

Tempus: Four Play

By Female Hawk <hawka@iinet.net.au>

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Summary: Clark Kent from the parallel universe has a problem — his Lois is going to marry Tempus. So who better to call on for help than Lois and Clark? Can they help Lois see the true character of Tempus? Can the four of them overcome the time-travelling villain? And will Lois ever see Clark as more than a friend?

All standard disclaimers apply.

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Lois Lane was dreaming — an explicit and sensuous dream — powered by more than a year of memories. In her sleep, she reached for her husband and found his pillow cold and empty.

She awoke enough to groan. There were breathtaking positives to being Mrs Superman. The nights she spent alone were the negative.

Then she heard footsteps — familiar footsteps — coming up the stairs. Suddenly wide awake and poised for action, Lois turned on the soft light of the bedside lamp and hitched herself a little higher on the pillow.

Clark's face appeared in the doorway.

Lois rose from the bed and moved to where she could see more than just his face. He was wearing the Suit — the Suit that accentuated every contour of his magnificent physique. Lois pulled her gaze from his body and to his face, realising instantly that he looked tired and dispirited — a man clearly in need of the attentions of his wife.

Lois swooped into his arms. She captured his mouth with hers and slid her hands around his hips to settle them possessively on his lower back.

He jolted backwards. "No!" His hands clamped onto her shoulders, establishing and maintaining a distance between them. "Lois, no."

She scanned from red boots to gelled hair. There was no obvious reason for his withdrawal — no blood or grime from his rescue. Then she understood — it must have been a bad one. She reached around his shoulders and tenderly drew him into her embrace. "Are you OK?" she murmured as her fingers lovingly spread through the short hair at the back of his neck.

"Lois! Don't!" Clark put his hands on her waist, lifted her bodily, and firmly deposited her at arm's length. Then he stepped back as if to emphasise his need to separate them.

"Clark?" she said, bewildered.

"I'm not *Clark*," he grated. "I'm ... me."

Maybe she was still dreaming. "You're *not* Clark?" she echoed, her disbelief prominent in her tone.

He looked up from his boots. "I'm not *your* Clark," he explained uncomfortably. "I'm the *other* Clark. From the parallel dimension."

Lois gaped as the appalling truth smacked into her consciousness. Her mortification glowed hot on her face and dipped to her neck. She snatched her robe and tightly overlapped it around her. "I'm sorry," she said, conscious of the complete inadequacy of her apology.

He'd been staring somewhere above her left shoulder, but now looked directly at her. "I'm sorry too."

She searched him. Dark, glossy hair, balmy brown eyes, clean-shaven, flawless mouth, with his lower lip enticingly shaped. Broad chest, which the spandex was helpless to camouflage, strong arms, bulging with muscle in all the right places, hands — Lois dragged her eyes away. Even his hands looked just like her husband's. And those hands ... She gulped. "I thought you were my husband," she offered lamely.

"My fault," he said charitably. "I shouldn't have come into your bedroom. But I didn't want to..." He motioned to his eyes. "You know?"

Lois was acutely aware of her embarrassment, but her disquiet went deeper than that. Surely, after more than a year of marriage, she should *know* her husband. Intuitively know. But she could see nothing in this man to differentiate him from her Clark. "I'm really sorry about ..."

"It's OK," he said quickly.

Nothing. Not one eyelash. Maybe it *was* Clark, teasing her. Lois glanced to his eyes, half expecting amusement. Instead she found bleak desperation and the lingering cloud of embarrassment. "Why are you here?" she asked, aiming for the middle ground between formality and friendliness.

"I need Clark's help."

"Clark's out," she informed him, rather shortly. She smiled to soften her words. "I don't know when he'll be back."

He looked flustered, as if this possibility hadn't occurred to him. "I'll go and find him."

"There's no hurry."

"Yes, there is. Lois ... *my* Lois is going to—"

"*Your* Lois?"

His shy, uncertain smile evoked a sharp memory of Clark ... her Clark ... from the time when he had first come to Metropolis. It was like being transported back five years. "My Lois," he repeated with a mixture of joy and pride and maybe some anguish too.

So that's why he'd been surreptitiously studying her — he was probably searching for differences too. "You *found* her?"

"Yes. And I have to get back before she marries Tempus."

"*Tempus*?" Lois didn't even try to keep the distaste from her tone.

"The wedding is today," he said miserably. "I need to find Clark now and—"

"No you don't," Lois calmed. "When you go back, it will be only seconds after you left."

"Really?"

"Remember when I came to your world? When I got back, Clark was panicked because I'd been gone for ten seconds."

"Oh."

Lois could see this Clark was exhausted. "Go and get some sleep on the couch," she said. "When Clark gets home, we'll work out what we're going to do together."

She followed him to the landing and watched as he walked down the stairs. At the bottom, he smiled up at her. "The teamwork thing," he said. "I remember that."

Lois leant against the door jamb, remaining there even after he'd disappeared from view. She'd finally found a difference between her husband and the man now settling himself on her couch. When they were Superman, she'd be all right. But when they were Clark ... she really couldn't risk any more misunderstandings.

Hopefully they went to different optometrists.

Clark Kent — Superman — gently deposited the last bus crash victim on the hospital gurney and gratefully turned for home.

Seconds later, he flew through his bedroom window and

automatically sought his wife's face. She was asleep, her dark hair splayed across the pillow. Yet again, he was engulfed with the depth of his love for her. He was the one with Superpowers, but she was his source.

He spun out of the Suit and slipped into bed beside her. He reached for her arm and let his touch slide down to her elbow, drop onto her hip and skate down her thigh. She pushed his hand away. "Don't," she said sleepily.

He lifted his hand. "Lois?"

She rolled away from him. "Go back to the couch."

"Lois, I think you've been dreaming."

She didn't respond. Her shoulder and upper back were bare. His fingertips were lured back to her shoulder. He would never tire of touching her.

She twitched.

He increased his pressure and began stroking the length of her upper arm.

"Leave me alone!"

Clark snatched back his hand as if he'd been stung. "Lois, what's wrong?"

"I'm sorry if what happened let you think this would be OK," she snapped. "It isn't. Not now. Not ever."

"Lo—is?"

"Don't you dare touch me." She hunkered down the bed, covering herself so only the very top of her head was visible.

Clark stared at the shape of her body under the covers.

He remembered this far too well. Watching her, yearning for her, not able to touch her.

What had happened to Lois while he was away? Only once before had she rejected him like this. His first wedding night, and it wasn't Lois, it was the clone. He shot upright and scanned her ankle. There it was — the scar from her broken ankle.

So she wasn't a clone.

He scanned her entire body, looking for signs of drugs, poisons, anything to explain her behaviour.

She lurched, turned, and round-armed him. Her fist brushed his shoulder and hit him flush on the jaw. It didn't hurt, but it sure did shock him. "How dare you scan my body?" she sniped with more venom than he'd seen in a long time. "I can't believe you stooped that low."

With a final glare, she turned away from him and covered herself completely.

Clark backed away, careful not to make contact with her. He stared at the ceiling, tense and uncomfortable, realising how few times he had lay next to her and been compelled to avoid contact. There was no way he was going to the couch; no way was he going to leave her. Not until he'd worked out what had happened to her.

Clark woke as the early morning light filtered through their window. Lois was asleep next to him. Nothing about her gave him any hint regarding her behaviour last night. Maybe he'd dreamed it? No, the sting of her rejection still sat like a burr in his heart.

She opened her eyes and considered him warily. "Clark?" she said uncertainly.

So it wasn't amnesia. "Yes."

"Will you do something for me?"

"Anything."

"Change into the Suit."

Even better, she still knew he was Superman. Clark got up and spun into Superman.

Lois stood on their bed and looked down at him. "Look at your boots," she said.

He did.

As he looked up, she threw herself at him. He caught her as her legs straddled his waist. She kissed him fervently and

dragged her hands through his hair, past his neck, across his shoulders and under the cape. Her fingers found the zip and pulled it down.

Within seconds the Suit was lying crumpled on the floor. Her sleepwear followed. Clark neither knew nor cared. He was being welcomed home exactly the way he liked best.

"You want to tell me what's going on?" Clark asked as they lay enjoying the afterglow.

Lois traced invisible lines across his bare chest. "Mistaken identity?" she suggested vaguely.

He didn't reply for a long moment and Lois knew his contentment had dulled his confusion. She felt him relax under her touch. "Who did you think I was?" he asked when the inadequacy of her answer finally filtered through his brain.

"Clark from the parallel dimension."

Clark sat up abruptly. "He's here?"

"Uh huh."

His contentment evaporated. "In our bedroom?"

"Uh huh."

His top lip tightened. "Did you...?"

"No. No, of course not."

Clark expelled a big breath and collapsed back onto the bed.

"Clark?" Lois said.

He rose onto one elbow. "Yeah?"

"I was dreaming about you and he came in and I thought he was you."

"You said nothing happened," Clark said tightly.

"He stopped me."

"How soon?"

"Very soon," she assured him. "As soon as he could."

"Did you kiss him?" Clark asked.

Lois knew her answer would upset him, but she had to be honest. "A little."

Clark dragged in a breath. "Were you naked?"

"No." Lois ran the side of her thumb along his top lip, hoping to soothe away his evident tension. "I would never ... not with anyone but you. I'm sorry."

Clark's dismay waned and he managed a small smile. "I know. But the thought of you with anyone else ... it kills me."

She kissed him, long and deep. "After he'd gone, I fell asleep feeling completely embarrassed, then I half woke and I thought he'd come back."

Clark rubbed his jaw. "Lucky I don't bruise easily."

"Sorry."

"I'm not," Clark said, grinning suddenly. "I'm delighted to know that's what every other guy can expect if he makes a move on you." He took her hand in his and toyed with her wedding ring. "Any idea why he's here?"

"He needs our help. His Lois is going to marry Tempus."

"His Lois? He found her?"

Lois nodded. "But now he's awfully scared he's going to lose her."

"Poor guy," Clark said with heartfelt affinity.

She kissed his Adam's apple. "Clark?"

"Uhm?"

"Please wear your wedding ring. I need to know for sure which one is you."

Lois brought the coffee from the kitchen to the two men at the table. It was like seeing double. Same optometrist, she thought wryly. Same taste.

"I can't stomach the thought of her with Tempus," not-our Clark said grimly.

"Does she love him?" Lois asked.

"I don't know." Not-our Clark slumped, shoulders forward, face set. "She doesn't love me, I know that."

“But you love her?”
 A shadow of a smile crossed his so-like-Clark’s mouth.
 “More than life.”
 “Have you told her?” Clark asked.
 “Yeah,” he admitted disconsolately. “Which was a mistake — all it did was wreck our friendship.”
 “What did she say?” Lois asked. But in her heart, she already knew.
 “That she loved me as a friend, but not the way I wanted.”
 His despair was palpable and triggered fresh revelation of how much she must have wounded Clark all those years ago. Lois caught her husband’s eyes. I’m sorry, she messaged silently.
 “I’d seen what you have,” not-our Clark said, his eyes swinging from Lois to Clark. “So I thought if there was the slightest chance ...” He sighed. “HG Wells took me back to early 1993 when Lois was in the Congo. I rescued her ... as Superman. She idolises him, but me, Clark, she treats like a kid brother — handy at times, but not to be taken too seriously.” Not-our Clark stared at his coffee. “She called me a ‘hack from Nowheresville,’” he said forlornly.
 Clark glanced at Lois, his face straight, but his eyebrow raised just enough to convey his tacit humour. Lois smothered her desire to giggle. “But your world knows you’re Superman,” she said.
 “Not now they don’t,” not-our Clark said. “When I brought Lois back to Metropolis, no one had heard of Superman. When it was just me, it didn’t matter if everyone knew. But with Lois, the secret identity was protection for her ... if we ever became close.”
 “You remember?” Lois asked with surprise. “Your life before, then going back, then living it all again?”
 “Some of it.”
 “Does Lois know you’re Superman?” Clark asked.
 “No. I wanted to ... I tried to find a way to tell her, but now that she’s marrying Tempus, I’m relieved I didn’t.”
 Lois re-filled his coffee. “What do you have on Tempus?”
 “When I got back from the Congo, Tex Tempus was the Mayor of Metropolis — rich, well-respected, generous. Naturally I was suspicious, so I dug into his affairs. I know he’s behind multiple deaths, I know he’s involved in underworld crime — but I can’t prove any of it. And nobody wants to listen; he has a charisma nobody sees through. Particularly Lois.”
 “But marry him?” Clark said.
 Not-our Clark shrugged. “It started with an interview, moved to a date and the next thing I knew we couldn’t agree on anything and she was engaged to him.”
 “You said she loves Superman,” Clark noted. “That didn’t help, eh?”
 “No,” not-our Clark answered dejectedly. “She basically said she would give up Tempus if there was any chance with Superman, but I couldn’t ...”
 “Because you wanted her to love you for who you are, not for what you can do,” Lois finished. Again she silently messaged Clark — I was such a klutz.
 Yep, he agreed with a teasing smile.
 “HG gave me two inter-dimensional transporters.” Not-our Clark took the gadgets from his pocket. “He said to give you one and show you how to use it. He said we could help each other in case he didn’t come any time we needed him. I figured this was that time.”
 Clark took one of the gadgets and examined it. “Do you have a plan for Tempus?” he asked.
 Not-our Clark shifted uncomfortably, looking like a self-conscious teenager. “Yes ... but ...”
 “Tell us,” Lois encouraged.
 “Well, I have tried everything to get close to Lois. Nothing has worked. I thought ...” He glanced at Clark, his colour

deepening. “I thought if you and I were to swap, maybe she would notice you ... me. At least enough to have second thoughts about marrying Tempus.”

