

The Wedding

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Rated PG-13

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Summary: When Lois is invited to the wedding of a college acquaintance, she is expecting an ordeal of romantic mawkishness. Instead, she meets the man who changes everything she believes about love.

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Part 1

“All finished?” Perry White asked as his star reporter marched into his office. He’d heard her footsteps approach his door, and their clipped nature had alerted him to the fact that she was far from happy.

Lois Lane slumped into his guest chair. “Yep,” she replied. “I just sent the story to you. It’s all there. Quotes. Supporting evidence. Specific details about how the Senator was skimming a private slush fund from public monies, how he tried to hide his trail, how he blackmailed two of his assistants to secure their silence, a history of his gambling addiction, and a list of associates I can prove were up to their ears in his shady deals.”

Perry gave her his brightest smile. “Lois,” he said with heartfelt admiration and more than a dash of gratitude. “You’re a gem.”

“Thanks, Perry,” she said glumly.

“You got the story,” he exclaimed. “It will be all over the front page tomorrow — an exclusive, no less. Every other paper in the country will be chasing the Planet’s tail, which is exactly how I like it.”

Her return smile was too vapid to disperse the cloud of gloom that clung to her like dandruff on a black velvet coat.

“You worked hard for weeks,” Perry said. “You started with a scrap of information that most reporters would have dismissed as too vague to be worth investigating. You did all the leg work. You probably did a few things I shouldn’t know about.” He grinned to show her he was OK with that. “You got the story, Lois. And that’s what makes you the best.”

“Thanks, Chief.”

“It’ll win you a Kerth,” he said. “And probably a nomination for a Pulitzer.”

Even that prediction wasn’t enough to melt her despondency.

“Are you all packed?” Perry asked, dropping his eyes to the papers on his desk in an effort to appear casual.

“Yep.”

“Early flight tomorrow morning?”

“Yep.”

“Lo-is,” Perry said with a little spurt of frustration. “It’s a wedding; not a funeral.”

“I wish I hadn’t said I’d go.”

“Why not? The timing is perfect. You haven’t had a day off since the first whisper of corruption in the Senator’s office, and that was a month ago. You deserve a break.”

“A break?” Lois said, sounding as if she didn’t fully comprehend that word.

“Relax a little. Have some fun.”

“I can’t see anything relaxing about travelling halfway across the United States squashed into a tin can with three hundred strangers,” Lois said.

Her expression made Perry wonder if the words ‘fun’ and ‘relax’ had disappeared from her vocabulary. “Take an extra day,” he offered. “A couple of days. The entire week, if you want.”

Her upper lip curled. “And what exactly do they do for *fun* in Des Moines?”

Perry had nothing to offer. “After the wedding, perhaps you will have unwound enough to be able to appreciate a few days vacation,” he said, although he figured there was more chance of Elvis walking into his office than Lois finding anything enjoyable in her trip.

“If I were going on a vacation, the last place I would go is Iowa,” she said. “And the absolute last thing I would choose to do would be to attend a wedding.”

“Surely you’re looking forward to witnessing your friend’s happy day.”

“It’s a wedding,” Lois said with frosty disdain. “An out-dated convention that is little more than an excuse for men to drink and women to cry.” She rolled her eyes. “I just can’t see any point in paying a fortune for hired clothes and making public promises with the intention of keeping them forever, only to conveniently disregard them a few short years later.”

“Lois, not all marriages are like that.”

“Name one that isn’t.”

“Alice and me.”

“That’s only because you’re never home,” Lois said.

Perry winced. She was right, but it said a lot about her state of mind that she was willing to state it so openly. “Perhaps these two people really love each other,” he said, needlessly shuffling some papers on his desk.

“Pfft.”

“When was the last time you saw the bride?”

“Five years ago. She was in college with me. Same major, but she was a couple of years behind me.”

“You were friends?”

“Nope,” Lois said. “That’s the strange thing. I don’t actually remember speaking one word to her. But I get a Christmas card from her every year. When I landed the job at the Planet, she sent me a note, congratulating me and saying I had always been her inspiration.”

“There you go,” Perry said. “She’s trying to thank you by inviting you to her wedding.”

“More likely she doesn’t have enough friends to fill up a church in a hick town.” Off Perry’s stern look, Lois continued, “Well, she’s a mouse of a person, Perry. Quiet. Colourless. Uninspiring. Meek. Eminently forgettable. I can’t imagine how she would ever get a story unless it fell into her lap. And as for how she found someone who wanted to marry her ...”

“Maybe she has changed,” Perry said, which was his non-inflammatory way of saying that maybe Lois hadn’t taken the time to get to know the young woman.

“Her name is ‘Jane,’” Lois said. “And she’s marrying Shane McVane. Can you believe that? I’m surprised the wedding isn’t on the top of a crane in Maine, just to set everything off perfectly.” She scowled. “That’s probably why I got an invitation. It’s the ‘Lois Lane’ that did it. Shoulda changed my name before it was too late.”

“Why did you say you’d go if you’re so against the whole idea?”

Lois snorted disgustedly. “In last year’s Christmas card, Jane mentioned that she was engaged to some guy she’d met at the inconsequential country paper where she works. I sent her a return card and doubled my usual output of words by adding, ‘Congratulations on your engagement’. I thought that if I didn’t ask any questions, she would realise I wasn’t interested.”

“I think it was a nice gesture to send you an invitation.”

“You don’t have to fight your way through the crowds at Metropolis Airport tomorrow morning, tolerate two hideously

long flights in order to achieve the dubious pleasure of arriving in Des Moines, Iowa, be condemned to two nights in a hotel possibly infested by local vermin of either the human or animal kind, maintain a smile through all the nauseating corniness of the wedding ceremony, and pretend you're swept up in the fairy tale of true love. Only to have to do it all again in reverse, just to return to civilisation."

Perry grinned, despite knowing his amusement wouldn't be well-received. "You could stay here," he said. "Run the paper, try to squeeze something printable from Ralph's attempts to emulate a second grader, negotiate with the suits upstairs, answer a few million questions when the police want details of evidence, and field threats of ligation from one very irate Senator's office ... while I take Alice to Iowa for a vacation."

"Don't tempt me," Lois said sourly.

Perry stood. "Go," he said, shooing her away. "Go, and have some fun. Try to remember that you can't spend your entire life chasing stories."

"Why not?" Lois fired back at him. "At least I'm good at that."

"You need to be good at relaxing as well," Perry said. Lois hauled herself from his chair with such abject misery that Perry stepped closer to her and said, "You're all right? You'd tell me if this is more than your aversion to anything that doesn't involve a story?"

His best reporter managed a weak smile. "I'm fine, Chief," she said. "I'm just tired and terminally grumpy. And I no longer believe in true love or happy endings."

With that, she trudged from his office.

Metropolis Airport was as bad as Lois had predicted, made worse because the cab she'd ordered failed to show up at her apartment until after her third call. When she finally arrived at her gate, boarding had officially closed, and only some quick talking and a loudly stated intention to call management got her to her seat — where she was rammed against the window, sharing the row with an elderly couple who had to shout at each other to make themselves heard.

When her second flight was delayed, Lois called ahead to Jane to say she would get a cab from the Des Moines airport and go directly to the wedding-eve party. Lois exaggerated the delay, hoping to give herself an hour in her hotel room to recuperate and prepare for an evening of fabricated excitement as she gushed over the bride and groom.

Two further delays eroded her 'hotel-first' plan. When she finally boarded the plane, she discovered she was seated next to a balding man in his forties who seemed to think she would appreciate his efforts to help pass the time by bombarding her with his unlimited supply of sexist, ribald, and exceedingly unfunny jokes.

Lois spent over half of the flight at the rear of the airplane pretending to stretch out the bad back she had invented.

As she climbed into the cab in Des Moines, she would have given half her Kerth awards for a quiet evening alone in her apartment. Instead, she was a required guest at a wedding-eve party for a bride she couldn't actually remember speaking to face-to-face.

Lois would know no one else.

That could work to her advantage.

She was required to put in an appearance, congratulate the bride, meet the groom, and pretend to be heartily socialising with people who would never mean anything to her, but if she snuck away to her hotel room after a short time, there was every chance her absence would go unnoticed.

She paid the cab driver and stood at the door of the hall, groaning at the loud and bustling atmosphere leaking from inside. She entered with more caution and greater trepidation than she

had when she'd broken into the Senator's office a week ago. Standing at the door, feeling like an alien invader, she surveyed the crowd of about fifty people.

They were carrying off the charade well — laughter regularly exploded from the steady thrum of manifold conversations. Lois searched the faces for Jane and found a woman who seemed to resemble her nebulous memories of the quiet girl she'd seen drifting around the college like a grey shadow.

Jane was in a group of four, chatting with two other young women and a -

Lois's breath jammed in her throat as surprise bubbled up like shaken soda.

Standing next to Jane was the guy who had to be Shane.

He was gorgeous.

Breath-stoppingly, heart-racingly, muscle-vaporisingly gorgeous.

He was 'Tall, Dark, and Handsome' in the flesh.

How had No-Personality Jane snared herself a man whose looks were sufficiently stratospheric to turn the head of every woman in every room he entered?

Did Jane know what she was marrying?

Trouble, Lois predicted. The good-looking ones were always trouble.

Shane was listening to one of the women in the little group, his expression one of mannerly interest as a courteous smile hovered on his stunning mouth.

Lois stared, transfixed. She knew she was being rude. That didn't bother her much. However, the certain knowledge that she was probably just one of many women whose brain had been reduced to pulp by Shane McVane was less easy to swallow.

At least Lois now understood how quiet, shy Jane had managed to lure so many young, female 'friends' to her pre-wedding party.

They'd come to ogle the groom!

Lois's lungs started to gripe, and she sucked in a hasty breath.

As she did, Shane's head turned — his smile still lingering — and his eyes crashed into hers.

Lois groped behind her and found the wall, collapsing into its comforting solidity.

No wonder Jane had sounded so happy.

No wonder she looked as if her cheekbones were in danger of pressing into her eyeballs, so wide was her smile.

Shane was staring at Lois, his lower jaw adrift, his mouth frozen to the shape of the bygone smile.

Lois swallowed. Breathed. Blinked.

He was still there. Still transfixed.

From somewhere outside the universe that had room for only him and her, Lois heard a squeal of delight. "Lois! Lois! You're here." Jane rushed up and encompassed her in a hug. "Oh, Lois," she said. "You'll never know how much it means to me that you came all this way for my wedding."

"It's ... it's a ... I was pleased to be invited," Lois stammered, pinning her gaze on Jane's slightly flushed cheeks because she didn't dare look at Shane again.

"You must meet my fiancé," Jane said, pawing excitedly at Lois's arm. She looked around the hall. "He was here a moment ago."

Shane was at the drinks table. His jacket emphasised the breadth of his shoulders. His grey pants covered his long legs -

"Ah, here is he," Jane said. "Shane, come and meet Lois, my friend from college."

Lois reluctantly dragged her eyes away. A tall, lanky man with springy blond hair and an intermittent moustache that looked as if it would be well suited to a cartoon character had placed his arm around Jane's shoulders and was smiling down at Lois.

"This is my fiancé, Shane," Jane said with pulsating pride.

“*Shane?*” Lois squeaked. “Ah ... Shane. Of course. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Lois,” Shane said with a wide and cheesy grin. “Jane has told me so much about you. How you blazed the trail for her to follow.”

“Have you eaten?” Jane said. She took Lois’s suitcase from her hand. “Shane, could you put this in the back room, please, darling?” She gave Lois a smile that was probably meant to be reassuring. “It’ll be safe there.”

“Ah ... thank you,” Lois said as the groom walked away with her suitcase.

“You must help yourself to the food,” Jane said. “And you don’t have a drink yet.”

“I only just arrived,” Lois said.

“What would you like? Juice? Soda? Wine? A beer?”

“Oh,” Lois said with a fake laugh. “So many choices. I -”

“Would you like some punch?”

The voice was deep, whispering across her heart like silk ribbons. Lois turned. He was standing just a few inches from her. He smelled ... *amazing*. His smile fluttered — a brief, tantalising appearance that liquefied the ligaments in her knees. “Ah ...”

“Lois,” Jane said. “This is Clark Kent. He’s a colleague of ours at the paper. Clark, this is Lois Lane — she was my inspiration in college.”

He wore glasses, Lois realised, but they didn’t detract from his looks. Instead, they drew her gaze to eyes the colour of rich caramel.

Somehow, her hand found his. Or perhaps, his hand found hers.

His skin was surprisingly warm, considering he’d been holding a cold glass a moment ago. His grip enclosed her hand, sending flurries of sensation through her wrist and up her arm.

He recovered before she did. “I’m very pleased to meet you, Ms Lane,” he said. The pressure of his fingers increased slightly, and then, his hand slipped away.

“I’m pleased to meet you, Mr Kent.”

Her statement — fumbling and inane though it had been — earned her a full-bodied smile, lobbed like a hand grenade from dangerously close range. “Clark,” he said. “Please call me ‘Clark’.”

“I’m ‘Lois’.”

“Would you like a drink, Lois?” He offered her the glass of punch in his other hand.

“Thank you,” Lois said, taking it. Her fingers butted against his, igniting mini-explosions that skittered across her skin.

“Here’s your drink, Clark.” It was Jane who had spoken.

Clark took the glass without looking at either it or Jane. “Thanks,” he said.

“We should mingle with our guests, darling,” Jane said to Shane, who had reappeared at her side. “Clark, would you look after Lois, please?”

“Sure,” he said.

The almost-married couple faded away, leaving Lois with Clark in a bubble of solitude that the noisy and crowded room couldn’t penetrate.

Caught in those incredible brown eyes, Lois could find nothing to say, although her mind was abuzz with a warm flow of wordless sentences.

“Hi,” he said, breaking into the hum of silence. His smile unfurled slowly, stretching to utter magnificence.

“Hi.” Echoing him was about the limit of her conversational abilities right now.

“I’m so glad you could come. Jane wasn’t sure you’d be able to make it.”

“I ... I’m ... busy, you know? I have a full life.”

Clark sipped from his punch, moistening his lower lip, which inexplicably made her wonder how he would taste if he kissed

her. “Jane told me you work at the Daily Planet,” he said.

“Yes,” Lois said, dragging her mind away from the enthralling prospect of kissing him. “You work with Jane?”

“And Shane. We’re at the Des Moines Register.”

“How long have you been there?”

“A couple of years.”

“What do you write? Sports? Travel?”

“I like sports and travel,” he replied. “But I’m a general reporter.”

Lois couldn’t imagine what a general reporter would find to write about in Des Moines, Iowa. “Crime? Environmental issues? Local politics?”

“All of those.”

“Really?” She’d tried to stifle her surprise, but realised her failure immediately and held her breath in anticipation of a stinging retort.

His smile made a fleeting appearance. “You ask a lot of questions, Lois.”

Her name floated from his mouth on waves of sound that caused an answering flutter through her stomach. “I’m a reporter,” she said without a trace of the tempestuousness that usually accompanied that statement. “It’s what I do.”

“I’m a reporter, too,” he said, his eyes crinkling. “Does that mean I can ask questions?”

“I guess so,” she said, agog at what questions he might want to ask of her.

“You’re not wearing a wedding ring.”

“That’s not a question.”

He grinned at that. “The question was implied,” he said. “Are you married, Lois?”

The solemnness of his delivery caused her heart to abandon its normal rhythm in favour of a helter-skelter dash to breathlessness. “No,” she said. “No, I’m not married.”

“Dating someone?”

“No.”

A dazzling, no-holds-barred smile lit up Clark’s face. “Oh, good,” he said.

“Good?”

His smile retreated. His eyes dropped before bounding back to her face. He swallowed. His mouth opened. “Lois ...”

“Yes?”

“Would you go out with me?” he asked. “On a date?”

Part 2

His question was hardly unexpected, although it had come sooner and more directly than Lois could have anticipated.

Certainly, her level of surprise wasn’t great enough to prevent the discharge of her primed and practised rebuff that had left a destruction of wounded male egos in its wake.

But her customary response disintegrated, snagged in the deep pools of earnestness glimmering from behind Clark’s glasses.

“You hardly know me,” she said. It was lame. It was unconvincing. It wasn’t worthy of Lois Lane. But it was the limit of her capacity to articulate.

His smile appeared for a second. “That’s why I’m asking you out,” he said. “I want to know more about you.”

“Why?”

Clark slid one hand into his pants pocket and did a quick sweep of the room with his eyes. When they settled on her again, he said, “You *do* ask a lot of questions, Ms Lane.”

“Don’t you know why you asked me out within five minutes of meeting me?” she challenged, lifting her chin for emphasis.

He didn’t flinch. “I know exactly why.”

“But you don’t want to tell me?”

“I’m not sure you would want to hear.”

“Oh, but I do.”

Clark puffed out a little breath from slightly rounded cheeks.

“From the moment I saw you ...”

Lois’s heart stopped, started, skipped, flip-flopped, shimmied. “Uhm?” she prompted.

“... I couldn’t think about anything except how much I would like to go out with you.”

Lois scanned his face, searching for duplicity, brashness, or flippancy.

She found sincerity. Hope. And more than a sprinkling of nervousness.

“I bet you say that to every woman you meet,” she said.

Clark shook his head. “No,” he said. “I’ve never done this before.”

“You’ve never asked a woman out?”

“I’ve never asked a woman out within ten minutes of meeting her.”

Lois had never said ‘yes’ to a man within ten minutes of meeting him. “There’s no time,” she said. “The wedding is tomorrow afternoon, and I leave on Sunday morning.”

“Tomorrow morning,” Clark said promptly. “Breakfast.”

Lois had already allocated the hours prior to the wedding as the perfect opportunity to catch up on a month of sleep deprivation. Assuming, of course, that the hotel bed was reasonably flat and free of things that crawl.

Now, she had a choice.

Sleep ...

Or a date with Clark Kent. Breakfast. Just him and her. Drowning in those eyes. Basking in that smile.

Except ... she was Lois Lane. She didn’t fall for balmy eyes. And she prided herself on being imperviousness to charm in all its many duplicitous expressions.

“I live in Metropolis,” she said. “You live in Des Moines.”

“We’re both here now.”

“Aren’t there dozens of local women who would love to go out with you?”

“I don’t know,” Clark said. “I haven’t asked them.” His smile wavered with the cautious hesitancy of the newly risen sun. “I’m asking you. Please, Lois.”

She had to admit she was tempted ... which was exactly why she needed to stop this right now. “I don’t date,” she told him with crisp finality. “Ever.”

Clark’s head dropped in defeat. His hand lifted. His fingers slid through the hair above the side of his glasses. “OK,” he said.

“I said -” The first of her ready supply of cutting remarks fizzled to nothing as his reply registered. She searched for an alternate end to her sentence, but gave up as latent exhaustion swelled like a wave, devouring the warm streams that had been revitalising her body since she’d first noticed Clark Kent.

She shouldn’t have come to Iowa. She should have sent a generous wedding gift and used the corruption story as her alibi.

“Can I get you something to eat?” he asked politely.

His tone accentuated their separateness, reducing them to two people who had met by chance, would spend a few short, meaningless minutes together, and would return to their different lives and quickly forget.

Except Lois wasn’t sure Clark Kent would be easy to forget.

“Are you hungry?” he said, filling in the space left by her lack of reply.

“A little.”

“Do you know anyone here? Other than Jane?”

“No.”

“Would you like me to introduce you to some of her friends so you can eat with them?”

The last thing Lois wanted was to be thrust into a group of loud and giggly women, drunk on the frothy cocktail of romance, love, and weddings.

“I’m too tired to be good company,” she said.

“Have you eaten this evening?”

“No.”

“Would you like to sit down and I’ll bring you something? Or would you prefer to choose for yourself?”

The thought of sitting down was way more appealing than it should have been, considering she’d spent the day doing little else. “I’ll get something for myself,” Lois said wearily.

Clark accepted her brush-off with a taut nod. “Excuse me, Ms Lane,” he said. “I hope you enjoy your stay in Des Moines.”

He turned away, dejection rising from him like steam, twisting Lois’s heart and releasing a droplet of regret. “I would love a cup of coffee,” she called softly to his back.

He whirled around. “How do you like it?”

She doubted a wedding-eve party in Des Moines would be able to supply her usually rigid coffee preferences. “Low-fat milk, if they have it,” she said. “No sugar.”

“The coffee’s out back.” He removed his hand from his pocket and gestured to a vacant table squashed into the corner. “Would you like to meet there?”

Coffee. Food. Escape from the pandemonium of excited voices. A chance to sit down. It was too tempting to refuse.

“Yes,” she said. “Thank you.”

Clark strode to corner, deposited his glass of punch on the table, and continued to the back room.

Lois moved to the food and surveyed the vast array. It could have been a picture on a billboard, extolling the abundance of country living.

She put enough items on her plate to appease her hunger, but her mind was elsewhere.

Who was Clark Kent?

What was it about him that had shaken her barricades with his presence, carved chunks from her resistance with every smile, and melted the icecaps of her heart with the heat smouldering in those striking brown eyes?

