

# The Wedding Pact

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Summary: Clark and Lois vow to marry each other at 35 if they haven't found anyone else. It's Lois' 34th birthday and she keeps setting Clark up on dates with other women. Is she dreading marrying him so much?

## Acknowledgements and Comments

//// indicates a flashback.

Thoughts are in *italic*.

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

**Background:** Lois and Clark have been work partners, and best friends, for years. The Prologue takes place a couple of months into their partnership (i.e. Season 1) but then the rest of the story takes place eight years later. The characters and sets will be familiar but the story-line does not follow the series at all. This is basically a 'Hollywood Romantic Comedy' film with Lois and Clark as the star-crossed lovers. Also, this takes place in the wider DC universe, but that only becomes clear later in the story and is very minimal. Lois and Clark are mostly based on LnC but there are elements of Comic Book, Smallville and Reeve Movies in some parts of their personalities.

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### Prologue: The Pact

"Clark?" Lois' voice spoke across the line tentatively.

"Lois," he replied, the grin evident in his tone. "So, how's the birthday girl now?"

"Um, fine ... you know." She trailed a finger round the edge of her wine glass. Rather than make the clear ringing sound of crystal it scratched and squeaked. Lois didn't care. It matched her mood, it matched her day.

"Lois," he repeated. This time she could imagine that look he got when telling her off.

"Hey, it's my birthday. I'm entitled to feel however I want."

"Of course you are. It's just ... most people usually feel happy on their birthday," Clark explained. Again she saw his head tilt and raised eyebrows. She closed her eyes and his face became even clearer in her mind. He was patronising her, in that gentle and sweet way. She laughed, then hiccupped.

"But most people don't spend their birthdays held hostage in a warehouse on Hobs Bay. And most people don't feel shamed beyond shame when they are finally rescued by Superman only to realise that they are still covered in the mud they'd trudged through following the suspected traffickers which then led to said hostage situation. And ..."

"Lois." This time his voice was low and comforting. It made her pause in her ramblings and take another sip of the delicious red wine she'd decided to indulge in. Well, if she were honest it was more than just a sip she'd taken. But, considering her mother's ... affliction ... she'd been sure not to *over*-indulge.

"Oh," she groaned. "I'm so bad. There's no way I'll wake up

tomorrow morning without paying for this wallowing. I can't believe it, Clark. I'm wallowing. On my birthday." She groaned once more and put the bottle back down. She closed her eyes and let her head rest back.

"Lois, do you want me to come over?"

Her eyes shot open. *Clark! Come over! Do I want him to see me like this? A little tipsy and a lot depressed. No way!* When the room blurred around her she let her head sink back again. A moan was all she could manage.

"I can be over in just a second, Lois," he pleaded with her.

"Okay," she capitulated.

It seemed only moments later when Clark was stroking her arm to rouse her. She realised that she still had the phone held to her ear. "Oh," she mouthed. "How'd you get in," she frowned and looked around the apartment.

"Lois, I think you've had too much." *No I haven't. It's just a little wine and a lot of post-kidnapping concussion*, she attempted to reply, but the words didn't leave her mind. He reached out and took the receiver from her and settled it back in place. "Come on Lois, I think I'll put you to bed."

"Huh!" she questioned.

Clark slid his arms around her and she found herself being carried into the bedroom.

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Clark tried to calm the pounding of his heart. Lois was in his arms, snuggling into his neck. Granted she was a little worse for wear. She was also incredibly emotional and vulnerable at the moment. He carried her gently and slowly to the comfort and safety of her bedroom.

He paused at the edge of her bed and stared at the woman in his arms. Was this just a little taste of heaven? His small crush on his partner of three months would most definitely receive a boost after this.

A voice at the back of his head poked him. *Okay. It's more than a crush*, he thought. Knowing he'd been captivated by her fiery personality and beautiful face since the first moment, he sighed in resignation. *But she has no interest in me that way.*

He laid her down onto her bed as gently as he could and then stood up. Gazing at her he reminded himself of the fact that he was Superman. He had a higher calling. He was destined to be alone. And he'd even come to accept and embrace that philosophy, over time. He had no regrets over choosing to be a bachelor. None.

In fact, even though his heart seemed addicted to this woman, his head wasn't all that sure if he liked her. She was rude, mean, stubborn ... and she definitely had no respect or like for him. She'd made her feelings for him, feelings of resentment and loathing, well known during their first few weeks working together. He'd worked hard to change that view, and now, three months later, he was reaping some small rewards.

Lois shuffled over to the side of the bed and yanked the covers round herself. "Thanks. You're a good friend, Clark," she mumbled. He smiled and gave a silent laugh to himself. "Maybe the best one I've ever had," her voice was getting quieter.

Clark widened his eyes in surprise. *Really? Best friend, after only three months? Maybe my hard work has paid off even more than I expected.*

"Thanks for spending my birthday with me." He hadn't really spent it with her. They'd worked on an article this morning, and then he'd seen her home after her kidnapping ordeal. Well, actually that had been Superman, not Clark.

"You're welcome." He thought it better not to argue and began to leave the bedroom.

"Will you promise to spend every birthday with me, Clark?" *She must have drunk most of that wine in one session*, he thought. *She can't possibly mean that.*

"What would your future husband think? If there's anyone

out there who could actually keep up with you day after day,” he joked at her with a soft tone and friendly smile.

Lois sat up and opened her mouth. Clark immediately expected a verbal tirade against him but instead Lois closed her mouth and frowned, her bottom lip quivering a little.

“What-” she stopped and gulped. “What if no-one ever wants to marry me?”

“Oh, Lois. I didn’t mean it that way.” Clark strolled over and sat down on the bed. “I was only joking. You know that.”

“Do I? Do I know that, Clark? Who out there is ever going to want to take me on? Want to deal with my rants and tempers and tangents?”

“I can.” Clark replied. “Sometimes,” and he gave a lopsided smile.

“Awwww, Kent.” She reached out to punch him on the arm but her aim was off. “Okay, how about we make a pact.”

“A pact?” Clark asked.

“Yeah, when we are thirty five, if we are still, you know, single, then we’ll, you know, marry each other.”

“Marry...” His heart was suddenly racing. “Each other?” He flicked his hand in the air between the two of them. Clark lifted his eyebrows and leaned his head forward. Not a good idea. Yes, he was in lo — had a crush on her, but she definitely didn’t like him. And there was still Superman to consider. Superman could not have a wife. Hadn’t he just reminded himself of his decision — which he was happy with — to be alone.

“Come on, Clark. I don’t want to be alone. I want a wedding. You’re my last hope.”

“Why thirty-five?” he tried to stall her ... to keep from having to answer. To keep from having to examine his heart, and why it was fighting against his head.

“Well, thirty is too soon. I’m already twenty-six. Four years doesn’t give me long to find Mr Perfect. But forty seems too far away. And what if I want children, it’s too late by then.”

Clark looked Lois in the eyes. *Is she truly serious or is this the alcohol talking.* When he saw her eyes start to water he realised she was serious. She was vulnerable at the moment and needed some reassurance.

Clark moved away a little and tried to finally assess how drunk she was. *Will she remember this in the morning? Hopefully not, but it will comfort her tonight if I give her what she wants. Tomorrow we’ll go back to the status quo.*

“Ok, Lois. A ... Wedding? ... Pact. If neither of us has someone by the time we are thirty-five ... we’ll marry each other.”

“Pinky swear.”

“Huh?” Clark frowned.

Lois held out her hand and opened her eyes really wide. It gave her an adorable, little girl countenance and he couldn’t resist her. Why would he **want** to resist her?

She didn’t reply, just nodded down at her hand and motioned. Clark sighed and linked his little finger with hers, then they shook.

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### Chapter 1: The Plan

Lois rode the elevator up to the newsroom floor, heart beating strongly. *It’s very early. The newsroom should be almost empty. Is he in there? Take a deep breath, Lois. Prepare. How are you going to start this day on top?*

“Hope you’re ready for a busy news day, Kent, ‘cause I’ve got a scoop for you,” she practiced into the empty elevator.

The doors slid open and she strode out as if she hadn’t a care in the world, then glanced down towards the twin desks.

Clark Kent

Lois Lane

The two nameplates stood out to her. Raising her gaze just a little she saw the empty desk. And the empty newsroom.

“He’s not even here,” she grumbled to herself, then growled as she strode down to her desk. “Argh. All that preparation for nothing.” She threw her bag down on the edge of her desk and dropped herself into her chair. Her bag teetered and tottered on the edge of the table and then dropped to the floor with a plop taking her name plate with it.

“What am I going to do?” She put her fingers to her forehead. “I’m turning thirty-four tomorrow. That means it’s his thirty-fifth in just a few months and thirty-five is the limit we set for the wedding. I’ve not had a date in ...” she paused. “Too long, if I can’t remember. I’ve been too focussed on my career to even *want* a date with anyone.”

Lois leaned back in the chair and looked around the empty newsroom floor while she nibbled on a fingertip. Bouncing the chair back and forth she gave in to her nervousness. “I can’t marry him. I just can’t. It would be too hard. It’s hard enough hiding my heart from him already, and we only spend work time together.” A little internal ‘lie monitor’ poked her but she refused to acknowledge, out loud, all the evenings and weekends that were spent together outside of work time.

She pushed herself up and out of the chair, picked up her fallen name plate, and wandered over to his desk. *Always so neat and tidy. Pens away in the drawer. Paper stacked at the side.* She trailed a finger along as she walked round, picking up his name plate as she passed. Lowering herself into his seat she played with them in her hands, knocking them against each other.

When she stopped, and held them still, she noticed something. Clark’s was behind, his last name just peeping out.

Lois Lane Kent

When Lois realised she was smiling ... quite widely ... she dropped them immediately. “Oh no.” She jumped out of Clark’s chair and ran back to her desk. “This is not going to happen. I need to sort this out, and quickly. I need to find someone. Even if I’m only ‘dating’ then The Pact is invalid.” Lois nibbled nervously on her fingernail again. “But there’s no-one willing to go on a date with me anymore,” she admitted.

She twirled her chair from side to side.

“That’s it.” She sprung up. “I’ll find someone for him. I’ll find Clark *his* soulmate.” She dropped back into her chair. “I just need to do it in only a couple of months.”

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Clark rode the elevator up to the newsroom floor, heart beating strongly. *I’m quite late this morning. Is she in there? Take a deep breath, Clark.* The doors slid open and he strode out as if he hadn’t a care in the world then glanced down towards the twin desks.

Clark Kent

Lois Lane

The two nameplates stood out to him. Raising his gaze just a little he saw her sitting at her desk, engrossed in something.

“So, what’s the scoop this morning, Lois?” he said brightly as he approached. She jumped out of her chair in shock.

“Didn’t they teach you not to sneak up on people, back in Smallville ... *Farmboy?*” She frowned at him.

*What? Why is she acting like I caught her doing something she shouldn’t?*

“Hey, you were so engrossed I could have sung the theme to The Ivory Tower on my way down the ramp and you wouldn’t have noticed.

He stepped towards her desk. Casually throwing his trench coat over to his desk he then sidled up next to her and leaned over her shoulder. She quickly reached out with a hand and flicked off her computer screen.

“Ah, private matter, Kent.” When he raised an eyebrow at her she stood and pushed him away. “Just because we’re partners doesn’t give you the right to see everything I’m doing.”

He shrugged and strode to his chair. Lowering himself he

adjusted his glasses and then pulled out his notepad. He made some notes on the ‘incident’ which had made him late this morning then started to pull them together into an article.

Lois watched him become engrossed and then flicked her screen back on.

Clark tapped away at his keyboard but kept glancing over the top of his screen to his partner. *She could be so much more, Kent. If you went for it.* He shook his head and went back to his work. *Superman is destined to be alone, he recited to himself.*

*You know that time is running out. For some reason she remembered the pact the following day. And then made you swear again when she was sober. Or maybe she wasn't really that drunk to start with.*

Clark gritted his teeth to keep from further arguing with himself.

He'd come to terms with the level of friendship that Lois offered him years ago. He'd reconciled his heart and his mind and settled into deep affection. Or at least, he thought he had. But, as time went on, it became clear that his heart had been playing ‘possum’, letting his head think it had won. Well, now the ‘possum’ had woken up.

The affection he felt for his partner and best friend had blossomed over the last years, till he couldn't continue to ignore it.

But Lois hadn't brought up the subject of The Pact in ... oh ... about two years.

*Maybe she's finally forgotten. That's good. It would be too complicated being married to her, having to explain things, having to hide things. Yes, I'm glad she's forgotten.*

But Clark knew he was lying to himself.

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Lois kept peeking over her screen to see if Clark was watching. She tried to type furiously. To get the application filled out as quickly as possible. Her heart jumped out of her chest when he stood suddenly.

‘I'm just heading off for an interview, Lois. Back later.’

And he was gone, just like that. She peered round the side of her screen. *But he's left his notepad?* She shook her head and went back to the screen.

‘OK. Name — done. Age — done. Interests. Music. Films. What does Clark like? Or rather, what does he want his perfect girl to like? Think, Lois, think. You need to fill this out so it matches him to the perfect girls.’

She typed away, inputting answers and then deleting as she tried to fill out the perfect profile. After pushing ‘submit’ she leaned back and smiled. ‘He won't know what hit him. These girls are bound to be irresistible to him.’

A light bulb went on in her brain and Lois reached forward to the keyboard again. ‘While I'm at it why don't I see if I can find my own Prince Charming? I just need to make sure I put in the right answers to score myself a super guy.’

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## Chapter 2: The Other Plan

‘Superman! Thank you,’ came the shuddering voice.

‘You are welcome, miss.’ He nodded at the elderly lady who was hugging her husband so tightly. When the couple pulled apart they stared into each other's eyes. He felt a little rude listening as he leapt away but it was hard to miss the conversation, especially with his enhanced hearing.

‘Are you alright, honey?’

‘Fine, sweetheart. Let's just go home.’

‘Mmmmm.’

*Such love. A lifetime love? Wouldn't that be nice!* He sighed, realising that thoughts in that direction were unhelpful for Superman, even though they were coming to him more and more often.

As he flew back to the office he tried to mentally prepare

himself for Lois. It took less than a second. Years of practice had honed his ‘sarcasm defence’ superpower. What he still wasn't prepared for, and hadn't developed a superpower defence against, was his heart.

In the quiet silence of his apartment at night, or in the lonely sky, he allowed himself to run away with thoughts of marrying Lois; of making her go through with The Pact, or lately, of **her** even being the one to make **him** go through with it.

But it was a fantasy. He couldn't allow himself that life. And, thankfully, Lois seemed to have forgotten, otherwise it would have been difficult to explain. How could he have gotten out of The Pact with his secret intact?

He landed on the roof and quickly changed back into his outfit. After more than eight years living a double life it was all second nature. The feel of the tight, Superman suit; the plain wardrobe; the glasses. Adjusting his tie and buttoning up his last button he descended the stairs back to the newsroom ... back to Lois.

She wasn't at her desk. He went searching and glanced ‘through’ the conference room door. Opening the door, he entered and then he stopped in shock, his heart hammering suddenly at the sight of her. That's when it truly hit him.

Lois was perched on the sofa just under the windows. Leaning over the back she was peering out of the window. The look on her face was one of awe, coupled with wistfulness. It made her look more beautiful than he'd ever seen before. His gaze was drawn down to her skirt and legs. He felt a familiar prickling behind his eyes.

*Control, Kent. Keep your control.*

When she turned away from the window and noticed him there she gave an unexpected smile. Her eyes lit up and sparkled. That's when he knew. He could deny it no longer.

*I need her.*

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Lois was staring down at the papers scattered over the conference table, but not really seeing them. She'd been waiting and waiting and checking her ‘fake’ e-mail that she'd set up for Clark but then Perry had called her into the conference room. Papers were now strewn all over the table and Lois had decided to leave Clark to sort them into some kind of order. That was the kind of thing he was good at.

‘Come on,’ she peered out back to her desk. ‘How long do these stupid sites take to make stupid matches?’ Repeatedly pushing the refresh button on the web site and the send/receive button on her e-mail had made no difference so now she was playing the ‘patient game’. It wasn't going very well.

She turned away from looking out at her computer and back to the papers from Perry. A whoosh going by the window caught her attention and she went running to the couch to peer out.

‘Superman!’ she whispered, heart beating rapidly. After eight years the sight of him still set her heart racing ... even if her feelings, hopes and dreams weren't exactly the same any more. Eight years ago she had been head over heels for the man in blue. Now, there was overwhelming respect and friendship.

Craning her head around to see where he had gone she realised she'd missed him. He was out of sight. Sighing in disappointment she allowed herself to revel in a tiny bit of hero-worship for a moment. *Okay, so it's not **only** respect and friendship,* she admitted. Hearing the soft click of the door behind her she turned and a smile came to her face, unbidden, when she saw that Clark had returned. He looked stunned for some reason that she couldn't comprehend

‘Clark, how was your interview?’ she asked, then climbed down off the couch. ‘Did you see,’ she continued without pausing to let him answer, ‘Superman just flew past.’ She made it back to the table and began rifling through the papers, looking for her pen.

“Superman, eh?” Clark said and strolled in, nonchalantly. He closed the door behind and strode over to a nearby seat. “You know, Lois. It’s been eight years since he showed up. Surely he’s old news by now.”

“Old news,” Lois looked up in shock. “How can you say that? He’s the city’s saviour. He’s the world’s hero.”

“Hmmm,” was the only reply she got. He dropped into the chair but misjudged and it skittered out behind him.

Lois tried to stifle a giggle, unsuccessfully. “Clark, you are such a klutz.” He gave her that ‘and I have to put up with your quirks too’ look then stood back up and popped himself correctly in the seat this time.

“So, Lois,” Clark spoke. She looked up but he wasn’t looking back, he was focussed on the papers strewn everywhere. Lois expected him to ask about this new assignment. Instead he said the thing she been most dreading. Well, not quite *most* dreading, but it would easily lead onto that subject. “It’s the big day tomorrow. What do you want to do?”

“Do?” She questioned. “Tomorrow?” She stood and strode for the door, desperately trying to escape. She made it to the door before he replied.

“Your birthday.”

She froze.

“We always spend your birthday together,” he continued.

“Of course,” she answered lightly and opened the conference room door. Somewhere inside a little molecule of strength actually made its way to her brain and activated it again. “Best day of the year, Kent.”

“Every year.” He nodded at her and grinned.

She ignored the grin and paid attention to the pounding of her heart instead, striding away from the conversion and heading for her desk.

“So, what shall we do?”

“Um.” Lois found it impossible to think of anything as she settled into her seat. What if the subject of The Pact came up on the birthday? That’s when they usually got around to discussing it, making dream plans for a fictional wedding, over the years. Thankfully she was saved by the ding-dong sound that indicated she had new mail. She gave Clark an apologetic smile and frantically looked for the mail, while he wandered off slowly, then slumped into his own chair.

**Subject Title: Match found.**

Her heart gave a little jump in anticipation. *I can send him on a date instead. I’m saved.* She clicked on the mail and opened up to see a brief profile of the prospective date.

Height: 5’8

*A bit tall, but then what does that matter to someone Clark’s size.*

Features: Blonde hair, blue eyes.

*Yes! He has a thing for blondes.*

Interests: Opera and fine dining

Lois frowned. *Not what I expected.*

Name: Brian

**BRIAN!!!**

*Damn, this is for me.*

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Clark watched the range of emotions flicker across Lois’ face. The e-mail she received was obviously causing an intense commotion in her thoughts. When he sensed that she’d finished reading he approached the subject once more.

“How about you come over to my place and we’ll just watch old movies. You bring the wine and the chocolate ice-cream, I’ll provide the entertainment.”

Lois’ eyes widened and Clark wondered what strange thoughts had gone through her mind at his words. After an almost imperceptible cough she replied.

“I’ll provide the movies, *Farmboy*. I’m not spending my

birthday watching sports movies.”

Clark grinned. “Fine. Just as long as you’re there.”

He turned away and his smile dropped.

*Okay, how did everything turn upside down in less than an hour? I thought I just flew back here reminding myself that a superhero couldn’t have this kind of life.* He glanced back to Lois quickly and couldn’t help but think about the sweet, elderly couple he’d managed to save just minutes ago. *But I want it so badly. Maybe it can work. Maybe I can do this.*

He swung back around and tapped away on his computer.

*So how do I win the delectable Miss Lane? Convince her to stick to The Pact. I’ll need a plan. And it has to be ready to go into effect by tomorrow night.*

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**Chapter 3: The Birthday**

Lois stepped off the elevator and came to a halt at the railing. She saw a jacket hanging over the back of Clark’s chair and knew that he was in. Whirling away she strode for the stairwell.

*What am I going to do? The Pact is bound to come up if we spend tonight together, especially if there is wine involved. In fact, Lois gritted her teeth, that’s kind of what got me into this problem.*

She purposely ignored the ‘re-pact-ing’ of the following day that had again been her idea ... sober. Not that she’d been particularly drunk that evening, but Clark seemed convinced that she had been. And the following morning he **knew** she **was** sober.

Striding purposefully in no particular direction she found herself in Human Resources.

“Lois!” came a happy voice.

“Suzie,” she shouted back and waved. Making her way over to her new friend’s desk she smiled. Suzie was a new addition to the Daily Planet family and a chance meeting in the elevator on her first day had led to an immediate friendship when it became clear that they were Mel Gibson’s No 1 and No 2 fan. Although they couldn’t agree on which way round! “So ... how long has it been now?”

“Just finished my one month probation.” She grinned up at Lois from her seated position. “I was thinking of celebrating.”

“Well, when you do, count me in.” Lois smiled genuinely.

“Um, Lois?” Suzie spoke timidly. “What’s it like on the newsroom floor?”

Lois frowned. “You mean noisy, frantic and manic!” she quipped.

“No.” Suzie gave a shy smile and looked down into her lap. “I mean ... with Clark?”

“Clark!” Lois’ eyes widened, then narrowed and was joined by a wry smile.

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Clark returned to his seat then turned to look up at the elevator. No sign of Lois yet. He turned back to his article.

**Intergang leader finally exposed**

Clark had broken the story last night and was desperate to finish off his narrative and get it to copy. But his mind kept going back to Lois. Looking up to the elevator once more he lowered his glasses a notch, staring over the top. The elevator carriage was there, as if the last person who used it had exited on this floor.

He sighed and returned to work again. When he finally pushed print and wandered over to wait for his output he allowed himself to acknowledge what was wrong. He was nervous about tonight.

*Kent, you’re slacking. You still haven’t figured out how you are going to do this.* He lectured himself. *Come on, you need to decide on your plan of action. Blunt, forward, aggressive — remind her of The Pact. Or gentle, careful, subtle — don’t bring up the subject in case it backfires.*

Clark decided to take a wander after delivering his finished

article. Trotting down the stairs he realised that Lois would never have forgotten about The Pact. *So that means she's avoiding bringing it up. I guess that means if I mention it we could have an awkward situation on our hands.*

Catching a glimpse of another Daily Planet reporter coming up the stairs he decided to do a little 'Clark Kent-ing' and stumbled ever so slightly into the fellow worker causing him to slop his coffee and drop his folder.

"Oh, sorry!" Clark mumbled sounding contrite. Inwardly Clark liked 'messaging' with this particular reporter, and seeing him with a coffee stain down his shirt was just a little rewarding.

"It's okay, Kent. Just ... take the elevator next time," replied Ralph.

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"Hold the elevator!" Lois shouted as she ran. A hand came out and cupped the doors, keeping them from closing. Lois had a dreadful suspicion about whose hand it was. She stepped in and turned around watching the doors close behind her, sealing her doom.

*Goodness, Lane. How dramatic can you get? Doom indeed!!!!*

She turned to confront the other elevator passenger and her suspicion was confirmed.

"Clark," she nodded.

"Lois," he nodded back.

They stood in silence for a few moments until Clark decided to break the tension. Unusual, as Lois was the one who babbled through uncomfortable silences normally.

"So, where have you been all morning?"

"Around," Lois shrugged.

"So, about tonight," Clark started. Lois felt her heart jump into her throat.

"Um yes, I've been meaning to say. Suzie in HR wants to take me out so," she paused hoping to gauge Clark's reaction. He just tipped his head forward a little and raised his eyebrows. "I said I'd meet her at the Ace o' Clubs." She smiled, pretending to apologise. *Wait for it, Lois. Work the situation.* "If you still want to celebrate my special day with me then why don't you come too."

"Sure, Lois. I'd be happy to." Clark smiled. Lois flicked her eyes away. *Was that an affectionate tone?* She turned away completely and nibbled on her lower lip.

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Clark entered the homely pub and scanned the room for Lois. For some reason she hadn't wanted him to pick her up. "We'll meet there Clark," she'd said as she left the office late this afternoon.

He pulled at his jacket collar, to settle it better into place, then began striding towards the bar. It had been difficult to dress 'date-worthy' without it seeming like just another work-suit, but he was sure he'd managed it.

"Lois, hi," he smiled as he drew near.

"Hey, Clark," she replied. "This is Suzie. You've met her right?"

He held out his hand and she took it. "Yes, once or twice. Hi." He smiled at her genuinely. The responding smile and gulped 'hi' gave him pause for a moment but then he turned his attention back to Lois.

He opened his mouth to speak but she jumped in. "Why don't we take our seats, eh?" and she indicated over to a spare table nearby.

Once seated he turned to speak again but Lois was there first. "Suzie's celebrating her one month probation being over, Clark." She gestured with her arms and Clark turned to smile at the young girl.

"Congratulations."

"Thanks!" she smiled shyly and clasped her hands in her lap.