Now Clark looked uncomfortable too. “I don’t have any ... foolproof strategies ... or special techniques ... or any—”
 “Are you kidding?” not-our Clark exclaimed. “I’ve seen how your Lois feels about you. If my Lois—”
 “So you think I sauntered in from Smallville,” Clark said incredulously. “Applied my ... ah, foolproof strategies ... and Lois immediately fell hopelessly in love with me?”
 “Well ... yeah, something like that,” not-our Clark said. “Isn’t that how it happened?”
 An unruly throng of giggles threatened to break loose inside Lois. The baffled earnestness of not-our Clark was catalyst enough ... but the gobsmacked expression on Clark’s face was very nearly her undoing. She applied studied attention to the sugar bowl while she gained control. But, she promised herself, Clark *would* hear about this later.
 “I don’t think you and Clark should swap,” Lois told not-our Clark, her tone carefully measured. “But we can come to your universe and try to help you take down Tempus.”
 Clark had managed to refocus his thoughts. “I will come, Clark, but Lois is staying here.” He hurried on, before she could interrupt. “We should plan before we leave. If I know Tempus, things will move quickly once we get there.”
 “Clark, I’m coming with you,” Lois said decisively.
 “Lois, you’re staying here,” Clark said, equally so.
 “In every dimension, in every time, Tempus has only ever wanted two things,” she argued. “To kill Superman and have Lois Lane for himself.”
 “That’s precisely why you’re staying here.”
 “He *will* have kryptonite.” Lois saw the conviction of her words settle into her husband’s consciousness and pushed her advantage. “So both of you could wind up useless and there’s so much his Lois doesn’t know. Our biggest advantage is Tempus not knowing we’re there, but we can’t use that fully unless I’m there too.”
 Clark dragged his hand through his hair. “No, Lois. It’s too dangerous.”
 “For five years, I’ve had one Clark and one Superman,” she reasoned. “You’ve always kept me safe. We’ll have two Clarks and two Supermans. What can possibly go wrong?”
 A whole lot, said Clark’s expression. He didn’t like it, but he was reconsidering. “Are you invited to the wedding?” he asked not-our Clark.
 He nodded. “But I’m not sure I can face it.”
 “I’ll go to the wedding as you,” Clark said. “You can be Superman.”
 “I’ll go to the wedding as your date, Clark,” Lois said. She waited until he looked at her. When he did, she smiled, needing to know he had accepted her going. After what seemed a long time, he returned her smile.
 “Clark and I can swap identities,” not-our Clark said. “But we can’t be together around Tempus because he knows Clark Kent is Superman.”
 “It would be best if we’re apart,” Clark said. “Then if there is kryptonite, one of us might escape it.”
 Lois drained her coffee. “How much do I look like your Lois?”
 “Her hair is a little longer. Even so...” Not-our Clark shook his head. “I wouldn’t want to have to guarantee who was who.”
 “Then how are we going stop Tempus from recognising me?” Lois asked. “And stop Lois wondering why Clark has a date who looks so much like her?”
 “She’s so engrossed with Tempus, I doubt she’ll notice,” not —our Clark said.
 “Trust me, she’ll notice,” Lois said.

“That’s Lois Lane for you,” Clark teased. “There’s not a disguise in the world she can’t see through.”

Lois kicked him under the table, hard enough to register her protest, not hard enough to damage her foot.

Clark responded with his ravishing smile. “Just for that my little minx, you can go as a blonde.”

“Blonde?”

“Absolutely. You are going wig-shopping.”

“So I get blonde, and then we leave?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Clark agreed.

Not-our Clark visibly relaxed. “Maybe ... there is a way out of this mess.”

“Of course there is,” Clark said. “We just have to find it.”

Lois Lane was dreaming — an explicit and sensuous dream — based on — Clark!

She shot upright in her bed.

Her dream had been about Clark!

Her and Clark together, undressed, entwined.

Clark — her partner and best friend.

Clark — kind, decent, reliable, dull Clark.

But he hadn’t been dull in her dream. Far, far from it.

He’d been gentle and adoring — no surprises there. But also passionate and adept, in a most unClark-like way. Although, it wasn’t completely inconceivable — she already knew he was a supreme kisser. She’d made that startling discovery in the Honeymoon Suite of the Texor Hotel. If she thought about it now, it caused her insides to roll with pleasure.

Clark.

Clark.

Clark, who’d told her with such defenceless honesty that he was in love with her. Clark, who hadn’t been able to hide his devastation at her response.

Clark, who deserved so much more.

But today was her wedding day. And she was going to marry Tex.

Tex Tempus — suave, charming, handsome, rich, enigmatic, mysterious.

Lois reached for the folder of notes she had been studying just before sleep had claimed her last night. She flicked through them again. They were case notes for murders stretching back a year. There was something she was missing. She was sure of it.

Her bedroom door opened and she shut the folder. “Tex,” she greeted.

“My lovely Lois.”

“You’re not supposed to see me on our wedding day. It’s bad luck.”

“Not for us, my dear.” He kissed her hand.

“What do you want?”

“Many brides experience last minute nerves, so I’ve come to banish yours.”

She squeezed his hand. He could be considerate.

“In my penthouse, there is a weapon loaded with two personalised bullets,” Tex informed her casually. “One is pure high-grade kryptonite and is programmed to find Superman — wherever in the world he may be. The other’s target is Clark Kent and will kill him. They will fire at noon.”

Ice capped her heart. “Clark?”

Tex took the folder from her and walked to the door. He turned before exiting. “Don’t take it to heart, Lois, my love. All is not lost. The registration of our marriage will prevent the weapon firing.” He sniggered. “Happy wedding day, Lois. No second thoughts, remember, or ... no Superman, no Clark.”

Lois melted back into her pillow. Tex had been behind those murders. He was the common thread. She’d just been too blind to see it.

Or too proud to admit that yet again ... she had got involved

with exactly the wrong sort of man.

And now she had to marry him, or both Clark and Superman would die.

Clark kissed Lois as she left to buy the blonde wig. “Don’t hurry,” he said. “Clark’s pretty stressed. He could use a little time-out.”

“Take him to Smallville,” she suggested. “That’ll relax him.”

“Good idea.” Clark kissed her again. “See you later, Blondie.”

He watched as she slipped into the Jeep, remembering the agony of not knowing how she felt about him.

Back in the kitchen, he saw his memories alive on not-our Clark’s face. “We’ve got a couple of hours on our hands,” he said. “Anything you’d like to do?”

“Do you have to go to the Planet?”

“It’s my day off.”

“Oh.”

“How about we visit my folks?” Clark offered.

“In Smallville?”

“Why not? They’d love to see you.”

“Are you sure? I wouldn’t want to intrude.”

Clark felt a little ashamed of his lingering jealousy over what had happened between this guy and Lois last night. His parents he was definitely willing to share. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s get out of here.”

Clark was conscious this could be awkward. Not-our Clark’s memories of his ... their ... parents stopped traumatically nearly two decades ago. Martha and Jonathan had no memory of not-our Clark — not as a child — but they couldn’t look at him and fail to feel a connection.

Yet Clark had counted without his parents’ ability to handle any situation graciously. He found himself sitting back, watching three people get acquainted ... or possibly reacquainted. Not-our Clark had been stiffly polite at first, but as time progressed, his confidence increased. Clark tried to imagine what it would be like to be a grown man having coffee with the parents who had died when you were a child. He gave up — it was too bizarre.

After, Clark suggested they all go for a walk around the farm.

“You go,” Martha said. “Jonathan and I are going to clean up.”

“No,” Clark said. “You and Dad go with him. I can see you any time.”

Martha’s hand on his shoulder increased in pressure. “He needs to spend time with you,” she said firmly. “Go.”

They walked around the farm, occasional inane comments cutting into lengthening periods of uncomfortable silence. Clark desperately sought a topic, anything, to break the ice. “It must be weird,” he said. “Being put back in time and living the same years over again.”

“The dates may be the same,” not-our Clark said with a small smile. “But the days with Lois have been nothing like the time without her.”

“How well do you remember the first time?”

“Like it was a dream; the main bits I remember, but the detail can be a little vague.”

“Does it ever help with a story?” Clark asked. “I mean, do you just know someone you’re investigating is lying because you remember?”

“Occasionally.” Not-our Clark grinned. “Lois doesn’t always take it well when one of my *ridiculous hunches* comes through.”

Clark returned his grin. “*That* I can imagine.”

They came to the tree house and flew into it as one.

“Clark?” not-our Clark said. “Do you mind if I ask you something?”

<That depends.> “No,” Clark said, hoping his hesitation

wasn't noticeable.

"What *did* it take for Lois fall in love with you?"

"A *lot* of patience."

"Really?"

"I loved her from the moment I met her in Perry's office,"

Clark declared. "He introduced me and she barely even nodded in my direction."

"Did she like Superman?"

"She adored him."

"But not Clark?"

Clark shook his head and they shared a look of understanding. "She became engaged to a thug called Lex Luthor and I wanted to pull the world apart piece by piece."

Not-our Clark's shock was unmistakable. "*Your* Lois? Engaged to someone else?"

Clark nodded.

"What did you do?"

"We proved Luthor was a criminal and the police stormed in during the wedding."

"Then she realised she had the wrong guy?" not-our Clark said.

"Well, yes," Clark said. "But that didn't mean she thought I was the right guy ... not straight away ... not that she told me anyway. But we got closer and she eventually chose Clark over Superman and that was the first of the happiest days of my life."

"How did you tell her about you being Superman? Was she mad?"

"Yep, she was mad." Clark smiled, remembering. "I had tried to tell her a hundred times, but I always got interrupted by calls for help. She thought I was scared of commitment."

"Were you?"

A quick denial rose in Clark's throat, but he swallowed it. If he couldn't be honest with ... well, himself ... who could he be honest with? "I was scared plenty, but not so much about the commitment."

"How could *you* be scared?" not-our Clark asked incredulously. "You're so self-assured, so confident, so on-top-of-everything. You look like nothing has ever shaken you. I wish I were more like you."

"I've had advantages," Clark said. "I've had parents. I've had more time. I've had Lois. I am stronger with Lois than I am by myself. You will be too."

"Assuming she changes her mind about marrying Tempus, assuming he lets her and assuming she's still willing to even consider me a friend," not-our Clark responded miserably. "Even then ... there are two big barriers between us and I just can't see how they can be overcome."

"Superman is one?"

Not-our Clark nodded.

Clark leant against the trunk of the tree, hands buried in his pockets. "I proposed to Lois and she took off my glasses and demanded to know which one of us was asking to marry her."

"She had figured it out?"

"Yep. And she was *not* happy I had lied to her."

Not-our Clark winced with heartfelt empathy. "Was it days, weeks or months?"

Clark laughed. "Only days, but it felt like years and I was scared it would be forever."

"Yeah."

"So what's the other barrier?" Clark asked.

Not-our Clark stared intently to the distant fields. "Personal stuff, you know," he muttered.