He’d asked her for a date. He’d been quietly persistent until she’d bluntly informed him that she didn’t date.

He’d accepted her refusal.

But he hadn’t abandoned her. Hadn’t walked away in a fit of pique. Hadn’t resorted to nastiness.

She should have been relieved.

But it wasn’t relief she was feeling. Surprise, maybe. And perhaps even a few flakes of disappointment.

Clark was nowhere to be seen as Lois walked to the table where his glass awaited her. Was he going to bring her coffee and leave her alone? Or would he sit down?

She repeated the mantra that had been necessary in becoming a successful reporter — she didn’t care a jot what anyone thought of her. She certainly didn’t care what the Iowan locals were going to think if she sat out the evening like an aberrant misfit, the one dissenter in the midst of exultant wedding revellers.

But if she invited Clark to eat with her, his presence might deter any other grass-seed guys who thought that a woman eating alone was sufficient reason to inflict his presence upon her. When she and Clark had finished eating, enough time would have passed that Lois could ask him to call a cab, make an excuse of tiredness to Jane, and flee to the sanctuary of her hotel room.

Clark appeared at the door, carrying two large cups of coffee, and Lois’s internal river of attraction leapt from dormancy and resumed pulsing through her veins. His shoulders were impossibly wide. The strip of shirt visible under his jacket hinted at a chest worthy of further exploration. He exuded ... *something* ... Something she could neither name nor deny.

He placed one cup on the table. Lois inhaled, closing her eyes as the aroma of fresh coffee massaged the knots of tension embedded in her muscles. When she opened her eyes, Clark was still there. Still standing. Still holding his cup.

Watching her.

“I’m sorry I made you uncomfortable, Ms Lane,” he said. “I

shouldn't have asked you to go out with me."

"I thought we'd agreed that you would call me 'Lois'."

His jaw twitched. "Would you prefer that I leave you alone?"

"Have you eaten already?"

"Yes."

She needed to end this now. Because every moment with him loosened her grip on the safety rail at the top of a very long, very steep, very slippery slide.

And Lois Lane never surrendered control to anyone.

But when she called on her well-drilled defences, she found them limp and lifeless, reduced to mush because Clark Kent was looking at her. And had brought her coffee. And had apologised for asking her out.

"OK," she said with brisk pragmatism. "If you get more food so I don't feel self-conscious about eating when you're not and if you stop calling me 'Ms Lane', you can share my table."

It was ungracious — rude even — particularly as his apology was still reverberating through her conscience.

Clark placed the second cup across from the first. "Is there anything else I can get for you?"

"No. Thank you."

He walked away, giving her an opportunity to study him from behind.

Physically, he had it all.

Great body. Sure, she hadn't seen much, but her imagination had eagerly filled in a few gaps.

Movie-star looks.

Sensational smile.

Natural charm.

In her experience, the presence of any one of those traits guaranteed that a little digging would unearth an inflated ego, an obnoxious personality, and a penchant for chronic dishonesty.

But Clark Kent ...

... was different.

He turned from the food table, and Lois wrenched her attention back to the table. She picked up the cup and sipped.

The coffee was incredible.

Smooth. Creamy. Fresh. Perfect.

Lois took another mouthful as Clark slipped into the opposite chair. "How's the coffee?" he asked casually.

She eyed him with suspicion. "Is there a coffee machine in the back room?"

His gaze remained steady in hers. "No."

"It's the best coffee I've tasted in a long time," she said.

"Where did you get it?"

"Just a place I know."

"They sell take-out coffee in real cups?"

"No. I poured it into these cups."

"Why?"

He squirmed a little, shooting her a plea for mercy that was stippled with a hint of amusement. "Isn't it obvious?"

"You didn't think I'd notice superb coffee?"

"I was hoping you'd enjoy it."

"But you didn't want me to know you'd gone to a lot of trouble to get great coffee?"

"It wasn't a lot of trouble."

"But you did it."

He placed his plate on the table. "There's a lot of food left," he said. "I hope everyone's going to be hungry later."

Apparently, the subject of her coffee was closed. "Was Jane expecting more people to come?" Lois asked.

"No," Clark replied, looking around. "I think she was expecting about this many."

"Maybe there was a miscommunication with the caterers."

"The caterers?"

"The company that provided the food."

"A company didn't cater. I think Shane's mom organised it. A

lot of the local ladies contributed."

"Oh," Lois said, recognising this as a good opportunity to glean some background information on Clark Kent. "Did your mom bring something?"

"No," he said. "My folks live in Smallville, Kansas."

"Do you see them often?"

"Quite a bit."

"You fly over there? Or drive?"

"Fly, mostly."

"Any brothers and sisters?"

He dabbed his mouth with the napkin. "No," he said. "I'm an only child. How about you?"

"One sister. My parents are divorced. My family is spread out to all parts of the country. Deliberately so."

"I'm sorry."

Lois shrugged, pretending she didn't care. "Is your family close?"

"Very close. My parents couldn't have children. I'm adopted."

"Oh," Lois said. "I ... I'm not sure what to say."

"I don't usually divulge personal information so soon after meeting someone," Clark said. "I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable. Again."

"I don't usually tell people my parents are divorced." She picked up her glass and sniffed at the punch. "Do you think someone slipped alcohol in this?"

She hadn't been serious, but Clark replied with, "No. It's not alcoholic. I wouldn't give you alcohol without telling you."

Lois was pretty sure that what she was feeling couldn't be achieved with alcohol. If it could, half the world would be perpetually inebriated. She nibbled a little more of a sandwich, searching for a topic that might facilitate easy conversation. "How long have you known the happy couple?"

"I've known Jane for two years. She was already working at the paper when I came to Iowa. Shane started about a year ago."

"Where did you work before Des Moines?"

"I travelled after finishing school, doing some freelance work. This is my first real job."

"Were you there when they met?"

"I think so," Clark said. "Shane was introduced to all the staff the morning he started at the paper."

"When did you first realise they were interested in each other?"

"I think Shane was interested from the get-go, but I'm not sure marriage was in Jane's plans for her immediate future."

"Shane wore her down?"

"Yeah. I think it took longer than he was hoping, but they seem very happy together now."

"They say the course of true love never runs smoothly," Lois said.

"Do you believe that?"

"I don't believe in love," she said flatly.

"You don't think there can be a 'happily ever after'?"

"I think 'happily ever after' is nothing more than a tired phrase to stick on the end of a story when the writer has realised that the readers are within one flowery line of gagging on the unrelenting sentimentality."

"I think love is beautiful," Clark said. "Shane is always smiling, and Jane -"

"Of course, he's smiling now," Lois cut in. "But what about in five years' time when they're trying to juggle a home, a couple of kids, and two jobs, and neither can remember why they ever wanted to be married in the first place?"

"Some marriages are like that," Clark conceded, "but I don't think it has to be that way."

"But that's the point," Lois insisted. "There are no guarantees of forever, and without forever, it's an ultimately futile exercise.

Futile. Expensive. Painful. Depressing.”

“I would gladly risk it all for a woman I loved.”

Derision leaped up her throat. She swallowed. Her mouth went dry.

Because she believed him.

Lois believed that Clark believed his bold and foolish statement.

But as bold and as foolish as it was, it was also a bit ... just a little bit ...

Inspiring.

Endearing.

Her eyes dropped before his did. They fell to the table. And his hands.

He even had perfect hands.

Strong. Lean. Masculine.

Gentle.

She couldn't imagine those hands ever lifted in anger. Or cruelty.

She was being silly. How could she possibly discern the character of a man she'd known for less than an hour?

Feigning fascination with her food, Lois asked, “Have you been caught up in all the preparations for the big day tomorrow?”

“Not really. I collected a few of Shane's relations from the airport. Oh, and they asked me to do the reading tomorrow.”

“What about Jane's relations? Do they live around here?”

“I don't know,” Clark said. “Why do you ask?”

“Jane went to college in Metropolis. I wondered if she moved back here to be closer to her folks.”

“She's never mentioned any family in Des Moines.”

Lois looked around the room, skimming over the faces. “I can't see anyone with an obvious family resemblance to Jane.”

“I guess we'll find out tomorrow when she walks down the aisle with her dad.”

“You're not in the wedding party?” Lois asked.

“No. Shane has four brothers. The wedding party is full.”

So, unless Clark had a date — which seemed unlikely — he would attend the wedding unaccompanied.

Perhaps she should suggest they sit together. Sitting together could not be misconstrued as a date. She had to be at the wedding, anyway. It wouldn't take up any extra time. And — for all his obsolete idealism and countrified values — he wasn't bad company.

“Clark?”

“Yes, Lois?”

“Would you -”

“Ladies and Gentlemen ...”

The young man holding the microphone was so similar in features to Shane that he had to be one of the brothers. He announced — with much fanfare and gusto — that this was the opportunity for tales about the bride and groom that might be considered a little too risqué for the wedding tomorrow.

The crowd laughed. Clark smiled. Sweet liquid warmth oozed through Lois.

Shane's brother launched into the first story. Lois kept her head pointed in his direction, but before he'd reached the conclusion of his opening sentence, her eyes had returned to Clark.

He'd settled back in the chair. His hands were resting on the table.

His face was clean-shaven, without even a hint of shadow.

The curve of his jaw made her wonder what it would feel like to draw her fingers down its ridge, to arrive at his chin, and then meander up to his mouth.

His head swung. His eyes collided with hers.

And held her there.

Captivated. Entranced.

The warmth turned to heat, burning and scorching as

adrenaline-charged flames licked her body.

She felt alive — more alive than she'd ever felt when chasing a story.

She felt free. And joyous.

The maelstrom of those audacious new feelings couldn't be contained, and Lois felt herself smile.

Clark responded with a smile, full and free, tempting her forward. Panic seized her. *What was she doing?*

She was ...

She wasn't sure of anything anymore because Clark was watching her with steady brown eyes that diminished everything else to insignificance.

Lois slid her hand across the table, palm up. His hand inched forward. The tips of his fingers landed on the pads of hers.

From the centre of the room, the stories rambled on, punctuated with regular outbursts of laughter, but for Lois, there was only Clark and the irrefutable awareness that she had finally found the place she had been striving for her entire life.

The stories gave way to music.

“Do you dance?” Clark asked.

“Only with you.”

His smile billowed like a sail caught by the sun-kissed breeze. His fingers lifted from hers, and he stood, offering his hand.

Her hand fitted perfectly into his larger one. The tingly sensation of shared touch radiated through her palm and into her fingers.

They walked hand-in-hand to the floor and joined the other dancers.

They stopped and faced each other. Clark released a breath. Lois stepped forward as his arm rounded her body.

His hand on her back guided them into loose alignment. Her hand on his shoulder cupped the crest of muscle under his jacket.

They began to move.

Within a few bars, Lois had relaxed enough to rest her temple against Clark's chin and give herself over to the music. To the illusion that the past and the future had faded away and nothing existed except the present ... and Clark, his gentle arms, the scent of his cologne, and the memory of his smile.

Clark felt as if he were floating.

He wasn't. He'd checked. Several times.

Dancing with Lois was better than flying.

The moment he'd first seen her was etched in his mind forever.

He'd glanced to the door where she had been standing, holding a suitcase.

His heart had soared. His breath had quivered. His mind had exploded with one truth.

That's her!

He'd watched as Jane had broken away from their little group and rushed over to the woman he'd recognised as having been an ethereal presence in every one of his dreams for the future.

He hadn't been able to stop himself from asking her out. It was too quick. Too early. Too hurried.

Too important to wait.

She'd refused him.

She'd tried to ease them through from the awkwardness he'd created, but he'd persisted, stopping only one step short of forcing her to declare that she didn't want to date him.

But now, she was dancing with him. She fit so seamlessly against him that it felt as if he'd been born to hold her.

Clark knew he'd been born to love her.

And he did.

From the moment he'd seen her, he'd loved her.

And his life could never be complete without her.

Part 3

The music faded. Their feet stalled.

Time, place, and other people encroached into their world-just-for-two.

Lois straightened. Clark's hand slid down her back to the upper curve of her hip. She ventured up, into his face, and saw her own dazed wonderment and awed disbelief reflected in his eyes.

"Thank you, Lois," he whispered. "That was beautiful." It had been beautiful.

Two people had come together to dance. The music had blurred the distinction of individuality so thoroughly that her mind had seemed able to direct his movements.

But perhaps it hadn't been the music. Perhaps it was *him*.

That thought was exhilarating. And petrifying. Lois took half a step back. Clark's hands dropped from her body. She swayed.

He clasped her shoulders, swiftly, but with such gentleness that she trembled under his hold. "Lois?" he said. "Are you all right?"

She nodded and tried to smile. "I think I've just realised how tired I am."

He rotated his arm, allowing him to glance at the watch on his wrist without releasing her shoulders. "I'm sorry," he said quickly. "I should have thought. You've had a long day."

"Would you mind calling me a cab?" Lois asked. "And I need to get my suitcase."

"I'll get your suitcase," Clark said. "But ..."

"But?"

"There's usually a long wait for cabs on Friday nights."

"I'm staying at the Holiday Inn," Lois said. "Is that too far to walk?" Anything further than fifty yards was going to be too far.

"It's about three miles from here," Clark said. "Would you let me drive you?"

That sounded blissful. Except ...

Lois had filed too many stories detailing the terrible consequences of women leaving a public place with a stranger. "I can't take you away from the party," she said.

"It will only take a few minutes," Clark said. "But if you prefer, I can ask one of Jane's female friends to drive you."

He'd understood her qualms. And he hadn't been offended.

When he'd wanted a date with her, he'd asked.

With straightforward simplicity.

When she'd refused, he'd accepted her decision.

And although every alarm bell in her well-orchestrated chorus should be clanging a warning, they had been silenced by the guileless honesty emanating from those velvet brown eyes and the most compelling smile she had ever seen.

But Clark was far more than a gorgeous face and a set of spectacularly broad shoulders.

He hadn't tried to hide his eagerness for a date. And despite his palpable disappointment at her refusal, he'd continued to be considerate. He'd brought her exquisite coffee. He'd asked her to dance.

He hadn't assumed that the best dance of her life automatically earned him her trust.

"I'd like you to take me," Lois said shyly. "If it's not too much trouble."

"I'd like that, too," Clark said with a smile that permeated deep into her soul. "I'll get your suitcase and be right back."

The music began again as he disappeared from view, and Lois drifted through the whirl of dancers to a quiet spot on the sidelines.

Her body was exhausted. But her heart ...

Her heart was soaring, still lost somewhere in Clark Kent's arms.

Would he come into the hotel? He didn't seem like the type of guy who would stop at the kerb to let a woman out and then

drive away.

Would he come into her room? To carry her suitcase perhaps? If he did, would he linger?

Would he try to kiss her goodnight? They had danced together and eaten together, but it hadn't been a date.

What would be standard for a date with Clark?

Would he open doors for her? Would he insist on paying? Would he make it abundantly clear how much he appreciated her company?

He would.

Would she enjoy it? Or would it make her feel constricted?

Jane rushed up to Lois. "I'm sorry I haven't spent much time with you," the soon-to-be-bride said. "But I could see that Clark was looking after you."

"I'm really tired, Jane," Lois said. "Clark is going to drive me to the hotel."

"The hotel, huh?" Jane said.

"It will only take a few minutes," Lois said primly. "Clark will be back here before you've even noticed he's gone."

Jane looked abashed. "I'm sorry, Lois," she said. "I didn't mean to imply anything. It's just ... Clark is a great guy. I'd love to see him happy."

"I'm sure there are hundreds of Des Moines women who could make him happy," Lois said, doing her best to ignore the passionate protest marching across her heart like an army bent on defending its territory.

"I thought that when he arrived," Jane said. "But as far as I know, he hasn't had a girlfriend in the last two years."

Deciding not to comment on that piece of information, Lois said, "Thank you for inviting me to your wedding."

Jane smiled, and her attention swung to Clark as he walked towards them, carrying Lois's suitcase. "I don't think I'm the only one who's glad you came," she whispered loudly.

If Clark heard her comment, he gave no obvious response. "I'm driving Lois to her hotel," he said, addressing Jane. "Cabs are hard to find at this time of night."

Jane nodded, her smile including both of them. "See you tomorrow, Lois," she said as she hugged her guest. "Sweet dreams."

"Goodnight, Jane."

Outside, the air was cool, and Lois clasped her arms against her chest.

Clark removed his jacket and held it up for her.

"Won't you be cold?" she asked.

"No."

"OK. Thanks." She slipped her arms into the sleeves. His warmth caressed her. His cologne wafted into her nostrils. And the memory of his arm around her tingled across her skin.

"My car's this way," Clark said, pointing to the left, but not moving until she did.

At his car, he opened the passenger door for her. Once she was settled, he stowed her suitcase in the trunk and slipped into the driver's seat. "The Holiday Inn?"

"Yes, please."

Clark eased the car out from the parking bay and drove sedately towards a large intersection.

The contrast of darkness after the bright lights and the muted purr of the engine after the merriment and loud voices made this feel like a period of transition. The evening was over. The dance had finished. The music had fallen silent.

Soon, Lois would be in the hotel room, alone with her memories.

Memories she would do well to banish.

She was a hard-nosed reporter from Metropolis who had deliberately eradicated all traces of sentimentality from her life.

But when Clark had held her as they danced ...

That hadn't felt like sentimentality. That had felt strong and

secure. It had felt real.

What if exhaustion had paralysed her jerk-detector?

Could any man be as flawlessly noble as Clark appeared to be? As decent and honourable?

Lois had to know. And uncovering his real motivation was not going to be difficult for the woman who had dismantled an entire Senator's office in search of the truth.

At the hotel, Clark opened Lois's door and took her suitcase from the trunk. He waited at a discreet distance as she checked in to her room.

Lois accepted the key from the man behind the reception counter and turned to Clark. "Would you carry my suitcase to my room, please?" she asked with a sugary smile.

"Of course," he said evenly.

They located her room in silence. Lois unlocked the door and went in. She put her handbag on the bed and turned to where Clark was standing in the doorway. "Come in," she said.

He took a step forward and placed her suitcase on the floor. "Goodnight, Lois," he said pleasantly. "See you at the wedding tomorrow."

He walked out, softly closing the door behind him.

Lois stared at it. Clark had gone. He'd come into her room to bring her suitcase. At her invitation.

He'd put the suitcase down and left. No delaying tactics. No attempt to snatch a kiss — or more — as reimbursement for the ride to the hotel.

She had no way to contact him. No number. No address. She would see him at the wedding, but -

Lois grabbed the handle and yanked the door open.

Clark trudged away from Lois's room, his heart recoiling from cruel truths he didn't want to accept. He would be in the same room as Lois for a few hours tomorrow, and then the most amazing woman on earth would walk out of his life forever.

"Clark!"

He spun around.

She came out of her room, holding his jacket towards him. "You forgot this."

He moved forward and took the jacket from her. "Thanks." He started to step away, not wanting to prolong the anguish of this penultimate goodbye.

"Clark?"

He paused, his pulse racing, and turned back.

"About breakfast. I have to eat. You do, too." She shrugged. "We could eat together."

His heart catapulted, and a torpedo of glittering possibilities erupted across his mind. He swallowed, hoping his voice wouldn't squeak. "What time?"

"Is seven-thirty too early?"

Any time would be fantastic. Any time. Any place. Any occasion. "Seven-thirty's fine," he said. "I'll be here."

"OK."

"See you then."

"Thanks for the ride."

"You're ..." He dragged some oxygen into his lungs. "You're welcome, Lois."

With a small wave of her hand, she stepped into her room and shut the door.

Clark donned his jacket and managed to walk with sedate composure until he reached his car. Then, his restraint shattered and he shot up into the darkness, spinning and twirling in jubilant celebration.

In less than nine hours, he had a date.

With Lois.

Lois checked her watch for the twentieth time. It was seven

twenty-six.

She'd been ready for fifteen minutes, waiting for time to dawdle towards half past seven.

Despite her exhaustion, she hadn't slept easily. Slumber had shied away from a mind utterly absorbed in one thing.

One man, actually.

Clark Kent.

She'd relived every moment they'd spent together — rewinding, pausing, and replaying her library of memories.

She would never forget the moment she'd first seen him. And seconds later — the first time his eyes had collided with hers, forging a connection powerful enough to silence the strands of cynicism woven through her heart.

She remembered the delicious shivers she'd felt the first time she'd heard his voice. They were still echoing through the corridors of her mind like a softly thrummed melody.

And that first fluttering, oh-so-devastating, smile.

His touch. The first time her hand had slid into his, adding tactile memories.

Seven twenty-seven.

Their small talk had evolved into questions about her relationship status. Flouting all the practicalities of time and distance, he'd asked her for a date. He'd met her excuses with gallant resolve.

When she'd rebuffed him with an unequivocal 'no', his civility hadn't faltered.

He'd bought her superb coffee. He'd divulged personal information about his family. He'd staunchly affirmed his belief in love.

I would gladly risk it all for a woman I loved.

