

The Wrong Man

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Rating: PG

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Summary: Clark has left Metropolis and Lois is engaged to Daniel Scardino. Is everything at an end for our favorite couple? Or will fate intervene?

Story Size: 14,741 words (80Kb as text)

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Author's note: Quite some time ago, there was a thread on the boards that posed a whole bunch of 'what-ifs'. The list ended up being pretty long, and I copied it for possible future story ideas.

One of the ideas was "What if Lois made it to Clark's apartment after he'd already left (in Whine Whine Whine)". I started writing this story, then forgot about it for quite some time (read: years). It languished on my hard drive until I went looking for a WIP to finish. I found the beginnings, inspiration struck, and I finally finished writing the story.

This story has absolutely zero A-plot (even if you squint), so if you're not a fan of angst with a side of WAFF, this story probably isn't for you.

Thanks go to my beta-readers, KenJ and Trina, whom I bombarded with chapters and who responded with lightning speed.

Chapter 1

Lois regarded the diamond ring glinting on her left hand with a feeling of unreality.

Rekindling her romance with Dan Scardino in the abyss left by Clark's disappearance had been a thing born of impulse, an attempt to stave off the loneliness that came from losing her best friend.

It was never supposed to get this far.

But now she found herself engaged for the second time in three years. She should be over the moon, blissfully, ecstatically happy.

Instead, all she felt was ... indifferent. She'd accepted Dan's proposal because it seemed like the sensible thing to do, the next logical step in their relationship, as it were, and she intended to see this wedding through. So what if there was no real spark between her and Dan — at least on her side? Plenty of people went their whole lives without feeling the 'grand passion' described in romance novels. That sort of thing never lasted anyway. Even between her and Clark, she was sure the fire would've burnt itself out — that is, if he hadn't just up and left ...

Stop it, she told herself fiercely. It had been months since anyone at the Planet had heard from her ex-partner. It was like he'd just vanished off the face of the Earth. His by-line hadn't cropped up anywhere in the world, as far as Lois could tell — not even in one of the tiny obscure papers of the type he'd favoured when he'd travelled before arriving in Metropolis. She'd had to conclude that he didn't want to be found, even though part of her wondered where he was and if he ever thought of her.

But this wasn't getting her anywhere. She'd rebuilt her life

just fine without him. She had a job she loved and a fiancé that loved her, and Clark no longer had any place in her life.

She brought up the search that had been continuously running in the background of her computer for as long as he'd been gone, looking for any clue to his whereabouts. With a decisive click of the mouse, she cancelled it.

Clark let the sound of the El train mask his landing in an alley nearby. He spun into his street clothes, thankful that he'd remembered a jacket. Chicago was colder than he'd anticipated, and the last thing he wanted was to be noticed or remembered. Skirting around the stairways that led to the elevated train platform, he blended into the crowd of commuters and stopped at the newsstand halfway down the block. There, he picked up a copy of the Chicago Tribune and more hesitantly, the Daily Planet.

He tried to avoid the Planet. Reading Lois' work just made the constant, yearning ache worse. Her distinctive writing style brought back memories of the woman herself, and on her good days, it was almost like he could see her and touch her once again. He'd pay for it later, but for those shining moments, he was almost happy. It hurt, but it was like an addiction.

He succumbed about once a week.

He paid for his papers and melted back into the crowd, waiting until the opportune moment before he took to the skies once more.

Back in the relative privacy of the tiny hotel room in central Mexico that was currently his, he spread the papers out on the foot of the bed before putting the kettle on to boil. He'd returned to the nomadic existence of his pre-Metropolis days, eking out a living as a freelance travel writer for a small provincial newspaper in Florida. Writing under an assumed name, it had been hard going at first but now, almost a year later, his columns were starting to be picked up by larger papers. That was the reason behind his trip to Chicago. One of his columns had been published in one of the Tribune's Sunday supplements. With his travels — and thus his articles — centring on destinations off the beaten track, it was quicker to fly to Chicago to find a copy of the Trib than it was to find one out here.

Coffee mug in hand, Clark forced himself to read the Tribune from cover to cover at normal speed before starting on the Planet.

It wasn't one of Lois' better days, he noticed. While she had a story on the front page, it was minor, a follow-up to an earlier story. He was both relieved and disappointed, reading on to catch up with the news from the city he still considered home.

Skimming the classifieds, he was about to close the newspaper when a single announcement caught his eye.

'Scardino – Lane

Dennis and Alice Scardino are pleased to announce the engagement of their son, Daniel, to Lois, daughter of Samuel and Ellen Lane. Wedding arrangements will be disclosed at a later date.'

The paper slipped from his suddenly nerveless fingers onto the floor as he struggled to catch his breath.

Lois was getting married. To Scardino. He felt like he'd been kicked in the guts, and despite his best efforts, tears sprung to his eyes. Although she'd chosen Scardino on that terrible day back in Metropolis, while she remained unengaged and unmarried, he'd been able to kid himself that there was still hope, that one day she'd come to love him as much as he loved her.

Now it was all at an end.

Shaking his head in rejection of the news, he felt the familiar stabbing ache intensify as his heart broke once more. Trying to escape, he launched himself through the window, rattling the surrounding buildings as he broke the sound barrier.

He landed in the Arctic, in the same place he'd visited that long ago day when Lois had accepted Luthor's proposal. As he had on that day, he screamed out his pain to the empty landscape,

hearing his voice echo back at him before sinking into a heap on the ice.

Chapter 2

The next few weeks passed by in a blur. Clark went about his daily life on autopilot, moving from place to place and writing his column almost without thinking. After a brief visit to his parents where he'd tersely informed them of Lois' upcoming nuptials, he hadn't allowed himself to speak of her. That part of his life was past, gone forever.

But that didn't stop him from thinking about her.

The nights were the worst. He'd toss and turn, trying to sleep and failing, torturing himself with memories and fantasies until he'd drive himself to put on the Suit and go looking for someone to help. Anything to take his mind off Lois Lane.

Two months passed, and the New Year found Clark deep in the highlands of Costa Rica. He'd spent Christmas in Smallville with his parents, deliberately avoiding any mention of Lois or Metropolis — something that he knew had both annoyed and worried his mother. He'd tried his best to appear happy so as not to spoil his parents' Christmas, but the only real glimmer of happiness had come in the form of a letter from the paper that published his articles down in Florida. The Daily Planet had picked up his column. Now, after a quick trip Stateside, he stood in his hotel room with the Sunday edition of the Planet in his hand. It was the first one to carry his column, and the thought that an article of his was once again sharing space with one of Lois' — even if she didn't know it — brought an increasingly rare smile to his face.

Lois took a sip of her coffee and turned the page of the Sunday lifestyle supplement with disinterest. It was her day off, and there was no pressing need for her to be in the newsroom — hence the leisurely perusal of the Sunday edition of the Planet. She'd come in any way, using a story as an excuse to avoid Dan and his constant pressure to set a date for the wedding.

Turning another page, she forced herself to read at least the first few lines of the travel section. It was an article on Nicaragua this week, she noted — a place that wouldn't have been her first choice for a vacation. The first paragraph, however, was enough to make her sit bolt upright and put her coffee mug down. Laying the paper flat on her desk, she read the column through and then read it again. The by-line said Jerome King, but there was no denying it. The phrasing, the choice of words, the ability to draw the reader in, and the way the writer painted a vivid picture in a relatively short piece...

It was Clark's work.

She'd know it anywhere. After all, she'd written with him and edited his copy for two years before he'd disappeared. This column wasn't the hard-hitting investigative reporting that was her forte, but it had Clark's undeniable talent for human interest stories written all over it.

Lois got to her feet, paper in hand, and strode into Perry's office, slamming the door shut behind her.

"The new travel columnist. Who is he?"

"Good morning to you too, Lois."

"Morning, Chief. The travel columnist?"

"I don't actually know. It came from the Chicago Tribune. One of the suits upstairs saw his column, liked it, and insisted we pick it up. Why?"

"Because it's Clark." She leaned over the desk and dropped her copy of the Planet in front of Perry, still opened and folded back to reveal the column that had caught her eye. He picked it up.

"Are you sure? Says here it was written by a Jerome King."

"Perry, he was my partner for two years. Of course, I'm sure. That column was written by Clark Kent; I'd bet my Kerths on it." She collapsed into the chair in front of the desk.

Perry studied the article in question. "It sure sounds like Kent. What about the by-line?"

