Aussie Rules

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Rated: PG

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Summary: An AU story featuring Lois Lane as a footy journalist in Melbourne, Australia and Clark Kent as an exchange reporter. They meet, and they fall in love… of course.

Story Size: 312,004 words (1,768 kB as text)

Disclaimer: Clark Kent, Lois Lane, and many other characters in this fic are not mine. Some of the names used are real life people, but anyone who has direct interaction with Lois or Clark is a fictional character.

Some of the events in this story did happen. I have tried to portray public events accurately. Private events, such as conversations, are fictional.

Some of these events are still controversial, and the people involved do not agree on what happened behind closed doors. There are instances when you would expect Lois Lane to find out more detail, but I have, from necessity, remained vague.

Australia is a diverse nation, and it certainly isn't my intention to characterise all Australians. It could be argued that some of the slang and attitudes in this story were more prominent in the eighties than the nineties.

Background: It's 1996. Clark Kent has worked at the Daily Planet for a couple of years.

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Part 1

Clark Kent ducked through the airplane door and stepped onto the jet bridge with genuine relief. He really didn't like flying.

Not like this.

His fellow passengers also seemed eager to escape the confines of the aircraft, and moments later, he was in the wide hall that formed the central passage of the terminal. Streams of people flowed in both directions. Everyone seemed to have purpose; everyone seemed to know where they were going.

Except him.

Someone would meet him.

That was all he'd been told.

How he would know the person meeting him—or how that person would know him—had been left frustratingly unexplained.

Clark followed the crowd to the end of the hall and down a short escalator. He turned left, stopped at the baggage release, and waited for the carousel to begin moving. He'd been subjected to all the various Australian international checking stations in Sydney, so now in Melbourne, he was considered a domestic passenger.

He peered through the floor-to-ceiling windows to the world outside. The sun was shining weakly, but the temperature-controlled atmosphere of the airport made it impossible to determine the weather conditions with any accuracy. Outside, some people wore jackets, but very few were wearing coats.

July… August, September, October, November, December, January… he counted in his head. Southern hemisphere July should be roughly equivalent to northern hemisphere January. There was not the slightest indication of snow. It didn't even look particularly cold.

The baggage carousel began, and Clark waited until his suitcases appeared. He picked up both of them from the belt and took them to an out-of-the-way corner. What now?

A group of maybe eight or nine young men had congregated close to him. They were dressed alike in various styles of what he assumed was a sports jersey. All the variations were blue and gold. The group was loud and boisterous—singing and laughing raucously, slapping each others' backs, and high-fiving. One had a blue and gold flag, which he waved with seemingly scant regard for the safety of passers-by.

As Clark watched them, the guy with the flag nudged one of his friends. The group turned as one. Clark followed their eyes and saw the focus of their attention.

She was a brunette.

Petite.

With shoulder-length hair.

A perfectly proportioned body.

Scintillating brown eyes.

And an understated beauty that radiated from her like warmth on a cold day.

The crowd might be young and unruly, but they had flawless taste in women.

"Flinders!" one of the young men called as others wolf-whistled loudly.

The woman halted, but she didn't look in their direction. Instead, she seemed to be looking for someone else.

The group sidled up her. "Hey, Flinders," one of the young men jeered.

They circled her, surrounding her. She held her ground, not taking refuge against the nearby wall. Clark lost sight of her as she was engulfed by the taller, bulkier bodies of the youths. He picked up his suitcases and edged closer.

"Hey, Flinders, yer guttersnipe," the flag-holder said. "Leave the Eagles alone."

"Yeah," another added. "We won, Flinders, by seventeen points—we're third on the ladder and heading for our third flag."

"You said we couldn't win away from Subi, but we showed yer, didn't we, yer tiprat?" Their taunts fluctuated from triumph to disrespect and beyond to outright antagonism.

The raw edge of their hostility kindled Clark's uneasiness, and he stepped closer.

The woman sighed. "Haven't you got a plane to catch?" she said, acting as if they, and this confrontation, bored her. Clark looked through the crowd—literally—and focussed on the woman. Her face held no fear; her demeanour said she didn't perceive the group to be any sort of threat she couldn't handle.

The young men were too inane to realise that she had their measure. "So, Flinders, what do you have to say now?" one of them snarled. "Not so cocky now you can't hide behind a newspaper."

"I'm not hiding," she said in an even voice. "I said I thought the Eagles would struggle to win enough games away from home. I still think that."

"You were wrong, Flinders."

"The season isn't over yet," she told them nonchalantly. She stretched to her full height and looked past the group. "Haven't you fine examples of Western Australian manhood got a plane to catch?"

"We have plenty of time," the holder of the flag drawled. He stepped closer to her and put his hand on her shoulder. "Maybe you could show us a good time, Flinders. Show us Perth boys some Victorian hospitality."

In less than a second, Clark was beside the woman. "Take your hand off her."

"What's it to you, Yank?" the man countered.

"I don't like your attitude to this lady."

"She's no lady," the man sneered. "She's Flinders."

"Take your hand off her," Clark repeated, his tone leaving no room for argument.

"Make me, Yank."

Clark grasped the man's wrist and slowly increased his pressure until the man's fingers sprang from the woman's shoulder. Clark stepped between them, meeting the antagonist eyeball-to-eyeball. The young man jerked his arm but was unable to free himself from Clark's hold.

They stared, both issuing an unspoken challenge, neither backing away. After a suspended moment, the man's eyes dropped. With a low, "Let's get out of here," he stepped away.

Clark released his wrist and watched as the group receded. He turned to the woman. "Are you all right?" he asked. "He didn't hurt you?"

"I was all right before you interfered," she informed him crisply.

Clark raised his hands in retreat. "Sorry," he said. "I just don't like to see guys roughing up a lady."

"They're harmless," she said. "They're hoons who've seriously overestimated their ability to hold booze, but they're harmless."

She glanced around again, and Clark knew she was about to leave him. He rammed his mind into overdrive, searching for anything that would give him a few more minutes with her. "Is your name really 'Flinders'?" he asked.

She shrugged, her attention elsewhere. "That's what they call me."

Clark held out his hand. "Good to meet you, Flinders."

She shook his hand, still distracted. Her hand was small, but her grip was firm. "Gotta go," she said. She walked three steps away from him and then turned. "Thanks," she threw over her shoulder. "And welcome to Oz."

Clark smiled, wishing he could find a way to prolong her welcome. She half-smiled back and lifted her hand in farewell. He watched, mesmerised, as she walked out of his life. He swallowed, trying to moisten a mouth gone dry, and hauled in an immense breath to calm his pounding heart.

She was stunning.

He hadn't even managed to discover her name. Not her *real* name.

Clark returned to his suitcases and searched the airport for someone who might just be looking for an American reporter. In the rush to pack and catch his flight, he hadn't been told what he was supposed to do if no one met him. He didn't even know the name of the hotel where he was staying.

He had the name of the newspaper where he was going to work—the Herald Sun. He would have to catch a cab and ask for their offices.

Suddenly, she was beside him again. The woman called 'Flinders'.

She eyed him speculatively. "You're Clark Kent?" she said, her tone bordering on accusation.

"Yes," he admitted, venturing into her brown eyes and discovering they were several depths of beautiful. "How did you know?"

She gestured to the 'CK' embedded in his battered suitcase. "You're American," she said. "You're here, waiting for someone. Your initials are CK." She shrugged. "It wasn't exactly difficult."

He held out his hand, eager to feel the touch of her skin again. "Clark Kent," he said, smiling. "And you are?"

This time her handshake was accompanied by a meeting of their eyes. "Lois Lane, Herald Sun."

"Lois." That was perfect. So much better than Flinders.

"You're here to pick me up?" he asked.

Her gorgeous eyes sparkled, and Clark realised his gaffe. "Not like that," she said. "But I'm on the lowest rung of the ladder, so I was sent to get you."

He sensed a need to apologise—for his clumsy line—if not for interrupting her day.

"Come on," Lois said, before he had the chance to speak. "My car's this way."

She led him across the ramp to the multistorey car park and directed him to an old Jeep. She opened the trunk, and Clark stowed his luggage. He automatically went to her door, planning to open it for her, only to remember that here, the driver sat on the other side of the vehicle.

She got into the Jeep and reached over from the driver's seat to unlock his door. He averted his eyes, but not before he'd seen her blouse dip low as she leaned forward.

Clark settled into the seat, glad the task of putting on his seatbelt gave him a few moments to collect himself.

Lois backed out of the bay and whizzed competently through the car park. Within moments, they were on a freeway. "OK," she said decisively. "You're going to need a few survival skills."

He took the opportunity to turn his head to the right and gaze at her fully. "I am?"

"Or else there's going be a barbeque and you're going to be the skewered prawn."

"I am?" he repeated. Her presence had eroded his ability to make decent conversation.

"Firstly," she said, "where are you?"

"Australia," he answered, wondering if he'd come across as even more brain-dead than he'd feared.

"Uh…" she said. "Uh-stralya."

"Australia," he repeated, trying to copy her pronunciation.

She nodded her approval. "Which city?"

"Melbourne."

"Melburn," Lois corrected.

When she said it, the second syllable hung somewhere between 'bun' and 'burn'. "Melburn, Uh-stralya," Clark said, trying to wield his tongue in obedience to her.

"Melbun," she said patiently.

He repeated it again and was rewarded with a smiling glance.

"What am I?" Lois asked.

Clark stared at her, and it took considerable effort to keep his lower jaw from dangling onto his chest. Surely, that had to be a loaded question. She glanced at him, waiting for his answer—looking impossibly guileless.

Beautiful? Sexy? Enchanting? Hot? Gorgeous? The possibilities careered through his mind.

He said nothing, deciding it would be preferable to keep his mouth shut and appear clueless than to open it and remove all doubt.

"What nationality am I?" Lois said.

Oh. "Australian?" he speculated, remembering to get the 'uh' sound at the beginning.

She grinned. “I’m an Aussie,” she said. She pronounced it ‘Ozzie’. “Not an ‘Arrrrsssssie’,” she said with a giggle.

“Ozzie,” he agreed weakly.

“Next thing,” Lois said, “you will be given a nickname… today. You probably won’t like it, but if you show any aversion to it, you’ll either be stuck with it for the term of your natural life or it will change to something even worse.”

“Like ‘Flinders’?” he guessed.

She nodded.

“How did someone like you get ‘Flinders’?” he asked.

“There’s a Flinders Lane in the city,” Lois said easily. “Named after Matthew Flinders, the explorer. Also, there’s a crude song with a reference to Flinders. Every Aussie bloke sang it when he was a kid.” She shrugged, lifting her petite shoulders. “It amuses them.”

“Can I call you Lois?” Clark asked, knowing he would regardless of her answer.

She lifted her hand from the steering wheel in a ‘whatever’ gesture. “The nickname they give you will seem harsh. It might be Yank because you’re American, or Septic Tank because that rhymes, or Four-Eyes because you wear glasses, or Pretty-Boy because you’re tall and easy on the eyes and smell good and stick up for women.”

Clark mentally shook his head at this, scrambling to decide whether her final few words represented any form of approval. “OK.”

“Next, Aussie humour can be cutting. They will say all sorts of things about you, stuff you might find offensive. Don’t cower like a wimp, and if you’ve got any larrikin in you at all, it’s going to come in very handy. Try to remember that they don’t mean any harm. They say much worse about each other.”

Somehow, he knew she spoke from the experience of being on the outside. Because she was a woman in a man’s world. And a beautiful woman at that.

“Anything else?” he asked. A distant part of his brain insisted he would need this advice, but right now, his primary motivation was to keep her talking so he could continue drinking in her beguiling accent while retaining the perfect excuse to stare at her.

Lois giggled, although she did make some sort of an attempt to cover it with a cough.

“What’s funny?” Clark asked.

“Eltse,” she said in exact mimicry of his accent.

“What do you say?” he asked, puzzled. He hadn’t realised that coming to an English-speaking country would pose language difficulties. He could speak over a dozen languages, but apparently Australian wasn’t one of them.

“Elssse.”

“Elsse,” he copied.

“Good.” The Jeep smoothly changed lanes, and they entered an off-ramp, leaving the freeway for the congestion of smaller streets. “What do you know about footy?”

“Footy?”

“Football,” Lois clarified. “Australian Rules Football.”

“Nothing.”

Clark saw her eyebrow lift. “You *do* know you’re here as a football journalist?” she questioned.

“Yes.” That was what Perry had told him.

“You didn’t think it would be wise to do some research?” There was curiosity, not reproof, in her question.

“I didn’t know I was coming until two hours before I got on the airplane,” Clark said. “Pete, our chief sportswriter, was supposed to come, but he was diagnosed with mumps, so my editor asked me to fill in.”

“Why did you agree?” she asked. “Are you in Sport?”

“No, I’m a general reporter.”

“Front page stuff?” she said without any sign of the deference that sometimes elicited.

Clark nodded and, feeling the need to give an explanation, added, “I enjoy sports, I enjoy new experiences. It seemed too good an opportunity to pass up.”

She glanced down to where his hand was resting on his thigh. “You’re not married?”

“No.”

Lois didn’t respond to that. “I’ll meet you tomorrow morning, six thirty in the park near your unit. Wear trackies and runners.”

Clark wasn’t sure what they would be doing—or indeed what he was supposed to wear—but he knew he wasn’t going to object to spending time with Lois Lane. He dragged his attention back to what she was saying now.

“Who’j’barrack for?” she asked.

Clark could discern no meaning from the run-together of sounds other than to establish she had asked him a question. There was an upside to his confusion—it gave him a not-to-be-missed opportunity to study her. “Excuse me?” he said with a smile.

She glanced in his direction, not smiling overtly, though her eyes suggested she was enjoying their conversation. “Who’j’barrack for?” she repeated.

He laughed. Lois was beautiful. And natural. And friendly. And—despite some linguistic differences—easy to talk to. “Would you translate?” he requested. “Please?”

“Get used to it,” Lois advised. “That’s the question you will be asked over and over again.”

“Will I be expected to have an answer?” he asked.

“You’ll be hounded until you do.”

“I’m not sure what the question is,” Clark admitted. “So I’m going to find it difficult to give an answer.”

His reply drew a smile from her, although her eyes didn’t leave the road. “People are going to want to know which team you follow. Whatever you do, don’t say you root for a team.”

“What should I say?”

“You barrack. You always barrack. Support is OK too. But never ‘root’.”

“Why? What does ‘root’ mean?”

For the first time, there seemed to be a tiny crack in her composure. “Have sex with.”

“Oh.” He took refuge in a sudden interest in the passing landscape. “Thanks for telling me.”

“And that question is, ‘Who do you barrack for?‘” she said, enunciating each word individually. “They aren’t going to want to know whatever American teams you support—they will want to know which footy club you’re going to follow.”

“I thought that being a reporter, I would be a neutral observer.”

Lois chuckled. “Good luck with that.”

Clark found himself smiling simply because Lois was. “I *won’t* be a neutral observer?”

“Not unless you want to stick out even more.”

Did he already stick out? Clark decided to move the conversation away from his differences. “Who do you barrack for?”

Lois grinned. “Everyone will be trying to get you to barrack for his club,” she predicted.

“Well, at this stage, you have the inside running,” Clark said. And not just in the football team stakes, he thought.

She shrugged.

“And a captive audience,” Clark added. A captive audience who was willing to stay captive for as long as she wished and was more than willing to swear lifetime allegiance to her team if it earned him one smile.

Lois took her eyes from the road long enough to give him a full-body perusal. Clark stifled the desire to squirm. “I doubt you’d be a good fit with my team,” she said as she refocussed on the road.

That couldn’t be good. “Why not?”

“Too fashionable.”

“I’m too fashionable for your team?” he queried. “Or your team is too fashionable for me?”

“My club’s colours are brown and gold,” she said.

Clark masked his reaction. “They’re not particularly fashionable colours,” he noted carefully.

Lois grinned easily. “Not at all,” she agreed. “And we like it that way.”

“Does this team have a name? This team of brown and yellow?”

She turned on him, her head spinning. “Gold.”

“They’re called ‘Gold’?” he asked.

“No,” Lois corrected firmly. “The colours are brown and *gold*. Not yellow. Never yellow. Always gold.”

“OK.” He wouldn’t make that mistake again. “I need a name if I’m going to answer the ‘who do you barrack for’ question.”

“You don’t have to barrack for my club,” she said.

“You don’t want me to?”

Lois shrugged again. “You should pick the club that fits.”

“Who’s the local team?”

She glanced at him. “You weren’t kidding when you said you hadn’t done any research, were you?”

“No.”

“There are eleven local teams.”

“*Eleven* teams?” Clark gasped. “In one city?”

“Close enough.” She sighed, though he wasn’t sure why.

“Perhaps I should hold off before deciding on my team,” he said.

“You’ll get bagged for it and harassed to make a decision, and it’ll be harder to fit in if you don’t have a team. But then, if you choose one, you’ll offside everyone else.”

“I’ll tell them I’m thinking about it.”

"Good idea—for now." Lois smiled; it seemed like approval, and Clark lapped it up. Her smile was pure magic. "Because once you've chosen your club, it's yours for life."

"No changing? Even if you move location?"

"No changing." Lois stopped in a long row of traffic stalled by a distant traffic light. Turning to him, she said, "You'll go to the pub tonight. Regardless of whether you're a drinker or not, you need to go."

"Will you be coming?

"I'm female."

He was well aware of that. Too aware. "Surely that doesn't mean you can't go?"

"I *can* go," Lois said. "But I get enough of a testosterone overdose at work. I really don't need it after hours as well."

Did she consider him nothing more than an addition to her 'testosterone overdose'?

"They'll tell you it's your shout," Lois was saying. "Count how many people are at your table, including yourself, and go to the bar and ask for that many VBs. If they tell you they want something else, ignore them. Just get the VBs. Take them back to the table and give everybody one. Drink yours at the same pace as they drink theirs. Don't be conned into drinking any faster, no matter how much they goad you."

The roads had widened a little, and the traffic was running more smoothly now. Clark wondered how long it would be before they arrived at the Herald Sun offices and realised that despite the long hours of travelling, he felt absolutely no desire for this part of his journey to end.

Lois continued. "When everyone has finished their drinks, they'll probably tell you it's your shout again. Do *not* be talked into it. Just keep saying that you've already shouted. If they persist, tell them it's 'unAustralian'."

"OK."

"Someone else will shout and bring you a beer. Drink it, and then tell them you're jet-lagged and leave."

It occurred to Clark that he was placing a lot of trust in someone he barely knew. What if she was in cahoots with the rest? Whoever they might be? What if this was a big laugh at his expense? An initiation maybe? "Why are you telling me this?" he asked.

Lois indicated and drove onto a sweeping curve that deposited them on another multi lane freeway. "Because the way things stand, we're on the bottom rung together. If you play your cards right and don't step too far outside the acceptable norms, you'll move up."

"And you *want* this to happen?" he asked, crushed.

"Of course I do."

"Why?"

She looked at him as if it should be obvious. "The Yank and The Sheila," she said derisively.

"Your name's Lois," Clark pointed out, puzzled.

She shook her head. "Sheila is a woman. Any woman. It's like… chick."

"Lois," he said, "I don't understand why us working together would be such a bad thing for you."

"For *both* of us."

Nope, it definitely wouldn't be a bad thing for him. "How?"

"You don't imagine we'd get any of the good games, do you?" she demanded. "If we're together, we'll get shunted off to the worst games every week… or even worse, the VFL."

"So, you don't object to working with me? Personally?"

She shot him a quizzical glance. "I don't know you. Until two hours ago, I'd never even heard your name. How could I object to working with you?"

"So, your motivation for helping me is so I get accepted and you won't be stuck working with me?"

Did he imagine she coloured a little at his question?

"You got it," she said.

"No other reason?" Clark probed, wanting desperately to know what had caused the pretty pinkness to flower in her lovely cheeks.

Lois cleared her throat. "OK," she conceded. "I'm at a bit of a loose end right now."

"Why?"

"You're on exchange?"

"Yes."

"So one of us has gone to your paper in Metropolis."

"Who?"

"Dan Scardino." She said the name with a heavy sigh that sliced disillusionment through Clark's heart.

"I guess you miss him?" he said.

Lois shrugged, her face cloaked with sadness. "We hung out," she said. "Yeah, I'm going to miss him."

Clark's opinion of the man plummeted. How could anyone leave Lois and make her look so bereft?

Ahead of them loomed a large bridge. “This is the Westgate Bridge,” Lois said. “In a moment, we’ll be going over the Yarra River.”

The view from the top of the bridge was spectacular. To his right lay a large body of water. To his left, the tall buildings of the city stretched along the horizon. It seemed smaller and lower than Metropolis, but Clark wasn’t sure it would be prudent to mention that. Once down the far side of the bridge, Lois left the freeway, and soon they had reached the innards of the bustling, busy city. Streetcars ran along the tracks in the middle of the streets. To a stranger’s eye, it looked chaotic, but Lois was unperturbed. She pulled into a car park and gestured for him to get out.

“Leave your luggage in the Jeep,” she said as she got out of the car. “I’ll drop you home later.”

“OK, thanks.”

“Oh, Clark?” Was that the first time she’d addressed him by name?

“Yes, Lois?”

“Do you have any money? Australian money?”

“A little. I exchanged for some in Sydney.”

Lois opened her purse and offered him a garish orange note. “You’ll need this for drinks tonight.”

Clark hesitated, torn. He really didn’t want to take her money, but he didn’t know how far his Australian dollars would stretch. Or when he could get to a bank. Or how useful his credit card would be. He took the note she offered with some misgivings. “Thanks,” he said. “I’ll pay you back as soon as I can.”

She shrugged. “No worries.”

Clark followed her to the elevator, standing back to let her enter first. “Lois?”

“Yes?”

“Thanks for all your help.”

She grinned. “Thanks for stepping in with the Eagles supporters.”

She wasn’t too annoyed at his interference, Clark thought with relief. “You didn’t really need my help, did you?”

“No,” Lois said. “But it was nice of you to do it.”

Part 2

Lois took Clark to their sports editor, Paul Brown, introduced them, and left. Clark watched her walk away, feeling ridiculously like he’d been severed from his anchor and was now at the mercy of a vast and swirling ocean of unfamiliarity.

Mentally, he shook himself and turned to his editor. Paul Brown was a voluminous man, loud of voice and expansive of girth. Clark sat on the proffered seat and tried valiantly to keep up as Paul jumped erratically through a string of—as far as Clark could fathom—totally unrelated subjects.

Clark realised within minutes that Paul Brown had two habits. He asked questions without pausing for an answer, and he was likely to explode into boisterous, chin-wobbling laughter for no apparent reason.

Clark smiled along, nodding at what he hoped were the right moments. Between the accent, the slang, and the guffaws, Clark was reasonably confident he had understood less than a quarter of what his editor had said.

But he could ask Lois.

The roller-coaster that was Clark’s first meeting with Paul Brown came to a sudden halt when Paul drew a big breath and shouted for someone called ‘Banjo’.

A tall, lean man wearing jeans and an open-neck shirt appeared at the door.

“Banjo,” Paul said, “this is Clark Kent, on exchange from the USA. Show him to Deano’s desk. Clark, this is Andrew Barton.”

Andrew nodded with a friendly grin and shook hands with Clark. Back in the sports newsroom, Clark had a moment to survey his new workplace. It wasn’t completely dissimilar to the Daily Planet newsroom—perhaps a little louder, but that could be a reflection of the editor. It did seem rather casual. Clark realised he was the only person wearing a tie. And except for Lois—now seated at her desk in the far corner—they were all men. More than that, it was a male environment. There was not a flower or a plant or a knickknack to be seen. Various posters adorned the walls—pictures of cars and sports teams and the occasional woman, dressed… well, less than modestly.

Clark followed Andrew to a desk. It was on the opposite side of the room to Lois, but Clark figured there was a good chance he would have an unobstructed view of her.

Not that an obstructed view was going to prevent him from watching her.

Andrew pulled out the chair and turned on the computer. “This is Dan Scardino’s desk,” he said. “It’s yours for the next three months.”

“Thanks, Andrew,” Clark said.

“It’s Banjo, mate,” he replied. “I arrived here from England when I was five years old, and I’ve been Banjo ever since.”

“OK,” Clark said. “Banjo.”

"If you need anything else, just ask Flinders."

"Lois?" Clark said, unable to resist reminding this guy that Lois had a name. And a very pretty name at that.

Banjo grinned. "Yeah, Flinders. She'll see you right." He took two steps away but then paused and turned back. "See you at the pub after work?"

Clark nodded.

Banjo's grin widened. "Your first shout, Rubber."

Rubber?

Clark watched Banjo walk away. Rubber?

Was that the nickname Lois had assured him he would receive? Rubber? How had they chosen that name in less than an hour? Rubber… did it mean here what it meant at home? And if it did, what was it about him that made them think of *that*? Did he dare ask Lois? Or would that be just too embarrassing?

During the next hour, Clark set up his computer and glanced through the Daily Planet site, catching up on the events that had happened during the thirty hours he'd been entombed in a flying crate. He wrote two emails—one to Perry and one to his parents. He kept to minimal detail, saying he had arrived safely but neglecting to divulge any of his impressions of this new country.

The truth was that the foremost impression crowding his mind was Lois Lane.

Had his new editor, Paul Brown, asked for a description of the landscape between the airport and the Herald Sun office, Clark's mind would have filled with the image of a lovely brunette with a ready smile and an oh-so-cute accent.

Clark glanced across the newsroom to Lois's desk. She was still engrossed in whatever she was doing, and he felt mild regret that she was probably trying to make up for the time spent driving him from the airport.

Two men approached his desk, and Clark tore his eyes from Lois.

"Gazza," one of them said, his hand extended. "And this is Bluey."

Clark shook hands with both of them. Gazza was tall with wide shoulders and a belly that had begun its passage over the top of his jeans. Bluey was shorter and reminded Clark of a relic from the seventies, with his longish red hair and thick, meticulously tidy moustache.

"Have you got a footy team yet?" Gazza asked.

"Not yet," Clark replied.

Gazza grinned widely. "Good move, mate," he said. "Glad to see you didn't let Flinders railroad you into barracking for the Hawks."

"The Hawks?" Clark questioned.

"Hawthorn," Gazza said in a tone that suggested merely saying the word caused a nasty taste in his mouth. He leaned forward as if to share a confidence. "Collingwood," he whispered. "The best darn footy club in the world."

Bluey nodded eagerly. "The mighty Magpies. Black and white army. Gazza here, he used to play for 'em."

Clark managed to resist the temptation to lower his eyes and appraise a physique that didn't appear particularly athletic.

"It was a good few years ago now," Gazza said. "I'll spread the word that you're a Magpie. Welcome to Collingwood, Rubber."

"No!"

They both stared at him, clearly taken aback by his reaction.

"I haven't decided on a team yet," Clark said, hoping he sounded firm but friendly. "When I do, I'll let you know."

"Stay away from Browny," Gazza said with an ominous nod in the direction of the editor's office. "He's a bluebagger."

"A what?" Clark asked.

"He barracks for Carrrrlton," Bluey explained, managing to make the first syllable sound like the snarl of a dog.

Clark tried to keep his face blank, figuring any reaction could be misunderstood. "Thanks for the advice," he said.

"You'll never regret barracking for Collingwood," Gazza said seriously. "Best decision you'll ever make. Think about it, mate."

Clark nodded, trying to portray the seriousness they probably expected. "I will," he promised.

* * *

An hour later, Lois came up to his desk. "Ready?" she asked.

Clark nodded. "I have to go to the pub," he said, hoping she would detect his reluctance.

"Yeah, I know," she said. "That's why we're leaving now. I'll take you to your unit, and you can settle in. Then I'll take you to the pub."

"My unit?"

"Your… apartment."

"I have an apartment?" Clark said with surprise.

"Did you think you'd be sleeping on your desk?" Lois asked with a grin.

Clark smiled, deciding he liked being teased by Lois Lane. He followed her into the elevator and back to her Jeep. Once back on the street, the congested traffic forced them to crawl along at walking pace.

"Rush hour," Lois said with weary resignation. "Any questions? We've got plenty of time."

Yes. He wanted to know why he was called Rubber. He'd been called it seven times already. Even Paul Brown had used it when he'd come to check that Clark had filled in the insurance forms correctly.

Clark bit back his question. He wasn't sure he would survive the humiliation of Lois explaining it to him—particularly if, as he suspected, there was something acutely embarrassing about it. "I don't think I know enough to ask intelligent questions yet."

Lois smiled. "It must be tough, landing in the middle of this with no preparation."

It would have been a whole lot tougher without her.

"There are a couple more survival skills you're going to need," Lois said.

"OK."

"Don't use the word 'fanny' unless you are trying to be coarse. Gazza will use it, but most men don't in female company."

"Should I ask what it means here?"

She wrinkled her adorably pert nose. "It doesn't mean what it means in the US," she said. The traffic lights turned green, and they spurted a small distance forward until they were again stopped by a logjam of cars. "And if you ask for the bathroom, people are going to think you want to take a shower."

"What should I ask for? Restrooms? Washrooms?"

"Toilets."

"Toilets?"

Lois grinned at his tone. "We say it as it is around here. If you want to use the toilet, just say so."

That was going to take some adjustment.

They were stopped in a long line of traffic. Lois turned her full attention to him, grinning as if what she was about to say had amused her greatly. "We have a few other slang words for toilet that might be helpful."

"Such as?"

"Dunny is the most common. But you might hear loo, jon, or bog as well."

"Dunny?" he said, mostly because he was hoping for a repeat of her mischievous grin.

He got it, and its warmth flowed through him like a river of hot melted chocolate.

The traffic lights—not hung overhead, but on poles on the sides of the road—changed to green, and Lois turned onto a road that wasn't so crowded. A few moments later, she pointed to the left. "That's the M-C-G," she said with deep reverence. "We call it 'The 'G'. If Melbourne has a soul, this is it."

So even the stadia had nicknames, Clark reflected as he peered up at the towering grandstand. "MCG?"

"Melbourne Cricket Ground. You'll probably go to at least one game there this weekend."

"They play football on it? Even though it's a cricket ground?"

"Of course," she said as if it were obvious. "The Grand Final is held here the last Saturday in September."

"I think I go home just after that."

"You wouldn't want to miss the Grand Final."

"No," Clark said, thinking not about seeing the Grand Final but about having to say goodbye to Lois Lane. He pushed that from his mind. "How do I have an apartment?" he asked.

"It's a unit," Lois corrected. "Or a flat." They pulled into a quiet street and then into a concrete driveway next to a long, low building with six doors. Lois parked in front of the second one. "This is your home," she said. "For three months."

She was already counting down the time until Scardino came home. "I didn't have the time to organise anything," Clark said. "I thought I'd be staying in a hotel."

"This is Dan's place."

"It is?"

Lois raised the trunk so he could get his luggage. "Dan was supposed to swap homes with Pete. Now you're here instead of Pete, I reckon it's your place."

"Is that OK with Dan?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"I doubt he's staying in my apartment."

She shrugged. "That's their problem."

Lois unlocked the door, and Clark followed her into what was apparently his new home.

"It's a two-bedroom unit," Lois said, "but Dan has locked some of his stuff in that room, so you've just got one bedroom."

"It's great. Thanks." Had she slept here? With Scardino? The guy too stupid to realise what he'd left behind? Clark determinedly turned his thoughts away from that track. It was none of his business.

Lois circled the area that doubled as a living room and kitchen. She opened the drapes, checked the fridge, and watered the potted plants, moving with the easy familiarity of someone who'd spent a lot of time here. "I'll go and wait in the car," she offered when she'd finished her rounds. "You probably want to freshen up and get settled. Take your time—there's no hurry."

Clark didn't want to keep her waiting in the car but realised she might be uncomfortable being in Scardino's apartment… unit… with him, so he nodded his agreement. When she handed him the keys, the very tips of her fingers brushed along his palm. "Thanks," he said.

Lois turned and left him, closing the door softly behind her.

Clark stood still, trying to gather his scrambled thoughts. He'd had a call from Perry Saturday morning telling him Pete couldn't do the exchange program and asking if he would go to Australia instead. He'd agreed, been on a plane two hours later… and now… it was Monday, and he was halfway around the world in a… unit… in 'Melburn', trying to come to terms with the fact that he was an Australian Rules football writer.

But all of that paled to insignificance against the very certain knowledge that he had just fallen harder for a woman than ever before.

Three months.

Three months to be with her. Three months to watch her yearn for the guy doing Clark's job in Metropolis. Three months until he would have to say goodbye and walk out of her life.

It hurt already.

Clark sighed.

He went into the bedroom, unpacked some of his clothes, showered, and only hesitated when deciding what to wear. He'd felt overdressed in his suit and tie today. What did they wear to go to the pub? He decided on jeans and a navy blue shirt.

It was less than five minutes since Lois had left, and he hated keeping her waiting, but if he appeared too quickly, she would be suspicious.

Clark lowered his glasses and looked through the wall. She was in the Jeep, turned sideways, scribbling notes in a book resting on her raised knees. In profile, she seemed more vulnerable… younger perhaps… but she was still breathtakingly beautiful.

His thoughts scurried ahead to tomorrow morning. What did she have planned for them? Maybe breakfast while she explained the rules of this game they called 'footy'—the game he was going to be expected to analyse and report on coherently?

Hoping he had waited long enough, Clark eagerly grabbed his black leather jacket, locked his door, and climbed into the Jeep beside Lois as the late afternoon light faded around them.

* * *

Clark's introduction to the Australian pub ritual eventuated exactly as Lois had predicted. He bought the first round of drinks and was told he should 'shout' again. He refused, to the great amusement of the gathered group. He drank his second drink and then excused himself.

Throughout it all, they called him Rubber. Every one of them. When they introduced him to someone new, it was, 'this is Rubber'. It was as if none of them were even aware of the names Clark and Kent. Somehow, they'd been left back in Metropolis.

Except for Lois. She hadn't called him Rubber yet.

Clark stepped out of the bright noisiness of the pub and onto the street. He stood there, searching for Lois and trying to ignore how his heart had accelerated at the mere thought of seeing her again. From behind him came a voice. "Did you survive?"

He spun to face her, already smiling. "Yes," he replied. "Thanks to you."

Lois gestured across the road. "The car's this way."

She walked away, hands thrust low in the pockets of her jacket. Clark crossed behind her so he could walk on her outside and hurried to catch up to her. "Thanks for making this so easy for me," he said. "I'm not sure I could have even found the pub without your help."

"No worries," Lois said. "I had some research I wanted to do, so I didn't mind the extra hour in the office."

"Do you ever go out socially with your colleagues?" Clark asked. "There were other women in the pub. I'm sure you could have come if you'd wanted to."

"It's better that I don't," Lois said. "I'm not particularly popular right now."

Clark wanted to ask why but they reached her Jeep, and the moment was lost. Ten minutes later, Lois pulled up at the bottom of his driveway.

"The park's up there on the left," she said, pointing ahead. "See you tomorrow morning. Six thirty." She pulled a piece of paper from her bag. "Here's my number. If you need anything, or have any questions, just ring me. Dan's phone is connected."

"Thanks." Clark hesitated, not wanting her to go. "I have a question."

"OK."

"What are trackies? And runners?"

"Trackies are tracksuit pants. And runners are… sports shoes… something you can run in."

Were they going to *play* football? Or talk about it? Would it be just the two of them? Or would others be joining them? Figuring Lois would be eager to get home, Clark decided not to bother her with further questions.

"Thanks for everything, Lois," he said. "You've been really helpful."

She smiled. He shut the car door and watched as she drove away.

Helpful? She'd taken possession of his heart.

* * *

Clark arrived at the park at twenty past six the next morning. It was cold enough that his breath clouded in front of his face. Lois was already there, slowly jogging around the extremity. She'd been here for some time—her tracks had scuffed an outer ring of green that contrasted sharply with the undisturbed dew in the middle of the park. She wore a pink tracksuit and white tennis shoes. When she saw him, she came over.

"G'day, Clark," she greeted. "Did you sleep OK?"

"Yep," he lied. Despite the long hours of travel, he hadn't felt sleepy at all and had spent most of the night thinking about her. He'd recalled every moment with her—repeatedly.

Lois strode to a bag under a tree and brought out a red football. "This is a footy," she said. "If you're going to write about the game, I reckon you could use some hands-on experience." She threw it to him.

Clark caught it. The leather was cool and sleek in his hands. It looked much the same as an American football, but its ends were more rounded.

Lois ran about fifteen yards away. "Kick it to me," she called.

Clark tested the football in his hands. His instinct was to lurch back and throw it as he had done so many times before in the parks at home. Instead, he balanced and kicked it in her direction, careful to severely limit his force on the ball.

Lois moved easily to meet it, and it thudded into her chest. He winced, sure he'd hurt her. "Good kick," she called out.

She retreated, walking backwards. She stopped, held the ball poised, and then, with a little spurt of forward movement, kicked it to him, like an arrow aimed directly at his heart. He caught it easily.

"Good mark," Lois called.

He kicked it again, and it slewed off his foot and missed her by ten feet. Lois ran and lunged at it, catching it again.

They kicked it back and forth a few times, enough for him to realise that Lois could kick the ball at least as well as he could—over short distances anyway.

She jogged over to him. "OK, if the ball's kicked and someone catches it without it touching the ground or anything else, it's a mark," she explained. "Not a catch."

Clark nodded. "A mark."

"One of the most exciting parts of the game is the high marking," she said. "We call them 'speckies'."

"Speckies?" Clark repeated hesitantly. "As in glasses?"

Her laughter echoed through the early morning stillness. "No," she said. "As in 'spectacular'."

Clark nodded, although he wasn't able to visualise what she meant.

Perhaps she saw his confusion, because she hurried to further explain. "A specky, also called a screamer, is when a player launches himself onto another player—or even a group of players—and, assuming he got his timing right, he marks the ball high off the ground." She grinned. "And then tries to stick the landing without injuring himself."

The chaotic picture in Clark's mind made no sense. Lois's hand rested on his arm. "You'll understand when you see a game," she assured him. Her hand lifted from him. "You did well; you've kicked a footy before, haven't you?"

Her touch had sent shivers of heat up his arm, and her approval flooded him with pleasure. Clark wrenched his mind back from the edge of distraction and forced himself to form an intelligent sentence. "I've kicked a football," he said. "Not a footy."

"Ever bounced it?" Lois asked.

"You can't bounce a ball this shape," he said, completely enthralled by the healthy glow of her cheeks and the sparkle in her eyes.

She lobbed it to him. "Try," she challenged.

Clark dropped it to the ground, and it bounced at a right angle, out of his reach. Lois laughed. He retrieved it and pushed it harder at the ground. The only difference was that it shot off with greater force.

Lois picked up the ball and nonchalantly dropped it to the ground. It obediently sprang back to her hands. Clark raised his eyebrows.

"When you can bounce it while running at full speed with an opponent hot on your hammer, you're halfway to becoming a footballer," she informed him.

Clark wasn't sure it was possible. But if it were, he'd sure like to see Lois do it. "Show me," he urged.

She considered him, a little smile on her face. "Can't you just believe it's possible?" she asked.

He'd cornered her. She couldn't do it. "Never," he said adamantly. "If I don't see it, I won't believe it."

Lois grinned at him. "Watch this."

She turned and jogged away. She bounced the oval-shaped ball, and every time, it plopped back into her hands so precisely she didn't even need to adjust her stride. Turning smoothly, she accelerated towards him, continuing to bounce the footy.

"How do you do that?" Clark asked, quite willing to let her see she had impressed him.

"Practice," she said. Lois held up the ball and pointed to the lower curve. "Look at the shape. You have to land it here." She gave him the ball and then picked up his hands and, one at a time, repositioned them on the soft leather. "OK," she said. "Keep this angle and push it to the ground."

He made a valiant attempt to follow her instructions, which was not made any easier by the Lois-induced wayward rhythm of his heart. Taking a steadying breath, Clark cautiously let go of the ball and to his surprise, it came back.

"Well done, Clark." Lois said.

His name on her lips caused his breath to catch in his throat. What if she said it… breathlessly? Passionately? Tenderly? Lovingly? He shook his head to banish his thoughts.

They practised bouncing for the next few minutes, and by then, Clark could slowly jog and awkwardly bounce the ball.

"You're doing great," Lois said sincerely.

"I have a great teacher," Clark replied.

"Thanks," she said. "Now, you can't throw the ball; you handball it." She took his left hand and opened it, palm up, and placed the ball on it. "Clench your right fist," she said. "And punch the ball off your hand."

He did as she said, and the ball lobbed towards her. She caught it and handballed it back to him. He tried again, more confidently this time.

She sent it back with a smile. "Three more skills," she said. "Smother, bump, tackle."

All of the words suggested contact, and Clark swallowed.

"Kick it," Lois said.

He stepped back and dropped the ball to his foot. A blur of pink flew across the path of his foot, and he pulled his kick. Lois landed on the ground, the ball buried under her. Clark fell to his knees beside her and tried to help her up, sure he had injured her. "Lois! I'm sorry."

She twisted to a sitting position, the ball still tightly clamped within her arms. "What are you sorry for?" she asked, seeming genuinely surprised.

"I nearly kicked you."

"No, you didn't."

"Yes, I did."

"No, you didn't. I smothered your kick."

"You could have been badly hurt." Anxiety had raised his voice.

Lois glared at him, all her good humour gone. Then she glared at the football she was holding.

Clark risked a hand on her shoulder. "Lois?" he asked. "What happened?"

"Would you be more comfortable if one of the blokes taught you the rest?" she said disconsolately.

He couldn't resist a tiny increase in his pressure on her shoulder. "What did I do wrong?" he asked quietly.

"You treated me like I'm a girl."

He laughed. He just couldn't help it. "Lois," he insisted, "you *are* a girl." A woman, his mind amended, a very beautiful woman.

"If I'd been kicked, it would've been my fault," she said. "Not yours just 'cause you're the bloke."

"Lois," he said in his best conciliatory tone, "please keep teaching me. Just warn me if you're going to do something that will freak me out."

"Are you sure you want to?" she said. "I could ask Gazza to show you."

"No," Clark said decisively. "I want you to do it." He straightened and offered her his hand, which she took after only a moment's hesitation. "I assume a smother is when you stop the ball with your body as it's being kicked."

"Yes," Lois said, allowing Clark to help her to her feet.

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"Only if your timing's dodgy."

"Can we skip to the next thing?" Clark suggested. "Tackle, wasn't it?"

She nodded. "If a player has the ball and it's 'play on', he can be tackled by any opponent. The tackle must be higher than the knees and lower than the neck."

There was an awful lot of territory between her knees and her neck. Lois kicked the ball so that it dribbled along the ground. "Go and get it," she said. "And I'll tackle you."

Clark ran after the ball, aware that every sensory receptor in his body was tightly coiled in anticipation of her touch. He gathered the ball, and it came—a pink flurry as two arms surrounded him and pinned his arms to his side. With surprising strength, Lois tried to toss him to the ground. She couldn't, of course, but the force she applied shocked him. The ball rolled free from his hands, and she immediately let go of him. "My ball," she announced triumphantly.

"Why?" he contended.

"You dropped the ball."

"What was I supposed to do?"

"When you're tackled, you have to get rid of the ball legally—either kick it or handball it."

"I couldn't handball it," he said with feigned indignation. "You had my arms trapped."

"Then it was a great tackle." She picked up the ball. "You wanna tackle me this time?"

There was absolutely no undertone to her words. Nothing to even hint he was anything more than a newbie in dire need of some acclimatisation. Clark couldn't think of another woman who could say such potentially flirtatious words so innocently. He couldn't think of another woman whose guilelessness could cause him such rampaging disappointment.

But he shouldn't be surprised. Lois was in love with Scardino. She was missing him. This was nothing more than a distraction to pass the time until he returned home.

"Sure," Clark said, trying to keep his discontent from sloshing through his tone.

Lois dribbled the ball forward, tore after it, and scooped it up. The moment it was in her hands, she weaved, turned, side-stepped, and sprinted away from him. "You have to catch me before you can tackle me," she called gleefully from the safety of fifteen feet away.

"Right." Clark set out after her. She ducked again, narrowly evading his outstretched hand. He had overcommitted and her laughter sounded in his ears as he tried to pull up. When he turned, he saw Lois running away, nonchalantly bouncing the ball. He leapt across the distance between them, captured her within his arms, and, as gently as he dared, brought her to the ground.

"Baaallll," she called as she untangled herself from his clutches. She stood up and tossed the ball to him. "Your free."

"Why?"

"You tackled; I didn't dispose of it. I was caught holding the ball, so it's your free kick."

"Why didn't you kick it?" he asked, already feeling guilty about using his unfair advantages.

"Because you have some serious closing speed," she said.

Clark heard the genuine admiration in her voice, and it felt incredibly good. "What's next?" he asked. Too much tackling was not wise.

"The bump," Lois replied. "If the ball is within five metres, you can bump an opponent when it's 'play on'."

He couldn't visualise what she meant. And his ability to grasp new concepts wasn't being helped by the fact that every touch set off another round of tingling explosions that skittered across his skin. "Show me," he said.

Lois placed the ball on the ground and walked a few feet away. "Come and pick it up," she said, sounding innocent enough.

Clark ran in and bent down to pick up the ball. The pink whirlwind was back, her shoulder hard against his. He consciously relaxed his muscles, and the force of her knocked him off balance. She took the ball and scooted away.

"That's a bump," she informed him. "Also called a 'hip and shoulder'."

"I could tell," Clark said as he picked himself up.

She laughed. "You want to bump me?"

"I don't think so," he said.

Lois sighed. "You won't hurt me. I'm smaller than you."

Clark laughed. "Lo-is… that's exactly what worries me."

"But I can balk." She set the ball on the ground with purpose and stood over it, arms crossed. "I bet you breakfast I can come in and pick up the ball without you laying a tackle or a bump," she challenged.

She probably could, because she mesmerised him. "Bet you can't," he said, managing to match her lightheartedness.

"You're on." She moved five yards away. "Ready?"

"Ready."

She ran towards the ball, but instead of stopping to pick it up, she dropped her body low and scooped up the ball without ever slackening her pace. Clark remembered he was supposed to be stopping her and lurched at her fast-departing pinkness.

He caught her around the waist, and together they fell to the ground. He held himself up long enough that his weight floated down on her rather than falling on her. In the scramble of arms and legs, he realised two things simultaneously: she was shaking, and his hand was wedged against her chest. He pulled his arm away as if he had been burnt and turned her so he could see her face.

A tear was rolling down her cheek, which alarmed him… until he realised she was shaking with laughter. "Lois?" he said. "Lois? Are you all right?"

She wiped her cheek and sat up. "That was a beautiful tackle," she declared.

"Did I hurt you?" he said, still concerned.

"No. At least, I don't think so." She laughed again, and it heated the blood in his veins. "It doesn't matter, anyway—it was a glorious tackle. I thought I was past you."

Clark noticed the grass stains on her knees and swallowed down his impulse to apologise.

"I owe you breakfast," Lois said matter-of-factly. She sprang to her feet. "Kick to kick first?"

He managed a smile. "What's that?"

"You're at one end, you kick it to me, I kick it back. If you spill the mark, you have to chase the ball and pick it up."

"OK." That sounded less perilous than tackling or bumping. Not that he hadn't enjoyed them.

They kicked the ball between them for fifteen minutes. In that time, Clark came to further appreciate Lois's significant skills with the football. And, he realised, she was thoroughly enjoying every moment of it.

After chasing the ball from one of his wayward kicks, she came over to him. "You owe me," she stated.

He knew that. "I thought you lost the bet about breakfast," he reminded her.

"I did," Lois admitted freely. She eyed him. "Have you ever played gridiron?"

"Football? Yes."

"What position?"

"Free safety."

She looked at him blankly. "Can you do the throwing thing?"

"Yes," Clark said. "The quarterback does that, but I can throw a little."

"Would you teach me?" Lois asked eagerly. "It's cool how the ball spins."

"Sure."

Lois tossed him the football, and he showed her his grip on the ball. She ran away and called, "Throw it to me."

He threw it, and she scurried after it and caught it. "Your turn to throw," he called.

Lois leant back and threw the ball. It lobbed forward pitifully, and her laughter rang out. She ran forward, scooped up the ball, and came over to him. "Please show me again," she requested.

He arranged her hands on the ball, took gentle hold of her wrist, and stood behind her to demonstrate the throw. When her arm stretched forward, his followed, and his body closed around hers.

Lois didn't react to their closeness. She was concentrating too hard on learning how to throw a football. This time, the ball went a respectable distance. She turned to him, eyes sparkling. "I did it," she said.

He nodded and smiled because words weren't possible. Everything about Lois Lane suggested she had no notion of how beautiful she was, that she was oblivious to the way her natural inner beauty lit her face and her smile and her eyes.

Dan Scardino was a fool. A blind fool.

"We should go," Lois said. "Gotta get to work." She put the ball in her bag, and they turned towards his apartment.

"Do you play footy?" Clark said, the final word still feeling strange on his tongue.

"No," she said, and he sensed her despondency. It was all he could do to keep his hand from resting gently on her back.

"Why?"

"Because when I was growing up, girls didn't play footy."

"They didn't?"

"There is a girls' league now," Lois said. "But it's only been going for a few years. By the time it started, I was already a footy journo, and I don't have any free time on Saturdays, so I can't play."

"But you're so good."

"Not really," Lois said. "The skills are not that difficult to execute when there's no pressure. In a real game, there's no time—everything has to be instinctive."

"How did you get so skilled? Who did you practise with?"

"Anyone who was willing to overlook that I'm a girl."

That would *not* be easy, Clark thought. "I'm willing to overlook it," he said quietly. At least, I'm willing to pretend when there's a football nearby, he corrected silently.

She smiled up at him. "You are?"

"Sure."

"So we could do this again?"

"I'd love to."

Lois smiled as if he'd given her a gift. "I'm going home to have a shower," she said. "I'll be back here in twenty minutes, and we'll have brekkie."

"Lois," Clark said. "I'm not sure what to wear to the office. At home, I wear a suit and tie."

"Would you be comfortable working in jeans and a jumper?" she asked.

Clark shrugged slightly. "I don't know," he said. "But I felt conspicuous yesterday."

"How about you leave off the tie for now?" she suggested. "Until Friday, anyway. On Fridays, everyone dresses down."

"OK," he agreed. "Thanks."

With another smile, she turned away. "See you soon," she called.

Clark stood watching her. He could watch her all day… and it still wouldn't long be enough.

Part 3

Five minutes later, Clark was ready. He tried to use the extra time productively by mentally listing the information he needed, such as where to where to find a bank.

Lois knocked on his door, and Clark hurried to open it, aware his level of excitement at seeing her again was totally out of proportion but also aware it was beyond his powers to contain it.

"We'll walk," Lois said as they walked down his driveway. "The cafe is just a couple of blocks away, and after breakfast, we'll catch a train to work."

When they came to the road, Clark looked left and, seeing no cars, stepped forward. He felt Lois grab his hand and tug him back to the sidewalk. She glanced up at him, grinning, as a car whistled by, coming from his right. In some far recess of his mind, Clark realised he should be embarrassed by his mistake, but he just couldn't get past the wonder of her small hand wrapped around his.

She released him, still grinning, and they crossed the road together. A few minutes later, they came to a warm cafe and settled at the table in the corner, adjacent to the front window. Lois ordered wholemeal English muffins with a cappuccino. Clark ordered bacon and eggs with a latte.

"What should I expect from today?" he asked.

"It's Tuesday," Lois said. "The games from last weekend are all but forgotten, and everyone's focus is next weekend. You'll probably be sent out with Gazza or Bluey. They'll be sniffing around the traps, trying to determine which players will miss games due to injury. Some of the clubs will train today. I think Banjo has an interview with the North Melbourne coach."

Clark felt disappointment scald a chasm through his hope. He so wanted to work with Lois. "What will you do?" he said.

"Browny gave me a story he wants for Friday," Lois said. "It's called 'Rich Club, Poor Club'—that'll take up most of my day."

"I'm not sure I'm going to be able to do this," Clark admitted. "When I agreed to come to Australia, I didn't realise there would be so much to learn… and… well… I didn't understand a whole lot of what Mr Brown said yesterday."

Lois laughed delightedly. "*No one* understands much of what Browny says at first," she said. "Don't worry, you won't have to work alone just yet. Banjo and Bluey let their mouths run away with them sometimes, but they're basically good blokes. Gazza… well… other than subjecting you to a blow-by-blow description of the 1990 Grand Final, he won't cause you too much grief."

"And Browny?" Clark asked dubiously.

"Is one of the finest footy minds in the country," Lois said firmly. "I know that isn't the impression he gives, but he's a wonderful editor and has an instinctive understanding of

the game. And he's a good bloke to have on your side, too." She reached into her bag, took out a handful of papers, and pushed the top one across the table to him. "This is the train system," she said. "The closest station to you is Richmond. You get off at Flinders Street Station when you're going into work. I'll show you today."

"*Flinders* Street?" Clark asked, unable to suppress his grin.

"Flinders Street is in the CBD and is also one of the main train stations. Flinders Lane is one block north of Flinders Street." Lois put the second piece of paper on top of the first. "This is a map of Richmond. You live here, the train station is here, and if you go along here, you'll come to the shopping area. There are banks, supermarkets, chemists—just about everything you could need. Every Sunday morning, there's a market."

"Chemist?" he queried.

"Drugstore."

Their meals arrived, and Lois buttered her muffin and then peeled back the lid from the tiny plastic container, revealing a smooth glob of gooey black stuff.

"What is *that*?" Clark asked.

She grinned at his tone. "Vegemite." She spread it sparingly across her muffin and pushed the little tray in his direction. "Try some."

Clark looked at her questioningly. The smell alone was enough to convince him that he didn't need to taste it.

"Come on, Clark," she urged. "You can't come Down Under and not try the local delicacies."

"Delicacy?" he blurted.

Her laughter burst out, and Clark took a moment just to watch her. Lois Lane was an incredibly attractive woman.

"Try it," she said, her eyes issuing an amused challenge.

Hesitantly, he dipped the very end of his forefinger into the black stuff and lifted it to his tongue. It tasted like pure salt. Worse than pure salt.

Lois's laughter increased.

"What exactly is it?" Clark asked, as he wiped the remaining black goo from his finger with his napkin.

"It's yeast extract," she informed him casually.

Well, that explained a lot.

"Eat your bacon and eggs," she said, still grinning. "They should taste all right."

He did. And she was right—they tasted great.

Lois slid a third piece of paper across the table. "This is the basic structure of the AFL—the Australian Football League—sixteen teams, their names, nicknames, training bases, home grounds, most recent premiership, colours, captains, coaches."

Clark looked at the neatly handwritten paper. It was set out in grid form—easy to read and follow. It was going to be invaluable as he tried to get all this sorted in his head. He glanced to the line about halfway down.

Hawthorn, the Hawks, Glenferrie Oval, Waverley Park, 1991, brown and gold, Jason Dunstall, Ken Judge.

"Thanks, Lois," Clark said gratefully. "This is going to help a lot." He was tempted to reveal that he knew the name of her team but decided to keep that information secret a little longer. "The guys at the airport yesterday? Which team were they?"

"The West Coast Eagles," Lois said. She leant across the table and pointed to the last team on the grid. "They are one of the two Western Australian teams. They're currently third on the ladder. They beat Richmond on the weekend; the guys were probably about to fly home."

"You didn't seem too threatened by them," Clark noted. He sipped from his coffee and immediately tried to shut down his reaction. It was weak and—and to be honest—insipid.

Lois spooned some froth from the top of her cappuccino. "It's football," she said lightly.

"It's *only* football, therefore it doesn't matter?" Clark questioned.

"Don't *ever* say it's only football," Lois advised with a small smile. She put the teaspoon in her mouth. When she slipped it out, a little bubble of froth remained on her upper lip. "Not around here."

Clark wondered what it would feel like to kiss away the froth. "Why not?" he said, trying desperately to keep his voice normal.

"Because it is far, far more than a game." Lois slid her tongue across her lip, sweeping away the froth.

Clark hauled his mind back to their conversation. "You think their behaviour was acceptable?" he asked incredulously.

"No," Lois said easily. "But they were away from home, they were excited about their team winning, and they almost certainly have finals to look forward to. They're passionate about their team."

Clark couldn't resist asking, "Are you passionate about your team?"

She lifted an eyebrow and shot him a grin that resonated through his insides. “There’s no point to it if you don’t care,” she said. “Might as well stay at home and knit.”

Clark laughed. He couldn’t quite picture Lois at home, knitting. But he did want to go to a game with her. A game involving her team. A game that aroused those passions. He did a mental backflip and focussed on trying to make sense of all the things he’d been told about Australian football. “Lois,” he said. “I don’t think you realise how little I know. This game—it’s just a big fog in my mind.”

She thought for a minute and then slipped the saucer from under her cup and put it in the centre of the table. “Imagine this is more oval,” she said. “And it represents a footy ground.”

“Are grounds a certain size?” Clark asked.

“No, they vary. The ‘G is one of the bigger grounds—its playing area is about 170 metres long and about 150 metres wide.”

“Wow,” Clark said. “That’s big.”

“It has to be big,” Lois said. “Each team has eighteen players on the ground, so that’s thirty-six, plus umpires.” She reached for a little container of toothpicks and took out six. She cut off two small sections of her muffin and stuck two toothpicks in each one and then placed the makeshift structures at each ‘end’ of the saucer. “These are the goal posts,” she said. “If the ball is kicked between them, it is a goal, which is worth six points.” She took the other two toothpicks and snapped them in half. She positioned the four halves—one on each side of the existing toothpicks. “These are the point posts,” she said. “If the ball goes between a goal post and a point post, that’s a behind and is worth one point.”

“You get a point for missing?” Clark asked.

Lois nodded. “I believe it’s the only sport in the world where that’s true,” she said. “A score reads goals-behinds-total score, so ‘ten-ten-seventy’ means the team scored ten goals worth six points each and ten behinds worth a point each, and that adds up to seventy points.”

“Who wins?” Clark asked. “The team with the most goals? Or the team with the highest score?”

“Highest score,” Lois said. She pointed to the middle of the saucer. “The game starts with the umpire bouncing the ball. The ruckmen are usually the tallest in the team. As the ball comes back down from the bounce, the ruckmen from each side try to tap it to the advantage of one of their players.”

“Like a tip-off in basketball?”

“Exactly. Once someone gets the ball, he has to dispose of it properly.”

“Either kick or handball?” Clark said.

That earned him a smile. “Well done. He tries to move the ball towards his goal. Once a player has the ball within kicking distance, he can have a shot at goal.”

“Are there set positions?”

“No, except for the centre bounces, any player can go anywhere on the ground.”

“And the centre bounces?”

“There is a centre square, and each team has four players in there at the bounce—a ruckman and three midfielders.”

“The other fourteen can be anywhere?”

“Yes,” Lois said. “Although normal is six in the forward line—we don’t use the word ‘offence’—six in the back line, and one on each wing.”

“Are there reserves? Players who come on during the game?”

“There’s an interchange bench. Each team has three players on the bench. They can swap as often as they like during play.”

“Only three?”

“Only three.”

“What happens if someone gets injured?” Clark asked.

“You make do with two on the bench or someone plays injured.”

Clark stared at the saucer, trying to imagine how thirty-six players could fit on a sports ground without the game deteriorating to total mayhem. Lois pulled two newspapers from a nearby counter and handed him one.

“Read this,” she suggested. “Start at the back—where the sport is.”

Clark finished his eggs and bacon in silence and forced down the rest of his coffee as he flicked through the paper. He was three pages in before he found a story about a sport other than football.

He surreptitiously glanced over the top of the paper.

Even dressed casually—in slacks and a no-nonsense white cotton blouse—Lois Lane was exquisite. She wore very little make-up and no jewellery he could see, yet her femininity oozed from every pore.

Her eyes rose from the paper, and she caught him staring. “You have a question?” she asked with a smile. “Something you don’t understand?”

Clark floundered as he trawled through his mind for a suitable response. “There’s a lot of football,” he managed—rather clumsily, he thought. “Does your paper cover other sports as well?”

“We do,” Lois said. “But during the footy season, unless there is something big happening, such as the Olympics, we usually only have a couple of reporters on general sport. The rest of us do footy.”

“The Olympics start in a couple of weeks,” Clark noted.

Lois grinned. “Then I guess we’ll have to find a few inches for that in amongst the footy.”

“Are you serious?” he asked. “Football would take precedence over something as big as the Olympics?”

“We have a joke here that if World War Three broke out on Grand Final weekend, the war wouldn’t make the front page of any Melbourne newspaper.”

“So, I might get to read *something* about the Atlanta Olympics?”

She grinned. “If you’re really lucky, you might,” she said.

Clark was fairly confident she was teasing him. It felt wonderful. “How long is the football season?”

“Six months, including finals. From the end of March until the end of September.” She grinned suddenly. “It’s said that Melbourne has only two seasons—footy season and non-footy season.”

Clark smiled in response. “Do you have a preference?” he asked, figuring he already knew her answer.

Her grin exploded. “Footy season,” she said. “There’s nothing quite like it.”

* * *

Clark spent the morning with Banjo. They went to a football ground called ‘Arden Street’ and conducted a long interview with the coach of the North Melbourne team. Clark listened, not understanding much but content to use the opportunity to become more familiar with the language of football.

For him, the highlight of the morning was bumping into Lois as he and Banjo left Arden Street.

“Hi, Banjo, Clark,” she said as she approached them.

‘Clark’, he noted with relief. Not ‘Rubber’.

“G’day, Flinders,” Banjo said. “How’s it going?”

“Good,” she said. “You?”

Banjo gestured to the club rooms behind him. “He was in a talkative mood.”

“That’s always good.”

“How’s your story going?” Clark asked.

Lois smiled. “Good, thanks, but I better keep moving. I’ve got two more clubs to get to before I can go back to the office and start writing this up.”

Clark and Banjo walked towards their car. “Is this one of the rich clubs or one of the poor clubs?” Clark asked.

Banjo seemed surprised by the question. “Couldn’t you tell?”

“I don’t have anything to compare it with.”

“North Melbourne is definitely one of the poor clubs,” Banjo said as he unlocked the car. “Their facilities would be in the bottom three or four in the league. Their membership is low. Their match attendances are poor.”

“Isn’t the owner willing to put more money into the club?”

Banjo looked up with surprise. “North is actually the *only* Victorian club that is privately owned. About ten years ago, their financial crisis was such that they were bought by a consortium of wealthy supporters.”

“Who owns the rest of the clubs?” Clark asked.

“The people who love them.”

“Supporters?”

“Members, officially, I guess, but anyone who loves a club considers it their club, and no one argues with that.”

“Who makes the decisions?”

“The members vote in a board, and the board runs the club. But if the members aren’t happy, they hold the board accountable.”

“Does it ever get ugly?”

Banjo grinned. “Sometimes, but it sure beats having some bloke making decisions about your club just because he’s filthy rich.”

Clark gestured behind him. “This club—even though they’re not rich, they’re successful, aren’t they?” He was sure he’d seen North Melbourne at the top of the table printed in the paper this morning.

Banjo nodded. “They’re favourites for this year’s flag.” He grinned suddenly. “Why do you ask, Rubber? You’re not thinking of being a Roo Boy, are you?”

“Roo Boy?”

“North are the Kangaroos. If you barrack for them, you’re a Roo Boy.”

"I haven't decided on my team yet," Clark declared quickly.

Banjo grinned wider as he started the motor. "Better get on with it, mate," he said. "You've only got three days until Round Fifteen starts."

"There have been fourteen rounds already this season?"

"Yep. Fourteen down, eight to go. Plus finals."

"Who do you barrack for?" Clark asked.

"Essendon."

"The…" Clark tried to visualise Lois's grid. "… black and red team? The Bombers?"

"Good onya," Banjo said, his voice laced with surprise. "Has Flinders been helping you?"

Clark nodded.

"What did she say about Essendon?"

"Nothing specific," Clark said.

Banjo seemed to find that funny.

"Why?" Clark asked.

"Because those Hawk supporters despise Essendon with a pure and unrelenting hatred. There's a lot of history between the two clubs—none of it friendly."

"It's that strong?'

"You bet." Banjo glanced sideways, his face serious. "I doubt Flinders would ever speak to you again if you decided to barrack for Essendon."

Clark managed a nervous smile. "You're joking, right?"

His only response was a slightly raised eyebrow.

"Do Essendon fans hate Hawthorn?" Clark asked.

"Not as much," Banjo said gleefully. "We enjoy stirring them, but we save our strongest feelings for Collingwood."

As they drove back to the office, Clark figured he felt a little like he had inadvertently dropped into a war zone. A war where he didn't know the sides. Or the rules. Or the history.

But he was sure he wanted to be on Lois's side.

* * *

Clark's second meeting with Paul Brown was considerably less baffling than the first. They managed to communicate sufficiently well that Clark came away with a pile of books and knew he was expected to read them and gain some background into the game and its history.

Lois came into the newsroom mid-afternoon, and after a brief interlude in Browny's office, she went to her desk with just a quick wave as she passed Clark. Now she was typing furiously.

A cry broke out across the general noise of the newsroom. Clark looked up from the pages of his book to see that Paul had emerged from his office, carrying a crate. He set the crate on the floor and hauled himself onto it.

Clark couldn't help glancing down, half expecting the crate to be bowed under the editor's weight.

Paul Brown didn't seem worried by the possibility of a collapse. "Hey!" he announced excitedly. "I got an email from Deano."

People streamed from their desks to crowd around the editor.

"Well, spill it," Bluey said eagerly. "Did he get to Metropolis all right?"

Clark stood, and his eyes automatically sought Lois's desk. She kept typing for a few seconds, and Clark wondered whether she hadn't heard Paul, or if she were ignoring his announcement. Then, she slipped from her seat and stood at the back of the crowd.

"Read it, Browny," Banjo urged. "Let's hear how the old bludger is getting on."

Paul Brown lifted the printout and began to read. "G'day from sunny Metropolis, where the beer is quite decent, but the coffee is seriously dodgy. I reckon it's strong enough to leach the flesh from your gullet. I've survived one day as a reporter for the Daily Planet—and they haven't given me the heave-ho yet. Though I was told that from now on, I have to wear a suit and tie every day."

Browny paused to allow for the laughter he'd known would come. Clark glanced across to Lois. Her eyes were fixed forward, but it seemed to him that her face was carefully impassive.

"The city is bonzer, actually," Paul read. "And the people are great—really friendly. The bloke I was supposed to swap with got crook, so I've moved in with the boss, an Elvis-loving crooner called Perry. They call me 'Daniel', which is weird. They all seem to go by their real names—except for this sheila called Cat. Her name is Catherine, but I reckon she's called 'Cat' because she prowls around the joint like a feline in heat."

The newsroom reverberated with more laughter. Clark gazed ahead, careful not to meet anyone's eyes.

Browny cleared his throat to command silence. "Tell Bluey I haven't laid eyes on Superman," he read. "Everyone I meet claims to have seen him at least once, but I reckon they're having a lend of me. I reckon he's Metropolis's version of a bunyip. Perry swears he's dinky-di, but you won't

catch me believing it unless I see him with my own two eyes. A man who flies and is strong enough to lift a truck? That sounds like a publicity stunt to me. Amazing what they can do with special effects these days. If I do come within cooee of him, I'm gonna grab him by the cape and haul him back to Oz to play centre half forward for Fitzroy. He'd just need to swap his red jocks for some blue footy shorts."

Paul stopped and grinned widely as the gathered crowd roared with laughter. Clark set his gaze ahead, steadfastly refusing to give in to the compunction to shuffle uncomfortably.

Paul lowered the paper and stepped down from the crate. "That's it," he said. "Break's over. Back to work, the lot of you."

Clark retreated to his desk and buried himself in his book, but his mind was too preoccupied to take in anything he read. Dan Scardino? From the response to his email, he was very popular. Was everyone aware of whatever it was that existed between Lois and Dan? There had been nothing to indicate she was closer to Dan than anyone else. Dan had mentioned Bluey by name, not Lois.

And Clark hadn't seen anyone nudge her or even glance at Lois to imply Dan was somehow more to her than just a colleague.

Was their relationship a secret? Was it a recent thing? Perhaps they were waiting for Dan to return to announce it?

But it still made no sense that Dan Scardino would willingly agree to go to Metropolis, knowing he would leave Lois behind.

Clark pushed his thoughts to the second part of Dan's email.

Did they really think Superman was an elaborate hoax? Clark supposed it wasn't inconceivable—Superman had never been seen outside of Metropolis, rarely spoke, and deliberately remained shrouded in mystery.

What did Lois think of Superman?

Clark risked a quick glance in her direction and caught her staring at him. When their eyes met, she jerked away and returned her attention to her computer screen.

For the first time, she seemed ill at ease.

What had she been thinking in the moments prior to him looking up?

Maybe she was missing Scardino. That would explain why she'd been staring so pensively in his direction. This was Scardino's desk. Maybe the email had brought home how much she missed him. Maybe habit had led her to look in this direction, and she was wishing it was Dan sitting here instead of the American import.

Clark sighed and returned to his book.

* * *

Lois Lane had moved slowly back to her desk. She sat down and sighed as fresh waves of regret assailed her. Dan's email had sounded cheery and untroubled, but she knew him well enough to see right through it. The tone was too jokey, too upbeat, too forced…

Her mind filled with the image of his face, and her heart ached for him.

Aw, Dan, she thought.

She gazed towards his desk.

Clark Kent lifted his head, and their eyes locked. Their connection lasted long enough for her to sense his mood—he seemed a bit dejected, too. That smile of his had vanished.

Lois forced her attention back to her computer screen.

She felt her face heat as she recalled Dan's email and realised that some of it could have seemed offensive to Clark, particularly the bit about the woman who prowled like a cat in heat. And maybe even the bit about not believing in the flying man.

What if Cat were a friend of Clark's? A girlfriend even. He'd said he wasn't married, but that didn't mean he didn't have someone special in his life.

What if Superman were a friend of Clark's?

No, that was unlikely. From what she'd heard of the bloke in blue tights, he appeared infrequently and only ever stayed long enough to help out with whatever disaster had brought him out of hiding. She couldn't remember seeing a report where he had actually spoken.

Lois chanced a quick scan of the room and saw that Clark's dark head was again buried in one of the books Browny had given him. His shoulders seemed more slumped than usual.

Perhaps the email had accentuated how far he was from home. Perhaps he now regretted leaving everything familiar and coming to this footy-crazy city. Perhaps he was feeling as if he didn't really fit in here.

Lois scrolled back to the top of her story and began another edit. Half an hour later, she saved it and closed down her computer. She gathered up her jacket and bag and sauntered over to Dan's desk where Clark was engrossed in a copy of Geoffrey Blainey's *A Game of Our Own.* He looked up as she approached and smiled.

"Hi, Lois," he said.

Now that she was here, Lois wasn't really sure what to say. Clark didn't seem so disheartened now. "You doing OK?" she asked, scanning his face to try to read his mood.

Her question seemed to surprise him. "Sure," he said. "Are you?"

She nodded. "I… ah, just… I was hoping you weren't offended by Dan's email. You probably know the woman called Catherine."

"I do," Clark said. "But I wasn't offended."

"Sorry," she said.

"It's OK," he assured her.

Lois hesitated. She knew exactly what it felt like to be different from everyone else—to not really fit in. And Clark seemed too… refined… too straight-laced to be totally at ease sitting in a pub, downing VBs and loudly swapping tales that regularly crossed the line of good taste.

Assuming he hadn't had the time to make friends outside of the office… and assuming he didn't have any previous contacts in Melbourne… his choices seemed limited to spending the evening alone or going to the pub with the blokes.

Unless she…

Lois really didn't want to seem too forward. There was a fine line between helping a newcomer and appearing pushy.

Particularly when he was a man and she was a woman.

But Clark had given no indication that she made him uncomfortable. And no indication he had misinterpreted her assistance as anything more than she intended.

It wasn't going to be a long-term problem, Lois reasoned. Anyone who looked like Clark Kent was not going to suffer from a lack of female attention. Very soon, he was not going to need her company.

Had he already reached that point?

In an all-male newsroom, it was difficult to assess.

"Did you need something?" Clark asked.

Lois decided to plunge in. He could always decline if he felt he'd already spent enough time with her. "I have to go to the supermarket after work," she said, trying to sound casual. "I was wondering if you wanted to come along. I reckon you're going to need to buy food at some stage."

Clark smiled brightly. He didn't seem at all put off by her suggestion. "Thanks, Lois," he said. "And after we come back from the store, would you let me cook your supper? I'd like to thank you for all your help."

"You cook?" she said, not able to keep the surprise from her tone.

He nodded.

"You don't have to," she hurried to assure him. "You don't owe me anything."

"Actually, I owe you twenty dollars," Clark said with a smile. "And a whole lot more. I'd really like it if you would come back to my unit and let me cook supper."

"Dinner," she corrected. "Or tea. Supper is a cup of tea and a biscuit in the evening."

He smiled again. "Are you ready to go now?"

"Yep, it's well past knock-off time."

Clark closed his book, put his notepad in his desk drawer, and stood. "Let's go then."

* * *

Clark handed Lois a plate of chicken and mushroom ravioli. She scrutinised it as she took it and then looked up to him. "You weren't kidding about being able to cook, were you?"

He sat beside her at Dan Scardino's small table. "Do you cook?"

Lois chuckled. "Not if I can help it. I certainly can't cook like this. Who taught you?"

"My mom."

"I guess she can cook really well, too?"

Clark nodded. "Better than anyone I've ever known."

"Do you miss her?"

Clark paused, deliberately taking time to chew his ravioli. If he said he didn't miss his mom, he would appear heartless. But he couldn't really say he missed her when he intended to fly to Kansas later that evening. "I haven't really been here long enough to miss anyone too much."

"Three months isn't too long," Lois said, as if trying to cheer him. "You'll be home again before you know it."

And Dan will be back here, Clark thought. "What about your folks?" he asked. "Do they live in Melbourne?"

"No."

The shortness of her tone caused Clark's eyes to snap up from his food. There was something in her face—something he took as a warning not to pursue this topic. "How's your story going?"

"Good," Lois replied. "The tough bit is to find something that hasn't already been said. Or at least try to find a new slant to the same stuff."

"With such preoccupation with football, I'm surprised there is anything new to write."

"That's the problem. Match reports are always easy, of course, but filling the mid-week papers with footy news can be difficult." She gestured to her plate. "This is *good*," she said appreciatively.

Clark smiled at her compliment. "Will you be working on your story again tomorrow?" he enquired.

"Tomorrow's Wednesday," she said with a grin. "It's my day off."

Clark felt his spirits plummet. He'd really hoped he would be able to work with her tomorrow.

"It's your day off, too," Lois informed him.

"It is?"

"Yep, half the footy department gets Tuesday off, the other half gets Wednesday. We're Wednesday."

"Mr Brown didn't say anything about it today."

Lois shrugged. "Dan always had Wednesdays off. I can't see why you'd be different."

So that was another thing Lois shared with Dan Scardino. "I'm glad you told me," Clark said, trying for a smile.

"You only get one day off a week, so you should make the most of it."

Clark waited, hoping Lois would tell him what she planned to do. Or ask what he planned to do. She said nothing, so, keeping his tone casual, he asked, "Do you have plans for tomorrow?" Then, to make it sound less personal, he added, "What is there to do around here? Mid-week and in the winter?"

"The usual stuff—movies, golf, tennis, sightseeing. What are you interested in?"

Anything that involves being with you, Clark thought. "What are your plans?"

"Routine stuff in the morning—housework, laundry—then I'm watching a replay in the afternoon."

"A replay?"

"A replay of last weekend's game."

"Any particular game?"

Lois caught his look, and her grin evolved slowly. "Maybe," she conceded.

"A game involving Hawthorn?" he guessed.

She chuckled. "You asked someone who I barrack for?"

Clark acknowledged that with a grin. "*You* wouldn't tell me."

Her eyes shone with amusement. "You're a reporter," she said. "A little research is good for you."

Clark was well aware that the very thing he needed most was to watch Australian football actually being played. If not live, then on the television. But Lois had already been more than generous with her time, and he'd sensed some hesitancy when he'd asked her to come for dinner.

"Have you ever seen a game of footy?" Lois asked.

"No," he admitted, trying not to look too needy.

She grinned. "What are you doing tomorrow arvo?"

He returned her grin. "I'd like to watch a replay," he said quietly.

Her grin widened. Lois reached across the table to where he'd left the map she'd given him. Picking up a pen, she drew two asterisks. "You live here," she said. "I live there. Come around whenever you're ready."

Clark's immediate reaction was joy—at the close proximity of their homes. Then he sobered quickly. The reality was it represented how close Lois lived to Dan, how close she would live to Dan long after he, Clark, had left Australia, reduced to a vague memory of an exchange reporter called 'Rubber'.

Part 4

"Clark! It's so good to see you!"

Clark quickly crossed the yard to take his mom into his arms. She hugged him tightly, and he breathed in the sweet scent of cinnamon. Was it too much to hope she had baked an apple pie? When she released him, he laughed at the exuberance of her welcome. "It's not like I've been away for months," he said.

"No, but you've been so far away," Martha said, smiling warmly. They turned together to go into the farmhouse. "How is it?" she asked. "Are you enjoying Australia? Are the people nice?"

Clark took a big breath. "There's more to get used to than I thought," he admitted. "And the people are very nice."

"Tell me about them," his mom said as she put on the kettle to boil.

"Well, there's Bluey and Banjo and Gazza and the editor—his name is Paul Brown, but everyone calls him Browny."

Martha looked at him blankly. "What are the others' real names?" she asked.

"I don't really know," he said. "They don't seem to use real names much."

His mom's eyes sparked with sudden interest. "Do they call you 'Clark'? Or 'Mr Kent'?"

Clark snorted with amusement. "I haven't heard anyone referred to as 'Mr'," he said.

"They call you 'Clark'?"

"Some do," he hedged.

His mom's grin widened. "But some don't," she guessed gleefully. "What do the rest call you?"

He didn't want to tell her, but Clark had learnt a long time ago that if his mom really wanted to know something, resistance was useless. "Rubber," he said quietly.

"Rubber?"

He nodded, hoping that if his mom made the obvious connection, she wouldn't feel the need to expound on it.

"Why?" Martha asked.

"Beats me."

"Isn't there someone you can ask?"

"Well… there *is* someone. But I haven't wanted to ask her in case—"

"Her?"

Clark tried to ignore the flare of interest that lit his mom's face. "Lois," he said casually. "Lois Lane."

His mom contemplated him for a long moment. Then she slid into the adjacent chair, and Clark could see her concern manifest in the little crinkles that had gathered at the corners of her eyes. "Have you had contact with anyone at the Planet since leaving?"

"Not really," Clark replied. "I emailed Perry, and he replied with a few lines saying he was pleased I had arrived safely."

"Nothing about… Mayson?"

Clark shook his head.

His mom's hand rested on his arm. "I think the chance to be in Australia for three months came at exactly the right time."

"That occurred to me, too," Clark said. "Though I hate feeling as if I've run away."

"You don't think Perry knows?" Martha questioned, suddenly alarmed. "You don't think that's why he offered you the chance to go?"

"No," Clark said firmly, hoping to reassure her. "Perry knows things have been strained between Mayson and me recently, but I don't think he knows that Mayson's continual attacks on Superman land so close to home."

"I read Mayson's story last week," Martha said. "You know, the one where she asserted that Superman has a secret life and challenged him to stop hiding behind a disguise and reveal who he really is."

Clark felt the familiar tightening across his chest. "Mayson hasn't liked Superman right from the get-go," he said. "I remember when Cat suggested the name 'Superman', Mayson said that 'Super-*monster*' would be more appropriate."

"Do you think there is any chance she will drop this now?" Martha asked hopefully. "If Superman makes very few appearances during the next three months, Mayson might realise that he's old news and move on to something else."

"Not Mayson," Clark said with a sigh of resignation. "Once she gets an idea, she never, ever lets it go."

"She gave up on having a relationship with Clark."

"Only after I got far more brutally honest than I was comfortable with," Clark said grimly. "She had decided I was the man for her, and once Mayson Drake decides she wants something, she usually gets it, regardless of what anyone else wants."

Martha stood and poured the boiling water into the teapot. "And she wants Superman exposed?"

"Yep," Clark said. "Exposed, and confined to somewhere he can be controlled, preferably by her."

"Oh, Clark," Martha said.

He heard the fear in his mom's voice and tried to reassure her with a smile. "Despite Mayson's influence and her one-woman campaign to stir up suspicion and distrust, she can't actually force me to reveal that Clark Kent is Superman. Unless of course, she discovers it for herself."

"If she did find out," Martha asked, "do you think she would print the story?"

"In a heartbeat," Clark said with certainty. "So for a whole lot of reasons—you, Dad, the farm, me having anything that resembles a life—I have to ensure that she never finds out."

"How are you going to do that?"

"I can't help feeling that she has left me with only two choices," Clark said disconsolately. "Either relocate—again—or give up the idea of trying to help people."

"Ah, Clark," Martha said. "I'm so sorry."

He manufactured another smile. "We tried, Mom," he said. "I've been in Metropolis for two years—that's way longer than I've ever been able to stay anywhere before. Using the suit as a disguise was a good idea. It bought me some time, allowed me some stability."

"But won't that stability just make it harder?" Martha asked. "Harder to leave your friends and your job and the life you've made in Metropolis?"

"That's how it is, Mom," Clark said. "People move on."

Martha poured milk into the cups. "You're not thinking of moving to Australia, are you? Permanently?"

Clark's pause was infinitesimal, but he knew it was long enough to spark his mother's suspicions.

"You *are* thinking of staying there?" she pressed.

"No," he said. "If I stayed there, I'd still be Clark Kent, formerly of Metropolis. If I move, I need to go someplace where there is no link to the past."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm not making any decisions yet, Mom," Clark said. "I want to help people; I want to use what I've been given to make a positive contribution to the world that has been my home for all these years. But I just don't have what it takes to be a big celebrity. I hate it when they gawk at me. Superman's not even real. He's just a front, yet people can't accept that. They either idolise me like some sort of god—you've seen all the merchandise—or they are terrified that I am going to hurt them. The only way I can live my life is to be Clark Kent, regular guy. But every single time I use my powers, I put that in jeopardy."

"And being in the same newsroom as Mayson Drake, the nation's top investigative reporter, didn't help much."

"No," Clark agreed with a wry, humourless grin. "That's why I ran away."

Martha laid a motherly hand on his arm. "You didn't run away," she said gently.

"Sometimes it seems that I've spent half my life running away."

His mom poured the tea. "Your father and I worry about you."

"I know, Mom."

"Sometimes, even though you have us… sometimes you just seem so… alone."

"I'm not alone," Clark said, brightly. Too brightly—his mother would see right through it. "I have you and Dad and Jimmy and Perry."

"But you've never felt close enough to anyone to even consider telling them the truth about yourself, have you?"

Clark took his tea and stared into the brown liquid. "No," he answered. "No, I haven't."

His mom waited until his gaze rose from the cup and met her eyes. "You'll find someone," she assured him. "I know you'll find someone."

An image invaded Clark's mind—uninvited, unsought, but welcome nevertheless—the image of a woman surrounded by agitated youths.

"She'll have to be someone very special," Martha said. "Someone trustworthy, someone loyal, someone who can overlook a few unusual circumstances and appreciate the heart of a truly special man."

There was a touch of humour in Clark's grimace. "A few unusual circumstances?"

His mom smiled back. "Just a few."

As Clark sipped his tea, his mind volleyed back to the other side of the world. This time he saw her dressed in a pink tracksuit. His arms could almost feel her tackling him.

"Tell me about Lois Lane," Martha said.

Clark's attention swung to his mother's face, and for the thousandth time, he wondered if she could see into his mind. "She works for the Herald Sun as a football reporter," he replied evenly.

"Is she pretty?"

"Mom!"

"Is she pretty?"

Again, resistance would be futile. "Yes," Clark admitted. "She's pretty."

"You like her, don't you?"

Clark tried a final means of escape. "I've known her for less than two days."

"But you like her." It wasn't a question.

"What makes you say that?" Clark asked, ironing his tone flat.

"The way you said her name."

Clark feigned a spluttered snort that he hoped would convince his mom there was no substance to her conjecture. "She's in a relationship already."

Martha was undeterred. "Are you sure about that?"

Clark hesitated. Was he? Lois said she spent a lot of time with Dan. She said she would miss him. But had she ever actually said they were together?

"Are you?" Martha persisted.

"He's in Metropolis doing my job," Clark said.

His mother stood and removed an apple pie from the oven. Its aroma flooded the kitchen, and Clark inhaled appreciatively. "Are you seeing her tomorrow?" she asked conversationally.

"I've missed your home cooking," Clark said. "There's no smell in the world quite like your apple pie."

"Are you seeing her tomorrow?" Martha asked, less conversationally this time.

"Yes."

"At the newspaper?"

"No," he admitted, feeling ridiculously like he was ten years old again. "We both have tomorrow off."

Martha placed the pie on the bench and turned, her eyes gleaming with triumph. She squeezed his shoulder as she bent low and whispered in his ear. "I can't wait to meet her."

Clark smiled. "You'll be waiting awhile," he said mildly. "She lives on the other side of the world."

Martha just grinned wider. "Want some apple pie?" she offered.

* * *

Clark stayed in Smallville long enough to help his dad with wiring a new fence and snatch a few hours' sleep in his own bed. When he returned to Melbourne, it was late morning, and he only had a short time to fill before he was due at Lois's to watch the replay.

He completed settling into his new environment and stashed away his empty suitcases, trying not to think about when he would have to bring them out again. By then, his time would be over. The time he had with Lois. The time he had to make a decision about his future…

And the future of Superman.

As Clark ate his lunch, he memorised the grid of AFL teams that Lois had given him and read every word of the *Herald Sun* he'd bought. He also read the football section of the *Age*—the rival Melbourne paper. He finished eating his lunch, glanced at his watch, and wondered how early would be acceptable to arrive at Lois's. It wasn't one o'clock yet.

His thoughts returned to Smallville and his conversation with his mom. Since arriving in Australia, there had been so much to learn—so many new people, new circumstances, and new experiences—he had been able to push Mayson Drake to the shadows of his mind.

But he knew she would not give up her campaign to hunt down and expose Superman.

He had relocated to a new country, but even that hadn't enabled him to escape the truth that he was an alien with extraordinary powers living on a planet that could never be his own. From his earliest memories, he had known he was different, had known he didn't really belong here.

Didn't belong anywhere.

But this was old ground. Worn ground. No amount of wishing or speculating or dreaming could make him normal. And, right now, he was a long way from Metropolis. A long way from Mayson Drake.

But close—geographically—to Lois Lane.

And that thought made him smile.

His mom's words came back to him—about meeting someone special.

Lois Lane.

She was unlike anyone he had ever met.

She was open and friendly and seemed to accept everyone at face value. Was there a limit to her acceptance? What if he told her he was an alien? Would she run away in shock? Would she look at him like a bizarre museum piece?

Somehow, he couldn't imagine either reaction.

Not from Lois.

But he doubted she would ever know.

There had been nothing in Lois's behaviour to indicate that she saw him as anything other than a colleague who could sorely use her help.

And maybe she was in love with Dan Scardino.

Maybe.

Clark wasn't sure.

He needed to find out.

But how did you ask a woman if she were in love with someone else?

And he certainly wasn't going to use others to procure information about Lois.

A knock sounded, and his heart leapt in hopeful anticipation. A quick glance through his door confirmed it was Lois. Clark forced himself to cross the floor at mere human speed and opened the door, hoping his smile didn't seem too enthusiastic. "I thought I was coming to you," he greeted.

"No replays for me," Lois said. She was casually dressed in jeans, a red sweater, and a denim jacket. "I just got a call from Browny, and rumour has it that Kendall has gone down

with a training injury, so I've been sent to see what I can find out."

"But it's your day off," Clark protested.

Lois shrugged. "That's what happens when you're on the lowest rung of the ladder."

She said it with such easy acceptance, Clark wanted to take her into his arms and tell her she would never be on the lowest rung of his ladder. "Kendall?" he said. "From Geelong?"

Lois's eyebrows lifted in surprise even as her mouth cut to a broad grin. "I'm impressed with your research," she said. "But your pronunciation needs a little work."

"It does?"

"J'long," she said. "The team is called J'long."

"J'long," Clark repeated. He gestured behind him to the newspapers still on his table. "I did some reading over lunch."

Lois reached into her bag and brought out a video tape. She offered it to him. "You can still watch the replay," she said. "There's commentary, so you'll be able to pick up some of it."

Clark felt the sudden rise of panic. If he didn't come right out and say that he wanted to accompany her, he risked spending the afternoon alone with a video tape.

"Dan's VCR is under his telly," Lois said.

"Would you mind if I came with you to Geelong?" Clark asked in a rush.

"No, I wouldn't mind," Lois said evenly. Clark could determine nothing in her reaction to enlighten him as to whether she had been hoping he would ask or hoping he wouldn't. "It's a bit of a drive though," she warned.

Even better. "What should I bring?"

"The usual. Notepad, pencil. I've got a camera."

"You don't get a photographer to go with you?" Clark asked, acknowledging privately that his real motivation for the question was to determine if they would be travelling to Geelong alone.

"Not on Wednesday," Lois said. "Not when it's Geelong. Not when there's no story yet."

Clark picked up his notepad and pencil from the table and slipped his jacket from the back of a chair. He gestured to his clothes. "Are jeans OK?" he asked.

Lois nodded. "Sure. We don't dress up much around here."

He'd noticed that.

Soon they were in the Jeep and heading west. "We have to go back through the city," Lois said. "Then over the Westgate Bridge, and it's about fifty minutes to Geelong."

"Geelong isn't a suburb of Melbourne?"

"No. Geelong is a city of about 125,000 people set on Corio Bay. For many years, they were the only non-Melbourne club."

"I was going to ask you about that," Clark said. "There are sixteen clubs, but you said that eleven of them were local to Melbourne—that's an incredibly high percentage."

Lois sighed. "Yeah," she said. "Of the sixteen teams, five are from interstate—two in Perth, one in Sydney, one in Brisbane, and one in Adelaide. Of the other eleven teams, ten are in Melbourne, and then there's Geelong, an hour down the Princes Freeway."

"*One* city supports *ten* teams?"

Lois nodded.

"Why?" Clark asked. "Why are there so many teams in Melbourne?"

"For many years, the AFL was the VFL—the Victorian Football League. There were twelve teams—eleven in Melbourne and one in Geelong. Six games were played every Saturday afternoon. It was the best of times."

Her voice had become imbued with an enchanting richness, and her face was potent with memories.

"Every Saturday morning in winter," Lois continued, "Melbourne would be alive and buzzing with people heading to the games. It was almost tribal—herds of followers making the trek to whichever suburban ground their team was playing at that day. In many ways, just getting there was half of the fun. Then a few hours later, it would all happen in reverse—except now, half of the tribes were deliriously happy and the other half were distraught."

"What happened?" Clark asked. "What changed all of that?"

"The powers that be decided we needed a national competition," Lois said. "Sydney is the biggest city, and it had no Aussie Rules footy, so at the end of 1981, South Melbourne, the Swans, were moved to Sydney to become the Sydney Swans."

"Sounds reasonable," Clark said hesitantly.

"Not if you barracked for South Melbourne, it wasn't," Lois said darkly. "When Sydney played at home, there were only five games in Melbourne on a Saturday—and lonesome figures dressed in the red and white of South Melbourne were scattered amongst the crowds at the other

games looking like the fallout of a master plan that didn't include them."

Clark figured that whatever he said could be taken the wrong way, so he didn't comment. They had long since passed the river and were coming down the far slope of the Westgate Bridge. The views of the bay had given way to factories and residential areas on both sides of the freeway. "When did the other interstate teams join?" he asked.

"In 1987, a club was formed in Perth, called the West Coast Eagles, and a club in Queensland called the Brisbane Bears. The Eagles had a good foundation to build on because Western Australia played footy and had their own league—the Western Australian Football League—the WAFL."

"The waffle?" Clark said, smiling.

"Western Australian Football League—the WAFL." Lois smiled before continuing. "But Queensland and New South Wales are rugby league states. So when South Melbourne went to Sydney and when the Bears began, there was very little interest."

"Is there interest now?"

"It's growing slowly. There's always been fierce rivalry between Sydney and Melbourne. They are passionate about rugby league, which we derogatively refer to as 'mobile wrestling'. They retaliate by calling footy 'aerial ping-pong'."

Clark smiled. "When did the other two clubs join? Adelaide and Fremantle?"

He was rewarded with a grin. "You *have* been working hard."

"I'm coming from a long way behind."

"Adelaide joined in 1991, and Fremantle, the second Western Australian club, joined last year."

"And does it work?" Clark said. "Has it made the competition better? Does the average supporter like the changes?"

"There is the argument that we had to do it. Grow or be overtaken. Expand or be sunk. Explore new markets or risk sucking the old ones dry."

"But?" Clark pressed.

Lois sighed again. "But some of us miss the days when the trip down the Princes Highway"—she gestured around them— "to watch your team play in Geelong was considered the big footy trip of the year."

"Do you think more teams will join?"

Lois sighed. "I think sixteen teams is as far as we can push it, so if other interstate clubs come in, I fear it will be at the expense of a Victorian club."

"I read that Sydney and Melbourne are similar in size," Clark said. "So it seems logical that the single team in Sydney would have many more opportunities for support and sponsorship than the ten teams having to compete in Melbourne."

Lois's eyes left the road long enough to send him a look of undisguised respect. "Exactly," she said quietly.

The warmth from her look meandered through him like sweet honey. "That worries you?"

"That worries me a lot," Lois said earnestly. "I don't know what it's like your country, but here in Victoria, footy is everything. Many, many people—people whose lives are hard, people who have very little—find their greatest joy in their footy team. They identify with it, love it, consider it a part of their family, talk about it, mourn the lost games, gloat over the victories, and cry over the memories—both good and bad. It is something that binds us all together. It is said that if you can talk footy, you can talk to anyone in Melbourne and find common ground."

"It really is that all-encompassing?"

"Very close. I don't know anyone who doesn't have a footy team." She grinned sideways at him. "Except you."

"Can the average fan afford to go to games?"

"Absolutely. The entry prices are kept low, and it costs only a few cents for kids to get in. The grounds are big. The MCG can hold one hundred thousand people, and Waverley, seventy-seven thousand. For many families, it is their big outing of the week."

"But things are changing?" Clark said.

Again, Lois sighed. "It may be a good business decision to take a team from Victoria, but that won't mean much to the thousands of supporters who will feel like the lifeblood has been leached from them."

"They can't choose another team?"

Lois shook her head. "No. The bond between supporter and club is rarely broken. That's why so many South Melbourne supporters still go to other games in their red-and-white jumpers. You look into their faces, and you can see their loss. They loved something, and it was snatched away from them."

"They can't barrack for Sydney?"

"Some do, probably most. Some turned their back and vowed to never again watch another game. Some—very, very few—found other clubs."

"You think other Victorian clubs will go?"

"I'm sure of it," Lois said, sadness oozing through her words. "I'm sure that within three years, at least one of the current Victorian clubs will no longer exist in the form it is now. There will either be a merger or a takeover or a forced move interstate."

"How do the people feel about that?"

"Many of us are terrified that it could be our club. The big clubs are safe—Collingwood, Carlton, Essendon—the clubs that have large memberships, huge followings, draw big crowds, and are financially stable. But others—Footscray, Fitzroy, North Melbourne—their supporters fear the future that rests in the hands of those despised administrators who choose to only see the game as a business."

They were well out of the city now, and there were green fields on both sides of the freeway.

"Is your club safe?" Clark said.

"I hope so," Lois said, and her voice shook. "I hope so."

Part 5

Half an hour later, Lois and Clark left the highway and weaved through the streets of the bayside city of Geelong. The road they took was wide and straight and gently undulating. Clark surmised it was an older part of the town. The houses exuded a timeless elegance, due in part to the ornate decoration of the front porches and the fully grown trees and shrubs in the front gardens.

Lois parked the Jeep next to a large sports complex decked out in blue and white. "Kardinia Park," she said. "Home of the Geelong Cats."

"I noticed that Hawthorn is going to play Geelong this weekend," Clark said as they climbed from the Jeep. "Will the game be here?"

"Yeah."

"Will you be here?"

"No," Lois said. "I'm doing St Kilda-Sydney on Saturday."

As they walked across the grassy strip to the stadium, Clark surveyed the area. It had a quiet and sedate atmosphere that seemed more suited to a recreational club of weekend sportsmen than a top professional outfit. "Are you able to go to Hawthorn games often?" he asked Lois.

"Maybe five or six times a season."

"How often do you cover the Hawthorn game?"

"Never," she said. "Browny keeps me away from them."

"Why?"

"Because he doesn't trust me to be impartial," she said without any noticeable resentment.

"But…" Clark wasn't sure how to respond to such a frank admission. He recalled reading Lois's match reports from the previous weekend. "But you write with such clarity and vivid detail," he said. "I haven't even seen the game being played, yet out of everything I've read, it was your words that gave me the clearest picture."

Lois stopped abruptly as her eyes drilled into his. "Do you mean that?" she demanded.

"Yes, I do."

A pleased smile spread across Lois's face. "That is one of the nicest things anyone has ever said about my work." She rested her hand lightly on his arm. "Thank you, Clark."

Lois… her touch, her eyes, her smile. Clark stood there, helplessly enchanted, as they bombarded his senses. He became conscious of the protracted silence and frantically hunted through a brain gone to pulp for something coherent to say. "Is that hard?" he managed. "Not being able to see your own team?"

"I would prefer to be there, of course, but there are always replays." Lois grinned up at him. "And the bottom line is that I get paid to watch and write about footy. I really don't have a lot to whinge about."

They circled the outside of the stadium until they came to an unlocked gate. Lois pushed through it without hesitation. The playing field was deserted. She headed for a door under the grandstand and knocked vigorously.

When there was no response, Lois thumped harder.

Eventually, an older man opened the door and glared at her. "Whata ya want?" he said.

Lois smiled. "G'day, Poddy," she said. "The bush telegraph is buzzing with the news of an injury this morning."

The man scowled. "The bush telegraph got it wrong. Sorry you wasted your precious time coming here."

"I always enjoy a trip to Sleepy Hollow," Lois drawled. "Will Kendall play this week?"

"It must be nice to get out of the poison of the Big Smoke."

"Kendall? Will he play?"

"Are you here as a reporter?" Poddy sneered. "Or as a spy for Hawthorn?"

"I reckon the Hawks would be pretty pleased if you lost Kendall," Lois noted smoothly. "That'll leave a big hole in your defence."

"Kendall will play," the man said brusquely.

"On one leg?"

"He'll be fully fit."

"No problems at all?"

"None."

"You'll train this afternoon? Kendall, too?"

"Of course," the man said scornfully.

"Thanks for all your help," Lois said, smiling sweetly. She spun and walked away. As she reached the gate, she turned slightly and called out, "I'll make sure the Hawk forwards know Kendall's shoulder is a bit dodgy."

The man slammed the door with such force that the echo reverberated around the deserted stadium.

Lois continued through the gate, and as she crossed the park towards the street, she pulled her cell phone from her bag and thumbed in the numbers. "Do you need to get back to Melbourne for anything?" she asked, looking up at Clark.

He shook his head.

"Browny?" Lois said into the cell. "Yeah, Kendall has definitely done something. They won't even admit to the ankle we've known about for weeks. This could be his shoulder though. No, I don't know if it's left or right. He might still play. I dunno how bad it is. Don't know if they'll risk him, not with finals coming."

Lois listened for a few seconds, and then said, "No, they wouldn't say anything. You know Geelong, it's like trying to get blood from a stone. You could run with it—throw a few uncertainties into the mix. I'm guessing training will be a non-event, but as I'm here, I'll stick around and have a squiz." She hung up and smiled at Clark. "Are you up for a little investigation?"

"Sure," Clark said, feeling a bit dazed by the rapid progression of the story. "Browny is going to print that Kendall's shoulder is injured?"

"Yep."

"But we didn't see Kendall," Clark said. "And the person we spoke to said he had no injuries."

Lois grinned. "Don't try to tell me that Americans always tell the whole truth when nosy journos ask awkward questions."

Clark laughed. "No," he conceded.

Lois responded with a relaxed sigh. "It's a nice day, there's a bit of sunshine around. We could do worse than poking around Sleepy Hollow for a few hours."

That sounded perfect. "Fine with me."

"You sure it's OK?" Lois said as they reached the Jeep. "You probably had plans, and you won't get another day off for a week."

Clark just wanted to be with Lois. "My only plans were to watch the replay," he reminded her.

Lois settled into the driver's seat. "If you still want to, we could watch that this evening," she offered.

"That'd be great," Clark said. Then he deliberately dampened his enthusiasm. "If it's OK with you."

"I'll be watching it anyway," Lois said. "You're welcome to join me."

"Thanks."

At the next intersection, Lois did a wide U-turn and headed back to the centre of Geelong.

"Where are we going now?" Clark asked.

"If Kendall was injured, you'd expect him to seek medical attention, right?"

Clark nodded.

"Let's check it out then," Lois moved into the right-hand lane. "OK," she said. "I'm going to drive past the front of the hospital. They don't know you, so you can take a good look at the entrance."

"What am I looking for?"

"A group of people—probably two or three that appear to be hanging around aimlessly. See if they've got coffee."

"OK."

A minute later, they passed the hospital and then stopped at the traffic lights. "Well?" Lois said.

"You were right," Clark said. "Two men, both drinking coffees."

"The footy department of the Geelong Addy," Lois proclaimed triumphantly. "That's Geelong's local paper. They must be worried if they've sent two along to investigate."

"Addy?" Clark asked.

"Advertiser. There's a sort of symbiotic relationship between the Addy and the footy club. They revel in the cosiness of the united city of Geelong against the nasty outsiders from the big city."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Not at all," Lois said lightly. "Except it hasn't worked. Their last premiership was 1963."

"Oh," Clark said. "If you know the reporters, wouldn't they have recognised your vehicle?"

"Possibly. But they would've seen me turn left, so they'll think we're headed home."

"But we're not?"

"Nope."

Less than a minute later, Lois parked in a tiny side street. She put a few coins in the meter, and Clark followed her as she slipped into a cafe diagonally opposite the front of the hospital. They sat at a table near the window.

"See that?" Lois gestured to the tall building where Clark had seen the gathered reporters.

"Yes."

"That's the Geelong Private Hospital," Lois said. "The building next to it—directly across from us—is the Geelong Public Hospital. Kendall went into the Private, and the Addy journos know because they're congregated at the door waiting for him to come out."

"But?"

"But there is a passage under the road between the two hospitals," Lois said. "More than one Geelong player has entered the Private Hospital and snuck out of the Public Hospital exit."

"So we watch?"

"Yep," Lois said. "And if Kendall comes out and faces them, we'll know whatever was wrong isn't too bad. But if he tries to avoid them, we'll know it's serious."

"The Geelong players don't completely trust the reporters from their own town?"

"Nobody trusts anyone is this business," Lois said. Her grin flashed again. "Actually, that's not quite true, but footy runs on rumour and innuendo and half-baked stories, and most of the time, we play games that have absolutely nothing to do with chasing a football."

The waitress came to take their order. She was probably in her sixties and had probably eaten a little too much of the cafe's fare in her time.

"Thanks, Mandy," Lois said after she'd ordered two coffees.

"S'OK, Flinders," Mandy replied. "You reckon we'll beat the Pussies on Saturday?"

Lois chuckled. "You know Geelong—if the game means anything at all, they usually find a way to lose it."

They shared a gleeful grin. "1989," they whooped together. Their shared laughter ricocheted around the small cafe.

"Will you be there on Saturday?" Lois asked.

"Wouldn't miss it for anything in the world," Mandy said. "I'm taking my daughter and five of me grandkids."

"Do the kids barrack for Hawthorn?" Lois asked.

Mandy looked at Lois with open indignation. "They wouldn't be coming to the footy with me if they didn't," she declared staunchly.

Lois smiled and put a hand on the older lady's arm. "Well-brought-up kids, hey?"

"Too right," Mandy said. She turned to Clark. "Who'j'barrack for?" she asked.

Clark looked from the older woman to Lois. Lois stared back, her face impassive, but with the hint of a smile playing on her mouth.

"I… ah… I'm new around here," Clark said. "I haven't decided yet."

"Who's the most important woman in your life?" Mandy demanded.

"Ah…"

"Is it your mum?"

"I… guess so," Clark said.

Mandy smiled jubilantly. "Then you should barrack for the Hawks," she declared firmly. "We're the Family Club."

Clark nodded obediently.

Mandy walked away, and Lois said, "She's a Hawthorn supporter."

"No kidding," Clark said with a smile.

"Mandy won't tell anyone we were here," Lois said. "She keeps watch on the hospitals for me and rings me if any Geelong players go in or out."

Mandy brought their coffees, and Clark eyed his with a reluctance he hoped wasn't noticeable. He hadn't had a decent coffee since arriving on Australian soil. He promised himself that next time he went home, he would definitely remedy that. He added three sugars. Lois watched, her eyebrows lifting a notch higher with each additional spoonful.

"Are you planning to go home ten kilos heavier?" she asked, grinning.

Clark was still trying to think of a response when Lois suddenly straightened in her seat. She pulled a camera from her bag and went to the window. He stood behind her and saw that a tall man had been corralled by the two reporters. Clark tuned in his hearing.

"Nothing at all, fellas," the tall guy said.

"You'll play on Saturday?"

"You bet," the man Clark assumed was Kendall replied. "Gotta beat the Squawks."

The reporters chuckled. "Was it your shoulder, mate?" one asked.

"Yeah," Kendall admitted. "Just a bump to the right shoulder. The scans say no damage." He took a step forward. "Thanks, fellas."

Lois turned back to the table and sat down. "Looks like he's OK," she said.

Clark could discern no disappointment in her tone. "Were you hoping he wouldn't be?" he asked. "You'd have a story, and Hawthorn would have more chance of winning if Kendall isn't playing for Geelong."

Lois shrugged. "Stories are good, winning is great, but I've seen too many talented footballers sidelined through injury." She pulled out her cell and called Browny. She talked for a few moments, but Clark tuned out her words and just allowed himself the luxury of watching her.

Lois was beautiful.

As she talked, a fascinating myriad of expressions floated across her face. Her eyebrows lifted, and that amazing smile flashed with wonderful regularity. How would it feel if she turned those luscious brown eyes on him and gave him a smile of love? Clark knew he would have no defence. He would simply melt on the spot and be hers forever.

Even without that special smile just for him… he was completely enchanted.

She hung up her cell and smiled at him in friendly fashion. "How are you settling in?" she asked.

"Good," he said, tearing his mind back from its wanderings. "Though I haven't actually seen footage of a game yet, and I'm not at all confident that I could write a match report."

"I don't think that is what Browny has in mind for you," Lois said. "Not just yet anyway."

"Then what?"

"I imagine he'll ask you to write your impressions of the game—from an outsider's viewpoint. That would be fascinating reading. Those of us who grew up with the game love a peek of how it looks to fresh eyes."

That sounded reassuring. "I'm not sure I'll get all the terminology correct."

"That will be a part of the attraction," Lois said. "But if you're really worried, I'd be happy to look over your copy before you submit it."

"Thanks."

"Has Browny told you which games you're doing this weekend?"

"No," Clark said. "But I'm hoping I'll be with you."

Lois thought for a moment, and Clark wondered if she was going to respond to his boldly stated preference. "I know," she exclaimed suddenly. "On Sunday, I reckon it's a good bet you'll be sent to the Melbourne-Richmond game at the 'G. Two traditional rivals, big crowd… Yeah, Browny will want you to see that game."

"Will you be there?"

"No," Lois said. "I've got Footscray-Fremantle on Sunday."

"Oh," Clark said, disappointed.

"But," Lois said, "you could tell Browny that you'd like to see the other main ground, Waverly Park, on Saturday. That'd mean you'd be at St Kilda-Sydney."

"Which is the game you're doing?" Clark said, trying to temper his leap from disappointment to delight.

She nodded. "We can drive out there together. There's no public transport." She drained her coffee. "Oh, and dress warmly. It's not known as Arctic Park for nothing."

"Thanks for the warning." Clark picked up his cup and saw with some amazement that it was almost empty. He couldn't recall drinking much of it.

They replaced the empty cups on the counter with a pink five dollar note, and Lois called out, "See ya, Mandy. Go Hawks!"

"Go Hawks!" came the shout from the back room.

Lois and Clark returned to the Jeep. "We've got a couple of hours before training starts," she said. "What would you like to do?"

"You're the local," Clark said. "What do you suggest?"

Lois got into the Jeep and leant over to unlock his door. "Let's go to Eastern Beach," she said.

* * *

A few minutes later, they parked at the top of a hill that overlooked a wide bay. In the bowl of the bay was a swimming area enclosed by a large circular boardwalk. "Feel like a walk?" Lois said.

"Sure," Clark replied.

They made their way down the hill, crossed the stretch of sand, and stepped onto the wooden boardwalk. The swimming area had platforms and diving boards and a big waterwheel.

"Looks like fun," Clark commented.

"It is," Lois said. "In summer."

"Lois," Clark said sternly. "You surely cannot consider this weather to be winter."

"Why not?" she shot back, grinning.

"There's no snow," he said. "And it has to be at least fifty degrees right now."

"Sunny winter days are the absolute best," Lois said.

"Yep," Clark agreed. This was perfect.

They strolled around the large circle of the boardwalk in silence as the placid sun rippled off the water and the gentle breeze played on their faces. The boardwalk seemed to transport them from the bustle of the city and into another world.

Clark allowed himself to daydream as they walked. What if this were real? Him, here with Lois? As a couple? As two people absolutely content in their togetherness? Two people whose future was secure in each other? He imagined the warmth of her hand in his. Imagined how she would look up at him, not only with a friendly grin, but with so much more. In his mind, he saw them reach the furthest point of the arc and stop. He would take her into his arms and lean down and conduct a thorough exploration of her tantalising mouth.

Clark wrenched his mind back from paradise. "What happened in 1989?" he asked.

"1989," Lois said, with a sigh infused with poignant memories.

Clark nodded, encouraging her to continue.

"Grand Final," she said. "Hawthorn versus Geelong."

"I thought so." He smiled down at her. "And I can tell from your expression that Hawthorn won."

"We did," Lois said. "But it was a close thing."

"Tell me," he requested, because he loved listening to her voice. And he loved her accent. And he relished hearing her talk about something she loved.

"The first bounce…" Lois said. "The ruckmen went up, Geelong cleared it… got it to their gun forward, Gary Ablett. He marked, had a shot for goal, kicked straight, and they're a goal up."

"That doesn't sound like the greatest start," Clark noted.

"Ah, there was more to that bounce than most of us realised at first. As the ball was bounced, Mark Yeates from Geelong charged at Hawthorn's centre half forward, Dermott Brereton, and belted him."

"You're only allowed to bump if the ball is nearby, right?"

"Right," Lois said. "And the ball was nowhere near them. It was illegal, and it looked premeditated."

"Losing a key player in the opening minute can't be good."

Lois glanced up with a look Clark was starting to recognise—a look that told him he had hit the mark with his comment. A look that said her respect for him was growing. A look that did untold things to his insides. "But this was Dermie," she said with deep affection in her voice. "He could dish it out, no question, but when he copped it, he didn't squeal. Anyway, Yeates had got him good, and he was pretty badly hurt. A couple of broken ribs and a tear in his kidney. Dermie collapsed onto his back and when the trainers managed to get him to his feet, he was woozy and vomiting. They tried to get him off the ground, but he wouldn't go, so they sent him to full forward where it was more likely he would get a few moments to recover."

"What happened?"

"The ball came down our end, Dermie marked it, and goaled. The message could not have been clearer—hit us with everything you have, but we will *not* lie down."

"The Hawks went on to a big win?" Clark guessed.

"No," Lois said. "Dermie was bleeding internally, but that wasn't our only problem. Dipper played most of the game with a punctured lung. Platten was hit, too, and had a concussion. There were only two on the interchange bench in those days, so for the entire game, we had at least one player on the field with a significant injury. We had a big lead, but the injuries took their toll, and Ablett was sensational for Geelong, kicking nine goals. They came back really strongly, but we held on and won by six points."

"Were there recriminations for Geelong because of their tactics?"

"No. The umpires didn't see it. Footy has been cleaned up a bit since then. Geelong hadn't won the premiership since 1963. They were desperate. Not that it helped them any. They lost to us in '89, and then made the Grand Final in '92, '94, and last year, and lost all of them."

Clark winced. "Ouch."

Lois shrugged. "They aren't called the 'handbaggers' for nothing."

"Handbaggers?"

Lois laughed. "A term meant to suggest that the Geelong team lack a bit of heart when things get tough."

"And do they?"

"Depends on who you ask," Lois said with a shrug. "But the records say they haven't won a flag in over thirty years."

They were almost back to the shore. Clark didn't want this to end… not yet. He wanted to prolong this time with Lois, wanted to savour the feeling of being alone with her. "Would you like to walk around again?" he asked.

"OK."

Clark dropped to the lower level of the boardwalk and held out his hand towards Lois. She only hesitated for a moment and then put her hand in his and followed him down. Clark used his other hand to steady her, and, once she'd landed, for a split second, he was almost holding her. She backed away—when everything within him wanted her to advance… wanted her to wrap her arms around his neck and nestle into his chest.

They walked clockwise around the boardwalk. Clark buried his hands in his jeans pockets to suppress the urge to reach for her hand. "When we go back to Kardinia Park," he asked, "are we going as reporters or opposition spies?"

Lois eyed him speculatively. "Are you sure you haven't done this before?"

"Walked in the Australian sun with a beautiful woman?" Clark asked.

She was almost quick enough to hide her reaction to his compliment. Almost. The slight flicker of her eyelids gave her away. It was too insignificant for most people to have noticed, but Clark did. What he couldn't decipher was the underlying meaning. Wasn't she used to being told she was beautiful? Had she spent so much time competing in a man's world that the men in it had become blind to her beauty? Had she dismissed his comment as empty flattery?

"No," Lois said lightly. "Reporting on sport."

"No, I haven't really done this before," Clark answered. "I did a game-fixing scandal story once, but the sport was nothing more than the means to the criminal end."

"Getting back to your question," Lois said, "I'm going partly so I can give Browny a quick rundown of whatever they do and who trains and who doesn't. He'll print my story, so Hawthorn will know anyway. But…" She grinned mischievously. "Anything Browny decides not to print will probably find its way to the Hawthorn brains-trust."

Clark felt his smile curling. "And why else are we going?"

"It can't hurt your footy education to see a training session."

He smiled at her. "Thanks," he said softly. They had passed the mid-point of the boardwalk, and Clark again felt his reluctance to leave this oasis. "It's great out here," he said. "Do you want to sit down for a bit?"

Her face lit with a sudden idea. "How much do you feel the cold?" she asked.

"Ah… not too much," he replied.

Lois grinned at him with a challenge in her eyes. "Want to dip your feet in?" she said. "Are you game?"

"Will it be cold?" he asked.

"Of course it will be cold," Lois said with a chuckle. "But come on, Clark; show me how tough you Americans are." She sat on the edge of the boardwalk and quickly removed her runners and peeled off her socks.

Clark sat next to her and watched as Lois dipped the tip of her toe into the water.

"Eeeek," she squealed. She snatched back her foot and rolled the legs of her jeans to her knees; then she plunged both feet into the water, causing a little splash.

A droplet of water landed on Clark's hand confirming that, for most people, the water would indeed feel cold. He removed his socks and shoes and rolled up his jeans. Then he dropped his feet into the water and looked at Lois. She was grinning widely.

"We're both idiots," she announced.

"Yep," he agreed happily. He had never realised that sitting on a wooden boardwalk with his bare feet dangling in cold water would feel so incredibly good.

Lois slowly swung her feet through the water.

"Hey," Clark protested. "Don't splash."

Lois grinned at him. "If I don't move my feet," she said, "very soon I won't be able to feel them anymore."

"What happens then?"

"I don't know," Lois answered, clearly unconcerned. "I reckon I'll have to rub them."

"I could carry you," Clark said nonchalantly. "For a price of course."

Lois contemplated him with laughing indignation. "For a price?" she spluttered. "What do you want?"

"Information."

She studied him, her smile hovering, her eyes questioning. "What sort of information?" she asked suspiciously.

"Why do they call me Rubber?"

Her laughter rang out across the water. "Haven't you worked it out yet?"

Clark shook his head.

"What do you think?"

"I figure it's embarrassing."

She giggled at that but said nothing.

"Come on, Lane," Clark said, trying to sound menacing. "Tell me. Or you'll be hobbling back to the shore without my help."

"You *really* want to know, don't you?" she teased.

Clark bent low and dipped his fingers into the water and then held his hand poised to flick the cold drops into Lois's face.

"You wouldn't," she said, holding up her hand to fend him off. Her grin, though, remained undaunted.

"I would," Clark assured her.

"OK." She enclosed his damp hand in hers and forced it back. "I'll spill," she said. "But you don't fight fair, Kent."

"From what I've heard of Aussie Rules, anything is fair," he said.

Lois released his hand. "Here's the deal—you tell me what you think is the reason they call you Rubber, and I'll tell you what it really is."

"That is definitely not fair," Clark declared.

Lois shrugged. "That's the deal. Take it or leave it."

"If you won't tell me, I could… I could pick you up and throw you into the water."

She laughed at his threat.

"You don't seem worried," Clark said.

"I'm not."

"Why not?"

"Because I know you wouldn't do that."

Clark laughed. She had him. She knew it. So did he. "Well, at home…" he mumbled.

"At home…" Lois pressed.

Clark sighed with exaggerated dramatics. "I figure it has something to do with condoms," he admitted.

Her laughter burst out again.

"Well, does it?" Clark demanded.

She made an effort—quite a dismal one, Clark thought—to gather herself enough to answer. Clark again lowered his hand towards the water.

Lois held up her hands. "No, no," she said. "Don't splash me. I'll tell you."

Clark lifted his hand away from the water. "Go on, then, Ms Lane."

"There's a very famous company called Clark Rubber," Lois said.

He waited for further explanation, but none was forthcoming. "That's it?" he asked.

"That's it."

"What do they sell?" A sudden horrible thought hit him. "Not condoms, surely? Please tell me they don't sell condoms."

"No," Lois said. "They're basically into anything rubber—mattresses, boots, cushions… anything really. But they're most famous for swimming pools."

"Swimming pools," Clark echoed weakly. He was surprised by how relieved he felt.

"They had a very famous advertising ditty that went something like this… 'Clark pools, better than a beach in your own back yard.'"

She'd sung it for him, and Clark just couldn't drag his eyes from her.

Lois's hand cupped his thigh for less than a heartbeat. "All that obsessing for nothing, Rubber," she chirped.

Clark grinned. "How are your feet, Flinders?" he asked. "Can you still feel them?"

She shuffled away from him, lifted both knees and hung her feet above the water. When they had mostly finished dripping, she swung them onto the wooden boards and wriggled her toes experimentally. "They still move," she said.

Clark copied her movements and looked at their feet, which were lined up together as a gradually expanding patch of dampness seeped into the timber. Lois's feet had a bluish tinge, and he wished he dare send a little spurt of heat onto them. He reached forward and touched the top of her foot with the back of his fingers. "You're cold," he said. "Come on, we should get you back to the Jeep so you can warm up." He stood and offered her his hand.

Lois tucked her socks in her runners, took his hand, and allowed him to pull her up. As soon as she was standing, she withdrew from his hold. "Let's go," she said.

"We had a deal," Clark reminded her.

"You are not carrying me," she said firmly.

"That was our deal," he said.

"I am not going to let you carry me when I am perfectly capable of walking myself."

Clark held out his hand. "Well, at least take my hand," he said. "That way, if your feet really are as numb as they look and you stumble, you won't fall into the water."

She opened her mouth, and Clark thought she was about to refuse. Then, without another word, she slipped her hand into his, and they began the walk back to the shore. After about ten steps, Lois stopped and turned. Behind them were two sets of diminishing footsteps. She looked up from the boardwalk, and they shared a smile.

They continued walking; the sun was warm on Clark's back, and Lois's hand was soft in his palm. She made it so easy to forget everything else and simply enjoy being alive and being with her.

When they stepped from the boardwalk, Lois withdrew her hand. Clark released her despite the sharp disappointment that jabbed inside him. They reached the thick springy grass, and she energetically slid her feet through it to dry them.

Clark pointed up the hill. "Can we go up there and sit down to put on our shoes?" he asked. "It looks as if the view would be pretty amazing."

Lois shot him a grin. "Bet I can get there first," she said. She took off up the hill.

Clark hesitated long enough to appreciate the play of her muscles under her jeans before setting off after her.

"I won," Lois said as she dropped to the grass.

"You didn't define the finishing line," Clark objected as he collapsed beside her.

"I still won." Lois leant forward and began to brush the sand from her feet. She rubbed them vigorously, and some of the colour slowly returned.

"Are you all right?" Clark asked, feeling a little concerned. "Your feet have turned blue."

"I'm fine," she said.

"Give me your socks," he said.

She looked at him for a moment and then reached into her runners and pulled out her bunched-up socks. "You want my socks?" she said, her eyebrow cocked in question.

Clark nodded and held out his hand.

She dropped her socks into his palm.

"I grew up in Kansas," he said. "Where it gets really cold. Not Melbourne cold where the sun still shines, but really seriously cold." He carefully folded her socks into layers. "So we know a few little tricks for getting warm."

Clark glanced up and saw Lois watching him closely.

He began rubbing the layers of the socks against each other. His hand left the socks, flew to his glasses and lowered them. He spurted heat into the socks and then pushed his glasses back into place so quickly that no human could have detected the movement. He rubbed the sock material together for a few more seconds and then handed them to Lois.

As she felt their warmth, a look of surprise crossed her face. "How did you do that?" she asked.

"Family secret," he said.

"Are you going to tell me?"

"Put on your socks," he said. "Before they lose all their heat."

Her quizzical look lingered long enough for Clark to question if he'd gone too far. Other than with his parents, he had never before used his powers so openly. Not without hiding behind the disguise of the Superman suit.

Lois's attention dropped away from him, and she pulled on her socks without another word. He saw her smile of pleasure as his warmth blanketed her cold feet.

"Better?" Clark asked.

"Much," she said. "Thanks."

Knowing she was still observing him, Clark carefully rolled his own socks and rubbed them the way he had done with hers.

"Why didn't your feet go blue?" Lois asked.

"Because in Kansas, cold water has lumps of ice in it."

"You think you're tougher than Aussies?" she said, grinning.

Clark figured this conversation had gone far enough. "No comment," he said. After tying his shoelaces, he reclined, and, leaning on his bended elbow, he perused the bay.

Lois wrapped her arms around her knees and also stared ahead. A comfortable silence fell. Below them, a few mothers had brought their children to the playground. Others were walking along the sand.

Clark couldn't remember the last time he had felt this good. This relaxed. This peaceful.

And it was all because of her.

Part 6

Clark scanned the beauty of the bay, but it couldn't hold his attention—not with Lois sitting next to him. "So beautiful," he mused, breaking the silence that had settled upon them like a soft blanket.

Lois uncurled and lay back. She turned onto her side and faced him. "Despite my crack about 'Sleepy Hollow', I like Geelong," she said. "The place—not the footy team."

Clark smiled. "You seem to know it quite well."

"I studied Journalism at Deakin Uni," Lois said. "The main campus is on the south-western edge of the town."

"Where did you grow up?" Clark asked.

She chuckled. "Where do you think?"

"I don't know," he said, wondering how he would know.

"Hawthorn," Lois said proudly. "It's a suburb over in the east of Melbourne."

"Ahh. So you *do* barrack for your local team?"

"You bet I do." She pointed ahead. "Those hills you can see on the other side of the bay are the You Yangs," she said.

"The You Yangs?" Clark said.

"It's adapted from an Aboriginal language that means 'big mountain in the middle of a plain'." She smiled across to him. "The first European to see the You Yangs was Matthew Flinders."

"Flinders?" Clark said, grinning. "You know, I much prefer Lois to Flinders."

"And you prefer Clark to Rubber, right?"

"Well, yes," he admitted. "I like you calling me Clark. Do you mind being called Flinders?"

"Not really. It could be worse."

"Is it difficult being the only woman in a world so dominated by men?"

Lois nodded. "Sometimes. But I knew it would be like this. When I applied for the position, there had never been a female football journalist in Melbourne. Some people told me I was wasting my time even applying. They said I might get work reporting on the small country leagues but not the big city stuff. Browny took a lot of flak for hiring me."

"You've done really well," Clark said. "It's never easy being different from everyone else." He stared out to the horizon. "Do you sometimes feel as if you just don't fit in? And you never will?"

Lois didn't answer at first, and Clark turned to her. She was absently picking at the grass. "Things can be difficult."

Clark wasn't sure what she meant, but he sensed she was hoping he wouldn't continue this line of questioning. "Have you always been in Sport?"

Lois smiled at him, as if she realised he had backed away and was grateful. "Yes," she said. "I've done all sport, any sport. But it was always footy that had my heart."

Clark wasn't sure how it was possible to feel envious of a sport, but he did. "Why is Gazza called Gazza?" he asked.

"Because his name is Gary."

"OK," Clark said, unable to see the connection.

"It's very common," Lois said. "You take the first two sounds of a name and add 'zza'. Sharons are called Shazza. Warrens are called Wozza. Darrens are Dazza."

"Were you ever called Lozza?"

"At the very beginning, but then Banjo started calling me Flinders and Lozza was instantly forgotten."

"Why is Banjo called Banjo?"

"Because his name is Andrew Barton."

"So?"

"AB Paterson was a famous Australian poet," Lois said. "He wrote classic ballads like *Waltzing Matilda* and *The Man from Snowy River*. He was always known as Banjo, but the AB stands for Andrew Barton."

"Did Banjo's parents name him Andrew deliberately?"

"No. They're English. They had no idea, until they got here and everyone started calling their kid Banjo."

"And Bluey?" Clark asked.

"Because he has red hair."

"Makes perfect sense," Clark said, even though it didn't.

"Redheads are always called 'Bluey'," Lois told him. "It's like tall blokes being called 'Shorty'."

"It seems everyone has a nickname."

"Mostly. Even if it's fairly unimaginative like Browny, most people go by a different moniker from the one their parents bestowed upon them."

"What are some of the more imaginative ones?" Clark asked.

"Football history is littered with them," Lois said. "There's Bruce Doull—he was always known as 'The Flying Doormat' and Mick Nolan was 'The Galloping Gasometer'. Leigh Matthews was 'Lethal' and Graham Farmer was 'Polly' and Kevin Bartlett was 'Hungry' and Greg Williams is 'Diesel' and Dean Laidley is the 'Junk Yard Dog' and Stephen Silvagni is 'Sos' and—" She stopped, her wide grin laced with a dash of self-consciousness. "Sorry," she said. "Sometimes I get carried away."

From amid the whirlwind, Clark latched onto one of the last things she'd said. "Sos," he said. "I think I've read about him."

Lois nodded. "He's Carlton's full back. Sos stands for 'Son of Serge' because his dad, Sergio Silvagni, played for Carlton in the sixties."

"Is it common for a son to play for his father's team?"

"It doesn't always happen, but there's a father-son drafting rule that makes it possible." With no warning, Lois stretched and jumped fluidly to her feet. She looked down at him. "If I stay there any longer, I'll fall asleep," she said. "And we should be getting get back to Kardinia Park."

Clark stood, and together they returned to the Jeep and headed for the Geelong ground.

* * *

The drive back to Kardinia Park was quiet. Lois didn't seem inclined to talk, and Clark had plenty to occupy his thoughts. The memory of holding Lois's hand as they had strolled around the boardwalk was still potent in his mind. He wasn't expecting it to be a memory that faded quickly… if ever.

When they reached the football ground, about thirty players were on the field. Clark stood next to Lois as they watched the players run laps and then move to kicking and handball drills. The regular thud of the ball being kicked was interspersed with laughing comments thrown around by the players and coaches. About thirty fans—most dressed in jerseys of blue and white horizontal stripes—were huddled behind the fence.

"Kendall is training," Clark noted as he recognised one of the players as the person from the hospital entrance.

"Yeah," Lois said. "They're not doing any contact work, so we can't tell whether he's up for that or not. And they've been very careful not to strap either of his shoulders."

After less than an hour, the players came off the ground. They stopped long enough to sign some autographs for the assembled kids before trickling into the change rooms. Clark turned to Lois. "That didn't seem too intense," he said.

"No," she agreed. "It's Round 15 this week. Only eight more games until the finals. By this stage of the season, it's mostly about maintenance of fitness levels and injury management."

"This was a lighter session than normal?"

"Absolutely. If you are scheduled to play on Saturday, the two big sessions will be Tuesday and Thursday."

They turned from Kardinia Park and crossed the grassy stretch as darkness began to overcome the last dregs of daylight. "Are you hungry, Lois?" Clark asked.

"A bit," she said.

"Could I buy you dinner?" he asked.

She unlocked the Jeep and climbed in. "Sure, if you want to," she said. "What sort of food do you like?" She grinned. "There's a Macca's just down the road."

"Macca's?"

"McDonald's."

"I am *not* taking you to McDonald's," Clark said emphatically.

She grinned. "Chinese?"

"OK." That sounded a lot better than McDonald's. "Do you have somewhere in mind?"

"Yep. It's on the way back to Melbourne. We'll be there in a tick."

Clark nodded, wondering if there was any possible way to make this seem more like a date and less like two colleagues catching a meal of convenience while working. He was still grappling with his uncooperative mind when Lois stopped the Jeep outside a small Chinese restaurant. When they arrived at the door, Clark's heart sank.

The tables were cheap, the seats were plastic, the prices were low, and a television blared from high in the corner. It was about as incompatible with 'romantic date' as a place could get.

Lois and Clark took two plates. He paid, and then they went to the heated buffet and helped themselves to the food.

Lois led him to a table where they could watch the television. Clark took an orange twenty dollar note from his wallet and held it towards her. "Thanks for the loan," he said, hoping his tone didn't betray his disappointment with her choice of restaurant.

She put the note in her purse. "No worries," she said. "Did you see the reaction of the bloke when you paid for our meals?"

Clark hadn't noticed much except for the soulless functionality. "No."

"He was excited because you tipped him."

"I always tip," Clark said. Although if ever a tip wasn't merited…

"We don't," Lois said.

Clark took his first mouthful of food. It was hot and fresh and, he had to admit, delicious. "You don't tip?"

"It's not expected," she said. "You can if you want to, but it's OK if you don't."

Clark couldn't imagine not tipping. "Do you eat here often?" he asked.

"I used to when I was a student," Lois said. "This place supplied plentiful food at low prices."

He wasn't sure how to phrase the next question. "Does Geelong have… more upmarket restaurants?"

"Yes," Lois said. "But I don't know if they're any good. I've never eaten at them. Better to go with what you know."

Clark felt his spirits sink further. Did that apply to men, too? Lois knew Dan Scardino. She had worked with him for years. Next to Dan, Clark was an unknown entity.

Today had been so wonderfully good—being with Lois, laughing with her, dunking their feet into the salty water, warming her socks. But now this place… its stark atmosphere had dragged him back to reality. To Lois, he was nothing more than a temporary colleague who needed some help settling into a new country and a new job.

The presence of the television stifled any need for conversation. Lois seemed interested in the news bulletin, and Clark's crumpled spirits were not conducive to chat.

They finished eating and returned to the Jeep. As they drove back to Melbourne, Clark mourned the lighthearted closeness of the boardwalk and pondered how it could have dissolved so quickly and so completely.

In his heart, he knew why. It was because that closeness wasn't real.

Not in the way he wanted it to be real.

Clark tried to achieve some perspective. He'd known Lois for less than three days. He'd accepted Perry's offer to come to Melbourne because he'd thought it would be good to experience another country, another sport, another culture. And because it gave him the chance to get away from Mayson while he decided what to do with Superman. He could still do all of that. He should enjoy doing exactly what he had come here to do.

Except… that was before Lois Lane.

Before Lois Lane had turned his world upside down.

Before Lois Lane had captured his heart with her smile.

Before Lois Lane had reduced any moment without her to a moment of poverty.

And she'd done it seemingly without any effort. Without any intent. Without any comprehension of the power she had over him.

Again, Clark tried to realign his attitude. He was a visitor to this country, this city. He had come to learn and to experience—not to pine over the first woman he saw. And in just three short months, he was going home.

But no amount of mental acrobatics was going to change one certain fact.

When he did go home, he would leave his heart in Melbourne, Australia.

* * *

An hour later, Lois pulled into the driveway of her unit. "Coming in to watch the replay?" she said.

"Do you still want to?" Clark questioned.

"I'm pretty tired," she admitted. "How about you?"

"I'm OK," he said.

"How about we watch the first quarter and see how we feel then?" Lois suggested.

"OK," Clark agreed, trying to muster some enthusiasm. He really didn't want Lois to think his subdued frame of mind was due to a lack of appreciation for all she had done for him.

As Lois unlocked her door, a woman emerged from the shadows. "Hi, Lois," she said in a singsong voice.

Clark turned to her and saw she was a tall and glamorous woman, adorned with long, sweeping waves of blonde hair. She stepped right up to them, and he realised she was less than an inch shorter than he was.

Lois pushed her door open and then turned, rather unwillingly, Clark thought, to the woman. "Hi, Esmeralda," she said tonelessly.

Esmeralda edged closed to Clark, and he caught a whiff of sweet perfume. She held out her left hand as if she expected him to take it and kiss it. "I'm Esmeralda," she gushed.

"Clark Kent," Clark said. He ignored her hand.

"Clark," Esmeralda said, her voice vibrating to a throaty tone and her eyelids flickering. "It is *so* nice to meet you. You're American, aren't you? I can tell from that sexy accent."

Clark wasn't sure he believed that she'd detected his accent from two words, but he was sure he had no desire to further their acquaintance. "Excuse us," he said pointedly and stepped closer to Lois's door.

Esmeralda put her crimson-tipped fingers on his arm and halted his progress. "If you get bored," she said with an almost imperceptible toss of her head towards Lois, "I'm in number five."

In her unit, Lois had switched on the light and put her bag on her table. Clark followed her and firmly closed the door behind him, hoping Esmeralda would take that as an unmistakable rebuff of her invitation.

Lois's unit was small and uncluttered. There was a tiny kitchen in the corner, and the space in the living room was filled with a couch, a table almost completely hidden under a computer and three piles of books, a set of shelves, and a television on a small stand.

"Have a seat," Lois said as she removed the video tape from her bag and pushed it into the player. If she'd been in any way affected by Esmeralda's appearance, there was nothing evident in her face or her actions. Clark sat on one end of the couch. Lois picked up the remote control and looked at him. "Would you like anything?" she said. "A drink?"

"No, thanks," he said. For the first time, they felt like people who barely knew each other. Was Lois backing away? Had she felt the closeness at the beach and now regretted it?

She settled into the couch next to him. It was small for a two-seater, so although they sat on the extremities, they were easily within touching distance.

"Lois?" Clark said. "Are you all right?"

She turned to him with a small smile. "I'm fine," she said. "Just really tired. I got caught up in some research for my story last night and didn't get to bed until after two." Her smile lifted fractionally. "My fault—but it's catching up with me now."

"I can go if you'd prefer," Clark said. "We can watch the replay some other time."

A flicker of reaction crossed Lois's face, but she closed it down quickly. "I'm going to watch the footy," she said flatly.

"Then I'd like to stay and watch it with you," he said. He added with solemn certainty, "I'm not interested in Esmeralda or anything she might be offering."

Lois took a second to scrutinise him as if weighing his trustworthiness. She gave him a quick smile before turning on the television. "We played Collingwood," she said. "This is last weekend's game." She started the tape.

From the first moment when the umpire flung the ball so hard into the ground that it bounced twenty feet straight up into the air, Clark was engrossed. His first impression was that these men did not wear enough protection. His second was that rules were minimal. His third was that the combination of the two previous conditions made it highly unlikely that surviving this game was a given.

The athleticism of the players was stunning. They could jump—very high and seemingly with no consideration for a safe landing. Clark gasped the first time he saw a 'specky'.

Lois turned and smiled at his reaction. "High marks are pretty impressive, hey?" she said.

Clark nodded. "I don't know how they do it without someone getting seriously injured."

Their attention returned to the game. The players pursued the ball with single-minded brutality. More than once, Clark winced at the thought of the pain they must inflict on each other in their bone-crunching crashes.

He had questions, but he didn't want to interrupt the flow of the game. It never stopped. After a goal had been scored, the telecast went to a commercial break, but Lois fast-forwarded through it, which accentuated the breakneck pace of the game.

After about twenty minutes, Clark noticed that Lois's breathing pattern had changed. He turned and saw that her eyes were closed. As he watched, her head slanted sideways. With a deft movement, Clark managed to position his shoulder under her head. She sighed and settled against him.

He smiled with satisfaction and forced his eyes back to the television.

The game was even better now—now that he had the warm weight of Lois's head resting on his shoulder.

Clark continued watching, but he didn't take the remote from her hand. He was quite content to use the commercial breaks as the perfect opportunity to gaze at the gorgeous woman leaning into his side.

* * *

"Lois? Lois?"

Lois could hear him saying her name. She could feel his gentle touch on her arm.

But she couldn't determine if her perceptions were dream or reality.

"Lois, honey? Wake up."

It was definitely Clark's voice.

"Lois?"

Her head jolted up, and her eyes sprang open. Clark was looking down at her, his brown eyes softly gazing into hers.

"Clark?" she mumbled.

He smiled. "You fell asleep," he said. "You must have been tired."

Lois lurched away from where she had been leaning far too intimately into his side, and she gaped at the television. Someone… Clark evidently… had paused the tape. "What happened?" she asked, trying to muster her scattered brain cells into a workable whole. "We were watching the replay."

"We were," Clark said.

She looked into his eyes and saw gentle amusement. There was no sting to it—nothing to intensify her embarrassment. "Sorry," she said.

"No need to be sorry at all," Clark said.

"How much of the game did you watch?"

"To the first break. The first quarter, they were calling it."

"Ah… any questions?"

"A couple, but you don't have to answer them now. Tomorrow will be soon enough."

"Sorry," she repeated. "I was supposed to be introducing you to the intricacies of footy."

Clark lightly slid his hand down the outside of her upper arm. "You're tired," he said. "I should be getting home." He stood from the couch.

Lois had a feeling he was going to offer his hand to help her up, so she quickly leapt from the couch. Right now, she definitely didn't need physical contact with this tall, good-looking American.

Clark crossed her unit to the door and opened it. "Thanks for today, Lois," he said sincerely. "I really enjoyed being with you."

Lois gave him an autopilot smile. "Are you right to get home?" she asked. "And to get to work tomorrow morning?"

He nodded. "Yes. Thanks to you."

"Expect a late night tomorrow," Lois warned. "It's Thursday, so most of the clubs have a big training session, and then the teams are announced about six o'clock, so there's plenty to do after that for Friday's edition."

"The teams?"

"Every club announces their team for the weekend game. Most teams will have 'outs'—either through injury or suspension or players dropped for poor form. They will be replaced with the 'ins'—players coming back from injury or who've played really well in the second team."

Clark seemed to find something funny.

"What?" Lois asked, wondering exactly what she had said that was so amusing.

"Well," Clark said, trying—with limited success—to pull his smile into line. "From what I saw on the replay, I wonder exactly what a player would have to do to get a suspension. I'm thinking first-degree murder might just do it."

Lois chuckled. "A punch to the head or face will do it," she said. "Incidents behind play are particularly frowned upon."

"I see," Clark said, still smiling. "Thanks, Lois. Thanks for everything."

"Thanks for dinner," she responded. "Goodnight, Clark."

"Goodnight, Lois." Did she imagine he hesitated? And if he did, why? Or was it just that her brain hadn't fully emerged from dream mode and it was playing tricks on her?

Clark stepped outside, and Lois firmly shut the door. She slumped against it and closed her eyes. Immediately, the dream flooded her mind—with just as much clarity and breath-strangling detail as when she had been asleep.

She had been with Clark.

They were walking together, their hands joined.

Clark had stopped and turned to her, positioning his body close against hers. Then he'd looked down at her with a hundred heart-exploding messages, and his mouth had curled to the smile that had become so familiar. But this one was different. It was definitely not the smile of someone who was merely a friend. This was packed with a whole lot more. Lois had stared back at him, wanting him to speak yet perfectly content to simply bask in his attention.

Then he had said her name.

And she'd waited… waited for what he wanted to say to her.

He'd said her name again.

And wakefulness had come, seamlessly sliding her from the world of her dream to the world of reality.

Lois pushed back her head and stared at the ceiling as she let loose a long, deep sigh.

Her heart was still cavorting around her chest.

Her blood was racing around her body, leaving trails of tingling warmth in its wake.

She had to get a grip.

She had to get a grip now.

She could *not* fall for Clark Kent.

He was here for three months.

Three short months.

Then he'd be gone, and if she wanted to be left with her heart intact, she needed to take control of this now.

Rigid control.

Right now.

She could not fall for someone who could only offer her three months.

She would not.

But… oh boy, did he have a heart-stopper of a smile.

And those eyes…

This had to end.

Before it started.

Lois jerked away from the door, stood straight, and pushed out another deep breath. She even managed a small laugh on the very tail of the breath. This is what she got for staying up so late. She'd embarrassed herself by falling asleep in front of a colleague and had been subjected to a dream that, in the cold face of reality, was clearly beyond fanciful.

Lois settled back on the couch and rewound the tape. She was going to watch at least the first quarter. Maybe more. Because if she went to bed now, if she tried to sleep, no amount of willpower was going to be able to drive those amazing eyes from her mind.

So, she would fill her mind with football. And there would be plenty to fill it with because Hawthorn had beaten Collingwood by thirty-three points.

The tape reached the beginning, and Lois waited for the magic of football to drive all else from her mind.

An hour later, she stopped the tape, having watched half of the game.

It was a great game, bursting with highlights. And her Hawks had been magnificent.

But even they hadn't managed to drive the memory of that smile from her mind.

Part 7

Clark walked into the Herald Sun office the next morning and was immediately waylaid by Banjo. "Word to the wise, mate," he said. "Steer clear of Browny for a bit."

Clark glanced to the door of the editor's office but could see nothing unusual. "What's wrong?" he asked Banjo.

"Flinders is in there."

"Lois?"

"Yeah. They're having a blue about her story."

"Is Lois all right?" Clark's inquiry was out before he could stop it.

"You don't have to worry about Flinders, mate. She can look after herself." Banjo nodded to Clark's desk. "Go and start up your computer, and if the door to Browny's office moves so much as a millimetre, make sure you're flat out like a lizard drinking."

Clark's question didn't progress beyond an open mouth. Banjo had hurried across the room and was now staring intently at his computer screen. Clark turned to his desk, and, despite knowing he shouldn't, he was unable to stop himself from tuning in to the conversation on the other side of the door.

"No, Lois!" Browny said in a voice that sounded as if it had been fortified with steel. "You will write the story I told you to write, not some half-baked idea you dreamed up."

"It's *not* half-baked," Lois said in a voice Clark barely recognised. "It's a logical extension to the story you gave me and—"

"Write the story I told you—"

"… and it makes much more interesting reading than—"

"… I told you to write or don't—"

"… than a story that has already been done to death by everyone from—"

"… or don't write anything at all except your letter of resignat—"

"… by everyone from the chief writer of the Football Record to the illiterate parent who puts together the weekly newsletter for the Tongala Under-Tens."

There was silence then, and Clark had to fix his eyes on his still-blank computer screen to stop himself from turning and looking through the closed door.

Then he heard a roar that scorched through his super-sensitive eardrums. "KENT!"

Clark leapt from his chair and was within one step of Browny's door when it suddenly swung open and the tornado that was Lois Lane charged past him. He hesitated, torn between wanting to check on Lois and needing to answer Browny's summons.

The second boom of his name decided for him, and with a final glance to Lois's fast-receding back, Clark entered the office. He quietly closed the door and faced Browny.

The editor appeared remarkably unruffled. "Rubber," he said, in a tone devoid of the anger so evident just a few moments ago. "I've been reading some of your work."

Clark hoped his work hadn't contributed to Browny's bad mood and that had somehow translated into trouble for Lois.

"You don't have much experience in Sport," the editor noted. His voice was calm, but his rolling laughter seemed ominously absent this morning.

"No, sir."

"And you seem to specialise in the touchy-feely human-interest stuff."

"Not always," Clark said, feeling defensive. "I write the hard news stories as well."

Paul Brown didn't seem convinced. "I have a story for you, Rubber," he said. He picked up a piece of paper from his desk and perused it. "Bessie Bellchambers. She's a lady in her seventies who grew up barracking for South Melbourne. The interview is all teed up. She's expecting you there about ten this morning."

"What sort of story do you have in mind?"

"I want to know how it feels to have your club moved interstate," Paul said. "I want to know if the loss is still felt fifteen years later. I want to know if she feels bitter or sad or robbed or angry or apathetic. And I want you to write it."

"OK," Clark agreed, glad this story didn't seem to require an extensive knowledge of football and hoping his relief wasn't too obvious. He took the proffered piece of paper. Beside the lady's name, there was an address in Albert Park. Clark looked to Browny, hoping he would offer further details about getting to the interview.

Browny's attention had returned to his computer, and when he did look up, he seemed surprised that Clark was still there. "Ah… of course," he said. He gulped in a big breath and screamed, "Flinders!"

Clark heard Lois sigh, and he tracked her agitated footsteps as she crossed the newsroom. A few seconds later, the door opened, and she stormed past him without a glance in his direction and faced Browny, the set of her shoulders radiating hostility.

"Flinders," Browny said in a controlled tone. "You are to drive Rubber to this address in Albert Park and wait there while he does the interview. Then you are to drive him back."

Clark stepped forward. "Really, it isn't necessary. I can take a cab."

Browny's eyes volleyed from Lois to Clark. "You will not be taking a taxi," he said in a tone that didn't leave any room for argument.

Clark wished he could see Lois's face. More, he wished she would turn so he could try to communicate that this hadn't been his idea.

"I have a deadline," Lois informed Browny in a tight voice.

"You have an hour to get whatever you have to me," Browny said in an equally tight voice. "And then you will drive Rubber to his interview."

"My story's not ready yet."

"If you had the time-management skills of a koala, it would have been ready last Tuesday," Browny snapped.

Lois turned, swept past Clark, and closed the door firmly enough that the sound of it pulsed through the room.

Clark turned to Browny, expecting anger, annoyance, or at least a significant reddening of his countenance.

Browny looked up to him with a calm smile. "That girl…" he said. "I swear she'll be the death of me."

Clark had not been expecting the affection so unmistakable in the editor's voice.

Perhaps Browny had read his expression because the editor's smile opened further. "You didn't really think I was about to tear her apart, did you, Rubber?" he asked.

"You… er… sounded angry with her."

"Fair enough, too. I told her to write a story, and she gives me something else completely." Browny smiled as if at a secret thought. "A better story, but don't tell her that."

Clark wanted to jump to Lois's defence and demand to know why Browny hadn't told her himself, but the editor lifted his hand to stall Clark's words.

"I run this department like a footy team," he said. "I train them so they do what they are told. If I ask for a story, they give me that story and they do it exactly as I ask, just like footballers do exactly as the coach asks. They train doing it that way so when it really matters—the last five minutes of a close Grand Final—doing it properly is instinctive."

Clark had no response—not one he was willing to share anyway.

"The better the player, the more important it is that they follow the team rules," Browny said.

Clark searched Browny's face for deeper meaning.

"And Flinders is one of the best I have," he said quietly.

"One of the best?" Clark said.

"That surprises you?" Browny said, straightening in his chair. "Why? Because she's a woman? Because she's young? Because she's never played a game of footy in her life?"

"It doesn't surprise me that she's good," Clark said. "But from what Lois has said, I'm not sure she realises you have such a high opinion of her work."

Browny relaxed again. "Good," he said.

"She thinks she is on the bottom rung of the ladder," Clark said.

Browny nodded as if that wasn't really news to him. "She probably thinks that's why she gets all the dud games."

"That's exactly what she thinks," Clark said, hoping his openness wasn't going to come back and bite him with Lois.

Browny chuckled softly, a sound that was totally incongruous with his usual manner. “The top games every week are televised—some live, some delayed,” he said. “Anyone interested can easily watch those games. The lesser games aren’t televised, so if a fan can’t get to the game, he has to rely on the newspaper reports for information about how his team played.”

Clark thought he was beginning to understand.