The speeches had interrupted their conversation, but not their on-going communication. Lois couldn't remember one word spoken about the bridal couple, but the messages that had flowed from Clark's eyes were written across her heart in indelible ink.

And then, they had danced.

Seven twenty-eight.

His arms had felt like a sanctuary of excitement. And Lois, who fervently guarded her personal space, had felt cocooned in freedom.

Freedom to be the woman she didn't dare to be.

The music had finished, and Clark had reverted behind a shield of polite and proper behaviour.

She'd had to know the truth. Was he real? Or was he a master at playing the role most likely to deliver him the outcome he wanted, knowing his looks provided him with a potent accessory?

He'd accompanied her to hotel room.

He'd said 'goodnight' and left.

And in that moment, she'd been forced to accept the unpalatable, uncomfortable truth.

Clark Kent was different. His differences were not just a mask donned to curry approval. He *was* different from any man she'd ever met.

He'd dissolved a few more atoms of her scepticism with every smile.

He'd thawed a few degrees of her frostiness with every look from those clear brown eyes.

He'd peeled another layer from the hard crust of her heart with every touch from his gentle hands.

He'd begun to turn her world right-side-up.

She'd known she couldn't let him walk away.

When she'd suggested breakfast, his smile — bursting with not-quite-able-to-believe joy — had melted his slightly detached manner, setting her heart ablaze all over again.

Seven twenty-nine.

He would be here soon. Actually, Lois was surprised he wasn't here already. She wished he would hurry.

Because she missed him.

She'd been away from him for just a few hours, and she missed him.

Which was ridiculous.

Because nothing could change the fact that tomorrow morning, she was going to board a plane and return to her life in Metropolis.

Back to being the tough, successful, uncompromising reporter who saw, revealed, and wrote but never emerged from behind a wall so thick she didn't have to feel.

She would dive back into her work. Find another scandal. Follow up every thread from the corrupt-Senator story.

But she feared that even the most enthralling story would not drive away her memories of Clark.

She didn't want to forget him. She wanted to remember every single moment with him.

She had to forget him.

She wanted to create countless memory-moments with him and carefully catalogue them in the library of her mind.

Seven thirty.

Lois walked over to the mirror and checked her appearance again. Her eyes were bright and her cheeks dusky pink. Despite her restless night, all the tiredness from yesterday had vanished. The grime from chasing stories in Metropolis's underbelly had melted away, leaving her refreshed and invigorated.

How was Clark feeling? Had he gone to sleep thinking about her?

Had his sleep been laced with smiles as his subconscious had played memories of their time together?

Why was he late? Had he changed his mind?

Had he realised the foolishness of continuing whatever had seized them last night?

Or was he rushing around, trying to make everything just right?

Didn't he realise that she was in need of another hit of his smile? Another touch from his hand?

Lois went to the window and looked out.

It was raining.

Not hard. Just drizzle, really.

Had he planned an alfresco breakfast and was now frantically amending his preparations in deference to the weather?

Lois leaned forward and peered through the window, but she could only see a small, damp garden and a fence that blocked her view of the road.

Was he here already? Walking towards her room?

How was he feeling?

Nervous?

Excited?

Petrified?

All of those melded into a jumble of emotions that defied definition?

Because that's how she felt.

Would he kiss her? Would he want to kiss her? Had he thought about kissing her?

She'd thought about kissing him.

And every time she thought about it, a rush of anticipation cascaded through her body like just-poured champagne.

How would he kiss?

Gently? Cautiously?

Maybe at first.

But after that ...

Once he knew she welcomed his kisses ...

Even then, Lois couldn't imagine Clark being demanding or rough.

Seven thirty-one.

He was late.

That surprised her.

Shocked her.

Relieved her.

Devastated her.

Forced her to face the reality that a woman living in Metropolis dating a man living in Des Moines was abject stupidity.

She shouldn't do it.

Not even once.

Because one date with Clark Kent was never going to be enough.

What had he planned for breakfast? Did he have a favourite café? A quiet place where they could eat? And talk? Where she could learn more about his life?

Would they be able to sit together during the wedding?

Perhaps there would be opportunity to dance at the reception.

What was she thinking?

Actually, she wasn't thinking. She was *feeling*. And, as Lois had realised a long time ago, giving any ground to feelings was akin to asking for a bomb to be dropped right in the middle of your ordered, neat, and perfect life.

Except her life wasn't perfect.

It was lonely.

And isolated.

And empty of everything except her work.

But it was better to be alone by choice than to risk becoming a blubbing globule of regret at having surrendered control to something as flaky as feelings.

It was time to regain that control.

Seven thirty-two.

Lois went to the door and pressed her ear against it, listening for footsteps.

There was only silence.

She was usually at her desk by seven thirty, already downing her second cup of coffee.

But in Des Moines, it was different. Quiet. Calm. Sleepy.

Perhaps because it was Saturday.

Lois couldn't remember the last time she hadn't worked on a Saturday. It had been before she'd started chasing down the Senator and his secrets.

What sort of stories did Clark write?

Were there bad guys in Des Moines? Did Clark investigate corruption? Misuse of authority?

Why had Jane chosen to leave Metropolis and come here?

Had it been choice? Or necessity, because this had been her only job offer?

Where was her family? From the moment Lois had realised that the hunk with the stunning smile wasn't Shane McVane, she hadn't noticed much other than Clark.

She couldn't remember anyone from Jane's family having spoken at the speeches. Clark had said he'd picked up Shane's relations from the airport. He'd said Jane had never mentioned any family.

Seven thirty-three.

He would come. He would. There was a reason he was late.

Traffic, perhaps.

There was an explanation. There had to be.

But whatever it was, Lois just wanted him to stroll down the corridor, knock on her door, greet her with his smile, and remind her just how wonderful it felt to be with him.

Lois Lane didn't believe in love. She didn't believe in marriage. She certainly didn't believe in 'happily ever after'.

But she was perilously close to believing in Clark Kent.

Seven thirty-four.

Part 4

Ten minutes later, Lois's limited reserve of patience had dwindled to nothing. She picked up her handbag, slewed her jacket over her shoulder, pulled open the door of her hotel room, and strode down the corridor towards the reception area.

She was hungry, and she was going to find a café and eat breakfast.

Alone.

When Mr Clark Kent actually bothered to show up, he would discover that Lois Lane didn't wait around for anyone.

She marched into the reception area, propelled by steaming indignation that she'd been stood up by a hick from Iowa. Or Kansas, which was worse.

Her feet stalled, her jaw dropped, her throat withered.

Clark was leaning against the far wall, wearing jeans that hugged his hips more tightly than his pants had last night and a textured grey sweater that accentuated the vast plains of his chest. He straightened. "Lois?" He swallowed. His smile glimmered like a rainbow after a storm. "Lois. Good morning. You ... wow, you look great."

She advanced on him, using her stockpile of aggravation as a blowtorch to obliterate her tumultuous reaction to his presence. "Why are you waiting out here?" she demanded. "Why didn't you come to my door? I thought you wanted us to have breakfast together. Have you changed your mind?"

"No. No, of course I haven't." He checked his watch. "But I'm hopelessly early."

"You're *early*?"

"Everything was ready," Clark said. He regarded her with eyes that had lost none of their splendour overnight. "I couldn't stay away any longer."

"You're late," she said, thrusting her watch under his nose. "It's almost eight o'clock. You said seven-thirty."

Clark examined her watch, his mouth suspended on the verge of a smile. "I'm sorry, Lois," he said. "I didn't realise we made our plans in Metropolis time."

"Met—" Lois slammed her mouth shut and tried to pretend she was oblivious to the heat flooding into her cheeks. She lifted her chin and met him square on. "What time is it?"

"In Des Moines, it's a quarter to seven."

"Oh." A blaze of fresh comprehension swamped her embarrassment. "You're an *hour* early?"

"No," Clark said with a little gush of defensiveness. "I was only fifty-one minutes early." His smile trembled with heart-tugging hopefulness. "Are ... are you ready?"

"I had decided I wasn't going to ..." Her planned announcement that she no longer wanted to go out with him had held no conviction, even at the beginning, and quickly petered out to empty air.

Clark watched her, saying nothing, awaiting her verdict.

Lois closed her mouth, stunned by the galling realisation that she wasn't capable of standing before this man and boldly declaring that she would not be a party to something as ridiculous as going on a date with someone whose future presence in her life amounted to just a few hours.

Clark moved a step closer. "I feel like I'm stumbling around blindly, too, Lois," he said. "I'm guessing what I should do and hoping like crazy that I don't mess up anything too badly."

"Really?" she asked in a small voice that was draped with relief.

"Really," he said with a confirming nod. "But I do know how much I want to have breakfast with you." He gestured towards the door. "Please, Lois?"

There were hundreds of reasons why she shouldn't spend another moment with a man so unconsciously adept at employing the arsenal of weapons at his disposal, but right now, Lois, the master wordsmith, couldn't have constructed a sentence detailing even one of them.

She could do no more than nod silent acquiescence.

Clark's responding smile could have lit up a moderately sized city. "Let's go then," he said. He strode to the door and held it open for her.

As Lois passed him, she sneaked a glance into his face. She wasn't subtle enough, and he caught her, responding with a smile that wrapped around her heart like a shawl.

Lois fixed her gaze ahead and hurried through the door. Outside, the drizzly rain had become a steady downpour. She pulled on her jacket.

"Wait here," Clark said. He ran to his car, opened the passenger door, and beckoned her forward.

She crossed the short distance and slipped into his car. When Clark joined her, he pushed the key into the ignition and peered out through the windshield. "This is not the weather I was hoping for," he said.

"It'll be OK," Lois said. "We shouldn't get too wet running between the car and café."

"A café was Plan B," Clark said, tapping on the steering wheel. "But it's Saturday, and this is Des Moines." He turned to her, his mouth hinting at a smile. "And — as hard as this is to believe — cafés around here don't generally run on Metropolis time. Although, they very definitely should, of course."

Lois felt herself smiling right back at him. "Are you trying to tell me that nothing's open yet?"

"There's a diner out on the highway," Clark said. "It'll be open, but the food is so awful, you'd probably never speak to me again, and I'm not willing to risk that."

"How long until something opens?" Lois asked.

"Forty minutes. Longer for the nicer cafés."

"How about the place you got coffee last night? That was open late. Could we go there?"

Clark shook his head. "I packed us a picnic," he said. "I'd thought the park would be nice. There's a little gazebo ..." He lifted his hand from the steering wheel in a gesture of frustration. "I remembered *everything* except to check the weather forecast."

"Is the gazebo covered?" Lois asked.

"Yes."

"Then we can probably stay dry."

"You might get cold."

Last night, it had been important to Clark that she had good coffee. Now, he was concerned about keeping her warm on a chilly morning.

"I just want you to have a good time," he said as if he thought her silence necessitated an explanation from him.

Lois reached over and patted his hand where it was resting on the steering wheel. The touch lasted less than a second, but it was enough to send tingles through the pads of her fingers.

She glanced into his face and caught him swallowing.

So, he felt it, too.

This ... this *thing* between them. This connection. This feeling of being inexorably drawn together by something stronger than will or common sense or the impracticalities of living more than a thousand miles apart.

It could only be a temporary thing, of course. No other outcome was possible. But, for now ... Even Perry had said she should relax and have fun. "Let's go and see if the gazebo has a dry corner," Lois suggested.

"It doesn't have any corners at all," Clark retorted with a grin. "But if you'd like to go and look ..."

For the second time that morning, Lois found she was smiling simply because Clark was. "Corners or not," she said. "A picnic in the park sounds perfect."

And it did.

Because she would be with Clark.

And that simple fact elevated her spirits and reduced everything else, including the weather, to mere triviality.

Clark started the engine and pulled into the almost-empty road. "You seem happy this morning," he noted.

She did? Her? Happy?

When was the last time she had thought of herself as being

happy? After an exclusive? No. That was satisfaction. Relief. And maybe a little bit of professional pride.

But now, happiness had snuck upon her, enfolding her in its clutches, permeating her threadbare heart, and infusing her with vitality.

Could it really be possible that one person could change everything?

“Are you?” Clark asked. “Feeling good?”

“Yeah,” she said, although her reply was lacking in any real conviction.

“Did you sleep well?”

“OK. You?”

He seemed caught unawares by the abruptness of her comeback question. “Ah ... yeah. Your hotel room seemed nice enough. Was it OK?”

Lois had taken so little notice of the room that she couldn't remember one feature. Actually, there was one. “It didn't have a clock,” she stated with a playful glare at Clark's profile. “You didn't steal it, did you?”

“No,” he said, glancing her way with a smile. “But if I'd thought of it, I may have been tempted.”

“Why?”

“Metropolis time is good.”

“Why?”

“Day starts earlier.”

“And that is good because?”

He grinned. “You were right about asking a lot of questions.”

“They call me ‘Mad Dog Lane’ because I don't give up until I have the answers I want.” For the first time ever, the ‘Mad Dog’ tag didn't sting. Not here. Not with Clark. Not as they drove to a soaked gazebo to share breakfast.

But Clark was no longer smiling. “Mad Dog?” he grated. “Do you mind?”

“I'll tell you whether I mind or not if you tell me why you wanted the day to start earlier.”

“Because I had a breakfast date with a beautiful woman.”

Beautiful. Lois had fielded a plethora of similar comments. Usually, she dismissed them as insincere slush, used as a ploy to bend her to the will of the speaker.

But this time, she wasn't so sure.

“You really think I'm beautiful?” she asked, because she had to know, even though it sounded excruciatingly close to fishing for a further compliment.

“Yes. I do.”

His three words, spoken with quietly steadfast assurance, set off a series of shock waves inside Lois. “I bet you say that to every woman you date,” she threw back at him.

Clark swung into the kerb and brought the car to a smooth stop. He turned to her, his expression solemn. “You are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, Lois,” he declared. “And I've never said that to anyone before because it hasn't been true until now.”

She laughed. Short, brittle, embarrassed.

“I had been counting down the hours to seven thirty since last night. Why wouldn't I be pleased about the day starting earlier?”

“Clark ...” There was so much she wanted to say — a churning mass of scrambled feelings that were crying out for release — and even more she wanted to ask. But speaking the words gave them validity. And she might get some answers — answers she wasn't ready for yet. “Let's just go to the park, shall we?”

After another smile that lingered just long enough to melt another couple of million nerve endings, Clark pulled back onto the road and said, “Are you looking forward to the wedding?”

“I guess so.” In truth, Lois hadn't given one thought to the wedding since she'd stopped bemoaning her moment of weakness in accepting Jane's invitation.

“Are you glad to have a day away from the paper?” Clark continued. “A break from Metropolis?”

“Not really.” It was the truth. Or it had been. But it sounded petty and ungrateful. “I'm a little bit ... obsessed about my work.”

He nodded. “It shows.”

“Really? How? Am I -?”

“No,” he said with a chuckle. “It shows in your stories.”

“You've read my stories?” she gasped.

“Of course, I have. Jane often gets a copy of the Daily Planet when you have the front-page byline. She's very proud of your success.”

“Oh.” Lois wasn't sure what else to say, but some of her attitudes towards Jane were no longer sitting comfortably in her conscience.

“She thinks you're amazing,” Clark said softly. *So do I.*

The final three words hadn't been spoken but they hung in the air, as tangible as the rain sloshing down the windows.

“Ah ... that's nice of her,” Lois muttered. Hurrying to change the subject, she cast a glance out of the windshield. “I hope the weather clears for the wedding.”

“So do I.” He turned off the main road and onto a smaller one. “I wonder how Jane's feeling this morning.”

“I can't even imagine,” Lois said.

“I figure she's excited,” Clark said. “Anxious. Nervous. Ecstatic. Full of joy.”

Yesterday, Lois would have spouted something disparaging about the myth of true love. But this morning ...

The image of Clark waiting for her at the top of the aisle lodged firmly in her mind. He would be dynamite in a tux. She could imagine his smile ... his anticipation ... his radiating happiness ... his eyes, brimming with love ... his -

“They were hoping to take the photographs outside,” Clark said. “But mud splatters can't be great for a white dress.”

“You're looking forward to the wedding, aren't you?” Lois asked, hoping he would discern the teasing lilt in her tone.

“Ah ...” He tossed her a sheepish smile. “I think it's nice when two people love each other enough to want to be together for the rest of their lives.”

“Last night, you said you would risk everything for the woman you loved.”

“I would.”

“You'd be willing to commit the rest of your life to one woman?”

“Yes.”

“What if your feelings were to change? What if you were to meet someone else who is perfect for you?”

“My wife would be perfect for me.”

His fervent declaration skipped across her heart, imprinting the very sure knowledge that Clark Kent's wife would be a woman enveloped in the unwavering love of her husband. “What about having the freedom to go out with any woman?”

“I want the freedom to go out with one special woman,” he replied. “The freedom to love her openly. The freedom to affirm publicly that we have chosen to be together. That she has chosen to be with me.”

Lois felt her throat thicken with tears. She had believed in marriage once. She had dreamed of a man who would commit to building a life with her. The desire to believe still flickered weakly, but wanting to believe was never enough. She swallowed roughly and tried to chuckle to disguise the inner turmoil. “You are a very unusual man, Clark Kent.”

“What do you mean?” he asked quickly.

“You're different from anyone I've ever met.”

He flinched. Tried to hide it. Asked, with somewhat laboured nonchalance, “Is that a bad thing?”

“No.”

Lois's reply reverberated more strongly than she had intended. It stated so much more than 'not a bad thing' and became 'a very good thing'. Lois held her breath. Clark's eyes stayed fixed on the road, but his throat lurched as he swallowed rather loudly. Lois snapped her head to the right and stared at the soggy landscape.

The deluge of attraction swept back, seasoned with memories.

Dancing with him.

His arm around her. The feel of his shoulder under her hand. The firm velvet of his chin against her temple.

Clark turned off the road and pulled into a parking bay facing a murky grey gazebo. As he killed the engine, the rain increased. He groaned. "Perhaps this isn't such a good idea," he said. "The wind is blowing rain into the gazebo."

Lois reached over and lightly rested her hand on the wrist band of his sweater. His head jolted towards her. "We can't see into all the gazebo," she said. "There might be an area that's still dry. Over to the left, perhaps."

"Would you like me to go and have a look?" Clark asked eagerly.

"Sure."

"Wait here."

He was gone before she'd opened her mouth to reply, sprinting through the rain and leaping up the gazebo steps. Lois watched, entranced. The man turned the simple act of running into compulsive viewing.

And his jeans appeared to have been fashioned purposely to emphasise a very nicely shaped butt!

Clark stayed in the gazebo only a few seconds and then dashed back to the car, grinning at her before he'd even shut the door. "There's a bit that's protected from the rain," he announced. "If you really don't mind risking a bit of dampness."

Lois had never minded risking anything. Except for perhaps her heart. And that worried her far more than a few drops of rain. Or it should. "Let's get the food."

Clark touched her — his fingers brushing lightly over her knuckles and setting fire to them. "My coat's in the trunk. You can use it to run through the rain. I'll get everything."

"You'll get wet."

He grinned at that. "Perhaps I can run fast enough to miss all the raindrops," he said. "Stay there while I get the coat."

A few seconds later, he opened her door and held his coat up for protection as Lois rose from the seat. She took the garment, propped it over her head, and ran for the gazebo.

She stood on the edge of the dry spot and followed Clark with her eyes as he rushed back to the trunk.

She was drawn to Clark Kent. Irresistibly. Overwhelmingly. Undeniably. Alarmingly.

He felt something, too. She knew he did.

What was he thinking?

Had he wondered — even for a second — if she could be the woman he was waiting to meet? The woman who could fulfil his dreams of 'happily ever after'?

He'd said he would risk heartache and disappointment for the woman he loved.

Had that been merely generalisation? Or had his message had a very specific intended audience?

He bounded up the steps and placed a loaded basket at her feet. "I also have a few things to make us more comfortable," he said. "Be back soon."

Lois crouched next to the basket. There were multiple containers. She opened one, and her stomach leaped at the chocolate aroma emanating from the crumbly pastry.

All it needed was coffee!

Perhaps Clark's favourite coffee shop would open soon and he'd take her there.

Had he planned more than breakfast? Lunch, perhaps? Sitting together at the wedding? Another dance?

He couldn't know that all of Lois's relationships had ended so badly, she'd concluded that love and Lois Lane were two divergent entities and therefore, completely immiscible.

Love? That word caused an earthquake through the landscape of her thoughts.

Did Clark love her?

He couldn't. Not yet.

But there was something between them. Something Lois had never felt before.

She was sure he felt something, too, but was he thinking they would spend the weekend together — two days that would result in nothing more significant than memories when they returned to their separate lives on Monday?

Or was he thinking so much more?

With any other man, a pleasant, ultimately pointless, association would seem most likely. A little flirting. Perhaps some kissing. Maybe even a night together. Then, their lives would reset back to normal.

If that happened, Lois would fly to Metropolis tomorrow, throw herself into her work, and resolve that she would never again waste one moment thinking about her weekend in Des Moines.