"Jerome is Clark's middle name. And King was the surname he used when we were undercover at the Metro Club. Is there any way we can confirm it?"

"I can put in a call to Tyner at the Trib, but uh, Lois, what are you going to do? You know, if it is Clark?"

"I'm going to find him and get him to come back to Metropolis."

Perry nodded. "Why?"

"Perry! Don't you want him back?"

"Look, Lois, I know you miss Clark. We all do. But uh, did you ever think that maybe he's better off wherever he is now?"

"Perry..."

"Look, darlin', I try not to interfere in the personal lives of my reporters. But I told you once that that boy would walk on water for you or die tryin', and I stand by that. Now, uh, when you and Clark started dating, and then Dan came on the scene, I was worried. And then, well, when Clark took off in the middle of the night like that, it wasn't hard to put two and two together. I figured that you'd told him you'd chosen Dan."

Lois stared at the editor, unable to speak in order to correct his false assumption. She couldn't tell him that she'd gone to tell Clark that she wanted to be with him after breaking things off with Dan — only to find his apartment vacant.

"The thing is, uh, I know how Clark felt about you. Boy fell for you like a poleaxed steer the day you two met. You getting engaged to Luthor didn't change that, and I'd bet my Elvis collection that you getting engaged to Dan won't have changed it either." He fixed her with a steely glare. "So if you only want him back in Metropolis because you miss your friend, then leave him where he is."

Lois stood and nodded tightly at the chief, managing to escape his office and get to the relative privacy of her desk before the threatening tears started to fall. Had Clark loved her? Granted, she knew he'd had feelings for her, but love? Surely it had been too early in their budding relationship for that? But Perry had said that Clark had fallen for her the day they met. The idea sent a thrill through her, and she smiled through the tears. If it was true...

If it was true, she'd done a lot of damage to Clark Kent. Her smile faded. Perry was right, he was better off wherever he was now. He was better off without her.

The thought made her heart ache.

But why had Clark been so sure that she'd choose Dan? When he'd left, she'd taken it as a sure sign that he'd changed his mind about wanting a romantic relationship with her, but if Perry was right — if Clark loved her — it put a whole different spin on things. Packing up his entire apartment like that wasn't the work of a few minutes; it had to have taken hours at least. Superman must have told Clark about their conversation after Superman's court case, but why had Clark assumed that her rejection of Superman meant she wanted to be with Dan? Things hadn't been going all that well between them, but had it really gotten that bad? The only way she'd get answers was by talking to Clark — and that wasn't going to happen.

Chapter 3

A week passed.

Lois had resolutely avoided trying to trace Clark's whereabouts. She knew he was somewhere in Central America, that much was obvious from his article.

It would have been so easy.

She'd planned out how to track him at least a hundred times during that week, and there were so many avenues she could use to find out where he was, or, at least, how to contact him. All it would take was a word to Jimmy, and she'd get the information she wanted, but she resisted.

Instead, she searched out back issues of the Tribune, all the ones that had carried ‘Jerome King’ by-lines, and made copies of his stories. Reading them made her feel like he was right there with her, to the point where several times she’d raised her head and gone to say something to him... and then seen the empty desk across from hers.

As much as she loved reading and re-reading his articles, they were a poor substitute for the flesh and blood man. And she missed him.

Missed his perpetual cheerfulness, his supportiveness, even the arguments. Missed the subtle protectiveness of his hand on the small of her back, the feel of his solid body when he hugged her, the passion of the few kisses they’d shared. Missed his blinding, brilliant smile that could light up a room, his gentle teasing, and all those nights spent sharing pizza while watching a Mel Gibson movie on his couch.

No one had ever understood her the way Clark had. Very few people had even bothered to try.

It wasn’t that she’d forgotten about the more negative things about Clark Kent, like her conviction that he’d been hiding something from her or the constant, mysterious disappearances at the worst possible times. Before he’d left Metropolis, she’d been convinced they could work through those things. And it wasn’t that she didn’t genuinely care for Dan, because she did.

But she loved Clark.

The realisation that she was in love with her erstwhile almost-boyfriend came after the third almost sleepless night in a row and was enough to make Lois sit bolt upright from her doze.

She was in love with Clark Kent. And he loved her.

A sudden surge of excited energy made her cast off the covers and get out of the bed. She had to find him. She had to tell him that she loved him.

It wasn’t until she was in the shower that something else—several something-elses— occurred to her.

She was an engaged woman.

And even if Clark had loved her — as Perry seemed so sure that he had — there was no guarantee that he still did. For all she knew, he had a girlfriend now, or even a wife... The thought seemed to freeze her heart, and she slowly reached up and turned off the water.

She couldn’t just go haring off into the Central American jungle to find him. If he had built a new life for himself, what right did she have to disturb that?

As subdued as she’d been excited, she got ready for work and left the apartment.

Someone had left today’s edition of the Planet on her desk. She picked the thick Sunday paper up and noted that it had been carefully folded so that Clark’s latest column was the first thing she saw. She read the piece about his travels in Panama with a wistful smile on her face. Finishing the story, she looked around for Jimmy.

“Jimmy, I need you to do me a favour. I need everything you can find on Jerome King.”

The young aspiring photographer looked dubious. “Sure Lois, but ...”

“What?”

“Just ... Well, King is a pretty common surname. Without anything to narrow it down, you’re gonna get a lot of hits. I’m just sayin’, it’s gonna be like looking for a needle in a haystack.” She glared at him. “But I’ll get right on it, sure.” He disappeared into the depths of the bullpen.

Lois drummed her fingers on the desk impatiently. As much as she hated to admit it, Jimmy was right. Just a name — and a common name at that — was too general a search. She needed more information. She could talk to Perry and ask him to contact the Chicago Tribune for her, but she didn’t want to face the

questions he’d throw at her. Especially not yet, while she still had no real idea why she was trying to find Clark. She could try talking to Martha or Jonathan Kent, but she’d tried that in the early days of Clark’s disappearance and been stonewalled.

Another idea occurred to her and she went in search of Jimmy.

Finding him at his desk, she looked over his shoulder.

“Royalty cheques.”

“Huh?” Jimmy looked up at her, brow furrowed in confusion.

“The Planet has picked up his column, right? So we must be paying him royalties. Those cheques have to go somewhere, Jimmy.”

“Oh! Right. I knew that,” he muttered. Closing the search he had running, he opened up the Planet’s internal database. Before she had a chance to see how he did it, he’d somehow gained access to the payroll department’s files.

“Looks like they’re going to a post office box in Sarasota,” he informed her.

“Florida? Ok. I want you to find out any information you can about that post office box. Who rented it, what address they gave when they rented it, everything.”

She touched him on the shoulder lightly as she walked away.

Knowing that Jimmy was so close to possibly finding out Clark’s location made it hard to concentrate. Even the story she was supposed to be putting the finishing touches to — an expose of Customs agents being bribed to look the other way when certain shipments arrived at Metropolis Airport, which Lois was almost certain would be nominated for another Kerth Award — failed to grab her attention.

She’d finally managed to force herself to focus on the story — after a warning glare from Perry — when Jimmy appeared beside her desk, clutching a sheet of paper.

“What did you find?” she demanded eagerly, the Customs story forgotten.

“Ah, the post office box was rented about ten months ago to Jerome King. He paid a year in advance and used an apartment lease as proof of identity. I spoke to the girl that rented the box, she remembers him because it’s a month to month rental but he paid it so far in advance. Thought it was weird that he used his lease, most people use a driver’s license. Said he was a big guy, about six feet tall but solid, black hair, and glasses.” He paused. “You don’t think it’s...”

“I’m not sure yet. Did you get an address?”

“Oh, yeah.” He handed her the piece of paper and seemed about to comment further when someone called his name from the other side of the bullpen. Lois laid the paper flat on her desk and surveyed the small amount of biographical information Jimmy had been able to find, committing the address, an apartment building on North Euclid Avenue, to memory. There was a phone number listed, and Lois stared at it for a little while, trying to decide whether or not to call and find out once and for all if it was in fact, Clark Kent.

“Lois! I need that story in ten minutes!”

The sound of Perry’s gruff bellow made her jump. Quickly folding the page Jimmy had given her, she stuffed it in her desk drawer and got back to work.