"You're a virgin and you're frightened that if you ever get close to Lois, you'll blow it and scare her away. Or hurt her physically. Or, once she knows you're from another planet, she'll find the thought of intimacy with you repugnant."

Not-our Clark swallowed. Twice. "How did you know?"

"Been there, felt that." Clark also stared into the distance.

"It's like a party where everyone else is invited, but you can't go in, so you stay outside and ... wonder. It's tough. Until you meet Lois Lane. Then it's torture."

"Did you tell Lois? Did she think it made you even more ... weird?"

"I told her. Initially, she was surprised, but she likes being my first. My only."

"And when the time came to actually ... you know?"

"The ... differences ... simply weren't an issue. It will be the same for you."

"Was it worth the wait?"

"More than worth it." Clark jumped down from the tree house. "Can I give you some advice?"

Not-our Clark followed. "Sure."

"If you ever have the really great idea of denying you love Lois so you can restore your friendship with her, make sure you let her speak first, OK?"

He looked puzzled, but shrugged. "OK." They headed back to the farmhouse. "Which is better?" not-our Clark asked. "Lois knowing you're Superman or her not knowing?"

"That's simple. Her knowing makes everything better." Clark opened the farmhouse door. "I have a question for you. Which is harder — having a secret identity or having your whole world know you're Superman?"

Not-our Clark grinned. "That's simple too. The secret identity is much harder. My excuses are *so* lame."

"Mine too," Clark said. "Maybe we should compare notes."

Lois, wearing her blonde wig, gazed around not-our Clark's apartment — the stairs, the balcony, the little kitchen, the couch ... the bedroom ... the memories, ah, the memories.

"The wedding is at 11:30," Clark said. "Then there's a reception."

They were dressed for the wedding and Lois couldn't help but cast an appreciative eye over her husband. She allowed herself a moment to envisage luring him into that oh-so-familiar bedroom and re-visiting some history.

This world's Lois didn't know what she was missing.

"I'll have to take off my wedding ring, Lois," Clark said. "Someone will notice it."

She spread her hands across his cheeks and smiled up at him. "You just want the freedom to test your *foolproof strategies* on the women of this world."

He laughed, a little self-consciously, under her fingers. "Ever since a certain gorgeous brunette completely snubbed me in Perry's office years ago, I've lost all confidence in those strategies."

"Bah, brunettes," she scoffed. "You should stay right away from them."

"I intend to," he said, gently toying with her wig. "In this dimension, anyway."

Lois slipped the ring from his finger and gave it to him.

Clark put it in his pants' pocket. "There has to be a way to tell us apart without the ring," he said.

"There is when you're Superman," Lois said. "But I just can't tell when you're Clark. Particularly now that you're wearing his clothes and pretending to be him."

"You're not really worried, are you? I mean, I doubt there'll be any opportunity for ..." Clark gestured to the bedroom with a suggestive grin.

She leant into him, deliberately provocative. "With your *special techniques*," she murmured huskily, "Who knows how long I'll be able to control myself."

She felt him chuckle. "I'm not going to live this down any time soon, am I?"

She giggled. "Nope."

He backed away to see her face. “Seriously, though, you’re not really worried, are you?”

“No. It’s just disconcerting ... not knowing who I’m talking to.”

“I’ll try to say something to make it obvious for you.”

“Assuming you know which Lois you’re talking to.”

“That shouldn’t be too difficult,” he said, again running his fingers through the blonde locks.

“It’s only a wig,” Lois reminded him. “It can come off.”

Clark gently kissed his wife, then retreated and ran his tongue across his top lip with a sigh of regret. “Unfortunately,” he said. “We have a wedding to attend.”

The bride walked up the aisle to where Tempus waited. As Clark watched her, he began to understand Lois’s concerns. The woman in the flowing white dress could have been Lois. She *is* Lois, he reminded himself.

Yet she was a troubled and tentative Lois, her expression fixed and her steps reluctant. Clark felt a strong impulse to scoop her up and whisk her away to any place where Tempus could never find her. Relax, he told himself, this is Lois. She won’t go through with this.

The bride reached the front and the vows began.

“I, Tex Tempus take you, Lois Lane...”

The bride’s responses came in a small, shaky voice.

“For better or worse.”

Come on Lois, Clark prompted silently.

“For richer or poorer.”

Now Lois, stop this now.

“In sickness and in health.”

Don’t do this, Lois.

“I now pronounce you man and wife.”

Clark felt his wife grip his hand.

The bridal couple signed the register and walked down the aisle, receiving congratulations from their guests. As they neared, Clark moved in front of his wife to obscure their view of her.

The bride turned in his direction and locked eyes with him. Hers were wide with dismay and brimming with unshed tears. Whatever her reasons for continuing with this charade, it had nothing to do with love. At least, not love for the man who was now her husband.

Clark squeezed Lois’s hand and felt her cheek rest on his shoulder.

They followed the guests into the sunlight and hurried away from the crowd.

Lois Lane Tempus attempted to wrench her arm from her new husband’s grip. His hold intensified. “Let me go!” she hissed under her breath. “The marriage is registered. You’ll get nothing more from me.”

His smarmy face closed in, pretending to kiss the depths of her cheek. “Not so, my darling,” he said with nauseating certitude. “You see, the weapon is merely on hold. If this marriage isn’t consummated by two o’clock ... then kerboom.”

Not-our Lois fought against the revulsion clambering up her throat. She searched for Clark’s face in the crowd of guests. She’d seen him as she’d walked down the aisle and had tried desperately, wordlessly, to communicate to him that this wasn’t her choice.

How many times had he warned her that this was a mistake? How many times had he insisted that Tempus couldn’t be trusted?

But each time, she had dismissed it as childish petulance borne of his irrational dislike of Tex. Except now it didn’t seem irrational at all.

She couldn’t find Clark. He’d probably returned to the Planet — leaving her to the awful consequences of her foolishness.

She glanced to the sky. No Superman either. But even he

couldn’t save her this time.

“What are we going to do now?” Lois said, alarmed.

“Did you see her?” Clark said. “There’s no way she wants this.”

“Our only hope now is to get the marriage annulled.”

“But that can only happen if they don’t consummate.”

“We, of all people, shouldn’t lack for ideas,” she said wryly.

“What do you have in mind?” Clark said. “Amnesia? Unethical psycho-therapists? War on another planet? Clones? Ancient curses? All of the above?”

“Clones,” Lois replied. “Well, not a clone exactly. More a swap. Her for me.”

“No!” Clark shook his head. “Absolutely not.”

“If we can replace her with me, you can find out why she married Tempus,” Lois said. “And I can promise you — the marriage will *not* be consummated.”

“No,” Clark growled. “You are not going anywhere near him.”

“We have to think this through,” Lois said. “Let’s assume Lois didn’t *want* to marry Tempus.”

“She didn’t.”

“So, he forced her.”

“Or he threatened her with something,” Clark said with simmering hostility.

“More likely someone,” Lois speculated. “Either Clark or Superman.”

“Or both.”

“If I swap with her,” Lois reasoned. “I’ll know if the threat is real and can act accordingly.”

“If we can *talk* with her,” Clark countered. “We’ll know if the threat is real and there will be no need to swap.”

“She doesn’t know Clark can be hurt by kryptonite, she doesn’t know Clark is Superman, she doesn’t know Tempus knows Clark is Superman, and she doesn’t know Clark from a parallel world, who is also Superman, is here.”

Despite his concern, Clark smiled. “That makes it all perfectly clear.”

“We have to think of a way of distracting Tempus.”

“What does he care about — other than himself and power and killing Superman?”

Lois thought for a long moment. “Guns,” she exclaimed. “When I came here the first time, everyone had a gun. They were everywhere — on the streets, in the homes.”

“So if we could somehow tell him legislation is being proposed to ban gun ownership, it might distract him long enough for us to get to Lois?”

“Good idea, but how?” They looked at each other and then Lois smiled. “Got it,” she said. “We’ll put a subliminal message through his phone, like he did when he was John Doe. Do you think you could set it up?”

“I didn’t see it,” Clark said. “You told me Tempus brought technology from the future.”

“We need to talk to Clark.” Lois looked around expectantly.

Clark grinned. “You’ve never had a problem summoning Superman.”

She returned his smile. “Help! Superman!”

With a blur of red and blue, he was there. “She did it,” not-our Clark groaned. “She married Tempus.”

“She didn’t *want* to,” Clark said.

“What do you mean?” not-our Clark asked quickly.

“She’s not in love with him,” Clark said with certainty. “That is obvious. We think he forced her.”

“Really?” The tiniest ray of hope gleamed in not-our Clark’s eyes.

“Don’t worry about that now,” Lois said. “We have a plan. Could you make a Subliminator for Tempus’s phone?”

Not-our Clark thought for a moment. “I saw it in the electrical system, but it wouldn’t take much adaptation to put it through his phone. I would need components from around the world, but yes, I could do it.”

“The subliminal message needs to be about proposed legislation to ban gun ownership,” Clark said.

Superman smirked as comprehension dawned. “That should take his mind off Lois.”

“Couldn’t we just say ‘don’t hurt Superman’?” Lois said.

“No,” not-our Clark said. “Tempus’s hatred of Superman is so deeply etched in his psyche, it would take weeks to influence those thought patterns.”

“Who would Tempus take a call from on his wedding day?” Lois asked.

“Mr Olsen,” not-our Clark replied. “He’ll be back at the Planet by now. Not even a wedding can keep him away for more than half an hour.”

“I’ll go and ask him to call Tempus,” Lois said.

“Tell him to call at one o’clock,” not-our Clark instructed. “Time is everything to Tempus; he’s obsessively punctual. The reception is on the ground floor of Tempus Towers and they leave at 12:58. He and Lois then go up to his penthouse on the 21st floor.”

“I’ll go back to the reception,” Clark said. “I may get the opportunity to speak with Lois. And it will give Tempus a false sense of security if he thinks he can see Clark.”

Not-our Clark flew away.

“Come back to the reception when you’ve talked with Jimmy,” Clark said to his wife. “Hopefully by then, I’ll know what Tempus is up to.”

Lois paused momentarily as she entered the Planet building. It was the old building; the one Luthor had burned down in Lois’s world. She saw Jimmy Olsen and skirted between the desks to get to him. “Mr Olsen!”

“Yes?” he said, looking puzzled. “Do I know you, Ma’am?”

“I’m LoAnne Lane, Lois’s cousin.”

Jimmy extended his hand. “Ms Lane, it is a pleasure to meet you. How can I help you?”

“Mr Tempus noticed you leaving before the reception.”

“I have a newspaper to run,” Jimmy said with the air of one who wasn’t used to his actions being questioned.

“He understands that,” Lois placated. “And if you were to call him at one o’clock to extend your personal congratulations, I’m sure there would be no lasting ill will.”

“One o’clock?”

“Yes, the timing is very important — after the reception, but before ... well, you know?”

Jimmy smiled. “Consider it done.”

“Thank you Ji.. Mr Olsen.”

“You’re welcome, Ms Lane.”

Lois hurried to Tempus Towers, located the reception and found Clark. “Have you spoken with her?” she asked.

“I hugged her in the receiving line,” Clark replied. “She didn’t speak, but I could feel her tension. Since then I had no opportunities at all. I’m the last person Tempus wants near his bride.”

“There’s still fifteen minutes until one o’clock,” Lois said quietly. “I’m going up to his penthouse to look around. I might be able to find somewhere to hide, so we can swap.”

The tautness rippled through Clark’s jaw, telling her he still didn’t like the exchange idea. “Lois—”

“If he leaves her after he gets the subliminal message, it might be our only chance. There won’t be much time. It will be quicker to swap than to explain everything to her.”

“OK,” Clark said, resigned. “But *be* careful.”

“Clark, you’re here,” Lois said as she kissed his chin.

“Superman’s not far away. I’ll be fine.”

He held her arm and drew her ear close to his mouth. “If you have to choose between whatever he’s demanding and me getting a hit of kryptonite, don’t give in to him.”

Lois nodded and turned away.

Clark didn’t release her arm. “Promise me,” he demanded.

“I promise.”

Lois pushed the ‘21st floor’ button in the elevator. It didn’t respond. A light flashed, illuminating the outline of a hand. Lois positioned her hand in the shape and the doors closed.

They opened on the 21st floor. A corridor stretched ahead, broken only by two doors. One, half way along and on the right, was presumably the door to the penthouse. The other, at the far end, was the fire escape.