"Lois," Clark was determined to get out his thoughts this time. "I know you said no present was necessary last year ... but ..." he paused and reached into his pocket. "Here you go." He shrugged and tried to play it down. "It's nothing, really."

Lois reached out tentatively and took the package. Her mouth twitched as she tried to suppress a smile. She looked up at him with a little confusion in her eyes, but then looked back and ripped into the paper. Before she could make it all the way into the box her phone rang.

"Bother!" she mumbled. Looking at Clark and Suzie apologetically she pulled out her phone and glanced at it. "I have to take this, sorry." She stood and walked away, placing the phone to her ear and tucking the present in her pocket.

Clark turned to look at the shy girl left next to him.

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#### Chapter 4: The Present

Lois squeaked in surprise when she logged onto her e-mail the following morning.

Subject Title: Match found.

Height: 5'6

Features: Blonde hair, blue eyes.

Interests: Art, animals, decorating

Name: Jenny

*Yes! Sounds good.*

She immediately set about composing a reply that, while not being untruthful, didn't yet give the game away but would prepare Jenny for the 'subterfuge' when finally revealed.

She kept glancing over to the empty chair opposite. Perry had sent Clark to a press conference and, thankfully, he'd be missing all morning.

After pushing 'send' she leaned back then nibbled on her fingernail for a minute. Finally making a decision about her own match she lunged forward and typed out a quick invitation to meet to Brian.

Resting back in her chair she smiled. *Opera and fine dining. Sounds perfect. He's possibly rich. Not that wealth is particularly important, or a guarantee of ... anything.* After a moment she frowned and chewed the inside of her cheek. As she swivelled around in her chair she began to second guess her excitement. *What if he's a 'snob'? I want class, intelligence and refinement, but I don't want anyone who will act superior.*

Remembering her disastrous time dating Lex she suddenly got the feeling that Brian would be completely unsuitable. She leapt forward for her computer again but it was too late, her outbox was empty. *Oh no, what have I got myself in to?*

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Clark marched into the office knowing he had to confront her, even though part of him didn't want to. But it had to be done. She deserved whatever was coming to her.

"You set me up!" he whispered sternly. Lois jumped in her chair and turned to him. "Lois, why?" He knelt down at her side and softened his voice. "I thought you wanted to spend your birthday with me."

"I did, Clark." She stood and walked past him, wandering to the fax and fiddling with the paper. "But I just couldn't ignore the distraught call from Lucy. She needed me." Clark narrowed his eyes. It was possible. Lois and Lucy were close. And Lois was fiercely loyal, protective and caring when it came to her sister.

"It was just rather convenient," he walked towards her, automatically going into Superman mode with his attitude. "The call ... right at the start of the evening. The extra guest ... who wanted to take you out, rather than come to my place." He came up right behind her. His head was so close that he could smell her perfume, or was it her shampoo. Clark took in the scent then stepped back in shock. His affection for Lois had grown extremely strong over the years. Even though he'd attempted 'friendship' for years, he'd only recently accepted that his initial

crush had become deep love — or maybe it always had been. But something that had been overtaking him, in moments like this, even more recently, was a physical desire for her. It had been creeping in, in recent days, and it always took him by surprise whenever it hit.

“Clark, relax!” she twirled round and then backed away when she nearly slammed into Clark’s chest. “I apologise for abandoning you, but I’m sure you had a great time with Suzie. She’s lovely.”

“Maybe with you.” He turned away and softened his voice. “But I have some doubts about how comfortable she is around me.” Turning back he spoke emotionally. “Lois, she hardly spoke for the first five minutes. I tried to put her at ease and we eventually talked but once it became obvious you weren’t coming back ...”

“I’m sorry, Clark.” She smiled but Clark could hear a very tiny tinge of sarcasm. “I’ll make it up to you. Um, how about an Ivory Tower evening tomorrow night?”

“Lois, that’s not exactly making it up to **me**.”

“Well, if you don’t want to ...” She walked back to her desk and Clark got the impression she’d offered that particular olive branch as she knew he’d decline.

They both sat down and an uncomfortable silence descended. Clark made notes and did research to add weight to his article covering this morning’s conference.

“So, what did you do?” came a sudden question.

“Do?”

Lois shrugged and nodded to the stairwell, indicating the lower floors of the Daily Planet. “You and Suzie.”

“Oh, well, when you didn’t return I thought it best to end the evening, but Suzie looked so crushed that I bought her a drink and we chatted. Lois, she was devastated that you left. It was meant to be her celebration and you left her with a stranger.”

“I don’t think it was me that devastated her,” Lois mumbled. It was so low and under her breath that Clark knew any normal human wouldn’t have heard. *What the heck is that supposed to mean?*

They settled back into silence again. A tiny squeak from Lois made him frown and glance up. She was staring at her monitor as if she could see through it. A little smile twitched at the corner of her mouth.

“Um, Clark. How about we have another night together? Do something special.”

“What did you have in mind?” Clark felt a combination of excitement and dread.

“I’m not sure at the moment. I’ll have to think about it.” She tapped away on her computer. “And I’ll have to get back to you with the date.”

“Okay.” It was a start. Clark rested back in his chair and adjusted his glasses. Lois grinned at him. It was confusing. He couldn’t figure out her motives. He couldn’t guess her mood. He continued to ponder the situation until he was interrupted from his thoughts by a different shout of exclaim from his partner.

“Ahh, stupid pen.” Lois reached down to the floor searching for her missing item and that’s when Clark noticed something.

He smiled. *Okay, so maybe Lois did set me up. Maybe she didn’t. I guess I’ll never know. Either way, though, I still think I’ve got a good shot.*

His eyes stayed honed on Lois as she sat back up, pen in hand. Her gaze came up to meet his and when he grinned, knowingly, she frowned. He nodded down a little and dropped his gaze to her chest. She glanced down and let out a sharp breath.

She dropped her pen again and scrambled for the simple heart necklace which was now dangling out of her blouse. Tucking it back inside she flicked her hair back with a snap of her head and turned back to her work obviously trying to ignore him.

Clark spent the rest of the afternoon with the tiniest of smiles

on his face. Nothing could make it drop, not even memories of the poor, nervous girl forced to spend an hour with him last night.

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Lois dropped herself into her couch at home. *I don’t know how I managed to make it through the day. The only thing that kept me from having a breakdown or a manic attack was the dating site coming through with a match for Clark and the girl in question replying already.*

She wiped her hand across her brow. *Ok, Lane. Remember your uncle’s training. All’s fair in Love and War. No mercy for the enemy. Get the job done.*

Lois rested her head back and closed her eyes, remembering the previous evening.

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“Hi, Lucy,” Lois said as she put the phone to her ear.

“So, what did you want to talk about that has me ringing you at precisely 7:05?” came Lucy’s voice.

“Nothing. Just thought you’d want to wish me Happy Birthday.” Lois continued to stride away from the table.

“I did that this morning. Lois, what is going on?”

“I just thought we could talk.” She reached the exit and then slipped behind a partition.

“Don’t you usually spend your birthdays with Clark?” Lucy questioned.

“Not today.” She turned to glance at the couple left behind. “Maybe never again.” She smiled in relief at the thought. It would also be nice for Clark to have someone. *He deserves a nice, sweet girl.* She took one last, quick glance around, then left.

At home she took off her coat and threw it down. A thump reminded her of the present in her pocket. Slowly extracting the half-unwrapped box she lowered herself to the couch. She turned the present over and over in her hands then nibbled her lip. Nervousness was keeping her from finishing the job. *Why should I be nervous? It’s just a present ... from Kent ... and it’s not even very big.*

She ripped off the rest of the paper and then slowly slid the lid off the black embossed box. Inside she was greeted with burgundy tissue paper. Gently moving it to the side she uncovered a heart. Lois’ breath caught and her own heart skipped a beat. A tear rolled down her cheek as she lifted out the necklace; a simple heart on a long, simple chain.

“*It’s nothing really,*” he’d said. But it was beautiful. Oh it obviously wasn’t gold, but there was a lovely antique, light-bronze, look to it. Lois swiped away the tear and put it round her neck.

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Lois opened her eyes then stood and walked in a daze into the bathroom. Flicking on the bright light above the mirror she stared into her eyes. Without breaking contact with herself she lifted a hand and pulled the necklace out from behind her blouse.

*Why did you hide it? It was a birthday present ... from your best friend. Why did you hide it, Lois? And why did you feel hugely embarrassed when he saw?*

She shook her head to break the contact then turned away.

*It’s okay. Everything will be okay once he’s dating. No more complications, no more worries about the stupid Pact. He just needs to like one of them.*

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## Chapter 5: The Trivial Pursuit Night

“Hey Cuz. Happy belated birthday,” came a ridiculously cheery voice.

“Cindy. Nice of you to call,” Lois replied, sarcasm evident in her tone.

“Hey! I’m trying here.”

Lois rolled her eyes. “Sure you are, Cindy.” Lois sat down on the love seat and dropped her head backwards. When the line went quiet she raised her eyebrows, waiting. Her free hand felt

behind her blouse and pulled out the heart necklace.

“Look, can I come over. We’ll spend some time together, mend some bridges. Please?” Lois sighed and closed her eyes. She sounded genuine. Suddenly Lois felt like she was seven years old again; playing with her baby sister and cousin, at family gatherings. Mothering them, teaching them, showing her the fun that could be had climbing the gigantic tree in the back yard. They were the three musketeers.

“Okay. Trivial Pursuit tomorrow night?” Lois gulped in fear. “Sounds great. Can’t wait.”

Cindy hung up but Lois was left with the phone still to her ear. *What if this goes wrong again? We’ve tried this so many times. We just don’t get along as adults, no matter how close we were as children.* She lowered the phone and dropped it to the couch next to her. Bringing both hands back up she fingered her necklace again. *Clark? He’s a calming influence. I’ll invite him round.*

Lois smiled and stood up ambling into the kitchen. *Actually, a devious glint entered her eyes. Cindy is a really nice girl ... with some questionable ex-partners that she’s trying to get past. It’s just that ... well ... we’re cousins and we have this rivalry thing since teenage years. And we’re attempting to get past that ...*

She filled herself a glass of water and turned around, resting herself back on the sink.

*Clark and Cindy. It’s possible. And I’d get to be related to Clark then.*

At that thought a sudden, excited feeling stole into Lois’ heart. *Related to Clark!*

Turning back suddenly she slammed down the glass. *Nope, that’s what you’re trying to avoid. Cousin-in-law is close enough.*

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Clark raised his hand to knock and then dropped it. *What lame excuse can I use this time?* Quickly making a decision he lifted his hand again then knocked.

While waiting for Lois to come to the door he spent a few moments pondering the strange day he’d had. Lois had been so confusing. She asked for his help in mediating an evening with her cousin but then she’d made the strangest of comments and given him the weirdest of looks. He caught her staring at him on many occasions over the course of the day but he could not figure out her thoughts.

When the door swung open he was all ready to produce his excuse for being late but, instead of Lois standing there, it was Cindy.

“Oh, hi, Cindy.” Clark smiled. It had been a couple of years since he’d last seen her. That had been at the wedding for one of her few short-lived marriages. She looked quite different this time; shorter hair, not quite as heavy makeup. There was also an air of maturity that hadn’t been there when she’d last been in town. *Maybe time has finally helped her to grow up?*

“Clark.” She drew out his name lingering over the ‘ar’. She smiled and tipped her head to one side. “You’re late.” She reached out her hand and pushed his chest with her forefinger.

“Um, yes.” He smoothed his shirt back down with his palm. “Sorry about that.” He glanced down to his shoes and then adjusted his glasses. “You see ... there was ... um,” he stammered.

Cindy cut him off when she grabbed his arm and dragged him in. “Oh, Clark. You are such a pushover. I was only teasing.” Once he was inside she let go of his arm and then closed the door behind. Clark stopped in shock when he saw Lois exiting her kitchen. She had on a pair of soft grey sweat pants and, what Clark suspected, was his missing university sweater. Her hair was tied up in a high bobble. His mouth dropped open and he blinked in surprise. She was dressed so casually, but he had never seen her looking so beautiful.

“Clark. Fashionably late as usual.” Lois’ quip brought him back down to earth.

“Um, there was an accident ... um ... traffic’s backed up all the way down town.”

“Accident?” Lois put down the wine glass she held in her hand and rushed to her window. “Anything that big must be newsworthy. Did Superman show up?” She turned back to Clark.

“Um. Yes.” He tried to sound nonchalant.

Lois picked up the glass and took a drink then put it back again. “Cindy, are we ready?” she queried then nodded towards the coffee table.

“Wait up cuz. Our guest here needs a drink first.” She rested her hand on Clark’s arm and he turned to look at it. “You sit yourself down, Clark.” She led him over to the couch and, mild-mannered farm boy that he was, he allowed her to sit him down. She leaned over to look him in the eye. “So, what can I get ya?”

“Um, wine is fine, thank you Cindy.” Clark felt uncomfortable but didn’t really know what to say. He glanced over to Lois hoping for help but she was spreading out the Trivial Pursuit board on the coffee table.

“Come on, Cindy. We’re nearly ready.” Lois shouted loud enough for Cindy to hear in the kitchen.

“You need some patience, Lois.” Clark jumped when he heard the voice in his ear. Cindy was directly behind him and crouched down. Her mouth was only inches from his ear. She stretched out her arm and passed the wine glass over to Clark then stood and walked round the couch to join her cousin.

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Lois peered through the crack she had created by opening the refrigerator door and standing as if she were looking for something in there. She grinned and nodded to herself. *Lois Lane you are the best.*

She hadn’t even said anything to Cindy. She’d actually gotten carried away with ‘making up’ and it had gone surprisingly well. *Maybe it’s a good thing that Clark was late. Gave us all that extra time.*

But, the moment Cindy had laid eyes on Clark she had been flirting outrageously with him. Lois chuckled to herself at how uncomfortable he looked. He’d even widened his eyes in terror once or twice but after a while he’d finally settled into the ‘ambiance’ of the evening. *Maybe it’s the wine. How many has he had? Enough to be ‘mellow’ or maybe enough to be ‘reckless’.* *Not that I’ve ever seen him ‘reckless’,* she realised and frowned.

She looked back to the crack and smiled whilst watching Clark try to get the question cards back off Cindy. *Poor Cindy,* thought Lois. She was doing her best to act ‘seductively’ but Clark was fully focussed on the game, and on trying to win, and on watching out for any ‘cheating’. Clark couldn’t stand any cheating.

*Okay. How long have I been over here?* Lois tried to think whether it would be too obvious if she stayed in the kitchen area much longer. She glanced at her watch. *Hmm, I could possibly get away with a couple more minutes.*

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Clark split his concentration into two. While continuing to talk to Cindy, which he had to admit was ... interesting, he also listened for Lois. *She’s been gone for quite a while. It doesn’t take that long to get a drink.*

His concentration wavered momentarily when he realised that he could actually hear her heartbeat. It was pounding away steadily from somewhere off behind him ... the kitchen. How long had he been able to hear her heartbeat? A little shock and awe whispered across his mind.

“Clark!” came a shout from beside him and he turned to see Cindy with her head resting on her hands, elbows on the table. “You’re going to lose, Clark, if you can’t keep your concentration.” She smiled through her lashes then fluttered

them.

Clark sighed and dropped his head then reached over to his drink. Thankfully, or maybe not, the alcohol didn't affect him.

Suddenly his hearing buzzed and he honed in on the sound of screams. Twisting to look in the direction of the window he gulped.

"Uh, Cindy. I'm just going to pop to the bathroom." He rushed off and, the moment the catch shut on the bathroom door, he sped out of the bathroom window.

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Lois strode from the kitchen and back into the living area carrying a new bottle of wine. "Hope you two haven't been looking at the next few answers while I was gone."

She dropped her shoulders when she just saw Cindy. Clark was nowhere in sight and Cindy was looking out of the window into the night sky.

"Clark's visiting the little hunk's room," Cindy commented idly. *Hunk?* Lois raised her eyebrow. She placed the bottle down on the table and wandered over to stand next to Cindy. "Lois, you've met Superman haven't you."

*Superman, where did that come from?*

"Yeah!" She smiled a little to herself. "He's saved me once or twice. Why'd you ask?"

"Oh, he just flew by." Cindy turned away and rested her head on the window pane. "So, what's the deal with you and Clark then?" She grinned suggestively at her cousin.

"Me?" Lois pointed at herself. "And Clark!" She laughed. "Oh, we're just good friends. But I notice you've been throwing yourself at him all evening."

Cindy pushed off and walked over to pick up one of the wine glasses. "Not that it's done me any good." She turned back and gesticulated with the glass towards her cousin. "Lois, is he as naive as he makes out, cause sometimes I think he's the nerdiest hick on the block and then other times. God!" she melted down onto the couch. "I look behind those glasses and behind the stiff shirts and I can just imagine the body he has, and I can just feel his strength of character."

Lois blinked a little. This was what she was hoping for, so why did she feel like there was a fire-pit in her stomach.

"And these last few years, since the last time I saw him. He's so much ... more ... both of those things." She sat up and glared at Lois. "How come you've never seen it?" Cindy seemed shocked at the thought.

Lois gulped. "Who's ... who's to say I haven't. But Kent and I, we're best friends, and colleagues. And that's how it should stay."

"Great." Cindy smiled and bounced up and down on the couch.

Lois turned to peer out of the window just as a streak of red and blue went by.

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Clark strode into the living area adjusting his shirt carefully.

"Ladies!" he spoke, announcing that he'd returned.

"Clark," Cindy shouted and jumped over to him. "Come sit next to me again. See if you can come out on top this round." When he looked down at Cindy's face to see a ridiculously adoring look on her face he coughed.

"I think, uh, that Lois is going to win. She always does." He turned and gave Lois a 'help me' look. She grinned at him and shook her head.

Clark glared at her in frustration. *What is Lois doing?*

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"So, I think we should watch a movie after this. What do you think, Clark? I could go make some popcorn?" Lois asked but didn't wait for an answer. She just got up off the couch and headed for the kitchen, leaving him alone with Cindy ... again.

Opening the door to the refrigerator she peered through the

sliver of a gap, as before, hoping to see the progress.

*Come on Clark. You've drunk five, maybe six glasses. How come you're not more relaxed? Every time Cindy touches you ... you jump like a scared cat.*

She sighed and turned away to put some popcorn in the microwave. As the popping sound gradually increased she felt her frustration level rise in tandem.

*This isn't as easy as I thought. Finding Kent a date, finding him a partner, a relationship, is going to be more challenging than I expected. Well, nobody would ever say that Lois Lane is one to back down from a challenge.*

She pulled the popcorn out of the microwave and tipped it into a dish. She turned to view the living area and struggled to work out what was happening for a moment. As she popped a piece of sweet popcorn in her mouth, her eyes widened.

Cindy was leaning all the way over the coffee table advancing on Clark and he was backing away. She grabbed hold of the Trivial Pursuit board and then flung it away. Crawling over the table she climbed down as Clark stood to try and back further away. She continued advancing. Bringing her hands up to his chest she murmured something. Her hands travelled further up and touched his glasses. Clark jerked away at that movement, but Cindy grabbed his shirt and pulled him back.

Lois saw Cindy begin to rise up on her tiptoes and her mouth dropped open when she realised that her baby cousin was about to kiss her best friend.

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## Chapter 6: The Coffee Date

Clark took it on himself to tidy away. Collecting up the counters and picking up the question cards scattered all over — Cindy refused to put them back after playing compare — he shuffled them into a tidy pile then slid them into the box.

He glanced to his side and saw Cindy gazing at him, her chin resting on her hand, itself resting on the coffee table. She'd been making her interest known all evening and Clark had yet to figure out how to gently let her down. He really wasn't interested, and his heart really and truly belonged to the other lady in the room, well, in the kitchen area behind.

"Good game, Cindy," he attempted to lighten the mood. She leaned forward, her head now straight above the playing board. Shifting forward she came closer, so he shifted backwards. She reached out and took hold of the board, pulling and then flinging it behind her.

Clark shuffled away further until his back hit the couch. Standing he watched as she climbed over the table.

"Clark?" she said as she tipped her head to the side. She stepped towards him. "I get the feeling you're uncomfortable."

"No, um why would you think that?" He adjusted his glasses and stepped away. She advanced further on him.

"There's no need to be. I think it's time to be up front now. We've had a fun evening. I'd like to do it again sometime."

"Uh, Cindy. I'm not sure ..." he gulped when she stepped up to him and placed a hand on his chest.

"Well, I am sure, Clark." She put her other hand on his chest. "Don't fight this. I think we could be good together. I'm attracted to you, and I know you've been watching me."

Clark frowned at that, he'd been glancing, yes, but not for the reasons he suspected Cindy thought. He'd been watching her, but not because he was attracted to her. Rather he was concerned over her behaviour.

"I've noticed those eyes glancing at me, those beautiful, brown eyes — hiding behind dull glasses." Her hands reached up from his chest and he stepped back in momentary terror to keep her from pulling off his glasses.

He couldn't step very far though as Cindy grabbed his shirt and yanked him back. As he blinked in shock she tipped her head back and rose up on her toes.

“No!” A crash and a shout from the kitchen had both Clark and Cindy turning to look. Lois rushed over with an empty bowl in her hand. Clark could hear her heart pounding and see her heavy ragged breathing.

“What is it, Lois?” he asked.

“I, uh ... I, uh ... dropped the popcorn,” she replied but Clark could see the deadly glare that Lois was giving her cousin.

“Lo!” came Cindy’s strained voice. It seemed she was glaring back. She let go of Clark’s shirt and stormed into the kitchen.

Hushed voices were impossible to ignore but Clark steadfastly held his hearing in check. After a few minutes Cindy came storming past. She grabbed her coat and flung open the apartment door.

“Cindy?” he called out carefully. She turned.

“Sorry, Clark. Guess I got my wires crossed. From both of you.” She turned to look at her big cousin just standing in the kitchen area, then she left and shut the door behind her.

“Lois,” Clark turned to her. “What’s going on?”

“Clark, are you that naive?” He shook his head in confusion at her. “Cindy made a pass at you and you dealt with it like some virgin schoolboy.”

“You ...” he pointed to the door. “You wanted me to reciprocate?” he asked sharply.

“Well ...” she grinned, widely. Clark suddenly felt betrayed but dismissed the thought.

“If it wasn’t for the fact that she’s your cousin ... and you’ve been here all night ... and you just stopped her from kissing me I would swear you set me up again,” he challenged.

Her eyes widened and she took a step backwards. “My goodness, *Farmboy*. Have a pretty high opinion of yourself there.” She turned and entered the kitchen, immediately bending down to start clearing the spilled popcorn from the floor.

Clark groaned in frustration at the sight. “Lois,” he said carefully. “I, uh, think I should probably go. I’ll see you tomorrow at the office.” He lingered for another moment taking in the sight of the soft, grey material pulled tightly over her behind, unknowingly burning the image into his subconscious before striding away.

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Clark turned his head to the elevator at the sound of it ascending. His hearing picked up the slightest sound from inside, but all Clark needed to do was search for her heartbeat to know that she was nowhere near the Daily Planet. He looked over to the large window. *She’s somewhere in that direction.* He stared out, through the wall, and over the Metropolis skyline.

*I’m going to have to speak to her about this soon. Need to bring up The Pact. He rested his forehead on his hand. I can’t believe I’m doing this. How did she even get me to agree to The Pact all those years ago? And now I’m the one that’s going to try and enforce it.*

He pushed up from his desk and wandered over to the coffee station. *Clark, you idiot. You can’t force her into anything; she’s Lois Lane. And even if she wasn’t Lois Lane it would be unfair to make her stick to The Pact if she no longer wanted to.*

And it was obvious she no longer wanted to.

Clark stirred two sugars into his coffee, his mind conflicted. It had been years since he’d struggled over a decision so much. Yes, he sometimes *pretended* to be unsure about choosing things, but this was real. He knew what he wanted, but didn’t know how to get it, or whether he *should* even try to get it.

“Okay,” he talked out loud to himself to work through the problem. “I know we are friends. Lois has admitted to being ‘best’ friends sometimes. That’s good enough for a marriage, isn’t it?” He sipped at the coffee and wandered back to his desk.

Another voice joined in. It was deeper, in his head, it was Superman’s. *But you cannot afford to be selfish in that way. The world needs you. A hero is not meant to love.*

Clark sat himself back at his desk. “But it’s too late,” he realised. “I already **do** love.”

*Well, Lois is a strong woman. Maybe she could be a stable force to return home to then,* came the strong voice.

“Yes, but how would my heart cope with a lukewarm reception every time I walked, or flew, in the door?” Clark almost felt his heart break at the thought.

He groaned and pinched his nose, adjusting his glasses. *I can’t believe I’ve just argued with myself about this. And then changed my own mind, twice. What am I going to do?*

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Lois took a deep breath and adjusted her coat and bag. Stepping into the coffee shop she glanced around for the tell-tale red carnation which would signify her date.

*Red Carnation indeed. Couldn’t he think of something more original? Surely he could at least afford some Roses!*

She put a bright smile on her face and strode forwards. As she drew closer she found that the smile began to drop so she steeled herself and kept it in place.

*His profile picture is obviously a few years out of date. Not that he’s old and grey, Lois. Maybe he’s just having a bad hair day.* She tried to give him the benefit of the doubt. *And a bad clothes day.* He stood up to greet her as she approached. *And a bad body day.*

She groaned inwardly but stretched out her hand in greeting. “Brian? I’m Lois.”

“I’m so glad you wanted to meet, Miss Lane.” He let go of her hand and she dropped it to her side, surreptitiously wiping off the clammy feel. He held out a seat for her and she slid into it. He sat down once she was in place.