Her story written, passed by the lawyers, and approved by Perry, Lois shut down her computer for the night. Reaching into her desk drawer, she retrieved several Double Fudge Crunch bars and the piece of paper with Jerome King’s address and phone number and stuffed them all into her bag. She was halfway down to the ground floor in the elevator when she remembered she was supposed to meet Dan for dinner at a restaurant downtown. She groaned. She didn’t want to go to dinner. All she wanted to do was go home and try to figure out what she was going to do about Clark. And there was no way she’d be able to get out of it, either.

Not when Dan had been out of town for most of the last two weeks.

When had it gotten like this? When had the prospect of a date with Dan filled her with boredom, rather than pleasure? In her sudden anger, she shoved the door of the Planet building open with more force than necessary. The truth was that they had nothing in common. And she knew that! She'd known it a year ago when she'd broken up with him. She should never have gone back out with him, and she certainly should never have accepted his proposal. She leant on the side of her Jeep. What was she going to do? Now that she knew she was in love with Clark, she couldn't go through with the wedding. Even if she was wrong about Jerome King — even if she never found Clark — she still couldn't marry Dan.

Lois got into the Jeep with a sigh and started the engine. She had a date to get ready for.

Daniel Scardino let his cutlery fall to the table with a clatter and fixed his fiancée with an exasperated stare.

"Stop. Just ... just stop. Do you realise we've been here for 45 minutes and all you've talked about is Clark Kent?"

He watched as Lois coloured guiltily, then attempted to explain.

"Dan, I ..."

The thing was, he'd heard it all before. Clark and Lois had been partners and best friends; his leaving had left a hole in Lois' life and she missed him. That was fine, as far as it went, but ...

But. They'd been dating when Dan had met Lois, and though Dan had personally never been able to see the appeal — Kent had been a little boring, he thought — he'd also never quite been able to shake the feeling that he was competing with a ghost. After all, for all they really knew, Kent was dead.

"I know. He was your friend and you miss him. I've heard this, Lois. But he left. He's gone, Lois, and he's not coming back. You have to accept that."

Her eyes narrowed in anger. "Like you accepted Jenna?"

That was a low blow, and she knew it. Angry himself now, he retorted, "Jenna was killed, she didn't choose to leave. And that was different. I loved Jenna ...". He tapered off as realisation struck. "That's it, isn't it? It's not different. You didn't go over there that night to break things off with Kent at all."

He never actually asked her, and she'd never volunteered the story of exactly what had happened that night. She'd broken things off with him, and he'd just assumed she'd also broken things off with Kent. He'd thought that was why Kent had left the way he had. Now Dan saw how wrong he'd been.

"Dan ..."

"Just answer me one thing, Lois. If he hadn't left that night, would we be sitting here now?"

She was silent, her eyes fixed on her plate.

"I see." He swallowed hard. "I think ... I think I'd like my ring back."

Slowly, she slid the solitaire off her finger and handed it to him. Wrapping his hand around it, for a moment he had to fight back tears. "Do you care? Did you ever care?"

"Yes, I cared Dan."

"But not loved."

"No. I'm sorry, Dan." She reached out to touch his hand and he jerked it away. He took a deep, albeit shaky breath.

"The Agency wants to reassign me to DC. I'm going to tell them yes." He gave her a sad half smile. "You'll be rid of me in about a week."

He tossed a few bills on the table as he turned to walk out.

Lois dropped into her desk chair. The Planet newsroom was almost deserted; only a skeleton crew remained to make sure that the next day's early edition was produced without any hitches.

This was one of her favourite times of the day. It was quiet enough to think, the sound of the skeleton crew moving around was enough to keep her from feeling alone, at least, most of the time, and yet they seldom bothered her.

The scene at dinner had shaken Lois. She'd psyched herself up to call off their engagement, although she was still nervous. It was no easy thing, after all, to tell someone you didn't want to marry them. Even though she'd done it once before — when she'd come to her senses just in time to not marry Lex — that had been a bit more of a spur of the moment thing. The nervousness had led her to prattle about the one thing that had been occupying her thoughts — Clark — and she really hadn't expected the result.

She knew she should be upset about her broken engagement, and she did feel bad for Dan. But all she felt was relieved.

"Lois?"

Perry's voice broke into her reverie.

"Hi Perry."

"What are you doing here? Aren't you a little overdressed?"

The words struck a distant memory, and she half smiled. "For a night at the office? Clark asked me that exact question once. The night that gang came looking for Dragonetti's vault. Aren't you a little overdressed for a night at the office?"

"Darlin', is everything okay? You know, planning a wedding can be mighty stressful."

She held up her left hand, bare now of the glittering diamond that had adorned it for the past few months.

"There's not going to be a wedding. Dan called it off."

"Oh! Oh, honey, are you okay?"

"It's fine, Perry. Really. I was going to call it off anyway."

She resumed her unfocused stare into the middle distance, barely aware of Perry's worried gaze.

"Is there anything I can do, Lois?"

"I think..." She made the decision she'd been vacillating over since yesterday. "I think I need some time off." She stood abruptly and grabbed her bag from where she'd dumped it on the desk. "I've got just over two weeks owing. I may only need a week; it depends on flights. I'll let you know if I'm taking the second week."

"Of course, darlin', but where are you going?"

She turned as she got in the elevator.

"I'm going to do something I should've done a long time ago."

Chapter 4

Clark sank onto the couch and surveyed his surroundings. His apartment in Sarasota, although smaller, was furnished similarly to the place he'd had in Metropolis. He'd added a few pieces from his most recent travels, like a carved wooden Hopi Indian statuette and several stone figurines from Costa Rica. When he'd rented the apartment, he hadn't anticipated being there as much as he was, and he'd left most of his belongings in storage in his parents' barn. Before long, however, he'd realised that he couldn't travel the same way he had in his early twenties. Not with the added responsibility of Superman. It was unwise to try and carry an extra Suit with him, going into some of the places he was going — and trying to clean the eye catching Spandex when he often had little privacy was practically impossible. So he'd formed the habit of leaving his spare Suits at the apartment in Sarasota, and returning briefly when needed. Along the way, he'd decided he disliked the bare, Spartan feel of the apartment and returned to Kansas to retrieve his belongings.

This, however, was the first time he'd been back to Florida for more than a night in well over a month. He had enough notes for a couple of weeks of articles from his travels throughout Panama and Colombia, and he was giving himself a break from travel until he needed more material.

He'd only been home long enough to throw the contents of his

duffel bag into the washing machine and order in a pizza. Leaning back against the couch, he turned on the television and let himself relax. As much as he liked travelling and experiencing other cultures, it was nice to be able to just enjoy the comforts of home.

The ringing of the portable phone on the kitchen counter interrupted the programme he was watching. He considered letting the machine get it, but decided it might just be his parents — very few people had this number, after all. Still half concentrating on the television, he answered the call.

“Jerome King.” After almost a year, he still had to remind himself not to say Clark Kent when answering the phone. No one replied. “Hello?” Still no reply. Shrugging, he put it down to a wrong number and flopped back down on the couch.

Lois was tired, frustrated, anxious, and now, soaked to the skin.

Jumping on the first flight to Florida had seemed like a brilliant idea when she’d made her snap decision last night. But the first available flight hadn’t left Metropolis until after midday, and then she’d had the aggravation of changing planes in Atlanta. Upon getting to the airport in Sarasota she’d discovered that the rental car she’d reserved had not, in fact, been reserved due to some mix up in the rental company’s computer. Consequently, it had been after 8pm before she’d finally made it to her hotel. She’d taken the time to change out of her travel-grimy clothing and study the map provided by the rental car company to figure out the fastest way to get from her hotel by the bay to North Euclid Avenue before jumping into the tiny subcompact she’d been stuck with.

She’d gotten more than halfway across town before realising that it would be a good idea to confirm that he was actually home. If he was working as a freelance travel writer, chances were, he would be on the road, somewhere in the jungles of Central America. Accordingly, she’d pulled over at the first payphone she’d seen, making it to the phone just as the threatening looking clouds finally stopped threatening and started raining. She’d dialled the number from memory, gripping the phone so tightly her knuckles had turned white, only to hang up in panic as soon as she heard his voice.

It was him. The voice was unmistakeable. The warm, velvety tones echoed in her dreams, and the sound of it was enough to ramp up her nervousness even more. She found the right apartment building and pulled up, turning off the engine and taking a few deep breaths to try and control herself.

It was time.