Lois assessed the lock on the penthouse door and within two minutes had entered a large, majestic room. There was a huge fireplace along one wall, with a fire burning brightly. On the far side of the room was a series of windows. As she walked across the room, she noticed the perception angles didn’t gel properly and realised they weren’t windows at all — just incredibly life-like murals.

She opened a door and found herself in an office. The desk was empty except for a few implements. There were no papers or files. Not even a computer. Still no windows, she noted, not even the pretence of a mural in here. She tried the desk drawers. They were locked.

Lois felt a gust of wind blow the strands of hair from her cheeks. She returned to the main room. “Hi,” she said to Superman, hastily checking his identity.

Not-our Clark picked up Tempus’s phone. “What are you doing here?” he asked, glancing up at her.

“Looking, maybe for somewhere to hide. If Tempus leaves after the phone call, I’m going to talk with your Lois and maybe swap with her.”

Not-our Superman’s attention left the phone and centred on her. “Is Clark OK with that?”

“Not really, but I know more than your Lois. I can make better decisions.”

She watched the blur of his hands as he worked. “Done,” he said, replacing the phone. “Where are you going to hide?”

“Can you see anywhere?”

He scanned a full circle. “This room is completely lined with lead,” he said. “Every wall, the ceiling, even the floor.” He opened a couple of doors and then motioned for her to squeeze into the closet behind one of them. “I won’t be able to see what’s happening, but I’ll be listening. To everything. I’ll know if you’re scared and I’ll be here.”

She settled into a position that was almost comfortable.

Not-our Clark crouched beside her, his brown eyes serious. “If you have to choose between letting that monster touch you and me getting a blast of kryptonite, there’s no decision to be made, right?”

She smiled. “Right. No kryptonite.”

“Don’t even joke about it,” not-our Clark said stiffly.

“Promise me you won’t give in to him to protect me.”

“I promise.”

He closed the door and the darkness surrounded her.

“So, my darling,” Tempus said in his unctuous voice. “The moment has come. I have waited countless lifetimes for this.”

Confined in the closet, Lois heard the shuffle of movement, interrupted by the peal of the phone.

He answered it. “Tempus.”

Lois held her breath.

“Thank you, Mr Olsen. I appreciate you taking the time to

offer your congratulations.”

Lois forced herself to breathe, shallow and soundless. “I wouldn’t want to keep the lady waiting.”

Lois clenched her fist, imagining his arrogant, evil face. She heard him replace the phone and held her breath again. Had the Subliminator worked?

“Wait here,” she heard Tempus say. “I have a little business needing my immediate attention.”

“But Clark?” not-our Lois cried. “And Superman. There’s less than an hour until —”

“An eager bride,” Tempus mocked. “How touching.”

The penthouse door opened.

“Stay here,” he barked. “Remember, no fireworks in the bedroom mean a big explosion for the caped superhero.”

Lois heard the door shut and lock. She emerged from her hiding place. “Lois,” she whispered urgently.

Not-our Clark’s Lois gaped at her. “Who are you? What are you doing here?”

“It’s a long story and I only have a few minutes,” Lois said. “I know you don’t trust people easily, but it is really, really important you trust me now.”

“Who are you?”

“I’m . . . Lois Lane.”

“Right,” not-our Lois said with unconcealed disdain.

“I’m from a parallel universe.”

“You’re me?” she gasped. “In another place?”

Lois nodded.

“This is a joke, right? I’m not *that* stupid.”

“I know better than anyone that you’re not stupid. A little blinkered maybe, but definitely not stupid.” Lois tried to devise the simplest and quickest way through this. “Do you know anyone who can fly?”

Her look said — I’m not the stupid one here. “Of course, Superman.”

“Before you knew Superman, would you have believed a man in blue tights could fly?”

“Well, no,” not-our Lois admitted.

“So, for now, with just the eeniest, teeniest piece of you mind, could you please accept the possibility I’m from an alternate universe and I’m here to help you get out of this mess you’ve managed to get yourself into?”

That sobered her. “What are we going to do?”

“Why did you marry Tempus?” Lois asked, careful to smother the reproach from her tone.

“Tex has two pre-programmed bullets, one trained on Clark, one on Superman, and he said if our marriage wasn’t registered by noon and consummated by two o’clock, they would automatically fire.”

“It would take more than a guided bullet to take out Superman.”

“Not if it’s made of kryptonite,” not-our Lois said ominously.

Lois’s fears festered into devastating reality. “When did you know this? Couldn’t you have gone to Clark for help? Or Superman?”

“Things have been . . . tense . . . between Clark and me.”

“What about Superman?”

“That’s . . . complicated.”

“Either of them would have helped you.”

Not-our Lois stared at her hands, scrunched in her lap. “I didn’t realise about Tex until this morning,” she admitted. “Maybe I am stupid.”

Lois moved a little closer. “We need to swap.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve dealt with Tempus before.”

“You have?”

Lois nodded, already beginning to undress.

“Tex is evil, but he’s not blind,” not-our Lois said. “You’re

blonde.”

Lois ripped the wig from her head. “Get out of the wedding dress. Quickly.”

Not-our Lois stared at her, speechless.

“Yep, the likeness is unnerving, isn’t it?” Lois said, unzipping her skirt. “Why does Tempus have two bullets?”

Not-our Lois loaded up another derisive look, but pulled it. “One for Clark, one for Superman,” she explained, almost managing to quash her ridicule.

“Is he bluffing?”

The bride shimmied out of the wedding dress. “I doubt it. He has killed before.”

When they were both dressed again, Lois handed not-our Lois the wig, then straightened it for her. She took off her engagement ring and offered it to her. “Our wedding rings are close enough, but your engagement ring is three times the size of mine.”

“Tex is rich,” not-our Lois said as they swapped rings. “But not in any way that matters.”

“Get out of here,” Lois said. “Try to avoid Tempus. If he does see you, tell him you’re LoAnne Lane, Lois’s cousin. Find Clark or Superman and tell him about the bullets.”

“I’ll use the fire escape. Tex will come up in the elevator.”

Lois reached to open the door. It was locked with a deadbolt.

Not-our Lois took two keys out of her bag and gave one to Lois.

“You have keys to his penthouse?” she squeaked. “You’ve *stayed* here?”

“No! Not like that.” Not-our Lois blushed. “I stole one, had copies made, then returned it.”

“So you *didn’t* trust him? Not really?”

She shrugged. “Once a reporter . . .”

After she’d left, Lois relocked the door and sat down to wait for Tex Tempus. Within minutes, she heard the key in the lock.

Not-our Clark, in the Suit, landed at the Daily Planet and went into Perry White’s office.

Perry stood up. “Superman,” he greeted. “How nice to see—”

“Lois and Clark are working on a story and need your help.”

“A story?” Perry faltered. “But it’s Lois’s wedding day.”

“You know Lois.”

“She’s working with Clark? On the day she married Tex Tempus?”

“Will you help them?”

“Yes, of course I—”

“Call Tempus,” not-our Superman instructed. “Talk to him about . . . about anything. Congratulate him, ask him when Lois will be returning to work . . . anything . . . just keep him on the phone as long as you can.”

Perry looked concerned. “Is Lois all right?” he asked. “Tempus hasn’t hurt her, has he?”

“Just do it, Mr White. Please. It’s really important.”

Perry nodded his compliance.

Outside the Daily Planet, not-our Clark spoke into the mini-microphone linked to the Subliminator in Tempus’s phone. “Lois Lane is repulsive. Only a blind simpleton would be attracted to Lois Lane. Lois Lane has the sex appeal of a parasite. Kissing Lois Lane is like kissing a drooling bulldog.”

Lois faced Tempus defiantly.

“My darling,” he sneered. “How kind of you to wait for me.”

“If I had a choice, I wouldn’t wait for you if you were the only man still breathing.”

Tempus laughed harshly. “But you don’t have a choice and the clock is ticking.” He leant over her and slowly, purposefully, advanced. His hand touched her face and she repressed a shudder. His mouth moved closer. Lois forced her eyes to stay open as he

loomed above her. His phone jangled, and they both jumped.

He cursed and picked up the phone. “Tempus.” He was silent for a protracted interval and then suddenly exploded with, “Mr White! It’s my wedding day and I have no intention of discussing my wife’s work schedule with you now.”

Tempus slammed down the phone and turned back to Lois. Her stomach churned.

He scrutinised her, then his lip curled with distaste. “Duh,” he muttered. “What was I thinking?” He towered over her, menacing. “Get out of my sight, you ugly wench.”

Lois stood unsteadily and began to inch towards the door. “What about the Clark? And Superman?”

“You’re right.” He sprang past her and dead-locked the penthouse door.

“It will be much more gratifying to actually witness Superman’s death. Let’s get him here.”

Clark was at a loss. It was an unusual feeling for him and not one he was enjoying. Tempus and the bride had gone up to the penthouse. Clark had scanned the building and discovered he could not see into any part of the top floor. He paced the length of the foyer on the ground floor of Tempus Towers. Where was Superman? Where was Lois? Then he turned and saw her.

Lois. Running towards him, blonde hair skittering. Clark stepped quickly into her embrace and clutched her to him. “Are you all right?”

“Clark.”

She clung to him and he held her close, awash with relief to have her safe. “Did you talk to Lois? Why go ahead with the wedding?”

“Tempus is going to kill you and Superman. He has two programmed bullets, one of them kryptonite, set to fire at two o’clock, unless the marriage is consummated.”

“Two bullets?” he questioned, glancing at his watch. They had thirty-eight minutes.

“Yes! *Two!*”

The impatience in her voice triggered sudden doubt in Clark’s mind. *Was* this his wife? He examined every detail of her face and still wasn’t sure.

“Why are you looking at me like that, Clark?” she said. “It’s me, Lois. Your partner. Surely the blonde wig didn’t fool you?”

His partner. *Not* his wife. “Did you swap with the Lois from the alternate world?” he asked desperately.

“Yes,” she said, taken aback by his tone. “She insisted.”

Clark closed his eyes. Lois, his beautiful Lois, was with Tempus — who was threatening murder unless she ...

He couldn’t even think about it.

Tempus went to the fire and picked up a branding iron. He put it in the fire and waited, turning it occasionally as it heated. Lois’s heart pounded. Tempus pulled the iron from the fire and walked towards her with slow, predatory certainty. His crest — the raised, clenched fist — glowered.

The iron came close enough for its heat to radiate onto her cheek. It came closer.

There was a blur of swift movement and the branding iron thudded to the floor. A slow spiral of smoke rose from where it lay on the carpet. Not-our Superman held Tempus off the ground by his throat.

“How nauseatingly predictable,” Tempus sneered. “Do you ever have an original thought, Superman?”

“Original?” not-our Superman scoffed. “Exactly how many times have you tried to kill Superman and marry Lois Lane?”

“This time I succeeded on one count.” Tempus reached into his pocket and a large hole opened in the ceiling. A green, glowing cage lowered into the room. “Or ... perhaps both.”

Not-our Superman dropped Tempus and collapsed in pain.

Tempus shoved him under the cage. It lowered over the superhero, trapping him. Four huge hooks disconnected from the cage, retracted and the ceiling closed.

“Finally,” Tempus gloated. “I win.” He straightened his tie, returned the branding iron and sat across from Lois. “You’re an intelligent woman, Lois, astute enough to fully comprehend your situation. Let’s talk business.”

“Call Superman,” Clark told not-our Lois. “We need to talk with him.” She called and Clark waited for the swish, the blur of red and blue, but it didn’t come.

“Superman,” not-our Lois called again. “Help, Superman!” She turned to Clark, distraught. “He *always* comes, Clark. Tempus must have him.”

Clark’s mind whirled. Tempus had Lois. If Tempus had Superman, he also had kryptonite. Every fibre in Clark’s being ached to fly to the penthouse of Tempus Towers and reclaim what was his.

But he couldn’t. He couldn’t let Tempus know he was here. He couldn’t allow Tempus to have both of them in his control.

“Come with me,” not-our Lois said insistently. Her hands on his chest and her earnestness touched him in the place where he kept memories of his wife.

“Where are we going?”

“Somewhere you’ll be safe.”

He followed her across the foyer and around the main elevator to a second one, backing onto the first. “Lois, I can’t go up to the penthouse. Tempus can’t—”

“We’re not going up, we’re going down.” She took his hand and pulled him into the elevator, pushed a series of buttons and placed her hand on an illuminated square. “And we’re *not* going to let Tex—”

“Down?”