*He’s a gentleman, Lois. It’s what you wanted.*

“I hope you don’t mind me insisting on a simple coffee date to start with, but I’m swamped with work at the moment.” She gave a winning smile over to him and he grinned back at her.

“It’s fine. I’m busy, too, with board meetings and sales projections. But I can take some time off late next week, so if you want we could go to see Madame Butterfly at the Theatre Magnifique.” His expression was so hopeful and Lois tried to say yes but visions of Lex suddenly overwhelmed her.

“Um. I’m not sure. I’ll have to get back to you on that.” Lois ordered a coffee and a piece of chocolate cake, then sat back. She usually hated uncomfortable silences but she couldn’t bring herself to say anything to Brian.

“So, what Operas have you attended recently?” he asked.

*Oh no. What do I say? It’s been so long. And I only ever went with Lex. Think of an opera, Lois. Any opera. Nothing came to mind. Well done Lois, she sarcastically commended herself.*

“Oh, this and that. I’ve been rather busy. I guess it’s been over six months since I last went to the theatre.” She picked up her napkin and twisted it in her hands. She craned her neck around looking for the waitress with her coffee.

“I went to see Wagner’s Ring Cycle when I was in London last year. It was superb.”

Lois turned back. “Huh? Oh, yes, Wagner.” She’d seen one of his with Lex, hadn’t she? She nodded in what she hoped was a knowledgeable fashion. Before the conversation could progress her chocolate cake and drink arrived and she dived right in, sighing in relief. Brian began to spoon out some jam and cream onto the scone he’d ordered.

“So, have you ever seen the whole Cycle, or just the separate Operas?”

Lois raised her eyebrows and continued to drink from her cup, indicating that she was busy so unable to answer.

*Lois, she shouted at herself. Why did you choose Opera as an interest? Oh yes, because you considered it an upper class trait and you’d get a ‘classy’ gentleman. Classy indeed! More like ‘stuffy’.* She put down her cup and tried to find a way to change

the subject.

“Look, to be honest it’s been a while since I last had the time...”

“Oh, sorry. Well, what are your current interests then?”

“Well, my career,” Lois answered quickly before remembering that she’d mentioned being a traditional woman, hoping it was more likely to be appealing. She groaned inwardly. *How did I ever think that filling in such a wildly inaccurate profile would find me the perfect mate? This is **not** the kind of man I really want.*

“Career?” he asked in obvious confusion.

“Oh. I mean. Um. I enjoy my work.” She paused.

“Journalism. Current events. News.”

“Oh!” He went quiet for a moment. “Lois Lane. Journalism. How come I didn’t put it together before? You’re THE Lois Lane. I read the Daily Planet from cover to cover every day. But I must confess that I linger over the business pages and the arts and society pages more than others.”

Lois gave a small smile and groaned once more, flooded by remembered conversations with Lex again. She hung her head and saw her cake directly in front. *YES!* She picked up her fork and took a comforting bite all while her mind came to the obvious conclusion. *I’m really not compatible with Brian at all. I need to get back to the office and change my dating profile as soon as I can.*

Lois drained the last of her coffee and stood up. “Well, I need to be getting back to work now, Brian. It was nice meeting you.”

“So.” He stood. “How about a visit to the Opera then?” He asked hopefully.

“I’m sorry, Brian. I don’t think it would work. Let’s just leave it at that. Thanks for the coffee.”

She smiled and left a confused, but possibly relieved, Brian finishing his scone.

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Clark was engrossed in some serious editing when his hearing picked up her heartbeat heading this way at top speed. *Boy is she in a hurry.* It was strange how easy he’d slipped into listening to it since discovering it last night. *Maybe I should stop. Maybe it’s like eavesdropping on someone’s conversation. What’s the moral code for listening to someone’s heart?*

Clark fought with his conscience over it then decided that it wasn’t as if he were actually stalking her. In fact there was a safety aspect to it which was beneficial, especially considering the amount of times Superman had saved her over the past eight years.

*Superman.* That would have to be addressed if The Pact ever came to fruition. *How will she take it? Maybe I should try and figure that out first. If the answer is not favourable then I guess there is no point pursuing this idea any longer.*

He looked up just as she exited the elevator and rushed in.

“Hi, Lois.” He couldn’t help but smile at her as she walked past his desk.

She stopped and almost stumbled. “Clark! Um, hi.” She shrugged out of her coat then strolled to her desk.

“So where have you been this morning?” he asked conversationally.

“Had a couple of interviews. Chased a lead on the leaked memos from the Mayor’s office and ...” she paused. Clark looked up in confusion. Her heart rate jumped incredibly at that ‘and’.

“And?” he questioned.

“Oh, nothing, that’s it.” She waved away the silence with her hands. Clark looked at her in confusion for a moment then returned to his editing. Her heart was beating a mile a minute but he had no idea what would make her so terrified.

“And you? Busy morning?”

“Not particularly.” Clark wondered about testing the water

over the Superman idea. “Oh, I managed to catch Superman for a quote on his overnight saves.”

He heard Lois’ heart skip a beat again. “Were there many?” Clark looked up to catch her eyes.

“A couple of particular interest but most of them were routine.” He feigned boredom.

“Routine! Kent! There is nothing routine about Superman saving people. He is a miracle. And every life he saves, every disaster he averts is a gift to us all.” Lois spoke passionately.

“You really feel that way about Superman, Lois?” Clark asked her earnestly.

“You must know by now how I feel about him. We’ve been partners for years.” Clark did know. Lois never failed to express her admiration for his super alter-ego but what he really needed to figure out is how she would take the truth.

“But what do we really know about him, Lois. I mean. He saves people, but ... what else.” Clark tried to find a way to open up the discussion.

“You mean, like, what’s his favourite baseball team? Or who makes his capes?” Lois grinned. “Can’t say I haven’t wondered about those things in the past. But you seem to know him better than anyone else with the number of articles you submit on his activities. How **do** you get those articles, Clark?”

*Bad move, Clark. That didn’t go at all as you wanted. She turned it right back round on you.*

“Just lucky, I guess,” he replied and then went quiet.

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Desperate to modify her online dating profile Lois had completely blotted out the rest of the newsroom, so she’d nearly jumped out of her shoes in shock at Clark’s greeting. It had put her on the defensive and the resulting conversation had been difficult.

She’d nearly spilled the truth that she’d been on a coffee date. But that could have been a disaster. It might have resulted in revelations about the dating web-site or even led to mention of The Pact. Plus she would have had to confess that it had been a terrible failure.

Lois spent the rest of the afternoon alternating jobs. She typed up her interviews and compiled her information but also kept flicking to her profile. She carefully adjusted her responses, taking the time to think about each answer. In amongst all those jobs she also stopped to ponder the strange conversation that Clark had initiated about Superman. Unable to understand she dismissed the chat and then focussed on her latest quandary: How to tell him that she’d arranged a date for him tonight.

There would be no way to pretend that this wasn’t a setup. Jenny was from a dating website, she was bound to mention it. She hung her head and realised that she’d made a terrible mistake. *I can’t believe I thought I could set him up, and get away with it. It’s not going to work.*

“Lois.” Her head shot up at Clark’s voice. “Did you ever hear from your father for this birthday?”

*Birthday. Pact.* Lois felt the panic come over her again. *I CAN make it work.*

“Uh, yes.” She looked away. “Um, Clark?”

“Yes, Lois?”

“You know you’ve been accusing me of setting you up?”

Clark narrowed his eyes and looked at her accusingly. “Mm hmm.”

“Well, it got me thinking,” she continued in a false bright tone. “Even though your accusations were completely without any basis in truth and I am totally offended that you would think such things of me ... it occurred to me. You deserve someone special. You’re such a sweet guy, and you’re all alone. So ... I did something about it.”

“About what?” he asked, confusion evident in his tone.

“I signed you up to a dating website and you have a date for

tonight.”

“You what!” he shouted as he stood up.

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### Chapter 7: The Blind Date

Clark stood at the entrance to the restaurant. *I can't believe I'm here. How does she get me to do these things? She should be the one here to do this.*

He could tell which one was his date. She was sitting alone, neck craning over to view the door, and she looked just like the profile picture which Lois had shown him. She'd raved on about the perfectly long straight blonde hair and the perfectly proportioned face, pointing out the high cheekbones and pert nose.

*Okay, Clark. You can do this. Just go over there and explain. She'll be fine. It's not as if you were the one deceiving her and she's not emotionally attached to you either.*

He strode forward with confidence. “Jenny?”

“Clark?” she replied tentatively. She gave a small smile and Clark's heart dropped. Somehow he knew that she was going to be upset. He sat down and took a deep breath.

“Look, Jenny. I'm afraid there's been a mistake.”

Her brows crinkled. “Mistake?”

“My ... friend I suppose you'd call her ... signed me up to the dating site and set up this meeting without my knowledge. I'm sorry, but you've been set up. *We've ... been set up.*”

“Oh!” her voice quietened and she dropped her head. Clark watched as she slid her hands off the table and clasped them in her lap: an obvious sign of nervousness and a defensive gesture. Clark felt like a jerk.

*Lois, I can't believe you did this to me. I'm not a jerk and I don't treat women like this.*

“Look, why don't I just get you a drink while you let this sink in then I'll make sure you get home safely.”

Clark took the quiet girl's arm and led her to the bar then helped her up onto a stool. While the bartender mixed up a simple cocktail Clark went to inform the Maître-D to cancel the reservation. Back at the bar he found a much changed lady.

“Clark. I'm sorry for my reaction. I have to admit I was very disappointed as your ... friend ... played your part particularly well. I liked you. But I'm a strong girl. People don't always see that with me. They look at my fragile body and simple hobbies and think I'm a pushover.” She took a sip of her cocktail. “Anyway, I just wanted you to know.”

“Thank you, Jenny. I'm relieved. I really didn't want to disappoint you. I'm so sorry that you were dragged into this ridiculous scheme of hers. And I'm not even sure what the point of this scheme is.” Clark perched himself on a stool.

“So, who is this friend then? The one who obviously thinks you need a woman.”

“Lois. She's my work partner. Actually she's much more than that.” Clark took a drink from his glass of water. “We've known each other for years and I guess we've become best friends during that time. It also happens that we often partner together on assignments at work.”

“But there's even more again, isn't there, Clark?” Jenny arched an eyebrow.

“I ... thought so. But maybe I was wrong.” Clark took another swig of water and looked away. Jenny must have caught on to his defensive mode as she didn't question further.

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The first thing Clark did when he got into work the following morning was listen for Lois' heartbeat. As he stepped into the elevator he was surprised to hear it close by, rather than up above in the office. He turned and was about to step forward for the button when another hand got there first.

He looked up to find Lois smiling at him.

“So, did you do it?”

“Do ... what?” Clark asked

“Break her heart,” Lois replied. “You stormed off after I refused to cancel the date saying that you couldn't leave her there waiting. I presume you actually went and then broke the poor little girl's heart.”

“Jenny is not a ‘poor little girl’,” he said.

“Oh, because she seemed the delicate type from her picture and her profile.” Clark dropped his head and smiled. *Jenny was right. People do see that about her.*

“You'd be surprised, Lois. She's stronger than most people think.”

“Sounds like you actually got to know her then, Clark.” He looked up to see her grinning at him. “Am I great, or what? So I guess it's time to thank me.”

“Thank you?” he almost shouted back.

“You're welcome,” she returned.

“Lois, what you did was wrong. But just so you know,” he grinned, “I had a lovely time. Jenny has so many nice qualities and interesting hobbies.”

“Ah ...” Lois stuttered. Clark saw her confused look as she clamped her mouth shut. She seemed to regain her composure after a moment. “See. I knew it.” She looked up at Clark, straight in the eyes. “She's perfect for you.” Then her gaze faltered and looked away.

*Did that work or not, thought Clark. She seemed to have an emotional reaction to the knowledge that it went well. But then she got over it rather quickly.*

The elevator doors opened and Clark let Lois exit first. When they were both sitting at their desks he made his demand of her.

“I'd like the details for my profile, Lois.”

She looked up and Clark could read shock on her face. Was she surprised, upset, saddened?

“Of course.” She smiled brightly and logged into her mail. Less than a minute later Clark received multiple notifications in his in-box. She had forwarded on multiple mails with login details.

“Thank you,” he replied genuinely.

“So,” she said. “Are you going to continue seeing your matches?”

“There's no need,” Clark replied, not even looking back up.

“Oh!” replied Lois. Clark glanced up in shock. *That sounded like utter disappointment in her voice.*

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Lois found it almost impossible to keep back the tears. *Why? Why am I on the verge of a crying fit?*

She snuck a glance up at her partner. *He's found someone. Jenny was perfect. I knew it. I am sooo good. I got everything perfect on his profile.*

The tears threatened again. *Too good. Too perfect. Lois how could you be so stupid?*

She looked back to her computer screen and tried to focus on the words but her ‘almost’ tears blurred her vision.

*I wanted him to find someone. I needed him to find someone so I could get out of The Pact. But now that he has. I can't deny it any longer. It's not just a crush. It's not just 'in love'.*

**I love him.**

*And it will hurt me to see him with someone else. But that's better than him ever finding out the truth. I can't marry him because that would do **more** than just hurt. I'd slowly die inside. Every day that he was 'kind' to me, that he would 'look after me' in that gentle, loving, caring way he had. Every day he **didn't** fall in love with me, I'd lose some of myself. And I'd die.*

As a single tear finally rolled down her cheek she turned away so that Clark would not see. She blinked it away and brought her latest e-mail into focus.

Dear ‘Lonely One’

As you have now received the details of your first Love

Match and also experienced your first date, it is time for your H.M.W.C.

We have reviewed your profile and found someone who, though not necessarily a traditional match, could still very well be your soulmate. We call this the Hot Match Wild Card.

Our success rate with H.M.W.C. is over 80% so we urge you to accept this Love Match, but beware ... H.M.W.C. rules are different. You AND your H.M.W.C. must both agree to this match, the details will remain anonymous and contact to arrange your date will be entirely through the website.

Would you like to meet your H.M.W.C.? Remember, this will only go ahead if your Hot Match Wild Card also agrees.

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### Chapter 8: The Talk

Clark logged into his online profile and was about to push the cancel button when he noticed something.

Interests: Animals

Huh!

"You lived on a farm for eighteen years, Farmboy." He could hear Lois' answer in his head.

*I suppose I should see what else she put down when she filled this out on my behalf.*

Vital Statistics: 6ft 1in, Brown hair, Brown eyes

*Well at least she got all that right.*

Interests: Animals, Sport, Romantic Movies, Easy Listening Music, ...

*Easy Listening Music! Where'd she get that idea. I have a wide interest in different music. And Romantic Movies? When's the last time we watched one? Sports movies, or Action movies would have been better.*

Your Ideal Mate: Sweet and gentle personality, likes cooking, charity interests, ...

*She's just described Jenny. He paused and his eyes widened. Or Lana. Is that who she thinks I should be with? Is that what she thinks I'm attracted to?*

Clark risked a glance up over his monitor at Lois. She was reading something intently. *Okay. This needs dealing with. I've been 'about' to make my move for days now, but Lois always seems to interfere with my plans in some way. I've not been able to mention The Pact either.*

He stood.

*It's now or never.*

**Help!**

Clark whipped his head around in the direction of the sound. *Not now!* He gritted his teeth and looked back to Lois.

"Um, Lois, you want a coffee?" he asked and then left without waiting for an answer.

\*\*\*

Lois breathed a massive sigh of relief when Clark left. The emotions running riot inside her head had almost made her jump up and shout out to him ...\* Clark, you idiot. Find a woman before I go stir crazy and jump you myself. Even though that was no longer the truth.\* He HAD found a woman. Jenny.

Thankfully, she'd controlled herself, although her adrenaline had shot through the roof when he'd stood with such purpose moments ago, only to then disappear after offering to get her coffee.

She turned back to her e-mail and the prospect of another date.

Nibbling on her lower lip she hovered her finger over the 'allow contact' button but hesitated. *Is this match based on my amended profile or the original details?* She groaned in frustration. *This is not happening to me.*

She shook her head and blinked her eyes. *Okay, Lane. Work, get on with some work and you'll forget all about this situation.*

\*\*\*

Clark strolled back into the office after forty-five minutes.

He hoped Lois would accept his explanation of getting caught talking to Eduardo, then getting stuck in the elevator, and then ending up on the wrong floor, and then deciding to walk back down the floors only to find the door from the stairwell jammed shut.

He couldn't exactly tell her that he'd been helping the Special Crimes Unit to capture a gloopy-acid-matter creature which had destroyed half a shopping mall on the other end of Metropolis.

As he popped the steaming coffee down next to her hand he opened his mouth to reel off his excuse but she just reached for it and began drinking without a word.

He shrugged and went to his desk to sit down.

*Okay, Kent. You just dealt with a mutated acid monster, you can talk to Lois.* He attempted to talk but nothing came out so he reached for his coffee and took a sip instead. *You're Superman. You've defeated Brainiac, challenged Lex and fought off alien invasions. Why can't you mention a simple Pact to the lady sitting across from you?*

He gripped his Styrofoam coffee cup tightly.

*Because you're terrified of rejection.*

The cup crushed in his hands causing boiling hot coffee to spew out. The heat didn't bother him but the shock made him jump up in surprise. Lois looked up and he saw the alarm on her face.

"Clark! Oh, no. Get some cold water on it immediately." She ran round to him in a panic. "Oh, Jeez, you're gonna have burns."

"Lois."

"Um, run to the bathroom, I'll call for first aid help. We may need to take you to hospital." All this time she was trying to brush away the liquid with her thin voile scarf.

"Lois. It's okay. It wasn't hot. My coffee had gone cold," he lied.

"Huh!" she looked up into his eyes and paused in the act of undoing his shirt cuff. "Cold?" She turned to look over at her own drink; the clearly visible steam giving away its temperature. She looked back at him and he could see the confusion on her face.

Suddenly, he could hold in his frustration no more.

"How come you haven't mentioned The Pact?" he asked. She jumped backwards. Clark was pretty sure that he'd never seen her look quite as scared ever before, even when saving her from The Prankster's 'Ride of Doom' two years ago.

Lois turned away and he could no longer see her reactions. She stayed facing the other way as she answered. "I," she paused, "I just didn't want you to be disappointed." She turned back suddenly, gesturing around with her coffee soaked scarf. "You see, I'm not ... single anymore."

Clark raised his eyebrows then stood. He stepped towards her. "What do you mean, Lois?" he asked quietly, his heart breaking a little.

"I ... couldn't tell you. I couldn't tell anyone. You see he asked me to keep it secret. We can't go through with The Pact anymore. I'm in a relationship."

"With who?" Clark asked. It seemed too unreal. Somehow he distanced himself from the conversation; as if watching from over his own shoulder. It separated him from the heartbreak, kept him from letting the devastation overwhelm him.

"Superman," she replied and gave a little laugh and smile.

Clark collapsed back into the chair stunned. Or was that relieved? *She isn't seeing anyone. But why fabricate a relationship with Superman?*

He watched her sit back down. All her movements seemed terribly precise. He didn't need to listen in to her heartbeat to know that it would be going double-time with the whopper she'd just told.

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Lois stared at her computer screen, every muscle tight with

anticipation, waiting for Clark to challenge her on her declaration. She gritted her teeth together. *Why isn't he saying something? I never thought he'd actually believe me. And even so, why isn't he interrogating me on the details?*

After a few minutes passed in silence her muscles began to relax and her pulse slowed. She began to get lost in her work again. When an e-mail notification popped up she flicked to look at it but her eyes went back to the last dating e-mail.

*Okay, Clark knows The Pact is now off but what's going to happen when it becomes obvious I was fibbing. And how am I going to deal with seeing him lovely-dovey with Jenny?*

Her mouse pointer moved and she realised it was once again hovering over the 'allow contact' button.

*Oh, what the heck,* she thought, and clicked.

\*\*\*

Clark's Kryptonian brain could think at light-speed but that was of no help in figuring out the bewildering Lois Lane.

*She wants out of The Pact. And I'm pretty sure she misinterpreted me when I said I wouldn't need the dating website anymore. I don't want to date **any** random women, but she seemed to think that I was happy with Jenny.*

He rubbed the bridge of his nose and pushed his glasses up. *I could challenge her on the Superman deception but what would that get me.*

*He told me not to tell anyone.*

*But I know him really well, he would have told me.*

*No, he said he didn't even want you to know.*

*And how could he then reply? I know you're lying because I'm Superman?*

No. He would have to let it go, for the moment.

A flickering on his screen caught his eye and he noticed a new e-mail.

**Re: Your First Love Match**

He groaned. *I never got chance to cancel the subscription earlier. Damn, I was distracted by the mall-wrecking acid monster.*

Something about the message caught his eye. Maybe it was the large font, or the tacky red and pink highlighted words, but he decided to read it through.

Dear 'Lonely One'

As you have now received the details of your first Love Match and also experienced your first date, it is time for your H.M.W.C.

We have reviewed your profile and found someone who, though not necessarily a traditional match, could still very well be your soulmate. We call this the Hot Match Wild Card.

Our success rate with H.M.W.C. is over 80% so we urge you to accept this Love Match, but beware ... H.M.W.C. rules are different. You AND your H.M.W.C. must both agree to this match, the details will remain anonymous and contact to arrange your date will be entirely through the website.

Would you like to meet your H.M.W.C? Remember, this will only go ahead if your Hot Match Wild Card also agrees.

*Soulmate. They claim an 80% success rate with finding your soulmate. I very much doubt that.*

But something drew his mouse pointer to the 'allow contact' button. He glanced up at Lois.

*She wants out? I'll let her out.*

And he clicked the button.

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### Chapter 9: The Hot Match Wild Card

Lois arrived at the restaurant. Vino Mia. She'd considered cancelling after the website had sent the details, as it just proved that the Hot Match was based on her original profile.

*At least he didn't say he'd be wearing a red carnation. Just gave me a code word to say at the desk.*

She approached and the waiter looked up.

"I'm here to meet someone," she said. "I was told to say 'Lara' and you'd know which table to take me to."

"Yes, miss. This way."

Lois was determined to see this through, even though her date was probably as stuffy, snobby and 'Lex-like' as Brian but there was always a chance that he'd be nice ... something special. And, anyway, she'd get a good meal out of it.

As she wove through the tables she pondered over the code word. Somehow it seemed familiar but she couldn't place it. She flicked to a memory of someone speaking the word to her, a name, then she was back in the restaurant again.

The waiter came to a stop and indicated a table to his right. Lois stopped and turned. Her eyes narrowed lightly when she saw her date. He was facing away and she could only see his back. His broad shoulders were covered by a black jacket. His thick, slightly wavy, dark and shiny hair was just curling up at his collar.

*There's something familiar ...* she started to think but before should could complete the thought he shifted and stood, turning to greet her.

The welcoming smile on his face dropped and his eyes widened when he saw her. She knew her face reflected the same shock.

"Clark!"

"Lois!"

"What are you doing here?"

"What are you doing here?"

They both spoke together.

*This must be a mistake. He brought me to the wrong table.* Lois quickly scooted past Clark to the other side and slid into the empty chair. She lowered her voice and spoke in a whisper, somehow still managing to sound angry.

"I'm here to meet someone. What are you doing here? Are you meeting Jenny?"

"Lois you misunderstood. I just took Jenny safely home after telling her the truth." Lois saw a look which could only be described as teasing come over Clark's face. "Lois, how would Superman feel to know you are going out on a date?"

"He ... how do you know this is a date?" He raised his eyebrows in mocking and then she realised. "It's you isn't it. You **are** my date." She groaned and put her head in her hands.

They both sat in silence until Lois could bear it no longer. "So, you're my hot match then," she said in a cheery voice. *Make the best out of this Lois, turn it around somehow.*

"I guess so," he replied and Lois was sure she heard a tone of wonder in his voice. He glanced down at the table then looked back up at her. "So, what do you want to do then?" He smiled, a little shyly and Lois bit her bottom lip to keep from letting the emotions overwhelm her.

*He looks so sweet. He is so sweet.* Lois nibbled harder. *I'm here, on a date with Clark. Is this a good thing or not?*

"Come on, Lois, we shouldn't let the reservation go to waste. It's a swanky restaurant." Lois looked into his eyes, pleading in such a sweet way and she was lost.

"All right," she smiled. *Keep in charge of the situation, Lois.* "But you're paying." She arched her brow at him in a challenge.

"I wouldn't have it any other way, Lois." When he grinned at her she gulped. *Gosh, this is going to kill me.*

\*\*\*

Clark risked a look up at Lois while perusing the menu. *I can't believe it is Lois. She's here, on a date with me. Don't ruin it, Kent. This is the breakthrough you were hoping for. I can't believe I nearly gave up on this.*

He looked back to his menu. *I'm going to have to say something about her Superman deception but it could make the evening awkward. I'll challenge her on it later. Let's just enjoy this now.*

“So, ready to order?” he asked and folded up his menu.

“Yes, I’ll have the Salmon en Croute,” she replied as she placed her menu on top of his.

Clark indicated to the waiter who immediately headed for their table.

“I’d like the Beef Bourguignon and the lady will have Salmon en Croute.”

“Any wine, sir,” asked the waiter. Clark looked over to Lois and she nodded briefly.

“Just a house red please.” Clark looked up as he handed the menus over.

When he looked back to Lois he could tell that something was bothering her. She was fidgeting, almost acting nervous.

“Okay, I can’t take it anymore. What is Lara?” she blurted out.

Clark stilled. He’d picked that name as it was a pretty normal word but it meant something to him. He hadn’t expected to have to explain, but then he never thought his date would be Lois; the woman who knew more about him than almost anyone else; the woman whose insatiable curiosity had led her to become a top reporter at the best newspaper in the world.