Clark had just picked up a second slice of pizza when he heard a soft knocking at his door. Who knew he was here? Puzzled, he dropped the slice back into the box and called out “Coming!” to whomever was waiting for him.

As he reached the threshold, he slid the deadbolt back and opened the door. Standing on his doorstep was someone he’d never expected to see again — unless he was dressed in head to toe Spandex, anyway.

“Lois?!”

“Hi Clark.”

He hung onto the door in amazement, staring at her. She looked tired and drawn, thin rather than slender as he remembered so well.

“Can I come in?”

Belatedly he realised that she was dripping wet and he was just standing there with his mouth open, looking like a fool. Her question sparked him into action, and he grabbed her wrist, pulling her inside.

“Of course, come in! You’re soaked, you must be freezing.” He left her standing in the middle of his small living room and strode into the bedroom, unearthing a pair of sweats from a

drawer. They’d look ridiculously baggy on Lois’ much smaller figure, but at least she’d be able to cinch the drawstring in enough to keep the pants up. Returning to the living room, he thrust them at her. “Here. The bathroom is through there,” he pointed. “There’s towels in the cabinet under the sink.”

She nodded. “Thanks, Clark.”

When she’d disappeared into the bathroom, he moved into the kitchen with the intention of making a pot of coffee and to try and gather his racing thoughts.

Lois Lane was here. In his bathroom.

What was she doing here? Was she here on assignment for some unknown reason? And how had she found him? What did she want?

He heard the shower start and heaved a sigh. At least he had a few minute’s grace — although the thought of her showering just a few feet away wasn’t helping matters.

Inexplicably, he was angry that she’d come. He’d spent the majority of the past year trying to rebuild his life, trying to forget Lois Lane. He’d had to accept the fact that nothing would ever stop him from loving her, but he was... coping. He’d managed to mostly avoid talking to her in the rare moments he did a rescue in Metropolis, and he’d finally gotten to the point where he didn’t think of her every second of every day.

And now she was here, and she was acting so... so normal. Like everything that had passed between them — the aborted attempt at romance — had never happened.

He felt the distinctive crumple of metal under his hand and realised he’d accidentally squashed the handle of the kettle he still held. Sighing again, he reshaped the handle and turned the gas burner on. Maybe, if he managed to get her to leave quickly, there wouldn’t be too much damage done.

He heard the shower stop and told himself to get a grip. He filled the kettle with water and gave it a few helpful bursts of heat vision. It was boiling by the time she emerged from the bathroom, and he quickly removed it from the burner, pouring the water into the coffee cups he’d left standing ready.

He looked up as she approached and settled onto one of the high stools at the kitchen counter, feeling the familiar twist in his gut. She was even more beautiful than he’d remembered. The sweats were just as oversized as he’d thought they’d be, making her look small and vulnerable, making him ache to take her in his arms and protect her from whatever it was that had driven her to come and find him.

But he couldn’t. She was engaged to someone else.

Anger made his movements brisk as he set a cup of coffee in front of her.

“Here. Feel better?”

She nodded. “Thanks, Clark.”

He stayed in the kitchen, keeping the counter between them and both hands wrapped around his own coffee cup, unwilling to break the silence. He watched as she sipped at her coffee, grimacing at the real sugar and milk he’d used in lieu of her usual artificial substitutes.

Finally, she spoke.

“So how have you been?”

“Fine. Doing a lot of travelling. I just got back from Colombia. You?”

She nodded, drawing idle patterns in a small splash of water on the counter.

“Fine. Working a lot. Solo again.”

He couldn’t take any more of this. Was this really why she’d come all the way to Sarasota? To make small talk? He set his cup down hard enough to risk it breaking.

“Why are you here, Lois?”

She met his gaze fleetingly before looking back at the pattern she was creating.

“I wanted to see you.”

“Why now? It’s been almost a year; why wait till now?”
“I only found out where you were a few days ago. You... weren’t easy to find.”

“Did it occur to you that maybe I didn’t want to be found?”
The words came out clipped with anger. He hadn’t wanted to be found, at least by Lois. Maybe he had, at the beginning, but now all he wanted was to be left alone, to live his life as best he could. He took two steps away abruptly, unable to bear being this close to her, and ran an exasperated hand through his hair.

“Okay. You’ve seen me. Now I think you should go.”

Her face paled and she tilted her chin up in that characteristic pose he’d seen so many times.

“Is that really what you want?”

He strode to the front door and flung it open.

“Damn it, Lois. Yes. Go back to Metropolis, back to your fiancé, back to your life and let me go back to mine. Please.” His voice broke, to his chagrin, and the last word came out like a plea.

“Fine.” She stood and walked over to him. “I’ll leave, if that’s what you want. But you’re wrong about something, Clark. Dan and I split up.”

On that parting remark, she left without a backwards glance.

After she’d left, Clark sat on the couch for a long time, staring unseeing into the distance.

Had Lois really been here? And had he really thrown her out?

He’d wanted to see her so badly. It had taken all the willpower he possessed to stop himself from putting on the Suit and appearing at her apartment window so many times. There was so much he wanted to ask her, so much he wanted to say, and he’d squandered the chance in useless anger.

“This isn’t helping,” he muttered. Forcing himself to move, he got up and snapped off the lights, detouring past the bathroom and smiling wistfully when he saw the small pile of neatly folded clothes. He’d have to find some way of returning them.

Crawling into bed, he tried not to think of Lois, tried not to relive every moment she’d been in his apartment.

Sleep was a long time coming.

Chapter 5

Clark moved around his apartment restlessly. He’d been unable to settle, unable to concentrate on any of the things he’d planned on doing with his time off. He’d tried flying patrols, but even that had failed when he found himself drifting aimlessly, doing nothing but thinking about Lois Lane. He hoped she was well on her way back to Metropolis. If she was, he wouldn’t see her again, and this stage — where he did nothing but think about her and brood — would pass; he knew that from experience.

A knock on the door proved a welcome distraction.

He opened the door and sighed with resignation when he saw who his visitor was. “I should’ve known you’d be back.”

“Look, Clark, I know you don’t want to see me, and I’ll leave you alone if that’s what you want. But first, I want some answers,” Lois stated.

He ran a hand through his already messy hair. “I guess you’d better come in.”

She’d barely made it into the room when she whirled.

“Why did you leave Metropolis?”

He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “I thought that was obvious.”

“Not to me.”

“I knew you’d chosen Scardino. After that ... well, there just wasn’t anything left for me there.

“What about your friends? The Planet? Didn’t they mean anything to you?”

“Of course they did, Lois! But what did you expect me to do? Stay and watch you with him? Maybe dance at your wedding?” He flung the words at her, letting his intense hurt colour them.

“You’re wrong,” she whispered.

“What?”

“I said, you’re wrong. I didn’t choose Dan.”

“You could’ve fooled me.” He looked pointedly at her now-bare left hand, and she blushed.

“What made you think that, anyway?”

“Because I saw you! I went to see you that night, and I saw you take Scardino upstairs —” his voice cracked with the remembered pain of that moment — the moment his heart had broken into a million tiny pieces — and he broke off.

“Oh, Clark. For a smart guy, you really are an idiot. What you saw that night was me breaking things off with Dan. I told him that I was sorry, that there was no future for me and him. We went upstairs because it’s not the sort of conversation you can have in the street! Then I went to find you. I went to tell you that I’d finally come to my senses, that I wanted to be with you ... you, Clark!” She paused, choking back tears. “Finding your apartment empty like that ... it was the worst night of my life. I tried to find you for weeks afterwards, but no one knew where you’d gone or had even seen you leave — well, except for your parents, and they weren’t talking.”

That didn’t surprise Clark. For those first few weeks, he’d been a wreck. He rarely cried, even with all the terrible things he saw as Superman, but for the first couple of days he hadn’t seemed to be able to stop the tears. Even afterwards, he’d been withdrawn and depressed. It was just like his parents — especially his mom — to try and shield him then.

“Do — do you still feel that way?” he asked hesitantly.

“Yes, Clark.”

He reached for her and pulled her into his embrace, sighing happily as she wrapped her arms around his waist. He wanted to stay like this forever, but all too soon a thought intruded.

Superman.

Lois was still in the dark about his other identity. And there was no way he could let that continue.

Reluctantly he dropped his arms from around her and stepped back. She looked at him in disappointed puzzlement.

“Clark? You’re not having second thoughts, are you?”