“There isn’t a person in this newsroom who can write up a game like Flinders Lane,” Browny said. “She sees things no one else sees. She writes with the flair of someone who not only watches the game but *feels* it. She writes as someone whose passion for the game is evident in every word, but her love never dulls her perception.” Browny chuckled, and his stomach wobbled. “So long as I keep her away from those Hawks,” he said. “Because with them, all she can see is brown and gold heroes.”

“Perhaps you could tell her why she gets the lesser games,” Clark suggested softly.

Browny’s reflective mood shattered with a loud guffaw. “No chance of that.” He pointed a stubby finger at Clark. “And don’t you tell her either, Rubber,” he said sternly. “Not unless you want to spend the next three months cleaning the dunnies instead of watching footy.”

Clark nodded.

“Now, get your Yankee backside out there and work up some questions to ask this old dame,” Browny said. His words were delivered harshly, but Clark could see the twinkle in his eyes.

“Yes, sir,” he said, turning to leave.

“Rubber!”

The sharpness of Browny’s tone grounded Clark’s feet. “Yes?”

“You call me ‘sir’ one more time and I’ll find something for you to do that will make you beg to clean the dunnies.”

Clark controlled his smile. “OK… Browny.”

He stepped out of the editor’s office and glanced in the direction of Lois’s desk. She was pounding her keyboard so hard that he half expected to see smoke rising from it.

Clark sat down and picked up a pen, figuring his most prudent move was to have his questions ready when it was time to go to his interview.

He really didn’t want to risk further aggravating Lois.

* * *

“Lois, I’m sorry about this,” Clark said as she drove him to his interview in her Jeep.

Until this point, Lois hadn’t said enough for Clark to be able to discern if any of her anger had dissipated, so he was assuming it hadn’t. She glanced sideways. “It’s not your fault,” she said in a voice that was much closer to normal than he had dared to hope.

“I heard what happened with your story,” he said, hoping she would detect his empathy.

“Meh, it was my own fault,” she said easily.

“It… it was?”

Lois shrugged. “Browny told me to write the story. I did a bit of extra research and hit upon similar issues back in the archives of history and thought it was remarkably relevant to the current situation, so I sat up the other night researching and writing. I should’ve known what Browny would say.”

“There’s no scope for initiative in Browny’s newsroom?” Clark asked. “No room to be creative, to run with an idea?”

Lois sighed. “There’s plenty of scope but not without first running it past Browny. And not with a story he’s already pencilled in.”

“OK,” Clark said, figuring he would take that as a warning.

“We’re a team, you see,” Lois said. “It’s like footy. There are team rules, and if everyone follows the rules, the team will be successful. But if someone runs off on his or her own tangent, the team collapses.”

“I’m…” Clark searched for the right word. “… surprised you are taking it so well.”

“I was angry this morning,” Lois admitted. “But it’s Thursday.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning there’s a very important game this weekend that Hawthorn have to win if we are going to have any chance to make the finals.” She shot him a small smile. “Last week, we beat Collingwood, so Monday and Tuesday were good days.” She grinned with triumph. “For me, not for Gazza and Bluey.”

“Yesterday was a good day, too,” Clark said.

He hoped Lois would agree, but she didn’t. “Have you got your questions ready for Bessie?” she asked.

“I have some ideas,” Clark said. “But I’d appreciate hearing any suggestions you have.”

“I would try to get her talking as much as possible,” Lois said. “I would ask her why she barracks for South Melbourne. I would ask about her childhood memories of going to games. I would ask who her favourite footballer

was. Then, when she's established exactly how much she loves her club, I'd ask how she felt when they were moved to Sydney."

"OK," Clark said.

"And I wouldn't take notes," Lois said. "Not while you're there. I'd put it all on tape. That way, you'll seem involved in the conversation, and she'll probably be more open than if your eyes are constantly on your notepad."

"Good idea," he said. "Thanks."

"Try to make it more of a conversation than an interview," Lois suggested. She pointed to her left. "That's the Lake Oval where South played their home games. Beyond that, you can see Albert Park Lake."

Clark looked to where she pointed and saw an old grandstand in significant disrepair. A new grandstand stood next to it, highlighting the dilapidated condition of the older one.

"The ground is used for soccer now and has a new name," Lois said. "The old grandstand is all that is left of the old Lake Oval."

"It doesn't look safe," Clark commented.

"It's not used any more," she said, the regret heavy in her voice.

A minute later, they pulled up at an old single-fronted clapboard house in a small street.

"Do you want to fly solo?" Lois asked. "Or would you like me to come in with you?"

Clark didn't want her thinking he was completely incompetent, but he knew the story would be better if Lois were there offering suggestions during the interview. "Would you mind coming in?" he asked.

"Of course not."

They walked along the little lavender-edged path and knocked on the door. A few seconds later, it was opened by a tiny woman with steely grey hair and piercing blue eyes. "Mrs Bellchambers," Clark said, offering her his hand. "I'm Clark Kent."

Her hand was almost swallowed by his much bigger one. "Please call me Bessie," she said. She turned her eager eyes to Lois and smiled. "And you must be Lois Lane," she said.

Lois nodded. "It's good to meet you, Bessie," she said.

"I enjoy reading your reports," Bessie said.

Lois smiled, and Clark felt the good humour return to his world. They followed Bessie down a long corridor with a worn carpet runner and into a room that looked like its decor belonged in the forties. Bessie gestured to two armchairs upholstered in a floral pattern. They were arranged around a little table covered with an embroidered cloth and laden with a teapot and cups and a plate of chocolate-covered square blocks dotted with coconut. Lois and Clark sat down.

"Would you pour the tea please, young man?" Bessie asked as she sat across from them. "I have mine with milk and no sugar."

Clark busied himself with the teapot, hoping either Lois or Bessie would carry the conversation and leave him free to organise his thoughts in preparation for the interview ahead. He couldn't help feeling a twinge of nervousness, reminding him of his first few months at the Daily Planet.

Lois broke into the short silence with a little squeal. "Lamingtons!" she said. "Did you make them, Bessie?"

"That I did," Bessie said. "Made fresh this morning."

"Oh, thank you," Lois said. "There is nothing like homemade lamingtons. The bought ones just don't compare."

Bessie smiled. "Too right," she said. She handed Lois a delicate plate and offered her the chocolate blocks.

"Clark is American," Lois said. "I doubt he's ever eaten a lammo before."

Clark finished pouring the three cups of tea. "I've never seen them," he said. "But they look delicious."

"I'll give you the recipe," Bessie said. "You can take it home to your mother."

"Thank you," Clark said with a smile. "Do you mind if I turn on the tape recorder?"

"Soon," she said. "Eat your lamington first, and then we'll talk."

Clark bit into the block and discovered it was a sponge so light his mother would have be proud of it. Inside was a generous layer of strawberry jelly. He guessed the outside had been rolled in melted chocolate and then covered in coconut.

When he had finished eating and declined Bessie's offer of a second lamington, Clark asked again if she minded him turning on his recorder. This time Bessie agreed, and he took a deep breath. "I understand you barrack for South Melbourne," he said.

Bessie's blue eye shone, and her face lit. "Since I was a little tacker," she said. "I was born in 1925. By the time I was four years old, my dad was taking me to the footy every Saturday. I loved it. I loved everything about it. I loved the colour, and I loved the cheering, and I loved the excitement, and I loved the smell of liniment when the players ran out, and I loved sitting on my dad's shoulders and watching the game."

Bessie's smile turned poignant. "The best day of my life," she said. Her voice wobbled a little, and she took a moment to gather her composure. "The very, very best day of my life was Grand Final Day, 1933. My dad got us tickets. There were over 75 000 people there that day. Mum packed us Vegemite sandwiches and a bottle of orange cordial, and she made lamingtons for us to eat at half time. I was eight by then and too old to sit on my dad's shoulders, but halfway through the last quarter when we knew we were going to win, my dad said to me, 'Up onto my shoulders, Bess; you don't want to ever forget seeing the Bloods win the Grand Final.'

"He hoisted me up onto his shoulders, but when the siren went, I couldn't see much at all because I was crying like a baby. When my dad took me down, I saw his eyes were red and damp, too. He stood me in front of him and put his hands on my shoulders, and just kept saying over and over again, 'We did it, Bess, my girl, we did it'."

Bessie reached into the sleeve of her pink cardigan and pulled out a lacy white handkerchief. She dabbed at her eyes before continuing. "We knew it was special to see South win a flag. We knew it was special, but deep, deep down in our hearts, we thought we would see another one together. We had a good team, and we had Bob Pratt to kick our goals, and we thought… we thought there would be another one."

Again, Bessie dabbed at her eyes.

"The Swans haven't won a flag since that one in 1933," Lois said quietly.

Bessie twisted the corner of her handkerchief. "Six years later, the War began," she said. "My dad was nearly forty, but he wanted to serve his country. He wanted to do his bit to ensure that all the wonderful things about being an Australian were protected. The last thing he said before he left was to make me promise that I would always love South Melbourne. He said, 'Bessie, my girl, if I don't come home, you make sure you always cheer twice as loud 'cause you'll have to cheer for me, too.'"

Bessie faced Clark with a brave smile. "I'm still cheering for him," she said. "My dad never came home."

Clark swallowed down the lump that had risen into this throat. "I'm sure he would be very proud of you," he managed.

Bessie smiled sadly. "You know, with every year that passes, with every year that goes by and makes that day slip further into the dim annals of history, it becomes more special. I saw our last premiership with my dad. That's worth more than all the money in the world."

Clark really didn't want to risk bringing her close to tears again, so he hesitated to ask about South Melbourne being moved to Sydney. He didn't need to.

"At least my dad was saved from seeing his beloved South Melbourne shunted off to Sydney," Bessie said. "At least he was saved from that."

"How did you feel?" Clark asked.

"Like my heart had been ripped out," Bessie said dolefully. "There is so much more to a club than just the players and coaches. There are the people who clean the boots, and the people who prepare the food for the players, and the people who look after the ground, and the people who mend the jumpers after every game, and the people who do the hundred-and-one little things that need to be done. Those people love the club. Their hearts beat to the rhythm of our song. The players went, the coaches went, the trainers went, but you cannot tear out a heart. Not when that heart doesn't want to be moved."

"You don't think Sydney has a heart?" Clark asked.

"It has a heart," Bessie said. "But it's not South Melbourne's heart. That is still here. It will always be here. They think they can simply pick it up and cart it away, but they can't."

"Do you still go to the games?" Clark asked.

"Every game," she said with a tinge of pride. "Every game in Melbourne. I have to. I promised my dad, you see."

"I notice the Swans are almost certain to play in the finals this year," Clark said.

"Yes," Bessie said with a soft sigh. "Yes, this year, the drought may—finally—be broken."

"How will that feel?"

"You know, young man," Bessie said, "I don't know how it will feel. I imagine an old woman will feel differently to a young girl perched on her father's shoulders. I don't know if it will mean less because it's Sydney and not South Melbourne. I hope I will be able to see only the colours and the old South Melbourne spirit and not see the name." She grinned suddenly. "In truth, I probably won't be able to see much more than I could in 1933. And it will be me saying, 'We did it, Dad, we did it.'"

Clark cleared his throat and, at the same instant, heard Lois doing exactly the same thing. "Who was your favourite player?" he asked.

Bessie's infectious grin broke out again. "Bobby Skilton," she said with great affection. "He wore number fourteen, and there was never a player like him. He was quick and had absolutely no fear. He won three Brownlows,

and it should've been six." She winked at Clark. "I cried again the day he retired. Imagine that—a woman of forty-six crying her eyes out because Bobby had retired. But I knew there would never be another like him. And I was right. There never has been."

Clark asked a few more questions and discovered that Bessie had never married—"one bloke was interested, but he barracked for Carlton, so that was never going to work"—and had taken dozens of children to the football on the proviso they wore red and white and cheered for the Swans. Those children, now grown, ensured she always had a ride to the footy. Clark again raised the topic of the move to Sydney and asked how she had felt the first time her club had played a home game in the city to the north.

"Sad," Bessie said. "Sad and empty and bereft. I still put on my red-and-white scarf, and I sat on this chair with my bag at my feet packed with Vegemite sandwiches and a bottle of cordial and watched it on the telly, but it wasn't the same." She sighed. "It's been fifteen years now, and it still feels strange to be watching the footy on the telly." Her eyes twinkled suddenly. "Although now I do get up and make myself a cup of tea at half time."

Clark figured he had more than enough for his story, so he thanked her and turned off the tape. Bessie offered them another cup of tea, but, conscious that it was Lois's time as well as his, he declined.

Bessie looked at Lois. "Young lady," she said. "Would you do a favour for an old woman?"

Lois smiled. Her eyes were glistening with unshed tears. "Of course," she said.

"I know you're a Hawk," Bessie said. "But I also know you love football, and I was wondering if you knew the South song."

Lois nodded. "Of course I know it," she said. "It's a beauty."

"Would you sing it with me?" Bessie asked.

Lois didn't hesitate. As Clark watched in surprise, she knelt beside Bessie's chair and put her hand on the old lady's arm. "I would be honoured to sing it with you," Lois said.

"You start," Bessie said.

Lois smiled. "Ready?"

Bessie nodded. They looked at each other and began.

Cheer, cheer the red and the white,

Honour the name by day and by night,

Lift that noble banner high,

Shake down the thunder from the sky

What though the odds be great or small,

Swans will go in and win over all

While her loyal sons are marching

Onward to victory!

The song had started tentatively but finished with gusto, and Bessie and Lois shared a smile and an impromptu hug.

"Thank you, dear," Bessie said. "That was the first song my dad ever taught me. We sang it together more times than I could count."

"Thank you for talking to us," Lois said.

Bessie looked at Clark. "If you pass me that pen and paper from the shelf," she said, "I'll write down that recipe for your mum."

Clark reached for the shelf, his amusement bubbling at hearing his mom referred to as his 'mum'.

While Bessie wrote, Clark looked at Lois, and they shared a smile.

A few moments later, Bessie tore the page from her pad and offered it to Clark.

"Thank you," he said as he carefully folded it and put it in his wallet. "I'll be sure to give it to her."

"I know you will," Bessie said with a smile.

"How do you know?" Lois asked.

"I know a well-brought-up boy when I meet one," Bessie said. "You are a credit to your mum."

"Thank you," Clark said, hoping Lois wouldn't notice the warmth he could feel spreading across his cheeks.

Bessie showed them to her front door and stayed at her doorway, waving until they drove away.

"What do you think?" Lois said.

"I think I understand a whole lot more about the forlorn South Melbourne supporters in their red-and-white jerseys," Clark said sombrely.

"Jumpers," Lois said. "Or guernseys. We don't say jersey."

Clark nodded. "Well, I understand more now about what they lost."

"Sydney are —and South Melbourne were—officially the Swans, but many of the old-timers refer to them as the Bloods." She grinned suddenly. "A swan is hardly the most ferocious of birds."

"That's true," Clark said, returning her grin and realising how good he felt simply because Lois was smiling again. "I loved your song."

Lois scrunched her nose. "It was such a small thing to do, yet it brought her so much pleasure."

"It did," Clark said. "I recognised the tune. It is very similar to the fight song of the University of Notre Dame in Indiana."

"Really?" Lois asked, looking surprised.

"Yes," Clark said. "Do all clubs have a song?"

Lois nodded. "The recently formed clubs usually have sophisticated songs—sometimes with chorus and verses—but somehow they don't quite grab your throat the way the old ones do."

"Will you sing the Hawthorn song for me?" Clark asked.

Lois chuckled. "Don't push your luck, Kent."

"You sang with Bessie," he cajoled.

She gave him a little smile and said, "If Hawthorn don't make the finals, I hope Sydney win the flag. I hope they win it for all those people like Bessie who have stuck fast to their club despite everything."

"Sixty-three years is a long time to wait."

Lois flicked back her hair. "I reckon you'll write a great story."

"I hope so," he said. "Thanks for all your help."

Lois smiled suddenly and looked sideways at him. "Bessie took a shine to you," she said in a teasing tone. "Your 'mum' will be pleased to hear that Australian women have noticed your manly charm."

There was only one Australian woman Clark wanted to notice him. "Bessie is a very kind lady," he said.

"Are you going to tell your mom what she said about you?"

"No."

Lois giggled. "Here's a promise, Kent," she said. "If I ever meet your mother, I'm going to tell her what Bessie said."

Clark smiled but said nothing. There was something very wonderful about the thought of Lois meeting his mom. He was sure they would like each other, but more than that, it would mean he and Lois had become far more than colleagues.

They drove the rest of the way to the office in silence. Clark planned his story, unable to forget the soft Aussie accent of a brave little woman who had lost so much that she loved.

Part 8

When they arrived back at the Herald Sun office, they separated, Lois heading to her desk, Clark to his.

Clark listened to the tape of his interview with Bessie and put together the bare bones of his story. He contemplated taking it to Browny now—just to ensure it was what was required—or whether to advance the story further before showing it to the editor.

Clark glanced to Lois's desk, thinking it would be a good idea to take her a coffee and ask her opinion.

Her desk was empty.

He hadn't noticed her leave. He must have been engrossed in his story. Deciding not to bother Browny yet, Clark kept working, although it didn't stop him from listening for the sound of Lois's return.

By mid-afternoon, his story was in good enough shape that Clark felt comfortable about sending it to Browny. He submitted it, surprised at how nervous he was about the editor's reaction. This was his first contribution to the paper, and he really didn't want Browny feeling that the Herald Sun had been short-changed in the switch of reporters.

Lois still wasn't at her desk.

Clark's mind drifted back to their time at the beach in Geelong yesterday, but his pleasant recollections were chopped short by the scream that swathed through the newsroom.

"RUBBER!"

With his heart thumping way beyond what seemed warranted, Clark rose from his seat and hurried into Browny's office. "Yes?" he said, only just managing not to add 'sir' to his greeting.

Browny looked up from his monitor. "I've just read your story," he said in a tone that gave absolutely no clue about his opinion.

"And?" Clark asked.

Browny's loud laugh reverberated around his office. "You look worried, Rubber," he said. "Don't you know a good piece of writing when you see it? It's exactly what I was hoping for."

"Thank you," Clark said, trying hard not to sound too surprised or relieved.

Browny's thoughts seemed to move on from the story. "Bluey is going out to Moorabbin to watch St Kilda train,"

he said. “I want you to go with him and then come back and write up the training report together. By then, the teams will be coming in.” Browny picked up his phone, which Clark took as a dismissal.

Walking back to his desk, Clark felt a wave of satisfaction at Browny’s response to the story. If only Lois was here, his life would be perfect.

Later, Clark went with Bluey to the St Kilda training ground and saw a much more spirited and intensive session than he’d seen the day before at Geelong. Bluey’s approach to the story seemed somewhat haphazard, and his interest regularly drifted to his conversation with some of the female fans, but Clark thought it best not to comment.

After training had finished, they stopped at a milk bar to buy a couple of meat pies—which Bluey told him were an institution in Australia—and ate them as they returned to the office.

When they arrived back, the newsroom was abuzz with a frenzied level of activity. Clark checked immediately, but Lois still hadn’t returned. He wanted to inquire but hesitated to show too much interest in her whereabouts. No one else mentioned her absence. Perhaps she was chasing up last minute information for her ‘Rich Club, Poor Club’ story.

Bluey wrote up the training report, demonstrating he had noticed more than Clark had feared. Clark offered occasional suggestions and felt the combined effort resulted in a good story. At regular intervals, the call came across the newsroom—“Collingwood’s in… Essendon’s in… Fitzroy’s in,”—and a new piece of paper was added to the big board on the wall. When he heard the Geelong team announced, Clark wandered over to the board and discovered that Kendall had been named to play.

It was after ten o’clock when the flurry finally eased, and Browny told him to go home. Clark caught the train back to Richmond. As he walked to his unit, he detoured past Lois’s home. A light was on, and Clark paused. He could hear footsteps and a heartbeat coming from her unit. Feeling he had invaded her privacy more than was appropriate, he hurried away.

But he knew he couldn’t have gone home without knowing for sure that Lois was safe.

* * *

The first thing Clark did when he arrived at the office the next morning was to check Lois’s desk. It was still deserted. He quickly scanned the entire newsroom and realised she wasn’t there. Trying to suppress his disappointment, he opened his copy of the *Herald Sun* and found Lois’s ‘Rich Club, Poor Club’ story. After reading it, he was impressed. The story could have been reduced to little more than stodgy information, but she had breathed life and interest into her words.

He figured Lois assumed she had been given the story because she was the least of the reporters in the football department. Having read it, Clark was sure Browny’s reasoning had been that she was one of the very few who could actually produce a quality piece of work, given the subject matter.

Gazza came over, and Clark noticed he had indeed ‘dressed down’, wearing a well-worn pair of jeans and a casual polo shirt that had probably seen a few too many Fridays. Clark had remembered Lois’s advice and was wearing jeans and a button-up shirt without a tie. As he had dressed, he had wondered wryly if the next time he wore a tie would be the day he returned to the Daily Planet.

“We’re outta here, mate,” Gazza said. “Three debutantes have been named in the teams, and Browny thinks the young Carlton bloke, Aaron Hamill, has a future, so we’re headed to Princes Park to see if they’re willing to let him talk to us.”

Clark followed Gazza out of the office. He passed Lois’s vacant desk with a sigh, his disappointment beginning to morph into concern despite his patrol last night. Was she OK?

“Do you know where Lois is?” Clark asked Gazza as they stepped onto the sidewalk.

Gazza shrugged, his disinterest stark. “Could be anywhere.”

“But someone would know where she is?” Clark said, trying desperately to keep the anxiety from his voice. “Browny would be keeping tabs on her?”

“I s’pose so,” Gazza said. “Listen, mate, the first thing you need to know about Flinders is that she isn’t your average sheila. I mean, what normal woman would want to work in a footy department? It’s a tough gig if you’re a bloke who hasn’t played the game. If you’re a woman, you just don’t have any credibility at all.”

“She has earned credibility,” Clark said tightly.

His response seemed to surprise Gazza. “She writes OK, and her looks aren’t too bad,” Gazza said. “She could be a TV reporter on twice the money, or she could get married and have a coupla kids. But she prefers the hard slog of trying to carve out a career as a footy journo.” He shook his head as if such decisions were unfathomable.

“But she’s good at it.”

Gazza shrugged. “Doesn’t change that she’s a woman.”

"That's an incredibly sexist attitude," Clark said before he could stop himself.

Gazza didn't take offence; he merely grinned. "That's how it is."

"It shouldn't be that way."

"You could be right, Rubber," Gazza said indifferently. "And if anyone can change people's minds about women reporting on footy, it's probably Flinders Lane. But will it be worth it if she gets to the end of the road and wonders about all the things she missed?"

"Such as?"

"A life."

"She has a life."

Gazza's expression clearly said two things: he didn't agree, and he didn't want to discuss it further. "We're having a barbeque next Wednesday," he said. "The missus said to make sure you know you're welcome."

"The missus?"

"My 'trouble and strife'." Gazza saw Clark's confusion and chortled. "My wife," he said. "The good woman, the other half, the missus, the minister for domestic affairs, she who must be obeyed."

"Oh," Clark said. He had assumed Gazza wasn't married.

"Wednesday arvo," Gazza said. "Get Flinders to give you a lift. Oh, and bring a plate."

* * *

Clark and Gazza arrived back just before lunch, having been granted a short interview with the debutante but having had to wait for over an hour while he attended the team meeting.

Lois was at her desk! Clark's heart danced.

Even better, she didn't have a drink.

Tucked into the corner of the newsroom was a bench with a tiny sink, a miniature fridge, and a large white jug with a lead connecting it to a power outlet. Cups hung from hooks below a shelf that held tea bags, instant coffee, and a jar of sugar.

"What'cha looking for, mate?" Banjo asked, coming up behind Clark. "Milk's in the fridge."

Clark turned. "Is there a coffee machine?"

Banjo snorted. "This is a newspaper, Rubber," he said. "Not an Italian restaurant."

"So, we have instant coffee?" Clark asked, trying to make it sound like a question and not a criticism.

"Yep," Banjo said. "Just stick on the jug and away you go."

Clark contemplated the white jug, hoping Banjo would remember he had a story to write.

Apparently, Banjo didn't have a story. "You don't know how to work the jug, do you, Rubber?" Banjo said, grinning widely. "It's easy. You check the gauge at the front to make sure there's enough water, and then you flick this switch at the top. Got it?"

Clark nodded. "Thanks, Banjo," he said.

"How do you boil water in the USA?" Banjo asked.

"Ah… kettles… on the stove top." Or a coffee machine.

"Oh," Banjo said. He slipped two cups from their hooks and set them on the bench. "You want coffee?"

"Actually, I was going to take one to Lois," Clark said.

Banjo took down another cup. "I have mine black with one sugar," he said. "Thanks, Rubber." He turned and walked back to his desk.

Half a minute later, the jug began to steam and automatically clicked off. Clark made the three coffees and took one to Banjo.

"Thanks, mate," he said.

Then Clark took the remaining two cups to Lois's desk. "Hi, Lois," he said, trying to sound casual despite how good it felt to see her again.

She looked up from her work with a smile. "Hi, Clark," she said. "How are you going? How's your Bessie Bellchambers story?"

Clark put a cup on her desk, biting back the inclination to apologise that it was instant coffee. "Browny said it is what he was hoping for."

Lois smiled her thanks. "That's always good. It will probably be in tomorrow's edition as a build-up to the Swans game against St Kilda."

"Yeah, that's what Browny said."

"Congratulations—your first Aussie byline."

"Thanks," he said. "I read your story. It was great."

Lois wrinkled her nose. "It was OK given it's a topic nobody really wants to read about."

"I asked Browny if I can do the St Kilda-Sydney game tomorrow, and he said that would be a good idea," Clark said.

"No worries. I'll pick you up about nine o'clock."

Any chance of further conversation was snuffed out by a loud demand from Browny for silence. He was perched on the crate again.

Browny cleared this throat. “Lunch’ll be here in a tick, so hold onto your hunger for a moment and listen here. We’ve had another good week in this department. Thanks to all of you for your efforts. As you know, we’ve had a team change of our own, with Deano out and Rubber in.” His eyes rested briefly on Clark. “Welcome, Rubber, it’s good to have you on board.”

“Thanks,” Clark said.

Browny didn’t shift his attention as Clark had expected him to. “You’ve been here nearly a week, Rubber,” he said. “It’s time for you to spill the beans.”

This statement was met with loud agreement from around the room. Clark was genuinely unsure what they expected from him.

“Your footy team,” Gazza explained from across the room. “We want to know who you’re going to barrack for.”

Oh. That.

“Come on, Rubber,” Bluey said. “Be a man and make a stand.”

“Yeah, come on, Rubber.”

Clark was aware of Lois to his left and slightly behind him, but he determinedly kept his eyes forward as he thrust his hands into his pockets. “I… ah… haven’t…”

“Don’t give us that, Rubber,” Banjo said, grinning. “It won’t wash. You can’t live in Melbourne and not have a footy team.”

Clark realised that his time in neutral territory was over. “OK,” he said. “I think I’ll barrack for Hawthorn.”

His announcement was met with loud groans of abject disapproval. “Hawthorn?” Gazza said, his lip curling with deep disgust. “I wouldn’t barrack for those colours if every other team dropped dead.”

“That’s ‘cause we ripped you a new one last weekend,” Lois said quietly.

This comment was met with loud laughter. Gazza scowled.

“The Colliwobbles came early this year,” Lois added.

Gazza’s scowl deepened. From the crate, Browny spoke again.

“So you’re a Hawk, Rubber,” he said, a hint of disappointment in his tone. His eyes scanned the gathering before him. “I trust you all know which games you are doing this weekend? Good. Don’t push the deadlines. It plays havoc with my blood pressure. And don’t forget you’re supposed to be in training for our game against the electronic media blokes. We don’t want any of you carking it just ‘cause you had to run twenty metres.”

He stepped down from the crate with surprising agility, and Clark snuck a look at Lois. She was contemplating him with a small smile.

“Welcome to the Hawthorn family,” she said.

Clark grinned and winked at her.

Her attention turned to the door as a man and two women strode into the room carrying large trays of food.

“What’s this?” Clark asked.

“We get lunch on the bosses on Fridays,” Lois said. “Are you hungry?”

Clark nodded. “Are you?”

“Yep.” They walked together to the table where the food was being laid out.

“What happens around here on Friday night?” Clark asked.

“Footy,” Lois replied.

Banjo sidled up to Clark. “C’ov a word, mate?” he said.

Clark turned. “Sure.”

Banjo gestured away from the crowd at the table. “Not here. This is for your ears only.” Banjo walked to the door of the newsroom and exited into the corridor. Clark followed.

“Hey, mate?” Banjo said once they were alone. “Do yourself a favour and stay away from Flinders.”

Clark understood but pretended not to. “Browny has us working together sometimes.”

“Not work,” Banjo said. “Personally. Don’t go there, mate. You’re barking up the wrong tree.”

Clark studied Banjo’s face, trying to read beyond his words. “Is this because I said I barracked for Hawthorn?” he asked. “Is that the problem?”

“That and how often you look at her desk.”

Clark tried to stifle his unease at having been caught watching Lois. “Because she’s with someone else?” he asked.

“Because you’ve got Buckley’s.”

“Buckley’s?”

“Buckley’s chance, meaning none,” Banjo said. “Listen, mate, you’re an OK-looking bloke, and with that Yank accent, you shouldn’t have too much trouble pulling the

sheilas, but going after Flinders is like a dog chasing a truck —it's best that you don't actually catch it."

"Are you warning me to stay away from her?"

"You got it, mate," Banjo said, looking relieved that Clark had understood.

Clark decided this was not a conversation he wanted to continue. "Thanks," he said. "Mate."

Banjo smiled. "Us blokes have to stick together, Rubber. I couldn't stand by and watch a mate get himself into a mess like that."

"Thanks again," Clark said.

He walked back into the newsroom and picked up a plate. He put a few of the more recognisable food items on it and returned to his desk. Glancing surreptitiously to Lois, he saw she was eating absently while reading from her computer screen. He surveyed the room and realised that he and Lois were the only two at their desks. Everyone else was standing around, chatting and laughing as they ate the lunch that had been provided.

Lois looked as if she were oblivious to everything going on around her. Clark wondered if she really was as much of an outsider as it sometimes appeared. She didn't seem unduly perturbed by her separateness.

Was she eating alone because Dan Scardino wasn't here?

If he were here, would they be eating together, laughing and talking just like everyone else?

Was that why Banjo had warned him off? Out of loyalty to Scardino? It had sounded more like he was trying to keep Clark out of trouble, but maybe Scardino was the sort of man who didn't like anyone showing an interest in his girl.

But if that were the case, why had he gone to Metropolis?

Clark stood and resolutely weaved through the gathered people to Lois's desk. He took his notes from his pocket. "There's a game tonight," he said. "West Coast Eagles versus Fitzroy. Your friends from the west."

"The game's in Perth, so there's no footy in Melbourne tonight," Lois said. "Therefore, your choices are pretty much any pub. They'll all be showing the game."

"What do you usually do?"

"I usually go home and watch the footy on the telly," Lois replied. "Saturdays and Sundays are my biggest days, so I try to keep Friday night quiet." She shrugged. "Sorry to be so lame. Gazza and the boys will be going to the pub. I know you could go with them if you wanted to."

"I'd rather watch the game with you."

She didn't seem taken aback by his forthrightness. "There would be conditions."

Clark could tell by the gleam in her eyes that the conditions were not going to be onerous. "Such as?"

"Well, Friday night wouldn't be Friday night without fish and chips for dinner."

"Chips? They're like french fries, aren't they?"

"Fat french fries."

"OK," Clark said. "Deal."

"Beauty," Lois said. "I'll probably be ready to leave about seven; does that suit you?"

It suited him just fine. "Yep," he said.

Clark walked back to his desk, completely unable to control the wide grin that had settled on his face.

* * *

It was after seven when Lois and Clark swung out of the Herald Sun offices. "I didn't bring the Jeep today," she told him. "Friday night traffic is a nightmare, even when there's no footy."

They crossed the Yarra River and walked into the teeming Flinders Street Station. When they boarded the overloaded train, all the seats were taken, so they had to stand, crushed against the door. The movement of the train kept jostling Lois against him.

They alighted at Richmond station, walked along the street and into a brightly lit, crowded store. As soon as they entered, an older guy from behind the counter raised his hand in cheery greeting. "Flinders!" he called.

Lois manoeuvred her way through the customers to the counter. The old guy leant over and squeezed her shoulder. "Thank you, Flinders. You were very nice to my Dees."

Lois grinned. "It's easy to be nice to them when they play like that, George."

"Neitz kicked eight," he said, grinning broadly. "Big game this week. Do you reckon we can beat the Tigers?"

"I didn't pick 'em, George," Lois admitted.

His grin faded. "Flinders," he said, "You didn't pick my Dees?"

"Sorry, George. I think Richmond will win."

Two people from the assembled crowd joined in the conversation, and the four of them tossed around comments for the next few minutes. Clark looked at the other people in the shop and noticed that, without exception, they were listening to the footy talk. Then, one by one, they joined in.

They talked over each other, they disagreed loudly, and they laughed often.

Clark couldn't follow the conversation. There were just too many phrases he didn't understand and too many names he didn't know, but he found himself smiling because they were clearly enjoying it so much.

George handed Lois a package wrapped in white paper, and she paid him with a blue-green ten-dollar note.

"Thanks, George," she said. "See you next week."

"Bye, Flinders. Have a good week and remember, 'Go Dees'."

The store erupted into a chaotic and unsynchronised sports cheer.

Outside, it was cold and dark. And noticeably quiet after the noise of the shop. Lois cuddled the warm package against her chest.

"Do you go there every week?" Clark asked.

"Every Friday night," Lois replied. "It's my weekly indulgence."

"Who are the Dees? I don't remember them from the sheet you gave me."

"The Demons. Melbourne. Their name is the envy of all clubs. Their record isn't. Their last premiership was 1964. You have to wonder if their fans care any more."

"Because they've been so long without success?" he said.

"Because… I don't know… it's as if something vital is missing at Melbourne."

"What makes you say that?"

"Just a gut feeling," Lois said. "I hope for George's sake that I'm wrong."

When they had nearly reached Lois's unit, she suddenly gave a little squeal. "Eeek, I forgot," she said. "I'm out of milk." She handed Clark the warm white package, reached into her bag, and offered him her keys. "Take the chips and go home. Turn on the heater and get out a couple of cans from the fridge. I'll zip to the milk bar. I'll only be a few moments behind you."

"Do you want me to go for the milk?" Clark offered.

"No," Lois said. "It will take just as long to tell you where the milk bar is as it will to go there myself. See you in a few minutes."

Clark went to Lois's unit. As he pushed the key in the lock, he heard a sound behind him. It was Lois's neighbour, Esmeralda.

"Hi, Clark," she said in a sultry voice.

"Hi, Esmeralda." He opened Lois's door.

"You spending the night with Lois?" Esmeralda asked.

"We're watching the football together," Clark said, his tone not inviting further conversation.

Esmeralda giggled. It was a high-pitched cackle that soured his insides.

"Bye," Clark said. He stepped into Lois's apartment and emphatically shut the door.

Part 9

Clark put the wrapped package on the table and flicked the switch on Lois's heater. He shot a few spurts of warmth into her couch and curtains to help dispel the chill from the air.

Before slipping his glasses back into place, Clark looked through the door. To his relief, Esmeralda had gone.

He removed his jacket and surveyed Lois's apartment. At the bookshelf, he skimmed the spines of her books and smiled. Only three weren't football books, and they were about cricket. She had a large collection of videos—most were football games, meticulously labelled with the number of the round and the year.

He turned to the couch and was reminded of how Lois had fallen asleep on his shoulder two nights ago. Such a simple thing—her head on his shoulder—but it had felt better than anything he could remember with any other woman.

What had Banjo meant today? Why had he said Clark should stay away from Lois? If she did have a commitment to Scardino, wouldn't she have said something by now?

Yet, he admitted dejectedly, there had been nothing in her behaviour to suggest she was offering Clark anything more than her friendship.

There was a sound outside, and Clark looked through the door again. It was Lois. She came in as he quickly readjusted his glasses. She put the bottle of milk in the fridge and said, "Is it OK if we sit on the floor? The table's kind of crowded with my computer and everything."

"Sure," Clark said.

Lois gathered two cans of coke from the fridge and the tomato ketchup from the pantry. She threw him one cushion and sat cross-legged on another in the space between the couch and the television. "Do you like flake?" she asked as she unrolled the white paper package.

Clark settled onto the cushion, facing her. "What's flake?" he asked.

"Gummy shark."

"Shark?" Clark peered into the pile of oversized french fries. There was nothing noticeably foreign.

"It's great." Lois picked out one of the two large portions from amongst the chips and handed it to him. "I didn't know what you'd want, so I just told George to give us double the usual."

Clark examined the battered lump in his hand.

"Try it," Lois said and took a bite of hers.

He did. It was surprisingly good—thick and juicy—although it didn't taste particularly fishy. And despite its name, it seemed less flaky than any battered fish he'd eaten before. "Is this what Australians eat?" he asked.

Lois shook her head. "Victorians," she said. "If you go to a fish and chip shop in any of the other states and ask for flake, they'll know you're a Victorian. We eat it by the ton." She picked up the ketchup bottle and squirted a puddle of red onto the paper and then offered it to him.

Clark shook his head.

"Do you want anything else?" Lois asked. "Vinegar? More salt? Anything else Americans have on their chips?"

"We don't have chips, we have french fries," he told her with a grin.

"Oh, of course." Lois dunked her piece of flake into the glob of ketchup. "And you have ketchup, don't you?"

"Yes."

"We don't," she told him. "This is sauce. Or, using rhyming slang, dead horse."

Clark grinned—it was caused by a combination of her words and just how good it felt to be sitting on the floor on a Friday night eating flake and chips with Lois Lane. "So if someone asked me to pass the dead horse, they'd want ketchup?"

Lois chuckled. "You're catching on real quick, Mr USA," she said. "You'll be a true-blue Aussie by the time you go home."

The thought of going home sobered him. Well, not so much going back, but leaving Lois.

And that would mean Dan would be returning to Melbourne. To Lois. Clark wanted to ask about Dan. Wanted to ask if Dan was the reason why Banjo thought he, Clark, shouldn't pursue anything with Lois beyond a working relationship.

Of course, even without Dan, there were a multitude of reasons why Clark shouldn't act on the insistent promptings of his heart. Lois thought they were different nationalities with different homelands. How would she react if she knew they had different home planets?

Lois licked her fingers and used her foot to drag the remote control closer. "The footy starts in a few minutes," she said. The salt had paled her lower lip. Clark swallowed, aware of just how much he'd like to taste her saltiness.

After they had finished eating, Lois rolled up the paper, and they both got up to wash their hands. When Clark returned from the kitchen, Lois was already sitting on the couch. He sat next to her, deliberately positioning himself a few inches closer than he had the other night. She turned to him and smiled.

"Ask any questions you like," she said. "Do you want the commentary up or down?"

"Whichever you prefer."

"I usually have it up. Otherwise, it's just too quiet. Maybe we'll keep it up. It'll help you become familiar with the lingo. We can mute it any time you want to ask me something."

"OK," he replied. Lois had offered to answer his questions, but Clark didn't dare ask any one of the questions that were burning in his mind.

How would you feel about going out with me?

Would you mind if I kissed you?

Do you love Dan Scardino?

Have you noticed that I am captivated by you?

Do you have strong views about aliens?

Clark smothered each of those questions and instead asked the much more insipid, "Do you usually watch the footy alone every Friday night?"

She nodded. "In winter, I do. In summer, there's usually cricket to watch."

"But don't you watch with… friends… or colleagues… or Dan?"

"Not Dan recently, not when the game's in Melbourne," Lois said. "He's done so well since he arrived, he usually gets the Friday night game. It's always a big one, so we send at least four or five people. Dan is usually one of them. Gazza, too."

"Do you ever do the Friday night games?" Clark asked, remembering what Browny had said about televised games.

"Nah." She shrugged. "Maybe one day."

Clark wished he could tell her why she was sent to the lesser games. "But Gazza gets them?" he said, trying not to sound too incredulous.

Lois laughed. “Gazza used to play for Collingwood. Therefore, he’s an ‘expert’. Though Banjo ghosts for him sometimes.”

Clark didn’t need to ask why.

On the television, the West Coast players ran out—a large group dressed in blue and gold jumpers similar to those worn by the youths at the airport. The players bunched together in front of a crepe-paper screen being held up by dwarfed groups of people around the two poles and stabilised by multiple ropes extending outwards from the top of the poles. The players burst through it, leaving the screen in tatters, and kept running.

“The Cheer Squads,” Lois said, gesturing to the television. “Groups of avid fans who make a banner every week with a message of support and encouragement and sometimes a picture. They see to its safe transport to the ground and put it up… just so the players can run through it and demolish it.”

Clark had seen run-through banners before, but this was seriously big and remarkably complex. “How long does it take to make a banner of that size?” he asked.

Lois shrugged. “Depends on how elaborate it is. Forty man-hours would be average. It would be a lot longer for finals. Each banner probably costs about fifty dollars. The Cheer Squads raise the money to pay for the materials. Then, during the game, they sit behind the goals and cheer on their team.”

“The Cheer Squad is a group of supporters who are paid by the club?”

Lois looked at him blankly. “Paid?”

“The NFL teams have paid cheerleaders.”

“Oh.” It seemed to take a moment for Lois to grasp that. “No,” she said. “They all volunteer. They give up their time to make the banner. Some of them arrive four hours before the game starts to set it up. They use their holiday leave from work to travel interstate for games, and they pay for their own flights and accommodation.”

“That’s some dedication,” Clark said.

“It’s their club,” Lois said simply. “Somehow, getting paid would… I don’t know… detract from that.”

An idea stormed into Clark’s mind. “You sound like you could possibly have a little inside knowledge of a Cheer Squad,” he said.

Lois grinned, causing his heart to miss a beat, but she admitted to nothing. On the television, the other team had run out. Their banner was smaller and less impressive.

“Fitzroy,” Clark said. “They’re one of the poorer clubs?”

Something of the cheerfulness died from Lois’s face. “Yeah,” she said. “But also, they’re a Victorian club, so they had to make their banner here and transport it to Perth. Sometimes the airlines make you pay for extra luggage, so the banner has to be kept small.”

Clark watched as the players began their warm-up. “I’ve noticed that sometimes the teams wear coloured shorts and sometimes white shorts,” he said. “Does that indicate the home team?”

“Yes,” Lois said. “The home team wear the dark-coloured shorts—brown for Hawthorn, black for Collingwood, blue for Geelong. The away team wear the white shorts.”

“No away jumpers?”

“Not generally.”

“And the players’ jumpers? The number appears only on their backs. And they don’t have their names on there at all?”

“That’s correct. They are identified by their number.”

“Do the numbers signify which position they play?”

“Not at all,” Lois answered. “Any player can wear any number. When someone comes into a club, particularly if he’s a young kid, he’ll usually be given a high number. Wearing the lower numbers is a privilege that has to be earned.”

“The lower the number, the better the player?”

“Often, but not always. Carlton’s Koutoufides was given number 43 when he arrived at the club, and he says he wants to keep it for his whole career because that was the year his mother was born.”

“He could have a lower number by now?”

“Yes, he is one of Carlton’s most promising kids.” Lois picked up a cushion from the floor and settled against it. “Different numbers mean different things at different clubs. At Melbourne, number 31 is special because it was worn by their legend, Ron Barassi. The clubs are keen to ensure that their revered numbers are only worn by players worthy of that honour.”

“I saw at Geelong that some of the fans wore jumpers with numbers.”

“Yeah, that’s a way of supporting a particular player.”

“Do you have a Hawthorn jumper?” Clark asked.

“I have three,” she said.

“Which numbers?”

"The jumper I wore as a kid has 24 on the back for Peter Knights. The jumper that fits now has 19 for Jason Dunstall."

"And the third one?" Clark asked.

"The third one is my most treasured possession," Lois said gravely. "It's a jumper from 1974 with number 5 on the back."

Clark could tell from her expression that there was a whole lot more that could be said, but on the television, the siren sounded, and they both turned to the game.

* * *

By quarter time, the West Coast Eagles had six goals to Fitzroy's one, and Clark's respect for the men who played football had continued to escalate. They wore no protection except for a mouth guard, and there were thirty-six of them running for the ball as if their lives depended on it. Perhaps their careers *did* depend on it, but it looked a perilous business.

The lack of a helmet made the players' faces clearly visible. Clark was fascinated by the added insight gained simply by being privy to facial expression.

As the siren sounded to finish the first quarter, Lois looked at him. "It's not going to be much of a contest for your first live game," she said apologetically.

"It doesn't matter," Clark assured her quickly. "I have so much to learn that any game is helpful."

She smiled, but he sensed a tinge of sadness. Was she thinking about Scardino? About how many Friday evenings she had spent with Dan? Watching the footy? Eating fish and chips? Was she missing his ability to make intelligent comments about the game?

Well, at least Clark could ask questions—questions he hoped would be intelligent. "I don't really understand the holding the ball rule," he said. "Could you explain it to me, please?"

Her peal of laughter ricocheted around the small room. "*Nobody* understands the holding the ball rule," she gurgled. "That's the beauty of it."

Now he was more confused than ever.

Lois leant over and—for less than a second—her hand cupped his. "Sorry," she said. "I shouldn't have laughed at you." She grinned. "I wasn't laughing at you; I was laughing at our game."

Clark's hand felt like it was on fire. He hauled his attention away from it and looked into her beautiful eyes. "Can you try to explain it, please?" he asked.

"A player gets possession, and it's 'play on'. That means any opponent can tackle him. When a tackle is laid, the player with the ball has to legally dispose of it. The umpire has to decide if the tackle was legal; then he has to decide if the player with the ball had an opportunity to get rid of it. If he calls 'holding the ball', the tackler gets the free kick. If he calls 'push in the back' or 'high', the player with the ball gets a free. If he calls 'mine', he couldn't call it either way, so he bounces it."

"It seems a little grey," Clark ventured.

"You bet it's grey," Lois agreed. "And it makes the umpires' job close to impossible. And it means that win, lose, or draw, about ninety percent of the fans leave the ground believing they got a raw deal from the umpires." She grinned again. "But that's football."

The second quarter began, and their attention returned to the television. At least, Lois's did. Clark's eyes flitted between the television and Lois. Her face rode the game—animated, smiling at good play, wincing at the regular bumps. If she was aware of him studying her, she gave no indication. It was as if he ceased to exist while the play was happening. And Clark had never known a game that had so few pauses. After a goal, there would be an advertisement break, and Lois would seem to remember his presence.

"You OK?" she asked. "Anything I can help you with?"

Actually, Clark was wondering if she would mind inching a little along the couch and maybe shuffling under his arm… because all of this would be so much more enjoyable if he was actually touching her. But she seemed oblivious.

If it were Scardino sitting here, would there be empty space in the middle of the couch?

Somehow, Clark doubted it.

At half time, the score was ten goals to three. "Your friends from the west will be happy," Clark commented.

She didn't seem to understand for a moment. Then she smiled. "Oh, you mean from the airport?"

Clark nodded. "Does that happen often? You get harassed like that?"

"Sometimes. Deep, deep down, the average male footy supporter doesn't want to admit that a woman could possibly know more about football than he does. Sometimes, he likes to try to assert his superiority. The truth is that some of the most fanatical supporters are female."

"Maybe that has something to do with the players' tight shorts and muscular bodies," Clark said with a smile.

Lois lifted her eyebrows and grinned but said nothing.

"It can't have been easy making your way in a man's world," Clark said.

"It's all I've ever wanted to do."

"All?"

"Well," she said. "I wanted to *play* footy, but once it became obvious I didn't have certain necessary attributes, getting paid to write about footy seemed like a pretty good idea."

She had all the attributes he'd ever wanted in a woman… and then some.

Lois stood. "It's half time," she said. "Milo?"

Again, she seemed completely unaware of his thoughts. "Is that like the flake and fries?" he asked, trying to sound casual. "It's tradition that you eat Milo at half time?"

Lois giggled. "Milo is a drink," she said.

"Oh."

"I can make coffee for you if you'd like," Lois offered.

"No, I think I'll have Milo," he said.

She was halfway to the little kitchen when she stopped. "Even though your knowledge is so deficient, you were going to *eat* it?" she teased.

"I'm willing to try it since you recommended it." She grinned, and Clark stood and followed her to the kitchen. "I noticed you were out of the office a lot yesterday," he said. "Were you following up a story?"

"I heard a whisper, and when I took it to Browny, he wanted me to see what else I could discover."

"Were you able to find out more?"

Lois shook her head with a depth of gloom that seemed to indicate more than just being unable to track down a story. "No one would say anything," she said. "That usually means something big is about to break open."

"Do you know what?"

"I can guess," she said. "But I hope I'm wrong."

"Are you willing to tell me what you think?" Clark asked.

Lois hesitated for a moment as she replaced the lid on the green Milo tin. "This doesn't leave this room," she said, her eyes grave.

"OK," he agreed.

"The word is that Fitzroy and North Melbourne are about to announce a merger."

"A merger?"

Lois nodded. "The North-Fitzroy Kangaroos."

"Would that be better than relocation to another state?"

Lois lifted her hands in despairing uncertainty. "Some will say so. From the very little I've managed to find out, I think the Fitzroy fans will see it more as a takeover than a merger."

"But surely if the choices are to move interstate or simply cease to exist, this could be the best solution?"

"Fitzroy fans don't want the best solution. They just want to keep their club."

"Why is it being kept so quiet?"

"Because if this is actually happening, the AFL administrators will be doing everything they can to push it through. They've already awarded Port Adelaide—a South Australian club—a licence to join the AFL. They're just waiting for one of the current clubs to fold or merge."

"North Melbourne is the favourite to win the championship this year," Clark said. "And Fitzroy have only won one game. That doesn't seem like a balanced partnership."

"It won't be," Lois said. "Fitzroy are extremely vulnerable. They have no recent on-field success, a massive debt—if the rumours are to be believed—and no obvious saviour in the form of a wealthy supporter." She gestured to the television. "What we're seeing tonight is just the surface of a club that could be in the final stages of extinction."

"But a merger… wouldn't that keep the name?" Clark asked. "Wouldn't that be something?"

"The name would go very quickly," Lois said. "North Melbourne are often known simply as North. North-Fitzroy wouldn't be any different."

Lois gave Clark a chocolaty drink and took her cup and a packet of cookies back to the couch. "These are Tim Tams," she said as she opened the packet, revealing a row of chocolate-covered rectangular cookies. "We use the generic term 'biscuits', not 'cookies', and Tim Tams are absolutely the most heavenly of all biscuits."

Clark reached for one. "Thanks," he said. He bit into the chocolate treat, and a smooth layer of sweetness spread over his tongue. He met Lois's enquiring look with a nod. "You were right," he said. "These are amazing."

Her eyes lit in a way that reminded him of when she had suggested they dunk their feet in the cold water on the boardwalk. "Wanna try something?" she said.

"Is it going to involve you needing your socks warmed?"

Lois giggled as she reached for the tissue box and put a handful of tissues on her lap. "Watch this," she said. "And after you've watched, copy me."

"OK."

Lois dipped one end of the Tim Tam into her Milo, and her cheeks concaved as she sucked on the other end of the cookie. A few seconds later, she made a throaty sound of triumph and pulled away from the melting chocolate. She licked a few drops of the chocolate-Milo mix from her bottom lip and grinned jubilantly. She popped the rest of the soggy cookie into her mouth and gestured for him to do likewise.

Hesitantly, Clark put one end of the cookie in his Milo and sucked. Nothing happened for a few seconds. Then, he felt the dam give way, and his mouth was flooded with a river of rich, chocolaty fluid that, impossibly, tasted even better than the cookie by itself.

He looked at Lois who was watching him, her eyes shining. She took another handful of tissues and offered them to him. Clark was vaguely aware of a small stream of liquid meandering down his chin, but all possible embarrassment was erased by Lois's smile.

"Good?" she asked.

"Very good," Clark said as he wiped his jaw.

"That is called the 'Tim Tam Slam'," Lois informed him.

His reply was cut short by a sharp rap on the door. Clark clamped down on the groan that rose automatically.

Lois opened the door to reveal Esmeralda.

"Oh," Esmeralda gushed as she stepped uninvited into Lois's unit. "I'm *so* glad you're here, Clark. My washing machine has become unbalanced, and I'm not strong enough to straighten it, so I'm hoping you would be kind enough to loan me your muscles for a few minutes."

As she spoke, Esmeralda walked past Lois and stood at the end of the couch. She looked down at Clark and laboriously winked. He figured there was a good chance she imagined her smile was alluring.

It wasn't.

"It's half time," Clark said in a voice he hoped clearly communicated that if there hadn't been a break in play, he wouldn't even be thinking of leaving Lois.

"Perfect," Esmeralda said. "I doubt we'll need very long."

Clark looked across to Lois, still standing at her door. Her face was expressionless. She simply looked at him and awaited his decision.

Reluctantly, he wiped the remnants of chocolate from his mouth and hands. Esmeralda marched out. Clark followed, giving Lois a small smile as he passed. "I'll be back soon," he promised her.

Once in Esmeralda's unit, she pointedly closed the door behind them, and Clark felt his flight instinct roar to life.

"That's better," she crooned. "Much better."

"Where's your washing machine?" Clark asked tersely.

"In here," Esmeralda said as she opened a door.

Clark followed her, realising too late that she had led him into her bedroom. She quickly closed the door, stepped up to him, and slipped her arms around his waist. Clark took a firm hold of her elbows and pushed her away. "No," he said sharply.

Her smile didn't falter. "Don't be silly, Clarkie," she said. "You must know by now that you're never going to get anything from that tight-wad, Lois."

Clark risked taking his eyes from her long enough to reach for the handle of the bedroom door. He opened it but was stalled when it ran into her foot. "I'm leaving," he said firmly.

"You're being silly," Esmeralda said, just as firmly. Her hand reached for his chest. Clark caught it and held it away from him.

Using enough strength to move her but not enough to hurt her, Clark forced the door open and stepped out of her bedroom. At the front door of her unit, he stopped. "I'm not interested," he declared. "And that isn't going to change, so don't try anything like this again."

Esmeralda smiled smugly as if she knew he would eventually succumb to her charms. Clark strode out of her unit and decisively shut her door.

Once outside, he moved far enough away that he wasn't within reach should she try to follow him and leant against the brick wall. He had become more adept at dealing with situations like this. Mayson had been good for that, at least.

Why was it that he seemed to attract beautiful women whom he found not remotely attractive, and yet the one woman who completely enthralled him showed no interest in being anything more than friends?

From deep in his jeans pocket, Clark heard the shrill of his cell phone. He pulled it out, hoping fervently that Esmeralda hadn't somehow managed to procure his number. With relief, he saw that it was his mom. It would be very early morning at home. "Mom," he said, steadying his voice. "How are you?"

"Clark," his mother said with an urgency that gripped his stomach. "There's been a train crash in the subway in Metropolis. A lot of people are trapped. Can you come?"

"Of course I can come," Clark said. "I'll be there in a few minutes." He slipped the cell back into his pocket as his heart plummeted. He had to go to Lois and make an excuse. And regardless of how convincing he was—and past experience told him he was unlikely to be convincing at all—she would think he was making excuses so he could go back to Esmeralda.

Clark groaned.

Then he remembered the trapped people and hurried the few steps to Lois's unit.

She looked up as he entered. He thought he saw a glimmer of pleasure that he was back so soon, but he had no time to process her reaction now.

"Lois," Clark said, knowing he sounded a little breathless and despising himself for it. "Lois, I've just had a call, and I have to go. I'm sorry."

Her expression of surprise slashed through his heart.

"Thanks for everything," he said. "I'll see you tomorrow. I'll be ready by nine."

Clark shut her door and turned away quickly. He ran to the shrubs at the far end of the driveway, spun into the suit, lifted into the darkness, and flew to Metropolis.

The apprehension he felt every time he was seen in public as Superman simmered inside him. He tried to calm himself by thinking ahead to the job that awaited him. But nothing —not his nervousness or his attempt to focus his mind on the emergency—could dissolve the memory of Lois's look of hurt surprise as he had mumbled his feeble excuse.

Part 10

A portion of the tunnel had collapsed around the front of the train. Clark's estimation was that the train had left the tracks at high speed and cannoned into the side of the tunnel, which had then caved in, crushing all of the first carriage and a portion of the second. He hovered directly above the site, his cape flapping in the early-morning breeze as he looked through the street level buildings and sidewalk, trying to differentiate between those people already deceased and those who could be saved.

He fine-tuned his hearing to the first carriage to ascertain what he thought he already knew. Nothing. No dah-dub of a beating heart, no swish of breath. Clark moved to the second carriage, forcing his focus to the living at the expense of the dead. He heard a stilted chorus of heartbeats, and he was fired with new purpose.

With people situated so near the devastation of the collapsed tunnel, he needed to take particular care not to endanger their tenuous hold on life. Clark decided on his strategy and then, flying at superspeed, tracked the underground tunnel to the nearest station. Seconds later, he landed amidst the gathered rescue workers and frightened would-be passengers.

"Superman! Superman!" The cry rose from the crowd. "Superman! You're here!"

A man Clark recognised as having been in charge of other major rescues—Eric, his name was—strode over to him. "Superman," he said. "The lights are out, and we want to activate the emergency lighting, but we're worried about bare wires and the risk of fire."

Clark nodded and flew along the tunnel until he reached the rear of the train. He could hear the cries and screams of people trapped in the darkness. A super-quick inspection told him that the emergency lighting would provide safe and much-needed visibility. He flew back to the rescuers. "It's safe," he said.

Returning to the depths, Clark reached the crumpled train as welcome light flooded the tunnel. At the rear carriage, he forced open the doors and surveyed the passengers. He concluded that everyone there would be capable of getting out of the tunnel—either by themselves or with human help. He knew the rescuers wouldn't be far behind him.

Clark worked his way along the carriages—opening doors and checking for the seriously injured. Those trapped, he freed. Those badly injured, he carried to the station exit and carefully placed on the waiting gurneys for the ambulance officers to treat. Those critically injured, he flew to the nearest hospital.

He worked as he always did—silently, efficiently, carefully, alone.

When the train had been cleared of all those still alive, Clark doggedly began the task he had been dreading. He carefully transported each body, flying slowly through the tunnel because somehow that seemed more respectful. Once on the station platform, he paused briefly to carefully lay each lifeless form on the ground.

Soon, only the first carriage remained untouched. Clark x-rayed the ruins of the tunnel and decided the best method would be to pull the train out from under its tomb of debris. He returned to the back of the train, and, having checked one final time that it held no life, he pulled on the rear carriage, straightening the puckered train and releasing it from the rubble.

Twenty minutes later, the train was empty. Clark carried the last limp body, weaving between the police officers who were trying to assist the frightened, hysterical people searching for their loved ones. Their pain enveloped him, and their cries stabbed at his heart. He placed the body on

the platform, next to the other victims, and took a moment to look into their faces.

Slowly, dejectedly, Clark climbed the steps from the underground platform. He hoped he would be able to fly away, unnoticed. Instead, Eric hurried towards him, followed by Henderson—the Metropolis police inspector—and two other officers Clark didn't recognise.

"Superman," Henderson said, a little breathlessly. He seemed poised, as if he expected Clark to fly away at any moment. "We had a tip-off that this wasn't an accident, that someone sabotaged the track and weakened the structure of the tunnel to maximise the damage. What do you think?"

Clark nodded.

"What?" Henderson asked urgently. "What did you see?"

Clark gestured to the tunnel. "The evidence is there," he said.

An almost palpable cloud of despair settled on Henderson. "Thanks," he said dispiritedly. "It's hard to believe someone would want to kill so many innocent people."

Eric turned to Clark. "Thanks for your help, Superman," he said. "A lot of these people owe you their lives, and you saved all of them from many dark and frightening hours waiting to be rescued."

Clark nodded again. He turned and was about to fly away when he heard a shout.

"Superman! Superman! Wait! I have questions!"

He knew that voice. And that tone. He didn't need to turn around to know that Mayson Drake was closing in like a lioness with prey in her sights. Clark shot straight up into the clear blue sky of the Metropolis morning and flew southwest.

Back to Lois.

Five minutes later, he was wearing jeans and a shirt and standing forlornly at the end of her driveway as his longing for her battled with his common sense. His hearing picked up the sound of her heartbeat and her slow, even breaths.

She was asleep.

A powerful yearning swept over him—the urge to go to her. He wished he could slip in beside her, not for any other reason than to let her warmth and her aliveness dissipate the shroud of death that had enveloped his spirit. He'd known this agony many times, but he'd never thought that anything could ease his distress.

But she could.

Being with Lois would bring healing and restoration.

But he couldn't go to her.

Even had she still been awake, he couldn't go to her.

She thought he had been with Esmeralda.

Clark turned away.

He trudged to Scardino's apartment and let himself in. Not bothering to switch on the light, he slumped onto the couch and stared ahead, seeing again the destruction of life, hearing again the fear-driven hysteria of those who had been trapped, experiencing again the grief of those who had come searching for their loved ones.

His heart cold and his insides tightly tangled, he waited for the passing of the long, lonely hours of darkness.

Several times during the night, his cell rang, but Clark ignored it. It was almost certainly his parents, but this was a road he walked alone.

* * *

It was after seven thirty the next morning when Clark finally stood from the couch. He hadn't slept. He never did after touching death. He became mired in the grim memory of the lifeless bodies in his arms. Usually, unless he had to be at the Planet, he would go to some faraway place where he could grieve by himself. A place where he could try to summon the equilibrium to go on with life, firstly as Clark Kent, and then, when the time came that he was needed again, as Superman.

As Clark showered and dressed, his thoughts turned to Lois, and from amid the clinging web of hopelessness, new shoots of life began to grow.

Lois, who in less than a week had become…

What?

Everything, he realised.

She had become his centre, his core, his first thought upon waking, his last thought before sleeping. She had become the one who caused time to crawl when he was away from her, and the one who brought light to his world when he was with her.

But nothing gave him such undeniable clarity as recalling how he had felt outside her unit last night. On a level so fundamental it defied understanding, he had needed her.

Lois.

He loved her.

Totally. Eternally. Immutably.

His heart soared… and then plummeted.

Lois, who probably thought… wondered, at least… if he had gone to Esmeralda and taken what had been so clearly offered.

Though not remotely hungry, Clark opened the fridge, hoping something in there would prove appetising.

A tap sounded on his door.

He opened it and stared.

It was Lois.

"I… I thought I was coming to your apartment," he managed, feeling mind-numbingly unprepared for her presence.

She stepped through his doorway, and her hand rested on his arm. "Clark," she said. "I'm so sorry."

"Sorry?" he said, feeling like a fluffy cloud had engulfed his brain. "Sorry for what?"

Her hand tightened on his arm. He wanted to put his hand over hers and hold her there. "Perry," she said. "Dan rang me this morning and told me about his heart attack."

"Perry?" Clark breathed. "Perry?"

Lois's eyes were so soft, Clark was sure he could drown in them. "Haven't you heard?" she said. "Didn't someone contact you?"

He shook his head dumbly.

"Perry White had a heart attack," Lois said. "Dan said there was a big train crash in an underground tunnel and many of the reporters were out at that. When they got back to the office, Perry had collapsed."

Clark felt the drawstrings of anxiety squeeze around his heart. "Is… is he…"

"He's all right," Lois hurriedly assured him. "Dan said they got him to hospital in time and the doctors believe he will make it."

Before Clark could respond, her arms circled his neck, and without any thought from him, his arms surrounded her tiny waist. He clung to her, aware that he was holding her too intimately, too closely, but unable to release her, unable to give up the onrush of amazing restoration brought by her touch.

He listened to her breaths as they mingled with her heartbeat. He tracked the rise and fall of her body within the circle of his arms. He drank greedily from the empathy she so freely offered. He fervently hoped she wouldn't move.

Eventually, she did. She eased away, and her hands left the back of his neck and slid to the curve of his shoulders. Her beautiful eyes connected with his. "You're close to Perry?" she asked, her voice sweet with sympathy.

Clark nodded.

"We have time to spare," Lois said. "Why don't you call someone? One of your colleagues? Or the hospital?"

"I'll call my mom," he said in a voice that seemed to come from anywhere but him. "She'll know."

Lois's hands slid gently down his shoulders, and her smile caressed his heart. "I'll wait outside," she said.

"No!"

Lois didn't jump at the sharpness of his cry. "You want me to stay in here?"

He nodded.

So she stayed. She didn't ask any questions. She just waited for him to make the call.

It had been his mom trying to call his cell during the night. She didn't have much extra information. Perry had been rushed to the hospital after collapsing at the Daily Planet. His prognosis was good, although the doctors were strongly advising a change in lifestyle—less stress, more exercise, and an improved diet.

Clark finished the call to his mom and then called the hospital. They would only tell him that Perry's condition was stable. Clark asked them to forward his best wishes and hung up. He turned to Lois.

"Are you going to be OK?" she asked with gentle concern.

He nodded. "Thanks," he said. "Thanks for coming."

She stepped close to him, and for a wonderful moment, he thought she was going to hug him again. Instead, she put her hand on his arm. "You sure?"

All he needed was to be with her. Not just today but every day. But he couldn't say that, so he manufactured a small smile. "I'm sure," Clark said. "It was just a bit of a shock."

She nodded. "And at times like this you must feel like you're so far away from home."

"Yeah."

Lois lightly squeezed his arm and then removed her hand. She smiled, further dissolving his moroseness. "Have you had breakfast?"

"No."

She grinned. "I know just the place," she said. "It's the closest thing you're going to find to an American diner. They have all sorts of strange foods, like bagels."

"Bagels?" Clark said with a smile that was more genuine than he would have thought possible half an hour ago.

She wrinkled her nose. "You know? Strange American food?"

"I'll buy you anything you want," Clark said. "So long as it doesn't include Vegemite."

Lois chuckled. “Deal,” she said.

Together they walked to the Jeep. As they drove east out of the city, Clark could not keep his eyes from Lois.

He’d found her. For his whole life he’d been looking for her, and now he’d found her.

And he loved her so much.

* * *

By the time they had finished eating a breakfast that truly was a taste of home, Clark felt as if something—or more accurately, someone—had banished the pain of the memories of last night and filled him with the warmth and wonder that was uniquely hers.

“Looks like we’re in for a wet one,” Lois said as they drove towards the football ground.

Clark glanced skyward. The dark clouds hovered low and ominous. He hadn’t even noticed.

“Did West Coast win last night?” he asked.

“Yeah. By seventy-two points.”

“That’s a big win.”

“Yeah.”

“Have you heard any more about the possible merger?”

“North aren’t saying anything other than they have a very important game this weekend and that is their entire focus. With the Fitzroy team in Perth, everyone who might know something has either gone west or gone to ground. I’m waiting for a couple of sources to get back to me, but at this stage, I just keep hitting dead ends.”

The subject of his hasty departure the previous evening hadn’t been mentioned, but Clark couldn’t leave it. He couldn’t let Lois think he had gone to Esmeralda. Even if it led to questions he didn’t have answers for, she had to know he hadn’t done that. “Lois,” he said, before he could change his mind. “I’m sorry about leaving so abruptly last night.”

“When Dan rang this morning and told me about Perry, I assumed that’s what your call had been about last night,” she said. There was nothing in her manner to suggest she believed she was entitled to answers.

Clark’s heart sank. Did she not care? Did she not care who he was with and what he did? “I know it looked like I went to Esmeralda,” he said. “But I didn’t.”

Lois smiled, but it seemed just a little forced. “You don’t owe me any explanations,” she said.

“I’m not interested in her,” he stated firmly. “Not in the slightest.”

“It’s none of my business,” Lois said lightly.

But he wanted it to be her business.

He desperately wanted everything he did to be her business.

* * *

They arrived at the ground, now called Waverley Park, but as Lois had explained on the way, it had been built as the showcase ground of the VFL and had originally been called VFL Park. The extensive car parks that spanned out from the stadium spoke of planning for huge crowds.

They entered the ground, and Lois led him up a series of internal stairways to the press box. She introduced him to the reporters from the other papers. In the adjacent box were the radio commentators. Clark surveyed the ground spread out below him. Lois had told him the dimensions, but until now, he hadn’t fully appreciated the enormousness of the playing area.

The fence separating the crowd from the ground was low. Dotted around the ground were security guards, but even from this distance, Clark sensed they were fairly relaxed about their duties.

For the next hour, Lois gave him background information on the game and a rundown of what to expect. “Feel like a coffee?” she asked when they had covered what felt like a mountain of detail.

“Sure.”

“Wait here. I’ll be back in a tick.”

Ten minutes later, she was back with two coffees in plastic cups. She brought a bundle of sandwiches from her bag and shared them with Clark. “If we don’t eat now,” she said cheerfully, “we won’t eat until late this evening.”

Clark took the ham-and-tomato sandwich and tried to eat. He felt marginally better when Lois teased him about saying t’mate-o instead of t’mart-o, but never had he realised easy-going friendliness could be so painful.

Stuck fast in his mind was that Lois had made it clear she felt he owed her no explanations for his behaviour.

If she cared for him, even the tiniest bit, wouldn’t she have had some sort of reaction when he’d said he hadn’t been with Esmeralda?

Yet this morning, when she’d told him about Perry, it had certainly felt like she cared.

Perhaps she did… as a friend.

Clark strangled a sigh and turned his thoughts back to the football.

After they had finished eating, the time leading up to the game sped by quickly. Below him, the preparations played

out like well-rehearsed theatre. The crowd gradually filled the large stadium. Lois pointed out that the cluster of red and white behind the goals to the right was the Sydney cheer squad. Behind the goals to the left was the red, black, and white of St Kilda.

The teams ran on separately and began their warm-up, careful to avoid each other as they jogged around the ground. Then, they congregated at one end each, did a few drills, and practised kicking for goal. The balls were energetically retrieved by small groups of fans who fought in cheerful fashion for the privilege of returning the ball to the players.

Two small strings of the crowd—about twenty people each—leaked from each of the goal ends and walked between the low fence and the boundary line. “They’re from the cheer squads,” Lois said, leaning into Clark’s shoulder and pointing. “They will wait in the race until the players have finished their warm-up, and then they’ll bring the banner onto the arena.”

Ten minutes later, the two teams of players ran off, and from different sides of the ground, the two small groups emerged, each with a long bundle carried on the shoulders of about four of their number.

Clark watched as what seemed like an orchestrated routine played out below him. The banners were laid on the ground and rolled outwards, revealing the poles on each end. St Kilda’s was hoisted, held up to the cheer of the crowd, and then carefully lowered back to the ground. While the St Kilda banner was rotated one hundred and eighty degrees, the Sydney cheer squad raised theirs.

Clark couldn’t help but think of Bessie Bellchambers. He figured she was here, somewhere in the crowd, dressed in her red-and-white scarf and armed with Vegemite sandwiches and lamingtons. Lois must have been thinking the same thing because she turned to him with a smile. “I read your story,” she said. “Great job.”

“You really liked it?” he asked, not sure.

She nodded. “You really know how to tug on the heartstrings,” she said. “Which is a phenomenal effort for someone who must, at least sometimes, wonder what all the fuss is about.”

“If nothing else, I’ve realised that football is much more than merely a sport here,” he said.

Lois smiled at him, dazzling him. “I’ve changed my mind,” she declared.

“About what?”

“About working with you. It won’t necessarily be such a bad thing at all.”

Clark grinned. “What about the Yank and the Sheila being relegated to all the dud games?” he said.

“I’m beginning to think the Yank can well and truly hold his own,” she said.

Wonderful warmth flowed through him. “Thanks,” he said softly.

Lois turned from him and to the ground. “Here comes Sydney,” she said.

The red-and-white cheer squad lifted their banner, and the Sydney song rang out around the stadium. From the race, the players spilt onto the field, grouped together, and then crashed through the banner. They kept running as the cheer squad lowered the tattered remains of their banner and cleared the ground.

Moments later, the process was repeated as the St Kilda team ran onto the ground.

For the next two and a half hours, Clark was engrossed in the game that played out before him. Being there in person gave him the freedom to choose whether to follow the progress of the ball or to try to comprehend the plays each team were implementing.

In some ways, it was like a huge game of chess.

A game of chess with highlights that included bone-crunching contact, ferocious tackling, jaw-dropping high marks, and the ability to handle the oval ball with a speed and surety that at times seemed closer to conjuring than sport.

When it was over, Sydney had won by seventeen points. The siren sounded, the Sydney fight song blared triumphantly, and the players shook hands in a manner so civilised and friendly that it seemed incongruous with the gladiator violence of the game itself.

Clark turned to Lois.

She was staring through the glass of the press box, although Clark immediately realised her focus wasn’t on the ground but a spot straight ahead. He looked forward, wondering what had captured her attention, but saw nothing noteworthy. Turning back to Lois, he noticed the tension in her shoulders and the clench of her fists. Her heart, he realised, was pounding.

Before he could ask what was wrong, her eyelids slid shut, and all the tension slithered from her body. Her shoulders curved, and her head fell forward, and a huge breath expelled from her mouth. She slumped back and looked at him, a smile lighting her face.

Clark saw the wire leading to her ear and suddenly understood. “You were listening to the Hawthorn game?” he asked.

She nodded, her eyes glistening with excitement. “We won by two points,” she said. Her fist clenched in celebration, and her grin exploded. “Two points. We’re still a chance to play finals this year.”

“Congratulations,” Clark said.

“Thanks.” Lois curbed her grin and stood. “We’d better get down to the rooms.”

“The locker rooms?”

“Yeah. We call them dressing rooms. The two coaches—one from each team—will give press conferences, but we need to try to get a few words with the players before then.” Clark followed her through the concrete tunnels under the stands until they came to a door. “We’ll start with the winners,” she said as she knocked.

The door was opened, and they walked in. They were immediately immersed in the noisy, excited atmosphere of the room. The players—no longer instantly identifiable because some had removed their red-and-white jumpers—were scattered around the room, many sporting ice packs on various parts of their bodies. Some were sitting on the floor; others were standing around, or being interviewed, or chatting with the small gathering of people Clark assumed were either family, friends, or lucky supporters. Lois made a beeline for a player. Clark followed her and listened as she asked a few questions about the game. Then, she thanked the player for his time and moved on.

Five minutes later, she had talked to six players in various stages of undress, from those still in the jumper and shorts to those only saved from nakedness by towels slung low across their hips. If they were uncomfortable being interviewed by a female, Clark saw no evidence of it. If Lois had even noticed the supremely ripped male bodies, he saw no evidence of that either.

Perhaps they were just very used to each other—the footballers and the female footy journalist.

Lois and Clark left the cheery chaos of the winners’ rooms and went upstairs to a conference room. They stood with other members of the media as first one coach, and then the other, faced the barrage of questions.

That done, Lois led Clark to the other side of the ground, and they entered the much quieter, more sombre atmosphere of the St Kilda rooms. Again, she circulated, asking questions, recording answers.

Then, finally, she turned to him with a smile and said, “Let’s get out of here and write this up.”

* * *

The Herald Sun office was brightly lit and alive with an energetic and purposeful urgency as the journalists finalised their match reports for tomorrow’s edition of the paper. Browny strode the floor of the newsroom, loudly checking the progress of the stories.

When Clark’s story about his impressions of the Australian game and Lois’s match report had been filed, they walked together to her Jeep.

“Tired?” Lois asked.

“Yeah.” He didn’t add that he hadn’t slept at all the previous night.

“Hungry?” Their evening meal had been a scant and hasty affair as they had driven back to the city from Waverley Park.

“Do you usually eat after you’ve finished?” Clark asked.

“No,” Lois said. “I usually just go home and get to bed as quickly as possible. Tomorrow, we get to do it all again.”

“What game do you have?”

“Footscray-Fremantle out at the Western Oval.”

“I’m going to Melbourne-Richmond with Banjo,” Clark said, realising she would already know but wanting to give some small voice to the disappointment he felt that he would not be with her.

Lois nodded. “I hope you have a great day. There’s nothing like the ‘G for watching the footy.”

She stopped the Jeep at the end of his driveway. “Thanks, Lois,” Clark said. “Thanks for everything.” He didn’t add that what he appreciated most was the hug she had given him so many hours ago—the hug that had eased him from the cloud of death and shown him the way back to life.

“No worries,” she said. “See you tomorrow.”

She drove away, and Clark walked slowly to his unit, wishing things were different.

Wishing Lois didn’t have to leave him.

Wishing he could be with her always.

Wishing she loved him the way he loved her.

Part 11

Sunday was, in many ways, a carbon copy of Saturday. The MCG was certainly an impressive stadium, Banjo was good company, and Richmond led the entire game to secure a comfortable win over Melbourne.

But in other ways, Sunday was a hollow and futile day because Clark saw Lois for only a few minutes in the

evening as she wrote up her match report and he worked with Banjo on their story. By the time Clark had finished, Lois had already left.

Earlier, as he had passed her desk, she had asked after Perry White, and Clark had replied that he'd called the hospital and learned that Perry's condition was continuing to improve steadily. She'd smiled, and that had been the sum total of their interaction for the entire day.

Monday augured no better when Clark walked into the office and discovered Lois's desk vacant again. He guessed she was chasing up the merger story, and he toyed with the idea of asking Browny if he, Clark, could work on it with her.

But Browny sent him out to Footscray with Bluey for a follow-up story on yesterday's game. Clark went, trying hard to appreciate the crisp, sunny morning, a job that didn't involve chasing down criminals, and a life that didn't require dodging Mayson Drake.

But none of that came near to making up for not being with Lois Lane.

* * *

Clark's day rallied when Lois walked into the office mid-afternoon and came straight to his desk. He tried to dampen down his enthusiasm as he greeted her, but he realised wryly that he had probably failed spectacularly.

"Hi, Clark," Lois said.

"Hi, Lois."

She stood there, grinning at him, her eyes shining.

"Your story broke?" he guessed.

"No," she said, sobering, but only for a moment. "I have something for you."

"You do?"

She nodded. "I could give it to you now, or—"

"Or," Clark cut in, "you could come to my apartment for supper tonight and give it to me then."

"Are you cooking?" she asked.

"Sure," Clark agreed. "I'll even take requests."

"Anything you want to cook is fine by me," Lois said. She glanced to Browny's office. "I better get in to see Browny before he starts hollering my name across the newsroom. See you tonight."

Clark watched her walk away, his world glorious with anticipation.

* * *

The meal was almost ready when Lois arrived at his apartment that evening. "Perfect timing," Clark said, thinking that her timing was only one of the many things about Lois Lane that was perfect.

She grinned. "What's for dinner?" she asked.

"Chicken and Vegetable Lo Mein," he said.

She looked around his kitchen. "You got take-away?" she asked.

Clark sensed she had tried to hide her disappointment, and he felt ridiculously pleased that he could reply, "No, not at all. I cooked it."

"You cooked it?" she asked suspiciously. "Or you warmed it up?"

He laughed at her response, feeling elated because she was here and they were going to spend the evening together. "I cooked it from scratch," he said. "Would you like to see the vegetable scraps?"

She chuckled. "No, I'm willing to believe you."

He was feeling cheerful enough to press her with, "Didn't you say you had a present for me?"

She regarded him sternly, but her eyes lost none of their cheeriness. "What are you?" she demanded. "A kid on Christmas morning?"

Not even Christmas felt this good. "I just want to see my present," he said, grinning.

Her mouth broke into the smile he loved. "Well, Kent, you're going to have to wait. I'll give it to you after we've eaten."

"No fair," he said.

"If the food isn't up to the standard you set last time, you might not get your present at all," she warned.

He piled two plates with the egg noodles and topped them with the chicken and vegetables he had stir-fried. Lois sat and eyed her plate appreciatively. "Wow," she said. "I'm impressed."

"Try it," he said, hoping she would still be impressed after she had tasted it.

He could tell by her expression that she was, and his mood elevated a few more levels.

"Are you going to Gazza's barbie on Wednesday?" she asked.

"He invited me," Clark said. "Are you going?"

"Yeah."

That decided it. "I am, too."

Lois grinned suddenly. “Did Gazza tell you to bring a plate?”

Clark nodded. “Yeah, but I wasn’t sure what he meant.”

“He means to bring some food to share. Either a bottle of drink or a bag of chips or a salad or a dessert.”

“So I don’t actually have to bring a plate?”

Lois grinned. “No, but I do wonder how many newcomers arrive at a barbie armed with a single empty plate.”

Clark smiled, seeing the humour, but glad she had saved him from public embarrassment.

Lois stabbed a piece of juicy chicken with her fork. “Originally, it meant to bring food on a plate—like sandwiches or a cake—but now it just means bring food. Usually the hosts provide the meat, the bread, and perhaps the alcohol, and the guests provide the salads, the desserts, the soft drinks, and more beer if they want it.”

“Gazza said he’s married.”

“Yeah. His wife, Narelle, is a slim and very attractive redhead.”

“And she married Gazza?” Clark said with slightly exaggerated shock.

Lois chuckled. “No accounting for taste, huh? Though she does barrack for Collingwood, so I guess that’s a start.”

“Bessie said she didn’t marry a man because he barracked for Carlton,” Clark said. “Was she joking?”

“Not at all,” Lois said. “We don’t believe in mixed marriages.”

She looked serious, although she was suddenly taking diligent interest in her food as she twirled the noodles around her fork. Clark waited for her to look up at him and give him a clue as to whether she was joking with him. She didn’t look up, just kept twirling her noodles. “Mixed marriages?” he scoffed. “Because of a football team?”

She did look at him then, her face set like concrete. “This is Melbourne,” she said.

Her dancing eyes and oh-so-tightly controlled mouth were close to the most enchanting sight Clark had ever seen. “You wouldn’t consider a proposal of marriage from a man who didn’t barrack for Hawthorn?” he asked.

“Never,” she said. Her facade crumbled, and her grin burst through.

“Who does Dan barrack for?” Clark asked casually.

“Fitzroy.”

“Oh.”

The sadness he had seen before swept the smile from her face. “I’m waiting on a call to confirm the story I wrote today,” Lois said. “If I get the call early enough, it will be in tomorrow’s paper.”

“Saying what?”

“That tomorrow night, there will be a secret meeting between representatives of the AFL, North Melbourne, and Fitzroy to sign the deal and bring the North-Fitzroy Kangaroos into being.”

“They will continue as separate entities for this season, I suppose?” Clark noted.

She nodded grimly. “Which is going to be like a long, slow, excruciatingly painful death march for Fitzroy.”

“What happens if you don’t get the call?”

“Browny won’t print anything.”

“But when it was a matter of Kendall’s shoulder, he was willing to print with only flimsy evidence,” Clark pointed out.

“That was a shoulder,” Lois said. “This is a football club.” She placed her fork on her empty plate. “Browny has to do an incredible balancing act. He has a responsibility to the Fitzroy fans, but he also has a responsibility to try to ensure that nothing we print could jeopardise this—if it is indeed the best thing for Fitzroy.”

“Is it?”

Lois shrugged despondently. “I don’t know,” she said. “We have a saying, ‘There’s no sentimentality in football’. It’s rubbish. There has to be sentimentality when people love something this much. But decisions made with the heart are not always the wisest of decisions.”

“You think they should merge?” Clark probed gently.

Lois let loose a deep breath. “I haven’t seen the accounts, and I don’t know the details, but I think the harsh-reality decision would be to merge.”

“But?”

“But that is going to break the hearts of every Fitzroy supporter and sadden the entire footy community. Fitzroy have over a hundred years of history and are one of the founding members of the VFL. They deserve to be treated with dignity.”

From Lois’s bag, her cell sounded, and she answered it. After listening for a few minutes, she thanked whoever was on the other end of the line and hung up. When she looked at Clark, her face was blank.

“Well?” he said.

"We can't print—not yet. I can't get any solid evidence that the meeting is going ahead tomorrow." She punched some numbers into her cell. "Excuse me," she said. "I'll just ring Browny."

Clark stood and cleared away the plates, aware that something of the happy atmosphere of their evening had seeped away. He was desperate to lure it back but really didn't want to make the mistake of glossing over the plight of Fitzroy, something he knew was upsetting to Lois.

And it wasn't even her club.

But it was Scardino's.

And if Lois loved Dan, and Dan loved Fitzroy…

When he heard Lois finish her call, he turned to her. "There's nothing we can do about it now," she said with a smile that seemed almost genuine.

He grasped the opening she was offering. "Can I have my present then?" he said.

As quickly as it had come, some of her good humour died away. "You can," she said hesitantly. "Although it didn't work out as well as I'd hoped."

His curiosity soared. What could she have gotten for him? "Isn't it the thought that counts?" he asked.

She nodded and reached for her bag. She withdrew a newspaper, instantly recognisable as an edition of the *Daily Planet*. "Nugget, one of the guys from Travel, was sent to Sydney, and I asked him to go to the international newsagency there and get the latest available copy of the *Daily Planet*. I thought it might be a nice piece of home for you."

Clark was touched. "Thanks, Lois," he said, knowing the slight jaggedness in his voice probably gave away how much this meant to him.

"Except…"

"Except what?"

She held it out for him to take. He unfolded it and was immediately hit with the massive headline 'SUPER CONSPIRACY'. Next to it was a picture of Superman—an unflattering image where he appeared distant and unapproachable. A bitter taste rose in Clark's mouth.

Clark scanned the rest of the front page, noticing more was promised on pages two, three, four, five, and six. His eyes flitted to the byline… Mayson Drake. "Have you read this?" he asked Lois.

She nodded.

His heart felt as if it were being crushed as his ribcage caved in. "What did you think?"

Lois shrugged. "I think I'd love a cup of coffee," she said. "Would you mind if I made one? I know where everything is. What would you like?"

"I can make the coffee," Clark said.

"No, I'll do it." She stood. "You read the paper."

He didn't want to read the paper, but he knew he had to—and for more reasons than not wanting to appear unappreciative of Lois's gesture.

Pages two and three were a double-page spread of Mayson's in-depth interview with someone called Jason Trask—a government agent who claimed to have mountains of evidence against the alien being. Specifically, this evidence apparently included that Superman was responsible for the sabotage of the train track and tunnel, a move supposedly designed to give him the opportunity to curry favour with humans by appearing to be a helpful friend.

The further Clark read, the more vitriolic it became. Trask alleged that the reason for the suit was to disguise the fact that 'Superman' was actually more than one person. He asserted that many aliens lived on Earth, assimilating, gathering information, strengthening their strategic position, and easing humans into a fatal attitude of complacency.

Complacency was certainly not something Trask could be accused of.

The final column was given to Trask's detailed and emotive depiction of exactly how the barbarous invasion would mercilessly seize planet Earth and wipe out all humanity.

Clark felt the acrid taste of nausea crawl up his throat.

Lois pushed a cup of coffee in front of him and sat down. Clark attempted to clear his face of all expression and forced a smile so fake it probably looked like he was in pain.

Actually, he was.

"Thanks," he said. "And thanks for getting me the newspaper. That was a sweet idea."

"Would you like me to leave after the coffee?" Lois asked. "So you can read it in peace?"

"No," he said quickly. "I can read this later."

"OK," she smiled. "What would you like to do? Watch a movie? Dan has a big collection of videos. What interests you?"

Clark had the distinct impression that Lois really didn't want to discuss the story plastered all over the *Daily Planet*. Why was that? Did she find the topic of alien life distressing? Did she believe Trask was right? Had she been swept up in the tsunami of fear and hatred? "What do you think

of the story?" Clark said, trying for a level of nonchalance that probably wasn't attainable.

He had to know.

He was sure her answer would scythe through his crushed heart, but he had to know.

"I think I'm an Australian and should stay out of it," she said.

"Why?"

Lois seemed undaunted by the sharpness of his question. "This is your paper," she said calmly. "The stories are probably written by people you know. It's also possible that you know Superman, although it seems he isn't very popular with your paper. Whatever I say, I'm sure to say something that will offend you." She smiled hesitantly. "It was never my plan to get something this controversial."

"I know that," he assured her. Inside him, his logical side was sending dire warnings that the smartest course would be to just drop this right now. Questioning Lois about Superman could only lead to places he should avoid. Mayson Drake wasn't a completely safe subject either. Yet despite the screaming protests from the dark recesses of his mind, Clark said, "But I'm really interested in what you think."

"You should know me well enough by now to understand that if you ask for my opinion, you'll get it, no holds barred," Lois said.

"I know that."

"Clark…" She sighed. "I really don't want to get into an argument with you. I'd rather we just watched a movie."

"Please tell me what you think," he said. It sounded far too much like a plea, but Clark couldn't help it.

"No, Clark."

"You enjoyed getting my perspective on football," he said. "I'd like your perspective on my world."

Lois sighed in resignation. "OK," she said. "I think it's obscene and someone should do something about stopping it."

Clark's throat seized, and his stomach lurched. "Stopping what?" he asked in a strained voice. "The invasion by countless armies of vicious aliens intent on conquering Earth and massacring all humans?"

"No," she said. "Unsubstantiated reporting that is clearly aimed at stirring up hatred for an individual who, despite being different, has done nothing to deserve such treatment." Her lip curled in disgust. "And that Trask definitely has a few kangaroos loose in the top paddock."

Clark felt his lower jaw drop. Not for anything could he have managed a response.

Lois looked at him with unrepentant fire. "You asked what I thought," she said. "I warned you that you wouldn't like it."

"What makes you think I don't like it?" he managed to ask.

"It's your paper," she said as if it were obvious. "Mayson Drake is probably a friend of yours. It'd be just my luck she's a close friend of yours, perhaps even your girlfriend. But you asked what I thought, and my opinion is that that"—Lois poked contemptuously at the front page of the *Daily Planet*—"*… that* is as close to propaganda as I've seen in a long time, and I really thought the Daily Planet was above such drivel."

Clark felt waves of hysterical laughter start to rumble deep inside him. He knew he had to control it—if he didn't, Lois would be convinced *he* had a few kangaroos loose. "Mayson is no friend of mine," he said tightly.

Lois took a moment to assess his declaration, and then her smile made a slow, majestic appearance. "I haven't offended you?" she said, clearly surprised.

Clark shook his head. "Not at all. In fact, I agree with you on all counts."

"You do?" she squeaked.

He nodded, his joy now bubbling very close to the surface. "I agree that Mayson's story is very light on facts and seems to have no intent to inform or to report but only to stir feeling against Superman. I agree that Jason Trask doesn't warrant his claims being taken seriously. And I agree that the Daily Planet should be above that. My only defence is that Perry is still in the hospital, and I hope you'll believe me when I say that there is no way he would have allowed this to be printed if he'd been at the helm."

"Does Perry think that Superman is here to hurt us?"

"Perry keeps his opinions close to his chest," Clark said. "But he doesn't allow speculation to be printed as fact."

"Is Mayson the assistant editor?" Lois asked. "Is that how she got her story printed?"

"Mayson's uncle is on the board. Perry stands up to her regardless, but with Perry not there, I assume she just ran straight over the top of whoever is the acting Editor-in-Chief."

Lois chuckled. "I guess you're not mad at me," she said.

Clark couldn't imagine ever being mad at her. "I'm only sorry you had to see such a poor example of what is usually a fine newspaper," he said.

"Well, it's to be expected," Lois said.

"What is?"

"That the standard of the Daily Planet would fall."

"Why?"

"'Cause we snaffled their best reporter," she said with a triumphant smile.

Clark laughed. "I'm not sure too many people would agree with your assessment," he said. "Mayson gets most of the big stories."

Lois snorted. "You and Mayson Drake are not in the same league," she said decisively.

Clark grinned. "I'm taking that as a compliment," he said.

"You do that," she replied. She rotated the paper, and her eyes dropped to the photograph. She studied it, and Clark held his breath. Would Lois notice? No one else had. But would she?

He realised with profound shock that a significant part of him hoped she would notice… hoped she would look up with the light of recognition in her beautiful eyes and probe his deepest secret.

He *wanted* her to know.

He wanted to share everything with her.

"Have you met him?" Lois asked.

Clark's breath caught in his throat. Should he tell her? Should he just come right out and say he hadn't met Superman as such because he was Superman? He wanted to. But he couldn't. The habit of years of hiding was too strong. "Yes, I've seen him," Clark said.

Her eyes were still scrutinising the photograph. "What's he like?"

"He says very little. He just arrives, helps out where he can, and leaves."

"Can he really fly?"

"Yes."

"You've seen it with your own eyes?" Lois questioned. "You've seen him fly? No trick photography, no clever stunts?"

"He can fly."

Lois seemed to take a moment to digest that.

"Don't you believe he's real?" Clark asked.

Lois shrugged. "I don't know. I mean, the first time he appeared in Metropolis, it was big news here, but mostly we just dismissed it as one of those 'only in America' stories."

"Would you believe he was real if you met him?" Clark asked.

Lois's laughter gurgled through the sombre atmosphere. "As if that's going to happen," she said.

"Why do you say that?"

"He's never been seen outside of Metropolis," she replied. "And, if for some reason he decided to visit Australia, I doubt he would have any interest in a footy journo from Melbourne."

That was where she was very wrong. "You might be surprised."

"He seems to take particular care to avoid the media," she said. "I don't think I've ever seen or heard of him giving an interview to anyone."

"If you did come face to face with him, what would you say?"

Lois thought for a moment and then said, "I'd tell him that not everyone believes he is intent on murder and destruction. I'd tell him he is welcome to share our planet."

Clark felt his joy explode into a million tiny pieces that, inexplicably, brought him closer to tears than he'd ever been. "I think that would mean a lot to him," he said quietly.

"I think it would be easy for him to feel very alone," Lois reflected. "However he got those powers—whether he is an alien, or whether he's the result of a cloning attempt gone out of control, or whether he was badly injured and they've rebuilt him with metallic body parts—what can't be denied is that he is very different to the rest of us. And sometimes that feels lonely."

Something in her voice told Clark that she had had her share of loneliness. He longed to take her into his arms and whisper assurances that she would never be alone again.

Lois smiled. "Although clearly, he has *someone*," she said.

"Why do you think that?"

She gestured to the photograph. "Someone made that suit," she said. "Unless his powers include a deft hand with a sewing machine."

"You think he has a wife?" Clark asked.

Lois peered at the photograph. "I hope so," she said. "I hope he has someone; someone he can go home to… someone who can hold him and love him and be there for him."

The memory of her arms around his neck invaded Clark's senses. He could feel her body pressed against his. "Why are you so sure he's a good guy?" he asked. "How can

you know for sure that his intentions are not what Trask is alleging?"

"Because Superman has never done anything to suggest he is other than a friend," Lois replied. "In every instance, he has stood for life and justice, not death and destruction."

Clark smiled. "If he knocked on your door, you wouldn't be scared of him?"

"I'd be shocked," she admitted. "Probably speechless." She thought for a moment. "But, no, I wouldn't be scared of him." She eyed Clark. "What about you? You said you've met him? Do you think he's a threat?"

"No," Clark said. "No, I don't think he's a threat."

Her hand rested momentarily on his. "Then we agree," she said, looking relieved. "What sort of movies do you like?"

"You choose," Clark said.

Lois stood and went to Dan's shelves of videos. "Dan likes action movies," she said. "Anything here appeal?"

Clark knew he didn't want to watch anything that would remind Lois of her times with Dan. He would rather not watch a movie than risk doing that. "Not really," he said, pretending to cast an eye over the videos.

Suddenly, Lois grinned and went to her bag. "It just so happens…"

"What?" Clark asked, unable to control his grin.

"I brought my favourite movie." She pulled a video from her bag. It wasn't anything Clark recognised.

"What is it?"

"*The Man From Snowy River*," she said, holding out the video so he could see the cover.

"And it's your favourite movie?"

"Just. I love *Gallipoli*, too, but I'm not really in the mood for all that angst right now." Lois grinned. "It's probably not your sort of movie," she admitted.

"Have you ever watched it with Dan?"

Lois laughed. "Are you kidding? Dan only watches movies if they have at least a dozen gun fights, mega-litres of spurting blood, and a few flying body parts."

That settled it. Now Clark really wanted to watch this movie with Lois. He didn't care if there was not one single scene that interested him in the least, he just wanted to watch it with her. He held out his hand, and she gave him the video. He removed it from the box and slid it into the VCR. "What's it about?" he asked.

"It's based on the famous ballad by Banjo Paterson," Lois said. "It's about a mountain man, Jim Craig, who comes down from the high country and falls in love with Jessica, the daughter of a rich squatter."

"At home, a squatter is usually someone who has moved into a house they don't own."

"Same here," Lois said. "But years ago, a squatter was a landowner."

"Does Jim get his girl?" Clark asked as he sat on the couch.

"Eventually, yes," Lois said. "But not until the sequel." She sat down—not close to him but facing him. "Jessica's father gets together a huge group of riders to go after a mob of brumbies—they're wild horses—and Jim becomes a legend because he and his horse are mountain-bred, so when the mob goes over a steep drop, the rest pull up, but Jim keeps going."

"Let's watch it," Clark said.

"Are you sure?" Lois said. "It's much more a woman's movie than a man's."

Clark slid his arm across the top of the couch and gestured to the space next to him with his other hand. "Come and sit down," he said, ignoring the fact that she was already sitting. "And let the story begin."

Lois hesitated and looked from his face to his arm. Then she turned and shuffled back, leaning ever so slightly into his side.

Clark took a deep breath of pure happiness and let his fingertips gently rest on the curve of her shoulder. Nope, he didn't care in the least if *The Man From Snowy River* was less entertaining than watching paint dry. But he did hope it was a long movie. A very, very long movie.

* * *

Almost two hours later, the movie finished, and Lois gave a sigh of contentment. She turned, her eyes still a little dreamy from the movie. "Well?" she said.

"I enjoyed it," Clark said, realising it was the truth.

"Really?" She sounded surprised.

"It was great," he said. "Stunning scenery, some great action. Jim coming down that mountain was amazing, and"—Clark grinned—"… a very good-looking female lead."

Lois laughed and swatted his chest with her hand. "Sigrid Thornton," she said. "Mind you, Tom Burlinson is pretty easy on the eyes, too."

"So you're partial to tough, lean Aussie men, are you?" he asked.

"If you're asking if I'm waiting for my handsome hero to come riding in on a white horse," Lois said. "The answer is 'no'."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm just not the sort of girl something like that would happen to."

Clark opened his mouth in protest, but Lois cut him off.

"And anyway," she said, "my dreams run much more to a Hawthorn premiership than a gorgeous guy sweeping me off my feet."

Clark wagged his finger at her. "Don't give me that, Ms Lane," he said. "I saw how much you enjoyed the mushy bits with Jim and Jessica."

Lois grinned. "You should see me after a Hawthorn premiership," she said.

"Is that an invitation?" Clark asked.

She stood, still smiling. "I should be getting home." She took the video from the VCR and returned it to her bag.

"You said there is a sequel," Clark persisted.

"There is."

"So? Can we watch it?"

"You really want to watch the sequel?" she asked dubiously. "I don't think it's as good as the original."

"Absolutely I want to watch it," he said.

"OK," she agreed easily. "I'll bring the sequel around one night soon, and we'll watch it together."

Clark grinned, awash with anticipation. "Can I walk you home?" he asked.

"No, thanks," she said. "It's only a minute away."

"Then it will only take me a minute to walk with you."

"I'll be fine." Lois opened the door. "Goodnight, Clark."

"Goodnight, Lois," he replied. "Thanks for a wonderful evening."

"Thanks for dinner."

"Anytime," he said. "I'll cook for you anytime."

With a final smile, she turned and left.

Clark closed his door and moved to the table. He stared at the front page of the *Daily Planet*. The accusations and the distrust and the suspicion had lost their sting.

Because Lois didn't believe them.

And that meant more than anything else.

Part 12

After Lois left his apartment, Clark flew home to Kansas. He found his parents weeding the vegetable garden together. "Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad," he said as he approached them.

They both looked up, their faces immediately crinkling to smiles of welcome. "Clark," Martha said. "It's wonderful to see you." Then her pleasure waned. "Have you seen Saturday's *Daily Planet*?"

Clark nodded. "Yeah. Lois got me a copy from Sydney."

"Lois?" Martha said, her curiosity overcoming her concern. "She knows?"

Together they moved towards the farmhouse kitchen in unspoken acknowledgement that Clark couldn't be seen in Kansas when he was supposed to be in Australia. "No," he said. "She doesn't know—not *that* anyway."

"What does she know?"

They closed the kitchen door behind them. "She read the reports," Clark said. "But she thinks Superman didn't cause the train tragedy, and she believes he poses no threat to humanity."

"Well, she has more sense than that Drake woman," Martha said bitterly.

"Mayson did a comprehensive job on me," Clark said. "Six pages of character assassination."

"Jason Trask seems equally deranged," Jonathan said. "He's a government agent; I worry about Superman having enemies in high places."

Martha slammed the kettle on the stove with more force than Clark had ever seen before. "I would like to take both of them and slap them upside the head," she fumed.

Clark felt a smile begin to wander across his face. His mother turned, and he pulled it into line but he wasn't quick enough.

"What are you grinning about?" she demanded in a tone that transported him back to his childhood.

"I wouldn't like to be either Mayson or Trask if they came face to face with a mama bear like you," he said.

His mom didn't smile. "Clark!" she admonished. "This is serious."

Clark stood and gave his mom a quick hug. "I'm not sure there's much they can do," he said, "other than trying to convince everyone there are thousands of us all trained and ready to take over the entire world."

"What if everyone believes them?" Jonathan asked.

Clark sat down again. “Dad, I knew before leaving for Australia that I had to make some decisions about Superman. Mayson was already baying for his blood, and every time he appears, she increases her efforts to bring him down.”

“But now she’s found a powerful ally in this Trask fellow,” Jonathan said glumly.

Martha brought the teapot to the table, and silence fell in the little kitchen. Clark’s mind slid back to the movie he’d watched with Lois. The horse chase had been breathtaking. And he would never forget the wonder of having Lois’s warm presence pressed against his side. He wanted to watch the sequel with her. And that other movie she had mentioned. And about a million more movies.

“What are you smiling about?” Martha demanded.

Clark forced his mind back to Saturday’s *Daily Planet*. He knew that if he didn’t manage to push aside the enticing aura of his evening with Lois, he would face a barrage of questions from his parents. Questions he wasn’t ready to answer. Not yet.

“Mom, Dad,” he said, forcing gravity into his tone. “My greatest fear is that someone will use you to try to get to me, but there hasn’t been the slightest indication that anyone suspects you have a link to Superman. While you are safe, nothing else matters.”

“What about you?” Jonathan said.

“Dad,” Clark said, restraining his chuckle. “They can say this stuff, but they can’t actually hurt me. Not physically.” And, he added silently, there is only one other person whose opinion really matters, and miraculously, she has already made up her mind that Superman isn’t someone to be feared.

“What if they’ve discovered more of the green rock?” his dad asked.

Clark felt the little outbreak of apprehension that always accompanied the memory of the only physical pain he had ever experienced. “You wrapped the green rock in lead, and I tossed it far into space,” he reminded them. “Trask is a government agent, but that doesn’t mean he can retrieve little green pebbles from the vastness of the universe.”

His attempted joke fell flat. Clearly, his parents were worried. “What if there’s more of it?” Jonathan persisted.

“More?” Clark said, his throat tightening despite his belief that there was virtually zero chance Trask could have found more of the green rock.

Martha stood abruptly, and from the shelf, she took a copy of the *Daily Planet*. Clark recognised it as the same edition Lois had given him. The picture on the front was truly appalling. His mom smacked the paper on the table, opened it, and pointed at a column. “A quote from Trask,” she said bleakly. “‘Government scientists have discovered the weakness in this alien race. Despite seeming to be invulnerable, the secret to their strength has been uncovered, and we are confident that when they attack us, we will be ready for them with the means to overpower them. This is a war we can win if we remain vigilant and refuse to be blinded by Superman’s meaningless benevolent acts of charity.‘” She looked up to Clark, her eyes filled with a compelling mix of fear and fury.

“Mom,” Clark said. “That doesn’t mean they have the green rock.”

“It means they might have it,” Jonathan countered.

Clark thought for a moment. “That would mean there was more to find,” he conceded. “And we didn’t get all of it.”

“Exactly,” Martha snapped. “From where we found it, and from the effect it had on you, we concluded it had come to Earth in the trail of your spaceship. Your father and I searched the whole area and gathered up all we could find, but we have no way of knowing if we got all of it.”

“And we had no way to test it,” Jonathan added. “We certainly didn’t want to show it to anyone else. Science is so advanced these days, they could determine that the green rock is alien in origin.”

“And then,” Martha said as she absently poured the tea. “It’s only a small leap to assume it is somehow related to Superman.”

“They haven’t even fully decided Superman *is* alien,” Clark said.

“Publicly, there have been numerous hypotheses—most of them too far-fetched for even science-fiction,” Jonathan said. “But we have no way of knowing what they believe privately. This Trask fellow says he has been working on ‘eliminating’ the threat since the first appearance of Superman, and now, after two years of intensive research, he believes he has the answers. He sounds confident that he knows how to bring down Superman.”

Clark could see from their faces that his parents were concerned. He imagined them poring over the Planet stories and anxiously trying to determine what it meant for their son. His irritation with Mayson Drake surged. Her attacks on him he could tolerate, but now her fixation had touched his parents.

“Clark,” Martha said sombrely, “we don’t think Superman should appear anymore. Not for a long time.”

"Mom," Clark said, "you know I can't sit by and watch people die when I could prevent their deaths. That's why you called me after the subway was sabotaged."

"That was a mistake," she said. "If I hadn't called you, these stories wouldn't have been written."

Clark reached over to cover her hand with his. "There are people who are alive now who wouldn't have made it without my help," he said. "It wasn't a mistake."

"Clark," Jonothan said. "We think Trask will swoop the next time Superman appears. He is frighteningly single-minded and driven. It's possible he would cause an emergency just to lure you into his trap."

"How are they going to hold me, Dad?" Clark asked. But he already knew the answer.

"That won't be hard if they have the green rock," Jonathan said, his voice not quite steady.

Clark sipped his tea. He had nothing to quell their fears.

"Clark," Martha said, "we think you should go back to Australia and stay there for the remainder of the three months. We think you should destroy the suits and give up all thoughts of Superman. It is just too dangerous."

"Mom, I can't—"

"You can," she said firmly. "You've helped a lot of people these past two years. I know you want to help others, but you can't put your own life at risk."

"Mom, I just want to help."

"We know that," she said. "But you didn't see Trask. He was on the television, and his hatred is frightening, Clark. He said he will stop at nothing to see Superman dead."

"And with that Drake woman writing her poison, it won't be long until everyone starts believing them," Jonathan said ominously.

Clark contemplated them—first his mom and then his dad. As always, he saw the magnitude of their love for him. He saw their desire to protect him, to give him the normal life they knew he craved.

"And Clark," Martha said, "you know how much we love seeing you, but we don't think you should fly home again. We don't know if they have radars that could pick up your movements."

Clark felt a rising tide of dismay. Was that possible? Was it possible they could track him as he flew? And if they could, had he just led them directly to his parents? And did that mean he would lead them to Lois when he flew back to Melbourne?

Perhaps his mom saw his alarm, because she patted his hand. "There's no reason to believe they can do that," she said. "We just think you should be careful." She took a deep breath and managed a smile. "Tell me about Lois," she said. "You were with her before coming here, weren't you?"

"What makes you think that?" Clark said, trying to keep his tone even.

Martha smiled, and it peeked out from her concern like the sun materialising from behind a dark cloud. "The way you walked in here as if you were floating on air," she said. "The glazed look in your eyes, the way you keep smiling at some private thought."

Clark felt his smile pull at the edges of his mouth. "Yes, I was with Lois," he admitted.

Martha smiled more fully. "Then you need to go back to her and just be Clark Kent for a while. Clark Kent, American reporter on exchange in Australia. Clark Kent, young man in love."

"I didn't say I was in love," Clark said quickly.

"You didn't have to," his mom replied.

Clark chuckled and stood up from the table. "I should get out of here," he said. He gave his parents a long hug. "I love you both," he said, realising that for the first time ever, he was facing the possibility of an extended time away from home. "I'll miss you."

"We'll miss you, too," Jonathan said.

Clark backed away and looked at both of them. "If… if you need me," he said, hating to give voice to his fears, "… for anything at all, call me. Promise you won't try to protect me by not contacting me."

He waited, knowing they wouldn't want to agree to his request.

"Promise me," he demanded.

They nodded—only slightly—but Clark knew it was as much as he would get. He scanned for anyone in the vicinity, and, finding it clear, they walked outside. He quickly hugged both of his parents again and shot into the sky.

* * *

On Tuesday morning, Clark walked into the Herald Sun office feeling as if his emotions were attached to the end of a wildly swinging pendulum. Whenever he thought about Melbourne, and Lois, and watching the movie with her, and how her small body had felt against his, and her staunch support of Superman, he was flooded with exhilaration. But then he would remember Metropolis, and Mayson, and his parents' worries, and Trask, and a smothering drape of anxiety threatened to suffocate his joy.

Perhaps the time had come to stop trying to be two people.

Perhaps it was time to retire Superman and put away the red cape and the blue tights forever.

Perhaps it was time to pretend he was normal.

But if he did, people would die. People who didn't have to die because he had the strength and the speed and the power to save them.

Innocent people would be maimed and injured and denied justice. Criminals would continue to steal and cheat and dominate and wield their weapons of fear.

Clark felt as if he were suspended on the cliff of indecision.

Then Lois walked in, and his heart accelerated. She nodded in his direction with a half-smile and picked up the phone the moment she sat at her desk. He wondered if there were further developments regarding the merger.

She was on the phone for over an hour, immediately dialling a new number as soon as she hung up from the previous call. Finally, she replaced the phone and scrutinised her scribbled notes.

Clark sprang from his desk, glad he'd had the forethought to use a little super-speed to get ahead on the story Browny had given him. He detoured to the coffee bench and made her a drink. "How's it going?" he asked Lois when he arrived at her desk, fervently hoping that none of the closeness from last night had been lost.

Lois smiled up at him, giving his optimism the impetus to surge through the cloak of despair. "OK," she replied. She glanced down for half a second and then added, "Thanks for last night. I had a wonderful time."

That one comment from Lois completely shredded the last traces of gloom. Neither Mayson, nor Trask, nor anyone else could cloud his world if Lois enjoyed being with him. "I had a wonderful time, too," Clark said. "I'm looking forward to seeing the sequel."

"It won't be for a few nights," she warned. "I think I'll be chasing this story most of the week."

"What's been happening?"

Lois motioned him to come closer, and Clark leaned over her desk. "The meeting is definitely going ahead tonight," she said quietly. "It's in Brunswick."

"Where's that?"

"Inner northeastern suburb," she replied. "Ironically, it's just past Fitzroy. One of the key figures in this has offices there."

"Do you think there is any possibility of a solution other than a merger?"

Lois shook her head. "No," she said sadly. "I think that by tomorrow, there will be one less Victorian club."

"Will you be at the meeting tonight?" Clark asked.

"They won't let me in, but I'll be outside."

"Can I come?"

"You want to share my byline?" she asked in a tone that left Clark unsure as to whether she was joking or serious.

"No, I want to make sure you get home safely," he answered honestly.

Lois laughed, although it was strained. "I can't see how it could possibly *not* be safe," she said.

"Can I come?"

"OK."

"Thank you."

"I'm not sure what I'll be doing this afternoon," Lois said. "I'll let you know where and when to meet."

"Thanks, Lois." Knowing she needed to work on her story, Clark straightened and began to walk away.

"Thanks for the coffee, Clark," she called after him.

He waved in response and sat at his desk, intending to get his story finished quickly so he would be free to go with Lois whenever she decided to leave.

* * *

That evening, Lois and Clark sat in her Jeep in a dimly lit lane off a larger, brighter street. Lois told him the meeting was to be held in an office around the corner. A building blocked their view of the office, but Lois was hopeful she would recognise the cars as they passed.

She seemed tense and preoccupied, and Clark sensed that any excitement at the prospect of a big story wasn't enough to counteract her sorrow over the probable death of a football club. She said little, merely noting when a car passed carrying a relevant person.

By nine o'clock, Lois estimated that all the people imperative to the deal had arrived. She started the engine, crawled around the corner, and parked in sight of the office building. She called Browny and told him she expected to have concrete news within an hour.

Ten o'clock came and passed. Occasionally, Lois would sigh deeply, and Clark couldn't help thinking that this felt like waiting in a hospital for news of a desperately ill loved one. He gently squeezed her shoulder. "It's tough, isn't it?" he said quietly.

She nodded.

By eleven o'clock, Clark could sense Lois's escalating anxiety. Her heart had accelerated, and he didn't need to touch her shoulders to know they were tight with stress. "Any thoughts?" he asked.

"The details must have been thrashed out already," she said. "It shouldn't take this long to sign the final papers."

"The delay makes it less likely the merger will happen?"

"Yes," Lois agreed. "But I really don't know if that is good news for Fitzroy or bad."

It was past midnight when Lois suddenly lurched, opened her door, and sprinted across the road to where a man had emerged from the office block. Clark followed close behind her. "Lois Lane, Herald Sun," she said. "Is the North-Fitzroy merger going ahead?"

The man's face was impossible to read. "No comment," he said.

"When will it be announced?" she pressed. "When will the supporters of the two clubs be informed of the decisions made about their futures?"

"No comment."

"Why have the boards chosen this path without consulting the members?"

The man pushed past her and walked away.

A second man emerged from the house and stepped up to Lois. Even in the dim light, Clark could see that his face was pale and drained, and his body language projected extreme hopelessness. He glanced to Lois and said one word. "Nothing."

"Nothing?" Lois echoed, seeming to have grasped more understanding of his meaning than Clark had.

"Nothing," the man repeated.

"Why?"

"I'm sorry, Flinders," he said. "My first loyalty has to be to my club."

Lois lifted her hand and rested it on the man's upper arm for a moment. She said nothing, but Clark could sense the empathy flowing between them. The man gave her a quick glance that was probably meant to suffice as thanks for her gesture and then walked away, his step heavy and his posture slumped.

Lois trudged slowly back to the Jeep.

"You aren't going to talk to anyone else?" Clark asked.

She shook her head. "No one else there will talk to me," she said gloomily.

"What did 'nothing' mean?"

"No merger."

"So?"

Lois lifted her hands in utter confusion. "I don't know," she said. She took her cell from her bag and called Browny.

"Nothing was decided tonight," she said after he'd answered her call. She listened for a few moments and then said, "All of my sources said the decision would be finalised tonight. No, I don't know what stalled it. I get the feeling that if the truth about what happened in there tonight comes out, it could spell the death of Fitzroy."

She listened for a long moment.

"It's your call," she said eventually.

She listened again and then hung up her cell phone and replaced it in her bag. She slumped back into the driver's seat and stared into the darkness.

"Is Browny going to print your story?" Clark asked softly.

She nodded. "He feels we've sat on this long enough. He's going to print what we know for sure—that there was a meeting tonight that was meant to sign off on the merger between North and Fitzroy. We don't know what happened, or what will happen now."

"Is it possible they will sort out whatever couldn't be decided tonight?"

"Yes, but my gut feeling is that the longer this goes, the more ground Fitzroy will lose."

"Would you like me to drive home?" Clark asked.

Lois chuckle was restrained and doleful, but it put a small crack in the despondent atmosphere. "How many times have you driven on the correct side of the road and the correct side of the car?" she asked.

"Never."

"Then I think I should drive home."

"Will you come to my unit and let me get you something to eat?" Clark asked. "I know you have had nothing since mid-afternoon."

She smiled, but it couldn't dispel her dejection. "Been keeping tabs on me, have you, Kent?"

"Hardly," he denied. "But I'm starving, and you've been with me for hours, and neither of us has eaten, so I figure you're probably hungry, too."

"I am hungry," she admitted. "But more than that, I'm tired. Thanks for the offer, but I just want to get home and

get some sleep. However this falls, I can't see tomorrow being anything other than a big day."

"Wednesday's your day off," he said.

"Not this week," she said with a sigh.

"OK," Clark said, trying to stifle his disappointment.

She drove them home through the dark, sparsely populated streets in silence.

At his driveway, she bid him goodnight, and Clark walked sombrely towards his door, wishing he could have voiced his yearning to hold her in his arms.

* * *

It wasn't a hard decision for Clark to forego his day off and head into the office the next morning. He wanted to be with Lois, and if she was at the office, that was where he intended to be. From his desk, he heard her heartbeat first, and he looked to the door, knowing she was about to enter. As she appeared, a shout erupted, followed by loud applause as several people crossed the floor to surround her.

"Congratulations, Flinders," Banjo said.

"Your first-ever front page," Bluey said. "Well done."

Browny came from his office, a smile on his face. "Great story, Flinders," he said. "It's about time football took the front page again. You did us proud."

Clark stood up and was able to see Lois's face through the crowd. Her subdued smile didn't hide her sadness at the content of her story.

Browny turned back to his office. "Flinders," he ordered, "come with me."

Lois sent Clark a little smile as she headed into Browny's office. Clark logged onto his computer and opened the Daily Planet site. He flicked back to Sunday's edition and found more speculation about Superman, his past origins and his future intentions.

Clark shook his head. Mayson had missed her calling. With an imagination like hers, she should be writing science fiction.

And Trask—he sounded dangerous.

Monday's edition led with the story that a group of three men had been charged with sabotaging the train track and weakening the tunnel. Clark noticed there was no published apology to Superman for the now-disproved accusations.

Tuesday's edition didn't mention Superman. Clark surmised that one of two things had happened—either Perry was out of the hospital and back in the office, or he had somehow managed to wrest back control of the paper despite being confined to bed. Clark knew that some of the stories published in his absence would have done nothing to lower the Chief's stress levels.

Clark closed the Planet site and picked up the copy of the *Herald Sun* that had been left on his desk. On the front page was the headline—'NORTH FITZROY'—and then in smaller print, 'Merger planned, stalled'. And under that… 'by Lois Lane'.

He read her report and was again impressed at how Lois had managed to include necessary detail without losing sight of the fact that many people were going to be devastated by her story.

"RUBBER!"

Clark stood, hoping Browny was calling him to tell him to work with Lois on the merger story. His hopes were dashed when he met Lois at Browny's door, coming out of his office. Clark stood back to let her pass, caught the little smile she tossed to him, and returned one of his own.

He stepped into Browny's office and shut the door. "Isn't it your day off?" the editor snapped.

"Yes."

"Why are you here?"

"Lois told me about her story, and I knew it was going to be a momentous day, so I came in," Clark said, hoping that sounded reasonable.

"I hope you don't have any plans for next Wednesday," Browny said.

"No, I don't," Clark said, knowing from Browny's tone that that was the only possible response.

"Good. You'll be playing for the Print Media boys in our annual charity game against the Electronic Media boys."

Clark gulped. "Football?" he said.

"Of course, football," Browny barked. "What were you expecting? Tiddlywinks?"

"No," Clark said. He hurried on. "I haven't played a game in my life. I really don't think—"

"You're here as Deano's replacement," Browny said decisively. "And Deano always plays, so you'll be playing."

Clark realised that argument would be futile. "OK," he said.

"Gazza's the captain. He'll give you the details and organise your kit. You're going to the barbie this arvo? Good. See him then."

Browny picked up his phone and began to dial.

Clark turned and walked out of Browny's office.

This was not good.

This was not good at all.

Part 13

Clark caught a ride with Bluey to Gazza's barbeque later that afternoon. Lois had again left the office without explanation and not returned.

They were greeted at the front door by Narelle, Gazza's wife. She was, as Lois had told Clark, a fine-looking woman—a titian-haired beauty with startling green eyes and a natural elegance. She smiled in welcome. "Bluey, Clark," she greeted. Turning to Clark, she added, "Or would you prefer that I call you Rubber?"

"Either," he replied, realising he no longer really minded his nickname. It made him feel as if he belonged.

"Clark," Narelle said. "Come through to the pergola. Gary has just fired up the barbie. We'll eat in about half an hour."

Clark followed her through the large and impressive house. Beyond the back door, they stepped into an outdoor area with a timber floor, waist-high lattice surrounds, and a canopy of leafless vines that meandered across the overhead beams. Three sturdy wooden planks served as steps down to the neatly kept lawn and a small paved area where Banjo, Browny, and Gazza were standing around the barbeque. Gazza had a bottle of beer in one hand and tongs in the other. He waved the tongs in greeting.

Clark responded, even as he realised with sharp disappointment that Lois wasn't here.

"Drinks are in the esky," Narelle said.

"Thanks," Bluey replied. He went to the blue box in the corner, lifted its white lid, and took out a squat brown bottle. "Beer, Rubber?" he said, turning to Clark and lifting the bottle for him to see.

"Ah, no, thanks," Clark said.

Bluey took his drink and joined the men around the barbeque. Narelle introduced Clark to the gathered women—Sue, who was Browny's wife, and Molly, who was Banjo's girlfriend.

"Can I get you a drink?" Narelle asked Clark. "What would you like?"

"Yes, please," Clark said. "Do you have Coke?"

"Sure." Narelle gestured to the men clustered around the barbeque. "Women love barbies because the men cook," she said. "One bloke periodically prods the meat, and the others stand around yarning, and they all come away convinced they have solved the world's problems. You can join them if you'd like, and I'll bring your drink down to you. Or you can stay up here, and we can have a chat."

Clark hesitated, not wanting to be caught in the all-male environment if Lois arrived but also wary of appearing too eager to monopolise the attention of the hostess.

Narelle saw his hesitation and smiled. "I'll get your Coke, and we'll have a chat." She was back a minute later with his drink, and they sat down on chairs overlooking the lawn. "How are you finding Australia?"

"Different," Clark replied. "More so than I expected."

"What specifically?"

"The language, the slang, the lack of formalities, the total fixation on football…"

Narelle grinned. "You mean no one ever told you that you can't go more than half an hour in this city without someone bringing up the subject of football?"

Clark matched her grin. "I certainly wasn't told that."

"We're not called 'Sports-mad Melbourne' for nothing."

"Is it like that in general?" he asked. "Or does it just seem like that because I'm working in the footy department of a newspaper?"

"There are small pockets of people who aren't completely obsessed," Narelle said. "But just about everyone has a team, and with that comes a lot of passion, and everyone wants his opinion heard, so we just keep on talking about footy. I think it's accentuated because we support different teams within one city." She sipped from her glass of red wine. "Gary says you've decided to barrack for Hawthorn."

"Yes," Clark said. "I was told I had no choice but to select a team."

"And Lois barracks for the Hawks," Narelle said smoothly. "I reckon you made a good decision."

Clark studied her, wondering if her words carried deeper meaning. "Do you barrack for Collingwood?"

She laughed. "I do now, but when I was a kid, I barracked for Richmond."

"Lois said no one changes their team."

"It's a bit hard not to change when you're going out with a Collingwood player," she said. "Don't tell Gazza, but there's a small part of me that will always love the Tigers."

"I'm not sure Lois could be lured away from Hawthorn even if she were dating the captain of Collingwood," Clark said.

"I think you're right," Narelle agreed. "Do you know if she's coming today?"

"She said she would."

"Oh, good," Narelle exclaimed. "I was hoping enough time had passed that she felt included again."

"Included?"

"Hasn't she told you?"

"No."

"There was a… difficult situation. Divided loyalties. And Lois figured the men would stick together." From the front of the house came the chimes of the doorbell, and Narelle stood. "Maybe that will be her now."

Clark waited, hoping… wondering.

Seconds later, Lois walked into the room followed by Narelle.

"You go and sit over there," Narelle said to Lois, nodding towards Clark. "And I'll get you a drink."

Clark stood as Lois approached him. The world had suddenly become a brighter place. "Were you out chasing up the story?" he asked as they sat together.

She nodded.

"Anything happen?"

"Nothing I can prove."

Narelle came over with a glass of orange juice and a burlap bag. She put the drink on the table and gave the bag to Lois. "Can you check them tonight and get back to me?" she asked with a smile. "If there's a problem, I'll send replacements with Gary tomorrow."

Lois opened the bag and peered in. Her face clouded with confusion, and her eyes rose quickly to Narelle.

Gazza's wife grinned. "Never trust a bloke with detail," she said and walked away.

Lois closed the bag, placed it on the deck next to her chair, and took her orange juice from the table.

"Should I ask what's in there?" Clark asked, nodding to the bag. "Or is it none of my business?"

Lois took a sip of her orange juice. "It's yours."

"Mine?"

"It's your footy jumper and shorts," Lois said. "For the game."

"For me?" Clark gasped.

She nodded.

"Why did Narelle give them to you?" Clark asked. "And what does she want you to check?"

"That they fit."

"Oh." Clark felt the beginnings of heat shimmer across his face. Just one of his problems with having to play football was the skimpiness of the clothes they wore—a pair of *short* shorts and a sleeveless jersey with no padding at all. He wasn't particularly looking forward to being seen like that in public. He definitely didn't want to parade in front of Lois dressed like that. "Did Browny tell you he insisted I play?"

"No," Lois said. "But I guessed he would. That's one of the reasons why I suggested we do some skills last week."

"I have to go to training on Monday."

"Yeah."

"I figure you're not allowed to play?"

"Nope," she said. "I'm a girl."

Clark couldn't detect any bitterness in her frank assessment, although he would have understood it. Lois had loved football and studied it for years, yet she was barred from the team. He had been in the country less than two weeks, knew practically nothing of the game, and he had been ordered into the team. Clark briefly touched her arm. "Sorry," he said.

"It is how it is," she said with a small shrug. "And don't worry about the game. You'll be fine. No one'll expect too much."

"Is Dan good at football?"

Lois nodded. "He has a prodigious left foot, keeps his head over the ball, and always flies the flag for his teammates."

Clark groaned. "I didn't understand most of that," he said. "But I understood enough to know I won't be an adequate replacement."

"A prodigious left foot means he can kick the ball a long way. Keeping his head over the ball means he doesn't squib it." Lois noticed Clark's look and grinned. "He keeps going for the ball even if he knows a hit is coming," she explained. "And flying the flag means that if a teammate gets into a scuffle with an opponent, Dan will always be there in support."

Clark felt his stomach sink. "Lois," he hissed. "I can't get into any 'scuffles'."

She didn't ask why. Part of him dreaded her asking. A contrary, imprudent part of him wanted her to ask, wanted

her to delve into his secrets and uncover them. Her hand rested on his arm. “You’ll be fine,” she said.

“Will you be there?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Clark wasn’t sure if that made him feel better or worse.

A shout from Gazza informed them that the meat was cooked. Clark stood and waited for Lois to go down the few steps to the barbeque. He figured he should probably be glad Lois hadn’t asked why he was so concerned about playing football.

But, strangely, he wasn’t.

* * *

To Clark’s surprise, he enjoyed the barbeque despite being coerced into joining the men after filling his plate with meat. Bluey told him there was no need to return to the pergola and the table loaded with food because only women ate salad. So, Clark remained with the men, eating a hefty chunk of steak encased in two slices of bread.

He laughed at their jokes and accepted their cracks aimed at everything from him being American to him barracking for Hawthorn. He noticed, as Lois had warned him, that they could be merciless in their humour, but any possible offence simply got lost in the relaxed ambience of standing around eating, drinking, and laughing together.

Browny brought up the subject of their upcoming game, and Clark followed the conversation intently, trying to gauge exactly how serious they were.

With growing apprehension, he realised they were deadly serious. The Electronic Media—the radio and television commentators—had won the past two years, and the Print Media team was determined that things would be different this year.

“We won’t have Deano,” Bluey said solemnly. “He’s a big loss.”

“But we’ve got Rubber,” Browny said with a pointed look in Clark’s direction.

Clark nodded, hoping that would suffice as a response.

“Ever played gridiron?” Banjo asked.

“In high school.”

“Good,” Gazza said approvingly. “You’ll do all right.”

The discussion moved to the strategies of how they were going to counter Bonzo, the ‘monster forward’ from the other team. Clark’s attention strayed to Lois, who had returned to the pergola. She was sitting with the group of women, but she didn’t seem to be taking part in the conversation as it flowed around her. She looked tired.

Clark waited until dessert had been served and eaten, and then he sidled up to Lois and suggested they go home. It hadn’t actually been confirmed that she would drive him home, but he figured there was no harm in asking.

She agreed with a weary nod. They approached Narelle and thanked her for her hospitality.

“Don’t forget to check the gear,” she said. “You know what men are like—a quick glance is enough to convince them it’ll fit.”

“I’ll do it,” Lois promised.

Narelle beamed. “Thanks.”

Lois was quiet on the way home. Clark asked a few questions about the merger, and she told him she’d had a tip off that another meeting was planned for the next evening. She asked about Perry, and he told her that the editor had been released from hospital and was recuperating at home.

When they arrived, Lois parked outside his front door instead of dropping him off at the bottom of the driveway. “You have to try on the footy gear,” she said in answer to his raised eyebrow.

Clark had been hoping she would forget about that.

They went into his unit together. Lois handed him the bag and gestured to the bedroom door. “Go on,” she said. “Let’s see how this is gonna look.”

“Lois,” Clark said. “You don’t need to stay. I’ll try them on later and tell Gazza tomorrow.”

“Narelle wants to know tonight so she can find replacements if they’re needed.”

“I can call her.”

Lois stared at him for a moment and then broke into laughter. “Kent,” she said, directing an accusing finger at him. “You’re blushing.”

He was fairly sure he wasn’t. Not yet, anyway. “I’m used to sports where there’s a helmet and long pants and big jerseys with padding,” he said defensively.

“And now you’re going to get used to sport where there’s a jumper and shorts,” she told him.

“I thought you were tired,” he said, playing his last card.

“I’m not so tired that I can’t make sure you’re going to look respectable next week,” Lois said. “Narelle looks after the jumpers every year, and she takes her responsibility very seriously. We don’t always win the game, but we do always look the part.” Lois gave him a little shove in the direction

of the bedroom door. “Go on,” she said. “It’s not like you’re going to be the first bloke I’ve ever seen in shorts.”

Reluctantly, Clark took the bag into his room and carefully ensured the door was fully shut. He took out the green and gold jumper with the insignia of a pen on the chest. He looked at the back. He’d been given number 24. Hadn’t Lois said she’d worn a number 24 jumper when she was younger to support one of the Hawthorn players?

He slipped off his jeans and shirt and pulled on the jumper and green shorts. His black socks looked ridiculous, so, deciding he might as well go the whole way, he peeled them off and replaced them with the green-and-gold hooped socks. He pulled them up to his knees and folded over the tops.

Clark turned to the full-length mirror and grimaced. It may be true that ‘clothes maketh the man’, but a jumper and a pair of shorts had not turned him into an Australian Rules footballer.

He looked like a joke.

He looked like an all-American boy trying to be something he wasn’t.

He groaned. Trying to be something he wasn’t had been a continuing theme in his life.

Clark gave in to the strong compulsion to fold his hands across the front of his shorts. Now he just looked like he had something to hide.

“Clark!” Lois called. “Do they fit? Come and show me.”

His heart dropped somewhere low in his stomach. He was going to have to face Lois—looking like a misfit clown.

He turned away from the mirror and opened the door.

* * *

Lois waited with growing curiosity for Clark to emerge from the bedroom. What could possibly be taking him so long?

The door opened slightly, and Clark’s head emerged.

“Come on,” she said encouragingly. “It can’t be that bad.”

“It is.”

She heard the bleakness in his voice and stifled a sigh. Football jumpers looked great on men who had spent hours strengthening and toning their bodies for the rigours of the game. On anyone else…

“You know, the others aren’t professional sportsmen either,” she reminded him. “This is about having some fun and raising money for the kids’ hospital. No one’s going to look great.”

He opened the door fully and stepped from the bedroom.

Lois gulped, her throat as dry as the desert and her knees as fluid as the wind-blown sand. From the scattered mass that had once been her brain, she managed one thought —this year, *someone* was going to look great. Better than great.

Clark’s arms dipped from broad shoulders to plunge into chiselled biceps that were tight under his creamed-honey-coloured skin. Past his elbows, his forearms gave no relief from the overload of sculpted magnificence. Beyond his shorts, his thighs emerged, taut and bulging with the promise of power.

Who could have imagined that Clark kept all this hidden under jeans and loose-fitting shirts?

Lois swallowed twice, one on top of the other, pumping the lubrication that was going to be needed for a sustained blather session.

“You know, Clark, generally footballers fall into two broad, equally important, categories—the thoroughbreds and the mongrels. Right now, you look like a thoroughbred, which is hardly surprising given the raw materials we are working with, but you simply won’t have the skills to back up the thoroughbred look, so we need to turn you into a mongrel because you certainly have the brawn to back up that, and if you run out there looking like a mongrel, there is every chance you might survive the game without being targeted by every wannabe tough-guy on the other team who delights in bringing down the show ponies.”

His lower jaw had collapsed a little. Lois figured he’d probably followed less than half of what she’d said, but she couldn’t allow herself to concentrate on that. She stepped up to him like she was his commanding officer and he was a new recruit. She clutched the bottom of his shorts and yanked them downwards about six centimetres. Then she pulled his jumper from the waistband of his shorts at the front and circled him with her arms to do likewise at the back. She allowed his jumper to fall unfettered across the top of his shorts.

Lois dropped to her knees and pushed down his socks, first his left leg, then his right. They bunched around his ankles in a mass of green and gold.

She grasped his left wrist and undid his watch band. Having removed it from him, she placed it carefully on the lamp table. When she straightened, she reached for his glasses.

“No!” he snapped, jerking back his head.

“No?”

He shook his head. “No. The glasses stay on.”

She peered at him, dumbfounded. “What about when you play footy?”

“They stay on,” he said firmly.

“It’s gonna get rough out there. Can’t you wear contacts?”

“No,” he said in a tone that brooked no argument.

Lois lifted her hands in defeat and stepped back. She allowed herself the freedom to make a slow, detailed sweep of him. Her breath rammed somewhere at the bottom of her throat, somewhere congested by a heart so out of normal rhythm that it was everywhere it shouldn’t be.

“That’s a start,” she said in a voice that sounded like her vocal cords had congealed. She took a big breath in preparation. “Body language is everything,” she said. “From the moment you run onto the ground, your body language needs to say that you are supremely confident, that you are sure of your place in the game, and that you have no anxieties about anything.”

“Do you have a magic wand?” Clark asked dispiritedly.

“I don’t need one,” she said. She ventured into his eyes, and as she met his gaze, a lightning bolt seared through her. She broke away and forced herself to speak. “Shoulders back,” she directed. “Back straight.”

He straightened in response to her command—a move that gave further definition to the chest lurking tantalisingly under the thin material of the footy jumper. Was it too much to hope that at the end of the game, the players would revive the old tradition of swapping jumpers with their opponents? Ten seconds of bare-chested Clark would be—

“Shoulders high,” Lois said sharply. He jumped at her tone and forced his shoulders back further. “Legs straight and slightly apart,” she continued. “Chin up, arms crossed… good… now look at me with purpose and intent in your eyes. Look at me like you know what you want and anyone who gets in your way might not live to regret it.”

Clark folded his arms and pinned her with those amazing brown eyes.

It was perfect for the game—focussed and uncompromising.

But it was liquefying her composure like chocolate over a flame.

Lois fixed her hands on her hips and surveyed the figure in front of her. He was… ‘Impressive’ just wasn’t enough. ‘Stunning’… that was closer. ‘Jaw-droppingly spectacular’… yeah, he was. “That’s better,” she said crisply. “Now you look like a footballer.”

“I do?” Clark didn’t seem convinced.

“You do,” she said decisively. “You need to believe you can do this, Clark. If you believe it, others will, too.”

“You think so?”

“I know so,” Lois said. “When the players first run onto the ground, you can tell if they truly believe in themselves. When you walked out from the bedroom, you looked like your main objective was to find somewhere to hide.”

He didn’t argue.

“Even though there are thirty-six blokes out there on the ground, there is nowhere to hide,” Lois said. “You need to look like you know exactly who you are and what you’re there to do.”

“It’s not that easy when you’ve never played a game before in your life, and two weeks ago you didn’t know the difference between a mark and a handball.”

Lois figured this was an opening and, without waiting for discretion to kick in, stepped forward. She put her hand on the silky warm skin of his upper arm and curled her fingers around the hard, muscular grooves. He felt just as amazing as he looked, and her skin tingled at their contact. “You can do this,” she said quietly. She found his eyes and smiled, pressing her confidence into the uncertainty that lingered in his expression. “You can do this, Clark.”

“I—”

“I can do this,” Lois said. “Say it, Clark.” Under her hand, she could feel his arm burning up.

He paused. Was it because he still didn’t believe what she was saying or because he could feel the heat generated by their skin-on-skin contact, too? “I can do this,” he said.

Lois dropped her hand and quickly stepped away while she still could. “You’re going to be a sensation,” she said. And that’s without so much as touching the ball, she added silently.

“Thanks,” he said.

“You should probably get out of your footy gear,” she said. Though if you don’t, you won’t be hearing too many complaints.

He turned, still a little awkward, and retreated into his bedroom.

But not before he’d given her a spectacular view of his shapely butt encased in the tight footy shorts.

Lois collapsed onto his couch, her heart thumping. She was exhausted. She’d spent the past three days chasing leads, and asking questions, and following up long-shots, and waiting for something to happen. Her gut said it was

about to crack wide open, and once it did, there would be no going back.

Yet despite the emotional intensity of the story, the memories of watching the movie with Clark had never been far from her mind. His hand had rested lightly on her shoulder, and she still wasn't sure if he'd placed it there deliberately.

And now, the sight of him in the footy gear was branded into her mind forever. She'd seen some of the best male bodies in the country. She'd interviewed them at close range, sometimes when they'd been wearing nothing but a towel that covered the bare minimum of their modesty.

Yet never before had a male body had such an effect on her.

Why?

Why Clark Kent?

His body was good… OK, better than good… OK, a *lot* better than good… But not significantly better than any AFL footballer who'd had a couple of pre-seasons to build his physique.

Was it because it was unexpected? She'd assessed him in that first moment at the airport—gorgeous, chivalrous, safe. Safe because a man like him would already be taken. And if not taken, at least inundated with offers. Safe because he was only here temporarily. Safe because men like Clark Kent did not fall in love with women like Lois Lane.

So she had been friendly. Because he was safe.

But as she had come to know him, her initial assessment had been continually challenged. Oh, he was certainly gorgeous—and that was without the mega-watt smile that definitely should have been confiscated with other dangerous weapons at Customs. And he was chivalrous. He opened doors for her and brought her coffee, all with a naturalness that made her feel… She definitely wouldn't have admitted it… not out loud… but the gentleman in Clark seemed to bring out the lady in her.

Time had confirmed some aspects of her initial assessment. He had been blessed with incredible looks and a protective streak that sat well on those broad shoulders.

But safe?

No—he was definitely not safe.

And he was a whole lot less safe now she knew that concealed under the jeans and shirts of a journalist lurked the body of a supremely toned athlete.

But it wasn't just the body that made him dangerous.

Clark was so much more than a body, more even than that intoxicating smile. He was kind and intelligent and caring and friendly and understanding.

And here for three months.

He had a life in the US. A life he would return to. A life that had to include a bevy of beautiful women just waiting for a spark of encouragement from a man who had it all.

Don't, she told herself.

Don't go there, Lois.

Don't.

Just don't.

Don't.

Don't even think about it.

Don't.

Because if you do, you are going to get your heart so badly shattered it will never recover.

* * *

Clark was in the shower the next morning when he heard an urgent banging on his door. He super-sped from the shower, dried himself, spun into his clothes, and was at the door before the vibrations had stopped whirring in his ears.

It was Lois. He'd known it was her. He didn't even need his x-ray vision. It was her heartbeat. And it was going at an accelerated speed. He opened the door. "Lois, what's wrong?" he asked.

"Clark," she said breathlessly. "We need to get out to Fitzroy."

He reached for his jacket and followed her. "What's happening?"

She jumped into the Jeep and started the engine. "I think there's another player."

"Excuse me?"

Lois turned out of his driveway and sped down the street. "I think North are going to get squeezed out of this."

"Why?"

"Because of the dirty dollar," she said with disgust.

This wasn't making a lot of sense, but Clark could tell that Lois was upset about something. "What has happened?"

"The question I've been asking for days is this… How can the Fitzroy board even think about entering into a merger without a ballot of their members?"

"I remember you telling me that clubs are owned by the people who love them."

"Exactly," Lois said. "And through all this, there has been no talk of a vote; no mention of taking it to the members."

"Have you found out why?" Clark asked.

Lois nodded, and in an instant, her demeanour turned from urgency to despair. "Because they're in such deep financial trouble, they've been taken over by their creditors." She turned to Clark, and he was startled to see that her eyes were moist. "That means money people are running the football club and that"—she sniffed—"that is never going to be a good outcome."

Clark rested his hand on her arm. He said nothing. There was nothing to say.

* * *

It was a long and exhaustingly emotional day, full of twists and turns and rumours and speculation. At the end of it, well past midnight, the deal was done. Fitzroy, the proud Lions with over one hundred years of history, had been taken over by the Queensland-based newcomers, the Brisbane Bears, to form the Brisbane Lions.

At the press conference to announce what Lois had already unearthed, written up, and sent to Browny, they called it a merger. But the words didn't change the facts.

The death warrant had been signed on another Victorian football club.

Part 14

It was nearly two in the morning when Clark followed Lois into her unit. She turned to him with a tired smile. "Thanks for all your help today, Clark," she said. "I really appreciate you sticking with me."

"I wish I could have done more," Clark said. As each long hour had stretched into the next, he had watched her energy seep away and lamented his inability to ease her distress.

She briefly rested her hand on his forearm. "Without you, I wouldn't have eaten a bite all day."

"You got the story," he said. He hoped she would detect the admiration in his voice. He had accompanied Mayson Drake more than once as she had pursued leads. In Clark's opinion, Lois was just as good as the venerated Daily Planet reporter. The difference was that Lois didn't leave her heart in the office when she went out to chase a story.

"Yeah," Lois said. "But it's a story that's going to devastate thousands."

"The Brisbane representatives seemed happy," Clark noted.

"Didn't they?" Lois said with more than a touch of resentment. Her fire died quickly though, doused by sheer exhaustion.

Clark wanted to hold her, wishing he dared step up to her and fold her in his arms in an attempt to achieve with touch what he had failed to achieve with words and coffee and solicitude.

She turned suddenly and headed purposefully to her phone. "I have to ring Dan," she said.

"Is it going to upset you? Calling Dan?"

Lois tried to smile, but her efforts crumbled. "I can't let him find out on the Internet," she said unsteadily. "He loves Fitzroy. This is going to destroy him."

"Lois," Clark said. "I… Would you like me to stay? To be here… after?"

"No," she said. "But thanks."

"I can stay," he said. More than anything, he wanted to stay, he wanted to be there for her.

"No," she said firmly. "It's late."

"Lo-is," Clark said. "I thought we were friends."

"We are," she said tremulously. "But this is something I need to do alone." Her brown eyes met his, pleading for his understanding.

"OK," he conceded.

Clark knew he should turn and walk out. He knew Lois had made it very clear that she wanted to be alone to make her call. But he couldn't do it. He *couldn't* just walk away without some form of closure. He lifted his arms towards Lois… and waited.

She hesitated, and his world stopped.

She took one step forward, and his arms closed around her. She was small and warm and soft. Holding her brought crystal-clear clarity to something he had already begun to realise—that his life to this point had been missing something vital, something essential.

Her.

Lois.

She belonged right here.

In his arms.

And now that he knew, never again would he be able to endure the emptiness of a life without her.

His hand slid slowly up and down her back in response to the little quivers that trembled through her body. He breathed in her essence—an aroma that he guessed was

partly her shampoo and partly her perfume, and with a trace of something beautiful that was quintessentially Lois.

A minute passed. A minute that seemed fleeting yet also seemed expansive enough that it could encapsulate his whole life. Lois took a deep, steadying breath and eased out of his embrace. Her glance passed quickly over his face… when he longed to hold her gaze and communicate something of the depth of his feelings.

"Thank you," Lois whispered, so low that anyone else would not have heard. She stepped away from him, and the spell was broken. "I need to ring Dan," she said doggedly.

Clark nodded, trying to absorb the rapid shift from togetherness to banishment. He walked to the door, opened it, turned back, and sent Lois a little smile of support. Then he left her.

Because she wanted to do this alone.

Alone with Dan.

Clark slumped against the outside wall, his hands deep in his pockets. He had no right to stay and listen. He wouldn't listen. He wouldn't. It was Lois's private conversation, and he had no right to intrude.

He heard the murmur of her voice and consciously blurred the stream of her words. But he had no powers to camouflage the despair in her tone.

After long minutes, Clark heard the sound of her phone being replaced. Then he heard another sound, and his hearing snapped to attention.

Lois was crying.

He could hear the muffled sound of her sobs. He could imagine her head low, perhaps sunken into her arms as she wept for what had been lost.

He yearned to hold her again. Hold her until her tears had dried and her spirit had buoyed.

But she had sent him away.

He walked down her driveway and turned for home, knowing that nothing would dispel the sound of her anguish from his mind.

* * *

The Herald Sun office was a sombre place the next morning. A gloom had settled upon it, a gloom that spoke tangibly of loss and turmoil and disbelief.

Clark had turned on the television that morning, and the news had been full of angry and confused Fitzroy fans whose depth of mourning was matched only by their anger at having been betrayed.

Some facts had come out - principally, the dire financial situation of Fitzroy and the resulting takeover from a creditor—but, as Lois had predicted, it seemed likely that some details of what had happened would never become public.

Lois had been at her desk when Clark had entered the office. She still looked drained, and he thought he detected extra makeup around her eyes. He'd wanted so much to go to her and take her into his embrace and hold her until her despair had been soothed away. Instead, he'd taken her a cup of coffee and gently squeezed her shoulder when she'd looked up and thanked him.

Just after ten thirty, Browny brought out the crate and clambered onto it. Everyone in the room left their desks and crowded around him. He stood there for a long moment, and Clark had the distinct impression that the burly editor was battling the choppy sea of his own emotions.

"It's Friday," Browny began, without any hint of his usual joviality. "There's a big game at the 'G tonight and then a huge weekend of footy. Our job is to report on the games, and we're going to do it the very best way we can."

He paused and took a breath. Silence settled over the newsroom.

"Today, I want you to finish the stories you've been assigned," Browny continued. "Some of you have follow-up stories on the events of yesterday; some of you have previews of the weekend games. Whatever you've been given, I want the stories done by mid-afternoon." He looked to the ceiling for a long moment. "And then, I want you to go to your club. Just go there. If you stumble over a story, great; if not, that's OK. Just go, and be grateful you still have a club to go to."

Without a further word, he stepped down from the crate and disappeared into his office.

The hushed atmosphere lingered for a few seconds, and then the crowd slowly dispersed.

Lois came over to Clark. "Guess we're headed out to Glenferrie," she said.

"Hawthorn's home?"

She nodded. "Do you want to go together?"

"Do you mind?" he asked.

"No."

"OK, thanks."

With a hollow smile, she returned to her desk.

* * *

It was after three when Lois approached Clark. "Ready?" she asked.

He nodded. He'd been ready for over half an hour. He'd filled the empty minutes by pretending to read the paper, but in reality, he'd been looking through the paper and watching Lois. A smattering of colour had returned to her cheeks, but she still looked weary and downcast.

"We'll go by train," she told him. "Glenferrie Oval is only a few minutes from Glenferrie station."

They caught the train at Flinders Street station and travelled east. "It's nice here," Clark said, gesturing out the window to the rolling green parks and abundance of deciduous trees.

"Yeah," Lois said with a sigh. "I haven't been out here for ages."

"Doesn't Browny send you to do Hawthorn training reports?"

"Never," Lois said. "He doesn't trust me. That's probably the real reason I'm still on the bottom rung of the ladder. It's not just that I'm a woman. It's not just that I've never played a game of footy in my life. It's that, in my priorities, my job comes second."

"It's not easy having conflicting priorities."

Lois turned on him with resentment flashing in her eyes. "I don't expect you to understand," she said. "But I loved Hawthorn before I was a journo. I love my job, and I love the excitement of being a part of the footy circus that takes over this town every winter, and I work my backside off to get good stories and be the best reporter I can be, but my first loyalty has never shifted and it never will."

"You don't expose stories about your club?"

"Never," Lois proclaimed. "I won't write anything that could possibly hurt Hawthorn."

Clark had the feeling Lois had been forced to make this stand before. "Browny knows this?"

Lois nodded. "He's threatened to sack me more than once when he thinks I know something and I won't spill."

"Example?"

"If I know a certain player will or will not play the next weekend. If I know a player is injured and where. If I know a player broke a team rule. If I know there is animosity between the coach and one of the players. If I know a player is likely to be offered for trade at the end of the year. If I know the recruiters are very keen on a certain kid."