She would do it, because she was Lois Lane.

But he was Clark Kent. And that changed everything.

He arrived again, carrying a pile of outdoor cushions and two blankets, one thick and heavy duty, one soft and delicate. "Perhaps you'd like to set it up the way you want it," he suggested. "Or you can wait until I get back and we'll do it together."

When he'd gone again, Lois spread out the thick blanket on the dry concrete. She added some cushions, placing them against one of the broad wooden support posts. She returned to the basket and began -

Coffee!

The aroma, fragrant and full-bodied, surrounded her like the embrace of an old friend.

Clark walked up the steps, more sedately this time, carrying two steaming take-away cups. Lois moved forward to meet him. "I was just thinking that all this needed was coffee," she said.

He handed her a cup. Their fingers brushed. "I hope it tastes all right," he said. "It was brewed about half an hour ago, but it's still hot."

Most of the coffee Lois drank at work was hours old and decidedly tepid. She sipped. Swallowed. Sighed. "Great coffee," she said appreciatively. "Just like last night. Perhaps we could go there later."

Clark eyed the cushions she had placed on the rug. "This looks wonderful, Lois." He hesitated a moment to offer a shy smile. "Would you like to sit down?"

But instead of sitting down, she moved closer to him, her attention riveted to the splatters of moisture that dotted his sweater.

Lois slowly lifted her hand. With her fingertip, she touched a single droplet. It trickled down her finger and into her palm. She brushed him lightly, feeling the protrusion of his collarbone. Her hand stalled at the point of his shoulder.

With her eyes, she traced the track her hand had left through the fibres of his sweater. She realised he was holding his breath. She tilted her head upwards. His mouth was there. Accessible. Poised. Ready.

He didn't lean closer. He didn't move. Not even the twitch of a muscle.

He waited, gifting Lois the freedom to choose.

She wrenched her gaze from his mouth. She stared at her hand as it began moving down his arm, gathering speed as she

flicked at his sleeve and then continued with jerky strokes across his chest to his other shoulder and arm.

When she'd finished, he breathed again, taut and shallow. "Th... thanks."

"You're welcome."

Her gaze drifted back to his mouth, and she found he was smiling — a little shaken, a little tentative, but still with the power to captivate her. "Would you like to sit down?" he asked, offering his hand to assist.

She should run now. Because if she ever got within kissing distance of that mouth again, her resistance would be about as useful as tissue paper in a blizzard.

And kissing Clark Kent ...

Lois couldn't see how there could be any way back from that. But she didn't run.

She took his hand and sat down. Clark began unpacking the basket, and Lois sipped from her coffee, as inside her, trepidation and euphoria engaged in a feisty battle for ascendancy.

Part 5

"Bread?"

Lois stared at the chunky slices Clark had cut from the two-person artisan loaf. Each new container they had unpacked from the basket had escalated her surprise to new levels. But it wasn't just the enormous variety of foods that had stifled her flow of words. The extra touches Clark had included — the small blue vase holding a single stem that exploded into a circle of creamy lace flowers, the thick white napkins, embossed with three blue petals in the corner — had catapulted her beyond surprise and into the grip of astonishment.

"It's sourdough," he said.

"Thanks," Lois said, taking a slice and putting it on her otherwise-empty plate.

"I ... I wasn't sure what you liked," Clark said, offering her a small dish of butter. "I hope -"

"How did you get all this?" Lois asked, running her eyes over the spread of cheeses, bite-sized quiches, thick slices of turkey bacon, cranberry chutney, bratwurst, currant doughnuts, buns draped in butterscotch sauce, plump juicy grapes, red cherries, a mix of nuts with dried fruits, and a selection of chocolate pastries. "You said nothing is open."

"I have a friend who owns a store. I went to see him last night and asked for his help in putting together a picnic breakfast. I know there's too much, but I wanted to make sure we included something you'd enjoy."

Lois took the butter and picked up a knife. "It's amazing, Clark."

"You like it?" he said with a hopeful smile.

"I ... I'm not sure what I was expecting, but this ..." She gestured across the assembled multitude of pots and containers.

"So ... you like it?"

"Of course, I like it, Clark," Lois exclaimed. "It's just ..."

His smile died. "Too much?"

"No. It's ... " How could she say that it was the sweetest thing anyone had ever done for her? And the scariest? "How could I not like it, Clark? You ... This must have taken you all night."

"Not really," he said, picking up the plate of assorted cheeses and offering it to her. "I just wanted ... I hoped ..."

His hopes didn't need to be verbalised — they were being boomed from every carefully chosen ingredient, every matching accessory, every crevice of thoughtfulness. "Thanks," Lois said, taking pieces of the camembert and havarti. Seeing that his plate was still empty, she quickly added some bratwurst, a quiche, and a handful of grapes. Then, she leaned back against the wooden upright and sighed with what she hoped sounded like contentment.

Clark put some cheese and bacon on his plate. As he reached

for a slice of bread, he said, "I hear you broke a huge story yesterday."

"The Senator story?"

"Yes. It sounds as if it's going to have far-reaching ramifications. Congratulations."

"Thanks," Lois said, reflecting that a damp picnic breakfast in Iowa with Clark was a long way from her usual celebration of chocolate-fudge ice cream, eaten straight from the container as she sat alone on the sofa in her apartment. "How did you know about my story?"

Clark's grin was a little bit self-conscious as he said, "I heard a radio news report this morning. They said the story had been broken yesterday by The Daily Planet."

"My name was mentioned?" Lois asked with surprise.

"No," he admitted. "But I figured it was most likely your story, so I took a chance."

"What if it hadn't been my story?" Lois asked. "What if my biggest rival had written it? What if I'm annoyed that he got the story and I didn't? What if that particular story is the last thing I want to talk about?"

Her volley of questions didn't moderate Clark's smile. Quite the opposite, in fact. "As I hear it," he replied, "Lois Lane is the best reporter The Daily Planet has. The odds were solidly in my favour."

Lois pulled her gaze from his mouth and rammed into his eyes. He held her there, a willing captive, bobbing in the sea of his unabashed admiration.

He blinked, releasing her. "Well," he said. "It's true, isn't it?"

"Maybe," Lois conceded, although for the first time ever, being the best didn't matter in the slightest.

When Clark Kent was looking at her like that ...

He plucked a few grapes from their stalks. "What made you suspicious about the Senator?" he asked. "Why did you start investigating him?"

This was easier ground. Lois leaned further into the upright and nibbled on a piece of cheese. "Last year, his office was very keen that we publicise their program to help disadvantaged youth," she said. "The objective was to keep kids in school for as long as possible through mentoring and providing funds for books and other educational costs."

"Sounds like a great idea," Clark said. "But, in hindsight, it's easy to wonder if all the allocated funds got to the kids."

"Exactly," Lois said. "Last month, Perry sent me out to cover a hold-up. Two days later, I got a tip-off that they were about to make an arrest. I got there before most of the police and managed to get a few words with the perpetrator. He was only fifteen. I asked him why he wasn't still in school, and he said there was no money for school."

"That was it?" Clark asked. "That was enough to make you investigate the Senator?"

"The young burglar was a perfect candidate for the program," Lois said. "I wanted to know how he'd slipped through the net."

"And you discovered the program was not as expansive as the public had been led to believe?"

For a reporter who worked in Iowa, Clark was pretty adept at connecting the scattered dots of an investigation. "With a little digging, I realised that — other than the kids who had been featured in the original story — it was impossible to find *anyone* who had been helped by the program."

"So you realised the money had gone somewhere?" Clark said. With a grin, he added, "And you needed to find out where?"

Lois nodded, smiling ... because he was.

"How long did you work on the story?" he asked. "A few weeks? A few months?"

Even fellow reporters sometimes assumed that the best stories were mostly luck; that all the facts simply collated themselves into order and were delivered as a neat package to the

reporter lucky enough to be on the receiving end of such gifts. But Clark was different, it seemed. “A month,” Lois said. “Every day, after I’d filed my other stories.”

Clark gave a low whistle. “That’s a lot of dedication based on the word of a kid. I don’t think too many people would have given it a second thought. But I guess the Daily Planet is big enough that the editor could afford to give you some help.”

Lois shook her head. “I work alone. Always. By choice.”

His head jolted up. “Isn’t that dangerous sometimes?”

“If you’re worried about a few dangers, you’re on a one-way track to spending your life writing the obits,” Lois stated.

“But you take precautions?” Clark said. “You let someone know where you’re going? You arrange back-up?”

Lois stared at her plate, tensing her muscles to keep from squirming. She gathered all her defiance and looked up, ready to launch her self-defence. “I do what I have to do to get the story,” she said in a cold, hard tone.

“I’m sorry,” Clark said, his hand raised in surrender. “It’s none of my business how you get your stories. I didn’t mean to sound as if I thought it was.”

“But it bothered you?”

He took a walnut half, examined it closely, and broke it into quarters. “Yes,” he admitted finally. “It bothered me.”

“Why?”

“Because I care.” He tossed the walnut fragments onto his plate and looked across at her. “I care, Lois,” he affirmed softly. “I care about what happens to you. I want you to be safe. The thought of someone hurting you ...” His eyes dropped. “I just can’t stomach that.”

Right now, he was the person most likely to hurt her. Because she’d allowed him too close. She’d let him affect her. She’d let him lure her to the place where she cared, too. “It’s easier not to care,” Lois said, unsure if she were directing her words to Clark or herself. “And a whole lot safer.”

“Easier,” he echoed. “Emptier. Lonelier. More isolated.”

“But caring always involves risk,” Lois said.

“Of course it does.”

“When you don’t care, you can’t be hurt.”

Clark nodded sadly. “I suppose that if you don’t want anything, you can’t be disappointed.”

“What do you want, Clark?”

Her question echoed around the gazebo. He shuffled a little and released a long breath. “Lois ...”

“Tell me,” she said, leaning forward. “Tell me what it is that you want.”

“I don’t want to scare you away.”

“You asked me for a date within five minutes of meeting me,” Lois reminded him. “Now, we’re having breakfast together.”

The crease between his eyebrows relaxed, making it easy to believe that a smile was imminent. “Yeah,” he said. “But I came horribly close to blowing it.”

“Tell me what you want.”

He brushed at his fingernail with the tip of his thumb. “I want ... one day ...” His eyes levelled in hers. “One day, I hope that you will be able to see what I can see.”

“What do you see?”

His hand fluttered in the space between them. “That us ... that we ... that this could be ... *incredible*.”

She could see that already. She could feel it. The truth of it hadn’t stopped battering her heart and bombarding her brain since the first moment Clark Kent had entered her world and filled it with new awareness. “Clark ...”

“I’m sorry, Lois,” he said. “I’m sorry for everything. I know I shouldn’t have asked you out so quickly. I’m sorry for being so intense. It just ...” He lifted his hand as if in hope it would express sentiments where words were inadequate. “It’s just ...

this *is* intense.”

“So you think I would prefer indifference?”

Her question drew a small smile. “I don’t think it’s possible for me to be indifferent to you, Lois.”

His compliments had a way of burrowing deep into her heart, as if intent on finding a permanent home. “Has this ever happened to you before?” she asked.

“No.” He prodded at a chunk of bread. “You?”

“No!” she said with a gush of emphasis. “No. I didn’t expect this. I didn’t believe this would ever happen to me. I didn’t believe it could happen.”

“I wanted to believe,” he said. He put his barely touched plate on the floor and stared out into the gloom.

Lois copied his action, discarding her plate. She wriggled back against the wooden upright. It was hard and uncomfortable. Clark was sitting on the rug with his long legs crooked awkwardly in front of him. She shivered and vigorously rubbed her arms.

He reached for the soft blanket and offered it to her.

She shook her head. “You must be cold. You keep it.”

“I’m not cold.”

Lois took the blanket. “Come and share it with me,” she said.

Clark froze, shooting her a questioning look.

“Over here,” Lois said, gesturing to the space next to her.

“Share the upright. You can’t be comfortable with no support. And you’ll protect me from the wind coming from that side.”

He scrambled to his feet and settled next to her — close, but carefully distant enough that they didn’t touch. Lois handed him one edge of the blanket and placed the other side over her lap, tucking it under her thigh and using the action as a cover to inch a little closer to Clark.

He tensed as her elbow brushed against his side. She leaned slowly sideways until her shoulder ran into his arm. It felt like warm steel. She waited a few breaths and when he didn’t say anything, she rested her head on the slope of his shoulder. “Do you mind?” she asked.

“No.” His reply was deliciously breathless. “Are ... you feeling warmer now?”

“Yes. Thank you.” After a few more seconds of silence, she added, “You’d be a more comfortable pillow if you relaxed a bit.”

“Oh. Sorry.” His shoulder dropped half an inch.

Smiling, Lois closed her eyes and let the melody of their combined breaths wash over her. After just a few seconds, the ghost of Lois Lane, Metropolis super reporter, rose up, barging through the tranquillity with a torrent of incensed protests.

Spurning her, Lois nestled a little further into Clark’s arm.

It felt so right, being here with Clark. Sharing time and place and something that couldn’t be seen or heard, but had a solid presence whenever they were together.

The ghost slinked away in defeat, and Lois was left with the staggering reality that she was enjoying herself. She liked being with Clark. She loved how he made her feel. And the thought of giving it up ...

“What are we going to do?” Lois asked, cautiously slicing through the silence.

He took a breath before answering. “What do you want to do?”

She wanted unqualified assurance that this could be forever. She wanted proof that this indefinable mass of feelings would be strong enough to withstand the erosion of time. But Clark could no more give her guarantees than she could promise him that her feelings — so wild and effervescent now — wouldn’t crumble to dust. “I don’t want to be vulnerable,” she said. “I don’t want to do something I’m going to regret. I don’t want to believe in something that is impossible.”

“Lois ...” His fingers tapped against his thigh. “I wish I knew what to say. I wish ...”

“Do you wish you knew what to say to make me see what you can see?” she asked, although, a little to her own surprise, there was no hostility in her tone.

“No. Not really. I wish I could find the words to explain how I’m feeling.”

She wished for that, too. “Perhaps there is no explanation.”

Clark turned to her, bracing his elbow against the upright to provide support for her head in place of his shoulder. He cleared his throat. “You’re so very special, Lois,” he said. “I want ... hope ... maybe ... if you felt the same, we might ... one day ... have a future together.”

She lifted her head, facing him straight on. “Is that what you want?”

He flinched. Recovered. Answered. “Yes.”

“When did you realise this?”

He smiled, awkward and endearingly off-centre. “Is it corny to say ‘from the moment I met you’?”

Lois smiled, too. “Yes,” she said. “Very corny.”

“It’s the truth.”

“Clark ... I live in Metropolis. You live in Des Moines.”

“That doesn’t have to be a problem.”

“I hate flying.”

“I love flying.”

“Are you saying you’re willing to come to Metropolis to see me?”

“If you ask me to come, I’ll be there. As often as you want.”

“That’s going to get terribly expensive,” Lois said. “And there are no direct flights. You’re going to waste hours waiting at airports.”

“Coming to see you would never be a waste of time.”

“But the cost, Clark. Doing it once was OK, but regularly, it’s going to be -”

“The cost won’t be a problem, either.”

She searched his face for meaning. “Are your folks wealthy?” she asked bluntly.

“Not especially so.”

“Then how are you going to afford regular flights on a Des Moines Register reporter’s salary?”

“Please, Lois,” he said. “Let’s not worry about that now.”

Lois had always needed to know how things were going to work out. She always planned. Always organised. Always calculated.

She looked through the lenses of his glasses and into those deep brown eyes. She found such warmth there. Warmth that draped around her heart and chased away her fears.

She had become a successful reporter by trusting her instincts. In matters of love, those instincts had failed her repeatedly.

But perhaps she’d never paused long enough to listen to her instincts. Perhaps she’d run headlong into new, and ultimately disastrous, relationships because she’d so desperately wanted to fortify the hope that had been steadily dissolving since she’d been forced to witness the daily decay of her parents’ marriage.

Perhaps Clark was different.

Her instincts were insisting that he was different.

Perhaps she could trust him without having to know all the answers now.

She nodded, just a tiny movement. He responded with a soft smile. “Thank you,” he whispered.

A mere sliver of space separated them. “Have you thought about kissing me?” Lois asked.

“Yes.” His reply came without emphasis. Just simple truth, unadorned.

“Do you want to kiss me?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you kiss me earlier?” she said. “When I brushed the rain off your sweater?”

“I wasn’t sure you wanted me to.”

“You wouldn’t kiss me unless you were sure I wanted it?”

“I hope not.”

“What if you knew I wanted you to kiss me?”

“Do you?”

“Uh huh.”

His eyes closed, his mouth moved forward, and his lips touched hers. His hand followed, curling around her neck as his thumb reached up to her cheek. His kiss deepened, moving with careful thoroughness that searched out her strands of resistance and brought every speck to panting glorious compliance.

Far too soon, he backed away. His eyes opened, looked up, and met hers.

Lois slid down the contours of his sleeve, reaching his hand and grasping it. “Well,” she puffed. “That makes everything so much more complicated.”

“I think it makes everything clearer,” Clark said.

“How so?”

“That was the best kiss of my life, with the most fascinatingly beautiful woman I have ever met,” he said, caressing her with a smile. “What’s complicated about that?”

His certainty washed over her in waves, razing the barriers. “The best kiss of your life?” she questioned.

He nodded.

It had been the best kiss of her life, too. And as much as she wanted to dwell on the memory, mere memories couldn’t compete with Clark ... right there ... available. “Kiss me again,” she murmured.

He came to her, both hands clasping her neck, holding her with infinite tenderness as his mouth imprinted the story of his wonder and fascination.

“Clark! Clark!”

Clark’s frustrated groan rose from somewhere deep in his chest, and he eased away before springing to his feet.

A woman Lois recognised as having been in the group with him last night was running through the rain towards the gazebo. “Clark!” she shouted. “We need your help. Shane’s called off the wedding.”

Part 6

The woman hurtled up the gazebo steps and came to an abrupt stop in front of Clark. “The wedding’s off,” she announced, pushing the hood of her coat from her head and wiping her face with her sleeve. “Shane says he won’t marry Jane.”

Clark pressed a brief touch to her elbow. “It’s probably just wedding nerves, Belinda,” he said. “I hear that happens all the time.”

The woman shook her head vigorously. “No,” she said. “It’s far more than a few nerves. Emma called Shane’s home, and one of his brothers answered. Shane wouldn’t even come to the phone. He has told all his relations to go home and forget that a wedding was ever planned.”

“Where is Jane?” Clark said. “Has she talked with Shane? She must be distraught.”

“She is,” Belinda said. “She’s locked herself in her bedroom and refuses to speak to anyone. But we can hear her sobs through the door, and it sounds as if her heart is breaking.”

Lois took a step closer. “Has Shane said why he doesn’t want to get married?” she asked. “He must have given a reason.”

“All he has said is that Jane is not the person he thought she was,” Belinda replied. “And he is adamant that there will be no wedding.”

“Does Jane know why?” Clark asked. “Has she said anything at all? Has she talked to Shane? Does she want to talk to Shane?”

“It almost seems as if she half expected this,” Belinda said forlornly. “We told her it was probably just nerves, and she burst into tears and said we didn’t understand. When we offered to take

her to Shane's so they could talk, she said it wouldn't make any difference."

"Was there an argument?" Clark asked. "Did something happen at the party last night?"

"I was busy helping clear away the rest of the food," Belinda said.

"But?" Lois prompted.

"Carol said that Anna said that Jane had received news that her father wasn't able to come."

Clark adjusted his glasses. "Maybe it's none of our business," he said.

"If we don't do something, there's going to be no wedding," Belinda said flatly. "Is that what you want?"

"No," Clark said quickly. "But what I want isn't important."

"What *they* want is important," Belinda said, "and I thought they desperately wanted to be married."

"We all thought that," Clark said.

"Until this morning, and suddenly ..." Belinda raised her hands in frustration. "Emma and I thought that if anyone could talk to Shane, it would be you."

"Me?" Clark said, sounding surprised. "What about his brothers? And his parents?"

"They're too close," Belinda said. "And they haven't been able to do anything so far. They hardly know Jane. You know both of them. They respect you. We think you are the best person to find out if this can be made right."

"Of course it can be made right," Clark said. "They are perfect together. Last night ... They just seemed so happy."

"That was last night," Belinda said. "This morning, Shane won't budge and Jane seems to have lost all hope."

Clark swept his hand through his hair. "I don't understand. I thought -"

"Which is why you need to talk to Shane," Belinda cast a glance over the food dotted across the rug. "I'm sorry to interrupt," she said, giving Lois a rueful smile. "I know you're busy, Clark, but we've been trying to talk to Jane for over two hours. And Shane won't say anything to his brothers except that there will be no wedding. We didn't know what else to do."

"How did you know Clark would be here?" Lois asked.

"Well, that wasn't hard," Belinda said with a small shrug. "We all saw what happened last night. When Clark wasn't answering his phone this morning, it seemed likely he was out with you. None of the good cafés are open yet, so the obvious place was the park. And it's raining; hence the gazebo."