“Never.” His denial was vehement and heartfelt. “But if we’re going to do this — if we’re going to be together — there’s something you need to know.”

Something she needed to know.

The phrase sounded ominous to Lois, especially when coupled with the almost fearful look on Clark’s face.

A million possibilities flashed through Lois’ mind. He was secretly married? A murderer? Born female?

“Whatever it is, it can’t be as bad as what I’m imagining right now,” she told him shakily. “Let me guess, your name isn’t really Jerome King?” It was a weak joke, she knew, but she had to break the tension that had sprung up between them somehow.

“Something like that.” He sighed. “The truth is, Lois, is I am Clark Kent... but I’m someone else as well.” As she watched, he took his glasses off and smoothed his hair, slicking it straight back away from his face. “Lois, I’m ...”

“Superman,” she finished for him.

He nodded slowly, swallowing nervously.

She couldn’t take it in. “But — but you *can’t* be Superman. I’ve seen both of you together. I’ve seen you bleed!”

He sighed again, then levitated about a foot off the floor, his feet dangling.

She broke into laughter, aware there was a hysterical edge to it, sinking down onto the couch and burying her head in her hands.

Clark watched helplessly as Lois’ shoulders shook, unable to tell if she was laughing or crying. Finally, he crouched down in front of her.

“Lois? Are you okay?”

She raised her tear streaked face and glared at him. “Okay? No, Clark, I am not okay! You just told me that the man I love and the superhero I chased around Metropolis for over a year are the same person! How could I be okay?”

He couldn’t stop himself from smiling, which only provoked another glare from her.

“What are you smiling at?”

“You love me?”

“Yes, but ...”

This time he didn’t resist. Leaning forward, he captured her lips with his. For a moment she resisted his kiss, then he felt her lips move under his and silently exulted. Oh, how he’d missed kissing her! She threaded her fingers through the hair at the back of his neck, tugging him closer as her tongue sought, and received, access to his mouth. He moaned deep in his throat as the tip of her tongue found his and pulled her off the couch into his arms, holding her tightly against him as he explored her mouth. All too soon, she was pulling away from him, making him groan in disappointment as she broke their kiss.

“You may not need to, but I need to breathe,” she reminded him.

“I love you, Lois,” he told her seriously. She leaned forward and pressed a lingering kiss to his lips.

“I’m still mad at you.”

“I know. And I’m sorry, Lois. I should have told you earlier. I’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

She gently disengaged herself and clambered back onto the couch. “It’s not that simple, Clark. You lied to me every day for two years.”

“You understand why, don’t you?”

“I know why you lied, Clark. But that doesn’t make it hurt any less.” She gave him a sad half smile. “I’m going to go back to my hotel. I need some time to think.”

She got up and walked to the door. Clark trailed behind her.

“Lois? Are we okay?” he asked, hesitantly.

“I don’t know yet. Ask me again tomorrow.”

Chapter 6

Lois spent all evening and most of the night pacing her hotel room.

Clark’s revelation affected so much. They loved each other; she never doubted that. But could she trust him? She’d been burned so many times by people she thought she could trust; would he be any different? If she couldn’t trust Clark, then, that was the end as far as a relationship went. No matter how much she loved him.

Even if she could trust him, that wasn’t the end of it. Knowing what she did now, her perspective of so many of their dealings had changed, and she had to get used to that. Pieces were falling into place and snippets from the past were making sense all of a sudden — but, at the same time, so many of her assumptions and conclusions were being proven false. Things like the real reason Clark had left during the heatwave, what had really triggered his attack of amnesia during the Nightfall episode, and even little things like how Superman had known where her desk was on that first day, were suddenly being explained. It was a lot to process and take in.

Assuming she could deal with the past, there was still the future to contend with. When Lois had fallen for Clark, she thought she was getting a regular guy — quirky, but regular. Instead, he was Superman for crying out loud! She’d never be able to depend on him being there, even for important things. She’d have to share him with the world; she wouldn’t have a choice. Demanding his presence when someone else needed him was something she would never do ... to either of them.

Around dawn, no closer to a decision, but unable to stay

awake any longer, she collapsed into an exhausted and fitful sleep.

When Lois awoke late in the morning, her eyes were heavy and felt like they were packed with sand. Too many nights with too little sleep were beginning to take their toll, but she felt both calmer and more clear-headed than she had last night.

All of the negatives ... they were all linked to one thing — Clark’s secret. Could she really fault him for trying to protect himself and his family? For trying to have some sort of a normal life?

And could she really let that stand in the way of having a relationship with the only man she’d ever loved?

She left her morning cup of coffee half-drunk and rushed out the door. She needed to see Clark.

Clark had spent the time apart from Lois vacillating between hope and despair. Lois loved him; he was so close to getting everything he’d always wanted. Surely fate couldn’t be cruel enough to rip that away, right?

But then he’d remember that he’d been close to getting everything he’d ever dreamed about before and lost it, and he’d plunge back into despair again.

As the morning dwindled towards the afternoon with still no word from Lois, he became more and more convinced that he’d lost her; that his attempt to live a normal life had backfired and driven away the only woman he’d ever loved.

He was pacing on the ceiling when a knock sounded on his door. Unwilling to see anyone else, he lowered his glasses and x-rayed the door.

It was Lois.

His anxiety built to the point to where it felt like it was almost choking him. Heart pounding, he dropped to the ground and opened the door, steeling himself to be let down gently.

Instead, she slid an arm around his waist and turned her face up to be kissed. A little confused — he’d been so sure she’d tell him she never wanted to see him again — he obliged, feeling the familiar surge of passion send his heart racing even faster.

“Does this mean you’ve forgiven me?” he asked when he could speak again.

“Did you doubt me?”

“That you love me? No. But it was a pretty monumental lie, Lois. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m not happy that you lied to me, Clark.” She shrugged.

“Then I realised that every time you lied to me, it was to protect your secret. And I decided I can live with that.” She fixed him with a glare. “But no more secrets.”

He gave her a shaky, lopsided smile as he sketched a ‘Scout’s honour’ salute. “No secrets.” He pulled her closer again, burying his face in her silky dark hair. She really was incredible. He’d deceived her for two years, made her think that he was two different people, left her, and she still loved him.

He’d never do anything to put that in jeopardy again.

Finally, he let her go, stepping back and dropping onto the couch, still feeling shaky from sheer relief. She sat down next to him.

“You still should’ve told me earlier.”

“I wish I had.”

“So why didn’t you?”

“At first ... I didn’t know if I could trust you. You’re a world-class reporter and Superman was big news. Then, by the time I figured out that I could trust you, you and Luthor were getting pretty close.” He tapered off, remembering that awful time when he’d felt powerless to stop her from marrying a monster — and feeling bad for reminding her, as well.

“I would never ...”

He held up a hand, cutting her off. “I know you wouldn’t have told him, Lois. But Luthor had — has — a way of finding things

out. After that ... I'd been keeping up the charade for so long, I didn't know how to tell you. And the longer I waited, the harder it got."

"So why not after we started dating? Didn't you think I deserved to know the truth about who I was dating?"

"I wanted you to want Clark Kent, not Superman. The real me."

"But Clark Kent isn't the real you any more than Superman is."

He must have looked as puzzled as he felt, because she made an exasperated noise before continuing. "You use your powers when you're not dressed as Superman, don't you?" He nodded. "In fact, I'd be willing to bet that when you're alone or around people that know, you use your powers as naturally as breathing." He nodded again. "See, that's my point. You're not really Clark Kent or really Superman... the real you is somewhere between the two." She flopped against him. "I just wish you'd let me see that earlier."

"You're angry with me."

"A little," she admitted. "It comes and goes."

She slid down his shoulder, swinging her legs up onto the couch and resting her head in his lap. Smiling, he began to run his fingers through her hair, feeling the glossy strands try to cling to his hand.

"Will you tell me something?"

She tilted her head up to look at him. "As long as you don't stop doing that."

"Why did you start dating Dan again?"

She sighed and started picking at a stray thread on the hem of her t-shirt. "Dan and I ... just kind of happened. After you disappeared ... I was lonely, Clark. We ran into each other at the supermarket and started spending time together. Before I knew it, we were dating again."

"When did you break up?"

Lois thought for a moment. "Two ... no, three ... days ago."

"Three *days* ago?" He let his hand fall in surprise. He knew their breakup had to be recent — after all, it wasn't that long ago when he'd seen the notice of her engagement in the paper. But he hadn't realised it had been that recently.