The elevator doors shut and they were alone. “You were right about Tex,” she said, looking up at him with huge, solemn eyes. “I’m sorry, Clark. About so many things.”

He didn’t know how to respond to such a soulful apology which wasn’t meant for him and there was no time to explain now. “Why are we going down?”

“Clark! In thirty-three minutes a guided bullet is going to be fired with your name on it.”

“Lois! This isn’t necessary. Really. I—”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Clark. We have to get you to safety first. Then I’ll try to help the other Lois and Superman.”

The elevator stopped and the door opened. Not-our Lois took his hand and pulled him forward to a gigantic steel door. She placed her finger on the identity pad and the steel door slid open. Still firmly attached to his hand, she hurried him down a long, sterile corridor. “Where are we?” Clark asked.

“Tex’s nuclear shelter,” not-our Lois informed him. “He offered me a place here when the asteroid was heading towards Earth.” She led him to the end of the corridor and into a room. A very familiar room. “Hey this ... this is your apartment,” Clark said.

“Well, just like it. Tex had it made for me, so if the asteroid hit, we’d be OK.”

“And what about everyone else?” Clark asked dryly.

“Thanks to Superman, it didn’t come to that.” Not-our Lois shut the door and sent home the numerous locks and bolts.

“I can’t stay here,” Clark told her. “I have to get to Lois.”

“You can’t,” not-our Lois said matter-of-factly. “There are time-delayed dead locks. Once the door is opened, it can’t be opened again for fifteen minutes.”

Clark made short work of the multiple locks on her apartment door and ran back to the steel door. He braced against it and —

“What are you doing?”

OK, he remembered this. Being bound by ties that couldn’t

hold him. Being imprisoned by locks that couldn't contain him. Just so Lois wouldn't guess he was anything more than inept Clark.

He turned with a shrug of resignation. "I thought it might be weaker than it looks."

Her look was pure, undiluted Lois Lane exasperation.

Clark followed her back to her apartment, lost in a tornado of conflicting emotions. Gnawing anxiety for Lois. Bristling frustration at being locked in. Bittersweet nostalgia at being in Lois's apartment with a Lois who didn't think twice about nailing him with a single look.

He would sit out the time. He would plan. He would rescue Lois.

Back in her apartment, not-our Lois put her hand on his chest. "You're safe here," she said.

"Why the time-delayed locks?" he asked with a sigh.

"Tex has a thing about time," she said. "Everything is timed to the last second." She swallowed. "Even murder."

Clark sat on Lois's love seat, formulating his plan. It was time for Superman.

Partly because he couldn't let not-our Lois see Clark Kent doing Super stuff.

But mostly because, kryptonite or not, it was time to confront Tempus. This had gone far enough.

"Clark?"

He looked up at her.

"I feel so bad about getting us into this. I can't believe I let Tex dupe me. I was wrong ... about so many things. I'm sorry."

"Lois?" he said. "There's something I have to tell you."

"I know."

"What do you know?"

"I know you're hiding something," she said with calm conviction. "I've known for awhile. There's something about you that just doesn't add up."

Clark took his wedding ring from his pocket and held it up for her to see.

"You're married?" she gasped. "Clark, how could you not tell me? And why have you hidden her all this time? Is she still in Smallville? And what business did you have saying you're in love with me?" Her face suddenly twisted. "It's Lana, isn't it?" she accused coldly. "You told me that was over."

He put on his ring. "No, it's not Lana. Remember Lois? Lois who swapped clothes with you? Lois from the alternate dimension? I'm her Clark."

"She has a Clark too?" not-our Lois squeaked. Then her astonishment morphed into panic. "Clark!" she screamed. "Clark!" She sagged onto the bench, her head in her hands.

Clark stood and drew near to her. "Lois?"

She turned like a viper. "How could you?" she screeched. "How could you come here, all safe and protected, and leave Clark ... my Cl..Clark up there to take the bullet?"

"It wasn't *my* idea to come here."

She turned away from him. "Clark ... Clark," she said so low he wouldn't have heard without superhearing. "You can't leave me."

Clark knew it wasn't him she wanted, but he couldn't stay away. He put his hand on her small, trembling shoulder. "Lois?"

She faced him, fury spent, but replaced by a cold abhorrence which was much worse. "You sound like him, you look like him, but you are *not* like him. He would never let someone else die for him."

You left my Lois with Tempus, he wanted to scream back. He controlled the impulse. "Lois, I'm sorry," he said, although he wasn't totally sure what he was sorry for.

She glanced at the clock. "There's still time."

"Time for what?"

"Time to get Clark down here too."

But Clark was Superman and Superman was possibly with Tempus. "What if you can't find him?"

"There's another option."

Her meaning ricocheted through Clark's consciousness. "No! Lois, no. You can't do that. You can't let Tempus win."

"You can't stop me," not-our Lois said coldly.

"Clark would hate it," he said emphatically. "*You'd* hate it."

Her tears overflowed and Clark's overcame the instinct to gather her into his arms. "He'd rather be dead?" she whimpered.

"What if there's only one bullet?" he said with a calmness he didn't feel.

She looked up at him. "Tex said there were two."

"Tempus wants Superman dead. Threatening Clark is about scaring you."

"He doesn't like Clark either," not-our Lois said. "He's jealous of our friendship."

"Superman's unique molecular structure makes the idea of a specifically guided bullet feasible," Clark said, hoping he sounded convincing. "But Clark is just like everyone else. Maybe Tempus doesn't have the technology to pick out one human amongst millions. Maybe he's bluffing."

She wiped her tears and smudged mascara with the back of her hand. "You think Clark might be all right?"

Clark didn't know, but right now, she needed something to cling to. "I hope so."

"What about Superman?"

"I don't know," he admitted.

She took a handful of tissues and dropped onto her love seat. He sat opposite and waited for the minutes to pass.

Lois Lane Kent gulped. "Business?"

Tempus took out a small, pale green pill from his jacket pocket. "This is the wonder-drug of the twenty-third century," he said. "During its spectacular — but regrettably short — reign of terror, it completely transformed the entire criminal landscape."

She waited.

"Hypnotica Continuum," Tempus said, regarding it with overt admiration. "'Hip' to its devotees. Its ingestion causes an irreversible hypnotic state where the *patient* is completely subservient to the suggestions of the *master*."

Lois closed her eyes and forced herself to breathe evenly and think clearly.

"Despite extensive efforts," he said smugly, "An antidote could not be developed."

"Don't be ridiculous," Lois said dismissively. "The twenty-third century hasn't happened yet."

"You don't believe I've been to the future?"

"Of course not."

He unlocked the drawer in the lamp stand, took out a newspaper and handed it to her. It was dated 2005. "The White Sox finally win the World Series?" she said.

"Bet on it." Tempus took back the paper and locked it away.

"But you don't have time to read the details now." He knelt before her, close, way too close, and held up the green pill.

"Regrettably I found you lacking as a wife, so this remains your final option."

"If I take the pill, you'll spare Clark and Superman?" Lois said in a voice that, to her, sounded like it came from the depths of a crypt.

"I've always admired your perception, Lois." He held the pill closer.

"How would I know you'll keep your word?"

"Superman will no longer be a threat. Why not let him live?"

"Of course he'll be a threat," she exploded. "He's not going to sit by and let you get away with this."

"Picture this, Lois. I will have you — completely and

irreversibly in my control. Anytime I want to distract Superman, I simply suggest you jump off a building. Or step under a train. It would be just like having Superman in my power. Only so much more entertaining.”

“You are still filth,” Lois spat. “You still don’t deserve to breathe the same air as decent people. You don’t deserve to breathe at all.”

Tempus glanced to the clock. “Lois, there are nineteen minutes, thirty-three seconds until the weapon fires. If you choose not to take the pill, it *will* fire, it *will* find Superman and you *will* watch him die.” He held up the capsule. “Take it. Save your friends.”

“No, Lois! No!”

Superman was sprawled on the floor in the kryptonite cage, but his head was raised, watching them. “NOOOO!” he bellowed, as if pushing every last atom of his strength and conviction into the word. He collapsed forward.

Lois took the green pill from Tempus.

After what seemed like a long time, not-our Lois looked up at Clark. “You’re married to Lois?” she asked in a small voice.

He nodded.

“How long have you known her?”

“Five years.”

She twisted a tissue around her finger. “I’ve only known Clark a year. Why are we behind you?”

“Clark asked HG Wells to take him back in time four years so Superman could rescue you from the Congo.”

“HG Wells is dead,” she said listlessly.

“If I’m here, from a parallel universe ... perhaps time travel isn’t so implausible.”

Clark could see she accepted that ... maybe. “So why did Clark want to go back?”

“To save you.”

“But he didn’t even know me.” Not-our Lois didn’t speak for awhile. Then she said, “He did that for me?”

Clark nodded.

“I had it all, didn’t I?” she said sadly. “But I threw it away before even realising what I had.”

“The marriage can be annulled.”

She shrugged. “Even if he survives this, any feelings Clark may have had ... after what I’ve done ... I doubt he’ll ever speak to me again. And I don’t blame him.”

“Clark’s got a big heart for forgiveness.”

“Do you think there’s *any* chance?”

Clark sighed. “Lois, even a guy who seems placid and dull and follows you around like a puppy — even a guy like that wants to be more than someone’s second choice.”

“It was stupid to even consider Tex’s proposal. But things were so bad with Clark, and even Superman was upset with me, it just seemed—”

“I’m not talking about Tempus.”

She studied him with her lovely brown eyes. “Superman?”

Clark nodded.

“Superman was safe for me,” not-our Lois said. “Deep down, I always knew I could never be with him. Not like that.”

“Clark didn’t know that.” Clark stood up. “It’s almost time. We need to get back up there.”

Not-our Lois put her hand on Clark’s arm. “I’m going. You stay here. You’ll be safe here.”

“My *wife* is up there with Tempus.” Clark opened the apartment door and stood back for her to go through.

“Your wife would want you to be safe,” she said as they walked towards the steel door. She slowed and looked at him.

“You love her, don’t you? Your Lois?”

“More than life.”

“Does she love you the same way?”

“Yes.”

Not-our Lois put her finger on the identity pad and the huge steel door opened. Clark waited for her to enter the elevator and was about to follow her through it when she turned and pushed him back with surprising force. She darted through the door and it shut behind her.

Clark leant against the wall and shook his head, chuckling.

He listened for the elevator door to close and the car to rise. Once he’d heard the door open and Lois exit, he smashed through the steel door and destroyed the identity pad with a spurt of heat vision. He x-rayed and found the power source for the underground shelter and zapped that. The lights remained on. He found the emergency power source and zapped that. Still light. He located a third source and zapped that too.

The lights spluttered and the shelter went black.

Clark spun into the suit and flew to the top floor of Tempus Towers.

Not-our Lois ran out of the elevator on the ground floor and into the reception centre where the last of the guests continued to celebrate her wedding. She searched frenetically for Clark, quickly realising he wasn’t there.

She hurried to the nearest guests, associates of Tex. “Have you seen Clark Kent?”

“He left earlier.”

She rang the Planet office from the pay phone. Perry White answered. “Perry,” she said breathlessly. “Is Clark there?”

“No, Lois. Are you all right, darlin’?”

“Could you call Clark’s apartment, page him, contact him by any means? Tell him he *must* meet me on the ground floor of Tempus Towers? It’s urgent.”

There was a short silence. “Lois ... shouldn’t you be with your husband?”

“Ah ... yes. Tell Clark to get to the ground floor and call me in the penthouse.”

“Lois ...”

“Please, Perry,” she sobbed. “Please find him. Please tell him to come to me.”

“Lois—”

“I have to go, Perry. Please, please find Clark. I need him.”

Her editor sighed. “OK, Lois.”

The pale green capsule sat innocently in Lois’s hand.

“Choices, choices,” Tempus said superciliously.

She slowly lifted it to her mouth, her eyes riveted to Tempus’s face.

Once it was in her mouth, Lois lifted her chin and took a deep breath ... and spat the capsule into Tempus’s eye with as much force as she could muster.

She raised her knees and drove her feet into his chest. He staggered back, but was immediately on his feet and closing in on her again.

Lois crab-stepped along the wall, eyes fixed on his, ready to flee.

He stepped closer. She stepped further away. He stepped closer again.

