food was good — tasty and hot — and Lois ate eagerly.

When she was finished, she rose from the table and put the kettle on the little stove. Drinking tea together had gotten them through awkward times in the cell.

Tea ... and chocolate.

Lois rummaged through her bag and found two candy bars.

A few minutes later, she brought the cups to the table. Clark pushed away his plate, although more than half of his food still remained.

Lois gave him the cup of tea and a candy bar. His eyes lifted, and she formed a smile.

“Thanks,” he said.

Even his voice sounded different. Hoarse. Dry. As if the life had been sucked from it.

As Lois sipped her tea, its warmth began to loosen the apprehension that was coiled through her body. She turned her mind to what needed to be done now. Perhaps dealing with the practicalities would help her devise a way to reach Clark.

When she’d finished her tea and chocolate, Lois stood to clear away their plates, cups, and Clark’s untouched candy bar. She took his tin box into the bathroom. She opened the suitcase and selected a tee shirt and sweatpants for Clark and an old pair of pyjamas for herself.

The practicalities hadn’t brought any flashes of inspiration, but they had strengthened her feeling that she needed to try to reach him. It was obvious that Clark had no inclination to talk, but she had to try to stop him sinking further into the quagmire of isolation.

She had to initiate a conversation. She had to be the one to show him the way through this.

Lois sat next to him with renewed purpose. “Is your shoulder still hurting?” she asked without waiting for him to look at her.

“Not as much.”

Lois smiled. “That’s good. Do you mind if I look at it?”

Clark shook his head. Perhaps touch could begin to restore their connection — just as it had in the cell.

Lois washed and dried her hands, slipped the shirt from his shoulder, untied the sling, and positioned his forearm on the table. She lifted the gauze and gasped.

“What’s wrong?” Clark asked quickly.

“Nothing,” Lois replied. “It’s looking better than I could have hoped. It looks like the two sides have begun knitting together already.”

“Good,” Clark said dully.

Lois opened a packet and took out a disinfectant wipe. “I’m going to clean it,” she said. “Is that OK?”

He nodded.

Lois put her left hand on his neck and edged her fingertips into his hair. With her right hand, she gently dabbed around the wound. When she had finished, she straightened, but didn’t remove her left hand. “I’m sorry if that hurt you.”

“It didn’t.”

Lois smiled, trying to recall the brilliance of Clark’s best smiles, and forced herself to respond to that memory. She picked up a clean square of gauze, laid it on the wound, and carefully fixed it in place with tape before refastening the sling and repositioning his shirt.

Clark said nothing. Gave no indication that he had even felt her touch.

As she deposited the trash and washed her hands, Lois decided that she needed to stop obsessing about what she should do and simply do it.

This wasn’t a stranger. This was Clark. The man she loved.

“Clark?”

His head turned towards her.

“I need your help,” she said as she slipped into the seat next to him.

“You are doing great by yourself,” he said listlessly.

“I can’t even begin to imagine how you must feel,” Lois said. “I know that today was traumatic. I know you had no time to prepare properly. I walked into your room this afternoon and announced that everything had changed, you suffered hours of pain, the implant came out, and suddenly I’m whisking you away from the only place you’ve known for seven years. It must feel like a dream.”

He nodded — a tiny movement, but it felt like he was offering the first tenuous fibre of reconnection.

“Can you talk to me?” Lois said. “Tell me how you’re feeling? Tell me if there is anything I can do to help you?”

“I’m tired,” Clark admitted.

“Then you should go to bed.”

He glanced over his shoulder. “There’s only one bed.”

“I said we were a married couple.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s less noteworthy if we’re married than if we’re not married and travelling together.”

“You take the bed.”

“Clark!”

In other times, her gentle exclamation would have elicited a smile from Clark. Now, it didn’t. “I haven’t slept in a bed for a long time,” he said. “I’m used to sleeping on the floor.”

Lois smiled and tried to ignore the fact that he didn’t smile back. “Clark,” she said, allowing a sprinkling of humour to season her words. “We’ve both had the day from hell. We’re both exhausted. We’re both unsure about what is going to happen tomorrow.”

“What are you suggesting?” he asked cautiously.

“I can’t see any reason why we can’t both sleep in the bed.”

He couldn’t have looked more startled if she’d suggested they sleep together — in the other sense.

“When this room is cleaned tomorrow, we don’t want any signs that someone slept on the couch,” Lois reasoned. “Or the floor.”

“I . . . I . . . don’t know.”

Lois leant back in the chair. “Can you tell me what worries you about sharing a bed with me?” she asked.

“I’m not sure I’ll sleep well,” Clark said. “My shoulder feels better, but the sling is awkward, and I found sleeping on a thin mattress difficult at first. I don’t want to disrupt you.”

“We can take off the sling.”

He said nothing.

“How about we start together,” Lois suggested, keeping her tone light. “And if there are any problems, one of us can move to the couch?”

A slight blush had risen into his cheeks, and Lois was reminded again that, in essence, she was talking to a very young man whose life experiences almost certainly hadn’t included sharing a motel room with a woman. “I . . . I’m not sure,” he said. “I’m just not sure.”

“You have the bathroom first,” she said. “I’ve put your box in there.”

Clark stood from the seat.

“Do you need any help?”

He shot her a look of alarm.

“I meant with things like putting toothpaste on your brush,” she said.

“Oh.” Clark opened the bathroom door. “I can manage. Thanks.”

When he’d closed the door, Lois released a long breath.

It had been completely unrealistic to think Clark would simply adapt to life outside after seven years of imprisonment and abuse. He should be getting counselling. He should have a network of support. He should have the assurance that he would be allowed to live a normal life. He should have been given weeks to prepare.

Instead, it had been thrust upon him.

She’d given him very little choice.

But they were here now. And she had to make it work.

Lois noticed that his notebook had fallen on the floor under the chair. She picked it up, and it opened to a page containing a few lines of words.

Before she could stop herself, Lois read them.

Hope blossoms in the blackness, splashing colour on the empty, threadbare canvas,

Hope shines in the darkness, bringing light where fear-filled shadows loomed,

Hope cradles promise, birthing life where barrenness reigned unchallenged,

Hope is beautiful,

Lois felt her tautly strung emotions begin to unravel.

She read the words again through the blur of her tears. She had to be that hope for Clark now. She had to shine into his darkness just as clearly as she had when he was in the cell.

She returned the notepad to the floor.

The bathroom door opened, and Lois spun away.

“Lois?”

She quickly wiped her eyes and turned, forming a smile.

Clark stared at her, apprehension creeping across his face. “You were crying,” he said.

“Not real—”

“Why?”

Why? There were a thousand reasons why — and no words to express even one of them.

Clark stepped right up to her and looked down into her eyes. “Are you crying because you’ve realised that this was a stupid mistake?” he demanded harshly.

Lois met his gaze without wavering. “No,” she said firmly.

His eyes narrowed. “Don’t lie to me, Lois.”

“I’m not lying to you.”

“You must know this is hopeless,” he said. “We can’t do this.”

His words — spoken with such despair — provided heartbreaking contrast to the sentiments he had written in the cell. Lois swallowed down the hot ball that wanted to flare into her throat. “We *can* do this,” she said. “If we stay together. If we keep believing.”

“Keep believing *what*?”

“Believing that we are meant to be together. Believing that we can prevail. Believing in each other. Believing in ourselves.”

Clark stepped back, and disillusionment cloaked him. “We can’t, Lois,” he said. “It’s too much.”

“Too much?”

“You have given up *everything*.”

“No, I haven’t.”

“You must know you can never get your job back,” he said. “Your career died the second you walked out of my prison with me in tow.”

You can't contact your family. You can't tell your father where you are."

"I told him who I'd be with," she fired back. "That was enough for him."

Clark stared at her in disbelief. "You told him you were going to run away with an alien fugitive?" he said scornfully.

"No," she said. "I told him I was going away with a man I trusted implicitly." She wanted to add so much more. The man whom she loved. The man who meant more to her than anything else. The man she wanted to be with forever. The man who held her future happiness in the haven of his heart.

"Lois," Clark said, and his voice was quieter now. "Lois, this can't happen. We have nothing. We have nowhere to live. We have no means of gaining an income. We have -"

Lois scooted to her bag and took out the envelope containing the three hundred dollars. She shoved it at him. "This is yours," she said.

He stared at it, dumbfounded. "Mine?"

"Yours," she said. "Take it."

He reached for it and held it in his right hand while his left hand opened the envelope. Bewilderment flooded onto his face when he looked inside. "What's this?"

"Payment," Lois said. "For the trays you made."

"How much?"

"Three hundred dollars."

"Minus the cost of the materials."

Lois pulled the receipt from her purse and thrust that at him, too. He read it and then said, "That's one hundred and eighty-four dollars profit."

Lois almost smiled at the amazement in his tone. "It's yours."

Clark tossed the envelope onto the table. "I'm out of touch with the price of things," he said. "But I do know that one hundred, eighty-four dollars won't go far when we have nothing."

"How long did it take you to make the trays?"

"An hour."

"How long if you'd been working as fast as you could?"

"Five minutes," he mumbled.

Lois let her smile blossom and tentatively curled her fingers around his left wrist. "Clark," she said. "You see all of your differences as negatives, and I understand that completely. But they can be positives as well. Wonderful positives. If you were a regular guy, this would be so much more precarious. But you're not a regular guy, and -"

"All I've ever wanted was to be a regular guy," he said.

"I was glad you weren't a regular guy when Moyne tried to shoot me," Lois said. She tightened her grip. "And I thought you were glad, too."

His brown eyes finally stopped avoiding her. His nod was almost imperceptible, but she saw it.

"We work with what we have," Lois said. "We have each other. We have all of my training and experience. We have your powers."

His eyebrow dipped. "Powers?"

She nodded. "That is what they are. Powers. Things you can do that no one else can do."

"That doesn't make them powers," he said. "That makes them defects."

Lois didn't reply. Not verbally. She locked her eyes in his and challenged him. He stared right back.

Neither moved for a long moment as they engaged in a silent tussle of wills.

Finally, Clark's head dropped. When it lifted again, his resolve had waned. "It's not fair to you," he said unhappily.

"I am exactly where I want to be," Lois declared softly.

He scanned the room. "Really?" he said with arrant disbelief.

"The place doesn't matter. I want to be with you."

Clark pulled back from her grasp, and she thought he was going to step away. Instead, his hand landed on her curve of her shoulder.

"Lois," he said. "I need some time."

"I know."

"I have a million questions, and I can't find any answers."

"That's OK. We'll find them together."

"Everything ... *everything* is so different. Nothing feels familiar."

"You can have as much time as you need."

"You don't know that."

"I know that I'm going to try really hard not to pressure you into anything."

"I've always felt like a misfit," Clark said. "Now ... tonight ... as we drove away from the prison ..." He looked away, and the muscles of his jaw quivered. "... tonight, a part of me wanted to go back ... wanted to flee back to something I knew."

Lois put one hand on his neck. It wasn't a hug, but it did seem to bring them a little closer. "That's exactly how I would expect you to feel," she said.

"You would?"

"Yes," she said. "I don't know what you're going to need, and I don't know how you're going to feel, but the one thing that hasn't changed is you and me. Being together. Working together. Let's start with that. Let's clear away everything else and just concentrate on trying to do this together."

His eyes drifted to the bed. "And getting through the awkward things like where we sleep?"

Lois allowed herself a tiny chuckle. "I've already spent a night with you — when I slept on a mattress in the cell. This doesn't have to be any different."

"It's a *bed*."

"Would you feel more comfortable if we both used the sleeping bags?"

Clark began to shake his head, but then stopped. "Yeah," he said. "I would."

Lois gently pressed her fingers into the tight ridge of muscle on his neck. "I'll get them," she said.

"I'm sorry."

"You never have to be sorry for asking for something that makes this easier for you." Lois pointed to the sweatpants and tee shirt she had removed from the suitcase. "Perhaps you want to get into those while I get the sleeping bags from the car."

"OK."

Lois picked up the keys. Outside, the cold night air dashed against her heated cheeks.

The dark cloud of Clark's hopelessness seemed to have thinned the tiniest amount.

Perhaps they had taken the first step in their new lives.

It was one step — one step in what was going to be a long and arduous journey.

Lois had to believe.

She had to believe for both of them.

But when she came back with the sleeping bags, Clark was slumped at the table. Still dressed. Still staring into the nothingness. Still immersed in his isolation.

Part 2

The bed dipped under his weight. His hip was being sucked into the mattress, and his back felt uncomfortably misaligned.

Lois had fallen asleep within a minute of smiling and wishing him goodnight — as if they'd been settling into individual sleeping bags on a shared bed for years.

She'd offered to turn off his bedside lamp, but he'd declined.

It wasn't that he was scared of the darkness. It just seemed so unnatural after seven years of constant relentless light.

And it meant he could search Lois's face in the hope of finding a semblance of sanity in the cluttered confusion that was still bombarding his mind.

She had said she loved him.

This morning — he didn't know if it was past midnight yet, but he hadn't slept, so it felt like the continuation of one long, interminable day. This morning ... just a few short, monumental hours ago, he had

been with Lois, and only a pane of glass had separated them. He hadn't been able to see her, but he'd been able to hear her.

And she had said that she loved him.

At the time, he'd been swept up in the excitement of her unexpected visit. When she had uttered those words, he'd been sure she had meant the exclusive love of a woman for a man. That had been her tone. That had been the context.

But could she have possibly meant that?

It wasn't a statement that could stand alone. It inevitably led to so many other things. Things that — if he were honest — petrified him.

What did Lois expect of him?

Their relationship couldn't stay static. They had agreed they would wait until he was free of the prison.

And now, he was out, and this thing between them would have to progress.

To what?

She'd already said she wanted to kiss him.

But kissing wasn't the end either.

He'd never expected to be in this position.

He'd never expected that a beautiful woman — who knew he was an alien — would want to be with him ... *like that*.

She hadn't been thinking straight. She'd become caught up in his story ... embroiled in campaigning for his freedom.

But now, she would be able to recoup her objectivity. She would be able to see him as he really was — an alien, an outsider.

He couldn't be what Lois needed.

He doubted they would let him marry. Not officially. Not legally. He wasn't human.

As long as Lois stayed with him, she would face the threat of constant danger. His parents had taken him in — loved him and accepted him ... and, for that, they had been dragged away from their home like criminals and never allowed to return.

Now that he was out of the prison, Lois would see that. She would realise the dangers of being with him.

And if she didn't ...

He would have to convince her that she needed to salvage whatever she could of her life.

She'd said she loved him.

At the time, it had felt so good. Now, it felt like a poisoned knife being plunged into his heart.

He had nothing to give her.

She'd said that didn't matter.

She'd said she needed his humour. Whatever humour he'd managed to simulate had decayed to arrant bitterness.

She'd said she needed his steadfastness. Right now, his insecurities were devouring him like a plague of desperate locusts stripping a field of already-impoverished crops.

She'd said she needed his strength. Physically, he would recover, but that wasn't what she had meant. His determination, his will to fight ... they had evaporated so thoroughly that he could no longer comprehend how he had survived seven years of imprisonment.

He was nothing more than a brittle shell — and Lois needed a whole lot more than that.

However much he grappled for perspective, he couldn't escape the feeling that he was floating helplessly — being carried along by an external force that would, eventually, deliver him to his downfall.

He was in bed with a woman.

He was out of the prison.

His whole life, he hadn't actually expected the first would be possible.

The past seven years, he had been sure the second was impossible.

He was free of Trask. Free of Moyne. Free of the implant. Free of the prison.

But he was still an alien.

Still different.

Still hated.

Still feared.

Clark turned over — away from Lois's sleeping form — and stared at the pale light of the lamp.

He was alone.

And no amount of pretence was ever going to change that.

~~ Saturday ~~

Lois's eyes opened, and for a moment, she skimmed the dim and unfamiliar surroundings. Then she heard the sound of breathing from behind her and smiled as her memories flooded back.

She was with Clark.

Morning had come.

Yesterday — with all its anguish and uncertainty — was over.

Today was a new day. The first day of their lives together. A dawn of new hope.

Hope ... She recalled the words Clark had written in his notepad. And how — despite his pain — it had been important to him that he carried them with him as he had walked from the cell.

Clark's steady breaths whirred softly through the stillness. Lois hoped he was asleep. Hoped he had slept well. Hoped he would be heartened by the freshness of a brand new morning.

The clock next to the bed showed it was just after five o'clock.

Lois wriggled out from the sleeping bag, stood, and turned to look at Clark. She smiled. Asleep, relaxed, without his glasses — he looked so young. So vulnerable.

So ... she stifled her giggle. So cute.

From his sideburn, a dark shadow fanned towards his jaw and then curved up his cheek and around his mouth.

Looking at him caused her heart to leap ... captured her eyes and tempted them to linger. His mouth — the instrument of the most devastating of smiles — was relaxed.

What would it feel like to kiss him?

It would feel — Lois tore her eyes away, reminding herself that she was supposed to be having her shower, not ogling Clark.

She had all day today to look at him. And tomorrow. And the rest of her life.

Evan Shadbolt answered the knock on his door. Mrs Kingsley was there — the woman in her sixties that he paid to oversee the girls in the morning as they prepared for school or their weekend activities.

"Mr Shadbolt," she said in her terse greeting that hadn't softened one iota in four years.

"Mrs Kingsley." He stepped back to allow her to pass and then walked out of his house and into the cold Metropolis morning.

He hadn't told anyone about the changes at his work. Leaving Metropolis wasn't an option he was willing to consider, but whether he could get another assignment or whether he was going to have to look for alternate employment, he didn't want to cause the girls any worry.

And, despite her abruptness, the girls liked Mrs Kingsley. He didn't want to give her any reason to look for another position.

Shadbolt got into his car and pulled out of the garage.

What should he do now? What did a person do with *spare* time?

Habits were hard to break. He'd made the trip to Bessolo Boulevard most days for the past seven years.

He would go there. Perhaps Ms Lane ... Lois ... would appreciate some company.

He hadn't forgotten how she had helped with Layla's sewing machine. Perhaps taking her some breakfast would be an appropriate way to thank her for her kindness.

The bathroom door shut, and Clark rolled onto his back. He reached across to Lois's side of the bed.

Last night, he had lain awake for a long time as his thoughts had circled like preying vultures.

He should have been feeling great. Exultant. He was out of the prison.

But an ominous cloud clung to him in the same way that Lois's warmth clung to her father's sleeping bag. He just couldn't shake the

certain feeling that this would be a few stolen hours — days, at best — with Lois. And the price she would pay for their time together would be horrifically high.

In the prison, he had been able to cast aside his pessimism and simply enjoy being with her. Last night, he'd tried — he had — to reclaim that, but nothing had been able to tear down the wall of his despondency.

He was free.

Right now, he was free.

He would tell himself that over and over again.

He was free.

Right now, he wasn't a captive.

And he was with Lois.

That should have been enough.

It had to be enough.

Yesterday, Lois had done everything. Once they'd left the compound, he'd been useless. A zombie.

And the icy condemnation that capped his heart was his awareness that she'd been so desperate for him to respond to one of the many little smiles she had sent him.

He'd failed her.

He couldn't fail her again today.

Somehow, he had to try to be what she needed him to be. He had to respond. He had to act as if he could see a way through this.

But deep within him ...

He couldn't even bring himself to think the truth.

But it was there ... and denial wasn't going to change it.

The truth ...

He hated himself for it.

Despised himself.

But the truth was that he longed to be alone.

He had built up walls around his soul — walls that had kept Trask and Moyne away. And now, he just wanted to go there and be alone.

He didn't want to be with humans.

He didn't want to interact.

He didn't want to try to pretend he was one of them.

He didn't want to try to pretend he belonged.

He just wanted to be left alone.

But Lois ... she was different.

She was.

But it didn't change that he yearned to pull the barricades in on himself and exclude everyone from his private hell.

Lois slipped her tee shirt over her head and picked up her comb. As she ran it through her just-washed hair, she could detect the slight aroma of Clark's apple conditioner.

It brought memories of washing his hair, but those pleasant memories were quickly shoved aside by more recent ones. Last night. And the awkwardness and stilted silences as they had prepared for bed.

She hadn't brought toothpaste, shampoo, or conditioner of her own and had asked Clark if it were all right if she used his toothpaste. He had replied gruffly — it was hers, and she didn't need to ask him.

Lois had forced herself not to remonstrate, choosing instead to go into the bathroom to brush her teeth and change into her pyjamas.

When she'd returned, Clark hadn't moved from the table. He had been still staring ahead, his face a mask of detachment.

"You should try to get some sleep," she'd said gently.

He'd made a low rumble in his throat, and she had been torn between trying to say something to him and going to bed and leaving him alone.

"Goodnight," she'd said as she passed him.

"Night."

She'd turned off the main light and switched on a lamp next to bed. Then she'd laid out the Winnie the Pooh sleeping bag on one side of the bed and slithered into the other one.

For long minutes, she'd watched him, aching for him, wishing he

would let her share his anguish.

Then he'd stood abruptly, swept up the sweatpants she had put out for him, and strode into the bathroom.

Five minutes later, he'd emerged.

He'd walked slowly to the bed, and despite being hampered by the sling, he had managed to slip into the sleeping bag without disturbing her side of the bed.

She'd smiled at him.

His attempt to smile back had been empty.

"Shall I turn off your lamp?" she'd offered.

"No," he had said. "Thanks."

"Goodnight, Clark."

The cache of her emotions, so tightly bound, had wanted to spill out in a rampant flood. But she had known she couldn't allow that to happen. She had to sleep. Their freedom might depend on her ability to think clearly and make sound decisions. She might have to concoct a watertight story on the spot, and to do that, her mind needed rest.

She had done it before — forced herself to seize opportunities for sleep despite the chaos raging in her mind. She had done it numerous times as she had run away from the horror of Linda's dead and violated body.

So, last night, Lois had slept.

And today was a new day.

All she wanted was one smile from Clark.

And some sunshine. And a lot of miles between them and Metropolis.

But most of all, she wanted that one, genuine smile.

Clark quickly rose to a sitting position as the bathroom door opened. He tried to pull the sleeping bag higher to cover his bare chest.

Lois emerged dressed in jeans and a pale yellow tee shirt and with her hair slightly damp. She looked at him and smiled. "Good morning, Clark," she said brightly.

He tried to respond to her smile, but, concerned it would look more like a grimace, he resorted to words. "Good morning."

Lois walked over to the bed and sat down on her side. "How are you feeling this morning?" she asked.

He shrugged.

"How's your shoulder?"

"Fine."

"Do you mind if I look at it?"

"No."

Lois pulled a handful of tissues from the box next to the bed, swung onto her knees, and edged closer to him. She smelled nice. Her hair was sitting on her shoulder like a smooth dark drape. She had used the apple conditioner.

She untied the sling and eased it from his body. Her fingertips brushed against his skin as she slowly peeled away the tape. A few moments later, she lifted the square patch from the wound on his shoulder.

Clark peered down but wasn't able to crane his neck enough to see properly.

Lois, however, was smiling. "It looks great," she said. She removed each of the butterfly clips and placed them in the tissues with the discarded patch. "You were right about not needing stitches."

He'd known he wouldn't need stitches. If exposure to the rods had continued, stitches wouldn't have helped him heal. With the poison removed, he would heal without stitches. Moyne had accumulated data the way serial killers accumulated corpses.

Although, he'd accumulated those, too.

Clark shook his head and tried to break free from the mesh of macabre thoughts.

Lois had rolled up the tissues and placed them in the plastic bag with the rest of the trash from his surgery. "If we go past a hospital today, we'll dump this in one of their bins," she said.

"In a hospital?"

Her smile tapped on the walls of his heart. "Yep," she said. "It's

easy. You walk into a ward during visiting hours, head to the pan room, and deposit the trash. It will be disposed of safely, no one feels much inclined to go through medical waste, and even if they did, it's hard to trace it back to us."

Obviously, she'd done this before.

Lois picked up the suitcase and laid it on the bed. She turned it to him and flipped open the lid.

"Get some clothes," she said. "Your sneakers are near the door. I brought them in last night." She turned away from him and piled the plates they had used into the sink.

The pastels of Lois's clothes were on top of the suitcase. Clark tentatively pushed them aside to reveal his own clothes. He gathered a bundle, slid from the sleeping bag, and stood up.

He stretched his shoulder experimentally. It was fine. No traces of the surgery at all.

But everywhere else, he still felt weak.

And his spirit felt dead.

As he walked to the bathroom, Lois turned. "If you need any help, just ask," she said. Then she turned back to the sink.

She was trying so hard.

Trying so hard to be what he needed. Trying not to pressure him. Trying not to intrude.

He didn't deserve her.

"Lo ..."

She spun around, grabbed the tea towel, and dried her hands as she walked towards him, her face alight with hope.

She reached him and stopped. Waited for him, her eyes in his.

Clark controlled the compulsion to fold his arms across his bare chest. He didn't know what to say. His mind was a frozen mass. "Lois."

Her hand lifted, and he felt himself tense in anticipation of her touch. Her hand dropped, and he saw the flicker of disappointment cut through her hope.

"I'm sorry," Clark said.

"You don't have to be sorry."

He raised his hands in despair. "I feel so numb. I know I should be feeling relieved, and grateful, and -"

"I think what you're feeling is completely normal," Lois said. "I just wish ..."

He didn't want to ask, but he had to. "You wish what?"

"I wish you'd let me help you."

"I'm not sure what you can do."

"I know that feeling," Lois said. "And I understand that this must be harrowing for you. The rods, the surgery, being hurled back into the world, the future being so uncertain. And it was only a couple of days ago that you heard news about your dad. I understand all of that."

"But?"

She paused. She looked down to where she was still mindlessly drying her hands. When she looked up, her eyes were glistening with tears. "But I thought you trusted me."

"I do trust you."

"You've locked me out."

"It's not you I don't trust."

"I keep telling you that we can do this, and you refuse to believe that it's anything other than an inevitable disaster."

"It's not you I don't trust."

"I can understand you not trusting the entire world," she said, and there was fire in her eyes now. "Some of the people of this planet treated you so badly that I can understand your hesitancy about rejoining it. But I thought you trusted me."

"Lois." He sighed. "Lois."

Her fire cooled a little, and she gave him a tiny smile. "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry," Clark said quickly. "Yesterday was difficult for you, too. You're allowed a little steam."

She smiled — with more strength this time. "I think you should go and have a shower," she said. "Just enjoy it. Don't think about what's going to happen today, or tomorrow, or next week. Don't think about

what happened yesterday or at any time during the past seven years. Just try to relax."

He nodded. "Thank you."

She turned back to the sink, and Clark went into the bathroom and shut the door.

Shadbolt let himself into the compound and sniffed as he put the bags of breakfast sandwiches on the table. The smell of coffee wasn't as prevalent as usual. Perhaps Lois hadn't started the machine yet.

The staffroom was deserted. The bed was empty — but someone had removed the blanket.

Had Lois slept in her office?

She must have.

Shadbolt washed out the carafe, put in fresh coffee beans, and turned on the machine.

Something was wrong.

He could feel it. Something was definitely wrong.

His stomach lurched as sudden fears assaulted him.

No!

He stormed up the stairs and banged on the office door. "Ms Lane! Lois! Are you there?"

There was no reply. No sound. No movement.

He dashed down the stairs, crossed the staffroom in three long strides, and dropped to the floor. He pushed the flap out of the way and peered into the cell.

In the far corner, he saw the prisoner, lying on the ground under the staffroom blanket.

And he saw something else — the rods.

What had happened?

Who had put the rods into the cell?

Was *this* how they intended to terminate the operation?

Where was Lois?

Had she snuck out to get something for breakfast? Shadbolt didn't think so. He couldn't imagine Lois Lane meekly accepting the order that the prisoner be exposed to the rods.

He wriggled forward, trying to see into more of the cell. It didn't look like the aftermath of a confrontation. He snaked his arm through the pet door and groped around for the metal box. It wasn't there.

If the higher-ups had ordered the prisoner's death, had Lois protested and been removed from the compound?

But that didn't explain why the prisoner had been left here without supervision.

Unless he was dead already.

Shadbolt sprang to his feet and flew up the stairs again. He thumped on the door. "Lois!" he shouted. "Lois. Are you there? Are you all right?"

Still, there was no response.

As he ran down the stairs, Shadbolt pulled his wallet from his pocket. He crossed the staffroom, rustling through his wallet for his lock pick.

At the door of the cell, he inserted the pick. The lock gave way; he pushed open the door and entered.

Lois wasn't there. He sprinted to the half-wall just to be absolutely sure. She wasn't in the cell.

Relief flooded through him.

The prisoner hadn't moved. Who had ordered that the rods be brought into the cell? Scardino? If Scardino had ordered this, he should be here, supervising it.

Shadbolt hesitated. There was something going on here that he didn't understand. Should he check the prisoner more closely?

What would that achieve?

Someone had put the rods there, and until Shadbolt had orders otherwise, he couldn't remove them.

But he had no desire to witness their effect at close range.

He returned to the staffroom and poured himself a cup of coffee, but the questions didn't stop pummeling his mind.

Clark turned on the faucet and put his hand into the cold flow of the shower.

When the water had warmed, he stepped out of his sweatpants and briefs and into the stall. The hot water splashed onto his head and shoulders and gushed down his body.

He closed his eyes and tried to do exactly what Lois had advised.

It *did* feel good. Tiny scraps of familiarity surfaced ... things almost forgotten, but not completely obliterated from the bank of his memories.

He took the shampoo Lois had left on the shelf and squirted some into the palm of his hand. He washed his hair — his short, neat, untangled hair. Then, he applied some of the apple-scented conditioner. Its aroma evoked memories of Lois.

When she'd washed his hair.

When she'd sprained her ankle and he'd carried her.

When she'd set up the mattresses, candy bars, and tea so they could work on a jigsaw puzzle together.

The memories wafted through his mind, soothing the tension pinched across his shoulders.

Lois had said that they hadn't changed. Everything else had changed, but there was still them — him and Lois.

They hadn't changed.

But he had.

He had changed so much — not in the past few hours, but during the seven years of captivity. Had anything of Clark Kent survived?

He was going to have to try to reconcile the hardened person he had become with the hostile world that didn't want him.

And somehow, he had to do it without hurting Lois any more than he already had.

Lois rolled up the sleeping bags and untucked the blankets so that the bed looked as if it had been slept in rather than on. She tidied the room and began to pack their belongings into the Buick. She took her dad's touring map out of the glove compartment, spread it on the table, and planned a general route. It didn't have to be direct or purposeful. In fact, less deliberate made it harder to track.

She scrutinised the room, checking every drawer, every nook, every possible place where something could be concealed. The notepad was no longer on the floor. It seemed important to Clark — Lois was sure he would have put it somewhere safe.

The bathroom door opened, and Clark walked out — wearing his glasses and dressed in jeans and a black tee shirt.

Black was *definitely* his colour.

Lois wiped the overt appreciation from her expression and smiled casually. "We just need to pack the things from the bathroom, and we're ready to go," she said.

Clark came to the table and perused the map. "Where are we going?"

She took his interest as a good sign. "I thought we'd follow this highway for a while," she said, as her forefinger traced a black line. "We should be able to make good time."

He nodded. His eyes met hers.

Her heart stopped.

"Lois?" he said quietly.

"Yes, Clark?"

"It's not you I don't trust — it's me."

"Why?"

"Because I wasn't able to stop them taking my parents. Because I don't even know who I am anymore. Because I am totally powerless. Because sometimes, everything seems so dark, and I don't know how to get through that. Because I'm petrified that I'm going to hurt you."

"You'll learn to trust yourself again," she said with quiet certainty.

"Will I?" he asked doubtfully.

"Yes," Lois said. "You helped me learn to trust again. If you'll let me, I'd like to help you."

"Thanks ... thanks for not pushing ... not pushing the ... other stuff."

The other stuff? Like the fact that she was totally in love with him? Like the fact that, even now, the persistent thought running through her head was how much she wanted to take him into her arms and hold him? Hold him close? Bury her fingers into his hair? And try to reach him with something other than mere words?

"Let's get going, shall we?" Lois said in a voice that had just enough substance to avoid being a squeak.

Clark nodded.

"We need to put the sling back on," she said. "Just in case the woman is looking out of the window."

"OK."

Lois got the sling, and Clark sat down. She lingered on every touch ... just a little. She let her fingers drift across his neck.

He didn't respond. But he didn't flinch either.

When it was done, she smiled at him. "Let's go."

He stood, and together, they picked up the rest of their things and went outside to face the first day of their new lives.

Something was definitely wrong.

Shadbolt slapped his coffee on the table and lurched from his seat.

He opened the cell door and strode towards the prisoner's unmoving figure. After kicking one of the rods out of the way, he crouched behind the prisoner and drew back the blanket.

"AGGGGGHHHHHHH!"

Part 3

Shadbolt jolted backwards, his heart hammering, his brain reeling. He spread his hand across his mouth, his fingers and thumb pressing deeply into his cheeks as he braced himself to look again. It was still there — the bony deadpan face of a skeleton surrounded by a shock of dark hair.

Shadbolt's hand dropped, and a string of expletives erupted from his mouth.

Almost a minute had passed before he regained enough equanimity to crouch low and grasp the corner of the blanket. He lifted it, revealing the length of the 'body'. He could see foot bones poking out from the pants of the coveralls and hand bones from the sleeves.

Shadbolt replaced the blanket. He stepped back, pegged his hands on his hips, and slowly shook his head.

Surely not.

She couldn't have ...

But the alternative was that the prisoner had attacked Lois, and if that was what had happened, how had he managed to set this up? How had he managed to procure a skeleton? And coveralls?

This could not have been done without help.

Who?

It could not have been Longford.

Scardino?

No. He hadn't shown a scrap of interest in this operation in two years.

If anyone had engineered the escape of the prisoner, it had to be Lois Lane.

What now?

If she were in any danger, he needed to notify Scardino.

But this was bigger than just Lois's safety.

An alien — an accused killer — was loose.

For over three decades, Shadbolt's job had been to gather information to assist in the protection of the citizens of the United States.

He turned from the skeleton and hurried across the cell. He passed through the staffroom and climbed the stairs. At the top, he inserted his pick into the lock of Lois's office. It gave easily, and he pushed open the door and switched on the light.

Shadbolt ran his eyes over the bizarre collection of things that covered her desk and then stopped suddenly. *Two* racquets. Not one, but two.

He stepped up to her desk and rustled through it. There was a large mirror, a tin of white paint, half a bag of small nails, several off-cuts of

lumber, a hammer, a saw, one tennis ball, a video tape of the movie *Beethoven*, and a jigsaw puzzle box.

Shadbolt picked up the box and opened it. Chunks of pieces were still hanging together — as if it had been pulled apart in haste.

This box had been in the cell. One of the racquets had been in the cell. He'd seen them in there. Both were too big to fit through the pet door. Someone had opened the main door.

If the prisoner had kidnapped Lois, would he have taken the time to pull apart a jigsaw puzzle and return it to her office?

Shadbolt took the telephone directory from her desk and looked up 'sewing machines'.

He found the number of the store in the arcade off Westborough Street and punched it into his cell phone. It was after eight o'clock. Hopefully someone would have arrived at the store by now.

While the call connected, he returned the directory and left Lois's office. He locked the door, and halfway down the stairs, his call was answered.

"Janelle's Sewing Store," came a female voice.

"Could I speak with Angus, please?" Shadbolt asked.

"Angus?"

"Yes. He repaired a Pfaff machine two days ago."

"Sorry," she said. "You must have the wrong store. No one called Angus works here."

"You don't have a contractor? Anyone?"

"No. All repairs are done by Janelle and her husband, Steve."

"OK. Thanks."

In the staffroom, Shadbolt slumped into the chair, took a gulp of his tepid coffee, and stared at his cell phone.

He should call Lois.

If she answered, he would know she was all right.

But if she'd done the unthinkable, she wouldn't answer.

Shadbolt thumbed in her number and wasn't surprised when the recorded message told him that her cell was either out of range or turned off.

Could it be possible that she wasn't aware of this development?

No, he decided. From what he knew about Lois Lane, very little happened in her operation that escaped her attention.

The hair on the skeleton looked like the alien's hair. That meant someone had cut it. Shadbolt's eyes fell on the pet door. Had the real reason for its installation been so that he and Longford wouldn't notice what was happening in the cell?

A haircut.

Had Lois given him scissors?

Or had she cut his hair?

Either way, it showed that she trusted him.

Who had made the wig?

Regardless of who had made it, someone other than the prisoner had obtained the swimming cap.

The tennis racquet and the jigsaw puzzle could be attributed to trying to alleviate boredom, but there was no valid reason for a swim cap in a room with neither a shower nor a pool.

Shadbolt knew Lois had been into the cell. She'd said that Moyne had pushed her in, and perhaps he had. But she'd been adamant that the prisoner hadn't hurt her.

She didn't believe that the prisoner had killed Deller and Bortolotto.

Was Lois Lane the sort of person who could see injustice and accept it? Or would she try to do something about it?

Shadbolt knew the answer.

She would try to repair the unrepairable.

Just like Layla's sewing machine.

Shadbolt shook his head.

He'd lost his touch.

Seven years of babysitting a ... a ... a whatever he was ... had blunted his ability to see beyond the obvious.

Lois Lane had been working *with* the prisoner almost from the start of her time in this operation. Had she been placed here — by

Scardino or someone higher — to free the captive? Now that Trask was dead, was this how they had decided to terminate the operation?

Or had she acted of her own volition?

Either way, she'd had multiple opportunities to reassess her involvement with the prisoner. She could have gone to Scardino, or higher, if she'd had any concerns about her safety. If she were with the prisoner now, it had to be because she'd chosen to be.

Should he call Scardino?

If Lois had done this on Scardino's orders, Scardino didn't need to be told.

If Lois had done this on the orders of someone higher than Scardino, that was good enough reason to leave him out of it.

But if she had done this without the approval of anyone, what she needed most was time.

For now, Shadbolt decided, he should make himself another cup of coffee and wait to see what happened next.

"What would you like for breakfast?" Lois asked.

"I don't want to go in anywhere," Clark replied.

"That's fine. I'll get us something and bring it to the car. We'll stop at the next diner."

"Thanks."

They had driven for over an hour as the sky behind them had slowly lightened. Lois had made occasional remarks about the passing scenery. Clark had stared out of the window, but if he'd seen anything that provoked his interest, he hadn't made any comment.

She wondered whether he was actively observing or whether his mind was so preoccupied with his introspection that there was no room to process what was happening around him.

Since leaving the motel, he hadn't inquired about either their location or their destination. Lois's plan was to get as far from Metropolis as possible. She hoped that soon ... tomorrow, maybe ... Clark would be ready to take some interest in their route.

They were heading west. And west led, eventually, to Kansas.

But Clark couldn't go home. As soon as their disappearance was discovered, the Kent farmhouse — and possibly surrounding areas — would be placed under surveillance. Soon, they were going to have to make the decision to veer north or south.

For now, she intended staying on the highway. Distance was her priority. If things had gone as she hoped, no one knew they were missing yet. This afternoon, she would start to look for smaller, more remote roads.

She saw the sign for a diner and smiled across at Clark. "Let's eat, huh?"

He nodded.

"Are you hungry?"

"Do we have much money?"

"We have enough for now," Lois replied easily. "Don't worry about it."

But he was worrying; she could tell. About money. About her. About being hunted down. About assimilating into a society that had condemned him. About their future.

"What would you like to eat?" Lois asked.

"I'm not sure what they'll have."

Lois tempered her sigh, but perhaps Clark sensed something of it in her expression.

"Perhaps something hot?" he ventured.

Lois gave him a wide smile of encouragement. "I'm hungry," she said. "And I think we'll both feel better after we've eaten."

Clark sat in the car, open and exposed.

Lois had disappeared into the diner. He'd wanted to be alone. But now that he was alone, he wanted her back. She was his anchor in this daunting world.

His eyes were riveted to the door. It opened, and Clark held his breath. Two young men emerged.

Clark waited.

It opened again, and a woman and a child appeared.

The door began to swing shut, stopped, and opened again.

And there was Lois, her hands full with their breakfast. Clark watched her, impossibly torn. He should help her, but that would mean leaving the harbour of the car. He paused, and the moment was gone. He leant across the driver's seat and opened her door.

"Thanks," she said as if she hadn't noticed his inadequacy.

He took the two cups, and Lois lifted a flap from the centre console, revealing two hollow rings and a rectangular depression.

"Can you organise breakfast while I drive?" she asked.

"OK."

She put the bags of food in the pit and grinned at him. "I got you a hamburger," she announced.

A hamburger? That must be the cause of the delicious aroma that was pervading the car. "Thanks."

"I got a bagel and some cream cheese for myself. There's a plastic knife in one of the bags. I don't take sugar in my coffee, but I got some for you." After a final smile, she pulled out of the diner and onto the road.

Clark put the two cups into the rings and opened the smaller bag. He cut the bagel in half, peeled back the top of the tub of cream cheese, and spread it over the bagel. Then he offered one half to Lois.

She glanced in his direction. "Thanks."

She drove. He handed her food and coffee.

They both ate.

His hamburger — containing a thick and juicy patty with crisp lettuce and succulent tomato — tasted even better than he remembered.

And little by little, the world brightened.

When they were finished eating, Lois stopped on the side of the road.

"What's wrong?" Clark asked.

"Nothing," Lois replied as she wiped her hands and mouth on the napkin. "But there's more sun on this side of the car, so I think you should sit behind me for a while."

Clark was relieved she hadn't suggested that he drive.

"Would you like to?"

"Yeah," Clark said. The sun would hasten his healing — and sitting in the backseat would give him some time and space to be alone with his thoughts. He opened the car door, shuffled across the back seat, and fastened the seat belt.

"All set?" Lois asked.

"Uh huh."

She pulled smoothly back onto the road, and their journey into the unknown continued.

Daniel Scardino was worried about Lois Lane.

He shouldn't have yielded to her insistence that she oversee the final hours of the alien's life.

He'd been at his office since early morning, awaiting the phone call to confirm that Neville Moyne had arrived at the location of his new assignment.

Scardino had heard nothing.

And as each hour had passed, his anxiety had escalated.

There was a chance that something had befallen Moyne en route — but Scardino knew there could be many other explanations for his lack of communication.

But there was another thought that had started as little more than a vague notion and had expanded to the degree that it now filled his mind.

He'd never quite been able to dismiss the possibility that Moyne would seek revenge on Lois.

Could he have delayed his departure in order to return to Metropolis and witness the alien's death? If Moyne had been in regular contact with Menzies, there was every chance he would know what had been ordered.

Three times, Scardino had called Lois on her cell phone — twice

using her regular number and once using the secret number that was reserved for emergencies.

Every time, the response had been the same — the phone was either out of contact or turned off.

He'd come close to deserting his office phone and driving to the compound.

But Moyne — assuming he had actually gone — would have only a short window of opportunity to call as he passed through the last small town before leaving civilization to head into more isolated regions.

And Scardino had information that would be crucial to Moyne's assignment — information that hadn't been delivered until late last night.

Scardino leapt from his chair and paced the length of his office. Why didn't Lane have her cell turned on?

And where the hell was Moyne?

Clark hadn't spoken or moved for a long time. Lois adjusted her rear-view mirror and discovered that his eyes were closed.

The sun rose higher in the sky, its rays strengthened, and Lois hoped they were rejuvenating Clark physically while sleep restored him emotionally.

It was well past midday when she left the highway as it curved through a town. She searched for a cafe near a park — somewhere quiet enough that Clark might consider leaving the car.

She found the ideal place and parked the Buick. In the back seat, Clark stirred. He sat up and looked around.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Pennsylvania," Lois replied. "Just short of the West Virginia border."

"What's the time?"

"Nearly one o'clock."

"We should get off the highway soon."

"Yeah," Lois agreed. "But we need to eat first."

Anxiety doused his expression as he peered out of the car window. "I thought we could buy something and sit in the park to eat," Lois said nonchalantly.

Clark scanned the area.

There were only a few people in sight.

Lois held her breath.

"OK," he said.

"Great," she said. "I'll get us some food and drinks."

"Would ... would you like me to look for somewhere to sit?"

Lois had to restrain herself from lunging between the front seats and throwing her arms around his neck. She nodded with admirable restraint. "That would be good."

He looked outside the car again, his face filled with uncertainty.

"Clark?" Lois said.

"Uhhmm?"

"You have every right to be here. If you believe it, no one else will question it."

Clark's expression closed.

"Not everyone is like Trask," she said gently. "Relax — and no one will even notice you."

"Should I take off the sling?"

"Good idea," Lois said. "It's always best to mix things up a bit."

He ducked his head and removed the sling.

"I'll get our lunch." Lois climbed out of the car and forced herself to walk away. It felt as if she were abandoning him. As she approached the cafe — without even a backward glance — she reminded herself that Clark had survived seven years of torturous imprisonment. He might feel as if his reserves of resilience were depleted, but she was sure that his innate strength and tenacity were still there.

He just had to regain some confidence in himself.

And now seemed like a good time to start.

Clark opened the door and inched out from the car. The rays of the

sun bounced off his shoulders. His eyes flittered along the sidewalk. There were people everywhere. Two men were coming directly for him.

They passed by — kept walking, without even looking at him. Clark stepped onto the kerb.

A woman came from the other direction. Her head turned. Her eyes fixed on him.

Clark held his breath and fought against the compelling need to shrink back into the car.

She smiled ... and continued walking.

Clark shut the door, trying to calm his thumping heart.

Around him, the cars whizzed by. Their fumes encroached upon his sense of smell. The noise of their engines roared through his eardrums.

About thirty yards to his right was the park — a rectangle of grass with a few trees and a strip of white ankle-high flowers. Between two of the trees was a bench. No one was using it. The park was vacant.

Clark turned and walked forward, feeling the burden of a thousand pairs of eyes fastened on him. He stalled a few yards from the bench. No one else seemed to be approaching it. He sat down, perched right on the end.

An elderly man with a brown and white terrier on a lead crossed the road. The dog looked at Clark; the man didn't.

On the other side of the road, a woman pushed a stroller with a small child toddling beside her. The child — a boy — tripped and almost fell. His mom stopped the stroller and bent low to him. She gave him a quick hug and a warm smile. He clasped the stroller again, and they continued.

"Good spot."

At the sound of Lois's voice, Clark looked up. She sat next to him — a wave of familiarity in an ocean of strangeness.

"I wasn't sure if you would want a cold drink or a hot one," she said. "But it was getting warm in the car, so I thought we'd start with soda."

He nodded and took the bag that she offered.

"I got you a smoked chicken and Swiss cheese melt and a side of fries."

"Thanks."

She popped the lid of her soda can. "Can I ask all of my questions and get them over with?" she said with a smile.

"OK."

"How's your shoulder?"

"Good. It feels no different from the other one."

Lois grinned happily. "You heal wonderfully well."

"The sun helped."

"How are *you* feeling?"

"I don't know."

"Better than this morning?" she probed. "Worse?"

"Physically, I feel better."

"That's good." Lois drank from her can, which gave Clark a moment to take a bite from his melt. "Is it all right if I ask more questions?"

He nodded his agreement, although he couldn't quite dispel the vague dread that she would ask something he couldn't answer.

"Do you know how long it will take to recover?"

"It varies. I'm probably recovered now."

"Recovered," she said. "But not 'super'?"

Super? "In the cell last week, it took about four days before I could lift off the ground. It was hard to tell, because I wasn't sure if someone was watching me, so I had to be careful."

"But last week, you didn't have as much sun to help."

"And this time, I only had one dose of the rods."

"But it was a long dose."

Clark shook his head. "Not really," he said.

Lois winced, and sympathy flooded her eyes.

"We should get off the highway," Clark said, wanting to change the subject. "They'll be looking for us soon."

"Do you have any preference as to whether we go southwest or northwest?"

"North?"

Lois nodded easily. "Any reason why?"

"I've never been north of Chicago."

Her look of surprise seemed to require an explanation.

Clark leant towards her and muttered, "Not at ground level, anyway."

Lois grinned. "North, it is then."

They ate in silence, and when the food and sodas were gone, Lois picked up the two McIntosh apples and offered him one.

"I need to stretch my legs," she said. "Would you like to come with me?"

Clark wasn't able to control the impulse to scour the area for possible hazards. "I ..."

Lois smiled through her disappointment. "That's OK. I won't be long. You can wait in the car."

"No. I ..." A sudden vision flashed into his mind ... a vision of Lois's face as she had picked up the scalpel and placed it on his skin. Her horror had been heart-wrenchingly obvious. But she had overcome her aversion and done for him what he couldn't have done for himself. "I ... I'll come," he said.

Lois beamed. "Let's go," she said. "We can eat our apples as we walk."

Clark stood and followed Lois as she threw their trash in the can. She looked up at him with an encouraging smile.

His eyes travelled a wide semi-circle from left to right. They could walk *anywhere*. They could cross the road, they could walk through the park, they could continue ahead. His sweep finished with Lois, and her head turned to him with her ready smile.

He was so privileged to have her support.

Without her ... without her, he would be lost. Hopelessly lost.

Impulsively, he slipped his hand into hers.

She looked straight ahead and continued munching on her apple.

But he could feel her pleasure in the way her hand tightened around his.

Scardino glanced at the wall clock for about the thousandth time.

Where Moyne was, it would be late evening.

By now, it was too late for him to be able to leave the town. He would have to bunk down for the night — which meant he could try to call again if no one answered his first attempt.

Scardino had called Lane five more times, and both of her cell phones were still unavailable. He couldn't wait any longer. He had to know if she were all right.

He had to find out what was happening at the compound.

Lois's heart was singing as she strolled around the park with her hand firmly entrenched in Clark's.

She remembered the day — less than two weeks ago — when she had walked through Metropolis and her thoughts had been heavy with the appalling realisation of what imprisonment entailed for the man she was guarding.

Now, he was with her.

Judging by the slight jumpiness in his stride and the way his hand clenched reflexively every time there was a sudden noise, she guessed he wasn't actually enjoying the freedom to walk in the early afternoon sunshine. She wondered if the conglomeration of sights, sounds, and smells felt like a banquet or an assault on his senses.

She wanted to tell him how proud she was of him. She wanted to stop walking, and take him into her arms, and hold him ... to celebrate his freedom and saturate him with her optimism that this was a beginning, not an interlude.

Her hand squeezed his, and she looked up at him with a restrained smile.

His mouth didn't move, but Lois imagined she saw a tinge of relaxation ease through his posture.

Tiny steps, she reminded herself. Tiny steps.
They had a lifetime to work at this.

By the time Scardino reached the door of the compound on Bessolo Boulevard, he had convinced himself that something had gone horribly wrong. He took out his frustration by drumming loudly on the door.

He was a fool.

He should never have agreed to Lois doing this alone.

If the alien had resisted ... if Lois had been hurt ... Scardino would never forgive himself.

As he reached into his pocket for his set of keys, he heard footsteps on the other side of the door, and relief inundated him.

The door opened abruptly — but it wasn't Lois who stared back, it was Shadbolt.

"Where's Ms Lane?" Scardino snapped.

"I think you should come inside," Shadbolt replied.

Scardino felt the cold coat of trepidation creep over him. "Is she all right? What happened? Why didn't you call me?"

Shadbolt stepped back and gestured for Scardino to enter.

Scardino strode into the staffroom and fired his question before Shadbolt was completely in the room. "Where is Ms Lane?"

"I don't know."

"What? She's supposed to be here. She'd supposed to be watching the prisoner."

Shadbolt pushed open the door to the cell. "Perhaps you should look for yourself."

Scardino's eyes jolted from Shadbolt's inscrutable expression to the open doorway and back again. Something had happened. Something had gone wrong.

But if Lois were hurt, surely Shadbolt wouldn't be standing there so passively.

Scardino stormed past Shadbolt and into the cell.

After finishing their apples and using the restrooms, Lois and Clark returned to the Buick.

"Will you be all right if I slip into a store for a few moments?"

Lois asked. "I need to buy a couple of things."

"OK."

Lois handed him the keys, gave him a parting smile, and walked away.

Scardino stared at the grotesque face of the skeleton as rabid speculation blitzed his mind. He turned on Shadbolt. "Where is she?" he demanded. "What happened?"

"I don't know," Shadbolt said with exasperating calmness. "When I arrived, this is exactly what I found."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"I figured someone had ordered this. It's not my place to question the orders given to my boss."

Scardino scowled at him. "Don't give me that. You should have called me the instant you discovered the prisoner was missing. Why didn't you?"

"I tried to call Ms Lane, but she is unavailable."

"That wasn't my question."

Shadbolt straightened his shoulders. "OK," he said. "This operation has been in your portfolio for two years. You came here for five minutes to meet us, and then we didn't see you again until you brought Ms Lane here two weeks ago."

His implication was clear — Scardino had done nothing to earn his trust.

Scardino deliberately wiped the animosity from his posture. "What do you think happened?"

Shadbolt shrugged.

"You must have some idea."

"I don't know anything," Shadbolt said quietly. "Anything I said would be mere conjecture."

"Do you think she has been hurt?"

"No."

"You think she's OK?" Scardino asked, wanting to believe it might be possible.

"Yes, I do."

Scardino rubbed the bridge of his nose as, over his hand, he again looked at the skeleton.

"What are you going to do?" Shadbolt asked.

Scardino swept his hands through his hair and sighed deeply.

What was he going to do?

When Lois returned to the Buick, Clark was sitting in the front passenger seat. She climbed into the driver's seat and put her bag behind the seat.

Clark held out the keys, and their hands made brief contact as she took them from him. Lois pushed the key into the ignition, but didn't start the motor. She turned to Clark.

"Is anything wrong?" he asked.

"No," Lois said. "I just wanted to tell you that I realise how hard that must have been for you."

He looked embarrassed by her words. "It was just lunch in a park," he said.

She smiled. This felt a little like some of their times in the cell.

"Well, it might be just lunch in the park," she said easily. "But I was impressed by your composure."

"It felt like everyone was looking at me."

Lois chuckled. "Don't worry," she said. "If anyone *was* looking at you, it wouldn't have been because they thought you were weird."

"How do you know?"

"Because if I saw you in the street, I'd look at you, too."

"Why?"

It was a genuine question — forged by the damage wreaked by years of abuse. Lois started the engine. "You're tall. You're dark. You're handsome," she stated offhandedly. "Three out of three — people are going to look at you."

As she backed out of the parking spot, Lois glanced surreptitiously at Clark and turned away to hide her smile.

His face was swathed in shock.

Lois said nothing. Let him stew on that for a while.

Part 4

You're tall. You're dark. You're handsome.

Lois's words reverberated around Clark's mind.

You're an animal — a dirty inhuman animal.

Trask's condemnation circled slowly, eyeing the newcomer, unwilling to give ground easily.

You're tall. You're an animal. You're dark. You're dirty. You're handsome. You're inhuman.

Clark was distracted from the conflict when Lois pulled into a rather dilapidated service station and stopped next to a gas pump.

"Could you fill the tank, please?" she asked.

"Ah, OK," he said, hoping it was one of those things you never forgot how to do.

Lois smiled. "Thanks." She handed him the keys, lifted her bag from the back seat, climbed out of the Buick, and walked away.

As Clark filled the tank, the gas fumes abraded his nostrils. When the tank was full, he returned the nozzle and paused, unsure what to do next. He busied himself with washing the windshield.

A minute later, Lois appeared from the ramshackle building, carrying her bag. Her posture seemed upbeat — as if something had pleased her.

"Did you pay?" Clark asked.

"Yep," she chirped.

Clark got into the passenger seat and tried to read her expression. "Is everything all right?"

"Everything's fine," she assured him.

Five miles out of the town, Lois turned onto a smaller road, and a minute, she later stopped the Buick. She reached into her bag and

withdrew an Indiana licence plate.

Clark's mouth fell open.

"I'm hoping Scardino will look for my car first," Lois said. "But my dad is listed as my next of kin, so Scardino could find this registration number. If he were to involve local cops in a search for us, it's going to be a lot harder to stay hidden." She opened the door and got out of the car.

Clark got out, too. "This is your dad's car?"

Lois opened the trunk and took a small screwdriver from the metal toolbox. "Yeah, this is Dad's. I asked him if I could borrow it." She crouched down and lifted the screwdriver to the licence plate.

"Would you like me to do it?" Clark asked.

She handed him the screwdriver. "Sure."

He removed the original plate, and gave it to Lois. When Clark had affixed the new plate, the original plate was nowhere in sight.

A minute later, they were driving again.

"How did you get the new licence plate?" Clark asked.

"While we were eating lunch, I noticed a pawnbroker," Lois replied. "Even if they are running a totally legitimate business, they usually know where things can be ... acquired." She grinned.

"Acquired?" Clark asked. He could feel a smile nudging at his mouth.

She nodded. "He told me that he'd heard that licence plates could be acquired at that filling station. Easy."

"Easy," Clark echoed.

Scardino dragged the blanket from the skeleton and bent low to examine the feet. The bones were strung together with wire.

So, this wasn't the body of the alien after having undergone a bizarre post-death purging. Who knew what was typical for beings from other planets?

And — more importantly — it didn't need to be reported as a possible murder.

Scardino stood, replaced the blanket, and went into the staffroom. He hunched against the table and folded his arms across his chest.

Shadbolt was at the coffee machine. "Coffee?"

Scardino shook his head. "Do you think she's gone with him?"

"I don't know anything. I wasn't here."

"I didn't ask what you knew," Scardino barked. "I asked what you thought."

Shadbolt opened the fridge and took out the milk. "What are you going to do?"

"Will you stop asking -" Sudden insight stalled Scardino's outburst. Shadbolt wasn't asking for his conclusion, he was asking for his intentions. "I'm going to protect my agent," Scardino declared. "And I am trying to determine whether she needs protection from the alien."

"OK," Shadbolt said as he returned the milk. He shut the fridge door and picked up his cup. "I think it is most likely that she has gone with him."

Scardino wasn't sure if that were good news or bad. "Willingly?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because she doesn't believe he killed Deller and Bortolotto."

"How would she know? She wasn't here then."

"Trask's logic was flawed," Shadbolt said. "His notes had inconsistencies."

"What inconsistencies?"

"There is an entry in Trask's log about the surgery he performed on the prisoner." Shadbolt frowned. "Actually, according to his records, I did it."

"Did you?"

"No."

"That isn't proof that the prisoner didn't kill Deller and Bortolotto."

"The sheer brutality of the murders made it easy to believe they were the work of a depraved alien," Shadbolt said. "But I'd seen how

he collapsed in pain immediately a rod was introduced into the cell. Therefore, the logical conclusion was that he was faking the effect of the rods."

"Meaning he could kill, even in the presence of the rods?"

"Exactly," Shadbolt said. "But then I learnt about the surgery — an Achilles implant that would activate if he left the cell. If the prisoner had been feigning his reaction to the rods, he had no reason not to escape when the door was open during the incident with Moyne and Lois."

Scardino rubbed across the day-old bristles on his chin. "Who told you what the surgery entailed?"

"Lois."

"How did she know?"

"She said she'd seen the lump in his shoulder." Shadbolt took a slow swig from his coffee.

"It's an enormous leap from seeing a lump in his shoulder to being certain the implant would kill him if he escaped."

Shadbolt said nothing ... and suddenly, Scardino knew. Lois had communicated with the prisoner. She'd been into the cell. More than the one time with Moyne.

And she had come out — unhurt.

"But Trask noted that the alien was exposed for a long time before the surgery was possible," Scardino said. "So perhaps the effects weren't immediate."

"I think the long exposure was needed to enable penetration of his skin," Shadbolt said. "But that's not really important — the major inconsistency surrounds Bortolotto's death."

"Go on," Scardino prompted, wondering what he'd missed in Trask's notes.

"In December of 1991, Trask reintroduced the discipline sessions. At first, I thought he was starting to believe — as I did — that the mere presence of the rods was ineffectual, so he'd decided to use them as weapons to inflict physical damage."

Scardino nodded. "I remember reading that."

"I remember it being a barrage that went on for months," Shadbolt said dourly.

"And Bortolotto died in February, 1992," Scardino said as grim realisation wormed into his heart. "So the prisoner — injured by the constant beatings and weakened by the rods — could not have killed Bortolotto?"

"No," Shadbolt said bleakly. "But we either didn't care or were too indoctrinated with Trask's insanity to see it." He snorted with disgust. "And I'm supposed to be an agent."

Scardino dreaded the answer to his next question, but he had to ask. "So who did kill them?"

"All I know is that it wasn't me."

"And it couldn't have been Longford — he came after Bortolotto's death."

Which left Trask and Moyne. Trask was dead — he'd caused a mountain of trouble, but he couldn't cause any more. Moyne, on the other hand ...

The photos of the butchered bodies gouged a repugnant and alarming chasm through Scardino's mind.

"I don't understand why she felt she had to run away with him," Shadbolt said. "Surely she could have done something less drastic."

Scardino knew why. "What makes you so sure that Lois went willingly?"

"Her office is full of stuff that suggests she has had contact with him. And the swimming cap wig ... the skeleton ... This was planned."

Scardino hauled in a shaky breath. If only Lois were safe ... Nothing else mattered.

But he still had to decide what to do now.

Menzies had ordered that the operation be terminated. Lois had terminated it. Unless ... "Do you think he's a threat?" Scardino asked. "To anyone? To the safety of the human race?"

Shadbolt stared at his coffee for a prolonged moment. "Trask was

so sure they were coming,” he said sombrely. “But Trask was also sure about other things ... things that have proven to be incorrect.”

“Do you think he’s a threat?” Scardino persisted.

“Lois was willing to risk her life on him not being a threat,” Shadbolt noted. “How much confidence do you have in her judgement?”

Scardino considered that. Lois Lane was a brilliant operative. Her achievements were many, and she had an uncanny knack of jumping the right way. She didn’t trust easily. Her one error — by her own admission — was the decision that had led to Linda King’s death. Scardino had read the counsellor’s report. Her opinion had been that although Lois accepted responsibility, there was good reason to believe it had been Linda’s decision to trust the local man.

Lois Lane — grieving and full of self-recriminations — would be less likely to trust following the tragedy of her previous assignment.

So, if she trusted the alien ...

“I have a lot of confidence in her judgement,” Scardino said as, in his mind, the path opened up before him and the way ahead crystallised. He stared levelly at Shadbolt. “Do you wish to leave now? Or do you wish to help me bring this to an end?”

“If you’re going to cover for Lois, I’ll stay and help you,” Shadbolt said without hesitation.

His staunch support came as a shock to Scardino, and unsettling questions rose in his mind. “Can I ask you something?”

“OK,” Shadbolt agreed.

“What did Lois do? She was only been here for two weeks, but you were willing to put your career on the line to give her some time.”

Shadbolt swirled his coffee. “She has the ability to look beyond the surface, she doesn’t accept the most-obvious scenario without investigating it for herself, and she always treated me as if she thought I was more than an embittered old grouch.”

Shadbolt’s words felt like scolding condemnation. Lois had cared. Conversely, he, Daniel Scardino, hadn’t given a damn.

“I figure it isn’t too much of a stretch to think she did the same with the prisoner,” Shadbolt said.

The way ahead shone with almost blinding clarity. It was the only possible course of action. It was the *right* thing to do. “What do you know about the process of someone assuming a new identity?” Scardino asked.

“Very little. That isn’t my field of expertise.”

“The most watertight new identities start with a record of death.”

Shadbolt nodded. “Falsify the death of the former identity.”

Scardino pulled his cell phone from his pocket as the heavy burden of this operation magically lifted. Very soon, it would be over. “I’ll spare you the details,” he said, “but by this evening, I’ll be able to report to Menzies that the alien is dead and the body has been disposed of.”

“Menzies?” Shadbolt exclaimed. “Did he order the alien be killed?”

Scardino nodded. “Didn’t Lois tell you?”

“No,” Shadbolt said. “But it explains why she felt she had no choice but to run.”

“Yeah.”

“Are you going to use the skeleton?”

Scardino considered. “Makes sense,” he said. “We don’t need the demolition guys finding bones in the rubble.”

“What are you going to do with the rods?”

That was the only decision remaining. If he disposed of the rods, the world would be defenceless should the alien — or any of his kind — choose to attack. If he didn’t, he had to decide where to keep them. He had to ensure that no one could ever gain access to them. Menzies hadn’t included any directives about the rods. Did that mean he didn’t consider an alien invasion to be a likely occurrence?

Or did it mean he had issued his orders without much thought?

It was one thing to trust Lois’s judgement with regard to her own safety. The protection of humankind was another thing entirely.

Lois had been an agent for six years. She had committed her life to

protecting the world’s citizens who wished to live in peace. She wouldn’t have released the prisoner if she had any doubts about him being a future threat.

But to leave the entire world vulnerable ...

“I think they should be destroyed,” Shadbolt said quietly.

“Why?”

“Call it compensation.”

Compensation? That raised another dilemma in the midst of this tangle that had been initiated by paranoia and sustained by abject apathy and bigotry. If the prisoner had never been dangerous, what had happened here was deplorable.

But compensation?

Part of Scardino’s responsibility was to protect the organisation.

If the building was demolished and every record wiped — as Menzies had ordered — the prisoner would be free to continue whatever life he’d had before his capture. Lois would be free to resume her career when she returned from leave.

And if the former prisoner should ever decide to go public and pursue legal action, there would be minimal evidence to support his claim.

It wouldn’t right the wrongs, but it would allow for the possibility of a fresh start. The cost of Trask’s delusion would be seven years — not a lifetime.

Menzies had said that *every* trace of this operation was to be destroyed.

“We’ll put the rods and the skeleton in a casket and take it to the crematorium,” Scardino said. “We’ll do it now — before Menzies decides to check on the progress of his orders.”

“I assume we have a crematorium we use when there isn’t a body?” Shadbolt asked with a small grin.

Scardino nodded. He punched some numbers into his cell phone.

In a short time, this would be over.

Scardino eyed Shadbolt solemnly. “If anyone ever asks, we found a body in the cell.”

Shadbolt nodded. “We did,” he said.

The two men shook hands.

And a secret was forged.

The road took Lois and Clark through tiny towns, but most of the time, they weaved through fields containing either animals or crops.

They reminded Clark of his childhood.

And his parents.

And although the memories hurt, the rural ambience brought a sense of peace. Familiarity. And that familiarity birthed the realisation that he yearned to return home.

It wasn’t going to be possible, but had it been his choice, Clark knew he would go home. He would look for his mom, find her, and take her back to the farm in Smallville.

It wouldn’t restore everything they had lost, but it was infinitely better than anything he had dared to dream in such a long time.

And Lois?

Where did that scenario leave Lois?

It left her free to return to her life. If she knew that he was happy and settled on the farm with his mom, she could return to something like her former life.

That thought stabbed at him.

But he’d always known that Lois was temporary in his life.

Eventually, she would walk away from him, and he would be left with a heart that was irreparably broken and a mind that perhaps one day would be able to take comfort in a shoal of memories.

“Is it imperative that you leave now?”

Eric Menzies looked down at the very young nurse. “I have a job to do,” he snapped. “I can’t spend hour after hour sitting next to a hospital bed.”

“This is your wife we’re talking about.”

“She doesn’t seem to notice whether I’m there or not.”

“She will notice if you leave her.”

Menzies sighed. Could he trust Scardino to oversee the first stage in the windup of the alien operation?

He had no choice.

He couldn't leave Phoebe.

“I'll stay,” he said gruffly to the nurse. “But I have to make a call first.”

She smiled, and Eric got the feeling he had just been outmanoeuvred by someone close to half his height and one third of his age. He paced the length of the corridor while he waited for Scardino to answer his call.

“Daniel Scardino.”

“Scardino. It's Menzies. I have been unavoidably detained. What's happening with the operation?”

“The first part has been accomplished. I'm returning to my office to -”

“Accomplished? What does that mean?”

“I disposed of the consequence of your orders,” Scardino said as if his meaning should have been obvious.

“Disposed of?”

“By the customary means. The building will be demolished tomorrow.”

Menzies stopped pacing. “Everything went ... well?”

“Everything went as planned,” Scardino said. “Will you arrange for the disposal of the written records?”

“Yes.”

“I will come to your office on Monday to report the successful conclusion of the operation.”

Scardino sounded remarkably competent. Too competent. Something wasn't right.

“Mr Menzies!”

Eric turned towards the sound of his name.

The young nurse glided towards him. “Your wife is asking for you,” she said with a told-you-so smile.

“I have to go,” Menzies said into the phone. “Be in my office at two o'clock sharp on Monday.”

He disconnected the call without waiting for a reply and tailed the nurse into Phoebe's room.

Scardino walked into his office feeling better than he had in weeks.

He'd followed orders. *And* he'd done the right thing.

Far too often in this job, it wasn't possible to do both.

In an hour, he would return to the crematorium for the ashes. He would sift through them for any pieces of wire that had survived the furnace — and take the remains to Menzies on Monday.

His task now was to find a demolition company that was willing to raze the building tomorrow. It shouldn't be too difficult — he had a list of companies who had worked for the agency before. Companies who would come at short notice, complete the job competently, and ask no questions.

His second task was more challenging. Somehow, he had to find a way to inform Lois that the prisoner was free to resume his former identity.

He took Lois's file from the cabinet and sat at his desk.

Her details were on the first page. Scardino marvelled again at her age. Twenty-seven. She was still so young. Yet with such poise. Such conviction. When she believed in something, she acted on it.

As her higher-up, that was a little disconcerting. She could do — had done — something unimaginable. But as a fellow agent, he felt nothing but respect.

Just below her date of birth were the contact details for her next of kin — Dr Samuel Lane.

Doctor:

That explained the skeleton.

And probably how she had been able to remove the implant from the prisoner. Her first aid training would definitely not have included

field surgery.

But it seemed very little stopped Lois Lane when she had decided to do something.

And it seemed she had decided to free the prisoner.

Scardino shook his head again. She was incredible.

As he and Shadbolt had waited for the hearse to arrive with a cremation box, they had gone into Lois's office. It had painted an unequivocal picture — she had planned the escape. Scardino's only lingering worry was that the alien had tricked her into trusting him and, now free, had turned on her.

He would rest a lot easier if he could verify that she were safe.

She wasn't going to answer her cell phone. She probably wouldn't even turn it on. She was an experienced agent with every reason to want to stay hidden. Finding her was not going to be easy.

And if she became suspicious that someone was tracking her, she was going to assume the agenda was a lot more than merely inquiring after her safety.

Scardino picked up his phone and punched in the number for Samuel Lane.

There was no reply.

Lois had said that her father was unwell. Scardino speed-dialled the home number of his PA. It was late on Saturday afternoon, but she understood that her job had flexible hours.

“Hi, Mr Scardino.”

“Tracey,” he said. “Sorry to disrupt your weekend, but I need some research.”

“What do you need to know?”

“I need to know the whereabouts of Dr Samuel Lane. Try the hospitals first.”

“Do you know his area of specialisation?”

“He's been ill. You should look at patient admissions before trying to locate him professionally.”

“How do you want the information? Cell? Desk phone? Email?”

“Cell,” Scardino replied. “I want to know as soon as possible.”

“OK,” Tracey agreed easily. “I'll call you as soon as I know something.”

“Thanks.”

Scardino hung up his phone. He had to find a way to let Lois know that she could enjoy her vacation ... with ... whoever the prisoner had been before Trask had invaded his life.

And ... Scardino swallowed as apprehension reared into his throat. And he should warn her of the possibility that Moyne was not safely dispatched to a faraway assignment.

“Lois?”

“Uhhmm?”

“I think we should stop for a while.”

Stop? Lois turned to her right and gave Clark a smile. “OK,” she said. “Any reason?”

“You've been driving for a long time. You must be getting tired. I think you need a break.”

Lois nodded, managing to keep her surging spirits from breaking into an effervescent grin. This was sounding more like Clark. “That would be nice.”

“I saw a sign indicating there is a small town ahead.”

“Great.”

“And ... Lois?”

“Yeah?”

“Could we talk?”

Talk? About what? He sounded serious. Lois soothed the clatter of her lurking worries. Whatever Clark wanted to say, it would be an improvement on his silence. “Sure, we could.”

“I'd like to know what you're planning.”

Lois smiled at him again. “I've been waiting for you to ask.”

“Thanks.”

Half a mile into the town, Lois saw a vacant roadside stop. She parked and got out of the car, stretching her back and shoulders.

“Are you OK?” Clark asked as he rounded the hood of the Buick.

“Yeah,” Lois said. “I just need to start moving.”

He hesitated long enough to dip his glasses down his nose and slowly scan the small area of shrubs and trees. Apparently satisfied, he began walking.

“What would you like to know?” she asked as she fell into step beside him.

“We can’t keep driving forever,” he said desperately.

“No, we can’t.”

“What are we going to do?”

“Initially, our priority was to gain distance from Metropolis. We’re in Ohio now, so we’ve achieved that to a degree. Then, we needed to disguise the Buick.”

“OK. What now?” Their progress didn’t seem to bring Clark much reassurance.

“I think we continue driving until sometime tomorrow. Then we could start looking for somewhere to stay — perhaps for a few days, perhaps longer.”

“And look for work?”

“Yeah,” Lois said. “Scardino offered me three months leave with pay, but we can’t rely on that continuing. And we’ll have to be careful about accessing it.”

“If we stop in a farming area, I think I could find work easily enough,” Clark said.

“We’ll need new identities first.”

He looked aghast — as if she’d thrown an insurmountable obstacle into their path.

“Don’t worry about it,” Lois assured him with a smile.

“Constructing a new identity is part of my job. It won’t be the first time I’ve forged documents.”

“But Lois,” Clark said. “None of this is sustainable. Not long term. You’ve changed the licence plate on the Buick, but what happens when the new registration is due? Your apartment or wherever you lived in Metropolis — what happens with that? How are you going to pay the rent? You couldn’t have had the time to arrange anything — not even your belongings being put into storage.”

“I knew that some things were going to be lost,” Lois said easily.

“Once my rent becomes overdue, the owner will try to contact me, and failing that, he will take my stuff and re-let the apartment.”

“You’ll lose everything.”

“I’ve never been settled long enough to accumulate much,” she said. “Nothing in my apartment means anything to me. Most of it I never bothered to unpack.”

“But —”

“I paid a security deposit; the owner won’t be out of pocket.”

“You’ll be throwing away *everything*,” he said. “Your name, your job, your apartment, your family, your friends ... everything. It will be as if Lois Lane has ceased to exist.”

“Clark, I’m not sure how this will work, but I’m still hoping there will be an opportunity to convince the higher-ups that you are not a danger to anyone.”

His head snapped towards her. “So you’re not really OK with losing from everything?”

“I don’t want to,” Lois said. “But if that is what we have to do ...”

“I can’t see any way that we would risk contacting the authorities,” Clark said darkly.

“Not now,” Lois agreed. “Not for a long time. But one day, maybe. I haven’t completely given up on it.”

“Why didn’t you talk to them while I was still in the prison?”

“If I had, they would have removed me from the operation. Then, just getting into the cell to be with you would have been difficult.”

Clark took a series of silent steps before saying, “I don’t think you’ve thought this through.”

“In some ways, I haven’t,” Lois admitted. “I don’t have all of the answers. But I’m confident we can work it out together.”

“Lois ...” His sigh lifted his shoulders. “Lois, I just can’t see how there can be any viable future for us.”

Lois stopped walking and turned to him. When he stopped, too, she smiled. “I’m not asking you to see the future,” she said. “I’m asking you to believe in the present. You must have done it in the cell — you must have taken it day by day — sometimes hour by hour.”

“But in the prison, it was different.”

“How?”

“Because, in the prison, I had nothing to lose.”

Lois lifted her hand and tentatively placed it on Clark’s upper arm. His muscle tightened under her touch, but he didn’t recoil. “We are not going to lose anything without a fight,” she vowed.

“I lost everything once,” he said. “I was powerless to stop it happening. I couldn’t protect my parents. And now you’re ... you’ve given up so much ...”

His fears were so real. So unrelenting. “Last time, Trask had the advantage of surprise,” she said. “This time, you’re older, and you’re aware of what can happen.” She smiled, hoping he would respond.

“And you’ve got me.”

“That just makes it worse,” Clark said. His face filled with sudden dismay. “I mean ... I didn’t mean that like it sounded.”

Lois used her thumb to caress the hard bicep under her hand.

“How did you mean it?” she asked.

“With you here, the stakes are higher. This isn’t just about me. If they catch me, you will pay the price.”

“That’s why we have to work together.”

“But the thought of you being hurt ...” Clark looked away, his jaw rippling with tension. “... I can’t bear to think of what they would do to you if they caught us.”

Lois inhaled deeply, forcing herself to take the time to consider her next words before they were out and could not be recalled. After one breath, she could hold back no longer. “Clark,” she said, her tone gentle but firm as she looked deeply into his eyes. “Clark, we can only do this if we work together. But I feel as if you aren’t working with me. You won’t let me help you. It’s completely understandable that you’re not sure about anything, but I believe that by shutting me out, you’re harming our chances of staying free.”

He looked as if she’d slapped him. Then, his expression slowly changed from shock to shame. He looked down at his feet. When his head rose, he said, “I’m sorry, Lois. I know this has been traumatic for you, and I know I’ve done nothing to help you.”

She gave him a soft smile. “Instead of feeling guilty about what is past, you could try to give me what I need most now,” she suggested.

He released a long breath. “I probably should be able to work out what you need most — and whether that was a general comment or not ...” A shadow of his smile sprinkled joy through her heart. “... but you’re going to have to be specific, Lois. I’m horribly out of practice at dealing with people.”

Lois chuckled as admiration and love welled inside her all over again. “I’d like you to hug me,” she told him. “That’s what I need.”

Clark’s surprise hovered for a moment, but then his arms lifted in silent invitation. Lois stepped forward. His arms tightened around her, and she sank into the wide expanse of his chest.

They stood for a long time — not moving physically, but taking vital steps forward in their journey.

Part 5

An hour after crossing the border into Indiana, Lois and Clark decided they had travelled far enough for one day. They stopped at a Chinese restaurant to buy a takeout meal and not long afterwards, passed a motel in slightly rundown condition.

“What do you think?” Lois asked as they whizzed by.

“The inside looks better than the outside,” Clark said.

Lois hid her smile as she requested that he pass her the red wig from her bag. He cautiously rustled through her bag before pulling out the crimson creation. He eyed it with such complete bewilderment that Lois couldn’t help laughing. “You’re not the only one who wears a wig,” she quipped.

“But the colour,” he gasped. “It looks like someone dyed it in cranberry juice.”

“Linda dared me to buy it.” Lois pulled off the road and donned the wig. She turned to Clark to show him, and laughed aloud when the corners of his mouth turned upwards in response. They drove back to the motel, and Lois went into the reception area and paid, prattling non-stop about travelling to Ohio to visit her sister’s new baby.

Their room was tiny and modestly furnished, but it was clean and in better condition than the exterior had forecast.

There were no plates or cutlery supplied, so preparations for their meal were as simple as removing the two containers and plastic cutlery from the bag. Lois waited at the tiny table while Clark finished bringing in the suitcase and sleeping bags from the car.

Impatience had chafed at her mind more than once today, but now that she had a moment to reflect, she could appreciate the progress of the past twenty-four hours.

Last night, she’d known that, in terms of the practicalities, everything depended on her. Today the balance had slowly shifted as Clark had begun to take an interest in their circumstances. As the day had stretched towards the evening, he had made a few comments about the scenery. He had taken out her dad’s touring map and asked questions about their route.

And then there was the hug.

At the time, Lois had hoped it would signify a leap forward. Perhaps it had — but when they’d returned to the car, Clark’s introspective mood had continued to inhibit his smile, and she’d had to keep reminding herself that his recovery was going to be neither easy nor quick.

Clark placed the suitcase next to the bed, walked over to her, and put the car keys on the table. “I’ll just be a moment while I wash up,” he said.

“OK.”

As Lois watched him walk away, she thought about his request that they leave ‘the other stuff’ for now. She had to respect that. She had to let him take the first step when — and if — he was ready.

As much as she longed to hear him say again that he loved her, she knew it had to be founded on more than the fact that she was the first person in years to treat him humanely. That motivation would be strong now, but it wouldn’t be strong enough to sustain their love for years and years.

And that was what she wanted most.

She wanted to be with Clark — forever. She had found the man who completed her. The man who fulfilled everything she wanted in her life partner. She needed him, and she loved him.

Clark emerged from the bathroom and sat next to her. “Smells good,” he commented. He wasn’t smiling exactly, but some of the tonal warmth had returned to his voice.

“Are you hungry?” Lois asked.

“Yeah.”

That was progress, too. “How’s your shoulder?”

Clark peeled away the lid from his container. “Fine. I hardly notice it.”

“Could you feel the implant when it was there? Does it feel different now?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I got used to it being there, and it feels a bit strange now that it’s gone.”

“Has the wound knitted together?”

“Yes. There’s nothing but a faint line. It’ll probably be gone by tomorrow.”

She wondered if he’d offer to show her, but he didn’t. “And the exposure to the rods? Any lingering effects?”

“I can feel my strength coming back.”

Lois hesitated to voice the next question that popped into her mind, but she really wanted them to be able to discuss Clark’s extra abilities without him feeling self-conscious. “Can you lift off the ground yet?”

“I haven’t tried.”

“Perhaps you should.”

“Now?”

“Why not?”

“Isn’t it a bit weird to suddenly levitate during dinner?”

“No,” Lois said. “Not when there’s just us.” She turned her attention to her plate and slid her fork into the rice. When she looked up, Clark’s head and upper body had risen six inches. She smiled.

He dropped down onto the seat with a quiet thud.

“I’m glad you’re healing,” Lois said, although she knew that physical healing was only a small — and relatively simple — part of Clark’s rehabilitation.

The silence gathered, and Lois wondered how they were going to fill the hours until it was late enough to go to bed. She was tired, but going to bed before nine o’clock would only result in awkward sleeplessness.

Her mind kept returning to the hug. She had sensed his initial uncertainty, but once she had settled onto his chest, his heartbeat and breathing rhythm had remained steady. She had drawn strength from his closeness, and she was convinced that human contact would play a vital role in his recovery.

He had been so isolated, and touch had been a solely negative experience for so long. In the cell, the ankle rubbing and hair washing had helped them connect.

But now, they had no racquets, and the bathroom was so tiny she doubted there was room for them to be in there together.

What could they do?

When he had finished eating, Clark collected both containers and rose from the table. “I’ll see to the clearing away,” he said.

“I can help,” Lois said, wanting to do something with him.

“You did it last night,” Clark said. “It’s my turn tonight.”

“OK,” she said, not wanting to argue with him.

“You must be tired,” he said. “Go and relax.”

The solitary tub chair didn’t look particularly inviting. Lois picked up her bag and sat on the bed to clear out the few pieces of accumulated trash. In the bottom of her bag were the purchases she had made at lunchtime — from the store next to the pawnbroker. They were gifts for Clark. She had seen the store and been overtaken by impulsiveness. Was now the right time to give them to him?

Would she know when it was the right time?

She opened a side compartment of her bag, and her eyes fell on the paper airplane that Clark had made, but they had never flown.

Perhaps she could use it to try to reach him. It had worked in the cell.

Clark had gone into the bathroom. The door was open, and she could see him holding a cloth under the running faucet.

Lois found a pen as possible messages flitted through her mind. Stifling a chuckle, she quickly wrote: *‘Tea please, milk, no sugar. Thank you.’*

She refolded the creases, pumped up the pillows on one side of the bed, and settled onto them, tucking the paper plane out of sight next to her body. She half-closed her eyes and assumed a posture of repose as she watched Clark wipe the table.

When he turned to deposit the containers in the trash, Lois seized her opportunity and launched the plane in Clark’s direction.

The tip of it cannoned into the middle of his back.

Clark slowly turned. A small smile glimmered through his surprise.

Lois giggled.

He scrutinised her for a lengthy moment. Then, he stooped to pick up the plane, and with his thumb and forefinger, he straightened its crushed nose. “Did you fly an airplane at me?” he asked, trying — and failing — to sound baleful.

“Me?” Lois said. “I’m doing exactly what you told me to do — relaxing.”

His left eyebrow jumped, which made his incipient smile even more enchanting. He unfolded the paper and read her words. His smile widened. “Three minutes,” he said. “And you’ll have your tea.”

“Thanks,” Lois said.

“You’re welcome. I owe you a few.”

“You don’t owe me anything.” He looked set to disagree, so Lois quickly sat up and spread open her bag. “OK, Mr Ace Pilot,” she said. “Land the airplane in my bag.”

Clark contemplated the bag for a moment and then lifted the plane over his shoulder. He lobbed it forward, and it flew in a graceful arc and landed in the opening of her bag.

Lois’s laughter, full of surprise and admiration, pealed through the room. She rescued the plane from the depths of her bag and tossed it back to him, not even trying to match his skill. He lunged sideways and caught it.

Lois took out a clean tissue, folded it into quarters, and flattened the small square on the bed. “Are you game to try to land on that?” she asked.

Clark’s mouth pursed in acknowledgement of the difficulty of the task she had set him.

He tossed the plane again. It landed just short of the tissue and then jolted forward onto its target.

Lois grabbed the airplane and leapt from the bed, pointing at Clark in laughing accusation. “This time, do it with your mouth *closed*.”

Clark half-turned towards the counter. “I’m supposed to be making your tea,” he said.

“Are you quitting?” she demanded.

“Of course not, but the tea . . .” His smile had gone, but the lingering amusement in his eyes warmed her heart.

Lois grabbed his wrist before he could reach for the cups. She put the paper airplane in his hand. “Land it on the tissue,” she said. “With your mouth closed.” She couldn’t help wondering if he would be able to fly the plane with such phenomenal accuracy while kissing her. *That* would keep his mouth occupied.

He threw it, and Lois focused on his mouth rather than following the flight path. She could track the progress of the paper plane by the expression on Clark’s face — concentration, hope, and then dashed disappointment.

She turned to the plane and as she did, it lifted slightly off the bed and settled six inches further on — right in the middle of the tissue.

Lois spun to Clark. “You!” she exclaimed as her open hand landed on his chest. “You are a cheat.”

He grinned — his first spontaneous grin since leaving the cell. It had taken a full twenty-four hours, but it was worth it. Lois chuckled, and suddenly they were standing together, grinning at each other as if they had just discovered something of great value.

Perhaps they had.

Then Clark broke away, stepping back so her hand fell from his body. “I . . . I should finish up here,” he said woodenly. He turned away and busied himself with making the tea.

Lois stared at his broad back for a short time before retreating to the bed in a cloud of disappointment. She picked up the paper plane and absently ran her fingers along its precise creases.

For a short time, it had seemed as if they had recaptured the closeness that had developed in the cell. But it had made Clark uncomfortable. Why?

Was it because he was unsure of her?

Because he was unsure of himself?

Because he was unsure of everything?

Or because — as he’d said — he needed some time.

This must be so daunting for him. To be expelled from the closed-in world where he had been confined for seven years. To be forced to adjust to travelling with someone else. To be unsure of what the future held.

And — Lois hoped this was a factor — to, as a man, have to share a car and a room — and a bed — with a woman. A woman he had said that he loved.

Was he having second thoughts?

Or did he assume she was having second thoughts?

Should she go up to him right now and tell him that she still loved him? That nothing had changed? Would that reassure him? Or make him feel pressured into something he no longer wanted?

What *did* he want?

Realistically, he probably didn’t know.

Lois sank into the pillows.

Clark walked over with a cup of tea. He stopped at the edge of the bed and looked down at her. “You look really tired,” he said.

Lois nodded. She was tired. But it wasn’t tiredness that was weighing heavily on her heart.

“Maybe you should go to bed after you’ve drunk your tea,” he suggested as he held the cup towards her.

That sounded wonderful. But what she’d really like would be to go to bed with Clark and have him hold her in his arms while she fell asleep.

“Thanks,” Lois said as she took the cup.

Clark folded his arms across his chest. “Is . . . What . . . Have you realised that this isn’t what you want?”

Lois shook her head. “No.” She sipped from the tea.

“Then what’s wrong?”

How could she answer that? She couldn’t tell him the truth — that she was heartsick because she loved him so much, and it felt like he had slipped away from her. She had to find a way to reassure him. And it had to be convincing. “I’m tired,” she said.

“But it’s more than that. You seemed so happy just a short time ago when we were flying the plane.”

She could give him a version of the truth. “Clark, I always knew that this would be incredibly difficult for you. I understood that — but being with you, watching you . . . it has shocked me to realise . . .”

“You don’t have to stay a moment longer than you want to,” he said earnestly. “I’ll understand if you want to go back and try to recoup what you can of your life. I’ll be fine.”

Was that Clark Kent selflessness? Or was he hoping she would accept his offer? And if he was hoping, was it because he thought that would be best for her? Or because he thought it would be best for him?

Lois couldn’t tell him that she loved him and wanted to be with him forever, but she could make some things clearer. “Clark,” she said. “I’m staying with you until you tell me that you want me to leave. And even then, I’m not going unless I’m sure that you want me to leave for your sake, and not mine.”

“Until when?”

“Until forever.”

“Lois,” he protested. “Lois . . .”

“That’s how it is,” she said in a tone that didn’t leave any room for dispute. She wriggled off the bed and walked to the suitcase to get her pyjamas. “I’m going to have a shower.”

Clark looked from the half-full cup of tea that Lois had left on the table to the firmly closed bathroom door and wondered what had happened.

For a few moments, it had felt like it had in the cell. It had been fun. It had been possible to forget the pain of the past and the uncertainty of the future.

Then suddenly, it had all dissolved.

There was only one possible explanation — that Lois regretted her recklessness. That she had realised the enormous price she was going to pay for his freedom.

So why was she so adamant that she wasn’t going to leave him?

Did she feel that she had forced him into this situation and she had an obligation to see it through?

Then he remembered.

In the chaos that had preceded the surgery, in the moments when she had burst into the prison with the mind-blowing news that they were leaving, she had said that she wouldn’t leave him — because she had already left one partner.

He assumed she meant the friend who had died. The one who had been raped.

When had Lois left? Before her friend had died? When there was still hope? Or after, when all hope had gone?

Is that why Lois was so unwavering in her determination not to

leave him?

Was this an attempt to find redemption for what had happened to her friend?

Clark picked up the paper plane and examined it as if it might miraculously hold the answers he needed.

He felt completely inept. Perhaps other men would know what to do. Perhaps other men would understand whatever it was that Lois was trying to tell him. But he was completely confused.

He didn't know what she wanted.

He didn't know what she wanted from him.

And he had no notion of how to find out.

He'd tried — he'd asked her straight out what was wrong. And she answered. But everything within him believed that she hadn't been completely truthful. She was hiding something.

Logically, it had to be that she wanted out of this disaster.

He understood that.

He'd expected it.

But he didn't know what to do about it.

And even if he did, he wasn't sure he could trust his own perceptions. Even if he thought he knew what Lois wanted, even if he thought he knew how to be what she wanted — he wasn't sure he could trust himself to do it.

The bathroom door opened, and Clark spun around.

Lois walked towards him — and past him. "Goodnight, Clark," she said. When she reached the bed, she turned and gave him a weary smile.

"Goodnight, Lois."

He gathered up his sweatpants and tee shirt and went into the bathroom.

When Clark came out of the bathroom, Lois was lying on her back in the sleeping bag. Her eyes were open, and she was staring at the ceiling.

Clark switched off the light and used a little levitation to slip into the Winnie the Pooh sleeping bag without rocking the bed.

The darkness and silence hung heavily between them.

They had to talk. He was floundering. But they couldn't leave things like this.

"Lois," he said. Her name — driven by desperation — was spoken before he'd decided what to say. "Lois, I need your help."

Immediately, she switched on the bedside lamp and turned over to face him.

The tightness that had masked her face seemed to have softened. "You know I'll do anything I can to help you," she said.

"I know you're upset about something," Clark said. "I have a few ideas about what it could be, but I think there's every chance I'm misreading it. And even if I got it right, I have no idea what I should do about it."

"What do you want me to do?" she asked.

"Tell me what you want me to do."

She brushed back a lock of her dark hair that had fallen forward onto her cheek. "I want you to believe me when I tell you that I'm not having second thoughts about this."

"OK," he said slowly.

"And I want you to stop believing that once I actually have the time to think about it, I will realise that I made a big mistake."

"I ... I can't see how it would be possible for you *not* to realise that."

She sighed. "I know Trask and Moyne told you a lot of things. I can see the damage they have done. I can probably see it more clearly than you can. It's there all the time, and it hurts me so much."

"I ... I'm sorry."

"You couldn't do anything about what happened in the cell," Lois said. "But now, they can't hurt you anymore ... unless you let them."

"I ... I'm not sure ... I ..."

Lois put her hand on his forearm. "Trask told you a lot of lies — they weren't true when he said them, and they're not true now. But if

you believe them, you're allowing two evil men to continue the cruelty they inflicted on a kind and caring person."

"I don't know how to ..."

"Choose to believe me," Lois said earnestly. Her fingers tightened on his arm. "Tell me something they told you ... something that you can't forget."

The biting pain churned inside him. He didn't want to answer. He didn't want to remind her of the depravity of how he had lived — of how low he'd sunk. But this was Lois — and he would do anything for her. "They ... Trask said I was an animal. Less than human."

Lois bulldozed directly into his eyes. "I'm telling you that you are a wonderful man. It is true that you are Kryptonian and not from Earth, but that doesn't make you any less than human."

Clark didn't know what to say.

"Think about what happened in the cell and tell me who acted like an animal," Lois said. "Who killed? Who committed atrocities? Them? Or you?"

"Them," he muttered.

Lois smiled, and it wrapped comfort around his heart. "This is what I want you to do for me, Clark," she said. "Every single time you are torturing yourself with memories of things they said about you, I want you to tell yourself, 'Lois says that I am a fine man — kind and caring, full of integrity, and with a good heart.' Then, you need to decide who you are going to believe."

"Is that really what you think? About me?"

She nodded, eyes solemn and unwavering. "It's really what I think."

Clark's emotions threatened to overwhelm him, but he fought them down. "You ... you are amazing."

"Then it shouldn't be too hard for you to believe me," she said with a hint of her smile.

"OK," Clark said.

Her smile widened and lit up her eyes. "Have you noticed that I can occasionally be a little impetuous?"

That seemed like a perilous question. He nodded mutely.

"Good," she said. "Then this shouldn't shock you too much." She sat up, grasped his hand, and placed his arm on her side of the bed. Then she wriggled closer to him, laid her head on his shoulder, and put her arm across his chest. "Goodnight, Clark."

Clark looked down at the top of her head. He looked at her arm across his chest. This ... this was unexpected. Unwise. Unbelievable. But he couldn't ask her to move. He couldn't. He couldn't reject her. Not Lois.

And, anyway, he realised. He liked her being there.

He liked the feeling of her nestled into his side. Even the thickness of two sleeping bags couldn't diminish how good it felt.

He liked it.

A lot.

Clark closed his eyes.

Lois said he was a good man.

He tentatively placed his arm over the hollow of her waist and waited for her reaction. She snuggled closer. Clark wound his arm a little further across her body.

His mind darted back to when he had hugged her earlier today.

After the first few seconds of adjustment, it had been such a ... a comfortable hug. Of course, she was Lois, and nothing was ever going to nullify her beauty and femininity, but it had felt like the hug of a friend. He'd sensed a new depth ... a developing trust ... a growing belief that he and Lois could be ... were already ... friends.

A few minutes later, her steady breaths and relaxed muscles told him she was asleep.

It was unbelievable. That Lois would fall asleep — not only next to him, but touching him.

And Clark knew one thing with certainty. Having experienced this, he never wanted to spend another night alone.

He wanted to be with Lois. Always.

Daniel Scardino spent the evening at his office desk.

He arranged for a dawn start to the demolition of the compound behind the warehouse on Bessolo Boulevard. By tomorrow evening, there would be no physical evidence that the alien operation had ever existed.

The ashes — what remained of the combination of a skeleton that had probably belonged to Dr Samuel Lane and four rods of uncertain origin — were on Scardino's desk.

He had wondered if the green stuff would explode and had asked the crematorium proprietor to set the furnace at the highest possible temperature. But nothing untoward had happened. And when Scardino had gone through the ashes looking for pieces of wire, there was nothing to indicate the presence of a possibly alien substance.

As he waited at his desk, pondering a day that had held more than its share of drama and surprises, his thoughts constantly meandered to Lois and the prisoner.

Where were they?

Why had Lois helped him?

Was it simply a case of righting injustice?

Or was there something more?

Tracey had called earlier in the evening with the information that Dr Lane was a resident in the South Grove Nursing Home. Scardino had called the home and spoken to a chatty nurse called Veronica who had assured him that when Lois called to ask after her father, she would pass on his carefully worded message.

It was after midnight when Scardino left his office to go home.

But he still hadn't received any news of Neville Moyne.

~ Sunday ~

"Clark?"

He awoke with a start, and leapt to a sitting position.

Lois put her hand on his shoulder. "Everything's OK," she said quietly.

"Is it time to go?" he asked, dusting away the last vestiges of sleep. Lois was out of bed and dressed. Had he — in his sleep — done something wrong?

"No," she said. "It's early. But after spending all day in the car yesterday, I feel like going for a run. Do you want to come with me?"

"Sure," he said. "Give me a minute."

Lois watched as, in a blur, Clark was gone from the sleeping bag. She heard the sound of the bathroom door shutting, the suitcase lid closing, and the paper airplane fluttering to the floor from the bedside table.

Before she had time to process that, Clark was back, dressed in his shorts and a tee shirt. "Ready?" he asked.

"Whoa," Lois said with a grin. "When you say 'a minute', you actually mean three seconds."

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't want to keep you waiting."

"If you intend running at that speed, I am not going to be able to keep up."

"I won't," Clark said earnestly. "You can set the pace."

As Lois passed him, she laid a casual hand on the front slope of his left shoulder. "I was joking," she said with a smile.

She went out of the door, and jogged towards the road in the pale pre-dawn light.

Half an hour later, they were back in the motel room.

Lois was puffing hard. Clark looked as if he'd been leisurely strolling. Even though it probably didn't qualify as a workout for him, she hoped he had enjoyed it. Hoped he had found it relaxing. Hoped it was another step back into a normal life.

"You ... take the bathroom ... first," she said around heavy breaths. "I'm going to the public phone to call my dad's nursing home and make sure he's all right."

"Will you be OK?"

"I'll be fine. Even if they've found my dad and put a trace on the

nursing home phone, it'll take time to locate the call. We'll be gone in twenty minutes."

"I didn't mean that. I meant ..."

Lois stepped closer to Clark. "What did you mean?"

"Will you be safe? Or would you like me to come with you?"

Lois smiled and laid a hand on his chest. "Have you got your super-hearing back yet?"

He nodded.

"If I need you, I'll call for you."

"OK."

Reluctantly, she lifted her hand from the tantalising curves of his chest and took her purse out of her bag. She saw the package there — her gift for Clark. The right moment hadn't come last night ... perhaps this morning would work? "Clark?"

He looked up from where he was sorting through the suitcase for his clothes. "Yes, Lois?"

"I have a present for you. I bought it yesterday."

He looked shocked. She'd known, of course, that no one would have given him a gift in seven years. But it wasn't until she saw the complete incredulity in his reaction that she realised exactly how much this would mean to him.

"Have your shower," she said. "I'll give it to you when I get back."

His fleeting disappointment almost prompted her to give it to him now and not make him wait.

Except, she needed a few moments to prepare it.

"I'll be back soon," she said.

He nodded — although his look of wonder hadn't dissipated.

Lois walked quickly to the public phone near the entrance of the motel. She dialled the number of her dad's nursing home, hoping Ronny would answer.

"South Grove Nursing Home, Veronica speaking."

"Ronny," Lois said. "It's Lois. How's Dad?"

"Hi, Lois," Ronny greeted. "He's great. He's been working on the jigsaw puzzles, and his physiotherapist said he had recovered more strength in his good hand."

"That's wonderful, Ronny. I've had to go away for a while. Could you give Dad my love?"

"Of course. I'll tell him you called."

Lois needed to finish the call. "Thanks, Ronny."

"Wait!"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I have a message for you."

"From whom?"

"A man called Daniel Scardino."

Lois's gut curled. "What is the message?" she asked, trying to keep her voice steady and unconcerned.

"Hold on," Ronny said. "I wrote it down so I wouldn't forget. He asked that I pass it on exactly." Lois heard the rustle of paper. "He said he knew you had gone away, and he didn't want to interrupt your vacation."

Lois waited, her heart thumping an ominous rhythm through her chest.

"Ah, here it is," Ronny said. "The message is: Menzies satisfied with completion. His nephew might return following the death of his colleague on Friday."

Part 6

"Lois? Are you still there?"

Lois dragged her mind from the frantic analysis of Scardino's message. "Ah, yes, Ronny. Thanks."

"You're welcome," Ronny said brightly. "I'll tell Sam that you called."

"Thanks. Bye."

Lois slowly replaced the phone. As she left the telephone booth, Clark hurried towards her. "What's wrong?" he asked before he'd reached her.

She took his hand and led him back into the motel room. They shut

the door, and Lois leant against it, her mind grappling for comprehension.

“Lois?” Clark said uncertainly. “Is it your dad?”

She shook her head. “Sc...Scardino left a message for me. With Ronny.”

Clark’s eyelids slid slowly shut. “A message?” he gulped.

“Menzies satisfied with completion,” Lois said.

“What does *that* mean?”

“Could ...” She stopped, unable to believe what she’d almost said.

“Could what?”

“I don’t know what it means.”

“You were about to say something.”

Lois *had* been about to say something — and she had stopped because she hadn’t wanted to plant a seed of false hope in Clark’s mind. He waited for her to decide whether to share her thoughts, and his troubled expression brought the realisation that false hope was probably preferable to fears bred in lack of knowledge. “Could ... could it possibly mean that Menzies’ main objective was to terminate the operation?” she said. “And now, he’s satisfied that that has been achieved?”

“No,” Clark breathed, emphatically shaking his head. “No, he couldn’t be OK with me being on the loose.”

“Perhaps he doesn’t know.”

“*Someone* has to know.”

“You don’t think ... It’s not possible ... that they just destroyed ... No ... Scardino’s a bit lax, but not even he would forget to check a building is empty before the demolition team began its work.”

A deep rumble sounded in Clark’s throat that could have indicated anything from despair to sudden comprehension.

“What?” Lois said.

“Menzies ordered the termination of the operation?”

“Yes.”

“How?” Clark asked in a low voice. “What were the specifics of how it was to be done? What was to happen to me?”

Lois was cornered. Clark had asked a direct question, and she had to answer. “He ordered your death,” she said quietly.

“Is that why you said we had no choice?”

“That’s why we had no choice with regard to the timing,” she said. “It didn’t change what we were going to do anyway.”

Lois could see Clark churning through what she’d said. And she realised there was every chance he would arrive at the precisely the wrong conclusion. She hooked both of her hands on his shoulders and faced him squarely. “Don’t, Clark,” she said in a soft voice that was underpinned with rigid resolve. “Don’t even think that.”

His mouth opened — either to protest or to pretend he didn’t understand what she meant — but it closed without uttering a sound.

“Don’t,” she repeated.

“They forced your hand,” he rasped.

“They forced the timing,” Lois asserted. “No one forced me to do what I did.”

“If you hadn’t gotten me out, I’d be dead now.”

She wasn’t even going to think about that.

“I’d be dead now, right?” Clark demanded.

Lois nodded in reply.

“Menzies came, didn’t he? I remember someone I didn’t know coming into the cell.”

“Yes, Menzies came.”

“He ordered that I be exposed to the rods?”

“Yes.”

“Until?”

“Until you were vulnerable enough to be ...”

“Killed.”

“Please, Clark,” Lois cried. “Please. Please don’t let this sit and fester.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“There was no time. We -”

“We’ve been together constantly for the past thirty-six hours. Why

didn’t you tell me?”

Lois snatched one hand from his shoulder and angrily swiped at the tears that had gushed into her eyes. “Because I knew you would react like this,” she fired at him.

The vehemence of her reply stunned him. Lois turned her head so he wouldn’t see her still-rising tears.

Clark’s hand gently cupped her jaw and turned her head towards him. “Look me in the eyes,” he said. “And tell me that the execution order changed nothing except the timing.”

Lois faced him without flinching. “It changed nothing else,” she said. “I wasn’t pushed into this. I had already decided what we were going to have to do. I knew there was very little chance they would just let you go. I knew that going to them as your advocate was probably only going to get me taken off the operation. And at the very least, we would have lost our advantage of surprise if I had told them what I thought of your imprisonment.”

The gush of her words came to an abrupt halt, and the air filled with her unsteady breaths. Lois waited, silently pleading with Clark to believe her.

His fingers slipped from her jaw and down her neck, and the side of his hand rested on her shoulder. His thumb skimmed over the skin just below her ear lobe. “Did you ever tell anyone that you had doubts about who killed the two agents?”

His question surprised her. “Shadbolt and I talked about the deaths.”

“This might make sense,” Clark said.

“It might?”

“Menzies is Moyne’s uncle. Everyone accepted that I had killed those two men. If you disputed that, it raises the question of who did commit the murders. Moyne is one of the very few who could have done it. Perhaps Menzies wanted the operation terminated to protect his nephew from suspicion.”

Lois nodded slowly. “I didn’t think of that,” she said. “But you’re right; it does make sense.”

“But that doesn’t mean he would accept what has happened,” Clark said. “His solution was my death, not my freedom.”

Clark’s words had held remarkably little emotion, but that didn’t lessen the pain in his eyes that his life had been of so little consequence. “It was never a solution we were going to accept,” Lois reminded him.

He swallowed roughly, understanding — she hoped — her unspoken declaration of the value she placed on his life.

“Scardino said that Menzies was satisfied with completion,” Lois said, steering them back to the message.

“Do you trust Scardino?”

“I don’t know.”

“Perhaps it’s an attempt to try to lure you back to Metropolis,” Clark said.

“Or perhaps he’s trying to let me know that no one is chasing us.”

“We can’t believe that,” Clark said. “If we think for one moment that no one is looking for us ...”

“If Scardino really wanted me back in Metropolis, he would have arranged for the message to be that something had happened to my dad.”

Clark grimaced. “No,” he said. “That would be an unconscionable thing to do.”

“Often, they’re the most effective,” Lois said. “And in this business, you usually only get one shot, so you go for the jugular — first time.”

“You really think so?”

Lois nodded. “That’s what I would have done. Scardino obviously knows about my father’s situation — he left the message with Ronny at the nursing home.”

Clark suddenly seemed to realise that his hand was draped rather intimately around her neck. He dropped it and pushed it into the pocket of his jeans with a small murmur of embarrassment. “Do you know where Moyne is?” he asked.

The mention of that name felt like jagged ice shards being crammed into her heart. “Scardino was supposed to send him away on an assignment.”

“If there’s any chance that questions are being asked about the murders, he might have been glad to go.”

Lois shook her head. “There was another part to the message.”

Clark paled. “About Moyne?”

“Yeah. Ronny said that Menzies’ nephew could be returning.”

Some of Clark’s colour returned. “Metropolis,” he said with evident relief. “We’re a long way from Metropolis.”

“That isn’t all,” Lois said. “But I can’t figure out what the rest is supposed to mean.”

“What else?”

“That Menzies’ nephew could be returning following the death of his colleague on Friday.”

“Did you hear of someone dying?”

“No,” Lois replied. “My first thought was either Shadbolt or Longford, but I was at the compound most of Friday. I’m sure that Scardino would have called or visited to tell me if it had been either of them.”

“Perhaps it was someone Moyne worked with on another operation?”

“Moyne hasn’t worked on any other operations for seven years.”

“Someone he worked with before that?” Clark suggested.

Suddenly, the ends joined, and in a flash, Lois understood. “It’s you,” she exclaimed. “Scardino was talking about *you*.”

“Excuse me?”

“The part about someone dying goes with the first bit of the message. Menzies is satisfied with the completion of the operation following a death on Friday. Scardino means *you*. He means Menzies thinks that you died, and that’s why he’s OK with it.”

Clark’s throat jumped. “That would mean Scardino faked my death.”

“Yeah.”

“Why would he do that?”

Lois chuckled, and the sound of it lapped against the wall of her uneasiness. “Probably because it was easier than having to tell Menzies that the prisoner had escaped.”

“But ... but he wouldn’t do that ... not if he thought I was a danger to humans.”

She pondered that. “You’re right,” she said. “Even if it meant a lot of trouble, Scardino wouldn’t take the path of least resistance if he seriously thought that people were going to get hurt.”

Clark adjusted his glasses and squeezed the bridge of his nose.

“Are you sure about this?”

“It seems more likely than anything else we’ve considered.”

“Are you sure enough to risk our freedom?”

Lois sobered. “No,” she admitted.

“Then what are we going to do?”

“We’re going to keep driving. Today, we should look for a place where we could stop for a few days.”

“I need to find work,” Clark said.

“We don’t need to worry about that yet,” she said.

Her assurance didn’t smooth the crease from between his eyes.

“Motels, food, gas ... I need to find work soon.”

“I have a present for you,” Lois said, seizing on something to ease their conversation further from the perils of discussing Menzies’ sentence of death on Clark. “Remember?”

He nodded.

“I need a few moments to prepare it. I intended to do it when I got back from making the call to the nursing home.”

Clark glanced at the bathroom. “I ... I heard your heartbeat accelerate. I knew something was wrong.”

Lois smiled. “I wondered how you knew that I needed you.”

“I ... I didn’t mean to hear,” Clark said. “Just suddenly ... I knew you were scared, or worried, or anxious. And ... and I couldn’t stay here.”

Lois light slid her hand down his arm. “Thanks for caring.”
“You’re not upset with me? You don’t think it was intrusive?”
“No.”

He looked relieved. “Thanks.”

Lois picked up her bag and headed for the bathroom. “I’ll just be a moment,” she said. “And then I’ll give you your gift.”

His earlier eagerness had gone. “OK,” he said.

Lois spun around as she reached the bathroom door. She pointed at Clark. “And no peeking,” she ordered.

“Lois! I would *never* look while you were -”

“I know,” Lois said, smiling. “I was joking.”

Before he could reply, she went into the bathroom and shut the door.

Clark slumped into the seat.

They hated him.

Feared him.

They believed he was a killer.

Believed he would use his strength for destruction.

They were not going to rest while he remained at large.

They wanted him dead.

Dead.

But Lois ... she seemed to think it was a possibility. Her belief wasn’t strong enough to act on it, but she thought it was possible.

Clark could not imagine what it would be like to be truly free.

Free and not hunted.

Free to live.

Free to be Clark again.

As Lois prepared the gift for Clark, she mulled over Scardino’s message. Would he cover for them? She didn’t know, but when she thought about the potential risks of getting this wrong, her gut was remarkably calm.

Clark didn’t believe. Didn’t trust.

She figured that was to be expected. Preparing himself for the worst outcome in every situation had been a survival skill for the past seven years.

She opened the bathroom door, and excitement welled inside her. She didn’t know how Clark would react to the two items, but she was looking forward to giving them to him.

He was sitting at the table, still looking dazed.

Lois walked over to him and held out the paper bag. “This is for you,” she said, infusing her words with the affection she felt for him.

His eyes rested on it for a second, and then he took it. “Thanks.”

“Look inside,” Lois urged.

He did, and Lois saw the surprise register on his face ... followed closely by a smile that — although restrained — warmed her heart.

He looked up at her. “Lois ...”

“Do you like them?”

“Lois, this is too much.”

“No, it’s not,” she said. And it hadn’t been. It had eaten into their supplies of cash, but she had been desperate to do anything to help Clark assimilate back into the world. “Do you like them?”

“Lois ...” Clark lifted the watch from the bag and stared at it.

“Did you wear a watch?” she asked. “Before?”

“Yeah,” he said, not taking his eyes from it as it lay in his palm.

“Put it on,” Lois said. “Would you like me to?” Without waiting for him to respond, she took the watch from him and fastened the leather strap around his left wrist.

Clark twisted his forearm. “Ten past seven,” he said. “We should get going.”

“Look at the other gift first,” Lois said.

He withdrew the wallet from the bag.

“I put your money in there,” she said.

He opened it and drew his thumb over the bills. “Lois ...”

“Every man needs a watch and a wallet,” she said. The depth of wonder on his face stirred up a myriad of emotions inside her — but

Clark looked as if he were struggling to deal with his own emotions. He didn't need to have to contend with hers, too. "Have you finished with the bathroom?" she inquired casually.

He closed the wallet and slipped it into the pocket of his jeans as he stood. "Yeah," he said. "I'll get everything into the car."

"OK." She turned away.

"Lois?"

She faced him again.

"Thank you," he said hoarsely.

Lois smiled. "You're welcome."

They continued west for most of the morning, stopping only to buy breakfast. Lois had considered asking Clark if he would like to eat in the diner rather than the car, but something in his manner told her he wasn't ready for that yet.

They drove mostly in silence, with only occasional dialogue to discuss their route. Clark had the map open on his lap and took an active interest in their progress.

Lois used the silence to ponder what they should do next. What were their most pressing needs?

They needed driver's licences in their new identities. The next time they passed through a town of reasonable size, she would look for somewhere to have passport photos taken. In her bag, she had a kit containing everything else she would need.

She would work on them tonight. Once she was happy with the facsimiles, she would ask the motel proprietor for the use of an iron and meld the clear plastic coverings onto the backings.

Their 'licences' wouldn't pass scrutiny by someone experienced or specifically looking for fakes, but someone merely looking to hire a worker for a few days would almost certainly not notice anything amiss.

That would give them identities.

Their other need was cash. Despite what she'd said to Clark, it was getting short.

She had formulated a plan — but it was flimsy and carried inherent risk. She had decided that they would reach a town, access her account, withdraw some money, and then immediately change direction and drive east northeast. If Scardino or Menzies had placed an alert on her account, by the time they received notification, she should be at least twenty miles away, and heading in a direction they wouldn't anticipate.

She wasn't completely happy with it, but it was the best -

"Clark!" Lois braked hard, skidded onto the side of the road, and stared at Clark.

"What?" he said. "What's wrong?"

"I know how to do it."

"How to do what?"

"How to get money out of my account without flagging where we are."

"You think they *are* chasing us."

Lois put her hand on his arm. "No. I don't know. I think we need to be careful. But it's OK. We can get cash without revealing our whereabouts."

"How?"

"You can fly, right?"

He nodded.

"Then take me ... anywhere! Texas. Florida. California. I'll go to the ATM, get the cash, and you can fly me back to the car."

He didn't seem convinced.

Lois's fingers pressed into the hard muscle of his arm. "You can't fly yet?" she asked.

"I can fly," he said.

"You don't want to fly with me?"

"Are you sure about ... about trusting me?"

"Yep," she said nonchalantly.

Clark shook his head slightly. "And it's also that ... it's that we must be eating into a lot of your savings."

"Consider it payment for the flight," she said with a playful grin.

He didn't return her smile, but he didn't argue further. "When ... when do you want to go?"

Lois was trying to act as if this were something she did every day — fly, by personalised alien, across half the continent. She couldn't contain her smile, though. It sounded like it would be fun ... and that was without even considering the whole experience of being in Clark's arms. "How long will it take?" she asked.

"Where do you want to go?"

"I think Florida would be best — if we'd headed south from the beginning, it's plausible that we could be there by now."

Clark hesitated. Lois wondered if Florida was too far for him to fly. Was he embarrassed to admit that he had limits? "If we went to Florida, perhaps I could fly back regularly and check to see if anyone has set up roadblocks coming out of the peninsula," he said. "That might give us some indication as to whether they are trying to find us."

"Good thinking," Lois said with enthusiasm. She squeezed his arm. "So how long will it take? An hour to get there? Two? I think it takes about three hours to get from Metropolis to Orlando by airplane."

Clark adjusted his glasses. He was definitely self-conscious about something. Perhaps it would take longer than by airplane, Lois thought. Her next thought ricocheted around her mind — the longer it took, the longer she would be in Clark's arms.

"If I slow down enough so that it's comfortable and safe for you, it will take about five minutes," he said.

Lois's jaw dropped. "*Five minutes?*" she gasped.

He nodded. "But when I go back by myself to check for roadblocks, I can be there and back in five seconds. Plus a minute to check out everything."

Lois managed to recapture the ability to speak — although her brain was working frenetically to assimilate this new information into the landscape of her mind. "Clark," she said as her smile blossomed. "This is going to be so cool."

A tinge of pink coloured his cheeks, just below the frame of his glasses. "Flying?"

"Yes! And being able to get anywhere quickly. It solves so many problems."

"Of course, they might know that I can fly; so even if they don't try to trap us in Florida, it doesn't necessarily mean they are all right with me being free."

"That's true," Lois said. But she wasn't going to let anything dampen her excitement at flying with Clark.

"Do you want to stop at the next roadside stop?" he asked.

"Yep." Lois pulled back onto the road, her enthusiasm bubbling. The way ahead suddenly seemed so much clearer.

And fun, too!

Clark's heart jumped a little when he saw the sign for the coming roadside stop.

He was sure he could fly. He was sure he could get them both to Florida and back safely. He never would have agreed to flying if he had had any doubts about his ability to keep Lois safe.

It had been seven years, but his body felt exactly how it had before his capture — strong and fully powered and capable of just about anything.

But there were so many other thoughts scuttling through his mind. Flying.

The freedom of being able to move through the measureless expanse of sky.

Would it feel the same as when he had emerged from the cell? Would the openness and immenseness feel like it was pressing against him?

Or would he feel as if he had returned to somewhere familiar?

And holding Lois? How would that feel?

He had carried her from one side of the cell to the other. But this ... Holding her in his arms. Having her arm around his neck ... her

face close to his ... her side secure against his chest.

For at least five minutes. Ten, if he included the return trip.

That was going to be blissful torture. Or torturous bliss.

Lois pulled into the small parking area. There was an old brick building that probably housed restrooms — so anyone passing wouldn't find anything unusual in a parked Buick without immediately visible people.

The car stopped, they got out, Lois took her purse out of her bag, and then she locked the car doors.

She smiled at him. Her eyes were shining. If she felt any apprehension, she was doing a compelling job of concealing it.

Clark scanned the entire area. No one was around. He tuned in his hearing. There was no sound of any motors in the vicinity. Lois's heart was skipping along at an increased speed. He checked her face again. There was still no sign of fear.

Could her elevated heart be driven by excitement?

She grinned. "Would you like to go by yourself first?" she offered.

He understood her hesitation. "Yeah," he said. "I should."

Her hand gripped his arm. "I didn't mean that," she said. "I meant that this has to be a big moment for you — you're returning to something from your life before the cell. I understand if you want to do it alone."

"No," he said. "I'd like to share it with you."

Her grin widened. "Let's go, then."

"I'll need to ..." He gestured towards her.

She raised her arms from her sides. "Go ahead."

Clark bent low and swept her into his arms. "Ready?"

"Yep."

"We'll shoot up pretty fast — so no one sees us."

"OK."

He bent his knees slightly, and then they were in the air, high above the Illinois countryside.

Lois's face was alight. There was no doubt now. She wasn't worried; she was enthralled.

"This is *amazing*," she called. Her head dropped back, and laughter rippled through her body.

Clark couldn't drag his eyes from her. He used the sun to set a course vaguely southeast, and relished Lois's reaction to flying with him.

She was amazing. Her trust in him was so complete that it hadn't seemed to occur to her that there was any possible danger. There wasn't. Not up here. But for her to *know* that ...

She thought his weirdness was something to celebrate.

And, right now, she has celebrating. It was intoxicating.

Lois lifted her head and opened her dancing eyes. "Clark," she said. "This is incredible. I love it."

"We can do it again," he offered tentatively.

"Does flying tire you? Does my weight make any difference?"

"No."

"Then I'd *love* to do this again," she said. "As often as possible."

Clark smiled. Having Lois in his arms 'as often as possible' sounded wonderful.

"Will I unbalance us if I look down?" she asked.

"No," he said. "But because of our speed and height, you won't see much."

She tightened her hold around his neck and peered down. After just a few seconds, she settled back against his body. "You're right," she said. "The feeling is better than the view."

A few minutes later, Clark landed them in a tiny alley in Orlando — having already scanned extensively for people and cameras. They walked — just like any other couple — onto the street and found an ATM.

Clark waited impatiently while Lois withdrew the money. The feeling of being exposed was even greater here than when they had been in the park yesterday. People hurried past them, not even glancing in his direction, but it felt as if *everyone* was staring directly at him.

He just wanted to get them alone and lift Lois back into the friendly cape of the empty sky.

Lois, however, didn't seem to be in a great hurry to leave. She was looking along the stretch of stores.

"We should go," Clark said, trying to keep the desperation from his voice.

"I know," Lois said. After a final lingering glance, they retraced their steps. When they came to the quiet alley behind the stores, Clark again swept her into his arms.

Then, they were alone in the blueness of sky.

"Do we have to go straight back to the car?" Lois asked.

"We shouldn't leave it for too long," he cautioned. "Perhaps we can have a more leisurely flight soon."

She smiled at him — full of acceptance and unrestrained delight. "I can't wait."

Neither could he.

"Can't we do just a small detour?" she begged. "Not to anywhere in particular but just to extend it a little."

It wasn't possible to refuse Lois anything, so Clark smothered all the fears that were gripping his heart. "Just a small one," he agreed.

Lois's smile was full of joy. "Great," she said. "I love this."

And he loved her.

That certain knowledge pushed through all the darkness and uncertainty that had clouded him since leaving the cell, beckoning him forward and lighting his way.

For a time, he'd lost sight of it, but now it was becoming clearer again.

He loved Lois.

He always would.

Part 7

Eric Menzies walked into the care facility where Phoebe was now a resident.

Progress — both generally and in her attitude towards him — had been close to non-existent. When he was with her, it was hard to arrive at any conclusion other than that she blamed him for everything.

He tapped timidly on the door to her room and waited for a response. As usual, there was none. He opened the door and peeped around it. Phoebe was sitting in the chair — her posture rigid and her face blank.

"Good morning, my dear," Eric said, wincing because he knew he sounded nauseatingly cheerful.

Phoebe blinked. She didn't speak. She didn't turn her head in his direction.

He pulled up the other chair and sat across from her.

She didn't adjust her position or acknowledge his presence in any way.

And so began another stretch of dragging time — time when he would agonise between attempting a one-sided conversation and acquiescing to her obvious preference for silence.

Perhaps this was her way of revenge — forcing him to ponder his misspent life ... his busyness, his negligence, his complete preoccupation with work.

His flailing inadequacy when they had fought to save Malcolm.

Now, he had the time — and nothing to do except plumb the depths of his regret.

The buzz from flying with Clark still hadn't dissipated an hour later. Lois felt more alive than she had since walking into the building with Linda — the building they'd believed to be a haven. The building where death had lurked.

But now ... now it was a beautiful fall day, the sun was shining, and her heart was singing.

She loved Clark.

She knew there was a mountain of reasons why he would suspect her love might prove transient, but she was sure that what she felt was real and strong and everlasting.

But Clark — what was he feeling?

Had he begun to adjust to life outside of the cell? Or was he just getting more adept at pretending he was adjusting?

How did he feel about her? Did he regret saying he loved her? He appeared unable to accept that this was forever. Was that based on what he thought was best for her? Or what he truly wanted for himself?

How could he be sure about *anything* after what he'd suffered?

Again, a rush of admiration surged inside her. He was so strong. One of the first things she had noticed — about the man, rather than the conditions of his life — was his extraordinary inner strength.

And one of the next things she had noticed was his selflessness. She had been working so hard to make him believe that she needed him — because she did — but in doing that, was she, in reality, pushing him into a corner and making it impossible for him to be able to speak out what he truly wanted?

She wanted to be with him — but not if, for him, it felt like payment for her kindness.

She wanted his love — but love for her, not because of what she had done for him.

“Are you OK?” Clark’s quiet voice — full of his customary concern — cut into her thoughts.

Lois glanced sideways with a small smile. “Just thinking,” she said.

“Are you worried that Scardino and Menzies are still trying to track us?”

“I don’t know what to think.”

“The next town is about five miles away,” Clark said as looked down at the map lying across his thighs. “Is it OK with you if I fly to Florida now and check on things?”

Fear mounted within her — irrational fear that he might leave and not return. “Sure,” she said lightly. “Shall I pull over?”

“No,” Clark said. “There might be a small back draft, but basically it will seem like I’ve disappeared.”

“And then you’ll appear again?”

“Yeah. I’ll try not to startle you.” He reached to undo his seatbelt.

“Be careful.”

“You, too.” There was a gust of wind and the sound of the door closing. Then Lois was alone in the Buick.

“Hurry back,” she muttered.

The shrill of Menzies’ phone carved through the morose silence.

“Sorry,” he muttered.

He stood and turned away from his wife as he pulled the cell from his pocket. “Menzies.”

“It’s Daniel Scardino, Mr Menzies.”

Menzies sighed. He *knew* Scardino had sounded too competent. “You said everything was going well.”

“It is ... with the termination. I’m calling about -”

“What do you want? I’m busy.”

“I haven’t heard from Neville Moyne since he departed for his new assignment. I thought you should know.”

Neville again. “Could he be delayed?”

“He could be. He was supposed to call in and confirm his arrival twenty-four hours ago.”

“His assignment isn’t my jurisdiction,” Menzies snapped.

“I realise that, sir, but given the family connection, I thought -”

“Don’t think, Scardino! Just do your job.”

Eric cut off the call and took a calming breath before facing Phoebe. “Sorry about that,” he said as he returned to his seat.

“Who was it?”

He jolted at the sound of her voice. “Just one of the supervising agents who couldn’t wipe his own nose with getting direction from someone higher-up.”

Phoebe said nothing, and the silence covered them again.

But Eric couldn’t help feeling a glimmer of hope.

His wife had spoken to him.

Except — the spectre of Neville still hung in the air like an

offensive odour. Whatever had happened to him, Eric had to ensure that it was kept from Phoebe.

Neville was trouble. Always had been. Always would be.

And Eric was ominously sure that he hadn’t heard the last of Neville’s ‘disappearance’.

Lois heard a soft noise — a little like the breeze rustling through a canopy of leaves. Then came the sound of the car door shutting, and Clark was beside her.

She chuckled — expelling her caught-up breath. “Wow.”

“Sorry,” he said. “Perhaps we should try to work out a signal between us so I can warn you when I’m about to appear.”

“I’m sure I’ll get used to you appearing and disappearing,” she said. “And if I managed to keep the car on the road the first time you did it ...” She smiled across at him, ridiculously relieved to have him back. “Out of interest, what would you have done if I’d been so shocked that I veered off the road?”

Clark looked a bit self-conscious. “I would have righted you ... us ... the vehicle.”

“You would have simply *put* us back on the road?”

He lifted his arms and put his hands on the roof to demonstrate.

Lois couldn’t help her little gurgle of laughter. Life had changed. And Clark wasn’t the only one who had some adapting to do. “What’s happening in Florida?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he said.

“Nothing?”

“No roadblocks. No cops out searching for two fugitives. I listened to the police radio for a while — that’s why I took so long. Nothing out of the ordinary. No secret orders to look for a Buick, no descriptions that could possibly have anything to do with us.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

Lois met Clark’s eyes. He was thinking the same thing she was — but neither of them was willing to say it.

“Are you hungry?” Clark asked after a moment.

“Famished,” Lois said. She grinned. “Flying does that to me.”

Clark’s smile unfurled slowly in response. “We should hit the next town in about a minute,” he said.

“What would you like to eat?” Lois asked.

“I think you should choose ...”

She glanced sideways as his words died.

Clark wasn’t quite grinning, but light-heartedness adorned his expression. “... Call it celebrating your first flight.”

Lois had loved every minute of her flight, but right now, she was celebrating Clark. His smile. The way he looked at her when he smiled. What it did inside her. “There is something I would really like,” she said.

“What?” he said. “Name it. If the town doesn’t have it, I could always ...” His hand made a ‘takeoff’ motion.

“I’m sure the town will be able to supply this,” Lois said.

“What would you like?”

“I’d like us to eat in. To find a quiet cafe and eat in.”

Lois felt the tension rise in Clark. She waited. “All right,” he said quietly. “On one condition.”

“Anything,” she said.

“I pay. With my money.”

She turned to him as they entered the small town. “The prices might be a little higher than you remember.”

He shrugged. “I’m going to have to get used to a lot of things.”

“You have yourself a deal, Mr Kent,” Lois said with a smile.

He smiled back — and poured sunshine into her heart.

Only a few hundred yards into the town, they found the ideal place — a rustic, homey looking cafe with lacy curtains and window boxes of exuberantly coloured flowers. Except ...

“Will this be OK?” Lois asked when she’d pulled into the parking spot.

“Yeah,” Clark replied as he looked at what had probably once been a little cottage. “You don’t seem sure.”

“It looks like somewhere that might remind you of your mom,” Lois said cautiously.

His throat jumped. “Yeah,” he said. “But I can’t avoid everything that might remind me of my parents.” He turned and forced a smile. “As you told me, I have to try to remember the good things.”

Lois put her hand on his knee. “And we will find your mom,” she said. “We won’t stop looking until we do.”

“Talking about my mom ...” Clark said. “Would you mind sitting there a moment so I can open your door for you?”

Lois smiled. “Did your mom teach you that?”

“My dad always did it for her.”

“I’ll stay right here,” Lois promised. She lifted her hand from his knee.

Clark rounded the front of the Buick and came to the driver’s side. He opened the door and offered her his hand, reminiscent of the many times he had helped her rise from the mattress in the cell.

Lois took his hand and stood from the car. She locked the door, and they began the short walk along the narrow path to the cafe door.

“Please feel free to order anything you want,” Clark said.

“Thank you.”

“And ... I’ll say this in advance. I’m sorry if I’m awkward. I ... I haven’t taken a woman out for a meal in a long time.”

Lois pushed her hand into his. “This is just one more thing to get used to,” she said.

His fingers weaved through hers. “So ... perhaps this might not be the last of such occasions?”

“I hope not,” she said.

He didn’t reply, but his little smile made her think she wasn’t alone in hoping they would do this again.

Neville Moyne stared in disbelief.

The compound where he had worked for seven years had been reduced to rubble — rubble that was quickly being loaded into trucks and taken away.

He guessed that by evening, there would be nothing left.

Where was the alien?

Had he been killed?

Or had he escaped?

And where was that bitch, Lois Lane?

Clark sat opposite where he had seated Lois.

So far, everything seemed all right. A large friendly woman had greeted them. When Clark had looked around the cafe, he’d been relieved to discover that there were only three other patrons — two middle-aged women at one table and an older man at another.

And even better, the waitress had led them to a table tucked into a corner away from the other diners.

Lois smiled across at him, and he felt the tautness across his shoulders ease a notch.

The menus arrived. Clark gave it a cursory glance and decided on the clam chowder with a sourdough roll. For the next minute, he stared out of the little window, grappling for topics of conversation that could steer them through the next half an hour. Since he’d taken her flying, Lois had been happy, her smile constantly lighting up her face. Foremost, Clark didn’t want to say anything that would jeopardise her upbeat mood.

When the waitress came to take their orders, he was still without inspiration. Clark asked for a glass of apple juice and the chowder. Lois ordered an iced vanilla latte and a Caesar chicken wrap.

They made a few stunted comments about the country-style decor while they awaited their drinks, but the conversation petered out to a stilted silence. This is Lois, Clark reminded himself. This isn’t a stranger. This is Lois. I have massaged her ankle. She has washed my hair.

“What are you smiling about?” Lois asked softly.

Uh oh. “Ah ...”

“You don’t have to tell me,” she said quickly.

“Actually, I was trying to talk myself out of being nervous,” Clark admitted. “Which, I know, is silly.”

“I don’t think so,” Lois said. “Good conversation doesn’t just happen.”

“And there are a few subjects we can’t discuss. Not publicly.” “Yeah.”

The waitress arrived with their drinks, and Lois used the straw to take a sip of her latte. Clark drank from his apple juice and tried to jumpstart his uncooperative brain.

“I have an idea,” Lois said.

“Good,” Clark said, smiling to try to hide his relief.

“We could have one question each.”

“Kind of like we did in the ... before.”

“Yeah,” Lois said. “Do you want to go first?”

“Do you have a question ready?”

“Yes.”

“Then you go first.”

She smiled again. When Lois smiled, the world brightened. He’d thought — at first — that anyone smiling would brighten the gloom of the cell. But Lois’s smile could brighten a sunny day.

“What did you do after you graduated high school?” she asked.

“I went to college.”

“Which one?”

“Columbia.”

“Missouri?”

“Yeah,” Clark said with a small smile. “School of Journalism.”

Lois’s eyebrows jumped. “Journalism?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you always want to be a journalist?”

“Since I was about ten years old. I enjoyed writing — in many different formats, and I figured that with journalism ...” He leant across the table and lowered his voice. “... perhaps my speed might be an advantage in getting the stories.”

“Speed?” Lois said with a giggle. “I can think of a few other skills that might have proven to be quite useful as well.”

Clark had reached the limit of his comfort zone in discussing himself, and he was about to ask Lois a question when he noticed that she was staring into her latte, looking quite discomfited. “Lois? Are you all right?”

She looked up. “There’s something I should tell you.”

Clark tried to calm the fear that immediately seared through his mind. If Lois were going to leave him, she wouldn’t tell him in the middle of a cafe while they awaited their lunch.

“The first night,” Lois said. “I found a piece of paper on the floor of the motel room.”

Immediately, Clark knew what she was going to say. He wasn’t sure which of his reactions was more acute — his embarrassment or his relief.

“I read it,” Lois confessed. “I’m sorry.”

Clark slipped his new wallet from his pocket and opened it. He pulled out the single sheet of paper from the notepad Lois had given him in the cell and unfolded it. “It’s finished now,” he said. He held it towards her.

Lois took the piece of paper, and Clark followed her eyes as she read the poem he had written in the cell.

Hope blossoms in the blackness, splashing colour on the empty, threadbare canvas,

Hope shines in the darkness, bringing light where fear-filled shadows loomed,

Hope cradles promise, birthing life where barrenness reigned unchallenged

Hope is beautiful, and her name is Lois.

When Lois looked up, her eyes were damp. “I can see why you wanted to be a writer,” she said in a voice that wobbled just a little. Her eyes dropped, and she read his poem again.

One tiny, endearingly cute tear dappled down her cheek, and Clark figured he was looking at the most beautiful sight he had ever seen. “I wrote it for you,” he said.

Lois carefully refolded the paper and offered it back to him. “Keep it safe for me,” she said. “And one day, I’d really like you to make a copy for me.”

“I will.”

She took a tissue from her bag and wiped her cheek. Clark mourned the loss of the tear droplet. It had enhanced the significance of the moment. He had made Lois cry — but in a totally wonderful way.

“Did you used to write poetry?” she asked.

Clark nodded. “Sometimes. But it wasn’t something I advertised.” He winced. “Poetry doesn’t quite fit with the football jock image.”

“You played football?”

“Yeah. And basketball. Some hockey.” Again, he felt the need to withdraw from the spotlight. “It’s time for my question.”

Before he could ask, the waitress arrived with their meals. They thanked her, she left, and they began eating.

“Are you ready for my question?” Clark asked.

“Yep.”

“How did you decide on the line of work you wanted to do?”

Lois’s laughter pealed through the little cafe.

Clark smiled in response. “What’s so funny?” he asked.

“My answer,” she replied. “And it got funnier when you told me your chosen career.”

“You can’t leave it there,” Clark said as he daubed golden butter on his roll. “You haven’t even begun to answer my question.”

“Well,” Lois said. “I wanted to write, too.”

“You did?”

She nodded. “But not poetry or newspaper reports. I wanted to write the Great American Novel.”

Clark smiled. “Did you go to college?”

“Champlain College in Vermont. Professional Writing.”

“Doesn’t explain how you ended up where I met you.”

Lois released a long breath. “No,” she said. “But it was at Champlain that I met Linda King.”

“Linda?” Clark said. “The one who dared you to buy that shocking pink wig?”

Lois chuckled, but he saw the anguish in her eyes. Suddenly, he knew.

“And the one who was killed?” he continued gently.

Lois nodded. “The best friend I ever had.”

“You’ve answered my question,” Clark said. “You don’t have to say anything else if you don’t want to.”

“Linda was studying psychology,” Lois said. “We met one night when we’d both had too much to drink. We staggered home, singing at the top of our voices. We arrived at her room first, and I crashed on her bed.”

“She sounds like fun.”

“She was,” Lois said. “Our friendship grew stronger- she was just like a sister to me. When the end of college was looming, neither of us liked the idea of having to grow up, having to work. Anyway, Linda had heard that *certain employers* were always willing to take young females because it wasn’t exactly a career path that most women considered.”

“No.”

“Linda was really keen,” Lois continued. “She was confident that, with her psychology major, she would be accepted. I hated the thought of her disappearing for long stretches and never knowing where she was or what she was doing. Or if she were safe.”

“So you both applied?”

“Yeah. Linda told me that I’d have heaps of exotic experiences to use in my Great American Novel.”

“And did you?”

“Have heaps of experiences? Yes. Ever write that novel? No.”

“Do you still want to?”

Lois picked at a piece of lettuce from her wrap, her eyes low. “After Linda died, for the first time in years, I felt the compulsion to write.”

“Did you?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I was so full of bitterness and cynicism and anger that it would have been a very ugly story.” Lois looked up, and there was pain lodged in her eyes. “And it probably would have included stuff that would have broken more than a few secrecy contracts I had signed.”

Clark wished he could hold her. He wanted it so much he could almost feel her soft body in his arms. “How long ago did Linda die?” he asked, trying to permeate his words with the shared sorrow he felt for her heartache.

“Almost three months ago.”

“*Three months?*”

“That surprises you?”

“When you mentioned it ... I thought ... I thought it had happened ... I don’t know ... a year ago.”

Lois sadly shook her head. “No. Three months ... next week.”

Her words from the cell carved through his mind. *I heard it all. I heard his evil triumph. I heard her fear. I heard his cruelty. I heard her pain. I heard her die. I heard her final breath.* “Aw, Lois,” Clark said.

She gave him a tremulous smile. “I was a wreck.”

“I never saw that,” he said. “That’s why I thought more time had passed. I knew you were hurt about what had happened, but I never saw the bitterness.”

“You know why?”

“Why?”

“Because when we met, I’d been watching you for a week. I saw the hardships that you were dealing with, and it started to change me. It started to help me deal with how much I hated the world.”

“You could never hate.”

“Yes. I could. I have. I still do.” She pushed a wan smile through eyes that had hardened. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. I shouldn’t let all that spoil our lunch together.”

“Thank you for telling me.”

Lois averted her eyes. “The garden is nice,” she said, blinking rapidly as she stared through the window.

“Yeah,” Clark agreed, although his gaze didn’t leave Lois. “How is your wrap?”

“It’s delicious. Thank you.” She picked it up from her plate. “*Does* this place remind you of home?”

Clark’s gaze circled the room, ending with the little patch of garden that was visible through the window. “Yeah,” he said. “It does a bit.”

“The garden at your home is overrun,” Lois said. “But it seemed to me that it could be recovered with some pruning and weeding.”

“Mom loved her gardens,” Clark said. “Flowers at the front. Vegetables at the back.”

“Near the kitchen door?”

He nodded.

Lois’s hand slipped across the table and grasped his. “We will find her,” she said quietly. “We’ll find a way to take her home.”

Clark wished he could believe. He couldn’t. But a week ago, he couldn’t have believed that he would be sitting with Lois in a cosy cafe as they ate the lunch paid for with money he had earned.

Lois Lane seemed to have the ability to will the impossible into being.

Tentative hope birthed. Perhaps ... one day ... his mom could tend her gardens again.

They finished eating their meals, and Clark received the check, took out his wallet, and paid. It felt so mind-numbingly normal — a man buying lunch for a woman.

As he walked back to the Buick with Lois’s hand tucked into his, he felt as if he were traversing two worlds — the world of

estrangement where he had lived all of his conscious life and a new and scary world where, maybe, he could find a degree of normality.

Was there any chance that he could live free on this planet?

Not if everyone knew the truth about him.

But if the records had been wiped ... if those who knew were willing to forget ...

And with Lois beside him ...

Maybe ... maybe, it was possible.

Moyne heard the little clunk as the last of the three locks gave way to his pick.

He pushed open the door and crept into the apartment.

There were three packing crates stashed into the corner. Was she planning to leave? He walked over to them. Two were open and both looked as if she had sorted through them, found whatever she'd wanted, and left them jumbled.