"That information sounds like it would make good copy," Clark noted.

"It would," Lois agreed. "But I will never do it. Not with Hawthorn." She glowered at him, daring him to confront her.

Clark said nothing.

"Say it," she goaded.

"Say what?"

"Say I will never be a reporter's shoelace while I have conflicting loyalties."

"I wasn't going to say that," Clark said quietly.

"Why not?" Lois snapped. "It's what everyone else thinks."

"I don't think that."

"Why not?"

"Because I understand what you mean."

Her eyes bored into his. "You do?"

"Yes."

Lois contemplated him. "You have something that means more to you than any story?"

"Yes."

"Something you would protect even if it meant giving up the biggest story of your life?"

"Yes."

The belligerence slowly seeped from her eyes. "How does Perry take that?"

"He doesn't know."

"He doesn't know? That can't be easy."

"It's not."

Clark waited for her next question. She had given him details. What if she asked the same of him? Would he tell her? Not here, he decided. Not now.

But…

The train clunked to a stop at Glenferrie station, and they alighted. "Clark?" Lois said when they'd left the platform.

"Yes?" he said, trying to sound unconcerned despite the fact that every nerve in his body had tensed in anticipation of her question.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For getting snappy with you." She smiled apologetically. "I'm tired, and I'm gutted about Fitzroy, and I feel like I've been put through an emotional wringer these past few days, but that's no excuse for taking it out on you."

Clark smiled and rested his hand on her back. “That’s OK,” he said.

Lois continued looking at him. Clark didn’t know if she were responding to his touch or if she were thinking about his hinted-at admission. He removed his hand and put it in his pocket.

They walked in silence through a bustling streetscape of various stores and cafes. Lois turned into a small arcade, and when they emerged from it, Clark could see the oval ahead, surrounded by a high wire fence.

“We played our home games at Glenferrie until 1974,” Lois said. “But the ground is too small, and there is a railway line on one side and Linda Crescent on the other and nowhere to expand. We still train here. And this will always be our home.”

They crossed a carpark and strolled along the sidewalk next to the wire fence.

“The old-timers talk about how on game days, you could see the stream of brown and gold coming from the station,” Lois said.

They reached the opening in the wire fence and entered the ground. To the right, a beautiful Art Deco style grandstand loomed high above them like an old and gentle giant watchfully guarding the oval. The playing field stretched out to their left. Three men slowly ran the circumference of the oval, each carrying a football and bouncing it as they jogged.

There was movement from under the grandstand, and a large man emerged. He saw them, and his face spread to a wide grin of welcome. He hurried towards them. “Lois,” he said. “About time you paid us a visit.”

Lois stepped forward and was swallowed up in the bounty of his embrace. When he released her, she stood on her toes and reached up to drop a friendly kiss to his cheek. “Ron,” she said, her voice imbued with pleasure. She gestured to Clark. “Clark, this is Ron Wilton. Ron, this is Clark Kent. He’s working at the Herald Sun on exchange.”

Clark extended his hand, and it was firmly taken in Ron’s larger one. “Pleased to meet you, Ron,” Clark said.

The words were barely out of his mouth when Ron looked down at Lois with a mischievous wink. She grinned, clearly understanding whatever had passed between them.

“To what do we owe the pleasure of this visit?” Ron asked Lois.

“Browny got sentimental and sent us back to our grassroots.”

Ron’s cheeriness died. “Fair enough, too,” he said. “It’s an awful business.”

The shared loss hung between them, draped in the silence.

“Are you going to hang around for training?” Ron asked. “The boys will start arriving soon.”

“Are you gonna have a sausage sizzle?” Lois said, her face still serious.

“It’s Friday.” Ron smiled down at her, his eyes twinkling. “And you know perfectly well, Missy, that Thursday is sausage sizzle day.”

She swatted his ample arm. “I know perfectly well that you can be persuaded to cook up snags whatever day it is, Ron.”

Ron laughed. “You stay, and I’ll get the sausages. Deal?”

“Deal,” Lois agreed. “But I get the first one.”

That seemed to amuse Ron. He put his arm across her shoulders and hugged her. “Ah, Lois, love,” he said. “It’s so good to see you again.”

“I’ve let time get away with me,” Lois admitted.

“Don’t worry about it,” Ron said. “It’s a busy world out there, and you know we will always be here waiting for you.”

Lois smiled. “Big game this weekend.”

“Yeah,” Ron said. “Last week was a beauty.”

“It’s always good to beat Geelong.”

“I reckon. Our boys were hard and tough and simply refused to be beaten.”

“That’s how it should be,” Lois declared. “You wear our jumper, you never give up.”

“Did j’hear that Seb’s home for a couple of days?”

Lois’s face lit with excitement. “Really? He didn’t tell me, the rotten bludger. When’s he going back to Sydney?”

“Sunday arvo.”

“Can I come around Sunday morning? It feels like forever since I saw Barb.”

“Since when did you ever need an invitation, love?” They smiled, and then Ron switched his attention to Clark. “Who’j’barrack for, son?”

Clark shot a look to Lois, who was trying to contain her smile. “Hawthorn,” he replied.

Ron beamed at him. “Welcome, Clark,” he said. “Good thing Lois brought you out here. It’s never too early to get

used to the Hawthorn way of doing things." He gestured to the room behind him. "I gotta get the gear ready for training."

Lois pointed at Ron, her grin wide. "Don't forget," she said. "I get the first sausage."

"Done." Ron started to walk towards the grandstand but then turned back. "We've missed you, Little Miss America," he said, and then he disappeared into the dim underbelly of the grandstand.

Lois turned to Clark. "Looks like we're staying for a bit. Is that OK with you?"

"Sure," Clark said. "What do you want to do?"

She looked up into the grandstand. "Soak it up," she said. "I need a dose of this place."

"Would you mind if I soaked it up with you?"

Lois grinned easily. "Of course not. You're one of us now. Come on." She crossed to the old concrete steps and climbed up them into the empty grandstand. As she walked slowly along the aisle, her hand paused lovingly on each bench. About halfway to the top, she dusted off the dark green planks of the wooden bench and sat down.

Clark sat next to her and glanced sideways. Lois had perched her feet on the seat in front—her arms rested lightly on her knees, her head was back, her eyes were closed, and a small smile played around her mouth. A mouth, Clark realised, that he really wanted to kiss.

He dragged his eyes forward and pushed away that thought. It flooded back. He turned to Lois and allowed himself a moment to imagine what it would be like to kiss her. It would be incredible. He forced his head forward again.

"Where's home for you, Clark?" Lois asked.

From the edges of his vision, he could see that she had opened her eyes and was staring ahead. He kept his head forward, too. "A small farmhouse in the middle of Kansas."

"Why is it home?"

"Because I grew up there."

"Any other reason?"

"Because of the people there—my folks. Because of the memories there. Because wherever I go, I can always return there and know I will find love and acceptance."

"Because whenever you go back, something about the place reaches inside you and makes you feel as if you've never been away?"

Clark thought for a moment, remembering holding her last night. *That* had felt like coming home. "Yes," he agreed.

"Do you miss it?" Lois asked. "Now you're half a world away, do you think about it sometimes and wish you could go there? Just for a few minutes?"

Clark hesitated. "I haven't been gone that long," he said.

She fell silent again, and Clark sensed the opportunity to catch a glimpse into her heart.

"Is this your home?" he asked gently.

Lois sighed. Clark wasn't sure if it were driven by happiness or sadness or something in between. "This place," she said. "This place affects me in a way nowhere else does."

"Why?"

"Because when I was alone, I found friends here. Because when I had nothing to do, I was swept into the bigger purpose here. Because when I felt awkwardly different, I was accepted here. Because when I had no family, they became my family. Because by myself, I am one; here, I am many."

"They sound like good reasons."

Lois straightened and looked at Clark with a gentle smile. "They are the best reasons."

"Why did Ron call you 'Little Miss America'?"

Lois chuckled, her grin flashing. "You don't know? You can't even guess?"

Clark shook his head. "I wondered if it could be a reference to me, but that doesn't make sense. And I got the impression he had called you that before."

"Many, many times before."

She hadn't seemed perturbed by his questions, so Clark pushed ahead. "Then why?"

"Because I was born in Detroit, Michigan."

That was a shock.

Lois laughed at his surprise. "You can't hear it in my accent?"

"No," Clark said. He thought back to the day he'd met her. He'd noticed she had the cutest accent, but he hadn't detected any trace of home.

She chuckled. "When I first came here, my accent set me apart as being different, and I desperately wanted to fit in, so I consciously trained myself to speak like a dinki-di Aussie."

"Dinki-di?"

"True blue. Real. Genuine." Lois grinned happily. "If you couldn't tell, I must have done a good job."

"I'm not from Michigan," he hedged. "How old were you when you came here?"

"Ten," Lois said. "My dad is a doctor, and he was offered a position at the Royal Children's Hospital in Parkville. They were doing some research that really interested him. My whole family—Mom, Dad, my sister, Lucy, and I—came here in January 1978. It was summer. My mother lasted a week. She wanted to take my sister and me home, but I had hated being cooped up in the plane for all those hours, so I had a major dummy-spit and got what I wanted."

"They let you stay?"

Lois grimaced, and Clark could see the pain in her eyes. "Mom and Dad made it a policy to never agree on anything," she said quietly. "Mom really hadn't wanted to come here, but Dad had insisted that a new start would be good for all of us. Mom wanted to take me home, but Dad let me stay. I still don't know if he actually wanted me or if he just liked getting one over Mom."

"I'm sure he was pleased you wanted to stay with him."

"He was working eighteen hours a day," Lois said flatly. "Most of the time I think he forgot I was here."

"It would have been hard," Clark said. "Leaving all your friends at home and being here with only a working father."

"Let me show you something." Lois stood and walked down the aisle to the front of the grandstand. Clark followed her. At the railing, she pointed across the road. "See the white house, nestled among the trees?"

Clark nodded, taking the opportunity to move closer to her so he could follow where she'd pointed.

"See the little window upstairs?" Lois asked.

"Yes."

"That was my bedroom."

"When you looked out of your window, you could see the oval?"

Lois nodded. "I was bored. And alone. And when the players were training, I was fascinated. I'd never really been interested in sport at home, but this … this was magic." Her eyes shone. "And that was just the training."

"You came over here?"

Lois started walking down the concrete steps. "My dad hired a seventeen-year-old girl to look after me anytime I wasn't at school. Problem was, she had nothing in her head beyond the Ted Mulry Gang—that was a pop band—and her boyfriend who supposedly looked like Les Hall, the guitarist in TMG."

"You were left to entertain yourself?"

Lois reached the bottom of the steps and grinned up at him. "Better than that. The boyfriend paid me twenty cents to leave them alone. He told me to go to Glenferrie Road and buy myself an icy pole. I put the money in my pocket and came here." She gestured to the gate they'd entered. "The first time, I wandered in and leant against the fence and just watched. Then a big man came over, and I thought he was going to tell me to get out."

"Ron?" Clark guessed.

"Yep," Lois said. "He smiled at me and told me they were going to cook sausages soon, and if I was hungry, I could come over and get one. When I did, he gave me a sausage wrapped in bread and covered in tomato sauce and asked me who I barracked for. I had no idea what he was talking about, so he told me I barracked for Hawthorn. He went into the rooms and when he came out, he had a beanie, which he gave to me. 'There you go, Little Miss America', he said. 'Now you're a part of the Hawthorn family.'"

"And you've been a part of it ever since?"

Lois nodded and brushed her fingers across her cheek, although Clark couldn't tell if she was brushing at tears. "Yes," she said. "And despite January weather being totally unsuited to a brown-and-gold woollen hat, I wore it like a badge of honour."

Clark smiled, imagining a little American girl wearing the colours of her new Australian club.

"The boyfriend kept paying me twenty cents to make myself scarce, and I kept coming here, and by the time the season started in late March, I had enough money to buy my own footy. Ron gave me a membership. That was one of the best moments of my life, holding my first membership ticket. It got me entry into all Hawthorn games, but it was so much more than that—I belonged. I belonged somewhere. I belonged here."

"I figure that was pretty important for a little girl whose mom was in another country and whose dad was busy at work," Clark said softly.

"It was," Lois said. "I shamelessly nagged my dad into paying the babysitter to take me to games, and she did—for the first couple of years. After that, she didn't want to, and I knew how to get around Melbourne and find all the grounds, so I didn't need her anymore. I loved being here for training, but games… they were the absolute highlight of my week. I lived for them. In 1978, we made the Grand Final and won the premiership, and I… I have never, ever felt so happy. I sang our song so loud and so often, I couldn't speak for three days."

Her eyes sparkled, and the enthusiasm radiated from her face. Clark couldn't look away. When Lois Lane loved, she loved passionately.

He quashed the wayward direction of those thoughts. “Tell me what you love about this club,” he said, desperate for her continue.

“I love the spirit that was born in the years without success. We came into the VFL in 1925 with North and Footscray. They had had good results in a lesser competition, but we had nothing to recommend us as being worthy to be elevated. The VFL threw us in, probably because they wanted an even number of teams. It took thirty-two years before we even made the finals, and in that time, we won ten wooden spoons.”

“Wooden spoons?”

“Last. Stone motherless last.”

“You *win* them?”

Lois smiled. “In a manner of speaking. They were hard times. There were no financial handouts, no assistance with facilities, no early draft picks for finishing low on the ladder. We didn’t win a game from Round 16, 1927 to Round 6, 1929. And for many years, losing by less than ten goals was cause for celebration.”

Lois scanned the breadth of the oval. “But we did it. We built our club from nothing. We called our official history ‘The Hard Way’, and looking back now, we wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Why?”

“Because that struggle birthed something… something strong, something lasting, something unique. It shaped us. We cling to what others consider old-fashioned values like loyalty and integrity. For years, we didn’t have contracts—a handshake between mates was enough to guarantee commitment. We’re called the ‘Hawthorn Football Club’, but the ‘Hawthorn Family’ is much more descriptive. Anyone who has worn our jumper—either in battle or in support—is a part of that family. And we share an affinity—a unity that draws us into a common purpose that is played out on the footy field, but in reality, is so much more than that.

“Ron has told me about when we won our first flag in 1961. There were people—people who had sat for years through the rain and cold and watched their team being thrashed. People for whom playing in the finals in September was something they only dreamed about—something that happened to the other clubs, not us. When we won in 1961, many of them just sat there, not quite able to believe what had happened as their tears flowed freely.”

Lois glanced into his eyes as colour blossomed across her cheeks.

“Sorry,” she said. “I get carried away. I’m sure that to you it just seems like an insignificant club, tucked away in a small city on the other side of the world.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

Lois eyed him as if trying to gauge his sincerity. She took a deep breath and shrugged off her reminiscent mood. “Training won’t be for at least an hour,” she said. “Do you feel like a coffee?”

“Sure,” Clark said.

“Come on,” Lois said. “Let’s go to the Social Club.”

They left the ground, crossed the road, and entered a building. Again, Lois was welcomed like a long-lost daughter by the man working there—Bantam. They sat at a small table, surrounded by walls that were covered in pictures of men in the heat of battle, all wearing the brown-and-gold jumper that Clark privately thought was a little gaudy. Not that he ever intended to say that to Lois. A few minutes later, Bantam brought them coffee and refused to allow Clark to pay.

“What do you miss most about home?” Lois asked as she stirred her coffee.

“The people,” Clark said.

“Your parents?” she asked. “Are you close to them?”

“Very close.”

“They must miss you,” Lois said.

“They do, but they know I’ll always come home to see them.”

“Do you have brothers? Sisters?”

“Neither. I’m an only child.”

“Oh.”

“I’m adopted.” Never before had Clark volunteered that information. He hadn’t planned to now, but it felt so right to share everything with Lois.

“Oh,” Lois said. If she were surprised by his disclosure, she didn’t show it. “Is that hard? Do you know anything about your birth parents?”

“Not much. I know they’re dead.”

“Oh, Clark,” she said. “That’s so sad. I’m sorry.”

“I never knew them,” Clark said. “My adoptive parents, Martha and Jonathan Kent, are all I’ve ever known. And they filled my world with love. I am very lucky.”

“Yes,” Lois said wistfully. “Is there anything else you miss from home?”

Clark sipped his coffee, stifled his grimace, and then grinned. “Actually, the coffee,” he said.

“Is ours different?”

“Yes. It seems…” He faltered.

“It seems what?”

“Honestly?”

“Of course.”

“It seems weak and well… insipid.”

Lois stood abruptly from her chair and went to the kitchen. A minute later, she returned with a cup. “Try this,” she said as she placed it in front of him.

Clark drank from it, and the smooth, strong fluid slid easily down his throat. He put down the cup and smiled at Lois. “Thank you,” he said.

“Good?”

“The best coffee I’ve had since arriving in Australia. How did you get it?”

“Bantam can get just about anything,” she said. “I simply asked him for strong American coffee, and that’s what he gave me.”

“It’s great,” Clark said. “We’ll have to come back here.”

She nodded. Behind Lois, Clark saw two men walk into the room, stop abruptly, and immediately turn and scuttle away. Without thinking too much, he turned on his super-hearing.

“That’s Lois Lane,” one of the men hissed.

“Why is she here? Do you think she knows something?”

“All she needs to know is that it’s the only possible way forward.”

“Clark?”

Lois’s voice screeched through his supersensitive eardrums. Clark pulled his attention from the men and back to Lois. “Uhmm, sorry, what did you say?”

She smiled at him. “Where were you?” she asked.

“Ah…”

“You were thinking about home, weren’t you?”

He half smiled, hoping she would take it as agreement. “Lois, would you mind if I asked you something?”

She hesitated, and he knew she hadn’t missed the gravity in his tone. “I guess not,” she said cautiously.

Clark took a deep breath. He wanted to know. He had to know. But in knowing, he risked his hopes being ground into the dirt. “Is there anything between you and Dan Scardino?”

Part 15

“No.”

Clark hadn’t been expecting such a short, direct response. Certainly, it gave him the bald answer he’d hoped for, but he felt the lack of some much-needed further detail. “No?” he questioned.

“No.”

“But you’re friends?”

Lois paused, but then she spoke hurriedly as if trying to negate her hesitation. “Yes.”

She obviously didn’t want to talk about this. The openness he had come to associate with Lois Lane was absent as she stared at him, stoically awaiting his next question. He didn’t want to pry, but he did want to know if there were any reason why he shouldn’t ask her for a date. “Does Dan know there is nothing beyond friendship?” Clark asked gently.

Lois looked away, and he was startled to see the glistening evidence of tears in her eyes. “He knows,” she said roughly.

So Scardino had left her broken-hearted. Clark lamented the table that separated him from Lois. He wished her hand were on top of it, wished there was a part of her close enough for him to touch. “Tell me if it’s none of my business,” he said, offering her a way out.

“It’s none of your business.” The harshness of her words was tempered somewhat as she tried to force a smile through her still-threatening tears.

“I’m sorry,” Clark said.

Lois pushed away her empty cup and stood abruptly. “Let’s go and see if Ron has the snags cooking.”

Clark stood, too. “Snags are sausages?” he guessed, clutching at something he hoped would provide a painless exit from the subject of Dan Scardino.

Lois nodded. She shouted a farewell to Bantam in the kitchen and walked out of the Social Club.

Clark followed her across the road and back onto the little rise just inside the gates of Glenferrie Oval. During their absence, it had transformed into a hubbub of activity. On the playing area, about thirty-five men were involved in various kicking and handball drills. Walking amongst them were men Clark assumed to be the coaches. He watched in silent salute to their ability to move the ball between them with such speed and precision.

About sixty people were scattered on the concrete area between the grandstand and the oval. The outfit of choice was definitely the brown-and-gold Hawthorn jumper. Many of the spectators were leaning forward, forearms perched on the hip-high wire fence as they watched training and, Clark guessed, talked about their team. Behind the goal posts, a father kicked a miniature football with two toddling boys whose enthusiasm regularly erupted into shrieks of delight.

From Ron's barbeque rose the delectable smell of cooking sausages, making this seem more like a gathering of friends than a training session for a professional sports team.

"Are you going to watch the game tonight?" Clark asked Lois.

"Yeah," she said, her eyes not moving from the players on the ground. "North Melbourne-St Kilda. I'm expecting a slaughter."

Clark chuckled. "Literally?"

She didn't smile at his question. "No. But North should win easily."

"Would you like to take the fish and chips to my unit and watch it together?" Clark asked casually.

Lois's gaze didn't shift. "Do you have Milo?"

"Yes."

"Tim Tams?"

"Yes."

She turned to face him, and his heart surged because her smile had returned. "Then I guess that's what we'll do," she said.

"Stick 'em up, Lane," came a low voice from behind Clark, "and no one'll get hurt."

Clark whirled and came face to face with a young guy. He was blond and tanned, dressed in a pink tee and cut-off jeans, and with a grin as wide as the Brooklyn Bridge. Lois sprang from behind Clark and leapt into the guy's arms. He spun her around until they both had to be dizzy and then plonked her on her feet and smacked a big kiss on her cheek.

"Seb," Lois said. "What are you doing here?"

"Dad rang and said he'd managed to hold you here with the promise of snags, so I thought I'd drop by and see how you're doing."

"I'm doing fine," Lois said, still grinning with pleasure. "How about you, Seb? How're you going in Sydney? Have they converted you to rugby yet?"

"Not much chance of that," Seb said.

Lois turned to Clark. "Seb," she said. "This is Clark Kent. He's on exchange from the States."

Seb's handshake was firm, and his blue eyes met Clark's steadily. His smile, though, was noticeably cool.

"Clark, this is Seb Wilton; he's Ron's son."

"Pleased to meet you, Clark," Seb said. He gestured to where his father was cooking the sausages. "You get the first snag, Lois," he said.

"Are you coming?"

"In a minute," Seb replied. "Go and make sure the old man doesn't burn them."

Ron looked up from the barbeque, saw them, and waved enthusiastically. Lois hurried over to him.

Seb turned to Clark. "How long are you here for?"

"Three months."

"I have less than a minute, so I'm going to give it to you straight," Seb said. "Lois is like family to us. You cross her, you cross all of us. Do you understand?"

Clark nodded.

"Don't forget you're going home. And don't let her forget it either."

"I have no intention of hurting her," Clark said.

Seb met him with a steely blue gaze. "You'd better not." With that, he turned and strode out of Glenferrie Oval.

Lois returned with a sausage wrapped in bread and drizzled with tomato ketchup. "Where's Seb?" she asked.

"He had to go."

"Typical. He's harder to pin down than a jellyfish." She took a bite of her sausage. "Go and get a snag," she said.

Clark shook his head. "No, thanks," he said, hoping Seb's appearance hadn't changed Lois's plans for the evening. "I think I'll keep some room for the fish and chips tonight."

"OK," she agreed easily and turned back to watch the training.

Clark also looked at the players on the oval, but his mind registered nothing of what they were doing.

Lois *wasn't* in a relationship with Dan Scardino.

But she might still love him, an inner voice cautioned. She might still hold hope that things could be different with Dan.

Clark's optimism deflated, but it couldn't be completely subdued. He was in Melbourne; Scardino was far away

in Metropolis. And this evening, he, Clark, would be with Lois.

It wasn't a date exactly.

But he'd asked, and she'd said yes.

And sometime very soon, Clark decided, he was going to ask her out. He'd had enough of tiptoeing around his feelings. He didn't want to be merely her colleague. He didn't want to be just her friend. He wanted a lot more than that. It was time to speak.

Tonight.

Tonight, he would ask her. An opportunity was sure to present itself—perhaps during half-time as they drank their Milo.

And when that opportunity came, Clark intended to take it. And he intended to ensure there was no possible ambiguity.

Regardless of what Seb or anyone else thought, it was time Lois knew how Clark felt about her.

* * *

The fish and chips were eaten, and Lois and Clark were settled on the couch with the football about to begin on the television. Unfortunately, Scardino's couch was big enough that there was room to spread out.

Lois glanced in Clark's direction, smiling slightly.

He smiled back.

"Clark?" she said.

"Yes?"

She paused. "I… ah, I feel a bit embarrassed about today."

He wondered if she were referring to her tears when he had asked her about Scardino.

"When I went on about Hawthorn," Lois clarified. "You're here for three months. Even though you're very polite and a fantastic listener, I'm sure your interest in anything here will pass quickly once you return home."

No. No, it wouldn't. Clark was sure of that. He thought again about his plans to ask her for a date and glanced at his watch. The game would start in less than ten minutes. He decided to wait for half-time. "I think it is always interesting when people talk about something they love," he said.

"Maybe… but I did go on a bit."

"You gave me the greatest insight I've had into how much football means here."

She looked surprised. "I did?"

Clark nodded. "And then later, during training, it was like a happy gathering of a big family. You seemed to know a lot of people."

"Many of the trainers—the people who help with training and on match days—have been there for years. They were there when I was a little girl hanging around because I had nowhere else to go."

"And they all called you Lois."

She smiled. "Flinders only came once I started working at the Herald Sun. Hawthorn was way, way before that."

"That old guy who came over and talked to you? You didn't know him, did you?"

"No," Lois said. "But he barracks for Hawthorn."

She seemed to think that was sufficient explanation. And Clark figured it was. He'd listened to the conversation between Lois and the supporter who had shyly approached her. Clark had been fascinated by their immediate rapport, by how they had slipped into an easy discussion fuelled by a mountain of shared memories.

Lois stretched out her legs and placed her feet on the corner of the coffee table. "What's it like having parents who still love each other?"

Clark dragged his mind from their time at Glenferrie Oval. "Ah… great, I suppose."

"I bet you've never thought about it."

"Not too much," he admitted.

"Fair enough," Lois said. "I guess that's all you've known."

"Did your dad move back to the States?" Clark asked. "Did he ever get back with your mom?"

"Yes and no. Yes, he did move back to the States. No, he never went back to my mother."

"Are you close to them?"

"No."

"Neither of them?"

"My mother has never forgiven me for staying here when I was ten," Lois said. "She went back to Michigan. I go and see her for Christmas some years, but it's about as much fun as having a tooth pulled."

Clark slid his arm along the top of the couch and dropped his fingers onto her shoulder. "Have you ever talked to her about Hawthorn?" he asked. "About the life you've made for yourself here?"

"I've tried," Lois said. "I've tried to explain, and I've tried to show her the game, but she is convinced I am wasting my life."

"What about your dad?" Clark asked.

"I lived with Dad until I was seventeen," Lois said. "We'd go back to the States once or twice a year to see Mom and Lucy, but all it did was highlight the gulf between us. Then Dad planned a trip in September, but Hawthorn were in the finals, so I told him I wasn't going anywhere. We had a huge row, and he told me it was time that I grew up and got over my silly obsession with football."

Clark didn't need to be told that that hadn't ended well.

"I told him Hawthorn were not going into a finals campaign without me," Lois said. "And then I packed my bags and walked out. I went to Ron's place and stayed with him and his wife, Barb. They tried to talk me into going home and attempting to fix things with my dad, but I wouldn't. The next day, Dad came to Ron's and told me he had accepted a position in Chicago and was leaving Australia for good. He said I had two choices—I could live in Chicago with him or go back to Detroit with Mom."

"Which did you choose?"

Lois grinned. "There was no contest. I chose Hawthorn. I was just a few months off finishing school, and I knew exactly what I wanted to do—be a footy journalist. Not much chance of that happening in either Chicago or Detroit."

Clark knew he needed to tread carefully. "Do you ever regret that decision?" he asked.

Her grin faded. "No," she said. "It wasn't anything I did that caused the rift in my family. Things were broken way before then."

"But they're…"

"My family?" Lois said wistfully. "I realise it's hard for you to understand how anyone could choose a football club over their family, and had my family been like yours, I'm sure things would have been very different. In fact, my love for Hawthorn may not have been so all-encompassing if I'd felt that connection with my family. But we didn't have it then, don't have it now, probably will never have it."

"It was a huge decision for a teenager," Clark said, hoping she would hear his respect. "To choose to stay, to make your life here… with everyone else from your family in another country."

"I knew what I wanted to do, but that doesn't mean I made the decision lightly," Lois said. "That night at Ron's, after I'd walked out on Dad, I thought about every possible negative outcome of staying. I worked through them one by one, and in the end, I still wanted to stay."

"What happened then?" Clark asked. "Did you live with Ron and his wife?"

"Yeah. For the next four years." Her smile broke through again. "They were the best years of my life. Hawthorn made the Grand Final eight years out of nine and won five flags. Imagine what I would have missed if I'd gone back with Dad. And I was part of a family. Ron and his wife, Barb, adore each other, and having Seb for a brother was such a lot of fun. I had absolutely everything—a home, a family, and Hawthorn."

"Why did you leave them?"

"I finished uni and got a job with the Riverine Herald in Echuca. That's up on the Murray River." Lois smiled pensively. "Ron and Barb are more like my parents than my real parents."

"Do you ever go home?"

"Home?" she said. "As in Ron and Barb's home? Or as in the States?"

"The States."

"Once a year in summer, which is the footy off-season. I spend a few days with Dad and hear the lecture about how I need to stop wasting my life on a no-account sport in an insignificant city. Then I go to Mom and hear the same diatribe with the added bonus of every little detail about how badly Dad treated her. Sometimes, I stop-over in California and have a few awkward meetings with my sister, Lucy, and then board the plane, very, very glad to be coming home."

"This is your home?"

Lois nodded. "But it's not really about the countries. It's more about the people. I just happened to find exactly what I needed exactly when I needed it. My parents were in constant turmoil, and my home was always on the edge of self-destruction. A football team is twenty-one players who are willing to sacrifice just about everything for team success. It's about mateship and teamwork and commitment. The contrast was stark, and I gravitated towards it and found acceptance. Possibly, if we'd stayed in Detroit, I'd have fallen in love with the Detroit… whatever… and I'd be writing for the Detroit…"

Clark smiled. "I think hockey would have been your game, so you'd be a Red Wings fan. And you'd be writing for the Detroit News."

"Maybe I would," Lois said with a smile. "Uhm, the Red Wings, that's a cool name. How many flags have they won?"

"They haven't won the Stanley Cup since 1955."

Lois grimaced. “That’s a longer drought than Geelong’s,” she said. “Perhaps it is better that I was here.” She thoughtfully brushed back her hair and tucked it behind her ear. “Success is nice, but that’s only a part of it.”

“What’s the rest?”

“Belonging. Being involved. Experiencing the joy together. The pain, too.”

Clark nodded his understanding. “Will you do something for me?” he asked.

“What?”

“I’d like you to think of a Hawthorn story to tell me at half-time.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” he said. And after you’ve told me your story, I’m going to ask you for a date, he silently promised both of them. “I’m sure you have hundreds of stories you could tell me.”

“I do,” she said.

“Which one do I get tonight?”

She craned her neck and looked around the room. “If you have tissues, you get the Crimmo story,” she said.

“It’s going to upset you?” Clark asked, wondering if this would be the best prelude to his invitation.

She nodded with a sad smile. “Maybe. But it’s a part of our history, and if you’re a part of Hawthorn, you need to know this story.”

Clark deepened his contact with her shoulder. “Thanks,” he said.

On the television, the siren sounded, and their attention turned to the game.

* * *

By half-time, North was six goals up in a game that, as Lois had predicted, was not a close contest.

Clark stood from the couch. “I’ll make the Milo,” he said.

“Need some help?” Lois offered as she stood and stretched.

“I can probably manage,” Clark said with smile that he hoped covered his growing nervousness. “You can get out the Tim Tams.”

They were both stalled in their progress to the kitchen by the short news bulletin that had replaced the football on the television. It detailed the final preparations for the Atlanta Olympics Opening Ceremony, due to start early the following morning, Australian time.

“Will you miss being in your home country when they have the Olympics?” Lois asked.

Before Clark could answer, the newsreader had moved to a newsflash. He gave the sketchy details of unconfirmed reports that a bomb had been placed in a prominent business building in Metropolis. He said it was believed that the Central Police Station had received a warning that the explosion was ‘imminent’.

Lois looked to Clark, her face ashen. “Oh, no,” she breathed. “How awful.”

Clark’s heart was hammering violently in his chest. This could *not* be happening. Not now.

Metropolis needed Superman.

But Superman was with Lois Lane, on the other side of the world, watching a game of Australian football and trying to ask her out.

And Superman had decided to stay out of the public eye.

But if there was a bomb, and it wasn’t able to be safely defused, people would die. And those people trying to divert the disaster would risk their lives.

He could make the city safe.

Lois approached him, her face serious. She laid a comforting hand on his arm. “Oh, Clark,” she said. “You must be worried about your friends.”

“Lois,” Clark said, his mind spinning but nothing productive coming from it. “Lois… Lois, I need you to leave.”

Her concern turned to confusion. “You want me to leave now?” she asked in a small voice.

“Yes. Yes. Please. Sorry. I just… remembered… I have an important… something important… a phone call… I need to make, and I need to do it alone.”

He watched her, silently pleading for her understanding. No, that was too much to ask. But he needed her acquiescence. And he needed it now.

Lois regarded him for a stretched moment, her face mostly showing her bewilderment, but Clark was sure he could see a little trickle of hurt filtering through her shock. “Of course,” she said as she bent low to pick up her bag.

Clark followed Lois to the door, distraught that he couldn’t even offer to walk her home. “Sorry,” he said. “Sorry. See you tomorrow.”

“We’re at different games,” she reminded him. Then she walked through his door without a backward glance.

As soon as she was out of the door, Clark closed it. Before he could think too much about the hurt on her face, he spun into the suit and flew to Metropolis.

* * *

Clark hovered above the city. To his surprise, he felt a wave of affection, as if he had come back to somewhere that had a place in his heart.

Now, it was a city in panic. The sidewalk was filled with people running every which way. The streets were jammed with vehicles, some with drivers relentlessly sounding their horns and others standing in silent testimony to having been abandoned by those who'd realised that escape wasn't going to be possible by car.

The subway had been closed. Many who had come into the city that morning were now desperately trying to flee, driven by the powerful combination of uncertain knowledge and mind-numbing fear.

Clark located the bomb easily. He scanned the whole area and found three more. They were in four buildings that could be considered to be the corners of a square enclosing the central hub of Metropolis. The first one was timed to explode in twelve minutes, with the others to follow at intervals of eight minutes.

He checked for any hidden dangers. There was nothing to indicate that the bombs were linked—that successful deactivation of the first would trigger the others.

His impulse was to simply take out the bombs, one at a time. Then, situation fixed, he could fly back to Melbourne. He stalled, remembering Lois's words when he'd tried on the football outfit. She had said that body language was crucial. Clark squared his shoulders.

You need to believe you can do this, Clark. If you believe it, others will, too.

The desire to hide was strong. He'd always felt compelled to hide. Not as Clark, but as the alien with strange powers, he had certainly wanted to hide.

You can do this, Clark.

Clark searched among the police officers gathered on the street. He recognised Eric. And Henderson. Without taking the time for further deliberation, Clark swooped down and dropped into the midst of the group. They startled at his sudden appearance, but their shock was quickly replaced by relief.

"Superman," Eric said, stepping forward. "Thank you for coming."

"What do you know?" Clark asked.

He saw their surprise that he was consulting with them, but though he searched their faces, he could see no evidence of fear or dismay.

"An anonymous and untraceable call came in about an hour ago," Henderson said. "It claimed that a bomb had been hidden in the Hobb's Bay Business Center."

"Only one?" Clark queried.

Alarm flooded Henderson's face. "There are more?" he gulped.

"There are four," Clark said. "The first one is in the Business Center, and it will blow in about ten minutes."

"And the other three?" Eric asked, stricken.

"Are set to explode at eight-minute intervals."

"Is there anything you can do?" Henderson asked.

"I can disable the bombs," Clark said.

"Isn't that risky?" Eric asked. "Even for someone of your strength?"

"I can see through the casing," Clark said. "I can see into the bomb and then—"

"You can see *into* the bomb?" Henderson gasped.

Clark experienced a fleeting uneasiness that perhaps he had divulged too much information, but he pushed aside his doubts. He could do this. The bombs were easy. But interacting with people, allowing them close enough to see him properly, allowing them to hear his voice, working with them instead of alone… that was the difficult bit. That was what he had always avoided.

But now…

He could do this.

"I can have the first bomb here in less than a minute," Clark said.

"Disabled?"

"Completely disabled," Clark said with confidence. "If you're worried about any possible danger, I can hurl it far into space, but I think it could be helpful to your investigation if you have it as evidence."

Henderson stepped forward. "Yes," he said. "If you can guarantee there will be no danger, please bring it back here."

Clark nodded and flew to the building.

A mere fifteen seconds later, he was back with the now-benign bomb in his hand. He offered it to Henderson. Henderson hesitated, his expression rampant with questions as he searched Clark's face.

"It's completely safe," Clark assured him. He held it out and waited.

With a final jerky glance down to the bomb, Henderson reached forward and took the bomb.

Clark gave him a hesitant smile. “It won’t blow,” he said.

Henderson’s mouth twitched—not quite a smile, but close.

Clark flew to the remaining three buildings and brought each bomb back to Henderson. When he had handed over the final one, instead of flying away immediately, he said, “I scanned a thirty-mile radius, and there is no further danger.”

“Thank you, Superman,” Eric said. There was no mistaking the genuine gratitude and relief in his tone. “Thank you. You have saved the lives of many people today.”

From behind him, he heard a shout. “Superman! Superman!”

He turned as Mayson Drake ran to him, her blonde hair flying behind her.

“Superman,” she wheezed, breathing heavily.

The urge to flee was strong.

You need to believe you can do this, Clark. If you believe it, others will too.

Clark straightened to his fullest height, pushed back his shoulders, and folded his arms across his chest. He regarded Mayson steadily, relieved that she wouldn’t be able to hear the thumping of his heart.

“Was there a bomb planted in a city building?” Mayson said.

You can do this, Clark. “There were four bombs.” He listed the four buildings as Mayson scribbled notes.

“Is there any ongoing danger to the people of Metropolis?” she asked.

“No. All of the bombs have been safely defused.”

“What if there are other bombs? What if you missed something?” Mayson looked up from her notes, hostility dripping from her stony expression. If this had ever been merely an interview, it wasn’t anymore; it had become an interrogation.

“I didn’t miss anything,” Clark said steadily. “There is no danger now.”

“How can you be sure?” she said coldly.

“I can see through walls and concrete. I am sure there are no further bombs.”

“You can see *through* walls?” Mayson gasped. Shock had dispersed some of the antagonism from her moue.

Clark nodded and didn’t shift his gaze from her face. He could do this. He didn’t have to hide. He didn’t have to run away.

Mayson recovered from her surprise quickly. “Of course, it’s also possible that you knew the locations of the bombs because you, or one of your fellow invaders, placed them there.”

“I didn’t,” Clark stated. “There is only me, and I mean no harm to anyone.”

Mayson had opened her mouth, already armed with her next accusation, when a tall, dark-haired man stepped up behind her. He put his hand on her shoulder, and as Mayson spun abruptly, Clark feared he was about to pay for his rashness. Upon seeing who it was, the irritation drained from her like water from a leaky tank. The man gave Mayson a quick smile and then turned to Clark.

“G’day, Superman,” he said. “My name’s Dan Scardino. On exchange from Oz. It’s good to finally meet you. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

As I have you, Clark thought, noticing that Dan’s hand had remained on Mayson’s shoulder. “Good to meet you, Mr Scardino,” Clark said coolly. His gaze took in Eric and Henderson and the interested crowd that had gathered. “I’ll be around,” he said, by way of farewell.

Then he slowly levitated, and the gasps of the crowd rose in his wake. He took the time to do a final check of Metropolis, looking for anything that could hurt the people of his city.

He saw Mayson and Dan hurrying back to the Daily Planet office.

Perry was behind his desk.

Clark smiled, wishing he could drop in and see how the Chief was doing.

But Perry White had never spoken to Superman, and Clark Kent was supposed to be on the other side of the world.

After a final patrol, Clark flew west to Kansas.

His parents were in the barn. Clark dropped quietly and stepped inside. They both turned from their tasks and looked at him.

“Clark,” his father said evenly.

His mother took in the suit. “What happened?” she said anxiously as she came over to him.

“Someone put bombs in four buildings in Metropolis,” Clark said.

“And you stopped them from exploding?” his father asked.

Clark nodded, putting a hand on each of their shoulders. "I've just dropped in for a few moments to let you know, so you didn't find out via a news report."

"Are you sure it was wise to go to Metropolis?" Martha said. "That Drake woman has been quiet for a while, but she has never retracted the allegations she spat out after the train disaster."

"I'm sure," Clark said, hearing the quiet certainty in his own voice.

"Was Mayson there?" Martha asked.

"Yes. I spoke to her."

"You *spoke* to her?"

Clark nodded. "I think the time for hiding is over. Perhaps if I allow them to see more of who I am, they will realise that I'm not a threat."

"Are you sure about this, son?" Jonathan asked.

"I'm sure," Clark repeated. "I can't let people die when I can stop them getting hurt. I can't let people use violence to hurt others when I have the power to prevent it."

"Do you know why the bombs were planted?" Martha said.

"No," Clark said. "And at this stage, I'm leaving the investigation to the police."

His mother's hand clutched the blue spandex on his arm. "At this stage?" she asked.

Clark could see the doubt in his mother's eyes. "Perhaps I could help them find whoever did this," he said. "I haven't decided what to do exactly, but it occurred to me that Superman could do more than just the occasional rescue."

"Clark," Jonathan said. "Clark… the more Superman does, the greater the risk that someone will try to harm him. Or try to expose him."

Clark smiled gently at his dad. "That might be true, Dad," he said. "But I have been given these powers, and they can be used for good."

"You're not thinking of revealing the secret, are you?" Martha said in a hushed tone.

"Not to the public," Clark said.

Her eyes sought his. "But you are thinking of telling someone?"

"I haven't made any decisions yet," Clark said. "But I was with Lois when I heard about the bombs. I had to leave her—again—and I was utterly unprepared, so I gave her a bumbling excuse that means she probably thinks I'm totally untrustworthy and more than a little weird. I would rather she know the truth than she think I can't be trusted."

"Are you sure about telling her?" Jonathan asked. "Are you sure she is trustworthy?"

"I think so," Clark said. He smiled at his parents, hoping to ease their fears.

His dad still looked worried. His mom, Clark noticed, looked less worried. In fact, there was the hint of a smile on her face. She squeezed his arm.

"Lois, huh?" she said with a knowing look.

"I'm in love," Clark stated simply.

His parents' faces moved in tandem from initial shock to happy smiles. "You're in love?" Martha said joyfully.

Clark just smiled. Their reaction didn't surprise him at all. Never before had he been so forthcoming with information about the admittedly small number of women that had been in his life. But Lois was different. "Lois is beautiful," he said. "And determined and strong and passionate about what she believes in and loyal and gutsy and friendly and down-to-earth and… did I mention beautiful?"

His parents' laughter rang around the barn. "I believe you did mention beautiful," his dad said.

"Twice," his mom chirped. "Last time you were here, you said she was in a relationship; I guess you got that sorted out."

Clark felt his smile drain away. "I don't know the whole story," he admitted. "But Lois said she isn't with Scardino."

"Have you asked her how she feels?" Martha said. "About you?"

Clark began to wonder if he'd been somewhat premature in his announcement. But he'd felt almost euphoric after Metropolis—bringing safety to the city, conferring with Henderson, facing Mayson. It had felt so good that it had been easy to suppress his usual caution. "Not yet," Clark said. "But for the first time in my life, I know exactly how I feel about a woman. I know I want to be with her every day for the rest of my life." He smiled at both of them. "And that just feels so good."

"Have you asked her for a date?" Jonathan asked.

"I was going to," Clark said, sobering. "But I got interrupted by the newsflash about the bomb. And that's another reason why I have to tell her the truth. If I'm going to date her, she has to know the real reason why I might have to run out on her."

"Have you thought longer term?" Martha asked. "About what happens when the three months in Australia is over?"

"I don't know what will happen," Clark said. "But I do know that I can't make any decisions until I know if there is any chance that Lois wants me in her life."

He saw his mom telegraph a significant look to his dad. "Clark," she said, "we're really happy for you, but Mayson is not someone to be taken lightly. You said she doesn't stop until she gets what she wants. And Jason Trask seemed frighteningly fanatical."

Clark sighed. "I know, Mom," he said. "And I appreciate your concern, but I'm half a world away, and somehow, being with Lois just makes everything seem so much more… simple. When I'm with her, the world, Mayson, Trask—they just don't matter that much."

His mom hugged him. "Are you going to change your clothes and come and have breakfast with us?" she asked. "Or are you going back to that girl of yours in Australia?"

"It's late there now," Clark said. "And Lois isn't my girl. Not yet."

The gleam in his mother's eyes deepened. "As soon as you've told her that you can fly her around the world in a matter of minutes, I want you to bring her home to meet us," she said.

Clark smiled, imagining landing at the farm with Lois in his arms, imagining his parents hurrying forward, eager to meet her. He stepped away from his parents and spun into jeans and a shirt. Then he put an arm across each of their shoulders and together, they walked back to the farmhouse. "I will," Clark promised. "As soon as I can, I'll bring Lois to meet you."

Part 16

Much of Clark's good humour seeped away as he crossed the Pacific Ocean. When he opened the door to his unit in Melbourne, the memories foremost in his mind were neither the rescue in Metropolis nor the time spent with his parents, but Lois's hurt surprise as he had prematurely ended their evening.

Sure, he had been Superman in a new and very satisfying way. A way where he didn't cower and hide, a way where he'd paid more attention to his self-belief than to the beliefs others held about him.

And, as Lois had predicted, it had seemed to work.

He had confronted Mayson. He had allowed her to question him and had simply answered her truthfully. There had been nothing to indicate that she had recognised anything about him—not his mannerisms, not his voice, not even his face.

Then Dan Scardino had arrived, and it had seemed as if his hand on her shoulder had had an effect on Mayson. That was astounding. Clark had never seen anyone distract Mayson when she was on the trail of a story, particularly not a story with the potential to be the biggest of her career.

What if there was something between Mayson and Dan? How would that affect Lois? Would she care? Would it bring back all the hurt from Dan's rejection? Or would it help her move on from that and perhaps make her willing to consider a date with someone else?

Which brought him to how things stood with Lois…

How would she respond to his sudden departure? Surely, she would have questions. And for the first time ever, Clark wanted to give answers. He had spent his entire life evading questions but now he sought them from Lois.

But if she didn't ask, when was the right time to tell her?

Before he asked her for a date?

On their first date?

After their first date?

Would there *be* a first date?

He didn't know.

It would be easier if she came right out and demanded to know why he had chosen to rudely evict her from his unit. Then he would have the opening. He would simply reply that he'd gone to deal with the bomb report in Metropolis, and it would just flow from there.

Did she care enough to ask him?

It was possible she was so annoyed she wouldn't want to speak to him again.

Mayson had taken great delight in punishing his disappearances with raging anger at his inability to offer anything approaching a believable reason for not being at her beck and call.

Clark spun out of the suit and climbed into bed. Sleep, though, wouldn't come.

He *did* feel good about going to Metropolis. It had occurred to him that the bomb could have been an attempt to lure him into the open, but he had gone anyway. And because he'd gone, many people had been saved from death or injury.

That certainly felt good.

He wanted to use the powers he had been given.

And then, he wanted to come home.

To Lois.

But achieving that seemed much, much more difficult than deactivating a few bombs.

* * *

Clark watched some of the Opening Ceremony of the Atlanta Olympics as he prepared for work the next morning. He was going to the Essendon-Richmond game at the MCG with Bluey.

After he'd eaten breakfast, he turned off the television, picked up his jacket and notebook, and left his unit. Outside, it was a grey and overcast day. The air hung heavy with moisture, but it wasn't actually raining.

The gloominess matched his spirits.

Lois was going to be mad.

And if she wasn't mad because she didn't care that he'd practically pushed her out of his home halfway through a game, that was even worse.

A whole weekend of football loomed ahead, a weekend where he'd been assigned different games than Lois.

He needed to talk with her, but even if she were willing to talk to him, he couldn't see when there would be an opportunity.

Clark walked to the MCG, his hands deep in his pockets and his heart heavy.

* * *

The weekend eventuated as Clark had feared. When he and Bluey arrived back in the office from the MCG on Saturday evening, Lois wasn't there. Initially, he wasn't too concerned because he knew she had been at the Footscray game, which was farther out of town, so it was to be expected that she would arrive later.

But she didn't.

"Where's Lois?" Clark asked Bluey after an hour of listening for her footsteps. "Shouldn't she be back from the Whitten Oval by now?"

"Hawthorn are playing Carlton out at Waverley tonight," Bluey said. "Browny is so sure his team will thrash the Hawks, he let Flinders email in her match report so she can get across town to watch the game."

"She's reporting on the Hawthorn game?"

Bluey laughed. "Not in a million years," he said. "Browny's not stupid enough to let Flinders do a Hawthorn game. Particularly not against his beloved Blues. That would be guaranteed anarchy." He grinned. "It'd be fun to watch, though."

Clark couldn't see any possible fun in the scenario, but he figured it would be best if they simply got on with their story. He tried to concentrate on it, but his disappointment sat like a sharp dagger against his heart.

He wouldn't be seeing Lois tonight.

It was after ten o'clock when Clark arrived home. He watched the last quarter of the Hawks game on television. Somewhat against the odds, Hawthorn had a big win, doubling Carlton's score of 49 and kicking six goals to two in the last quarter.

Lois would be happy.

Browny wouldn't be.

But it wasn't Browny Clark was hoping to ask on a date.

* * *

Lois walked slowly along Kerferd Road Beach. She was wearing her thickest coat, and most of the lower portion of her face was covered by her Hawthorn scarf, but she felt as if she were freezing.

She paused to look into the grey water of Port Phillip Bay and groaned. The one time she didn't envy footballers was during their recovery session. Dotted in the water was the Hawthorn team—happy and buoyant following their victory last night but clearly suffering greatly from the dual effects of the cold water and the biting wind.

With a final grimace of heartfelt sympathy, Lois turned and continued her stroll along the beach.

Ahead, Ron and Barb walked hand-in-hand. Lois could hear their murmurings, but her collar was pulled high, and it was too much effort to attempt to follow their conversation.

And anyway, her own thoughts were enough to completely monopolise her mind.

Clark Kent was inexplicable.

At times—most of the time, actually—he seemed too good to be true. He was kind and considerate and practised a chivalry that many men couldn't have pulled off without looking ridiculous. But with Clark, it wasn't ridiculous at all. He did it with a charm that just seemed so natural.

But twice now, he had suddenly needed to escape her presence.

The way forward was clear—uncomplicated, easy, safe, and patently obvious. Clark Kent was her colleague, a fleeting acquaintance who would soon return home to his life in Metropolis.

Yet the mere thought of him leaving hacked a canyon of protest through her heart.

Lois glanced across to Seb, who was walking with her, wearing only shorts and a thin jumper. He grinned and reached over to tug her scarf low enough to uncover her mouth.

"You're very quiet," he said. "I would've thought you'd have been jumping out of your skin after last night."

"It was a glorious game, wasn't it?" she said as memories frolicked through her mind. She glanced back to the water and shivered. "Though the boys are paying for it now."

"Yeah," Seb agreed. "I reckon it would feel better after a win than a loss, though. Do you think we'll make the finals?"

Lois took her hand from the depths of her coat pocket long enough to land a thump on Seb's arm. "If we don't, it'll be your fault."

"Mine?"

"We beat the reigning premiers last night. That's what happens when you get your scrawny carcass out of Sydney and actually turn up to a game."

He responded with embellished indignation. "You think our form this year is *my* fault?"

She nodded. "If we don't make the finals, Sebby Boy, I'll be coming after you with a big stick."

Seb put his arm across her shoulders and pulled her tight. His arm slipped up, and his hold ended up more of a headlock than an embrace. Lois chuckled. Despite the passing of over a decade, Seb still treated her like she was his big sister, imported into the family for the sole purpose of giving him someone to compete with. And compete they had, over just about everything imaginable.

She squirmed out of his loose hold and used her ruffled scarf to try to hide her delighted grin.

Barb turned around, took in the situation, smiled, and kept walking.

"Will you really?" Seb asked. "Will you really come to Sydney and visit me?"

"With my big stick?" Lois said. "Sure, why not?"

The amusement died from Seb's eyes. "What if that American is still here?"

Lois strangled the sigh that rose automatically. That American. That American who had pushed her out of his unit on Friday night claiming he needed to be alone.

As she had walked home, Lois had tried to make some sense of his bizarre behaviour. She'd failed. Until then, he'd seemed happy enough—a little jittery perhaps but happy enough to be watching the footy with her. It had been his suggestion, for goodness' sake. Then, suddenly, from nowhere, she was out the door.

And this was Clark, a man for whom manners and courtesy seemed as fundamental as those glasses he refused to take off. Clark, who, on Friday night, had been downright rude.

Lois shook her head. Men were unfathomable.

"No?" Seb queried. "No, he won't still be here? Or no, you won't be with him?"

Lois sighed. "What are you trying to say, Seb?"

"That I don't want you to get hurt again."

Again. Seb had to bring up that, didn't he? "I won't get hurt," Lois declared with a whole lot more confidence than she felt.

He smiled his boyishly endearing smile—the smile Lois knew he kept as insurance for when he felt he was about to say something that could get him into trouble. "It's just the whole Claude thing, Lois. I *never* want to see you get that hurt again."

"Me either," she assured him grimly.

"How can you be sure it won't happen this time?"

"Clark is going home. He knows it. I know it."

"But Lois—"

"How's business?" Lois asked.

"Brilliant," Seb said, though his tone didn't support his verbal assessment.

Lois grinned at him. "Seb," she said. "I'm OK. There's nothing between Clark and me. We're colleagues. He's good company, he needed some help learning the game. It's that simple. I don't fall for every bloke I meet, you know."

"It's pretty obvious he's a bit more than 'some bloke'."

"Seb, I appreciate your concern, but I can handle this." She put her hand on his arm. "Now tell me about Sydney. I suppose you're still wowing them?"

"Yep," Seb agreed with self-deprecating grin. "Jeweller to the revoltingly rich and fabulously famous—that's me."

"I watched the Logies a couple of months ago, and two of the actresses said they were wearing Sebastian Stone creations."

Seb shrugged dismissively. "That was nothing," he said. "You should see what's coming out of Coober Pedy this year."

"Opal?"

"Crystal opal. Beautiful blues and greens like I've never seen before."

"Expensive?"

Seb gave a low whistle. "I'm having a two-day expo in September, culminating in an auction. I'm expecting the prices to skyrocket."

Lois smiled at him. "I'm pleased for you, Seb. You deserve your success."

"Any chance you could come up for the expo?" he said. "I know you're busy, and it will be finals, but you say the word, and I'll send you the plane tickets."

"Thanks," Lois said. "I'll let you know."

Barb turned around and smiled at them. "We're going to get pizzas and take them home to eat while we watch the replay of last night's game," she said. "Are you two coming?"

"Sounds good to me," Lois said. "I'm not doing a game today."

"And after the replay," Seb said as he pointed at Lois, "we are going to play chess, and I am going to obliterate you from the board."

Lois grinned at the challenge in his tone. "Really?" she said. "Just like you did last time?"

He didn't argue further. Instead, he gave her a little shove backwards and ran away. "Beat you to the car," he called.

Lois giggled and set off after him.

* * *

For Clark, Sunday was no better than Saturday. Despite there being only one game in Melbourne, he wasn't able to work with Lois. Browny sent every reporter he had —except for Lois Lane—to Collingwood's home ground, Victoria Park. The game was against Fitzroy, and it would be Fitzroy's first game since it had been decided that their future lay in another state.

Collingwood won easily—which delighted Gazza and Bluey—although Clark hadn't been able to squash his hope that the Fitzroy team would give their sad and angry and demoralised and shocked supporters something to cheer about.

Nobody seemed to know why Lois wasn't at Victoria Park. She wasn't in the Herald Sun office when they all trooped back there after the game.

After the match reports were done, the guys loudly decided they were going to the pub.

"Are you coming, Rubber?" Bluey asked.

Clark hesitated. In the interests of developing friendships with his colleagues, he should go with them. But he really wanted to check on Lois.

"Come on, Rubber," Gazza said. He grinned widely. "What's your problem, mate? It's not like you have a missus to put you through the wringer if you get home late."

The rest added their agreement, and Clark found himself following them to the pub.

After their drinks had arrived—Gazza had offered to shout first on account of Collingwood's victory—and they were seated around the table, the conversation turned—not unexpectedly—to football. They talked extensively about the games from the weekend, and then the subject moved to their upcoming game against the boys from the electronic media. The general consensus seemed to be that they needed to 'hit 'em hard and hit 'em often'.

Clark's apprehension ballooned inside him as he realised his teammates firmly believed that this game represented their chance to settle some old scores.

By the third round of drinks, they had moved to loudly speculating—with much hilarity—exactly how things would unfold between Browny and Lois the next morning.

Clark initially assumed they were saying Browny would be annoyed because Lois hadn't been at Victoria Park today. Then he realised that the much-anticipated encounter between Lois and Browny had nothing to do with any work issue but the fact that Hawthorn had beaten Carlton.

"I *hate* losing to Hawthorn," Banjo said dismally. Immediately, the jovial atmosphere deflated.

"Yeah," Gazza agreed. "Flinders doesn't even say anything; she just looks at you with that smarmy smile and that haughty expression as if she knew all along that the Hawks would win."

Bluey turned to Clark. "Don't ever get into a stoush with Flinders about football," he said seriously. "She'll wipe the floor with you."

"Not that it'll be a problem for you," Gazza said, "seeing as you decided to barrack for Hawthorn." His tone held deep regret mixed with a heavy dose of reproach.

Clark decided any response was likely to do him no good, so instead he picked up his glass and drank from his beer.

"The problem with Flinders," Banjo said, "is that she knows all these obscure incidents from the past twenty years, and no matter what you say about Hawthorn, she can trump you and turn it on your club."

"And she *never* lets one go through to the keeper," Bluey said. "You bag Hawthorn, and you just know she's going strike like a taipan."

"And I swear she knows more stats than any computer," Gazza said.

"And she knows when to use them to greatest effect," Banjo added.

"Where was she today?" Clark asked.

"Dunno," Gazza said with stark disinterest.

A small silence fell. Then Bluey said, "Wonder how Deano is going?"

There were a few shrugs and grunts.

"Poor bloke," Gazza said with deep feeling.

Banjo turned to Clark. "You wanna watch yourself, Rubber," he said gravely.

Clark didn't know how to respond, so he waited for someone else to continue the conversation.

"Yeah," Gazza said. "If you're not careful, you'll end up like Deano."

"And you've got Buckley's," Bluey said glumly.

"Every bloke's got Buckley's when it comes to Flinders," Banjo said.

Clark sipped from his beer, not understanding all of the words, but understanding enough of the tone that he didn't think it was complimentary to Lois. "Lois isn't here," he said. "Perhaps we shouldn't be talking about her."

Gazza shrugged. "Your loss, mate," he said. "We were only trying to save your skin."

"Yeah," Bluey added. "Deano had to skulk off to Yankeeland with finals just around the corner 'cause he couldn't hack being around Flinders, since she shafted him."

She had shafted *him*? Whatever had happened, it was obvious Scardino had the sympathies of the men.

"Women," Banjo said, slowly shaking his head and then taking consolation in a gulp of his beer.

Clark decided this conversation had gone far enough. "We have training tomorrow," he said.

"Yeah, at Punt Road Oval, Richmond's training ground," Bluey said. "It's near your place, Rubber. Are you right to get there?"

"Yeah, thanks," Clark said. "What time?" He knew perfectly well what time they were supposed to be there, but he wanted to keep the subject moving away from Lois.

"Five," Gazza answered. "Do you have a pair of footy boots?"

"No."

"I'll bring some you can borrow," Gazza offered.

"Thanks."

The subject stayed on their game. Clark let it flow over him, not concentrating enough to be able to take in the still-not-familiar terms.

Where was Lois?

Had she gone to visit Ron and his wife? Had she seen Seb? Had Seb warned her against any involvement with someone who was here only temporarily?

If Lois was the one who had ended the relationship with Scardino, was that why she had seemed estranged from her colleagues when Clark had first arrived in Melbourne? It seemed clear that whatever had happened, they blamed her for it.

He longed to see her again.

But when he finally did, would she actually speak to him?

* * *

When Clark walked into the Herald Sun office the next morning, Lois was already at her desk. The sight of her stopped him in his tracks. Firstly, she was there. He hadn't seen her for over two days, and her presence caused his heart to make a very creditable attempt to catapult out of his chest.

But not only was she there, she was also nonchalantly leaning back in her seat with her feet perched on her desk. On her lap was a paperback that looked suspiciously like a trashy novel. And she appeared to be engrossed in it.

Clark stared. It was one thing to be so enamoured with a novel that she would read it surreptitiously at the office. It was quite another to do it so obviously. It was as if Lois *wanted* people to notice.

He paused at her desk. She didn't look up from her book.

"Hi, Lois," he said, trying to make it sound like a casual greeting.

Slowly, her eyes lifted. "Hi, Clark."

She had spoken to him. Clark felt his tension loosen a few degrees. Her face was expressionless, offering nothing to help him gauge her level of annoyance about Friday night. The silence between them grew heavier by the second. She stared at him, waiting for him to speak. He cleared his throat, as his mind thrashed about for something to say.

"Good book?" he asked.

"Very good."

"Ah… Lois… about Friday—"

Clark was interrupted by Browny's loud voice slicing through the newsroom chatter. Clark turned and saw that the editor was already on the crate, glaring around the room as people hurried to the space in front of him. "Listen up here," he snarled.

Clark joined the crowd and heard Lois's step behind him.

"The weekend's over," Browny said. "Losing Fitzroy has hit us for six, but we are professionals. The footy world still wants to know what's going on, and we are going to tell them. Saturday's match reports were late, sloppy, and worthy only to line the bottom of a bird cage. But I gave you some leeway, because we were still reeling from what happened to the Lions."

"And Carlton hadn't lost yet," Clark heard Lois mutter from behind him.

He thought there was a good chance Browny had heard, too, because his fiery stare turned in Clark's general direction and lingered there. Clark held his breath, fearing Lois was about to pay for her gibe.

"Yesterday's reports were rubbish as well," Browny said, his eyes finally moving away. "So if any of you want a job this time next week, you will get off your rear ends and get me some decent stories."

He stomped from the crate and stormed into his office. Before the crowd had had the chance to disperse, a loud roar sounded. "RUBBER!"

Clark gulped and caught Banjo's eyes.

"Better you than me, mate," Banjo said as he scurried back to his desk.

At Browny's door, Clark hesitated. He decided to knock gently.

"Get your Yankee butt in here, Rubber," he heard from the other side of the door.

Clark pushed it open, entered the office, and carefully closed the door.

"Get yourself to Fitzroy—the suburb," Browny ordered. "I want to know what the public think about the Lions' demise. Try Brunswick Street. Or the Fitzroy Town Hall in Napier Street. Just talk to people and find out what they're feeling now they've had a few days for it to sink in. Ask who they barrack for."

"OK," Clark said, figuring it would be wiser to ask Banjo or Bluey how to get to Fitzroy. He paused, hoping Browny would give him more guidance regarding the type of story he wanted. When it became obvious that no further direction was coming, Clark opened the door.

"And get that smug, smirking, swaggering, crowing, insolent brown-and-gold minx out of my newsroom."

Clark nodded and quickly exited.

Lois was still reading her book, still looking more like she was on vacation than in the office. She hadn't even turned on her computer. Clark crossed to her, apprehensive about the reception he was likely to receive.

This time, she did look up at him. That was progress.

"Browny's given us a story," Clark said apologetically.

Lois closed her book and tossed it onto her desk. She swung her legs down and stood. "Where are we going?" she said.

"Fitzroy."

She picked up her bag. "We'll take the tram."

Part 17

Lois waited with Clark outside the Herald Sun offices. Neither had said a word since she had announced that they would get to Fitzroy by tram.

Clark seemed preoccupied. Hesitant. Unsure.

The weather matched his mood. It didn't seem able to decide what it wanted to do. The weak winter sun occasionally peeked out from behind the low, grey clouds. It felt like rain was imminent, but so far, it had remained dry.

Two days without seeing him had given her the time and space to bully her wayward heart into accepting that Clark would never be anything more than a colleague.

Then he had walked into the newsroom, immediately looked in her direction, and approached with a hesitant half-smile that undermined every rational conclusion she'd carefully constructed during the weekend.

She could so easily fall for Clark.

Which would be spectacularly stupid.

Firstly, he looked so incredibly good. And Lois knew from experience that good-looking men were only interested in beautiful women. Usually, their tastes ran to a plethora of model-types—all at once.

Secondly, he was going home.

And thirdly, he was hiding something.

Lois had mulled long over what he could be hiding. She had considered drugs. That would explain his sudden need to be alone.

But when he'd been in the footy jumper, she had conducted a diligent exploration of his amazing arms, and she was sure they bore no signs of drug abuse.

And anyway, he was too steadfast, too together… *most* of the time.

Then, on Sunday, she'd seen a television news report about how Superman had saved Metropolis from the attempted bombing. Not being able to access Superman directly for an interview, the news anchor had talked with the woman who had talked with him—the very beautiful, blonde Mayson Drake. As Lois had listened, the pieces had begun to fall together. It didn't explain Clark's first disappearance… unless perhaps he had suddenly wanted to call Mayson.

But it did explain his sudden panic and need to be alone on Friday night. He was anxious about Mayson's safety. According to her reputation, she didn't let anything stop her when she was chasing a story. Clark had probably known instantly that she would be right there, close to the bomb and in danger.

So, he'd wanted to be alone—to ring Mayson and beg her to stay safe.

And that—Lois kept telling herself firmly—was a very good thing.

Except nagging away at the back of her mind was Clark's firm statement when they had read the *Daily Planet* together: "Mayson is no friend of mine."

Clark wouldn't lie.

Would he?

If he were attracted to Mayson, there was no reason why he wouldn't just come out and say so.

No reason at all.

So maybe it was nothing more than his highly developed protective streak stretching to encompass a colleague half a world away.

Lois shrugged mentally. She'd been going around in circles, but it didn't change the most telling fact of all: Clark Kent would never be hers.

And if she wanted to keep her heart from being savagely torn apart, she needed to remember that.

"Lois?" Clark said.

She looked at him. He seemed anxious about something. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry about Friday night."

He was thinking about Mayson? And that's why he was so introspective today? "I guess all of your friends are OK, seeing as Superman got there to save the day."

"Yeah," Clark said. "They're all fine."

"Do you work with Mayson Drake?"

"Sometimes."

"I saw her on a news report," Lois said. "She got the first-ever interview with Superman."

"I heard that."

"That's a massive scoop," she said, watching carefully for Clark's reaction. "I guess it isn't unexpected. They said she is America's top investigative reporter."

Clark didn't reply beyond a stilted nod.

Lois decided to plunge in. "Is Mayson your girlfriend?"

An unreadable expression flitted across his face. "No."

"Do you wish she was your girlfriend?"

"No."

"Do you have any feelings for her at all?"

"Not like that."

"She's very pretty," Lois said. "And she has a sensational figure."

Clark turned directly to her, and his eyes centred in hers, causing her heart to leap. "Mayson Drake means nothing to me beyond being a colleague," he said firmly. "And that is never going to change."

His eyes held her captive for a long moment. His gaze was steady, unflinching, direct… soft… eloquent. And the message it carried utterly crumbled every one of Lois's carefully constructed barriers.

She tore her eyes away and, in the distance, saw the approaching tram. "Come on," she said, her voice not at all steady. "The tram's here."

Clark smiled tentatively, and Lois knew he was hoping she would smile back.

It was hard not to, such was the power of that smile.

She smiled for him and pushed all her indecision to the dark recesses of her mind. "Come on, Kent," she said. "We have a story to write."

* * *

Clark sat on the streetcar—or tram, as it was called in Melbourne—while it rattled through the inner city. Lois had smiled at him. His apology had been stunted, and he'd never gotten to any sort of explanation, but Lois had smiled at him.

And for now, that was enough.

"Browny was a bit irritable this morning," Clark noted.

Lois's answering smile poured lovely warmth over his troubled world. "That was my fault," she admitted freely.

"What was with you reading that novel?"

"I was just stirring," Lois said. "I knew I could do just about anything and Browny wouldn't say a word to me because if he did, I'd give him heaps about how Hawthorn belted his Blues on Saturday night."

"Is that usual?" Clark asked. "That the fans tease each other after a game?"

Lois nodded. "Absolutely. It's probably because we all barrack for different teams. I can't imagine what it would be like to live in a place where everyone barracks for the one local team."

"You all celebrate together," Clark said.

Lois grinned. "Or mourn together."

"What would Browny have done if Carlton had won?"

Lois groaned. "He would have been unbearable," she said. "Carlton won the flag last year, and he had the Carlton theme song playing in the office for *two* weeks. He decked out the place in navy blue, and he had a roster for inflicting pain on us. He'd call one of us into his office so he could talk about the Grand Final. Then, he'd call in someone else. It got to the point where we all dreaded the sound of our own name."

Clark smiled, wondering if it were too early—and too naïve—to think that any damage from Friday night had been repaired. "I can't imagine him like that."

"You can't imagine how bad it was," Lois said darkly. Her expression cleared. "This morning was payback. And he deserved every bit of it."

"I was worried for you when he was on the crate."

"I knew he wouldn't address me directly," Lois said. "If he had, I would've brought up about a hundred memories from Saturday, and each one would have been like a stab to his heart."

"Where were you yesterday?" Clark asked.

Lois chuckled. "I knew Browny had plenty of people to cover the Collingwood-Fitzroy game, and I was owed some time after all the extra hours I put into the merger story, so I went home and spent the day with Ron and Barb."

"Was Seb there?"

"Yeah. His flight wasn't until late afternoon, so I gave him a lift to Tullamarine Airport on the way home," Lois said. "Did Browny tell you what sort of story he wanted? Or did he just tell you to keep me out of the office all day?"

"He said he wanted the reaction of the people to Fitzroy's merger with Brisbane."

Lois grinned. "But he told you to keep me out of his way, didn't he?"

Clark smiled, but he didn't reply verbally.

"Looks like we have plenty of time," she said cheerfully. "Feel like a walk?"

"Sure."

"We could change trams, but let's continue on this one, and then we can walk through the Carlton Gardens to Brunswick Street."

"OK."

"Have you been to Lygon Street?"

"No," Clark answered. "But I think I've heard of it."

"It's Melbourne's Little Italy," Lois said. "Delicious pastas, incredible pizzas, and good coffee."

"Good coffee?"

"*Great* coffee," Lois amended. "And I reckon at least one of the cafes will have that strong stuff you like."

Clark felt his mouth form a wide smile. "My shout," he said eagerly.

Lois laughed. "Better watch out, Kent," she said. "You're turning into an Aussie."

* * *

The clouds had moved on, granting the opportunity for a few rays of warmth to shine weakly. Lois and Clark chose a cafe and decided to encourage the sun by sitting at one of the outside tables.

Although he was relieved that Lois no longer seemed upset about his sudden disappearance on Friday, Clark felt uneasy about leaving it unresolved. He couldn't come right out and tell her why he had so abruptly ended their time together, but perhaps he could allude to another part of the evening.

"You never did tell me the Crimmo story," he said.

"You don't have to be polite, Clark," Lois said.

"I'm not being polite," he said. "I would really like to hear the story, and I'd like you to tell me." He took a clean, folded handkerchief from his jacket pocket and offered it to her.

Lois laughed. "OK," she said. She reached across the table and took his handkerchief.

Clark smiled and waited.

"Peter Crimmins was our inspirational, courageous captain. He wore number 5 and had blond hair and, for a footballer, wasn't overly muscular. He never shirked any issue, though. On the field and off the field, he was a magnificent captain, a true leader, and a man who passionately loved Hawthorn."

"I remember you once told me that your most treasured possession is a Hawthorn jumper with number 5 on it."

Lois nodded, and a little moisture had already gathered in her eyes. "At the end of 1974, Crimmo was diagnosed with cancer. He had the surgery and the chemo, and throughout the 1975 season, he wanted just one thing—to be fit enough to lead us into the finals. He didn't play in the early finals, and when we made the Grand Final, Crimmo so desperately, desperately wanted to play. He'd been training hard, but training doesn't give you match fitness, and in those days, there was no interchange bench—just a reserve, so when a player was replaced, he had to stay off, and the replacement had to stay on."

"Difficult decision," Clark said.

Lois's unshed tears deepened. The waiter arrived with the coffee, and Lois poured a sachet of sugar into hers and slowly stirred.

Clark watched her, easily able to read her heightened emotions. "I didn't mean to upset you," he said.

She looked up from her coffee and gave him a tremulous smile. "It's OK," she said. She placed the spoon on the saucer and continued. "Being the captain, Crimmo had a vote on the Match Committee—they select the team—but it wasn't enough. He was outvoted and not named in the Grand Final team.

"He was devastated. Absolutely shattered. He drove home to his wife and two little boys a broken man. On the Saturday, we played North Melbourne in the Grand Final and got badly beaten. I think we probably deserved that."

"What happened?" Clark asked. "Did he stay at Hawthorn? Did he keep playing football?"

"The cancer came back. As the 1976 season drew towards finals, Crimmo was seen less and less at the club. Hawthorn made it to the Grand Final, and the Premier of Victoria offered Crimmo the use of his private car to get to the game, but he was just too ill. Before the game, our coach, John Kennedy, read only one of the hundreds of telegrams—the one from Crimmo." Lois smiled wistfully. "Kennedy always called him 'The Little Fella'."

"Did Hawthorn win?" Clark asked softly.

Lois nodded as a solitary tear broke free and flittered down her cheek. She wiped it away with Clark's handkerchief. "1976 will always be Crimmo's Cup," she said. "Very, very late that night, a few of the players took the cup to Crimmo's home. He had listened to the game on the radio and had memorised every minute. There is a photo—six big, healthy footballers surrounding Crimmo, who is holding the cup, his indomitable grin shining, and his spirit unbroken, although his body was so cruelled by the cancer."

Clark waited.

"Crimmo died three days later," Lois said as another tear fell. "We retired his number 5 jumper for nearly twenty years, hoping that perhaps one of his sons would wear it."

"Did they?"

"No. And eventually, we brought it out of retirement, but no one will get it unless the Crimmins family agree. It is one of the greatest honours we can bestow on our players." She used his handkerchief to wipe her eyes.

"No lingering bitterness over not including him the year before?"

Lois shrugged. "It's family," she said. "There's disagreement and conflict sometimes, but in the end, we're all still Hawthorn."

"Lois?" Clark said. "You said you came to Australia in 1978."

"I did," she agreed. "I wasn't here when it happened, but that doesn't mean I can't *feel* the legacy left by Peter Crimmins. People told me about him, just like I'm telling you. Ron told me the Crimmo story, Barb told me, others told me, and I've seen the display cabinet in the board room at Glenferrie. It holds our nine premiership cups and one jumper—Crimmo's number 5."

"Thank you for telling me," Clark said.

Lois smiled and sipped from her coffee. "If we stop telling our stories, something inherently Hawthorn dies," she said. "Crimmo is just one of the reasons why we can never lose Hawthorn."

"Are you still worried that Hawthorn is vulnerable?"

Lois shrugged slightly. "I ache for Fitzroy, but the cold hard truth is that what happened to them may mean that another club escapes being sacrificed. And that club could be Hawthorn."

"The merger has strengthened your club's position?" Clark asked, remembering what he had overheard in the Social Club.

Lois nodded. "But it feels a bit like dancing on someone's grave."

Clark said nothing as he contemplated the story Lois had told him.

She stared at him, her eyes still damp.

"What?" he asked.

"You understand, don't you?" she said in a tone of wonder.

"Understand what?"

"You understand about needing to belong somewhere," Lois said. "About how, whether it's a family or a football club or anything else, we all need to belong somewhere."

"Yes," Clark said gravely. "I understand."

She smiled. "I didn't think you would."

"Why?"

"Because you have a family. You didn't have to find one for yourself. You're not different. Or alone."

"You make it easy to understand," Clark said.

Their eyes locked, and Clark felt her warmth sizzle through him. He gazed at her mouth, drawn into her magnetism, willingly trapped by the essence that was Lois Lane.

"Big game for you on Wednesday," she said.

He dragged his attention away from her mouth. "Yeah."

"You're not looking forward to it?" Lois guessed.

Clark shook his head. "I'm worried. There is so much that could go wrong."

"You mean like giving away a crucial free kick… or missing a goal?"

Like maiming someone, Clark thought.

Lois smiled encouragingly. "Don't worry," she said. "They know you're new to this. You have a training session this arvo. Perhaps you'll feel more confident after that."

He doubted it.

She stared at him, her face unreadable.

He figured it was most likely she was wondering how a man could wish he wasn't playing when she was so desperately wishing she could.

Lois broke away from the contact of their eyes. "We should finish up here and get on with our story for Browny," she said.

Clark stood up, wishing he could speak from his heart.

Everything.

But he couldn't.

Not in the middle of a work day.

Not when Lois had given no hint that she wanted more than friendship.

Not when there was so much more that had to follow the 'Will you go out with me?' question.

* * *

As darkness fell on Tuesday evening, Lois pounded the joggers' track through the Fitzroy Gardens. She had been running for nearly half an hour and was just about spent.

Her body was spent, but her mind…

Her mind was still a battlefield.

And the crux of the battle was Clark Kent.

On one side… the simple truth was that she enjoyed being with him. More than enjoyed it. His presence brightened her world… accelerated her heart… lifted her spirits.

Anytime she wasn't with him, she missed him. Pined for him. Thought about him… incessantly.

Throughout Monday, when she had gone to watch him train and then walked home with him, and into this morning, when she had practised skills with him before work, Lois had constantly pushed forward all the reasons why she could never be with him. But not one of them was strong enough to stand against the overwhelming tide of her attraction.

He was going home… Well, maybe she could go home, too.

He was possibly involved with someone else… but from everything she had learnt about Clark Kent, she found it impossible to believe he wouldn't have said something to her.

He had some unanswered questions… but she couldn't quash the suspicion that if she asked the questions, he would answer them. Willingly. Honestly. Truthfully. In fact, sometimes she had wondered if he *wanted* her to ask.

She felt as if he were a good book just waiting to be opened. A book with a gorgeous cover. A book that promised so much more.

And, despite warning herself over and over and over again, she just couldn't believe that the book wouldn't be as good as the cover promised.

And there was the problem.

She wanted to open the book.

She *so* wanted to open the book.

But did she dare?

Could it be possible that Clark was different to all the other men she had known?

Had he considered the prospect of them being more than friends?

Her head said it wasn't possible.

And yet…

Maybe.

So Lois had come directly from the Herald Sun office to the Gardens and run and run and run. Her legs were tired, her heart was hammering, her breath was laboured…

And still… she didn't know what to do.

But what she did know was this—she enjoyed being with Clark, and it was getting more and more difficult to manufacture reasons why she shouldn't open that book.

* * *

By Tuesday night, Clark was anxiously grasping for any possible way to avoid participating in tomorrow's game of football. He'd attended training on Monday and—between trying to remember the rules, and trying to execute the skills, and trying to avoid all physical contact with his teammates—it had been a nerve-racking experience.

Clark had met the coach, Toggy, whose real name was Tadhg O'Gerraty. He spoke in a lilting Irish accent and smoothly blended idioms from his homeland with some colourful Australian slang.

Certainly, his constant urgings—"Git in amongsht it, Rubber; the ball's not goin' a bite ye, lad,"—hadn't helped at all.

Clark had felt completely out of place—and that had been with his teammates.

Tomorrow, there would be eighteen opponents.

He'd walked home with Lois after training on Monday evening, and she'd suggested they have another before-work session at the park the following morning. He'd tried to sound grateful—and he was—but her offer confirmed Clark's suspicion that his deficiencies had been glaringly obvious.

Football was a chaotic game. Thirty-six normal men chasing one ball was, as far as Clark could see, a recipe for disaster. When one of them *wasn't* normal…

He didn't even want to think about it.

Then there was the issue of his glasses. He'd been pressured to remove them to train, and he'd had to strongly insist that he couldn't play without them.

Despite his aversion to playing, he dreaded an emergency requiring Superman even more. He had no doubt that Lois's opinion of him would slide irrevocably if he didn't get to the ground.

He'd learnt enough of the Australian ethos to know that letting down your mates was considered 'lower than a snake's belly'.

Clark barely slept Tuesday night, and by Wednesday morning, he felt worse than he had the first time he'd appeared in the Superman suit. Then, he'd had a simple-enough plan—get in, deal with the danger, and get out quickly. Now, there was nothing to do but wait. The game wasn't until three o'clock. He'd been instructed to be there at two. He still had six hours to fill, and they stretched out, long and vacant before him.

He still hadn't managed to devise an excuse that was likely to be deemed satisfactory.

It wasn't as if he could easily fake an injury.

If the ball came near him and he made any effort at all to go after it, someone was likely to get badly hurt. If he didn't go after the ball, he was going to look apathetic. What was it Lois had said? "If you don't care, there's no point to it." Well, he did care. He cared about the game, and he cared about the safety of the others on the field, and most of all, he cared about Lois's opinion of him.

And he figured that, regardless of what happened, there was a good chance that one of those things was going to get damaged.

He had faced this dilemma many years ago and decided that the only course open to him was to give up all competitive team sports. Nothing had changed. Yet today, he was going to have to play Australian Rules football, a game where heavy contact was the accepted norm.

Clark showered and ate his breakfast. As he listlessly washed his solitary dish, spoon, and cup, his thoughts lingered over asking Lois for a date. He wanted to so desperately but pushing her out of his unit on Friday night must have caused her to doubt him. She had to have questions, even though she hadn't asked them.

A knock sounded, interrupting the flow of his thoughts. Turning, Clark looked through the door, and his heart leapt.

It was Lois.

He opened the door, aware he probably looked like his dreary world had just turned to sunshine. "Hi, Lois," he said brightly.

"Hi, Clark," she said. "What are you doing?"

"Ah… actually, I was washing my dishes."

"How exciting," she teased. "Do you have other, equally fascinating, plans for this morning?"

Clark chuckled. He loved everything about being with Lois, but he particularly loved how she made him feel so good. So normal. So accepted. “No,” he admitted.

“Beauty,” Lois said. “Are you ready? Let’s go!”

She’d single-handedly rotated his day one hundred and eighty degrees. “Where are we going?” he asked, knowing he was grinning broadly.

“It’s a surprise,” she told him.

“You’re not going to tell me?”

“Nope. Just get in the car, and you’ll know when we get there.”

There was nothing Clark would rather do. “Give me one moment,” he said, wanting to run a comb through his hair and splash on some cologne.

Lois grinned. “I’ll wait in the Jeep.”

Part 18

Soon, they were on a big freeway heading east. “You still won’t tell me where we’re going?” Clark asked. In truth, it mattered not a bit. He was with Lois, and she was happy - that was all he needed to feel fantastic.

“Ringwood,” Lois said. “A suburb in the east.”

“Why?”

“I’m not going to tell you,” Lois said with a smile that somersaulted his heart.

“Any hints?” he asked. “Does it have anything to do with the game this afternoon?”

“Not exactly.”

Clark looked at Lois and couldn’t hold back his smile. Clearly, she was revelling in the intrigue. The ‘I-have-a-secret’ grin on her face was adorable. “More football practice?” he probed.

“No.” She laughed, clearly enjoying his curiosity. “Did you bring your mouth guard? For the game?”

“I don’t have one.”

“No worries. We can stop at a chemist and get one.”

“I… ah… I don’t think I’ll need one.”

“They’re a good idea.” She grinned across at him. “Wouldn’t want to risk damaging that smile of yours.”

“Do I have to wear one?”

“No,” she said easily. “Not everyone does. It’s your choice.”

He decided it would be best to get away from the subject of why he didn’t need a mouth guard. “Any more hints about what we’re doing?”

“Well, I thought you could use something to take your mind off the game.”

“OK,” he said, his curiosity growing with every moment. “What?”

“Patience, Kent,” she told him. “Just sit back and enjoy the ride.”

He looked out of the window. There was little to see but the treetops poking over the edge of the concrete freeway barriers. “The view isn’t all that picturesque,” he noted.

She laughed but didn’t respond. Accepting she wasn’t going to give him any further details, Clark decided to change the subject. To what? ‘Lois’ worked for him.

“I’ve been thinking about how you chose to stay here despite all of your family being back in the States,” he said. “That was a brave move.”

Lois shrugged. “Decide what you want, consider all the ramifications, and if it still seems good, go for it,” she said nonchalantly.

“Do you have what you want?”

“Mostly,” she said. “I have my dream job. I work hard at something I love. I have a small but very supportive group of friends. I have Ron and Barb and Seb, who are like family to me. I earn enough to visit my folks every year. And I have Hawthorn.”

They pulled off the freeway and onto a wide, busy road.

“What about you, Clark?” Lois asked. “Do you have everything you want?”

The whole of his life he had wondered if he would ever find the belonging that his heart craved. Now he had found it with Lois. And what he wanted was simple. He wanted her—to be with her, to love her, to share everything with her. “I have a great life,” he said. “Loving parents, a place I can always go home to, a good job… and three months in a new country meeting new friends.”

Lois pulled into a small alley and parked outside a large, dingy building.

Clark peered out of the window of the Jeep. “This is it?” he asked.

Lois nodded. “I think so. I haven’t been here before, but this is the right address.”

Clark followed Lois through the door and into the building. To his surprise, it housed a skating rink.

Lois turned to him. Her 'I've-got-a-secret' smile had transformed into overt excitement at the unveiling of her surprise. "Can you skate on ice?" she asked.

"Yes, of course."

Lois snorted. "Of course," she mimicked. "Most Aussie kids can't ice skate. This is the only ice rink in Melbourne."

Clark surveyed the rink. It was dilapidated and rundown, but the ice looked solid enough. There was no one to be seen, either on the ice or beyond its boundaries. "Can you skate?" he asked Lois.

"I did a bit when I was a very young kid," Lois answered with a smile. "I'm hoping you can give me a refresher course."

Suddenly, the dank and dreary appearance of the rink didn't matter at all. Lois's smile more than compensated. "Can we rent some skates?" Clark asked.

"Sure." Lois headed to the unmanned counter and banged on the bench. "Hello?"

A lean man in his sixties trudged from the back room. "Yeah?" he said.

"Two for the ice rink, please," Lois said. "Plus skate hire." She took her purse from her bag.

Clark laid his hand on her arm. "No," he said. "I'll pay."

"You can either pay for the skating or for lunch," Lois said. "Not both."

Clark didn't know what the skating would cost but thought it was likely to be more than lunch. "Skating," he said.

"OK," Lois said as she put her purse back in her bag.

Ten minutes later, they were at the edge of the rink. To Clark's surprise, his rental skates were good quality and well-fitting.

"All right, Mr USA," Lois said. "Show me how it's done."

Clark slid easily onto the ice. He skated away and then spun so he was gliding backwards and could still see Lois. He switched to forward movement and gathered speed for a wide turn. This felt good—familiar, easy. A volcano of wonderful feelings erupted inside him.

He was in love. Totally in love.

And it felt better than flying.

He glanced at Lois. There wasn't a woman in the world like her. Today, he promised himself. Today, he would ask her for a date. He whirled back to her and came to a smooth stop a foot from where she waited at the edge of the rink.

She greeted him with a wide smile. "You didn't say you were *incredible* at this."

"I've skated every winter I can remember," he said.

"I figured that."

"You did?"

"Yeah." Lois shrugged and glanced down. "I thought that if you had to spend the afternoon doing something very foreign to you, it would be nice if you spent the morning doing something you were more familiar with."

Clark's heart melted again. If he'd had any doubts regarding how he felt about this woman, they were swept away forever. And surely, this gesture *had* to mean she felt something for him. Surely. He reached for her and gently lifted her chin, causing their eyes to meet. He lingered for half a second and then lowered his hand. "Aww, Lois," he said softly. "Thank you."

"No worries," Lois said casually. "I think I'm either going to have to stay anchored to the railing or hold your hand. Do you mind?"

Clark only just managed to contain his snort. Did he mind? He took her hand and helped her onto the ice.

Together, they skated slowly into the centre of the rink. Clark looked sideways at Lois. "Are you OK?"

She nodded. "Just keep holding my hand."

Forever, he thought.

With Clark's encouragement, advice, and steadying hand, Lois's long-dormant skills and confidence returned rapidly.

"I'm fine now," she said after twenty minutes. "I want you to have fun, and that's not going to happen if you're hampered by going at my pace."

"Lois, I like being with you."

She chuckled. "Clark, we'll still be on the same rink."

He sped away and then executed a swift turn and smoothly glided past Lois. He missed her by at least a foot, but she squealed softly as he shot by.

He turned and came back to her, more sedately this time. "Are you all right?" he asked, grinning.

"That wasn't nice, Kent," she said. Her attempts to look annoyed were destroyed completely by her breezy grin.

Clark lifted his hands in innocence. "What?" he asked.

She pointed her forefinger at him. "Coming so close to me at that speed," she said.

"Were you worried I would sweep you off your feet?" he asked.

She looked taken aback, but only for a second. "Like I swept you off your feet when we played footy?" she shot back.

Clark grinned. "Well, the tables have been turned somewhat," he said. "Right now, I'm the one in familiar territory."

"Should I be worried?" she asked. She didn't look worried at all.

Clark held out his hand and waited for her to take it. When her hand was firmly in his, he vowed, "I won't let you get hurt."

Their eyes met, held for half a heartbeat, and the skaters glided away.

They stayed on the rink for nearly two hours. In that time, no one else joined them on the rink.

"This place doesn't seem to do much business," Clark said.

"I didn't know it was here," Lois said. "I asked around, and everyone said there hadn't been an ice rink in Melbourne since St Moritz closed in 1981. Finally, Browny remembered that his cousin's daughter had done some ice skating in Ringwood, and I found this place."

Clark gently squeezed her hand. "Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome," Lois said. Then she burst into a grin. "See? I remember how to speak American."

"Can you still do an American accent?"

"Hi, there," Lois drawled. "Howdy. Welcome to Melborn. How're your folks?"

Clark laughed. "You still have it," he said.

"Yeah," Lois said. "I wanted so badly to fit in here that my accent had to go. But anything Australian annoys my mom, so whenever I see her, I'm an all-American girl again."

"I've heard some people who still have their accents after thirty years of being in a new country."

"It wasn't easy," Lois said. "But I've always had an ear for detail, so I just copied the people around me. Firstly, I got rid of words like faucet and elevator and sidewalk, and then I added in some fair dinkum Aussie words and phrases. Then I worked on the sounds."

"So on my first day, you knew exactly what I was facing?"

"Sort of," Lois said. "I had no idea what you'd want, so all I could do was tell you what I wished someone had told me when I first arrived. Of course, it was possible that you didn't mind being different, perhaps you even liked it, but I tried to give you the choice to blend in if that made you more comfortable."

"I can't imagine a nicer welcome," he said.

"You probably didn't need such an intensive course in being an Aussie," Lois said. "You seemed to adapt without too many problems."

Adapting had been a continuing theme in his life.

Lois glanced to the clock on the wall. "We should go," she said. "Toggy will kill me if I get you back late for the game."

They skated to the opening, and Clark held Lois's hand until she was safely off the ice. They sat down and began to remove their skates.

"You did really well, Lois," Clark said. "You didn't fall over once."

"I came close," she said. "I'm sure I nearly pulled your arm from its socket at least once."

"I'm not sure that would be possible," Clark said with a smile.

"What about the time I got up some speed and couldn't stop and nearly rammed you into the barrier?"

Clark smiled. "I was glad to be able cushion your crash," he said.

"You're not much of a cushion," she said.

"I'm not?"

She smiled. "Not soft enough."

"Oh." He thought that was probably a compliment.

They returned their skates to the counter and walked outside. Heavy rain poured from dark clouds.

"Looks like we're not eating outside," Lois commented. She rubbed her hands together. "It's freezing out here."

Actually, it was probably ten degrees from freezing, but Clark wasn't about to mention that. "Do you have plans for lunch?" he asked.

Lois shook her head. "No. I don't come to Ringwood much. But White Horse Road is only a block away, and I'm sure there will be a cafe or something there. I just want somewhere warm."

They sprinted to the main road and found a cafe with a deliciously tempting menu. From outside, they could see an open log fire crackling an undeniable welcome. They

went in, and Lois warmed her hands by the fire. When the waitress came, they sat at a nearby table, and she gave them their menus.

Clark scanned it. The steak sandwich looked good. "Lois?"

"Yes?"

"What does 'with the lot' mean? I've seen it quite a bit, but I'm not sure exactly what I'll get if I order something with the lot."

"You can have a steak sandwich and choose what else goes in it, like lettuce or tomato or onion or cheese. Or you can have 'the lot', and you'll get all their options."

"Sounds good," Clark said. When the waitress came over, he ordered a steak sandwich with the lot.

Lois ordered the minestrone soup with a sesame seed roll.

When the waitress had gone, Clark said, "This is great. In fact, the whole day has been amazing." Thanks to you, he thought. "Thanks to you," he vocalised, smiling softly at her.

Lois smiled back. "I hope the weather clears for the game today," she said. "It might, because the weather usually comes from the west, so they've already had this rain."

"What if it doesn't clear?"

"We get wet," Lois said easily. She grinned suddenly. "If it's been raining over in the north-west, you will get wet *and* muddy."

"Oh."

"Don't worry," she said. "The game's at Windy Hill. That's Essendon's home ground. They probably have showers in the change rooms."

"Probably?"

Her grin flashed. "*Cold* showers."

"No one mentioned that when I was forced into playing this game," Clark said, pretending to look aggrieved.

"You'll survive," Lois said unsympathetically. "You stuck your feet into Corio Bay, and they didn't even turn blue." She held his gaze for moment before continuing. "And anyway, I'm sure you have more of those 'family secrets' hidden away, like the one you used to warm my socks."

Clark merely nodded, awe-struck again by how incredibly beautiful Lois was. Right now, he didn't want to play football this afternoon; he didn't want to drive back to the city and then to the football ground. All he wanted was to be with Lois. He took a deep breath.

"Lois?" he said.

"Yes?"

"Would you go out with me?"

"I am out with you."

"No, I mean… this is great, I've had a fantastic time… but I'd like you to go *out* with me. On a date."

He saw her surprise, and it scraped across his already tightly strung insides. Had she not realised how he felt about her? Not even a hint of it?

"A date?" she asked in a tone that suggested she wasn't sure if she'd heard correctly.

Clark nodded. "A date," he said firmly. "I'd really like to take you on a date."

"Clark…" She smiled, but there was no joy in it. "I don't do short-term relationships."

"I am *not* thinking short term," Clark said gravely.

"I don't do long-distance relationships either."

"We have ten weeks," Clark said hurriedly. "Ten weeks and then—"

"And then you go home," Lois said. "And I stay here."

"But… maybe there are… ways." Clark could hear the desperation in his voice.

"Ways?" she asked dispiritedly. "Ways that involve a lot of time apart? And a lot of travelling? I don't think that's a good idea."

"Travelling doesn't have to be problematic," he said.

"Clark," Lois said evenly. "You live on the other side of the world, about as far away from Melbourne as it's possible to get."

"What if… what if there were ways around the distance problem?" Clark asked. "What if we could work out something that suited both of us?"

Lois shook her head. "No," she said.

"Why not?" His question came out sharply. Clark deliberately softened his voice and asked again. "Why not, Lois? You are an amazing woman, and I can't believe you haven't noticed how much I enjoy being with you."

She stared at him as if he'd said something unbelievable. "Clark, you must have plenty of interested women back in the States. They are probably all falling over themselves to get to you."

"It doesn't matter how many there are if I don't want them."

"So there have been a lot?" she questioned. "Hundreds of women?"

"Hundreds?" he gasped. "No! Not even tens. Just a couple… and no one like you."

"I don't do relationships well," Lois said. "I have a trail of ugly disasters behind me."

"But we could be different," Clark said beseechingly.

She paused, indecisive. "No, Clark," she said eventually. "I don't think it is a good idea."

Her words crushed him, but her hesitation shone like a small glimmer of hope in the darkness.

The waitress arrived with their orders. They thanked her and offered limp smiles. When she had gone, they both looked at their meals, but neither started eating. Clark wasn't hungry. He pushed his plate away and settled back in his chair. He looked at Lois, who was staring miserably at her soup. He couldn't leave it here. He had ruined what had been a great day—a day Lois had gone to such effort to plan for him.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"S'OK," she replied, but she didn't look up at him.

He definitely couldn't leave it here either.

"Other than time and distance," Clark asked, trying to keep his tone even. "Is there any reason why you don't want to be with me?"

Lois's eyes slowly lifted from her soup—although not high enough to reach his face. She took a deep breath and pushed her hair behind her ear. She opened her mouth but then closed it before any words came out.

There *was* something else. "Say it," Clark begged. "Anything is better than not knowing."

Still, she hesitated. "You sure you want to know?" she asked eventually.

"Yes," he said. If he knew, he could try to do something about it. "Yes. I want to know. Whatever it is."

"I know from experience that being with a man that most women find attractive leads to heartache."

He took a moment to consider her words. "Doesn't that depend on the character and integrity of the man?" he asked quietly.

She did look up then and met his gaze, her beautiful brown eyes troubled. "There was a guy," she admitted.

"Would you like to tell me about him?"

Lois absently stirred her soup. "He looked so unbelievably gorgeous, you couldn't help but gawk at him. His body was perfection. He was lots of fun and very charismatic and incredibly popular. He was an actor, working on one of the television shows made in Melbourne. His name was Claude Cooper-Hyde."

"What happened?"

"I fell for him," Lois admitted miserably. "I fell for him so hard, I would have dented concrete. He was very much the flavour of the month, and I knew he barracked for Hawthorn, so I managed to convince Browny that I should interview him."

"And you did?"

Lois nodded. "We hit it off immediately, right from the first moments of the interview. At least, I thought we did. Claude asked me to go with him to a function the next day, and somehow, the whole thing snowballed from that. It was the most exhilarating three weeks of my life. I saw other women look at me. I saw their open envy that I was with Claude. I didn't even take the time to really think about why someone like Claude would want to be with someone like me."

"Three weeks?" Clark probed gently.

"I saw Claude's photo in the social pages—that happened a lot, but this time he was with another woman and they looked… *close*. It had been a Saturday night event, and I hadn't been able to go with him because I had a game to cover. I asked him about the photo, and he said it was nothing, so I believed him. Then, a week later, one of the women's magazines led their edition with a story of an actress talking about her 'night of reckless passion' with Claude Cooper-Hyde."

"Aw, Lois," Clark said.

Lois continued as if she hadn't heard him. "I asked Claude about it, and he told me that his career was riding high and that in his business, you never knew when the wave was going to crash, and he intended to enjoy everything that came with being all the rage."

Clark couldn't stay still any longer. He leaned forward and slid his hand across the table. Lois didn't move, so he gently squeezed the hand holding her spoon. She looked at him with a sad smile, and he reluctantly withdrew his touch.

"I was devastated," Lois said in a voice that pierced Clark's heart.

"He was a fool," Clark said grimly.

"No," Lois said. "I was the fool. He couldn't believe that I had seriously thought he was interested in me." She looked up at Clark, and he could see her still-lingering pain. "He said his only interest in me was that, being a footy journo,

my inside knowledge would be useful in helping him win when he bet on games."

Clark could feel her pain. "Aw, Lois," he said, wishing he could gather her into his arms and hold her until all of the damage inflicted by Claude had melted away.

"And I promised myself never again… *never* again would I fall for a bloke who could have his pick of women."

"Look at me, Lois," Clark said gently.

She lifted her eyes and met his.

"Do you really think I would do that to you?"

"I really think you'd have the opportunity," she said defiantly. "Many, many opportunities."

"And you think that if I'm in Metropolis and you're in Melbourne, there is more of a chance that I will take those opportunities?"

"Makes sense, doesn't it?"

"Lois…" He didn't know what to say. Unless she trusted him, his promises were hollow. "Lois… you've known me for a few weeks. That's not long, I know, but have I done anything in that time to make you think I would do that to you?"

"*Did* you go to Esmeralda that night after she came and asked you to fix her washing machine?"

"When we got into her unit, she took me to her bedroom. I only went in because I thought she was showing me to the washing machine. Once I realised, I got out of there as quickly as possible."

"Three days later, she told me that I didn't know what I was missing because you were a great ride."

"Lois!" Clark deliberately calmed himself. "Lois, nothing happened. Please believe me."

"But you came back from her unit and immediately made an excuse to leave."

Clark sighed. "I know."

"I figured it had to be one of two things—either you wanted to go to Esmeralda, or you wanted me to think you had gone, so I would know you didn't want anything beyond friendship with me."

Clark shook his head. "No," he said. "That's not why I left you."

She said nothing, waiting for his explanation.

"There was never anything between Esmeralda and me," Clark said. "There never will be."

Lois poked at her soup but said nothing.

"Lois…" Clark tried to form his words into something that wasn't going to make this situation worse. "I do understand how much Claude hurt you, but… maybe… you don't have to allow one experience to have such a big effect on your future decisions."

"It's not just Claude," Lois said dejectedly.

Clark felt his heart twist further. "It's not?"

Lois shook her head. "I love football," she said. "But I'm not so enamoured that I don't realise there's a seedy side to it. When you put young men into a situation where they are very well paid, where they have people flocking around them simply because they're on an AFL list, where they constantly have women throwing themselves at them, then it's inevitable that some of them decide they are going to make the most the opportunities."

"But surely not everyone is like that?"

"It's tough," Lois said. "If you play footy in Melbourne, you have immediate celebrity status, and that gets you a whole lot of advantages. Being a journo, I see and hear of things that are… unfortunate."

"Do you print them?"

"Depends on who is going to get hurt," Lois said. "Too often, it's the wives or girlfriends or parents or even the kids who are going to pay if something goes public."

"Lois," Clark said. "I'm not a footballer."

She conceded that with a terse nod. "What about Mayson? You've said she isn't your friend, but I know there is something there. What happened with her?"

"Mayson wanted us to be together," Clark admitted. "And she doesn't like being told 'no' by anyone, but the truth is I didn't even like her all that much. I could never consider being with her in that way."

"Does she know how you feel?"

"Yes. Although it took a long time and some very firm words to get the message through to her that we did not have a future together."

"Firm?" Lois said, and a hint of her smile showed for a tiny moment. "Is that a euphemism for you losing your cool?"

Clark shrugged and almost smiled. "One day, I'd had enough of being hunted, and I was extremely direct."

"I can't imagine you angry," Lois said.

"I'm not really in a position to allow myself to get angry."

Lois pulled apart her bread roll and loaded her knife with a blob of butter.

"I guess that's still a 'no' to the date," Clark said disconsolately.

"There's someone else I need to consider."

"Dan?"

"Yeah," Lois said, not looking particularly surprised that his name had come up.

"Will you tell me what happened with him?" Clark asked. "I know it upsets you."

Lois slowly buttered her roll. "Dan was my friend," she said. "When I arrived at the Herald Sun, there had never been a female in the footy department. Dan was great. He treated me like a colleague and not a bimbo. He'd only recently crossed over from Perth, so he wasn't really established yet either. We worked together, he showed me the ropes, and we became friends."

Maybe Scardino wasn't such a bad guy after all, Clark reflected.

"Then, one day a couple of months ago, we took our lunch to the Fitzroy Gardens, and as we sat on a park bench, Dan suddenly got all serious and told me he'd been in love with me for a very long time."

A single tear escaped from her eye and shimmered down her cheek. "I didn't know," Lois said. "I mean, I knew he liked me, was attracted to me maybe, but I didn't think about him that way."

"And now?" Clark asked gently and held his breath.

"I love him," Lois said, and Clark's world crashed around his feet. "But only as a friend, not… romantically."

The fragments of Clark's world magically reconnected. "Do you think that will ever change?"

Lois shook her head sadly. "I didn't mean to hurt him. He was totally devastated. I didn't know it would mean so much to him."

"It's not your fault he got hurt."

"Dan is such a good bloke," Lois said. "He's kind, and he's honest, and he's fun to be with, and he genuinely cares about others, and sometimes, I just wish things could have been different."

"Different?"

"It makes sense—we work together, we live in the same city, we both love footy, and Dan loved me. He offered me everything he had, and I just shoved it back in his face."

"Lois, if you don't feel—"

"That's the problem," she cut in. "I *do* love him… but as a friend, a brother, even. I will always love him, but I will never *love* him. I don't think our friendship will survive this." Lois brushed the back of her hand along her lower eyelash. "It's me," she said dejectedly. "I fall crazily in love with a low-life like Claude, and when a decent bloke like Dan tells me he loves me, I feel nothing at all. Nothing of what he wants me to feel."

"I'm sorry," Clark said. And it was the truth—partially. He was sorry Lois felt regret that she had hurt her friend. He was most definitely not sorry that she didn't love Dan Scardino. "Is that why Dan went to Metropolis?"

Lois nodded. "The chance came to be in the exchange program, and he took it. I know he only went to get away from me. Because I hurt him so much. And now he's lost his football club, too."

"So if you went on a date with me…"

"If I went on a date with you," Lois said. "It's just going to seem like I'm rubbing Dan's nose in it."

From what Clark had seen, it was very possible that Dan had moved on… to Mayson Drake. He couldn't tell Lois that, though. There was no way to explain how he knew.

"Have you talked to Dan?" Clark asked. "Other than about Fitzroy merging with Brisbane?"

"No. It's not something either of us wants to talk about."

"The guys at the paper? Gazza and the others? They blamed you, didn't they?" Clark said.

Lois shrugged. "They know Dan is a top bloke, one of the absolute best. They know he was gutted by what I did to him. I understand why they sided with him."

"Do you think that if you went out with me, they would react badly? Out of loyalty to Dan?"

"I don't know," Lois said. "I don't care too much about what they think. I do care about Dan getting hurt again."

"What do *you* want to do?"

Lois slowly shook her head. "I don't know."

Clark smiled. "Perhaps going on a date with me would help you sort out what you want," he suggested softly.

Lois didn't match his smile. "And where would that get us?" she asked dismally. "Alone? Apart? Just living for the few weeks we can spend together each year?"

"Are you scared of being hurt again?"

"Yes, I am. And even if you never did what Claude did, we'd be apart, and I reckon after ten weeks of being together, that's going to hurt like crazy."

Being away from you already hurts, Clark thought. "But we'd be together," he said. "And that would be everything."

Lois looked at him directly, as if weighing his words. "Just answer me this," she said. "Why would a man like you want to be with a journo from Melbourne with nothing in her head beyond football?"

"Because of who you are. Because of your loyalty, and your integrity, and your determination, and your incredible strength, and because you are honest and open. And because you care so deeply about people—like you cared for the people who love Fitzroy."

His words had brought a pink velvety colour to her cheeks. Clark wanted to lean over and drop a kiss on the softness of her warm skin.

"There's something about you, Clark Kent," Lois said.

"Is that a good thing?"

The corners of her mouth twitched. "I haven't decided yet."

"I will do everything in my power not to hurt you, Lois," Clark promised. "Will you think about going on a date with me? Please?"

She smiled. "Eat your sanger."

"Sanger?"

"Australian for sandwich."

"Oh." Clark examined his 'sanger'. It had slices of red beets in it, and the juice had leaked all over his steak. "What is that red stuff?"

"Beetroot," Lois said, as if its presence in his sandwich was totally expected.

"In a steak sandwich?" he exclaimed.

"You're in Australia now," she told him. "Eat your sanger."

Clark smiled. "Yes, ma'am." He picked up his sandwich and, trying very hard to ignore the red stains, took a bite.

It didn't matter anyway. He doubted he would taste it.

After weeks of keeping his silence, he had finally voiced his feelings to Lois.

She hadn't agreed to go on a date with him. But she hadn't said 'no' when he'd asked her to think about it.

He had a chance.

They had a chance.

Part 19

Clark said very little as they drove back across Melbourne. The silence gave Lois a chance to try to establish some order in the tumult of her mind.

Clark had asked her for a date!

That had shocked her.

Yet in another way, it hadn't.

She knew Clark was an all-round nice guy who treated everyone with courteous respect.

But she couldn't help noticing the little things he did for her that seemed to go beyond courtesy.

She couldn't fathom how a man like Clark Kent had even noticed a woman like Lois Lane.

Surely there had to be other women, beautiful and sophisticated women… yet he'd asked *her* for a date.

And, impossibly, it hadn't been easy for him. He hadn't asked lightly. Despite her initial perception of him—based solely on his looks, she admitted—she was beginning to think he wasn't the kind of man who would ever ask something like that lightly.

He'd looked so unsure, it had tugged at her heartstrings far more effectively than if he'd been assured and polished in his invitation. As far as Lois could see, Clark had every reason to be confident in everything. Yet often, she sensed his vulnerability, and that was a quality she had found endearing from the first, and now, as she had come to know him, she found it downright tantalizing.

There was definitely something about Clark Kent.

Lois wasn't sure what it was, but her well-schooled alarm bells were silent. Her instincts were that Clark was a good man. An honest man. A trustworthy man.

Dan was all of that, she reminded herself.

But Dan had never caused her heart to race the way Clark did.

The image of Dan's smile had never crowded her thoughts the way Clark's did.

Lois's mouth went dry as her mind again recalled the image of Clark in the footy gear. Today, he would be dressed like that for three hours. She gulped in luscious anticipation. *Three* hours.

Every woman in the crowd would probably jump the fence and accost him. Right in the middle of the game.

No… Lois knew that wouldn't happen. But she would bet a year's wages that plenty of female hearts would skip a beat, and many female throats would constrict when Clark Kent ran onto the field.

He'd asked her for a date.

And laid bare his hopes. Given her a glimpse of his heart.

He'd taken a huge leap, and she'd left him hanging.

Lois knew she needed to break free from her rumination. Problem was, the only person to talk to was… the object of that rumination. She took refuge in football. “Are you nervous about the game?” she asked.

“Not as much as I was,” Clark answered.

Lois could hear the trace of his misgivings. She glanced sideways, trying to reconcile the magnificence she saw with the uncertainty she heard. She shook her head in bafflement. “You can do this, Clark,” she said. “You’re in good shape, you’re young, you’ve played a lot of different sports before—all that puts you way ahead of most of them.”

“Most of them grew up living, breathing, and eating footy.” Despite the gloominess of his words, she saw a glimmer of his smile.

Lois chuckled. “You go out there, you kick the footy, you do your best.”

“Lois, there are things you don’t understand.”

“It won’t be just you,” she said gently. “That’s the beauty of footy—it’s never just you. You have seventeen mates out there with you. It’s a team.”

Clark didn’t seem convinced.

Lois reached across and rested her hand on his forearm. “I know a lot more about football than you do, and I’m telling you that you can do this,” she said firmly. She forced herself to remove her hand from his taut, muscular arm. “But there is something I should probably warn you about.”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“Do you know what sledging is?”

“Going down a hill on a sledge?”

Lois laughed. “Not in Australia, it isn’t. Sledging is saying something—anything—to your opponent in the hope that it will put him off his game.”

“Oh.”

“I’ve never played, but I’ve heard some examples of sledging, and I think it can get quite willing out there.”

“Willing?”

“Rough. Just realise that some players are chatty, and they will say absolutely anything if they think it will take your mind off the next contest. They are hoping to distract you so that the next time the ball comes, you’re still thinking about what they said rather than concentrating on winning the ball for your team.”

“OK.”

“It could be that it’s no worse than what you’ve encountered in other sports. Or it could be that it’s a shock, so I wanted to warn you.”

“I figure I should just try to ignore it?”

“It depends on how adept you are at firing back comments. And how low you are willing to go in what you say.”

“Probably not that low,” Clark said uneasily.

Lois smiled. “You know, I had sort of assumed that. Although white line fever can do strange things to people.”

“White line fever?”

“It means that when some people cross the white line of the boundary and go onto the ground for a game, they become very different people. They might be the quietest person imaginable, but on the footy field, they’re loud and aggressive and stalk around looking for someone to devour.”

“Does that happen much?”

Lois grinned. “You definitely don’t want to rile Bluey on the field. A little provocation and he becomes a monster. Maybe it’s that red hair of his.”

“Bluey?” Clark asked in surprise.

Lois nodded. “That’s what white line fever does to you.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Clark said.

“After the game, the team will probably go to the pub—particularly if we win.”

“Will you come, too?” Clark asked. “Please?”

Lois heard the hope in his voice. “Sure, I will,” she promised.

Clark chuckled, and some of his tension seemed to seep away. “If we win, will you go on a date with me?” he asked.

She grinned in response to the sudden buoyancy in his tone. “If we lose, will you accept ‘no’ as my answer?”

“No.”

Lois raised her hand off the steering wheel to indicate he had answered his own question. She made sure he could see she was smiling, though.

“If I kick a goal, will you go out with me?” Clark persisted.

The lightness embedded in his tone pulsated warmth through her veins. He didn’t sound so anxious about the game now. And clearly, their date was still prominent in his mind. “Kick one, and I’ll think about it.”

“You already said you’d think about it,” he reminded her quickly.

Lois smiled. “Kick a goal, and I’ll have an answer for you within a week.”

“A week?” he exclaimed. “You don’t give an inch, do you, Flinders?”

“When you grow up with footy, no quarter is asked and none is given.”

“Even in relationships?”

His tone had turned slightly serious, but Lois chuckled. “All I know is that whatever I’ve done in the past hasn’t worked.”

“Perhaps it wasn’t anything you did,” Clark said gently.

She shrugged. “What about you, big guy? There was Mayson who wanted you, but you weren’t interested. There has to be others.”

“Lana Lang,” Clark said. “I took her to the prom, and we dated for a year…”

“But?”

“But I went away to college, and after a few months of not seeing each other, we agreed that we should both be free to date others.”

“Did you?”

“Not really.”

“Did she?”

“She married another guy six months later and had a baby a year after that.”

“Did that upset you?”

“It shocked me,” Clark said. “Someone younger than me—getting married, having children—it all seemed to happen very quickly.”

“You’re not the marrying type?” Lois asked, trying to sound like there was no particular significance to her question.

Clark paused. “I’m not sure I should answer that.”

She felt the first quiver of her alarm bells. “Why not?”

“Because I’ve just asked you on a date, and I don’t want to scare you off.”

Lois forced some air into her collapsing lungs to enable her to speak. “Better that I know now than I find out later.”

“OK.” Clark’s head turned her way, and her breath snagged again. “It’s what I’ve always wanted… to be married and raise a family.”

Opposing floods of panic and relief clashed ferociously somewhere deep in her stomach. Clark wanted to get married! And he’d asked her for a date!

“Lois?” he said.

“Yes?”

“Don’t you have a response?”

“That… ah… surprises me.”

“What does?”

“That you want to get married. And that you aren’t married already. I can’t imagine you would find it difficult to get dates.”

“I don’t want to get married,” he clarified. “I want to marry the right woman.”

“Do you think you will know when you find her?”

“I’m sure of it.”

Lois determinedly pushed away any and all possible conclusions from his statement. She grinned casually and slipped him a sideways glance. “Oohh… very confident, Mr Kent,” she said. “Now, all you have to do is take that confidence onto the footy field, and we should win by ten goals.”

He smiled but said nothing.

And Lois was alone with her thoughts again.

* * *

There was, Clark had to admit, a very real feeling of comradeship in gathering with the other players from his team in the locker rooms. There was an upbeat atmosphere fired by nervous energy and an almost palpable resolve. It reminded him of his high school days—before he had decided that competitive sports were incompatible with superpowers.

Toggy moved among them, patting a shoulder here, offering a few quiet words of encouragement or advice there. “I’ll be shtarting ye on the bench, Rubber,” he said when he reached Clark. “But ne’er fear, lad, to be sure we’ll be needin’ ye afore the day is out.”

When Clark and Lois had arrived at the ground, he had been shocked to discover that quite a crowd of spectators had already gathered. He remembered being told that this was a game to raise money for charity, but he hadn’t translated that knowledge into the expectation of a crowd of, in his estimation, at least a thousand people.

Also unexpected had been Lois’s quick hug as she’d bid him good luck. She had opened the trunk of the Jeep for him to take out his bag. After shutting the trunk, she had given him a so-short-he-didn’t-have-the-time-to-grasp-what-she-

was-doing hug. Then she'd smiled and said, "Go well, big guy."

Clark had walked into the dressing rooms in a daze.

Toggy called his players together and outlined their strategy, illustrating his points with dizzying diagrams on a whiteboard.

"She's howlin' a blast that'd flatten your house without blinkin' an eyelid," he said. "When she's behind us, ye're to kick it long up the guts. When we're agin the wind, I want ye to be sure and shtick tight to the flanks. Close it down. Dinna give 'em an inch."

The players nodded, and there were a few grunts of agreement. Clark hoped that anything vital to the game-plan would be discernible by the time he was actually called upon to implement it.

After Toggy's pre-game speech, the Print Media team, dressed in their green shorts and green-and-gold jumpers, ran onto the ground together for their warmup. The opposition, dazzling in blue and red, were already there.

As they jogged a circuit of the ground, Clark searched for Lois in the crowd. He found her quickly. She was standing next to Browny, deep in conversation. Clearly, he'd forgiven her for Hawthorn beating Carlton. As the team passed them, Lois clapped wildly and screamed out, "Go the Print Boys."

After what was basically a mini-training session, they ran back into the rooms. Toggy got them to huddle around him, arms across each other's shoulders. He reminded them what the Electronic Boys had done to them the previous year and told them that today was the day for revenge.

Raucous cheers of agreement greeted this statement.

Then they dispersed and ran onto the ground again. The crowd had built up and was now probably close to double Clark's original estimation. He snuck a look at Lois. She waved, and he hoped it was meant for him.

Ten minutes later, Clark found himself sitting alongside two teammates on the bench as the umpire thumped the ball into the turf for the opening bounce. His team had lost the toss, and the other team had chosen to kick with the strong breeze. Aided by the wind, the Electronic Media scored eight goals by quarter time. The Print Media had one. Other than occasional sprints along the boundary line to 'keep warm', Clark hadn't left the bench.

"OK, lads," Toggy said when his team congregated for the quarter-time break. "To be sure, that wasn't the shtart we needed, but the wind is wid us this coming quarter. Just git it on yer boot, and git it forward. Banjo an' Barney'll do the rest."

One of the trainers held up a board with the players' names stuck in the various on-field positions. Clark noted he was again on the bench. When the team dispersed, he jogged back to the sidelines and looked towards Lois, unsure whether he felt relieved that, being on the bench, he could do no damage or embarrassed that so far he was the only player Toggy hadn't felt the need to call upon.

Lois was chatting with Browny and Gazza's wife, Narelle. Lois saw Clark, and she responded with some enthusiastic applause and a loud cheer for the Print Boys.

With just a few minutes left in the second quarter, the call came that Clark had dreaded. He was to go onto the ground and play in defence. He was told that his opponent was wearing number four and Clark was to follow him wherever he went.

He ran onto the ground, and a teammate saw him and pointed to a huge guy standing alone in the Electronic forward line. Clark didn't need to check the guy's back to know he wore number four.

"What are you?" his opponent scoffed before Clark had even reached him. "An escapee from a library? Or a science lab? Where's yer white coat?"

Clark extended his hand. "I'm Clark," he said.

"I'm not shaking your hand 'til the end," Number Four sneered. "That's assuming I haven't put you in hospital by then."

Clark retracted his hand.

His opponent looked Clark up and down with clear derision. "They've put a Yank on me," he said. "A Yank wearing glasses. This should be fun. I bet Toggy doesn't have the guts to keep you here when we have the wind. That would be a slaughter. I reckon I could kick a dozen goals if I'm on you. Though you probably won't see either me or the ball, Four Eyes."

The ball remained at the other end of the ground, which allowed Number Four to continue his stream of monologue aimed at Clark. He denounced Clark's glasses, his looks, and his parentage and gave a detailed, highly inaccurate history of the United States of America.

Up the field, one of the players in red and blue broke away from the group and ran towards Clark and his opponent. The player bounced the ball and then kicked it. Clark's opponent ran towards the oncoming ball. Clark trailed behind him. The ball bounced in front of them and lobbed high over the opponent's head and straight into Clark's arms.

He needed half a moment to overcome the shock of actually having the ball. Twenty metres away, Clark saw Bluey, arms raised and screaming, "RUBBER!" Without

much thought, Clark kicked the ball in that direction, and to his very great relief, Bluey marked it.

The crowd were cheering, but from amidst the noise, Clark heard the voice he knew belonged to Lois.

"Yay!! Clark!! Well done! Great kick!"

Clark's smile died as his opponent turned on him, grabbed a fistful of his jumper, and glared at him, their noses a mere half an inch apart. "You try that again," he snarled. "And you'll be going home in a coffin. And when they open the lid, not even your own mother will recognise you."

He released Clark's jumper, and Clark turned away to watch where Banjo was preparing to kick for goal.

Clark looked into the crowd and found Lois. He'd been expecting her to be watching the play, but she was staring directly at him.

Banjo's shot resulted in a goal. Clark could tell by the cheer from the crowd. Lois, however, didn't take her eyes from him.

He smiled.

She smiled back.

Clark's spirits soared.

* * *

Clark spent the third quarter stranded in his own forward line as he watched the Electronic Media team use the wind to great advantage and pile on seven goals.

His new opponent was the silent type. He didn't say a word. Clark didn't repeat the mistake of offering to shake his hand.

By three-quarter-time, the Print Media were eight goals down.

Toggy was in fine form. "Jusht kick it long, lads," he said. "Yerra, to be sure we can shtill win this game. 'Tis ours if we want it. We have a howling gale at our backs, jusht bang it onto the boot, and kick it up the guts. Go shtraight for home, lads. I want bold football. I want quick football. I want relentless football. If ye see the ball, ye go for it."

He made a few positional changes and then said, "Rubber? Where are ye, lad? OK, I want ye on that there number four agin. Shtick close to him; dinna give him an inch."

Clark nodded.

After a few more urgings from Toggy to 'fire up, lads', the group broke apart, and Clark headed into the backline with the other five defenders. He approached the number four and stood next to him.

"You again," Number Four spat.

Clark said nothing.

"It's not like Toggy to give the game away this early—even when you're so far down the gurgler."

Clark still said nothing.

The umpire bounced the ball. It was cleared by an opponent and kicked towards Clark and Number Four.

Things happened very quickly. Clark ran to the spinning, skidding ball and bent low to pick it up. He saw a flash of red and blue from his right and had less than a second to relax his muscles. The opponent cannoned into Clark's shoulder and neck with such force that he ricocheted off Clark and collapsed onto the ground.

Before Clark had the time to check on the opponent's wellbeing, he was attacked on all sides by a pack of angry men in blue and red, all clutching a piece of his jumper and making a decent attempt to rip him into a hundred pieces.

One of the players drew back his fist, threatening to punch.

Clark felt a moment of panic.

They couldn't hurt him, but they could hurt themselves. Badly. And that was going to lead to some very awkward questions.

From nowhere came Gazza and Bluey. They took hold of an opponent each and hauled them away. Two other teammates arrived, and Clark was left standing alone as a cluster of wrestling matches played out around him. The guy who had been flattened was sitting up—unhurt, but looking, not surprisingly, like he didn't know what had hit him.

Clark hesitated. Was he supposed to go and help his teammates? Or go and check on the player he'd, albeit accidentally, felled?

A few feet away, Bluey and a significantly bigger opponent were engaged in what looked to be the most ferocious of the tussles. Clark went to them and tried to pull them apart.

The umpire ran up, frantically blowing his whistle. "Boys! Boys! Break it up, boys. No need to be stupid."

Clark managed to separate Bluey and the opponent, and he stood between them. Bluey had a trickle of blood leaking from a gash above his right eyebrow. Number Four rose from his tussle and menacingly strode towards Clark.

Gazza released the opponent he had hauled away and blocked Number Four's path to Clark. "You so much as lay a finger on the Yank, and you'll have me to deal with," Gazza warned in a low, ominous voice.

"He flattened Smiddy," Number Four accused darkly.

"He was going for the ball," Gazza said. "Smiddy hit him high."

"He's a Yank," Number Four shot back with contempt. "He's probably never played a game of real footy in his life."

"He's a mate of mine," Gazza said in a tone that clearly ended the matter. Gazza turned to Clark. "You right, mate?"

Clark nodded.

"I'll be watching your back," he said with a pointed glance to Number Four.

The umpire handed the ball to Clark. "It's your free," he said. "For a head-high hit. Are you able to take your kick?"

"Ah… yes."

"And you get fifty metres," the umpire said. He ran away, towards the Print Media's goal.

Bluey came over, blood still oozing down his cheek.

"You got fifty, mate," Bluey said. "Run forward to where the umpie is. Then just kick it as far as you can."

"Are you OK?" Clark asked. "You're bleeding."

"She'll be right," Bluey said cheerfully as he used his jumper to mop up the blood. "So long as the umpie doesn't see it." He ran away before Clark had the chance to say anything else.

Clark jogged forward to where the umpire had set the mark. He was about eighty metres from the goal. Clark knew he could kick the distance easily. He was tempted to slam it home for a goal—he really wanted to give something back to his teammates.

They had come to help him when he had been outnumbered and in a situation that could have led anywhere.

Clark took a few shuffling steps forward and swung his foot through the ball. He used a little super strength, enough that the ball went about sixty-five metres. About five players flew for the mark, and the ball spilt to the ground. Banjo swooped in, picked it up, and kicked a goal.

"Way to go, Clark! Great kick!"

Clark smiled at Lois's voice.

On his way back to his position in the backline, Clark passed Bluey, who was still trying to stem the drizzle of blood from above his eye. He grinned. "Great kick, Rubber," he said.

"Are you OK?"

"Ssshh," Bluey said. "If the ump sees me, he'll send me off with the Blood Rule."

Clark kept jogging and stood next to Number Four.

Number Four said nothing.

The umpire bounced the ball, and it was swept into the Print Media's forward line. Clark risked a look to Lois. She was watching the play, her hands clenched in excitement and her body giving little jumps as she tried to urge the ball towards their goal.

Clark smiled.

He loved her.

He loved her so much.

Suddenly, all he wanted was for the game to end so he could be back with her.

During the next twenty minutes, the Print Media kicked five goals and kept their opponents scoreless. Suddenly, Clark's team was only ten points down.

"Two more goals," the players said to each other as they jogged back to their positions after the goal had been kicked. "Come on, mate, just two more goals."

The umpire bounced the ball, blew his whistle, and gave a free kick to the Electronic Media ruckman. He kicked it directly at Clark and his opponent. It was a wobbly kick, and realising it would hold up in the wind, Clark ran forward. He felt his opponent jostling at his shoulder. Clark held his line, and somehow, the ball landed safely in his outstretched arms.

"Great mark! Go, Clark, you're killing him!"

Clark looked up-field and saw Gazza sixty metres away. Clark kicked long. It skewed a little off his boot and missed Gazza, but it was marked by a teammate who'd run at least thirty metres to meet the flight of the ball.

The teammate went back and kicked the ball directly through the goal posts.

Four points down.

The runner came out to Clark and offered him the bottle of water. "One minute to go, Rubber," he said. "One minute. We've just got to get one goal. If you get the ball, just bomb it long like you've been doing."

Before Clark could reply, the runner had taken the water bottle and gone to the next player.

The umpire bounced the ball, and it flew high into the air. Once back on the ground, it was held under the desperate bodies from both teams. The ball didn't come out. The umpire blew the whistle, called "Mine," and retrieved the ball. He bounced it again.

Clark watched, willing his teammates to find a way to clear the ball and get it towards their goal. Bluey dove at

the ball, gathered it, and shot out a handball. Banjo took it and was immediately tackled. The ball fell free, and at least six players crashed on top of it.

"Come on," Clark muttered. "Come on."

The umpire bounced again. It was pushed out of the congestion and fell at the feet of a teammate. He picked up the ball and tried to kick it forward. An opponent flew across the ball and smothered it. The ball was picked up by a player in red and blue. He ran ten metres, bounced the ball, ran another ten, and kicked it towards Clark and Number Four.

The ball was still in the air when the siren sounded.

The game was over.

They'd lost.

By four points.

Clark felt a savage, burning disappointment swell inside him.

They'd lost.

Part 20

Clark felt a tap on his shoulder and turned. Number Four was there, his hand extended. "Great game, mate," he said.

"Thanks," Clark said. "Congratulations."

"For a Yank, you're a bloody good kick."

"Thanks."

Number Four moved on, and Clark was surrounded by other opponents. He shook hands with them all. When he crossed paths with one of his teammates, they patted each others' shoulders and traded looks of disappointment.

With the post-game etiquette seen to, the teams gathered as two separate groups. A man Clark recognised as the sports anchor for one of the television stations took the microphone. He thanked the sponsors, thanked the crowd, announced that they had raised eighteen thousand dollars for the Royal Children's Hospital, and handed a rather battered cup to the captain of the Electronic Media.

The Print Media team then trooped into their locker rooms.

The mood was sombre. Clark looked into the faces of his teammates and saw the misery of having given everything they had, only to fall short of victory.

At least three of them sported bandages. Many were limping. The trainers circulated, handing out ice packs and helping strap them to body parts that were sore and strained. Barney, the Sports Editor of *The Age* newspaper, gingerly peeled off his jumper, and Clark winced when he saw the huge, angry bruise across his chest.

"You were lucky he didn't poleaxe you into next week," the trainer told him.

Barney nodded and patiently waited, in obvious pain, as the trainer strapped two huge ice packs around his chest.

"You need anything, Rubber?"

Clark turned to the trainer who had appeared at his side. "No, thanks. Nothing."

"I want to have a squiz at your shoulder."

Clark nodded, figuring it would be simpler to agree. The trainer lifted Clark's right arm and manipulated it in different directions.

"Does that hurt?" he asked.

"No."

"Not at all?"

"No. It feels fine."

The trainer moved up to Clark's shoulder and pressed his fingertips into the joint. "Feels solid enough," he said with surprise. "I was sure you'd have some damage. It was a hard hit."

"I'm fine," Clark said. "Thanks."

"What about your neck?"

"It's good," Clark said. "Thanks."

The trainer walked off to the next player.

Clark slumped onto the concrete floor, knees raised, elbows on his knees.

He wanted Lois.

He wondered how disappointed she would be by their loss.

He wished he could have won for her.

But mostly, he wanted her.

He wanted her smile.

And he wanted her touch.

He just wanted her.

Toggy was moving around the players, saying a few words of consolation. He came up to Clark. "Good game, Rubber," he said. "When're ye going home, lad?"

"September," Clark replied.

"Ye're coming back next year?"

"No."

"Pity," Toggy said. "Ye've a kick on ye like a mule." He patted Clark's shoulder and moved on to the next player.

Gazza joined Clark, dropping next to him. “I hate the feeling of losing,” Gazza said dolefully.

“Me, too,” Clark said, realising it was true.

“It feels like you’re carrying a ten-ton truck on your shoulders.”

“Yeah.”

“And a slab of concrete in your guts.”

“Yeah.”

“You going in the ice bath?” Gazza asked.

“The ice bath?”

“It helps recovery,” Gazza explained. “It’s the absolute pits, standing in the ice, but tomorrow you’ll be glad you did.”

“I think I’ll give it a miss,” Clark said.

“How’s your head?”

“My head?”

“Where that mongrel, Smiddy, lifted his elbow and got you high.”

“Oh, yeah, that,” Clark said. “It’s OK, he didn’t connect too well.”

Gazza grinned. “Betcha won’t be saying that tomorrow. It was a hard hit. You won’t be moving your shoulder with any comfort for a couple of days.”

“Thanks for coming to help when I had four of them on me.”

Gazza looked surprised. “You didn’t think we’d just stand there and watch, did you?”

“I don’t know… I didn’t think…”

“You gotta fly the flag,” Gazza said. “The opposition have to know that if they take on one of us, they take on all of us.”

“Well… thanks. I appreciate it.”

“Forget it, mate,” Gazza said. “You coming to the pub?”

“Yeah.”

Gazza hauled himself to his feet. “See you there. I’m off to the torture of the ice baths. Sure you don’t want to join me?”

“I’m sure.”

Gazza chuckled. “Your funeral.”

Across the room, Clark saw a doctor leaning over Bluey. Clark stood and went over, feeling sick. “Ah, Bluey,” he said, watching as the doctor tied the second stitch.

Bluey smiled and was sharply told to stay still. Clark watched as the doctor added a third stitch.

“Keep it clean,” the doctor instructed when he’d finished.

Bluey nodded and touched his fingers to his forehead.

“Bluey… thanks,” Clark said when the doctor had walked away. “I’m sorry you got hurt helping me.”

“Couldn’t stand by and do nothing,” Bluey said simply.

“Well, thanks… mate.”

Bluey stood and gestured to his eye. “Do you reckon it looks dashing?”

“Definitely,” Clark said.

“Do you reckon it’ll make me a hit with the ladies?”

“I hope so.”

They shared a grin, and Bluey limped away.

Clark picked up his bag and headed into the showers.

* * *

Lois leant against the bonnet of her Jeep.

Clark should be out of the dressing room soon.

Her heart cavorted at the thought of seeing him again.

Which was ridiculous. She had spent all morning with him… had eaten lunch with him… and had watched him play a game of footy.

But now… all she wanted was to see him again.

Every time a figure appeared at the dressing room door, her heart sprang into anticipation mode—only to sink with disappointment when it wasn’t Clark.

This was silly. But she couldn’t help it.

Despite all her questions, all her uncertainties, she had fallen for Clark Kent. Big time.

When had she started falling?

Lois didn’t know—but seeing him try on the footy gear had certainly done nothing to slow the plunge.

But when had it started?

If she were honest, probably when he had stood between her and the West Coast Eagles supporters at the airport.

And, when asking her for a date, his sincerity had beckoned her past the point where she could get out of this with her heart undamaged.

But that was a moot point. Lois didn’t want to get out.

From the doorway of the dressing room, he appeared, and her heart began to prance like an unbroken colt.

Clark had walked only two steps when a group of three young women flooded over him. Lois heard them tell him how well he'd played and how they were going to the pub and were wondering if he'd like to join them.

They were young, probably early twenties—all blonde, all glamorous.

Lois saw Clark shake his head. "No, thanks," he said.

One of the women reached into her bag and offered him a piece of paper. "This is my number," she said. "If you can't come tonight, perhaps we can do it some other night."

Clark didn't take the paper she offered. "No, thanks," he said. "I'm with someone."

Lois saw the disappointment slither through the group of young women. The woman thrust the paper at him again. "Take this," she persisted. "Just in case your other thing doesn't work out."

"No, thanks," Clark said, still polite, but his tone held solid conviction that they couldn't fail to misinterpret.

"Are you sure?"

"Very sure."

With regret, they turned and walked away. Clark looked around.

He saw Lois and smiled.

Her heart exploded.

* * *

Clark scanned the almost-deserted car park. Then, he saw the Jeep… with Lois leaning against it.

As soon as she saw him, she bounced off the hood and came towards him. She stopped when they were face to face, a foot apart.

She looked at him for a long moment, driving his heart faster as her brown eyes steadily bored into his. "I told you," she said quietly.

"Told me what?" he asked. His words came out low and husky.

"I told you you could do it."

"We didn't win," he said.

"You were a winner," she said. "I don't care what the scoreboard said—you were a winner to me."

He smiled. "Thanks."

Clark expected Lois to turn and go to the Jeep, but she didn't move. "I've thought about what you said today."

His heart flipped. "About what?" he said, his throat constricting around his words.

"The date."

Clark dove into the depths of her beautiful eyes, and what he saw caused his head to spin. "H…have you made any decisions?"

"Is the offer still open?"

"Absolutely."

"Yes," Lois said.

"You'll go out with me?"

Lois nodded, Clark dropped his bag, and she slid into his arms. He lifted her and spun her around. When he returned her feet to the ground, his hands remained on her waist as he drank in the beauty of her smile. He couldn't find any words, so for a long moment, he simply looked at her, hoping his obvious excitement made speech superfluous.

Lois had agreed to go out with him.

Her hand slid up his arm. "How's your shoulder?"

"It's fine."

"It was a hard bump." Her fingers gently massaged him. Her touch was exquisite. "It *is* a bit sore, isn't it?" she said.

"What you're doing feels great."

"If it's still sore later, I'll rub it again for you."

"OK, thanks."

Her hand dropped from him, and together, they ambled to the back of the Jeep.

Lois released the trunk, and Clark stowed his bag before going to the driver's side and opening her door. "Are we going to the pub?" he asked.

"If you still want to."

"I'd like to," he said. "I'd like to buy Gazza and Bluey drinks. I owe them that."

"Let's go, then," Lois said.

"And afterwards, can we talk about our date?"

She smiled. "I'd like that."

Clark closed her door and crossed to the passenger side. They drove out of the grounds of Windy Hill and headed back to the city.

"Were you disappointed that we lost?" Clark asked.

"A bit," Lois said. "But I mostly wanted a win for you."

There was no way Clark felt like anything but a winner right now. "Not for you?" he asked.

She shrugged. “I put all my competitive emotional energy into Hawthorn. I don’t have much left over for any other team.”

“I’ve heard Aussies say they were gutted by something. I didn’t understand that until today.”

“Yeah, losing hurts,” Lois said. “I was hoping you’d get to experience a win. That feels fantastic.”

“I feel amazing now.”

She smiled. “Did you ice your shoulder?”

“My shoulder’s fine.”

“It looked like a pretty hard hit to me,” she persisted.

A sudden thought occurred to him, and Clark couldn’t stop himself asking, “Were you worried about me?”

Lois responded with a slight smile and a quick glance. “I was very relieved when it became clear that you weren’t hurt,” she said. Then, almost as an afterthought, she added, “I’ve seen plenty of bumps in footy, but none of them made me feel as crook as yours did.”

That was bad… good… hopeful. “Sorry,” he offered, though he knew his unruly smile probably tarnished any sincerity attached to his apology.

She responded with a shy smile. “It’s different when it’s someone you… care about,” she said.

Clark felt a groundswell of elation surge through him. Lois *cared* about him. He looked sideways and saw that she appeared a little flustered by her admission. He decided to store away that magnificent memory and for now, not push for further elaboration. “I wasn’t expecting Gazza and Bluey and the others to react the way they did.”

“Why? Don’t people stick up for their mates in America?”

“Yes, but… I didn’t realise I was their mate.”

“I told you that one of the best things about footy is that you’re never on your own,” Lois said.

Clark nodded. He didn’t agree, though. The absolute best thing about footy—no question—was to come out after the game and be met by the woman he loved.

* * *

At the pub, the mood slowly brightened as the sting of defeat receded. Most of the Print Media players were there, and with the addition of friends and family, it developed into a loud and boisterous group.

They stayed well into the evening. Clark talked with a variety of people—teammates from other papers, Narelle, and Browny’s wife, Sue—but all the time, he watched Lois.

He still couldn’t believe that she had agreed to go on a date with him. And had admitted that she cared about him.

Just after nine, the Electronic Media team arrived, and the noisy cheerfulness escalated. Number Four, who was known as Bonzo, brought a drink over for Clark, and they chatted amicably for ten minutes. Smiddy joined them, and Clark was relieved to see that he seemed to carry no injury, despite having run into a man of steel.

“Do you work out?” he asked Clark.

Clark nodded.

“Thought so,” Smiddy said. “It was like hitting a brick dunny.”

Clark didn’t know how to respond, so he took a sip from the beer Bonzo had bought him and let the comment pass.

Later, Lois drove Clark home. “You seemed to be having a good time,” he said.

“Yeah,” Lois agreed. “It was good.”

“You haven’t mixed socially with them for a while, have you?”

“Not since the thing with Dan, and that was two months ago.”

“Did they tell you outright that you weren’t welcome?”

“No,” Lois said. “But I didn’t need to be told. I could see how they were all rallying around Dan. And I didn’t mind—he was a bit of a mess.” She looked across to Clark. “Was Mayson hurt when you told her you didn’t want to be with her?”

“Which time?” Clark asked.

“Oh.”

“I don’t think ‘hurt’ is how I would describe it,” Clark said. “Incredulous, incensed, indignant… that probably covers it.”

“Do you think she loved you?”

Clark didn’t want to seem petulant, but he also didn’t want to lie to Lois. “No,” he said. “I think she saw me as a nice accessory to the career she was building for herself. Having a man on her arm suited the image she wanted.”

Lois grinned. “I hadn’t thought of that,” she teased. “Going out with you could be *exactly* what I need to climb a rung or two on the ladder.”

“Only if they know,” Clark said with a smile. Then he sobered. “Do you want to keep it a secret that we’re going on a date?”

“Not a secret,” she said. “But perhaps there’s no need to advertise it.”

"OK." Clark paused. "But you still want to go? On our date?"

She smiled. "Of course."

A few of his doubts eased their grip on his heart. "Good. Have you thought about which day suits you?"

Lois nodded. "It can't be tomorrow night because the teams will come in and it'll be late by the time we finish work. It can't be Saturday or Sunday night because we'll both have work commitments."

"And there is a game Friday night," Clark said, disappointed that it seemed they were going to have to wait nearly a week.

"Has Browny said you're doing the Friday night game?" Lois asked.

"No."

"I'm not either."

Clark felt a dawning of hope. "So… would Friday night be suitable for you?"

"Yes."

"You don't mind missing the flake and chips and Milo in front of the television?"

Lois smiled. "I could probably miss it once. If there's a good reason."

Clark smiled. "Friday night?" he said.

"Friday night," she agreed.

Less than forty-eight hours to wait! Clark could feel the excitement billow inside him, but the flipside was that he had less than two days to plan what to do. He really wanted to make their first date special for Lois.

They arrived at the end of his driveway, and Lois stopped the Jeep.

"Thanks for a wonderful day, Lois," Clark said. There was so much more he could add—his appreciation for her taking him to the ice rink, how much her encouragement before and during the game had meant to him, and how wonderful it had felt to emerge from the locker room and find her waiting for him. And most of all, his joy that she had agreed to go out with him.

"Thanks, Clark. I had a lot of fun."

Clark hesitated. He so, so wanted to lean across and place a kiss on her mouth. Or even her cheek. Or even just lean forward and see if she responded. He didn't. In two days, he would bring her home from their date. That would be the time to test if she would be open to his kiss.

He opened his door and got out of the Jeep. "Bye, Lois," he said.

Lois lifted her hand in farewell. "See you tomorrow, Clark."

He stepped back and watched her drive away. "Bye, honey," he said quietly. "I'm missing you already."

* * *

On the way to the Herald Sun office the next morning, Clark continued to plan his date with Lois. He'd considered at least a dozen scenarios and had yet to decide which one she would prefer. He had concluded that perhaps he should ask her. The thought of surprising her was appealing, but it carried inherent risk.

Clark arrived at the office and noticed Lois wasn't in yet. Before he had reached his desk, the shout rang out across the newsroom.

"RUBBER!"

Clark went into the editor's office, and Browny gestured for him to sit down. As Clark did, the phone rang. "Excuse me a min, Rubber," Browny said as he picked up the phone.

While Clark waited, he wondered if it were coincidence that Browny had called the moment he'd arrived in the newsroom or if Browny had been waiting for him specifically.

Surely it couldn't have anything to do with his date with Lois? Was it something about the game yesterday? Or a story he wanted Clark to write?

Browny hung up the phone and turned to Clark. "Good game yesterday, Rubber," he said. "You did us proud."

That surprised him. "I didn't do much at all."

"You showed a clear head and never once shirked a contest. It wasn't your fault we lost."

"Thanks."

"I reckon it's about time you saw some of this country, Rubber, so I'm sending you to Brisbane for the weekend," Browny said. "You and Banjo and Gazza."

Clark's heart sank. Please let it be Saturday, he thought.

"You're leaving at lunchtime tomorrow," Browny continued. "I want a story about the reaction in Brisbane to the merger with Fitzroy. Then I want you to stay for the big game against the West Coast Eagles on Saturday night."

Clark felt his disappointment settle like a cloak around his heart.

"Then you can catch the red eye to Adelaide after the game," Browny said. "I want you at the Adelaide-Fitzroy

game on Sunday. I don't just want match reports; I want comparison and contrast between the two parties in this arranged marriage of convenience. I want to know who feels like they won and who feels like they lost."

"Yes, sir," Clark said, trying to keep his frustration from showing in his tone.

Browny frowned. "I thought we'd moved passed 'sir'."

Clark forced a lifeless smile. "Sorry. Forgot."

"This is a great opportunity to see some of the country," Browny said.

"Thank you," Clark said, knowing that, despite his best efforts, there wasn't a whole lot of gratitude in his tone.

Again, Browny contemplated him. "Is there a reason you don't want to go?"

"I… I had plans for Friday night."

"Sorry, Rubber," Browny said. "I need you in Brisbane on Friday afternoon. I've given Banjo all the details. After lunch tomorrow, you can take a taxi out to Tullamarine."

Figuring he was dismissed, Clark went to Browny's door, dreading having to tell Lois that their date had to be postponed.

"Rubber?"

Clark turned.

"I have a trip planned for you for next week, too." Browny's face was deadpan. Clark wasn't sure if it were his way of warning Clark not to protest or if he was deliberately trying to be inscrutable.

"OK," Clark said. He just couldn't force any sort of enthusiasm into his tone.

"I gave Thommo in Travel some tickets to the footy last week, and he gave me a couple of nights' accommodation in Port Campbell," Browny said. "There's no way I could take the missus until the season is over, so you might as well use them next week."

"Where's Port Campbell?" Clark asked summoning every ounce of interest he could muster.

"On the Great Ocean Road," Browny replied. "You can't visit Victoria without driving the Great Ocean Road. It's spectacular."

Clark nodded. It didn't matter how spectacular the road was, he had very little interest in seeing it if it meant being away from Lois.

"You can have Tuesday off," Browny continued. "Just make sure you're back here by Thursday afternoon for when the teams come in."

Clark nodded again. "Thanks, Browny," he said, trying to clamp down on the sigh that wanted to accompany his words.

Browny handed Clark a brochure. "Here's the number for the motel. Ring them today and make the booking for next Tuesday and Wednesday nights."

"OK. Thanks."

"Tell Flinders to get herself in here. Now."

"OK."

"And Rubber?"

"Yes?"

"You step one millimetre out of line, and I'll hit you harder than Smiddy did yesterday."

Before Clark could question further, Browny had picked up his phone and punched in some numbers.

Clark exited the office and saw that Lois was at her desk. He crossed the newsroom, and she turned to him with her smile. Her smile, usually so wonderful, just made him feel worse. He hated that he was going to have to disappoint her. "Browny wants to see you," he said dejectedly.

Her smile faded. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"He's sending me to Brisbane tomorrow," Clark said.

He saw the dismay cut across her face. "Oh, no," she said, resting her hand on his arm.

"I'm sorry, Lois."

She managed a smile, and Clark took some consolation from the fact that it looked like she had to force it. "It's not your fault," she said. "We can go out next week."

He nodded. "Better get to Browny."

Lois squeezed his arm and walked to Browny's office.

Ten minutes later, she emerged and came straight to Clark's desk, her face a mass of confusion.

"What's wrong?" Clark said.

Lois gestured into Browny's office. "Browny just insisted that I take Tuesday off next week. And he says not to come in until Thursday afternoon."

Clark's spirits suddenly roared to life. "Did he say why?" he asked.

Lois shook her head. "Not really. Just that I'd put in a lot of extra time during the lead-up to the merger, and that next week was the quietest week we are going to get before finals, and with the Olympics on, he didn't need to fill so many inches with football."

Clark couldn't contain his smile. "Have you said anything to Browny about…" He was hesitant to use the word 'us'. "… about our date?"

"No. Nothing."

"Does Browny ever pick up things that no one else notices?"

"All the time. He'd known for months how Dan felt about me."

Clark's soft chuckle escaped past a mouth that couldn't stop grinning. "I get the feeling we've been set up," he said.

"How?"

"After Browny told me about having to go to Brisbane, he gave me two nights' accommodation in a place called Port Campbell and said I had to see the Ocean Road."

"When are you going?"

"He said I could have Tuesday off… and I don't have to be in the office until Thursday afternoon." Clark watched Lois's face closely, eager for her reaction.

She pushed back her hair. "Have you thought about whether you'd like some company?" she asked.

Clark grinned. "Of course I'd like some company," he said. "Would you come with me?"

Lois matched his grin. "Are you sure?"

"Lois," he said, "I would love you to come with me. I have the number. I can call them now and book two rooms." He hesitated. "Please?"

Lois thought for a moment, and then her smile illuminated her face. "Yes," she said. "I'll come."