He knew that some painful emotions flickered across his face. “It’s my mother’s name.” When she tilted her head and leaned forward, looking confused, he continued. “My biological mother.”

“Oh,” she sat back again. “I didn’t know you were in touch.” He saw the nervous twitches and arm gestures again. “In fact I didn’t remember that you’d even found out who your real parents were.”

She was babbling. He knew he needed to say something and the plain basic truth was actually the best thing to say.

“I’m not in touch with them. They are ... um,” he paused. It was difficult to say it, but he didn’t have to as Lois jumped in.

“Oh my goodness, they’re dead.” She looked mortified; one hand covering her mouth, the other reaching across the table to take his. “I’m so sorry, Clark. I didn’t mean to be so insensitive.” Clark could see a glistening in her eyes, betraying her soft, loving heart: the truth that she kept hidden from everyone.

“It’s okay, Lois. They died when I was a baby, and even though I didn’t find that out for a long time, I’ve accepted it. And I love my family.” He squeezed her hand and smiled at her reassuringly.

She smiled back, momentarily, and then she gently extracted her hand from his grip.

“So, how does a Kansas farm boy afford a meal at *Vino Mia*?” she asked, clearly attempting to lighten the mood.

“I haven’t worked on the farm for years, Lois. I’m a reporter now, in case you forgot,” he teased.

“You’ll always be a farm boy, *Farmboy*,” she replied.

Clark smiled. Somehow, his heart always skipped a beat whenever she called him that.

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Lois enjoyed every morsel of food. She even enjoyed every syllable of conversation but that was to be expected when you spent the evening with your best friend, especially when he was such a sweet, wonderful guy. Doubly so if you were secretly in love with said best friend.

They talked about all manner of things from work to the farm, from movies to music. Lois knew she fell more in love with him over the course of the evening, but she allowed herself to enjoy the moment.

One single evening to pretend that there was no heartache to come.

There were many smiles exchanged and plenty of genuine laughs. As it came towards the end of the night Lois found her sadness attempting to creep back in. She pushed it away by choosing a delectable sticky chocolate desert and relishing every

bite.

The mood was unpleasantly broken when Clark said the one thing she hoped he’d forgotten about.

“So, what will Superman think when I tell him that you’ve cheated on him?”

She put down her spoon and slumped her shoulders. “I think you know, Clark.”

“Of course I do. He’ll be devastated.”

“No.” She shook her head. “You know ... that I was lying. I’m not in a relationship with Superman.”

“Yes, I knew.” Lois could tell that Clark was a little upset with her, but he was also confused.

“I’m not even sure if Superman would be interested in that kind of a relationship with ... anyone.” *Does he need a companion? Not that I’d be offering myself to him anymore.* She looked up at Clark. *Well, maybe if he offered. If anyone could help me get over Clark, it’s Superman.*

“So why did you do it?” Clark enquired.

“I,” she picked up her spoon and began to eat her desert again, answering as if she had no problems with her deception. “I wanted you to think you were free from The Pact. You need a good woman. You deserve someone who can love you and who you can love back. And we both know that I’m not an easy person to live with. You don’t want to marry me, *Farmboy*.” She knew she was rambling again so she shoved a spoonful in her mouth.

“Isn’t that my choice?” he said and Lois looked up in shock.

She swallowed her desert then spoke. “Are you saying you want to go through with The Pact?” She leaned forward, her eyes wide.

“Well it was your idea to start with,” he pointed out.

“Eight years ago!” she squeaked out in defence.

“I thought you didn’t want to be alone.” He threw her tipsy words back at her.

“I don’t,” she admitted without thinking what the revelation would mean.

“So you just don’t want to be alone ... with me?” he challenged.

Clark Kent, mild mannered reporter yet quiet farm boy had just called her out and Lois felt her spine stiffen in defence. Her fight or flight mode had been permanently active for over a week now and she’d done too much of the ‘flight’.

“Okay, then. You’re on. As of this moment we are officially engaged.”

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### Chapter 10: The Long-distance Assignment

Lois sat in the cab on the way home. The uncomfortable silence was ... uncomfortable. But she dare not speak. Who knew what other galactically stupid ideas would pop out of her mouth.

Lois looked down at her hand, clasped tightly by Clark’s. *Just a token gesture*, she convinced herself. *It doesn’t mean anything.*

She focussed on the heat that was growing in her palm. His large hand was so warm, so comforting. It felt wonderful to hold his hand. As she stared at the tangled fingers her mind began to wonder if he was always so warm. They hugged fairly often, but clothing stopped her from feeling his body heat. *Careful, Lois. More than your hand is getting warm now.*

“So, when do you want to do it then?” he asked.

*Do it?* Her eyes widened. *Oh gosh. Sex. How’s that going to work?*

“The date. When would you like to get married?”

“The date!” She laughed nervously. “Of course. When? Um, well ... there’s no rush yet,” she said dismissively. She looked away but she could hear the frown in his voice when he replied.

“I guess not.”

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As Clark rode the elevator with Lois up to her apartment he pondered over the lack of conversation. *This is so unlike Lois. Does she already regret it? I know I kind of 'challenged' her into it but ... if she really didn't want to she'd be rambling on about why it wouldn't work and then breaking it off.*

As the doors opened he reached out and took Lois' elbow to lead her home. He missed the feel of her hand in his. When they'd exited the cab she'd walked too far away for him to take it.

Just a few steps along the corridor they made it to Lois' apartment door. She turned.

"Thanks for seeing me home, Clark," she smiled at him brightly but he could see some pain in her eyes.

"Are you all right, Lois?"

"Sure I am. Why would anything be wrong?" and her smile brightened even more. She turned and opened her door then looked back.

Clark stood quietly, just looking at her for a few moments. *If I don't play this right it could all come crashing down on me.*

"Well, I'll say goodnight then," he spoke. She nodded. "See you at work?" He said it as a question and she nodded once more.

Neither one moved, they just stared at each other and then Clark stepped forward and lowered his head. He pressed his lips to hers gently and lingered just slightly too long for 'just friends' even if those friends were going to get married.

When he stepped away he found it impossible to read her expression but he could swear that she'd done the slightest sigh and as he walked away he tuned in to her heartbeat. He was surprised to find it fast and erratic.

Clark chose to take that as a good sign and a grin was plastered on his face all the way to his own apartment.

\*\*\*

Lois woke the next morning and lay just staring up at the ceiling.

*I'm engaged.*

*I'm an engaged woman.*

*I have a fiancé.*

The warring emotions which accompanied each of those thoughts made Lois feel like she was two different people. One Lois was ecstatic, excited and living in a wonderful wedding haze. The other Lois was in hell.

This was the situation she'd worked so hard to avoid, but she was here anyway. Maybe it was karma. Or fate. Or destiny. Whatever it was, it just felt like it was inevitable. There was no way to have avoided this. It was always going to happen.

*Me and Clark. Getting married.*

*Yes, it was always meant to be. But why did I have to fall in love with him, though?*

She pulled back the covers and climbed out of bed.

*Maybe that was always meant to be, too. Well, I guess I can deal with it then. I can learn to live with my feelings. And it's not going to be so bad. In fact, loving him may possibly make this marriage easier to deal with.*

She wandered into the bathroom and turned on her light. Staring at herself in the mirror she reached her fingers up to her lips to touch the spot where he'd kissed her. Her heart had been pounding so loud she was sure he must have been able to hear it.

As she relived the kiss she frowned. *That's not what I remember,* she thought, when she imagined his arms around her back. She moaned when she pictured his tongue seeking entrance to her mouth.

*Oh no. I dreamt about him, about the kiss.*

Immediately her cheeks were hot with blushes and she reached up her hands to cover the evidence.

*No. I thought I just loved him ... and was 'in love' with him.* She opened her mouth in shock when she remembered the things Clark had done to her in the dream. *How am I going to deal with unresolved physical desire for the rest of my life? Or maybe it*

*won't be 'unresolved' if he wants to ...* Lois nibbled on her lower lip and worried over the fact that she couldn't even decide which situation would be worse.

\*\*\*

Clark whistled to himself as he dressed the following morning. Tying the knot in his tie he ran through all the important things he now needed to discuss with Lois.

*Does she want a ring?*

*Does she want to tell people?*

*Does she want to tell them that it's just a marriage of convenience?*

His heart nearly broke at that thought, but he squashed the feeling, choosing to hope for the best.

*How shall I tell her about Superman?*

*When shall I tell her?*

*How shall I tell her my true feelings?*

*Should I tell her my true feelings?*

The last thought lingered in his mind as he made his way to work. *She needs to know. And I need to tell her. Even if she doesn't feel the same, I need to be honest. About everything.*

Clark heard a shout for help and was quickly at the scene of an accident in his costume. After dealing with the problem he continued on to work.

*I think she's going to be more upset about the Superman thing, rather than my romantic feelings for her. Which one shall I tell her first then? Which way round would be better?*

When he arrived at the office he still hadn't decided.

\*\*\*

Lois avoided work all day. She even rang Perry and managed to wheedle a difficult assignment that would keep her out of the office for weeks. But it wasn't until late afternoon when she finally accepted the inevitable.

*I need to call Clark. We just got engaged. Gosh I still can't believe I'm saying that. But he needs to know about my assignment in Coast City. He just doesn't need to know that I almost demanded it.*

She held her phone to her ear whilst randomly pulling clothes out of drawers to pack. The phone continued to ring but she waited. Needing to close the top of her suitcase she tried to balance the phone on her shoulder wedged to her ear. Kneeling on the case, sitting and bouncing on it and finally, just plain shouting at it, didn't work. She also gave up on waiting for Clark to answer and then threw the phone to the other side of the room.

In frustration she dropped to the floor on her knees and braced herself with her hand. A few tears trickled out and she swiped them away.

*Get it together, Lane. You're strong. Life has made you that way. You can go through with the marriage, you can live like this. You just need a few weeks to prepare yourself.*

She stood and walked back over to her bed and flipped the top of the suitcase back.

*Okay, Lois. Streamline. Are you really going to need the ski jacket in Coast City? She picked it out and flung it behind. And this bikini. Who exactly are you trying to impress on the beach? It followed the jacket. She put her hands on her hips and glared at the slinky red dress. And you. Redundant now. I don't need to spend every night refuting advances from sun bronzed Adonis-es.*

She nibbled her lip and then attempted to close the suitcase again.

"Success!" she shouted and lifted her arms in the air.

Glancing at her watch she realised she was running out of time. *The phone call to Clark will have to wait.*

She grabbed the suitcase and lugged it to the door then picked up her purse and jacket. One quick glance around the room to check on closed doors and windows then she was gone.

\*\*\*

Clark knocked on Lois' apartment door and when there was

no answer he became a little worried. She hadn't turned up at work all day.

"Lois," he called out. But there was no answer. A glance 'through' the door revealed an empty apartment and a quick search for her heartbeat determined that it was quite a distance away. He frowned and turned away, pulling out his phone.

When he went to start dialling he noticed that he'd missed a call from her earlier. *Okay, so whatever is going on, she did try to ring me. How did I miss it?*

Looking at the time he pursed his lips in annoyance. *Superman. That's why. Stupid nuclear meltdown. Why can't the Russians take better precautions?*

He dialled her number and then ambled back out of her apartment block. When the phone was answered he stopped.

"Hi this is Lois Lane. Leave a message. I'll get back to you. If I'm not chasing down a lead. Or not being held captive by a super-villain. Or not being rescued by Superman. Or ... just ... leave a message."

"Hi, Lois. It's Clark." *Your fiancé*, he wanted to add, with a smile. But he didn't. He shuffled his feet. "Just wondered where you were today. Hope you are okay. There are things we need to discuss." He paused and looked down at his feet. "Um, things I need to, uh, tell you." He paused again to try and still his beating heart. "Call me."

Clark slid the phone back inside his jacket and went home with a heavy heart.

\*\*\*

It was late when Lois finally checked into her hotel room. She dumped her case directly in the doorway and dropped her purse on top of it. Seeing the bed only steps away she stumbled forward and collapsed onto it face first.

What a disastrous journey it had been. *Delays, bad weather, noisy cabin crew, missing tickets. Ugh.* Lois was seriously suffering from lack of sleep. But her sense of duty was shouting so loudly in her head that she couldn't ignore it.

"All right, all right." She levered herself up and reached back for her handbag, extracting her phone and turning it back on. A message icon immediately started blinking at her.

*Clark!* She knew it would be him.

"Hi, Lois. It's Clark." She couldn't help but smile at the sound of his voice. "Just wondered where you were today. Hope you are okay. There are things we need to discuss." Her heart hit double time and she gulped. *You're not wrong there*, she thought. "Um, things I need to, uh, tell you." That sounds worrying. She frowned. "Call me."

She put the phone down on the bed and nibbled her lip. *What does he want to tell me? He wants to call it off? He wants to elope to Vegas? He's decided he's gay?*

Lois really knew she was sleep deprived when that last thought popped into her head. She deleted the message and settled herself on the bed. Leaning back against the headboard she dialled Clark's number.

\*\*\*

Clark was instantly awake the moment he heard the phone ring. Glancing at the time as he reached over for the handset he crinkled his brow. *Who's calling at this time?*

"Hello?"

"Clark? It's Lois." He immediately sat bolt upright.

"Lois, what's the matter?" He was ready for Superman mode. Why else would she be calling at this hour?

"Nothing, except jet lag, exhaustion and frustration."

"What?" he asked confused.

"I, uh, tried to call you earlier but you didn't answer. Perry's sent me on assignment. I'm in Coast City. I've just arrived at my hotel room." Now that Clark knew the truth he could hear the weariness in her voice.

"Uh, how long will you be there?" he asked, although he was

pretty sure he already knew the answer.

"Three weeks," she replied, her voice tilting upwards at the end. *Yeah, I was right.* "I'm covering the Glo-"

"Global Warming Summit," he interjected, guessing correctly.

"Yes."

Clark let himself fall back to his pillow, keeping the phone close to his ear. *Is this because of last night?* But he dare not actually ask the question.

As he lay there, her breathing coming through the phone into his ear, he realised that this was almost what it would be like every night, except she'd be right next to him ... in bed. They'd talk, they'd kiss ... he hoped ... and then say goodnight. The pain of her leaving so soon after their engagement paled a little as he imagined that future with her by his side.

When he realised she hadn't spoken in all the time he'd been thinking he sat up again. "Lois?" he asked.

"I'm here, Clark." She spoke so quietly. He could hear the exhaustion in her tone.

"Go to sleep. We'll talk tomorrow."

"Okay. Night, Clark," she said.

"Night, Lois," he replied gently. "I love you," he whispered into the receiver, but the dial tone was already ringing in his ear.

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## Chapter 11: The Phone Calls

Clark was standing outside a jewellery store when his phone rang very late the following day. He'd been considering each and every engagement ring on display, evaluating them one by one. He knew there were probably more inside, but that was a step too far at the moment, literally.

Looking at the caller ID he took a deep breath. *Well, here's my chance to find out.*

"Hey, Lois. Feeling better now?" he asked cheerfully.

"Much. I'm so sorry I disappeared so quickly. It just happened so fast, and I couldn't get in contact and I had to catch my plane."

"Lois!" he butted in. "I understand. Truthfully, I am a little disappointed, but I still understand." When everything went silent, Clark worried. "Lois?"

"Uh, sorry, Clark. I ..." she stuttered. "I didn't want that to happen."

"So, how was your first day at the summit?" Clark turned away from the sparkly window and began heading down the street.

"Pretty good actually. Looks like there's controversy coming. Some European politicians have very different ideas and standards to the rest of the world. I could see it coming to blows." Clark could hear the sing-song teasing tone she got when making a little joke.

"Really?" He decided to play along. "Maybe I should ask Perry if he wants an extra reporter there if it's going to get so interesting."

"Uh. No!" she stuttered back down the phone immediately. "I mean, I've got it covered. No need to fly you out too."

"Lois?" Clark wrinkled his brow. "Are you trying to avoid me?" The moment he said the words he regretted them. If she was, then talking about it would probably bring about the end of the engagement, less than a day into it. But it was too late, the words were said and he just had to wait for her reply.

The phone line was silent for too many seconds but Clark continued to wait.

"I, um. I guess I am." She spoke slowly and quietly. "I'm sorry," she speeded up and then began to ramble at lightspeed. "It just took me by surprise. I didn't expect it to happen like that and I'm not sure I'm ready. Not that I want to back out now that it's done, I just need time to get my head round the idea. Is that okay?" She stopped and Clark could hear her heavy breathing.

“Of course it is, Lois. It *was* a bit sudden.” He remembered her reaction to him mentioning a date for the wedding. “I won’t press you on any arrangements if that’s what you want.”

He heard her sigh of relief. “Thanks, Clark. You are so great. You did say you wanted to talk about some things and you needed to tell me something?”

“Well I was hoping to start making some wedding decisions, but we can leave them all for now. Except for two questions. I hope you don’t mind, Lois, but I do need to know something.” He waited.

“Okay, go ahead. What do you want to know?” she replied slowly.

“Would you like to tell people yet?” He knew the nervousness was showing in his voice.

“Ah,” she gulped. “Not yet, Clark,” she answered and he heard the inherent ‘sorry’ in her tone.

“I guess that also answers my other question then.”

“What question?”

“I wanted to know if you ... um ... would you like a ring?” he asked.

He heard her breath hitch on the other end of the phone and when she spoke he would swear he heard her voice cracking.

“Not yet, Clark, but thank you for the thought.”

Clark looked back, over his shoulder, at the Jewellery store, regretfully, and then hung his head.

“It’s okay, Lois.”

\*\*\*

Lois tapped her foot and kept glancing at her watch. *Come on, come on. You should have finished an hour ago!* She screamed at the delegate from Qatar but he didn’t hear her as it was all in her head. When he eventually stepped back from the podium and the press began standing and vacating the room she let out an audible “Finally!”

Slipping on her thin cotton jacket and picking up her bag she practically ran all the way back to her hotel room. Once inside the room she tossed away her bag and dropped to the floor scrambling under the bed.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust but eventually a small shadow began to stand out from the rest of the shadows. “Yes. Come to mama!” she said as she shuffled further under to try and reach her phone.

It began to ring just as she was crawling backwards out from under the bed and the shock caused her to bang her head. “Ow.”

Finally climbing up and out she answered the phone, breathless. “Hi, Clark.”

“Hi, Lois,” came his voice straight into her ear. A shiver went down her spine as she remembered something ‘Dream Clark’ had whispered in her ear last night. “I’ve been phoning all afternoon, what happened?”

*Phoning all afternoon!* She grinned widely. Her heart, already thumping furiously, skipped a beat.

“I must have left the phone on the bed when we talked this morning and it slid off so when I turned to pack my bag and didn’t see it ... I’m so sorry. I’ve been frantic for the Summit to finish for the day so I could get back to find it.” She stopped to pant some more. “As you can tell from my heavy breathing.”

“I wondered what was causing that.” She could hear him chuckling.

“Hey, don’t you be getting the wrong idea, this is all aerobic workout.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, Lois,” he replied and the flippant way he answered sent a little pain through her heart. But then there was silence and he didn’t say anything else and she heard some shuffling on the other end.

“So, what’s the urgency that had you ringing me all afternoon when I told you I’d phone this evening.”

“Actually it’s Perry that’s after you.”

“Oh!” she couldn’t hide her disappointment.

“He needs your okay on a few things he wants to change quite significantly in the article you sent yesterday.”

“Okay, I’ll call him now,” she said subdued. Suddenly all the life had drained out of her. “I’ll ring you tomorrow, okay?”

“Sure. I look forward to it Lois.”

After she hung up the phone Lois pondered over Clark’s final words. *Is he really looking forward to it? Or was it just a polite way to end the call?*

\*\*\*

Clark was confused. To say that she wanted space and time to come to terms with the engagement Lois still rang him every day. They chatted for hours. When he thought about their conversations, though, he could find nothing in them to give him hope. It was ‘best friend’ talk; idle chatter about random things that had gone on during the day.

As he sat at home waiting for today’s call he seriously considered flying over and confronting her. But that would be unfair. He’d promised her time to come to terms with it, and he was willing to give it to her. And when it came time to reveal the truth he’d do it on home ground, somewhere she felt safe, somewhere familiar so that she didn’t feel threatened or ambushed.

When the phone finally rang he snatched up the receiver immediately.

“Lois?” he asked.

“Yeah, it’s Lois. Who else would it be?” she replied jokingly.

“Well, I was expecting a call from my hot, blonde girlfriend,” he immediately returned.

“Very funny, Clark. You used to run a mile whenever a hot blonde came on to you, even before we uh ...” she stopped talking and Clark realised that she hadn’t meant to bring up the matter of the engagement yet so he quickly changed the subject.

“So, how’s it going then? One week of the conference over. Has anything erupted yet?”

“Nope, boring as ... well a Global Warming Summit.”

“Maybe I should come over to keep you company then.” A feature of every phone call was Clark managing to approach Lois with the idea of him coming over. After seven days, though, she now knew he was just teasing and that he was not the kind of man to push her when she wasn’t ready.

“I think the hotel is fully booked at the moment.” Another feature of the conversation was Lois coming up with a reason that he couldn’t come.

“Aw, that’s too bad.”

“So, what’s new in Metropolis?” she asked brightly.

“Oh,” Clark remembered, “Suzie, that you set me up with, and don’t deny it, she’s started seeing Terry in Sales.”

“Really?” Lois’ voice squealed in disbelief. “He’s not her type at all.”

“Yeah, you thought I was her type,” Clark accused gently.

\*\*\*

“Clark, thank goodness you’re in the office,” came Lois’ voice over the line the next day. “I’ve been trying to get through to Perry desperately.”

“He’s in an investor’s meeting. He’s been grouching about it all morning and when 1pm came around he stormed out of his office on the way to the conference room shouting ‘I don’t see why I even have to be there. I’m not an investor, just the Editor in Chief. The King never had to go to investors meetings. Great shades of Elvis.’”

Lois laughed delightedly. Clark did an absolutely superb Perry impression. “Well, I need to get a message to him about yesterday’s article. The Russian Delegate has recanted his statement on the carbon footprint of their Nuclear Power Stations and he’s announced radical new legislation that he is involved in implementing. Clark you should hear some of the ridiculous ideas

he's throwing around."

"Okay, I'll try and get a message to him."

"Thanks, I gotta go. I just snuck out to call and I think I'm missing Australia now."

"Okay, I'll speak to you later then."

"Yes, I'll call you after everyth-," Lois had the wind knocked out of her suddenly and then a massive explosion rocked the building. The ground trembled beneath her feet and she stumbled to the floor. Looking up, she screamed as a chunk of ceiling dropped from directly above, aiming for her head.

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## Chapter 12: The Bomb

"Lois," Clark shouted down the phone. "LOIS!" He stood up from his desk in shock. People looked up from their desks, but he ignored them. He focussed his super-hearing through the phone and when he heard her scream he dropped the phone and immediately ran, at human speed, for the stairwell then super-spined up and out to the roof.

He didn't think he'd ever done such a fast change and he knew he'd never flown as fast in his life. *Coast City. That's 2,400 miles. At 'speeding bullet' speed that's still gonna take me ... too long. I need to go ten times faster.* And he sped up, terror urging him onwards at ever increasing speeds.

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Lois experienced the fastest lifetime recap ever as the chunk of ceiling dropped.

*Mom drinking, Dad leaving, looking after Lucy, college, work, more work, award, Clark, Lucy, Clark ... home ...*

As she raised her hands to shield her face, one final thought came to her.

*I should tell him.*

Somehow the ceiling missed Lois by inches, smashing to the floor just to her right but crushing her phone. She scrambled to her feet and stumbled for the exit. Her ears were ringing, making all sounds muffled as if there were cotton wadded up in her ears. A quick glance behind revealed the devastation and her mouth dropped open in shock. The conference room was inaccessible, the doors a tangled mess, and piles of debris were streaming down through a wide open hole in the ceiling.

A second explosion rocked the building again at that moment and Lois watched as supporting columns in the lobby began to collapse around her. More sections of ceiling began to fall and she turned to head for the exit again, this time desperately dodging multiple chunks of falling concrete.

Just as she made it to a gaping hole in the wall she was struck from behind, something impacting on her skull.

\*\*\*

The closer he got to Coast City the more he tried to focus on Lois' heartbeat. The terror that he always buried deep in the forgotten corners of his heart and mind surfaced with a vengeance.

*I wasn't there.*

*I couldn't save her.*

There were so many heartbeats, so many shouts for help as he landed, only minutes after setting off. *My goodness I must have been flying at nearly light-speed,* came a dispassionate thought in the back of his mind.

Seeing the devastation he knew he couldn't waste time being selfish and looking specifically for her, so he just dived straight in and began removing rubble, hoping desperately that he would come across her anyway. As he focussed on the task at hand it also cleared his mind and eventually he started to hear a steady thumping. *Lois,* he breathed a sigh of relief, but before he could discern a direction he was interrupted.

"Superman!" came a deep, familiar and authoritative voice. "What are you doing here?"

He turned round to see Coast City's resident hero. "Lantern,"

he acknowledged. "I'm here to help."

"Obviously," he chuckled. "I mean, how did you know, how did you get here?"

"I was, uhm, on the phone with Lois Lane and heard the explosion."

"You!" Green Lantern pointed at him incredulously. "On the phone? ... with Lois Lane!" He tipped his head to one side and then his expression lightened with realisation. "Well, she is your unofficial publicist."

"Yes, but now I can't find her and there's too much destruction to waste time on one particular person."