"The night before I flew down here," she confirmed.

"Lois, I ... I knew it couldn't have been long ago, but that soon? Are you sure..."

She pressed a finger over his lips, stopping him.

"Clark. Dan and I broke up because he realised I was in love with you. This ... us ... is not some sort of rebound relationship. I'm here because I want to be here. Not for any other reason."

The vehemence and sincerity of her tone left no room for doubt. He leaned over and kissed her gently.

"I'm not sorry you broke up."

She smiled up at him. "Neither am I. I never loved Dan, Clark."

"So why agree to marry him?"

She shrugged. "It was the next logical step." She sat up. "I love you, Clark. I never felt like this with Dan, or anyone else."

He kissed her in return, angling himself towards her so he could draw her up against his chest, running one hand along her jawline and cupping her cheek as he deepened the kiss. His mouth teased and tantalised, his tongue darting out to entwine with hers, making her moan with pleasure. She kissed him back eagerly.

One kiss turned into several, then into a protracted make out session on the couch.

Finally, hair mussed and clothes askew, they broke apart.

"Are you still worried?"

He shook his head slightly. "No. But I hope when I propose, you don't accept just because it's the next logical step."

"Are you going to propose?" she questioned, her eyes wide with shock.

"Yes." Clark stood. "But not yet." He flashed her an impish grin and grabbed her hand. "Come on. There's something I want to show you."

"Oh Clark. It's ... it's incredible."

Hovering thousands of feet above the Earth's surface, Lois stared in rapt fascination at the land below. From their vantage point, she could see tiny pinpricks of light become pools as the people below reacted to the darkness that was creeping from the east. Tiny wisps of cloud drifted past them, and she could feel their chill dampness on her cheek.

"I come up here a lot. It's quiet. Peaceful. Beautiful."

Lois watched in amazement as an aeroplane flew beneath them, banking as it made its final approach into Sarasota — Bradenton International.

"You must see a lot of beautiful places," she commented.

"Yes," he confirmed. "It's one of the best things about being able to fly." He paused. "I'd like to show you some of them ... if you'll let me?"

Even with Clark's cape wrapped around her, she couldn't resist the effects of the cold of their altitude any longer and shivered. Instantly his expression changed to one of concern.

"We should go back."

Clark set Lois back on her feet in his living room and used a gentle burst of his heat vision to warm her up before spinning back into his street clothes.

"I'm sorry, Lois — I forgot how cold it would be up there for you."

"Don't be," she told him quietly. "Thank you for taking me there. I've been that high up in a plane before, but it's completely different to be out there like that."

He made a face. "I like it better my way."

She laughed at him. "Don't tell me you're afraid of flying."

"Flying is great. Being stuck in a giant metal tube with absolutely no control over it ... not so much. And it takes forever to get anywhere."

The sound of his neighbour's television impinged on his hearing and he froze, trying to concentrate on the breaking news broadcast. He groaned, pulling away from Lois.

"What?"

"There's a ship in trouble in the Gulf." He kissed her, starting to undo the buttons of his shirt. "I have to go." He kissed her again, unwilling to leave, then dragged himself away and gave her a rueful grin. "I guess you're about to get an idea of what this is going to be like."

She sat up, watching him wide eyed as he spun into the Suit. "How many times a day do you do this?"

He shrugged, his mind already half on the job. "Not as many as I used to since I stopped concentrating mainly on Metropolis. I only do the bigger ones now."

He went to kiss her again, but she shooed him off. "Go. Go!"

He paused at the window. "I'll be back as soon as I can." Then he launched himself, arrowing towards the coast and leaving his signature sonic boom behind him.

By the time he found the drifting, rudderless ship, it had slammed one of the oil drilling platforms that dotted the Gulf of Mexico, shearing one of the platform's supports and severing the well pipe. He groaned when he saw how much oil had already spilled into the waters of the Gulf. If he didn't act quickly, it was going to be an ecological disaster. He hovered, scanning the seas around the twin wrecks for people, pulling two men out of the water and depositing them on the deck of the ship. Working as quickly as he could — without risking sparks around so much crude oil — he dragged the ship free of the platform's legs, moving it to a safe distance so the current wouldn't just bring it back into the same position. Then he dove, risking a fine beam of

his heat vision to weld the severed support and stop the platform from toppling completely. He crimped the well pipe shut and surfaced, landing on the now much more stable platform and seeking out the foreman.

After airlifting the most critically injured sailors and platform workers to the nearest major trauma centre, it was time to try and stop the spreading oil slick. Clark could see the edges of it, calming the sea as it spread. He detoured past Lafayette, grabbing boom nets stored in the oil town for this very purpose. With them, he could arrest the spread.

It became a routine; place a net, dart upwards, check its positioning, then head back for more nets. Finally, he had the slick contained. Unwilling to wait long enough for skimmers to arrive to remove the surface oil, he used his heat vision to set the oil alight, patrolling the edges of the slick to make sure the boom nets didn't catch fire.

Only once the slick had dissipated did he realise how long he'd been out there. To the east, the sky was very faintly lightening from black to a deep cobalt blue; his Suit was a write-off, soaked with oil. All he wanted now was a hot shower and some clean clothes.

Passing over the damaged ship, now under tow by a recovery vessel, he waved in acknowledgment of their shouted thanks and headed back to Sarasota.

Lois watched the tiny blue and red speck disappear into the distance with a feeling of unreality. While she knew Clark was Superman, it was one thing to know it, and something totally different to see him transform into Superman right in front of her. She was still finding it hard to wrap her head around the fact that it was *Clark* who'd lifted the colonists' transport into space; *Clark* who'd prevented the world's annihilation by the Nightfall asteroid; *Clark* whose shoulder she'd dug a Kryptonite bullet out of; and *Clark* who was out there now, doing god knows what with a ship in the Gulf of Mexico.

She turned the television on, flicking it to an all-news channel to try and get some information. Coverage was necessarily patchy; it took time to get helicopters out that far, so the initial information was in the form of terse sentences delivered by a talking head. Lois left the television on anyway, and she was eventually rewarded with slightly out-of-focus amateur footage of a blue and red blur, diving and resurfacing.

Is this what it was going to be like? A quick explanation, a sonic boom, and then she'd catch whatever he'd been doing on the evening news? He saw the worst of what nature and humanity could throw at the world; who did he talk to after something horrible? His parents? Or did he keep it all bottled up inside? Knowing Clark, she suspected the latter. Well, she resolved, he could always talk to her. She'd make sure of it.

She curled up on the couch and watched the news coverage, falling asleep long before he returned.

Lois was asleep on the couch when Clark got back to his apartment, her head pillowed on one hand and the television playing softly in the background. He smiled tenderly at her. He hadn't expected her still to be here; he thought she would've gone back to her hotel long before. Floating so as not to disturb her, he moved through the living room to his bedroom, collecting fresh clothes before heading for the bathroom and showering at super-speed. He stuffed the ruined Suit into a plastic bag, then returned to the living room. Gently he picked Lois up and carried her to the bedroom, laying her on the bed and covering her with the comforter. He'd sleep on the couch.

He'd never had someone waiting for him when he got home from a rescue before. The fact that she'd stayed brought a smile to his face that he couldn't seem to wipe away. He laid down on the couch, reflecting that he'd never been so happy in his entire life.

Lois knew who he was — who he really was — and she loved him anyway. There was only one more hurdle to get across. Punching his pillow into a more comfortable shape, he decided that that could wait until tomorrow.

Chapter 7

Lois awoke, disoriented. It wasn't her hotel room; the bed was too comfortable and the furnishings were too eclectic. Her hotel was good, as hotels go, but the décor was impersonal at best. It struck her that the room had a familiar feel about it, and she realised she was in Clark's bed. Blinking to clear the lingering bleariness, she focussed on the picture frame on the nightstand, recognising the photo it contained to be one of her and Clark, a candid shot taken at the Kerth Awards ceremony the previous year. She picked the frame up and studied the picture. He cradled his crystal statuette — his first ever Kerth Award — in the crook of one arm and looked so happy and proud. She had her hand tucked through his other arm and was laughing at something. They'd laughed a lot that night, she remembered. How had she not known then that she loved this man?

The smell of fresh coffee tempted her into sitting up and replacing the frame. She swung her legs out of the bed and stood, padding out in bare feet to the kitchen.