They appeared half-unpacked, not half-packed.

There was a thin layer of dust on the countertop. He estimated it was two to three days worth.

Moyne snuck into her bedroom. One side of the bed was crumpled as if she had left in haste.

One side.

Did that mean she hadn't brought the alien here?

Moyne darted into the bathroom. There was a solitary pink toothbrush on the shelf. He rustled through the cupboard. Everything suggested this was a woman's bathroom; nothing suggested the presence of a man.

Not that the alien was a man.

Moyne closed the cupboard. There were two towels on the rail. Both were dry — they hadn't been used recently.

Where was Lane?

Where was the alien?

Back in her bedroom, Moyne opened her closet. He didn't know how much clothing was normal for a woman, but there were no big gaps to signify that some had been removed.

If Lane had left Metropolis, she had left quickly — not even stopping to pack her toothbrush.

Moyne skulked into the kitchen and peered into the trash can. It held a few items — a soda can, a candy bar wrapper, and an advertising pamphlet — but nothing that indicated anyone had recently cooked a meal in this kitchen.

That was to be expected — Lane had been doing the afternoon/evening shift at the compound.

But the compound didn't exist anymore.

Moyne set the locks to engage and let himself out of the apartment.

He couldn't ask Scardino or Eric or even Shadbolt about what had happened to the alien operation without alerting them that he wasn't working his new assignment.

But — he was an agent.

And finding people was his job.

Finding them ... and exacting revenge.

That was something he did better than anyone he knew.

As he returned from his second trip to check on police activity in Florida, Clark detoured to Kansas.

He hovered high in the air and looked down at the little farmhouse that had been the only home he had known.

He had not expected to see it again.

The fields were in good condition. Clearly, someone was farming the land — probably Wayne Irig and his son, Brett. The fences had been maintained. The boxes in the chicken coop were lined with fresh hay and contained four newly laid eggs. The tractor had oil and gas — and a brand new front tyre.

But the gardens around the house — his mom's domain — were in a state of neglect. Clark looked into the house — into his bedroom ... and his parents' bedroom — and sadness welled inside him.

He wanted to come home.

He yearned to be here. To work the farm in memory of his father. To look after his mother. To try to make up for all the pain and heartache he had caused her.

But he couldn't.

Just as he had been locked in, now he was locked out. The place he ached to be was the one place that was barred to him.

Clark dragged his eyes away and slowly flew back to Lois.

Part 8

Lois lay in her dad's sleeping bag on the double bed, waiting for Clark to finish in the bathroom. Her mind flitted through the events of the day, and she couldn't help but enjoy the feeling of satisfaction brought by her musings. It had been an afternoon packed with little steps forward.

Clark had driven the Buick for a while. Lois had settled into the passenger seat and pretended to doze. In truth, she had been mesmerised by Clark's shapely hands as he had skilfully plied the steering wheel.

As they had passed through a town, Lois had glanced down a street and noticed the familiar sign of Baskin-Robbins. The temptation to reintroduce Clark to ice cream had been too overwhelming to resist.

Lois would never forget his wonder-draped expression as he had walked into the store and slowly scanned the array of flavours. She had speculated over which he would choose and whether it would take him a long time to decide.

It hadn't. After surveying the expanse of the choices, he had returned to the strawberry cheesecake and chosen that. Lois had added a chocolate chip waffle cone to their order, and a few minutes later, they had walked out of the store, grinning like a pair of schoolkids at the start of summer break.

They had strolled along the quiet street, eating ice cream and making occasional light-hearted comments. Chocolate chip had been Lois's favourite for as long as she could remember, but it couldn't compete with her joy that Clark hadn't even seemed to hesitate at the prospect of being out in public.

It had been a long time since Lois had felt so carefree.

And it must have been even longer for Clark.

They had returned to the Buick and continued travelling northwest. As they had driven, Clark had 'disappeared' twice to check on what was happening in Florida. On both occasions, the report had been the same — as far as all of his superpowers could detect, no one in Florida was interested in two people who had withdrawn money from an ATM earlier that day.

It seemed to Lois that the turning point in their day had been when Clark had taken her flying.

Perhaps it had been the freedom of the skies. Perhaps it had been the closeness of their contact. Perhaps it had been the lack of reaction in Florida. Lois didn't know, but flying had worked something in Clark, and this afternoon, more than any time since leaving Metropolis, she had been able to glimpse the man she had come to know in the cell.

Except ... it had been even better.

This Clark was free. And beginning to take tentative steps back to life.

Now, it was evening, and they had chosen another motel, given another story, and settled into another room.

The bathroom door opened, and Clark walked out, wearing his black tee shirt and dark sweatpants.

Lois lifted her eyes to his face, although she was sorely tempted to linger on the tantalising bulges that peeked out from under the sleeves of his shirt. He looked up at her, and his smile came readily. "Are you tired?" he asked.

"I'm not too sleepy," Lois said. She patted his Winnie the Pooh sleeping bag. "Do you want to come over here and talk?"

Clark neatly placed his sneakers under the table. "OK," he said. He climbed into the sleeping bag and lay on his side, facing her. "Is there something specific you would like to talk about?"

Lois pumped up her pillow. “Nothing specific,” she said. “We should probably try to decide where we might stay for a few days.”

“Would you like me to get the map?”

Lois shook her head. “No,” she said. “My brain can’t be bothered dealing with detail right now.”

“OK,” Clark agreed easily. “What would you like to talk about?”

“I really enjoyed our discussion at lunch today.”

“Thanks for telling me about Linda.”

“Thanks for listening,” Lois said.

Sympathy had intensified the luscious brown of Clark’s eyes.

“Have you had someone you can talk to about it?”

“I had counselling,” she said lightly. “And debriefing.”

“But?”

Lois felt her mouth stretch to a smile. Conversing with Clark was unlike conversing with anyone else. He picked up nuances that no one else ever had — even Linda. It was as if he saw her meaning as well as heard her words. “But that was just playing another role.”

“Were you playing a role today?”

“No,” she said. “Today, I was just being Lois.”

“You looked happy.”

“I was. Am.” A question erupted in her brain. A question that took her breath away. If she asked it ... if Clark answered it ...

It could irrevocably change their relationship.

For better? Or worse?

Should she? Was Clark ready?

“Go on,” he said softly.

When she looked up, his partly formed smile was shimmering with encouragement. “It’s uncanny how you do that,” she said.

“That isn’t what you were about to say.”

Lois chuckled. “Is reading my mind a superpower?”

His eyes crinkled with amusement. “What were you going to say?”

“I have a question that I would love to ask you,” Lois said.

“OK.”

“But if you were to ask me the same question, I’m not sure that I’d be willing to give you the truth. Not yet.”

His smile tempered, but his eyes lost none of their warmth. “How about you tell me the question, and then I’ll think about whether I’ll answer it?”

“You don’t have to answer any questions,” she said. “We established that a long time ago.”

“What is this question? I’m intrigued now.”

“What is your greatest fear?”

“Whoa,” Clark said. “You weren’t joking about going for the jugular.” He offered her a little smile that sweetened his words.

“You know you don’t have to answer.”

“Why that question in particular?”

Lois felt her cheeks warm.

“You don’t have to answer either,” Clark said quickly.

“Because I feel this unexplainable and probably quite impractical need to ...”

“To what?”

Lois gulped. “To protect you.”

Clark’s jaw dropped. “I feel that about you ... but ...”

“It doesn’t mean I see you as less than masculine, in fact ... well, we probably don’t need to go there,” Lois said quickly. “But I certainly don’t think of you as a child or a project or anything like that.” She ventured into his eyes, looking for clues as to whether she could continue. “... but you’ve been hurt so much ...”

He looked down the valley of bed between them. “Lois,” he said in a voice that was raw with feeling. “No one has ever made me feel the way you do. You constantly surprise me.”

Lois smiled, hoping he would look up and see it. “Is that a good thing?”

He did look up. “Being constantly surprised by you takes some getting used to, but ... yeah, it’s a good thing.”

Something in his tone told her that his assessment was deliberately understated. Lois smiled. “I think I know the answer to my question. I

think your greatest fear would be recapture. Or perhaps what your capture would mean to your mom. Or to me.”

Clark nodded thoughtfully. “Those possibilities scare me,” he admitted. “But they are not my greatest fear.”

“They’re not?”

“No.”

“Then what is?” Lois asked hesitantly.

Clark didn’t reply for a long moment. He stared at his hand, and flecks of muscle twitched along the smoothness of his cheek. Eventually, he looked up, his eyes grave. “My greatest fear is that I can’t be what you need me to be.”

“Clark! You’re -” She stopped as her brain caught up with her mouth. “Now you’ve surprised me,” she said lamely.

“I don’t know what you need,” Clark said quietly. “And even if I did, I’m not sure I can be it. I’m not sure that I could have been it before I was captured — and now I have seven years of ... abnormality to try to overcome.”

“I want you to overcome that,” Lois said earnestly. “I want you to heal and be whole again — but I don’t want it for me, I want it for you.”

“The possibility of recapture — that scares me,” Clark said. “But they won’t catch me unaware this time. There are things I can do to avoid it happening. But this ... this *thing* with you ... I have never felt so out of depth in my life. And I don’t know what I can do to ensure that you don’t get hurt.”

Lois put her hand on his tightly clenched fist. “Clark,” she said. “Just be you. That’s what I need.”

He laughed humourlessly. “That’s the problem, Lois,” he said.

“I’m not sure how to be Clark Kent anymore. I’m not sure how to be an alien in a human world. I’m not sure how to be a son to a mother who has been locked away because of me. And most of all, I’m not sure how to be whatever it is you are hoping I will be.”

Lois stroked the back of his hand. “Have you ever wondered if you put too much pressure on yourself?” she asked softly.

“No,” he said with disarming honesty.

“You do,” Lois said. “You expect far more of yourself than I expect from you.”

His eyes wandered again, and he shuffled uncomfortably.

She’d pushed him far enough. It was time to give something back. “My greatest fear ...” Lois said.

Clark’s eyes shot back to her face.

“My greatest fear ... I have two greatest fears.”

“What they will do to you if they catch us?”

“No.”

His smile glimmered for a tiny moment. “I should be surprised,” he said. “But I’m not.”

Lois answered his smile, giving herself a moment to compile her answer. “My two greatest fears are sort of the same. One is that I’ll never be able to truly convince you that what I feel for you is not pity or compassion or sympathy but the real feelings of a woman for a man.”

Clark swallowed loudly in the silence, but said nothing.

“And the second is similar,” she said. “I’m scared that your feelings for me will always be controlled by what you think I want. Or what you think I need.”

“I thought the best relationships were built on self-sacrifice,” Clark said quickly.

“They are,” Lois said. “But not to the exclusion of your wants, your needs.”

Clark lifted his hand and sighed. “I’m not very good at this,” he said disconsolately. “I’m even less sure now than I was before we started talking.”

“I guess what I’m trying to say is that I’m desperately hoping you will fall in love with me. Not the guard. Not the woman who gave you reasonable living conditions. Not the woman who took the poison from your shoulder. Not the woman who helped you escape. Just me. Lois.”

“I ...”

Lois tightened her grip on his hand. “See Clark, that’s what I mean about you expecting so much from yourself. I don’t expect you to know how you feel yet. That’s why I want you to feel secure in my feelings for you — because I don’t expect there is any way possible for you to feel secure in your feelings about anything. I want you to know that I’m here for you — and however long it takes, I’m willing to wait for you.”

“Lois,” Clark said. “I ... I can’t believe that someone like you would be saying that to someone like me.”

She smiled a little. “Well, I am. And I mean it.”

“How can you be so sure?”

Lois thought for a moment, searching for the right words. “I think that if I were you, I would hate being reminded about the time in the cell and the way they forced you to live.”

The muscles in Clark’s hand tensed.

“But all that squalor and cruelty — much as I hated it — made it so easy to see exactly the sort of person you are. A bit like how a light shines brightest in the darkest places.”

Clark slipped his hand out from under Lois’s. “Can I turn off the light?” he asked.

“Sure.”

He rose from the bed, removed his glasses, and put them on the lamp stand. He crossed the room and flicked the switch. A few seconds later, Lois felt his weight return to the bed.

“Are you OK?” she said.

“Yeah.” His tone gave no clue to his feelings. Or what he was going to do next.

No one spoke for a long time. Only the sound of their breathing filled the void.

“Good night, Clark,” Lois said.

“Lois?”

“Yes?”

“It wasn’t you,” Clark said. “It was me. It just got a bit too intense ...”

“I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable.”

“You did. But you said things that I will dwell on for a long time ... and every time I think of them, I know it won’t be my discomfort that I remember most, but my awe for you ... and my wonder at being with you.”

“Are you sleepy yet?”

“No, not at all. My mind is too full to sleep.”

“Do you want me to be quiet and leave you alone with your thoughts?”

“Not if you want to talk,” he said. “But I don’t think I can answer any more questions tonight.”

Lois didn’t particularly want to talk. But it had been such a good day, and she didn’t want it to finish like this. She wasn’t sure how Clark would feel about her touch — the distance between their sleeping bags suddenly seemed like a canyon of separation. And after having admitted that she wanted him to fall in love with her, he might think she had more in mind than simple physical contact.

Perhaps she could try to touch him with her words. He had opened himself up a lot — admitted things she hadn’t been expecting when she’d asked the question about his greatest fear. If she didn’t reciprocate, he might feel that their relationship had become even more unbalanced.

But wanting to talk was one thing. Knowing what to say was another.

This was Clark, she reminded herself. Clark — the most understanding person she had ever met. She could give him some of the story. She didn’t have to include the worst bits. She could stop whenever she wanted to — Clark would never press her for more.

Before there was time to reflect on where it might end, Lois began. “Linda and I were sent on an assignment to a small village in a foreign country,” she said. “We were to be there for three months, and our mission was to find out whatever we could about a rumoured terrorist

training camp in the hills behind the village.”

She had begun. She had begun the story she had thought she would never again vocalise to anyone.

Clark said nothing, but she knew he was listening.

“We got there, told our story, settled in, kept our ears open,” Lois said. “On the second day, we met two young men — Ivica and Elan. From the start, there was something between Linda and Ivica. She was naturally more cautious than I was, and she was well aware of the dangers and difficulties of a relationship starting on a job. But she thought Ivica seemed perfect — a steady man with a dry sense of humour that kept her laughing. We checked around, and he seemed legitimate. He came from a long-established local family; his mother had died when he was a child, and his father was a teacher in the school.

“I had reservations,” Lois said, remembering the earnest discussions she’d had with Linda. “But the more we delved into Ivica’s background, the more normal he appeared. I knew he would never leave, and if Linda wanted to be with him, she was going to have to move permanently to the village. I certainly didn’t want to live as a third wheel in a remote little village, so I accepted that if anything did develop between Linda and Ivica, it would mean the end of our partnership.”

Lois closed her eyes and was immediately transported back to the hot and oppressive atmosphere of the village.

“I had doubts,” she said. “I always had doubts, but Linda figured they were mainly because I didn’t want our partnership to end.”

“That’s a difficult situation for both of you,” Clark said.

“Yeah,” Lois said with a long sigh. “Then, about five weeks into the assignment, Ivica came early one morning. He banged on our door, urgent and distressed. He told us that the military was going to raid the village, looking for possible anti-government factions, and we had to get out fast.”

“Did you believe him?”

“We had also heard a couple of whispers about anti-government factions,” Lois said. “His fear seemed real — so did his concern for our safety.”

Lois could hear the bitterness taint her voice. She wondered if Clark had heard it, too.

“Ivica said we would be safe if we went with him to a shack in the hills — a shack belonging to a friend of Elan’s.”

“What did you do?” Clark asked.

“He was insistent that we go with him then,” Lois said. “But Linda and I had agreed a long time before this that unless it was literally a matter of life and death, we would do nothing major without consulting each other first. We sent him away and talked it through. It was almost a replica of our earlier discussions — could we trust Ivica? Except now, it wasn’t Linda’s happiness at stake but, possibly, our lives.”

“What did you decide?”

“I had doubts,” Lois said. “In fact, the more we talked about going, the less I liked it. But the other thing we had promised each other was never to separate because of a disagreement about what we should do. We would continue to talk it through until we reached a decision. Eventually, we did. Linda insisted that my feelings of uncertainty regarding Ivica were about a whole lot of things other than his actual trustworthiness.

“We’d meticulously covered every base. We’d found out all the information we could about him. We had no reason to suspect that he had any inkling of why we were really there. Logically, there was no reason not to trust him.”

“But you still weren’t sure?”

Lois gulped down the ball of bitter regret and self-recrimination that had crept into her throat. “No,” she said shakily. “I was worried. But I didn’t want to appear petty and jealous of Linda’s happiness.”

There was a small rustle of movement, and then she felt Clark’s fingers brush against her arm.

She should stop now. Clark would wonder, but he wouldn’t

demand that she tell him more. She should stop. She should defer to the decision she had made never to relive what had happened.

But now, something drove her forward.

She wanted to share it with someone.

And there was no one she trusted more than Clark.

Lois sucked in a steadying breath and continued. “When Ivica came back, we went with him,” she said. “We drove in his old truck out of the village to the foothills and then left the truck and trekked into the mountains. Two hours later, we found the building. It was bigger than we had expected from Ivica’s description — more like a compound than a shack — and it was built into the side of a rock face.”

The powerful sense of evil that had assailed her as she had stood before the building struck her again. Then, she had grabbed Linda’s arm and tried to telegraph her concerns, but Linda had been holding Ivica’s hand as he’d hurried her forward.

Now, Lois grasped Clark’s hand and clung to him.

“I ... I ... It felt wrong,” she said. “It felt so wrong. But there was no way back. It was two hours down the mountain to Ivica’s truck, and neither Linda nor I had been into the hills before. Now that we were there, it seemed safer to go in than to risk trying to get back to the village.”

“But it wasn’t safe?” Clark said.

“No,” Lois said in an anguished cry. “And we knew within seconds. As soon as Ivica had shut the door, Elan appeared, and they dragged us to the back of the building and threw us into a dark room.”

“Did they say anything? Did they give any reason?”

“Elan was involved in the terrorist training camp, and he’d recruited Ivica to the cause. We found out later that they had discovered the truth about us.”

Clark lifted Lois’s hand and placed it in the centre of his chest. His hands covered hers like a mantle of protection.

Lois pushed down the tears. She hadn’t intended to say this much. Even when she had been debriefed, she had kept detail to a minimum and claimed that the trauma had blunted her memory.

That wasn’t true. Every memory, every pang of fear, every stab of apprehension was still vividly sharp in her memory.

“They tied us up and gagged us and left us for a long time,” Lois said. The darkness of the motel room closed around her, oppressive and replete with unseen threats. But her hand was cocooned between Clark’s large and gentle hands and his solid chest. She concentrated on him, and the darkness retreated.

“We managed to communicate enough to get my tied feet under Linda’s tied hands, and she worked tirelessly at loosening the knots. Then Ivica and Elan came back, and they were like two strangers. They reeked of alcohol, but it wasn’t just two men who’d had too much to drink. It was as if their personalities had undergone a complete change. They jeered at us and told us they knew we were American agents. Then ...”

Lois stopped as the memories jammed the words in her throat.

Clark’s thumb glided gently over the back of her hand.

“Then, they began discussing who would go first. Ivica said he had waited long enough for the blonde slut. Elan agreed and told me he’d be back for me, and then he left. Ivica untied Linda and pushed her onto the floor in the corner. He turned off his flashlight ... and then ... in the darkness ... it began.”

There was sudden movement, and Lois’s head was on Clark’s chest, his arm tight around her, his hand sweeping through her hair with utmost gentleness.

The dam of rigid control burst, and Lois’s tears swept free.

She cried for Linda and the agony and torture Ivica had inflicted on her before finally releasing her to the haven of death.

She cried for the friend and partner that she missed so much.

As she cried, Clark held her.

And in his arms, she found comfort.

Comfort that flowed unerringly into all the crevices of her heart where pain had festered. Comfort that carried healing.

And such sweet love.

Clark didn’t move to wipe away the stray tears that had drizzled from his eyes.

That anyone could have treated Lois that way — it felt like a poisoned rod being gouged through his chest.

But what was even more unbearable was the knowledge that she hadn’t trusted him enough to tell him everything.

There was more.

He was sure there was more.

She hadn’t told him how she had escaped. She hadn’t finished the story.

And it was what had happened between Linda’s death and Lois’s escape that haunted Clark.

He was sure that something bad — really, really bad — had happened to Lois.

Worse than hearing her friend being violated and killed.

Clark’s imagination rioted at what they might have done — sickening him.

Lois needed support. She needed understanding. She needed stability.

She needed someone to help her.

Someone whole. Someone human. Someone who would know instinctively what she needed.

And Clark wasn’t that person.

It had been his greatest fear — and now he was sure.

He could never be what Lois needed.

Part 9

~ Monday ~

When Lois awoke the next morning, her first awareness was that every muscle in her body ached. Her neck felt as if she had slept with it jammed in a vice. Her back felt as if it had been twisted into a half hitch. She jolted to a sitting position, groaning as armies of angry insects burrowed through her brain.

What had happened?

The other side of the bed was empty.

Where was Clark?

The room had been tidied, and their meal from last night had been cleared away. The bathroom door was open.

“Clark?”

There was no reply to break the silence.

Lois sank back into the pillows.

Why was she feeling so dreadful? She’d finally spoken openly about the horror that relentlessly stalked her mind. Shouldn’t that have brought relief? She had fallen asleep to the melody of Clark’s heartbeat, safe in the protection of his arms. She should have slept well. She should have been feeling refreshed.

Instead, she felt like she had spent the night embroiled in turmoil.

Had she said something in her sleep? Had she been subconsciously reliving the events in the dark room? A wave of horror crept over her. Had she, in her sleep, mistaken Clark for Ivica or Elan?

Surely Clark would understand. Surely he wouldn’t leave on the strength of something she’d said or done while asleep.

And it wasn’t as if she could physically hurt him.

So, where was he?

Lois rose gingerly from the bed and searched the room for a note. There was nothing.

Her anxiety rose and spilled through her gut like bile. Where was Clark? Had someone come? How could she have slept through it? Could she possibly have been drugged? Or gassed? Was that why she was feeling so awful?

As she reached for her watch to check the time, the door opened, and Clark walked in.

She stormed towards him. “Where have you been?” she shouted angrily.

He looked shocked at the ferocity of her advance. “Ah ...”

“Are you all right? Did someone come? What happened?”

"I'm fine," he said blankly. "No one came."

As relief flooded through her, Lois realised that Clark looked like she felt — as if he'd survived a turbulent night.

What had happened?

She edged closer and put her hand on his upper arm. He tensed.

"What's wrong?" Lois asked as her anxiety extinguished the spark of her anger. "Did you go to Florida again? Are they chasing us?"

"There's nothing happening in Florida," he said.

"You checked?"

"Yes!" It was as close to snapping as Clark had ever come when speaking to her. Before the word had even left his mouth, he had stepped past her and moved towards the bathroom.

"Clark! You can't just walk away. What's wrong?" Lois shook her head — which was a bad idea — trying to clear her thoughts. "I don't understand what's happening here."

He turned, his face closed. He folded his arms across his chest and waited.

Lois moved into his line of vision. "Clark, I'm sorry I shouted.

When I woke up, and you weren't here, I was worried. I panicked."

"I should have left a note," he conceded. "I wasn't thinking too straight."

"Why not?"

His mouth tightened, and he said nothing.

Lois's tears made a determined push, stinging her eyes. She blinked them away. "What *happened*, Clark?" she demanded. "I woke up this morning feeling as if I'd been run over by a bulldozer; you're acting as if we had a huge argument or something ... but the last thing I remember was crying on your chest before we went to sleep."

"You didn't sleep well. You were restless all night."

"I kept you awake?" she asked, trying to find something meaningful in his cryptic answers.

"No. It wasn't you."

"But you didn't sleep?"

"Not much."

"Why? Was it something I said last night?"

He sighed. "Lois, do we have to do this now?"

"Yes, we do," she said. "Yesterday, everything seemed fine. We -"

"Yesterday wasn't real."

His cold statement dammed the torrential flow of her questions.

"Excuse me?"

"We need to stop pretending," Clark said.

"Pretending?"

"Yesterday. Lunch in the pretty little cafe. The ice creams.

Pretending we're just two normal people. I'm *not* normal. I'll never be normal, and you pretending we can have any sort of future together is not making this any easier."

"But ... but you seemed to be enjoying it, too," Lois protested weakly. "You seemed relaxed. You seemed -"

"I was 'playing a role,'" he said bitterly. "You should understand that."

"You were pretending to be relaxed?" she asked incredulously.

"Why?"

"You were happy. I like it when you're happy. I was willing to do anything to keep you happy."

"Even pretend to be happy yourself?"

He glared at her. "You asked me my greatest fear, and I told you. I *can't* be what you need." He abruptly turned away and yanked open the lid of the suitcase. "I have to find work. There are a couple of ads in the window of one of the stores. Farm work. I came to ask you if I can use the car to get to the farm."

He'd gone looking for work? Here? Now? Without talking to her about it first? "Of course you can use the car," Lois said, as her mind retrieved the details of her plan. "But first, we need to sort out identification. When we were in Florida yesterday, I noticed a store that takes passport photos. We could -"

"I'm not having my photo taken."

The harshness of his voice spurred on her tears, but Lois fought

them down. "Clark — at the very least you need a driver's licence. And you need it *before* you drive the car."

"I drove it yesterday."

"You need a licence."

He turned on her. "There's a small chance that any early photos or descriptions of me have been destroyed. If they are hunting for me, they could be looking for a hairy monster. It's just possible that how I look now could be something of a disguise."

"I understand that," Lois said, utilising reserves of patience that she hadn't known she possessed. "But you still need some form of ID."

"Do you have the cards? Or pieces of plastic? Or whatever you were going to use to make the licences?"

"Yes." Lois snatched her bag and rustled through it. She pulled out her kit for constructing ID and threw it onto the table.

"Can I see your licence?"

Lois pulled it from her purse and thrust it at Clark.

"I can do it," he said. "Without photos."

"You can draw?" Lois asked. "Photo quality?"

"Yeah. If we get some crayons, I can do it."

"Crayons?"

"They melt."

"Have you ever done it before?"

"No."

"Then how -"

"No photographs," he said firmly.

His eyes were fixed on her — hard and unyielding. "OK," Lois said. "No photographs."

"Can I have the car keys?" Clark asked.

"Yes, you can."

He held out his hand.

"But first, I want you to answer a few questions."

He sighed as his hand dropped. But he didn't move away.

Lois felt as if he'd tossed a hand grenade into the middle of her carefully constructed schedule. She needed to take them back a step or two. "I'm not buying that yesterday was entirely an act," she said.

"Perhaps you were pretending to be more relaxed than you felt — we all do that. But I can't believe that you were just trying to be what you thought I wanted you to be."

"I have no idea what you want me to be," Clark said disconsolately.

He seemed fixated, and there was no point in covering this ground again. "What did I do that caused such a change in your attitude?"

Lois asked. "Did I do something while I was asleep? Did I curse all men? Or hit you? Or swear at you? What did I do?"

"You didn't do anything."

"I *must* have done something. Yesterday, we were -"

"Yesterday, we were indulging in a silly, childish game of make-believe."

Lois shook her head. "No," she asserted. "No, that is not what we were doing."

Clark frowned, refusing to back down.

"You didn't answer my question," Lois said.

"You didn't do anything," he said grimly. "You were restless. You groaned some. Your heart rate was erratic."

"But I didn't say anything abusive? I didn't accuse you of something?"

"No."

"I didn't swear off men forever?"

"Lois," he growled. "This isn't funny."

"No," she said with a long sigh. "It's tragic."

"Can I have the keys?"

A flash of inspiration, driven by frustration and fear, hurtled through her mind. "No," Lois retorted.

He jolted at the sharpness of her reply. "I need to find work."

"You'll find work," Lois said. "I have the perfect place."

"Where?"

“Would you fly me to Metropolis, please?”

“Metropolis?” he exclaimed sharply. “We can’t go -”

“Will you fly me to Metropolis, please?” Lois repeated calmly.

“What for?”

“I’ll explain on the way.”

He looked around the room. “Should we pack the car first?”

“No. We’ll only be a few minutes.”

Lois took a couple of swift steps towards Clark and leapt into his arms. He caught her — as she knew he would.

“Metropolis?” he said dubiously.

“Yes. I’m going to call Scardino.”

“You can’t -”

“Yes, I can. I’m going to call Scardino from a public phone while you watch him from above. You’ll be able to see if he has any reaction to my call. I figure you’ll be able to super-look or super-hear or super-something to determine whether there is a trace on his phone.”

“What if he does trace your call?”

“We’ll know that his message was deliberately misleading. And by the time he’s traced the call to a local telephone booth, we’ll be several states away.”

Clark said nothing, which Lois took to mean that he couldn’t think of any reasonable objections to her plan.

“I’m ready,” she informed him lightly.

“All right,” he said. “Hold on.”

Seconds later, they were flying. Clark’s face was set, and he maintained a stony silence — which suited Lois. She needed to think.

Now that the fog of sleep had lifted, she could remember some of the dreams that had haunted her during the night. She hadn’t dreamed of being in the dark room. She’d dreamed of escaping — of being chased. Of the torment of being hunted and the fear of being caught.

Finally, as she’d made it to safety, she’d felt an overwhelming desire to go home. To go back to what was familiar. The desire still lingered — and it was that yearning that had precipitated the flash of inspiration.

The way forward had crystallised.

Now, she knew what they had to do.

Scardino’s PA hadn’t arrived at the office yet, so the call came directly to him. It wasn’t a number his system recognised. His first thought was that perhaps it could finally be Neville Moyne.

“Daniel Scardino,” he said.

“It’s Lois Lane.”

“Lois?” Daniel couldn’t help the squeak that gushed out with her name. He cleared his throat. “Ms Lane? Are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

“I’m really pleased to hear from you,” Scardino said, realising it was true. He hadn’t quite been able to dismiss the nagging possibility that the alien had turned on her. “Did you get my message?”

“Yes.”

“The whole operation has been wound up,” Scardino said. “All the records have been destroyed. The body was cremated.”

“The body?”

“The body in the cell.” Scardino paused, weighing his next words. “You did well, Ms Lane,” he said. “I was impressed with the professional manner in which you brought the operation to its conclusion.”

The line went silent, and Scardino wondered if Lois was trying to assess the sincerity of his compliment.

“Did you find an assignment for Shadbolt?” she asked.

“Not an assignment. But he has a job as a security guard.”

“A security guard?”

“Yeah. It suits his needs — regular hours, he can stay in Metropolis, and he even gets two days off a week.”

“I have to go. Bye.”

Scardino heard the click of the line being disconnected and slowly replaced his phone.

Lois was safe.

She was with the alien.

Scardino hoped that it worked for them. They both deserved some happiness.

“Anything?” Lois asked as Clark flew them back to the motel room in Wisconsin.

“Nothing,” Clark replied. “There was no tap or anything else attached to the phone. There was nothing to trace the call.”

“What did Scardino do when he hung up from my call?”

“Went back to doing a crossword puzzle.”

“OK,” Lois said as she settled more comfortably into his arms. She closed her eyes and tried to relax away her lingering headache. The time for talking was over.

Clark flew them back to the motel room, feeling mind-numbingly confused. He had detected nothing to indicate that Scardino was conducting a search for them.

There were two possible dangers — either Menzies had organised a hunt without Scardino’s knowledge, or Scardino’s actions had been those of a man who realised that the alien had the power to spy on him from a great distance.

What was Lois thinking? Did she accept that, for now, they were safe from recapture? Was she suspicious of Scardino’s actions? She seemed relaxed in his arms.

Clark had a niggling hunch that he was going to regret the way he had behaved this morning. He’d slipped from the bed as the first rays of light had crept into the dark room. He hadn’t slept — not for a moment.

All night, he had been torn — torn between the intoxicating closeness of Lois’s body and his unshakable belief that there could be no future for them.

Her closeness had inflamed the myriad of feelings he had been trying to deny almost since the moment Moyne had thrown her into the cell.

Lois had been so many different things to him — the first kind voice in years, a light in his darkness, a compassionate guard, a true friend.

But none of that negated the fact that she was a woman.

And he ... well, he wasn’t a man, but that didn’t mean he was immune to the lure of a beautiful woman.

From the start, he’d known that they could never be together — really together. Last night had firmed that belief into rigid certainty.

The more he had thought about her story, the more convinced he’d become that Lois had been raped by either Elan or Ivica. He couldn’t fathom how she had managed to escape with her life, but he had no doubts about what she *hadn’t* told him.

He was not the man for her.

He wasn’t even a man.

So, he had gotten up, sped through a shower, dressed, and decided that the sooner he found work and was able to support himself financially, the sooner Lois would be free to seek the counselling and help that she needed.

Then, he’d come back to the motel, expecting that Lois might be a little surprised by his sudden purposefulness, but thinking that she — shaken by the memories she had dredged up last night — might make a token protest and then accept the inevitable.

Looking back, it had been a naive expectation.

Lois Lane didn’t give up.

The fact she was alive was testimony to that.

His decisiveness had done nothing except incite hers. And Clark had a sinking feeling that — despite all of his ‘powers’ — in a battle of wills, Lois would outmuscle him.

He swept them through the door of the motel and landed with a gentle thud. He loosened his arms from around Lois, and she slipped to the floor. “Thanks,” she said.

“You’re welcome,” he said stiffly.

“Can you pack away everything while I have a shower?” she said.

“Lois ... I ... I would like to go out to the farm that is advertising for a labourer. Is it OK if I borrow the car?”

“No,” she said. “We need to get on the road. We have a long way to travel today.”

“Ah ...” Clark wasn’t sure how to remonstrate that he suddenly seemed to have no say in what they did.

“What’s up?” Lois asked lightly.

“Ah ... Where are we going?”

“Smallville, Kansas.”

“Smallville?” he gulped. “Lois, we can’t -”

“Yes, we can. It’s stupid for you to work for someone else when your farm needs work. And it’s stupid paying for motels when you own a house.”

“But Lois -”

“We’re going.” She turned towards the bathroom.

Clark used a little extra speed to arrive there first and block her way. “Why?”

“Because I think you need to go home.”

“We can’t, Lois.”

“We can, and we’re going to.”

“But ... at the very least, we should discuss it first. We should check Scardino again. Perhaps even Menzies.”

“We are not going to discuss anything right now,” Lois said.

“Why not?”

“Because you don’t believe half of what I say — regardless of how many times I say it.”

“I ...”

“It’s time for action,” Lois said. “We’ll try words again later. Excuse me.”

She pushed past him, entered the bathroom, and firmly shut the door.

Clark stared at it.

Apparently, he was going home.

Wayne Irig looked up and down the wiry young man who had knocked on his door and inquired if he had any work available. “Have you worked on a farm before?” Wayne asked.

“Yes. Dairy and hogs.”

“We have beef.”

“I’m sure I could adapt.”

Wayne hesitated. He needed the help. With Brett’s wedding coming up next month, and winter approaching, and both farms needing upkeep ... “What’s your name?”

“Phil Deller.”

“Do you have a reference?”

The young man pulled out his wallet, extracted a folded piece of paper, and offered it to Wayne.

Wayne read it and then glanced up to the young man. Something wasn’t right. The young man’s nonchalance seemed overdone.

Perhaps he just really needed the job.

And Wayne really needed the help.

“The woman in town said that you would be the best to ask because you have two farms,” Deller said.

“You can’t live here,” Wayne said. “You’ll have to find somewhere to stay in Smallville.”

Deller nodded as he replaced the paper in his wallet. “Start tomorrow?”

Wayne nodded. “See you at sunup.”

Deller turned and sauntered away, lighting up a cigarette as he went.

Wayne watched him ... still not sure.

As they drove, the certainty that he’d made a big mistake solidified into an uncomfortable lump that wedged in Clark’s gut.

What was more disconcerting was the realisation that he still had no clear idea of what he *should* have done.

The way they had been living — spending the days like two

companionable travellers and the nights in the same bed — couldn’t continue. It couldn’t.

It simply wasn’t a sustainable situation.

Lois had given every indication that she would be willing to move things forward — that her easygoing friendliness was because she was waiting for him to decide what he wanted.

He’d already decided.

He’d decided a long time ago.

He wanted to spend every possible second of his life with Lois.

But what scared him — what had always tormented him — was that he simply could *not* believe she would want to be with him long-term. And the thought of her leaving him ripped his heart into tiny quivering shreds.

The closer they became, the more devastating would be her departure.

He’d obsessed over it interminably, decrying his inability to cross the impasse.

He glanced sideways.

Everything about Lois suggested she was a woman on a mission. Her posture was straight, her hands were clenched around the steering wheel, her eyes were riveted forward, and she’d been constantly sitting a few miles over the speed limit.

“Lois?” Clark said, startling himself with the sound of his voice as it carved through the long-maintained silence. “What happens when we get to Smallville?”

“Before we get there, we need to have our story ready,” she said, her eyes never deviating from the road ahead.

She was willing to talk to him. That felt like progress. “Our story?”

“I’ve been thinking it through. I think sticking close to the truth might be our best plan.”

“The truth?” he gulped.

“There is a chance I will be recognised in Smallville,” she said. “I wore a blonde wig when I was there, but we can’t guarantee that it will be enough.”

“So ...”

“We can’t hide away at the farm. We should be open and try to assimilate back into the local community.”

We? Both of them? Clark couldn’t imagine Lois being happy living a country life in a small community. Not for any longer than a week or two.

“I think we should say that I’m a government agent,” Lois said. “We should say that parties unfriendly to the US government got it wrong seven years ago — mistakenly thinking that your family was being groomed as US spies. They kidnapped you and took you to some mysterious, unnamed country.”

“My family?” Clark said incredulously. “Spies?”

“The whole idea of spies is that they are supposed to look like regular people,” Lois said. “We’ll say that they got it wrong — the people of Smallville who knew your parents will probably mutter, ‘Yeah, we could have told them that,’ and roll their eyes at the incompetency of city types.”

“OK,” Clark said, not convinced but hoping his lack of conviction wasn’t evident in his tone.

“Our story has to be able to cover not knowing where your mom is now or when she will be home, but still allow for her sudden appearance when we find her.”

If they found her.

“So, we say that the US government spy agency that I work for knew of the capture of the entire Kent family and has been working to get you back,” Lois said. “That’s where I come in — I’ve been assigned to bring you home while the agency continues trying to locate your mom.”

“I’m not sure about this, Lois,” Clark said. “It seems only one step away from questions about why it would be my family that was under suspicion.”

“It does need work on the detail,” Lois said. “But the good thing

about using a spy agency cover is that people are often more willing to accept ‘secrets’ if there’s a hint of national security involved. If they know a little, they feel privileged rather than burning with curiosity to know the rest.” She glanced at him but didn’t smile. “The old ‘need-to-know’ platitude can come in really handy sometimes.”

“Yeah.”

“Think about it,” she said. “We’ll firm up on it before we have to actually say anything to anyone.”

“You really think we should be open about being there?”

“We’ll have to be,” Lois said. “I doubt we could live there without anyone knowing.”

“We couldn’t,” Clark said. “The grapevine works pretty efficiently.” Which led to another issue. “What ... what are we going to say about ... about us?”

“We’re going to say that my job is to help you adjust back into normal life.”

Was that what their relationship had been reduced to? Had he done *that* much damage this morning?

Lois glanced his way again. “Hungry yet?” she asked. Then she smiled.

She *smiled*.

Clark had thought he’d banished it forever.

Her eyes were back on the road, but traces of her smile lingered.

“Are you?” she asked.

“Huh?”

She chuckled — short and soft — but it brought untold relief to Clark’s heart. “Are you hungry yet?”

“Yeah. A bit.”

“Do you mind if we eat and run? I want to arrive in Smallville tonight.”

“No, I don’t mind.” He doubted he would even be terribly cognisant of what he was eating. He just wanted to feast on the smile that he thought he had doused forever. He dragged his brain cells back to working order. “Are you sure Smallville is a good idea?”

“It makes sense practically,” she said.

“I didn’t mean that. I meant whether you’re sure that we’re not walking into a trap.”

“Do you want to check on Scardino again?”

“I think we should,” Clark said. He couldn’t believe that Scardino would allow him freedom so easily. “Do you want to come with me?”

“Sure. Any reason?”

He wanted her in his arms again. “Maybe ... Do you know where Menzies’ office is? Perhaps we should check on him, too.”

“OK,” Lois said. “We’ll do it when we stop for lunch.”

“I also wondered if you wanted to go to your apartment. If there were things you wanted to get.”

She considered that for a moment. “I think it’s a good idea to check my apartment — to see if there is any surveillance equipment there. But I don’t think we should go in yet. Perhaps once we are settled in Smallville, I can get some things from my apartment.”

That sounded like she intended staying for longer than a few days. “OK,” Clark said. “Checking for surveillance equipment is a good idea.”

She smiled again — and this time Clark was sufficiently composed to attempt to analyse it. It lacked the bubbly warmth of her smiles yesterday. It looked like a smile she would give to a colleague — someone she liked. Not someone she loved.

Again, Clark was deluged with questions, and regrets, and uncertainties. If only he’d just let things be this morning.

But then ... they *couldn’t* continue the way they had been. It had been a castle built on a foundation of cotton candy.

Eventually, it would have dissolved.

He knew that.

He wasn’t sure about anything else.

But he knew that.

Part 10

From the safety of Clark’s arms, Lois peered down at the orderly

grid of tiny rectangles that was the city of Metropolis. “Anything happening with Scardino?”

“Nothing,” Clark replied. “He’s at his desk, writing a report. I skimmed it, and it has nothing to do with us.”

“No tap on his phone?” Lois asked, taking advantage of her close range to stare at Clark while his concentration was directed far below them.

“No.”

His face changed suddenly. “What is it?” Lois gasped.

“Two o’clock this afternoon,” Clark said. “He has a meeting with Menzies. It’s in his diary.”

“We need to be there,” Lois said. “Not *there*,” she amended. “But here.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “Two o’clock, Metropolis time. Do you want to check out Menzies’ office now?”

“Yes. That will save time this afternoon.” Lois smiled to try to ease the worry lines that had appeared on Clark’s face. “The meeting is a good thing,” she said, trying to sound upbeat. “We’ll know something concrete. That’s better than relying on guesswork.”

Clark nodded, but anxiety still shrouded his eyes. “Where is Menzies’ office?” he asked.

“Go south about five miles from Scardino’s office, then west about one. There’s a drab concrete building that looks like a factory.”

There was a small pause, and then Clark said, “Got it.”

“Look for the biggest office in the building.”

Clark peered down again. “OK, I can see his name on the door.”

“Menzies is a tall man. He has a small bald patch on the back of his head.”

“He’s not there,” Clark said. “His desk calendar is still set to Friday, so perhaps he hasn’t been in yet today.”

“You’d think that if he were coordinating a big search, he’d be at his desk,” Lois mused. “I would have expected him to be there most of the weekend.”

“Yeah.”

There was such despair in Clark’s tone. Lois turned to him, undecided as to whether she should give in to her strong inclination to run some fingers through his hair. Or lay her hand on his shoulder. Perhaps all the touching had contributed to the confrontation this morning. Perhaps, instead of helping Clark, it had seemed as if she were driving them forward at an ever-increasing speed. “Clark?” she said, keeping her hand to herself. “Would you be all right with checking the compound? Scardino said Menzies had ordered that it be demolished.”

“Where is it?”

“About eight miles due west of Menzies’ office. Behind a big brown warehouse.”

His head turned. His eyes fixed. His mouth opened a little. “I think I’ve found the warehouse,” he said. “But there’s nothing behind it.”

“Any signs of demolition?”

“Yeah.”

“So it’s gone?”

“Yep. All gone.” He looked across to her, his face carefully deadpan.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m OK. Where’s your apartment?”

She gave him directions. “It’s on the fifth floor,” Lois said when Clark had located the building. “First room on the western side.”

“There are some half-unpacked boxes in the corner of the living room.”

“That’s it. Is everything all right?”

Clark’s gaze seemed to intensify.

“What is it?” Lois asked, trying to convince herself that her rising apprehension was unfounded.

“I think someone has been there.”

“You do?” she squeaked.

“It’s hard to tell, even with my enhanced vision. I can see very faint footprints through the thin layer of dust.”

“Could they be my footprints?”

Clark hesitated. “They could be — they don’t look big enough for a man.” His eyes glanced to her feet before panning to focus on her face. “Does anyone else have a key? Your mother? Do you have a sister?”

“I have a sister — she lives in California. My mother has never been to my apartment. No one except me has a key.”

Clark looked down again. “I’m not sure,” he said after a few moments, looking crestfallen that he couldn’t give her definite answers.

“It doesn’t matter,” Lois said quickly. “Even if someone did go into my apartment, there’s nothing there to indicate that I’m in Smallville.”

His gaze rose from the building below. “Back to the car?”

She nodded. “Thanks.”

Clark rotated and propelled them forward.

Lois settled back to enjoy the sensation of gliding effortlessly through the air, enjoy the strength of his arms, enjoy his closeness.

And plan how she was going to get him out of *this* prison.

Clark’s stomach was cramping with ever-tightening knots.

He felt like he was awaiting a verdict. The verdict brought down by those who ruled this planet — those who could sentence him to captivity.

Those who *had* sentenced him to death.

He stared at the oncoming road as it was swallowed up by the hood of the Buick — although he wasn’t so engrossed in his thoughts that he was unaware of how often Lois glanced sideways at him. He could feel her empathy rolling over him in waves.

Whatever the verdict — whatever passed between Scardino and Menzies — Lois’s support would be unfaltering.

Which elevated the significance to almost intolerable levels.

This wasn’t just about him.

This was her future, too.

Looking back now, he realised that his actions this morning had been a gauche and clumsy attempt to test Lois’s commitment to him. To show that he was OK. That he didn’t need her.

Which was so diametrically opposed to the truth, it was almost laughable.

Almost.

If it had been a test — subconsciously formulated and poorly executed — she had passed with distinction.

She wasn’t going to leave him.

She had been telling him that for days. She had told him that before they had even left the cell, and she had never wavered.

And now, finally, he had heard her.

Really heard her.

Lois wasn’t going to leave him.

But his relief was spiked with fear.

The same unquenchable fear he had battled since Lois Lane had walked into his life.

He couldn’t be what she needed.

Her determination to stay meant there could be no escape.

For either of them.

Daniel Scardino walked into Menzies’ office feeling less intimidated than ever before when approaching a higher-up — particularly one with the reputation of Eric Menzies.

He set the urn on the desk.

“What’s that?” Menzies asked.

Scardino hoped he managed to conceal his surprise at the inanity of the question. There was nothing to be gained from provoking a bad-tempered dog. “The ashes,” Scardino said. “The buildings have been —”

“Who killed him?”

Scardino had prepared himself for that question. “I did,” he said steadily. He waited for Menzies to demand detail.

“The building is gone?”

“Yes,” Scardino replied, wondering if it could possibly be this easy.

“Have you made it clear to Shadbolt and Longford and Lane that nothing of this operation is ever to be mentioned again?”

“Yes. They understand.”

“Have you heard from Moyne?”

“No.”

Menzies dropped heavily into his seat. “Thank you for your efficiency in concluding this unfortunate episode. With Trask dead, it can finally truly be over.”

Scardino nodded, sure that his shock at being *thanked* by Eric Menzies was plastered across his face.

“That’s all,” Menzies barked as he picked up the phone.

Scardino turned and walked to the door, feeling as if a sad and shameful chapter had closed.

Could there be any sort of positive outcome for the man who had endured the horrific consequences of Trask’s paranoia?

Scardino didn’t know.

But the former prisoner had Lois Lane in his corner.

And that might just be enough.

Her excitement and relief erupted, and Lois threw her arms around Clark’s neck. “It’s over,” she whispered, her mouth against his ear. “It’s over.”

They were high above Metropolis. Clark had watched and listened as the meeting had played out below them, relating the conversation to Lois word for word.

They were free!

She backed away before she wanted to and perused Clark’s face.

He looked more lost than he ever had in the cell. More stranded.

More startled. More disoriented. “Lois . . .”

She spread her hands over his cheeks. “Clark Kent,” she said, connecting with his brown eyes. “Clark Kent — that’s who you are. Just a regular guy. Free to live and work and play and be whoever you want to be.”

“I’m still an alien. Still different.”

“But you’ve been given a chance. *We’ve* been given a chance. A chance to build new lives. To start again.”

“Is that what you want?”

“More than anything.”

“Lois,” he said. “I still need . . .”

“Time.”

He nodded. “I can’t believe that they will just leave me alone. Perhaps Scardino will, but there might be someone else. I can’t just snap my fingers and wipe away the past seven years.”

“I know,” Lois said, honing deep into his eyes and trying to alleviate his uncertainties. “I know that some of the scars will be there for a long time. But we can do it. We can do it together.”

He looked unsure. As if he didn’t know what to do now.

“Let’s go home,” she suggested.

“Back to the car?”

“Back to Kansas,” she said. “You need to go home.”

The countryside slowly became more familiar, calling to him, awakening the person he had once been.

Even after darkness had fallen, he could feel it. There was something about the sounds, the smells, the stars — the very atmosphere — that reached inside him and found affinity there.

An hour ago, he’d put the map away. Slowly at first, and then with greater frequency, individual landmarks spoke memories to him.

This was the little town where his parents had brought him to a carnival to celebrate his ninth birthday.

And later . . . they passed through the town where he’d come with his dad to sell some yearling bullocks.

Later still . . . he’d driven his mom here so she could buy art supplies — and they’d had lunch together in the park.

From a distance, he'd planned to skirt Smallville, but as it loomed ever nearer, the yearning to see the once-so-familiar streetscape grew stronger.

"Lois?"

She turned to him with a tired smile. "Uhm?"

"Would it be best if we didn't go through Smallville?"

Her reply took long enough in coming that it was possible she understood his dilemma. "I think so," she said gently. "Your return is going to be big news. If someone recognised you, people might come to the farm tonight." She reached over to squeeze his hand. "We're both tired. Tomorrow will be soon enough to start getting reacquainted with our neighbours."

She was right. "OK," Clark said, trying not to sound disappointed.

Lois gave him a little smile that confirmed his suspicion — she understood the turmoil of emotions that were swirling through him.

"Turn left just up here by the big fir tree," Clark said, glad for the need to give her directions.

Lois put on the indicator, slowed the Buick, and rounded the corner.

It had been a long day. A day of impossible-to-grasp hope. A day of trying to glimpse a future that stubbornly refused to take shape in his mind. A day when Lois had said very little, giving him the freedom to try to come to terms with the enormity of the changes in his life.

Many times, Clark's mind had gone back to the closeness they'd enjoyed yesterday. Was there any chance they could ever recover that?

Everything had happened too quickly. If their relationship was going to be real, and solid, and sustainable, it needed time.

And now, it seemed, they had time.

Clark stared out of the window. He was almost home.

What should he be feeling?

Joy?

Hope?

Gratitude?

Relief?

Sorrow for his parents who wouldn't be there?

Grief for the lost years that could never be recovered?

It felt like a dream. From the moment he had first become aware of Lois's presence in the compound, his life had had a disconcertingly nebulous quality that blurred reality.

"Turn right," he said in a voice that cracked.

Lois turned, and they carved a winding path through the darkness towards his parents' farm. Time slowed. Stalled. Stopped.

Never before had it taken so long to travel the mile from the junction to the gate.

Clark stared, his eyes fixed and ready for what he knew would be the first fleeting glimpse of the farmhouse roof as it peeked above the grove of maples.

He waited.

Waited.

Then it came — and was gone.

Half a minute later, Lois pulled into the driveway. "This is it, right?" she asked.

He'd forgotten he was supposed to be giving her directions. He nodded mutely.

"Would you like me to open the gate?" she asked.

Clark shook his head. Moving in what seemed like slow motion, he reached for the handle and opened the door. As he slid from the car, a hundred different tiny scents filled his nostrils — and every one of them carried a memory.

The gate ... the white paint he and his dad had brushed on nearly ten years ago had lost its lustre and was peeling in a few places.

Clark stepped up to the catch and released the chain. The gate swung open automatically. He moved back to let Lois drive forward.

He closed the gate. Once the clasp was driven home, he stopped. He scanned, beginning with the house. It was covered in darkness, and it was empty. He turned slowly. Watching. Listening. Feeling. Remembering.

There was no one close. No one lurking. No one hiding, waiting to pounce.

Clark walked slowly to the Buick and settled into the seat. Lois turned to him. "Are you OK?" she asked with a smile that covered him like a soft blanket.

"Y ..." He swallowed and tried again. "Yeah."

Her hand left the steering wheel and landed briefly on his arm. "It's natural that you would feel overwhelmed," she said. "It will get easier."

Would it?

Lois took back her hand and drove slowly up the driveway. Every bump, every dip, every turn was like a dance routine that he'd done a thousand times before.

In essence, it hadn't changed.

He had changed beyond recognition. But this place still felt like home.

Lois parked the Buick behind the eastern red cedar. Suddenly, Clark felt the restraints snap, and his eagerness burst free. He didn't want to wait anymore. He wanted to see his bedroom. He wanted to see the kitchen where he had eaten so many meals.

He leapt from the car. Lois was right there with him. She opened the trunk, and he picked up the suitcase.

They stood together and looked beyond the dappled moonlit shape of the maples. Lois's hand pushed into his, and he clasped it gratefully.

She waited. Not moving forward. Not hurrying him. Just waiting for him to choose the timing.

Suddenly, just as he'd been so sure that he wanted to go into the house, now he was sure that he didn't want to go in alone. He looked down to Lois and met the soft eyes that were trained on him.

"I'm so sorry about this morning," he said.

Her hand tightened. "I'm sorry, too."

"You didn't do -"

"It doesn't matter now."

She waited again. Waited for him to move them forward. He took a tentative step.

Then, suddenly, Clark was walking with Lois walking through the maples as the branches seemed to open before them in welcome.

They reached the house, and though Clark wanted to stare at the front, he kept walking — past the side wall and to the back door. When they arrived there, he heard Lois rustle through her bag. She withdrew a small screwdriver and an Allen key, and less than thirty seconds later, the door swung open.

He took one step — into the only real home he had known.

Mustiness had replaced the aromas of his mom's cooking.

Staleness had replaced the clean country air.

Neglect had replaced the loving maintenance.

Coldness had replaced the warmth.

Silence had replaced the sound of family.

Abandonment had replaced the love.

But it was still home.

Clark reached for the light switch and turned it on. Nothing happened. "We don't have power," he said.

His voice echoed strangely in the silence.

Lois brought a flashlight from her bag. She pushed it into his hand. He flicked it on, and a small beam of light cut into the dimness.

"Would you like something?" Clark asked. "I can get you anything you'd like. A cup of tea, perhaps?"

"No, thank you," Lois said. "I'm not hungry."

"You didn't eat much today."

"I didn't move much either," she said. She turned to him with a smile. "I really feel like going to bed."

Here — unlike in the motel rooms — there were two beds. Two bedrooms. "Would you like a shower first?" Clark asked, wanting to forestall the moment when he would have to leave her in one room and go to the other. "I can heat the water for you."

He saw the refusal spring to her lips, but then her smile broke free. "That would be wonderful," she said.

“Come upstairs.” Clark gave her the flashlight and took her hand.
 “Can you see?” Lois asked as he led her through the kitchen.
 “Yes.”

He went to the stairs he had climbed every day for so many years. They smelled different, but on a deeper level, they *felt* the same. Clark stopped for a moment, put down the suitcase, and ran his hand along the wall, tracing the large shallow indentation. He’d been thirteen and still trying to come to terms with a body that was burgeoning with escalating strength. He’d rushed out of his bedroom, tripped, and banged his head into the wall. The damage had been extensive. To the wall. He’d helped Dad fix it, but the slight dip remained.

It was there still.

Clark picked up the suitcase and climbed the rest of the stairs. On the landing, he pointed to the door directly ahead. “That’s the bathroom,” he said. Turning to the right, “This was my parents’ room.” And to the left, “This was my room.”

“Which room would you like?” Lois asked.

Clark’s heart sank like stone. It felt like a parting of ways. “I ...”

“Think about it while I have a shower.”

“OK.” Clark pushed open the middle door. The bathroom was grimy and dusty. The faucet dripped a mournful rhythm onto the stain it had caused in the bottom of the bath. He turned back to Lois. “Could you wait here a minute, please?” he asked.

He sped to where his mother had kept the cleaning products, and then zoomed past Lois and back into the bathroom. Half a minute later, it looked almost as if Martha Kent still lived here. Clark took out two towels, flew downstairs to the laundry, washed and dried them, and returned to Lois.

He offered her the towels. “The soap is in reasonable condition,” he said with a small shrug. “I took off the hardened edges. And I ran the water until all the build-up had gone.”

She lifted the towels to her nose and inhaled appreciatively. “It will be fine. Thank you.”

“I’ll have the water heated by the time you need it. Then I’ll make the bed for you.”

“Thanks.” She gave him a weary smile. “Clark?”

“Yes?”

“Would you mind ...” She paused as if unsure.

“I’ll do anything for you, Lois,” Clark said earnestly.

“I don’t want to embarrass you.”

He didn’t want that either. “What would you like?”

“Would you mind washing my pyjamas?” she said.

Clark almost smiled with relief. “Not at all,” he said. “I am going to wash the bedding anyway.”

Lois crouched beside the suitcase and took out her pyjamas.

“Thanks,” she said as he took them. Then she went into the bathroom and shut the door.

Clark flew downstairs and outside to the water tank that fed the bathroom. He shot heat into it with his eyes until it began steaming. That done, he returned to the landing. His bedroom door was closed.

He turned the knob and pushed gently. It swung open, and Clark entered.

Other than the dust, it was the same.

Except ...

He inhaled deeply. Was it his imagination? Or could he really detect the faintest whiff of Lois’s perfume? She had been here just five days ago.

Suddenly, he knew that he wanted Lois to have his room. He wouldn’t be with her, but in a strange, illogical way, it seemed like the separation wouldn’t be complete if Lois slept here.

Clark quickly stripped his bed and left the linen in the landing. Then he faced the closed door to his parents’ room. His most vivid memories of this room went back further — to when he’d been a small boy. This room had been his first port of call every morning for years. Usually, both of his parents were already up.

He remembered the first morning he had awoken early enough that they had still been in bed when he had slipped into their room. His dad

had made a joke about how good it would be to have his best farmhand on duty right from the start of the day, and Clark had hurried back to his room to get dressed.

That morning, he had arrived in the kitchen *before* his mom had filled the air with the aromas of breakfast. She’d smiled at him and commented that farmhands needed to start the day with a big meal.

Clark took a deep breath and opened the door to his parents’ room. The quilt his mom had made had a stain in the middle of it, but other than that, the room didn’t look dramatically different from the image imprinted on his mind. It felt different, though. It felt as if its soul had been ripped out.

He didn’t have time to reflect. He removed all the bedding, scooped up the pile on the landing, and went back to the laundry.

It was good to have something to do. Good to have a purpose.

Lois was his guest. It was his responsibility to ensure she was comfortable.

In his home.

The water was wonderfully warm as it landed on Lois’s shoulders, massaging the tension and tiredness from them. The muted glow of the flashlight eased her wound-up body from the effects of the hectic pace she had set in her determination to get Clark home.

As she’d driven, she had analysed the events of the morning and more fully realised that her unstinting support was not enough. She could love Clark, but she couldn’t be his entire network. He needed more. He needed purpose. Just as with the jigsaw puzzle trays, he needed the satisfaction of achieving something. He needed other friends. He needed to belong to a community. He needed to feel settled — and driving across the United States with no aim other than to hide could not give him that.

The meeting between Scardino and Menzies replayed in her mind.

Scardino had *lied* for them. Blatantly. He’d facilitated their freedom.

Lois wasn’t sure if Clark fully comprehended it yet. She guessed that many of his silent hours in the car had been spent trying to accept that he wasn’t being hunted.

She remembered the too-good-to-be-true relief of arriving at the American embassy. It had seemed like a dream — and that was after a month of the *threat* of captivity. Clark had experienced the ghastly reality of being cruelly caged for seven years.

She loved him so much.

She loved his strength. She loved his gentleness. She loved his concern for her.

She had dreamed of her perfect man. Who would have thought she would find him in a cell?

Lois sobered as images filled her mind. Clark — bruised and battered after Moyne had beaten him. Clark — dirty and -

She closed down the images. She knew Clark wouldn’t want her to dwell on them.

Lois turned off the faucet and wrapped the soft, sweet-smelling towel around her body. Even with so much crowding into Clark’s mind, his first thought had been for her.

He was incredible.

If only he could see himself the way she saw him.

Lois sighed. It was going to take a long time. She knew it was going to take a long, long time.

And in a moment of brutal clarity, she realised something else. Time might not be enough. Time and love might not be enough.

There were no guarantees that Clark would ever totally overcome the emotional wounds inflicted by Trask and Moyne.

But she couldn’t control that.

All she could do was love him ... support him ... be there for him. Forever.

Lois emerged from the bathroom with one towel wrapped under her arms and another curled around her head.

Clark quickly averted his eyes. He lifted his left arm and gestured

into his room. “If you need anything, please ask.”

“Are you sure you want me to have your room?”

“Yes.”

“OK.” She stepped past him. “Goodnight, Clark.”

Her words felt like being cut from his mooring place in the midst of a raging storm. “Goodnight, Lois.”

She went into his room and shut the door.

“Thank you,” he muttered, knowing he’d left it too late, and she wouldn’t hear. “Thank you for bringing me home.”

Her room was clean and dust-free. The bed was neatly made. Her clean pyjamas were folded on the end of her bed. Lois picked them up and chuckled.

Clark had ironed them.

The suitcase was next to the bed. She lifted the lid and discovered that Clark had taken out his belongings.

She opened the closet — it was empty other than a row of coat hangers awaiting her clothes.

He was a perfect host.

Lois dried herself and put on her clean, ironed pyjamas.

Was it fanciful to believe that they were permeated with his love?

It was fanciful.

But it was comforting, too. She missed him already.

And it was going to be a long, lonely night.

Clark climbed uneasily into his parents’ bed.

It felt intrusive. This was *their* place. He didn’t belong here.

He didn’t know where he belonged.

But here ... in this little farmhouse in Smallville ... here, there were a few grains of familiarity that gave him hope that, perhaps with time, he could belong here again.

But belonging wasn’t about a place.

It was about a person.

Clark reached for the wallet Lois had given him. He unfolded it and took out the piece of notepaper on which he had written the poem. Hope.

Lois was his hope.

Without her, he was utterly lost.

She was here. In Smallville. With him.

Yet he was alone.

And it was going to be a long night.

~~ Tuesday ~~

The next morning, Clark was ripped from sleep by a loud bang. He leapt from the bed as the sound continued, thundering through the quiet house.

He pulled his jeans over his sleep shorts and yanked a tee shirt over his head. He rushed onto the landing — and ran straight into Lois.

“Sorry,” he muttered, as his hand reached to steady her. “You OK?”

“I’m fine,” she said. “Just a bit startled.”

“Police!” a harsh male voice shouted from below. “Open up.”

Part 11

Clark looked at Lois, expecting all of his fear and panic to be reflected in her eyes. She calmly put her hand on his arm. “You stay out of sight until I -”

“Lois -”

“Let’s see what they want before admitting to anything.”

“Lo -”

“If they *have* come for us, it’s better that they capture me.”

“No!”

“You will be able to find me and rescue me much easier than I would be able to find you,” she said. “Stay out of sight. Fly away if you need to.”

“Lo -”

“If they do take me, you’re my only hope.”

With a final squeeze on his arm, she ran lightly down the stairs.

Clark stepped back — out of sight of the front door, berating himself that he hadn’t swept Lois into his arms and flown away. He looked through the walls, saw Lois reach for the door, and readjusted his vision to look through it.

A large male police officer had lifted his hand to thump on the door again. Fear constricted Clark’s chest. Then, as Lois opened the door, he noticed the second person — it was Rachel Harris, wearing the Sheriff’s badge.

A glimmer of hope struggled to the surface through his alarm.

Lois opened the door. “Yes?” she said mildly.

The male deputy looked down at her as if a young woman in her pyjamas with a jacket slung over her shoulder was about the last thing in the world he had expected.

Rachel stepped forward. “This house belongs to the Kent family,” she said. “What are you doing here?”

Lois pushed one arm into the sleeve of her jacket. “You’re Rachel?” she said.

Rachel’s right hand drifted to her weapon. Clark tensed.

“Rachel Harris?” Lois said as she continued donning the jacket. “Clark told me about you. He said you were a friend of his.”

Rachel’s carefully official composure melted away. “Clark?” she gulped, although she barely managed to make a sound. She swallowed roughly. “Clark Kent? You know Clark? You know Clark *now*?”

Lois nodded nonchalantly. “I know Clark.”

“Who are you?” Rachel said.

“My name is Lois Lane.” She reached into the pocket of her jacket and took out a card, which she offered to Rachel.

Rachel stared at Lois — her face, her hand, the card — before finally taking the card. She examined it and showed it to the male deputy. He gave her the slightest of nods. Clark hoped it meant that they had accepted whatever ID Lois had given them.

“Where’s Clark?” Rachel asked urgently. “Is he safe? Where are his parents? Do they know you are here?”

Clark wondered if this were the right time to make an appearance. He hesitated, knowing beyond any doubt that Lois was better skilled at handling this situation than he was. And there was always the chance that with two of them, they might say something contradictory. They never had gotten around to finalising their story.

Perhaps Lois was thinking along similar lines because she said to Rachel, “Clark is upstairs sleeping. He brought me here last night.”

“Clark’s *here*?” Rachel said. Her shock was evident, but there was also hardly-daring-to-believe delight, and Clark felt the first stirrings of welcome.

Lois nodded. “He’s still asleep. It would be better if we didn’t have to wake him.”

Rachel glanced to the male cop in silent consultation. “How can we be sure you’re telling the truth about knowing Clark?” he asked gruffly.

Lois gestured to her card as she took it back. “I’ve been assigned to help Clark.”

“Help him?” Rachel said. “Why does he need your help?”

Lois took a long moment to draw a deep breath. “This situation needs to be handled with the utmost care,” she said in a lowered voice.

“What situation?” Rachel had also lowered her voice.

“I know there are going to be a lot of questions,” Lois said. “I know that everyone who knew the Kent family seven years ago is going to be agog with curiosity about what happened to them. But my first priority is Clark.”

“You don’t want half the town thumping down his door to see if it’s true that he really has returned?” Rachel said.

“Exactly,” Lois said, sounding relieved.

“What happened?” Rachel asked. “What happened to them?”

“It’s a long and tragic story,” Lois said. “And I hope you can understand that many parts are highly confidential. I don’t know everything, and some of what I do know, I’m not free to reveal.”

Both cops nodded. Clark began to breathe a little easier. “What can you tell us?” Rachel asked.

“That the Kent family was the unfortunate and totally innocent victims in a case of mistaken identity.”

“They were kidnapped?”

“Yes,” Lois said.

“By your agency?” Clark couldn’t see Lois’s silent response to the question, but he saw Rachel’s slight grimace before trying to regain ground by answering her own question, “No. No, of course not. That’s ridiculous.”

“The Kent family was taken by representatives of a foreign agency whose information was hopelessly compromised,” Lois said.

“But surely ... as soon as the mistake was realised ...”

“By then, the Kents had been removed from the United States.”

Lois pushed her hands into the pockets of her jacket. “My agency has been working to locate them and negotiate their return.”

“It took *seven* years?”

“Very few rogue agencies are willing to admit to mistakes,” Lois said grimly. “Even fewer are willing to make restitution.”

“So you kidnapped him back?” the male cop asked incredulously.

“Not me personally,” Lois said with a dour chuckle. “My assignment is to facilitate Clark’s re-entry into society.”

“Do you know what happened to his parents?” Rachel asked. “Do you know where they are?”

“Clark was separated from them soon after the kidnapping, and — as I’m sure you’d realise — procuring information is fraught with risk.”

“Do you know anything about their fate?”

Lois paused. “You should ask Clark about this ... but ... we believe that Jonathan Kent has passed away.”

Rachel put her hand over her mouth. “Oh, no,” she muttered. “Poor Jonathan. Poor Martha.”

“We are still working to bring Martha home,” Lois said in a business-like fashion. “I’m sure you can understand that this is an extremely stressful time for Clark and that the best way to help him would be to give him the time and the space that he needs.”

Rachel nodded.

“I realise that any hint of Clark’s return will spread like wildfire through the Smallville community,” Lois said.

“How much of what you told us can be repeated?” the male cop asked.

“As much as is needed in order that Clark’s friends and acquaintances understand that this is going to take some time.”

Rachel nodded. “I’ll deal with it,” she said. “I’ll put the word out.” “Thank you.”

“I assume that, eventually, Clark will come into town?”

“Our long-term goal is to fully reintegrate him into regular society.”

“May I suggest that you bring him in tomorrow?” Rachel said.

“That will be long enough for the rumour mill to have recovered from its initial paroxysm, but not so long that it has worked itself into a frenzied lather.”

“I’ll see how Clark is feeling.”

Rachel paused. She looked at Lois. “Clark Kent was a friend of mine for a long time,” the sheriff said.

Lois nodded.

“If you were me, would you just walk away without seeing for yourself that he is all right?”

“No, I wouldn’t,” Lois said.

“Do you expect me to?”

“If you did, I would have very little respect for you.”

“Would you call Clark, please?” Rachel asked. “He won’t know my colleague, but he shouldn’t find me too daunting.”

“Why you in particular?” Lois asked coolly.

Rachel smiled as if at a memory. “Well, he *was* my date to the senior prom.”

Lois straightened her shoulders a little, and the two women stared at each other.

“I’m not leaving until I see Clark with my own eyes,” Rachel said

with cool resolve.

Lois slowly turned around and looked up the stairs. “Clark?” she called. “Are you awake?”

Clark silently sped into the bedroom and put on his glasses. He walked slowly to the door, counted to ten, opened it, and then closed it with just a little more force than was necessary.

He peered around the corner and down the stairs, a little disconcerted at the frantic pace of his pounding heart. Two steps down, he stopped. “Rachel?” he said with what he hoped was an equal mix of surprise and pleasure.

Rachel’s reaction was all pleasure. “Clark!” She pushed past Lois and ran up the stairs, meeting him halfway and throwing her arms around his neck. When she backed away, she contemplated him with joyful surprise. “Oh, my,” she said. “It really is Clark Kent.”

He nodded. “Yes, it is. How are you, Rachel?”

“I’m just fine.” She reached up to his cheek and ran her hand down it. “I wasn’t sure I’d ever see you again, Clark. When you and your family just disappeared ...”

Clark had to stifle his instinct to flinch at her touch. He looked past Rachel, searching for Lois. “Ah ... you’ve met Lois Lane?” he said. “We arrived last night.”

“Yes, we’ve met,” Rachel said, sounding undecided as to whether that was a good thing.

“Is it just coincidence that you’re here on our first morning?”

Clark asked, trying to copy Lois’s light tone.

“We received a call from Jack Wetherly first thing this morning. He was convinced he had seen a light in the window late last night.”

“It was only a flashlight,” Clark said. “We don’t have power.”

“I’ll see to it for you,” Rachel said. She finally seemed to remember that her hand was still fastened to his face, and she lowered it to rest it on the butt of her weapon. “Don’t you worry about anything, Clark. If anyone gives you any trouble, they’ll be answering to me.”

“Thanks,” he said, hoping it wasn’t obvious how much he wanted this encounter to conclude quickly.

Not that he didn’t like Rachel.

Or had liked her, once.

Rachel retreated down the stairs and out the front door. She turned and looked up at him. “See you soon, Clark,” she said affectionately. “Perhaps we could have dinner together once you’re settled.”

Lois reached for the door handle but said nothing.

“I don’t think I’ll be ready to socialise much for a while,” he said. “Lois says this is going to take some time.”

Rachel took a moment to digest that. “Lois, huh?” she said.

Clark nodded firmly. “Lois.”

Rachel’s eyes swung from Clark to Lois and then turned away to walk to her car with the other officer.

Clark slumped against the wall and closed his eyes, trying to calm his racing heart.

Meeting Rachel had stretched his latent social skills to their limit. How was he going to face the rest of the Smallville locals?

He heard the door shut and the police car move down the driveway.

Footsteps approached him, and Clark opened his eyes. When Lois was level with him, she stopped.

She smiled, and the tension released its grip on his stomach.

“Good job,” she said.

“I ...” Clark lifted his hands in bewilderment. “I hadn’t realised it would be that difficult.”

“The first time is always the hardest,” she said. “And you had very little warning. You did great.”

But Lois — she had been magnificent. She took another step, but Clark reached out and lightly clasped her elbow. She stopped and looked down at him.

“Rachel and me,” he said. “It was the prom, two dinner dates, one movie, one kiss. That’s all.”

“Thanks for telling me.” She took another step higher.

“And it will never be anything more,” Clark said.

Lois turned. “I know.”

“You do?”

Her mouth turned upwards into the suggestion of a smile. “I’m trained to read people,” she said. “And sometimes, you’re an open book.”

She continued up the stairs and went into his bedroom.

Clark stared.

Her head appeared in the doorway, and he snapped his mouth shut.

“Any chance you could get us something to eat?” Lois said. “Not from Smallville. Somewhere further afield.”

“Ah, yes. Of course,” Clark said. “What would you like?”

“You choose.” With that, she disappeared and shut the door.

By the time Clark arrived back at the farmhouse with breakfast, the power had been restored.

“Clearly, Rachel has some significant pull around here,” Lois commented.

“I hope she can keep the hordes away,” Clark said as he sat across from Lois at the old wooden table. “For a day or so at least.”

“They’re your friends, Clark,” Lois reminded him gently as she unpacked the bagels and coffee he had bought in North Carolina.

“I know,” he said with a sigh. “But ...”

“What do we need to do today?” Lois asked.

The balance of their relationship had subtly shifted. While they had been travelling — actually, before that, too — Lois had taken the lead. He’d looked to her to make the decisions for both of them.

Now, they were in his home. And although he was still floundering, he had to be the host. He had the knowledge. And the responsibility. “Someone has been working on the farm,” Clark said.

“Wayne Irig. That’s what Maisie told me last week.”

“He owns the neighbouring farm.”

“Do you think you’ll go and see him?” Lois asked.

After feeling so inept when facing Rachel, Clark wasn’t eager to repeat the experience with anyone else. But Wayne had always been a good friend to his parents. “I should.”

“Would you like me to come, too?” Lois asked. She lifted the lid from her coffee. “Or would you like to go alone?”

Clark wanted her to come. But realistically, he couldn’t expect her to accompany him every time he had contact with other people. “I’d like you to come,” he said. “But I need to start doing things by myself at some stage.”

“See how you feel later,” she said.

Clark spooned some strawberry jelly onto his bagel, trying to work up the courage to ask a question he dreaded. “What are you going to do?”

“Today?”

“Yeah.” He couldn’t imagine there was anything in Smallville, Kansas, that could hold lasting interest for someone as extensively travelled and sophisticated as Lois.

“I have a couple of ideas,” Lois said.

That was two more than he had. “What?”

“Would you mind if I weeded and pruned the flower garden?”

Lois? Gardening? “Is that what you *want* to do?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I had an assignment once where my cover was as an exchange horticultural student. I quite enjoyed it. I haven’t ever had the opportunity to try out some of the skills I learned.” Her smile came laden with understanding. “But it’s your mom’s garden, so I won’t even touch it unless it’s OK with you.”

“I think ... I think she would be happy that someone was caring for it,” Clark said. “She’d hate how it looks now.”

Lois smiled. “Great,” she said. “I’ll get started soon after breakfast.”

“What was your other idea?”

She looked around the kitchen. “This place needs to be cleaned,” she said. “I thought I could do that.”

“Is that what you *want* to do?”

“Not really,” she said. “But someone has to.”

“Lois,” Clark said. “I can have this entire house clean in less than five minutes. There is absolutely no need for you to do anything you don’t want to do.”

“But what about the farm? And no one has been looking after the house — there are probably roof leaks or blocked guttering. Stuff I don’t know anything about. You’ll be busy with that.”

“Five minutes,” he reiterated.

“You really can have it clean again in five minutes?”

He nodded. “If I slow down enough to ensure that I don’t break any of Mom’s vases and things like that.”

Lois’s smile died. “They took all of the personal things,” she said. “They took the photos and letters and cards.”

“I know. I looked around last night.”

“I’m sorry,” Lois said.

“It’s OK,” he said. “I can remember them without photos.”

“Have you thought about how you’re going to look for your mom?”

Clark took a deep breath. “I don’t even know where to start.”

“You said that it was my heartbeat that alerted you when I was calling the nursing home,” Lois said. “How did you know it was *my* heartbeat?”

He had no explanation. “I just did,” he said.

“Do you remember your mom’s heartbeat?”

“No.”

“Could you hover in the sky and concentrate on her? Would that work?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “But I could try.”

They continued eating their breakfast, and Clark’s thoughts centred on his mom. The kitchen had been her domain — a place that had always been filled with the smells and tastes of her cooking and bursting with the warmth of her love.

He missed her so much — missed her, and worried about her, and felt such crushing responsibility for the pain she had endured.

His most vivid memories involved how she made him feel. She had never accepted that ‘different’ meant ‘inferior’. In that way, she had been a lot like ... Clark’s eyes shot to Lois as she stood and cleared away her plate and knife. “I’ll be in the garden if you need me,” she said.

“I ... I thought I’d look around the farm first.”

“Good idea,” she said with a bright smile. “If you want company, you know where to find me.”

Clark stood from the chair. “Don’t do anything you don’t want to do,” he said.

“OK.”

He stepped closer to her. “I mean it, Lois,” he said gently. “The past few days must have taken a huge toll on you. I want you to rest.”

She smiled but didn’t reach out to touch him. “I’ll be fine. But if I feel tired, I might have a snooze later.”

“The front porch gets the afternoon sun,” he said. “Mom often read or painted there.”

“Thanks.”

Suddenly, Clark recalled one of their earliest conversations in the cell. “Leave the cooking to me,” he said.

“You can cook?”

“Yeah,” he said. “My mom taught me.”

“That’s good,” she said. “I destroy even the simplest dishes.”

“I’ll get some supplies today. Not from Smallville.”

Lois nodded her agreement. “I think we should go to Smallville together the first time.”

Facing an individual had seemed daunting enough. Clark recoiled from the thought of facing an entire town of people eager to talk and ask questions. “Thanks,” he said, hoping she would pick up the depth of his gratitude.

With another little smile, she walked from the kitchen.

Clark took a few seconds to clear away their breakfast. Then, he ventured out of the farmhouse. He hauled in a deep breath of rich,

clean Kansas air and headed for the barn to begin the chores.

Lois had weeded about one quarter of Martha Kent's flower garden when she heard the noise of a vehicle approaching. She straightened, took off Martha's gloves, and walked slowly to greet the car. It skirted the maples and came to a stop about ten yards away. A boy — probably about seventeen — jumped from the driver's seat.

"Hi," he called with a cheery wave.

Clark was standing in the doorway, watching them. "I can handle it," she muttered, knowing he would hear her.

He backed into the shadows of the barn, but Lois knew he would be watching and listening to everything that passed between her and the young visitor.

The tall, lanky boy had hauled an overflowing cardboard box from the trunk and was walking towards her. "Which way to the kitchen?" he asked.

Lois peeped into the box. It was loaded with groceries — fresh vegetables and fruit, flour, tea, sugar, and bread.

The visitor grinned at her — probably in response to her surprise. "Dave said you'd be needing this," he said.

"Dave?"

"My uncle. He runs the general store." He nodded towards the house. "Around the back for the kitchen?"

"Yes," Lois said, hurrying in front of him. She came to the back door and opened it. The young man slid the box onto the table. "Thank you," she said.

"S'OK," he said. "I have a cooler with meat, milk, and butter, too. Hang on a minute."

With that, he was gone. Lois checked the contents of the box. Whoever had packed it had thought of everything. She sprinted up the stairs to get her purse.

She returned as the delivery boy came through the door. He pushed the cooler onto the table and began to unpack a few trays of meat. "Thank you," Lois said when he'd finished. "How much do we owe you?"

"Dave said not to worry now. He says to tell Clark to come in when he gets settled."

"Do ... did you know Clark?"

"Not really," the young man replied. "I was only a kid when he left for college and not much older when he left ... the next time. I remember that no one bullied the little kids when he was around. And he was the best point guard the Smallville Bears ever had."

Lois smiled. "What is your name?"

"Donny. But he won't remember me."

"You'd be surprised," Lois said. "Clark doesn't forget people easily."

Donny picked up the cooler. "Tell Clark, 'Welcome home,'" he said. "It's great to have him back."

"Thanks," Lois said. "And thanks for the supplies."

With a wave of farewell, he was gone. Lois put the meat, milk, and butter in the fridge, and half a minute later, Clark came through the door.

She looked up and smiled. "That was Donny," she said. "Dave's nephew."

"Yeah," Clark replied. "I recognised him. Although he's a lot taller than I remember." He moved toward the cupboards. Lois passed him the items; he put them away.

"How are things outside?" she asked.

"Better than I expected," he said. "I knew that Wayne would have done the best he could, but it's never easy running one farm, let alone two."

"He did a good job?"

"Yeah," Clark said. "The essentials are done. The extras — painting, non-urgent repairs, that sort of thing — they were a bit behind."

"Were?" Lois asked, pausing from her task to smile at him.

His smile flickered as he shrugged a little sheepishly.

Lois's gaze drifted down his body. His well-worn checked shirt had come untucked from his jeans in a couple of places — jeans that looked soft and supple, having moulded to his body over time. Sturdy black boots completed the farmer look to perfection.

Lois had never seen a more gorgeous farmer.

"You look the part," she said.

He glanced down at his clothes. Lois figured he'd missed the compliment in her words. "Thanks."

"And you look like you enjoyed it," she added.

"Yeah," he said. "I did."

"Will you be in for lunch soon?"

"Half an hour?"

"Perfect."

"I'll get it," Clark said. "You rest. You've done a lot in the garden."

"I'm enjoying it, too," Lois said. "Fresh air, warm sunshine, and all the colours of fall."

Clark picked up the cardboard box. At the door, he turned and gave her an unbridled smile. "See you soon."

"Bye."

The door shut, and Lois hurried to the window so she could watch Clark walk away.

That smile.

That mouth.

He had admitted to kissing Rachel Harris.

Patience, Lois told herself.

In some ways, it was hard to believe that Clark was the same person she had seen the first time she had looked through her office window and into the cell. In other ways, he was Clark — steadfast, caring, strong — and that didn't change, whether he was a prisoner, a farmer, or a super-powered alien flying across the sky.

He was always Clark — and Lois loved him.

A car stopped. Clark heard the chain being unfastened and the gate swung open. He looked through the barn wall and saw a pickup moving slowly forward. He focussed on the driver and recognised Wayne Irig.

Clark watched the pickup approach with mixed feelings. Wayne coming here meant that Clark didn't have to leave the farm and risk encountering other people. Wayne being here now took away Clark's chance to prepare.

He took a deep breath to settle the nervousness in his stomach and walked out of the barn, timing it so he arrived the same moment the pickup stopped.

Wayne leapt out and hurried forward, his face alight with welcome and his hand outstretched. "Clark," he said. "Clark, it is so good to see you again."

Clark shook the proffered hand and studied the face that had grown a little more creased over the past seven years. "Wayne. It's good to see you, too."

"I was so sorry to hear about your father," Wayne said. "Jonathan was the best of neighbours."

Clark nodded.

"I hope everything goes well with your mom."

"Thanks."

"I won't hold you up now with a lot of details," Wayne said. "I've been looking after the farm." He glanced over his shoulder with regret. "I didn't have time to do anything about the house."

"I appreciate everything you did."

Wayne looked a little relieved. "I waited awhile, hoping you'd all be back. Then, jobs needed doing, and I just fell into the habit of coming over here and doing them — not wanting it to be overrun when you came back."

"Thanks. The farm looks great."

"About six months after you left, I began to keep records — expenses, market prices, stock sold, calves born, all that sort of thing. I have it with me now." He took a couple of steps towards the pickup

and reached in through the open window. “Look over it as you have time, and come to me if you have any questions.”

He held out a large account book. Clark took it. “Thanks, Wayne.” He’d said that a lot, but he couldn’t think of anything else to say. And gratitude was welling inside him.

Wayne also held out a bankbook. “This is yours.”
“Mine?”

“Proceeds from the farm. As I said, I took out all expenses. I replaced stock and equipment as needed. I also took a fair payment for my labour. There’s almost five thousand dollars in the account now — and everything on your land is fully paid for.”

“Wayne,” Clark said. “I can’t take this. You did —”

“It’s your land. Yours and your mom’s. I always knew that when you came home, you’d need it.”

“Thanks. I ... Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Ah ... How’s your family? Maggie? And Brett?”

“Maggie hasn’t changed — still the same — never stops working, never stops talking.” Wayne grinned. “Brett’s getting married next month.”

“Ah ... Congratulations. That’s great.”

“Yeah. Boy, was I glad to hear you’d come home. With Brett going off on his honeymoon, I didn’t know how I was going to manage both farms. I even employed a guy who knocked on my door looking for work.”

“Someone who knocked on your door?” Clark said, because it was easier to echo Wayne’s words than to think of a new direction for their conversation.

“Yeah,” Wayne said. “He’s no good, though. He said he’d worked on dairy farms before, but I haven’t seen any evidence that he knows one end of a cow from the other. He didn’t know enough not to smoke in the barn. I figure with you being home, I won’t need him anymore.”

Clark made a small sound that he hoped was an appropriate response.

“I’ll be going,” Wayne said. “Come over whenever you’d like to — you’re always welcome, and I know Maggie’d love to share a cup of tea with you.”

“Thanks. And ...” Clark lifted the books. “... thanks for everything.”

With a smile and a wave, Wayne climbed into his pickup and drove away.

Clark opened the bankbook. Four thousand, eight hundred, seventy-two dollars and twenty-six cents.

It wasn’t really his. It belonged to his parents. He flicked to the front of the book and saw that it had been opened seven months after his capture. Clark was sure that his parents also had a bank account. He would have to look for the paperwork. When he went into Smallville, he probably should visit the bank.

There was so much to do. So much to think about.

But for now, he just wanted to have lunch with Lois.

Part 12

It had been a good day.

Clark stirred through the chunks of steak as they sizzled in the pan.

A good day — a day of constant activity — both physical and mental.

For so long, there had been no outlet for the constant commotion of thoughts that had plagued him, so they had piled up, twisting and churning to create a fragmented mass of confusion.

Even in the car as he’d travelled with Lois, there had been no way to take positive action to deal with his fears and uncertainties.

But today ...

When he’d seen something needing attention, he’d located the necessary tools and done the job — quickly, efficiently, satisfyingly.

And being active with his hands had unshackled his mind.

After the first twenty minutes or so, he’d settled to working at close to normal speed. He’d still called on his extra strength, and more than once, he had levitated instead of taking the time to collect a

ladder — but the steady pace and growing list of accomplishments had brought him a kind of peace that he hadn’t experienced since the day Trask had invaded his home.

Clark’s mind buzzed with plans. Some of them were new and some were those he had discussed with his dad — ideas that were now surfacing from the dungeon where they had lain dormant for so long.

He *wanted* to do this. He wanted the fulfilment of watching things grow. It was important to him that he have the chance to express faith in a future by implementing plans and seeing them come to fruition.

He was sure that he was capable of successfully working the farm. He had the foundation — all the years when he had followed his dad, listening, learning, copying. There were areas where he would need to catch up — the bank, the insurances, the markets, the new products and machinery that were available — but Clark was confident that he could do it.

That confidence filtered into the built-up turmoil in his mind and made it seem more manageable.

Clark added the chopped vegetables to the steak and continued stirring.

Re-capture was still possible. Would one of the people who knew he was an alien — Shadbolt, Scardino, Menzies, Longford, Moyne — decide that he constituted an unacceptable risk to humanity?

But Scardino had lied for him. Menzies thought he was dead. Moyne was in Metropolis.

Nothing could change that he was an alien. He still didn’t belong.

Except ...

Rachel, and Wayne, and Dave, and Donny had seemed eager to welcome him home. Even after seven years of absence, they seemed to accept him as one of their own — one of the people of Smallville. They appeared glad that he was home — and willing to put aside their curiosity in deference to his need for time and space.

In their eyes, he was Clark Kent, son of Jonathan and Martha.

Perhaps ... perhaps it was possible to belong here, in Smallville, even if that didn’t extend to humanity as a whole.

Clark took out another spoon and stirred the gently simmering rice before returning to the larger pan.

Then there was Lois.

Every separate path of his thought inevitably led to her.

And in that ... he still had no answers.

Lois. He loved her. He loved her with the love of a man for a woman. A love that drove him relentlessly to dream impossible dreams.

She had said she was sure of her feelings.

In *every* other thing, he trusted her.

In *this* thing, he trusted that she thought she was sure about wanting to be with him.

But how could she be sure?

How could she know that he could be what she needed? Forever?

Clark added a handful of cherry tomatoes that he had found among the weeds in what had once been his mom’s vegetable garden.

His fear — the fear that he had not been able to conquer — was that he would not survive if Lois left him.

There it was — the plain truth.

He was scared.

Scared of being with her and failing her.

Scared of losing her.

It was true what they said about fear having the ability to paralyse. That was what he had been — paralysed.

Did he have the strength to overcome it?

He had to. He owed it to Lois.

But knowing he had to do it didn’t guarantee that he could. He’d had to protect his parents but -

Lois entered the kitchen and came to stand beside him, freshly showered and smelling delectably of sweet apple. “Wow,” she said, inhaling deeply. “You weren’t kidding about being able to cook, were you?”

“I hope it tastes as good as it smells,” he said.

“I’m sure it will,” she said. “Where do I find the plates?”

He directed her to the cabinet, and she began to set the table.

Lois — could she be happy with an alien? Really happy? Or would she always ponder longingly about what she could have with a normal man?

Today, one thing had become clearer. If the future were his to decide, he wanted to live on the farm. It was a way to honour his parents — to build on their legacy.

Lois — could she be happy with a Kansas farmer?

He’d missed her, he realised.

Not only last night when the bed had seemed huge and empty ... but during the day, as well. Yesterday. Today. Ever since he’d fractured something in their relationship by making a stance about getting work.

In the blur of his fears, he had tried to push them apart. She had accepted his action, and despite still being friendly, she had backed away.

He missed her.

He missed the closeness. Not just the physical — the constant little touches to his arm, his shoulder, his chest — but even more, he missed the emotional connection.

“What are you thinking about?” Lois asked.

He grappled for a reply that would pay heed to the truth without risking a barrage of questions from her. Nothing came to him. “You,” he said, suddenly not caring that she might uncover the depths of his longing for her.

“Me?”

All he could do was nod mutely. He should claim that their meal was ready. He should serve it out and hope that her first taste was sensational enough that she would forget they had been on the verge of diving into a portentous conversation. But he didn’t. “You,” he said, more emphatically this time.

“Do you want to elaborate?”

Yes, he did. He wasn’t confident that he would be able to express the anarchy of his thoughts, but he was sure he wanted to try. He met her eyes and knew that — whatever his answer — she would accept it without pressuring him for more. “Specifically — us.”

“Us?” she said with a little smile of surprise.

“Yeah. Us.”

She held out her plate for him to load with rice and beef stir-fry. “Let me know if you reach any conclusions,” she said.

Clark smiled. “That’s all you’re going to say?” He filled his plate, pulled out a chair for Lois, and then sat down beside her.

“Sometimes we need to work out what we are thinking before we share it with anyone.”

“But perhaps sharing it is the best way to achieve clarity.”

“That’s true.” Lois put her loaded fork in her mouth, and Clark couldn’t help holding his breath as he awaited her reaction. She chewed, swallowed, smiled. “Wow,” she said. “It tastes even better than it smells.”

Clark felt relief first, but it was closely followed by pleasure. Lois had done so much for him. Giving something back realigned the balance — just a little. Clark wasn’t sure that an entire lifetime would be long enough to repay Lois for what she had done for him, but this little step felt good.

They continued eating, and Clark knew he was free to move away from the subject of his contemplation. Or he could pursue it. Lois would accept either.

But the night was coming — and that meant parting from Lois and going to the big bed alone. He knew, of course, that nothing he said now was going to change that, but if he could feel he had forged a small connection with her emotionally, he could take something with him, and perhaps it wouldn’t seem so lonely.

“The past few days have been pretty confusing,” Clark said.

Lois chuckled softly. “That is probably the biggest understatement I have ever heard.”

“But you never seemed confused,” he said with wonder. “You always seemed to know what to do; you always seemed sure of what

you wanted. You didn’t waver once.”

“I didn’t waver in what I wanted,” Lois said. “But I wavered many times in trying to decide the best way to help you.”

“And I was completely useless.”

She looked at him, her eyes teeming with vivid understanding. “You always did the best you could,” she said. “When we left the cell, I knew it was going to take time.”

“I tried,” Clark said. “But going out yesterday morning and looking for work — they were the actions of a desperate man.”

“I still don’t really understand what changed.”

“I just can’t get past that this cannot be forever.”

Lois chewed slowly, staring at her plate. Then she looked up. “If we were two regular people who had met somewhere, there would be no guarantees it would be forever.”

“But the odds seem stacked against us.”

“You said that about getting out of the cell.”

Yeah. “And I said that about staying free.”

Lois smiled at his admission.

“But forever is such a long time,” Clark said.

“It is,” Lois said. “But it comes in little bite-size pieces — one day at a time. We don’t have to deal with forever; we just have to deal with one day.”

The foremost fear in his heart reared up and took possession of his mouth. “But what if — one day — you realise that you don’t want to be with me anymore?”

“What if — one day — you realise that you don’t want to be with me?”

“That is *not* going to happen,” he said emphatically.

“How can you be sure?”

“Because you’re ...”

“I’m?”

As Clark tried to gather his thoughts, a picture formed in his mind — a clear and precise visual representation of his feelings. “I feel as if I’m on a rock in the swirling sea that is humanity,” he said. “I don’t even know if I have the right to be on this rock, and it is so small and unstable. I see you on another rock — a large and sturdy rock — and there is a fragile connection between us. I see other rocks between you and me — rocks that could perhaps get me closer to you, but I’m so scared that if I step onto the wrong rock, it will sink.”

“And you will drown?”

“No, I will break the connection with you.”

Lois pushed her hand across the table and slid it onto his. “I believe that the connection between us is unbreakable,” she said earnestly. “Unless one of us chooses to deliberately sever it.”

“That is what you really believe?”

“Yes,” she said decisively.

He had to know exactly what she meant. “Together ... how?”

Lois shot him a look that bordered on laughing disbelief. “I guess one of us is going to have to spell it out,” she said.

Yeah. And, cowardly though it was, Clark was hoping it wouldn’t have to be him.

“OK,” Lois said. “Together as two people who are in love and are totally and exclusively committed to each other.”

Clark could feel the heat rising into his cheeks. “M...Marriage?”

“I can’t see why not.”

He could. He could see an overwhelming number of reasons why not. “Lois ...”

“Clark,” she said. “I get that you think I might change my mind. But there is nothing I can do now to convince you of how I will feel in the future. All I can say is that I have never like felt this before — so settled, so decided, so sure.”

“You’re *not* leaving, are you?” he said with utter wonderment.

This time, she did smile. “You got it.”

“What if you’re unhappy? What if I can never be what you need?”

“What if I can never be what you need?”

“Lois!” he exclaimed. “You are *everything* I need.”

She just looked at him — letting the love in her eyes speak for her.

“But I’m ...” he faltered.

“Not human,” Lois said. “That’s good — I like men who can fly.”

Clark couldn’t allow himself to be lured into the promise that dwelt in her beautiful eyes. “What if they won’t let me marry?” he said. “I don’t have a birth certificate. I wasn’t born here.”

“What’s marriage?”

Was that a trick question? All he had to offer was the obvious. “Ah ... the official commitment between a man and a woman that they will love each other for the rest of their lives,” he ventured.

“The important words are commitment and love.”

“I ...” Clark could feel himself blushing. “I ... I know it’s old-fashioned, but I was raised to believe that ... marriage is important.”

“It is,” Lois agreed. “It is very important. But if we can’t get married — simply because of where you were born — then we could still make a lifelong commitment to love each other.”

He couldn’t believe that he and Lois were discussing marriage — even an unofficial ‘marriage’ — as if it were a real possibility.

“I have a question for you, Clark Kent,” Lois said. Her serious tone sent a series of shivers down the crest of his spine. Surely ... surely, she wasn’t going to propose.

“OK,” he said, trying not to sound flustered.

“Let’s say we decided we wanted to be married, but it wasn’t possible, so we decided to make promises to each other and live by them forever.”

He nodded. It didn’t sound quite like a proposal.

“In that situation, would you be any less committed to me than if you were married to me?”

“Of course not. I would give my word, and nothing would ...”

He stopped as triumph lifted her smile.

“Lois,” he said. “It’s not just the official stuff.”

She sobered immediately. “What else?” she said.

“A husband has to be many things ...”

“Yes?”

“And I’m not sure ...”

Lois gazed at him with disconcerting intensity. “This is one of the things that has been troubling you all along, isn’t it?”

His throat was too tight to permit speech, so Clark nodded.

“What do you think I need? Specifically?”

He remembered the warm wetness of her tears on his chest. He remembered the way her body had shivered with anguish. He remembered the images that had stormed his mind. “Lois ...”

She leant closer. “Don’t stop now,” she pleaded. “You have that look on your face — the same one you had when you came into the motel room after you’d been out looking for work. Just say whatever it is that is worrying you.”

“Did Ivica or Elan rape you?”

Her jaw dropped. “That’s what has been worrying you?”

“Lois ... I don’t think ... I can’t ... Did they?”

“No,” she said, tightly grasping his hand. “Elan said he was coming back for me, but I got out before he did.”

Clark was hit by a wave of relief. But also bewilderment. He had been sure there was more to her story. “How did you get out?”

“Linda had loosened the knots around my feet,” Lois said. “While Ivica was ... was raping her, I tried to shut out the noise of it, so I worked on the knots around my wrists. By the time he’d ... he’d finally finished, my wrists were almost free.

“I managed to release my hands just a few minutes after Linda died. Ivica left, and I scrambled over to her in the dark. She had no pulse, and there was blood everywhere. I found a large flashlight that Ivica had left next to her and used the pick from my bag to unlock the door.”

Her memories brought pain. Clark waited, fervently wishing he knew how to ease her suffering.

“I slipped out,” Lois said. “It was supertime. I could smell their food, and I could hear the laughter and talk from the big room where they had gathered to eat. I met one guard — a young kid they had left on duty. I jumped on him from behind and knocked him out with the

flashlight. I took his jacket, his gun, his knife, and his ammunition.” She stopped, swallowing roughly, as heavy silence fell.

“Lois?” Clark said quietly a few moments later.

She startled at the sound of his voice. “I ... I found the front door, got out, and ran into the hills.”

“They never found you?”

“No,” Lois said. “I headed away from the truck. Perhaps, if they chased me, they assumed I would try to get to it. I ... I found a cave in the rocks and ... and stayed there until darkness fell.”

“I’m so sorry,” Clark said.

He wasn’t sure that she’d heard him. “I should not have left Linda’s body with them. I should have -”

“Lois,” Clark exclaimed gently. “You couldn’t have done anything for Linda. Taking her body with you would only have made it more difficult for you to escape.”

She nodded slowly as she stared forward. “Yeah,” she said. “But I promised her I would never leave her.”

“Is that why you’re so adamant you won’t leave me?”

Her eyes snapped into his. “I won’t answer that,” she said.

“You won’t?” he gasped, feeling the rock begin to sink.

“I can’t say for sure that there isn’t some truth in what you say, but if I admit it is possible, you will think the only reason I want to stay with you is to try to earn redemption for what I did to Linda.”

“You didn’t do *anything* to her. They did.”

Lois stared at him for a long moment. “Is that what was worrying you?” she asked. “That I had been raped? That I would need ... I don’t know ... a particularly loving husband?”

He managed a stilted nod.

“I wasn’t raped,” she said. “And I believe that you would be the most loving and understanding of husbands.”

“I don’t know how you can believe that,” he said. “I’m not ... I haven’t ... ever ...”

“You were strong enough to survive what they did to you,” Lois said. “I know you will be strong enough to heal.”

“But I couldn’t heal,” Clark said miserably. “I just couldn’t believe you. You told me. You told me over and over again, and I just couldn’t make myself believe you.”

“Do you believe me now? Do you believe that I won’t leave you?”

“Yeah,” he said, although his tone was far from joyous.

“When did you start believing it?”

“Today.”

“This is your fifth day of freedom,” Lois said. “And you’ve made such amazing progress that you are able to trust someone from this planet — despite what others did to you. But you still think you’ll never be able to love me properly because you’re damaged?”

When she said it like that, it didn’t make a whole lot of sense. “I ... I don’t think I’ve been thinking too straight.”

“Clark!” she said. “You were imprisoned for *seven* years with no hope of recovering your former life. You were tortured, neglected, in pain, and mad with worry about your parents — and you are down on yourself because you don’t think you’re quite ready to be a perfect husband yet?”

“I ... I ... I know it’s silly, but I want ... I think respect should be a part of love.”

Lois looked puzzled. “I know you respect me,” she said. “So I can only conclude that you don’t think I respect you.”

“No. Yes. I think you’ve ... seen ... you know ... too much. I don’t think you will ever be able to forget ... how I was.”

“And you think that will diminish my respect for you?”

Just thinking about it made him feel sick. The squalor. The depravation. The dirt. The humiliation. The utter powerlessness. And Lois seeing all of it. “I don’t ...” He gulped down stupid tears that were threatening to flood his eyes. “I don’t think you will ever be able to forget.”

“I won’t,” Lois said, cutting stripes through his heart. “But where you see weakness, I see strength. Where you see disgrace, I see dignity. Where you see shame, I see courage. Where you see defeat, I

see tenacity.”

“There is nothing dignified about being forced to live like a despised animal.”

Lois straightened in her chair. “OK,” she said, full of resolve despite the little tremor in her voice. “Let’s stop circling around what we are both thinking and get it out in the open, shall we? Do you find me attractive?”

He only had the truth. “Yes.”

“Do you find me sexually attractive?”

His shock crammed into his throat, crippling his vocal cords.

But Lois wasn’t finished yet. “Do you ever think about being intimate with me?”

“No! Yes. No.” He took a ragged breath and tried again. “I try not to.”

Her smile blossomed, and for the first time ever, its appearance hurt him.

“Please don’t laugh at me,” Clark said.

She pulled her smile a little. “Clark,” she said. “When a woman has been lusting after the man she is in love with, and that man has shown minimal interest, she is going to be happy when he admits that he has thought about her in that way.”

“Lois. Lois. Trask kept telling me I was an animal. Thinking about you like that feels so wrong.”

“I’ve already told you that you have to decide who you are going to believe,” Lois said. “Trask told you things. I’m telling you things. I know Trask had seven years, and I’ve only had a few weeks — but you have to decide who is more trustworthy.”

“I ...”

“Do you think I would lie to you?”

“No.”

“OK.” She hauled in a deep breath. “Here’s the truth, Clark. I am seriously attracted to you. I am in love with you, and a part of that is physical. I love your body, and I think about what it would be like to be with you.”

His throat leapt in a series of spasms.

“Think about it,” Lois said. “And please stop believing there is anything wrong in what you are thinking.”

“I don’t have the right to -”

“I’m giving you the right.”

“Are you *trying* to drive me crazy?” he demanded.

“If that is what it takes to break down some of the barriers ... yes.”

He stared at her in utter disbelief. “I -”

“We had an agreement, remember?” Lois said. “I’m still waiting for you to kiss me.”

“I ... I ...” Clark picked up the knife and fork that had somehow been discarded onto the table. “We should finish eating.”

Lois also picked up her cutlery. “What are you going to do this evening?”

Was this a new topic? Or was this related to their previous topic? “I hadn’t decided.”

“I think you should go flying,” Lois said. “I think you should begin to look for your mom.”

Did Lois have any reason for her suggestion? Did she want some time away from him?

With a couple of quick mouthfuls, she finished the food on her plate. “I think I’ll have an early night.”

“Are you tired?”

“Pleasantly tired,” she replied. “Some of my muscles are doing a little complaining about actually having to work today.”

He should tell her that she shouldn’t have spent so long in the garden. He should know what he could offer to help alleviate her aches. But after their just-finished conversation, he was sure that anything he said would risk sounding suggestive.

“Actually ...” Lois turned from where she was placing her plate in the sink. “Would it be all right if I had a bath? I’d like to soak in the tub for a while.”

If she was having a bath, he was definitely getting out of the

house. “Sure,” Clark said, sounding a whole more composed than he felt. “You’ll be all right if I go out? I’ll lock all the doors before I go.”

“I’ll be fine.” She smiled. “Goodnight. I might be asleep when you get back.”

A sudden feeling overwhelmed him — a longing for her to reach over to him. To lay her hand on his arm as she smiled at him.

But she didn’t.

She’d hardly touched him since she had fallen asleep after crying on his chest two nights ago.

“Goodnight, Lois.”

She walked out of the kitchen, and he tracked the sound of her footsteps up the stairs.

Clark cleaned the kitchen, checked that both doors were locked, and lifted into the darkness of the night sky.

Lois stepped from the bath and wrapped the towel around her. It had been a good day. Tomorrow would be a good day, too. They would go into Smallville. She was confident that Clark would be able to cope with whatever attention he received.

Although, from what she’d seen today, the people of Smallville were going to play a crucial role in Clark’s recovery. Her gut had been right. Home was where he needed to be.

This evening ... this evening had been wonderful.

Oh, Clark had been uncomfortable at times. In truth, she had been, too. But they had dragged some hidden things into the open.

He had noticed that she was a woman!

Not a guard. Not a friendly human.

But a woman.

That was progress indeed.

Lois chuckled as she recalled his shock when she had informed him she was attracted to him. If he knew some of what had transpired in her mind, he would probably be dumbfounded.

After drying herself, she moved from the bathroom and into her bedroom. As she closed the door, she thought she heard a sound coming from outside the bedroom. She opened the door and peered down the stairs.

They were empty. She waited, her ears straining for any further sounds.

Silence reigned. Lois returned to her room and continued listening as she put on her pyjamas.

Until now, she hadn’t noticed the quietness. It was strange how being alone exaggerated sounds that normally went unnoticed.

Lois slid between the sheets. There was a slight chill to them — a reminder that winter was approaching. She sighed and wondered how cold the farmhouse would be during the depths of a Kansas winter. There was a fireplace downstairs; would that warmth reach the bedrooms?

Perhaps, if things progressed with Clark ... A cold bed would never be a problem when it was shared with a body that hot.

Or ... perhaps, failing that, he wouldn’t mind using his eyes to warm her sheets.

That would solve the cold problem ... but not the lonesomeness. She wanted to be with Clark.

Even if all they did was sleep, she wanted to be with Clark — during the day and during the night, too.

A muffled noise sounded again, and Lois’s body tensed.

It was probably an animal outside, she told herself.

Then why didn’t you hear it last night?

Because I was so tired, I fell asleep straight away.

No, you didn’t. You lay awake and thought about how much you wanted to be with Clark.

But I wasn’t listening for sounds. I knew Clark was just across the landing.

The house buzzed with silence, and slowly, Lois’s tension ebbed away.

Then it came again — from below. Not directly below. Sideways. About at the top of the -

Her door flung open. Moyne stood there with his gun aimed directly at her. “Lois,” he said. “How lovely to see you again.”

Part 13

Her heart plummeted, and her breath stalled.

She prised her gaze from the barrel of the gun and into the crazed triumph radiating from the cold black eyes.

Moyne.

He stepped forward cautiously — leading with the levelled gun — and the stench of stale cigarette smoke wormed into her lungs.

“Nothing to say, huh?” Moyne jeered. “The great Lois Lane — alone, vulnerable, and so scared she can’t utter one word.”

The cogs of her mind squeezed free from the mesh of panic. Why was Moyne here? Had Scardino sent him? Menzies? Or was he working alone? That was possible; he’d been with Trask when -

Acid self-recrimination rose within Lois. She should have anticipated this possibility. She should have factored Moyne into her decision to bring Clark home.

Except ... “Scardino gave you an assignment,” she said, managing to keep her voice steady despite feeling that her heart was flapping around in the pit of her stomach.

“So you can still speak,” Moyne said. “For a moment there, I was imagining the alien had performed all manner of heinous acts on you.”

Where was Clark? Would he hear her thundering heart? Would he know that she needed him? Why was Moyne here? “Scardino gave you an assignment,” she repeated.

“He sent me to a place that is full of career murderers and people way too fond of bombs,” Moyne said dismissively. “No way was I going there. And anyway ...” His mouth contorted to a condescending smirk. “... I haven’t signed off on my previous assignment yet.”

She needed to keep him talking. She needed to prolong this as long as possible in the hope that Clark would come.

“Where’s the alien scum?” Moyne said. “Not here, that’s for sure. If he were, he would have already charged in to rescue the damsel.”

Her gut heaved at Moyne’s lack of concern about Clark’s possible appearance.

“I can think of an interesting experiment,” Moyne continued in the same creepily conversational manner. “I shoot. You scream. It’s race between the animal and the bullet.” His eyes dropped to the tip of his weapon. “And this time, my money’s on a very different outcome.”

Her throat was becoming painfully tight with the need to swallow. But Lois wasn’t going to give Moyne the satisfaction of detecting anything that looked like nervousness.

His left hand slipped into the pocket of his brown trousers. “Do you know my motto, Lois?” he said. “Do you know why I’m still alive despite having been given some of the most dangerous assignments that come into the agency?”

He waited. She said nothing.

“This isn’t like you, Lois,” Moyne said when it had become obvious that she wasn’t going to reply. “You had plenty to say in the compound. But no matter. Where were we? Ah, that’s right. My motto.” He lifted his hand from his pocket. “Always carry insurance.” He opened the palm of his hand to reveal a glowing chunk of the Achilles substance.

Lois fought to keep even a trace of alarm from leaking onto her face.

Clark *couldn’t* come. She couldn’t allow him to come. But how could she keep him away? How could she warn him?

Even if there were a way, he wouldn’t heed it.

If Clark knew she was in danger, nothing would keep him away — not even knowing that the poison awaited him.

“So, Lois,” Moyne continued as he casually rolled the green substance between his thumb and fingers. “I guess that means you’ve just shelved all thoughts of whistling for that alien dog you’ve been training. Pity, that. Oh well, as I always say — three’s a crowd.” He returned the poison to his pocket.

Lois refocussed on his eyes, staring fixedly as her hand inched towards the edge of the mattress. When the moment came, she needed

to be able to leap from under the covers.

Moyne didn’t seem to notice her movement. “I’m sure the brute has tried to convince you that he didn’t kill those poor agents,” he said. “It’s not true, of course, but I am indebted to him for giving me such a fascinating exhibition of how things are done on his planet. And in the interests of collaborative evidence, I’m sure you’ll understand that I need to copy his methods — so that when they find your ripped and mangled body, it will be obvious what happened here.”

Perhaps Moyne didn’t know that the alien had supposedly died. Or perhaps he did and was bluffing. If they were anywhere other than Smallville, it might have been worth sticking to the official version of how the operation had ended.

But that wasn’t going to work. Not here. Not in Clark’s bedroom. Even so, Lois wasn’t going to admit to anything.

“We’re alone,” she noted, using the cover of the blanket to work the sheet loose from where it was tucked under the mattress. “You don’t have a convenient scapegoat this time.”

“Oh, Lois,” Moyne said with an exaggerated sigh. “You seem to have conveniently forgotten that you abandoned your assignment and escaped with the dangerous prisoner you were supposed to be guarding. No one is going to be surprised when they find your body.”

“Forensics will detect that you were here,” Lois said.

“For an agent, you have a distressing habit of overlooking the most basic details,” Moyne said. “You see, I’m human. And I have friends ... family, even ... in lofty places — people who want to believe that I could never do anything wrong. So if it comes to my word against an alien monster — a known killer, no less — no one is going to believe him. And sadly, you — his feisty little advocate — will be unable to contribute to his defence.”

Moyne’s eyes lowered, and Lois’s arm froze. However, it wasn’t her arm where his eyes stopped, but the middle of her chest.

“Of course,” he continued with a rancid smile. “There is a difference this time. You’re a woman. And because of that, there are ways to make you suffer before getting to the really fun bit of watching you die.”

“If you rape me, they will know,” Lois said. “They will run tests and trace it back to you.”

“Ah, Lois,” he said, shaking his head. “I can play a grieving and distraught lover better than anyone I know.”

“No one will *ever* believe that I was with you.” She spat the final word at him. His only reaction was a snide smile. “There will be bruising,” she continued. “It will look like rape.”

“And I have the obvious explanation. Being raped by a vicious alien is going to leave some damage.”

Lois opened her mouth, but closed it without voicing her protest.

Moyne sniggered. “I suppose you’re hoping that being in the freak’s hometown will make a difference. It won’t. I realise they are all agog at his return. I heard nothing else all day. In fact, his return caused me to lose the job that was my cover, so instead of watching you for a couple of days while you settle in, I decided to hurry things along so I can get out of this deadly dull backwater.”

He stepped towards the bed, his gun propping a few inches from her face.

“Come on, Lois,” he goaded. “You promised me a fight. Remember last time? I haven’t forgotten. No one crosses Neville Moyne and lives to gloat about it. Ask Phil Deller. Or John Bortolotto.” He made a low noise that sounded like his throat was mired in slime. “Ah, that’s right. You can’t ask them. Just like, after tonight, no one will be able to ask you.”

“You won’t get away with this.”

“That’s what Deller said five years ago.”

“Shadbolt knows you killed those agents.”

“Shadbolt is a washed-up has-been. No one cares what he thinks.”

“Scar -” Lois swung her left arm, chopped into his wrist, and the gun flew from his grasp. She scrambled from between the sheets, but just as she freed her feet, Moyne’s weight landed heavily on her back, flattening her against the mattress.

A memory infested her mind. Moyne on top of her, his loathsome body pressing her into the concrete. Then, Clark had saved her. Now - Moyne's hand curled over her shoulder and down her chest. His vile odour pervaded her. The sound of his heavy panting whistled past her ear. She wanted to kick and fight and scratch.

She didn't. She couldn't. Not yet.

His hand reached the top button of her pyjamas. His fingers grappled, but could progress no further.

Lois waited. He had to make the next move. That would be her chance.

His knees slid down — one either side of her hips. His weight eased forward. His hand edged lower.

Lois threw her head backwards and crashed into his face.

She heard a grunt of pain. His hand clawed as it was dragged away, and she felt his nails tear across her skin.

Lois squirmed out from under his weight, clutching the side of the bed to propel herself forward onto the floor. She twisted as she fell, landing on her butt. Moyne's head rose. She pressed her hands into the floor, lifted her body, and swung her foot, just managing to clip the curve of his shoulder as he ducked away.

He turned on her, roaring from a mouth spitting blood. Lois pulled her feet in close to her body and sprang to a standing position. She faced him as he pitched from the bed. She leant forward onto the balls of her feet, poised, watching his eyes to give herself a fraction of a second warning of his movements.

They circled. Moyne dragged his forearm across his mouth, smearing blood on his cheek. Lois tensed, waiting, but his eyes didn't drop to check his sleeve. He stepped towards her. She stepped back, conscious that the wall was about three steps behind her.

Moyne advanced again.

Lois retreated.

She could almost feel the presence of the wall. She couldn't allow herself to be cornered.

Moyne's features twisted to a grotesque caricature of revulsion. His eyes slithered down her body, and Lois seized her chance, lunging forward. She jerked her knee upwards — two sharp and forceful jabs — the first into his groin, the second moments later, timed to meet his chin as his body folded in reaction to the first blow.

He collapsed to the floor. Lois shoved him backwards and dropped onto his chest, pinning his arms with her knees. She seized his throat and looked down into his blood-smearred face. All traces of swagger had gone, replaced by shock. And pain. And fear.

Inside Lois, something snapped.

Hatred welled, and she tightened her grip, pressing deep into the valleys next to Moyne's throat, starving him of oxygen. He struggled frantically and managed to pull one arm from where it had been wedged under her leg. He groped at her arm, her wrist, her hand that was slowly squeezing the life out of him.

But nothing was going to stop her now.

Clark.

Linda.

This was for them.

And nothing less than death would pay for what they had suffered.

The dark room. The sounds of abuse. The smell of blood. The still-warm stickiness of her body. The cell. Clark's beaten body. The wounds carved across his back.

Moyne's efforts weakened.

Lois relaxed her grip slightly — he hadn't suffered enough. Not nearly enough. He had seven years to pay for.

His hand flailed again, finding her arm and grasping it. Pulling at it with a weakening desperation that was strangely satisfying. His eyes opened. Lois stared into them, wanting him to know. Wanting him to know that this was the end. Wanting him to know that he would pay for what he had done.

"Lo ... iss."

Moyne's eyes snapped sideways at the sound of the new voice. Without any thought, Lois reacted to his movement and pummelled

her left fist into his face.

"Lo ... iss. D...don't!"

"Shut up, Clark," she snarled in a hard and ugly voice.

"Don't! Pl...ease. Pl...ease ... don't."

"He deserves to die," she said, looking straight at Moyne, wanting to relish his fear.

"But ... but ..." She heard a rough and pain-ridden in-breath. "But you ... you don't ... deserve to kill."

She saw ... or perhaps imagined ... a flicker of hope in Moyne's eyes. Lois released her grip and cannoned her right fist into his face.

His eyes rolled back. His eyelids slid shut. His head drooped to the side.

Lois put her hands — stained with Moyne's blood — on her thighs.

He deserved to die.

But her desire to kill had gone — gone as quickly as it had flared — smothered by the brokenness that was creeping through her body.

Her hands began to shake. Nausea frothed at her throat. She thrust aside the clamouring claws of her consciousness and forced herself to concentrate only on what needed to be done now.

Clark was slumped in the doorway. Lois swung off Moyne and reached into his pocket for the piece of Achilles. She enfolded it in her hand and rose to her feet as every jellied muscle threatened to buckle. At the door, she stepped over Clark without looking at him.

His hand shot out and grabbed her ankle. "Don't ... flush ... it," he wheezed. "S...septic tank."

Lois pulled away from his hold and clumped down the stairs, her mind embroiled in shock. When she arrived in the kitchen, she looked down at the poison in her hand.

What was she going to do with it?

She summoned her weary brain and demanded one final effort.

Lead. Clark had told her that the walls of the cell were lined with lead. That had protected him from the rods.

Lead. Where could she find some lead?

Lois took a tea towel from the rack and spread it on the table. She quickly rolled it up with the piece of Achilles inside. In the cupboard under the sink, she tied the tea towel around the water pipe, positioning the lump at the back.

She shut the door and dragged her numb body up the stairs. When she reached the bedroom, Clark was standing, his hands on his knees and his head low. He straightened as she entered and lifted his hand towards her.

"Are you all right?" he asked in a raspy voice.

"Yeah." She picked up her bag and took out her cell phone. She turned it on and pressed the speed dial for Scardino. Moyne was still unconscious. Lois watched him as she waited for her call to be answered, feeling nothing.

"Lois?" Scardino said, his surprise evident.

"Moyne is here."

"What?" he screeched. "Moyne? Are you all right?"

"You need to come and get Moyne."

"Are you all right? Where are you? Did Moyne hurt you? Did he hurt the ... Mr Kent?"

"We're in Smallville, Kansas," Lois said, battling the eerie feeling that she was watching this scene unfold from a great distance. "You need to come and get Moyne."

"Lois," Scardino breathed. "You're worrying me. What happened?"

"Moyne threatened to rape and kill me."

"Lois!" The gush of his breath hissed through her cell phone. "Did ... did you kill *him*?"

"I wanted to." She heard a sound behind her and turned. Clark had picked up Moyne's gun from the floor. When she turned back to Moyne, he had begun to stir.

"But he's still alive?" Scardino asked anxiously.

"Yeah. He was unconscious, but he's moving now."

"Lois," Scardino said, sounding distraught. "It's going to take

time. Even if I can get a flight tonight, it's going to take a few hours to get there."

"What do you want me to do?"

Scardino didn't reply for a few seconds. "Call the local cops," he said. "Tell them to keep him overnight. If they quibble, tell them he is a suspect in two murders. Give them this number and tell them to call me. I'll give them verification."

"What if he tells them -"

"We'll do damage control tomorrow. You can't guard him all night. I can't get there until tomorrow. This is our only option."

"OK." Lois hung up before Scardino could ask any more questions. "Go and call the police," she said to Clark. She took the gun from his hand, never lifting her eyes to his face.

She sank onto the bed and trained the weapon on Moyne.

Clark closed in on her. "Lois," he said. "Are you all right?"

"Go and call the police," she said coldly. "Stay away from the kitchen."

"Are you sure about bringing the police into this? What if -"

"Just go, Clark."

"But -"

"Go!"

He backed away and slid silently from the room.

Lois's eyes did not waver from Moyne. If he even attempted to move from the floor, she was going to put a bullet directly between his eyes.

Part 14

Clark picked up the phone and tentatively placed it next to his ear. It was connected. Perhaps Rachel had seen to that, too. The number for the Smallville Sheriff's Office was written — in his mom's handwriting — on a piece of yellowing paper stuck to the wall.

He dialled and waited.

"Smallville Sheriff's Office." The voice was male.

"Could ... could I speak to ...?" He remembered her badge. "... Sheriff Rachel Harris?" he asked. "Please?"

"Who's speaking?"

"Clark ... Clark Kent."

"I'll put you through."

"Thank you," he breathed. His relief at overcoming the first obstacle was short-lived — unable to stand against the panorama of foreboding that was pressing in on him.

His two worlds were about to collide.

And the fallout would be nothing short of disastrous.

He had just a few seconds to decide what to tell Rachel. He had to give her enough information that she would realise the urgency of the situation.

But, inevitably, there were going to be questions. Questions about why Moyne had come here. Questions about the connection between Moyne, Lois, and himself. Questions about how Clark had spent the past seven years.

Questions that Moyne could answer. Questions that would destroy Clark's chance of being a regular Smallville local.

He held the phone away from his ear and tried to detect any sounds from upstairs. There was only silence.

He had hated leaving Lois alone with Moyne. It had seemed like he was taking the safe option and leaving her in danger. But — unpleasant though it was to accept — there was every chance that right now, Lois was more capable of restraining Moyne than he was.

But if Moyne *did* try to hurt her again ... Clark glanced anxiously up the stairs. He needed to get back there.

To try to protect Lois.

From Moyne.

And from anything she might do to him.

"Clark," Rachel greeted. "It's so good to hear from you."

He jumped at the sound of her voice. "Rachel. We need your help."

"Oh," she said. "What's wrong? Didn't the power get reconnected?"

"An intruder came into the house. Someone ... someone who tried to hurt Lois."

"Is she all right? Are you? Where's the intruder now?"

"He's still here. Can you come?"

"Does anyone need an ambulance?"

"Ah ... no. I don't think so ... I'm not sure what -"

"Is Lois in any immediate danger?"

"No. But I'd really like you to come quickly."

"I'll be there in ten minutes."

Clark gratefully returned the phone and urged his weakened body to climb the stairs.

He was worried about Lois. Her pyjamas were blotted with blood. She had parallel scratches that started at her throat and plunged downwards into her pyjamas — which hung slightly open because the top button had been ripped away.

The scratches looked deep, but they were scratches, not cuts. They would heal. Was she injured anywhere else? How seriously? What other humiliation had Moyne inflicted on her?

Something had happened. Her detached and closed-away demeanour felt like barbed wire coiled around Clark's heart. She hadn't even looked at him.

He'd been too late to save her.

And even when he had arrived, he had been useless. Unable to protect her. Unable to do anything but fall to the floor and watch as Lois had single-handedly battled a depraved killer.

Clark reached the top of the stairs and entered the bedroom, but neither of the occupants acknowledged his appearance. Lois sat with deathly stillness on the bed, her eyes fixated on Moyne, the weapon ready. Clark's first impulse was to go to her and try to ease the gun from her hand, but he really wasn't sure how she would react. He edged forward, hoping he was close enough that he would have a chance of intercepting the bullet if she fired.

Moyne had regained consciousness, but he still looked drowsy. He listlessly wiped away some of the blood oozing from the corner of his mouth but said nothing.

They waited — three silent people in a dishevelled room that was soiled with bloodstains and polluted with the spectre of the past. Lois stared at Moyne; Clark stared at Lois.

Clark's gaze dropped beyond Lois's throat. The scratches — three ridges — were glistening with moisture but not openly bleeding. She had told Scardino that Moyne had *tried* to rape her. How far had he gone?

"Lois?" Clark said quietly.

She gave no indication of having heard him.

Clark concentrated his hearing and picked up the faint sound of a motor. He followed it through the weaves and turns of the road. It stopped at the end of the driveway, and he heard the gate creak as it swung open.

Half a minute later, the low purr of the engine stopped.

"The police are here," he said.

Neither Lois nor Moyne responded.

The sharp rap on the front door slashed through the oppressive atmosphere.

Clark hesitated. If he left Lois with Moyne, he couldn't be sure that she wouldn't shoot him. But he couldn't take the gun and leave Lois unarmed.

He was saved from having to make the decision when he heard the front door swing open.

"Clark?"

"Up the stairs, Rachel," he called back.

Footsteps approached. Lois didn't take her attention from Moyne. Moyne didn't move.

Rachel and a young male deputy swept through the door, weapons raised. She scanned the room and stepped towards Lois. "Give me the weapon," she said, reaching for it.

Lois didn't resist, and Clark breathed easier as Rachel passed the weapon to her colleague.

Rachel put her gun in her holster and leant over Lois. “Are you all right?” she asked gently.

Lois looked dazed, but she nodded in response.

Rachel turned to Clark. “What happened here?”

“He tried to kill me,” Moyne cut in angrily.

Clark’s head jolted towards Moyne, who was looking at Rachel as if she were his hope for sanity in a manic world.

“Who tried to kill you?” Rachel asked.

“He did,” Moyne said, indicating Clark. “He came in and found Lois with me. He went crazy and tried to kill me.”

“Mr Kent reported an intruder in his house,” Rachel said evenly.

“Lois is staying here as his guest,” Moyne said. He gingerly pressed his fingertips into a top lip that had begun to swell. “I came here to visit her.”

“Ms Lane?” Rachel said.

“She’s too scared to tell you the truth,” Moyne said. “She knows what he will do to her if she says anything against him.”

“What will he do to her?” Rachel asked.

“Same as he did to the others,” Moyne said. He paused long enough to glare at Clark. “This man has brutally murdered two men.”

The accusation stabbed at Clark’s heart.

“No, he didn’t,” Lois said dully. “You did.”

Moyne raised his hands. “See?” he said. “She’s too scared to admit the truth. She knows what he did, but if she says anything, she will be his next victim.”

“Clark?” Rachel said.

“I didn’t kill anyone,” Clark said quietly.

Rachel leant closer to Lois. “You need to go to the hospital to get checked out,” she said.

“No,” Lois said.

“You need medical attention.”

“I’m not going,” she said, her tone so hard and cold that Clark knew the only way they were going to get her to the hospital would be to overpower her physically.

Rachel looked to Clark. “I think she needs to go,” she said.

Clark agreed.

“See how much he’s scared her?” Moyne said. “She can’t even think about her own needs.” He scrambled to his feet, wincing as he did. He reached into the pocket of his brown trousers and withdrew his wallet. He took out a card, which he handed to Rachel with a shy smile. “Sheriff,” he said. “Lois is a colleague of mine. And a friend. If you could see to her safe transport to the hospital and take this man into custody, I’ll call a higher-up from my agency and arrange for the fugitive to be returned to Metropolis.”

“Fugitive?” Rachel asked.

Moyne looked surprised at her question. “Yes,” he said. “I’m not sure what you’ve been told, but this man has been in prison for the past seven years. During that time, he killed two men. Last week, he escaped and kidnapped Lois. I have been tracking them, trying to rescue her.”

“That’s not true,” Lois mumbled.

“You can see she is in shock,” Moyne said, throwing a concerned glance towards Lois.

“Lois has already called a higher-up,” Clark said quickly.

“Scardino?” Moyne sneered. “It was his incompetence that allowed this to happen to Lois.” He pulled his cell phone from his pocket. “Here is the number for Eric Menzies. If you call him, he will support my story.”

Clark’s world was crumbling piece by piece, but nothing worried him more than Lois’s shocked remoteness. She was hurting. And there was nothing he could do for her.

“What happened here, Clark?” Rachel said.

Moyne moved towards her. “I already told you what -”

In an instant, Rachel’s gun was out and pointing at Moyne. “Do not take one more step,” she warned.

Moyne raised his hands in a bemused gesture.

“Face the wall,” she ordered. “And put your hands up.”

Disbelief tarnished Moyne’s expression. “You’re kidding, right, lady?” he said scornfully.

“No, I’m not,” Rachel retorted. “Face the wall, or I’ll bring out the cuffs.”

Moyne glared at her, but he turned to the wall and raised his hands. “I’ve given you ID,” he said. “You know who I am. This is not going to look good on your record.”

Rachel lowered her weapon, but didn’t take her eyes from Moyne’s back. “Clark?” she said. “What happened here?”

“I was out,” he answered. “When I returned to the house, I heard thumping and banging sounds. I ran up the stairs and found Ms Lane and this man involved in a scuffle.”

“What did you do?”

He’d done nothing. He hadn’t been able to do anything. He’d been rendered powerless and in pain by the poison. “A very short time after my arrival, Ms Lane knocked him out.”

Rachel placed her hand on Lois’s slumped shoulder. “Lois?” she said.

Lois slowly raised her head in response to Rachel’s touch.

“I have to ask you who hurt you,” Rachel said. “And I have to remind you that making a false report to a police officer is an offence.”

Lois nodded slowly.

“Who did this to you?” Rachel said. “Who caused those scratches on your chest?”

“Moyne did.”

“She’s so scared of him that she’s not thinking properly.” Moyne spoke despite being turned into the wall.

Rachel straightened. “Turn this way,” she ordered Moyne.

He did, his face twisted to a disdainful smirk.

“Hold out your hands, palms down.”

With an exaggerated sigh, he obeyed.

Rachel examined them and then turned to Clark. “Hold out your hands,” she said in a more civil tone.

He did, and Rachel scrutinised his nails.

“OK,” she said decisively as she turned back to Moyne. “You’re coming to the sheriff’s office with us. We’ll sort it out there.”

“Me?” Moyne said as if he must have misheard.

“You.”

“If you were to call Eric Menzies now, you could avoid the embarrassment of taking in a government agent.”

“I won’t be listening to anything he has to say until I’ve verified his authority,” Rachel said coldly.

Moyne covered his surprise quickly. “I’m impressed,” he said smoothly. “In my experience, backwaters like this aren’t aware of the protocol.”

If Moyne had hoped that his compliment would soften Rachel’s manner, he would have been disappointed.

“Whatever Mr Menzies says, it’s not going to change the fact that you have what appears to be skin and blood under your fingernails,” she stated. “A simple test will ascertain whether it was you who caused the injury to Ms Lane.”

“I had to drag her away from him.”

“If that were the case, I would expect the marks to be on her shoulder, not halfway down her chest,” Rachel said matter-of-factly.

Clark looked at Lois and finally saw something he could do to make this easier for her. “Does Ms Lane have to come with you tonight?” he asked Rachel. “Can your questions wait until tomorrow?”

“She should go to the hospital.”

“I’m *not* going,” Lois said.

“Will you stay here and look after her?” Rachel asked Clark.

“Yes.”

Rachel crouched next to the bed. “Lois?” she said. “Do you want to stay here with Clark?”

“Yes.”

“You’re not scared to be alone with him?”

“No.”

Rachel turned to Clark. “I’ll need to talk to both of you again

tomorrow. Don't go anywhere."

"We won't," Clark agreed.

"You can't be serious," Moyne scoffed. "You're leaving a government agent alone and unprotected with a known killer."

"Ms Lane has expressed her preference." Rachel nodded to her colleague who took hold of Moyne's arm and led him towards the door.

As Moyne passed Clark, their eyes met. Moyne's expression seethed with barely contained revulsion. Clark watched him without wavering.

"You deserve to die," Moyne spat. "You're nothing but a dirty animal."

"Be quiet," Rachel said. "One more word from you, and I *will* cuff you." As she passed Clark, she spoke in a lowered voice. "Call me if you or Lois need anything."

"Thanks," Clark said, realising how inadequate it was.

The sheriff left the room, and Clark was alone with Lois.

In the back of the police car, Neville Moyne had time to decide how best to gain advantage from his situation.

He had no doubt he would be released — probably with a gushing apology — the moment the puffed-up sheriff finally talked with Eric Menzies.

There were good reasons why he had hadn't spilled the juicy information that the person masquerading as Clark Kent was, in reality, a vicious alien. He didn't want some stupid female cop seizing her moment of glory and gleefully informing Menzies that she had recaptured the prisoner.

No — Moyne had already put the pieces in place to guarantee that he would gain whatever benefit was to be had from finding the escaped alien, returning him to captivity, and securing the safety of humanity.

But now, a different plan had grown and taken possession of his mind. A better plan. A plan he'd devised while staring down the barrel of his own weapon while that bitch had stared at him as if he were a piece of trash.

A plan eminently suited to a man who relished the taste of revenge.

He would say nothing to anyone — not even Menzies. The reward for his restraint would be the opportunity to go back and finish the job properly. He would have to detour to his car — for another piece of the Achilles and another, more powerful gun — but this time, there would be no talk, no delay. He wanted Lois Lane dead. No one humiliated Neville Moyne — twice — and lived.

Then, he would kill the alien.

Moyne had done the tests. He knew that exposure to the green substance would render the alien vulnerable to bullets within two to three hours. The only question remaining was whether he shot the bitch while the alien watched helplessly, or whether he kept her alive to witness the alien's suffering.

Either way, he wouldn't be taking any chances.

As soon as they arrived at the police station, he would demand that he be allowed to call Eric Menzies. The snooty sheriff would get her verification, Menzies would secure his release, and he, Moyne, would be back at the farmhouse within an hour.

"Lois?"

Clark perched on the edge of the bed. She didn't look at him.

"Lois?" he said. "You can't stay like this. You've got blood on you."

She looked down and seemed mildly surprised by her crumpled appearance.

"Are you in any pain?" Clark asked, relieved that he had elicited any reaction from her.

She lifted her hand to the back of her head and prodded, inhaling sharply. When her hand lowered, she looked at her fingertips. There was a small smudge of blood.

"Do you mind if I check it?" Clark asked.

She didn't reply, so he stood up and gently brushed back the hair near where she had touched. There was a slightly rounded bulge topped with a seeping wound.

"It's not too bad," Clark said as he sat on the bed again. "Does your head ache?"

Her gaze moved slowly to focus on his face. "A bit."

"How did you get the wound?"

"I ... I don't know."

"Did you hit your head on something?"

"I ..."

Clark's anxiety escalated. "Lois," he said. "Perhaps you should go to the hospital."

"No," she cried, shaking her head. She grimaced and looked at him beseechingly. "No. Please."

"OK," he conceded. "But promise me you'll tell me if your head feels any worse."

She didn't respond. Clark's eyes dropped to the area he had been trying to avoid — her chest and the strips of parallel scratches. They were probably stinging now, but he didn't think they were serious in the long-term. However, Neosporin would avert infection.

There was blood on the bed coverings. Lois would feel better if she was clean, and Clark opened his mouth to suggest she have a shower. He closed it again, remembering she had been going into the bath when Clark had left earlier that evening. Had she still been there when Moyne had come?

Lois was dressed in her pyjamas, so it seemed unlikely. Clark had to suggest something — they couldn't stay like this. "Lois?" He looked into her vacant eyes and tried to smile encouragingly. "Would you like a shower? If I get it running for you -"

"No," she said emphatically.

In the cell, severely limiting his supply of water had been a part of the abuse. "I think you'll feel a lot better if you get out of these bloody clothes," he said. "I can wash your pyjamas for you, and then you can get some sleep."

Her eyes lifted slowly, raising Clark's hopes that she was considering his suggestion.

"Would ... would you run a bath for me?" she asked.

Relief flooded through him. Lois had responded. And her willingness to have a bath strongly suggested that Moyne hadn't barged into the bathroom earlier. "Of course," he said. "Will you wait here while I do it?"

"Uh huh."

Clark sped into the bathroom and turned on the faucets. He hadn't experienced the stabbing pain since Lois had taken the poison downstairs, but his body still felt achy. It was probably still somewhere in the house.

Moyne was probably — this instant — telling Rachel about the murderous alien in their midst.

But Clark couldn't think about that. He had to do whatever he could for Lois.

While the bath was filling, he found two clean towels and a washcloth. He turned off the faucets, checked the temperature of the water, and did a final sweep to ensure everything was perfect for Lois.

"It's all ready for you," he said as he crouched beside her bed.

She didn't make any move to rise. Clark stood and offered her his hand. After a moment's hesitation, she slipped her hand into his, and he helped her to her feet.

"When you are undressed, put your pyjamas outside the door, and I'll wash them for you."

"Can you dry them?"

That was a good point. He certainly wasn't back to full strength. "Maybe not," he admitted. "Sorry. Would you like me to get something else for you to wear? Or would you prefer to get it yourself when you've finished?"

"I ... " She looked lost.

"It's OK," Clark hurried to reassure her. "I'll get you something."

She withdrew from his hand and shuffled slowly into the bathroom.

“Call me if you need anything,” Clark said as the door began to swing shut.

It latched, and he stared at it.

Whatever had happened between Lois and Moyne, it had caused her to put up a barrier that shut out the world.

And that included him.

Moyne waited for his call to be answered, grinning insolently at the sheriff. He was looking forward to seeing her grovel after Menzies had reduced her to mash.

He heard the click of the phone being connected. “Menzies,” came the gruff voice of the man who had married his Aunt Phoebe.

“Eric,” Moyne said, remembering to employ some family goodwill in his tone. “It’s Neville.”

“What do you want?”

Moyne wasn’t taken aback by the harsh tone. Despite his curtness, Menzies had always come through for him. At heart, Menzies was a coward who would never risk being whipped by his wife’s annoyance.

“There’s been a misunderstanding,” Moyne began. “Following the incident last week, I wanted to check on Ms Lane before I left for my new assignment. Just a courtesy call to ensure that she was all right and there were no hard -”

“Get on with it.”

“She panicked, and things got out of hand, and she called the local police. I showed them my ID, but they don’t seem fully cognisant of what it means, and -”

“What is the charge?”

“They haven’t charged me with anything,” Moyne said indignantly. “There is nothing to charge me with.”

“Put the local cop on the line.”

Moyne grinned. Within five minutes, he would be walking out of the sheriff’s office. Within half an hour, he would be back at the farmhouse. By midnight, both the freak and Lois Lane would be dead. He gave the phone to the sheriff, unable to stop himself from winking at her as he did.

Eric Menzies waited, his irritation growing with every passing second. A female voice spoke, and she introduced herself. Menzies didn’t even bother taking note of her name or rank.

“Eric Menzies,” he barked. He rattled off his agency ID number and his single-use pass code.

“Thank you, Mr Menzies,” she said. “Please hold the line while I check your details.”

He waited, hoping Moyne wasn’t so far from civilisation that it was going to take a long time just to establish authority. He was pleasantly surprised when the voice was back quickly.

“Thank you, sir,” the female voice said. “We have verified your position.”

“What’s the charge?” he asked.

“Mr Moyne hasn’t been charged yet, but he is implicated in an assault.”

Not murder? “Assault?” Menzies said.

The voice hesitated. “There has been an allegation of attempted rape.”

Menzies felt disgust twist through his stomach. Rape.

“Mr Moyne said you would vouch for him as being a member of a government agency,” the voice continued.

“He is,” Menzies said.

“He is claiming he is innocent of the accusation.”

He would. Menzies knew what Neville expected of him. He had the authority to pull strings. One word from him, and regardless of what they believed Neville had done, regardless of the evidence, Neville would walk free.

It was a necessity of the job. Agents who were asked to go into desperate situations sometimes had to resort to desperate actions. The

agency’s policy was that everything was handled in-house. If an agent made a bad decision, it was important that those who understood the pressures of the job judge whether any other action had been possible.

