

The Apartment

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Summary: Sequel to “The Letter.” Superman has taken to heart some of the things Lois said in her letter. What will happen when one of Lucy’s granddaughters turns up to contest part of Aunt Lois’ will?

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Disclaimer: Superman, Clark Kent, Lois Lane and all other character and place names are owned by DC and/or Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman. I own nothing ... except my fantasies — which frequently include Clark/Superman.

This story continues from the author’s [“The Letter.”](#)

Chapter 1

“Can I help you?” Clark stood at the door, looking in confusion at the woman out in the corridor: the woman glaring back at him.

“Yes. You can give me back my apartment.”

“What?” Clark laughed. “I’m sorry. I think you have the wrong apartment, miss.”

“No, I don’t. I know exactly where I am. Now hand over the keys and get packing.”

Clark stood up straighter and narrowed his eyes, finally taking in the reality of the woman arguing with him. She was short. Barely five foot three he would guess — and that might be pushing it. She had jet black hair cut into a shoulder length bob. Her eyes were hidden behind slightly tinted, slim glasses. He mentally brightened the dull grey of her eyes into a bright blue and imagined taking off the glasses to reveal that sparking blue. His gaze travelled down her body taking in her chocolate brown fitted skirt suit and flat black shoes. He immediately re-evaluated her height up to five foot four, much more towards ‘average’ for a woman, as he’d actually been including high heels in his original estimation.

Returning his eyes up to her face he met her burning gaze. “Like what you see?” she accused.

Clark took a deep breath and folded his arms across his chest. “Just trying to take in who exactly would be trying to kick me out of my apartment.” She folded her arms in mirror of his pose and glared at him. “So, what makes you think this apartment is yours, then?” he queried.

“It just is.”

Clark laughed and unfolded his arms. “Win many arguments that way?”

“Well...” she trailed off and Clark was momentarily distracted by a clearly embarrassed flush creeping up her cheeks.

“Look. I just moved in last week, but I can assure you that I

own this apartment legitimately. If you want to see the papers I can go and get them.”

“No. Uh.” The lady sighed and the fighting stance which had been surrounding her seemed to drain away. “The thing is ... I know you own the apartment. It’s just ...” Clark saw the young lady’s eyes begin to shimmer. “She ... she never ...” A tear escaped and began to travel down the gently blushing cheek.

Clark opened his mouth, but had no idea what to say. His heart lurched at the pain he could feel radiating from this fiery, yet vulnerable woman. “Um, would you ... like to come in?” he asked gently.

She nodded stiffly.

Clark opened the door wider and indicated into the apartment. Turning away he felt the *petite* lady follow him inside. Once she passed him and entered the living area he closed the door, shutting them both inside. As the door clicked shut Clark turned, only to almost crash into the young lady. She hadn’t made it any further into the apartment than a couple of steps. He stepped around and to the side, aiming for the kitchen.

“Um, would you like something to drink miss? I can make a pot of tea ...” he let his friendly tone linger. The woman didn’t move. He hoped there was nothing wrong. He took a step back towards the living area, leaving the kitchen behind.

“You re-decorated,” came the sharp accusation.

“I what?” he asked, shocked. As he approached her she lifted her arm and gesticulated at the walls. Clark caught a glimpse of a familiar gold watch on her wrist.

“It’s not the same colour. You re-decorated.” She finally turned and looked at him. He could see her eyes glistening with a combination of anger and tears.

“Actually, that would be the realtor. It was like this when I bought the place.” He tried to explain and, hopefully, dispel her wrath, but his thought train continued and he had to admit that he would have preferred that they **hadn’t** decorated to ‘increase sales possibilities’. He’d preferred it as it was, too. Clark held out his arm and indicated to the couch. The lady glared for a moment, and then the fire faded from her eyes. She nodded in agreement and then moved to sit down.

Once seated she unbuttoned her jacket and let it hang open. Clark could not sense any comfort coming from his visitor, though. She didn’t rest back into the couch, or take off her jacket. That could indicate that she didn’t expect to stay long, that she was still angry, or that she was uncomfortable. Clark guessed at the latter two. With her initial declaration of ownership of the apartment he presumed that this could be a long and complicated visit.

After a minute of awkward silence Clark repeated his request in regards to refreshments. “Tea?” he asked. “Or I have coffee. Both decaf and regular. And I have a variety of tea infusions too. Or there’s even-”

“Tea would be fine,” she suddenly smiled at him with a tiny laugh accompanying her request. “You babble like her.”

Clark, who had stood and was half way to the kitchen, turned in confusion. “Her?” There was no reply. The lady just stared into space, her anger now fully replaced by a seeming melancholy. Clark returned to his task of getting the tea. As the lady was clearly lost in her own world he decided not to inquire over whether she would prefer any particular infusion, and just pulled out some traditional English Breakfast. He also risked a little heat vision on the water, to heat it up quicker, reasoning that the lady was too involved in her own thoughts to be able to accurately measure the time which had passed.

So, it was less than a minute later when Clark returned to the couch with a tray. A teapot, two cups, a milk jug, the sugar bowl and some teaspoons graced the tray, which he placed on the coffee table. Sliding back onto the couch he turned to attend to his guest. She nodded when he indicated milk and sugar and then

she held out her hand to take the tea cup.

He smiled, gently. “Thank you,” came her reply. “I guess you are wondering what’s going on here.” She lifted the cup to take a sip.

“Not at all,” Clark replied in a teasing manner. He hoped that his friendly character would relax the dark-haired lady and allow her to feel more at home. *Maybe she already is home*, came the unexpected thought. He frowned and shook his head.

“Sorry,” she smiled and looked away. “I know I was blunt and rude ... back at the door. I’m sorry.”

“Hey, it’s okay. You’re not being blunt and rude now, are you?” he replied rhetorically. She didn’t turn back. “Hey.” He tried to get her attention and placed his hand on her shoulder, urging her to turn. She did. Warmth travelled through his hand and up his arm as he rested his hand at the top of her arm. She met his eyes and he was surprised to see a tear travelling down her cheek. “Hey,” he said once more, as gently as he could. This lady was a clear contradiction of fire and compassion. It reminded him of someone. Although ... being here — in this apartment — could have actually been the instigator of his memories of ... Lois. Not necessarily this woman.

“It’s just ... I loved it here. Whenever I visited her I ... this was where I was happiest.”

Clark’s heart began to beat a rapid tattoo. The woman clearly knew a previous occupant to his apartment. But seeing that the only owner for the last sixty years had been Lois, then this woman knew Lois.

“So,” he paused and cleared his throat. “I’m guessing you knew L ... the woman who lived here before?”

She nodded. “She was my Aunt. Well, actually my Great Aunt; my gran’s sister.”

Clark stood and strode away. His heart was pounding. This was one of Lucy’s granddaughters. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, recalling that moment when he’d entered the offices of Merton, Wallace and Hannah a month ago. This lady had been there. One of the many people dressed in black: allowed to publicly grieve. His eidetic memory recalled what each face looked like, even if he had never met them before. He saw faces around the city; faces he knew from so many different places, events, rescues. But he was just so used to recognising faces that he hadn’t thought about *where* he’d met her.

“She was called Lois, wasn’t she? The woman who owned this apartment?” Clark tried to keep his voice steady. He slid his hands into his pockets.

“Yes. Aunt Lois. She was my best friend.”

She was mine too, thought Clark. Although the past tense in his sentence was even more pronounced than hers.

He also recalled every single part of the will. He knew her name now, too. He recalled the watch on her wrist. He’d thought it familiar before, but now he knew that it had belonged to Lois. Bequeathed to her grandniece ...

But it would be careless of him to speak her name without a clear reason to know it.

“Could I ask *your* name?” he spoke tentatively.

“Lauren.” He was correct. “Lauren Lane.”

“I’m Clark Jonson.” He turned and stretched out his hand, smiling as genuinely as he could, all trace of emotion missing. Lauren stood and took the offered hand. As they shook Clark felt a return of the warmth which had seeped up his arm while touching Lauren’s shoulder earlier. For some reason his fingers enclosed her hand and then wouldn’t let go. This woman was a link to Lois. He felt Lauren attempt to pull away. When his fingers wouldn’t release, no matter how much he told them to, she looked up and met his gaze.