"I understand." He turned and began lifting chunks of masonry with the green glow emanating from his ring.

Time moved on and Superman and Green Lantern rescued dozens of delegates and press but the pile of bodies was also growing. Clark let the beating heart he was focussed on spur him on but he wouldn't let himself aim directly for her so he refused to work out which direction it was coming from. The despair at the loss of life warred inside with his hope over continuing to hear Lois' heartbeat.

"Hey," came a shout from behind. "I've found her."

\*\*\*

Lois awoke to the sensation of flying. *Superman.* But when she opened her eyes she was surrounded by a green glow and held by unfamiliar arms.

"Green Lantern!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, Miss Lane, you're awake." He looked down at her.

"What's happening?" she asked.

"I'm taking you to hospital."

"What!" she struggled against his arms. "I'm fine, put me down and get back to the conference." *A superhero shouldn't waste time taking an uninjured person to hospital,* she thought.

"No," he spoke clearly and held her tight. "It's okay.

Superman's there. But the only way I could get **him** to stay and keep helping was for **me** to promise that I'd get you to hospital. He was originally determined to take you himself. I'll drop you off and go straight back, but he can help more than I could."

*Superman was willing to stop the rescue to take me to hospital!* Lois was a little confused but she filed the information away in her memory for later thought and started to plan the fastest route back to the scene of the destruction.

Green Lantern dropped her off at the entrance to an Emergency department. "Please, get yourself seen to." He looked at her, somehow knowing what she planned. "He made me promise. Don't be responsible for me breaking my word to Superman."

She immediately felt her teeth grit together and she growled. "Ugh," then she sighed in resignation. "Okay." When he peered at her, attempting to work out whether she meant it or not, she shooed him away with her arms. "I promise. Now go."

While she waited to see a doctor she found a payphone and called Clark. "Hi, this is Clark Kent. Leave a message."

"Clark, I'm fine, don't worry. Tell Perry I'll have him an exclusive later on today. Eyewitness account ... journalist on the spot ... Green Lantern ... Superman. It'll have it all." She hung up and went back to her seat.

*He had to play the promise to Superman card,* she grumbled silently.

After she'd been discharged, diagnosed with 'minor bump on the head' and 'major impatience', Lois made her way back to the disaster site complete with painkillers gracing her handbag.

Superman and Green Lantern were still attempting further rescues even though hours had passed. Lois waited patiently until they stopped the rescue effort. She closed her eyes to rest and let the pounding pain subside. She opened them suddenly when she heard shouts. She was just in time to see Green Lantern flying away surrounded by his signature green glow. Superman strode

away from the scene and Lois ran after him.

“Superman!” He turned and looked at her, bleakness in his eyes. But as he blinked and focussed on her she saw that wash away to be replaced by ... something she must be misinterpreting.

“Miss Lane!” he said quietly. “Do you want an interview, or a quote?” he asked wearily.

“What just happened?” She raised her arm in the direction Green Lantern had gone, her tone making it clear that it was not a professional interview question but just curiosity.

“We found a third bomb still live. Green Lantern shielded it and has flown away to a safe distance.” She watched the shutters come down over his eyes again and he turned away. “And I can no longer hear any heartbeats.”

He sat down on a low wall and rested his elbows on his knees, clasping his hands together out in front. Lois sat down next to him and she felt her heart break for him as he hung his head.

“I couldn’t save them all. Why couldn’t I save them all?” She heard the raw emotion in his voice and felt a tear run down her own cheek. He looked up and turned to her. He reached out a hand and brushed her cheek. “At least you are safe. I don’t know what I would have done if ...” Lois knew she must have looked shocked at his words, as he stopped and pulled away.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“No!” she grasped his hand to keep him from pulling away. “It’s okay. I know you care about me, Superman. I know you care about **everyone**.” She explained away his feelings as being part of his general compassion. He smiled at her.

“Look, um, there’s something I need to talk to you about. I ...” she paused then stood up and walked away a few paces. “I need a friend. A good friend, as I think I’m about to embark on a ... difficult period in my life. I need someone I can talk to about things, about how I’m feeling. Can I come to you?”

“You know you can talk to me about anything, Lois.” She heard a little confusion in his voice.

“Not, now. I need to speak to Clark first.”

“Clark! But I ...” he stood and his expression changed again. “You and Clark?”

“Yes, me and Clark. When I’ve talked to him, can I come and find you? I ... uh ... think I will need friendly support.”

“I’m always here for you, Lois.” *Is that upset in his tone? Why would he be upset?*

“Thank you,” she said and reached up to kiss him on the cheek. “Now about that interview and quote.”

He chuckled and smiled at her. “Of course, Miss Lane.”

\*\*\*

All the way back to Metropolis Clark fought the despair creeping into his soul. *It can’t possibly be as bad as I think. Of course she’s going to want to talk to me ... as Clark. But why would she then need to confide in Superman afterwards? Confide things she can’t tell Clark ... her fiancé.*

*Unless.*

He landed at home and sped inside his apartment without being seen.

*Unless, there is no ‘fiancé’ after she speaks to Clark.*

His knees buckled, whether from the physical and mental exertion of the rescue or from the emotional impact of what Lois was about to do to Clark, and he collapsed onto his bed.

Clark checked the clock. It was late evening, well past the time Lois had taken to calling him for their daily, platonic chats. He knew what she was doing. He knew how much she valued him as a friend. For years they had been each other’s sounding board and go-to friend whenever life was overwhelming and she clearly missed that as she wasn’t in the office with him day by day.

So she called ... and they chatted ... and it was perfectly

natural. Except for the giant white elephant that no-one mentioned ... their change in status.

He sped to the shower and washed in super-quick time. As he exited the bathroom and wandered into his bedroom, towelling off the last drops of water, the phone began to ring.

He immediately stilled and turned to look at the phone. *Here it comes*, he thought and his stomach dropped into his feet.

“Clark Kent,” he answered, just in case it wasn’t Lois.

“Clark, where the heck have you been?” She was fuming.

“Um,” he spoke but the nerves kept his mind from working fast enough to explain why he hadn’t been around to answer the phone all afternoon.

“I screamed at you down the phone this afternoon. The conference was bombed and every time I tried to call, you weren’t there. I’m supposed to be your fiancée. Clark what is going on?”

He found it hard to breathe for a moment, excitement taking over. *She called herself my fiancée. Maybe it’s not over.* “I ran for Superman the moment I heard your call. Ever since then I’ve been ... working.”

“Working! Where? Because you never answered your office phone and your mobile must have been in a signal black-spot and I’ve been calling your apartment every ten minutes this evening.”

The difficulties of this situation just brought home to Clark how important it was that he tell her the truth as soon as possible. But over the phone was not the way to reveal such a gigantic secret. TWO gigantic secrets.

“Lois, it’s a bit complicated.”

“Complicated. How complicated can it be? I was almost in the middle of a terrorist attack. Thankfully, I was on the phone to you just outside the conference room otherwise I could have ... I could have ...” and that’s when he heard the shock and the terror that was underlying her anger, and her voice cracked.

“Lois, I’m so sorry,” he spoke earnestly and the despair hit him again. He felt like he was back in the rubble pulling out lifeless bodies. The thought that Lois had nearly been one of them had him gritting his teeth to help keep his composure. He made such stupid mistakes as Superman this afternoon. His emotional reactions to Lois had been uncharacteristic, even atypical of Superman. *Was that part of Lois’ reason for a ‘talk’ with Clark followed by a ‘talk’ with Superman?*

“Clark, I ...” he heard her take a shuddering breath and knew that she was holding back tears. “I could have died and I just, I needed to talk to you. The way we left things ... about our engagement. I ...”

“It’s all right, Lois. I wish I could have been there for you, more than you can know, or understand. But, once you get back we will talk. I will be able to explain everything to you then. I can tell you ... Well, I can explain, and I hope you will understand.” He practically begged for her understanding with his tone.

“Yes. There are things I need to say too, but not over the phone. I’ll come back as soon as I finish up the story, Clark. In a few days.” She spoke quietly, all the anger having drained away once she’d vented it.

“Okay, I’ll be waiting.”

After she hung up Clark climbed into bed and stared up at the ceiling while his mind processed the day. He’d had to accept his inability to be omnipresent early on in his career as Superman, but he never came to terms with loss of life. The despair and anguish would tear at him, but never more than this day. Lois could have been one of them. And she was usually the one to help him through it, without her ever knowing it. Whenever he turned up at the office carrying his ‘Superman emotional baggage’ she’d call him on it, although she would never know what was causing his mood. And before long she’d have him laughing, or teasing, or engaging in playful banter.

And he was strengthened to carry on another day.  
But she wasn't here tonight, and she was going through her own emotional rollercoaster.

As he pondered all her words to both Clark and Superman he, once again, began to worry that she was going to call it off. And then true despondency hit him. She'd never be there for him again, as this would probably end their friendship.

And then he decided ...  
He would tell her anyway.

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### Chapter 13: The Illness

Lois stood outside the airport — new phone in one hand, suitcase in the other — and dialed Clark's number for the fifth time.

"Hi, this is Clark Kent. Leave a message."

"Clark. I left you a message when I was setting off to the airport, then when I got to the airport, then when I landed and twice since. Where are you? I caught an earlier flight and it's pouring down. If you're not here in five minutes I'm getting a cab."

She hung up as forcefully as possible and stuffed her phone back in her pocket. She knew she was feeling ratty and tired. Over-tired. And the vision of Clark's face greeting her would have been the perfect balm. But it didn't happen, and so she felt the overbearing tiredness resting heavily on her.

Five minutes later, with no sign of Clark, she climbed into one of the ever-present airport cabs and snapped out her apartment address. As she settled into the seat she felt a raindrop trickle from her hair, past her ear and disappear down her back. The tickle it caused was almost unbearable and she shifted in her seat trying to rub her back against the fabric to relieve the itch.

"Damn you, Clark Kent," she muttered.

"What was that miss?" came the cab driver, obviously wondering if she was talking to him or giving him new instructions.

"I was just cursing my missing work colleague," she said harshly. *Work colleague! Why did you refer to him like that? He's your fiancé.* She frowned and tried to dissect the meaning behind it. *Freudian slip? Do I just want him to be my work colleague and that's all? Or is it a panic reaction? Or maybe just anger that he let me down?*

"Oh. Supposed to pick you up, was he?" he asked conversationally.

"Mmm hmmm," she replied.

When the cab pulled up she climbed out, dragging her suitcase. Standing on the sidewalk she passed some bills through the open window then turned. "What?" came her surprised exclamation. She turned back, but the cab was pulling away. She shook her fist in the air and ran forward a few steps. "Wrong block, block-head!" Groaning, she kicked at the puddle of water at her feet then began to stamp furiously along the road to the next block over, the correct block.

Arriving home, soaking wet, she immediately glanced to her machine hoping for a message from Clark. Disappointment arced through her at the lack of blinking light. "Just when I thought everything was going to be alright."

She dropped to the couch and hung her head. "Just when I thought it would be a good idea to tell him how I really feel."

Standing up and storming into her bedroom with her suitcase she began to unpack, venting all her frustration on the poor clothes and toiletries. "Well, he doesn't deserve to know."

Realising that she was still soaking wet she reached for a towel, but then heard a knock at the door.

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Clark stood at the door and took a deep breath. *Here goes. It's time for the truth. And she most definitely needs to know after I failed to collect her this afternoon. I guess this is also when I*

*find out if she wants to end it. The way she talked ... the things she said in that last phone call from Coast City. And now, my failure to pick her up can't have helped.*

Clark thought back to the series of increasingly aggressive messages he'd just listened to after returning from the earthquake in China. He'd immediately sped to her apartment and now he was feeling the nerves building as he was about to spill his two biggest secrets to his best friend and possibly find that that friendship had well and truly ended.

Raising his hand he knocked and waited.

When Lois opened the door his heart lurched. He took in everything in a microsecond; her dishabilled appearance, her bright eyes and cheeks, her soaking wet clothing clinging to her curves, but most of all, the anger rolling off her in waves.

"Where the heck were you?" she shouted at him then sneezed.

"Bless you!" Clark automatically said and reached into his pocket for a handkerchief to pass to her. He stretched out an arm in supplication, hoping she'd begin the forgiveness process early but she just glared at him.

"Well, I'm waiting, Clark!" She hadn't stepped back to allow him entry into the apartment. *Not a good sign.*

"It's complicated, Lois. I ... can I come in please? It's not something I want to explain out in the hall."

She studied him for a moment and then stepped to the side, almost robotically. He walked in and headed for the couch but when he looked back Lois was still at the door.

"Lois?" he queried.

"All right, you have five minutes. And it better be a superb explanation, because, Kent, you are in the dog house at the moment." She stamped over to him and stood, glaring, hands on her hips.

"Um," he turned away and began to pace. "I'm not exactly sure where to start, Lois,"

"It's not hard, Kent." She interrupted. "Basically, you just need to tell me where you were. Why you couldn't pick me up, like we arranged. Why I was left in the rain and had to walk a whole block to get home when the stupid cab driver dropped me off at the stupid wrong corner." She was shouting so loudly that Clark could see her body shaking.

"Lois!" Clark placed his hands on her shoulders to steady her. "Calm down. I'm sorry. I really am. I wanted to pick you up. I planned the whole thing. I was going to tell you ..." He dropped his hand and sighed. "You asked for an explanation before, about why I didn't respond to your messages and I promised you one once you got back. Well ..." he took a deep breath and was about to speak again when he noticed that Lois was still shaking.

"Lois?" he frowned and put his hands back on her shoulders. "Are you okay?"

"I'm ..." she faltered. "Just, a little woozy." She shook her head. "Go on. You have four minutes left!" she said roughly. Then she swayed a little and Clark grabbed on tighter. "Ooooo!" came a soft sound from her mouth. "That's not good." She reached up to grab onto Clark then collapsed.

Clark held her in his arms and experienced a moment of déjà vu. Suddenly he was back at the start, on Lois' birthday. *The Pact. That's where it all started.* Feeling her forehead with the back of one hand he was surprised at the heat she was radiating.

*I should have noticed before. Her glassy eyes and red cheeks. She's soaking wet through.*

He gently lifted her into his arms and carried her through to the bedroom, again bringing forth a memory of that night.

*Now, this could be awkward,* he thought. *I can't leave her in these clothes, but she'll be twice as angry with me if she thinks I've undressed her. At least that night her clothes were dry and I just needed to remove her shoes.*

Clark perched on the edge of the bed, tentatively reaching out

to Lois' jumper. Warring emotions kept him from being able to make a decision on what to do. Part of him desperately wanted to take the forbidden route and damn the consequences but the rest of him knew full well what the wrath of Lois tasted like.

"Clark? What's going on," came a soft mumbled question from the bed.

"You fainted. Lois, you have a fever but you're also shivering. I think you caught a chill from the rain. You should get out of your wet clothes and maybe go to bed."

Clark watched as Lois tried to climb off the bed but her knees buckled and he reached to catch her again.

"I think you might be right." She lifted a hand to her forehead. "Um, could you help me out of ... um!"

Clark raised his eyebrows. Lois had gone from blazing hot anger to quiet shyness. Something was definitely up. She was ill. "Okay, Lois," he answered carefully.

Easing her jumper over her head he was relieved to find a small but dry t-shirt underneath. *She can sleep in that and I don't need to remove any more.* It was a bit more awkward helping her with her jeans but Lois seemed unaware of the strange intimacy of the situation now.

"Why didn't you change as soon as you got in?" Clark wondered out loud.

"I was about to when you knocked on the door, Mr Interruptus," she mumbled.

Clark helped Lois climb under the covers and she began to snuggle up to her pillow.

"I'll come round in the morning to check on you. Get some good sleep, and stay warm."

"Okay, Clark," she answered drowsily. "Thank you."

As Clark left the apartment and clicked the door shut behind him he let out the breath he'd been holding. The tension that had started to build in his stomach, as he lowered her jeans, thankfully dissipated along with the shuddering sound.

As he strode away he pumped his fists in and out in frustration. He'd built himself up for tonight's conversation. He'd readied himself for all possibilities when he told her the full and complete truth. But he'd not counted on her feeling ill and he felt the unfulfilled promise weighing on his shoulders.

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Lois woke in the morning and groaned as she rolled over in bed. Completely tangled in her sheets it took too many minutes to extricate her body.

"Okay, escapology is coming off my CV," she quipped at herself.

She tentatively climbed out of bed and shuffled across the floor and into the bathroom. The bright fluorescent light penetrated her skull and made her wince in pain. As she stared at her bleary-eyed reflection she felt the same furnace of heat flow through her that had hit last night. The rush of sound in her ears and the light-headed feeling made her lose her balance and she slid to the floor grabbing onto the bath for support.

And that's where Clark found her five minutes later.

"How did you get in?" she mumbled.

"I had the clever idea to take your key last night," he smiled at her, laughing lightly.

"Oh."

"How long have you been here?" he asked gently. On some level she was aware that she was just in her small t-shirt and panties but she didn't care. The fact that Clark seemed oblivious did send a stab of disappointment through her for a moment though.

"Too long. Help me up." She grabbed onto his arm and attempted to pull herself up but instead she found herself cradled in Clark's arms. Looking into his eyes as he gazed down at her she heard the rushing noise again, but knew that it was not linked to her fainting this time.

When Clark carried her back to bed she protested.

"You can't go to work like this. I think you have flu."

"Don't be ridiculous. It's just a small chill." She waved away Clark's concern and tried to climb off the bed again but he held out a hand and gently pushed her back down.

"See, you have no strength, Lois. Let me get you something to drink." Lois levered herself up on her elbows to watch him disappear through the bedroom door. She had to admit he was right. Her muscles had no strength and she feared embarrassing herself further if she tried to stand again.

As she waited for Clark to return she contemplated her decision to tell him about her true feelings. After the way he'd let her down yesterday she really felt like making him suffer but his kindness to her when she'd fallen ill ... that was his true self. That was Clark. And she knew that there would be a true reason, not just a pathetic excuse, why he failed to pick her up.

When he came back in carrying a tray her heart leaped. *It could be like this every day when we are married. Him looking after me, caring for me.* As he came closer she opened her mouth to say something but a wracking cough came out instead.

*No. I can't have this conversation now. Not when I feel this way.*

Clark placed the tray on her bedside table and then perched on the edge of the bed. He reached out and touched her cheek.

"Lois, I think you need rest. I'll tell Perry not to expect you and I'll call on you tonight." She smiled up at him and when he began to lower his head she widened her eyes, her heart pounding. But he just brushed her cheek with his lips and then pulled back.

"Clark, you'll catch cold."

"That's not possible, Lois," he said softly, and for some reason, she believed him.

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Clark arrived at Lois' apartment, early evening, later on the same day. He strode through her apartment quietly when there was no reply to his tentative cry of 'Lois' and was actually surprised to find her in bed. It was a shock to realise that Lois had actually paid attention to his suggestion. He'd been half expecting her to stride out of the elevator and then promptly collapse at his feet in defiance of her illness.

He perched on the edge of her bed and watched as she slept. Unable to resist he nudged forward and then reached out to trail a finger over her cheek and tuck a strand of hair behind her ear.

*Gosh, she'd be beautiful. Stunning. I need to tell her my feelings, my secret. But I can't do it while she's so ill.*

As he trailed his finger back over her cheek and down to her chin she began to stir. He moved away quickly to avoid discovery. Standing and taking a step away he called out quietly.

"Lois. It's Clark. Do you need anything? I can get you a drink, or something to eat."

"Mmmm," she rolled over and blinked her eyes tiredly as she woke. "A drink please," came her croaky reply.

When he returned a minute later with a glass of cold water he found Lois trying to push herself up. He put the drink down and took hold of her arms to lift. When she was settled against the pillow he passed her the drink and she gulped it all down smacking her lips in refreshed sigh when she pulled the glass away.

"Thank you, Clark."

"How much have you slept, Lois?" he asked.

"I think I've slept ..." she turned to look at her alarm clock and Clark watched her eyes widen in shock when she saw the time "... most of the afternoon. Oh, Clark," she moaned. "I hate feeling useless. I hate being ill."

"It's okay. You can't help it. If it helps you to feel better, you can blame me." He smiled at her.

"I already do!" she said playfully and smiled back.

“See, it’s working already.” Clark felt his heart swell with love and he just gazed into Lois’ eyes. When several minutes passed in silence Clark realised that she’d been gazing back and he broke the contact with a little nervous cough.

Clark’s brain suddenly began buzzing with ideas. He wanted to tell her he loved her but knew that now was not the time so he settled for trying to get some answers on the wedding.

“Um, are you up to discussing a few things?” He raised his eyebrows a little, in tentative question.

“Discussing what exactly?” she asked.

“Do you have any ideas on a date for the wedding yet?”

She looked away. “There’s still plenty of time. We don’t need to rush into it, Clark.” He let out a little breath, slightly disappointed, but mostly relieved. *Well, if she wanted to call it off, that would have been the time. And she didn’t, she just stalled.*

\*\*\*

Clark visited the following evening and immediately made her a sandwich. Lois seemed a little better and sat at the table to eat but she only picked at the sandwich. Once finished she stood up from the table. It became obvious that she still had a lot of recovering to do, though, when she collapsed in Clark’s arms again. Instead of taking her back to bed he laid her on the couch. He attempted to open up discussion on the wedding again.

“Have you thought about bridesmaids?”

Lois looked away and he would swear her cheeks went redder than red, but with her fever it was difficult to tell.

“Um, Cindy still won’t talk to me after that Trivial Pursuit disaster. I haven’t actually called Lucy yet.”

Clark couldn’t hide his smile. *She’s chosen her bridesmaids.* Thankfully she was looking away so she didn’t notice his goofy grin.

“I know you don’t want people to know yet,” he said, trying to show his disappointment a little with his tone, “but I thought that Lucy would be someone you would *want* to confide in.”

“I don’t know, Clark. I just ... haven’t got round to calling her.”

“Have you told *anyone*?” Clark asked, fearful of the inevitable negative response to come and its ultimate meaning.

“No. Have you?” She looked at him wide-eyed.

“No,” he breathed out while shaking his head. *But I desperately want to,* he thought.

Clark knew that time was running out. One way or another, things were going to change drastically, soon. He felt his body humming with tension every time he was near her.

*Soon. Maybe I’ll get my dream.* He allowed himself a moment of pure joy at the thought. *Or maybe it’ll slip from my grasp.*

\*\*\*

Lois managed to shower herself the next day, but only after spending most of the day gathering her strength ready for it. Thankfully, Clark arrived soon after she exited the bathroom and was on hand the rest of the evening to wait on her.

As he fussed over her; seating her on the couch, getting a blanket, getting a hot coffee, closing the drapes, she smiled. *He will make a wonderful husband, even if he never loves me in a romantic way. If I think about it logically then I have to admit that I’m the luckiest girl in the world.*

He left the room to make her a sandwich and her smile turned to a frown. *Since when has Lois Lane been logical? Think instinctively, Lois. Go with your gut. What does my gut tell me?*

Her stomach growled and gurgled at her.

*It tells me that Clark’s taking too long with that sandwich.*

\*\*\*

Clark called Lois from work the next day and she asked him to bring Chinese food that evening. *That’s a really good sign. I don’t like seeing her ill and if she’s wanting to eat that much then*

*she’s definitely better.*

As Clark approached the apartment door he began to wonder if she was ‘better’ enough to have *the talk* or not.

He let himself in and was pleased to see her sitting on the couch watching the television. She waved a welcome and he smiled at her but strode straight for the kitchen to get cutlery for the food. As he came back out he noticed her laptop on the table; paper, pens and notes strewn around it.

*She just can’t relax,* he sighed. *But I suppose it’s the best I could hope for. She’d never give up on work for more than a day or two, even if she was at death’s door. At least she didn’t try to come into the office.*

He walked around to the love seat and Lois shifted over to give him room. He sat down and passed over some cardboard containers and chopsticks.

As they ate in silence Clark decided to test the water once more; as he’d done every evening.

“So, you’ve had a lot of time on your hands. Have you come up with any ideas for wedding themes, or a venue?”

“Clark,” she said, not moving her gaze one iota from the television. “I refer you back to answer one from two nights ago. There’s no rush. In fact there’s no point making any decisions as I may even change my mind about my choices by the time we get round to arranging everything.”

Clark realised that it was useless trying to push her on this, at least until he’d told her his feelings ... and his secret. Then maybe he could make her see how much he wanted to do this, how he was desperate to put his arms round her and call her ‘wife’.

*Well, with the way she’s improving maybe she’ll be up for a ‘date’ in a few days. I can set the scene, give her a lovely evening out ... then drop a bombshell on her.* Clark groaned in his head. *This is just going to be a disaster.*

As the evening wore on it became clear that Lois was getting tired again. She didn’t need any help getting in to bed so Clark left her sitting on the couch still watching Lethal Weapon.

He pecked her on the cheek then stood and walked to the door. He’d done it every night since she’d returned, hoping to get her used to at least a little affection between them.

“Night, Lois,” he said as he opened the door.

“Night, Clark,” she called out as he clicked it shut behind him and at that moment it was as if another click happened in his brain.

*Clark! She said ‘night Clark’. She hasn’t called me ‘Farmboy’ since we got engaged.*

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Lois woke early the next morning. Glancing at her alarm clock she was surprised to discover that it was only 7:05 am and she didn’t feel tired or fatigued or achy at all. She sat up and swivelled around to put her feet on the carpet and when she stood there was no rushing sound, no light-headedness and no muscle failure.

She made it all the way to the bathroom without problem and when she still felt fine after a shower she attempted to get dressed. All the way through her morning routine she kept expecting to collapse on the floor then have to crawl back to bed in shame but it never happened.