It was how he had extracted Neville from trouble in the past.

But this time ...

This time it was rape. Attempted rape of a fellow agent.

Something within Menzies reared in protest. He had ordered the death of the alien to keep Neville out of trouble.

That had lasted less than a week.

Why had the stupid young fool gone after Lois Lane?

Eric glanced up and saw Phoebe looking at him. Although she had finally started to show some progress, she wasn’t going to be able to cope with Neville getting into real trouble.

But attempted rape ...

“What evidence do you have?” Menzies asked.

“We haven’t questioned the woman formally yet — she is still in shock. But she has several gouges on her chest.”

Menzies grimaced. “You’ll test under his nails?”

“Yes.”

With a sinking feeling, Eric knew what he had to do. It might mean that Phoebe would regress into her silent and angry world. It might mean that she would leave him.

But he couldn’t allow Neville to continue. If he had done this ... if he were able to evade the consequences this time ... next time, it could be anything.

“Treat the case on its merits,” Menzies said.

“No special treatment?”

Menzies paused, wondering what inner compulsion was driving him to destroy the fabric of his life. “The officers involved should be aware that the person concerned is linked with two murders.”

“You want him held?”

Menzies knew that this would be the end of his marriage. Phoebe would never forgive him. “Yes,” he said. “Keep him overnight. I’ll send someone to get him tomorrow.”

“OK. Thank you, Mr Menzies.”

Eric grunted a close to the conversation and slowly replaced his cell in his pocket.

Lois Lane had been an agent for over five years. Female agents who lasted that length of time without quitting or dying were good. Neville was lucky he hadn’t been killed.

When Eric turned, Phoebe was looking at him. “Who was that?”

“Police,” he replied. “One of the agents got himself into a bit of trouble.”

“Trouble?”

“Assault.”

“I guess that happens a lot in your job.”

He heard the trace of contempt in the words ‘your job’. “Yeah.”

Phoebe gazed at him. “Was it more than that?”

For most of his married life, he had fobbed off her questions concerning his job. He’d told himself that — given his line of work — it was necessary. But the truth was that he’d wanted to keep his wife from intruding into the world where he was king. “Attempted rape,” he said — because Phoebe was actually talking to him.

“Rape?” she gasped. “How can *that* be justified? Even in your job?”

“It can’t be.”

“Did you get him off?”

“No,” Menzies said, feeling like a man who was signing his own execution notice. “No. I didn’t.”

“Good,” Phoebe declared.

Menzies stared at her. Clearly, it hadn’t even crossed her mind that the unnamed agent could be her nephew. “You don’t think I should have extricated him from the mess he’s gotten himself into?”

Instead of answering, Phoebe stared to where her fingers were weaved into a tight net. To Eric’s alarm, a small tear rolled down her soft pink cheek.

He wished he were anywhere else — back out in the field, facing

gunfire. That was definitely preferable to facing an emotional woman.

“Phoebe?” he said.

When she looked up, there was such pain in her eyes that revelation hit him with the force of a blow.

In that instant, he knew.

He knew the secret she had kept from him for all of their marriage.

He knew that his marriage wasn't in danger of ending — not over this incident with Neville, anyway. Phoebe's nephew had crossed the line. Rape was something she would never condone.

“I ... I didn't know,” Eric said softly.

“I didn't feel I could tell you,” she said.

“I'm sorry.”

Phoebe's eyes dropped. “I would like a cup of tea,” she said.

Eric sprang to his feet. “I'll get it for you.”

The icy coldness that had enveloped her since her suicide attempt thawed a little. “Thank you,” she said.

Eric walked down the short corridor of the care facility, feeling more hope than he had since the day he had found out that his son was addicted to heroin.

Someone, somewhere, had violated his wife.

And terrible though that was, perhaps it would give them a glimmer of connection, a second chance.

She had gone there again.

There — to the place she had promised herself she would never return.

There — the place where something inside her rose like a fire of poison and devoured her — blinding her with uncontrollable rage.

She had been there once before. The young guard. The still-in-his-teens kid they had left on duty while they'd eaten their supper. Lois had crept out of the dark room of Linda's death, moved stealthily along the corridor, seen him, and attacked, knocking him out with the flashlight.

She'd taken what she'd needed from him — weapon, clothes, ammunition.

Then, the fury had risen within her, and she'd found herself with her hands around his throat, squeezing the life from him — driven to kill, driven to revenge, driven to make someone pay for what Ivica had done to Linda.

There had been a loud bang from the dining room — possibly someone had dropped a plate or knocked over a cup — and it had been enough to shake her from her frenzy.

She'd let go of the boy's neck. She'd risked recapture by waiting the long seconds while his breathing had become re-established.

Then she had run. Run away from Linda. Run away from the terror of death. Run away from the cruelty of those who had threatened to take her life.

But mostly, she had been running away from herself.

She'd escaped them.

She'd begun to believe that she'd escaped herself.

But she hadn't.

And now, she wasn't sure she ever would.

Part 15

Neville Moyne glowered at the frigid face of the woman sheriff.

“What?” he gasped.

“Mr Menzies' instructions are that the case be treated on its merits.”

“I want bail.”

She shook her head. “You are to be held here overnight,” she informed him. “Someone from your agency will come and get you tomorrow.”

Moyne snorted with disgust. “You've got it wrong, you incompetent woman,” he hissed. “When someone from the agency comes tomorrow, it will be to deal with *your* clumsy interference in my assignment.”

“I don't think there is any point in questioning him tonight,” she said to her two male deputies.

Moyne clenched his fist, wanting to crash it into her dog-ugly holier-than-thou face. “She's got it wrong,” he said, turning to the deputies in the hope that one of them would be man enough to overthrow the bungling female who had probably slept her way to the sheriff's badge.

Neither of them made any move to respond.

“Help me here,” Moyne pleaded. “What she's doing is going to bring humiliation to your entire office.”

They stood — as lifeless as statues.

“You *can't* just throw me into a cell,” Moyne exploded.

“Yes, I can,” the stupid cow said. “They are my instructions from your superior.”

“You are lying,” he screamed. “Menzies would not say that.”

“He did.”

Moyne put his hand to his throbbing jaw, remembering again how that bitch, Lane, had attacked him while he'd been lying helpless. “I demand to be released,” he growled. “I haven't done -”

“Mr Menzies mentioned two murders.”

Moyne's mouth dropped, and he tasted blood as it dribbled again from his swollen lip. She would pay. She would suffer as the filthy alien had suffered. He would kill her. He would. He wasn't going to be caged like an animal. He would kill her. He -

His rage erupted, he slipped his knife from its hiding place, and he lunged at the sheriff.

A thunderous noise exploded.

Neville Moyne dropped.

A few seconds later, he died in a creeping pool of his own blood on the floor of the sheriff's office in Smallville, Kansas.

The uncontrollable trembling advanced like dark storm clouds. She'd known it was coming and could do nothing but await its arrival and endure its fury.

It began with little quivers and quickly escalated to body-rattling tremors that seemed to start somewhere deep in her chest and radiate out through her muscles.

Lois closed her eyes, hugged her knees tightly against her body, and tried to concentrate on breathing steadily.

Instantly, her mind filled with the bleakness of the cave. Its coldness burrowed through the heat of shuddering muscles to seep into her bones. Its hardness pressed against her body.

The cave.

The cave where she had crawled when the shaking had beset her last time. It had been such a ghastly and inhospitable place, but in hindsight, the need to hide had possibly saved her life. She had heard the distant muffled sounds of their search, but no one had come.

Breathe, she told herself. In. Out.

The shaking would stop.

It would.

In. Out.

She had destroyed everything.

But she couldn't think about that now.

Breathe.

Her brittle shell of pretence had been shattered.

In. Out.

The unforgettable stench of blood seemed to have coated her nostrils.

In. Out.

Nothing else.

Don't think.

Just breathe.

In ... And out.

“Lois?” Clark leant closer to the bathroom door. “Lois? Are you all right?”

Silence was his only answer.

“Lois?”

She had been in there for twenty minutes. Initially, Clark had left

her alone, stripping the bed and hauling the bloodied sheets into the washing machine to soak. He'd stopped at the bathroom door once and asked if she wanted her pyjamas washed, but Lois hadn't replied. He'd gathered a handful of assorted bandages from the first aid box his mom kept in the little cabinet at the bottom of the stairs and had taken the tube of Neosporin from his metal box.

Back at the bathroom door, Clark closed his eyes and concentrated his hearing.

He heard the whispered zephyr of her breaths and a choppy noise that he couldn't identify.

Had she fallen asleep? She had sustained a blow to her head. Could she be unconscious?

"Lois?" Anxiety spiked his question. What should he do? He *couldn't* go in there. But ... "Lois? Lois, honey, could you please just let me know you're all right?"

He listened again, trying to hear above the thumping of his heart.

He heard a splash of water. "I'm OK."

Clark's head dropped backwards against the wall as relief coursed through him. "The water is probably getting cold," he said, trying to sound calm and reassuring. "I'll get you something to wear."

"Just ... just give m...me a few m...minutes."

"OK. I'm here if you need me."

She didn't reply, but the most distressing of Clark's fears had been dispelled. He went into his childhood bedroom and cautiously opened the closet where Lois had stored her meagre supply of clothes. He found a pair of old sweatpants that he'd never seen her wear. He reached for the small pile of tee shirts but hesitated, remembering the injuries to her chest.

A button-up shirt would be better. A quick perusal of her wardrobe revealed that she had nothing suitable.

Clark crossed the landing into his parents' bedroom. He eyed his mother's clothes, figuring Martha and Lois were about the same size. His fingers rested on a blouse he could clearly remember his mom wearing just days before Trask had so brutally hacked through their lives. It smelled musty.

He had washed all of his own clothes today, but he hadn't gotten to his mom's. He picked out a cotton shirt he must have worn when he was about fifteen. There was no way it would fit him now, and Clark wasn't sure why he had bothered to wash it.

However, it was clean, sweetly smelling of sunshine, about the right size, dark in colour, and thick enough that it wasn't see-through. And the buttons down the front would ... well, he wasn't sure exactly how Lois was going to deal with her injuries, but at the very least, they needed antiseptic ointment on them.

Clark couldn't even think about the three long gashes without fierce rage rising within him. He had trained himself long ago to be the master of his anger. Someone with his strength had no choice but to remain in control.

But the thought of Moyne ... hurting Lois ... touching her ...

Clark's fist clenched. He unrolled it slowly and stretched out his fingers.

Lois didn't need his anger. She needed his support and understanding.

He heard the bathroom door swing open and hurried onto the landing. Lois was there, wrapped in a towel that was secured under her arms.

Her face was pale and her expression gaunt. Clark tried to form a smile.

She didn't seem to notice as she walked past him and into the bedroom.

Clark paused, unable to decide what he should do now. Should he go in? Should he wait here? "Lois?"

"Uhhh?"

"Can I come in?"

Her low grunt wasn't definitive, but Clark figured that if she had meant 'no', she would have ensured there could be no misunderstanding. He pressed his fingers against the door and

cautiously entered. She didn't look at him. Her face was vacant, and her eyes were fixed on a spot on the far wall. Clark took a step closer. His eyes dropped to the scratches that disappeared into the towel.

Not knowing what else to do, he pulled the Neosporin from his pocket and held it towards her.

Slowly, her eyes moved. She looked at him with a vaguely questioning expression, and then her focus slid down his arm to his hand. He waited.

"I need some clothes," Lois said vacantly.

"Your sweatpants are here," Clark said quickly. "And this shirt should fit all right." He laid the shirt on the mattress and put the Neosporin next to it. "Call me when you're done." He went out of the room but didn't shut the door all the way. He began to pace the limited length of the landing. The sound of his footsteps made it more difficult for him to listen to Lois. And, he hoped, it sent a very clear message that he wasn't peeking.

She had been threatened with rape. He was male.

The two just couldn't fit together comfortably.

But when offered choices by Rachel, Lois had chosen to stay here with him.

"Cl -"

He was through the door before she finished uttering his name. She was dressed now — in her sweatpants and his shirt, her beauty adorned with a never-before-seen fragility that triggered every protective instinct he possessed.

Clark approached her slowly and stood a foot from her. He tried the smile again, hoping it looked passably genuine. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

"OK."

Her voice sounded stagnant — as if all the life and zest had drained away. Had she used the Neosporin? If he asked, would he sound like he had an unhealthy preoccupation with her chest?

How far down did the scratches extend?

They couldn't stand here staring at each other all night. Lois needed to rest. And he couldn't ignore her need for medical attention any longer.

"Lois," Clark said as gently as he could. "You have some quite deep scratches on your chest. Did you put ointment on them?"

She shook her head.

"Do you want to do it?"

Her head turned slowly to look at the tube. Clark picked it up and offered it to her. As she reached for it, her body began to sway. Clark encircled her waist in his hands, steadying her.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She stared at him and then jolted slightly as if suddenly seeing him. "Clark?"

The dizziness worried him. The detachment worried him. The possibility of more-serious injuries worried him.

He hadn't detected any fear when she'd said his name. Someone had to decide what to do.

Clark pushed the Neosporin into his pocket and crouched low to sweep her into his arms. She didn't resist, so he took her into his parents' room and laid her gently on the bed.

He sat next to her and smiled. "OK," he said, trying to sound as if his heart wasn't hammering violently enough to burst out of his chest. "It's your turn."

"My turn?"

"Remember when you had to look after my shoulder? Now it's your turn."

"Wh... what happened?"

That was the question he wanted to ask her. "You have some scratches on your chest," he said lightly. "I think they will heal better if a bandage protects them from the shirt."

"OK."

"I am going to undo the top button of the shirt," Clark said. "Then, I'm going to peel it back so I can see the scratches."

"OK."

“I’ll put some ointment on them and bandage them.”

She nodded.

“I’ll just be one moment while I wash my hands.” Without waiting for a reply, he hurried into the bathroom. A few seconds later, he was back. He sat on the bed and took a deep breath, trying to steady hands that wanted to tremble. He undid the top button — managing to free it on his second fumbling attempt.

He tentatively pushed open the material — revealing the lower ends of the three scratches — and sighed with relief. The middle scratch was the longest and extended into her cleavage, but reached no lower than the area many women exposed when wearing an evening gown.

His relief was for her — that Moyne hadn’t injured her more intimately.

And there was relief for himself — that he could tend her wounds without invading her privacy too much.

Clark took another deep breath, debating whether he should look into her face and try to reassure her. He decided not to — this needed to be done. If he saw anything negative in her eyes, he wasn’t sure he would be able to continue.

The scratches looked clean — he assumed that had happened in the bath. He unscrewed the lid of the tube and put a dab of the ointment on the pad of his forefinger. Very gently, he started at the top of the middle scratch — just down from her throat.

He worked along all three scratches, not rushing, being thorough, yet not dwelling on the task. When it was done, he tore open a large gauze patch and laid it over all three scratches. He taped it in place and refastened the top button of his shirt.

He looked into her face, dreading her reaction. Would he see anger, or fear, or revulsion?

Lois’s eyes were closed.

Clark stood and went to the other side of the double bed. He pulled back the covers and then returned to Lois, lifting her and carrying her to the welcoming sheets.

“You sleep,” he whispered as he pulled the covers to her shoulder. “I’ll look after you.”

She swallowed and made a small movement that settled her head further into the pillow.

Clark waited, looking down on her face and wondering exactly what had happened during the time she had been alone with Moyne.

He didn’t think an actual rape had been committed. He was sure that Rachel had come to that conclusion, too; otherwise, she would have insisted that Lois go to the hospital.

But Moyne’s sickened mind knew no limits when it came to depravity.

“I *will* look after you,” Clark vowed. “Whatever happens, he won’t hurt you again.”

Clark pulled the single mattress from his bed and positioned it on the landing outside the door to his parents’ room. He covered it with a clean sheet, added a pillow, and then climbed into the Winnie the Pooh sleeping bag he had taken from where it had been stored — briefly — in the closet.

He slipped silently into the bedroom to do a final check on Lois; she seemed to be sleeping peacefully. He allowed himself a few moments to stare at her face. Her beauty had always had the power to take his breath away. She was still a little pale — but the slightly alabaster hue of her skin contrasted strikingly with her dark hair, giving her an almost ethereal quality.

Still, silent, sleeping — she looked so vulnerable. It was an illusion. That oh-so-feminine body was packed with strength, and character, and resourcefulness.

She had faced Moyne — and beaten him.

Clark shook his head in wonder.

Lois was the most amazing person he had ever met — and she had promised to stay with him. She had said that she wanted to be with him.

It was unbelievable.

Yet inside him, the sheer unrelenting force of her conviction had planted seeds of belief. Seeds that were beginning to sprout.

“Goodnight,” he whispered. “Goodnight, my love.”

He turned off the light and returned to the mattress on the floor at the entrance to her room. He didn’t think it was likely that Rachel would release Moyne, but Clark wasn’t taking any chances. If anyone was going to get to Lois tonight, they were going to have to get past him.

The darkness closed in.

It gripped her throat, squeezing mercilessly.

It pressed into her lungs, wringing the air from them.

She fought against it and broke free, hauling in a breath. Her lungs filled, gorging on the oxygen.

Until ...

The dam burst, and a terrorising scream ruptured the air.

Clark leapt up and was out of the sleeping bag before the final traces of the scream had died away. He dropped onto the vacant side of the double bed and placed his hand on Lois’s thrashing body.

“Lois,” he soothed. “Lois, it’s all right. You’re safe now.”

The intensity of her struggle waned, and her eyes blinked open. They fixed on him. “Clark?” she gulped.

He brushed the hair from her forehead with a tender touch.

“You’re safe,” he said. “No one else is here. No one can hurt you.”

“Where were you?”

He nodded towards the door. “Just out there; not far away.”

She gripped his hand. “Will you stay?”

“Here?”

Lois closed her eyes. “Yes,” she said with a little sigh. “Stay with me.”

“Are you sure?”

She didn’t reply, and within a minute, her breathing had returned to a steady rhythm. Clark concentrated his hearing and was able to detect the slowing pace of her heart.

He pulled the spare pillow under his head and lay beside her as wonder flooded through him.

Lois had been scared.

She’d screamed.

He had gone to her — without even pausing to question.

She had found comfort in his presence.

She trusted him.

He had been what she needed.

A man had threatened her. An alien had brought her comfort.

He had been enough.

Clark knew he wouldn’t sleep again tonight.

Lois might need him again. And if she did, he would be here for her.

~ Wednesday ~

Clark rose as the first rays of daylight crept past the curtains and glimmered in the darkened room.

He hadn’t recovered fully, but he was able to shower, shave, and dress in less than five minutes. As he hauled the single mattress back onto the bed, he pondered how he was going to provide breakfast for Lois. She had said not to go into the kitchen, so it was probable that the poison was there.

He knew there was still some in the vicinity. His body should have recovered completely by now. The exposure had been short — only a few minutes — but he was still hampered by a dragging weariness that made his limbs feel unnaturally heavy. He was sure he wouldn’t be able to fly — probably not even the short distance to Smallville.

And he wasn’t willing to leave Lois for the half an hour it would take to drive there.

He decided that there was no choice but to go into the kitchen for a short time. He knew he would be affected if the poison were there. He

also knew that every time he lost strength, it diminished his ability to protect Lois.

But she needed food.

After a final peek into the bedroom to check that she was still asleep, Clark went down the stairs. He set a straight path through the living room towards the kitchen and began resolutely. However, before he had reached halfway, the claws of pain began to tighten across his chest.

He forced himself to take another step. And another. The claws gripped tighter, and the strength drained from his legs.

Clark turned and retraced his steps. He struggled to climb the two stairs needed to gain cover from the wall. He slumped against it, hauling in big breaths as he tried to drive away the pain.

He couldn't go into the kitchen.

Lois needed him — and that meant he had to stay away from the poison.

Lois awoke — breathing hard, muscles clenched.

Her eye shot open and registered the light.

It was enough to bring a cloak of calm over her panic.

Where was she?

Not her apartment.

Another motel?

Where was Clark?

It was very quiet.

Then, with a sweeping wave of horror, she remembered.

Moyne.

Her stomach heaved.

Moyne.

He'd intruded into the place she had thought would be a haven for Clark. He'd intruded and tainted it with his cruelty. By now, he had probably told the sheriff about the alien. He would ruin everything for Clark.

And she, Lois ...

She had wanted to kill him.

Had been determined to kill him, heedless of anything.

Had been crazy with such potent hatred that killing him had seemed right and reasonable.

She had sunk to his level — sunk to a level where there was perverse delight in hurting, in killing, in taking life.

Only one thing had saved her.

Clark.

Clark, who had suffered infinitely more from Moyne than she had.

Clark — who even after every agony, every humiliation, every degradation — had still had the ... the innate *goodness* to speak out against that which he knew was wrong.

They hadn't corrupted him.

For seven long years, they had tried — but they hadn't corrupted him.

And when the test had come, he had stood firm.

She had given in, but he had stood firm.

She was no better than Moyne. Or Trask. Or Ivica.

She had the capacity to kill. To kill when it wasn't strictly necessary.

She'd known it after almost killing the young guard. She hadn't told anyone about it — not the counsellor, not Clark, certainly not Scardino, no one. When she'd had the sudden flashes of the boy's lifeless face, she had tried to tell herself that it was a solitary incident.

And it had been.

She had seen cruelty. She had witnessed death. But she had acted in violent and uncontrolled retaliation only once. That didn't make her a killer. That made her a person under stress who had snapped.

But now ... now it had happened twice.

The fear that it would happen again felt like a vice constricting her heart. And next time, there might not be a loud noise or a steadying word from Clark. Next time, there might be nothing to save her. Nothing to keep her from taking that final step that turned deranged

desire into murder.

Footsteps sounded outside her door, and Lois hunkered lower in the bed.

The footsteps paused. She hoped he would go away.

He didn't.

He rounded the bed and crouched next to her.

"Lois?" he said.

Unable to resist his voice, her eyes flickered open, and Clark's face came into view.

Clark's face — with those kind brown eyes. He was so good, he could even overlook that she had almost killed.

He could overlook it — but she couldn't.

She was evil.

On the inside.

A killer.

No better than Moyne.

"How are you feeling?" Clark asked, his question simmering with quiet concern.

"OK." Her voice was hard. It scythed through the softness of his words like a blade through a petal.

"Do you still have the headache?"

"A bit."

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

She was. And, she realised, something smelled good.

"I brought you breakfast," Clark said. "Can you sit up?"

Breakfast? "Did you go into the kitchen?" Lois asked in alarm, scrutinising him for signs of exposure to the poison.

"No," he said. "I could only get halfway across the living room." He stood and offered her his hand.

Lois took it and sat up. Clark bundled a couple of spare pillows behind her, and she shimmied into them. She looked to the other side of the bed and saw a flat piece of wooden board containing a small plastic plate laden with two fried eggs.

Clark hurried around the bottom of the bed and picked up the makeshift tray. He brought it to her and lowered it onto her lap. "The eggs were freshly laid this morning," he said. "I'm sorry about the plate and cutlery."

Lois picked up the diminutively sized knife and fork, and lobbed her question at Clark.

"I remembered they were in my tree house," he explained, his smile hovering. "When I was real little, Mom used to let me eat lunch in there sometimes. When I got too big for the plate — it has a little teddy bear painted on it — I put them in a chest in the tree house."

Lois looked again at the meal he had prepared for her. The picture of a small furry paw peeked out from the slightly browned edge of one of the eggs.

Tears gathered, pushing into her eyes.

If only ...

If only she could be the person Clark thought she was. Strong. Kind. In control. Compassionate. Whole. If only she had all the qualities she had been faking since she had walked into his cell and begun playing the role of the Good Samaritan.

"How did you cook the eggs?" she asked — because that cut a path through the tears and self-disgust.

Clark grinned — and nearly put a fatal crack in her determination to remain aloof. She swiftly slid the knife through one egg yolk and watched it gently ooze.

"Dad and I had a little place where we could light a fire during the winter," Clark said. "I made a fire and found an old pan." He smiled again. "I washed the pan well," he added.

Lois concentrated on eating her eggs. They were exactly how she liked them — pulled from the heat in the last seconds before turning completely solid.

Her mind switched into planning mode. That was professional. Cool. Safe.

What were they going to do? Drive away from Smallville? Wait until Clark had fully recovered physically? Then what?

Once Moyne had told his story, it was feasible that nation's entire police force would be looking for the alien absconder.

When would it be possible to fly to another country?

"We need to leave here," Lois said.

"We can't," Clark said. "I told Rachel we would stay."

"Moyne will have told them -"

"Don't worry," Clark said softly. "We'll work out something."

How? How were they going to evade the uproar that would follow Moyne's revelations?

"We'll be OK," Clark said.

"You don't know that," she challenged harshly.

"I know that we're not going to let anything take away what we have," he said.

Lois looked down at her plate. It was easier than looking at Clark — easier than seeing his candid resolve to reassure her.

She had failed him. She had brought him back to Smallville where Moyne had awaited them. She was sure it would prove to be a fateful misjudgement.

Lois hurriedly finished the eggs and placed the small-sized cutlery on the now-revealed little teddy bear. She pulled her eyes away before she could even think about a little boy with sweet brown eyes having a picnic in his tree house.

"I need a shower," Lois said.

"You should take off the bandage first," Clark said. "I'm not sure if it's waterproof."

"What bandage?" But even as she asked, her hand lifted to her chest, and her fingertips ran across the bandage.

"How does it feel?" Clark asked. "Is it still sore?"

"How bad is it?"

"You have three scratches. They're quite deep, but I think they will heal well if they don't get infected."

She remembered Clark dressing her wounds. He was an incredible man. She had been threatened with rape. She had been groped by Moyne.

Yet when Clark had pushed back the shirt and revealed a vee of cleavage, she hadn't felt even the slightest inclination to shrink from his touch.

She'd known she would be safe with him.

Totally safe.

He was so good. He didn't seek revenge. He didn't take advantage of situations. He stayed true to his personal code of integrity — even in the most testing of situations.

"I'll take it off in the bathroom," Lois said.

Clark stood, and she scrambled from the bed before he could offer to help her. He waited next to her, hands raised in readiness should she need him.

"I'm fine," she said.

"Call me if you need anything."

"I have everything I need."

If Clark heard the coldness in her voice, he didn't react. He picked up the wooden board and balanced the plate as he headed for the door. As he reached it, a loud knock sounded from below.

Lois's heart plummeted into the pit of her stomach. "Who's that?" she cried.

Clark placed the board on the end of the bed and put his hand on her shoulder. "Don't be afraid," he said.

She glanced to the bedroom door, half expecting a stampede of armed police.

"I'll deal with it," Clark said in that same calm voice. "You go back to bed."

"But what if it's Moyne? What if he has more of the poison? What if it's the police? What if they're here to capture you again?"

His hand squeezed her shoulder. "It will be OK," he assured her.

"Rachel isn't going to believe anything Moyne says without asking me first."

"How can you *know* that? How can you be willing to risk your freedom on a woman you haven't seen in seven years?"

Clark didn't answer, and the hesitation was enough for Lois to realise that she was hardly dressed for company. Not knowing what else to do, she slipped back into the warmth of the sheets, earning another smile from Clark.

"I'll be back soon," he said. "Don't worry about anything."

Clark walked slowly down the stairs. Despite his attempts to calm Lois, he knew it was likely that whatever was about to unfold was the direct consequence of Moyne's presence in Smallville.

Halfway down the stairs, he lowered his glasses and tried to look through the door, but it refused to peel back.

It was probably Rachel, he surmised. Rachel and her entire team of deputies — come to capture the vicious and destructive alien, as described by Moyne.

Alarm should have been coursing through him. But inside, he felt a strange calmness. He and Lois were meant to be together. Somehow, they would find a way.

Taking a deep breath, Clark opened the door.

Daniel Scardino stared back.

Part 16

Daniel had been expecting Lois to answer the door.

Instead, there was a man — a man who was younger, taller, and more toned than Scardino. A man who looked as if he, too, had been expecting someone else.

"Ah, hi," Daniel said, offering his hand to shake. "I'm Daniel Scardino."

The man took his hand in a firm grip. "Mr Scardino," he said. "I'm Clark Kent."

Daniel's jaw plunged. *This* was the alien? The prisoner? Former prisoner? He looked ... looked ... normal ... "Ah, Mr ... ah, Kent," Daniel stammered, realising he shouldn't be surprised that the alien had answered his knock. But he had not been expecting him to appear so ... human. "Mr ... ah ... Kent. Ah ... Lois. Lois Lane. Is she here?"

"She's upstairs resting," Mr Kent replied. "She had a traumatic experience last night."

"Yes. Ah ... may I see her? Please?"

"I'll check to see if she feels up to company," Mr Kent said. "Come in."

Daniel stepped into the farmhouse.

Mr Kent shut the door. "If you'll just wait here," he said cordially. "I'll only be a moment."

"Thank you." Daniel couldn't help staring as Mr Kent climbed the stairs. Casually dressed, clean-shaven with neatly cut hair — he looked civilised. Human. There was nothing about him reminiscent of the scruffy half-human-half-beast that Daniel had seen in the cell.

His appearance was shockingly normal, but it was more than that. His manner was polite ... gracious.

And, as they both knew, Daniel had done nothing to deserve any courtesy from Trask's prisoner.

He appeared at the top of the stairs and descended towards Daniel. "Ms Lane is willing to see you," he said. "But she is very tired and still quite distressed."

"Thank you," Daniel said. "I won't need to stay long." He climbed the stairs, followed by his host. At the top, Mr Kent pushed open the door to his right and gestured for Daniel to enter.

Lois was sitting up in the double bed. A large bandage covered the area below her throat, and she was ghostly pale.

Daniel felt the scorching heat of contrition. In effect, he had done this to Lois. He was the one who hadn't followed up after the incident at the compound. It had been his judgement that dispatching Moyne to a faraway assignment would be enough.

It hadn't been.

And the evidence was right before him.

Daniel stepped closer to the bed. "I'm so sorry, Lois," he said. "This shouldn't have happened."

She nodded mutely.

He didn't know what else to say, and Lois didn't look capable of

speech. Mr Kent cleared his throat. “Where is Moyne now?” he asked.

Daniel’s head jerked from Lois to Mr Kent. “You haven’t heard?”

“We haven’t heard anything since the sheriff and her deputy took Moyne last night,” Mr Kent said.

“Moyne is dead,” Daniel said, feeling a strange sense of elation that really shouldn’t accompany such an announcement.

He expected some sort of reaction from the two other people present. However, neither said a word. Daniel looked at Mr Kent — he was staring at Lois, his face lined with concern so genuine, Daniel felt a lump rise into his throat.

“How did he die?” Lois asked vacantly.

“He rushed the sheriff in a threatening manner and was shot dead by both of her deputies.”

Lois’s deadpan expression didn’t change. “Is Menzies going to be a problem?” she asked.

“No,” Daniel said. “I have informed him, and he asked me to accompany the body back to Metropolis.”

“Is the sheriff all right?” Mr Kent asked.

Again, Daniel could perceive the sincere concern of the being he had been led to believe wasn’t capable of human reactions. “She wasn’t hurt,” he answered. “Her deputies protected her.”

“Will they face prosecution?” Lois asked.

“There will be an inquiry,” Daniel said. “But it was an armed attack, and I think it will be accepted that Moyne had a history of violence.” He couldn’t help glancing to Mr Kent — who knew Moyne’s penchant for brutality better than anyone did.

There was nothing in Mr Kent’s face to indicate he was thinking along similar lines. “Will Lois be questioned?” he asked.

“Not by anyone from the local sheriff’s office,” Daniel replied.

“The original incident is no longer their jurisdiction.” He took a hesitant step towards Lois. “Do you need anything?”

She shook her head. It was obvious she wanted to be left alone. Or perhaps left alone with Mr Kent. Daniel paused. Lois was his agent. His actions — or lack thereof — had directly contributed to her ordeal. “Lois,” he said gently. “Sheriff Harris told me that you refused to go to the hospital last night. You should be checked by a doctor. And ... and I think you should also consider counselling.”

“I’m not going to the hospital,” she said decisively. “And I’m not having counselling.”

Again, Daniel paused, torn between his responsibility to ensure his agent received whatever care she needed and a growing empathy for Mr Kent. “Do you want to come back to Metropolis with me?” he asked.

Scardino saw the reaction from Mr Kent. Saw how his jaw tightened.

But he said nothing.

It would be Lois’s decision.

Both men looked at her.

She didn’t speak for a long time.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, I want to come back to Metropolis with you.”

Clark couldn’t breathe.

He couldn’t believe what he had heard.

He couldn’t believe what Lois had said.

She wanted to leave him.

She had promised him she would stay. She had assured him. Not once had she wavered.

Lois wasn’t looking at him; she was looking at Scardino. Suddenly, she was sitting straighter in the bed. She looked stronger. More decisive. More like the Lois he knew. “What did Moyne tell them?” she asked.

“Obviously, I couldn’t ask for too many details without the risk of divulging sensitive information,” Scardino said. “But anything Moyne did say could easily be dismissed as the ravings of a very unbalanced man.”

Clark couldn’t feel any relief. *Lois wanted to leave him.*

“What did you do with the rods?” she asked.

“I cremated them,” Scardino said in a tone that would have fitted well with the announcement of a bonfire. “With the body I found in the cell.”

“You *cremated* them?” Lois gasped. “With Jonas?”

Scardino shrugged, his face straight, although Clark had the definite impression he had elicited some satisfaction from Lois’s shocked response. Was he telling the truth? Did Lois believe him? A glance to her face gave Clark his answer. The rods were gone — forever.

“It seemed appropriate,” Scardino said.

“Moyne brought more of the stuff with him,” Lois said, throwing off her surprise like an unwanted cloak. “You need to take it, and you should also find his car and search it for any more he might have had.”

Clark stared at Lois, unable to fathom her sudden businesslike manner. She had seamlessly slipped from the traumatised woman to the consummate agent, efficiently and impersonally dealing with every detail. The transition shocked him. But it didn’t begin to answer the only question that mattered — why she wanted to leave him.

“Go down the stairs and turn left,” Lois continued to Scardino.

“Go through the living room and into the kitchen. There’s a tea towel tied around the pipe under the sink. The Achilles is rolled up in there.”

Scardino nodded. Clark wondered fleetingly if Lois had rendered him speechless.

Lois threw back the bedcovers and stood with more energy than Clark would have thought possible. She made a beeline for Scardino and faced him squarely. “You take all of the Achilles and destroy it,” she said in a manner few would have felt comfortable challenging. “We cannot guarantee that there are no more imbeciles like Trask and Moyne just waiting to indulge their vicious and perverted bigotry. Hiding it isn’t good enough. It has to be destroyed.”

Scardino’s throat jumped as he nodded.

But Lois hadn’t finished. “I’m trusting you,” she said. “Don’t mess with me.”

“I agree with you,” Scardino said, sounding eager to concur. “The only fitting outcome is that all of the Achilles be destroyed.”

Lois stared at him for a long time. Clark figured she was either trying to decide if she could trust him, or she was driving home her threat that he would regret crossing her.

“Go and do it now,” Lois said. “Be back here in a couple of hours to collect me.”

As Clark’s world collapsed, his determination rose. Lois still wanted to leave him. But he had two hours to try to change her mind.

“Look after yourself, Lois,” Scardino said. “I’ll be back soon.”

“Don’t bring the poison back here,” Lois said grimly.

“Of course not,” Scardino said. He walked past Clark and exited the bedroom. Clark paused long enough for a sweeping glance at Lois. She was leaning over the bed, pulling the covers into place. He got the feeling she was only doing it to avoid a discussion with him.

Clark backed out of the room and followed Scardino. At the bottom of the stairs, they shook hands again.

“Nice meeting you, Mr Kent,” Scardino said as if the full extent of their association really did stretch back only ten minutes.

“You, too, Mr Scardino,” Clark replied, although even as he said the words, he was unsure how much truth they held.

“Thank you for looking after Lois.”

“I will *always* look after Lois.”

“I know,” Scardino said, sounding genuine. “Is the kitchen through his door?”

“Yes.”

“Is there a back door? So I won’t have to come back this way?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you, Mr Kent.” Scardino turned and walked across the living room.

Clark took a couple of steps up the stairs and leant against the wall, shoving his hands into his pockets. Lois wanted to leave him. What had changed her mind?

It couldn't be that she was angry with him for not being there when Moyne had barged into the bedroom.

Clark deeply regretted that he hadn't been able to protect Lois. But it just wasn't in her nature to hold that against him.

So, why?

What had he done?

Clark couldn't find any answers.

There was movement in the bedroom — Lois was packing. He had to decide what he was going to do. And he had to decide now.

After feeling numb and detached since she had released Moyne from the death grip, Lois was now galvanised into purposeful intent.

She knew what she had to do.

Have a shower.

Dress.

Pack her very few clothes.

Tell Clark ... tell him what? Tell him anything he would accept.

Lie, if necessary. Last night, she had come within a heartbeat of killing a man. A few lies were not going to dent her conscience over much.

But lying to Clark ...

He — of all people — didn't deserve that.

But even more, he didn't deserve to be saddled with someone who could, at any time, revert to a raging killer.

So, she would lie to him. Tell him he had been right all along. This wasn't what she wanted.

He would be OK.

Moyne had gone. Soon, the poison would be gone.

Clark could reclaim his life in Smallville.

She'd seen enough from the local people to know they would embrace him again. They would be the network he needed.

She would lie to him. Then she would fly back to Metropolis with Scardino.

By tonight, this tragic, incredible, wonderful, extraordinary, distressing, implausible phase of her life would be over.

Lois put the last of her things into the suitcase and snapped it shut, relieved that she was going to be able to get into the bathroom without having to confront Clark. She gathered up the bundle of clothes that she had put aside and headed for the door.

She stopped abruptly.

Clark was there, standing in the doorway, his arms folded across his chest, his face impassive.

"Excuse me," Lois said, deliberately keeping her eyes lower than his face.

His chest didn't move.

"Excuse me," she repeated to the folded arms.

He still didn't move.

She couldn't push past him without making significant contact, and right now, she didn't want his touch. Nothing was going to prevent her leaving, but she wasn't willing to risk touching Clark. Her determination was strong, but she couldn't guarantee it was that strong.

With a sinking feeling, Lois realised they were going to have this out now. She didn't feel ready, but she doubted she would ever feel ready, so now was as good a time as any.

"You were right," she said in a low voice.

"Right about what?" Clark said.

His tone surprised her — it was devoid of the pain and desperation she had expected. Perhaps this was what he really wanted. "Right about me not wanting this," Lois said, studiously brushing a piece of fluff from her clothing. She had to be careful — no one could read her as flawlessly as Clark could.

"When did this become clear to you?" he asked.

"Last night. This morning. I've been thinking about it since we arrived in Smallville."

"You didn't seem to be thinking about it yesterday when you told me you were seriously attracted to me."

She had hoped that what had happened with Moyne would be enough to inhibit Clark from mentioning that particular discussion. "Later," she said hurriedly. "I realised later."

"When Moyne came?"

"This has nothing to do with him," she snapped.

Clark adjusted his arms a little and then settled them back on his chest. "Really?" he said sceptically.

"Really," Lois insisted. She sensed that his eyes had dropped and chanced a quick look up. Clark was looking at the floor, but there was nothing defeated in his stance.

His head rose, and their eyes clashed. "You told me a lot of things," he said quietly. "You didn't say them once, or twice, but many times. Every time I questioned you, you insisted you knew exactly what you wanted."

"I was wrong."

"I don't believe you."

His statement, coolly delivered, felt like a smack to her face. "I can't help what you believe," Lois said, hardening her tone because she could feel her conviction was in danger of dissolving away to nothing.

"Yes, you can."

"No, I can't."

"Yes, you can," he said. "You know you can. You've been trying to influence what I believe since the moment you first walked into the cell."

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice beginning to rise with frustration. "I was wrong. I'm sorry."

"You weren't wrong."

His conviction — so calm, so unexpected — felt like a condemning finger pointed directly at her soul. "You can't tell me what is right for me," she said, not caring that she sounded so perilously close to losing control.

"You've been doing that for me," he said.

There was no accusation in his tone. In fact, it sounded more like gratitude. But Lois was in no frame of mind to accept either. "I —"

"You knew what was best for both of us," Clark said. With a smooth movement, he unfolded his arms, pushed off from the doorjamb, and took a step towards her. "And you fought for it."

There was very little to be gained from repeating the mantra of her mistakes, so Lois just waited.

"You fought with such magnificent purpose, such inspiring passion that I couldn't help but begin to believe." His hands moved in harmony with his words, driving home his point.

"I'm sorry," Lois said. Her tears were very close. She needed to get out of the bedroom and into the haven of the bathroom where she could cry out her pain away from Clark.

"You showed me two things," he continued as if she hadn't spoken. "You convinced me that we are meant to be together, and you taught me that when you want something that is right, you never, ever give up on it. When obstacles get in the way, you just keep on fighting."

Lois had nothing to say. There was a chance that she could out-argue Clark, but she couldn't out-argue the double whammy of Clark using her own logic against her.

He took another step forward. Lois snuck a look around him, trying to estimate if it were going to be possible to make a dash past him. Except — by now, Scardino had probably left with the piece of poison. And Clark was the man who could cross America in under ten seconds. Even if he'd only partially recovered, it was going to be a non-contest.

"So why don't you tell me what is really going on here?" Clark said.

She couldn't tell him. Clark would *never* understand how anyone could fall low enough to kill. To *want* to kill. "I can't," she said, already flinching in preparation for his response.

"OK," he said with quiet composure that shocked her more than his anger would have done. "Then I'm asking for two days."

“Two days?”

“You stay here for two days. On Friday, if you still want to leave, I’ll fly you to Metropolis.”

Lois had begun shaking her head as Clark had spoken the first sentence. “No,” she breathed. “I need to go today.”

“Why?” Clark said, his voice rising just a few degrees. “Why is it so important that you leave now?”

Because she was scared that if she didn’t leave him now, she would never leave him. “Because I don’t want to be here anymore.”

“You don’t want to be here? In Smallville?” he said. “Or you don’t want to be with me?”

She had decided that she could lie to Clark, but she had never imagined he would be like this. Never imagined he wouldn’t accept her decision. “I just want to leave.”

“No, you don’t, Lois,” Clark said. “You don’t want to leave. But you’re scared of something, and I can’t work out what it is.”

Clark would probably deduce that he was the cause of her fear. Lois wasn’t sure if that were good or bad. To allow a gentle and good man like Clark to believe she feared him was reprehensible — but it was the truth. She feared he would lavish his kindness on her — and she was so undeserving.

“It would make sense if you’d been scared of me from the start,” Clark said. His voice had quieted again, but it now carried a raw intensity — as if he were pulling apart the hub of his emotions and exposing them to her scrutiny. “But you were *never* scared of me — even before you knew me.”

“I’m . . . I’m not scared of you,” Lois said. “Not in the way you’re thinking.”

She could see him trying to decipher what other ways she could be scared of him. He gave up after a few silent moments. “Will you stay?” he said beseechingly. “Will you give me two days?”

“Two days for what?” she exclaimed.

“Two days to fight for us,” Clark said. “Just like you fought for us.”

“No, Clark,” she breathed. “Please don’t ask me to stay.”

“It’s my turn now,” he said, full of hushed resolve. “You showed me that we are meant to be together. You showed me how important it is. You showed me how to fight, how to never give in, how to find solutions to every barrier.”

“I didn’t -”

“That’s what you did,” he insisted. “There was no possible way I could get out of the cell, but you did it. There was no possible way to get the poison out of my body, but you did it. There was no possible way for me to ever feel even slightly comfortable in this world that had condemned me for being an alien, but you did it. There was no possible way you could ever convince me that a woman like you could want to be with someone like me, but you did it.”

“Clark . . .”

“I owe it to you to fight for this,” he said in a voice fortified with steel. “Anything less would be an insult to the battle you have been so courageously fighting since you were first assigned to guard the alien brute.”

Lois felt crushed into a corner. There was no way out. “Clark,” she said, feeling her hysteria seep into her words. “You don’t understand. I *wanted* to kill Moyné.”

She’d expected Clark to recoil in horror. Or at least to brace himself against the awful truth of her outburst. “So did I,” he said.

“No, you didn’t,” she shouted. “Despite everything he’d done to you, you still argued for his life. You didn’t fall to his level. You didn’t want him dead.”

“Yes, I did,” Clark said.

“No, you didn’t,” she fired back, hardly able to believe that Clark was denying what they both knew to be the truth.

“You didn’t hear me, Lois,” he said. “My reasons were not about Moyné — they were about you.”

What had he said? Exactly? She couldn’t remember.

“I said that you didn’t deserve to kill,” Clark said.

With a flash of illumination, she understood. Clark knew what it was to be labelled a murderer. He had suffered immeasurably, knowing that everyone believed he had viciously killed.

He hadn’t wanted that for her.

But he was too late.

He had saved her from killing. But he couldn’t save her from the knowledge of how much she had wanted Moyné to die.

Lois had no doubt that if Clark had kept silent, she would have watched Moyné die under her hands.

And felt no conscience at all.

“But if it had been you — if you had had the chance to kill him — you wouldn’t have done it, would you?” she said.

Clark couldn’t hide the truth. He would never kill.

And that was where they were different.

“I want to leave with Scardino,” Lois said coldly. She stepped towards the door.

Clark mirrored her movement and barred the way. “No,” he said. “There’s more. There’s something else. Either tell me the truth or give me two days to change your mind.”

“I’m not staying two days,” she said flatly.

“Then tell me the truth.”

The constrictive tourniquet around her emotions snapped. “All right,” she screamed. “I’ve done it before. I’ve nearly killed. I’ve wanted to kill. I wanted to kill after what happened to Linda. I fell into a blind rage and almost killed the guard. It was just like last night. Something within me changed. Something within me worked loose and tricked me into believing that ending a life was justified.”

Her clothes tumbled to the floor, and her words stopped, replaced by gushing, uncontrollable tears.

Clark stepped up to her and surrounded her.

With his arms, with his chest, with his love, with his security.

Lois wept huge body-quaking sobs.

His hand cradled her head.

His voice provided a soothing bass to the shrieking soprano of her anguish.

It took a long time for her tears to slow enough that coherent speech was possible. Lois gathered every last scrap of her strength, threw herself away from his chest, and fired her final shot. “I am *not* who you think I am, Clark,” she said. “I have something inside me. Something evil. Something uncontrollable. Inside, I am like Moyné and Trask. I am not like you.”

His hands grasped her shoulders. She jolted in a pathetic effort to break away. His grip tightened.

“I don’t believe that,” Clark said solemnly. “Not for one moment.”

“How can you know what it feels like to be me?” she demanded.

“I can’t,” he admitted. “But I know you haven’t given yourself time to recover from the trauma of Linda’s death. I know you threw yourself into another emotionally charged situation way before you were ready. I know you were forced into escaping from the cell before either of us had had the time to prepare. I know you managed to hold everything together while trying to help a sometimes-difficult alien see that he could have a place in your world. And I know that, whatever you think about yourself, I will always love you.”

Lois stared at him through raw and tear-filled eyes. “Clark,” she said — softly now that her protest had lost all momentum. “Clark . . . I am not the person you think you know.”

His eyebrow lifted the tiniest amount. “Ms Lane,” he said. “Are you trying to tell me that you’re not sure you can be what I need?”

“Yes,” she said, relieved that he’d finally understood.

His eyebrow lifted further, taking one side of his mouth with it. “That’s *my* line,” he said. “Remember?”

“You . . . you are exactly what I need.”

“What Moyné did to you was horrible,” Clark said. For the first time, there was a tremor in his voice and a ripple of pain through his jaw. “You were hurting so much. You still are. At first, I wasn’t sure if anything I did would help. But last night, you called me. I went into the room, and although you were half-asleep, you clung to my hand,

and immediately, you weren't afraid anymore. Maybe ... maybe that was because of me."

It had been. In the darkness and the confusion of sleep, Clark had been the light that she could trust.

"You were right about so much," Clark said. "What I did was important, but in the middle of the night, you didn't need anyone to do anything. You just needed me." His hand lifted from her shoulder, and his thumb skimmed across her cheek, wiping away her tears. "Just like I need you."

"You ... I can't ..."

"Two days," Clark said. "I promise I will fly you to Metropolis on Friday if you ask me to."

"I ... I feel so empty," Lois said. "I feel as if there's nothing there. I have nothing to give you."

"Two days," Clark said. "No pressure. No decisions. Just some time for you ... me ... us ... to begin to heal."

"Can I have a shower now?" Lois asked.

"Do you agree to our deal?"

What choice did she have? If she left Clark now, she would break both of their hearts. She couldn't see how a future could work for them, couldn't see how she could ever be whole again, but she was too drained to fight anymore. "OK," she said. "Two days."

Clark's mouth didn't move, but his eyes smiled. "Good," he said, taking his hands from her. "I'll get the water."

"Excuse me?"

"The water," he said with an innocent look that suggested she really should understand his meaning.

"What water?" Lois asked.

"The wound on your head has been seeping," he said. "Your hair needs washing. I'll get the water."

"You're going to wash my hair?" she gasped.

He winked, shattering his nonchalant manner. "It works brilliantly," he said. "I should know — I was taught by the very best."

Part 17

Lois stared as Clark's back disappeared through the door.

She wasn't sure she could have uttered a sound to save her life.

Never could she have envisioned that, "I'm leaving, Clark," would conclude with, "I'll get the water, Lois."

Not that she had taken the time to think through how he would respond. She'd succumbed to her compelling need to escape. The same need that had driven her to flee from the unconscious young guard. The need, primarily, to escape from herself and what she had done.

Scardino had offered her a way, and she'd grabbed it without thought.

But Clark hadn't accepted her decision. He had met her at every turn. He hadn't given an inch. He hadn't wavered. And he'd done it all with that mannerly Clark Kent charm that was becoming so endearingly familiar.

He swung back into the room and pulled the mattress from the bed, allowing it to flop on the floor. "OK," he said as he crouched to straighten the sheet. "Get yourself settled, close your eyes, and relax."

She didn't move. "Clark ..."

He turned towards her, and his eyes settled in hers, causing her heart to bounce. "We could discuss this for the next twenty minutes," he said dispassionately. "Or we could just do it. I vote for the latter."

"Where did you ... What are you ..."

He waited, giving her the chance to complete her question.

But she didn't have the will to continue. Disorder clouded her mind, strangling her purpose. She wanted to give in to the aching weariness of her body. Right now, lying down seemed like a wonderful idea.

Lois dropped her gaze from Clark and shuffled to the mattress. She collapsed onto it, not caring that she wasn't in a position where her head would be easily accessible. If Clark wanted to do this, he was going to have to do it without her cooperation.

She closed her eyes, shutting out the world.

She wanted to sleep. She wanted to curl up and slip into a world

where she didn't have to think. Didn't have to feel. Didn't have to decide. Didn't have to deal with the consequences of her mistakes.

Clark's arms slid under her body and lifted her. With exquisite care, he repositioned her on her back and straightened her legs. He raised the top half of her body a few inches, arranged a towel around her neck, and eased her down onto a stack of pillows. He placed a blanket on her and grasped her hand. After holding it for a moment, he tucked both of her hands under the blanket.

"I'm going to dab the wound with warm water," Clark's voice said, coming from behind her.

The touch came. The wound was tender. Lois twitched.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She wondered if he'd stop now. He didn't. His touch came again. Soft. Careful. Loving.

Lois refused to dwell on that.

How had she sustained the injury?

She couldn't remember.

Had Moynes pushed her?

Had she hit her head against the bed? Or the corner of the desk?

Trying to remember was too hard.

Thinking about Moynes felt like pus oozing through her mouth.

Lois cleared everything from her mind — even Clark's touch — and let sleep seduce her into the place of forgetfulness.

Half an hour later, Clark dropped onto a bale of hay in the barn, and his head sagged into his hands.

Lois had said she wanted to leave him.

She was sleeping peacefully now. His hearing was tuned to the steady breaths coming from his parents' room.

They had come so far together. Made such progress.

Until Moynes had come and tainted their lives again.

So many times, Clark had imagined the moment of utter despair when Lois would tell him that she wanted to leave him. He'd expected it. He'd dreaded it. Yet when it had happened, he hadn't been able to accept it.

His reaction had been fuelled by pure desperation. He'd astounded himself. Replaying their conversation now, Clark couldn't believe that he'd sounded so staunch, so resolute, so composed.

Inside, he'd been nothing of the sort. He'd been petrified.

He'd resisted Lois. For a short time, he'd forgotten he was an alien with no rights. He'd forgotten he was less than human — unworthy of a woman's love. He'd walked into the bedroom, and despite having no firm plan about what he was going to do or say, he'd managed to procure a promise of two days.

Two days.

Would that be enough?

He lifted his head and slumped back against the rough wall of the barn.

Snippets of their discussion clattered through his mind.

Lois was scared of him — but not in any way that he could understand.

She had said she'd wanted to kill Moynes.

She had said she'd wanted to kill the young guard after Ivica had murdered Linda.

But she hadn't done either.

Somehow, Clark had to make her see that what she had done were not the acts of evil but the understandable consequences of someone pushed to their limits of endurance.

Until last night, he hadn't questioned her illusion of wellness. It had been easy to overlook her heartache when his gaping wounds had been so conspicuous.

He should have realised earlier. Perhaps he had known in part after the night in the motel when she'd told him how Linda had died. But that vague understanding had only served to highlight his own inadequacies. He'd sensed that she had held something back, but he hadn't had the confidence to pursue it.

Now, he knew — the young guard ...

Clark groaned. If he'd been human ... a real man ... would he have noticed her hidden anguish? Would he have been able to do something that could have averted what had happened with Moyne?

He didn't know the answers. But he took solace in his memories of last night. He looked at his hand and remembered how Lois had clung to it as her fears had receded.

She had always found the strength to help him. Every single time he had stumbled, she had been there for him. Steadfast. Patient. Reassuring. Optimistic.

Lois Lane was a phenomenal woman.

And Clark loved her.

He'd told her so. He hadn't planned to. It had just come out.

She hadn't responded. But she hadn't resisted him, either.

Lois couldn't do this alone. She'd tried to after Linda's death, and it hadn't worked. She needed to talk about what had happened. She needed someone she trusted to listen as she unravelled her confusion.

She needed ...

... him.

Lois needed him.

Could he be what she needed?

Somehow, he had to find a way to help her see that she couldn't do this alone. She couldn't leave him.

And not just because he needed her.

Clark stood and scanned the barn, looking for something to provide an escape from the turbulence of his mind.

He opened the door of the storage cabinet and was deluged by a raft of memories. He took out the old hand-turned milk separator. The large bowl was cool and smooth in his hands. He gripped the handle and was surprised that it still turned easily.

It had been old-fashioned when he was a child. His mother had kept a solitary dairy cow and had turned the provision of milk into seemingly endless supplies of cream, butter, and an ever-expanding array of ice cream flavours.

His mom ... his dad. Being home had intensified his yearning for them. Everything he saw, everything he touched, evoked memories of them.

Would he ever see them again? It seemed unlikely that his dad was still alive. But his mom ...

He would begin looking soon — just as soon as Lois was well enough that he felt comfortable leaving her.

Or she had left him.

A motor sounded in the driveway, and Clark walked out of the barn.

As he'd expected, it was Scardino. What if Lois said she wanted to leave? In front of Scardino? He would take her. If she asked to go, Clark would be powerless.

But Lois was asleep.

Clark approached the car as it stopped. "How is she?" Scardino said as he climbed from his vehicle.

"Asleep."

Surprise crossed Scardino's face. "Has she decided not to come with me?" he asked evenly.

"Yes," Clark said.

Scardino paused, searching the ground, as if the right words could be found in the dust. "Ah ... Mr Kent," he said. "Lois is my agent, and it's my responsibility to make sure she's all right."

"I understand that," Clark said.

"Would you mind if I went into the house? To see her for myself?"

Clark did mind. He didn't want Lois to wake up. He didn't want her to renege on her agreement to give him two days. But if Clark were in Scardino's position, he wouldn't leave without checking on Lois. "Come this way," he said.

Clark led Scardino through the front door, up the stairs, and into the bedroom.

Lois didn't stir as they entered.

Instead of crossing to the bed, Scardino turned around and quietly left the room. "I can see that Lois has changed her mind about coming

to Metropolis," he whispered as he started descending the stairs. "When she wakes, will you tell her that I came and to call me if she should need anything?"

"Of course," Clark said, relieved that every step took Scardino further away from Lois.

At the front door, Scardino stopped and held out his hand. "Thank you," he said. "Thank you for looking after Lois. And ..." Scardino's eyes briefly intersected with Clark's. "And thank you for not pre-judging me the way I pre-judged you."

Clark wasn't sure how to respond, so he shook the other man's hand. "Thank you for not waking Lois," he said. "She needs to rest."

"If you should need anything, I hope you would consider contacting me," Scardino said.

They stepped out of the house and walked down the path. "Do you know anything of my parents — Martha and Jonathan Kent?" Clark said.

"I have asked questions," Scardino replied. "I went to Anstruther — the assistant to my predecessor. The information he was given proved to be incorrect."

"You investigated?" Clark asked, trying to keep his surprise from being too obvious.

"Yes. Lois insisted."

"But you found nothing?"

"I'm sorry," Scardino said with what appeared to be genuine regret. "Every avenue of investigation resulted in a dead end."

"She must be somewhere," Clark insisted.

"She?"

"My mother."

"You know the whereabouts of your father?"

"No," Clark said, as grief rifled through him. "We think ... Lois found information that suggested he has passed away."

"I'm sorry," Scardino said.

"Is there anyone else?" Clark persisted. "Anyone who could possibly know?"

"There is one person," Scardino said cautiously.

"Who? Have you asked?"

Scardino sighed. "There's a man called Eric Menzies. He seems to know something about most operations."

Clark's hope died. "Moyne's uncle?"

Scardino nodded. "There are risks in asking him. Particularly now."

"He knows of Moyne's death?"

"Yes. The sheriff called him."

"Is he going to ask why Lois was in the exact place where the alien was captured?"

"He held all of Trask's records for a short time. I don't know how extensively he read them before having them destroyed." Scardino reached his vehicle and opened the door. "I don't think I should speak to Menzies yet. Not until every other possibility has been exhausted."

"My mom can't have just disappeared," Clark said desperately.

Scardino winced. "It happens," he said. "People are given new identities. Records are destroyed."

"But you'll keep trying?"

"Yes. But it has to be done with great care. I can't say anything that could cause questions about the relationship between Clark Kent and the former prisoner," Scardino said quietly. "I won't be admitting anything other than one is a friend of Lois Lane and the other died at the conclusion of her last assignment."

"Thank you," Clark breathed.

Scardino slipped into the driver's seat. "Goodbye, Mr Kent," he said. "And good luck."

Clark watched the car pull away. Nothing had been said about the poison, although Clark was sure Scardino hadn't brought any with him.

Was it too much to hope that it was gone forever?

Menzies could disrupt their lives; he could ask questions, he could try to chase them down, but without the poison, his effectiveness

would be limited.

Without the poison, Clark was truly free.
Free from possible capture.
Free from imprisonment.
Free from being incapable of protecting Lois.
He sighed.
But would she stay with him?
If she didn't, freedom meant nothing.

Eric Menzies walked sombrely towards his wife's room, fearing that any meagre progress made yesterday in the truce-like aftermath of her revelation would have been lost already.

He had arrived later than usual. Deliberately. He'd been dreading this since the local sheriff had called late last night with news of Neville's death. Eric swallowed nervously as he tapped on Phoebe's door. He couldn't predict how she would respond to the news, but coming now, with her grief for their son still so acute ...

Would she insist he conducted a thorough investigation? Would she expect him to find proof that Lois Lane had provoked Neville? Eric fervently hoped not. He just wanted this to end.

He heard a small sound and opened the door.

Phoebe looked up at him. She didn't smile or greet him, but acknowledging his presence was a giant leap forward.

Eric perched awkwardly on the seat next to hers. "Phoebe?" he said. "I have some bad news."

Her expression didn't change. Perhaps, in her current state of mind, she expected all news to be bad news.

"It's about Neville."

There was nothing in her face to suggest that she had even heard. Eric faltered.

"The phone call?" Phoebe said in a dull voice. "The phone call about the agent who had tried to rape someone?"

Eric nodded, unsure what to say.

"Was it Neville?"

Shock swamped Eric. It had never occurred to him that his wife would suspect Neville of anything untoward. "Yes," he said.

"Who was the woman?"

"Lois Lane."

"The woman who had him removed from the operation in Metropolis?"

"Yes."

"Where did it happen?"

"Kansas."

"Do you need to go there?"

"No. Scardino has already gone."

She didn't react, and Eric couldn't determine whether she would have preferred that he had gone. "Did Neville chase her?" Phoebe asked. "Or did she chase him?"

"He chased her."

Phoebe said no more.

Eric, however, couldn't leave it there. "There's something else," he said.

"He's dead."

Eric pulled in a breath as he studied his wife's impassive face.

"Yes," he said, hoping she would sense his sympathy.

"Did she kill him?"

"Lois Lane? No, Neville attacked the sheriff and was shot by her two deputies."

Phoebe swiftly turned on him, and Eric recoiled at the suddenness of her action. Her eyes bored into his. "Have you covered for him before?"

"Yes," Eric admitted.

"Why?"

"For you. I didn't want you to be upset. After Malcolm ..." Eric's words drifted away. Malcolm was not a subject that sat easily between them.

He waited, but his wife said nothing.

"You ... you don't seem surprised," Eric ventured.

"Malcolm was given a kitten when he was four years old," Phoebe said in a remote voice. "A week later, I found the kitten's mutilated body. Neville told me the boy from the Latino family that lived down the street had done it."

"Did you believe him?"

"Yes," Phoebe said. "That night, Malcolm cried when I turned off the light, and for the next few weeks, he wouldn't sleep in the dark. I figured he had seen what had happened. I asked him, but he wouldn't tell me."

"I'm sorry I wasn't there to help you," Eric said ruefully.

"About a month later, the boy from the Latino family knocked on our door. He told me that they'd been playing a ball game in the street and the ball had come into our garden and broken a branch on one of the shrubs. He apologised, and it seemed strange that he would care about a plant after what he'd done to the kitten."

Eric knew who had killed the kitten. And he had a hunch that his wife was thinking along similar lines.

"Malcolm came running to me as I stood at the door," Phoebe said. "I picked him up, expecting him to be frightened. He wasn't. He smiled at the Latino boy, and the boy shyly smiled back."

"How old was the boy?"

"About fourteen. The same age as Neville."

Realisation hit Eric. "That was when you insisted we pay for Neville to go to boarding school."

"Yes," Phoebe said. "I didn't want him near Malcolm." She said nothing more, staring ahead, her face blank.

Eric thought of the two agents who had died. Thought of Neville's claims that they had been killed by the alien.

The silence stretched. Eric wondered what Phoebe was thinking. Was she remembering her little boy? Her nephew? Long and quiet minutes later, she broke from her trance with a start and looked at him. Eric held his breath, wondering what was coming.

"Would you get me a cup of tea, please?" she asked.

"Tea?" he spluttered.

"Yes, please," she said placidly. "That would be lovely."

When Lois awoke, she was in the double bed. The curtains were closed, but she could see the brightness of daylight pushing against them. She lethargically cast around for a clock and, not finding one, closed her eyes again.

Thoughts poured into her brain like floodwater.

Trask was dead.

Moyné was dead.

Menzies thought the alien was dead.

She doubted that either Shadbolt or Longford had been privy to the details regarding the termination of the operation. If they'd given it any thought, they probably assumed that the alien had been moved or killed.

Which left Scardino.

He'd said he had destroyed the rods.

He'd said he would search for more of the Achilles and see to its disposal.

Suddenly ... improbably, the way ahead seemed clear for Clark.

He could resume life as Clark Kent. He could search for his mother. He could stay in Smallville and be a farmer. He could finish school and become a journalist. He could travel.

His dream of a regular life — an unthinkable impossibility for seven years — had come true.

Clark had everything he could want.

Except ... Lois knew that wasn't true.

He wanted her.

He wanted to be with her.

He loved her.

He had said he would always love her. And as he'd said it, his eyes had blazed with unmasked sincerity. He would always love her.

She knew that.

She knew it wouldn't matter whom Clark met ... wouldn't matter how many beautiful and sophisticated women flirted with him or offered him their numbers ... Clark would never waver in his love for her.

Just a few days ago — before Moyne had shattered her colossal charade of wellbeing — it was all she had wanted.

Now ... she felt too empty to want anything.

Too disillusioned to need anything.

Too numb to feel anything.

She heard a sound and opened her eyes. Clark was crouched low, his hand resting on the bed, his face lit with a gentle smile. "Hi, Sleepyhead," he said.

"Hi." Her voice was gravelly and her throat dry.

"Would you like a drink?" he asked.

She swallowed but decided not to trust her voice again, so she merely nodded.

"Water? Tea? Both?"

She nodded again, hoping Clark would understand.

He stood, gave her another smile, and walked out of the bedroom.

He was back quickly. Lois wasn't sure if she'd drifted off to sleep or if he'd used some super-speed. She didn't have the energy to ask. Didn't have the heart to wonder.

Clark put the glass of water next to the bed and helped her sit up. "I'll make your tea now," he said as he handed her the glass. "Would you like anything to eat? I can get you anything you want."

After taking a few sips, Lois shook her head.

"Are you sure?" Clark said. "Are you hungry?"

"No," she croaked. "Just the tea."

"OK." He smiled. "I'll be back soon."

Lois finished the glass of water and hunkered back down in the bed.

The whirlwind of thoughts rushed back. She shut them out and closed her eyes.

She was still so tired.

So bone-wearily tired that she couldn't imagine ever wanting to leave this bed.

When Clark returned to the bedroom with Lois's tea, she was asleep.

He stood there — just looking at her — as the tea slowly shed its warmth.

The first time he'd seen her — when Moyne had thrown her into his cell — he'd known. He hadn't known her name — hadn't expected he would ever know her name — but he'd seen immediately that she was beautiful and strong.

Beauty and strength — such an enchanting combination in a woman.

And Lois Lane had both qualities in abundance.

Clark picked up the empty glass and took it and the cold tea downstairs. He returned to the barn, but his attention did not leave Lois.

The next time Lois awoke, the brightness behind the curtains had faded considerably.

Scraps of information were rustling through her mind like leaves caught in a strong wind. Before she could try to piece them together into a coherent whole, she realised that she needed to use the bathroom.

Lois pushed back the covers and stood, giving herself a minute to see if she was going to be hit by a wave of dizziness. She felt all right — better than she remembered feeling before she had come to bed.

She slipped to the bathroom, and as she was heading back to the bedroom, she stopped on the landing and stared at the closed door. Was Clark in there? Asleep?

Beyond the curtains in his parents' bedroom, there was still a glimmer of light, suggesting it was late afternoon. Not late enough that Clark would be in bed.

Lois reached for the door handle, and her heart rolled. It was here that she had faced Moyne. It was here that she had nearly killed him.

With a quick, jerky movement, she opened the door and forced herself to step inside.

The room had been totally restored. The bed had been made. The curtains were pushed aside, and the window was open, allowing free passage to a cool breeze. Lois shivered and rubbed her hands along her upper arms.

She scanned the floor.

It was clean now, but she remembered blood.

Had it been her blood?

Or Moyne's?

She lifted a hand and prodded the back of her head.

There was a lump there, and it was sore.

Moyne had been bleeding, she remembered.

There had been a smear of blood across his cheek when she had seized his throat.

Lois spun around and sped from the room — and straight into Clark's chest.

His hands clasped her shoulders to steady her, and his face carried the look of concern that was becoming very familiar.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

She didn't know. Or, more accurately, the words needed to convey how she was feeling seemed unreachably distant.

"Are you hungry?" Clark asked.

"I don't think so."

"You haven't eaten much all day."

"What time is it?"

Clark twisted his wrist to look at his watch. "Just after four o'clock."

She remembered Scardino coming. He had said he would come back and take her to Metropolis. "I ... I slept all day?" Lois asked.

Clark smiled cheerfully. "Most of it." He removed his hands from her shoulders and slipped them into the pockets of his jeans. "I think you should try to eat," he said. "I'll go down and get you something."

He didn't ask what she wanted, which was a relief.

"Would you like to eat up here?" he said. "Or have you had enough of bed, and you'd like to come down to the kitchen?"

Lois glanced past Clark's broad body and into the bedroom. "I ... I'd like to stay here," she said. Her voice still sounded like rocks grating against each other. She wasn't sure why. It hadn't been her throat that had been crushed in a death grip.

"Would you like a cup of tea?"

Somewhere, in the nebula of a mind that was still floundering for clarity, she remembered Clark offering her tea. She couldn't remember drinking it. "Yes," she said. "Please."

He smiled as if in appreciation of something she'd done something for him. "I'll be back soon." He bounded down the stairs, and Lois returned to his parents' bedroom.

She climbed into the bed and angled back against the pillows. Her head touched the headboard, and she felt the slight soreness there. She reached for it. Her hair was limp and grimy.

Hadn't Clark been going to wash it?

Before she had time to ponder that, he swung into the room, carrying a tray. He placed it on her lap. Lois looked at it, and tears rose into her eyes. She fought them down, blinking rapidly.

On the tray was a small plate containing a sandwich of soft, white bread. Ham, cheese, and lettuce peeked out from the edges. There was also a cup of tea and a neatly folded blue and white napkin.

But what had caused her tears was the little vase — plain white in colour and with a few stems of cheerfully simple mauve flowers.

It was so evocative of Clark.

"Asters," Lois murmured. She brushed at her eyes before looking up to discover he was watching her.

"Do you need anything else?" Clark asked.

She shook her head, not willing to trust her voice.

"I'll leave you to eat," he said. "I'll be back soon to collect the

tray.”

“Th ... thanks.”

He smiled. “If you need me, you just have to say my name. I’ll hear you.”

She nodded and watched him leave the room, not sure if she were relieved or disappointed.

Relieved, she decided. The foremost thing on Clark’s mind would be whether she was going to leave him, and she certainly wasn’t ready for that conversation yet.

Could she leave him? Knowing how much it would hurt him?

Could she stay? Knowing that by staying, she could hurt him even more?

Lois didn’t feel particularly hungry, but she should try to eat something. Clark would be disappointed if he came back and found an untouched tray. She sipped from the tea for a few moments, and once its warmth had had a few moments to seep through her, she put down the cup and picked up one half of the sandwich.

From the first mouthful, it was surprisingly good. Five minutes later, the plate and cup were empty.

She felt a little better.

Still jaded.

Still dazed.

But it was as if a tiny stream of life had begun to penetrate the sludge of her lethargy.

There was a soft knock on the door, and Clark came in. His eyes flew to the tray, and his smile appeared. “Feeling any better?” he said.

“A bit.”

His smile widened. “Would you like anything else?”

“I’d like a shower.” She put her hand on the bandage below her throat. “This is starting to feel uncomfortable.”

“Will you do something for me?” Clark asked.

It was an impossible question to answer, so she waited for him to elaborate.

“Please don’t wash your hair,” he said. “I’d like to do it.”

“Why didn’t you do it earlier?”

“Because you fell asleep,” he replied. “I figured that it wouldn’t be ideal trying to dry it, so I just cleaned up around the wound on your head and carried you to the bed.”

Lois shrank back from the intimacy of having Clark wash her hair. But ... it needed to be done, and the thought of standing long enough to do a decent job wasn’t appealing. “OK,” she whispered.

Clark smiled. “I brought all of your clothes in here,” he said. “They’re in the closet.”

“Thanks.”

“Put these on the scratches after your shower,” he said, indicating the tube of Neosporin and fresh bandages on the bedside table.

“OK.”

Clark picked up her tray. “Remember,” he said. “If you need anything, just say my name.”

Lois nodded, wondering if he’d deliberately intended for it to sound as if his offer extended far beyond the next few minutes.

When Clark had gone, Lois went to the closet to get some clothes.

In the bathroom, she tied up her hair and stepped into the warm flow of water, hoping it would somehow possess the ability to wash away more than the physical grime that seemed to be embedded in every particle of her body.

Part 18

Lois leant forward and peered into the small mirror. The scratches were red and raised and tender.

She stood on her tiptoes, trying to decrease the angle so she could see the lower ends of the scratches. After less than a second, she gave up. Both she and Clark had survived him dressing them last night; they would both survive if he did it again today.

She picked up the tee shirt she had gotten from the closet in Clark’s parents’ bedroom. If she put it on, it was going to make it awkward for him to dress the scratches.

“Clark?” she said.

“Yes, Lois?” His voice came so quickly from the other side of the door that, had he been anyone else, she would have believed he had been standing there, listening.

“Do you have another button-up shirt I could borrow, please?”

“Yes,” he replied. “I’ll leave it outside the door for you.”

Lois stepped to the door and opened it, knowing Clark would already be gone.

He was.

She picked up the shirt and put it on. She ran a comb through her hair, making sure to avoid the sore spot, and left the bathroom without looking in the mirror again. She knew her hair was awful and her eyes were dull and her face looked like a ghostly apparition. She didn’t need to be reminded again.

She went into the bedroom, put her clothes in the laundry basket, and considered crawling back into bed.

Her body still ached. She didn’t understand why she was still feeling so listless. Last time, as soon as darkness had fallen, she’d forced herself to leave the cave in search of a house or barn where she could steal food.

This time, just showering had depleted her sparse supplies of energy.

She didn’t feel sleepy, so returning to bed was probably paramount to inviting a host of disturbing thoughts to invade her brain. “Clark?” she said.

She heard his footsteps on the landing and a quiet knock on the door.

“Come in,” she said, turning.

He did, leading with a hopeful smile. “How are you feeling?” he asked in a tone that suggested her answer was the most important thing in his life right now.

With a stifled sigh, Lois realised it probably was. “OK.”

“Do you need anything? Would you like to come downstairs? Sit on the porch, perhaps? Or come into the kitchen while I cook our supper?”

“Would you dress the scratches again?” Lois asked. “I couldn’t see them in the mirror.”

Clark smothered his reaction quickly. “Sure,” he said, trying to look — and almost succeeding — as if he dressed the wounds on a woman’s chest every day. “I’ll get the ointment and another bandage.”

Lois stretched out on the bed. She should be feeling something.

A man was about to push back her shirt and uncover the place where another man had left the marks of his assault.

She should be feeling something.

But she knew Clark would never take advantage of any situation. And anyway, if he could see through walls, he could also see through material, so he didn’t need to push back the clothing to see her body.

He wouldn’t do that. Lois knew he would never do that.

Even so, it was disconcerting to be feeling nothing at all.

Shouldn’t she be feeling ... anticipation, perhaps?

After all, less than twenty-four hours ago, she had told Clark that she was lusting after him.

There was nothing.

The ability to feel was gone.

The ability to want anything was gone.

Clark walked in and sat next to her on the bed. “Do the scratches still hurt?”

“Not much.”

“I’ve already washed my hands.”

Was he putting off the moment when he would reach for her shirt and undo the top button? He must have done it last night. She couldn’t remember. Perhaps her eyes had been closed.

Clark’s hesitancy nudged something inside her, reminding her of all the times he had looked to her reassurance. She had failed him a lot since last night. She couldn’t fail him again. She reached for the top button of the shirt he had loaned her, undid it, and pulled the sides apart.

He shot her a look of gratitude — for helping him through

something that was difficult for him.

For understanding.

For remembering that he didn't have all the experiences usually accumulated by a man of his age.

Their eyes met, and Lois's insides melted.

"Thanks," Clark said, his voice deep and resonant.

Lois tried to smile. She wasn't sure if it ever quite reached her mouth, but Clark's smile came easily in response.

"I should get this done," he said.

She nodded.

He applied the Neosporin down the three lengths with such care that she didn't feel any discomfort. Then he put on a clean covering, fixed it in place, and refastened her button.

"Thank you," Lois said.

"They — the scratches — are looking much better," Clark said. He gathered up the used packaging and dropped it into the trashcan. "Are you hungry?"

"Not really."

"Then how about we wash your hair before I cook our dinner?"

It felt as if her hair was caked to her scalp, but Lois hesitated. On Clark's face, she could see his hope. More than that, she recognised the hope — it was exactly what she had felt in the cell when she'd been trying to convince him that washing his hair was a great idea.

Was his reasoning now similar to hers then?

Was Clark trying to use touch to help her recover — not from years of abuse, but from Moyne attempting to dehumanise her with sexual assault?

Somewhere deep inside her, a nascent smile birthed at the idea of Clark copying her strategy. "Did Scardino come back?" she asked.

Clark didn't seem thrown by her diversion. "Yes," he replied.

"What happened?"

"I told him that you'd changed your mind about going to Metropolis."

"Did he find any more of the poison?"

"I didn't ask."

"You didn't -" Lois chopped off her outburst as comprehension filtered through a brain that still wasn't firing on all cylinders. Clark hadn't asked Scardino about the poison. She knew why — because in his mind, her staying or leaving him was more important. She pulled the band from her limp hair. "Let's do this," she said.

Clark broke into a wide smile. "I prepared everything," he said eagerly. "I thought we should do it downstairs."

"OK."

He stepped closer to the bed, his momentary exuberance dissolving as uncertainty flooded his face. "Ah ... would you like me to carry you?"

"I'm not -" Again, her brain caught up, just a fraction too late, but at least it felt like it was almost a functioning organ again. "Thank you," she said.

Clark slipped his hands under her and lifted her easily. He took her down the stairs and to the couch in the living room — which was indeed ready. A sheet of plastic hung over the arm, and a pile of cushions was positioned to give support to her back. A bowl of water waited nearby with the washcloth, shampoo, and conditioner.

He placed her on the couch with a small smile. "Feeling OK?"

Lois nodded. She was feeling OK. No better than OK, but the cloud of dejection seemed less oppressive.

Clark moved to her head. "I'll warm up the water, and then we'll get started," he said. There were a few seconds of silence. "I need to check the wound. I'll try to be gentle." She felt his fingers brush back her hair. "It's looking much better," he said. "Did that hurt?"

"No."

"Good. I'll wet your hair now."

Lois closed her eyes, squeezing out all thoughts. Nothingness was infinitely preferable to an attack of her memories. However, a clear image penetrated her barriers. The image of Clark, lying on the concrete floor as she washed his hair.

She remembered how his tension had felt like a tangible presence in the cell. How much he had had to fight to allow her to continue.

How much she had celebrated when relaxation had swept over him.

The water was exactly the right temperature as it gushed from the washcloth, down her hair, and into the bowl. She heard the squirt of shampoo and smelled its scent.

Then, his touch came to her hair, easing through its strands, always careful, always loving, always conscious of the sore patch.

Lois heard herself sigh.

She imagined Clark's smile.

And felt the chains begin to ease.

Clark ran his fingers the length of Lois's hair.

She had beautiful hair. He loved touching it. He had watched it so often, mesmerised as it swung across her shoulders in time to her movements.

Being allowed to touch it ... Being granted the opportunity to do something for her ...

Every day — more than once — he recalled the time she had washed his hair. He doubted she would ever fully understand the enormity of what her acceptance meant to him.

Now, she had been hurt. Clark had experienced firsthand the pit of Moyne's depravity. His mind could too easily form images of what might have transpired when Lois had been alone with Moyne. The position of Lois's scratches made it horrifyingly easy to guess his intentions. And coming such a short time after Lois had been rendered helpless while her friend Linda had been brutally raped and bashed to death ...

Clark could feel her pain.

He could understand her instinct to withdraw.

With all of his heart, he wished he could alleviate her suffering.

She had given him two days.

Two days to try to persuade her to stay with him. Two days to hope she would begin to confide in him. Two days for time and love to begin the healing process.

Her eyes were closed, but Clark knew she wasn't asleep. He used a pitcher to collect some water from the bowl and tested its temperature with his finger. He lowered his glasses and shot a little spurt of heat into it before testing it again. Satisfied, he poured it slowly over Lois's hair.

He inhaled as he filled his palm with the apple conditioner. He'd always loved the smell of apples. He remembered telling her that his favourite food was apple pie. That couldn't be the reason for her choice of product — she'd bought the conditioner before they had begun talking. Perhaps she had just known.

It wouldn't surprise him.

He stroked the conditioner through her hair and continued his slow fingerdance.

His gaze dropped from her eyes to her mouth.

Last night — before Moyne had come and contaminated their lives — Lois had said that she was waiting for him to kiss her.

He couldn't deny that he wanted to. He had been wanting to since ... Well, he wasn't sure when, because he'd ruthlessly buried the thought the first few times it had muscled into his mind. But as much as he'd tried to drive it out, he'd never succeeded.

He wanted to kiss Lois. That was the truth, and it scared him. He wanted to know what it would feel like.

But ...

Clark dragged his eyes from her mouth and his thoughts from the possibility of a kiss.

Right now, the last thing Lois needed was a male pressing her for physical closeness. He couldn't do anything that would remind her of Moyne. Or Ivica.

Clark thoroughly rinsed the long dark drape of her hair and picked up a towel. He spread it over her head and began drying, being careful to avoid the place of her injury.

He wondered how it had happened. It could be a tooth mark. He

hadn't said anything to Lois. She didn't seem ready to talk, and until she was, Clark figured he should remain quiet on the matter.

When her hair was almost dry, Clark began to comb it out with long, gentle strokes. He'd never expected to have the privilege of combing a woman's hair.

But Lois ... She had already exploded so many of the restrictions on his life.

Her trust was an even greater gift than his freedom.

She had the ability to change things. To affect things for the better. Clark was sure that Lois's trust had significantly influenced Scardino's attitude.

Scardino trusted Lois. Lois trusted the alien. That changed everything. Suddenly, the alien didn't appear so different, so fearsome, so worthy of hatred.

With a gush of disappointment, Clark realised that he had finished his task. He attempted to part her hair close to its customary place and arranged it over her ears.

Her eyes opened.

"All finished," Clark said with a smile.

"It feels good. Thank you."

Clark picked up the bowl of water. "I'll start dinner." He took a couple of steps away and then turned back to her. "Lois," he said. "While you're here, I want you to feel as if this is your home. You can go wherever you want, use whatever you want, do whatever you want."

"Thanks," she said.

"I'll call you when supper is ready."

He gave her a parting smile and walked away, refusing to think about how Friday was drawing ever closer.

Lois put down her knife and fork even though her plate was still half-full. Clark was a brilliant cook, and the meal had been delicious, but she couldn't force herself to eat any more.

If he felt disappointed, he tried not to let it show. He gave her a smile — probably not realising that she had analysed his smiles and knew that this one held little joy.

That was understandable. His mind was probably in turmoil over the possibility of her returning to Metropolis.

Lois wished she could tell him she wasn't going to leave. She knew that if she did, his smile wouldn't be forced at all — it would be real and genuine and bursting with joy.

She wished she could. But her fears held her silent. What if something else happened? What if she told Clark that she would stay, only to change her mind again? That wasn't fair to him.

She'd made one of the most fundamental errors possible. She'd been told a hundred times — never compound a mistake. If you make a wrong decision, it's better to do nothing than to make it worse. But that was what she had done.

She'd lost control and almost killed Moyne. That was bad enough. But then, she had exacerbated it by telling Clark she was leaving. In just a few unthinking words, she had undone everything she had been trying to achieve since she'd first felt the compulsion to help him.

She'd built and built and built his trust. Only to slay it by her own hand.

Or her own stupidity.

She knew Clark wanted her to be safe and happy.

And to stay with him.

He hadn't thought through the implications of how they could build a relationship now that the trust between them had been shattered.

She had almost killed Moyne. She could no longer trust herself.

She had almost gone with Scardino. Clark could no longer trust her.

The future seemed like a dark, impenetrable cloud.

She had no job. No career. No partner. No friends.

None of that mattered. What tore at her heart was the knowledge that she had hurt someone so vulnerable. Someone who had already

suffered so much.

Someone she loved.

"Would you like to sit on the couch?" Clark asked. "I can bring you a cup of tea."

A tiny thought caused a spark of interest in the torpor of her mind. "Could I sit on the porch?" she said.

"Of course," he said with evident relief. "It will be cool now that the sun is gone, but I can bring you a blanket."

"Would you mind?"

"Of course not." His look said he wouldn't mind doing anything ... if only it made her happy. But she didn't know how to tell him that her happiness needed to come from within her — and within her there was only dejection and lifelessness.

Five minutes later, Lois was sitting on a comfortable chair with her feet perched on a padded stool that Clark had brought for her.

He put two cups of tea on the tiny table next to her and sat on the other side of it.

He said nothing.

Lois felt a feeble smile wriggle free from her heaviness. Clark was doing exactly as she had done so many times in the cell — given him company, but not forced him to talk.

"Did you go into Smallville today?" she asked.

She sensed his surprise at her sudden rupturing of the silence.

"No," he replied. "I didn't want to leave you."

"I think you should go tomorrow."

"Maybe. We still have some of the supplies that Donny brought us. And if you want anything else, I can fly."

"You've recovered?"

"Yes." The silence came again, seeming to sweep over the darkened fields and settle on them — not as a stranger, but a friend. "Rachel came today," Clark said.

"What did she want?"

"Just to make sure we are all right."

"What did you tell her?"

"I thanked her for coming so promptly last night and told her how sorry I was that it could have ended with her death."

"Yeah." Lois hadn't really considered that angle. "What did she say about Moyne?"

"That he had gotten progressively more agitated — particularly when Menzies told her that Moyne didn't get any special consideration."

"Menzies said that?" Lois asked in surprise.

Clark nodded. "Whatever assistance Moyne had gotten from the superiors ran out last night."

"I wonder why," Lois pondered.

"Rachel didn't say."

Lois glanced to Clark, looking for signs of the anxiety he must feel about the secrets Moyne could have revealed. "Do you have any idea of how much she knows?"

Clark's smile flickered. "I couldn't really ask her if Moyne had told her that I'm an alien."

Lois wanted to respond to his smile. Or his attempt to lighten the conversation. But before she could muster a smile, Clark had continued.

"I got the impression that no one was taking anything Moyne said too seriously."

But a thought planted was hard to dislodge. "Scardino said he would do damage control," Lois said, trying to be encouraging.

"Rachel said he'd been really helpful. He took Moyne's body back to Metropolis." Clark looked sideways for a moment. "When he was here today, he told me that he would keep looking for Mom."

"Did he have any new information?" Lois asked.

"Nothing useful," Clark said. "It still feels like an impossible dream. To be free. To have the chance to look for Mom. To think she might come home."

"What do you believe?" Lois asked. "Do you believe that you're free? That those who know your secret mean you no harm?"

Clark took a long breath. “I want to believe that,” he said. “I want to.”

But Lois knew he wanted something else even more. He wanted to be with her. She should gather up all the impetuosity that usually came so naturally and simply say the words — *I’m not leaving you, Clark.*

But self-condemnation strangled her ... and the moment slipped away.

“Rachel asked me if I would like to go out on a date with her,” Clark said. His gaze moved from the distant fields and centred on Lois.

“What did you say?”

“I told her the truth.”

“What is the truth?”

“That I am in love with you.”

Lois felt the warmth of his love seep into her again. She didn’t deserve it. But she couldn’t deny its power. Clark’s love was possibly the strongest thing about him.

And considering he could catch fired bullets that made it a powerful force.

Could it be enough? Could it be enough to restore whatever was broken inside her?

If anyone could do it, Clark could.

If she snapped again, he would be there for her. Just as he’d been last night.

Realising he was probably waiting ... hoping ... for a response, Lois forced herself to find words. She had to say something. “Clark ...”

What could she tell him? She couldn’t promise she would never leave him. She’d done that ... over and over. She’d promised. She’d pleaded for his trust.

It had taken so long to build. And only a second to destroy.

What could she say? If she said she would stay with him, it would be nothing more than empty words.

With a smooth movement, Clark slid his chair forward and turned it sideways. He bent low and gently clasped her ankle. He lifted her foot onto his knee and removed her shoe.

Then his fingers began to massage her ankle.

The familiarity filled her.

His love surrounded her.

Lois put her head back and closed eyes that had become damp.

He loved her so much.

She wasn’t worthy of his love.

She had failed him.

She needed him.

He said nothing. He didn’t need words. His hands were speaking his heart. He loved her. He feared that she didn’t believe him. He didn’t know how to find another way to tell her. In his desperation to recapture common ground, he had turned to something they had shared.

His fingers on her ankle felt so good.

Five minutes later, he put down her foot and picked up the other one.

His thumbs glided across her skin.

She had to respond. She had to give him some indication of what she was thinking.

She couldn’t expect that he would believe her, but nothing would be as cruel as saying nothing.

She opened her eyes and watched him. Watched his face. She could see his uncertainty. See him desperately clinging to hope that was beginning to fade.

“Clark?”

His eyes swung from her foot to her face. “Uhhh?”

“I’m sorry.”

He looked genuinely surprised. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

She had done a whole lot wrong. She had wanted to kill. She had run away. She had hurt the man she loved. “Clark?”

His eyes settled in hers, but his fingers didn’t stop their message of

love on her ankle.

Lois had to ask now. If she didn’t, the moment would be lost, and it would be too late. Her request wasn’t fair to him — in so many ways. But she couldn’t face the darkness alone. “Clark, would you stay with me tonight?”

His reaction was surprise. And confusion. And maybe hope, too. “Stay?” he queried.

“Will you stay with me all night?” she asked. “I don’t want to be alone.”

“Of course I’ll stay with you.”

Lois felt as if she had nothing to give him in return. She searched and found something. “I trust you, Clark,” she said. “There is no one I trust more than you.”

His smile made a hesitant appearance. “Thank you, Lois.”

Her trust meant so much to him. If she continued looking at him and thinking about all the things that had been taken from him, she was going to cry. She didn’t want to cry. For so many reasons. “Would you mind if we went inside now, Clark?”

He smiled as he reached for her shoes. When he’d tied her laces, he jumped to his feet and offered her his hand.

He’d done exactly that action many times, but it never looked tired or forced. Life would be like that with Clark, Lois thought, as she took his hand and rose to her feet. He would be the sort of man still doing the little acts of chivalry after decades of being together — and doing them with style regardless of the trends of the day.

As soon as she was standing, he released her hand. They walked to the back of the house, and Clark opened the door for her. “Would you like a cup of tea?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “Thanks.”

“Anything?”

The tiredness had returned. “No. I’m going to bed.”

“I’ll do a few things here before I come up.”

“OK.” She should give him a smile. She tried, but she figured it was a failure. She left the kitchen and trudged wearily up the stairs.

Clark waited until he could no longer hear Lois’s footsteps above him and then went upstairs. He showered and went into his bedroom to dress in a tee shirt and sweatpants.

Why had Lois asked him to spend the night with her?

Was it because the darkness brought memories? Of Ivica? And Moyne?

Was it because she didn’t want to be alone?

Or because she wanted to be with him?

Would she want to sleep? Or would she be willing to talk?

Clark took a breath that he hoped would combat the nervousness twisting through his stomach and pushed open the door to his parents’ bedroom. Lois was in bed, looking at him. “Shall I get the sleeping bag?” he asked.

“Do you want it?”

He didn’t know how to answer that question. Lois didn’t answer his question either.

Not knowing what else to do, Clark stepped forward. He reached the bed. He slid in and pulled the covers over his body, being mindful to keep a distance between them.

“Do you want the light left on?” he asked.

Lois paused. “I’m not scared of the dark,” she said in a small voice.

“I understand.”

“How could you understand?”

“When I first came out of the cell ... I wasn’t scared of the darkness — but it was just so different. So unfamiliar. So threatening.”

“Clark ... today ... today, you were so ... so exactly what I needed.”

Her words filled him with hope. Hope that he’d done enough. Hope that she would stay.

“Clark, I won’t leave tomorrow. I promise.”

He’d already assumed that. He wanted to ask about Friday. Would

she leave on Friday? Would she leave him one day?

Clark brushed aside his fears. When Lois had been adamant that she would stay with him, he hadn't been able to believe her because his sights had been so firmly set on forever.

It had gotten him nowhere.

If Lois could guarantee him one day, he would take it. He would take it as a gift. "Goodnight, Lois," he said.

"Goodnight, Clark."

"Lois, if you need anything during the night, all you have to do is ask. I'm here for you."

Just before she closed her eyes, Lois almost smiled. It was strained and tired. But he clasped it, and relished it, and didn't avert his gaze until long after it had disappeared.

When his eyes finally slid shut, a convoy of feelings assaulted him.

He'd climbed some mountains. He'd overcome new and difficult situations. Many of them. But a huge one still remained.

He was in bed with the woman he loved. *In* the bed. Without the barrier of separate sleeping bags.

If it ever progressed ...

Clark gulped.

Moyne had never allowed him to forget that he was an animal.

Lois would tell him to discount everything Moyne had said.

And she was right.

Moyne was a sadistic killer who had attempted to rape Lois.

Attempted?

How far had he gone? Clark couldn't dislodge the twist of fear that wormed through his heart. He knew Moyne too well. "Lois?" he said. "Are you still awake?"

"Uhhh."

She sounded almost asleep. He shouldn't ask. Not now.

"What?" she said.

"I ... I ... There is something I wanted to ask, but my timing is all wrong. Go to sleep."

"What did you want to ask?"

"I don't really have the right to ask ... but ..."

"Moyne didn't rape me. He said he was going to, but he didn't. He didn't touch me anywhere except for the scratches on my chest."

Clark gulped. With relief. With astonishment that Lois had read him so accurately. "I'm ... I'm so glad. I ... How did you know I was going to ask that?"

"You were worried that Ivica or Elan had raped me. It makes sense that you would be worried about Moyne, too."

"Thank you. Thank you for telling me."

"Clark?"

"Yes, Lois?"

"Thank you for being with me now."

"I ... I'm glad you asked me to be here," he said. "I'm glad you feel safe with me."

"I do. I always have. I always will."

That sounded like she was thinking about more than the solitary day she had promised him. "I hope you sleep really well," Clark said. "But if you don't ... if you just want someone to talk to ... I'm right here for you."

"Thanks." She closed her eyes.

Clark watched her, wishing he could stand guard at the gateway of her mind. Did he dare touch her?

Would she want his touch?

Very slowly, Clark slipped his hand across the sheet and covered her hand with his.

Her fingers grasped his.

A few minutes later, she was asleep.

Then, Clark pushed aside the accumulation of his hopes and fears and willed himself to follow her.

Part 19

~ Thursday ~

"Have you thought about what you would like to do today?" Clark

asked Lois as they ate breakfast.

She was still pale. Still quiet. Still subdued. And she still appeared tired, although every time he had awakened and checked on her during the night, she had been sleeping peacefully. "No," she said.

Clark had thought about it. He had an idea — but it was an idea that involved risk. "I have a suggestion," he said.

Lois took a small bite from her toast. "Oh?"

Her obvious lack of interest nearly changed his mind. But Lois had given him today, and Clark didn't want to waste it. "Would you like to go flying?" he asked.

She didn't respond as positively as he had hoped. But she didn't respond negatively either. "We should go into Smallville," she said flatly.

"Only if you want to," Clark said. "There's no hurry. No hurry at all."

"I don't want to," Lois said with sudden decisiveness. "I don't want to face all those people. Not yet."

"Then we won't go," he said.

"Thanks," she said.

"Would you like to go flying?" Clark asked again.

"Have you recovered enough?"

"Yes."

"Maybe later," she said without any discernable enthusiasm.

"Any place in particular?" Clark asked casually.

"No."

Ignoring the warnings screeching through his brain, Clark forced himself to continue. "Would ... would you like to go to Metropolis?" Her ripple of surprise stalled his breath. "Why?" she asked.

"I wondered if perhaps you'd like to visit your dad."

"Ah ..."

"We don't have to; it was just a suggestion."

"I ... I would like to see him," Lois said slowly. "But ..."

"But?"

"But I'm not sure I'm up to acting as if everything is all right. I don't want to worry him."

Clark hadn't considered that. "OK," he said, wishing now that he hadn't mentioned it.

"Thanks anyway," she said.

"Is there anything you would like to do?" Clark asked hopefully.

She stared into her cup of tea without replying.

"Anything at all?" Clark prompted.

"Yeah," she said, the word carried on a jaded sigh.

"What?" Clark said, trying to curb his eagerness. He was willing to do anything if only it brought a splash of colour to her cheeks and some life to her eyes.

"I wish ... I wish we could go back to Wednesday when we were eating dinner together," Lois said wistfully.

Before Moyne had hurt her. Regret draped over Clark's heart. Even with all of his strange abilities, he couldn't do that for her. He couldn't restore what Moyne had contaminated. "Would you like to sit on the porch?" Clark asked. He forced himself to ask the much harder questions. "Would you like me to stay with you? Or would you prefer to be alone?"

"Don't you have stuff you should be doing?"

"Lois ..." You've given me one day, he wanted to say. Nothing comes close to being as important as making this day count. And they hadn't even begun to talk yet.

"I wouldn't be good company."

She would always be the best company he could ever have. Clark slid from his chair and crouched beside her. "Lois," he said. "Is there *anything* I can do to help you through this?"

Her eyes glistened with tears. "I'm not sure if anyone can help," she said forlornly.

"If you want to talk about it ..."

"I *can't* talk about it."

"OK," Clark said, feeling crushed.

"You go and do whatever needs to be done outside," she said.

“What will you do?”

“I ... I don't ... Maybe I will sit on the porch.”

She wanted to be alone.

Clark nodded his acquiescence, stood up, and walked out of the kitchen, feeling as if he were abandoning his downcast heart.

The day had passed with agonising slowness. Every hour or so, Clark had approached Lois, asking if she needed anything. Her invariable response had been that she was all right.

But she wasn't, and Clark knew it.

Each time, he had retreated to the barn, his steps marking time to the rhythm of her heartbeat and his mind searching for inspiration.

As he had dabbled in various tasks, he had played out the conversations he wished he could have with Lois. He imagined his words, faltering and inept, but somehow managing to reach the depths of her pain.

Then he'd return to her, but nothing he said or did was able to traverse the deep moat of her isolation.

So, he'd seen to her practical needs. He'd brought her food and drinks; he'd checked the fast-healing injuries to her head and chest. He'd suggested things that she might want to do and places she might want to sit.

Lois had said very little — nothing more substantial than token replies or an occasional passing comment. Many times during the day, Clark had thought back to the cell when, contrarily, conversation had seemed easier.

They had seemed closer.

Now they felt like two strangers who knew enough about each other's pasts to divide them but not enough to draw them together.

Darkness had fallen, bringing with it the increasing awareness that his chances were slipping away and he hadn't been able to make any one of them count.

As Clark showered in preparation for bed, his mind travelled the path ahead. Was he going to have to take Lois to her apartment in Metropolis tomorrow and leave her there? He couldn't begin to comprehend how a woman would feel after witnessing the rape of her friend and then being threatened in the same way, but he was sure that being alone wouldn't be helpful at all.

Surely, it would be better for Lois if she stayed with him.

Did she have anyone else? Her mother? She'd said she had a sister in California. If Lois insisted he fly her back to Metropolis, should he try to contact someone? Lois had rarely mentioned her mother. Clark figured the relationship wasn't that close. Lois might be upset that he'd interfered.

But he couldn't leave her. Not alone.

Clark emerged from the shower, hitched a towel around his waist, and returned to his bedroom. He pulled on his sweatpants and tee shirt. In their scraps of conversation today, they had not mentioned the sleeping arrangements for tonight.

He was impossibly torn.

Sleeping in the same bed as the woman he loved ... Always being mindful of the need to ensure he didn't brush against her body. Suspended between the fact of so being close to Lois and the fear of where it might lead.

Clark put on his glasses and took a deep breath. He crossed the landing to his parents' room and quietly tapped on the door.

“Come in,” Lois said.

He walked in. “Are you OK?” he said, because he was sure that however he worded it, asking Lois if she wanted him to sleep with her was never going to come out right.

She nodded. “Where are you going to sleep?”

“Wherever you want me to sleep.”

“Would you mind staying with me?” she asked.

No, he didn't. Not if that was what Lois wanted.

She'd only promised him until tomorrow. If tonight was their last night, he didn't want to spend it anywhere but with Lois.

Clark shuffled into the bed, drew the covers to his waist, and lay

on his side, facing her. “How are you feeling?” he asked.

Lois sighed. “I don't know,” she said. “I'm feeling so much, but none of it seems to bring me any closer to a conclusion. It's all just a blur.”

He remembered that feeling. In the days after his capture. In the days after Lois had first come into his cell. In the days after his escape. “You can talk to me about anything,” he said.

“I know,” Lois said. “But we've talked so much, and it doesn't feel like we've made any progress.”

“We've made lots of progress,” Clark insisted.

“We were making progress,” she said dispiritedly.

Clark's heart sank as he wondered how much longer this would continue. How many times would they get to a point, only to run into Moyné and the damage he had caused? “Until?” he questioned

“Until I destroyed it.”

“You?” he exclaimed. “*You* destroyed it?” His voice had risen, and Lois seemed to shrink further down into the blankets. Clark reached for her and laid a light touch on her shoulder. “Lois,” he said gently. “You didn't destroy anything.”

“Yes, I did.”

Clark reluctantly withdrew his hand. “Whatever happened, it was Moyné. He did it. He caused it.”

“I almost killed him.”

“Please don't dwell on that,” Clark said. “What you did is entirely understandable. He came into your room — a place where you should have been safe. He threatened to rape you. He attacked you. You *didn't* kill him — and, even if you had, it would have been self-defence.”

“It started as self-defence. If it hadn't been for you, it would have finished as murder.”

“You don't know that.”

“Yes, I do. I was overwhelmed by such powerful hatred that I wanted to kill him. If you hadn't been there, I would have killed him.”

“Lois, we're here for each other,” Clark said, realising that now was his time to put the hours of planning into action. He had to find the right words. He had to. “You've helped me so much. If anything I did helped you, I'm glad.”

“You couldn't stop me *wanting* to kill him.”

“And that is understandable,” Clark insisted. “You've been through so much trauma — Linda ... and what happened to her just a few months ago ... then being on the run in hostile territory ... then coming home to find out about your dad's stroke ... then being caught up in everything that was happening at the compound ... then planning my escape and having to run away again ... and finally facing Moyné.” Clark shook his head, hoping she couldn't fail to see his admiration. “You are amazing, Lois.”

“None of that excuses murder.”

“You didn't murder anyone.”

“No,” she agreed dolefully. “I did something far worse.”

Clark searched her impassive face for meaning. “What did you do?” he asked. “What did you do that was worse than murder?”

“I destroyed something that was between us.”

It was destroyed? What was destroyed? How had she destroyed it? “I ... I don't understand.”

A tear bubbled in Lois's eye and skidded sideways down her cheek and onto the pillow. “I destroyed it,” she whimpered.

Clark used the tip of his thumb to brush away the residue of her tear. “Is that what you meant when you said that you wished we could go back?”

She nodded, and another tear escaped from her eye and drizzled onto his thumb.

“What did you destroy?” he asked. “Help me here, Lois. I don't understand.”

“How can you ever trust me again?” she cried. “After everything I said, I -” She stopped speaking and clamped down on her lower lip as her chin trembled.

“Lois.” Clark moved his hand on her shoulder and stretched his fingers to caress her hair. “Lois, I trust you with everything. I would

trust you with my life.”

She swiped at the tears with her forearm and quivered a long breath. “I tried so hard to prove to you that you could trust me,” she said. “I kept promising I wouldn’t leave you. I could see how hard it was for you to accept that I meant it. I knew that you were struggling to overcome such immense pain, but I believed that if I just kept on telling you, you would eventually come to trust me.”

“I did,” Clark said. “I do trust you.”

“How can you?” she demanded. “After what I did?”

“You mean when Scardino was here?” Clark said, sliding his fingers through her hair.

She nodded despondently.

“Lois,” Clark said. “Lois, I knew you were in shock.”

“But it hurt you, didn’t it?”

“Yes, it did,” he admitted. “But it propelled me into action. For the first time in seven years, I didn’t have to just accept the will of others; I had the opportunity to fight for something I believed in.”

“I wanted to give you security. I wanted to help you learn to trust again. And then, I ruined everything.” Her disconsolate eyes met his. “And I don’t know if it can ever be built again.”

“Of course it can,” Clark soothed. “I didn’t believe you when you said you wanted to leave. That’s why I argued with you. That’s why I pleaded for two days — so you would have some time to regain your perspective.”

“But for you, everything you have is something that could be taken away. I understand that. That’s how I would be if I’d suffered as you suffered. I wanted to counteract that. I wanted you to know that you could depend on me. Not just today, but forever.”

Right now, Clark wasn’t concerned about forever. “Are you going to leave tomorrow?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you want to leave tomorrow?”

“No, I don’t.”

Clark felt a smile begin, but it lost its way before ever reaching his mouth. “Then stay,” he said. “Please stay with me, Lois.”

“Clark, it’s not that simple,” Lois said. “I want to be with you, but what I want more than anything else in the world is for you to be whole again. For you to be happy and safe.”

“I need you.”

“I’m not sure that I can make you happy.”

“I am,” Clark said. “I am very sure. You are everything I need.”

“Even if I tell you now ... even if I promise that I will stay with you ... how can you believe me again?”

“I will believe you.”

“Until something happens, and I change my mind,” she said bitterly.

“You didn’t change your mind; you were hurt and shocked and confused.”

Lois looked away. “I’m so scared, Clark,” she breathed.

He laid his hand along her jaw and eased her around to facing him again. “Scared of what?”

“Scared of us.”

“Us?”

“Look at us,” she said. “What happened to you in the cell — that isn’t something that can be just brushed aside. You have such deep wounds. And I can’t forget what happened to Linda. I don’t think I’ll ever forget.”

“We both have wounds. But if we’re together -”

“That’s the problem, Clark,” Lois said. “Think about it. We have both been so badly hurt. Does that mean that we can help each other? Or does that mean we are just going to keep on tearing each other apart as we scramble to put our lives back together again?”

“We -”

“That’s what scares me, Clark,” she said. “I want to be with you, but I’m not sure you will heal if you’re with me. Perhaps you need someone strong, someone whole, someone not fighting their own demons.”

“That’s what I mean,” she said. “Perhaps we will just go on, tearing each other down, never healing.”

“No,” Clark said, shaking his head. “No. When we got out of the cell, I felt as if I had nothing to give anyone. I felt so empty. But when you needed me, I found it. It was there, inside me. I hadn’t even known ... until you needed me.”

“Does that mean the only way for you to recover is if I’m an emotional mess? And the only way I can pretend to be OK is when your wounds are on display?”

“No,” Clark said. “It means that sometimes the best way to heal is to take our minds off our own problems and concentrate on helping someone else. Just like you did for me.”

“No,” Lois said dejectedly. “I was hiding. Helping you was easier than facing the destruction inside me.”

“I won’t accept that I was nothing more to you than a means to overlook your pain.”

“You’ll always be far, far more than that.”

Clark realised he had been holding his breath, and now he expelled it slowly.

“I feel so unsure, Clark,” Lois said. “I can’t risk hurting you again. I can’t say I will stay with you if there is any chance I will change my mind.”

“Are you going to ask me to take you to Metropolis tomorrow?”

She sighed. “I don’t know.”

“I was wrong to insist that you guarantee this is forever. I was wrong to even ask.”

“No, you weren’t,” Lois said. “I wanted to give you forever.”

“I’m not asking for forever now,” Clark said earnestly. “I’m asking for tomorrow. I’m asking that you will still be here with me tomorrow night.” She didn’t say anything, and tension coiled through his stomach.

“OK,” Lois said finally. “I’ll still be here tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” Clark breathed. “Thank you.”

Lois didn’t smile. “We have to get the balance right, Clark,” she said. “It wasn’t right before Moyne came here ... and then he tried to hurt me ... and you’ve been so supportive ... but it’s still not right.”

“Not long-term,” Clark said. “No relationship can be built on one person always needing the other. But these past two days ... I would have done anything to prevent Moyne getting to you ... but it gave me a chance to be there for you.” He smiled. “I admit it, Lois. I want to be able to help you.”

“But you must wonder if anything you’ve done has helped.”

“Yes,” he said sadly. “There was the first night when I came in here after you’d called, but other than that, I’m not sure if anything I’ve done has helped. But I kept telling myself that it would be worse for you if you were alone. I hung onto that.”

“I’m sorry,” Lois said as her tears threatened again. “I couldn’t get past my own pain enough to see how it must be affecting you.”

“Don’t be sorry,” he said.

“But you ...”

“Whatever I had to give you, I got from you,” Clark said. “And that doesn’t mean we are going to tear each other apart — it means we are perfect for each other.”

Lois stared at him, and he saw the faintest hint of a smile light her eyes. “You can be very persuasive,” she said.

“I learned from you,” he replied.

Her gaze dropped from his face to the sheet.

“What?” he said gently.

“Clark ... it wasn’t fair to ask you to stay with me. I shouldn’t have -”

“Do you want me in here with you?”

“Yes. I want it, but it’s not fair to you.”

“If you want me here, there’s nowhere else I want to be.”

A glimmer of pink shaded her pallid cheeks. “Are you all right with ... with the other stuff?”

“Lois — you were nearly raped. The fact that you want me here at all is -”

“But is it OK?”

“It’s OK.”

Clark could see that she was still unsure. He brushed back her hair and smiled. “You need to sleep,” he said. “Perhaps by tomorrow you will be feeling a whole lot better.”

Lois reached for his hand and clasped it tightly. “I’m not going to cry,” she said in a shaky voice.

“It’s all right if you need to cry,” Clark said.

“I’ve never met a man who is comfortable around a wailing woman.”

“Whatever you need to do is all right with me.”

“But if I cry, you’ll want to hold me. And we’re in bed. And that’s going to be awkward.”

“Not if we don’t let it be awkward.”

Lois rested her hand on his cheek. “Clark Kent,” she said. “You are the most amazing person I have ever met.”

Her eyes found his and rested there. After a moment, they crinkled with the dawn of a smile.

“I love it when you smile,” he said hoarsely.

“I love it when you smile,” she replied.

He smiled for her, and the awkwardness dissolved. “I have a suggestion for tomorrow.”

“Really?”

Her tone held a trace of interest. “Let’s try to have some fun,” Clark said eagerly. “Let’s go somewhere. The beach. Or the woods. Or anywhere. Let’s do something you enjoyed when you were a child. Horse riding. Or bike riding. Or ice skating. Let’s just be two people enjoying being together. Let’s try to forget, just for a short time.”

“OK,” Lois said with a small nod. “But I want you to choose the activity.”

“Lois -”

“No, Clark,” she said. “There must be things you loved doing. Things you have missed. I really want you to choose.”

“OK,” he said. “I’d like to go to the beach. I used to love walking barefoot along the sand.”

“That sounds nice,” Lois said.

“We’ll do it?”

She nodded. “Tomorrow.”

“OK,” Clark said. “Tomorrow.”

“Do you want to turn off the light?” Lois asked.

“It can stay on. I don’t mind.”

“No, turn it off.”

“Will you be all right?”

She smiled. It was soft and hesitant, but it filled Clark with hope. “I’ll be fine,” she said. “If you stay with me.”

So will I, Clark thought as he rose from the bed to turn off the light. I’ll be fine if you stay with me. When he slipped back into the bed, Lois’s eyes were closed.

“Goodnight, Clark,” she said.

“Goodnight, Lois,” Clark replied. *I love you.*

Part 20

~ Friday ~

As Clark opened his eyes the next morning, he was struck by an invigorating sense of anticipation. A sense so real that it reminded him of the first moments of wakefulness on long-ago Christmas mornings when the day had stretched ahead with such wonderful promise.

Lois was facing away from him; the top of her shoulder was visible above the sheet. He wanted to touch her — just to place a hand on the material of her pyjamas. Feel her warmth. Connect with her.

He didn’t. He didn’t want to startle her.

Last night, he’d fallen asleep with their conversation still echoing through his mind. She’d said she feared she had broken the trust between them. What scared Clark the most was that he would inadvertently do something to crush the fragile trust she was showing in him.

After everything she had endured, she must be within a careless touch or an indiscreet comment of shrinking back into her cocoon of

solitude.

Last night had felt like real progress.

She trusted him. Trusted him enough to want him to share her bed. Trusted him enough to unveil some of her feelings. Trusted him enough to be honest. Trusted him enough to give him another day.

Why did she trust him? Why did she feel safe sleeping next to him?

Was it because she trusted him not to brush aside his principles? Or because she had sensed his trepidation?

Was it because she saw him as an honourable man? Or because she saw him as less than a man?

Clark pushed back the covers and sprang from the bed in a lithe movement. He would not think about Moyne. He would not permit Moyne a foothold in his thoughts. Moyne was there — always — like a tenebrous cloud, but Clark was not going to give him ground easily.

Not when the day ahead promised hours shared with Lois.

He went into the bathroom to shower and shave. Once dressed, he peeked in again at Lois, who was still asleep, and then went downstairs. He set the coffee to brew, wanting Lois to awaken to its aroma even though she'd once told him that she preferred tea if she'd slept well.

Her breathing and heart rate were still steady, and he'd heard no movement from above so Clark left the house and went outside, inhaling the fresh vibrancy of the early morning. It felt so familiar — so right — to be walking from the house to the barn as the sun began its daily climb into the brightening blue sky.

He did the chores and collected the eggs, taking them back to the kitchen for breakfast.

Lois was awake now — he could hear the shower.

Clark smiled to himself as he took out the pan to fry the eggs. Today was going to be a good day.

Lois walked from the bedroom, and halfway down the stairs, she was greeted by the smell of coffee and frying eggs. The aromas teased her appetite, birthing the awareness that she was hungry.

When she entered the kitchen, Clark was there, already smiling. “Good morning,” he said brightly.

“Good morning,” she replied.

“Sit down,” he said, pulling out a chair for her. “Your breakfast is ready.”

Lois sat down, and as Clark put a plate and cup in front of her, she couldn't help but picture this as a foretaste of her life. Waking up to the quiet serenity of the farmhouse, having her breakfast served by a loving farmer.

It was a long way from the constant action, lurking danger, and intriguing subterfuge of the life of an agent. Did she want this? For most of her life, her answer would have resounded in the negative. Too quiet. Too dull. Too unchanging. Too unchallenging.

But now ... now the peace and tranquillity called to her. “Thanks,” she said, with a little smile to Clark.

He sat next to her, and they began to eat. “Do you still want to go to the beach today?” he asked.

His tone was casual, and he hadn't stopped eating to await her reply, but Lois could feel the tension inherent in his question. He really wanted to do it. “Yes,” she said. “I'm looking forward to it.”

That was putting it a little more positively than was strictly the case, but Clark's wide grin was ample reward for her slight exaggeration. “I know the perfect beach,” he said. “I used to go there a lot.”

“I didn't realise there were many beaches in Kansas.” Lois didn't season her comment with a smile, but Clark did.

“This one is in California,” he said. “It's not one of the main beaches — other people go there, but it's never crowded.”

Lois was ridiculously relieved that there wouldn't be many people. She didn't feel capable of dealing with crowds. “Sounds great,” she said.

Clark glanced at his watch. “It's still dark in California,” he said.

“So we have plenty of time before we need to leave.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I thought I'd go into Smallville.”

The muscles of her stomach constricted. Lois was sure that — in the manner of small towns — something of her encounter with Moyne had reached the ears of the local people. She didn't want to be pointed at; she didn't want to answer questions. She didn't even want to be there while they crowded around Clark. “Do you want me to come with you?” she asked.

“I didn't think you'd want to,” he said, his tone carefully neutral. He picked up his coffee and nonchalantly drank from it.

Lois was grateful for his understanding. “Will you be all right going by yourself?” she asked.

He looked at her then, over the top of his coffee. “I'll be fine,” he said. “I don't intend to stay for long. I'll go and pay what I owe Dave and buy some more food. I might visit the bank and maybe do a couple of other things, but I don't intend to be there any longer than is necessary.”

Lois nodded, and Clark quickly looked away, taking a swig of his coffee. He was hiding something. Nothing major, probably -

Then Lois realised. He was probably planning to buy something nice to take to the beach. Perhaps some Smallville speciality that he had particularly missed. “Are you sure you'll be all right?” she asked. “People might have a lot of questions. Even more now — since the incident with Moyne.”

“I'll be fine,” Clark said. He tweaked his glasses in a semi-nervous motion that told Lois he wasn't entirely sure he would be fine.

“I can come if you want me to,” she offered.

“No,” he said — just a fraction too quickly. He was definitely planning something. “Will you be OK being alone?”

She nodded.

“You know you only have to say my name. I'll hear you — even from Smallville.”

“I know,” she said. “Thanks.”

“Do you mind if I drive the Buick?”

“No. Of course not.”

“I changed the licence plate back,” he said with a small smile.

“Thanks.”

“I'll ... uhm ... just go upstairs quickly and then leave. Bye.”

There was a blur as Clark cleared away their breakfast, leaving only Lois's almost-finished cup of coffee.

“Bye,” she said, wondering if his haste was due to a desire to evade her questions.

After he'd gone, Lois poured herself another cup of coffee and climbed the stairs. She went into the front bedroom and stood at the window. From there, she watched Clark walk towards the Buick and slip into the driver's seat.

He looked great. He was wearing the pants he had worn during their ‘date’ in the cell and a white cotton shirt. There was nothing in his appearance to suggest he was anything other than a handsome young farmer, heading into town for supplies.

She could still feel his slight apprehension, though. Her admiration for him surged. Facing Smallville — its people, its questions, its scrutiny — was going to be a huge test

He had progressed far enough that he was willing to do it alone.

Lois watched the Buick until it was out of sight.

Then she went to her bag and took out her phone — she had a call to make.

Clark drove along the road towards Smallville. It was a route so familiar that he could have accurately described every detail — every turn, every slight dip in the road, every tree.

For seven years, he had thought he would never drive this road again. Never see it again. He rolled down the window and pulled the air deep into his lungs.

Yep — it still smelled the same.

About a mile from Smallville, he slowed the Buick. The closer he

got to the town, the more changes he noticed. There was a new house here ... and a new fence there ... and a row of trees that had grown from stringy saplings to bushy maturity. But the small changes in detail didn't lessen the feeling of familiarity.

The town hadn't changed much. He passed the cafe and used some extra vision to look inside. Maisie was there, clearing a table. There were people on the streets — a few faces he knew, older, but still fundamentally the same.

Clark pulled into a parking space between the bank and Dave's store and hesitated, trying to brace himself with a steadying breath. This was his home. This was his community. People who had known his parents. People who had known him since babyhood.

They were expecting Clark Kent — the person they had known for twenty-one years. Clark wasn't sure he could even be that person anymore, but to become whoever he was now, he was going to need these people.

He blew out another breath, opened the door of the Buick, and slid out. The sensation of being the focus of everyone's attention was strong, but somehow it didn't seem too intimidating. He shut the door and stepped onto the sidewalk, heading for Dave's store.

A man was walking the other way — someone who had been a few years ahead of Clark in school. They passed before Clark reached Dave's door. "Hi, Clark," he said. "Welcome home."

"Hi, Simon," Clark replied. His steps slowed as he waited to see if Simon wanted to talk, but the man simply smiled and continued walking.

That had been easier than Clark had feared.

He made it to Dave's store without having to interact more deeply than a few nods to people as they passed. He pushed open the door, and the oh-so-familiar bell tinkled above him.

Dave looked up from where he was stacking loaves of bread onto a shelf. His grin cracked open. "Clark!" he said. "It's great to see you again."

"Hi, Dave," Clark said. "Thanks for sending out the supplies with Donny."

"You're welcome," he said. He added another pair of loaves to the shelf. "Let me know if there's anything you can't find."

"Thanks."

Clark picked up a basket and began browsing the neatly arranged shelves. He tried to concentrate on what they would need, but he didn't manage to think of anything beyond the basics. He stopped at the fresh produce section and filled the basket with vegetables and fruit.

Dave met him at the counter. While he packed Clark's purchases into a box, he chatted about the weather and added a few snippets of town news.

"Don't forget the cost from the other day," Clark said as Dave finished.

"It adds up to seventy-one dollars and seventy-six cents," Dave said.

Clark opened his wallet and took out eighty dollars from the money he had earned making the trays.

As Dave handed over the change, he looked at Clark, and his grin faded. "We heard you had some trouble out at your place," he said. "Is your friend all right?"

"Yeah, some trouble," Clark said. "And my friend is doing OK."

"Nasty business," Dave said. "I'm so glad no one was hurt." He reached across and added a candy bar to Clark's box. "Take that home to her," he said. "Never known a woman who doesn't feel better with candy."

"Thanks," Clark said. "Thanks for everything."

"You're welcome," Dave said cheerily. "Have a great day."

Clark picked up the box. "Is there somewhere I could buy a computer?" he asked.

"Sure," Dave said. "Do you remember Marty Fowler? He has turned the front room of his house into a computer showroom. He sells all sorts of things — software, monitors, keyboards, cables, disks. He'll set you up."

"Thanks," Clark said. He opened the door and almost walked into Maisie.

"Clark!" she said as she reached up and hugged him despite the impediment of the box he was carrying. "It is so good to see you again. And would you believe I was talking about you only last week? How -"

"Maisie!" came Dave's sharp reminder.

Her eyes swung from Clark to Dave. When she looked back to Clark, her smile had sobered, but the welcome was still there in her eyes. "It's good to have you back," she said, patting his arm.

"Thanks, Maisie."

She move aside, and Clark stepped into the sunshine.

He put the box in the Buick and headed for the bank.

Lois punched the numbers into her cell phone and waited with growing anticipation.

"Mike Lane," came his voice.

"Uncle Mike," she said. "It's me, Lois."

"Lois," he said with evident pleasure. "How are you? It's great to hear from you."

"I'm good," Lois said, realising it wasn't a complete lie. "How's Dad?"

"He's doing so well, Lois," Uncle Mike said excitedly. "Since you took him that tray and the jigsaw puzzles, he's been making great progress. The therapists are teaching him a basic form of sign language that he can do with his good hand. I've been learning some, too, so I can understand him."

"Can he actually get across what he wants to say?" Lois asked.

"It's still a bit limited," Uncle Mike admitted. "But he learns new words every day."

"That's great," Lois said, feeling the tears spring to her eyes. She missed her dad. She couldn't imagine how wonderful it would be to communicate with him again.

Uncle Mike chuckled. "I hope you're calling to tell me that you're going to be here for lunch," he said.

"No," Lois said with real regret. "I can't, not today."

"OK, Lois love," he said. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Actually, there is," Lois said as she picked up a pen.

"Name it," he said.

"Remember you offered to teach me how to cook?"

"The offer is always open. When do we start?"

"I can't take lessons right now, but could I have your recipe for apple pie?"

"Sure," he said. "Do you have a pen?"

"Yep."

"OK," Uncle Mike said. "Start with the pastry. You need flour and ..."

Lois wrote down his instructions, questioning him on anything that wasn't clear.

"Make sure the oven's hot when you put it in," he finished. "Take it out when it's nicely browned on top. And serve with ice cream."

"Thanks," she said.

"Let me know how it turns out."

"I will," she said.

"It was great hearing from you, Lois love," he said. "Anytime you need another recipe, you know who to call."

"Thanks, Uncle Mike," Lois said. "Bye."

Lois put down her cell and read the recipe she had written. Then she folded it and put it safely in her bag. She slipped down the stairs and out the back door ...

... to the heavily laden apple trees she had seen in the distance — beyond the remnants of Martha Kent's vegetable garden.

An hour later, Lois had stashed a bucketful of apples in the back of the pantry, and Clark still wasn't home.

She didn't want to worry — not yet — but she could no longer ignore the tiny trickle of anxiety that was dripping through the back of

her brain. She stood at the bedroom window and waited for the first sight of him.

He would be all right. He was invulnerable, after all.

Actually, he wasn't. And she knew that better than anyone did. Sure, he was invulnerable physically when he was away from the horrible poison, but in other ways, he was so vulnerable.

And she had hurt him so much. In one sentence, one stupid decision, she had torn his heart from his chest and stomped all over it. But his strength — one of the first things she had noticed about him — had come to the fore again. She'd failed him — the one person he was supposed to be able to trust — and he had simply gotten on with doing what needed to be done. Helping her.

And he'd done it with such sincerity. Such earnestness. Such concern. It was as if he'd boldly entered her numb and darkened world, taken her hand, and shown her the path out of her prison.

Last night, she had told Clark that he was the most amazing person she had ever met. And he was. He didn't need the flying or the physical strength to be incredible. He just was — because he was Clark.

His capacity to forgive was huge. It had to be — he'd overcome the pain of the poison to speak up and stop her from killing Moyne. At the time, his goodness had only seemed to accentuate her wickedness, but now she realised how much she needed that capacity to forgive.

He would forgive her.

He would trust her again.

Because he was Clark.

The sound of a motor caused her head to jolt upwards. The hood of the Buick rounded the trees, and Lois smiled.

She watched as the car stopped, and Clark slid from the driver's seat. He opened the back door and leant forward. Lois gazed in appreciation.

Then, she could wait no longer. She exited the bedroom and almost skipped down the stairs — her legs, her body, her heart suddenly infused with energy.

Because Clark was home.

At the front door, she stalled. Clark needed consistency. He didn't need her to be morose one moment and elated the next.

She opened the door. Clark was approaching her, carrying a box. When he saw her, his smile came, full and hopeful. Lois gave him a restrained smile in return, and his smile escalated. "Hi," he said. "I'll just unpack this, and we can leave." He waited at the door for her to turn and walk in front of him to the kitchen.

"How did it go?" Lois asked as she crossed the living room.

Clark put the box on the kitchen table. Lois gave it no more than a passing glance. She was more interested in trying to read Clark's face. He seemed all right. Better than all right now that he had arrived home and found her at the door to greet him. "It was good," he said.

"Did they crowd around you? Ask a lot of questions?"

"No. Someone — probably Rachel — must have put the word out."

"Do they know about Moyne?"

He nodded. "Dave asked me if you were all right." Clark reached into the box and brought out a candy bar. "He sent this for you. He says candy always helps."

Lois took the bar and eyed Clark. "Dave? He doesn't even know me."

"He knows you're a friend of mine," Clark said as he began unpacking the box.

"Are you sure the candy wasn't your idea?"

"I'm sure," he said took a handful of items to the pantry. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I got the impression that you had some sort of plan for your time in Smallville. That you weren't really all that disappointed when I didn't want to go with you."

"I wouldn't push you into anything you didn't want to do."

"I know," she said. "But I thought there might be something else."

Clark took a moment to scrutinise her before returning to the

unpacking. "Do you have everything you need for California?"

She did. But there was something she needed to do first. Something more important. "Clark?"

His shoulders tensed in response to the seriousness of her tone. His head lifted slowly, and she saw him wide open and defenceless as he waited for her to speak.

Lois took the couple of steps needed to be within touching distance of him. "I can't promise you forever," she said. "But I don't want to leave you."

"Y..." He cleared his throat. "You don't *want* to leave?" he said. "Or you're not going to leave?"

"I'm not going to leave," Lois said. "Not today. Not tomorrow. Not anytime soon."

His wonderful smile appeared as his breath slowly released. "That's good," he said quietly. "That is so good."

Lois wasn't sure what reaction she had been expecting, but probably more than a smile and a few quiet words. Yet, somehow, it was fitting. They were back on the path of progress. Moyne's appearance had threatened them, but they were still together and still working through the issues that haunted them. Lois put her hand on the firm warmth of Clark's forearm and left it there for a second. Then, she broke away and reached into the box. Her hands landed on a bunch of spinach. "Where does this go?" she asked as she lifted it from the box.

"In the bottom of the fridge," Clark said absently. He took it from her and placed it on the table. He leant back against the counter and folded his arms across his chest. "You were right."

"About what?"

"I did have a reason I wanted to go into Smallville alone."

Lois scanned his face, searching for a clue that he was about to deliver bad news. "Why?" she asked quietly.

"I wanted to buy something for you," Clark said. "I *did* buy something for you, but then as I drove home, I realised that it could look as if I were trying to bribe you into staying, and I wasn't sure any longer." He cautiously met her eyes. "I haven't bought too many gifts for women."

Lois moved to him again — standing toe-to-toe, close enough that she could smell the freshness of the sunshine that clung to his clothes. "It won't look like a bribe now," she said. "I've already said I'm staying."

He nodded, but still didn't look sure.

"Clark, whatever it is, I'm sure I'll love it." She laid her fingers around his arm.

He looked down and stared at her hand. Lois started to lift it away, but his arms unfolded and his other hand landed on top of hers.

"You've stopped touching me," he said. "Since the morning in the motel when I insisted I wanted to look for work."

"I wasn't sure if it was helping," Lois said.

"I don't know if it helps either," Clark said. "But I know that I love it every single time you do it."

Lois felt regret wash over her. "I'm sorry," she said. "I lost sight of some things these past two days."

Clark shook his head. "I was just trying to be honest," he said. "I wasn't saying you should touch me ... just that I like it."

Lois smiled and gently tightened her grip on his arm. "Would you like me to guess what you bought?"

His expression brightened. "I'll give you three guesses," he offered with one of his most endearingly boyish grins.

"I'm guessing it isn't candy."

"No."

"Something else that is nice to eat? Something to take with us today?"

"No."

"Something girly? A ribbon to tie up my hair? Or a lace handkerchief?"

"No."

"Something practical? A new pair of shears so I can finish pruning

the front garden?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"A computer."

Her hand slid down his arm to clasp his hand. "A computer?"

"I think you need to rest," Clark said. "For days. Maybe even weeks. But eventually, you are going to want something to do. I figured maybe you could think about writing that Great American Novel of yours."

"You bought a computer?"

"Yeah." His smile came a little self-consciously. "I'm kind of hoping you will let me use it sometimes. Apparently, I can keep the farm accounts on there."

"Of course I will," Lois said, still feeling stunned. Clark had bought her a *computer*?

"And ..." He looked down to where their hands were joined. "And ... I'm going to need someone to help me catch up. My very limited knowledge of computers is probably obsolete by now."

"Of course I will help you."

"Thanks."

"Clark, that is an incredibly thoughtful gift," Lois said. "But ..."

"You're wondering how someone who's had one paying job in seven years can afford to buy a computer?"

"I know you would never do anything wrong," she said quickly.

"Wayne Irig worked the farm during the years I was away. When he came on Tuesday, he gave me the bank book he kept for the profits."

"And you used it for a computer for me?" Lois said in awe.

Clark lifted his broad shoulders a little and looked away.

Lois touched her hand to his cheek. "Thank you," she said.

His eyes crashed into hers, and she saw his hope that he'd done the right thing.

She smiled to reassure him. "Did you bring it home?" she asked.

"Or is it getting delivered?"

"It's in the car."

"Let's go and get it."

"OK." Clark straightened from where he'd hitched his butt on the counter, but Lois didn't move.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you so much."

"Let's go and get your computer," he said.

She still didn't release his hand. "There's something I need more than a computer," she said.

"What?"

"Hold me?"

Clark's arms spread wide, and Lois fell into the sanctuary of his broad chest. He closed around her, and his big, gentle hand cupped her head. She heard the steady beat of his heart and felt his warmth and love saturate her.

And she knew that everything was going to be all right.

Part 21

Twenty minutes later, empty boxes littered the floor of the living room, and the basics of the computer were arranged on the desk Clark had brought down from his bedroom.

"Marty offered to install the programs," he said. "But it was going to take a long time, and I wanted to get home. Can you do it?"

"I can probably work it out," Lois said as she picked up an instruction booklet.

"Do you want to do it now?" Clark asked. "Or shall we go to the beach?"

Lois checked her watch. "It's still really early in California," she said. "How about I stay here to work on this and you go and check out the beach? See if it's how you remember it?"

"Are you sure?"

"It will be easier to show you how it works when I have it set up," she said.

"OK."

"And Clark?"

"Uhhh?"

"Have you thought any more about looking for your mom?"

"I've thought about it," he said. "But I just don't know where to start."

Lois smiled. "Perhaps give me an hour here. Just ... look around. Enjoy the freedom of flying."

"Will you be all right?"

"I'll be fine."

"OK," he said, not really wanting to leave her but seeing nothing in her demeanour to imply she had slipped back into her melancholy of isolation. "I'll be back in an hour."

She glanced up from the booklet she was reading. "Enjoy flying," she said with another smile.

"Thanks." It didn't seem enough. He wanted something else.

Something more than a verbal farewell. A touch. A quick kiss to the top of her head, perhaps.

But Lois was concentrating on the book.

Clark walked away, feeling strangely empty but strangely full, too.

Just under an hour later, Clark arrived back at the farm and landed at the door. He opened it and called out, "Lois?" despite already knowing she was sitting in the living room at the computer.

"In here, Clark," she called back.

He smiled as gladness swept through him. Twice today, he'd come home to Lois, and it was definitely an experience he hoped would be repeated many times. He brushed a few drops of rain from his sweater as he crossed the kitchen.

"Hi," she said, standing from the chair and looking him up and down. "You're wet."

He swept across his clothes again. "Just a bit."

"It is raining?"

"Not yet. It probably will be in about ten minutes, though." He smiled. "But the weather in California is perfect."

Lois's smile was slightly subdued, but it was enough for him to realise how much he had missed it. "Did you look for your mom?" she asked.

Disappointment snaked through his good humour. "I didn't know where to look," he said. "The United States is so big ... and we don't even know for sure that she's still here."

Lois put her hand on his chest — which, Clark had to admit, was exactly what he'd been hoping she would do. "Did you try to listen for her heartbeat?"

"Yeah. I can do it when I know a heartbeat. I know yours. I can find yours easily through all the cacophony of other noise. But I didn't ever specifically listen to Mom's heartbeat."

Lois's fingers curled — just a small movement, but he felt it through his sweater. "What did you do?"

"I imagined there was a grid covering the country and started in the north-east and worked across the top."

"Looking? Listening?"

"Both. I adapted your suggestion and listened for her voice. I tried to hone in on the smallest detail of how she speaks."

"Nothing?" Lois said with sympathy vivid in her balmy brown eyes.

Clark shook his head. "No," he said. "But it would only work if she were actually speaking at the precise moment when I was listening."

Lois's soft smile pushed away his disappointment. "We'll keep looking," she said. "We won't stop until we've found her."

"Did you know that Scardino tried to find her?"

"No," she said with surprise. "I asked him to, but he said he couldn't find anything."

"He said there was wrong information right at the start." Clark felt his powerlessness wash through him. "They could have done anything to her," he said desperately.

Lois put her other hand on his chest. "She could be all right," she said, looking up into his eyes. "We don't know anything for sure."

There isn't any point in torturing yourself over the worst possibilities."

Clark nodded. "Scardino said he would keep investigating."

"Perhaps when things have settled a bit, we should go to Metropolis and talk to Scardino. If he really is willing to help, we could share information."

"Yeah," Clark agreed. "That's a good idea."

With another understanding smile, Lois stepped back from him, and her hands dropped from his body. "I got the computer working," she said.

"Is it ... Will it be all right for what you need? Marty said you would need a word processor."

"I've installed that. It has everything I need." She smiled at him again. "Thank you."

"Do you want to show it to me now?" Clark asked, hoping he didn't sound disinterested. He was interested, but the computer could be done later this evening. Right now, he wanted to take Lois to the beach.

"No," she said, moving back to the computer and shutting it down. "I want to go flying."

Clark grinned. "Me, too," he said.

"Give me five minutes to get changed."

Lois looked through her meagre supply of clothing, quickly realising there was nothing suitable for a day at the beach. She picked up the old pair of jeans she had pulled from the closet in her dad's home and scrutinised them critically. Opening the door, she said, "Clark?"

He opened the opposite door. "Yes?"

She held up her jeans. "Would you tear the legs off these, please?"

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. They're all I've got that is anything like beachwear."

"Would you like us to fly via Metropolis?" Clark offered. "We could go to your apartment."

"No, thanks," Lois said. "These will be fine."

"OK," he said. "How much do you want taken off?"

"Knee length?"

Clark held up the jeans and measured the length with his eyes. Two crisp ripping sounds later, he displayed her new 'shorts' for inspection.

"Thanks." Lois let her eyes travel down his body. He was wearing jeans and a tee shirt. "I'll be ready in two minutes," she said.

"I'm ready. I'll wait for you downstairs."

"You're wearing jeans to the beach?" Lois asked in surprise.

Clark looked down, and when he looked up, doubt had permeated his expression. "Is that all right?"

"Ah ... yeah," Lois replied. "You don't want to wear the shorts I got you?"

"Is that what you want me to wear?"

Lois smiled, hoping to reassure him. "You can wear whatever makes you feel comfortable," she said. "Thanks for the shorts." She walked back into her room and quickly changed into the torn-off jeans. She chose a tee shirt; its dark blue colour wasn't at all summery, but its neck was high enough to cover the healing scratches. She slipped her sandals onto her feet, picked up her bag, and went down the stairs to meet Clark.

He was still wearing his jeans, but she noticed that he'd exchanged his sneakers for a pair of black flip-flops.

"Let's go," Lois said. "If we leave now, we should avoid that rain."

They walked out of the door — which Clark locked — then he lifted her into his arms, and they rose into the darkening sky.

Twenty minutes later, after a leisurely flight across the continent, Clark landed them behind a sand dune. He lowered Lois to her feet, reluctantly releasing her from his arms.

She had barely spoken as they had flown, and Clark had checked her anxiously, hoping her quietness was due to being engrossed in the sensation of flying rather than anything ominous.

He looked at her now and smiled. She smiled back — not effusively, but still a smile, and still enough to cause his heart to ricochet around his chest. "Are you feeling OK?" he asked. "You were very quiet."

"I'm feeling OK," she said. "I was thinking. A walk along the beach is exactly what I need."

"Perhaps it's what we both need," Clark said, wondering if she would expound on her thoughts. He nodded towards the ocean. "This way?"

"Yep."

He stifled the impulse to reach for her hand, but deliberately refrained from burying his hands in his pockets, letting them dangle by his side — just in case her hand brushed against his.

They reached the belt of sand that stretched in both directions. A few people were scattered on the beach, and a couple of hardy surfers were riding the waves.

"Which way?" Clark asked.

Lois looked left. Then she looked right. Clark awaited her decision. "Right," she replied.

He turned right and took a step.

"Wait," Lois said.

Clark stopped.

"I thought you said you liked walking barefoot along the beach." She bent low, slipped off her sandals, and put them in her bag.

Clark pulled his flip-flops from his feet. The sand was warm and crunchy. He wriggled his toes, burrowing them into the golden grains. Lois probably saw him do it, because when he looked into her face, she was grinning at him. She began walking — taking a diagonal route that took them closer to the water.

When they reached the indistinct border between the loose sand and the slightly damp rim of the water's reach, Lois veered slightly so they walked parallel to the ocean. Clark breathed the salty air deep into his lungs and listened to the muted pulse of the waves and the squeaky tempo of their footsteps. The breeze skipped over the water and lingered in Lois's hair, separating strands and positioning them slantwise against the swinging drape.

If he concentrated, he could hear the swish-swish as it brushed against her shoulders in harmony with her stride.

Her head turned to him, and her hand lifted in an attempt to restore some order. "I should have tied back my hair," she said.

"No," Clark said — too sharply. He gave her a smile. "No," he said more softly. "I like watching the wind play with your hair."

She lowered her hand. "It will be knotty later."

He could tell from her smile that she didn't mind. "Do you still have that de-tangling spray?"

"Yes."

"Would you allow me to comb out your hair tonight?"

She nodded. "I'd like that."

Clark returned his focus forward as his heart overflowed with hope and promise and optimism and exuberant joy. There was so much that he'd thought could never be his again. So much that Lois had returned to him.

Freedom.

The touch of the sun on his face.

The vastness of the distant horizon.

And the privilege of a having a beautiful woman to walk by his side.

Only one thing was missing. Clark folded his fingers into a fist, wishing Lois's hand were in his.

When she had first come into the cell, he had diligently avoided any contact between them. Mostly, that had been because he hadn't wanted to scare her. But also, after seven years of isolation, just the thought of touch had seemed intimidating in the extreme.

But she had found ways to dissolve his barriers. The hair-washing. Her total acceptance when he had sliced through his uncertainties and in the heat of the moment, taken her foot into his hand and tried to massage away the pain after she had sprained her ankle.

And since then, she had given him dozens of little touches. She had done it so naturally — as if, for her, it was no big deal.

For him, it had been monumental.