Clark’s heart skipped wildly as their eyes locked. His lips parted, allowing him to take in desperately needed air. Hers parted too, and then paused. It was only moments later, though,

when she spoke and he abruptly dropped her hand.

“Clark? Your name is Clark?” Lauren queried.

“Yes.”

“It’s just ... my Aunt knew a Clark. She talked about him sometimes.”

“Really?” He tried to interject a light, questioning tone into his reply, but his rapid heart rate meant it came out like a squeak.

Lauren turned away and sat back down, reaching for her tea. “He was quite famous actually. A long time ago. There’s even a film that was made about his death — well, about the cloned gangsters anyway. Although, the story is so utterly ‘loosely’ based on the truth, that Aunt Lois refused to watch it. Possibly ...” she gave a little laugh, then sipped the tea. “Possibly you were even named after him. Do you know why your parents named you Clark?”

“Uh...” Clark racked his brain to come up with an answer that wouldn’t betray his identity. Gaining time to think, he made his way back to the couch and also reached for his tea cup.

“Actually it was my mom’s maiden name.”

“Oh.” Lauren seemed disappointed by that. “I guess ... it would have been rather strange, but also rather nice to think that he ... uh, Clark Kent, that is ... lived on — here — actually in Lois’ apartment. She would have liked that very much.”

Clark carefully took a sip of tea. This turn of the conversation was very disturbing. If he continued to press the subject further, and inquire as to who this Clark Kent was, then things could become worse than awkward. Suddenly he felt like he was back sixty years, having a conversation with Lois about Superman. The difficulties of keeping up two identities came back to him and he momentarily regretted his decision to follow Lois’ advice in her letter, and ‘live’ again. It was too hard.

But then he recalled her gentle plea, her last request, so lovingly written in that letter. It *wasn’t* too hard. He would live again, if only to honour Lois’ last wish. And, strangely enough, he had already fallen back into ‘living’. It would break his heart to let go and return to Superman full time once again. After sixty years living as the world’s hero it only took one week to become addicted to life as a normal human once more.

As the time drifted on with nothing further said Clark began to feel uncomfortable. There was an, admittedly, beautiful lady sitting in his apartment, who was actually a complete stranger, but she happened to know the ‘love of his life’: Lois. What did a person say in that situation?

He’d already, thankfully, stalled the conversation about who *he* was. They’d established who *she* was. What else was there?

Except ...

“So, you claimed this apartment was yours. I *know* it’s mine, legitimately. You’ve admitted that it belonged to your Aunt. So what was that all about?” Clark let his eyes twinkle and his smile grow, hoping that Lauren wouldn’t feel he was accusing her, or being angry, or defensive.

“I never told her how much I loved it here. It wasn’t just that *she* was here. I told you she was my best friend. But, aside from loving her, and loving the time I spent with her ... I loved it *here*. I don’t know what it is about this place.” Lauren stood, placing her tea cup down. She began to amble around. “I felt at home every time I visited. I even stayed here regularly, and it felt like home, even whenever Aunt Lois was out. It was like I belonged here. Not just because of her. But just ... me. I belonged here. I never told her. I think, if I had, she might have left the apartment to me, instead of the Superman Foundation.”

“Oh!” Clark placed his cup down and stood, then walked up to meet her near the window. She had now stopped and was staring out.

“She used to stand here, at this window, sometimes. I’d see her staring out, and up. I’m not sure why. I know that the look on her face ... well, it was the exact look that mentioning Clark

would bring. I guess she was thinking of him.”

Clark moved away, his heart resuming its pounding. Clark Kent was a dangerous subject. He needed to turn the conversation away again.

“Are ... are you going to contest the will then?” Clark asked, a little fearfully. “Because I love this place too. And the contracts and money have already changed hands. The money is now at the Superman Foundation.”

“I don’t know.” Lauren turned away from the window. He met her eyes and could see the tears shining there. “I ... I don’t want to give her up. I don’t want to give up on this feeling of ... belonging here.” Clark’s heart stopped beating as she spoke of belonging. “But I don’t think I have any kind of valid case. Not really.”

He released the breath he had been, unconsciously, holding. He wouldn’t have to leave. Somehow, he was holding onto Lois by staying here, and if he truly had to say goodbye he feared that he would die himself. He’d tried, at her death, at her funeral, at the reading of the will and at the reading of the letter. He’d convinced himself that each one was the ‘closure’ he needed, that would allow him to neatly package up his feelings for her, and place them in the ‘history’ portion of his heart and his memory.

But they hadn’t. And when the idea had come to him, to follow Lois’ advice and ‘live’ again, he’d known that this apartment was where he wanted to live. He’d taken all his precious belongings out of his long-term, hidden storage, and approached the Foundation — through the realtor — with an offer on the apartment ... as Clark Jonson.

Yet ... by holding on to Lois in this way ... it meant that Lauren had to let go of her instead. He could feel the pain radiating from her and he had an almost uncontrollable urge to stride over to her and enfold her in his arms. Except, he had no idea whether that would be welcome or not.

He took a step back toward her again, and opened his mouth, ready to say something, but not knowing what.

“I guess ...” Lauren looked back out of the window. “I guess I just have to let go. Say goodbye.” Clark watched as she took a shuddering breath. “I don’t think I can.” Her voice broke on the last word and she covered her face with her hands, trying to hide the freely flowing tears.

Clark immediately took the last step to bring himself up to her and he enfolded her in his arms. He’d known, a minute ago, that this was what was needed, but he’d held back. She turned and buried her head in his chest. He could feel her whole body shaking. He didn’t know whether Lauren hadn’t allowed herself to grieve so deeply until just this moment, or whether she’d been crying every night for the last two months, but either way, he didn’t think she’d ever allowed herself to be ‘comforted’ in that grief. He tightened his hold and let his own tears run down his cheeks. He’d never been comforted in his grief either, in fact, he’d hardly let himself grieve, at least — not publicly. As the tears flowed and the body in his arms trembled he felt the sharp edge to his grief begin to dull a little.

When Lauren finally stopped shaking in his arms he loosened his hold. She pushed away and took her glasses off, wiping at her eyes. He kept his arms around her waist and she put her hands back on his chest, one hand still holding her yellow tinted glasses. She raised her face to look at him. He met her bright blue eyes, glistening with more tears. As he gazed down at her he was reminded of the clear waters of the ocean surrounding a tropical island paradise.

“Clark,” she whispered and flicked her eyes around his face. “You’re crying too.” She suddenly looked confused.

“I ...” he didn’t know how to explain. As he searched for words her confused look turned horrified and she pushed away from his chest.

“I ... I’m sorry, Clark. I should leave.” She rushed over to the

door, but Clark caught her before she could reach the handle.

“It’s okay, Lauren.” He made her turn. “Lauren, I understand your grief. Believe me, I do. It’s okay.”

She took a deep breath and looked up at him. She nodded and smiled. “Thank you for the tea. And ... thank you for” — she flicked her gaze over to the window — “you know.”

“You are welcome, Lauren.”

They stared in silence at one another. Clark found himself marvelling at the ocean colour of her eyes once more.

“Well,” she finally looked away. “I should go. Thank you.”

“All right,” Clark replied softly.

Lauren turned and opened the apartment door. Clark watched her leave, unable to move from his spot — a few feet from the door. Many minutes later he eventually stepped forward and slowly closed the wide-open door.

Chapter 2

Lauren closed the door behind her, after entering the apartment, and called after Clark as he headed for the kitchen. “Actually, I’d prefer coffee this time please.”

“All right,” he called back.

“Cream and two sugars please,” came the following request.

“Okay,” Clark replied from the kitchen.

“I know, it’s bad for you. I know.”

“Hey, it’s okay. That’s exactly how I take it too,” he said as he returned to the living area carrying two coffees. He passed one over to her and then they both took seats on the couch, exactly copying the poses that they had taken the day before.

Taking a sip of his, Clark studied his guest for a moment. She wore those slightly yellow tinted glasses again. Did that mean they were prescription? Or did she just love the fashion statement so much? Her clothing was much more casual today. Yesterday’s brown suit had probably been working clothes. Clark recalled the numerous similar suits that Lois would wear to the office, day after day. Today Lauren was in casual, cream slacks and a soft aqua-blue t-shirt. Clark immediately knew that the choice of t-shirt colour was directly related to her eye colour. He remembered that they reminded him of a tropical ocean when the tinted glasses had come off yesterday. There was a small logo above the right breast area ... well, right to him ... left to her. A palm tree with four stylised leaves curved gently out of a perfect semi-circle shaped sandy island. It solidified the link in his mind. Lauren ... and her eyes ... would always make him think of a tropical paradise.