"Oh," Lois said, wondering exactly what they concluded had happened last night. "OK."

"Will you come?" Belinda said, addressing her question to Clark.

"I'm not sure what I can do," he said doubtfully.

"Shane might talk to you," Belinda said. "Please try, Clark. You're the one person who knows them equally. They both like you a lot. If we can find out why Shane has cancelled the wedding, perhaps we can try to do something to help."

Clark looked at Lois, his expression twisted with indecision.

"I think you should go," she said. "If there's a chance of helping them, you should go and try."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Clark nodded and turned to Belinda. "You go back to Jane," he said. "I'll drive over to Shane's house and see if he'll speak to me."

Belinda's smile stretched to include Lois. "Thank you," she said. "We have to try something. I really don't know what could have happened. They seemed so much in love."

"They *are* in love," Clark said firmly.

"I'll wait at Jane's," Belinda called as she ran down the steps and towards her car. "You know her number."

Clark turned to Lois. "I'm so sorry, Lois," he said with a helpless wave towards the remains of their picnic.

They stared down at the food as disappointment skulked around them like a dark cloud of dashed hopes.

"It can't be helped," Lois said briskly, crouching low and reaching for the nearest container. She fixed its lid in place, startled to discover that an unyielding wad of emotion had pushed up into her throat.

She swallowed roughly, admonishing herself for being silly.

Shane and Jane would be all right. A solution would be found. The wedding would probably go ahead, and this story would be told to their children as a tiny — even humorous — glitch in an otherwise perfect day.

But, if Lois were honest, the sudden knot of sentiment wasn't just about the broken dreams of the bride and groom.

Belinda's arrival had shattered an exquisite moment with Clark, cooling the atmosphere of closeness so completely that they were now hastily clearing away the evidence of their date in silence.

The moment had been lost ... but it wasn't irretrievable.

It could be restored.

If Clark wanted it.

If she wanted it.

Did she? The possibility of never again kissing Clark Kent was far more devastating than the prospect of them returning to the wondrous moment when his mouth had caressed hers with such lavish attention.

Lois stole a glance into his face. It was set ... a little closed ... as if he, too, was using the need to pack away as a shield for his disappointment.

I counted down the hours to seven thirty.

He'd sacrificed a few hours of sleep to plan their date in minute detail. He'd arrived at her hotel an hour early.

And just when everything had been going perfectly ...

Lois cleared her throat and smothered her uncertainties with a dose of common sense. If this thing between them could be side-tracked by a single interruption, it wasn't worth pursuing.

But why had Clark gone so quiet?

Was he reconsidering?

Did he regret kissing her?

Was he backing away?

That thought hurt like a spike to the core of her heart.

Only one container remained. Lois reached for it, and her fingers smacked into Clark's wrist.

"Sorry," he said, their hands hovering like two bees assessing the same flower.

Lois snatched at the remaining container and threw it into the basket. As she straightened from her crouched position, she tried to muster a pretend-nothing-happened smile.

He slowly stood. "I'm so sorry, Lois," he said. "I can't believe I let Belinda talk me into abandoning our date."

"But if the wedding never happens, wouldn't you always worry that you could have done something?"

"That's better than worrying that I've blown my only chance with you."

His apprehension glimmered from behind his glasses, curling around her heart and melting more of its crusty edges. "You haven't blown anything," she said.

He lifted his hand, ran it through his hair and left it perched at the back of his neck. "Lois ..." She'd meant her words to be reassuring, but it was clear they hadn't had the intended effect.

"What's wrong, Clark?" Lois asked. "Everything was going well. Nothing's changed. Maybe it's changed for Jane and Shane, but that doesn't have to affect us."

Clark stared at his feet. "Right now, I would give anything to go back to the moment before Belinda arrived, but ..."

"But?"

His hand dropped listlessly to his side. “But as much as I enjoyed kissing you ...”

He wanted more. She gulped, not sure how she felt about going beyond kissing. She scrutinized his face. Found comprehension there. Breathed again. “It’s not enough, is it?” she said. “Not for you?”

Clark shook his head. “I was trying to ... I hoped ... but the first thing comes along, and I ...” He grimaced. “I really wanted you to know how important this is to me.”

“You think I didn’t get that?” Lois exclaimed sharply. “You think I haven’t realized how much this means to you?”

He shrank back half a step. “I’m sorry, Lois,” he said. “You made your feelings perfectly clear right at the beginning, and -” “I did?”

“You said you don’t believe in love. You don’t date. I am trying to respect that, but then I look at you and ...”

“And?”

His gaze came steadily, potent with meaning. “And I can’t help wishing -”

“You said you wanted me to see what you can see,” Lois said. “I can see it. I can. Every moment I spend with you makes it more difficult to avoid, but -”

“But nothing ... none of this ... changes that it’s not what you want.”

His statement — so cold and final — shocked her into silence. He stood there, watching her, his shoulders rigidly straight, his expression cloaked in despair.

“Is that why you told me to go to and speak with Shane?”

Clark asked. “So our date can be over with?”

“No!” Lois shuddered through a long breath, calming her rampaging heart. “No. If I didn’t want to be with you, I would just say so.”

“You did.”

His words felt like a slap to Lois’s face. She recovered, hastily dragged something coherent from the chaos churning through her mind, and said, “I thought I didn’t want this. Actually, that’s not completely true. I had given up on what I really wanted because I no longer believed it was possible.”

“If there’s no hope — I know you already tried to tell me that, but you came with me this morning and you said you wanted me to kiss you — but if there’s no hope of anything long-term, I’d ...” He swallowed roughly. “I’d really appreciate it if you’d tell me now, straight out.”

Lois had said she was afraid of being vulnerable, but she’d rarely felt as vulnerable as Clark looked now. It was as if he’d placed his heart in her hands and ceded all control of it to her. “I’m confused, and I’m scared,” she said.

“Lois, I can’t promise that I won’t do something stupid,” Clark said. “But I can promise that your happiness will always be important to me.”

His words drifted over her, loosening tightly bound shackles. She rummaged through the commotion of her heart, looking for jewels of truth. “I can’t make any sense out of what I’m feeling, but ...” She moved closer to him. “But I’m drawn to you, Clark, and I can’t imagine getting on a plane tomorrow and going back to Metropolis and forgetting you.”

His smile came tentatively, flickering like a flame infused with unexpected hope. He waited, saying nothing, allowing her to direct the way forward.

Lois reached for her bag and took out her notepad and pen. She quickly jotted down her address and phone number. She ripped the page from the pad and held it out to Clark. “Call me,” she said. “When I get back to Metropolis, call me.”

He took the paper. “That will be OK?”

“Will you call me?” she asked, hardening her tone so he knew she was serious. “Or am I going to sit by the phone waiting because your attention has moved on to something else?”

“What time does your plane land in Metropolis tomorrow?”

“Ten past seven.”

“I’ll call before eight o’clock,” he promised.

“Des Moines time?” she asked.

He grinned at that. “Metropolis time.” He carefully placed the paper in his billfold and took the pen and pad from her. “Here are my details. You can call me anytime.”

“Thanks,” Lois said, replacing the notepad in her bag when he’d finished writing.

Clark looked through the rain to the car. “Would you like me to take you back to your hotel?” he offered.

“Would you mind if I came with you to Shane’s?” Lois asked.

“Of course you can come,” he said, looking surprised. “If you want to.”

“It will save time. We can go from Shane’s to the place with sensational coffee. Or we can continue our picnic. There’s plenty of food left.”

Clark’s smile burst forth, warming her from the inside out. “Perhaps it’s just a simple misunderstanding with Shane and Jane,” he said. “Perhaps it won’t take long. Perhaps there will be plenty of time for lunch before we need to get ready for the wedding.”

“Is that what you really believe?” Lois asked. “That the wedding can be saved?”

Clark’s spurt of optimism drained away. “I ...” He shrugged. “I don’t know what to think.”

I would gladly risk it all for a woman I loved.

From a remote corner of Lois’s heart came the urge to beg him not to give up. To plead with him to stand firm. To be strong ... for her ... for them ... for Jane and Shane, too. “Clark ...” She shuffled forwards.

And stepped right into his embrace.

She snuggled into the soft sweater as his arms enclosed her.

It felt like ... *He felt like ...*

Home.

He felt like home.

He felt like the place she had sought and never found in work or stories or busyness or success or bad relationships with unworthy men.

He felt like the answer to every lonely cry from her heart.

He felt like he was hers.

Now. In this moment.

And for a whole lifetime of moments in the future.

Lois regretted every one of her former relationships. Every single one festered like a lesion on her scarred and hardened heart. But, as she stood enfolded in Clark Kent’s arms, the realisation came that if she turned her back on this chance — *this man* — her regret at her lack of courage would far, far outweigh her mass of regrets at her past lack of discernment.

Not trusting Clark would be far worse than trusting all those other men had been.

He was different.

His head came down, and she felt the touch of a kiss to her hair.

It’s not enough, is it? Not for you?

A short fling would never be enough for Clark. He understood there were no guarantees, but he hadn’t allowed the potential for heartache to deter his dreams.

She sighed.

“You OK?” Clark asked.

OK? She was a lot better than OK. She was enveloped in the strong and gentle arms of Clark Kent. “Uh huh.”

“I wish we had time to dance,” he said.

“There’s no music.”

“I don’t need music to dance with you.”

His foot slid sideways. She followed.

And they danced to the melody floating up from a heart no

longer comatose.

The tide of questions lapped against the shores of Clark's mind, but he diligently ignored them, determined to let nothing diminish these moments with Lois.

Holding her in his arms, breathing in the flowery scent of her hair, listening to the patter of raindrops on the gazebo roof — it surpassed every one of his dreams.

It's not enough, is it? Not for you?

He'd guarded that truth for fear of upsetting her, but she'd perceived it anyway.

And she hadn't run away.

He'd offered her a way out, knowing he would forever count it as the worst moment of his life if she'd taken it.

But she hadn't.

She was dancing with him.

Close. Nestled against his body. She felt relaxed in his arms. As if she wanted to be there.

He wanted nothing more than to dance with her for hours, but his sense of responsibility was tugging on his conscience with ever-growing persistence, reminding him of his promise to Belinda.

Clark's feet stopped. "I suppose we should ..."

Lois inched away from his chest. "What do you think Belinda meant when she said they'd all seen what happened last night?" she said.

"I don't think they assumed we spent the night together," Clark said quickly. "I deliberately went back to the party so everyone knew that I hadn't stayed with you."

"Belinda was sure you'd be with me this morning."

Clark chuckled, trying to hide his consternation at where Lois's questions might be heading. "Lucky guess," he said lightly.

Lois' fleeting smile soothed Clark's qualms. "It was more than a guess," she said. "What did she see to make her so sure we'd be together?"

He should have learned by now that evading Lois's questions wasn't easy. "Maybe she saw a man helplessly captivated by a beautiful stranger," he said.

Lois's smile expanded. Her hand slid from his shoulder to his chest and stayed there. "You are an amazing man, Clark Kent," she said. "No one has ever touched me the way you do. You make me want to believe again."

"Are you still scared?"

She nodded. "But I'm more scared of running away than I am of staying."

"I am more scared of hurting you than you are," he said. "Please believe me."

"I do," she said with a smile and a touch to his face.

His thoughts turned to kissing her again, but she backed away, her attention moving to the remnants of their picnic.

He loved her. He'd loved her from the first, and he could feel that love permeating his heart, layer after layer, advancing and taking every part captive for the cause of loving Lois.

Of winning her love in return.

And of nurturing and protecting that love every day of his life.

Part 7

Clark picked up the basket and thick rug. "I'll get this stuff into the car," he said. "You want to wait here where it's dry?"

Lois nodded, stepping sideways a few inches so she would have an uninterrupted view as he ran through the rain.

She shivered, and bent low to pick up the soft blanket, wrapping it around her shoulders. As Clark reached the car, she diverted her gaze for a few seconds to retrieve the two half-full cups of coffee. He turned and ran towards her, sending a skitter of sensation through her heart. As he leapt up the steps, Lois's gaze

became snagged on the fresh raindrops clinging to his sweater. When she dragged her eyes up, she discovered he was smiling at her.

"Want to brush them away?" he asked in a voice that came more thickly than his smile had foreshadowed.

Yes, she did. But if she touched him again, they might never fulfil their promise to talk to Shane. "You have a wedding to rescue," she reminded him.

With a good-natured grin, he reached over to take his coffee from her.

She jolted her hand away and smacked a kiss right on his unsuspecting mouth.

Playful. Short. Startlingly good.

His grin made her want to laugh out loud. "What was that for?" he asked

"Ah ... " Why *had* she kissed him like that? Without any thought to the consequences or how he would perceive her actions? "Did you like it?"

"Oh, yes."

His reply was thick with emphasis. Not knowing what else to say, Lois mumbled, "I liked breakfast."

His eyebrow dipped, feigning disbelief. "It was cold, it rained ..."

"And we were interrupted at a most inconvenient moment," Lois said, releasing a little spurt of laughter at the memory. "But for all that, I had the best time."

His eyes were trained on her mouth. "Belinda's timing was terrible," he murmured.

"Yeah," she breathed.

His hand slid across her cheek and dipped to curl around her neck, exerting gentle pressure. His eyes closed. His mouth settled slowly on hers.

His kiss was a tenderly issued invitation. To move forward. With him.

The shadows lurked, full of all the things she had come to fear most.

But Clark was kissing her. And she could feel his strength. His fearlessness. His vision for their future.

She wanted to go with him.

She could no longer deny the truth.

Sometime during breakfast under a rustic gazebo in a rain-sodden park in Des Moines, Iowa, she had released the safety rail and was already hurtling down the steep slope towards love.

She drew away, reeling at the truth.

"You OK?" he asked.

"Yeah. I ... " She smiled. "I was just enjoying that a little too much."

"Oh." His cheeks deepened a little in colour. "I'm sorry. I -"

"I need you to answer one question."

"OK."

"Do you like living in Des Moines?"

"Yes," he said. "But if you asked me to move to Metropolis, I would do so without a moment's hesitation."

He meant it. His belief in their future was so unshakeable that he would willingly give up his job and leave his home and friends to be with her. Lois glanced out of the gazebo. "I don't think I could live in Des Moines."

"I'm not asking you to."

She swung back to him. "What if you hate Metropolis? What if you can't get a job with a paper? You'd be further away from your parents. How are they going to feel about that?"

"My parents want me to be happy," he said. "And I can't imagine hating anywhere -"

"It's big. It's fast. It's impersonal. It's unjust. It's crowded. It's lonely. It's -"

"*We* would not be lonely. And maybe, together, we can change some of the other things."

“Clark ...” She stopped, torn. She *wanted* to believe. She wanted so desperately to believe that being with Clark would be different. That Clark would be different. That the future he believed in could be their reality.

His hand rose, and the back of his fingers skated across her cheek, coming to rest under the tip of her chin. “No one’s going to force you to do anything, Lois,” he said. “I promise.” He took his coffee from her and picked up his coat. “Ready to brave the Iowan rain?”

She nodded. He smiled. And the shadows dissolved in the brilliance of his optimism.

Lois skipped down the steps and across the wet and shiny grass to the car. Clark overtook her in the last few strides, just in time to have her door open the moment she arrived. “Thanks,” she said, pulling the blanket from her shoulders and throwing it into the back seat.

Clark slid into the driver’s seat and shut out the drenched world. His sweater was stippled with drops again. Lois’s fingers itched to brush them away, to slide over the contours hidden under the soft woollen material.

“I don’t know how long this is going to take,” Clark said. “Are you sure you don’t want me to drive you to the hotel first? I could come and get you as soon as I’m done.”

“Is the hotel on the way?” she asked

“Not exactly.”

She smiled inside, but tried to keep her face straight. “Meaning?”

A tiny grin poked through Clark’s earnestness. “Meaning it’s in the opposite direction.”

“Then I’d like to stay with you,” Lois said.

His hand slid down her arm to take her hand in his warm and gentle grip. “I’d like that, too,” he said, deep in tone and extravagant with meaning.

One man. One very extraordinary man. A few short hours. An on-again-off-again date with a stuttered start. A curtailed picnic under leaking rain clouds.

And she had succumbed.

Not to Clark. But to her own heart.

A heart that beat with new vitality. Buoyant confidence. Fresh hope.

And joy that bubbled over, making everything beautiful.

Should she tell him? That she was on the verge of falling in love with him?

She couldn’t.

It was too soon.

And they had promised to talk to Shane.

“We should go,” Lois said. “Imagine if Belinda caught us kissing? *Again?*”

Clark sighed overdramatically, his eyes glistening with fun. He released her hand, slowly and sensually sliding his fingers over hers. After a final lingering look, he turned the key in the ignition.

“Have you thought about what you’re going to say to Shane?” Lois asked as they drove out of the park.

“Not really,” Clark said. “Other than asking him why he changed his mind.”

“How well do you know him? Do you think he’s likely to confide in you?”

“I wouldn’t say we’re close friends,” Clark said. “We’ve covered a few stories together. He’s a nice guy — always cheerful, not much rattles him. That’s what makes his decision this morning so hard to understand.”

“Did you notice anything? Before today? Has Shane ever said anything that made you think this might happen?”

“No,” Clark said. “Not at all. I thought he’d wanted to marry Jane since the first week he arrived in Des Moines. She wanted to wait and give them time to be sure.”

“I’m sorry this happened,” Lois said, surprised to realise it was true. “Jane must be feeling awful.”

Clark shot her a smile. “Thanks for not saying, ‘I told you so.’”

Before Lois had met Clark Kent, there was every chance she would have said exactly that, embellished with a sneer for good measure.

But today was a new day, and Lois could barely keep her eyes off Clark. Everything about him fascinated her. Thrilled her. Reassured her. Filled her.

And when he had kissed her ...

“Lois?”

“Uhhh?”

“If the wedding goes ahead, would you like to go with me?”

Lois suppressed her automatic acceptance, hoping to avoid gushing too obviously. “Yes,” she said evenly. “I’d like to go to the wedding with you.”

Clark beamed. “Great.”

“And if the wedding doesn’t happen,” Lois said, “well, my flight doesn’t leave until tomorrow morning.”

“Would you like to do something with me? A meal? A movie, perhaps?”

“Yes. I would.”

“I know a great restaurant,” he said eagerly. “The food is amazing.”

“I’d like that,” she said, although however amazing the food, she doubted she would carry much memory of it back to Metropolis.

But her memories of this weekend ... of Clark ... meeting him, discovering, layer by layer, the sort of man he was ... learning the nuances embedded in that smile ... dancing with him ... kissing him ...

Those memories would live with her forever.

“Jane must be feeling terrible,” Lois said. “She looked so happy last night.”

“I wonder what Shane said to convince her there was no hope,” Clark said. “Jane usually isn’t easily persuaded when it’s something she really cares about.”

“Do you still think it’s for the best that they marry?” Lois asked.

Clark tapped a few times on the steering wheel before replying. “I want to say ‘yes,’” he said. “But I guess that if they’ve got doubts, they should wait.”

It didn’t sound like doubts to Lois. It sounded as if Shane was sure that he no longer wanted to marry Jane and he wasn’t interested in anyone changing his mind.

How could that happen so quickly? How could the celebrations of last night turn to the heartache of today?

Her well-drilled cynicism wanted to provide a few choice replies, but Lois hushed them. Something had happened. And although she would never write the story, the reporter in Lois really wanted to know the answers.

It had to be something significant. Two people who loved each other didn’t ditch their wedding over something minor.

Did they?

Maybe unrest had been brewing for weeks. Maybe Shane had been harbouring doubts. Maybe they’d had a huge argument last night. Maybe -

Clark pulled up outside a modest house with a plain and neat garden. “Coming in?” he asked.

“Would that be all right?”

“Of course,” Clark said. “It’s going to get pretty cold in the car without the engine running.” He grasped the door handle. “Wait there. I’ll get your door.”

“You’ll get wet.”

“I don’t mind getting wet. In fact, as of this morning, I quite enjoy it.”

“Why?”

His smile evolved into soft laughter. “Can’t you work it out?”

Lois answered him with a smile that she hoped conveyed she knew exactly why he liked raindrops on his sweater.

“Wait here?” he said. “Please?”

“Why is it so important that you open my door for me?”

“Because I was raised to believe that if a man has the privilege of a woman’s company, he should look out for her.”

“I can open my own door,” she said mildly.

“I know,” he said. “But I like doing it for you.”

“OK,” she said, her grin breaking through her words. “You open the door for me; I’ll brush the rain from your sweater.”

“Deal.”

After he’d come to her door and offered her his hand, they ran through the garden to the front porch. Clark didn’t knock. He waited, a half-smile loitering on that very kissable mouth.

Lois giggled and raised her hand, using the tips of her fingers to brush away the lamentably few raindrops.

“Thanks,” Clark said when she’d finished.

“You’re welcome.”

They shared a smile, and then Clark rapped on the door.

Half a minute later, one of Shane’s brothers opened the door.