He still cringed at the thought of anyone else touching him. Shaking hands — briefly — he could tolerate. Anything more personal than that, and his instinct to shrink back was overwhelming.

But Lois — her touch had become like a drug.

He was addicted.

And the desire to hold her hand was so strong he could feel it prickling his palm.

He risked a sideways glance. She was looking ahead — slightly turned away from him as she stared at the blue horizon. His eyes slid down her shoulder and along her arm to her hand.

Did he dare ask her?

Or should he gently slide his hand into hers?

No, he shouldn't do that. He couldn't impose. They had held hands before. But then Moyne had come.

"Lois?" His voice sounded as if he had a thick cord wrapped around his throat.

She looked up at him, and her slight smile suggested she hadn't noticed anything amiss. But now that his moment had come, he faltered. "The ... ah ... the ..." He stopped. Lois deserved more than the sham of pretending he had been going to make a comment about the scenery. "Would you ... would you mind ... would you like to ... hold my hand?"

Her expression had become progressively more perplexed as he had stammered his way through his question, but when he did finally get to the end, her face cleared, and she gave him a little smile. She didn't reply, but her hand slid into his.

Clark's fingers tightened around her hand.

Now, the day was perfect.

The warmth from Clark's hand seeped up Lois's arm. She smiled inside as she recalled his request. Moyne's invasion had definitely devoured some of their hard-won progress.

But perhaps that wasn't such a bad thing. Perhaps overcoming it together would work durability into their relationship.

Clark had bought her a computer. She hadn't asked how extensively it had eaten into his funds, but to buy it before she had said she would stay was a significant risk.

Or a huge statement of faith.

Clark believed in them. Believed in their future together.

For so long, he hadn't been sure. For a whole range of reasons, he hadn't been able to trust that they would be able to withstand the tests he feared would come. But a major test had come — and despite the initial snags, they had survived.

Moyne's attack had shifted something in their relationship. It had made her the vulnerable one and Clark the strong one. It certainly wasn't the way she would have chosen to demonstrate to him that he could be what she needed, but it had seemed to work.

And as for her ... during the past two days, she had given a lot of thought to many things. She no longer felt overwrought with confusion, but from the chaos, one thing had become patently clear.

"Clark?"

He looked down at her, his brown eyes warm and his hair tousled by the breeze. "Yes?"

"These past two days ... I've done a lot of thinking ... and I've made a decision."

Some of the colour drained from his cheeks. "About what?" he asked.

She squeezed his hand to reassure him. "About the future. About my future."

"OK."

Lois hurried to explain. "After my leave is over in three months, I'm going to resign from the agency," she said. She had wondered if vocalising it would bring second thoughts; it didn't.

Clark nodded. Lois got the impression he hadn't thought about the

specifics of her job.

"I don't want to do it anymore," she said.

"Why?" he asked softly.

"Because I lost my partner. I can't imagine wanting to work with anyone else. I don't want to put the time into getting to know a new partner. My life has moved on."

"OK." She could see Clark wasn't really sure how to respond.

"I haven't decided what I want to do," Lois said. "But I figure I'll give that novel a try and see what happens."

"I ... I have wondered what you could do in Smallville," Clark said.

"Is that why you bought the computer?"

He shrugged a little. "One of the reasons," he said, sounding uncomfortable discussing his gift. "I wanted to give you something that interested you. And I figured that the good thing about writing is that you can do it anywhere."

"It was a sweet thing to do," Lois said.

He looked relieved, but quickly added, "It doesn't mean we have to stay in Smallville."

She could leave it there. But there was more. And she owed it to Clark to tell him. Owed it to herself to stop evading the truth. "I ... I can't be an agent anymore. I can't risk it happening again."

She'd expected Clark to ask for clarification, but his only response was a gentle squeeze of her hand. After a few more steps through the sand, he said, "Lois, you shouldn't feel responsible for anything that happened with Moyne."

"Yes, I should," she retorted. "I made a mistake. A mistake that could have resulted in a lot of trouble. It didn't — thanks to you."

"I don't think you would have killed him," Clark said with quiet certainty.

"I think I would have," Lois said, swallowing down the bile that wanted to rise into her throat. "But it doesn't matter now. I don't intend ever putting myself in that position again." The certainty she felt about this decision was exhilarating. Liberating. "Have you decided what you'd like to do? Long-term?"

"Yes."

His confidence surprised her. "Would you like to tell me?"

"I would like to stay on the farm," Clark replied. "I would like to work it. To fulfil its potential. To have it ready for when Mom comes home."

"You don't want to finish college? Become a journalist?"

"No," he said. "If my father has passed away, I want to be there for my mom."

"I think that's a lovely idea."

"I would like to stay on the farm," Clark said. "But if you're unhappy there ..." He gazed solemnly into her eyes. "More than anything, I want to be with you, Lois. And if that happens, I don't really mind where I live."

She smiled. "I did notice how naturally you slipped into the Farmer Kent persona."

He smiled, too. "It felt good."

"It looked good," Lois said, lacing her comment with a definite tinge of appreciation. Clark cleared his throat, and she decided to change the subject. "Do you mind if we talk about what happened with Moyne?"

"If that's what you want to do," Clark said, looking surprised.

"When did you come in?"

He looked ahead. His mouth moved as if he were about to answer, but no words came.

"When?" Lois said, feeling curious now.

"About the time you crunched your knee into his groin," Clark said with just a trace of a grimace. "That ... that was a nice move."

"Yeah," Lois said. "And I know that ... after everything that happened, and now he's dead and everything ... I probably shouldn't, but I have to admit, that looking back ... I ... I don't feel much sympathy for him."

Clark nodded slowly, and then a shadow of his smile surfaced.

“Admit it,” he said. “Moyné deserved it.”

Lois tried to rein in her responding smile. “The man’s dead,” she reminded both of them. She half smiled. “But yes, it would have hurt him, and I can’t be sorry about that. He had it coming.”

“You shouldn’t feel bad about anything that happened with Moyné,” Clark said gravely. “You did nothing wrong.”

“Why did you come back?” Lois asked. “Did you hear something? My heartbeat?”

“I heard your elevated heart rate. So I came.”

“And walked straight into the poison.”

“I saw it,” Clark said. “I knew it was in his pocket. I looked when I was a long way from the farmhouse.”

“But you still came.”

It hadn’t been a question, but Clark answered. “Yeah, I came.”

“I was trying to work out how I could warn you. But I knew that you would come, no matter what I did.”

“Uh huh.”

“I’m really sorry you got exposed to the stuff again,” Lois said.

“But I’m so glad you came. I needed you.”

“I will always come when you need me,” Clark said.

“I know that.”

“Lois?”

She knew from his tone that he wasn’t sure about whatever he wanted to say. She smiled up to him to encourage him. “Yes?”

“Would you mind telling me what happened before I arrived? You don’t have to, but -”

“What would you like to know?”

“What did he do to you?”

“He didn’t *do* much,” Lois said. “He threatened to rape me. I tried to scramble off the bed, and he landed on my back. That’s when ...” She stopped as more of the foggy air cleared. “That’s when I got the bump on my head.”

“What did he do?” Clark asked in a strained voice.

“He didn’t do it,” Lois said. “I did.”

“How could you have hurt your own head?”

“He was on top of me. I threw my head back and smashed it into his face. That’s when he started bleeding.”

“When ... when did he make the scratches?”

There was anger simmering through Clark’s question. Lois leant towards him and rested her cheek against his arm for a few steps.

“They happened as I lunged back into his face.”

Clark frowned.

“The ends of the scratches are as low as he got,” she said so that Clark didn’t have to ask. “He was repositioning himself to reach lower, and that’s when I made my move.”

Clark said nothing for a few steps. “You were amazing.”

Except I almost killed him, she thought. I went too far. I lost control. When she looked up, Clark’s eyes were trained on her face.

“Where you see a lapse, I see the compulsion to right wrongs,” he said gravely. “Where you see a mistake, I see the desperation to prevail in the midst of a horrifying situation. Where you see a failing, I see the sort of strength that makes me in awe of you.”

Lois felt her eyes bud with tears. But they were sweet tears, lured by Clark’s words, but even more by the way he had taken something she had given him and turned it into a gift for her.

She glanced up to him with a wobbly smile.

He smiled back.

They fell silent, and the warmth from Clark’s hand soaked into her heart. His grip was so characteristic of the man. Immeasurably strong yet infinitely gentle.

Stark realisation hit her with the force of a crashing wave.

If Scardino had destroyed all of the poison, Clark was the most powerful being on the planet. Nothing could match his strength. No one could challenge his domination.

With anyone else, that would be a terrifying thought. With anyone else, there would be the fear that the power could be corrupted into an amoral grab for self-gain. But Clark ... Clark had proven himself

when he had begged that she spare Moyné’s life.

However Clark chose to use his powers, humanity could only benefit from his presence on Earth.

She glanced up to him, wondering if he’d even begun to consider the possibilities. He could be anything. He could be a champion of the weak, a defender of the helpless, a beacon for the lost, a saviour for those in peril.

A hero.

Clark turned to her and smiled. “What are you thinking?” he asked.

“I’m just wondering where all this will end,” she said.

He stopped walking and turned to face her. “I don’t mind where it ends,” he said. “All I want is that when we get there, I’m still with you.”

That was all she wanted, too. Lois shuffled forward in the sand, slipped her arms around his waist, and laid her head on his shoulder.

Perhaps Clark hadn’t even begun to think about how he could make a difference in the world.

But she had.

And whatever he chose, Lois knew one thing.

He was going to need her.

Almost as much as she needed him.

Clark curved his arms around Lois’s sun-warmed body.

He sensed something new in her. Something steadying and full of purpose.

Perhaps it was the beginning of healing. The dawn of a new stage in her life.

He hoped it was.

She had included him. She had told him of her decisions. She had told him about the time with Moyné.

She had talked of a future. Their future.

For so long, a future had been something that was so impossibly out of reach, he hadn’t given it much thought. But now, everything had changed. There was every reason to believe he would have a future.

He couldn’t even begin to envision what it would entail.

But Lois was with him.

And nothing else mattered.

Part 22

Lois and Clark ate at an outside table of the moderately busy cafe they found at the end of their walk along the beach.

The food was good. The atmosphere was relaxed. The weather was sublime.

But for Lois, nothing could match the glow of satisfaction she felt that Clark hadn’t hesitated when she’d suggested they join the twenty or so other people already eating.

The waiter had directed them to a vacant table near the fringe of the cluster of diners. After pulling out her chair and waiting for her to be seated, Clark had perused the menu, inquired what Lois would like, and then interacted with the waiter when he returned to take their order.

Their meals arrived, and as they ate, they talked of normal, everyday things. The farm. The flower garden. The new computer. Clark’s trip to Smallville that morning.

When they finished eating, he paid for their meals.

Lois figured they looked exactly like a normal couple relishing the casual ambience and Californian sunshine.

As they walked back to the beach, Clark slipped his hand into hers. That felt normal, too. Lois looked up, saw the unspoken question in his eyes, and smiled her consent.

Clark grinned, and it was so full of contentment that her heart skipped in response.

They walked back along the beach, blithely ignoring the fact that when you travel by alien-powered superflight there is no necessity to arrive and depart from the same point.

The shallow waves billowed up the sand, glittering with sunlit stars and beckoning Lois to join in their game. She began inching

towards the water's edge — through the darkened dampness where land and ocean met. The next wave scurried to greet her, bubbling across her toes.

Lois chuckled. The water was cold, but invigorating. She glanced up at Clark. "Do you want to roll up your jeans?" she asked. "We could go in a little way."

"Ah ..."

"If you're worried about splashes, you could take off your shirt," Lois said, her enthusiasm gaining momentum with every word. "We'll leave a little pile on the dry sand. My bag and our shoes -"

"No, Lois."

The sharpness of his reply stalled her, planting her feet in the sand and fastening her gaze on Clark. His expression was closed as he stood, poised between trepidation and resolve. Lois reached out and hooked her hand on his bare elbow. "OK," she said with all the softness she could muster. "I'm not forcing you to do anything."

His eyes dived to the ground. Lois felt his muscle twitch and noticed that his fist had balled into a tight cone of misgiving.

"It's OK," she said. Her thumb glided across the bulge of his bicep muscle. "It's OK."

His head lifted, and his eyes met hers. "Sorry," he mumbled.

"What did I do wrong?"

"You didn't do anything wrong," he said grimly.

"OK," Lois said. "But I said something that upset you. Was it that I suggested going into the water? Was it leaving our clothes in a pile? Was it taking off your shirt? Are you worried about scars?"

"I don't have any scars."

Not physical ones, perhaps. Lois lifted her hand and laid it on the curve where his neck met his shoulder. His underlying muscle felt like hardened steel. She stretched out her thumb and slid it along his jaw. "We're in this together, Clark," she said. "But I don't know what happened just then."

"I ... I don't want to talk about it. I don't even want to think about it."

"You don't have to give me any details. Just give me a hint about what is troubling you. So I know for next time."

"Wearing ... " He gulped so loudly that Lois winced. "... being allowed to wear clothes ... " His eyes lurched to hers, pleading for her understanding.

Lois recalled her earliest conversation with Scardino. He had said that when the alien had been shot, the bullet had ricocheted off him. Lois had asked if he'd been wearing a vest, and the reply had been that he'd been naked. "I'm sorry," she whispered. Her thumb continued its slow pendulum passage along Clark's jaw line.

"You didn't do anything wrong. It's me. I ... " He lifted his hands in frustration. "It's me. It's ..."

She slid her hand along his shoulder, down his arm, and into his hand. "Let's walk, shall we?" she suggested with a smile.

He nodded miserably, and they began walking again. Regret bulldozed trails of turmoil through Lois's thoughts. Should she say nothing more, or should she try to mend what she'd broken? "Clark?" she said.

"Uhm?"

"If what happened had been reversed ... If you'd unwittingly said something that made me uncomfortable, would you be thinking any less of me?"

"Of course not," Clark said quickly. "I'd be berating myself for what I'd said."

"Which is exactly what I'm doing right now."

He stopped abruptly and turned to her. "No, Lois," he said. "That wasn't your fault. You suggested something completely reasonable — it's me. I just can't ... forget."

"It's all right," Lois said. "I understand something I hadn't realised before. No harm done."

"You ... you must think I behaved like an idiot."

"I think your level of normalcy is nothing short of incredible. There is no one I admire more than you."

To her relief, Lois saw a tiny twinkle birth in Clark's eyes, thawing the edge of his despondency. "There is no one I admire more than you," he said.

She chuckled and squeezed his hand. "Let's walk along the beach."

They set out again. "Lois?" Clark said. "Do you have any thoughts about what you'd like to do now?"

"Yes, I do," she said, speaking as the idea formed in her mind.

"What?"

"Would you fly me to Metropolis, please?"

"Sure," Clark said. "Do you want to visit your father?"

"Not today. Soon, but not today."

"What would you like to do?"

"Would you mind moving all of my stuff to Smallville?"

"All of your stuff?"

"Yeah. And I'll give up my lease on the apartment."

"Lois -"

"If there isn't room in the farmhouse, perhaps we could store some of it in the barn."

"But Lois ..."

"Do you mind?"

"Of course I don't mind, but it seems such a drastic step," Clark said. "You should be sure before you give up your apartment."

"You're wondering what happens if I change my mind."

"Yes. No." He shrugged as a small smile lifted his mouth. "I just don't want you to do anything you might regret."

"You're right," Lois said. "I still have over a month left on the lease. If we keep the apartment, we'll have somewhere to stay if we visit Dad — not that getting home to Smallville is particularly difficult or time-consuming ..."

"I can easily take your things to Smallville," Clark said. "You need more clothes. And you must have other possessions you'd like to have with you."

"I don't have much. My lifestyle wasn't conducive to collecting stuff."

"Would you like to go now?"

"Yeah," she replied. "If you've had enough of the beach."

Clark stopped walking, faced her, and put both hands lightly on her shoulders. "I really enjoyed it," he said. "Would you come with me again sometime?"

She nodded. "I really enjoyed it, too. We can come back anytime."

Clark glanced around. "Let's go somewhere a little less obvious," he said.

"Good idea." Before moving off, she smiled.

Clark smiled back.

And inside, Lois breathed a sigh of relief.

Clark waited in the corridor as Lois pushed the key into the door of her apartment.

He felt ... He wasn't sure how he felt. Almost as if he were intruding somewhere he didn't belong ... although that was clearly absurd.

Perhaps it was the lingering embarrassment from his irrational behaviour at the beach.

All Lois had suggested was that he roll up the legs of his jeans and paddle with her in the water. He'd reacted without thought. But Clark knew that even if he'd taken the time to consider her idea, he couldn't have done as she'd asked.

Clothes made him feel safe. Camouflaged. Normal.

Being out in public ... where people could look at him ... stare at him ... where he felt like an oddity — the clothing gave him the illusion of being able to blend in. To give up that protection ...

It was patently ridiculous.

He didn't carry the marks of imprisonment on his body.

His alien-ness wasn't discernible whether he was clothed or not.

The door swung open, and Lois entered her apartment. Clark followed. It looked as if she were still in the process of unpacking ...

as if she had never really settled here. It felt impersonal and barren — not like a home at all. He wondered if it held any sentimentality to Lois. Probably not, he realised.

“How much can you take?” she asked.

“Weight? I’ve never found anything I can’t lift.”

Lois scanned the room. She stopped at the hutch. “So if I were to pack that with all of my clothes and anything else I want into that, you could simply pick up the whole thing and take it to Smallville?”

Clark nodded. “Do you mind if I remove your window? I’ll put it back.”

Lois gasped. “You’re going to take it out of the window?”

“That will be less conspicuous than taking off from the street.”

Lois giggled suddenly. “Or carrying it out of the front door.”

Clark smiled. “Would you like to pack it yourself? Or would you like to tell me what you want, and I’ll do it in a few seconds?”

“Everything needs sorting,” Lois said. “I don’t want some of it anymore.”

“Is the hutch empty?”

Lois walked over to it and checked through all the cupboards and drawers. “Yeah,” she said. “I never got around to unpacking properly.”

“You could make two piles,” Clark said. “The things you want in the hutch and the things to be thrown into the trash.”

Lois nodded. “I’ll be a lot slower than you.”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“Would you mind doing something for me?”

“Of course not.”

“I’d love a cup of coffee,” Lois said. She walked to the window and pointed out of it. “There’s a street stall on the corner of that street and the one to the north. They have great coffee. Would you mind?”

“Latte?” Clark said. “Cappuccino? Mocha?”

“Latte,” Lois said. “Thanks.”

“I’ll be back soon.”

Lois grinned suddenly. “Are you going out of the door? Or the window?”

Her amusement melted away some of his mortification. “The door,” he said.

“OK,” she said, still grinning. “See you soon.”

Lois stared into the bathroom mirror, searching it for inspiration.

Or if not inspiration, at least the ability to make the right decision.

The remainder of the day had gone well. She and Clark had worked together to clear out most of her possessions from her apartment. They’d left the bed there; they didn’t need it at the farmhouse — not until Martha Kent returned home — and it would be useful if they did decide to spend a night in Metropolis.

After Clark had brought everything to the farmhouse, he had returned for her, and they had flown back to Smallville. Clark had gone out to do the chores and then prepared dinner for them while Lois had packed her clothes into the closet in Clark’s parents’ bedroom.

They had eaten together and discussed a few things, but both had been careful to avoid the incident at the beach.

The memory of it was caught like a thorn in Lois’s mind.

They had spent the evening at the computer as she had begun introducing Clark to the technology of the mid-nineties. He’d caught on quickly, and it felt as if they’d achieved a lot.

But through it all, her mind had been preoccupied with how she could help Clark overcome the damage inflicted in the cell. She knew enough about Moyné to realise there were probably good reasons why Clark had responded the way he had.

She understood why — but that didn’t mean she was willing to accept it as a situation that couldn’t be changed.

She had a plan.

But it was a plan that came with a whole raft of risks — risks that even someone as impulsive as Lois Lane couldn’t fail to recognise.

What if Clark didn’t respond in the way she hoped?

What if she became paralysed by memories of Moyné? Or Ivica? She couldn’t begin if there was any possibility of not being able to

continue.

But the truth was — despite all of her uncertainty — she wanted to do it.

If it worked, it could be the beginning of Clark breaking free from the hold that Moyné still had on his life.

If it didn’t work ... Lois didn’t even want to think about that.

The face in the mirror looked just as indecisive as she felt.

What should she do?

Clark was already in the bed that they had been sharing. He’d asked — as he always did — where she would like him to sleep. She had replied without any thought. She wanted to be with him.

For a whole variety of reasons.

And now ... Now, she had to go into the bedroom and make a choice. To either slide into the bed beside Clark, bid him goodnight and go to sleep. Or to try to implement the plan that had been slowly materialising in her mind.

What should she do?

She turned away from the mirror and picked up her clothes, still undecided.

She opened the bathroom door, still undecided.

She entered the bedroom, saw Clark in the bed, and made her decision.

She would do it.

Clark watched as Lois put away her clothes.

He still found it almost impossible to believe that she chose to sleep in a bed with him.

He pulled back the covers for her. She walked over, but instead of lying down, she sat cross-legged on the sheet.

Clark sensed her purposefulness and sat up, leaning back into the headboard. “Are you all right?” he asked.

She nodded.

“You want to talk?”

“Yes, I do.”

His heart sank. She would want to talk about what had happened at the beach today. He’d hoped — rather vacuously — she would forget the incident. Or at least refrain from mentioning it until after he had managed to construct a defence that sounded remotely reasonable.

He still had nothing. He still had no way to explain the overwhelming need to avoid being exposed. But Lois was sitting next to him — the expression on her face declaring she intended to talk — and he knew there was no way out. “I think I know what this is about,” Clark said dejectedly.

Lois picked at her fingernail, and the thought struck him that she wasn’t entirely relaxed about this either. “I don’t think you do,” she said.

“Do you want to ask me a question?” Clark said. “Or tell me something?”

“I want to tell you something. Something I realised.”

That surprised him. “Go on.”

Lois looked up and looped her hair behind her ear. “After Linda was murdered, I didn’t grieve properly,” she said. “I couldn’t really. In order to survive, I had to run and hide and steal. I couldn’t think about it ... I had to plan what I was going to do. I had to keep my mind free to think quickly. I couldn’t allow myself to sleep soundly ... The nightmares didn’t start until I got home.”

Clark coasted his hand over the sheet, palm up. Lois laid her hand in his.

“They debriefed me and forced me to have counselling, but I didn’t allow anything to reach inside me ... to touch where I was really hurting,” Lois said. “I was adamant that I was OK. I demanded to be allowed to return to work. People offered to help, but I refused. I couldn’t accept that there was anything wrong. I couldn’t accept that Linda really was dead. I didn’t want to believe it. I didn’t want to talk about it. I wouldn’t allow myself to think about it.”

She looked up from where she had been staring at the junction of their hands.

“But then Moyne came here ... and afterwards, I just dissolved into a mess. What Moyne did to me was nothing compared with what Ivica did to Linda. Nothing. Yet that time, I coped, and this time, I disintegrated.”

“I think it compounded,” Clark said quietly.

“Maybe,” Lois said. “But I think there was another — much more important — factor.”

“Being?”

“You,” Lois said. “The difference is you. After Linda’s death, I didn’t have you. I didn’t have anyone I trusted enough to allow my control to slip. This time, you were here. This time, I could afford to grieve. I didn’t have to keep it all locked away ... because you were here ... and I know that when I’m with you, I’m safe.”

Clark felt elation tingle through him with the effervescence of soda. “Lois,” he said, and his voice cracked. “Lois, I’m so glad you feel like that.”

“I’m safe with you Clark,” she said. “You being here gave me the freedom to let go. I could allow my deepest hurts and my greatest insecurities to show. It wasn’t a conscious decision, but on some deep, profound level, I knew. Last time, I was so scared. So scared that if I didn’t hold on, I would be swept away. But this time, I knew you were here. I knew I didn’t have to be alone. I knew that if I fell, you would catch me; if I slipped, you would hold me.”

Clark was too overwhelmed for speech. He just hoped that Lois realised she had paid him the greatest compliment of his life.

She smiled softly. “And now, I’m going to ask you to do something for me.”

Clark tried not to grip her hand tighter. “What?”

Lois stood from the bed and crossed to the door. She shut it. And they were alone. In a closed-off room.

She walked back to the bed and settled on the edge. “I want you to trust me,” she said. “I want you to know that you’re safe with me.”

“Lois, I -”

“I won’t ask you to do anything that is too difficult,” she said. “We will take this slowly.”

Clark desperately tried to moisten his parched mouth. “What ... what do you want me to do?”

“I want you to take off your shirt.”

“Lois, I -”

“That’s all I’m going to ask. Just that you take off your shirt. Nothing else. And I want you to lie on the bed, face down.”

Clark paused.

“It’s only us here,” Lois said softly. “Just you and me. We are safe with each other. We can trust each other. I won’t do anything to hurt you.”

“I ... I know that ... but ...”

Lois smiled. “Just take off your shirt, Clark,” she said. “That’s all you have to do.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to claim back some of the things Moyne and Trask stole from you.”

“H... How?”

“I’m going to rub your back. Just your back. Nothing more. I’m not going to touch you in any way that is intimidating. I’m just going to remind you that touch can be a beautiful thing.”

“Lois,” he said, feeling desperately cornered. “Lois, I know this is silly. I know I should have just taken off my shirt today at the beach. I don’t know why I didn’t. I -”

“Just take off your shirt, Clark,” Lois said. “For the past two days, I’ve let you see the depths of my pain. I knew I could trust you. Now, I want you to trust me.”

Clark discharged a pent-up breath as he straightened from the headboard. He clasped the hem of his tee shirt.

“Do you want me to look away?” Lois asked.

Instead of answering, Clark quickly slipped the shirt from his body and rolled over onto his stomach, his upper body perched high on his elbows as he stared ahead.

Waiting.

Lois gazed at the expanse of Clark’s back, remembering when it had been marred by open wounds and discoloured by bruises.

It was clear now. Clear. Perfect. Smooth.

Broad of width, silky of skin, tight of muscle.

Lois shuffled closer to him on the bed. She decided not to inquire if he were all right; she could see the tension pulling through his shoulders.

She needed a place to start. His hair, she decided. That’s where they had started in the cell.

She leaned forward and put her spread-out fingers at the top of his head. He didn’t flinch. Very slowly, she drew her fingers through his hair and down the back of his head. She lifted her hands and repeated the movement. This time, when she reached his shoulders, she separated her hands, one to each shoulder. Her thumbs lay along his hairline, and her fingers shaped to the ridge of his shoulders.

She pushed her thumbs back and forward across his neck, edging downwards, traversing the slightly rounded bumps of his spine. After reaching the natural dip in his back, she worked up again — this time pressing just a little deeper into the balls of muscles. Her thumbs reached his hairline, and she turned her hands so that the pads of her fingers climbed the sides of his neck. She reached the soft skin under his ears and lovingly caressed it with the tips of her fingers. She inched forward, past the border of his facial hair and into the slightly textured skin of a man who hadn’t shaved for a few hours.

From there, she retreated, laying her palms on his neck and then continuing the fuller contact as she skimmed lightly down the length of his back, one hand on each side of the valley of his spine. She pulled up a couple of inches before reaching the waistband of his sweatpants, and her eyes lingered for a few seconds on the tantalising shape of his butt.

Sudden movement grabbed her attention, and her head snapped sideways. Clark’s elbows had splayed outwards as his upper body dropped lightly onto the pillow, his head turned sideways.

Lois smiled as she swept up the length of his spine again. Upon reaching the top, she began a meticulous journey down the rib-tiered slopes of his back, venturing as far as the curves of his sides, but always returning to his spine.

Gradually, his muscles loosened under her touch. His shoulders sagged forward, and their magnificent definition muted a little.

This time when she reached the nadir of his waist, she twisted her hands and began working up the small distance to the top of his sweatpants. She continued right to them, not varying her rhythm. As her fingertips touched the material, she spread her hands and began long, slow strokes up and down the plains of his back.

After several sweeps, she stopped at his neck and burrowed her fingers into his hair. She thoroughly massaged the top and side of his head, noticing that his eyes had closed. She placed her hands on his cheeks and gently lifted, turning his head to expose the other side.

She continued massaging, tracing little patterns through the dark locks and watching as his hair parted and swayed at her bidding.

Deciding she had done enough for the first step of her plan, Lois leant forward to touch the lightest of kisses into his hair. Before he could respond, she wriggled from the bed. She picked up his discarded tee shirt and put it next to him, smiling when their eyes met.

Lois crossed the floor to turn off the light but didn’t open the door. When she returned to the bed, she slipped in beside him. “Goodnight, Clark,” she said nonchalantly.

“Good -” He cleared his throat. “Goodnight, Lois.” There was silence for a couple of breaths, and then he spoke again. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she said. “We’ll do more tomorrow night.”

He didn’t say anything. Lois smiled in the darkness. Step One had been successfully negotiated.

Clark’s back tingled with memories of Lois. He’d known pain. Intense pain.

But this ...

This was just as intense.

Just as able to reach into the depths of his soul.

Her touch had spoken so eloquently.

Never had Clark felt so loved.

So accepted.

She'd said they would continue tomorrow.

What was she planning?

His back again? Or some other part of his body?

Taking off his shirt had been difficult. His aversion was nonsensical. She had already seen his upper body. She'd probably seen a whole lot more than that before he'd realised there was a woman in the vicinity and had taken measures to uphold what little modesty had been available to him.

But to willingly undress ... To force himself to remove his shirt — that had been difficult.

What would she ask of him tomorrow night?

Was this a two-night plan? Or an every-night-for-two-weeks plan?

How much further would she go?

“Clark?”

He jolted at the sudden sound of her voice as it carved through his thoughts. “Yes, Lois?”

“Stop obsessing.”

“I ... I thought you were asleep.”

“I was. Almost. But I can hear the turmoil chewing up your brain cells. Relax.”

That was easy for her to say. “Sorry.”

She chuckled. “Will you take me to visit my dad tomorrow, please?”

“Of course I will,” he said, glad that she felt well enough to want to plan ahead.

“Thanks.”

Now that they were on the subject of tomorrow ... “H...Have you decided what you're going to do tomorrow night?”

“Not completely. I have a few ideas.”

“Ideas?” he said, hoping desperately that she would elaborate.

“Yeah. I thought I'd start by giving you the opportunity to ask any question you like. Anything. And I'll answer. That's me trusting you. Then I choose what we do. That's you trusting me.”

Clark wanted to gulp, but he feared it would sound thunderous in the quietness of the room. “OK.”

“Go to sleep.”

“Goodnight, Lois.”

“Goodnight, Clark.”

Part 23

~ Saturday ~

Clark landed them behind the covering of a large tree in a park in Metropolis and slid Lois to her feet. “Are you sure you don't mind me not coming in?” he asked.

Although her feet were on the ground, her hand hadn't moved from his shoulder. She'd touched him a lot today — fleeting contact, feather brushes. His body — arms, chest, shoulders, hands — had registered every one of them. “I'm sure,” she said.

“If you want me to, I will,” Clark said, not sure if he regretted his automatic reaction to decline when Lois had asked him if he wanted to meet her dad.

Lois smiled. “I know,” she said. “Perhaps next time.”

“How much time do you want with your dad?”

“About an hour. What are you going to do?”

“I thought I'd walk around the streets. I'd never been to Metropolis before yesterday. Not ... not as a regular visitor.”

“Good idea,” Lois said. “It's a lot more crowded than Smallville, but that makes it easy to be anonymous.”

He nodded, hoping the full extent of his apprehension wasn't readily noticeable. “I thought I would listen ... you know, just in case Mom is here somewhere.”

“Good idea,” Lois said again. Her hand was still on his shoulder.

She smiled, and her fingers squeezed lightly, shooting darts of fire down his arm. “See you soon.”

She turned away, walked out of the park, crossed the street, and disappeared into the front door of a large building.

Clark jiggled his hand, trying to restore normal feeling to his arm.

All day, memories of last night had played incessantly through his mind. He could still feel her hands on his back. His scalp still bustled with the feel of her fingertips.

What did she have planned for tonight?

Lois walked into the main area of the nursing home, and the first person she saw was Ronny. When the nurse saw Lois, her face lit with welcome, and she hurried over.

“Lois,” Ronny greeted with her usual wide smile. “It's so good to see you.”

Lois returned Ronny's light hug. “How's Dad?” she asked.

Vivacious enthusiasm fired Ronny's already cheerful expression. “He is doing so well, Lois,” she gushed. “The therapists often talk about a breakthrough with stroke patients. Their recovery can be so spasmodic and so individual that there is no predicting what will work and what won't. Bringing your dad the jigsaw puzzle was inspired. You'll notice a huge difference.”

Lois smiled. “I can't wait to see him,” she said.

“He's in his room,” Ronny said. “I know he's going to be so excited to see you.”

With a parting smile, Lois left Ronny and walked quickly to her dad's room as the anticipation welled inside her. She went through his door and saw him, dressed and sitting straight in his wheelchair. His paralysed hand lay in the trough connected to the arm of his wheelchair; his good hand rested near a book that was perched on some sort of stand.

He was reading.

Her dad was reading! Such a normal activity. Something he had enjoyed in his pre-stroke life. Something she had thought could have been gone forever.

“Dad,” she said.

He looked up, and his face creased into a lop-sided approximation of a smile that shook loose her wad of tears.

Lois rushed forward to the chair and enclosed him in her arms.

“Dad,” she breathed, swallowing down her tears. “Dad.”

His right arm stretched awkwardly around her. She felt his fingers pressing into her back — with markedly improved dexterity and strength. She withdrew, wanting to see his face.

“Dad,” she said. She kissed his cheek. “Dad. You are looking so good.”

His arm slipped from her back, and he gestured towards a large sheet of paper hanging on the wall above his bed. It listed words and matching hand signals. When Lois looked back to her dad, his arm was moving a circular route, his flattened palm brushing upwards against his chest.

She looked back to the list, quickly skimming the descriptions of movements.

Then she found it.

Happy.

Her dad was telling her he was happy.

Lois snatched a tissue from her bag, wiped her eyes, and told him, “I'm happy to see you, too, Dad. I'm so happy to see you.”

She pulled a chair closer and sat down, her arm resting on the tray of his wheelchair. He reached for her hand, touched her ring finger near the knuckle, and then made a familiar swooping movement.

Lois chuckled. “You want to know how things are going with the guy who makes the paper airplanes?”

Her dad nodded. It was a jolty movement, but Lois marvelled at how something so simple could be such a remarkable advancement on blinking to communicate ‘yes’ and ‘no’. His hand rose slowly, and he pointed to the shelf where the paper airplane was perched on display.

Lois stared at the plane, remembering the cell. Remembering her

first tentative attempts to communicate with Clark. Remembering how hesitant he'd been. She turned back to her father. "I love him, Dad," she declared. "I've only known him a short time, but he is kind and loving and so very strong and gentle."

Her dad lifted his hand, extended his forefinger, and rolled it towards his chest. Lois glanced to the list.

Come.

"You want to know if he'll come here?" she guessed.

He nodded.

"Do you want him to come here?"

He nodded again.

Lois smiled. "Next time I visit with you, I'll ask him to come, too."

Her dad smiled — not perfectly formed, but perfectly eloquent. With some difficulty, he extended his first two fingers and clasped the other two into his palm. He moved his hand to his paralysed arm and tapped the two fingers twice on the drooping fingers of his left hand.

"Name?" Lois said after consulting the list. "His name is 'Clark'."

Her dad's mouth moved a little, and Lois had the impression he was trying to say the name. She waited, but no sound came. He closed his mouth, and Lois thought she detected frustration in his eyes.

"Will you teach me some signs?" she asked cheerily.

He rolled his fist into a ball and thumped it onto his chest, just below his shoulder blade. Lois copied him. Her dad nodded in encouragement. He did it again. Lois copied him. She looked to the list.

Love.

"Love," she said.

Her dad nodded. His hand moved again, beginning another sign.

The next time Lois checked her watch, she was surprised to discover that over an hour had passed. They had made a game out of practising every one of the twenty or so signs on the list. They had talked about the ultra-large-print book her dad had been reading. Lois had admired his most recent jigsaw puzzle that lay complete in the tray Clark had made.

"I have to go, Dad," she said with real regret. "I'm meeting Clark."

He made the sign for 'come'.

"I'll come again soon," she promised. "And I won't forget to ask Clark if he would like to come, too."

Her dad looked pleased.

Lois hugged him tightly and kissed his cheek. She picked up her bag and then put her clenched fist across her heart — the sign for love.

Her dad replied.

Lois waved. "See you soon."

She left the room and was immediately accosted by Ronny. "Isn't he doing great?" she squeaked. "Did he show you his signs?"

"Yes," Lois said. "It's so wonderful that he has begun to communicate."

"The aim is to add one new word every session," Ronny said. "But Sam has been insisting on more than one."

"Does this mean they believe he will never speak again?" Lois asked.

"With stroke victims, we try not to make any predictions," Ronny said. "Progress can start, it can stop, it can accelerate, it can slow down."

"So there are no guarantees that this surge will continue?" Lois asked, her blossoming hopes dashed.

"No," Ronny said. "But it's also unlikely that he will lose any of his gains. His mind is more active, his demeanour is more cheerful, and he's eager to learn new things. They are all incredibly positive steps."

"Is there a chance he will get any of his old life back?" Lois asked. "Is there a chance he could move back into his home?"

Ronny laid her hand on Lois's arm. "It's always best to celebrate the small steps and not look too far ahead," she said.

Lois could feel all of her jubilation draining away. "So there is no

chance?"

"There's always a chance," Ronny said. "But if Sam, or his family, decides that the only way he can be happy is by going home, that sets up everyone for disappointment. It's imperative that he learn to find fulfilment and interest in whatever life he has."

"That's a hard thing to do," Lois said, thinking of Clark's time in the cell.

Ronny nodded. "It's a very hard thing to do," she said. "And you should be really proud of your dad and what he has achieved in this past week."

It was only eight days since Lois had last visited the nursing home — on the morning before she had gone to the cell, taken the poison from Clark's shoulder, and run away with him.

Eight days — her life had changed drastically in that time.

It hadn't occurred to her that her dad's life would have been changing, too.

"Thanks for everything you do for him, Ronny," Lois said, feeling genuine affection for the bubbly nurse.

"It was you who got him kick-started," Ronny replied. "It was as if those jigsaw puzzles awoke something inside him."

"I hope to be able to visit a little more regularly now that I'm back from vacation," Lois said.

"I know your dad appreciates you coming," Ronny said. "But he also knows you have your own life." She leant forward and lowered her voice. "And he tells me there might be a whiff of romance in the air."

Lois didn't know whether to grin, gulp, or pretend she didn't understand. "It's still very early," she said vaguely. "I haven't known him for very long."

Ronny smiled. "All Sam wants is for you to be happy," she said.

"I know," Lois said. Remembering Clark was probably waiting, she turned to walk away. "I have to go, Ronny. See you soon."

"Bye, Lois."

Lois walked out of the door and into the mild fall sunshine. She looked around for Clark and saw him coming towards her. "Sorry I'm late," she said as she fell into step beside him. "I was having such a good time with Dad that I forgot the time."

Clark smiled. "He's well?"

"He has made incredible progress in the last week," Lois said. "He's beginning to sign as a way to communicate. He's reading. He seems more aware. He seems happier. He ..." Lois thought for a moment. "He seems more like my dad."

Clark put his arm across her shoulders and squeezed her gently into his side. "I'm so pleased."

"He wants to meet you."

"He does?"

Lois nodded. "I told him about the paper airplanes we flew and how I couldn't fly them as well as you could. When he moves his arm like a diving airplane, he means you. Although he asked your name today."

"Did you tell him?"

"Of course I did."

"What else have you told him about me?"

Lois heard the not-quite-concealed apprehension in Clark's voice. She stopped walking and turned to him, sliding out from under his arm, but noting that his hand stayed on her shoulder. "I've told him lots of things about you," she said in a lilting voice that she intended as an inducement for him to question further.

She saw the little glimmer of surprise filter through his expression at her teasing tone. "Like what?" he demanded, although all his vehemence was lost in the twinkle of amusement in his eyes.

"Like that I am in love you," she said softly.

His smile burst free. His hand slipped higher on her shoulder, and his fingers meandered through her hair to touch the skin of her neck.

"Really?" he whispered as if he couldn't quite bring himself to believe.

"Really," she said. "I should have told you before now."

"You told me in the cell," he said in a voice that was slightly

husky. “I heard you, even though I couldn’t see you. And since then, you’ve shown me in a hundred different ways.”

“Would you like to hear it again?” Lois said as she placed her hand on his cheek.

He nodded.

“I love you, Clark,” she said.

His eyes seemed to be branding their love into hers. “I love you, Lois.”

She slipped her arms around his neck and slid into the harbour of his arms. Her head found its perfect resting place on his broad shoulder. Lois sighed with contentment and heard Clark chuckle in response.

She closed her eyes and let his closeness soak into her.

After long moments of blissful contentment, she slowly eased backwards. “Let’s go home,” she said.

“Home?”

She nodded. “Home.”

They spent the evening quietly — Lois sitting at the computer while Clark familiarised himself with the account book that Wayne had given him.

On the outside, Clark hoped he appeared just as serene as the atmosphere, but every time he checked the watch Lois had given him, his heart lurched. The evening had crawled by at a painfully slow pace, but as the time slipped past ten o’clock, he didn’t feel ready to go to the bed he shared with her.

What would happen once they were alone in the bedroom?

What had Lois planned?

Did she still intend to continue what she had started last night?

She seemed engrossed in what she was doing on the computer. Perhaps she had started writing her novel.

The row of numbers he had been staring at for the past ten minutes blurred to a fuzzy black worm. If he shut the book and went upstairs for a shower, what message would that send to Lois?

The flight home to Smallville had been wonderful. Lois had nestled in close against his body, and her head had rested on his shoulder. Twice, she had lifted her hand to brush her fingers down his cheek.

Such a simple gesture.

But it held such monumental meaning. She loved him.

She’d said it.

With words.

With the soft message of her eyes as she’d gazed into his.

With touch.

Clark loved her so much.

Sometimes, it threatened to well up inside and overwhelm him.

Lois stood from the chair, and Clark jumped. He saw that she’d turned off the computer. She smiled at him, causing his heart to soar into his throat. “I think I’ll have a shower and go to bed,” she said.

“OK,” he managed to croak through a dry, dry mouth.

If she noticed, she didn’t comment. “I’ll be about ten minutes,” she said.

She walked past him and to the stairs. Clark stared at the empty doorway. Ten minutes.

Then what?

Ten and a half minutes later, Clark walked cautiously from the bathroom, having showered, shaved, dressed in clean nightwear, and dabbed on a sprinkling of the new aftershave he had bought today while Lois had been visiting her father.

He heaved in a deep breath. He reminded himself for the millionth time that this wasn’t something that warranted such trepidation. He was overreacting. Lois had promised she wouldn’t push him into anything he really didn’t want to do. But that left a lot of scope for doing things that were going to be difficult.

Difficult but amazing.

He tapped lightly on the door.

It opened, and Lois was there, wearing pink pyjamas he hadn’t seen before. “Come in,” she said.

He stepped forward into the room, and her hand shot out, clasping his elbow.

“Wow,” she said. “You smell wonderful.”

He figured that if he had an hour, he wouldn’t be able to think up any response beyond ‘thank you’ so he said that and continued into the room.

Lois shut the door. Firmly. Definitively.

And they were alone — with the world shut out.

Lois went to the bed and shuffled onto it. She patted the covers next to her, and Clark perched on the edge of the bed.

“You don’t look too comfortable,” she said as she picked up a pillow and lobbed it to him.

“Thanks.” He put the pillow next to the headboard and moved back, lifting his legs onto the bed.

“Have you thought of your question?” Lois asked.

He had thought about how he *should* be trying to prepare something to ask her, but he hadn’t been able to settle on a definite choice. “Not really.”

“Come on,” she said with an encouraging smile. “There must be something you’d like to ask me.”

“There are some things,” he admitted.

“Go on.”

“It’s not that simple. I’m concerned that you might not want to answer.”

“This bit is about me trusting you,” Lois said. “Ask one of those questions, and whatever it is, I’ll try to answer it as honestly as I can.”

Clark pulled one leg into an arched position and rested his wrist on the point of his knee. “Lois, I know you’re still hurting over Linda ... and what Moyne did. I really don’t want to -”

“Ask,” she said.

“What happens if you get upset?”

“Will you hug me?”

“If you want me to.”

“Then ask your question,” she said with a tiny peep of her smile. “I’ll be all right.”

“OK,” Clark said with another humungous breath that delved deep into his lungs. “Last night, you said you were able to begin to grieve because you were with me, and you knew that if you fell, I would be there for you.”

Lois nodded. “That’s true,” she said. “I mulled over it for ages during the following days. I didn’t understand how I’d been so capable then and so frail this time.”

“You weren’t frail,” Clark said quickly.

“I retreated into myself and began uncovering so many things I had tried to hide — from everyone, but most particularly from myself. But I could do that because I knew you were there — I knew I could talk to you anytime I wanted to. I knew you would understand. I knew you wouldn’t judge me. I knew you would wait for me, even if it took a long time.” She smiled. “Was that your question? Did I answer it?”

“That wasn’t really my question,” Clark said, although he was sorely tempted to make his escape and not push this any further.

“Then ask your question,” she said.

“If you needed me, why did you say you wanted to go with Scardino?” Clark held his breath as he awaited her response.

Lois took a few moments to respond, but her expression didn’t indicate any distress. “I’m not sure,” she said slowly. “I wasn’t thinking too straight.”

“That’s all right,” Clark said quickly. “You don’t have to answer.”

“I wanted to run,” she said. “Like I had after I nearly killed the young guard. I had to run away then to avoid being captured. But it was more than that. I ran from fear of what I’d done. I wanted to escape from myself.” She looked up with solemn brown eyes. “And this time, my instinct was to run away again. Scardino offered me a way out, and I took it. I didn’t even think about it. I didn’t think about you. I didn’t think about what I really wanted.”

“Do you think it’s possible that, even in your state of shock, you knew I wouldn’t let you go?” Clark said quietly.

Lois gave him a shy smile. “I’ve thought about that,” she said. “I’d like to believe that was the case. I was so confused ... I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“I think you had a concussion,” Clark said. “That could have been a part of why you felt so bad.”

“Nothing seemed clear,” Lois said. “Nothing at all. I would try to grasp something and realise I couldn’t grasp it without going deeper, so I would try, only to realise there were layers below that.” She looked at him. “Does that make any sense?”

“Yeah,” Clark said, thinking about how often he had tried to find a viable explanation for his behaviour at the beach yesterday.

“And the one thing that sat like an immovable lump in the middle of my brain was what I had done to you when I said I wanted to leave. I couldn’t see any way back from that.”

Clark risked a small smile. “So you figured going ahead and leaving was the best option?” he asked gently.

She scrunched up her nose. “Dumb, huh?”

“Not dumb,” Clark said. “You needed time. I knew you’d make the right decision in the end.”

She gave him a rueful smile.

“How is the injury on your head?” Clark asked.

She reached up and ran her fingers over the area of the wound.

“There’s still a small bump,” she said. Suddenly, a flippant grin broke through her seriousness. “Yesterday, you promised to comb the tangles from my hair,” she said. “And you didn’t do it.”

He’d realised that after they had turned out the light last night. “I know,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“Would you like to do it now?”

“Yes,” he said. “I’ll go and get the comb.” Clark sprang from the bed and went into the bathroom. When he returned, he closed the door behind him. He sat behind Lois and began carefully gliding the comb through her sleek, perfectly untangled hair. “I guess you already did it,” he commented.

“Yes.”

“Sorry.”

“That’s OK,” Lois said lightly. “You promised to take me to the beach again. Next time, I’ll make sure we don’t forget when we get home.” She pulled in a shoulder-lifting breath. “You smell heavenly.”

“I ... I bought some aftershave today.”

Her head spun around, her grin flashing. “That’s great,” she said.

He’d felt so cumbersome and out of place when he’d looked at the baffling variety available. All he’d wanted was to choose something that Lois would like. Apparently, he’d succeeded.

She turned her head to the front again, and Clark continued combing her hair.

He finished way too quickly.

Lois shuffled around so she was facing him and took the comb from his hand. She leant back and placed it on the table beside the bed, and then she returned her attention to him. “Ready?” she said.

“I don’t know,” he said truthfully.

She grinned at that. “Did you enjoy last night?”

“Aw, Lois,” he said. “It was ... breathtaking.”

“Then don’t look so worried.”

“Have you decided what we are going to do?”

“Yes,” she said. “I’d like you to sit in the centre of the bed and lean back against the headboard.”

She hadn’t asked him to take off his shirt. Or anything else. Clark reeled with relief.

When he was settled as she had directed, Lois shuffled forward and knelt next to his thigh. “Do you trust me?”

He nodded.

She picked up his hand and laid it on her thigh, just above her knee. “You have great hands,” she said as she reached forward to fold her palm around the point of his shoulder. She slowly swept down, past the sleeve of his tee shirt and onto the bare skin of his upper arm,

her thumb tracing the front, her fingers skimming the back. She continued, past his elbow, along his forearm, and onto the top of his hand.

As she reached his hand, his fingers reflexively gripped around her thigh. He jolted them open. Lois pressed his hand flat again and sent him a smile that said he hadn’t done anything wrong.

She reached up again and repeated the action — lightly travelling all the way to his hand.

She swept down again. And again. And again, until Clark was sure that his arm was in danger of imploding. Then, she picked up his hand from her thigh and used her thumb to work around his knuckles. She turned his hand over and probed into his palm. Lastly, she turned her attention to his fingers, stroking their length, from knuckle to nail.

His entire arm felt impossibly heavy and wondrously relaxed. As if every muscle and ligament and tendon had bowed to her touch and melted in deference to her.

When she had finished, she put her hands on his chest as she crossed over his legs to the other side of his body.

Then, she repeated every intoxicating action on his other arm.

Clark watched her face. She rarely looked away from her task, which gave him the opportunity to study her at close proximity.

She was stunningly beautiful.

He’d known that from the very beginning.

And the more he’d gotten to know her, the more he’d realised that her outer loveliness was a reflection of her inner beauty.

She finished working to the very end of his littlest finger and looked up to him with a smile.

“Thank you,” he said. “That felt great.”

“Would you mind if I did something for me for a few moments?” she asked.

After what she’d done for him, there was only one possible answer. “No.”

She took his right hand in her left — palms together, thumbs entwined. Then she leant back, and Clark braced his arm to support her weight. With her right hand, Lois reached forward, burrowing her fingers under his sleeve to fashion her hand to the shape of his bicep. Like warmed syrup, her fingers inched downwards, searing his skin with five distinct trails of fire.

When she reached his elbow, her hands dropped into her lap.

“Was that really for you?” Clark asked.

“Oh, yes,” she said, a little breathlessly.

He was at a loss as to how he should respond to such overt admiration. “Ah ... have you planned something for tomorrow night?”

“Yes,” Lois said, peeling her eyes away from his arm.

“Are you willing to tell me?”

She smiled. “Do you want to know?”

Did he? He wasn’t sure if knowing would be more or less excruciating than wondering. “Yes,” he said.

“Tomorrow night, you get a choice,” she said.

“OK,” he said as his curiosity soared.

“You can either take off your shirt and let me massage your chest and shoulders. ...”

“Or?” he gasped.

“Or I’ll take off my pyjama top, lie face down on the bed, and you can massage my back.”

Part 24

~ Sunday ~

Lois smiled at Clark as he put a second cup of tea in front of her. He sat down again and returned her smile.

It was a stifled smile. Forced from the midst of distraction — as everything he’d done this morning had been.

The other side of the bed had been empty when Lois had awakened feeling refreshed and well rested. If Clark had had an unsettled night, he hadn’t disturbed her.

“Did you sleep well?” she asked conversationally.

“I don’t need as much sleep as everyone else,” he said.

She smiled at his evasion. “Why didn’t you sleep so well?”

He didn't reply, but he didn't need to. Lois knew the answer.

"Because of the choice I gave you for tonight?" she guessed.
"Were you preoccupied with that?"

He lifted his cup, but just stared into the depths of the liquid. "It's pathetic," he said wretchedly.

"Do you want to tell me why this is so hard for you?"
"No."

"I feel like I missed something," Lois said. "I didn't realise ... Not really. Not until the beach."

"Maybe I hid it well," Clark said with a dejected shrug. "But it wasn't hard to ignore when I thought there was no chance of anything like this happening between us."

"I told you in the cell that I loved you," Lois reminded him gently. "Didn't that cause you to think about where this could end up?"

"I tried to believe you," Clark said, lifting his eyes from the tea to look at her. "But if you'd pushed me for the absolute truth, I would have said that you *thought* you loved me."

"OK," she said as she wrapped her hand around the warmth of her cup, hoping it would somehow aid her understanding. "But even that was probably going to lead somewhere."

"I didn't dare believe it was the sort of love that could lead to ..."

"I pushed too hard, didn't I?" Lois said as comprehension clunked through her brain. "I went too quickly?"

"No," Clark said. Neither said anything for a moment. He returned his cup to the table. "It's just the choices you gave me ... I can't imagine being able to do either of them."

Lois wanted to ask why, but she restrained her inquiring instincts. "Then we'll do something else," she said lightly.

Clark wasn't able to hide his relief. "Are you sure?"

"You can choose," she said. "Or perhaps we could do the back massage again. Would that be all right?"

His fingers tapped against the sides of the cup. "I'm sorry, Lois."

"Clark — we both need time. We both need someone to understand. We're here for each other. You don't have to be sorry."

"Thanks," he said. He stood abruptly and cleared his place from the table. "I'll be in the barn if you need me."

"Clark?"

At the door, he turned. "Yeah?"

"It's the weekend. Our first weekend in Smallville. Is there anything special you used to do with your folks? Anything you'd like us to do?"

"We used to go to church on Sunday mornings," he said evenly.

"Would you like to do that?"

"Would you?"

"I don't know," Lois said. "My family didn't go to church much. Christmas, sometimes — if my parents hadn't already had a fight by then." She subdued those memories. "But if you want to go, I'll come with you."

"The service starts at ten-thirty," Clark said.

"Would you like to take me to church?" she offered.

"Yes," he said. "I would like that."

Lois smiled to mask her slight disinclination. "Is it formal?" she asked. "What should I wear?"

"My mom used to wear a skirt or a dress. My dad and I wore nice trousers and a shirt and tie."

"OK," she said, mentally rummaging through her wardrobe. "It's a good thing we brought more of my clothes from Metropolis yesterday."

"Yeah." He opened the door. "I'll be in soon. Perhaps you should use the bathroom first."

"OK."

He went outside and closed the door. Lois sipped from her tea and couldn't help wondering about the specifics of what had happened in the cell.

As she thought about it, she realised that Clark's edginess was most likely the result of Moyne's abuse rather than Trask's. When Moyne had seized her outside her office at the compound, he had tried

to scare her with threats that the alien would rape her. He'd said he would 'finish the job'. And when he'd come to the farmhouse, rape had again been his intention.

Imagine being helpless and alone with Moyne. Night after night after night.

Lois felt sick just thinking about it. "Aw, Clark," she whispered. "I wish I knew how to fix this for you."

She drained her cup and stood from the table. She was going to church. But the big question was — what was she going to wear?

Lois chose a creamy wool skirt with a matching jacket and a burgundy blouse that buttoned high enough to cover all but the very tops of the scratches. She added pumps the same colour as the blouse and looked into the mirror attached to Martha and Jonathan's dressing table.

Other than her date with Clark in the cell, she hadn't taken so much care over an outfit in a long time.

She looked all right. Probably a bit better than all right. But she wasn't sure if what she had chosen would be appropriate for a church service in rural Kansas.

With a deep breath, she left the mirror and walked down the stairs.

Clark was there — waiting for her.

She stopped.

And looked at him.

He was wearing crisply pressed black trousers with a white shirt. And a tie — a tie of cerulean overlaid with dramatic white diamonds that almost jumped out from the subdued background of his shirt.

He looked amazing — even if the tie was a little bold.

"Wow," he breathed, before she had the chance to say anything. "Wow."

His blatant admiration bolstered her confidence in her choice of outfit. "You look fantastic," she said. "We should go to church more often."

"You look stunning," he said, slowly shaking his head as if he couldn't quite believe what he saw. "I ... I don't know what to say, and I couldn't describe what you're wearing, but I know it looks sensational."

"Thanks," she said.

Clark pushed his hand into the pockets of his trousers. "How would you like me to introduce you?" he asked. "Ms Lane? Ms Lane, my friend? Lois Lane, from the agency?"

She thought for a moment. "Lois Lane," she decided. "Just that."

"OK," Clark said. "And if anyone asks about us, we remain vague?"

"It doesn't matter what we say," she said.

"It doesn't?"

"No," she said with a little giggle. "The way you are looking at me right now, it's not going to be too hard for anyone to guess the nature of our relationship."

Clark looked surprised, but then his smile began to unfurl.

"And the way you look, I'm probably not going to be able to hide how I feel about you," Lois continued.

His smile broadened. "So you don't mind if people think we're together?"

"When you look like that, I want everyone — especially the single women — to know that you're with me," Lois declared.

Clark lifted his hand from his pocket and held it out to her. "Let's go to church, Ms Lane," he said.

"Good idea, Mr Kent," she replied.

Lois hadn't known what to expect from the church service, but the relaxed atmosphere and lack of ritual came as a bit of a surprise. The minister had been looking at them when he'd welcomed all visitors, but he hadn't mentioned them by name. The tunes of the hymns had seemed almost familiar, and the minister preached with quiet and sincere conviction about the wonder of God's grace. The people — both before the service and afterwards — approached them, chatted

casually about a range of topics, and drifted away to join other conversations.

Clark didn't falter once in remembering the names and faces of the people of his community. Lois felt her heart go out to him as she realised how real these people must have been in his mind during the interminable days and nights of his imprisonment.

Clark introduced her as 'Lois Lane', but he did it with his hand tucked into hers and his eyes so full of love that it would have been impossible for anyone to miss that they were a young couple in love.

And, to Lois's surprise, that seemed to please the people almost as much as having Clark back in Smallville. They most often greeted Clark with "Welcome home," but many of them also expressed their delight that he had found someone who obviously made him so happy.

Maisie approached, and Lois mentally prepared her response in case the Smallville café waitress recognised her. "I'm Maisie," she said with a wide smile. "You must be Lois."

"Yes. Lois Lane."

"And you're *with* Clark?"

"Yes, I am."

"That's wonderful, love," she said with a wink of understanding. "I'm so pleased for both of you."

"Thank you."

Maisie moved on, and a tall, wiry woman came up to Lois. She was not particularly feminine, but she had a face that bore an enchanting smile.

"Hi," she said to Lois. "I'm Maggie Irig."

"It's good to meet you, Mrs Irig," Lois said. "I'm Lois Lane."

"Call me 'Maggie'," she said. Her eyes slipped sideways, and her smile blossomed as she looked at Clark. "Thank you for bringing our boy home."

Lois hadn't been sure how to reply, but Maggie hadn't waited for a response.

"We are so glad you're both here," she said. "It's a miracle, really, after all these years. Our son, Brett, is getting married next month. Your invitation will arrive this week. We'd be honoured if you could both come, but we understand if you don't feel you are able to."

"Thank you," Lois said. "And I know how much Clark appreciates everything you and your husband did on the farm while he was away."

"The Kents were my neighbours from the day I married Wayne," Maggie said staunchly. "We didn't do anything they wouldn't have done for us."

Clark turned from his conversation with Donny, and Maggie wrapped him in a big hug. She peered into his face, and Lois saw tears in her eyes. "Welcome home," she said, her voice shaky with emotion. "I'm praying just as hard as I can for your mom."

"Thank you," Clark said.

"We would love to have you over for dinner," she said. "Or for a cup of coffee anytime. Whatever and whenever suits you."

"We're still trying to settle in," Clark said.

"There's no hurry," Maggie said with that smile of hers. "The invitation is there — anytime."

"Thank you."

Lois and Clark talked to a few more people and then walked from the church building. A touch of winter hung in the air despite the weakly shimmering sun. Clark turned to her. "There's a little creek that runs out of the town," he said. "After church, Mom, Dad, and I often walked along it. Would you like to do that now?"

"I'd love to," Lois said, hoping it wouldn't inflict too much damage on her pumps, but realising she didn't really care if it did.

Clark smiled at her response. "We'll leave the car here. It's not far."

Lois squeezed his hand and looked up to him with a smile. The smile she received back was as relaxed as she had ever seen from Clark. He seemed more peaceful, more confident. Perhaps he had been anxious about facing so many people and was feeling relieved that the first meeting had gone so well.

"I'm glad we went to church," Lois said.

"Thank you for coming."

"The people are very nice."

"Yeah. It wasn't until I went to college that I realised not everywhere is like Smallville. I was incredibly fortunate to be raised here."

"Do any of them know about you?"

"No. Mom and Dad told them that a relative had died, leaving me an orphan. I think most people knew they had been hoping to start a family for a long time, so the overriding reaction was joy rather than curiosity."

"Just like now," Lois noted.

They reached the shallow, winding creek and began walking along the path that edged its bank. "I'm sure they would be curious about where I've been for seven years," Clark said, "but if Rachel told them what you told her, perhaps that was sufficient explanation for them."

"Did anyone ask for details about your mom?"

Clark smiled sadly. "A few people mentioned my folks. Some said how sorry they were to hear that my dad had passed away and expressed their hope that my mom will be home soon."

"No one asked any questions?"

Clark shook his head. "No."

The path took them into the shade of the nearby trees, and Lois leant a little closer to Clark. "It's obvious your parents are much-loved in this town."

Clark smiled again, although his sadness hadn't dissipated. "My folks are wonderful people," he said.

"Tell me about them," Lois encouraged casually.

He waited a few steps before replying, probably trying to arrange his thoughts. "On the outside, they are just ordinary people," he said. "Two farmers living a simple life. But they are so much more than that. They had an enduring love. They would speak their love; they would show it. Nothing meant as much to them as each other.

"And they loved me," he said. "They drew me into that circle of love. They knew I was different. They didn't know how different I would be, but every time something new appeared — like the ability to fly — it didn't change anything. I was still their son." Clark smiled down at Lois. "My mom always used to tell me that being different was a good thing."

"It is."

His smile widened. "You remind me of her sometimes."

"I do?"

"She made up her own mind about everything. She didn't believe something just because everyone said it was true." Clark's hand tightened around hers. "Just like someone I know who was told that an alien had viciously murdered two men, but she still walked into his cell — alone and unarmed."

Lois smiled at the memory. "Could you hear my heart thumping?"

"No," he said. "All I could hear was my heart thumping."

"You were nervous, too?"

"Intensely."

"But you must have known that I couldn't hurt you. I didn't have a rod with me."

"I wasn't nervous about you hurting me. I was nervous about doing something that might scare you away."

Lois leant her head into his arm, and they walked in silence until they reached a sharp bend. They stopped and watched the clear water cascade over the glistening pebbles.

"Would you like to walk back on the other side?" Clark asked.

"My shoes aren't -"

Clark lifted her into his arms and smoothly floated across the creek. "Your shoes aren't in any danger of getting wet," he said as he placed her gently back on the ground.

She grinned. "Sometimes, I still forget what is possible with you."

They began walking again, heading towards the town. "How are you feeling?" Clark asked.

It was deeper than a casual question. "Most of the time, I feel all right," she replied. "The numbness has gone, which means there's

nothing to buffer the pain of losing Linda. I miss her dreadfully. More than I ever have. But perhaps that's a part of the grieving process. I've begun to accept that she is gone. Forever. I'll never see her again."

"That's a hard thing to accept," Clark said.

Lois ran her other hand down the inside of his arm, finishing where their hands were connected. She wished she could give him some hope regarding his father, but her conviction was still strong that Reuben O'Brien had spoken with certainty about Jonathan's death. "It's harder than I ever thought it would be," she said. "I mean ... Linda and I knew the risks when we joined the agency. We said we understood, but I don't think either of us had really thought about it. We talked a lot about what we would do in a really desperate situation, but I think we both believed deep down that however desperate the situation got, we would be able to find a way out of it."

Clark waited for her to continue. When she didn't, he said, "What memory of Linda always makes you smile?"

Lois's mind filled with images of her friend. "Her laugh," she said after reflection. "It was the sort of laugh you couldn't hear without smiling. It was totally infectious and never half-hearted. It was like a big neon sign saying 'Welcome to my hilarity. Please feel compelled to join me.'" Lois smiled. "I couldn't help it. Even when I was mad at her — which wasn't often — I had to laugh. When Linda laughed, the world was a better place." A tear pushed through the curve of her eye and frittered down her cheek. She wiped it away. "I have so many wonderful memories," she said. "But what comes next always hurts so much — knowing there will be no more."

"I think accepting that is a part of the process," Clark said. "Even though it hurts, it has to be faced if we are going to move on."

Lois took a steadying breath. "And, as horrible as her death was, at least I know for sure that she has gone. Perhaps that is easier than not knowing."

"Not knowing is like swinging wildly across a huge chasm," Clark said. "Sometimes I can almost convince myself that perhaps they are both all right. That perhaps they were taken somewhere safe and comfortable. That perhaps they were even lied to about where I was — told a story that I was helping national security or something like that so they didn't worry about me."

"That would be wonderful," Lois said.

Clark sighed. "But being able to believe that is rare. Even now, when so much has changed for me, it's hard not to think about how bad it could have been for them. I know that if my father has died, my mother's heart will be broken. And that's without all the other pain — worrying about me, having her life taken away from her, being forcibly removed from Smallville." His hand tightened around Lois's. "Sometimes ... *many* times in the cell, I just hoped and hoped that someone had killed them the night we were captured."

"That's what I would have been hoping," Lois said.

"Really?" he said, sounding genuinely surprised. "I felt so bad to be hoping they were dead. They did so much for me. They found me. They took me in and gave me everything — a chance to pretend I'm normal, a chance to be like everyone else. They loved me so much, and I'm not even their son."

Lois stopped walking, faced him, and put her hand on his cheek. "I don't know your parents," she said softly. "But from everything I've heard about them, I don't believe they ever thought of you as anything other than their son."

Clark's cheek twitched under her hand. "You're right," he said. "To them, I was their son."

"And to you, they're your parents."

He nodded.

"I think we should go to Scardino today," Lois said, fired with sudden purpose. "We should find out everything he knows. I'm an agent. I'm trained to find people. With your extra skills and my experience, we will —"

Clark put a restraining hand on her shoulder. "Lois," he said. "Slow down. I want to find my mom, but I'm not going to let you hurtle into another assignment. Not yet. You need time. I will keep

looking for her. I'll keep flying over our country, listening and looking, and gradually working south. If we've found nothing in a month or so, we'll talk about going to Scardino."

"A month or so?" Lois gasped as her impatience erupted.

He nodded. "I want you to take the time you should have taken when you first got back to the US."

"I can start —"

"You can start your novel. You can rest. You can give yourself the time to come to terms with what happened to Linda. You can give me the time I need to work through some of the things that still haunt me. *Then* we'll start trying to find out what happened to my parents."

"Clark, it's going to be so hard waiting."

"Yes," he said. "I can't even think about what might be happening to her right now as we speak. But wherever she is, she's probably been there for seven years. A few more days isn't —"

"It might make a difference," Lois cut in before she'd thought about what she was saying.

His face darkened. "I can't think about that," he admitted grimly. "You need some time. But it's not just you. I do, too. I don't feel ready to find out the truth — not if it's bad news. I feel like my world has been spinning faster and faster, and ... " He looked at her, pleading for her understanding. "... and I just need some time to catch up."

Lois felt the sting of self-recrimination. "And I'm way too impatient," she said. "I've always wanted everything right now."

His smile flickered. "You're not too impatient," he said, running his finger along her jaw. "You're perfect."

"I'm sorry I put so much pressure on you about the bedroom thing."

His eyebrow quirked. "The bedroom thing?" he said. "That sounds ... intriguing."

"Perhaps we should call it 'bedroom therapy'," she suggested, wanting to ease the pressure from the situation.

"Bedroom therapy?" Clark said, smiling openly now. "How about tonight, you get the question — but it can't be about anything that happened in the cell — and I get to choose the 'activity'?"

Lois smiled. "I am looking forward to whatever activity you propose," she said.

She thought she saw a tint of colour infuse his cheeks, and it was confirmed when Clark cleared his throat. Lois stifled her giggle, but his half-smile made her think he'd perceived her amusement. He turned, slipped his hand back in hers, and began walking. "What do you want to do this afternoon?" he asked nonchalantly.

This time, Lois did giggle, and Clark smiled. "I'd like to spend some time in the flower garden and then work on my novel," she said.

"Your novel?" Clark said with interest. "Did you start it last night?"

"I wrote a few notes," she said. "But I have the scene where they meet all fixed in my head, and I want to get it down in words."

"They?"

"She's a tough, independent agent who has gotten to the top of her field through a combination of brilliance and determination. He's new to the game, and to her great disgust, they have been partnered together on an assignment."

"Ouch," Clark said. "Poor guy."

"Don't you worry about him. He's well able to take care of himself — and her, too."

"So she's going to realise he's not a pushover?"

"He's not a pushover at all. But it's going to take her awhile to catch on to that."

"Will you let her realise it before the last page?" Clark asked.

"Surely, he deserves that much."

"Maybe," Lois said with a smile.

Clark answered her smile. "Do you mind me asking questions about your story?" he said. "Will you want to talk about it as you write it?"

"No, I don't mind questions. And it might be fun to have someone to discuss it with."

“Do I get to read it?”

“Not until I’ve edited it at least five times,” she said as they arrived back at the car in the now-empty churchyard. Lois took the keys from her bag.

“Lunch?” Clark asked. “Anywhere in the world?”

Lois chuckled. “You know what I’d really like? Soup and soft fresh bread at home.”

“Are you cold?”

“Just a little.”

“Hold still.” Clark lowered his glasses, and Lois felt a blanket of warmth envelope her. “How’s that?” he asked as he pushed his glasses back up his nose.

“Wonderful,” she said.

He took the keys from her hand, unlocked the Buick, and opened the driver’s door for her.

“Thank you,” Lois said. “And thanks for sharing your hotness.”

She watched, waiting to see if he would react to her implied compliment. He paused for a moment and then shut the door. Lois chuckled again.

And then sighed. Patience had never been her strong point.

And she wanted a whole lot more from Clark than he was able to give just yet.

She would give him the time he needed.

She would.

But she didn’t know how she was going to do it without dissolving into a puddle of pure need.

As evening approached, Clark’s thoughts turned frequently to their planned ‘bedroom therapy’, and each time, his nervousness cranked up another notch. It wasn’t wholly nervousness — more a combination of uneasiness and anticipation.

He’d decided on the ‘activity’. Actually, deciding on it had been the easy part. Keeping the anticipation of it from overwhelming his mind had been the difficult bit.

Lois’s question was causing most of his tension. What would she ask? He’d set some boundaries — nothing about the cell — but there was still plenty she could ask that would render him grossly uncomfortable.

Why haven’t you kissed me yet?

Are you curious about my body?

Being Kryptonian, how do you differ from human men?

How far have you gone with a woman?

Of all of those questions, the last would be the most simple. The answer to the second was easy, but his face might get hot enough to cause Lois second-degree burns if she inquired about how often he’d thought about her body.

He didn’t know what she would ask — and that was a little bit exhilarating and a whole lot terrifying.

She’d spent the evening with her fingers flying on the computer’s keyboard. He’d become mesmerised by the arrhythmic flow of her work. Fast at times, interspersed with frequent pauses that were often accompanied by deep sighs and then followed by sudden bursts of frantic energy.

Clark had watched her. Never before had he realised that watching someone do something as mundane as tapping on a keyboard could be so fascinating.

But it was Lois doing the tapping.

And everything about her was fascinating.

She stopped typing, checked her watch, and groaned. “Ugh,” she said. “Sorry. I meant to finish up before now. I got caught up in my story.”

“Have they met yet?”

“They met page one, line one,” Lois said with a grin. “I don’t think he’s quite realised what has hit him.”

“Are they going to end up together?” Clark asked. “Beyond the work partnership?”

“She wouldn’t even consider it a possibility at this stage,” Lois

said with a grin.

“What about him?”

“He’s already fallen in love with her,” Lois said airily. “Page one, line two.”

Clark chuckled. “You make sure you’re nice to him,” he said, trying to sound ominous. “I feel for the guy.”

Lois stood from her chair and stretched. “And if I’m not nice to him?” she challenged.

Clark stood as well. “Are you ticklish?” he asked.

She held her hands towards him, fending him off. “Don’t you even think about tickling me,” she said, grinning despite her warning tone.

“I get to choose the activity tonight,” Clark said. “Remember?”

“But not tickling,” she said.

He paused long enough to let her think he was considering arguing the point. “OK,” he agreed easily. “Do you want to use the bathroom first?”

“Yes,” she said. “Give me about ten minutes.”

Clark picked up the empty cups from their evening drinks. “See you soon.” He watched her leave the living room.

Ten minutes.

Part 25

Lois waited for Clark in the bedroom, wondering what he would choose for them to do. Wondering if he would take them further than she had. Wondering if her question would affect his choice.

He tapped on the door.

“Come in, Clark,” she said.

He did. And carefully shut the door behind him. When he turned, Lois examined his face. He was doing a good job of appearing unflustered, but she could see from the tiny spasm in his cheek that he wasn’t completely relaxed. She smiled up at him as he walked forward and sat on the bed, facing her.

“The question first?” he said.

“OK,” Lois said. “There’s a lot I’d like to ask you, but I’ve decided to use my question to answer something I think you would like to ask me, but probably wouldn’t be able to bring yourself to actually vocalise.”

He swallowed roughly. “OK,” he said hesitantly.

“Remember,” Lois said. “It’s just us in here, and we can trust each other implicitly.”

He nodded but didn’t look totally convinced.

“I think that if you felt free to ask absolutely any question of me, you would ask how far I am willing to go. Tonight. Not in the far-off future, but tonight.”

He stared at her, his face a carefully maintained mask of blankness.

“So I’ll answer you,” she said. “As far as I’m concerned, when that door is shut, nothing is off-limits unless it makes you feel uncomfortable.” She smiled, hoping to ease the look of trepidation that was creeping into his face. “I’m impatient, as you know. I’m in love with you, as you also know. I don’t see you as either alien or human — you’re just the man I love. So, whatever you have planned for tonight, I want you to know I’ll be OK with it.”

He cleared what sounded like a humungous lump from his throat. “You’d do *anything* I asked?” he said.

She nodded. “I trust you. I know that I don’t have to set restrictions on what is appropriate. You’ll do that.”

“But ... but ... I have absolutely no experience in this,” he burst out.

“You have Clark Kent honour. You have Clark Kent gentleness. That’s more important than all the experience in the world.”

“If ... if I asked ...” His eyes darted away, he took a breath, and his eyes crashed back into hers. “If I asked that we ... make love ... tonight ... would you do it?”

“Yes,” she said. “I would.”

“I’m not going to ask that,” he said hurriedly.

Lois put her hand on his arm, and the heat sizzled from their contact. “I don’t know what Moyné did to you,” she said. “But I know

you struggle to believe you are entitled to a full relationship with a woman. All I'm trying to do is show you how I see things."

Clark sighed. "Lois," he said. His eyes cannoned into hers. "I'm not sure if I'll ever be able to overcome this. I wish I could. I wish I could just wake up one morning, and all the feelings of being different — of not being human — were gone. I wish I could do that for you."

"I wish you could do it for you," she said.

He stared at the sheet, not saying anything.

"Can I ask another question?" Lois said.

Clark nodded, but his gaze didn't budge from the sheet.

"You told me you enjoyed me touching you. You said you noticed when I stopped and loved it when I started doing it again. You asked me if you could hold my hand at the beach. I want to understand why this is different."

"I've asked myself that a thousand times," Clark said disconsolately. "I have a possible explanation, but I don't know if it's really the truth."

"Tell me," Lois encouraged softly.

"The touching ... to my shoulder and arm and even my chest ... it feels like ..." He stopped speaking as he adjusted glasses that didn't need adjusting. "I have some memory of that ... My mom, my dad ... they hugged me and put a hand on my shoulder and tousled my hair. Those memories ... they provide some resistance against the memories from the cell — the beatings and the pain of exposure to the poison."

Lois thought she could see where this was going, and nausea snaked through her stomach. "But touching of a more intimate nature ... you have no good memories of that?"

"I want to forget," Clark said. "I want to be able to push it all aside and not let it affect what I could have with you. I know that with you, it's different — so very, very different. But I just can't separate the two."

"You will," Lois said. "We'll keep doing this every night — until you have enough good memories to stand against the bad ones."

"How long are you willing to wait for me?" Clark asked.

"As long as it takes."

His eyes shot into hers. "Weeks?"

"Yes."

"Months?"

"Yes."

"Years?"

She couldn't falter now. "Yes."

"I ... I can't promise anything, Lois," Clark said.

"You can promise that you'll keep trying," she said. "That is enough."

"Do you ever wonder ..." He stopped, doubts filling his expression.

"No, I don't," Lois said. "I don't ever wonder if this would be easier with a *human* man. I don't want to be with anyone else but you."

His smile flickered for a brief moment. "You read me so well," he said.

"I'm trained to read people," she said. "And I've never been more motivated to understand someone."

"Thanks," he said. "Thanks for trying to understand. Thanks for not demanding details."

"Moyné is dead. He can't hurt you anymore." Lois smiled, but Clark didn't respond. "So — question time is over. What are we going to do now?"

"Would you mind lying down?" he said. "On your stomach? With your pyjama top on?"

"OK."

He placed two pillows about four inches from each other. "Will it be comfortable to have your face here?"

She twirled around and stretched out on the bed, placing her chin and her forehead on the pillows. "That feels good," she said.

He carefully brushed aside her hair, gathering it above her head and letting it splash down onto the pillows. "May I touch your neck?"

he asked.

"Uh huh," Lois said, the skin of her neck beginning to tingle in anticipation.

His fingers landed softly on her hairline and began to move across her skin.

Each individual muscle fluttered as he passed over it. He gently — almost reverently — explored every inch of her neck, edging into her hair and slipping down towards her throat. When he moved to her shoulders, his pressure deepened, and his thumbs rounded the top of her spine, delving into the ridges, seeking and finding all the hidden modules of tension and releasing them. His fingertips swept along the ridges of her collarbones, dipping into the valleys with sweet caresses.

He'd touched such a small part of her body, but Lois could feel the tension draining away from her legs, her back, her arms. Everywhere.

As that rigidity waned, another — very different — ache began. She wanted him to go further. She wished he would continue, extending the enjoyment to other parts of her body.

"Lois?" His voice came from directly above her, and she realised she couldn't feel his weight pressing into the mattress. He must be levitating above her. It was funny how normal that felt.

"Uhhh?" she said, hoping he wasn't about to finish.

"Would you mind if I slipped my hands under your top and massaged your back?"

Mind? Her back was panting for his attention. "I don't mind," she managed, congratulating herself on not sounding completely desperate.

His hands left her, and the muscles of her body tensed in delicious suspense. Her pyjama top was lifted, and then Clark's fingertips slowly skated up each flank of her back, his thumbs hugging her spine.

Two-thirds of the way up, he stopped abruptly, and his hands jolted from her back.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Ah ... nothing."

"Keep going," Lois said. "It feels sensational."

His hands landed on her again, and he continued up to her neck.

The next minutes blended into a haze of pleasure as Clark's hands worked up and down her back. She noticed that although he was very careful not to drift to her sides or lower than her waist, his confidence seemed to increase with every stroke.

If this could bring him confidence, Lois was willing to offer herself for as long as he needed.

Her brain was pretty much comatose, but with the few cells that hadn't completely surrendered to Clark's touch she managed to wonder if her massage of him had felt anywhere near as good as this. She hoped it had. Perhaps, because his back had taken the brunt of much of the brutality, it had felt even better than this.

Eventually, his hands slid down her back, and the material flopped onto her skin.

"Thank you," Lois murmured, although she was sure it wasn't too clear.

The blanket came over her, the light went out, and the bed dipped as Clark slipped in beside her.

"I hope you enjoyed that," Clark said as if there was a real possibility that she hadn't.

Lois prised her eyes open as she rolled onto her side. "It was heavenly," she said.

"It was?" He sounded surprised.

"Absolutely," she said emphatically. "Why did you stop the first time you went up my back?"

She heard a shuffle. "It's kind of embarrassing," Clark said.

"When a man can make a woman feel the way I'm feeling, he has absolutely nothing to be embarrassed about."

He cleared his throat, and Lois figured she had probably just compounded his embarrassment. "I expected you would be wearing a bra," he said.

"Oh," Lois said, ensuring there was nothing in her tone to suggest she was laughing at his misconception. "I only wear a bra during the

day — not at night.”

“Is that the same for all women? Or just you?”

“All women, I think,” she said.

“I ... I didn’t know.”

“How would you?” she said. “It’s no big deal.”

“I guess so. I felt a bit silly, though.”

“Don’t,” she said. “When the door is shut, it’s just us. This is our trust time. Our time to ask questions. Our time to get to know each other.”

She heard him chuckle softly and was relieved that he seemed to have overcome his discomfort. “I have to trust you with a whole lot more than what we do here,” he said. “You know stuff about me that no one else in Smallville knows.”

“I hope you know you can trust me with that, too.”

“I do,” he said. “Thanks for going to church with me today.”

“I enjoyed it more than I thought I would. The people of Smallville are wonderful.”

“Yeah. I thought ... if you want to go and see your dad tomorrow and you want me to come in with you, I will.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” Clark said.

“You know that meeting a girl’s folks is the first step to being committed to her for the term of your natural life,” she joked.

“I’m already wholly committed to her,” Clark said.

Lois stretched her arm across the sheet, looking for his hand. He found her, soft and warm and protective. “Goodnight, Clark.”

“Goodnight, Lois.”

~ Monday ~

Lois had expected to sleep well.

She hadn’t.

And when she had awakened, she’d been suffering from a lurking headache and an oppressive feeling of heaviness.

During breakfast, she tried to smile and chat chirpily enough that Clark wouldn’t notice anything amiss.

But despite her efforts, she caught a few questioning glances, so she wasn’t surprised when, at the end of their meal, he asked if she were all right.

“Yeah,” she said, although she knew she didn’t sound all right.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. He didn’t ask what he’d done wrong — which Lois took as progress.

Not that it made her feel any better. “I don’t know,” she said honestly. “I just feel really down.” To her dismay, tears welled into her eyes. “Last night, I dreamed that I went to Linda’s funeral. Somehow, it made it seem more real.”

Clark stood from his chair and held his arms towards her.

She stood also, but didn’t go into his arms. “If you hold me, I’m going to cry,” she warned him. “It might be better if I go to the computer and continue working on my novel.”

His arms didn’t drop. “I don’t mind if you cry,” he said.

Her resistance crumbled, and Lois allowed herself the comfort of falling into his chest. Her tears had begun to flow before his arms closed around her. He held her, saying nothing, tenderly stroking her hair.

When she finished crying out her pain, Clark gave her a tissue, but it was too late. There was a damp patch on his shirt.

“I’m s... sorry,” Lois said, reaching for another tissue and trying to mop up the mess.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “It will take less than a second to fix next time I’m near a mirror.”

Lois managed a shaky smile. “You really are the most remarkable man.”

His eyes were steady in hers. “Lois,” he said. “I’d much rather you cry than trying to bottle it up. And if you’re going to cry, I’d much rather that was on my chest than anywhere else in the world.”

“Thanks,” she said.

He moved his hand from her shoulder and slid it under her hair

and behind her neck, eliciting sweet memories of last night. Lois lolled back her head and gave him a watery smile.

“Was there ever a memorial service for Linda?” Clark asked as his fingers renewed their acquaintance with her neck.

“Yeah. But I didn’t go. I made excuses and said I wasn’t well enough, but the truth was that I couldn’t face Linda’s parents and her brothers, knowing I had left her. Knowing I had survived and Linda hadn’t.”

“I’m sure they don’t see it that way,” Clark said.

“Maybe,” Lois said with a sigh. “But I wasn’t seeing anything very clearly then.” She rested two fingers on the side of his chin. “I didn’t know then that something vital was missing from my life.”

He smiled warmly. “Are you feeling better now?”

She dried her eyes and tried to smile. “Yes. Thanks to you.”

“Are you going to write now?”

“Yes. Unless you wanted to do something together.”

“I’m going to check the entire barn and make sure it’s watertight and ready for winter,” he said. “Do you still want to go and visit your dad?”

“Yeah. Is that OK?”

“We’ll leave after lunch,” he said with a smile.

Lois removed her hand from his chin and answered his smile. “See you later.”

There was a blur as Clark cleared away their breakfast. Then he materialised at the door. “Be nice to your hero,” he said. “Don’t let your heroine give him too much grief.”

“OK,” Lois agreed.

“See you later.”

As soon as Clark had left, Lois went upstairs.

She sat on the bed, remembering last night. Wondering about tonight. Wondering how long it would take for Clark to feel more relaxed. Wondering if there was anything she could do — outside of the bedroom — to help him heal.

Her mind drifted back to the cell.

What had happened there? Before she’d arrived?

She veered away from those thoughts and concentrated instead on her earliest times with Clark.

The memories of their bumbling awkwardness brought a smile to her face.

They had come such a long way. And in such a short time.

She shouldn’t push Clark. He needed time.

But -

Lois lurched from the bed as an idea illuminated her mind. She went to her bag and retrieved Uncle Mike’s apple pie recipe.

She unfolded it and quickly read the instructions. It would be a risk. Clark had said apple pie was his favourite food, but he’d also said it carried poignant memories of his mom. How would he react if she had a nicely browned, wonderfully aromatic apple pie for him when he came in at lunchtime? Would that be pushing too hard? Would it aggravate his anxiety for his mom? Or would it help him see how far he’d come?

Perhaps, like her, he needed to face some things. Things that, when faced, were stripped of their power to loom so large and menacing.

She should have gone to Linda’s memorial service. She should have faced Linda’s family and grieved with them. If Clark had been with her then, she would have gone. But being alone — it had just seemed too difficult.

Now, they had each other.

However Clark reacted to the pie, she would be there for him.

Fired with purpose, Lois took the recipe downstairs and laid it flat on the table. She quickly gathered together everything she would need. She peeled and cored the apples and put them in water in a saucepan on the stove. Then she began making the pastry.

The entire process took longer than she would have thought possible, but nearly two hours later, she slid the pie into the oven, feeling a sense of achievement as she imagined Clark’s surprise when he came in for lunch.

She quickly cleared away the mess and swept the flour from the floor. Glancing at her watch, she saw she had just enough time to write a couple of scenes while the pie cooked.

Eric Menzies slammed down his phone, overwhelmed with anger — which wasn't uncommon. But what was uncommon was the paralyzing fear that threatened to overpower his anger.

It wasn't possible.

It just wasn't possible.

It couldn't be happening.

But it was.

Right now. Right here. And they had less than two days.

His phone shrilled again, and a curse erupted from his mouth.

"Menzies," he barked.

"Hello, Mr Menzies. It's Daniel Scardino."

"What is it?" Eric demanded brusquely.

"I've received the autopsy report regarding -"

"That was quick."

"I asked them to make it a priority."

"What does it say?"

"That there were significant qualities of methamphetamine present in Mr Moyne's body."

Drugs! Eric swore under his breath. "Anything else I should know about?"

"No. I'll fax you a copy of the report. I thought you might appreciate a warning about what it contained."

"OK," Eric said. "Thanks," he added.

He put down the phone. Things had been much better with Phoebe this morning when he'd visited her. She was even talking about coming home. But she didn't need this piece of information. It was too close to Malcolm.

The phone sounded again. Eric picked it up. "Menzies," he growled.

"Hello, Mr Menzies," came an unknown female voice. "I'm Ruby Rhodes, Daily Planet."

His fear and anger translated into exasperation. How the hell did she know? She was the leading reporter at the top Metropolis newspaper, but this was so confidential that *he* had only just been informed. And why was she calling him anyway? "I don't talk to anyone from the media," he said curtly.

"I think you need to make an exception in this case," she said in an irritating tone that made it sound as if talking to her would benefit him.

"I said -"

"I received a letter this morning," she cut in. "From a Mr Neville Moyne. A letter that outlines the details of a recent operation by your agency."

Eric felt the sweat prickle his brow as the profanities he wanted to say rammed against his skull. "What allegations?" he said, drawing on his long years of experience to sound dismissive rather than aghast.

"I don't wish to discuss it over the phone," she said. "I need to meet you. May I come to your office?"

Eric had no choice. Moyne had been a loose cannon in life. It wasn't entirely unexpected that he would leave an unexploded bomb to be dealt with after his death. "When?"

"Now," she said briskly. "If there is a story, I want it headlining this afternoon's edition."

If there was a story. That sounded more hopeful. "Fifteen minutes," he said.

"I'll be there."

"Do you know the location of my office?"

She didn't reply, and the line disconnected. Eric thumped down the handset, only to pick it up again before it had stopped vibrating. He jabbed the button for his PA.

"Mr Menzies?" she said.

"Ruby Rhodes from the Daily Planet will be here in fifteen minutes. Bring her directly into my office. While she is here, there are to be no calls. No visits. I don't care who they are or where they are

from, I am not to be interrupted. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

He slammed down the phone again, cursing the day Neville Moyne had been born.

Clark straightened from where he was replacing a rotted plank in the barn wall. He sniffed again — and recognised the smell of smoke. He pushed down his glasses and looked through the walls of the barn and the house. Lois was at the computer, tapping away at her novel.

He quickly scanned the entire house and within seconds had discovered the source of the strange smell. In the oven was ... well, he wasn't entirely sure what it was. It was round and very black. He readjusted his vision and was able to determine that it had been an apple pie ... once.

As he watched, Lois suddenly leapt from the chair with such force that it tumbled backwards. She scrambled helter-skelter into the kitchen, yanked open the door, snatched a tea towel, and pulled out the blackened disk.

She thumped it down, and charcoal fragments splattered onto the table. She stared at it with such despair that Clark yearned to fly to the kitchen and tell her it didn't matter.

Before he could decide whether his presence would be welcome, Lois grabbed the tea towel, picked up the charred mess, and hurled it into a bag. She rolled up the bag and shoved it into the trashcan. She threw open the window and then collapsed onto the chair and put her head in her hands.

Her shoulders shook.

And Clark watched her — at a total loss as to what he should do now.

"Ms Rhodes is here," Eric's PA informed him.

"Send her in."

Eric quickly gulped the last of his whisky and hid the glass in his desk drawer. He walked to the door, trying to focus the chaotic ramble of his thoughts. If Moyne had revealed details of the alien operation, it was very likely going to blow up like a volcano.

But the alien was dead. Perhaps Rhodes planned to fuel her story with outrage over human rights abuses. If that were her intention, it would cause a furor. But it would have a limited life. Unless a miracle happened, by tomorrow, no one was going to care anyway.

Eric opened the door and nodded in subdued welcome. "Ms Rhodes," he said. "Come on in."

She entered his office — an impressive figure dressed in a high-quality suit that screamed she was the quintessential nineties businesswoman and no one had better get in her way. She sat in the chair, folded one black-stockinged leg over the other, and took out a notepad and pencil from her bag.

Eric sat in his chair. "Can I offer you a drink?" he asked. "Coffee? Something stronger?"

"No. Thank you," she said in a tone that suggested his offer had offended her.

"Then perhaps we should begin," Eric said smoothly.

"This morning, I received a letter from Mr Neville Moyne. In that correspondence, he makes several serious allegations regarding the lax procedures in your agency."

"Lax procedures?" Eric echoed, managing to keep any emphasis from sounding on the first word.

"You allowed a dangerous alien to escape."

Escape? "An alien?" Eric said.

"Are you denying any knowledge of the existence of an alien living on our planet?"

Eric straightened in his chair. "Ms Rhodes," he said. "I work for a government agency. Every day, I deal with highly confidential information that could affect national security. I don't have the time for scaremongering tales that have no basis in fact."

Ms Rhodes reached into her bag again and withdrew a sheet of paper. She held it up for him to see.

The hairy, unkempt face of the alien stared back.

Part 26

Eric gazed at the photograph — not because he had any doubts that it was the alien, but to give himself time to formulate the best strategy. “Ask your questions,” he said, because he needed to determine her agenda.

He didn’t miss the fleeting flash of triumph in Ruby Rhodes’ violet-blue eyes. “Is everything you say ‘on the record?’” she asked.

“If I say it’s ‘off the record’, will you print it anyway?”

“Mr Menzies,” she said crisply. “I have Mr Moyne’s letter, and I have the photograph. I have substantiated some of Mr Moyne’s claims — such as the recent demolition of the building on Bessolo Boulevard. If you refuse to answer my questions, I will be left with no option but to print what I know.”

Did she know Neville was dead? “Have you tried to contact Mr Moyne?”

“No.”

“He didn’t include a contact number in his letter?”

“No.”

She was good, Eric thought with grudging respect. She could have been agency-trained. *Never give away information.* “Do you have anything more newsworthy than a razed building?” he asked.

“I have a description of an alien being, including an exhaustive list of his known abilities.”

“A third-rate science-fiction novel has that.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Those abilities make him a danger to all mankind. That is why he was in captivity. That is why your agency has failed in protecting the citizens of the world.”

“Do you know the current location of the alien?”

“Mr Moyne’s letter details his valiant attempt to recapture the escapee.”

Actually, Neville had been chasing Lois Lane, trying to exact revenge for his dismissal from the alien operation. Ms Rhodes’ investigation might have uncovered the fact of Neville’s death, but her continual harping on an escape suggested she didn’t know the alien had died. And she probably didn’t know that her source was a meth-soaked murderer. “Have you considered that if you print your story, it could severely hinder Mr Moyne’s chances of success?” Eric asked.

She shot him a look of disdain. “The people have a right to know when their safety has been compromised.”

“Did Mr Moyne mention why he felt compelled to enlighten you about his activities?” Eric asked, wondering how long she would allow him to ask the questions.

She ignored the dash of ridicule in his tone. “He wanted to ensure that his story be told.”

His story? “I thought this was about an alien apparently running amok in the world.”

Ms Rhodes’ eyes turned ice cold. “Why didn’t your agency alert the public to the danger when the alien escaped?”

“Ms Rhodes,” Eric said. “You mentioned that you have information — from Mr Moyne’s letter. During our phone conversation, you seemed to imply that I would benefit from this discussion.”

“You will,” she retorted. “I’m giving you a chance to explain how an agency that enjoys such favour from the government can -”

“Favour?” Eric questioned.

“I know Moyne met his death when a local sheriff’s office refused to believe his story. I also know that information regarding his death has been suppressed.”

“That couldn’t have been included in his letter,” Eric said calmly.

Her expression turned to disgust. “You don’t seem particularly upset by the death of one of your agents.”

“I am sorry about Mr Moyne’s death,” Eric lied. “But I’m nonplussed that a reporter of your reputation thinks she has a story when she’s missing so many of the critical facts.”

“I have sources,” she said defiantly.

“We all have sources, Ms Rhodes,” Eric said wearily. “The mark

of a successful agent is knowing how to use that information.”

She understood his subtext. That being a reporter, even a successful one, did not mean she could successfully compete in his world.

“The prime objective of any government agency is to ensure the safety of all American citizens,” Rhodes said. “Yet you have allowed this alien menace free to continue his plan to take over the world and seize this planet for his fellow aliens.”

Eric decided they had spent enough time circling. “If you report what you think you know, your opposition papers will lead tomorrow with the story of exactly how badly you misjudged Mr Moyne’s information.”

“Not if the alien is recaptured,” she said brusquely. “I assume you *do* have people searching for him?”

“There is no chance of the alien being recaptured,” Eric said.

The cool edge of her confidence blunted a little. “Why?”

“How about you tell me exactly what you propose to write, and together we’ll see if it’s possible for you to have a passably accurate story without inciting an unnecessary public panic?”

“Are you going to endorse *anything* I print?”

“Ask your questions.”

“Can I name you?”

“No, you can’t. But if you ask your questions, you will have a much greater chance of being able to accurately sift the truth from Mr Moyne’s ravings.”

“Is there an alien?”

Eric tried to ignore the desire for another shot of whisky. He was confident he had her measure, but it was going to require some juggling to divulge enough to satisfy the headstrong reporter with a whiff of a story in her nostrils, extinguish the fire of her investigative tendencies by discrediting Neville, and still ensure Phoebe wasn’t hurt by anything that besmirched her sister’s memory.

And there was also the need to protect the agency. Rhodes hadn’t mentioned Lois Lane, so it was possible that Lane hadn’t been featured in Neville’s letter. Eric wanted to keep her — and Neville’s attempted rape — out of this.

“Mr Menzies?” she snapped. “Is there an alien?”

“There was an alien,” Eric said slowly.

“Was?” she gasped.

“Yes,” Eric replied, gratified by her shock. He could be a little loose with the truth about the imprisonment. Neville was dead. The alien was dead. Lane was on leave. Scardino, Shadbolt, and Longford wouldn’t dare publicly contradict him. “There was an alien,” he repeated. “A being that came here from another planet. A being endowed with abilities that far exceeded human strength.”

“What happened?” she asked breathlessly.

“My agency captured him,” Eric said with a discernable trace of satisfaction. “We discovered the risk to humankind and took the necessary steps to ensure they were protected.”

“Until he escaped,” Ms Rhodes fired at him.

“He didn’t escape.”

“Mr Moyne gave his life trying to recapture the alien.”

“He died.”

“I know that, Mr Menzies,” Rhodes exploded. She gathered herself with considerable effort. “Do you have a contingency plan? What steps are you taking to apprehend this invader?”

“There is no need for a contingency plan, Ms Rhodes,” Eric said expressionlessly. “The alien is dead.”

Her carefully coloured bottom lip fell open. “Mr Moyne said he escaped.”

“Did Mr Moyne also tell you he was removed from the operation two weeks ago, following a serious breach of regulations?”

Ms Rhodes didn’t reply. She was probably too busy scrambling to salvage her fast-dissolving story.

“I assume you’re familiar with the concept of sour grapes?” Eric asked.

The balance of power had shifted towards him, and Ms Rhodes

was smart enough to know it. She had walked into his office thinking Neville's letter was her trump card. "How did the alien die?" she asked, her blue eyes turning frosty in her attempt to recover lost ground.

"Natural causes."

"*Natural* causes? What is natural for an over-powered alien?"

"We were unsure of his expected life-span. We lacked knowledge of his physiology."

"So you don't know what killed him?" Ms Rhodes said, sounding more scornful than was wise.

"Anything I do know, I'm not free to disclose to you."

"Why did Mr Moyne believe he had escaped?"

"When Mr Moyne was removed from the operation, the alien was still alive. Mr Moyne was assigned to another operation. Without the knowledge of his superiors, he decided not to attend the assignment. I can only assume that he returned to the location where the alien had been kept, saw that the building had been demolished, and drew his own conclusions."

The reporter stared at him, and Eric could imagine the spinning cogs of her brain.

He toyed with the idea of informing her of Neville's drug use — just to drive home the spurious nature of her information. However, thoughts of Phoebe stilled his tongue.

"You have a story," Eric said, hoping to placate her. "There was an alien. The threat to our safety was dealt with quietly and efficiently; the threat is now over. If you print that story, we will avoid a widespread panic, and your integrity as a reporter won't be tarnished."

"But if this individual was truly an alien, there are so many questions requiring answers," Rhodes said excitedly. "Did we learn anything from him? Did he admit to planning to wrest our planet from us? What do we know of his planet? His society? Are there more aliens here, or was he the only one? How did he get here? How does he communicate with others of his kind? Why did he come?"

"Ms Rhodes," Eric said. "I have limited time today. I wasn't involved personally in guarding him."

"Who was? Can I talk to his guards?"

"If you print the story you have today ..." Eric flicked through his desk calendar. "... I can see you again on Wednesday afternoon."

The reporter looked so pathetically eager — she didn't know that by Wednesday afternoon, the story of an alien would be of no consequence. "You won't talk to any other reporters?" she said. "You'll guarantee me the exclusive?"

"Yes."

"Can I use the photograph today?"

Eric reached across the table and took the sheet of paper. He stared into the mostly-concealed face of the alien, wondering what had really transpired between Trask, Neville, and the individual they had believed to be such a dire threat. "Yes," Eric said as he handed back the photo. "You may print that photo."

"Can I quote you?"

"You can say that a senior representative of the agency said ... 'American citizens can be assured that their safety is always the foremost objective of all government agencies, and secrecy is sometimes required in order to achieve this.'"

Ms Rhodes finished scribbling on her pad and returned the photograph to her bag. She stood. "Goodbye, Mr Menzies," she said.

Eric figured the promise of a bigger story should be enough to curtail what she printed, but he decided to add a final safeguard. "Ms Rhodes?"

"Yes?"

"If you choose to go beyond our agreement and print other, highly questionable details, your career will be over by the end of the week."

"I don't scare easily," she said with a toss of her light brown hair.

"I don't warn unnecessarily," Eric replied.

She swept from his office. As Eric watched her go, he wondered when she would ever discover how close she had come to the biggest story in the history of Planet Earth.

Lois bathed her red eyes in cool water and hoped that any lingering traces of distress could be attributed to this morning when she had cried on Clark's chest. Just after midday, she heard Clark enter the kitchen. She stood from where she had been pretending to write her novel.

She sniffed and wasn't able to detect any traces of smoke in the air. Not obvious ones, anyway. Would it be enough to keep Clark from being suspicious? Was his olfactory sense as keenly developed as his sight and hearing?

She sniffed again, and this time, she smelled it. The aroma curled into her nostrils.

She inhaled again. And again. Hardly daring to believe.

Her mouth watered. Her stomach leapt with blissful recognition.

Pizza.

She hurried into the kitchen, her nose working double time to soak up the delectable forerunner of their lunch.

Clark was there — holding a pizza box as wispy whorls of aromatic steam rose from it.

"Clark?"

"I got it from my favourite place in Italy," he said, his face full of uncertainty.

Lois could wait no longer. She stepped up to him, lifted the lid on the box, and breathed in like a drowning woman plucked from the depths of the ocean.

When she looked back to Clark, he was grinning.

"You know, don't you?" Lois said.

She saw him consider a range of replies. Eventually, he just nodded.

"I guess I'm going to have to learn that very little escapes your notice."

He winced. "Sorry."

"Why did you get the pizza?"

"Because when we talked about our favourite foods, I said I loved apple pie, but there was pain there, too, because I always associated it with Mom. You said you didn't know if you would ever eat pizza again. I figured you thought maybe it was time to make some new memories." He shrugged self-consciously. "I didn't know what else to do."

Lois stretched over the box to give him a quick hug. "Well, I know exactly what to do," she said. "Let's eat before it gets cold."

Clark grinned, and they sat down together. He pushed the box towards her, offering her the first piece.

Lois took it out, dragging in great big breaths of reminiscence. How many times had she and Linda shared a pizza? Hundreds? Thousands? The memories flooded back — good memories. Memories that brought a smile and not a tear.

Lois took a bite and chewed, appreciating the taste of every individual topping. When she'd finished her piece, she looked at Clark. "Thank you," she said.

"I'm glad it didn't upset you more."

"It was a lovely thing to do."

He looked pleased by her comment. "Are you looking forward to seeing your dad?"

"Yeah. Are you still OK with coming in to the nursing home?"

"Yeah."

Lois reached for another piece of pizza. "Tough things are easier to face when you share them with someone," she said.

"Yeah," he said with a smile.

Clark held Lois's hand as they walked into her father's nursing home. He'd never expected he would have to meet a girlfriend's father. It seemed so normal — something that most young men faced at some stage in their lives.

Young men.

Not young aliens.

Not a young alien living on a foreign planet.

Lois stopped as a nurse with a big smile greeted her enthusiastically. “Ronny,” Lois said. “This is Clark Kent. Clark, this is Veronica.”

His hand was shaken with gusto. “Call me ‘Ronny’,” the nurse said. “It’s lovely to meet you, Clark.”

“You, too,” Clark said, smiling despite feeling a bit besieged by her exuberance.

“How’s Dad?” Lois asked.

“He’s doing really well,” Ronny replied. “He added another four words to his sign list yesterday. Hurry in. I know he’ll be delighted to see both of you.”

Lois took Clark’s hand again and led him through a big room and to a door to a smaller room. A man who had probably once been tall and distinguished sat in a wheelchair, working on a jigsaw puzzle in the tray that Clark had made. He looked up as they entered, and his face broke into a crooked expression that probably represented a smile.

Lois let go of Clark’s hand and rushed forward to hug her father. As his right arm came around her shoulder, his eyes looked up to Clark.

Clark smiled, not sure what else to do.

When Lois backed away from the embrace, she picked up the jigsaw tray and placed it on the bed. Her father lifted his arm and swung it horizontally before dropping it to his wheelchair.

Lois laughed, sounding happier than she had all day. “Yes, Dad,” she said. “This is Clark. Clark, this is my father, Sam Lane.”

Mr Lane’s head turned slowly to Clark, and their eyes met again. He lifted his hand, stretched it out, and placed the top of his fingers against his mouth. Then, his arm fell forward.

Lois’s head snapped sideways, and Clark saw a large hand-written list of words above the bed.

“Thank you,” she said.

Mr Lane nodded, his eyes still fixed on Clark.

“You’re saying ‘thank you’ to Clark?” Lois asked.

Her father nodded again. Then he made another sign.

“Thank you for making Lois happy,” Lois interpreted.

Mr Lane nodded.

Clark smiled, and this time, it felt less forced.

Mr Lane awkwardly stretched his hand towards Clark.

Clark shook it gently, immensely grateful for Sam Lane’s affirmative reaction to his being with Lois.

Lois pulled up two chairs, and they both sat down.

She began talking about the jigsaw puzzle, and Clark sighed with relief at being able to slip into the background.

The visit went well — as far as Clark could determine. Lois laughed more than once, and her dad smiled. She did most of the talking, but the communication seemed surprisingly two-way despite the obvious difficulties. Clark spoke a few times, but mostly he just enjoyed watching Lois in a new situation. Enjoyed watching her interact with her dad, who obviously loved his daughter very much.

Clark’s nervousness faded quickly; he wasn’t overly relieved when Lois stood and kissed her dad’s cheek to signify the end of the visit. Clark shook hands with Mr Lane and told him it was good to meet him.

He signed the words for ‘thank you’ and ‘come’. Lois promised she would visit again soon, and Lois and Clark walked out of his room.

Clark slipped his hand into Lois’s, and she turned to him with a smile.

“Thanks for coming,” she said. “I know Dad enjoyed meeting you.”

“I enjoyed meeting him,” Clark said. “I can see that he loves you a lot.”

Lois smiled happily. As they walked towards the exit, Clark looked around the room at the few people gathered around the television. His eyes fell on a copy of the Daily Planet lying on the coffee table.

His breath stopped. His head reeled.

The front page was filled with a shocking photo of a man with a

shaggy beard and long, straggly hair.

Above the photo, the headline screamed: “ALIEN!”

Lois felt Clark’s hand lurch in hers. Her eyes shot to his face, registered his horror, and followed his gaze to the paper lying on the coffee table. Her heart heaved with recognition. The photograph burned an image into her mind. The headline exploded from the paper, pumping alarm through her veins.

She put her other hand on Clark’s arm to steady herself. After a moment to re-summon the ability to think clearly, she turned away from the paper and took a step towards Ronny, tightening her grip on Clark’s hand to transmit the message that he needed to come with her.

“How did the big meeting go?” Ronny asked.

What big meeting? “Ah ... good,” Lois said with a feigned smile. “So good that we’re now running late.”

Ronny smiled brightly. “It was lovely to meet you,” she said to Clark. “I hope you come again.”

“We will,” Lois said quickly, not sure that Clark would be capable of a response. “See you next time, Ronny.”

Lois headed for the door, conscious only of the need to get Clark to a place where they could talk. Once outside, she scooted numbly along the sidewalk, wanting to put some distance between them and anyone who might be idly looking out from the nursing home windows. At the corner, they turned. Lois saw the broad trunk of a tree and dragged Clark towards it.

When they reached the cover afforded by its branches, she turned to Clark and put her hands on his neck. “We’ll be all right,” she whispered hoarsely. “We’ll be all right.”

His face was jagged with shock.

“Did you read the entire story?” Lois said.

He shook his head — jolty little movements that testified to his shaken emotions.

“Ronny didn’t recognise you,” Lois said. “The newspaper was right there, in the same room as you, and no one thought it was you.” He didn’t respond.

“We need to get a copy of the paper,” Lois said.

“We can’t,” Clark hissed.

“We have to. We have to know what they’re saying so we can decide how we’re going to deal with it.”

“I can’t,” he exclaimed. “Someone will see me. They’ll know it’s me.”

From Lois’s bag, her cell phone rang. She saw the call was from Scardino. She couldn’t answer it now; there wasn’t time, and when she talked to him, she wanted to do it on the security-enhanced agency cell phone. She disconnected the call and took Clark’s hand firmly in hers. “Come with me,” she said. “We’ll go to the nearest newsstand and buy a copy.”

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can,” she said. “We need to test this. If someone recognises you, we’ll deny it. If things get really out of hand, you can pick me up and fly away so fast no one will know for sure what happened.”

“I ...”

Lois smiled up at him. “You can do this,” she said. “You’ve done much harder things than this.”

His hand tightened around hers, and he gave her a stunted nod.

They walked out from under the haven provided by the tree. At the next corner, Lois saw a newsstand. A large group of people had milled around it, reading, speculating loudly.

She marched to the newsstand. When she arrived, she had to let go of Clark’s hand as she reached into her bag for her purse. She took out the coins, gave them to the vendor, took the paper, grasped Clark’s hand again, and walked away.

Half a minute later, they found an empty alley.

A minute after that, they were in the kitchen of the farmhouse.

Lois slapped the paper on the table. “How fast can you read?” she said.

Clark's eyes were already scanning the words. He turned the first page and continued reading.

When he looked up, his face was pale, but his expression wasn't as appalled as Lois had feared. "It says I died," he said.

Lois felt the vice-like grip of her tension ease a fraction. "Is there any indication of where the information came from?"

"A 'senior agent' is quoted."

"Menziez?" Lois speculated. "Hold on a minute; I need to talk to Scardino." She raced up to the bedroom, grabbed her agency cell phone from the drawer, and dialled as she scurried down the stairs. He answered within seconds. "What's happening?" Lois said as she reached the kitchen.

"Have you seen it?"

"Yes."

"I've just called the higher-up," Scardino said. "His nephew sent a letter to the paper, reporting an escape and claiming he was attempting the recapture."

"He's the one quoted?"

"Yes."

"Does he still believe he was killed in the compound?"

"I think so."

"But surely, he must be wondering. He must wonder if there is any truth in the letter. He must wonder how I became involved in the attempt to recapture the prisoner."

"He didn't ask any questions. He seemed distracted."

Lois felt the tension grip again. Distracted by what? What else was coming to threaten them? "What are we going to do?"

"Say nothing and hope it dies a natural death."

"Do you think it will?"

"It's possible. The story barely skims the surface. Perhaps she doesn't know anything else."

"Does she know the agent is dead?"

"Yes. But there's no mention of him or any details of his death."

"If she knows where he died, that's only a small step to us."

"The higher-up will want that kept out of the papers for his wife's sake. He won't want attempted rape added to the mix."

"Do you know why he didn't come to the party when the sheriff called?" Lois asked.

"No. He called to inform me of the death and asked that I go and arrange for transportation of the body. He didn't say anything else."

"You really think this could be all?" Lois asked, daring to hope.

"Do any locals read the city paper?"

Lois looked to Clark, who shook his head. "No," she replied into the phone.

"Good. The story doesn't give a timeframe, but we don't want anyone connecting this with the disappearance."

"What are we going to do?"

"We are going to ride it out," Scardino said. "This changes nothing. Tell him to hang in there."

"OK. Bye." Lois disconnected the cell and laid it on the table.

"You heard all that?"

Clark nodded.

She stepped up to him and folded her arms around his neck, hugging him closely. "We'll be all right," she said. "We're together. We'll be all right."

She could feel the trepidation straining the muscles of his body. She held him for a long time, hoping it would dissipate. When he didn't relax, she backed away and looked up with a smile. "No one recognised you," she said. "Around the newsstand, they were all looking at the photo. You were right there, yet no one thought you were the person in the photo."

"Did you hear what they were saying?" Clark asked.

"No," Lois said. "I just wanted to get a paper and get out of there."

"They were saying how evil I looked. They were scared. Even though they think I'm dead, they were scared of what I could have done to them. They said -"

Lois put her fingers over his mouth. "What could they tell from a

photo?" she said.

"They could tell that I'm different. And because of that, they found it easy to believe the worst about me."

Lois turned from him and picked up the paper. "This is how you looked when I first saw you," she said. "This is how you looked when I walked into your cell. This is how you looked when I washed your hair. This is how you looked when we arranged our first date." She tossed the paper onto the table. "Were my actions the actions of someone who thought you were evil?"

"But you're different. You're -"

"Then we're a good match," Lois said. "You're worried because you're different. But as you've just said, I'm different, too."

"Lois ... " His gaze settled on the paper, and she saw the agony of rejection sear his expression.

"Is there much detail?" she asked. "About your time in the cell?"

"Nothing accurate," he said. "It reads as if it were nothing more than a high-security prison."

Lois picked up the paper again. "Take this into the barn and burn it," she said. "We don't want anyone seeing it here."

"Don't you want to read it first?"

Lois snorted. "No," she said. "I have better things to do with my time."

"It says I wanted to rule the world. To conquer this planet and kill its people. It says I'm inhuman, and vicious, and -"

She ran her hand down his chest. "The reporter is just parroting Moyne," she said. "And he parroted Trask. I love you, and I know they are wrong."

Clark took the newspaper from her. "I'll get rid of this," he said.

He walked out of the door, and Lois watched him, wishing that erasing the impact of the story could be as easy as destroying the newspaper.

Part 27

Eric Menziez stared at the front page of the Daily Planet.

Overall, he was satisfied.

The alien was dead. The threat was past. The public would speculate, but they wouldn't panic.

Rhodes hadn't revealed her original source — she hadn't mentioned Neville's name in any context. She'd portrayed the agency as being reasonably competent in difficult circumstances. She hadn't even raised awkward questions demanding justification for the imprisonment.

The story hinted at bigger revelations to come — which Eric figured explained her compliance.

He shrugged.

It mattered little now.

If there was an edition of the Daily Planet in two days, the existence or otherwise of an alien being was not going to be on the front page.

Eric picked up the photo taken on Malcolm's fifth birthday and gazed at the little boy. The world had seemed so bright then, so full of promise. How could it end like this?

Clark was quiet throughout the afternoon and into the evening. Lois felt as if he had slipped away, beyond the reach of her love and support.

She'd smiled often.

His answering efforts had been hollow.

She'd talked to him. She'd insisted that the Daily Planet story would have a short lifespan. By tomorrow, something else would have taken over the headlines, and the possibility that an alien had lived and died among them would slide into folklore history.

But nothing she'd said had been able to disperse the dark sense of foreboding that had enveloped Clark since he'd seen the headline.

Recalling what he'd said about enjoying her touch, Lois had instigated physical contact at every opportunity. She had left her floundering novel and wandered into the barn — for the sole purpose of putting her hand on Clark's arm and asking how he was doing.

She'd hovered in the kitchen, probably getting in the way as she brushed past him — casually placing her hand on his back or shoulder or chest — so many times, he must have felt as if he were cooking in a crowded restaurant instead of a farmhouse kitchen in Kansas.

Nothing had worked.

Alien.

That one word had such power. The power to isolate. The power to ostracise. The power to stir up hatred and fear.

Lois's thoughts kept leaping forward to when they would retire to the bedroom for the night. What would happen then? Would that be her chance to connect with him? Or would Clark be unreachable? Would he be unwilling to answer questions? Perhaps the back massages would work again.

Although, what he really needed . . .

What *she* really needed was far more than a back massage.

Lois gave up on her novel — it was impossible to write a ticked-off heroine when the hero kept morphing into Clark, and all Lois wanted to do was give him a hug. She turned off the computer and smiled to Clark, who was — ostensibly — reading a book. "I'm going to bed," she said, hoping that was a sufficiently clear invitation.

"Goodnight," he said.

Lois sat next to him on the couch. She put her hand on his thigh — just above his knee. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said. But he didn't sound all right. His detachment took her back to the first night after they'd left the cell.

"All they know is that there was an alien," she said. "They think he's dead. You're alive. There is absolutely no reason to link that story with you."

"Menzies has to realise that I'm not dead," Clark said desolately. "He has to. Even if Moynes didn't tell him directly, he has to know that Moynes was chasing me when he came to Smallville. That implicates you. By extension, it implicates Clark Kent. And that could mean trouble for my mother."

"Clark, at this stage, if it means trouble for your mom, it means someone knows where she is and knows she has a connection with you. That could give us a hint as to her whereabouts."

Clark nodded slowly, but he didn't look at all encouraged. "I'll be up soon," he said. "I just want to sit and think for a while."

"You've been sitting and thinking all evening," Lois said, hoping he would smile at her tone.

"I'll be up soon," he said as if her words hadn't even registered.

Lois squeezed his hand. Then she left him alone and walked up the stairs to the bathroom.

He's evil.

You can see it in his eyes.

Look at him. He's a monster. He could do anything.

He's not even human. He looks like a wild animal.

I'm glad he's dead. We could never be safe if he were still alive.

The words he had heard at the newsstand hacked through Clark's mind.

He was different. He didn't belong here. They didn't want him. They were scared of him. They were sure he had come to dominate and destroy.

Trask was right. Moynes was right. There was no place for him on this planet.

Clark closed the book; he hadn't read one word. He checked that the doors were locked and trudged up the stairs. Lois was still in the bathroom. He went into his childhood bedroom and closed the door. He slumped on the bed and looked around at all the familiar things he had once thought he would never see again.

Many nights during his childhood, he had lain on this bed and tormented himself with fears that he could never be a regular guy. But not even the worst of his imaginings had prepared him to wake up one summer morning and by nightfall have been brutally captured, experienced excruciating pain, and be overwrought with worry about what may have befallen his parents.

Then had come the nightmare of abuse, pain, guilt, and abject hopelessness. They had tried to break him. Many times, Clark had been sure they had succeeded. Then there would be the rare day when no one came into his prison. Or a day when he'd been exposed to the rods, but not bashed.

And he would recover enough to find a way to cling to his sanity.

He'd figured out quickly that Trask was paranoid. Delusional. His hatred came from fear. His compulsion came from the desire to protect his people. He did what he felt he had to do.

But Moynes. Moynes had been sick. Evil. Deranged. Clark had never been convinced that Moynes believed Trask's assertions of the coming alien invasion. But that hadn't inhibited Moynes. He had savoured his work and taken delight in concocting new ways to inflict suffering.

Clark clenched his hands and sank his forehead onto them as the memories assailed him.

A knock sounded on the door. He leapt from the bed. He reached for the doorknob with a hand that shook. He opened the door.

"The bathroom's free," Lois said.

"O...OK. Thanks." He hoped she would leave him alone.

She didn't. She stepped forward. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yeah."

Her hand cupped his upper arm, and she eyed him with heart-squeezing compassion. "What can I do to help?"

"Nothing. I'm fine."

"You are not fine, Clark," Lois said.

"You didn't hear them."

"Have you considered that if you didn't have super-hearing, you might not have heard them either?"

"They were right there," he said tightly. "They were looking at the photograph of the ogre and -"

"They don't know you."

"They know I'm different. That's enough for them to be scared of me."

"Clark," Lois said. "Come to bed. We'll talk. I can rub your back."

Clark shook his head. "No, Lois," he said vehemently. "Not tonight. I can't do it tonight."

"Why not?"

"Because ... because ..."

"After what happened today, I think you need our time together more than ever."

"No."

"Why not, Clark?" Lois said as her voice began to rise. "Why are you letting them win?"

"I'm not *letting* them win," he said, matching her tone and volume. "They've already won."

"They haven't won," Lois said emphatically. "And they can't win — not unless we let them."

"They've taken my mother," he cried. "They killed my father. They took seven years of my life. They changed me. They polluted me."

"I can't speak about who you used to be, but I don't think you've changed all that much," Lois said. "They couldn't change you. Not the important things. That's why they didn't win. That's why we aren't going to let them win."

"How can you say that?" he flared. "How can you think that? After what's been happening the past few days?"

Lois looked confused. "I don't understand," she said more quietly. "If anything, the past few days have shown me how remarkably whole you are. I was hurting — and you were there for me. You showed me more empathy than any supposedly normal person could have done."

"I'm not talking about that," he said.

"Then what are you talking about?"

"The nights. The 'bedroom therapy'."

Her confusion deepened. "I thought you were enjoying that," she said.

"It's not about enjoying it. It's about the fact that we even have to

do it.”

“You don’t want to do it?”

“Lois, you’ve been incredibly patient and understanding, but nothing changes the fact that you are a beautiful and sexy woman, and I am in love with you, and the thought of doing anything more than massaging your back terrifies me.”

“But that’s why we’re taking it slowly,” she said. “That’s why we’re getting used to each other.”

“But you are assuming it will progress, aren’t you? You think that we’ll work towards full intimacy. That’s what you’re hoping for.”

“Eventually,” she admitted. “But I already told you I am willing to wait as long as it takes.”

“It’s never going to happen,” Clark said. “You should accept that.”

“Why?” Lois said.

“Because I can’t forget.”

“You’ve been out of the cell for just over a week,” Lois said.

“Give yourself some time.”

“Time won’t make any difference. Nothing is going to change this.”

Lois put her other hand on his arm, surrounding him. “Tell me why,” she said. “Tell me what they did to you.”

“No.”

“Tell me, Clark. Whatever it is -”

“No.”

“Clark, you’ll never heal if you lock it away.”

“I will never heal.”

“You will. You just need some time to -”

“You think I should go for counselling?” Clark said bitterly. “Do you know a counsellor who specialises in alien mental health?”

“That’s why I’m trying to help you,” she said. “That’s why we’re doing this together.”

“I don’t want to do it anymore.”

“I agree.”

Shock rocketed through Clark. Lois had given up on him. Wasn’t that what he wanted? Wasn’t it? “Then we’re agreed,” he said. “I’ll sleep in here from now on.”

“No,” Lois said. “No. That wasn’t what I meant. I think we should skip the therapy, and -”

“No.”

“Why not? You said you’re in love with me. You know that I love you.”

“No, Lois.”

“Why not?”

“No.”

Lois turned towards his parents’ room and pointed. “We go in there. We brush aside all of the trash that Moyne inflicted on you, and we -”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I can’t.”

“Can’t?” she challenged. “Or don’t want to?”

Clark couldn’t believe she had asked that. “Don’t want to?” he uttered. “How can you even think that? How can -”

“Then kiss me. And kiss me again. And just let it happen. By tomorrow morning, it won’t matter what they say. It won’t -”

“It will always matter,” he shouted.

“Did Moyne rape you?”

“No!”

“Then what did he do?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“We’ve gone too far, Clark,” Lois said ominously. “We’ve gone way too far. If I leave now and go into that room, and you stay in here, neither of us is going to sleep. We’ll both -”

“There is no alternative. I can’t keep sleeping in the same bed as you.”

“Why?”

“Because ...”

“Is it because you think about what you’d like us to do?”

He wanted to lie. He wanted to deny the part of him that yearned to be normal.

“It is, isn’t it?” Lois demanded. “That’s why this is so difficult for you. I’m serious about this, Clark. I’m not going to pull away from it. I’m ready to -”

“Your friend was raped.”

“So?” she said. “That has nothing to do with us. Nothing at all. That was evil and cruel domination. This is love and acceptance.”

“How can you brush that aside?”

“How can you make it relevant here?”

“I can’t separate them,” he said. “I’ve tried. I can’t.”

“This isn’t about Linda,” Lois said. “This is about what happened in the cell.”

“Leave it, Lois.”

“You think I should leave you?” Her vehemence rose again. “You think I should just walk out of this room and go to the other bed and ... and then what? Fall asleep? Just like that? Knowing that you’ll be in here, torturing yourself with memories and reliving the lies that Moyne told you.”

“I want to be alone.”

“Whatever Moyne did, *he* did it. You didn’t.”

“Lois,” he begged. “Please ... please leave this.”

“And what happens tomorrow? What happens tomorrow night? We are going to stay together; we will get back to this point — perhaps over and over again — so why not just deal with it tonight?”

“I can’t.”

“You can,” she said. “If you trust me, you can do it.”

“Don’t make this about trust.”

“Clark, don’t let him rob you of one more minute. Don’t let him take away more than he already has.”

“I can’t be who you want me to be.”

“You are exactly who I want you to be.”

“I can never be a real man. Not in the bedroom.”

The torrent of words stopped abruptly. Lois sighed. She looked down at the floor. She took her hands from his arms. “Tell me what he did,” she said quietly. “And let us deal with it together.”

Her quiet tone jarred against his self-loathing. There was no way out; he was hopelessly cornered, and Lois was never going to let him get away. “He called me an animal,” Clark said with wretched surrender. “Every night, he called me an animal. He said that if I had ever been with a woman, that would be an abomination. He told me — in sickening detail — what he’d done with women, all the while telling me that I could never have that because I was an animal. He brought in photographs and forced me to look at them.” Clark shuddered. “Horrible photos.”

Lois’s hands reached for him. The softness of her touch caressed his neck. “He was wrong,” she said with hushed conviction. “He was so wrong.”

“Everything he talked about ... the fact that *he* was talking about it ... that makes it dirty. Dishonourable. Wrong.”

“With Moyne, it *was* wrong,” Lois said as her fingers skimmed softly across his skin. “But with you and me, it’s different. It’s right. And beautiful.”

“Not if I’m an animal.”

“Moyne said you were an animal. Moyne. And perhaps Trask. I don’t think that. Scardino doesn’t think that. The people of Smallville don’t -”

“The people of Smallville don’t know me — not really.”

“Yes, they do. They’ve watched you for over twenty years. And now you’ve come home, they’re welcoming you. They know -”

“They don’t know the truth.”

“You’re from another planet,” Lois said. “That doesn’t make you an animal. It doesn’t make you less than human.”

“I was less than human for seven years. Nothing can change that.”

“We can change how it affects us now.”

“I can’t, Lois,” Clark said with a sigh of defeat. “I’m so sorry, but I

can't."

He saw the moment that she finally believed him. Her hands dropped, and moisture flooded her eyes. "You are the man I love," she said, her voice quivering with rising tears. "You are the man I will love for the rest of my life."

She spun around and walked into the other bedroom, but she didn't shut the door. Clark heard her climb into bed. He heard her shivering. He heard her gulp with the strain of holding back her tears.

Clark shut the door of his bedroom and collapsed onto the bed.

His tears rose, hot and bitter and contaminated with hopelessness.

He let them come. He let them blister his mind and lacerate his heart. He let them rattle his body.

Because it was better than listening the pain he had caused Lois.

After Eric's evening visit to Phoebe, he returned to his office. He needed whisky, and Phoebe had never liked alcohol in the house.

He needed to think.

He needed to be alone.

Alone where he didn't have to pretend that everything was normal. That life would continue as it always had.

Stephen Daitch — an acquaintance from college who had become EPRAD's Chief Scientist — had called another three times today. They had kept in touch over the years — not often, never close enough to be considered a friendship, but both men had been astute enough to know that the other could be trusted and sometimes had information that could be shared to mutual benefit.

The three calls today hadn't changed anything — merely reported on a situation gradually and unequivocally sliding towards the coming cataclysm.

A monstrous asteroid was heading towards Earth. They had been tracking it for days, checking and re-checking their calculations, always hoping for a miracle.

But it wasn't going to happen.

They were travelling on paths that would collide — the estimate being sixteen minutes past eleven on Wednesday morning.

Daitch said government officials had decided on a public announcement tomorrow evening. In one sense, the timing was crucial. In another, it didn't matter.

Nothing did.

Human effort was not enough.

Eric downed the remainder of his whisky and refilled his glass.

Their planet was hurtling through space — towards an unavoidable destiny of destruction.

This was the end.

Even if some people survived the actual contact, Daitch was convinced that the delicate balance needed to sustain life would be irreparably damaged.

Eric realised he had been staring into the depths of his whisky for a long time. He blinked, and his eyes fell on the Daily Planet — and the photograph of the alien.

Did his people have advanced technology?

Did they have ways to detour an asteroid?

Even if they did — it was to no avail.

The alien was dead.

Eric opened the paper and re-read the story. Ms Rhodes hadn't even alluded to Moyne. Eric didn't think Phoebe read the papers much, but even if she heard about this, she shouldn't be upset by it.

Neville had told Rhodes that he'd gone to hunt down the alien. It was strange that he hadn't even considered the alternative to escape — that the operation had concluded due to the alien's death.

But if his target had been the alien, how had he ended up in the same place as Lois Lane? In Kansas? That was too much of a coincidence.

Unless the alien had escaped, and she had been chasing him, too.

No. Scardino had brought in the ashes from the cremation of the alien's body.

Neville — his mind doused with the drugs — had gotten it wrong.

Eric took a gulp from his whisky. As it burned down his throat, he closed the newspaper. It would be a mistake to make assumptions based on Neville's actions.

He stood from his chair and rinsed his glass. As he locked his office, he couldn't help reviewing his life. Phoebe. Malcolm. His job. His years out in the field.

All meaningless.

All would be snuffed out.

In just a few short hours.

~ Tuesday ~

Eric Menzies was thumping his large fist into Daniel Scardino's door before the sun rose the next morning. He waited, his natural impatience escalated by a sleepless night and a mind that had constantly churned over the impending disaster.

Eric lifted his hand and banged again.

"Hold on," came an irritated voice from the other side of the door. It opened, and Scardino stood there, dressed only in a pair of jeans.

"Uh, Mr Menzies," he said. "I ... I wasn't expecting you."

"Clearly," Eric said as he marched into Scardino's house without waiting for an invitation.

Scardino scurried behind him. "I'll ... ah, just get a shirt."

Eric didn't comment as he waited with limited patience for Scardino to return.

He did, still buttoning up a wrinkly shirt.

"Is the alien still alive?" Eric barked.

Scardino's hands fell from his shirt, although the two top buttons still hung loose. "No," he said.

Eric scrutinised his face. Scardino wouldn't dare lie to him. Scardino wouldn't dare disobey a directive. He wouldn't. "Why did Moyne tell Rhodes the alien had escaped and he was going to recapture him?"

"Moyne had already left the operation," Scardino said. "He shouldn't have known about the death of the alien."

Eric detected the hint of accusation in Scardino's tone — as if he were suggesting that Eric had used the family connection to pass on agency information. Eric glared — partly to see if Scardino would melt and partly to give himself time to assess the surprising possibility that the younger agent might have — finally — developed a backbone.

If he had, it was possible he had disobeyed the order to kill the alien.

And if he had disobeyed, he was lying now.

And if he were lying now, the world had a chance.

A slim chance. But a chance.

"Would you care to offer a hypothesis about how Moyne just happened to run across Lois Lane's path in his quest to find the alien?"

Scardino didn't falter. "Moyne should have been at his new assignment," he said. "He wasn't; therefore, it's possible he returned to Metropolis, looking for Ms Lane."

"Moyne has been removed from operations before. Why go after Lane in particular?"

"There was an incident prior to Moyne leaving. Ms Lane said he tried to push her into the cell without a rod. Moyne said she had wanted to enter the cell, and he was trying to stop her."

Ms Lane's side of that incident was news to Eric. "What happened?" he asked.

"Moyne was knocked out."

"I know that. He went to the hospital. Did they go into the cell?"

"Yes."

Neville had said he'd been knocked out when he'd tripped in the scuffle *before* entering the cell. "What did the alien do? Did he knock out Moyne?"

"Not in the way you're thinking."

"How else could he do it?" Eric asked, exasperation increasing the volume of his voice.

"Moyne charged him and knocked himself out."

That was surprising. Not that Neville had lied, but from everything

Eric had heard about the alien, he would have expected Neville to have been torn to shreds. In the context of the current situation, it was positive news. Extremely positive news.

“I think Moyne returned to Metropolis looking for Ms Lane,” Scardino said. “He went to the compound and found it was gone. He decided that the alien and Ms Lane had escaped together and set out to hunt them down.”

That was close enough to Menzies’ assumption. “Why Kansas?”

“Moyne was an agent — and a skilled one. If he wanted to find someone, he probably could. And Ms Lane was on vacation. I doubt she was making much effort to hide her tracks.”

It all sounded reasonable. Which left two options — either Neville had gotten it wrong and the alien was dead or Scardino’s development of a backbone had also fostered a sense of loyalty and the ability to lie convincingly.

There was little point in trying to outmanoeuvre Scardino. Eric took a step forward, towering over the smaller man. “I don’t have the time to have this out with you,” he said.

Scardino looked up, and Eric sensed relief in his expression.

“So I’m going to tell you what is really happening in the world. Our planet is on course to collide with a massive asteroid. It will happen at sixteen minutes past eleven tomorrow morning. The force of the collision will kill millions. It could possibly push us closer to the sun. In short, those people who aren’t crushed will be cooked.”

All colour had bleached from Scardino’s face.

Eric pressed home his advantage. “Every notable scientist has been frantically working on this since they first became aware of the danger. EPRAD has fired three missiles at the asteroid. Two were completely ineffectual, and the other one missed. They are planning two more, but the overwhelming belief is that there is nothing we can do.”

Scardino’s mouth had dropped open.

“I figure the alien is our only chance,” Eric said. “Perhaps he has knowledge of advanced technology. Perhaps he knows of something we can do to avert this collision.”

Scardino stepped back, pulling his hand through his hair. “How do I know you’re telling the truth?” he said — in what was a virtual admission.

“It has been decided to inform the public at five o’clock this afternoon. Obviously, EPRAD has been hoping such an announcement would be unnecessary. But the people deserve to know — deserve a chance to spend their final night with their loved ones.”

“That still doesn’t prove what you claim.”

Eric stepped closer, wanting to intimidate. “If you want, I can take to you EPRAD. You can see for yourself. You can talk to Daitch, the head scientist.”

Scardino stepped back with a whoosh of breath. “How do you know this?”

“Daitch and I went to college together. The relationship has been ... advantageous ... to both of us over the years.”

Scardino nodded, his face lined with shock and confusion.

“Meet me in my office in an hour,” Eric ordered. “And if you want to see tomorrow’s sunset, I suggest you come armed with the truth about the alien and a workable plan to contact him.”

Daniel stared at the door Menzies had slammed.

An asteroid. It felt like a scene from a horror movie.

Daniel turned from the door, went to his safe, dialled the code, and the door swung open. He took out the video tape from the compound. The one that had recorded the encounter between Lois, Moyne ... and Mr Kent.

Daniel pushed it into his VCR and rewound it for a few seconds. He pressed play and watched as the scene rolled out on his television. He winced as Moyne — on top of Lois — pinned down her legs, took the gun from her ankle holster, sprang to his feet, and aimed the gun directly at her.

There was a blur of movement, and Mr Kent was standing over

Lois. Then there was a pause, followed by Moyne charging Mr Kent. Daniel rewound the tape and played it in slow motion.

Twice.

Three times.

Four times.

By then, he was sure.

Moyne had fired the weapon at Lois.

From close range.

But Lois hadn’t been hurt.

And the only possible explanation was that Mr Kent had caught the bullet.

Scardino had heard of the alien’s frightening speed and incredible strength. They had been a major part of the rationale for the need to keep him imprisoned. During his initial interview with Lois, Daniel had spouted all the beliefs, not really caring whether they were true or not.

But it mattered now.

Was it possible that Mr Kent could save the planet? Not with advanced knowledge, but with his phenomenal strength?

Daniel watched the tape again.

There was no doubt. Mr Kent had saved Lois’s life.

But catching a fired bullet was a different matter from pushing an asteroid off course.

Could he do it? Even if he could, was it possible to prepare him in the short time they had?

And even if he could ... the biggest question of all remained.

Would he?

Would he be willing to save the planet that had treated him so abominably?

Eric was parking his car at Phoebe’s care facility when his cell phone rang. “Menzies.”

“It’s Scardino. What can I offer him in return?”

Him? The alien? “Anything.”

“Anything?”

“Anything.”

“You don’t have the authority to offer him anything.”

Scardino *had* grown a backbone. “The President has offered Daitch and his team of scientists anything if they can save the earth.”

“Will that offer extend to an alien?”

Eric heard the slight emphasis on the word ‘alien’ and felt shame burn through his conscience. “Of course it will,” he snapped.

“I have your word? Whatever I promise, you, the government, the President, will deliver?”

“You have my word.”

“I won’t be meeting you,” Scardino said. “I’m going to Kansas. Get me a private flight leaving from the Metropolis Air Base in half an hour.”

Part 28

Clark sat atop an ice-capped mountain and looked down upon the cold and bleak world where winter reigned for most of the year.

He felt empty.

Empty of hope.

Empty of answers.

Empty of understanding.

Last night ... last night had been a disaster. Clark couldn’t believe the extent of his bumbling ineptitude. It could not have been more of a debacle if he’d purposely set out to ruin everything he had with Lois.

He hadn’t even managed to protect his secrets. Now she knew some of what he’d been subjected to in the cell. The taunts. The ridicule. The insults. The derision. The ruthless attack on the essence of who he was as a man.

He’d dreaded it more than the physical beatings. When darkness had fallen outside, the door of the cell had opened, and Moyne had stood there.

If he’d been holding a rod, Clark had felt a measure of relief. It had meant that his torment would be physical.

But if Moyne hadn't been holding a rod, Clark had known that far worse would be coming. Words. Pictures. Graphic descriptions. And overriding it all, the constant assertion that Clark was an animal who wasn't worthy to even think of such things.

Lois was so beautiful. So pure. So perfect. So trusting.

If he had agreed to her suggestion — to begin kissing her and allow things to progress — so much could have gone wrong. What if he hurt her physically? What if he did something that allowed her to see through the veneer of his counterfeit humanness and glimpse the animal that lurked underneath?

His body had been so tempted. His mind had been so torn. His heart had been so afraid.

Lois hadn't managed to fall asleep until well after midnight, and consequently, she awoke late. The house was silent. She found a note on the kitchen table: *'I have gone to search for Mom. I'll be back around lunchtime, Clark.'*

She made breakfast and took it to the computer, trying to convince herself that this was a good opportunity to get a large slab of the first chapter written.

Twenty minutes later, her toast and coffee were cold, and she had written one line. One poorly constructed sentence that was nothing more than a stain on her computer screen.

Thoughts of Clark racked her mind.

His pain plagued her heart.

Last night ... had been a mistake. She'd felt pressured into doing *something*. When it had become obvious that Clark wasn't responding to her words, her instinct had been to try action.

That had been a big mistake.

Lois started to sigh, but it turned into a sob as misgivings drove deep furrows through her conviction that love and time could heal Clark. When he'd been in the cell, she'd believed that freedom would unlock more than his physical imprisonment — she'd thought it would unshackle him from all the effects of what he had suffered.

It hadn't.

In some ways, he was still a prisoner.

And for the first time, Lois had doubts that anything could truly liberate him.

Time, she reminded herself. Time and love and patience.

That plan had some merit, but it didn't even begin to answer what she should do when Clark came home. Should she pretend nothing untoward had happened?

If she did that, what would happen at bedtime?

Would they go to their separate rooms?

Clark needed time — she knew that. But would time alone be enough?

If she backed off, would he slide further away? If she stopped pressuring him, would he take that as her agreement that a physical relationship wasn't possible for them? Would he believe she no longer found him attractive?

The sound of a motor came from the driveway, and Lois stood from the desk. She ran up the stairs and to the front window. An unfamiliar car came to a stop next to the big cedar, and Daniel Scardino got out.

Lois's heart sank into a stomach turned to quicksand.

Scardino's appearance could only mean one thing; the Daily Planet reporter had printed — or intended to print — another story, disclosing more details about the alien.

Lois turned from the window as Scardino began to walk along the path to the front door. She flew down the stairs and opened the door before he knocked.

Scardino's face was puckered with anxiety. He hadn't shaved, and his dark stubble contrasted with his pale cheeks. Something was wrong. Terribly wrong.

Lois laid her hand on her chest, hoping to calm her pounding heart. She didn't want Clark to come. Whatever had happened, she wanted to be the one to tell him. She wanted the chance to prepare

him.