“So,” Clark started. “Not that it isn’t nice to see you again, Lauren, but what exactly brought you back here?” He smiled.

“I just ... I wanted to feel close to her. I miss her so much.” Clark felt his heart beat in empathy with her pain.

“So ... tell me about Lois then.” Clark was torn. Lauren probably needed to talk about her best friend. Plus there was a desperate need, inside Clark, to reconnect with Lois ... to strengthen his memories of her, but he also dreaded being overwhelmed by emotion. Still he’d asked, so he waited for Lauren to reply.

“Lois Lane.” Lauren paused. “She was an investigative journalist most of her life. She loved it. She was brusque, and forthright. It could come across as rude to those who didn’t know her, but she was just being as truthful as she could, and not beating around the bush. She was kind and gentle and honest. Loyal. Loving. She loved watching football and basketball and baseball, although I’m not sure why. She didn’t support any team, and it was more like ... she put it on in the background. She didn’t sit down and actually **watch** very often.” Lauren paused again. She shuffled back further into the couch and took another sip of coffee. Clark let himself relax. His eyes drifted closed as she began again. “She loved Mel Gibson films, and chocolate, and ice cream. And the Daily Planet was her life. I used to visit

her there, as a girl ... when dad would let me ...”

Lauren’s voice faded away and Clark drifted into memories. He recalled exactly the things Lauren was talking about. As she rattled on about the news room, he found himself dealing with the warring emotions of nostalgia, grief, longing and so many more.

“I wanted to be like her when I was little.” Lauren’s voice intruded into his memories. “I guess I am, actually. Just like her. And also completely the opposite too.” She stopped and laughed. “Yeah. That’s it. I’m just like Aunt Lois, and completely the opposite of her, too.”

“And how do you figure that?” Clark smiled, not opening his eyes, but just revelling in her babbling voice.

“Well, she was an Investigative Journalist for the *Daily Planet*. I work for the *Online Planet*. Which is basically just the Daily Planet, but online, so it’s the same thing ... but not. And I’m a reporter ... but not like her. I’m the food critic — well Food and Nutrition Specialist is my full title. Oh, and I guess that’s a major difference. Food. And drink.” She held up her coffee with cream and sugar. “Aunt Lois would have panicked at the thought of so many calories in one drink. Plus, she could burn a pot of water.” Lauren laughed. “I even remember this one time when she decided to bake a chocolate cake. I’ve used the exact same recipe and ... well, hers came out like a solid rock. A *so-lid* rock. Mine are usually thick and gooey. Then there’s clothes. I absolutely adore everything she wore, except she was taller ... and slimmer than me, so ...”

“Sounds like you babble, too.” Clark teased, finally opening his eyes and looking at her.

“Oh yeah. That’s definitely another way that we are identical ... yet different, because she could babble, but then she’d realise and shut up, whereas I babble, and then even when someone points it out I continue and continue and.... Oh.” She paused and brought her hand up to cover her mouth when Clark began to smirk. “Just like that, I guess.”

Clark let his laugh out and Lauren began to laugh with him.

“Everyone loved her.” Lauren sighed. “There were so many Aunts and Uncles and Great Aunts and so on. Grandpappy was an only child but Grandma’s second ... well first husband really, as she never had chance to marry daddy’s father — that’s why my last name is still Lane — came from a very big family. But Aunt Lois was everyone’s favourite. She had so much love to give, to everyone. I asked her about it once. She said that Clark had taught her to love. He’d also taught her the value of friendship, and family, and making sure you never regretted your actions ... or your inaction. I try to be just like her.” Lauren paused and her lips trembled. “But I’m not. I regret everything.” Her voice was so shaky filled with tears. “I never told her how much she meant to me, and I never told her I loved this place.” She paused again. “I never told her I loved her.”

Clark took Lauren’s body into his arms. *Neither did I*, he thought. *At least, not when she believed me, or wanted to hear it.*

He rocked her gently as she cried. It was different from the previous day. Standing at the window Lauren had been shaking with grief. This time Clark could just hear her ragged breathing. Eventually she pushed away and, when she looked up, Clark could see the tear streaks down her cheek. Her yellow tinted glasses hid the bright, ocean blue of her eyes, but they couldn’t hide the sadness.

“I think I’m going to start visiting just for your hugs, Clark, and not only to remember Aunt Lois,” she chuckled quietly.

Clark laughed in reply and stood up from the couch. “I think that would be fine by me ...” He strode away, into the kitchen to check on his food just as Lauren finally noticed the sound of bubbling water.

“Oh, Clark. I’m sorry. I didn’t realise. I’ve interrupted your dinner.” Clark watched from the kitchen as Lauren stood and headed for the door.

“No,” Clark called out desperately. “Stop! There’s no need to leave.”

Lauren turned. “But you’re cooking. I can tell now. I can hear the water bubbling, and smell the pepper. And there’s a sauce ...”

“Stay. Lauren, I’ve made enough for at least three people. I would have just frozen the left-overs.” Clark quietened his voice. “Please. Stay, and have dinner with me.”

He watched as Lauren frowned. She didn’t reply immediately. When her head began nodding Clark felt himself relax. “All right.” She smiled and stepped towards the kitchen. “So what is it?”

“Ahhhh.” Clark’s eyes widened in fear, suddenly remembering that she was the food critic for the Planet, meaning that she had a particularly discerning palette. “Um, just a concoction of my own. It’s kind of a cross between curry and bolognaise. I guess you have to try it to ... well, um, is that okay?”

Lauren laughed and Clark felt self-conscious at his unintelligible rambling. “Sounds great. How long will it be?” She began looking into the pots and sniffing the air.

“About fifteen minutes.”

“Oh, all right. Um, should we sit back down then? Or do you need to do something? I could always help. I do know about food. Or maybe I could work on a dessert. I know plenty that only take ten minutes preparation.”

“Yeah, sure. I guess we could make something.”

Lauren immediately walked over to the refrigerator and pulled open the door. “Do you have any mascarpone?” she asked while reaching in and pulling out some milk and some butter.

“Ahh,” Clark grimaced. “Not at the moment, no.”

“Right.” Lauren stood upright and turned back to look around the kitchen. “Okay, then, what about flour?”

Clark immediately smiled. “Up here,” he said and reached around to open a door above him revealing all kinds of baking implements and ingredients.

“Fruit?” Lauren asked.

Clark spun around and spread his arms wide. Lauren followed his gaze and blushed when she noticed the table covered in various fruits on clear display right in front of her.

“Okay. I’ll whip up a quick batter, if you cut up some fruit, and we’ll just have pancakes, fruit and cream.”

“Sounds great ... but I do have ice cream, or maple syrup, or even some merengue, and we could do an Eton Mess.”

“Mmmm, yum.” Lauren grinned up at him. She began to collect the items she wanted and placed them neatly in a row on the counter. When she turned back around, and began to look confused, Clark laughed. “I don’t see what’s so funny,” she growled and placed her hands on her hips. “How am I supposed to know where you keep your bowls, and measuring cups ... you want me to just guess?”

“No. I don’t want you to just guess, Lauren.” He laughed good naturedly again and opened the cooking cupboard once more, extracting a glass bowl, a measuring cup and a sieve. “Actually, I was wondering at the placement of the ingredients.” He raised his eyebrows and nodded in the direction of the worktop.

Lauren glanced back over her shoulder and then blushed back at Clark. “Oh. I do that. It’s just my way of putting the ingredients in order, and making sure I haven’t forgotten anything. My dad complains terribly. But if I have even one item missing, or in the wrong place ... He says it’s OCD ... but, come on, what’s wrong with being organised? If it means a better meal, then why does he complain? Does he want Aunt Lois to cook, because her method is particularly disorganised and I can tell you that not a single thing she ever makes is edible and ...”