Clark wanted to leap out of his seat and throw his arms around her to give some release to the bubble of excitement that was quivering inside him. He made do with a wide smile. "Thank you," he said.

"That's a pretty impressive first date, big guy," Lois said. With a lingering smile, she walked back to her desk.

Part 21

The teams were in, the reports were written, and Lois and Clark left the office together.

"Lois?"

She smiled across at him. "Yes?"

"I know it's late and you're probably tired, but would you like to do something now?"

"What are you suggesting?"

Anything. Anything that would extend their time together. "Coffee? Supper? A walk? Milo on your couch?"

"A walk sounds nice."

Clark controlled his ecstatic smile and forced himself to ask, "Are you sure you're not too tired?"

A shadow of melancholy moderated her answering smile. Was it too much to hope that she was also thinking about the yawning cavern of separation that stretched before them? "I'm fine," she said. "Would you like to go into the city? Or along the Yarra River?"

"The Yarra," Clark said. "Are you cold?"

Lois took her hand from her jacket pocket and examined it. "I forgot to bring my gloves," she said. "So this hand might get cold." She held it towards him with a little smile of invitation.

Clark felt a rush of jubilation. He didn't take her hand immediately. The anticipation was so sweet he wanted to savour it. Then he slid his hand around hers and met her eyes with a smile. "Lois…"

"Clark…"

His heart was so full. Full of her. Full of hope for a future that centred on her. "I booked the rooms for next week," he said, because that transported them beyond their separation and to the time when they could be together.

"Thanks," Lois said. "Have you read about the Great Ocean Road?"

"I think there was a promotion for it on the airplane coming from Sydney," Clark said. "But I didn't take a lot of notice."

"It is stunning."

They reached the Yarra and took the riverside path. The air was crisp and still. Clark glanced down at Lois, checking for signs she was cold. She seemed OK for now.

"Do you need to go back to the office for anything?" she asked.

"No."

"We could keep walking along the river until we get to Swan Street and then take a tram home."

"What about the Jeep?"

"I can get it tomorrow."

"OK."

They continued in silence. There was so much Clark wanted to say. So much he wanted to tell her. So much he wanted to ask her. But knowing where to start—that was

the difficulty. Before he had managed to work out what to say, Lois spoke.

"You seem disappointed about going interstate."

Clark chuckled bleakly. "I'm gutted," he said.

Lois grinned at his use of the Australian phrase. "Brisbane's a great city, and Adelaide is beautiful," she said. "I'm sure you'll have a wonderful time."

"That wasn't what I meant." He looked down at Lois and saw her thinly veiled smile. "And I think you know that," he added.

"I can't imagine why you would want to hang around Melbourne when you have the chance to see other cities," she mused.

"I had a date…"

"Oh. That."

"Yes, that."

"Clark, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

They took a few silent steps. "You seem… I mean… It would be easy for me to think that this date is important to you. If I'm reading it wrongly, I'd really appreciate it if you told me now."

Clark stopped walking and slipped his hand from hers. He took possession of her shoulders and gently turned her towards him. He gazed down into her beautiful brown eyes that were overcast with doubts. "It is *very* important to me," he vowed solemnly.

"Honestly?"

"Honestly." He slid his fingers forward along the definition of her cheekbone and then retreated and rested his hand in the soft cushion of her hair. "Is there any possibility that you could feel something for me beyond friendship?"

Her eyelids flickered, and he felt her shoulders lift with a diminutive sigh. "I've been trying really hard *not* to."

Her inference hurtled through his brain, and Clark swallowed roughly, trying to moisten an arid throat. "I think you should stop trying," he murmured.

Much of the uncertainty in her eyes drained away, and amusement garnished her expression. "You do?"

He nodded. Lois lifted her hands and placed them on his chest. His eyes slid downwards to her enchanting mouth. "Do you have any idea how much I want to kiss you?" he said in a low voice.

"Are you going to?"

Was he? "I don't know."

"Why not?"

"Because maybe the right thing to do would be to wait until our date."

Lois chuckled, and the intensity of the moment slowly ebbed away. "I have never known another man who could say that without losing all credibility," she said.

"I want this to be perfect for you, Lois," Clark said earnestly. "That's what I want more than anything else."

Her fingers dove under his jacket and skimmed his ribs. When her hands met behind his back, she laid her head on his upper chest. Clark tightened his arms around her.

Her heartbeat had accelerated, but her body was relaxed against him. Clark knew his own heart was racing. Yet he also felt an all-pervading serenity—this was where he belonged.

He had searched all his life to find the place where he truly belonged. But it wasn't a place, it was a person.

It was her. His beautiful Lois.

He kissed the top of her head. He felt a little quiver weave through her body—probably laughter, he surmised. She eased away, though her arms stayed anchored around him. "Was that my kiss?" she enquired with a small smile.

He could think of nothing to say, so he merely nodded.

She stretched onto her toes and brushed a soft kiss on his cheek.

As she moved away, their eyes locked and held, shooting a cascade of bubbling joy through him.

With a little smile, she glanced sideways. "How's your shoulder?"

"It's…"

He was saved from having to reply further when her hand slid up his shirt and burrowed under his jacket. Her fingers began to work his shoulder. A patch of heat radiated out from their contact and spread down his arm and back and across his chest. "Uhhmm," Clark said in a throaty tone.

Lois smiled. "Has it given you any trouble?" she asked.

"Truthfully?" he said. "None at all. But please don't let that deter you."

She chuckled. "I'm surprised. It looked like a decent hit." Her fingers drifted slowly towards his neck.

Clark closed his eyes and soaked up her touch.

When she stopped, he took her hand and enfolded it in both of his. "You're getting cold," he said.

"I don't feel cold."

"Still, it's time I got you home."

They continued walking, over the Swan Street bridge and onto Punt Road where they caught a tram. Twenty minutes later, they stood at Lois's door.

"I'll probably see you tomorrow," Clark said. "But…"

"I know," Lois said. "We might not even get a chance to say 'goodbye' properly. I could be on a story."

"Lois, I want to promise you something."

She seemed a little surprised by the seriousness of his tone. "OK," she said.

"This weekend—no matter what happens—I will not be going out with any other women. I won't flirt with them in bars. I won't allow them to think for a moment that I'm remotely interested in anything beyond being polite."

Lois brushed a lock of hair from his forehead. "Thank you," she said.

"I wouldn't, anyway," Clark said. "But I want you to *know* I wouldn't."

"Thank you," she repeated.

It was late, and he had to leave. Clark dreaded walking away, knowing he wouldn't be alone with her again for three days. "It's going to be a long weekend," he said.

Lois nodded. "But we can think about Tuesday. On Tuesday morning, we'll have two and a half days together."

"It's going to be incredible."

Lois stepped back. "I'll miss you, big guy," she said.

"I'll miss you," he said. Terribly.

She unlocked her door and pushed it open. "Goodnight, Clark."

"Goodnight, honey."

She paused as his words sank in. Then her smile slowly appeared. She reached for his hand and gave it a little squeeze. Then, with one last smile, she stepped into her unit and closed the door.

Clark was glad she did, because he wasn't sure he could have forced himself to walk away while she still stood there.

He waited a moment, passively accepting the strong swell of longing that rose within him—the longing to be with Lois.

When it had subsided a little, he turned and walked away. The tips of his fingers grazed over the place on his cheek where she had left her kiss.

He loved her.

He loved her more than he had ever hoped it would be possible to love someone.

And he would love her forever.

* * *

"Clark?"

He looked up from his desk, already knowing it was Lois and already knowing why she had come. "Yes?" he said with the best smile he could manage.

"Browny has given me a story," she said.

"What story?" he asked, desperate to delay her departure, if only for a few minutes.

Lois frowned. "One of the AFL administrators—one of the guys who is seen by the Fitzroy supporters as being the culprit—has offered us a 'look into his life' story."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning we will see his wife and his children and his home, and he's hoping all of that will make everyone realise that he's just a normal guy, and feel more kindly disposed to him, and conveniently forget that he was a willing accomplice to the sacrifice of a football club."

"Publicity 101," Clark said.

Lois nodded. "I can understand why Browny accepted his offer. The timing's right, and usually the administrators are loath to expose their families to any publicity."

"The fact that he's offering a look at his family shows he's pretty worried about the reaction to the merger."

"Yeah," she said. "It's smart, though. It works every time. Show us a husband and a father dressed in jeans and a jumper, and we'll see him very differently from the stilted businessman in the starchy suit."

"I'm sure you'll write a great story."

Lois sighed. "I'm not. The merger is off limits. This is a human-interest story… or propaganda, depending on your point of view."

"I wish I could come with you," Clark said, his voice very low.

Lois forced a smile. "I'll be fine," she said. "I'm just grumpy today."

Clark answered her smile. "Why?"

"Because I had a date tonight… and now I don't."

"I'm sorry," Clark said.

"It's not your fault," she said quickly. "But that doesn't mean I'm not disappointed."

"I'm disappointed, too."

"I know," she said.

"I get back late on Sunday. Can I call you and see if you're still awake?"

"I'll still be awake," she said decisively.

"Don't stay up if the plane is delayed." Though the selfish part of him hoped she would.

Lois smiled wanly, her expression mirroring his feelings exactly. "See you," she said. "Have a good weekend."

"Yeah," he replied, though they both knew he wouldn't. "See you… honey."

Lois turned, somewhat abruptly, and walked away.

Clark watched her.

At the door, she turned back. She smiled—wistfully. He smiled back—equally so.

Then she walked away.

Inside, Clark could feel the emptiness settle like lead in his stomach. He was going to be away from Lois for three days.

Three impossibly long days.

* * *

Later, Clark, Gazza, and Banjo went to the airport, boarded the flight, and flew to Brisbane. It was a beautiful city, set on a river and just inland of breathtaking surf beaches.

They spent the afternoon at the Brisbane Football Club, talking with officials and administrators about the process of two clubs becoming one.

They went back to their motel and had a meal in the restaurant. Clark excused himself early and went to his room to call Lois.

They talked as colleagues—about work, and football, and their stories—as if by unspoken agreement, they would put aside their personal feelings until they could be together again.

Really together.

After their call had finished, Clark turned on the television but discovered that Friday night football in Brisbane wasn't AFL, but rugby. He switched off the television and sat in the chair, staring ahead.

He just wanted to be with Lois.

He wanted to be eating flake and chips, and drinking Milo, and sitting on her couch—perhaps with his arm around her—as they watched the football.

So strong was his longing that he considered flying south to Melbourne and simply knocking on her door… and then truthfully answering every last one of her questions.

He didn't. He wanted to do this right.

He would tell her about himself, but when the time was right.

With a deep sigh, he went to bed… and lay there, thinking about Lois.

After ten minutes, he gave up.

He leapt from the bed, spun into the suit, and headed across the Pacific Ocean.

Surely, in a city the size of Metropolis, there had to be a distraction for a heartsick caped superhero who was yearning for the woman he loved.

* * *

Mercifully, Saturday was a full day. In the morning, Clark and Banjo had an interview with the Brisbane CEO. After that, they met Gazza for lunch, and then they wrote up their story in the afternoon. Together, they went to the Brisbane-West Coast game in the evening, submitted a match report, and finally caught a cab to the airport.

Banjo bemoaned that they'd had very little time for Clark to take in the local sights, but Clark could honestly say he wasn't terribly disappointed.

He called Lois as he waited to board their flight. Hawthorn had lost badly to Richmond, and he could feel her dejection. He wished he could have been there for her.

Clark and his colleagues flew to Adelaide on the final flight for the day, and the next morning, they talked to two Fitzroy administrators before the game. The contrast in optimism for the future between them and the Brisbane representatives was stark. Then, they attended the Adelaide-Fitzroy game, which Fitzroy lost by ninety-nine points. Even with his embryonic knowledge of football, Clark could see that the Fitzroy players were dispirited. Something vital was missing.

He wondered if forcing them to play out these last few meaningless games was actually a greater cruelty than shunting them off to Brisbane.

They submitted another match report, although there really wasn't a lot that could be said about such a one-sided game and there was very little point in looking for positives for the losing team.

Tired but, in Clark's case at least, incredibly eager to get home, they arrived at Adelaide Airport to discover the devastating news that their flight had been delayed indefinitely.

They conducted a quest for information and swiftly concluded that if anyone did actually know the reasons behind the delay, it wasn't information they were willing to divulge to passengers. Trying to establish any sort of possible timeframe for resumption of services proved equally frustrating.

While Gazza and Banjo called their respective partners, Clark called Lois to tell her the news. He could feel her distress—it matched his.

"I'll wait up," she said.

"Lois." He couldn't force himself to give up all hope that he would see her tonight, but he had to be honest. "They can't even give us an estimated time of departure. And, even if flights resume tonight, I still have to get from Tullamarine Airport back to Richmond."

"I'll wait up," she repeated.

"I'm going crazy with missing you," Clark said, knowing he sounded forlorn.

"Me, too," she said glumly.

"See you soon."

"I'll be waiting for you."

Clark hung up the phone and reflected on the stupidity of waiting for a fickle metal box to take an hour to fly him to Lois when he could get himself there in less than a minute.

He couldn't do it.

He wanted to be with Lois.

He wanted to tell her the truth about himself.

He moved to where Gazza and Banjo were trying to get comfortable on seats clearly not designed for comfort. "I don't think there will be a flight tonight," Clark said. "I think the best idea would be to make a booking for the first flight tomorrow."

Gazza and Banjo looked at each other, considering Clark's assessment of the situation. "Easy for you," Gazza said. "You don't have a missus waiting for you at home."

"Yeah," Banjo said. "And whatever the hold-up is, it might get fixed pretty quickly."

"They didn't sound hopeful," Clark said. "Actually, they didn't sound like they knew much at all."

Banjo nodded. "But I'm going to wait it out here a bit longer."

"Me, too," Gazza said.

"I think it would be better to have a good night's sleep," Clark said. He picked up his bag. "See you tomorrow."

Gazza thumped his bag, trying to bash it into a more comfortable pillow. "See you, Rubber."

Clark hurried away from their terminal, looking for somewhere with enough privacy to allow him to spin into the suit and then fly away so quickly he couldn't be tracked by the airport radar equipment.

His cell phone rang in his pocket. He figured it was Lois, and he smiled at the thought of knocking on her door as she waited for him to answer her call. She would be surprised—no question—but he hoped the shock wouldn't diminish her happiness at seeing him again.

He just wanted to be with her. Nothing else mattered.

Noticing that a few bored people were staring at him, Clark decided, in the interests of not being too conspicuous, to answer his cell. He pulled it from his pocket and saw it wasn't Lois calling but his mother.

"Hi, Mom," he said.

"Clark," she said breathlessly. "Have you heard the news?"

"No. What news?"

"The Daily Planet. The staff have been taken hostage—Perry, Jimmy, Mayson, everyone. The perpetrators are threatening to murder them one by one unless their demands are met."

Cold horror crawled through Clark's veins. "What demands?"

"They want Superman. Jason Trask—that government agent who said all those horrible things—he's demanding that Superman meets with him, or he will begin executing the hostages in fifteen minutes."

Clark closed his eyes. The Daily Planet and Superman—how had Trask linked them? Was it possible he'd discovered that Superman actually worked for the great Metropolitan newspaper? "Are they still inside the Daily Planet building?"

"The information is very sketchy—contradictory even—but there are rumours that people were taken out the back of the building." He heard his mother take a calming breath. "Everything is so vague, Clark, but I thought you should know."

"Is the SWAT team there?"

"Yes, but Trask is so totally out of control, they're worried that anything they do will result in many deaths."

"I have to go there," Clark said.

He heard the sharp intake of breath from his mom. “I knew you would feel like that.” He could hear the fear vibrate through her words.

“I don’t have a choice, Mom,” he insisted. “I can’t let people die. I can’t let my friends die. And there’s every chance this is somehow linked to me, Clark.”

“I know. That is why your father and I thought I should call you.”

“I have to go now, Mom,”

“Be careful, honey,” she begged. “Please, be careful.”

“I will.”

“I love you, Clark.”

“I love you, too. And Dad.”

Clark hung up and slipped into the male bathrooms. Less than a minute later, he was in the air and flying towards Metropolis.

* * *

Clark hovered above the Daily Planet office.

Outside, under the globe, several television crews had gathered. One woman was talking into a camera. Clark tuned in his hearing.

“… do we know why the Daily Planet was targeted?” The voice came from her earphone.

“It is believed to be tied to the recent refusal of the paper to publish unproven allegations about Superman and his intentions towards the people of Earth,” she replied.

“Following the subway train disaster, the Daily Planet was very vocal in its condemnation of Superman.”

“Yes,” the on-site reporter agreed. “And it seems possible that the about-turn by the newspaper’s editor, Perry White, may be the reason why his staff were forcibly removed from the Daily Planet building.”

“Do we know where they have been taken?”

“They were marched at gunpoint into a military vehicle, and there has been a reported sighting of a similar vehicle near the EPRAD launch site.”

“What do we know about Jason Trask?”

Clark didn’t wait to hear more. He flew to EPRAD. A small rocket was on the launch pad. He looked into the building and quickly located Perry, Jimmy, Cat, Mayson, Dan, Ralph, Pete, and about ten others from the Daily Planet. Their wrists and feet were bound, and they were shut in a small room.

In the adjoining, much larger, room were Jason Trask, about fifteen armed soldiers dressed in fatigues, and five men in suits. Clark thought he recognised at least two of them as government officials. A cameraman—his camera perched on his shoulder and with a sound guy leashed to him via a microphone lead—waited nervously in the corner.

Trask prowled the room like a caged lion. His face was crimson, and his white long-sleeved shirt showed large patches of sweat.

As Clark watched, Trask kicked open the door between the two rooms and stormed into the midst of the hostages. The cameraman attempted to follow, but the door was slammed in his face.

Trask crossed to Mayson and stared down at her. He shoved the end of his rifle against her shoulder. “Where is he?” he demanded.

Mayson looked terrified—so terrified that Clark felt a moment’s pity for her. Mayson, always so assured and in control, had been reduced to a very frightened young woman. That, alone, said plenty about Trask. “I… I… don’t know,” she stammered.

“You *do* know,” Trask screamed. “You knew the truth about the murdering aliens. You knew the truth, and now you will no longer admit to what you know to be the truth. Therefore, they must have gotten to you. They must have threatened you or hypnotised you or possessed you, because I can tell that you no longer believe the truth.”

Mayson stared at him but said nothing.

“WHERE IS HE?” Trask screamed, punctuating each word with a stab of his rifle into her shoulder.

“I… I…”

“Get him here,” Trask demanded. “You have two minutes to get him here or you will watch every one of your colleagues die an excruciating death, and then you will finally meet the deserved end of a traitor to her country.”

“I… I… have… no way… of—”

“Leave her alone,” Scardino said from where he sat next to Mayson. “She’s already said she doesn’t know how to get Superman.”

Trask turned to Dan and swung his rifle butt across Dan’s head. The Australian slumped, unconscious.

Clark flew down, super-sped through a couple of doors, and passed unnoticed through a trail of guards. He stepped between Mayson and Trask. Straightening his shoulders and crossing his arms, he gazed steadily at Trask. “You wanted to see me.”

Trask's eyes gleamed. "Superman," he said in a maniacal voice. "How nice of you to make a final appearance."

"Final?" Clark said. "I'm only just beginning."

"You are strong and powerful," Trask sneered. "But human technology is far more advanced than you ever gave us credit for."

Clark crouched beside Dan. There was a trickle of blood coming from a gash on his forehead, but he was still breathing.

Trask thrust a device that looked like a remote control into Clark's face. "See this?" he spat. "See this? If you don't do exactly what I say, it will take just one tiny touch to this button for this room to be filled with lethal gas, and every one of these traitorous humans will die."

Clark slowly stood. "You said you were trying to protect your people," he said coolly. "Now you plan to kill them."

"There will always be sacrifices for the greater good," Trask said. "Those who lose their lives will do so for the most important cause that has ever faced the inhabitants of Earth."

"I mean you no harm," Clark said.

Trask smirked with satisfaction. "Soon, you will not have the means to cause us harm," he said. He jerked his rifle towards the door. "Get out!" he ordered.

Clark walked from the small room. He heard Trask follow him and lock the door. Trask shoved past Clark and strode purposefully across the room and up a short flight of stairs. Once at the top, he turned and faced the assembled crowd.

Clark watched the remote control, still embedded in Trask's clenched fist. Clark scanned inside the device and then between the walls and realised with sickening horror that the threat was real. He stared ahead, trying to look impassive, as his mind considered how best to avert disaster.

Trask peered around the room. When his gaze fell to the cameraman, he beckoned him to move forward. The cameraman and his accompanying sound technician moved to the bottom of the stairs.

Clark watched Trask's thumb as it hovered precariously close to the button. In the excitement of what he obviously saw as his big moment, he seemed to have forgotten that he held the lives of more than a dozen people in his hand.

Trask took a deep breath, and then, looking directly down into the camera, he began. "Fellow inhabitants of Earth," he said. "Today is a great day in our history. Today is the accumulation of many months of investigation and scientific discovery. Today is the day that the peoples of Earth stand as one and overcome the alien invasion. Today is the day that we quash the deadliest threat we have ever faced."

He paused and very slowly scrutinized the room. He finished with a long stare into the camera. Clark took a step closer to the adjoining room.

"Today is the day of our triumph," Trask said. With a flourish, he swept his free arm and turned to watch as, from behind him, two men pushed forward a trolley. On the trolley sat a metal container slightly bigger than a shoebox.

Trask lovingly ran his hand over the top of the container. Clark was concentrating on his other hand. His thumb had shifted sideways, almost far enough from the button that Clark could risk pouncing on him.

"This is the key to our victory," Trask said. "This is the means by which we will wrest back the control of our planet from the invaders who came to seize it from us."

With a sharp movement, Trask lifted the lid from the box.

A shaft of intense pain assaulted Clark's body.

He briefly registered the presence of the glowing green chunk of rock in the box.

Clutching his chest, Clark collapsed to the ground.

Part 22

Jason Trask looked down at his fallen enemy. He didn't believe for a moment that he'd won the battle, but that didn't put any sort of restraint on the intoxicating river of pure hatred that coursed through his veins.

Today's events were the result of two years of meticulous planning. Trask surveyed the room—he had personally selected each man present. He'd assembled a team of rigorously trained soldiers and uncompromising government officials—men who were capable of comprehending the imminent danger and had committed themselves to the total obliteration of the alien enemy. Trask studied each face individually. There had been ripples of unrest recently. The unfortunate drawback of men with sufficient insight to perceive a situation accurately was that they occasionally entertained the delusion that their opinions were valid.

They weren't. Never would be.

This was to be Trask's victory and his alone. He would eliminate—ruthlessly and permanently—anyone who stood between him and the ultimate triumph. Trask was confident that once the world understood his achievement, the necessary deaths would be dismissed as unavoidable casualties of war.

He had invited two former colleagues to this victory ceremony—men he had worked with on previous assignments,

men who would ask intelligent questions and provide the perfect forum for Trask to elucidate his masterful strategy. Men who, having asked their questions, would bow to his genius with right and proper deference.

Trask turned to the camera. He'd decided against a live feed to the television stations. By the time the world knew, the deed would be irreversible. But it had to be recorded for posterity so all would know the debt they owed him.

Trask fixed his eyes in the camera and began his account of how he had saved humanity.

* * *

Clark writhed as the effects of the green rock tormented his body.

He felt his strength draining away in a whirlpool of agony. The pain centred in his chest, and each heartbeat propelled the anguish through his body. He was burning up. His mind was unable to focus. He knew unconsciousness was lurking, ready to overwhelm him should he cease to fight for one moment.

Trask talked. Ranted. Raved. He outlined every plan his sickened mind had concocted and attributed to the invading aliens. He detailed how their evil intentions were about to be foiled by 'the brilliance of his plan'. He talked about the power of the green rock.

Through the ravages of his pain, Clark heard most of it. Words like 'control' and 'invasion' and 'annihilation' felt like barbs piercing his heart. His spirit wanted to fight, to deny, to demand his right to reply, but his body was unable to answer the call.

He tried to concentrate on Trask's voice—tried to cling to it as a means to retain consciousness.

"… and so, people of this great planet, know that your government and your scientists have today brought you freedom from the scourge of alien invasion. This warning will echo throughout the universe, through all life forms everywhere. We are not a vulnerable people. We can defend that which is rightfully ours."

Clark heard the sharp bang of the lid closing, and immediately, the intensive stabbing in his chest lessened. He took two feeble, steadying breaths as the lingering waves of pain rolled through his body. He opened his eyes.

As he did, a man dressed in a business suit spoke up. "What if you're wrong?" he said, loudly and clearly.

Slowly, Trask turned to the dissenter. "Wrong?" he sneered in a tone of disbelief.

"What if the green rock *isn't* the source of alien power? Clearly, it has an effect on Superman. But the effect seems to be detrimental to his strength."

"Don't be ridiculous," Trask snarled. "Do you really think you would know more than the brilliant American scientists who have been studying this rock for over a year?"

"I know what my eyes see, and they see that the presence of the green rock severely debilitates the alien."

Trask took a mountainous breath, obviously struggling to contain his temper. "Did you not hear anything I said?" he grated. "The aliens get their superior strength from the tiny particles of this rock. We have searched the planet and combined all fragments of this rock into this large, supremely powerful piece. Once we have expelled this rock into outer space, all aliens will be reduced to human strength. Indeed, it is our belief that once we have forever removed their life force, they will quickly wither up and die."

"He looks like he is dying now," the dissenter noted.

"He is unused to being subjected to such huge amounts of the rock at close range," Trask said dismissively. "What you see is similar to a drug addict overdosing."

"Once he overcomes the initial effects… what will happen then?" Clark could hear traces of panic in the question.

"By then, he will know that certain death awaits him."

There was a period of silence, and then another voice spoke. "How can you know for sure that the aliens get their power from this particular rock?"

"Because we have proven beyond doubt that the rock is alien in nature," Trask responded. "The only way it could be here is if it were brought by the aliens. Why would they bring it with them if they didn't need it to power their insurgency?"

"Have you considered that, by destroying all the green rock, you could perhaps be destroying the only way to control their powers? Perhaps this represents not their power, but our only means of defence."

"Of course, I have considered that," Trask said, his agitation increasing with each question. "But the simplest of minds should be able to grasp that if the rock were harmful to the alien forces, they would not have brought it to Earth."

"I think sending all the rock into space is a flawed plan," the man persisted. "Dangerously flawed."

"You think we should leave some here?" Trask demanded sarcastically. "So the aliens can recover it and continue with their plans of destruction?"

"If he's so super-powered by the rock, why isn't he escaping now?"

"Because my superior strategy had already planned for such an eventuality." Trask lifted the remote control, still wrapped in his clenched fist. "I hold the lives of those traitors—his allies—in my hand."

"If that rock is instrumental in powering the alien, why did you bring him here?" another voice asked. "Where are all the 'others' you talk about? Why risk luring them here? Why not just expel the rock into space without all this fanfare?"

"Because eliminating the threat is not enough," Trask screeched. "We have to know that we have overcome them. We cannot kill each alien individually. We don't know how many of them live amongst us. And obviously, they are disguised in human bodies. If we kill some, we will never know if others remain, biding their time to rise again. We will never be able to rest easily. But we can destroy their source of power. And that is what we are going to do."

"What's going to happen to this alien?" someone from behind Clark asked.

"He will be held captive so we can witness his death. He will weaken considerably and die within a short period. Upon his death, we will have proof that, without the power of the green rock, no alien can survive on our planet."

One of the government officials stepped forward. "How do you know there isn't more of this rock?"

Trask sighed as if his patience had sunk to dangerously low levels. "When this alien dies, it will be clear that we have purged our planet from the alien invasion," he said, making no effort to hide his disdain.

"You have had this rock in your possession for a period of many months?" another man in a suit asked.

"We accumulated it gradually, yes."

"Have the aliens been able to access it?"

"Not directly," Trask answered. "And that is what has stalled their final conquest. Because the rock was still on Earth, they were powered to the degree that allows them superior speed and strength but being unable to access it directly has stopped them attaining the powers required for a whole-world takeover."

"How do you know that even the vastness of space will be sufficient to cut off their supply?"

"Do you have any better ideas for making it inaccessible?" Trask sneered.

The official backed away.

"While the green rock remains on Earth, we live with the threat of a supremely powered army of aliens who will choose to murder our people and claim this planet as our own," Trask said. "The green rock is indestructible. Obviously, our only hope is to banish it beyond their reach."

The original voice began again. "This is ludicrous, Trask. And dangerous. And farcical. Everyone in this room can see that the presence of the green rock severely traumatises the alien. Open that box again and bring the rock closer to—"

A volley of gunfire flooded the room. The dissenter fell to the floor, and a pool of blood slowly leaked from the wound in his head.

Ignoring the gasps of horror that echoed through his gathered audience, Trask lifted his clenched fist in victory. "People of Earth," he proclaimed, looking straight into the camera. "The specifically modified, unmanned spacecraft awaits us. All of the powers of the US military will be used to ensure that this deadly green rock is safely banished to outer space, never again to power the alien invasion of our planet."

Trask scanned the room, daring anyone to challenge him.

On either side of him stood two soldiers, their weapons poised and pointed into the crowd.

No one moved.

They wheeled away the box containing the green rock. Trask and his two soldiers followed.

Three other soldiers came to Clark and roughly hauled him to his feet. They dragged him out of the room, along a short corridor, and to a small empty cell, devoid of windows. Clark slumped against the wall as he heard the door close and a series of locks click into place.

He closed his eyes and concentrated on simply breathing. Each breath was still potent with suffering; it scorched his lungs and seared his body.

He wanted Lois. His yearning for her reared strong and unrelenting. But she was half a world away. And, for now, he had no way of getting to her.

He thought about how he had walked along the river with her. He imagined standing next to her, his arms encircling her. He could smell her perfume. He could feel the light touch of her lips on his cheek.

He drifted between reality and the dream world where he was with Lois. Only the thought of her caused the pain to recede. The stronger the image of her, the further away he could push the pain.

He steeled his mind to concentrate on her and her alone, and slowly, his body began to heal.

* * *

Lois paced the length of her small living room. She had heard nothing from Clark for over three hours. She had rung his mobile phone, hoping to get an update of the time of his flight, but he hadn't answered. At first, she had taken that as positive news. He was probably already on the plane and heading home.

She continued trying to call him—initially, at intervals of twenty minutes, then fifteen, and then ten. Still, he didn't answer. The flight from Adelaide took about an hour. What could possibly have kept him out of contact for three hours?

Finally, in desperation, she had called Tullamarine Airport and learnt that all flights out of Adelaide had been delayed following a security threat. They would give her no details other than to voice the hope that the airport would be operating normally as soon as possible.

Lois didn't know the name of the hotel where Clark had stayed the night before, and it was too late to ring Browny and ask. She called Dan's home number, but it went to his voicemail.

She paced the floor, regularly redialling Clark's mobile as anxiety twisted through her knotted stomach.

Where was he?

What had happened?

Why hadn't he called her?

Was it possible he had fallen asleep at the airport and slept through all of her calls?

Maybe, but it seemed unlikely.

Her phone shrilled, and Lois jumped. She snatched it to her ear. "Yes?"

"Hi, Lois; it's Narelle."

Lois registered the voice of Gazza's wife, and with it came a white-hot sea of dread. What had happened to them? "Narelle?" she breathed.

"Gazza just rang to tell me they've heard there will be no flights out of Adelaide tonight," Narelle said. "They've gone back to the hotel and will try to get the first available flight home tomorrow."

Lois breathed deeply as the worst of her fears subsided. "Th…thanks, Narelle," she said. "Did you get the name or number of the hotel?"

"No. I always contact Gary on his mobile."

"OK."

"I thought it was likely that Clark would call you and let you know," Narelle said. "But just in case he doesn't… I didn't want you worrying."

"Thanks, Narelle."

"They'll be home tomorrow," Narelle said brightly.

"Yeah," Lois agreed, trying to match Narelle's tone. "Thanks for letting me know."

Narelle hesitated. "Did you hear about Dan?"

"No," Lois said. "What about Dan?"

"There was a hostage situation at the Daily Planet newspaper."

Shock splintered through Lois's already-tense muscles. "What happened? Is Dan all right?'

"Yeah, he's fine. They're saying Superman turned up, and I think the police had the building surrounded, and most of the hostages were released. I only caught the tail end of the report, but I saw Dan coming out of the space facility where they'd been held."

"Are you sure he's OK?"

"Yeah. He had a bit of blood on his face, but he was walking OK. They said the hostages were being taken to hospital to get checked out."

"OK. Thanks. Thanks for ringing."

"Goodnight, Lois."

Lois slowly replaced the phone. Within her, competing emotions struggled for supremacy—disappointment, relief, and confusion. Why hadn't Clark answered her calls?

Why hadn't he called her once he'd realised it wasn't going to be possible to get home tonight?

She turned on the television and waited for the late-night news bulletin.

The headline story was the disruption to flights out of Adelaide. They said nothing that Lois hadn't already known.

Next, they moved to the situation in Metropolis. The anchor crossed to a male reporter who was standing outside a large building with a huge globe suspended above its front entrance.

"Thanks, Robert," he began. "As already reported, the mastermind behind this situation was Jason Trask. Our sources suggest that Trask has headed a secret government taskforce since the initial appearance of Superman two years ago. His assignment was to investigate Superman and determine if he posed any threat to humanity. I can confirm that two men who were originally a part of the taskforce have died in suspicious circumstances, and three others have resigned in recent months. They are unwilling to speak to us about their reasons, but we believe they have been

assisting the police with information regarding Trask and what he is likely to do."

"Do we know why Trask was allowed to continue in his position despite those around him having doubts about him?"

"Jason Trask is a very persuasive man with a long and successful career in various aspects of homeland safety. As recently documented in the *Daily Planet*, he became convinced of an imminent alien invasion. According to our source—who cannot be named—the government was hesitant to ignore his claims because, had he been correct, the ramifications of removing him from his position could have been disastrous."

"What is the situation now? We've seen footage of the hostages being released from the EPRAD centre."

"Yes, Robert. Most of the Daily Planet hostages were released twenty minutes ago. The exception is Mayson Drake. You will recall that she is the Daily Planet reporter who broke the story of Trask's allegations."

"Is she working with Trask?"

"We believe the released hostages have told the police that Trask was particularly incensed by what he saw as her defection from his beliefs."

"Have you been able to speak with any of the former hostages?"

"No, but there is speculation that they were able to confirm that Superman did arrive."

"Why didn't Superman simply overthrow Trask? Was it because Trask had so many armed soldiers that even superpowers couldn't overcome them?"

"No. Unconfirmed reports suggest that Trask threatened to gas the hostages if Superman didn't comply with his demands."

There was silence following this information, as if the true depravity of Trask was dawning on the news anchor. Finally, he spoke. "Do we know anything else regarding the rocket that was launched earlier?"

"No. The preparations were kept secret from even the highest-ranking EPRAD authorities. It is believed that Trask authorised the launch."

"There is speculation that Superman was in the rocket. Is there anything to support that theory?"

"Nothing at all, although Superman's current whereabouts are unknown. The SWAT team has surrounded the EPRAD building, but no one has been able to establish contact with anyone inside."

"It is frightening that one man could orchestrate something as significant as a space launch."

"It must be remembered that Trask has a long history in covert operations. He has fostered networks and contacts with people who have been directed to do as he ordered."

"Thanks for your report," the anchor said. "We will keep in touch."

The scene changed back to the newsroom, and they switched to a political analyst to discuss authority structures and accountability in government. Less than a sentence in, the anchor interrupted, saying, "There is breaking news on the situation in Metropolis. We will return to our reporter there."

The reporter again filled the television screen. "In news just in, pictures have been posted on the Internet that seem to show Superman either dead or unconscious."

Onto the screen came a series of pictures. In the first, Superman was lying on the floor, clenching his chest, his face contorted with agony.

Lois swallowed down her tears as she looked at the magnificent man reduced to such suffering. As the reporter continued his conjecture on the legitimacy of the pictures, three other photographs splashed onto the screen, each with Superman in slightly different positions, all clearly displaying his anguish.

Lois leapt to the television and turned it off. She really couldn't look anymore.

Much as she lamented Superman's demise, there was nothing she could do to help him.

And Clark was still missing.

Lois absently prepared for bed. As she slipped into the cold sheets, the memory of Claude prowled around the dark corners of her mind. Clark was different, she insisted. He was. He would not do what Claude had done to her. Clark wouldn't do that. He had promised her.

But all her assurances couldn't stop a single tear from escaping and running down her cheek. She used her Hawk-embossed pillowcase to wipe it away.

She wanted Clark.

She wanted him so much.

She had been counting down the hours until she would see him again. What had initially been disappointment at the delay was now trepidation warped with fear. Where was he?

The future she had begun to allow herself to believe in… maybe that was—had always been—nothing more than a pipe dream.

If Clark cared about her, why hadn't he found a way to contact her?

Lois closed her eyes, knowing there was simply no answer to that.

* * *

Clark groaned as he attempted to sit up. He was still weak. His body ached. He needed to get out of this tenebrous room. He needed the sun.

But despite the lack of light, he could feel the rudiments of his strength returning.

And with each small increment in his strength, his desire to get to Lois increased exponentially. He wasn't sure how much time had passed as he had lain on the floor of his prison, but by now, she would be worried. She had probably tried to call him.

He had to get to Lois.

Clark rolled onto his knees and, using the wall to steady himself, shakily stood.

He took a deep breath and noted with satisfaction that breathing was no longer torturous. He allowed himself a few moments of consolidation and then surveyed his prison.

There were four walls, broken only by a door. Clark invoked his x-ray vision and saw two armed soldiers guarding his tiny room.

He turned sideways. Mayson Drake was in the next room—bound and gagged.

He continued rotating. The far side was an external wall.

Clark took a gargantuan breath and summoned every ounce of strength from his depleted body. He burst through the internal wall, crouched low, and swept Mayson into his arms. She was heavier than he had expected. He heard the key turn in the lock of her door. "Hold on to me," he muttered.

He tucked her knees into her chest and bent over her in protection. Then he charged the outer wall, leading with his shoulder. Once through, he flexed his knees and leapt upward into the Metropolis sky.

"You can stretch out now," he said to Mayson.

Her legs slowly unfolded from her chest, and she looked up at him with eyes glinting with fear—or perhaps anger.

Clark reached behind her head and loosened the gag from her mouth. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Where are you taking me?"

Clark stifled his sigh. He knew that tone. Mayson wasn't happy. "Where do you want to go?" he asked.

"Back to EPRAD, of course," she spat. "I need to get the story."

Clark ignored her demand. "I can take you to the hospital. You need to get checked by a doctor."

"Take me back to EPRAD," she said.

"It's too dangerous," Clark said. "Trask stops at nothing."

"Dangerous?" she scoffed. "Nothing's too dangerous for you."

There was no way that Clark was going to inform her that he was a long way from invulnerability. His strength was draining quickly, her weight dragged heavily on his arms. He turned in the direction of the Metropolis General hospital. Once there, he dropped next to the front door and lowered Mayson to her feet. He reached behind her and released her wrists.

"So that's it?" she sneered. "You're just going to leave me here?"

Clark hesitated. Mayson didn't seem to realise that until Trask was captured, she would continue to be in danger. However, there was little Clark could do to ensure her safety. He knew he didn't have the strength to take her anywhere else. He didn't have the power to protect her if the need should arise. Then Clark heard a voice—Perry's voice. He looked through the glass of the entrance doors and saw his editor striding towards him.

"She's my reporter," Perry said to the police officer who was scuttling along beside him. "And I don't care who's in charge, we are going to get her out of there, and we are going to get her out of there now."

Behind Perry, Clark saw Jimmy Olsen and Dan Scardino.

Clark shot into the air.

He wanted just one thing.

He had to get back to Lois.

His weakened body struggled to keep him airborne, but he resolutely gained height and broke through the clouds. The sun was low in the sky, but he was flying towards it. More importantly, he was flying towards Lois.

He didn't know if the effects of the sun would be enough to provide the restoration and power he would need to get to Lois.

But the thought of her would.

Whatever it cost him in pain or exhaustion, he was going to get to Lois.

That thought drove him forward as he crossed the American continent at a speed more characteristic of an airplane than a superhero.

Lois.

He had to get to Lois.

* * *

Lois had barely slept. She had regularly checked her mobile, but there had been no messages and no calls. At six o'clock, she called Clark's phone. Still, there was no answer.

Feeling weary and defeated, she went into her lounge room and switched on the television. The early morning news bulletin covered the story of the suspected security breach that had closed down the Adelaide airport the night before. The problem had been satisfactorily resolved, and flights had already resumed.

They then moved to the story in Metropolis. There was an interview with Mayson Drake. She claimed Superman had broken into the room where she had been a prisoner and had flown her to the hospital.

She pointedly ignored the suggestion that her former opposition to him now seemed misplaced.

"If you'd given him half a chance," Lois muttered bitterly, "neither of you would have been in this mess."

But if Mayson were to be believed, Superman was alive and free, and that gave Lois a small spark of optimism in a world dark with fear and uncertainty. She called Clark again —his mobile and his home—and still, there was no answer.

Where was he?

And at what point did she inform the police that he was missing?

In desperation, she tried Gazza's mobile, clinging to the vain hope that Clark's phone had died or its battery was flat —although that wouldn't explain why he hadn't called her on a public phone or from the hotel. A metallic female voice answered, informing her that the number she had called was currently not available.

Gazza was probably on a plane coming home.

But was Clark with him?

As Lois showered and dressed, she decided to check Clark's unit. There was no logical reason why he would be there, but Lois was desperate.

Once there, she banged on the door as loudly as she dared without risking the ire of still-sleeping neighbours. Not unexpectedly, she got no response.

She arrived at the Herald Sun office early, but Browny was already in his office. Instead of screaming for her, he left his office and came to her desk. "Have you heard from Rubber?" he asked without preamble.

"No," Lois said. "I know their flight was delayed last night, but the Adelaide airport is open again."

Browny nodded. Something in his face poured cold fear through Lois. "What have you heard?" she gasped.

"Banjo rang," Browny said in a sombre voice. "Clark left the airport earlier than them last night. He said he was going back to the hotel."

"But?" Lois said, her voice barely able to squeeze past the tightness of her throat.

"But this morning they couldn't find him," Browny said. "The hotel management said he never went back there."

Lois's nebulous fears sharpened to chilling clarity.

"Gazza and Banjo are on the flight now, but last I heard, they hadn't seen Rubber," Browny said. "I wondered if he had called you."

Lois shook her head, trying desperately to keep from descending into a cesspit of mindless panic. "Should we inform the police?"

Browny smiled, but the anxiety didn't leave his eyes. "Rubber probably went back to the wrong hotel," he said. "He's never been to Adelaide before. And maybe he couldn't find the airport."

Lois nodded, but she knew they were groping at unlikely possibilities. It wasn't particularly challenging to get in a taxi and ask for the airport. "Do you think something has happened to him?" she asked in a small, frightened voice.

Browny gave a hollow laugh. "'Course not, Flinders. He'll be right. He's probably just got himself lost."

"He's not answering his mobile."

"So, his mobile got lost, too." Browny put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed gently. "It's too early to worry yet," he said. "I'm sure he'll walk in here soon, looking sheepish 'cause he wasn't able to navigate the wilds of the Australian bush."

"He isn't in the bush. He's in Adelaide."

Browny smiled again, though this smile held no more credibility than his first one. "Is there a difference?" he asked.

Lois couldn't even muster an answering smile. "Browny," she said. "I'm going to look for him. I'm useless here. There's no way I can write about football until I know that Clark is OK."

"Flinders," Browny said evenly, "e's probably in Adelaide. What's the point of looking for him here?"

Lois shrugged. “I’ve already called every hospital in Adelaide, and he’s not there. I can’t sit here. It’s driving me crazy.”

“Do you have his parents’ number?” Browny asked.

“No.”

“It should be on his employment form, but you know me, hopeless at detail. I sent off his insurance papers and didn’t bother about the rest.”

“Have you called the Daily Planet?”

“No. I reckon they have enough problems of their own right now,” Browny said. “Though at least that whacko Trask is dead.”

“Dead?”

“He topped himself. Seems he couldn’t face the ignominy of Superman escaping. When the police charged into the space facility, they found some of the soldiers shot and some alive but tied up. Trask was in a room—locked from the inside—hanging from the ceiling.”

Lois pushed away the gruesome image that infested her mind as she kindled a momentary hope that things would be better for Superman now. But neither could overcome her fear for Clark.

“You can go,” Browny said. “If I hear anything, I’ll ring you.”

Lois stood with a sigh. “Thanks, Browny.”

She walked out of the office and stopped. Where should she go? Browny was right. There was absolutely no reason to suspect that Clark would be in Melbourne. If something had happened to him, he would be in Adelaide.

Had he heard that his friends had been taken hostage?

Suddenly, a series of connecting thoughts catapulted through her brain. There had been the train crash in Metropolis… and Clark had abruptly left her unit.

There had been the bomb threat in Metropolis… and Clark had insisted she leave his unit.

Now, there was a hostage situation in Metropolis… and Clark had disappeared.

Coincidence?

Lois shook her head, trying to force the loose ends to connect.

What could possibly mean that Clark had to be alone every time something dire happened in Metropolis?

Could he be… what?

Her mind buzzed with possibilities. What if… what if he were an undercover cop? What if he had to coordinate? Or oversee? Or authorise… what?

That was absurd.

Why would they send an undercover cop to Melbourne? And if they had, why would he need to be alone every time something major happened in Metropolis?

Could he be a spy?

Again… why Melbourne?

And yet… Clark coming to Melbourne had been a last-minute arrangement. Someone else had been supposed to swap with Dan.

Even so, it made no sense.

But Clark’s disappearance made no sense either.

Yet… somehow, it did.

Lois knew he was hiding something.

She’d known almost from the start.

She had assumed it was none of her business.

But now…

Now, she needed to get into Clark’s unit. Perhaps he had left a note. Or perhaps there would be something there to give her a clue as to his whereabouts. At home, she still had the key Dan had given her months ago. She turned and hurried to Flinders Street Station.

If she could find nothing else in Clark’s unit, perhaps she would be able to find the number to call his parents. She dreaded having to tell them their son was missing, but perhaps they would have a suggestion for where he could be.

She stepped onto the train and willed it to hurry to Richmond.

Clark had to be somewhere, and she wasn’t going to rest until she found him.

* * *

Completely exhausted and barely able to stand, Clark landed behind the shrubs at the end of Lois’s driveway.

He had made it.

There were many times when he had thought the distance would be beyond his strength. Only the thought of Lois had kept him going. Thankfully, he had been able to draw power from the sun as he had flown. Even so, the effects of the exposure to the green rock had made flying a precarious business.

He had spun out of the suit and into his clothes as he had crossed the eastern coastline of Australia. If he had lost power or consciousness and dropped, he figured it would be preferable that Clark be found rather than Superman.

He stepped unsteadily from the shrubs and tried to focus on Lois's door. It was thirty yards away. Forty steps. He could do it.

He stepped forward. His vision blurred, and he felt his knees give way. He stumbled forward and regained his balance.

He could do it.

He had to get to Lois.

He took another three steps. Then another three. He blocked out everything else. There was just Lois's door and the promise of Lois.

He was so close.

He had fought his way across mile after mile after mile to get to her. He wasn't going to be denied now.

Then he heard a voice.

"Clarkie."

He forced his vision to focus on the blurry form that was approaching him.

"Clarkie," she said. "You've finally realised that you want what only Ezzie can give you. Come with me, Snookums."

Esmeralda took a firm grip on his arm, and Clark tried to lurch away. He had no strength left to protest. She pulled him forward, towards her unit.

Clark lifted his free hand to the arm that had been captured by Esmeralda and managed to undo his watchband. As she shuffled him past Lois's door, he let his arm swing free and heard his watch clatter onto the concrete.

Part 23

Lois ran from the Richmond train station to her unit. She rushed to her door and inserted the key. Then she stopped. Turned. Stared.

Behind her, lying on the ground, was a watch.

She walked over and picked it up.

It was Clark's watch. She was sure of it. She had noticed it before—usually when checking out his superbly masculine hands. She ran her fingers along the band, recalling how she'd taken it from his wrist when he'd tried on the footy gear. It felt the same… weighed the same.

She raised it to her nose and inhaled deeply.

The band smelled of leather, but there was something else… a whiff of his cologne. This was definitely Clark's watch.

He had been here!

Lois rushed to her door and fumbled slightly with the key in her haste to get into her unit. Finally, the lock cooperated, and she pushed inside. "Clark?" she called.

It took only a few seconds to check every room. He wasn't here. Now that she had time to consider it rationally, how could he be here? He didn't have a key to her unit.

Was he at Dan's place? Had Clark come here and left his watch so she would know he was back from Adelaide?

But why not a note? Why not ring her?

Lois rushed to her doorway and surveyed outside.

There was nothing else… nothing unusual… nothing to suggest Clark had been here.

But he *had* been here.

Esmeralda!

Maybe she had seen something or heard something. She always kept a running tab of everyone's comings and goings.

Lois went to Esmeralda's door and knocked sharply. "Esmeralda!" she called. "It's Lois. Are you in?"

Her knock was ignored. Lois leant closer and placed her ear against the door. She heard a low moan—a low, masculine moan.

That explained why Esmeralda wasn't answering her door. Lois turned towards her own apartment, planning to call Clark's mobile. She stopped after two steps. The moan had been low and almost indistinguishable, but it was definitely male.

Could it be Clark?

And if it were Clark, was he moaning in pain? Or something else?

She had to know.

Lois scuttled back to her unit and rifled through her bag for her lock-picking tools. Less than a minute later, she opened Esmeralda's front door and stepped into her unit.

It was the mirror-image design to Lois's unit. From the bedroom on Lois's left, Esmeralda emerged. She saw Lois, gasped, and quickly closed the door behind her.

"Lois," she said, unsuccessfully trying to cover her surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"I've come to get Clark," Lois said firmly.

Esmeralda backed against the bedroom door, blocking Lois's way. "What makes you think Clark is here?" she drawled with a smug smile.

"I know he's in there," Lois said. "And he's coming with me."

"Lois, Lois," Esmeralda said. "Of course I'm willing to share, but first come, first served. Come back in twenty minutes, and he's all yours."

Lois stepped closer. "Get out of the way," she ordered.

Esmeralda's smirk died, and her eyes narrowed. "Make me," she said.

Lois executed a highly effective move that she had perfected at her self-defence classes, and Esmeralda stumbled away from the door, slumped over and clasping her arm.

"Aaaaahhhh," Esmeralda squealed, her voice high-pitched and piercing.

Lois stalled, fearing she had actually done significant damage. "What's wrong?" she asked coldly, not allowing even a trace of her concern to sound in her words.

Esmeralda looked up, her eyes glinting with dismay. "You broke my nail," she howled.

With a disgusted snort, Lois turned from the woman and opened the door.

Clark lay on the bed. He saw her and tried to rise. Lois moved forward, her eyes flitting over him and assessing his appearance. He wasn't well, that much was immediately obvious. His face was pallid, and his body had an overt listlessness that intensified her fears. His jacket had been removed, half of his shirt buttons were undone, and his glasses were slightly askew.

Other than that, he appeared to be untouched.

Lois leant over and straightened the glasses. She felt a wave of revulsion for Esmeralda. How could she not have noticed that Clark was sick? Or if she had noticed, how could she not care? Could she be that much of a predator that she was willing to inflict her dubious 'favours' on a sick man?

Clark's eyes hadn't left her face. Lois took his hand in hers.

"L…Lo…" he said.

She used her other hand to brush the hair from his forehead. "It's OK," she soothed. "We'll get you to my place. You'll be fine then."

"I… I… didn't… Esm…"

"I know you didn't," Lois said. "Can you stand up? With my help?"

Clark nodded slightly and struggled to a sitting position. Lois crouched beside the bed and looked up into his face. He heavy breathing resonated around the room.

What if their combined strength was not enough? Lois was reasonably confident she could bully Esmeralda into helping, but did she really want that woman touching Clark?

"I… I can… do it," Clark breathed. "If you help me?"

Lois gave him an encouraging smile and was rewarded as he scrambled to his feet. She placed his arm across her shoulder. "Are you right?" she asked. "Lean on me as much as you need."

She felt his slight nod of agreement, and they began their faltering steps out of Esmeralda's bedroom.

Once in the lounge room, Esmeralda glowered at them with sullen resentment. She was still nursing the finger with the broken nail. Knowing Clark needed to rest for a moment, Lois paused.

"You drugged him," she accused, staring directly at Esmeralda.

"I didn't!"

"You drugged him," Lois repeated, low and cold. "This is a police matter now."

All of Esmeralda's bravado melted instantly. "Please," she begged, looking genuinely alarmed. "Please don't bring the police into this."

Lois's heart iced over. What had Esmeralda done to Clark? Why was she so worried?

With a sudden flash of insight, Lois understood. It wasn't about Clark; it was about all the other men who so regularly visited Esmeralda's unit. Lois decided now was as good a time as any to lay down some rules. "See this man?" she shot at Esmeralda.

"What about him?" she asked sulkily.

"This one is mine," Lois said firmly. "Keep your eyes and your hands and your pretty painted fingernails and everything else off him. He's mine. And he's always going be mine."

Esmeralda's jaw flailed.

Lois felt a slight quiver pass through Clark's body, and she turned to him, worried that he might be about to lose consciousness.

Instead, she saw a fledgling smile. He still had about as much colour as porridge, but he was definitely smiling.

It took a moment for her to comprehend.

He was smiling at her declaration of possession! Clearly, she hadn't offended him - although her words had been intended to send a message to Esmeralda, not Clark.

Lois met Clark's eyes, and they both smiled. "Let's get out of here," she said.

He nodded, and together they lumbered out of Esmeralda's unit, along the concrete path, and into Lois's home. She kicked at the door, and it slammed behind them. She continued towards her bedroom, but Clark halted.

"No," he rasped. "The couch will do."

"You're not going on the couch," she said resolutely. "It's half your size." Without giving him the opportunity to argue, she continued to her bedroom door and opened it.

At her bed, he collapsed. Lois positioned her pillow for him and then helped him swing his legs onto the bed. "I'll call the doctor," she said.

"No!" His hand reached for her. "No," he said. "Please, just stay with me." With difficulty, he shuffled over to make room for her to sit on the bed. "Please?"

"Clark, you need a doctor," Lois said. "You look awful and… and…" To her dismay, she felt all of her tightly bound anxiety well up into her throat and morph into tears. She turned away and tried to surreptitiously wipe her eyes.

She heard movement behind her, and Clark's hand cupped her shoulder. She turned and saw him teetering on his feet. "What are you doing?" she admonished. "You look like you're about to fall over."

Clark subsided back onto the bed. "Please, don't cry, honey," he begged. "Please… don't cry."

Lois sat next to him. "Clark… I was so worried about you."

His eyes dropped, and his shoulders sagged. "I know," he said in a low, hoarse voice. "I'm sorry."

He looked crushed, so crushed that Lois drew a heavy cloak over her mountain of questions. Clark was all right. He was here. He'd come home.

For now, that was enough.

She spread her hand over his cheek and tilted his face so their eyes met. "You're OK," she said. "And you came back."

He smiled tentatively and covered her hand with his own. "Lois…" he said. "Thank you."

There was much to suggest his gratitude carried a wealth of meaning, but Lois grasped the simplest interpretation. "I couldn't leave you with Esmeralda," she said.

"Thanks," Clark said. His eyes, soft and expressive, held hers captive. "Will you stay here with me? Please?"

His heartfelt request drove her questions further into the recesses of her mind. "I have to call Browny first," she said.

"But then you'll come back to me?"

She nodded.

Browny answered his phone on the first ring, and Lois told him that Clark had arrived home safely. Browny had questions, but Lois had few answers, so she evaded his queries with hazy assertions that all Clark needed was some time to recover.

Her editor gave them both the rest of the day off. Australia's Cathy Freeman was preparing for the 400 metres at the Olympics, and Browny was going to devote many column inches to that. "Just get yourselves—both of you—here on Thursday afternoon," Browny said gruffly. "Fit, healthy, and ready to write me something earth-shattering."

"OK," Lois agreed, hoping her relief wasn't too obvious. "Thanks, Browny."

Lois returned to her bedroom and looked down at Clark. He patted the bed, silently asking her to sit beside him. "You look tired," he said.

"I didn't sleep last night."

"I'm sorry," he said. Again, he patted the bed. "Sit down? Please?"

Lois sat next to him but was careful to ensure there was no contact between them. "Shouldn't you lie down?" she said. "You don't look good at all."

"Will you stay with me? Please?"

The undisguised plea in his voice melted the last of Lois's reservations. She needed him. And he was making no attempt to hide how much he wanted to be with her.

She gently pushed him back onto her pillow and then pulled together the unbuttoned upper sections of his shirt, covering the slither of bare skin. After a final glance into his face, she stretched out alongside him and rested her head on his chest.

His heart was racing faster than normal, and Lois considered insisting she call the doctor. Or, before this closeness became totally addictive, she should demand to know what he was hiding.

But there was something about the way his hand had closed over her arm that brought reassurance. Something made her believe that although she had a million questions, he would have answers for all of them.

She was with Clark—and for now, nothing else mattered.

Lois closed her eyes and was beckoned into sleep by the soft lullaby of his heart and the gentle rocking of his breaths.

* * *

When Lois awoke, her first awareness was of Clark's hand on her back. Her second was of his chest beneath her cheek. Her third was that her hand was resting intimately on the crest of his ribcage. She must have moved while she was asleep because a good portion of her face was directly skin-on-skin with his chest. She strangled her urgent instinct to pull away and permitted herself a stolen moment to relish being this close to him. He felt amazing—soft and warm skin over rock hard and exquisitely defined muscle.

From further down his body came the sound of a phone. Lois sat up, her attention drawn to his jeans pocket. She could see the outline of his mobile phone.

She should answer it. It was probably his parents or someone else worried about Clark.

But to answer it, she had to reach into his jeans pockets and extract his phone.

Lois stared—her hand airborne and irresolute—as the phone shrilled throughout the quiet room.

* * *

The sound of his phone invaded Clark's consciousness.

His chest felt cold, as if something warm and vital had recently moved away.

Without opening his eyes, he reached for his pocket and removed his phone. He felt for the button, pushed it, and tried to pull some memory from the fog of his brain.

"Cl…Clark Ke…" His voice was scratchy and his throat parched.

"Clark? Where are you? How are you? Are you all right?" It was his mother's voice.

His memories flooded back. Trask… Mayson… the green rock… and—his eyes shot open—and Lois. She was still here. Still with him. Sitting on the bed, next to him.

With his other hand, he reached for her, and her hand slipped into his. She smiled hesitantly, and his entire world swam in a sea of happiness. He was with Lois, and she was smiling.

"Clark?"

"Ah… Mom," he said. "Sorry. Yeah, I'm fine."

"What happened?"

"I'm sorry, Mom," Clark said with real regret as he realised how much time had probably passed since he had escaped from Trask's clutches. "I'm sorry. I should have called you before now."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm with Lois."

"In Australia?"

"Yes."

He heard his mom's deep sigh of relief, and hot shame again swept through him. He should have thought to call his parents before he fell asleep. He should have known how worried they would be. "I'm really sorry, Mom," he said.

"It's OK, Clark," his mom said. Most of the anxiety had left her voice. "We heard on the news that Superman had escaped. And Superman doesn't have to worry anymore because Trask is dead, and before he died, he launched the rocket containing the green rock."

Trask was dead? The green rock had gone? Aware that Lois was with him, Clark clamped down on his battery of questions.

"We're so glad you're OK," his mom said. "And we're glad you're with Lois."

"Thanks, Mom," Clark said. He was glad he was with Lois, too.

"Call us when things settle down."

"Sure, Mom. I love you. Give my love to Dad."

"I love you, too, Clark. Talk to you soon."

Clark disconnected the call and tossed his cell onto the bed. He sat up and looked at Lois. It felt like he'd been away from her for weeks. He loved her. He loved looking at her. He loved being with her. Every ounce of effort spent in getting to her had been worth it. He would do it all again—a hundred times—if it meant being with Lois.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Much better," he said. "Thanks to you."

"I didn't do much," she said. "I fell asleep instead of looking after you."

The last thing Clark remembered was the wonderful weight of Lois's head and her steady breaths as they skittered across his chest. He hadn't wanted to sleep. He hadn't wanted to miss one moment of their togetherness. But too quickly, exhaustion had claimed him. "I fell asleep, too," he said.

"I think you needed it," she said. "You looked awful when I brought you in here."

"Lois," he said. "Lois, you know I didn't want to go with Esmeralda, don't you?"

She nodded. “How did she get you in there?”

“I came here, looking for you,” Clark said. “She found me, and… it’s all very vague, but the next thing I remember is you barging into the room.” He risked a brief glance into her face. “I know that sounds incredibly convenient, but I really don’t remember too much else.”

“How did you get back to Melbourne? From Adelaide?”

“I flew,” he said.

“When did you get sick?”

“Earlier today.”

“In Adelaide?‘

Clark pressed his fingers into his forehead and released a gush of breath. He couldn’t do this… not for a moment longer. He reached for her and slid his hand along the lovely line of her jaw. “I guess you were worried, huh?”

She nodded, and the tiny wobble of her chin clanked through him like pungent accusation.

“I’m so sorry, honey,” he said. “It won’t happen again. I promise you, that will never happen again.”

Lois drew away from his hand and reached across to her bedside table. She took a bunch of tissues from the box. “How can you promise something like that?” she asked.

“Because there are going to be no more secrets,” Clark declared. “Not between you and me.”

“Why didn’t you call me?” she said, her tears still close. “Why wouldn’t you answer my calls?” A tear leaked from her eye and trickled down her cheek. “Why did you just disappear?”

“I’ll tell you,” Clark said. “I’ll tell you everything.” He glanced around her bedroom. There were posters of various Hawthorn players covering the walls. A framed brown-and-gold jumper stood proudly atop her dressing table. “But perhaps this isn’t the best place to do it.”

Lois wiped her eyes. “Where?”

“In the other room—somehow, it seems less personal than in your bedroom.”

Lois nodded and stood. “Are you able to stand?” she said.

Clark moved to the edge of the bed and stood. He felt almost normal again, other than a mild headache and a throat that felt like he had swallowed a few tons of grit. “I’m fine,” he said.

Lois went into the kitchen, filled her electric jug, and flicked it on. “Would you like something to drink?” she said.

“Thanks,” he said, sensing her need to put some distance between them. He understood completely. He would have understood if she had demanded he leave. Instead, she was making him coffee.

But he’d hurt her. He’d made her cry.

Never again, he vowed.

Never again.

When she’d made their coffee, she brought the cups to the couch. They sat down—Clark being careful not to crowd her—and silently sipped from their steaming drinks.

She wasn’t looking at him.

All of the closeness from being together again, from —well, not *sleeping* together, but sleeping together—had evaporated.

Clark couldn’t even begin to imagine how confused she must feel. “Lois,” he said. He turned slightly, and his legs came very close to hers. She retreated further into the couch, snatched a cushion, and hugged it against her stomach as she raised her knees in front of her.

She looked as if she were defending herself against him. He understood that, too. He didn’t deserve her trust.

“Lois,” he said, trying to gather his thoughts as he frantically wondered if any of his numerous rehearsals were going to help him through this. Somehow, he didn’t think they would be of any use at all. “Would you like to ask your questions, or would you like me to just tell you everything?”

Her eyes slowly rose from her cup and met his. “If I ask, will you answer me honestly?” she said. “Will you tell me whatever it is you’ve been hiding?”

He nodded, his eyes steady in hers. “Yes,” he said. “I will tell you everything.”

Lois sighed. “Clark,” she said. “I’m so confused. I don’t know what to think. I was so worried when you didn’t answer my calls. No one knew where you were… and I was so scared I would never see you again.”

She was close to tears. Clark could see how much she hated being so vulnerable before him. He rose from the couch and brought her the box of tissues. She took a wad, wiped her eyes, and sipped from her coffee. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“You keep saying that,” she said listlessly. “But it doesn’t tell me anything.”

He sat beside her. “How about I tell you, and then, if you have any questions, you can ask?”

She nodded.

Clark’s heart was hammering so loudly, he was sure half of Melbourne would be able to hear it. “Lois,” he said. “I told you I was adopted.”

"Yes."

"What I didn't tell you was that my parents didn't get me from an adoption agency or anything like that."

"How did they get you?"

"They found me…" He gave her a moment to register that and then forced himself to continue. "… as a baby… in a spaceship."

Her mouth dropped open. "Who would leave a baby in a spaceship?" she asked incredulously.

Clark took a deep breath and leapt into the unknown. "Parents who knew their baby's only chance of survival was if they sent him to another planet."

Her mouth closed, and her throat lurched as she swallowed. Her eyes had widened but now snapped shut as if she were hoping that when she opened them again, things would seem more believable. When her eyelids rose, she stared at him.

"I'm not from this planet," Clark said softly. "I'm from a planet called Krypton. I was sent here because my biological parents knew that Krypton was about to be destroyed. My adoptive parents, Martha and Jonathan Kent, found me and raised me as their own child." He stared at Lois, not daring to breathe as he awaited her response.

Lois placed her cup on the lampstand, moving in the slowest of slow motion. When she turned to him, she stared again. Then, suddenly, understanding flooded her face. "Y…you're S…Superman?" she squeaked.

"I'm Clark Kent… but when my powers are needed to help someone, I change into the suit, and that way, I can still be just Clark all the other time."

"Powers?" she gulped.

"I'm very strong, and I'm very fast, and I can see through things and hear long distances."

"You were *in* Metropolis?" she said with arrant disbelief.

"Yes."

"What happened? How did Trask hurt you?"

"The only thing I've ever known that can hurt me is a green rock. We think it came to Earth from my planet—probably in the wake of my spaceship. Trask had some of it. It causes me pain, it wipes out my powers, it weakens me… and I think that if I were exposed to it for a long time, it would probably kill me."

"Did you know about it?" Lois asked. "Before… what Trask did?"

"Yes," Clark answered. "We found some in the fields close to our home. It was the first time I had ever experienced pain. My parents gathered it up and wrapped it in lead—which protects me from it—and I threw it into space."

"How did you escape from Trask?"

"He had the unshakable belief that the green rock was the source of my powers. He brought it close to me—that's why I was so weak. Then he said he was going to shoot it into space, so I would lose my power source and no longer be a threat to humanity."

"What does power your… powers?"

"The sun energises me. And heals me after I've been exposed to the rock."

"Then shouldn't you have been outside? Instead of…?" She gestured to her bedroom.

He'd needed *her*—being with Lois had restored him more than the sun ever could. But Clark wasn't sure she would be receptive to that particular insight right now, so he said, "I knew you'd be worried."

"Are you the only one?" Lois asked. "Are there others from your planet?"

"No. Just me."

"The rocket was launched. Was the green rock in it?"

"Mom said that is what's being reported."

"So Trask took it away, and that's how you were able to regain enough strength to rescue Mayson? And escape?"

Clark nodded.

"If your powers had been significantly weakened, how did you get back here? Why did you come back here?"

Now he had to tell her. "I had to get to you."

He had hoped she would smile—just a glimmer would have meant the world to him. But she didn't. She stared at him—his face, his hands, his chest, and then back to his face. The silence stretched on, and Clark wondered if he should say more, or if he should wait for her to process what he had already said.

Lois cleared her throat. "You… you can fly?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Fast? Like an aeroplane?"

"Usually a lot faster than that."

"Faster than a jet?" she asked. Her expression suggested she wasn't necessarily buying this.

"When I haven't been near any green rock, I can get from Metropolis to Melbourne in less than a minute," he said, stating it as plain fact.

Lois pinned him with hard, cool eyes. “You said you were going to be honest.”

“I am being honest,” he said quietly.

“Prove it,” she challenged.

“You want me to fly to Metropolis?”

“No. Even I can see that wouldn’t be possible at the moment. It’s obvious you’re not fully recovered from whatever made you so sick.”

Clark studied her. Didn’t she believe him? Did she think he was making it up to cover something else? What else could possibly make *this* seem the easier of two options? “You don’t believe I was in Metropolis?” he said. “You don’t believe I got sick from exposure to the green rock?”

Lois sighed. “Honestly, Clark? I have no idea what to believe.”

Clark placed his coffee on the floor and stood up from the couch. As Lois watched him, he slowly rose from the floor and hung in the air.

She gasped.

She looked him up and down.

She dropped from the couch to the floor and swished her hands in the space under his dangling feet.

Then she slithered back to the couch and stared at him, mouth open, eyes wide. “You can come down now,” she directed tonelessly.

He dropped lightly to the floor and sat next to her on the couch. “I’m sorry, Lois,” he said, not knowing what else to say and hoping it would adequately cover whatever she was feeling.

“Clark… this is… I’m… I’m going to need some time.”

“I understand,” he said. “You can have as much time as you need. And you can ask anything you want, and I promise I will answer fully and honestly.”

“Anything?”

“Anything. You can ask me anything. I don’t want any secrets from you.”

“Who else knows about this? Perry White? Mayson? Half of Metropolis? Your friends?”

Clark shook his head. “No one knows. Just my parents… me… and now you.”

“No one?” she whispered. “Not your colleagues? Not your former girlfriends? Not your cousins? Not the neighbours’ kid you grew up with? *None* of them know?”

“No.”

Lois swallowed again, her eyes still riveted to his face. “Clark… I have a lot to think about.”

“Do you want me to leave?” he asked, dreading her answer.

She nodded slowly, and Clark’s greatest fears assailed him. He had driven her away. He was *too* different. He was too odd… too alien.

“I… I think that would be best,” Lois said. Her voice had a faraway tone that suggested her mind was a quagmire of bewilderment.

He wanted to apologise… again. Instead, he stood, placed his half-empty cup on her kitchen counter, and went to the door. He turned and faced her, but he had no idea what to say. Should he thank her? Should he remind her that he would answer all her questions? Should he assure her that whatever she decided, he would accept it, regardless of how much it hurt him? Should he forego every last trace of dignity and beg her not to push him away? He didn’t know, so he just looked at her looking at him.

Then, he opened her door.

“Clark!”

“Yes?” He turned, impossible hope surging through him.

“I won’t tell anyone,” Lois said. “I don’t know anything else, but I do know that. I won’t tell anyone.”

Clark smiled sadly. It was small compensation for having gouged a cavernous gulf between them—a gulf that he feared could never be bridged. “I know that, Lois,” he said. “I know.”

He waited for moment, hoping she would say more, but she didn’t, so Clark quietly closed her door and walked into the darkness.

It was Monday night.

Tomorrow, they were supposed to travel along the Great Ocean Road together.

Clark walked back to his unit. His body felt as if it were close to totally recovered. His heart, though—he knew that would never recover.

He’d lost Lois.

He could feel it.

He’d lost her.

* * *

When Clark arrived home, he called his parents on Dan’s phone. His cell was still on Lois’s bed. He told them how he had escaped from Trask, and they filled him in with the

slowly-coming-to-light details of Trask's obsession with ridding the world of Superman.

"What are they saying?" Clark asked. "Do the people believe Trask and see him as a tragic hero who wasn't able to convince the world of his views? Or do they believe he was wrong?"

"It seems mixed right now," his dad said. "I think many are still in shock. And it's early morning here, so there was a lull overnight."

"I told Lois," Clark said dejectedly. "I told her everything."

His announcement was met with prolonged silence from his parents. "What did she say?" his mom finally asked.

"She didn't know what to say," Clark said.

"Is that what has upset you?" his mom asked.

"Yeah."

"I could tell from your voice that you were down, but I hoped it was just the after-effects of the green rock."

"I'm not sure I could do a long-distance flight, but I feel like I'm almost back to normal," Clark said.

"You managed to fly to Australia," his dad said. "We figured you must be all right."

"Yeah," Clark said. No way was he going to tell them how long it had taken or how many times he had feared he was going to be stranded somewhere in the Pacific Ocean.

"Did Lois say anything?" his mom asked. "Anything about what happens from here?"

"No. Just that she wouldn't tell anyone."

"She probably needs some time to think it through," his mom said brightly. "I'm sure it must have been a surprise to her."

Clark clamped down on his sigh. He just couldn't bring himself to believe that Lois would be able to accept his alienness. "I'm really tired," he said. "But I wanted you to know that I'm fine."

"Give her time, Clark," his mom said. "Just give her some time."

"Goodnight, Mom, Dad," Clark said. They didn't respond. "Oh, good morning," he amended.

Clark replaced the phone and slumped onto the couch.

He had looked forward to Tuesday morning with such blissful anticipation. Now it was nearly here, and all he felt was despair.

They had never had their date.

He had never kissed her.

He had never told her he loved her.

He shouldn't have told her his secret—not yet. He should have waited.

But if he'd waited—waited until he'd experienced greater closeness with Lois—it would have just hurt more.

No, he thought disconsolately.

Nothing could hurt more than this.

Not even the green rock.

Part 24

Clark was in the shower the next morning when he heard a sound that caused his heart to surge in response.

Lois!

He could hear her heartbeat. She was—

He heard the soft tap on his door.

She was here!

Two seconds later, he was shaved, dried, and dressed, with his hair combed and his cologne applied. His heart capered in eager reply to the heart he could hear on the other side of the door.

He opened it and feasted his eyes.

Lois stared at him, her expression inscrutable. She looked pale and tired. Not that it detracted from her beauty—in fact, just the opposite. It gave her a dreamlike quality that made him long to run his fingers down the velvet skin of her cheek. The silence stretched, and Clark searched his mind for something to say. The manners his mom had instilled came to his rescue. "Lois," he said. He stepped back. "Would you like to come in?"

She continued staring. "Is that OK?"

He could hear the thundering of her heart and mourned again that his actions had caused such awkwardness between them. "You will always be welcome," he said.

Her questioning eyes searched his face, and he realised that his words had sounded like he had accepted that their friendship was over—that they had moved on to the stilted discomfiture of the once-were-friends.

Her eyes dropped, and she walked in. She swung to face him, her hands clasped together. "I'm sorry, Clark," she said. "I'm sorry for pushing you out last night."

She was sorry. "Lois," Clark said. "Lois, you don't have to be sorry. I messed up. I'm sorry. It was too much, too soon, too implausible."

She gestured to his couch. “Can we sit?” she asked. “And talk?”

She wanted to talk! “Of course,” he said. Inside him, hope pushed insistently against his heart, but he tried to stifle it. Lois had come to his unit—she hadn’t said she wanted a future with an alien.

They sat together—not close… but at the respectable distance of acquaintances.

“Are you all, right?” Clark asked.

Lois nodded. “I’ve thought and thought about everything you said, and…” She lifted her hands from her lap in a gesture of bewilderment. They fell back, and she locked them together again. “… and finally… finally I got some sort of handle on how I feel.”

“Are you mad at me?” Clark asked. “For telling you? For not telling you sooner?”

She shook her head. “I’m not mad… I’m… I’m not sure if I’m going to be able to explain this well at all, but I’m… lost. I feel lost.”

He hadn’t been expecting that. “Lost?” he echoed softly.

“I feel like I had a friend… a friend called Clark. A man I had come to know and… and then, suddenly, it’s like I don’t know him at all.”

“I’m sorry,” Clark said. “I realise it must seem as if I tried to deceive you.”

“No.” Her hands unfolded, and one almost crossed the chasm between them; then it flittered back and rested again on her lap. “No, Clark, I don’t blame you for not telling me before. I understand that… but I just need some time to… to find you again.”

Pure, high-grade jubilation swept over him. Lois wasn’t running away—she was coming back. “You can have all the time you need,” he said.

“Would you mind… just sitting for a little while? I need to…” Lois glanced away, and a light sprinkling of pink coloured her cheeks. “I just need to look at you… I need to try to find the Clark I knew in amongst all the other things you told me.”

Clark settled further back into the couch and tried to look as if he were relaxed.

“It’s like there are two Clarks,” Lois said after a short silence. “The man I met at the airport. The man who sat with me on the boardwalk in Geelong while we dunked our feet in the bay. The man who cooked for me. The man who asked me out on a date. The man I thought I knew.”

Her words ate a trail of regret through his heart. “Lo—”

“And then there’s another Clark,” she continued. “The man who is trying to live the best way he can despite some really tough circumstances.” She found his eyes and held them for a long moment. “And both of them are wonderful people… but somehow, I have to merge them together and feel like I know Clark again.” Her smile glimmered. “Did that make *any* sense?”

He nodded. “It made a lot of sense; I just… I’m not sure what to say. I wasn’t expecting this.”

“Why?”

“Because I thought… I feared it would be too much… and you wouldn’t want to be with me… not now you know everything.”

“Then why did you tell me?”

“Because I couldn’t go on keeping the secret from you.”

“Even though, by telling me, you risked ending everything?”

“I had to tell you,” Clark said. “I couldn’t risk hurting you again by disappearing and leaving you not knowing where I went.”

Lois shuffled forward, and their knees connected. “May I touch you?” she asked.

His throat dried, and he leaned towards her as he nodded.

Her hand lifted, and she brushed slowly across his cheek, then along his jaw, down his throat, and to the curve of his neck. She began to work her fingers into his shoulder, just as she had done when they had stood by the river. Clark concentrated on the sensation of her touch. He didn’t know his eyes had slid shut until he heard a small chuckle and they shot open.

“I guess I know why you weren’t sore after Smiddy’s bump,” Lois said.

“And why I was so reluctant to play.”

“It was never about you getting hurt, was it?” Lois said. “It was about someone else getting hurt.”

“Mmhmm.”

“I remember seeing on a news report that you were shot and the bullet just ricocheted off you.” Her fingers continued plying their magic through his shoulder.

“Yeah.”

“So, you can’t be hurt, but it’s not like you can’t feel? I mean, it seems as if you can feel this OK.”

“I can feel this,” Clark confirmed. “And it’s amazing.”

Lois smiled. Her hand moved to his other shoulder. “Now I know there’s nothing wrong with either of them, I guess this other guy shouldn’t miss out.”

They fell silent—the only sound was the slight swish-swish of her fingers across his shirt. That and the low sounds of pleasure Clark could hear coming from somewhere deep in his own contentment.

Finally, her hand left his shoulder, and she reached into her bag. She offered him his cell phone and his watch. Clark slipped the phone into his pocket and cinched the watch around his wrist.

“I knew the watch was yours,” Lois said.

He had hoped she would. “How?”

“I recognised it. And it smelled like you—your cologne,” she explained. “That’s how I knew you were in Esmeralda’s.”

Clark smiled. “And you came to get me,” he said, remembering her declaration to Esmeralda. It was too much to hope that she still felt the same about him… wasn’t it?

“Are you ready?” Lois asked.

“Am I…”

“Ready?” she finished for him. “Port Campbell? The Great Ocean Road? Are you ready?”

“No,” Clark said, his heart executing a wild series of somersaults. “But I can be—in just a few seconds.”

She smiled—openly and incautiously—the stunning smile he had come to associate with Lois Lane. She flicked her hand in the general direction of his bedroom. “Come on, Kent,” she said brightly. “You’ve got five seconds, or I’m going without you.”

He shot into the bedroom at a speed far beyond normal. He threw enough clothes for a couple of days into his suitcase, added some bathroom necessities, and then stood before her, suitcase in hand.

Lois looked at her watch. “Three seconds,” she said. “Very impressive.”

She stood from the couch, and they were only inches apart. Clark gently grasped her arm, just down from her shoulder, and swallowed against the emotion that had crawled up his throat. “Lois,” he said, his voice husky, “thank you for coming back to me. I was scared you wouldn’t.”

She met his eyes, and he saw a replica of the expression he’d seen when they’d walked along the river. She smiled and reached for his face. The tip of her thumb skimmed along his cheek. “We should go,” she said, so softly that her voice felt like silk to his eardrums. “We have a long road ahead of us.”

He heard her words even as his heart grappled with a deeper meaning. They had a long road ahead of them. And it was a road they would travel together.

* * *

They didn’t speak much as they drove. Clark had to keep glancing at her, not sure he dared believe. He was with Lois, and he didn’t have to hide anything. She would have more questions, he knew that, but for the first time in his life, interrogation was not something he needed to fear. He had revealed his deepest secret, and rather than it being an insurmountable barrier, it had simply melted in the warmth of Lois Lane.

As they came down the far side of the Westgate Bridge, she looked at him and smiled. “Hungry?” she asked.

“I haven’t had breakfast yet.”

“Do you get hungry?”

“I like to eat.”

Her eyes dropped from his face and swept his body. “Please don’t tell me you can eat whatever you want and still look like *that*.”

“Sorry,” he said with a little shrug.

She shook her head in feigned disgust. “Well, big guy, I’m hungry, and I want breakfast.”

“Have you thought of a good place where we could stop?”

“Torquay,” she said without hesitation. “It’s a lovely beach town. Assuming the traffic through Geelong isn’t too bad, we should be there in less than an hour.”

“Would you walk with me along the beach?” he asked, remembering the boardwalk in Geelong.

“Only if you promise to warm my socks when my feet get cold,” she said. She glanced at him, her smile peeking through the seriousness she was trying to maintain. “You didn’t warm my socks by rubbing them together, did you?”

“No.”

“Then how?”

Clark paused, acutely aware of exactly how weird this was going to sound.

Lois lifted her hand from the steering wheel and held it out to him. “Just tell me, big guy,” she said. “It can’t be any bigger than the whole flying thing.”

He took her hand in his. “I can shoot warmth from my eyes.”

He felt her surprise ripple through the connection of their hands. “Warmth?” she queried. “Or heat? Can you melt things?”

“I’ve learned to control it now. I can make it hot enough to melt steel. Or just warm enough for a lady’s socks.”

“You can control it now?” she said. “Does that mean there were a few regrettable incidents in the past?”

“Just a few,” he admitted.

“Whoops,” she said as her grin widened.

“I set a hay bale on fire once.”

Her laughter exploded, and her hand wrenched from his and covered her mouth as she tried to contain her amusement.

“It wasn’t funny,” Clark said, although he knew his smile did nothing to support his claim.

“No,” she agreed, attempting a semblance of seriousness. “What did you do?”

“Well… as it happens, I can freeze things with my breath, so I just blew on it.” Clark waited again, wondering if there was a limit to how many bizarre details she could cope with.

After a moment of reflection, Lois said, “Can you control that, too?”

“Yes.”

“Are any other senses heightened? Hearing?”

“Yeah. If I concentrate specifically, I can hear things no one else can.”

“Such as?”

Clark paused. “Your heartbeat,” he said. “Does that bother you?”

Lois also paused, and Clark’s fears stirred from their dormancy. “With anyone else it might,” she admitted. “But you’ve shared so much with me, I don’t feel any need to have secrets from you. Not even my heart rate.”

He smiled as his fears subsided again.

“Why do you wear glasses?” Lois asked. “But Superman doesn’t?”

Clark swallowed. He had promised he would be truthful—totally truthful. “I use it as a disguise now, but…”

“But?

“I started wearing them when I was a teenager.”

“Why?”

“Because I can see through things.”

“So, by wearing them, you can actually see less than when you’re not wearing them?”

“Yes,” he said, wondering how much further she would press for an explanation. “They’re lined with lead.”

“Fair enough,” she said.

Fair enough? That was *all*? “You seem to be taking all this with remarkable composure,” Clark noted.

“I had all night to think about it,” Lois said.

“I guess you didn’t sleep much.”

“Not at all.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s OK,” she said easily. “I slept most of yesterday afternoon.” She slipped him a glancing smile that rekindled the memory of the feel of her next to him.

“We both did,” he said, not even bothering to curb the smile that probably told her exactly how much he had enjoyed it.

“If I get tired later, we can stop,” Lois said. “Or you… *Can* you drive?”

“Yes. Did you think I couldn’t?”

She shrugged. “If I could fly, I’m not sure I’d bother with something as cumbersome as a car.”

“I have to be careful with flying,” he said. “It’s not a skill I publicise.”

She grinned. “What’s it like? Flying?”

“It’s great.”

“You’re a writer, Kent; I’m sure you can come up with a better description than that.”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Because I’d like to be able to imagine it. To have the freedom to fly wherever you wanted—that would be just so cool.”

“You don’t have to imagine it,” Clark told her softly.

She didn’t understand. “Why not?”

“Because anytime you say the word, you can come flying with me.”

Her head spun quickly, and then she forced her eyes forward again. “I… can… come with you?” she asked in awestruck wonder.

“There’s no one else I would rather take flying.”

“We would just”—her hand lifted in a vague floating movement—“fly?”

"Anytime you want to, Ms Lane," he said. "It would be my honour to take you flying."

Lois took a deep breath. "Oh, boy," she said. "I thought I'd considered everything, but I didn't think of that."

"Would you come with me? Would you trust me?"

She grinned. "Would you behave yourself?"

He raised his hands in protest. "Have I ever *not* behaved myself?"

"You thought it was fun to skate way too close to me when we were on the ice."

"How many times did you fall over?"

"None."

"Because I looked after you," Clark said. "And I always will."

She looked at him. "I know that," she said with quiet assurance that melted his heart.

* * *

Half an hour later, they arrived in Torquay. At a cafe on the main street, they stopped to buy coffee and sweet buns. Then they parked at the top of a small cliff that protruded into the ocean and ate their breakfast as they watched the waves sweep the empty beaches that stretched on both sides.

Lois was glad to be free from the necessity of watching the road. She still felt the nagging need to stare at Clark. She wanted to watch him, to study everything about him—his smile, his facial expressions, the way he moved his hands when he talked—in the light of what had to be the most startling story of all time.

When he had told her yesterday, she had felt Clark—her Clark—slipping away. The man she had come to know. The man she had come to—she hesitated to admit it, even in the privacy of her own mind, but her heart knew it to be true—the man she had come to love.

She had found that more disconcerting than the mind-blowing secret he had disclosed.

It had been so hard to reconcile the man she knew with the things he'd told her.

So, she had pushed him away.

And she had spent the long hours of darkness trying to meld together the little she knew of Superman with what she had experienced of Clark Kent.

When she had knocked on his door that morning, a few of her reservations had still lingered. Then, he'd opened the door, and at the first sight of him, her remaining doubts had simply vaporised.

And every moment she spent with him, it became clearer. *He* became clearer. This was still Clark. This was still the man who dressed in jeans and a shirt and had been to the footy with her. This was still the man who had stood between her and the Eagles supporters. This was still the man who had listened to her Hawthorn stories. This was still the man who had held her hand on the ice rink.

This was still the man who had completely captivated her heart.

* * *

"Would you like to go for that walk now?"

Lois drained the last of her coffee and smiled. There were still a lot of kilometres to Port Campbell, but she could think of nothing she wanted to do more than walk with Clark. "Sounds great," she said.

He jumped from the car and opened her door, offering his hand to help her out.

They locked the Jeep and walked to the fenced-off track that weaved through the dunes and down to the beach. About halfway down, Lois stopped and looked across to the chiselled cliffs on the far side of the beach.

Clark stopped behind her. Close behind her. She couldn't actually feel him, but that didn't stop her body tingling at his nearness.

The waves crashed into the distant cliffs, a snapshot of time in the eons of their constant sculpting. Mesmerising though it was, Lois turned from the magnificence of the view and centred her attention on Clark. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"Incredibly beautiful," he murmured. His eyes had settled low on her face, somewhere around her mouth.

Her heart raced in response. "I know what you're thinking," she whispered.

His eyes rose and met hers. "You do?"

"You're thinking how much you'd like to kiss me."

"I'm thinking that this is the perfect place for our first kiss," Clark said in a low, hoarse voice that electrified every nerve in her body. "But you would have to think so, too."

"I think this is perfect," Lois said, her voice barely audible.

Clark's throat jumped, and she knew he'd heard.

His face lowered—slowly, yet with a purposefulness that caused the world to tilt. Lois placed her hands on the broad

slopes of his chest and, finding solidity, closed her eyes. Their lips touched. His mouth was warm, and soft, and exploratory. He drew back minimally and then came again, deepening their contact.

His arms surrounded her, nestling her into their sanctuary as his mouth continued to kiss her with a dizzying eagerness that was dotted with tiny hesitations as he assessed her response.

Time ceased.

Surroundings faded.

There was nothing but him.

And Lois had never felt like this.

Too soon, Clark drew away, and the mouth that had transported her to a new realm lifted slightly to a shy smile.

She smiled back, and his grin broadened at their unspoken agreement.

Their kiss had been good. Very good.

Lois eased forward onto his chest. His arms tightened around her. His head leant against hers, and she felt the touch of a kiss in her hair.

Lois chuckled softly.

"What?" came his gentle voice.

Lois didn't move from her place on his chest. "If seems as if all my life, I haven't quite fitted," she said. "Firstly, I was an American in Australia, so I became as Australian as I could be. Then, I was female when everyone else was male, so I tried to fit in there."

"And now?"

"Now, right now, it feels as if I've found exactly where I belong. And…"

"And?"

Lois straightened and looked into his face. Her hand rested lightly on his cheek, and she looked into his chocolate brown eyes. "And it's kind of funny that the first time I ever feel like that, I'm in the arms of an alien from another planet."

"Does that concern you?" Clark asked anxiously. "I mean, I'm hardly normal."

His apprehension touched something within her and fired the desire to dissolve the doubts that clearly plagued him. Her hands slid up his shoulders and met behind his neck. She yearned to give him something… something momentous that he would treasure… something that would reassure him. Suddenly, Lois knew exactly the gift that he would value most.

And she wanted to give it first.

Her fingertips delved into the softness of his sea-breeze-tussled hair. She gazed into the depths of his beautiful brown eyes. "I love you, Clark," she said.

His eyes closed, and his breath stopped, and his head leaned gently against hers. She could hear the thundering of his heart. When his head rose again, she saw that moisture had gathered in his eyes.

"I love you, Lois."

She slid her fingers through the hair just above the wings of his glasses. "I know," she said.

"I've wanted to tell you for a long time."

"You did tell me," she said. "Not with those words exactly, but with your actions."

"You knew?"

Lois smiled. "I can read you like a cheap comic, Kent," she said.

He leant close to her again. "Then it's a good thing I will never again have any secrets from you," he said.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you for trusting me."

"Thank you for not walking away."

She took his face in her hands and held him close. "I won't walk away," she promised.

He smiled, though it was just a little wobbly, and she didn't fail to notice that his eyes still glistened with unshed tears.

She kissed him one final time and stepped away. "Let's take that walk," she said.

* * *

They stepped onto the dry, wind-swept sand and walked along the beach. Clark rested his hand lightly on Lois's shoulder, revelling not only in the contact but also in the knowledge that his touch was welcome.

Lois loved him.

Lois… loved… him.

She had said so.

Clark felt like he was floating in the glorious new world of his dreams.

Lois turned to him, her smile shining. "Sand and shoes don't go together," she declared. "Let's take them off."

"You're going to get wet, aren't you?" he predicted.

"You're not scared of a little water, are you, Kent?"

Without waiting for his reply, Lois dropped to the sand and removed her tennis shoes and socks. Then she rolled up her jeans. Clark did the same, and they put their shoes together.

"They'll be fine here," Lois said as she slid her hand into his. "No one'll touch them."

They walked to the water line and stepped into the lightly frothing wavelets. The cold water shimmied up Lois's legs, and Clark felt her hand tighten around his.

"Oooh," she said. "This is colder than I thought it would be."

Clark used his free hand to slide his glasses down his nose, and he shot a little warmth into the stretch of water in front of Lois.

Two steps later, she looked up at him, surprise and delight on her face. "*You* did that, didn't you?" she demanded.

"Did what?" he asked.

"You warmed the water, didn't you?"

"I didn't warm it," he defended. "I merely took the chill off it for you."

She laughed. "You don't have to, you know?" she said. "I don't expect you to use your powers just to make me comfortable."

"Lois," he said. "It's just so wonderful to have the freedom to be open with someone. My whole life, I've had to hide. I've hidden my powers, and I've hidden what I can do. I've hidden from everyone except my parents. Now, for the first time, my powers are… well, more than something that stops me from being just like everyone else."

"You'll never be just like everyone else," she said.

Clark nodded. "I know that. I've accepted that."

Lois shook her head. "I didn't mean it like that," she said. "I meant your honesty and your integrity and your kindness… The way you rescued Mayson despite everything she did to you. The way you never think about what you can get, only about what you can give. You'll never be like everyone else, and that is just one of the things I love about you."

Clark felt his spirits bubble like the froth of the wave. "Lois…" he said, and his mind refused to go any further. There weren't words to describe how he felt about her.

"I know," she said softly. "I know."

And she did—that was just one of the many amazing things about Lois Lane. His mind replayed it again—*I love you, Clark.* He hadn't been expecting her to say it, although it was certainly on his mind. He had wanted to tell her that he loved her but had hesitated. That she'd wanted to kiss him had been mind-blowing. He was willing to take this slowly, willing to take it at any pace that suited Lois. So, he had simply bathed in the wonderful reality that Lois had allowed him, *encouraged* him to kiss her.

And then… then, she had said she loved him.

Said it with a sincerity that had shone in her deep brown eyes.

Lois loved him.

Clark had hoped… had dreamed… had imagined. Yet the reality was beyond anything he could have envisaged.

His musings were shattered by a small spray of water that flicked up and splattered his jeans and sweater. Lois's hand pulled from his grasp, and she scurried away. He didn't need super-hearing to know she was giggling.

He set out after her, catching her quickly, again without resorting to superpowers. He bent low and scooped her up into his arms and tried to glare into her grinning face. "You splashed me," he accused.

She giggled harder.

Clark strode purposefully to the water's edge and continued until the surf lapped around his knees. "You deserve to be dunked," he told her sternly.

Not even that wiped the smile from her face. "You won't do it," she said with rock-solid conviction.

She was right, but… "How do you know I won't?"

Lois grinned wider. "Because if I feel even the slightest loosening of your grip, I will resort to a tactic that I know will make it impossible for you to even think about dropping me."

His eyebrows jumped. "Really?" He deliberately slackened his arms, and she slid a few inches lower.

Immediately, her hands cupped his cheeks, and her mouth zeroed in on his, capturing him as a willing prisoner. Without any actual intention, his arms tightened around her, lifting her and bringing her mouth in closer contact with his.

She kissed him and then drew away. "See?" she said quietly. A little of her teasing had faded, driven away, he surmised, because she felt it, too—the still-new wonder of a shared kiss.

"You're right," he said. "I'm never going to let you go if there's a chance you might kiss me."

She smiled. "We should be getting back," she said. "It's still a long way to Port Campbell."

He gently—and reluctantly—set her down, and they walked up to the dry sand. Once they'd collected their shoes and socks, they continued up the track to the Jeep.

"Have you recovered from yesterday?" Lois asked.

"Yes," Clark replied. "No after-effects at all."

"Do you always improve so quickly?"

"This was only the second time I've been sick."

"What happened last time? Were you OK the next day?"

"I felt OK, but I didn't have any powers for a few days."

"But this time, you flew to Australia just a few hours later."

"Yeah."

"What was different?"

"I've learnt that the sun restores me," Clark said. "And this time, I had to get my powers back quickly. I *had* to get to Australia."

Again, she understood. Her hand squeezed his, and she smiled. He'd always loved her smile—but now… now she looked so happy.

Once they reached the Jeep, Lois unrolled the damp legs of her jeans and looked up at Clark. "Anything you can do to help?" she asked, gesturing to her water-speckled clothes.

Clark began to pull his glasses down his nose and then stalled. "Lois," he said. "When I push my glasses down, I can shoot heat, but I can also look through things."

"At the same time?"

"No. I can separate them."

"OK," she said. "Go ahead, big guy, dry my jeans."

"You're not worried that I'll… well, that I'll look through your clothes?"

She put her hands on her hips and confronted him. "You're Clark Kent, right?"

He nodded.

"Then you might think about peeking, but you never will."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because I know you, and I trust you." She shrugged. "And if you'd wanted to do it, you've had plenty of opportunities, and I would've never even known."

Clark smiled, lowered his glasses, and dried her clothes.

"Thanks," she said.

He took her socks from inside her shoes, held them for a moment as he zapped them with just the right amount of heat, and then handed them to her. As soon as she felt them, she smiled.

"You are something else," she said with such affection it swept another wave of happiness through him.

"So are you." Clark stepped to the Jeep and appraised the side mirror. Realising it wasn't flexible enough for his purposes, he turned to Lois. "Do you have a mirror?" he asked.

"Yes. But you don't need one. The slightly wind-blown look suits you perfectly."

He chuckled. "Not for that. I'd like to dry my clothes, too."

She brought a mirror from her bag and handed it to him. He placed it at arm's length and shot heat via the mirror and to his clothes.

"I thought I'd considered everything," Lois said as she returned the mirror to her bag. "But I can see you are going to be full of surprises."

"No more so than you," he said, grinning.

"Me?" Lois said. "I haven't slapped you with anything as extraordinary as flying or x-ray vision."

"Maybe not," he said reflectively. "But I can't shake the feeling that this is the best dream I've ever had. I can't believe that you've reacted with such easy acceptance."

Lois slid her hand gently down his arm. "I wish I could have given you that last night," she said. "I wish I hadn't left you wondering."

"One night," Clark said dismissively. "That's nothing. I would've willingly accepted a month of uncertainty if it meant you came back to me."

She smiled, but it didn't seem to dispel her regret completely. "I bet it didn't feel like that last night."

"It doesn't matter now," Clark said. "Nothing matters except you and me and being together."

"We have some decisions to make about our future," Lois said.

Clark nodded. "I know that concerns you, honey. I know you've always questioned how we can be together once my time in Australia has finished, but I was… well, I wondered if you'd do something for me?"

She took a deep breath. "You want me to think about moving to Metropolis with you?"

"No," Clark said, stunned she had even suggested it. "No, I was going to ask if we could not worry about it just yet. I don't have any answers, and for now, I just want to enjoy being with the woman I love."

Lois smiled. "OK," she agreed. "That sounds good."

Clark laughed. It sounded absolutely perfect.

She grinned suddenly. "And since you think this feels like a dream, it might as well be a good one."

She reached up and kissed him.

At first touch, the dream theory shattered. It wasn't possible to feel this level of intensity if it wasn't real. Lois slipped her hands to his neck and nestled into his embrace.

Clark tightened his arms around her and kissed her as he had dreamed of kissing her.

Part 25

Clark drew back from kissing Lois and gazed into her face as the enchantment of their closeness flowed through him. Lois—with him, loving him, kissing him.

He had imagined this… yearned for it… but deep within him had lodged the unrelenting fear that no Earth woman could possibly love an alien man.

Not once she knew the truth.

But Lois did.

She snuggled her head into his shoulder and gave a little sigh. "You OK, honey?" Clark asked.

"I am really tired," she admitted. She straightened and gave him a half-strength smile. "But we have a long way to go."

"Would you like me to drive?"

"Would that be all right with you?"

"If it's all right with you."

Lois thought for a moment. "The next bit is relatively straight and flat," she said. "It's the best stretch of road for a newbie. Further west, it gets tight and twisty."

Clark opened the passenger door for Lois and then settled himself into the driver's seat. He made the necessary adjustments for his greater height and familiarised himself with the controls.

"Any questions?" Lois asked.

"No. Everything seems to be somewhere near where it should be."

"Just remember to keep left," she said.

"Thanks."

"Actually, I'm really tired. Will you be all right if I fall asleep?"

He turned to her with a smile. "I'll be fine; you just relax. Do I just stay on the Great Ocean Road? Is it clearly marked?"

Lois nodded. "Out of Torquay, the road goes inland for a bit. We meet the ocean again at Anglesea, and then we go along the coast to Lorne. It should take about an hour."

"What happens if I get lost and you're asleep?"

She smiled. "Just keep the ocean on your left, and the rest of Australia on your right, big guy, and you can't go far wrong."

Clark grinned. "Where do I go after Lorne?"

"Nowhere," she said. "Wake me. There's a beautiful grassy hill overlooking the ocean. It's one of my favourite places, and I don't want to miss it." She reached over to the back seat and retrieved a pillow enclosed in a Hawthorn pillowcase.

Clark grinned. "I noticed that when I was in your bedroom yesterday."

"It helps me dream about Hawthorn premierships."

"Really?" Clark said. "Do you dream about anything else?"

Lois smiled mischievously. "Well, I have to admit, I have never dreamed about a gorgeous guy taking me flying, but who knows… Are there Superman pillowcases?"

Clark grimaced. "I think so. There is a lot of merchandise."

"Don't you control it?"

"No," he replied. "I never even thought about it. Just suddenly, there it was. Kids wearing copies of the suit and pictures of Superman plastered on just about anything you can buy."

Lois yawned and covered it hastily with her hand. "We should get moving," she said. "Or I'm going to be asleep before we get out of Torquay, and the next thing you know, we'll be in Ballarat."

"I assume we're not supposed to go to Ballarat?"

"No." Lois wedged her pillow between the door and her seat. "Are you sure you're going to be OK driving?"

"I hope so." Clark started the motor. "You're very trusting," he noted. "Sleeping while being driven by a newcomer American with no experience on Australian roads."

She settled into her pillow. "No, I'm not trusting at all," she corrected. "I don't trust anyone unless I'm sure he is trustworthy."

Clark wanted to dwell on the fuller meaning of her words, but he figured she expected him to drive. He backed away from the point, turned, and headed for the road.

"Turn right," Lois instructed. "Remember, wide right, sharp left."

"Wide right," he repeated. He drove onto the road.

"OK," she said. "Next left is Bell Street. Tight left."

He followed her instructions.

"Good job," Lois said.

Clark resisted the temptation to look at her. It was somewhat disconcerting to have cars coming towards him on the right side of the road.

"OK, here's your big test," she said. "We need to turn left at the roundabout up ahead. If you can manage going around clockwise, you'll be able to cope with anything. Remember, look right, drive left."

The roundabout safely navigated, Clark shot her a very quick smile.

"Well done," Lois said. "You're now on the Great Ocean Road."

The next time Clark glanced to his left, Lois's eyes were closed. A slender lock of her hair had fallen across her cheek, and a little smile shaped her mouth.

Clark hauled his eyes from that mouth.

He had kissed it.

And kissing it was better than he had ever imagined.

* * *

An hour later, they reached Lorne. Clark continued through the town until he saw a wide expanse of grass leading down to the beach. He parked the Jeep, killed the motor, and looked at her.

Lois.

She was so beautiful.

And she was with him.

She loved him.

She'd kissed him.

She knew everything about him.

And she loved him.

He couldn't help himself. He reached over and tenderly brushed the lock from her cheek.

How many times had he wanted to touch her but had restrained himself? From now on—what an incredible privilege that he could touch her… hold her… kiss her.

His fingertips swept over her soft cheek and to her mouth—a mouth shaped so exquisitely, he knew he would never tire of looking at it.

And as for kissing it…

Lois's lids flickered, and her eyes opened. Immediately she saw him, and her mouth stretched to a beautiful smile. "G'day, big guy," she said. "Did you get us lost?"

"Does it matter if I did?"

"Not at all," she said easily. "We're together."

He felt exactly the same. He skimmed his hand along her jaw. "Tempting though it was to get lost with you forever," he said, "I did find Lorne. And I even found your stretch of grass."

"How many times did you veer onto the other side of the road?"

"Not once."

She straightened from her pillow and looked around. "I'm hungry," she said. "I forgot to eat last night."

"That was probably my fault," Clark said.

"Yep," Lois agreed. "But you can make up for it right now. There's a cafe across the road that has the most amazing hedgehog known to humankind. And they have pretty good coffee, too."

"Hedgehog?" he queried. "As in little spiky animals?"

"No," she said with a wide grin. "As in chocolate heaven."

"Better than Tim Tams?"

She paused and thought for a moment. "Maybe," she said. "I'll let you decide after you've tried it."

Clark lightly touched her forearm. "Will you stay there?" he asked. "Long enough for me to open your door for you?"

She chuckled. "You're going to do the whole gentleman thing, aren't you?"

"If you'll let me," he said.

Lois smiled her agreement, and Clark quickly jumped out of the Jeep and hurried to her side. He opened her door and offered her his hand. She took it with a smile, and together they crossed the road and entered the cafe.

* * *

Ten minutes later, they sat on the grassy hill, drinking coffee and sharing a slice of hedgehog. Clark discovered that it was a chocolate fudge creation, with bits of cookie inside it and topped with soft, thick chocolate frosting.

The view before them was amazing. Ahead was the majestic expanse of ocean, serene in the distance, and restless and jittery close to the beach, where vigorous waves crashed onto the wide semicircle of sand. To the left and right, dark

green hills rose against the pale blue sky, reaching around the town like two mighty arms.

Clark stretched onto his side, supported his head with his hand, and looked at Lois. She licked a slither of chocolate frosting from her finger and then saw him looking at her and smiled. He hoped she would never grow weary of him watching her.

Lois reclined on the grass, facing him. She swung her leg and rested it on his knee. “You look like a happy man,” she said.

“Happy doesn’t even begin to describe it,” he said. “From the moment I met you, I knew I wanted to be with you.”

“I thought that, because we live in different parts of the world, nothing could ever happen between us,” Lois said. “I didn’t know that you were dealing with much bigger issues.”

“Now you have to deal with them, too,” he reminded her.

“I have you to help me,” she said.

She was truly amazing. “Lois,” Clark said. “Lois. You sound so wonderfully sure about this.”

Her forefinger skated along his jaw. “Why don’t you kiss me again and find out how sure I am?”

His eyes slid low to the delectable temptation of her mouth.

“You should do it quickly,” she advised. “Or eltse, I’ll kiss you.”

He didn’t take the time to process her dig at his accent. Instead, he leant towards her mouth. He kissed her long, and he kissed her tenderly as they lay on the grass above Lorne beach.

And for the first time ever, Clark Kent didn’t care that he wasn’t just like everyone else.

* * *

When they returned to the Jeep, Lois insisted on driving. “I’m not tired at all now,” she said. “And I want you to be able to concentrate on the view.”

As they left the town, the ocean side of the road underwent a dramatic change as serrated rock face replaced the long flat beaches. “A feature of the Great Ocean Road is the cliffs that have been carved by the waves,” Lois said. “Have you heard of The Twelve Apostles?”

“I assume you’re not talking about the Bible?”

“No. The Twelve Apostles are very famous rock stacks near Port Campbell. Originally, they were limestone cliffs, but over time, the wind and water erosion have washed away the softer rock—firstly forming caves, and then tunnels, and then finally stacks.”

“Will we see them?”

“You bet. If we make good time through the Otway Ranges, we should be there before sunset.” She glanced to him. “What happens if you have to fly in the dark?” she said. “Can you see?”

“Perfectly.”

Lois smiled as she appeared to add that piece of information to the file in her brain that must be bulging with his anomalies. “That must come in handy.”

Clark marvelled again at her easy acceptance of his idiosyncrasies. “It does.”

“We’ll be in Apolla-bay soon,” she said. “After that, the road heads north into the Otways. There’s a lovely walk through the forest at a place called Melba Gully. We could buy lunch at Lavers Hill and take it for a picnic.”

“Sounds great,” Clark said.

Half an hour later, they drove into the small town that, in contrast to Lois’s pronunciation, was signposted as ‘Apollo Bay’. They passed the last of the brightly painted seaside houses, and the road began twisting up the side of a mountain densely covered in towering eucalyptus trees and rainforest-type ferns. The road carved a tortuous path between the steep drop on one side and the sharp rise on the other. Lois slowed significantly in deference.

“I didn’t expect this on the Great *Ocean* Road,” Clark commented.

“The road leaves the coast and detours through the Otways,” Lois said. “We’ll be back to the ocean soon.”

“I’m not sure we’d want to meet a truck on this road,” Clark commented. “It’s pretty tight.”

“I’m not sure any truck driver in his right mind would come this way,” Lois said.

They swung around a sharp corner, and Lois braked hard and brought the Jeep to an abrupt stop on the side of the road. In front of them, a jagged trail of broken-off plants plunged thirty yards down the incline, finishing with the back of a van. The front appeared to be wedged between two large trees.

Lois parked as close to the edge as she dared. “You right to get out?” she said. Without waiting for his reply, she jumped from the Jeep and began hurtling down the hill.

Clark opened his door and, hoping no one in the van was watching too closely, caught up to Lois, and grabbed her hand. They arrived at side of the van, and Clark saw that

both front doors were pinned shut by trees. The windshield was smattered with blood. Inside the van, the driver's seat was empty, and a man was in the back, trying frantically to release the sliding door. A heavily pregnant woman in the passenger seat had turned awkwardly and was trying to calm the four children as they flocked around their father.

Lois rapped lightly on the window of the sliding door and the man peered out at them, his face flooding with relief as he saw them. He slid open the window.

"Is anyone hurt?" Clark asked.

"No," the man said. "But the child-lock is on this door, and I can't open it from inside. Can you get us out? Please?"

"Sit still," Lois said. "I have a Jeep and a tow rope. I'll pull you out."

The man reached out of the window and groped for the door handle. The tree trunk made it inaccessible.

Lois put her hand on his arm and summoned his attention. "It's OK," she said calmly. "Get all your kids back into their seats and make sure their seatbelts are on. Then get into the driver's seat and try to keep the wheels straight as we pull you out."

"No," he said breathlessly. "I need to get the kids out of here."

"They'll be safer inside the car," Lois said. "It's too dangerous for them to wait up on the road, and they're too young to be on a slope this steep. Think about your wife—she's not going to be able to climb up that hill. It's best if you all stay in here together."

The father didn't seem convinced. "But—"

"See to your kids," Lois said firmly. "We'll have you out in a jiffy."

"What sort of rope do you have?" he demanded.

"A strong one."

"Because if it snaps halfway, we'll be worse off than ever."

"It won't snap," Lois said confidently.

"I don't think you'll be able to get us out," the man said desperately. "It's too steep, if you deviate at all, you risk pulling us over."

Lois reached into the window and briefly touched his shoulder. "It's straight back along the road," she said. "Let me worry about that. Your job is to look after your wife and keep the kids calm." She looked beyond him to the four young faces. "Back into your seats, kids," she directed. "Last one in a seatbelt is a Collingwood supporter."

That galvanised the kids into a scramble of action. The father turned from the window to assist the youngest child.

Lois and Clark hurried back up the hill. At the Jeep, she lifted the hatch and took out a rope so flimsy that, in different circumstances, Clark would have laughed aloud. "That's it?" he asked. "That's your tow rope?"

"This is it," she confirmed. She bent low and expertly secured the rope under the bumper and then handed the other end to Clark. "Call when you've tied this to their tow ball."

He took the rope and surveyed their surroundings. "Be careful, Lois," he begged. "Keep the Jeep off the road in case anything comes around the corner, but don't get too close to the edge."

She gave him a brief smile and touched her hand on his. "I'll be fine. All I have to do is back up along the side of the road."

Clark ran down the steep slope and twirled the rope around the tow bar of the trapped vehicle. He heard Lois start the Jeep.

"OK," he called loudly. "It's ready." He bent low, took a firm grasp of the tow ball, and carefully hauled the van up the hill, matching his pace to Lois's as she slowly reversed the Jeep along the road.

Once the van was safely perched on the edge of the road, Clark disconnected the insubstantial rope from both vehicles.

"I'll get that out of sight," Lois said.

He gave her the rope and then went to the passenger door, opened it, and helped the woman out from the van.

"Are you all OK?" Lois asked when they were assembled between the two vehicles.

One of the children, a boy of about seven, had blood down the front of his sweater but no obvious injury. Clark crouched beside him. "Are you hurt?"

"I had a blood nose," he announced importantly.

"Did you hit your head when you went off the road?" Clark asked.

"No," he said. "My nose was bleeding before that. It just started all by itself."

The father stepped forward, carrying a girl of about three in his arms. "Jordie said his nose was bleeding, and then he sneezed, and the blood shot forward, and I took my eyes off the road for just a moment to see if he was OK, and the next thing I knew, we were careering down the hill." He

looked from Clark to Lois, clearly awaiting their verdict on his culpability.

"Easily done," Lois said. "This is not a road with much give in it."

Clark turned to the woman. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

She smiled, a little shakily. "Glad to be out of that hole," she said. She scanned the kids. "I think everyone is all right—thanks to both of you."

The father gestured to Lois. "You're Lois Lane, aren't you? The one they call Flinders? The footy journalist?"

"Yes," Lois said.

Clark figured this was a good moment to discreetly drift away from the group and check out the van. He continued to listen to the conversation as he assessed the damage.

"Is there any chance we could keep this out of the newspaper?" the father said.

"Why?" Lois asked. Clark could hear the trace of suspicion in her question as he ducked low to look under the car.

"This is my wife," the man said. "And two of the kids are mine, but two of them are my wife's kids from her previous marriage, and if her ex finds out that I drove his kids off the road, there is going to be hell to pay."

Clark lowered his glasses and welded a long gash in the muffler.

"Are you supposed to have these kids now?" Lois asked. "You didn't break the custody arrangements or anything like that?"

"No," the man replied earnestly. "We have the kids this week, and we thought we'd take them on a holiday before the new one is born. It's just that things are difficult enough already with the kids' father. This would set him right off."

Clark glanced up from where he had realigned the sliding door so it again moved easily to open and close. He saw Lois make a point of scanning their surroundings. "I'm a footy journo," she said. "I don't see anything here that would make the sports pages."

The man and his wife smiled with relief. "Thank you," he said. "Thank you for everything."

"Do you think the car is still driveable?" the woman asked anxiously.

Clark finished his covert straightening of the wheel alignment and moved back to the group. "I think it should be fine," he said. "It's a bit banged up, but I think it will drive OK."

"Really?" The father seemed surprised.

"Why don't you try it?" Lois suggested. She met Clark's eyes for the tiniest second, barely more than a flicker, but it was enough for him to know that she fully understood what he'd been doing.

The father climbed into the van and turned the key. The engine roared to life. He experimentally drove a few yards forward and then poked his head out of the window and looked back at them. "Would you mind staying with my wife and the kids while I do a bit of a test run?" he asked.

"Of course not," Lois called back.

He drove off, cautiously at first, but Clark heard him accelerate once he'd passed the first corner.

Lois looked down at the bloodied child. "So, Jordie," she said. "Who'j'barrack for?"

He grinned. "The Mighty Bulldogs," he said proudly.

"The Bulldogs?" Lois said in mock horror. "The *Bulldogs*?"

His grin widened. "We're better'n those dodgy Hawks," he said.

His mother made a move to curb his tone, but Lois smiled at her. "It's OK," she said. She crouched low so she was face to face with Jordie. "Who's your favourite player?" she asked.

"Chris Grant."

"Good choice," Lois said. "Are you going to play for the Doggies when you grow up?"

Jordie nodded earnestly. "I'm gonna play in the ruck," he said.

"They'll need a young ruckman in about ten years," she said. "If you keep working on your skills, I reckon it could be you."

The kid smiled so broadly, Clark figured that the bloody nose and the runaway van would fade to insignificance, but he would always remember the moment Lois Lane had told him that she thought he could play for his beloved Bulldogs.

Jordie's mom smiled, and it encompassed both Lois and Clark. "Do you have children?" she asked.

Lois ruffled Jordie's hair and straightened. "Not yet," she said.

"Maybe one day, hey?" the woman asked.

Lois nodded. "Maybe one day."

Inside Clark, a splash of excitement rose as he realised that Lois hadn't corrected the misconception that they were married. It was such a small point—totally irrelevant to the

situation—yet it was hard not to attribute greater meaning to it.

The van appeared from around the corner. The father parked in front of the Jeep and jumped out. “It’s fine,” he announced cheerfully. “Absolutely fine. Hop in, kids.”

With a final smile of gratitude to Lois and Clark, the mother began to herd her children into the van.

The father offered his hand to Clark. “Thanks, mate,” he said. He shook hands with Clark and then with Lois. “Thanks, Lois,” he said. “Thanks for everything. Lucky you carry a strong tow rope with you, hey?”

Lois grinned. “Enjoy the rest of your trip.”

“You, too,” the man called as he jumped back into the van.

When they had disappeared around the first corner, Clark gathered Lois into his arms and held her. “We’re a good team,” he said quietly.

She withdrew enough to examine his hands. “I was a bit worried you might not have fully regained all of your powers,” she said. “But there wasn’t really any opportunity to ask if you thought you would be able to drag a fully loaded van up a hill.”

“You were amazing,” Clark said.

“I didn’t do anything,” she said. “Without you, there is no way I could’ve got them out. The tow rope would’ve given way before I’d moved them an inch.”

“But you thought so quickly. It was as if you had everything planned within seconds.”

“I told you—I spent last night thinking this through. I’m not saying I considered this exact scenario, but I did reflect on how tough it would be to use your powers discreetly.”

“Yeah, it is,” Clark agreed.

“Of course, you could always make up stories about family secrets and warming socks,” she teased. Apparently satisfied that his hands had received no damage, she released them. “Other than when you’ve been hit by the green rock, is there anything you haven’t been able to budge?”

“Lois Lane,” he muttered.

Her mouth flew open with laughing indignation. “Me? You asked me on a date, and I said ‘yes’. You asked me to come on this trip, and I came. I have been incredibly accommodating. I probably should have kept you at arms’ length for at least another month.”

Clark sobered. “Do you regret that you didn’t?”

Lois’s smile didn’t fade. “What do you think, big guy?” she said. “Do I look like a woman full of regrets?”

Smiling again, Clark shook his head. “Honestly?” he said. “You look like a woman who is supremely happy.”

She placed her hands on his neck in a soft caress. “And exactly whose fault do you think that is?”

“I’m hoping it’s mine.”

“Got it in one,” she said. “I’m in love with you, Clark Kent.”

Then she slid her arms around his neck and kissed him.

* * *

Fifteen minutes after leaving the site of the rescue, they emerged from the steepness of the mountains, and the dense rainforest gave way to gently undulating farmland scattered with dairy herds. Clark stared out of the window.

“Are you thinking of your home?” Lois asked.

Again, Clark was startled by her ability to read him so accurately. “A little,” he said.

“How often do you visit your parents?”

“I’ve only been back a few times,” he said. “When Mayson published the story about Trask and his allegations, we decided it might be wise to minimise my flights—just in case someone can track my movements.”

“Do you think that’s possible?”

“I hope not,” Clark said grimly. “That would lead them directly to you.”

“How long have you been flying?”

“About fifteen years.”

“I think if it were possible for them to track you, someone would have done it by now.”

“Yeah, but when it involves the safety of my parents and you, any risk is unacceptable,” Clark said. “Mom was really upset about Trask’s theories and how Mayson was portraying Superman.”

“Your parents must be amazing people,” Lois said.

“They are.” Clark took a moment to look at her before adding, “They are really looking forward to meeting you.”

“Me?”

“You don’t really think I could visit them and not once mention the very best part of Australia?”

She smiled. “What did you tell them?”

Clark took a deep breath. “That, after all the years of searching, I had finally found her.”

There was a tiny tear glistening in her eye as Lois glanced sideways. “Clark,” she said. “You are so incredibly willing

to put your heart on the line. You let me see every nook and cranny of it, and you don't even seem apprehensive about how vulnerable that makes you."

"I trust you," he said simply.

"You certainly proved that," she said. They shared a smile. "You should ring your parents soon—although I'm not sure there will be any network in Port Campbell. But tomorrow, we'll go to Warrnambool, and there will definitely be network there."

Clark nodded. Brewing in his mind was not the possibility of calling his parents, but of visiting them. And introducing them to the woman he would love until his last breath.

The Great Ocean Road swung through the picturesque Aire Valley and touched the coast for the briefest rendezvous, before climbing again into the mountains. Ten minutes of driving along the ridge brought them to a wide intersection and the town of Lavers Hill that had been blessed with breathtaking views across lush valleys to the distant ocean.

Lois stopped outside a quaint bakery. They pushed open the door and were enveloped by the marvellously rich aroma of freshly baked bread. There was a huge oven built into the far wall, and in front of them lay row upon row of bread rolls boasting a bewildering array of toppings.

Lois chose the mushroom and cheese variety, and Clark chose olives and ham drizzled with rivulets of cheese. Lois added two apple-and-custard scrolls and two bottles of orange juice to their order, and they took their bounty back to the Jeep.

"We'll be at Melba Gully in about five minutes," Lois told him as they pulled back onto the road.

"Sounds good to me," Clark said. He didn't add that anything would sound good so long as it didn't involve being separated from Lois. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"How did you know Jordie and his family didn't barrack for Collingwood?" he said. "The whole 'last one in his seat is a Collingwood supporter' could've backfired horribly."

"There was a Bulldogs sticker on the back window and a Saints beanie on the seat," Lois said. "I went with the odds."

"I didn't even notice them," Clark said.

She grinned at him and turned onto the track to Melba Gully. When they stopped, Clark put their lunch and drinks in a backpack, and they set off along the walking track with Lois's hand in his. Soon, towering eucalypts and tall tree ferns surrounded them.

It was cool and crisp in the heavy shade. The ground was darkly damp, and the air smelled like sweet musk. From somewhere not too distant, he could hear the gurgle of running water.

They walked mostly in silence for fifteen minutes. It gave Clark time to try to take stock of how far—literally and figuratively—they had come since he had first heard the knock on his door this morning.

Literally… well, that wasn't quite so earth-shattering—not for a man who could circumnavigate the world in less than a minute.

But figuratively… it felt as if Lois had been in his life for years—yet that in no way reduced the newly discovered wonder of simply being able to hold her hand.

He didn't even want to think of what his life had been like without her, and he vowed with every last ounce of his powers that he would do everything to ensure that she always wanted to be with him.

Because, as he knew with complete certainty, life without Lois was… unthinkable.

Part 26

Clark ambled along the track that weaved a welcoming path through the lush forest. To his left, a crystal-clear stream rippled blithely over smooth stones. To his right, Lois walked by his side—her hand fitted securely into his.

"That's the Johanna River," she said. "It runs into the sea just a few kilometres south of here."

They came to a wooden seat perfectly positioned to offer a place to watch the river as it tumbled down a little drop.

"Let's eat," Lois suggested.

Clark agreed, and they unpacked the soft, fragrant bread rolls with their colourful toppings.

"No red beets," Clark noted with a smile.

Lois answered his smile. "I thought your American palate found beetroot quite objectionable."

"The red beet in the steak sandwich was surprisingly good," Clark said. "Although that could have been due to the fact that I had finally managed to ask you for a date."

"Do you even remember what it tasted like?" Lois asked.

"No," Clark admitted.

Lois chuckled, and they ate their lunch accompanied by the steady twitter of the birdlife and the music of the creek.

When Clark had finished eating, he put his arm across Lois's shoulders, and she snuggled into his side. He laughed quietly.

"What?" she asked.

"I was remembering the times I put my arm across your shoulder and held my breath in case you told me to back off."

She wriggled closer. "I was wondering exactly what you were trying to tell me."

"I was trying to tell you everything."

Lois casually rested her hand on his knee, and Clark smiled. The simplest touch from her felt like a little portion of paradise. "Is there anyone else around?" she asked.

Clark tuned in his hearing. "No," he said. "Just us."

"We can talk openly?"

He nodded, wondering what she wanted to talk about and relishing his total lack of apprehension. He could relax. Whatever she asked, he would willingly tell her. He wanted no secrets from Lois.

"Tell me about being Superman," she said.

"What do you want to know?"

"I know Superman first appeared about two years ago. What happened before that?"

"I've always known I wanted to use my powers to help people," Clark said. "What I've never been able to satisfactorily determine is the best practical way to achieve that. I can't stand by and watch people suffer, but by helping, I risk someone discovering the truth, and that could threaten the safety of my parents."

"Aw, Clark." Lois reached up to her shoulder and cupped her hand over his. "You're in such a difficult situation."

"I kept trying to help discreetly, but I wasn't very good at thinking up reasonable explanations, and it wasn't long before people would start to regard me with suspicion."

"What did you do?"

"Moved on to somewhere else."

"But moving on could only be a temporary solution," she said.

Clark didn't want Lois feeling sorry for him, so he constructed a smile that he hoped would permeate his voice. "Yeah," he agreed. "The same thing would happen, and then I'd go somewhere else."

Lois turned her head enough to place a soft kiss on the back of his hand. "It must have been hard to maintain friendships when you kept moving around."

"I'm not sure I can have a lot of close friends anyway," Clark said. "It's imperative that I protect the secret because people like Trask would have no qualms in using my parents as targets if they knew." He took a deep breath and forced himself to continue. "And if you stay with me, you face that risk, too," he said.

"I know that," Lois said evenly.

"You've thought about it?"

"Yep—from every possible angle."

"And you're OK with it?"

Lois brushed her cheek against his hand. "I'm here, aren't I?"

Again, his love for her rolled through him like a huge wave. He kissed her head. "Aw, Lois…"

She entwined her fingers in his. "What happened when you got to Metropolis? Is it because of the suit that you've been able to stay there longer?"

"Yeah," Clark said. "Working at the Daily Planet was my dream job. When Perry gave me a trial—more based on a recommendation from my college professor than anything I'd done—I knew I wanted to stay. My mom thought of the idea of a disguise so I could try to be two people—one a remote and mysterious being with strange powers, and the other, an unremarkable reporter from Kansas."

"Even with the disguise, it couldn't have been easy."

"No," Clark said. "I would hear of an emergency, and then I'd have to make a quick excuse to get away. Mayson never took that well."

"No one ever recognised you?"

"No."

A little spurt of laughter quivered through her body. "I didn't," Lois admitted. "I looked at that photo on the front page of the *Daily Planet*, and despite sitting right next to you, I didn't see any resemblance at all."

"I think people only see what they want to see—that's what my mom said. No one is expecting Clark Kent to fly around in blue tights and a red cape, so they just don't see me."

"It's more than that," Lois said. "Last night, I got on the Internet and found a few photos of Superman. He always looks so… so isolated, so unapproachable."

Clark winced. "Yeah, I know."

"Did you plan that?"

"Not consciously. I think I was so used to hiding my powers when I was Clark that it seemed natural to try to hide as much as possible when I was in the suit. I didn't want anyone to hear my voice, or get a good look at my face, or see anything in me that was suggestive of Clark."

"What changed?"

"What do you mean?"

"I read the reports about you defusing the bombs," Lois said. "They were astounded that you had spoken so freely. You even gave Mayson a short interview. So, what happened?"

"What happened?" Clark echoed with a smile. "Lois Lane happened."

She lifted from him and turned, her face filled with surprise. "Me?"

He nodded. "You. You thought you were telling me how to be a football player. Instead, you were telling me how to be Superman."

"And did it work?" she asked.

"It worked wonderfully," Clark said.

"Until Trask and the green rock."

"No," Clark said, shaking his head. "That was different. After the bomb emergency, I felt great. I had never felt so good about being Superman. Even when I'd saved people and helped them, it never felt good to be skulking around so afraid that someone would recognise me. But after the bombs, I felt so… so *able* to be what they needed me to be."

"I can't imagine you not being what people needed," she said.

"You believed the best of Superman—even before you realised you knew him."

Lois stroked the curve of his jaw. "I understand why you thought it was best to keep your distance and not let anyone see anything about you except for a… a stunning physique in an oh-so-tight suit—"

"My mom made the suits." Clark could feel his ears reddening. "She said no one would be looking at my face."

Lois's laughter rang through the forest. "She was right," she said.

The heat crept down from his ears and to his neck.

"You're definitely blushing now, Kent," Lois teased.

He glanced away to give himself a moment to recover and then faced her again. "I think you and my mom are going to be a formidable combination," he said, hoping she would ask about meeting his parents.

She didn't. "Have you ever thought about allowing people to see a little more of who you are? Not Clark, but Superman? Have you thought about showing the world not just his powers, but his heart, his compassion, his caring?"

Clark considered for a moment. "I didn't know how to be more open without risking them seeing far more than I wanted them to."

"The stories after the bombs were quite positive," Lois said. "Except for Mayson."

"Mayson hasn't liked Superman since the first time he appeared."

Lois shrugged. "That's her problem," she said dismissively. "Have you read any reports since Trask and the hostage situation?"

"I got on the Internet last night and tried to read some of it, but I wasn't able to concentrate too well."

"The reports I saw were slanted towards Trask being a loose cannon whose interpretation of Superman's motives had missed the mark by a long way. There was even an editorial that expressed regret for how we humans had treated a visitor to our planet." She laid her head on his shoulder. "Have you decided what happens with Superman now?"

"What do you think I should do?"

"I think it has to be your decision."

"Do you have any thoughts?"

"I think now could be exactly the right time for Superman to do a little work on his public profile," Lois said. "If people got to know you—even just a little about you—they are going to fall in love with you, and very soon, you'll find yourself as the world's great superhero."

"You think so?" he said dubiously.

She nodded.

"I've never really wanted the clamouring interest. But the interaction, working together with others—that felt good."

"Teamwork," Lois said quietly. "Mateship, common goals. It sounds a lot like footy."

"Yeah," Clark said. "Do you really think I could do it? Do you think I can be more than just a cardboard package of powers and strange abilities?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Will you help me?"

"Every last millimetre of the way," she vowed.

She had choked him up again. He was sure he'd fail dismally if he tried to express what he was feeling, even supposing his congested throat would allow for speech. He swallowed roughly and said, "Do you know that I have dreamt about you for a long time?"

"Since you came to Melbourne?"

Clark shook his head. “No,” he said. “A long time before that.”

“How could you have dreamt about me?” she said with a little smile.

“I was still young when I knew that, more than anything, I wanted to find someone to share my life. I fervently hoped that somewhere on this planet there would be a woman who could love an alien man. I didn’t know what she would look like, but I knew she would be beautiful. I didn’t know anything about her, except that she would be able to accept someone as different as I am.” Clark’s thumb slowly slid over the back of her hand. “Then things like the flying and the heat vision started appearing, and I began to doubt that *anyone* could overlook all of that.”

“I have no intention of overlooking any of it,” Lois said.

“You don’t?”

“No. I intend to treasure everything about you.” She kissed his cheek. “And don’t ever forget that I’m incredibly fortunate, too.”

“You are?”

She nodded. “I think the best thing that ever happened to me was when your sports reporter got the mumps.”

Clark shuddered. “Without that…”

Lois smiled. “Without that, there would have been another way for us to meet.”

“You think so?”

“I know so. We are meant to be together.”

Clark’s love for this woman swelled, surged, and flooded through him. He knew it would be impossible to find the words to convey even a fraction of his heart, so instead, he gently surrounded her face with his hands and thoroughly kissed her lovely mouth.

* * *

Half an hour after resuming their drive, Lois and Clark were again greeted by the Southern Ocean. The Great Ocean Road swept them west along the dramatically zigzagging coastline that had been assiduously carved by centuries of pounding waves.

They stopped at various places along the road and marvelled at the power of the waves that leapt high up the rock face after thundering into the base of the cliffs.

The sun was well into its descent when they reached the collection of rock stacks called The Twelve Apostles. There were no longer twelve—some having succumbed to the might of the waves—but those that remained were truly spectacular.

Clark stood behind Lois on the viewing platform. He put his arms around her waist, and she leaned back and rested her head between his neck and his shoulder. He touched a kiss to her temple.

“Lois,” Clark whispered against her ear, “this has been the best day of my life.”

She folded her arms over his. “Mine, too,” she said.

“What about all those Hawthorn premierships?” he said, trying to inject some levity into the question.

“They were wonderful,” she said. “But they don’t compare to this.”

Clark’s arms tightened around her. “You’ve given me so much—and all in just a few hours.”

She turned in the circle of his arms and faced him. “Does that concern you?” she asked. “Does it seem like too much, too soon? Are you worried I will change my mind?”

“No,” he said. “But it’s been so quick, it takes my breath away.”

She smiled. “The truth, big guy, is that I’ve wanted to be like this with you almost since I met you, but I was worried about my heart being mauled.”

“You’re not worried about that anymore?”

“Not at all.”

“You have such belief in me,” he said with awe.

She kissed him. Her lips bore the slight saltiness from the ocean breeze. Clark longed to seek her lips with his tongue, longed to taste her more intimately.

He resolutely kept his tongue in his own mouth. They had travelled so far today—not for anything was he going to push too fast and risk causing Lois to back away.

Their kiss ended, and he felt her shiver.

“How far to Port Campbell?” Clark asked.

“Not long. Fifteen minutes.”

“We should go, you’re getting cold.”

“Once the sun has gone, it cools down really quickly.” They moved towards the Jeep. “Are you feeling OK?” Lois asked.

He was feeling absolutely wonderful. “Yeah. Why?”

“You seem to have recovered from yesterday.”

“I have,” he said. “Sunshine and large doses of Lois Lane—works wonders.”

She smiled, but Clark noticed it took effort to keep it from degenerating into a yawn.

"Would you like me to drive the rest of the way?" he asked.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because you look tired."

"Thank you," she said, smiling. "I'd like that."

Clark opened the door for her. "I guess you didn't sleep much the past two nights," he said.

"No."

"Sorry," Clark said. "That was my fault."

She smiled. "I lost one night's sleep because I didn't know about you and the next because I did."

Clark shut her door and climbed into the driver's seat. "There's no reason why you shouldn't sleep well tonight," he said.

"No reason at all," she said.

* * *

Once in Port Campbell, they found the motel and took their bags to their adjacent rooms. Lois wearily dumped her bag on the floor and looked ruefully at the double bed. If Clark had asked—hinted, even—she would have welcomed him into her room. But this was Clark Kent—the man who lived by his own moral compass so unwaveringly, he hadn't even kissed her until he had been staggeringly honest with her.

And that made her heart sing.

But her body lament.

She abruptly turned from the bed and met him at the door of her room.

"Where would you like to eat?" Clark asked.

"There won't be too many choices in Port Campbell," Lois replied. "Not mid-week at this time of the year, but we can probably find something quite decent."

"It doesn't have to be in Port Campbell," Clark said.

She thought she understood his implication, but she still had to ask, "What are you suggesting?"

"That you can choose anywhere in the world."

Lois grinned at Clark's nonchalance. "I suppose you just happen to carry currency from every country?" she said.

"No," he admitted. "But many places will take American dollars."

Her exhaustion warred with the notion of exactly how much fun it would be to pick a place somewhere on the planet and go there to eat.

"I can see that you're tired," Clark said. "Let's look in Port Campbell."

Lois smiled her thanks as exhaustion prevailed. "You know what I'd really like?"

"Name it," he said.

"I think I'd like Room Service. That way we can relax totally."

"Same room?" Clark asked. He'd tried to say it casually, but it was obvious that the thought of eating alone in his motel room didn't appeal to him at all. Lois didn't care for it much, either.

She clasped his arm and smiled. "Of course, same room," she said. Then she summoned the last dregs of her energy. "Is that OK, Clark? We've never had our date. If you'd like to, we can dress up a little and go somewhere nice."

"It's fine," Clark said, as he took her hand. "Let's go to my room and see what we can find on the menu. There will be plenty of other opportunities to have our date."

* * *

The next morning, Lois awoke in Clark's bed.

Alone.

She was still dressed, only her runners had been removed.

She sat up and saw her bag on the chair next to the bed.

Clark.

After she'd fallen asleep, he must have put her into his bed, swapped their bags, and moved himself into her room.

Lois checked the clock and realised she had slept for nearly twelve hours. She leapt up, feeling energised and invigorated. The day stretched ahead—a whole day to spend with Clark.

She practically skipped as she went to the bathroom and was humming as she turned on the shower.

Never had she been so happy.

Never.

* * *

As Lois put the final touches to her makeup, she heard a light tap on her door, and her heart soared.

She knew he would hear her footsteps, but that didn't stop her racing to the door and flinging it open.

There he was, looking as sensational as ever, his smile wide and his hands occupied with two cups of coffee and a large paper bag.

"Good morning, honey," Clark said.

"Good morning to you," she replied, knowing she was grinning quite ridiculously but totally unable to contain her excitement.

"You're looking beautiful this morning," he said.

He was, too, but Lois wasn't completely sure how he'd take being told that. "Thank you," she said. "Come in. Is that breakfast I see?"

He walked past her and placed the food on the table. He turned, and Lois could wait no longer. She threw herself into his arms and was met with his equally enthusiastic embrace.

"Did you sleep well?" Clark asked as he backed away just enough to look down into her face.

"Wonderfully well," she said. She grinned up at him. "In your bed."

"I figured it was easier to settle you here than risk waking you by carrying you through the cold to your room."

"Thank you," she said. "What do we have for breakfast?"

He didn't turn to the table. "I was hoping for a kiss before breakfast," he said.

She reached up to him, and his hands gently cupped her head as he kissed her with just a little more intensity than any of his kisses yesterday. It seemed he had missed her, too.

When they drew apart, they were both a little breathless. Clark turned to the table and said, "I got these from a French bakery."

"Tell me, Kent," Lois said. "Does 'French' describe the location of the bakery or the goods it sells?"

He grinned and pulled out a seat for her to sit down. "Both," he said.

Lois chuckled. "So, you've fully recovered?"

"Completely." Clark opened the bag and offered it to her. "I got a selection," he said.

Lois chose a plump croissant that had been drizzled with chocolate. "Thanks. Did you stop by and see your parents?"

"No. I thought about calling them, but I have no phone signal."

"You can call them when we're in Warrnambool."

"OK."

She heard hesitancy in his voice. "You don't want to call them?"

Clark removed the lid from his coffee and ripped the tops from three sachets of sugar. "I'd like to visit them," he said.

"Sure," she said. "They must be eager to see you, especially after the whole Trask thing. And they might have updates on what's been happening. Like whether he really did manage to banish all of the green rock into the vastness of space."

Clark took the bag and peered into it. "Would you come with me?" he asked. "Please?"

Lois paused. "What if I'm not what they were hoping for?" she said quietly.

Sharp surprise cut across Clark's face. "Lois," he said, "you're perfect."

She sighed. "My parents didn't think so."

He covered her hand with his and looked solemnly into her eyes. "Do you know what my parents have always wanted for me? They wanted someone who knows everything about me and still loves me. They wanted someone who makes me feel as if all my differences don't matter in the least." He squeezed her hand. "And they are going to positively adore you."

Lois smiled. "When do you want to go?"

"It might be best if we took off in the dark. I can be gone so fast no one would notice, but I'll have to slow down a bit for you."

"So… tonight?"

"I was thinking perhaps we could get up early tomorrow morning and go to Kansas for breakfast." He grinned. "Though it will be late afternoon there."

Lois laughed. "You make it sound so normal," she said.

Clark smiled. "Will you come?" he asked. "Please?"

"Yes, I'll come."

"Thanks."

"Are you going to wear the Superman suit?"

"Probably not. I usually don't wear it just to fly home. Why?"

"I've never formally met Superman."

"I'm sure you will."

"Is the suit as tight as it looks?"

"Yeah. Mom says it helps with aerodynamics." Noting she had finished her croissant, Clark pushed the bag in her direction. "What do you have planned for us today?"

"I thought we could go further west. Warrnambool is about half an hour away—it's the main city for south-western Victoria. Then, a few kays past Warrnambool is Port Fairy—a quaint little fishing town that is just beautiful."

"Kays?"

"Kilometres."

Clark smiled. "Sounds wonderful, just being with you is wonderful." His brown eyes rested in hers. "I love you so much, Lois."

Lois smiled, and suddenly her tears surged. Tears of joy, tears of disbelief that life could be this good, tears at the wonder of being loved by someone she trusted implicitly. "You're going to make me cry, Kent," she said.

He tenderly brushed the tip of his thumb along her lower eyelid. "Only tears of happiness, honey," he said. "I never want to hurt you again."

"You didn't—"

"Yes, I did. I ran away. I let you wonder… and worry." He smiled. "There will be times when I have to run away again, but you will know why. And you'll know that I will always come back."

"I was wondering about that," Lois said, swallowing down her heightened emotions. "How do you decide when to go and help?"

Clark stared at the table for a long moment. "It has always been difficult," he said. "Obviously, throughout the world, I could be rescuing and helping all day, every day. But if I did that…"

"You wouldn't have a life."

"No. I know there are advantages to the suit, but I don't enjoy being the focus of everyone's attention. And I've always feared that the number of times I can appear is limited. The more photos taken of me and the more people see me, the greater the chance of someone recognising me." He absently folded the now-empty paper bag. "So, I never went looking for emergencies. If I heard or saw something where my powers would be significantly more useful than human effort, I would spin into the suit and do what I could."

"So that's why you haven't been constantly darting back to the States?"

"Yeah. That, and the fact that every Superman appearance prompted another rant from Mayson. One of the reasons I came to Australia was to give me time to make some decisions."

Lois put her hand over his. "Had you planned what you'd do if you saw an emergency here? I mean, it wouldn't be good for Superman to suddenly turn up in Australia—at exactly the time Clark Kent happens to be here. Someone—Mayson, or Perry, perhaps—would be sure to make the connection."

"I guess if I saw something, I would try to help discreetly—like I used to before Superman."

"Like you did yesterday."

He grinned. "Like *we* did yesterday," he corrected. "You were definitely the brains of the operation. I was merely the brawn."

Lois laughed, reflecting that brawn had never looked so good. She decided that lingering on Clark's physical assets was probably a less-than-prudent track, so she stood abruptly. "Give me two minutes to freshen up," she said. "And we'll be on our way."

* * *

Warrnambool was a large regional centre that effortlessly combined the bustle of modern living with the relaxed ambience of a coastal village. Lois and Clark stopped at Cannon Hill and looked down upon a tapestry of lakes woven into verdant grass. Beyond the lake area was a strip of golden sand and then the deep blue of the ocean.

Clark checked his phone. He had a signal. "I'll call my parents," he said.

Lois smiled. "I'll go and check out the cannon," she said.

Clark caught her arm. "Why?" he asked. "Because you have a voracious interest in cannons? Or because you think I want some privacy?"

"The latter," she admitted.

Clark shook his head. "I don't need privacy," he said. "Not from you. Stay here? Please?"

"Are you sure?"

In reply, Clark put his arm over her shoulder and pulled her gently into his side. "I know this trip is going to end," he said. "And I know that, once we're back in Melbourne, it isn't going to be possible to be together all the time. But for now, I want to be with you."

"OK."

He dialled his parents' number.

"Clark," his mother greeted a moment later. "It's so good to hear from you. Your father and I have been wondering how you are."

Clark knew his most goofy grin was wandering all over his face. "I have never ever felt as blissfully happy as I do right now," he said.

Simultaneously, he heard his mother's sharp in-breath and Lois's partially stifled laughter.

"Oh, Clark," his mom said. "We are so pleased for both of you."

Clark grinned wider. "I'm currently standing on a hill overlooking the ocean, and right beside me is the lady I

love.” His arm tightened, and Lois looked up to him with a smile.

“Ah, Clark,” Martha said. Even from so far away, he could hear the delight bubbling in her voice.

“Would you like company tomorrow?” Clark asked. “Late afternoon?”

“Company?” his mother shrieked. “How many?”

“Two,” Clark said.

“Eek! Clark, that would be wonderful. We can’t wait to meet her.”

“I promised you we would come,” Clark reminded her. “But first, I had to explain to Lois about our travel arrangements.”

He heard both women chortle, and he couldn’t contain his grin. He was really looking forward to seeing his mom and Lois together.

Martha sighed, and Clark wondered if there were happy tears glistening in her eyes. “Clark,” she said. “You sound so incredibly happy, happier than you’ve ever been before.”

“I am,” he said. “We’ll see you tomorrow, Mom.”

“Bye, Clark.”

“Bye, Mom.”

Clark replaced his cell in his jeans pocket and enfolded Lois in his arms. “Mom and Dad can’t wait to meet you.”

Lois looped her arms around his waist and leant into his chest. Clark kissed the top of her head.

Contentment and optimism surged through him. No longer did the future stretch uncertainly before him. No longer did he fear that his life would be lived alone.

He had Lois.

He had everything he had ever wanted.

Part 27

West of Warrnambool was Port Fairy—an enchanting little town built on the mouth of the Moyne River. It had retained much of its old-world charm with carefully preserved buildings amidst the dignified rows of Norfolk Island pines.

Lois and Clark parked the Jeep and strolled along the main street, passing a host of cosy cafes and quaint gift shops. Finally, Clark surrendered to the tantalising aroma of coffee. “Are you hungry?” he asked.

Lois inhaled deeply. “Mmmm,” she said. “That coffee smells great.”

Clark grinned. “So?”

Lois paused, clearly undecided. “Is it too early for lunch?”

“You can have lunch any time you want, honey,” Clark told her.

Lois pointed ahead. “If we keep walking, we will meet the river, and on the banks, there is one of Australia’s great fish and chip shops. They take delivery of the fish directly from the commercial fishing boats.”

Clark smiled at her enthusiasm. “It’s not Friday,” he teased gently.

She wasn’t deterred. “We’ll skip the fish and chips on Friday and have them now,” she said. “Do you like whiting?”

“Yes.”

“OK, we’ll get you some King George Whiting,” Lois said. “It is supposed to be the best-tasting fish caught off southern Australia.”

“What will you have? Gummy shark?”

Lois thought for a moment. “No,” she said. “Today, I feel like butterfish.”

Twenty minutes later, they sat on the springy grass overlooking the Moyne River. Lois unrolled the steaming bundle, revealing two pieces of battered fish and a pile of fat fries.

Clark’s whiting had a delicate taste that was the equal of any fish he’d ever tasted. Lois ate her butterfish without speaking. When the fries were almost gone and she’d still said nothing, Clark was sure there had to be a reason for her silence. A fishing boat drifted slowly up the river—heading back to the port—yet Lois didn’t seem to notice.

“Are you OK, honey?” Clark asked.

Her eyes focussed on him, and she smiled. “I’m fine,” she said.

“You’re very quiet.”

Lois wiped her fingers on the edges of the white paper. “I was thinking—about us.”

Clark felt the resurgence of every one of his pessimistic tendencies. “What about us?” he asked, trying to sound casual.

“I can’t help wondering how this is going to work,” Lois said. “I mean, for the next couple of months, it’s easy. But what happens after that?”

“I know I want to be with you.”

“And I want to be with you,” she said. “And with your ability to get to places quickly, we’ll have advantages…”

"But it's still not simple."

"No," she said. "If I stay in Melbourne and you go back to Metropolis, we could see each other, but…"

"It would be difficult to avoid situations that can't be explained. Something as simple as eating out, for instance, could be awkward. We couldn't do it in Melbourne—the risk is too great that someone would recognise me."

"Is Metropolis big enough that it's possible to hide?"

"Maybe," he said uncertainly. "But I don't want to hide you. I have hidden so much of my life—I don't want to hide my relationship with you."

"I don't either," Lois said. "If I'm supposed to be living in Melbourne, but I spend a lot of time in Metropolis, eventually someone is going to ask questions we can't answer. And we would have to try to coordinate different time zones. And there are also the legal issues of visas and passports."

"You're still an American citizen, aren't you?"

She nodded. "I have joint citizenship."

"So you wouldn't be an illegal, but, I agree, we would have to be constantly on guard for complications."

"And if we were in Metropolis, and you had to go to an emergency, I couldn't really ring Browny and tell him my story is late because I'm stranded in the United States." She attempted a smile, but it wasn't strong enough to dispel the solemnity from her eyes.

"What if I stay in Melbourne?" Clark asked.

"Permanently?"

He nodded.

"No, Clark. Metropolis is your home. You have your ideal job there. You've become a good footy journo in a short time, but I know it isn't what you really want to do."

"Perhaps I could apply for other positions with any of the Melbourne papers," Clark suggested.

Lois shook her head. "I think Superman should cultivate a relationship with the people of Metropolis first. That's his city. That's where he needs to be."

"Lois, if I have to choose between Metropolis and you—or even Superman and you—there's no contest."

"I know that," she said. "But I can't stop you doing what you need to do."

Clark was conscious that there was one option remaining, but he didn't think he should be the one to suggest it. To ask Lois to relocate to Metropolis would be to ask her to give up everything she held dear—her friends, her job, and Hawthorn. He knew she loved him, but was that love enough that she would be willing to give up *everything* else she loved? Everything she had worked for? They both knew that her extensive knowledge of Australian football would count for little in Metropolis.

Was it even fair to ask her?

"I think we're both thinking the same thing," Lois said. "That I could move to Metropolis."

"Lois, I'm not going to ask you to leave your home."

"But if we're going to be together in any meaningful way, I can't see any other options."

"Could you live in Melbourne during the footy season and—"

"—live in Metropolis the rest of the year?" Lois finished. "Realistically, there's a six-week break between the Grand Final and the start of pre-season training. That hardly constitutes a married life."

Clark's eyes darted to her face. "*Married*?" he breathed.

Her cheeks had turned scarlet. "I'm sorry," she said. "I… I didn't mean… I shouldn't have said that."

"Don't be sorry," Clark said, aware his heart was thundering. He reached over and put his hand on her shoulder. "It's OK, honey."