It got to 8:30 and Lois found herself standing at the apartment door, fully dressed, her stomach satisfied, her jacket on and her bag over her shoulder. She took a breath and nodded to herself then opened the door and went to work.

She was a little bit breathless when she got to the Planet but took that as a good sign. She could easily have been coughing and wheezing. Knocking on the door to Perry’s office she strode in without waiting for an answer.

“Hi, chief. I’m back. What do you want me on today?”

Perry looked up startled and then stood up suddenly. “Lois,

what in the King's name are you doing here? You've got flu. Get back home to bed." He waved an arm in the direction of the door.

"Don't have a heart attack, Perry. I'm fine now. As you can see." She spread her arms and dipped in a little pose.

"Well, you better be. Kent's been trying to fill your role, but between that and his own assignments and his obvious worry over you, he looks a wreck."

Lois frowned. What was Perry implying?

"You know he'd do anything for you."

"What?" Lois blinked in shock.

"Lois, how can you not see it? Either of you." His voice was soft, almost a whisper, with a disbelieving tone.

"See what?"

"What you two mean to each other." Perry was frowning at her, clearly frustrated that she couldn't see what he was trying to explain. His mouth twitched and he wiped away his frown revealing an affectionate smile in its place.

"Chief, I really think you're living in a fantasy world," Lois laughed nervously and left, but she couldn't help but get butterflies in her stomach as she got closer to her desk.

Clark had kept asking about wedding related things when he'd visited. Was he excited about the marriage? Maybe he really did want to marry her. Lois had stubbornly refused to make any decisions and had constantly steered the conversation away from the subject but she knew that, inside, she'd already secretly planned the perfect wedding.

*Perry can't possibly be right. But what if he is? What if we both want this wedding as much as each other?*

She looked over at the empty desk opposite. Glancing to the conference room she saw a shadow through the glass in the door. Clark was clearly working on something in depth or sensitive. *It's time*, she thought. Taking a deep breath she opened the door, stepped in, and then her nerve failed her. Clark looked up in surprise.

"Lois," he shot out of his chair. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm feeling much better now. You don't need to worry anymore." She smiled as brightly as possible and then strode over to a chair. Collapsing into it she realised that she *wasn't* fine. She was a nervous wreck ... combined with the lingering effects of draining flu.

"Well, if you're feeling up to it I'd like to take you out for dinner then," Clark said casually. Lois narrowed her eyes and looked up. He wasn't even looking at her and the tone had been completely matter of fact.

*Perry's wrong. Clark is just a very caring person in general. It means nothing.*

"I know you keep saying there's no rush, but there are some important things to discuss." Lois heard a very slight waiver in Clark's voice, although he was still looking away.

*Maybe he's right. Maybe I can tell him my feelings and maybe he'll return them.* An anticipation began to build in her stomach. The more she thought about it and repeated Perry's words in her head the more it spread. She found herself breathing deeply in nervous excitement. *Here it comes*, she thought. *I can't hold it in any longer.*

She opened her mouth but words failed her. Lois Lane, lost for words. Only Clark Kent could do that to her. She decided some reassurance would be useful before she told him the truth. Maybe if she knew what he expected then she could phrase how she told him appropriately.

"So, how is this marriage going to work then, Clark?"

"How do you mean?"

"You know. Living arrangements, intimacy, finances, hobbies, vacations."

"You don't want to discuss the wedding itself, but you're happy to discuss the resulting marriage?" Clark was confused.

"Well, the wedding is only one day. The marriage is ..."

"Forever?"

"Forever!" she whispered out. *Perry's wrong*, came the inner scared child. Suddenly it was all too much for her. She jumped up. "I can't do this." Flight mode had suddenly switched on again.

Clark looked up at her. "What?" He stood.

"I can't marry you, Clark."

He strode over to her. "Lois," he took hold of her arms. "It's okay. Everything will be fine. You don't need to worry. I'm sure we can make it work." She turned away in his arms and tried to escape. He let go of one arm but instead of releasing her he lifted it to her face. Gentle pressure made her turn her face back to his. "Lois, I promise I will look after you. I will care for you. We will have a good life together."

"How do you know that? I'm not easy to live with ... and I'm always getting into trouble." All her insecurities came pouring out.

"Believe me, there is no-one better out there that can put up with you, or look after you."

"I ... I know, but-" she blurted but he interrupted.

"No buts, Lois. We can make this work." His voice was a little stronger.

"How can you be so sure it will work?" Her voice was now rising, too.

"Why are you so sure it won't?" he asked vehemently.

"Because I'm in completely love with you," she shouted back.

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#### **Chapter 14: The Truth, the Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth**

She said it. The thing he most longed to hear. The thing he'd thought least likely to happen. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't think. The silence all around was palpable.

He had a stray thought that if she'd done that out in the middle of the news floor, rather than here in the conference room, the ever-present clamour of sound and chatter would still have faded, leaving him in stunned silence.

She must have misinterpreted his silence as she turned and strode away.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have dropped that on you. Um, forget I said it. Actually don't forget. I just ... It won't get in the way." She turned around. "Of our marriage that is."

Clark got over his shock and tried to interrupt her. "Lois."

"I'll be a good wife. I will. And maybe, someday, you'll love me a little."

"Lois."

"They say that you grow to love the person you're married to. And it can be a strong love. Based on respect and admiration."

"Lois."

"And if it doesn't happen then I'll always know that you're still my friend."

Clark figured there was only one way to get her attention so he grabbed her arms to still her then swooped down to capture her lips. He felt her shock at the sudden intimacy but she quickly softened in his arms and he began to draw her closer.

As his arms went round her back he felt her hands come up to his shoulders. He deepened the kiss, opening his mouth a little and her fingers tangled in his hair. When he heard a little sigh come from her he moved his hands to her lower back and drew her body right in to his. The contact sent a frisson of desire through him and he reluctantly pulled away, knowing that it was too soon for that.

Clark looked down at Lois' face. Her eyes were closed, a look of happiness on her features. When she opened them to look back at him dreamily he smiled at her.

"Why haven't you called me *Farmboy* since we got engaged," he asked quietly.

“I ...” she blinked and looked shocked. “I didn’t think it would be appropriate now.”

“I miss it,” he confessed.

“Oh!” She widened her eyes and looked shocked. Clark lowered his head again and gave her a sweet, tender kiss.

“Perry was right,” she whispered when he drew back again.

“Right? About what?”

“He said that the only ones who didn’t know how we two felt about each other were ... well ... *we two!*” She smiled shyly up at him and he grinned back down at her.

“I guess so,” said Clark. As he let his gaze linger on her face he noticed her expression become wary.

“Um, how *do* you feel about me, Clark?”

“Mmm!” he asked, confused and still lost in her eyes.

“You haven’t said that you love me.” Her voice wobbled a little.

Clark felt real terror hit his stomach. He stepped back and turned away from her. “That’s because it’s a lot more complicated than ‘I love you’ for me, Lois.”

“More complicated. How can it be? Unless ...” he heard her take a shocked breath in “... you don’t.”

He turned round and strode back, grabbing her arms. “I do. Lois I’m **completely** in love with you. So much ... But ...”

She reached up a hand and put a finger on his lips. Her beautiful smile calmed his nerves.

“No buts, Clark. Just kiss me again.”

*Who’d have thought it?* Lois was in heavenly bliss. Clark Kent, naive farm boy — although also well respected journalist, and not exactly a boy anymore — kissed like a pro. His lips were divine; his touch like soft feathers caressing her arms. Behind that calm, reserved exterior was a pulsating heat, a passionate soul.

*My goodness, how did I not see it before? His passion when writing and investigating, his search for the truth, his desire to expose injustice. That passion must have come from somewhere. His heart, his soul. And if the passion was there for his job, then ...*

She moaned as he slid his hand to her cheek and twisted sideways to kiss her deeper. She brought her arms round his back and pulled him in tighter. Lois parted her lips slightly and she felt Clark’s tongue seek to enter. The closeness of their bodies began to increase her awareness of him. Every touch, every tingle made her more alive in his arms.

She felt like she was soaring through the sky. She’d only ever felt this way in another man’s arms before. Situations which were as remote from ‘intimate’ as possible. But flying in Superman’s arms, on the occasions he had rescued her from her own folly, were nothing in comparison to this.

As she gave herself completely into the kiss she began to notice the feel of Clark’s body against her. She felt a little surprised but a sudden rush of euphoria kicked her past that. *He desires me.* She rocked closer to him and he moaned.

“Oh, Lois!” he mumbled into her lips. She drew back to take a much needed breath but when she leaned back in, he pulled away. “Lois, we have to stop. We’re at work. And there are things to talk about.”

His softly spoken words brought her down to earth with a bump. She stepped out of his arms and felt unexpectedly cold at the loss. As she studied him she began to feel apprehension. He was breathing deeply, as was she, a lingering effect of the long, drugging kiss.

Lois watched as he turned away, slowly, and took a few steps towards the window. She wondered why he seemed so nervous after the glorious joy of the revelations just minutes ago. Coming up behind him slowly she reached out a hand and placed it on his shoulder. When he turned his head and brought up a hand to cover hers she moved round to the side and faced him. He turned

to face her and brought her hand down.

Lois watched in confusion as Clark took hold of her other hand and then held them both together in his. He looked up into her eyes and spoke earnestly.

“Lois, I have confessed my love for you. You know my feelings.”

Lois got the impression that he was asking her a question so she answered. “I know.” She nodded and smiled.

“Um,” he paused and Lois watched as his throat quivered as he swallowed. “I think it’s time that I confess something else to you. Another secret. One I’ve been hiding for even longer.”

Lois frowned and gave a slight shake of her head. “Secret? *Farmboy*, you don’t have any secrets from me.” She laughed.

She watched as Clark’s eyes lit up at her calling him ‘Farmboy’ again. He glanced to the floor and his breathing seemed to return to normal. Peering back up through his lashes he smiled back at her and raised an eyebrow. “Really? How about ‘I love you’? You didn’t know that secret did you?”

“Well, no,” she pouted. He smiled at her then his chest heaved as he took a deep breath.

“I’ve been keeping this particular secret since I arrived.”

“Arrived? You mean the office?” she teased. He didn’t take the bait.

“No, since I arrived ... in Smallville.” Lois finally began to feel the seriousness of the situation.

“Oh, your adoption,” she breathed out quietly. He gulped and nodded.

“I’ve spent all my life hiding who I am, where I come from.”

“Clark. It’s nothing to be ashamed of, being adopted.”

“No, Lois, that’s not it. My parents ...” he sighed. “This is hard for me. I have to confess that I’m terrified.” He gave a nervous laugh.

“What do you have to be terrified of Clark?” she tried to smile encouragingly with a loving, but teasing tone to her answer.

“I didn’t think it would be like this, but I never expected that you felt the same way. But now that I have you, I’m scared to lose you.”

“Lose me? Clark, what is this secret that could possibly change what we’ve just become to each other?” She reached a hand up to his face and cupped his cheek.

“I’ve been hiding who I am. Disguising my true self. This ... is not Clark Kent. Well it is, but ... it’s not. Not the whole Clark Kent. This is a front, a deception. So that I can hide, so that I’m safe. And when I strip that away, I worry that you won’t feel the same way. I can’t even believe that you would fall in love with ... this, when I remember how you used to feel about Superman.” He indicated with his hand by placing his palm on his chest. “Clark Kent can’t compare with Superman, although I’ve been secretly hoping that he can ... in your eyes. And this man you see standing before you, this isn’t even really Clark Kent.”

“Are you saying that the man I love doesn’t really exist?” she asked. Her eyes were wide with worry and trepidation.

“No, um. I am Clark Kent. This is Clark Kent. He’s real. I’m real. But it’s not truly me. It’s only part of me, it’s the part that I hide behind ... a mask ... the part that I try to keep ... safe.”

*If this is all a mask then who is Clark Kent?* She tried to look past the facade to find him.

In a second she saw past the geeky glasses and wild ties. She forgot about the naive personality, the farm boy, and realised that Clark was very strong; very manly. The feel of his arms around her; the way she’d ‘flown’ when he kissed her; the way he held her gaze. It was impossible to rip her eyes away.

She saw his heart, that passionate soul out to fight for truth. She put away all her preconceptions — the hack, Mr Green Jeans — which had weighed her down since their first meeting, and had continued to blind her even once she fell in love with him. And then true recognition came.

“You see, Lois ...”

“Oh my goodness! You’re ...”

“I’m Superman,” he said as he removed his glasses.

She stood there, shock evident in her blank look and wide-eyed stare.

“Say something, please, Lois.” He felt his heart pounding so hard, it was a good job he was the Man of Steel or it would have burst out of his chest.

As he watched a gradual softening came over her face. “How did I never see this?” she frowned in jest. “I must be blind or galactically stupid.”

“Lois, you’re not stupid. I didn’t *want* you to see it.”

She squinted and turned her head a little. He saw the challenge in her eyes, the anger rising, and quickly tried to explain.

“No, I mean, I did, but, uh, it wasn’t safe.” He stammered out his quick reply but it came out all wrong. “I’m not doing this right. Lois. I’ve wanted to tell you for so long. To share myself with you completely. Even before I fell in love with you. When we became best friends I wanted to tell you and now ... now that we ... I knew you needed to know. Even though it’s dangerous. Even though you’d be at risk.” He stopped and looked into her eyes trying to read her expression.

“Lois, please say something.”

“I ...” she faltered and lifted her hand back to his cheek. He took a chance that it was a gesture of forgiveness, of acceptance, and began to lower his lips.

**Rap, rap, rap,** came a sharp tapping on the glass in the door. They both broke apart and turned to stare at the door. When it opened immediately Clark quickly slipped his glasses back on and stepped away from Lois.

“Kent, I sure hope you’ve convinced Lois to go back home.” Perry strode in then stopped suddenly when he looked up to see them both. “Lois, you ...” he paused and sighed pressing his fingers to his temple. “You are one stubborn woman. Are you sure you’re up to this?”

“I thought we already covered that back in your office, Chief.”

“Yeah, you would think it was finished. And Kent,” he pointed, “I would have thought your ‘mother hen’ instinct would have had you carrying her back home. I was counting on it. Judas Priest. She’s been ill.”

“Sorry, Chief.” He shuffled his feet and looked down at the floor. Lois turned to frown at him; he saw it in his peripheral vision. It was the first time she seen his ‘Clark Kent-ing’ since finding out the truth.

“You just look after her.” Perry pointed at Lois and ordered Clark.

“I will, sir,” he nodded.

When the door clicked shut behind the Editor-in-Chief they both let out a breath and turned back to face each other.

“Why do you do that?” she asked.

“Do what?”

“That act. The subservient, humble, meek act. Why? You’re the most powerful man on earth.”

“To throw people off the scent. To avoid suspicion. To give the impression that I’m the opposite of super. Plus ... I kind of actually am humble.” He grinned in amusement.

“But **why**?” she emphasised even more.

“I want a life, Lois. I can’t be Superman twenty four hours a day. I need to be me. Clark. And I need **time** as me.”

Lois lifted her hand to his cheek again. The tentative, tender touch of the tips of her fingers was feather-light. “Your life is so complicated. I never realised.” Clark looked down into her open eyes, her honest expression. He saw the tiny wrinkles along her forehead that indicated her empathy for him.

“Too complicated?” he asked. He knew that this was the

moment. This was the make or break question.

“No,” she shook her head and smiled. Lifting her hand further up and round to the back of his head she pulled it down into quick a searing kiss.

“So you’re still okay with the engagement?” He raised his eyebrows just a little in hope.

“Can we not focus on the engagement for now? Let’s just enjoy being in love.” He nodded at her and grinned.

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### Chapter 15: Being in Love

Apparently to ‘enjoy being in love’ Clark had to take Lois to the park ... and the fairground ... and ice skating ... and the movie theatre. He pointed out that there was an International circus and fairground booked into Centennial Park at the weekend.

“Oh, but I can’t this weekend Clark, I’m visiting Lucy.” Lois suddenly blurted out.

“Oh,” he expelled, disappointed.

“I’m sorry,” she reached out her hand and placed it on his chest.

“Say hi to her from me will you?”

“Of course.” She smiled up at him.

“So, how about a movie on Friday evening then instead?”

She grinned and turned away, striding towards the conference room door. “Sure, but I get to choose. You’d probably pick some foreign artsy film or a boring ... Oh!” She put her hand up to cover her open mouth and turned back round. “I’m sorry Clark, that’s probably all part of your act!” She looked mortified.

Clark frowned at her and took a step backward.

“Oh, gosh. I’m sorry. Is that bit *not* an act.” Now she looked distraught. “Oh, no. This is terrible.” She turned away and began to stride around. “I can’t believe it. Lois Lane strikes again.” She hung her head in her hands. “Clark, please forgive ...” She turned and stopped. When she saw him chuckling she put her hands on her hips. “Clark Kent, you are so mean. I never thought Superman could be mean.

His chuckles turned into full laughs and she found her mouth quivering, eventually joining him in the amusement.

He strode forwards and cupped her cheek. “You can choose, Lois. I’ll love whatever film you choose.” He lowered his mouth and brushed her lips gently.

She coughed and murmured then gave a slight nod as he pulled away. “Uh, huh. Maybe we should get to work?”

He smiled. “I think that would be a good idea.”

\*\*\*

Lois was completely engrossed in her research, strewn all over the conference table, when Clark suddenly jumped up from his seat. She looked up, questioningly.

“Lois, I need to, uh ...” She saw him looking very uncomfortable and she stood up with a query evident on her face.

He glanced towards the conference room door then back at her. “I have to ...”

“What, Clark? What do you need to do?” She stood.

He looked frustrated, as if he didn’t know how to explain himself. Then, all of a sudden, he stood up straighter, whipped off his glasses and tossed them down onto the room-length desk then ripped open his shirt to reveal the red ‘S’.

“Oh!” she mouthed and then he was gone in a sudden breeze which sent papers flying around the conference room.

She dropped back into her chair in shock. Blinking rapidly, her mouth started to twitch and her lips curled up in a smile.

She’d known that Clark was Superman since this morning but this was her first experience seeing it. As she leaned back in her chair she allowed herself to remember her previous encounters with Superman. Looking back on them, complete with full knowledge, she now saw things in a different light.

Things Superman had said ... and done; the way he had

looked at her sometimes. He was always there to rescue her. He looked after her. It was obvious now ... he loved her. But even before the love had begun to develop between the two of them there had been friendship — connection. Superman had been entwined in her life more that she was aware of for years.

It gave her a warm feeling, a sense of belonging. She was loved, accepted, wanted, desired and cared for. And it was the most wonderful man in the world who ignited all these feelings.

Lois blinked her eyes and realised that she'd lost five minutes of time staring out of the window thinking about Clark.

*Clark.*

She smiled and absently reached up to her neck and pulled out her birthday present. Sliding the chain between her fingertips she felt the weight of the heart tugging a little.

*Clark.*

*Superman.*

She tilted her head to the side and smiled in beautiful surprise. She'd always attributed Superman's character and personality to his 'Superhero-ness'. He was kind and compassionate and wonderful ... because he was ... Superman.

But that wasn't true.

Superman was kind, compassionate and wonderful ... because he was Clark Kent.

That's where it all came from. That was the source of his 'Superhero-ness'; his background, his upbringing, his home. Clark Kent was the Superhero.

And then Lois realised she'd lost another five minutes of time.

"Lois, pull yourself together. You're acting like a teenager in the throes of her first superstar crush." She giggled as she pulled herself forward to slide back to the table. "Well, I think you're entitled," she replied to herself.

\*\*\*

Superman righted the small table and began to pick up the flowers which had been forcibly scattered around the marketplace by his altercation with an angry, supercharged villain, whose slightly purple skin had been disturbing.

"Thank you, Superman," came the grateful words from the flower stall owner.

He smiled back at her. "You're welcome, miss." As he turned to leave his eye caught a beautiful collection of roses just visible from behind a shattered stall. He strode over slowly and reached down, pushing his cape over his shoulder, out of the way. He gently collected together the red, pink and white blooms then straightened up.

Unable to focus on anything but the thought of Lois he felt a smile begin to appear on his face as he marvelled at the soft petals and sweet fragrance.

"Take them."

"I beg your pardon?" He turned around in surprise.

"Please, take the roses, Superman." He saw the grateful face of the young girl who tended the flower stall. He could read her expression and tone of voice. She was truly thankful for his help, not just for now, today, but every time he made a difference in the world.

"Thank you, miss. They are beautiful." He smiled genuinely as he leapt into the sky clutching the bouquet.

He returned to the conference room the same way he left — at superspeed. He made sure that it was Lois, and only Lois in there, before blurring in. Plus he'd left his glasses on his desk. He couldn't casually stroll through the newsroom without them.

"Clark!" Lois exclaimed when he appeared suddenly. She shot up out of her seat and ran over to the other side of the table.

He strode forwards and when she turned round to face him she had his glasses in her hands.

"You need these on Clark," she whispered urgently.

"Lois, there's no-one around. And we're alone in here." He

grinned at her.

"You can't be too careful." She flicked her eyes around him warily, glancing past to the door. He continued to grin at her. When she finally focussed back on him and lifted the glasses up to slide them on his face she smiled. Stepping back she glanced down then frowned.

"What are those for, Clark?" She pointed at the bunch of flowers.

He continued to grin at her for a moment until he realised what she had asked. "Oh." He held them up. "They're for you."

"Oh, Clark," she reached out a hand, "they're beaut ... no. No. You can't buy me flowers," she exclaimed then backed away waving her hands in front of her to ward away the roses.

"What?" Clark frowned. "I can't bring my girlfriend flowers."

"No. Nobody knows we are ... you know. And your image. Clark. You can't be seen to be a romantic, wonderful boyfriend. It's too good, too perfect. You can't do that."

"You don't want me to be the perfect boyfriend. You know I only do a 'little' bit of playing down Clark Kent, don't you?" Clark was truly confused. "What's wrong with Clark Kent being a good boyfriend. How will that damage my image?"

Lois stopped her fussing and her face softened. She stepped forward. "Oh, Clark," she sighed and smiled. "You WILL be the perfect boyfriend. I have no doubt." Her smile reached her eyes and they twinkled. "But we can't have other people seeing it." She blinked the moisture away and shook her head. "If they start to see you as romantic then they may move on to sexy, then wonderful, then ..."

"Lois, you sound almost jealous," Clark teased.

She took a shocked breath then frowned at herself. "Well, maybe I am ... a little. I mean all the world gets to see you in your underwear ..." Clark raised his eyebrows ... "but that's not actually the point here. We can't risk anyone gradually changing their perception of you as it could lead them down a dark and dangerous alleyway ... for you."

He sighed and dropped his head. "Lois, I want to be able to give you flowers, to be romantic." He looked up into her eyes. "I love you."

"I know that, *Flyboy*," she twinkled at him, testing out a new nickname. "And I also know you." She placed her hand on his chest. "You'll be just fine ... as Clark Kent. He's good enough for me."

\*\*\*

Working side by side the rest of the week was so hard. The temptation to fall into 'distraction' was so great. But Clark found out he had a new Superpower — super-discipline — and he hated it. He **wanted** to give in; to spend every second revelling in his newfound love; holding her in his arms; stroking her hair; tasting her lips. But he didn't.

He knew she felt the same. The blistering looks they gave each other, sneaking a peek over the tops of their monitors, were so easy to interpret.

When Friday evening came they both clocked off at precisely 5pm. There were blatant stares following them as they exited, flicked off their computers, grabbed their coats and made their way out of the building. It was unheard of for Lane and Kent to leave at this time on a Friday evening; the best stories were made at this time; people out on the town getting into trouble. The stories were unexpected, they were emotional and passionate, they called out to the heart, and they made great front page headlines.

Outside on the street Clark turned to Lois. "I'll pick you up at 6:30."

"Okay," she replied, her voice so quiet with a mixture of nerves and happiness that she knew only Superman could have heard. Luckily, that was who she wanted to hear it, and that was

who was standing next to her, gazing down at her adoringly. “See you then.”

“See you soon,” he said.

Lois felt a shiver run up her spine at the word ‘soon’. Such tantalising promise in that word. As she made her way through the city to her apartment she allowed herself to think over the last few days.

It came as a shock to Lois when she realised that she’d never once doubted herself, or Clark, since the ‘moment’. So often she ran away from complex and emotional situations. But why would she do that here? It was a blissfully happy situation. Then again, Lois always second guessed everything. She could so easily have done that here.

*It can't possibly be as good as I think. There's no way it will last. How can Superman possibly be in love with me? I won't be able to cope with this complicated relationship.*

But none of those thoughts had ever hit her. And even now she was **forcing** herself to think them. Making them up. It wasn't real. The doubts were not real. She had **no** doubts.

This was IT.

\*\*\*

Lois, unsurprisingly, had chosen an action film for their official first date ... and it wasn't a good one. Clark found himself shifting uncomfortably in his seat every time the hero made a lame comment or a witty comeback that wasn't at all witty. He groaned at the sound effects accompanying each punch. And he sighed in despair when the over muscled protagonist swept the girl into his arms and kissed her senseless, ignoring her protests, which obviously ceased after she'd been thoroughly ravished.

“I'm sorry,” Lois apologised as they exited the movie theatre at the end of the film. “I really thought it would be much better.”

“I don't mind, Lois. I'm just happy I got to spend some time with you.” She turned and smiled up at him saying ‘thank you’ with her eyes.

A short walk in the cool, late evening climate took them back to Lois' apartment. As they travelled up the elevator in unusual, but comfortable silence, Clark wondered how he should deal with the ‘goodnight’ at the door.