She suddenly stopped. Clark’s amused face, and quiet chuckles had done nothing to stem her babbling, but when she

began mentioning Lois ... and using present tense, rather than past, he knew his face had changed. Possibly the shock, or the pain, or ... something ... was showing, because Lauren clearly realised what she'd been saying at that moment.

She took a deep breath and her animated face fell. "She's gone. She's never going to cook again," came her quiet, shaky voice. She closed her eyes for a moment and Clark watched her breathe slowly and deeply for another few seconds. "It's probably a good thing," she forced a laugh, to bring some lightness, and dispel the grief. "I don't know how much longer my stomach could have taken her attempts at chicken curry and rice."

Clark smiled, recognising that she was not really insulting her dearly departed Aunt, but acknowledging one of the things that actually *made* her Lauren's beloved 'Aunt Lois'. He figured that it would be a good idea to make a clean break from that small foray into memory and so he strode over to the fruit and picked up a few apples.

"I'll slice some apples, then. I also have grapes, oranges, kiwi, cherries and a fresh pineapple in the refrigerator."

"Sounds perfect," replied Lauren. She turned and opened up the milk then began measuring her ingredients. "I think I have an idea about making lots of tiny, tiny pancakes and we can put them into the whole mess."

"Lovely." Clark took his fruit to the other side of the kitchen and made sure his body hid the surreptitious use of his speed. Pretty soon there was a bowl full of diced pineapple, sliced apple and kiwi, orange segments, grapes and cherries. Clark turned back to the meal and adjusted the heat under the rice and gave the bolognese mixture a stir, adding some final spices. "Oh," he called, "we could add some cinnamon to the batter, if you like."

"Yeah, that would be a great idea." Lauren replied, clearly agreeing with the suggestion. "Although, I wouldn't normally do that. I have a friend who is allergic to all kinds of spices. She'd be in hospital if she came across any cinnamon."

"Oooo, that can't be nice."

"No, it isn't. It has made me be much more careful with ingredients, though. And I've become particularly inventive with the spices that she *can* have. I used her in a series on allergies recently, and took her along to most of my tastings. It was fascinating."

Clark nodded. "I can guess." He stood back and surveyed all the food. "Okay. Everything's coming along nicely, but it does still need another five minutes."

"Perfect timing, Clark," Lauren chirped up from the other side of the room and held up her bowl. "Do you want to do the pancakes, or do you trust me with your pan?" She grinned.

"Hthssssss," Clark pulled in a teasing, shocked breath. "I'm pretty protective when it comes to my ... pans." He grinned back at her. He reached into a cupboard to his left and pulled out a large pan.

Lauren strode over and put down the mixture next to the burners. "Okay ... shoo." She swiped at Clark's arms. "Go, trust me. Set out the table, or put on some background music, or turn on the TV ... whatever it is you usually do."

Clark left Lauren in the kitchen, strangely confident in her ability and completely trusting of her with his pans. He pulled out a tablecloth and covered the table, then even managed to find some place mats. He paused momentarily as he pulled them out of the drawer, remembering them from the farmhouse kitchen. The grief over the loss of his parents was long established in his heart. They had been gone for decades, and it was no longer intensely painful whenever he thought of them. Mostly they were happy memories, and he smiled whenever he thought of them. Sometimes there was even a chuckle of joy.

He resumed setting the table and wondered if his memories of Lois would ever result in the same. Surely there would come a time when his heart would not ache, like it was pierced by an

arrow, at the thought of her. Surely, fifty years of parental memories were stronger than two years of friendship. And if *that* pain could fade, then surely *this* pain would too.

He looked up at Lauren. Maybe it already had begun to. Comforting her yesterday had brought a sliver of closure: something he had never expected to happen, and definitely not so soon, or while he lived surrounded by her memory, day after day, here in this apartment.

He watched as Lauren deftly flipped her mini-mini pancakes then piled them up on a plate she had acquired. She gave the batter another stir and then dropped some more small patches into the pan and waited while they cooked. She pushed her hair behind her ear and Clark suddenly recalled Lois doing exactly the same manoeuvre on many occasions.

As Lauren started a third batch Clark returned and carefully reached past to take the rice off the boil. Lauren turned off the burner for him and flipped her pancakes again. Clark dished out the rice and then returned for his curry-bolognese. Again Lauren turned off the burner for him and then added her finished pancakes to the pile on her left. She turned off the final burner and placed the pan in the sink, giving it a quick swill with the hot tap, along with the bowl. Clark added his concoction to the plates and then took them to the table. Lauren left the pancakes to cool and headed for the table. Clark reached up to his wine rack and removed a simple red wine. Sitting down together they raised their forks and began eating.

"Mmmm," Lauren moaned. "Nice." She pulled the fork out of her mouth and went for a sip of wine. After swallowing Clark saw her pause and breathe deeply. For a moment he worried that she hadn't liked his concoction and was just being polite, but when she spoke he knew that embarrassment over the coming conversation was to blame. "I looked into contesting the will today. I actually do have a case, if I want. Kellen versus Santiago, in 2037, set a precedent for 'unknown factors' which could have changed the deceased person's will. Granted you have to pull in a lot of character witnesses, and there's even a psych evaluation and a lie detector test ... but.

"You're ... you're gonna do it?" Clark panicked, his fork halfway to his mouth.

"I don't know. If it had gone to another relative, maybe, or at least the *wrong* relative. But it's the Superman Foundation. I mean, what a worthy cause. And it would mean voiding your contract, and you'd want your money back. But that's taking money away from the poor, and the sick, and underprivileged. I don't think I could do that." She sighed. "Plus, I know that Aunt Lois considered herself a friend to Superman. She said they were very close when she was younger. So it wasn't just about giving to charity for her. There's always the chance that she still would have ... done this ... even if I'd told her how I felt about this place."

"Oh. I ... well I can't say I'm disappointed, you know." He let his heart relax and he returned to eating. "I have to be truthful with you, Lauren; I want to stay here." He noticed her watching him, her eyes bright with tears. Placing down his fork he leaned forward and covered her hand with his. "But I also understand what you are giving up. I can feel for you." Clark brought his other hand up to his chest. "In here. I know what you are feeling."

She looked up and met his eyes. "Yes. I think you do." He knew his eyes were reflecting his own grief. Sixty years of pain and loneliness. For a few moments they were both frozen in that tableau, only breaking away at the chiming of a clock from the living area. Lauren smiled shyly and then looked away, diving back into the rice.

They ate in silence after that. Clark finished first. Putting his fork down on his plate he reached for his wine and relaxed back into his seat. As he continued to sip at the wine Lauren also

finished. She immediately stood, taking her plate. She passed behind Clark on the way to the kitchen and he caught a whiff of cinnamon from her. He smiled, guessing that there were some remnants of the spice lingering on her clothing. It was almost a certainty, based on what Clark had seen of her personality so far. She was so like Lois, in her manic movements and energy. It was a great possibility ... probability ... that there had been a spillage of the cinnamon whilst Lauren was making the pancakes.

“Are you ready for it?” came the call from the kitchen.

Clark looked up, suddenly. “Pardon?” he called back, frowning.

“The dessert, Clark. Have you finished? Shall I bring it in?”

He looked over to see Lauren checking on her mini-mini pancakes. She turned around and looked, questioningly.

“Oh, yes. Sure.” Clark stood and picked up his plate then took it over to the kitchen worktop. At the sink he found that Lauren had already rinsed off her plate and had it draining. “Aw, you didn’t have to do that Lauren. I’ll clean up later.”

“It’s okay, Clark. It’s another OCD thing. I have to clean up in the kitchen immediately after I’m done with something. Mostly because I can’t **start** any cooking if there is mess, so I then spend ages tidying up, and have no energy left for whatever I want to bake. So I just make sure the kitchen is always tidy.” While babbling she’d been adding her pancakes and crumbling some meringue into the bowl of chopped fruit. “Oh, did you want to keep it separate and serve yourself,” she suddenly asked, bringing her hand to her mouth in embarrassment.

“Nope, all in one bowl is perfectly fine,” Clark replied then opened the freezer and pulled out some vanilla ice-cream. “Do you want it at the table, or back on the couch with the coffees?” he asked casually, not turning round from his search for an ice-cream scoop. When he heard a shocked gasp he whirled around.