"It's not OK," Lois said. She was more flustered than he'd ever seen her. "It was rude and presumptuous, and I shouldn't have said it."

Clark grinned. "Did you think for one moment that I *don't* want to marry you?"

"No," she said. "But it's polite to wait to be asked—not throw it into a conversation like a pathetic attempt to entrap you."

Clark brushed the hair from her shoulder. "Honey," he said. "I'm already trapped."

She gave him a restrained smile that diluted her embarrassment.

"Lois," Clark said softly, "the *only* reason I haven't already asked you to be my wife is that I don't want to rush you."

"I'm still sorry," she said. "I should've been more careful with my words."

"If you said it, does that mean you've thought about it?"

She nodded.

Clark grinned wider. "What were you thinking?"

"You told me you're Superman."

"Ah, yes?"

"When you said that, I knew immediately there would be a lot of ramifications. And they multiplied when you said you'd never told anyone else. It wasn't hard to deduce that you saw our relationship as close, lifelong, intimate, exclusive, special."

That hadn't occurred to Clark. "I didn't mean to pressure you," he said. "I was just trying to be honest."

"I know," Lois said with a small smile. "But I knew that you wouldn't have told me unless you had considered the future—and in looking into the future, you envisaged us as being married."

"I did, but…"

"In *telling* me you're Superman, you *asked* so many questions, and I needed to find answers for all of them. Eventually, after churning through all the possible consequences, I realised that my answer to every question is 'yes'."

Clark smiled. "You are an amazing woman, Lois Lane."

"No," she said. "I'm responding to the most incredible leap of faith I have ever witnessed. You showed such enormous trust in me—but more than that, you proved your total commitment to our future. This is not something you can walk away from. As long as I live, I will know the truth about you. You didn't hold anything back, including how much you want us to be together. And you asked nothing in return. You didn't demand my loyalty or my promise that I would honour your trust; you left yourself wide open, knowing you could never go back."

Clark's mind was reeling. "I didn't think about it like that."

A slither of doubt crossed her face. "Did I misread the situation?"

"Not at all, but I wasn't expecting you to comprehend all that from two words."

"You completely answered every important question I had about you. I don't have to wonder if you're committed to me. You are, and you always will be—you *have* to be. You made the choice to be."

"Does that mean you trust me?" Clark asked.

"Completely," she said. "Because you showed such trust in me."

"So, you're no longer worried about other women?" Clark said.

Lois smiled. "Well, I don't necessarily trust them," she said, "because you sure are a tempting package. But I do trust you."

"I don't want anyone else," Clark said fervently.

"I know," she said with a sweet smile. "You proved that."

"Lois, I'm sorry," he said. "I was so caught up in what this meant for me that I didn't think too much beyond never having to deceive you again. I didn't realise how huge this is for you. Were you mad at me? Even for a time?"

She hesitated.

"Tell me," Clark coaxed.

"At first, I was a little bit mad," she admitted. "I felt as if I'd lost Clark, and I didn't know Superman, and this third person, Superman-Clark, had invaded my relationship with Clark and taken him from me. I didn't ask to be included in this tiny exclusive group who hold—and must protect—the biggest secret in history." Her voice had risen, and when she stopped speaking, she looked around as if suddenly worried that someone could have heard. Seeing no one, she turned back to him.

Clark searched for something profound to say, but he knew that if he opened his mouth, the only words that would emerge would be, "I'm sorry."

"I felt as if you'd made all the decisions," Lois said, her voice quieter now. "You'd decided that we would have this unbreakable bond. You'd decided that we would always be together."

"I thought that if you chose to, you could walk away," Clark said. "I was so scared that is what you would do."

"But even if I had walked away, it wouldn't have changed that I know."

Clark nodded. It was easier—and probably safer—than trying to think of something to say.

"Then I began to think about every moment we had spent together," Lois said. "And I realised that although some things are ridiculously easy for you, other things are incredibly difficult. And right at the top of that list would be relationships, particularly love relationships. And the toughest decision would be whether to tell."

"I couldn't *not* tell you, Lois."

"You didn't tell Lana."

"That's because what I feel for you is different from anything I've felt for anyone else."

Lois smiled again and put her hand on his arm. "I realised that. It took all night to think it through, but by morning, I had made my decision."

Clark smiled. "And that decision is?"

"That I want to be with you," Lois declared. "And I know this, too—because you're Clark Kent, you'll want to make this official and public."

Clark stared at her, completely lost for words.

Lois caressed the skin of his arm. Most of her heightened colour had faded to the prettiest pink imaginable. "But I did plan to let you actually do the asking."

"I still intend to," he said.

She grinned. "I can predict two things about your proposal."

"Really?"

"You'll try to make it incredibly special and—despite everything I've said here—you'll still worry that I'll say 'no'."

"You're probably right on both counts," Clark admitted with a smile.

"Well, you can take this as a warning, big guy," Lois said. "If you ever ask me to marry you, I will have you in front of a preacher so fast, there won't even be time to say 'Superman'."

Clark felt his joy erupt into a stream of exhilaration. "Have I told you today that you're perfect?" he asked.

"Good thing, too," she said, pointing a forefinger at him. "Because you're stuck with me, Kent."

Clark hauled her into his arms and took her with him as he collapsed back onto the springy grass. He hadn't completely thought through the consequences of his actions, and suddenly, Lois was lying across a good portion of his body.

He swallowed down his shock—and his delight—and looked into Lois's eyes. She was smiling. "This is very nice," she said.

"But perhaps not so wise," he replied.

She lowered her mouth onto his for a kiss that was short in duration but explosive in intensity.

Then, in a smooth movement, she swung onto her feet and offered him her hand. Clark took it and sprang up. They picked up the discarded paper, put it in the trash, and began to walk along the riverbank boardwalk.

Clark had difficulty keeping his feet on the ground. Lois… marriage… Lois… with him forever… Lois… his wife… Lois.

He loved her so much.

* * *

For about the hundredth time that day, Martha Kent leaned over her kitchen sink and peered out of the window. Clark had said 'late' afternoon, but that hadn't stopped her watching for them since lunchtime.

She took the cloth from the drawer and again wiped the window ledge that she had already dusted twice today.

She had imagined this day a thousand times—the day her son would bring home his love.

What would she be like, this Lois? Clark had said he was in love with her. That was all Martha needed to conclude that Lois Lane was a very special young lady.

"You're not dusting that ledge again, are you?"

Martha turned to Jonathan, who had come in while she'd been lost in her ponderings. She crossed the kitchen and stepped into his arms. "How many times have you swept the path today?" she fired back.

"Three," he admitted with a rumbling laugh.

"It's a big day," Martha said. "Our son is bringing home his girl to meet us for the first time."

"That's true," Jonathan said. "We'd already known Lana for years when she and Clark got together."

"This is a lot different from Lana," Martha said. "They seemed such good friends, but Clark never came close to sharing everything with her."

"But he has told Lois after three weeks."

"He knows it's right. He knows she's the one."

"She must love him—"

"Mom! Dad!"

Martha pulled away from her husband, and together they opened the door. Clark was there—his face lit with excitement and his expression radiating happiness. Standing next to him—with his arm resting protectively across her shoulder—was a petite young woman.

"Mom, Dad," Clark said. Martha heard the slightest tremor in his voice. "This is Lois Lane."

Martha dragged her eyes from her son and smiled at his companion. Lois smiled back. Martha gathered the younger woman into her arms and instantly felt the foundation of a bond between them.

Martha glanced up to Clark and smiled. "She's perfect," she mouthed.

Clark's smile broadened. "I know," he mouthed back.

* * *

Clark watched as his mother and Lois embraced. Two vital elements of his life had come face to face—and connected.

After releasing Lois, Martha turned to Clark and flung her arms around him. Clark saw Lois and his dad hesitate for half a breath, and then Jonathan held out his arms to Lois, his smile wide with welcome. Lois stepped forward into his hug.

Clark saw the tears glistening in his mother's eyes. His heart flooded again with appreciation for this wonderful woman who had been so steadfast in her love for the baby that had become her son in the most unusual of circumstances.

They sat around the already-prepared table, and Martha brought a huge stack of pancakes from where they had been warming in the oven. "Lois," she said with a smile, "please help yourself."

Clark met Lois's eyes and smiled. He knew she'd been nervous about meeting his parents. In a way, he could understand it—Clark wasn't entirely sure he was looking forward to meeting Sam and Ellen Lane. But he'd known that his parents would love Lois from the moment they met her. Lois answered his smile, and it seemed genuine enough that Clark could hope that most of her concerns had already been assuaged.

"Clark gave me a recipe for something called lamingtons," Martha said as she poured the boiling water into the teapot. "I made them last week."

"They were delicious," Jonathan said with unmistakable appreciation. "Do you have any more Australian recipes that Martha could try?"

"Hedgehog?" Clark suggested, looking at Lois. "Do you know of any recipes for hedgehog?" He turned to his parents and laughed at their questioning looks. "Yeah," he said. "My first thought was that spiky animals wouldn't be too tasty, but I'll get you a recipe, and you'll be able to see for yourselves."

"Are they good?" Jonathan asked. "These hedgehogs?"

Lois giggled softly, and Clark took it as a sign she was relaxing further. "Hedgehog is sublime," he said.

"Browny's wife, Sue, will have a recipe," Lois said.

They talked of general things as they ate their pancakes and maple syrup. Clark's parents asked Lois a few questions about herself. She answered simply and openly, and Clark watched as his parents fell in love with Lois just as completely as he had.

When they had significantly reduced the pancake stack, Martha put the kettle on to boil water for more tea. "Have you seen the papers?" she asked casually.

"No," Clark answered cautiously. "Lois and I have been away. We haven't heard any news for a couple of days."

He had half-expected his mom to respond with a knowing smile, but when she didn't, the little spark of concern fanned into alarm. What had been happening? Had they found more of the green rock? Had the government decided that the alien had to be caught and suppressed?

"You rescued Mayson and took her to the hospital?" Jonathan asked.

Clark clamped down on the automatic groan that rose at the mention of that name. "Yes," he said. "Why?"

"Did you talk to her? As you flew her to the hospital?"

Clark shrugged. "I think I asked her if she were OK. I don't remember much. I'd had a dose of the green rock."

"Did you talk to her about the green rock?" Martha asked.

Clark shook his head. "No," he said.

"She wrote a story saying she'd interviewed you as you flew her to the hospital. She says you told her that Trask was correct about the green rock being the source of your power and that you admitted you had faked weakness to try to trick him into keeping it here."

"I said nothing to her," Clark said.

"She said you struggled to pick her up and had only been able to fly at a much-reduced speed because you were already losing power."

"I did struggle," Clark admitted. "But I didn't tell her why."

"Why would she lie?" Lois asked.

"Because Mayson Drake will write anything for a story," his mom said with disgust. The kettle boiled. She stood and poured water into the teapot.

"Do they believe her?" Clark asked. "Do they think Superman is finished?"

"They don't know," Martha said. "And the speculation has been frenetic." She reached for the shelf and brought down a bundle of newspapers. "The Star and the Planet have been trying to outdo each other with Superman stories."

"But Superman hasn't been seen for nearly a week," Clark said.

"That hasn't stopped them," Jonathan said.

Martha slapped the papers onto the table, and Clark recognised the top one as the *Metropolis Star*. He resisted the urge to scan them. "What has happened?" he asked.

Lois's hand slid across the table and rested on his arm.

"Well," his mom said as she sat down. "They're calling it 'Superman Wars'."

"Excuse me?" Clark said.

Martha unfolded the papers. "Following the whole Trask debacle, the Daily Planet had the advantage. Mayson claimed she had spoken with you and of course, the Planet staff were actually there. The Metropolis Star fired back with a series of stories aimed at eroding the credibility of the Daily Planet. They reminded the public about Mayson's past stories and her championing of Jason Trask. They speculated that the reason Trask took hostages from the Daily Planet was to ensure that Perry White kept his part in a secret deal to bring down Superman."

"By sending the green rock into space?" Clark asked.

His mom nodded. "Perry White denied there had been any deal with Trask, and the Star responded by taking the moral high ground and printing an editorial that apologised to Superman for the way humans had treated him."

"Has the Planet countered that?" Clark asked. "Has Perry reminded everyone that the stories giving such credibility to Trask's theories were published when he was in the hospital?"

"He has," Martha said. "But I'm not sure it means much to the general public."

"What else has Perry said?"

"That he regrets the allegations following the train crash. He also stated that the Daily Planet fully supports Superman in his efforts to make Metropolis a safer city."

"Did the people accept that?"

"This is being perceived as a fight between good and evil, between Superman and Trask, between the Star and the Planet," Jonathan said.

"And the Star is supposed to be the *good*?" Clark exclaimed.

His father nodded gravely. "The Star has made astonishing ground in less than a week. This morning, they reported that, for the first time in history, the Star has a higher circulation than the Planet."

"The Planet's circulation numbers are three times those of the Star," Clark said.

"Not anymore," his mother responded grimly.

Clark's thoughts went to Perry White. This must be devastating for him.

Martha pulled a paper from the pile—a copy of the *Star*—and placed it on the table in front of Clark.

The headline was bold and black—"$500,000 for Superman Interview!"

Clark speed-read the story. It took him less than a second to realise that the Metropolis Star was serious in offering him half a million dollars for an exclusive interview.

The shockwaves were still reverberating through him when his mom unfolded the next paper and laid it on top of the *Star*. It was the *Daily Planet*. "$1,000,000!" the huge headline shouted.

Clark looked at his parents, bewildered. "A *million* dollars," he said weakly. "For an interview? The Daily Planet can't afford that."

"Perhaps someone on the board can," Jonathan said.

Clark turned to Lois. "I can't… I can't take this money," he said. "You know that?"

She smiled. "Of course I know that."

Clark shook his head. "That… that is immoral… So much money… for one person."

"They're awaiting your answer," Martha said.

"They won't be getting an answer," Clark said grimly. "I don't care if they think Superman is finished—I won't be giving anyone an interview."

Lois's hand pressed gently into his arm. "I don't think you should reject it without consideration," she said.

"Lois!" Clark said emphatically. "I am *not* taking that much money. I'm not taking *any* amount of money. Superman can't be bought."

"You don't have to take the money," she said quietly. "I'm sure you could find a worthwhile charity that could benefit greatly."

Clark thought about that. "You think I should do the interview and direct the money to a worthwhile cause?"

Lois nodded. "I think this could be a wonderful way for Superman to begin to allow people to see him as he really is." She gestured to the papers. "Obviously, interest is high. He hasn't been seen for a couple of days. No one knows how the absence of the green rock has affected him. An interview now could be the perfect opportunity to set some things straight—to declare there is only one of you and you are here to help."

Clark sensed his parents' unspoken concerns with Lois's suggestion. "Lois thinks Superman being so distant and aloof provided the perfect breeding ground for distrust and suspicion," he explained. "I guess people didn't know if I intended harm, because I never said I had come as a friend."

"I think that if the public could see Superman's compassion and his heart, they would know that idiots like Trask are sprouting rubbish," Lois said.

"What are you going to do?" Jonathan asked his son.

"I don't know," Clark replied. He placed the papers side by side. Both featured a large photograph of Superman. They must have trawled the archives for the best they could find. In the pictures, his expression was deadpan rather than surly. "I wouldn't even know which paper to choose."

"The Daily Planet, obviously," his mom said.

Clark shook his head. "The condition is that Mayson Drake gets the interview," he said. "And Superman can't be seen to be favouring the Daily Planet." He looked at his parents. "Was there something else that contributed to this? Other than the speculation that Superman is dead or powerless?"

"Many details have come out about Trask," Martha said. "He had totally lost his grip on reality. He misused his authority terribly to the point that whenever someone didn't agree with him, he had him murdered. There has been an uproar about accountability in government."

"I'm guessing that Mayson's alignment with him hasn't done the Daily Planet any favours at all," Clark said, wishing he could go to Perry White and offer his support.

"And because it was Mayson who got the first stories about Trask's atrocities, it was easy for the Star to claim that she had inside knowledge," Jonathan said.

"Have the police investigated her?" Clark asked.

"Yes," Jonathan said. "But at this stage, they haven't been able to nail her with anything. She says she befriended Trask in order to get the story."

Again, Clark perused the newspapers. He could give the interview to the Planet—that would help Perry arrest the slide. He wasn't comfortable with Superman being used for something as petty as a war between two competing commercial entities, but he had always believed that the Daily Planet was about more than circulation numbers and advertising dollars—that it stood for something important… justice and truth and equality. The Metropolis Star—while not as trashy as the National Inquisitor—had certainly nudged the line of ethical propriety more than once.

Despite everything, his strongest tendency was to ignore the offers. He turned to Lois. "What do you think I should do?" he asked.

"I think you should tell them that the price is half a million," Lois said. "And the condition is that *both* papers get the story. That you will only give an interview if both Mayson and"—her eyes flittered over the copy of the *Star*—"Linda King are there."

"I talk to *both* of them?" Clark said. "Together?"

Lois nodded. "It's too risky to choose the Daily Planet, and if you choose the Star, you are practically signing the death warrant on your own paper."

She was right. "So," Clark mused, "you think I should offer one interview, to be conducted by both Mayson and Linda, and direct that a joint payment totalling half a million dollars is to go to…"

"Are there children's charities in Metropolis?" Lois asked.

"You think it should be something that helps Metropolis?"

"Definitely."

"What if they refuse?" Clark asked. "What if both the Star and the Planet refuse to pay for an interview that isn't an exclusive?"

"You could offer the joint interview but leave it open as to what happens if one refuses. If either paper believes that accepting the joint interview is the only way to stop the other from getting an exclusive, they won't like it, but they will accept it."

Clark settled back in his chair and put his arm around Lois. He looked across to his parents. "What do you think?" he asked.

They glanced at each other. Finally, his mom said, "I think the days of Superman being able to fly even partially under the radar are over. This whole Trask thing has been too big—he was a top government agent. From now on, every appearance by Superman will cause a media brouhaha, and it's possible that the best way to deal with that would be to meet them head-on and give them the interview."

"And it gives you the chance to speak for yourself," Lois added. "You can make a clear statement of your intentions."

Clark considered her words.

"Do you have reservations?" Lois asked.

"Some," Clark said. "Mayson will be infuriated. She won't like having to share with Linda. At the best of times, their animosity sizzles at a hundred yards, and it will have gotten worse since the Star speculated on Mayson's involvement with Trask."

"You can do it," Lois said. "If you believe in yourself, others will, too."

"I wish you could be there with me," he said.

"You can do this, Clark," Lois said. Suddenly, she grinned. "We can have a mock interview. I'll think of every intrusive and awkward question I can, and you can practise

answering without actually saying anything at all. It's not hard—football coaches do it all the time."

Clark turned to his parents. "Do you think this is a crazy idea?" he asked.

They hesitated. Then his father spoke. "When we read the papers, we thought there was no way you would agree to the interview. But now… perhaps Lois is right. Perhaps this is the perfect opportunity for Superman to make a firm declaration about who he is and what he believes in."

"And," Martha added, "if Mayson Drake is willing to write complete lies about supposed interviews with you, it might be safer to talk to her with Linda King there."

Clark took a deep breath and smiled at the three people he loved most. "Then I guess Superman will give his first real interview," he said.

"Take a day to think through the details," Martha suggested. She smiled at Lois. "And talk it over with Lois. I'm sure you'll make the right decision together."

Clark stood reluctantly. He didn't want to end the time with his parents. "We need to go," he said. "It's after eight o'clock in Australia, and we have to be back in Melbourne this afternoon."

Once outside, Lois and Clark hugged his parents and then he checked for anyone in the vicinity. Finding it clear, he turned to Lois and smiled. "Ready, honey?" he asked.

Lois smiled back. "I'll always be ready to fly with you," she said.

Clark's heart leapt. No matter how often she affirmed her feelings for him, he knew he would never tire of hearing them.

He swept her into his arms and held her close against his body. "Bye," he said to his parents.

His dad's arm was across his mother's shoulder, and they were both smiling brightly. "Come again, soon," his mom said. "Both of you."

"We will," he promised.

He paused long enough to drop a kiss on Lois's cheek and then shot them both into the deep blue of the Kansan sky.

* * *

"Tell me about Mayson Drake," Lois said.

Clark looked across to where Lois was driving them towards Melbourne. "What would you like to know?" he asked.

"I've been thinking about this interview," Lois said. "What she might ask. What she *really* wants. Why she lied about you and the effects of the green rock."

"If she believed Trask, she probably thought I would never be able to refute her claims," Clark said.

Lois nodded but didn't seem convinced. "Did you date her?"

Clark grimaced. "A couple of times. It's hard not to go on a date with a woman when you arrive home and she's ensconced herself in your kitchen and has supper prepared. Then, at the end of it, she refuses to leave until you've agreed to take her out to repay the meal you now owe her."

"Hmm," Lois said. "She's determined, isn't she?"

"I'm not sure it's determination," Clark said. "More, it's an obsessive inability to accept that life sometimes doesn't go the way she wants it to."

"Do you think she has any idea about you?"

He sighed. "I think she's suspicious that I'm hiding something from her. She is the top investigative reporter in Metropolis, and I work in her newsroom."

"Maybe she thinks you're hiding your true feelings for her."

"Maybe."

"Do you respect her?"

"At first, I did… professionally."

"But?"

"The more I got to know her, the less regard I had for her."

"Was there anything specific?"

"Three months ago, I was at a function—most of the Daily Planet staff were there. Mayson had just landed the first big exclusive interview with Lex Luthor—he's the third richest man in the world—and she was called up during the presentations to say a few words."

"What did she say?"

"She announced our engagement."

"She did *what*?"

"She announced that we were engaged to be married."

"Oh, Clark," Lois said. "What did you do?"

"It was ugly." Clark removed his glasses and hooked them on his knee. With the heels of his hands, he rubbed his eyes as he recalled his confrontation with Mayson Drake. "Perry helped me get her off the stage, and Jimmy took her home in a cab. She'd had a fair bit to drink, and I think the

party atmosphere and the adrenalin rush from getting the interview with Luthor…" He sighed again.

"Surely she can't have believed you would simply fold and marry her?"

"I don't know what she believed," Clark said. "I'd told her over and over again that I didn't feel that way about her. After that, Perry didn't put us on stories together." He hesitated. "It hasn't affected her work—she is still a brilliant reporter."

"Not if she has to fabricate interviews," Lois said.

"Maybe she realised that Trask's downfall could damage her reputation, so she wanted to make him appear less deranged."

Lois turned to him and smiled. "Don't worry about Mayson," she said. "She can't hurt us."

Clark wasn't so sure, but he said nothing.

"We're nearly home," Lois said. "Back to the real world after the magic of being alone."

"But it's a real world that includes you."

"Always," she promised.

* * *

Lois entered the Herald Sun building with Clark. In the corridor, she stopped and faced him. "I had the greatest time," she said.

"I did, too," he said.

"I'm going to miss you."

He nodded emphatically and loosely grasped her hand. Together, they walked into the newsroom, and Clark's hand discreetly slid from hers.

Immediately, every head turned in their direction and silently stared. Lois stopped, her eyes darting from face to face. Had they heard that she and Clark had gone away together and drawn their own conclusions? Perhaps, in their absence, they had been the talk of the newsroom.

It must have been a slow news week.

The silence stretched to breaking point, and still no one spoke.

No one moved.

They just kept looking at her and Clark. Lois felt him shuffle behind her. His hand came to rest on her back.

Banjo stood from his desk and uneasily approached them. "Ah… Lois," he said. He looked down at his hands. "Have you heard—"

"Flinders!"

Lois jumped and turned to where Browny had emerged from his office.

"Come into my office," Browny invited quietly.

His tone caused an icy river to gush through her. Browny never spoke like that… not unless something was very, very wrong.

"You come, too, Rubber," Browny said in that same soft tone.

Lois walked into the office and heard Clark shut the door. "What is it, Browny?" she asked. "What's wrong?"

"You haven't heard, have you?" he said.

"Heard what?" Lois said as her heart roared in her eardrums.

"Hawthorn and Melbourne have announced their intention to merge," Browny said. "To form the Melbourne Hawks."

Part 28

Mayson Drake rolled over, turning away from the lump in the bed beside her.

He had served his purpose. Initially, he'd been fun. He'd gotten her attention with his victim-of-unrequited-love persona and kept her interested with a vaguely entertaining balance of flirtation and skittish reluctance. In short, he had managed to somewhat mitigate the bitter taste left by Clark Kent.

How dare Kent—a no-name, inconsequential, hayseed from Kansas—embarrass her like that? And then, he had scurried off to Australia like a frightened rabbit.

But no matter. He would return to Metropolis, and then, the games could resume.

But for now, she had bigger fish to fry.

Much bigger fish.

Superman.

Where was he?

Surely, he couldn't be dead. Or worse, unpowered.

Perhaps he was still recovering. That was possible if—as she had strongly suspected at the time—Trask had gotten it wrong.

Mayson had spoken at length with the eyewitnesses who had seen the alien slumped and writhing in pain. Many of them believed that the green rock, far from empowering him, had had a debilitating effect on the alien.

But Trask, of course, wouldn't listen. Before his death, he'd achieved his goal to rid the world of the alien rock.

Or thought he had.

After Superman had dumped Mayson at the hospital door and flown away, Perry and Dan had hustled her into a room to await treatment. She had stayed there less than a minute before slipping out of the window and taking a cab back to EPRAD. Using a combination of charm, feminine wiles, lies, the ability to pick locks, and rat cunning, she had slipped through security and managed to get into the then-deserted room where Trask had 'enlightened' the world with his particular brand of lunacy.

And there she had found it. Lying on the floor—less than three feet from the blood stain—looking as innocuous as any other colourfully hued rock.

Just a pebble—smaller than a golf ball and oddly shaped.

But—in the right hands—more powerful than dynamite.

And more than able to make up for any damage done to her reputation over the Trask debacle.

Had he kept it as insurance? Or had one of the dissenting voices managed to procure the piece while Trask's collection of green rock was being readied for its journey into space? Perhaps it had dropped from the dissenter's pocket as his body had been removed.

Mayson didn't know.

Didn't care.

What she *did* know was that the piece of green rock—now securely hidden in her apartment—gave her so much power, she couldn't think of it without wanting to screech in delight.

Whatever the truth, she now held all the aces.

If Trask had been correct, she had the only known source of power for the world's strongest man. She could control him.

If Trask had been wrong, and the green rock actually incapacitated Superman, she could threaten him with it—and still control him.

The ideas just kept piling up. Ideas that would secure everything she craved—power, control, success, fame, and wealth. Ideas that would launch her way beyond a mere reporter and into the stratosphere of being America's most powerful person.

And, as a satisfying aside, Mayson was confident there would be a way to use Superman to rattle Clark Kent's home-spun attitudes so severely, the Kansan hick would beg her for a date.

Assuming the alien was still alive.

And powered.

It had seemed expedient that the world accept Trask's beliefs about the green rock. Mayson certainty didn't want a frenzy of crazed criminals hunting for a means to control Superman.

So, she'd written a story that Superman had confirmed Trask's assessment.

If he were dead, there would be no one to contradict her.

If he were alive, she had the green rock. He wouldn't dare cross her.

He was alive. He had to be alive. She couldn't come this close to attaining real power only to be thwarted by an incapacitated alien.

But if he were alive, why hadn't he responded to the financial carrot? Her rich and malleable uncle—whose position on the Planet board had never been more propitious—had responded magnificently to her less-than-subtle prodding.

Dan Scardino rolled over and brushed against her. Mayson leapt from the bed and looked down at him with distaste.

He'd served a purpose, but no more. She had moved on to far greater things than needing an unsophisticated Australian to restore her bruised ego. She was weary of maintaining the pretence of being impressed by his grating accent and his weird sense of humour.

As she watched him, his eyes opened, and he smiled sleepily. "Whatcha doing, Ducky?" he asked. "Come back to bed. It can't be time to get up yet."

That sealed it. Not for anything would she tolerate him calling her 'Ducky' one more time. "I have a hot tip for a story," she said, her tone dripping with revulsion.

"Need any help?" he mumbled, already half-asleep again.

Mayson's lip curled. "Not from you," she said.

She hastily dressed and returned to her own apartment.

Her apartment that held the means to her future.

Now, if only the alien would get over his silly vanishing act and play ball.

She was confident he would.

A million dollars.

Who could resist that?

* * *

Clark's hands spanned the slope of Lois's hips. She was trembling, and he could hear the galloping of her heart. She swayed a few degrees, and he tightened his hold. He leant forward so he could see her face. She was deathly pale; her

eyes were fixed ahead, her mouth was open, and her breath was coming in short, sharp jabs.

"Do you want to sit down?" Browny asked. "Perhaps you should."

Lois shook her head. "Tell me," she demanded, her voice thin and strained.

"The Melbourne Hawks," Browny said. "Announced earlier this morning. Both boards in agreement."

"So…" Lois gulped. She closed her eyes and took two steadying breaths. "No more Hawthorn."

Browny looked at her with genuine sympathy. "Melbourne were never going to give up their name," he said.

Lois swallowed and then sucked in another colossal breath. "I'm going to Glenferrie," she declared.

"I knew you would," Browny said. "Rubber, you go with her."

"No!" The word shot from her mouth with such force it seemed to propel her into action. She turned to Clark and put both hands on his chest. "No," she said. She searched his eyes and silently pleaded for his understanding. "I need to do this alone."

"Lois—"

"Please, Clark," she begged. "Please just let me do this. Please."

He wanted to argue, he wanted to stake his claim that, after everything they had shared, his place was beside her. He wanted to beg her not to push him away.

She took his face into her hands and looked deep into his eyes. "This changes nothing," she whispered. "Not between us."

Clark realised he must have been holding his breath, because he released it to speak. "Lois, can I come with you? Please?"

She shook her head. Her manner had become business-like, purposeful, driven. "I'll see you tonight."

"You'll come to my place? I can cook for you."

Lois reached into her bag and gave Clark a key. "Go to my place. Please? I'll come home. I'll need to be close to my phone."

She stretched up and took his mouth in a desperate kiss. Then, without so much as a glance at Browny, she hurried from his office.

Browny slumped into his chair, having shown no surprise at Lois kissing Clark so openly. "Sometimes, I hate football," he said.

Clark stepped forward and sat opposite Browny.

"I hate how the people in control think it's OK for them to force their vision for the future on the entire football world. And I hate how it's always so tightly bound up with money and personal profile and growth." The final word was uttered with patent disgust. Browny slowly shook his head. "They say our game must grow. They say our game must move forward. They say we must have a national competition. They never mention that the road to such glory is going to be littered with sacrifices."

"Do you think there is any chance for Hawthorn?" Clark said.

Browny lifted his eyes. "No," he said dejectedly. "No, I don't. From what I'm hearing, most at Hawthorn believe it's a choice between merging and going under completely."

"And Melbourne wants this?"

Browny grunted. "Of course they want it. They get to keep their name, their colours, their home ground, and a free pick of Hawthorn's best players. They also get concessions from the AFL, concessions that will practically gift-wrap them a flag within five years. Their last premiership was 1964—this is like offering a banquet to a starving man."

"And what does Hawthorn get?"

"They get to avoid a slow and public death."

"How could it have gotten this bad?" Clark asked.

Browny shook his head. "I don't know. Five years ago, that club had just won its fifth flag in nine years. Now, they're in debt, their membership is low, and they seem to have accepted their fate."

"Lois won't accept it."

"I know," Browny said glumly. "And that is only going to make it harder on her." He looked directly at Clark. "Stick by her, Rubber; try to help her through this."

"Of course."

"And don't *ever* tell her it's only a football club."

"I know it's far more than that."

Browny sighed and picked up his notepad. "I need you to do a story, Rubber," he said. "There's a rumour that St Kilda have been hit by gastro. Can you get out to Moorabbin and find out if it's true? They should be training soon."

"Sure."

"Do you know how to get there?"

Clark stood from the chair. "Yeah," he said. "I've been there before."

"Rubber…" Browny stared at his notepad as if it suddenly held the answers to all of life's questions. "… as the new kid on the block, I won't be asking you to write any stories about the merger."

Clark searched his editor's face. It was impassive, but his interest in the notepad strongly suggested his words carried further meaning.

"Make sure Flinders knows," Browny said. "You're too new to this. Anything you find out wouldn't be worth printing."

Clark felt a surge of affection for the crusty editor. "Thank you," he said.

"Now, get your Yankee butt out to Moorabbin," Browny barked. "I'm one reporter down, and I need the rest of you out there finding me stories."

* * *

Clark bent low to check the meal he'd placed in the warm oven. He straightened and paused, listening again for that one special heartbeat.

Still nothing.

He meandered out of the kitchen and picked up his cell phone. Should he call her? Where was she? When would she be home?

She had said that nothing would change between them.

In the hours since Lois had stormed from Browny's office, Clark had tried to cling to that.

But when Lois had spoken, she'd been in shock. Would this change anything? Would it change everything?

Then Clark heard it—her heartbeat.

Lois was coming.

He pushed his hand through his hair and straightened his glasses. He hurried to the door and opened it.

She was at the bottom of the driveway, walking towards him. He searched her for clues to how she was feeling. Was she tired? Dejected? Disheartened? Emotional?

She looked up, saw him, and gave him a tentative smile. "Hi, Clark," she said.

He rushed forward to meet her. "Are you all right?" he asked as his hand found her arm.

She went into her unit, and Clark followed. He shut the door and waited, unsure what Lois wanted from him. Then she turned and slid into his embrace.

Clark held her close as relief flooded through him. She wasn't shutting him out. "Aw, honey," he said. "I'm so sorry this has happened."

Lois clung to him. Her breaths came evenly, and her heart rate was only slightly elevated. Then she eased away and looked up at him—composed and calm. She inhaled deeply. "Is that dinner I smell?" she asked.

Clark nodded and went to the oven. He filled the two plates with chicken casserole and put them on the table. "What did you find out?" he asked as they both sat down.

Lois slowly chewed the first mouthful of the meal he had prepared for her. "It's not looking good," she said. "We're in a hole, no doubt about it."

"Do you think there's any hope of avoiding the merger?"

"There's always hope," she said.

"Has it been signed off?"

"No. September 16 there's an Extraordinary General Meeting of members."

"The members get to vote on this?"

"Yes," Lois said. "Our members. And Melbourne's members. If we both vote 'yes', that's the end of Hawthorn."

"How do you think the vote will go?"

"Melbourne will vote 'yes'. There is absolutely no reason for them not to."

"And Hawthorn?"

"The feeling I'm picking up so far is that most people believe we have no choice. Either we merge or we die."

"Is it that bad?"

Lois sighed deeply. "Information was hard to come by, but I managed to find out that our player payments are behind. I reckon that means we're in pretty deep financial trouble."

"Did you have any inkling that things were this bad?"

Lois shook her head in bewilderment. "No." She sighed. "But I've barely been at the club all this year. I let myself get distracted with other things."

"Lois, this isn't your fault."

"It's not about whose fault it is. It's about what we can do about it."

"What are you going to do?"

Lois reached into her bag and withdrew a bulky notepad. "I have made a list of past players, past board members, past coaches, and as many supporters and members as I can think of. First thing tomorrow, I'll give Browny my resignation and then—"

"Lois…" Clark paused, feeling like he was standing on a solitary rock in a raging river. Whatever he said next, he was likely to be swept away in the torrent.

"What?" she asked, dangerously quiet.

"Are you sure it's necessary to resign?" Clark asked gently. "Perhaps you could take leave?"

"It's coming up to finals," she said. "Browny doesn't need an absent reporter. If I'm not there—and I won't be—he needs to be able to replace me."

"Are you sure you want to give up everything you've worked for?"

"It's not worth squat if there's no Hawthorn."

"Lois… "

She put down her fork and covered Clark's hand with her own. "Clark," she said. "I know you mean well, and I can see you are trying really hard not to upset me—but this is *Hawthorn*."

"I'm trying to understand that," he said softly.

Lois stroked the back of his hand with her fingertips. "I know," she said. "But what I really need from you is that you let me do this my way. You haven't even been here for a month. You can't possibly understand what I'm feeling. You won't be able to understand my decisions. We both need to accept that."

"I'm worried that this will tear us apart."

"We won't let it," Lois said.

Clark didn't want to argue, but his fears were strong enough that he said, "I feel like you're being called back by your first love, and as much as I am going to support you in that… it scares me."

Lois's hand tightened around his. "Hawthorn are my first love timewise," she said. "Nothing will change that. But that's not the same as having the first place in my heart. That place is yours, Clark. Nothing will change that either."

"Thank you," he said, forcibly shutting down his internal howls of doubt.

"It's six weeks, Clark," Lois said earnestly. "We Hawthorn supporters have six weeks to see if there is any way to save our club. I *have* to give everything—my time, my energy, my passion. I have to give Hawthorn every chance to survive. I can't take everything the club has given me and just turn my back now."

"Lois," Clark said, "do you really believe that Hawthorn has a chance? Do you believe that if you avoid the merger, there is any possibility that your club can fight back from this and still survive five, ten, twenty years into the future?"

"I know the odds are against us," she said. "I know that many good Hawthorn people believe the merger is our only viable option. I know they have had weeks, maybe months, to plan how to present this as a fait accompli to the members."

"Do you think it's possible?" Clark persisted. "Not only to avoid the merger, but to continue as a single club?"

"That depends on how much we want it," she said.

"What are you going to do? After you've given Browny your resignation?" Clark tried very hard to keep any trace of disapproval from his voice.

"I'm going to ask everyone who has a connection with the club if they are willing to fight. It was only announced today. They chose their timing carefully. With Cathy Freeman running in the 400-metre final later tonight, they hoped it would slip under the radar."

"What will you do if you find enough people who think Hawthorn can continue without merging?"

"We will fight," Lois stated. "We will fight with everything we have."

"And if most people believe Hawthorn need to merge?"

"I will stand alone," she declared.

Clark felt despair drape his heart. Lois was going to get badly hurt. And there was nothing he could do, except wait and hope he would be able to find a way to lessen the devastation of losing her club. "Lois," he said. "I know I won't fully understand. I know I don't love Hawthorn the way you do. But I *do* love you, and I give you my word that I will stand with you. You won't have to stand alone."

Her chin wobbled, and her eyelids fluttered against rising tears. "Thank you," she said shakily. "Thank you."

Their eyes met and held, until a loud tap on the door broke them apart. Lois glanced at her watch. "Who could it be this late?" she said as she went to answer the knock.

Clark looked through the door, so it was no surprise to him when Lois exclaimed, "Seb!"

She stepped into his arms, and they held each other for a long moment.

"Come in, Seb," Lois said after they had parted.

He followed her into the unit.

"Seb, you remember Clark Kent?" Lois said. "Clark, this is Seb Wilton."

Clark nodded and offered his hand. Seb took it, but his gaze didn't waver from Lois.

Lois sat with Seb on the couch. “I guess you’ve heard,” she said.

Seb nodded. “I caught the first flight down to Melbourne. I was at the club today.”

“I was, too. I didn’t see you there.”

Seb hesitated. He looked uncomfortable. Clark took advantage of the break in conversation to crouch beside Lois. “Would you like me to leave?” he asked.

“No,” Lois said with a little smile.

Clark sensed that Seb would prefer to be alone with Lois. “Is that OK with you, Seb?” he asked.

Before Seb could answer, Lois spoke. “Seb, Clark and I are together now. Anything we say, we can say in front of him.”

Seb didn’t respond, and Clark turned back to Lois. “Honey,” he said, “it’s OK. I can come back later—after you’ve talked with Seb.”

“No,” Lois said firmly. She turned to Seb. “Clark’s staying.”

Seb accepted that with a terse nod. He looked squarely at Lois. “The reason you didn’t see me today was that I was in a meeting with some of the board members.”

Lois’s mouth dropped open. “You were? How did *you* get into a meeting? Nobody would tell me anything.”

Seb shifted uneasily. “The board invited some members to a meeting so they could explain their position.”

“*Some* members?” Lois asked.

Seb looked down. “Those with the financial capacity to __”

“Oh, Seb,” Lois squealed delightedly. “They *are* trying to find a way around this merger.”

Dismally, Seb shook his head. “No, Lois,” he said. “There is no way around this merger.”

Lois stared at Seb. Cold horror had swamped her fleeting delight. “Seb?” she said in a small voice.

“Lois, I’ve come here to beg you not to fight this. I know how persuasive you can be. I know how people gravitate towards you. I know how much this is going to grate against every instinct you have, but please, Lois, please don’t fight this. No good can come of it.”

“Seb?” Lois said in a voice that choked.

“Lois,” Seb said desperately. “Lois, I’ve seen the books. We haven’t paid our players in weeks. The merger is our only hope.”

Lois stared at him from the cloud of her bewilderment. “Seb,” she gasped. “I can’t believe that you—of all people—would accept this so easily.”

Seb clenched his hands. “You know I love Hawthorn,” he said wretchedly. “My family has been Hawthorn since my grandfather was ten years old. But Lois, we need to accept the facts. If we try to fight this, there are only two possible outcomes.”

“Which are?”

“We will be split. It will get very ugly, and the final memories of our club will be filled with pain, and anger, and resentment. Lifelong friendships will be shattered.”

“And the other outcome?” Lois said.

“If the members vote against the merger, by Round 1 next year, there will be no Hawthorn.”

“If the members vote for the merger, by Round 1 next year, there will be no Hawthorn,” Lois said. Clark could hear the steeliness underpinning her tone.

“Lois,” Seb said, his voice raising a notch. “I know this is hard for you. That’s why I came here—to tell you what I know. To help you understand that resisting the merger will spell the certain death of our club.”

Lois stood abruptly and marched to her bedroom. When she returned, she was holding a Hawthorn jumper. As Seb stood, she thrust it him. “Have you forgotten what *this* stands for?” she demanded.

“Of course I haven’t,” he shot back.

“Seb,” Lois insisted. “We are Hawthorn. We don’t give up. We *never* give up. No matter what. The tougher it gets, the more determined we get. Think of the ‘89 Grand Final. Think of the years and years without finals. Think of everything we have faced and overcome.”

“Lois, we will have nothing. If the merger proposal is defeated, there will be a spill of the entire board. The players and the coaches will look elsewhere. Who can blame them? Who would commit to a club with a lifespan measured in weeks?”

“I would,” Lois stated defiantly.

“We will start the pre-season with no board, no money, very few players, no assets, and a debt that will strangle every last gram of life from us.”

“The club does not belong to the board,” Lois said heatedly. “The club belongs to every single person who loves it. And if those people want to fight to keep their club, *nothing* will stand in our way.”

"Lois, things have changed, and this is just the beginning. Footy isn't what it once was. It's a business now—a brutal, cutthroat business—and only the strongest survive."

"You want to see how strong Hawthorn are?" Lois challenged bitterly. "Then you just stand back and watch."

"Strength used against each other is not really strength at all."

"So we just give up?" Lois snapped at him.

"No," Seb said. "We don't give up. We realise that we have an out, and we take it."

"A merger is not an out," Lois said scornfully. "It's a surrender."

"Lois, we don't have on-field success. We don't—"

"We won the flag five years ago."

"We don't have enough members," Seb continued. "We have less than thirteen thousand members, Lois. We need thirty thousand. We don't have the money. We are a million dollars down the gurgler."

Lois stared at him, breathing heavily. "I will find the members," she proclaimed. "I will rattle tins on the streets if I have to. I will find the people who love this club, and together, we will take back what is ours."

"The people who love this club know that the merger is the best possible outcome."

"No!" Lois said, shaking her head. "No, I will *never* accept that."

"Lois, I could give you fifteen iconic Hawthorn names, and every one of them believes we have no choice but to merge."

As Clark watched, he saw a little of Lois's resolve melt away. "Kennedy?" she ventured in a voice heavy with trepidation.

"No," Seb admitted. "He is refusing to align with anyone."

"Which means he doesn't want the merger," Lois said with a measure of triumph.

"Nobody *wants* the merger, Lois."

"Then fight it, Seb." She leant forward and put her hand on his arm. "Fight it with me, Sebby Boy."

Seb's eyes slid shut, and he slowly shook his head. "I can't, Lois."

"Don't give up," Lois begged. "Please, don't give up."

"I'm not giving up. I'm being realistic."

Lois removed her hand from him and clutched the Hawthorn jumper to her chest.

"You're ignoring the facts, Lois."

"You're ignoring your heart, Seb."

Silence cloaked the impasse as Lois and Seb stared at each other.

Eventually, he shuffled a step backwards. "If you do this," he said coldly. "If you choose to stand against this, and you manage to convince enough members to vote against the merge, if Hawthorn miss this opportunity to keep a tiny remnant of what we once were, I hope you realise that you can't just hightail off to the States after the vote. If you're going to fight this, it has to be a long-term commitment. And, believe me, it is a long, long way back. I don't think you have even begun to understand the enormity of what you are trying to achieve."

Seb strode to the door. By the time he reached it, all the anger had drained from his step, and when he turned, there were tears glistening in his blue eyes. "Please, Lois," he pleaded. "Please let Hawthorn move into the next phase with dignity. Please don't tear this club apart."

"If we merge, there is no Hawthorn, there is no club to tear apart."

"You wouldn't barrack for the Melbourne Hawks?"

Lois snorted—harsh and uncompromising. "If we merge, I will never watch another game of football," she declared bitterly.

"Lois—"

"Get out, Seb. You've said what you came to say. I've listened, and I don't want to hear any more."

"Lo—"

"Get out, Seb."

Seb turned, looking so defeated that Clark couldn't help feeling sorry for him. He walked out and softly closed the door behind him.

Clark turned to Lois. Tears of anger had splashed onto her cheeks. With the sleeve of her Hawthorn jumper, she fiercely brushed away the dampness. "I have a lot of work to do," she said as she moved to the table.

Clark cleared away the plates and sat beside her. "What can I do to help?" he said.

She slid the pile of papers across the table. "You can help me find phone numbers for all these people," she said. "I'm going to contact every last one of them and see how they feel about this. I'm going to find out if Hawthorn people care enough to save their club."

Clark lightly touched her arm and gave her a tentative smile. “Lois, I love you.”

She returned his smile, and it seemed almost genuine. “I love you, too, Clark,” she said. “I promise you nothing is going to change that.”

“I’ll help you however I can.”

Lois snatched at the tissues and dried her eyes. “Thank you,” she said.

“Will Seb be all right?”

Her tears welled again, and she dabbed at them. “Yeah,” she said.

“It’s none of my business, but perhaps you should call him,” Clark said. “Tomorrow, maybe?”

“No,” she said firmly. She smiled tightly, as if she were the one reassuring Clark. “We’ll be fine. We’ll be on different sides in this battle, but whatever happens to Hawthorn, nothing will threaten what Seb means to me.”

“He said that lifelong friendships will be destroyed.”

“But not ours,” Lois said. “Not Seb and me.” She pulled her notepad closer and picked up a pen. “We need phone numbers for all of these people.”

“OK.”

Lois suddenly lifted her gaze from the papers and stared enquiringly at Clark.

“Yes?” he asked.

She smiled with sudden excitement, and Clark felt its wonder flow through him. “Uhm… are you able to do this *really* fast?”

Clark nodded. “I could have it done in less than a minute.”

Lois tossed the pen onto the table and grinned. “Great,” she said. “Because then I’d like you to fly me home.”

“Home?”

“Yes, please,” Lois said. “I want to talk with your mom.”

Part 29

Clark gaped at Lois. “You want to talk with my mom?” he asked. “I don’t think she knows much about football.”

Lois grinned at him. “I’ve been thinking about your interview.”

His interview? When she had so much else to crowd her mind? Clark had to smile. With Lois, the surprises just kept coming. “What have you concluded?” he asked.

She matched his smile. “I reckon I know what the first question is going to be.”

“The green rock. I wouldn’t be surprised if Mayson insisted that I *did* say Trask was correct.”

“And if she does that, the next question will be how you are still powered when there is no green rock on Earth.”

“Even though it’s possible that Trask banished all trace of the green rock from Earth,” Clark said, “I don’t think it’s a good idea to inform everyone of Superman’s Achilles heel.”

“I agree. You could skirt around it by saying that you are powered by the sun.”

“But with Mayson and Linda, I doubt that will deter them from zeroing in on exactly how the green rock affects me.”

“That’s why you need a diversion.”

Clark laughed. “A diversion?” he said. This should be good. “What exactly do you have in mind?”

Lois grinned. “Remember just before you went interstate? Remember the story Browny lined up for me?”

Clark nodded, part of his mind recalling the details of Lois’s story as the other part scrambled ahead to try to predict where she was going with this. “Ah, something about an administrator, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. I interviewed the AFL administrator whom the Fitzroy fans saw as the culprit in their demise. He resorted to some PR basics and allowed us access to his family, hoping we would see him as more than a stodgy suit.”

Clark’s mind continued grasping for ideas. Then, two ends connected, and he shook his head. “No, Lois,” he said decisively. “My parents stay out of this. They can’t ever be associated with Superman.”

Lois chuckled and put her hand on his arm. “Not your parents, silly,” she said. “Me.”

Lois? “No,” Clark said quickly. “No. I can’t have you linked with Superman, either. It’s just too dangerous, and anyway, you’re too close to Clark.”

“It wouldn’t be recognisably me,” she said. “That’s why I need to talk to your mom—to see if she will make me a disguise.”

Clark felt his mouth drop. “You want a disguise?” he gasped.

Lois put both hands on his arm and leant closer, her face alight with her enthusiasm. “You turn up to the interview, and I’ll come with you. You already said that you wished I could be there. Well, I can be—but disguised. Allowing everyone a glimpse into your personal life will make it possible for people to identify with you. And hopefully my

presence will distract Mayson and Linda from their more awkward questions. When you agree to the interview, you should tell them there's a strict time limit. So, every minute they want to talk about the green rock is one minute less they can talk about your private life." She shrugged. "And I reckon they'll think your private life will make much better copy than a green rock that probably isn't even on Earth anymore."

"Lois…" Clark shook his head. "No, Lois, I won't put you in any danger."

"What possible danger could there be?"

Clark felt his mind stagger with a litany of dangers. "If someone decides he wants to control Superman—who is invulnerable—who better than to target someone Superman cares about? Someone who *isn't* invulnerable."

"Trask is dead, and his theories have no credibility anymore."

"It's not only Trask, Lois," Clark said. "So far, Superman has only helped with emergencies. But since the bombing attempts, I've been thinking that his powers could be used to assist the police in solving crimes."

Lois nodded. "That thought occurred to me, too."

"Even if the invading-alien theory is debunked, Superman will continue to have enemies—dangerous enemies." Clark smiled hesitantly, hoping Lois would accept his rationale without further argument. "So, you see, honey, you can't publicly be a part of Superman's life."

"Yes, I can," Lois said smoothly. "I'll be in a disguise. Yours works; mine will, too."

"Lois, you don't wear glasses."

She giggled. "I'm sure it wouldn't be beyond your mom's abilities to make a face mask for me. Just something to cover my eyes."

"Lois, I don't like it. I don't—"

"I knew you wouldn't like it," Lois said, with a wide grin. "Which is why I need to go and talk to your mom."

"You think she is going to side with you?" Clark asked incredulously.

Lois nodded cheerfully. "Probably."

Her irrepressible poise collided head-on with his objections, and Clark couldn't hold back his chuckle. "I knew you two will be a formidable combination," he said.

"So… you agree?" Lois pressed. "Superman takes his girlfriend to the interview?"

Clark felt his concerns come flooding back. "Lois, there are a lot of things we would need to decide first."

"Such as?"

"Who do we say you are?"

Lois shrugged. "Superman's girlfriend. That's the truth, isn't it?" She leant closer to him and rubbed her head against his arm. "Or have I jumped the gun again? Am I supposed to wait until you ask me to be your girlfriend?"

Clark kissed her head. "Will you be my girlfriend, honey?" he asked.

She backed away and smiled into his eyes. "Only if you don't mind sharing me with Superman."

"No, I don't mind sharing you with Superman," he said and then hurriedly added, "but that does not mean I think it's a good idea for you to go public. Knowing Mayson and Linda, they will try to outdo each other with intrusive questions."

"All the more reason why you need me there."

"It will quickly degenerate into a competition to see who can elicit the most newsworthy information. I'm uneasy enough about this, and the stakes just get higher if you're involved."

"Why?" Lois asked. "We want them asking questions about me; that way, they're not asking about the green rock or anything about how long you've been here, which *could* lead to your parents."

"They're going to assume you're an alien, one of the hordes that so alarmed Trask."

Lois smiled. "We'll ask your mom to put me in pretty pink or inoffensive pastels. That way, I couldn't possibly look like a threat to the safety of this planet. And, when they ask, we will tell them that I'm not an alien, but a harmless Earth-gal."

Clark shook his head. "No, Lois. That way they'll know that you're vulnerable. They'll know that you can be hurt."

She didn't look worried at all. "They can't hurt me if they can't find me," she said.

"Lois!" Clark said. "I can't let anyone hurt you."

"And you won't," Lois said. "But I don't think they will find me."

"How can you be sure?"

"Remember that all-American accent I dust off every time I visit my mom? Superman has ties with Metropolis, and his girlfriend has an American accent. Assuming anyone wants to find her, where will they look? They are going to comb all the states of America first. No one is ever going to think of looking in Melbourne."

Clark gazed into her resolute brown eyes. “I’m really not sure about this.”

“It will be perfect for your profile,” Lois said firmly. “It will show that you have feelings. It will show that you are capable of emotions such as love. It will tell the world that you have been found trustworthy by ‘one of us’, and”—she grinned suddenly—“it will send a *very* strong message that you are already taken, and all women—starting with Mayson and Linda—can keep their distance.”

Clark reached for her hair and let a dark lock slip through his fingers. “This is probably the craziest idea I have ever heard,” he said softly.

“Crazier than when your mom suggested you wear your underwear on the outside?” Lois burst into a fit of giggles.

Clark let her laughter wash over him. It gave him time to try to organise his own thoughts. He wasn’t convinced about Lois’s idea. It seemed unnecessarily risky. To deliberately bring her into Superman’s world—the consequences if something went wrong were too horrible to think about.

Lois managed to reduce her amusement to a soft smile. “You worry too much, Clark,” she told him. “I think there are a lot of advantages to this, and no possible way it can become a problem.”

“What will we tell them about our relationship? I think they will ask a lot of questions about that.”

“We’ll tell them that we met and fell in love,” Lois said. “We will be vague about the timeframe. We will say that our relationship is very strong, but it is our business, and other than this one interview, we would appreciate them respecting our privacy.”

“They’ll ask your name,” Clark warned.

“That’s OK,” Lois replied. “By then, we will have worked out an alias. And when they ask why we aren’t giving them my real name, we’ll tell them the truth. That I’m an ordinary girl, and I want to be able to continue my life without having to deal with the public interest inherent in being Superman’s girlfriend.”

“That might cause them to wonder if I also have a normal life,” Clark said warily.

“I always assumed that was the case,” Lois said. “When Superman was nothing more to me than a possible American publicity stunt, I figured he had to be doing something when he wasn’t saving lives.”

“What if they ask details about you? Your job? Your family?”

“We will say that this interview is about Superman and details about me aren’t relevant. If we give them a peek into our relationship, I don’t think they will be too concerned with much else. Superman having a girlfriend is going to be the big news.”

“I’m not sure, Lois.”

She gently ran her hand through his hair, lazily lingered at his neck, and then repeated her caress. “There’s something else we need to consider, Clark,” she said sombrely.

His doubts deluged his mind again. He firmly pushed them away as he waited for Lois to expound further.

“What Seb said was true,” Lois said. “I can’t fight to keep Hawthorn as a separate entity and then walk away to a nice life in the States and leave them to deal with the implications.”

Clark nodded. He’d realised that, too.

“Do you disagree with my decision to fight for my club?” Lois asked. “But you’re too polite to say so?”

Clark shook his head. “No,” he said. “I’m worried that you’re going to get hurt, but… I’ve been thinking about this. In some ways, we’re not that different. You were alone in a new country, and Hawthorn became your family. I was alone on a new planet, and my folks became my family. I couldn’t walk away from them if they needed me. I know that the Lois Lane I love could never walk away either.”

Lois blinked rapidly and constructed a shaky smile. “You are the most amazing man I have ever met,” she said unsteadily. “You probably won’t ever understand how much that means to me.”

“Yes, I do,” Clark declared. “It’s exactly how I feel about your willingness to support me in being Superman.”

Her smile wobbled. “It’s perfect, isn’t it?” she said. “Us being together?”

He nodded. “Perfect,” he agreed.

Lois hauled in a deep breath and brushed at the dampness under her eyes. “Which brings us back to my disguise,” she said. “I’ll have to live in Melbourne for the foreseeable future. You need to go back to Metropolis at the end of September. Other than a few weeks a year when we could visit each other, Clark Kent and Lois Lane can’t be seen together. But if Superman is seen with his girlfriend—in any country in the world—that won’t need an explanation.”

Clark had a sudden vision of him and Lois, out together and being trailed by a crowd of pointing and whispering people. “I’m not sure that will work,” he said.

“Are you worried about people stalking us?”

“A bit,” he admitted.

Lois slid her fingers through his hair again. “People will get used to seeing us,” she said. “It’s not ideal—and certainly your disguise isn’t designed for easy camouflage—but it could be the only way we can be together without having to hide away in our homes.” She smiled. “And, if it gets too much, you can simply pick me up and fly away.”

“I’m also concerned that being around you will make it easy to slip into a more Clark-like persona. I think I went too far with the detached and remote facade, but the reasons for it remain pertinent.”

“We’ll both have to very conscious of who we are,” Lois said. “When we’re in the suits, we’re Superman and… Ms Superman. It will become second nature after a while.”

Clark was sure he should protest further, but Lois’s hand was making long, slow sweeps through his hair, and his need to remonstrate was no match for the power of her touch.

He closed his eyes and focussed on her. Then, her hand stilled, and her mouth landed on his. He wrapped his arms around her and drew her onto his lap. They shared a long kiss that transported them back to the dreamy closeness of their trip along the Great Ocean Road and further dissolved Clark’s greatest fear—that something would come between them.

When Lois retreated, she slid her tongue over her upper lip. “You’re very good at that, Superman,” she said. “Your girlfriend is a lucky woman.”

Clark smiled, but he knew now wasn’t the time to explore the topic of how much he enjoyed kissing Lois. “You must be tired, honey,” he said. “Perhaps I should go home alone and talk to Mom about a suit for you. That way, you could get some sleep. You need to be rested for tomorrow.”

“I think you should take me to Kansas, and your mom can take the measurements she needs. Then, you can go to Metropolis and inform them you will do the interview.”

“And what will you do?”

“Sleep?” Lois said. “Would your parents mind if I found a corner somewhere and crashed for a few hours?”

“No, of course not.” Clark grinned. “You can have my bed.”

Lois smiled. “Thank you.” She leapt from his lap. “Let’s go, Superman. We have a disguise to create.”

Clark stood. “Lois,” he said. Again, he searched for the words to explain how much she meant to him. “Lois, I love you.”

“I love you, too, Clark,” she said. “Please believe that I always will.”

Had she read his mind again? Perhaps it was his heart she could read so accurately. “You will need more layers,” he said. “It’s going to be cold flying home.”

Lois reached for her Hawthorn jumper and pulled it on.

“Hey,” Clark said. “You look pretty good in that.”

“Yeah,” Lois said nonchalantly.

Clark laughed at her easy acknowledgement of his compliment.

“*Everyone* looks good in this jumper,” she said with a mischievous grin. “One day, I’m going to put you in one. Except that could be very, very hazardous.”

“Hazardous for whom?” Clark asked, trying to control his amusement.

“All I’m saying is that if you were wearing a Hawthorn jumper, I couldn’t possibly be held responsible for my behaviour.”

Clark was trying to assemble a retort when her laughter died. He slid his hand down her arm to convey that he understood her distress at the prospect of Hawthorn’s brown-and-gold jumper being reduced to nothing more than a relic of the past.

She answered with a sad smile and went into her bedroom. Clark crossed to the table and when Lois returned—wearing a coat—he’d found phone numbers for most of the names on her list. She looked over his shoulder. “Thanks,” she said.

He put down the pen and turned to her. “If we’re going to do this, Superman must never be seen with Lois Lane.”

Lois grinned, probably recognising that he had just come very close to agreeing to her idea. “So, if I get a disguise, I might actually get to meet this mythical superhero,” she said. “Finally.”

“If you’re lucky,” Clark said.

They stepped out of her unit together and moments later were flying east to Smallville, Kansas.

* * *

Clark watched as Lois outlined her proposal to his parents.

Watched as she met and countered their reservations.

Watched as she enchanted them—with her staunch commitment to Superman, with her sure logic as she answered their questions, and with her infectious enthusiasm for something that was, he had to admit, sounding more reasonable with every passing minute.

"Are you sure about this, Lois?" Jonathan asked. "If someone were to discover that it's Lois Lane under the disguise, you become the obvious target for anyone wanting to control Superman."

Lois met Clark's eyes and smiled. "I am confident that should anyone ever threaten me, the strongest man in the world will somehow find a way ensure my safety," she said.

Martha smiled at that. "You also need to realise that should Clark's secret become known, the consequences for you will be unavoidable," she said.

"That's true whether I go public or not," Lois said. "Anything that affects Clark's life is going to affect mine."

Clark watched as the effects of her statement rippled through his parents. They smiled at her, smiled at him. He saw it in their faces—Lois was exactly what they'd hoped for, too.

"Lois has long-term commitments in Melbourne," Clark said. "When my time in Australia has finished, we both believe that I should return to Metropolis."

"You're not going to be together?" Martha asked, looking distressed.

"We're going to be together as much as superpowers and three busy lives allow," Clark said firmly. "But it's going to be some time before Lois Lane and Clark Kent can be together openly and officially."

"But Superman can be with his girl?" Martha surmised.

Clark nodded. "I know this is unusual, but it seems to be the best option for us."

Jonathan chuckled. "We've become accustomed to the unusual," he said. "I'm not sure we'd be able to stand the shock if you did things the regular way."

Martha stood. "I'll get my tape measure," she said. "And we'll get started on Lois's suit."

"After you've taken the measurements, Lois needs to sleep," Clark said. "It's after midnight, Melbourne time."

"We'll look after her," Martha promised. "You go to Metropolis and tell the world that Superman is not only still alive, but he's very much here to stay."

* * *

Lois rolled over. It was warm, hot even. She pushed aside the bedcovers, expecting an icy blast of Melbourne winter, but instead was enveloped in delicious warmth that was redolent of summer.

She remembered and smiled.

She was in Clark's bed.

And she hadn't needed a Superman pillowcase to dream about the man under the blue tights. Just being in his bed was catalyst enough.

Her thoughts returned to Melbourne. There was so much to do. So many people to talk to. Tonight, Melbourne time, Hawthorn were to play North Melbourne. Lois intended being at the game early and leaving late.

But for the first time ever, it wasn't game strategy and player positions that dominated her thoughts. The battle had turned serious. Deadly serious.

Cocooned in the sanctuary of Clark's bed, Lois unlocked the door in her mind that so far, she had kept firmly shut—the door that led to the contemplation of a world without Hawthorn.

For her personally, things would be simpler if the members voted 'yes' and Hawthorn merged with Melbourne. She could pack up her life, bid goodbye to the city and the people that had been her home and family for nearly twenty years, and move to Metropolis to be with Clark.

Simple.

Yet the thought of it felt like an ice pick stabbing a series of perforations through her insides.

There was a part of her that was Hawthorn. Would always be Hawthorn. And if the club died, a part of her would die, too.

She had Clark.

And he was more than she had ever dared to hope for.

He loved her. Selflessly. Totally. Transparently.

She loved him.

But even in the fullness of his love, she couldn't heartlessly sever the ties that had been building and binding for over half of her life.

And he didn't expect her to.

Imagine… an alien… not only not from Melbourne, but not even from this planet… and he understood!

Lois sighed as she thought about last night—earlier today. Time became confusing when one flitted around the globe. After a depressing visit to her club, she had come home and found Clark waiting for her. Never before had her unit seemed so welcoming.

She'd been tired and discouraged and anxious about what the future held, but she hadn't been so absorbed in her own thoughts that she'd been oblivious to the look on Clark's face. He, too, was anxious—anxious that Hawthorn's crisis would cause her to re-evaluate his place in her life.

It wouldn't.

But how to convince Clark of that?

Lois chuckled softly. She was in Clark's bed. An hour with him in here, too, and she reckoned she could be pretty convincing.

A soft knock sounded on the door, and Lois knew instantly that it was him. She couldn't see through the door, but she didn't need to. It was him.

"Come in, big guy," she called.

The door opened, and he walked in, dressed in jeans and a tee shirt that clung tightly across his biceps. There were definite advantages to the summer climate.

He smiled as he approached the bed. "Did you sleep well?" he asked.

Lois shuffled over to make room for him to sit on the bed. "I slept wonderfully well," she replied. Then, because he looked so good, and because it was so wonderful to wake up and be with Clark, she added, "I enjoyed sleeping in your bed."

He coloured slightly, as she had thought he might. "You can sleep in my bed any time," he said.

Lois gasped. She had not expected him to return her serve. He had the most adorable look on his face—a mix of his enjoyment at seeing her and his satisfaction with his reply. "I'll remember that," she whispered.

He chuckled and remained standing—looking down at her. "Mom has finished the suit for you," he said. "And she's prepared a meal for us to eat before we go back to Melbourne."

"She's a great person," Lois said. "You are a lot like her."

"She wants to know if it's OK if she comes in and shows you the suit."

"Absolutely," Lois said. "I can't wait to see what she made. What's it like?"

"I haven't seen it. She wants to show you first."

"OK," Lois said. "How did it go in Metropolis?"

"I spoke to Preston Carpenter and Perry—the two editors—and outlined my offer. I told them that when they came to a decision, they could publish it in their papers, and assuming they were willing to agree to my terms, we could set a time and place."

"How did they take it?"

"Carpenter seemed surprised at first but agreed very quickly. I think he feels his paper is ahead in the Superman stakes, and he wants to do everything to protect his advantage."

"And Perry?"

Concern clouded Clark's expression. "Perry didn't look well," he said. "He was pale and seemed tired. I hope he's looking after his health."

"Aw, Clark," Lois said. "It must have been hard to talk with him and not be able to tell him who you are."

"Yeah, it was," Clark said. "Before today, I'd never spoken to him as Superman."

"Did you see Mayson?"

"No. Why?"

"Just wondered."

Clark shot her a questioning smile. "You're not jealous, are you?"

Lois grinned. "If you'd wanted Mayson, you had plenty of opportunities to have her."

"Too many opportunities," Clark said grimly. "I'm really not looking forward to being interviewed by her."

"We'll both be there," Lois said. "Mayson is no match for the two of us. Did you mention there would be an unexpected extra at the interview?"

"No," Clark said. "I thought it best we keep the advantage of surprise."

"Good thinking."

Clark gestured out of the door. "I'll send Mom in," he said. "We need to get to Melbourne."

* * *

Twenty minutes later, Lois had managed, with considerable difficulty, to stretch Martha's creation sufficiently that it covered—in a manner of speaking—most of her body.

In colour, it was mid pink, with hot-pink trim and an aqua cape. In style, it was daring; the neckline plunged far lower than would have been Lois's choice.

She pulled on the high-heeled pink boots and, with some bafflement, added the forearm guards. Then, she stepped up to the mirror and would have gasped—had her lungs been able to inflate to any degree.

Clark wasn't going to need x-ray vision when he saw her in this.

Lois tied the mask across her eyes and over her gelled hair.

She looked… different.

In fact, she bore no resemblance to Lois Lane, the not-overtly-feminine football reporter of the Herald Sun, Mel-

bourne, Victoria, Australia, who invariably hid her curves under jeans and a jumper.

She left Clark's room and descended the stairs, feeling the unfamiliar sensation of the cape flapping against her calves as she walked.

At the bottom of the stairs, she attempted a deep breath and then walked through the door.

Clark stood as she entered. He stared at her—not moving, not speaking.

"Clark?" Lois said hesitantly.

He didn't respond.

"Clark?"

Martha chuckled. "I don't think he's looking at your face, honey," she said.

Part 30

Clark followed Lois into her unit. She sank heavily onto the couch and made a rather dismal attempt to use one foot to remove the shoe from the other.

"I'll get them." Clark knelt onto the floor, undid the laces from both shoes, and tugged them from her feet.

Lois reclined into the couch and wriggled her newly freed toes. "Thanks," she said.

He stood. "Would you like a cup of tea? Coffee? Anything?"

"A cup of tea would be lovely," Lois said. "Thanks, big guy."

Clark moved across to the kitchen and filled two cups with water. He zapped them and reached for the tea bag container. He had just come from his first Hawthorn game with Lois. Their team had been ahead at half time, but the ladder leaders—the top ranked team, North Melbourne—had surged during the third quarter, and the Hawks had fallen away.

While watching the game, Clark had found his attention constantly being drawn back to Lois. Something was wrong. He'd expected her disappointment at the loss, but it was more than that.

They'd arrived at the MCG before the gates had opened two hours prior to the game and between them had tried to talk to as many Hawthorn fans as possible.

They had taken contact numbers, given out the flyer Lois had designed and printed that day, pleaded with supporters to think about what they wanted for their club, and asked questions aimed at gauging the feeling of the fans.

Lois had been business-like and purposeful, detached even. It would have easy to believe she was a paid researcher with no emotional connection to the subject of discussion.

When the game began, Lois's passion and excitement had seemed restrained. She'd been more upbeat during the first half, certainly, but when North had come with their run in the third quarter, she'd seemed more resigned than devastated.

"Is there a problem?" Lois asked from the couch.

Clark quickly got the milk from the fridge. "Just letting it brew," he said.

He brought over their drinks and offered her one. "How are you feeling?" he asked as he sat beside her.

"Tired."

Tired? Or something else? "Buoyant or dejected?" Clark probed. "Hopeful or despondent?"

"Not buoyant," she said dispiritedly. "As they say in an election, it's too early to call. The merger group have made good use of their prior knowledge and are definitely ahead right now. The key is still how much the Hawthorn supporters want to keep Hawthorn and what they are willing to do to save their club."

"You've made a good start."

"*We've* made a good start." She put her hand on his knee. "Thanks, Clark."

Silence fell again as Lois sipped her tea and stared ahead.

"Lois?" Clark said.

"Uhm?"

"You seemed disconnected from the game. It wasn't what I expected."

Lois stretched out her legs and settled them on the corner of the coffee table. "It's hard to get emotionally involved in a game where, realistically, it doesn't matter whether we win or lose," she said. "There've been other games, of course—games late in a season when we've known we aren't going to make finals, but there was always reason to look ahead. You can watch the kids. You can see who looks like he might make it. You can try to glimpse the future and hope for better times."

"But now, there might not be a future?"

"Exactly."

"Have you thought about that?"

"Yes… No. I'm trying to concentrate on what needs to be done rather than what happens if… if we lose this fight."

Her last words trailed away to a heavy silence.

Clark waited, giving her time.

Lois lifted her cup but then lowered it without drinking. “What happens to Hawthorn people?” she said plaintively. “What happens to the old people who have followed Hawthorn for a lifetime? What happens to the kids who are dreaming about playing for Hawthorn? What happens to our history? What happens to the pieces in our museum that mean nothing to everyone else, but to us, represent living memories? What happens to Crimmo’s jumper? It won’t mean anything to Melbourne. What happens to all the little idiosyncrasies that make Hawthorn Hawthorn? What happens to our sausage sizzles? What happens to our oh-so-corny theme song? What happens to that feeling, that *belonging* that sets us apart from everyone else?”

Much of it would fade into the stagnant pages of the past. And Lois knew it.

“Lois,” Clark said, “when Seb was here, you said that if the merger goes ahead, you won’t watch football again.”

She stared ahead.

“Did you mean that?”

Lois looked at him, her eyes clouded. “Clark, one part of my life is so secure right now—how I feel about you—but everything else is so uncertain. And it’s all interwoven. What happens to Hawthorn will affect us.”

“Lois, you know I want to be with you,” Clark said. “But I don’t want you to give up everything else in your life.”

Some of the turmoil lifted from her expression. “Thank you.”

Clark hesitated. “Lois, I don’t want to interfere, but have you thought about Browny’s suggestion?”

Lois reached far enough to hook her fingers around his chin and turn him more directly towards her. “Clark, it would be impossible for you to interfere. We’re together now and that means I value your opinion.” Her face brightened, although she didn’t quite manage a smile. “Even if I won’t always agree.”

He smiled in return. “Have you thought about what Browny said?”

Lois sipped her tea. “I wasn’t expecting him to react like that.”

“It didn’t surprise me,” Clark said.

“He didn’t even look at my resignation,” Lois said with still-fresh wonder. “He chucked it onto his desk and told me that if I gave him two games a weekend, he’d give me the rest of the week to work for Hawthorn.”

Clark had been with Lois in Browny’s office. She’d told the editor that the smart decision would be to replace her.

And Browny had told her—quite forcefully—that he didn’t want to replace her.

Lois had muttered that she would think about it and hurried out of the editor’s office. When Clark had caught up to her, she’d been wiping her eyes.

“Have you made a decision?” Clark asked now.

Lois smiled from above her cup. “I rang Browny this afternoon,” she said. “I thanked him for his very generous offer and told him I would cover two games a week and take the other four days as annual leave. He’s given me Carlton-Fremantle tomorrow and Fitzroy-Footscray on Sunday.”

“I have Geelong-Adelaide tomorrow,” Clark said. “But I have Fitzroy-Footscray on Sunday.”

“Really?” Lois said, showing a welcome spark of interest. “Wanna come with me?”

“I would go anywhere with you.”

She smiled at his response, but it faded quickly. “Clark,” she said solemnly. “Do you trust me? Now?”

Her question hit him like an unexpected blow from behind. “Of course I trust you, Lois. I trust you totally.”

She held her hand towards him. “Then stop worrying that I’ll change my mind about you.”

Clark took her hand and smiled. “You always seem to know what I’m thinking,” he said.

She smiled, too. “So, stop worrying. The way ahead may be hazy—there’s a chance we won’t be able to be together in public unless we both look like we should be at a fancy dress party—but we will be together.”

Clark chuckled.

“What?” Lois asked.

“I was thinking about our river walk the night before I went to Brisbane and imagining us in the future—walking together, capes fluttering and spandex squeaking.”

“Will you kiss me?” Lois asked. “When Superman is out with his girl?”

“I will want to,” Clark said with certainty.

“You ‘wanted’ to when we were by the river,” she reminded him with a teasing smile. “But you didn’t.”

“I won’t make that mistake again,” Clark vowed.

“I was really annoyed with you,” Lois said.

“You were?”

She nodded. “I so, *so* wanted you to kiss me. I was devastated when you didn’t. I wanted to push you into the river.”

Clark smiled. “I wanted to kiss you, too. I wanted to so much.”

“I understand now why you didn’t—the secret and all that—but at the time, I was totally exasperated with you.”

“Sorry,” he said with a rueful smile.

Lois put her cup on the lamp stand. “You know something?” she said. “I’m too far away.”

He concurred totally.

She rotated, shuffled back, lay across his lap, and rested in the curve of his far arm. “That’s better,” she said.

“Much,” he agreed. He casually rested his other arm across her stomach.

“We don’t know what’s going to happen with Hawthorn,” Lois said. “But I think it’s important that we plan how we’re going to manage living on different sides of the world.”

“You still think you should come to the interview?”

She nodded. “Have you heard from the papers about setting a time?”

“The morning editions will be out by now. There will probably be some details in them.”

“Do you still have concerns that the interview will throw up something we aren’t expecting?”

Clark paused. “I recognise that it’s a good idea for Superman to be a more accessible, but I don’t trust either Mayson or Linda. I’m uneasy about what they will ask.”

“We’ll both be there,” Lois said. “We can help each other.” She laid her arm along his forearm and threaded her fingers through his. “Are you still OK with me being there?”

“I hate the thought of putting you in any possible danger.”

“But?”

“But whatever happens regarding the merger, introducing you at the interview will give us a way to be together. Lois Lane has a public profile—the guy we rescued in the Otways recognised you. Being reporters is like publishing a record of our whereabouts. Lois Lane and Clark Kent can’t be seen together if you’ve just filed a story on a footy game in Melbourne and I’ve just filed a story on a crime in Metropolis.”

“I think the interview will be easier than you imagine,” Lois said.

Clark hoped so. “Have you thought about how we should approach it?”

“I don’t think you should volunteer anything,” she said. “Put the onus squarely on them. If they want to know something, make them ask. I think we should arrive, sit down, and wait for their questions as if there’s nothing remarkable about my presence. Don’t introduce me—let them ask.”

“They’ll be falling over themselves to get the first question,” Clark said. “And it will be about you.”

Lois nodded, and her grin made a brief appearance. “So, my presence immediately shifts the focus away from your past, and how you got to Earth, and what the green rock does to you.”

“Are you willing to answer questions?” Clark asked. “Or would you prefer that I shielded you? I can tell them to direct questions only to me.”

“I think this interview is about you, and you should do most of the talking. But if they ask a question where it’s easier for me to answer than you, I will.”

“What question would be easier for you?” Clark asked, not quite able to squeeze all the apprehension from his tone.

Lois smiled up at him reassuringly. “We need to remember that this is a team effort,” she said. “Like footy, it doesn’t matter who kicks the goals so long as the team wins.”

“And we’re the team?”

Lois smiled. “You bet. Team Superman. But we do need to decide on our roles.”

“Roles?”

“Who’s going to defend, and who’s going to attack.”

“Mayson and Linda are going to attack,” Clark predicted grimly.

Lois smiled. “I think you should play the straight guy. Still be Superman—a little bit distant, a little bit impassive, a little bit mysterious. Answer the questions verbally, but don’t let them see too much.”

“And you’ll be?”

“The not-so-straight guy. I can be more flexible.”

“You’ll have to be careful, Lois,” Clark warned. “You can’t say or do anything that is indicative of Lois Lane. We can’t allow them to recognise me as Clark Kent, but it’s just as important that they don’t recognise you.”

“I know,” Lois said. “But they’ve never met me. That’s in our favour.”

“This is Mayson Drake and Linda King,” Clark said forebodingly.

“What are they like?” Lois asked. “Do you think they will work together?”

"I doubt it," Clark said. "Mayson rarely works *with* anyone. Linda will probably appear to be the more affable of the two, but I don't trust her either. Mayson won't bother trying to hide her dislike and suspicions."

"The more I hear about Mayson, the more convinced I am about being there," Lois said. "Which means I need a name. Do you have any suggestions?"

Clark grinned. "I have a lot of suggestions."

Lois looked at him in surprise. "Really? Such as?"

"Amazing Woman. Incredible Woman. Gorgeous Girl."

"I know this is being ultra cautious, but perhaps we should stay away from words beginning with 'A'. We don't want anyone to connect me with Australia."

"OK," Clark said. "How about Unbelievably Sensational Awesome Woman?"

She grinned. "Don't you think that's a bit of a mouthful?"

"Unique Superbly Alluring Woman?"

Lois chuckled. "Less is more, Clark."

"Ultra Sexy Woman?"

Clark had expected her to dismiss that idea instantly, but she considered it. "Ultra Woman?" she said thoughtfully. "Do you think that works?"

"Ultra Woman," Clark said. "That sounds good."

"OK," Lois said. "Ultra Woman it is."

Clark nuzzled into her neck. "You're my 'ultra' woman."

Lois put her hands on his shoulders and hauled herself further onto his lap. "You still owe me the kiss from the river walk," she said quietly.

Clark lightly rested his hands on her ribcage, closed his eyes, and waited for the wondrous touch of her mouth on his.

When it came, he kissed her as if the rest of the world had ceased to exist…

Because for him, it had.

* * *

With regret, Lois eased away from the lure of Clark's mouth. She swept her thumb over his lower lip—still shaped to their kiss. She gazed into the melting brown eyes that left no doubt as to how much he enjoyed their closeness.

"It's late," he murmured. "Do you want me to leave now?"

No. She didn't. She wanted him to warm her bed with his incredible eyes and then snuggle in beside her and hold her while she succumbed to her exhaustion.

Except… exhausted though she was, Lois was fairly certain that if the first part of that image played out, the second wouldn't be possible.

"It is late," she agreed with a sigh. Leaving him—even for the few hours overnight—had quickly become the nadir of her day.

"And tomorrow we have games to cover," he said, as if trying to convince both of them that she should rise from his lap and he should walk out of her door.

"Do you think this will ever get any easier?" she said.

"Never."

Lois paused, torn between the choice to stand and the choice to settle comfortably against his chest. She knew that if she did, his arms would close around her again.

The phone shrilled through her indecision, and she groaned. "It's late for a phone call."

"Maybe it's someone we talked to at the football tonight."

Grudgingly, Lois rose from Clark's lap and picked up the phone. "Lois Lane."

There was a slight hesitation, and then a familiar voice spoke. "Lois. It's Dan."

"Dan," she said, knowing her voice betrayed her surprise. "Ah… how are you?"

"OK," he said, though she knew him too well not to pick up the despondency in his tone. "Actually, I'm ringing to ask how you are. I… ah… I heard about the proposed merger with Melbourne."

"Oh, Dan," she said, touched by his thoughtfulness. "Thank you for calling."

"So… how are you? I've been thinking about you. I know this would've hit you pretty hard."

"Yeah, it did."

"I heard the members are going to vote."

"In September."

"I guess you're campaigning against it."

"Yeah."

"Good luck, Lois," Dan said sincerely. "I really hope you find a way out of this. I know what it feels like."

Yes, he did. He'd already lost his club. "Dan," Lois said, feeling a wave of regret at what had happened between them. She'd missed him. "I really appreciate you calling."

"Lois." He paused. "Lois, there's something else I want to say. I know we didn't part on the greatest of terms, and I want to say how sorry I am for the way things turned out. It was my fault—I never should've put you in that position. I know you took the rap for it with the blokes at the paper, and I'm really sorry."

"It's OK, Dan," she said. "I understood."

"And I also wanted to say that I really appreciate your honesty, Lois. You were always straightforward—you never played games, never tried to mislead me, never tried to make out you felt things you didn't."

"We're friends, Dan," Lois said. "I wouldn't do that to you."

"I miss you, Lois," he said. "I miss Melbourne, and I miss the footy, and I miss all the good times we had together."

"We had some really good times, didn't we?" Lois said wistfully.

"Yeah," Dan said. "Maybe… maybe when I get home, we can have a drink? Like the old days? Just two friends hanging out together?"

Lois felt her heart sink. "I don't know, Dan. Perhaps it would be best if we didn't…"

"You've found someone else, haven't you?"

"Dan…"

"Haven't you?"

"I… Dan… I … yes, I have."

He was silent for a long moment. "I hope he's knows he's a lucky mongrel," he said. "Do I know him?"

"No."

She heard a rough, completely unconvincing laugh. "So, it's not Bluey?"

"No."

He was silent, probably giving her the chance to expound if she wanted to.

"Dan," Lois said, "I do appreciate you ringing."

"Good luck with Hawthorn, Lois."

"Thanks."

The line went dead. Lois slowly replaced the phone. Clark had left the couch and was staring at the door, his hands buried deep in his pockets. He turned to her, his face impassive. "Sorry," he said. "I didn't know if you'd want me to leave, but I didn't want to go without saying goodnight."

She crossed to him and put her hands on his shoulders. "Clark Kent," she said, "I thought we'd established that we don't have any secrets from each other."

"Yes, but I wasn't sure you'd want me listening in to your private conversation."

Lois smiled. "Even if you'd walked out, you could still hear."

"Yeah, but I wouldn't."

"That was Dan," Lois said. "He rang to tell me he'd heard about Hawthorn and to wish us luck in trying to save our club."

"It sounded like he asked something you didn't want to answer."

"Yeah, he did. He asked if I'd found someone else."

Clark's expression looked forcibly deadpan. "And you didn't want to tell him?"

"I thought it best not to give him too many details." Lois slipped her arms around Clark's neck. "If I tell Dan that Clark Kent has a new girlfriend, he might mention it to Mayson. Then, Mayson has the biggest interview of her life and… guess what… Superman has a girlfriend. If she's as good as everyone says, there's a chance she'll make a connection. Or at least wonder."

Clark's concern cleared. "That's a stretch," he said.

"Yes," she admitted. "But we can't take any risks."

"Does that mean we're going to have to keep our relationship secret?"

"Not a secret exactly," Lois said. "But at this point, Lois and Clark don't have too much of a future beyond September. And I'm not sure that Lois and Clark should flaunt their love at exactly the time that Superman reveals his girlfriend."

Clark slid his hand through her hair. "I'm sorry you had to be evasive with Dan."

"Clark," Lois said earnestly, "I know I'll have to hide things. I'll have to keep secrets and dodge the truth. And, if there's no other way, I will lie outright. But if the alternative threatens our secret, I'm willing to do that."

Clark smiled. "'Our' secret," he said.

She nodded. "Our secret. We're in this together."

Clark tightened his arms around her and kissed her. He abandoned his usual restraint as he thoroughly investigated her lips. Lois opened her mouth, inviting him in. The tip of his tongue touched her upper lip, and they both trembled at the contact.

He pulled away and leant his head on hers. She waited for him—to ease them back or take them forward. He stepped back and gestured to the door. “I should go,” he said. “It’s late.”

Lois nodded as disappointment and respect twisted through her.

“Did Dan say anything about Mayson?” Clark asked.

“No. Nothing. Why?”

“When I was there as Superman, it looked like there could be something between Mayson and Dan.”

“Mayson and Dan?” Lois said with surprise. “From all you’ve told me about Mayson, I wouldn’t have thought that would work at all.”

“I was surprised, too,” Clark said. “I saw them together after the bomb scare, and they seemed… close.”

“Dan didn’t say anything; maybe something happened. He sounded a bit down. I thought it was because he understood about Hawthorn.”

Clark gathered her close again. She allowed his nearness to fill her so she could get through the hours without him. Finally, he released her.

“Goodnight, big guy,” Lois said. “Meet you at the office after the game tomorrow?”

He nodded. “I hate leaving you.”

“Yeah.” She stretched up and kissed him, deliberately keeping it short so their parting might be as painless as possible.

He kissed the very end of her nose. “I love you, Lois,” he said.

“I love you, Clark.”

He left, and Lois closed the door behind him. Refusing to wallow in her lonesomeness, she turned on the television and rewound the video tape of tonight’s game.

She sighed as the game began. She would only watch the first quarter. Hawthorn had won that quarter, and, for a time, she had hoped for an unlikely victory. They were out of the Eight now, and their chances of playing finals were slim. There were four games left in the season.

Four more games.

Maybe… four games… forever.

The television screen blurred as hot tears stung her eyes. Four games and then… maybe… no more.

Ever.

Part 31

When Clark arrived back at his unit, he turned on the computer. He clicked through to the Daily Planet site and was mildly surprised to discover that the forthcoming interview with Superman was the headline story. Was Perry reacting to Mayson’s demands? Or to genuine public interest? Either way, Clark realised that despite his reservations, he was very glad Lois would be by his side when he faced Linda and Mayson.

The papers suggested that the interview take place at nine o’clock the following Tuesday morning. That would be eleven o’clock Tuesday night Melbourne time, which was perfect. It wouldn’t clash with their work commitments, and Clark would have the following day off to help Lois if she were tired.

He speed-read a few stories that weren’t Superman related. Mayson had written about the establishment of the Luthor Children’s Foundation. She usually didn’t deign to report on charities. Of course, the name ‘Luthor’ could have been the deciding factor. Was it too much to hope that Mayson had become more amenable following the Trask debacle?

Clark had long empathised with Perry in the editor’s battle with Mayson. Perry had kept control of his own newsroom, but not without having to overcome continual challenges from Mayson. Now, with his health having suffered, he really needed to minimise his stress.

Impulsively, Clark picked up the phone and dialled the desk of the Daily Planet editor.

“Perry White,” came the voice Clark knew so well.

“Chief, it’s Clark.”

“Clark.” He could hear the pleasure in Perry’s voice. “It’s good to hear from you. How are you doing in Australia?”

“I’m doing fine,” Clark said. He wanted to tell Perry about Lois but decided against it. Perry was a cagey old newshound, well used to making connections. If the headline today was the forthcoming interview with Superman, the furore next week was going to be all about his girlfriend. “I see the Planet got the big interview with Superman.”

“Yeah,” Perry said. His level of enthusiasm was hard to interpret from half a world away.

“And Mayson’s doing it?”

“Yeah.” This time, there was no mistaking the lukewarm response. “Her uncle—the one on the board—put up the money, with the stipulation that Mayson gets the interview.”

“But you have doubts?”

Perry sighed. “I’m not sure about this, Clark. If Superman really is an alien, it will be the biggest story of my career. Even if he’s not, he had to have gotten those powers somehow, and the public wants to know. I couldn’t let the Star get the exclusive.”

“But?”

“But I’ve never liked chequebook journalism. I don’t like having to buy stories.”

“I read that the money is going to charity.”

“Yeah,” Perry said. “And it will do a power of good—half a million will help a lot of underprivileged kids in Metropolis.” He chuckled suddenly. “I don’t think Superman knows what he’s got himself into, though. It took Mayson and Linda King more than half an hour today to negotiate the simple logistics.”

“Oh?” Clark said. What did they decide?”

“The interview is to take place in the Daily Planet conference room, but Linda gets the first question.”

“Maybe they’ll be so engrossed in outdoing each other, they won’t put too much heat on Superman,” Clark said, careful to keep his tone casual.

“I doubt that,” Perry said. “Neither of them is easily diverted from their prey.”

Clark felt his apprehension rise again. He changed the subject. “How have you been, Chief?” he asked. “Are you looking after yourself?”

“You know how it is, Clark,” Perry said. “There’s always another edition to put to bed, always another story to chase.”

“Has Mayson been OK? She hasn’t been making it too difficult for you?”

“Mayson is Mayson,” Perry said. “There’s no one like her for getting the big stories.”

Clark knew that. “But she makes the entire newsroom a stressful place.”

“Yeah.”

“She hasn’t been any better?” Clark enquired hopefully.

“No,” Perry said. “She’s been worse since the Trask debacle. She’s completely intractable. Yesterday she argued with me for fifteen minutes because I changed one word in her copy.”

“I’ve read the speculation that she was working with Trask,” Clark said. “Do you think that’s possible? She has never liked Superman.”

“If she was working with him, she won’t admit it to me,” Perry said wearily.

“Mayson has a lot of dubious contacts,” Clark said. “But Trask was not a man to be taken lightly.”

“I know,” the editor said. “But you can’t tell Mayson that.”

“Look after yourself, Perry.”

“You, too,” Perry said. “Thanks for the call.”

“Bye, Chief.”

Clark hung up and stared ahead for a long moment as his concerns rose like scalding steam. If only Mayson would back off and let Perry do his job without her constant attempts to bludgeon him into compliance.

But Clark knew that was unlikely. He could only hope that it wouldn’t adversely affect the Chief’s health.

* * *

“Ready?” Lois asked.

Clark looked up from the final read-through of his story. Banjo had done the main match report, but Browny had assigned Clark to write up the press conference with the victorious Geelong coach. “Two more minutes,” he said.

“Would you like me to read it before you submit it?” Lois asked.

“Sure,” Clark said. “Thanks.” He stood from his seat and offered it to her.

She shook her head. “Sit down,” she said. “I’ll look over your shoulder.”

He sat again, and Lois’s hand landed on his neck. She leant forward a little, her eyes flicking across his screen as her thumb found the little strip of bare skin above his collar and gently skimmed along it. Clark forced his wayward attention back to his story.

A few moments later, Lois reached for the screen and pointed. “Geelong ‘are’,” she corrected. “Not Geelong ‘is’. We use plural verbs for clubs.”

“Arggh,” Clark said as he fixed it. He *knew* that.

“Easy to do,” Lois said as her thumb continued to spread sweet sensation along his neck. She read to the end of his story and turned to him with a smile. “Great job, Clark,” she said. “It reads like you’ve been reporting on footy for months, not weeks.”

“Thanks.” He submitted the story and began closing down his computer. The Metropolis news site he kept open in the background had updated its headline—there had been an explosion in an ammunition factory in the north of the city.

Lois leant close to his ear. “Come by… afterwards… if you want to,” she whispered. “It doesn’t matter how late; you have a key.” She straightened and walked away. At her desk, she sat down, picked up a pencil, and began scribbling notes. When Clark passed her, she glanced up at him and said casually, “See you tomorrow.”

“Bye, Lois,” he replied. He hurried into the cold Melbourne night, reflecting on how much easier it was to be Superman when it didn’t entail the need to concoct improbable excuses.

Not that he enjoyed leaving Lois.

But it was so good to know that once he had done what he could—helped those he could help, saved those he could save—he could come back to her.

And that meant everything.

* * *

Clark stood outside Lois’s door, clenching her key in his fist. Melbourne time, it was almost three in the morning. The fire in the factory had been fierce and well-established by the time he’d arrived. Some people had already escaped. Those who hadn’t were either dead, badly burned, or severely affected by smoke inhalation. Clark had doggedly searched for, and found, every one of them.

Once back in Melbourne, he’d gone to his unit and changed out of his smoky suit. While he’d showered, he’d refused to allow himself to contemplate going to Lois. Sure, she had offered, but it was the middle of the night. She would be asleep.

He couldn’t go to her.

He shouldn’t even think about it.

But when he’d stood beside his bed and willed himself to get in, he just hadn’t been able to do it. Less than a minute later, he was outside Lois’s door.

She’d said he could come.

But had she meant it?

She’d said the time didn’t matter.

Clark pushed the key into the lock and opened her door. He entered her home and quietly closed the door behind him. Lois was in her bedroom; he could hear the steady breaths of her slumber.

Everything within him ached for Lois.

But she was asleep.

He had to decide quickly, otherwise he risked startling her if she awoke and realised someone was in her unit. “Lois?” he said quietly.

“Clark?” Unbelievably, her voice came through the darkness.

“Yes, it’s me.”

A dull light shimmered under her door. “Come in,” she said.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

He pushed open her bedroom door. Lois was sitting up in bed, her hair a little tussled and her eyes squinting against the muted light from the lamp beside her bed.

“Are you OK?” she asked.

He nodded. “I shouldn’t have come.”

“Why not?”

“It’s the middle of the night.”

“So?”

“You were asleep.”

She patted the bed. “Come over here,” she said. “Sit next to me.” He did, and she covered his hand with hers. “Are you all right?”

“The fire was well-advanced when I got there.”

“Casualties?”

He nodded dejectedly.

Lois shuffled away from him. “I know you probably won’t actually get into the bed with me, but I think you should stay here for a while.” She smiled encouragingly. “There’s room for two.”

Still, he hesitated. He wanted to ask if she were sure, just to hear her affirm what he already knew.

She rose from the bed—she was wearing soft pink pyjamas with a large teddy bear print—and went to the closet. She returned with a throw blanket and slipped back between the sheets. “I know you don’t feel the cold, but we’ll put this over you.”

She waited for him to make the next move. Clark removed his glasses and placed them next to the lamp. He sat awkwardly on her bed and took off his shoes and sweater. Feeling more than a little awkward, he reclined onto Lois’s bed and stared at the ceiling. She arranged the throw blanket over him and then settled her head into the junction where his arm met his upper body. “Have you got enough room?” she asked.

“Yes, thanks. Have you?”

“Yes. Tell me what happened.”

He did. He started talking, and everything flooded out. He told her about the bodies, and the burns, and the unforgettable, sickening smell. He talked as he had never talked before. He went beyond the details—which he had occasionally told his parents—and shared his feelings. He spoke of his sorrow, and his heartache, and his anguish for the people whose lives had ended or changed forever in the fury of the flames.

Her hand gently soothed him.

Her warmth seeped into him.

Her presence drove away the lurking shadow of his memories.

When he'd told her everything, there was silence.

Clark listened as their breaths mingled, and their heartbeats merged, and their love settled around them like a whispering canopy of closeness.

"Are you OK?" Lois asked.

"I need you, Lois," Clark said huskily. "I can't be Superman without you."

"You don't have to be."

"Thank you."

"What did you do before?" she asked. "Before you knew me? Did you go to your parents after something like this?

"Sometimes."

"What did you do the other times?"

"I'd go away somewhere—anywhere I could be by myself."

"Promise me you'll never do that again." Lois lifted off his chest and looked down at him. "Promise me, Clark," she said. "Promise me you'll come to me… regardless of the time, or what I'm doing, or anything else. Promise me you won't ever again try to do this alone."

"Lois," he said, his voice splintering. "Lois…"

"Promise me."

"I promise."

She kissed his cheek and then settled again on his chest.

Clark tightened his arms around her. He never wanted to move. He wanted this—not just after a rescue, but every night.

"I should leave," he said wretchedly. "I don't want Esmeralda seeing me sneak away in the morning."

"Then don't sneak," Lois said pragmatically. "Fly."

Clark chuckled. "You don't mind if I stay?"

"I want you to stay."

"You should try to get more sleep," he said.

"Are you going to be all right?"

How could he not be all right when she had given him such an abundance of understanding, and love, and comfort, and support? "Yes," he said. "Because of you."

She wriggled to a more comfortable position and sighed deeply. "G'night, my love," she said.

"Goodnight, honey," he said.

Less than a minute later, her body had relaxed, and her breathing had slipped into a steady rhythm.

Clark didn't sleep.

He held Lois.

And marvelled at his amazing good fortune.

He'd found her.

Clark had found her.

Superman needed her.

And all they both wanted was to be with her forever.

* * *

On Tuesday evening, Clark let himself into Lois's apartment and began to unpack the bag of groceries he'd bought. Hopefully, she wouldn't be too late.

They had attended the game together on Sunday, but on Monday when Clark had gone to the Herald Sun office, Lois had continued trying to establish an anti-merger campaign. They had spent Monday evening together, slipping easily between the diverse topics of a superhero's first interview and the salvaging of a football club.

He missed Lois's presence in the newsroom, but the knowledge they would spend the evening together was like a beacon shining through a dim day. Later tonight, they would fly to Metropolis for Superman's interview.

Clark was cutting up the vegetables when he heard a familiar motor. He quickly washed and dried his hands and hurried to the door. Lois was climbing out of the Jeep with slow and sombre movements.

He met her and took her into his arms. "Bad day, honey?" he asked.

She managed a wan smile. "Yeah," she said. "It seemed as if everyone I talked to believes we have no choice but to merge." She lifted her hand and showed him the mail she had collected from the post box. "And I got this."

Clark took it. It was from the Hawthorn Football Club. "What do you think it is?"

"It's official," Lois said. "It's probably outlining the case for the merger."

"Why did they send it to you?"

"They would've sent one to every member," she said. "Anyone who hasn't already decided how to vote—this is probably going to tip them in the direction of the merger."

Clark put his arm across her shoulder and ushered her inside. "Sit down, and I'll make you coffee," he said. "Dinner isn't ready yet."

"I came home early," Lois said.

"That bad, huh?"

"Yeah," she said. She plonked her bag on the table and snatched for the tissues as her eyes welled with tears.

Clark gently turned her into his body and held her close against his chest. He felt her frustration and despair. He hated her being upset—hated that, despite all his strength, he was powerless to give her club a future.

He kissed the top of her head and slowly ran the palm of his hand down her upper arm. As much as he hated her distress, he loved that she had turned to him for comfort.

A minute later, she straightened and wiped her eyes. "I've realised I can't do this alone," she said.

Clark used his fingertips to brush back her hair. "You'll never be alone."

She smiled sadly. "I know. But Hawthorn is bigger than us. In our song, we sing the line, 'one for all and all for one.' Being inclusive, being expansive enough to include everyone, achieving as a whole what can't be achieved alone—that's intrinsic to who we are." She glanced up. "I can't save Hawthorn by going against everything we stand for."

"What are you going to do?" Clark asked as moved away to make coffee for them.

Lois shrugged. "I don't know," she said. She brightened, forcing a smile. "But that's not the only reason I came home early. We need to get ready for our interview tonight."

Clark was glad to see even the shadow of her smile. "I flew home to Smallville during my lunch break, and Mom showed me where she'd sewed a 'U' and a 'W' on your suit."

Lois chuckled. "That's cute."

"I did something else today," he said in a tone that invited her curiosity.

She grinned. "Are you going to tell me? Or do I have to guess?"

Clark slipped his wallet from his pocket, opened it, and pulled out a card. Before it had fully emerged, Lois squealed with excitement and hugged him.

"You bought a membership," she said.

"I've joined too late to be eligible to vote," he said. "But I wanted to show my support."

"Thank you," Lois said, beaming. She took the card from his hand and then solemnly offered it back to him. "Welcome to Hawthorn. Now you're truly one of us."

Clark returned his membership card to his wallet, still smiling at Lois's reaction. He finished making their coffee and took the cups to the table. "Are you still sure about doing this interview?" he asked. "It's not too late to pull out if you don't feel up to it."

Lois nodded. "I'm very sure about it."

"I'm really glad you're going to be there with me," Clark said.

She smiled. "Me, too."

"Are you going to open your letter?"

Lois picked up the envelope and opened it. She unfolded the multiple sheets, and her face fell as she read.

"Bad?" Clark enquired.

Lois shrugged. "No worse than I expected. They genuinely believe that our only chance of any form of survival is to merge with Melbourne. I can't blame them for trying to do what they think is best."

"Have you talked to Ron? Barb?"

Lois looked up with such despair that Clark felt it shroud his heart. "Yeah," she said. "They are both sure that the merger is our only option."

"What happens after the vote? What happens to you and them?"

"I hope our relationship is strong enough that, whatever the outcome of the vote, nothing will change for us."

"Are you worried that won't be the case?"

Lois shook her head, her mouth shaped to say, "No." Then, her mouth closed, and she gave the slightest hint of a nod. "But I don't want to think about that," she whispered roughly. "I can't imagine life without Ron and Barb and Seb."

"Hopefully, it won't come to that," Clark said, thinking about how she had already endured the fragmentation of her birth family.

Lois folded the sheets of paper and returned them to the envelope. “Enough about that,” she said briskly. “We have an interview to prepare for.”

* * *

Lois slipped her hot-pink armguards over her wrists and contemplated her reflection in the mirror. The suit was incredibly tight. She tugged at the dual curves of material that arced across her chest, trying to achieve a little more coverage.

A soft knock sounded on the door. “Lois?”

She turned. They had arrived at Clark’s parents’ farm an hour ago, and he had insisted she use his bedroom to put on her suit. “Come in, Clark,” she said.

The door opened, and he walked in. Not Clark, but Superman.

He was magnificent.

His suit clung to his sculpted body, emphasising every carved muscle, every breathtaking curve.

“Wow,” she breathed.

“Wow, yourself,” he said, his voice sounding like something had throttled his vocal cords.

Lois stared. The suit left less to the imagination than the footy gear. It made him seem taller… broader… maler.

“You look awesome,” she said. “No photo I’ve seen has ever done you justice.”

“You are going to be a sensation,” he predicted as his eyes took a slow stroll down her body.

“Has Superman received a lot of female attention?” Lois asked. “Letters? Photos? Marriage proposals? Propositions?”

“Superman doesn’t have an address.”

“There are probably entire roomfuls of undelivered mail waiting for you somewhere.”

“They are going to stay undelivered,” Clark said firmly. “Because Superman is taken.”

Lois crossed the small distance between them and put her hand on his chest. “Are you still worried about this interview?”

“Not so much,” he said. “Though I can’t guarantee I won’t pick you up and fly away at any moment.”

“We’ve planned this,” Lois said. “We’ve talked through every possible eventuality. We’ll be there together. We can do this.”

Clark smiled. “Are you ready, Ultra Woman?”

“I’m ready, Superman.”

“Let’s go and face the dual offensive of Drake and King.”

“They have nothing on Lane and Kent.”

“Nothing at all,” he agreed with another glance down her body. “Nothing at all.”

* * *

Mayson Drake rolled the fragment of green rock between her thumb and fingers.

She had decided—contrary to her more combative instincts—to leave it in her apartment when she interviewed Superman.

Other than the satisfaction of witnessing his shock—and possible pain—there was little to be gained from alerting him that some of the powerful rock remained on Earth.

And Linda King would be there—the wannabe hussy from the Metropolis Star who had taken opportunism to new levels. The less she knew, the better. Mayson certainly didn’t want the Star speculating that not all of Trask’s green rock had been in the spacecraft.

Superman wasn’t going anywhere. Time was on her side.

This interview would be merely research. The more Mayson discovered about Superman, the more she could fine-tune her strategy.

She replaced the green rock in the gouged-out pages of a drab-looking book. She put the book in her safe, locked it, replaced the panelling across the hole in the floor of her closet, neatly arranged three pairs of shoes on top, and then closed the door.

Her time would come.

Part 32

Clark, with Lois in his arms, landed under the globe, and an audible gasp rose from the throng of people pressed against the temporary barriers that circled out from the entrance to the Daily Planet.

“Superman!”

“Superman!”

“Who’s that with him?”

“Is she an alien, too?”

“Trask was right—there are more of them.”

Clark slowly slid Lois to her feet and took her hand in his as he surveyed the enormousness and restless energy of the gathered crowd. Two dozen security guards were dotted along the barriers, poised with arms wide to discourage anyone who might think about charging forward.

Clark knew the time and place of the interview had been publicised, but he hadn't translated that knowledge into an expectation of this level of fevered interest.

He turned to Lois, and she met his glance with a calmness that steadied him. "Let's do this," she said, low enough that only he could hear.

He nodded, and together they entered the Daily Planet building and walked towards the elevator. The doors opened, and Clark and Lois stepped in, still holding hands.

"Are you OK?" Lois said.

"I'm glad you're here."

"We can do this," she said. "We've planned well. We're prepared. We're a team. It's game day, and we're ready."

Clark allowed himself a quick smile before pulling his face back to the impassive mask so characteristic of Superman. He didn't release Lois's hand, though.

The elevator stopped, and there seemed to be an unnecessarily long pause before the doors grated open to reveal Mayson and Linda. They both hastily stepped forward, and then, in almost comical unison, their attention slid sideways and their mouths gaped.

Clark felt a surge of confidence. Not only were he and Lois two-on-two, but they had already seized the advantage. "Ms Drake," he greeted. "Ms King."

With what looked like a considerable effort, they hauled their eyes from Lois. After a short silence, Linda said, "Superman, thank you for agreeing to this interview."

Mayson recovered enough of her composure to step forward, the move a blatant attempt to establish her position as the senior interviewer. "Come this way, Superman," she directed crisply. "We will conduct the interview in the conference room."

Mayson turned and walked away, her high-heeled shoes tapping an abrupt beat on the floor. Clark noticed she had chosen one of her shortest skirts and a tailored jacket that cinched around her tiny waist. He squeezed Lois's hand and hoped she would understand his message—Mayson was no competition for Ultra Woman.

With a saccharin expression that made Clark think of a vulture about to swoop, Linda gestured for them to precede her. He and Lois crossed the newsroom, passing a substantial percentage of Daily Planet employees who had managed to find reason to be in the bullpen.

In the conference room, there were three white leather tub chairs set equidistant around a low timber table. On the table, two tape recorders lay in readiness.

Clark strode to the nearest chair and seated Lois. He stood behind her with one hand resting on her shoulder and waited for the two reporters to determine their next move.

"Ah," Mayson said in a brusque, authoritarian tone, "we need another chair." Without waiting for a response, she flounced to the door, swung it open, and loudly directed that a chair be provided.

Seconds later, a young copyboy arrived with a fourth chair. He hesitated, earning a scowl from Mayson, and then quickly positioned the chair at the table. Clark moved it closer to Lois and sat down.

Mayson took the chair directly opposite. "As previously agreed, the interview will be recorded," she said.

Linda scrambled into the remaining seat as Clark nodded. Mayson and Linda reached forward and started their tapes. "How are you affected by the green rock?" Mayson asked.

"Excuse me, Superman," Linda said, her attention fixed on him and pointedly bypassing Mayson. "The Metropolis Star has the first question."

Mayson's eyes had dropped to her notes, a picture of sudden disinterest.

"We weren't expecting you to be accompanied," Linda said with a tight smile to Clark.

It wasn't a question. Clark considered maintaining his silence but instead decided to press home the advantage of Lois's surprise presence. "Is there a problem?" he asked evenly.

Mayson's gaze shot to Lois. "Who is—"

"Would you introduce us?" Linda cut in. "Please?"

Clark ignored the hostile glance that sizzled between the two reporters. "This is Ultra Woman," he said.

The eyes of both women shot to his left. Lois stared right back, seemingly unmoved by their scrutiny.

"And she is?" Mayson asked with about as much warmth as an arctic blast.

"Ultra Woman," Clark said.

"Is she your sister?" Mayson's gaze slithered sideways to Lois, and her top lip curled with unconcealed disdain. "Or your mother?" she added spitefully.

There was no sign of even the slightest reaction from Lois, and Clark silently applauded her composure. "She's my girlfriend," he said firmly.

Both Mayson and Linda gawked. Apparently, the idea of Superman having a girlfriend hadn't occurred to them. "Your girlfriend?" Mayson gasped.

Linda lifted a constraining hand in Mayson's direction. "Is your girlfriend—Ultra Woman—an alien?"

"No."

"Are *you* an alien?" Mayson demanded.

"I am from another planet."

"Which planet?" Mayson fired at him.

"Krypton."

"Krypton?" Mayson echoed.

"Why did you leave Krypton?" Linda asked.

"Because it was facing certain destruction."

"So you came to Earth?" Mayson said.

"Yes."

"What about the rest of your kind?" Linda said.

Clark took a moment before replying, wanting to slow down the volley of questions. Mayson and Linda were like two lionesses fighting over a scrap of meat. "To my knowledge, none of them survived."

Mayson eyed him for a stretched moment. "Do you really expect us to believe you are the only one who came to Earth?"

"It was a desperate situation," Clark said. "Attempting the journey to Earth was speculative. I was extremely fortunate."

Before Mayson could ask her next question, Linda spoke. "And, having arrived on Earth, you met Ultra Woman?"

"Yes."

"Why did you bring her to this interview?" Mayson asked frostily.

"I brought her because this interview is about my life."

"And she is a part of your life?" Mayson said.

"Yes."

"How long have you known her?" Linda said.

"Long enough to be very sure of my feelings for her."

Mayson sniggered. "Are you in love with her?" Linda asked.

"Yes."

"Can an alien be in love?" Mayson sneered.

"Yes."

Mayson straightened in her seat and crossed her legs. It was her 'I'm taking control here' pose. "Our newspapers are paying a significant sum for this interview," she said coldly. "The expectation is that you answer more fully than merely 'yes' or 'no'."

"Surely the quality of the answers is, to some degree, the responsibility of the interviewer," Clark said mildly. He heard the tiniest in-breath from Lois and took that as hushed support.

"What do you love about Ultra Woman?" Linda said.

"I love her loyalty, and her sincerity, and her honesty," he replied.

Linda smiled—which Clark took as a warning sign. "And, surely, her trustworthiness?"

"Obviously."

"You trust her completely?"

"Yes."

"No doubts?"

"None."

"By bringing her here, you have subjected her to the machinations of the media," Linda explained in a patronising tone. "She has just become the most sought-after interview in the world. Publications will be scrambling to offer big dollars for an explicit tell-all interview with Superman's girlfriend."

"I trust her."

"Obviously," Linda said. "Of course, everyone has their price, and only time will tell whether your trust is misplaced."

"If she's human, why the need for an alias?" Mayson said.

"For precisely the reasons already alluded to by Ms King," Clark said. "Ultra Woman wishes to be free to live her life without having to deal with the hype of being Superman's girlfriend."

"Clearly, you have the same tailor," Mayson sniped.

It wasn't a question, so Clark didn't bother with an answer.

"Why Earth?" Linda asked. "Why *this* planet?"

"Because the conditions are similar enough to my home planet that I can survive here."

"And how convenient that you found a country that speaks your language," Mayson said.

"Quelle langue préféreriez-vous j'utilise?" Clark asked.

Mayson almost covered her surprise with a thick layer of derision. Linda however, smoothly responded with, "Parlez-vous français?"

"Oui," Clark replied. "Je peux parler—"

"So, you're not human?" Mayson said. "And please try to remember that this is an *interview*, not a circus to showcase your language skills."

"I'm Kryptonian."

"But you're dating a human woman?" Mayson made it sound like she was accusing him of a heinous crime.

"Yes."

"Do you think that is fair to her?"

"I think that is her decision."

Mayson's eyes narrowed. "Why did you agree to this interview?"

"Because the actions of Jason Trask made me realise that my desire to remain anonymous had possibly contributed to widespread suspicion of my intentions."

"What are your intentions?" Linda asked.

"I want to use my powers to help people."

"Why?" Mayson shot at him.

"Because I have the strength and the speed to save lives."

"And what do you get from it?"

Clark stared at Mayson, letting the viciousness of her question reverberate around the room. "I like to help people," he said. "I can't stand by and watch someone be hurt when I know I can make a difference."

"Do you intend to continue helping people?" Linda asked.

"Yes. In fact, my intention is to help even more than I have in the past."

"Why?"

"Initially, I had misgivings about how I would be received by the people of this planet. That concern proved valid when Jason Trask took hostages and threatened human lives in a desperate attempt to confirm his unfounded theories."

"Do you think people still believe the legitimacy of his assertions?" Mayson asked.

"I believe that, in time, people will realise I'm not a threat to their safety and will welcome my presence and the assistance I can bring."

"What do you want in your future?" Linda asked.

"What I want is not significantly different from everyone else," Clark said. "I want to be able to make a contribution and to be accepted by those around me." He glanced towards Lois. "And I want to be with Ultra Woman."

"It's hard to accept you when we know so little about you," Linda noted.

"I'm doing this interview to address that situation," Clark countered.

"What do we have to fear from you?" Mayson asked.

"You have nothing to fear from me."

"You're strong enough to lift a train?" Mayson said. "But you claim we have nothing to fear from you?"

"Everything I have done is to help—never to harm."

"Describe yourself," Mayson said. It sounded like an order.

Clark paused. "I'm strong, and I'm fast and—"

"Don't tell me what you can do," Mayson snapped. "Tell me who you are."

Lois cleared her throat. "Perhaps I could answer this question," she suggested in a believable yet vaguely generic American accent.

Mayson turned to Lois with an expression that suggested she doubted whether Lois could string together three words coherently.

"Superman genuinely cares about people," Lois said. "His desire to help is not based on what he gets, but what he can give."

"Why should we believe you?" Mayson said harshly.

"You asked; I answered," Lois replied evenly. "What you believe is up to you."

With a dismissive scowl, Mayson turned back to Clark and struck like a viper. "What effect does the green rock have on you?"

He and Lois had discussed this at length. "According to a story you wrote, you've already asked me that question. And received my response."

"Would you like to comment on that interview?"

"No," Clark said. "Would you?"

Mayson stared at him, her eyes cold and hard. "You can still fly?"

"Yes."

"And you still have all of your powers?"

"Yes."

"How can that be possible when Trask loaded all of the green rock into the space capsule and launched it into outer space?"

"Clearly, it's possible," Clark said. "As witnessed by many people, I flew here this morning."

"Is Metropolis your permanent home?" Linda asked.

"Yes."

"Do you envision a time when you will use your powers to help in other cities? Other countries?"

"Yes," Clark replied.

Mayson leant forward. "If the green rock doesn't have an adverse effect on you, why were you lying on the ground, seemingly in great pain, while Trask disclosed the conclusions of his investigation?"

"I believed Trask's state of mind to be such that he was capable of carrying out his threats. I didn't want to do anything that would jeopardise the lives of the hostages."

"Was there a need to writhe around in agony?" Mayson asked scornfully.

Linda turned to Mayson. "Your attitude is inexplicable," she said. "Have you forgotten that you were one of the hostages? And that it was Superman who rescued you?"

Mayson stared coldly at the Star reporter. Linda deliberately turned away from Mayson and towards Lois. "May I ask you some questions?" she said with exaggerated deference.

Clark tried to smother the sudden surge of his apprehension. Lois, however, appeared relaxed. Her heart rate was normal. "Yes," she said.

"Superman said you're human," Linda said.

"I am."

"You have a real name? And a normal life, apart from being Superman's girlfriend?"

"Yes."

"Where did you meet him?"

"I was working, and I was accosted by a group of youths. Superman stepped in to ensure that I wasn't hurt."

"How chivalrous," Linda commented.

"Going to such effort to conceal your identity suggests you have doubts about the longevity of your relationship," Mayson said.

"Not at all," Lois said with certainty. "I love Superman, and I'm very sure of his feelings for me. However, his work as Superman does not need to impact my job—just as I'm sure you wouldn't wish for your boyfriend's life to impinge on your career."

"What is your career?" Linda asked.

"This interview is not about Ultra Woman and her life," Clark said firmly.

Mayson stared stonily at him. "Then why did you bring her?"

"She is a part of my life, and as such, she graciously agreed to accompany me today. But her life—apart from me—is beyond the scope of this discussion."

"So, questions about your relationship are permitted?" Mayson asked.

Clark sensed danger in her question, but Lois answered "Yes" before he could reply.

For the first time, Mayson smiled—a cruel, triumphant smirk. "Have you consummated this relationship?"

Clark felt as if the colour from his cape had leapt to his face and congealed there. Before he had begun to formulate a reply, Lois answered.

"What do you think?" she said. She gestured towards Clark, managing to encompass most of his body. "If your boyfriend looked like this…"

Mayson scowled. Linda looked uncomfortable. Lois, however, looked as if she couldn't have been more relaxed if she'd been sitting on the beach sipping champagne.

"Any further questions?" Lois asked casually into the delicately poised silence.

Mayson opened her mouth, and Clark held his breath.

"So, despite him being alien, he's normal enough that you're physically compatible?" Mayson said. "He's not… impotent?"

Lois's eyes swept lingeringly down the length of Clark's body, and then she directed her gaze to Mayson. "He's… *super*."

Clark felt as if he were within a few degrees of disintegrating into a slither of blue and red goo and slipping off his chair into a blob of mortification. If he got out of this without melting his hair gel, that would be a bonus.

"The suit *does* come off?" Mayson pressed.

Lois nodded. "It comes off."

"You've actually seen him when he hasn't been wearing the suit?"

"Yes."

Linda leant towards Lois, her face alight with eagerness. “The Star will give you $500,000 for a tell-all interview.”

“One million,” Mayson said immediately.

“One and a half million.”

“Two.”

“Two and—”

“Ladies!” Lois exclaimed loudly.

They both looked at her, mouths adrift.

“This is my only interview,” Lois said firmly. “After today, I intend to return to my life—which includes supporting Superman in what he does. I doubt there will be a need for me to comment publicly on any matter.”

“If that is the case,” Linda said sceptically, “is there anything else you would like to say now?”

“Yes,” Lois said without hesitation. “Trask thought he could control Superman with threats and contrived accusations. You think you can control him with monetary enticements. If you ever gain even a rudimentary understanding of this man, you will realise the only thing that will ever control Superman’s actions is Superman’s heart. And his heart is incorruptible. It will always pursue what he knows is good and right. Superman will never waver from that.”

Mayson reclined in her chair and contemplated Lois. Clark got the uncomfortable feeling that Mayson had taken Lois’s statement as a personal challenge.

Linda, sensing she now had the floor, asked, “Has Superman proposed?”

“He’s my boyfriend,” Lois replied. “If he’d proposed and I’d accepted, he would be my fiancé.”

“Have you discussed marriage?”

“Yes, we have.”

“I’m not even sure it would be legal,” Mayson scoffed.

Linda turned to Clark. “If you love her, why haven’t you proposed yet?”

“I’m very comfortable with our relationship,” Lois said. “If I’m not pressing Superman to propose, you don’t need to.”

Linda retreated with a tight smile. “Would you be willing to pose for our photographers?”

Clark winced inwardly. He and Lois had discussed this, but he hadn’t been able to dispel his fervent hope that photographs would not be requested.

“Yes,” he replied. “For a few minutes.”

Linda rose from her seat and opened the door to the conference room. A moment later, Jimmy Olsen and a woman Clark didn’t know joined them. When Jimmy saw Lois, his eyes goggled and his mouth dropped. Clark didn’t know whether he wanted to grin or to go over and firmly close Jimmy’s hanging jaw.

He did neither. He moved to where the photographers directed him to stand in front of a white screen that had been placed there in anticipation of a photo opportunity. Clark crossed his arms, squared his shoulders, and allowed them to take the photos.

Then, with a shy glance at Lois, Jimmy asked haltingly if they would mind posing together. Lois shot Jimmy a smile that would have melted sterner men than the young photographer. She stood next to Clark, their pose reminiscent of the formality of old sepia portraits.

“Would you mind putting your hand on her shoulder, Superman?” Jimmy asked.

Clark unfolded his arms and placed a hand on Lois’s shoulder.

The cameras clicked again, and then Clark glanced to the clock on the wall. To his surprise and relief, their allotted time was up.

“Thank you,” he said as he stepped away from the white screen.

The female photographer walked out of the room, followed by Mayson and Linda. Jimmy didn’t move. His attention appeared centred on his camera, but Clark sensed that his hesitation was a ploy to gain a few extra seconds with Lois.

She cleared her throat, and Jimmy looked up. Lois turned to Clark, put one hand on his chest, and gazed intently into his eyes with a love-drenched smile. Jimmy raised his camera and took his shots.

When he lowered his camera, the look on Jimmy’s face far surpassed his infatuated expression at his first sight of Lois. Now he looked like he’d just fallen in love.

“Thanks,” Jimmy said, favouring Lois with a diffident smile.

Hand in hand, Lois and Clark walked through the newsroom and to the elevator. Many people—people he knew well—stopped their work and stared at them. His instinct was to turn away, lest they recognise their colleague under the superhero outfit. Instead, he glanced down at Lois and allowed himself the suggestion of a smile.

She squeezed his hand.

The elevator doors opened, and they stepped in.

When the doors had closed, Lois stretched up and placed her mouth next to his ear. “Are there cameras in here?” she whispered.

Clark had checked long before, having used the elevator to change into the suit on more than one occasion. “No,” he said.

Lois folded her arms around his neck. “Well done, Superman,” she said. “You were magnificent.”

“You were, too,” he said. “We’re a great team.”

“I knew we could handle a pair of reporters.”

Clark chuckled as he felt the tight constraints of the Superman guise drop away. “I think you just captured Jimmy’s heart.”

“He seems like a nice kid.”

“He is,” Clark said. “You gave him the best photograph of his career.”

Lois smiled. “We had to give the Daily Planet some advantage. After all, you need a job.”

“And Perry needs a break.”

Lois nodded.

The elevator clanged to a stop, and they both straightened, emptying their faces of all expression.

They stepped from the elevator and walked outside. Under the globe, Clark hesitated long enough to acknowledge the screaming, waving crowd and then lifted Lois into his arms and flew away.

Part 33

We have answers to some of our questions regarding the man who claims to be an alien from the planet Krypton. Other questions, though, remain frustratingly—and perhaps dangerously—unanswered.

Mayson Drake finished her story with a flourish. She knew it was good—good enough to guarantee the *Daily Planet* would be the newspaper of choice for the thinking person.

Certainly, it would be better than what the Star would offer. Mayson fully expected Linda King’s story to read like a trashy romance novel.

However, despite having just written up an interview with an alien, Mayson felt none of the euphoria that should accompany such a story.

Having to co-interview with Linda King was insulting. Having Superman’s squeeze turn up had pushed the entire venture to the edge of degenerating into a farce. Mayson had experienced an immediate and intense dislike for the woman who had sat with such serenity alongside her superhero boyfriend.

They had looked so… complete. So absolute in each other. There had been minimal physical contact between them, yet that hadn’t weakened the illusion of their invisible bond.

Mayson scoffed audibly. Ultra Woman—what a fatuous name.

She wouldn’t look so smug when she came face to face with the green rock. It wouldn’t be Superman’s ‘heart’ controlling him then.

It would be Mayson Drake.

And the spandex twins had better get used to it.

Superman had refused to deny that the green rock was hazardous to him. In Mayson’s mind, that constituted an admission.

She had decided on the first steps in what she intended to be a lengthy—and supremely enjoyable—journey.

At the next suitable opportunity, she would expose Superman to the green rock. Not a large dose—just enough for him to understand the new power structure. Then, she would issue her ultimatum—unless she was given prior notification of a Superman appearance, she would arrive at the scene with the green rock.

This would cause him embarrassing physical difficulties. But more than that, she was sure he wouldn’t want his vulnerability on public display.

Superman was going to be huge—an *alien* interacting with and living among humans. And not just any dreary alien, but a strong and powerful one, complete with a girlfriend—which afforded so many prospects for future scandal that Mayson’s fingers twitched in anticipation.

And she, Mayson Drake, held the key.

Her professional life had never looked more promising.

But personally…

There had been a few moments of gratification in educating Scardino, the dumb Australian, in the realities of life. He’d pressed her for an explanation, and Mayson hadn’t held back in making it patently clear that if he’d ever believed he was in her league, he was more delusional than she had feared.

But it was precisely because of his gullibility that the whole episode had left her with a vaguely dissatisfied feeling—not unlike when she reduced Olsen to an inarticulate nervous wreck.

She needed a challenge.

A challenge she could win, but something worthy of her abilities.

Who was the one man who stood up to her?

Well, there were two, but Perry White was old, past his time, and probably within a year of a health-crisis-induced retirement. For now, she was content to allow him to keep the editor's chair. She certainly didn't want to be stuck behind a desk while other reporters got the Superman stories. One day, the position would be hers, guaranteed by the surefire combination of her own brilliance, her uncle's money, and the coming plethora of Superman exclusives.

But the other man… Clark Kent.

The only man who hadn't succumbed to her attempts to attract him.

His recalcitrance had only increased her desire for him.

She wanted him back in Metropolis so she could actively resume her efforts to ensnare him. He was startlingly good-looking and, from what she could deduce, had a spectacular body. He was *exactly* what she needed to complete the picture of the modern, successful woman.

Mayson wanted him.

And what Mayson wanted, Mayson took.

The passing of time had allowed her to recover from his rejection of her marriage proposal and to formulate a fresh strategy.

Nothing motivated a man like the threat of public humiliation, and nothing humiliated a man like public defeat.

She would lure Kent back to Metropolis—that bit would be simple.

Then she would force his hand with the threat of competition.

Powerful competition.

Wealthy competition.

Illustrious competition.

Mayson picked up the phone and dialled Lex Luthor's private number.

* * *

Walking to Lois's on Wednesday morning was a disparate business. Whenever Clark thought of being with her again, his feet increased their pace without any conscious direction from him. Then he would remember that it had been barely seven hours since he had left her unit, and he would deliberately slow his steps. She was probably still asleep.

They had arrived back in Melbourne and—using some superspeed—had gotten into Lois's home without alerting anyone that two strangely dressed individuals had flown in from the northern hemisphere.

Clark had spun out of his suit, and Lois had gone into her bedroom and emerged ten minutes later dressed in loose, comfortable tracksuit pants and a sweater. They had sat together on the couch, drinking Milo, dissecting their interview, and trying to forecast the tone of the stories by Mayson and Linda.

They had covered every aspect of the interview… except one. They had carefully avoided any allusion to Mayson's questions regarding the physical aspect of his relationship with Lois. Even now, Clark couldn't comfortably think of those few minutes.

He and Lois had to discuss it. They had to. But Clark was dreading it.

Last night, after an hour with Lois, Clark had forced himself to return to his unit. Being with her after the factory fire had been incredible, but he didn't want to slip into the habit of staying overnight with her, even assuming she would want that.

His feet were racing again, and Clark deliberately slowed his pace. Then, he heard her heartbeat—pounding fiercely—and her running footsteps.

Clark dashed the length of the street and turned the corner.

Lois saw him, quickly closed the distance between them, and flew into his arms. His quick glance had been enough to reassure him that she was smiling. Whatever had precipitated her haste, it wasn't anything bad.

As he held her, he could feel the excitement jigging through her. She backed away and landed an energetic kiss on his mouth.

"Guess what?" she said, executing little jumps of enthusiasm as she spoke.

"What?" he said, grinning widely.

"The sleeping giant has finally stirred, and the Hawthorn faithful are making their move."

"Really? What's happening?"

"Our former skipper, Don Scott—he became the captain after Crimmo—is challenging the merger. He believes we can do this. He believes we can raise the million dollars needed to pay off our debt; he believes we can significantly increase our membership and move forward with confidence—*without* merging."

Clark hugged her tightly against his body. "Lois, I'm so pleased for you," he said against her ear.

She clung to him. “Thank you.” She kissed him—hot, hard, and exultantly.

Clark took a steadying breath and dragged his concentration back to football. “What are you doing today?” he asked. “Meeting him?”

Lois shook her head. “Today, he’s finding answers. We need to know the exact condition of our finances and explore any legal issues. Tomorrow, we decide what to do about it.”

“‘We’ being you and Don Scott?”

Lois shook her head emphatically. “No,” she said. “And that’s the wonderful thing. Scotty will be the face of this—he handles the media with aplomb—but it’s not just him. There are other past players and other members who have grave doubts about the merger—people who will band together behind Scotty’s leadership. One or two can’t do this; if Hawthorn are going to survive, it has to be because many, many members of the Hawthorn family want it.”

Clark hugged her. “Lois,” he said. “I’m really glad. I was beginning to wonder if you were the only one who cared.”

“Me, too,” Lois admitted. “I have a part to play. I can write letters and write more pamphlets and rattle tins and spread the word that we *can* survive. But if this is going to happen, it’s going to be because thousands of Hawks refuse to bow to those who want us to crawl away and die quietly.”

“Are you hungry?” Clark asked. “Can I take you to breakfast?”

Lois grinned happily. “I would love that,” she said. “And then… you know what?”

“What?”

“There’s nothing more I can do for Hawthorn until tomorrow, so we both have the whole day free.”

Clark grinned. “What would you like to do?”

“Start with breakfast,” Lois said, “at that cafe we went to the first morning you were in Melbourne.”

“And then?”

“And then I’m sure we can think of something,” she said with a buoyant grin. “It’s not like we’re constrained by time or distance.”

* * *

Clark landed on the hot sand and lowered Lois to her feet.

She raised her arms and lifted her face to the sun. “Aahhh,” she said. “It is so good to feel warmth again after months of Melbourne winter.”

Clark grinned. “You do know that Melbourne winters are not that cold?”

“They’re bleak,” Lois said firmly. “And grey and overcast.” She smiled. “And anyway, what would you know, Superman? You wouldn’t feel cold in the Antarctic.”

“Do you want to swim?” Clark asked. “Or sunbathe?”

Lois peeled off her sweater and stepped out of her jeans to reveal a white tee shirt and blue shorts. “Maybe both,” she said. “But first I need to sunscreen.” She grinned. “You might think Melbourne winters are mild, but it would be hard to explain the sudden appearance of a tan.”

“Need any help?”

She pulled a large towel from her bag and shot him an amused look that said his eagerness hadn’t gone unnoticed. “Yes, please,” she said.

A few moments later, they were seated on the towel, with Lois applying the sun cream to her legs while Clark rubbed it into her upper arms. “This is beautiful,” she said. “Where are we?”

“On the island of Motu Vavaratea in French Polynesia.”

“I bet you’re a whiz at geography.”

He nodded.

She giggled as she turned to face him. “Languages, too.”

He smiled.

“The look on Mayson’s face when you responded in French was hilarious,” Lois said. “I had to stare ahead and think about Hawthorn being beaten by North Melbourne to keep from bursting into laughter.”

Clark smiled, but behind it, his thoughts were whirling. This was the opportunity he needed. “Lois,” he said. “Could we talk?”

She studied him for a small moment and then surveyed their surroundings. When she turned back to him, her expression had become pensive. “You didn’t bring me here just to enjoy the warmth?”

“No.”

“Judging by your choice of location, this is to be a private conversation.”

He nodded. “It’s something I’ve wanted to talk to you about for a while.”

“OK.”

Strangely, she didn’t look too curious. She probably figured that nothing could possibly trump the ‘I’m Superman’ revelation. Though if anything, Clark found he was almost more apprehensive about this than he had been about

telling her he was from another planet. “Would you like something?” he asked, refusing to acknowledge—even to himself—that he was stalling. “I can bring you a drink or something to eat.”

“No,” she said. “I think we should just get this over with.”

Clark studied her face as his heart thumped. Surely, she couldn’t have guessed what he was going to say. She *couldn’t* have.

The sun was hot, the sand was warm, and a cooling breeze fluttered off the water. If the location could possibly make this any easier, he’d chosen the perfect place.

If only he could think of the perfect way to begin.

The silence stretched as he floundered.

“I thought Mayson and Linda were quite unimaginative in their questions,” Lois said. “I don’t think what they got was worth half a million dollars.”

“Did you read their stories? On the ‘net?”

Lois nodded. “The bulk of Mayson’s story was fair and factual, probably to increase the impact of her subtle attempts to rehash Trask’s suspicions. Linda concentrated on the personal aspects—though she seemed more interested in the future of our relationship than the answers we gave.”

“That’s the risk you take with the media,” Clark said wryly. “You can never be sure how they will slant the story.”

“Oh, I think that we got what we wanted,” Lois said. “Just the fact that you were willing to do the interview speaks volumes. The two stories being so diverse will allow people to make up their own minds. And Jimmy’s photograph portrayed two people very much in love.”

“They asked some questions we hadn’t anticipated,” Clark said.

“Not really.”

Clark managed to keep from spluttering. “You were expecting them to ask about…” He stopped, not sure how to frame the rest of his question.

“Our sex life,” Lois said easily. “I think it was obvious once you used the word ‘girlfriend’ that they would ask something about the most personal aspect of our personal lives.”

Clark could feel himself reddening as he recalled that part of the interview. “You handled them with amazing composure,” he said. “I didn’t know what to say.”

“I assumed they would ask, so I had an answer ready,” Lois said.

“You didn’t tell me you were expecting those sorts of questions,” Clark chided mildly.

Lois put her hand on his bare arm and smiled. “Telling you would have only made you more nervous,” she said. “Questions on this topic very definitely fell into the category of those that I could answer more easily than you could.”

“Mmmm,” he agreed, completely out of ideas about how to proceed.

“But we should discuss it,” Lois said. “Which is, I imagine, why you’ve brought me here.”

He nodded. “You must have questions,” he said. “About… me.”

“Not really,” she said.

“You don’t?”

“No,” Lois said. She folded her hands together and stared at them. “I did—the night I went home after you’d told me you were from Krypton. I had a million questions—and some of them were about this.”

“And?”

“And I figured out most of the answers.” She looked up from her hands. “And saved both of us some embarrassment.”

“I don’t have anything to hide, and I don’t want any secrets from you,” Clark said. “But I haven’t been looking forward to this.”

“Don’t worry,” she told him. “It will be a whole lot easier than you’re imagining.”

“It will?”

Lois nodded. “As we fly back to Melbourne, I reckon it’s a fair bet that you’ll be more shocked than I am.”

Clark was fairly certain that wasn’t going to be possible. “Did your questions include some of the things Linda asked?”

Lois nodded. “I did wonder if physically you are like human men—and then I decided that you were.”

Clark felt his discomfiture singe his ears again. “The suit,” he guessed.

She chuckled. “I didn’t see you in the suit until yesterday. And I don’t have x-ray vision.”

“X-ray vision may be superfluous in those suits,” he noted dryly.

She smiled briefly. “I thought about it, and I realised that if you were… different, you would have told me that night when you told me all your other secrets.” She grinned cheekily, and some of the tension ebbed away. “And the bits of you I have seen look human—the upper echelon of

human magnificence, but human, nevertheless. There was no reason to think otherwise."

Clark released a big breath. "Did you have any other questions?"

"Dating a Kryptonian is a new experience for me," Lois said with a smile. "So, I did wonder if Kryptonian men find Earth women attractive."

"I can only speak for one Kryptonian man," he said. "I can say that I don't find all Earth women attractive, but one particular woman I find *extremely* attractive."

Lois cheeks went a little pink, but her smile showed how much she had liked his declaration. "Sexually attractive?" she probed.

"Yes."

She looked down at the sand, still grinning. Then she cleared her throat and pulled her smile into submission. "Perhaps we should move on," she said.

Clark recognised that this was the best opportunity he was going to get. "Before we do move on," he said, "can I ask the same question?"

"Do I find you sexually attractive?" Lois asked.

Clark nodded, not permitting himself to give in to the temptation to look away.

Lois smiled. It wasn't her usual smile; this one held something he hadn't seen before—something… inviting… something innately woman. "Yes," she said in a voice that cracked. "You drive me crazy."

Her words exploded through him, setting him afire. "Now we *really* need to move on," he said doggedly.

She scooped her hand through the sand and let it sift through her fingers. "I know what you're trying to tell me," she said.

"You do?"

She looked up at him. "Does it make it any easier knowing that I know?"

"I doubt you know this," he hedged.

"I do," she said decisively. "I know that you're trying to tell me that you've never been totally intimate before."

Clark's heart dived, rose, and shuddered through another long dive. "You know?" he rasped.

Lois smiled reflectively. "It wasn't that difficult," she said. "You didn't even kiss me until you'd told me your secret. I can't imagine you would go the whole way with someone unless you'd told her the truth first… and, until me, you'd never told anyone."

"I have kissed other women," Clark stated. "Even though they didn't know the truth about me."

Lois's laughter rang out across the beach.

"What's funny?" he asked.

Lois covered her mouth with her hand and looked out from above it with eyes that sparkled. Her hand dropped, and she said, "You are so remarkably expert at kissing, I figured you had to have gone that far."

Relief—with a little hint of pleasure—inundated him. Lois enjoyed his kisses. Yet it couldn't cancel out his persisting discomfiture at what was—for anybody—a seismic disclosure. "Are you OK with this?" he asked hesitantly.

"With what?" she asked.

Was she going to make him say it? He waited. She waited. She *was* going to make him say it. "Are you OK that I'm a virgin?" he said.

"Totally," she said. "I am, too."

Clark felt jagged shock detonate through his brain. The stupefaction disengaged his speech faculty, and his mouth opened, but no words emerged.

"I have dreaded telling anyone that for most of the past decade," Lois said. "Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine I would be able to say, 'I am, *too*.'"

"How…" Clark faltered. He'd thought a lot about how Lois would respond to his admission, but now, he had no clue about how to respond to hers.

"The weekend before I started uni, Barb took me away for a girls' retreat," Lois said. "By then, we'd both accepted that she was the closest thing I had to a mother. She told me that the act of love is one of the most powerful of all things, and it can be powerfully good or powerfully bad. She said that the important factors were the 'when' and the 'why', but the most important of all was the 'who'. She suggested that the litmus test could be whether I loved him more than I loved Hawthorn."

Clark's surprise receded enough that he almost managed a smile. He'd never thought of a football club as being integral to a mother's advice on intimacy.

"Throughout uni, there were some blokes," Lois continued. "But the same thing just kept happening. I would think he was nice, but then way, way before he'd come anywhere near Hawthorn in my affections, he would start pressuring me into his bed. Generally, not long after that, he would leave for someone more accommodating."

Clark smiled gently. "Someone with lower standards?" he asked.

Lois shrugged. “They didn’t see it that way.” She arched her knees and wrapped her arms around them. “Once I finished uni, I got the job in Echuca and met Paul Bender. He was the senior sports reporter—a fair bit older than I was—and he’d just come out of a marriage that had disintegrated into a disaster. He was good company, and he taught me a lot professionally, but most weekends we were working, and during the weeks, he had his four kids.” She glanced to Clark. “I think he was petrified that I would get pregnant and he would have another child support payment.”

“What happened? Did he go back to his wife?”

“No. I got the job at the Herald Sun and came back to Melbourne with not too many regrets about leaving him.”

“Then there was Claude,” Clark said, not managing to keep the distaste from his tone.

Lois nodded. “I would’ve thrown out all the good advice—all the advice that had probably kept my disasters from being even more devastating—if he’d shown even the slightest interest. But, as he told me later, no real man would waste his time on a ho-hum mare when there were far better-looking fillies in the stable.”

“Aw, Lois,” Clark said, wanting, right then, to squish Claude like a bug on a windshield.

She smiled, although there was no humour in it. “And it was about then that I realised the earth-shattering truth. I was almost in my mid-twenties, and I was still… *waiting*. Waiting for someone I could love completely and trust totally. Waiting for my perfect man. And I also realised that not only did I need a man whom I could love more than Hawthorn, I also needed someone who wasn’t going to mock, or sneer, or patronise me when I told him my big secret.”

“I would never mock, or sneer, or patronise, no matter what you told me.”

“I know,” she said. “And that’s just one of the things that tells me I’ve found my perfect man.” She chuckled. “At the airport, of all places.”

“I saw you first,” Clark said quickly. “I found you before you found me.”

“Did you?”

“Uh-huh. I was watching the Eagles supporters, and they suddenly started wolf whistling. I looked across and saw a woman who completely took my breath away.”

Lois leant into his side, and Clark put his arm across her shoulders. “Was it that immediate?” she asked.

“Yes,” he answered honestly. “Yes, it was. I knew as we were driving to the city that I had fallen for you in such a big way that I might never recover. Then, the next morning, we did footy skills at the park, and that tackling…” He hauled in a big breath. “I was sure you were trying to drive me to distraction.”

“I figured you were safe—that you either had a commitment in Metropolis or you had so many offers you wouldn’t even look at me.”

“I am safe,” Clark murmured as he brushed back her hair and exposed a little patch of skin on her neck, which he then kissed.

He felt her laughter ripple through her. “You don’t feel very safe right now.”

Reluctantly, he retreated. “I won’t do anything more than kiss you,” he vowed. “Not here. Our first time is going to be special. And planned.”

She turned to him, smiling. “Really? Planned? You’ve thought about this? What do you have in mind?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “But I’m hoping it will make us both glad that we waited.”

Lois rested her head on his shoulder. “Can I ask you a personal question?”

Clark chuckled. “You mean more personal than some of the questions we’ve already asked?”

He felt her nod, but her head didn’t leave its place on his shoulder.

“Go ahead,” Clark said. “No secrets, remember.”

“When were you closest? Which time did you come closest to giving in?”

Clark felt his memories stir up amusement. The question might have been personal, but it certainly wasn’t difficult to answer. “On the grass above Lorne Beach,” he said. “When we crossed the road to the cafe, I’d noticed there was a nice-looking hotel set into the side of the mountain. Then, you started kissing me, and I came so close to saying, ‘Lois, there are hotel rooms; let’s get one.‘”

He expected her to ask him why he hadn’t made the suggestion. Instead, she surprised him again by asking, “What about with other women?”

He wasn’t going to lie—or even attempt to cover some of the truth. “I thought about it,” he said. “Many times, I thought about it. And there were times when, physically, I wanted to. But I knew that if I did, I would have to tell them so much more, and I never felt able to do that.”

“You didn’t completely trust them?”

“That’s part of it. The other part was that telling the secret was like permanently inviting someone into the tiny world

where I can truly be me. Until I met you, there was never anyone else I wanted in there."

Lois lifted her head and smiled softly. "I love being in the world where you can be you," she said. "And I love you."

"I love you," Clark said. "Thank you for telling me… about you."

She chuckled. "You were going to find out," she said. "One day."

One day.

One day.

Impatience.

Promise.

Glorious promise.

Gruelling impatience.

"It's cooling off," Lois said. "If we're going to swim, it should be soon."

Clark nodded. "I deliberately brought you far enough east that the sun would be low in the sky, and you wouldn't risk getting burned."

She smiled, and her hand caressed his arm. "So, no need for more sunscreen."

"Probably not," he said, smiling despite how much he would have enjoyed rubbing the sunscreen into Lois's shoulders and back.

She stood, peeled off her tee shirt, and dropped her shorts, revealing a black one-piece that, compared to many swimsuits, was modest. The reaction of Clark's heart, though, was not.

He stood there, his eyes glued to her. She laughed and pushed gently at his shoulder. "Come on," she said. "Take off that shirt."

"Why?" he managed through a desiccated throat.

"Because I want to see your chest."

Robotically, he took off his shirt, still staring at Lois. He lifted his eyes and saw undisguised appreciation on her face.

"Wow," she breathed.

Clark's cheeks ballooned, and he let out a long breath. "Shall we swim?"

Lois nodded. "Yes," she said. "It suddenly got very hot around here."

He took her hand, and together they walked towards the water.

"Clark?"

"Uhm?"

"Just in case you were wondering," Lois said. "I love you more than I love Hawthorn."

* * *

Mayson's eyes filled with abundant tears.

The older woman offered a folded white handkerchief. "Thank you for coming," she said. "Thank you for telling me. I had no idea it had become so bad."

Mayson took the handkerchief. "He tries to hide it," she said, sniffling. "But he's always so pale, and more than once I've seen him rubbing his chest and grimacing like he's in pain."

Fear rolled across the older woman's eyes.

Mayson drove home her advantage. "I… I could never forgive myself if something happened to Perry."

"Nothing will happen. I will talk to him and make him see sense. I'll tell him he needs to retire."

Mayson's tears flowed again, and she shook her head. "No, Alice," she said. "That would destroy him. We need to find a way to lessen his workload."

"Can he employ someone new?"

"He could… but if anyone is going to take on some of Perry's work, it will have to be someone he knows and trusts."

"How about Clark?" Alice said. "I know Perry's missed him since he went to Australia."

"Clark will be home in two months," Mayson said. "But by then…"

Alice White put her hand on Mayson's arm—warm and motherly. "You leave it with me," she said. "Perry runs that newsroom, but I run this marriage. I'll tell him that unless he gets Clark home within a week, I will insist that he retires."

Mayson stared soulfully as she dabbed at her tears. "Thank you, Alice," she said. "You have no idea what this means to me."

Part 34

Lois finished the final edit and submitted her match report of the Melbourne-Carlton game. Lowly placed Melbourne had won. Carlton, in the Eight and looking ahead to finals, would be devastated.

"FLINDERS!"

Lois sighed. Reporting on a Carlton loss was like trying to navigate safely through a crocodile-infested river. She

stood, smiled with slightly exaggerated apprehension to Clark as she passed his desk, and entered Browny's office.

"Flinders," he said mildly. "How's everything going?"

"Good," Lois said, her suspicions immediately aroused by his tone. "I just submitted my story."

"Banjo was at Don Scott's press conference yesterday."

Lois paused, wondering if Browny was going to ask for inside information. "Yeah, I saw his story," she said noncommittally.

Browny picked up a pencil and absently tapped it on his desk. "Lois," he said, "the word on the street is that the merger group have no intention of backing down."

Lois processed his use of her name. If this was an information-seeking manoeuvre, it was heavily cloaked in something that looked like genuine concern. "I know," she said, careful to keep her tone free of attitude.

"Do you think this campaign—this 'Operation Payback' Scott outlined yesterday—has any chance at all?"

He wanted her *opinion*? "Yes," Lois said firmly. "I believe that if enough people care, we can avoid the merger."

"You really think you can raise a million dollars to pay back the debt?"

"Yes."

"Avoiding the merger isn't an end in itself."

"It's the first step."

"Flinders…" Browny paused. He seemed to dismiss whatever he'd been going to say. "Get out of here," he said gruffly. "I know you want to get to Waverley for the Hawthorn game tonight."

It seemed she wasn't going to have to face difficult questions. "Thanks, Browny," she said. "And… commiserations to Carlton."

He grunted. "Good luck to Hawthorn," he said. "With everything."

Lois hesitated for a tiny moment, overcome by the totally unexpected inclination to circle the desk and hug her editor. She shook her head and walked out of his door.

Clark turned at the sound of her footsteps. "You OK?" he asked with a nod to Browny's office.

"Yeah," Lois said slowly. "Except… I nearly hugged him."

"Browny?"

"Yeah. I thought he was going to ask questions about Operation Payback, but he didn't." She casually placed her hand on Clark's shoulder. "Have you finished your story? I'm hoping to get to Waverley in time for the first bounce."

Clark nodded. "All done. Let's go."

Lois stopped at her desk to shut down her computer, and then they walked out of the newsroom together.

"I bought you a present yesterday," she said.

"You did?" Clark said, breaking into one of his amazing smiles.

Lois nodded. "A beautiful, long, brown-and-gold woollen scarf," she said. "It's time you publicly declared your allegiance."

"You're expecting me to wear it?" he asked, managing to insert disbelief into his tone but completely failing to shut down the amusement that glinted in his eyes.

"You bet I'm expecting you to wear it," she retorted.

"And if I don't?"

"You'll be walking home from Waverley," she said severely. "Alone."

Clark's eyebrows lifted. "Walking?" he said with a wide grin.

"Walking," she confirmed.

He put his hand on the small of her back. "And why would I walk?" he said. "When there are other—faster and more convenient—ways to get across the city?"