The elevator doors opened and Lois suddenly launched into chatter mode again. “Look, Clark, I'm really sorry tonight's movie was so terrible, and I can't make it up to you tomorrow 'cause I'm off to Lucy's but you have to believe me that I want to and ...”

“Lois,” he took her hand in his and she quietened suddenly. “Stop it.”

“But the dialogue!”

“I know!” he raised his eyebrows and started to walk her along the corridor.

“And those terrible outfits.”

Clark laughed.

“And the sound effects. I mean, if anyone knows what a real hero/villain fist fight is like it's you.” She stopped outside her apartment door and turned to face him. “You must have been holding in your anger, or your laughter, in frustration.”

“No!” he spoke quietly. Looking deep into her eyes he felt a change in his mood, deep within his soul. “I was holding on to your hand ... in anticipation.”

Lois' breath caught and she stilled. Clark lowered his head and brushed her lips tenderly. A slight parting allowed him to sneak a taste of her with his tongue as he swept it gently across her mouth. He drew her close and she melted into his embrace.

A little ironic thought at the back of her mind taunted Lois with the picture of the ‘hero’ getting his girl. But Clark was no hero; at least, not in the same genre as tonight's lame hero. They couldn't compare. And, in contrast with the film, Clark most definitely deserved to ‘get his girl.’

*Should I let him 'get' me? she pondered as she felt his hands slide up her back. Is it too fast? Or have we been waiting for eight years?*

Clark slowly released Lois but kept his head close. Opening his eyes he looked into hers and saw questions. Questions he was tempted to answer with dramatic action, but now was not the time.

He took a deep breath then consciously stepped away. He brought a hand up to her cheek. “Goodnight, Lois.”

“Night, Clark.”

“I hope you have a lovely weekend.” He paused. “I'll miss you.”

“Miss you too, *Flyboy*,” she squeaked out quietly.

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## Chapter 16: The Real Proposal

Saturday afternoon found Clark taking a walk down the streets of Metropolis. He needed a distraction from the pain, the loneliness. She'd been gone less than a day, but it felt like half his soul was missing. He'd felt this way before, when she left for Coast City, but the intensity was razor sharp now. He guessed that was due to the change in their relationship. He'd felt this loss every time he went home alone since that change.

Wandering aimlessly he found himself outside a particular shop he'd visited a few weeks ago. Stopping, he turned and looked in the window.

It set off thoughts of The Pact. He wondered about Lois' statement of not focussing on the engagement. It felt like ‘one step backwards’.

*But she never said it was actually off. And now we are 'together'.*

The happiness he felt when he thought about Lois was overwhelming. He tried not to let the feeling of ‘one step backwards’ take hold. In fact, if it was ‘one step backwards’ then they'd actually taken two, maybe three, steps forwards — of a different kind, and wasn't that an overall ‘win’?

*So why do I still feel like it's a backwards step?*

Pushing his hands further into his pockets he flicked his eyes to the doorway and wondered whether to go inside.

\*\*\*

Lois arrived back in Metropolis late Monday afternoon. Flight delays had started her tapping her foot waiting at the departure gate from Gotham and constantly approaching the boarding desk only to be given a frosty look by the tall, stern, greying gentleman who was waiting patiently.

She'd glanced at her watch after landing, checking the time and, as she called for a cab, she'd seriously considered going straight home. But there was enough of the afternoon left to still make it to the office and plan a serious article.

*Plus, she smiled to herself, you missed him. There's no need to even deny it any longer.*

When she finally exited the elevator she realised her palms were sweating and her heart was pounding. She approached her desk only to see Clark so focussed on his computer screen that he was oblivious to her entrance.

“I guess even super-hearing shuts off when you're fully engaged in work, *Flyboy*?” she whispered. He turned and shot up from his seat.

“Lois!” came as a growl from his throat. He took her hand and dragged her to the conference room. The door was barely shut behind them when she found herself pressed against it. Clark's hands were on her shoulders and his head was less than an inch from hers. “I missed you.” He reached up a hand and tenderly pushed a lock of hair behind her ear.

Her shocked features softened into a smile but she couldn't speak, afraid of her voice failing her. Instead she showed him her reply in her eyes. He lowered his lips and brushed gently across hers. Lois snaked her arms up and around his neck drawing him

closer. *I missed you so much, Clark*, she thought to herself as she kissed him back gently.

Clark tightened his hold on Lois, his heart soaring at the feeling of her in his arms once more. He deepened the kiss and one arm travelled down to the small of her back. Clark felt the moment that Lois lost her balance and leaned her back against the door again when her legs gave out. As he pressed her against the door, the kiss, which had been sweet and gentle, turned hot and needy.

*She's back. My other half. She's here.*

Finally finding some control he pulled away and they gazed into each other's eyes, dreamily. A shy smile crept onto Lois' face and she glanced away momentarily.

A little cough loosened her vocal chords. "So, I guess that's 'hello' out of the way."

Clark laughed.

\*\*\*

Later that evening Clark saw Lois home. He helped her with her weekend bag and she invited him in. For some reason an awkwardness came over them. It was actually the first time they'd been alone in this manner since the confessions.

Clark wondered if *this* was the time, but when he was called away before they had chance to become comfortable he knew it wasn't.

\*\*\*

Tuesday saw both of them out of the office on stories. Lois tried to call Clark when she finally made it home. Turning on the TV while dialling his number she hung up and dropped to the couch when she saw the news reporting a disaster in Mexico. *Clark's not home, Lois*, she told herself, disappointed.

\*\*\*

Wednesday lunchtime Lois was fully engrossed in an article on the crime rate in Gotham when Clark touched her shoulder and she jumped in shock.

"How about we take a walk in the park, Lois?"

She looked up and gave him a bright smile. "I love that idea, Clark."

As they walked hand in hand down the path Lois began to glance up at Clark surreptitiously. He was acting a little odd. He also kept taking a deep breath and coughing, as if he were about to say something. But he never did. Strangely, Lois found the silence quite comforting. Unusual for her, but with Clark, she could be herself, and she could be at peace.

Clark bought Lois a hotdog and they sat on a bench looking out over the lake while eating. *Why am I finding it so hard?* He rested his hand on his thigh and the box in his pocket poked at his wrist. *Clark, you worried about this too much before and there was no reason to. She went through with The Pact. And that was before you both knew that you felt the same way about each other.*

He turned to look at her. She was taking a bite of her hotdog. He watched as she stood and meandered down to the edge of the lake. She glanced down at her hand and then casually tossed the last, small piece into the water. She quickly stumbled backwards, but laughed when it was pounced upon by various ducks.

Clark smiled when he noticed her happiness. He followed the line of her gaze to notice her watching the boats out on the lake. He hoped he was interpreting her dreamy look correctly. Fingering the box in his pocket he made a decision then and a weight left his shoulders.

Lois turned back to look at Clark still sitting on the bench. Her happiness bubbled over into her laugh but it faded when she took in the intense look on his face. Striding over to him she sat back down.

"Everything all right, Clark?"

He smiled and the deep thoughts which must have been bothering him fled. "Perfect, Lois."

They stood and he took her hand in his. As they walked along their clasped hands swung a little.

"Spend the day with me on Saturday, Lois," asked Clark.

She stopped and glanced up at him. "Of course." Tilting her head, she squinted a little. "What are you planning, Kent?" she asked, warily.

"Nothing, Lois. I, uh, ..."

"Come on, spill. Are you gonna take me to the Three Ring Circus?" she said brightly, excited.

"Let's just say that there will be a ring involved."

\*\*\*

Saturday morning saw Clark standing at Lois' apartment door. He was so glad he'd made the sudden decision to put this off till Saturday. Every time he'd tried for a moment alone with Lois there had been an interruption. If he hadn't already known that he was waiting for today his frustration would have grown to immense proportions.

Knocking on her door he quickly listened in to see if she was actually up, or anywhere near the door. When his superhearing picked up soft moaning from a distance he sighed. *She's not even out of bed.*

A shuffling noise eventually made its way towards the door and when it opened a crack he was met with the most beautiful sight ever. Lois was wearing flannel pyjamas, bunny slippers graced her feet, and her hair had a knot the size of Alaska making it stick up at the back. Clark's heart skipped a beat.

"Morning beautiful," he said and smiled. "I brought breakfast." He held up a bag.

"Clark!" she blinked. The lethargy infused in her muscles vanished and she suddenly felt full of energy. "Breakfast!" She opened the door the rest of the way and dived for the bag.

"Sorry I wasn't up," she mumbled as she turned away, and began opening the brown bag, pulling out a Danish pastry. "Late night stakeout with Jimmy," she explained. Glancing back over her shoulder she saw Clark holding up a steaming coffee. "Boy am I so glad you brought that." She grabbed the coffee from Clark and devoured the food and drink with her eyes for a moment, before dropping herself to the couch and eating.

\*\*\*

It was quite late morning before they finally made it back to the park.

"The park?" Lois asked Clark, a frown on her face.

"I know we came here for lunch on Wednesday but I wanted to show you something." He took her hand and walked her round the lake. At the boat house he stopped. "Would you like a float on the lake?"

Her eyes widened and she stared at him, a smile slowly growing across her face.

As Clark rowed them across the lake, Lois leaned back her head and let the sun shine down on her face. *I never thought I'd enjoy something as simple as this soooo much.* Bringing her head back she looked at Clark. *Somehow, I see the world through his eyes now. The beauty of the simplest things.*

"I ... um. Would you ... I brought a picnic, Lois," he eventually said after stumbling over his sentence. "We can have it when we get back to shore if you are hungry."

"Sound's lovely, Clark." She grinned, but he didn't notice. He was glancing off to the right. Lois turned to look.

"Hey, watch where you're rowing, buddy," she shouted out but it was too late. Another boat was heading straight for them at quite a speed. Clark pulled on his oars with extra strength. Not enough to seem out of the ordinary, but enough to move their position suddenly. It wasn't enough, though, and the two boats still clipped each other.

Lois gripped either side of the boat to help stay steady.

"You stupid idiot," came a shout from behind and Lois turned to see the other rower standing in his boat and gesturing at Clark.

Clark stood, himself, and turned to address the other man. “I’m sorry, sir. I did try to get out of your way. Maybe if you’d been looking where ...”

“Looking where I was going! Is that what you were going to say?”

Clark held out his arm peacefully. “I just think you should calm down, sir.”

“If anyone needed to look, it was you. Four eyes.”

Lois saw Clark’s calm demeanour change in a moment. He stiffened. “Now look here ...” but he never got a chance to say any more as the other man lifted his oar and pushed against their boat, sending it rocking. Lois watched in horror as Clark wobbled and then toppled over the side.

“Clark!” she shouted, grabbing the edge of the boat and looking over. He came to the surface, spluttering and climbed back into the boat ungraciously. Turning back to the other boat Lois saw that it was already drifting away. She whipped her head round to Clark. “Why did you let him get away with that? You didn’t need to fall in the water.”

“It’s okay, Lois. Any normal man would not have held his balance. It’s okay. It’s just part of who ‘this’ Clark Kent is.” he paused. “Sometimes.” He looked away, shyly, then looked back. “Anyway. He didn’t get away without punishment.” Clark raised his eyebrows and peered over the top of his glasses.

“What did you do?” she asked with a little laugh.

“Look down.”

“Down,” she wrinkled her brow. “The boat is full of water. So what? It’s had this inch of water in it since we set off.”

“Lois, I burnt a hole in the bottom of his shoe.” Clark reached out and took hold of the oars and began rowing them back to the shore. Lois felt a small smile trying to get out but she steadfastly refused to give in. But as time went on she kept imagining the rude, aggressive man noticing the wet, squishy feeling in his shoe and the smile came ... then grew ... until she was eventually laughing out loud. Clark raised his eyebrows and grinned at her.

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Clark was sitting on the picnic blanket nibbling a sandwich. He knew the moment was coming up. Lois was leaning back against a tree trunk, Double Fudge Crunch bar in hand. “So, *Flyboy*. What’s up next?”

Resting back on his elbows he allowed himself to stare at her for a few moments before answering. She had her eyes closed and her head was resting back. She looked at peace. Something he’d never seen before with Lois Lane.

*It’s time.*

“Um, I guess that’s up to you Lois. You see ...” he coughed. “I, well ...”

“Lois!” came a shrill, high voice from behind. He whipped his head round to see Suzie running towards them.

Lois opened her eyes suddenly and blinked at the bright sun.

“Hey, Suzie,” she replied, lifting her hand to shield her eyes. Clark felt his heart crash again. *First the belligerent rower, now Suzie.*

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Clark walked hand in hand with Lois. After Suzie had finally wandered away Clark had packed away the picnic and suggested a walk around the lake. It was mid afternoon and the sun was still high in the sky. Lois unclasped her hand from his for a moment and took off her jacket. Clark stopped and turned to her. He took her jacket from her and tossed it to the grass just off to his left.

Taking both her hands in his he walked her backwards a few steps until they were standing in the shade of a large tree, laden with pink blossom.

He kept hold of her hands and brought them between their two bodies. Quickly glancing around to make sure there were going to be no further interruptions from maniac pedestrians or work colleagues he then turned back and smiled at Lois.

“Lois, I asked you to spend today with me for a reason.”

“Of course, Clark,” she said, as if it were an unnecessary comment.

“No ... I mean ... yes. I asked you because I want to spend time with you, of course. But there is another reason.”

“Oh!” She looked a little surprised.

He looked up and let out a quick puff of air causing the tree branches to shake. Lois let go of his hands and laughed delightedly when the pink blossoms began raining down all around her. As she tried to catch them Clark slipped his hand into his pocket and then dropped to one knee.

Lois looked back and took in the sight in less than a second. Her mouth dropped open ever so slightly.

“I want to make it official and I want you to know that I’m asking this question, not because of a pact we made eight years ago, but because I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

He lifted his hand and opened a small black box revealing a dazzling solitaire, diamond engagement ring.

“Lois Lane. Will you marry me?”

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### Chapter 17: The Preparations

“But, don’t you think we should book the venue first, Lois?”

“Clark, we need the invitations designed so that all we need to do is insert the venue name. With how fast we want to get married the invitations should have already gone out. It could take a while to find somewhere free on the day we want. The invitations need to be ready to go immediately then.”

“Okay.” Clark just decided to be in full agreement with his fiancée. He leaned back on the couch and put his hands behind his head to stretch while watching her.

Lois was sitting cross—legged in the centre of the floor. Papers and magazines were scattered all around her. It was like she was swimming in a sea of white weddings. Clark smiled to himself. This was his dream. All his fears had been pointless. She was here, with him, planning their wedding. As her hands rifled through the magazines Clark saw the twinkle of reflected light from her engagement ring. She stopped and stroked her hand through her hair to push it out of her eyes and he couldn’t take his gaze off the ring.

“Okay, where is it,” she began mumbling to herself. Picking up magazines and chucking them over her shoulder she continued the muttering. “I know I saw it on the front of one of these.”

“What is it you are looking for, Lois?” Clark asked and leaned forward, peering closer.

“There was a picture of a blue rose on the front of one of these. I know that it had something inside about the correct wording. And there were some fabulous designs.”

“Lois,” he held out his hand to try and stop her.

“It’s around here somewhere.” She twirled around and stretched, throwing more papers around.

“Lois,” he shouted a little louder.

“I KNOW I saw it.”

“Lois,” he reached forward and grabbed her arm. She stilled and turned to look at him. “Keep still a moment.” He lowered his head and peered over the top of his glasses for a few seconds. “It’s here,” he reached out and slid a book out from under Lois’ foot. “How do you know this is the correct book?”

“I remember the blue roses because I thought ...” she stopped and looked away.

“Thought what?”

“Um. I wondered whether we should go for a blue theme with the flowers. You know, rather than traditional red ... or pink ... blue, it has ... um, significance.” She turned back to him, looking over her shoulder.

Clark knelt down and took hold of her shoulders. “I like the idea, but it’s up to you.” He moved forward and touched his lips

to hers. When the crick in Lois' neck became too much she pulled away, but the loss of her lips was too much to bear so Clark turned her around and took her in his arms again.

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Lois took a deep breath and then picked up the phone. She dialled her sister's number and then waited. It had been an easy decision to ring Lucy first. The conversation with her cousin was bound to be much more complicated, especially after the Trivial Pursuit night when she'd actually encouraged Cindy to go after Clark.

"Hi, Lo!" came Lucy's voice.

"Lucy, how are you?" asked Lois carefully. Even though this conversation was bound to be easier than the one to come next she still wasn't sure how to approach the subject.

"Pretty good. You sound odd. Is everything okay, Lois?"

"Mmmm hmmm," she replied as brightly as she could. *Ok, just do it*, she told herself. "Lucy, will you be my Maid of Honour?"

"WHAT!" came the reply down the line.

"I'm getting married!" she said, brightly.

"WHAT!" Lucy replied again.

"Lucy," Lois frowned, "What is so hard to understand. I'm marrying Clark and I want you to be my Maid of Honour."

"CLARK!"

"Lucy, please calm down," asked Lois.

"Okay, okay." Lois heard the deep breathing on the other end. "Is this a 'Pact' thing, because you don't have to go through with it just because you did a pinky swear with him ten years ago. Clark will understand. I mean, he's probably only going through with it because he's such an honourable guy. He would never feel right about breaking a promise, but he would understand if you talked to him."

"Lucy," Lois interjected. She finally understood what Clark went through every time he tried to interrupt her ramblings. "It's okay. We want to get married. Really."

"Lois. Are you sure? I know Clark is a great guy, and you've been best friends for years. He'll make a great husband ... except ..."

Everything went quiet again.

"Lucy, we love each other. Truly. It's not because of The Pact. Well, it is, and it isn't. Without The Pact I'm guessing we may never have got to this stage, may never have been forced to admit. Or maybe we would. I know I don't think I could have held it inside much longer, but it's wonderful. I've been slowly falling in love with him all these years, and he's been doing the same, and neither of us knew. But now we do. And it's wonderful. And I'm so excited."

"Lois!" Lucy shouted down the phone. *Oops, I guess I got carried away myself then.* "Why didn't you say anything last weekend?" Lucy sounded confused.

"I guess I was still coming to terms with it all. We'd only just really got together and I was a little scared to make it public."

"Well. I have to say I'm over the moon for you. Lois and Clark. I actually sounds right. I'd love to be your Maid of Honour."

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"So, did they both say yes?" Clark asked as he and Lois entered the church the following morning.

"Yeah. Although apologising to Cindy was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do in my entire life." She glanced up at him and he squeezed her hand.

"I'm sure it wasn't that bad."

"Oh, you don't know Cindy that well. She can be a right ..."

"Lois," he interrupted as speedily as possible. "That's your cousin you're talking about. And we're in a church." He widened his eyes in shock.

"Hmm" Lois stopped and glanced down to the front of the

church in a frown. Looking back at Clark she saw his disapproving look and rolled her eyes. "Okay," she said and then mouthed a silent *sorry* out to the holy atmosphere.

As Clark walked her down the aisle he tried to prevent the smile on his face from becoming a grin but it was an impossible task, even for the world's greatest superhero. "So, what do you think of this place then, Lois?"

Lois slowly turned, assessing everything on view. The size of the church was big enough that the ceremony could never be referred to as intimate but small enough that it didn't compete with a Royal Wedding. The seats looked sturdy, yet comfy. The stained glass windows were large and bright and let in a wonderful amount of softly coloured light. As she approached altar, still holding Clark's hand, a tear threatened to spill from her eye. It was simple, yet elegant and antique.

"Oh, Clark," she turned to look at him. "It's perfect."

"Can I help you," came a soft voice from behind and they both turned around to see the minister waiting, hands clasped in front of his chest.

"Yes please." Clark shifted his feet and then grinned. "We were hoping to book the church. You see we're getting ... we want to ... I asked her to marry me."

Lois laughed at Clark's bumbling answer. "And I obviously said yes," she interjected playfully. "But, the thing is ... we want it soon. Seven weeks."

"Well, I will have to check the diary. It's in my office, why don't you come with me."

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"Clark, we ..." she sighed and melted into his arms. "We have to stop."

"I know," he moaned into her hair, tightening his grip round her waist. "We're in the minister's office ... in church."

"Mmm." She reached up her hand and took his chin, drawing him back to her mouth. Clark nibbled on her lower lip.

"He'll be back any moment, he only went to ... to ..." He took her mouth again. Just when he thought he was about to irrevocably lose control Clark heard a scream. It penetrated his passion haze and he pulled away from Lois. Looking into her dreamy eyes he apologised as quickly as he could.

"I have to go. I trust you to make all the arrangements with the minister. See you later." A quick peck on the nose later and he was gone.

Lois dropped into an old wooden chair and tried to climb out from the fog in her brain. She looked up in bewilderment when the minister came back in, almost forgetting why she was sat there waiting.

"Where's Mr ... uh ..."

"Kent," replied Lois.

"Where's Mr Kent gone?" he asked confused.

"Oh, he uh ... had to ... remembered an appointment," Lois stumbled, "with a source." She noticed the frown on the minister's face and knew exactly what thoughts were passing through his mind.

*But you're wrong buddy. My 'Farmboy' is taking this wedding very seriously. It's just that he takes saving the world even more seriously. But I can never tell you that, so I'll plaster a fake smile on my face and act completely oblivious to your thoughts and just make all the wedding arrangements.*

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Clark stood in the changing room grimacing at himself in the mirror. It wasn't that the suit didn't fit, or that it didn't look good, but he couldn't see himself walking down the aisle in a white tux. It didn't give the correct impression, and it didn't match the old fashioned church he and Lois had booked either. Plus the rental was extortionate.

"Next!" he shouted and held out his hand. Another hand slipped past the changing curtain holding a hanger complete with

alternative choice.

“So what was the matter with that one, CK?” came the high tenor voice.

“It just wasn’t me, Jimmy. And I can’t see it being you either,” he chatted while changing. It was nice to do this at normal speed, but Clark got the feeling that he would have caved in to his super-speed a long time since, if not for having Jimmy along to keep him grounded.

“Me?”

“Yes. The Best Man has to wear the same.”

“Best Man?” came the squeal from the other side of the changing room. “Oh, CK, I’d be honoured.”

“Great,” Clark replied.

After a quiet minute, during which time Clark slipped out of the white tux and into the black morning suit, struggling quite a bit with the cravat, Jimmy spoke again. “So, how’s that one?”

“I like it. Not sure about the waistcoat.” Clark looked at himself critically, wanting to be sure of his choice. “Maybe I should see someone else in a matching one.” He drew back the curtain and grinned. “Jimmy!” he teased and wiggled his eyebrows.

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“Oh, Mrs Kent, this is heaven,” moaned Lois. She snuggled into the comfy farm couch holding a hot chocolate in her palms. The lights were dimmed and soft music played. All her tension was fading.

“Lois, we’ve known each other for years. Don’t you think it’s about time you started calling me Martha?” Lois looked sheepishly over the top of her mug. “Or even Mom?” She rolled her eyes away.

“I’m not sure if I could go that far Mrs Kent.” When she saw her future mother-in-law scowl at her she amended her statement. “Um ... Martha.”

“Now, Lois. Tonight is just for relaxing. No talk of the wedding, no stressing or worrying. Just put your feet up and relax.” As if to demonstrate Martha leaned back in her chair and reached out with her legs to the little table in front, propping her feet up.

Lois grinned and copied her exactly. “Yes, it will be nice to take a break from all the frantic planning. Clark and I ... well, I think we are wound so tight I sometimes feel like I’m about to snap and some important metal pin joint will go flinging across the room and ping Clark in the eye ... metaphorically, of course.” She sighed and took a sip of her divine drink. “I mean there’s only two weeks to go and we still haven’t had a chance to visit the bakery. What are we going to do without a cake? I sure hope Clark got the band sorted today. And then there’s the flowers which, even though I’ve confirmed three times, I still think they don’t get that I *really* do want them to be blue. And the biggest one of all. I still haven’t got a dress. Everywhere has a twelve week wait while they make the dress to your size. Where am I going to find one I can just try on and buy?”

“Lois,” came a soft voice beside her and a gentle hand on her arm. “No wedding talk.”

“Sorry Mrs ... Martha.”

“Well, actually ...” Martha paused and Lois looked at her questioningly. “Just one thing that would be wedding related.” She stood and wandered off into the kitchen. Lois frowned and sat forward then put her cup down and followed. Just as she came up behind Martha, the beautifully greying lady turned around. “Here, try this.” She held out her hand and almost forced something into Lois’ mouth.

Lois opened her lips obediently, never one to deny herself a taste of Martha Kent’s cooking, and her tongue tingled with life as she tasted the sweet morsel. “Oh, that is just divine. Martha what is it?”

“A light lemon sponge with just a few special extras.”

“Oooaaahhh,” Lois groaned and she licked her lips.

“You’re only having a small set of guests aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Lois replied looking past Martha to see if she could see more of the cake.

“Well, how about I make your Wedding Cake then?”

Lois stopped and looked up in surprise. “Martha, no. We can’t ask you to do that. You’re the mother of the Bridegroom ... and kind of mother to the Bride as well.”

“I really don’t mind at all, Lois. I would feel honoured to take part in that way.”

Lois felt her face warring over a smile and blubbing tears, eventually giving way to both in some fashion. Reaching out she wrapped her arms around the woman who had been an honorary mother to her for many years and hugged tightly.

“So, now that is out of the way ... no more wedding talk.”

“Yes ma’am,” Lois saluted and laughed. Heading back to the living area she smiled. “You can tell me all about my fiancé’s most embarrassing moments from when he was younger.”

“Ha ha,” Martha laughed. “Well, there was this one time he got it into his head to be a lion tamer after we visited the Circus.”