“The coffees!” Lauren was looking at him with wide eyes and her hand covering her mouth once more. It seemed to be an instinctive movement for her. She dropped her hand and Clark saw her smiling. “We forgot them. Aww, they’ll be cold.”

“Uh, no. I’ll go look, but I’m sure they will be fine.” Clark strode into the living area with the ice-cream and a spoon. Placing them on the table he then lowered his glasses and sent a little dart of heat into each mug. “It’s okay,” he called to Lauren, then straightened up as if to show that he’d been checking with his hands. “The mugs are quite good, heat retaining, you know.”

“Oh,” Lauren replied. “Well, sitting on the couch with ice-cream could be quite ... indulgent ... or slovenly, then. Whichever descriptive you prefer.”

“Oh definitely ... indulgent. I can’t imagine you ever being slovenly.” Clark grinned at her as she brought the desert in, along with two spoons. Placing it next to the ice cream and the coffees she looked up at Clark and then flicked her gaze away, embarrassed.

“I, uh, couldn’t find any bowls.”

“Oh, um, they’re ... well, I’ll go get ... unless you just want to share from the big bowl?”

“Yeah, we can share,” she nodded and smiled. “But then it definitely moves from indulgent to slovenly.” Lauren laughed and slapped Clark on the arm. Sitting down she reached for a spoon and then slid back. Clark scooped some ice-cream into the larger bowl and then picked it up, placing it on the couch in between the two of them.

There was very little talk for the next few minutes. The fruit, meringue, pancake, ice-cream mix began to dwindle and the light began to dim. Clark reached behind him and flicked on a lamp, not wanting to move from his cross-legged position facing Lauren, with the bowl in between. He put his spoon back in the bowl, fishing out some pineapple and ice-cream. As he brought it back to his mouth he looked up. Lauren was staring at the lamp behind him. She opened her mouth, then closed it. She dropped

her spoon back in the bowl and looked at her wrist, checking the gold watch inherited from her Aunt.

“Oh my goodness. I can’t believe how late it is.” She untangled her legs and almost stumbled off the couch. “I only meant to visit for a few minutes.” She grasped her coffee and gulped it down. “I mean, I must admit that I hoped you’d offer me a drink, but I never expected ... oh no, you must think me so presumptuous. I didn’t mean to stay so long. I’m sorry. I’ll just be off now. Thank for you dinner, it was fantastic. I’ll be going now. Thank you.”

By now she was at the door. Clark stood and followed her. “Lauren, it’s okay.” She turned to look up at him. Her eyes were glistening with tears. Possibly she really didn’t want to leave her Aunt’s apartment, but knew that she should. They were strangers. They shouldn’t be acting so ... friendly ... in such a short space of time. It was only fitting that she leave.

But he didn’t want her to.

“I don’t mind. You can stay, if you’d like.” Clark tried not to sound desperate and lonely.

“I think ... I’d like to stay ... and that’s why I have to go.” She turned, opened the door, and was gone again.

Chapter 3

Lauren stood at the door, ready to knock. She didn’t know why she was nervous. She’d been around so many times over the last two months — since those first few visits. Her job required her to review restaurants, and eating establishments, on a regular basis, and that traditionally happened in an evening. But otherwise ... almost every free evening was spent in this apartment. Yet somehow, sometime along the way, she’d stopped visiting to be reminded of Aunt Lois, and started visiting to spend time with Clark Jonson. In fact, *he* was now her best friend. And so ... she was nervous.

It didn’t help that he was mind-numbingly gorgeous.

Aunt Lois’ Clark had been gorgeous too. She’d said so on a couple of occasions. Lauren had teased her about being in love with her ‘drop-dead gorgeous’ partner. Aunt Lois had cried, shouted and nearly thrown her out, and Lauren had never used that term again.

But it was true. Aunt Lois had definitely been in love with Clark Kent. And he’d died. She had regretted missing out on a life with Clark for the rest of her own life. But it was the only thing she let herself regret. She’d made sure that every other part of her life was full of love, full of rewarding relationships ... and without regret.

And that was why Lauren would find the courage to do this. No regrets. And if she turned around and walked away, just because she’d realised last night that she was in love, then that would definitely become a regret.

She knocked as confidently as she could.

The door opened only moments later and she looked up into the beautiful face of her best friend. He was wearing faded blue jeans and an extremely tight black t-shirt. On most occasions that she had visited he had been in reasonably smart, but casual, clothes. Once or twice he’d been in a suit, but with the tie discarded ... somewhere. A few times he’d been as relaxed as this. But never before had she seen ... in such clear detail ... the contours of his biceps and chest. She caught her breath immediately.

“Lauren,” he smiled. “I hoped you might pop over tonight. I was thinking of watching a movie. Come on in.” Clark nodded to the side and then moved to let her in. As she followed she let out the breath and managed to keep from fainting through loss of oxygen.

“What did you have in mind?” she called as Clark walked away, heading for the kitchen.

“Well, if you hadn’t come I was thinking of some kind of

action. Maybe a cop movie, or spy.” Clark came back from the kitchen holding a bottle of wine and two glasses. He raised them in question and she nodded. “But we can log into InstaWatch and take a look. I don’t mind a comedy or something like that, if that’s your preference.”

Lauren settled herself into the couch, her favourite spot, after removing her jacket. When Clark perched next to her she knew her heart skipped a beat but he just reached over to the coffee table and placed down the bottle and glasses. “Uh, I don’t mind the action movie. I used to watch them all the time with Aunt Lois. I think her crush on Mel Gibson rubbed off on me. Lethal Weapon is one of my favourites. And I’m hopelessly in love.” She widened her eyes. “With Mel, that is,” she quickly added.

“Mel Gibson? Really?” Clark turned to look at her in shock. His face clearly displayed his surprise at her statement. “I can’t believe that.”

“Why not? Why shouldn’t I like him? Mel Gibson was a superb actor, as well as being incredibly sexy.”

“I’m not disputing that, just saying that women of your age are usually more into Louis Schwarzenegger, or Gary Windsor Evans.”

“What do you mean ‘of my age’. You sound like my grandfather.” Lauren frowned at him, pretending to be a little offended.

“What?” Clark’s eyes widened and his face paled. She watched as his throat bobbed up and down.

“Well, you are the same generation as me. It was a strange phase to use.”

“Whatever made you think I was the same generation as you?” Clark grinned, the colour back in his face. He turned and began to peel at the foil surrounding the wine cork. His teasing always made her grin, uncontrollably, and this was no exception.

“What generation are you from, if not mine. Come on Clark. You look around thirty two, thirty three.”

“And that would be your generation because ...?” He trailed away and raised his eyebrows just as the cork popped on the wine bottle.

“Thirty,” she replied shyly.

Clark poured the wine into the two glasses and then slid back into the couch, getting comfy. Lauren reached for her wine and then did the same.

“T.V. on,” Clark spoke into the small remote he had picked up. After a second the monitor on the far wall sprung to life. “InstaWatch.”

While the system processed Clark’s requests, Lauren took a sip of the deep red wine. Pictures flickered across the screen randomly, then finally settled on a shot of a man running down a city block, gun in one hand and cop badge held out in the other.

“So, Mel Gibson? Or are you up for something more ... contemporary?” Clark looked at her, waiting.

“You really think I should be into Louis Schwarzenegger?”

“Or Gary Windsor Evans,” Clark reminded her.

“Oh, please. He is such an arrogant jerk. Just because he looks like the reincarnation of James Dean, and claims to be British royalty, and managed to snag Jessica Jones after they starred in *From Heaven With Love*. If I was going to crush on anyone contemporary it would be ...” She let her words trail off as she racked her brains. Who did she like? Which actors drew her to a film, even if she might not have liked it otherwise? “Timothy Clooney.”

“Really?” Clark’s eyebrows disappeared into his hairline, clearly shocked at her choice of actor.

“Or that guy who’s made a living out of playing Superman ... Devon Cain. He’s dreamy.”

“Yeah, I guess he’s on most women’s list.” Clark sounded a little uncomfortable.

“Just like Superman himself, eh?” She smiled, envisioning

Superman standing in front of her, smiling back. “His dad played Clark Kent in *The Resurrection of Al Capone*, you know.”

Clark had his wine glass to his lips and he began coughing. Sitting up straight he leaned forward to place down his glass. A final cough cleared the liquid from his throat. “Uh, no. I didn’t know that. I’ve never watched it.”