Not-our Lois rushed out of the elevator on the top floor of Tempus Towers and saw Superman.

She ran to him. “Superman!” she said in a loud whisper.

“Have you seen Clark? There’s a kryptonite bullet! In ten minutes! And another Clark and Lois have come—”

He calmed her with a hand on her shoulder. “I know, Lois.”

“Everything?”

“Everything.”

She gestured to the penthouse. “What’s happening in there?”

“I can’t see. This entire place is lead-lined.” He motioned her

to be quiet.

“What can you hear?” she whispered.

“Two sets of footsteps, one heavier, one lighter.” He frowned. “It’s like they’re dancing.”

“Lois would *not* dance with him.”

“I’m going in,” Superman said. “The door is locked. Stand back.”

“I have a k—”

Superman wasn’t listening. He charged through the door, snapping it off its hinges. Then he collapsed with an agonised groan.

Lois Lane Kent heard the crash and saw Tempus’s eyes wander. Seizing her advantage, she charged him, ramming her shoulder into his abdomen, flattening him onto his back. Her momentum carried her onto him.

He pushed up against her shoulders, his superior strength forcing her away. With a quick twist, he had her on the floor and hovered over her, his face a terrifying mix of uncontrolled anger and caveman triumph.

Beyond his face, she saw not-our Lois, blonde wig askew, her arms raised with the branding iron.

Lois heard the crash and felt the reverberation. She wriggled sideways and Tempus fell next to her. She rolled away and stood. Tempus was already on his knees. He had a revolver, aimed at them.

“Two of you,” he snarled.

“Actually ... four,” Lois said.

He turned the revolver directly on her. “Actually ... two.”

She watched his finger move on the trigger.

Then the revolver glowed and Tempus dropped it with a yelp. Lois lunged at him, conscious of not-our Lois lunging beside her. Their combined weight drove him backwards; his head arced and slammed into the wall. He dropped to the carpet with a guttural groan.

Then he slumped sideways, unconscious.

Not-our Lois’s face was beyond flabbergasted as she looked from the cage to the doorway. “Two Supermans,” she muttered faintly. “Of course ... two Loises, two Clarks ... there *had* to be two Supermans.” She looked at Lois, eyebrows raised. “Which one’s mine?”

Clark had been less than a step into the penthouse when he was avalanched by an immense shaft of pain — a simultaneous onslaught to every part of his body. Every joint, every muscle. He doubled over and the walls and floor whirled crazily as his legs gave way. He registered the green cage and Superman trapped in it.

He saw his wife ram Tempus, saw them scuffle, saw him overpower her. Clark struggled to stand, but the pain was unrelenting.

He saw not-our Lois lift the branding iron and hit Tempus’s back, saw him fall, saw them both rise.

Then he saw the revolver.

Clark forced his uncooperative eyes to focus on the weapon. He summoned all his concentration and fired every bit of superheat, terrified it wouldn’t be enough.

Tempus dropped the gun and Clark glanced to the cage.

He could tell by not-our Clark’s posture that he had fired too. Together, they had been enough.

Clark looked back to Tempus. Both Loises had charged him and forced him into the wall with a resounding thud.

They both fell with him and Clark was treated to the sight of two matching, deliciously-shaped derrieres.

The exposure to the kryptonite had rendered him dizzy, nauseated and in substantial pain.

But a man would have to be dead not to have appreciated that

sight.

Lois Lane Kent picked herself up and rushed to her husband. “Quickly,” she gasped to not-our Lois. “Help me get him out of here.”

She heard the chimes of a distant clock and a portion of the ceiling opened. A large weapon dropped down near the mural window. The ‘window’ raised, the weapon pointed out and fired with a deafening explosion.

Micro seconds later, a green blur came back through the hole and cannoned into not-our Clark. He lurched, gripped his chest, and then was still. The ‘window’ slowly closed as the weapon retracted.

Not-our Lois rushed to the cage. “Superman!”

Lois bent over her husband. “Help me,” she said to not-our Lois.

Not-our Lois turned.

“Help me!” Lois ordered.

Together they half-dragged, half-carried Clark out of the room and well away from the door. They leant him against the wall and Lois knelt beside him and took him into her arms. She discovered he was looking up at her and she kissed his forehead.

“You always ... always were the most ... beautiful bride,” she said.

Not-our Lois returned to Superman in the cage. Judging by the other Lois’s reaction, this one must be *hers* — the one she knew. He, usually so strong, so invincible, lay slumped and unconscious. She could see he was breathing — shallow and irregular — but concentrating on his chest made it impossible to avoid seeing the gaping wound. She leant against the cage and sobbed.

Clark.

He hadn’t called her. He hadn’t come. He was out there, somewhere. And if Tex had been telling the truth about two bullets, right now he was injured, vulnerable.

Dying.

Dead.

Not-our Lois clung to the bars. He could be infuriating, evasive and downright dense. But overshadowing all that was his goodness. He was innately good. Trustworthily good. Put-your-heart-in-his-hands-and-know-it-was-safe good.

She *loved* him!

And she would never have the chance to tell him.

Not-our Lois’s mind went back to the park. She saw him sitting there, saw his desperation, his intensity, heard his quiet voice — “I have been in love with you for a long time. You must have known.”

If only she could go back and change her reaction.

“I’m in love with you too, Clark.”

She tried to imagine his face, his wonder, his joy, but it wouldn’t come.

Angrily she kicked the green bars, but they had not the slightest give. She put her arm between two bars and strained against them, but couldn’t reach Superman.

She couldn’t help Clark. She didn’t even know where he was. But she didn’t have to sit here and watch Superman die.

She dried the tears from her cheeks, picked up the revolver and went back to the corridor.

Lois, in the wedding dress, was anxiously watching Clark, in the Suit. When not-our Lois approached, Lois shuffled away a little and removed her hand from his thigh. “How’s Superman?” she asked.

Not-our Lois leant against the far wall, positioned so she could still see Tempus in the penthouse. “Unconscious. The bullet wound looks awful. He’s breathing, but I don’t know how much

more he can take.” She glanced to Superman. “How are you?”

“OK. I just need time.”

“Time is something we don’t have,” not-our Lois declared. “I think we should call 911 and get him out of that cage.”

“Do the general public know about kryptonite?” Clark asked.

“No.”

“Then let’s see if we can get out of this without alerting every bad guy that Superman has an Achilles’ heel.”

“Where did the cage come from?” not-our Lois asked.

“Tempus had some sort of remote control in his pocket and it —” Lois stood up and raced to Tempus. She rustled through his pockets and found the remote control. It had one button. She aimed it at the cage and pressed.

Nothing.

Lois looked at not-our Lois, who had followed her and saw her own hopelessness reflected in her eyes. With unspoken agreement, they went back to Clark and gave him the revolver and the remote control. “Can you destroy these?”

He did. Slowly and laboriously. “There’s lead the whole way along there,” Clark said, indicating the corridor wall opposite the penthouse. “Whatever Tempus was doing, he went to a lot of effort to make sure Superman couldn’t watch him.”

“Pity he doesn’t know all that effort is now protecting you,” Lois said. “He appreciates irony.”

“And not just me.” Clark staggered to his feet and stood, hands on knees, breathing deeply. He straightened. “Stand back.”

His heat vision was sporadic, but he managed to cut a large rectangular piece out of the wall. After removing the plasterboard, he reached into the wall cavity and peeled out a strip of lead lining.

“Can you carry this?” Clark asked the ladies. “Go and put it over Superman.”

They took it. It was monstrously heavy for its size. Together they maneuvered the lead strip through the door, across the room and between the green glowing bars. By reaching into the cage, they were able to position the lead over half of Superman’s body.

Back in the corridor, Clark had another strip ready for them.

Five minutes later both lead strips were placed, somewhat haphazardly, across the unmoving form in blue and red.

On their way back to Clark, Lois saw the pale, green capsule. She picked it up and threw it into the fire.

Clark was leaning against the wall when they got back.

“Done?” he asked.

Lois nodded, aching to hold him. She rested a chaste hand on his arm.

“Good,” Clark said. “I have an idea, but we’re going to have to do it together.”

“What shall we do?”

“Bring all the bedding, sheets, towels, anything strong out here. I’ll tie them together and you can tie one end to the top of the cage.”

“You’re going pull it over?” not-our Lois asked.

“That’s the idea.”

“Will you be strong enough?”

“We’re going to find out.”

In the penthouse, not-our Lois said, “The bedroom’s this way.” Lois tore the bedding from the bed. She took the pile to the corridor. Not-our Lois added a bundle of towels and spare linen.

Clark tied the materials end to end. He picked up one end. “This is a half-hitch,” he said, demonstrating. “Put enough of the sheet around the top of the cage to do at least three of these knots.”

Lois nodded and took the end. “I’ll do it,” she said. “Lois, you check on Tempus. Take the branding iron. If he looks like he’s moved, use it again.”

Lois took the end of the sheet to the cage. Superman, under the lead coverings, hadn’t moved. She climbed onto a chair and

threw the sheet to the top of the cage.

“Done,” she called.

“Get right out of the way,” Clark instructed from along the corridor.

Both Loises stood behind the cage.

“Ready?” Clark called.

“Yes.”

Lois watched as the sheet rope lifted and begin to stretch. It strained and Lois held her breath, hoping the knots would hold. The top of the cage bowed, then the side lifted. Slightly. A little more.

Not-our Lois scuttled forward and dived under the raised side and into the cage. Suddenly, the sheet rope loosened and the cage crashed down, missing her by a sliver.

“Lois!” Lois ran to the cage. “What were you doing? If it had fallen on you, it would’ve killed you.”

Not-our Lois looked up defiantly. “You never jump first, think second?”

“No! Not like that.” Lois took a breath and tried to calm her racing heart. “OK,” she conceded. “Maybe. But—” She remembered Clark and ran out of the penthouse and to him.

“Superman, are you all right?”

He wasn’t. He was hunched on the floor, breathing heavily. Lois took him into her arms and held him closely. She cradled his head against her body, stroking his shoulders and neck with her fingertips and kissing his forehead. He nudged her away. “Lois will see,” he said.

“No she won’t,” Lois said. “She’s in the cage.”

“She’s *what*?”

“She dove in when the side was up.”

“What if the cage had dropped on her?” Clark said, exasperated.

“That’s what I said to her.”

He grinned weakly. “Now do you see what it’s like? Working with Lois Lane?”

Lois gathered him close again, her hands busy on his neck, shoulders, anywhere she could reach. She tipped his head a little and kissed his lips.

“I near ... nearly had it over,” he said.

“I know.”

“By the time I get my strength back, it’ll be too late for Clark.”

“Lois can get the bullet out. Then, with the lead covering him, we’ll have more time.”

Clark smiled. “Any chance you can find her a letter opener?”

Lois kissed him again and then stood. “I can try,” she said. “You rest up.”

Back in the penthouse, not-our Lois had shaped the lead strips so Superman was completely covered. “He’s alive,” she said. “He has a pulse. It’s weak, but it’s there.”

“We need to get the bullet out,” Lois told her.

Not-our Lois blanched. “Now?”

Lois nodded. “Now.”

“But I wouldn’t know how to,” not-our Lois protested. “And I’d have to move the lead out of the way.”

“Only for a minute or two,” Lois said, trying to sound more confident than she felt. “Then you could put the lead back on, and with the bullet out, he’ll get minimal further exposure to the kryptonite.”

“Moving the lead is a bad idea.”

“We’ve always thought kryptonite can kill Superman,” Lois said direly. “If we don’t get that bullet out now, today could be the day we find out for sure.”

“I think we should leave him be,” not-our Lois said stubbornly.

“So you’ve done Kryptonite 101?” Lois snapped.

“No.”

“Neither have I,” Lois conceded, a little softer in tone. “But the bullet *has* to come out.”

“I wouldn’t know what to do.”

“It’s OK,” Lois said. “I’ve done it before.”

“You’ve taken a kryptonite bullet out of Superman?” she asked incredulously.

Lois nodded. “With a letter opener.”

“A letter opener?” not-our Lois said dubiously.

Lois ran into the study, found a letter opener and brought it back. She handed it to not-our Lois and knelt next to the cage. Reaching in, she took a firm grasp of the strip of lead. “I’ll pull this off. You find the wound. You dig out the bullet. You give it to me, then pull the lead back in place.”