"Because Clark Kent is too principled to wangle his way out of something he knows he deserves."

Clark chuckled. "I'll wear the scarf," he said.

Lois grinned up at him. "Smart move, big guy."

* * *

It was almost midnight when they arrived back at Lois's unit. She pushed open her door, and Clark followed her in. She turned to him, her smile still radiating excitement. "What a great game."

It had been. Hawthorn had won by ten goals. Their captain, Jason Dunstall, had kicked fourteen goals. And Lois had revelled in every moment of it.

"Jason Dunstall was amazing," Clark said. "He was unstoppable."

Lois grinned wider. "That's Piggy for you," she said with evident affection.

"Piggy?"

"He's fat."

Clark shot Lois a questioning look, and she giggled.

"OK, he's not fat," she amended. "Just a little bulky, but we still call him Piggy." She walked into the kitchen and filled up the electric jug. "Want coffee?"

He hesitated. "Do you know what time it is?" he asked.

"Yes," Lois said. "But I won't sleep yet anyway. I'm way too excited."

Clark followed her into the kitchen and corralled her body into the corner of the counter, although he stopped short of making any contact. "You got pretty animated at times tonight," he said, smiling at the memory.

Lois took an end of his scarf in each hand. "It feels just like it did when I was a kid," she said. "Somehow, I lost something. I got all professional and distracted by the game, and I lost much of the intrinsic enjoyment of simply barracking for Hawthorn." She laughed, her head back and her eyes shining. "This feels *so* good."

"If Richmond get beaten by Sydney tomorrow, Hawthorn will be back in the Eight."

"Oooh," Lois said. "You've been researching, Mr USA."

"And Sydney are on top of the ladder," he continued. "I can't see Richmond winning."

She sobered. "We play Sydney next week."

"Uhmm," Clark said, figuring it was safer not to speculate on Hawthorn's chances of beating the top team. "I figure playing finals is even more important this year."

Lois tugged slightly on his scarf, easing him closer. "If the merger does happen, I want us to eke out every last game, to create every last memory. But it's more than that. I'm hoping that some characteristic Hawthorn spirit on the field will cause people to question whether they really want to surrender our club to the AFL administrators."

"Who does Hawthorn play after Sydney?"

"St Kilda and then Melbourne."

"Melbourne?"

She nodded. "Melbourne. It's going to be a huge game. The last round, and it's possible we will have to win to make the finals. And all the merger stuff will be reaching fever pitch with the vote only two weeks after that."

And if the merger went ahead, it could be the last game Hawthorn ever played, Clark reflected dismally. He pushed away that thought. "You seem so much more positive," he said. "More hopeful that the merger will be avoided."

"I am," Lois said. "I've been feeling it since we all met with Scotty on Thursday, and the feeling was definitely there tonight. We haven't given up. We're still fighting. We're going to pay off our debts and build a sustainable membership. We're going to show them that they can't just take our club because it suits their vision for a balanced competition."

"Lois," Clark said. Then he stopped.

"What?"

"Perhaps you should have Milo instead of coffee."

She smiled. "That isn't what you were going to say."

Clark paused—he had so many reservations about what he was going to say. "Lois," he said. "The debt problem could be solved if Ultra Woman did an interview."

Her mouth dropped in shock. "Would Superman do an interview just for the money?" she demanded.

"It might depend on the cause," Clark said warily.

"No, Clark," Lois said. "I'm not going to use the fact that we're together in that way. I'm certainly not going to let someone like Mayson Drake think she has the right to probe into our lives. And if Hawthorn are going to make it, it has to be a team effort. It has to be many people doing whatever they can, not one person doing everything."

Clark nodded. "I know," he said. "But neither of us had mentioned it, and I thought we should at least air the possibility."

Lois took a firmer grip on his scarf, pulled him against her, and stretched up to meet him.

Her mouth touched his, and immediately, the touch intensified to feeling, and the feeling escalated to ravenous flames. Clark snatched her close and hungrily devoured the taste, and the essence, and the allure of Lois Lane.

The tip of her tongue seared deftly across his upper lip, razing his ability to think. Her hands on his neck felt like fire. Her mouth felt like an inferno. His heart pummelled, his muscles melded, and every instinct drove his need to experience more of this woman.

Then—and Clark was never sure who had backed away—they were apart, both rasping frayed breaths as their hearts pounded like the hooves of stampeding wild horses.

They stood in whirring suspension as they tried to claw back from the edge of control. Lois looked up to him, her lips slightly puffy from the imprint of his mouth. "What are we going to do?" she asked in a throaty whisper.

Clark had never felt so conflicted. "Lois," he said, "it's late. It's *really* late, and we both have games tomorrow."

A wry chuckle wafted on her next breath. "You sound like you're trying to talk me out of it," she said.

"I'm trying to talk both of us out of it," he said.

"Why?" she asked quickly. "What aren't you sure about? Us? Taking this a step further? Are you having second thoughts?"

Her doubts coursed a river of dismay through him. "Lois," he said as he put his forefinger under her chin and gently lifted her face, "remember what Barb said? I have no doubts at all about the 'who' and the 'why'. But I want to get the 'when' right."

"And now isn't the time?"

Clark shook his head. "No, honey," he said, even as hammers of regret bombarded his brain. "You deserve more than something that is squeezed between a late night and a busy day."

A shadow of uncertainty still lingered. "You'd tell me? If… if something had changed?"

Her eyes were begging for reassurance. "Lois," Clark said, his voice steady and sure, "if you're asking whether I'm suffering like any other man who's completely in love with a beautiful and sexy woman but hasn't taken that love to its physical conclusion… then, yes, I'm suffering."

She smiled as the uncertainty melted away. "Me, too," she said.

Those two words nearly undid him. He took a steadying breath. "Wednesday," he said, "I have the day off. I'll help you with whatever you're doing for Operation Payback during the day, but I'd like to take you on a date in the evening. Somewhere really nice." He grinned. "Do you realise I've never seen you in a dress?"

"Jeans are my standard clothing in winter." She smiled. "But dressing up sounds like fun."

"Then, let's do it," Clark said. He kissed her, briefly and with restrained chasteness, and then he smiled apologetically. "I have to go."

Lois nodded her acquiescence. "See you tomorrow."

"Lois, I love you."

"I know," she said softly. "And I love you. Always."

"Always."

* * *

"So, Clark, the bottom line is that I need you back in Metropolis. As soon as possible."

Clark's eyes closed, and his breath stopped as the world swam around him.

"Clark? Are you still there?"

"I'm still here, Chief."

"Alice says that if I can't get you home, I have to retire. And if I refuse, she'll move out. She says she won't stand by and watch me work myself into an early grave."

Perry had already outlined his position. Possibly, he was repeating it for emphasis. Or possibly, Clark's fragmented responses had made Perry think there was a problem with the telephone line.

"There's a flight leaving Melbourne late Wednesday afternoon," Perry said. "If you say it's OK, I'll confirm the booking."

"What about the Herald Sun?"

"The board has approved us paying the Herald Sun the equivalent to your salary for the remainder of the exchange program," Perry said. "I haven't spoken to Scardino, but if he would prefer to go home early, we could simply exchange back."

"Perry…"

"Is there a problem?" Perry asked. Clark could hear the surprise in his voice.

"I… I have commitments here."

"Commitments?" Perry said, disbelief raising his voice. "You knew you were only going to be there for three months."

"I have to be in Melbourne on September 16th," Clark said firmly.

Perry hesitated. "I thought you'd jump at the chance to get home early."

"I… I like it here."

"But, Clark, you're writing about *football*," Perry said. "That's an appalling waste of your talents."

"It's not just a game," Clark said.

There was silence, and Clark could feel Perry's bewilderment. "I just assumed it would be all right with you. I still feel bad because you were railroaded into going at such short notice. "

"There's someone I need to talk to," Clark said. "I can't give you a definite answer until I've spoken to her."

He heard Perry expel a long breath. "Oh," he said. "I'm sorry, Clark. I didn't realise."

"It's OK, Chief," Clark said. "It's just difficult, you know?"

"It didn't occur to me that you…"

"Have you been unwell?" Clark asked. "Is there a good reason why Alice is so worried?"

"I've been fine," Perry insisted. "I've been getting off the subway two stations early and walking to the Planet. I've been watching what I eat. I've lost nearly ten pounds, and I've been trying not to get stressed over deadlines and incompetent copyboys."

"Then why is Alice worried?"

"Beats me," Perry said in a tone of exasperation. "Yesterday, she stormed into my office, and without even a 'How do you do', she told me that if I didn't resign—immediately—she would be packing her bags and moving out. I was flummoxed but eventually managed to broker a deal that if you came home and I made you my assistant editor, I could continue—both as an editor and a husband."

Clark sighed deeply, quickly covering the phone with his hand. Mayson. He would bet his last dollar that Mayson had something to do with this. "How's Mayson been?" he asked.

"Mayson?" Perry said. "She's been OK the past couple of days. She had a harebrained idea about doing a story on Lex Luthor's latest charity initiative, but it was too similar to something she did recently. I told her so, and she just shrugged and walked out of my office without as much as a peep of argument."

Clark sighed. Yep, Mayson had engineered this. She wanted him back in Metropolis. "I'll call you in an hour and let you know," he said.

"I'm sorry," Perry said. "I honestly thought you'd be glad to get back to some real reporting."

"I'll call you," Clark said.

He slowly replaced the phone and squeezed the bridge of his nose. It was Tuesday morning. His flight was tomorrow afternoon.

Lois.

His heart contracted at the thought of telling her. Hurting her. Disappointing her.

Clark stood from his desk and crossed the newsroom.

"Hey, Rubber," Gazza called. "Where're you going?"

"Ah… I just got a call, and I need to follow up."

"Ooohh, Rubber," Gazza said, grinning widely. "Your first big footy scandal. What have you got? Injury? Possible trade deal? A coach about to be dumped?"

Clark forced a smile that he feared was woeful. "Gotta go," he said.

Gazza chuckled, and Clark walked out of the newsroom.

* * *

Clark waited gloomily in Yarra Bank Reserve. He had called Lois, and she had agreed to meet him here.

He'd tried to keep from alerting her to his downcast spirits, but he'd failed. She suspected bad news.

And bad news was all he had to give her.

Clark knew he couldn't refuse Perry. Not Perry. Not the editor who had given Clark his first big break, and since then had been unwavering in his support and encouragement, even when he'd felt the need to berate the young reporter.

He couldn't refuse Perry. Alice White wasn't a woman to make empty threats. If she left Perry, that would kill him more surely than any amount of stress. Perry couldn't resign—not now, not with the paper on the brink of being eclipsed by the Star. Not when his resignation would give the editor's position to Mayson Drake—or a figurehead who would be putty in her hands.

Clark heard the heartbeat he'd been listening for and stood from the park bench. He saw Lois on the other side of Bridge Road and slipped his glasses down his nose to get a clearer look at her face. What he saw felt like a spear to his heart.

She was worried. The traffic lights changed, and she crossed the road, her eyes flitting ahead, looking for him. Clark stepped out from between the trees. She saw him and ran the final few steps. "Clark?" she said. "What's wrong?"

"Perry called," he said.

"Oh, no," she said, her hand on his arm. "Is he all right? It's his health, isn't it?"

Clark shook his head. "Not really." He saw her alarm and hurried on. "Perry's wife, Alice, is worried that his workload is damaging his health. She threatened to leave him if he doesn't retire."

"Oh, Clark."

"There's one other option she'll accept."

Lois's eyes closed, but not before he'd seen her register what was coming. "That you go back," she said desolately.

He nodded and put both hands on her shoulders. "Lois, I'm sorry."

"When?"

"Tomorrow afternoon."

She made a small sound that could have been a sob, but she forced a smile that was completely incongruous with the anguish in her eyes. "We're not meant to ever have that date, are we?" she said.

"Lois," he said desperately. "Lois, we can still see each other."

"I know," she said. "But it will be different."

"I've told Perry I have to be in Melbourne on September 16th. Nothing will keep me from being with you for the vote."

She smiled sadly. "Thank you."

"I'm sorry," Clark said.

"There's nothing you can do," she said. Her hand wandered down his arm. "You have to be there for Perry."

"Thanks for understanding."

"I'll call Barb and cancel tonight."

"No, Lois."

"Clark, we can't spend out last evening together having dinner with Ron and Barb."

"Yes, we can, honey," he said. "I know how pleased you were when Barb called and invited us."

"But it's our last night," she said plaintively.

"We need to go," Clark said. "Your relationship with Ron and Barb is too important to risk it by cancelling at this late stage."

"They would understand."

"They don't know me. I want them to be happy about you being with me."

"Are you sure it's all right?"

"Yes," Clark said. "Once I'm back in the States, we won't be able to do anything like that."

"I'm going to miss you," Lois said.

"We still have a day and a half," he said.

She nodded forlornly. They both knew it wasn't enough. A lifetime together wasn't enough. A day and a half didn't even begin to salve their need to be together.

"Do you want to get a coffee?" Lois asked.

Hating that he was going to disappoint her again, Clark despondently shook his head. "I didn't even tell Browny I was going out. I need to get back. I need to tell him about this."

Lois reached for him and held him close for a long moment. "See you tonight," she said.

"Lois?" he said. "Lois, I hate seeing you sad. I said I wouldn't hurt you again."

"It's not your fault."

"You know I'll visit you? Every single chance I get?"

She nodded.

"I love you."

"I know," Lois said. "That's why this hurts so much." She kissed him and then turned away. "See you tonight."

Clark watched her walk away, wishing he could pick her up and take her to a place where they could be together forever.

Part 35

Clark knocked on Lois's door. When she opened it, he reeled as the vision before him stormed his senses. She was smiling demurely, her hair had been gathered up, fully accentuating the sleekness of her neck, and she was wearing a satiny red dress that boldly proclaimed her curvy femininity.

"Lois," he said, knowing he was scrambling for coherence.

Her smile broadened—which he took as an invitation to continue staring.

The dress sat wide enough on her shoulders to show off the creamy clarity of her throat and collarbones. The red fabric curved into her waist and then flowed past her hips to hang gracefully around her knees. Her perfectly shaped lower legs dipped delicately to tiny ankles.

Clark could see about a hundred places that he very definitely wanted to kiss.

"Lois," he said, relieved he had chosen to wear his dressier black trousers, a pale-blue business shirt, and his navy jacket. "You look incredible."

Lois completed what he now realised had been an equally rapt exploration of him. "Wow," she said. "Wow."

Clark stepped forward and enclosed her in his arms. She felt subtly different—soft and delightfully womanly—and she smelled like enchanting vanilla. "I'm glad I didn't wear jeans," he said.

"I figured if we can't have our date, at least I could dress up a little so you have something to remember when you're back in the States."

"Honey," he said, "even without this, you'll never be far from my mind." He reached into his pocket, withdrew a small cherry-coloured jewellery box, and held it towards her.

Her gaze leapt from the box to his eyes, and her smile began to curl.

"It's not what I'd really like to give you," Clark said. "But I hope it will match your outfit."

She hesitated, looking at the box as if she didn't quite believe it was for her.

"Take it," he encouraged.

Lois took the box and gently lifted the lid, revealing a necklace—its fine white gold chain looping through a petite pendant featuring pink-tinged diamonds clustered into a floral design. She looked up to Clark, her face illuminated with pleasure. "Aw, Clark."

"Do you like it?" he asked, although her expression made his question redundant.

"I love it."

"I know that when you think of Hawthorn, you don't think of flowers," Clark said. "But this was the closest I could get to a hawthorn flower."

She laughed. "This is a hawthorn?"

"I couldn't find anything in brown and gold," he said. "So I hoped this would suffice."

"It's beautiful." Lois removed the necklace from the box. She gave it to Clark and turned around.

He laid the pendant against her throat and fastened the clasp at her neck, discovering a few more places he wanted to decorate with his kisses. She turned, smiling and radiantly beautiful.

"Lois," Clark said, "the first moment I saw you, I was captivated, but tonight, I can't even look at you without my heart threatening to burst from my chest."

She smiled, a little shyly, at his compliment. "Let's go, shall we?" she said.

He nodded and offered her his arm. "My lady," he said.

* * *

Both Ron and Barb answered Lois's knock. The four of them stood for a suspended moment, and then Barb stepped forward and enfolded Lois in her arms in a manner so motherly that Clark felt a lump push into his throat. Ron put his arms around both of them, and as Clark watched them together, he realised something—as important as Hawthorn was to this 'family', nothing that happened to the football club was going to threaten the bonds they shared.

When their hug dissolved, Lois looked towards Clark. "Barb, Ron," she said. "This is Clark Kent. I love him."

Clark held out his hand to Barb, trying not to look too taken aback by Lois's introduction. Barb glanced at his hand, smiling widely, and then she reached across and gave him a brief hug. Barb was taller than his own mom—and slightly stockier—but there was something about her that reminded him of Martha Kent.

Clark shook hands with Ron and said, "Pleased to see you again, Ron."

"Thank you for coming," Barb said. "Lois told us that you have been unexpectedly asked to return home tomorrow. I'm really glad I've had this chance to meet you before you go."

"Thank you, Mrs Wilton."

"Barb," she said. "I'm called Barb by everyone except Seb."

His name hung awkwardly between them. "How is Seb?" Lois asked.

Ron moved behind them to shut the door. "He's well," he said. "He's working hard on the big exhibition next month. He's really inspired by the new opal coming out of Coober Pedy."

They moved into the warm, elegant house. "Come with me, Lois," Barb said. "It'll be just like old times, being in the kitchen together."

Lois giggled. "With you cooking and at the same time, trying to keep me from ruining everything?"

Barb smiled at the memories. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Clark's a whiz in the kitchen," Lois said as the women walked away.

When they'd gone, Ron looked at Clark. "Sit down," he offered.

Clark sat on the comfortably worn leather couch.

Ron perched at the other end. He folded his hands and contemplated them for a moment. "I've never had a daughter," he said, looking up. "So I'm new to this, but the first time Barb took me home to meet her parents, her father sat me down and asked me if my intentions towards his daughter were honourable." He laughed nervously. "I expect that is a bit out of fashion these days."

"I don't think caring about Lois's future is old-fashioned," Clark said. "And I know how much you and your wife mean to her." He smiled, trying to settle the slight flutters in his stomach. "So, if you were to ask, I would tell you that I love Lois with all of my heart and that my intentions towards her are entirely honourable. I want to spend my life making her happy, and I will never knowingly do anything that will hurt her."

Ron smiled with obvious relief. “I reckon I got my answer,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” Clark said.

“Ron,” he said. “Call me Ron.”

Clark nodded. “Thanks.”

“Thanks for looking after my girl.”

“All my life,” Clark vowed. “I will look after her all of my life.”

“Seb said you were a good ‘un.”

“He did?” Clark couldn’t keep the surprise from his question.

“He did.”

“Will they be all right? Lois and Seb?”

“Yeah,” Ron said with a wistful smile. “Seb adores Lois. He’s more distraught about them being on different sides than he is about anything that might happen to Hawthorn. He swaggers around like a big-shot surfie with his blond streaks and colourful clothing, but he falls off his perch mighty quickly if Lois so much as frowns in his direction.” Ron chuckled. “It’s been like that since he was fourteen years old.”

“And he approves of Lois being with me?” Clark asked.

Ron nodded. “He said you were a grouse bloke.” He grinned. “But that won’t mean a thing if you hurt Lois.”

“I won’t hurt her,” Clark said.

A call came, informing them the meal was ready, and both men stood and moved towards the delicious aromas emanating from the kitchen.

As they ate the hearty first course of beef stroganoff, Barb and Ron asked questions about Clark’s home and job. Neither had ever visited the United States, but their interest in his home country facilitated an easily flowing conversation. Clark wasn’t sure if there had been a prior agreement not to discuss the situation at Hawthorn, but the subject was never broached.

When they had cleared the plates, Barb brought a huge strawberry-and-cream concoction to the table.

Lois, probably seeing Clark’s reaction, grinned. “Do you know what it is?” she asked him.

“No,” he replied. “But I don’t need to know its name to predict that it’s going to taste delectable.”

“It’s a strawberry pavlova,” Barb told Clark.

He grinned at Lois. “Here’s another recipe I need to take home to my mom.”

Barb cut a generous wedge and expertly lifted it onto a dessert plate. “I’ll give you the recipe before you leave,” she said as she handed it to Clark.

“Thanks,” he said. Closer examination revealed that the pavlova was a meringue base, filled with lashings of thick cream and topped with plump strawberries.

He looked up to find Lois grinning at him. “This is a family favourite,” she said. “In summer, Barb makes them regularly.”

“I couldn’t resist tonight,” Barb said as she gave Lois a loaded plate. “Despite the weather, you being here seemed like a good enough reason to make a pav.”

“All we need is Seb here, and it’d be perfect,” Lois said. She poked her spoon through the creamy mountain on her plate and then looked up at Barb. “Is Sebby OK?”

Barb nodded. “He’ll be fine. This exhibition of his is going to be huge. It’ll raise the Sebastian Stone profile—not only here, but overseas as well.”

Lois turned to Clark. “Seb calls himself Sebastian Stone,” she explained. “And his boutique jewellery business is called ‘Stoned’.”

Clark decided to leave unsaid the immediate connotation that sprang to his mind. Instead, he filled his spoon and savoured his first taste of pavlova—which was even better than he’d anticipated.

“In high school, one of Seb’s best mates overdosed,” Barb said quietly. “Since then, Seb has campaigned against drugs. He called his business ‘Stoned’, hoping to highlight the issue. He donates a percentage of his takings to drug rehabilitation and displays anti-drug posters in his shop.”

“That’s a great thing to do,” Clark said.

Lois nodded. “That’s Seb,” she said gravely. “He dresses like a kid. Most of the time, he acts like a lair with not a thought in his head beyond catching waves, but when he cares deeply about something, he just quietly goes about trying to make things better.”

Clark squeezed Lois’s hand, trying to communicate his hope that the proposed merger wouldn’t damage her relationship with Seb. She smiled in response.

Then silence fell, probably in tribute to the pavlova.

When they had finished eating, Clark helped Barb clear away the meal while Ron and Lois made the coffee. Clark felt as if he had known the Wiltons for a lot longer than a few hours. The atmosphere was reminiscent of the farmhouse kitchen in Smallville where so many of his favourite childhood memories were centred.

After coffee—with hugs and thanks—Lois and Clark left the warm, convivial atmosphere and drove back to Richmond, feeling like they were slipping out from under an insulating cloak that had protected them from tomorrow's separation.

"Are you OK?" Clark said.

"Yeah," Lois said. "I had such a good time tonight. It was great being with Ron and Barb again. But I'm dreading tomorrow."

"I feel exactly the same," Clark said. "I'm so glad I was able to get to know them. But tomorrow…"

She nodded and gave him a wan smile. "There's nothing we can do about it."

"I've been thinking about the practicalities," Clark said. "Very early morning Metropolis time is early evening Melbourne time. I could leave Metropolis about five in the morning and get here about seven in the evening."

"And then stay until you need to get back for work?"

"Yeah. So hopefully, we'll get a few hours together."

"Depending on Superman."

"Yeah."

Lois glanced across to him. "Won't you get tired? Missing all that sleep?"

"I'd rather miss sleep than miss seeing you."

She smiled. "Do you get tired?"

"Not easily. Getting up at five certainly isn't going to be any hardship at all."

"Thanks," she said. "I'm guessing you won't come in the suit?"

"No," Clark said. "We can't risk Superman being seen outside your unit."

"We also can't risk Esmeralda seeing Clark outside my unit."

"Is it all right with you if I just come in? At superspeed?" Clark asked. "Having me suddenly appear might be a bit off-putting at first."

"It'll be fine," Lois assured him. "I assume you'll check to make sure I'm alone?"

"Yeah. Is that OK?"

"Sure, it's OK." She grinned. "Though if anyone is in my unit around the time you're expected, I'll be doing everything I can to get rid of them."

"Good," Clark said. Talking about being with Lois lifted his spirits a few degrees, but nothing could alleviate the sting of leaving her.

"Ron and Barb liked you a lot," Lois said. "I just wish Seb could've been there."

"He sounds like a good guy."

"He is." She pulled up at a red traffic light and looked across at him. "I have another question."

"Ask away."

"When we were talking about Seb calling himself Sebastian Stone, I wondered if you have another name. Do you know your name from Krypton?"

"Kal-El," Clark said.

"Kal-El?" Lois repeated.

"My father's name was Jor-El, and my mother was Lara."

"So, 'El' is like a surname?"

"Yes. I am from the House of El."

The light turned green, and Lois accelerated forward. "How do you know this?" she asked. "Did Jor-El and Lara put notes in the spacecraft?"

Clark smiled. "Not notes exactly. There was a globe with me in the spaceship. My parents - Martha and Jonathan kept it for me. It did nothing for years; then, when I was fifteen, it spoke to me."

"Really?"

"It was a recording of my father. He told me about the coming destruction of their planet and how they believed that sending me to Earth was my only chance of survival. Everything I know about my heritage comes from the globe."

"Do you still have it?"

"Yes. It spoke five times in all, over a period of six months. Then, it never spoke again."

"How wonderful that your biological parents found a way to give you some of the answers you needed."

"Yeah."

"I'm glad you know."

"So am I. It meant I didn't feel so"—Clark grinned suddenly—"alienated."

Lois smiled and put her hand in his. "Do you still feel alienated?" she asked. "Even just a little bit?"

Clark squeezed her hand. "No," he said. "Different, yes. Alienated, no."

"But you used to?"

"Yes."

"When did it change? When the globe began speaking to you?"

"No, after that." Clark smiled at the memory. "I was at Torquay beach, and an amazing lady put her arms around my neck and looked into my eyes and told me she loved me. That was the moment when all my differences no longer mattered."

Lois smiled. "Aw, Clark," she said. "That's such a sweet thing to say."

"I'm not just saying it," he said. "It's the absolute truth."

They pulled into the driveway of her unit, and Clark jumped from the Jeep to open Lois's door. She stepped out and into his arms.

He bent low and kissed just in front of her ear. The vanilla scent was strong there. "I'm not coming in," he said.

He felt her disappointment. "You're not?"

"No," he said. "If I come in, I'm not sure I would have the strength to leave."

She paused. "OK," she said.

"Thank you."

"Kiss me goodnight?"

He didn't reply verbally. Instead, he kissed her. Having firmly set his boundary—he would not go into her unit tonight—Clark gave in to the compulsion to brush a question along her lip with his tongue. Instantly, Lois's mouth opened in dizzying enticement.

Clark inched forward into her mouth and was met by her tongue. They indulged in an exploratory dance that caused the world to spin. He put one hand on her neck, loving the touch of her skin under his palm. He kissed her extensively… intimately… joyously… yet with a tinge of desperation.

When their kiss subsided to a poignant conclusion, Clark clutched Lois against his body. Her heart was thumping in loud unison with his. "I have to go," he murmured against her ear.

"I know," she said, her tone laden with regret. "I will never forget that kiss."

"Me either." Clark traced the silky outline of her neck with the pads of his fingers, revelling in her exquisite softness. "Thank you for tonight—for dressing up and letting me meet your family. The memory of how you looked will stay with me forever."

"Thank you for the Hawthorn necklace."

He kissed her and spoke without fully disconnecting his mouth from hers. "Think of me whenever you look at it."

"I'll be thinking of you all the time."

He kissed her again and moved away to allow her to lock the Jeep.

At her doorway, Lois turned. "I love you, Clark," she said.

He kissed her one final time, and she went into her unit.

Clark turned and walked away. Before he arrived home, he realised that he didn't want to face packing up the unit that had been his home for five weeks. Getting out his suitcase would accentuate the reality that he was leaving Melbourne… leaving Lois.

He found a dark corner and shot up into the air.

* * *

"She sure is pretty."

Clark, in the Superman suit, looked down into the face of the elderly woman he had lifted from the overturned bus.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "Did you get a knock to your head?"

She gave him a surprisingly youthful grin, full of zest for life. "No," she said. "My ankle got caught under the seat in front, but that's all. And she sure is pretty."

"Who's pretty?" Clark asked as he carried her to the area where the paramedics were checking the injured.

"Your girl. Ultra Woman."

"Oh." Clark felt the beginnings of colour fan his cheeks. "Ah… thank you."

"You're very lucky."

Clark permitted himself a ghost of a smile. "Yes, I am."

She patted his shoulder in maternal fashion. "I think it's wonderful that you've found someone. Just be happy—you and your girl—and don't worry what anyone else thinks."

"Thanks." He gently lowered her to a waiting seat.

She detained him with a hand on his arm. "We were talking about it at the Bridge Club, and we all think it's wonderful that you're here. Having a girlfriend means it's more likely you'll stay."

Clark crouched beside the woman. "Thank you," he said.

She smiled again. "Thanks for getting me out of the bus."

Clark straightened. "Look after that ankle."

"I will," she promised.

Clark nodded farewell and returned to the bus.

Later, as he flew back to Melbourne, he thought again about his conversation with the elderly lady. She had been the first to mention Ultra Woman, but not the only one. Others had spoken about her. Some had asked questions. Some had made comments.

But, without fail, they had all been positive, welcoming towards him and supportive of him being with Ultra Woman.

Being Superman was no longer something he endured in order to help people. It was quickly becoming something he wanted to do, something he enjoyed.

And it was all because of Lois.

* * *

Clark clung to Lois as the final call for his flight rang in his ears. The *final* final call.

He held her, empathising with her inner battle to keep her tears contained as he looked into her glistening eyes. “I’ll be back as soon as I can,” he promised.

Moving away, he ran his hand down her outstretched arm. Their hands met, arms extending to the furthest point, and soon, only their fingertips were touching. “I love you, Lois,” Clark said.

He took the step that severed their connection.

Her first tear broke free and skittered down her cheek. “I love you,” she whispered.

Then he turned and walked into the jet bridge.

* * *

Twenty-four hours later, Clark alighted from the plane at Metropolis International airport. He felt emotionally tired and physically drained from the hours of confinement.

And he missed Lois.

As he left the terminal, he pulled out his cell phone and turned it on. There was a message from Lois. He opened it and read.

I love you, big guy.

He smiled. He missed her so much he could feel his heart twisting.

He waited for his battered suitcases to appear and then walked towards the cabs. Passing a newsstand, he glanced in that direction, automatically seeking the *Daily Planet*.

His eyes, however, didn’t get past the *Metropolis Star*.

Emblazoned on page one was a huge colour photograph of Superman and Ultra Woman—posing after the interview.

And the headline read ‘SUPER WEDDING!‘

Part 36

Clark pulled his wallet from his pocket and rummaged through it for some US currency. He paid for a copy of the *Metropolis Star* and went to a discreet corner to read it.

The paper was offering Superman and Ultra Woman an all-expenses-paid wedding.

Clark read it quickly, his shock escalating with each paragraph. The story outlined the gala event in extravagant detail and had been written by Linda King, who apparently hadn’t felt any need to consult with the proposed bride and groom.

She suggested September 7th—the weekend of the Metropolis Summer Festival.

She’d enlisted ‘official sponsors’—florists, caterers, jewellers, wedding attire rental…

She had procured—from the office of the President, no less—official ratification for the legalities of the union.

She had tentatively booked the Lexor Ballroom for the reception. She thought a live band would be most appropriate, with the guests dancing long into the night.

She recommended the honeymoon suite at the Lexor Hotel for the wedding night.

The Metropolis Star awaited a reply from Superman and Ultra Woman.

Clark stood, his physical stillness in stark contrast to both the bustle around him and the turmoil within.

Why would the Star do this?

Publicity, he guessed. If they organised and paid for the event, they were guaranteed the exclusive.

Not for one moment had he envisaged that Lois attending the interview would lead to something like this.

His eyes gravitated to the picture of Lois. Even with the pink mask covering at least a third of her face, she was beautiful. He missed her. He yearned for her. He glanced at his watch, still set to Melbourne time. It was just past six in the evening. She wouldn’t be home yet. Or would she?

His longing swarmed around his heart like a relentless throng and propelled him to a decision.

It was 4am local time. He definitely had time for a trip to Melbourne.

Clark hurried out of the airport. Less than a minute later, he landed on the balcony of his apartment. He looked through the glass and groaned. A big chocolate cake embellished with the words ‘Welcome Home’ lay in wait on his

counter. A glitzy pink envelope leant against it, providing a splash of unwelcome disparity in his muted colour scheme.

Once in his apartment, Clark scanned the envelope for less than a second. It was, as he had suspected, from Mayson.

He surveyed his apartment. He'd never heard whether Dan had continued staying with Perry or if he'd found alternative accommodation, but no one had approached Clark about staying in his apartment.

After five weeks, it should be dusty. The air should be slightly stale. Instead, there was every indication that it had been recently cleaned.

Mayson. Again. She'd probably paid a cleaner. Mayson Drake would never lower herself to pick up a duster.

Clark really needed to change his locks.

But he'd done that once before, and she still managed to find ways into his apartment.

Clark stashed his suitcase in the concealed cubicle behind his closet. Initially, it had been the ideal hiding spot for his Superman suits, but now he had the spares stowed in the roof space. He didn't trust that a fake wall would be sufficient to keep Mayson from snooping.

He scanned for any other indications of her presence and felt unreasonably relieved that she hadn't sunk to installing surveillance equipment.

He showered, shaved, and dressed in his clothes for work at the Planet—smart charcoal trousers, a crisp white business shirt, a floral tie he particularly liked, and a grey jacket.

With a final frown at the chocolate cake, he returned to the balcony.

He wanted to be with Lois. He needed her.

A minute later, he landed, unlocked her door, and entered her unit at a speed undetectable to the human eye.

From her bedroom, he heard the music of her heartbeat. "Lois?" he said.

A delighted squeal sounded as she rushed forward and charged into his arms.

His eager mouth found hers, and he kissed her with the hunger that had built up during the long hours apart.

"I missed you… so much," he said when their first rush of kisses finally abated enough to make speech possible.

"I missed you," she said between kisses.

"I landed half an hour ago… couldn't stay away."

"How long… until you have to be at work?"

"It won't matter if I'm late… long flight."

"We have… some time," she said.

"Uh-huh." With considerable effort, Clark relinquished her mouth.

"Mmm," Lois said appreciatively. "You look very smart." Her fingers explored the lapel of his jacket. "Do you have a date?"

"Yes," he said. "With you." He glanced down at his clothes. "Actually, I'm dressed for work."

She grinned. "What? No jeans?"

"Not in Perry's newsroom." He gently slid the tip of his finger along her jaw. "I *had* to see you; I couldn't stay away a moment longer. And if I keep getting welcomed like that…"

"I was thinking about you," Lois said with a smile. "As I came home, I was hoping you'd be able to visit me." She gestured to the counter where a stack of containers suggested Chinese takeout. "Want something to eat?"

"Sure," Clark said. "Thanks."

Lois stepped from his embrace and crossed to her kitchen.

"Lois, honey," Clark said. "There's something we need to talk about."

Her progress stalled, and she looked questioningly at him. "Something good?" she said. "Or something else?"

Clark faced her across the counter. "Something totally unforeseeable," he said.

She gazed at him, a small smile hovering through her curiosity. "Mayson thinks you should come back to Melbourne?" she said. Despite her light tone, Clark could hear both hope and apprehension in her words.

He took the copy of the *Metropolis Star* from under his jacket, straightened it, and held it out to her. He anxiously watched her face as she took in the picture and processed the headline.

"A wedding?" she gasped, looking up from the paper.

Clark nodded. "When I landed in Metropolis, this was on the newsstand."

"What—exactly—are they suggesting?"

"That Superman and Ultra Woman get married." He half grimaced, half allowed a glimmer of his smile to show. "Their shout."

"They want to pay?" Lois said incredulously. "For everything?"

He nodded.

"And, in return, they get the exclusive?"

"It's not stated specifically in the story, but I figure that is what Linda King and Preston Carpenter are angling for."

The food forgotten, Lois wandered to the couch. She sat down and stared wordlessly at the front page.

Clark sat next to her and put his arm across her shoulders. "What are you thinking?" he asked.

Lois slowly shook her head. "I don't know," she said. "It's a lot to take in. I thought doing the interview would be the beginning and the end of it. I never thought they would do this." She rested her head on his shoulder.

"Don't let it upset you," Clark said softly. "We don't have to do anything."

Lois didn't respond, and the silence settled around them. Then, suddenly, she lurched away from his side, dropped the paper to the couch, and twisted to face him. "Clark, would you do something for me, please?"

"You know I would do anything for you, Lois."

"I want you to be totally honest with me," she said. "I want to ask a question, and I want you to answer truthfully."

"OK," he agreed.

Lois put her hand over his and squeezed. "What do you want to do about this?"

"I want to do what you—"

"Please don't say you want to do what I want. I know that. I want to know what *you* want."

"I want to marry you," he said.

She jolted back, but then the grin that he loved so much oozed through her shock. She chuckled, and her hand rose to curl gently along his jaw. "I like it when you're direct," she said.

"That doesn't mean I think we should accept the offer."

"Why not?"

Clark sifted through his mind, certain there were multiple good reasons—obvious reasons—why they couldn't get married as Superman and Ultra Woman. However, now that it came to actually vocalising those reasons, Clark found they had mysteriously dried up. "We… we…"

Lois grinned and captured his eyes in her look of love and laughter. "Let's consider all the options and decide which one is best for us," she said.

Her smile, her touch, and her love-drenched eyes made it difficult to concentrate—even on the subject of their wedding. "What are our options?"

"We could politely refuse the offer," Lois said. "We could say that Ultra Woman's appearance was always intended to be a one-off and both Superman and Ultra Woman wish for her to remain in the background."

"Is that what you want?" Clark asked.

"I'm certainly not hankering for a big public wedding," Lois said slowly. Her contemplative mood broke with a sudden burst of laughter. "And I've never thought about getting married in a cape, but…"

"But?"

"But I think that to refuse their offer would seem like Superman is retreating. I think we could lose the ground we gained through the interview."

Clark smiled at her use of the word 'we'. Everything about being a super-powered alien was so much easier… so much better… with Lois.

"And, realistically, it's the only way we can get married," she said. "For now, anyway."

"You're willing to accept their offer?" he asked in surprise.

"I'm willing to," Lois said cautiously. "But there would be some stipulations."

"Such as?"

"How many people come, who gets invited, if 'guests' have to pay, where the money goes, what outfits we wear," Lois said, ticking them off on her fingers. "I wouldn't be comfortable with this being any more of a media extravaganza than it has to be."

"So," Clark said, still trying to grasp that they were discussing this as if it were a viable possibility, "we tell them we want it kept simple and…"

"We definitely don't want it to be a high-society event for the upper crust of Metropolis," Lois said. "It has to be in the morning—that'll be nighttime here, and it'll also keep a lid on Linda King's more extravagant ideas."

"Lois…" The euphoria of being married to Lois was threatening to elevate Clark into the intoxicating realm where the impossible became possible. However, he needed to slow down… needed to re-establish perspective. "Would it seem as if Superman and Ultra Woman were endorsing the companies involved? I'm not sure about that… at the very least, I'd need to know they are ethical companies."

"If we refuse a lot of the extras that Linda proposed, there will be very few companies involved," Lois said. "I'd be happy to be married in a park, but the Star will probably insist on somewhere more private than that. Really though, all we need is a venue and a celebrant."

"Who would be the guests?" Clark asked.

Lois winced with regret. "I don't think the Star would allow anyone from the Planet to come," she said. "None of your friends will be there."

"And, of course, none of your friends will be there either."

"And your parents will miss it, too."

It *was* impossible. They couldn't do this. "Lois," Clark said. "You would miss out on so much… This can't be how you imagined it would be."

"No," she admitted with a small smile. "I couldn't have imagined it quite like this."

"Lois, it wouldn't be anything like you've dreamed. Not one single thing." He tried to smile. "We can't do this."

"Yes, we can," she said. "Who needs the dress, and the flowers, and the bevy of bridesmaids, and a heap of family I hardly know cooing around me?" She kissed him briefly. "What I dreamed about was the man waiting for me at the top of the aisle, and you, Mr Kent—you are everything I have ever wanted."

"Lois…" He wanted to kiss her. He wanted to ease her back onto the couch, and follow her, and find her mouth and explore every part of it—inside and out. "We need"—Clark cleared his throat and hauled his mind away from the lure of her lips—"to consider all the details."

"Are you concerned that giving the Star such a big scoop will seriously hurt the Planet?"

"Not really," he said after consideration. "Historically, the Planet is a much more serious newspaper than the Star. I'm not sure Perry would want to splash a wedding across his front page."

"And as much as we want to help the Planet, having Superman establish links with the Star will avoid any possible connection with Clark Kent."

"Yeah," he said thoughtfully.

"As for the details, some of them are obvious," Lois said easily.

"They are?"

"For starters, we wouldn't accept the wedding clothes Linda proposed. It would be Superman and Ultra Woman. Therefore, we would wear the suits. Secondly, I think we should refuse everything other than the actual wedding—no reception, no celebration after, no big dance. They can do it if they want to—perhaps as a charity event—but we won't be there."

Clark grimaced. "Lois, this isn't even going to seem like a wedding."

She grinned cheekily. "Ah, but no reception means we can get to the honeymoon bit so much quicker."

Clark felt a cataclysm of emotion, and heat, and shock, and desire whirl through his body, rendering him incapable of managing anything approaching an intelligent response.

Lois laughed aloud and took his hand in hers. "You have all those powers," she said. "But the one thing you are superbly good at is making things as difficult as possible for yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"You want to marry me. You want to be with me. In fact, I'd bet you've dreamed about taking me and doing what most newlyweds do the night of their wedding."

Clark gulped as he felt the colour rise to his face.

Lois smiled and gently poked his chest. "Haven't you?" she demanded.

Clark nodded.

"But now, because this is somewhat… unorthodox… you're going to torment yourself that it isn't fair to me and that it wouldn't be a 'real' wedding."

"Lois, I don't want you to miss out on anything. I want to take you somewhere romantic and propose and give you a ring and let you plan the wedding you want—not to be married in a staged event that, ultimately, is little more than a publicity stunt orchestrated by a newspaper."

"Can't we do that anyway?" Lois said. "Can't we have the proposal and the wedding and the honeymoon? Can't we do that as Lois and Clark once we've had time for the future to become clearer?"

"You think we should get married twice?"

"I think this is perfect," she stated. "Lois and Clark can't get married yet. I need to stay in Melbourne—depending on what happens at the vote. If we don't merge, I have to help Hawthorn rebuild. I can't just walk away."

"And I would never ask you to."

"But Clark Kent has to be in Metropolis. Perry needs you. The Daily Planet needs you. Metropolis needs Superman. And even though we know we can still see each other as often as you are able to dash across the Pacific, no one else can know that."

"You seem to have a lot of this worked out," Clark teased gently.

"It didn't take much working out," Lois said. "Not if you push away all the extraneous stuff and just concentrate on what's important."

Clark felt his smile broaden. "What's important to you?" he asked.

She returned his smile. "I want to be with you. I want to be married to you."

Clark reigned in his unruly smile and forced his mind back to his uncertainties. "It's possible it won't end with the wedding," he warned. "What if Superman and Ultra Woman get asked to make appearances together? Perhaps support charity events?"

"We'll consider each situation separately."

"Lois, I feel like I'm dragging you into a world of stealth. If I'm going to be Superman, I need to live two lives. But if we do this, you'll have to live two lives, too. I'm not sure that's fair to you."

"Clark, life is about making the best of the situation you find yourself in."

"But you don't have to find yourself in this situation. You're—"

"Human?" she asked, her eyes serious. "Is that what you were going to say? I'm human? Normal? Therefore, I can escape this, so I should? You, on the other hand, you're what? Alien? Not normal? So you're stuck with it?"

Clark could sense she was a little riled and decided to tread carefully. He shrugged slightly and offered an appeasing smile.

"I thought you said you wanted to marry me," she said with unmistakable challenge in her tone.

"I do," he said quickly, wondering how she'd managed to leap to that. "More than anything, I want to marry you."

A ghost of her smile appeared, soothing his alarm. "I thought marriage meant my world becomes your world, and your world becomes my world."

"It does."

"If we do this, will you—Clark Kent, Superman, Kal-El, Rubber, whatever name you happen to be using—will you be marrying me—Lois Lane, Ultra Woman, Flinders?"

"Yes."

"And will you mean it when you commit yourself to me for the rest of our lives?"

"I'll mean it with all of my heart."

"So, we'll be married," Lois proclaimed staunchly. "You and me. The clothes, the names, what everyone else thinks—none of that matters. What matters is what is between you and me. What we know to be the truth. And the truth is that you love me, and you know I love you." She smiled at him through glistening eyelids. "I'm not doing this unless we both accept that it's for real."

Clark felt a great gush of happiness sweep over him. If he had all the time in the world and every word from every language he'd ever learnt, he would never be able to form a sentence that would adequately describe how he felt about her. "I love you," he said.

"And I love you," she said.

"Honey," Clark said, knowing this was the last of his resistance, "they're suggesting the wedding be in three weeks."

"Good."

"You're willing to marry me in *three weeks*?"

Lois grinned. "Is that too fast for you, big guy?" she teased. "Are you struggling to keep up?"

"Yes. No. But—"

"But what, Clark?"

"This is bigger than Lois marrying Clark. If Ultra Woman marries Superman, we can't walk away from that. You need to think about it—*really* think about it—before you commit to something that will affect the rest of your life."

She took her hand from his neck and rested her chin on it, staring ahead at his chest. "OK," she announced a second later. "I've thought about it."

"And?" Clark said, feeling his grin push for release.

"And I want to marry you," Lois said. "In three weeks. With both of us spectacular in spandex."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure I want to marry you," she said. "And I'm also sure that if you keep asking me if I'm sure, I'm likely to smack your teeth in."

"Lois, honey," Clark said, grinning widely. "That would be a very bad idea."

"OK. Maybe I'll just kiss you. Passionately. Until you beg for mercy."

He had no retort. So, he just looked at her—and grinned with bubbling joy. "We're getting married," he said wondrously.

"In three weeks," she added.

"Happy?" he asked.

"Deliriously."

"I love you, Lois."

"I love you, Clark."

He leant forward and kissed her… clumsily, because he just couldn't stop smiling.

* * *

Lois retrieved the plate from the microwave, picked up the other plate from the bench, and took it to Clark, who was sitting on the couch.

He looked up to her with his smile, but it was so much more than a mere expression. It radiated his happiness and declared his contentment and proclaimed his excitement.

The feeling of sharing a secret—a secret just for them—was strong. And every time their eyes met, they just couldn't help breaking into wide smiles.

Lois had no doubts. None at all. From the moment she had grasped the possibilities of the offer, she had realised this was too good an opportunity to let slip.

She sat next to Clark, and they began eating. "How was your day?" he asked.

"Operation Payback is slowly gaining momentum," she said. "But it's still early days in what will be a long campaign."

"Have you heard anything from Browny and the boys?"

"I dropped in today to check my games for this weekend. The office was abuzz with news—Browny has employed a new footy reporter." Lois stared ahead as her thoughts eddied through her mind. "You know," she speculated, "Browny thinks the merger will go ahead, and he thinks I'll go to Metropolis to be with you. That's why he's got this new bloke."

"Has he said that?"

"No," Lois admitted. "And he's made it clear that he'll keep my job open at least until the vote."

"He's a good editor. He knows how hard it is to replace a great reporter."

She smiled. "Thanks."

"Has the new guy started yet?" Clark asked.

"Not yet. Apparently, he's a Croweater."

"Excuse me?"

Lois giggled at the confusion on Clark's face. "A Croweater," she said in a tone that implied her meaning should now have become completely clear.

Clark grinned and pointed his fork at her. "And what is a Croweater?" he asked. "It can't be someone who eats crows."

"Not anymore," Lois said. "A Croweater is a South Australian—in this case, someone from Adelaide."

"Oh," Clark said with a smile. "Is there a name for Victorians?"

"We're Vics."

"That's not particularly imaginative," he said.

"Western Australians are called Sandgropers."

"Are those names considered derogatory?"

"Not at all," Lois said. "The new bloke—Chris Torrens is his name—will probably be quite proud of being a Croweater. South Australians are a parochial bunch. Their favourite saying is 'kick a Vic'."

"The newsroom could be an interesting place," Clark predicted with a grin.

"Not as interesting as it used to be," Lois said soberly.

"What happened?"

"You left."

Clark took her hand in his. "I'm going to miss you so much, honey," he said. "It was wonderful seeing you every day."

"Yeah," she said. "It was. I was thinking about it earlier. I wish we could have those five weeks back again."

"Would you do anything differently?"

Lois grinned. "You bet I would. I would stop on the way home from the airport and inform you that I intended to overlook your gorgeousness and my deep-seated suspicion of handsome men, and then I would throw away all my inhibitions and kiss you."

"Now *that* would have been some welcome to a new city."

They shared another smile; a smile with layers of meaning—the enjoyment of each other's company, the intimacy of being together when no one else thought it was possible, and the promise of their future.

"Is Dan coming home to Melbourne early?" Clark asked.

"Yeah," Lois replied. "In about a week. That bit has worked well. He'll be able to see Fitzroy's last game in Melbourne and their last game ever, which will be in Perth. I reckon Browny will send him over there for Round 22."

"Are you looking forward to seeing him again?"

Lois shrugged. “Yes—because he’s my friend. And no—because I know things will be strained between us.”

“I figure there was never anything between Dan and Mayson.”

“I guess not,” Lois said. “Lucky for Dan, huh?”

Clark nodded. “I went to my apartment for a few minutes and discovered she’d left a chocolate cake there for me.”

“She goes into your apartment? You gave her a key?”

“No, I didn’t give her a key,” Clark declared. “I used to keep the spare key under the front doormat, but when she kept going into my apartment, I removed it. She kept coming in, so I changed the locks. Even that didn’t deter her.”

“She knows how to pick locks?”

“Apparently,” Clark said glumly.

Lois reached over and squeezed his arm. “We can deal with Mayson,” she said. “She doesn’t have anything that can hurt us.”

“I am going to make my position very clear,” Clark said. “I’m going to take the chocolate cake into the office for everyone to share. And I’m going to tell her that nothing has changed and we will never be together.”

“Are you going to tell her you have someone else?”

Clark hesitated for a moment. “No,” he said. “I’ve thought about what you said. From what I’ve seen, this wedding is going to be huge news. I want to avoid all parallels between Superman and Clark Kent.”

“In Linda’s story, she assumed Superman and Ultra Woman had been together for a considerable time.”

“Yeah,” Clark agreed. “I know I’m probably being over cautious, but I think the less said, the less chance we will have to deal with something unforeseen. Living two lives—there’s always the possibility that someone will notice inconsistencies.” His brown eyes settled in hers. “And with you involved in this, it’s even more important that we’re careful.”

“Perhaps Mayson will back off now that you’ve had some time apart. Perhaps the cake was meant as a peace offering.”

“Maybe,” he said.

“You don’t think so?”

“There was a card as well as the cake. It wasn’t possible to misinterpret her meaning.”

“Do you think this could be a problem?” Lois asked. “Do you think she’ll keep going to your apartment and realise how little time you spend there?”

“Maybe.” Clark shrugged and managed a smile. “But Metropolis is a big city,” he said. “Mayson might discover that I’m not in my apartment, but that doesn’t mean she’ll be able to find out where I am.”

“If she tries to track you, there’s a chance she’ll notice that the times when she can’t find you coincide with Superman’s appearances.”

“She hasn’t realised that yet. Hopefully, she won’t.”

Lois put her plate on the lamp stand and rested her hand on Clark’s knee. “Don’t worry about Mayson,” she said.

“Don’t you worry either,” he said. “I can deal with her.”

“Do you think she had anything to do with Perry asking you to go home?”

“Yes, I do,” Clark said. “I can’t prove it, but my instinct is that she was involved somehow.”

“Perhaps she went to Perry’s wife.”

“Yeah,” he said gloomily.

Lois knew the reason behind the dip in his spirits. “You have to leave,” she said quietly.

Clark nodded sombrely. “Yeah,” he said. “I wish I could spend the evening with you and help you with Operation Payback tomorrow.” He stood. “I hate that our relationship is going to be a series of ‘goodbyes’.”

“The flip side is the series of ‘hellos’,” Lois said. “The best moment today was when you called my name.”

He smiled. “You know I’ll come whenever I can.”

“Are you going to respond to the wedding offer?”

“Not yet,” he replied. “Think it over some more. When I come next time, we’ll work out the details, and if you still want to go ahead, I’ll go and see Preston Carpenter.” Lois nodded, and Clark took her into his arms. “Bye, honey.”

She kissed him. “Bye, big guy.”

“I miss you every moment I’m not with you.”

“I miss you, too.”

He broke away from her with obvious reluctance. Then, there was a gush of wind, and he was gone.

* * *

Banjo Barton was pretending to read the document on his computer screen, but he—like everyone else—was completely gobsmacked by the most startling turn of events.

There was a woman in the newsroom. A blonde, leggy woman who looked like she belonged in the fashion pages, not the footy department.

Bluey had already approached her, and she'd told him she had an appointment with Mr Brown in ten minutes. She had politely refused Bluey's offer to make her a cup of coffee and seemed disinclined to offer any further information.

Now she stood there—apparently waiting for Browny.

Who was she?

And why was she here?

Browny stepped from his office, saw her, and motioned for her to come over. They spoke in low tones for a few moments and then disappeared behind a firmly closed door.

Ten minutes later—ten long minutes when the total productivity of the newsroom was limited to speculation about exactly who *she* was—they emerged.

Browny stepped forward. "Listen up, everyone," he said. "I'd like you to meet our new reporter—Chris Torrens."

Banjo felt a collective gasp resonate around the newsroom. Flinders was one thing—despite being a woman, she didn't look so delicate that it was inconceivable she would know a torpedo from a drop punt. But this woman—she looked like she'd dissolve into hysterics if a football came within ten metres of her.

"Banjo," Browny said, "Chris can have Deano's desk until he gets home. Help her settle in."

Banjo stood, smiled hesitantly at Chris Torrens, and spent the next five minutes trying to pretend she was just the same as any other new colleague.

He was back at his desk when Flinders walked in twenty minutes later. She headed directly to Browny's office… but stopped dead when she saw a woman sitting at the desk that had most recently been occupied by Rubber.

Chris Torrens looked up, and the eyes of the two women clashed.

The newcomer stood. Flinders took a step forward.

They stared, measuring each other. "Are you Chris Torrens?" Flinders asked in surprise.

The newbie nodded from under the immaculate curtain of her blonde fringe. "Yes," she replied.

"You're from Adelaide?"

"Yes."

Banjo figured that was two strikes.

"Who'j'barrack for?" Flinders asked. "The Adelaide Crows?"

Three strikes coming, Banjo thought, already happily anticipating a catfight.

"No," Chris said with disdain. Her perfectly rounded chin lifted with pride. "I barrack for Hawthorn."

"Are you a member?"

"Yes."

Flinders' eyes narrowed. "Pro-merger?" she demanded. "Or Anti-merger?"

"Anti-merger," Chris said emphatically. "The AFL should get their dirty mitts off our club."

A slow smile spread across Flinders' face, and she held out her hand. "Welcome to Melbourne," she said warmly. "And welcome to the paper. I hope we can work together."

Chris smiled—a smile that would have reduced every man in the room to a blithering idiot. "I hope we can work together, too," she said. "You've been my inspiration."

"I have?"

"Definitely. Every time they told me I wouldn't make it as a footy journo, I told them Lois Lane had."

Flinders smiled. "Don't let the blokes get you down," she said. "They've only just got acclimatised to one female in the newsroom. They'll probably go into meltdown at the thought of two."

Then, as Banjo watched, the unbelievable happened.

The two women dissolved into what could only be described as fluttery giggles. It lasted less than a couple of seconds, but it was enough to broadcast the direst of warnings—life at the Herald Sun had just changed.

Forever.

Part 37

"Hey, Flinders, I see your Yankee mate had to go home early."

"Yeah," Lois replied, infusing that one word with enough brightness that she hoped it would mask her underlying despondency.

"I read about it in the paper. Seems he made quite an impression in just a few weeks."

Now *that* was an understatement, Lois thought wryly as she handed George a five-dollar note and took the wrapped package of fish and chips from the countertop. "Thanks, George."

"I didn't see your name much this week. Have you been on holidays?"

"On leave."

His good humour faded. "The merger?

"Yeah."

"I guess you don't want it."

"No." She gave him a wan smile. "What about you? What are you hearing from other Melbourne supporters?"

George shrugged. "It's hard not to look at some of your players and imagine them in the red and blue," he admitted.

Lois smiled past the pain that image brought. "See you next week, George."

"See you, Flinders. Have a good week."

Lois stepped out from the warmth of the fish-and-chip shop and into the cold and damp night.

It had been a long and tiring day. There was exactly one month until the Extraordinary General Meeting when the members would vote on the future of Hawthorn, and the pressure was building. The feeling among the volunteers at Operation Payback was that if the vote were held now, the pro-merger group would win comfortably.

Some Hawthorn supporters saw the merger as the only means to escape certain extinction.

Others were being enticed by the concessions offered by the AFL, concessions that would almost guarantee on-field success.

There was so much to do. The declaration needed to resonate throughout the footy world—the stalwart heart of Hawthorn was still beating strongly. The essence was still there, the essence that had been birthed in the early years when victories were so scarce and had ripened in the glory years of the eighties when Hawthorn had played in seven consecutive grand finals.

With the future so uncertain, their history took on greater meaning than ever before.

In the midst of a mind buzzing with campaign strategy and the threat of losing her club, there was something else never far from her thoughts.

Marrying Clark.

Lois had schooled herself not to dwell on the possible wedding except when she was alone or with Clark. She was worried that, in a lax moment, her thoughts would rise to the surface and she would speak out something that would lead to a lot of awkward questions.

In that respect, being with the Operation Payback volunteers had been better than being in the newsroom. She knew no one—not personally—and there wasn't the time to indulge in the luxury of personal chat. They had a club to save.

Mentally, she snapped shut the lid on the still-pulsing concerns of the day and thought ahead to the evening. A wellspring of hope gurgled inside her. Would Clark be able to come to Melbourne?

Lois hugged the small package tighter, glad she'd remembered to order her usual amount for one. Browny had written a short piece, explaining that Clark had had to return home and thanking him for his contribution during his five weeks in Melbourne.

How many Friday nights had she walked home clutching her fish and chips? Too many to count. And for so many of them, she'd walked with a light step, looking forward to a quiet night watching the footy.

But now, that seemed so hollow.

Anything without Clark seemed hollow. Not that she needed all the extras—the flying and the suits and the double-life and the still-mind-blowing reality that anywhere in the world was merely minutes away. What she needed was *him*. Just him. Just Clark.

As Lois hurried up her driveway, her excitement mounted. Was he here already? No lights glimmered in her windows, but that didn't mean Clark wasn't in there, waiting for her. She stepped into her unit, and the chilly air froze her hopes. Clark would've warmed it for her.

Lois switched on the light and the heater and couldn't resist checking her bedroom, just to convince herself that he wasn't here.

Back in the kitchen, she stood, hugging the bundle of fish and chips and drawing minimal solace from its warmth and aroma. Her thoughts stretched across the miles, and she willed him to hurry, trying to ignore the niggling awareness that he might not be able to come to her tonight.

It was always possible that someone needed Superman.

It was still very early—not yet six thirty in Melbourne. That meant it was not yet four thirty for Clark.

He wasn't due at the Planet for a few hours. There was still time.

There was a swish of moving air, and her hair lifted from her shoulders. Lois swung around, beaming with welcome.

He was there, dressed in a charcoal suit and gazing at her as if he'd been waiting for this moment all day. "Hi, beautiful," he said in his wonderful, love-charged voice.

"G'day, big guy."

They stood, content to stare and relish the wonder of being together. "You got fish and chips," Clark said.

"It's Friday." She smiled. "You're early."

"I had a busy night, so I figured there was no point going to bed for such a short time. And anyway, I couldn't wait to see you."

Lois put the package on her counter and stepped into Clark's arms. "Ooh," she said. "You're cold."

He put his hands on her shoulders and eased them apart. "May I go into your bedroom?"

"Of course," she replied, puzzled.

Clark was back within seconds, his arms held towards her in invitation. She rushed into his embrace and was surrounded—not only by him but also by the lovely warmth emanating from him.

"I guess you put my mirror to good use," she murmured from the haven of his chest.

"It's cold in here."

"I only just got home."

"I'm glad you came home early."

"Me, too."

Clark unfolded from her and nodded towards the bench. "Since it's Friday night, I guess your plans are fish and chips and watching the footy?" he said.

"Only if I don't get any better offers."

He smiled. "Do you feel like flying?"

"Ooh, yes. What do you have in mind?"

Clark plunged his hands into his pockets and contemplated his shoes. Lois could see his smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. When he had it mostly under control, he looked up. "Am I allowed to keep it a secret?"

At that moment, Lois would have agreed to almost anything he asked of her. "I guess you're allowed one," she said as sweet anticipation bubbled inside her.

"Thanks," he said.

In that one word, Lois discerned a mountain of meaning. Clark had planned *something*. She indulged in a slow visual journey, taking in his crisp white shirt and geometric tie. "You are dressed to impress," she said, allowing her appreciation to gild her tone.

"My plans didn't really include fish and chips," he admitted.

Lois took the package from the bench and held it towards him. "Can you cool it off?" she asked.

He took it from her, blew on it, and then disposed of it in the fridge.

Lois chuckled at the ease with which Clark could achieve some things. "What would you like me to wear?" she asked.

"Something warm. And comfortable."

"Give me ten minutes?"

He nodded, but Lois sensed his unvoiced impatience. He was excited about something, and it was contagious.

She hurried into her bedroom, and when she emerged, she was wearing dress pants, a white blouse, a fitted jacket, and the pink diamond necklace Clark had given her.

"You look fantastic," he said as he reached for her coat and held it while she slipped into it. "Are you ready?"

She smiled, and he picked her up.

"Hold on to me," he advised. "It's dark, but we're still going to move quickly."

Lois clasped her hands around his neck and clung to her man.

* * *

Clark could barely contain his exhilaration. He'd planned everything in minute detail. The only variable had been what time Lois would arrive back at her unit. She'd been home early enough to give him confidence that everything else would fall into place.

And that made his heart dance.

He started to lose altitude, and in his arms, Lois strained to look down. "Any hints about where we're going?" she said.

"You'll see soon," he said.

"It's dark."

"Yep." He touched a kiss to her temple. This was a secret he couldn't wait to share with her.

* * *

Lois laid her head on Clark's shoulder. She was intrigued about his plans, but not so curious that she couldn't simply relax for a few moments. She loved the feeling of his strong arms around her… loved the firm wall of his chest… loved the warmth of his neck… loved the aroma of the cologne that she would forever associate with him. She placed a kiss on the bare skin above his collar and felt the responding tremor of his laughter.

A few minutes later, Clark landed them with a gentle thud. He slid Lois to her feet and took her hand in his. "Do you know where we are?" he asked.

Lois took a deep breath, inhaling the pure freshness of pre-dawn. "The lack of lights and the silence tell me we're nowhere near a city," she said. "And it smells rural."

"How would you know that, city girl?" he teased.

"No car fumes."

"Good point."

"And, although it's still dark, the temperature is quite mild, so I'm guessing northern hemisphere."

Clark chuckled, and it resounded softly through the murkiness. "Can you see well enough to walk?" he said.

"Yes, I can see vague outlines."

"I won't let you fall."

He led her towards a tree, and after a few steps, Lois could distinguish a narrow shadowy building looming between the branches.

"We're on my parents' farm," Clark said. "And this is my tree house."

Lois could see the outline of a ladder that, even in the dimness, looked somewhat rickety. "Are you sure it's safe?" she asked.

"I built it," Clark said, pretending indignation. At the foot of the ladder, he put his hands on her hips. "Duck low enough that you don't hit your head," he instructed. "Once you're through the door, you'll be able to stand."

Lois's eyes had adjusted sufficiently that the moonlight enabled her to see the rungs of the ladder. Taking a firm grasp of them with her hands, she climbed to the top and into the tree house. Clark was immediately beside her, reaching to help her stand.

Suddenly, light flickered in the corner, and Lois saw a small candle. Next to it, another burst into flame, and then another. Soon, a dozen candles saturated the room with warm, cosy light.

Lois looked around. Though simply built, the tree house was solidly constructed. Along the far wall was a large and sumptuous floor cushion that probably should have looked out of place in the rustic surroundings but instead augmented the otherworld ambience.

Clark lifted her coat from her shoulders and gestured towards the cushion. "Would you sit? Please?"

Lois sank into the softness that billowed soothingly against her tiredness. Clark sat next to her, not reclining, but perched on the edge as he faced her.

"Thank you for coming," he said.

His formal tone suggested he wasn't completely at ease. Lois smiled inwardly, and her growing anticipation dissolved the last of her fatigue. Clark took her hand in his and hauled in a huge breath.

"Lois," he said. "I never imagined I would do this here, but in some ways, this is a very appropriate place." He swung his hand to indicate the little shack. "When I was younger, I would come here whenever I needed to think… whenever I needed to try to find ways to deal with being the only one of my kind on Earth, probably the only one of my kind still alive."

Lois squeezed his hand, experiencing his isolation as acutely as if it were hers.

"So, I'd come here to be alone," Clark said with a short, ironic chuckle. "And I would try to overcome the biggest fear of my life—that I would always be alone. I have wonderful parents—two people who couldn't love me more if I were their biological son—but they belong with each other. I always yearned for someone who belonged with me." He touched a kiss to the back of her hand. "And then I found you."

Lois smiled tremulously as tears clustered along her eyelids.

"You're the person I'd been looking for, hoping for, dreaming of. All of that lonesomeness—that was my heart crying out for you." He slid from the cushion and knelt on the floor of the tree house. "Lois," he said. "I will always love you. I want to share everything with you—my secrets, and my hopes, and my dreams, and the moments that encapsulate my life. I want to share your life, and your secrets, and your moments, and your hopes. More than anything, I want you to be happy, and if being with me makes you happy, that would mean everything to me."

The moisture in Lois's left eye broke from its barrier and drizzled down her cheek.

Clark took a folded handkerchief from his pocket and tenderly dabbed away her tear. After returning the handkerchief, he continued. "I promise you my faithfulness and my everlasting love. This is not just for today; it's for every day of our future." He reached again into his pocket. When his hand reappeared, he was holding a small ring box. He flicked it open, revealing an elegant, solitaire diamond ring. "Lois," he said. "Will you marry me?"

Lois took a moment to gaze into his eyes—the candlelight had darkened them. She could see his love and his sincerity and just a sprinkling of anxiety.

"Aww, Clark," she said on a gush of breath. "Of course I will marry you."

He didn't move—except for a slow grin that spread across his face with glistening joy.

Lois took his face in her hands. “You won’t ever be alone again,” she promised. “You’ll be with me, and together, we have everything.”

His eyes lowered, and his mouth drifted towards hers. He captured her in a kiss sweet with intensity. Lois slipped her hands to his neck and pulled him closer. Instantly, a wave of heat rolled through the sweetness, dissolving it. She felt Clark’s answering groan tremble through him.

Their mouths opened, and Lois pushed her tongue forward. She met Clark’s tongue, and the impact of their touch radiated through her, driving her to surrender to the mind-numbing demands of her need for him.

He kissed her with an urgency that, until now, had been confined to her dreams. He wanted her. And he was closer to capitulation than he’d ever been before.

It was that thought that dowsed her fire.

If they went ahead now, Clark would see it as his failure. His weakness.

Lois forced herself to draw away.

Clark placed his head against her, his ragged breaths testament to the power of their kiss. “Lois,” he breathed.

She found refuge in the simple, calming action of kissing his forehead. “It’s a beautiful ring,” she said. “Thank you.”

“Thank you,” he murmured. “Thank you for saying ‘yes’.”

She buried her fingers in the hair on the back of his neck and waited for time to bring a measure of stability to their runaway hearts. “Thank you for making this so special.”

Clark straightened and removed the ring from the box. He slid it onto her finger, and then he leant forward and capped her knuckle with a kiss. “I love you, Lois,” he whispered.

“I love you, Clark.”

He rose from his knees and shuffled onto the cushion next to Lois. She extended her hand and examined the ring.

“Do you like it?” he asked.

“I love it.” She smiled. “Were you worried about my answer?”

“I tried not to be.”

“Clark!”

He grinned. “I hoped you would say ‘yes’.”

Lois tilted her hand and watched the candlelight play in the diamond. “Well, it’s official now—not public, but official—so you are to quit worrying.”

“I wasn’t really worried,” he said. “But sometimes, this seems too good to be true.”

“We’ve got the rest of our lives to get used to it.”

Clark smiled at that thought. “I can’t take you to a restaurant, so I hope it’s OK with you if we eat here.”

Lois looked around, savouring the intimacy of the candlelight and the tiny room. “You know,” she said. “It’s true that in other circumstances this wouldn’t have been our location of choice, but I think it is perfect.”

He smiled, obviously pleased by her comment. “As soon as Mom and Dad were asleep, I began preparing our food in the kitchen. It’s all ready for us.”

“They don’t know?”

“They won’t mind,” he said. “But I wanted this to be just you and me.”

“That’s what it feels like,” Lois said. “Private and secluded—it’s perfect.”

“I was hoping you’d feel like that.”

“After your parents get up, would you like us to go in and tell them our news?”

He nodded with a happy smile. “They are going to be thrilled.”

“We’re both lucky to have them.”

Clark stood and gestured over his shoulder. “Would you stay here for a few moments while I go and see to the final touches?”

“Do you need help?” Lois offered.

“Yes, I do,” Clark said. He withdrew a piece of paper from his pocket and offered it to Lois. “This is a list of all the decisions we need to make about our”—his smile surfaced—“about our wedding.” He handed it to her. “Could you think about it while I get the meal?”

Lois took the paper. “Sure.”

He crouched beside her. “There’s something you should think about first,” he said. “Before you think about anything else.”

“I’ve already chosen the groom,” she said with a smile.

His responding smile was brief. “The Star suggested September 7th for our wedding. That’s the first week of the finals. If Hawthorn makes the Eight, you’ll have a big game that weekend.”

“We don’t even know if we’ll make the Eight,” Lois said.

"But, if you do, and if the merger… I'd hate for you to always regret that you were in Metropolis when Hawthorn played their last game."

"I've already thought that through," Lois said. "And also the fact that, being a finals weekend, Browny will probably want me to cover a game."

"Perhaps we should suggest another date for the wedding?"

"Finals go for four weeks," Lois said. "Do you really want to wait until October?"

"No," he said decisively.

"Neither of us wants to wait that long," she said. "So, we'll tell the Star the wedding is to be in the morning. That will be late at night, Melbourne time. We can get married and have a few hours together before I need to go home."

Clark grimaced. "Lois," he said. "This is… Our wedding shouldn't be squeezed between everything else. It's too important for that."

"That's true," Lois said with a smile. "And next time, we'll get married outside of the footy season, and we can do it however we want, but this time, we have some obstacles to work around."

"You're OK with that?" Clark asked.

"I want to marry you," Lois said. "The rest is simply detail to be worked out."

He smiled and straightened. "I'll be back soon," he said.

* * *

Lois reclined between Clark's chest and his arm and sighed with utter contentment. She was pleasantly full, deliciously warm, and with the man she adored. He'd transformed the tree house into a pseudo-restaurant. A small table and two chairs had appeared, followed by a dainty tablecloth and a little vase of summer flowers. Thanks to his super-speed, he had easily combined the roles of chef, waiter, and attentive fiancé.

The food had been sensational—creamy chicken marsala with steamed vegetables fresh from Martha's garden, followed by a chocolate cheesecake that outdid anything Lois had eaten in a restaurant. As they had dined, they'd discussed Clark's list and decided on the specifics of their very simple wedding.

It was nearly dawn. Lois could see little beams of light sneaking around the door. The timid half-light of the rising sun combined with the candles to dress the atmosphere with dreamy intimacy.

And, of course, simply being with Clark was like the best of dreams coming true. Every time Lois saw or felt the ring on her finger, her simmering joy surged again. Three weeks and one day. Twenty-two days, and she would be only hours away from marrying Clark.

He'd asked her again if their plans were too rudimentary. He said he knew that most women about to be married revelled in sharing the excitement with family and friends. Did she wish things could be different?

Lois had been able to answer with total honesty. With no elaborate detail to distract her, she could concentrate on Clark and that suited her just fine.

His hand cradled hers, and the side of his thumb slowly strummed the back of her hand. Much as she urged the days forward, Lois was content to allow these minutes to dawdle. "How was your first day back at the Planet?" she asked.

"Good," Clark said. "Perry wants me to work as his assistant editor about half of the time. We spent some time thrashing out the details, and then I chased up my sources to let them know I'm back in town."

"Did you see Mayson?"

"Briefly."

"How was she?"

"Remarkably agreeable."

"Was anything said about the Star offering Superman and Ultra Woman a wedding?"

"Jimmy said something about it. Mayson ignored him."

"She isn't taking this as being scooped?"

"Either she thinks Superman will refuse—which will be a slap in the face for Linda—or she figures a wedding doesn't constitute real news."

"She didn't ask you for a date?"

"No," Clark said. "She stopped at my desk as she headed out on a story and asked if I'd liked the cake. I replied that I'd left it in the staff kitchen for everyone to help themselves, and then I told her I would appreciate it if she didn't go into my apartment when I wasn't there."

"How did she respond to that?"

"She made a comment about there not being any reason to go to my apartment if I wasn't there."

"Maybe she'll be easier than you feared."

"I hope so," Clark said. "How's Operation Payback going?"

"Remember how I told you we play our last game before finals against Melbourne?"

"Uh-huh."

"It's a Saturday night game, so we're organising a rally for the afternoon. We're hoping a lot of people will come before going to the game."

"Where's the rally?"

"At Glenferrie Oval."

"The board is allowing that?"

Lois shrugged. "I don't know anything about the negotiations. Scotty said that's where it would be, and we're starting to advertise it."

"What else are you doing?"

"Gathering volunteers. Trying to raise a million dollars to get out of debt leaves very little money to run a campaign. Operation Payback is only a week old, and every day we see new faces. Scotty is hoping for a big turnout this weekend."

"How's the mood?"

"Determined. Single-minded. We're hearing stories of people spending hundreds of dollars on paint and fabric and making 'no merger' banners. We've opened a bank account, and people are already donating into it."

"What will happen at the rally?"

"Scotty's hoping to get some past-players to talk about what Hawthorn means to them. He wants to outline the plan for rebuilding the club. He wants everyone to know there is an alternative to the merger. Also, we'll be taking down names and addresses and asking people to commit to being members next year."

"Membership is important?"

"Vitally important. We've always struggled to attract members. We are the most successful club of the past twenty years, yet our membership has never been over fifteen thousand."

"How many would you need to be viable?"

"Twenty-five thousand would be the minimum so we have to double."

"Do you think that's possible?"

"I'm hoping that what we couldn't achieve with premierships can be achieved with the threat of extinction. The supporters need to realise that members are the lifeblood of any club. Without them, we're an easy target for the AFL."

They fell silent again. Lois's eyes slid shut, and her mind filled with a vision of Clark, dressed as Superman, waiting for her as she walked towards him on their wedding day.

"What are you thinking about?" Clark asked. "Hawthorn?"

"No. Us."

"Happy thoughts?"

"Completely happy. I have never felt such peace and contentment. It feels as if I'm exactly where I have always wanted to be."

"I feel it, too."

"Clark?"

"Uhmm?"

"You want children, don't you?"

She felt his surprise as he looked down at her. "Where did that come from?" he asked.

"I said I was thinking about us."

"Us, yes." She could hear the smile in his voice. "I didn't realise that included children."

"But you want children, don't you?"

Clark didn't answer for a moment. Lois turned to face him, trying to read his expression. "I did," he said finally.

His answer shocked her. He'd changed his mind? Did he think she wouldn't make a good mother? "Did?" she asked.

"For so much of my life, my dream was to get married and raise a family."

Her apprehension reared up and caught in her throat. "And now, you don't want children?" she said, trying not to sound stricken.

"It's not that I don't want them," Clark said. "It's just that I feel so absolutely complete with you that I can't imagine being any happier no matter what happened."

"So, it's not that you don't want children?"

"No," he said. "I want you, and there isn't any room in my heart for anything else—not right now."

She lifted his hand to her mouth and kissed it. "Do you think we will be able to have children?"

"I have no way of knowing," he said. He sighed. "This is something we should have talked about before I proposed."

"Meh," Lois said easily as she settled back into the warmth of his body. "We'll talk about it before Lois and Clark get married."

"Will you be devastated if we can't have children?"

Lois thought about it for a long moment. "Not devastated," she said finally. "Disappointed, mostly for you."

"Me?"

"I've never been particularly maternal, but I think you'd make a wonderful father. I'm sure you've imagined what it would be like to have a son or daughter."

Clark kissed the top of her head, and she felt the wisp of his breath as he chuckled. "Whenever I thought about having a child, it was always a son. Don't get me wrong," he added quickly. "It's not that I would prefer a son, but my experience of family involves parents and a son. I have experienced a father-son relationship, so it was easier to think about a son than a daughter."

Lois giggled. "A little boy who looked just like you would be so cute."

"Ah," Clark said. "That's the thing. I always used to think about having a son, but since I met you, whenever I think about having a child, she is always a girl—a beautiful, dark-haired girl with her mother's smile."

"Would you like that?" Lois asked softly.

There was another stretched silence. "Yes," Clark said in a voice that broke. "Yes, I would. But if it doesn't happen, I'll have you, and that is more than I ever hoped for."

"We both have more than anyone could hope for," Lois said.

He straightened a little. "Mom and Dad have just made a cup of tea," he said. "Shall we go and tell them our news?"

Lois lifted from Clark, turned to him, and smiled. "Let's go, big guy."

He stood and held out his hand to help her up.

She hugged him. "Thank you, Clark. I'll never forget tonight."

He smiled. "Did you ever think someone would propose to you in a tree house?"

"No," she said. "I never had such lofty dreams."

* * *

Clark had no chance of inhibiting his smile as he let himself and Lois into the farmhouse. His parents were at the table. They looked up and smiled in welcome.

"Lois, Clark," his mom said. "What a lovely surprise." She took in their clothes. "It looks like you've just come from a lovely evening somewhere."

Clark smiled. "We did," he said. "And we have some news."

The looks on the faces of both his parents told him they were not going to be surprised by the announcement. They looked from him to Lois, their delight already apparent.

Clark tightened his arm around his fiancée's shoulder and smiled down at her. "Lois is going to marry me."

His mom gave a little squeal and rushed forward. His father stood, grinning widely. Moments later, they swept Lois and Clark into a family hug of celebration.

* * *

Mayson Drake glared at the front page of the *Metropolis Star*. The cheap, tacky, classless, garish, cringe-worthy stunt was actually going ahead.

How typical of Linda King.

And Superman.

And the floozy in pink.

The Star was trumpeting it as 'The Wedding of the Decade'.

No one from the Daily Planet would be there. Mayson was sure that Preston Carpenter's foremost demand would be an exclusive story.

The guest list would be crammed with as many dignitaries as Linda King could procure in a futile attempt to portray this as something other than what it was—a tawdry, desperate attempt to sell more papers.

A slow smile spread over Mayson's face.

Dignitaries.

Metropolis dignitaries.

There was no one in Metropolis more notable than the third-richest man in the world.

A man who had responded encouragingly to her offer to accompany him to any of his innumerable functions.

His secretary had called early yesterday asking if she would be willing to accompany Mr Luthor to the cocktail party to raise money for the Luthor Children's Foundation.

Stifling all evidence of her indignation that Luthor hadn't called personally, Mayson had graciously accepted.

She had ensured that Clark had overheard when she'd told an openly envious Cat that she, Mayson, would be Lex Luthor's partner.

Clark had appeared completely unmoved.

But appearances weren't always indicative of reality.

If she could inveigle an invitation out of Luthor to be his partner at the 'Wedding of the Decade', she would see how Kent reacted to *that*.

He had feelings for her. He did. Like most of his gender, he suffered from a commitment phobia. Seeing her with Luthor should amend that.

And Mayson couldn't wait to see Linda King's face when her archrival from the Daily Planet sauntered into the event she had so carefully orchestrated as a Metropolis Star exclusive—on the arm of Lex Luthor, no less.

Part 38

Lois walked into the Herald Sun newsroom, still submerged in the dark cloud of defeat. Hawthorn had—not unexpectedly—lost to Sydney. But even worse, Richmond had easily defeated Geelong and snatched Hawthorn's place in the Eight.

Browny had assigned Lois the Fitzroy-Brisbane game, which Brisbane had won easily. As she watched the game, the irony had settled like bile in her stomach. Repeatedly, she'd pushed away the lurking parallels between Fitzroy—whose future was limited to just two more games—and Hawthorn.

Lois turned on her computer and began her report—her main objective being to get it done and get to her unit as quickly as possible. However, the words proved elusive, and try as she might, Lois could think of little that didn't read like sour grapes at the demise of a stalwart of Victorian football.

After twenty minutes of frustration, she acknowledged that everything she'd written was unusable and deleted her entire report. She crossed the newsroom to make a cup of coffee, hoping it would resuscitate her ability to write a decent match report.

She needed Clark.

"Hi, Lois."

Lois turned to see the new footy journo, Chris Torrens, behind her. "Hi, Chris," she said.

Their shared look communicated volumes.

We lost.

Badly.

We're out of the Eight.

Losing sucks.

"How are you settling in?" Lois asked.

"Good, thanks." Chris spooned coffee into her cup. "I heard you're working with Operation Payback during the week."

"Yeah. Have you heard about the rally?"

Chris nodded with a grimace. "I doubt I'll be able to get there."

"Sorry," Lois said. "I've already teed it up with Browny to get that day off."

"S'OK," Chris said reasonably. "I'm the new kid on the block. I can't expect any special favours." She stirred her coffee and then said, "I don't suppose you want to catch a bite to eat once we've finished here?"

"I have plans," Lois said, surprised at her genuine regret.

"No worries."

"Do you know anyone in Melbourne?"

"I have an aunty in Frankston."

"Anyone else? Any friends?"

Chris smiled with slightly overdone lustre. "Not yet," she said.

"Sorry about tonight," Lois said. "Perhaps some other time."

As Chris walked away, Lois wondered if her excuse had sounded feeble. She shrugged mentally as she settled back at her desk. It wasn't as if she could tell Chris that there was a chance her fiancé might fly in from Metropolis to spend the evening with her.

But it could be lonely in a new city, even for someone with Chris's pretty-girl looks. Lois vowed to try to find a spare hour to have coffee with her. Between working five days a week for Operation Payback, covering games at the weekend for the Herald Sun, and leaving her evenings free to be with Clark, she wasn't sure where that spare hour would fit.

And… there was the wedding to think about.

Lois sat at her desk and stared at the dishearteningly blank screen. Her mobile phone beeped, and she seized the welcome diversion, hoping it was a message from Clark telling her he was on his way to Melbourne.

It was from Clark, but it wasn't the message she wanted.

Hi, honey. Emergency. Sorry. Hope the Hawks won. I love you.

Her heart sank further.

A shadow fell over her desk, and Lois looked up from her mobile. It was Gazza. She slipped the phone into her bag. "Hi, Gazza," she said.

He didn't respond immediately; he just stood there looking like he wished he hadn't come.

"What's the problem?" Lois asked, hoping it wasn't bad news. She missed being in the newsroom every day, missed keeping up with what was happening in everyone's lives.

Gazza pulled up a chair and sat down. "Are you OK, Flinders?" he asked solemnly.

This wasn't a trite enquiry—she could discern that much. "I'm fine, Gazza," she said with contrived brightness.

"Are you cut up about Rubber leaving?"

She had not expected that question. "We always knew he wasn't here forever," she hedged.

"But we didn't know he was gonna turn out to be such a bloody good bloke."

Lois couldn't think of a response, so she merely nodded.

"Listen, Flinders," Gazza said. "I'm not blind, and it seemed you and Rubber were getting on like a house on fire. Then, suddenly, he's racked off."

"You think he left 'cause of something that happened between us?" Lois asked as her astonishment continued to build.

"Makes sense."

"No, it doesn't," Lois declared. "Clark's editor has been crook, and he asked Clark to go back early."

"Did you tell Rubber how you feel about him?"

Lois laughed. "No offence, Gazza, but if I needed advice about my love life, you would the last person I would go to."

He grinned, looking relieved that her frankness had steered them to firmer ground. "Me and the missus do all right."

"Do you love her?"

"'Course I love her," he said with more conviction than Lois would have believed possible. "Do you love Rubber?"

If she said 'yes', it would lead to further questions. But she couldn't say 'no'. She just couldn't. "That's a bit personal, isn't it?"

"He loves you."

Lois felt her mouth fall open. "How would you know?"

"I told you—I'm not blind."

"Gazza… Clark has to be in Metropolis, and I have to be in Melbourne. We don't have a lot of wriggle room."

"But you're OK?"

"Yeah." Lois smiled at him. "Thanks, Gazza."

Her appreciation seemed to intensify his uneasiness. He stood abruptly from the seat and marched back to his desk. Lois returned her attention to her computer screen, and by an act of sheer will, she hammered out a match report and submitted it. As she closed down her computer, she noticed Chris heading out of the newsroom. Lois grabbed her bag and coat and ran after her. "Hey, Chris?"

She turned. "Yeah?"

"My plans fell through," Lois said. "Do you still wanna get something to eat?"

"Sounds great," Chris said, looking pleased. "Can you suggest somewhere?"

Lois grinned. "I know just the place."

* * *

As they ate their meals, Lois realised that she liked Chris a lot. She was easy to talk to… unpretentious… ambitious, but not ruthless… knowledgeable about footy, but eager to learn… excited about her new job, but with no illusions regarding the continuing need for hard work.

Browny had chosen well.

After ordering, their conversation had opened with a Hawthorn memory… which led to another… and then another. The arrival of their meals did nothing to stem the flow of reminiscence that jumped haphazardly from the premierships to the great players, from the quirky incidents to the humorous anecdotes. Very quickly, Lois recognised that Chris's love for their club ran deep and true.

"Why do you barrack for Hawthorn?" Lois asked as she pushed away her empty plate. "Did you used to live in Victoria?"

Chris shook her head. "I'm a Croweater, born and bred," she said. "But my mother grew up in Camberwell."

"Does she love football?"

A shadow crossed Chris's face. "She did. She died a couple of years ago."

"Aw, Chris," Lois said. "I'm so sorry."

"Car crash," Chris said.

"Ah, no," Lois said. "That must have been awful."

"Yeah, it was."

"I'm so sorry."

"Mum and Dad decided before they were married that all the daughters would barrack for Hawthorn with Mum and all the sons would barrack for Richmond with Dad."

"Phew," Lois said. "You dodged a bullet there."

They grinned together. "I'm the only girl," Chris said. "I have three brothers."

"Did you get to many Hawthorn games?"

"Once a year, Mum and I would come to Melbourne for a weekend. We'd go to the footy, stay in a hotel, do some shopping…" Chris smiled wistfully. "They were the best times."

"Great memories, hey?"

Chris shrugged a little self-consciously. "I promised Mum that if I ever had a daughter, we would go to Hawthorn games together."

"We can't let them take that away," Lois said vehemently. "We just can't."

"We can't," Chris echoed. "All they see is the big picture—the dollars and 'growing the game'. They don't see what really matters."

The waitress came to take their plates, and during the lull in conversation, Lois found herself hoping she would be able to work with Chris.

Except working with Chris would mean that she wouldn't be in Metropolis with Clark.

"Thanks for coming, Lois," Chris said. "I haven't had too many chances to get to know my new workmates."

"How have the blokes been treating you?"

Chris smiled faintly. "They've been helpful in a work sense, but I'm not sure they're ready to socialise with me just yet."

"They're good blokes," Lois said. "But they do feel as if we've barged into their private world, and they're not really sure whether to treat us like colleagues or women." She giggled. "It's a bit beyond them to see us as both."

Chris laughed, too. "It must've been interesting being the first, and the only, female in the footy newsroom."

"It was," Lois said. "I concentrated on being the best reporter I could be and tried not to rock the boat too much."

"I think it will be easier for me because you've paved the way," Chris said.

"Have they decided on your nickname yet?" Lois asked. "Or did you bring one from Adelaide?"

"In Adelaide, I was called 'River'."

Lois nodded. "Obvious."

"Yeah, but Gazza started calling me 'Spencer', so I think I'm stuck with that."

It took a moment for Lois to make the connection, but when she did, she burst out laughing. "That's quite clever," she said.

"He said his wife thought of it."

"That figures," Lois said. "Do you know why?"

"I do now," Chris said. "Banjo told me. It's because the two major train stations in Melbourne are Flinders Street and Spencer Street—and you're Flinders."

"Sounds like they've decided to lump us together," Lois said.

Chris grinned. "Both women, both barrack for Hawthorn—I guess that's enough."

Yeah, Lois thought, that was enough.

They paid the bill and left the cafe.

"Lois, I'm sorry if you were disappointed that your plans fell through, but it was great for me," Chris said as they headed towards Flinders Street station. "I really enjoyed chatting with you."

"I did, too," Lois said.

"Perhaps we could do it again?"

Lois hesitated. "I would like to," she said honestly. "But things are really busy now—with Operation Payback and everything."

"That's fine," Chris said. "Are you married? Do you have a partner?"

Lois paused. "I'm not married," she said, wondering how many times in the future she would have to lie about that fact.

"Sorry," Chris said. "I didn't mean to pry."

"You didn't pry," Lois said quickly. "There is someone… we're not married… but it's… complicated."

Chris nodded understandingly. "I know what you mean."

No, she didn't, but Lois smiled anyway. "Are you with someone?"

"I was," Chris said. "It broke up a couple of months ago. He found someone else."

Lois swallowed down her surprise. It hadn't been hard to discern that the blokes at the paper were agog at Chris's looks. As they'd eaten in the cafe tonight, there had been a steady stream of appreciative looks directed at her companion—although Chris had seemed oblivious. "I'm sorry," Lois said.

Chris shrugged. "Better that I find out now."

"Yeah."

"Tonight…" Chris said hesitantly. "It wasn't that he's with someone else, was it?"

Lois shook her head. "No, nothing like that."

"I hope it works out for you."

"Thanks."

At Flinders Street station, they bid each other goodbye and took different trains home.

Lois stared into the darkness as rain pelted the train windows. More than anything in the world, she wanted to be with Clark.

But she didn't want to leave Hawthorn.

And she didn't want to leave her job at the Herald Sun.

And she didn't want to leave Melbourne.

And she didn't want to leave Barb, Ron, and Seb.

And even Chris seemed like someone who could become a really good friend.

She wanted to be with Clark.

But for the first time, the high price of relocating sat heavily on her heart.

In Metropolis, she would have Clark.

But she wouldn't have a job. Or Hawthorn. Or the Wilton family.

Lois tried to calm her agitation. She couldn't make any decisions until she knew the outcome of the merger vote. Once they knew that, she and Clark would decide their future together.

Lois walked the short distance from the Richmond station to her unit and arrived home wet and miserable.

Hawthorn losing. Clark not being able to visit. It hadn't been a great day. It was a mere twenty-four hours since Clark had proposed in the most romantic of ways, and cracks had already appeared in the perfection of her happiness.

She missed Clark.

In her bedroom, Lois took out her engagement ring and slipped it onto her finger.

As she stared at it, Clark's words floated back to her, telling her that his lonesomeness had been his heart crying out for her. Now she was lonesome, and it was her heart crying out for him.

Lois quashed her melancholy.

Clark would come to her as soon as he could—probably tomorrow evening.

And, unlike the bloke who'd dumped Chris, she knew Clark was missing her just as much as she was missing him.

In three weeks, they would be married.

Lois smiled as optimism permeated the shadows of her glum mood.

Later, when she slipped into bed, she deliberately left Clark's ring on her finger.

She relived the beauty of his proposal. And the impassioned promise of his kiss.

Three weeks.

She couldn't wait.

* * *

"Hey, Clark?"

Clark stopped and turned, his face washed of all expression. "Yes, Mayson?"

"Cat's organised a farewell dinner for Dan Scardino tonight. Are you going?"

"No."

Mayson smothered her reaction to the shortness of his reply. "I'll let Cat know," she said indifferently. "She's making the booking, so she needs the numbers."

Clark nodded and turned to leave.

"I won't be going either," Mayson commented.

He hesitated long enough to give her a tight smile. "Have a good evening," he said. Then he walked away, into the elevator and out of sight.

Mayson picked up her pencil and twirled it in her fingers as she stared at the closing elevator doors. Clark Kent was different since returning from Australia.

Before, he'd seemed every inch the naïve country-boy—a pushover for a savvy city woman. Mayson had had a bet with herself—he would be in her bed within a week of starting at the Daily Planet.

Two years later, and she hadn't even managed to entice him to step into her apartment.

However, he'd always *seemed* pliable.

Until Australia. Now, that quality was disturbingly absent.

Kent carried himself with a new surety, a demeanour of self-confidence and inflexible determination.

What had changed?

It couldn't be the country. If Dan was in any way characteristic of his countrymen, Australia should have made Kent less resolute. And writing about sports instead of reporting real news could hardly have brought about this change.

No, it wasn't the place. And it wasn't the job.

Maybe it was a person.

Mayson tossed the pencil onto her desk and stood up. She meandered over to where Scardino was packing things into a cardboard box. "Dan," she said.

He looked at her in surprise. Since their showdown, she'd pointedly ignored him. "Mayson," he said frostily.

"I can't be at your farewell dinner tonight, so I thought I'd say 'bye' now."

"Bye," he said and returned to his packing.

She stepped closer and perched on the corner of his desk. "Are you glad to be going home early?" she asked in a friendly manner.

He continued placing his desk items in the box. "Yes, I am."

Clearly, she wasn't going to get any information from him without a little massaging of his bruised ego. "Dan," she said. "I'm sorry about how things finished between us."

"I'm sorry they ever started," he said darkly.

She took a moment to let him think that his retort had wounded her. "I hope you find someone who makes you happy," she said.

He muttered something unintelligible.

"Pardon?" she said.

"Nothing."

"Have you been in contact with that woman? The one you told me about—the one who didn't want to be more than friends?" She smiled encouragingly. "Perhaps it will be a case of absence making the heart grow fonder."

Dan closed the flaps of the box and secured them. "She has someone else," he said. He picked up the box and strode from the newsroom.

Mayson returned to her desk, deep in thought.

A changed Clark Kent had come back from Australia.

The woman who had broken Scardino's heart had found someone else.

Was Kent that *someone*?

Mayson's smile curled. Getting Kent back to Metropolis early could well have achieved more than she had realised.

Now, he was here, and the other woman was in Australia. Distance would surely destroy any chance of that relationship continuing.

Kent had resisted Mayson's advances for two years. He wasn't going to fall for an Australian nobody in a few weeks.

Her phone shrilled, and she picked it up. "Mayson Drake."

"Mrs Cox, Mr Luthor's personal assistant." Her tone was formal, but Mayson could detect the icy chill of disapproval.

"Mrs Cox," Mayson said, equally aloof.

"Mr Luthor wishes to enquire whether you would be available to accompany him to the nuptials of Superman and Ultra Woman."

Mayson suppressed her smile at Mrs Cox's disdainful utterance of the names of the bride and groom. It didn't take any creativity to imagine the assistant's haughty expression. "He's attending the wedding?" Mayson said, trying to sound as if that news surprised her.

Mrs Cox sniffed. "Yes."

Meaning—like many others who would be there—Lex was more interested in being seen than witnessing the wedding. "I would be honoured to accompany Mr Luthor," Mayson said nonchalantly.

"The event is to start at the unseemly hour of ten o'clock on the morning of September 7th," Mrs Cox informed her. "Mr Luthor's private car will collect you twenty minutes prior."

"Thank you, Mrs Cox."

The line clicked dead, and Mayson returned the phone with smug satisfaction. Obviously, her casual remark alluding to the series of editorials by Preston Carpenter—where he had questioned the motives of businessmen who publicly supported charities—had had the desired effect. Lex was a ruthless competitor—a man who remembered those who crossed him and was swift to retaliate.

He would realise that the last person Carpenter and King would want at their glitzy spectacle was a reporter from the competing paper.

But what none of them knew was that, this time, Mayson Drake wasn't chasing a story.

This was far bigger than a single story.

This was the perfect opportunity to bring together Superman and his nemesis.

And then… the fun would begin.

* * *

The couple walked leisurely through the trees. The balmy evening breeze rustled the leaves and cooled the sun-baked air.

"Are you disappointed that we can't be there?"

Martha Kent looked up at her husband with a half-smile. "A little," she admitted.

Jonathan's arm came across her shoulders and snuggled her closer to him. "You told them you weren't disappointed," he scolded gently.

"I told them the only thing I could tell them," she said. "But you get the truth."

Jonathan leant sideways and placed a kiss on the side of her head. "We'll be there next time."

"And there will be photos," she said.

"I imagine the *Star* will be full of them."

"I'll look at the photos, of course," Martha said. "But it won't be the suits I see. It'll be our son… and his wife."

Jonathan chuckled. "I don't think I've ever seen a young man so completely smitten."

"They're so cute together," Martha said. "But I don't agree that I've never seen a man so taken by his young lady."

Her husband smiled down at her. "Now, Martha," he said. "You're not going to go dragging up stories from nearly forty years ago, are you?"

She reached up and kissed him. "All I'm saying is that Clark reminds me of the young man who courted me with such persistence."

"I didn't propose in a tree house."

Their shared laughter echoed through the tranquillity as they continued walking together.

* * *

"Lois?"

Lois surfaced from the depths of sleep.

"Lois, honey?"

"Clark?" She sat up and glanced at her clock. It was six fifteen.

"I've brought you breakfast," came his voice from the other side of her bedroom door. "I know it's early, but I couldn't stay away a moment longer."

Lois sprang from her bed. "Give me ten minutes," she called.

* * *

Clark unrolled the copy of the *Herald Sun* he'd scooped from Lois's driveway and turned to the back of the paper. He groaned. Hawthorn had lost.

And Richmond had won.

He glanced to Lois's bedroom door and willed her to hurry. He hadn't seen her since bringing her home after his tree house proposal, and that was thirty hours ago. It felt like thirty months.

Today, after leaving the Planet late in the afternoon, he'd patrolled for a couple of hours around Metropolis, waiting for time to pass while Lois slept.

He needed her.

He ached for her.

But he had to be careful. In the tree house… if she hadn't backed away…

He touched his hand to the creamy cappuccinos he'd bought from an Italian cafe. They were still fairly hot, but he zapped them anyway. It kept his mind from wandering to the room next door and his ears from listening for clues as to her progress.

Then, the door opened, and Lois was there, hurrying towards him with a wide smile of welcome. Clark sprang from the seat and swept her into his arms. She felt so amazingly good. He tightened his hold, wanting her closer. When he couldn't wait a second longer, he loosened her enough that his mouth could seek out hers.

He kissed her.

It was sweet torture… holding her in his arms as her kisses imprinted fevered eagerness on his mouth.

He'd yearned for this, but now it was like a morsel that tantalised him.

Three weeks. He snatched the words from the chaos of a mind in meltdown. Three short… impossibly long… beautiful… excruciating weeks.

Clark hauled himself away from their kiss. He opened his eyes and saw Lois's face; her mouth was slightly ajar, and her lips were full and moist. He fought against the temptation to kiss her again.

She smiled at him. "I missed you," she whispered.

He groaned in agreement. "Every moment I'm not with you, it feels as if half of me is lost."

Her hands stroked his neck. "Aw, Clark," she said. "I feel the same."

"I'm so sorry about last night. There was a storm in the south that caused lots of damage."

"The south?" she questioned. "Superman went further than Metropolis?"

Clark nodded. "They were getting pummelled. I'd been counting down the hours until I could see you, but I had to go." He grimaced with regret. "By the time I'd done everything I could, it was after two in the morning here. I knew you'd be asleep."

"Why didn't you come and sleep with me?" she asked.

Clark didn't pause long enough to consider the wisdom of his reply. "Because I was scared that we wouldn't just sleep."

She smiled at that, and her hand continued its slow journey over his shoulder and towards his throat. "You want to wait, don't you?"

"I want it to be so special for you, Lois," he said. "Our wedding day won't be anything like you've dreamed. I want our honeymoon to be something you will never forget."

"It's only three weeks," she said—although her words lacked conviction.

"It feels like three years."

Her responding smile made him think that if he had picked her up, taken her into her bedroom, and begun kissing her the way he wanted to, she wouldn't protest at all. "Did you say you brought breakfast?" Lois asked.

"All the way from an Italian cafe," Clark confirmed. "Fresh coffee and pastries."

He turned towards the table, but Lois stalled him with a hand on his arm. "Not the table," she said. "The couch. I can get closer to you there."

Grinning, Clark brought the coffees and paper bags to the couch. He sat down, and Lois ensconced herself on his lap. She took the coffees and placed them on the lamp stand and then peered into the bag. "Good choice," she said. "They all have lots of chocolate."

"I noticed that you seemed partial to the chocolate cheesecake."

"I've always loved chocolate," she said, taking a chocolate-covered Danish from the bag. "Actually, it used to be my biggest weakness."

He grinned. "Used to be?"

Lois giggled. "I've discovered there is something even more irresistible than chocolate."

She was irresistible—but resistance was required. Clark took her hand. "You're wearing the ring."

"I put it on when I came home in a funk last night because we'd lost and you couldn't come."

"I'm sorry about that."

"Don't be sorry," Lois said, brushing back a lock of his hair. "I know you have to be Superman, and as much as I want to see you, I understand that you can't be with me when you know someone else needs you."

"Thank you," he said softly.

"How did the people react to Superman? I assume they recognised you?"

"Yeah. They were great. Very appreciative and…" He smiled. "And very interested in my fiancée and the wedding. Many people wished us luck and said how pleased they were that we're getting married."

Lois offered him the Danish, and he reached to take it. She giggled as she pushed his hand away and held the Danish close to his mouth. With a grin, Clark took a bite.

"The wedding seems to have struck a chord with people," Lois said. She bit from the Danish they were sharing.

Clark nodded. "I think it has helped people to identify with me. They can't really understand coming from another planet or having the powers, but they can understand being in love and getting married." He ran his hand down her cheek. "You coming to the interview was an inspired idea."

"How did Linda King respond when you told them we want the simplest of weddings? And no reception?"

"I met with Preston Carpenter and Linda, and we went over everything together. Linda was disappointed that she wouldn't be presiding over the major gala event she had imagined, but when I suggested that she plan a charity ball for the Saturday evening, she accepted that."

"So it's set then?"

"Yep. Ten o'clock, Saturday morning, the 7th of September."

"That'll be midnight here," Lois said. "That's perfect timing for me. What about you? How will you explain not being available to work?"

Clark winced. "I've already organised to have that weekend off."

"But?"

"I told Perry I needed to see my parents, and he assumed I wanted to go to Smallville."

She brushed her fingers down his cheek. "You're really not comfortable with the deception, are you?"

"No," Clark said. "But I couldn't risk Perry wanting Clark on a story that day."

"With the wedding at midnight, Melbourne time, that gives us at least ten hours until I'll have to be at a game."

"You won't be too tired?"

Lois laughed. "I'll be feeling a lot of things," she said. "Tired won't be one of them."

"How do you think you'll be feeling?" he asked.

She smiled at his question and lifted the Danish to his mouth again. “Excited, elated, eager… and perhaps just a little bit nervous.”

“Don’t be nervous,” Clark said, although he knew he would be. He took a bite from the Danish.

“Where do we go after the wedding?”

The necessity of chewing gave him a moment to compose himself for the direction of their conversation. “Linda has booked the Honeymoon Suite at the Lexor Hotel for us,” he said as evenly as possible.

“Lexor?”

“It’s owned by Lex Luthor. He’s the third richest man in the world and a Metropolis identity.”

“Because he’s rich?”

“He’s a very successful businessman. The archetypal self-made man. He employs hundreds. He’s very generous. He’s just established the Luthor Children’s Foundation.”

“He sounds like a good guy.”

Clark didn’t say anything for a moment. “I’m not sure about him,” he said. “He’s… lucky.”

“That’s not a crime.”

“Sometimes the misfortunes of others provide a windfall for him.”

Lois chewed thoughtfully. “And you wonder if he had something to do with the misfortunes?”

“I can’t prove anything.”

“Will he be at the wedding?”

Clark nodded. “All the ‘sponsors’ have been invited.”

“Already?”

“Yeah. Linda had everything ready to go.”

“Then I guess we just relax and let her go with it.”

“Are you concerned that we’re consigning our wedding to someone you don’t know and I don’t trust?”

“What can she do?” Lois asked.

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Clark said. “And other than pushing some of the boundaries we set—inviting a few more people—I’m not sure she can cause too much damage.”

“Did she publish our statement?”

“Yes. Word for word—I checked.”

“It’ll be fine,” Lois assured him. “In the statement, we outlined exactly what we want. The Star has agreed to it. If Linda breaks that agreement, it won’t reflect badly on Superman.”

Clark didn’t say anything.

Lois shifted on his lap and smiled at him. “What can go wrong?” she said. “We arrive. We say our vows. We let them take photos. We leave.” She winked at him. “And then the fun begins.”

“Are you *trying* to drive me crazy?” he asked.

“I love how your ears go red every time we mention the honeymoon.”

Clark tried to look unruffled—although he knew there was nothing he could do about the colour of his ears.

Lois chuckled at his efforts. “I’m just making sure you don’t forget about that bit,” she said.

He had to keep this light. “I thought I’d fly you back to Melbourne immediately after the wedding,” Clark said innocently. “And then I will leave and go looking for something Superman needs to do.”

“Oooh, Kent,” she said, wagging her finger at him. “If you even *think* about doing that, you are going to be in big trouble with the missus.”

“It’s safer for me to think about that than the alternative,” he said direly.

Lois grinned as she offered him the Danish. He took a bite, and she burst out laughing.

“What?” he asked.

“You have a flake of pastry on your lip.”

Clark lifted his hand to wipe it away, but Lois caught his wrist and restrained him. She then slowly leant forward and lifted the flake with her tongue.

His laugh was an attempt to hide the constriction in his throat. “You *are* trying to drive me crazy, aren’t you?”

She kissed him—gently, chastely. “Sorry,” she said, although her grin was incompatible with any semblance of contrition.

Clark skimmed his finger along Lois’s jaw. “Don’t be sorry,” he told her. “I’m willing to risk a lot worse than craziness if it means being with you.”

Part 39

“Time to call it a day, Clark,” Perry said.

Clark looked up from the story he was editing for the weekend edition. “I’ve nearly finished, Chief.”

“Leave it,” Perry said. “There’ll be time tomorrow.”

Clark hesitated. It was too late now to squeeze in an early morning visit to Lois—she would have already left her unit—and the thought of going home to his empty apartment held little appeal.

"Leave it," Perry repeated. He leant against Clark's desk, his body language indicating he was settling in for a longer exchange.

Clark saved his story and closed the file. "How have you been feeling, Chief?" he asked.

"It's not me I want to talk about," Perry said. "It's you."

Clark looked up at his editor. "Me?"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong."

"Now, son," Perry said with a deep chuckle. "No one becomes a good newsman without developing the ability to observe, and since you've been back in Metropolis, there's been something amiss."

Clark opened his desk drawer and dropped his pens and notepad in there.

"My guess is that it has something to do with the woman you met in Australia."

Clark leant back in his chair and contemplated Perry, realising he had no way of escape. "Yes," he admitted.

"Is it over?" Perry asked. "Have you decided that you can't be together because of the distance involved? Did she end it?"

"No," Clark said quickly. "No. It's… well, I miss her."

"Ah," Perry said, nodding sagely. "So it's serious?"

"Yeah, it's serious."

"I'm sorry I asked you to come back. I didn't realise you—"

"I know that, Perry," Clark said. "It's OK. I had to come back eventually anyway."

"You weren't thinking about staying in Australia permanently?"

"No."

"Is she going to move to Metropolis?"

Clark shrugged. "Not any time soon. We haven't made any decisions."

"I wish I'd known."

"Even if you'd known, what were you going to do?" Clark asked. "Allow Alice to leave you? Walk out on the Planet?"

"No," Perry admitted. "But I wish there was something I could do to help your situation."

An idea that had been floating nebulously in Clark's mind for a few days suddenly took shape. "There is something," he said.

"Name it."

"I have to be in Melbourne for September 16th."

"And I've already said that's fine."

"Would it be if I took a slightly longer weekend at the end of next week?" Clark asked.

"You want to go back to Australia twice? Next week and in September?"

Clark nodded.

Perry chuckled. "Whoa, she must mean a lot to you if you're willing to fly to Australia twice in two weeks."

"She means *everything* to me," Clark asserted.

Perry's humour died. "Sure, that's OK," he said. "You have a lot of leave built up. Go ahead and book the flights; let me know which days you'll be away."

"Thanks, Chief."

"Lucky you're a good flier, huh?"

"Yeah, lucky."

Perry straightened from Clark's desk. "What's her name?"

"Lois," Clark said. "Lois Lane."

Perry grinned. "I hope it works out for you, son." Then he wheeled around and strode out of the newsroom.

"Thanks, Perry," Clark called.

The editor waved in acknowledgement and kept walking.

Clark went to a travel website. Half an hour later, he'd found one flight that arrived in Melbourne on the morning of the rally and another that left late the following evening.

A wave of excitement swept over him as he finalised the booking. He could be with Lois for the rally and Hawthorn's game against Melbourne. If Hawthorn didn't make the finals and it turned out to be their final game, he would be there. Be at the game. Be at the rally. Take her out. They wouldn't have to hide in her unit.

He composed a message to Lois on his cell phone but cleared it without sending it. He wouldn't tell her. He would keep it as a surprise.

Clark shut down his computer and walked out of the Planet office, his mind leaping ahead to the moment when

Lois first saw him and realised they would have two days together—openly together.

* * *

Lois's week consisted of five days that blended homogenously in her weary mind. Each day, she rose early and went to the hired hall where Operation Payback had established their headquarters. Much of her time was spent on the phone, answering questions, outlining the strategy to rebuild all facets of the Hawthorn Football Club, and dealing with the animosity of those who believed Operation Payback was jeopardising Hawthorn's only chance of survival.

Being a volunteer enabled her to leave in good time to be in her unit should Clark be able to make the trip to Melbourne. He'd come three days this week, although Wednesday's visit had been cut short by a television report of a loaded passenger jet with engine trouble trying to get to Hawaii to attempt an emergency landing.

Clark had looked questioningly to Lois. "Go," she had said. "Go—they need you."

So, he'd gone.

Footage taken from inside the plane of the caped superhero guiding the aircraft to safety had headlined news bulletins across the world.

During their fragmented hours together in her unit, they'd talked about Superman's rapidly spreading fame. Lois had smiled inwardly at Clark's country-boy innocence as he bemoaned that there didn't seem to be a way to help people and avoid all the fanfare.

They also talked about the progress of Operation Payback. The Hawthorn board had been vocal in pushing their message, but the feeling of the volunteers was that they had made ground. Slowly, they believed, the tide was turning from 'We can't survive' to 'Can we survive?'

Clark told her about his work at the Planet—about dividing his time between being Perry's assistant editor and chasing leads on the murder case he was investigating.

She told him news from the footy world as the finals drew ever closer.

They discussed their wedding, trying to find balance between their euphoria that it was so close and their impatience that the days crawled so slowly. Superman had visited the Metropolis Star office on three occasions to check Linda's plans and ensure she didn't move too far outside the wishes of the bride and groom. So far, she'd seemed remarkably accommodating.

But always, their time together would end, and with bleak reluctance, Clark would kiss Lois and disappear with a gust of breeze. The moments after that were the darkest of all—alone and with long Clark-less hours stretching before her. The whiff of his cologne still hung in the air, and the memory of his kiss lingered on her mouth… and, if she listened really carefully, she could almost hear the soft tones of his voice. Always, his presence was slow to disperse.

On Friday evening, Lois's mobile phone beeped as she unlocked the door to her unit. Her heart sank. Clark had never messaged to say he was coming—it was always bad news. She slipped the phone from her bag, read the two-word message—*Emergency, sorry*—and disconsolately shut her door.

Five minutes later, she was standing at the open door of her fridge and trying to decide what to eat. George's daughter had had a baby, and he'd closed his fish-and-chip shop for a three-day weekend to enable him to visit her. Lois hadn't been able to summon any enthusiasm for trying somewhere else, so she had come home.

Hoping, she admitted now, that Clark would arrive with something exotic and tantalising from a faraway place.

Instead, she was alone.

And not really hungry.

She slumped onto the couch and turned on the television.

The gardening show that preceded the footy telecast was lauding the merits of using groundcovers as a means for conserving water. She muted the television and stared absently at the screen.

She yearned to be with Clark, but even had they been married, she would still be alone right now.

How could they be married and live on different sides of the world? How were they going to be able to spend time together when they had to accommodate two jobs, never-ending emergencies, and different time zones? How long until the snippets of time together—within the confines of her unit—simply wouldn't be enough?

What sort of a relationship could they have when she couldn't mix with any of his friends in Metropolis and he couldn't be seen in Melbourne?

The footy began on the television, but Lois didn't turn up the sound. She mechanically followed the play as her mind churned through the practicalities of their situation.

Eventually someone had to relocate.

And, whatever happened to Hawthorn, it was probably going to be her.

Should she simply go? Now?

Should she stop fighting for Hawthorn? Stop fighting for the career she had carved out with hard work and bull-headed perseverance? Stop fighting for the relationships she had built with the Wiltons, and her friends, and the blokes at the paper?

Stop fighting for her dream?

The four quarters of football slipped by almost unnoticed. Ten minutes before the end of the game, Lois turned off the television and rose from the couch. She still hadn't eaten; she couldn't face food. Instead, she prepared for bed.

When she slipped between the cold sheets, Lois tried not to think of how wonderful it would be to have Clark's eyes to warm it for her. Or his body.

She wanted him.

She wanted him to hold her.

But in his world, it was nine o'clock on Friday morning, and, assuming the emergency had been dealt with, Clark Kent was working at the Daily Planet.

* * *

Superman sat on the seat, careful to arrange his cape so it didn't pull on his neck. There was an assortment of microphones on the table in front of him. He looked up to the pack of waiting news hounds.

Linda King was front and centre. Congregated around her was a throng of reporters from far-flung newspapers across the country.

Everyone wanted a piece of Superman.

Clark sighed and wished Lois was here. He'd called this press conference with only an hour's notice and, knowing it was the middle of the night in Melbourne, had accepted that he would be doing it alone.

He cleared his throat as his eyes travelled over the gathered crowd. Eduardo Friaz was the Planet's representative. Mayson was notably absent. "Thank you for coming," Clark said, hoping his words conveyed a self-assurance he wasn't sure he possessed.

A discord of voices rose, and Clark raised his hand to silence them.

"I will make a statement," he said firmly. "Then I will allow a short time for questions."

A few voices rose again, and Clark stared in their direction, hoping to make it clear that this was going to be done in an orderly fashion. They fell quiet, and he took a deep breath as he glanced at the notes he held in his hand.

"On behalf of Ultra Woman, I want to thank the many people who have wished us well in our forthcoming marriage. We greatly appreciate your kind words."

Clark paused, wondering if he needed to expand this point further. He decided to reiterate it later.

"However, earlier today, the outcome of a rescue was threatened by people wanting to speak with me personally. This necessitated a number of police officers who, instead of assisting with the injured, were required to restrain crowds from invading the area. While I want to stress that both Ultra Woman and I have been touched by the interest in our wedding, it is imperative that no one from the public approaches me when I'm occupied with a rescue operation."

Clark paused, and more voices rose to fill the gap. Again, he raised his hand, and again, the questions subsided.

He laid his notes on the table and decided to speak from his heart.

"When I decided to use my powers for the benefit of many, I was unsure of the reaction I would receive. I expected suspicion—perhaps even rejection due to my differences. Instead, from the public, I have received gracious acceptance and a heart-warming welcome. Perhaps, if you were to try to imagine being the only human on another planet, you could begin to understand the depths of my gratitude for the friendship you have extended to me."

Clark looked around the faces of the gathered press. A man he didn't know had raised his hand, and Clark nodded to him.

"Will Ultra Woman make another appearance before the wedding?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," Clark said. "We haven't discussed that."

"I think the people have made it clear they would very much enjoy seeing Ultra Woman again," Linda King said. She couldn't have looked prouder if she had personally engineered Clark's entire relationship with Lois.

"I can't agree to anything without having first checked with Ultra Woman," he said.

"Good move," a male reporter said. "You learn quick, buddy."

Linda spoke over the burble of laughter. "Perhaps we can organise a pre-wedding reception. We could invite eminent Metropolis identities and—"

"No," Clark said quickly. "I will speak to Ultra Woman, and when we have decided, I will inform everyone."

His slight emphasis on the final word drew a fleeting scowl from Linda, but she recovered quickly. He raised his

head, inviting other questions. His eyes fell on a female journalist at the back, and he nodded to her.

"How did you propose to Ultra Woman?" she asked.

"On my knees."

"Awww." The low murmur of approval resounded throughout the room.

"And she accepted immediately?"

"Yes, she did."

"Were you relieved?"

"Very."

That brought a volley of laughter.

"Did you give her an engagement ring?"

"Yes, I did."

"The wedding rings are being supplied by Mazik's Jewellers," Linda put in quickly.

"How is Ultra Woman feeling?" another female reporter asked.

"I imagine her feelings are similar to many women in the days before their wedding—excited, perhaps a little nervous, hopeful that everything will go well."

"It will go very well," Linda said confidently.

Clark nodded to Eduardo, the Planet's representative. "The rescue today of people in the collapsed building…" he said. "Were there any fatalities?"

"Some people had sustained significant injuries," Clark replied. "But everyone I rescued was alive when I brought them out from under the rubble."

"There are rumours that you can see through things—buildings, bricks, and so on. Is this true?"

"Yes, it is."

Clark heard their surprise ripple around the room on a drawn-in breath.

"Is that how you find trapped people with such certainty?" another reporter asked. "And how you can be sure when all of the injured have been brought to safety?"

"Yes," Clark said. "I can also hear extremely well, so I listen for the sound of heartbeats. When I can neither see nor hear anyone, I can be confident that all have been rescued."

Another reporter spoke up. "Following rescues, you usually fly away. Would it be possible to take a few moments to talk to the media—once you are sure that you have done all you can to help?"

Clark considered this.

"We would be grateful for the chance to speak to you directly," the reporter continued.

"And direct quotes minimise the chance of you being misrepresented," another added.

Clark nodded. "If there is time, I will make myself available to answer questions."

"The members of the media are often held behind security lines," Eduardo noted.

"Wait together, and I will come over to you," Clark said.

"Thank you."

"In return, I ask that your stories emphasise the importance of the public not endangering themselves or others in their attempts to speak to me."

At least three reporters began with questions, but Clark stood up. "Thank you for coming," he said with a stilted smile. Then he turned away and walked outside.

Upon seeing him, half a dozen people began to hurry in his direction. He lifted slowly into the air, made a vague gesture of farewell, and flew away.

He wanted Lois.

But it was too early to visit her.

And Clark Kent needed to continue trying to build a profile of the murder victim whose death he'd been investigating.

A minute later, Clark walked into the Daily Planet newsroom and sat down. Before he'd had the opportunity to log on to his computer, Mayson had wheeled her chair across the floor and was parked on the other side of his desk. "How's your story going?" she said.

"Slowly," he said, partly because it was true and partly because he didn't want to talk about it with Mayson.

"The victim was English?"

"Yes."

"What do you know?"

"He was here legally. He'd been here for six years. In that time, he managed to avoid all other records."

"Employment? Taxes?"

"Nothing."

"International income?"

"Nothing I can find."

"I think it's likely he was involved in crime of some sort," Mayson said. "That explains his need to remain invisible. It

explains his income. And it probably gives a motive for his murder."

She'd said nothing that Clark hadn't already considered, but hearing someone else voice his thoughts caused him to review this line of investigation.

"Would you like me to contact my snitches?" Mayson asked.

Clark hesitated. Mayson's contacts were superior to everyone else's—with the possible exception of Perry's never-mentioned-aloud liaison with Sore Throat.

"No harm in asking," Mayson said casually.

"OK," Clark agreed. "Thanks."

"I'll get back to you." She spun her chair around and returned to her desk.

Perry emerged from his office and stopped at Mayson's desk. They conversed for a few moments, and then Perry moved to Clark. "Did you get the flights booked?" he asked.

Clark nodded. "Leaving late Thursday night," he said. "I'll arrive back early Monday morning."

"How many hours flying?"

"Forty."

"How many hours in Australia?"

"Thirty-seven."

Perry shook his head, his grin wide. "She must be something special."

"She is."

Chuckling, the editor walked away.

Clark glanced across to Mayson's desk. He could see her back, and she gave every appearance of working, but he could hear no tapping to indicate her fingers were busy on the keyboard.

Had she been listening to Clark's conversation with Perry?

Clark shrugged and returned his mind to his story.

A man murdered.

A man who had left absolutely no clue about his life between arriving in the States and being found dead under a pier in Hobb's Bay.

Six silent years.

Clark was sure that uncovering his life would be the key to uncovering the circumstances of his death.

And that was exactly what Clark intended to do.

* * *

After a frustrating afternoon of chasing leads that went nowhere, Clark left the Planet office and returned to his apartment. He spun into the suit and did a patrol, hoping there would be nothing to delay his going to Lois.

It was Saturday morning in Melbourne, and she had a big day ahead. Hawthorn was playing in a game they had to win if they were to retain any chance of being in the finals. Lois was covering the Essendon-Sydney game at the MCG.

He'd been watching her carefully for signs of exhaustion. He knew the time at Operation Payback was emotionally draining and the threat of losing Hawthorn was never far from her mind. The wedding was approaching but she couldn't mention to anyone except him. She must feel as if her life was being stretched in a hundred different directions.

Superman dealt with a few small situations—most of which involved about five minutes of using his powers to assist and then about twenty minutes of chatting with people. Everyone wanted to talk about the wedding and Ultra Woman. He lifted from the ground with a wry smile. It seemed that being an alien faded to insignificance when compared with a wedding.

Finally, just as he figured enough time had passed that he could go to Lois, he saw two armed and masked men running from the door of a bank. He flew down, was shot twice before they realised their weapons were useless and tied the would-be robbers to a pole. The police arrived within a few minutes but asked an inordinate number of questions, which meant that when he was finally free to leave, his time with Lois had been significantly reduced.

Clark took a two-second detour to his apartment to spin out of the suit, stopped to buy breakfast, and flew to Melbourne.

She was in the kitchen when he entered her unit.

He quickly put the breakfast on the counter and took her into his arms. He loved this first moment—this first touch after having been separated from her. He hugged her close and dropped his cheek to her head, inhaling deeply and relishing the lovely vanilla scent that he would forever associate with his Lois.

"I didn't think you were coming," she said.

"I got held up answering police questions about a bank robbery."

She smiled, but it seemed hollow.

"Are you OK, honey?" he said.

"I'm fine."

"Really?"

"Nothing more than a few nerves. It's a big game for Hawthorn today."

Clark wasn't completely convinced 'a few nerves' explained her low spirits but, conscious of their limited time, he decided to leave it for now.

They sat at her table, and Clark opened the bag of blueberry bagels he had brought. "Bagels," Lois said. "How very American." She grimaced. "I don't have any cream cheese—only jam."

"Jam is perfect," Clark said. They spread the jam over their bagels and ate amid a few superficial questions. "How's it going at Operation Payback?" he asked, hoping that would bring some depth to their conversation.

Lois shrugged. "I'm beginning to realise that whoever wins, something will be lost," she said.

"What will be lost?"

"The unity," she said dolefully.

Clark sipped his coffee and waited.

"We constantly talk about rebuilding," Lois said. "Rebuilding our team to be successful on the field, rebuilding our financial situation, building a much larger membership…"

"But?"

"But the thing that might be destroyed forever is our unity. It just feels so wrong to be on the opposite side to Ron and Barb and Seb and so many past players and coaches that I would have supported to my last breath."

"Do you have any doubts?"

"None," she said. "Not about what the merger really means. If we merge, we will fade to nothing." She gave a long shaky sigh. "But in avoiding the merger, it's possible we might destroy the essence of Hawthorn."

Clark put his hand over hers and looked into eyes, which were very close to tears.

Lois roughly snatched a tissue and scrubbed away the moisture. "I read your report on the 'net about the murdered Englishman," she said.

He accepted her change of subject. "What do you think?" he asked.

"It seems weird that someone could die and leave no hint about how he lived," she said. "Have there been any further leads?"

"No," Clark said. "His life is a total blank since he moved from England six years ago."

"Nothing?"

"There are no records of any sort—no medical records, no insurance, no taxes, no employment, no bank accounts."

"What about the autopsy report? Anything there?"

"He was killed by a single shot to the back of his head."

"Was he malnourished? Sick? Any evidence of disease?"

"He was lean but certainly not malnourished."

"Injuries?" Lois asked. "Any signs of neglect? Do you think he was living on the streets?"

"No. He was clean and well-dressed. There was absolutely nothing to indicate he was homeless."

"He was living somewhere?"

"Seems so."

"How was he identified?"

"His wallet was in his pocket; it contained some money and his green card."

"He wasn't robbed?"

"No."

"And the green card checked out?"

"Yes."

"No one's come forward in England? No family? Or friends?"

"Scotland Yard checked and came up with nothing."

"So…" Lois said. "He had no ties to his homeland, he lived in the US in seeming comfort, was well-fed and clothed—yet he achieved it all without any paper trail?"

"That's it."

"He couldn't have shot himself in the back of the head."

"And he couldn't have dumped his body under a pier in Hobb's Bay. The police believe he was killed somewhere else and taken there."

"No witnesses?"

"No," Clark said with frustration. "The police canvassed the entire area, and no one saw anything."

"Have you been helping them with their enquiries? As Superman?"

"I saw the group of police and flew in to see if I could help. It was way too late for me to do anything for the victim."

"Anything else you could do? Fingerprints on his clothing? Anything left at the scene that might point to who dumped the body?"

"The only fingerprints were his own. I scanned the area—there was one imprint of a shoe that could be something." Clark shrugged. "I couldn't really determine much that wasn't going to be found by the autopsy."

"You can't just leave it like this," Lois said. "What's the next step?"

"Mayson said she would check her contacts. See if they know anything."

"You're working with Mayson?"

"No," he said, realising too late that his swiftness in replying sounded like he *was* working with her.

"It must be nice being able to go out with her and not have to hide away," Lois said.

"Lois," Clark exclaimed. "I do *not* go out with Mayson."

"You sound like there's something you don't want me to know," she said.

"You know there is nothing between Mayson and me." Clark couldn't believe he even had to say it.

"I know she wants to be with you. I know she's in Metropolis and I'm half a world away. I know she's helping you with your story, and I know you don't want me to know she's helping you."

"There is nothing between Mayson and me," Clark said, slowly and unwaveringly. "Nothing at all."

"Not from your side," Lois said. "But what about from hers?"

"I can't control what she feels," he said, trying to keep all traces of indignation from leaking into his words.

"So you admit she has feelings for you?"

Clark felt like he was being backed into a corner. "I admit she did. I told you that. I don't know what she feels now because I haven't asked her."

"Have you told her you're with someone else? Have you told her you are in a relationship?"

"No. And you know why I haven't—"

Lois lurched from her chair and turned away from him. Her shoulders were shaking.

Clark stood up, bewildered by the path their conversation had taken. "I don't know what to do," he said to her back.

"Neither do I," Lois replied.

A cold wave of horror shook him. She was having second thoughts about the wedding. She had doubts about them being together.

"Lois," he said. He lifted his hand towards her shoulder but then dropped it again. He buried both hands deep in his pockets. "Lois, I will do *anything* to make this work."

She turned. "And that's the problem, isn't it?" she said coolly.

Now, he was completely confused. "I… I—"

"Exactly. You can easily say you will do 'anything' and that our relationship is your first priority because you know I would never ask you to give up being Superman. That's off the table. So is any possibility of you not living in Metropolis. You can claim you'll give up anything for us, but you know that it will never come to either of those situations."

"Lo—"

"You keep saying it, and the unspoken question is why I won't give up my life to be with you. Why I won't just dutifully pack up my life and follow you to Metropolis—where I won't have a job and I won't have a family and I won't have Hawthorn. All I'll have is you—though I'll have to share you with everyone who needs Superman, and I'll have to share you with the career that you will still have, and I might even have to stand by while Mayson Drake continually tries to lure you into her web."

"Lois," Clark said. "I have *never* asked you to move. I have never said anything to make you think I expect you to move to Metropolis."

"Of course you haven't *said* it," she fired back. "That would accentuate how incredibly unfair it is that I have to be the one who does all the changing. But I bet you've thought it. I bet you've thought about how perfect everything would be if only I would move to Metropolis."

"I want to be with you," Clark said. "But the only person who ever brought up you moving was you."

"Then why have you never offered any sort of solution beyond sneaking around snatching a few minutes here and half an hour there?" Lois rasped. "You've always said we'll work it out. We're getting *married*, for goodness' sake, and neither one of us has the slightest idea of what happens beyond 'I do'."

"I thought we would work it out together."

"You thought I would see the obvious solution and offer to leave Melbourne," she accused. "That way, we're together, your job and your career are unaffected, and you can even sleep easy knowing that it was my choice and not something you forced me into."

"I would never force you into anything."

"Good!" she cried. "Because I'm staying right here. I'm *not* leaving Melbourne. It's my home." She stormed

towards her bedroom. At the door, she stopped and faced him. “So when we do finally get around to working out how we are going to do this, at least we’ll both understand the ground rules. I’m staying here.”

She went into her room and slammed the door.

Clark’s eyes drifted over the half-drunk coffee and the half-eaten bagels.

What had happened?

He cautiously crossed to her bedroom door and gently tapped on it. “Lois?”

The door was flung open, and he stepped back. “I have to get to the ground,” Lois said. “I have a game to cover.”

“Lois, we can’t part like this. We just can’t.”

She pushed past him. “We don’t have any choice,” she said. “You can’t go out of the door, and I have a job to do. It might only be a game of football, but it’s my job.”

Her underlying insinuation was unfair. “I have never implied that what I do is more important than what you do,” Clark said.

“You’d be the only one in the entire Daily Planet newsroom who hasn’t thought it.”

Clark hesitated for a fraction of second, but it was long enough. A jagged look of hurt crossed Lois’s face.

“Fair enough,” she said as she grabbed her coat and stormed out of her unit.

And, as she’d said, despite all his superpowers, Clark was unable to follow her.

Part 40

Clark flew—slowly for him—in the vague direction of Metropolis. He didn’t want to go back. He didn’t want to be Superman. He didn’t want to be alone in his apartment.

He wanted to be with Lois.

But even if he had been able to go to her, he had absolutely no notion of how to deal with a situation he hadn’t seen coming.

Should he have anticipated it?

Could he have done something to avert this?

He didn’t know. He’d tried to be aware of Lois’s feelings. He’d tried to ensure she’d never felt coerced into anything. He’d tried to understand the distress she felt over the situation with Hawthorn.

How could their perfect relationship have unravelled so quickly? So completely?

Clearly, his best efforts were not enough.

After an hour of aimless drifting, he landed on his balcony and went into his apartment.

He slumped onto his couch and stared at the black screen of his television.

Worse—much worse—than not knowing what had happened was not knowing how to fix it. Was it redeemable? It had to be. Didn’t it? Two people so much in love didn’t fall apart after one argument.

But simply smoothing things over wasn’t going to be enough. He couldn’t be with her if he made her unhappy. He had to find solutions.

His contemplation was interrupted by a sharp knock on the door. For one wild, impossible moment, he hoped it was Lois—then cold reality obliterated his impulse. He lowered his glasses and sighed.

It was Mayson.

He trudged to the door and opened it.

“Clark,” she said brightly.

“Mayson,” he said dully.

“I put the word out among my snitches that I want to know more about the murder you’re investigating.”

“Thanks.”

Mayson leant sideways and looked past him. “If you’re not doing anything, would you like to get a pizza? Perhaps we could go over all you know and see if a new pair of eyes can find something you’ve missed?”

“No, thanks,” Clark said without hesitation.

“Clark,” Mayson said evenly. “It would be work—nothing else.”

“No, thanks.”

Mayson hesitated, and Clark steeled himself for a barrage of questions. “OK,” she said. “If there’s anything I can do to help, you just have to ask.”

“Thanks.”

“I got one tip.”

What would she want from him in return for her information? “Oh?”

“There were parts of the autopsy report that weren’t released to the public.”

“Such as?”

“The victim’s jacket contained smoke particles.”

“He was in a fire?”

"No. It was tobacco smoke—most likely from cigars."

"So he smoked cigars?"

"Not according to the condition of his lungs, teeth, and airways."

"Many cigar smokers claim they don't inhale the smoke."

Mayson shrugged. "That's all I know," she said. "I'll pass on anything else I hear." With that, she wheeled around and walked away.

Clark closed his door and leant against it, his hands deep in his pockets and his shoulders slumped.

His heart cried out for Lois.

But there was no answer.

* * *

Hawthorn had won.

The dream of finals lived on.

Lois walked into the Herald Sun offices, her thoughts oscillating between Hawthorn's game and the skeletal ideas for the match report she was about to write.

The one thing she was determined not to think about was the episode with Clark this morning.

Two steps into the newsroom, she ran into someone—someone tall and male. She backed away and looked up. "Dan," she said.

"Lois."

She didn't know what to say. She gave him a feeble hug that didn't quite encircle his shoulders and said with false brightness, "Welcome home."

"Thanks," he said.

"Are you going to the footy tomorrow?"

"Yeah," he said, looking numb.

It would be Fitzroy's last game in Melbourne. Next week they had an away game in Perth. Lois completely understood his mood. Part of him would want to savour every precious moment of the game, knowing the end was near. Another part of him would already be in mourning.

"Will you be there?" Dan asked.

"Yeah," Lois replied. "I'm not doing the match report. I'm doing a behind-the-scenes story after the game."

"I'm not doing anything," Dan said. "Browny told me to go to the game as a fan."

"That was nice of him."

"I'll be sitting in the outer with my brothers and two mates from school." Dan shrugged. "There's a spare seat if you want to join us."

"No," she said. "I'd be in the way amongst all you Fitzroy fans. But thanks."

"I can't believe it's over," Dan said desolately. "I just can't believe there won't be a next season."

Lois put her hand on his arm. "Do you think you'll barrack for the Brisbane Lions?" she asked.

"No," he said decisively. "In fact, I've thought about this, and I'm going home."

"Back to Perth?"

"Yeah. I don't want to stay in Melbourne. There's no escaping footy in this city, and I couldn't stomach it—not without Fitzroy."

Lois understood that, too. Football without Hawthorn just didn't bear thinking about. She squeezed his arm in consolation and then dropped her hand.

"How's the campaign going?" Dan asked.

"So-so."

"Good luck."

"Thanks, Dan."

He walked sadly past her and out of the door. Lois watched him, knowing the stalemate between them was probably a contributing factor to Dan's decision to leave Melbourne, knowing also that this was probably the end of their friendship. She went to her desk with a heavy heart.

An hour later, Lois submitted her match report of the Essendon-Sydney game, closed down her computer, and crossed the newsroom to where Chris Torrens was still working on her story. "How's it going?" Lois asked.

"Nearly done."

"Want to go out?"

Chris stopped typing and looked up at Lois as a smile spread across her face. "What are you thinking?"

"Well, I'm eager to get home and watch the replay, but I reckon I can do that any time."

Chris's grin broadened. "So…" she prompted.

"Let's go to the Social Club. It'll be buzzing after the win today."

"Good idea," Chris said. "I've only been there once before. Mum and I had lunch there years ago."

"You sure about going there?" Lois asked. "We could go somewhere else."

"No," Chris said decisively. "I want to go to the Social Club. I want to soak up the Hawthorn atmosphere."

Because it could be the last time.

The unspoken fear hung over them like a threatening black cloud.

Lois gestured to the editor's office. "I'll go and have a yarn with Browny," she said. "Bang on the door when you've finished."

"I won't be long," Chris said.

Lois nodded and walked away.

She tapped on Browny's door, resolutely ignoring the creeping certainty that all of this—Browny, Chris, the Social Club—was about one thing: delaying the moment when she would have to think about what had happened this morning.

She had immersed herself in football from the time she'd left her unit until now because she'd known that if she allowed those memories a foothold, it would have been like entering an emotional minefield.

"G'day, Browny," she said with bright cheerfulness.

He looked up and contemplated her. "OK," he said sternly. "What happened? And don't give me any rubbish about the dog eating your match report."

Lois grinned. She should've known he'd be in a good mood—Carlton had won today. "I just submitted it."

"I saw that," he said. "Sydney mightn't be the real deal."

"Not after the way they played today."

"Have you talked to Rubber since he got home?"

Lois felt a sudden urge to turn and run. She'd come in here to avoid that exact subject. "A couple of emails," she said casually.

"Flinders," Browny said, "if Hawthorn merge with Melbourne, will you be leaving us?"

Lois sighed. "I don't know," she said.

"You and Rubber…" Browny said. "That looked promising."

"What makes you say that?"

"Everything I learnt about him indicated he's a good man," Browny said. "A ridgy-didge, fair dinkum bloke who wouldn't give you the run-around."

"He's all of that," Lois said, not able to keep the wistfulness from her voice.

"Flinders," Browny said, "I don't want to lose you. Struth, you're the best I've got. But—"

"Excuse me?" Lois gasped.

Browny chuckled. "Be careful," he said. "Your Yank is showing."

Lois shrugged. "Being around Rubber… I've slipped into old habits," she admitted with a sad smile.

"As I was saying—I don't want to lose you. When I retire, it's you I wanted in this seat, but—"

"Me?"

"If you interrupt me one more time, Flinders, you'll be reporting on the TAC Cup."

Lois said nothing.

"When I retire—which won't be for a decade or more, so don't get any ideas—I wanted you in this seat, but no job, and no football team, is worth giving up your chance at happiness."

Lois managed—with difficulty—to turn her splutter into a cough. "I'll… uhm… remember that," she said.

Browny's eyes narrowed. "You think I'm kidding?"

"No," she said quickly.

"Footy is my life," Browny said. "This newspaper is my obsession. Carlton is my passion. But nothing—*nothing*—comes before Sue."

"Are you still in love with her?" Lois asked, not quite able to believe she was asking her crusty editor that question.

"More so than the day I married her," he said.

There was a timid knock on the door, and Lois saw Chris through the glass.

"Get outta here," Browny said gruffly. "And, Flinders, the instant you know what you're doing, I want to know. I already have to find a replacement for Scardino."

"Thanks, Browny," she said. "Thanks for everything."

He grunted, his attention already back on his computer.

* * *

Mayson Drake stared at the grainy, low-resolution picture on her computer screen. She had managed to find two Melbourne newspapers—the *Age* and the *Herald Sun*. From there, it hadn't been hard to find a list of reporters, which had led to sports reporters and finally, female sports reporters. There was one—Lois Lane.

She was, according to the picture, an unremarkable-looking woman, lacking sophistication. Which was what you'd expect from a sports reporter—and an Australian, at that.

Mayson sniffed.

Yet, by all accounts, this woman had captured the hearts of both Scardino and Kent.

Mayson shook her head in bewilderment. Whatever Lois Lane's charms, they were patently undiscernible from the photograph.

Mayson clicked through to a list of stories. She picked one at random and spent the next three minutes trying to decipher a jumble of terms and lingo that was incomprehensible.

Her eyes fixed on one sentence, and she read it three times, but she was still no closer to enlightenment.

Brisbane's engine room proved superior, with Voss's quick hands dominating the stoppages in a display that could only have increased his chances of taking home Charlie on Brownlow night.

Was this a *sport*?

Regardless of what it was, this woman—this 'Lois Lane'—had mauled Scardino and had had such an effect on Kent that he was panting after her like a dog sniffing around a flyblown carcass.

With a final look of repugnance, Mayson closed down the site.

It was definitely time to up the ante.

* * *

The Social Club was crowded, noisy, and pulsing with the rhythm of victory. There was also a tinge of desperation in the air, but no one was acknowledging that.

Lois scanned the room. Many of the faces were familiar. Some she knew by name. Some she knew by reputation. At a table in the far corner sat a noisy group of about six people. Lois grinned in anticipation.

"Drink?" she asked Chris as they crossed to the bar.

"OJ," Chris replied.

"Nothing stronger?"

"No. Thanks."

"I'll get the drinks," Lois said. "See the pic on the wall of Dermie with the '88 cup? Go to the table under that pic and tell 'em we need two extra seats."

Chris hesitated.

Lois laughed. "Don't worry, I know them," she said. "We'll have a great night—though I warn you now, your stomach muscles will be sore from laughing."

Chris walked over the table, and it took just a couple of words from her for the seated occupants to begin gesticulating and calling to Lois. She waved back as eagerness and nostalgia flooded over her.

Lois turned back to the bar and waited her turn to be served.

She would *not* think about Clark.

Where was he?

Was he angry?

He would be aware that she couldn't go to him. Would he come to her? If he went to her unit—

"LOIS!"

Long arms surrounded her and lifted her off her feet. Once back on the ground, she spun around. "Matty!" she cried with delight.

He kissed her cheek—the now-greying man Ron had singled out from the Cheer Squad all those years ago and ordered to 'look after the young 'un—she's here by herself'.

"How're you doing, Matty?" Lois asked.

"You know," he said, his eyes shining with victory through the shadow of foreboding.

"I know," Lois said quietly.

"But we have tonight," he said with a gush of high spirits. "And it just got better with you being here."

Lois smiled. "Thanks," she said.

"Will you be at the game next week?" Matty asked.

"Wouldn't miss it for anything in the world."

"Working?"

"No."

Matty grinned. "Come and sit with us in the Cheer Squad," he suggested. "It'll be like old times."

"I don't have Cheer Squad membership."

"Pfft," he said. "You think that's going to matter?"

Lois hesitated.

"Come on," he pleaded. "The chants, the banner, the flags, the half-time raffle, the floggers… you know you want to."

She did. She wanted to experience it one last time. "OK," Lois said. "Thanks."

Matty lifted his hand, and Lois high-fived him. "It's about time you came home," he said. "We've missed you."

* * *

It was past midnight when Lois pulled into her driveway. She had managed to sustain her euphoria until the moment

she had pulled away from the kerb after dropping Chris at her home.

In the fifteen minutes since then, Lois's spirits had plummeted. All the joy of victory, all the excitement of celebration, all the thrill of being with old friends and rummaging through a treasure chest of memories… it had deflated like a popped balloon.

All that remained was a heart that longed for Clark.

And the stabbing fear that she had lost him.

Lois glanced at the clock on her dashboard. It was mid-morning in Metropolis. If Clark had come to Melbourne, he would be back at the Planet by now. He was probably chasing up leads in his murder investigation.

It would serve her right if he were working with Mayson.

Lois picked up her bag and climbed wearily out of the Jeep. Her unit was frigidly cold and unwelcoming. Groping for the light switch, she flicked it on—and muffled the scream that leapt into her throat.

Clark was sitting on her couch, perched on the edge, his forearms on his thighs, his hands clasped, and his head low. Despite the tension inherent in his posture, he looked like he'd been sitting there for a long time.

He turned slowly and looked at her, his face as blank as an unmarked canvas. "Sorry if I startled you," he said in a thin voice totally devoid of its usual warmth.

Lois drifted to the bench and dumped her bag and keys. She stayed there—not approaching him, not knowing what to do. "H…how long have you been here?" she asked.

He glanced at his watch. "Six hours."

"Six—" Lois broke off her exclamation. "Why didn't you call me?"

He stared at the floor. "I didn't know what to say. I still don't."

A part of Lois—a large part of her—yearned to go to him. Yearned to crouch next to him, take him into her arms, and tell him that she loved him and everything would be all right. But a small, resistive part knew that easing his anguish wouldn't provide the answers they needed. "Clark," she said, grasping the bench top, "we need to talk."

"I know."

"We need to talk," she reiterated. "We need to take a long time and talk this through without being interrupted, without watching the clock, and without one of us having to dash off."

He looked up at her, defeat and fear inscribed across his ashen face. "Are you willing to talk with me?" he asked. "To try to work out how we can do this?"

Her heart melted, and suddenly, it didn't matter that they didn't have answers. All that mattered was that she do whatever was needed to ease the misery on Clark's face.

Lois took two quick steps and knelt before him. She put her hands over his and ventured into the eyes that burned with pain. "I'm sorry, Clark," she said.

His eyelids flittered over moist eyes. "Sorry doesn't change that you're not happy," he said grimly. "Sorry doesn't mean that everything is OK."

"Sorry means there are things we need to sort out, but it also means that I did it the wrong way."

"It's not important how you did it," he said bleakly. "The only thing that's important is that you're not happy."

"Clark, I was upset," Lois said. "I said things I shouldn't have said."

"Were they the truth?"

Lois paused, looking down to where her hands capped his like snow on the mountaintop. "They were indicative of the truth," she said. "But I made it sound like it's wholly your fault, and that wasn't fair."

Clark withdrew his hands and leant back into the couch. "So you're unhappy… and there's nothing I can do about it?" he said.

"I hope there's something *we* can do about it," Lois said in a small voice.

"OK," Clark said. "Let's go through the options. I could give up being Superman and move to Melbourne."

Lois lightly rested her hand on his knee. He glanced down but whatever he was thinking remained unsaid. "Do you think that would work?" she asked softly. "Do you think either of us would be happy with that?"

"I want to be with you," Clark grated. "I will do anything to be with you and have you happy."

"Neither of us will be happy if we do that," she asserted.

He hauled in a tattered breath. "There's no hope for us?" he asked in a voice that clawed across her heart.

"There's every hope for us," she said. "But you need to do two things."

"What?" he said quickly. "I'll do them. Whatever they are, I'll do them."

"Firstly, you need to believe me when I tell you that my words this morning were driven by anger and stress and un-

certainty. You need to believe that although they contained an element of the truth, they do not represent the entire truth. You need to be willing to listen to me—now that I'm not so upset."

He nodded. "What's the other thing?"

"You need to be able to forgive me. I was wrong. I was unfair in how I went about expressing my uncertainties."

"Lois," he breathed. "Of course I forgive you. I couldn't *not* forgive you."

She put both hands on his knees and stretched towards him. "Then kiss me."

He didn't move. "Do you forgive me?" he asked starkly.

"For what?"

"For not noticing that you were unhappy. For not realising how you felt. For not seeing how my actions could be interpreted."

"Of course I forgive you." Lois removed her hands from him and settled back down onto her calves. "Can I ask you something?"

"Anything. You know that."

"Why have you eased back on the physical side of our relationship? You kiss me, but you stop well short of the boundaries. Something has changed."

"The night in the tree house," Clark said wretchedly. "I came so close to losing control… I wanted you so much… I scared myself."

"Were you scared because we aren't married? Or scared because we're different?"

"Both," he admitted. "I want your first time to be so special, but there is no way I can find out if… if the practicalities will work for us… and I have one chance…"

"Is that why you want it planned? Why you're so against it being an impetuous thing?"

He nodded.

"I wasn't scared," Lois said.

"I was."

"Why?"

"Lois, I *can't* lose control," Clark said. "Ever since I realised that I'm the strongest man on Earth, I've known that I can't allow my emotions to control me. I can feel angry or jealous or irritated or frustrated, but I can't act on those feelings. That night in the tree house… that kiss… I lost control. If you hadn't backed away, I would've kept going."

"You didn't lose control," she said.

"Yes, I did," he insisted. "I nearly did something we had decided not to do."

"But the second I backed away, you stopped. If you'd truly lost control, you wouldn't have accepted my decision to cool it."

"Lois!" he exclaimed, horrified. "I would *never* force you."

"I know that," she said calmly. "But you seem to have doubts."

He grimaced and nervously adjusted his glasses. "And there's another thing… utterly embarrassing, but…"

"What?"

"I didn't have any condoms. Perhaps I should have thought ahead, but… but that seemed too much like I'd planned it… that I expected…"

Lois faced him steadily. "Do you have condoms now?"

He spluttered. "Lois! I wasn't even sure you'd talk to me… let alone…" He ran his hand through his hair. "No," he stated. "I don't have any condoms with me."

"You've got two weeks to get some," she said.

A wave of confused hope rolled across his face. "T…t… two…" he swallowed. "You still want to marry me?"

"Of course I want to marry you," she said.

"But you said… you said you weren't going to leave Melbourne."

"I said I wouldn't leave Melbourne," Lois said. "But I didn't say I wouldn't marry you."