“Ahhh. Aunt Lois hasn’t ... hadn’t either.” Lauren still made rare mistakes with the tenses she used when mentioning Aunt Lois, but it didn’t automatically result in a crying fit anymore.

“So ... have we chosen?” Clark seemed awfully quiet, and strangely embarrassed. “I have been wanting to watch the new James Bond.”

“Oh. Um, sure. I guess that would be okay. I’ve heard that Stuart Edwards is hilarious as the new Q.”

“James Bond,” Clark spoke clearly into his hand-held remote. “Yeah,” he turned away from the remote to reply to Lauren. “I’ve heard that too.”

The screen was suddenly filled with still shots and titles of many James Bond films. Lauren scooted forward on the couch to take a closer look, but got distracted by a reflection on the coffee table in front of her. “Oh, Clark. You spilled some wine when you had that coughing fit.” She stood, forcefully. “I’ll go get a cloth to wipe it up.”

“No, it’s okay. It’s my apartment. I should ...” but Lauren was already in the kitchen.

Clark sighed. As always, an evening with Lauren was a combination of funny, embarrassing, manic, happy, relaxing, sad, wistful and utterly mortifying for him. Luckily she didn’t notice the embarrassment, or know his reason for it; usually some reference to Clark Kent, or Superman. That conversation had been the worst so far, managing to link Clark Kent to Superman in two easy steps. He groaned and dropped his head, resting it in his palms.

“Oh hey, this cabinet is new,” Lauren called from behind.

“Yeah, I’ve been meaning to put it together and get out all my books for weeks.” He lifted his head and then noticed the moment her heart rate changed. There was a shocked intake of breath and he immediately suspected what she’d seen. His heart began to pound.

“You have her books.” Her voice was a shocked whisper.

“Huh?” he effected casually and turned to look over the back of the couch.

“Aunt Lois. You have her books. The *Wanda Detroit* series. Joanne Kent was her pseudonym.”

“Really?” Clark squeaked out, not at all managing to sound casual. He turned back around and reached for his wine hoping that this would distract her from her current subject.

Lauren turned from the bookcase and returned to the couch. Using the cloth in her hand she wiped the splash of red wine from the table and then held it out for Clark to wipe the bottom of his glass. She sat down and then reached for her own wine. “I’ve read them five times.” She shuffled back into place, cradling the glass in her hands, and to her chest. “I’m presuming you’ve read them. They look read, rather than new. Although I guess someone could have given them to you in that condition. You seem the kind to enjoy reading, though, and your shelves look to be full of all kinds of books.”

“I’ve read them,” he interrupted, trying to cut off her babbling.

“Good.” She smiled at him. “Do you have a favourite? I do. I love the second book. When Wanda is falling in love and finally realising that her best friend is her soulmate.” She took a sip of the wine and leaned back, closing her eyes. “I could tell that from the first book though. I think it was the scene where he saves her from Mr. Chameleon.”

Clark took another gulp of wine. His heart was racing. He hoped desperately that his trembling fingers wouldn’t cause

another spillage. Clark had read the books, a few times. The growing relationship between Wanda and Charlie had so clearly mirrored himself and Lois in the first book. But it had become clear that he'd read too much into that when the two had, happily, got together in the second book.

"Um, I think I like the fourth book best." His reply, although truthful in some respect, was also a lie from another viewpoint. "The closeness, the love and trust between Wanda and Charlie, is what I always imagined marriage to be like, but it hadn't dulled their lives either." Still, knowing that he could never have that, and it was just a fantasy, meant that he sometimes preferred the first book ... knowing that it really was *him* in that book. But only that book. Once the second book came along ... Charlie was no longer 'Clark'.

Because Clark died. And Charlie didn't.

"You know, I often wondered if they were autobiographical. Wanda seems so like Aunt Lois." Lauren trailed her finger around the top of her glass. "She claimed not ... said it was definitely all fantasy ... in her mind." She dipped her finger into the red liquid, absent-mindedly, and then lifted it to her lips. Sucking off the liquid she then dropped her hand, swirling her glass around with the other. "I think I figured it out once, though. It was both. She used these books to live the life that she'd really wanted with Clark."

Clark paused. His heart had ceased beating. Lois had wanted *that* life, with him. He took a breath then reached out to drop the cloth, which was still in his hand, onto the table. He knew that Lauren was right. Recalling Lois' letter to him, which had revealed her love for him, and her knowledge of his other life, it was clear now. Wanda and Charlie really was ... Lois and Clark.

He struggled to think, tears forming in his eyes. Thankfully Lauren stood and picked up the cloth then walked away again. He put down his wine and then held his head in his hands, resting his elbows on his knees. "Pull yourself together, Clark," he muttered to himself, "before your guest sees, and wonders why the heck you are crying and shaking."

"Have you found it?" Lauren called from the kitchen. Clark looked up, shocked out of his sadness. A quick swipe of his cheeks revealed no evidence of his feelings.

"Um, no. Give me a minute."

"Okay."

Clark picked up the remote and tried to steady his breathing before speaking any further instructions into the device.

"I'm just gonna ..." Clark looked up to see Lauren standing at the end of the couch. She was nodding with her head in the direction of his bathroom. "I'm gonna ... you know. Just be a sec. Okay?"

"Sure." Clark turned back to the TV and scrutinised the pictures that were displayed.

In the bathroom Lauren washed her hands, dried them on Clark's masculine dark grey towels, then looked up to assess her countenance in the mirror. A little smudge of makeup was visible over her left eye so she used her middle finger to smooth it. A funny wisp of hair was stuck up at the back of her parting so she ran the cold tap and grabbed a couple of drops of water on her fingers then attempted to encourage it into place. Straightening her top, once done, she gave herself a smile and then nodded her head, ready to go back out to Clark.

Watching a movie was probably the best thing that could have happened tonight. There was a chance she could manoeuvre his arm around her, and a snuggle, especially if it was an action movie, with explosions. Tonight could be the start of things. Good things. Exciting things.

She grinned and stepped back out of the bathroom heading for the living area. She passed the new bookshelf, but from this angle she could see that the books were actually shifted forwards and there was a space behind them. A section of shelf was hidden.

Immediately curious, Lauren craned her neck to see over the books.

Her eyes widened and she opened her mouth in shock to see a familiar glass award. Aunt Lois had won dozens of them, most kept hidden away, with a couple displayed ... in a similar kind of shelf. Lauren frowned and reached to push the books to one side. Clark had said he was a children's book editor, so he was clearly in the writing profession. Possibly that was a new thing and he'd been in journalism until recently. A tingle started at the top of her spine. Clark ... journalist. It was just a spooky coincidence. The books moved and she peered through the gap to read the inscription on the Kerth Award.

Clark Kent.

She stumbled backwards. Whirling round she stared into the living area, and the man sitting on the couch, facing away from her and fumbling with his TV remote. The latest James Bond film popped up on screen and Clark called out. "Found it." He didn't turn. Lauren breathed a sigh of relief. If he had, he would have probably seen the whitest face ever, surrounded by jet black hair, mouth wide open. She turned back to the shelf and replaced the books; Aunt Lois' books.

On shaky legs she returned to the couch. The wine waited for her on the table. The couch waited for her, comfy and inviting. She could sit back down, and hope that Clark would snuggle up to her. She could reach for the glass and then gulp the whole lot down in one swallow. That seemed like a good idea.

She stood at the edge of the couch but was unable to move any further.

"Lauren," Clark turned and looked up at her. "Everything all right?" He stood and approached her, clearly concerned at whatever he saw on her face.

"I ... I," she gazed into his eyes. Almost losing herself in their tender concern she swayed towards him. "I have to go. I'm sorry."

She reached for her bag and jacket, on the floor next to the couch, and then fled. She ignored Clark's calls of protest and ran for the elevator.

Chapter 4

"Lauren." Clark was staring at her in shock, his mouth wide. Suddenly the shock changed to joy and she saw his eyes light up and his mouth curl into a smile. "Lauren. I'm so glad you've come round. You left so quickly last night. What happened?"

"I, uh." She gulped. "Maybe I'll tell you later, okay? Can I come in?" She looked up at him, hopefully.

"Sure." He moved to the side and opened the door wider so that she could enter the apartment.