Clark was sitting at the kitchen counter, frowning in concentration at the laptop in front of him. He looked up when he heard her enter and his face creased into the brilliant grin she loved.

"Good morning."

"Morning," she yawned, approaching him and resting her hand on his shoulder. He grabbed her hand and pulled her across her lap, making her shriek with surprise before kissing her soundly.

"Clark!" She laughed up at him.

"Better than coffee," he informed her.

She slid off his lap, straightening her clothes, and made a beeline for the coffee pot. She poured a cup, fixing it the way she liked it and noting with pleasure that he'd picked up the artificial sweetener and low fat creamer she preferred. Sipping at her cup, she leaned against the counter. "What time did you get in?"

"Late. I didn't want to wake you."

"Where did you sleep?"

"On the couch." He gestured to where a pillow and blanket lay in a neat pile on the end of the couch.

"You didn't have to give up your bed for me."

He shrugged one shoulder. "You looked like you needed a good night's sleep."

"It's a big bed, Clark. We could've shared."

He shot her a look brimful of laughter at the reminder of their stay in the honeymoon suite at the Lexor hotel, then sobered.

"I didn't think you were ready for that yet."

"I'm not," she sighed.

She took another sip of her coffee, studying him over the rim of the cup. He was looking especially good today, happy and relaxed. His glasses were sitting on the counter next to his laptop, and the lack of them made him look younger. The fitted black t-shirt he was wearing clung just right to his muscular frame, accenting his build without being skin-tight. The thought of sharing a bed with him was becoming more appealing by the minute. It's too soon, she told herself. It'd been what? A day?

"So, what are you working on?" She gestured with her mug at the computer.

"Next week's column. You may be on vacation, but I am not." He hit save and smiled at her, taking any sting out of his words. "When do you have to be back at the Planet?"

She thought rapidly. "End of next week. When do you have to go back to the jungle?"

"About the same time. I've got enough notes for this week and

next.”

She rounded the counter and leaned over his shoulder, reading his first paragraph. “You know, this is how I found you,” she commented. “You were always better at this stuff than me.”

“You found me through my articles?”

“Of course. You think I can’t recognise your work? Perry recognised it too.”

“Does anyone else know?”

“Jimmy suspects. He helped me find your address.” She fidgeted, trying to decide whether the question she wanted to ask would be pushing too hard in a very new relationship. She shrugged mentally and forged ahead; the alternative, after all, was trying to carry on a relationship when one of them was deep in some South American wilderness.

“Do you have to go back to the jungle? Can’t you come back to Metropolis?”

He stopped typing and slowly swivelled around to look at her. “I’ve thought about it,” he admitted.

He’d been doing a lot of thinking about it, in fact. He’d only managed to concentrate on his article a few minutes before Lois had awoken. He wanted nothing more than to be able to go back to Metropolis, but it wasn’t that simple. Quite apart from having no job to go to, there was Superman to consider.

When he’d left Metropolis, he’d been too wrapped up in pain to think about what Clark and Superman leaving town at the same time looked like. And he hadn’t consciously decided to expand his Superman activities to the entire world; it had been a natural consequence of his travels. When he’d finally thought about what he was doing, it had dawned on him that having Superman suddenly concentrate his abilities on a succession of Central and South American countries — and at the same time as ‘Jerome King’ was travelling through them — was a bad idea. He’d immediately stopped attending every single local problem and initiated a worldwide patrol instead, even though it had meant having to concentrate mostly on bigger disasters.

If he went back to Metropolis, could he keep that up? In the less densely populated areas he’d been travelling through, there weren’t as many cries for help and it had been easy to expand his operations. Once back in Metropolis, back amongst its twelve million inhabitants, he was sure it would be a different story. He couldn’t ignore a cry for help; that was why he’d invented Superman in the first place. And he knew from experience that Metropolis would be full of people needing his particular type of help.

“And?”

“I want to come back. I’m just not sure if I can.”

“Why not?”

“Superman, for one thing.”

“But Clark, that’s easy. You never explained why Superman left; you don’t have to explain why he comes back.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You don’t think Clark Kent and Superman arriving back in Metropolis at the same time isn’t a little suspicious?”

“Oh.” Her shoulders slumped a little. “I didn’t think of that.” She perked up again. “I’m sure we can find a way around that. What’s the other problem?”

He sighed. “What am I supposed to live on? I have some savings, but that’s not going to last very long in Metropolis, and I don’t have a job to go to.”

“What about the Planet? Perry would hire you back in a heartbeat.”

“Really? I’m not so sure. Look, Lois, in the two years that I worked there, I left twice — both times without notice. I was lucky that Perry overlooked the first time, but I was only gone for a couple of days. This time, it’s been almost a year. If it was you, would you hire me back?”

“You’re right! You’re right.” She set her coffee cup down.

“Come back anyway. We’ll figure out a way around the Superman thing and we can work on Perry. Even if he says no, you’ll find something; I know it. I want to be with you, Clark, not have you thousands of miles away, splitting your time between here and some remote South American village. I want to be able to go out to dinner and a movie with you. I want to be able to turn up at your place at three in the morning just because I wanted to see you. I want to build a relationship — a life — together.”

He stood and took her into his arms, cradling her against him. “I want that too.”

“So you’ll come home?”

“Yes, I’ll come home. I’ll even fly us there.”

He grinned, feeling laughter build in his chest out of sheer joy. Lois loved him, and he was going home.

All too soon she pushed herself away from him with a familiar determined look on her face.

“Maybe I should go back first. It’ll take you a few weeks to pack anyway, and that way I can talk to Perry-”

“Minutes. It’ll take me a few minutes to pack.”

He broke into laughter at the expression on her face.

“You forgot!”

The consternation on her face only made him laugh harder.

“I didn’t forget; I’m just not used to thinking in terms of you being Superman.”

“Even after yesterday?” he teased.

“Clark, will you be serious?”

“I can’t; I’m too happy,” he informed her.

She shot him an exasperated look, and he held up his hands defensively. “Okay, okay. I’ll pack and store my stuff at the farm; then we’ll go back to Metropolis and see Perry together.”

Faster than she had thought was possible, even for him, Lois found herself cradled against Clark’s Spandex-clad chest as the coast of Florida dropped away. He hadn’t taken her to Kansas, explaining that he could travel faster and carry more if he didn’t have to worry about a passenger. She’d been guiltily grateful that she hadn’t had to face Clark’s parents — her last conversation with Martha Kent, a few months after Clark’s disappearance, had not ended well. Eventually she knew she’d have to see them again, especially considering how close Clark was to his parents, but she was glad it could wait just a little longer.

“Is everything okay? You’re not cold, are you?”

She smiled up at him, wanting to kiss away the little concerned furrow of his brow. “No, everything is fine. It’s ... beautiful.”

Flying like this ... she could see why Clark disliked planes. She could see so much — the coastline with its seemingly endless expanses of white sandy beaches, the sparkling ribbons of rivers winding across the land, and the sprawling cities and towns. It sure beat the view from a tiny aeroplane window.

Before she knew it, Clark started to descend, and the familiar skyscrapers of Metropolis came into view. He flew over Centennial Park and came to a stop, hovering above her apartment building.

“Are your windows unlocked?”

She thought for a moment, then shook her head. She’d resolutely locked them after she’d broken things off with Superman — Clark — last year and had gotten back into the habit of keeping them locked when she wasn’t home.

Swiftly he dropped into the alleyway nearest to her building, making her yelp in surprise.

“Sorry. I didn’t want to be spotted.”

She clung to him for balance for a moment before regaining her feet. “Guess I should start leaving my windows unlocked again, huh?”

“It does make this easier.”

She took a few steps towards the mouth of the alley before she realised he wasn't following her. "You're not coming?"

"No." He gave her a reassuring smile. "I'll be back in a few minutes ... with your luggage."

"Oh! Right."

She stayed where she was, watching him take off, before she shook her head and walked around the corner to her building, jogging up the steps at the entrance. It was one thing to know that Clark was Superman and something entirely different to see him being Superman. She unlocked the door to her apartment and went straight to the living room windows, unlatching them and pushing them wide open.

He was back before she'd had a chance to accomplish anything besides a tidy up of the 'stuff-it-out-of-sight' variety. Depositing her luggage next to the couch, he spun back into his 'Clark' clothes in the manoeuvre that had so fascinated her the night before.

"Should we go see Perry?"

"Ready?" Lois asked as the elevator climbed to the newsroom floor.