“Dig out the bullet?” not-our Lois repeated shakily. “You make it sound simple.”

“It is. At least he’s unconscious. Superman watched me when I did it.”

The letter opener in not-our Lois’s hand hovered shakily above the lead sheet.

“You’ll do fine,” Lois encouraged. “Remember, if you don’t do this, he *will* die. Are you ready?”

She nodded again.

Lois pulled back the lead sheet and not-our Lois leant closer. Lois held her breath, watching the concentration on her face. After what seemed an interminable time, not-our Lois reached in and extracted the green bullet. She handed it to Lois and re-covered not-our Superman with the lead sheets.

“What now?” said not-our Lois, pale and leaning heavily against the green bars.

“Now we have time for Superman to recover,” Lois said. “You did really well.” She gestured to the still-slumped Tempus. “If he moves, scream loudly.”

She put the bullet on a lamp table and went back into the corridor. Clark had gone. The end of the sheet rope disappeared into the elevator.

“Superman,” Lois called.

The elevator doors opened and he emerged, still slightly pale, but definitely improving.

She ran to him held him closely, her arms clenched under his cape. “Did she get it out?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“I knew she would.” His hand moved to her head, cupping her closer into his shoulder. “I need this,” he murmured. “I need you.”

She sighed, drawing immense comfort from the strong, steady rhythm of his heart.

“I have another idea,” he said.

“Uhm?”

“I’ve put the elevator on the floor below. I’ve tied the end of the sheets to the top of the elevator car. We’ll lower the elevator while I push and the combined force might be enough to topple the cage.”

“That’s brilliant,” Lois said. “Except for one thing.”

“What?”

“I don’t want to move from here. Not ever.” She felt him chuckle. “What if someone else uses the elevator?”

“I put an ‘out of order’ sign on it.”

Lois backed away from the warmth of his chest. “Let’s do it then, but first...”

“Yeah?”

“Can you pull off another piece of the lead lining? Just a small bit. About the size of a handkerchief?”

He did and gave it to her. Lois went into the penthouse and carefully enclosed the bullet in the lead lining, then took it back to him. “It’s the bullet,” she explained. “When you’re strong enough, you can hurl it into space.”

“Thanks,” Clark said. “Beats leaving it here.”

Clark reached into the interior of the bared wall and snapped a horizontal block of timber from the frame. He forced the elevator doors further open and wedged the block of wood between them. “Go down to the 20th floor,” he told Lois. “Hit the down button, then get out. Quickly.”

“Will you be all right?”

“Yes,” he said, although Lois could tell the confidence in his voice was for her benefit. “I need to be there. I’m not sure if the elevator by itself will be enough, nor if the sheets will hold.”

“Clark—”

He put his hands on her shoulders. “We *have* to get Clark out. Even with the lead, we can’t wait until I’m strong enough to pull over the cage by myself.”

“I know.”

He kissed her and she watched him jump into the elevator shaft. “Be careful,” he called.

Lois ran into the penthouse. “Lois?” she said.

“Yes?”

“We’re going to use the elevator to pull over the cage. I have to go, but I’ll be back soon to help you get Superman out of here.”

Not-our Lois waited, crouched next to Superman, observing the cage which imprisoned them both.

She saw the sheet rope tighten, then strain. Then strain more. Right when she was convinced the sheets could take no more, the cage wobbled momentarily, leant, then slowly, like an overbalancing giant, tipped. It seemed to hover, as if undecided whether to go or not, then with a loud, reverberating sound, clattered to the floor.

She heard a ‘twang’ and the sheet went loose.

Lois in the wedding dress came swiftly through the door. “Let’s get him out of here.”

The two women hauled off the lead strips. “One arm each,” Lois said.

They heaved the unmoving Superman to a sitting position and wriggled under his arms. “On three.”

“One, two... three.”

With matching grunts, they stood. They shuffled across the floor, squeezed past the cage, through the door and along the corridor, out of the range of the kryptonite.

The bullet wound was still open and gaping, visible through the torn spandex. “Come on, Superman,” not-our Lois whispered as she smoothed his hair. “Heal yourself. We need you.”

The crash of the cage was the first thing Tempus heard as he drifted through the shadows to consciousness. He stayed still and watched while the woman he loathed ... two of them ... dragged his hated enemy out of the penthouse.

He’d been *so* close. He’d had Superman helpless in the kryptonite cage and Lois within a heartbeat of taking the ‘hip’.

If those other two hadn’t come in, he would have overpowered her and forced her to swallow it.

If those other two ...

They were the single blemish in his otherwise flawless plan.

The battle, for today, was lost. The war, however, could still be won. But he needed to get to his underground shelter. He would be safe there. He could see to the necessities — like removing Lois’s fingerprint access. And if, as he escaped, he could even the odds for next time, so much the better.

Tempus stood. His head protested vehemently. He unlocked a cupboard and took out another revolver. He checked it was loaded and unsteadily made his way to the door.

“Will he be all right?” not-our Lois asked Lois as they both knelt over Superman.

“I hope so. Now he’s away from the kryptonite, his body

should regenerate.”

Not-our Lois heard a sound in the penthouse and looked to the doorway. Tex was there, hair uncharacteristically chaotic, face contorted with ferocious rage.

Not-our Lois spurted the length of the corridor. She had no definitive plan. She just knew she had to lure Tempus away from Superman.

She came to the elevator. A wooden block held the door ajar. Behind it was emptiness.

Tempus’s footsteps stilled behind her and she felt a vicious shove to her back. She plunged into the nothingness.

She tried to summon enough breath to scream. Then she felt the familiar sensation of strong arms around her. “Superman,” she breathed.

Lois gasped as she saw Tempus push not-our Lois into the elevator shaft. Then he turned and strode towards her, leading with the revolver. “Lois Lane,” he sneered. “So smug, so self-satisfied. So pathetically unaware that in the future you’re seen as the most galac —”

“Galactically stupid woman who ever lived,” she said dryly. “You’ve mentioned that before.”

His eyes narrowed and he lifted the gun to her head.

For the second time Lois saw his finger settle on the trigger. Then she heard a whirring sound and the revolver flew out of his hand. He glanced around, saw Superman and fled to the fire escape.

Lois ran down the corridor and threw herself into Superman’s arms.

He hugged her, then kissed her fully and freely, on her mouth.

Clark, in the Suit, held his bridal Lois close. “Are you all right?” he asked. “He didn’t hurt you?”

“No. How did you stop him?”

He grinned in boyish triumph. “Hurled the lead-wrapped bullet at his gun.”

She laughed. “*You* got *him* with kryptonite. Nice touch.”

Clark buried his face into her sweet-smelling hair. He loved this woman so much. Her spirit. Her audacity. Her resourcefulness. Her unwavering love for him.

Not-our Lois used a corner of the sheet rope to dab Superman’s forehead. She looked up as the other Lois and her world’s Superman came towards her. Then she saw a blur of movement as he had passed the doorway to the penthouse and knelt next to Superman.

“We need to get him to Clark’s apartment,” Superman said. “We don’t want anyone seeing him like this. But I should go after Tempus. I can’t do both, my superspeed is still ... not that super.”

“Tex will go to the shelt—” not-our Lois said. A sudden memory stabbed her mind. “Oh no.”

“What’s wrong?” Lois asked anxiously.

“Clark! *Your* Clark! I locked him in the nuclear shelter. To keep him safe from the bullet. I intended to go back later, but I forgot. Tex will find him.”

Superman put his hand on her shoulder. “I got him out,” he said. “He’s fine. I also destroyed the power sources, all three of them. Tempus won’t find the refuge he’s expecting.”

Lois reached a friendly hand on her other shoulder. “Thanks,” she said. “Thanks for looking after my husband.”

“Lois, can you bring me the phone from the penthouse?”

Superman asked bridal Lois. “I’ll call the police. They can deal with Tempus.”

“*You* are not using that phone,” she said with fervour.

“If you bring the phone out here, it’ll be all right.”

“You are *not* using that phone,” she repeated.

“Why not?”

“There’s a subliminal message on it.”

“I know, about the gun laws.”

“No, a different one.”

“What is it?”

“I’m not sure exactly, but it made Tempus like ... a clone on her wedding night.”

Comprehension dawned on Superman’s face and he laughed. “I think I could probably withstand it.”

“We are *not* taking the risk.”

The look he gave her was intensely intimate, like they shared a cluster of secrets, exclusive of everyone else.

He picked up the other Superman, walked along the corridor to the fire escape and flew slowly away.

Not-our Lois pulled the blonde wig from her head and sagged against the wall. Her fear for Clark had become a relentless ache. But right now, her thoughts were also with the other Clark. The Clark she had taken deep into Tex’s bomb shelter. The Clark who clearly loved his Lois with his whole heart. The Clark whose wife had seemed to need reminding her husband was in danger.

The Clark who was too blind to see his wife and Superman were in love.

Lois Lane Kent changed out of the wedding dress in not-our Clark’s apartment. Clark had gone, as Superman, with the police. Tempus had been found staggering through his nuclear shelter with a flashlight. Clark was out again now, patrolling, being seen, offsetting any potential rumours about Superman being rendered powerless by a green cage.

Not-our Superman lay on not-our Clark’s bed, still unconscious. The wound had begun to close over. They could only hope healing was happening internally as well.

Not-our Lois had sagged into the corner of the couch, unresponsive, unspeaking, eyes unfocussed.

The door opened and Clark entered. Not-our Lois startled and rose from the couch, hope birthing on her face.

“I’m not your Clark,” Clark said quickly, showing her his wedding ring.

Not-our Lois collapsed back onto the couch, silent tears cascading down her cheeks. Clark crouched beside her and took her hand in his. “I think Clark will be all right,” he said.

“Then *where* is he?” she cried. “He’s not here; he’s not at the Planet. Perry called everywhere. No one has seen him since before the bullet fired.” She glared at him and withdrew her hand. “And don’t give me the ‘one bullet’ story. Tex said there was a kryptonite bullet and there was. He wasn’t bluffing.”

“Superman will look for him.”

Not-our Lois turned away.

Lois went into the bedroom and Clark followed. He checked on not-our Clark. “He’s improving,” he said.

“How about you?”

“Almost back to one hundred percent.”

Lois went into his arms and rested her head on his chest. “How can we help Lois?” she asked quietly. “She’s hurting so bad now. She is sure Clark is dead.”

“We can’t tell her he’s alive without telling her ...”

“Maybe that’s what we should do.”

“It’s not our secret to tell, Lois,” Clark said. “Anything we alter, they have to deal with.”

“So we should allow them to keep bumbling around, continually colliding into a glass barricade she doesn’t know is there and he thinks is impenetrable?” Lois backed away to look into his face. “I know how she’s feeling.” Her voice shook with the memory. “*We have* to tell her.”

Clark sighed and glanced at not-our Clark lying on the bed. “Would they want us to interfere?”

“That night, after I’d seen Clyde shoot you, the night I thought you were dead ... was the worst night of my life. Worse

than the night you went to New Krypton—”

“Worse than that?” Clark said, a tremor in his voice.

“In a sense, yes. Because then you were alive and you knew I loved you. But the night I thought you were dead ... there was so much regret, so many wasted opportunities, so much left unsaid. I thought the best thing in my life had ended before it even started.”

“Are you sure? About telling her?”

“Lois believes her Clark died thinking she’d married Tempus,” Lois said.

Clark pulled her against him again. “I’ll tell her,” he said.

“No, I’ll do it.” She moved away and smiled teasingly. “Last time, you rehearsed for months and still didn’t get it right.”

Lois sat next to not-our Lois, who gave no indication she was aware of her nearness.

“Lois,” Lois said softly.

She turned and Lois saw her face was desolate with hopelessness.

“Lois, I understand how you’re feeling.” She put her hand on not-our Lois’s arm.

She recoiled from the touch. “How could *you* understand? Your Clark’s here, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“A few years ago, Clark and I were working on a story and we went to a gaming club. One of the crooks threatened me and Clark stepped in to protect me and was shot. Three times. To the chest.”

Not-our Lois’s eyes widened a little.

“They took his body away and I was inconsolable,” Lois said. “I knew I loved him, but I hadn’t told him. I thought I’d lost my chance. I thought I’d lost the only man I would ever truly love. I thought he’d died without knowing how I felt.”

Not-our Lois’s expression hardened, but she was still listening.