"Do you want to watch the James Bond movie, then? I never watched it last night." His voice was bright and cheery.

Lauren turned around to see him closing the door. When he turned back and met her eyes she could see his genuine desire to make her at ease — to make her happy — written all over his face. She'd run out last night, before they had watched even a second of the film. He'd been meaning to watch a film that evening, even if she didn't come around. Yet, he'd obviously decided **not** to watch it once she left. Probably, he hoped she'd come back another time and they could enjoy it together.

The only question was ... why would he want her to come round again? Was it a 'friend only' thing, or was there a chance that he could feel something for her, the way that she felt for him?

But after all her constant cyclical thinking last night at home ... she'd come to the conclusion that he couldn't. Either he just didn't want a relationship with a woman, or he'd been in love with Aunt Lois — and probably still was, if the depth of *her* love for *him* was any indication, or he'd be reminded of Lois whenever he saw her, or he would make the same decision to

serve the world rather than love ...

He was still waiting for an answer and she was just staring at him.

“Lauren?”

“Uh, no. I’m not here to watch a movie. At least, not tonight.” In fact, she didn’t really know why she was here ... except that it had something to do with regrets ... and not having any. It was the same reason that she’d come round last night — not having regrets. She didn’t want to regret not ‘going for it’ with Clark. But that was before she knew he was *the* Clark. Clark Kent. So ... this night’s regrets, or the reason for **not** having regrets was probably more to do with cowardice. She’d toyed with the idea of never seeing him again, due to fear of having to confront all his history, all his celebrity. But that was cowardly. Aunt Lois would never have run from such an awkward situation just because she was afraid to face it. The reason she’d never told Clark her feelings ... was due to him being dead! But now ... he was somehow ‘alive’ again ... with a new identity.

So she’d convinced herself to come. But had no idea what to say, what to do, now that she was here.

“Is everything all right? You said you’d tell me what caused you to leave ...” There was a gentle smile on Clark’s face

“I said maybe ...”

“Then if we are not going to watch a movie, and you’re not going to tell me, then ... why are you here?” His smile had faded, to be replaced by a concerned frown.

“I ... can we just sit? And maybe talk. And a coffee would be nice.”

“Of course. Coffee.” Clark nodded, acquiescing to her desire to change the subject, and strode into the kitchen. Lauren stood in place, unable to move. If she took a step towards the kitchen, towards Clark, then she was bound to blurt something out. Something inappropriate, or embarrassing, or worse. If she moved to the couch then she could drop into her familiar position. They’d slip into watching the movie, and she’d let the evening just drift on ...

She lifted her hand to her forehead, unable to make a decision. How did she want to proceed? Did she want to confront him, or just let everything meander on as normal? She was still in that position when Clark returned from the kitchen. He placed two mugs onto the coffee table and sat on the couch. “Lauren, please sit down.” He spoke gently. She drifted over to the couch, almost as if invisible strings were pulling her to Clark. She perched at the very far end. Further from Clark than she’d ever placed herself, even on the very first visit, when he was a stranger. “Lauren,” Clark sighed and then smiled, encouragingly. “Please tell me what is wrong.” He lifted a hand and motioned up and down, clearly indicating her choice of seating and her uncomfortable stance. “Please.”

Lauren forced herself to shuffle along and settle back, after picking up her coffee. “I’m sorry Clark. I can’t say ... yet.” Clark opened his mouth as if to plead with her again. She could see the distress on his face. He hated to see her hurting. Whether that was just his natural compassion, which had led him to devote himself to saving the world for sixty years, or whether it was because he had ... feelings for her, she didn’t know. She desperately hoped it was the latter. “No, Clark. I’m sorry. Just leave it, please.” She cut him off before he could say something. “Maybe we *should* watch the movie.”

“If that’s what you want, Lauren. But I have to let you know that I’m worried about you. You know you can tell me anything. At least let me know that you are not in trouble, or worried about something.”

“It’s nothing to worry about, Clark. I’m not in trouble. Really, I’m not.” She had to repeat herself at the look on his face; a look of true concern. Suddenly a passage from *Wanda and the Entrepreneur* came back to her and she remembered Charlie

constantly worrying about Wanda, and how she got herself into trouble. With what Lauren now knew, she recognised that Clark must have been constantly worried about Aunt Lois, mostly because of her propensity for life-threatening situations, but also because of his hero complex, and feeling responsible for the safety of the world. “If we watch the movie, maybe I’ll relax and feel like opening up,” she offered in the hope that he would drop the subject — for now. Maybe she would know how she wanted to approach this situation by the time the movie was over.

“Okay.” Clark reached forward and picked up the remote from the coffee table. “T.V. on,” he spoke into it as he relaxed back. Once the T.V. had sprung to life he spoke again. “InstaWatch. Nation of Deception.” Lauren watched as half the screen displayed a picture of the James Bond movie, and the other half of the screen listed alternative choices, in case the remote had misinterpreted the instructions. Lauren smiled to herself, glancing down the list and seeing *National Deception 1 & 2*, *Natural Deception*, *The Nature of Deception*, *Natalie Note: Teen Detective*, and ‘*Wallace and Gromit’s*’ *Cheese of Deception*.

When she heard a chuckle come from beside her she turned to see Clark trying hard not to laugh. “Cheese of Deception?” she questioned. He nodded and his grin grew even more. “Maybe we should watch that next?”

“Maybe,” he replied and turned to beam at her. She grinned back, and all her worry dissipated. Clark was still Clark. Even if he did have a pretty awesome and awe-inspiring second job. Even if he was half a century older than her. Even if she was in love. Even if he didn’t love her back.

He was still Clark. Her best friend. The man who comforted her through the worst of her grief when Aunt Lois died. The man who made her laugh, and smile. The man who made her heart pound with a single look.

There was no need to worry, no need for nerves. Whatever happened tonight ... if she told him how she felt, or if she instead revealed she knew his secret, or even if it was just a completely normal night ... she knew that everything was all right. Clark would always look after her, always be her friend.

She felt a weight lift from her chest and a gentle smile settled on her face. She leaned back into the comfortable cushions and watched as the movie started and the familiar production company opening credits began to roll up. She was momentarily thrown back to the previous evening, at home, after her abrupt departure.

She’d watched *The Resurrection of Al Capone*, after doing as much research on Clark Kent as she could in two hours, and it had been the exact same production company. The internet was full of information, but pictures were actually few and far between. Still, she’d found enough to confirm her suspicions, and leave her with not even a sliver of doubt in her mind, especially once she had discovered that Clark Kent’s father was called Jonathan, so he was ‘Jonathan’s son’ — Jonson — and that his mother’s maiden name was Clark. Needing to understand even more about this extraordinary man she’d gone to the only other source ... the movie. While it had shed light on a few questions, she now understood why Aunt Lois had refused to watch it, stating that it was too far removed from the truth. Lauren could now read between the lines of that comment too. Clark Kent didn’t actually die. And the scenes between Lois and Superman ... well they were utter fiction.

And this new revelation also explained why she’d left her apartment to The Superman Foundation. It was really the only way to leave Clark something in her will without raising even the tiniest of suspicions. Legacies in wills, especially legacies of homes, were very popular. There would be no questions raised.

The iconic ‘Duh du-dl-uh-duuuuh de de de, duh du-dl-uh-duuuuh de de de,’ music began playing and James Bond walked through the ‘bullet’s eye view’ then shot at the screen. Lauren

jumped a little at the gunshot as she'd been too lost in her thoughts. Clark turned at her sudden jerk and smiled. He lifted his arm and put it round her shoulders then drew her close. Her heart skipped a beat. "Is this okay?" he asked. She nodded, mutely, while looking up into his face. "I've heard it's the most action-filled Bond film yet. If you are feeling a little jumpy ... maybe I should just stay like this." He grinned and she realised that he was trying to distract her in his generally friendly manner. When she didn't laugh in agreement, or make a comment back, he frowned. She saw a little crinkle in his forehead as he drew his brows together. "Lauren?" He sounded serious again.