"Come in," she said to Scardino.

He didn't answer verbally, signalling that he knew she knew this wasn't a social call. He stopped in the living room, looking like a man carrying the burden of the world.

"Tell me," Lois said.

"There's a massive asteroid on a collision course with the earth," he said, his words rushed and quivery. "It could destroy everything. Those not killed immediately will face insurmountable changes to the environment."

"Why?" Lois finished her question silently. ... *are you telling me?* She knew. They wanted Clark to save them. They'd tried everything else and figured he was their only chance.

"Do you think he would be willing to at least listen?" Scardino said desperately.

Would he? "What do you want from him?"

"I want to ask if he thinks there is any way to divert the asteroid."

"You mean by throwing something at it?" Lois asked incredulously.

"I don't know," Scardino said as he ran an unsteady hand across his forehead. "EPRAD has tried everything humanly possible. They can't stop this. We need his help."

"When?" Lois asked. "When is this collision supposed to happen?"

"Eleven-sixteen tomorrow morning."

They had less than twenty-four hours. "How do you know?"

"Menzies."

"Menzies knows the alien didn't die in the cell?" Lois squeaked.

"Rhodes, the reporter from the Daily Planet, told Menzies that Moyne's letter said he was hunting down the alien. Menzies kept Moyne's name out of the article, but it was enough for him to suspect the alien hadn't died."

And it was a completely different story now that they needed him, Lois thought. "So Menzies came to you, and you folded," she said scornfully.

"No, I didn't," Scardino said. "I reiterated that the alien is dead. But then Menzies told me about the asteroid."

"And you believed him?" Lois exclaimed. "It didn't occur to you that it might be just a story to wangle the truth out of you?"

"I believed him," Scardino said. "It seemed to me that he was telling the truth."

"He's been an agent for thirty years," she said scathingly. "If nothing else, he should know how to lie convincingly."

"He was scared," Scardino said. "He tried not to show it, but he was scared. He looked like a man who knew he was facing death."

Lois scrutinised Scardino. He was telling the truth. And as much as she didn't want to admit it, her gut said that Menzies was telling the truth, too. "There would be conditions," she said.

"Name them," Scardino said quickly. "Anything."

"On whose authority?"

"The President of the United States of America."

"I'm assuming this will become public? If it hasn't already?"

"There is to be an announcement at five o'clock today."

"But EPRAD scientists can't have been the only ones to notice it."

Scardino grunted as if he hadn't thought of that. "I assume EPRAD has asked for the cooperation of those with credibility, and anyone else is easily dismissed as a crackpot."

"So it's possible this is known outside of EPRAD?" Lois questioned.

"Possible," he admitted. "But I don't know anything about that."

Lois paced a couple of steps as her mind worked feverishly. When Clark knew about this, he was going to facing a monumental battle — his innate penchant to protect warring with his crushed self-confidence. Which would be stronger? Before last night, she would have been sure the former would prevail. But now ...

"If he helps you, Clark would have absolute discretion regarding what is made public about him — if anything," Lois said.

“OK.”

“If Clark should choose to do this secretly, those who know will be kept to an absolute minimum and nothing of his part in this will ever be revealed publicly.”

“Menzies knows and trusts the head scientist at EPRAD. Together, they could select one or two others who can be trusted.”

“Should Clark want the alien officially acknowledged, you will ensure that his life as Clark Kent is protected and that there is never even a hint of association between the two.”

“The public thinks the alien is dead.”

“I’m sure Menzies can come up with a plausible cover story,” Lois said acerbically.

Scardino nodded his assent.

“Menzies will do whatever is necessary to keep people like Rhodes from ferreting into the past,” Lois said.

“We can do that,” Scardino said. “I know the agency has established a relationship with the Daily Planet’s editor.”

Lois shot him a caustic look questioning why the ‘relationship’ hadn’t prevented the alien story from being printed. However, she had more important considerations right now. “Should Clark choose to go public, there will be official recognition from the governments, EPRAD, and everyone else with any influence that he is welcome to live on this planet. That he is not, and never will be, a threat to our safety. That Trask and Moyne and the agency got it very wrong when they imprisoned him.”

“Naturally.”

“And no details of the depravity of his imprisonment will ever be made public.”

“The records have been destroyed.”

“There will be an apology for the years of imprisonment. And an official statement that Clark did not kill the two agents.”

“Of course,” Scardino said. “And there is also the matter of compensation.”

“Compensation? You mean financial compensation?”

“Yes. Name a figure.”

“I’m not sure Clark -”

“A man of his age has usually established a career and is on the way to financial security,” Scardino noted.

“OK,” Lois said, thinking about the computer Clark had bought her and wondering again how deeply it had eaten into the money from Wayne Irig. “That sounds fair.”

“How much?”

“You’d have to talk to Clark.”

“All right.”

“Furthermore, you would provide everything needed to corroborate his identity as Clark Kent — birth certificate, adoption papers, everything.”

Scardino nodded. “Anything else?”

“Yes,” Lois said. “You will locate Clark’s mother and find out what happened to his father.”

“I’ve been making inquiries,” Scardino said.

“I’m not asking for inquiries,” Lois said. “I’m telling you that you *will* find her.”

He nodded. “Anything else?”

“That is my list. Clark, of course, can add anything else.”

“Of course.” Scardino glanced around the room. “Is he here?”

“No. He’s out looking for his mother.”

Scardino grimaced. “When do you expect him home?”

Lois looked at her watch. “He shouldn’t be much longer than an hour.”

“I need to return to Metropolis to inform Menzies personally,” Scardino said. “You can contact me via the security cell phone.”

“I figure you will want Clark to come to Metropolis?”

“Yes,” Scardino said. “Our best chance is a collaborative effort between Clark and the scientists who have been working on this thing around the clock.”

“Clark Kent can’t be seen entering EPRAD,” Lois said.

“Will you come to Metropolis with him?”

“That’s up to Clark — but probably, yes.”

“He can fly long distances?”

“Yes.”

“With you?”

“Yes. If we come, we’ll fly to Metropolis.”

“You can’t come to the base like that,” Scardino said. “There is too much surveillance. Too many radars.”

“OK. We’ll fly to my father’s home and drive my Jeep to the EPRAD base.”

“I have the details in your file. I’ll get your vehicle passed so you get through security without any difficulties.”

“My presence is to remain strictly confidential. There must be no public connection between the alien and Lois Lane. The fact that I worked on that operation is to be wiped from all records.”

“I think that has already happened,” Scardino said.

This was sounding as if Clark’s decision had been made for him. “I haven’t agreed to Clark doing anything,” Lois said. “I’ve agreed to alert him to the situation.”

“Do you think he will help?” Scardino asked pitifully.

“I don’t know,” Lois replied.

“Is he bitter? About what happened to him?”

“About what we did to him?” Lois corrected. “No. Not bitter. Damaged. Hurt. Broken. That about covers it.”

“We got it h...horribly wrong,” Scardino said.

There was nothing to be gained from belabouring the point now. “I’ll talk to him.”

“Thank you,” Scardino said. “That is far more than we deserve.”

“It is,” Lois said.

“I have to get back to the airport,” he said. “An Air Force jet is waiting for me. I’m here as a Jack Gumbleton, presidential aide, checking out possible rural towns for a presidential visit next year.”

“You were disguised? When you were at the airport?”

“Yes. It’s in the car.”

“Why did you visit this particular farm?”

“My tyre went flat at the bottom of your driveway.”

“It did?”

A debilitated smile emerged through Scardino’s anxiety. “Slow leak,” he said. “I need to get out there and change it.”

“No loose ends, huh?”

“No.” He held out his hand. “Thank you, Lois,” he said. “Without you, we would have no hope.”

She shook his hand. “I haven’t guaranteed Clark will do anything,” she said.

“Without you, there would be no Clark to ask.”

Scardino moved to the door. He opened it and then turned back to her. “I hope to see you later today. If not ...” He enclosed her in the briefest of hugs. “... thank you — for showing me how this job should be done.”

Lois was surprised by the hug and stunned by his words. However, he didn’t wait for a reply but turned away and walked down the path.

She went up to the bedroom and waited until Scardino had changed his tyre and driven away. “Clark?” she said. “Clark, I need you.”

She strained her ears, hoping to hear a footstep or a swish of air. She heard nothing. She decided to call more loudly.

“Cl -”

There was a sudden gust, and Clark walked through the doorway. He crossed the room quickly, clasped both of her arms, and looked down at her with concern creased through his expression. “Lois?” he said breathlessly. “What’s wrong, honey?”

It was the ‘honey’ that crumbled the staunch pillars of her tenacity. Lois collapsed into his wind-cooled chest, and Clark’s arms wrapped around her.

“Are you OK?” he murmured into her hair.

She backed away after only a few moments, refusing to allow herself to wallow in the comfort of his embrace. “Yes,” she said. “I’m

OK. But we need to talk.”

The cogs of Clark’s mind had slowly seized up as Lois had outlined the details of Scardino’s visit. Now, he felt as if every brain cell had fallen into an undignified heap somewhere around his throat.

They *wanted* him.

They had come to him to ask for his help.

“You don’t have to do anything,” Lois said quietly.

“Yes, I do,” he said. “If the asteroid crashes into the earth, I might be able to survive. But even with my help, you might not. And my mother won’t have my help.”

“What can you do?”

A few of his most resilient brain cells staggered to attention. “I’ll go now. To see if I can spot this asteroid. I need to know what I’m up against.”

“Clark!” She gripped his arm. “I’m scared. I’m scared for you.”

“I’ll be all right,” he said. “You kept telling me we’d be all right. And we will be.”

“What if . . . what if it’s too big? Too —”

Clark slid his fingertips across her temple and into her hair. “Lois,” he said as his hand came to rest on her neck. “I need you. We’re together, remember? I can’t do this without you. Please don’t think about what might happen. Please help me to be strong.”

She nodded and blew out a shivery breath. “Tell me what you want me to do.”

“While I’m gone, I want you to think this through. You know Scardino and Menzies. You’ve worked as an agent. I need you to decide how we can help without jeopardising our future.” He gently squeezed her shoulder. “Please help me,” he said. “I can try to face the asteroid, but the thought of dealing with people terrifies me.”

“You trust me to make the decisions for you?”

“Completely.”

“All right,” she said. “But there’s one decision we have to make together.”

“OK.”

“Do you want the people to know that the alien is alive and willing to use his strength to try to save their planet?”

Clark shook his head. “I don’t want anyone to know.”

“I understand why you feel like that,” Lois said. “But I’m not sure it’s the best way forward.”

“Why?”

“I think there’s a high risk of someone finding out. I doubt EPRAD astronomers are the only ones following this.”

“I . . . I’m not sure I could . . .”

“If the ‘alien’ makes an appearance — alive, powered, and cast as the hero who is our only hope — that will contradict the Daily Planet story and eliminate any lingering negativity. You being willing to use your powers to save the earth rather than dominate it will reduce Trask’s original supposition to what it was — the ravings of a lunatic.”

“What if they say I only saved Earth so there will be something for my fellow aliens to come and conquer?” Clark said, unable to keep the shadow of resentment from his tone.

“I’m thinking that perhaps this doesn’t need to be the last appearance of the hero.”

“No, Lois,” Clark said. “I cannot be some sort of flying circus act.”

“I’m not thinking of a circus act,” Lois said. “I’m thinking that there are a lot of times when your strength and your speed could save lives. You could make a stand against all the evil that was perpetrated against you. But you could do it by fighting for good.” She smiled and ran her hand down his jaw. “Because there is no other way Clark Kent could do it.”

“You mean that when something happens — a fire, or a car wreck, or a flood, or a robbery, or a kidnapping — I could fly in and help?”

“Exactly,” Lois said with a smile.

Clark shook his head. “I’m fast,” he said. “But I can’t be everywhere at once.”

“No one would expect you to be everywhere at once,” she said. “No one would expect you to save everyone. But every life saved would be using your special abilities in a way that would help the world to see you as you really are and would help you to understand that you have a place on this planet.”

“I couldn’t, Lois,” Clark said. “I couldn’t openly let people see how weird I am. And I’d have no life. People would come gawking at the farm gate, hoping to get a glimpse of the alien freak.”

Lois shook her head. “No,” she said. “You wouldn’t do this — any of this — as Clark Kent. We would keep the alien and Clark Kent as two completely separate entities. One is a Kansas farmer, human, regular guy, son of Martha and Jonathan Kent, and married to Lois Lane. The other is a super-powered guest from another planet.”

He couldn’t see how Lois’s proposal could be possible. “I can’t do that, Lois. I have to try to divert the asteroid. But that’s all.”

“I think you should choose somewhere — perhaps Metropolis, because you were imprisoned there. I think you should confine most of your rescues to that city. That will show goodwill. It will also mean you can still have a life here on the farm. Your mom and I will never be seen with the alien. We won’t go to Metropolis unless we visit with Clark.”

“Lois, the people of Smallville might not read the Daily Planet, but there is no way they could miss hearing about an alien in Metropolis. When they read that the alien was captured seven years ago and that Moyne was one of his guards and that he escaped a week ago — it’s not going to take them long to make the connection.”

“Moyne wasn’t mentioned in the news article,” Lois said. “We can be vague about how long the alien has been here — let them think he arrived on Earth just a short time before his capture. We don’t have to give specifics about how long he was imprisoned.”

Clark gave a rueful smile. “You’re already talking about him as if he’s someone other than me,” he said.

“He would be,” Lois said. “You would still be Clark. He would just be what you can do.”

“Do you really think it could work?” Clark said. “Do you really think that people won’t recognise me?”

“We’ll make a disguise,” she said. “We don’t have to worry about that now.”

But Clark couldn’t glimpse the future Lois was painting. “No,” he said decisively. “I think it would be better if no one knew except a couple of people at EPRAD. They can tell the reporters they fired a missile at the asteroid.”

“There’s another reason why you should consider allowing this to go public,” Lois said.

“What?” Clark asked, hoping she wasn’t about to raise something dire that he hadn’t even considered.

“Wherever your mom is, there’s a chance she reads the papers.”

The force of Lois’s words hit him. “You . . . you mean, perhaps she could find me instead of the other way around?”

Lois nodded eagerly. “If she sees a report about a strong, super-powered alien saving the world, she is going to know it’s you — whatever your disguise. If she’s being held somewhere, she can try to call out to you. At least she’ll know you’re all right.”

“But if she reads the papers, she’ll think I’m dead.”

Lois patted his arm. “Which is why you should do this openly. Then, she’ll know you’re not dead, and she’ll know you are trying to find her.”

Some of his lifelong aversion to publicly displaying his abilities melted away. He could stand the scrutiny, the questions, the scepticism, the prejudice if it meant his mom wasn’t worried about him. “All right,” Clark said. “Tell them I’ll do it openly but in a disguise. Tell them there is to be no link between Clark Kent and the alien.”

Lois smiled. “I know you can do this,” she said.

“No, I can’t,” Clark said. “Not unless you help me.”

“You know I will always be here for you.”

“Thanks.” His gratitude felt like such an insignificant token after

“It wasn’t your fault,” he said. “I let the newspaper story and the things I heard get to me. I let them bring back all the feelings from the cell.” His worded apology wasn’t enough. He had to show her that he meant it. “When this is over, would you mind if I moved back into the double bed with you?”

She grinned. “That would be wonderful, Clark. I missed you so much last night.”

He had pined for her. “And ... and perhaps we could continue the ‘therapy?’”

Her grin widened. “I would love that.”

More than anything, Clark didn’t want to leave now. After spending the night and morning away from Lois, he just wanted to be with her. Have lunch. Talk. Maybe even go to the bedroom for some afternoon therapy. “I have to go,” he said glumly. “I need to try to get a look at this asteroid.”

“How long will you be?”

“I don’t know. Half an hour; maybe more.”

“Do you want me to call Scardino and begin to work out the details?”

“Yes.” He put one hand her cheek. “And Lois,” he said. “I know we decided that the alien and Lois Lane have nothing to do with each other, but I need you to come to Metropolis with me this time. I can’t do this without you.”

She put her arms around his neck. “I’ll be there,” she said. “Will you promise me something?”

“OK.”

“Promise me you won’t try to deal with the asteroid now. Promise me you’ll come back.”

He hesitated. “The further away it is, the less I’ll have to push it off course.”

“You’re sure you’ll have to do it? You couldn’t launch a missile at it?”

“That’s a possibility. But I think they would have already tried that.”

She nodded, but there was still fear in her eyes. “Hold me?” she said.

Clark held her, breathing in her scent and allowing her essence to permeate through him. When he eased away, he looked into her still-anxious brown eyes. “I’ll be back as soon as I can,” he promised.

“OK.”

He turned away and sped out of the farmhouse, into the sky and beyond.

Lois dialled Scardino on the security cell phone, feeling as if Clark’s entire future rested in her hands. But she also felt a sense of calm. She could do this. More importantly, Clark could do this.

Perhaps this was what he was born to do. To be a guest on a planet that wasn’t his own, among people who were not his own, and help them.

Lois clung to that thought. Because if it were Clark’s destiny to be a super-powered hero on the earth, he would be all right when he met the asteroid. He would be all right. And the people of Earth would be all right.

“Hi,” Scardino said.

Lois could hear the whir of the airplane engines in the background. “We’ve decided,” she said. “It is to be done publicly but with a disguise. No one else is to know the connection. We’ll need a place to make the switch.”

“Will you be with him?”

“Yes.”

“Once you’re here, we need someone to oversee the ... transition. Your former colleague works as a security guard at EPRAD. He knows everything; he helped clear the cell at the compound.”

Former colleague? At the compound? It had to be Shadbolt. He knew? “Ah ...”

“We want to limit numbers,” Scardino said. “He seems ideal. He’s there. I’m sure we can trust him. There will be a lot of attention on the

higher-up — there always is. I’ll liaise. No one will think to check what a security guard is doing. And because the records have been destroyed, his work history won’t be known.”

But how would Clark feel about having to face Shadbolt? He would probably accept it if it meant one less person knew of his dual identities. “OK,” Lois said.

“See you soon. And thanks. To both of you.”

Lois hung up her cell.

Shadbolt knew. He’d helped Scardino arrange the cremation of Jonas and agreed to the pretence that it was the body of the alien.

Menzies knew.

Scardino knew.

Three people.

Could the secret be kept?

She trusted Evan. Scardino had covered for them when they’d escaped. Menzies? If he were committed to keeping the secret, he would be a powerful ally.

He had influential connections. He could bluster his way through almost anything. He’d protected Moyne. Would he now protect Clark’s secret with that same vigilance?

Part 29

Lois awaited Clark’s return, trying to control the two spirals of fear that were twisting through her insides.

Her world — the earth was in mortal danger. Her world — Clark was going to put his life on the line trying to save an entire planet.

She could lose her world — twice over.

They had touched on where this could lead — Clark living two lives. But neither of them had dared wonder aloud about what would happen if he were unable to divert the asteroid.

Her tension-tuned ears picked up a faint sound, the door opened, and Clark walked in. Lois rushed to him and threw herself into his arms. His clothes were cold, but his hug was warm. Too soon, he leaned back, looking a little nonplussed at the fervour of her welcome. “I told you I wouldn’t take any risks,” he said.

“Did you locate it?”

“Yeah.”

His tone told her more than the single word. “It’s big?”

“Huge.”

“The size of a sports ground?”

“Bigger.”

“The size of Smallville?”

Clark nodded tersely and looked away.

It was a lot bigger than Smallville. The fear swelled, pushing into her ribs and pressing against her heart. “And moving quickly?” Lois asked.

“Yeah,” he admitted.

“Clark,” Lois said feverishly. “If you don’t think you can do this, you must say so. No one’s asking you to risk your life.”

But that was exactly what they were asking. “I don’t have to move it far off course for it to miss the earth,” he said.

“Do you have a plan?”

“I think the best option is going to be to fly into it.”

“Best option for whom?” Lois gasped. “It doesn’t sound like the best option for you.”

“I have to do whatever is needed to alter its course.”

Clark still hadn’t said whether he thought he could do it. If he didn’t want to answer that question, Lois wasn’t sure if she wanted to ask it.

“How are we getting to Metropolis?” he said.

“We fly to my father’s home, and then drive to the EPRAD base in my Jeep.”

“And then the alien makes his appearance,” Clark said dourly.

“There are some things you should know before we leave.” Lois saw his concern deepen. “Three people will know the truth. Menzies, Scardino -”

“Menzies? He knows?”

“He worked it out.”

“He worked it out?” Clark questioned. “Or Scardino told him?”
 “Scardino confirmed. But only after he knew the seriousness of the situation.”

“Can we trust them?”

“I think so,” Lois said.

“You don’t sound too sure.”

“This is a huge risk — in so many different ways. But my gut says they’re genuine.”

Clark gave her a halting smile. “I’m willing to trust your gut.”

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

“What?” he asked sharply.

“Shadbolt is a security guard at EPRAD.”

“Shadbolt?”

“Scardino told me he had a new job as a security guard, but he didn’t say where.” Lois shrugged. “It seems appropriate — he was always reading space magazines.”

“But Shadbolt thinks I’m dead,” Clark said ominously.

“No,” Lois said. “Scardino told me Shadbolt helped him clear out the cell and cover up our escape.”

“Shadbolt did that?”

“You find that hard to believe?”

Clark thought for a moment, and painful memories clouded his expression. “Shadbolt did his job,” he said. “When Trask ordered the discipline sessions, he did them, but he never went beyond what he was ordered to do.”

“Did he ever come into the cell? Alone? During his shift?”

“No.”

“He wasn’t ... like Moyne?”

“Not in any way. I knew he despised me; he had had to clear out the first body, and he thought I’d done it. After the second body, he could barely bring himself to look at me.”

“He found out too late that you hadn’t killed those men.”

“He knows?” Clark said with surprise.

“Yeah, he knows,” Lois said. “I think that’s probably why he helped Scardino cover for us.” She paused for a moment, giving Clark some time to try to reconcile the past with the future. “Scardino says Menzies will be the centre of attention, as he always is. Plus, he knows the chief scientist at EPRAD. Scardino will liaise, but we’ll need someone to help safeguard the secret.”

“Shadbolt?” Clark didn’t sound convinced.

“If you’re uncomfortable facing him, we can ask for someone else.”

“No,” Clark said, although he still sounded unsure. “Shadbolt is better than having someone else see Clark Kent enter a room and an alien emerge from it.”

“That’s what Scardino thought,” Lois said as she swept her hand along Clark’s arm. “But I know how hard it will be for you.”

“I’ll be OK,” he said.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Did you tell Scardino that we want a disguise?”

“Yes.”

“What did he say?”

“Neither of us could elaborate much. The agency cell phones are security-enhanced, but there are no guarantees some hacker hasn’t found a way to break into the system.”

“Did he say anything about precisely what they want me to do?”

“They can’t know that until you’ve told them your capabilities. I think the scientists will work with you to devise the best strategy — for averting the collision and for getting you back home safely.”

“OK,” Clark said. “Are you ready to go?”

No, she would never be ready to go — because going brought the moment closer when Clark would confront a huge chunk of space rock. Lois picked up her bag from the table and checked that her keys were in there. “I’m not sure what I’ll need,” she said.

“If you’ve forgotten anything, I can come back and get it,” Clark said.

“I think you’ll be a little too busy to be running errands for me.”

She tried to smile, but it fell flat.

Clark’s effort was more successful. “We’ll get this done,” he said. “Then we’ll fly home. Just you and me.”

She tried again and gave him a rickety smile. They stepped outside, Clark picked her up, and they rose into the air.

Clark landed them amongst the trees in the back garden of Sam Lane’s large, ivy-covered home. Lois smiled her thanks as he slid her to the ground, and then she walked towards the door.

“Lois?” Clark asked as he followed her. “What did your father do?”

“Do?” she said, inserting the key into the ornate wooden door. “As in his career?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s a doctor.”

A doctor? How was he going to feel when he found out his daughter was with a farmer? Clark perused the elegant magnificence of the house, his heart sinking. He’d never even been in a house this grand.

Lois dropped her bag on the hutch. “I’ll just grab a couple of things from my room,” she said.

“OK.”

She took three steps, stopped, and turned. She walked back to him and put her hand on his arm. “Are you having second thoughts?” she said.

“I don’t know if I’ll be able to do what is needed,” Clark said honestly. “But right now, I’m a bit overwhelmed by this house.”

Lois looked around as if seeing it for the first time. “It’s just a house,” she said nonchalantly. She smiled and patted his arm. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

When she returned, she was carrying a black curly wig.

“Another one?” Clark said, remembering the cranberry-coloured creation.

Lois chuckled. “Lois Lane shouldn’t be seen at EPRAD today. Not with a super-hero making his debut.”

“Super-hero?” Clark said doubtfully, although he couldn’t help smiling when she donned the wig and posed for him.

Lois used the wall mirror to adjust her wig. When she turned, the moment of playfulness had passed. “Are you ready?” she asked as she hooked her bag on her shoulder.

“Yes,” he said.

“I love you, Clark.”

“And I love you, Lois.”

“Our love will be enough,” she said. “Don’t ever doubt that it will be enough.”

Clark wrapped her in his arms, trying to imprint the feel of her into his memory.

Lois backed away too quickly. “No long goodbyes,” she said.

“This is not the end. This is just the beginning.”

“OK,” Clark said as he reluctantly released her.

They said little as Lois drove the Jeep to the EPRAD base. As they approached the gate, it opened automatically, and the guard waved them through.

“That was easy,” Clark commented. His nervousness had been steadily rising. He wished he could just shoot up and tackle the asteroid head on. It couldn’t be more harrowing than working with a horde of scared and sceptical humans.

They parked the Jeep, and Lois confidently led him towards the nearest door. “Have you been here before?” he whispered.

“No,” she murmured. “But I’m sure we’re being watched.”

“By Scardino?”

“Hopefully.”

An unfamiliar security guard materialised at the door. “Ms Everitt?” he asked.

“Yes,” Lois said without missing a beat.

“Come this way.” The guard led them through a maze of corridors and into a windowless room that contained a small table and about ten

chairs positioned to face a large television at the front of the room. “Wait here.”

The room felt sterile and unwelcoming. It didn’t have the malevolent atmosphere of the cell, but it reminded Clark of being there. This was man’s domain — a place of power in a world where he had not been welcome.

For a brief but excruciating second Clark was beset by the overpowering instinct to flee. What if this was a trick? What if Scardino and Menzies had cooked up the asteroid story to save the world from what, in their minds, was the greater threat — a rampaging alien?

Lois pulled the curly wig from her head and tossed it onto a seat. She stepped into his vision and wrapped her arms around his neck. “My gut is calm,” she said. “They need your help.”

Clark gazed deep into her brown eyes and found the certitude he so desperately needed. He slid his hand over her hair, smoothing where the wig had ruffled.

He needed her so much — the thought of life without her felt like a gaping cavern opening up inside him. He had to be with Lois. He wasn’t going to let anything — including a monstrous asteroid — separate them.

The door opened. Clark dropped his arms from Lois. She moved more slowly — smiling up at him before releasing him from her embrace. She turned on the spot, standing in front of him as they faced whoever was coming.

It was Shadbolt.

He closed the door without looking at them. He stared at the floor for what seemed like an interminably stretched second. Then he looked up, saw them, and focussed on Clark.

Clark saw recognition in his eyes. Perhaps he was remembering the early days before neglect had defaced Clark’s appearance.

Time stopped as the atmosphere, cumbersome and rancid, pressed in on two men staring at each other, reliving the past, accepting the present, tentatively assessing the future.

Shadbolt took two unsteady steps forward, his eyes never leaving Clark’s face. “Mr Kent,” he said in a hoarse and crumbly voice. He roughly cleared his throat. “Mr Kent. I’m sorry.”

The walls of the small room seemed to close in on them, shrinking the space between them. Shadbolt’s eyes didn’t waver. In them, Clark could see shame. And such sincere contrition that it was almost painful to observe. Finding his own throat dry, Clark offered his hand and only said, “Mr Shadbolt.”

Shadbolt shook his hand and held it for a fleeting second.

In that gesture, Clark understood something profound. They were equals. Two beings of different origin, but equal nevertheless. “Call me ‘Clark,’” he said.

That seemed to unnerve Shadbolt even more. “I’m ‘Evan,’” he croaked.

After another suspended moment when nothing was said but much was conveyed, Evan turned from Clark to greet Lois.

“Ms Lane,” he said with a stiff nod.

“I thought we’d moved beyond such formalities,” Lois said as she gave Evan a brief hug.

He smiled hesitantly. “Lois. It’s ... ah ... good to see you both again. Even in such terrible circumstances.”

“How are your daughters?”

“They are both very well,” Evan replied, jumping to the subject of his daughters with evident relief. “I have two days off a week now. We’ve been having picnics and going to movies.”

“That’s wonderful,” Lois said. “And Layla? Did she get her college portfolio completed?”

Evan prefaced his reply with a smile. “She did. She’s ... ah ... actually, she’s working on another project now.”

“That’s great,” Lois said.

Evan replaced the smile with a more business-like demeanour. He pointed to the television. “They are going to feed through Daitch, the head scientist. That way, he can give you information without knowing

your identity.”

“But Clark will meet him eventually?” Lois said. “What if he has questions?”

“The scientists have calculated the optimum time for this attempt,” Evan said. “It is just after seven o’clock this evening. I don’t know much else, but there will be plenty of time for questions.” The radio strapped to his hip crackled, and he pressed a button on it. The voice sounded tinny and indistinct, but Evan seemed to understand. “Right.”

He gestured for them to move to the side of the room and opened the door. When he turned back, he was carrying a tray of drinks — both hot and cold — a plate of assorted sandwiches, and another plate containing slices of moist chocolate cake. He set the tray on the table. “Are you ready to watch the information session?” he asked.

“Yes,” Clark said, feeling more out of place than he ever had before.

Evan dragged the table to the centre of the room and positioned three chairs behind it. As they sat down, Lois slipped her hand into Clark’s and smiled.

Her smile relaxed him. Her smile grounded his feet in a heaving sea of the unknown.

“Tea?” Lois asked.

“Thanks,” Clark replied.

Evan used a remote control to switch on the television. Lois poured tea from the pot. Two scientists appeared on the screen and began outlining everything they knew about the asteroid.

It was — without doubt — the eeriest meal that Clark had ever experienced. Chocolate cake and looming extinction seemed odd bedfellows.

He ate very little, drank multiple cups of tea, and listened intently to the scientists. Most of what they said confirmed what he had already surmised from his reconnaissance into space.

After twenty minutes, they demonstrated the equipment they suggested he wear — an oxygen tank and a radio to maintain contact.

Their change in manner was noticeable. When talking about the asteroid, they spoke with the ease of learned experts. When they moved to the possible equipment, it was obvious that they, too, were unsure about this.

They didn’t know his capabilities. They didn’t know if he could do this. They didn’t know how they could assist him. They knew they needed more time — time to test various options. To test, to modify, to improve, to test again.

But time was one thing they didn’t have.

And, as they had explained earlier, the sooner the asteroid was diverted, the less chance of fragments being able to penetrate the earth’s atmosphere.

When they had finished, they asked if there were any questions.

Clark relayed his questions through Evan, who spoke into the radio, and the answers came back via the television link.

Then, they asked questions. About Clark’s capabilities. About his speed. About his strength. About his ability to fly beyond the earth’s atmosphere. About his height and weight. About what he would need.

About whether he thought he could do this.

He didn’t know.

But everyone knew that he was their only chance.

Over two hours had passed when the communication was finally complete. The countdown for Clark’s rendezvous with the asteroid slipped under one hundred minutes.

The radio crackled again as they poured tea from the fresh tray that had been delivered to the room. It sounded like, “Your daughter’s here,” but Clark figured he’d misheard.

Evan stood. “I’ll be back in a few minutes,” he said.

When he’d gone, Lois put her hand on Clark’s knee. “You doing all right?” she asked.

“I think so,” he replied.

“You don’t have to do this,” she said. “If you think there is a minimal chance for success, you don’t have to take the risk.”

“I do have to do it,” he said. “There’s too much at stake.”

He saw fear threaten to overwhelm her and watched her fight to control it. “Please come back to me, Clark,” she said desperately.

“I will,” he promised.

“We have so much we still need to do.”

“I’ll come back,” he promised. “I won’t leave you.”

She smiled bravely and squeezed his knee.

The door opened, and Evan walked in, carrying what looked like a shiny blue jumpsuit and a large flowing piece of satiny red material.

He shut the door and stood there, looking acutely uncomfortable. His eyes dwindled on the garment he was carrying. He laughed nervously. “My daughter’s project,” he said. He thrust the jumpsuit at Clark. “Your disguise.”

Clark’s mouth fell open. “I’m supposed to wear *that*?” he gasped.

“We asked Layla to design something that a comic hero might wear.” Evan shrugged nervously. “Guess there’s no telling what a teenager will dream up.”

Clark took the garment and examined it in horror. The material was stretchy. It would probably fit him, but it was going to cling to his body like a second skin. His modesty would be hopelessly compromised.

But Evan hadn’t finished. From his pocket, he withdrew a pair of red underpants. He held them out to Clark, his face strung with embarrassment.

Clark took them. And stood there, holding a slip of red material and not knowing what to do now.

Lois stepped forward. “We’ll call you when we’re ready,” she said to Evan.

He didn’t need to be told twice. He scuttled through the door and closed it firmly.

Clark looked from the costume to Lois in horror. “I *can’t* wear this,” he said. “I’m going to look like a joke.”

“You won’t look like a joke,” she said. “You’ll look like a hero.”

Not any hero that Clark had ever seen.

Lois took the eyesore from him and held it up to inspect it. “Aww,” she said. “Layla made you a cape.”

“I am *not* wearing a cape.”

Lois lowered the jumpsuit. “We don’t have any choice,” she said. “You need a disguise. Clark Kent cannot do this.”

She was right. Clark just wished they hadn’t entrusted his wardrobe to a teenage girl.

“Do you want me to help you get into it?” Lois asked.

No, he didn’t. But he needed someone. And getting changed in front of Shadbolt was unthinkable. “Thanks,” Clark replied, trying not to sound ungrateful.

“OK,” Lois said, suddenly very business-like. “You probably need to take off your clothes.” She examined the jumpsuit more closely. “I think you should put this on feet-first.”

Clark removed his watch and took his wallet from his pocket. He gave them to Lois, and she put them in her bag. He peeled off his sweater and began undoing the buttons of his shirt, trying to tell himself that this was supposed to be the easy bit. In less than two hours, he would launch himself into space with the intention of careening into a giant asteroid.

When his shirt was unbuttoned, he sat down and removed his shoes and socks.

He stood, glanced to Lois for support, saw understanding in her soft smile, and slipped the shirt from his upper body. When he looked back to Lois, her eyes were affixed to his face.

He undid his jeans and stepped out of them.

He took the suit from Lois and sat down again. There was no way he was going to wear the red underpants. He just wasn’t going to do it.

He slipped his feet into the suit, working as quickly as his trembling fingers would allow. He stood up and pulled it up to his waist.

“Hold on,” Lois said. “I think the straps for the cape go under the suit.”

“I think the cape is a ridiculous idea,” Clark said.

“It will look spectacular when you’re flying.” She held up the straps of the cape, and Clark slipped his arms into them. He stretched the suit over his upper body and pushed his arms into the sleeves while Lois held the ends of the cape.

She stepped closer and pulled up the zipper, causing the suit to tighten around his torso. She turned him around and looked him up and down. “I think you need the red shorts,” she said.

They weren’t shorts; they were underwear. And he was not going to wear them. “No.”

Lois picked up the offending scrap of red material. “They have a cute yellow belt,” she insisted. “They’re shorts. Put them on.”

“On *top* of the suit?” he demanded incredulously.

“Yep.”

Clark took the ‘shorts’ and put them on. Then he stood before Lois, awaiting her verdict.

“Wow,” she said. “You look sensational.”

He checked her face, sure he would find barely contained amusement. He didn’t. He found genuine admiration.

He looked down. As he’d suspected, the blue material hugged every curve of his body. He was one slither of spandex from being stark naked.

And he was supposed to appear in public — dressed like this!

Lois reached for his face and removed his glasses. She put them in her bag and contemplated him again. She opened the door, and Clark heard her ask Evan for some hair gel.

Two minutes later, it was delivered to the room. The final piece of his outfit arrived too — a pair of knee-high, fire-engine-red boots.

He was going to look like a buffoon!

Lois put some gel in his hair, gave him a severe side part, and plastered his hair to his scalp. Clark put on the boots and stood up.

Lois gasped.

Yep, he looked like a dressed-up dolt.

But Lois wasn’t laughing. “Wow,” she said softly. “Wow. You look exactly right.”

“For a costume party, maybe,” he grumbled.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I admit that I had some doubts when Evan first showed us the outfit. But now you’re wearing it . . . You look stunning.” She put her hand on his chest — where the blue material clung so tightly, the curve of his pec muscles was patently obvious. “You are going to be a sensation.”

A knock sounded, and Evan’s voice said, “Are you ready? Can I come in?”

“Yes, Evan,” Lois said. “Come in.”

The door opened, and Clark wanted to hide in the corner. Or under the table.

Evan walked in and stopped. His mouth dropped. “Oh my,” he said. “Oh my.”

“It looks stupid, doesn’t it?” Clark said.

“No,” Evan said with hushed reverence. “It looks exactly right.”

There was movement behind Evan, and Scardino appeared, carrying a folder. His reaction was the same. Shock, closely followed by awe.

“Are you ready to go and face the scientists?” Scardino asked when he’d recovered enough to speak. “They want to fit you with the oxygen tank and do a few rudimentary tests.”

“Can Lois come?”

Lois slipped her hand into his. “I’ll wait here for you,” she said.

“I’ll be back before . . . you know?”

She nodded. “See you soon.”

With a final squeeze of her hand, Clark followed Evan out of the room.

Out of the room and into a new life. A new persona. Openly alien. Openly friend.

Lois watched Clark stride through the doorway, his cape swinging majestically.

Scardino shut the door. “Are you doing OK?” he asked.

“I’m worried,” Lois admitted. “I’m worried he’ll get hurt.”

“He caught a fired bullet from close range.”

So he knew about that. “This isn’t a bullet,” Lois said anxiously.

“It’s a hurtling mass of rock.”

“We are doing everything to make this as safe as possible for him.”

“Do you think anyone will realise that the person who walked in with ‘Ms Everitt’ is the alien?”

“Menziez concocted a story,” Scardino said. “We changed the details of your vehicle’s licence plate. If anyone asks questions, the answers — with supporting evidence — are in place.”

Lois natural tendency was to wonder, but there wasn’t room in her mind to give much consideration to anything other than Clark.

“Clark is an impressive man,” Scardino said. “He’ll handle all the scientists with aplomb.”

“And the asteroid?” Lois said. “Do you think he’ll be able to handle that, too?”

Scardino didn’t answer, and Lois knew why. He didn’t know. No one did. Not even Clark.

“Has the press conference happened?” Lois asked. “Does everyone know?”

“They delayed it. Menziez is hoping Clark will appear.”

“He won’t do it,” Lois said hurriedly. “Please don’t let them try to push him into things that are too hard for him.”

“They won’t,” Scardino said. “They are in awe of him. Whatever he asks for, they’ll do it willingly. No one will force him into anything.” He sat down at the table, gestured for Lois to join him, and opened the folder. He picked up the top sheet of paper. “Here is his birth certificate,” he said. “I had to guess his age.”

Lois looked at the piece of paper: Clark Kent, male, born 4th March 1966.

“I gave him my brother, Tom’s, birthday,” Scardino said. “I called his mother Mary Clark and his father George Roberts.” Scardino picked up two more sheets. “Here are their death certificates.”

Lois took them. Grief swamped her, even knowing they were falsified. Clark *had* lost his real parents.

“Here are the adoption papers, dated June of the same year,” he said.

“Do you know that is when Clark started living with the Kents?” Lois asked. “Or is it a guess?”

“I know,” he replied with a small smile.

“How do you know?” Lois asked, thinking there must have been something in Trask’s notes.

“The day I went to Smallville to collect Moyné’s body, I had coffee in the cafe. The waitress, Maisie, was bursting with all the town news. I changed my order from coffee to a hamburger with fries, and in return, I got the entire Smallville version of Kent history.”

Lois managed a smile.

Next, Scardino brought out a bankbook and card and handed them to Lois. She took it, but didn’t open it. What price did they place on seven years of a person’s life? How much value did they give to someone who was their only hope?

“It’s not much,” Scardino said. “Consider it a down-payment. We’ll talk to Clark about the rest once he’s home again.”

“Has the card been activated?”

“Yes. The PIN is the first four digits of your agency number. Clark can change it when he’s gets back.”

Lois opened the book and gasped. Seventy thousand dollars. “How did you arrive at that figure?” she asked.

“Ten thousand for each year,” Scardino said. “It’s not enough. But if the US government gives Clark Kent seventy thousand dollars, it might not be noticed, and even if it is, it can be explained. Seven hundred thousand is more noticeable, less explainable.”

Lois stared at the five-figure sum. It was a lot of money. But after what Clark had suffered, it seemed a pittance.

“It’s mainly to show that we are serious about trying to undo the wrongs.”

Would they have been so serious without the asteroid, Lois thought. She didn’t voice her doubts. Scardino had made mistakes, but he was trying to make amends. He’d covered for them when they’d run away, he’d lied for them — and that was before he knew the earth was under threat.

“We haven’t found Mrs Kent,” Scardino said. “As you would understand, whatever happens, this will be the biggest story of all time. We don’t want a sudden search for Mrs Kent to coincide with the appearance of the alien in case someone makes the connection. Menziez has committed to work with me to find her, but we don’t want to jeopardise Clark’s chance to have a normal life.”

“But you will find her?”

“Neither of us will rest until she is found.”

“Thank you.”

Scardino looked down at the folder. “The apology and statement regarding the deaths of the agents will arrive — signed by the President — within days.” There was one remaining official-looking paper. Scardino picked it up and considered it for a long moment.

“Lois?” he said.

“Yes?”

“Forgive me if I’ve misread the situation, but it appears to me that you and Clark ... you have something special.”

“We do.”

Scardino diffidently offered her the paper, and Lois gasped. It was a marriage certificate, proclaiming the marriage of Clark Kent and Lois Lane. It was dated a week ago. “Why?” she gasped.

“First, I want to assure you that this can be annulled with no record of it once Clark has returned home.”

“Then why do it?”

“If Clark has a will, it probably pre-dates his capture,” Scardino said.

“You think he’s going to die?” Lois demanded.

“No. I’m covering all the bases.”

“I don’t want anything,” Lois raged. “I can’t save the world. Clark can.”

“You’re the one who saved Clark.”

“I still don’t understand the need for the marriage certificate.”

“If ... if Clark were able to successfully divert the asteroid ... but didn’t survive, I want you to be looked after.”

“You think money can make up for losing him?” Lois cried with disgust.

“This certificate gives you more than the money,” Scardino said. He shuffled uncomfortably. “It gives you the rights of a wife. The right to have a say about his ... his body. The funeral. The farm. While Martha Kent remains missing, Clark has no next of kin.”

“I don’t even want to think about what will happen if Clark doesn’t make it,” Lois said shakily.

Scardino rested his hand on hers for a fleeting moment. “I know,” he said. “So just believe me when I tell you that everything will be smoother if you are legally Clark’s wife. The money will be yours. I know you don’t want it, but it opens possibilities for ... ways to remember him. All of that will be in your control. And I think that’s how Clark would want it.”

His reasoning was sound, but it didn’t alleviate Lois’s intense aversion to cheapening her love for Clark to a convenience in the event of his death. “Don’t tell him about this,” she said.

“OK,” Scardino agreed. “When he’s home ... if you want it annulled, all you have to do is say so. On the other hand ...”

“Now that Clark has an official identity, he will be able to marry if he chooses to.”

Scardino reached for the remote control, and the television hissed to life. “It’s time for the press conference.”

“Who’s doing it?” Lois asked.

“Menziez.”

“Menziez?” Yet even as she questioned the choice, Lois realised that Menziez was the perfect person. He would field difficult questions. He knew the truth and knew what could be revealed and

what had to stay secret. And he had thirty years of experience in dealing with sensitive information.

“He’s a hard man and a formidable rival,” Scardino said. “But he’s also a good man to have on your side.”

“And he’s definitely on our side?” Lois asked. “Despite what happened to Moyne?”

“I don’t know exactly how Moyne fell from grace in Menzies’ eyes,” Scardino said. “But I’m sure Menzies now knows who killed Deller and Bortolotto.”

The tall, imposing figure of Eric Menzies strode to the microphone. In his steady, no-nonsense manner, he began with the Daily Planet story, admitting he had been the senior agent quoted. He said he had not been able to reveal then what he could reveal now — for reasons that would become clear. The alien hadn’t died; the story had been an attempt to avoid a public panic.

He went on to portray the alien’s ‘imprisonment’ are more accurately described as a testing period as officials worked with the alien to determine his true intentions regarding the people of Earth.

Then Menzies looked directly into the camera, and in his steely voice, he proclaimed, “After a thorough investigation, we determined beyond a doubt that the alien means us no harm. He has many physical advantages, but he has no intention of using them to harm the citizens of Planet Earth.”

“How can we know that?” The question — sharp with disbelief — shot from someone off-screen, presumably from a member of the gathered media.

Menzies didn’t falter. “Having determined that the alien is not a threat, we were willing to consent to his wish to live anonymously as a regular member of society,” he said. A question fired, and Menzies held up his hand for quiet. “However, that situation changed when our scientists discovered a large asteroid on a direct path towards a collision with the earth.”

There was a stretch of stunned silence. Then a commotion of questions erupted.

Menzies held up his hand again. “Our best scientists have implemented every possible means to avert this disaster which will result in a horrific death toll.” He paused for the shocked gasp he’d probably known would come. “All attempts have failed. We have one shot left.”

“When is the collision going to happen?” someone asked. “How long do we have?”

“About eighteen hours,” Menzies replied.

The silence was heavy with horror. Then the jumble of panicked questions rose again.

Menzies waited, eyeing the unseen questioners. When they silenced, he spoke again. “Our final chance is for the super-powered alien to do what our most advanced technology has been unable to do.”

“He’s going to build a mega-powered missile,” someone guessed.

“No,” Menzies said, pausing for effect. “He’s going to fly into space and attempt to divert the course of the asteroid.”

“Fly? In what rocket?”

“In no rocket,” Menzies said calmly. “By his own power.”

“Into *space*?” someone screeched.

“To take out an asteroid?”

Menzies waited for the cry to die down. “I have asked our friend from another planet if he will make a brief appearance before you,” he said. “He is understandably tense about the task ahead. He is also very conscious of his differences and unsure of the reception he will receive. I’m asking you — the members of the media — to set the tone by showing appropriate respect for our visitor.”

“Can we ask him questions?”

“No. Not today. After the completion of the operation, if might be possible if he agrees.”

“What’s his name?”

“He has chosen not to reveal his name from his home planet.” Menzies’ eyes travelled over the assembled media. “I’m sure that

someone from this gathered mass of wordsmiths can think of a name.”

“If he’s going to take out an asteroid, he must be super strong.”

“We’ll call him ‘The Super Man’.

“Or perhaps just ‘Superman’. That sounds friendlier.”

There was the sound of movement off to the side, and an audible gasp rose from the unseen crowd.

Clark stepped into screen, his face expressionless, although Lois could see every nuance of nervousness under his carefully constructed mask. Her heart cried for him, and she yearned to be with him.

“Is there anything you wish to say?” Menzies asked.

Lois cursed under her breath. Menzies had handled this so well until now.

Clark slowly stepped forward to the microphone, his shoulders straight, and his head up. “I came to your planet because my planet was facing certain destruction,” he said in a deep, steady voice. “I understand your fear and uncertainty. I pledge that I will do everything in my power to keep you safe.”

Another cry arose — many cries of ‘Superman’ and questions about how he intended to overpower an asteroid. Then the voices died away, overridden by enthusiastic applause.

For a second, Clark’s shock dissolved the detachment as his eyes scanned the cheering crowd. He nodded tersely and walked away.

Menzies returned to the microphone, and the applause died down. “The radar image of Superman’s attempt to change the course of the asteroid will be televised live,” he said. “I’m sure all humanity will join with me in wishing him a successful mission and a safe return to our planet.”

Menzies strode away, and the noisy confusion rose again.

Scardino muted the television. “Test One passed with flying colours,” he said.

Lois gathered the papers into the folder and closed it. “I think Test Two will be a lot more difficult,” she said grimly.

“I think he might find an asteroid less daunting than a crowd of chomping reporters.”

The door opened, and Clark walked in with Evan. Scardino stood. “We’ll leave you alone,” he said.

“You have five minutes,” Evan said.

The two men left. The door closed.

Lois stepped into Clark’s arms and clung to him.

“I’ll come back to you,” he murmured.

“I want to be with you forever.”

“I do, too,” Clark said. He settled his hands on her neck, and his thumbs caressed her jaw. “I love you, Lois,” he said. “I think I loved you from the very beginning.”

“I love you, Clark.”

Uncertainty flooded his eyes, and she waited for him to speak.

“Would ... would you like me to kiss you now?” he asked.

“No.”

“No?”

“If you kiss me now, it is going to be borne of desperation and fear,” she said. “It will feel as if we’re scared that you won’t return.”

“Lois ...”

“I don’t want you to face the asteroid believing that I have doubts.”

“I have doubts.”

“I know you can do this.” She glided her thumb across his mouth.

“The first moment we are alone when this is done ... that is when I want you to kiss me.” She smiled up to him. “And you had better get in quickly, or I will kiss you first.”

His smile was short-lived. “Lois ... there is so much I want to say to you.”

“It’s all right,” she soothed. “You have all the time in the world.”

“I have two minutes.”

“When this is over, we will both have all the time in the world.”

Clark lifted one hand from her shoulder and touched his forefinger to his cheek. “Kiss me here,” he said. “So I can carry something of you with me.”

“You will carry all of my love in your heart.”

“And that will be the strongest part of me.”

Lois stretched onto her toes and lingered a kiss to his cheek.

“Thank you,” he breathed.

She sank back into the haven of his arms. They held each other, wanting time to stop.

Too soon, a knock sounded on the door.

“I love you, Clark,” Lois whispered.

He touched the place she had kissed. “I love you,” he said.

The door opened, and Scardino entered. “Are you ready?” he asked Clark.

“Yes.”

“Come with me. Evan Shadbolt will stay with Lois.”

Clark walked out. Evan walked in.

The door shut.

“We’re getting the radar direct,” he said. “Not the television broadcast.”

“OK,” Lois said.

They sat down.

And the countdown began.

Fifteen seconds to impact.

Lois’s impossibly knotted stomach tightened further.

Ten seconds.

She gripped the folder, her eyes glued to the tiny dot on the radar that represented the man she loved. One tiny dot, approaching a much larger bulk.

Six seconds.

The two dots converged.

Lois held her breath.

Three seconds.

Two.

One.

Impact.

The large dot trembled.

The tiny dot disappeared.

Lois’s lungs demanded oxygen.

She sucked in air.

The tiny dot was gone.

Had it worked?

Was Clark all right?

Where was he?

Lois clutched Evan’s arm. “He’s all right,” she said anxiously. “He has to be all right.” She jumped from her seat. “I have to find out what happened to him.”

Evan got to the door first and barred her way. “No, Lois,” he said. “You can’t leave this room. No one can know you’re here.”

“I have to know. I have to know what happened to Clark.”

“As soon as they know something, someone will come and tell you.”

She slumped into her seat and stared at the screen.

Evan picked up the remote control and turned off the television.

They waited.

A minute passed. The longest minute of Lois’s life.

Another minute passed. And another.

Then the door flung open, and Scardino strode in.

Lois flew from her seat and grabbed his shoulders with both hands. “What happened?” she screamed. “Where is he?”

“We don’t know,” Scardino said. “We lost him.”

4. Highway

Part 1

~ Wednesday ~

Lois Lane stared out of the window of her apartment.

The world was dark. Quiet. Safe.

He’d done it. Clark had pushed the asteroid far enough off its path that the earth was free to continue its orbit as if it had never been threatened.

Free to continue to nurture human life.

But at what cost?

Clark.

Lois’s her tears rose again.

She had waited long hours at the EPRAD base as the scientists had worked frantically to locate Clark on their radars or re-establish contact with him.

There had been nothing.

The impact had happened.

The asteroid had been deflected.

Clark had disappeared.

It had been after midnight when Daniel Scardino had suggested that Lois stay the night in his spare room.

Evan Shadbolt had offered to move Layla in with Abi so Lois could have Layla’s room.

Both men — and Menzies, too — had smothered the euphoria and relief they must be feeling for themselves and their families and shown genuine concern. Concern for her, concern for Clark.

Had Lois sensed even the slightest hint that, being alien, Clark’s life didn’t matter too much, she would have torn them to shreds — verbally. And probably made a decent attempt physically, as well.

But they had been kindness itself — ensuring she was never alone and bringing her regular updates of the outer-space search for the Earth’s hero.

Every atom in Lois’s mind and body had yearned for Clark. But if she couldn’t have him, she wanted to be alone.

So she had declined their offers and demanded to be taken to her Jeep so she could drive herself home. They had resisted; Lois had snapped. Not even Menzies had been able to stand against her fear-driven fury. Eventually, Daniel had agreed to drive her to her apartment. When they’d arrived, she’d ordered him to leave. He’d hesitated. She’d pleaded exhaustion, and he’d gone, reiterating that a team of scientists would continue to work through the night and promising to contact her at the first breath of any news.

As soon as Daniel had left, Lois had thrown open her window. If Clark was out there, he would find a way back to her. He would.

He would.

Bound tightly in a blanket, she stood and cried until her eyes felt raw and her throat chafed.

She needed Clark.

She couldn’t live without him.

The night crawled on — hour after desolate hour — and Lois continued her vigil at the window. She took Clark’s watch from her bag and held it against her cheek, listening as it marked the passing of time and wishing it was Clark’s heartbeat.

Lois took out his wallet and brought it to her nose. It still smelled of new leather — she couldn’t detect even the faintest trace of Clark. She opened it and found the folded piece of paper on which he had written his poem.

She read it slowly — a tear-hampered journey that elicited the entire spectrum of emotions. Upon reaching the final line, she stopped for a moment and sucked in a shuddery breath.

Hope is beautiful — and her name is Lois.

Honour is captivating, she thought. And his name is Clark.

After folding the paper carefully, she replaced it in his wallet and opened the folder Daniel had given her. For the first time, Clark had an official, irrefutable identity as a citizen of Planet Earth.

Lois stared at the marriage certificate for a long time.

Legally, she and Clark were married.

A wedded couple. A week into their honeymoon.

Honeymooners who had never even kissed.

She longed for the safety of his arms.

She ached for the comfort of his chest.

She yearned for the reassurance of his voice.

“Clark,” she muttered.

In her mind, she heard his reply. “If you want me, you just have to say my name. I’ll hear you.”

“Clark,” she cried. “I want you.”

She held her breath and strained her ears.

Nothing.

Just the muted sounds of a city in slumber.

Not the greeting of a man coming home to the woman he loved.

Lois scanned the chilly darkness.

Nothing.

Just the glimmering lights of a city cloaked in the shadows of night.

Not the smile of a man returning to the woman who needed him.

Clark.

Please come back to me.

Please.

I can't live without you.

I don't want to live without you.

A loud knock awakened Lois.

She lifted her head, groaning as pain pushed through the stiffness of cold muscles.

The knock sounded again, and Lois hauled her brittle body from where she had fallen asleep under the window. She pulled the blanket more securely around her shoulders. At the door, she looked through the peephole and blinked.

Longford?

Lois opened the door. “Longford,” she said, not even attempting to cover her confusion. “What are you doing here?”

“I got a call from Mr Scardino. He said he wanted me to pick you up from here and take you to the EPRAD base.”

Lois lunged forward and grabbed Longford’s arm. “Scardino? What else did he say? What does he want?”

“I don’t know anything else,” Longford said. “I’m retired from the job now.”

This had to be about Clark. Daniel had to know something. Something too confidential to risk telling her over the phone, even the agency cell.

She had to get to the base.

Lois threw the blanket into her bedroom and picked up her bag. “Let’s go,” she said.

Three hundred yards from the EPRAD base, their progress was halted by a mass of haphazardly parked cars and a phalanx of milling people.

One word reverberated across the throng — *Superman!*

What had they heard? Was it a rumour? Had somebody actually seen Clark?

Lois gazed ahead to the fortress-like brownstone wall and imposing wrought-iron gates standing firm and impenetrable against the pulsating mob.

How was she going to get into the base? If she called Daniel and he sent out a security guard to escort her past the wall, hundreds of people were going to witness her being given preferential treatment.

Longford reached across Lois and opened the glove compartment. He took out a vermillion hat — a faux-fur monstrosity adorned with a pink and white polka dot ribbon that reminded Lois of her grandmother. “Put this on,” Longford said, handing her the rather crumpled headpiece.

Lois searched through her bag for the black wig, only to remember she had left in the room last night.

Longford reached down and began undoing his shoelaces.

Lois gathered up her uncombed hair, bunched it on top of her head, and shoved the hat over it, pulling the brim as far down her face as she could. She turned back to Longford and gasped. His feet — one metal, one hairy and pale-fleshed — were bare, and the legs of his slacks were bunched at half-shin level.

“What are you doing?” Lois asked.

“Facilitating safe passage,” he said cheerfully. “When people see someone with a disability, they tend to move out of the way more

easily. With you in that hat and me looking like one-legged tramp, we’ll be passed over as nothing more significant than the jetsam of a grateful society come to pay our respects. And because of the prosthesis, no one will be looking at our faces.”

“We won’t be so easily overlooked when we get to the gates and they let us in,” Lois noted.

“There’s a concealed entrance,” Longford said. “Scardino told me to go about eighty yards to the left of the main gates. Perhaps he knows about this commotion.”

“I wonder if he knows it’s this bad.”

“The media are here,” Longford said, gesturing out of the car window. “This whole drama is probably playing out live on early morning television.”

“Probably? You haven’t seen any reports?”

“No. But my mother called. Someone is revelling in his five minutes of fame by claiming he saw the alien fly into the EPRAD base.”

Fly? For a fleeting second, Lois’s hopes soared — until she realised that if Clark could fly, he would have located her heartbeat and gone directly to her apartment.

She sighed, reflecting that she had been out of the city for too long. Of course the media would be here. Of course everyone would be agog for news of the alien. Or course it would be a hotbed of hearsay and rumour.

“Once we’re out of the car, hang onto my arm,” Longford said. “And whatever happens, don’t let go.”

“OK. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, Ms Lane.”

“My name is ‘Lois’.”

He smiled. “And I’m ‘Bill’.”

“Bill,” Lois said. “Whatever you know ...”

“I know nothing,” he said. “I signed a contract to say so. Ready?”

They opened the doors, closed them, and met at the front of the vehicle. Longford offered her his arm, Lois grasped it with both hands, and they entered the frothing multitude.

Somewhat to her surprise, Longford’s prediction proved accurate. People did give ground — perhaps in response to his accentuated limp and occasional gruff admonition to “Watch out for me leg.”

As they shuffled forward, Lois tried to shut out the loud conjecture, but it was impossible to ignore.

“Superman exploded, you know.”

“No, he didn’t. I heard that they found him.”

“They found bits of him.”

“He was brought back here. That’s what they said on LNN.”

“Shouldn’t they have taken him to a hospital?”

“What could a hospital do? He’s an alien.”

“The finest doctors in the country should be here. He deserves the best we have.”

“I heard he’s dead. They brought his body back here for testing.”

“I know for a fact he was wearing a toupee at the press conference. That’s why he didn’t look anything like the picture in the paper ...”

Bill Longford leant closer to Lois. “Don’t listen to them,” he said. “There has been no official announcement. All they have is guesswork.”

They had been steadily slewing left, and eventually, the crowd thinned. They broke from its grasp and headed for the high brownstone wall, Lois straining forward with sharp, agitated steps, and Longford inhibiting her progress to an excruciatingly slow shuffle.

“Don’t look back,” he murmured. “Don’t give them anything to look at.”

Five minutes later, they reached a thick wooden gate, painted to blend seamlessly with the wall. Lois reached into her bag for her cell, but before she could dial, the gate opened, and they were hustled forward by Evan Shadbolt. “Thanks, Longford,” he said. “Scardino says you should stay here and have some breakfast until the crowd disperses a bit.”

“OK,” Longford agreed easily.

Lois hurried along the wall with Evan, her questions screaming for release. When they entered the huge building, Evan turned to the trailing Longford. “Wait here,” he said. “I’ll come back and take you to the cafe.”

Lois managed a microsecond to focus on Longford. “Thank you, Bill,” she said, ripping off the hat and thrusting it into his hands.

He smiled and bent low to begin unrolling his slacks.

Evan gestured for Lois to follow him. “What happened?” she hissed as soon as they were out of Longford’s hearing. “Is Clark here?”

“He’s here.”

Relief gushed through her. Then fear ruptured the relief. She snatched the back of Evan’s black security guard jacket. “Is ... is he alive?”

“Yes.”

One word.

One word, and Lois had her life back.

“Take me to him.”

Evan was already striding along a corridor that Lois didn’t recognise. They came to an elevator, and he punched in a security code. The doors opened, and a few seconds later, they were plunging downwards. The elevator came to a smooth stop, and the doors slid open.

Lois rushed forward, desperately searching for Clark.

She saw Daniel.

And Menzies.

But not Clark.

She ran to Daniel. “Where is he?” she cried. “Where’s Clark?”

His hands grasped her elbows. “Lois,” he said. “Clark -”

“Is he alive? Evan said he’s alive. Where -”

“Lois.” Daniel moved his grip to her shoulders and stared into her eyes. “Lois,” he said. “Take a breath. Clark needs you to be calm.”

“He’s alive?”

“Yes, he’s alive.”

“Is he hurt? How could he be hurt? What did you do to him?”

“He’s not hurt. Not physically.”

“Then what’s wrong?” she demanded.

“He doesn’t remember anything.”

“He doesn’t remember anything about the impact? About the asteroid? He has a concussion? That’s all right. We -”

“He doesn’t remember *anything*.”

Lois’s battery of questions collapsed. “N...Nothing?”

“He doesn’t remember his name,” Daniel said. “He doesn’t remember the asteroid. He doesn’t remember one single thing about his life.”

“He doesn’t remember me?” Lois said as tears stung her eyes.

“He didn’t ask for you.”

“Did he ask for anyone?”

“No.”

“But he can speak?”

“Yes.”

“Take me to him,” Lois said, yanking Daniel’s sweater. “I want to see him now. He’ll remember me when he sees me.”

Menzies stepped up to them. “Ms Lane,” he said. “You’ll see Clark very soon, but there are a few things we need to explain first.”

Her fears rose again. “What? What aren’t you telling me?”

“We’ve told you everything,” Menzies said calmly. “Clark seems physically unharmed. There are no signs of injury.”

“I want to see him.”

“You can see him,” Daniel said. “But before you go in, we want to talk to you.”

The realisation penetrated the haze of her panic-stricken mind — they really were willing to give her information about Clark. They weren’t going to try to keep her away from him. Her questions were only delaying the moment when she could be with him again. “OK,” Lois said. She let go of Daniel’s sweater. “OK. How did Clark get here?”

“He was found — semi-conscious — by an early-morning jogger.”

“But he’s conscious now?”

“Come and see him,” Daniel said as he began to walk across the room towards a large window.

Lois rushed to the glass.

And saw Clark.

He was wearing an old pair of sweatpants, a frayed tee shirt that was several sizes too small, and no shoes. He sat unmoving on the concrete, one leg arched, one straight, his wrist resting on his knee. Lois turned viciously to Daniel and seized his sweater again. “You put him in a cell?” she cried. “How could you? How could you lock him up again? How -”

Menzies grasped her arm. “Ms Lane,” he said soothingly. “Listen to me.”

Lois spun from Daniel and blazed at Menzies. “Why did you lock him up?”

“The door is locked, that’s true,” Menzies admitted quietly. “But we told him that if he needed anything, all he had to do was knock on the window.”

“It’s one-way glass, isn’t it?” Lois asked scornfully. “We can see him, but he can’t see or hear us?”

“Yes,” Menzies said. “But we didn’t bring him here to capture him; we brought him here to protect him. We -”

“He’s *locked* in,” Lois said, fighting to keep her indignation from erupting into hot and fiery tears.

“Ms Lane,” Menzies said. “Lois. Listen to me. We got the call before dawn this morning. Clark was still wearing enough of the Suit that the jogger recognised him. We were able to get a team out there before too many other people showed up at the scene.”

“You said Clark was semi-conscious?” Lois said. “Does anyone else know he can’t remember?”

“No,” Menzies replied. “He started to stir as he arrived at the base. We brought him in here and cleared everyone out except Scardino and myself — just in case Clark said something as he was regaining consciousness.”

“Did he speak?”

“Not at first. He looked around, but said nothing. Scardino asked him some questions, and Clark was able to give a few answers about how he was feeling, but nothing about anything that had happened before he arrived here.”

Clark would remember her. He would. “So why lock in him a cell?” Lois asked coldly.

“To protect him.”

“Or to protect you,” she snapped.

Menzies didn’t flinch. “From what I’ve been told about Clark, I think he would be upset if he inadvertently hurt someone. Right now, he doesn’t know how strong he is. He doesn’t know how easily he could injure someone.”

“You still locked him up,” Lois said bitterly.

“There’s a bed in the room, and we gave him clothes, food, and drink,” Menzies said. He lifted his hands in exasperation. “We didn’t know what else to do. We don’t know enough about him. He doesn’t know anything about himself.”

“We thought it best to wait until you arrived,” Daniel added.

“How did Clark seem when you questioned him?” Lois asked.

“He seemed dazed,” Menzies said. “Unsure. Vague. Confused. But he can speak.”

“What did he say?”

“He said he wasn’t hurting anywhere. He wasn’t hungry. He didn’t want anything. We asked if there was someone we could contact for him, and he just looked lost.”

Lois swallowed down her sob. “Can I go in there now?”

“Just a few minutes more,” Menzies said. “There are some things I need to tell you about what happens now.”

“I’m taking him with me,” Lois said with steel-like conviction.

“That is what happens now.”

Menzies nodded. “If Clark agrees, and if he’s still showing no

signs of an injury requiring medical attention, he can certainly go with you.”

“Then what else do I need to know?” Lois said, trying to hide her surprise at his compliance.

“We had a doctor check him over in the first few minutes he was here,” Menzies said. “But once Clark was fully conscious, we thought it best if no one else saw him. In any other circumstance, we would have brought in a counsellor or psychiatrist, but clearly, we don’t want anyone asking Clark questions.”

“OK,” Lois said, accepting that as sounding reasonable.

“This isn’t the first time I’ve had an agent suffering from amnesia,” Menzies said. “The stresses of the job ... the dangers ... it seems to happen to us more regularly than the general public.”

“So?” Lois said as her impatience rose again. She glanced over her shoulder to Clark. He hadn’t moved. He was still staring blankly ahead.

“So I know a bit about what would be advised if we had consulted a professional.”

“Tell me.”

“It’s important that Clark regain his memories in his own time. It is particularly critical in this case, because some of his memories might be ... distressing.”

“Are you saying I shouldn’t tell him anything?”

“You should try not to fill in details. He will have a lot of questions, but it’s important for his recovery that he doesn’t confuse what he has remembered with what he has been told.”

“That isn’t going to be easy when he starts floating across the room,” Lois retorted. “Or sets fire to something he’s staring at.”

“That’s why we think it is best for Clark if he’s with you,” Daniel said. “No one — not even Clark at this stage — knows him as well as you do.”

They seemed genuine in their desire to help Clark.

Daniel continued. “This isn’t going to be easy for you, Lois,” he said. “To you, Clark is still the same person you knew yesterday. To him, you are someone he has never met — a stranger.”

A stranger. Lois fiercely buried that thought. “When will he recover his memory?”

“Nothing is guaranteed,” Menzies said.

So he might not remember that he loves me, Lois thought. He won’t even know who I am.

“Lois,” Daniel said. “You and Clark have come through some tough times. You’ll come through this one.”

Lois nodded woodenly as fear snaked a trail of foreboding through her insides. They would. But would they come through it together? Or apart?

“We are worried about the possibility of Clark inadvertently doing something ‘super’ in public,” Menzies said.

“You think he’ll hurt someone?” she flared. “You think he’ll turn into the monster Trask -”

“No,” Daniel said. “No. We are trying to protect Clark’s wish to have a regular life. You said you wanted no link between Clark Kent and the alien.”

Lois paused, realising the legitimacy of their concerns.

“You could both stay here,” Menzies suggested. He raised his hand as Lois started to protest. “We feel responsible for what has happened to him. We are willing to care for him here. We -”

“No,” Lois said. “Clark needs to come with me.”

“Do you want us to arrange a flight to Smallville for both of you?” Daniel asked.

“No,” Lois said. “Clark can’t go back to Smallville yet. The people have been wonderfully understanding, but there will be questions. Clark can’t go there until he has at least some of the answers.”

“How did you get to Smallville after leaving the cell?” Daniel said.

“We drove.”

“Perhaps you should do that again. Perhaps repeating it will assist the return of his memories.”

Lois nodded. “That’s a good idea,” she said, thinking of long hours in the car, and motel rooms, and eating meals, and nights ... together. “That will give Clark the time he needs.”

“What will you do about the farm?” Dan said.

“I’ll call the neighbour and ask him if he can do the chores for a few days.”

“What will you tell him?”

“That we’ve had a lead about Clark’s mom, and we had to go in case it developed into something. That’s the only reason Clark would leave the farm.”

“I’ll call the neighbour,” Daniel said. “You’ve got enough to think about.”

“OK, thanks,” Lois said, glancing to Clark again. She had to go to him. “Anything else?”

“I really think you should both stay at the base for a while,” Daniel said.

“No. I -”

“Lois,” he said. “This story is going to be screaming from every newsstand in the country. It’s going to be on every television set and blaring from every radio. It’s going to be the main topic of conversation in every restaurant and workplace across America. I think we should protect Clark from that. At least until we know more about his condition.”

She had to get to Clark. She couldn’t leave him alone a moment longer. “OK,” she conceded. “I’ll see how he is and then decide what we’re going to do.”

Menzies stood to his full height, and Lois felt a shaft of apprehension about what he was going to say. “You are a credit to our agency,” he said gruffly. “If there is anything you or Clark need, don’t hesitate to ask me.”

Lois swallowed down her astonishment and stuttered her thanks.

“Once Clark has recovered, we will again look at the question of appropriate compensation,” Menzies continued.

Right now, Lois didn’t care a jot about compensation. She just wanted Clark. “What will you tell the public?” she asked. “There’s a crowd outside the gates, waiting for news.”

“We’ll tell them the alien was found unconscious this morning,” Menzies said. “We’ll say he is staying here on the base while he recovers. Hopefully, that will be enough to persuade them to return to their homes.”

“Your Jeep is here,” Daniel said. “Whenever you’re ready to leave, we’ll work out a way of getting you out of here without attracting a convoy of paparazzi.”

Lois nodded. “I want to go in to Clark now.”

Menzies put a stalling hand on her shoulder. “I realise this question will probably insult you,” he said. “But you’re my agent, and I’m duty-bound to ask. Are you sure he won’t hurt you?”

“Of course I’m sure,” Lois said.

“I know he would never have hurt you before, but you need to remember that this Clark could be a different person from the one you knew. He remembers nothing — not even who he was.”

“Mr Menzies,” Lois said. “Seven years of torture and abuse couldn’t stop Clark being Clark. This won’t either.”

“Are you sure?”

“He doesn’t need memories to be who he is. A concussion won’t have changed his heart.”

Menzies nodded. “Go to him,” he said. “Stay with him as long as you want. We’ll be here if you need us, but we’ll give you privacy.”

“Thank you.”

Lois turned back to the window and looked through it. She stifled a sob. Clark looked so crushed. So lost. So alone. So exactly as he had looked in the cell.

Menzies unlocked the door, and it swung open.

Clark’s head shot up at the sound.

Lois stepped into the room.

He stood to his feet.

She edged closer to him.

He watched her, his eyes glued, his body unmoving. She reached him. Smiled. “Hi,” she said. “I’m Lois.” His smile came, a little hesitantly, but it tugged a million memories through her heart. “Hi,” he said. “I’m ...”

“You’re Clark.”

“They said that.”

“Are you all right?” Lois asked, aching to hold him. “Do you feel OK?”

“Yeah.” He scanned the room, located a chair, and positioned it near the bed. “Please sit down,” he said. Anxiety distorted his expression. “Are you going to stay?”

Lois nodded, fighting back her tears. “I’m going to stay for as long as you want me to.”

His smile flickered again. He waited until she was seated before perching on the edge of the bed.

“You must feel very confused,” Lois said.

“Yeah,” he said. “Obviously, I had some sort of life, but it’s completely blank. There’s nothing there. Nothing. It’s all gone.”

“Your life isn’t gone,” she said, longing to touch his hand.

“What do you know about me?” Clark asked. “Do you have a file or something? Do I have a family? Where are they? What happened that caused me to lose all of my memories? Was I in an accident?” His eyes, filled with trepidation, rose to the big window. “Is there a reason they locked me in here? Did I do something wrong?”

“No,” Lois said quickly. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

He stared at her as if appraising her reply. “Am I allowed to leave?”

“Yes.”

Clark looked at the door. “I don’t have anywhere to go,” he said plaintively.

“Yes, you do,” Lois said.

“Where?”

“We think you should come with me,” she said. “Would that be all right with you?”

“Is that what you want?” he asked dubiously.

More than anything in the world. “Yes,” Lois said.

“Where will we go?” he asked.

“To your home.”

His eyes shot into hers. “You know my home?”

“Yes.”

“Is someone there waiting for me? My parents, perhaps? Siblings?” He ran his thumb over the place where a wedding ring would be. “No one came for me.”

“I came for you.”

“You don’t count.”

“I don’t?”

“Are you a social worker?” he said glumly. “Or a psychiatrist? Or something else?”

Lois’s surprise gushed out on a breath. “Is that what you’re thinking?” she said. “That I’m here ... professionally?”

He shrugged as if it were the obvious conclusion.

Lois looked down at her sleep-tousled clothing. “Do I look like a professional?” she asked.

A glimmer of amusement filtered into Clark’s eyes. “Well, no,” he admitted. “But I figured it’s really late. Or really early.” He picked at the too-small tee shirt they had given him. “Or perhaps you didn’t want to make me feel even more out of place.”

“Clark,” Lois said. “I’m here because I know you. I’m your friend.”

His mouth gaped open. Then half closed. Then stretched to a smile. “You’re my friend?” he breathed. “You know me?”

Lois nodded, smothering the hot spurts of tears that were threatening to flood her eyes.

“Then tell me,” he said eagerly. “Tell me who I am and how I got here. Tell me -”

“Clark, they told me that the best way I can help you is by not telling you too much. We need to give your memories a chance to

return by themselves.”

His eyebrow lifted in tandem with the corner of his mouth. “I’m supposed to guess?”

Lois answered his smile. “You’re supposed to relax and give yourself time to recover.”

“And you’ll stay with me? You’ll help me? You’ll tell me if what I’m remembering is accurate?”

The urge to take him into her arms was so strong, Lois shivered.

“Yes,” she promised. “I’ll stay with you.”

“And you’ll take me home?”

“Yes.”

“How long will it take?”

“We’re going to drive. It will take a few days.”

His eyebrow lifted, and his smile rolled out. “A few days?”

“Is that all right?”

Clark nodded as he stood. He held his hand towards her. Lois stared at it as wave after wave of memories rolled through her. She clasped his hand — dizzying at his touch — and rose to her feet.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

Lois pulled a tissue from her bag and wiped her eyes. “Yes.”

Clark rested his hand lightly on her shoulder. “Sure?” he asked, his eyes vivid with unmistakable Clark Kent concern.

“I’m sure,” she said. And she was. She was with Clark. Clark who remembered nothing, but was still Clark.

“Let’s go,” he said. His smile unfurled in all its brilliance. “I’m so glad you’re here, Lois. Thank you for coming.”

Part 2

Lois reached for the door handle at the same moment as Clark. She was marginally quicker, and his hand encased hers.

He lifted it away and gave her another smile.

Lois fumbled as she opened the door, her dexterity compromised by the pulsing quivers shooting up her arm in wild reaction to his touch.

She gathered her wits and faced Daniel and Menzies as they approached her, their expressions loaded with questions.

“Is everything all right?” Menzies asked.

“Clark and I would like to leave now.”

“All right,” Menzies said, although he sounded a little doubtful.

“Scardino will arrange for Shadbolt to get your vehicle. I’ll call a press conference, and we’ll admit anyone carrying a press badge. You can leave via the side entrance.”

Daniel gave her an uncertain smile. “Are you going to be all right?” he asked, glancing meaningfully at Clark.

“Yeah,” Lois said. “We are going to be fine.”

“I think you should stay here awhile,” Daniel said.

“No,” Lois said. The desire to flee was strong. She needed to take Clark. To go where no one could hurt him. Where no one could threaten to take him away from her.

“Lois,” Daniel said. “I’m concerned.”

“About what?” she said sharply.

“I’m concerned you could get into a difficult situation.”

“My last job was full of difficult situations,” she retorted. “I coped.”

“I don’t doubt your ability to cope,” Daniel said. “But I think a few hours would make everything easier for you.” When she didn’t answer, he continued. “You must be tired. And drained. There are rooms on the base. They’re similar to hotel rooms. Used for guests. You’ll be comfortable there. And no one will disturb you.”

“I ...” Lois faltered as she recalled their earlier conversation. Yes, it was tempting to run — to get away from Metropolis and its crowds. But outside of the base, the world was full of potential predicaments.

A society voraciously consumed with the near catastrophe and the sensational appearance of a superhero who had flown in — literally — to save them.

An amnesiac alien, oblivious to the super-powers he possessed.

And the man she loved — whose memories of her stretched back less than an hour.

But could she trust Menzies? Or Daniel? And even if she could, how much authority did Menzies have at EPRAD? What if the scientists decided this was their ideal opportunity to experiment on an alien?

The Earth had been saved. They no longer needed Clark. What if his display of incredible strength caused any lingering trace of Trask's paranoia to re-surface? "No," Lois said. "I want to go. It can't be any worse than after Linda -"

"Lois," Daniel said. "I think you should stay. It doesn't have to be for long — just long enough to let things settle a bit out there."

"So you can lock -"

"No," Daniel said quickly, earnestly shaking his head. "No. You can leave whenever you want to. You have my word."

Lois felt a touch on her back. A light touch, settling gently on the waistband of her jeans. She turned to Clark.

"Lois," he said as his hand dropped away from her. "Perhaps it would be a good idea to wait. You look tired. I'm not dressed ... I don't even have shoes. We can get cleaned up ... have something to eat ... rest ... and then leave."

She bit back her protest. Clark was right. And the risks were greater than he could know. His hair was still plastered to his head. What if someone recognised him as the alien who had saved the world? Clark had lost his past; she had to safeguard his future.

"OK," Lois said with a smile to Clark. "If that's what you want to do."

He thanked her with a return smile.

"I'll get Shadbolt to take you to a room," Daniel said, dialling his cell phone. "And I'll arrange for coffee and food to be delivered."

"I'll talk to Daitch about the press conference," Menzies said. "Excuse me."

He left the room. Daniel began talking into his phone.

Clark's hand contacted Lois's back again. "Are you OK?" he murmured.

Lois nodded, rendered speechless by the combined power of his softly spoken inquiry, his concern-filled eyes, and the tenderness of his touch.

She had been so scared. During the long dark hours of the night, she had thought she had lost him forever. Then, she had found him — only to discover that, for him, everything had gone.

But not everything. Some things remained. Whatever the situation, Clark's foremost concern was for her. Just as it had been at their first meeting — in the cell, when he'd protected her from Moyne's bullet and then brought Neosporin to treat the scratches on her face. Just as it had been after Moyne had broken into her bedroom.

That hadn't changed.

"If you want to, we can leave as soon as we've had something to eat and I'm dressed," Clark said.

The door opened, and Evan entered. "Hi," he said, approaching Clark. "I'm Evan Shadbolt."

"I saw you earlier," Clark said. "When they brought me here."

"Yeah," Evan said. "But I don't think we were ever properly introduced."

"I'm Clark," he said. "I don't remember anything before today. Do I know you?"

"Yes," Evan said.

"Are we friends? Colleagues?"

"We both know Lois," Evan said.

Clark gave him an apologetic smile. "Sorry," he said. "I don't have any memories of you."

Evan replied with a brief smile as he nodded towards the elevator. "Come this way," he said. "The room is ready for you."

Clark gestured for Lois to go first. She walked forward slowly, wanting the feel of his hand on her back again.

It came. Fleeting, but there.

As the elevator slid upwards, Lois realised something. Clark without memories meant Clark without hang-ups. Clark without cruelly imposed inhibitions. Clark with no thought of himself as being

less than human.

The future opened up like the flowing curtain of a giant stage, revealing a glitter of possibilities.

They had some time. Time to make new memories without the shadow of the cell. When — if — Clark's memories returned, he would have good memories to stand firm against the horror of his imprisonment.

Lois turned to Clark and gave him a dazzling smile, determining that she was going to cram whatever time they had with good memories. Great memories.

Clark responded with a masterpiece of a smile. If he was going to keep smiling like that ...

... She was going to need emergency bedroom therapy. And a lot more than rubbing each other's backs.

Lois tore her eyes from the enchantment of Clark's smile and stared at the elevator doors, willing them to hurry up and open so she could be alone with Clark.

Patience, she reminded herself sternly. Patience. Don't rush him.

Clark was going to feel disoriented for a while. In rebuilding their relationship, she had to bear in mind that this would feel like a beginning for him.

But he was smiling. He'd touched her — nothing too personal — just a hand on her back. That was light-years ahead of where they'd started in the cell.

And — as she'd told Menzies — a concussion couldn't change Clark's heart.

The doors slid open and they exited the elevator. Twenty yards along the corridor, they came to an exterior door. Evan led them into a small courtyard, and Lois glanced anxiously skywards. There were no helicopters hovering, hoping for a glimpse of the alien hero. Perhaps Menzies had already called the press conference.

They arrived at a row of three motel-style rooms, and Evan unlocked the first door. He stood back to allow them to enter. "I'll be back soon with your meals," he said, putting the key in Lois's hand.

"Thanks, Evan," she said as she entered the room. It was a combined living/dining room with basic kitchen facilities, a table with two chairs, and a soft leather sofa.

"Thank you, Evan," Clark said. He closed the door, and they were alone. Lois and Clark. Together. "I'm sorry if I coerced you into staying here."

"Daniel was probably right," Lois said, trying to be discreet about peering past the open door and into what she assumed was the bedroom. How many beds? How long were they staying? "We could both use some time to take stock."

"You said it's going to take us a few days to travel to my home," Clark said. "I figured it would be a good idea to take advantage of their hospitality before we start."

"It is a good idea."

"But it wasn't until after I'd spoken that I realised you probably had reasons for wanting to begin the journey. You probably have a life to get back to after you've taken me home." He gave a shrug and a small smile. "Sorry."

"There's nothing that can't wait," Lois said. "And anyway, I didn't intend to start right away. I was going to take us to my dad's place so we could shower there."

"Oh," Clark said. "Sorry. I should have -"

"Clark," Lois said with a smile she hoped would reassure him. "It's OK. We can stay here for a few hours. No problems."

"Why were you going to your father's place? Don't you live around here either?"

"I have an apartment, but it's near the centre of the city. Dad's house is out in the suburbs; it's quieter, and the route to get there is much less crowded."

He nodded, seeming to accept her explanation. "Would you like to use the bathroom first?"

"No. You go first."

He looked down and winced. "I don't think these are my clothes."

“They’re not.”

“Phew,” he said with a bashful smile. “I’ve been hoping I wasn’t that inept at judging my size.”

“You usually dress well,” Lois said. And you often look positively gorgeous, she added silently. She brushed at her sweater, making a lame attempt to smooth out some of the wrinkles. “We could both use some cleaning up.”

“At least your clothes fit,” he said.

“Don’t worry,” Lois said. “Everything will start to feel more normal soon.”

“If my home isn’t near here, how will I get my clothes? Did I bring a suitcase? I don’t have anything with me. Not a wallet. Not anything.”

Lois reached into her bag, but stopped herself, remembering his poem. He couldn’t read that. Not yet. “Don’t worry about anything,” she said, taking her cell phone out of her bag. “Excuse me while I make a call.”

“Do you want me to give you some privacy?”

Lois shook her head as she dialled Daniel’s number. “Hi, Daniel,” she said when he answered. “Do you know the whereabouts of Clark’s clothes?”

“They were put into a bag. Shadbolt will bring them.”

Lois hung up and smiled at Clark. “Your clothes are coming.”

“I left clothes here?”

“Yeah,” Lois said. She looked around the room, trying to discourage Clark from asking any further questions — and managing to sneak a peek into the bedroom.

One bed.

“You don’t want to answer my questions, do you?” Clark said.

Lois turned to him and was relieved to see that the legion of questions in his eyes hadn’t wiped away his smile.

“I want you to remember in your own time,” she said. “Don’t worry about it.”

“You keep telling me not to worry,” he said as his smile hovered.

“You almost have me believing that everything will be all right.”

“It will be,” Lois said.

“Can you tell me anything?” he said. “If you can’t tell me why I’m here or why my clothes are here but I’m not wearing them, can you at least tell me where we are?”

“We’re at the EPRAD base — Extra Planetary Research and Development.”

“In Metropolis?”

“Yes.”

“Why is Eric arranging a press conference?”

“There has been a lot happening the last few hours, and the media is bellowing for information.”

“It seemed to be somehow linked with us leaving.”

“The media have blocked the front entrance.”

“Why was I brought here?” Clark asked. “I can’t work here — you said it’s going to take a few days to drive to my home.”

“You don’t work here.”

“Maybe that’s why everything is so unfamiliar.”

Lois risked a brief touch to Clark’s arm — right at the junction where the sleeve of the undersized tee shirt gave way to his warm tight skin.

His hand brushed lightly across the place she’d touched — as if he, too, had felt the lingering effects of their connection. “Lois?” he said uneasily, his smile gone.

“Yes, Clark?”

“When my memories come back, am I going to discover something really bad? Do I have amnesia because it was easier than dealing with something traumatic?”

“That’s not why you have amnesia.”

He seemed to accept that, although Lois could imagine the clatter of interrogation that must be bludgeoning the blank spaces of his mind.

“Do you know why I can’t remember?” Clark asked.

Lois nodded indistinctly, trying to formulate something that wouldn’t be a lie, but wouldn’t open the floodgates to a torrent of questions. To her relief, she was saved by a knock on the door. “Come in, Evan,” she said.

He entered, carrying a tray loaded with a full coffee pot and a plate of bagels with a slab of butter and a dish of red jelly. He put them on the table. “There are cups and plates in the cupboards,” he said. “I’ll just get the clothes.” When he returned with the large paper bag, he said, “If you need anything, call Daniel on the agency cell phone. If we don’t hear from you, we’ll leave you alone.” He turned and walked out of the door.

Clark pulled out a chair for Lois. “Do you like coffee?” he asked.

Lois sat down, grateful for his apparent acceptance that answers were going to come slowly. “Yes,” she said. “And right now, I need coffee even more than a shower.”

He opened the nearest cupboard door and took out two cups and two plates. From the drawer, he added two knives. He grinned as he sat down. “I think I need a shower more than you do,” he said lightly. “There’s something in my hair — something starchy that has dried to a horrible mess, but I haven’t seen a mirror, so I can only guess at what it might be.”

His disclosure led to an obvious question. “Do you remember what you look like?” Lois asked as she buttered a warm bagel. “If you were shown ten photos of different people, would you be able to pick out which one is you?”

“Probably not,” Clark said, although his tone didn’t suggest significant levels of distress. “I mean, I know I’m male and I have light skin. I assume I have dark hair, and I can feel that it’s quite short.”

His casual summation drove home to Lois exactly how unsettling this must be for him. He hadn’t had access to mirrors in the cell. Did that — in the subconscious depths beyond his memories — make this easier or more difficult? “How do you know you have dark hair?” Lois asked.

He gestured to his forearm with his knife. “I doubt someone with hair that colour on his arms could have blond hair on his head,” he said.

Lois felt a smile bud at the thought of Clark with blond hair. She kept it under control, but then she saw that he was smiling, so she allowed her amusement to show. He waited until she had finished with the butter and jelly, and then he spread his own bagel.

“Does it feel really weird not knowing what you look like?” Lois said.

“No more weird than everything else.”

“In a really strange way, I can understand,” she said. “I can imagine that my hair is a mess. I don’t think I’ve even combed it today — but because I can’t see it, it’s a bit easier to avoid thinking about what it must look like.”

Clark’s eyes rested on her, causing her heart to catapult. “It doesn’t look bad at all,” he said solemnly.

She smiled. “Neither does your gelled hair.”

“Do I usually wear it gelled?” he asked. Before she could reply, he lifted his hand to stall her. “Forget I asked that,” he said with a smile.

“Thanks for being so understanding,” Lois said. “This must be incredibly frustrating for you. And scary. And disturbing.”

“Yeah,” he said. “But you’re right — stressing about it isn’t going to help.”

“Do you remember anything?” Lois asked. “Do you know what country we are in?”

“The United States of America,” Clark replied. “It’s not like my mind is empty. I have knowledge. Obviously, I know a language. I know the meanings of words and how to put them together. I know the names of things. This is strawberry jelly. I know the butter was made from cream. I know the Detroit Red Wings play hockey and the Dallas Cowboys play football. I know the months of the year ...” He punctuated his speech with a sheepish grin. “... but I had to be told it is October.”

“So ... it’s only the personal stuff that’s gone?” Lois asked, feeling a surge of sympathy for him.

He nodded. “It’s like my existence has been erased from the panorama of life. The setting is still there, but all the people, all the personal stuff has been taken away.”

“You don’t remember anyone?” Lois said, unable to keep from hoping there would be some small memory of her that had survived the obliteration.

“No. No one. Nothing.” He shrugged apologetically. “Sorry.”

“You don’t have to be sorry,” she said quickly.

Clark finished his bagel, pushed aside his plate, and picked up his cup of coffee. “If I can’t ask questions about me, can I ask you about you?” he asked. He grinned suddenly. “I’d rather talk than be stuck with my own thoughts, and I can’t think of a nicer subject.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he said in a low voice made her want to swoon. He sipped his coffee. Grimaced.

Lois chuckled and pushed the sugar bowl closer to him. “You take two,” she said.

He spooned in two generous heaps and stirred his coffee. “What is your favourite colour?”

“Red.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s so vibrant,” she said. “Because it’s bold. Because it makes a statement. Because it’s never wishy-washy.” And because it’s the colour of passion. She couldn’t stop herself glancing at Clark, just in case he got the connection.

But he wasn’t looking at her; he was sipping his coffee. “What is your favourite food?” he asked with a little smile of encouragement.

“Chocolate,” Lois said, thinking about the candy bar she had given him — that first time when she had left a cup of tea and a candy bar near the door of his cell and then rushed up to her office so she wouldn’t miss his reaction.

And the chocolate they had shared as they had worked on the jigsaw puzzle on the floor of the cell.

Lois looked at Clark over the top of her cup of coffee. Was he — even dimly — remembering either of those times?

“Favourite flower?” Clark said.

“Aster.”

“Aster?”

She nodded. *Ever since you gave me a vase of asters when I was feeling so lost after Moyne came to the farm.*

“Asters seem an unusual choice,” Clark noted quietly.

She nodded again, staring at him steadily, willing him to remember that asters were just one of the hundreds of small threads that weaved through their shared history.

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

“I’m wondering what you’re thinking,” Lois said. “I’m wondering if you remember anything. If anything I say elicits even the smallest reaction.”

“No,” Clark said with a deep sigh. “Nothing.”

She should probably leave it there, but the temptation to probe was too great. “But?”

“But I’m trying to read your face ... trying to determine if there’s anything significant in your answers ... something you’re remembering ... something I should be remembering.”

“Clark, if I thought it would help you, I would answer every one of your questions,” Lois said. “I would tell you everything. I wouldn’t care about the advice of the so-called experts; I would tell you anything you wanted to know.”

“Why don’t you?”

Because some of your memories are like chains, and without them, you have a chance of real freedom.

“Because I think your mind will re-discover your life piece by piece,” she said. “And although I realise how incredibly frustrating this is now, I think it will be best for you in the long-term.”

“Is it *that* daunting?” he said. He smiled, trying to lighten his

words. “Is there something I am going to discover that is earth-shattering?”

Earth-shattering? That was an ironic choice of words. “Clark,” Lois said, giving him a smile. “You don’t have to be afraid of anything that you don’t know.”

“Will you answer one question for me?” he asked, smiling in such a way that it was going to be a monumental effort to refuse him anything.

“Ask your question,” Lois said.

“Did I give you asters?”

Her heart leapt as she searched his face for any sign of recognition. “Yes,” she whispered.

His eyes dropped, and he refilled his cup from the coffee pot.

Lois finished the last morsel of her bagel, wondering why her reply had caused him to withdraw. Perhaps it was too close to an acknowledgement that their relationship had been romantic. Perhaps he wasn’t ready for that yet.

“Do you remember your favourite anything?” Lois asked.

“No.”

Their conversation had run aground, and Lois wasn’t sure how to re-float it. “If you’re finished eating, would you like to go and have a shower?” she asked.

His hand lifted to run through his plastered hair, and he grimaced. “Do you mind if I don’t re-gel my hair?” he said. “It’s uncomfortable. I can’t imagine why I wore it like this.”

“I don’t mind at all,” Lois said, choosing to respond to his direct question rather than his implied one. “Is your head sore anywhere?” His fingers spread and delved deeper. “No,” he said. “Should it be?”

No, Lois thought. “I just wanted to ensure you don’t have a head injury.”

“Because I can’t remember?” Clark said, sounding as if that hadn’t occurred to him. He continued running his hand over his head, prodding here and there.

Lois had sudden inspiration. “I could check for you,” she said. She stood before he could decline her offer and stepped behind him. His hand dropped into his lap, which Lois took as consent. She ran her fingers through the stiffly gelled rows of hair, looking for injuries she was fairly confident she wouldn’t find.

She’d covered almost every inch of his scalp when she realised something. Dried gel was not particularly enticing. Certainly, it didn’t feel anywhere near as good as the memory of Clark’s soft silky waves flowing through her fingers.

But Clark wasn’t self-conscious about it. He’d said he didn’t like it, but he was comfortable enough to allow her to touch it.

“Any sore spots?” Lois asked, hoping to divert his attention from the fact that she had stretched out this fact-finding mission as long as she reasonably could.

“No,” he said. “Nothing.”

Reluctantly, Lois removed her hands from his head. “That’s good,” she said brightly.

He stood from the chair and faced her. “Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“Well, if there is no physical reason for the amnesia ... perhaps it’s psychological.”

“Don’t think that,” Lois said quickly. “You are the strongest, bravest person I know.”

He broke into a small smile. “I won’t be too long in the shower.”

“Take your time,” Lois said. “There’s no hurry.”

He picked up the bag containing his clothes and went through the door into the bathroom.

Lois walked to the window and stared out at the neatly trimmed lawns of the EPRAD base.

Again, she was the bridge between Clark and the world.

Again, she found herself in the position of having to determine what was best for him.

What should she tell him? Nothing? Something? Everything?

No, she decided quickly. Not everything. Not the cell.

He was lost and confused, but already, she had glimpsed a Clark who was free from the scourge of torture and abuse and imprisonment.

If he asked about their relationship, she would answer him as honestly as she could without pressuring him into thinking she expected anything from him.

Just like in the cell, she wanted his love — but she wanted it given freely and not tied with the strings of indebtedness.

If he discovered some of his extra abilities, she would try to make them seem normal. OK ... so that wasn't realistic. But if she were unperturbed, hopefully he would be able to be more accepting of his differences.

And if she needed to use the fact that he had single-handedly saved the world in order to bolster his self-confidence, she would.

But the cell. The horror and depravity of the cell ... She would do everything to protect him from that.

It was going to come up. Perhaps he would ask how they had met. Should she avoid every reference that could possibly link back to the cell? Would that just make him suspicious? Would that inadvertently lead him directly to the place she most wanted to avoid?

Should she pick out the good memories and hope they would be enough to override the need to dig below them?

She desperately wanted him to remember being with her. She could feel the cords of fear binding her heart. What if he never remembered her? What if — free from the cell — he didn't need her? What if he never remembered that he loved her?

She had to encourage memories of them being together. But some of their best memories — the hair washing, their first date, the paper airplanes — had happened in the cell.

And then there was his mother. Clark was going to ask about his parents. What possible explanation could she give for a mother of unknown whereabouts? A mother no one could guarantee was even alive? A mother who might not be found for weeks or even months?

Lois turned back from the window and sank onto the sofa.

What if she'd lost Clark?

He'd been caring. He'd been considerate. He'd been polite.

But there had been nothing in his actions or words to suggest he felt anything special for her.

Why would he? He'd known her for an hour.

How she wished she could take him into her arms and tell him that although the answers to his questions were astounding in the extreme, everything would be all right. She wished she could run her hands down his cheeks and hold him there while her mouth captured his.

They had promised each other that ... as soon as they were together again ... they would finally kiss.

Now, they were together, but ...

Clark stared into the mirror in the bathroom.

His heart sank.

And sank further.

He closed his eyes. Opened them. Closed them again. Opened them again.

Nothing had changed.

He dropped his head into his hands, and he turned away from the mirror in utter despair.

Part 3

When Lois heard the sound of the running shower, she picked up her cell phone and dialed Daniel.

"Hi, Lois," he said just a few seconds later. "Is everything all right? Do you need anything?"

"Can you come here so we can talk privately?"

"I'll be there in two minutes."

Lois watched at the window, and when she saw Daniel approaching, she slipped outside. "What's happening?" she said in lowered tones. "Has the press conference happened?"

"Yeah, Menzies and Daitch have just finished it."

"What did they say?"

"Menzies said Superman was found unconscious this morning and brought to the base. He said he is going to need some time to recover and he would be staying for at least two or three days."

"So no one should be expecting him to leave today?"

"No," Daniel said. "Do you still want to leave quickly?"

"If Clark's OK, I want to leave as soon as it's dark tonight. What was the reaction from the press?"

"There were a lot of questions. Ruby Rhodes from the Daily Planet tried to suggest it could all be a publicity stunt by EPRAD — that the asteroid was never a threat, and the government needed an excuse to allow a super-powered alien loose on society."

"How did Menzies respond?"

"Menzies didn't have to respond."

"Why?"

"She was shouted down by the rest of the reporters. Daitch and two other scientists vouched that the asteroid had definitely been there, had been an explicit threat, and without Superman, we wouldn't have the luxury of arguing about whether it had been a hoax or not."

"You think the newspaper stories will be positive?"

"Extremely positive. But I should warn you that every reporter on the face of this planet wants to interview Superman."

She probably should have expected that. "It's not going to happen," Lois said. "Not until he has recovered his memory. Perhaps not even then."

"Menzies said Superman was concentrating on recovering."

"Recovering from what?"

"He left it vague," Daniel said. "When they pushed for further detail, Menzies mentioned that an individual's medical records are not for public scrutiny."

"Did they accept that?"

"Yes."

"They didn't say that because he's different, his privacy doesn't matter?"

"No," Daniel said. "No one was thinking like that."

"OK," Lois said. "I should go in. Clark will finish in the bathroom soon."

"Do you need anything?"

"Yes. Clark needs more clothes. I know you gave me the bank account with the compensation down-payment, but I don't have an explanation for Clark as to why the US government suddenly decided to give him seventy thousand dollars."

"You need cash. How much? A thousand? More?"

"A thousand — in various bills."

"I'll have it within an hour. What would you like for lunch?"

Lois remembered how much Clark had enjoyed the hamburger she had bought for him their first morning on the road. "Hamburgers," she said. "And fries."

"Anything else?"

"A jigsaw puzzle," she said impulsively.

"OK," Daniel said, without any discernable surprise.

"Thanks."

"How's Clark?"

"Confused," Lois replied. "Trying to make the best of a distressing situation."

"He'll be fine."

"How do you know?"

"He's with you," Daniel said. With that, he turned and walked away.

Clark hadn't emerged from the bathroom when Daniel returned twenty minutes later, carrying a jigsaw puzzle box. He put it on the table and handed Lois a stack of bills from his pocket.

Lois took Clark's wallet from her bag and put the bills in it. "Thanks," she said.

"Would you mind signing this?" Daniel asked, putting a receipt on the table and holding out a pen. "Sorry," he added. "Approved procedure is that cash has to be signed for."

Lois scribbled her signature.

“Thanks,” Daniel said when she’d finished. “Call if you need anything else.”

“I want to leave as soon as it’s dark.”

“I’ll make sure your vehicle is ready.”

Daniel left, and Lois took out the folded piece of paper on which Clark had written his poem of hope. She lingered over it, inundated with yearning for the Clark who was so familiar. She heard a sound behind her and slipped the paper into a side compartment in her bag.

The bathroom door opened, and Clark walked out. At the sight of him — dressed in his own clothes and with his hair shining and unfettered — Lois’s heart soared.

She smiled, but he didn’t. “What’s wrong?” she said.

“Ahh ...” Clark spread his fingers and thumb across his cheeks. “I ... ah ... tried to shave, but the razor broke.”

Lois hadn’t even thought about that. “The stubble looks good,” she said. “It suits you.” And it did. It gave him a slightly roguish appearance that filled her imagination with a parade of possibilities.

“I don’t like it,” Clark said shortly.

“I have some things for you,” Lois said, trying to haul his mind from the broken razor and her mind from how much she’d like to conduct a thorough exploration — starting with the stubble and moving south. She rummaged through her bag for a few seconds longer than was strictly necessary and took out his glasses. “These are yours.”

His questioning look rose from the glasses to her face. “Mine?”

“Yeah.”

“Do I wear them all the time? Or just for reading?”

“All the time.”

He swung open the wings and put them on. He pushed them down his nose, looked over the frames, and then repositioned them. “They don’t make much difference,” he noted.

Lois decided to hurry on from that topic, too. “Here’s your watch,” she said.

He took it from her and looked at it for a moment before turning it over and checking the back. Then he wrapped it around his wrist and fastened the buckle.

“And your wallet,” Lois said.

“Thanks.” He put it into the pocket of his jeans without opening it or commenting on its bulk.

Something had changed. His appearance had improved, but his mood seemed to have deteriorated significantly. Had he remembered something? Perhaps the isolation of amnesia had stirred up deep-seated residual fears from the cell. “Are you all right?” Lois asked. She laid her hand on his arm.

He stepped back, causing her hand to drop. “Sure,” he said. “The bathroom’s free.”

But he wasn’t all right. She waited.

Clark gave her an unconvincing smile. “I’m fine,” he said. “Really.”

“Lunch will be here soon.”

“Already?” He glanced at his watch. “Oh — I lost track of time somewhere.”

“We had breakfast late,” Lois said. She pointed to the jigsaw puzzle box on the table. “You can get started on that if you feel like doing something.”

He glanced at the box, and Lois saw the shadow of displeasure darken his expression.

She held her breath. The jigsaw puzzle had been a risk. What if, instead of evoking memories of an activity shared with her, it reminded him of the oppression of the cell?

“I’d like to ask you a question,” Clark said quietly.

Her eyelids dropped. She’d blown it. He was remembering the cell. She opened her eyes and nodded, fearful of what he was going to ask.

“Were you my nurse?”

“No. Why?”

“Are you a hairdresser?”

“Are you remembering something?”

“Nothing concrete. But before when you were checking for injuries, it just felt ... familiar.”

“Good familiar? Or bad familiar?”

“I don’t know.” He gestured to the open bathroom door. “Go, have a shower.”

“Will you be all right?”

He nodded tautly.

Lois went into the bathroom and shut the door. This wasn’t working. They had come through everything — the cell, the escape, Moyné — by trying to be open with each other. They had always found ways to communicate. Back in the earliest days, they had each given answers when asking questions had seemed too perilous. She had always encouraged Clark to talk to her about his fears and doubts. He had been a supportive and sympathetic listener when she’d finally been able to begin to mourn Linda’s death.

They’d overcome so much. And they’d done it by working together.

But now ...

Now she felt like she was trying to evade him. Like she had abandoned him to grapple alone with the obscure cloud of nothingness.

Lois slumped against the door. He was pacing. She could hear him. Up and down the small room, his torment evident in every step.

She couldn’t do this to him.

It was preferable to deal with the truth than to fear the unknown.

Dealing with the truth — they could do that together. Fearing the unknown — that isolated Clark and cheapened the strength of their bond.

She grabbed the doorknob and pulled.

Clark was there, hand raised, knuckles bent, about to knock on the door. His surprise at her sudden appearance wasn’t enough to drive the anguish from his expression.

“Lois,” he said desperately. “I need some answers.”

“I know,” she said, her heart breaking at his despair. “I was just coming out to talk to you.”

“You were?”

“Yeah.” She clasped his hand and squeezed it for a moment. “It’s OK,” she said. “We can do this. Let’s sit down and talk.”

At the table, he withdrew a chair and waited for her to sit. He dropped into the chair next to her and pushed the jigsaw puzzle box aside. He leant forward, elbows on the table, clenched fists forming a clunky peak onto which his forehead slumped.

Lois waited, wishing she knew how to make this easier for him.

Clark lifted his head. “I heard you tell Daniel that you wanted to leave as soon as it gets dark.”

“Yes,” she said, surprised by his words. She’d been expecting a question about him. Or his life. Or her. Or them. “Is that all right with you?”

“And you want to go to your father’s home?”

“Yes.”

Clark’s face contorted with anguish. “Will your father be there?” he asked.

“No,” Lois said quickly. “He is away at the moment. It will be just us.”

Clark stared at his knotted hands, looking like a man who had just been sentenced to death.

“What is wrong?” Lois asked. “Something is going on here, and I don’t understand what.”

His irony-laden look conveyed more than a thousand words could have.

“I guess ... I guess that’s how everything feels to you,” Lois said.

“I know you’re not supposed to answer my questions,” Clark said, “but this is killing me, Lois. Will you answer just one question for me?” His eyes found hers. “Please?” he begged.

She couldn’t refuse those amazing brown eyes when they looked

at her like that. “Or course I will,” she said. “But one answer is probably only going to generate a hundred more questions.”

“That’s OK,” he breathed. “If I know the answer to this, I can wait for everything else. But I . . . I can’t go on not knowing.”

“Go on,” Lois said. “Ask.”

“Are you my sister?”

His *sister*? “Is that what you were thinking?” Lois asked.

“It’s obvious, isn’t it?” he said. “I’m lost and without any memories, and they send for you — not as a professional but as someone who ‘knows’ me. We could be just friends, but it seems more likely that you’re either a family member or my girlfriend, because neither of us is wearing a wedding ring.

“You told me I gave you asters — not roses, but asters. You didn’t deny that you’d done something to my hair. You touch me — affectionately, but not with the intimacy of someone who is really close. You have a jigsaw puzzle brought here — probably trying to rekindle memories of our childhood. And you want to take me to your father’s home — probably again trying to awaken some of those lost memories. And when I went into the bathroom, I looked in the mirror. I have dark hair — just like you — and brown eyes — just like you.”

“I’m not your sister.”

“Half-sister? Step-sister? Cousin?”

“None of them. We’re no relation at all.”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely positive.”

His mouth fell against his fists, and his eyes slid shut. By the time they opened again, hope had replaced the devastation and his mouth was tending towards a smile. His hands dropped to the table, and he leant back in his chair.

His shoulders relaxed, and his grin erupted.

He stared at her, his eyes sending messages in rapid time. Messages that shot deep into Lois’s heart. Messages that made her want to cry and laugh and squeal and leap onto his laid-back body and hug him until neither of them had any breath left.

“Why do you ask?” she said with such composure that it eclipsed every performance she had managed in her entire career as an agent.

Clark’s grin took on a trace of teasing. “I thought there was to be just one question,” he said.

“I answered your question,” Lois said, knowing her excitement was feeding an effervescent grin. “You owe me one. Why is it so important for you to know whether I’m your sister or not?”

“Because if you were my sister . . . that would be the *worst* thing in the world.”

“How can you be sure about anything?” she asked, wanting to prolong this conversation, wanting to bask in the adoring warmth of his unveiled eyes.

“From the first second I saw you, I knew. At first, I tried to dismiss it as a normal reaction to having someone — *anyone* — come. Then I tried to convince myself you were a social worker who had been assigned to help me. But I knew — when everything else was a haze of uncertainty, I knew one thing for sure. We have *something*. You and me. Something strong and unbreakable.”

“Yes,” Lois said with pure elation. “But it’s not the bond of siblings.”

Clark grinned again, radiant with relief and joy. “You were right,” he said. “About one answer breeding a horde of other questions. Can I ask more?”

“No, you can’t,” Lois said lightly. “You know you can’t.”

“That is definitely not fair,” he declared, giving her another grin to devour. “All I know is how I feel about you.”

“That’s all you need to know.”

He nodded his emphatic agreement. “But what I can’t even begin to fathom is how I can feel like this and not have done anything about it.”

“How do you know you didn’t do anything?”

“You’re not wearing my ring.”

“You feel that strongly?” Lois asked in awe. “After just an hour?”

He nodded, and then his face folded with comprehension. He bit on his lower lip. “I get it,” he said disconsolately. “You don’t feel the same way. That’s why nothing . . . Did I ever tell you how I felt about you? Or did I suffer in silence?”

“I knew. But -”

“Please!” he cried, lurching forward in his seat. “I don’t remember the first time you had to let me down gently, or if there was a second and a third time, but I am sure I don’t need to hear it again.”

“I never told you,” Lois said quietly. “Because it wasn’t the truth. It wasn’t the truth then, and it isn’t the truth now.”

His jaw dropped. “Did I know that?”

She nodded.

His expression was strung between hope and disbelief. Disbelief won. “No,” he said, shaking his head. “That can’t be right. I can’t have known that I had a chance with you.”

“Why?”

“Because there’s something else I know for certain. Something that made me sure you had to be my sister.”

“What?”

“I know I’ve never kissed you. Not kissed you the way I want to.”

“How could you know that?”

“Because if I had, I am sure nothing would be able to block that memory.”

Lois didn’t know what to say. He was right, but the reasons . . .

“Lois,” Clark said. “How can a man feel like this and not have kissed you? I was thinking about kissing you within seconds of you walking into that room.”

“You had good reasons for waiting.”

“You were with someone else?”

“No.”

“I have something wrong with me?”

Her heart fluttered with alarm. “Like what?” she gasped.

“Cancer or something? Something that would make it unfair to ask you to get involved with me?”

“No. Nothing like that.”

“I was with someone else? I was already committed to someone when I met you?”

“No.”

He lifted his hands in abject frustration. “Then what is *wrong* with me?”

“You . . . we both needed time to work through some issues.”

“No,” Clark said, vehemently shaking his head. “Ever since I woke up, I’ve had issues — tons of them. But not one of them stopped me from knowing that my life isn’t complete without you. Not one of them stopped me from wanting to hold you. Kiss you.” His eyes flitted to the open bedroom door. “Be with you in a way that sickened me if you were my sister.”

“I’m not your sister,” Lois said. “What you feel is perfectly OK.” Better than OK.

He stared at her, cheek twitching. “I want to believe you. You can’t know how much I want to believe you . . . but I have to ask this, too. Are you saying this because you think I couldn’t cope if there was no chance for us? I couldn’t,” he said desperately. “But it would be better than thinking we were together and finding out later that you were just trying to -”

“I wouldn’t do that to you.”

“Lois,” he breathed. “I don’t know anything. I don’t know what’s acceptable for us. I don’t know where we’re at. I don’t know why we stalled.” He gazed at her, his eyes solemn. “And I am so scared.”

“Scared of what?”

“Of assuming something is OK when it’s not. Of barging in and doing something that upsets you.”

“That won’t happen,” Lois said. “You are the kindest, most considerate man I know. You would never demand or take advantage.”

“But I don’t remember *anything*.”

“Clark, don’t worry about this,” Lois said. “We can do this. Together, we can do anything.”

“Have I held your hand? Have I hugged you? Have I told you how I feel about you?”

“Yes — for all three.”

“But we haven’t . . .” His eyes swung to the open bedroom door. “No,” he said as his cheeks coloured. “We haven’t.”

“Clark,” Lois said. “I will answer any questions that are really troubling you, but I still think it’s best if you remember things gradually.” She gestured to the box. “Like a jigsaw puzzle — piece by piece.”

“Will you stay with me? Will you help me put all the pieces back together?”

“Yes,” she said. “I won’t leave you.”

“That’s the most important piece in place,” he said. His grin flashed suddenly, shaking off his seriousness. “You didn’t correct me about never having kissed you.”

“If you were to kiss me, you might discover it’s not that memorable.”

He chuckled delightedly. “Ms Lane,” he said. “That sounds like an invitation.”

“Does it?” she asked softly.

He nodded, his eyes locked in hers. “You don’t seem against the idea,” he murmured in a low voice that ruptured numberless nerve endings and set them atingle.

“I have a suggestion,” Lois said.

A mischievous gleam lit his eyes. “You do?”

“Instead of obsessing about the past, let’s concentrate on the present. Let’s pretend we’ve just met. Instead of you worrying about the memories you’ve lost, let’s make new ones.”

“I love that idea.”

“Me, too,” she said.

Clark stood from the table and extended his hand towards her. Lois took his hand and stood also. “Hi,” he said. “My name is . . .” He leant forward, his mouth to her ear. “What’s my surname?” he whispered.

“Kent,” she replied.

He backed away, his smile vibrant. “Hi,” he said, gently tightening his grasp on her hand. “My name is Clark Kent. It is wonderful to meet you.”

“I’m Lois Lane,” she said, suppressing the desire to giggle.

“Ms Lane,” he said, his tone serious, but his eyes sparkling.

“Would you mind if I called you ‘Lois’?”

“I wouldn’t mind at all, Mr Kent.”

“Please call me ‘Clark,’” he said.

“Clark.”

“There is something I would like to ask you, Lois,”

“There is?”

“Would you go out with me? Tonight? On a date?”

“Tonight?”

He nodded sombrely. “If we leave here as soon as we’ve eaten lunch, we’ll have the afternoon to make preparations.”

“What preparations?”

His hand was still holding hers, and the heat generated could have melted a significant portion of the North Pole. “I’d like to buy some clothes. And a razor.” He grinned. “And the most beautiful bunch of asters I can find.”

“I don’t mind the stubble look,” Lois said quickly.

“I do,” Clark said. “It’s scraggly and itchy. And . . . I want to be clean-shaven for our date.” He looked at her beseechingly. “If you will agree to go out with me.”

“I would love to go out with you,” Lois said. She’d been swept away by the charm of a confident and gallant Clark, but it was time to pay heed to some practicalities. “But I’m not sure going *out* is the wisest idea.”

“Then we could order in,” Clark said. “Would that be all right?”

“That would be wonderful,” Lois said.

He grinned. “I definitely need to shave.”

That was going to be problematic, but Lois didn’t want to think about that now. “Why?” she asked lightly. “Are you planning to kiss

me?”

Clark gently brushed back a strand of her hair. “I thought we agreed to limit our questions,” he said.

“That applies to questions about the past,” Lois said. “Future questions are OK.”

His eyebrow lifted, seasoning his smile with a touch of banter. “So it’s OK if I ask you for another date tomorrow night?”

“I think that would be perfectly OK.”

Clark smiled. Then he seemed to remember their hands were still clamped together. He slowly eased out of her grasp and gave her another mind-shattering smile.

Then he stood there and just stared at her.

Lois stared back, relishing the openness of his expression and the unshackled flow of love from his soft brown eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he said, not sounding sorry at all. “But I have been trying not to stare at you all day.”

“I’m sure I don’t look my best. I hardly slept all night, and I -”

“Was that because of me?”

Lois nodded. “I was so scared that I’d lost you.”

“That I am sorry about,” Clark said sincerely. “I wish I could have saved you from that.”

“There was nothing you could do,” Lois said.

“Was it only one night? Or was I missing for longer?”

“Only one night.”

“And when you found me, I didn’t even remember you,” Clark said with regret.

“You remembered the important things.”

Clark acknowledged that with another stunning smile. “It’s weird,” he said. “I don’t remember any detail at all. I can’t remember doing one thing with you. I can’t remember when we met. I can’t remember what you were wearing the first time I saw you. I can’t remember our first date. I can’t even remember if we had one. But from somewhere deeper than memories, I *know* I need to be with you.”

Lois tried to smile, although her chin was not that firm and her eyes were not that dry.

“Now I’ve made you cry,” Clark said, putting a comforting hand on her shoulder. “Have I done that before?”

“No. Yes.”

He smiled. “Which is it?”

“I have cried, but never because you were unthinking or inconsiderate.”

“That’s a relief,” Clark said. “Because it would be easy to conclude that I’m really woeful at this.”

“No,” Lois said quickly. “That’s not true.”

“Ah,” he said with a wink. “But we only just met, so . . .”

“So we have memories to make.”

His eyebrows lifted in interest. “Memories?” he said in a husky voice that somehow turned an innocent word into something much, much more exhilarating. “Any suggestions?”

A knock sounded loudly on the door, and Lois felt as if she’d been released from a cord pulling ever tighter through her body.

“Hamburgers.”

“Hamburgers?”

“You like them.” Lois turned from him and walked to the door, running a hand through her hair and wishing there was an effective way to dilute the joy and excitement — and arousal, she admitted — from her expression. “Evan,” she greeted.

He pushed forward a tray containing three paper bags and a bottle of soda. “How is everything?” he asked quietly.

“Fine,” Lois said. “Everything’s just fine.”

“Good.”

“Could you tell Daniel we’ll be leaving as soon as we’ve finished eating?”

“You will?”

“Yeah.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

Evan nodded. “Good luck,” he said. “You both deserve the best of everything.”

She had the best of everything. She had Clark. “Thanks, Evan.”

He turned away, and she closed the door.

Clark was there — just a step behind her. He took the tray.

“Wow!” he said. “That smells great.”

“Do you remember the smell?” Lois asked as they sat at the table. “Could you have identified that we have burgers from the smell?”

He inhaled deeply. “Maybe,” he said. “Are there fries, too?”

“Good guess,” Lois said.

When they arrived at the table, he deposited the tray, pulled out a chair for her, and took two glasses from the cupboard. She sat down and pushed one bag towards him.

“Thanks,” he said with a smile that was a velvet-gloved assault on her senses. “What do you have?”

“Same as you,” she said as she opened her bag.

He looked up from his task of pouring the soda. “I’m surprised you have a hamburger, too.”

“Are you remembering something?” Lois asked. She took a small bite of her hamburger to take the pressure off his reply.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Do you usually eat hamburgers?”

“No,” she admitted. But today ...

He took a bite, chewed appreciatively, swallowed, and smiled.

“This is great,” he said.

“Have some fries,” Lois said.

“Thanks.” He took one and offered them to her.

“No, thanks.”

“You don’t usually eat fries?”

“No. But I thought you’d like them.”

“Thanks.”

They ate, and between bites, Lois snuck glances at Clark.

His hair was black and shining as it sat in gentle waves. Lois remembered how she had massaged it during their therapy.

That was what she would like to do this afternoon. Go to the bedroom with Clark, indulge in some therapy, and then fall asleep in his arms. But they had a date tonight. Who knew where that would end?

“What are you thinking about?” Clark asked.

“Tonight,” she said, because that covered the date ... and beyond.

“Our date?”

“Uhm.”

“Do you know a good place that delivers?”

“I know the perfect place.”

“Have we used them before?”

She grinned to show him that she’d noticed his smooth slip into asking questions about the past. “Once or twice,” she said.

“So we’ve eaten together before?”

“Stop it,” she said, wagging her finger at him. “We agreed to one question — which I have already answered.”

The wagged finger seemed to amuse him greatly. “You were the one who predicted that one question would lead to others.”

“I didn’t say I would answer them.”

“What’s your favourite food? Other than chocolate?”

“Pizza.”

“Have you ever eaten pizza with me?”

“Yes.”

“Did I know it was your favourite food?”

“Yes.”

“Did I get it for you?”

“Yes.” *From Italy.*

“Do I always bring you food when you’re upset?”

“No.”

“What else do I do?”

“You listen to me. You understand me. You comfort me.” You rub my ankle. You give me Neosporin. You dress my wounds. You always see the best in me.

“So I might have been shambling and inept and mind-numbingly

clueless, but I did manage to get some things right?”

“You got a whole lot right.”

“I must have,” he said. “Because somehow you stayed around long enough for me to ...” Suddenly, Clark smacked his open palm into his forehead. “I have it,” he exclaimed.

“You’ve remembered something?”

He chuckled. “No,” he said. “But I have the most realistic scenario for how we ended up like this.”

“You do?”

“Yes. I frustrated you so much with my dithering that you slapped me upside the head to knock some sense into me.”

Lois grinned. “Well, it’s working.”

His humour dispersed. “Is this what you want?” he said gravely. “Is this really what you want?”

“Clark,” Lois said. “I can honestly say that I have wanted this almost from the time I first met you.”

“I can honestly say that, too,” he said. “In fact, it probably happened twice.”

She was eager to get away. “Have you finished eating?”

“Yes.” He stood, wiping his hands on the napkin. “My past is gone,” he said as he held his hand towards her. “But my future is yours, and I would be honoured if you would share it with me, Lois.”

She took his hand, smiling and swallowing down her tears.

“Forever,” she said.

“Let’s go. Let’s get out of here and begin making these memories.”

Lois picked up her cell phone and dialled Scardino.

Clark watched her — smiling, happy, relaxed.

Free.

Part 4

The leafy residential streets of Metropolis evoked no memories at all for Clark. Although, as he reflected wryly, their chance of having an impact would have been greater if he’d been able to wrest his eyes from Lois for more than a few seconds at a time.

He was intoxicated with her.

He wanted to touch her. If that wasn’t possible, he wanted to watch her.

In some ways, he felt as if he had lost everything — but it was his shared history with Lois that he mourned most deeply.

Perhaps those memories had vanished forever.

They had the chance to make more memories now, and Clark felt a burning compulsion to ensure that nothing mar their time together.

Lois hadn’t actually said that she loved him.

But then, he hadn’t actually said that he loved her.

He did.

Beneath the bubble and fizz of feelings that were exhilarating in their newness, he was conscious of the steadfast and enduring resonance of lifelong love. Love that was independent of his memories.

His mind had forgotten. His heart had not.

Lois looked across at him, and Clark smiled. “What are you thinking?” she asked.

“That even if I could remember every day of my life, this would still be the best,” he said.

Her smile came easily, enchanting him. “Your confidence staggers me. Aren’t you concerned ... just a bit ... that this might be a — very understandable — reaction to what has happened to you? That once things settle and become clearer, you could have second thoughts?”

“No,” he said with conviction. “How I feel about you withstood losing my memories. Remembering isn’t going to change anything important.”

“And if you don’t remember?”

“Then my life will be an empty canvas.” He smiled, because being with Lois made it hard not to. “I’m hoping you’ll help me paint it.”

Her smile carried such sweet promise.

She *wanted* to be with him. As much as he wanted to be with her. That insight gave him the impetus to speak out. “Lois?” he said, finally taking an interest in the passing scenery. “Is there somewhere

we could stop and talk? Have coffee, perhaps? Do we do that?"

"We do," she said cautiously.

"But you don't want to now?"

"I'm still wearing the clothes I slept in," she said.

Clark hadn't noticed. In fact, she looked perfect to him. "Oh," he said. "Sorry."

She swung him another smile. "We'll be at my dad's place in about five minutes. We can talk then. Is that all right?"

"That's fine," he said. Her attention shifted forward again, and Clark returned to his still-scattered thoughts.

Lois hadn't confirmed it, but Clark was sure he had been the one to stall the progress of their relationship. Inwardly, he shook his head, unable to fathom any plausible reason for his reticence.

He hadn't even kissed her.

Clark rubbed the roughness of his chin.

He had to shave.

If he kissed Lois ... If she kissed him back ... It wasn't going to be a light peck.

His stubble was going to scratch her skin.

He had to buy a razor. He had to shave. Before this evening.

They pulled into the driveway of a large and stately house. It gave Clark an immediate impression of wealth — although it was far from ostentatious. He remembered the bulky feel of the wallet Lois had given him and hoped there would be enough money to buy clothes and pay for their meal tonight.

Did he have a bank account? Was he a spender? Or a saver?

He couldn't shake the feeling he'd been handed someone else's life. And with that came the unsettling notion that he might one day have to return something that wasn't really his.

Rationally, he knew his reservations were unfounded, but that didn't diminish his need to make every moment count.

Lois unlocked the door and led him into an entrance foyer. "You don't live here anymore?" he asked, looking up the lofty staircase.

"No," Lois replied. "My parents split up when I was twelve. My dad moved here, and I have a bedroom upstairs where I stayed when I was with him."

"I'm sorry about your parents," Clark said, checking her face for signs of lingering trauma. "Are you close to them?"

"Close to my dad. Not so much my mom."

"Do you have some spare clothes here?"

"A few." She smiled. "I'll probably look like something that escaped from the eighties, but at least I'll be clean."

"Do you have anything to wear for our date?"

"No. But you mentioned wanting to buy some clothes."

Clark laughed to cover his embarrassment. "You're probably more aware of my financial situation than I am," he said. "But I'd really like to buy you an outfit to wear tonight."

"You would?"

"Most definitely."

"Thank you," she said. "And your financial situation is such that you don't have to worry about money."

That was ... *probably* good news.

Lois grinned. "You didn't rob a bank," she said. "Nor are you involved in any crime. Nor did you cheat anyone. The money you have was honestly gained."

Clark mirrored her grin. "The obvious comment is how adept you are at reading my mind," he said. "But considering how little is left in my mind, you must be getting your information from somewhere else."

"Maybe I'm reading your heart," she said. "Which is easy because it hasn't changed a bit."

There was a question that had nagged him incessantly since awaking this morning. He thought he could accurately predict how Lois's reply, but he needed to hear her say it. "Do I have a good heart?" he asked.

"The best," she said. "The very best."

"That's good," he said quietly. "Because you deserve the best."

"I have it," she said with another smile that had Clark marvelling again at his good fortune. She moved into an adjacent room, dumped her bag on the coffee table, and sat on the sofa. "What do you want to talk about?"

Clark sat beside her. "I've been thinking," he said.

"Oh?"

"I know you're hesitant to reveal details of my former life, and I understand your reasons."

"Thanks," she said.

"But would it be all right if I tell you what I'm thinking? You don't have to confirm or deny anything."

"OK," Lois agreed after a moment's deliberation.

Clark began with a smile, hoping he didn't look too much like a nervous teenager about to bare his heart. "I think there are specific reasons for your caution."

"That was the advice from the counsellor."

He nodded. "But I think that if my life had been straightforward, there would be very little reason not to tell me."

Lois's eyes dropped to where her hand was lying on her thigh. So, his hunch was correct. There was *something*.

"Lois," Clark said, covering her hand with his. "It's OK. This isn't about trying to change your mind. Quite the opposite, in fact."

She met his eyes. "I just want to do what is best for you."

"I know that," Clark hurried to assure her. "That's why I wanted to say that I trust your judgement. I don't know enough to be able to decide what is best. You do. That's enough for me."

"You are showing incredible faith in someone you met this morning."

He lifted her hand from her thigh and placed it in the middle of his chest. "This part of me has known you a lot longer than a few hours."

"Aww, Clark," Lois said. "That's a beautiful thing to say."

He'd made her happy. Perhaps he was getting better at this. "I have one question," he said. "Whatever this thing is ... Can it stop us being together?"

"No."

That was all he needed. "I don't want us to be solely focussed on my lost memories and whether or not they come back," he said. "I want to move forward."

"Do you think you can do that?"

"If I don't, I think it could become an obstacle in our relationship," Clark said. "Perhaps it has already been an obstacle. Perhaps that is why I've never kissed you."

"Clark ..."

So much responsibility had been placed on her petite shoulders. "Don't worry," he said. "We'll be all right."

She gave him a halting smile. "That's my line," she said.

Clark raised her hand from his chest to his mouth and touched a feather-light kiss to it. "I'm not promising I won't ask questions," he said. "But I want to enjoy being with you, and I think stressing over how we got to this point will only tarnish our time together now."

Lois shuffled closer to him and rested her other hand on his chest. "Clark, I would do anything to help you through this."

"I know." He looked into the brown wells of her eyes and saw the fragments of pain that couldn't be concealed. Something in their past had hurt her. He hadn't been the one to hurt her, but he had been ineffective in alleviating her anguish.

Lois jumped to her feet and held her hand towards him. He took it and stood. She smiled brightly, erasing the evidence of her distress.

"First test," she announced brightly.

"A test?" Clark said, grinning because she was.

"To see if you can do what I say without asking questions."

"I didn't say I wouldn't -"

"Arms wide."

Clark spread his arms out from his shoulders. "Like this?"

Lois nodded her approval. "Do you remember if you're ticklish?"

"No."

"Let's find out, shall we?" she said.

“You mean you don’t know?”

“You threatened to tickle me once.”

The thought of that drove his smile wider. His hands ... her ribs ... “Are you going to tickle me?” he asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

She approached him with slow and tantalising deliberation. Then, her hands dived for his sides. Her fingers probed through the thickness of his sweater and shirt.

In an instant, Clark realised two things. He wasn’t remotely ticklish. And her hands on his body were exquisite torture.

His arms dropped, sandwiching her hands against his sides. Her fingers stopped their feverish attack and fell still, softly circling his ribcage.

He had to do something. If he didn’t, he was going to kiss her. Her mouth was right there, waiting ...

He wanted to.

So much.

But he hadn’t shaved.

Clark’s hands shot from his sides, making a beeline for her ribs. Anticipating his counterattack, she ducked. He clasped her waist, lifted her feet from the ground, and tossed her gently onto the sofa.

His knees dropped to the floor, and he took possession of her lower arms, pinning them against her stomach with one hand while threatening to tickle her with the other. “D...don’t ... don’t ...” she stammered, her words punctuated with peals of laughter.

Clark kept his grip loose enough that she could easily break away if she wanted to. Her pseudo-struggles caused her elbow to press into his chest — a touch that burned straight through his clothing to scorch his skin.

Perhaps she felt it, too, because all of her playfulness drained away, and her giggles faded. He had to get out while he still could. He released her wrists and held his hands aloft in surrender.

Her serrated breaths lifted her chest. Her smile returned, softly this time. “You,” she said, sternly pointing at him. “You are way too hot for tickling to be a game.”

He was? Her words entered his ears, made a mush of his brain, and radiated through his entire body like a slow-burning fire. Even if his mind had been capable of forming coherent words, his tongue being cleaved to the roof of his mouth was incompatible with speech.

He attempted a smile and stood — a little unsteadily — to his feet.

“I should have that shower,” Lois said as she rocked off the sofa. “Is there anything you would like to do?”

Her words were casual and her tone even, but there was enough of a gleam in her eye to make Clark suspect that her question was not entirely innocuous. He pried his tongue free and determinedly chose the safe path. “Does your dad have a television?” he asked nonchalantly. “I probably should try to catch up with what’s been happening in the world.”

“Do you like to read?” Lois asked. “Dad has a huge collection of books in his study.”

“OK,” Clark said, taking refuge in the mundane. “That sounds good.”

“Come this way.” She led him up the stairs. At the top, she walked along the short corridor. “That’s my dad’s room,” she said, indicating a room with an open door. “My room, the spare room, the bathroom. And this is my dad’s study.” They walked in. Two walls were lined from floor to ceiling with books. In the corner was a stand, which appeared as if it should have something on it. “Do you think you’ll be able to find anything interesting here?”

“Sure,” Clark said, gazing at the rows and rows of books.

Lois brushed her hand across his arm. “See you soon.”

Clark watched her leave, wondering if his fascination with watching her would ever diminish. He tried to wrest his mind from Lois, which wasn’t made any easier by the sounds of her sorting through her closet and drawers.

He picked up a book at random and opened it.

His eyes drifted from the meaningless strings of letters and to the

stand.

It looked as if something had once hung from it, but it was too short to be a hatstand. He shrugged, accepting that he wasn’t going to determine its purpose. Perhaps he could ask Lois.

Her footsteps emerged from her bedroom and crossed to the bathroom. Clark returned the book and walked out of the study. The bathroom door was shut. He crossed the corridor and hesitantly went through the open door into her dad’s bedroom.

Feeling as if he were invading another man’s territory, Clark made straight for the full-length mirror he had noticed as he’d walked past the room.

He slid off his sweater, unbuttoned his shirt, and inhaled as he caught a whiff of a pleasantly woody fragrance. It seemed too masculine to be Lois’s perfume. Perhaps — despite his plethora of shortfalls — his former self had actually managed to choose a nice after-shave.

Clark slipped the shirt from his shoulders and stared into the mirror. He turned sideways and then strained his neck to see his back.

It confirmed what he had surmised from the much smaller mirror in the bathroom at the base.

He had no scars.

His skin had no blemishes. As he had dried his legs, he had checked every inch of them. Even his knees were unmarked.

So — unless there was something on his butt — his body was without a scar.

How did a man get to his ... Clark took a guess ... late twenties without incurring even one scar on his body? His first suspicion had been that he must be some sort of scared-of-his-own-shadow wimp who hadn’t done anything venturesome enough to sustain an injury.

But his body told a vastly different story. His shoulders were broad with swollen cords of muscle. His chest was defined, his stomach taut. This was not the body of someone who sat around all day.

So why were there no scars?

How had he avoided all injuries?

A noise sounded from the door, and Clark jumped.

Lois was there, still fully dressed.

He felt the heat of mortification flare into his cheeks, spread down his throat and onto his chest.

“Everything OK?” Lois asked, as if it were customary for her male guests to preen in front of her father’s mirror.

“Ah ...” Clark stepped away from the mirror. “This looks *really* bad, doesn’t it?”

“No,” she said.

“Yes, it does. It looks like I was checking out my own body.”

“You must be curious,” Lois said. “About a lot of things.”

That made it worse. Clark diffidently approached her. “I ... I should try to explain.”

“If you want to. But it’s OK if you don’t.”

“I ... In the bathroom at the base, I noticed that I don’t seem to have many scars on my body. I looked for them, thinking that it might help me remember some incidents from the past. The mirror was too small to see my back and sides properly. I saw this large mirror as we walked past ...” He shrugged. “Sorry if I intruded. I know it’s your father’s room.”

“You didn’t intrude,” she said quickly.

Clark didn’t know what else to say. He’d given a truthful explanation, but he wasn’t sure if Lois was buying it.

He checked her face, hoping to be able to discern if she believed him.

But she wasn’t looking at him. Not at his face, anyway. Her eyes were cast lower; they were affixed to his bare chest.

Clark felt his mouth stretch to a grin. He walked right up to her, keeping his hands at his sides. If she wanted to look at him, he was more than happy to stand here and let her look.

“You ... are ... stunning,” she said.

Her appraisal was gratifying, but it was her breathy tone that detonated a few million explosions through his body.

Clark waited a few moments longer, basking in her open admiration.

“I ... ah ... I probably should put on my shirt,” he said.

“You won’t get any complaints from me if you don’t,” Lois said. She laughed, releasing some of the tension that had syphoned the oxygen from the room.

He turned around and walked away from her, bending low to pick up his discarded shirt and sweater.

Her quick intake of her breath sizzled through the silence.

When he turned, she was gone.

Clark put on his shirt and buttoned it as he walked back to the study. He put his sweater on the desk and looked around at the books again.

He wouldn’t think about Lois. He wouldn’t think about her expression as she had gazed at his chest. He wouldn’t think about how much he wanted to kiss her. He would find a book that stood some chance of claiming his attention.

What interested him?

One title caught his attention. It was called, ‘*The Workings of the Human Mind.*’

He skimmed through a few chapters. It was dry and lingo-driven, but he found enough passages that seemed to bear some relevance to his situation to keep his mind from dwelling on Lois.

Finally, footsteps sounded, and she appeared in the doorway. She was dressed in another pair of jeans and a light green sweater. Her hair shone glossy black, and her cheeks bore a tinge of subtle pink. “Do you still want to go out shopping for clothes?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, realising he’d forgotten to check his wallet.

“I’ll just get my bag.”

She turned, and Clark took out his wallet and opened it. The large bundle of notes shocked him. He quickly skimmed his thumb over them, estimating there was at least eight hundred dollars. That would be more than enough for clothes for himself, an outfit for Lois, and their meal tonight.

Lois had said that his financial position was good, but he hadn’t expected to be carrying around so much cash.

It was just one more thing about Clark Kent that seemed to have no rational explanation.

“Let’s go,” Lois said, appearing again.

“Do you have somewhere in mind?”

“Yes,” she replied. “There’s a store where my father has bought clothes for many years. Good quality, reasonable prices, and a quiet, dignified atmosphere with helpful but not pushy assistants.”

“Have you been there before? Will they recognise you?”

“No.”

“Do they cater to people my age?”

“Yes. And they stock everything, including shoes.”

“Do they sell women’s clothing?”

“No, but there’s a store nearby that should have something suitable.”

“Let’s go,” Clark said. He picked up his sweater from the desk and followed Lois down the stairs.

“Lois?”

“Yes?”

Clark paused before continuing, even though he’d spent the last ten minutes trying to decide if he should pursue this conversation.

“What is it?” Lois asked.

“Remember what we talked about earlier? How there is *something* that I’ve forgotten?”

“Yeah,” she said hesitantly.

“Did it hurt you, too?”

Her response was limited to a slight nod, but it was enough for him to know that she had suffered, too.

“Would you pull over, please?” Clark said.

She did.

When the Jeep had come to stop, Clark reached for her chin and

gently positioned her at exactly the right angle so her beautiful eyes slotted straight into his. “Is it going to make this more difficult for you — not being able to share it with me?”

“No,” she said. She paused a moment and then seemed to reach a decision. “You asked why our relationship stalled. Partly it was because I was grieving for a friend of mine who was brutally murdered. But also -”

“Aw, Lois,” Clark said, feeling his heart begin to weep for her.

“I’m so sorry.”

“But partly it was because you needed time as well.” She smiled through the sheen of gathering tears. “You could say we were two damaged souls trying to help each other.”

“And now ... with me not remembering ... that leaves you to deal with this on your own?”

“I’m not on my own,” Lois said. “I have you.”

He had to tell her. He couldn’t keep it to himself any longer. He risked sounding shallow and too eager, but he had to tell her. “I love you, Lois,” he said. “My love for you survived even though my memories didn’t.”

She began a quivery smile, but before it reached maturity, one precious tear escaped from between her fluttering eyelids and tumbled slowly down her cheek. “You sound so sure.”

“I have no doubts,” Clark said earnestly. “None at all. From the very first moment I saw you, I knew.”

“Clark,” she said. “I love you. And I am in awe of how you are dealing with this.”

She loved him. Lois loved him. “It’s only possible because I have you,” he said. “Because I trust you.”

“Thank you for that trust.”

“I’m guessing ... that with both of us hurting ... trust was really important in our relationship?”

“Yes,” she said. “It was.”

“Maybe that survived, too. Knowing I can trust you. No matter what.”

She smiled and lifted her hand towards the traces of the tear on her cheek.

Clark caught her wrist. “May I?” he asked.

She nodded.

He leant forward and touched a kiss to the path of her tear.

When he backed away, Lois was smiling. “What was that?” she asked.

“That was the prelude,” he said.

“There’s more to come?”

Clark grinned. “Tonight. Our date. After I’ve shaved.”

“I really don’t mind the stubble.”

“I am not going to scratch you.”

“You seem very sure of your intentions.”

“I’m going to kiss you,” he declared. “Unless you ask me not to.”

“I won’t.”

“And it will be something that neither of us will *ever* forget.”

He saw her swallow. He saw the blaze of passion light her eyes, and it roared through him like a ball of fire. He released her chin and sat back in his seat. “You need to keep driving, Ms Lane,” he said.

“Or?”

He looked at her, managing a grin. “Or ... Just drive.”

She chuckled shakily, but to his relief, she started the motor and pulled back onto the road.

Lois had never had any inclination to attend a fashion show.