"I was thinking ... maybe you should go and see him first. After all, he doesn't even know I'm in Metropolis."

"I don't believe you — you spend your time flying around in skin-tight Spandex, and you're nervous about talking to Perry?"

He shrugged. "That's different."

The elevator opened onto a crowded newsroom, and instantly Clark regretted choosing this time of day to try and get his job back. But Lois was already striding down the ramp and across the room, giving him little choice but to follow her. Behind him, he could hear the puzzled whispers of the newsroom staff and Jimmy's shouted exclamation of "CK!"

Lois knocked on Perry White's door and opened it in the same motion, walking in and dropping into one of the chairs in front of the editor's desk.

Perry looked up from the article he was editing; from the amount of red pen decorating the page, Lois was sure it was one of Ralph's.

"Lois. I wasn't expecting you back so soon."

"I didn't need the extra time after all."

"Do you mind telling me where you went?"

"Florida. Sarasota, actually."

"So you went looking for him after all."

The editor kept his voice mild, but Lois could hear the undercurrent of steel in it and braced herself for the conversation that would follow.

"I had to, Perry."

"And?"

"He's here. Waiting to talk to you and probably being mobbed by Jimmy and the rest of the staff."

"Lois, are you sure you know what you're doing? I mean, you lit off out of here — what was it, five days ago? Saying that you'd split with Dan, and now you walk in here with Clark?"

Perry White surveyed the young woman in front of him with misgivings. From Lois' air of suppressed excitement, it was clear that Lois and Clark had patched things up. He was happy for them; he'd never considered Lois' relationship with Dan to be a good fit, after all, and Clark was like a son to him. But so soon after Lois had broken up with Dan?

Another thing was also clear to him. If Clark was back in Metropolis, he'd want his old job back, and Perry just wasn't sure if he could give it to him. The one problem he had — that he'd always had — with Lois and Clark dating was what it would do to his newsroom if it went sour.

He'd seen the effects firsthand.

After Clark had left, not only had he lost one of the most

successful teams the paper had ever seen, but Lois had fallen apart. For weeks afterwards, the only thing she'd been able to concentrate on was trying to find Clark. As she'd run up against brick wall after brick wall, she'd become more and more despondent. While she'd seemed to recover eventually, she'd lost some of the fire that had previously characterised her writing. If it happened again — if their personal relationship went sour — what else would they lose?

And then there was the matter of Clark's employment history.

Three years ago, Perry had managed to pass off Clark's absence during the heatwave as personal leave, but that wasn't possible this time. Not with Clark being gone for so long.

"I know what I'm doing, Perry." Lois spoke with a confidence that had been lacking from her voice for far too long, and Perry had to suppress an exultant smile. "I had to go after Clark." She leaned forward to press her point, the earnestness and sincerity in her voice impossible to miss. "It was always Clark, Perry. He's the reason I couldn't marry Dan. It always will be Clark."

He studied her. She'd changed in the five days she'd been gone; there was a lightness, a vibrancy that he'd never seen in Lois before. She was, he realised, completely happy for the first time he'd known her.

"Can't argue with that. Send him in." As she got to her feet, he warned: "But no promises, Lois."

As Lois had predicted, Clark was surrounded by a gaggle of newsroom staffers, including Jimmy. They were bombarding him with so many questions that it was almost a relief when Lois exited the editor-in-chief's office and broke up the gathering.

"Your turn. Good luck."

Clark took a deep, steadying breath and entered the office, closing the door behind him. Perry sat back in his chair, looking almost as forbidding as Clark remembered.

"Kent."

"Hi Chi ... Mr. White."

"Lois said you wanted to talk to me."

Clark nodded, remembering exactly why he'd been dreading this meeting. What did you say to an employer — no, more than that, a friend — who you'd deserted?

"Yes, sir." He figured that the honorific couldn't hurt at this point, even though he'd long gotten out of the habit of calling Perry sir. "I wanted to apologise for the way I left last year..."

"And the year before that."

"Yes, and the year before that. I was wrong to leave the way I did, and I'm sorry."

Perry was silent for a moment, then Clark saw the older man's face soften. "Love makes us do some crazy things, son."

Clark nodded, unable to deny the truth of that statement.

"Was there something else?"

"Yes, I wanted to talk to you ... about a job. You gave me a chance once before and I've always been grateful for that. You know my writing, and you know I can do the work ..." Perry held up a hand. "I can't do it. If it was up to me, I'd hire you back in a heartbeat. But it's not up to me. Something like this has to go to the suits upstairs." He leaned forward. "If you'd left on better terms, maybe it'd be a different story."

Clark nodded. He was lucky Perry had even agreed to see him.

"I'm sorry, son. What will you do if the suits say no?"

He sighed. "There's always the Star. Or I'll try the magazines, one of them might be hiring." He gave Perry a wan smile.

"You'd do that?" The editor's voice was suddenly sharper.

"If it means staying in Metropolis." He reached out a hand for Perry to shake. "Thanks for seeing me."

When Clark emerged, Lois was seated behind her desk, idly swivelling her chair from side to side. She looked up as he approached.

“Well? How did it go?” she demanded eagerly.

He made a so-so motion with his hand and perched one hip on her desk. “Maybe. It’s not Perry’s decision ... has to go higher up.” He sighed heavily. “I really stuffed everything up. If I had just talked to you ...”

“Well, next time you leave town in the dead of night you’ll just have to remember to talk to me first.”

It was lightly said, but he could sense the lingering worry behind the words. He grabbed her hand and squeezed it gently. “There won’t be a ‘next time’, Lois. I’m done running.” She smiled shyly at him and he wanted to kiss her so badly, crowded newsroom or no crowded newsroom.

Jimmy broke the spell, pausing by Lois’ desk on an errand.

“Hey CK, are you coming back to work at the Planet?”

“Not sure yet, Jim, I ...”

Someone called Jimmy’s name from deeper in the bullpen, and he changed direction with a wave of his hand at Clark.

“Some things never change. Listen, I’m going to go book into a hotel. I’ll call you when I’ve found somewhere.”

“Mm, not the Apollo I hope,” she teased.

He winced, remembering the rundown flea pit he’d stayed in when he first moved to Metropolis.

“No, definitely not the Apollo. Someplace nicer.” He squeezed her hand again. “I’ll see you later.”

He booked into a Holiday Inn that was conveniently close to Lois’ apartment building, making the promised phone call and giving her the room’s phone number. He’d barely hung up the receiver when the sound of sirens reached his ears.

A pile up on what used to be the Luthor Expressway required his attention. It was the beginning of three solid hours of Superman duties, ranging from armed robberies to a fire in an apartment building. As he walked up the corridor to his hotel room, he reflected that Superman had been too active in the skies of Metropolis. To allay suspicion, he was going to have to patrol someplace far away. The return of Superman to Metropolis had to be a gradual thing if he didn’t want the link between Clark Kent and Superman to become obvious.

The first thing he saw when he walked in the door was the blinking red light on the answering machine. He pressed the button to hear the message.

“Clark, it’s Lois. Where are you? I guess you’re out doing ... other ... things. Perry wants you to call him as soon as you can ...”

By the time the message had finished playing he was already out the door.

“They signed off on your rehire ... with certain conditions.”

Perry White dropped a thick sheaf of papers on the desk in front of Clark.

“They’re giving you a six-month contract, on probation for the first three months. After six months, they’ll review it.” He mentioned a weekly salary that made Clark wince internally — it was significantly lower than what he’d been earning at the Planet the previous year — but was at least more than he’d been making as a freelance.

He gave Perry a relieved grin. “I’ll take it.”

“Good. I don’t think I need to tell you, Kent, that this is your last chance.” He pointed a finger at the pile of papers. “The only reason you got that contract is I told the suits that the Star would snap you up. I convinced them that we’d lose front page stories if they let you go, and they didn’t like the idea of losing stories to that rag. So don’t slip up.”

“Thanks, Chief.” He poured every ounce of his heartfelt gratitude into the words.

Perry waved him off. “You can start on Monday. Oh, and Clark? It’s good to have you back.”

Clark left the office with a grin on his face. Career-wise, he was back at square one — okay, more like square zero. It was worth it to be back at the Planet. He couldn’t wait to tell Lois. He had a second chance — his last chance — and this time, he was determined not to screw it up. He had his dream job, and more importantly, he had Lois.

Life couldn’t get any better than this.

THE END