She couldn't think, she couldn't breathe. Her heart was racing. The calm, brought on by her realisation that everything would be alright, had vanished. This was the very scenario she had been hoping for last night when Clark had suggested watching a movie. But everything was different now that she knew who he really was. And she still didn't know what her motivation for visiting this evening was. She knew what her *true* heart's desire was, but she also had a very pragmatic side. Part of her knew that some people had responsibilities that came before love. And part of her also knew that she was not worthy of what she wished for. Her view of herself ... her ego ... was pretty low.

And she knew she could never live up to her Aunt. This man ... this *Superman* ... had loved Aunt Lois with a rare passion ... if Lauren understood everything she'd learned from the internet, from the *Wanda Detroit* books and from her Aunt. And she, in no way, compared to the legend that was Lois Lane.

"Clark," she choked out on a strangled breath. Tears welled up and immediately rolled down her cheeks.

"Oh, Lauren. Please tell me what's wrong. Whatever it is ... I'll make it better. I promise."

"I need ..." she paused and licked her lips. Clark tightened his arm around her shoulder. It was so like her hopes from yesterday evening.

"What, what is it you need?" His face was so close. His voice so gentle.

"I ..." Again she paused, unable to speak the words, but getting more and more lost in her fantasy. Passing the point of no return she gave in to the desire of her heart and pushed up, her lips meeting his.

Clark parted his lips in shock. He'd been worried about Lauren since she fled, suddenly, last night. His relief, at seeing her at the door, had been great, but only lasted a few seconds once he realised there was still something wrong. He'd been trying to encourage her to open up, but also wanted to be a truly supportive and understanding friend, and not push where it wasn't wanted. His comforting 'arm around the shoulder' had resulted in a most unexpected ... but not unpleasant ... outcome.

He pulled away, gently pushing against her shoulders. While the meeting of his lips with hers had been brief, he still felt their loss, significantly. He had no misconceptions about his attraction to this small woman in his arms. She'd been in his dreams almost every night since her first visit. But he was also under the impression that this attraction was only because his subconscious was using her as a substitute for Lois. She deserved better than that. She deserved someone who could love her as Lauren, rather than *Faux Lois*. Someone who could grow old with her rather than look only three more years older at her funeral. Someone ... who wasn't old enough to be her grandfather.

Lauren moaned, almost inaudibly, and pushed back up to meet his lips again. Clark was prepared this time, and pushed again at her shoulders. She opened her eyes and dropped her head, moving away. Clark felt her moving away emotionally too, and regretted his actions immediately. He'd hurt her and that had not been his intention.

"I'm sorry, Clark." She pulled further away. "I should never have done that. I'll go." She moved to stand and he tightened his

hands on her shoulders.

"No. Lauren, don't. You did nothing wrong. **I'm** the one who pushed **you** away. And not for any reason that you think."

"Clark ... I ..."

"Lauren," he interrupted her, then paused and sighed. "Tell me what's wrong, please?" When she didn't continue, or reply, he lifted a hand from one shoulder and brushed it across her cheek. "Why did you come tonight? Why did you run last night? What's going on?"

Clark watched as Lauren's eyes sparkled brightly with moisture and sadness. She tilted her head into his hand and he automatically cupped her cheek. Her eyes closed as she burrowed into his palm and a tear escaped, travelling down her cheek and into his hand.

"I need to know something, Clark," she whispered, her eyes still closed.

"What?"

She opened her eyes and lifted her head up straight. "How you feel about me."

Clark pulled his hand away suddenly, as if burned, although that was not physically possible. He should have seen this coming when she'd tried to kiss him. But the kiss itself had come as such a surprise. He'd never suspected that Lauren had a romantic interest in him. She was always so vibrant and full of energy — not counting any moments of grief, which were now less frequent than they had been. She'd never shown any signs of nervousness, or flirtation. Nothing which would have clued him in to this scenario. She'd been the perfect 'friend'.

Plus, he had to admit, that he'd compared her to her Aunt. Lois had taken months to warm up to him, and a year or more to fall in love. He'd expected the same of Lauren ... Not that she'd eventually 'fall in love' but that she would take time to create some kind of emotional attachment, such as friendship.

Possibly he needed to tell his subconscious to stop comparing her to Lois. She was her own woman.

"I must admit that I'm attracted to you. But I have to be honest ... I think it's because you remind me of someone. And you should be loved as Lauren, not as a substitute for someone else."

"You're attracted to me?"

"Truthfully ... yes." He stood and began to pace, running his hand through his hair. "But it's more complicated than that, Lauren."

"What's complicated about attraction, Clark." She stood too. "I think it's one of the simplest things in the world."

He shook his head slowly. "There's so much you don't know, don't understand."

"But I do." She stepped forward. "I understand better than you realise. You see ... I'm just like my Aunt. She was in love with a man called Clark. She would have given up everything to be with him. I'm just like her." Clark sucked in a shocked breath. Lauren thought she was 'in love' with him. She wasn't just talking about attraction. "But I don't want to be," she continued. "She never told him. She never got to spend her life with him." She paused and gulped. Clark watched her as her, barely visible, Adam's apple bobbed up and down. "I need to know something. Aunt Lois missed out on something ... special ... in her life. I don't want to miss it ... if there is a chance. I need to know. Is there a chance. Could you ... love me, the way you loved her?"

"What?" Clark paled and stepped away.

"At least ... I think you loved her. I know she loved you, and I've read her books five times, remember. I can read between the lines. I even went home and watched *The Resurrection of Al Capone* last night, and I re-read a lot of your joint articles. Then there was the memoirs that Perry White published. He ... he said that when you died he lost a great reporter, but he also lost a son, and he was convinced that you were in love with her ... that you

two would get together in the end.”

“Lauren, I ...”

“She regretted never telling you. I’m just like Aunt Lois, and I’m not like her too. She was in love with a man named Clark Kent. I’m just like her. But, she never told him that she loved him. I don’t want to be like her in that.”

Clark looked down at his feet and put his hands in his pockets. Turning away he took a few steps before turning back. “You’re nothing like her. She used to frustrate me. I’d worry about her all the time. Always be on edge. Never relaxed.” He took his hands out of his pockets and raised one to gesture at her. “With you, I feel at peace. It took me months to earn her trust. You trusted me immediately. She took two years to figure out I was Superman. You took two months.”

As those words hit the air — verbalised, rather than hidden away in the corners of his mind — Clark realised that Lauren really was nothing like Lois ... and yet he was still attracted to her. He still ... wanted her. His heart began to pound in shock and wonder. He loved Lauren ... because she was Lauren.

“I know you loved her. Probably still do.”

He nodded. “Always will.” He knew the truth of his statement, but he actually wasn’t thinking about Lois at that moment. He was letting himself truly see the small woman standing in front of him, offering him her heart ... her life.

“I know. And I know that you love the world. Superman’s capacity for love and compassion is ... never ending. You have room in your heart for so many people ... for the whole world. But, what about individuals, friends ... what about romantic love. Are you sure there is no room in your heart for another?”

“I think ...” he paused and stepped forward. “There is.”

Reaching up a hand he cupped her cheek as he had done back at the beginning of this conversation. Ever so slowly he lowered his head until his lips brushed hers. Clark felt a breath whisper past his lips as Lauren sighed. He straightened back up and watched as she opened her eyes, dreamily.

“Lois left me a letter,” he began. Lauren nodded but he could see a sudden wariness in her eyes, as if she were afraid to hear what was coming. “In it she told me to live again. Well, I started doing that a few months ago, but I have to admit that, while I’m seriously enjoying having a life, my new career ... whenever you visit it feels like when Lois and I were partners, I feel ‘alive’. She also told me to love again. She wanted me to find someone who would love me. She wondered if that person would be just like her ... or completely the opposite. Strangely enough ... she is both. That person is you. Oh, I don’t think she ever suspected that it was literally you, Lauren, but you fulfil her criteria, perfectly.”

“Are you saying you love me?”

“I’m saying I *could* love you. I possibly already do. I know I’m actually severely attracted to you. I know that I respect you. I miss you when you are not here. I ... I want you in my life. In fact, the first day you visited, my subconscious seemed to know that you belonged here. And now I know that it’s not just the *apartment* that you belong *in*, but it’s *me* you belong *with*. Lauren, I’d like to give this a try. If ... if you think you can deal with all my complications.”

“Clark ...” She let her eyes wander around his face. “No regrets,” she whispered to herself. Pushing up on her tiptoes her lips met his and, this time, he didn’t push away.

THE END