However, as Clark tried on various outfits and emerged from the fitting room seeking her opinion, she realised the degree to which she’d undervalued the concept.

Of course, the level of enjoyment was probably directly proportional to the sexiness of the model.

Which explained precisely why her level of enjoyment was sky-high.

She remembered her shock when she had walked into the cell for

their ‘date’ and encountered a clean-shaven, well-dressed man with neatly cut hair — and been staggered by his youth. But it had been more than that.

He wasn’t just young. He was breath-strangingly, muscle-meltingly gorgeous.

And now ... now, his steadily growing confidence dramatically intensified his natural magnetism.

He’d treated her to half an hour of different outfits — most of them enhanced simply because he was wearing them.

As she waited for him to change back into his own clothes, she reflected on how he had gravitated towards styles similar to those she’d found in his closet when she’d gone to Smallville the first time.

His taste had matured a little, but he still basically favoured a classic, not-too-extreme look.

His stash included a pair of well-fitting jeans that curved enticingly around his butt, a pair of black slacks, two crisp shirts — one white, one pale blue — a dark grey jacket, two black tee shirts, a checked shirt, a navy blue sweater, a pair of sleep shorts, three pairs of briefs, a pair of black leather shoes, and a purple-and-gold striped tie.

Unfortunately, his penchant for wild ties seemed to have survived the amnesia.

But everything else was perfect.

And Lois felt just as excited as she would have if the new clothes had been for her. It was going to be fun watching him wear them.

It was going to be even more fun if she got to watch him take them off.

He appeared at the door of the fitting room, and Lois cleared her throat as she dusted those thoughts from her mind.

Clark smiled. “Thanks for all of your help,” he said.

“You’re welcome.”

“Now we need to find something for you to wear tonight. Do you have any ideas?”

“Yes,” Lois said. “I want to surprise you.”

“You don’t want me to come into the store?”

“You can come in. And you can give your opinion. But I’d like to keep my final choice a secret.”

“Until tonight?” Clark said, a touch of roughness scraping through his tone.

“Until tonight,” Lois echoed.

She couldn’t wait.

Eric Menzies tapped on his wife’s door and entered.

She rose from her chair and approached him. “Phoebe?” he said.

“You did it,” she said. “I saw you on the television. You saved the world.”

“It wasn’t really -”

She timidly put her hand on his arm. “I’m ... I’m very proud of you, Eric.”

He stared at her, completely speechless for the first time in his life.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

All he could do was nod.

Phoebe reached up and brushed a kiss to his cheek. “Take me home, Eric,” she said.

“I will, Phoebe,” he said. “I will.”

Part 5

Lois looked into the large fitting-room mirror and couldn’t hold back her smile.

She twisted, swivelled, leant slightly forward, and tried a variety of poses, checking each of the three mirrors to see herself from every angle.

She couldn’t ever remember looking this good.

The dress could have been designed specifically for her. It was black in colour. And demurely low-cut in a way that suggested rather than showed. It was close fitting enough to accentuate her curves, but not tight enough to feel as if she were being suffocated. The gently angled hemline revealed a splash of skin above her left knee before dropping sedately to the top of her right calf.

What would Clark think?

Lois chuckled. This dress should probably come with a coronary warning.

But ...

Her high spirits dissolved.

She had a date with Clark — a real-dress-up-romantic date with the man who exceeded every one of her dreams.

But there was a brewing storm cloud that doused her excitement.

Clark’s desire to shave.

He wanted to kiss her. She revelled in his self-assurance, his plainly spoken intention.

But how did you explain to someone that there was no razor strong enough to shave his whiskers?

How did you tell him that his clean-shaven look is achieved with a mirror?

And that was just the first step in a steep slide of disconcerting discoveries.

How did you inform a man that he had taken on an asteroid the size of a town? And won?

The powers were going to surface eventually. She was a little surprised that they hadn’t appeared already.

With that thought, Lois hurriedly unzipped the dress and began to remove it. Clark was waiting for her outside the fitting rooms. He’d promised to stay there — but every moment he was alone was a moment when something could happen that would startle everyone in the vicinity and completely confound Clark.

Timing was imperative. She wanted him to enjoy being ‘normal’ for as long as possible. Normal, loved, accepted, respected. The stronger that foundation, the easier it was going to be for him to assimilate the special abilities into his self-perception.

She’d loved him wholeheartedly before the asteroid. But this ... this *new* Clark — free of inhibitions and released from the effects of the cell — was like having the real Clark emerge boldly from the shadows. This afternoon, he had stood there — completely devoid of either arrogance or self-consciousness — and allowed her to ogle his bare chest.

And when he had thrown her bodily onto the sofa ...

This was high-octane unpolluted Clark, and he excited her. His mere existence called to everything female within her. She felt like a volcano tottering on the edge of eruption.

Lois quickly slipped on her jeans, jolting her thoughts back to the practical.

For now, she had to deal with the shaving. Would he just accept that he couldn’t shave? Would that fall under his promise to accept what he knew and refuse to be consumed by what he didn’t know?

She pulled her sweater over her head, gathered up the five outfits she had brought into the fitting room, and exited.

Clark stood up and smiled. “Were you able to choose something?” he asked, looking remarkably unfazed in what had to be an unfamiliar environment — even before his memories had abandoned him.

“Yes,” Lois said. “I found exactly the right dress.”

“I’d like to pay,” Clark said, removing his wallet from his pocket.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” he said, handing her his wallet. “Take as much as you need.”

“OK,” Lois said, seeing that a significant portion of the thousand dollars had gone and realising she was going to have to give him some details about money soon. She removed the necessary bills from his wallet and returned it to him. “Thank you, Clark,” she said with a smile.

“You’re welcome,” he said softly. He gestured towards the front door. “I’ll wait there. I won’t turn around and peek, I promise.”

She smiled and headed to the sales clerk.

Clark stared out of the store. Like the men’s store earlier, this was in a quiet neighbourhood. On either side of the road were other, similarly low-key stores. Lois had said that the men’s store was where

her dad shopped. He was obviously successful in his job. What did Lois do?

What occupation could he imagine for her? Something requiring her sharp mind. Something varied. Something where her initiative would be an asset.

What did *he* do?

Did they work together?

Was that how they had met?

Could their job be the reason he hadn't acted on his feelings for Lois?

He felt her brush against his arm and turned with a smile.

"Everything OK?" he asked, glancing down to the bag she carried.

"Yes," Lois said, quickly hiding it behind her back. "You'll see in a couple of hours."

He couldn't wait. He could feel the frisson of anticipation. There was just one more thing to do. "Now I need to buy a razor."

"Clark," Lois grasped his arm. "Let's go back to the Jeep."

He sensed tension in her tone and looked around for whatever had alarmed her. There was nothing obvious — just a smattering of people going about their business.

Clark followed her to where they'd parked the Jeep. "What is it, Lois?" he asked as they shut the doors on the outside world. He could see her anxiety. It had risen from the midst of the satisfaction he'd detected over the purchase of her dress.

She took a jittery breath. "Clark ... would you mind not shaving?"

"You like the straggly look that much? It doesn't really suit the clothes I bought."

"Clark," she said urgently. "You said that you would accept things without understanding them. That's what I'm asking here."

He tried to smile to ward off his looming apprehension. "Is this like the tickling?" he said. "Is this a test of how much I trust you?"

Her smile appeared for a few seconds. "Not really," she said. "I just ... Please don't try to shave."

Why not? Didn't she want to kiss him? Was there some disfigurement on his face that was hidden by the stubble? Was that why he had never kissed her? Because he couldn't shave? Then why didn't he have a long beard?

The questions hammered at his brain ... but he had promised Lois his implicit trust. "OK," he said. "I won't shave."

"I want you to kiss me at the end of our date."

"But Lois —"

"This is not about me not wanting you to kiss me," she said earnestly. "But I need some time to work out the practicalities."

The practicalities seemed straightforward to Clark. Buy a razor. Shave. At the end of their date — possibly before that — take her into his arms and kiss her extravagantly.

But apparently, it wasn't that simple.

"I won't shave," he said. "And I won't try to work out why."

Her smile was more than enough reward. And the accompanying touch to his hand made everything else fade to insignificance. "Thank you," Lois said. "I know I'm asking more of you than I could probably give."

"I get the feeling that my amnesia is asking more of you than is fair," Clark replied. "I want to do everything I can to make this easier."

"Thank you," Lois said with a smile imbued with relief and gratitude. She started the motor. "Let's go back to my dad's place. We have a date tonight."

Clark adjusted his tie so that it sat neatly in the apex of his starched collar. He slipped on his jacket and surveyed the result in the full-length mirror. His new clothes looked good. But his face ...

He grimaced.

His stubble had grown progressively longer and thicker since his unsuccessful attempt to shave this morning.

Why was Lois so against him shaving?

Was it because — despite everything she'd said and her evident appreciation of his bare chest — she was nervous about this first kiss?

Was she hoping that his stubble would mean the kiss would be limited to a brief touch?

Or was it somehow linked with the lack of scars on his body? If his body couldn't be marked, did that mean his whiskers couldn't be shaved?

Clark stepped away from the mirror, heedful of his promise not to allow himself to be plagued by the unknown. There were more important things to fill his mind.

Regardless of whether they kissed or not, he had a date with Lois. And that made him the luckiest man on the planet.

He removed his glasses and checked the mirror again.

That was better. He didn't like the glasses — and they certainly didn't improve his vision. He could see just as well without them.

He heard footsteps beyond his closed door. Lois must be finished in the bathroom. The door to her bedroom opened ... and closed. Very soon, she could begin to dress.

He tried to imagine how she would look. What colour would she have chosen? Red? She'd said that was her favourite colour. With her dark hair, she would look sensational in red.

Or perhaps black.

Lois in black would be breath-taking.

Blue? Not pale blue. But vivid blue — dark and just a little bit mysterious.

How long would it take her to dress?

Ten minutes?

Half an hour?

For the hundredth time, Clark checked his watch. Their food was due in forty-five minutes.

Would she need all of that time?

It was too soon to expect her to be ready, but he strained his ears, hoping to hear her door opening.

Da-dub.

What was that?

Da-dub.

Da-dub.

He looked around. The noise was coming from outside the room. Was it a heater? Or perhaps a security system?

He listened again.

Da-dub.

It was a soft, muted noise. Too quiet to be a motor.

Clark opened the door and stopped in the passageway.

Da-dub.

The noise was coming from Lois's room.

He looked at her door.

And *saw* her.

He wheeled around, staggering away and clutching the doorframe to her father's room as the image gouged through his conscience.

He had seen Lois.

He had seen *through* her closed door.

He had intruded on her privacy. He had violated her trust.

He had to tell her.

Now.

Leave it, a voice echoed through his head. Leave it until after your date. Don't risk upsetting her now.

He couldn't leave it. Even if it meant their date didn't happen. He couldn't sit across from her all evening and pretend everything was all right.

It wasn't all right.

Perhaps it would never be all right again.

Clark straightened from where he had been listing against the doorframe, and — in a haze of bewilderment and shame — he took the three steps needed to arrive at Lois's bedroom door, keeping his eyes glued to the floor.

He knocked. "Lois?" he said in voice that sounded as if someone had shoved shattered glass down his throat.

"Yes, Clark?"

"I ... I need to talk to you. Now."

“OK.”

A few seconds later, the door opened, and Lois stood there, tying the belt on her robe. She smiled at him. “What’s -” Her eyes slipped down his body. “Whoa,” she said in a voice rich with appreciation. “You look ... wow.”

This had to be done quickly. It had to be done before he lost all nerve and went scurrying back to anywhere that might afford him a hiding place. “I saw you,” he gulped. “I saw you through the door.”

Her initial surprise receded in less than a heartbeat and was replaced by a cautious smile. “I wondered when something like that might happen.”

“You ... you knew?”

She nodded.

“I didn’t mean to,” Clark said quickly. “I was just looking at your door, and suddenly, it was as if a big hole appeared in it, and I could see you.”

Lois reached for him, her hand a steadying touch to his arm. “It’s OK,” she said.

“It’s *not* OK,” he railed, even now unable to believe what he’d done. “You should be safe in your bedroom. You should be safe from someone -”

“You didn’t mean to look.”

“No!” he exclaimed. “I would never do that.”

Lois smiled. And chuckled. And looked at him with soft brown eyes that glimmered with love. “I know that,” she said. “I know that you would never take advantage of your extra skills.”

“Skills?” he gasped. “Those ‘skills’ just turned me into a sleazy -”

“No!” Lois said. “If you don’t know for sure that you would never do that deliberately, then believe me. You wouldn’t do that. You never have.”

“This ...” He sucked in a breath, trying to calm the crazed commotion jangling inside his skull. “This is the ‘something’? This is what you didn’t want me to know?”

“Partly.”

“And you’re OK about being in the same house with me?”

Lois chuckled softly. “Think about it, Clark. Even if I were in a different house, you can see through walls.”

“I ... I can see through walls?”

“As far as I as I know, you can see through everything except lead.” She rubbed her hand up and down his arm. “And before you ask, you can see through clothes as well. Is that what happened? You saw me naked?”

Clark gulped loudly enough that it could have drowned out thunder. “No,” he croaked. “No. You were wearing a thin black thing.”

“My slip,” she said. “I was wearing my slip.”

He nodded. “I’m so sorry, Lois.”

“I’m sorry, too,” she said.

“What do you have to be sorry about?”

“Perhaps I should have told you before you found out like this. Perhaps I should have realised when you were talking about not having any scars.” Her hand came to rest on his elbow. “Has anything else happened?”

He was almost too afraid to ask. “Such as?”

“Enhanced hearing?”

He nodded. “When I was in that room, I heard ...” He stopped as the realisation hit him.

“My heartbeat,” Lois said.

So she knew about that, too. “I feel like a stalker,” Clark said miserably.

“No,” she said. “These extra skills are safe with you because you will never use them wrongly.”

“You sound very sure.”

“I am. I’m more sure about that than anything else.”

“You have a lot of faith in me.”

She nodded sombrely. “Yes. And it’s completely justified.”

“What else should I know?” he said as his imagination surged into overdrive. “Am I going to suddenly erupt into flames? Grow horns?

Have limbs falling off?”

“Nothing like that,” Lois said.

“But there’s more?”

“Yes.”

He wasn’t sure he wanted specifics. Not yet. “So I’m a freak?”

“No. You’re the man I love.”

“I’m a freak.”

“Clark,” Lois said. “Do you know why I didn’t tell you about this earlier?”

“You figured I was too fragile to be told the truth?”

“No. I wanted you to enjoy being just like everyone else for a while.”

“How could I be just like everyone else?” he demanded. “I didn’t even remember my own name.”

Lois lifted her hand and placed it along his unshaven jaw. “You just asked me if you’re a freak,” she said. “No, you’re not. You’re not a freak. You can do some things that no one else can do. But what really sets you apart is your integrity and your strength and your selflessness. Yes, you’re different. And in the past, you’ve agonised over all the downsides of being different. I wanted to give you a chance to break free from that mindset so that when you did find out, you could accept it as just a fact of your life.”

“It’s a whole lot more than -”

“Clark,” Lois said, her fingertips gliding across the smooth skin of his upper cheeks. “You asked me for a date. Our food will be here soon. I still have to get dressed. If you want to, we can sit down now and talk this through. I’ll answer your questions. But ...” She gave him a little smile. “But I have a new dress, and you look gorgeous.”

But he could see through doors.

Lois covered his cheeks with both of her hands and tilted his head forward. She stretched up and placed a balmy kiss on the point of his cheekbone.

Clark leant forward, allowing his forehead to rest on the top of her head.

Whatever was wrong with him would still be there later. Lois knew, and she still wanted this date with him. Clark realigned his mind. Yes, he was weirdly different. But Lois Lane had chosen to be with him anyway.

He lifted his head and gestured over his shoulder. “I’ll wait in there.”

“If you’re alone, are you going to stress about this?”

He didn’t know how to answer her truthfully.

“You are, aren’t you?” Lois said. She clasped his hand. “Come on in. You can chat to me while I get dressed.”

“Lois,” Clark gasped. “I *can’t* be in there while you are getting dressed.”

“You’re not going to see anything you haven’t already seen,” she said pragmatically.

“But ... but ...”

“Wait here a second.” She brushed past him and went into her father’s room. When she returned, she was holding his glasses. “Put these on,” she said. “They help you *not* to see.”

He wore glasses to *weaken* his visual abilities? He slipped them on.

“Coming in?” she asked, as nonchalantly as if she were asking him in for a cup of tea.

He shook his head. “I couldn’t, Lois. It’s just ... It’s not right.”

“OK,” she said. “I’ll be ready as quickly as possible. But please,” she said, levelling her eyes in his. “Please don’t worry about this.”

“But -”

“Clark, nothing can happen that we can’t deal with. Please believe me.”

“OK.”

Lois put her hand on the doorknob. “Give me five minutes,” she said.

“OK.” Clark took a step back. “And Lois, I really am sorry.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong.”

She closed the door, and Clark went back into her dad's room. He could see through solid objects. He couldn't shave.

But Lois loved him anyway.

He stopped in front of the mirror and stared at the regular-looking image of a dark-haired young man.

What was he?

What else could he do?

He recalled an earlier conversation with Lois. He had asked her if he had a good heart. Suddenly, that took on enormous implications. To have these extra skills ... to be able to see through walls ... the potential for wrong was huge.

But Lois had said he had a good heart.

She had known he hadn't meant to look at her. He hadn't even had to tell her. She'd just known.

Behind him, he heard the bedroom door open. He turned. Lois walked towards him.

His breath stopped.

She wore a shiny black dress that subtly hinted at every tantalising curve of her body. The material slanted across her knees, and beyond its hem, her calves emerged, delicately shaped by the raised heels of her black shoes.

Her arms were bare. The shoulders of the dress sat wide on her neck, exposing the soft white skin of her throat and inner collarbones.

His eyes drifted lower.

And he saw them.

Three fading lines.

Marks.

Scars.

Scratches.

Clark stepped up to her, his breath tight for an entirely new reason. "What happened?" he said tightly. "Who did this to you?"

Lois put her hand under his chin and lifted his gaze from her chest. "Do you think you did this?" she asked.

"I hope not," he breathed.

She gave him a smile. "Of course you didn't, Clark," she said.

"You would never do something like that."

Despite her hand, his gaze dropped again. The scratches stopped just short of the curve of her breasts. "Who did?"

"Someone tried to hurt me. You came and -"

"Where is he now?"

"He's dead."

Clark's eyes fell shut as horror engulfed him. "I did it," he said weakly. "I killed him. That's why I can't remember."

"No," Lois said, grasping the lapel of his jacket. "No. You didn't kill him. He was arrested for what he had tried to do to me. At -"

"Tried?"

"Yes. *Tried*. He didn't hurt me."

Clark's eyes travelled the length of the three lines. "I can see the scars," he said.

"That's all he did. Nothing else. You came."

"I came? And I saw this? And I *didn't* kill him?"

"No."

Clark released a breathy cocktail of relief and wrath. "I'm glad I didn't kill him," he said. "But I figure I really wanted to."

"He was taken to the sheriff's office. He threatened the sheriff and was shot by two of her deputies."

"I wish I had gotten there earlier," Clark said. "I wish I could have stopped him from doing that."

"You did the next best thing," Lois said.

It hadn't been enough. "What did I do?"

"You looked after me," she said as she let loose his lapel and stroked it back into place. "You put ointment on the wounds, and you dressed them for me."

His eyes rose from her chest and searched her face. "And you were comfortable with me doing that? You didn't mind me touching you there?"

"Very comfortable. I trust you."

Clark felt a smile stretch the corners of his mouth. "I haven't told you how beautiful you look," he said. "I tried to imagine this ... and you ... " He lifted his hands in frustrated acceptance that he didn't have the right words. "You are so beautiful, Lois."

"It's your outfit," she said in a low voice. "I'm glad you like it."

He loved it. He'd thought the compulsion to look at her had been irresistible when she had been dressed in jeans and a sweater. Now ... Now, he had the whole evening to look at her.

To talk to her.

To rediscover the woman he loved.

"Our food should be here soon," Lois said. "Let's go and set the table."

Clark followed her down the stairs, not failing to appreciate the way her hips shimmied under the black material. He stretched forward and allowed his fingertips to drift across the small of her back. She stopped, turned to him, smiled.

"I like the little touch on my back." She turned and continued down the steps.

Clark followed her, smiling, his hand maintaining contact.

After the table was prepared, Lois left the dining room for a few moments. When she returned, she was carrying a bottle of red wine. "I got it from my dad's collection," she said with a grin.

"Is he going to mind?"

"No. He likes you."

"I've met your father?"

"Yep."

"Does he know about ... the x-ray vision?"

"No."

"Perhaps that's why he likes me," Clark muttered as he eased the cork from the neck of the bottle.

"No," Lois said, grinning in a way that gave him no room to wallow in his differences. "He likes you because you make me happy."

She was right, Clark acknowledged with a returned smile. What were a few little anomalies when a woman like Lois Lane loved him?

He poured the wine into the glasses and gave one to Lois. "A toast?" he suggested.

"To what?"

"To the most beautiful woman in the world?"

She smiled. "How about to the future?"

"Will you be my future?"

"Yes," she promised.

"To our future," Clark said. Their glasses clinked, but his eyes had become so buried in hers that he forgot to sip from the wine. "Lois, will you do something for me?"

"Yes."

"After we've eaten, will you tell me how to shave?"

She grinned and then made him wait while she sipped languidly from the wine. "Why are you so keen to shave?" she asked.

Her breezy innocence ruptured his patience. "Because I may not survive if I don't kiss you tonight."

"You are very forward, Mr Kent," she noted.

"Do you mind?"

"I love it," she said. "And for the record, we had an agreement — that you would kiss me first."

He tried to frown — which wasn't easy when he was so utterly captivated. "Because I was so indecisive?"

"No. Because I wanted you to know that anytime you felt right about kissing me, it was fine with me."

"I feel very right about kissing you," he said huskily. "Now. Please, Lois, I don't want to wait any longer."

"I need you to trust me, Clark," she said. "I need you to trust me with something that will blow your mind."

"Even more than kissing you?" he said.

She chuckled, and all of his apprehension evaporated. "Promise me there will be no questions," Lois said. "No freaking out. No obsessing."

"OK," Clark said, knowing he would willingly promise her

anything.

“Come with me.” She took his hand, and together, they scampered up the stairs.

In the bathroom, she took out a hand mirror from the cabinet and gave it to him. Then, she slid his glasses from his face. “Ready?”

He was ready, but he couldn’t imagine what she was going to ask him to do.

“Look in the mirror,” Lois instructed.

He did.

“Stare at the stubble and ... and ... imagine it disappearing.”

Clark lowered the mirror. “Excuse me?”

She clasped his hand and raised the mirror again. “Look at your whiskers and imagine burning them off.”

“Burning?” he said doubtfully.

“You can do this.”

He could? Clark forced his eyes from Lois’s half-hopeful, half-nervous expression and stared at his own face in the mirror.

He concentrated on his cheek and ... and what?

He focused harder, feeling his eyebrows draw together in his effort to make something happen.

As he stared, a clear patch of smooth skin emerged — a lop-sided circle in the midst of the forest of black bristles. He slowly moved his eyes — along his upper lip and onto his other cheek.

He heard Lois release a breath, but his eyes didn’t waver from his task. He ‘shaved’ all of one cheek, then his chin, and then completed his other cheek.

He closed his eyes, shook his head a little, and reopened his eyes.

His face was smooth and clean-shaven.

He slowly lowered the mirror and looked at Lois.

She said nothing. She slowly skimmed her fingertips across the newly claimed silkiness of his cheek.

Her touch caused a shiver of reaction to shoot down his spine.

Lois took the mirror from him and returned it to the cabinet. She leant back against the wall and waited.

Waited for him.

Clark stepped so close to her that only a film of air separated their bodies.

“Thank you,” he murmured, inching closer.

Her mouth opened a little. Almost to a smile. Almost to a reply.

Caught in the magnitude of the moment.

“I love you, Lois,” Clark said. “I will love you forever.”

“I love you. Forever.”

“May I kiss you?”

“Oh, yes.” Her tongue brushed a moist trail along her lower lip.

He traversed the final inch of separation.

His lips touched hers.

Just a touch.

A taste.

But it was enough to set his body ablaze.

Enough that he wanted more.

More of her.

He backed away. Minimally. Not far enough to break their tenuous link.

He leant in again, thrilling as Lois rose to meet him.

His palms flattened against the wall, enclosing her.

Her hands clasped his neck, easing him closer, trapping him.

Although he was trapped already.

By her power.

Her love.

By everything that was Lois.

He grew bolder, opening his mouth a little wider. Contact became exploration. Exploration became interplay. Interplay became connection.

Time ceased.

The edges of his consciousness blurred.

And the world fell away.

Part 6

“Clark?”

“Uhhmm?”

Lois felt, rather than heard, his response as it rumbled through his chest. “Are your feet on the ground?”

His chest vibrated again, and she sensed his amusement. “After that kiss?”

‘That’ kiss had transported her to sublime planes she hadn’t known existed. The feeling of weightlessness had been only one element in the thrilling bombardment of her senses.

But ... considering whom she had been kissing ...

Summoning viscous muscles to action, Lois lifted her head from where she had nestled into the curve of Clark’s neck and, with one glance, realised they were way closer to the ceiling than could have been reasonably expected. “Clark?”

His glazed-over eyes and indolent smile made her think he was probably still stuck in the wonder-world they had created with one — very drawn-out — kiss. “Yeah, honey?” he managed.

“Think down.”

“What?” He hauled his eyes from her face, and his head jolted towards the floor. “Uh oh,” he said. “I’m guessing that’s me.”

Lois nodded. “But it’s nothing we haven’t done before.”

“We haven’t done it before as a result of kissing,” he said with a grin that oozed luscious memories.

“It was the best kiss of my life,” Lois said with a sigh.

“Not for long, I hope.”

“You think we can better that effort?”

“We can try,” Clark said with a suggestive lift of his eyebrows. He looked around again. “And we could start by choosing a better location than the bathroom.”

“Aw, I don’t know,” Lois said. “The fact that it happened in the bathroom says a lot about how long we waited.”

“Do you know how you ended up in my arms?” Clark asked. “The last thing I remember was that my hands were on the wall on either side of your body. And I had told myself it would probably be wise to keep them there.”

“No,” Lois argued lazily. “That wouldn’t have been wise at all. When you rose, I would have been left behind.”

“I was never going to let that happen.”

“Me either,” Lois said. She giggled. “I think I was clinging to you quite indecorously.”

“I loved it,” Clark said. They shared a smile as memories assuaged them. “But ... Lois?”

“Yeah?” she said, trying to decide between the dual delights of returning her head to his shoulder or her lips to his mouth.

“I’m not actually ... completely sure how to get us down.”

“Easy,” she said.

“It is?”

“Uh huh. Drop me.”

“I am not doing that,” Clark said.

“Let go of me,” Lois said. “Before I hit the floor, you will have caught me again.”

He chuckled. “I’m not dropping you, honey.”

“OK,” she said. “Then think down.”

“Just ... *think* it?”

“Yep. I don’t know how you do it, but you can pretty much choose any space — high or low — to occupy.”

“OK,” he said.

Lois looked down over their arms as the floor slowly rose to meet them. “There,” she said when they’d landed. “Easy.”

“Are you going to tell me the rest of my oddities?” Clark asked.

“Or are you going to let me discover them one by one?”

“Depends,” she said.

“On what?”

“On whether you kiss me again.”

He grinned. “If I kiss you, I get information?” he said. “Is that how it works?”

“Nope. If you kiss me, my mouth will be too engrossed to be

giving you any information. Not in words, anyway.”

His eyes glistened with amusement. And anticipation. He gently backed her against the wall and leant closer.

The wave of feeling, endowed with the essence of Clark, washed through Lois again as his mouth captured hers and began an unequivocal portrayal of his enchantment. She melted against him and drank in the intoxicating combination of his familiar gentleness fired with his new — and electrifying — fervency.

Clark. Could. Kiss.

And so far, his tongue hadn't left the confines of his mouth. If it ever ventured forward ...

A loud knock on the door perforated their kiss.

Clark groaned as he slowly released her. “I figure that's our food,” he said, sounding less than delighted by the prospect of eating.

“It is,” Lois said, not able to rein in her amusement at his reaction. “And it will be great.”

“Yeah,” he said, rallying a smile.

She shot him a look that was meant to convey that she knew exactly what he was thinking.

Clark shrugged without any sign of abashment. “I like kissing you,” he said in his own defence.

“I'll get the door,” Lois said. “You get your glasses.”

“OK,” he agreed. “But I'm paying for the meal.”

By the time Lois had reached the bottom of the stairs, Clark — bespectacled again — had caught up. She took the bags, and Clark paid the delivery boy, including a generous tip. Back in the dining room, their wine glasses sat on the table, abandoned and forsaken.

Lois chuckled, remembering their mad dash upstairs to see to the prerequisites of that first — incredible — kiss.

Clark pulled out a seat for Lois. She sat down, thanking him with a smile.

“What do we have?” he asked.

“Steak,” Lois replied as she opened the first container. “And baked potatoes, Portobello mushrooms, and salad.”

“Is there some significance?” he asked. “They're not your favourite foods — so perhaps they are mine?”

“I know you like these foods,” Lois said.

“But there's more, isn't there?”

She nodded. “This is the meal we had on our first date. And it comes from the same restaurant.”

“So we have dated before,” Clark said with surprise. “Did we go to out? Or have it delivered?”

“Delivered,” Lois said, rummaging through her brain for a way to move them away from any possible association with the cell. “My Uncle Mike owns the restaurant.”

“Your father's brother?”

“Yes,” she said, wondering why that was relevant.

“Guess he knew the address then,” Clark said. He stopped unpacking the containers and lobbed her a questioning look. “I took you on a date, but I didn't kiss you. Did it end badly?”

“No. It was perfect.”

He shook his head. “No,” he said. “It wasn't perfect. Tonight ... *that* was perfect.”

Lois waited, more than half hoping that he would ditch the food and take her into his arms and begin kissing her all over again.

He paused.

Her heart stopped.

He picked up the salad and offered it to her.

“I think it's possible that you and I work together,” Clark said casually.

Lois smiled from over the salad. “Really?”

“I think I went to work and was completely knocked over by a beautiful colleague ... possibly even my boss. Perhaps that's why I was so hesitant to tell you how I felt.”

She didn't say anything.

“Well?” he said.

“No comment.”

“Do I use these ‘extra skills’ of mine in my job?”

“By ‘extra skills’, do you mean the ability to kiss a woman off her feet?” Lois asked.

His brown eyes fastened in hers — amusement sprinkled liberally through the overflowing love and tangible desire. “That wasn't what I meant,” he said with a dashing smile. He picked up his knife and fork, perhaps giving her the chance to answer his question. When she didn't, he said, “Are we leaving here tomorrow?”

“Yes,” Lois answered. “I'd like to leave really early. Before sunrise.”

“How far do we have to go?” Clark cut off a piece of the tender steak.

“Kansas.”

“Kansas? I live there?”

“Yes, on a farm.”

“Are my folks in Kansas?”

“No.”

“Do I have family?”

Lois stared at her steak — watching its juices seep out — as she felt the light-heartedness drain away. She had only a moment to make her decision. And whatever her decision, it was going to have far-reaching implications.

It was too early.

Too early to spoil this by opening up even the tiny possibility that the horror of the cell could invade and contaminate their world.

Clark had been so happy tonight. So eager. So undamaged.

She had to give him more time.

She had to give *them* more time.

“Lois?” he asked softly.

“Your parents have passed away,” she said.

She mourned the sorrow she'd caused him as his eyes flickered with pain.

“I'm sorry,” Lois said, referring to more than he could realise.

“How long ago?” he asked quietly.

“A long time.”

“When I was a child?”

“No. Later than that. They were farmers. They lived near a town called Smallville,” she said, wondering if the name would shake free any memories.

“Smallville?” he echoed. No recognition registered on his face.

Lois put her hand on his. “I'm so sorry,” she repeated.

“What happened to their farm?”

“It's yours now.”

“Is that where I live? Am I a farmer?”

Lois took back her hand and cut a slice from her potato. “You sound surprised.”

“No,” he said. “Not so much surprised. Not for me, anyway. But if we're close ... and I'm a farmer ... Where does that leave you?”

“We'd just started trying to work that out,” Lois said.

“Did we come to any conclusions?”

“We had decided to go to Smallville and see what happened.”

“You really thought you could be happy on a farm?”

“I really thought I could be happy with you.”

He grinned and then pointed his fork at her. “Now that I know we don't work together, there's nothing stopping you from telling me what job you do. And how that could possibly involve a farmer from Kansas.”

“I am on leave for three months.”

“Were you ill?”

“No. Remember I told you that my friend had been murdered?”

“Yes,” he said, his sympathy evident.

“Well, she was more than my friend. She was also my partner.”

“Partner?”

“We were government agents.”

Clark's mouth fell open. “Spies?”

Lois nodded with a dismissive shrug. “Yeah,” she said. “It was a job.”

“More like a lifestyle, I would have thought,” Clark said. “But it explains a lot.”

“It does?”

“It explains how you are so skilled at dealing with my questions — answering them without really giving away too much information.”

So he’d noticed. “I just want what is best for you,” Lois said, stamping down the spark of guilt regarding her lie about his mom.

Clark’s grin flashed. “I know. But it’s fun trying to wrangle stuff out of you because you’re so adept at sidestepping. I bet you are a great spy.”

“I’ve decided to resign,” Lois said.

“Why?”

“Because — as you’ve already realised — being with you on the farm doesn’t really fit with too many jobs.”

“But Lois,” Clark said, his eyes crinkled with concern. “I could not have expected you to give up everything to be with me.”

“You didn’t. But after Linda was killed, I didn’t want to start again with a new partner. I’d had enough of the travelling, the constant changes. It was the right time to do something different.”

“A farm in Kansas certainly qualifies as ‘something different’.”

“I am hoping to write a novel,” Lois said, trying to subdue the little dart of self-consciousness.

She hadn’t needed to feel self-conscious. Clark’s reaction was genuine interest. “A novel? That’s a good idea. You must have a lot of experiences to draw on.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m guessing you can’t tell me too much about your job. Secrecy and all that.”

Lois nodded, appreciating his understanding.

Clark grinned. “And as I can’t remember my job, we probably need another topic of conversation.”

“Which is not that easy,” Lois commented.

“No,” he said. “You can’t ask me questions because I have no answers. I can’t ask you questions because I’m supposed to come up with the answers myself.”

She nodded.

“Although ... Now that I know about the x-ray vision, and the floating, and the ability to hear very quiet sounds ... Perhaps there’s no longer a good reason not to tell me more.”

Lois took the time to sip from her wine. If she refused to answer any questions, he would wonder what else she was hiding. “Do you remember anything?” she asked.

Clark shook his head. “Nothing.”

“It’s been less than a day,” she said. “There’s still time.”

“Can I ask a question?”

Curiosity swamped her. “If I were to allow you one question, what would you ask?”

“The most obvious one.”

“Which is?”

“How a Kansas farmer met a beautiful, talented, brilliant government agent who was based in Metropolis.”

Lois nodded slowly. “That’s a good question.”

He grinned. “Are you going to answer it?”

She ran her fingers down the three scratches on her chest. “You saved my life,” she said.

“I did?” He glanced at her chest. “When those scratches happened? They look only a few days old.”

“They are. We met before that.”

“But he was the one who was threatening your life?”

“Yeah.”

“Does that happen regularly in your job?”

“Too regularly,” Lois said, thinking of the past three months.

“What happened?”

“He pulled a gun on me. My own gun as it happens. He was a couple of yards away, and he fired.”

“And I ...” Clark looked puzzled. “What *did* I do?”

Lois took the knife from his right hand and unfurled his fingers.

There was no telltale scar to mar the smoothness of his skin. She ran her fingers lovingly across his palm.

“What happened?” Clark asked as his hand closed around hers.

“You caught the bullet meant for me,” Lois said quietly.

His face paled. “I ... I ...”

She gathered his hand in hers and pressed it against her cheek.

“You stood between him and me, and when he fired, you caught the bullet.” She smiled. “You hid it in your pocket.”

“Did ... did I know that I wouldn’t be hurt?”

“I don’t think you thought about it. You just reacted.”

“And that was when we met?”

Lois nodded.

“So you knew about my oddities right from the start?”

“Yeah,” Lois said. “And I’ve never been able to think of them as anything other than a wonderful part of you. Without them, I would have died, and we would have only known each other for a few horrifying moments.”

“That would have been a terrible tragedy,” Clark said. “On both counts.”

“Yes.”

“How many other people know? About my unconventional abilities?”

“Four,” Lois said, mentally sending apologies to Martha Kent.

“Who are they?”

“Eric, Daniel, Evan, and one other man; he was at the base, but I don’t think you met him.”

“How do they know about me?”

“They’re all agents.”

“Like you?”

“Yes.”

Sudden comprehension lit his face. “I figure that my ‘special abilities’ might be useful to a government agency.”

She nodded.

“That’s why I was taken to the EPRAD base this morning?”

“We needed to ensure you didn’t say something that would alert others.”

“So ... me ... the things I can do ... it’s all a big secret?”

“Yeah.”

“How did I get to be like this?” Clark asked, desperation leaking into his tone. “Was I an experiment that went wrong? Did I get badly injured, and they replaced parts of me? Do I have steel instead of flesh and blood?”

“No,” Lois said, tightening her grasp on his hand. “None of those.”

“Are you going to tell me?” he asked.

“When the time is right.”

“Now? Tonight?”

“No.”

“When will the time be right?”

“Clark,” Lois kissed his hand. “There were times when you struggled with the extra abilities. Not struggled to control them, but struggled to incorporate them into your desire to be a regular guy.”

“Is that why I was so tardy in telling you how I felt about you? Because I wasn’t sure if you should be burdened with this?”

“That was a part of it.”

A measure of relief swept his face. “At least that is sort of understandable,” he said. “And it doesn’t make me seem so lame.”

“You were never lame,” Lois said. “And even though my heart breaks at your confusion, I can’t help but see positive aspects to you having amnesia.”

“It cleared out all the junk from my mind?”

“Yes,” she said. “And gave us a chance to start again ... with good stuff this time.”

“Let me hypothesize,” Clark said with a small grin. “I was a bit of a loner ... I had strange abilities, and I wasn’t really too sure how I fitted into the world. Perhaps hiding away on a farm in Kansas caused that feeling to become ingrained. I might have had acquaintances, but not too many friends, and no family. I was probably worried that

people would find out, so I maintained a distance from everyone. Then ... I met you.”

Lois said nothing.

“And ... because of the bullet incident, you knew everything about me. But you refused to see me as different. You just treated me as if those differences didn’t matter. I fell in love with you — probably before I had even caught the bullet — and you became the one person who knew me completely and allowed me the freedom to venture out from behind those barriers.”

Lois looked at him through tear-misted eyes.

“But because of my differences, I was hesitant to pursue the sort of relationship with you that I really wanted,” Clark continued. “Is that about right?”

She nodded, conscious that her tears were threatening to spill over. Clark stood and held his arms towards her. Lois rose into his embrace, clinging to him.

“You told me that I saved you,” Clark said. “But it seems as if you saved me, too.”

“We need each other.”

“I knew there was something about you. Right from the first moment, I knew you were someone very special.” He leant sideways and took a tissue from the box, using it to dab away her tears. “I love you, Lois,” he said.

“And I love you.”

He grinned suddenly, crumbling the solemnity that had crept into the atmosphere. “Can I ask you another question?”

“Another one?” she teased.

“This is about today. About something I can remember.”

“OK.”

“The kiss.”

“Ah,” she said, figuring he was going to ask about the floating. “That.”

“Lois,” Clark said, suddenly a little breathless. “It seems possible that I don’t have much experience in this. And I’ve forgotten anything I did know. Did you ... did you like it when I kissed you?”

“You have to ask?” she said incredulously.

“OK,” he said as a tentative smile appeared. “It was either really good or really bad.”

“Clark!”

He chuckled. “The fact that you’re holding me now — and you’ve probably realised that I’m thinking about kissing you again — gives me hope that it was really good.”

“It was better than really good,” Lois said.

With his forefinger, he brushed a light touch down the bridge of her nose. “I thought so, too,” he said. “But I can’t kiss you unless I’m sure you want me to.”

“I want you to. We waited such a long time for that kiss.”

“I can’t believe I was able to wait that long,” he said, shaking his head in disbelief. “I think some of my patience went with my memories.”

“There were good reasons.”

“Did I ever come close?”

“A couple of times. You once blew me a kiss through a window.”

“Nah,” he said, shaking his head. “That doesn’t count. It’s pathetic.”

“No,” Lois countered. “It was sweet — a lovely gesture.”

“Well,” Clark said decisively, “I intend to make up for my reticence. Is that all right with you?”

“That is perfectly all right with me.”

His smile was quickly formed and quickly dissolved — lost as he began to kiss her again.

Clark thoroughly reacquainted himself with Lois’s mouth. Kissing her had become just as essential as breathing. He wanted to do this every day — multiple times — for the rest of his life.

His feet were still on the ground.

But if any woman could lift a man from his feet, Lois Lane was

that woman.

Her hands were warm and insistent on his neck — pressing, adjusting, gripping.

He felt like a starving man indulging in a banquet.

But he needed to stop. They had — way too quickly — reached the edge of his control.

Clark brought the kiss to a finale and eased away. His eyes met hers, and he saw his own feelings plainly reflected. He smiled, overwhelmed with love for this woman.

It was a love that emerged from the barrenness of his past and stretched forward into the hope of their future.

“W...we should get back to our meals,” she said.

The little stutter confirmed that she, too, had come close to that edge.

How long was it going to be possible for them to nudge that barrier without crashing through it? He’d known her for less than a day.

But he’d loved her for so much longer than that.

Clark shut down the trail of his thoughts and positioned Lois’s chair for her. “Our food has probably gotten cold,” he said regretfully. She nodded, looking at him as if she expected him to say something further.

“Does your father have a microwave oven?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said.

“Would you like me to -”

Lois reached for him and removed his glasses. “Zap the food,” she said.

“Zap it?” Yet even as he asked, he had a feeling what was coming.

“Gently,” she cautioned. “We don’t want it incinerated.”

He loved her for so many reasons. But what kept dancing through his heart was how calmly, how naturally she accepted his differences. She made it impossible for him to do any less. He stared at the food — at a loss as to what was supposed to happen now. “What should I do?”

“Think hot,” Lois said. “That shouldn’t be too difficult for you.”

He thought he’d detected an underlying meaning in her words. He checked her face, saw her barely contained grin, and knew for sure.

“Lois,” he said, aiming for sternness, but knowing that his grin destroyed any chance of appearing anything other than completely besotted. “Are you trying to tell me something?”

“Yes,” she said. “Your body drives me crazy.”

He hadn’t expected her to be quite that honest. But perhaps that made it all right for him to be completely smitten by everything about her. Including the alluring femininity of her body.

Remembering he wasn’t wearing his glasses, Clark swiftly turned his attention to the food. He focussed on the food on his plate.

How did a person ‘think hot’?

Well, the kisses he’d shared with Lois should do it.

Or overdo it.

He needed to be careful, or a harmless plate of food was going to turn into a volcano.

Warmth.

Gentle warmth.

As he stared at the plate, steam began to rise from the food.

Lois applauded in delight. “Well done,” she said.

Making sure that whatever he had turned ‘on’ was turned ‘off’, he lifted his eyes from the plate to Lois. “Do you have any idea how amazing you are?” he asked softly.

“It wasn’t me who reheated the food,” she said with a smile.

“It was you who told me I could do it,” he said. “And you who have somehow made the most bizarre things seem almost ordinary.”

Her smile widened. “Good,” she said. “Because they are normal for us.”

Us. He fell in love with her all over again. Us.

He wasn’t alone.

He’d been lost. But Lois had found him. Lois had shown him the way out of the darkness.

He would never be alone again.

“I should heat your food,” he said. Because if he didn’t, they were in danger of forgetting it again.

A few seconds later, steam arose from her plate, too, and Clark returned his glasses to his face.

“Thank you,” Lois said.

“Thank you,” he said, meaning it with all of his heart.

“Do you remember this taste?” Lois asked as Clark put the first spoonful of tiramisu in his mouth.

He paused and then shrugged slightly. “Not really,” he said after swallowing. “The tastes of the other foods — the steak, the salad, the hamburger, and fries — were sort of expected. But this taste is completely new. Did we have this during our date?”

“Yes.”

His brow creased a little. “That surprises me,” he said. “I would have expected that anything associated with you would be the strongest of my memories.”

Was it possible that his mind had subdued memories of the cell more deeply than anything else? “Do you actually remember anything?” Lois asked, loading her spoon so it didn’t appear as if her question was anything other than a general inquiry.

“Still nothing specific,” Clark replied. “Just general things.”

She put her hand on his and left it there as they continued eating. “It must be disconcerting,” she said. “But try not to worry about it.”

“I remember the only thing that matters,” he said. “That I love you.”

Lois decided that now was a good time to broach a subject that had been simmering in her mind all day. “Clark?”

He waited, ignoring his dessert and giving her his full attention. “Yes, honey?”

“Have you thought about where you are going to sleep tonight?”

“Here?” he said with surprise. “In the spare room? Or your dad’s room?”

“And I’ll sleep in my old room?”

“I guess so,” he said as if it had been obvious.

“Are you happy about that?”

There was a short pause as he processed her question. “Ah ...” he said, bursting into an adorably bemused smile. “Ah ...” He chuckled. “I really don’t know how to answer that question.”

“We could share the double bed,” Lois said casually.

His eyebrows leapt. “Are ... Are you suggesting that we share the bed?” he asked. “Or share a lot more than that?”

“I’m worried that if you’re alone, your mind won’t let you sleep.”

“If I’m with you, my body won’t let me sleep,” he said.

There was another silence as she processed his words. Then, she chortled, and Clark joined in.

The laughter died quickly, smothered by the enormity of the possibilities. “I think it would be best if we were in different rooms,” Clark said.

“Why?”

“Because this is so perfect, I don’t want to spoil it by rushing.”

Rushing? She’d been ready for a long time. But she had to remember that their love was less than a day old for Clark.

“Whatever happens,” Clark said. “I want it to happen because we both know it’s right.”

“But you’re thinking that ... we will ...”

“I certainly hope so,” he said emphatically. His grinned sheepishly. “Sorry,” he said. “That came out with just a little too much enthusiasm.”

“No, it didn’t,” Lois said. “It was exactly what I wanted to know.”

“I’m trying for the right balance here.”

“Just be honest.”

“OK,” he said. “Even though I can’t remember, I seriously doubt that my control has ever been tested as much as it was today.” He shrugged. “Sleeping in the same bed with you ... Sorry.”

Lois chuckled. “You don’t have to be sorry that you find me attractive.”

“I woke up and discovered I am involved in this incredibly amazing relationship with the most beautiful of women,” Clark said. “I’m sure about how I feel, but I’m missing all the background that I should have. I don’t want to do anything that jeopardises what we have.”

“You won’t,” Lois said.

“I’m still flailing a bit. It’s been a day of surprises.”

“That’s why if you can’t sleep for thinking about everything that happened, I want you to come and wake me. Don’t wrestle with this alone.”

“Oh, I’m not alone,” Clark said. “I thought I was before you walked into the room, and it was the worst of feelings. But then you walked in, and I knew I wasn’t alone.”

“Except you thought I was your sister,” Lois teased gently.

His smile returned. “I was wrong,” he said. “*That* was the worst of feelings. Even worse than being alone.”

“I’m very glad I’m not your sister,” Lois said.

“Me, too,” Clark said fervently.

Lois smiled, partially to cover her tinge of disappointment. She had hoped they would spend the night together. Sleeping. Or perhaps not sleeping.

But Clark, even with no memories, still had his innate sense of what was right and proper. And before the cell had stolen his freedom, Lois was sure that he hadn’t been the type of man to indulge in casual sex.

Not that what she had in mind was going to be casual.

“It’s going to be a long night,” Clark said.

“Yeah,” Lois agreed. “Although I have an idea.”

That sparked his interest. “What?”

“We could shorten it by getting up really early. We have a long way to go — let’s leave before sunrise.”

Clark nodded with far more enthusiasm than the suggestion of an early start would usually evoke. “Good idea. I know that as soon as I go into my room, I’m going to be counting the minutes until I’m with you again.”

She would be counting, too.

He finished the last of his tiramisu. “I’d like to go to the bank tomorrow,” he said as he settled back in his chair and picked up his glass of wine.

“OK.”

“You said my financial situation is sound.”

“It’s better than sound.”

“Ball-park figure?”

“Seventy thousand dollars.”

The wine splashed up the curve of the glass as Clark lunged forward. “*Seventy thousand dollars?*”

“Yes.”

“Why? Was I planning to buy something? Had I just cashed in an investment? Do I have huge debts?”

“I’m not sure about the farm — whether there’s a mortgage or not,” Lois said. “But that money is yours — you can spend it however you wish.”

He sipped from the wine. “Was it a payment? From your agency? For ‘help?’”

“Yes,” she said.

“Can I access it easily?”

“Yes.”

His smiled blossomed. “Good,” he said. “Because tomorrow, I’m hoping you’ll need another outfit.”

“I will?” Lois said, smiling.

“Yep.” He put the glass on the table and offered her his hand.

When they were both standing, he said, “Lois, I’ve had the best time this evening. Would you go out with me again tomorrow night?”

“I would love to.”

“Thank you.” He kissed her forehead — and even managed to make that feel sensual. “We should clean up this meal and get to bed,” he said. “It’s getting late.”

Lois nodded, although the moment of separation loomed like a cloud of depression.

Clark stepped back, grinning. “And we need to ensure there is time for our goodnight kiss,” he said.

“I thought we had our goodnight kiss in the bathroom.”

“Nah,” he said with another grin. “That was just the practice.”

“If that was merely the practice, I can’t wait for the real performance,” Lois said.

His reaction told her he’d realised she was possibly referring to more than a kiss. His smile flashed, and he deliberately turned his attention to clearing away the plates.

Lois shivered with anticipation.

This Clark had no memories to hinder how he expressed his love for her. He would always be a gentleman, always be ultra-considerate — but he *wanted* her. And he wasn’t trying to hide how much he wanted her.

Not tonight, she accepted. But soon.

Very soon.

Part 7

~ Thursday ~

Wakefulness came softly to Lois, wafting on beautiful memories.

Kissing Clark.

Their goodnight kiss had stopped time.

It had started with sweet familiarisation.

And escalated.

In both intensity and location.

He’d tasted of an exquisite combination of wine and coffee and cream.

The mouth-on-mouth harmony had been wonderful, but very quickly, not enough.

Clark had paused from his gentle tattoo that had branded her as his forever. His lips had parted.

She’d stilled.

Waiting.

Hoping.

Pleading.

The tip of his tongue had touched the underside of her upper lip.

Just the memory of it was enough to radiate fire through her limbs.

She was panting now ... over the *memory* of a kiss.

And not even the kiss, just the moment when Clark’s tongue had first made contact with her lip.

But it hadn’t stopped there.

She had opened her mouth, and her tongue had slipped forward to meet Clark’s.

His body had shuddered.

And his tongue had delved further.

After that, specific memories were lost in the heat haze of a kiss that had taken Lois beyond anything she had ever experienced.

Physically, she had gone further with other men. But no past experience could come close to the euphoria of kissing Clark.

It had felt so wondrously intimate.

So beautifully right.

Uncounted minutes later, Clark had eased away. A protest had leapt to her mouth, but she’d clamped down on it when she’d seen his battle with raw desire.

Now, Lois closed her eyes ... and saw it again.

Clark ... unafraid ... undamaged ...

Free to love.

Every feminine instinct she possessed was straining for more of him.

Their goodnight kiss had been glorious. But what if, instead of it being the forerunner of separation, it was the avenue to full intimacy?

To know Clark. To know him completely.

And afterwards, to sleep in his arms.

To use that chest as her pillow.

Lois wanted it to happen as soon as possible.

And not just to appease her aching body.

But because she wanted them to be close — *really* close — before he had regained even an inkling of the cell. Then, even the most horrific of memories wouldn’t stand a chance against the power of their love.

But ...

Could it be that simple?

This must feel like a whirlwind to Clark. His total life experience started with meeting her and culminated — just sixteen hours later — in a paragon of a kiss.

Clark still needed time. She still needed that elusive patience.

Not that he had complained about any development between them.

But she had to ensure that he didn’t get hurt. And that included protecting his heart from being mauled because of any misunderstanding that might arise between them.

The potential for misunderstanding was huge.

He’d had a host of questions. She had responded with some truth, some evasive misrepresentation, and some outright refusal to answer.

He’d accepted his powers with remarkable equanimity. So far, their disclosure hadn’t appeared to threaten the one secret she most wanted to preserve.

The cell.

Making love.

Two events — absolutely opposite in every sense — engaged in a tussle for Clark’s emotional wellbeing.

A soft tap sounded on her bedroom door. “Lois?”

“Come on in, Clark,” Lois said, quickly running a hand over her hair and sitting up a little in the bed.

He came in, dressed in some of his new clothes, freshly ‘shaved’, and looking sensational. “Hi,” he said in a soft voice that teased every nerve ending she possessed.

“Hi.”

“Did you sleep well?”

“Mostly.”

“Did you miss me?”

“Terribly.”

That made him grin as he sat on the edge of her bed. “I missed you,” he said emphatically.

“But now we have the whole day together.”

“Would you like me to go and get some breakfast while you use the bathroom?”

“No, thanks,” Lois said. Although it was probably too early for the morning editions of newspapers to have hit the newsstands, she was sure that the *Superman Saves The World* story would continue to blaze from every headline. “I don’t think anything around here is open this early.”

“You don’t even want coffee?”

“No, thanks. We can get some miles behind us, and then stop at a diner.”

“OK,” he said agreeably. “Do you have a suitcase or a bag I could use for my clothes?”

“In the closet next to the study. Help yourself.”

“Thanks.” He rose from the bed with a parting smile. “See you soon.”

Lois sighed with happiness. He hadn’t kissed her; he hadn’t even touched her. But every part of her body was tingling from the affects of his voice, his presence, the clean smell of soap and shampoo.

Just him.

It was wonderful to start the day with Clark.

Lois showered, dressed, and packed in record time. She scribbled a note for her father’s cleaner and left it on the table to explain any signs of their presence.

Clark picked up both of their suitcases, and together they went to the Jeep. The pre-dawn air was chilly. Lois shivered. Clark smiled. Warmth radiated through her.

“Do you need me to navigate?” he asked as he opened the driver’s door for her.

She couldn't help recalling the last time they had driven out of Metropolis. It had been dark then, too. Just like now, it had felt like a new beginning. But Clark's shock at having been thrust into the world had seemed like a bleak barrier of separation between them.

Now, the barrier had moved. It was no longer between Clark and the world. Or between her and Clark. The barrier now was between Clark and his past. "Thanks," she said as they settled into the Jeep. "There's a map in the glove compartment."

He unfolded it onto his lap. "I assume I can drive," he said. "I can't imagine anyone could live on a farm and not learn."

"You can drive," Lois said.

"Have I driven you?"

Lois laughed as she waited for the automatic garage door to open. "My, my, Mr Kent, the questions have started early this morning."

He chuckled. "Have I driven you?"

"Yes," she said. *Flown me, too.*

"So when you need a break from the wheel, I can take over."

"That would be nice," Lois said. "I thought we'd drive for a couple of hours and then stop for breakfast."

"Do you like to drink coffee in the morning?" Clark asked.

"Sometimes."

"Perhaps we could stop and get some coffee to go."

"OK," Lois agreed as she pulled onto the street. "Did you sleep well?"

"Better than I thought I would."

"So it wasn't too difficult to settle your mind after the roller coaster of yesterday?"

"Not really."

"Not really?"

"Lois, am I a worrier?"

She checked his expression before replying. He looked semi-serious. "Ah, sometimes. Why do you ask?"

"There was one thought that I just couldn't get out of my mind."

Lois pulled up at a red light and looked sideways at him. "What?"

"That if I went to sleep, I would risk waking up and not remembering anything again."

"Aw, Clark," Lois said. "You should have come to me."

"I didn't want to disturb you," he said, taking his wallet from his pocket. "So I did the next best thing." He withdrew a piece of paper.

"What's that?" Lois asked, thinking about his poem.

"Instructions," Clark said with a good-natured chuckle. "Just in case."

"In case you did forget?"

"Yeah." He unfolded the paper and read: "Your name is Clark Kent. You are in love with Lois Lane. Keep your glasses on and make sure you're inside a building the first time you kiss her."

The traffic light turned green, and Lois's laughter resonated over the accelerating motor. "That is perfect," she said.

He grinned. "I'm so glad I didn't need it."

"Me, too."

"So many incredible things happened yesterday, but I want to bank them and move on, not live through them again."

Lois nodded, thinking about how Clark had never expressed even a hint of self-pity. Perhaps that was another deeply embedded consequence of the cell. "We'll add some good memories to your bank today," she predicted.

"It's *our* bank," he said. "And today is going to have it bursting."

"Except you haven't kissed me yet today," Lois reminded him — probably needlessly.

"You told me we had a deal that I was to kiss you first," he said.

"We did," she said. "And you did. Spectacularly."

"Well, today, Ms Lane, it's your turn," he said with a smile that pushed her right to the edge of slamming on the brakes and kissing him in the middle of the early morning Metropolis traffic.

"My turn?"

"Today, you kiss me first."

"Deal," she said, knowing she was probably grinning like a

predator contemplating the juiciest of prey.

"When?" he asked with another adorable smile.

"You are going to have to wait and see."

"I'm not sure I can wait."

Lois giggled. "Coffee," she said with tissue-flimsy sternness.

"Then we get out of Metropolis. Then breakfast."

Clark smiled. She smiled. Lois figured their thoughts were running along similar lines, revelling in the memories of yesterday and skipping ahead to the promises of a new day.

"You should keep your eyes on the road," Clark said softly.

He even managed to make *that* sound sexy. Lois cranked her head forward and centred her entire concentration into safely negotiating the dark streets.

"Lois?" Clark said after a couple of silent minutes. "I have three questions."

"Three?" she said, trying to sound unconcerned.

"Do you mind?" he asked. "It's not so much that I want specific information. I just want to know that my fears don't represent reality."

"OK," she said.

"My first question is very embarrassing," Clark said. "That's why I want to ask while you're driving — so you have to focus on something other than my distress."

That sounded intriguing.

"Because if you were looking at me, I'm not sure I could actually get the words out," he said with a self-conscious laugh.

This was more than intriguing. "Ask," Lois said, keeping her eyes forward. "It can't be that bad."

"It is."

When he didn't speak, Lois let her eyes slide sideways and met his look. His smile came tentatively, but it wasn't enough to drive away his look of uneasiness. "Go on," she said. "There's nothing we can't talk about."

He took a breath, his cheeks ballooning as he expelled it. "Do you know why yesterday morning I was wearing two pairs of briefs and between them, the remains of something that looked like a blue girdle?"

It took a phenomenal effort, but Lois managed to keep her reaction from exploding into a loud guffaw.

"Well?" Clark said when she didn't answer.

She risked a glimpse, trying to determine his level of anxiety. She was relieved to see that, although his cheeks had a deeper layer of colour than usual, he looked more curious than perturbed. "Yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes, I know why."

"It's not that I'm ... freaky? In a really *off* sort of way?"

"You're not 'off' at all," Lois said. "It's nothing to worry about."

"Do you know if I usually wear outlandish underwear combinations?"

"You don't."

His grin — decidedly wolfish — shattered his consternation. "You *know* that?" he said. "I didn't think we'd progressed that far."

She allowed her amusement some freedom. "I'll tell you more ..."

"... at the right time," he finished. "I did wonder if the blue stuff was some sort of flame retardant material. Perhaps it had something to do with the job I did for the agency."

Lois gave him a muted nod that she hoped he would take as agreement that his theory was plausible.

"That's OK," he said, accepting her non-answer. "But it does sort of lead to my next question."

Lois sensed a new seriousness in his tone. She saw a female street vendor setting up her coffee stall and pulled into the adjacent parking spot. "We have a few minutes," she said. "What do you want to ask?"

Clark unbuckled his seatbelt and turned towards her. "I know there are things you don't want to tell me," he said. "And that's OK. But it makes me wonder what could possibly be more mind-blowing than some of yesterday's revelations. I mean, shaving with a mirror." He shook his head as if trying to bend his mind to fit the configuration of

his life. “And floating.”

The unknown must be looming like a dark storm cloud on the horizon of his mind.

Clark rested his forearm on his raised knee and held his hand towards her. Lois threaded her fingers through his with an encouraging smile. “But I know that whatever it is, this has got to be really difficult for you,” he said.

“For me?”

“I think that is what Daniel was trying to say yesterday when he thought we should stay at the EPRAD base. He realised that you taking sole responsibility for someone with amnesia was a big undertaking. And that would be with someone normal.”

“You are normal.”

Clark shook his head. “No,” he said. He eyed her, breaking into a hesitant smile. “The things I can do — they’re not normal, but this isn’t about me. It’s about you.”

“Me?”

“Are you all right?”

Lois thought back to her earlier pondering about timing and revelations. “Yeah,” she said. “I’m all right.”

“But it’s not easy for you, is it?”

“Sometimes ... sometimes, it’s hard to determine the best way forward.”

“I wish I could help you,” Clark said. “I wish you didn’t have to do this alone.”

He was worried about *her* being alone? “Can I ask you a question?” Lois said.

“Of course,” Clark replied.

“It’s not an easy question.”

His smile slowly expanded. “It can’t be any more excruciating than asking about a blue girdle.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

His other hand cupped the union of their hands, and his thumb glided across her knuckles. “You said we can talk about anything.”

“I love you,” Lois said. “I have had time to be sure about how I feel.”

“You’re worried that we’re moving too quickly?”

“I’m worried you will feel as if I’ve steamrolled you into this.”

His laugh rumbled softly. “Lois,” he said, making her name sound like a caress. “The only thing I’m sure about is wanting to be with you.”

“With me ... like that kiss last night?”

“Oh, yes,” he breathed.

The sun hadn’t yet risen, but the temperature in the car definitely had.

“Thanks for answering my questions,” Clark said.

“You’ve only asked two. What about the third?”

He glanced out of the car window to the coffee vendor. “What would you like to drink?”

“That wasn’t your question,” Lois said.

“No,” he said. “But it will save time if we talk while we eat breakfast.”

“Whatever it is, don’t stress about it.”

His sudden grin ignited the simmering warmth scurrying through her veins. “One final question? Very quickly?”

“All right.”

“May I kiss your hand?”

Her joy sounded in a soft laugh. “Yes.”

Clark smiled. He gently brought her hand to meet his mouth. He carefully placed a kiss on her knuckle. His mouth lifted marginally from her skin. His eyes rose to meet hers. “I love you,” he said, his mouth whispering its message on her hand.

“I love you, Clark.”

He straightened with a smile. “I’ll ... ah ... get that coffee.”

“Latte, please. Milk, no sugar.”

Clark released her hand and stepped out of the Jeep.

Lois watched him go, feeling a swell of panic at the thought of

letting him loose in the world. What if he heard someone talking about the asteroid? She could answer that. What if someone recognised him? That would be more problematic. What if he’d forgotten the basics of their money system and didn’t know the bills to give the vendor? She would watch him, ready to go and assist if he needed it.

The vendor was a middle-aged woman. Her face brightened into a welcoming smile as she saw Clark. Lois held her breath, waiting for the vendor to show any sign that she recognised her customer as the superhero who had saved the world. Her mouth moved, asking for his order, and Lois relaxed to a muffled giggle.

There was no recognition.

Just the reaction of a woman when she saw a very good-looking man. Clark was going to get that — he’d better get used to it.

A few minutes later, coffee in hand, Clark returned to the car, unscathed from his first solo foray into the world. He offered her one cup. As Lois took it, she leant forward and placed a deft kiss directly onto his mouth.

When she backed away, he was grinning.

“Thanks for the coffee,” she said casually.

“Thanks for the kiss,” he said.

She looked at him, remembering so much, in awe of the changes, but marvelling that he was still so ‘Clark’.

“What?” he said with a smile that — save for the coffee — would have been the trigger for him to be inundated with a storm of kisses.

“You,” Lois said. “You’re ... you’re perfect.”

His smile tapered a little, but lost none of its appeal. “So are you.” Lois decisively turned the key. They needed to get driving.

“Are you getting hungry?” Clark asked about an hour later.

“Yeah, I am,” Lois replied. She’d been looking out for a suitable diner for the last ten minutes.

“Will the banks be open yet? I would like to withdraw some cash.”

“They should be open soon. But I have your ATM card. I should have given it to you yesterday.”

“What sort of card?”

“An automatic teller machine card. You can access your money using it,” Lois said, trying to remember if she’d used a debit card in the mid eighties. There was a chance Clark had never used one before. But if that were the case, she needed to tell him before he thought too much about the unexplainable hole in his knowledge of the world.

“I take it to the bank?” he said dubiously.

“Yes. Or any teller machine. You can use it in some stores, too.”

“I can?”

“You give it to the clerk, he puts it in a machine, you punch in your secret number, and the store takes the money directly from your account. Then, the bank sends you a statement, itemising where you spent your money.”

“That sounds easy.”

“It is.”

“I’ve forgotten my secret number.”

“I know it.”

“So you could use this card, too?” he said.

“It’s not my card,” Lois said. “It’s not in my name. I think it’s illegal for me to use it.” She saw a diner pulled off the road. When she’d parked, she rustled through her bag and removed Clark’s card and bankbook. She gave them to him, and then added a pen. “You should sign the card.”

“Assuming I remember my own signature,” he said wryly.

She smiled to reassure him, although he didn’t look particularly troubled.

He signed his name and then examined both sides of the card. “I haven’t used this before?” he said as he returned the pen.

“No. You probably have other accounts in Smallville. I don’t know anything about them. This is an account the agency set up to pay you for your assistance.”

“Seventy thousand dollars,” Clark said, shaking his head in disbelief. “I must have done something huge.”

“You did. You earned every cent of it.”

His head lurched up suddenly. “Was that how I got hurt?” he said. “How I lost my memory? I did something dangerous because it was safer for me than anyone else?”

“You did it because it wasn’t possible for anyone else to do it.”

“And I got knocked out?”

“Yes.”

“And they took me to the EPRAD base?”

“Yes.”

“And you came,” he said softly.

Lois nodded, a little relieved that he had chosen to concentrate on her arrival rather than ask for more details about what he had done to earn the money. “Nothing was going to keep me away.”

“That’s worth more than all of this money,” Clark said.

“Obviously, I can’t remember, but I figure that’s probably more money than I’ve ever had before.” He slipped the card into his wallet. “Let’s have breakfast. I’m paying.”

“OK,” Lois said. Her mind had moved on to more things more important than money. “But ...”

“Uhhh ...” he said. His eyes had already dropped to her mouth.

“Is it still my turn to kiss you?” she asked.

“You can kiss me anytime you want to,” Clark said. “But today is your day.”

Lois put her hand on his neck and eased him forward. She kissed him — and added another memory to her file.

Perhaps because they were in a semi-public place ... perhaps because it was still morning and there was a long day of opportunity ahead ... but their kiss meandered sweetly like a walk through a lush valley.

When they broke apart, Clark was smiling. “What would you like?” he asked.

It took a moment for Lois to comprehend his question. “Oh,” she said. “You mean breakfast.”

“What did you think I meant?” he asked with tantalising innocence.

“Breakfast,” she said, matching his tone. “What else?”

Clark was laughing as he climbed out of the car. Five seconds later, he was at her door, opening it for her.

“Thanks,” Lois said.

“Can you tell me the number for this card?”

“6108,” Lois said after checking that no one was within earshot.

“When you go to the bank, you can change it to protect your security.”

“Does anyone else know it — other than us?”

“Daniel Scardino.”

Clark’s hand lightly touched her back. “When is your birthday?”

“You can’t use my birthday as a PIN,” Lois said, laughing. “It’s supposed to be something random.”

“You’re not going to tell me your birthday?” he persisted.

“August 27th.”

“Aw, no,” Clark said. “I’ve missed it for this year. Did we do something special to celebrate?”

Actually, her birthday had been swallowed up in the month she had lost — between Linda’s death and finally securing her safety at the US embassy.

“You don’t want to tell me?” Clark asked. “Did something bad happen?”

“Nothing between us,” Lois said. “We weren’t together then.”

“So, it’s been less than two months? For us?”

“Yes.”

“Time doesn’t matter,” Clark said as they arrived at the door of the diner. “It is a poor measure of our love.”

“We’ll do something special next year,” Lois said.

“You’ll still be with me then?”

“Definitely.”

After they had ordered, Lois stood at Clark’s shoulder and discreetly guided him through the process of paying with a plastic

card.

He figured he must have done it before. Probably only a few days ago. But there was nothing about the process that seemed even remotely familiar.

They chose seats near the window, away from the other diners.

“Are you going to ask your third question?” Lois asked as she sat down.

“It’s not really a question,” Clark said. “It’s more speculation. Just something that is bugging me. I want to say it so then I can hopefully forget about it.”

“OK.”

Clark tried to keep his gaze fixed on her face, but it dropped. Her sweater hid the scratches, but it didn’t diminish his memory of them. “The man who hurt you,” he began.

“What about him?”

“He shot at you, and I saved you ... He must have known about my extra abilities.”

“He did. But he’s dead now, so he can’t hurt us anymore.”

“But he came back,” Clark said. “He found you, and tried to hurt you again.”

“Yes.”

“Was that because of me?” Clark asked. “Did he try to hurt you because of what he knew about me?”

“He was an evil man,” Lois said. “He’d already killed two people.”

“But you were put in danger because of me?” Clark persisted.

“No.”

“It seems the most likely reason to me.”

“Without your abilities, it wouldn’t have happened,” Lois said. “Because I would have been underground in a casket.”

“I’ve thought about this,” Clark said. “And I’ve realised how important it is to keep the secret. If everyone knew about me, it could lead to people threatening you. Because you’re with me.”

“It’s a secret so you can have a regular life,” she said gently.

“But your safety is more important,” he said, feeling sick at the thought of the scratches. What if Lois had been hurt more seriously? What if he’d arrived too late?

She put her hand in his. “Clark, you aren’t responsible for the actions of others.”

“I can’t let anything or anyone hurt you.”

“You were there for me. When I *really* needed you, you were there.”

“But he hurt you,” Clark said, his eyes dropping to her sweater.

Lois squeezed his hand. “I’ll tell you more of the story later,” she said. “But for now, I want you to accept that the scratches were just a small part of something much bigger. It could have been so much worse — you were the one who saved me from something really bad happening.”

“I couldn’t stand it if you were hurt because of me.”

Lois smiled, filling him with hope that he would be enough to keep her safe. “This is old ground, Mr Kent,” she chided so very gently.

“I’ve worried about this before?”

“Yes,” she said. “And we decided that if we’re together, nothing can hurt us.”

“Then we need to stay together.”

“You got it,” she said.

Clark’s doubts melted away.

From somewhere deep inside him, he felt a desperate compulsion to be what Lois needed. To protect her. Physically. Emotionally. To make her happy. To see her smile.

Lois believed in him.

She knew everything about him, and she loved him.

That was enough. *He* was enough.

Part 8

Clark drained his coffee. “Would you like another drink?” he asked Lois. “Anything else?”

“No, thanks,” she said.

“You sure?”

“Yeah. But if you’re still hungry, go ahead.”

He wasn’t hungry. But he didn’t feel inclined to return to the road. As they’d eaten breakfast, he’d relished the freedom from the constraints of driving — where one of them had to concentrate on the road. “I ... I’m just enjoying being with you,” he said.

“You’re with me in the car,” she said.

“I figure I should offer to drive,” he said. “And that’s going to restrict how much I can look at you.”

Her smile suggested that his remark had pleased her. “What would you like to talk about?” she asked, settling further into her seat. “Or do you just want to stare at me?”

Clark chuckled. “I did notice that you seemed to be doing your share of the gazing,” he said.

“That’s because you’re gorgeous,” she informed him matter-of-factly.

“What would you like to talk about?” he asked, feeling more comfortable with that course than exploring the ‘gorgeous’ route.

“You choose,” she said.

“But there’s a problem with that,” he said. “I don’t remember enough to make good conversation — other than plying you with endless questions, of course. And my small stock of memories is full of things that probably aren’t appropriate for a discussion that could be overheard.”

“You still don’t remember anything?” Lois asked.

“Nothing personal. Everything I know about my life, you’ve told me.”

“Ah, Clark,” she said, full of sympathy.

But it wasn’t her sympathy he craved right now. He wanted to connect with her again, to add another strand to the bond between them. To do that, they needed to talk. But about what? “I have an idea,” he said as sudden inspiration illuminated his mind.

“You do?”

“How about you choose the question? And then tell me the answer?”

Her gaze intensified — as if his suggestion had called forth memories. Memories they had made together. Memories he had lost.

“Have we done that before?” he guessed.

“Yes.”

“What question did you answer for me?”

“I told you about my job,” Lois said. “And my friend.”

“The one who was killed?”

“Yes.”

It still hurt Lois. And it was more than the grief of losing a friend. There was something else there — something dark and terrible. “I wish I could say something to help ease the pain,” Clark said.

“You did,” she said. “Once I was ready to listen, you said exactly what I needed to hear.”

“The man who tried to kill you ... was he the one who killed your friend?”

“No.”

“What question did I answer for you?”

“You told me a few things about your childhood.”

“That’s good,” he said, mourning again the cavernous lack of knowledge of his parents. Had they known about his extra abilities? “With my folks having passed away and my memories gone, I wondered if all of that was lost forever.”

“I’ve thought of a question you could ask,” Lois said.

“OK,” Clark said, expecting she would direct him to ask something about his parents.

“You could ask me about your most surprising talent.”

More surprising than floating? “What is my most surprising talent?” he echoed, trying to prepare himself for another revelation that further stretched the boundaries of believability.

“You write poetry,” Lois said.

“Poetry?” He hadn’t been expecting that. “Is it any good?” he

asked dubiously.

“I’ve only read one piece that you’ve written,” Lois said as she unzipped a side compartment of her bag.

Clark felt his anticipation rise, sure that he was about to rediscover another aspect of his relationship with Lois. A man who wrote poetry ... a man who was in love — yep, this poem was going to be about his feelings for her.

She carefully eased the piece of paper past the zipper and held it as if it were something very precious to her.

“Is that my poem?” Clark asked, hoping his question would prompt her to read it to him.

Her eyes lifted from the paper and slid into his. “This is possibly the most beautiful gift I’ve ever received,” she said with a slight wobble in her voice.

This piece of paper was important to her. His poem meant a lot to her. “I gave it to you?”

She nodded. “But I asked you to keep it for me. It belongs in your wallet.”

Clark slid his hand across the table and touched two fingers to side of her wrist.

“I’d offer to read it to you,” Lois said. “Except I will probably cry.”

“Would you prefer to give it to me in the car?” Clark suggested. “Or someplace where we’re alone?”

“No,” she said. “That might not be ...” She grinned suddenly. “I think the word you used is ‘wise’. That might not be wise.”

Her words and her smile pushed images through the sieve of his brain. Images that had to be expeditiously curtailed. “Would you read me the poem?” Clark said, yearning to hear his words carried by her voice. “Please?”

“OK,” she said. “But if I cry ...”

“You said I’ve made you cry before.”

Her damp eyes dropped to the paper and, on a steadying breath, she began:

“Hope blossoms in the blackness, splashing colour on the empty, threadbare canvas,

Hope shines in the darkness, bringing light where fear-filled shadows loomed,

Hope cradles promise, birthing life where barrenness reigned unchallenged,

Hope is beautiful, and her - ”

“And her name is Lois,” Clark said.

Lois’s attention jolted from the paper. “You’re remembering something?”

“No,” Clark said. “But there is no other possible way for that poem to end. It’s obvious.”

“Obvious or not,” Lois said. “That’s exactly how it ends.”

“And I wrote it? I didn’t adapt it from someone else’s poem and substitute your name?”

“No. You wrote it.”

He opened his hand. “May I keep it, please?” he asked. “I want to keep a little piece of you close to me.”

“You were going to get a copy for me.”

“I will do that,” Clark said. “But if you don’t mind, I’d like to keep it in my wallet.” He took the paper and stared at the words. The handwriting was unfamiliar, but the feel of the words tugged strongly at something deep inside him.

“Remember anything?” Lois asked.

“Not really,” he said. “But it confirms what I had already surmised. That I was lonely. That I wasn’t sure where I fitted into a normal world.” He looked up from the paper. “That I need you.”

“As much as I need you.”

Clark read the poem again, absorbing each word, each line, allowing its rhythm and flow to seep into him. “When did I write this?” he asked. “Before I told you how I feel about you? Or after?”

“Before.”

He grinned at the expense of the Clark Kent on the other side of

the wall of amnesia. “I wonder how long I obsessed,” he said. “Knowing how I felt, but unsure about burdening you with all of my peculiarities?”

“I think that’s normal for any relationship,” Lois said. “There’s often a time of uncertainty.”

“How did I ever work up the courage to show you what I’d written?” Clark asked.

She hesitated.

“I didn’t, did I?” he said with a wry grin. “Did you find it?”

“Yeah, I did,” she said. “Before it was finished. When I admitted that I’d seen it, you showed me the finished piece.”

“Lois,” he said. “Was everything with me slow and painful? Did everything take a long time? Did you ever get tired of waiting?”

“I understood your caution,” she said.

“Are you glad I lost my memories?”

Lois studied her empty plate. “I would never be glad about anything that hurts you,” she said.

“But ... when we met ... it seems that certain things were already ingrained in my psyche. Things that probably meant I had accepted that nothing like this was ever going to be possible for me. I figure you were probably trying so hard to make me see things differently. I figure I was probably being stubborn. Does that describe it fairly accurately?”

“Yeah,” she said, smiling fondly at him. “That about covers it.”

“But then, I forgot everything,” Clark said. “I forgot you, but — perhaps more significantly — I forgot me.”

“You haven’t changed much. I fell in love with you very soon after I met you. You’ve always had such gentleness, such strength.”

“But I also had such insecurities?”

“Some,” she admitted.

“Which is why I didn’t kiss you?”

“You offered to kiss me just before you left for the mission.”

Clark rolled his eyes. “That was way too late.”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“You obviously refused my offer,” he said, grinning. “So you agreed with me that my timing was awry.”

“We promised each other that as soon as we were together again ... after ... we would kiss.”

“But you had to wait again.”

“Yeah,” she said, her eyes glinting with amusement. “But when we finally got to it ... wow!”

“It was *that* good?”

“It was better.”

“It’s your day, honey,” he reminded her, keeping his tone casual in the hope that he didn’t sound overly eager. “You can kiss me anytime you want to.”

“I know,” she said. “And I have plans.”

The diner had heated suddenly. His heart was pumping gallons of blood, trying to assuage the light-headedness that was threatening to lift him from the seat. “We need to get out of here,” he said.

“Yes,” she said. But her eyes didn’t release him.

He had to get up. Or he risked something inside him exploding. And who knew what that would mean for someone with his extra abilities.

Clark stood and offered Lois his hand. She took it, and they walked out together.

As they approached the Jeep, he realised something.

The doubts that had plagued Clark Kent for years were not only forgotten — they were gone.

He could face the world boldly — with Lois beside him — because her love made it possible for him to be the person she perceived him to be.

Lois.

Already, she had taken his blank canvas and painted it with a background of strength and confidence.

He was different. Strange and odd.

But he wasn’t alone.

Lois’s eyes were closed, but she wasn’t asleep.

She was indulging in replayed memories. Specifically, her file entitled, *Kisses with Clark*.

He had been driving the Jeep since they’d left the diner after breakfast.

As each mile had passed, she’d been conscious of her rising impatience. Driving steadily west to Kansas was too slow. Too restrictive.

A multi-day road trip had seemed like the ideal solution when she had assumed Clark would need much longer to settle into their relationship. Information — getting it and protecting it — had been the principal currency for most of her life as an agent, but she hadn’t given much thought to the difficulties of being evasive with someone she loved.

The more she told him, the greater the chance Clark was going to notice the hole in his life.

Seven empty years.

Lois was determined to fill that void with good memories.

She wanted to do something with him.

Something fun.

Something like the paper airplanes.

So much had happened since Daniel Scardino had arrived at the farmhouse in Smallville just two days ago. Before that, there had been the argument about the bedroom therapy.

And before that — Moyne.

But in between had been ...

An idea bolted through her brain.

An invigorating idea.

It could backfire. But — as she’d already discovered — walking the minefield of lost memories was fraught with the risk of detonation.

But this idea ...

It would be fun.

It was something she really wanted to do.

Clark would enjoy it.

But there was a snag.

Not an insurmountable one. But significant enough that she probably should control her impulsiveness and at least try to think through the possible ramifications.

The car stopped.

Lois opened her eyes and sat up. They were parked in a busy street next to a row of stores. She scanned the area for displayed newspaper headlines.

Clark smiled across at her. “Did you have a nice sleep, honey?” he said.

“Yeah,” she said, her eyes darting left and right. “Where are we?”

“Akron, Ohio.”

She couldn’t even remember that name on the map. But it was definitely bigger than anywhere she would have chosen as a stopping place.

“There’s a branch of the bank where I have money,” Clark said with a nod to his left. “Is that machine in the wall the automatic teller you mentioned?”

“Yes.”

“And I can withdraw cash?”

“Yes. Do you need help?”

“No, thanks,” he said with a smile that triggered some of her best memories. “It should be straightforward enough.”

“OK,” she said.

“Would you like me to buy us lunch? Takeout? Or would you prefer to eat in?”

Lois looked around, wary of the bustling crowds. “Takeout,” she said.

“A sandwich?”

“Yeah. Ham, lettuce, tomato. Whatever they have. I’ll come with you.”

“No,” Clark said. He looked pointedly to his right. Lois followed

his gaze and noticed a sign pointing to some restrooms. “I need a few moments ...”

“Oh,” she said. “OK.”

“You just relax here,” he said. “I won’t be long.”

“OK.”

He got out of the Jeep and headed to the teller machine in the wall of the bank.

Lois watched him, admiring the way his jeans conformed to the contours of his butt. When he’d withdrawn his money, he turned around and waved to her as he put his wallet in his pocket.

Then he strolled along the sidewalk.

Lois felt her anxiety rise. What if ...

There was so much that could go wrong.

But she couldn’t attach herself to him permanently.

She calmed her simmering fears. Clark would be fine. He knew enough about his superpowers to be able to deal with anything unexpected.

If he overheard a conversation about the asteroid, he wouldn’t necessarily assume it was related to his amnesia. But even if he did ... Lois was confident he had progressed far enough that that information no longer needed to be guarded so vigilantly.

He would be fine.

Lois closed her eyes again ... and drifted back to her plan.

She wanted to go to the beach.

With Clark.

Which meant that she had to determine the best way to introduce him to the concept of flying.

Even with superpowers, Clark couldn’t drive and kiss at the same time.

However, the possibility of kissing while flying definitely demanded some investigation.

Clark entered a random store. Once in there, he lowered his glasses and looked through the wall to the Jeep. And Lois.

She wasn’t looking in his direction. Good.

He snuck out of the store and went into the one that had caused him to stop in this particular street. The vast display was a little disconcerting, but -

He saw it.

A large photograph.

Probably cut out from a newspaper.

Affixed to the wall.

And under it, the handwritten proclamation: *OUR HERO!*

Clark stepped forward. The photograph — taken from the waist up — was of a man dressed in a shiny cling-tight suit. A red cape cloaked his shoulders. He was standing behind a microphone and appeared to be speaking into it.

He looked terribly tense.

It wasn’t a particularly good photograph.

A little grainy, but -

“Sir?”

Clark turned to the voice of the assistant.

“How can I help you?” she asked.

Lois dragged herself from her plans and looked around. She checked her watch and was surprised that nearly half an hour had passed.

Where was Clark?

She saw him in the midst of the crowd. He was coming towards her, carrying two cans of soda and some bags that presumably contained their lunch.

Her immediate reaction was relief — but it was quickly overshadowed by the rush of appreciation.

Wow, but that man could look delectable.

And he didn’t even appear to be trying.

The beach, she thought, returning to her plan. Imagine him on the beach.

In shorts.

And perhaps ... perhaps nothing else.

Would he do it?

Would he be willing to take off his shirt?

He hadn’t seemed perturbed by his semi-nakedness when she’d found him in front of the mirror, checking for scars.

The beach.

She desperately wanted to go to the beach.

This afternoon.

Was this being impulsive?

Yes.

Was it a risk?

Yes.

But it was less hazardous than some of the other imaginings that had been tromping through her mind with ever-increasing ferocity.

A couple of hours walking along the beach — perhaps that would soothe her raging impatience.

It was preferable that Clark discovered he could fly — rather than merely float — when she was with him. She could justify this. She could.

He opened the door and slid into the seat with a sunshiny smile of greeting. “Do you want us to drive while we eat?” he asked.

They should. Particularly if they were going to take some time out for a little beach trip. “Yeah,” Lois said. “But I’ll drive.”

“I don’t mind.”

“No,” she said firmly. “It’s my turn.”

“OK,” he said agreeably. “I’ll hand you your food.”

After they had swapped seats, Lois backed out of the parking spot, and Clark directed her to the highway.

A few minutes later, they were travelling west again.

“How are you doing?” Lois asked between bites of her sandwich.

“Fine,” he said, sounding a little surprised at her question.

“You are coping incredibly well,” she said. “Discovering you’d lost your entire life, finding it again in little pieces and having to put them back together — that’s a difficult thing to face.”

Clark chuckled. “Falling in love with a woman I thought was my sister, finding out she isn’t, desperately hoping she might feel something beyond friendship, realising she does despite some rather bizarre complications ...”

“Those ‘complications’ were never a barrier,” she said solemnly. “Not from my side.”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

The regret in his apology galvanised Lois into action. Seeing a densely treed wayside stop, she pulled into it.

She parked the Jeep, taking best advantage of the trees to conceal it from the road.

Clark looked across at her. “Is everything all right?” he asked. “Do you want me to drive for a bit?”

“Everything’s fine,” she said, putting the rest of her sandwich back in the bag. “I just need to stretch my legs.”

“Ah,” he said. “I forgot that you stayed in the car when I got our lunch.” He looked out of the window. “Would you like to walk with me? There’s a bit of a track.”

Lois sprang from the Jeep before Clark had the chance to open her door, feeling as if she were about to leap from the top of a cliff. That should be dangerous. But Clark was here, and therefore, jumping off a cliff would be exhilarating but with no nasty bump at the end.

She went to the passenger side, and when he was out and had shut the door, she put her hands on his shoulders and pushed him back against the car.

His surprise quickly gave way to a grin as he caught something of her intention.

Lois gave herself one second to back out of her plan. What if it all ended badly?

No, she thought. It wasn’t going to end badly — it was going to end at the beach.

She hooked her arms around his neck and leant into his chest.

Clark's arms came around her and joined at the small of her back — one of the first places he had touched her after losing his memories.

It seemed like an omen. Encouragement to continue.

Lois reached up and kissed him, lingering just long enough for him to respond. Then she drew back and smiled at him. "I'd like to talk to you," she said.

"OK," he said. "But if you wanted to build up to it slowly ..."

She smiled at his hinted invitation and kissed him again, luxuriating in the feel of his mouth and the closeness of his body for a few moments but backing away before any real heat could be generated. "What I'm going to say might shock you, but -"

"Is it going to affect us? Our relationship? About how you feel about me?"

"No. It's nothing about that."

He shrugged as if dismissing whatever it was. Lois considered her options. She could try to ease into this or she could just announce that they were going to California.

"This whole experience must feel a bit surreal," she said, surprising herself by taking the less dramatic of the two options.

"Yeah," he agreed. "The startling disclosures ... The fogginess of amnesia ..."

"Are you doing OK?"

"Yeah," he said. His arms tightened a little. "Because every time I come close to freaking out, you're there for me." He kissed her forehead. "The more I think about all the decisions facing you yesterday, the more I am in awe of how you handled it." He grinned. "Even the shaving. I was so determined to kiss you during our date, and I was completely aghast at scratching you ... I mean, the razor broke ... what damage was I going to inflict on your face?" One arm released her long enough for the back of his forefinger to skim across her cheek. "But you found exactly the right way to make something so bizarre seem as if it were no big deal."

She smiled, feeling more confident than ever that now was the right time to initiate flying.

"When you said that it is normal for us," Clark said. "That ... that meant so much to me. That was when I knew for sure that I wasn't alone. That I would never be alone."

"I'm so glad you feel like that," Lois said. "Because ..."

Clark grinned. "What new thing are you going to spring on me now?" he asked. "I'm guessing it will be something else that is totally unconventional — but you're going to present as 'normal for us'."

His grin and nonchalant attitude warmed every part of her. "I want to go to the beach," Lois said.

"The -" His mouth closed. Slowly, he began to nod. "The beach," he said as if considering that as a realistic possibility. "The beach."

She nodded.

"Today?" Clark asked.

"Now."

His smile was a little tentative, but he didn't look unduly concerned. "And I suppose you have a plan for how we are going to get there?"

Lois smiled at his tone. "Do you remember floating?"

"I remember kissing," he said. "I will *never* forget that."

"But when we finally finished kissing ..."

"I discovered that my feet were no longer on the ground."

"Yes," she said. "But floating is just the tip of the iceberg."

Clark nodded sagely. "That occurred to me."

"Have you experimented?"

"No." He grinned. "I figured you'd get around to telling me when you thought the time was right."

Lois laughed. "You show incredible faith in me."

"No more than you show in me." His hand was on her back again, moving up and down in a slow rhythm, his fingertips pressing gently into her sweater. "Have we flown together before?"

"Yes."

"I've carried you? In my arms? And flown?"

"Uh huh."

His grin escalated. "Now *that* sounds like fun."

"It is. It is the best fun," Lois said, caressing the strip of skin between his hairline and his collar. "Actually, it's the second-best fun."

"After kissing," he said gravely.

"Absolutely."

Their eyes met again, alive with memories. Potent with anticipation.

"I'm relieved that you're taking it so well," Lois said.

"I'm shocked. About the beach."

"Why?"

"Well ..." His smile turned a little self-conscious. "I was imagining flying across a field."

"Oh," Lois said. "It's a little more than that."

His head lifted, and he looked around. "I don't think there are too many beaches around here," he said. "Do you have one in mind?"

"Yes. In California."

His mouth dropped. "How ... how long is it going to take to get there?"

"Five minutes. If we're leisurely."

"Fi -" He gulped. "*Five minutes?*"

Lois nodded.

Clark burst out laughing. "Then why are we *driving* to Kansas?"

"That is precisely what I was thinking," Lois said. "It was a good idea when I thought it was going to take days of being together for you to remember me, but now ..."

"Now," he said with smiling sternness. "Now, you owe me a few answers."

"OK," she agreed, realising that many of her mountains of apprehension had crumbled. If Clark could accept flying this easily, everything else — except for the cell — would be fine.

"What if I drop you?" he asked. "You could get hurt."

"Clark," Lois said, inching her fingers into his hair. "There's one thing I learned right around the time you caught that bullet."

"What?"

"That if you're around, I'm not going to get hurt. Not ever. You just won't let it happen."

His smile crashed over her again. "Wanna go flying with me now?"

"I'd love to."

"You mean ... we just ... take off ... and fly to the beach? Just like that?"

"No, not just like that," she said. "We have to negotiate first."

His eyebrows drew together. "Negotiate?"

This had been so straightforward that Lois felt as if she were flying already. "In return for me flying with you, you agree to take off your shirt when we get to the beach," she said lightly.

His grin was infectious. "What if I get cold?"

"You don't get cold. And even if you did ..." She unfolded from him enough to spread two fingers wide and pointed to his eyes.

"What are you going to wear?"

"What would you like me to wear?" she said, feeling emboldened by the exhilaration of having challenged the minefield and come through without detonating anything.

"I assume you do get cold?"

Nice dodge, she thought. "Yes, but your eyes ..."

Clark chuckled. "We could buy some beach clothes. Perhaps a pair of shorts for you, and ... I don't think women's fashion is something I've ever known much about ... a shirt ... blouse ... top ... of your choosing."

"We're going clothes shopping again?"

"Yeah. You need something for our date tonight."

"Clark, you don't have to buy me clothes."

"I want to," he said eagerly. "I want to get you something really special for tonight. Please, Lois."

"All right."

"I figure there will be lots of clothes stores in California."

"Lots," Lois said. "But we can't leave yet."

“Oh?” His eyebrows lifted with surprise, but his suggestion of a smile told her that he had an inkling of what she was going to say.

“My day is half over,” she said. “And I know that kissing tends to get you airborne.”

“You’re going to have to give me instructions,” he murmured.

“As I recall, you don’t need no instruction,” Lois drawled.

He smiled. “I meant for flying.”

She nodded, deciding that the time for talking was over. She leant further into his chest, reached up to his mouth, and kissed him.

His mouth met hers — soft and warm and replete with his love as they kissed an unhurried journey of rediscovery.

“I have another question,” Clark said when their kiss had ended.

“OK,” Lois said as she settled into the nook of his neck.

“What did I do?”

“Ah ... kissed me?”

“No. What did I do when I was dressed in the blue thing?”

Lois lifted her head. “You remember?”

“No. I saw a picture.”

“Of you?”

“Well, no one else seemed to recognise me ... but considering the gelled hair, the lack of glasses, and the blue suit ... it wasn’t that difficult.”

“You saved the world.”

He paled. “I *saved* it? How?”

“There was an asteroid. Heading directly for us. The entire planet was doomed.”

“And you knew that I could fly? Really fast? And I was impervious to bullets?”

She nodded. “You were our only chance.”

“So, I dressed up in a disguise to protect our future ...”

“Yes.”

“And ... And did what?”

“Flew into the asteroid.” Lois felt him tense. “Do you remember anything?”

“No. Nothing,” Clark said. “But a lot of the fragments don’t seem quite so disjointed.”

“Such as?”

“The money in my bank account. Being at the EPRAD base. The media being camped at the front entrance.”

“My scrambling efforts to keep you away from any newsstands?”

“I didn’t really notice that,” Clark said. He smiled. “But now that you mention it ...”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. I don’t see how else you could have done it. I was in no condition yesterday to deal with having saved the world by flying into space.” He wrinkled his brow. “I’m guessing I wasn’t in a rocket?”

“No.”

“Who made the costume?”

“Evan’s daughter.”

“You told me that my abilities are a secret.”

“The media named the blue-suited hero ‘Superman,’” Lois said. “That he has abilities is no longer a secret. But -”

“But that Clark Kent, farmer from Smallville, is the blue-suited oddball — that’s the secret?”

Lois nodded, unsure what to say.

Clark smiled suddenly. “It seems as if you and I had it worked out pretty well,” he said.

“We did.”

“And this ... ‘Superman’? Did he do anything else? Did he help out in any other ways?”

“Not yet. But we’d talked about it.”

“Can Evan’s daughter make another suit? To replace the first one?”

“I guess so. If that’s what you want.”

“Maybe. We’ll think about it.” Clark took his arms from her back and slid gentle fingers along her jaw. “For now, I just want to be Clark Kent, regular guy, who is hopelessly in love with Lois Lane,

extraordinary woman.”

“Not so much the *regular* guy,” Lois said. “I want to go to California.”

He grinned. Then, he broke their deal.

Because *he* kissed her.

On her day!

Part 9

Clark swept Lois into his arms and grinned at her. “What now?” he said.

She pointed skywards. “I suggest that way.”

He responded with a quiet chuckle. Having Lois in his arms was wonderful, but it didn’t change that he had no firm knowledge about how they were going to get to California.

“Can you give me something more precise?” Clark asked, looking down at her and wondering if they could shelve the whole flying idea for a few minutes while he kissed her again.

“You never told me how you do it,” Lois said. “You just did it.”

Feeling just a little ridiculous, Clark bent his knees.

“Up!” Lois encouraged.

Nothing happened. “Perhaps you could kiss me,” Clark suggested hopefully.

She grinned as she ran her hand lovingly across his cheek. “If I kiss you, we’ll float up,” she said. “And we would risk someone seeing us. We need to shoot up. Fast.”

Clark bent his knees again and tried to elevate his thoughts.

“Throw me into the air,” Lois suggested.

“Huh?”

“Hurl me upwards. You’ll catch me before I get anywhere near the ground. Then we’ll both be airborne. Easy.”

Her relaxed attitude drove away the tension that had begun to squeeze across his shoulders, but it didn’t change that his feet were still anchored to the earth. “Perhaps I should try it by myself first,” he said.

“We’ve already been through that,” Lois said. “We’re in this together.”

“But -”

She enclosed his cheeks with her hands and pinned his eyes with her gaze. “I love you,” she said. “And we can do this.”

His legs flexed, and he sprang up. The tops of the trees zoomed past as he and Lois launched into the expanse of sky.

“I told you you could do it,” she said, crossing her ankles and lounging back as if he were a particularly comfortable armchair.

When the trees had receded to a small line far below them, Clark stalled and looked around in wonder.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it?” Lois said.

He nodded, trying to overcome the feeling that this *had* to be a dream.

“Do you remember this?”

Did he? “I’m not sure. I never would have guessed that I could do this. Who would? But now that we’re here ...”

“It doesn’t seem totally foreign?”

“Not totally,” Clark said. He looked down to convince himself that they really were floating. The ground was a long way below. And they weren’t hurtling towards it. “Do you know how I navigate?”

“The sun?”

“OK.” He consulted his watch, checked the position of the sun, and turned them west.

With no specific intent on his part, they began to glide through the air. Fast. It felt like freedom — unfettered and exhilarating. When Clark looked at Lois, he saw his feelings reflected in her laughing excitement.

She leant in close, and for a moment, Clark thought she was going to kiss him. Instead, her mouth passed his cheek and nuzzled against his ear. “Next time you’re thinking about how ‘odd’ you are, remember this,” she said.

A surge of joy burst inside him. He could fly. With Lois. Wherever he wanted. He could -

“Where did I get that pizza?” Clark asked. “The one I brought for you?”

He felt her laughter rumble through her body. “Italy.”

Italy. For a pizza.

The implications were still swirling through his mind when a stretch of ocean — it had to be the Pacific — appeared on the horizon. “Wow,” he said.

“I told you we can move quickly when we need to,” Lois said.

“But ... but we’ve just flown across three quarters of the United States.”

“That gives us plenty of time for the beach.”

As they reached the coast, Clark looked over the rim of his glasses and scanned the shoreline, searching for a place to land. A row of scrubby bushes seemed to offer the ideal location. “Hang on,” he said to Lois.

He glanced into her face, received the assurance he needed, and five seconds later, his feet gently thudded into the sandy ground.

“Nice landing,” Lois said.

“Ah ... thanks.”

“May I congratulate the pilot?”

Her question dragged him from the shock of distance. And time. And flight without an airplane. “Depends on the form of the congratulations,” he said.

She didn’t reply. Not verbally. She drew him into a lavish kiss that probably came close to shooting them skywards again.

Clark broke the kiss before he wanted to. Time had become an unfathomable stranger. What time he’d once had was now lost. He had less than two days of memories with Lois, but he felt as if he’d known her for months. Years.

He’d said that time was a poor measure of their love. And Lois hadn’t disagreed.

She pushed her hand into his. “I think I saw some stores this way,” she said.

Lois tied the sides of her new sleeveless blouse into a knot at the arch of her ribcage. She looked down. Despite being dressed modestly for the beach, she was revealing a lot of skin. Her shorts only reached a few inches down her thighs, and from there, her legs were bare all the way to the stringy sandals she had purchased. Then there was the strip of flesh above the waist of her shorts.

Her fingers paused on the second top button of her blouse. She’d left the top one undone, exposing all but the lower portion of the faint lines that still marked her chest. If she undid the second button, Clark’s superior height was going to give him an occasional glimpse of the top curve of her breasts.

Should she?

She undid the button.

She adjusted the blouse.

How much was too much?

Exactly what message was she trying to send? That she loved him, certainly. That she was attracted to him. That she wanted him to be attracted to her. That if he chose to move their relationship forward, she wouldn’t be hanging back?

How did she encourage without pressuring?

In his mind, he’d known her for little more than a day.

Lois fastened the button, picked up her bag, and left the changing rooms.

Clark was already waiting for her.

She stopped.

Stared.

As her heart danced the flamenco.

He was wearing a pair of red and yellow board shorts that started at the top of his hips and dropped to his knees.

The rest of him was uncovered. Right there. On display. For her to look at.

And look she did.

Starting with his ankles, she sauntered up his lean calves, drifted

past the shorts to the tight abdomen, and settled on the broad, sculptured chest. Her breaths became clogged, her mouth torrid. She tore her eyes away, luring them with the promise of wide shoulders and swollen biceps.

A blur of heartbeats later, she noticed his face.

Clark’s eyes were riveted to her, his expression carved with appreciation.

Lois walked up to him, and his gaze rose to her face. He swallowed a couple of times and broke into a shy smile. “You look great,” he said.

“So do you.”

He offered her his hand. “Would you like to walk along the beach?”

Lois slipped her hand into his, and they began the short walk to the beachfront. Once there, they stopped, both looking west to where the lighter blue of the sky dipped to touch the ocean. Lois leant closer to Clark — and her elbow contacted the bare skin of his side.

He looked down at her and smiled. “Which way?”

She laughed at his question. “That’s what you asked the last time we were at the beach.”

“I did?”

“Yeah. It wasn’t this beach. You took me to a favourite place of yours. I’m not sure where it was exactly.”

“We have time ... years ... to keep coming back until we find it,” Clark said.

“Yeah,” she agreed, already looking forward to endless walks along the beach.

“So, which way?”

“Before we go anywhere ...” Lois opened her bag and brought out a tube of sunscreen. “Would you mind?” she asked Clark.

“No,” he said.

She pulled out a towel, laid it on the sand, and sat down. “You could start with my ankles,” she said.

Clark dropped his knees onto the towel. “Your ankles?” he said.

Lois plopped one ankle on this thigh and sent him a nod of encouragement.

He eyed her with smiling suspicion. “Have I done this before?”

“Not with sunscreen.”

He picked up her foot and slipped off her sandal. Lois arranged her bag behind her and lounged back against it.

Clark didn’t open the sunscreen. He began massaging her ankle — his thumb gliding in and out of the grooves in a way that roused such potent memories that her mind felt like a carousel of reminiscence.

“Do you remember?” Lois asked quietly.

“No,” Clark replied.

“I sprained my ankle,” she said. “I fell over — or I would have done, except you moved so quickly you caught me before I hit the ground. That was the first time you carried me.”

“I bet I enjoyed it,” Clark said. “Except for you being in pain, of course.”

“The pain was no match for your touch,” she said. “Or your breath.”

“My breath?”

“You can cool things with your breath. It is much better than an icebag.”

Clark lifted one hand from her foot and steadily blew onto it. Then he tilted his head and directed the gush of air onto her ankle. “Like that?” he asked when his breath had expelled.

“Exactly like that.”

He propped her foot on his knee and reached for the tube, squirting a dollop onto his palm. He wrapped his hands around her calf and began working the cream into her skin.

Lois watched him, getting as much pleasure from his assured manner as she was from the touch of his hands on her leg. “This is another of your special abilities,” she said. “You make this feel so good.”

With a smile of satisfaction, he reloaded with the sunscreen and

began on her other leg, skimming up and down her calf long after all traces of the ointment had disappeared.

Then he stopped, his hand resting on her knee. “Where else?” he said, his face carefully arranged to blankness.

Lois was sure that they were both thinking the same thing. Did he continue along her thighs — right to the hem of her not-very-long shorts?

She searched his face for direction. He waited for her.

“My arms?” Lois said.

The easing of pressure was palpable. So was the dash of disappointment.

Lois swivelled. Clark’s long legs stretched out on either side of hers.

His hand on her neck held back her hair while he smoothed the cream over her upper arm. The tips of his fingers edged a little way under the light cotton of her blouse.

When he had finished, he swapped sides and worked on her other arm.

Lois closed her eyes and let his touch seep into her. When he finally stopped, he didn’t release her hair. “Lois?” he said in a rusty voice that seemed to come from somewhere deep in his chest.

“Uhhh?”

“You have the most kissable neck in the world. Would you mind if I ...”

His words set off a chain reaction of sensation that prickled across the skin of her neck. If skin could plead, that is what it was doing.

“Please,” she murmured.

His lips came lightly. Her head dropped forward in silent encouragement. Clark beaded a line of kisses from the centre of her neck to the ridge of her shoulder. His breath shimmered across her heated skin like the ocean breeze.

His arms rounded her waist, and Lois reclined into his chest. Her cheek rested against his. It was so smooth she wondered if he’d taken a few seconds to ‘shave’ while he was changing into his beach clothes.

They sat there, absently watching the waves stretching up the beach, mesmerised by the rhythm of two hearts beating in unison.

Finally, with a drawn-out sigh of contentment, Clark picked up the tube of sunscreen and put it in Lois’s hand. “You should do the rest of your legs,” he said.

“Will you do my lower back, please?” Lois asked. She squeezed a blob onto the pads of his fingers and leant forward onto her arched knees.

Clark shuffled backwards, and then his hand made contact with her back, just below the hem of her blouse. He worked downwards — efficiently, not lingering as he had on her ankle.

His gentlemanly caution was endearing. A little frustrating, but endearing.

Lois rubbed the cream into her thighs rather haphazardly. She didn’t think there was much chance of getting burned ... at least, not from the sun.

“Your turn,” she said, swinging onto her knees and turning.

“Ah ... I don’t think I burn,” Clark said. “Not if I survived going through the earth’s atmosphere.”

“You don’t burn,” Lois informed him. “But that doesn’t mean I should miss out on the fun.”

His mouth fell open, and his eyebrows lifted. His smile unrolled slowly, spiced with amusement. “Where would you like to put the sunscreen?” he asked.

Trying to ignore a whole range of inappropriate replies, Lois concentrated on pushing a generous amount of the cream into her hand. “Shoulders?” she said. “Back?”

Clark pivoted on his butt — although Lois noticed that the towel didn’t twist and guessed he must have lifted from it. She didn’t have the inclination to dwell on that now — not with Clark’s lean and muscular back spread out before her, awaiting her attention.

She rubbed the sunscreen into his back, going all the way down to the waist of his shorts and rising again to his shoulders and upper

arms. A marching battalion of memories assuaged her. Bedroom therapy. His back — hers to explore. She curved her fingers so the heel of her hand and her nails skimmed across his skin. When every inch of his back had been covered multiple times, she ventured to his sides and beyond, circling him with her arms.

Her hands flattened across his ribcage, and she tenderly kissed the junction of his shoulder and neck.

Lois heard and felt his quick intake of breath, loving that her touch could affect him just as profoundly as his touch affected her.

She unravelled from him, reached over his shoulders to trace the corrugation of his collarbones, and then delved lower to the rounded definition of his pec muscles.

“I ... I think you’ve covered everything,” he said.

The slight stumble in his words made her question if she had gone too far. “Clark?” she said, taking advantage of the fact he was facing away. “Did I make you uncomfortable with anything I did?”

“No,” he said, a little too quickly. He turned and faced her. “A little,” he conceded. “But it wasn’t you.” His smile flickered. “Actually, it was you, but it’s not your fault.”

She wanted to melt every trace of awkwardness between them. “What do you mean?”

Clark searched the towel for inspiration. “I think you know what I mean,” he said quietly.

“Yes,” she admitted with a smile. “But I want to hear you say it.”

“You are dismantling my control,” he said. He took her hand in his. “Happy now?”

“Yes,” she said airily.

He chuckled. “You ... ah, you don’t feel the need to respond in kind?”

“You think I might be even the tiniest bit affected by all those muscles and that broad chest and a body so hot it could scare off winter?”

His mouth dropped open, but no words emerged.

“Because I am,” Lois said, skating her forefinger along the curve of his bicep. “My control is shot to pieces.”

Clark leapt to his feet and hauled her up beside him. “We need to walk, Ms Lane,” he said. He took two steps and stopped. When he looked down at her, seriousness had overridden all other emotions. “Lois?”

“Yes?”

“We have to be honest with each other, right?”

“Of course.”

“There’s a fine line between being honest enough to let a woman know she’s driving you crazy and coming across as a sleaze. I’m desperately trying to walk that line. What I feel for you covers the whole spectrum of how a man loves a woman. But when you’re dressed like that, it’s easy to get the balance a little skewed.”

“You didn’t get anything skewed,” Lois said. She went to lay a hand on his chest, but then adjusted and reached for his shoulder. “I need you to be honest with me,” she said. “I don’t want you to feel I’m pushing you into something before you’re ready.”

“My love for you spans far longer than two days.”

Her instinct was to kiss him, but perhaps they both needed a little breathing space. “Let’s walk,” Lois said. She pointed to the left. “This way.”

“Would it be all right if I put my arm around your shoulder?”

Clark asked.

“Can I put my arm around your waist?”

“Yep,” he said with a pleased smile.

Lois slipped her hand along his back and hooked it just above his hip. His arm crossed her shoulders, and they fell into step.

“I love your hair,” Clark said. “I love how it feels. Right now, I love how it bounces on my arm.”

“Last time we were at the beach, you asked me not to tie it back because you enjoyed watching it in the breeze.”

He smiled at that. “Why did I wash your hair?”

“You remember that?” Lois squeaked. “You’re remembering

something?”

Clark didn't answer for a few crunchy steps. “Yeah,” he said. “I can't remember anything else — not even where we were — but there's something.”

“Can you describe what you remember? Before I fill you in with the details?”

“I can remember the feel of your damp hair. I can remember running my fingers across your scalp. For some reason, I felt I had to be really careful.”

“Is that all?”

Clark grinned. “I know I loved every moment of it.”

“Is this the first thing you've remembered?”

“I've had a few vague feelings — but they seem to hover just beyond my reach. This is the first time I've managed any clarity at all.”

“Would you like to know more about the hair-washing?”

“If you don't mind telling me.”

“When I got the scratches, I also sustained a small head wound. It had bled a bit and clotted in my hair. You washed it for me.”

“That's why I had to be careful.”

“Yes. You were wonderful — so caring and loving. I really needed you, and you knew exactly how to help me.”

“Perhaps I learnt from you,” Clark said. “Because, since yesterday morning, you've known exactly how to be what I've needed.”

“I think we've learnt a lot from each other.”

He nodded. “Is your head all right now?”

“Yes,” Lois said. “It was only minor.”

Clark glanced down. “Your scratches have nearly healed, too,” he said. “I can hardly see them.”

“That whole incident was very unpleasant. But it's over now. I just want to forget it.” Clark chuckled, and Lois realised what she'd said.

“Oops,” she said. “Sorry.”

“It's OK,” he said. “When you bought your beach clothes, did you see anything you would like for our date tonight?”

“Not in that store. But there was a boutique nearby that could hold some possibilities.”

“I'd like you to buy something special,” Clark said. “And I'd like you to get whatever else you need — shoes, bag ... whatever.”

“Thank you.”

“Until I learn more about your tastes, I think you should buy stuff like perfume for yourself.”

“You don't have to buy me -”

“Lois,” he said. “I suspect that even before my amnesia, I didn't have too much experience with women. I'd like to buy you gifts — things a man buys for the woman he loves — but I just draw a blank.” He shrugged. “I have nothing to guide me in this.”

“Clark,” she said with a smile. “Last night, you literally swept me off my feet. You don't have to worry about anything.”

“So, I'm doing OK?” he asked.

“You are doing brilliantly.”

“I want you to be happy.”

“Then stay with me,” she said. “Always.”

Clark dropped a kiss on her temple. “Always,” he promised.

“I want this one.”

Lois looked up from where she was glancing through the rack of dresses. Clark had taken down a dress of burgundy chiffon.

She reached for the price tag, but he firmly enclosed it in his fist. “Do you like it?” he asked.

“Clark, it probably costs a fortune.”

“Do you like it?”

“I haven't even tried it on yet.”

“Would you? For me?” He disconnected the price tag and handed her the dress. “Please?”

“Why this one?” Lois asked.

“Because the moment I saw it, I could imagine you wearing it.” He slid his hands into his pockets. “But if you hate it ...”

“I'll try it on,” Lois said. “Would you like to see?”

“Only if you decide not to buy it,” he replied.

Lois gave him a smile and headed for the fitting rooms, already knowing that unless it was positively awful, she would agree to Clark buying the dress for her.

It wasn't positively awful. Quite the opposite, in fact.

But — it was revealing.

Very revealing. The neckline plunged, making the black dress she had worn last night seem almost matronly in comparison.

Lois was sure Clark hadn't realised. She stared at her reflection in the mirror. Should she refuse the dress, but not say why?

Should she refuse the dress and explain her reasons? If she did that, he was probably going to be embarrassed about suggesting it.

Or should she take it off now, allow him to buy it, and let tonight look after itself?

Lois slipped out of the dress and quickly donned her jeans and the blouse she had worn at the beach.

As soon as she stepped out of the fitting room, Clark's face lit with pleasure. “You're not wearing it,” he said. “That means we're buying it.”

She couldn't refuse him. She would just play it cool tonight — adopt the attitude that there was nothing notable about the extensive dip of the neckline and hope Clark followed her lead.

Clark took the dress from her in masterful fashion, giving her no chance to change her mind. “Do you need anything else?” he asked. “Shoes? Bag? Jacket?”

“No. Thank you,” Lois said with a smile. “I have everything I need.”

“I'll pay,” Clark said. “And then we should probably get back to the Jeep.”

She watched him walk right up to the female assistant and pay for the dress, making easy conversation, charming her — and probably completely oblivious that his smile had made her day.

Lois laughed as a swell of happiness billowed through her. Fundamental Clark with just a shot of confidence was definitely the most exhilarating and heart-warming of prospects.

And she had a date with him.

Tonight.

“Lois?” Clark said. “Would you mind if we stopped soon and looked for a motel? I know we could drive for another couple of hours, but I'd like to find a restaurant for our date.”

Lois checked the time. It was just after four o'clock. “Sure,” she said.

“We will come to a fairly big town soon,” he said, perusing the map. “It should have a variety of nice restaurants.”

He sounded a little anxious. Lois smiled. “I'm sure we'll find the perfect place.”

He returned his attention to studying the map, and Lois's thoughts jumped ahead to tonight.

They had decided they would eat out. Clark knew enough now that being in public shouldn't cause any problems. Lois smiled at the memory of her dress. Its colour was almost exactly the same shade as the dress she had worn for their date in the cell.

Had Clark remembered? If only subconsciously?

If he remembered the date, would he remember the location?

Had they come far enough that even if he recalled something about the cell, its power over him would be diluted by the strength of their relationship?

It was impossible to predict. But Lois was going to cling to this carefree Clark for as long as she could. She wouldn't tell him about the cell until there was no other option.

Fifteen minutes later, they entered the town. The first motel seemed suitable, and Lois pulled into the parking space in front of the reception area.

“I'll get it,” Clark said, opening the car door the instant she cut the motor. “You stay here and relax.”

Lois settled back in her seat, smiling as she wriggled her bare toes and a few grains of sand fell from her feet.

The beach had been a great idea. Clark's easy acceptance of being bare-chested had seemed like being given the richest of desserts after spending weeks on a diet.

And she definitely hadn't been the only woman who'd noticed him.

But Clark had seemed unaware of the many appreciative looks.

Except for hers.

He had caught her staring more than once. His response had been a half-shy, half-pleased smile.

What would happen at the end of their date tonight? They would kiss — Lois had no doubt about that. But where would the kiss lead?

It had been less than two days, she reminded herself. Clark needed time. She needed patience.

Clark appeared. He got into the car with a smile. "Rooms 6 and 7," he said. "This way."

Lois quickly turned the key and started the motor, desperate to hide her crushing disappointment.

Two rooms.

Clark carried Lois's suitcase into her room and put it on the floor. "Will you be OK for a bit while I go and look around the town?" he said. "I'd like to find the right restaurant and make a reservation."

"OK," she said, stifling the sprig of anxiety at the thought of him being alone in public.

Clark smiled. "Get some rest," he said. "You've had a big day. And I know you didn't sleep much the night I was missing." He kissed her quickly. "Do you mind if I take the Jeep?"

"No. Of course not."

"Thanks," he said, flashing that smile. "See you soon."

He left her room and shut the door.

Lois walked to the window and watched him drive away.

Two rooms.

She should have anticipated that Clark would never assume they would share a room.

But she couldn't help feeling a little dejected at the prospect of another night alone.

A tap sounded on Lois's door as she took a final look in the mirror.

She was happy with her outfit. She paused, pulling together the two sides of the deep vee of her cleavage. Her efforts had little effect.

It wasn't daring enough to be scandalous. But it was definitely a whole lot more than Clark was expecting.

With a sigh of acceptance, Lois went to door of her motel room and opened it.

As she'd expected, Clark was there.

Smiling. He brought his arm from behind this back and presented her with a large bunch of flowers with mauve petals springing from golden centre buds.

Lois laughed. "Asters," she said.

"You said they are your favourite."

"They are." She took the bunch and retreated into the room. "I'll get some water for them."

Clark followed her, revealing the vase in his other hand. "I got this from the reception area," he said.

"Thanks." Lois went into the tiny bathroom to fill the vase with water. She put it on the small writing desk and began to unwrap the flowers.

After a few minutes, she became aware that Clark hadn't moved. She glanced up from her task, saw his expression, and realised she had been leaning forward. She straightened and approached him with a smile. He still looked a little shell-shocked, so she twirled, and the sleek fabric of the dress danced around her knees.

"Like it?" she asked.

His throat jumped. "I ... I didn't know."

"Know what?" she said nonchalantly.

"How ... how *low* it is."

She glanced down as if checking out the dress for the first time. "It looks pretty standard to me."

A tinge of colour had risen into Clark's cheeks. "I'm sorry," he said. "I wouldn't have insisted on this dress if I'd know how it would look."

"You don't like it?" Lois asked innocently.

His smile cracked a rent through his concern. "I like it," he said with warm appreciation. "Probably too much."

"Then don't worry," she said, returning to the asters.

Clark gathered up the gold wrapping. He folded it carefully and took it to the trashcan.

Lois smiled to herself, wondering how long it would be before he relaxed enough to stop looking for anywhere other than her cleavage to park his eyes.

"Ready?" he said, his eyes fixated to her face.

"Ready," she said.

He took her hand, and together they went to the Jeep.

The date was perfect.

Clark had chosen a stylish Italian restaurant. The food was flavoursome and beautifully presented. The atmosphere was relaxed, with soft music playing loud enough to fill some gaps in their conversation, but never with enough volume to impede it.

As the meal progressed, Clark appeared to relax. He was still careful not to linger as his eyes travelled back and forth from her face to the food on his plate, but he smiled often enough for Lois to conclude he was having a good time.

He didn't know, of course, but Lois figured this was possibly his first ever restaurant date.

When they had finished — with creamy coffees and a cheese platter — Clark paid, and they walked out into the dark evening air.

"Would you like to go for a walk?" he asked.

Lois sensed a little apprehension in his question. Perhaps he wasn't looking forward to their separate rooms, either. "That would be nice," she replied.

His grin was quick. "Are you cold?" Without waiting for a reply, he slipped off his jacket and put it across her shoulders.

"Thanks."

They walked a few steps in silence.

Lois sorted through her mind for another topic. Perhaps she could mention again how wonderful the food had been.

Clark stopped suddenly and turned to her. His hand tightened around hers. His other hand dived into the pocket of his trousers.

"Lois," he said, pulling his hand from his pocket and revealing a ring box. "I love you. Would you marry me?"

Part 10

"Yes."

Clark tensed — from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. "Yes," Lois repeated, caressing him with that amazing smile. "I would love to marry you."

He hauled himself free from the web of shock and sucked in a ragged breath. "You would?"

"Yes," she said — for a third time.

"I ..."

"Did you really think I would say 'no'?" she asked, the pads of her fingers resting lightly on his cheek.

"No." Clark cleared his throat. "No. But I thought you might say it was too quick."

"Do you feel ready for this?"

"I've been ready since the first moment I saw you."

Lois's gaze dropped to his hand. "Is that for me?"

He remembered the ring. With shaky fingers, he eased it from the box and took Lois's left hand. He paused at her first knuckle, unable to believe this was really happening. He glanced into her face, saw her complete happiness, and slid the ring along the length of her finger.

She threw her arms around his waist and kissed him. After a few

seconds, the initial excitement and novelty of kissing as an engaged couple settled into some serious necking. His tongue met hers. Her tongue seared his lips.

Too quickly, it was too much.

Clark disconnected from her mouth and clasped her firmly into his chest. “I love you,” he muttered. “I love you. I love you so much.”

“I love you, too.” She withdrew from his chest and examined the ring. “It’s beautiful, Clark,” she said. “Thank you.”

“The store assistant suggested it,” he admitted.

“When did you buy it?” she asked, her brow furrowing a little in puzzlement. “At the beach? When you went to look for a restaurant?”

“No. When I stopped to get lunch. I saw the jewellery store and hoped I would be able to convince you to stay in the Jeep while I slipped away for a few minutes.”

“Thank you,” she said. “I love it.”

Clark smiled with relief. Lois was wearing his ring. A vitally important piece of his life had been set aright.

“Was that where you saw the photograph of Superman?” she asked.

“Yes.”

Lois laughed, still examining the ring. “That’s kind of funny,” she said. “The store where Superman buys an engagement ring has a photo of him.”

“I’m not Superman,” he said, still feeling dazed. “I’m Clark.”

Teasing glistened in her eyes. “But you look so good in spandex.”

He laughed. “The photograph didn’t show anything below my waist,” he said. “For that, I was grateful. From the scraps of material I found when I undressed, I can imagine what I looked like.”

“So can I,” Lois drawled with a tantalising hitch of her eyebrow that came close to short-circuiting his nerve endings.

Needing a distraction, Clark rearranged his jacket across her shoulders. “What would you like to do now?” he asked.

“Go flying,” she said.

He grinned. That sounded perfect. He deposited the empty ring box in his pocket and lifted her into his arms.

“All clear?” she asked.

He scrutinised the area and stepped away from the street light and against a wall that provided them with a little cover.

He launched them upwards. Once the friendly darkness had enveloped them, he hovered, adjusting his jacket around Lois. “Where to?”

“West,” she said decisively.

“To the beach again?” he asked, thinking that a moonlit walk along the sand sounded idyllic.

“No. To Kansas.”

“Home?”

“Yes. Home.”

“Do you know the way?”

“No,” Lois said. “But I figure you’ve flown home hundreds of times. Head to Wichita, and we’ll try to work it out from there.”

Clark wasn’t sure they would be able to find one small farmhouse in an entire state, but he hadn’t been sure they could fly. Or that he could shave using a mirror.

If nothing else, he’d learned that Lois’s assessment of what was possible was more reliable than his was. He turned them towards the west, flying slowly, not wanting the magic of this to end.

The stars were splayed above them, the earth a shadowy presence below. It felt as if they had entered an expanse that was just for them — him and Lois.

Lois, who had promised to marry him. The realisation rippled through him like just-opened champagne.

“Are you cold?” Clark asked.

“A little,” she said. She slid his glasses down his nose and lifted the jacket from her body. “If you could shoot a little heat in there ...”

He did. “How’s that?”

“Just right.” She giggled. “I’m glad you didn’t forget the temperature controls on that heat thing of yours.”

“Me, too,” he said.

“My feet are freezing,” Lois said.

Clark turned his head and sent a couple of gentle rays into her feet.

“Uhhmmmm,” Lois said, nestling closer against him. “Thank you.”

“Anything for my lady,” he said. He waited for her to respond. When she didn’t, he said, “Is that OK?”

“Can I refer to you as ‘my man?’”

“Any time you want to.”

She smiled. “Then it’s perfectly OK.”

“Does this feel to you as if we are the only people in the world?” Clark asked.

“Yes.”

“It’s amazing how the difference between abject loneliness and total fulfilment is just one person.”

“But not just any one person.”

“No. You. It has to be you.” He kissed her hair. “Lois, I can’t believe you said ‘yes’.”

“I didn’t even have to think about it.”

“Do you need time to think about it?” he asked, trying not to sound worried.

“No. I can’t imagine anything better than being married to you.”

He thought back to the moment of his proposal. “Ahhh ... were you disappointed that I just blurted it out?”

“No.” She chuckled. “I thought it was the perfect proposal.”

“It was a little unconventional,” he said, wishing now that he’d had the equanimity to lead up to his question with some sort of an attempt to express what Lois meant to him.

She laughed, and her body shook in his arms. “Clark,” she said. “We’re *flying*. Flying. Doesn’t that tell you that ‘conventional’ is not a particularly apt description for us?”

That was true.

Clark stopped over the lights of a city. “That’s Wichita,” he said.

“How do you know?” Lois asked. “It’s not as if there are signposts in the sky.”

“I just know,” he said. “I think I must have spent a lot of time learning how to find my way around up here. Maybe it’s like language. I didn’t forget how to speak.”

“If that is Wichita, how do we get home?”

“This way,” Clark said, moving again.

“You can *feel* your way home? Or do you remember?”

“I’m not sure how, but I feel a strong connection to ...” He stopped and looked down. “... to that little farmhouse right there.”

“I can barely see it,” Lois said. “But I trust your instincts. Let’s fly down.”

He dropped them slowly into the area behind the farmhouse.

“This is it,” Lois said excitedly. “This is your home.”

Nothing about it was familiar. Not the path. Not the overrun vegetable garden. Not the door that could use a new coat of paint.

But it was home.

Clark knew just as surely as he’d known Lois was the person who completed his life.

She pulled keys from her bag and unlocked the door. Clark followed her inside. She turned on the light, and they looked around the neat kitchen.

“Recognise it?” Lois asked.

“No.” Clark stepped forward and ran his hand over the time-smoothed surface of the wooden table. “No. I can’t remember anything.”

She slipped her arms around his neck. “Do you want to go upstairs?” she asked. “There might be something about your bedroom that you remember.”

“OK.”

Lois took his hand and led him through a living room and up the stairs. At the top, they faced three closed doors. Lois tightened her grip on his hand and waited.

Clark shook his head. “Nothing.”

“Nothing at all?”

He reached for the doorknob to his left, but snatched back his hand. “What happened in there?”

“That’s the bedroom you had as a child.”

He shook his head more vehemently. “Something happened in there.”

“That’s where I got the scratches,” Lois said quietly.

“In there?” Clark gasped. “In my bedroom?”

“I was using your bedroom at the time.”

“He followed us to this house?”

“Yes.”

“Did we know? Did we suspect he was following us?”

“No,” she said, soothing him with her touch to his arm. “But nothing too bad happened, remember? You came.”

Clark turned his attention to the door on the right. “Is that where I was sleeping?”

“You weren’t here when he broke into the house.”

Unlike his averse reaction to first door, Clark felt drawn to the second. He slowly twisted the knob and pushed open the door. He stepped in, and immediately, a sense of peace settled on him like a cloak.

Lois followed him.

He put his arm across Lois’s shoulder, wanting her closeness. She came willingly into his side, and her arms slid around his waist.

He couldn’t take his eyes from the bed. He should — staring at so it fixedly was hardly acceptable in the circumstances.

He felt *something*.

He couldn’t grasp it, but there was something about that bed.

It couldn’t be the obvious.

It couldn’t be.

“Are you feeling all right?” Lois asked. “Do you remember something?”

Clark tried to smile to alleviate his bewilderment. “I can be honest, can’t I?”

“Yes,” she said. “About everything.”

“I have the strongest feeling that something very good happened in here. And because it feels so good, I figure it has to involve you.” Hot mortification rose within him. “At least, I’m *really* hoping it involved you.”

“It did,” she said, flooding him with relief. She unwound from his arms and shut the door.

Clark heard the catch shoot home. They were alone. In a bedroom. With a bed.

“Did we sleep there?” Clark guessed. “Did we share that bed?”

“Yes. More than once.”

“But we didn’t ...”

“No.”

Clark ballooned his cheeks and let out a slow burst of breath.

“How did that work?” he asked incredulously.

“Separate sleeping bags.”

That pushed it into the realms of possibility. Just.

“What else happened here?” Clark asked as curiosity threatened to devour him.

Lois’s hands skimmed up his neck and burrowed through the hair at the back of his head. Her mouth came to his, and she kissed him.

It was a kiss. Like all the others. Not like all the others. This one was a firestorm.

He reached the edge in record time. A few seconds of her lips, a brush of her tongue ... and his control was slipping like oil in a clenched fist.

Clark backed away, breathing heavily and sinking his hands into the sanctuary of his pockets. “I’m sorry, Lois,” he rasped. “I shouldn’t have let that happen.”

“Let what happen?” she asked.

“I shouldn’t have let us do that. Not here. Not in a bedroom.”

“Clark,” Lois said. “I brought you here. I brought you up the stairs. I closed the door. I kissed you.”

“You planned this?” he said, barely able to get any substance into his voice.

She smiled. “I hoped. I hoped this room would be better than separate motel rooms.”

The avalanche of possibilities broke free and careered through his body. He scrambled for a foothold, a handhold, *any* hold. “Lois.” He dragged in a humungous breath. “Lois, I know this is ridiculously antiquated, but I was raised to believe in the sanctity of marriage.”

“You’ve already asked me to marry you.”

“And as far as I’m concerned, that is a total commitment,” Clark said. “I guess that’s old fashioned, too — the idea of a betrothal being a binding agreement.”

She studied him, a slight smile playing around her mouth and wonderful warmth shining in her eyes. “Be honest with me,” she said. “Do you want this?”

“*Want?*” he breathed. “Stopping was the most difficult thing I have ever had to do. And I can say that with certainty despite having forgotten most of my life.”

Lois stepped away from him, and his hand flinched with the instinct to grab her and keep her close. She went to her bag, pulled out a piece of paper, and held it up for him to see.

It was a marriage certificate.

Certifying the marriage of Lois Lane and Clark Kent.

He took the paper from her and stared at it. According to this document, they had been married for over a week. But the marriage hadn’t been consummated.

“We’re married?” he breathed. “We’re married?”

“Officially.”

“Officially?” Clark gasped. “What does *that* mean?”

“It means that before you went on the mission, Daniel thought it would be easier for me if we were officially married.”

“How could I have forgotten that?” Clark said, aghast.

“You didn’t know about it. You were busy trying to work out the best way to save Planet Earth.”

“This was to look after you if I didn’t return?” he guessed. He could see no other possible reason for a sham marriage. Not when their love was so real.

“Yes,” Lois said. “We only had a very short time. Just hours. This was his way of ensuring that I could have some say in what happened to you ... to your body ... to the farm ... if ... if you didn’t come back to me.”

“So it’s not real.”

“It can be real if you want it to be. Or we can have it annulled. It’s our choice.”

The avalanche gathered momentum. Clark grabbed at a twig of reason. “Lois, Lois ... this isn’t how people get married.”

“Flying isn’t how people celebrate their engagement.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s OK,” Lois said, although disappointment had crept into her lovely brown eyes. “We can wait. We can do it properly ... the wedding ... the -”

“I didn’t mean that,” he cut across her words. “I meant I’m so sorry I sounded as if I don’t want this.”

Her look radiated a hundred questions. *What are we going to do?*

“I don’t know,” Clark said in reply. “I want this. Obviously, I want this. I asked you to marry me.” He took her hand and ran his thumb lightly over the ring. “Everything has happened so quickly. To stop now ... to wait ...”

“Seems wise?”

“No,” he said, lifting his gaze from the ring to her face. “Time doesn’t matter anymore. It’s too flimsy, too ungraspable. I feel as if I’ve known you for a long time — and I’ve loved you for every second of it.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Don’t you want a wedding? Haven’t you dreamed of it? Planned it?”

“Yes,” Lois admitted. “But nothing is left of my dream — except

for the groom, who surpasses every dream I ever had.”

“What do you mean ‘nothing is left’?”

“My friend can’t be at my wedding. I shared my dreams with her. It wouldn’t be the same without her.”

“But you must have other friends? Family? People you want to share your wedding?”

Lois shook her head. “There’s my dad — but ... he ... he isn’t well.” Her smile came sadly. “And when you work as an agent, there isn’t a lot of opportunity to make friendships.”

“What about your uncle? The one who has the restaurant?”

“He would love to cater for my wedding,” Lois said. “But he’s not going to be upset if he doesn’t. If I’m happy, he’ll be happy.”

“Your mother?”

Lois sighed. “My mother is one very good reason to avoid a wedding. She will try to turn it into a huge, meaningless society showpiece — the sort of event where everything that matters gets hopelessly lost. I wouldn’t want to put either of us through that.”

Clark had run out of reasons why they needed to have a wedding. “Lois,” he said. “There is nothing I want more than to be married to you.”

“How do you want it to happen?”

He read the certificate again. “If we accept this, we have ten days to make up for.”

Lois nodded gravely, although her eyes were sparkling with possibility. Her expression decided him. Clark tightened the knot in his tie and straightened his glasses. “Do you want to get married in my jacket?”

She slid it from her shoulders and returned it to him. He put it on, fastened the buttons, lowered his glasses, and warmed her.

Lois smiled her thanks.

Clark took her elbows and guided her to sit down on the bed. Then he dropped to his knee and took her hands in his. “Lois,” he said. “I love you with everything I am. Would you marry me now?”

She smiled. “Now?”

He nodded. “Now. Here.”

“Yes,” she said.

He kissed her hand, slipped the ring from her finger, and then stood, helping her to stand. He scanned the room. “Let’s do it by the window,” he said.

They walked to the window. They stood there, facing each other, their hands joined.

“Lois,” Clark said as his happiness erupted. “I love you.” He forced his mind to search his heart for words to convey its fullness. “My love isn’t measured by days or weeks, but by every beat of my heart. I know my life couldn’t be complete without you, but that’s not the main reason I want to marry you. I want you to be happy. And I trust you when you say that I’m the one who makes you happy.”

Lois smiled as she blinked away the moisture that had gathered in her eyes.

“I love you, Clark,” she said. “I love your honesty. I love your courage. I love how you always think of others first. I love how you are willing to forego what you want if it means doing the right thing. I will love you faithfully for my whole life. I will never leave you.”

“Thank you,” Clark said gravely. “Thank you for accepting me. Thank you for loving me despite the things that set me apart. Thank you for not allowing me to use my differences as barriers. Thank you for capturing my heart — simply by walking into a room.”

“Thank you for trusting me,” Lois said. “Thank you for allowing me to see your big loving heart.”

“I promise you my love will be strong and steadfast,” Clark said. “I promise you I will love you for as long as I live. I promise you my faithfulness. I promise I will try to be there for you — to be everything you need me to be. I promise that your happiness will always be of the utmost importance to me. I will protect you, and love you, and support you. Forever.”

“I promise I will love you every day of my life,” Lois said. “I promise you my faithfulness. I will support you in however you decide

to use your special abilities. And I will never let you forget that it is your heart who defines who you are, not the things you can do.”

Clark positioned the ring at the end of her finger. “This ring signifies our agreement,” he said. “It signifies that we have agreed to love each other and we have promised to live together as husband and wife forever.”

Lois nodded. “I won’t leave you. I promise.”

“And I will never leave you,” Clark said as he pushed the ring along her finger.

She looked up at him with a beaming smile, her tear-doused eyes shining with joy. “That was beautiful,” she said.

“May I kiss my bride?”

“Yes.”

Clark wrapped her in his arms and kissed her — slowly, wanting to savour every second, wanting to remember every touch, every taste of the first few moments of their marriage.

When the kiss ended, he smiled at her. “My wife,” he whispered in awe.

“My husband.”

“What would you like to do?” he asked. “We can go anywhere in the world and to any time of the day — sunset, sunrise, afternoon.

Would you like to go back to the beach?”

“Not the beach,” she said emphatically.

“Oh?” Clark said. “I thought you enjoyed it today.”

“I did,” she said. “But it was kind of torturous, too.”

Yep, it had been torturous.

“But that sort of torture isn’t for newlyweds,” Lois said.

He planted his eyes on her face, refusing to allow them to dart to the bed. “Would you like to stay here?”

“Yes,” Lois said. “Right here. With the door shut.” She reached for his tie and loosened the knot. He felt his throat jump against the collar. She slipped one end of his tie through the knot, and it hung loose. She extended his collar and slid the tie from his neck, tossing it onto a chair. She undid over half of his buttons and pushed open his shirt. Then she leant forward and kissed his cheek.

“Your turn,” she said as she looked up into his eyes.

“My turn?”

“Anything you want. Anything you’ve been thinking about doing, but didn’t feel you could.”

“Anything?”

“Anything.”

He extended his forefinger and lightly traced the length of the middle scratch on her chest. Then he rounded her waist with his hands and gently kissed the top of the scratch.

He dropped a little lower and kissed again. Then he straightened and faced her.

“You wanted to do that?” Lois asked.

“Ever since I first saw them,” he said. “I know kisses don’t really make things better ...”

“Don’t ever underestimate the power of your kisses,” she said.

Clark smiled at her comment, but quickly moved on. “Is it your turn now?” he said, eager to know what she would choose to do.

Lois put her hands on his shoulders and pushed the jacket from his body. She hung it on the back of the chair with slow deliberate movements that threatened to melt his muscles with anticipation. She came back to him, and Clark was sure he had forgotten how to breathe. She took his shirt in both hands and tugged it from his trousers. Then she undid the remainder of his buttons. “Your turn,” she said as her eyes coasted down the strip of bare skin where the flaps of his shirt had fallen apart.

Clark guided her to sit on the bed. He dropped to the floor and removed her shoes. He massaged her ankle, working slowly up her leg, kissing a trail that followed the path of his fingers. He reached her knee and smiled up at her.

Her eyes were closed, her expression languorous. “Your turn,” he said.

Her eyes flickered open. She dropped from the bed and onto her

knees on the floor next to him. She undid the buttons at his cuffs and slipped his shirt from his body. She leant back and stared.

And stared some more.

Then she grasped his shoulders and nuzzled into his neck, dropping kisses like petals from a flower.

Although the effect on him was more akin to a flare than a flower.

Her hands explored his back, his shoulders, his chest, all while her mouth continued to ignite him.

Every single touch set him aflame.

She dropped away, leaving him hopelessly dangling between survival and seduction.

“Your turn,” she said unsteadily.

Clark lifted her onto the bed and returned his attention to her ankles. He repeated what he had already done — lovingly massaging her other calf and following with a trail of lingering kisses.

He reached her knee.

He paused.

A sound came from Lois. A sound that oozed encouragement. He didn’t even need to glance into her face to check that his assumption had been correct.

His fingers edged under the hem of her dress. Very, very slowly, he explored the lower parts of her thigh, visualising how she had looked at the beach when dressed in the shorts.

“You have great legs,” he murmured, dropping a kiss onto her kneecap.

At mid-thigh, he stopped. “Your turn,” he said, barely able to compel his voice to obedience.

Lois stood from the bed and reached behind her body. The zipper whirred.

The shoulders of her dress dropped, lowering the front even more.

Lois looked at him and said, “It’s your turn. But even the slightest movement is going to drop this dress to the ground.”

Clark slowly stood to his feet. His eyes, which had been riveted to her face, dipped lower. He stared at where the deep burgundy of the dress contrasted with the slightly flushed pink of her skin.

Lois wriggled her shoulders — just a tiny movement — and the dress slithered to the floor.

Part 11

“Scotch?”

“No, thanks.”

Eric Menzies slid open his drawer, set a glass on his desk, and half-filled it from the bottle that had also been stashed out of sight. He took a large gulp and swallowed quickly.

“Long day?” Daniel asked, endeavouring to hit exactly the right level of empathy. He wasn’t sure if Eric had slept at all since banging on his door early Tuesday morning, and tiredness and stress were likely to make the higher-up’s mood more volatile than usual.

“The papers, the television news, the radios have been hounding me nonstop,” Eric said, sounding disgruntled. “Answering their calls is about all my PA has done since this story broke. There are only so many ways she can say, ‘Mr Menzies has no comment at this time.’”

Daniel thought he sensed a glimmer of dark humour in Eric’s reply, so he chanced a cautious smile. “I guess that was going to happen once you became the face of this.” He paused, carefully weighing his words. “You handled it with aplomb.”

Eric snorted. “If I had handled it a little better months ago -”

“The assignment was never in your portfolio.”

“No, but Moyné was a part of the assignment, so it was on my radar.” Eric raised his glass to his mouth, but instead of drinking from it, he stared into its amber depths. “I know he killed those two agents.”