“Hi,” he said. “You must be Clark. I’m Andrew.”

“Hi, Andrew,” Clark said, shaking his hand. “This is Lois Lane.”

“Pleased to meet you, Lois,” Andrew said with a nod to her.

“Come in. Belinda called to say you were coming.”

“I’m not sure what we can do,” Clark said as they walked down a small hallway and into a room where several men were clustered around the open fire.

“Shane won’t say anything except -”

Shane — his face unshaven and his springy hair wild — stormed into the room, holding a half-empty beer bottle in his hand. “I can speak for myself, Andrew,” he snarled.

“Well, speak then,” Andrew said, unmoved by his brother’s display of anger. He took the bottle from Shane’s hand and placed it on the coffee table. “Sit down and talk. Tell us why a man who has been so excited for months about getting married suddenly doesn’t want the wedding to happen.”

Shane slumped into the nearest chair and sank his face into his hands.

“Shane?” Clark said, stepping closer to him. “Are you all right?”

Shane dragged his hands down his face, distorting his features. “No,” he said. “I feel worse than I ever have before.”

“Why?” Clark said.

“Because I know the truth.”

“The truth?”

“The truth about Jane.”

“You love Jane,” Clark said. “Whatever ‘truth’ you found out, surely it isn’t enough to stop you loving her.”

Shane collapsed back against the chair. “She didn’t trust me,” he said woefully. “All this time ... she didn’t trust me.”

“I’m sure she trusts you,” Clark said.

“No,” Shane corrected. “She didn’t trust me. She wasn’t even going to tell me. We were supposed to be getting married today and she wasn’t going to tell me.”

“Tell you what?”

“The truth.”

“The truth about what?”

“The truth about who she is.” Shane fired an angry look at Clark. “Do you know her name isn’t even ‘Jane’?” he demanded. “Her real name is Margaret.” He flinched as he said the name, as if it caused him pain.

“It’s not a crime to prefer a different name than the one your parents gave you,” Clark said gently.

“She is Margaret Johnston,” Shane said, his lip curling with

disgust. “But she wasn’t going to tell me.”

“Does her name really matter?” Clark asked. “Doesn’t it matter more that -”

Shane lurched from his seat. “Margaret Johnston,” he said as he paced away. He spun around before reaching the window.

“Margaret Johnston. Surely you know that name?”

Clark glanced to the other men, who all looked blank.

“I know who Margaret Johnston is,” Lois said quietly.

Shane advanced on her. Clark shuffled closer to her. “Then you must understand why I can’t marry her,” Shane said, stopping only a few inches from Lois’s face.

“I understand why she would change her name,” Lois said.

“It’s not that she changed her name!” Shane bellowed. “It’s that she didn’t tell me. She was going to marry me without telling me. She let me think her family would be coming to the wedding. She let me think they were a normal family. She didn’t trust me enough to tell me the truth.”

“What happened wasn’t Margaret’s fault,” Lois said.

“Exactly!” Shane shouted. “It wasn’t her fault. And if she’d been open and told me the truth, I would have understood. But she didn’t! She didn’t tell me. She didn’t trust me.” He leaned into the wall, his arms high, his head buried in them.

Clark looked across to Lois. “Who’s Margaret Johnston?” he asked quietly.

“She was the little girl in a Metropolis crime family,” Lois replied. “It was huge news in the seventies. I studied the case in high school.”

“What happened?” Andrew asked.

“The Johnston family specialty was bank robberies,” Lois said. “The father and two almost-grown sons would enter a bank. They would draw their guns and demand money from the teller. Once they had the money, they would shoot at the little girl standing in the queue with her mother. The girl would drop, everyone was either too shocked to move or went to aid the little girl. The men made a getaway. A few minutes later, the girl miraculously recovered, mom picked her up, and they left, too.”

“They shot at their little girl?” Clark asked in horror.

“They shot in her direction. She fell as if she’d been hit.”

“Were they caught?” Andrew asked.

“Not the first two times,” Lois said. “But the third time, something went wrong, and Margaret was hit in the shoulder by a bullet. A young man charged at the father and was shot and killed by one of the sons. The mother took Margaret away, but a couple of days later, the little girl was left outside a hospital. The wound had become infected. When she was well enough to talk with police, the things she told them enabled them to locate the family. They were tried, convicted, and jailed. The papers reported that Margaret had survived the wound, but never said what had happened to her. It was believed she went to a foster family.”

“She did,” Shane said scathingly from his position against the wall. “She became Jane Jones — new name, new life, new -”

“What is wrong with that?” Lois snapped. “Margaret Johnston was only five years old when her family used her as a diversion in three bank robberies. She was innocent, and she -”

Shane spun away from the wall. “Yes,” he exploded. “She was innocent. So why didn’t she just tell me the truth? Why didn’t she tell me that her family is in prison? Why did she let me think that they would be coming to the wedding? Why did she let me think everything was normal? Why did she lie to me?”

“She said her family would be here?” Clark asked. “She told you that?”

“No,” Shane said sourly. “I assumed her family would be coming to her wedding. That’s reasonable, isn’t it? She didn’t correct me. Didn’t say a word. Just kept quiet and hoped that by the time I realised the truth, it would be too late.”

“Perhaps she was scared,” Clark said.

“Scared of what?” Shane spat.

“Scared of how you’d react,” Clark said. “Scared that if you knew the truth, you’d feel differently about her. Scared that telling you the truth would change everything.”

“Telling me the truth would have proved that she trusted me,” Shane said bitterly.

“When?” Clark said. “When should she have told you?”

Shane looked up, his mouth opened but no words came. “Definitely before the wedding,” he said eventually. “We were supposed to be getting married today, and yet there was a whole part of her life she was hiding from me.”

Clark stepped closer to Shane. “I agree that she should have told you before the wedding,” he said, “but it’s probably not something she has told anyone before.”

“I didn’t know,” Lois said. “I don’t think anyone in college knew that Jane was Margaret Johnston.”

“See?” Clark said. “It isn’t something Jane wanted to be public knowledge. And for good reason. She couldn’t help being born into that family. She feared people would judge her if they knew the truth. She wanted to be free to live just like everyone else.”

“OK,” Shane said. “I get her not wanting it to be public knowledge, but I was going to be her husband. What if one of them escaped? Apparently, they’ve made threats against her because she talked to the police. What if they found new evidence about something and came to our home? What was I supposed to say? That I had no idea I was married to Margaret Johnston? That my wife didn’t trust me enough to tell me the truth?”

“Jane probably wanted to tell you,” Clark said. “She probably agonised over finding the right moment. She couldn’t tell you before she was sure that your relationship was going to be more than just friends. But when she realised she was in love with you, she really, really didn’t want to risk damaging that.”

“We were engaged ten months ago,” Shane said. “She had ten months to tell me.”

“She probably planned to tell you a thousand times,” Clark said. “She probably rehearsed the words over and over and imagined every possible scenario for what happens after she’s said things that can never be recalled. And the longer she left it, the bigger it got, and the more anxious she became about losing the most precious thing in her life.”

“I don’t feel differently because she was Margaret Johnston,” Shame said tightly. “I feel differently because she didn’t trust me. Because she kept a whole part of her life a secret from me.”

“And if she’d told you a month ago, would you have reacted like this?” Clark asked. “Would you have called off the wedding then?”

Shane dragged his hand through his hair, making it stand to attention. “I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t know what I would have done.”

“Then how can you expect Jane to know?” Clark said. “How can you expect her to have faith in your feelings for her when you can’t say what you would have done? How can you expect her to have known exactly the moment to tell you that wasn’t too early but was early enough that you didn’t deem her silence to be a lack of trust in you?”

Shane slowly shook his head. “I don’t know,” he said. “I just know that it feels as if everything we shared was pretence. As if I never really knew her.”

“You knew her,” Clark said. “You knew the real Jane.”

“She let me think she came from a normal family,” Shane said.

“She was scared that telling you the truth would change things,” Clark said. “She valued your love so much, she couldn’t risk losing you.”

“She could have told me.”

“You know now.”

“Only because I finally refused to be put off by her diversion tactics. Last night, we were talking about the wedding and I asked what time her father would be getting in this morning. She said he wasn’t able to come. I told her how disappointed I was for her and asked what had happened to prevent him coming. She said she wasn’t that close to her father. This was news to me, so I asked more . . . about her mother.” He glared at Lois. “Did you know that her mother was killed by a fellow prisoner about five years ago?”

“No,” Lois said. “I didn’t know that.”

“I thought her mother was alive. I thought her parents were coming to the wedding.” Shane lurched for the bottle and took a long swig. “I told her that a marriage involves trust and if she was serious about marrying me, she needed to tell me the whole story.”

“Did she?” Clark asked.

“Yes.”

“What did you do?”

“I took her home. I came back here. I started to think about all the times she’d lied to me — not with words exactly, but by not correcting my assumptions. By letting me think things were one way when they were very different. And then I realised that I couldn’t marry someone who didn’t trust me.”

“She trusted you,” Clark insisted. “She told you something she has probably never told anyone before in her life.”

“It was too late,” Shane bellowed. “Much, much too late.”

Clark stepped back, his face ashen.

“Are you willing to talk to Jane?” Andrew asked. “See if you can work this out?”

“There’s nothing more to say.”

“I thought you were in love with her,” Lois said. “I thought love was supposed to be more resilient than this.”

“I deserved to know a long time before now,” Shane said. “I can’t help how I feel.”

“What are you feeling?” Lois asked.

“Betrayed. Left out. Confused. Alone.”

“There’s one person who would understand that perfectly,” Clark said, “but you’ve shut her out.”

Shane looked up, surprise filtering through his resentment.

“I’m sure Jane feels betrayed by her family,” Clark said. “I’m sure she felt left out in the foster homes. I’m sure she loved the idea of finally being a part of a family again. I’m sure she was overjoyed to find someone who loved her for who she is.”

“I didn’t know who she is.”

“Maybe she hoped your love was strong enough that the other stuff didn’t matter.”

“It matters,” Shane grated. “She should have told me.”

“She probably realises that now,” Clark said. “She probably knows she made a mistake. But I think you need to accept that she never meant to hurt you. She has probably spent hours trying to plan the right way to tell you — the right moment, the right words, the right amount of detail.”

Shane shrugged. “I can’t even get a handle on my own feelings,” he said. “I know Jane is upset, but what am I supposed to do? Turn up to the wedding and make vows to a woman who feels like a stranger to me?”

“No,” Clark said. “But this . . .” He gestured towards the bottle in Shane’s hand. “. . . this isn’t helping.”

“I’m not going to speak to her while I’m so angry,” he said.

“What are you going to do?” Andrew asked.

“I’m going to bed,” his brother replied. “Maybe this will make more sense when I wake up.”

“What about the wedding?” Andrew said.

“I’ve already told you,” Shane replied. “There will be no wedding.” He marched from the room, taking the bottle with him.

“He means it, doesn’t he?” Andrew said sadly.

“Yeah,” Clark said. “He does.”

Andrew walked Clark and Lois to the front door. “Thanks for coming,” he said. “At least you managed to get some answers.”

“I don’t think I helped much,” Clark said. “People are going to want to know why there will be no wedding. Jane’s secret is going to be all over town.”

“I’ll talk to my brothers,” Andrew said. “We’ll work out something.”

“Thanks,” Clark said. “I’m sure Jane will appreciate that.”

Clark took Lois’s hand, and they ran through the rain to the car.

He opened her door and then hurried to the driver’s side. As he shut his door, Lois turned to him.

“OK, Clark,” she said. “What is the big secret that you’re hiding?”

Part 8

Lois’s question had been part joke, part affable curiosity, but Clark’s smile had vanished. His expression had sealed to a deadpan mask, his complexion had reddened, and his eyes were fixed at some point behind her.

“What do you mean?” he asked with gruffly laboured nonchalance.

Her interest flared, augmented by sudden flashes of panic. “In there,” she said, pointing toward the house. “You seemed to know exactly how Jane would have felt. You understood her dilemma immediately. You argued her case with vehement conviction. Either you know her a whole lot better than anyone realises or there is some other reason why you identify with her so closely.”

“What happened to her is terrible,” Clark said. “I can’t imagine any parents being so heartless to do that to their daughter.”

“It wasn’t the little girl you were defending,” Lois said. “It was the grown woman.”

“I didn’t know Margaret. I know Jane. She’s a friend; a colleague.”

The familiar waft of suspicion crept through Lois’s mind like pungent smoke. “What are you trying to hide?”

Clark took a breath and his mouth opened, but no words came. His hand moved slightly, and the clink of his keys reverberated loudly through the silence.

“There is something, isn’t there?” Lois insisted. “Something you don’t want to tell me?”

His nod was terse. And he still hadn’t looked at her.

“Why can’t you just tell me the truth?”

He shuffled in his seat. “I’m not sure there will ever be a right time,” he said. “But I’m sure this isn’t it.”

“Why?”

“It’s too soon.”

“You asked me out after five minutes.”

He lifted his head, moving in agonisingly slow motion until his clouded brown eyes settled in hers. “You’ve known me less than twenty-four hours, Lois. How can I ... I didn’t plan ... I wasn’t expecting this.”

“Are you married?”

“No.” His denial, steadfastly stated, brought no obvious reprieve to his distress.

“Wanted by the police?”

“No.”

“You had an affair with Jane?”

“No!”

“Then what, Clark?”

He blinked a couple of times and said, “Jane waited too long. I get that. But this isn’t right either.”

“It’s right if you want to continue seeing me.” Her words carried the sting of threat, which hadn’t been her intention. Lois consciously softened her tone. “We’ve come too far to pretend it’s nothing, Clark. You’ve admitted you’re hiding something. How can I trust you when I know there’s a bombshell coming?

Do you really think I’m not going to obsess over something so big you’re willing to risk driving me away?”

“It’s too soon,” he muttered. “You hardly know me.”

“I know you’re a kind and decent man,” she said. “I know that honesty is important to you. I know you’re willing to be open, even if it makes you vulnerable. I know you have decided you want to be with me. I know -”

“I haven’t decided anything,” he said miserably. “I promised you I would never force you into anything.”

“You decided what you wanted.”

“Yes,” he admitted bleakly. “Yes. I did.”

“Even though you knew this would come up? That this ‘big secret’ would eventually be revealed?”

“I knew that if we continued seeing each other I would have to tell you.”

“Really? It sounds as if you were hoping to avoid divulging the truth for as long as possible.”

“I would want you to know,” he said. “But actually saying the words ...”

Lois took a breath and tried to squeeze a few drops of appeasement into her voice. “Just tell me, Clark. If we’re going to be together, let’s get this done now. Let’s not be like Jane and Shane and have it erupt at the worst possible moment.”

“I’m not sure there could be a moment worse than this one,” Clark said. “I can’t ... I just can’t see any way forward after this.”

His despair stirred her heart, and Lois placed her hand on his. “How bad can it be, Clark?”

“That depends on how you react.”

“Have you done something you’re ashamed of?”

“No.”

She forced a rickety laugh. “It’s probably not as big as you’re thinking. Once you’ve told me, we’ll probably both wonder what all the fuss was about.”

“I really can’t see that happening.”

The certainty of his statement shivered down her back, pouring dread through her heart. “Just tell me,” Lois pleaded. “Because as big as it might be, it can’t be as bad as some of the things I’m imagining.”

He pushed the keys into the ignition. He stared out of the window for a long moment, his face turned away from her. “I wasn’t born here.”

“I know that,” she said. “You told me you’re from Kansas.”

“I wasn’t born there either.”

Lois stared at Clark, trying to glean understanding from the taut outline of his profile. “Are you trying to tell me you’re not American?” Another thought dawned on her. “You said you’re adopted. Are you saying that your adoption wasn’t legal? That your adoptive parents brought you here without permission?”

“They didn’t bring me here. They found me.”

He’d been abandoned by his birth parents. Lois squeezed his hand. “Aw, Clark,” she said. “I can see how that would cause you a lot of pain, but it doesn’t have to change anything for us.”

His hand clenched to a hard fist. “Even if they found me in a spaceship?”

“A spaceship?” she echoed.

He turned to her then, his eyes blazing with an acid mix of pain and trepidation. “When I said I wasn’t born here, I didn’t mean I wasn’t born in this country, I meant I wasn’t born on this planet.”

Lois stared, her mouth adrift, her heart thumping as all her hopes crumbled to dust. She tried to find words ... anything ... but nothing came to fill the raging void of her mind.

“Say something,” he begged.

“I ... I really don’t know what to say.”

He dragged his hand from under hers and clenched the steering wheel, his knuckles white like glaciers.

“Did your parents tell you they found you in a spaceship?”

Lois asked.

He nodded tightly.

“And you *believe* them?”

He winced as her implication battered him. “Of course I believe them. Why would they lie?”

Obviously, they’d had a reason. Perhaps they’d stolen him from his birth parents. Perhaps they’d been given him by a young unmarried girl and had promised to keep her secret. Whatever Clark’s parents’ reasons for lying to him, nothing could justify his blind belief in them. “Clark,” Lois said as gently as she could, “you couldn’t have come from outer space. It just isn’t reasonable that a child would survive that sort of journey. And alien life ... there’s not a shred of evidence ...”

“You don’t believe me.”

His eyes dived again, but this time, instead of eliciting sympathy, his action sparked anger. Lois had believed in him, and he had ruthlessly trampled over her fragile strands of hope. “No,” she said harshly, “I don’t believe you. Not for a moment. But I can’t decide whether you are deliberately lying or you’re delusional.”

He swung to face her. “My parents don’t lie,” he said. “They certainly wouldn’t lie to me about something as important as this.”

“Did they ever offer you any proof? Have you seen the spaceship?”

“I have always felt different from everyone else,” Clark said.

“Feeling different does not make you an alien.”

“I can do things ... things no one else can. I have ... unusual abilities.”

Boy, she sure knew how to pick them. Lois shook her head, reeling at the sudden and complete disintegration of something that, just a short time ago, had seemed so solid and durable. “Like the ability to believe you’re a spaceman?” she sneered. “That’s definitely unusual.”

“I can fly.”

It was time to get out. Out of Clark’s car. Out of his life. Out of Des Moines. “Take me to the hotel.”

Clark started the engine. They drove to the hotel in frigid silence. Lois used her fuming anger to quell the tears that pushed up her throat. She would not cry. She would not let him know how close she’d come to allowing him into her heart.

He pulled up outside the hotel. As soon as they stopped, Lois opened the car door to prevent him from doing it for her.

“Lois?”

She stepped out of his car. “What?”

“Are you going to print this?”

She turned on him, propelled by a volatile mix of anger and disappointment and shock. “Do you really think I would trash my reputation with a fairy tale?”

“Thank you.”

His civility aggravated the rawness of her emotions. “Don’t contact me,” she hissed. “Don’t call me. Ever.” She slammed the door and ran into the hotel.

Before she reached her room, hot tears were streaming down her cheeks like lava spewed from an angry volcano.

She fumbled with the key, staggered into her room, and shut the door on a world lost under the blanket of despair.

After hauling in a long and shuddery breath and sweeping away the overflow of tears, Lois picked up the phone, and keeping her voice flat and unfluctuating, she asked to be connected to the airline. She booked the next available seat, not caring that it would mean a wait of six hours for her connecting flight to Metropolis.

She had to get out of Des Moines. She had to get away from Clark. She had to expel this entire weekend from her memory.

She had to get back to where it was safe.

Back to the big impersonal city where her heart could hide in

the shadows of anonymity.

Perry White’s pencil paused as he recognised the footsteps approaching his door.

“Lois?” he called.

The door opened, and she entered. “Hi, Chief.”

One hasty scan of her face told Perry all he needed to know about the trip to Iowa. “I wasn’t expecting you back today,” he said, striking out a couple of words from the story he was editing. “I thought your flight didn’t arrive until this evening.”

She sank into his guest chair. “They cancelled the wedding,” she said with no more fanfare than if she’d been announcing what she’d eaten for breakfast. “So I got the first flight back to civilisation.”

“They cancelled it?” Perry scribbled a note and looked up. “Why?”

“They came to their senses just in time.”

“They agreed? Just like that? No wedding?”

Lois picked at the arm of the chair. “Actually, the groom realised it wasn’t what he wanted. The bride agreed. And it was pouring with rain.”

“Lo-is,” Perry said, allowing some of his exasperation to leak into his tone. “You cannot tell me they called off the wedding because of the weather.”

Her mouth stretched, but it was too empty and vapid to be considered a smile.

“I guess you didn’t have a great time?” he asked carefully.

“It was exactly as I expected,” Lois said. “A complete waste of time and money. It would have been worse if I’d actually had to attend the wedding. As things turned out, I only had to suffer through the pre-wedding party the night before.”

“The wedding was still on the night before?” Perry asked. “When did they decide to cancel?”

“Yesterday morning.”

“Oh,” Perry said. “That’s awful. How is your friend?”

“She’s upset now,” Lois said, “but in time, I’m sure she’ll see this as a lucky escape.” She leaned forward in the chair. “What’s happening with the Senator story? What do you want me to chase down? I read this morning’s edition in the cab. The story seems to be fading fast.”