Lois dropped back into place on the couch. “What? A lion tamer?”

“Yes. He took to wearing a pair of red swimming shorts as his circus outfit and then hung a red tablecloth over his shoulder as the cape.” Both Martha and Lois frowned ever so slightly before bursting out into fits of laughter. “Oh and then there was the time he went to the Halloween party at the community hall dressed as a Roman Gladiator.” Martha stopped and frowned again. “Red skirt and cape ... again.”

Lois clutched at her stomach, the pain of laughing uncontrollably was so intense. She was still not in control when the kitchen door opened and Clark whooshed in from whatever crisis had called him away from the evening at the farm. Lois and Martha looked up in shock at the noise but then burst out laughing again when they saw him.

“What?” he asked. They just laughed louder. “What is it?” When he didn’t get a response he sped upstairs to his childhood room and then re-appeared downstairs, seconds later, in a pair of soft blue jeans and a red and blue checked shirt.

\*\*\*

The following morning Lois waved goodbye to Clark as he flew up into the air after having dropped her back at the farm once more. Martha had specifically asked for Lois to come back alone just as the couple were leaving for Metropolis the night before.

Lois suspected that Martha was going to offer to make her wedding dress but she just couldn’t accept. The cake, well, that was a different matter. The ingredients wouldn’t cost half as much as the fabric and the time taken to make it would be minute in comparison.

Lois took some deep breaths as she climbed the porch steps, readying herself to gently refuse Martha’s offer but when the door was opened and she saw the smile on the older woman’s face she realised she couldn’t do it ... at least not by just blurting it out anyway.

Martha invited her in and made a pot of coffee. A plate of cookies on the kitchen table called to Lois and her eyes constantly flicked to them while Martha pottered around the kitchen washing up a few pans and bowls.

“Take a cookie if you want one, Lois,” came Martha’s voice and Lois looked up with wide eyes. *How the heck does she know, she’s not even looking in this direction?*

Lois reached over and picked one up, taking a large bite, before perching back on the seat. Martha eventually completed her cleaning and then, whilst drying her hands on a towel, she turned to Lois. Her heart beat erratically when she saw the look on Martha’s face. *Here it comes.*

“Lois, I have something I’d like to show you. Will you come upstairs with me?”

Lois nodded mutely. *Don’t tell me she already has the material.*

At the top of the stairs Martha headed directly for the large bedroom and Lois followed, curious. The pounding of blood rushing from her heart and around her body reverberated through her ears as she stepped across the threshold into Martha and Jonathan’s bedroom. Once inside Martha closed the door behind them and Lois turned.

Her breath caught in her throat and all brain activity ceased.

“It was my wedding dress,” Martha spoke quietly. “I have this feeling that it will be the perfect fit.” Lois turned her head ever so slightly to look back at her.

Still incapable of talking she looked back to the dress once more. Her eyes were wide as she stepped forward but, instead of reaching for the hanger to pull it down, she held out her fingers, trailing the tips along the thin voile fabric. Unable to get over the shock she blinked away the tears misting her eyes and began to move her fingers upwards, passing the folds and lace and hidden, subtle sequins and pearls.

After the silence stretched beyond the minute mark Martha spoke once more. “Would you like to try it on?”

Lois smiled and nodded. *Everything is in place. The last piece just fell into place.*

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#### Chapter 18: The New Pact

Lois Lane woke on the morning of her wedding earlier than ever before. And it wasn’t by accident, or forced by the alarm clock from hell, it was by choice. Her first thought brought a smile to her face.

*I’m going to become Mrs Superman today.*

Stretching her arms above her head she wiggled down under the covers a little. It was warm and cosy. But not warm and cosy enough. Something was missing. It was strange to think of it that way. He’d never shared her bed yet, but it still felt like he was missing from that spot. *Although, after tonight.* She felt her cheeks hot with her blushes and she leapt out of bed before she could continue that train of thought.

She lingered in the shower letting the hot rivulets of water slide down her back, over her curves and down her legs. The steam fogged up the glass cubicle. Her breath came in short pants with the thickness of the air causing her to remember that night seven weeks ago when Clark had dropped her off at the apartment.

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Lois pocketed her door key and turned back to Clark to say goodnight only to have him swoop down and take her lips in a searing kiss. She was tempted to lean herself back against the door so that her legs didn’t have to take all her weight but she’d just unlocked it and thrust it open. When Clark brought one hand round to the small of her back and drew her in close she knew it didn’t matter; he would support her.

Her arms were trapped between both chests so she inched them up and over his shoulders. Linking her fingers behind his head she drew him in deeper. When she opened her lips he dived in with his tongue immediately. A moan escaped and she rocked her hips closer to him.

Their kisses had steadily been getting hotter since she’d returned from visiting Lucy and the passion grew exponentially after the real proposal. Somehow, in the church this afternoon, they’d been unable to keep from leaping on each other the moment the minister left the room. And now ... they were back at the door to Lois’ apartment just hours later.

Lois shivered as Clark’s hand moved lower and then gently cupped her bottom. That’s when her knees gave out and she found herself in his arms, ‘Superman Save’ style. It broke the kiss

and they just stared into each other’s eyes. Lois recognised the look on Clark’s face. It was impossible to count the number of times she’d seen it, on both Clark and Superman. Over the years it had become more frequent and more intense.

Now there was a hunger part to it; a need, driving **both** of them to the edge.

Clark tensed a moment then took a step towards the open doorway. He stilled and then raised his head to look upwards but closed his eyes. When he looked back down he took a deep breath then spoke quietly. Lois could hear the raw passion in his voice.

“Lois, I want to take you inside and ...” he glanced down again. “If we hadn’t booked the church just this very afternoon then I would be taking you inside and holding you tight all night. But I want to carry you over the threshold on our wedding night. And it is only seven weeks away now. It will kill me to do it, but I want to make that night special.”

Lois nodded and Clark let her down slowly. “I,” she paused to clear her throat from the lump choking her. “I agree, Clark. We should ... we can wait seven weeks.”

Clark lifted a hand to her cheek. “I don’t think I’d be doing this if we hadn’t finalised the date.”

“I know what you mean, Clark.” She lifted her hand to his cheek. Sliding her fingers into his hair she pulled him closer. “Goodnight Clark,” she said just as they touched lips. She felt herself being swept away again when he nibbled her lower lip.

Clark pulled away reluctantly. “I should go, before I change my mind.” Lois nodded. “It’s only seven weeks, but it’s going to seem like seven years.”

////

But the seven weeks had passed in a blur of whirlwind preparations. Two weeks ago, when Martha had put the last major items in place, Lois had felt a peace come over her. That didn’t mean she hadn’t experienced moments of sarcasm and bossiness. The news floor had been continuously on alert for an outburst from ‘Mad Dog Lane’.

When the doorbell rang, interrupting her reverie, Lois opened her eyes in shock. “She’s here already. Oh gosh. I’m already behind. I’m going to be late on my wedding day.”

Climbing out of the shower and reaching for a towel she shouted out as loud as possible. “Hey Lucy, I’m coming.” She wrapped the towel round her body and sprinted for the door, water dripping from her hands, feet and hair. At the door she let in a shocked Lucy.

“Lois!” she exclaimed.

“I know, I know,” she flustered and ran back to the bedroom to change into a robe.

\*\*\*

Two hours later and Lois was sitting on the couch, hair in alien sci-fi rollers, with Lucy painting her nails.

Cindy was in the kitchen making a pot of coffee; the third one Lois had demanded since her arrival. Lois was buzzing with caffeine and it was taking ultimate willpower to keep her hands from shaking while Lucy gave her the manicure.

“So, you promised us girl talk ... including an explanation about Trivial Pursuit night ...” Cindy placed down the steaming pot and peered at Lois. Her heart suddenly jumped and she looked around to escape but she was trapped. Lucy still held onto her right hand applying the clear gloss finish.

“Oh, well ... um ... we can get to that later.” She blinked her eyes and tried a distraction technique. “How about I tell you how he proposed?”

“You did that at the bachelorette party,” replied Lucy.

“Four times,” growled Cindy.

“And the story became more wild and romantic and unbelievable with each telling.” Lucy pointed at her with a nail brush before stroking over the final nail and then releasing Lois’

hand.

“Then how about the time we went on our first date to the worst movie ever?”

“Lois, that was only two months ago. You’re talking like these events are years ago and we will have forgotten them.”

Cindy placed her hands on her hips.

Lois sank down into the couch and sulked. “Hmmm. Well then I guess you’ll have to make do with the story of us making out in the minister’s office,” she grinned as she spoke and sat up quickly.

“Yuck, Lois we don’t want that kind of detail.” Lucy shook her head and stood up, turning away and packing up the manicure kit. Lois noticed and widened her eyes in surprise.

“Oh, I’m ready?” she asked.

“Fully cooked, sis,” Lucy quipped.

Lois squeaked. “So is it time for the dress?”

Cindy sighed. “Lo, it’s not even lunch time. You and Clark are having an afternoon wedding, remember?”

“Hmmmph,” Lois said and slumped back again. “This day is going sooo slow.” She crossed her arms in defiance then suddenly uncrossed them in horror. “Oh, no. My nails.”

\*\*\*

Clark strolled into the kitchen at the farm, a feeling of peace spreading over him. He turned to see his mother struggling with a flower for her lapel.

“Hey, let me help you,” he reached out his arm and stepped forward.

“Thanks honey,” she replied and passed him the blue posy. She took a deep shuddering breath and relaxed.

“Mom, are you alright?”

“I’m fine sweetie. It’s just,” she looked up and he stilled with his hands half way to her lapel, “my boy is getting married.”

Clark noticed the tears in her eyes and felt them threatening in his eyes too. His father stepped over and put an arm around her. “Now Martha, we always hoped this day would come. You know that.”

Clark gave her a wistful smile. “It’s not like I’m leaving home and you’ll miss me. I’ve been gone for years.”

“I know you live in Metropolis now, Clark, but there’s just something about this. The change, the commitment. I’m so happy for you.” She smiled and the tears tricked down her cheeks.

“Me too, son. I’m very proud of you. Of everything you are doing in Metropolis, the man you’ve become. And to know that you are marrying the woman you love today. Oh, Clark!” He stepped over and placed a hand on Clark’s shoulder

“Thanks mom ... dad. I’m happy too.” Clark returned to fixing the flower to Martha’s jacket. “You know, I never would have expected this day to come eight years ago. When I first met her, she fascinated me — yes — but she also drove me mad. She was so rude, and domineering, unfeeling. Plus she made her opinion of me quite clear on numerous occasions. And if somehow you’d convinced me this day **would** come, there is no way I would have thought she was doing it of her own free will.” Martha and Clark both laughed. There was also a chuckle from Jonathan, standing behind.

“Oh, I don’t know. I could always imagine a spark of something between the two of you. Whenever you spoke of her...” Martha’s eyes twinkled.

“Yes. I have to admit, looking back, I guess I could too. But at the time ...” He raised his eyebrows and tilted his head to the side.

“She hated the sight of you?” Martha finished for him.

“Well ...” he turned away awkwardly. “Hate is such a strong word.” Turning back there was a grin on his face. “More like detested violently.” He laughed and scooted away before his mother could hit him with her handbag. He knew Lois had dealt with seriously conflicting emotions regarding him and Superman

since the beginning. But her initial reluctance and resentment over Clark had actually only lasted a short while.

“You better super-speed me to the church before I tan your hide, Clark Kent,” she spoke sternly.

“Of course mom, but Jimmy will be waiting at my apartment by now, and it’s a little early for the church. Hold onto your hat and I’ll get us there in one piece. I’ll be back for you in a moment, dad.”

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“So was the journey easy?” Jimmy asked Martha and Jonathan nervously.

“Yes Jimmy,” replied Martha

“It’s a nice day, no bad weather on the horizon.”

“No, Jimmy,” said Jonathan.

“So there were no traffic jams in the centre of Metropolis?”

“No Jimmy, Clark got us here safe and sound from the Metropolis Hilton, and in plenty of time.” Martha smiled at the young photographer who seemed overly nervous.

Clark chuckled to himself and slowly shook his head while he fastened his bow tie. Listening to the three of them in his living room was quite amusing. A sudden scream invading his hearing had him speeding to the balcony, ready to leap out until he stopped himself. One hand was already on the door frame, the other at his shirt but he took a deep breath and then stepped away from the opening.

“No, not today.” He recalled the morning, while he’d still been alone. Needing to keep himself occupied until time to go for his mother and father, and Jimmy’s arrival, he’d put on his other suit and gone patrolling. It had been the most satisfying way to release his tension and anticipation. The criminal underworld would tell stories of this day.

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Superman raided known drug dens and smuggler’s warehouses. He stopped bank robberies and street muggings. He rescued every cat stuck up a tree.

By the time he needed to be going for his parents things had started to slow. At first he thought it was his own good work but he soon noticed that something else was interfering. Arriving at the scene of a highway crash he found Martian Manhunter already dealing with the disaster. Tuning in his hearing he sped off to another bank robbery only to arrive and find Flash already there. After that he came across Green Arrow capturing a mugger, then he bumped into Diana while doing another aerial sweep.

His suspicions aroused he focused his hearing and vision in tandem, looking for someone in particular. *There, I knew it.* Clark sped to the rooftop and landed behind the man he knew would be responsible.

“Bruce,” he spoke.

“Clark,” came the reply and the black clad man turned, not showing any surprise that Superman had just landed behind him.

“What’s the meaning of all this?” Superman gestured out, sweeping his hand over the city.

“It’s time for you to take some time off. If I ... or one of my team ... see you answer any call, short of all out alien invasion, between now and your return from honeymoon I will be forced to take serious measures.”

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Clark had heard absolutely no sign of teasing in Bruce’s voice. His mind shuddered at the thought of the serious measures Bruce had mentioned. He was quite capable, with the item stored in the Bat Cave. Clark had immediately left and sped off for the farm to collect his parents.

“No need to answer any calls for help, Kent,” he spoke to himself. “The League have it covered.” He turned away from the window and returned to fastening his bowtie

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Hours later Clark was standing at the far end of the room

staring at his beautiful wife. He couldn't believe how lucky he was. She'd been his wife now for ... he held up his arm and checked the time ... three hours, twenty minutes.

The moment he'd seen her walking down the aisle towards him he'd been lost. The vision of loveliness was forever etched on his eidetic memory. His pulse had been racing, increasing in reaction to the decreasing distance between them as she slowly inched down the carpet.

Now he stood, replete from the wonderful meal and ready to give his speech, but all he could do was drink in the sight of her. She sat in her place, at the head of the room, the focus of everyone's attention. Her animated gestures to some distant cousin further down the room brought a smile to his face.

In a few minutes he would have to stand up and give his speech, putting into words all the emotion of the day, all the ups and downs of the last few years. It would be impossible to express everything in his heart but he would do his best today, and then spend the rest of his life trying to show Lois all he couldn't fit into the few words he'd scribbled on his piece of paper.

The paper wasn't necessary, he knew exactly what he was going to say and his memory was perfect. But to keep up the Clark Kent appearance he had to appear bumbling. The paper was his one concession to that, otherwise he was determined to be his true self today. His speech would be confident, moving, passionate ... and utterly from his heart.

He made his way back to his seat and leaned over to give his wife a peck on the cheek as he sat down.

"Hi honey, I was wondering where you were," she smiled up at him.

"Just checking on something for later," he explained. He was about to lean forward and take her mouth once more when he heard the clinking of a glass indicating that it was time for the speeches.

Taking in a deep breath Clark stood slowly. He licked his lips to bring some moisture to them then took a sip of his wine.

*Here goes,* he thought.

"Years ago we made a pact, Lois and I." He looked around at all the guests. "We promised each other that, if we were still single at thirty-five, we would marry each other."

Clark paused and quiet gasps could be heard. Some guests had, clearly, been unaware of The Pact.

"At first I never even considered that there was a chance it would happen." He laughed lightly. "One or both of us was **bound** to find someone." He played up the comedy.

"But as time went on, I must confess," he spoke conspiratorially to the guests, "I began to feel a sense of impending doom. Having to spend all my life deflecting sarcastic comments from Lois. It was not exactly a dream come true." There were many giggles around the room. Clark stopped and waited for the heel to dig into his calf, but it never came.

He turned to look at his wife. She was smiling up at him, even after his joking comment.

"But then time continued on, and I realised that it wouldn't be so bad." He took on a more serious tone. "You were my best friend. How terrible could it be ... to be married to your best friend?" He shook his head ever so slightly as if to seem confounded over the thought.

"And then, before I knew it, I was looking forward to my thirty-fifth birthday." A wondrous quality entered his voice. "Waiting impatiently for the day I could say that we were officially engaged."

"And now," he blinked away moisture from his eyes and smiled down at Lois. "I am happy to say that being married to you, Lois, will be the most wonderful thing in the world. I cannot imagine a better life, a better future."

She smiled and nibbled on her lower lip. He could see the

tears shining in her own eyes back up at him.

"And so today I make a New Pact with you."

He reached down and took her hand. Holding it between both of his he began to recite a solemn oath.

"I promise to make you breakfast ... sometimes."

A laugh rippled around the room, also spilling from Lois' lips.

"I promise to wake you with coffee ... most days."

She lifted one eyebrow in surprise.

"I promise to kiss you goodnight ... every night."

Clark heard a dozen whispered *awwww's*.

"I promise to tell you I love you ... every day."

Clark saw Lois' emotional control break at that point. One tear rolled down her cheek.

"That is my new Pact, made just for you, Lois."

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### Epilogue: The Addition (A few years later)

"It's okay, Lois. You're doing fine," Clark muttered feeling absolutely useless. "Just grab my hands and squeeze tight."

"Oh, like that will do any good," came his wife's reply through gritted teeth. "You're supposed to feel and share in the pain," she spat out at him.

"Dig your fingernails in then."

"You won't feel it," she took in a deep, shocked painful breath.

"Yes, I will. I don't feel the pain, but I still feel it, Lois. I'm not numb you know. My nerves still register sensation."

Lois let out a final scream then relaxed. "You know, you can cut the science please. There's no-one here that cares."

"I know."

"Bernie won't mind if you slip into Superman mode you know. In fact it might be a bit comforting to me too."

Clark raised his hand and cupped his wife's cheek. "I'm here," he smiled deep into her eyes, trying to convey Superman's strength to her.

"I know," she smiled back. "Oh!" she tensed again.

"Grasp my hand Lois," he ordered and she did.

"This is so unfair," she grimaced. "The woman's supposed to pass on the pain when she squeezes the man's hand ... aaaaaaaaah!"

"I know, I know," Clark agreed. "How about I let you tape some kryptonite to my chest for an hour when you come home?" He let her grip at his hand while he stroked her hair with the other.

"That sounds like a good ideaaaaaaaah!" Lois replied, screaming through gritted teeth. "But I think you got the ti — aaaaaaaa — iming a little wrong, honey." She injected as much sarcasm into the *honey* as she was able. "Try thirty hours ... and your chest would be a foot too high."

"Okay, Lois. Okay." Clark was willing to say anything to help her through this experience.

As the contraction eased Clark felt Lois' grip on his hand lessen. He reached over for a wet cloth and dabbed her face.

The cool water felt so wonderful against her hot, sweaty skin. Lois closed her eyes and sighed. *Just a minute's rest, just one minute. Then the pain will return. I can't keep this up any longer. I can't.*

"You're doing great, Lois." She opened her eyes to see Clark smiling down so sincerely. She knew he'd spoken truly and suddenly she felt able to tackle another contraction. Maybe even a thousand more, if that's how many it took. Blinking back hormonally induced tears she smiled up at her husband and knew she'd never in a million years hold him to the kryptonite bargain. She also knew that Clark knew it too.

He leaned forward to touch his lips to hers and she felt her womb begin to contract again. *Stupid Kryptonian genes floating around my body counteracting the painkillers,* she cursed in her

head before taking a deep breath.

She reached out for Clark's hand and grasped tightly then began to squeeze again.

"Okay, just remember your breathing, Lois. And don't be afraid to grip on as tight as you can."

She nodded numbly holding her breath in anticipation of the peak of the pain. It broke over her and she released her scream. "Oh!" she shouted in shock as the pain changed. "I ... I ..." she didn't know what to say, couldn't explain it. Her eyes were wide in confusion.

"What is it, Lois," came Dr Klein's low soothing voice.

"I ... I think, aaaaah," she gulped. "I want to push."

"Then push, Lois. If that's what your body is telling you, then push."

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Two days later, Lois found herself strapped into the jeep making her way home to the brownstone she shared with Clark. And now with ... baby. She turned to look over her shoulder at the tiny person snuggled tightly into the car seat, wrinkled face peering out of a large fluffy hood. Lois looked back when the driver's door opened and Clark slid in. He turned to look at her.

"Ready?"

She nodded and he turned the key in the ignition then pulled out of the parking spot. She closed her eyes and rested while the jeep swayed gently, making it's slow way along the Metropolitan streets. Since the birth she and baby had been through test after test. Bernie had arranged a private area in the hospital for the birth. She had been assured that everything would be completely normal, but everyone — her included — had felt safer being prepared for privacy and the unexpected.

All tests had returned normal — **completely**. *Did that mean no super-powers?* No-one could answer that.

"So, have you decided yet?" Clark asked. Lois opened her eyes to see that they were pulling up at home. She unclipped herself and reached for the door handle before stopping.

"I don't know, Clark. I was so sure ... before." She looked over her shoulder and smiled, tears glistening in her eyes. "But, now ... I look at her, and I just don't see it."

"Lois, you must have some idea. I mean, we went through hundreds of names before you finally settled on Deborah."

Lois opened the door and climbed out. As she unbuckled her daughter and gently lifted her out she reconsidered the name again then shook her head. "Nope, I just don't see it. She's not a Deborah, or a Debbie, or a Debs. It's not right."

Clark came up behind her and put a hand on her shoulder. "I understand. In fact, I think I agree." He chuckled. As Lois headed off up the steps and inside the lobby Clark emptied the truck and followed her carrying all the baby and hospital bags.

He caught up to her just as she reached out with a key only to have the door swing open. Her eyes widened when she saw her mother-in-law.

"Martha!"

"Lois," the older woman smiled. "I've been waiting for you. Jonathan can't come till the harvest is in. I came as soon as Clark called with the news. Here, I've got some coffee on and I've set up the cradle in the corner. Oh, let me take that bag ..."

"Mom, stop fussing," chided Clark as he stepped in and put down the bags. Everyone stopped and just smiled at each other. Clark's smile turned into a grin when he heard a gurgle.

"Hey," he spoke quietly, "can I have a cuddle with my little Lane-y girl?" He held out his hands and Lois reluctantly handed her over. "Oh!" Clark brightened suddenly. "That's it. Lanie." He grinned down at the beautiful bundle in his arms. She blinked up at him, mouth open.

"Lanie Lane-Kent!" Lois shouted incredulously. "Have you inhaled some wacky pink kryptonite, *Farmboy*?"

He looked back at her suddenly. "What, and none of your

suggestions over the last nine months were questionable?"

Lois put her hands on her hips. "Are you saying you didn't like my choices?" Clark tilted his head in worry. "Which of my choices were questionable?" she demanded.

"Well, there was Tra-" he never got a chance to finish as his mother swept forwards to intervene, removing the little baby from Clark's arms.

"I think it's time I got to meet my little granddaughter," she interjected smoothly, successfully distracting Lois and Clark from their disagreement.

"Oh, sorry, mom. Of course. Time to meet your Grandma." He looked up into his mother's eyes and frowned. "Or is it Gramma ... or Grammy ... or Gran ... or Nanna."

"Let's just wait and see what comes naturally over the next few days," Martha replied, smiling down at the bright blue eyes which were gazing all around. A cute yawn alerted everyone to her tired state and so they all moved further into the room and headed for the basket in the far corner. Lois pulled back the fleecy blanket and Clark removed the fluffy coat before Martha laid her down.

When everyone moved away a tiny abandoned cry drew them back so Lois seated herself nearby and placed her hand over and onto the baby's chest then she settled.

"Have you decided yet?" Martha turned to Lois.

"No, I'm really struggling. Nothing seems to fit her."

"Well, why don't you think about who, if anyone, she reminds you of. Friends, family ... you know ... and see if that leads you anywhere."

Lois turned and gazed at her perfect daughter. A tiny covering of dark blond hair curled around her head. *That must be from mother's side ... and I used to be fairer when I was a toddler. Or from the females in Clark's family!* A little wriggle as she yawned made Lois suspect that her new baby had a cheeky and adventurous side.

Clark studied his daughter and the first thing that came to his mind was the fair hair. *Must be from my Kryptonian mother.* He watched as she sighed and let out a soft breath, falling asleep. The peaceful mood put him in mind of her also.

"Kara."

"Lara."

They both spoke together.

"Really?"

"Really?"

They turned to each other, frowning.

"She reminds you of my cousin?" asked Clark.

"Yes," laughed Lois. "I don't know why, but I just see a cheeky little ... supergirl ... when I look at her."

"But there's already a Kara Kent," pointed out Martha.

Lois looked up at Clark. "Lara Lane, you really want to go with that?" Clark could tell from her tone that she wasn't taken with the idea.

"Lane-Kent," pointed out Clark.

"Well, how about," spoke Martha. She swallowed then nervously continued. "How about you combine both of them? Kara and Lara. Clara."

Lois felt her mouth drop open in shock. She looked at Clark who had an incredulous look on his face.

"Well?" he asked, hopefully.

"I love it."

Clark stood and walked over to the crib and gazed down at his daughter. He reached out for Lois' hand and she grasped it then stood up. She moved close and rested her head on his shoulder.

"Welcome home, Clara Lane-Kent."

THE END