Silence fell like a night fog. Eric emptied his glass and refilled it from the bottle. He took a second glass from the drawer, poured from the bottle, and pushed it across the desk.

“Thanks,” Daniel said, feeling coerced into accepting it. “Have you considered another press conference? Someone else could do it — it doesn’t have to be you.”

“We don’t actually know the whereabouts of Superman or his

mental state, so there is very little we can tell them,” Eric said. “Have you had any contact with Lane?”

“No. I thought it best to leave them alone. This is going to be a huge adjustment for Clark. Lois, too.”

Eric nodded slowly. “That isn’t stopping the media wolves from baying for an interview.”

“Let them bay,” Daniel said. “They are not the most important ones here. Neither is the public.”

“We need to find out what happened to his mother,” Eric said.

Daniel had been wondering how he was going to broach the subject of Martha Kent. He had assumed Eric had been too engrossed in the fallout from introducing the world to its resident alien to give much consideration to the missing mother. “Yes,” he said. “Have you had any thoughts?”

“Four guards were there at the beginning,” Eric said. “Shadbolt, Deller, Trask, and Moyné. Reuben O’Brien was the higher up, and Anstruther his deputy.”

“Three of the guards are dead,” Daniel said. “Whatever they knew, they’ve taken to the grave.”

“O’Brien can’t put two coherent sentences together, what Anstruther was told has been shown to be incorrect, and all the records are gone,” Eric said. “Which leaves Shadbolt. Have you ever talked to him about this?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Daniel shifted uncomfortably.

“I figure you and Shadbolt had some sort of pact of silence after they escaped.”

Daniel took a gulp of the Scotch and swallowed, managing to limit its effects to a gruff clearing of his throat.

“Will you ask him?” Eric said, saving Daniel from having to give a detailed account of the final few hours of the alien operation. “Ask him if he remembers anything about those early days. Ask him if Trask mentioned anything at all about what happened to the parents.”

“I’ll do it first thing tomorrow,” Daniel said.

“I’ve had Moyné’s apartment emptied and everything put in secure storage,” Eric said. “Perhaps we could ask for Shadbolt back for a couple of days, and the three of us go through it together.”

“OK.”

“I’m going to see Deller’s widow tomorrow morning,” Eric said.

“You think she might know something?”

“I contacted Mrs Deller before Rhodes published the first story — the one about the alien’s capture and subsequent death. As I suspected, she had been told the vicious alien had slaughtered her husband.”

In all the turmoil of an approaching asteroid, Scardino hadn’t taken even a moment to consider the full ramifications of Clark going public. “How did she react when the story changed to the alien being alive and free ... and our only hope?”

“While you were scuttling to Smallville, I went to Mrs Deller and told her the truth.”

“That her husband had been killed by someone other than the alien?”

“Yes. That as an agency, we had failed in protecting her husband — not from the dangers of a prisoner, but from the dangers of one of our own agents.”

Daniel wondered if he’d mentioned that the killer had been his wife’s nephew, but decided that there was little to be gained from antagonising Eric Menzies. “What about Mrs Bortolotto?”

“He wasn’t married. His mother passed away about two years ago. He was an only child.”

Had Bortolotto’s death contributed to the passing of his mother?

“It’s like a pebble in a pond,” Eric said as he sadly swirled his Scotch around his glass. “One man’s evil — sometimes it seems the effects just go on and on.”

“It’s easy to forget in this job,” Daniel said. “Death happens, we move on, and we rarely take the time to reflect on the devastation suffered by the family ... friends ... a community.”

Eric emptied his glass and reached for the bottle again. He tightened the lid and replaced it in his desk drawer. “Mrs Deller is being well-looked after,” he said. “It doesn’t bring back her husband, but she doesn’t want financially.”

Money seemed to be the great panacea of how the agency fixed its mistakes.

“When I see her tomorrow, I’ll ask her if she remembers her husband saying anything about the alien’s mother,” Eric said.

“But you won’t mention her name?” The question was out before Daniel could stop it. He held his breath in anticipation of a sharp retort.

“No,” Eric said calmly. “But — like everything else in this mess — it will have to be handled carefully.”

Perhaps Eric hadn’t slept since realising the escaped alien could save the world — he seemed to have done a lot of damage control in a short time.

“We have to give Clark some answers,” Eric said with a deep sigh. “We owe him that much.”

“I had wondered if his mom would find a way to come forward,” Daniel said.

“Yeah. I did, too,” Eric said. “But that assumes she *can* come forward.”

“If she’d been told that her son had died, she could have made a new life.”

“That would be the best possible outcome.”

Daniel jolted upright in his chair. “You don’t think it’s possible she will return home, do you? To Kansas?”

“I’ve been hoping you would hear from Lane with exactly that news,” Eric admitted. “If Mrs Kent has seen the newspaper reports, she’ll know her son’s identity is being kept a secret. She’s not going to publicly announce she is Martha Kent, Superman’s mother.”

“There are some pretty big assumptions there,” Daniel said wryly. “That she is alive. That she has access to a news service. That she isn’t being kept against her will.”

“I’ve had a couple of the admin staff check the women’s prisons and every institution such as nursing homes where some of the residents are restrained from leaving for their own safety,” Eric said. “Every name can be substantiated.”

“In Metropolis?”

“New Troy. And the neighbouring states.”

“Is it worth going further?”

“They’ll keep working on it tomorrow.”

Eric was serious about finding Clark’s mother, Daniel thought with growing respect. He was overseeing it personally, not farming it out to a junior.

“I figure they won’t have arrived in Kansas yet,” Eric said, draining his already empty glass.

“They have no reason to hurry,” Daniel said. “And I’m sure Lois has realised that reintroducing Clark into his community is not going to be straightforward. Not while they know more about his past than he does.”

“You have a lot of faith in her.”

“She saved our hides,” Daniel said.

“Yes, she did,” Eric said. He tapped his glass lightly on the desk.

“Do you think there is any future to the Superman thing?”

“As in Clark getting back into the costume and helping out again?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know,” Daniel said. “But I can assure you he won’t do it unless Lois encourages and supports him.”

“You think she’s *that* important to him?”

“I don’t think there’s a way to quantify how important Lois is to Clark. Or Superman. They both need her.”

“He’s a lucky man,” Eric said.

“Yeah,” Daniel agreed. “And that’s despite everything Trask and Moyné did to him.”

Lois listened to their combined breaths slowly return to normal.

She was tucked between Clark’s arm and his body, availing herself of his bare chest to use as a pillow. Her arm was draped languidly across his stomach, her fingers skating over the warm skin that stretched tightly around his ribs.

Clark’s chest lifted suddenly with a chuckle.

Lois responded with a lazy laugh. “Good, huh?”

“Better than good,” he said. His voice droned through his chest, magnifying its sexiness to crazy levels.

She could feel the depths of his relaxation and contentment as his fingers drew abstract patterns on her shoulder. Now was the time. She risked shattering the current mood, but there would be no better opportunity to do this. “Clark?”

“Yes, honey?” he said in a husky voice that sorely tempted her to veer from her chosen path.

Lois refocused. Now was exactly the right time. Clark needed her to do this. “I’d like to tell you a story,” she said.

“OK,” he said, although she heard a trace of surprise in his tone.

Her hand slid up his ribcage and to his neck, resting it there as the side of her thumb stroked the skin near his ear lobe.

“Are you sure you want to *tell* a story?” Clark asked as his hand captured hers. “Perhaps it would be more fun to act it out.”

Lois chuckled. “I’ll tell the story first, then ...”

His laughter rolled through his chest again. “What is this story about?”

“It’s about a mom and a dad,” Lois said. “And their baby.”

“Lo-is?” he said, sounding serious, but she could hear his smile.

“Are you trying to tell me something?”

She giggled and determinedly applied her mind to finding the way through this particular minefield. “No,” she said. “The parents are not us.”

“Pity,” he said, his fingers continuing to caress her shoulder.

“This mom and dad faced a terrible decision.”

“They did?”

“Yes. They knew their planet was going to be destroyed, killing all life on it.”

A smattering of tension cinched through Clark’s chest. “Is this about the asteroid?”

“No. This is about another planet.”

His breathing stopped. His muscles tensed. “Is *that* what makes me different? I’m from another planet?”

Lois lifted from his chest and smiled into his slightly widened eyes. “Yes,” she said. “Your natural parents packed you into a tiny spaceship and sent you to Earth — hoping you would look enough like the rest of us that you could have a chance of a regular life.”

“They died?” he asked, his voice weighed down with sadness.

“I believe so,” Lois said, stroking his jaw. “Jonathan and Martha Kent found your spaceship, brought you home, kept your secret, and raised you as their own son.”

“They must have been such good people,” Clark said.

“They were,” Lois said.

“How did they cope with all of my differences?”

“I don’t think the differences manifested themselves straight away,” Lois said. “But from what you have told me, your parents accepted you just the way you were.”

“I owe them everything. My life. My name.”

“They loved you very much. And you loved them.”

“I ... I wish I had some memories of them,” Clark said.

“Perhaps being here on the farm will help you remember,” Lois said, keeping her focus on this minefield and refusing to think ahead to the others that were going to have to be confronted eventually. “You have plenty of time.”

Clark managed a wan smile. “So ... I’m not human?”

“Not in the sense of Earth being your home planet,” Lois said lightly. “You come from the planet of Krypton — so that makes you Kryptonian.”

His eyebrows pulled together. “I guess that makes me an alien,” he said.

Lois wasn't going to admit to that. "It makes you Kryptonian," she said firmly.

"But this is Planet Earth," Clark said. "So, here, I'm an alien."

"I don't want you to obsess about this."

He grinned suddenly, easing Lois's tension. "And you figured that, having already blown my mind with your wifely attentions, you could slip in another bombshell and hope it would hardly cause a ripple through my torpid tranquillity?"

Lois matched his grin, daring to hope that this would be all right. "You got me."

"Your timing is impeccable," Clark said. "I can't feel isolated — not while we're like this. It just isn't possible."

"So, you're all right? You're not going to fixate on being different?"

"Whatever I am, it didn't stop me from marrying the prettiest of all Earth women." His grin came again, doused with suggestion. "And it didn't prevent us from ... ah, verifying our compatibility."

She responded to his smile, but hauled her attention back to ensuring that Clark was going to be OK. "Ah ... do you have any more questions?"

"Yep."

He didn't sound terribly perturbed. "Go ahead," she said. "Ask."

"Would you like to make love with me again? Now?"

Lois felt her smile burst forth. "You've had enough of the story-telling?" she said.

"Well," he said with a muscle-melting smile, "tomorrow, we have to continue driving the Jeep towards Kansas. You can tell me more stories, then. But now ..."

"Now, you have other ideas for better use of our time."

"Precisely," Clark said.

Lois grinned and lowered her hand from his neck and onto his chest. "Well, Mr Krypton," she said in a low, evocative tone, "this Earth woman thinks it would be wise to check out our compatibility again. Just to make sure the first time wasn't an anomaly."

Clark didn't agree. He didn't disagree, either. He spread his hands around her head and kissed her with such heat that every other thought combusted in the fire of his passion.

The intensity ebbed away, leaving behind a silky layer of complete contentment.

He had everything.

He was an alien.

A planetary foreigner.

He had Lois.

She had married him.

She loved him.

She had shared her body with him. Willingly. Naturally. Forging unbreakable bonds between them.

And then, with total acceptance as her platform, she had revealed the truth of his past.

Clark touched a kiss to the top of her head. "Are you asleep, honey?"

"No," she replied. "Just very, very sated."

Clark felt a ripple of combined relief and humour. "That's good," he said. Then he added, "'Cause I don't think I'd done this before today."

Lois lifted her head with a burst of energy that seemed to come from nowhere and grinned at him. "I never would have guessed," she said.

"Hadn't I told you?"

"You once said that you didn't have much experience."

"So ... I was a virgin," Clark said, completely unsure how he felt about that.

"Not anymore," Lois said with what sounded a lot like triumph.

Clark laughed, but it was stifled as he reflected on the enormity of what she had done for him. "Thank you," he whispered, brushing back her hair with a light stroke.

She shuffled up his body and kissed him. "Do you want to go back to our motel rooms?"

"No," he said, remembering how much he had dreaded the separation from Lois.

"I couldn't believe it when you got *two* rooms," she said. "What a way to crush a woman's hopes."

"I suppose we do have to go back and get the Jeep?" he said, wanting nothing more than to stay here with Lois indefinitely.

"Yeah, but not now. It's not even midnight yet."

"You should get some sleep. I'll wake you before sunrise."

"Are you OK?" Lois asked. "With the other-planet thing? You're not going to lie here all night and let it prey on your mind, are you?"

If he lay awake all night with Lois draped over him, Clark was sure he wouldn't be thinking too much about where he had been born. "You mean the fact that I'm an alien?" He had meant to sound serious, but his mood just wasn't suited to solemnity.

"I mean the fact that you're a married alien with a hot-hot-hot body and a wife who intends to make good use of it."

Alien or not, how could he be anything other than completely happy? "I'm married to you," Clark said. "My body is slaked with pleasure, my heart is overwhelmed with love, and my mind is so full of you, there is no room for anything else."

"Good," Lois said with a satisfied smile. She kissed him and snuggled back down the bed, resting her head on his chest.

"Goodnight, my love."

"Goodnight," he said. "My darling wife."

~ Friday ~

Lois's cell phone rang about an hour after they'd left the motel where the newly married couple had ostensibly spent the night in separate rooms. She saw the caller ID and smiled. "Hi, Uncle Mike," she said.

"Hi, Lois, love," he said cheerily. "How was dinner the other night?"

"Delicious," Lois said. "Thank you."

"Are you still in Metropolis?"

"No. It was a flying visit," Lois said with a smiling glance towards Clark, who was driving. "I had a couple of work commitments that needed my attention."

"Were you able to see your dad?"

"No. I called Ronny at the home during the asteroid scare, and she told me they were playing videos on the television and keeping all newspapers out of the home. They'd decided it wasn't worth upsetting the residents."

"Yeah. And it was all over in just a few hours, thanks to Superman turning up and saving the day." Lois could hear the admiration in her uncle's voice. "I don't suppose you got to meet him?"

"I'm in the travel business, Uncle Mike," Lois said with a smile. "I don't think Superman needs to book a ticket if he wants to get from A to B."

Uncle Mike's hearty laugh reverberated down the phone line. "Well, whoever he is and wherever he came from, it was a great day for us when he chose Earth as his new home."

"Yes," Lois agreed, again looking at Clark. He shot her a smile.

"We are very lucky he's here."

"Were you OK?" Uncle Mike asked. "I tried to call you after the first press conference, but I couldn't get through."

"Yeah," Lois said. "I was with Clark."

"Clark?" Uncle Mike asked, drawing out the name to emphasise his interest. "I assume the other meal was for this Clark I keep hearing about?"

"Yes," Lois said.

"Is it serious? With him?"

"Do you consider marriage to be serious?"

"Marriage?" Uncle Mike exclaimed. "You're engaged? Lois, love, that's wonderful news. Clark is one lucky man."

"He keeps telling me that," Lois said with a smile to her husband.

“But we’re not just engaged, we’re married.”

“Married? Lois, when did this happen?”

“A few days ago. But then the asteroid happened, and things got hectic at work, and Clark and I have been trying to juggle his farm in Kansas and my job in Metropolis.”

“I must be getting old,” Uncle Mike said. “Suddenly, I’m finding it hard to keep up.”

“We’ll be back in Metropolis tomorrow,” Lois said, with a questioning glance towards Clark. He nodded. “We’ll go and see Dad then. Would it be all right if you didn’t tell him our news? I’d like to tell him myself tomorrow.”

“Sure, Lois,” Uncle Mike said amiably. “And is there any chance you would have a few minutes to pop into the restaurant? I’d love to meet the young man who has captured your heart. Perhaps we could have lunch together.”

After another glance to Clark and seeing no overtly negative reaction to the suggestion, Lois said, “We’d like that, Uncle Mike. Thanks. And I still have an account I need to settle.”

“Ah, don’t worry about that,” her uncle said. “Consider it a wedding present.”

“OK, thanks.”

“Before you go, I did call for a reason,” Uncle Mike said. “Ronny has suggested your dad might be able to manage an electric wheelchair.”

“You mean he could get around by himself?” Lois said as a whole range of possibilities floated through her mind. “That would be so wonderful for him.”

“We can’t get too excited yet,” Uncle Mike cautioned. “A stroke can affect a person’s spatial perception. He might find it too difficult to control the chair.”

“Oh,” Lois said.

“I agreed to the salesman coming later today with a range of chairs. Ronny says we should know fairly quickly whether it’s going to be possible for Sam to manage one of them.”

Although the electric wheelchair might not be a reality for her dad, just the suggestion of it had altered her mindset a little. “Hey, Uncle Mike?” Lois said. “Would it be possible for Dad to come to lunch with us tomorrow? Could we get one of those special cabs to collect him? It would do him good to get out of the nursing home for an hour or so.”

“When the weather’s been nice, I’ve been taking him for walks,” Uncle Mike said. “He enjoys that a lot.”

“I haven’t eaten with him since the stroke,” Lois said, feeling a bit ashamed of her admission. “How much help does he need? Would that embarrass him in public?”

“I’m sure we could choose something from the menu that would be easy for him,” Uncle Mike said. “A sandwich or something like that.”

“Can we do it?” Lois said, feeling her excitement rise. “Would that be OK?”

“I’ll ask him today,” Uncle Mike said. “If it doesn’t go so well with the wheelchairs, it might give him something to look forward to.”

“But if it does go well with the wheelchairs, we’ll have two things to celebrate,” Lois said.

“A family lunch,” Uncle Mike said happily. “And we even get a new member to welcome. This is going to be good.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Lois said. “We’ll go to the nursing home before lunch.”

“Great,” he said. “Don’t worry about anything. I’ll book the cab and clear everything with Ronny.”

“Thanks, Uncle Mike,” Lois said. “See you tomorrow.” She disconnected the call and smiled across to Clark. “You heard that?”

He looked a little uncomfortable. “Yeah,” he said. “I tried not to listen.”

“It’s OK,” Lois said. “It’s easier if you listen — then I don’t have to repeat everything.”

“You don’t have any more secrets from me?” Clark asked with a smile.

“A few,” she said, trying to make it sound alluring rather than alarming. “But nothing that need stop you listening to my conversation with my uncle.”

Clark held out his hand towards her, and she slipped her hand into his. “Do you want to spend all day in a vehicle?” he asked.

“No,” Lois said, glad they had moved away from the subject of secrets. “This is our honeymoon.”

“So I was thinking ...”

“Go on,” Lois said, drooling ever so slightly over the mysterious smile on Clark’s face.

“We could park this Jeep somewhere and get on back to Kansas. I’m sure there’s work I should be doing on the farm — and if I get tired — you know, after the trauma of banging into an asteroid — I could stumble up the stairs to the bedroom and maybe ... my wife could, ah ... find a way to reinvigorate me.”

Lois chuckled. “Are you propositioning me, Mr Kent?”

“Yes,” he declared with a wide grin. “So ... want to go home with me, honey?”

“What are we going to do with the Jeep?”

“Well, it would be useful to have it to get around Metropolis tomorrow. After dark tonight, I could come back for it and take it to the garage at your dad’s place.”

“Good idea,” Lois said. “His car is at the farm, so eventually, we should probably swap them back, but Dad’s not going to need a vehicle for a while.”

“Did he have a stroke?”

Lois nodded. “Sorry,” she said. “I forgot that I hadn’t told you.”

“You said he was unwell.”

“I was away on an assignment. I didn’t even know it had happened until a few weeks after the fact. Then when I got home, I discovered he was paralysed down one side of his body, confined to bed, and unable to speak.”

“Aw, Lois,” Clark said softly. “I’m so sorry.”

“But since then, he’s made a lot of improvements,” Lois said brightly. “He is learning to sign as a means of communication and now he might be able to get an electric wheelchair. He’s a lot happier, he’s working hard at his therapies, he can read again, and he enjoys doing jigsaw puzzles.” She waited to see if Clark responded to the mention of the jigsaw puzzles.

“It will be nice if he can have lunch with us tomorrow,” he said.

“A lot of his improvement began after you made him a tray for the jigsaw puzzle,” Lois said.

“I did?”

“Yeah. I had the idea, I gave you a rough description, and you did the rest.”

“Did I use a hammer and nails? Like a regular guy?” Clark said.

“Or did I use some alien skills?”

“I think you sanded it back with your eyes,” Lois said with a smile.

“Ah, just like the shaving.”

“Yeah.”

Clark pulled into a densely treed roadside stop. “Do you think the Jeep will be safe here until nightfall?”

“You’re serious about wanting to get back to Smallville?” Lois said, trying to formulate a plan to deal with the difficulties inherent in Clark having contact with people who knew he had seven missing years.

“Yes,” he said, reaching over and kissing her cheek. “I’m eager to start our lives. Together — as husband and wife. Once we’re there, you can work on your novel if that’s what you want to do. And we can begin to plan about our future.”

“You don’t want to keep driving? Think of it as a honeymoon?”

“Honey,” Clark said, smiling through his ‘consider-this’ expression. “We can have a vacation anywhere in the world. At any time. But this is our honeymoon, and all we need is a readily accessible bed.” He looked around the Jeep, appearing to search for something. “As a honeymoon venue,” he said with a wink, “this is

sadly lacking.”

“OK,” Lois said, smiling despite her gut rapping its warnings through the corridors on her brain.

Clark leapt from the driver’s seat and went to her door to open it. “Let’s go home,” he said as he scooped her into his arms.

Lois kissed him, and they flew into the early morning sky.

Part 12

Twenty minutes after Lois and Clark had arrived at the farmhouse, a haphazard trail of clothes extended from the back door, through the living room, and up the stairs — where a breathy silence had fallen in the bedroom.

“Wow,” Lois said. “What have you done to me? I can’t keep my hands off you.”

Clark had noticed that. “I’m not complaining,” he said.

“I thought you said we were coming back to Smallville to — and I quote — ‘work on the farm.’”

“That *was* work,” Clark protested. “See how breathless we are.”

“Breathless or not, you should get out of bed, try to locate your clothes, and get your cute butt into the barn to see to your neglected animals or crops or whatever else you have out there.”

His chuckle oozed contentment. “And what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to drive into Smallville for some supplies,” Lois said. “And then I’m going to open my file on the computer and see if I still think my novel is worth writing.”

“What is your novel about?”

“Are you stalling?” she asked, eyeing him suspiciously. “Or are you genuinely interested?”

“I’m interested,” he claimed. “And I’m stalling. This is my honeymoon, and my wife has banished me to the barn.” He tried to look suitably crestfallen.

Ignoring his plea, she said, “It’s about two agents — one male, one female.”

“Any chemistry?”

“Tons of it,” Lois said with a grin. “But he’s a little bit green, and she’s a little bit hardened from years of experience, and they’re thrown together on a difficult assignment.”

“Can he fly?” Clark asked.

Lois swatted his chest. “I marry men who fly,” she said. “I don’t write about them.”

“Are they going to sleep together?”

“Eventually,” Lois said. “After I’ve put them through a few realistic impediments.”

“What about unrealistic ones?”

“Maybe those, too.”

“Poor guy,” Clark said with feeling.

Lois scraped her fingertip across his chest. “Would you get my clothes?” she asked. “Please?”

He grinned. “And if I don’t?”

“Well, I guess I’ll have to get them myself.”

He waggled his eyebrows, courtesy of an overactive imagination, and then slowly stood from the bed. At the bedroom door, he glanced back and saw appreciation scrawled vividly across Lois’s face. Marvelling at just how wonderful life was, Clark went out of the bedroom in search of the scattered clothing.

“Could I speak with the sheriff, please?” Lois asked the deputy at the desk.

“Who can I tell her is here?”

“Lois Lane.”

The deputy retreated into the depths of the sheriff’s office, and a few seconds later, Rachel Harris appeared. “Were you able to find out anything about Martha?” she asked.

“No good news,” Lois said, steadily meeting the sheriff’s gaze. “In fact, our information strongly indicates that she passed away around the same time as Jonathan.”

Rachel’s face crinkled. “Oh, no,” she said. “I was hoping the news would be better for Clark.”

“Clark is understandably devastated,” Lois said. “It brought back much of the trauma of what he has endured, and everything has compounded.”

“What happened?”

“He needs some time and space,” Lois said. “The townspeople were so supportive of him when he first returned home. I believe we have you to thank for that.” She smiled tentatively. “That’s why I’ve come to you now.”

“What can I do to help Clark?”

“It is imperative that no one mention his parents or their passing,” Lois said. “No condolences, regardless of how well-intentioned. And no mention of the missing seven years. Clark just wants to leave the past behind and move into his new life.”

Rachel nodded, although Lois could see that the sheriff wasn’t completely convinced about glossing over the passing of a much-loved Smallville resident. “OK,” she said eventually. “I’ll put the word out.”

“And I haven’t had a chance to say this to you before now — but thank you for your help on the night Neville Moyne broke into our home.”

The slight flutter of Rachel’s eyelids indicated she hadn’t missed Lois referring to the farmhouse as *our* home. “So you intend to stay in Smallville?” she asked evenly.

“For as long as Clark wants to.”

“You’re wearing a ring,” Rachel noted, her eyes diving to Lois’s hand.

“Yes.”

“Are you and Clark engaged?”

“Actually, we’re married,” Lois said. “We decided to make it official while we were in Metropolis.”

“Did you marry before or after he found out about his mom?”

“Is that important?”

“I think Clark would be particularly vulnerable after hearing the bad news about his mom,” Rachel said.

“He asked me to marry him,” Lois replied. “He felt that he would benefit from some stability in his life. Hence, his desire to be married without delay.”

Rachel stared at Lois for a long moment. “For Clark’s sake, I’m willing to trust you,” she said. “But you should understand that if I ever believe you are using him or taking advantage of his situation, I will do everything I can to limit the damage you cause.”

“Clark has been damaged a lot,” Lois said. “But not by me. I love him. I am trying to help him build a new life.”

“I hope so,” Rachel said. “Because Clark deserves some good luck.”

“Yes,” Lois said.

“I’ll ensure he isn’t pressured,” Rachel said. “And I’ll keep his parents and the seven missing years off the agenda.”

“Thank you.”

“Before the week is out, I’ll be visiting Clark to see for myself that he’s OK.”

Lois nodded and walked briskly out of the sheriff’s office.

Clark stopped in the middle of the barn and looked through the dust haze. Even without memories, he should be feeling something. If he was a farmer, and this was his farm, he must have spent a lot of the past decade right here.

When had his father died?

Lois had said both of his parents had died after his childhood, but enough years had passed to assuage his initial grief.

Clark took a couple of hesitant steps forward. There was *something* here. Something vague. Something lurking just beyond his grasp. Something he couldn’t define.

Was there something else Lois hadn’t told him about his past? Something significant? Did it have anything to do with his parents? His adoptive parents.

But this nebulous cognisance wasn’t just about Martha and Jonathan Kent. This went back further. It was something important.

But although he grappled to the limits of his memory, he couldn't latch onto anything tangible.

For the first time since coming to consciousness in the room at the EPRAD base, frustration rasped through his memory-swept mind.

With a sigh and a silent reminder that he had promised Lois he wouldn't stress about the effects of his amnesia, Clark began sorting through the tools in a trunk in the corner of the shed.

He picked up a hammer and slid his hand along its burnished handle. Its head bore the dents of fierce and repeated contact. He closed his fist around the wood and tested its feel. It was a good hammer — finely balanced, well weighted.

He must have used it. So why had it been packed away in a trunk? And why couldn't he remember it?

The important memories would come back.

They would.

And if they didn't, it meant they weren't important.

Certainly, nothing was important enough to break his promise to Lois.

His wife.

She loved him.

Forty-eight hours ago, he had begun a new life with nothing.

Now he had Lois. Forever.

He had a home.

Clark went to the barn door and leant against the frame, slowly panning the trees, the driveway, the distant road, and the farmhouse.

Nothing made any sense. The front garden . . . half of it bore evidence of a harsh prune; the other half looked as overgrown as a jungle.

But both halves indicated that someone had once tended this garden.

His mother?

If she had loved and cared for the plants in her garden, why had he allowed it to deteriorate to such a neglected condition?

What could have been more important than honouring her memory?

And it wasn't just the gardens. The barn had been repaired recently — but it was in dire need of a new coat of paint.

Tufts of weeds grew up the sides of the barn. Why hadn't he found a few moments to pull them? Him, in particular? After all, he could fly across the continent in just a few minutes.

So why did his farm — his inheritance from his beloved parents who had given a stranger a home — appear as if it had been someone's second or third priority for a long time?

When he'd asked Lois how they had met, she had told him about catching the bullet fired at her. But she hadn't given him a convincing explanation for how a farmer from Kansas had been there to catch the bullet.

Clark smiled suddenly as two stray threads connected in his mind.

He had worked for the agency, too. And for longer than he had previously assumed. That explained why his farm looked a little rundown — perhaps he'd deliberately allowed it to deteriorate because the locals knew he wasn't here much.

Why had Lois been hesitant to tell him? Was it because of the secrecy required? Was she worried he would inadvertently divulge confidential details?

Why had they decided to return to Smallville? Had — as she'd said — Lois needed a change after the death of her partner? And had he taken the opportunity to suggest they return to the farm together to give her time to heal and their relationship time to become established?

That also seemed reasonable.

Clark turned around and moved back into the barn, feeling more satisfied with his conclusions. But there was still *something*. Secrets lurked here — he could feel them.

Lois's agency cell phone rang a mile and a half from home. She pulled the Buick onto the side of the road and saw that the call was

from Scardino.

"Hi," she said. "What's happening? Have you found out anything about the missing person?"

"No. But I talked with Eric last night, and he has a number of ideas to follow up."

"Follow up? I expected more than that. It's been a couple of days."

"He thinks we should question the people who were there at the start. He's meeting with the widow as we speak."

Deller's widow? Or Bortolotto's? Probably Deller — Bortolotto hadn't come until after Deller's death. "Do you think Eric's committed to this?"

"Absolutely. And he's dampened down some flares that didn't even occur to me."

"Ah," Lois said. Until now, she hadn't thought about them either. "The family would have been told the assumed details of the death."

"Exactly. But Eric contacted her."

"I wonder if he told her the identity of the real murderer."

"He said it was a fellow agent," Daniel said. "How's your friend doing?"

"All right," Lois said, smothering vivid memories so they couldn't seep into her tone.

"Has he remembered anything?"

"No. But I've told him some."

"Was that wise?"

"I didn't have much choice considering some of the things he started doing."

"Oh," Daniel said. "*Those* sort of things."

"Yeah."

"Has he remembered anything about the seven years?"

"No. Nothing. And that's how I want it to stay. For as long as possible. I even told him they are both deceased. There was no way to explain a disappearance."

"I wondered how you were going to deal with that," Daniel said.

"Does he remember how he sustained the concussion?"

"A little."

"So he knows about the costume?"

"Yes."

"The media want a press conference."

"I'll get back to you," Lois said, wondering how Clark would respond to that request.

"OK."

"And Daniel?"

"Yes?"

"You talked about an annulment?"

"Yes."

"We don't want it. Just leave things as they are."

Lois heard the gush of his breath, but she was unable to determine if it had been driven by surprise or some other emotion.

"Congratulations," Daniel said. "I'm very happy for both of you."

"You are?"

"Yes," he said, sounding sincere. "Please pass on my best wishes."

"OK," she said. "Thanks."

"Call me if there is any possibility of a public appearance."

"OK." Lois hung up the phone, feeling as if a web was closing in around her.

Clark would be Superman. He would be. It just wasn't within him to ignore someone who needed his help. The call would come again, she was sure of that. The next time there was a disaster or some other incident that threatened human life, they would turn to Superman for help.

It would be better if — when that happened — Superman had already made a non-emergency appearance.

An interview would be the perfect vehicle. Menzies would be there to protect the secrets — Superman's other identity, the atrocities of the past seven years, and the fact that the sum total of the superhero's memories spanned less than three days.

But . . . Lois sighed, deeply regretting having told Clark that his

mom had passed away. She still couldn't see any way of explaining a mother of unknown whereabouts without getting way too close to the cell, but her gut was nervy about the explosion that surely had to come.

Would Clark remember? Would Scardino call to say they had located Martha?

Would Clark be upset that she had lied to him?

Would he understand? He wouldn't — not if she told him only part of the story. But how could she tell him about his missing mother without also having something plausible to explain why he hadn't scoured the planet in search of her?

Clark still needed more time.

But every time Superman appeared in public, every time he featured in a news report, there was a chance Martha Kent would see it. That had been one of the foremost reasons Lois had encouraged Clark go public with his abilities when they'd first been told about the asteroid.

An interview now would help prepare him for the next time someone needed his help. Martha — assuming she was still alive — needed to know her son was free. Reuniting Martha and Clark was of the utmost importance for both of them.

But would Clark — carefree, untroubled Clark — survive the pain of remembering? What would that do to his vulnerable self-confidence?

What would her lie do to their marriage?

Eventually, Clark would know about the cell. It just wasn't realistic to think he would never remember ... that no one would ever inadvertently say something ... that there would never be any news of his mother.

Lois had to tell him. She had to tell him *before* any of those things happened. The timing was critical. She needed to secure as much time as possible for Clark, but each extra day, each extra hour, risked something detonating the bomb.

For now, she had to continue helping him to rebuild his life. She had to encourage him to do the interview. That would begin to establish Superman — in both his mind and that of the public — as alien and friend. The lunch with her family was also important. Clark needed to see himself as part of a larger group — a family. And there was the community of Smallville, too. Rachel's visit, although potentially hazardous, would help Clark reconnect with the fabric of his life — even if he had no specific memories.

Lois pulled onto the road, and two hundred yards later, she turned into the driveway before the Kent farm.

"Lois! How lovely to see you," Maggie Irig said as Lois stopped the Buick in front of the house. "Wayne said you and Clark were back." She stopped, and anxiety filled her expression. "Did you find out anything about Martha?"

Lois put her hand on the other woman's arm. "It's not good news," she said.

"Oh, no," Maggie said, covering her mouth with her hand.

"We don't know for sure," Lois said. "But it seems there is very little chance that Martha is still alive."

"You don't have a body?"

"No. And there won't be a memorial service."

"But —" Maggie searched Lois's face. "How is Clark?"

"This has been a bit of a setback for him," Lois said. "What he wants most is to move on. He doesn't even want people offering their condolences."

"I guess he needs time."

"Yes, he does. He has suffered a lot."

"Will you come in for a cup of tea?" Maggie asked.

"I would love to," Lois said, a little surprised that it was true. "But I've been to Smallville, and I don't like leaving Clark alone for long."

"I understand," Maggie said. "Perhaps one day soon?"

"Yes. I'd like that. Thank you."

"Thank you for coming and telling me about Martha."

"I know you were a special friend of Martha's. And you and

Wayne were wonderful in looking after the farm while Clark was away."

"We miss them," Maggie said, dabbing her eyes with the corner of her apron. "They were the best of neighbours."

Lois put a gentle hand on Maggie's shoulder. "I have to go," she said with real regret.

"You get back to Clark," Maggie said, raising a smile. She grasped Lois's left hand. "Is that what I think it is?"

Lois smiled. "What do you think it is?"

"An engagement ring."

"You're partially right."

"How can you be partially engaged?" Maggie said with a chuckle.

"Clark asked me to marry him," Lois said. "I accepted his proposal, and he gave me this ring."

"So you're engaged?"

Lois smiled with sweet memories. "Actually, we're married," she said. "But we haven't gotten around to buying the wedding rings yet."

"You're married?" Maggie squeaked. "When? Where did you have the ceremony?"

"It was very small," Lois said. "My father isn't well. My closest friend died recently. And Clark's parents obviously couldn't be there. We decided something quiet would be the best option for us."

Maggie squeezed Lois's hand. "I'm so pleased," she said. "I'm so pleased for both of you."

"Thank you."

"Would it be all right if I congratulate Clark the next time I see him?"

"Yes," Lois said. "I'm sure he would appreciate that."

"And perhaps — in a few weeks, after Brett's wedding — we could have a wedding party for you and Clark."

"Perhaps," Lois said. "We'll see how Clark is feeling."

Maggie threw her arms around Lois and placed a motherly kiss on her cheek. "If you or Clark ever need anything, please ask us," she said.

"There is something," Lois said.

"What can I do?"

"How do I know when an apple pie is cooked?"

"When it's nicely browned on the top."

"How long should it take?"

"The oven should be about 350 when the pie goes in. Then it should take about forty-five minutes."

"Thanks," Lois said.

"Martha Kent made the best apple pies I ever tasted," Maggie said.

"That's why I am going to try to make one for Clark."

Maggie smiled with encouragement. "What a lovely thought."

"I burned the last one," Lois admitted.

"That's easy to do," Maggie said. "I've done it myself."

Lois slipped into the Buick, waved to Maggie Irig, and drove back towards the road, her anticipation at seeing Clark not able to smother the dire warnings of her gut.

Clark heard the sound of a motor approaching. He stepped out from the barn and looked in the direction of the sound. The Buick was moving quickly.

He lowered his glasses and focused his eyes. He could see Lois clearly despite her still being half a mile away. She looked preoccupied, her fingers tapping impatiently on the steering wheel.

Clark broke into a jog and ran down the driveway, arriving at the gate at the same time as the Buick. He leapt over the gate and went to the driver's window. "Hi, honey," he said, feasting his eyes on her.

"Hi, yourself," she said, breaking into a smile.

Perhaps she had been worried about leaving him alone. "I missed you," Clark said.

"I was only gone for an hour."

"I still missed you."

"I missed you, too," Lois said. "Did anyone come?"

"No," he said. "But we had already decided that if someone came,

I would fly away. There was no need for you to worry.”

Her smile dissolved the final traces of her anxiety. “Are you going to open the gate for me?”

“Sure.”

A few minutes later, they were carrying the supplies into the kitchen. They unpacked them together, Clark remembering unerringly where everything belonged.

Lois noticed, too. “I hope that means you remember how to cook,” she said.

“I cook?”

“Scrumptiously. I don’t, so we’re a good team.”

“Oh, yes,” Clark agreed. He stepped right up to her and took her into his arms, revelling in the freedom to hold her whenever he wanted to.

Lois put her hands on his chest to keep a small distance between them. “If we start this, we won’t get lunch for ages.”

“Does that matter?” Clark murmured as he kissed her. “I’m not hungry. Not for food.”

Lois’s laughter tasted sweet on his lips. “For what then?”

“Let me show you,” he said as he lifted her into his arms and strode out of the kitchen.

She took hold of his cheeks and began kissing him with such desperate intent that Clark was never exactly sure how they safely negotiated the stairs.

After a delayed lunch and Clark’s return to the barn, Lois began to mix the ingredients to make the pastry for the pie.

After slipping it into the oven, she set alarms on both of her cell phones and began clearing away the floury mess.

When the kitchen was spotless again, Lois sat at the table and waited for the time to pass, determined that she would not destroy another pie with her inattentiveness.

Her mind drifted.

Clark.

He was dynamite in bed.

Considerate. Fun. Exciting. Uninhibited. Gentle. Strong. Sensual. Hot.

Lois fanned her cheeks, telling herself the oven was making the kitchen unseasonably warm.

She thought back to their conversation last night, relieved that disclosing his origins against the backdrop of their post-lovemaking closeness had worked so well.

She’d asked him at breakfast if he felt any different — knowing he was Kryptonian. He’d smiled and said it didn’t change how much he loved her, and that had settled the matter.

So far, so good.

The ominous spectre of the memories of the cell seemed to retreat with each step forward in their relationship. Each hour — each trip to the bedroom — fortified Clark’s life as a loved and loving husband. His time in the barn established him in his vocation as a farmer and would hopefully provide tentative links to the parents he could no longer remember. Each use of his powers diluted the feelings of strangeness and isolation.

But every step forward came at a price. All of her training and experience confirmed the conviction of her gut that if she didn’t get the timing of her revelation right, Clark was going to be hurt again.

Her agency cell phone buzzed, carving through her thoughts. As she rose from the table, the alarm on her personal cell sounded, too. Lois slipped on Martha Kent’s mitts, opened the oven door, and gasped.

It was perfect.

In looks, anyway.

And — Lois inhaled deeply — it smelled great, too.

She slid the pie from the oven and placed it carefully on the cooler. After closing the oven door, removing the mitts, and silencing the alarms, she stared at her creation.

The pastry was lightly browned, a little crispier at the edges and

softer in the centre. It looked as if it had come out of Uncle Mike’s kitchen.

Lois checked the time. It was ten past four.

She didn’t want to wait.

She pushed the pie further onto the bench and hurried outside.

Clark heard Lois’s footsteps. She was running. What had happened?

He sprinted out of the barn and met her halfway to the house.

“What is it, Lois?” he asked. “Are you all right?”

She was smiling. “I’m fine,” she said. “Are you hungry?”

“Hungry?” he said as thrilling possibilities marched into his mind. He glanced to the upstairs window of their bedroom. “*That* hungry?” “Not right now,” Lois said, taking hold of his arm. “Come with me.”

Clark allowed her to drag him to the back of the house. Before he reached it, an enchanting aroma had filled his nostrils. An aroma that smelled of home and family and belonging.

“What did you do?” he asked Lois, stalling their progress.

“I made your favourite food,” she said.

“Apple pie,” he said, suddenly knowing. “I can smell it.”

“Your mom used to make it for you,” Lois said. “This is my second attempt. Last time, I put it in the oven and forgot all about it.”

“Did it burn?” he asked, managing one iota of sympathy for the results of her first effort despite the enticement of her second effort luring him into the kitchen.

“Yep,” Lois said. “As black as night. And as crumbly as ash.”

He grimaced. “What did you do?”

“I packed it away and tried to hide it from you.”

“What did I do?”

“You flew to Italy and brought home pizza.” Lois took the final few steps into the kitchen, and a wave of familiarity engulfed Clark. She passed the table and indicated the pie.

Clark came closer, relishing every breath. “I thought you said you can’t cook,” he said.

“I can’t,” Lois said. “But I really wanted to do this for you.”

Clark took her into his arms — partly because he needed her closeness to offset the turbulence of his emotions and partly in an attempt to hide the moisture that had leaked into his eyes. She hugged him, and he could feel the excitement pulsing through her body. He wasn’t surprised when she backed away.

“Can we eat some now?” she asked eagerly.

Clark was sure he would never be able to refuse Lois anything — particularly when she looked at him with that scintillating smile and those sparkling eyes. “Now?” he teased. “It’s not dinner time yet.”

“But our meal times are all askew anyway,” she said. “Seeing as how we were too busy to eat lunch at lunchtime.”

“I would love to eat pie now,” Clark said.

Lois beamed. “Would you like whipped cream or ice cream with it?”

“Ice cream?”

Lois took a knife from the drawer and handed it to Clark. “I’ll get the ice cream; you cut the pie.”

He cut two large pieces and put them into the dishes. Lois added dollops of vanilla ice cream, and they settled at the table.

Lois waited while he loaded his spoon. Clark took it to his mouth, determined that however it tasted, he was going to give a credible performance of delight.

There was no need to act.

It tasted exactly as it should — light pastry around soft-cooked apples, lightly sweetened.

“Is it all right?” Lois asked anxiously

“It’s perfect, honey,” he assured her.

“Does it taste anything like your mom used to make? Do you remember?”

“I don’t remember my mom making pie,” he said honestly. “But I do remember that apple pie should taste exactly like this.”

She smiled with relief and took a spoonful to her mouth. After swallowing, she said, “You’re right. It does taste good.”

“And no ashes to be seen anywhere,” he said, trying to chase away the lump that had formed in his throat.

“It was silly to try to hide them from you,” Lois said, digging into her pie again. “Your sense of smell works better than anyone else’s, too.”

“Thank you, Lois,” Clark said, bemoaning that simple words couldn’t begin to express the depths of his gratitude for everything she had done for him.

“I still don’t cook,” she said, pointing the spoon at him. “This was the exception.”

“Understood,” he said gravely.

“Clark?” Lois said as she stared into her bowl.

“Yes, honey?”

“Remember last night when we were talking about whether we should get married?”

“Yes,” Clark said, wondering where this was going.

“When I suggested we make love, you said you had been raised to believe in the sanctity of marriage.”

“Yeah,” Clark said. “I didn’t mean to sound as if I was seizing the high moral ground.”

“You didn’t,” Lois said. “But that’s not my point. You must have remembered something — even if you couldn’t remember the specifics of being told by your parents, there was something there.”

“I didn’t think about that.” He grinned. “My mind was a little preoccupied.”

“The essentials of who you are have survived the amnesia,” Lois said. “Things like your integrity, your strong sense of what is right and what is wrong — it’s all still there.”

“Is that good?” Clark asked.

“It’s great,” Lois said. “You’re still so definitively *Clark* but ...”

“Without the hang-ups?”

Her nod was slight. “The best things about you haven’t changed.” Actually, something had changed. Wonderfully. “I have an idea,” Clark said.

“What?” Lois said with immediate enthusiasm.

“I think I’ve done enough outside today. We’ve just eaten, so there’s no hurry for supper.”

“So ...”

“So would you like to have a bath? Together?”

Lois slowly slid the spoon from her mouth. “Together?” she echoed.

“Would you like to do that?”

She put her spoon in her empty bowl and sprang from the chair. “Last one upstairs has to sit at the drain end,” she said.

Her flying footsteps floated down the stairs, combined with peals of laughter. Clark stood slowly and took the dishes to the sink.

“And no cheating, Kent,” came Lois’s giggle-filled command.

Clark flew — literally — up the stairs, his heart so buoyant he couldn’t imagine ever feeling happier.

Part 13

After darkness fell, Clark flew Lois’s Jeep to her father’s garage. Once it was safely locked inside, he turned west towards Smallville.

Where Lois awaited him.

His wife.

It had been twenty-four hours since their wedding by the window, but he still found it hard to believe that Lois had married him. And so far, marriage had included apple pie, laughter, sweet kisses, and a lot of sizzling love.

It was hard not to wish it could stay like this forever — just him and Lois. But Clark knew that soon his world was going to have to expand beyond Lois, beyond the farm, perhaps even beyond Smallville. He wasn’t sure how he felt about that. He’d felt connected with Lois from the first moment he had laid eyes on her — and other than the appalling time when he’d thought she was his sister, that connection had felt so perfectly right.

Would it be the same — to a lesser extent of course — with other people he had known? Neighbours? Friends? Did he have any extended family? What about Lois’s father? They were having lunch together tomorrow, and Lois had said her dad liked him.

But Clark couldn’t help feeling a tinge of apprehension.

Was he going to appear a dolt when he didn’t know who had won last year’s Super Bowl? When all he could do was nod vaguely at the mention of well-known names? When current events were discussed, and he had nothing intelligent to contribute?

Lois would be there. Clark tried to calm his nervousness as the farmhouse came into sight — the bedroom light shining like a beacon to welcome him home.

Across from the light — in the moon-cast shadows — was the barn. All day, he’d felt drawn back there — almost like an addict to a drug supplier. But being there had become steadily more disconcerting, robbing him of his peace and even niggling at his joy in being with Lois.

When she’d come to get him to show him the pie, he’d gladly turned his back on the barn and concentrated on being with his beautiful wife.

Clark decided to do the same thing now, turning his attention to the light — and Lois.

His eagerness to get to her had him through the back door and up the stairs at a pace that wasn’t normal. He stopped on the landing, not wanting to startle her with his sudden appearance.

He pushed open the door, took in her smile, and closed out the rest of the world. He loved being with her — in the car, in the kitchen, at the beach, in the restaurant — but there was something special about being alone with her in this bedroom when the door was shut.

Here, he could get close to her. And it was more than physical. Here, he felt as if their souls intertwined.

“Everything OK?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said as he put the keys to the Jeep on the dressing table.

Lois pulled back the bedcovers. “You look cold,” she said.

“Perhaps you could add some heat before you get in — as well as after.”

Grinning, Clark slipped off his glasses and focussed his eyes on the bed. When he’d finished, Lois glided her hand over the sheets and smiled up at him. “Come on in.”

He undressed quickly and slipped in beside his wife.

“Are you doing OK?” she asked, as she snuggled next to him.

“I’m in bed with my wife,” he said. “I’m doing great.”

Her arm came across his body, and her fingers slid up to his shoulder. “Other than right now ... are you OK?”

“I have never been happier,” he said. And that was true.

Lois lifted her head to stare at him for a stretched moment, perhaps debating whether to continue her interrogation. Clark met her gaze, hoping she wouldn’t detect the small part of him that wanted to squirm. “Daniel called me today,” she said.

“What did he say?”

“The media wants a press conference with Superman.”

Clark’s reaction stalled somewhere between acceptance that this was going to happen and dismay that it was happening now. “What do you think?” he asked.

Lois swivelled, stretching out her upper arm across his stomach and bending her elbow so that her hand provided support for her head. “I think it would be good for the public to get to know Superman,” she said. “But it’s more important that you feel comfortable about it.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever be comfortable in that suit,” Clark said, wincing at the memory of the photograph on the jewellery store wall.

“It could work to our advantage that it’s so distinctive,” Lois said.

“No one would ever think Clark Kent would wear something like that.”

“Would I have to answer questions? At the press conference?”

“That’s up to you,” she said. She curled her knees against his side.

“We could tell Eric what you were prepared to do, and he will inform the media about how it’s going to be.”

Clark put his hand on her thigh. “What do you think they will ask? What have they been told about me?”

“They know you came from a planet that was destroyed, but they don’t know when. They know that after the collision with the asteroid, you were taken to the EPRAD base, and Eric said you were going to stay there for a few days to recover.”

“Recover from what?”

“He didn’t say.”

“So it isn’t public knowledge that Superman can’t remember anything?”

“No.”

“What if they ask something I should know but can’t remember?”

“Eric will be there with you,” Lois said as her fingers skittered absently over his bare chest. “He’s a master at handling awkward questions.”

“Was Superman accepted well by the public? I’m guessing — from the picture I saw — that the reaction to him was positive.”

“I have stayed away from news reports,” she said. “But I believe the reaction was overwhelmingly positive.” She smiled at him. “You *did* save the world.”

“Yeah,” Clark said. “What will they expect? Will they expect me to continue helping them? Will they expect me to be worldly and knowledgeable about everything? Will I completely ruin the whole image of being a superhero the moment I open my mouth and it’s obvious I’m ignorant of something the average five-year-old knows?”

Lois didn’t answer for a moment. She looked at him, her soft brown eyes filling him with relief that she wasn’t brushing aside his concerns. “I don’t think Eric will let that happen,” she said. “We’ll give him clear instructions, and he knows about your amnesia.”

“I don’t want the amnesia known publicly,” Clark said.

“There’s no need for anyone else to know.”

“I haven’t met any of the Smallville locals yet, but I’m concerned that when I do, someone is going to suspect something is wrong. We don’t want anyone wondering why Clark Kent and Superman just happened to forget everything at exactly the same time.”

“I talked to a couple of your friends when I was in Smallville today,” Lois said. “Maggie Irig lives with her husband, Wayne, on the next farm. They were both very close to your parents.”

“Maggie ... Wayne ...” Clark repeated, searching his mind for recognition of those names. He gave up. “Nothing,” he said. “I don’t remember them.”

“That’s OK,” Lois said, soothing him with light caresses across his chest. “I also talked to the sheriff. Her name is Rachel Harris, and you took her to the Senior Prom.”

“I did?”

“Yeah. As well as being the sheriff, she’s a good friend of yours. And she helped both of us when Moyne came here.”

Moyne? Now he had a name for the man who had dared to try to violate Lois. “He was killed when he tried to attack her?” Clark said, remembering what Lois had told him.

“Yeah.”

Moyne targeted women — clearly, he had been a lowlife bully.

“Rachel said she is coming to see you soon.”

Clark was besieged again with the mix of grudging acceptance and teetering panic. “I guess that’s the neighbourly thing to do.”

“She’s concerned about you.”

“Why? What does she know?”

“She doesn’t know anything about your extra abilities. She — and everyone else in Smallville — thinks you are the adopted son of Martha and Jonathan Kent. She thinks they adopted you after your own parents died when you were a baby.”

“So what is she worried about?”

“She is worried that I might have coerced you into marrying me.”

Clark looked at Lois in surprise. “She couldn’t see immediately that you are *exactly* the right person to be my wife?” he asked.

She smiled at his tone. “Apparently not.”

“If that’s her main concern, it shouldn’t be too hard to put her

mind at rest,” Clark said, feeling relieved.

“I have a suggestion,” Lois said.

“Me, too,” Clark said, sliding his hand up her thigh to her hip.

She grinned. “I have a different suggestion.”

“Does it involve us being together?”

“Yes.”

“Naked?”

She giggled. “No.”

Clark sighed with feigned impatience. Well, it was mostly feigned. “What’s your suggestion, honey?” he said, gliding his hand back and forth across her hip.

“We’ve agreed to have lunch with Dad and Uncle Mike tomorrow, right? I could call Daniel and ask him to arrange a press conference for the afternoon. That would give you the chance to be involved in general conversation with Uncle Mike over lunch. Sort of like a trial run in dealing with people other than me. He has probably kept up with the news and the fallout from the asteroid, so we should be able to gauge how people are thinking from him.”

“And you’ll be there with me?”

“Yeah,” Lois said. “But I can’t be at the press conference.”

“I know,” Clark said. “Superman and Lois Lane must never be seen together.”

“You’ll be fine,” Lois said, her expression full of encouragement and support. “We can go over everything with Eric beforehand. If anyone asks a question that gets too close to a no-go zone, Eric will shut it down.”

“Do they have another suit?”

“Daniel didn’t say, but Eric seems to have thought of everything, so I expect they’ve asked Layla to make one.”

“Hopefully this time, she’ll forget about the little red briefs,” Clark said grimly.

“You will be wearing those little red briefs,” Lois said firmly. “On the outside of the suit.”

“But they look ridiculous,” he protested.

“Yes, but without them, you’re going to ... well, let’s just say that with them, you’re going to have every female in the room hyper-ventilating. Without them, things could slide into anarchy fuelled by unbridled oestrogen.”

Clark chortled, although the image generated by her words was more horrifying than humorous.

“And I won’t be there to protect you from all those women,” Lois warned.

“OK,” he conceded. “I’ll wear the red briefs.”

“And you’ll do the press conference?”

“Yeah. But can we ask Eric to keep it short? Ten minutes or so?”

“That’s a good idea. We’ll give the reporters something to fill their columns, and hopefully they will back off a bit then.”

Clark wasn’t sure that was realistic, but he had more important things on his mind right now than how a bunch of journalists were going to terrorise an alien visitor in a cape and a skin-hugging jumpsuit. “Kiss me?” he said.

Lois flopped forward on his chest and shuffled a little higher up his body. “I love you,” she said, hovering above him. “There is nothing out there that we can’t overcome.”

And then she kissed him.

~ Saturday ~

The second morning of their marriage was no less idyllic than the first. Waking up next to Lois, allowing the natural consequences of that to come to an exhilarating conclusion, showering together, getting dressed, and finally — full and replete with love — kissing as they stumbled a little awkwardly down the stairs to arrive in the kitchen and begin the business of breakfast.

But leaving the sanctuary of the bedroom felt like a crumbling dam as the full force of his nervousness assailed him. He was going to have to be Clark — husband of Lois — as he met her family. He reminded himself that the ‘meeting’ with her father was going to be on

his side only — as far as Sam Lane knew, he had already met the man who had fallen in love with his daughter.

But how was he going to feel about that man having already married his daughter?

“Have you thought any more about the interview?” Lois asked as she poured coffee beans into the machine.

Clark’s trepidation lifted another notch. After facing Lois’s father and uncle, he was going to have to be this newly created being, Superman, heroic stranger dressed in a ridiculous get-up and swishing around in a cape and red briefs. He had to appear before a bunch of — hopefully friendly — humans and admit that he was alien of origin and bizarre of abilities.

But perhaps — as he’d saved them — they would be curious without being unduly suspicious of him or his intentions.

Lois turned from her task. “I haven’t called Daniel yet. We haven’t committed to anything.”

“But you think I should do it?”

Lois paused. Clark studied her face. “Yes,” she said. “I think you should do it.”

“OK,” he said.

“We’ll make it late afternoon so there will be time to talk to Eric beforehand.”

Clark nodded and took out a pan to begin frying the eggs. His mind returned to the day ahead. He couldn’t help wishing he could spend the entire day right here with Lois — alternating between the bedroom and the jobs that needed doing outside.

And in the barn.

Would he still feel strange in there?

What was his mind trying to remember?

Or was his mind trying *not* to remember?

Fifteen minutes of stilted breakfast conversation later, Lois drained her cup of coffee and slid from her chair to straddle her husband’s lap.

“What are you stressing about?” she demanded.

“Do I look stressed?”

“Yes.”

Clark smiled, trying to hide his embarrassment that Lois had caught him mired in his misgivings. “I ...”

“It’s going to be a big day,” Lois said, her hands on his face gently transmitting her love. “But for most of it, we’ll be together.”

“Lois ...” Clark sighed, feeling torn between trying to convince her that he was all right and opening up a subject that, once started, could finish anywhere.

“Talk,” Lois said.

He moved his hands from her thighs to encircle her waist and laid his head on her shoulder. For a few breaths, he simply soaked in her presence. He needed her. He needed her so much.

And that was a part of the problem.

She stroked the back of his head, moving through his hair and down to his neck. He loved her touch. It had the power to reach beyond his skin and seep into his very being.

“What do you get from this?” he asked, surprising them both with his sudden outburst.

Lois lifted his head from her shoulder and stared at him, nose to nose. “Excuse me?”

“What do you get from this?” he repeated, managing — just — to meet her eyes.

“From sitting on your lap like this? From being married to you? From knowing you? From loving you?”

“From being married to me,” he said.

“Where did this come from?” Lois said. “Have you remembered something?”

“No.”

“Then what is going on in that head of yours?”

She expected an answer. Clark could see the uneasiness in her eyes and chided himself for having caused it. “I ...” “The words just couldn’t come. He had everything, but ...”

“You know our marriage is forever, don’t you?” Lois said. “You know I love you and I won’t ever leave you?”

Clark nodded, wondering if there was any possible way to turn this into a very unfunny joke.

“Then what is wrong?”

“It just seems so lopsided,” Clark said. “I’m the intruder, the outsider. I have nothing — no place here. You are a beautiful woman — you could have any man you wanted.”

“I have the man I want.”

“But what do you get from it? I’m so different that if you’re with me, your life is never going to be normal. If I do the press conference today, that comes close to accepting I will be Superman into the future. That is going to affect you. Whenever anything happens, it will be your husband who has to go and try to help.”

“No one is forcing you to do this,” Lois said, her brow wrinkling in her effort to understand something he didn’t fully understand himself. “If it seemed as if I was forcing you into the doing the press conference, I’m sorry.”

“Do you feel forced into it?” he asked.

“When I married you, I promised that I would support you in however you wanted to use your powers. Nothing is going to change that.”

“But ... but wouldn’t your life be simpler if you were married to a regular — human — guy?”

Lois’s smile came softly. “Simpler, maybe,” she said. “But not as perfect.”

Clark stared at her, trying to draw on her confidence and let it permeate through his simmering doubts.

“I chose to be a government agent,” Lois reminded him. “Simple has never been one of my life ambitions.”

“You give me acceptance. You give me normality. You give me your love. You give me your body. I’m just having a lot of trouble seeing what I give you.”

“Your love. Your strength. Your loyalty. Your understanding. Your smile.”

“My strength,” Clark said, feeling bitterness twist through his stomach. “But I didn’t stop Moyne from getting close enough to fire a gun at you.” He dropped his gaze to her chest. “I didn’t stop him from scratching you.”

“You were *exactly* what I needed,” Lois said with such vehemence that her voice shook.

“Then how did he get close enough to get his filthy hand down the front of your clothing?”

“You were out flying,” Lois said. “I had gone to bed. I heard a noise, and a few seconds later, Moyne came into the bedroom.”

“And I didn’t come back?” Clark said with disgust.

“Yes, you did.”

“Not soon enough.”

“You did.” Clark opened his mouth to argue, but Lois put her finger over it. “Sshh,” she said. “And let me tell you what happened. Moyne and I scuffled. He made some threats — actually, he threatened to rape me.”

Clark’s eyes folded shut as icy horror scorched through him.

“A month earlier, my friend, Linda, had been raped,” Lois continued.

His eyes shot open as the horror hurtled on. “Aww, Lois,” he said. “Aww, honey.”

“He killed her after he’d raped her.”

“Not Moyne?”

“No. Someone else. But the incident with Moyne brought back all of my repressed anger and hatred. I overpowered him. I pinned him to the ground and put my hands around his throat, and I had every intention of choking him until he took his last breath.”

“But you didn’t,” Clark said. “He died when he threatened the sheriff — Rachel.”

“Do you know why I didn’t kill him?” Lois said. “Do you know why I’m not either facing murder charges or so weighed down with

guilt that my life is a wreck?”

“Because you couldn’t do it. You couldn’t kill him. Even after everything he had done to you.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “No. I wanted to kill him. I would have killed him. But you were there, and you begged for his life.”

“I -” Clark’s throat constricted, making the completion of his sentence impossible.

“Yes,” Lois exclaimed. “You saved me. You saved him, too, but that was never the point. I was hurt and damaged and out of control and blind with fury, and the only thing that saved me from making a terrible mistake was the strength of your love.”

“I can’t believe you would have killed him,” Clark said quietly.

“I would have,” Lois said with unwavering certainty. “It wasn’t the first time it had happened.”

Clark waited for her to continue, not wanting to hazard a guess as to her meaning.

“After they had killed Linda, they were going to come back for me,” Lois said. “But she had managed to loosen some of the ropes around my ankles, and I escaped.”

Clark could feel the nausea worming through his stomach.

“On the way out, I saw a young guard. He was just a kid, probably as young as sixteen. I sprang him from behind, knocked him out, took his jacket and his weapon ... and then ... when I should have just left, I was so overwhelmed with hunger for revenge that I closed my hands around his neck and began to choke him to death.”

“He wasn’t the one who had killed Linda?”

“No. He was nothing more than a kid who had probably been conscripted into their group and was too young to know if he believed in what they were trying to achieve.” She looked directly into Clark’s eyes. “But something wild and uncontrollable rose within me, and I wanted to kill him. Just like I wanted to kill Moyné.”

“Did you kill the kid?”

“No. I heard a crash, and my survival instinct kicked in, and I ran away.”

“I’m not convinced you would have killed either of them,” Clark said gravely.

Lois gave him a stifled smile. “You have never been convinced,” she said. “But that doesn’t matter. What matters is that you are convinced of my need for you.”

“Thank you for telling me,” Clark said. “I needed ... I needed a glimpse of us from your side.”

Lois removed his glasses and put them on the table behind her. She spread her fingers around his ears and ran through his hair. “Why are you so worried this morning?” she said. “Is it the lunch with my dad and Uncle Mike? Is it the press conference?”

“All of that,” Clark said.

“You didn’t seem this perturbed last night.”

“There is something else,” he said, closing his eyes and letting her touch soak into him.

“Tell me,” Lois commanded gently.

Keeping his eyes closed, Clark said, “Yesterday, when I was in the barn, it felt as if I was right on the verge of remembering something. Something crucial. I couldn’t remember, but it left me feeling a bit ... unsettled.”

“Did you remember anything specific?”

“No. Just feelings. As if something was luring me forward and something else was warning me not to respond.”

“And you feel it most strongly in the barn?”

Clark opened his eyes and nodded.

“I don’t understand why,” Lois said. “You never told me about anything significant happening in the barn.”

“When we were here — before the asteroid — did I go into the barn?”

“Yes.”

“And everything was normal?” Clark smiled wryly. “As normal as it gets for me?”

“Yes,” Lois said. “But we shouldn’t underestimate how distressing it must be to have your lifetime of memories wiped from your mind.”

He half shrugged, half winced. “Yes ... and no. I mean, the important things — the *only* important thing is being with you and loving you — and I’m just so happy about us being together that nothing else should matter. But as much as I love you, it’s not fair to either of us if our love is the only thing in my life. It will always be the best thing, but it can’t be all I have.”

Lois continued playing with his hair, massaging reassurance into his mind. “That’s why we’re having lunch today with my family,” she said. “And your friend, Rachel Harris, is going to call in. And we’ll go and have coffee with the Irigs, who are our neighbours. And tomorrow is Sunday. Last Sunday we went to church together.”

“That covers Clark,” he said. “What about the Superman thing?”

“That is up to you.”

“But what about when something happens? Something where I could be the difference between life and death? What choice do I have then?”

“Very little,” Lois said.

That was not the reply he had been expecting.

She undid a few of his shirt buttons and put her hand on his chest, right over his heart. “But it’s not because of the expectations of the people,” she said. “It’s because of this heart. It will compel you to go — as it compelled you to fly into space and ram into an asteroid. There’s nothing anyone can do about that — not even you. I told Eric the first morning — before I came into the room where you were waiting — that amnesia wouldn’t change your heart. And it hasn’t.”

“My heart still knew that I loved you,” Clark mused.

“And when you know people need your help, you won’t be able to stay away,” Lois said. “So if Clark Kent and his wife are going to have a life, we need the suit — red briefs and all.”

Clark returned his head to her shoulder. “I love you,” he said. He wished he had the eloquence needed to express the cavalcade of feelings in his heart. “I love you. You are the air I breathe. You are the other half of me. I can’t be me without you.”

Her head came down next to his, cheek on cheek. “Then how can you doubt you are anything less to me?” she whispered.

It had been foolish. And illogical. “I’m sorry,” Clark said. “None of this was because I have any doubts about my love for you.”

“Did we make a mistake by rushing into marriage?” Lois asked in a quiet voice.

Clark’s head shot from her shoulder. “No,” he said. “No.”

She smiled. “You sound very sure.”

“I am. Sometimes it seems as if our marriage is the only thing I’m sure about.”

“Clark,” Lois said. “I think that on some level you are remembering odd fragments of your life. I’m not sure how the barn is the catalyst, but this is one of the things that kept stalling us before the asteroid.”

“Me figuring your life would be better without me?”

Unshed tears glistened in her eyes as she nodded.

“I’m sorry,” he said, brushing his thumb along her lower eyelid.

“This was mostly about the barn — I felt so disoriented in there. And then I got to thinking about how much I need you — how, every time I flounder, you’re right there, knowing how to be exactly what I need. And I couldn’t remember too many times when I’d done the same for you.”

Lois took his hand in hers. She unrolled his fingers and stared at his palm.

The bullet.

She kissed his hand and placed it on her thigh. Then she held up her hands. “I could have killed with these,” she whispered. “Except you saved me. For a second time.”

Every single time, she knew how to be what he needed.

“You’re allowed doubts,” Lois said quietly. “You’re allowed doubts about everything ... except us, except how much I need you.”

“OK,” he said submissively.

“Take me upstairs?”

“You don’t . . .” He appreciated her offer, but he didn’t want her to feel he had pressured her with his brittleness.

“I want to,” she said. “Right now, I need my husband. I need you.”

Before he could question further, she had dropped her mouth onto his. Her kiss started like a slow dance, a journey of discovery. Her tongue edged forward and touched his lips, answering the cry of his heart for oneness, for confirmation of their bond.

He stood, slipping his hand under her bottom and lifting her without ever breaking their kiss. When they reached the bedroom, they united in steamy passion.

And when it was done, Clark’s doubts had melted in his wife’s love.

Part 14

As they lay in bed after making love, Clark clasped Lois’s hand onto his chest and ran the side of his thumb over the diamond in her ring. “This needs a companion,” he said.

“A wedding ring?”

“Yeah.” Clark checked the time. “If we leave now, we could buy them before visiting your father.”

“Them? You want to wear a ring, too?”

“Unless you’re against it,” Clark said.

“I think it’s great when a man is willing to openly declare that he isn’t available,” Lois said.

“I doubt I’ve ever been ‘available,’” Clark said. “Certainly not from the second I met you.”

“And you’re never going to be available again,” Lois declared with a cheerful kiss to the end of his nose.

“Therefore I need a ring. So do you.”

“This means a lot to you, doesn’t it?” Lois asked.

Clark could see how easily the concern shadowed her face and again wondered if it had been a mistake to mention his doubts at breakfast. “I’m a bit apprehensive about your father’s reaction,” he admitted. “It seems presumptuous to turn up and announce that I’ve already married his daughter.”

“If things had been different, would you have asked his permission before proposing?” Lois said with a smile.

Clark nodded. “Somehow, it just feels as if that is how it should be done.”

“I have an idea,” Lois said. “We could take the rings to lunch and give them to each other there. That way, Dad and Uncle Mike will feel as if they’ve been included in this.”

“That’s a nice idea,” Clark said.

She smiled and brushed back a lock of hair from his forehead. “Don’t worry,” she said. “My dad and Uncle Mike are not intimidating people. All they want is for me to be happy. You make me happy. That will be enough for them.”

“Do they know you work as an agent?”

“No. They think I used to work as a singer on a cruise ship. That explained the long absences when I couldn’t be contacted. Now they think I take reservations.”

“You sing?” Clark asked with delighted surprise.

“A little,” Lois admitted. “I’m not sure if I’m good enough to land a job as a professional singer, but no one ever questioned the cover story.”

“Will you sing for me?”

She considered his request. “Maybe,” she said, although her smile promised a lot more than ‘maybe’.

“When?”

“When you write out my poem and give me the copy you promised me.”

“Deal,” he said, already looking forward to experiencing another dimension of the multi-faceted treasure that was Lois Lane. Then his mind slid back to the matter of their nuptials. “You know, honey, if you ever change your mind and would like to be the beautiful bride and have a wedding with all the extras, you just have to say so.”

“I think I’d prefer a moonlit swim on a Caribbean Island,” Lois

said. “Bride and groom only. Swimsuits optional.”

Visions floated through his mind, causing him to smile.

“And perhaps for Honeymoon Two, we could go to some incredibly romantic location in Europe. Somewhere old and full of character. We could stay in a little room with a roaring fire.”

“Clothes still optional?” Clark asked.

“Nope,” Lois said. “Clothes forbidden.” She put both hands on his chest and pushed herself up. “But, for now, we need to get to Metropolis.”

“All right,” Clark agreed, accepting the looming reality of a skin-tight blue suit when his mind was much more interested in exploring Lois’s honeymoon ideas.

It was late morning when Daniel entered Menzies’ office block for the second time that day. He’d come earlier after having received the call from Lois agreeing to a short press conference that afternoon. “Go right on through, Mr Scardino,” the PA directed as he arrived at her desk. “Mr Menzies is expecting you.”

Daniel nodded and continued to the door of the higher-up’s office.

“Come in,” came the call in response to his knock. When Daniel walked in, Eric was pouring Scotch into two glasses. He crossed the room and shoved one into Daniel’s hand. “I got something,” he said.

“You got . . . something?” Daniel asked. “About the interview?”

“No. That’s all arranged. This afternoon. Four-thirty. Centennial Park — they’re putting up a dais for him and barricades to keep the crowds in place. The Mayor’s going to officially thank him on behalf of the people of Planet Earth.”

Daniel wondered if that was what Lois and Clark had had in mind when they’d agreed to a press conference. “What have you got?”

“A possible lead regarding what happened to Mrs Kent.”

“What?” Daniel asked quickly.

“Deller’s widow. I saw her yesterday, and — as I told you this morning — she said her husband always refused to say one word about his job.”

“But?”

“She called me half an hour ago. She had remembered finding an envelope in the pocket of his jacket about four months before his death.”

Daniel sipped from the Scotch and waited.

“The envelope was empty,” Eric said. “It was addressed to ‘Mr Philip Barron’ with a post office box number.”

“Barron?”

“His mother’s maiden name. Mrs Deller also said it was strange because absolutely everyone called her husband ‘Phil’. And until then, she hadn’t known he had a post office box.”

“Was there a return address on the envelope?”

“No.”

“Postmark?”

“Philadelphia.”

“You think the letter could possibly have come from Mrs Kent?” Daniel asked, trying to suppress his scepticism.

“Mrs Deller felt the handwriting on the envelope was female.”

“I don’t suppose she still has it?”

“No. He asked for it back, and she never saw it again.”

“She asked Deller about it?”

“Yes. She said he had gotten very upset by her questions.”

“So it could have been an affair?”

“It could have been,” Eric agreed after a gulp of his whisky. “But she believed then — and she still believes now — that her husband wasn’t cheating on her.”

“There would be some comfort in believing that,” Daniel noted.

“Now that he has passed away.”

“I’m inclined to believe her,” Eric said. “I think that if I . . . well, if I, you know, Phoebe would know.”

“If he wasn’t having an affair, what did he have to hide?”

“Mrs Deller doesn’t know. Her husband wouldn’t answer her questions, other than to insist that he wasn’t doing anything wrong.

She said he had always been ‘overly-secretive’ about his work and he closed up even more after the birth of their child, when he joined a ‘local assignment’.”

“The alien operation.”

“I saw photos of the child in the house,” Eric said. “He looked about seven or eight to me.”

“We already knew Deller was there at the beginning of the operation,” Daniel said carefully. “It doesn’t prove the letter came from Mrs Kent.”

“No,” Eric said. “But it’s all we’ve got.”

“Do you happen to know if Deller was close to his own mother?”

“No,” Eric said. “Other than he used her maiden name. Why?”

“If he had a close relationship with his mother, he would be more likely to empathise with a mother’s anxiety for her son and perhaps try to ease her worries by sending reports.”

Eric’s face darkened. “If he told her the truth, I doubt it did anything to ease her worries.”

“Hearing any news would be better than complete silence,” Daniel said grimly.

“Can you go to Philadelphia today?” Eric said. “I have to be in Metropolis for Superman’s press conference.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I have two assistants going through lists of residents in every nursing home, hospital, and hospice in Philadelphia,” Eric said. “They are calling a listed family member and pretending to conduct a survey about the quality of care. I’ll call you if we get anything of interest. Meanwhile, you can visit a few of the places and see if anything seems promising. Make up a story about trying to track down a relative you lost contact with six or seven years ago.”

“OK,” Daniel said.

“If you do happen to find anything, you will need to exercise extreme caution. I doubt she is still using the name ‘Martha Kent’. Be careful with your questions, and don’t admit to anything until you are absolutely sure you have the right woman.”

“If she has read the newspaper reports, she is going to know Clark is keeping his identity a secret,” Daniel said. “Depending on her level of awareness, she could be willing to lie if she thinks it will protect her son.”

“Which is going to make identification difficult,” Eric said. “I don’t suppose you’ve seen a photograph of her?”

“No.”

“Have you spoken to Shadbolt yet? About the early days of the operation?”

“No. When I called him this morning, he was taking his daughter to school. Then he had a shift at the EPRAD base. He said he’d meet me this evening on his way home.”

“I’m meeting Lois and Clark at the base before the press conference,” Eric said. “I’ll talk to Shadbolt then.”

“Clark can’t know anything about this,” Daniel said. “Lois told him his mother had passed away years ago.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Eric said. “Is the new suit ready?”

“Yeah. It’ll be at the base when they arrive.”

“Your private flight is waiting for you at the airport.”

“Thanks.” Daniel managed to gulp about half of the Scotch and returned the glass to Eric.

“Good luck,” Eric said.

“Thanks,” Daniel said. He walked out of the office, feeling he was going to need a lot of good luck if this particular trail was going to end with Martha Kent.

“Dad,” Lois greeted as she walked into his room. She let go of Clark’s hand and embraced her father. “How are you?”

He nodded and, after hugging his daughter, turned to Clark and slowly stretched out his hand. Clark took it as their eyes met. *Please trust me*, he wanted to say. *Please trust me to love your daughter*.

“You remember Clark, don’t you Dad?” Lois said.

Sam nodded.

“Hello, Mr Lane,” Clark said.

Lois pulled two chairs next to her dad’s wheelchair, and Clark sat in the second one. “How did you go with the electric wheelchair?” Lois said.

Sam put a flattened palm to his mouth and swung his arm down to the tray of his wheelchair. Lois glanced to the large paper above the bed, and she smiled happily.

“Good?” she said excitedly. “It went well? Will you be able to have your own chair?”

He nodded.

“Oh, Dad,” Lois squealed, rising from the chair to give her father an exuberant hug. “That is such good news. I’m so pleased for you.”

Sam’s face twisted to the same expression as when they had walked into his room. Clark figured it must represent a smile.

“Actually, Dad,” Lois said, “you’re not the only one with good news.”

Sam took his daughter’s left hand and brushed his thumb over her ring. His slightly wavering gaze meandered from his beaming daughter and settled on Clark.

“S...Sir,” Clark said, sitting straighter. “I want you to know that I love Lois very much and I will always look after her. I asked her to marry me, and after she accepted my proposal, we ...”

“We went right ahead and got married,” Lois finished, looking so happy that Clark hoped her father couldn’t fail to notice.

Sam placed Lois’s hand on his tray. He stretched for Clark’s hand, and after Clark had reached forward, Sam put Clark’s hand on top of Lois’s. Then, he repeated the sign he had made earlier.

“Good?” Lois said, smiling as radiantly as any bride does. “You think this is good?”

Sam nodded. He made two upwards motions against his chest.

“Happy?” Lois said. “You’re happy about this?”

Her father nodded again.

“I’m happy, Dad,” Lois said, shooting a smile towards her husband. “I’m so very happy with Clark.”

Clark got the impression her words were not just for her father’s benefit.

Sam made the sign for ‘good’ again and then touched his thumb to his forehead and brought his hand down to his chest.

“Good man,” Lois said, consulting the list. She smiled at her father. “Yes, Dad. Clark is a good man.”

She continued talking excitedly, never veering too much from the truth, but making their wedding sound intimately unique rather than hasty and perfunctory.

Her cheerfulness splashed over Clark, combining with his relief at Sam’s reaction to the marriage. Lois wanted him as her husband. Sam accepted him as his son-in-law. Clark felt as if his friends on this foreign planet had just doubled.

But that was Clark. This afternoon, he had to be Superman.

Lunch was a family occasion.

Uncle Mike was a jovial man who clearly loved Lois. He’d set aside a small function room for them, away from the commotion of his restaurant in the swing of the lunchtime bustle. The food at the table was simple — the bread was fresh from the oven, the diced vegetables were crisp, the dips were creamy.

Any possible initial awkwardness was swept away in the lively conversation that volleyed between Lois and her uncle. Clark listened, finding himself smiling as they recounted a cross-section of past memories. Occasionally Clark glanced to Sam. The older man’s face drooped a little on the left side, but that didn’t hide his enjoyment at being able to share this time with his family.

Not that he was reduced to being merely a spectator. Both Lois and Uncle Mike naturally included him, shooting questions at him and then pausing while he made the one-handed signals that had become his language.

They also ensured Clark felt included in this family gathering. Uncle Mike asked him some questions about the farm, and Clark

discovered he'd retained enough general knowledge of livestock to sound believable — at least to a city doctor and a city restaurateur. Other questions Lois fielded for him — either answering herself or adapting the question to something within the limited bounds of his knowledge.

It was tiring — having to be constantly on guard with every word he said. Lois glided through it with natural charm, seemingly unfazed, even when the conversation turned to Superman and his upcoming public appearance.

“Are you going to be there?” Uncle Mike asked.

“What time’s the appearance?” Lois said.

“Four-thirty.”

“No,” she replied. “We can’t miss our flight back to Kansas.”

“Better than missing a chance to see Superman,” Uncle Mike said.

Lois chuckled. “Not when there are chores to be done. I don’t think the animals would consider even Superman a good reason for missing out on their supper.”

Laughter erupted, and the conversation moved on.

After the food was gone and the plates were empty, the waiter brought them a pot of coffee and a platter of cut-up fruit. After he'd gone, Clark stood up and cleared his throat. He looked at each face — from Sam to Uncle Mike and then to Lois.

She smiled pure encouragement.

Clark slipped his hand into his pocket and felt the reassuring presence of the rings he and Lois had chosen earlier. He had given some thought to what he wanted to say and had decided to start with an explanation. “When I asked Lois to marry me, I didn’t imagine it would be possible for it to happen so quickly,” he said. “But when we thought about it, we couldn’t see too many reasons for waiting.” He forced his eyes from Lois and faced the two men who were representing her family. “Being married to Lois is like the very best of my dreams coming true, but the one regret I have is that the wedding didn’t include our family members.”

Clark snuck a look to Lois. She smiled, filling him with the resolve to continue.

“I know you are both very special to Lois,” he said. “I know you want the best for her. I hope that, in time, you will come to see that being with me is what makes her happy.”

“No,” Uncle Mike said, causing Clark’s heart to collapse. “We already see that.”

Sheer relief inundated him, stealing the rest of what he had intended to say. He turned to Lois. “Would you stand up with me, please, honey?”

As she stood, she slipped the engagement ring from her finger. Clark took her left hand and cradled it in both of his as he turned towards Sam. “Mr Lane,” he said. “I promise you I will love your daughter for the rest of my life. I will protect her always, and nothing will ever be more important to me than her happiness. I’m asking for your blessing on our marriage.”

Sam nodded, and his smile seemed to become more distinct.

“Thank you,” Clark said. He took the rings from his pocket, putting the larger one on the table and holding the other one at the end of her finger. “Lois,” he said. “I give you this ring to signify my love for you and my total commitment to our marriage. This ring circles without end, as will the seasons of our love.” He pushed the gold band the length of her finger and then took the engagement ring and nestled it next to the wedding band.

Lois picked up the other ring. “Clark,” she said. “This is for you — the man who captures my heart with his gentle strength, the man who inspires me with his unfaltering integrity, the man I am honoured to call my husband. I love you, Clark.” With a tremulous smile, she pushed the ring the length of his finger.

Uncle Mike broke into loud applause, and Sam slapped the table with his good hand. “Kiss the bride,” Uncle Mike called out. “Kiss her, Clark.”

Clark smiled into Lois’s slightly damp eyes and leant forward to

seal their exchange of rings with a kiss.

“Welcome to the family, Clark,” Uncle Mike said.

“Thank you,” Clark said. They sat down, and the chatter flowed as they finished the meal with coffee and fruit.

Clark had lost one family in the first months of his life. He had lost all the memories of his second family, but today seemed like a new beginning. Sam and Uncle Mike would probably never know how much their acceptance meant to him.

But Lois knew.

She smiled. She offered him her slice of apple and laughed when he took it and kissed her hand. She sugared his coffee. Under the table, her hand squeezed his thigh.

She did everything to build a bridge between him and her family, and by the end of the meal, Clark no longer felt like a stranger.

His family had grown to four.

Lois stood before Superman.

He was magnificent. He had the evidence of great strength, the aura of great power, and the stamp of great virtue.

“You look incredible,” she breathed.

“I do?”

“Yes,” she insisted. “When we saw the first suit, we both had some doubts. When you put it on, I wasn’t thinking too straight because of my fear you wouldn’t come back to me. But now ... Clark, this is exactly right.”

He looked down dubiously.

“Trust me,” Lois said. “You look like a superhero.”

“I wish you could come with me,” he said.

“I’ll be here waiting for you after you’ve finished.”

Clark slipped the new wedding ring from his finger and gave it to her. “Keep this for me,” he said.

Lois put it in her bag, adding it to the glasses, watch, and wallet she had already taken for safekeeping. “Are you clear on what will happen?”

He nodded. “I fly out of the EPRAD base, drift slowly down to the dais they have set up at Centennial Park, accept the official thanks of the Mayor of Metropolis, and then allow the journalists to ask me a few questions.”

“Are you worried about their questions?”

“Yes,” he said. Then his uncertainty evaporated a little as his smile came hesitantly. “There is so much they could ask that would blow open a secret.”

Yes, Lois agreed silently. “Stick to what we agreed with Eric,” she said. “If you’re not sure, wait and he’ll take control.”

“Do you think many people will be there?”

She nodded, remembering the crowds outside the EPRAD base the morning after the asteroid.

“How many?” Clark asked.

“I don’t know,” Lois said. “But sometimes large crowds are easier than a face-to-face encounter.”

He nodded, but his acknowledgement didn’t drive away all of his trepidation. “What if someone recognises me?” he asked. “What if someone sees right through this costume and the gelled hair and knows I’m a Kansas farmer?”

“They won’t.”

“How can you be sure?”

Lois took a breath. “OK,” she said. “Stand up straight. Shoulders back. Fold your arms across your chest. Head up.”

He did as she directed.

“Now, think aloof, think distant.”

“I’m looking at *you*,” he said with a glimmer of his usual smile.

“Aloof” just isn’t possible.”

“Clark is in love with Lois,” she said. “Sup-”

“So is Superman.”

Lois laughed, glad he seemed to be relaxing a little. “I know you’ve struggled with being different,” she said. “But it’s exactly those differences that will help us now. The people of Earth want to know

you, they want to thank you, they're probably already over halfway to being completely infatuated with you, but Superman *can't* be one of us."

"Are you saying I can't ever truly belong on this planet?" Clark asked somberly.

"I'm saying Superman has to be a little bit set apart. He has to be good and strong and true — you're all of those things naturally — but he also has to be a little bit mysterious. He has to be a fantasy that no one will ever truly know."

"I don't know if I can -"

"You can do this," Lois said. "Clark is my hero. Superman can be the world's hero."

"I'm your hero?" he asked, seeming surprised.

"Always."

His smile came readily, confirmed with new purpose and confidence.

"I think this is your destiny," Lois said. "This is why you came to our planet."

"To swish around in a cape?" Clark said with a grin.

Lois answered his smile. "No," she said. "To be our hope. When your planet faced destruction, you were just a baby. But now you are a grown man — a man who has been endowed with a heart of great compassion and a body of great strength. You are exactly what we need."

"I need you," he said. "I can't be whatever it is they think I can be unless I have you."

Lois held up her hand, showing him her rings. "You have me," she said. "Whatever happens — today, and into the future — you will always be able to come home to me."

He stared at her with wordless wonder.

"When this is over, we will fly back to Smallville," Lois said as she arranged his cape over his shoulders. "You will make us dinner, and after we have eaten, you and I will go upstairs."

"And what will happen then, Ms Lane?" he asked with a smile.

"Mr and Mrs Kent will indulge in some steamy honeymoon interaction."

His eyes lit with interest. "Is that a promise?"

"Absolutely."

There was a tap on the door, and Evan Shadbolt entered. "Ready?" he said.

Clark straightened his shoulders, wiped the warm affection from his expression, and faced Evan with business-like resolve. "Yes," he said. "I'm ready."

Part 15

After Clark had left, Lois turned on the television and settled into a chair to watch the live broadcast from Centennial Park, where it seemed a significant portion of the population of Metropolis was awaiting the arrival of its hero. An on-site fast-talking female reporter was making predictions about what they expected from Superman's first public appearance.

"Aw, Clark," Lois said, hoping he wouldn't find the seething mass of humanity too daunting.

The reporter stopped mid-sentence as an audible gasp rose from the throng of people. The camera view switched to the dais, where the red boots of Superman slowly descended. The focus continued to slide forward, and Clark's upper body filled the screen.

Tumultuous applause resounded. And then from the disarray of loud approval came the chant — "Superman! Superman!"

The camera zoomed in on Clark's face, and Lois gasped.

He looked — as she had foretold — as if he had been born to do this. He folded his arms across his blue spandex chest, straightened shoulders to breath-stealing broadness, and slowly scanned the gathered people, his expression perfectly balanced between composed interest and unassuming confidence.

The chant continued.

The lump in Lois's throat liquefied and pushed tears into her eyes. Clark didn't know it, but he had come such a long way — from

despised prisoner to loved champion — in such a short time.

Lois's cell phone buzzed from her bag. She checked the caller ID, more than half inclined to ignore it. When she saw it was from Daniel, she answered.

"Hi," he said. "Are you watching the television?"

What else would she be doing? "Yeah," she said. "What's up?" She didn't want to sound rude, but she did want this conversation over before the ceremony began.

"Eric has a grain of a lead regarding the whereabouts of the missing person."

Lois's stomach knotted as the burden of decision crept closer.

"I told him not to say anything," Daniel said. "But I wanted to warn you that you might need to prepare."

"Thanks," Lois said, appreciating his foresight.

"I'll keep in touch," Daniel disconnected the call, and Lois slipped her cell back into her bag.

On the television screen, the Mayor of Metropolis had stepped forward to the microphone. He waited, one hand raised as the noise of the crowd slowly abated. "Citizens of this great planet," he began. "Today is a momentous day in our history. Today, we officially extend our warmest welcome to our friend from beyond the frontiers of Earth — a friend who came to our planet and, in our darkest hour, risked his life to give us the chance of a future."

The wild cheers rose again.

Behind Lois, the door opened. She turned and smiled as Evan entered. He sat beside her and let out a whoosh of surprise. "Look at all of those people," he said.

"Look at them," Lois said. However, it wasn't the crowd that held her attention, but the man in the blue suit.

The mayor continued — managing to stretch his fairly limited knowledge of Superman to a full-blown five-minute speech. When he'd finished, he placed a medal around the hero's neck with excessive flourish and endowed him the freedom of the city.

Clark thanked him graciously and stepped up to the microphone. "Friends," he said.

One word — one solitary word — and the crowd erupted again.

Evan glanced to Lois and gave her an encouraging smile. "He'll be fine," he said.

"I know," Lois said.

"You did a great thing."

"Thanks."

The crowd quieted enough that Superman attempted to speak again. "Thank you for such an enthusiastic and heartfelt welcome," he said. He opened his mouth, but his words were lost as the Superman chant began again.

"I hope he didn't plan a long speech," Evan said with a grin. "If he did, we could be here for hours."

"The press has been clamouring to question him," Lois said. "They wanted a media-only conference, but doing it this way meant he only had to appear once."

Evan's smile died. "Are you worried? About the questions?"

"Eric's there. He hasn't stepped onto the dais yet, but he will coordinate the question time."

"Has Clark remembered anything?"

"Very little. I've told him a few things."

"Anything about how he spent most of the last seven years?"

"Not yet. I'm hoping for a few more days."

Evan shuffled uncomfortably in his seat. "I'm guessing ... I'm guessing the damage ran deep?"

Lois nodded slowly, fighting down the tears that threatened again. "Real deep."

"I'm sorry," Evan croaked. "I am so sorry."

"You only did as you were ordered."

"That's no excuse."

On the screen, the mayor had subdued the crowd enough that the questions could begin. Eric Menzies strode onto the dais and stood a few feet from Clark.

“Superman has agreed to take questions,” Eric’s voice boomed through the microphone. “But it is to be done in a controlled fashion.” He turned to the roped-off section at the side of the temporary stage where those with a press pass had been permitted to gather. “First question.” A bevy of hands shot skywards. Eric pointed directly at a man near the front. “You.”

The question was murmured indistinctly. Eric straightened, faced Superman, and spoke into the microphone. “The question is, ‘Are you fully recovered following your mission into space?’”

Superman’s face mirrored the surprise that Lois felt. “Yes,” he said. “Thank you for asking.”

“You no longer need to recuperate at the EPRAD base?” Eric asked.

“No.”

Eric pointed to another reporter, listened to the question, and returned to the microphone. “Are you the only one from your planet on Earth?”

“Yes,” Superman replied. “I don’t know of any others who survived the destruction of Krypton.”

A murmur rumbled through the crowd. “Krypton. Krypton.”

“And, as we have seen already, you came here in friendship?” Eric said.

Superman nodded. “I had no home. I came to this planet seeking a place of refuge.”

Eric took another question and repeated it for all to hear. “Did you have super-strength on your planet?”

“No.”

“So your abilities developed after you arrived here?” A male voice rose from the midst of the crowd.

“Yes,” Superman said.

“Do you know why?” the voice asked.

Eric spoke quickly. “As I revealed in a previous press conference, my agency worked with Superman for a considerable time to discover the extent of his abilities.”

“Do you know why he’s ‘super?’”

Eric didn’t falter. “His physiology has responded to the foreign environment here on Earth. Exactly why or how is beyond my capabilities to either understand or explain. I’m a government agent, not a scientist.” He pointed to another reporter, a female at the front of the group of media representatives.

The woman ducked under the restraining rope and marched up the steps and onto the dais.

Lois’s breath jammed in her airways.

“That’s Ruby Rhodes,” Evan muttered ominously. “From *The Daily Planet*.”

Rhodes ripped the microphone from its stand and confronted Superman. “Why did our government feel the need to imprison you?” she demanded. “Why did they respond to the leaks of your presence on our planet with the fabricated story of your death?”

Lois felt queasy apprehension well up inside her. She had tried so hard to keep the cell and Clark apart. Now they had come together. In the most public of ways. And she couldn’t get to him. She couldn’t cushion the damage.

She tried to examine his face or read his body language, but Eric stepped forward, blocking the view of the camera. He spoke into the microphone. “Once you have returned to your position with the other reporters, we will continue,” he said firmly, regarding Rhodes with intractable determination. “If you refuse to do so, I will direct security to physically remove you.”

The crowd erupted again, but this time the mood was harsh and disapproving. Ruby Rhodes scanned them and realised that, in a crowd of hundreds, she was without a scrap of support. She opened her mouth. Eric frowned. The crowd booed. She stepped from the stage to the sound of riotous applause.

The camera rested briefly on Superman. His expression was deadpan, nullifying Lois’s frantic attempts to interpret his feelings. Under that cool exterior, was he reeling from the mention of

imprisonment? Was he angry? Confused? Upset?

Was he feeling betrayed? By her? By the one person he had thought he could trust?

Eric slipped the microphone back into its stand. “As I have already outlined,” he said with the sigh of one whose patience was being sorely tested, “Superman worked with a government agency for months before the advent of the asteroid.” His eyes slid over the crowd. “Is it realistic to think that something as complex and meticulous as a space mission could be planned and executed within a few hours?”

There was a murmur of acceptance. Eric turned to his left and stared at the *Daily Planet* reporter. She stared back, unremorseful.

“Ms Rhodes came to me earlier this week, threatening to print her limited and misconstrued information — information she had received from a disgruntled former agent who had been dismissed from working with Superman following the agent’s attempt to rape a female colleague.” Eric paused, allowing time for the crowd to digest that. “I believed that if Ms Rhodes had published her story, it could have jeopardised the final preparations for Superman’s mission. The primary objective of every government agency is to ensure the safety of the people.”

A solemn hush had fallen over the crowd. The camera slowly panned over it, before coming to rest on Superman, who stood like a statue, looking more like a vaguely interested spectator than the centre of the discussion.

Lois’s stomach squeezed again. Had Clark retreated into his private world as he tried to assimilate Rhodes’ question into the landscape of his obliterated memories?

Eric continued speaking, and the camera focused on him, edging Superman from the screen. “I think it would be easy for us to overlook a certain truth here,” he said. “Had the asteroid hit the earth, it would have almost certainly resulted in the deaths of millions of people. Your chance of survival, my chance of survival ...” He turned to his left and paused for a second that seemed to stretch to breaking point. “... Ms Rhodes’ chance of survival — would have been slim. But Superman would have almost certainly survived. He could have flown to the furthest point from the impact, and he has already proven his body’s ability to adapt to changing conditions.”

Eric waited while the crowd murmured its response.

“Any further questions?” he asked. He pointed to a young woman at the back of the assembly of reporters. “Yes?”

“Is Superman married?” she called out loudly. “Does he have a girlfriend? Does he want one?”

Eric leant forward to the microphone and spoke over the laughter of the crowd. “Superman doesn’t answer personal questions,” he said. “But I think I would be correct in saying that any such offers would be met with a polite refusal.”

“So he’s happily single?” the woman continued. “What a waste.”

The crowd laughed again, and it seemed to Lois that the pressure-cooker atmosphere engendered by Ruby Rhodes had eased considerably. Her own trepidation hadn’t eased at all. What was Clark thinking?

Evan glanced to Lois, and his hand covered hers for a brief moment. “Don’t worry,” he said. “Clark knows that you did everything in his best interests.”

“But I don’t want him to know about the cell,” Lois said fretfully. “Not yet. Not until ...”

“You’re wearing a wedding ring,” Evan said. “Don’t underestimate what that means.”

“But I married him before he knew everything.”

“Does he love you?”

“Yes.”

“Then something as horrific as the cell might be able to shake that, but it won’t be able to break it.”

“You think?”

“I’m sure.” He smiled. “You two have something. Something special. Something that is so intrinsic to your relationship that nothing

outside could possibly penetrate it. Frankly, I'm envious."

"Thank you," Lois said, hoping he was right. She heard Clark's voice and returned her attention to the screen.

"... new to this. Standing before you, knowing you know I am not one of you — that is daunting. Unless you have experienced being one amongst billions, you probably won't be able to comprehend the depths of my appreciation for your welcome and acceptance."

"Being so strong and fast, you probably won't be able to comprehend the depths of our appreciation at not being decapitated by an asteroid," a voice called out.

The crowd erupted into laughter. Eric smiled stiltedly. Superman's mask slipped enough that an embryonic smile emerged.

Lois felt captivated all over again. That smile had never failed to call to something deep inside her, brightening the bleakest of moments.

In that smile, she found hope. Maybe everything would be all right. Maybe the foundation of their love was strong enough to withstand the buffeting of memories of the cell, strong enough to prevent Clark from slipping back into the clutches of the trauma he had suffered for so many years.

"On that note, I think we've had enough questions for today," Eric said. "But I would like to finish with a request to all of you. If you see Superman, be friendly to him, but please don't overwhelm him. Remember what he said about being the only one in the midst of billions, and please give the man some space."

"Will he sign some autographs for us?" a voice came from the crowd.

"No," Eric said dryly. "He won't." He stepped up to Superman, shook his hand, and muttered a few private words.

Superman lifted slowly, hovered long enough to wave to the crowd, and then flew away.

"Well done," Evan said. "You handled them like a professional."

"Excuse me?" Lois said, turning to her companion.

Evan gave a smiling shrug. "That's what Menzies said to Superman. 'Well done. You handled them like a professional.'"

"How do you know?"

"Layla is deaf. She taught me how to lip-read."

"Oh," Lois said, not knowing how to respond.

Evan smiled. "Luckily, she doesn't need to be able to hear to sew."

"She did a wonderful job designing Clark's suit."

Evan grinned, looking like a proud father. "Yeah," he said.

"Although at first ..."

They shared a laugh. "Layla might not be able to hear," Lois said, "but she could see some things with more clarity than the rest of us. The suit is exactly right."

Evan nodded. "I guess you haven't heard anything more about Clark's mother?"

"Nothing concrete. Do you remember anything? You were there at the start. Did Trask or Moyné say anything about what happened to his parents?"

"Menzies asked me about that today," Evan said. "I've been thinking about those early days — trying to work out why I believed Trask without ever questioning whether he was speaking the truth."

"But then Deller was killed, and the blame fell to Clark, and that just confirmed he was a vicious animal," Lois said.

Evan grimaced at the bitterness in her tone.

"Sorry," she said. "That wasn't directed at you."

"I deserve it," he said. "To my dying day, I will feel ashamed of my part in this."

"Daniel told me you helped him cover our escape."

"Once I'd read Trask's journals and discovered they contained a lot of inconsistencies and more than a few outright lies, I realised there was a very good chance the prisoner we had so conscientiously guarded for seven years very likely hadn't killed anyone."

"Moyné killed Deller and Bortolotto," Lois said. "Clark was weakened by the rods, so he couldn't help them. But he had to watch."

"I heard that Moyné was killed," Evan said. "In Kansas."

His tone was light, but Lois thought it likely he knew more than he had verbalised.

"There is one thing I remembered," Evan continued. "A few days before Deller was killed, I came into the compound for my shift and heard shouting in the staffroom. They quieted as soon as they heard me unlock the door."

"Who was it?"

"Deller and Moyné. Moyné had no reason to be there. It was Deller's shift."

"They were arguing?"

"Yes. After Deller had died, Moyné told me they'd been arguing over whether the rods were really needed."

"Deller wasn't sure?" Lois guessed.

"That's what Moyné said. And, of course, his insistence that they were imperative was supposedly proven correct just a few days later when Deller's torn and broken body was found in the cell."

"I wonder what they were arguing about," Lois said.

"Moyné's story — the part about the argument — could have been the truth," Evan said cautiously.

"Moyné went into the cell without a rod."

"He did?" Evan said, his voice rising with surprise.

"Yep. Clark told me some of what he did during those night shifts."

Evan's face twisted. "I don't want to know," he said.

"Only one person alive knows what happened when Moyné was alone with Clark," Lois said. "And if he never remembers, that can only be a good thing." She stood from the chair as anxiety cascaded over her again. "Shouldn't Clark be back by now?"

"Maybe he got caught by autograph hunters," Evan suggested lightly.

"Yeah," Lois said, but it didn't appease her worries. "Don't say anything to Clark about the search for his mom."

"What did you tell him?"

"That she passed away years ago."

Evan nodded slowly. "Any other story would have been difficult to substantiate," he said. "And Clark's questions could have gotten very messy."

"I regret it now," Lois said. "I've been evasive at times, but that's about the only straight-out lie I've told him."

"He'll understand why."

"If she has passed away, the pain of that will be blunted for Clark. If she hasn't, and we manage to find her, I'm not sure how he'll react."

"He won't blame you."

"I chose to lie to him."

"Lois," Evan said, standing up and moving right to the edge of her personal space. "You landed the worst operation of all time — a complete disaster that violated every human rights convention ever written. Somehow, from that accumulated pile of muck, you stood against the accepted beliefs, you rescued an innocent man, you put your life on hold to help him in the onerous task of trying to rebuild his life, and you still managed to keep the agency from being smeared across the news like a foul-smelling scandal. And that's without mentioning the small detail that the innocent man turned out to be our only hope in avoiding a disaster that could have finished the lot of us."

"But none of that changes that I lied to him."

"Why did you lie to him?"

"To keep him from remembering the cell," Lois felt hot tears rise. "You should have seen him, Evan," she said. "He was like two different men. Before the amnesia, he was so unsure, so broken, so damaged, so indoctrinated to believe he was less than human. But afterwards when he couldn't remember it, he was so gloriously free. He smiled. He joked sometimes. He was like a new person — still Clark, but without the pain. I wanted to keep that for him."

"He will understand that," Evan said.

"How can you be sure?"

"Because when he came here the first time — before the asteroid, when he still remembered what I had done to him — he treated me

with far more respect than I deserved. He's a good man. Better than good."

"Yes," Lois said.

The door opened, and Clark walked in, his cape swinging. He stopped, his eyes darting from Lois to Evan. "Is everything OK?"

"Everything's fine," Evan said as he moved forward and briefly shook Clark's hand. "You did great." He slipped from the room, quietly closing the door.

Lois eyed Clark, desperately trying to read his expression.

He stared at her, his eyes filled with questions. "Was it *that* bad?" he said.

She stepped closer to him. "The press conference?"

"Yeah. You look ... you look upset." His hand lifted towards her face, but dropped before touching her. "You've been crying."

"No," Lois said, hurriedly brushing at her eyes. "No. I just ... I wasn't sure if you were all right with it."

"It *seemed* to go OK," he said with a small shrug.

Suddenly, Lois realised Clark was waiting for her guidance. "You were wonderful," she said.

"Really?"

"Really."

But he didn't look convinced.

Lois felt panic pummel against the flimsy veil of her composure. Something had risen up between them. Was it just a misunderstanding? Had Clark remembered something? Was he suspicious that she hadn't been entirely truthful with him? She had to find out what he was thinking — then she had a chance of getting them through this without too much wreckage. "What's wrong, Clark?"

He didn't seem taken aback by her question. Perhaps he felt it, too. "Eric seemed unduly displeased by that woman who came onto the stage."

"Is that all that perturbed you?"

Clark looked as if he didn't want to answer.

"Tell me," Lois encouraged.

"When I walked in here, I got the impression you and Evan were talking about something and my presence stopped the conversation cold."

Was he concerned about secrets? Or had he felt a twinge of jealousy? Surely not — Evan was at least twenty years older than she was. But she needed to remember that Clark didn't have the stockpile of memories to give him assurance in new situations. "Evan and I have worked together," Lois said, levelling her eyes in Clark's. "He was an agent before he worked here as a security guard."

Clark's face cleared. "I didn't realise you knew him so well," he said. "I'm sorry if I sounded suspicious."

"You didn't. We were just talking about the press conference. We watched it together."

Clark's smile came hesitantly. "So, everything's OK?" he asked hopefully.

"You seemed to take a long time to get back here."

"Ah ... yeah."

"What happened?" Lois asked as another swarm of worries teemed into her mind.

"I was flying back to the base, and I heard someone crying," Clark said. "I looked down, and I saw it was a little girl — she was probably about six years old. I landed next to her, hoping I wouldn't scare her too much. She stopped crying and told me she had lost her mom. I asked her name, and she said 'Amy', so I listened through all the other city noise, and I heard a woman's voice calling for her. I figured I shouldn't ask Amy to come with me because she'd probably been taught not to go with strangers, so I told her to sit down on a seat and if she promised she would stay there, I would be back with her mom before she could count to twenty."

Lois smiled as she pictured Superman with the little girl. "Did you find her mom?"

"Yeah. I followed the shouts, found her, told her I would take her

to her daughter, and got her there before Amy had counted to fifteen."

Lois put her arms around Clark's neck. "Your first rescue," she said. "Other than the asteroid, of course."

"I'm not sure it counts as a rescue," Clark said. "But I did stop a little girl from crying."

"And relieved a distraught mother," Lois added. "I'm sure that meant a lot to her."

"It did," Clark said. "She was crying and holding Amy and trying to thank me all at the same time."

"You did well."

Clark's smile was fleeting. "So, how about you tell me the truth?" he asked gently as he brushed her hair back behind her ear. "What upset you? Was it just because I took so long to get back to you?"

"I wondered if you were perturbed by what that Rhodes woman said," Lois said cautiously.

Clark's smile began in his eyes and slowly spread to his mouth. "Lois, honey," he said. "I had already figured out that I must have worked with the agency for a considerable time before the asteroid."

"You did?" Lois said. "How?"

"The farm. If I had spent most of my time there, there's no way it should be looking like it does. Not if I'm any sort of a farmer."

"Oh," Lois said, not sure what else to say.

"Was it such a big secret?" Clark asked. "We obviously met somehow — us both working for the agency seems the most plausible explanation."

Could it be possible she had been given a little more time? If so, Lois was determined to pack some more good memories into Clark's cache. "So what happens now?" she asked brightly.

"As I recall, you made certain promises," Clark said. "Something to do with 'steamy honeymoon interaction.'"

"Can I watch as you change into your clothes?"

He tried to look shocked, but failed dismally.

Lois giggled. "Get out of the suit, Superman," she said. "I need Clark, not a superhero in spandex."

His smile was tempered by the unmistakable desire that flared into his eyes.

Lois lifted his cape and slowly, sensually lowered the zipper on the back of the suit, skimming her fingernail down his spine. When she reached the red briefs, she tweaked his butt.

Clark spun around quickly. "Lois," he hissed, although his grin hadn't dimmed any. "What are you trying to do to me? We're in public." He glanced around the room. "Semi-public. And Evan will be back any moment to take us to the Jeep."

"So?" she teased.

"Stand back."

"Huh?"

"Just stand back," Clark directed. "I want to try something."

Lois stepped away. Clark spun into a blue and red blur that progressed into the more muted colours of his jeans and sweater.

His whirl of movement stopped, and Clark stood before her, grinning. "Was that fast enough for you?"

"H...How did you do that?"

"I can cross the United States in less than a minute," he said. "I figure that when I have the right motivation, I should be able to do other things quickly."

Lois picked up the discarded suit. His warmth still clung to the fabric. She folded it carefully and put it in her bag, giving Clark his glasses, watch, and wallet. Lastly, she slipped his wedding ring onto his finger. "You owe me," she said, trying to sound stern. "For cheating me out of seeing Superman strip."

He kissed her. "Once we're home, honey ..." he said.

Lois chuckled at the promise dripping from his words. She picked up her cell phone. "I'll call Evan," she said. "It's definitely time we got out of here."

Two hours later, Evan Shadbolt watched the news as he ate his evening meal in the cafe at the EPRAD base. Everything — the

headlines, the reports, the interviews — centred exclusively on Superman's appearance in Centennial Park.

The transformation was mind-boggling, Evan mused. To think that for seven years, he had sat in the staffroom of the compound, never suspecting that on the other side of the door was a humane and caring individual endowed with such mighty strength of character.

Scorching shame rose into his throat — shame that reared up every time he thought about his part in the alien operation. There was little he could do now other than offer his scant support to Lois and Clark and try to teach his girls to question the prejudices of others.

His radio buzzed, and a tinny voice instructed him he was required to check an intruder at the front gate.

Evan sighed. Another one. Since the asteroid, the front gate of the base had been the target for dozens of people wanting to catch a glimpse of Superman. He'd hoped that, following the appearance today, people would stop coming to the base.

But apparently, someone hadn't gotten the message that Superman was no longer here.

Leaving his meal and hoping he would be back before it had cooled too much, Evan took the elevator to the ground floor and crossed the stretch of concrete to the front gate.

A woman stood there — a petite woman, probably in her fifties, with light sandy-coloured hair swept into a bundle at the back of her head. She was wearing a dark skirt that reached her ankles and a well-worn coat.

Evan went to the gate. She looked harmless enough, but that didn't change the fact that she had no business being at the front gate of the EPRAD base. "You can't stay there, Madam," he said kindly.

She pushed a sealed envelope through the bars of the gate. "Could you please give this to Superman?" she asked.

"What is it?"

"A note of appreciation," she said.

"Superman isn't here anymore."

She pushed the letter further through the grill of the gate. "Please give this to Superman," she said.

Evan was on the verge of telling her they were a space research facility, not a postal service, when he noticed the resolve in her eyes. Whoever she was, it was important to her that this letter get to Superman. He took the envelope. "OK," he said. "I'm not sure when Superman will be back at the base, but I'll try to ensure he gets your letter. You should go home now."

"Thank you," she said with infinitely more gratitude than his meagre gesture warranted. She gave him a small smile and picked up her shabby suitcase. She turned away, and Evan looked beyond her, noticing there was no car in sight.

"Ma'am?" he said. "It's a couple of miles to the nearest bus stop. Do you have someone I can call to come and pick you up?"

She turned. "No," she said. "But I'll be fine. Just give that letter to Superman."

It would be dark in twenty minutes. Evan had only an hour left of his shift. He paused. It was against protocol to allow members of the public into the base, but he'd followed instructions to the letter at the compound — and been complicit in one of the greatest miscarriages of justice of all time. "Ma'am," he said, wondering if this were stupidity or the first step in a new direction. "Would you like to come inside and have a cup of tea? I'll be leaving soon, and I can drive you to the bus stop."

"No," she said. "Thank you."

"Do you have somewhere to go tonight? Do you have money for the bus?"

"I have money," she said, a spark of pride in her tone.

It would be dark before she got to the bus stop. Evan punched in the security code and opened the gate. "Come on," he said. "I'll get you a cup of tea."

He saw the battle raging inside of her. Saw how tempted she was by the thought of a hot drink and somewhere to rest. How far had she walked? Had she taken the bus? Or had she walked much further than

the two miles from the bus stop? When had she last eaten?

"It's quiet here this time of the day," Evan said. "Most of the scientists have gone home."

He saw her moment of capitulation and wondered why delivering her letter had been so important to her. "Thank you," she said with quiet grace. "That would be wonderful."

Evan took her suitcase, re-locked the gate, and re-set the alarm. "Come this way," he said. "What's your name?"

"Esther Wallace."

She wasn't wearing a wedding ring. "We'll get you that cup of tea," he said, "and then I'll find you somewhere to stay for the night."

Part 16

"Would you like another cup of tea, Miss Wallace?" Evan asked. She'd accepted his offer of a meal and eaten it without appearing famished, but she had devoured the tea with evident enjoyment.

Miss Wallace reached for her plain calico bag.

Evan stood quickly. "I'll get it," he said.

He returned with the cup of tea and placed it in front of her.

"Thank you, Mr Shadbolt," she said with a soft smile.

Evan turned his attention to his own drink, wondering what he was going to do with this quiet lady who had been so determined to deliver her letter.

Where did she live?

Her clothes were — as far as his unpractised eye could determine — unfashionable. They were dark in colour, unadorned with any sort of frills, and eminently practical — but not of inferior quality. When he had lifted the coat from her shoulders after they had entered the cafe, he had been surprised by its weight.

And without her coat, he'd observed that she wasn't as malnourished as he had feared. She was lean, but food and tea seemed to have brought a complete recovery from what Evan surmised had been a long walk to the base.

So why was she here?

Did she have any plans beyond getting the letter to Superman?

And why had that been so important to her?

He'd walked back from the front gate with her. He'd brought her to the cafe and provided her with a meal. And at some point during that time, he'd realised he wasn't going to be able to drop her at the bus stop and continue with his life. She hadn't admitted it, but Evan was sure she had nowhere to stay tonight.

She wasn't a Metropolis local. She was visiting his city.

And as far as he could deduce, her sole purpose for being in Metropolis was the letter that sat in the pocket of his guard's jacket.

"Miss Wallace?" he said. She looked up from her tea, eyeing him with calm composure. Evan decided to be direct. "Do you have anywhere to stay tonight?"

"I haven't planned anything," she said.

"Do you have the bus fare to get home?"

"I'm not going home."

"Did someone hurt you?" he asked quickly. "Is there a reason why you can't go home? Is that why you want to contact Superman? Do you need his help?"

"No," she said. "No one hurt me."

"Why is it so important your letter gets to Superman?"

Her smile came briefly. "Because so often today, people forget as soon as the danger has passed. I wanted him to know we are grateful for what he did."

"Did you see the press conference today?"

Her sandy-coloured eyebrows lifted. "There was a press conference?" she gasped.

Evan nodded. "Yes," he confirmed. "In Centennial Park."

"And Superman was there?"

"Yes."

Her face fell, and she stared into her tea.

"There were thousands of people there," Evan said gently. "No one got to talk to him personally."

"He's not coming back here?"

“No.”

Miss Wallace sipped from her tea, her face carefully blank, but Evan could sense the disappointment in the slight droop of her shoulders.

“I live with my two daughters,” he said. “They can share a room tonight. You’re welcome to stay in my older daughter’s room.”

She looked up with a brave smile. “Thank you, Mr Shadbolt. But I ... I need to keep moving. I need to leave Metropolis.”

“But not tonight,” Evan said, moderating the firmness of his tone with a smile. “It’s too late. It’s going to be a cold night. I can drop you off at the bus depot tomorrow, and you can take the bus to wherever you need to go.”

She hesitated for only a moment. “Thank you,” she said with sincerity. “Thank you.”

The ease of her agreement surprised him. Perhaps working as an agent had caused him to expect everyone to be instinctively cynical of another’s motives.

This woman — this Miss Esther Wallace — trusted him enough to go with him and stay the night in his house.

Perhaps it was a good thing he’d found her. With that sort of outlook, she would be an easy target for someone with less than honourable intentions.

“I have to do a few things before I leave,” Evan said. “Stay here and enjoy your tea. I won’t be any longer than twenty minutes. If anyone asks questions, tell them to contact Evan Shadbolt.”

“Thank you.”

Evan walked from the cafe, carrying with him the memory of her smile.

Lois had tried to relax in Clark’s arms as they’d flown home to Smallville, but her mind felt as if it were being telescoped in on itself as she tried to determine the next step in this journey of decisions.

Ruby Rhodes’ question had shaken her. What if Clark had noticed her use of the word ‘imprison’? What if he demanded answers? What would she do?

Had enough time passed? How would Clark react to knowing he had been imprisoned for seven years for the ‘crime’ of being an alien? Would he again suffer under the weight of hatred and distrust that had been his daily experience for years?

Was it possible to concoct a sanitised version that omitted the worst of the abuse?

Was it possible to tell him anything without awakening other memories?

When they’d arrived home, Lois had forced herself to smile and speak cheerfully as she excused herself from Clark’s dinner preparations.

In the bedroom, she stood at the spot where their spoken promises had brought authenticity to their marriage certificate. Outside, the moonlight caused the dappled tree-shadows to dance across the ground.

How much longer did she have?

Would Eric’s ‘grain of a lead’ find Martha Kent?

Everything had happened so quickly. Lois felt as if she had stepped onto a sled at the top of a large icy mountain. She hadn’t even had the time to settle comfortably before they had been hurtling downhill.

Just four days ago, she had been at the EPRAD base, her stomach in a tangle of trepidation as Clark had prepared to fly into space to change the course of the asteroid.

The weight of responsibility seemed unbearably heavy. Clark’s future was in her hands. In truth, it had been in her hands since the day she had walked into the compound to begin her assignment as the overseer of the alien operation.

She heard his footsteps coming up the stairs, manufactured a smile, and turned to greet him.

Clark didn’t stop at the doorway, but came right into the room — to the window. He smiled down at her, but his expression was so full

of concern that it caught at her heart. “Are you OK?” he asked softly.

She nodded, not trusting her voice to speak without cracking.

Clark folded her into his arms and held her close. “I feel it, too,” he said. “The need to stop and draw breath.”

“Things have happened so quickly,” Lois said, her head lounging on his broad shoulder. “And it must seem even more so to you. It must feel as if so much has been packed into the three days you can remember.”

“But a lot has happened to you, too,” he said. “You’ve faced some huge decisions.”

Lois’s breath congested as she wondered if he’d remembered something. He continued to hold her close, and slowly the tension trickled from her body.

After long minutes of soaking in the sanctuary of Clark’s presence, Lois lifted from his shoulder and turned in his arms to face the window. To her left was the dark bulk of the barn. Recalling their conversation over breakfast, she said, “Have you been into the barn since we got back from Metropolis?”

“Yeah.”

“Was it all right?”

“Yeah.” Clark released a long breath. “It was all right. It just feels as if there is something there, something I should remember.”

“Have you been into the other bedroom yet?”

“Yeah. I went in there while you were in Smallville yesterday.”

“Was it OK?”

“It wasn’t as bad as I had thought it might be. I think knowing what happened in there helped a lot.”

“Do you think there could be something like that in the barn?” Lois asked. “Do you think something happened in there, and although you can’t remember the incident, you can remember the feelings it evoked?”

She felt Clark shake his head. “No,” he said. “It’s different. It’s not ... evil — like I felt in the bedroom. It’s more ...” She heard his grunt of frustration. “It’s more like it’s a huge maze, and if I could just get through it, I would perhaps understand. But every time I go in there, I just keep running into dead ends.”

An idea sprouted in her mind, and Lois turned to Clark. “I have a suggestion,” she said. “But if you don’t want to do it, that’s OK.”

He smiled — perhaps in response to her sudden spurt of energy. “What would you like to do?”

“I think there is merit in meeting something head-on, so we could go to the barn together. It will be cold, so perhaps we will need to take a blanket. We could sit on the hay. Maybe in the dark, wrapped together in a blanket. And just talk. About anything. Or not talk. Either way, we could face whatever it is together.”

“After we’ve eaten dinner, we could take our coffee and some of your apple pie out there.”

Lois smiled as a sudden gust of enthusiasm chased away the heaviness of her mood. “It will be like a picnic,” she said. “A moonlit picnic for two.”

Clark kissed her. “Let’s go eat,” he said. “And I’ll put on the coffee machine.”

Evan had been a little uneasy about his daughters’ reaction to their unexpected guest, but his concerns proved to be unfounded. Esther — she’d asked him to call her that as they had driven home — had slid into his kitchen and his family as if she had belonged there for years.

She hadn’t been at all fazed when he’d told her Layla was deaf. She’d known to turn towards Layla when speaking and had included his elder daughter in the conversation with an easy naturalness that warmed Evan’s heart.

After they’d enjoyed hot chocolate and cookies together, Layla signed to say she needed to go to her room to work on a school project, and Evan allowed Abi to go and watch her nightly half-hour of television.

Which left him alone in the kitchen with his guest. “Go and sit down,” he said. “I’ll see to this.”

Esther smiled — she had a very natural smile. “We’ll do it together,” she insisted. “It won’t take long with two of us.”

So they did. They chatted as the table was cleared and the nightly chores attended to, covering a broad range of general topics, but never broaching how she had come to be at the gate of the EPRAD base with a letter for Superman or how he had come to be the single father of two daughters.

By the time they had restored the kitchen to order, the whole situation was feeling decidedly surreal to Evan. It had to be her influence, he reflected, because usually people — women especially — found him to be distant and crotchety and therefore avoided him.

“Time for you to go to bed, pumpkin,” Evan said to Abi when he and Esther went into the living room.

Abi shot him that look that females of all ages seemed to have as natural weaponry, but stood from her chair without objection and hugged her father. “G’night, Dad,” she said. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, Abi-girl,” he said.

She paused.

Evan waited, wondering what she would do.

Abi stepped up to Esther and hugged her. Esther responded with a pleased smile. “Goodnight, Abi,” she said.

“Goodnight, Miss Wallace,” she said.

“You have a lovely family, Evan,” Esther said as Abi’s footsteps faded up the stairs.

“Thanks,” he said, wondering if she would ask the obvious question regarding the whereabouts of the girls’ mother.

“Will you take me to the central bus depot tomorrow morning, please?” Esther asked.

Obviously, she wasn’t a curious woman. Or perhaps she was, but she didn’t pry. Or perhaps she really didn’t want to open the way for him to ask questions of her. “Of course,” Evan said. “Do you know the time of your bus?”

“No.”

“My shift doesn’t start until midday tomorrow, so if you have a long wait, perhaps we could pass the time with coffee.” As the final word left his mouth, Evan’s throat seized. He had just come alarmingly close to asking a woman for a date — something he had promised himself he would never do again.

“You’ve been very kind, Evan,” Esther said. “But I have already taken up too much of your time.”

Perhaps she did see him as a cantankerous old grump after all.

He stood, planning to offer her the television guide. At the same moment, she stood, and suddenly, they were standing within a few inches of each other.

“I would like an early night,” Esther said with a sweet smile.

“Goodnight, Evan.”

She turned from him and went to the stairs.

Evan collapsed back into the armchair. She was ... lovely.

Who was she?

And had she really come to Metropolis for the sole purpose of delivering a letter to Superman?

Lois and Clark ate steaming apple pie and melting ice cream as they lounged into the soft hay, protected from the chilly night air by a large blanket and regular applications of superheat. When they had finished the pie, they took the cups of reheated-on-the-spot coffee and slowly sipped the smooth liquid.

“Are you all right?” Lois asked. “Can you still feel something here?”

“Yes,” Clark said. “But it doesn’t seem quite so disconcerting when I’m with you.”

“Maybe you are growing accustomed to it.”

“I ... I’ve been wondering if perhaps my dad died in here,” Clark said.

Jonathan Kent hadn’t died here, but if Lois admitted to knowing that, Clark was going to push for details.

“It’s possible,” he continued. “He would have spent a lot of time in

here.”

“But you said it’s not necessarily a bad feeling.”

“It’s not. So perhaps it’s balanced by all the good times we had together in here.”

Lois nodded and concentrated on her coffee.

“Are you all right?” Clark asked. “You’ve been very quiet since we got home.”

Lois snuggled a little closer, drawing comfort from Clark’s arm as it tightened around her shoulders.

“Are you worried about something?” he asked quietly.

She was. And her worries had been gnawing at her gut since Ruby Rhodes had stormed onto the dais and used the word ‘imprison’ in reference to Clark. “We have so much,” she said. “Being with you, being married, being so euphorically in love.”

“They don’t sound like things to worry about,” Clark said gently.

“I guess I’m so happy now that it’s easy to worry about losing some of it.”

“Like Linda?”

“Yeah,” Lois said, following his lead with relief. “We worked together for a long time. We knew there were dangers inherent in the job, but I never really thought about how I would feel if I lost her.”

Clark put down his coffee and turned to his wife. “Honey,” he said. “I’m really sorry that Linda was killed, and I know how much her passing hurt you. But it’s not realistic to worry about losing me. There are significant differences.”

Lois took another mouthful of her coffee and then placed the cup on the floor. She nestled in — her back against his chest, and his arms folded along hers as she tightened the blanket around them.

“There’s something I need to tell you,” she said. Her heart began to thump. Was now the time? Should she tell him about the cell? What should she say? How could she start? How could she find an explanation for something that was unexplainably cruel and intolerably brutal?

“OK,” he said.

In his voice, she heard his trust. He wasn’t overly worried. He believed that whatever she was going to tell him, they would deal with it together.

Was she willing to jeopardize that? Now? Right now? Or did she want this wonderful feeling of closeness to continue? Clark had come to the barn, but being here hadn’t triggered his memories. Today was almost over.

She would do it tomorrow.

She would tell him about the cell. Tomorrow.

“There is a substance that weakens you,” Lois said.

“A substance? Something I eat? Like an allergy?”

“No. It looks like a green rock. Perhaps it came from your planet. We don’t really know too much other than if it’s in the vicinity, it causes you to become like everyone else.”

“I lose all the extra abilities?”

“Yes. You lose your great strength. And speed. And you become vulnerable to the same things the rest of us are vulnerable to.”

“Like bullets?”

“Yes.”

“So if someone wanted to kill me, they could shoot me if they also had some of the green rock?”

“Yes.”

Clark was silent, and Lois could imagine his mind trying to assimilate this new and unsettling information.

“To the best of my knowledge, it was all destroyed,” Lois said.

“Who knows about it?”

“The same people who know about you. Eric. Daniel. Evan. Daniel and Evan had it destroyed.”

She felt a jolt through Clark’s body, and her breath stopped. “Did Moyné have some of it?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“So that’s why I couldn’t protect you?”

“You did protect me,” Lois said. “You stopped me from killing

him.”

“But ever since you told me about that, I’ve wondered why I had to plead for his life.”

She waited, trying to prepare for the questions she knew were coming.

“So the green stuff weakens me,” Clark said, speaking slowly, although Lois figured his mind was probably racing. “It makes me like everyone else. That shouldn’t have stopped me from physically restraining Moyne. Even with the green rock, why did I just stand there and let you scuffle with him?”

“The green stuff doesn’t just take away your powers,” she admitted. “It causes you pain.”

“So much pain that I stood by and watched someone assault you?”

“Yes. It causes you intense pain.”

She could feel his disbelief. “Why couldn’t I fight it?” Clark said. “Surely if someone was hurting you ...”

“Clark, it totally debilitates you. It overpowers you and causes you intense agony.”

He was silent for a long moment. “That’s kind of sobering,” he said eventually. “Until now, I’d thought ...”

She knew what he’d thought — that he was physically invulnerable.

“Yesterday, I was taking down some boxes that had been stored on a high shelf,” Clark said. “One of them fell and landed on my foot.”

“You didn’t feel anything?”

“I felt something,” Clark said. “But not pain. I opened the box, expecting it to be empty — I lifted it easily. But it wasn’t empty; it was filled with tools. Wrenches, spanners, levers; even a couple of half-sized crowbars.”

“So it was heavy?”

“Very heavy. At first, I wondered why my reflexes were so sluggish. I mean, if I can fly across America in a few minutes, I should be able to evade a falling box.”

“Perhaps you knew instinctively that you wouldn’t be hurt.”

“That’s what I figured when I took off my shoe and discovered there wasn’t even a mark.”

“You don’t feel pain,” Lois said. “Not unless there’s some of the green rock around.”

“Is it the only substance that has that effect on me?”

“As far as I know.”

“Is there a lot of it?”

“I’ve seen a few pieces. Daniel told me he had it all destroyed.”

“Where is the piece that Moyne had?”

“Daniel took that.”

“If Superman ever has enemies, they are going to want to get hold of more of it.”

“Superman doesn’t have any enemies,” Lois said.

“He will eventually.”

“Why? When he’s here to help us?”

“If Superman saw some armed men going into a bank and attempting to rob it, what would he do?” Clark asked.

Fresh comprehension scurried through Lois’s mind. “Oh.”

“He’s going to step in,” Clark answered his own question. “The bank workers and customers are going to be safe. The money is going to be safe.”

“But the would-be thieves are going to wish Superman had kept his nose out of their business.”

“Exactly,” Clark said. “And the next criminals who plan a bank robbery are going to realise the green rock is a vital component of their success.”

“The public doesn’t know it exists,” Lois said.

“Moyne knew.”

“Moyne’s dead.”

“Was Moyne an agent?”

Lois’s fears billowed again. “Yes.”

“He was the ‘disgruntled agent’ who leaked information about me to the reporter?”

This was getting precariously close to the cell, but Lois couldn’t think of a way to evade the question. “Yes.”

“So Superman already has enemies?”

“Moyne was a sick man and a vicious murderer,” Lois said. “He killed two fellow agents. And he didn’t just kill them; he mutilated their bodies.”

“There will be others who want to bring down Superman,” Clark predicted. “And the more he does, the more determined they will become.”

Lois hadn’t thought too much about that.

“Are you sure you want this?” Clark said. “Are you sure you want your husband in this fight?”

Lois turned swiftly. “Yes,” she said. “Yes. Because if good doesn’t fight, evil will win.”

“Are you sure you want *your* husband leading the fight?” Clark said. “Because this isn’t something that can be done half-heartedly. If I enter the fight, if I make a stand, there will be no turning back.”

“You’re already in the fight,” Lois said. “Your heart will always stand for what is right and true and just. And your actions will always follow your heart.”

“Are you OK with that?” Clark said, his low voice echoing softly around the barn.

“Remember my vow to you the night we were married?” Lois said. “I said I will support you in however you choose to use your special abilities.”

Clark brushed back her hair. “I love you,” he said as he pushed aside her sweater and kissed her shoulder. “And I need you.”

Lois took his face in her hands. She kissed his mouth tenderly. At least, she had intended it to be tender, but the kiss took on a life of its own, igniting her body with insistent need.

“Ever ... made ... love ... in ... a ... barn?” Clark asked — his words squeezed out between fiery kisses.

“No ... But I ... *really* want to.”

It was therapy, Lois told herself with the last vestiges of a functioning brain. More good memories to stand against the bad.

Then she gave herself up to the power of Clark’s love.

~ Sunday ~

Evan shot upright from his pillow.

He stared into the darkness.

His mind whirled.

What if ...

He shook his head, trying to eke out comprehension from the haze of sleep.

What if Esther knew Clark?

What if that was why she had been so insistent on giving him the letter?

What if ...

What if she didn’t just know him?

What if she’d raised him?

What if *Miss* Wallace was *Mrs* Kent?

Part 17

Evan held the unopened envelope in his hand and stared at it.

The demands of being an agent had long ago dispelled his misgivings — instilled by his mom — about opening correspondence meant for others.

But this letter had been written by a gracious lady. A lady who was possibly trying to contact her son after years of forced separation.

To open her letter seemed wrong.

Before, he had been merely curious about her. Now, he needed to know who she was and why she wanted to contact Superman. But he couldn’t say anything that might lead her to suspect he had any knowledge beyond what could be reasonably expected for the average space facility security guard. As much as he felt drawn to ‘Esther Wallace’, his first loyalty was to Clark and Lois and the protection of their secret.

He owed them that much.

With regards to his guest, there were three possibilities.

Esther Wallace could be exactly as she proclaimed — a grateful woman wanting to thank Superman.

Or she could be someone from Clark's past trying to re-establish contact with him.

Or she could be a reporter. Or a rogue agent. Or someone hired by a criminal group wanting to find out more about the man with superhuman speed and strength.

She didn't look like someone with inimical intentions, but Shanti hadn't looked like an opportunistic, two-timing, baby-deserting jezebel.

Had Esther's naiveté been an act? An act to inveigle herself into his home in the hope of gaining information?

Had he been scammed again?

Evan replayed their conversations in his minds. Other than her initial request that he give the letter to Superman, she had shown no inclination to talk about the superhero. If she had come seeking information, if she had somehow discovered he had been one of the guards assigned to guard the alien, wouldn't she have asked more questions?

Perhaps. But, as he knew, the best information was often harvested after sowing a lot of patience. Develop trust. Foster familiarity. Wait until people felt comfortable talking. Listen. And then listen some more. And only then, ask questions.

He had to read the letter. He didn't want to, but he had to.

Evan rose from the bed and put on his robe. He put the envelope into his pocket and went downstairs to the kitchen. There, he set the kettle to boil. When it had, he poured the water into a cup and returned to his bedroom. The steam from the cup melted enough of the seal to enable him to release the flap without causing significant damage.

He gripped the single piece of paper inside the envelope and hesitated — strangely disinclined to flout the trust that Esther had shown in him.

But if her story were true, her letter would contain nothing of importance.

He needed information. If Esther had known Clark, Evan couldn't let her leave. Not if there was a chance she intended to use her knowledge to hurt Clark. But if she were his mother, Evan had a responsibility to see her safely returned to her son.

If she just disappeared again ...

Evan took the paper from the envelope and unfolded it.

The handwriting was smooth and neat, the message short:

Dear Superman:

Thank you for saving our planet. I hope you have recuperated well from your ordeal. Don't forget there is nothing like buttermilk for what ails you.

In gratitude,

Esther Wallace

Evan re-read the note. He dismissed the first sentence as containing nothing significant and concentrated on the second sentence. Was there something there?

Your ordeal? The public hadn't been give specific details of Superman's need to recover, but it was a reasonable assumption that the mission into space had been an ordeal.

He moved to the last sentence.

Was there a hidden meaning? Or was it just a motherly countrywoman dispensing advice to someone from a younger generation? Her clothes suggested she had come from a rural area.

The Kents came from Kansas.

The note gave him nothing conclusive. If there was a sinister reason behind her appearance at EPRAD's gates, it was to be expected that she — or the people who had sent her — would be smart enough not to put anything in the note that could allude to their intentions.

Evan read it one final time, committing every word to memory. He held it up to the light, looking for indentations that could perhaps convey a secret message. There were none.

He refolded the note and carefully slipped it back into the

envelope. He ran a glue stick along the flap and pressed it closed.

What now?

Evan picked up his cell phone and left his bedroom. Before descending the stairs, he popped his head into Abi's room and saw that both of his daughters were safely asleep.

In the farthest corner of the kitchen, he dialled Scardino. The phone rang out. He dialled again, and a few seconds later, Daniel's sleepy voice came down the line. "Do you know what time it is?"

Evan automatically checked the clock on the wall. "Ten past four," he whispered into the phone.

"This had better be important," Daniel growled.

"What do you know about the missing person?"

"What miss- Oh, *that* missing person."

"Yes. Have you seen a photo?"

"No."

"Has anyone? Menzies?"

"No. Why?"

"A woman came to the base yesterday with a letter."

"Another one? They've been collecting the fan mail. Apparently, they've filled half a room."

"I know that," Evan said, keeping a rein on his exasperation. "But this letter was hand-delivered."

"There have been plenty of those, too."

"This one was delivered by a lady, probably in her early fifties."

"What does the letter say?"

"Nothing unexpected," Evan admitted.

"She could be a reporter."

"She could be. She could also be you-know-who."

There was a moment of silence as, presumably, Daniel contemplated that possibility. "Where is she now?"

"I brought her home."

You what?

"She didn't have anywhere to go," Evan said, feeling defensive.

"She said she wanted to catch a bus, but it was getting late."

"Your first obligation is to maintain confidentiality."

"I know — but she doesn't know I know, so she's not going to admit to anything easily."

"Where's the letter?"

"I have it. I'm at home."

"I'm out of town," Daniel said. "I'll contact Eric. He'll want the letter."

"When?" Evan hissed. "I need answers quickly."

"I'll call him now. He should be there in less than half an hour."

"What can he do? Even if he has the letter?"

"We know of another sample of writing that could be relevant. He can have them compared."

"That's probably not going to prove anything," Evan said grimly.

"It's all we have."

"Tell him to hurry." Evan hung up and listened intently. The whirl of the fridge motor provided a low accompaniment to the soft drone of the heater, but there was no sound of movement.

He crept back up the stairs, always listening. At the top, he checked Abi's room again. Neither of the girls had moved.

As an agent, he probably should check that Esther was asleep, too. But he couldn't.

She had shown remarkable trust in him. He couldn't breach that trust. Not until he knew a lot more about Esther Wallace and what she wanted with Superman.

"Eric?"

Eric tried to rouse himself from the depths of sleep. "What? Phoebe? You all right?"

"Your cell phone is ringing."

"Uh. Sorry." Eric lurched from the warmth of his bed and hurried into the next room. The call was from Scardino. "What do you have?"

"I don't have anything," Scardino replied. "But Evan Shadbolt has a letter that could be an attempt to reunite the family."

“From whom?”

“Possibly the missing person.”

“Where is she now?”

“At his home. I said you’d go there and pick up the letter. If you take it to the widow who has seen the address written by unknown female, you could ask her to compare the handwriting.”

The clock on the wall had not yet reached four-thirty. It was going to be hours before it would be acceptable to knock on Mrs Deller’s door. “OK,” Eric agreed absently, ransacking his mind for a quicker and more reliable means to verify or refute this woman’s identity. “But it’s going to take some time.”

“Shadbolt will know to try to detain her.”

Eric grunted. “Leave it to me,” he said.

“Thanks. Ah ... sorry to wake you.”

Eric disconnected the call. A movement at the door caused him to look up. “Is everything all right?” Phoebe asked.

Was this the first time in their entire marriage that his wife had inquired about something related to his work? “Yeah,” he said. “But I have to go out. You go back to bed.”

Instead of turning, she stepped up him and rested her hand on his arm in a brief touch. “Take care,” she said.

With that, she returned to the bedroom. Eric shook his head and forced his thoughts back to Martha Kent.

After Evan had dressed, he waited in the living room, out of sight of anyone upstairs but sufficiently close to the door to hear the softest of knocks.

He clutched the letter in his hand. What were the chances of Eric being able to establish a definitive identification from handwriting alone?

Minimal, he realised. And time was short.

He was going to have to question Esther. He doubted she would admit to anything easily, so his best shot was going to be attempting to expose a hole in her story.

He had to do it.

But it was going to feel like interrogating a friend.

Esther Wallace awakened. Within a few seconds, her initial disorientation passed as she remembered the kindness of Evan Shadbolt in offering her somewhere to stay overnight.

She’d had some reservations about accepting the hospitality of a stranger — particularly a man, and a city person to boot. But he hadn’t done one thing to cause her to question his trustworthiness.

Her greatest fears had not been to do with her safety, but about whether he would grill her regarding her resolve to deliver the note to Superman. Last night, she had been tired, but her primary reason for retiring early had been to escape further conversation with Evan.

He had seemed to accept her explanation about the note. She suspected the restraints on his curiosity were due to him having things he would prefer not to discuss. Like the absence of a wife. And two daughters who bore not the slightest resemblance to him.

She hoped the morning busyness of the family would forestall any questions that might have occurred to Evan overnight. If he asked her again to have coffee, she would refuse. If needed, she was willing to eat into her limited finances to buy a ticket on the earliest bus out of Metropolis.

The house was silent. Esther rose from the bed, wanting to shower early enough that she didn’t disrupt the morning routine of her host family.

Evan heard the movement upstairs, coming from Layla’s room. The door to the bathroom shut, and a few minutes later, he heard the sound of the shower.

He sprang to the front door and opened it.

Where the hell was Eric Menzies? Didn’t he understand that time was limited?

Or perhaps he thought Evan could simply lock her up. Like they

had done to Clark.

Evan quashed those thoughts, knowing they stemmed from his own guilt, and turned his attention to what he needed to do now.

Esther was already up. She probably intended to make an early start.

He had to remember that whoever she was and whatever she wanted, his first priority was to safeguard the happiness of Lois and Clark.

Realising he had no ready excuse for loitering near his front door, he returned to the kitchen and tried to force his mind to think like an agent.

Eric Menzies arrived at Bessolo Boulevard and let himself into the huge warehouse. He unlocked the room where the contents of Neville’s apartment had been stored. Turning on the light, he was met with large piles of haphazardly placed furniture, a jumble of disparate boxes, and stray household items.

He glared at the clutter, realising that if he had the entire day, he wouldn’t be able to go through everything here.

But he didn’t have all day.

He needed a shortcut. He was going to have to try to think as Neville had thought. Eric scowled. What had been important to Phoebe’s nephew?

He had liked to kill. He had done it with a ferocity that was barbaric. He had a talent for weaselling out of the consequences of his actions — usually by blaming someone else.

There had been Malcolm’s kitten.

And Phil Deller. And John Bortolotto.

And the attempted rape of Lois Lane.

How many more incidents?

Surely, his opportunities for that level of evil had been limited. At least, Eric hoped they had been limited.