“It’s Sunday. And you’re not supposed to be here.”

“Have you had someone dig into the Senator’s past? Tried to find the first indication he had a gambling problem? Have you checked on his known associates from college? High school, even? What was his first job? Have you had someone talk to his colleagues? Uncover his credit history?”

“Yes,” Perry said, a little peeved that Lois assumed he couldn’t do his job without her. “I’ve had a couple of reporters researching his early life.”

“And?”

“And, so far, they’ve found nothing.”

Lois jumped up from the chair. “On it,” she said.

She marched from his office, closing the door briskly.

Perry stared after her.

His best reporter was back.

She would get him a story.

Because she was Lois Lane. As a reporter, she had it all.

But ...

Perry sighed.

In the things that really mattered, she was destitute. And worse than that, she seemed oblivious to her plight.

After leaving Perry’s office, Lois immersed herself in every detail of the Senator’s life and refused to entertain even the tiniest possibility that her efforts had any agenda except getting the story. She succeeded so well that by the time she fell into her bed very late on Sunday, she knew more about the Senator’s college

days than she could remember about her own and she was beginning to hold tentative hopes that Des Moines and all its accompanying memories could be banished forever.

By Monday night, she had tracked the Senator's gambling problem over twenty-five years and uncovered evidence of multiple illicit activities.

At times, thoughts of Shane and Jane had slithered amongst the pages of research. Lois couldn't help wondering if they had talked. Whether Jane intended to stay in Des Moines. Questions about incidental details such as what had happened to the wedding clothes, food, and flowers floated through her mind at odd moments.

Sometimes, those thoughts turned towards a tall man with expressive brown eyes. Lois swatted them down, refusing to give them even a breath of air. She had a story to write.

When she collapsed into bed on Tuesday night, she should have been buzzing with elation because the front page of tomorrow's Daily Planet would feature her in-depth, fully evidenced story of a life devastated by greed.

She felt nothing but emptiness.

She didn't care how the Senator had lived his life. She didn't care that the byline to the lead story would carry her name. She didn't care that it would enhance her reputation as the best and probably earn her nominations in all the top awards.

Exhaustion had stripped her of ability to pretend.

She missed Clark.

Her heart ached for him. Her mind yearned for him. Her skin hankered for his touch. Her imagination replayed his smiles over and over, sneaking up on her and eroding her conviction that her life was perfectly fine without him.

Sleep wouldn't come, leaving her at the mercy of a tired mind leaking memories.

The moment she'd first seen him. The moment he'd turned and noticed her.

He'd felt it then. She had, too.

He'd repaid her rudeness with consideration. He'd been honest about his feelings.

And when she'd pushed him into an untenable situation, he told her his deepest-held secret.

There were only two rational possibilities — he was lying or he was delusional. Lois realised now that sometime over the past three days, she'd dismissed the former. She'd been lied to many times by many people — her father, her mother, men, people with something to hide who didn't want their lives splashed across a the pages of a newspaper.

Over the years, Lois had developed the ability to identify a liar.

And her gut was adamant that Clark Kent did not lie.

He believed he'd been born on another planet.

And that ... it just wasn't poss-

The coffee!

Perhaps he had an other-world recipe. It had been the best coffee she'd ever tasted. Since returning to Metropolis, she had only drunk coffee to provide the much-needed boost from the caffeine hit. It had tasted rancid in her mouth and bitter with memories in her mind.

She craved more of Clark's coffee.

More of Clark.

Lois shook her herself, impatiently flopping onto her back. She needed to sleep. Tomorrow, there were more leads to chase, more stories to write.

Clark was not a part of her life. He would never be a part of her life.

Her life was full and busy. And way too stressful to even contemplate the added complication of being with a man who believed he was an alien.

Tomorrow, she would hunt down another story.

Something so big, there would be no time to think of anything else.

It was how Lois Lane had become the best.

She was still the best.

And that was all she'd ever wanted.

The next evening, Lois entered her apartment a little after eight o'clock, dropped her bag on the sofa, and dug a fork out of the kitchen drawer.

She returned to the sofa and sat down, peeling back the lid of her take-out. She lifted it to her nose and sniffed suspiciously. It was supposed to be fettuccine pescatore, but it neither looked nor smelled edible.

She put it down and sank into the hard unwelcoming embrace of the sofa.

Her search for a mega-story had been fruitless. Her day had been a series of frustrating dead-ends.

She just wanted to forget.

But forgetting today left an empty mind, and an empty mind was easy prey to the avalanche of other memories.

Clark.

If things had been different, perhaps she'd be on the phone now, talking to him — telling him about her day and hearing about his.

Perhaps she would be looking forward to a time when evenings meant being with him, talking, laughing, sharing, drinking his coffee. Kissing. Cuddling.

Lois sighed.

If only ...

She felt as if longing had gnawed a big hole through the middle of her heart. Would it close over? Or would it remain a gaping empty mess for the rest of her life?

The phone shrilled, and Lois's heart clunked somewhere low in her stomach.

Could it be him? He hadn't called. Or if he had, she hadn't been home, deliberately so. But now ... She gulped. Should she answer it? She didn't want to talk to him. She couldn't talk to him. She wouldn't have an answer if he simply enquired how she was.

Unable to stay away, Lois rose slowly and walked to the phone. Her hand hovered through several rings. Then she snatched at it, put it to her ear, and squeaked, "Hello?"

Part 9

"Lois. It's ... it's Jane."

Oh. Jane. Lois's stomach rolled, but she couldn't have said if her reaction was relief or disappointment. "Ah ... hi, Jane. How ... how are you?"

"I'm so sorry about everything," Jane said. "I'm sorry you came all this way for nothing."

It hadn't been for nothing. It had been worse than nothing. Better than nothing. It had been everything. "How are you?" Lois repeated. "Have you talked to Shane?"

"A little. Lois, I want to thank you for not printing anything. I thought maybe ... maybe you'd write the story of where I am now, and the fact that I ruined my chance of happiness would make it newsworthy. I've been checking the Daily Planet every day. I appreciate your discretion."

"That's ... you're welcome," Lois said, startled that she hadn't even thought about the potential for a story. "Does everyone know why Shane called off the wedding?"

"I told my two closest friends, Emma and Belinda. People have been really kind and not asked too many questions. Shane has taken the leave we booked for the honeymoon, but I've gone back to the paper. It helps keep my mind off everything."

"Yeah," Lois said, understanding completely. "Do you think there's any chance of reconciliation with Shane?"

"No. He doesn't ... He can't ... You know?"

"I'm sorry, Jane," Lois said, realising it was true. "I wish things had worked out for you and Shane."

"It's my fault," she said. "I knew I should have told him. It was just ... I never thought a man like Shane would be interested in me. Most people don't even notice I'm there. After ... after I left my family, I was comfortable lurking in the background, and I never quite worked out how to leave it ... until Shane came to Des Moines. He noticed me. He asked me out. He proposed. When I was with him, I felt just like everyone else. None of that other stuff mattered. I couldn't believe he wanted to be with me, and I just couldn't make myself ..." Her words ground to a strangled sob.

"Maybe Shane just needs more time," Lois said. "If he truly loved you, and I think he did, his love can't be wiped away by something that wasn't your fault."

"It was my fault. I wasn't honest with him."

"It's the past, Jane. It doesn't affect who you are now. There was no need to tell him."

"It does affect who I am now," Jane said sadly. "It affects me everyday. I have no family. I have to watch everything I say. When people ask normal questions about my folks, I have to be vague, and I've become a master at changing the subject."

"Why did you tell Shane that your father would be coming to your wedding?"

"I didn't. He assumed my parents would be coming. I almost told him that my mother had passed away, but I knew he'd ask how she died and I didn't have any answers for that without lying. I asked Emma and Belinda to be my bridesmaids because I could honestly say that I don't have any sisters. I tried to ask Shane's father if he would walk down the aisle with me because he only has sons, but he said that was a father's honour and he couldn't let my father miss out."

"Surely Shane had questions when you didn't send invitations to family members."

"Shane comes from a family of boys. They ... Weddings aren't really their thing — not the details, anyway. I sent the invitations. I invited everyone I could remember from college and even high school. You were the only one who accepted."

"Oh." Lois moved on quickly. "What about your foster family?"

"There were seven foster families," Jane said. "I'm not close with any of them. And anyway, just the mention of foster parents leads to a whole new set of questions."

"You could have said that your birth parents had died when you were a child."

"But that's not the truth."

"Jane, sometimes it's OK to make up a story to protect someone. Even if that someone is you."

"Is that what you really believe?"

"Yes." *Unless the story involves a baby in a spaceship, and then ...*

"I'm not very good at lying," Jane said. "Not outright. So I just let people assume things about me and don't say anything. I let Shane believe my father would be coming and hoped that when the time came, we'd be so caught up in the wedding that my father's absence wouldn't be a big deal. But it became a big deal on Friday night when Shane demanded answers."

And when she had given those answers, Shane had reacted exactly as she'd feared he would. "I'm so sorry, Jane," Lois said. "I wish there was something I could do to help."

"You could give me your word that you won't write my story."

"You have it."

"Thank you," Jane said with a gush of relief. "I just want everyone to forget that Margaret Johnston ever existed."

Lois fiddled with the phone cord, not knowing what to say.

"Thanks for taking my call, Lois. I know you don't really

consider me to be your friend — I'm sure you have hundreds of friends — but I'll never forget that you came to my ... that you came to Des Moines."

"I ... Goodnight, Jane. I hope you feel better soon."

"Goodnight, Lois."

Lois replaced the handset and slumped against the wall.

Her heart swelled with sympathy. For Jane. For the injustice she had suffered. For a woman still paying for the selfish actions of her parents.

And for Clark. Who had also lost his first family. Who also kept a secret. Who also lived set apart from those he considered 'normal'.

Lois sprang to her bag and took out her notepad. She flicked back a couple of pages and found where he'd written his details.

Looking at the page transported her back ... back to the gazebo, to the cold and wet morning, to the best date of her life, to the time when she had begun to hope that she'd found a man who was different.

Different.

Clark Kent was certainly different.

She snatched the phone and dialled his number, her heart thumping like a rampage of wild buffalo. As the call went through, she hauled in a deep breath. The phone clicked as the connection was established.

"Hello. This is Clark Kent."

His voice glided across her nerve endings, and they rippled in eager response. Lois gasped. No words came. In panic, she slammed down the phone.

Her tears surged, and she turned into the wall, hugging herself as the ogre of indecision mauled her brittle heart.

Some time later, a knock sliced through her heartache.

Lois dragged her sleeve across her eyes and stumbled to the door. When she opened it, the corridor was empty.

Except ...

A solitary cup of coffee had been placed outside her door. She picked it up, recognising the take-out cup as being the same as the ones Clark had brought to their breakfast picnic.

"Clark?"

His name echoed along the vacant corridor.

"Are you there, Clark?"

When no answer came, Lois closed her door, leaned against it, and drank from the cup.

It was good. So very, very good. It was Clark's coffee.

From the 'place he knew'.

Or perhaps more accurately, 'the recipe he knew'.

Clark had been here. Outside her door. Perhaps able to hear her sobs.

He had answered his phone in Des Moines just a short time ago.

I can fly.

I love flying.

"If you ask me to come, I'll be there. As often as you want."

It couldn't be possible. Could it?

Human beings didn't fly. Not without an airplane. Not halfway across the United States in a few minutes.

But Clark had declared he could fly. That couldn't be hearsay from his parents. Either he could fly or he couldn't, and either way, he had to know for sure.

Lois wandered to her sofa and sat down. She sipped from the coffee, and each taste brought back another bundle of memories.

Clark.

The quiet table pushed into the corner at the party.

Dancing with him.

His arms around her.

The way he touched her.

The way he looked at her.

His sometimes bumbling, always charming, attempts to

explain his feelings.

His uneasiness as she had pushed him closer and closer to the edge.

His refusal to succumb to the temptation to lie.

I would gladly risk it all for a woman I loved.

When the cup was empty, Lois's mind was full.

Full of the archive of memories she had thought could be repressed.

With a sigh, she rose from the sofa, placed the cup on her counter, and went to bed.

It was a little after 3am when Lois accepted that sleep was not going to rescue her from the turmoil of a mind in meltdown. She rolled from between her rumpled sheets and went to the closet to pull out her boxes of keepsakes. Twenty minutes later, she found the high school assignment she had written on the Margaret Johnston story a decade earlier.

The details of the case had been background to the focus of the study, which had been the agreement from all media outlets that the little girl at the centre of the tragedy deserved the chance to grow up away in anonymity. They reported she had survived the gunshot wound, and then, despite clamouring public interest, had resolutely refused to divulge even the smallest morsel of information.

Lois read her essay, shaking her head at her young self's vehement insistence that the public's right to know trumped any individual's penchant for privacy. *'And when I'm the best reporter in the country, I will always give the readers the whole story, even if others in my profession fail in their responsibility to keep the press free and open.'*

Lois rubbed her cheek, which had heated slightly, and ran her eyes over her words again.

I will always give the readers the whole story.

Young Lois had dreamed of breaking the biggest story in world history. Right now, older Lois had it. The story that would change their world forever was sitting in the palm of her hand.

She'd told Clark she wouldn't print what he'd told her because it would tarnish her reputation.

But now ...

The coffee.

How did special-recipe coffee get from Des Moines, Iowa to her apartment in Metropolis, New Troy, in a matter of minutes?

I can fly.

He hadn't mentioned that he could fly super-fast. But then, she'd hardly given him the opportunity to expound on his claims.

If those claims were true, she could prove them. There must be other instances where Clark had left fragments of evidence that verified his ability to move around with extraordinary speed. If they were there, she would find them. Then, she could write the biggest story of all time and take it to Perry.

The story of alien life on Earth would establish her place as the greatest reporter in the history of the news. She would have all the fame and accolades she had dreamed of for so long.

She would ruin Clark's life.

Lois tore up her assignment. Tore it into tiny shreds and dumped them in the trash.

She had been so very wrong. Some stories should never be told.

A little girl who had been thrust into the spotlight by greedy and callous parents.

And a man who lived with an unbelievable secret.

The man Lois loved.

She loved him. But ...

Clark Kent was a very special man. He needed a woman who could embrace his differences. A woman unwavering in her love and support. A woman willing to go to whatever lengths were needed in order to protect his secret. Someone he could trust

implicitly. Someone he knew would never leave him.

Lois wasn't sure she wanted to be that woman.

Wasn't sure she could be that woman.

Wasn't sure about anything.

Except Clark. And how every moment without him seemed desolate.

The alarm woke Lois just a couple of hours later. She moved through her morning routine with mechanical indifference, refusing to allow anything to lure her mind out of neutral.

But as she left her bedroom, the trash can caught her eye, nailing her feet to the floor.

The scraps of paper seemed to speak of a life in tatters.

Clark must feel as if she had shredded his life and walked away with callous indifference.

In her quest for clarity, she hadn't given much thought to how Clark would be feeling in the days following the most momentous weekend of his life.

Was he concerned she would print his story? Had he, like Jane, been checking the headlines every day?

How many other people knew his secret? His parents, obviously. Had he ever told anyone else?

It wasn't the sort of secret easily disclosed.

Telling her had been a huge decision. A decision that could have far-reaching consequences.

His candour about his hopes for their relationship had left him open to disappointment, but exposing his secret plunged him to a whole new level of vulnerability.

Lois shivered.

He'd placed his life in her hands. She'd been so blinded by her own raging emotions that she'd mercilessly stomped all over his defencelessness and scorned him for his naivety.

A wave of shame crashed over her.

He must regret his trust in her. He must wish he had lied. He must wish he had put his own wellbeing ahead of her demands for information.

I would gladly risk it all for a woman I loved.

He had risked so much more than she had thought possible when he'd uttered that statement. He'd risked his way of life — his freedom, his job, his friends, his tenuous grip on normality. He'd risked it all.

For what?

For a chance to be with her?

Did that mean he loved her?

Would he understand her reaction? Would he understand that she'd needed some time to come to terms with the reality of his life? Would he give her the grace she hadn't given him?

He was still thinking about her. The coffee proved that.

Should she call him again? And this time, actually say something?

Say what?

That she was close to believing he could fly?

And then what?

That she wouldn't print his story?

She'd already told him that.

And if his feelings for her had somehow managed to survive her derision, a deeper question would be burning in his heart.

Could she ever love a man who wasn't human?

That question burned for her, too. Could she?

She did love him.

But would that love continue, day after day, for the rest of her life?

Yes! The answer resounded through her heart, leaping up to deluge her mind with a glorious dawn of confidence.

Her love for Clark was different from everything she had ever experienced.

She wanted him. Wanted to be with him.

Wanted to be the person that shared his life.

Forever.

But what of Clark?

The past few days must have been traumatic for him. Had he hardened his big soft heart? Had he allowed bitterness a foothold? Could he forgive her?

Why had he brought her coffee?

How would he respond if she went to him and tried to explain?

Would he turn away, angry and hurt?

Did he regret his honesty? Had he vowed to never trust again? Was he -

A new thought burst into her mind, freezing the flow of her thoughts and transporting her back to the house in Des Moines. Shane had been angry ... shocked ... disillusioned.

Clark had pleaded with him, begging him to go to Jane and show her that love was stronger than any secret. Not for a moment had Clark appeared to consider the possibility that Jane might spurn Shane's attempt at reconciliation.

Clark had assumed Jane's forgiveness would be automatic. That Jane would understand.

Lois wasn't sure that was realistic. Maybe not for Jane. But for Clark ...

Would he forgive? Would he be able to trust again? Would he trust *her* again? Would he allow her to share his extraordinary life?

Would he give her the second chance she so desperately wanted?

Was she brave enough to lay her hopes before him and risk him rejecting her as she had scorned him?

Was she?

So many questions. So few answers.

With a sigh, Lois picked up her bag and went in search of a story. The lives of other people had to be infinitely simpler than hers was.

The phone was ringing as Lois entered her apartment on Thursday evening. She dumped her bag on the sofa and hurried to answer it. "Hello," she said. "This is Lois Lane."

"Lois." The female voice was breathless with excitement. "Shane came to the office today. He says he stills loves me. He wants us to get married on Saturday."

"This Saturday?" Lois gasped.

"Yes! It won't be the wedding we had planned, but we can get married in Union Park and follow the ceremony with afternoon tea. It will be small and informal, but that doesn't matter. I will be Shane's wife."

"Are you sure about this?" Lois asked. "I mean ..." She searched for gentle words. Finding none, she softened her tone. "Shane called off the wedding because of something that wasn't your fault."

"He loves me," Jane said wistfully. "Oh, Lois, he was so sweet today. So sorry for the he reacted. He just needed some time."

"He told everyone your secret."

"Not everyone. He told his brothers ... I wouldn't expect him to keep secrets from his family."

"He also told Clark and me."

"He thought ..." Jane gave a nervous laugh. "I told Shane you were my closest friend from college, Lois. I know it's not really true, but in another way, it kind of is. You were the only one who came to my wedding. And Clark ... well, everyone trusts Clark."

She said it as if it were an accepted fact. *Everyone trusts Clark.*

Except Clark's life was encapsulated in an earth-shattering secret.

"Are you sure about this, Jane?" Lois said. "You don't have to rush into anything. You have time to decide what you really want."

"I decided a long time ago what I really want," Jane said. "Shane is the man who makes me feel as if nothing else matters. I know it did matter for just a few short days, but it won't ever matter again."

"Does he know how much he hurt you?"

"Yes," Jane said. "And he's very sorry. I'm just so relieved that he knows about what happened and I don't ever need to be scared of him finding out again."

Lois silenced her doubts. "I'm pleased for you, Jane," she said. "You deserve to be happy."

"You are? Oh, Lois, that is such a sweet thing to say."

Lois didn't know what to say. 'Sweet' was not a description regularly applied to Mad Dog Lane.

"I don't expect you to come to Des Moines again," Jane said, "but I want you to know that you're invited to our wedding. It's at two-thirty in Union Park. Under the trees near the East Jefferson Avenue entrance."

"I ... I'm not sure about ..." ... *anything.*

"It's OK, Lois. I'm not pressuring you to come. That would be asking too much. I just wanted you to know, and if you decided to join us on our special day, we'd love to have your company."

"Thanks."

"Oh, Lois, I'm so happy. Happier than I've ever been. From the first time Shane asked me out, I was so scared of losing him. And now ... now, I can't believe he knows everything about me and he still loves me."

Her joy bubbled across the miles, returning Lois's thoughts to the one who didn't know if his secret had destroyed his chance at love. "How's Clark?" she asked casually.

"Clark? Clark is ..."

"What?"

"Clark is smiling a lot, but ..."

Lois understood immediately. Clark was pretending. He'd probably done a lot of that in his life. Pretended he fitted in. Pretended he was just like everyone else. Pretended he didn't care he was different.

"Did something happen between you and Clark?" Jane asked. "Belinda said you had breakfast together in the gazebo."