He looked as if he didn't dare believe her.

"Surely you didn't think one argument would finish us?" she said gently.

"I didn't know what to think," he said dismally. "I didn't know what you'd want. I didn't know how to deal with this."

"Clark, you've had other relationships. Surely you must have had disagreements with girlfriends before?"

He nodded. "I did," he said. "And it was unpleasant." He looked deeply into her eyes. "But it never felt as if I were slowly dying."

Lois swallowed down the surge of regret. "I'm sorry, Clark," she said.

"I don't have any answers for you," he said forlornly.

"Right now, I don't need answers," Lois said. "I need you. Can you give me that?"

"What do you want? Specifically?"

"I'd like you to sit back and let me sit on your lap. I'd like you to kiss me. It doesn't have to be hot—sweet is fine. And then I'd like to lean against you so I can listen to your heartbeat. And I'd like you to put your arms around me."

Clark offered her his hand, and Lois took it and rose from her knees. He shuffled back onto the couch and guided her onto his lap.

Once settled, Lois cupped her hand along his cheek and kissed him tenderly. She felt the shivery response slide through his body as she nestled into the nook between his throat and shoulder.

His heart was thundering as his arms surrounded her. Rather than bringing comfort, his closeness slashed the bubble of her overstrained emotions, and hot tears climbed her throat. Her body shook, and Clark's arms tightened around her like a snug blanket.

She wept.

He held her, soothing her with his touch.

When her tears had subsided, Lois brought her hand to her face and tried to wipe away the worst of the damage.

"Hold still," Clark said.

"I need a tissue."

He lifted them both from the couch, and without disturbing her position on his lap, he floated to the tissue box and handed it to her. While she was drying her sodden cheeks, he floated them back to the couch for a gentle landing.

Lois discharged a long and quivery breath.

"Do you feel any better?" Clark asked.

She nodded. "But I still don't know what we're going to do."

* * *

The warmth of Lois seeped through Clark, bringing comfort. He loved the weight of her—on his lap, against his chest. He loved her daintiness, her scent, her softness.

But unless it was forever, it was empty comfort.

And right now, he couldn't see how this could be forever.

She had been right—logically, objectively, he believed it made more sense for her to move. Yet who was he to determine that his ties to Metropolis were more important and more binding than her ties to Melbourne?

She'd said nothing for a long time now, and he wondered if she was going to sleep. It was late—she had to be tired.

"Lois?" he said quietly.

"Uhmm?"

"You should get some sleep. You have a game to cover tomorrow."

"I don't want you to go."

"I don't want to go either, but you need—"

She sprang from his chest with surprising speed. "This is one of our problems," she said. "Every time we're together, it feels like a bunch of stolen minutes—time that isn't really ours. And because we know our time is limited, we get all wound up about making the most of it, and we never really relax and simply *be* together."

"But if I stay any longer, you're going to be tired tomorrow."

"And if you go, I'm going to be distraught tonight."

"OK. I'll stay."

"What am I keeping you from doing?" she said.

"Nothing is more important than being here with you."

"What would you be doing if I were asleep?"

"I'd probably be at the Planet—though officially, it's my day off—doing more legwork in the murder case."

"We need to talk," Lois said. "And there's never going to be a better time than now."

They had to try to find a way through the quagmire. "Could you explain exactly what upset you?" Clark said.

Lois lifted her hands in despair. "It's everything," she said. "It feels like everything is pressing in on me. We want a future together, but we don't know how that will be possible. Every time we're together, it's not enough. We can't just relax together. It isn't normal, and it isn't working." Her serious brown eyes cannoned into his, accelerating his heart.

"Do you want to be with me?" he asked gravely.

"Yes."

"Why?" he demanded. "Why, Lois? I can't be who you need. I can't be *what* you need."

"You are everything I need."

"I'm an alien, Lois. I'm not from this planet. I can't change that."

"I haven't asked you to change who you are."

"You don't trust me, Lois," Clark said desperately. "You thought I would go out with Mayson."

Lois shook her head, and a tear tumbled down her cheek. "No," she said. "No. I knew you wouldn't go out with Mayson. But I was insanely jealous."

Jealous? Clark stared at her mutely, sure that anything he said would betray his exasperation.

"It was the thought of you and her being able to do something as simple as going out and having coffee together—out in public, not having to hide away, not being confined. I envied her that so much, and the words came out, driven more by frustration than anything else."

"This was all about a cup of coffee?" Clark asked incredulously.

"No. Not really."

He leapt from the couch and placed Lois on her feet. "Go and put on your suit," he directed.

"My suit?"

He nodded. "Go and put on your Ultra Woman suit. I'm taking you out for coffee."

Part 41

Lois's bedroom door shut, and Clark stared at it for a long moment, his mind churning.

Lois was talking to him.

She was willing to fly with him.

She'd said she wanted to be with him.

Despite his darkest fears, it wasn't over. She'd granted him another chance.

But he needed answers. And he needed them quickly.

Twenty minutes later, the door opened and Lois emerged, carrying a small bag. The sight of her stole Clark's breath as surely as if she'd reached down his throat and compressed his lungs.

"How are we going to do this?" she asked.

The practicality of the question untied his tongue. "I thought we'd fly to the farm," he said. "I keep a couple of my suits there. I'll change, and then Superman and Ultra Woman can continue to Metropolis."

"Do you want to visit with your parents?"

"No. Not today." As usual, time was short, but he didn't want to remind Lois of that fact.

"OK."

"What's in the bag?" Clark asked.

Lois set it on the floor. "Some of the things we need to talk about can't be discussed if there is any chance that someone is listening."

He nodded.

"So, after our coffee, perhaps you could take me somewhere. Somewhere we can speak openly without fear of being overheard. And" —she looked down at the suit—"this isn't really conducive to relaxation."

"Do you want to take the bag with us?"

"No," she said. "I thought if I leave it here, you could get it for me without having to search through my clothes."

He nodded. "I can have it to you in less than a minute."

"Thanks."

"There's something else I should tell you," Clark said.

"Oh?"

Clark could hear the hesitation in her voice. Sometimes, she must feel like the shocks just kept on coming. "Your fans want to see you."

"My fans?" she gulped.

Clark nodded. "I held a press conference to thank the people for their wedding wishes and to ask that they don't disrupt rescues, and the first question was whether Ultra Woman would make an appearance before the wedding."

That took a moment to sink in.

"So…" Clark shrugged.

"Do you think people will crowd around us?" Lois said.

Clark couldn't tell if she were concerned or merely curious. "I don't know," he said. "But we always planned to do this. Let's see how it goes."

"OK," she agreed slowly.

Feeling the same as he had in the early days when he hadn't known if his touch would be welcome, he reached for her and ran his fingers lightly through her hair. "Whatever happens, I won't let anyone hurt you," he said.

Lois leant her head into his touch and smiled. "I know," she said. She lifted her coat from the hook, and Clark reached to take it from her. His hand brushed across hers, and he noticed her engagement ring.

"You're wearing it."

"Of course I'm wearing it."

Clark stared at the ring on her finger for a long moment, reflecting on what it signified and recalling the unrelenting waves of dismay that had besieged him as he had waited for

Lois's return. He looked up and sought her eyes. "I'm so sorry, Lois."

She stretched up and draped her arms around his neck. He dropped her coat and enclosed her in the circle of his arms. He eased her closer and was instantly aware that—as any sort of practical barrier—the spandex failed dismally.

He tensed, torn between two equally dangerous choices. If he backed away, he risked Lois misinterpreting his actions. If he didn't…

Maybe she comprehended his dilemma because she slipped from his embrace and gave him a tentative smile. "We can do this," she said.

"Lois," he breathed, "I was so scared…"

She put her hand on his cheek. "Don't be," she said. "We'll work it out." Her smile was like sunshine on a gloomy day. "Let's start with coffee."

Clark retrieved her coat and held it as she slid into it.

Then, he took her into his arms, and they flew to Smallville.

* * *

Superman and Ultra Woman landed on the corner of a busy Metropolis street. Clark heard a cacophony of their names and took a moment to acknowledge those who had called out. He grasped Lois's hand and gave her a stilted Superman-smile. "OK?"

"Yes," she said. "Have you planned where to go?"

Clark reigned in the impulse to smile at the sudden American accent coming from his favourite Aussie. "This way," he said.

As they walked into the nearby cafe, Clark did his best to look as if it were a totally normal occurrence for an alien to take his fiancée out for coffee. He'd chosen a cafe Clark Kent had never frequented, and—fortuitously—the waiter was an older man who gave no indication that he found anything noteworthy in their presence. He led them to a table in a quiet corner at the back of the cafe.

Clark perused the menu as if it were riveting. "Are you OK?" he asked Lois.

Lois leant forward and said quietly, "I think everyone is looking at us."

"They are," he confirmed. "But you get used to it."

"Should I look at them? Smile? Wave? I don't know what to do."

"Just try to forget about everything else," Clark advised. "This is our time. This is about us. Try to imagine it's just you and me, having coffee. Try not to let it feel any different from all the other times we've eaten together in public."

"That's a tall order," she said with a smile. "These suits are not designed for blending."

Superman curbed his amusement. "When we walk out—if you want to—we can have a few words with people. But for now, just try to relax and enjoy being with the man who is completely in love with you."

Her answering smile warmed his heart and dislodged the worst of his doubts from where they had taken up residence in the forefront of his mind. "I guess you've had to get used to being watched at every turn?" Lois said.

Clark nodded. "At first, it made me incredibly uncomfortable. Every instinct was to look for somewhere to hide."

"When people asked about seeing me—was it like they think I'm a freak show? Or like they were interested in a nice way?"

"A very nice way," he said firmly. "They love you."

"I'm not sure why," she mused. "You're Superman."

"You're the one who gives me the strength to be Superman," he said.

Lois slipped her hand across the table to clasp his. Seeing the waiter begin his approach, Clark said, "The usual?"

She nodded.

Clark ordered a cappuccino for Lois and a latte for himself. "Would you like something with chocolate?" he asked Lois. "They have brownies."

"OK, thanks."

The waiter wrote down their order and slipped away.

"Are you feeling OK?" Clark said. "It's late for you, but I figured you probably weren't going to get much sleep until some things had been resolved."

"I'm fine," she said.

Clark squeezed her hand and scoured his mind for a suitable conversation opener. Every idea was incompatible with the possibility they could be overheard. "How was your day?" he asked, realising the lameness of his question.

"Good."

"Good workwise? Or otherwise?"

"Otherwise—we got the result we needed."

"That's good. So, one more week?"

"Yeah."

"Are you confident beyond that?"

She shrugged. “I’m hopeful.”

“Are you looking forward to next week? Are you worried? Nervous?”

“I haven’t thought about it too much. I was just trying to concentrate on enjoying this week.”

“Good idea,” Clark said.

Two women in their early twenties sidled up to Clark without so much as a glance at Lois. “Superman,” one of them gushed, “we were wondering if—”

“Excuse me,” the waiter said, appearing behind them. “In my restaurant, guests stay at the tables I assign to them.”

The two women turned on him, both clearly about to unleash a tirade. He straightened his shoulders and faced them without flinching.

Whatever the women had intended to say was lost, and after a few seconds, they turned and faded away. The waiter glided forward and placed the coffees and brownie on the table.

“Thanks,” Lois said.

He gave no indication he had even heard her as his eyes skimmed over the table and he assured himself everything was as it should be. He nodded solemnly to both of them and then turned towards Lois.

She giggled as the waiter hustled away.

“What did he do?” Clark asked.

“He winked at me,” Lois said, still chuckling.

Clark smiled. “See, even crotchety old waiters are powerless against the charms of Ultra Woman.”

“What about Superman?” Lois asked. “Is he powerless?”

“Since the moment I first saw you,” Clark declared.

“You’re very sweet,” she said.

Clark sugared his coffee and slowly stirred, dredging his mind for another possible subject of conversation.

“What time should we arrive for the wedding?” Lois asked.

The wedding! That was one thing they could legitimately discuss. “Just before ten,” he said. “Obviously, we’ll arrive together.”

“Shall we walk up the aisle together? Or do you want to wait at the front and watch me walk towards you?”

“Whichever we choose, I won’t be letting you out of my sight,” he said. “Not for one moment.”

Her eyes lingered in his. “Are you worried?”

Clark paused, striving for the balance between unnecessary anxiety and caution. “Not worried exactly,” he said. “But if anyone was planning a crime, it makes good sense to distract Superman—and how better to distract him than to jeopardise Ultra Woman’s safety?”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Lois admitted.

“It was the first thing I thought about,” Clark said. “I only agreed to the wedding because I can watch you and track your heartbeat. If anyone does anything unexpected, I’ll be by your side before anyone else even thinks about twitching a muscle.”

“That’s why I wasn’t worried,” she said. “I trust you.”

Her eyes signalled deeper meaning to her words. That she trusted him—and not just to keep her safe physically. “Thank you,” Clark murmured, loud enough for only her to hear.

Her smile laid a calming cover over his remaining qualms. They would find a way through this—they would.

“Would you prefer that we walk up the aisle together?” Clark asked.

Lois thought for a moment. “No,” she said. “I’d like you to be there already. I’d like to meet you there.”

“Sounds perfect,” Clark said.

“Are you expecting crowds of people at the entrance to the Lexor Ballroom Center?”

“The police are,” Clark said. “I talked with them about it yesterday.”

“Is this going to be a problem for them?”

“It shouldn’t be. It’s the Summer Festival that weekend, so they’ll have extra numbers on duty to deal with the crowds. Our wedding will be just one more event.”

“How will we get to the Lexor Hotel after the ceremony? Fly?”

“Linda wants a horse-drawn carriage,” Clark said.

Lois giggled. “The photos would haunt us for the rest of our lives.”

Clark covered his mouth to hide his smile. “The Ballroom Centre and the hotel are only about three hundred yards apart,” he said. “But I think it would be best if we were to fly. I want to avoid the crowds.”

“Straight to the Honeymoon Suite,” she said with a grin that was pure Lois Lane. A grin that was powerful enough to raze every remaining barrier between them. “Don’t worry, big guy,” she said. “I won’t say anything more about the honeymoon now. Imagine the outcry if Superman was seen blushing like a poppy in public.”

Joy and relief flooded through Clark. They still didn't have answers, but they had bridged the gulf that he'd feared could be permanent. He smiled as expansively as he'd ever permitted Superman to smile.

They ate the brownies, drank the coffee, paid the check, and then Clark took Lois's hand, and they walked slowly through the tables, stopping to exchange a few words with the other patrons who had so obligingly allowed them to dine undisturbed.

"Congratulations on your wedding."

"We hope you'll be very happy."

"We think you make a beautiful couple."

"We can see how much you're in love."

"We're so excited for you."

Clark nodded as Lois smiled to the well-wishers. "Thank you," she said. "Thank you so much."

Outside the cafe, they were approached by a small group of people—not from the media, just ordinary Metropolitans whose everyday activities had happened to cross paths with a superhero and his girl.

"Can we see the ring?" a young woman asked.

Lois lifted her left hand and smiled at the 'oohs' that it elicited.

"How did he propose?"

Lois tightened her grip on Clark's hand and said, "He told me that he would love me for the rest of our lives and said that my happiness was of the utmost importance to him."

An older woman looked directly at Clark. "Aww, Superman," she said. "Who'd have thought you would be so romantic?"

Clark felt the rise of colour to his cheeks and the inclination to lift Lois into his arms and fly away. He didn't because she was in conversation with a young child.

"What does flying feel like?" the boy asked.

Lois crouched to his level. "Flying feels wonderful," she said.

"Has Superman ever dropped you?"

She laughed. "No," she said. "He's never dropped me."

"What would you do if he did drop you?" the little boy asked.

"I would wait for him to catch me again."

The boy smiled. "Do you think he would?"

"I'm sure of it."

She stood, and Clark edged closer to her. The crowd around them had grown to more than twenty people, and it made him nervous. He slipped his arm under Lois's cape and clasped her waist. He scanned the vicinity, relieved to find nothing to substantiate his concerns.

As Lois continued to chat casually with those who had gathered, Clark allowed the conversation to glide through his consciousness as he concentrated on being alert to any possible danger.

A woman with a camera stepped forward and asked if they would mind posing for a photograph. Clark looked briefly into the lens, but at the sound of the shutter, he returned immediately to his surveillance. He heard the sound of an approaching car, travelling at speeds that aroused his suspicion. He tuned in his hearing.

"Outside Cafe Met. Superman and Ultra Woman. Hurry—we need photos."

Clark tightened his hold on Lois and leant close to her ear. "Media," he whispered.

Lois thanked the people for their good wishes and assured them she was very excited about the forthcoming wedding. Clark lifted her into his arms and slowly rose above the streets of Metropolis, as a car screeched to a halt and a horde of media spewed from it.

Lois chuckled. "This is the most effective escape route of all time," she said.

Now that she was safe, Clark could relax. "Yeah."

She took his face in her hands and kissed him.

"What was that for?" he asked, his grin breaking out from the Superman guise.

"Because I love you," she said.

Her eyes were sparkling, and all traces of her despondency had melted away. "You seemed to enjoy talking with them," Clark noted softly.

"I didn't realise how much I was missing being able to talk openly about the wedding," she said. "It was nice to be able to show off the ring. I can't believe people were so interested."

"You were the one who said that giving the public a glimpse into my life would help them to see me as more than a suit."

"Yes, but I didn't expect them to embrace *us* with such approval."

"Obviously, they can see exactly what I saw at the airport," Clark said. "You and I are meant to be together."

"And that is more important than anything else," Lois said.

"Where would you like me to take you, honey?" he asked, expecting her to ask to go home. She must be exhausted.

"Can I choose anywhere?"

"You can," he said, his hopes lifting. "The world is yours to explore."

"I'd like to go to your tree house," she said.

"You don't want to go back to Melbourne?"

"No," she said. "Melbourne is cold and dark. I want to go to your tree house, and I want us to stay there for as long as it takes to make the decisions about our future."

"It's the middle of the night for you," he reminded her gently.

"I won't sleep until we get this sorted out," she asserted.

"To the tree house it is," Clark said. "Then I'll go to Melbourne to get your clothes."

"And then," she said. "We'll talk."

* * *

Clark, no longer in the Superman suit, landed at the foot of the ladder with Lois's bag in his hand. He shot up into the tree house.

"Can I get you anything while you get changed?" he asked.

She took the bag. "Are we alone? Where are your parents?"

"They've gone into town. I doubt they'll be back before it's time to do the chores."

She unzipped her bag. "Thanks for getting this."

"What else would you like?"

She grinned suddenly. "I can have anything?"

Clark nodded, hoping he hadn't just agreed to something he'd regret. "What would you like?"

"It's so warm in here," she said. "I would like chocolate fudge ice cream. It feels as if I haven't had ice cream for months."

Her request brought his smile. It would be fun to bring her ice cream. "How long do you need to get changed?"

"Ten minutes."

"OK. I'll knock before coming in."

Lois nodded and reached under her cape for the zipper.

Clark shot out of his tree house and headed in search of ice cream.

* * *

Half an hour later, the ice cream had been eaten, and Clark was sitting on the oversized floor cushion with Lois leaning snugly against him.

He was enjoying their closeness, but he was conscious that if they didn't start talking, they risked still being at the impasse when he would have to take her back to Melbourne. Deciding to plunge right in, he said, "I admit it would be perfect for me if you moved to Metropolis. I could keep my job at the Planet, and I could continue being Superman. In fact, I could be Superman better than ever before because I would have your support." He slid his fingers over her knuckles and across the back of her hand. "But you must know I would never force you to leave your home."

"What are your honest feelings about the Hawthorn-Melbourne merger?" Lois asked.

"I can see how much the merger will hurt you, but I can't pretend to have the same feeling for Hawthorn as you do."

"I didn't mean that."

"Then what did you mean?"

"You've never said it, but you must have thought that if the merger goes ahead, there is a much greater chance that I will leave Melbourne."

"Yes, I've thought it," he said with a sigh. "But that doesn't mean I want it."

Lois arose from his shoulder and faced him. "It feels as if we're at cross-purposes. I'm fighting with every last ounce of energy to keep Hawthorn from merging, yet, on some level, you must want it."

"I don't want it," Clark said quickly.

"Sometimes, I'm sure we'll vote against the merger," Lois said. "And then… I don't know… I feel like I'm balancing on a knife-edge. I don't know what is going to happen but"—tears filled her eyes—"whatever happens, even if we merge, I'll have you. And having you means that in five years' time, Hawthorn will probably be something I look back on with really fond memories—a part of my life, my childhood. But…"

Clark waited, giving her the time.

She shivered.

"But?" he prompted gently.

"I'm not sure I can watch us die," she whispered hoarsely.

Her tears threatened again, and Clark pulled the clean handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed the moisture under her eyes. He waited for her to continue. When she didn't, he said, "I have a suggestion."

"OK."

"I know the uncertainty is harrowing for you—and unsettling for both of us—but we can't make any decisions until we know the outcome of the vote."

She nodded.

"But the vote is after our planned wedding, so—"

"Do you want to postpone the wedding?" Lois asked.

"I will if that is what you want."

"I didn't ask that," she said. "I asked if you wanted to postpone the wedding."

"No," he said. "I don't."

"Why?"

"Because my commitment to you isn't reliant on where we live or what happens at the vote or anything else."

"So even if we always lived in different countries, you would still want to be married to me?"

Clark nodded. "I want to be married to you more than anything else in the world. I know you think it sounds hollow, but I really would give up anything for you."

"How do you feel about me not wanting to give up my life to be with you?"

"I understand," he said quickly. "I have never expected you to give up everything to be with me."

"Is that why you get so worried about us?" Lois asked. "Is that why, at the first sign of a complication, you worry that I'm pulling away?"

Clark thought about that. "No," he said finally. "No, I think it's because I yearned to love someone completely, and I wanted her to love me, but I didn't think it would be possible."

"So, now that it's happened, you worry about losing it?"

"It's not anything you've done," Clark hurriedly assured her. "You've been unbelievably understanding and supportive. It's just that, being with me… comes with differences."

A tiny smiled peeped out from her unshed tears. "Like us being able to cross the room to get the tissues without me moving from your lap?"

He nodded. "And so many other things, too."

"Most of them good."

"Some of them bad."

Her hand caressed his face. "OK," she said decisively. "Let's go right back to the start and set these things in concrete. Firstly… about the wedding. Yes? Or no? We get one vote each. Majority rules. What's your vote?"

"What happens if it's a tie?" Clark asked.

Lois swatted his chest. "Don't complicate things," she said. "Yes? Or no?"

"Yes."

She smiled. "Yes."

"Is that two votes for 'yes'?"

"It is," she said. "The wedding is on."

Clark opened his mouth, but her forefinger closed over it.

"I know what you're going to say," Lois said. "Yes, I am sure so don't even ask."

He amended his question. "Why do you want to marry me?"

She took a moment before replying. "Well, there's the obvious," she said. "Because I love you. Because I need you. Because ever since I met you, being away from you feels like my heart is disintegrating and there is a huge hole in my life. Because I know you need me. But had your question been why I want to marry you now, the answer would be a little different."

"Oh?"

"The reason I want to marry you now… Actually, there are two. But both could potentially embarrass you."

Even with the threat of embarrassment, Clark had to know. "Tell me," he coaxed.

"I want you."

Clark swallowed. "Want… as in…"

"Sexually. I want you. And I know that, ideally, you'd like us to be married first. So either we get married now as Superman and Ultra Women, or we try to survive months of celibacy."

He cleared his throat. "What's the other reason?"

Lois smiled, probably at his lack of response to her first point. "I think marriage is the only way you will truly believe this is forever," she said. "I think you're wired to worry, and the more you care about something, the more you'll worry."

"That's my problem," he said quickly. "Not yours."

"Regardless—we need to be married. And soon."

"So it's settled?"

She nodded. "It's settled. Now, what else do we need to decide?"

"I know our current setup—with me dropping in either early in the morning or in the evening—isn't ideal, but I hadn't realised you found it so difficult," he said.

"It's like we're at cross-purposes with time, too," Lois said. "Either it's early morning for me and you've just finished your day, or it's evening for me and you're just starting. It always feels as if we're out of kilter. It affects something as simple as eating together. You bring me breakfast in the morning, yet I'm conscious that it must feel strange for you to be eating breakfast when your body clock says it's evening."

"I don't mind eating—"

"I know you don't mind," Lois said. "But we can't do something as simple as eating without being out of step."

"Perhaps we'll get used to it," Clark said hopefully. "Perhaps it will become normal for us."

"There's something else."

"What?"

"Sleeping together."

Clark cleared his throat, hoping she would continue without the need for him to comment.

"Not making love, but sleeping together," Lois said. "When I'm your wife, I want to sleep with you—if not every night, certainly most nights. But if I sleep between eleven and six, that's between nine in the morning and four in the afternoon for you. That's your work time. If you keep disappearing to sleep with your wife, very soon, you won't have a job."

"It'll be between seven and two when daylight saving switches from the northern hemisphere to the southern."

"That's no better."

A thought materialised in Clark's mind. It wasn't perfect, but it would show that he was willing to make some of the compromises. "I have an idea."

"Go on."

"I could ask Perry if I could work in the evenings. Perhaps I could start mid-afternoon. I would have to get up early, but if I left Melbourne by five in the morning, I would get to work about three in the afternoon. That would give me enough daytime to chase up stories. Then I'll stay at work until late—write up my stories, put the paper to bed, edit stories for the next edition—and leave about one in the morning. I could patrol as Superman for a few hours and be home by about six to spend the evening and… uhm… the night with you."

Lois smiled.

Clark waited for her to respond, but she didn't. Nothing beyond the smile, anyway.

"Do you think that would work?" he asked anxiously.

"No."

His hopes dashed. "It won't?"

"Not if you keep referring to Melbourne as 'home'."

He grinned and sighed with relief. "My home will always be wherever you are."

"Will Perry agree to this?"

"I'll point out that it would give him the chance to be home in the evenings, which will allow him to spend more time with Alice. I know he stays late most nights. She'll be delighted to have him home earlier."

"You being made the assistant editor was all about easing the strain on Perry."

"This would make his home life more normal than it's been in years," Clark said. "I don't know why someone hasn't thought of it before."

"What will you say if he asks why you want to do this?"

"I'll be honest," Clark replied. "I'll say that working nonstandard hours makes it easier for me to sync my life with yours."

Lois grinned. "We would have as much time together as most married couples."

"Would you be willing to give it a try?" Clark asked.

Her eyebrows leapt, and her grin shone. "You mean the sleeping together bit?"

Clark pointed at her, trying to look serious. "You are a tease," he said sternly.

"No, I'm just reminding you of things you seem to have forgotten."

"Believe me, they were never forgotten."

"Do you enjoy kissing me?"

"Enjoy!" he cried. "Lois, I enjoy it too much—that's the problem." He studied her face. "You must know how desirable you are to me."

"It's not great for a woman's ego when the mere sight of a bicep has her in a state of disarray and the owner of the bicep seems coolly unaffected."

"Coolly unaffected!" Clark shook his head. "If only you knew."

"If only I knew what?"

"I've already tried swimming under the ice in the Arctic circle," Clark said forlornly.

She regarded him with widened eyes. "You swim in the Arctic?" she said.

"Yeah," he said. "Cold showers don't work."

She almost managed to control her grin as she swept her hand down his face. "Aww, Clark," she said. "I'm sorry."

He managed a grim smile. "It's not your fault you're so incredibly sexy."

"Two weeks," she said. "And then no more swimming in the Arctic. I promise."

Part 42

Clark rapped on his editor's door and entered. Perry looked up.

"You wanted to see me?" Clark said.

"Yeah," Perry said as he leant back in his chair. "Have there been any developments in that murder case you were working on last week? What was his name?"

"Nigel St John," Clark said. "I called Henderson yesterday, and they can't find a trace of the guy's life, let alone who caused his death."

"Uhmm," Perry said. "Mayson wasn't able to unearth anything?"

"Nothing useful."

Perry glanced to the wall behind Clark. "It's almost five o'clock," he said. "Go home and pack. You have a plane to catch."

"My flight isn't until nine," Clark said. "And I'd planned to edit Mayson's story before I leave—the one about the death of the inmate in Metropolis Prison."

Perry's expression sobered. "That was a grisly business," he said. "I suggested she leave it to someone else, but you know Mayson."

"Yeah."

"Get out of here," Perry said gruffly. "I already told Mayson you would be going early. I'll see to her story."

"Are you sure?"

Perry chuckled. "I think I can probably remember enough to put the paper to bed by myself tonight."

"But—"

"Clark," Perry said, "your idea of me doing the early 'shift' and you covering the late hours has revolutionised my life. I can't believe I didn't think of it years ago. Alice is like a new woman. Last night, we went to a movie together. Do you know how long it's been since I took my wife to a movie?"

Clark shook his head.

"Neither do I," Perry said. "More shame to me."

"I'm glad it's working for everyone."

Perry grinned. "Big weekend, huh?" he said. "Is the lady in question excited?"

Clark thought about the moment when his carefully planned surprise would be revealed. His impatience surged, and he wished he could compact the next twenty-four hours into mere minutes. "I haven't told her I'm coming."

Perry's grin died. "What if she's made other plans? It's a long way to go to find an empty apartment because she's gone away for the weekend."

"She won't be going away," Clark said with certainty.

"Is it working for you—being awake more of the time when she's awake?"

"It's working wonderfully," Clark said, knowing his happiness was shining like a beacon.

Perry chuckled. "I assume you've seen to all the essentials? Airplane tickets? Passport?"

A bit sheepishly, Clark withdrew a plastic passport folder from the interior pocket of his jacket. "I didn't want to risk forgetting it," he said. "I have my ticket on me, too." Actually, the feel of his passport brushing against his chest had served as a constant reminder that he was going to Melbourne. To Lois.

"You have a great weekend," Perry said.

"Thanks, Chief. See you Monday."

Clark's simmering excitement escalated as he hurried from Perry's office and closed down his computer. He had four hours before his flight. That was more than enough time to pack his suitcase, get to the airport, check in his baggage…

… And still be able to squeeze in a visit to Lois. In her world, it was early morning. If he saw her now, the interval between his visits wouldn't be too lengthy.

Five minutes later, Clark landed on the balcony of his apartment. He reached for the door handle, only to freeze as his ears picked up a sound.

The sound of a heartbeat.

Coming from inside his apartment.

He couldn't see anyone through the glass. Who could be there?

Clark stepped away from the window so he wouldn't be visible if the intruder should move into the living area. He looked through the wall and into his bedroom, and a disgusted groan slipped from his mouth. *She* was there.

Mayson.

In his bed.

Clark slammed shut his eyes and turned away. What could he do now? If he went into his apartment, there was going to be a long and unpleasant confrontation with Mayson—who, from his quick glance, seemed to be wearing very little.

There was nothing to be gained from storming into his apartment and demanding an explanation.

Nothing to be gained, and everything to be lost—most importantly, his chance to see Lois before his long flight.

He couldn't physically remove Mayson from his apartment.

He couldn't call the police and ask them to charge her with trespass—that would take precious time.

And Perry had looked so relaxed this week. Having his top reporter charged was the last thing he needed.

Clark shot up into the air, deciding there was no way he was going into his apartment while she was there, even if it meant he had to travel to Melbourne with nothing except the clothes he was wearing. He reached into his jacket and felt the reassuring presence of his passport and ticket.

Moments later, he landed at the back door of his parents' farmhouse and walked into the kitchen.

His mom looked up from the book she was reading. "Clark," she said with a welcoming smile. She stood, and her smile died. "Is everything OK? Aren't you supposed to be flying to Melbourne today?"

He gave her a quick hug. "I am flying to Melbourne," he said. "But I need to get some clothes."

"What's wrong with the clothes in your apartment?" his mom asked.

"I can't get into my apartment."

"Why?"

"Because Mayson Drake is in my bed."

"In your—" Comprehension flooded her face. "She's not sick, is she?"

"No," Clark said darkly. "And I'd rather face a jungle full of lions than Mayson Drake."

"The sooner she finds out about Lois, the better," Martha said.

"I think she knows," Clark said. "She certainly knows I'm going back to Melbourne this weekend." He shrugged. "She's an investigative reporter; it's her job to find out things."

"What are you going to do?" his mom asked.

Clark smiled as the way forward became clear. "I'm going to pack a few clothes," he said. "Then I'm going to fly to the airport. Once I've checked in, I'm going to zip to Melbourne to see the woman I love."

"Have you thought of an explanation for why you won't be able to see Lois for twenty-four hours?" his mom asked.

No, he hadn't. He'd tried, but excuses were not his strong point. "I'm not going to say outright that I won't be coming."

"Will Lois worry? When there's no word from you?"

"I don't think so. Sometimes I can't visit her because someone needs Superman."

"She's OK with that?"

"She's great, Mom," Clark said, again marvelling at his incredible fortune in finding Lois. "She understands Superman is important to me. She's wonderfully supportive."

His mom smiled. "And that's why you're going to Melbourne this weekend?"

"Yep," Clark said happily. "I want to be there for Lois just as much as she's there for me."

Martha's eyes sparkled. "I figure there's a good chance she'll suspect you're hiding something."

He nodded. "Probably." He grinned again with sweet anticipation. "But by Saturday morning, none of that will matter."

"What are you going to do about Mayson?"

"Nothing," Clark said. "I'm not going to let her spoil this weekend. I'm not going to waste even one thought on her."

Martha patted his arm and smiled up at him. "Good idea," she said.

He bent down and kissed his mom's cheek. "See you when I get back," he said.

"Happy flying," she said.

Clark grinned. "I hate riding in tin crates," he said fervently. "But this one will be worth it."

"Give Lois our love."

"I will," he said.

* * *

Lois filled the electric jug and switched it on. She got out two cups and spooned in the coffee. While waiting for the jug to boil, her mind travelled forward to the day ahead.

It had started early and was going to finish late. There was still much to be done in preparation for the rally tomorrow afternoon. After the rally would come the game against the Melbourne Demons in the evening.

The equation was simple. If Hawthorn beat Melbourne, they would probably play in the finals next week. It they didn't, it would signify the end of their season… possibly the end of Hawthorn.

Clawing nervousness twisted through her stomach, reminding her of Grand Final mornings in the past when Hawthorn had been playing in the big game. But then, the worst scenario had been defeat—defeat that would feel like your heart was being ripped out as your hopes and dreams were shattered by whips of disappointment.

But there had always been next year.

And although you knew the lost opportunity could never be recovered… and you knew the pain of losing a Grand Final would sit like a barb through your heart forever… Hawthorn would live to contest another year.

Not so now.

The jug boiled and flicked off automatically. Lois poured the steaming water over the coffee in both cups.

She remembered the day she had first ventured into Glenferrie Oval, recalling how it felt to be a little girl in a strange new country, how Ron had walked towards her and she'd needed all of her courage not to scuttle away. She remembered her surprise at the friendliness of his welcome.

She put three sugars in one coffee and milk in both.

And then had come the games. Game after game after game, unfolding through the years. Some had faded to become little more than a bare statistic in her mind. Others seemed to have taken on their own personality—games that would never be forgotten. Games that were always recalled whenever members of the Hawthorn family got together.

The '83 Grand Final—and the sheer ecstasy of knowing, so far from the end, that the flag was theirs.

The '89 Grand Final—and Dermott Brereton rising from the ground after being crunched by Yeates.

The drawn game against North in '88 when the opposition were being coached by John Kennedy, the Father of Hawthorn.

Lethal's last game—the '85 Grand Final—and the sad end to what had been the most magnificent of careers. His tears—from a man who epitomised toughness—as he rode from the ground on the shoulders of his teammates.

Snapshots flashed through Lois's mind—the joy, the pain, the sorrow, the humorous moments, the jubilation—all weaved together in a fabric of brown and gold.

If she were seventeen again… if her father were standing before her, demanding she return home with him, her decision would be exactly the same.

She would not swap those years for anything in the world.

Lois blinked away the moisture that had gathered, and she picked up one of the cups. She gulped from it and immediately clamped shut her mouth in a herculean effort not to spurt it out.

It was disgusting.

How did Clark drink—

She burst into quivery laughter. She had made coffee for Clark, but she didn't even know if he was coming.

She fervently hoped he would be able to, but their relationship had subtly changed since last weekend. She loved seeing him, but it didn't feel as if she were falling apart when he wasn't able to visit.

She picked up the cup, being careful to get the right one this time.

Before it had reached her mouth, the swish she knew so well swept through the room, and Clark stood before her, casually dressed in jeans and a blue sweater.

She crossed to him. "Hi, handsome," she said.

He took her into his arms. "Hi, beautiful." He kissed her, his mouth warm and his cheeks slightly cool from the morning air. Then he smiled down and said, "How are you feeling?"

Lois took a deep breath. "I'm feeling OK," she said.

"Nervous about the game? And the rally?"

"Yes," she said. "But it's OK. Whatever happens, I will have you, and we'll get through this."

He nodded. "Whatever happens, we'll always have each other."

She grinned. "I made you coffee."

"How did you know I was coming?"

Lois shrugged. “Well, in my head, I didn’t. But maybe in my heart…”

He kissed the end of her nose. “Eight days,” he said. “Eight days until we are married.”

“Eight and a half.”

He accepted her correction with a quick smile. “Eight and a half. I can’t wait.”

“Neither can I.” They took their coffees to the couch and sat down. “Clark?” Lois said.

“Yes, honey.”

“You know I love seeing you, don’t you?”

“Of course.”

“It’s just that… well, maybe it would be best if you didn’t come again until tomorrow night. Late, tomorrow night. I won’t get home until after midnight.”

She eyed him carefully for signs that her suggestion had stirred up any of his doubts. “OK,” he said.

He seemed to be taking it well. “I’ll be working late tonight,” Lois said. “We still have a lot to do for the rally tomorrow. I’m not even sure if I’ll come home tonight. Chris—the new reporter—lives just around the corner from Glenferrie and—”

“That’s OK,” Clark said. “I understand.”

Did he? “There’s a big game at the ‘G tonight,” Lois said. “Essendon-Footscray. I think by the time I’ve finished, I’ll hit the footy traffic on the way home. It will be easier to crash with Chris.” She searched his face. “Is that OK?”

“Of course it’s OK,” he said.

“I did tell you that Chris is female, didn’t I?”

Clark smiled. “Yes, you did tell me that.”

“So, it’s OK, then?”

He gently brushed back a few strands of her hair. “Don’t stay up too long reminiscing about Hawthorn with Chris.”

Lois smiled with relief. “I won’t,” she said. “Tomorrow is going to be huge.”

“I hope the rally is a great success,” Clark said. “I know how much work all the volunteers have put into it.”

“I want thousands of people to come, and I want to be able to get out our message,” she said. “But whatever happens at the rally, whatever happens at the vote, we’ll always know that we did everything we could.”

“You should be very proud of the people of your club.”

“I am.”

They talked some more—about Perry and how much he was enjoying spending evenings with Alice… about the wedding… about what Superman had been doing… and about how many times people asked about Ultra Woman.

“Why are you wearing jeans?” Lois asked. “Has Perry’s relaxation extended to the dress code?”

Clark smiled. “I can’t see that happening.” He stood. “I have to go.”

Lois stood, and he kissed her quickly.

“You have a great day,” Clark said. “I hope everything goes really well at the rally tomorrow. And I hope the Hawks win and get into the finals.”

“By tomorrow night, some of the questions will have answers,” Lois said. “We’ll have an idea about the level of support for avoiding the merger, and we’ll know whether there’s a game next week.”

“Yeah.” Clark kissed her. “See you tomorrow night, honey.”

Then, he eased away and was gone.

Lois stared at the suddenly empty room. Clark’s departure had been unusually abrupt, and he’d never told her why he was wearing jeans.

She shrugged. She had more to think about than Clark’s clothes.

Although his butt did look sensational in jeans.

* * *

To Clark’s immense frustration, his flight was delayed, and it was almost midday on Saturday morning when he finally cleared customs at Tullamarine Airport. He discarded his original plan to use conventional methods to get to the city and instead shot out of the airport and landed in the shrubs at the end of Lois’s driveway.

He knew she wouldn’t be home. He had entertained the wild hope that he would get in early enough to take her to breakfast, but it had been unlikely even before the delays. As he walked across the driveway to her door, he reached into his jeans pocket for the key to her unit.

“Clark!”

Stifling his groan, he looked around and saw Esmeralda. “Hi,” he said.

“Lois didn’t tell me you were coming back.”

Clark figured that wasn’t unexpected. He knew the women had barely spoken since Lois had broken into her neighbour’s home to rescue him.

“Clark?”

He pushed the key into the lock. “Uhmm?”

“Does Lois know you’re back?”

He figured there was no reason to lie. “No,” he said. “I’m going to surprise her.”

Esmeralda put her hand on his arm, turning him to her. “She might not be the only one getting a surprise.”

“Oh?”

“There’s something you should know before you go in there.”

“What?”

His question had come out sharper than Clark had intended, but even so, he was surprised to see Esmeralda falter.

“What?” he repeated, consciously softening his tone.

“I know you don’t have any respect for me, but whether you believe it or not, I was happy for Lois when she got together with you.”

He wasn’t sure he believed her, but Clark nodded, willing her to get on with whatever she wanted to say.

“I don’t really know how to tell you this, and I wouldn’t say it if I wasn’t absolutely sure… but…”

“But what, Esmeralda?” Clark frowned, knowing he had done a dismal job of hiding his impatience.

“I thought you and Lois had finished when you had to go back to the States.”

“We didn’t finish,” he said. He pushed at Lois’s door, and it swung open.

Esmeralda tightened her grip on his arm. “Before you go in there, you should know that Lois has someone else.”

“She what?” he exclaimed. The words were out before he could moderate them. “No,” he said more evenly. “No, she hasn’t found someone else.”

“How would you know?” Esmeralda scoffed. “You’ve been on the other side of the world.”

“Lois wouldn’t do that,” Clark said firmly.

Esmeralda eyed him with abject pity. “She’s had a man in there most evenings and many mornings,” she said in a tone that invited him to draw his own conclusions.

“How do you know?”

“These walls are thin,” she said. “I’ve heard conversations when Lois was supposed to be in there alone. And the other voice was definitely male.”

“Did you recognise the voice?” Clark said, trying to sound like a boyfriend who wasn’t necessarily buying this allegation.

Esmeralda shook her head. “I didn’t hear any words, not even specific voices, but I heard enough of the murmur of conversation to know that one of the voices was male. And I heard Lois laughing. And last weekend, I heard raised voices. I think they had a fight.”

“Perhaps what you heard was the television.”

Her look told him what she thought of *that* explanation.

“Esmeralda, I trust Lois,” Clark said.

“Then you’re a fool,” she retorted.

Completely out of ideas and worried that he would simply dig a bigger hole for himself, Clark offered a smile and said, “Thank you for trying to warn me, Esmeralda.”

“You don’t believe me, do you?” she said.

“I’ll talk to Lois.”

“She’s not going to admit that she had a guy in her place within a couple of days of you leaving.”

“I’ll talk to Lois.”

“Just don’t blame me when everything goes pear-shaped,” Esmeralda said. She walked away, shaking her head.

Clark stepped into Lois’s unit, shaken by the encounter with Esmeralda. It had never occurred to him that anyone would hear him. What if she’d recognised the voice as his?

Deciding there was nothing he could do about it now, Clark went into Lois’s bedroom. She wasn’t home, as he knew she wouldn’t be. He hadn’t been able to ask if she minded him using her shower, but he hoped it would be all right.

He showered and shaved, splashed on some cologne, and dressed in clean clothes. At her front door, he hesitated. Should he super-speed out of the door and have Esmeralda think he was still in here? Or should he walk out normally and risk having to listen to more of her accusations?

He decided to walk. If Esmeralda came out, he would affirm again that he trusted Lois. There was very little else he could say.

Clark made it to the end of the driveway without being accosted and hurried to Richmond station. He bristled with impatience as he waited on the platform. When the train stopped, he stepped aboard, his excitement growing with every passing moment. Soon, he would see Lois.

And they could be openly together again.

* * *

Clark jumped from the train the moment the doors opened at Glenferrie station and hurried along the platform. He jogged down Glenferrie Road, dodging the shoppers, slowed as he passed through the little arcade, and quickened again to cross the car park. Ahead was Glenferrie Oval. His view was obscured by the tall trees, but he could hear the drone of voices. Clark lowered his glasses and looked through the trees.

What he saw made him catch his breath. The rally wasn't due to start for over an hour, but the oval was already a sea of brown and gold. He looked around him and noticed that people dressed in the brown-and-gold jumper of Hawthorn were marching towards the oval, armed with flags, banners, and 'no merger' placards.

At the sidewalk, he merged into the stream, and once past the trees, he was able to gain full appreciation of the enormity of the crowd. Lois had told him they were hoping for two thousand people. In Clark's estimation, they had exceeded that already.

He arrived at the gate and was greeted by an elderly lady who was completely decked out in brown and gold, including the earrings that hung from her ears. "Welcome," she said with a big smile. "Thank you for coming." She handed him a pamphlet and a cardboard sign emblazoned with the brown words 'NO MERGER' on a gold background. "Are you going to the game tonight?"

"Yes."

"Take the sign with you," she said. "We need as many as possible there."

He nodded and entered through the gate to stand on the little rise where he and Lois had watched Hawthorn train. He glanced up into the grandstand to his right, remembering how it was there that Lois had told him about the beginnings of her love affair with Hawthorn. Now, the stand was filling quickly. The ground itself was over half full as people crowded around a small temporary stage that had been set up near the centre.

It was obvious Operation Payback hadn't planned for this many people.

A long row of tables snaked between the goal posts and the grandstand. People sat on one side and on the other, long lines awaited, presumably to pledge their support and membership to Hawthorn for next year.

Assuming the merger was averted.

The air hung heavy with a sense of purpose and combative determination.

He needed to find Lois.

It wasn't going to be easy to see her.

Identifying her heartbeat—that one special rhythm he could distinguish from millions of others—was going to be the quickest way to locate her.

He closed his eyes and listened. There it was.

Suddenly, it accelerated.

Clark opened his eyes as a brown-and-gold figure flew into his arms with a delighted scream.

"CLARK!"

He swung her around—which was precarious given the milling crowds of people—and clung to her. She backed away, jumping with excitement as her smile beamed and her eyes danced.

"Clark," she said. "What are you doing here?"

"I caught a flight yesterday morning," he said. "And here I am."

Her hand reached for his face and lovingly slid along his cheek. "Aww, Clark," she said.

They stood there, looking only at each other, as the ocean of brown and gold swirled around them.

A tear leaked down Lois's face, and Clark tenderly brushed it away with the pad of his thumb.

He could see how much this meant to her. He could feel it in the slight trembling of her body under his hands.

He had dreamed of this moment many times. He had anticipated her surprise. But the reality was far better than anything he had imagined.

"You're crying," he said softly.

"But they're not sad tears," Lois said. "They are the happiest tears of my life. I can't believe you did this for me."

She threw herself at him again and kissed him emphatically. Then her mouth leant close against his ear. "I can't imagine loving anyone more than I love you right now," she said. "But you're Clark Kent, gentleman of extraordinary sweetness, so I imagine that, by tomorrow, my love will have grown again."

Clark held her close to his heart in the circle of his arms. It was worth every minute of the long hours in the airplane and every ounce of the frustration at the delays.

Lois was happy, and they were together.

And that meant Clark's world was perfect.

Part 43

"How long are you staying?" Lois asked. They'd moved from obstructing the main entrance into Glenferrie Oval and were now tucked into a corner at the foot of the grandstand.

"I fly out tomorrow night," Clark said.

He sensed the briefest glimmer of disappointment in the way her eyes dropped to where her hand was resting on his chest, but when she looked up again, she was smiling. "Your timing is perfect, big guy," she said.

"I wanted to be here for the rally and the game tonight."

Her grin was exultant. "Ah," she said. "But it's better than that. I have tomorrow off."

"You do?"

Lois nodded happily. "Browny figured that, after everything today, I'd be useless tomorrow, and he wanted two stories in today's edition outlining the cases for and against the merger."

"So you wrote a story for the anti-merger side and—"

"And, in return, I have tomorrow off."

Clark grinned, yet something he'd been wondering about occurred to him again, and he made a mental note to discuss it with Lois before he left Melbourne. Now wasn't the time, though. "What had you planned to do tomorrow?" he asked.

"I'd planned to go to Operation Payback and help to collate all the details we collect today."

"Do you still want to do that?" Clark asked, trying to keep his face deadpan.

"Of course," she said. Her head jolted down, but not before he'd caught the foreshadowing of her smile.

Clark hooked his finger under her chin and lifted her face to him. "Are you teasing me again?" he asked, trying to sound stern.

Her grin blossomed. "I thought I wasn't allowed to tease you," she said.

Her mere existence was a tease. Clark steered away from the direction of those thoughts with a firm reminder to himself that their honeymoon was still a week away. He placed a gentle kiss on her cheek, allowing enough time to pass that his question didn't sound suggestive. "So, what are we going to do tomorrow?"

The amusement in her eyes implied that her thoughts were running parallel to his. "Do you like trains?" Lois asked.

"Trains?" They were definitely better than airplanes.

"Steam trains. We could go on Puffing Billy."

Puffing Billy? "Together?"

"Of course."

That was all Clark needed. "Sounds great."

Lois brushed the front of his sweater. "Where are you staying tonight?" she asked.

"I thought I'd get a hotel room."

She looked up at him, her eyes serious. "Not at my place?"

"There are problems with that, honey," Clark said. "I went to your unit to shower and change, and I ran into Esmeralda."

"Did she try to lock you in her room again?" Lois asked with a grin.

"No," Clark said soberly. "She told me she's heard a male voice in your unit."

Lois covered her mouth as alarm filled her eyes. "She heard something?"

Clark nodded. "She was certain about it. There was no way I was going to be able to convince her that she'd imagined it."

Lois shrugged. "I don't care what Esmeralda thinks," she declared. "If you want to stay at my unit tonight, that's between us, and it's no one else's business."

"I hate anyone thinking that about you."

"Your opinion is the only one that matters."

He smiled gently. "I know," he said. "But you have to live here."

Lois looked up into his eyes. "Clark," she said solemnly. "If you want to swish into my unit and stay the night, I'm OK with that. If you want to walk in boldly as Clark Kent and openly stay the night, that's OK, too. If you want to sleep at my place, that's OK. If you want to do a whole lot more than sleep, I won't have any regrets tomorrow morning. If you want to stay somewhere else, I'm sure Narelle and Gazza would love to have you, so would Browny and Sue."

"Would you be disappointed if I stayed with Gazza?"

"Devastated," she said, although a small smile tempered her word. "But so long as you arrive there late tonight and leave early tomorrow morning, I'll survive."

"Lois, I don't want your friends thinking I had a flying visit to Melbourne and took advantage of you. We can't have any official future yet."

"I know," she said. Then her smile broke free. "But next week…"

Clark grinned as he lowered his mouth to her ear. “Next week, my love, it’s the honeymoon suite for us.”

When he withdrew, Lois was still grinning, but it faded as she checked her watch. “I’m due back at the tables,” she said.

“That’s OK, honey,” he said. “I didn’t come to distract you; I came to support you.”

She smiled. “Well, just the sight of you distracts me,” she said. Her eyes swept the length of him. “Nice jeans, by the way.”

They were? They were just some fairly old ones he’d dug out from the back of his closet in Smallville. “Can I help you at the tables?” he asked.

“That would be great. Come and sit with me. We need to try to have all the names and addresses recorded before the official part of the rally begins.”

She turned away, and Clark saw she was wearing her number 5 jumper—the one he’d seen framed in her bedroom. He hurried a few steps and caught up to her. “Hey,” he said. “You’re wearing Crimmo’s jumper.”

She nodded. “Yeah. I’ve never worn it before, but today, I had to. It’s my way of saying our history demands a future.”

They arrived at the tables and relieved two other volunteers. Lois quickly explained the questionnaire, and Clark looked up with a smile to the woman at the head of the line. “Hi,” he said. “What’s your name?”

* * *

It was almost three thirty when Don Scott climbed onto the small makeshift stage. The crowd—which now filled every inch of Glenferrie Oval and even spilled onto the sidewalk—rustled expectantly as he tested the microphone.

Then, he began.

He spoke earnestly about the direness of the situation—the financial debt and the low membership numbers that meant Hawthorn had seemed to be the obvious candidate when the AFL had cast its eye over the football landscape in search of a sacrificial lamb. He talked of the work of Operation Payback, and he outlined the future, explaining how that future could be achieved without merging with Melbourne.

Then, he called Dermott Brereton to the stage.

The crowd exploded into a wild cheer. From one section came the beginnings of a chant, “Der-mie, Der-mie, Der-mie,” and with each cry of his name, the voices swelled until they roared like a vast wave across the oval.

Clark glanced at Lois. She, too, was chanting and, he noticed, close to tears.

She saw him look at her and leant across so he would be able to hear her voice over the chant. “Things went awry, and Dermie left us,” she said. “He went on to play with Collingwood and Sydney. This is a favourite son finally coming home.”

The chant showed no signs of abating as ‘Dermie’ stood, elevated above the sea of brown and gold, fidgeting with the microphone and fighting back tears.

His hand brushed under his eyes, and he raised his arm, requesting silence. The crowd slowly quieted, and a hush came over them as they waited for Dermie to speak. He didn’t, and Clark could see why—the man who had played an entire Grand Final with a torn kidney was now fighting an equally difficult battle, this time with his emotions.

“We’ll never forget ‘89, Dermie,” came a cry from the crowd. “You’ll always be a Hawthorn hero.”

Loud cheers followed.

Dermie lifted the microphone and began to speak. “I… I… I didn’t expect this,” he said in a voice that cracked.

The crowd cheered again, giving him a few moments to compose himself.

Falteringly at first, but then with more surety, Dermott Brereton spoke about what Hawthorn meant to him. He spoke as a man might speak of his first love—with enduring affection and heartfelt nostalgia. Then he said that victory often required pushing through pain. He compared their current situation with the final minutes of a close game, noting how triumph came by taking the hard way and refusing to give in. Then he begged the crowd to give whatever they could to free their club from the scourge of debt.

The cheers of the crowd rose above his voice, and Dermie returned the microphone to Don Scott. Fevered applause, piercing whistles, and loud cheers accompanied the former player as he stepped down from the stage. As he walked through the throng of fans, they inundated him with hugs, handshakes, and pats on his still-broad shoulders.

As Lois had said, a much-loved son had returned home.

* * *

After the rally had concluded, the swarm of people scattered as Hawthorn fans headed to the station or their cars to travel to the MCG for the game against Melbourne.

As darkness fell, about fifty remaining volunteers packed away the tables and chairs, dismantled the stage, and bundled the precious questionnaires into boxes for safekeeping.

Clark had been following Lois, stepping in whenever she was about to lift something he considered too heavy for her. The excitement at the success of the rally had begun to fade as tiredness crept over her. “You need to eat before the game,” he said, knowing food wouldn’t have been her priority all day.

Lois summoned a smile for him. “That would be wonderful,” she said. “But we don’t have time to sit down.”

“I’ll walk to Glenferrie Road and get us something to eat on the train,” he said.

“OK, thanks. Don’t be long.”

“I won’t be. There’s still a bit to do here. I won’t hold you up.”

“That isn’t what I meant,” she said. “I meant that I don’t want to be away from you for even a second longer than necessary.”

With a smile, Clark leant over and kissed her. “I’ll be back soon with something hot and tasty,” he promised.

Lois grinned, as if at an amusing secret, but said nothing.

“What?” he asked.

“Hot and tasty,” she said, still grinning. “Just like you.”

* * *

For Lois, the trek across Yarra Park to the MCG felt eerily surreal. She’d walked this path hundreds of times. Everything—the stately elms, the upright gums, the dark soil, the wide asphalt walking tracks—was so familiar… but something had changed.

Something felt different.

She felt different.

It was as if she had been lifted from the course of her life and was dangling aimlessly—no longer a part of her past but not yet secured in her future.

This could be the last time.

The last time she dressed in her Hawthorn jumper.

The last time she felt her stomach knot with the anticipation of a big game.

The last time she smelled the scent of battle in the air.

In front of her loomed the mighty Melbourne Cricket Ground—the hallowed turf, the stadium where Hawthorn had won eight of their nine premierships, the place of a thousand memories.

Beside her was Clark—holding her hand, regularly looking down at her, his eyes soft with his love.

Around her were streams of people, divided into two distinct tribes—those dressed in brown and gold and those dressed in the blue and red of Melbourne. This time, however, there was a common thread. Supporters of both clubs carried banners and signs protesting the proposed merger.

Clark gently tightened his grip on her hand. “Are you all right, honey?” he asked.

Lois nodded. “Can you feel it?” she asked. “Can you feel the build-up? The excitement?”

“Yes,” he said. “I can.”

She banished the unsettling cocktail of melancholy and nostalgia and foreboding. “I don’t want to think about how this could be the last time,” she said. “I just want it to feel exactly as it has hundreds of times before.”

Clark smiled, and it felt as if he were her mooring post amidst a swirling sea. “Just enjoy it, honey,” he said. “And whatever happens, we’ll deal with it together.”

She smiled up at him and again felt her heart swell with love because he’d foreseen how much she would need him and had come to be with her.

“Do you think we have a good chance of winning?” he asked.

“Melbourne are thirteenth,” Lois replied. “They have no chance of playing finals. But if this is the end of an era for them, too, I’m sure they’d like to go out with a victory.”

“Anything else you’re hoping for?” Clark asked.

“Jason Dunstall is on ninety-one goals for the season. I’m wearing my number 19 jumper over Crimmo’s jumper to support Piggy. If he can kick another nine, he’ll get the ton.”

“Is that a big achievement?”

“Really big.” She pulled out her purse and extracted her Hawthorn membership card as they approached the gates. “Is it OK if we go and chat to the Cheer Squad for a few minutes before going to our seats?”

“Of course.”

They entered the ground, and Lois made a beeline for the Cheer Squad area behind the goal posts. Once there, she stood for a moment as memories pounded her heart like waves on the cliff face. Matty looked up from where he was handing out flags, and when he saw her, he jogged up the steps and greeted her with an enthusiastic hug. “Lois,” he said. “You’re here in good time. Do you want to do the banner? I’ve saved you a seat.”

Lois put a hand on his arm. “Matty,” she said, “I really appreciate the offer, but I can’t sit with the Cheer Squad tonight.”

His face fell. “You said you would.”

“I know,” she said. “But I’m going to sit with Clark.”

Matty glanced behind her. “We’re chockers,” he said. “I only have one spare seat.”

“That’s fine,” Lois said. “I’m going to sit with Clark. I just wanted to tell you.”

“Lois,” Clark said. “You can sit here.”

Shocked, she turned to him. “You travelled halfway around the world to be with me, and you think we’re not going to sit together?”

“This might be your last chance to sit with the Cheer Squad.”

“If that’s the case, it’s also my last chance to sit with you and watch Hawthorn play,” she said. She turned to Matty. “I’m sorry, Matt,” she said. “I didn’t know Clark would be here.”

Suddenly, Matty smiled. “So,” he said, “Little Miss America is all grown up, and she’s even got herself a Mr America.”

Lois nodded with a shy smile.

Matty gave her a quick hug. “If we win, come down after the game. Come and celebrate with us.” He looked at Clark. “You’re welcome, too, mate.”

Lois smiled. “Thanks, Matty. Go Hawks, hey?”

“Go Hawks.”

Lois took Clark to their seats about twenty rows behind the Cheer Squad.

“Lois,” he said. “Are you sure about this? I don’t mind if you go and sit with your friends.”

“I’m sure,” she said. “I want to be with you. I *need* to be with you.” She reached up to kiss him, and at that moment, the Hawthorn team ran out for their warm-up. Lois stood and cheered loudly. When she sat down, she said, “How long since you began planning to fly here for this weekend?”

“Almost from the time I arrived back in Metropolis.”

She grinned meaningfully. “I guess you’ve had a lot of practice at keeping secrets.”

“I was so worried you’d ask why I’d be missing for nearly a day.”

“How did you know how much I would need you?”

“I didn’t really think of it in—”

“Lois!”

At the sound of the well-known voice, Lois leapt from her seat and spun around. Seb was there, wearing his Hawthorn jumper—the one that still sported the number 9 she had rather crookedly sewn onto it. Lois embraced him—awkwardly at first, but then his arms tightened around her, and her heart gladdened. It was so good to be with Seb again. When they parted, he gave her a circumspect smile. “Good luck, Lois,” he said.

“Go, Hawks,” she responded.

He nodded.

“Where are you sitting?” Lois asked.

“On the wing with Mum,” Seb replied. “I ran into Matty earlier today, and he said you’d be in the Cheer Squad tonight.”

“I was going to join them, but Clark came back for the weekend, so we’re watching from here.”

Seb nodded at Clark. “Have a good game.”

“You, too.”

Seb paused before leaving. “The board asked me to contribute financially to the merger campaign,” he said. “I didn’t. I couldn’t—not with how things stand with you.”

“Aww, Seb,” Lois said, feeling her looming tears jam her throat. “Thank you.”

“I’ll still be voting for the merger,” he said.

“And I’ll be voting against it.”

He nodded. “C’arn the mighty Hawks.”

Clark put his arm around Lois’s shoulders and dropped a kiss into her hair as Seb walked away.

* * *

The teams had taken their positions on the field, and feelings were already running high. There were a couple of heated clashes between opponents before the umpire had even bounced the ball to start the game. Lois sprang to her feet. “Get off him, Clarkson,” she screamed.

When she sat down again, Clark asked, “Clarkson?”

“Alastair Clarkson,” she said with disgust. “The little thug.”

Clark decided not to pursue this topic and turned his attention to the play.

A minute later, Jason Dunstall kicked the first goal of the game. The rest of the first quarter was fast-paced and tough. By quarter time, Melbourne was eleven points up, and Lois was looking worried.

The second quarter was some of the most enjoyable football Clark had ever witnessed. It certainly helped that Hawthorn outplayed their opponents and kicked seven goals to Melbourne's two. It also helped that Lois became more excited with each goal her team kicked. She turned to him as the half-time siren sounded. "Six goals to Piggy in that quarter," she exclaimed. "He was brilliant."

Clark had to agree. Dunstall's speed, strength, and ability to mark under extreme pressure from his opponent had been impressive. "He kicked one goal in the first quarter, didn't he?" Clark asked. "So that's ninety-eight for the year?"

Lois grinned. "Two to go."

"What happens if he kicks one hundred goals?" Clark asked.

"Have you heard how 'a ton' is celebrated?"

"No," he said. "Does 'a ton' mean one hundred goals?"

She nodded. "I hope it happens, just so you can see one of the most remarkable sights in footy."

"What happens?" Clark asked.

She didn't tell him. Instead, she kissed him. "You'll see," she said when their mouths eased apart.

"Any hints?" Clark asked.

"Do you want hints or kisses?"

"Both?"

Lois kissed him again and then said, "The only hint you're getting is that the AFL administrators hate it and threaten all sorts of fines."

"Oh."

"But we do it anyway, just to remind them that it's *our* game, not theirs."

"Will you be doing it?" Clark asked, wondering exactly what 'it' was.

Lois considered for a moment. "Probably not," she said. "I've done it before—more than once—but if it happens, I think I'll just enjoy the spectacle tonight."

Clark hugged her against his chest, thinking how wonderful it was to be with her in public. "You seem more relaxed."

"I am," Lois replied. "You're here, and I still have to keep pinching myself to believe that you really came all this way just to be able to share today with me." She smiled happily. "And the Hawks are playing well. We're nineteen points up. They have no one who even looks like he's capable of stopping Piggy. Our midfielders are dominating. We should win reasonably comfortably."

The third quarter, however, didn't pan out the way they had hoped. Melbourne came out from the half-time break with new purpose and vitality, and suddenly the Hawks looked slow and ragged. The one bright spot was when Dunstall kicked another goal, bringing his tally to ninety-nine for the season.

A few minutes later, Hawk Darren Kappler raced the ball out of defence with a breathtaking run along the wing. He steadied and speared a left-foot pass into the Hawthorn forward line. Dunstall out positioned his opponent to take a strong overhead mark. He walked back to prepare for his shot at the goal, and Clark watched, dumbfounded, as hundreds of people left their seats and streamed down the aisles towards the fence. Lois's eyes were glued on Dunstall, her fists were clenched, and she was muttering something under her breath. The Hawthorn player took a few steps, kicked, and the ball skewed left, missing the goal.

A loud groan echoed around the ground, and the crowd seeped back to their seats. Lois sank her face into her hands.

By three quarter time, Hawthorn were clinging to a slender two-point lead, courtesy of a late goal from their forward, Nick Holland. Lois looked tense. Clark put his hand over hers and smiled encouragingly.

"One quarter to go," she said.

She meant—perhaps one quarter ever.

At that moment, Clark knew with total certainty that he was exactly where he needed to be—with Lois. Whatever happened in the next half an hour, they would face it together. He swooped down and kissed her cheek and then whispered in her ear. "Your Hawks aren't done with yet."

She gave him a strained smile.

The last quarter began, and not long in, Dunstall earned a free kick after being tripped. As he lined up for the goal that would be his hundredth, Clark again noticed the crowd flooding to the fence.

This time, Dunstall kicked accurately, and instantly, hundreds of spectators jumped the fence, spilled onto the playing area, and raced towards the Hawthorn player. The security guards, distinguishable by their blue coats, reached him first and formed a human barrier around him.

The swiftest members of the crowd reached Dunstall as others continued to leap the fence and run onto the MCG. They just kept coming—hundreds of them, thousands of them.

Clark dragged his eyes from the teeming mass on the ground and looked to Lois. "This is what happens when a player kicks his one hundredth goal for the year?" he asked.

She nodded. “Going onto the ground to congratulate the player is one of the traditions the AFL haven’t been able to stop. They’ve taken away allowing the kids to have a kick on the ground after the game, they’ve stopped the front row of fans from banging on the advertising signs to celebrate a goal, and they’ve banned running onto the ground after the final siren to pat the players on the back.” She grinned triumphantly. “But they couldn’t take this away.”

“What happens now?” Clark asked.

“They’ll clear the ground, and we’ll keep going.”

“The game will continue?”

Lois looked at him blankly. “Of course.”

Clark turned his attention forward again. People had begun to leave the ground and were returning to their seats in orderly fashion. “That’s an amazing sight,” he said.

“Isn’t it?” Lois said. “I’m so glad we saw it one final time.”

* * *

Dunstall’s goal had put Hawthorn seven points up. After a delay of about five minutes, the last of the spectators left the field, and play resumed.

A few minutes later, Dunstall kicked truly again and stretched the lead to thirteen points. Lois began to breathe a little easier. There were less than ten minutes to go—all they had to do was play shutdown football and hang on grimly.

But, as Lois watched with deepening horror, Melbourne rallied with two goals in the next nine minutes and reduced Hawthorn’s lead to one point. One point. All Melbourne had to do was knock it through their goals to score a behind and the game would be drawn—and that would not be enough to get Hawthorn into the finals. They had to win. They *had* to stop Melbourne from scoring. They *had* to keep the ball out of the Melbourne forward line. Trepidation snaked a path around Lois’s heart. It couldn’t end like this. It just couldn’t.

Clark slipped his hand into hers. “Squeeze as hard as you like,” he offered.

She took the time to flash him a tense smile before returning her attention to the play.

Melbourne surged towards goal, and her heart screamed in protest. Two Melbourne players attacked the ball, hampered each other’s efforts, and the ball fell loose. Lois breathed a little easier when the combined efforts of three Hawthorn defenders cleared the ball and gained thirty precious metres.

There couldn’t be long to go. A minute, maybe.

Hawk Daniel Chick received a handball and hesitated.

“Kick it long,” Lois advised under her breath.

He didn’t—and his short pass was cut off by a Melbourne player. Lois’s insides coiled tighter.

Melbourne kicked long into their attack, and the Melbourne forward surged to meet it. He looked certain to mark it until, rising from behind him, Chris Langford, Hawthorn defender, flew—and Lois’s entire body tensed in empathy. Langers somehow got his fist to the ball before it reached his opponent’s hands, and it ricocheted fifty metres away to the vacant wing area.

“L-L-L-L-L-angers!” she screamed in delight.

It became a race for the ball as tired legs pumped across the turf, driven by hearts that refused to give in. The Melbourne player reached it first, took possession, and managed a desperate, erratic handball as Hawk Shane Crawford tackled him.

Luke McCabe of Hawthorn evaded a flying Melbourne tackle and kicked forward, gaining an extra forty metres of breathing space.

“Siren,” Lois pleaded. “Come on, siren.”

A Melbourne player picked up the ball and threw it onto his boot, gaining good distance but without any precision.

Andrew Collins—small, blond, and wearing Crimmo’s number 5 jumper—used his body to shepherd his opponent from the drop of the ball, allowing his teammate Nick Holland to drift into the space and take an uncontested mark. Lois leapt to her feet like a suddenly loosed spring. “Yay, Dutchy!” she yelled.

Surely, it couldn’t be long now.

Lois perched on the end of her seat. “Take your time, Dutch,” she muttered. “Take your time.”

Holland walked, ran, stepped backwards… and managed to eat up ten seconds of time.

Then, falteringly, he inched forward. The umpire told him to play on.

Holland kicked the ball as long as he could, and while it was still in the air, the siren sounded.

Hawthorn had won.

By one point.

Part 44

As the siren sounded, Lois leapt into the air, arms aloft and fists clenched as all the tightly wound tension exploded into electrifying excitement. She turned to Clark and threw her arms around him, still jigging on feet that couldn’t stay still.

“They did it,” he said. “Well done. Great game.”

"It was a magnificent game," Lois said. "It had everything." Her hand caressed his cheek. "Even you."

"I'm so glad I was here."

"I am, too."

"Finals next week?"

"If Richmond get beaten by North tomorrow, yes," Lois said.

Clark put his arm across Lois's shoulder, and she slipped her arm around his waist. Together they watched the Hawthorn players celebrate with each other and then move to their opponents to shake hands. The strains of the Hawthorn theme song echoed around the stadium.

We're a happy team at Hawthorn

We're the Mighty Fighting Hawks.

We love our Club, and we play to win,

Riding the bumps with a grin (at Hawthorn).

Come what may…

The words of the much-loved song caught in Lois's suddenly constricted throat.

What if this was the last time?

She looked to her right—across the ground—in a desperate, futile attempt to pick out Seb and Barb so they might share this moment. It simply wasn't possible to pick out two individuals from the mass of people.

Clark's arm tightened around her. "Come on," he encouraged with a smile. "I'll sing if you will."

But Lois knew that if she attempted to sing, she would have no defence against the bulging clump of emotion wedged in her throat. She put her head on Clark's shoulder and rested it there.

A sudden premonition gripped her heart. This was goodbye. This was the end.

Hawthorn would merge with Melbourne, and she would leave her home and move to Metropolis.

Clark's hand rubbed up and down her arm. Perhaps he understood.

Below them, the Hawthorn players congregated into a group and headed towards the race. The leading players had already disappeared when, towards the back of the group, Chris Langford pulled off his Hawthorn jumper and raised it to the crowd.

It was a simple gesture—yet it screamed defiance. The board had instructed the players that they were not to speak publicly about the merger. Langers didn't speak, but his loyalty, his passion, his unshakeable allegiance resounded powerfully as he held aloft the jumper he loved.

Lois's eyes filled with tears.

For one moment, she'd given up. She'd given up on Hawthorn.

But Langers hadn't.

And wasn't that the essence of *team*? When one stumbled, another stood firm?

"Are you going down to the Cheer Squad?" Clark asked.

"In a minute," Lois said, wiping her eyes. "I just want to soak up this first."

Clark held her, and she drew comfort from his strength and his love.

"This could be the last time we play on the 'G," Lois said mournfully.

"What about next week?"

"Sydney won today. They're on top of the ladder. If Richmond lose tomorrow, we'll finish eighth. That means we play the top team—Sydney."

Clark winced. "Ouch."

"It gets worse," Lois said grimly. "Because they're above us on the ladder, they get the home final."

"So next week's game could be in Sydney?"

She nodded.

"When will the game be?

"The schedule for the first week of the finals will be announced tomorrow afternoon. I'm hoping the game will be Saturday afternoon—but it could be Saturday night."

"Saturday night?" Clark squeaked. "What time would it finish?"

"Before eleven," Lois said, knowing he was thinking about their wedding. She smiled reassuringly. "But don't worry, big guy. Once we know for sure, we'll work out how we're going to be where we need to be."

"Who was the Hawthorn player who took off his jumper?"

Clark *had* noticed. "That was Chris Langford, our full back. He's a proud Hawk. The players have been officially gagged, but that"—Lois signalled towards the arena—"that was so typical of the man—to make a stand for what he believes in."

"Do you think that will have an effect on the vote?"

"I don't know," Lois said. "But there are over sixty-three thousand people at this game. He sure chose the right place to do it."

Clark pulled her into his chest and surrounded her with his arms. He didn't say anything, but on a level so deep that words were redundant, Lois knew he understood the bewildering range of chaotic emotions that were churning through her. It was even possible that, with the advantage of some distance, he understood them better than she did.

* * *

Lois was in Clark's arms again an hour later as they stood next to the Jeep outside Gazza's home. They both knew it was late. They both knew that either Gazza or Narelle would be waiting up to let Clark into the house.

They both knew that the coming separation cloaked their hearts with desolation.

"Clark," Lois said, "it has been so amazing being with you without having to hide away in my unit. I have loved every minute of it, and every time I think about what you did to get here, my heart just about melts with love for you."

Clark rested his hand on her neck near where her hair fell. "I'm so glad I came," he said. "I'm so glad we will share these memories."

Lois chuckled suddenly. "There's something I should warn you about."

"Uhmm?"

"Gazza might try to give you some advice."

"About what?"

"Us."

"You and me? Doesn't he approve?"

"On the contrary," Lois said. "He tried to convince me that we should be together."

"He's a smart man," Clark said.

"Yeah." Lois giggled. "But he hides it well." She sighed and leant her head on Clark's chest.

Clark held her against him, trying to cling to the slippery moments as they sped away. "Are you OK?" he asked.

Lois slowly lifted her head from his chest. "I'm in a quandary."

"About what?"

"I want so much to really express my gratitude to you for coming, but…"

His breath stalled as his mind grappled with the meaning behind her words. "Does 'really' expressing your gratitude involve kissing?"

"Kissing… tongues… passion."

Clark's heart somersaulted across his ribcage. "I'm going into Gazza's in three minutes," he said. "Until then, I'm all yours."

In the dim glow of the streetlight, he saw the gleam in Lois's eyes. "You mean that?"

He nodded.

She slid her hands up his shoulders and around his neck. Her mouth slowly, provocatively closed in on his. The first touch was light—yet it powered a surge of feeling through his body. She kept moving forward—closer, tighter. Then her mouth opened, and Clark's followed. Her tongue slipped forward and met his and then continued further into his depths.

The world slipped away, and Clark centred his entire consciousness on the amazing woman in his arms. He had never thought anyone could make him feel like this—had never thought anyone would… could… be this close to him… this much a part of him.

Suddenly, he realised that his feet were no longer anchored to the ground. He wrenched a smattering of concentration from the fog of his mind and drifted downwards six inches until he connected with solid ground. Lois didn't seem to have noticed, so Clark returned his full attention to the pleasure of their kiss. When she eased away, they were both breathing heavily.

Lois smiled. "Did we gain a little altitude?" she asked.

Clark smiled sheepishly. "Just a little," he said.

"Good thing it's dark, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Did you mean to?" she said. "Or did I literally sweep you off your feet?"

"I didn't mean to," he said. "The ground dropped away of its own volition."

"Perhaps kissing in public is not such a good idea."

"Kissing in public like *that* is definitely not a good idea," Clark said. Heavy with regret, he looked up at Gazza's house. "I should go."

"I know."

"Lois," Clark said, "I wish we could be together openly all the time. Every day… every night."

"Yeah," she said as she slid her hand through his hair. "But this is what you get for falling in love with an Aussie."

He smiled. "I'll see you tomorrow morning."

"I'll be here. We'll have breakfast."

"A whole day together."

"I love you, Clark."

"I love you, L—"

"Hey, Rubber," Gazza called. "Haven't you finished saying goodnight yet? Struth, mate, you're taking even longer than Narelle and I used to."

The figure silhouetted in the doorway waved impertinently.

Clark chuckled, gave Lois a final kiss, and picked up his bag. "Goodnight, gorgeous," he said.

"G'night, my love," she replied.

* * *

"So, Rubber." Gazza had settled into the armchair and wasn't looking in any hurry to go to bed. "You couldn't stay away."

"No."

Gazza grinned. "It's me, isn't it, mate?" he said. "You had to come back to see me?"

Clark chuckled. "Not you, Gazza. Not Melbourne. Not Browny. Not football. Not Hawthorn."

"That only leaves Flinders."

"Yep."

"Are you going to lure her back to America?"

"I don't think so."

Gazza whistled. "I hope you like flying."

"I do."

"I thought I had problems because Narelle barracked for Richmond," Gazza said. "Trying to keep a missus happy across continents isn't going to be easy."

"No."

Gazza stood from his chair. "You're always welcome to stay here, mate," he said. Then he winked at Clark. "But maybe next time you come, you'll be able to find other digs."

Clark stood and picked up his bag. "How would you feel if I stayed with Lois?"

"That's your business, mate. And hers. All I'm telling you is that I never thought the man existed who could make her so happy. More power to you, Rubber."

Clark extended his hand, and Gazza shook it.

"Thanks, mate," Clark said.

* * *

"Don't you just love the first day of spring?" Lois said.

"The first day of spring?" Clark questioned. "Isn't that in mid-September?"

"Not here," Lois said. "Spring is September, October, and November, so today is the first day of spring. And that means footy finals, and the intoxicating smell of mown lawns, and the sun finally having a bit of warmth in it."

Clark had to admit that, weather-wise, it was a great day. In fact, in every way, it was a day of absolute perfection.

The day had started early with breakfast on a ferry as it had gently glided down the Yarra River to Williamstown. Lois and Clark had wandered around the historic bayside suburb before riding the ferry back to the centre of Melbourne. From there, it had been a train to the outer eastern suburb of Belgrave, and onto the historic steam train to enjoy its old-world charm as it chugged through the majestic Dandenong Ranges.

They had alighted at Lakeside station and eaten lunch in the al fresco area of the cafe that overlooked the leisurely swimming ducks and wading birdlife.

Now, Clark was lying on his back in the afternoon sun, using Lois's bag as a pillow. She was also lying on her back on the springy grass—using his stomach as a pillow.

Every moment of the day had been idyllic. Being with Lois, exalting in the freedom to go wherever they wanted, to drink coffee and be just like everyone else… Clark had never felt happier.

And it was all because of the beautiful woman who, in less than a week, would be his wife.

"How's the footy going?" Clark asked lazily. Lois had been periodically checking the scores in the North Melbourne-Richmond game.

"It's still half-time," she replied. "North are seven points ahead of Richmond."

"If Richmond win, they stay in the Eight and Hawthorn don't play finals?"

He felt Lois nod. "I'll check the scores again later, but I don't want to think about it right now. I just want to enjoy being with you." She pulled the earphone from her ear and

laid it near the radio. “When I suggested we go on Puffing Billy, did you know it was a steam train?”

Clark chuckled and swept back her hair. “Not a clue,” he said. “But as soon as you said we would be together, I knew I would enjoy it.”

“And did you?”

“It was great. I was a bit concerned at first about sitting with our legs out of the train windows, but once I realised it was safe, it was fantastic.”

“Yeah,” Lois said with a little giggle. “It wouldn’t be good if you were to go home with a broken leg.”

“I was worried about you.”

“I know,” she said. “And I love you for it. But in this instance, I wasn’t in any danger at all.”

Clark continued stroking Lois’s soft hair. “I have something to tell you,” he said.

“Something good?”

“Not good—but I’m hoping you won’t be too upset.”

“Uh-oh.”

Clark paused. He really didn’t want to spoil the tranquillity of the moment, but he couldn’t not tell her. “When I went back to my apartment to pack, Mayson was there.”

“Did you tell her to leave?”

“No.”

He felt the jolt as Lois lifted her head from his stomach in instinctive response, but then she lowered it again. “Why?” she asked calmly.

Clark returned his hand to her hair. “Because she was in my bed, so I didn’t even go into my apartment.”

“You just left her there?”

“Uh-huh.”

Lois laughed. “How long do you think she stayed there before accepting that you weren’t coming?”

For the first time, Clark could see a speck of humour in Mayson being in his bed. “However long she waited, it would be pretty demoralising when she had to get up and leave.”

Lois’s laughter echoed around the park. “Perhaps she’s *still* there.”

“I hope not,” Clark said. “I have to go home eventually.” He lifted his hand and watched as Lois’s hair slid through his fingers. “You don’t seem terribly upset,” he ventured hopefully.

“I’m as mad as a cut snake that another woman was in your bed,” Lois said. “Particularly as I’ve never been there.” Her smile lightened her tone. “But you weren’t in there with her, so… meh. We have other things to think about.”

“Thank you,” Clark said. “Thank you for not getting upset.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Lois said. She lifted her head from his stomach and looked at him. “Is that why you’ve been wearing those old, comfy jeans?”

Clark glanced down with regret. “Yeah,” he said. “Sorry.”

Lois shook her head, grinning widely. “Don’t be sorry,” she said. “I love them.”

“You do? Why?”

“The older the jeans, the softer the denim—and the longer they’ve had to mould around your very nice butt.”

Clark couldn’t contain his grin. “You are incorrigible,” he said with great affection.

She rested her chin on his ribcage and gazed at him. “Are you trying to tell me, Mr Boy Scout, that you’ve never, ever checked out my butt?”

That was a loaded question if he’d ever heard one. He decided the truth was his best option. “I have,” he admitted. “And I liked what I saw.”

Lois grinned, clearly pleased with his response.

Clark decided to change the subject before she could ask if he had checked out anywhere else. “Can I ask you a question?”

“You already did,” she said with teasing in her tone. “And I already said ‘yes’.”

He chuckled. “Not *that* question.”

He felt her laughter resonate through her. “OK,” Lois said. “What question?”

“You’re probably not going to like it,” he warned.

She lurched from her position again and sat up. “Spill,” she said. “Because I can’t imagine any question you could ask that I wouldn’t like.”

Clark was sure he’d probably found one. “You’re only working two days a week,” he said. “Can I help out financially?”

Her mouth dropped open. “Well, I wasn’t expecting that,” she said slowly.

“It makes sense,” he said. “And it’s none of my business, but it occurred to me that you might have donated money as well as time to Operation Payback. You must know I’d hate it if you were short… So, can I help?”

She smiled and leant forward onto his chest and kissed him tenderly. “There’s no need,” she said.

“Why?”

“I had no knowledge of this, but every time Browny sent me out on my day off, he kept a record, and because of that, I had some days-in-lieu stored up.”

“You’ve been getting full pay?”

“Yeah.”

“Can I ask how long until you’ll have to take time without pay?”

“It’ll run out in a couple of weeks.”

“What happens then?”

“If the merger goes ahead, all the donated money will be returned to the fans,” Lois said. “The AFL will give the merged team six million dollars, so they won’t need our money.”

“But if the merger doesn’t go ahead, there is going to be a huge job of rebuilding.”

“And, until Hawthorn get back on their feet financially, much of it is going to be done by volunteers.”

“Will you go back to the Herald Sun full-time?”

“I’ve thought about what happens after the vote on September 16th, but I haven’t been able to make any decisions about the future yet.” Lois half smiled. “Is that OK?”

Clark reached up to smooth her hair where it had become mussed from lying on him. “It’s perfectly OK,” he said. “But I want you to promise me one thing.”

“What?”

“Before you come anywhere near having to worry about finances—about paying your rent or bills or whatever—I want you to promise that you will tell me and let me help you.”

“Aw, Clark,” Lois said. “It was my decision to stop work and volunteer so much time to Operation Payback.”

“And it’s my decision to support you in that, both emotionally and in any other way you need.”

She smiled. “Thank you.”

“Promise me?”

She nodded. “I promise.”

“Everything I have is yours,” he said. “Never forget that.”

“Thank you,” she said. “And my heart is yours. Don’t you forget that.”

* * *

At three-quarter time, the radio reported that North Melbourne were only two points ahead of Richmond, and Lois felt her anxiety rise again. What if all of Hawthorn’s determination to secure the win last night wasn’t going to earn them a place in the finals?

However, in the last quarter, North pulled away, kicking nine goals to four. Lois turned off the radio with a happy sigh. “We’re in,” she said. “Finals next week.”

But the game would be against Sydney, in Sydney, and that was going to be a tough assignment for a team that had only just scraped into the Eight.

“What are your chances?” Clark asked.

“My head says slim,” Lois admitted. “But my heart reminds me that I’ve seen Hawthorn prevail against great odds on many occasions. There’s always hope.”

“What happens if you lose?”

“That’s the end of our season. No second chances.”

“And if you win?”

“We move onto the second week of the finals. If we win that, we play in the Preliminary Final in Week Three. Win that, and we’re into the Grand Final.”

“That’s a long road,” Clark said.

Lois nodded. “And it’s all uphill when you start at eighth.”

Half an hour later, as Lois and Clark strolled back to Lakeside station to board Puffing Billy for the return trip to Belgrave, the AFL announced the schedule for next week’s finals. Lois disconnected her earphone from the radio and listened with Clark.

“Sydney versus Hawthorn, at the SCG, Saturday the 7th of September, 7:10pm.”

Lois looked at Clark. Clark—aghast—looked at Lois.

“It will be OK,” she said. Ahead, the station platform was teeming with people. She took Clark’s hand and guided him to a secluded spot under a tree. She leant back against the broad trunk of the ghost gum, hooked her arms around his waist, and smiled up to him. “The game will be finished by ten thirty,” she said quietly. “The wedding is at midnight, Melbourne time.”

“Will that be enough time?”

She nodded. “You can take me to the farm, just as we planned. We can both get into the suits and go to Metropolis.”

“But if Hawthorn lose, you—”

"—we lose," Lois cut across him. "Whatever the result, I will put it behind me and get on with the most important part of the day."

"Are you sure?" Clark said. "It's not too late to postpone the wedding."

"Spoken like a man who has no real idea of the detail that goes into something like this," Lois said, hoping humour would ease Clark's anxiety.

"So, it's OK?" he asked uncertainly. "We go ahead?"

"Absolutely."

He exhaled deeply and with evident relief. "Will you go to Sydney for the game?"

Lois's mind was already buzzing with organisational details. "I'll ask Browny if I can have the North-Geelong game in Melbourne on Sunday. If he agrees, I'll go to Sydney on Saturday, and fly home Sunday morning."

"Lois," Clark said. "You're going to be exhausted."

"But I think it will work well," she said. "Sydney's a big city. It's easy to get lost there. And if Esmeralda happens to be spying on me, it'll be easy to explain why I'm not at home on Saturday night."

"If Hawthorn lose, you're going to be devastated."

"It will be the end of our season," Lois said. "But the beginning of my life with you."

"Is that enough for you?"

"More than enough."

Clark placed his hands on the smooth bark of the tree, trapping Lois in his arms. He leant forward. "Thank you for agreeing to marry me," he whispered.

Lois tilted her head back against the solidity of the broad trunk, enjoying the sensation of being enclosed by Clark's strong arms and pinned by his chest. "If you were to decide to kiss me," she murmured. "I would have no way of escape."

He kissed her, soft and warm. "Do you want to escape?" he asked quietly.

"Never," she whispered. "I want you."

* * *

Clark's cell phone beeped within seconds of him turning it on after landing at Metropolis International airport. He smiled in anticipation. As he'd expected, there was a message from Lois—and also one from his best source, Bobby Bigmouth. He opened Lois's first.

'You'll never know how much it means to me that you came this weekend. I love you, big guy. I always will.'

Clark's smile broadened. He opened the other message.

'Info on the Boss. Cent Park noon. Bring food.'

The Boss? The mystical person who supposedly wielded such power he could demand exorbitant amounts of protection money? The person who had such a reputation for merciless revenge that no one had ever been willing to divulge even the tiniest hint regarding his identity?

The Boss was so elusive, and there was so little hard evidence for even his existence, Clark and Perry had aired the possibility that he was nothing more than a figment of someone's imagination.

Except the protection money had to go somewhere.

Clark pocketed his phone, rueing that he couldn't go to Lois. His flight had been delayed—again—and it was now after midnight in Melbourne.

And he had less than an hour to get to Centennial Park.

* * *

Mayson stared at her computer screen, but her mind was vacillating between two threads of thought—neither of which had anything to do with the story Perry had given her.

It was early Monday afternoon, and Clark was due back in the newsroom. He should be here already.

She needed to work out the details of her strategy.

Deciding to take the green rock to the wedding had been the easy bit.

What she'd mulled over incessantly was exactly how to use it to best advantage.

She didn't want anyone knowing she had it. That would be tantamount to hanging a notice outside her apartment building, announcing 'MEANS TO STOP SUPERMAN—INQUIRE WITHIN'. The obvious way to distance herself from the green rock was to plant it somewhere in the wedding venue, but the very thought of the precious green rock being out of her hands—even for a short time—sent her mind spiralling into a panic.

The green rock had to remain with her, but in such a way that no one suspected she was linked to Superman's affliction.

An idea had formed, but it would involve the sacrifice of her 'relationship' with Luthor. Did she still need him?

So far, going out with Luthor—even their photographs appearing in the social pages of the *Planet*—had had no noticeable effect on Clark. It certainly hadn't kept him from scurrying off to Australia. Her efforts weren't a total waste, of course—they had secured an invitation to Superman's wedding.

But perhaps she no longer needed Luthor. Perhaps ending that association could be turned to her advantage if she were to explain to Clark that her dalliance with Luthor was the failed attempt of a broken heart to find new love.

Mayson smiled as the pieces of her plan fell into place.

She would take the green rock to the wedding. She would give Superman just enough exposure to prove beyond doubt that it rendered him weak and powerless.

Then she would leave, taking the little green rock with her. She would engineer her removal from the wedding in such a way that it wouldn't seem as if she had had any part in Superman's embarrassing collapse.

Perfect.

And, as a bonus, she wouldn't have to put up with Luthor any longer. For all his oily charm and excessive money, he really was a nauseatingly unimpressive little man.

Mayson checked the clock on the wall. It was almost one o'clock—well past the time Perry had expected Clark back from his weekend rendezvous with the football reporter.

What if Kent had decided to stay there?

Mayson pushed aside that terrible thought. Kent could be dumb, but he wasn't dumb enough to give up the position of assistant editor at the Daily Planet to chase a bit of Australian skirt.

Almost four days had passed since Mayson had waited… and waited… and waited for him to return to his apartment, and the sting of his absence was beginning to recede. He hadn't come—although his empty suitcase had remained in his bedroom. Finally, she had concluded that he must have gotten out one suitcase only to decide to use another.

When she had slipped into his bed, she had been confident that she would finally break through Kent's resistance. Hours later, she had left his apartment—angry and frustrated.

It had been her boldest move and her biggest failure.

Mayson Drake did not enjoy failure.

But one failure did not mean the battle was lost.

The elevator doors opened, and Mayson glanced up, hoping Kent would emerge from it.

He didn't.

She again opened the web page of Lois Lane's profile and stared at the woman's photograph. What did she have that Mayson didn't? What was it about this very ordinary woman that had Kent flitting back to Australia like a bee drawn to honey?

What had Lois Lane offered him that Mayson Drake hadn't?

The elevator opened again, and this time, Kent walked forward. Mayson shot from her seat and headed to the water cooler, ensuring she arrived at the top of the stairs at exactly the same moment as Clark.

"Clark!" she said with surprise. "Welcome home. How was your trip?"

"Good, thanks." He sidestepped past her and continued down the stairs.

"Where was it you went?" Mayson asked as she followed him.

He dropped into his seat and turned on his computer. "Melbourne."

"Oh, of course." Mayson twirled a strand of her blonde hair in her fingers. Before cutting her ties with Luthor, she needed to know for sure that her ploy wasn't working. "I had a great weekend," she said.

"That's good."

"I had a date on Saturday night."

Clark logged on. He seemed preoccupied. Was it a story? Or the football reporter? Mayson waited in the hope that Kent would ask about her date.

He gave no indication that he wanted their conversation to continue.

"Lex Luthor took me to the Metropolis Grand Ball," Mayson said. She swooned a little. "I have *never* had such a wonderful time."

Clark's eyes actually left his computer screen, and he seemed to digest what she had said.

Mayson waited—this was it. Clark was going to show some sign of resentment at her having been with Luthor.

"I'm really happy for you, Mayson," he said with Clark-Kent-patented sincerity. "I hope it works out for you and Mr Luthor."

With a tight smile, Mayson returned to her desk.

Yep, the thing with Luthor had to go. She would use him as her ticket to get to Superman's wedding, but after that, she would no longer answer any calls from that self-important Mrs Cox.

Mayson smiled triumphantly. Saturday couldn't come quickly enough.

She'd finally have absolute proof of the power of the green rock over Superman, she'd cause disruption to his

wedding, she'd inflict major humiliation on Linda King, and in the process, she'd disentangle herself from Luthor.

Brilliant. Absolutely brilliant.

Part 45

Clark absently logged onto his computer, his mind still pondering the meeting with Bobby Bigmouth.

The Boss—the truth is right in front of you.

What could that mean?

Last week, Mayson had reported on the death of an inmate in the Metropolis Prison. Security cameras had captured the incident, and the perpetrator—a fellow prisoner—had been charged. It had seemed straightforward—two angry men had become embroiled in a fight, and it had gotten fatally out of hand.

But—according to Bobby Bigmouth—the victim, on his deathbed, had mumbled, "The truth is right in front of you." When asked by a prison nurse to repeat it, he'd said, "The Boss—the truth is…" and had then passed away.

The nurse had disappeared—believed, again according to Bobby, to be in the witness protection program.

The police seemed to be taking it seriously. Why wouldn't they? Miniscule though it was, this represented the most information they had ever received about the mysterious Boss—who, if the rumours were true, instigated eighty percent of the crime in Metropolis.

When the police had questioned the murderer, he had claimed the fight was over a stolen packet of cigarettes.

Clark rose from his desk and went to Perry's office. The editor looked up with a smile. "Welcome home, Clark," he said. "How was your trip?"

All thoughts of the Boss were swept from Clark's mind as it filled with sweet memories of Lois. He smiled. "It was wonderful," he said.

"Was it good to see Lois again?"

Clark sighed happily. "It was great. We had a fantastic time."

Perry smiled. "I hope I get to meet her one day."

"So do I."

"What's been happening?" Perry asked. "What are you chasing up? Any further developments on the murder of that English guy?"

"No, nothing," Clark said. "The police have hit a complete blank."

Perry tapped his pen on his desk. "Next weekend is Superman's wedding."

"Yeah."

"I had intended to leave it alone completely and not give the Star the satisfaction of having us chase their tails." Perry tossed his pen onto his desk. "But Superman has become such a universal identity that to not mention his wedding would seem either petty or out of step with community feeling. What do you think?"

"Ah… I haven't really given much thought to the Daily Planet's involvement in Superman's wedding," Clark said.

"If you weren't going to Smallville to see your folks, I'd ask you to cover it."

"I doubt the Star will allow reporters from any other paper to attend the wedding."

"They can't stop us having someone outside, talking to the public and monitoring their reactions." Perry sighed. "I think it's going to be too big to ignore. The *Daily Planet* has been the voice of Metropolis for too many years for us to remain silent on this."

Alarms bells started clanging in Clark's head. "Who are you thinking you'll get to cover it?" He forced himself to add, "Mayson?"

"No, she has already asked for that day off."

Clark breathed a sigh of relief. "Eduardo?"

"Probably. And I'll send Olsen. Maybe he'll be able to get a few shots of the happy couple as they leave the Lexor Ballroom." Perry looked expectantly at Clark. "Anything else you've been chasing that might become a story?"

"I met with Bobby Bigmouth on the way from the airport. He told me something about the Boss."

Perry's interest was immediate. "Really?"

"Yeah. It seems the prisoner who was bashed to death last week left a message…"

* * *

"How has Mayson been?" Lois asked. "Has she said anything about your non-appearance in your own bed?"

Clark tried to extract his mind from the exhilarating memories of the kisses he had shared with Lois just a few moments ago. "Ah… sorry…" He stopped because she was grinning at him, and he knew she knew exactly why his brain was still fuzzy.

"Has Mayson said anything about being stranded—alone—in your bed?"

Lois's calm reaction to another woman having been in his bed still had the power to surprise Clark. "She hasn't mentioned it. I figure she thinks I didn't come home, so therefore I don't know about it."

They were sitting together on Lois's couch—very closely together, which, as Lois had said with a wide grin, was due solely to the necessity of having to speak softly so Esmeralda didn't hear. They had already taken the precaution of turning on the radio in Lois's bedroom—which butted onto Esmeralda's unit—and closing the bedroom door.

"It would be pretty embarrassing," Lois said, although her expression strongly suggested she didn't feel any great sympathy for the other woman's humiliation. "To make such a blatant attempt to seduce a man—only to have him simply not appear."

"Uhmm," Clark said. "Although…"

"Although what?"

"She's been going out with Lex Luthor." He'd expected that that piece of information would please Lois, so he was surprised when her mouth dropped with horror. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Luthor is coming to our wedding, right?"

"Uhmmmmm," Clark said, trying to guess where this was going.

"And he gets to bring a partner?"

Uh-oh. "You think he'll bring *Mayson*?" Clark exclaimed.

"Why not? Mayson would love to be there. Not that I imagine she has any specific interest in us, but it would be a telling victory over Linda King and the Metropolis Star."

A shadow of foreboding fell across Clark's heart, and he groaned. "Mayson has already asked for Saturday off."

"Has she said what she'll be doing?"

Despairingly, Clark shook his head. Mayson? At his wedding? She wouldn't know the groom was Clark, but he didn't trust her not to do something that would disrupt the event, and that would mean Lois's short, barely-there wedding could turn into worse than a media circus. It could easily degenerate into a catfight. "Oh, no."

Lois's hand was immediately on his face, soft with reassurance. "It's OK, big guy," she said, her eyes warm and loving as they met his. "If anything goes wrong, you simply pick me up, and we fly away."

"But Lois, this could ruin everything."

"How?"

"If there's a scene… security guards trying to remove Mayson. I doubt Luthor will take it too well if his invited guest is forcibly removed, and—"

"Does Luthor have something against the Star? Is there a reason he would do this? Or is he just too dumb to realise the implications of turning up with Mayson?"

"I did hear something. It was before my time. I think the *Star* featured a series of editorials about businessmen raising their profiles through public grants to charities. It was quite damning, I think. But it was years ago. I doubt it would still be a factor in anything Luthor does."

"You think he's the sort of person to forgive and forget?"

Clark thought about that. "Well… no," he admitted.

"So we should assume Mayson Drake will be at our wedding."

Clark groaned again. The wedding was four days away, and all he wanted was for it to go smoothly and be as close to Lois's dreams as possible.

"It's OK," Lois said. "You told me the police will have extra numbers—"

"But that's in case anyone thinks it's a good idea to take advantage of Superman being otherwise occupied. That's not about dealing with a troublesome guest at the wedding."

"Linda told you she's organised a huge number of security guards for the wedding. She thinks this is her triumph. She won't leave anything to chance."

"What happens if—"

"We'll deal with it," Lois said serenely. "Now, tell me about a story you're working on."

With some difficulty, Clark pushed aside his concerns about the wedding. "It's not a story exactly," he said. "Not yet. Maybe not ever. One of my sources told me that the murder of a prisoner last week could be somehow linked with the Boss."

"Who's the Boss?"

"The Boss could be the brains behind much of the crime in Metropolis."

"What did your source say?"

"Apparently, just before the prisoner died, he said that the truth about the Boss is right in front of us."

"Did you question the guy who killed him?"

"The police did, but he is adamant it was simply a fight that went too far."

"Have you checked—" A knock on the door cut across Lois's question. Her eyes shot to Clark. "Esmeralda!" she

hissed. “She couldn’t have heard you, surely.” She sprang from his lap. “Go into the bedroom, and I’ll get rid of her.”

Clark flew into Lois’s bedroom, hating that he had to leave her to deal with the nosy neighbour alone.

* * *

As the bedroom door quietly shut, Lois scrutinised her unit for any signs of Clark’s presence. No clothes, no jacket, no shoes. The knock sounded again, more insistent this time.

Lois straightened her clothes and hair, hoping she didn’t look too much like she’d recently indulged in a steamy necking session, and stepped to the door.

She opened it, but it wasn’t Esmeralda who stared back.

It was Chris.

“Chris,” Lois said, fumbling around her mind for words. “Chris… ah… this is a surprise.”

Chris’s smile died. “I’m sorry, Lois,” she said. “I should have rung first to see if it was convenient to visit.”

“No!” Lois took a calming breath and forced a smile. “No,” she repeated. “It’s OK. I just wasn’t expecting anyone.” Despite her reservations, Lois stepped back. “Come in,” she invited.

Chris hesitated.

“Come in,” Lois said again.

Chris walked in and surveyed Lois’s home. “Nice place,” she said.

“Thanks. It’s small, but very convenient.” Lois gestured to the kitchen. “Would you like coffee?”

The question was barely out of her mouth when Lois saw two empty cups sitting on the drainer like a public announcement that two people had shared coffee. Lois jolted her head back to Chris.

“No, thanks,” Chris said. “I won’t hold you up. I just wanted to ask you something, and with you not being in the newsroom…”

Was it possible she hadn’t noticed the cups? “It’s OK,” Lois said, scrambling through the quagmire with a manufactured smile. “Really. I was just thrown for a minute because I was expecting it to be my neighbour.”

“Oh?”

“When it was you at the door, it was a surprise.” Lois grinned. “A very pleasant surprise.”

Chris smiled, and for the first time since Lois had opened the door, she seemed to relax. “Are you going to Sydney for the game this weekend?”

“Yes,” Lois said. “Are you?”

“Yes,” Chris replied. “I am.” She took a deep breath and rushed on. “Actually, I came to ask if you’d like to go with me. My shout. It was my birthday a few days ago, and my uncle—my mother’s brother—sent me two plane tickets to Sydney for Saturday morning, and a hotel reservation right on Darling Harbour, and two reserved seats for the game.”

Lois’s mind worked feverishly to try to incorporate all of that information into her plans. “Darling Harbour? That’s a prime position,” she said, buying herself some time. “And he sent two tickets?”

Chris nodded. “He reckoned it wouldn’t be much fun by myself.” She smiled hesitantly. “Would you like to come with me?”

Lois knew indecision was scrawled across her face.

“It’s OK,” Chris said, trying—unsuccessfully—to hide her disappointment. “It’s such late notice, and I’m sure you’ve already made plans.”

Actually, Lois hadn’t. She’d been discussing them with Clark when, suddenly, kissing him had seemed a far superior option and… “I haven’t,” Lois said hesitantly. “I’d love to come with you.”

“But?”

“But…”

Chris’s eyes swung to the kitchen and rested on the two coffee cups. She surveyed the living area, and then her eyes darted to Lois’s bedroom door. Her mouth formed a circle, but no sound emerged.

Lois’s heart thumped, sure Chris had realised that they weren’t alone.

Neither woman said anything for a long moment.

“I think I understand,” Chris said slowly.

“You do?” Lois squeaked.

“The bloke you’re with… the one where it’s complicated. He’s someone you can’t be with openly, isn’t he?”

Lois nodded slightly, not daring to breathe.

“Is he married?”

“No.” Not yet anyway.

Suddenly, Chris grinned, and some of the tension oozed from the room. “He’s a footballer, isn’t he?” she guessed. She lifted her hand as Lois opened her mouth. “Don’t say anything,” Chris said. “I don’t need to know.” She grinned. “Except for one thing—does he play for another club?”

Lois's heart was thumping dire warnings, but she felt trapped. "No," she said, although the word was almost lost in a gulp.

Chris grinned wider. "I couldn't do that, either," she said. Her eyes swung to the bedroom door again. "So, you and a Hawthorn player? Makes sense, and I can totally see how that would be complicated. There would be nothing worse than having your relationship plastered all over the social pages before you'd even got it established for yourselves." She stepped forward. "Don't worry," she said earnestly. "I won't tell anyone." She grinned mischievously. "I'm not even going to try to work out the identity of whoever it is you have hidden behind that door."

"Thanks," Lois mumbled.

"About this weekend," Chris said. "Would you come? Please? We could do something fun in the afternoon. I'm sure" —she nodded towards the bedroom door—"*he'll* be occupied with team stuff leading up to the game. Then, we could watch the game together. Afterwards, all you have to do is say the word, and I'll make myself scarce. I could try to get another room for you at the hotel—mine's a twin. Or" —she grinned—"I could promise not to notice that your bed wasn't slept in."

Lois's mind was scrambling like a cat on ice. "I… Can I let you know?"

"Sure," Chris said. "Talk it over with you-know-who and —"

"I'll come," Lois said impulsively.

Chris grinned excitedly. "You will? That's great, Lois. Would you like me to try to book another room at the hotel? So you can have some privacy? Or do you have other plans?"

"Ah…"

"If you are going to be somewhere else, maybe it would be better if we didn't get a second room," Chris said. "Then, if anyone asks your whereabouts, you'll have an alibi."

"You'd do that?"

Chris shrugged. "If that's what was needed, sure."

"I couldn't ask you to lie."

"I doubt I'll have to," Chris said airily. "I'll go back to our hotel room after the game, and if anyone is remotely interested, they'll assume you came back with me."

"You think so?"

Chris put her hand on Lois's arm. "You look worried," she said. "Please don't be. I promise you I won't say anything about this to anyone."

"Thanks," Lois said. "It's a nice present from your uncle."

"Yeah. He's not a Hawthorn man, but he loved my mum, and he knows how much we both loved the Hawks."

Looking at Chris's wide smile, Lois realised that sharing Saturday afternoon with her was probably going to be the perfect way to pass the hours leading up to her wedding. She couldn't be with Clark—there would be Hawthorn supporters all over Sydney on game day. Lois smiled, this time genuinely. "This is going to be fun," she said.

"You bet," Chris said. She walked to the door. "I'll leave you to it."

"Thanks, Chris."

"The flight leaves at eleven on Saturday morning. Do you want to drive to the airport? Or share a taxi?"

"I'll drive."

"Cool."

"I'll pick you up about nine thirty."

Chris stepped out of the door. "See you Saturday, Lois."

"Bye."

Lois closed the door and leant against it, her heart still hurtling chaotically.

The bedroom door opened, and Clark emerged, looking abashed.

Lois chuckled at his expression. "I suppose you heard all of that?"

He nodded.

"Chris thinks you're a Hawthorn footballer."

He nodded again.

"But me disappearing on Saturday night isn't a problem anymore."

Clark crossed to her and took her into his arms. "Are you OK with this?" he asked softly.

"I didn't lie to Chris, but I don't like that she thinks something that isn't true."

"I know," Clark said with a heartfelt sigh. "I've done exactly that a thousand times before."

"And if she talks with Gazza… or anyone who knows about us…"

Clark caressed his fingers across her cheek. "She promised she wouldn't say anything," he reminded her.

They were silent for a time as Lois replayed the conversation with Chris in her mind, searching for anything that could develop into a future hazard.

"Before Chris came, we were talking about our wedding," Clark said. "And Mayson being there."

"Even if she's there, she won't be a problem," Lois said. "I'm sure the Star will have plenty of security guards."

"What if the trouble starts before the vows? What if there's a scene right at the start?"

Her hand rested lovingly on his cheek. "You can lift me into your arms, and we'll say our vows five metres in the air above Metropolis," she said. "And then we'll fly away and have a humdinger of a honeymoon."

Clark grinned and relaxed under her touch.

Lois took his face in both of her hands and looked straight into his eyes. "I love you, Clark Kent," she said. "I'm going to marry you on Saturday, and *nothing* is going to stop me."

"I can't wait," Clark said.

"Then kiss me, big guy," she said. "And give me a taste of what to expect on Saturday."

* * *

Lois stared at Browny. "You what?" she said.

"I want you to do the Friday night final," he repeated.

"Me?"

"You and Spencer."

Lois felt her grin slide all over her face. "You're sending two sheilas to cover a Friday night final?"

He glared, and Lois smothered her grin and nodded sombrely. "And I want you to do the previews for the three Melbourne clubs who play on Friday and Saturday," Browny instructed.

"You don't want me to cover Sunday's game?" Lois asked, as hope flashed across her mind.

"Did I say I wanted you to cover Sunday's game?" he demanded.

"No."

Her editor shot her a look that said his supply of patience was critically low. Lois stalled, wanting to voice another request, but not sure she dared.

"What is it?" Browny barked.

"I'm going to Sydney with Chris. If she isn't doing the Sunday game either, we could catch a later flight home."

"What is this?" Browny said. "A footy department or the travel pages?"

Lois knew better than to offer a reply, so she simply waited.

"OK," Browny said, pointing ferociously at her. "But I expect Friday night's report to be top-notch, and if Sunday's stories are half a second late, you'll both regret ever stepping foot in the Harbour City."

Lois nodded. "Good luck to Carlton on Saturday," she said.

"Hhmph," he said.

Lois left Browny's office, and it took great effort to restrain herself from prancing across the newsroom.

She now had most of Sunday morning free before needing to return to Melbourne.

She now had time to sleep… with Clark.

After having *slept* with him.

Lois caught Bluey looking at her, and she beamed at him. "Hi, Bluey," she said.

He stared quizzically at her. "Are you all right, Flinders?"

"I've never been better," she replied.

* * *

"This is so beautiful," Lois called.

Chris Torrens grinned and shook her head to release the wind-blown strands of blonde hair from her face. "I've heard great things about Sydney Harbour," she said. "But it's even better than I expected."

The sun was shining brightly, the air was cool, the breeze skipped across the ocean—and inside, Lois was a bubbly mass of excitement. She glanced at her watch. Ten hours and thirty-seven minutes until her wedding.

Meanwhile, she was on the Manly ferry being whisked across Sydney Harbour to the northern shores.

With her was Chris, whose excitement at being in Sydney was infectious. Chris, who had not once alluded to the man who had been hiding in Lois's bedroom during the unexpected visit.

She hadn't asked any questions.

She didn't seem to resent Lois's unwillingness to share her secret.

Lois had no regrets about accepting Chris's offer to come to Sydney together. She was such good company—uncomplicated, fun, enthusiastic. When Lois had suggested they take the ferry to Manly, Chris had eagerly agreed.

The water became choppier as they crossed the harbour opening. Lois stared out to the open ocean, looking east and thinking of the man waiting for her on the other side of the Pacific.

"Is this your first time in Sydney?" Chris asked.

"I've been here twice before," Lois replied. "I came for the first ever game in Sydney—Hawthorn versus North in 1979."

"We won that, didn't we?"

"Yeah, by fifty-one points."

"You must have been young. Did you come with your parents?"

"No. Not really. I came with Ron and Barb and Seb."

"Who are Ron and Barb and Seb?" Chris asked, looking at the northern arm of land that rose from the ocean.

"My adopted family," she said.

Chris's head swung around. "You're adopted?" she said.

"Not officially. I'm American."

Chris chortled. "Sorry," she said as she reined in her humour. "That just sounded funny—as if Americans can't be adopted."

Lois grinned. "I meant that, even before my father went back to the States, I had sort of attached myself to Ron and Barb Wilton and their son, Seb. Then, when Dad left Melbourne, I moved in with them."

"Ron Wilton? Isn't he a trainer at Hawthorn?"

"That's him," Lois said.

"How often do you see your family in the States?" Chris asked.

"I usually go back once a year."

"You were born there?"

"Yeah—Detroit, Michigan."

"Is it still home?"

Three months ago, Lois would have replied without hesitation that Melbourne was her home and always would be. Now… she wasn't sure.

Chris smiled. "It can be hard, can't it? I know my mum missed Melbourne after she moved to Adelaide to marry my dad. She made a completely new life—new friends, a husband who loved her, four kids, everything—but she still thought of Melbourne as 'home'."

Lois nodded. Was it possible to have two homes?

The ferry glided gently in to moor at Manly, and the passengers filed into the terminal. As Lois tried to straighten her dishevelled hair, she noticed that Chris, even with her hair askew, still attracted a lot of male attention.

They left the ferry terminal and walked across the narrow isthmus to the open ocean. Once there, they stood for a moment and watched the waves roll against the beach. Two young surfers walked by, carrying their boards. One whistled appreciatively, and the other winked.

Chris didn't respond.

"I think that was directed at you," Lois said when the surfies were out of earshot.

Chris giggled. "Unless they like brunettes." She turned from the ocean to the row of beachside cafes and shops. "Lunch?" she said. "I'm starving."

"Which one?"

Chris pointed to her left. "The fish place? Do you like seafood?"

"Love it," Lois said.

Ten minutes later, they were seated at an outside table, awaiting their drinks.

"I noticed you ordered soft drink," Lois said.

Chris nodded. "I don't drink. Not alcohol."

"Does it bother you that I ordered a glass of wine?"

"Not at all," Chris said. "But I haven't had a drink for over two years. Not since Mum was killed."

"Is there any reason why?" Lois asked quietly.

"It was a drunk driver who ran into Mum," Chris said. "He killed himself, killed my mum, and completely wiped out both cars."

"Aw, Chris, I'm sorry," Lois said.

"I know it makes no difference, and I certainly know it won't bring Mum back, but I decided not to drink after that." She smiled self-consciously. "I know it's not logical."

"It doesn't have to be logical," Lois said softly. "You do whatever makes it easiest for you."

"Thanks."

From inside Lois's bag came the sound of an incoming message on her mobile.

"Get it," Chris said with a grin. "It could be important."

Lois slipped out her phone and opened the message.

'Can time go ANY slower? I'm in danger of pacing my way through the wall and into the apartment next door. How's Sydney? SOH tonight, 11pm. Can't wait. I love you.'

Lois smiled and looked up to Chris who was watching her. "Don't say a word," Chris said. "I can tell who it's from by the dreamy look in your eyes. Is he nervous?"

"Ah… yes."

Chris grinned. "Reply," she said. "Tell him you love him and you are eagerly looking forward to seeing him after the game."

Lois composed a text for Clark.

'Syd great. I love you and can't wait to see you.' Smothering her giggle, she added, *'Sleep while you can, big guy! You're gonna need all your energy later!'*

She sent the message and slipped the mobile into her bag. She looked back at Chris, trying to appear nonchalant.

"I guess the future is really uncertain for you right now?" Chris said.

Lois nodded.

"If the merger goes ahead, not every Hawthorn player will be taken by the Melbourne Hawks. Some will have to look for other teams."

"Yeah."

"So next year… could be anywhere?"

"Yeah."

"If he can't be in Melbourne, will you follow him?"

"That is the sixty-four thousand dollar question," Lois said grimly.

The waiter arrived with their drinks and took their orders. He was young, probably still in his late teens, but his youthfulness didn't stop him from noticing Chris. When he'd gone, Lois leant across the table. "What's it like being so beautiful?" she asked.

Chris looked taken aback for a moment. "It's definitely not all it's cracked up to be," she said.

"Oh, come on," Lois said. "Every bloke we see can't keep his eyes off you. You must know you could have the pick of just about anyone."

Chris sighed. "I'd give it all up for just one bloke who loved me for who I am," she said wistfully. "That's all I want from a man. Someone who can make me look as happy as you did with a simple text. You're incredibly lucky."

Lois nodded. "Yes," she said. "I am."

She looked at her watch.

Nine hours and forty-eight minutes to go.

Part 46

Chris Torrens gazed out of the eighteenth-floor window of the hotel room. She'd heard about the magnificence of Sydney Harbour but seeing it for herself was breathtaking.

She turned away from the window and saw Lois—now dressed in her woollen Hawthorn jumper—stowing her hat and scarf into her bag. Lois looked up with a grin. "Do you think it's gonna get cold?"

Chris glanced out of the window again. "The sun is still shining," she mused. "How cold does it get in Sydney at night?"

Lois shrugged. "Dunno," she said. She lifted another Hawthorn jumper from her open suitcase and shoved it into her bag. "I'll take this as insurance."

Chris took her Hawk jumper from the bed and pulled it over her head.

"Turn around," Lois said.

Chris did.

"Ahhh," Lois said. "You've got Crawf's number on your back."

Chris felt herself blush. "Yeah," she admitted. "I think he's cute." Suddenly a thought bombarded her brain, and the warmth in her face turned to blazing heat. "It's not Crawf, is it?" she gulped. "You're not with Shane Crawford?"

Lois quickly shook her head. There was a strange look on her face—not for one moment did Chris think Lois was lying, but it was obvious she wasn't comfortable discussing this.

"Sorry," Chris said.

"Hey, it's OK," Lois said with a quick smile. "Really. You are being an incredibly good sport over this."

"But I can see you don't want to talk about it."

Lois looked genuinely regretful. "I'm sorry I can't tell you anything more," she said.

"It's none of my business," Chris said lightly. She decided to change the subject. "Do you know a good place to get something to eat before the game?"

"Are you hungry?" Lois said, eagerly grasping the new subject. "Do you want a sit-down meal? Or just a snack to take to the footy?"

"I'm not hungry," Chris said. "Not after all that seafood I ate."

"We have a couple of hours," Lois said, looking at her watch again. She'd done that a lot today. "There's something I'd like to do… something I've been thinking about."

"Then let's do it."

Lois hesitated, still looking unconvinced.

"Whatever we do, I've already given you my word that I won't say anything about stuff that's going on in your life," Chris said, hoping Lois would believe her.

Lois flashed a smile and seemed to reach a decision. "Remember I told you about the Wiltons—Ron and Barb, and their son, Seb?"

"Yeah."

"Well, Seb's a jeweller up here, and he has a big exhibition tonight. I've been thinking about dropping in and wishing him good luck."

Chris wasn't sure why Lois was so hesitant about that—unless Seb knew nothing about her relationship with the Hawthorn footballer. "Of course," Chris said. "Do you know where it is?"

"Not the exhibition. But I know where his shop is, and the exhibition doesn't start until eight thirty, so I reckon there's a good chance he'll still be there."

"Sounds good," Chris said. Lois turned towards the door, revealing her old-style seventies Hawthorn jumper with number five on the back. "You're wearing Crimmo's number," she said quietly.

Lois turned and nodded sombrely. "Ron and Barb gave me this jumper for my twenty-first birthday. I had it framed and never thought I would wear it. But now…"

"Now it says that all our history can't be snuffed out on the whim of a few administrators."

"Exactly," Lois said.

As they waited for the lift, Chris said, "I've never been to a jewellery exhibition before."

The doors opened, and they stepped in. "Me either," Lois said. "But Seb's told me about them. He's had three before. I think this is going to be the biggest of the lot."

"So, he makes jewellery and displays it… and people come and buy it?"

"He designs a whole new range. This time, the theme is nature, featuring the green opal from Coober Pedy. The exhibition is like a big unveiling—it's all kept under wraps beforehand. He invites a lot of really rich people to the exhibition, and they spend exorbitant amounts just so they can be the first ones wearing the latest Sebastian Stone creations."

"Sebastian Stone?" Chris exclaimed. "*The* Sebastian Stone? I've seen his work in magazines. *That* Sebastian Stone is your Seb?"

"That's him." They moved across the foyer and into the busy street. "This way," Lois said as she turned right.

Chris put her hand on Lois's arm. "Are you sure he'll want us… me to intrude when he has such a big night?"

"Of course he will," Lois assured her.

Chris looked down at her Hawthorn jumper. "We're not really dressed for a big event."

Lois laughed. "Yes, we are," she said. "And anyway, Seb's a Hawk."

Chris stopped. "Lois, I'm not sure about this."

"It's fine," Lois said. "Seb is like my brother. He already asked me to come to the exhibition."

"Maybe you could go in and I could wait outside."

Lois put a firm hand on Chris's shoulder. "Or maybe you could come inside," she said. Grinning, she added, "Don't worry, Sebastian Stone is a bigwig jeweller, but Seb Wilton is still the kid I grew up with."

As they walked, Chris stared wide-eyed at the calibre of the shops—fashion boutiques, hairdressers, milliners, beauticians, restaurants—all looking as if they catered for those with very large budgets. "Is Seb's shop near here?" she asked, trying not to let her misgivings sound in her question.

"Not far," Lois replied. "Are you right to get back to the hotel after the game?"

"Yeah. Where do you want to meet tomorrow morning?"

"Meet for breakfast in the cafe next to the ferry terminal?" Lois suggested.

"Do you want as long as possible with…" Chris stopped. "What time suits you?"

"It's not fair to keep you waiting."

"Why don't we make it brunch?" Chris suggested. "Ten o'clock? We have plenty of time now that we're getting later flights."

"Chris," Lois said, "thanks for this. You've been really understanding."

"No worries," Chris said easily. "Hopefully, one day I'll find the man of my dreams, and you can do the same for me."

"I hope so."

Chris smiled, but in her heart, she wasn't sure that day would ever come.

* * *

Seb Wilton gazed at the pendant design he had roughly sketched. He added a couple more strokes and scrutinised it again.

It still wasn't right. He heard a movement behind him and turned to see his shop assistant, Harry, at the door. "There's someone here to see you, Seb," he said.

Seb swallowed down his annoyance. He'd endured regular interruptions all day with media and buyers hounding him for a sneak peek or inside information about the exhibition tonight.

"I told them you were busy, but she said you'd want to see her," Harry said.

"Did she give a name?"

"Lois Lane."

Seb's irritation dissolved instantly, and he grinned. "Show her in," he said.

"She has someone with her."

"A tall bloke with dark hair and glasses?"

"No, a blonde woman."

"Send them in," Seb said.

Harry retreated, and Seb stood, feeling better than he had all day. Lois had come. Without doubt, she'd come to Sydney for the footy tonight, but she'd made time to see him, and that gave Seb hope they would be able to put the whole Hawthorn merger mess behind them.

Lois stepped through the door, and without waiting to gauge her mood, he hurried forward and swept her into his arms. He hugged her tightly, hoping his embrace would communicate the jumbled expanse of his feelings—he missed her terribly and he hated the distance that had sprung up between them since the night he'd gone to her unit to beg her not to fight the merger.

While still holding Lois, Seb looked up at her companion.

Their eyes met, and she smiled shyly.

And in that moment, Seb Wilton fell in love.

* * *

In Seb's hug, Lois felt the barrier between them melt away. This was Seb—Seb, who'd been her sparring partner, her kid brother, and her mate since childhood.

As his arms loosened, she drew back from him. She looked into his face, expecting to be met smile for smile, only to discover that Seb wasn't looking at her. He was looking beyond her to Chris.

"Seb, this is Chris Torrens," Lois said. "Chris, this is Seb Wilton."

Seb smiled at Chris and extended his hand to shake hers. His eyes seemed glued to her, and he had a dumbstruck look plastered across his face.

Lois felt laughter bubble inside her as she glimpsed the possible. What if? Seb and Chris? That would be wonderful. Lois's eyes swung from one to the other. Chris was smiling, but she seemed a bit self-conscious. Seb looked as if his world had just turned upside down and he had no desire to right it—ever.

No one spoke for a long moment. With a flicker of delighted amusement, Lois realised that of the three people present, it was entirely possible she was the one most capable of speech. "How's the exhibition?" she asked Seb.

For a moment, he looked as if he had to forage through his mind for an answer to her question. "Ah… good. It's all ready."

"Are you happy with everything?" Lois said. "Do you have enough pieces? Are you expecting a good response?"

Seb actually managed to drag his eyes from Chris. "Yeah," he said. "You can never be sure about the response, but I'm confident. I've been getting some excellent black opal out of Coober Pedy."

"Black?" Lois said. "I thought it was green."

"It's green in colour," Seb explained. "Some of the purest colour I've ever seen. 'Black' refers to the body tone, or the brightness. The best opal is black; other grades are 'dark' and 'light'." His eyes slid back to Chris. She smiled at him. It was the first time Lois had seen her friend acknowledge a bloke's interest.

And Seb was *definitely* interested.

Lois chuckled. "Do you have any rough opal? We'd like to see it." She glanced at Chris. "Wouldn't we?"

"Ah… yes."

Lois hid another smile, wondering how long it would take them to notice if she simply wandered from the room. "So, Seb, can we see it?"

He pointed to the back room and gestured for Chris to go first. "Come this way," he said.

Once there, Seb unlocked the safe and brought out a box containing rough pieces of opal. Lois gasped. "Seb," she said. "This is beautiful."

"Very beautiful," he said.

Lois reached into the box and took out the biggest piece. It was roughly shaped and slightly smaller than a golf ball. Holding it up against the light, she slowly rotated it and marvelled at the purity of its colour. “Seb,” she said, “this is going to be a sensation. I can just imagine the beautiful pieces you’ve made with this stuff.”

Seb took another piece from the box and held it out to Chris. She took it with a smile. “Move it around,” he suggested. “And you’ll see the play-of-colour.”

Chris did as he’d suggested. And as Chris watched the opal, Seb watched Chris.

“How long are you staying in Sydney?” Seb asked.

“Only until tomorrow,” Chris answered. Was that regret Lois heard in her tone?

Seb lovingly caressed a piece of opal. “What are you doing for breakfast?”

“The little cafe near the ferry terminal on Darling Harbour,” Chris said. “Ten o’clock.”

“Would you mind if I gatecrashed?”

Chris looked to Lois. Lois looked to Chris. It was Lois who spoke. “I think that’s a great idea,” she said. “Do you mind, Chris?”

“No,” she said with a smile that said a whole lot more than her solitary word.

“Good, it’s settled then,” Lois said.

Seb returned all the opal to the safe and locked it. “Good luck tonight,” he said. “I hope the Hawks win for us.”

“I do, too,” Lois said as they headed back to the shop. She hugged Seb tightly. “Good luck to you, Sebby Boy. I hope all your dreams come true.”

“Thanks,” he said. “And thanks for dropping in.”

Lois deliberately turned away to give Seb and Chris a moment’s privacy to bid each other farewell. Then she walked out of the door of Seb’s shop and turned towards the train station.

Five hours and twenty-four minutes to go.

* * *

Lois and Chris arrived at the SCG and found their seats. The stadium was dominated by the red and white of Sydney, with only small patches of brown and gold dispersed among the crowd.

Lois’s stomach was bunched into a ball of nerves. She didn’t know if it was because of the game or because of what would happen after the game, but every muscle felt as if it were twisting tighter with each passing minute.

Chris put her hand on Lois’s arm. “I guess it’s tougher than being just a fan?” she said.

Lois appreciated her understanding but hated having to mislead her. She nodded vaguely.

Chris smiled. “It’ll be OK,” she said. “Think about after the game when you’ll be with him again.”

“Thanks,” Lois muttered.

The Hawthorn theme song echoed loudly as the team ran onto the ground. Lois and Chris stood as one and cheered with gusto.

“Seb seems nice,” Chris said casually as they sat down.

Lois tried to keep her smile from being too knowing. “He is.”

“You’re absolutely *not* with him? Romantically?”

Lois snorted. “No way. I love him dearly, but it would be like going out with your brother.”

Chris wrinkled her nose.

“His timing sucks,” Lois said. “His exhibition has been planned for months, and it falls on the exact night when the Hawks play in Sydney.”

“Does he go to Melbourne much?”

“A couple of times a month—sometimes with business, sometimes to see his parents.”

“Business? Does he have a store in Melbourne?”

“Not yet. That’s the plan, though.” Lois glanced up to the clock on the big screen. Four hours and fifty-four minutes to go.

When the warm-up was over, the Hawthorn team stood side by side in a line facing the Sydney team, who had done likewise. The strands of the National Anthem resonated around the ground. Lois stood and sang as her heart swelled.

She’d been born an American, and her future might be in the country of her birth, but she knew that as long as lived, wherever she lived, *Advance Australia Fair* would always have the power to move her.

At the end of the national anthem, the players took their positions on the field, and Lois and Chris sat down. The siren went, the umpire bounced the ball, and play began.

From the start, it was a game where Sydney constantly threatened to break away and cruise to a big win. Hawthorn held on desperately, matching their opponents in determination and intensity—and inside Lois, the tiny spark of unlikely hope continued to flicker.

Then disaster struck. Jason Dunstall went down clutching his knee. The trainers crowded around him, and it quickly became obvious that he'd sustained a serious injury.

As they watched the heartbreaking sight of their champion forward being carried from the ground, Chris turned to Lois, her face lined with horror. "He's not… you're not with—no, you can't be. Piggy's married, isn't he?"

"I think Dunstall's married," Lois said noncommittally, her eyes not leaving the fallen Hawk. The chance of an implausible victory had just diminished to almost nothing.

Somehow, Hawthorn dug deeper and battled valiantly against the odds, playing in hostile territory and with a forward line that was missing its leading goal kicker. At three-quarter time, they clung to a narrow three-point lead.

But then, in the final quarter their fears turned to reality. Sydney, encouraged by the support of a noisy home crowd, snatched back the lead… and when the siren sounded, the Hawks had lost by one solitary goal. Six measly points.

Their season was over.

Lois slumped onto her seat as disappointment coursed through her body. They had come so close, they had fought so hard, they had challenged the odds and almost… *almost* achieved a remarkable victory.

As the Hawthorn players trudged from the ground, Lois and Chris stood and applauded solemnly. Lois didn't care that the gleeful Sydney fans looked at them and scoffed. All she cared about was that the men in brown and gold were her team, and she was almost bursting with pride at the way they had played.

When the Hawthorn players had disappeared into the race, Lois looked at Chris.

"This can't be the end," Chris said shakily.

Lois shook her head. "It can't. We can't let it be the end."

Chris picked up her bag. "I'm getting out of here. There's no point in hanging around." She smiled tremulously. "You have a great time—and whoever he is, tell him he was a hero tonight."

Lois nodded.

"See you tomorrow morning," Chris said.

"See you. And Chris… thanks."

They hugged briefly, and Chris walked away, her brown-and-gold jumper stark amongst the celebrating sea of red and white.

Lois sat down and allowed her eyes to drift over the scene in front of her.

Was this the last time?

Was this the last time she would care so much about the result of a game? The last time she would experience the gut-wrenching emptiness of defeat when victory had been so tantalisingly close?

The last time she would mourn, knowing that the entire Hawthorn family was mourning with her?

Lois felt a tear squeeze from her eye and carve a damp path down her cheek. She scrunched forward and used the bottom of her Hawk jumper to wipe away the moisture. Seizing a fistful of the soft woollen material, she lifted it to her lips and kissed it.

With a long, quivery sigh, Lois stood.

"Thank you," she whispered. "Thank you for letting me share your journey."

She turned her back on the arena.

On eighteen years of memories.

On a football club she would love until the day she died.

And looked forward to the man she loved even more.

Half an hour later, Lois waited in the shadows of the Sydney Opera House for her groom to come and take her to their wedding.

One hour and thirty-eight minutes.

* * *

"Are you ready, my beautiful bride?"

Lois took one last glance into the mirror and adjusted her cape. Then she opened the door of Clark's childhood bedroom and smiled at the wonderful man who would soon be her husband. "I still can't believe I found someone as amazing as you," she said.

Clark took her into his arms. "And I still can't believe I found you," he replied. "I looked for you for so long, hoping against hope there would be a woman on this planet who could love me."

She smiled and rubbed the side of her thumb against the 'S' on his chest. "It's really not that hard to love you."

He scrutinised her face. "Are you OK? Not too tired? I know you must be upset about Hawthorn."

Lois sighed. "Yeah, I am. Realistically, I know that even had we won, it would be really difficult to go deep into September without Piggy, but the end of the season always feels horrible."

Clark nestled her against his chest, and for a few moments, Lois soaked up his comfort and support. Then she drew away, switched her mind from the past to the future, and smiled up at her man. "I can't wait to be your wife."

He kissed her. “I love you, Lois.”

She smiled. “And I love you, Clark.”

He pointed to the bag in the corner. “That’s the bag you want me to bring once we’re in the honeymoon suite?”

Lois smiled as she thought of the contents of the bag. “Yes, please,” she said. She couldn’t resist adding, “Look after it—there’s something in there I think you’ll enjoy.”

He turned his attention directly to the bag, and Lois squealed as she reached up to cover his eyes with her hand. “Don’t cheat,” she said, giggling.

Clark turned to her with his most gorgeously innocent look. “Me?”

“You,” she said accusingly. “Did you look?”

He grinned. “No,” he said. “I didn’t need to—pretending to was just as much fun.”

Lois poked his chest—bang smack in the middle of his ‘S’. “You are gonna pay for that later,” she warned him.

She’d hoped he would take the bait and ask for details, but instead, he smiled happily and said, “Let’s go and say ‘bye’ to Mom and Dad.”

Downstairs, they hugged Jonathan and Martha.

“I’m sorry you can’t be there,” Lois said.

“We will be next time,” Martha said, smiling despite the tears in her eyes.

Clark carefully tied Lois’s mask across her eyes. “Is that all right?” he asked.

“Yes, thanks.”

“Good luck,” Martha said as she hugged her son.

“I already have it,” Clark replied. His gave his mom one last hug and then lifted his bride into his arms with a jubilant smile. “Let’s go get married, Ultra Woman.”

* * *

Mayson Drake sat next to Lex Luthor in the front row as they awaited the arrival of the bride and groom.

She was feeling exultant. She would never forget how Linda King had noticed her on the arm of Lex Luthor and then scuttled across the room with such a mix of dismay and self-importance she had looked like a two-bit actor from a cheap farce.

Luthor had dealt with Linda in the manner due a no-name who thought she was somebody because she’d orchestrated a sham wedding involving an alien invader and a grovelling human.

To Mayson’s gratification, Linda King hadn’t shown the slightest resistance as Luthor had walked past her with barely even a nod in her direction.

Mayson clutched her bag on her lap and surreptitiously drew her right elbow against the side of her chest. She felt the reassuring presence of the piece of green rock where it lay tucked into her bra between her breasts.

She’d thought for a long time about where to put the rock. Her bag was the obvious place, but she’d worried about the—admittedly slim—possibility of someone snatching it from her. And she hadn’t been sure it would actually affect Superman from inside her bag. She’d concluded that the green rock had to be kept somewhere on her person. Somewhere open, but unseen.

Eventually, she’d settled on the perfect place. She needed to keep the green rock a secret from everyone—except Superman, of course. Today, he would realise that some of it remained on Earth. Maybe he would even figure out who had it. That wasn’t a concern. He had to know eventually—he needed to understand the ramifications should he refuse to bow to her demands.

There was an added advantage to this particular positioning of the green rock. Superman was the only one who could see it. Should he choose to use his super-vision to look through her dress, it would give her further leverage. She would know that, despite his goody-goody facade and pseudo-morality, he *did* use his powers to ogle women. And that could be very useful information to threaten to pass onto Ultra Woman.

It hadn’t been easy to find a dress with exactly the right neckline. It had to be high enough to keep the rock secure and hidden, but low enough to ensure that Superman was sufficiently exposed. Mayson had set up an elaborate rigging system across the front of her bra, using several strands of elastic slung between the cups to provide a secure place for the rock.

Unable to resist, Mayson squeezed her elbow into her side again and felt the rock press slightly against her skin.

Luthor leant over. “Are you all right?” he hissed.

“Yes.”

“Then for goodness’ sake, sit still,” he said. “You’re like a schoolgirl fidgeting with her training bra.”

Perturbed—not that Luthor had noticed her breasts, but that he’d been able to pinpoint with such accuracy what she had been doing—Mayson glanced down. Her disquiet turned to alarm when she saw the tip of the green rock peeking out from between her breasts.

Awkwardly—and being careful not to lean in such a way that Luthor would get a glimpse down her front—Mayson shuffled closer to him. “Slight wardrobe malfunction,” she said. “I need to visit the ladies’ room.”

She didn’t wait long enough to dwell on his look of impatience, but stood, and trying for unhurried grace, she glided across the hall to the side door that led to the ladies’ room.

Once in the stall, Mayson hung her bag on the hook and removed the green rock from its hiding place. The top strip of elastic had worked loose. She carefully placed the rock on top of the toilet roll holder and searched through her bag for an appropriate implement to make some running repairs.

* * *

Perry White slammed down the phone with such force the pencil on his desk jumped.

“OLSEN!” he screamed.

Running footsteps told him Olsen hadn’t yet left for Superman’s wedding. The door opened, and Jimmy’s head appeared. “Just leaving now, Chief,” he said breathlessly.

“Get in here,” Perry commanded. “And shut the door behind you.”

Looking surprised, Jimmy entered, holding his camera. “I got held up with—”

“I need you to get a message to Superman.”

Jimmy looked at Perry as if the editor had completely lost his marbles. “Chief,” he said reasonably, “I think he’s occupied at the moment. His wedding is due to start in ten minutes.”

“I need to talk to him.”

“Chief, he doesn’t even know you.”

“He knows you. You took those photos of him and Ultra Woman after the interview.”

“That doesn’t mean I *know* him.”

“I have to talk to him. Before the wedding.”

“Chief!” Olsen’s ability to hide his exasperation was fading quickly. “I really don’t think that’s going to happen.”

Perry’s mind raced. “OK,” he said decisively. “Get to the Lexor Ballroom and barge through every barrier you need to to get to Superman. Tell him the editor of the *Daily Planet* is on top of the Planet building and about to jump.”

Jimmy’s mouth dropped about level with his chest. “Ch…Chief,” he stammered. “I know we didn’t get to cover Superman’s wedding, but, really, things aren’t that bad. We can—”

“Get to the wedding and tell Superman to meet me at the top of the building,” Perry bellowed. “And if I hear one more objection, Olsen, you’ll never work for another paper in the United States for as long as I live.”

Jimmy turned and shot through the door.

Perry picked up the pencil, jotted down an address, and then sketched a hasty map. He thrust the paper into his pocket and headed for the stairs to the top of the building.

* * *

Clark landed outside the Lexor Ballroom and slid Lois to her feet. Beyond the heavily guarded barriers, the crowd pressed forward, calling and waving. Many were holding up signs with good wishes for the happy couple.

He took Lois’s hand and stood there, smiling stiffly. The bridal couple waited, allowing people to take photographs and acknowledging the cries of congratulations.

Clark saw Lois raise her other hand and brush across her eye. He didn’t feel too far from tears himself. This was the beginning of the life of his dreams.

There was a commotion towards the back of the crowd, and Clark’s attention spun in that direction. He looked through the gathered people and saw Jimmy Olsen with three guards hanging off him.

“Superman!” Jimmy screamed. The kid actually managed to make a few steps of progress despite the efforts of three burly security guards. “Superman!” he shouted desperately. “I need to talk to you.”

Clark hesitated, torn between lifting Lois and taking her the thirty feet to where Jimmy was, or leaving her at the entrance. He leant over—she was still wiping her eye—and whispered in her ear. “I’ll only be a moment. Stay here, honey.”

Clark flew to Jimmy and the security guards. He hovered above them, crossed his arms, and looked down. “What is it?” he asked sternly.

Jimmy looked up. “Perry White—the editor of the *Daily Planet*—is on the top of the Planet building. He says he’s gonna jump.”

Clark hoped he managed to smother his shock before it reached his face. He nodded to Jimmy and then addressed the security guards. “Let him go, please,” he said.

They didn’t loosen their hold.

“He had a message for me,” Clark said. “Now he’s delivered the message, he won’t cause any further problems.”

The security guards released Jimmy.

“Go back to your office,” Clark directed.

Jimmy hurried away, and Clark turned back to the entrance of the Lexor Ballroom.

Fear gripped his heart.

Lois had gone.

Part 47

Clark flew to the entrance of the Lexor Ballroom and landed with a thud, his eyes darting in search of Lois. “Where is she?” he asked no one in particular. He saw Linda King just inside the doors of the hall where the guests awaited, and he strode quickly to her. “Where is Ultra Woman?” he demanded.

Linda smiled inanely at the panic in his voice. “Don’t worry, Superman,” she purred. “Ultra Woman has an eyelash in her eye, and she went to the ladies’ room to remove it. She told me to assure you she’s all right.”

Was Linda lying?

Had someone taken Lois?

Clark stood, not knowing what to do.

He couldn’t look into the ladies’ bathroom—he couldn’t.

But there was something he could do. He closed his eyes and listened.

Two long, agonising seconds later, he heard it. Her heartbeat. Coming from the ladies’ bathroom.

It was slightly elevated, but not enough to signify she was in any danger.

He let out a sigh of relief, and the tightness around his heart eased.

Then he remembered.

Perry.

Why was he on top of the Daily Planet building?

Was he really going to jump?

And why had he called for Superman?

Clark had to go. He couldn’t ignore Perry. He couldn’t wait for Lois to emerge from the bathroom. And he couldn’t barge in there and ask her to hurry up. Clark turned to Linda. “There’s something I have to do,” he said. “When Ultra Woman comes back, tell her to wait here. I won’t be long.”

Keeping his ears tuned to Lois’s heartbeat, he rose and flew at superspeed to the top of the Daily Planet building.

* * *

In the bathroom, Lois glanced along the row of stalls. One was occupied. Lois frowned at the closed door. She had hoped to be alone.

The presence of the eyelash had already caused moisture to flood her eye. She hurried to the mirrors, leant forward, and tried to locate the foreign object.

She blinked repeatedly, but the irritant didn’t budge.

Behind her, there was movement in the stall.

Lois rubbed her eye. It would be easier without the mask, but she couldn’t risk taking it off.

She widened her eyes and stared into the mirror.

It was still there.

She couldn’t actually see it, but she sure could feel it.

And there was no way she was getting married with watery eyes because of a recalcitrant lash.

* * *

Perry spun around as Clark landed on the roof of the Daily Planet building and searched his editor’s face for signs of desperation. “You wanted to speak to me?” Clark said, remembering to keep his words cool and aloof.

“I have a source—Sore Throat,” Perry said.

Clark’s heart constricted. This couldn’t be good.

“He has informed me that the Metropolis Star has installed hidden cameras in the honeymoon suite at the Lexor Hotel,” Perry said. “Their real interest was not in the wedding but in the honeymoon.”

A mix of relief and frustration swirled through Clark. Why hadn’t he thought of that? “Didn’t they think I’d check?” he asked.

A ghost of Perry’s smile shimmered for a moment. “Perhaps they thought you’d be distracted.”

Clark looked across the Metropolis skyline to where the Lexor Hotel towered above the other buildings. Knowing the honeymoon suite was on the thirty-fifth floor, he scanned in search of the cameras.

His vision blurred.

Clark shook his head and tried again. He couldn’t see through the walls. Instead, they merely softened to indistinct outlines.

* * *

Finally, Lois managed to coax the stubborn eyelash from her eye. She peered into the mirror and groaned softly. Her eye was pink and puffy, and her makeup was smudged.

Very carefully, she used the tip of her little finger to try to wipe away the shadow of mascara that had leaked from her lashes. Her efforts were ineffectual. She looked around the bathroom for some paper towel. There was nothing—

only electric hand driers. Shouldn't a place like this supply tissues? She decided to try again with her finger. She really didn't want to resort to using toilet paper to fix her makeup on her wedding day.

* * *

Clark turned back to Perry. "Do you trust this source?"

"He's always been straight with me before." Perry looked directly at Superman, and Clark had to force himself to hold his stance. What if the shrewd old editor saw through the disguise? "I know this sounds like a stunt to get a story for the Planet and outsmart the Star," Perry said. "But when that crank Trask took my people hostage, you came to try to help them. I haven't forgotten that."

Clark nodded. "Thanks."

Perry stepped forward, a piece of paper in his outstretched hand. "This is the address and a map of my fishing shack in the Adirondacks," he said. "It's about as far removed from the luxury of the honeymoon suite at the Lexor as can be, and I've hardly been there this summer, so it'll be under an inch of dust. But it's comfortable, and it's private, and you're very welcome to it."

Clark took the paper. "Thank you, Mr White," he said. "Thanks for everything."

"The key is under the mat at the back door." Perry shook Superman's hand. "Good luck."

Clark paused before flying off. "You're not going to jump?" he asked.

Perry chuckled. "No," he said. "I was never going to jump, but I couldn't think of another way to warn you. And I couldn't let the Star do that to you and your lady."

"Thank you," Clark said. He leapt into the air and flew back to Lois.

* * *

Lois leant forward again, her finger poised. The mask was hindering her efforts. If she went into one of the stalls, she could remove her mask without fear of detection, but then she wouldn't have a mirror. She cautiously ran her finger under her lower lash and examined the results. That was better. It wasn't perfect, but it was better.

She straightened, and to her dismay, she saw a conspicuous smear of black mascara on her hot pink mask. What was she going to do now?

From behind her came a sharp clinking sound as something landed on the tiled floor. Lois jumped and turned. The door to the occupied stall was still closed, and whatever had fallen remained out of sight. Lois heard a rustling movement and figured that the woman in there was picking up whatever she'd dropped. It had sounded like a piece of jewellery—no, it was heavier than that… more like a pebble.

After a hasty glance to the entrance door to check no one was coming, Lois faced the mirror, untied her mask, removed it, turned it around so the stained side faced inwards, and replaced it over her eyes.

As she did, the door to the stall opened. Lois's eyes jerked left, and in the mirror, she saw Mayson Drake emerge.

The two women stared at each other. Lois wasn't sure who was more surprised at the other's appearance. Possibly Lois had a slight advantage because, although she hadn't been expecting to encounter Mayson in the bathroom, her presence at the wedding was no surprise at all.

"Ms Drake," Lois said, remembering to slip into her American accent. She secured the mask at the back of her head, smoothed down a few stray strands of gelled hair, conducted a final check in the mirror—her mascara was a little blotchy, but none of it was visible on her mask—and walked from the bathroom without so much as a backward glance.

* * *

When Clark dropped into the entrance area of the Lexor Ballroom, Lois was nowhere to be seen. A few seconds ago, her heartbeat had spiked, but now it was returning to normal. "Where's Ultra Woman?" he demanded of Linda.

"She's—"

Lois appeared from the other side of the foyer, and a rush of relief surged through Clark as he hurried towards her. "Are you all right?" he asked, clasping her arms.

She nodded with a smile, although she still looked a little flustered. "I had an eyelash in my eye. Is everything with you?"

"Is that all? Just an eyelash?"

"I got a bit of mascara on my mask, but it's all OK now."

Clark looked closely and saw a tiny blotch underneath her left eye. "It's not noticeable," he told her.

She smiled. "Is everything OK? What did they want?"

"Nothing that's a problem," he said. "I'll tell you about it later."

Linda approached them. "Are we ready?" she said brightly.

Clark looked to Lois. His bride smiled and nodded. "Yes, we're ready," he said.

"Then perhaps you'd like to make your way to the front of the hall, Superman," Linda said. "I'll wait here with Ultra Woman."

Clark gently slid his hands down Lois's arms and gave her a smile. "Let's do this," he said. He turned around, tuned his hearing to her heartbeat, and began to walk up the aisle towards the celebrant.

Ahead and to the right, he saw Mayson Drake drop into the seat next to Lex Luthor. Lois had been right, Clark thought grimly. Mayson had found her a way to procure an invitation to the wedding.

But there was no room for thoughts of Mayson now. Clark's mind filled with visions of the woman he loved. The woman who would soon be his wife.

Then, the world tilted, and a suffocating tightness gripped his chest. Clark put his hand over his 'S' and tried to take a steadying breath. It was no use. The pain was back. The pain that came only from exposure to the green rock. The pain that would cripple him and reduce him to weakness as its cruel clutches racked his body.

He tried to turn. Tried to get back to Lois.

Instead, his legs folded under him, and Superman crumpled to the ground.

* * *

Lois saw Clark stop. She saw him grasp his chest. She saw him slump. And then she saw him fall.

By the time he hit the ground, she was already halfway up the aisle.

When she reached him, she dropped beside him. His face was contorted with pain, and his hands were snatching at his chest in a futile attempt to ease his agony. "Superman," she gasped.

A flash of light hit them.

Then another.

And another.

Lois looked up towards the light and saw three security guards surrounding Mayson Drake. In her hands, she held a camera, and on her face was an expression of evil triumph.

The guards herded her away—down the side aisle and out of the building.

Lois looked back to Clark.

Some of the intensity seemed to have eased from his face, and he was no longer gripping his chest with such wretched desperation. With one hand, she caressed his forehead, and with the other, she held his hand.

A horde of people jostled around her, and their dissonance of questions and speculation circled like a vulture, but for Lois, there was only Clark.

His eyelids lifted, and the dark brown pools of pain meshed with hers. She tried to smile for him, but her attempt drained away as his distress cut though her like a blade.

Clark increased the pressure on her hand, and Lois realised he wanted to sit up. She clasped his shoulder and using all of her strength, helped him rise to a sitting position. He slumped against the solid wooden chair. His head went back, and he pulled in deep breaths, but the worst of the torment seemed to have subsided.