In the long-passed days of her youth, Phoebe had enjoyed skiing. When she hadn’t been able to ski, she had enjoyed reading about skiing.

Eric moved through the boxes, testing the weight of each. The third one he lifted was heavy; he opened it, and a torrent of nausea gushed through him.

On top was a magazine — the sort of magazine Eric hadn’t even realised existed. There was a picture of a naked woman on the front. And a man ...

Holding the offending item by the spine, Eric shook it rapidly. Nothing dropped from its pages. He threw it to the floor and only just managed to stop himself from wiping his hand on his clothes.

Working efficiently, he checked every book and magazine in the box, trying to focus on his task rather than take in the revolting subject matter of Neville’s reading material.

The next box was also heavy and revealed more of the same — depictions of gratuitous sex and stomach-churning violence, but not the one thing Eric sought.

By the fourth box, he was wondering if he needed to change tactics. Perhaps he had figured wrongly.

Then he stopped abruptly as he caught sight of a children’s book lying in the bottom of a box. He picked up the thick hardcover book and opened the front flap. There was an inscription in a handwriting that was instantly recognisable — *To dear Neville, Happy eighth birthday, love from Aunt Phoebe and Uncle Eric.*

Eric hurled the book across the room. It hit the wall and dropped with a thud.

But, midflight, it had given up what Neville had hidden in its pages — a small pebble of green rock.

Lois was dragged from the labyrinth of her thoughts by the jangling sound of her cell phone. She leaned out of bed far enough to reach her bag. The call was from Evan.

“Hi,” she said, her heart thumping. Evan calling this early in the morning could not be good.

“Hi, Lois,” he said. “Sorry to wake you.”

“You didn’t.”

“You’re up? This early?”

“It’s a farm,” she said, wishing Evan would get to his reason for calling. “Is everything OK?”

“Can you talk?”

“I’m alone.”

“Where’s Clark?”

“He’s, ah, gone out to get us some breakfast.”

“Gone out?”

“Yes.” To Paris for butter croissants. Lois heard Evan’s long in-breath, and her anxiety escalated. “What is it?”

“Yesterday a woman came to the base. She said she had a letter for Superman.”

Martha? A swirling mass of joy swirled through Lois. But it was joy spiked with foreboding. “Did she give a name?”

“Yes. But there’s every chance it’s a false name.”

It could be the name she had been using since she escaped. Or the name forced upon her by a witness-protection-type program. “She’s not admitting to anything?”

“No. Neither am I. Have you ever seen any photos?”

“No. Everything personal was cleared from the house.”

“Do you know anything that could help with identification?”

“I know her name. I know she was much loved in the local community. She was a great cook and enjoyed gardening.”

“Is there any chance that one of the neighbours has a photograph?”

She could try Maggie Irig. “I’ll see what I can do,” Lois said.

“Where is she now?”

“She’s staying with me. But she intends to catch a bus this morning.”

“Where to?”

“She wouldn’t say.”

“Could Menzies arrange for her to be tailed?”

“Daniel’s not available, and it obviously couldn’t be me. Do we want to involve anyone else in this?”

“Not if we can avoid it,” Lois said. The last thing they needed was to lead someone directly to Smallville, Kansas. “Is she well? Happy?”

“She seems to be well. She was hungry, but she doesn’t look malnourished.”

Lois felt a glimmer of implausible hope that the years hadn’t been too cruel to Martha. “What was in the letter?”

“It was just a short note to thank him for saving the world.”

“OK. I’ll get back to you about the photograph.”

“Are you at Clark’s home?”

“Yes.”

“You said it’s a farm?”

“Yes.”

“Dairy cows?”

“No. Why?”

“She mentioned buttermilk as a sort of cure-all. Has Clark ever said anything like that?”

“No. But from the impression I get, it sounds like something she might say.”

“OK. You should prepare Clark.”

Yeah. “I know,” Lois said, feeling her stomach clench. “Thanks for calling me.”

She disconnected the call and hunkered down into the warmth of the bed.

What now?

Her gut said this woman was Martha Kent.

That was the best of news.

Clark needed a family. He needed his mom.

And Martha — a mother whose son had been taken away, who had probably spent years wondering, hoping, fearing — she needed her son.

There had been no mention of Jonathan, so it seemed likely that Martha’s suffering had included the loss of her husband.

Now — perhaps — she was coming home.

But she was coming home to a son who didn’t remember her.

Clark’s amnesia had brought so many positives to their relationship, but it was going seem like just another cruel blow to Martha Kent.

Lois was going to have to tell him. She had to prepare him so Martha’s homecoming was as happy as possible.

But timing was still the issue.

She needed to tell Clark early enough to give him time to come to terms with the past before the reunion.

Should she tell Clark about his mom over breakfast? Should she dash to the Irigs’ farm, hoping to catch them before they left for church? Should she ask Clark to take her to church and hope it would give her some inspiration for how to do this? Would Clark be more receptive to shocking news after he’d been to church?

Or was she just scrambling for a way to justify putting off the inevitable?

Should she say anything *before* Martha had been positively identified?

Lois had trusted her gut countless times when her own life had been at risk. But now, the stakes seemed so much higher. This was Clark’s happiness.

Was it fair to give him the hope of his mom returning when there was still a chance it would amount to nothing?

Was there any way possible to give details about his mom’s disappearance without mentioning the cell?

Clark’s time in the cell could be explained, as Eric had done, as a time of familiarisation. A time when those with authority and knowledge had tested the alien to determine whether he presented a threat to humanity. But that required being vague about how much time had passed. Not even the dilatory reputation of government bureaucracy was enough to explain seven years.

One of Clark’s first questions was going to be how long his mom had been missing. Incarcerating an innocent woman, taking her from her home — there was no way to dress that up to be anything other than what it was — a cruel attack based solely on prejudice and hatred.

Assuming Martha could be positively identified, she would not be able to get to Smallville until lunchtime at the earliest.

Clark would be home soon. She couldn’t leave before then. After breakfast, she would go to Maggie. If Maggie had a photo of Martha, Lois would call Evan before coming home. If the descriptions matched, the odds would move in favour of a positive identification. Then, she was going to have to accept that she had no option but to tell Clark the truth.

But she still wouldn’t know for sure that Martha Kent was alive and found and returning to her son.

Lois dropped her head into her hands.

So many decisions.

So much responsibility.

A low whirr of moving air caused her to lift her head, quickly brushing away the tears that had gathered in her eyes.

The bedroom door opened, and her husband walked in, bearing two cups of steaming coffee, a couple of bags that promised the delights of French pastries, and a happy smile.

It was the smile that nearly dismantled her composure.

Lois busied herself with pulling back the covers. “Let’s have breakfast in bed,” she suggested.

Clark handed her the cups, placed the bags on the bed, and spun back into his sleep shorts. He took off his glasses, gazed at the bed until little wisps of steam arose from it, and then climbed in beside her.

The coffee was smooth and creamy. The croissants were warm and deliciously light and buttery.

The company was gorgeous to look at and adorably relaxed, his smile flashing regularly as they ate.

But inside, Lois was tightly coiled.

At any moment, her cell might ring, bringing the best of news — news that would force her hand. Or it could bring the worst of news —

news that would give her more time.

“Clark, I’d like to visit Maggie Irig for a few moments,” Lois said when the last croissant was gone. “I’d like to ask her something about a recipe I found.”

“I thought you didn’t cook,” he teased gently.

Yeah, it had been a lame excuse, but she just wasn’t up for spinning elaborate tales. “After the apple pie being such a success, I thought I would try something else.”

“You could call her if you wanted to.”

“I don’t have her number,” Lois said, feeling her panic starting to rise.

“If the Irigs were such good friends of my parents, their number is probably written down near the telephone,” Clark said.

“I feel like a drive,” Lois said desperately. “I’ll only be a short time.”

“OK,” he agreed easily. “I’ll get to the chores.”

Her overwrought muscles loosened a little. Clark kissed her and rose from the bed. “Do it slowly,” Lois said, wanting to add further weight to her simulation of an untroubled newlywed woman.

Clark’s grin came at full intensity. Instead of spinning into his clothes, he slipped off his sleep shorts and proceeded to dress garment by garment. Then with another kiss and a knowing smile that said he’d appreciated her appreciation, he left for the barn.

Part 18

Evan hid the envelope in his pocket and went into the kitchen. He turned on the coffee pot and put some bagels in the oven to warm.

As he set the table, he couldn’t help reflecting that this was how he had imagined his life would play out when he had married Shanti — family life, sharing the care of Layla, and doing the mundane things of life together.

Instead, he was a single father whose interaction with women — other than terse greetings to Mrs Kingsley — was limited to his former boss, Lois, and a woman he had been directed to move on from the gates of the EPRAD base.

He placed a fresh cloth of pristine white on the table and carefully set it for breakfast, using a pitcher for the milk instead of the usual practice of pouring it straight from the carton. At the back of a high, rarely used cupboard, he found a small pewter ornament that looked like a bird about to take flight. Shanti had liked it. After she’d gone, he hadn’t wanted anything to remind him of her, so he’d banished it from his sight. He held it now as the bitter memories flooded back.

A glance to the table decided him. He didn’t need folderol. And he wasn’t trying to impress Esther, anyway. He was trying to discover her true identity and what she really wanted with Superman.

Throughout his preparations, he kept his hearing attuned for the expected knock. When everything was ready — and Menzies still hadn’t arrived — Evan went to the front door, opened it, and checked outside. There was no car parked in front of his house, and no sign of the tall, burly agent.

Perhaps Evan should call Daniel again. As he reached into his pocket for his cell phone, he heard Esther at the top of the stairs and hurried into the kitchen. She appeared just as he was taking the bagels from the oven. “You’re up early,” he said.

“So are you,” she returned with a smile.

“Come in, and sit down,” he invited, pulling out a chair for her.

“Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Evan put the warmed bagels on the table, added the coffee pot, and sat down across from Esther. “Do you know the time of your bus?” he asked as he poured coffee for both of them.

“No.”

He offered Esther the bagels. “Would you like me to call the depot and inquire?”

“No. Thank you,” she replied, taking a bagel.

“Strawberry jelly?” he said. “Cream cheese? Honey?”

“Honey?” Esther asked, her expression warm with amusement.

He gave a sheepish shrug. “Layla likes honey on everything.”

Esther smiled, looking as if she had experience with the incongruous nature of a child’s tastebuds.

Evan took a bagel for himself. “Do you know whether there is a direct bus route?”

“I’m not sure.”

Her answers had come evenly, but the sense of butting against a barrier was strong. Evan felt a surge of pity for her. Never before had he been so disinclined to scrounge for information. He reminded himself that if Esther were Clark’s mom, it was in her best interest that he ask these questions. “I saw Superman, you know?” he said conversationally. “When he was at the base, preparing for his mission.”

“You saw him?” she said, appearing politely interested but nothing more.

“Yes,” Evan said enthusiastically. “I usually work in a different part of the base. But one day, I was in a room, and he walked past.”

“That must have been something nice to come home and tell Layla and Abi.”

“I’m not really allowed to talk about anything that happens at work,” Evan said.

“I guess he was there for a while before anyone knew anything about him,” Esther said. “That’s what they said at the press conference before he left.”

She’d admitted to knowing something about Superman, but she had been careful to explain her knowledge. Was that a coincidence? Or part of the plan?

“You seemed disappointed that you missed his public appearance in Centennial Park yesterday,” Evan said, keeping his tone light. “Had you been hoping to deliver your letter personally?”

“Of course not,” she said. “I’m sure Superman would be too busy to bother with a single person.”

“But you would have liked to have seen him?” Evan pressed.

“How many people were at the public appearance?”

“Thousands.”

“Then it seems it wasn’t just me who would have liked to have seen him,” she said pragmatically.

Evan nodded and topped up their coffee cups. “Have you ever wondered where he came from?” he asked. “Where he got all those powers?”

“No,” Esther said. “I am just glad enough that when we needed him, he was willing and able to help us.”

“I wonder how long he’s been here,” Evan mused. “I had assumed the scientists would have detected something if a planet exploded, but no one has ever said anything about that.”

She took a bite from her bagel and said nothing.

“And you have to wonder how he got here,” Evan continued. He looked directly at Esther. “What do you think?”

She chuckled, but he thought he detected an edgy nervousness in her humour. “I’m a simple rural woman,” she said. “My knowledge of the planet I live on is limited, and I know even less about what exists beyond it.”

“But you must have some ideas,” Evan prompted.

“No.” Her eyes met his, unwavering.

Evan took another bagel and reached for the cream cheese. “It seemed to me that perhaps you had a special reason for wanting to contact him,” he said.

Esther pushed away her plate, although she hadn’t finished her bagel. “I appreciate your hospitality, Evan,” she said as she rose.

“You’ve been very kind. But it’s time for me to get to the bus depot.”

“I can’t leave the girls yet,” Evan said, trying not to sound alarmed at the prospect of her slipping away. “But I can drive you when I take Abi to school.”

“Your daughters aren’t even up yet.” She smiled absently. “I will go and pack my bag. I can walk to the bus depot. I know it isn’t far from here.”

She left the kitchen, and Evan heard her brisk footsteps on the stairs.

He had pushed too hard. His seven-year hiatus had blunted his skills.

But she had definitely been uncomfortable with his questions.

If her interest in Superman was sufficient to compel her to travel to Metropolis to personally deliver a less-than-remarkable note, why hadn't she wanted to glean extra tidbits of information about her hero?

Evan had to convince her to stay. If she was Martha Kent, he couldn't let her leave, couldn't subject her to more searching, couldn't risk her finding a way to 'meet' Superman, only to have her heart broken when he passed over her without recognition. Evan didn't even know if she had enough money to buy the fare to Kansas — assuming her plan was to return home.

Eric Menzies was being frustratingly tardy. Without input and direction from him, Evan was going to have to resort to revealing some of what he knew. But what?

If Esther was Clark's mom, Evan knowing anything about Superman's identity was going to do little other than rouse her suspicions. That would make her even more eager to leave.

Where was Menzies?

Evan took his cell phone and dialed Daniel's number.

Before the call was connected, he heard a tap. He returned the phone and hurried to the door. Menzies was there. Evan put his finger to his mouth to warn him to keep his voice down and slipped the envelope from his pocket.

Menzies took it with one hand and held his other hand forward, his fist closed.

Evan stretched out his hand, and Menzies dropped something small and cold and heavy into it. His hand moved away, and Evan gasped.

"Let her see it," Menzies murmured.

Evan nodded slowly as comprehension filtered through his mind. Martha Kent was one of the very few people who would react to what looked like a harmless green pebble.

"Call me," Menzies said as he turned and walked away.

Evan shut the door and glanced up the stairs. No one was in sight.

He went back to the kitchen and placed the small green rock on the table. It contrasted strongly with the white tablecloth. Now, his task was to ensure that Esther came back into the kitchen. If she did, she couldn't help but notice the small piece of green rock.

Clark stood in the middle of the barn. Lois wasn't home from the Irgs' yet. He had a few minutes to continue his exploration. So much equipment had been stored away — probably when he had joined Lois's agency and relegated the farm to a secondary priority in his life.

He'd found a bankbook last night — a record of steady profits, but hardly enough to constitute the earnings of a fulltime farmer. Had the agency paid him? He hadn't found any record of that — other than the seventy thousand dollars in the account Lois had passed on to him.

There were still so many unanswered questions.

About his past. And what was in the barn that unnerved him.

About Lois. He had awakened far too early to think about rising and had become aware of her restlessness. His mind had flirted with the possibilities, but when he'd reached for her, she had nestled into his arms with a sigh, making it obvious that her needs had been more emotional than physical.

He had suggested the trip to Paris, offering to take her in the hope it would lift her spirits. She had declined but had seemed buoyed by his follow-up suggestion that he bring home breakfast for them. When he'd returned, she'd been upset. Not full-blown-tears upset, but anxious about something. He'd noticed her attempt to cover her distress and had gone along with her obvious wish to eat the treats from the Parisian bakery without being interrogated.

Perhaps they both just needed some time.

But if something was worrying her, Clark wished she would tell him. Perhaps he could ask her later. Tonight, maybe — when they were in bed.

For now, he needed to continue to trust her. His knowledge of his

life had expanded, but there were still so many blanks. Lois was in a better position to make decisions about his life than he was.

If only he could work out how to make this easier for her.

Clark looked around the barn again. The evidence clearly pointed to a time when this farm had been the focus of at least a couple of people. Half-empty paint cans — and gates or palings or doors painted the same colour. Well-used and carefully maintained tools.

It wasn't hard to imagine his childhood and the early years of adulthood.

His relationship with Evan, Eric, and Daniel, their knowledge of his origins, and the payment of the money — all that spoke of his life in more recent times.

But in the middle, there was a gap.

What had happened?

What had he been doing during that time?

He levitated up into the loft. In the corner, the hay was still flattened from when he and Lois had had their 'moonlit picnic'.

The feeling was stronger up here. Not even the fresh memories of being with Lois were strong enough to overcome it.

Clark removed his glasses, looked deeper into the walls and through the tall stack of hay bales. Several bales deep, he saw a ledge built under the arched barn roof, forming a small cavity. In the cavity was an old crate.

He pulled the bales away, creating a path. He reached the ledge and clasped the crate, feeling his heart begin to race. He floated down to the floor of the loft, prised open the lid of the crate and stared at the unexpected nature of the contents. Every other trunk and box he had unpacked had contained tools or something pertaining to the farm.

This crate contained a soft blue blanket.

As he reached for it, he heard the sound of a motor outside and instantly knew it wasn't the Buick. He looked through the barn wall and saw the sheriff's vehicle.

Rachel. Rachel Harris. He'd taken her to the prom. She'd come the night Moyne had assaulted Lois. Moyne had been killed trying to attack her.

Was his sparse knowledge enough?

Was it enough to get him through a short meeting with her?

He yearned to fly away.

But he didn't want anyone to be suspicious of Lois. He didn't want small-town gossip casting aspersions on the validity of their marriage.

With a deep breath, Clark jumped from the loft and strolled from the barn and towards the vehicle. "Rachel," he said, trying to tailor his tone to the part he needed to play.

Evan took out a loaf of bread and began making sandwiches. When he heard footsteps coming down the stairs, he went to meet his guest.

"Thank you for your kind hospitality, Evan," she said.

He felt a spur of disappointment that this could be the last time he would see her, but his personal regret was quickly overshadowed by the need to complete his assignment. "I made you some sandwiches," he said, gesturing towards the kitchen. "I just have to wrap them."

"No," she said. "You've already done too much. Give them to your girls."

"They don't take a packed lunch," he lied. "The sandwiches are for you. Come on. I've nearly finished them."

She seemed to be reconsidering. Evan walked into the kitchen, desperately hoping she wouldn't take the opportunity to escape through the front door. After a few steps, he glanced back and smiled to see that she was following him.

In the kitchen, he turned to watch Esther Wallace.

She walked past the doorway, and her eyes fell to the table.

Her breath contracted, sharp with shock. Fear doused her face.

Without even looking in his direction, she turned and fled to the front door.

Rachel stepped out of the sheriff's vehicle and gave him a brief

hug. “Clark,” she said, gazing at him.

He stared back at her, refusing to cave in to the compulsion to recoil. “How are you, Rachel?” he asked.

“Fine,” she said. “But more importantly, how are you?”

He smiled, hoping it would be enough to mask his nervousness.

“I’m doing great,” he said. “Did you hear that Lois and I got married?”

“Yes.” She smiled, but it didn’t diminish the concern in her eyes. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks.” Clark decided to tackle her suspicions head on. “I know people around here don’t know Lois yet,” he said. “But when you do, you’ll see she is exactly right for me.”

“She doesn’t look much suited to the life of a farmer’s wife,” Rachel noted.

“That occurred to us, too,” he admitted. “We’ve agreed to stay here for a little while — until things settle down. Then we’ll decide whether we are going to stay permanently or whether we will move on.”

“Smallville will be sorry to lose you,” Rachel said.

“Thanks,” Clark said, appreciating her sentiment and the warmth with which it was delivered.

“Clark,” Rachel said solemnly. “If you ever need anything, please know that we will always be friends.”

He nodded. “Thank you, Rachel.”

“I just want what’s best for you.”

“Lois is what’s best for me.”

Her smile seemed a little more genuine this time. “See you around,” she said.

“Thanks for dropping by,” Clark said.

He watched as she drove away. He tuned in his hearing, but couldn’t hear the distinctive purr of the Buick. Lois must still be visiting with Maggie.

Lois pulled onto the side of the road and contemplated the photograph Maggie had given her, hoping that this was the same woman who had gone to the base yesterday.

She took out her cell phone and dialled Evan. He didn’t answer. She dialled again. “Come on, Evan,” he muttered.

Still, there was no answer.

What was he doing?

What had happened?

She dialled a third time, her mind scurrying ahead.

Even if she described the woman in the almost-decade-old photograph, the conclusion was going to be speculative at best.

With a sigh, Lois cut the call and tossed her cell phone onto the seat.

She had to decide what to tell Clark. She couldn’t wait any longer.

Perhaps she could begin by showing him the photo of his mom.

Lois pulled onto the road, her stomach feeling like a tightly knotted ball of razor wire.

After Rachel left, Clark returned to the crate in the loft. He picked up the blue blanket. Hidden in its folds was a large woven motif — a red ‘S’ on a yellow background inside an irregular pentagon. He picked it up and examined it.

The blanket was small and soft. Did it have something to do with him? When he was a baby? If so, what was this motif? Could it have possibly come with him from Krypton?

Lying on the bottom of the crate was a sphere. It was a bit bigger than a baseball and resembled a globe — although the markings of land and sea weren’t familiar at all.

Clark picked it up.

It warmed in his hands.

It glowed.

And suddenly, it was as if the curtain of his mind was ripped apart. And he remembered everything.

Part 19

Evan caught up to Esther as she fumbled to open the door.

“Let me go,” she said, turning on him with flailing fists.

“I won’t hurt you,” he promised, loosely gripping her upper arms and evading her blows.

After a few moments, the surge of her panic subsided, and her thrashing arms dropped to her sides. Her head rose, and her eyes cannoned into his, full of anger and defiance and scorn. “Let me go,” she said in a low voice that felt like a sharp blade scoring his conscience.

“You’re Martha,” Evan said. “I know you’re Martha.”

For a civilian, her recovery was quick. But not quick enough.

“Martha?” she said with derision.

“I know,” Evan whispered. “I know.”

Her contempt intensified. “Let me go,” she hissed.

Evan loosened his grip, but didn’t drop his hands from her arms. “I know you have no reason to trust me, but there are people looking for you. People who want to reunite you with your son.”

“I don’t have a son.”

“I want to protect him, too,” Evan said, meeting her eyes without flinching. “That’s why I couldn’t tell you anything. Not until I knew for sure who you are.”

“You have some of the rock,” she said coldly. “You brought it here.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “But there was no other way to prove your identity.” He tried a hesitant smile. “I knew you were never going to admit to what you know.”

The coldness in her eyes thawed a little. “People have been looking for me?” she said in a small voice.

“Yes. Looking for you so you can go home.”

A look of pure longing flooded her face. “I can go home?”

“Yes,” Evan said.

She wriggled from his grasp and picked up her small suitcase.

“Thank you for everything,” she said as her hand reached for the door.

“Please,” Evan said, desperate not to lose her now. “Please let me help you.”

“Now that I know I can go home, I can catch a bus.”

“It will take a couple of days,” he said. “And you’ll probably have to wait around for connecting busses. If you will let us help you, we can have you home by this afternoon.”

She looked as if he had just suggested an impossible dream. “How?”

“Direct to Wichita on a specially commissioned flight.”

“I don’t have the money for that,” she said steadily.

“You don’t need to pay,” Evan assured her. “After everything that has happened, the least we can do is to see you safely home.”

She studied him. “You can do that?”

“Yes,” he said, wanting her to trust him again. “You can be home by this afternoon.”

“Is he all right? Did he get hurt when he went -” She stopped, as if fearing she had spoken too much.

“He wasn’t hurt,” Evan said. “But ...”

“But?” she asked her throat jumping.

“But he has amnesia.”

“He has a brain injury?” she gasped.

“No — nothing like that. Except for the amnesia, he is fine.”

Shadows of pain darkened her blue-grey eyes. “He doesn’t remember me?”

“We are hoping he will recover his memories.”

“If he doesn’t remember, how did he know he had gone into space? You said he made a public appearance.”

“He has someone who loves him very much.”

The mother’s face softened. “A woman?” she asked in a hushed tone.

Evan nodded. “She has been helping him. They are married.”

“Married?” she said wondrously. “He’s married?” A tiny smile budded. “He’s really married?”

“Yes,” Evan said. “I’ve seen them together. It’s ... it’s beautiful. Even a grumpy old grouch like me can see how perfect they are

together.”

“Is she ... is she human?”

“Yes.”

“And she knows *everything* about him?”

“At this stage, she knows more about him than he knows about himself.”

“But she loves him anyway?”

“She adores him.”

“Was she at Centennial Park?”

“No. She’s not married to ... to Superman.”

She nodded. “She’s married to ...”

The unspoken name hung in the air. “Clark,” Evan said for her. “Lois is married to Clark. And they are very happy together.”

She smiled. “Can I still go home? Or will that upset him too much? Do you think I could see him? Even if he doesn’t know who I am? Perhaps he could have another public appearance, and I could be there. I would j... just like to see him again.”

Evan swallowed down the lump that had ballooned in his throat. Here was a mother who understood how a mother should love. “Of course you can see him again. And we’ll tell him who you are.”

“Will that be best for him?” she said.

“Yes,” Evan said. “Clark needs his family.”

“There’s only me,” she said sadly. “My husband passed away.”

“I’m sorry,” Evan said, wishing he dared place his hand on her arm again. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“It was a long time ago now,” she said. “Five years. He had a heart attack and didn’t make it through the night.”

“Was he in a hospital?”

“Yes.”

That was a relief. That suggested that whatever had happened to Clark’s parents, they had been shown a greater level of humanity than the treatment inflicted on their son.

Her sadness lingered. “Clark?” she said. “Was it really bad for him?”

Evan hated to hurt her. He nodded, trying to keep his face from giving away the extent of Clark’s suffering.

“But they realised he wasn’t a threat? And then the scientists began working with him? That was how he was able to divert the asteroid?”

Evan glanced up the empty staircase. “Perhaps now isn’t the right time to discuss this,” he said. “Would you like to come and sit down? Have another cup of coffee?”

“Will your daughters be coming down soon?”

“Yes,” he said. “I can hear Layla in the shower, and I need to go up and check on Abi’s choice of an outfit for today.”

“Do they know? About ... Superman?”

“They know about Superman. But nothing about Clark.”

She nodded. “You go and look after your girls.”

“You won’t ... you won’t leave?” Evan asked.

She shook her head. “No. Once your girls are at school, perhaps we could talk?”

“I’d like that,” he said.

Abi appeared at the top of the stairs, wearing her glittering pink fairy costume, complete with wand and wings. Evan looked at his guest, and they both laughed.

“I’ll go and put some more bagels in the oven,” she said. “You deal with the fairy princess.”

Evan smiled. “Thanks,” he said.

Lois pulled up in front of the farmhouse and got out of the Buick. She looked to her right, expecting Clark to come from the barn to greet her.

He didn’t.

She hurried into the barn. “Clark?”

There was no answer.

“Clark?” Lois turned from the barn and ran the short distance to the house, her feet driven by a gut that was suddenly nine-tenths of the

way to panic mode.

He’d probably just gone inside to get a drink, she told herself. He would be all right. She’d been gone less than half an hour.

She pushed open the kitchen door and saw Clark.

He was sitting at the table, his fists clenched, his head low, his eyes fixed in the nothingness.

“Clark?” Lois said softly as she edged towards him. “Is everything all right?”

He didn’t respond. As she looked closer, she saw the underlying muscle twitching in his cheek. She looked into his eyes. They were hard. And ... cold.

“Clark?” Lois gingerly reached forward and laid her fingertips on his arm.

He jerked his arm away.

“What is wrong, Clark?” she asked. “What happened?”

He lurched from the table, the chair grating loudly on the floor. “I know everything, Lois,” he said in a dull, defeated voice.

“Everything?” she gulped.

“Everything. I know about the prison. I don’t just *know*, I can feel it. I can feel their hatred. I can feel their contempt.”

Lois swallowed down her hot and burning tears. “Clark,” she said. “Clark ...”

He swiftly turned on her. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because the amnesia gave you a chance to find out who you are without all the damage.”

“You lied to me,” he said darkly. “You lied to me about my mother.”

Lois reached into her bag for the photograph. “I have some good -”

“How long, Lois?” Clark said, his anger obliterating the chill that had been in his voice. “How long were you going to lie to me? How long were you going to let us play at being the happy normal couple in my parents’ house while my mom could be anywhere and no one is even looking for her?”

“People *are* looking for her,” Lois said. “Evan and Eric and Daniel. In fact, Evan called -”

“You let me believe they are my friends,” Clark said indignantly. “Evan was my guard for seven years. He beat me with the poisoned rods. Eric and Daniel could have helped me, but it wasn’t until they needed me that they were willing to overlook that I’m not human — that I’m not one of you. Before that, they let me rot — year after year after year.”

“Evan and Daniel hid our escape from the cell,” Lois said. “They put a skeleton in the casket and had it cremated, so that Clark Kent could have a new life.”

“If they really thought it would be that simple, they are stupid,” Clark said darkly.

“No one has ever thought it would be simple.”

“You did,” he accused. “You thought you could manufacture your dream of a normal life for us. You were determined to make it happen. Then, when I couldn’t remember anything, you took advantage of me to write the script exactly how you wanted it.”

His words slashed through her heart. “That’s not true, Clark,” Lois said, fighting to keep the emotional turmoil from poisoning her tone. “I just wanted you to be happy. I wanted you to see that we could be together.”

“I’m not human, Lois,” Clark said. “You think you can change anything that doesn’t fit with your view of the world, but you can’t change that. You can’t make me something that I’m not.”

“I have never tried to make you into something that you’re not,” Lois said, her voice thick with tears. “I just wanted you to see that you are not who Moyne and Trask said you were.”

“Yes, I am. They were right. I’m not human. I’m not like everyone else. I don’t belong here.”

“Everyone loves you.”

“No!” he blazed. “They love Superman, the not-quite-real fantasy that appeared at exactly the right time to save a world that had rejected

and feared him.”

“You did an amazing thing,” Lois said. “Your capacity for forgiveness ...”

“Forgiveness doesn’t change the facts.”

“Forgiveness helps you to heal.”

“I don’t need to heal,” Clark said. “All this time, you’ve talked about me healing — but you don’t mean healing, you mean changing. Changing from the unpalatable reality that I’m a freak and trying to turn me into some sort of acceptable sideshow.”

Lois could feel her control teetering. “Everything I did, I did to try to help you,” she said. “I tried to give back what my world had taken away from you.”

Clark stared at the floor, his breathing heavy. Lois stepped forward and raised her hand towards his arm.

“Don’t touch me,” he said, stepping away. “Don’t touch me.”

The instinct to run away surged with breath-taking power. Lois planted her feet and fastened her eyes on him. “Clark,” she said softly. “There is something I need to tell you.”

His face contorted. “It’s too late, Lois,” he said. “I know the whole sordid truth. I’m back where I belong — under the mountain of hatred, hidden from the sight of decent people. The only difference now is that I’m allowed to come out like a trained dog whenever I’m needed — so long as I wear the pretty costume so no one will actually be able to see who I am.”

“It’s about your mother. Evan thinks we might have found her.”

Clark’s face twisted further.

“That’s good news,” Lois said. “She -”

“It is *not* good news,” Clark said sharply. “I can’t be with her. I’ve already ruined her life once. I won’t let her take that chance again.”

“She loves you. She -”

“How do you know? Have you spoken to her? You said Shadbolt thinks he *might* have found her. How do you know she doesn’t hate me because of what I caused in her life?”

“Because, unlike you, she probably doesn’t blame you for everything,” Lois said, her voice rising.

“If she’s free now,” he said. “She needs to find somewhere she can be safe, and that means staying right away from me.”

“She is going to want to be with you.”

“Then she’s a fool.”

“Clark, you’re her son. She’s -”

“What happens when the human lords change their minds again?”

Clark said. “What happens when there is no asteroid? No need for the strong weirdo from outer space? What happens when they decide I’m a threat again? They’ll come here — just like Trask and Moyné did. They’ll bring the poison. They’ll take her away again. They’ll take you away. And they’ll put me back in a cage like a wild animal. You ... her ... you both need to get away from me.”

“I promised you I wouldn’t leave you,” Lois said as her eyes overflowed.

“Fine,” Clark shouted. “I’ll leave you.” He stormed to the door and was gone.

Lois stood without moving as the echo of anger and fear and hurt slowly faded away.

Her cell phone rang, shattering the stillness. Her body convulsed, freeing the legion of tears that had been building inside her. She crumpled to the floor, and her screams of pain drowned out the phone.

Eric parked in front of Mrs Deller’s house. It was almost eight o’clock; he hoped that would be late enough to call on a woman he barely knew. He broke the seal on the letter Evan Shadbolt had given him and took out the single piece of paper. He read it a couple of times.

Then he stared ahead, his mind devising a cover story.

When Mrs Deller had called to tell him about remembering the envelope from the unknown female, he had managed to elicit information from her without sounding overly interested. He’d thanked her profusely, intending to sound like someone trying to be

polite.

Now, he had to show interest in the unknown woman who had been corresponding with Phil Deller. And this letter would link her with Superman.

He could tear the paper and only show Mrs Deller the lower part of the note. However, by the time he had taken away everything that could pertain to Superman, he would be left with a piece of homespun advice about buttermilk and a signature.

Eric tapped on his steering wheel as he churned over the possibilities.

A few minutes later, he had a story that would probably be enough to satisfy a busy single mother. He stepped from his car and approached the door.

Mrs Deller appeared in answer to his knock. To Eric’s relief, she was dressed. “Mr Menzies,” she said.

“I’m sorry to trouble you so early,” he said, “but I was in the neighbourhood, and following our conversation, I wanted to ask your opinion about this.” He took unfolded the note and held it towards her. “Is this the same handwriting as the address you saw on the envelope you found in your husband’s jacket?”

Mrs Deller took the sheet of paper and studied it carefully.

Eric waited, curbing his impatience.

“Yes,” she said. “This is the same.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes,” she said. Her eyes lifted from the note. “Who is she? Who is this ‘Esther Wallace’?”

“We believe that is a false name.”

“What does she have to do with Superman?”

“There are those for whom the presence of Superman is not good news,” Eric said.

“You mean ... criminals?”

He nodded. “We think this note could be an attempt to establish contact with him and gain his trust.”

“But what could they do to him?” Mrs Deller asked. “He flew into an asteroid and survived.”

“They could threaten people he is close to.”

She thought about that for a long moment. “When Phil told me he had been assigned to a local operation, I thought it would be wonderful to have him at home more as Billy grew up. But something changed him. Even when he was home, he brooded. He was angry all the time, but he would never tell me what was wrong.”

“It’s possible this organisation were trying to stop Superman then,” Eric said.

“Through Phil? He knew Superman?”

“I am not allowed to confirm or deny the details of any assignment,” Eric said. “But that would seem a reasonable conclusion.”

“And then he was killed,” she said sadly. “And whoever did it blamed Superman?”

“Yes.”

“And you believed him?” she said with a hard edge to her voice.

“Yes,” Eric admitted. “I made a terrible error of judgement.”

Mrs Deller opened her mouth to reply, but closed it as her son sidled up to her. “Mom?” he said.

“Everything’s fine, Billy,” she said as her hand rested on his shoulder. She gave the note back to Eric.

“What I told you ... if that were to become public knowledge ...”

“I won’t say a word to anyone,” she said. “I won’t ever forget who risked his life so my son could have a future.”

Billy’s eyes gleamed. “Superman?” he said excitedly. “Are you talking about Superman?”

“We were just saying how lucky we are that Superman was here to help us,” Mrs Deller said. She turned to Eric. “I need to get Billy to school.”

“Thank you for your help,” Eric said.

She stepped away and closed the door. Eric returned to his car, wondering what had passed between Deller and Mrs Kent all those

years ago.

Evan was unreasonably nervous as he drove back to his home after dropping Abi at school. What if Mrs Kent left? What if her apparent trust in him had been an act?

His cell phone rang as he turned into his street. He saw it was from Menzies and pulled over. “Shadbolt.”

“How did she react to the rock?”

“It’s her.”

“Are you sure? Was she able to give backup details?”

“Yes. It’s her.”

“The handwriting comparison agrees.”

Evan’s agency-trained mind wanted to ask questions about how they’d obtained a sample of Martha Kent’s handwriting, but remembering she was waiting for him, he stifled his curiosity. “She wants to go home.”

“I’ll have it arranged within the hour. You are to go with her.”

“Me?”

“I assume she trusts you. She stayed at your home overnight. It will be easier for her to be with someone she knows. And I don’t need someone else wondering about the relevance of that particular small town.”

Evan’s mind hurtled in three disparate directions simultaneously. Mrs Kingsley would be there to meet the girls when they finished school. Menzies didn’t only care about Martha being safely delivered home, he cared about her emotional well-being, too. And he, Evan, would get to spend a few more hours with her before the inevitable final parting. “OK.”

“I’ll clear it with the EPRAD base.”

“My shift starts at midday.”

“Leave it to me,” Menzies said. “I’ll clear tomorrow as well in case you need to stay overnight.”

“That won’t happen. And anyway, I need to be home for my daughters.”

“OK. I’ll order a private flight — there and back. And a car to transport you from the airport.”

“Thank you.”

“You can answer anything she asks about the operation,” Eric said. “The agency made a disgraceful mistake, and we are not going to shy away from that.”

Evan had already decided he owed Martha Kent his honesty.

“But keep in mind that her son may not want his mother knowing the explicit details,” Eric said. “And if he does, he might want to be the one to tell her.”

That was obvious, too.

“Good work, Shadbolt,” Menzies said gruffly before hanging up.

A minute later, Evan unlocked his front door and forced himself not to rush into the kitchen. She was there — at his table, drinking a cup of tea.

“You came back,” she said, looking almost as relieved as he felt.

“You’re still here,” he countered.

They laughed together.

She had cleared away of the remains of breakfast, leaving only a fresh cup for him, a pot of tea, and the pitcher of milk. The green rock was gone. “Would you like a cup?” she asked.

He nodded and reached for the pot, but she got there first. She poured his tea — her naturalness not quite able to overcome his awkwardness at having her do something for him.

“Thanks,” he said, embarrassed that his voice cracked.

“Have you told anyone I’m here?”

“Early this morning, I reported that I had someone with me who could be Clark’s mother,” Evan said. “After I dropped Abi at school, I tried to call Lois. I thought she ... they ... Clark should be the first to know.”

“What did she say?”

“She didn’t answer.”

“Do you need to contact anyone now?”

Evan shook his head. “No,” he said. “I received a call a few minutes ago. I said you want to go home today.”

“And it’s going to be possible?”

“Yes.”

“Should you try Lois again?”

“It might be better to leave them,” Evan said. “They need some time. You will be with them before the end of the day, but -”

“What did Lois tell Clark about me?”

He had to tell her the truth. It felt like disloyalty to Lois, but it was going to be best for everyone if Martha already had some answers before arriving home. “That you had passed away.”

She nodded, not looking unduly aggrieved. “Before his amnesia, did Clark know anything about what happened to Jonathan and me after we were taken from the farm?”

“I think Lois and Clark suspected your husband had passed away.”

“Poor Clark,” Martha said. “At least he had Lois with him.”

“You’re not upset about her explaining your absence by saying you’d died?” Evan asked.

“That had to be simpler than trying to fabricate a story about how and why I disappeared.”

“Yeah,” Evan said. “I think Lois is going to be relieved by your understanding.”

“She loves my boy,” Martha said quietly. “For that, I can be as understanding as she needs me to be.”

Evan sipped his tea, stalling now he was so close to knowing what had happened to this brave and gracious lady while her son had been cruelly detained and ruthlessly abused. Should he start with his part in this? Should he admit that although he would never again do anything to hurt her or her family, his past actions made him unworthy of her trust?

If he did, would she leave?

He had to get her to Clark first. Then, he would walk out of their lives forever.

“How many people know?” she asked.

“About Clark? Four — and Lois, of course. Three of us have been actively helping him. The fourth would have signed a confidentiality statement.”

“Only four?” She seemed surprised.

“Yes. Clark wants the number of people kept to a minimum.”

“Yes. I would expect that.” She smiled. “But what a miracle that I just happened to find you. From all the millions of people in Metropolis, I found one of the four people who could help me.”

“Perhaps you are due a little luck,” he said, wondering if she would still think it was such a miracle when she knew the truth about him. “What was your plan? Where were you going on the bus?”

“I didn’t plan to catch a bus. It was a lie to stop anyone from following me.”

“Were you worried about ... about someone capturing you again?”

“Yes,” she said softly. “But not as much as I was worried about not being able to find Clark. Did you mean it when you said we could get a direct flight?”

“Yes.”

“When can we leave?”

“As soon as you’re ready.”

“Will you drive me to the airport? Or should I get a cab?”

“I’ll drive you.” Evan paused, wondering how she would feel about his next disclosure. “And I’ve been directed to accompany you to Smallville.”

She seemed surprised, but not displeased. “What about the girls?”

“Mrs Kingsley will be here for them. I was supposed to work at the base this afternoon.”

“Do you mind coming with me?”

Mind? “No,” Evan said. “I want to know you are safely home.”

“I still have some questions — and I’m sure you do, too — but perhaps we could talk during the flight. Could we go now? Or is it too early?”

“Eric Menzies is organising this, and he has a gift for making

things happen quickly, so ...”

Her smile turned wistful. “I ... It just feels as if this is a dream — a day I thought might never come. To think ... I might see Clark ...”

“You *will* see him,” Evan said. “I’ll make the call, and tell them we are on our way.”

“Thank you,” she said, standing from the table. “And Evan?”
“Yeah?”

“Please call me ‘Martha’. No one has called me that for such a long time.”

He smiled. “Martha.”

“Thank you. Thank you for everything you’ve done for us.”

He turned away quickly, before she could see his eyes and guess at the terrible secret he wished she would never have to know.

Lois gingerly lifted her head from the floor. Her tears had drenched the sleeves of her sweater. Her eyes felt as if they had been scraped with glass. Her head felt as if it had been the stage for a vicious battle between crazed warriors.

Over an hour had passed since Clark had stormed from the house, leaving her.

Leaving her.

Leaving her.

Would he ever come back?

Had he meant it when he’d said he was leaving her?

He couldn’t have meant it.

Could he?

She would never have imagined he could be so angry.

Even in the cell. Even when Moyne had beaten him with the rod.

Even during the days after his escape when it had become clear to both of them how difficult it was going to be for him to learn to live again.

She had seen his pain. His grief. His devastation. Even his hopelessness.

But she’d never seen such raw anger.

How had he remembered?

He’d said he’d remembered *everything*.

The cell. The abuse. Being locked away. The beatings. The dearth of food and water. Being forced to live in filthy conditions. Not seeing the sky for seven years. Being accused of two heinous murders.

Being taunted.

Hated.

Treated as if he were a disgusting animal.

Believing them.

Believing them when they said he was less than human. Less than worthy of basic rights.

No wonder he was angry.

Lois dragged herself from the floor and stumbled outside. The dull sun hurt her eyes. She went to the barn. It was empty.

“Clark?” she said.

Her voice echoed, but there was no answering call.

She climbed the ladder to the loft and saw an open crate. She walked over to it and picked up the thick baby blanket. Had this been Clark’s?

Taking the blanket with her, she left the barn.

“Clark?” she called, fear raising her voice. “Clark?”

There was no response. The Buick was still parked where she had left it after coming from the Irigs’.

“Clark?” she said, hating how fearful and alone she sounded.
“Please come back to me.”

He was gone.

Clark had left her.

Lois turned and ran to the house. Through the kitchen. Up the stairs. Into the bedroom.

The bedroom they had shared.

She collapsed on the bed, clinging to the baby blanket.

And the avalanche of tears came again.

Part 20

Evan and Martha reached the gate where Eric had said he would

meet them.

Getting through the various security stations of the Air Force Base had been straightforward, and Evan couldn’t help but feel grudging respect for Eric Menzies. He had serious contacts.

Martha was looking around in awe, and Evan realised how surreal this would feel to her. She must have thought of the government and its agents as a ruthless enemy who had devastated her life and her family without justification. Now, those same agents were using government facilities to return her home.

Evan saw Eric approaching, his stride long and purposeful. After briefly shaking Evan’s hand, Eric turned his attention to Martha. “Mrs Kent,” he said. “I’m Eric Menzies. I am very pleased to meet you.”

“Mr Menzies,” she said. “Thank you for arranging my transport home.”

“Have you had a chance to ask questions?” Eric asked.

“Some,” Martha said. “But we decided there would be plenty of time during the flight.”

“The aircraft has a meeting room,” Menzies said. “It’s soundproof. You can talk freely in there. There will be a steward on the flight. Should you need anything, you can ask him, but he has been instructed to leave you alone unless you approach him.”

“Thank you,” Martha said.

Eric took a large envelope from the attaché case and offered it to Martha. “This is for Clark,” he said.

She took it. “Thank you.”

“Were you able to contact Ms Lane?” Eric asked as he turned to Evan.

“No,” Evan replied. “She isn’t answering either of her cell phones or the home phone.”

“I’ll keep calling her,” Eric said. “I’m sure I’ll be able to contact her before you arrive.”

A man in a smart military uniform approached them. “Two passengers?” he said.

Eric shook Evan’s hand again. “Look after her,” he muttered.

“My name is Anthony,” the uniformed man said. “I will be your steward on the flight. Come this way, please.”

They followed him aboard the small aircraft. Once inside, Martha gasped, and Evan had to strangle his automatic reaction to do likewise. They had entered a spacious area that looked more like a plush living room than the cabin of an airplane. The floor was covered in beige-coloured carpet, and the room boasted a large sofa, four leather armchairs, and an oversized television.

“We are due to leave in ten minutes,” Anthony said. “You must be seated with your seatbelts fastened during the takeoff. Once the seatbelt light has been turned off, you are free to move around the cabin. The restrooms are to the rear.” He opened the door to reveal a long table and two rows of swivel chairs upholstered in creamy suede. “This is the meeting room. The refrigerator and cupboards have been stocked for your convenience. Please help yourself, or if you would prefer my assistance, press the buzzer.”

“Thank you,” Evan said.

“Should there be anything you require to make your flight more comfortable, please don’t hesitate to ask.” Anthony showed them the location of the life jackets and briefly outlined the procedure should they encounter unexpected problems en route. As he stowed Martha’s solitary suitcase and calico bag in the locker, Evan and Martha sat in adjacent seats and fastened their seatbelts.

After the steward had left, Martha looked at Evan and chuckled. “When you said a private flight, I didn’t realise you meant this sort of opulence,” she said.

“Neither did I,” Evan admitted.

“You haven’t ever flown like this before?”

“No. Whenever I’ve flown as part of my job, I’ve been just another passenger on a commercial flight.” He noticed that her knuckles had paled as she gripped the arms of her seat. “Have you flown before?” Evan asked. “Are you nervous?”

“I’ve flown before,” Martha said. “But not like this. I’m nervous

— but not about the flight.”

“About seeing your son again?”

“Yes.”

“He is an extraordinary man, and I don’t just mean his physical prowess. You should be very proud of him.”

“I am,” she said. “I have always been very proud of him.”

A few minutes later, they began to taxi along the runway, and soon after that, they were in the air and flying west.

The seatbelt light flicked off, and Evan straightened in his seat.

“Let’s go where we can talk freely,” Martha said.

Evan stood and offered his hand to help her from her seat. She accepted his gesture with a quiet smile. They closed the door to the meeting room and sat at the table.

“Would you like a cup of tea?” Evan asked. “Or something to eat?”

“No, thank you,” she said. “I am too excited to be able to eat.”

“You’ve been very patient.”

“I’ve had seven years to learn patience.” Her words carried no self-pity. “Are you concerned that no one has been able to contact Lois?”

“There’s probably no cause for concern,” Evan said, hoping that would prove to be the case. “They’ve probably gone away somewhere together to talk.”

“A mother suddenly alive — a mother who has been missing since being taken from her home because her son is different. That’s going to be hard for both of them.” She eyed Evan hopefully. “But you said they have a great relationship.”

“They do.”

“So perhaps they’ve found an ideal way to reconnect.”

Evan cleared his throat, hoping it would cover his discomfiture at her implication. He snatched at a steadying breath. “You must have questions,” he said. “I have clearance to be completely candid.”

“Thank you,” she said. “But perhaps Clark’s amnesia is the perfect opportunity for everyone to move forward.”

Evan felt his heart thump inside his chest. Should he tell her? About his part in this?

“Perhaps if I tell you what I know, you will then be able to suggest how best I can help my son and his wife,” Martha said.

“OK,” Evan agreed, trying not to sound too relieved.

“Do you know about the capture?” she asked. “Do you know about the night when a man called Trask and a man called Moyne came to our home and took us away?”

Trask had boasted about the triumphant culmination of his brilliant plan. “Yeah,” Evan said. “I’ve been told some of the details.”

“They had the green rock,” she said impassively. “They asked to talk to Clark. He walked in and immediately collapsed. My son, my strong indestructible son, was suddenly weak and in terrible pain. There was nothing I could do to help him. Trask hauled him away, and I didn’t see my son again — not until I saw his photograph in the paper three days ago.”

There was no triumph or brilliance in the account when being told by the distraught mother. Evan swallowed, uncomfortably conscious that he hadn’t been this close to tears since he had opened the divorce papers from Shanti’s lawyers. “I’m so very sorry,” he said. “I —” His voice broke, and he turned his head away.

Her hand touched his arm. “It’s OK,” she said. “I’ve had seven years to come to terms with what happened that day.”

“Sorry,” he said. “Please go on.”

Her smile felt as if she — the woman who had lost everything — was comforting him. “We waited with Moyne for about half an hour. He was euphoric — as if he’d been drinking too much, although I couldn’t smell alcohol on him. He said we should feel grateful that people smarter than dumb farmers had been able to perceive the danger posed by the alien.”

“Trask had been tracking the supposedly dangerous alien for years,” Evan said.

“They found the spaceship,” Martha said blankly. “We had tried to

hide it in a large bush near where we found Clark, but it wasn’t easy to camouflage. And it was surprisingly heavy. We decided it was better to risk someone finding it than to attempt to hide it on our property — which would lead directly to Clark. Years later, when Clark had become so very strong, he and Jonathan went back. The bush had grown over it, and they decided to leave it rather than risk someone noticing the damage to the bush.” She looked up at Evan with eyes full of regret. “That was a mistake.”

“You couldn’t have known someone like Trask would find the spaceship.”

“We knew that if people knew about Clark, some would be suspicious of him. Others would fear him and want him exiled from our world.”

“Trask wanted all of that,” Evan said. “But he doesn’t represent everyone.”

“No,” she said, looking around as if she were still trying to convince herself that she really was going home.

“What happened then?”

“Moyne outlined what they had in store for Clark — how they would test him and force him to reveal all he knew about the coming army of aliens. Moyne said Trask had ordered our capture, believing we were needed as incentive for Clark to ‘cooperate’. Moyne was sure Trask was making a strategic mistake in not killing us because Clark, being an alien animal, wouldn’t care in the least about our safety.”

“Trask and Moyne are both dead now,” Evan said.

“I had wondered if that were the case,” Martha said. “I couldn’t imagine Clark being allowed to go free if either of them were still alive.”

“Moyne was ... Moyne was sick,” Evan said. “And Trask was delusional.”

“Yes,” Martha said matter-of-factly. “Moyne took pleasure in hurting people.” She stared at her interwoven fingers for a long silent moment. When she looked up, there was dread in her eyes. “Did Moyne go with Clark? Or did his part finish with the capture?”

Evan felt as if he were holding a dagger against her heart and knew his answer was going to be like plunging it into her. “He went with Clark.”

She flinched as if he’d struck her, and tears welled in her eyes.

“Tell me again,” she said. “Tell me how happy Clark is now.”

“He’s free,” Evan said. “He’s in love. He has Lois’s unwavering support. He has people who are committed to protecting his secret and wanting to do everything possible to make up for the mistakes of the past.”

Martha’s smile came falteringly. “I ... I have to hold onto that,” she said. “My boy is alive and happy and free. That is more than I had hoped for.”

“What happened to you and Jonathan?”

After a few breaths, Martha continued her story. “Moyne received a message via his radio, and he forced us out of the house. We went quietly, scared of what they would do to Clark if we resisted. A van had arrived — one of those with no windows in the back section. We couldn’t see either Trask or Clark. Moyne put us in the back and shut the door.”

“You must have been petrified,” Evan said. “And very uncomfortable.”

“We were,” she admitted. “But at least we had each other. Poor Clark was by himself.”

“Where did they take you?”

“We drove for what seemed like days,” she said. “Whenever we stopped, the driver would allow us to use the restrooms one at a time. He told us that if either of us tried to escape, he would drive away with the other, and he wouldn’t be opening the door again until we reached our destination. We decided it was better to stay together.”

“Finally, we stopped, the driver opened the back of the truck, and we shuffled out. It was dark, and the eerie silence was broken only by the breeze in the trees. There were no streetlights, just a solitary dim light coming from the nearby building. A man came out — he told us

later that his name was Jeff. He took us inside and padlocked the door to the outside world.”

“Where were you?”

“Jeff told us the place was a facility for people who ‘knew too much’. He said some people were there for their own safety and others were there because the information they had posed a threat to public safety.”

“It sounds like the sort of place you’d expect to find in a country under a despotic government,” Evan said. “Not the United States of America.”

“You weren’t aware of the existence of these sorts of places?”

“No.”

“Maybe all governments have secrets,” Martha said. “It became clear Jeff didn’t know why we had been sent there. He was a reasonable man — not given to cruelty or misuse of his authority, although he was weary of life and weary of his job. He told us his only goal was to ensure the place ran smoothly and warned us he was willing to do whatever it took to achieve that.”

That sounded ominous to Evan, but Martha’s expression hadn’t darkened.

“He told us our names were now Robert and Jane Johnson and we were never to mention what we knew to the other residents. If we did, we would be putting them at risk and reducing their chance of being released.”

“So it was a prison?”

“In the sense of no one being allowed to leave, yes, it was a prison.”

“But you hadn’t been tried, you hadn’t been found guilty, you hadn’t done anything wrong,” Evan said hotly.

“But we knew they had taken Clark,” Martha said. “Moyné had told us Trask was backed by the United States government. We were simple farmers — not people with great knowledge or unlimited financial resources or influential friends. We believed that any attempt to escape could only have made things worse for Clark.”

“It must have been soul-destroying,” Evan said. “Feeling so helpless. Knowing so little.”

Martha nodded slowly as if flicking through the pages of her memory. “But we also knew Clark would be worrying about us. Other than the lack of freedom, it wasn’t too bad. We were safe, we were comfortable, we were together. They gave us food and clothes. The other residents — there were about ten of us — occasionally got a little stir-crazy, but we had a very small room of our own where we could go if we wanted to be alone.”

“So no one ... hurt you?”

“No,” she said.

“Did you have any access to the outside world?”

“We had a television, but it could only be used for playing videos. There was a library with tapes and books. We received a newspaper about once a week, but the first few pages were always missing and occasionally the other pages had articles that had been cut out.”

Evan’s mind was torn between outrage that such an institution existed in his country and relief that Martha and her husband hadn’t been subjected to the sort of treatment Clark had endured.

“It was easier for me than Jonathan,” Martha said. “After we’d been there for a while, Jeff allowed me to go into the kitchen and help with meal preparation. He brought me some paints and a couple of canvasses. But Jonathan ...” She sighed. “Jonathan had spent his entire life outside. I talked to Jeff about the possibility of establishing a vegetable garden to supply the kitchen, and he agreed to consider the idea in the spring. But Jonathan passed away before then.”

Evan said nothing, but he couldn’t escape the terrible realisation that his actions linked him to Jonathan’s death. Martha Kent had lost so much. “Did you hate the injustice that had been done to you?” he said.

“Yes,” Martha said. “To us and to Clark. But there was nothing to be gained from dwelling on that.”

“Not knowing about what had happened to your son must have

been agonising.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “But there was a cleaner — a large cheery man called Jock. He came twice a week. One night, we found an envelope under my pillow.”

“He’d come that day?”

“Yes. Although there was nothing to indicate who had left it there.”

“What was inside it?”

“A note from someone who had contact with Clark.”

“Who?”

“His name was Philip Barron.”

“Philip?” Evan gasped.

“Do you know him?”

“I knew Phil Deller,” Evan said. “He had contact with Clark.”

“It could have been him,” Martha said. “It would have been risky to use his real name.”

Deller? Deller had corresponded with Clark’s parents?

“He’s dead, too, isn’t he?” Martha asked quietly.

“Yes, he is,” Evan said, seeing again the images of the torn and beaten body.

“Because of what he did for us?”

“I ...” Evan hesitated, remembering the argument he had witnessed between Moyné and Deller just a few days before the latter’s death. “That is possible, yes.”

“You didn’t know Philip had contacted us?”

“No,” Evan said. “What did he say?”

“His notes were always cryptic and read a little like a child’s fairy tale — good against evil. He said things like evil appearing to be strong, but he was sure that by the end of the story, good would prevail.”

“You figured he was talking about Clark?”

“We didn’t know at first. There was a chance that one of the other residents had written the note — perhaps out of despair.”

“What did you do?”

“Jonathan and I discussed the note from every possible angle and decided it could mean that Trask still had Clark as a prisoner, but that Philip Barron, either by himself or with a group, was working to help him escape.”

“Did you attempt to reply?”

“Yes. We composed a reply in the same vein, mentioning that the good might find encouragement from knowing that others were safe. I copied the return address — it was a post office box in Metropolis — and put our note in a sealed envelope under my pillow the next time Jock came to clean. When we went to bed, it was gone.”

That must be the handwriting sample Menzies had mentioned. How much did he know about what Deller had done?

“Do you know if Philip was ever able to tell Clark about his contact with us?” Martha asked.

“No, I don’t. Neither Lois nor Clark ever mentioned it.”

“Do you think it’s likely? I know Clark would have been so worried about us.”

“As far as I know, Clark was never told anything about what had happened to you,” Evan said, wishing there was a way to lessen the anguish of this news.

“Poor Clark,” Martha said. “None of this was his fault, but I know he would have suffered great guilt.”

Evan was transported back ... back to the time when he believed the alien was a vindictive murderer without conscience or the capacity for any emotion other than the thirst for blood. “Was there only one note?”

“No. There were five in all — the first in March 1988 and the last in October of that year. From the notes, we guessed Clark was still alive despite his situation being grim, but Philip was hopeful of things changing for the better. However, the final letter seemed more desperate in tone — as if he feared that, despite everything, the evil side was going to prevail.”

“And it did,” Evan said glumly. “Phil Deller was murdered in

November 1988.”

Martha’s eyes filled with tears. “Who murdered him? Moyne or Trask?”

“Moyne.”

“Because he was trying to help us,” she said wretchedly. “Clearly, he didn’t realise Moyne’s propensity for evil.”

None of them had realised, Evan thought. Although it should have been obvious. If he’d taken notice of his environment instead of fudging on his job and assuming nothing more was required of him than to ensure the prisoner didn’t escape ...

“What happened to Moyne after the murder?” Martha asked. “Was he charged?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know he did it?”

Evan stalled, hesitant to open the door into the world that had been Clark’s life for seven years.

“Tell me,” Martha prompted softly.

“He blamed Clark.”

“Oh, no,” Martha said, her eyes awash with tears. “Poor Clark.”

“And we believed him,” Evan said, feeling the acrid bile rise into his mouth. “We believed him.”

“Clark was someone different,” Martha said. “Sometimes it’s easy to believe the worst when someone is different.”

“That is true,” Evan said. “But it’s no excuse.”

“How did you find out Moyne was the murderer?”

“Lois challenged me about what I believed. Too late, I realised that much of what I’d been told was the product of a sick mind. When I got to know Clark a little, I knew he could never kill anyone.”

“Does Clark know he is no longer thought to be a murderer?”

“He did before the amnesia. My guess is that he doesn’t remember the murders now.”

“Murders? There was more than one?”

Evan nodded slowly, remembering Bortolotto, the quiet man who had been so clearly unsuited to the world of intrigue and death. “Two men. Deller was the first. I don’t suppose you got other letters? From another man?”

“No.”

Their conversation stalled, leaving Evan to mull over the earliest days of the alien operation. He had deliberately avoided Deller. Things with Shanti had begun to deteriorate, and he’d had no patience with Deller’s abrasive disposition.

If he’d taken the time to notice his colleague ...

What had Deller been planning?

How had Moyne discovered what he was doing?

Or had it been Trask who had discovered that Deller was an unacceptable risk and ordered Moyne to silence him permanently?

“A few months later, Jonathan died,” Martha said. “He started getting chest pains in the afternoon. The ambulance came and took us to a hospital, but it was too late. He died that night.”

“I’m so sorry,” Evan said, because there was nothing else to say. Words weren’t going to change anything. “Not having your husband must have made everything so much more traumatic.”

“It did,” she said. “I had to leave the hospital soon after Jonathan died. Jeff said his body would be buried in an unmarked grave, but there couldn’t be a funeral. We had a small memorial service for him.”

“What happened then?” Evan asked gently, unable to fathom how her story thus far could lead to the gates of the EPRAD base.

“The next few months are a blur,” Martha said. “I felt so alone. I was desperately hoping for another note from Philip, but nothing ever came. Not knowing what was happening with Clark and grieving for Jonathan and sensing that whatever Philip had been planning had been stopped ... I think it was about then that I gave up.”

“That is understandable,” Evan said.

“One day, Jeff called me into his office. He told me the government had ordered the closure of the facility. Perhaps there had been a leak about its existence. Jeff said that sometimes in a move, paperwork got lost. I was in too much of a daze to understand what he

meant. Finally, he had to spell it out for me. He said he’d noticed how thin and lifeless I’d become, and he believed that if I didn’t get out, I would follow Jonathan to the grave before the year ended.”

“What did he have in mind?”

“He told me about a community close by — a community of good, simple-living people. A community that could use my skills in cooking. A community that wouldn’t ask too many questions.”

“You went there?” Evan asked, as the path forward became clearer in his mind.

Martha nodded. “I had lost Jonathan. I had lost my hope that I would ever see Clark again. I feared what would happen if anyone else tried to contact me as Philip had done. I knew I had to make the best of a new season in my life. So, that bleak afternoon, I went with Jock. I don’t know how Jeff managed the details, but I think that, officially, Jane Johnson died in late 1989.”

“So you began a new life? As Esther Wallace?”

“Yes. A very simple life that revolved around family and the land. I cooked, I did laundry, I helped with the harvest — there was always more to be done than we had hours in the day. There was little time to think about the things I had lost. In time, I found a degree of contentment. Oh, I still missed for Jonathan and worried about Clark, but I knew both them would want me to make the best of what I had.”

“And then you saw the photograph in the paper?”

“Yes. There were no televisions or newspapers in the community. Sometimes, two of us would go into the nearest town to sell our excess produce and buy things like shoes or fabric for making clothes. I didn’t go. I guess I didn’t really want to be reminded there was a world out there that could be cruel and spiteful and judgemental. But three days ago, Sadie was sick, so I said I would go with Maud. I saw the photograph on the front page of a newspaper and knew immediately. It was Clark. I knew without even reading the story about what he had done. And I knew if I could just let him know I was alive, he would find me.”

“The line about buttermilk? That was the hint, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” she said. “Jonathan always said to take buttermilk for what ails you.”

“How did you think Clark would find you?”

“I intended to read the newspapers every day, hoping he would agree to a public appearance. I knew from the story that publicly he was ‘Superman’ so it was important that ‘Clark’ be kept a secret. I thought if I could see him, even in a crowd of people, he would know I was there. With all of his abilities, I was sure he would be able to find me.”

“Instead, you found me,” Evan said softly.

“Why did you invite me to your home?” Martha asked. “Were you suspicious about me?”

“No. Not until this morning.”

“Do you usually invite strangers into your home?” she demanded with a smile.

“No,” he said, smiling, too.

“Then why?”

Evan wasn’t really sure. “Maybe ... maybe it’s because I have realised I made some terrible mistakes. Maybe I wanted to be a kinder, more accepting person.”

“I think you’re very kind,” Martha said.

“Martha, there are things I should tell you. Bad things. Things I am deeply ashamed of.”

“You were with Clark?”

“Yes. And I -”

“And you believed what they said about him? About how he was evil and wanted to conquer the world?”

“I believed he was a threat, but -”

“Let’s leave it there,” Martha said. “If Clark feels the need to tell me the details, I will listen. But I think it is better for everyone if those years are put away and we all look forward.”

“I don’t think you realise how bad -”

“I don’t want to realise how bad it was,” she said. “In just a few

hours, I will see my son. I had lost all hope of ever seeing him again. The season of pain is over. It's time to move on."

"I hope you can move on," Evan said. "But I find it hard to forget."

"Your wife hurt you, didn't she?"

His defences shot up. "What makes you say that?"

"You have two girls — neither of whom resembles you, although there are similarities between them. I figure they have the same mother. There are no photos of her around the house, so I assume she didn't die."

"She left me," Evan admitted. "But that's not what hurts the most. She also left the girls. Abi was two days old."

"Aww, Evan," she said.

"And for that, I cannot forgive her."

"Look ahead," Martha said. "Don't let her spoil what you have with your daughters. They love you. You're a wonderful father to them. Don't let your bitterness damage that."

"I'm not their father."

"And I'm not Clark's mother," Martha said. "But do you think that makes a scrap of difference to how much I love him?"

Evan smiled, knowing he had been outmanoeuvred. "What did you do with the green rock?"

"Took it into the bathroom and flushed it."

"I would have destroyed it," Evan vowed. "I would never have allowed it near Clark."

"I know." She squeezed his hand and looked around the room. "Do you think this flying mansion has the means to make a cup of tea?"

"It must have," Evan replied as he stood. "Let's investigate."

Part 21

The sound of a motor pierced the murky veil of Lois's misery. Clark had left her.

And — although hours had passed — he hadn't returned.

She had waited. And hoped. And sobbed with regret. And become numb with fear.

But he hadn't returned.

There had been no whir of moving air. No footsteps. No call of her name.

Until now, the only sound to penetrate her torment had been the shrill of her cell phone.

But Clark didn't have a phone, so she had ignored it.

The motor stopped, and Lois groaned. She hoped that whoever it was would go away. Perhaps it was the sheriff, coming for the promised visit. Lois groaned again.

She struggled to a sitting position, and the shards jabbed callously inside her fragile head.

The clock said it was mid-afternoon.

She moved tentatively to the window.

An unfamiliar car had parked next to the Buick. It was black in colour, its darkened windows oddly reminiscent of a hearse.

By the time the front doors opened, Lois's heart was beating faster than normal.

Who was here? And what did they want?

Evan Shadbolt emerged from the driver's side.

He moved quickly to the passenger side and opened the door. A woman rose from the car and slowly scanned her surroundings, beginning with the house, moving past the barn, and then staring for a long moment out into the fields.

She was a slight woman, wearing a plain ankle-length dress under her drably functional coat.

It was Martha Kent.

She had come home.

And her son was gone.

Panic pulsed through Lois's veins. What was she going to do? How was she going to explain Clark's disappearance?

She only had the truth.

The time for cover-ups was over.

But her heart ached for the returning mother.

And for her shattered son.

They needed each other.

Clark *had* to come home.

Lois passed the dressing table and its mirror without stopping to inspect the damage she was sure had been wrought by hours of crying. She stumbled down the stairs, dreading the moment she came face to face with Martha Kent.

She had failed everyone.

She'd hurt Clark.

And because he had trusted her, the wounds of her betrayal would probably go deeper than even those inflicted by Trask and Moyne.

The back door opened as Lois reached the bottom of the stairs. She heard a little gasp of joy — a tiny sound that poured scalding condemnation through the clefts of her heart.

She forced herself forward, crossing the living room with short sharp steps.

When she arrived at the doorway, two heads swung towards her.

Lois's gaze was drawn to Martha — the mother who had taken in the baby she had found in a spaceship. The mother who had loved her son irrespective of his differences. The mother who had suffered for that love.

Martha stepped towards Lois, her arms outstretched.

Lois put up her hand to maintain the distance between them. "You ... you don't know what I did," she said. "Clark isn't here," she added quickly.

Martha's arms dropped. "Did you tell him about me?"

"No," Lois said dully. "He remembered. He remembered everything."

"And he got upset? Really upset?"

Lois could only nod as she awaited the other woman's response, unsure of what would be worse — her anger, her disappointment, or her reproach.

"Do you know where he is?" Martha asked.

"No," Lois said, fighting down her tears. "He stormed out this morning, and I haven't seen him since."

"You poor girl," Martha said, stepping up to Lois and enfolding her in her arms.

The embrace shook loose Lois's tears, but she clamped down on them, aware that it should be Clark's mom who was in need of comfort and support.

"Sssh," Martha crooned. "Sssh, honey. It will be all right."

Lois jolted back from Martha's shoulder. "H...how can it be all r...right?" she cried. "I've hurt him, and he's already been hurt so much. I lied to him. I told him you were dead."

"What other choice did you have?" Martha asked gently. Her smile peeked out. "You are perfect for my boy," she said. "But you're both going to have to learn to stop taking responsibility for things that aren't your fault."

"But I lied to him. That was my fault. That was my decision."

"And if you'd told him the truth, how would that have helped?"

"He'd be here now. You'd have your son."

"By not telling him, you gave him a few days to enjoy being free from the chains of the past. You showed him what is possible."

Lois shifted her gaze from Martha to Evan, who was standing behind her, staring at the floor. "How much have you told her?" Lois asked him.

His head lifted, but it was Martha who replied. "He told me some," she said. "But mostly, I know Clark. I know he blames himself whenever anything goes wrong. I know how quickly he decides that the solution to any problem is to withdraw. I have watched his struggles to feel at home on this foreign planet. I know sometimes his self-sacrificing nature gets the better of his common sense."

"Did you know he can get really, really angry?" Lois asked.

"Yes," Martha said calmly. "But I also know he never gets angry at others. His anger is only ever directed at himself."

"No," Lois said vehemently. "Perhaps he has changed during the past seven years, because he was angry with me. And he had every

reason to be angry with me.”

Martha took a breath, lifted her head and shoulders, and looked straight into Lois’s eyes. “Were you the one who captured him?” she demanded. “Were you the one who condemned him for being different? Were you the one who decided he had to be wrenched from his home? Were you the one who blamed him for two murders? Were you the one who tore apart his family? Were you the one who caused his amnesia?”

“N...no,” Lois whispered. “But I am the one who -”

“You are the one who loves him,” Martha said. “You are the one who accepts him. You are the one who put her heart on the line to prove to him that being different isn’t a life sentence of isolation.” She took Lois’s left hand in hers and looked at the rings. “You are the one who married him.”

No words would come. All Lois knew was that she wanted to cry and cry and cry until the pain inside her finally subsided.

Martha turned to Evan. “You make a cup of tea for Lois,” she said. “I’ll go and talk to Clark.”

“You don’t understand,” Lois said. “He’s not in the barn. I went and looked for him. I called him. I couldn’t find -”

“Of course he’s not in the barn,” Martha said. “He’ll be in his tree house. That’s where he always goes when he’s upset.”

“His tree house?” Lois said. “He never said anything about a tree house.”

“It’s meant to be a secret,” Martha said, lowering her voice conspiratorially. “I think he was always a little bit embarrassed he needed somewhere to go when his desire to be just a regular person became too much for him. Jonathan and I always pretended we didn’t know about it.”

“You think he’s there now?” Lois asked. “Where’s the tree house? I have to go to him. I have to try to make him understand how much he needs you. I have to make him see that if I’d handled this better -”

Martha put a restraining hand on Lois’s arm. “Did he say we should leave him? That it’s too dangerous for us to be with him?”

“Yes,” Lois said. “But I have to make him see that -”

“Clark has worried about that most of his life,” Martha said. “And of course, it finally happened, so I imagine his fears are even greater now.” She smiled reassuringly. “You and I have some work to do to help him see that nothing is going to drive us away.”

Lois had tried to do that. But all of her efforts had turned out so badly. “I ... I only wanted ...”

“Do you love him?”

“With my whole heart.”

“Did you always try to do what would be best for him?”

“Yes. But -”

“That’s all that matters.”

“I don’t think it’s all that matters to Clark,” Lois said dolefully. “I think he thinks I tried to force him into being someone he’s not.”

Martha patted Lois’s arm. “Just promise me you won’t leave until I’ve spoken with him.”

“I won’t leave,” Lois said. “I’ve promised him I will never leave him.”

Martha hugged Lois and then turned towards the door. Evan stepped into her path. “No,” he said. “You can’t go. The moment you first see Clark should be special for both of you. I’ll go.”

“He might still be angry,” Lois said.

“Then it’s better that he direct his anger at me than either of you,” Evan said. “You two ladies sit down, have a cup of tea, and begin to get to know each other. When Clark is seeing things more clearly, I’ll send him in.”

Martha looked to Lois and then nodded. “OK,” she said. “Thank you, Evan.”

“Where’s the tree house?”

“It’s in the large tree behind the barn,” Martha answered. “Head north for about a hundred yards. You can’t miss it.”

Evan walked out of the kitchen, leaving the two women alone. Martha spoke first. “I am so glad Clark found you.”

“I should make that tea,” Lois said. “Or I’m going to start crying again.”

Martha took off her coat. “Are my clothes still in the closet? Or have you packed them away?”

“They’re in the closet. But Clark and I have been using your bedroom.”

“I’ll move my things into Clark’s room later,” Martha said. “But for now, I just want to get into something with a bit of colour.”

“You don’t have to change rooms. Clark and I can have his room.”

“I shared that room with Jonathan for over twenty-five years,” Martha said. “With him not here now, I’d prefer to be somewhere else.”

“OK,” Lois agreed, although the course back to sharing a bedroom with Clark seemed strewn with impossible difficulties.

“Put the kettle on,” Martha said. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Clark sat on the uneven wooden floor, one leg straight, one bent, his wrist resting on his knee as he stared ahead.

The images in his mind were strong enough to blot out everything else.

He was back in the cell again.

Alone.

Despised.

Filthy.

Unwanted.

He was different.

Unacceptable.

The people around him always got hurt.

He couldn’t be with Lois. He couldn’t allow her to risk being with him.

She was gone anyway.

She wasn’t in the cell.

He was here.

Alone.

Forever alone.

Evan climbed the rope ladder and tapped on the door of the tree house.

There was no response.

He hadn’t expected one. He pushed open the door and saw Clark. He climbed the last few steps and perched in the doorway.

Clark continued to stare ahead.

“Clark?” Evan said.

There was no acknowledgement of Evan’s presence. “Your mom’s here,” he announced nonchalantly.

Clark swallowed, but said nothing.

“She saw your photograph in the newspaper,” Evan said. “She is very proud of you.”

Clark’s thumb tapped against his knee.

“She came home as soon as she knew it was safe to do so.”

“She won’t be safe while I’m here.”

“I can understand you feeling like that,” Evan said.

Clark didn’t move.

“But you see,” Evan continued. “It doesn’t matter how strong we are or how powerful we are, we all have to learn that sometimes other people can see things more clearly than we can.”

Clark’s head turned, and he faced Evan directly. “Would you leave, please?” he said. “This is not my prison, and you are not my guard.”

“I’ll leave,” Evan said easily. “But not until I’ve said what I came to say.”

Clark turned away, staring at the wall of the tree house.

“I probably understand better than anyone the pain and the anguish you have suffered,” Evan said. “I witnessed it. Heck, I contributed to it. I saw things the way I wanted to see them and remained blind to the things I didn’t want to see. I feel such overwhelming guilt for what I did to you — but I don’t pity you.”

Clark shifted his foot, dragging it closer to his body and

sharpening the angle of his knee.

"I don't pity you," Evan said. "I envy you. I envy what you have right now."

Clark turned, his brown eyes sparking. "You envy my powers?" he said scornfully. "You envy what I can do? It is nothing -"

"No," Evan said. "I don't envy what you can do; I envy what you have." He gestured in the direction of the house. "You have two women who love you. And if that isn't enough, they are two of the strongest, most incredible people I have ever met. I have spent the last four years despising half the population simply because they were women, but in Lois and your mother, I see characteristics deserving of the highest respect."

Clark's head rolled backwards, and he looked at wooden planks of the low ceiling.

"And they both adore you," Evan said. "They both accepted you without reservation. They are both staunchly committed to your wellbeing and happiness." He paused, hoping to add emphasis to his next words. "They both deserve a hell of a lot more than you're giving them."

Clark's head spun around, his mouth open with a retort. It closed slowly, and only a groan of pain emerged.

"All they want is for you to accept what is so obvious to them — that you are Clark first and an alien second."

"That wasn't how it was the night Trask and Moyne came here and took me away," Clark snapped.

"But we're not talking about Trask and Moyne," Evan said.

"We're talking about Lois and Martha. They love you. They love you despite your differences. They love you because of your differences. The bottom line is that they just love you — and they'll continue to love you no matter how long you fight their perception of who you are."

"I know who I am," Clark said. "I proved it today. Moyne always said that if I was ever with a human woman, I would hurt her."

Evan nodded. "And you hurt Lois today."

Clark sucked in a breath of utter pain. "I know," he said. "I could hear her crying. I had to stop listening. I didn't know I could tune out sounds, but I had to block out her crying. I couldn't bear it any longer."

"She's upset because she knows she hurt you."

"She didn't do anything wrong," Clark said fiercely.

"She's sorry she lied to you about your mom."

"What else was she supposed to do?" Clark fired at him. "How could she have explained Mom going missing seven years ago without also telling me what I'd been doing during that time?"

"She couldn't. But she's still upset. She's still afraid."

"She should be afraid. What if someone like Trask -"

"Lois isn't afraid of that," Evan said. "She's afraid because, other than when you had amnesia, you have never given her any reason to believe you can perceive a situation realistically. You always want to shoulder the blame yourself. She's scared you are going to leave her."

"I am," Clark declared. "After the way I treated her this morning, she should be hoping she never sees me again."

"You're probably right," Evan said. "But you know Lois. She doesn't take well to others telling her what she should think. When she was given her last assignment, I'm sure they told her what to think about the prisoner. But ... she's Lois. No one is ever going to convince her you're anything other than a strong, kind, gentle hero. Not even you. And your mother is exactly the same. Like I said, you are probably the luckiest guy on this planet."

"What am I going to do?" Clark asked desperately.

"Well, you could cling to what Trask and Moyne told you, and in doing that, you will put those two women through a mountain of pain. Neither of them will leave you, of course, nor will they blame you, but it will hurt them immensely."

"I spent seven years listening to Moyne. I can't stop his voice."

"You could start listening to Lois and your mom. They both have a lot to say about who they think you are."

"It's not that simple. I am who I am."

"Exactly. But are you going to look at all the putrid trash that has been piled on you? Or are you going to look at the man underneath? I know what Martha and Lois see."

"And what if I fail them? Again?"

"Clark," Evan said. "What is the big problem here? Is it that you're not human? Or that you're not perfect?"

"I ..."

"None of us is perfect," Evan said. "We all make mistakes. Some of us are carrying the burden of far greater mistakes than you will ever know."

"I'm ... I'm not sure how to face them."

"Simple," Evan said. "All you need to do is walk into that kitchen. With those two women, you don't have to *do* anything to be accepted. You just are."

"I can't believe how I spoke to Lois," Clark said. "I can't believe she will be able to forgive me."

"I can't believe you will ever be able to forgive me," Evan said. "Perhaps you have. Perhaps you haven't. I don't even have the right to ask for your forgiveness. But if you could even consider forgiving me for seven years of wrong, I think you can understand that it's going to be possible for Lois to forgive you for a few misspoken words."

"It was more than a few misspoken words," Clark said. "I was so angry. She was there. I -"

"Of course you were angry," Evan said. "You have every justification for being angry. All that time ... all those years, when you had to keep every single emotion bottled away inside you. Of course it was going to come out. It had to."

"But not at Lois. I wasn't angry with her."

"Then go and tell her that. She'll understand."

"Do you think so?" Clark asked plaintively.

Evan smiled. "I thought you knew Lois," he said.

Clark almost smiled. "I do," he said.

"Then don't ask stupid questions."

Clark swung onto his knees. "Let's get out of here," he said.

Evan climbed down the ladder. Clark jumped to the ground. They walked together in silence. When they'd passed the barn, Evan stopped. He extended his hand. "Good luck, Clark," he said.

Clark shook his hand. "You're not coming in?"

"No."

"I'm sure Mom will want to thank you for bringing her home."

"No. I've done what I was assigned to do. It's time to go."

Evan turned towards the car. With a flash of movement, Clark blocked his way. "How long ago did my father die?" he asked.

"Five years ago."

"How long have you been with my mother?"

"Since yesterday evening."

Clark stared at Evan. Evan stared back. "You care for her, don't you?" Clark asked quietly.

"I said you were the luckiest guy on the planet," Evan said.

"Have you told her?"

"Clark, there's no room here for me. I know that."

"Have you asked Mom what she wants?"

"No. And I'm not going to. You ... Lois ... your mom ... you deserve a chance to get on with your lives without a stain from the past."

"Perhaps in time?"

"No. Never." Evan opened the car door. "I made a terrible mistake. Now I have to pay for it."

Martha heard the motor start.

That meant Evan was leaving.

She turned to Lois. "I think Clark's coming," she said.

Lois stood up. "I'll wait upstairs. I'm sure you want some time alone with your son."

"When I'm done with him, I'll send him up to you," Martha said. "And I'll go out and begin to reclaim my vegetable garden, so you'll

have the house to yourselves.”

“I hope ... I hope it’s everything you both deserve.”

“Thank you, honey.”

Lois slipped away, and Martha turned to the door, awaiting her son as the excitement welled like effervescent spring water inside her.

She saw his shadow pass the window.

Her heart accelerated, pushing pure exhilaration through her veins.

The door handle turned.

The door swung open.

And Clark was there.

Martha sprinted forward into his arms. She held him, crying and laughing and crying some more.

“Mom,” he breathed. “Oh, Mom.”

She held him, marking time with his breaths. Finally, she took hold of his shoulders and eased away from him so she could look at him. There were tears on his cheeks, and his face was no longer that of a man just stepping into adulthood — but he was still Clark.

Her Clark.

“Did ... did they hurt you?” he asked.

“No,” she said.

“Please don’t try to save me from the truth.”

“For two years, I was safely tucked away where Trask couldn’t find me,” she said. “Then after your father died, I was allowed to join a rural community.”

“Did they tell you anything about what happened to me?”

“A man called Philip Deller wrote me,” she said.

“Deller wrote you?” he asked in surprise.

“Yes.”

“Did he tell you details? Did he tell you where I was? And ... and other stuff?”

Martha couldn’t bear to look at the pain in his eyes. “No,” she said, brushing a motherly hand across his shirt. “And unless you want to tell me, I don’t want to know.”

“I don’t want anyone to know.”

She looked up to his face. “He told me you were alive. He had a plan to free you. I’m not sure what he intended to do, but I fear he paid for his kindness with his life.”

“There has been so much death,” Clark said. “Dad ...”

Martha hugged him closely, noting how broad he had become.

“I’m sorry, Clark. I wish your dad could have been here today.”

“Did he suffer?” Clark asked.

“He had a heart attack. They took him to the hospital, and he died later that night.”

“Did they let you go with him?”

“Yes. I was with him when he died.”

“I’m so sorry, Mom,” Clark said. “I’m so sorry I couldn’t be with you.”

“There have been a lot of times in the past seven years when we haven’t been able to be where we wanted to be,” Martha said.

“I’m s-”

“It’s time to move on,” Martha said, cutting across his apology.

“It’s finally time to move on.”

“I ... I don’t know if I can.”

“Yes, you can. The three of us can move on together.”

Clark looked around the kitchen. “Is Lois still here?” he asked, his voice quivery with fear.

“She promised you she would never leave you.”

“Have you met her?”

“Met her, fell in love with her, and was completely swept off my feet by my son’s good fortune,” Martha said.

Clark’s smile glimmered, but the fear didn’t leave his eyes. “I hurt her,” he said.

“She’s upstairs, waiting for you.”

“What if I hurt her again?”

“That’s a risk we all take when we love,” Martha said. “I lost you for a time, and it hurt so bad that sometimes it felt as if my heart was being torn apart. But if I could go back to the moment when I first

looked into your little spaceship, do you think I would walk away? Even if I knew everything I know now?”

“I ... I ...”

“Or course I wouldn’t,” she said. “There has never been a day that I have regretted picking you up and bringing you home.”

“What about -”

“No. Not even for one day.”

“But Lois and me ... That’s different.”

“I lost your father, too,” Martha said. “But think of how lonely and empty my life would have been without the two of you.”

“You’ve been without the two of us for the past five years,” Clark said.

“Exactly,” she retorted. “And why were those years so full of longing for you and your dad? Because I knew what I was missing, that’s why. How blessed I am that I had all those good years.”

“I ... I’m not sure I can ... I can’t see things that way.”

“That’s why you need to get up those stairs and start living the wonderful life you’ve been given.”

“So I know what I’m missing if they come back and take me again?”

“No — so you don’t get to the end of your days and realise you chose emptiness when you could have had such abundance. That you chose fear when love was right there for the taking.”

“I can’t hurt her again.”

“Yes, you can. And you will. She’ll probably hurt you, too. That’s life. That’s marriage. That’s love.”

“But this is *Lois*. I can’t bear it when she’s hurting.”

Martha pointed upwards. “Then go make it better.”

“I ... I don’t know how to.”

She gave him a little shove towards the door. “She’s your wife, Clark. She’s waiting for you in the bedroom. That might not tell you where to start, but it certainly should give you some idea of where to finish.”

Clark’s jaw dropped.

“I’m going outside to see if I can find any trace of my vegetable garden,” Martha said. “It’s horribly neglected. I’ll be busy for at least three or four hours.”

He seemed a little dumbfounded.

“Go,” Martha said. “The best thing about a few angry words is the make-up s-”

But Clark was gone.

Martha chuckled as she walked out of her kitchen and headed to the garden shed in search of her tools.

It was so good to be home.

Clark reached the top of the stairs and stopped. The door to his childhood bedroom was closed; the door to his parents’ bedroom was open.

Her heartbeat was coming from the room to his right.

The open door.

She was in there.

He couldn’t hear movement.

Was she angry?

Would she talk to him?

He didn’t know what to say. How could he draw anything coherent from his jangle of emotions?

How could he make her understand that his anger had been directed at Trask? And Moyne? And his own inability to prevent his slide back into the sludge of their hatred?

He had to go into the bedroom.

He had to see Lois.

He had to try to explain.

His head shot up at the sound of a footstep.

She was in the doorway.

Her eyes were puffy; her hair still carried the tracks of her comb.

From the tree house, he had heard her weeping, and it had gouged his heart. Seeing the effects of her distress felt like acid on open

wounds.

“Come on in,” she said, her expression inscrutable. She stepped back.

Clark hesitated. So much had happened in this room.

The bedroom therapy — the battles waged within him between Moyne’s poison and Lois’s loving encouragement and understanding. And the intimacies of their marriage — made possible because of the shield of amnesia.

But that shield had been shattered.

Lois waited for him.

The spectre of the cell rose from hibernation and roared through the corridors of his mind.

He couldn’t do this. He couldn’t go into the bedroom with Lois. She would expect ... She wouldn’t understand. How could she understand that everything had changed? That the man who had made love with her last night had crumbled in the harsh light of the truth?

But he couldn’t just walk away.

Not from Lois.

Not after what he had said to her.

Clark opened his mouth, wanting to speak, wanting to wipe his earlier words from her memory.

His mouth closed.

Animal. Dirty animal.

Moyne’s voice snaked through his mind, leaving a toxic trail of contamination.

“Come on in,” Lois said.

Had he glimpsed a smile?

If not from her mouth, perhaps from her tear-chafed eyes?

Fixing his gaze in hers, Clark shuffled forward. One step. Two steps into the room.

Within touching distance.

She looked up to him.

He wanted to run. To run away before she saw through his transparent covering and perceived his shame.

But he couldn’t move. His feet were heavy. His hands were anchored to the bottom of his pockets.

Her gaze didn’t waver, holding him with invisible bonds. “I’m sorry, Clark,” she said. “I shouldn’t have lied to you.”

She was sorry. “I ... I’m sorry, too,” he whispered. “I’m so sorry.” There was more he should say, but before he could even begin to compose the words, Lois smiled.

Not a smile fully formed, but potent with ...

Acceptance.

Palpable. Complete. Indestructible. Unconditional acceptance.

That had never changed.

It had been there the first time ... when he had dared to look at her as he’d offered her the Neosporin. It had been there as she’d walked across the cell to him two days later. It had been there when she had washed his hair. It had been there as she’d cut the poison from his shoulder.

It was still there now.

Acceptance. So pure. So powerful.

She stepped behind him. She closed the door. And shut out the world.

She came closer. She reached for him. Her hands landed on his shirtsleeves, just down from his shoulders.

Heat erupted, melding her palms to his body.

He couldn’t breathe.

Couldn’t move.

Her hands lifted, and she took hold of his top button and slipped it from the hole.

“N...n...no,” he said on a quivering breath.

She ignored him. She moved to his second button and unloosed that.

“Lois,” he said as his panic reared. “I can’t.”

“Let me,” she said.

“I can’t.”

“Let me.”

She dropped to his third button. And his fourth. And lower, to his fifth. When his shirt hung open, she took a fistful of either side of his shirt and pulled it from his jeans.

He was trembling now.

He couldn’t do this.

Moyne’s voice reverberated through his head.

Animal.

Scum.

Abomination.

Inhuman monster.

Her fingertip grazed softly down his chest.

He shivered as her touch rippled through his flesh and touched his core.

Her hands slipped inside his open shirt and cupped the curves of his ribcage.

Moyne’s voice hammered again, more insistent now.

Animal.

No woman would ever touch you.

You’re disgusting.

“I can’t,” Clark grated.

“Let me.”

Her hands moved with slow deliberation. Her fingertips. Her thumb. Sliding across his skin.

Moyne’s voice screamed loathing and abuse.

Animal.

Dirty animal.

Her hands coasted upwards, across his pecs, and onto his shoulders. Her thumbs traced his collarbones, and her fingers climbed the sides of his neck. His eyes closed. She rode the ridges of his shoulders, pushing the shirt from his body.

He stood before her.

Exposed.

Within him, the battle raged.

Moyne’s voice spewed hate.

Lois’s hands massaged love.

The voice surged, seizing the ascendancy. Clark’s spirit crumbled in defeat.

He couldn’t do this.

He was an animal.

A dirty animal.

He wasn’t human. He had no right to her.

He had no right to any woman.

Her hands moved slowly down his chest, squeezing the air from his lungs. They felt like silk on his skin. They rounded his ribs and flattened on his back, moving, stroking, caressing.

Her sweater brushed against his chest.

He breathed in the scent of her.

Her mouth contacted his — a touch so fleeting she was gone before the harsh voice could rise in protest.

But it came.

No woman will ever want you.

A woman wants a man — a real man, not a murdering brute who lives like swine.

From the far recesses of his consciousness, other memories stirred.

Memories of her touch. Her mouth. Her body.

Memories that stood in defiance of Moyne.

He felt her kiss again. Was it memory-fuelled imagination? Or reality?

Clark’s mouth fell open. Her kiss deepened. It was her. Now.

No woman ...

“Let me,” she whispered into his mouth. “Let me.”

Her hands captured his head. Her body pressed against his.

Moyne’s taunts rose again, loud and insistent. *Monster! Vile beast! Murderer!*

She continued to kiss him, and his pulse boomed through his head, drowning out the words.

She eased him towards the bed. They turned, her mouth never breaking from his. The world dropped away. Her hands pushed on his shoulders, and he allowed himself to fall onto the cold sheet that felt like ice under the burning skin of his back.

Lois followed him, her body tight against his.

Animal.

Filthy animal.

He snatched his hands from his pockets and clung to her.

Her body. Her hands. Her mouth.

He knew her. He knew her intimately.

And he trusted her.

Lois beckoned him forward. She called him out of captivity with the sweet promise of freedom.

Her strength was overwhelming.

He couldn't resist.

Not Lois.

Ani-

The voice came one last time, but it was beaten. The sting had gone. Seven years of Moyne's hatred could not stand against the power of her love. The battle had been won.

Her voice came softly through the quietness. "I love you, Clark. I love you."

The hatred was gone.

The fear was beaten.

And he was free.

Epilogue

A/N — The time in each heading indicates how long has passed from the end of the story.

~ Sunday, 2 hours ~

Martha Kent straightened from where she had been waging war on the armies of weeds that had taken advantage of her absence to invade her vegetable garden. She glanced up to the window of Clark's bedroom. It was her bedroom now, she reminded herself.

What was happening in the other bedroom?

Before she could contemplate further, two figures emerged from the kitchen door. The sight of them caused her heart to swell. With love. And pride. And optimism.

Everything was going to be all right.

They were holding hands. They were shoulder to shoulder. They were chuckling over a shared secret. They seemed bound together by an aura of oneness.

Martha watched every step as they approached her, revelling in the sight of her son looking so contented and relaxed. When they reached her, he smiled, and her heart overflowed.

"Mom," Clark said. "I know you've already met, but this is my wife, Lois."

Martha grinned at the younger woman. "It is lovely to meet you officially, Lois," she said.

"And I am so glad to meet you, Mrs Kent."

Martha chuckled. "There are two Mrs Kents now, so you should call me Martha."

"Martha," Lois said.

"Shall we go inside?" Martha suggested. "I want to cook a meal in my own kitchen, and I want to get to know my daughter-in-law." She lightly touched Clark's arm, just because she could. "And I want to make up for lost time with my son."

His smile came easily, free from the uncertainties that had so often marred his happiness in the past. "I'll put away your tools, Mom," he said.

He was gone and back in a blur. Martha looked at Lois, and they both laughed. Together, the family of three walked into the farmhouse.

Martha picked up the envelope from the table and gave it to Clark. "This is for you," she said.

"What is it?"

"Mr Menzies asked me to give it to you," she said. "He didn't say what it was."

Clark opened the envelope and slid out two papers. He skimmed

over them.

"What are they?" Lois asked.

"There's a signed statement from the head of the Metropolis Police Department stating that I was in no way involved in the deaths of Philip Deller and John Bortolotto," Clark said. "And there's a letter from the President of the United States thanking me for diverting the asteroid and officially welcoming me to the planet." He returned the papers to the envelope and tossed it onto the table.

"Are you all right?" Lois asked, sounding concerned.

Clark smiled suddenly. "I guess it's a nice gesture," he said. "But the two people I care about most didn't need an official letter to know I hadn't killed anyone. And they welcomed me into their hearts, not just their planet."

Martha opened her arms, and both of her children stepped into her embrace.

She held them close, and the long years of pain and separation and fear faded away in the sunshine of hope for a future together.

~ Monday, 1 day ~

Maggie Irig heard the car purr up the driveway and dried her hands on her apron. She went outside and saw the Buick that her neighbour, Lois, drove.

Smiling in welcome, Maggie hurried forward to greet her company.

The car door opened.

A woman emerged.

Maggie stopped, her heart thundering, her breath arrested, her mind wanting so desperately to believe.

"Martha?" she squealed. She sprinted forward and into the arms of her friend. They clung together — laughing and crying breathless half-sentences of jubilation.

"Maggie," Martha said. "Oh, Maggie. I have missed you so much."

Maggie wiped the tears from her cheeks. "I thought I'd lost you. I thought I'd lost the best friend I've ever had."

"You haven't lost me," Martha said, turning towards the house.

"But I'm aching to have a cup of tea with you and catch up on all the news. Clark told me Brett is getting married. And you've met Lois? She is perfect, Maggie. Clark is ..."

Maggie hugged her friend tighter, sending silent thanks heavenwards that her prayers had been answered.

~ Wednesday, 3 days ~

Eric met Scardino and Shadbolt at the warehouse on Bessolo Boulevard.

They locked themselves in the back room and began the unpalatable task of meticulously combing through everything that had been removed from Neville Moyne's apartment. Five hours later, they had accumulated a small pile of eight green pebbles of various sizes.

Eric cupped them in his large hands. "What happens now?" he asked.

"I think we owe it to him to destroy all of it," Shadbolt said.

"Do we trust him?" Eric said. "Implicitly?"

"Yes," Shadbolt said, sounding as if he had no doubts.

Eric's gaze swung to Scardino. "What do you think?"

"I agree. We owe him."

"What if he changes? What if he decides his powers can be used for greater self-gain?"

"That is not going to happen," Shadbolt snapped.

"The foremost priority of a government agency is to protect the citizens of their country," Eric reminded them.

"And he is our most valuable asset in doing exactly that," Shadbolt insisted firmly.

"Can we be sure no one from his planet will come to Earth?" Eric said. "Aliens with an entirely different agenda to his?"

"His planet was destroyed," Scardino said.

"Can we be sure of that?"

There was silence as the three men stared at the innocuous-looking collection.

“If others do come,” Shadbolt said. “And if they threaten us, he would do everything in his considerable power to protect us.”

“If we don’t destroy them, we risk them falling into the wrong hands,” Scardino said.

Eric rolled the pebbles around his palms. “It’s your call, Shadbolt,” he said.

The agent-turned-security-guard shot him a silent question.

“Well, I see it like this,” Eric said. “I have no children and never will. Scardino might have children one day, but he hasn’t yet. You have two daughters. You have the best reason for safeguarding the future of this planet. You have the most to lose if we get it wrong.”

“I say we destroy all of it,” Shadbolt said. “It’s the only honourable thing to do. And it protects him from people like Trask and Moyne using it against him.”

“What is the best way to do it?” Eric asked.

“Mrs Kent flushed the piece you gave me,” Shadbolt said.

“Well, it’s already been hidden in sewage,” Eric said, looking around at Neville’s collection of repugnant magazines and books.

“But that doesn’t actually destroy it,” Scardino said. “The rods were cremated.”

Eric shot a questioning look to Shadbolt. He nodded.

“Cremation, it is then,” Eric said.

Less than two hours later, all of the green pebbles were gone.

The earth had no means of protection against invading aliens.

But they had Superman. And Eric figured they were in safe hands.

~ Ten days ~

Lois spun away from her computer screen at the sound of Clark’s running feet. He rushed into the room, his face alight with excitement.

“What?” she said as he lifted her into his arms and swung her around.

Clark held up a piece of paper, and Lois saw the logo of the University of Missouri. “They’ve accepted my application to continue my journalism course,” he said. “And they’ve agreed to me studying by correspondence.”

Lois kissed him exuberantly. “Clark,” she whooped. “I’m so pleased for you.”

“The semester has already begun,” he said with a wide grin. “So I have a bit of catching up to do. Luckily, I can speed-read.”

“And speed-type,” Lois said. “Just please don’t melt my keyboard.”

“I think the keyboard is in far greater danger from your novel.”

Lois tried valiantly to look either uncomprehending or indignant. Failing both, she just grinned.

Clark checked her desk with grave concern. “The computer’s not steaming,” he noted. “I guess that means you still haven’t got them into bed yet.”

“They sleep every night,” she answered innocently.

“But not together.” Clark slipped his hand under her sweater and slowly edged up her back. “I think further research is required, Ms Lane.”

“Research?”

He nodded. “And Mom’s in Smallville, so we have the house to ourselves.” He lobbed his letter onto her desk.

“I thought research involved books,” Lois commented.

“Nah,” Clark said. “Books are a poor alternative. This sort of research requires a hands-on approach.”

“And you are kindly putting aside your work outside to volunteer to help me?”

“That’s the sort of husband I am,” he said with a voracious grin.

“Wanna come upstairs with me, my love?”

Lois chuckled. “You know I’m insatiable when it comes to you,” she said.

He gave a rakish grunt of anticipation and flew them to the top of the stairs and into their bedroom, stopping only to shut the door.

And the research continued.

~ Three weeks ~

Martha paused from her task of rolling out the pastry for a pie as her son walked in from outside, brushing the light dusting of snow from his clothes. “Is everything OK out there?” she asked.

“Yep,” he said. “Where’s Lois? I can’t hear her keyboard tapping.”

Martha grinned. Her son was one crazy-in-love young man. “She’s -”

Her reply was cut short as Lois swung through the door and into her husband’s arms. They kissed as if they hadn’t seen each other for weeks, although by Martha’s calculations, it was about forty-two minutes since Lois had kissed Clark good-bye before he had gone to the barn to check on the animals.

Martha returned her attention to her pastry, joy bubbling in her heart. Clark had everything she and Jonathan had dreamed of for him — a woman to love, a career, and — although Superman had only made three appearances since the public press conference — a way to use his abilities to help the people of his adopted planet.

She looked up as Clark slipped into a seat and pulled Lois down onto his lap. “It’s Thanksgiving this week,” he said.

“We have so much to be thankful for,” Martha said. “We are going to have a wonderful holiday. I brought the turkey home yesterday.”

“I can’t wait,” Lois said with a kiss to Clark’s cheek. “My family’s idea of Thanksgiving was staying in separate rooms of the house so we couldn’t argue.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Martha said.

Lois and Clark managed to wrest their attention from each other long enough to send her inquiring looks.

“We have so much,” Martha said. “I thought we should share it with someone.”

“Good idea,” Clark said. “Who?”

Martha turned to her daughter-in-law. “How about your dad?”

“My dad?”

“You and Clark could arrange with Ronny to take him out of the nursing home for a few hours. Clark could fly him here. I know this house isn’t wheelchair-friendly, but with Clark around, it isn’t going to be a problem. What do you think?”

“Dad would have to know about Clark,” Lois said as she checked for her husband’s reaction. “How do you feel about that?”

Clark pause was short. “I think it’s a great idea,” he said. “Your dad really enjoyed the lunch we had with Uncle Mike. And if he knows about me — well, he can visit us regularly. I’m sure he’ll enjoy Mom’s home cooking.”

“Are you worried he will tell someone?” Lois asked.

“I don’t think he would if we asked him not to,” Clark said. He stroked Lois’s hair. “But even if he did, it’s difficult for him to communicate complicated ideas, and I’m not sure too many people would believe him if he tried to say he had flown to Kansas.”

“If you don’t mind him knowing, I think it’s a lovely idea for him to join us,” Lois said. She smiled at Martha. “Thank you for thinking of him.”

“If you wanted to squeeze in a quick visit to the nursing home now, the pie should be nicely browned by the time you get back,” Martha said.

“Want to go flying with me?” Clark asked his wife.

Lois grinned. “Anytime,” she said.

They went up the stairs to put on warmer clothes, and Martha couldn’t help but smile as their laughter floated down.

Her greatest delight since returning home had been watching their love become more established each day. Watching her son’s confidence flourish in the steady warmth of Lois’s love. Watching the way his eyes lit up every time she walked into a room.

Three days later, the Kent-Lane family celebrated Thanksgiving in the warm farmhouse kitchen. There were moments of reflection at what had been lost, but overwhelmingly, it was a time of hope. A time to look forward. A time to acknowledge the gift of family and the joy

of being together.
A time to heal.

~ Five weeks ~

Clark stood at the edge of the gravesite as the casket was lowered into the ground. His mother was on his right, his arm stretched across her shoulders. His wife was on his left, her hand securely folded in his.

Inside, his emotions were in chaos. His father had died. The death was five years ago, but right now, the passing of time was ineffective in numbing his grief for the man who had taken an alien child into his home and into his heart.

But alongside the sorrow, there was also relief. And closure. His dad had been brought home and laid to rest in the Smallville cemetery, amongst his friends, close to his family.

The minister finished his words. Clark eased his mom closer. She looked up, and he saw the same conflicting emotions in her face — tears in her eyes, yet a serene smile on her lips.

“I’m so glad we could bring him home,” she whispered. “He has finally been laid to rest.”

Clark nodded, feeling the lump in his throat grow larger. Lois gently squeezed his hand — a gesture full of the support and understanding that characterised her love for him.

The casket disappeared.

“Thank you, Dad,” Clark murmured. “I love you.”

~ Five and half weeks ~

Lois groaned as her cell phone cut through the wonderful languor that followed lovemaking. “Clark,” she said. “We need to go back down to the bed so I can reach my bag.”

Clark grunted, soft and satisfied, and lowered them slowly to the bed.

Lois took out her cell phone and saw the call was from Eric Menzies. “Mr Menzies?” she said with surprise.

“Lois,” he said urgently. “There’s been an explosion on one of the ships in the harbour. We need -”

“I’ll tell him.”

Clark had already wriggled out from under her and spun into the Suit. He dipped to kiss her.

“I love you,” she said. “Come home safely.”

“I love you,” he said.

And then he was gone.

Over three hours later, the fires on the vessel had been brought under control, the spillage of fuel and chemicals had been contained, and every person still alive had been removed from the wreckage.

Clark stood on the dock, looking through the ship and locating the bodies of those who hadn’t survived the initial explosion or who had died soon after from smoke inhalation or radiant heat.

He heard a step beside him and turned to see Stephen, the guy who had overseen the entire rescue operation. “Great job, Superman,” Stephen said. “Thanks to you, the death toll will be less than thirty instead of in the hundreds.”

“That’s still thirty lives lost. Thirty families grieving.”

Stephen put his hand on Superman’s shoulder. “In this job, we can’t dwell for too long on the ones we lose,” he said. “That sounds harsh, but we owe it to tomorrow’s victims to be at our best for them.”

Clark nodded, but it didn’t ease the pain inside him.

“It was an honour working with you,” Stephen said. “You’re welcome on my rescue operation anytime.”

“Thanks.” Superman gestured towards the ship. “I’ll bring out the bodies. Can you cordon off an area for them?”

“Sure,” Stephen said. “And thank you again.”

An hour later, Clark arrived at his bedroom door. He locked his hearing onto the heartbeat of his wife, unable to quell his hope that she would be awake.

He quietly opened the door, and entered their bedroom. She sat up,

switched on the bedside lamp, and sprang from the bed to come to him.

He caught her shoulders and held her back. “I’m a mess,” he said. But he needed her. He needed her to help dispel the aura of death and the stench of terror and the memory of horrible injuries.

“What happened?” she asked.

“We saved a lot of people.”

“But not all?”

“No. Those near the explosion didn’t have a chance.”

Her hands reached for his face and touched him with palpable love. “You know that is going to happen,” she said. “You know you won’t save everyone.”

He nodded. He knew that, but it still hurt.

“There are people alive now who would be dead without you,” Lois said. “There are people receiving medical attention now who would still be trapped without you. There are people who have lesser injuries because of you. And there are rescue workers at home with their family now because you made their job safer.”

He knew that. But he’d needed to hear it. He’d needed her to say it.

“I have an idea,” Lois said.

“I love your ideas,” he breathed.

“How about some bathroom therapy?”

“Bathroom therapy?” he asked — not because he couldn’t imagine what she meant, but because he wanted to hear her vocalise her thoughts.

“I think we could start with a Superman strip,” she said as she reached behind him and grasped the zipper of his suit. “Then, once the Suit is off, I’ll be able to see more clearly which parts of you need washing.”

“That sounds as if your pyjamas would be at serious risk of getting wet,” he said, undoing a button from her pyjama top and glancing downwards.

“We can’t allow that to happen,” she said. “So I guess I’ll have to undress, too.”

“If that’s the case . . .” Clark swung her into his arms and carried her into the bathroom. He shut the door behind them and looked down at the woman who had given him everything. “I need you,” he said, his buffeted emotions making his voice raspy and rough. “I need you to come home to.”

“And I need you.” She slowly lowered his zipper.

Clark gave himself up to the restorative power of bathroom therapy.

~ Saturday, six weeks ~

Monica Deller stood shivering among half a dozen other hardy parents as she watched her son, Billy, and his team play football. Phil had loved the sport, but her interest centred solely on her son’s involvement.

She had seen every game he’d played. She’d learned enough about football to make intelligent comments when Billy figured that the three hours following the game were needed to dissect every play, every touchdown, every move.

The wind felt cold enough to cut her in half.

Sometimes, she wished her son had fallen in love with basketball. Or baseball. Or even hockey — at least it was played indoors.

And often, she wondered how different life would have been if Phil hadn’t been killed when Billy was so young.

This would be so much more bearable with Phil’s arms around her, keeping out the cold. If he could have been there to talk about game with their son.

Billy’s team was being horribly beaten.

Monica sighed. There was still at least another half an hour before the game would finish and she could seek the warmth of her car.

Then, the ball was flicked to the opposing team’s quarterback, who leant back and threw a long pass to the receiver. He caught the ball and turned to run to the touchdown line. Monica groaned.

From nowhere came Billy, sprinting like a whippet.
 “Go, Billy,” Monica screamed.
 Her son caught the opponent and laid a tackle. The ball spilled free.
 “Great tackle, Billy,” came a deep male voice next to her.
 Monica spun around.
 Superman was there.
Superman.
 Watching Billy’s game.
 He knew Billy’s name.
 Monica gulped.
 Superman turned to her with a smile. “He’s got some great closing pace,” he said.
 “Y...yeah,” was the best she could manage.
 “His dad was a friend of mine,” Superman said. “Would you mind if Billy and I threw some balls together?”
 Would she *mind*? “No. Th...that would be ... be ... wonderful.”
 Superman smiled. He had a magnificent smile. “After school on Tuesday?”
 “Y...yes. Billy will be thrilled.”
 “See you then.”
 With that, he flew away, leaving Monica Deller to wonder if all the hours she had spent standing in the icy cold had finally rendered her delusional.

~~ December 20th, eight and a half weeks ~~

Martha put down the book she had been pretending to read and looked out the living room window towards the barn. Clark was in there. Lois was a few feet away, working on her novel.
 Now was Martha’s moment.
 But she hadn’t felt this sort of nervousness in years.
 She pulled on her coat and walked towards the barn, promising herself she wouldn’t make an inane comment and scuttle away. Like she had last time. And the time before that.
 Clark was lying under the tractor, tinkering with its engine. He lifted a few inches from the ground and floated out. “Hi, Mom,” he said as he sprang to his feet.
 “Hi, Clark.”
 He reached for a rag and began wiping his hands. When she didn’t speak, he said, “Is everything OK?”
 “It’s Christmas next week,” she said.
 “Are you worried about missing Dad?” he asked.
 Martha’s heart dived, did an ungainly pirouette, and collapsed into a heap somewhere around her navel. “I will always miss Jonathan,” she said. “But this is the sixth Christmas I’ve had without him.”
 “I wish he could be here with us,” Clark said.
 “I do, too.” Martha loved her son’s empathy, but in this instance, he really wasn’t making her mission any easier. Perhaps she should just ask him if he’d like her to make an apple pie for supper tonight and try to ignore the idea that kept prowling through her mind.
 “Do you need help with the preparations?” Clark asked. “Are you concerned about Sam coming?”
 “No, of course not,” Martha said. “It was wonderful having him here at Thanksgiving.”
 Clark’s hands stilled from their cleaning as he waited for her to speak.
 “I ... Clark, there’s something I’ve been wanting to talk to you about.”
 “OK,” he said.
 “I wondered ... I wondered if you’d mind if I invited someone else. For Christmas.”
 “Sure,” Clark said, although his expression showed incomprehension as to why this was such a big deal. “Are you thinking about inviting Wayne and Maggie?”
 “No,” Martha said. She took a big breath. “I’d like to ask Evan and his daughters.”
 Clark began mindlessly wiping his hands on the rag again.

Martha tried to read his face, but it was carefully blank. “H...how would you feel about that?”
 “I ... Would you mind if I asked a couple of questions?”
 “No,” she said, half petrified and half relieved at having the chance to get everything into the open.
 “Is this just a Christmas gesture?” Clark asked softly. “Or more than that?”
 “I ... I’m hoping more than that,” she said, watching carefully for his reaction.
 Clark looked as if he didn’t know what to say.
 “Clark,” Martha said. “You know I loved your father. I still miss him terribly, and I would give anything to have him here with us. But I have to accept that no amount of wishing is going to bring him back. And I still have a lot of life to live.”
 “You know you will always be welcome with Lois and me?” Clark said. “She loves you. She feels closer to you than to her own mom.”
 “I know I will always have you and Lois,” Martha said. “And watching you together is one of the joys of my life, but ...”
 “But?”
 “Jonathan and I loved you.”
 “Of course,” Clark said, looking puzzled.
 “But you still felt ... lonely. Didn’t you? You still felt as if you needed someone just for you?”
 Clark nodded.
 “That’s how I feel now. I love you both, and I know you love me. But *your* love is just for you. And I’m lonely.” She met his eyes, hoping for his understanding. “And I miss Evan.”
 Clark reached for her with a moderately clean hand and ran his palm down her upper arm. “Have you spoken to him since he brought you home?”
 “I wrote him, thanking him for everything he did for me.”
 “Did he reply?”
 “Yes,” she said. “A very short and impersonal reply that began with ‘Dear Mrs Kent’ and was signed, ‘Evan Shadbolt’.”
 Clark winced. “I guess he meant what he said before he left.”
 “What did he say?”
 “He said there was no place for him here. He said there was too much in the past. I think his exact words were that ‘he had made a mistake’ and now he was ‘going to have to pay for it.’”
 “You’ve told me very little about the seven missing years,” Martha said. “But I know Evan was there — probably as your guard. He is so sorry for his part in what happened.”
 “I know.”
 “I understand this could be too difficult for you, Clark. That’s why I’m asking you before contacting Evan.”
 Clark wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. “Mom,” he said. “I have everything. My heart is so full that sometimes it feels as if it is going to burst with happiness. Most days, I don’t even think about those years. And even when I do, they have no power to hurt me anymore.”
 “So?”
 “So if Evan makes you less lonely, I think it would be great to have him and his family here for Christmas.”
 Martha scrutinised her son’s face. “But I want more than that,” she said. “I want to know you’re going to be all right with this. I can’t start something unless I’m sure you will be OK with where it might finish.”
 Clark hauled in a big breath. “I have Lois,” he said.
 “Yes,” Martha said, unable to restrain her grin. “You have Lois.”
 “When I was growing up, I dreamed about having someone — someone who knew everything about me but loved me anyway. Someone whose love took away that aching loneliness. There were some girls who showed an interest, but I always wondered if they would feel the same if they knew the real me.”
 “Did you ever think about telling any of them?”
 “No. Never. I was too scared of how they would react. But, Lois ... she saw me at my absolute worst. She saw me dirty and helpless and despised ... and she loved me.” He looked out of the barn door,

swallowing roughly.

“What are you trying to say?” Martha asked softly.

“That I don’t have any room for bitterness. That if Evan makes you happy, there is nothing in the past that should stand in the way.”

“It’s serious, Clark,” Martha said. “On my side, anyway. He hasn’t said anything yet.”

Clark’s smile flashed. “I would love to be there when he gets your call.”

“Do you think he’ll be pleased?”

“He’ll probably be stubborn,” Clark predicted. “But if he keeps on being stupid, perhaps Superman could kidnap his girls. Then, he’ll have to come.”

Martha’s heart managed to heave itself back into her chest.

“Do you think you might marry him?” Clark asked.

“Would you feel as if that were replacing your father?”

“No,” Clark said. “I think that by loving again, you would be honouring what you had with Dad.”

“If Evan were to propose,” Martha said, “I would accept without hesitation.”

“When did this happen?” Clark asked. His smile came cheekily. “And being a dutiful son, I probably should ask if you’re sure about this.”

“When did it happen?” Martha said. “Sometime during those hours I spent with him. Although I didn’t realise it until later when I couldn’t stop thinking about him. Am I sure? Yes.”

“How can you be sure?”

His question seemed to be the product of simple curiosity rather than scepticism. “There was a good man in the community where I lived,” Martha said. “His name was Josiah, and he asked me to marry him. I liked him a lot. But I didn’t love him, and I knew I couldn’t marry him.”

“And this is different?”

“Yes.”

“It happened quickly,” Clark said mildly.

Martha smiled as she felt herself relax. “If you’d met Lois under normal circumstances, how long do you think it would have taken for you to know that you wanted to be with her?”

“About three seconds.”

They laughed together.

“I’m really pleased for you, Mom,” Clark said as he sobered. “The last seven years were hard for you, too. I just want you to be happy.”

“I’ll call him.”

“If this works out, you’ll have another motherless child to raise. And a teenager, too.”

Martha smiled. “This is about Evan,” she said. “But Abi — and Layla, too — well, I’d be lying if I didn’t admit that the thought of them fills my heart with happiness.” She grinned. “Abi might show more interest in learning to knit than you ever did.”

Clark chuckled with affection. “I bet you’ve already planned the lessons,” he said.

“I have,” she said. She put her hand on his arm. “Would you talk with Evan? Please? If he comes for Christmas? Would you tell him you’re OK with him being here?”

Clark nodded. “I’ll tell him.”

“Thank you,” Martha said as she hugged her son.

She managed to walk until she was out of sight of the barn, and then she sprinted into the house like a giddy young thing. Lois looked up from her keyboard.

“Lois, honey,” Martha said. “I would like to invite Evan Shadbolt and his girls here for Christmas.”

“Have you talked with Clark?”

“Yes. He says it’s OK with him.”

Lois grinned. “Great.” She turned back to her screen.

“You ... That’s all you have to say?” Martha said.

Lois turned slowly, still grinning. “Evan Shadbolt has become an expert at pretending he’s a crusty old curmudgeon,” she said. “It’s going to be such fun watching you break him down.” She stood. “I

think I need to go to my husband. Just to check if he’s still as gorgeous as ever.” She kissed Martha’s cheek as she walked past.

Martha hurried to the phone at the bottom of the stairs and dialled Evan’s number.

“Evan Shadbolt.”

She smiled at the brittleness in his voice. “Evan,” she said on a wispy breath. “It’s Martha.”

“How are you doing, Mrs Kent?” he said formally.

“I want you to bring Layla and Abi to Smallville and celebrate Christmas with us.”

His sucked-in breath made it easy to imagine the look on his face. “No,” he said. “Thank you, but I can’t.”

“You have other plans?” she asked innocently.

“The girls and I are planning to have Christmas at home.”

“Lovely,” Martha said brightly. “Bring your plans here, and we can all enjoy them together.”

“I can’t do that,” he said dully. “You know why.”

“You don’t like me?” she said. “You don’t like home cooking? You don’t like Kansas?”

“Martha,” he said, sounding desperate. “Martha, please don’t do this. The only thing I can do for Clark and Lois now is to stay away from them.”

“Those two kids are so happy with each other that there’s no room in either of their hearts for anything other than joy,” she said.

“I can’t.”

“They haven’t said anything to me, but I think Lois and Clark would like to move to Metropolis after Clark graduates from college. But they won’t, of course.”

“Why not?”

“They won’t leave me alone. Clark will probably get a job with the Smallville Post, but I know he could do so much better than that. And being in Metropolis will give him many more opportunities to ‘help’.”

“What are you saying, Martha?”

“That I miss you. That I think it’s silly for you to be lonely in Metropolis and me to be lonely in Smallville. Particularly after Layla leaves for college in the fall.”

“Martha ...”

“Clark told me you said that sometimes we need other people to help us see the truth in a situation.”

“I can see the truth,” he said, sounding just a little defensive.

Martha chuckled. “What is this truth you can see?”

“That you are a beautiful and special lady. That I am one of the people who inflicted such terrible pain on your son. That there is no way around that.”

“That’s not the truth I see,” she said. “Come for Christmas, and I’ll help you see things more clearly.”

“Martha ...”

“Good,” she said. “I’ll pick you up from the Wichita Airport. Let me know the time of your flight.”

“Martha, I can’t -”

“See you soon, Evan,” she said. “It’s going to be a perfect Christmas.” She hung up before he could argue anymore.

~~ Christmas Day, nine weeks ~~

“Need any help?”

Martha turned from stirring the gravy to find Evan at her shoulder. “Can you carve a turkey?”

“Yes.”

“I was going to call Clark, but since you’re here ...”

Evan leaned back against the counter and crossed his arms.

“Thank you for asking us to come,” he said. His smile came easily, causing the heat from the gravy to leap into her cheeks. “Or should I say ‘ordering’ us to come?”

“If you had been being sensible, I wouldn’t have had to order you to do anything.”

His smile deepened. Martha took that as agreement.

“Our family seem to be getting along well,” she said. “Abi is so

cute the way she sits next to Sam and chatters away with sign language.”

Evan chuckled. “I told her Sam can hear fine, but he can’t speak. But she still prefers to sign to him.”

“And whatever they talk about must be entertaining,” Martha said. “It’s such a delight to hear young laughter in this house again.”

“I was watching them before. She was giving him a blow-by-blow description of *The Lion King*. I’m pretty sure she’s coerced him into agreeing to watch it together when we get back to Metropolis.”

“He’s enjoying himself,” Martha said. “He’s improved so much since I saw him at Thanksgiving. His facial expressions are clearer, and his signing is more confident.”

“Yeah,” Evan said with a grin. “Although I think Sam occasionally deliberately gets a sign wrong just so Abi will laugh and correct him.”

“I think Abi reminds him of when his daughters were small.”

Martha concentrated her attention on the gently simmering gravy.

“Have you had a chance to speak to Clark?”

“Yes. I went out to the barn early this morning when he was there.”

“Is everything all right?”

“He told me that if I hurt you, he will come after me. Knowing who he is, I should probably be scared.”

But Evan didn’t look particularly scared. “What did you say?” Martha asked.

“I told him I would do everything I could to make sure no one ever hurt you again.”

She stopped stirring the gravy and looked at him. He looked at her. Her heart stopped.

“Martha?” he said.

“Yes, Evan?”

“Is this just about Christmas? Or do you want it to continue?”

“I’m hoping it will continue.”

“Here? Or in Metropolis?”

“I think Lois and Clark will go to Metropolis. How would you feel about bringing Abi to Smallville? After Layla has left for college?”

“I don’t have anything holding me in Metropolis.”

“What about your job?”

“A job is no substitute for having someone to love.”

Martha lifted herself onto her toes and leaned closer to him. His head lowered. He hesitated.

“Go on,” she said. “Be bold. You know you want to.”

He kissed her. It was quick but not hurried. Chaste but not hollow.

When she backed away, Evan was looking shell-shocked. “I can’t believe I just did that,” he said.

“I can’t believe you waited so long. You arrived yesterday afternoon.”

“I -” His protest died. “You should stir,” he advised. “Cause it’s gonna be difficult for a brilliant cook like you to come up with an excuse for lumpy gravy.”

Layla looked around the room of happy people. She had caught snatches of the conversation when she’d focussed on the person who happened to be talking, and both Abi and her dad were in the habit of signing for her whenever they were in a group with non-deaf people.

But she didn’t need to understand each individual comment to know this felt like Christmas. And it felt like family.

There was Clark, the tall, strikingly handsome guy who was so obviously completely smitten with his wife that it was almost enough to make you puke. Except it wasn’t. It was beautiful, and it made Layla hope that one day someone would look at her that way.

And Lois, the friendly, vivacious woman who looked as if she had always had an easy life. Even if she had, Layla couldn’t begrudge her it. She was way too nice. And she wore her clothes with a lot of style.

And there was Lois’s dad, Sam. Layla hadn’t seen anyone who’d had a stroke before. His signing was clumsy and basic, but she had to admire the guy for making the most of what seemed to be a horrible situation.

And lastly, there was Martha. Layla looked from Martha to her dad and back again.

She had her suspicions about her dad’s sudden announcement that they were going to be flying to Kansas for Christmas.

The gift giving was just about finished. The pile under the tree had diminished to a flat present that could be a picture book and another one that was probably a video for Abi to add to her humungous collection.

As Layla watched, Lois gave Abi the present. Her little sister tore at the paper and grasped the video case with delight.

Clark stood. He took the last present and offered it to Lois, smiling at her as if he never wanted to look at anything else. Lois took the present and reached up to kiss him, draping her hand down his cheek in a gesture that was totally innocent but somehow seemed intimate as well.

Lois opened the gift. As she pushed the paper aside, her eyes filled with tears. Layla looked at Clark. He didn’t appear perturbed that he had made her cry. He bent forward and kissed her hair, lingering there. She grasped his knee. And her tears turned to a damp smile.

“This is the poem Clark wrote for me,” Lois said. She turned the frame around so everyone could see the simply decorated print with words in the centre and tendrils of pink roses climbing the sides.

“You owe me,” Clark said as he stared into Lois’s eyes. Layla wasn’t sure if he’d spoken aloud, or if she had intruded on a private moment.

Lois nodded her agreement and stood up. “Clark wants me to sing for him,” she said.

Layla saw everyone applaud. Even Sam — with his one good hand.

Lois began to sing, her eyes fixed on Clark.

Layla shifted her gaze to her father’s hands, and she followed the words as he signed.

*You know our love was meant to be
The kind of love that lasts forever
And I need you here with me
From tonight until the end of time
You should know, everywhere I go
You’re always on my mind,*

In my heart

In my soul

You’re the meaning in my life

You’re the inspiration

You bring feeling to my life

You’re the inspiration

Wanna have you near me

I wanna have you hear me sayin’

No one needs you more than I need you

Layla’s eyes darted from her dad’s hands to his face. He wasn’t looking at Lois. He was looking at Martha. She wasn’t looking at Lois, either. She was staring at Dad.

Neither was smiling.

But they both looked happy.

Layla turned to Clark.

He was looking at Lois. With that look that clearly said she was his entire world.

Layla skipped back to her dad. The expression on his face wasn’t much different from ...

Her heart jumped.

Her dad was looking at Martha the way Clark was looking at Lois.

Oh, my.

Her dad looked happy.

Happier than he had looked since their first few months in Metropolis. He certainly hadn’t smiled much after Mom had left. It must have been hard for him, but until now, Layla hadn’t realised he had probably been lonely all these years. He had never fully explained why Mom had chosen to leave, but Layla figured there was a good chance she had gone with the man who had come to the house

whenever Dad was at work.

That must have hurt Dad a lot.

But now, he looked ... different ... happy.

The song ended, and everyone clapped. Layla joined in as her mind reeled with fresh comprehension.

Her dad was in love with Martha Kent.

~ February 1995, 3 months ~

“Ms Lois Lane is here to see you.”

“Thanks. Send her through.” Eric opened his office door and stepped out into the corridor. “Ms Lane,” he said.

“Mr Menzies,” she said. “This is my husband, Clark Kent.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mr Kent.” The men shook hands, Lois and Clark walked into the office, and Eric shut the door. “How are you both?” he said, his official manner dropping away.

“We’re well,” Lois said. She handed him an envelope. “This is my resignation from the agency.”

Eric took it. “I’m sorry about that,” he said. “We are losing one of our best agents. But I figured it was coming.”

“We’d like to talk to you about something else,” Lois said.

Eric sat down and faced them. “Would you like something to eat? Drink?”

“No, thank you,” Lois said. She sent her husband a look of encouragement.

“We would like to establish a Superman Foundation,” Clark said.

“A charity?” Eric said.

“Yes,” Clark said. “But we don’t know anything about the legalities. And we certainly can’t be openly involved in its daily running.”

“But you will want to ensure it is being run in a manner consistent with Superman’s principles and ideals?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“What do you envision would be the objectives of the Superman Foundation?”

“To help,” Clark said. “Initially to help the people of Metropolis — to give them access to better medical facilities, to assist families under pressure, to help teens who don’t have the support of their parents.”

“Perhaps trying to lessen the problem of drug abuse?” Eric asked.

“Yes,” Clark said. “That would be one part of it. We aren’t aware of the specific problems and needs of the people in this city, so we are looking for someone with more knowledge than us to manage the foundation.”

“Are you hoping I will be able to suggest someone suitable?” Eric asked.

“Yes,” Clark said, looking relieved. “We have a broad vision for this, but no experience with the detail.”

Eric mused for a moment. “I have a suggestion for a possible candidate,” he said. “Someone experienced and available. Someone who knows Metropolis well. But there could be a sticking point.”

“He or she sounds perfect,” Lois said. “What’s the sticking point? The salary?”

“No,” Eric said. He faced Clark. “The fact that he once ordered your death.”

“You?” Lois gasped. “You would consider managing the Superman Foundation?”

“I would love to do it,” Eric said. “But I suspect my actions in the past might disqualify me.”

“But you have a full-time job,” Clark said.

“Not for long. My retirement is going to be announced next week.”

“Are you serious about this?” Lois asked.

“Absolutely serious,” Eric replied. “But I fully understand your misgivings.”

Lois glanced to Clark.

“How about I outline an offer?” Eric said. “Then you can go away and think about it?”

“OK,” Lois said.

“I would like to work an average of two or three days a week. I want to take my wife away regularly. She is going to attempt to teach me to ski.” He laughed — partly to hide his nervousness at finding himself in the position of applying for a job. “I have a large office at home, so the Foundation wouldn’t need to pay for office space. And I have a handsome retirement fund, so I wouldn’t need a salary.

“Should you accept my offer, there would be advantages for you. I know your secret and have sworn to keep it. You can both be involved however you wish without someone else wondering why Lois Lane and Clark Kent have such an interest in the Superman Foundation. I have a substantial network of contacts, both in Metropolis and further afield. I am already publicly associated with Superman.”

“Why would you want to do it?” Lois asked. “And for no return?”

“Oh, there would be a return,” Eric said. “There would be a chance to make up for some of my mistakes. A chance to protect and help someone worthy of my support. A chance to perhaps make a difference in the lives of others — a difference I was never able to make in the life of my son.”

“You have a son?” Lois asked with surprise.

“I had a son,” Eric said. “He died of a drug overdose.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t know.”

Eric looked to Clark. “If you decline my offer, I will do everything I can to find you a suitable person to fill the position.”

“Thank you,” Clark said.

“Do you have ideas on how the Foundation will be funded?” Eric asked.

“Superman has received hundreds of invitations to attend events,” Clark said. “Some of these invitations are from charities, but some are from businesses.”

“You are considering charging an appearance fee?”

“We haven’t decided,” Clark said. “We certainly wouldn’t charge the charities. And we don’t want Superman to become a sort of hero-for-hire.”

“But many large businesses would be willing to pay a five-figure sum for a short appearance by Superman,” Eric said.

“And that money could be used to make a significant difference in the lives of many people,” Clark said.

Eric sat up straighter, his mind already humming with the possibilities. “Once the Foundation is established, we could suggest that a donation could be an appropriate gesture from anyone who has benefited from Superman’s intervention.”

“We could,” Clark said cautiously. “But it is never to become expected. When Superman helps, it is freely given.”

“I was thinking about the jewellery store theft that Superman stopped last week. The owner of the store might consider a donation to be a fitting way to express his gratitude.”

“We will open the Foundation with the million dollars I received as compensation,” Clark said.

“The *entire* million dollars?” Eric exclaimed.

“Lois and I have talked about it,” Clark said. “We have decided to keep the initial payment of seventy thousand dollars. It seems fair that it be used for things such as my college costs and the upkeep of my parents’ farm, which suffered during the time I was away. But we think the million dollars should be used to help as many people as possible.”

“Are you sure about this?” Eric asked.

“We’re sure,” Clark said.

“Do you want me to look around — discreetly, of course — for a suitable manager for the Foundation?”

Lois looked across at Clark.

“No,” he said. “If your offer still stands, we think you’d make the ideal manager.”

Eric could feel his enthusiasm growing by the moment. He needed a change — this would be perfect. “Get Superman to choose a lawyer he trusts and have a contract drawn up.”

“Are you sure about not receiving a salary?” Lois said. “Perhaps you should consider at least an expense account.”

“No,” Eric said. “I worked hard in this job, and I have been amply remunerated. Now it’s time to give something without expectation of payment.”

“We could review the situation at any time,” Clark offered.

“Thanks.” Eric picked up the envelope Lois had given him. “As of next week, my position will be vacant. Would you reconsider your resignation and apply?”

“I ...” Lois said.

“You don’t have to decide right away,” Eric said. “I realise that now you are married, you won’t want to travel to assignments. But this position is based in Metropolis.”

“We will be living in Kansas until the fall,” Lois said. “Have you considered Scardino for the position?”

“Yes,” Eric replied. “I’ve encouraged him to apply.”

“Is he going to?”

“I don’t know. Would you consider a part-time position? Perhaps taking half the portfolios — and Scardino take the other half?”

“Wouldn’t Daniel see that as a demotion?”

Eric grinned. “It seems Scardino has realised there is more to life than work. He announced his engagement last week.”

“Really?” Lois said. “To someone on the job? Anyone I would know?”

“I doubt it. She’s a nurse from Philadelphia, I believe.” He returned the envelope to his desk. “Is that a ‘no’ about applying for my job?”

“Now isn’t the right time,” Lois said.

“If you ever feel the time is right, I will always have contacts within the agency,” Eric said.

“Thank you,” Lois said as she and her husband stood. “We’ll be in touch regarding the Foundation.”

“Thank you for this opportunity,” Eric said. “I won’t let you down.”

After they had gone, Eric closed his office door, walked to his desk, and dialled his home number. “Phoebe?” he said when his wife answered. “Would you like to meet me for lunch?”

“Lunch?” she said.

“Yeah. I have some news.”

“Good news?” she asked hesitantly.

“Very good news,” he said. “Have you booked the ski trip yet?”

~ April 1995, six months ~

“I am so proud of you,” Clark said.

Lois smiled, basking in her husband’s praise.

“To write a novel,” he continued. “To have it accepted for publication. Lois, you are amazing.”

“Thank you.” She grinned happily. “You helped with the research.”

“I had to do something.” He leaned forward and lowered his voice. “I could feel the poor guy’s frustration radiating from the computer screen.”

“What about *her*?” Lois shot back. “She had her share of restless nights thinking about him.”

“I sure did enjoy it when you were writing those steamy -”

His sentence stopped abruptly as the waitress came to their table.

“What would you like?” she asked, not particularly graciously.

Lois looked at her. “I know you. You’re Ruby Rhodes. Don’t you work at *The Daily Planet*?”

The waitress scowled. “I used to,” she said. “But then the incompetent board sacked the editor, Preston Carpenter, and brought in some new guy. He wasn’t willing to print my stories without ridiculous amounts of verification. So I walked out. Serves him right. I can get a job with any paper I choose.”

“Then why are you waiting tables?” Lois asked.

Ruby Rhodes’ scowl deepened. “Do you want to order something?” she snapped. “Or discuss my career options?”

“We’ll have the salmon salad and the open steak sandwich,” Clark said quickly. “And two lattes.” He gave her a full-powered smile.

“What is the new editor’s name?”

“Perry White,” she said with evident distaste. “Do you want anything else?”

“No,” Clark replied with another dashing smile. “We have everything we need. Thank you.”

~ June 1995, seven and a half months ~

Evan Shadbolt stood at the front of the little church in Smallville. For about the tenth time, he turned around and checked the entrance. It was still empty.

As his attention returned to the front, he caught Lois’s eye.

“You look so nervous,” she mouthed with a wide grin. “Relax. She’ll be here.”

He nodded, but -

There was movement at the door.

Abi appeared, wearing the outfit Layla had designed and made.

Evan thought it looked more suited to a fairy than a flower girl, but Abi was happy, and Martha had said every wedding needed a fairy, so he had bowed to the females’ superior knowledge.

The bride came into sight, walking steadily on Clark’s arm, wearing an elegant ivory dress that was the result of a joint effort between Martha and Layla. Evan could only stare and try to keep his jaw from hanging too obviously. The moment had come, but he still couldn’t fully believe his good fortune. She met his eyes and smiled, and Evan steeled himself against the swirl of emotions that threatened to tear apart his composure.

Lastly came Layla, dressed in another of her designs and looking like an elegant young woman. How had the years slipped away so quickly?

Abi drew level with him and shot him a grin that was simply adorable, made more so by two missing front teeth. She stepped to the side, and Clark brought Martha to him.

Evan looked directly at Clark. “Thank you,” he said, his words carrying a depth of meaning the younger man would understand. “Thank you.”

Clark took Martha’s hand from the crook of his arm and gave it to Evan. “Love her always,” he murmured.

“I will,” Evan promised.

Clark went to his seat next to Lois, and the wedding ceremony began.

~ August 1995, ten months ~

Lois waited — with simmering impatience — on the sidewalk of the busy Metropolis street.

It had been nearly an hour, and she was willing to admit that if she’d possessed Clark’s powers, she would have either looked or listened by now.

But she was just going to have to wait.

Then she saw him, and her heart leapt.

He was spectacular.

She loved his jeans-and-sweater look around the farm, but Clark Kent in a suit and tie was another matter altogether. The women were going to have a field day. But they could only look. Lois — well, she knew exactly the quality of what was concealed under those black suit pants and crisp jacket.

She dragged her eyes from his body and looked into his face.

He was smiling.

Unable to wait for him to exit the building, she rushed through the rotating door and charged over to him. “Well?” she said, hopping excitedly. “Well?”

“Well,” he said, his eyes shining. “You’re looking at *The Daily Planet*’s newest rookie reporter.”

Lois squealed, unconcerned if the whole of Metropolis was watching her. She hugged her husband and planted an ecstatic kiss on his mouth. “Congratulations,” she said. “You rock.”

“Thanks,” Clark said, still looking a little dazed. “Mr White said that although I lacked experience, he could see potential in the samples

of my work, and he was willing to give me a probationary period of three months.”

“You’ll be on the permanent staff before the first month is over,” Lois predicted.

“I hope so,” Clark said. “Want to go somewhere and celebrate?”

“Sure,” Lois said. “Dad’s place? Our new bed hasn’t been delivered yet, but we don’t actually need a bed to ...”

He laughed. “I wasn’t thinking of that sort of celebration.”

“You weren’t?” she said, pretending to be aghast. “Oh no, the honeymoon is over.”

“Believe me, it isn’t over,” Clark said with a wink. “But there is something I’d like to do. And I’d like to do it with you.” He took her hand and led her out of *The Daily Planet* building. “We’re going to live in Metropolis,” he said. “And I’m going to work here, so ...”

“So?”

“So I’d like to go back. I’d like to face it again. Now. With you.”

“To the warehouse?”

“Yes.”

Lois whistled for a cab. “Bessolo Boulevard,” she said to the driver.

Fifteen minutes later, Clark stood on the sidewalk, looking at the old warehouse.

“The compound was behind the warehouse,” Lois said as she tightly gripped Clark’s hand. “Eric ordered that it be demolished.”

There was nothing left now — nothing to mark the place where he had been held captive for seven long years.

“Are you all right?” Lois said, moving closer to him. “Do you feel anything?”

“Yeah,” Clark said. “I feel a whole lot.”

She released his hand, slipped her arm around his back, and rested her head on his shoulder.

“I feel ... blessed,” Clark said.

“Blessed?”

“Full of so many blessings. I was despised; now I am accepted. I was hated; now I am loved. I was different; now that doesn’t matter. I was caged; now I am free. I was alone; now I have the most beautiful woman in the world as my wife. I had lost everything, including the capacity to hope, but now my dreams have become reality.”

“I am blessed, too,” Lois said. “Because I have you.”

Clark took her into his arms and kissed her. “Lois,” he said.

“Everything — every one of those blessings — is because of you. Because of your courage and your spirit and your love. Because you were willing to believe in someone so different.”

Lois shook her head. “No,” she said. “It’s because I realised it’s your heart that makes you who you are. And that is your true strength. Because of your heart, you never lost sight of what is right. Because of your heart, you could still trust, despite everything you had suffered.”

“That’s because you trusted me first,” Clark said. “You walked into my cell without a rod. You helped me escape. You supported me through those first few days in the outside world. You just kept on loving me until every single barrier to true freedom had been dissolved. You were my guide in the days when I couldn’t remember. Through every step, you were always there, being exactly what I needed.”

“You were everything I needed, too,” she said. “The first time I came here, I was so crushed with hatred, so broken by anger. You started dissolving my barriers before I had even walked in the cell — simply by being you.”

Clark gazed down at her for a long moment, wishing he had the words to convey the richness in his heart. “You once told me Clark is your hero,” he said.

“He is,” she said as she ran her fingers lovingly across his cheek.

“Lois Lane is my hero,” he said. “And I will love her forever.”

“I love you,” his hero replied. “And you will never be alone again.”

THE END

The song quoted is You’re the Inspiration, written by Peter Cetera and David Foster for Chicago, released 1984.