Lois wasn't ready to admit anything. "I was in Des Moines for less than twenty-four hours."

"I'm sorry, Lois. It's none of my business. I shouldn't have asked about you and Clark. It's just ..."

"What?"

"Clark has been the most amazing friend to Shane since last week. He took pizzas around to Shane's house on Sunday afternoon, and they watched a game together. Shane says Clark helped him understand the difficulties I was facing. We owe Clark so much. I ... I would love him to be happy."

"Will he be at your wedding?"

"Yes."

Feeling compelled to give a response to the invitation, Lois said, "I ... I'm not sure about coming ..."

"That's OK, Lois. I understand."

"Thanks for calling. I hope Saturday is everything you want it to be."

"It will be," Jane said. "I'm marrying the most wonderful man on the planet."

Lois slowly returned the phone.

She leaned against the wall and let the torrent of longing wash over her.

She wanted to be with Clark.

Even if he could fly.

Regardless of where he had been born.

The man ... the heart ... she wanted him. Nothing else mattered.

But did he still want her?

After what she'd said? After her scathing disbelief?

She'd hurt him.

Horribly.

He'd dreamed of love, but all of his dreams must have carried a caveat. For him, the chance of the dream turning into a nightmare was greater than for anyone else.

Lois reached for the phone again. She paused.

Clark had practically demanded that Shane forgive Jane. He had never given up on Shane's love for Jane. He'd been a friend to Shane, even after Shane had rejected Jane.

He would forgive her.

Because he was Clark Kent.

And he loved her.

He did.

He'd shown it in every word, every action, every touch.

He'd shown it in telling her the stunning truth when he could have lied.

He'd risked everything.

Lois's hand slid from the phone.

She needed to talk with Clark, but it wasn't a conversation to be had over the phone. She wanted to be with him — to see his face, to linger in his smile, to feel his arms. To talk to him and hold him and smile for him.

She wanted time ... time to help him see again.

See that they — Clark Kent and Lois Lane — that together, they could be incredible.

"I'm coming, Clark," she muttered. "I'll be there on Saturday, and then ..."

She chuckled softly as she imagined his smile.

"... and then, you'll never be alone again."

Part 10

It was a little before two-thirty when Lois climbed from the cab at the entrance to Union Park.

She'd already been to the hotel to drop off her luggage, wash away the grime of travel, fix her hair and make up, and change into the midnight blue dress she'd bought yesterday morning, right after calling the airline and booking her flights to Des Moines.

It had been a painstakingly slow forty hours since her decision to come to Clark, but now that she was here, the significance of the moment loomed large.

Seven days ago, in a car a few miles from here, the statement, 'I wasn't born here' had changed Clark's life forever.

If she went to him now and spoke the words from her heart, there could be no turning back. No doubts.

Lois searched for inner assurance.

And found it.

She wanted this.

She wanted Clark.

She wanted to share his life. His differences didn't matter at all. In fact, she'd begun to wonder how she could have considered a relationship with a man who *couldn't* fly.

Lifting her head high, she marched forward. Towards the man she loved. And their life together.

The ground was damp underfoot — her heels sank a little way when she stepped from the track and onto the grass — but the rain had stopped and the sun was shining from between the cotton-candy clouds that were scattered across the blue sky.

It was the perfect day for a wedding.

The perfect day for promises.

The lilting strains of music beckoned her forward. She rounded a grove of trees and saw several dozen chairs — most of them filled — facing away, towards the front where Shane was waiting with his four look-alike brothers.

Lois scanned the backs of the heads, and her heart did a pirouette when she saw the dark head that had been so prominent in her thoughts and dreams since she'd left Des Moines forever one week ago.

He was sitting in the aisle seat of the third row. All the seats around him were taken, thwarting her plan to slip in beside him. Lois edged past a young family and sat in a vacant seat in the second to last row.

She wrenched her gaze from the dark head to scrutinise Shane. Did he realise the devastating effects of his decision? Was he ready to commit the rest of his life to Jane? As Lois watched, he stepped across and said something to his brothers. Andrew patted Shane on the shoulder, and the groom glanced towards the back of the seats, from where his bride would come.

Lois's eyes dropped ... back to the dark head and broad shoulders.

Regret stabbed at her again, laced with impatience, and she urged Jane to hurry.

"Ladies and Gentlemen. Family. Friends."

At the front, Shane was standing behind the microphone.

"I know it isn't customary for the groom to make a speech before the bride arrives, but it also isn't usual for guests to come to a ceremony a week after the set wedding date."

A subdued ripple of laughter echoed across the gathering. Shane's head dropped for a moment. When he looked up again, his cheeks had blossomed red. "I want to apologise to all of you for the inconvenience I caused by cancelling the wedding last week." Shane glanced sideways to Andrew, who nodded encouragement. "Before she gets here, I want to tell you something about Jane."

Lois gripped her handbag, as possible diversionary tactics scampered through her mind.

"Last Friday, I knew that I was marrying the woman with the biggest heart in the whole of the United States," Shane said. "This week, I discovered her heart is even bigger than I'd realised. Last Friday, I knew Jane had an amazing capacity to see the best in everyone ... to overlook their mistakes. This week, I really, really needed that quality in her."

He stopped. Breathed. Rubbed his thumb across his cheek.

The guests waited in heavy silence.

"I love Jane," he said in a voice that quivered. "I will always love her. And I intend to spend the rest of my life making up for what I did to her last week."

He pressed his hand against his mouth, looking down. Andrew stepped closer to him, and the five brothers stood in a line of solidarity.

The low purr of an engine whirred through the silence, followed by the sound of closing car doors. The music burst through the reflective mood with resounding celebration, and Belinda and another woman appeared between the trees.

They walked past Lois, slowly and sedately, and then Lois heard the soft murmur of excitement as the bride appeared on the arm of an older man, who, inexplicably, reminded her of Perry.

Next to him, Jane — quiet, fade-away Jane — looked radiant.

The crowd stood. Lois shrank in behind the tall man in front of her and sneaked a look forward. Clark was standing, his eyes trained on the bride, his mouth moulded to a hollow smile.

Lois clamped down on her sob. She longed to see Clark's *real* smile — warm with sunshine and mulled with the bounty of his heart.

The bride swept towards her groom. When she reached him, he touched her elbow, looking down on her as if he couldn't quite believe she had come. The older man hugged them both before sitting down.

And the wedding began.

Clark stared forward as his friends began their vows,

committing themselves to lives of faithfulness, love, support, and unity.

She was here.

He'd hadn't actually seen her, but her presence was as real as if she were sitting beside him.

He'd heard her heartbeat.

"Do you take this woman ..."

Why had she come?

She must have known he would be here.

Why hadn't she called to tell him she was coming?

"... to have and to hold ..."

What was she wearing? She'd taken his breath away in jeans and a sweater. What colour had she chosen? Bold red? Deep blue? Lush green?

His first sight of her was going to be an explosive mix of untameable excitement and profound regret.

The reading was going to be like navigating a minefield. He would have to concentrate on the words. Keep his focus fixed on the trees. Pretend he didn't see. Didn't know. Didn't care so desperately.

"... for richer, for poorer..."

His always-simmering love for her bubbled up again, engulfing him — his mind, his heart, his soul, his being.

Did he dare believe that her presence meant there was hope? Would she speak to him? Would they exchange pleasantries and slip from each other's lives forever?

If that was what she wanted, he knew he would have to let her go.

But it was going to be the hardest thing he had ever done.

To forget ... wasn't going to be possible.

To lament ... would be his daily burden.

To love without return ... would be his destiny.

"... as long as you both shall live?"

"I do."

Shane carefully lifted the veil from his bride and bent low to kiss her.

It was done. Simple. Meaningful. Beautiful, too. Two people had promised forever.

They looked so happy. So complete.

So absolutely right together.

Lois slipped a handkerchief from her handbag and dabbed at the corner of her eye.

The bridal party moved to the spare seats at the front, and the minister announced that the reading was to be given by Clark Kent.

Lois's breath wedged between two beats of her heart. Would he see her? How would he react to her presence? With eager surprise? Cold suspicion? Or blank indifference?

He stood, a Bible in his hand, and walked with steadfast purpose to the front.

At the microphone, he turned. His eyes skimmed the crowd, missing her. His smile was pleasant, engaging ... empty.

Anguish surged through Lois, sharp with the knowledge that she had done this to him. She had sucked the life from his face, the beauty from his smile.

He took a breath and began. "The reading is from the first book of Corinthians," he said, steady, composed, vacant. "The thirteenth chapter, starting at verse one."

Lois stared at him, adding to her shoal of memories. He stood, tall and straight, wearing a black suit, white shirt, and oddly geometric purple and gold tie. Her imagination had not done him justice.

He was gorgeous.

He was everything she had ever wanted. Not just his physical attributes — although they had the capacity to reduce her muscles to mush — but all the other characteristics that made Clark Kent

... his quiet strength, his refusal to stray from what he believed was right, his courage to believe in his dream, his generosity of spirit.

She loved him.

She needed him.

On the outside, he was flawless, but on the inside, something was missing.

Her.

He needed her. He did. He knew he did.

But would he be willing to trust again?

"Love is patient, love is kind."

Clark had shown her such patience. And he'd always been kind.

"It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs."

The memory of her harsh words whipped through Lois's mind. She had accused him of lying and then accused his parents, whom he obviously loved, of deliberately misleading him.

"Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices in the truth."

She had demanded the truth, and his love had been too strong to seek escape through deception. It had cost him everything.

Or so he thought.

If only he'd look at her ... allow her the chance to smile, to connect with him, to begin to build the bridge of restoration.

"It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

That is how Clark Kent would love. How Lois was determined to love him. "Look at me," she murmured under her breath. "Please, Clark, look at me."

Slowly, his head lifted, and his eyes crashed into hers, setting off a thousand mini-explosions that cascaded through every part of her body. He swallowed. He drew in a long staccato breath. "Love never fails."

His image blurred as the well of her emotions seeped into her eyes.

He stared, caught in the unseen bond that held both of them.

Lois pushed a faint smile through her tears.

He didn't respond.

She strengthened her smile, hoping to convey her love across the crowd and directly into his wounded heart.

Clark's head dropped. He closed the Bible and returned to his seat, his eyes down.

One of Shane's brothers took the microphone and sang a deep and stirring rendition of 'Amazing Grace' while the bridal couple and their witnesses signed the register.

As the familiar strains echoed through the trees, Lois stared at the back of Clark's head, reliving every millisecond of their fleeting encounter.

He'd seen her. His heart — once so flagrantly accessible — had remained hidden behind his mask of stolidity.

His shoulders were taut and angular.

His neck ... her fingers itched to glide up from the strip of skin above his collar and into the rich lustre of his hair.

But first ... first she had to re-earn the right to touch him.

After the last note had faded, the minister turned to the guests and announced with gusto, "I present to you, Mr and Mrs Shane and Jane McVane."

The small crowd cheered boisterously. Shane leaned down and kissed his bride. Jane beamed up at her new husband, her face lit with an elated smile.

The newly married couple began walking down the grassy aisle. At the third row, they stopped and exuberantly hugged Clark. He returned their embrace, treading right down the middle between enthusiasm and woodenness, giving Lois no further clue as to his emotional state.

Shane and Jane moved through the well wishes of their friends.

“Lois! You came!” Jane stretched her arms towards Lois. As they hugged, Jane whispered, “Thank you. Thank you for coming.”

“Thank you for inviting me,” Lois said. “I appreciate it more than you can know.”

Jane smiled. “I think I know,” she said.

After the bride and groom had passed, Lois stole another glance at Clark. He was still turned away from her, talking to the man who had walked down the aisle with Jane.

Lois joined the small throng of people following the bride and groom. They moved through the trees and came to an open sunny area where clusters of tables and chairs were dotted around a long trestle loaded with food.

Lois took a position slightly adrift of the crowd and awaited her moment.

Clark was one of the last to emerge, and when he did, he stood alone, his hands in his pants pockets and his head fixed forward as he watched the photographer arrange various shots of the bridal couple.

Her time had come.

Lois inched towards him.

She stopped half a step from him.

He tensed. She could feel his awareness of her presence emanating from a body held rigid.

With the outer tip of her smallest finger, she touched the small ribbon of skin between his pants pocket and the cuff of his shirt.

He flinched. Not in body. But somewhere deep inside where he kept his hopes and dreams.

Lois waited, matching his forward stare, her whole being concentrated on their tiny sliver of connection.

His elbow flexed, lifting his hand from his pocket and bringing it to hang by his side.

Lois curled her pinkie finger around his.

His skin was warm. His hand soft.

His head turned to her, his eyes molten with confusion.

“I’m sorry,” she mouthed.

He opened his mouth as if to speak, but closed it without a sound. He stared at her, snagged in the crevice of a thousand questions.

Lois gathered all her unruly emotions and mustered them into a cautious smile. He didn’t respond, not overtly at least, but it seemed as if the inscrutable outer layer of his protective veneer softened.

“Lovely wedding,” she murmured.

“Uhm.” His reply sounded as if he had been ground through two boulders.

Sensing he needed some space, Lois returned her attention to where the photographer had positioned Jane in the midst of the groom and his brothers.

Clark must be wondering why she had come. Why she had sought him out. Did he welcome her presence? Her approach?

He hadn’t run away. His finger was hooked around hers — a loose and flimsy connection, but significant.

She hoped.

Or was he just too polite to pull away?

She leaned closer and whispered, “Come with me? Please, Clark?”

His head turned towards her, his expression slightly more receptive. But it wasn’t enough. She needed more than speculative guesswork. She figured he probably did, too.

So she closed her finger more tightly around his and stepped away. He followed, easily, but always half a step behind.

She led them into the grove of trees, out of sight of the wedding guests. Ahead, she saw the gazebo, glistening in the afternoon sun. She quickened her strides, eager now. When they reached it, she climbed the steps, her heart hammering as they

neared their moment of destiny.

At the top of the steps, she turned and faced Clark square on, careful not to dislodge the tentative connection their fingers. “I’m not here for a story,” she said. “I said I wouldn’t write anything, and I won’t.”

His expression didn’t change. “You must have a lot of questions.”

“I do. But only one is important.”

“Which ...” He coughed, glancing down to his feet. “Which one?”

“Will you forgive me?”

His head jolted up, and surprise rippled through his features, peeling away the mask to reveal the Clark of her memories.

“Lois, there’s nothing to forgive,” he said. “I ... I saw you, my brain went into meltdown, and ...” He gently squeezed her finger. “... and I just kept on getting everything wrong.”

“You mean like bringing me here for the most romantic picnic of my life?”

“I mean like asking you out within minutes, declaring my feelings within hours, and dumping the biggest secret imaginable on you within a day.” His other hand lifted in frustration. “I gave you no choice but to run away.”

“I’m not running now.”

“You came back to ask for forgiveness?” His eyebrow lifted. “Just that?”

Lois felt her mouth twitch. “Not just that.”

“What else?”

She stared into his eyes and saw the lingering layers of uncertainty, as if he were preparing to defend his life ... his world ... his decisions. She placed her other hand on the lapel of his jacket.

“No raindrops today,” he muttered.

She brushed them away anyway, relishing the texture of his jacket ... and the underlying firmness of his chest.

But ... her hand stilled. “I wanted to tell you that I believe you,” she said. “About everything.”

“You believe my parents found me in a spaceship?”

She nodded.

“Why?” he asked. “Why would you believe something so implausible?”

“Because you told me.” She waited for that to settle through his consciousness and then smiled softly. “That ... and the coffee helped, too.”

He groaned. “The coffee.”

“Thank you for bringing it to me.”

“I wasn’t sure ... After I’d done it, I thought maybe you’d be mad that I came to your apartment. But you called me and -”

“You knew it was me?”

“Yeah.”

“How?”

“I heard you breathe. And the little gasp. It was you. I knew it was you.”

“The coffee was wonderful,” she said, sliding her thumb from his jacket and onto the crisp cotton of his shirt. “It was exactly what I needed. I’m hoping you’ll make it for me again.”

“I didn’t make it,” he said blankly.

“Oh, that’s right,” she said, nodding sagely. “It was from ‘just a place you know.’”

His smile peeked out like the first rays of spring sun after the cold of winter. “You kept on asking me to take you there. Next time you ask, I will.”

“Where is this place you know?”

“Italy.”

“Italy?” she echoed.

“Yes.”

“You can get from Des Moines to Italy to Metropolis in ten minutes?”

"I had to wait for the coffee; they were just opening."
What had he thought about as he'd waited? And after he'd left her apartment? "Were you hoping I would call again?"
He shrugged. Glanced into her face. "Yes, I was."
"I'm sorry. I didn't know what to say."
"If you'd called, I wouldn't have known what to say either."
"You weren't sure? You couldn't see *us* anymore?"
"Lois, I will always be able to see us," he said with quiet conviction. "But telling you *again* ... begging ... hoping ... wanting ..."

It was true. He had been telling her from the beginning. Now, it was her turn. "I can see," Lois said, sliding her hand from his chest to perch on his shoulder. "I can see it, too, now. So very clearly."

"See what?"
"See what you could see from the beginning. That you and I — that *we* — could be incredible."
"Lois, there's more ... there are things you don't know."
"I know everything that's important."
"No. No ... there's so much -"

"I know you're an honest man. A man of integrity and courage. A man with enormous capacity to love. A man who — as you said before — will hold no record of wrong. I believe that, in time, you will forgive me. And when you do, I'll be waiting."

"Waiting?" he gulped.
"Waiting to spend the rest of my life with you."
His eyes slid shut for a moment, and when they opened, they were damp and shiny and extravagant with joy.

His smile unfolded to spectacular brilliance. "H...how do you know I'll forgive?"

"Because you're Clark Kent. Because you risked everything for the woman you love. Because you won't give up."
His smile glistened like raindrops in the sunshine. "You think you're the woman I love?"

"Aren't I?"
He chuckled. "I guess I didn't succeed in keeping that secret either."

"No," she said. "That was pretty obvious, right from the start."
"It was true," he said. His hand rose, and his fingers glided through her hair. "From the first moment I saw you, it was true."

"That you love me?"
"That I will always love you. That all I want is to be with you. That you need to think this through before you -"
"I've thought it through."
"Lois, it's not just the flying. I can -"

She pressed her forefinger over his mouth to silence him. "How about you surprise me?" she suggested. "One revelation at a time?" She returned her hand to his neck. "And we'll celebrate each one together?"

His eyebrow arched. "Celebrate?"
"You don't think being able to flit to Italy on a coffee whim is something to be celebrated?" she asked.

He appeared to be reconsidering. "Perhaps ... if I had someone to come with me ..."

"You do. You have. You will. Always."
"Aww, Lois. I ..." His words stopped, but his eyes continued with wordless vows that burrowed deep into her heart.
She smiled. His arms lifted, surrounding her, pulling her closer.

And Lois knew she had found her home.

Clark's mountain of fears had been reduced to just one.
He fervently hoped he wasn't dreaming.
She'd come to Des Moines.
She'd sought him out.
She'd apologized. Not that she had done anything wrong.

She'd said she believed him.
And despite knowing his secret, she was nestled into his arms.
She felt so good, so perfect. Clark would have been content to hold her forever.
But, after about a minute, she eased back. She smiled up at him, which mitigated the loss of contact. He slid his hand down her arm to take her hand in his.
"We should probably get back to the wedding," she said.
"There are going to be questions if they realise we've gone missing."

Clark lowered his glasses and checked over his shoulder. "Everyone seems to be concentrating on the bride and groom," he said.

"How do you know?"
"I can see through the trees."
"Literally? Through them?"
"I can see through everything except lead." He held his breath, awaiting her response.

She grinned. "When you come to Metropolis, you are going to work with me."

"You said you work alone. Always."
"I also said I don't date. Ever."
His laughter felt sweet as he asked, "Has that changed, too?"
"Only a little. I date one particular man. As far as everyone else is concerned, I don't date."

Her words and her smile and her hand on his chest emboldened him. "Want to go out on a date with me?"

"Only one date?"
He nodded. "Only one. One very long date that lasts a lifetime."

Her beautiful brown eyes sparkled with fun. "Is that a proposal, Mr Kent?"

If she wanted a proposal, she could have it. Right now. "Of course not," he said, unable to suppress his grin. "It would be much too soon for a proposal."

"But that's what you want, isn't it? Marriage? Forever? Risking everything for one person?"

"That's what I've always wanted. But until last week, I didn't know who that one person was."

"Do you know now?"
He nodded. "I'm sure."

She toyed with his tie. "You are a very romantic man, Mr Kent."

"I believe in love. I believe in being with someone forever."
"I didn't believe in love."

"And now?"
"I believe in us."

Clark cradled her chin in the curve of his fingers, tilting her head until their eyes met. "I love you, Lois Lane," he said. "I don't think it's possible for me *not* to love you."

"I believe you." Her eyelids fluttered over a film of moisture. Her smile budded. "And I love you, Clark Kent."

His heart soared, and Clark drew her closer. He kissed her, sealing promises made ... secrets shared ... love affirmed.
Forever.

THE END