“The thing was, Clark wasn’t dead, but he couldn’t tell me because if he did, he would have had to tell me something else ... something he had kept secret for a very long time.”

“So he just let you think he was dead?” she said harshly.

“He didn’t know my heart was breaking,” Lois said. “He didn’t know how much I cared. He found a way to come back. And I got a second chance.”

“Why are you telling me this?” not-our Lois said, tone brusque.

“Because it’s exactly the situation you’re in now.”

Not-our Lois was still for a very long moment. “My Clark isn’t dead?” she whispered, not daring to hope.

“No.”

“You know that for sure?”

“Yes.”

Not-our Lois put her hand across her mouth. “But he can’t tell me?”

“No.” Lois offered her the box of tissues. “Do you love Clark?”

Not-our Lois wiped the tears from her cheeks. “Yes. I do.”

“Clark? Or Superman?”

“Clark,” she declared with certainty. “I’m so sorry Superman is hurt and I feel awful because it’s my fault. I should be in there with him now. But I can’t. I just want Clark.”

“But you married Tempus today,” Lois said gently.

“I didn’t realise ... no, that’s not true ... I did realise ... eventually ... too late. Clark always seemed to think we belonged together ... that it was just a matter of time ... but he kept running away ... and Tex was ... there ... and somehow ... I got caught up in his charm ... and by the time I knew I loved Clark ... it was too late.” She looked up shamefaced. “I doubt you’ve ever done anything so stupid.”

“Yes, I have,” Lois said. “Just as stupid.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Not-our Lois clutched Lois’s arm. “Tell me where Clark is,” she pleaded. “I don’t care about knowing any secrets. I don’t care if I never know. Just tell me where I can find Clark. Please.”

Lois stood and walked to where her husband had been listening to their conversation. She removed his glasses and gave them to not-our Lois. “Go to Superman,” she said. “Put these on him and muss his hair a little.”

Not-our Lois took the glasses uncertainly, her face a labyrinth of questions. She walked to the bedroom. She sat on the bed and slipped the glasses on Superman. She hesitantly untied his hair, withdrew her hand and stared at him for a long moment.

Lois and Clark followed her into the bedroom and stood watching, his arm draped across her shoulders.

“Now, imagine him with a shirt and tie instead of the Suit,” Lois said. “Imagine him at the Planet, imagine working with him.”

“Cl-?” Not-our Lois’s voice strangled. “Clark?”

Not-our Lois fell onto his chest in a jumble of tears and elation and hope and disbelief. His arm curled around her, although he showed no other sign of consciousness.

After a long moment, not-our Lois looked up from the haven of the broad, blue spandex-covered chest, her still tear-stained face radiating with deep joy. She looked directly at Lois. “So you *do* love Clark?”

“Yes,” Lois said, unsure how she could think anything else.

She gave a mischievous smile. “I was convinced you were having an affair with Superman.”

“Oh, she is,” Clark said, as he retrieved his glasses. “She most definitely is.”

Lois and Clark moved into the kitchen and into each other’s arms. “Nicely done,” Clark said, between kisses.

“Thank you,” Lois said. “Any chance we can get home soon? I have an affair to continue.”

He pulled back regretfully. “We should wait until Clark is—”

Lois saw his abrupt look of faraway concentration and pushed him away playfully. “Go, save the world,” she said. “Just refrain from the *foolproof strategies* or you’ll leave behind a thousand broken hearts.”

He kissed her nose with a big grin and spun into the suit.

Not-our Clark was slowly becoming aware of his surroundings. Not that they made any sense. He was in the Superman suit. He could feel the cape snag every time he tried to change position. Yet people were calling him Clark.

And he was sure one of those people was Lois.

He drifted off to sleep and when he woke again, he felt someone putting on his glasses. He felt a gentle touch on his hair.

“Clark,” he heard. It was Lois’s voice.

He felt the warm weight on his chest and moved his arm around her, desperate for her to stay.

The next time he woke, the wonderful weight was gone. He opened his eyes. He must have been dreaming about the glasses because he wasn’t wearing them now.

Lois was there, sitting next to his bed, watching him.

“Lois.”

“Clark.”

She moved onto his bed and smoothed her hand over his forehead. So lovingly. This had to be a dream too. Lois from the other universe would never touch him like that. Unless —

Not-our Clark tried to sit up, but his head objected painfully to the movement. He pushed her hand away. “No, Lois. No.”

She ignored him and her hand continued caressing him. It felt so good. But he couldn’t let her ... he had to tell her. He could see the unconcealed love in her beautiful brown eyes. He remembered that look — he’d seen it more than once when Lois

had thought he was her Clark. Her hand brushed over his cheek. It felt so amazingly good.

“It’s me, Lois,” he said desperately. “Please don’t touch me. Please go away.”

He closed his eyes and resolutely turned away from temptation.

Lois Lane Kent was making tea in not-our Clark’s kitchen. She’d chuckled as she had searched for the kettle in the depths of the cupboards.

She heard a sob behind her and turned to see not-our Lois emerging from the bedroom. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“He doesn’t want me.”

“He’s still knocked around by the kryptonite.”

“He told me to go away.”

Lois sat down, puzzled. Not-our Clark loved his Lois, of that she was sure. So why...? “Did you call him Clark?” she enquired. “Or Superman?”

“Clark. Once I put on the glasses, it was so obvious.” She blushed. “I can’t believe I was so blind.”

“You’re not the only one.”

“You didn’t see it either?”

“Not for a long time.”

They looked at each other and slowly, a mutual smile blossomed and they gave mirroring shrugs. “It’s just, I feel so... dumb.”

“Yeah,” Lois agreed, nodding. “But that’s not important. What’s important is what you do now. If you love him, you need to tell him. Clearly. So there’s no misunderstanding.”

“But he said he didn’t want me to touch him.”

“You called him Clark. He thought you were me.”

“Ohhhh.”

Lois patted her arm, feeling like a big sister. “Now get back in there and don’t come out until he’s the happiest man in this world.”

Not-our Clark stared at the wall. He could hear the murmur of voices in his kitchen, but his superhearing wasn’t working well enough to distinguish any words. He did know it was Lois’s voice. Times two. That *had* to mean trouble, he thought and couldn’t help smiling, despite the lingering pain in his body and the still-rampant pain in his heart.

Lois had married Tempus.

Maybe she was blackmailed into it.

But it still sliced him to shreds.

He heard a movement behind him and turned. Lois was there. Dressed the same as before. The other Clark’s Lois. His Lois wouldn’t even come to him.

“Clark,” she said with a smile.

“Where’s your husband?” he said, determined she would know who he was before she had a chance to touch him.

“In jail.”

Not-our Clark shot up, wincing. “They put Clark in jail?” he gasped. He flung off the bed covers and tried to rise. “I’ll go and —”

She stopped him with a firm but gentle touch on his shoulder. It lingered a heartbeat longer than necessary and he flinched.

“I’m Lois from this world,” she said, a smile in her lovely eyes. “The one who was foolish enough to marry Tempus. *He’s* in jail. Not that he’ll be my husband for long. I’ve already applied for an annulment.”

His heart thumped so hard he was sure his ‘S’ was vibrating. “But you called me *Clark*?” he said falteringly.

She smiled again. When she was smiling, he knew everything was going to be all right. And even if it wasn’t, he didn’t care. Not when those beautiful eyes were smiling at him. “I know your big secret,” she said, with just a hint of triumph. “Clark.”

He grimaced. “How mad are you?”

“If you can forgive me for marrying Tempus, I can forgive you for not telling me.”

An enormous load rolled off his heart. He could be open with her, honest. About Superman anyway. But his feelings ... maybe not. His declaration of love sat wedged between them. If he took it back, they could be friends again. He could see her every day. Laugh with her. Be her partner. Her best friend. It wasn’t perfect, but it was more, a whole lot more, than he had thought possible.

“Lois—”

“Clark—”

“There’s something I need to tell you.”

“There’s something *I* need to tell you.”

“Let me go—” Clark’s words thundered into not-our Clark’s consciousness. *Let her speak first.* “... second,” he said. “You go first.”

“Will you do something for me ... before I speak?”

“Anything.”

“Would you mind getting out of the Superman Suit?” She blushed furiously. “Into Clark’s clothes, I mean.”

Not-our Clark didn’t know whether to relish her embarrassment or try to hide his own. “I usually spin ... so fast you couldn’t see anything, but I can’t ...” He gestured to the doorway. “Would you mind leaving for a minute?”

He called her back when he was in his jeans and flannel shirt, hair unfettered and glasses in place. He straightened the bed and stood, waiting for her, profoundly nervous about what she was going to say.

She came in and stood before him. She took a deep breath. Then another.

He braved a light touch on her arm. “You can tell me anything,” he said. “We’re friends, remember?”

“I know my timing sucks, considering I married Tempus today,” she said. “But that was only because he was threatening to kill you and Super- ... well just you as it turns out. But I did agree to marry him, which was so dumb, but I didn’t know he was so evil and had murdered all those people, even though you told me ... and we were fighting all the time and whenever I tried to talk to you, you kept leaving and I knew there was something you weren’t telling me and it wasn’t until after you said you were in love with me that I realised.”

She stopped to draw breath.

Not-our Clark shook his head slightly, trying to piece together the fragments. “Realised what?” he asked gently.

She locked her eyes into his. “How I feel about you,” she whispered.

He swallowed. Waited. When she didn’t continue, he said, “Any chance you’d like to tell me?”

“I love you, Clark.”

A wave of dizziness threatened to knock him off his feet. She stepped closer and put her hand on his chest. If her intent had been to steady him, her touch had exactly the opposite effect. He dropped on the bed and she sat next to him. “As a friend?” he said, voice quivering. “You love me as a friend?”

She laughed, warm and loving. “Yes.” She tenderly spread her hands around his face. Her thumbs reached to his lips and caressed them. “I love you as a friend. But more ... much more. I love you the way a woman loves the man of her heart.”

Clark’s heart exploded. Surely he was still unconscious. Still dreaming. Surely this couldn’t really be happening. He’d had this dream before — and a thousand variations.

Then she leant into him — and her mouth found his — and her hands roved across the back of his neck, pulling him closer — and if he *was* dreaming, he had no intention of ever waking up.

Lois and Clark, arm in arm, stood opposite Lois and Clark,

hand in hand.

“I had Henderson destroy the kryptonite from the cage,” Clark said.

Not-our Clark shook Clark’s hand. “Thank you,” he said, heavy with appreciation. “Thank you. For everything.”

The Loises embraced and then hugged each other’s Clarks.

“I guess the ‘luckiest man alive’ club just doubled in membership,” Clark said with a grin.

Not-our Clark beamed with deep contentment. “Thanks for your timely advice,” he said. “Is there anything else I should remember?”

Clark took the inter-dimensional transporter from his pocket. “Go with her when she gets dressed for your wedding. Do *not* let her out of your sight. Not for one second.”

Not-our Lois blushed a little. “Won’t that spoil the surprise?”

“Believe me,” Clark said with a discernable shudder. “It’s a surprise you can do without.”

Lois and Clark Kent lay on their bed, and she cocooned into his side with his arm snug around her.

“I envy them,” Lois said. “Just a little. They have so much in front of them.”

Clark laughed. “Yep, like almost dates and failed weddings and false paternity claims and enough tortuous restraint to drive a man crazy.”

“OK, maybe I don’t envy them. Maybe I envy us.” Her hand began circling his bare chest, dropping lower with each revolution.

He caught her hand, stilling it in the pit of his stomach. “Not until you answer one question,” he said.

“OK.”

“How could you tell which Superman was me? You needed my wedding ring to tell which Clark was yours, but you always knew with Superman.”

“I could tell by the superb definition of your chest.”

He took her captured hand to his lips and gently bit her fingers. “Don’t lie to me, beautiful wife. I saw his chest and it’s just as defined as mine.”

She giggled as his biting turned to nibbling, then to kissing. “It was your hair.”

“My hair?”

“When you’re Superman, you part your hair straight back and then across, sort of like an ‘L’”

“What does he do?”

“Sweeps it back on both sides.”

“So it was the ‘L’?”

“Uh huh. The ‘L’ ... like you’re marked as mine.”

He lifted her fully onto his chest. “Always.” He kissed her. “Forever.” Kiss. “In my heart.” Kiss. “Everywhere else.”

She nestled her body even closer into his. “Now,” she purred. “About those *special techniques* of yours ...”

THE END