Lois stroked his neck and held his hand. "Are you going to be all right?" she whispered.

He nodded. "Just… just give me… a moment."

Lois became aware that the photographer from the Star was feverishly working his camera—although he was doing it without the intrusive flash that Mayson had used. She leant closer to Clark, trying to obstruct the photographer's line of sight as much as possible.

"Do you still want to do this?" Clark said very quietly.

"We are not going to let this stop our wedding," Lois said decisively. "We can wait until you're feeling better, but we are going to do it."

He gave her a shaky smile. "Could you help me up?"

Lois gripped Clark's hand. He took a firm hold of the chair and scrambled to his feet as other people reached to assist him.

Once they were standing, Lois put her hands around his waist and looked up into his face. "OK?" she murmured.

"Yeah," he rasped. "Thanks."

Lois stretched up to Clark's ear and whispered, "It's OK, we've done this before. Lean on me as much as you need to." She positioned his arm along her shoulder and slipped her arm under his cape and across his back. "Let's get married," she said.

Linda King stood in front of them, her face pallid. "What happened?" she asked anxiously.

"Just a few wedding nerves," Lois said lightly. "Nothing to worry about."

"Wedding nerves?" Linda gasped. "It looked like a lot more than—"

"Excuse us," Lois said. She gave Linda a tight smile. "Superman and I are about to get married."

The people returned to their seats, and Lois and Clark made slow progress up the aisle. When they drew level with

the first row, Lois glanced to her right and saw the empty chair.

They could get through this. Clark was safe now.

Two steps later, they were standing in front of the celebrant. She looked at them with a practised smile. “Are we ready to proceed?” she asked in a crisp, official voice.

“Yes,” Lois said. Clark’s arm dropped from her shoulder and immediately she felt him sway. She turned to face him, put his hands on her shoulders, and spanned her hands above his hips. He steadied, and she smiled up at him, willing him to believe that everything would be all right. “There has been a change of plans,” she said, turning to the celebrant. “We are not going to recite the vows we wrote; we wish for you to lead us through some standard vows.”

For a moment, the celebrant looked taken aback at the request. “Religious or nonreligious?” she asked eventually.

Clark had mentioned going to church with his parents. “Religious,” Lois said.

The celebrant shuffled through her notes, paused, and then withdrew a sheet.

Lois used her thumb to stroke across the slippery material of Clark’s suit. Again, she found his eyes, hoping he would receive her message. *It’ll be OK. We’re together.*

“Repeat after me,” the celebrant said. “I, Superman, take you, Ultra Woman, to be my wife.”

Clark swallowed, and in his face, Lois could see his sorrow that their wedding was going to be even less than the simple ceremony they had planned. “I love you,” she mouthed.

“I, Superman, take you, Ultra Woman, to be my wife,” Clark said. The words came out steadily propelled, she was sure, by the strength of a heart that was determined to overcome the ravages that had been wrought upon his body.

Lois smiled her encouragement.

“Before God and these witnesses,” the celebrant read, “I promise to be a faithful husband.”

“Before God and these witnesses,” Clark said, “I promise to be a faithful husband.” *And I will love you forever*, his eyes added.

The celebrant looked to Lois. “I, Ultra Woman, take you, Superman, to be my husband,” she said.

Lois locked eyes with Clark. “I, Ultra Woman, take you, Superman, to be my husband.” His hands tightened on her shoulders in secret response.

The celebrant’s voice washed over them. “Before God and these witnesses, I promise to be a faithful wife.”

“Before God and these witnesses,” Lois said, “I promise to be a faithful wife.”

“Will you, Superman, take Ultra Woman to be your wife?” the celebrant asked. “Will you love her, comfort her, and remain faithful to her as long as you both shall live?”

“I will.”

Lois felt the tears gather along her eyes.

“Will you, Ultra Woman, take Superman to be your husband? Will you love him, comfort him, and remain faithful to him as long as you both shall live?”

“I will,” she said.

Clark blinked hurriedly, and Lois smiled her understanding.

The celebrant looked expectantly at Linda King. “Do you have the rings?”

Linda rushed forward and dropped two rings into the celebrant’s outstretched hand.

Clark took one hand from Lois’s shoulder.

The celebrant gave him the ring. “Repeat after me,” she said. “With this ring, I wed you.”

Lois took her left hand from Clark’s waist but tightened her grip with her right hand. He still didn’t seem completely secure on his feet.

Clark positioned the ring at the end of her finger. “With this ring, I wed you,” he said.

“I promise to love you through good times and bad, in sickness and in health,” the celebrant said.

Lois saw a hint of amusement in Clark’s eyes and had to refrain from laughing with relief that he was feeling well enough to see the irony of him—the strongest man in the world—promising to love her through sickness and health when she was propping him up at the altar. “I promise to love you through good times and bad, in sickness and in health.”

She heard the slight buoyancy in his voice and answered him with a radiant smile.

He pushed the ring onto her finger, and their eyes met and danced with joy.

The celebrant handed Clark’s ring to Lois. “With this ring, I wed you.”

Lois looked into Clark’s eyes and saw that the cloud of pain had cleared. “With this ring, I wed you,” she said, placing emphasis on the final three words.

His smile glimmered.

"I promise to love you through good times and bad, in sickness and in health," the celebrant prompted.

"I promise to love you through good times and bad," Lois said, "in sickness and in health." She pushed the ring along the length of his finger and sighed with satisfaction.

The celebrant smiled. "Before God and these witnesses, I pronounce that you are husband and wife."

Lois felt the swell of joy and elation cascade through her. At that moment, nothing else mattered—not the bizarre wedding outfits, not the names used, not the guests that didn't include even one person who mattered to them, not the encounter with the green rock. All that mattered was that she and Clark were married.

He, too, was smiling—more freely than Superman ever had.

"You may kiss your bride."

Lois slipped her arms around his neck and kissed him. It was short… and chaste, but it amply conveyed the depth of his feelings.

"I love you," Clark said as her mouth left his.

"I love you."

The bridal couple turned to the applauding guests and waited while the *Star*'s photographer took a few more shots.

They moved to the nearby table and signed the official documents.

Then, hand-in-hand, Superman and Ultra Woman began their first journey together as husband and wife.

* * *

Mayson Drake stared at the green rock in her palm as a volcano of euphoria and triumph erupted inside her.

Power.

She'd always craved it, and now she had it.

The most powerful man on Earth had to bow to her demands. She had the weapon that could control him.

In her mind, she could still see him, lying there… helpless… weak… writhing in pain.

Mayson smiled.

They had taken her camera and destroyed the film.

But they couldn't steal the images of victory that were etched in her memory.

King and her lackeys were so imbecilic, they didn't even realise they had missed the real prize.

Mayson carefully returned her most treasured possession to its hiding place.

It was time for the games to begin.

* * *

A roar of approval rose from the crowd as the bride and groom emerged from the building to stand in the morning sunshine. Clark looked down at Lois—his wife, his support. When he had been weak, she had been strong.

Off to the side, a horse-drawn carriage awaited them. All vestiges of the pain had gone, but Clark wasn't sure if he was going to be able to lift his bride and fly away.

"We'll take the carriage," she said with an understanding smile.

He nodded. It seemed that when circumstance denied them the opportunity to speak openly, their communication switched to another, deeper level.

The huge Clydesdale moved forward, and the driver leapt down to help them into the carriage. Once Lois was safely seated, Clark hauled himself up and dropped beside her. He was still weak—and a long way from super—but he could feel his strength returning.

They drove slowly through the cheering crowds. Clark smiled guardedly, as befitting Superman, but Lois waved enthusiastically, looking every inch the happy bride.

Clark hoped it wasn't just a cover for her disappointment.

She must be devastated.

Her wedding had been reduced to even less than their simple plans.

Her future had been put in jeopardy. When he'd agreed to her becoming Ultra Woman, he'd thought he would always have the strength to protect her. Now, he knew that some of the green rock remained on Earth. That changed everything.

Whoever had the green rock had chosen to use it to disrupt their wedding. That said much about their intentions.

Clark put his arm around Lois and snuggled her closer to him. He hadn't liked Linda's idea of a parade through the streets in an open carriage. It had seemed too pretentious and made them too susceptible to anyone with a mind to hurt Lois. He hadn't liked it when he'd assumed he would be sitting next to her with all of his superpowers.

Now, he felt vulnerable. If anything happened, he wasn't sure he'd be able to protect Lois. And that felt worse than being exposed to the green rock.

They continued the short distance to the Lexor Hotel, wending through the crowds at a leisurely pace. To Clark's great relief, they reached their destination without incident.

They alighted from the carriage, and after a final wave to the crowd, they entered the hotel. Two uniformed attendants welcomed them and led them to the elevator.

Seconds later, they were being whisked upwards to the thirty-fifth floor.

The exhilaration Clark should have been feeling as they approached the honeymoon suite was lost in the shadow of their predicament. In just a few hours, Lois had to be back in Sydney. He wasn't able to fly now, and he had no way of knowing when the trip across the Pacific would be feasible. Someone had the green rock and the will to use it against him. It was their wedding day, and they were stuck in a room that had been fitted with cameras.

The elevator came to a smooth stop, and the doors opened. The attendants escorted them into the honeymoon suite. As soon as he was in the room, Clark scanned the walls, but his vision hadn't recovered enough to enable him to see through them.

After graciously enquiring if they needed anything, the attendants left.

Clark looked at Lois. She was rotating slowly, her arms wide as she took in the grandeur of the room. Having completed a full circle, she faced him, smiling happily. "This is brilliant," she said.

Clark hated that he was going to have to disappoint her again. He took her into his arms and positioned his mouth next to her ear. "They've put cameras in here," he murmured under his breath. He felt the surprise ripple through her. "You'll have to keep your mask on," he added ruefully.

Lois took only a few moments to process that. She slipped from his embrace and went to the glass doors leading to the balcony. She opened them and stepped out into the sunshine.

Clark followed her, convinced she was trying to hide her distress.

When he reached her, she turned. To his surprise, she was smiling.

"Honey, I'm sorry," he said.

She turned him so his back was to the sun and then stepped into his shadow and slipped her arms around his waist. "It's OK," she said.

"It's *not* OK," Clark said as all his frustration and disillusionment rose to the surface. "That barely even qualified as a wedding, and we don't know how—"

Lois stopped the flow of his words with a kiss—and not only the flow of his words but also the thrust of his worries. When she kissed him like that, it was impossible to think about anything else.

When the kiss ended, Clark couldn't help smiling down at his wife. "The cameras might reach to the balcony," he warned.

She shrugged. "We've only done what everyone expects a just-married couple to do."

Clark studied her face. She seemed unperturbed by their situation. Hadn't she realised the implications of his exposure to the green rock? Or was she pushing them away and refusing to allow anything to spoil the first hours of their marriage?

Lois walked back into the room and opened the drapes to their fullest extent. A splash of sunshine fell onto the bed. She pulled back the blanket and sheet. "Come and get in," she said. "You take the sunny side."

What about the cameras? Clark looked to Lois with his question and saw her certainty and composure.

He sat on the bed and removed his boots. When he had settled onto his back, Lois slipped in beside him. She pulled up the covers and laid her head on his upper chest and her hand on his ribs. "We'll stay here for a while," she said.

"Honey! I can't fl—"

"I know," she said, very low and calm. "Remember the last time? Remember how being with me strengthened you? It's worked before. It will work again this time."

He let out a deep breath. Lois was right. They could wait here in the bed. It would seem strange, but it wouldn't make for sensationalistic or revealing photos. And if they were pressed for an explanation, they could say he hadn't been feeling well after his collapse.

"Don't worry about anything," Lois said with reassuring serenity. "I have everything worked out. All you have to do is get well."

Under the blankets, her hand moved slowly down his arm and rested on his hand. She jiggled his brand-new wedding ring. "That feels good," she said.

"Yeah." They had to get Lois back to Sydney before anyone noticed she was missing. To do that, he had to regain his strength.

Clark closed his eyes and concentrated on his wife's presence beside him.

Part 48

Clark spent the next hour listening to Lois breathe, enjoying the feel of her weight on his chest, and mulling over the

many wonderful moments that had filled his life since he'd met the woman of his dreams.

There was the moment at the airport when he'd looked to see what had caught the attention of the West Coast fans—and had been instantly captivated by the woman called 'Flinders'.

And the moment the next morning when Lois had shown him the skills of footy—and their attempts to practise tackling had left them in a jumbled heap.

And the moment when she'd agreed to hold his hand on the boardwalk in Geelong.

And the moment when she'd so staunchly supported Superman despite Trask's damning accusations.

And the moment when she'd come to him the morning after he'd told her his secret.

And the moment at Torquay beach when she'd looked into his eyes and said the three words he had dreamt of hearing.

And the moment in the tree house when she'd agreed to be his wife.

And now, here he was—in bed, in the honeymoon suite, with his wife.

But not in the way he'd envisioned.

Lois had fallen asleep, which was not surprising considering the late hour in Melbourne.

Clark felt almost normal. He wasn't sure if normal would equate to super, but he was ready to find out.

He eased out from next to her and paused for a moment as his eyes lingered lovingly on her face. Even in the mask—which was now slightly askew—she was utterly beautiful.

And she was his wife.

With difficulty, he pulled his gaze away.

He went to the balcony and looked down on Metropolis.

The most intense pain from the green rock had lasted only a short time, giving him cause to hope that the effects of his exposure would be significantly less than when Trask had trapped him.

Clark shot up into the air and flew in a wide arc above Metropolis. He felt great—full strength. Better than full strength, because he was now a married man and his beautiful bride awaited him.

He shot across the United States, did a wide U-turn over the Pacific, and flew east to land on the balcony of the honeymoon suite less than a minute after leaving it.

Once back inside, Clark quickly scanned the walls and discovered that Perry's information was good—there were at least ten cameras placed to intrude upon their honeymoon. He considered disabling them with a barrage of fiery darts but decided against it. Many people had heard Jimmy deliver his message. Clark didn't want the Star to guess Perry's involvement and retaliate against the Planet—not that Perry wasn't up for whatever Carpenter and King could throw at him!

Clark crossed to the bed, put his hand on Lois's shoulder, and gently shook her.

She woke instantly. "Are you all right?" she asked.

He smiled to reassure her. "I'm absolutely super," he said. "All I needed was a dose of Ultra Woman."

Lois grinned. "Let's go somewhere we can talk." She rose from the bed and pulled on her pink boots.

Clark picked her up and strode to the balcony. He flew them both into the air, high enough that they would be out of sight. They hovered above Metropolis—together and safe from prying cameras. And, Clark realised, he had no idea what to do next. Within him, conflict raged as his joy fought against the apprehension brought by the knowledge that some of the green rock remained on Earth.

His wife, however, seemed to have no such dilemma. She pulled the mask from her face and beamed at him. She looked so incredibly happy that Clark just had to answer her smile. "You said you have this worked out," he said. "Were you just saying that so I wouldn't worry?"

"Not at all," she said vehemently. "I have the perfect plan. It's obvious really."

It was?

Lois grinned at what was probably a bewildered look on his face. "Mayson Drake has the green rock," she announced.

Her words seemed incongruous with her cheerfulness. "Mayson?" Clark spluttered.

"Yep," Lois said.

"How do you know?"

"When I was in the bathroom getting out the eyelash, she was in there, too. I heard something drop—something that sounded sort of clinky, almost like a metal, but not quite, more like a pebble. I didn't see it, but later, I realised it had to be a piece of the green rock."

"You didn't see it?" Clark said, trying not to sound like he doubted her.

"No. But it was precisely when Mayson was dragged out by the security guards after trying to take the photos that you stopped feeling so bad."

"Surely she would have known that a Planet reporter taking photos was the one thing the Star wouldn't tolerate?"

Lois nodded. "Probably. I don't think she meant too much damage this time. She just wanted to test the rock and prove that it has a detrimental effect on you."

"Well, she did that," Clark said grimly. The knowledge that there was some of the green rock on Earth was bad enough. That it was in the hands of Mayson Drake was worse. "How could she have gotten it?"

"The last place we know there was green rock was the base where Trask sent it into orbit. We also know Mayson was there. Maybe she found some while she was Trask's hostage."

"I flew her to the hospital. I'm sure she didn't have any with her then."

"Maybe she went back later. I don't know how exactly, but the rock was there, Mayson was there, and that means she might have had an opportunity."

That was possible. "You think she's had it for a while and she kept it until the wedding?" Clark asked.

"That's exactly what I think," Lois said. "Probably to embarrass us. Perhaps because she didn't get the exclusive interview."

"But next time," Clark said as foreboding constricted his heart, "I doubt she will be content to merely embarrass me."

"Probably not," Lois agreed, not sounding at all worried. She reached for his face and gently ran her fingers down his cheek. "And that's why we have to make sure there is no 'next time'."

"How are we going to do that?"

"We are going to take it away from her," Lois said as if that were a simple thing.

"I can't go anywhere near it."

"No, but I can."

"Lois," Clark said as every internal warning light started flashing across his brain. "No. You're not going anywhere near—"

She put her hand over his mouth and grinned. "OK," she declared. "Now that I'm your wife, I can speak freely. We have less than eight hours for a honeymoon. But before we can get to the really fun stuff, we have a few loose ends to tie up. The longer you argue with me, hunky husband, the less time we will have to sample the delights of marriage."

Clark cleared his throat. "Tell me the plan," he said.

* * *

"Is she there?" Lois asked.

"No."

"Can you see it?"

Ten minutes later, they were hovering high above Mayson's apartment building. Clark was peering down through the maze of rooms, trying to locate a small piece of green rock without seeing anything he had no right to see. Then, he found it. "Yeah—got it," he said.

"Where is it?"

"It's in the closet in her bedroom. There's a fake floor on the left side of the closet with a space below it. The green rock is in there, hidden in the pages of an old book."

"Are you feeling OK? We aren't close enough for it to affect you, are we?"

"No," Clark said. Then he grinned at his wife. "I guess it's a good thing I have totally avoided going to Mayson's apartment."

"A very good thing." Lois kissed him briefly. "To think, you thought *she* was the most dangerous thing in there."

"I still think that," he muttered.

"OK," Lois said. "Let's get back to Smallville and get out of these suits."

Clark paused, still running Lois's plan through the cogs of his mind. She had explained it to him, he had questioned her extensively, and her easy answers and simple reasoning had stunned him. More than that, he was in awe of her resilience. In the space of a few hours, she'd watched her team lose a final, gotten married, supported her debilitated groom through the wedding, coped with cameras in her honeymoon suite… and she'd still been able to devise a plan that seemed entirely workable.

It was a plan that totally encapsulated the concept of team. What he couldn't do, she was going to do. What she couldn't do, he would do.

Together, they were perfect.

"You are an amazing woman," Clark said. His mouth sought his wife's, and he indulged in a long, deep kiss. He'd thought that by now, they'd be together. Really together. Instead…

Lois pulled away with a regretful smile. "Not long now, big guy," she said.

His reply was a frustrated groan.

* * *

Clark dropped gently at the back door of his parents' farm and looked into the kitchen to ensure they didn't have company. His mother was in there alone, bottling peaches.

He slid his hand into Lois's, and they walked in together.

His mom looked up. Her initial joy at seeing them was quickly replaced by concern. "What happened?" she said.

"We're fine," Clark assured her.

"Shouldn't you be in the honeymoon suite?"

"They put cameras in there," Lois said.

Martha stared at them in horror. "Did you do anything? I mean…" She looked at Lois. "Did you take off your mask?"

"No," Lois said. "Perry White discovered the Star wanted photos of the honeymoon to go with their shots of the wedding."

Martha gasped.

"He told me before the wedding," Clark said. "It's OK."

"So, you've come here to…"

"Get changed," Clark said. "And to ask you if you have some of the lead sheeting lying somewhere in the barn."

"Lead sheeting?" The colour drained from Martha's face. "The green rock…" she said. "There's more?"

Clark crossed to his mom and put his hand on her shoulder. "There is more, Mom," he said. "But you're not to worry. Lois and I are going to get it, and I'm going to throw it into space."

"You and Lois?" she said. "Clark, I'm not sure…"

"Do you think I'd agree to anything that might hurt Lois?"

"No," Martha said. She drilled into his eyes, and Clark knew more questions were coming. "How do you know there is more green rock?" she asked. "Did you get hurt by it?"

"Yes," Clark admitted. "But it was over in seconds," he added quickly. "I flew Lois here. I've recovered already. Really, Mom, I'm fine."

Martha nodded slowly, although the anxiety didn't clear from her face. "I'll ask your dad to find the lead sheeting. I'm sure there was some left over from when we found the green rock all those years ago."

"Thanks, Mom," Clark said. "And also, we're wondering if you'd be able to make an outfit for Lois—something that will make her look like a young man."

"You want Lois looking like a man?"

Clark winked at Lois. "Only for a short time."

"Are you going to tell me what's going on?" Martha asked suspiciously.

"Not yet, Mom," Clark said with an apologetic smile. "We don't have much time. But I promise I'll bring my wife home for a proper visit very soon."

Martha's face cleared. "So, despite the green rock, the wedding did go ahead?"

Clark grinned. "Yep," he said. He put his arm around Lois. "This beautiful woman is now my wife."

Martha hugged them both. "I'm so happy for you," she said. She leant back and smiled at them. "I guess it was too much to hope for an uneventful wedding?"

* * *

In his bedroom, Clark spun out of the Superman suit and into jeans and a shirt as Lois looked on. "I wish I could do that," she said.

Clark grinned. "OK," he said. "Now that I'm your husband, I can speak freely."

Lois laughed. "OK, Mr Diplomatic. This should be good."

"I have wondered if it would be possible after… well, after I'm more familiar with… well, if I could have you out of the suit and into clothes in as little time as it takes me to change."

She squealed with laughter. "You're gonna spin around me?"

He grinned. "Dunno," he said. "But I reckon we should try it."

She pointed at him. "I love it when you speak Aussie."

He took her into his arms and nuzzled into her neck. "I just love you."

"We haven't got time for this," she said with longing in her voice.

Clark looked from his wife to his bed and sighed. "You're right." He gestured to the door. "I'll get out of here while I still can."

* * *

"Do you still have concerns about what we're going to do?" Lois asked as they flew towards Sydney.

"I'll be glad when it's over," Clark said.

She giggled. "Obviously." She stroked his cheek. "Seriously, big guy, are you worried?"

"I wish the plan didn't involve any possible danger to you," he said.

"There's minimal danger," she reminded him. "I'll have the piece of lead sheet with me. And you'll be watching me."

"But once you have the green rock, I won't be able to come, even if I can see you're in danger."

"That will only be for a few seconds."

"Yeah," Clark said, still unconvinced. "Are you sure about asking Seb?"

"Yes."

"Do you trust him?"

"Totally."

"What if he says 'no'?"

"We'll go for Plan B," she replied. "But Plan A is better."

* * *

It was after two thirty local time when Lois and Clark landed in a dark alley near the centre of Sydney. Lois dropped to her feet. She was no longer in the Ultra Woman outfit but was again dressed in her Hawthorn jumper and a pair of comfortable jeans.

"I'll meet you back here," she whispered.

"Lois," Clark hissed. "I can stay."

They'd already had this discussion. "You can watch me from up there," she said, pointing into the darkness above them. "There too much risk that someone from Melbourne will see you. Hawthorn fans are out drowning their sorrows. Don't forget that your photo has been in the *Herald Sun*."

"OK," he said reluctantly. "Be careful." Faster than her eyes could follow, he shot into the air.

Lois slipped her mobile phone from her pocket and called Seb's number.

He answered quickly. "Lois," he said. "Why are you still up?"

"I've been… around."

"Is Chris with you?"

"No, she went back to the hotel room."

"Are you all right?" His tone had become serious. "You're not in any trouble, are you?"

"No, Seb," Lois said. "But I need you to do something for me."

"Anything," he said. "You know that."

"Meet me at the shop."

"Now?" he exclaimed.

"Yes," Lois said. "Please, Seb. I need to see you now."

"OK," he said. "Where are you? Do you want me to pick you up?"

"No—just get to the shop as quickly as you can."

"I'll be ten minutes."

"Thanks, Seb." Lois shut down her mobile and slipped it into her jeans pocket. As she did, her engagement ring snagged on the denim, and horror coursed through her.

She'd nearly forgotten to remove her rings.

Seb was a *jeweller*. He, of all people, was going to notice the presence of a wedding ring.

Lois slipped both rings from her finger and carefully lodged them in the coin pocket of her jeans.

* * *

At this time of night, it wasn't difficult to find a place to park. Seb locked his car and looked towards his shop. There was a figure near the door—small, female, and dressed in a Hawthorn jumper.

Seb shook his head. Who would traipse around Sydney in a Hawthorn jumper in the hours after a final? Lois Lane would. At least Sydney had won—that made it marginally safer because the locals would be more interested in celebrating than picking a fight with a lone Hawthorn fan.

He saw that she didn't have her bag with her, and his fears returned. Had someone already hurt her? He jogged the final few metres, and Lois turned at the sound of his footsteps. She smiled when she saw him, but Seb immediately sensed she was uneasy about something.

What had happened?

He unlocked the shop, stood back to let her in, shut the door behind them, and disengaged the security system. "Come through to the back," he said.

Once in the room behind the shop, he switched on the light and faced Lois. She was rubbing her arms as if she were cold. He turned on the heater and then hugged her for a long moment.

Seb was worried.

Lois wanting to see him at this time of night was disconcerting enough, but there was something about her. Perhaps it was the lateness of the hour, perhaps it was because she was away from her hometown, perhaps it was because she was scared that she had just watched Hawthorn's last game ever. He wasn't sure, just as he didn't know whether her shivering was due to cold or something else.

But he was incredibly grateful that—whatever the problem—she had come to him.

He drew back and smiled down at her. “Better now?”

She nodded. “How did the exhibition go?”

“Finished up about half an hour ago. Sold everything at top price and took enough orders to keep me busy for at least a couple of months.”

“Wow, Seb, that’s fantastic. Congratulations.”

He knew she hadn’t come to talk about his exhibition. “What are you doing here, Lois?” he asked. “What happened? You’re worrying me.”

Her brown eyes cannoned into his. “Seb,” she said a little breathlessly, “I’m going to ask you for something, and I can’t tell you why I need it. I’m going to beg you not to try to work it out. And, more than ever in our friendship, I need you to trust me.”

A thick rope wound tightly around Seb’s heart. “You’re in some sort of trouble, aren’t you?”

“No,” she said. “I promise you, Seb, I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“You’re in trouble because of what someone else has done?”

“I’m not in any trouble. I just need something from you.”

“What?”

“I need that big piece of opal you showed me earlier.”

Seb felt his mouth gape open. “*What?*”

“I need that big piece of o—”

“I heard what you said, but Lois, what possible reason could you have for needing a chunk of opal?”

“That’s what I can’t tell you.”

Seb stared at her for a long moment. “Why do you need money?” he said.

“I don’t need money,” Lois said. “I need that opal.”

“Does this have something to do with Operation Payback? If they need money that badly… if it means that much to you, just say so, Lois. I’ll give you however much you need.”

“It’s not for Operation Payback.”

Seb searched every nuance on Lois’s face. Her eyes met his without flinching—openly and honestly as she had always done. There was none of the teasing that was often there—she was deadly serious. She needed the opal, and she’d come to him to ask for it.

“OK,” he said.

Shock cloaked her uneasiness. “S…Seb?” she gasped.

“Come on.” He walked into the back room and turned on the light. He opened the safe, pulled out the box, picked out the biggest piece of opal, and held it up for her to see. “Is this the piece you want?”

Still wide-eyed, Lois nodded. Her eyes dropped from his face to the opal in his hand.

He held it out to her. “Take it,” he said. “It’s yours.”

Gingerly, Lois took the opal and clenched it in her fist. She hugged it against her Hawthorn jumper. “Seb,” she said. “Th…thank you.”

He replaced the box in the safe and locked it. When he turned back to Lois, she was examining the opal. She looked up to him with eyes that were damp.

“How… how much is it worth?” she whispered.

Seb shrugged. “That doesn’t matter,” he said. “I gave it to you because I love you. And even though there’s not one official record in the world that says you and I are family, we are.”

Lois threw herself at him and hugged him. Seb held her closely, hoping he had done the right thing. When she looked up at him with shiny tear-laden eyes, she said, “If I could choose my brother, I’d choose you every time, Seb.”

“Even if Hawthorn merge?”

She nodded. “Even then.”

They moved towards the shop. “How are you going to get where you’re going without getting mugged?” Seb said.

“I have someone waiting for me not far away.”

“You’re leaving a jewellery shop in the middle of the night and walking through Sydney in a Hawthorn jumper,” Seb said solemnly. “I need to know you’re going to be safe.”

“I will be.”

“Will you let me come with you?”

“I can’t, Seb,” Lois said. “But I can tell you that I won’t be in any danger.”

Seb stood in the doorway—barring her path—and folded his arms. “I want three things from you, Lois.”

“OK.”

“When you safely arrive wherever you are going, you are to call me and let me know.”

She nodded.

“And I want you to tell me something.”

"I might not be able to tell you," she said.

"You can tell me this," he said. "If I knew the whole story… if I knew the real reason why you need the opal, do you think I would give it to you?"

"Yes," she said without hesitation. "I think you would give it to me."

He studied her face and realised she truly believed what she said. In all the time he had known Lois, she had always been truthful with him.

"What's the last thing?" Lois said.

Seb glanced to the floor, and when he looked up again, he tried to keep his smile from showing in his eyes. "Is Chris with anyone?"

Lois grinned. "No."

"Did she mention me? After you'd left?"

"She said you seemed nice."

"Nice?" Seb echoed, feeling crushed. "That was it?"

"That was it," Lois confirmed. She grinned again. "But don't be discouraged by that, Sebby. I'm sure Chris has great taste in men."

"Do you think she'd mind if you weren't able to make it to breakfast tomorrow?"

"I don't think she'd mind at all."

"Any chance you could develop gastro or something?"

"I could… but there's a problem."

"What?" he asked quickly.

"Chris knows—or thinks she knows—something about me… something that you know isn't true. Please don't ask her or try to work this out."

"Lois!" Seb said as his worries came flooding back. "The more you say, the more this concerns me. Is Chris involved in your big secret?"

"No. But she guessed something that isn't true, and I didn't lie to her, but I couldn't tell her the truth, so I let her think that what she had guessed was the situation, but it wasn't."

Seb took a deep breath and tried to untangle his brain cells.

Lois put her hand on his wrist. "Please trust me, Seb," she said. "Please trust that I haven't done anything wrong."

Seb put his hand over hers. "I trust you," he said.

"Thank you," Lois said. She smiled at him. "Chris is a lucky girl."

"I haven't said more than two sentences to her."

"Ah," Lois said knowingly. "I saw that look on your face. I've never seen you look like that before."

Seb unfolded his arms and stood aside. "Get out of here," he said. "And remember, I'm not leaving the shop until I get the call that you're OK."

Lois gave him a final hug and kiss and walked out of the shop.

Seb locked the door and leant against the counter, deep in thought. Chris thought he was nice. That was a start.

And he'd arranged to have breakfast with her—alone.

His phone shrilled through the stillness, and he picked it up. "Sebastian Stone," he said.

"Seb, it's me."

"Are you all right, Lois?"

"Yes. I'm safe. And I'm with someone who will keep me safe."

"You're going to stay with them?"

"Yes."

"OK. G'night, Lois."

"G'night, Seb. And thank you."

Seb replaced the phone, his mind whirling.

He had promised Lois he wouldn't try to figure out why she needed the opal… and he wouldn't.

But a man couldn't help what he noticed…

* * *

Lois closed her eyes as heaviness assaulted them. She was determined not to fall asleep. Clutched tightly in her hand was the precious green opal. Not for anything was she going to risk losing it.

Clark's voice came above the whistling of the air as they flew east over the United States. "We're nearly back in Smallville," he said.

She opened her eyes and smiled up at him.

"Are you getting tired?" he asked.

"No," she said. "But it was nice to close my eyes for a few moments."

"We should be finished with this soon. Then I'll take you to Perry's fishing shack, and you can sleep."

Lois slapped at his chest. "If you think for one moment that I'll be sleeping, you are in for a shock, big guy."

Clark grinned. "OK, hold on for landing."

They dropped next to the back door of the farmhouse and went into the kitchen. Martha was working at the sewing machine on the kitchen table. She looked up and smiled her welcome. “Almost done,” she said. “I’ve altered some of Clark’s old clothes.”

Lois unfurled her fingers. Her palm was marked where the ridges of the opal had embedded in her skin as she had clutched it so tightly.

Martha stood from the table and examined the opal in Lois’s palm. “That looks exactly like…”

“Yeah,” Lois said. She gave it to Clark. “Do you remember the shape of the green rock?”

Her husband nodded. He looked around the kitchen. “I should do this outside. Stay in here, just in case there are flying shards.”

Lois and Martha went to the kitchen window and watched as Clark held the opal at arm’s length and began shaping it with his eyes.

“Who has the green rock?” Martha asked quietly.

“Mayson Drake.”

Martha groaned. “Oh, no.”

“Don’t worry,” Lois said. “She won’t have it for much longer.”

“What is it that Clark has? When I first saw it, I thought it was the green rock, except I knew you would never bring that near Clark.”

“That is a prime piece of Australian opal,” Lois said. “A friend of mine is a jeweller, and when he showed me some rough opal, my first thought was how much it looked like the green rock that I’d seen on the television when Trask showed off his collection.”

“You’re going to swap it? For Mayson’s?”

“Yes.”

“Why not just take the piece she has? Why bother swapping?”

Lois looked at her mother-in-law. “Because having what she thinks is green rock will keep Mayson occupied for weeks,” Lois said. “That means she won’t have the time or the inclination to try to seduce my husband.”

Martha smiled. “Knowing how Clark feels about you, there’s no chance of anyone else seducing him.”

“I know,” Lois said. “But that woman grates on me.” She looked back to where Clark was still whittling the opal with heat from his eyes. “Did he tell you she tried to ambush him in his own bed?”

“Yes, he did.”

With some difficulty, Lois pushed aside her lingering annoyance. “If the green rock disappears within a few hours of the wedding, Mayson is going to assume it was us who took it.”

“And if she thought that? What could she do?”

“She could start taking more notice of Superman. She might keep track of his appearances. She might notice that they line up with Clark’s disappearances. The difficulty in living two lives is when somebody looks too closely. We definitely don’t want Mayson doing that. If we swap the rock, by the time she knows for sure that it’s not working, she’ll still have a lot of possibilities to work through before she concludes that the piece she had was stolen.”

“What if she gets it tested and discovers it’s *Australian* opal? Could that lead to Lois Lane?”

“I doubt it,” Lois said. “And anyway, I don’t think Mayson would be willing to let anyone else get hold of it.”

“That’s true,” Martha said. “I assume you’re the one who’s going to get it and wrap it in the lead? Clark couldn’t do it.”

“That’s right. And that’s why I need to look like a boy.”

Martha nodded thoughtfully. “So Lois Lane is in Sydney. Ultra Woman is on her honeymoon. If anyone sees an unknown male entering the apartment building, he’ll be the prime suspect… assuming anyone even remembers him when Mayson finally starts asking questions.”

“Exactly,” Lois said with a grin. “And Mayson Drake will be the proud possessor of a piece of Australian opal—beautiful, probably worth a fortune, but absolutely harmless to handsome aliens.”

“How are you going to get into her apartment?”

“Probably the same way she keeps getting into Clark’s,” Lois said. “I’ll pick the lock.”

Martha chuckled.

Lois grinned suddenly. “I’ve already told Clark he doesn’t have to watch that part if he doesn’t want to. I’m sure he’s not comfortable with breaking and entering even in these circumstances.”

“What did he say?” Martha asked with a wide grin.

“Nothing, but I could see in his face that he wasn’t happy with the idea.” Lois laughed. “And then he said that nothing was going to induce him to take his eyes from me, no matter what laws I break.”

The two women were still laughing when the door opened, and Clark stepped in. He held out the piece of opal.

It was still rough in places, but it had been skilfully shaped. “How’s this?” he said.

“I haven’t seen Mayson’s piece,” Lois replied as she moved to him and took the opal from his hand. It was still warm. “Are you confident?”

“Yeah,” Clark said. “The colouring is slightly different, and the markings aren’t identical, but unless she’s spent a lot of time studying it, I don’t think she’ll notice.” He looked up hopefully. “And if she does, there’s always the chance she’ll think that because it’s of alien origin, it might change over time.”

“I guess it’s time to take back what’s yours,” Lois said.

“I’ll help you with the disguise,” Martha offered. “It’s all ready.”

Lois followed Martha up the stairs. “From Lois Lane to Ultra Woman to generic young American male,” Lois muttered. “And all in one night.”

Part 49

Clark landed on top of the apartment building in Metropolis where Mayson Drake lived.

He stood for a moment, waiting. There was no rush of pain, no searing agony through his chest, no dizziness. Looking across the city, he focussed on the far tower of the Lexor Hotel. He located the thirty-fifth floor and zoomed in on the honeymoon suite.

The building grew a little shimmery, but he wasn’t able to x-ray through the walls to see inside.

Dropping his head, he tried to look past his feet and through the concrete. Nothing.

It seemed he was close enough to the green rock for it to affect his vision, but not close enough to cause him pain or, he hoped, disable him. He checked the door down into the building and discovered it was unlocked. With two quick steps, he leapt up, and somewhat to his relief, was able to shoot effortlessly into the air.

Hovering high above Metropolis, Clark located the Daily Planet from amongst the array of matchbox-sized buildings. His efforts to see through the walls proved unfruitful, so he drifted sideways and instead looked through the huge windows set high above the newsroom. Mayson was at her desk.

He turned west, hoping his brief encounter with the green rock wouldn’t impede the plan. He needed to collect Lois and make the switch before Mayson even thought about returning to her apartment. He was able to fly to Smallville at normal speed, and it was only a few moments later that he landed in his parents’ backyard.

He was greeted by a person whose dark hair was hidden under one of his old baseball caps. Her lower cheeks had a slight dusting of something dark - just enough to suggest the beginnings of facial growth. She was dressed in a pair of his jeans from at least ten years ago and a shirt of the same vintage. Despite his mother’s alterations, the clothes hung loosely enough to hide any definitive hint of the body shape they covered.

“What are you staring at, big guy?” Lois said with a grin.

“You’ve actually managed to camouflage most of your femininity,” Clark said with amazement. “I didn’t think it would be possible.”

“Amazing what you can do with some binding,” she said lightly.

“Binding?”

She gestured to her chest. “Yeah, you know, binding.”

Her meaning hit him between the eyes. “Oh, binding,” he faltered. “Isn’t that… uncomfortable?”

“Well, I wouldn’t choose to be bound like a mummy for no reason,” she returned. “But it’s OK for now.”

Clark figured he should get off this subject and back onto the real reason why Lois had squeezed her very fetching curves into stringent masculine lines. “I landed on top of Mayson’s building,” he said.

“And? Anything?”

“Yeah. My x-ray vision was affected. I couldn’t see through the walls.”

“Any pain?”

“No. But Lois, if I can’t see through the walls, I can’t watch you when you’re in Mayson’s apartment, which means I can’t protect you.”

“Is your vision working now?” She grinned cheekily. “You could check out the binding—see if it’s secure enough.”

Clark figured two could play that game. He fixed his eyes on her… just a little below her chin. He awaited her response. When none came, he looked into her face. She was regarding him with a wide grin.

“Well?” she said. “How are they?”

Clark slowly shook his head, secretly loving her teasing. It was true that two could play the game, but she could definitely play it better. “I didn’t look,” he admitted. “I didn’t even try to.”

With a chuckle, Lois put her hands on his cheeks and turned his face towards the farmhouse. “Can you see your mom and dad?” she asked.

"Yeah," he replied. "They're sitting at the table, drinking coffee."

Lois didn't respond immediately. Instead, she stared at him with a knowing smile, making him sure she was thinking about him thinking about her binding. "Did you try to locate Mayson?" she said.

She was going to let him get away with not checking under her… well, his shirt. Clark wasn't sure if he were relieved or disappointed. "On the way back, I hovered above the Daily Planet building and looked through the windows; Mayson was at her desk," he replied.

"Good," Lois said. "Let's go and get this done."

Clark hesitated, stalled by his concerns about the few minutes when Lois would be out of his sight. "Are you sure you'll be able to open her locks?" he asked. "You've never seen them before. Promise me that if there are any problems, you'll come straight back to me."

"I'm sure I'll be able to get in," Lois said.

"But Metropolis is a big city. Her locks are probably—"

"You can listen to my heartbeat," she said with a reassuring pat to his arm. "Then you'll know I'm safe."

"Yeah… but, I agreed to this thinking you would never be out of my sight."

Lois grinned. She didn't look worried at all. "We don't have the time to argue," she reminded him. "Do you need some encouragement to see things my way?"

The look on her face left him with no doubts about the form of encouragement she was offering.

Clark conceded. "Not yet," he said, grinning despite his worries. "But once we've given Mayson her little gift of Australian opal and thrown the green rock into space, you can give me all the encouragement you want."

Her eyes gleamed. "Now that's an offer I'm going to keep you to," she said. She slipped her wedding and engagement rings from her finger and offered them to him. "Could you hold these for me, please? I don't think they quite work with my current outfit."

He took them and deposited them safely in his wallet. As he did, Martha and Jonathan came out of the farmhouse, and Lois and Clark turned to them. "Everything OK?" his mom asked, her face creased a little with lingering concern.

"Everything's fine," Clark assured her.

Jonathan gave Lois a thin sheet of grey lead and a pair of plastic gloves that were long enough to reach her elbows. "Just wrap the green rock securely in this," he said, pointing to the lead.

Lois tested it and discovered it was soft and malleable. Then she inspected the gloves and shot her father-in-law a question.

"No fingerprints," he explained.

"What do you use them for?"

"Birthing calves."

Lois examined the gloves more closely, clearly trying to hide her reservations.

Jonathan laughed. "They're disposable," he said. "Those ones haven't been used."

"Oh," Lois said with obvious relief. "Thanks."

Martha hugged her son and his wife. "Do you have the opal?" she asked Lois.

Lois patted the left pocket of the jeans she was wearing. "All safe in here," she said. "And the lock-picking tools are in the other pocket."

"If we don't hear anything, we'll assume it went well," Jonathan said.

"Bye, Mom. Bye, Dad." Clark picked up his wife and with a final smile for his parents, lifted from the Smallville soil.

* * *

A few minutes later, they landed on the top of Mayson's apartment building.

Lois slid from Clark and glanced into his face, wishing there was a way to alleviate his apprehension. "Mayson was at her desk five minutes ago," she reminded him. "I won't be in any danger."

Clark's smile was weak and did nothing to erase the anxiety from his face.

Lois put on the plastic gloves and pulled the sleeves of the shirt to her wrists. "I'll get the green rock, you can pitch it into space, and we'll get back to our honeymoon," she said. She gave Clark a quick kiss, thrust her hands into her pockets, and ran down the stairs before he could protest.

He had given her clear instructions regarding the location of Mayson's apartment. Lois saw only one person on the way to Mayson's door, and he didn't even give her a second glance.

Less than a minute after leaving Clark, Lois poked the first of her tools into the keyhole. She worked methodically through the series of three locks and then pushed open the door. She closed it carefully and secured one of the locks.

Moving silently, she crept into Mayson's bedroom and opened the door of the closet. She removed the shoes one

pair at a time, placing them in order. There was a small circular hole in the floor, and at this distance, the outline of the trapdoor was clearly visible. She slipped her gloved finger into the hole and the door opened easily. Inside was an old book, just as Clark had said.

Lois lifted the book out and flipped it open.

And there it was—the innocuous-looking pebble that held the only known means to overpower Superman. She reached into the gouged-out pages and removed the rock from its hiding place.

With her other hand, Lois took the opal from her pocket, muttering, "Opal left… opal left." She paused a moment to hold up the two pieces and marvel at Clark's skill and memory for detail. The opal was slightly smaller, and it had a couple of tiny dots of aqua dappled in the midst of the almost pure green. But without direct comparison, the minute differences were going to be almost impossible to detect.

Very soon, the green rock would be hurtling through space and comparison would no longer be possible.

Lois placed the stone from her left hand into the nest of soft, old paper and then securely wrapped the treacherous green rock in the lead sheeting. She shoved the grey bundle in her pocket, closed the book, and positioned it in the subfloor space exactly as she had found it. Next, she closed the trapdoor and meticulously realigned the shoes, one pair at a time.

Having completed the exchange, every instinct was to turn and run back to Clark, but Lois forced herself to pause. She carefully scanned the whole area, searching for any sign of her presence. Finding nothing, she slipped her hand into her pocket and ran her fingers along her tools. Once they were all accounted for, she quietly closed the closet door.

A moment later, she peered into the corridor and checked in both directions. No one was in sight, and half a minute later, she skipped up the stairs, already thinking ahead to the long-awaited honeymoon that suddenly seemed within touching distance.

As she stepped onto the roof, relief flooded Clark's face. She'd been gone less than five minutes, but it was obvious it had seemed like an eternity to her husband. Lois ran to him and flung herself into his eager embrace.

"Are you all right?" he asked as his arms closed around her.

"I am feeling great," she said. She reached into her pocket and retrieved the grey bundle.

Clark held out his hand for the rock.

Lois smiled as she gave him the small grey package. "I'll wait here."

Clark shot up faster than her eyes could follow. Lois removed Jonathan's gloves and bunched them in her pocket as she scrutinised the Metropolis cityscape. One building towered above the rest. Emblazoned across the top was the word 'LEXOR'. She grinned. It couldn't have been more ostentatious if it had had a neon sign proclaiming, 'My owner has too much money'.

Clark landed next to her, and despite expecting him, Lois jumped. "Everything OK?" she asked.

He smiled and took her into his arms, holding their bodies close. "Everything is super," he said. "We'll go back to the farm, you can get changed, and then—"

Lois shook her head decisively. "No way, big guy," she said firmly.

Clark's eyebrows dipped. "No way?" he asked.

"No way are we taking any more detours or accepting any more interruptions." Lois took a masterful grip of his tee shirt. "We are going directly to Perry's hut, and you are going to take off this binding that is killing me and"—she smiled at him—"after that…"

Her husband didn't wait for further enlightenment. He swept her into his arms and flew north.

* * *

Clark landed with Lois at the back door of Perry's fishing shack. He'd been right about it being private. It was built atop a small rise, nestled into a clearing surrounded by a screen of tall trees.

"We could be the only people on Earth," Lois said as she surveyed the scenery.

"That sounds perfect to me," Clark replied as he flipped back the mat and uncovered the key. He unlocked the door and stood back for his bride to enter. She smiled as she passed him—a smile that smouldered with promise. He followed her in and locked the door.

The fishing shack consisted of a large room with three comfortable chairs dotted around a fireplace. The kitchen was sparse but orderly. Off to the side was a smaller room that, as Clark discovered when he lowered his glasses, contained a bed and two small bedside tables.

They were here. Alone. Together. Free. Married.

Clark took Lois into his arms, hardly able to believe that he could kiss her without having to continually restrain himself; there were no longer any barriers to stop them finishing what they started.

He ran his fingers across her forehead, brushing away a lock of hair that had escaped from under the baseball cap. “Thank you for what you did for me today,” he said gravely.

“Marrying you?” she said with a smile.

“That… and getting rid of the green rock. I’m the strongest man on Earth, but you did something for me today that I couldn’t do for myself.”

Lois snuggled into his neck and sighed with contentment.

“You must be tired,” he said quietly.

“I am,” she agreed. “And the thought of a bed is just sublime.” She lifted her head and winked lasciviously at him. “But I have a much better idea than sleeping.”

“Really?” he teased. “I thought we’d come here to sleep.”

She lifted her eyebrows. “Don’t worry, big guy,” she said. “Once I start kissing you for real, I’m sure you’ll catch on quickly.”

He grinned. “Ah… do you need anything?”

Clark had meant his question in a practical sense, but from the response on her face, he knew the possible replies whirling through her mind had little to do with practicalities. He was surprised when she said, “Does this place have a bathroom?”

“Yeah,” he said, gesturing to the bedroom. “There’s one through here.” He put his hand on her back and guided her forward.

Once there, Lois kept going towards the far door. “I need to get this stuff off my face,” she said.

“What is it?” Clark asked. “Soot?”

She nodded. “It was your mom’s idea.” Lois went into the bathroom and shut the door.

Clark x-rayed through the closet doors and discovered neatly folded linens. He took down the sheets and blankets and began making the bed and didn’t even bother trying not to think about being there with Lois.

* * *

Lois hunted through the little cabinet, hoping Perry’s wife had come to his fishing hut at least once. She saw a small plastic bottle and grabbed it gleefully. It was moisturising soap. She used it to scrub her face. Further rummaging unearthed some eye shadow and blusher. There was no lipstick, but Lois figured Clark would be quite happy to kiss her unadorned lips.

She applied small amounts of the makeup and combed her hair. It was crinkled from having been crammed under the cap, but there was no way to fix it quickly. Again, she doubted Clark would be too perturbed by the condition of her hair.

A glance into the mirror reminded her of the ill-fitting nature of the clothes she wore. They had served a purpose - to hide her body shape. But now, it was the exact opposite effect that she wanted.

Should she send Clark to collect the bag she had left at the farm?

Lois giggled suddenly as another thought beat a path through her brain cells. What if she were to take off Clark’s clothes and simply step into the bedroom stark naked? Her laughter pealed around the bathroom as she imagined the stunned look on her husband’s face.

“Lois?”

The bafflement in Clark’s voice set off another string of giggles.

“Lois? Honey? Are you OK?”

She couldn’t do it. She was laughing too hard to be dexterous, and anyway, Clark was probably already wondering if exhaustion had rendered her hysterical. There was no need to confirm it.

Lois heaved in a steadying breath and drove her laughter away as she opened the bathroom door.

Clark stood from the bed. “Are you all right, honey?” he asked suspiciously.

“Yes,” she said as she clamped her lower lip to keep control of the giggles that pressed for release. “I’m fine.” She slipped her arms around his neck and buried her fingertips in his hair.

“What happened?”

“You wanna know the truth?”

Clark grinned at her jovial tone. “If you want to tell me.”

“I was thinking about how these clothes couldn’t be more different from what I’d planned, and then I figured one solution was to take them off and walk out naked.”

His eyebrows lifted, and a slow, wonderfully wicked smile appeared.

“Do you think you would’ve survived the shock?” Lois asked.

“If I didn’t, it would have been worth it.”

She chuckled as she continued to work her fingers through his hair. “Not true, big guy.”

Clark reached into his pocket and took out his wallet. He dug into it and brought out her rings. “You weren’t the only one thinking about what happens next,” he said.

"Although I'm not sure how my plans would have fitted if you'd followed your idea." He tossed the wallet on the little table next to the bed and rolled the rings between his thumb and fingers. "I didn't have the opportunity to say the vows I wrote for you."

"I figured you might not be up to remembering them."

"I don't think I would have," Clark admitted. "My head was pretty woozy."

"Are you feeling OK now?"

"Now?" he said with a glimmer of his smile. "Now I feel like I'm the luckiest man in the universe." Clark lifted her left elbow and unhooked her arm from his shoulder. He clasped her hand in his and positioned the rings at the end of her finger. "Lois," he said solemnly, "when I was a stranger… you welcomed me. When I was different… you accepted me. When I was alone… you loved me. I will always protect you and care for you. I will love you forever. I promise you my everlasting faithfulness. My heart belongs to you, every moment, every day, every year, my whole life long." He pushed the rings along her finger.

"Aww, Clark," she said, as tears welled in her eyes. "They are beautiful vows."

"I have a beautiful bride to inspire me."

Lois took his hand and slipped the ring from his finger. "Clark," she said, "everyone sees your physical strength, but very few see your heart. You've given me the privilege of knowing you, of seeing what motivates you, of understanding what drives you to use your gifts to make the world a better place. You are not defined by what you do, but why you do it. You are a fine man, full of goodness and unshakable integrity, and I am honoured to be your wife. I promise you my faithfulness and my never-ending love. I will love you always and support you in helping those who need your help."

She pushed the ring onto his finger for the second time in a few hours and smiled up at him.

His eyes were moist; his smile was jubilant.

"Now the wedding's over, you know what comes next, don't you?" Lois asked.

He nodded.

"Then kiss me," she said. "Kiss me like you've dreamed of kissing me."

* * *

This was really it. No more waiting. No more green rock. No cameras.

Just him and the woman he would love forever.

Clark reached down and found her lips. He started slowly, conducting a leisurely and deliberate exploration of her mouth before he gave in to the temptation to slide his tongue forward. His tongue met hers, and he felt the after-effects rumble though both of them.

She took her hands from his neck and slid them down his shoulders and along his arms. When she reached his forearms, she pushed downwards, moving his hands from her back to her butt.

He cupped his hands around the wonderful shape that he had admired from a distance on so many occasions. Even under the baggy jeans, she felt so rounded and curvy and intrinsically feminine.

Her hands lifted his arms, and he thought she wanted him to return to her back. Her little grunt of protest confused him at first. Then he realised that she wanted his hands under the shirt.

He dropped lower again and then slid his hands up the soft slopes of her back on either side of the valley of her spine. Her skin felt like silk—warm, luxurious silk. His thumbs ran into the binding, and he grasped a strand of it and tugged it free.

"Take it off," she murmured through a kiss.

The end of the binding was already starting to unravel. As he continued to kiss her extravagantly, Clark's hands worked to free her from the length of material. Soon, it dropped away from her body, and he threw it to the floor.

Lois broke from their kiss and smiled up at him. "Ahhh, that feels good," she said. "They'd had enough of being squished."

Clark's breath was coming too fast and shallow for him to reply.

Lois reached for the top of her shirt and undid two buttons. He thought she was going to continue, but instead she grasped the hem of his tee shirt. "May I?"

Clark took off his glasses and placed them on the little table beside the bed. He lifted his arms for her to peel the shirt from his upper body.

His view was still obstructed by the material when he heard her deep growl of approval. Once the shirt was past his head, he saw that she was ogling him with unconcealed appreciation.

"You are gorgeous," she breathed. She shook her head in wonder. "That is a magnificent chest."

Her open appreciation was great, but his skin was tingling for more than her visual attention. "Do you want to touch?" he asked shyly. "I'd really like you to."

She lifted her hand and rested it high on his chest. The side of her thumb scraped across his pectoral muscle.

Clark swayed—such was the power of her touch on his bare skin. Lois put both hands on his chest and pushed him backwards. He landed on the bed and lay there with his knees over the edge and his feet still on the floor.

Lois followed him, her knees straddling him at his waist and her hands perched on his collarbones. The shirt hung low, resting on his bare chest.

Clark fastened his eyes on her face.

She grinned. “You’re allowed to look,” she purred. “I know you want to.”

He slid his eyes down her face to the elegant slopes of her neck. Then, he went lower. “Lois,” he murmured. “You are beautiful.”

“You’d see better if you took off the shirt,” she said with a smile in her voice.

“It’s my shirt,” he reminded her. “We won’t need it again.” He clasped each panel of the shirt and, with a quick movement, tore it apart as buttons pinged across the room.

The shirt hit the floor, followed by the rest of Lois’s clothing. Clark’s clothing wasn’t long in joining them scattered around the room.

And on the bed, Lois and Clark discovered the joy of intimate love.

* * *

Lois sifted her fingers through Clark’s hair where his head lay on her shoulder.

He rose onto his elbows and looked down at her, his eyes bursting with questions and laced with hope. “Ah…” he said.

Lois smiled with satisfaction. “I’m not sure how you will ever better that,” she said. “But I’m looking forward to you trying.”

He grinned, though his questions lingered. “So… it was good?”

“Awww, Clark,” she said. “I have dreamed, I have hoped, but I couldn’t have imagined it would be that incredible.”

His grin widened.

“How about for you?” Lois asked.

“I have never been that close to anyone,” he said quietly. “Not physically. But it’s more than that. I feel like we were melded together, physically and emotionally, our souls, our bodies, our minds. I feel like we bonded in ways that can never be broken.”

“They can’t be broken,” she assured him. “Everything else may change, but what will never change is that you and I will be together.”

As she looked at him, a tear broke from his eye and rolled down his cheek.

And she understood.

This act was precious to both of them, but for him—a man who, deep in his psyche, never forgot he was different to everyone else—it spoke of acceptance and belonging on a level she could only glimpse.

She reached up and kissed the tear away.

* * *

Lois woke to the wholly wonderful sensation of Clark’s arms wrapped around her and her back tucked tight against his chest.

She sighed with overflowing happiness.

For a long time, she had wondered about her first experience of lovemaking. She’d hoped it would be good, but she had tried to be pragmatic enough to realise that the automatic perfection they portrayed in movies might not represent reality.

Yet, with Clark as her lover, it had been better than her most quixotic dreams.

Outside, the final dregs of daylight were fading fast. Lois lifted her head high enough to see the digital clock. It was twenty to eight.

That made it twenty to ten, Sunday morning in Sydney, where she was supposed to meet Chris for breakfast.

Except, she remembered with a smile, Seb was hoping she wouldn’t show up.

There was risk in them being together without her, but from what Lois had witnessed in Seb’s shop, they were going to be spending a lot of time together in the future anyway.

If Lois didn’t appear this morning, Chris would think Lois was with her lover—which was the truth.

Seb would think she’d feigned sickness.

If they compared what they knew, there were going to be questions asked that would be very difficult to answer.

Except neither Seb nor Chris pried into the business of others. Chris hadn’t needled her for information. Lois knew that she would have struggled to keep her curiosity under control had their positions been reversed.

And Seb… Seb had given her a valuable piece of opal and not demanded to know the truth about why she needed it.

She could trust both of them.

And hopefully, they would be more interested in each other than pondering her whereabouts.

Maybe one day, they would be where she and Clark were now.

Lois chuckled. Not in the Adirondacks exactly but waking up together with the same sense of joyful happiness that was awash in her as she lay in the haven of her husband's arms.

She wriggled further up the bed, reached for her mobile phone, and saw with relief that she had some network. She quickly punched out a text message.

'Sorry, can't make breakfast, meet you in the hotel room at 11:30.'

She sent the text, hoping that if Chris felt any initial disappointment, it would be quickly wiped away by the prospect of breakfast alone with Seb.

Behind her, Clark moved, and she felt his mouth begin to kiss behind her ear. "Good morning, big guy," she said.

He murmured a greeting but didn't stop kissing her.

She twisted in his arms, faced him, and smiled. "You look exactly how a groom should on the morning after his wedding," she said.

"Insatiable?" he guessed with a wide grin.

"I was going to say gorgeous and happy, but I'll take 'insatiable'."

Clark kissed her mouth, the message moving swiftly from 'Good morning' to 'I have a great idea'.

Part 50

Chris crossed the ferry terminal at Darling Harbour and looked nervously ahead to the cafe where she and Lois had agreed to meet. The morning chill hung sharply on the breeze that wafted off the water. Very few diners had braved the outside tables, but one of their sparse number was particularly conspicuous, courtesy of his bright blue and orange shirt.

Chris had received Lois's message with mixed feelings. There was, she had to admit, a small flicker of excitement at the thought of having breakfast alone with Seb Wilton.

But it was in danger of being snuffed out by her uneasiness. What if Seb thought she'd asked Lois to skip the planned breakfast? He must have more female interest than he knew what to do with. And following the exhibition last night, he was going to become even more sought-after in Sydney's fashionable circles. Chris knew she could never compete with that. Once he realised Lois wasn't coming, he would probably make a polite excuse and leave quickly.

The figure in the loud shirt turned suddenly and saw her. He leapt from the seat, and Chris's suspicions were confirmed—it was Seb, although his cut-off jeans and bright yellow thongs made him look very different to the man she'd met yesterday who'd been wearing a soft white shirt and semiformal trousers. Her heart began to beat a little faster.

Seb gave a friendly wave and hurried to meet her. "Hi, Chris," he said, smiling broadly. He pushed his designer sunglasses into his blond hair, and his stunningly blue eyes crashed into hers.

"Hi, Seb," Chris said.

Back at the table, he pulled out a chair for her. "Sit down," he offered, without ever looking around for Lois.

Once Chris was seated, Seb handed her a menu. "What would you like to drink?" he asked.

She couldn't help glancing to the half-drunk chocolate milkshake in front of Seb.

"Ah, that," he said, looking like a mischievous schoolboy who'd been caught committing a minor misdemeanour. "Lois always has a go at me because I eat like a teenager, but I simply can't get over my love of chocolate milkshakes."

He'd mentioned Lois, but he didn't seem puzzled by her non-appearance. Did he know about the footballer? Had Lois rung him to say she wouldn't be coming? If Seb had known beforehand that Lois wasn't going to be at breakfast, why had he come? "I'd like orange juice, please," Chris said.

He nodded to a waitress and gave Chris's order.

"You look like you've been here awhile," she noted.

"Yeah. I didn't want to keep you waiting."

Was that a singular 'you' or a plural 'you'? He perused the menu, and Chris grasped the chance to study him. He looked remarkably good for someone who'd probably had a late night. She wondered what time he'd got to bed… and if he'd been alone.

That last thought had sprung uninvited, and Chris pushed it away quickly. She had no business even wondering about such things.

What could they talk about?

If she asked about his job or the exhibition, it could sound as if she were prying into his financial status.

She didn't need to ask to know that he was seriously wealthy.

And in counterpoint, she didn't need to ask to know he was a little on edge. Who could blame him? Having breakfast with a woman he'd met once and would almost certainly never meet again could hardly be his ideal Sunday morning after a big night with Sydney's elite. Chris decided to finish her juice and then make an excuse and leave.

But while she waited for her drink, she might as well find out a bit more about the most interesting man she'd met in a long time. "What else do you have a love for?" she asked. "Other than chocolate milkshakes?"

Her words were out before she realised that they came uncomfortably close to flirting. Seb, however, seemed to take her words at face value. "My family," he said. "The Hawthorn Football Club, surfing, jewellery"—he looked down, somewhat abashed—"comics." Then his grin reappeared as he looked up. "What about you?"

"Some are the same," she said. "My family—my dad and three brothers—Hawthorn, footy, my career."

"You're a footy journalist."

"Yeah. Did Lois tell you?"

"No," Seb said. "I looked it up on the 'net. I read some of your stories." He gave her a shy smile. "Sorry if I intruded."

"It's all right," Chris said, wondering when he'd had the time to research her stories. The waitress brought the orange juice and stood, pen and pad poised, waiting to take their order.

"Sorry," Seb said with a boyish grin. "We haven't decided yet." Actually, Chris hadn't read one word from the menu. The waitress melted away, and Seb returned his attention to Chris. "You're an Adelaide girl," he said. "And you worked for the Adelaide Advertiser before landing the position at the Herald Sun."

Chris couldn't help grinning. There was something endearing about Seb Wilton searching the Internet for her stories. Endearing *and* exciting. "That's true," she said.

Seb laughed—a little self-consciously, she thought—and raised his hands. "Sorry," he said. "I must sound like a crazed stalker. I don't know anything about you other than professionally."

Suddenly, Chris felt daring. "What would you like to know?" she asked.

He didn't seem fazed by her question. "Are you involved with anyone?"

Chris sucked in a breath that her lungs didn't seem to want to accept. "No."

Seb absently stirred his milkshake and then looked up at her. "I have another confession," he said.

"Oh?" she said as horrible possibilities flooded her mind.

He nodded. "I asked Lois if she would mind not joining us for breakfast."

Chris's heart began to race. "Why?" she asked quietly.

"Because I wanted the chance to be alone with you."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted to ask how you would feel about spending a day with me. If I came to Melbourne on your next day off, would you go out with me? A movie? Or lunch somewhere nice? Or anything else you'd like to do?"

His blue eyes were deep with earnestness. Either acting was another of his talents, or he actually cared a lot about her answer. "I…"

"It's OK," he said quickly. "You don't have to answer now. But would you think about it? Please?"

"I have just come out of a relationship," Chris said.

"If you need time, I'm willing to wait."

"No," she said. "I just thought you should know."

"Could you tell me what happened?" Seb said with an understanding smile. "Or not, if you don't want to."

Now that they had negotiated the initial awkwardness, it seemed easy to talk to Seb. "He dumped me," Chris said. "He found someone he liked better."

Seb's mouth fell open. "*He* dumped you?" he gasped.

Chris nodded. Then she smiled. "But I'm OK now." It was true. Yesterday, in the deepest recesses of her heart, she hadn't been OK. Today, she was.

"So?" Seb asked. "A date?"

Chris snatched at the one straw she knew would save her from being swept away by his charm. "Can I ask you something personal?"

He nodded.

"When was the last time you were drunk?"

"I was seventeen," he said without hesitation. "I had just been to the funeral of my best mate who had OD'd. I left the funeral and headed to a pub, and I got in despite being underage. A couple of hours later, the cops found me stumbling around trying to find my way home. They took me to the cop shop, locked me in a cell for a few hours, and then an old sergeant came in with a big supply of aspirin and an even bigger serve of common sense."

"Did he charge you?"

"No. He didn't ask my age, although the only ID I had was my learner's permit, so he must've known I was underage."

"What did he tell you?"

"That I wasn't man enough to handle drink, and I should stay away from it until I had grown up enough to control it without it controlling me."

There was nothing in Seb's face to suggest anything other than he was relating a story—no false bravado, no bitterness at the cop, no embarrassment.

"I asked you when was the last time you were drunk," Chris said. "Not the first."

"They are one and the same," Seb said. "It was a stupid thing to do, no doubt, but I haven't done it since. I do enjoy a drink, but I don't get drunk. If you don't believe me, you could ask Lois."

"I believe you."

He smiled. "Why is it important to you?"

"Because a drunk driver killed my mother."

Seb's face creased with sympathy so genuine it felt like a hug to her soul. "Aw, Chris," he said. "I am so sorry."

"It was two years ago."

"You wouldn't date someone with a drinking problem?"

She shook her head. "I couldn't… not after… And I figured if alcohol is a big part of your life, there is no point in wasting each other's time."

"Can I ask you a question?"

"OK."

"Do you use drugs?"

Chris's first reaction was to assume it was a joke, but she quickly realised from the solemnity of his face that he was deadly serious. "No," she said.

Seb's smile dawned like a fresh new morning. "Good," he said. "Because I don't think I could date someone who used drugs."

"Because of your mate?" she asked. "The one whose funeral you went to?"

He nodded, and she could see there was a tiny part of him that still mourned.

"I saw the posters in your shop."

Seb shrugged. "I do what I can." Then he shook off his sombreness with a bright smile. "So," he said, "about the date…"

Chris decided swiftly. "I would love to go out with you," she said. "Tuesday is my day off."

He grinned widely. "I'll be there," he said. "Thank you."

Their eyes met, and Chris felt as if she could stare into those blue eyes forever. The moment stretched and stretched… Someone had to speak. She grabbed a stray thought from the haziness of her mind. "I guess it wasn't too hard to convince Lois not to come to breakfast?"

"No. She's a sweetheart." Seb laughed. "I know I should feel guilty about commandeering you and leaving her to eat a lonesome breakfast… but I don't."

Chris opened her mouth to voice her doubts that Lois would be eating alone, doubts that Lois would even be eating, but she snapped it shut. She smiled, hoping to cover that she had almost spoken.

Seb looked at her questioningly.

"What are you going to order?" Chris asked.

Without so much as a glance at the menu, Seb replied, "Pancakes with bananas and caramel sauce and ice cream."

Chris laughed. "With hundreds and thousands on top?" she teased.

Seb pointed at her, his face split to a wide grin. "Good idea," he said.

"I suppose you still eat fairy bread?" Chris said, trying to regard him with prim disapproval.

Seb saw through her act immediately. "Of course," he said with a wink. "Don't you?"

* * *

Clark tore away from his very deep connection with Lois's mouth and shot her a look of abject misery. "I can hear footsteps," he said.

He was gone in an instant, and seconds later, Lois heard the key turning in the lock of the hotel room she was supposed to have shared with Chris.

Her friend walked in—actually, more like floated in.

She looked exactly how Lois felt.

Perhaps not exactly, because Lois hadn't *shared* breakfast with her man. A more apt description would be that she'd had him *for* breakfast.

"Good morning, Lois," Chris said brightly.

Lois chuckled. "You don't look particularly devastated that I missed breakfast."

Chris smiled. “It was fun,” she said. Her eyebrows narrowed slightly. “Do you know that Seb still eats fairy bread?”

“And party pies and chicken nuggets, and he drinks red cordial.” Lois grinned. “And don’t ever let him near a bag of Fantales. Not only does he eat the entire bagful, he tries to read the wrapper with his mouth full and his teeth stuck together.”

Both women laughed, and then Chris searched Lois’s face. “You look like you had a wonderful time, too.”

Lois knew she wouldn’t be able to mask her joy. “I had the most amazing time of my life,” she said.

Chris grinned. “I guess that’s one way to overcome the pain of losing a final.”

Lois sobered. It was true she’d had a love-filled night that was even better than her dreams, but it was also true that Chris thought they were talking about a different person and a different place. However, if Lois were to say, “I made hot and steamy love in a fishing shack in the Adirondacks with a man you might have seen dressed in blue tights and a red cape,” well… that was going to lead to problems. “We should get out of here,” Lois said. “Our plane flies out in less than two hours.”

Chris flipped open her suitcase and paused. “Lois,” she said, “thanks for coming to Sydney with me.”

“Thanks for inviting me.”

“Despite the disappointment of losing, I had an unforgettable weekend.”

“Me, too.”

They shared a smile and fell to the task of packing their bags.

* * *

Lois bought a *Herald Sun* at Sydney Airport, and both she and Chris spent the flight getting up to speed with the first weekend of the finals.

From Tullamarine Airport, they shared a taxi. Lois got out at Windy Hill—Essendon’s home ground—and Chris continued to the MCG. where she was to do the injury round-up following the North Melbourne-Geelong final that afternoon.

Lois went to the three Melbourne clubs—Essendon, Carlton, and Hawthorn—who had played and lost finals that weekend. All had been defeated by interstate clubs. Lois sighed as she got off the train at Glenferrie station. The AFL’s resolve that the interstate clubs would be successful hadn’t done the Victorian clubs any favours at all.

A sombre mood hung over Glenferrie Oval. The players had already finished their recovery session, and most had left—probably to begin Mad Monday, despite it only being Sunday.

Lois had coffee with Ron in the Social Club, and after some general comments about the game and Jason Dunstall’s knee injury, she told him she’d seen Seb the previous evening.

“I rang him this morning to ask about the exhibition,” Ron said, grinning. “But he didn’t answer, the lazy bludger. He was probably still asleep.”

“What time did you ring?” Lois asked.

“A bit before ten. I had to be here at ten for the recovery session.”

Lois smiled inwardly. She knew why Seb hadn’t answered his phone, and it had nothing to do with him being asleep.

“What are you smiling about?” Ron asked, his face alight with amusement. “Are you thinking about that Yank of yours?”

“No,” Lois replied honestly. “I was thinking that we might be seeing a bit more of Seb around here now.”

“Yeah,” Ron agreed. “We’ve hardly seen him in months. He’s been so busy preparing for the exhibition.”

Lois drained her cup and stood. “I have to get back to the newsroom,” she told Ron. “I have a story to write.”

He stood. “When will you be seeing Clark again?”

“He’s coming for the vote meeting.”

Ron’s cheery countenance fell. “Lois,” he said, “whatever happens at the vote, you know you’ll always be like a daughter to Barb and me?”

Lois smiled and felt a surge of affection for the big Hawthorn trainer. “And you’ll always be like parents to me,” she replied.

Ron gave her a hearty hug, and with his arm across her shoulder, they walked out of the Social Club together.

* * *

“Hey, Flinders,” Banjo said. “Sorry about the Hawks.”

Lois paused on her way to her desk. “Sorry about your Bombers, Banjo. It wasn’t a great weekend for Victorian football.”

“No,” he said. “How’s it going at Operation Payback?”

She shrugged. “I still think Melbourne will vote ‘yes’. I still don’t know how we’ll vote.”

Gazza came over. “Is Rubber coming for the vote?”

“Yeah,” Lois said. “He arrives on Sunday.”

“Will he be staying for the rest of the finals?” Banjo asked. “Will he be here for the Brownlow Medal?”

Gazza winked at Lois. “That could be fun, hey, Flinders? You could frock up, and Rubber could get out his tux. I reckon the pair of you would scrub up quite nicely.”

Lois shook her head. “He’ll only be here for a couple of days.”

“Pity,” Banjo said. “Who’j’think will win the Brownlow?”

“A lot of good judges think Chris Grant is a chance.”

“What about Hird? He’s had a great season.”

“I reckon Hocking from Geelong is in with a show.”

“Salmon,” Lois said.

Gazza and Banjo stared at her. “Salmon?” Banjo echoed with disbelief.

She nodded, unperturbed by their reaction. “The Big Fish has had a great year. And he’s a ruckman, so he’s under the umpires’ eye all the time.”

Gazza shook his head. “It won’t be Salmon. He won’t even be top ten.”

Bluey joined the group. “Loewe and Burke’ll take votes off each other,” he said. “I can’t see either of them winning.”

“Loewe would have to poll better’an Burke.”

“Burke won’t get many threes.”

“No, but he’ll poll in a lot of games.”

“You need the threes to take home Charlie.”

“I have one name for you,” Gazza said with a broad grin. “McKernan.”

“Oooooohhh,” Banjo and Bluey said in unison.

“Wouldn’t that set the cat amongst the pigeons?” Gazza said gleefully.

“He won’t get invited,” Lois said. “That would be too embarrassing for the AFL.” With a parting smile, she reluctantly left the discussion. There was a story to write up, and she was impatient to get home and—emergencies permitting—continue her honeymoon.

As she turned on her computer, Lois sighed. She missed the footy talk—missed the endless conjecture, missed the arguments, and the speculation, and the rumours, and the friendly sparring. She missed pitting her wits and her knowledge against the guys at the paper—missed the simple enjoyment of being completely immersed in the world of footy.

Did *anyone* talk footy in Metropolis?

Somehow, Lois doubted it.

* * *

Lois unlocked her door, and as she stepped into her unit, she caught a whiff of Clark’s cologne. Before she had even closed the door behind her, his arms were crushing her against his chest, and his mouth was awakening her most vivid memories of their wedding night.

She kicked at the door and heard it slam shut. Without ever disrupting his frantic kisses, Clark lifted her, flew into the bedroom, and landed them on her bed, his hands already pulling at her clothing.

* * *

Clark grinned at her—his expression perfectly mirroring her feelings. “Hi,” he said quietly.

“Hi, yourself,” Lois said. “Do you make a habit of lying in wait for a woman to return home so you can literally sweep her off her feet and into bed for a hot session of lovemaking before even so much as a ‘hello’?”

Clark grinned wider. “Never done it before in my life,” he admitted airily. “But having done it once, I fully intend to do it again… repeatedly.” His hand glided down her back. “And you didn’t seem to have too many objections.”

“I didn’t have any objections,” Lois said as she skimmed her fingers across his bare chest. “That was the best ‘welcome home’ I have ever received.”

He sighed. “Lois, honey,” he said, his voice suddenly serious. “I thought it was tough being away from you before. Now, it’s torturous.”

She chuckled. “But at least being together isn’t torturous anymore.”

“No,” he said. “Being together is—well, I really like the together bit.”

She wriggled further onto his chest so eye contact was easier. “Have you seen the reports of the wedding in the *Star*? Were there photos? Was anything said about the honeymoon?”

“The afternoon edition carried a front-page photograph, and Linda King wrote a glowing piece describing everything in great detail.”

“Everything?”

Clark wrinkled his brow. “Not everything. She didn’t mention my collapse. And she didn’t include any reference to Mayson Drake.”

“Really? Maybe she didn’t want to admit that a Planet reporter was at the wedding. Maybe all she cared about was that the wedding be portrayed as a huge success. *Her* success.”

“Maybe what she really wanted was honeymoon photos that revealed the identity of the bride and groom,” Clark said resentfully.

Lois grinned at Clark’s unusually indignant tone. “But she didn’t get them,” she said.

“Thanks to Perry.”

“Forget Linda,” Lois soothed. “She’s not important.”

“I think I would have checked for cameras,” Clark said. “It would have been stupid not to.”

Lois didn’t want to dwell on Linda King and her plans to splash intimate and revelatory photos across her cheap rag. “What about the Planet? Any reference to the wedding?”

“Perry wrote an editorial saying that Superman’s decision to marry was cause for celebration because it showed he had made Earth his permanent home.”

“What about Mayson’s photos? The ones she took just before being evicted?”

“They weren’t published.”

“Perry refused to use them?”

“I guess so.”

Lois smiled. “I think I like Perry.”

“He wants to meet you.”

“The footy season will be over in three weeks. Maybe—if someone asked nicely—I could squeeze in a quick trip to Metropolis.”

Clark smiled. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“I had,” Lois said. She ran her finger along his lower lip, and he lazily kissed it. “What you need to think about is how you’re going to persuade me to leave sunny Melbourne for snowbound Metropolis.”

“I could offer to warm you with my eyes.”

“What about with the rest of your body?”

Clark grinned, but his reply was cut short by a sharp knock on the door.

Lois and Clark groaned in unison. He lifted his head from the pillow and looked through the walls. “It’s Esmeralda,” he said darkly.

“Uggghh,” Lois said. “She must have heard something.”

“We weren’t that noisy,” Clark said plaintively.

Lois tried to smother her giggle. “We weren’t *that* quiet,” she whispered. “And I think the bed creaks.”

“I didn’t notice it.”

That comment and his baffled tone drove her laughter harder. She buried her face in his chest and grasped for control.

“Is it too much to hope she will go away, and just let us get on with it?” Clark asked.

Another insistent bang on the door answered that question. “Lois Lane! I know you’re in there. Open up!”

Having suppressed most of her mirth, Lois stood from the bed. “Reckon you can you dress me?” she asked. “Superspeed?”

Clark leapt from the bed, and Lois saw a blur of movement. When it stopped, she looked down to discover she was fully dressed. “Thanks,” she said, a little dazed. She hadn’t been convinced it would be possible.

A few seconds later, Lois was face to face with her neighbour. “What is it this time, Esmeralda?” she said wearily.

“I know he’s in there,” she said. “I heard banging.”

“Haven’t you got anything better to do than spy on me?” Lois asked.

Esmeralda glared at her. “I don’t care what you do,” she said, low and hard. “But when you came and took Clark away from me, you acted like he was your own private property, and the moment he went back to the States, you turned into the town bike.”

“You’d know,” Lois muttered bitterly.

Esmeralda must have heard, because her face reddened and her eyes popped. “You’ve always taken the high moral ground with me,” she accused. “You’ve always looked down on me because of what I do.”

“What you do?” Lois gasped.

“Yes,” Esmeralda spat. “And it might seem contemptible to you, but everyone understands the situation. Unlike poor Clark, who’d hardly arrived home before he was panting to get back here—all because he honestly believes you love him.”

“Esmeralda,” Lois stated coolly. “Other than the fact that you tried to come on to Seb the first dozen times he visited me, I barely noticed you or what you did. I just don’t have the time or the interest—”

"Whoever is in there is *not* Seb," Esmeralda hissed. "This is someone who is living with you. I've never seen him arrive, never seen him leave, and I hear movement when I know you're not home."

"I don't have the time or the interest to think about what is happening in your unit. I just wish the same could be said of you with regard to me."

"Is Clark coming back to Melbourne?"

"Yes, next week," Lois said. "And just so you know, he'll be staying here. And—" she lifted her head defiantly "—you'll probably hear banging."

Esmeralda's mouth fell open, and she glared at Lois. "You pretend you're such a squeaky clean goody-goody, and yet you're nothing like that at all. You're a sl—"

"Esmeralda!" Lois cut in, afraid that if the other woman continued, Clark might just fly out of the bedroom and confront her. "Go back to your unit and leave me alone."

"I'll be telling Clark about you when he gets here next week."

Lois sighed. "You do that." She stepped back and shut the door.

Clark came out from the bedroom, wearing only his jeans. Lois looked up at him with a bleak smile.

He crossed to her, took her into the haven of his arms, and slid his fingers through her hair. "We have to do something," he said. "I can't let her keep berating you like that."

"I'm OK," Lois said. "Her opinion doesn't matter." But some of the gloss had gone from the evening.

"Lois, I know it doesn't matter, but it's not pleasant when someone thinks something about you that isn't true." He touched a kiss to hair. "I remember how it felt when Trask and Mayson were telling everyone I was going to overpower the world. You encouraged me to face my accusers and agree to the interview. But in this situation, you can't tell the truth, not unless you also tell her how I can live a life as Clark Kent in Metropolis and still visit my wife in Melbourne every day."

"Clark, we both know I can't do that," Lois said.

"So, we need another solution."

"This is supposed to be our honeymoon," Lois said dolefully.

"Do you want to put on the suits and go out for a meal?"

"It's six in the morning in Metropolis."

"We could order Chinese takeout," Clark suggested. "And eat it here."

Lois lifted from his chest. "Good idea," she responded eagerly. But her enthusiasm faded quickly. "You can bet Esmeralda will be watching. She'll probably count the containers as the delivery bloke brings them up the driveway."

Clark smiled despite her poor attempt at a joke.

Lois pushed away her melancholy. She was on her honeymoon. Her husband was standing there half-naked, showing off the most magnificent upper body imaginable. They could be together for the rest of the evening—an evening which she was sure would finish as it had started—in her bed. She grinned up at Clark. "Forget Esmeralda," she said. "Let her think what she wants to think. I intend to have Chinese for first course and Kryptonian for dessert."

Clark grinned. "Really?" he asked. "You're going to devour me?"

"You bet, big guy," she replied. "Are you worried?"

"No," he said with a suggestive grin that turned a good portion of her muscles to the consistency of treacle. "Any chance you'd like Kryptonian for entrée as well as dessert?"

Part 51

Lex Luthor took a long drag on his cigar.

The wedding of Superman and Ultra Woman had been weird.

Superman collapsing. Ultra Woman hovering over him like a helicopter parent. Mayson's erratic behaviour. Her long disappearance after her 'wardrobe malfunction'. The way she'd shot from her chair and begun crazily taking photographs.

Luthor blew out a cone of smoke.

Weird indeed.

But he would get to the bottom of it. And he fully expected that when he did discover what was really going on, there would be an advantage to be gained.

Luthor smirked in anticipation.

* * *

Clark's alarm sounded just before five the next morning. He awoke enough to silence it and then yielded to the temptation to slither back down the bed and cuddle his wife for a few minutes longer.

It had been their first real night together. The few hours of their 'honeymoon' hardly constituted a night together, but the previous evening, they had eaten Chinese takeout—sandwiched between two wonderful interludes in the bedroom—and had then fallen asleep together, with Lois snuggled into his arms.

Clark's last thought before surrendering to sleep had been to marvel at the wonder of sharing Lois's bed.

Fervently wishing he wasn't due at the Daily Planet in less than five minutes, he eased away from his wife and flew into her bathroom.

Less than a minute later, showered, shaved, and dressed in his work attire, Clark gazed lovingly at his still-sleeping wife. He knew he would never become indifferent to her beauty. He could stare at her forever, and she would always have the power to stir a myriad of wonderful emotions through his heart.

He leant forward and dropped a kiss on the warm blush of her cheek. "I love you, honey," he said quietly.

A minute later, he walked into the Daily Planet newsroom.

* * *

Lois spent Monday with the Operation Payback volunteers. The Extraordinary General Meeting was exactly one week away, and it hung like a spectre around everything they did. Inevitably, the tension was rising.

There was some latent disappointment regarding the result of Saturday night's final, but it was kept firmly in the background by the certain knowledge that they still had a much bigger battle to fight.

The success of the rally had generated a lot of hope and cautious optimism. It was estimated that 8000 people had attended, being almost two-thirds of the club's tally of 12 848 members. Many of those who had come were not currently members. Many had pledged membership for 1997—should the merger be averted.

By mid-afternoon, Lois's concentration was waning as her mind leapt eagerly to the evening ahead. Someone had turned on the radio, and initially, she had been glad for the diversion. However, when the four o'clock news bulletin headlined with the story of blazing bushfires in California, she knew her hope of spending the evening with Clark had just gone up in flames, too.

Lois stood from the table and collected another handful of questionnaires to add to the steadily growing database. There was no reason to hurry home now. She was sure Superman would go and help. Ten minutes later, her mobile beeped with a message from Clark confirming what she'd already surmised.

It was after seven o'clock when Lois wearily plodded home, trying to remind herself that this was going to be a part of being married to Superman. She would miss him terribly, but many people would be alive tomorrow because of his help.

Lois spent a quiet evening. She watched the replay of the Sydney game and then went to bed, hoping that sometime during the night, her husband would be able to join her.

* * *

The next morning, Lois awoke, and immediately a cloud of concern settled around her heart. She extended her arm to the other side of the bed and recoiled at its chill.

Clark should be back at the Daily Planet by now. If the fires were still out of control, he would have to think of an excuse for his absence. Either way, he would be tired and drained—and probably longing for his wife.

Lois listened to the radio news as she showered and dressed. The fires were no longer threatening lives, but there had been a tragic cost—eleven confirmed deaths and another nineteen people missing. She logged onto her computer, having already decided not to go to Operation Payback today. She'd been asked to write the piece for the leaflet they intended to offer to the members as they entered the vote meeting. She could do that at home, meaning she would be available for Clark should he be able to leave Metropolis.

For the next hour, Lois wrote her final plea for her club. She was allowed a mere two hundred and fifty words. How could she even begin to express her hope and her fear in just a few paragraphs? As she worked—pruning and editing so every single word contributed—she flicked through the morning news bulletins on the television and watched with horror as the scenes of charred destruction filled the screen.

Her heart ached for Clark. She knew he would be devastated.

A letter popped into her email box.

'I have to edit the stories coming in from the forest fires in California. It's going to be a long night, and I'm not sure when I'll be finished. I wish I could be with you.

Love, Clark.'

Lois quickly replied.

'I'll be here for you.

Love, Lois.'

She had never envied Clark his superpowers. Now, she wished she had the ability to fly across the ocean, land at the door of the Daily Planet building, walk to his desk, and simply hold him.

Of course, even if she could, that would elicit a legion of questions that couldn't be answered.

Lois sighed as her heart reached across the miles, hoping that somehow, her love would be strong enough to span the vast distance between them.

* * *

It was after midnight when Clark finished putting the paper to bed. He hadn't slept for over thirty hours, and in that time, he'd worked two shifts at the Planet, hauled mega gallons of water to dump on the fires, rescued hundreds of people, recovered fourteen dead bodies, and witnessed the devastating grief of those whose loved ones and homes had been devoured by the merciless flames.

Through it all, there had been one constant—his yearning to be with his wife.

It was mid-afternoon for Lois. Would she be at Operation Payback? He could call her… email her… text her… but none of those would satisfy his need to be with her. Spurred on by thoughts of her, Clark climbed the stairs to the roof of the Daily Planet building with more energy than he had felt in hours. Even if she wasn't home, he could lie in her bed and find comfort in the surroundings that were steeped in her essence.

Seconds later, he shot into her unit, and Lois looked up from her computer with a smile of welcome. Clark stood glued to the floor, hardly able to believe that he was finally with her. She hurried across the room and took him into her arms. For timeless minutes, she held him. She didn't speak, didn't ask questions, didn't move other than the soft strumming of her thumb on his neck. It was as if she understood that he didn't need anything from her. He just needed her.

Soon, life began to flow through his fatigued body, bringing restoration to his bruised heart and peace to his haunted memories. Clark loosened his hold a few notches and said, "Thank you for being here."

Lois smiled into his eyes. "I've been here all day. I knew you'd come as soon as you could."

She didn't add that she had also known how much he would need her. She'd known, she'd understood, she'd made his needs her priority.

Like a parched man who'd found water, Clark squeezed her against his body again and let her love soak into him.

"Are you OK to fly?" she asked.

He'd been assuming they would stay in her unit. "Sure. Where do you want to go?"

"I don't want Esmeralda to interrupt us, so I thought you could take me to Smallville. Your parents will be asleep. We could go to your room and have some privacy."

Privacy? Clark felt helplessly torn. He couldn't imagine ever not wanting to make love with Lois, but every muscle in his body felt as if it were swathed in utter exhaustion.

Lois rubbed her hand across his shoulder and smiled at him. "Can you fly us?" she persisted.

"If that's what you want," he said, trying to conceal his lack of enthusiasm.

"Let's go then." If she'd heard the hesitation in his voice, she made no comment.

He gestured to her computer. "Don't you have things to do?"

She nodded. "I need to be with my husband."

"Lois…"

"Just take me to your bedroom," she said, her voice kind but unyielding.

He didn't have the strength to argue. "OK." He lifted her into his arms and flew them to Smallville.

* * *

Clark opened his bedroom door and followed Lois into the dark room. He reached for the light switch and felt her hand on his arm.

"The lamp," she said. "Its light will be softer."

Clark crossed the room, turned on the lamp, and slumped onto his bed. The muted light set an atmosphere conducive to romance, but even that couldn't drive the dragging tiredness from his body. He'd been married for four days, his bride was with him, and—to his shame—all his body craved was sleep.

She crouched beside him, one hand on his knee. "Clark," she said with a soft smile. "I can see you're not sure about this, but you don't have to do anything. You've done your part—you saved all of those people. Let me be the strong one for a while." She reached for his tie, loosened it, released the knot, and slid it from his neck.

"Lois—"

Her finger on his mouth hushed him. "I'm your wife," she said. "Let me love you." She removed his glasses and placed them next to the lamp. Next, she turned her attention to his shirt and undid the line of buttons. She tugged the white material from the waistband of his trousers and slid it from his shoulders.

He should stop her… warn her…

Lois dropped to her knees and removed his shoes and socks. With a lithe movement, she rose to her feet and offered him her hand. He took it and stood beside her.

She peeled back the bedcovers. “Lie down, Clark.”

He lay on the bed and shuffled to the side, trying to ensure there would be enough room for her in the narrow single bed.

Lois grasped his upper arm and rolled him onto his stomach. “Get comfortable,” she said.

Clark wriggled, but the tension across his back and shoulders made comfort an unlikely goal. Lois was no longer in his line of sight, so he allowed his heavy eyelids to slide shut. He felt the edge of the bed dip and Lois’s thigh nestle along his side.

Her hands—warm and soft—landed on his shoulders, and her thumbs rubbed along the clinched bundle of muscle at the base of his neck.

She pushed and pressed and kneaded as her skilled hands sought and found every place where tiredness and stress draped with heavy achiness. After a few minutes, she left his neck and worked slowly and methodically across the width of his shoulders.

A low moan sounded, and Clark realised it had come from deep inside him. Her hands felt so good. He’d known love was a feeling, but never before had it felt like this.

She continued down his back, her fingers tracing his ribs with exactly the right level of pressure. Her thumbs burrowed deeper, releasing the balls of rigidity dotted along his spine.

The built-up heaviness drained from his body and into her hands. Her touch sweetened his weariness, and Clark drifted into a deep, restful sleep.

* * *

Lois continued massaging Clark’s back and shoulders long after she was sure he was asleep. Finally, she lifted from him and brought the chair closer so she could sit and watch him in the dim light of the lamp.

Asleep and without his glasses, he looked younger and—illogically—more vulnerable.

He gave so much, cared so much, tried so hard to be the best he could be, and always put others before himself.

Lois felt so privileged to be the one who could give back to him.

An hour or so later, he surfaced enough to roll onto his side but immediately returned to deep slumber. Lois turned off the lamp and lay beside him, her arm across his side and her fingers gently caressing his skin.

Her mind flittered through a range of topics as she dozed. Seb and Chris—no one could ever replace Chris’s own mother, but if things worked out, having Barb as a mother-in-law would be wonderful for her. Hawthorn and the looming vote meeting—sometimes Lois was sure the merger would go ahead, sometimes she was sure it wouldn’t. In her very darkest moments, she feared the proposal would be defeated, and Hawthorn would falter and die—and she would have contributed to the complete extinction of her club.

She wasn’t sure how she would face Ron, Barb, and Seb if that happened.

And then, there was Clark.

Everything in her life came back to him.

Somehow, they had to work out how to be together. He needed to be in Metropolis. If Hawthorn didn’t merge, she needed to be in Melbourne.

But whatever happened, they would find ways to be together. They would.

Because they both knew that nothing was as important as being together.

Lois sighed with overflowing happiness. She had Clark. Her heart was full.

* * *

As the first rays of the new day began to peep through the curtain, a tantalising aroma of bacon and eggs wafted into the bedroom where Lois lay next to her sleeping husband.

As she’d expected, the smell of breakfast worked its way into Clark’s nostrils, and he stirred. His arm tightened around her, and he kissed her hair. “Good morning, gorgeous,” he said.

“How are you feeling now, big guy?” she asked.

He sighed with deep contentment. “I’m in love,” he said. “I feel as if you completely immersed me in your love. I’m sure I can still feel your hands on my body.”

Lois smiled and ran her fingers up his chest. “You were a true hero, Clark. Without you, hundreds more people would be dead or badly injured.”

“I didn’t save everyone,” he said dejectedly.

“Nobody expects you to save everyone.” She twisted her head enough to kiss his chest. “I heard a report that said all the missing people were located.”

“Yeah,” he said with a sigh. “Five were stranded in a car—they had tried to outrun the fire. I found them and picked up the entire car. An elderly couple were sheltering in their basement—I brought them out. Three others were already dead by the time I got to them. Some thought to be missing

weren't actually in the area, and the rest were rescued by the fire departments."

"We can mourn the ones who died," Lois said gently. "But to concentrate on them to the exclusion of those who are still alive would be a mistake."

"I know," he said wretchedly. "But I can't help wishing I'd been faster… earlier…"

"Aw, Clark." She reached the top of his chest and stroked along the line of his jaw.

"I need you, Lois," he said, his voice raw. "I love you more than life, but I need you so much I can't even begin to find the words to express how vital you are to everything I do."

"I'm here for you. I always will be."

He sighed deeply, and it ended with a small chuckle. "Breakfast smells good. I'm sure Mom won't mind a couple of extra guests."

"Are you hungry?"

"Starving," he said. His hand slipped under her tee shirt and glided across her back. "But there's something else I'd like first."

"I can't imagine what," Lois said innocently, although her hand had left his face and begun to slide down his chest.

"Let me show you," Clark said, and his mouth found hers.

* * *

Seb Wilton parked his mother's car and walked up the driveway towards Lois's unit. He felt fantastic. His day with Chris had surpassed all his hopes. She was perfect in every way—great fun, natural, feminine, and she loved Hawthorn. His mind slipped back half an hour to when he had stood at the door of her unit.

"Thanks for a great day, Seb," Chris had said.

He'd wanted to kiss her so badly, but he hadn't wanted to scare her away.

Then, she'd leant forward and placed a cute kiss on his cheek. "See you for lunch tomorrow."

Seb had nodded and walked away feeling like the king of the universe.

His pleasant memories were shattered when the door next to Lois's burst open. Her neighbour—what was her name? Eleanor? Esther?—hurried out.

Seb fixed his eyes on Lois's door and hoped the woman would ignore him on her way to deal with whatever had caused her obvious agitation.

"Seb!" she called.

His heart—still buoyed with memories of Chris—sank a little. "Hi," he said, hoping he'd managed to conceal that he didn't remember her name—and that he really didn't want to talk to her.

"Seb, I'm glad you're here," the woman said breathlessly. "You know that nice American? Clark? The one who worked with Lois at the paper? Ever since he left, Lois has had a man in her unit nearly every night. I hear them talking and laughing, and the other night, I'm sure they were doing a lot more than talking. I heard—"

"Whoa!" Seb said, his mind spinning, but not so much that it overpowered the need to quieten this woman's run-away mouth. "What does this have to do with me?"

She gave him a glare that said it should be obvious. "Clark seems like such a nice guy, and he's coming again this weekend, and I think it's disgraceful that Lois is leading him on when she's clearly having it off with someone else."

Seb sighed, making no effort to hide his distaste for this conversation. "What Lois does is up to her," he said firmly. "What happens between Lois and Clark is their business."

"But don't you think it's just *wrong* to lead a guy on like that?" she said heatedly. "He's coming all the way back here this weekend, and if he finds out what's been going on, he's going to be gutted. If he doesn't find out, it's going to be worse."

"Leave it," Seb said frostily. "Just leave it alone. It's none of our business." He marched away before she could respond.

At Lois's door, Seb rapped sharply.

There was no reply.

He rapped again, even louder this time.

Still no movement.

Seb turned. The woman hadn't moved. She stared at him with cold, condemning eyes.

He strode past her. "Well, she's not in there with anyone right now," he said without stopping.

When he reached his mum's car, he climbed in. A quick glance back up the driveway told him the neighbour had returned inside. "Lois," he muttered as he started the engine, "I hope you know what you're doing."

* * *

The next day, Lois headed towards her home, revelling in the spring sunshine. It had been a glorious day—sunny, mild, and imbued with the invigorating feeling of bursting new life after the lull of winter.

She'd chosen to walk home in preference to taking the tram, partly to savour the weather and partly because there was no reason to hurry. Clark wouldn't be in yet. A London newspaper had published a letter from a young cancer patient asking Superman if he would attend the opening of the new wing in a children's hospital, and although Clark realised that agreeing would probably evoke a flood of such requests, they had both felt that it was something he should do.

So, Lois walked up Punt Road deep in thought. She wondered how Chris's date with Seb had gone yesterday. She hadn't heard from either of them. When she got in, she might call Seb.

She thought about the vote meeting—now just five days away. As the meeting approached, the rival sides had become more forceful in proclaiming their message. For a club in financial difficulties, the board seemed to have accessed large amounts of money to fund their campaign. Lois sighed. That money could have been utilised far more profitably in building a united future.

She reached her driveway and walked straight to her door, deliberately keeping her head forward and not even glancing towards Esmeralda's unit. She couldn't help feeling relief when she arrived without interruption.

Once inside, Lois picked up her phone and dialled Seb's shop.

Harry, Seb's shop assistant, answered. "Hi, Harry, " she said. "It's Lois Lane. I met you last weekend when I came to the shop. Is Seb there, please?"

"G'day, Lois," Harry said. "Seb's in Melbourne. He left yesterday morning."

"He's still here? I thought he went home last night."

"No. He rang earlier today to see if everything was OK, and he said he wasn't sure when he'd be back."

"OK. Thanks, Harry." Lois slowly returned the phone. Seb was still here. Was that because of Chris? Or because of the vote meeting? Had the board, in stepping up its campaign, managed to convince him to get involved? Or was there a problem with Ron or Barb?

She dismissed that last idea. If something had happened to Ron or Barb, they would have called her.

Lois smiled. Hopefully, it was because of Chris. Hopefully, it was because they'd had such a great time yesterday, Seb had been unable to drag himself back to Sydney.

Lois was still smiling when she heard the swish that heralded the arrival of her husband. She flung herself into his arms and kissed him delightedly. He picked her up and began walking to the bedroom.

Lois pulled back from the kiss and looked into Clark's already-glazed-over eyes. "I have an idea," she said.

He grinned wolfishly. It was a grin she wouldn't have believed was within Clark Kent's repertoire a week ago, but their marriage had awakened more than one latent talent and included the ability to grin with such sensual anticipation that it inflamed every facet of her femininity. "Does it involve you taking off your clothes?" he asked in a deep voice that aroused her further.

"Yes," she replied. "But not yet."

His face crinkled to a comical mix of disappointment and curiosity. Then he smiled his usual dazzling smile. "What would you like to do, my love?"

"I think we need to be more creative," she said. "I think that we had the argument because we'd both become a little stir-crazy from spending too much time in here."

He nodded. "And there's always the possibility that Esmeralda will coming banging on our door at the most inconvenient moment possible."

"I really enjoyed going to Smallville yesterday," Lois said. "It was great having breakfast with your parents. It was nice to walk around the farm. And—"

"And making love in a single bed was a lot of fun," Clark added, his tone solemn, but his eyes sparkling. "Do you want to go back to Smallville? We haven't tried out the loft above the barn yet."

Lois chuckled. "We could do that another day," she said. "But today, I think we should go to Metropolis."

"You want to get into the suits?" Clark asked. "That'll make 'em happy. Superman has been asked about a million times how he's finding married life and when Ultra Woman will be seen again."

Lois looked at her watch. It was just after seven. "OK, it's currently five in the morning in Metropolis. We could go to your apartment, find something to do to while away a couple of hours, and then maybe go out for breakfast—try a new cafe."

"Breakfast?" Clark said with a smile. "By then, it'll be nearly bedtime for you."

She poked his chest. "Honestly, Kent," she said. "You have developed a seriously one-track mind since becoming a married man."

He didn't deny her allegation, but merely kissed her, although his vigour had subsided a little. "Let's go, honey," he said. "Metropolis awaits us."

Part 52

Superman—with Ultra Woman in his arms—dropped into one of the quieter Metropolis streets. Lois slid to her feet and felt Clark's hand close around hers. She smiled and waved in response to the squeals of excitement that rose from the nearby people as they rushed towards the caped couple.

* * *

Mayson picked up her cell and saw that the incoming call was from Albert—her best source. She sighed, hoping he wasn't going to cancel their meeting that afternoon. "Mayson Drake," she said.

"Superman and Ultra Woman are having breakfast at the Blueberry Cafe."

"Both of them?"

"Yes."

"Thanks, Albert." Mayson hung up and hesitated. She wanted to talk to Superman alone—to inform him she had the green rock. That conversation couldn't happen in a cafe, but even so, there might be something to be gained from an encounter with the honeymooners. She picked up her bag and hurried from the Planet.

* * *

It had taken Superman and Ultra Woman nearly ten minutes to get to their table. Everyone in the cafe wanted to offer congratulations and ask veiled questions about 'married life'. Lois considered standing on a table and making a general announcement that when it came to his performance in the sack, Superman was indeed *super*. Her mind conjured an image of Clark's expression should she actually do that, and she smothered her giggle.

"What are you smiling about?" he asked from the other side of the table.

"If you must know," she replied. "I was thinking about your outstanding capabilities in certain aspects of married life."

Superman's face stayed appropriately deadpan, but his eyes crinkled with silent laughter.

"It's what they all want to know," Lois said with an inconspicuous nod towards the rest of the world. "But they're too polite to ask." Suddenly, a wild idea swamped her mind. "Lean over and kiss me," she whispered to her husband.

"What? Here? Now?"

Lois nodded. "Then they'll all know that things are peachy in the Super marital bed."

"Ultra Woman," he said, as if trying to curb her waywardness.

She grinned at his tone. "Do it," she challenged. "Kiss your wife."

Clark considered her for a long moment as his smile peeked from behind the superhero mask. Then he reached across the table, captured her face in his gentle hands, and kissed her. It wasn't quick and chaste as she had expected, but the lingering kiss of a man in love. Before ending their kiss, his tongue snuck briefly into her mouth.

"Very daring, Superman," she teased.

"Everyone is watching us," Clark said. "And those with cameras are taking photos."

"If we keep kissing in public, the photos will quickly lose their significance," Lois said easily. "Soon no one will even notice when Superman kisses his wife."

The waitress arrived to take their order. Lois ordered the waffles. Clark ordered the eggs Benedict. They smiled secretly at each other—it seemed strange to be ordering breakfast when, despite the early morning sunshine, it felt like evening.

"This is nice," Lois said. "I know you had some reservations about Ultra Woman, but without my suit, we wouldn't be able to do this." The door opened, and a woman entered the cafe. Lois groaned softly under her breath. "Here's trouble," she said.

It was Mayson Drake.

Mayson Drake—the woman who had dared to invade Clark's bed, the woman who had used the green rock to try to humiliate Superman at his wedding. Lois felt her latent anger stir to life.

Mayson came directly to their table and looked down at Clark. "Superman," she said, her eyelids beating double time. "You're back from your honeymoon."

"We might be back," Lois interjected. "But the honeymoon is far from over."

Mayson smiled tightly. "Such a delightful wedding," she said, her tone dripping with insincerity.

"Yes, it was," Lois replied evenly. "It was everything we had hoped for. Ms King did a wonderful job."

Mayson's smile clenched tighter, and Lois scored one to herself. "I'm sure she has a talent for such occasions," Mayson said, managing to coat the final word with a layer of disapproval.

"What a pity you had to leave early," Lois said with a counterfeit smile.

Mayson's facade of pleasantry dropped away. "I'm a reporter," she said tartly. "A good reporter never misses the opportunity for a story."

"I would have thought that a good reporter would need the ability to accurately predict the outcome of her actions," Lois noted.

"Those photos were worth more to me than attending a wedding of very little consequence."

"If they are worth so much to you, why didn't you publish them?" Lois asked. Under the table, she felt Clark's boot gently touch hers in silent warning, but now that she was face to face with this woman, Lois wasn't feeling the slightest inclination to back down. "Perhaps your editor has enough class to thwart your efforts to drag the paper through the gutter?"

"We decided to bide our time and determine the most effective way to use the photos."

Lois decided to go for the jugular. "That's going to be quite an achievement," she said. "Considering the guards confiscated your camera."

Mayson's mouth gaped. "How do you know they took my camera?" she asked.

Lois allowed only a modicum of her inner triumph to show. "Well, there's this thing called x-ray vision," she informed Mayson. "And Superman has it."

"But Superman was—" Mayson stopped.

"Superman was what?" Lois asked sweetly.

"Superman was on the floor… incapacitated."

Lois reached over to her husband and ran the tip of her finger along his forearm. "Incapacitated?" she drawled. "That's not the word that springs to my mind when I think about our wedding day."

Mayson leant towards Lois and spoke in a low, cold tone. "You are so smug with your alien husband and your ridiculous costumes, but when it all comes crashing down—and it will—you won't need to read the byline to know who has won this war." She turned and flounced away.

"How did you know?" Clark asked, as the cafe door slammed.

"About Mayson's camera?"

He nodded.

"It made sense," Lois replied. "The Star would have done everything to ensure that no photos left the building other than those taken by their official photographer."

"So you didn't know? You guessed?"

Lois nodded. "Looks like I was right, though."

"That's a relief," Clark said. "If those photos were printed, people would begin speculating about the… ah… stuff again."

Lois smiled at him. "There is no stuff, Superman," she said. "Not anymore."

"We hope."

"When Trask had it, you overcame it without my help. At the wedding, we worked together, and although I hate what happened in those few minutes, the overall effects were minimal."

"What if she hadn't left? What if—"

"I would have tackled her and snatched it away."

Clark's eyes widened, and Lois could see he wasn't sure whether he believed her or not.

"Remember the morning after we met?" Lois said. "Cold weather? Damp ground? Red leather? Remember how I beat you because I'd trained for years? She wouldn't stand a chance against a decent tackle. I'm sure I could dispossess her."

Clark's mouth gaped, and then an inhibited version of his smile wriggled free. "Sweetheart, you shouldn't even think about doing that."

"Why not?" she demanded. "You're thinking about it."

He didn't deny it. "You know," he said. "I get the feeling that you and I could find a way to overcome just about anything if we're together."

Lois grinned. "I'm glad you've finally realised that," she said. "Sometimes, for all your speed, you're a little slow on the uptake."

He didn't reply verbally, though his eyes gave away how much he was enjoying their conversation.

Lois leant forward. "Please," she begged. "Please make me pay for that comment later."

"What do you suggest?"

"You could kiss me until I beg for mercy."

His mouth twitched, and Lois could see that Superman was perilously close to cracking his superhero mask.

Luckily for him, the waitress chose that moment to arrive with their meals.

* * *

After they had eaten their breakfast, Superman and Ultra Woman talked with the crowd that had gathered outside the cafe and then slowly lifted into the air and flew away.

Clark took them high enough to be out of sight before zooming onto the balcony of his apartment. They went in, and two spins later, they were both dressed in jeans and tee shirts.

"Have you got any more information about the Boss?" Lois asked as she sank onto his couch.

"The Boss?" Clark sat next to her, and she curled into the crook of his arm. "Where did that come from?"

"I've been thinking about it a lot," Lois said. "There have to be answers. It's just a matter of finding them."

"I haven't heard anything since the prisoner's message on his death bed," Clark said.

"What about the English guy who was killed a couple of weeks ago? The guy with six missing years?"

"Still nothing," Clark said. "I chased up every angle I could think of and kept hitting dead ends."

"Was he rich?" Lois persisted. "Back in England, did he live in an exclusive area? Did he have old money?"

"No. Even in England there was little about him that was noteworthy. He seemed to live a quiet, solitary life that enabled him to blend into his surroundings."

"What if they're linked?"

"Nigel St John and the Boss?" Clark said. "How could they be linked?"

"You said it's believed that the Boss is behind eighty percent of the crime in Metropolis. If that's true, the odds are that the Boss had something to do with Nigel St John's death."

Clark mulled over that. "If that were the case, the Boss must have known St John."

"Or known of him," Lois said. "You said the prisoner who murdered the other inmate insisted it was merely a fight that got out of hand."

"Yeah, he said it was over a stolen packet of cigarettes."

"So, if the murdered guy had been going to spill what he knew about the Boss, and the Boss organised his murder to keep him quiet, there have to be reasons why the murderer was willing to take the rap. The Boss must be scarier than a murder conviction. Or so powerful that the murderer thinks the Boss can save him. Therefore, the Boss is rich, and he has clout."

Clark felt his head begin to spin. "Would you like to go over that again?" he asked. "Slowly, this time?'

Her grin flashed as she continued. "The bottom line is that the Boss has a lot of money, which means he could provide Nigel St John with an entire lifestyle without the need for a paper trail."

"You think Nigel St John worked for the Boss, and then the Boss had him killed?"

"I think it's enough that we could begin there and see where it leads."

"We?" Clark questioned with a wide grin.

Lois nodded. "We're a team, Kent. You're stuck with me."

"If you're hankering for some team-building activities, there are other ways besides investigating dead Englishmen," Clark noted.

Before Lois could respond, a knock sounded at the door, and Clark groaned. His irritation turned to alarm when he looked through the door and saw Mayson Drake.

"Hold on, honey," he said as he swept Lois into his arms and shot them into his bedroom. He opened the secret compartment in his closet and bodily lifted her into it. "Sorry. Mayson's here," he muttered as he closed the door. He removed his wedding ring and stuffed it into his jeans pocket. A second later, he opened the door.

"Mayson," he said.

"Clark," she greeted with a smile that turned his stomach. "I thought it was about time we caught up."

"I'm not due in the office for a few hours yet."

"But we've hardly seen each other since you got back from Australia," she grumbled. "You were only home for a few days, and you went back again. Then you went to Smallville to see your folks, and now I hear you're going to Australia again on Saturday. And with this silly idea of you working in the evenings, we don't even see each other much in the office."

"Perry doesn't seem to have any complaints about how I'm doing my job," Clark said.

A flicker of hurt crossed her face at his harsh tone, but he felt no remorse. "Clark," Mayson said, "I'm sorry for what happened between us before you went to Australia. I know I made some mistakes, but I'd really like it if we could put all that behind us and start again."

"There's nothing to start," he said shortly.

"You can't mean that, Clark," Mayson said. "I know you feel something for me." She smiled cloyingly. "A woman can tell these things."

"Mayson," Clark said, allowing an impatient edge to sharpen his tone, "there is nothing between us. There will

never be anything between us. I don't feel anything for you. You need to accept that and move on."

"I tried," she said, her eyes becoming moist. "I thought that if things worked out with Lex, I would be able to forget the pain of your rejection, but instead I learned that there is only one man who can make me truly happy."

Clark sighed. "I'm sorry you feel like that, Mayson," he said. "Because I will never feel that way about you. I don't love you, and I never will."

"Why, Clark?" she demanded. "Why are you so afraid of your true feelings?"

"I'm not afraid of my true feelings. I am in love with someone in Australia, and it's my hope and intention that I will be with her for the rest of my life."

Mayson regarded him with a patronising gaze. "Clark," she said as if she were explaining something patently simple, "you are an intelligent man. How could you fall for someone so dull and uninspiring that she writes about football? Any shrink would tell you that this is a desperate plea from your heart to connect with your real love."

"I have connected with my real love," Clark said. "And it's not you, Mayson."

"Will you take me out for lunch?" she said. "I have—"

"No."

"I have to meet a source later—Albert, the bald-headed bookworm who somehow always knows what is going on—but I have a few hours free first. Come with me, and later, I'll introduce you to Albert."

She usually guarded her sources jealously. "Mayson—"

"I'm not expecting to need Albert as much now. I, ah… it's not something I want to talk about, but I have another source that I expect to work out superbly. If you come with me—"

"Mayson, I'm not coming to lunch with you, and I'm not—"

Mayson's cell phone sounded, and she snatched it from her bag. After listening for a few seconds, she hung up and said, "Hostage situation at the hospital. Shots fired. Come on, Clark. Let's cover it together."

"You go."

"Clark, this is going to be a big story. Front page. We'll share the byline. Come on."

"No, Mayson. You go. I'm staying here."

With a final scornful glare, she scurried away.

Clark shut his door and turned to find Lois already emerging from his bedroom. "Go," she said. "They need Superman."

"I'll take you home first."

"There's no time. I can sleep here just as well as I can sleep in Melbourne."

"But—"

"Go, Clark. While we argue, people's lives could be in danger."

Clark spun into the suit. "Stay here," he said. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

* * *

Finding herself suddenly alone, Lois surveyed Clark's apartment. It was a little understated, but it reminded her of Clark—unpretentious, dependable, discreet.

She wandered back into his bedroom and looked at the bed they had straightened together after dishevelling it rather extensively following their arrival from Melbourne. Her happy recollections turned sour as she remembered that Mayson had also been in this bed.

Hopefully, Clark had disinfected the sheets after he'd returned home. Lois managed a self-deprecating smile at the way her annoyance rose every single time she thought about the audacity of Mayson Drake inviting herself into Clark's bed.

Lois had heard some of the conversation between Clark and Mayson. Didn't that woman ever get the message?

Lois sat on Clark's bed and hugged his pillow. She detected a slight trace of his cologne and sighed, wishing he were here with her.

It was almost midnight in Melbourne. She should be tired, but being in Metropolis had stirred up the questions and theories that had been lurking in the background of her thoughts.

The Boss.

Nigel St John.

They were connected, Lois was sure of it. She was also sure that if they found out more about St John's life, it would lead to information about the mysterious Boss.

Lois returned Clark's pillow, rose from his bed, and settled at his computer. With a smile, she typed in his password—'Hawkette'—and waited for the Internet browser to fire up.

She scribbled notes as she worked through Clark's stories about the death of the Englishman. When she'd finished,

she perused her jottings. His last known address in England was in Cornwall—and he had left in 1990.

Why?

What was the reason he had left the country of his birth?

Lois began to search for unsolved crimes committed in Cornwall in 1989 and 1990. She found nothing that leapt out as possibly involving Nigel St John. The detail was often frustratingly sketchy, and there was every chance that an important fact had been missed.

She widened her search to include crimes where there had been a conviction and still came up empty. Not knowing what to do next, Lois continued moving forward chronologically. Half an hour later, she discovered that three weeks after St John's departure, there had been a major ecstasy bust in a derelict barn less than five miles from where he had lived.

The police believed they had caught all those involved in smuggling the drug into England from the Netherlands, but what excited Lois was the statement that the operation had been running for well over a year.

Was it possible that St John had been involved and had realised that he needed to get out? Is that why he had come to Metropolis and disappeared?

She found some patchy notes about the history of ecstasy use. In the early nineties, it had been a new and much sought-after drug that was being spread among teenagers by the means of rave parties.

Seb would know more about it, but it was the middle of the night in eastern Australia. She couldn't risk calling him. Even if he were awake, the delay on the phone line would alert him that she wasn't in Australia.

Frustrated at the hit-and-miss nature of the information on the 'net, Lois decided she needed to read all the newspaper reports from the early nineties. To do that, she needed to access the microfiche in the library.

She found the address of Clark's local library and brought up a map. It was a five-minute walk from his apartment.

Should she go?

Clark had told her to stay here, but Lois knew she wouldn't be able to rest until she'd found some answers.

How long until Clark returned?

It could be hours. Not even Superman could end a hostage situation until he was sure his actions wouldn't cause the loss of life.

Lois went into Clark's bedroom and took a casual shirt from his closet. She put it over her tee shirt and tied the front panels at her waist. She slipped on her sunglasses and swept up her hair under one of Clark's baseball caps.

She should tell Clark where she was going. There was no point messaging him—he didn't carry his mobile when he was Superman. She should leave him a note, but it would have to be cryptic enough that if Mayson Drake decided to break into Clark's apartment again, she wouldn't be able to discern anything from the note.

'NSJ—old newspaper reports'.

Lois stared at the words she had written.

Would that be enough?

Lois didn't want to give any hint that could lead to the theft of Clark's story, but she did need to let him know she was OK and where to find her.

The note would be enough. She placed it on his bench and put her mobile in her bag. If he wanted to confirm her whereabouts, all he had to do was call her.

Lois hooked her bag on her shoulder and quietly slipped out of Clark's apartment.

* * *

The cab hadn't fully stopped when Mayson thrust a five-dollar bill at the driver and scrambled onto the sidewalk. She ran to the wide glass doors of the library and waited with foot-tapping impatience for them to deign to slide open.

Once inside, she scanned the assortment of library patrons but couldn't locate the shiny bald head that would signify Albert's presence.

If Albert weren't such an excellent source, she would have dumped him a long time ago. However, his information was good enough that she'd been willing to overlook his obsession with punctuality. He never waited for anyone. If she arrived half a minute late, he would be gone. He just wouldn't comprehend that time wasn't always a reporter's first priority.

The hostage situation had taken much longer to resolve than anyone had anticipated. Superman had been there when she'd arrived, and the general belief prevailed that it was a simple matter of sending in Mr Spandex to disarm the gunman, thus ending the crisis before it ever really began.

That was until the gunman had informed them that he had a bomb that was sensitive enough to be activated by the air movement which would result from a speedy attempt by Superman to rescue the hostages.

And if he came in slowly, the gunman would begin massacring the patients.

For reasons that remained vague, Superman hadn't been able to see sufficiently well through the walls of the hospital to ascertain whether the gunman had been telling the truth. And since the gunman had so thoughtfully ensconced himself in the children's ward, the police had been particularly reluctant to take any chances. So, they had negotiated and waited until finally, Henderson and his cowboys had come up with a strategy, and the emergency had fizzled to nothing in a matter of minutes.

But the delay had made Mayson late for her meeting with Albert. And now, he was nowhere to be seen.

She was only three minutes past their agreed meeting time of two o'clock. She would wait. Perhaps today was the one day when Mr Punctuality himself was actually running late.

Part 53

Lois stretched, her hands arched high above her head as she tried to ease the stiffness from her neck and shoulders. As her arms dropped back to the desk, she checked her watch and was astounded to discover that over two hours had passed since she'd sat down at the microfiche scanner.

She rubbed her dry and strained eyes and glanced over the chaos of her notes. Her time and effort had achieved one irrefutable result—she now knew more about the early use of ecstasy in both Cornwall and Metropolis than she had ever imagined a footy journo from Melbourne would need to know.

The disappointing reality was that she still had no evidence that Nigel St John had been involved in the busted smuggling ring in England. She'd ascertained that the reported incidents of ecstasy use in New Troy had increased dramatically around the time he'd arrived in the States, but the link was tenuous at best.

She had nothing beyond a few flaky coincidences, but she couldn't dismiss her gut feeling that the answers for St John's death were to be found in uncovering the real reason behind his departure from England.

Lois slumped forward, resting her elbows on the desk and her head in her hands. She allowed her eyes to slide shut.

She should be three hours into a night's sleep.

Dredging up the last reserves of her energy, Lois turned off the scanner and thrust her notes into her bag. She pulled Clark's cap lower, stood, and stopped abruptly when she saw Mayson Drake fifteen metres away near the entrance of the library.

Lois whirled around and skulked to the end of the partitioned desks. At the back wall of the library, she turned and passed three tall rows of shelves before sliding between the final two.

She'd run into Mayson Drake! Wasn't Metropolis supposed to be a *big* city?

Lois took a random book from the shelves—it was entitled *The Case for Antimatter*—turned her body away from the front of the library, and bent her head low, staring at the page as she listened intently for the sound of approaching footsteps.

"Last chance, mate."

Lois froze. The voice had come from the other side of the shelves—a voice that spoke with a broad Aussie accent.

"No, please, Moke, please. I'll have the dough by next week," a second voice—also Australian—whined. "I promise I'll have it by then."

"Next week is too late, Bazza." This voice was calm and low, yet despite that, it had a sinister undercurrent that sent a shiver through Lois.

"No! Please, Moke. I can pay; I just need some time."

"How is time gonna make any difference?"

"I heard a whisper," Bazza said earnestly. "Some inside info."

"What sort of inside info?"

"The winner of this year's Brownlow."

A menacing snigger snaked between the books, chilling Lois's blood.

"This is fair dinkum," Bazza said desperately. "This year, it's gonna be a three-way tie."

"How would you know?" Moke sneered. "I suppose the AFL announced it in The *Record*?"

"No," Bazza said with breathless eagerness. "They've been putting mics on the umps 'cause the television stations think it adds to the footy telecast. Me sister's been dating one of the sound techies, and they—"

"I don't care if your sister's been dating Ned Kelly. I just want my money, Bazza. Today."

"The techies put bugs in the umpires' room, so when they discuss the Brownlow votes at the end of the games, it's recorded, and—"

"Which grounds? The 'G? Just the Victorian ones? Or the interstate grounds as well?"

"All of 'em."

There was a long silence. Lois dipped low enough to peer between the top of a row of books and the shelf above. She

could see two torsos—one large and flabby and wearing a grimy white tee shirt and the other in a black cotton shirt with powerful arms folded across the chest.

"OK." Moke's voice came grudgingly. "Who's gonna win the Brownlow?"

"What's in it for me if I tell you?"

"You'll see another sunrise."

"And if I'm right?"

"We're even."

"If I'm wrong?"

"You'll be a shark's breakfast."

Bazza gulped so loudly that Lois heard it clearly. "Three-way tie," he gasped. "McKernan, Hird, Voss."

"McKernan's been suspended."

"But some bookies will accept bets on him leading the count."

"Hird and Voss are favourites. The odds won't be anything flash."

"Best roughie—Salmon. He'll come top ten."

"If this is a furphy, you'll be hearing from me in two weeks."

"I can go?" Bazza said in a hopeful bleat. "Now?"

"Keep your voice down, you drongo." The muscled arm unfolded and clenched a fistful of the white tee shirt. "And if you know what's good for you, you won't say a word about this to anyone else."

"Who'm I gonna tell?" Bazza said, a sudden perkiness in his tone. "This place is crawling with Yanks who wouldn't know the Brownlow Medal from an Oreo."

The fist released its hold, and the two men walked towards the front of the library.

Lois followed—staying behind the cover of the tall shelves. Near the end of the row, she crouched low and pretended to be examining the spines of the row of books. She glanced surreptitiously to her left and saw the two Aussies walk out of the library—straight past where Mayson Drake still stood.

* * *

Mayson waited for five long minutes in the vain hope that Albert would appear—and each passing moment served only to darken her mood. The hostage situation had taken so long to reach a conclusion, not only had it wasted her time, but it had also ensured that even the most slothful of editors had managed to get a reporter on the scene—which meant that her story wouldn't be an exclusive.

She really needed to talk to Superman and make him aware that she wanted prior knowledge of his exploits. That would be just the start. Later, she was sure she would think of other ways to use his powers to her advantage.

Although clearly, the man lacked intelligence. She'd expected him to realise she had the green rock and seek her out with a clumsy attempt at negotiation.

Instead… nothing.

Linda King hadn't seen fit to mention anything in her report that would tarnish the perfection of her grand event.

The spandex twins didn't seem particularly perturbed by Superman's collapse as he had walked up the aisle.

It was as if the entire episode hadn't happened.

This morning, Mayson had had the ideal opportunity for a quiet word with Superman regarding the green rock—except his wife had been there, acting like a celebrity just because she'd married an alien.

A trickle of satisfaction oozed through Mayson's despondency. It had taken just one look from her for Superman's wife to begin to scratch and hiss like a jealous alley cat guarding a chunk of meat. Mayson would remember that—provoking the pink floozy could prove to be an entertaining sideline to the serious business of capitalising on the green rock.

Mayson's fleeting good cheer dissolved as she recalled her encounter with Clark at his apartment. He'd totally rejected her and had even gone so far as to say he was in love with the woman in Melbourne. Mayson shook her head in bewilderment.

And now, to top off a dismal day, she'd missed her meeting with Albert.

Two men walked past her, and she caught a trickle of their conversation.

"… and Voss take home Charlie, we'll all be winners."

The coarse accent reminded her of Scardino, and she glanced into the faces of the two men. It wasn't Scardino—just two of his boorish countrymen.

With a sigh, Mayson accepted that Albert wasn't coming—or, more likely, had already left. She headed for the door—and back to the newsroom to write up a meaningless story about an inept gunman, dithering cops, and an overly cautious alien.

* * *

From the cover of the tall bookshelves, Lois watched the blonde figure of Mayson Drake leave the library.

Lois took down another book from the shelf and rustled through it, her mind in turmoil. If any of what she'd heard from the expat Aussies was true, this was going to shake the foundations of footy. Every year, there were rumours of leaks leading up to Brownlow Medal night, but almost inevitably, they turned out to be nothing more than some educated guesswork. What were the chances a sound technician could put hidden bugs in the umpires' rooms? The same bloke couldn't do every ground. There would have to be a few of them in on the scam.

And when more than one person knew something, the rumours usually gained momentum.

But Lois had heard nothing.

Perhaps that was because she had been so engrossed in Operation Payback.

And Clark.

Clark!

If Mayson was back from the hospital, Clark would be, too. And if he arrived at his apartment to find her gone, he was going to worry.

From her bag, her mobile sounded. She saw it was from Clark and disconnected the call without answering. She hurriedly punched in a text. *'I'm safe. Be there in five.'*

As she walked briskly through the busy streets of Metropolis, her mind was half a world away.

What Bazza had said… It was possible… not probable, but possible.

But it was more probable than the likelihood that information overheard in a Metropolis library could land her the biggest story of her career.

* * *

"Lois!"

She was still ten metres from his door when Clark emerged and sprinted towards her.

"What happened?" he said as he reached her, anxiety clouding his expression. "Where were you?"

Lois met him with a quick kiss and then took his hand and led him into his apartment. "It's OK," she said. "I'm fine. I was just doing some research."

"Research?"

Lois reached across him and closed the door. She put her hand on his chest and smiled at him. "Yes," she said calmly. "I was doing some research for your story about Nigel St John and the Boss."

Clark, however, was not calm, and he was becoming less so with every passing second. "Lois," he said with undisguised displeasure. "I can't believe you would take a risk like that."

"I can't believe you expected me to stay here like a well-trained puppy."

Lois saw him flinch at her words and regretted them immediately. She wasn't completely sure where such antagonism had sprung from, but now that it had been verbalised, there was no obvious path of retreat.

"What if someone saw you?" Clark demanded.

"What if they did, Clark?" she said, trying desperately for the middle ground that would neither provoke nor concede. "Who's going to recognise me? Lois Lane has never been to Metropolis in her life."

"There are security cameras everywhere, Lois. It only needs one person to identify you, and the secret—*both* our secrets—are threatened."

Lois knew the prime source of his irritation was concern for her safety, but she wasn't ready to surrender her right to make her own decisions. She did know that they couldn't do this now. "Clark," she said, careful to keep all overtures of confrontation from her tone, "I can see that you're upset, but I don't want to have an argument with you now. I'm tired, and in my world, morning is just a few hours away. Would you please take me home so I can get some sleep?"

He paused, and she could see he was sorely tempted to reiterate his uneasiness.

"Please, Clark," she said wearily. "If you still want to, we can discuss this tomorrow, but if we have this conversation now, we are going to end up arguing."

"You shouldn't have left the apartment," he stated harshly. Despite his tone, there wasn't anger in his eyes, but fear.

"Take me home," she begged. "Please. I need sleep, and you need to get to the Planet."

He lifted her into his arms. Clutching her bag, Lois closed her eyes, hoping that would be enough for Clark to realise that the trip over the Pacific was not going to be the opportunity to continue this discussion.

A few minutes later, they were in her unit in Melbourne. "G'night, Clark," she said. She reached up and kissed him briefly, and then, without giving him the opportunity to respond, she walked into her bedroom and collapsed into her bed.

* * *

Lois's alarm clock pulled her from sleep just a few hours later, and she groaned as the events of yesterday inundated her tired brain. She didn't need to open her eyes to know she was alone. Refusing to dwell on the emptiness of the cold side of the bed, she hauled her protesting body from the cocoon of warmth and headed to the bathroom.

Half an hour later, she left her unit and took the train to Flinders Street. It felt like old times—getting up alone and commuting into the city with thousands of other workers.

"Hey, Flinders," Bluey said as she crossed the newsroom towards Browny's office. "What are you doing here? Have you given up on Hawthorn?"

"Not yet, Bluey," she replied lightly.

"Dunno if you'll get your job back," Banjo said with an overdone wink. "Spencer is the real deal."

"Yep." Lois tapped on Browny's door and entered his office.

Her editor looked up with a smile. "Well," he said. "Look what the cat dragged in. What do you want, Flinders?"

Lois pulled the chair closer to his desk and sat down. "I have what could either be absolutely nothing at all or could be one of the biggest footy stories since Barassi left Melbourne to go to Carlton."

She had Browny's full attention. "OK," he said. "Tell me what you know."

"Clark was in a library in Metropolis, and he heard—"

Browny's loud chortle cut across her words. "*Clark* heard this in a library in Metropolis?" he asked incredulously. "A footy story? In a library? In *Metropolis*?"

"I know it sounds unlikely," Lois admitted. "But there were two men talking, and one of them told the other about a Brownlow leak."

Browny's eyes narrowed, and he stared at her as if weighing her words. "Flinders," he said, "there's a rumoured Brownlow leak every single year."

"This one was specific."

"Go on."

"Three-way tie for the win and a roughie to make the top ten."

"That's all? Or do you have specific names?"

"I have names."

Browny waited, still obviously teetering between grudging acceptance and scepticism. "Go on."

"McKernan, Hird, and Voss to tie."

The editor took a moment to ponder that. "That's entirely possible. Hird and Voss are champions, and McKernan has had a stellar year."

"I know," Lois conceded. "He also said that Salmon would come top ten."

"Gazza told me that you mentioned Salmon the other day."

"I did," Lois said. She tried to read Browny's face. "You don't think there's anything in it?"

He didn't reply immediately. "Did Clark say how this bloke knew?"

"Apparently, the sound technicians who did the umpires' mics rigged up hidden bugs in the umpires' rooms and listened in while they did the votes after the games."

"At every ground?"

"The bloke said it was every ground, but you wouldn't need to do every ground. You'd need to cover the top teams and anyone who was having a great year."

"Have you checked with the betting agencies? Has there been a splurge on any of those players? Or on a tied result?"

"I haven't checked. I wasn't sure if asking questions would arouse suspicions."

Browny nodded thoughtfully. "I'm not sure about this, Flinders," he said. "The AFL go to such great lengths to keep the votes secret."

"But that's *after* the umpires have voted. This is before."

"OK," he said. "It won't be hard to check it out."

"By looking for the bugs?"

Browny nodded. "I assume you want to follow up? Despite the merger vote being only four days away?"

"Do you think it's worth following up?" Lois said, trying to smother her relief that her editor hadn't immediately dismissed her information.

"We'd look like galahs if this is true and we did nothing."

"Yeah."

"OK," Browny said, suddenly decisive. "I'll organise a meeting for you with the AFL. You can tell them what you know, and we'll see if we can find evidence of the hidden bugs. If we can't, no harm done. If we can, we have a story."

"Do we have to go through the AFL?" Lois asked dubiously.

"Yeah, we do, Flinders," Browny said.

"But—"

"This is too big for us to investigate, Flinders. We can't demand entrance to the 'G and Waverley—not to mention the interstate grounds. It's not just the AFL. If this has happened, it's a police matter. Unauthorised surveillance for the purposes of financial gain is an offence."

"I could get into the 'G," Lois insisted. "I've been through the tunnels under the stands a thousand times. I could find the room the umpires use, and I could locate the hidden bugs." She didn't add that all of that would be easier with a flying, superfast husband who could see through walls.

"No, Lois," Browny said firmly. "If you do that, not only will they slap you with a trespassing charge, but you are also going to be the number one suspect when it comes to finding who put the bugs there. It's going to look like we tried to use totally unethical means to set up a story, and all with no thought to undermining the integrity of the Brownlow voting process."

"I don't trust the AFL."

"Lois, you're telling me you know who wins this year's Brownlow. Your explanation for how you know is shaky at best, and although I'm sure Clark will support your story, that's not going to hold much water with either the AFL or the police."

"Can't we just go straight to the police? Cut the AFL out of this?"

"We could," Browny said slowly. "But I have a paper to run, and it's not a good idea to offside the AFL."

"They will do anything to keep their image untarnished," Lois said, not making much effort to contain her bitterness.

"If they felt as if they had been backed into a corner and had the choice between nailing someone they employed and nailing a pesky reporter, there are no prizes for guessing which way the finger will be pointing."

Lois groaned. "I didn't think of that," she said. "I didn't sleep much last night."

"We have to do this by the book," Browny said.

"Will the AFL try to stop us printing what we know?"

"We have to accept that there will be some restrictions. We'll have to agree to withhold all the names. The AFL could take out an injunction to stop the entire story, but I don't think they will because that would risk a rumour-mill frenzy. They are going to be willing to do almost anything to keep those names under wraps."

"So the story will be that the sound techies *tried* to find out the umpires' votes… not that they did?"

"That's my take," Browny said as he rubbed his hand across his chin. "If we get the evidence to support this, we'll have a huge story. Printing the names will only damage footy and cheapen Brownlow night."

"And neither of us wants that."

"You don't have to worry about the legalities," Browny said. "That's my job. You just get the story."

Lois fidgeted with her bag. "Do you think I'm up to it?" she asked quietly. "I haven't done anything like this before."

Browny's snort dragged her eyes from her bag and to him. "If I didn't think you were up to it, I would already have Banjo in here," he said.

"Thanks."

"You realise that if they find anything, the police will want to talk to Clark?"

"That's OK; he'll be here on Sunday for the merger vote on Monday."

"And they might want both of you to sign to say you won't place any bets, and you won't tell anyone what you know. Would that be OK?"

Lois nodded. That was the least of her concerns.

"Give me a few minutes to make the calls," Browny said.

"What are you going to tell the AFL?"

"That you have heard about a possible situation, and in the spirit of goodwill, we're offering them a chance to be involved from the beginning of the investigation."

"Thanks, Browny. Thanks for listening and taking this seriously."

"You're a smart kid, Flinders. And Rubber's no fool." Browny grinned. "I guess it's a good thing he spent time here. Otherwise, he wouldn't have understood what they were talking about."

Lois stood from the chair. "How long do you think it will take to get the meeting arranged?"

"You know the AFL—never particularly accommodating unless it benefits them."

"I have something else I want to chase up," Lois said. "Would it be OK if I leave, and you ring me when you've organised a meeting?"

"Sure." Browny picked up his phone. "Oh, Flinders?"

"Yeah?"

"Good job. And it's nice that Rubber's still working for the Herald Sun—even from Metropolis."

"Yeah," she said, swallowing down her dejection as she remembered how she and Clark had parted.

Once out of the newsroom, Lois rang Seb, and when he confirmed he was still in Melbourne, arranged to meet him for coffee.

After she'd hung up, she paused, her mobile still in her hand. On impulse, she decided.

'I love you and I'm sorry I worried you.'

She sent the text to Clark. "And I wish you were here," she added. "Because right now, I could use a partner."

* * *

Seb crossed Melbourne's City Square and entered the cafe. He quickly located Lois in the far corner and wound a path through the tables towards her.

She stood and greeted him with a smile. A weary smile. His nagging worries flared to life again.

Seb reached over and kissed her cheek. "You look tired," he said.

"I've been chasing a story."

They both sat down. "I thought you were working with Operation Payback."

"I am."

Maybe that explained her tiredness.

A waiter arrived with a cappuccino for Lois, a latte for him, and a plate containing a large vanilla slice cut into two unequal parts. "You want the big bit?" Seb asked.

Lois grinned, and some of her usual cheerfulness seeped into her expression. "When have I ever wanted the big bit?"

He shrugged. "I reckon it's polite to ask."

"How was your date with Chris?" Lois asked. "And why are you still in Melbourne?"

Seb chuckled. Even when tired, Lois always got straight to the point. "Which date?" he said.

She broke into a delighted grin. "There's been more than one date?"

"Three," he said. "And I'm meeting her for lunch today." He took a bite of the vanilla slice.

"Four dates?" Lois exclaimed. "In three days? I guess that explains why you haven't managed to drag yourself away from Melbourne yet."

Seb decided to let that pass without comment. "I'm going back to Sydney this arvo," he said.

"Do you need a lift to the airport?"

"Nah. Mum's taking me. But thanks."

"So you and Chris?" Lois persisted. "It's going well?"

He gave her a half smile that stopped short of admitting anything. "Why did you want to see me?" he asked. "Somehow, I doubt it's just because you needed to share our zillionth vanilla slice."

"I need information."

"About what?"

"Ecstasy."

That word clanged alarm through Seb's brain. "Lois," he grated, "what is going on?"

"It's for a story," she said.

He eyed her for a long moment. She stared back at him, not flinching under his scrutiny. Her secrets worried him—but if those secrets were somehow linked with drug abuse, that would just about kill him. "What do you want to know?" he asked.

"Is it made locally? Or is it usually smuggled into a country?"

He stifled his exclamation and shook his head. "Lois," he rasped, "you are really worrying me."

She nonchalantly licked a dollop of custard from her thumb. "Seb," she said, "you know me. You know I wouldn't be involved in anything like that."

"You don't have to be *using* the stuff for it to be dangerous, Lois. The people who make huge profits from the drug trade are not going to blink twice at the thought of shutting up a nosy journo."

"This is Clark's story, Seb," Lois said. "He's investigating the murder of a man in Metropolis. The man lived in Cornwall in England before moving to the States in 1990. A few weeks after he left, there—"

"There was a huge bust," Seb said. "I remember reading about it. Did this bloke have anything to do with the operation?"

"Not that I can prove. But if he did, and he managed to avoid capture by shooting through, it could explain why his six years in the States are a complete blank. The first anyone heard of him was when his body was found under a pier."

"Perhaps whoever he double-crossed in England found him."

"Or he got involved in a similar business in Metropolis and upset someone there."

"What do you want to know?" Seb said.

"What do you know about the stuff? Do you know how it's made? Would it be possible to manufacture it in a city like Metropolis? Or would it be easier to import it?"

"I only really know about the effects and the dangers," Seb said. "But I have a mate in the Drug Squad. He's always worked in Australia, so I don't know if his knowledge would be helpful, but I'll find out what I can and get back to you."

Lois smiled. "Thanks. Could you ask him about the Cornwall bust? If any little piece of information didn't make the papers?"

Seb nodded and then sipped his latte as he pondered whether to raise the subject whittling at his brain. He decided there were already enough secrets between them. "Lois," he said, "I went to your place on Tuesday evening, and you weren't there."

He saw the unreadable expression that crossed her face before she was able to shut it down. "I was out," she said with just a hint of defensiveness.

"I know," Seb said. "But your neighbour saw me, and—"

"And she indulged in a little speculative gossip."

Seb nodded. "Lois," he said, "you asked me not to try to work out what is going on in your life, but the more I hear, the more concerned I get."

"I'm fine, Seb."

He sighed. "You told me that Chris guessed something about you that isn't true and you didn't correct her."

Lois nodded.

"Lois, this thing with Chris and me—it's serious, and I hope it's going to be long-term. I know she won't break a confidence, but there's a chance I will inadvertently say something to her that will alert her that you haven't been honest."

"I didn't lie."

"I didn't say you did." Seb sighed. "The truth is, Lois, I really don't want to be stuck between two women I care about. I don't want to be put in the position where I have to choose where my loyalty lies."

"Whoa," Lois said. "You really are serious about Chris."

He nodded. "I haven't told anyone else how I feel. Not Chris. Not my parents. But we've always trusted each other, Lois, and I don't want that to stop now."

"Chris thinks I'm involved with a Hawthorn footballer."

"Lois!" He took a breath, hoping it would give him some time to moderate his reaction. "Does Chris know about Clark?"

"No."

"Dad told me Clark is coming for the vote."

"He is."

"Chris will be at the meeting. She's a member. She'll be voting. How are you going to explain Clark?"

"I haven't worked that out yet."

"Well, you've got four days."

Lois nodded. "I know." From her bag, her mobile sounded, and with a nod of apology, she reached for it and answered it. She listened for a few moments, and then said, "OK, Browny. Thanks. I'll be there in half an hour." She returned the phone to her bag. "Sorry," she said. "I gotta go."

"Lois, this isn't about the drugs, is it?" Seb asked. "I have an appointment now, but if this has anything to do with drugs, I'm coming with you."

"No," Lois said, rising from the table. "This is a footy story."

Seb left a ten-dollar note on the counter as they passed. "I thought you were only doing weekend match reports."

"This is a huge story," Lois said over her shoulder as they stepped from the cafe. "If it breaks, it will be the biggest story of my career."

"So this has nothing to do with the drugs, nothing to do with why you need info about ecstasy, nothing to do with why Chris thinks you're with a Hawthorn footballer, and nothing to do with why you came to my shop in the middle of the night asking for a chunk of opal?"

"No."

"Lois," Seb said, lifting his hands in exasperation, "you make my life look simple."

"Tell me about it," she said wearily.

He put his hand on her shoulder to halt her footsteps. "You know I'm always here for you."

Lois smiled, but Seb could tell it was strained. "Thanks, Sebby Boy."

He watched her walk away, wishing she would let him help her.

Part 54

Clark quickly finished tightening the knot of his tie and reached into his pocket for his cell phone. When he saw that he had a received message, his heart accelerated a little.

Those few moments after Lois had returned to his apartment had replayed time and again in his mind. He'd tried

to convince himself that it was a minor disagreement which could be—and would be—easily resolved, but he hadn't been able to decide the best course of action. Should he contact her? Should he wait for her to contact him? Should he arrive in Melbourne after his work at the Daily Planet as if nothing had happened?

A series of emergencies had decided for him, and he hadn't contacted Lois. Now, he wondered if that had been a mistake.

He opened the message and read it.

'I love you and I'm sorry I worried you.'

Clark reread the message twice as relief washed over him. He replied quickly.

'I love you too and I'm sorry for how I reacted. Should finish here in about 2 hours.'

He sent the text and turned on his computer to begin the work Clark Kent should have been doing while Superman was rescuing people from a multicar pileup, foiling a drugstore robbery, and clearing a massive fallen oak tree from the road.

* * *

Lois was shown to a plush room with expansive windows that overlooked the sprawling city. Three people were already seated at the large timber table—two AFL representatives dressed in business suits and a police detective in smart black trousers and a short-sleeved blue shirt.

Lois wondered if it would have been wise to change out of her jeans and into something more formal.

The older of the AFL representatives made the introductions. Lois smiled tightly, hoping she didn't look as out of place as she felt. They nodded back, and it seemed to her that all three considered this a waste of their time.

"Mr Brown has made the terms of this meeting very clear," the older AFL administrator said to Lois.

She settled more comfortably into her seat and eyed him steadily. She didn't know what part—if any—these particular administrators had had in pushing forward the merger between Hawthorn and Melbourne, but right now, she didn't trust any of them.

"The agreement is that you tell us what has led you to making allegations and we refrain from commenting to any other media organisation until tomorrow after the morning edition of your paper."

"I haven't made any allegations," Lois said.

The younger AFL administrator pinned her with hard, cold eyes. "Mr Brown said you have information concerning impropriety within the AFL," he said. "We are all busy men, and so far, we've heard nothing that necessitates this meeting."

Somehow, Lois managed to refrain from retorting that if he had something else he needed to do now, he could read about this in tomorrow's *Herald Sun*.

The eyes of all three men settled on Lois. She took a deep breath.

"Mr Clark Kent, a reporter from the Daily Planet in Metropolis, USA, was here on exchange for five weeks," Lois said, keeping her words cool and unemotional. "He has returned home, and yesterday, he was in a library in Metropolis when he overheard a conversation between two men. One of the men claimed to know the result of this year's Brownlow."

Both AFL administrators gaped with indignant protest. "That is ludicrous," the older one said. "You've brought us here based on an unsubstantiated rumour heard in a library in America?" He smirked. "Next you'll be telling us what the drunken lout said when he was propped up in a bar in Timbuktu."

Lois said nothing as she tried to sweep away her annoyance so she could concentrate on presenting her information in a professional manner.

The detective spoke. "Was anything said about how they knew this information?"

"Do we really need to go any further with this?" the younger AFL representative said. "I think we've established that these claims are nothing more than an inexperienced reporter who got overexcited thinking she's stumbled on her first big story."

The detective turned to him. "Any attempt to procure information that could be used for advantage in placing bets is a police matter," he said unwaveringly. "I will be asking Ms Lane questions about this matter. We can do it here, in your presence, or Ms Lane and I can continue this discussion at the police station and the AFL will be duly informed of the outcome of my investigation."

Both administrators gasped.

"Please continue, Ms Lane," the detective said.

"He said the sound technicians who worked on the umpires' mics had placed hidden surveillance equipment in the umpires' rooms and listened as they discussed their votes after the games."

The detective jotted some notes. "This involves all grounds?" he asked. "The 'G? Waverley? The 'Gabba? Subiaco? Football Park? SCG?"

Lois nodded.

"OK," the detective said. "I'll organise simultaneous raids at the AFL grounds."

The older AFL administrator lurched to his feet. "Hold on," he said. "This needs to be handled very carefully. We can't have a bunch of cops running around saying there's been a Brownlow leak."

"This is no longer an AFL matter," the detective said. "It's a police matter. And you can be sure that our members will conduct themselves in a professional manner."

"But -"

The detective smiled at Lois. "Would you mind accompanying me to the station?" he asked. "It shouldn't take too long to organise the raids, and when the results come in, you'll be on hand to get the information you need for your story."

"There might not be any story," the older administrator said derisively.

"We have an agreement with Paul Brown about what can and can't be printed," the younger AFL administrator added, looking more than slightly flustered.

"And I'm sure that agreement will be honoured," the detective said smoothly.

"The AFL expects to be kept fully informed of the outcome of the investigation."

"Naturally," the detective said.

Lois stood and followed him to the door. The older AFL rep barred their way. "If there has been a leak," he said, "the AFL need assurance that no sensitive information will be released to the public."

"I'm sure that was addressed in the agreement between Ms Lane's editor and the AFL legal team," the detective said. "Excuse us, please."

The man stepped aside, and as Lois followed the cop out of AFL House, she pulled out her silenced mobile, hoping Clark had replied to her text.

He had.

'I love you too and I'm sorry for how I reacted. Should finish here in about 2 hours.'

Lois smiled, optimistic that the disagreement with Clark could be overcome with a little communication—of both the verbal and physical variety. Except—she groaned inaudibly—there was no way she was going to be finished in two hours.

At the car, the cop opened the passenger door for her.

"Thanks, detective," she said.

"Call me Ben," he said with a smile.

"Thanks." She had been given the names of the three men at the beginning of the meeting, but in the stress of being in the spotlight, she had forgotten almost immediately. "I'm Lois."

Ben climbed into the driver's seat. "I'll need to know everything you have on the two blokes in the library," he said. "And we'll have to deal with a few issues, such as you not profiting from anything you might know. I thought it best we didn't do that in front of the AFL reps."

"Thanks."

"You can't trust 'em as far as you can kick 'em," he said with sudden vehemence.

Lois looked at him questioningly.

Ben pulled up the short sleeve of his shirt. On his bicep was a tattoo. It was the proud lion logo of the Fitzroy Football Club.

* * *

Seb knocked on the door next to Lois's, still tussling with indecision. There was definite potential for this to backfire horribly, but he needed to alleviate some of the pressure on Lois and getting the nosy neighbour off her back seemed like a start.

The neighbour opened the door and stared at him in surprise.

"Hi," he said.

"Seb," she said. "I don't think Lois is in."

"She isn't. But it's you I wanted to see."

Her immediate spark of interest nearly caused Seb to turn and run, but he held his ground. "What can I do for you?" the woman asked with a suggestive wink. "You know you're always welcome to park your shoes under my bed."

"You told me about the guy in Lois's unit?" Seb said.

The woman's immaculately shaped eyebrow arched. "She's finally admitted to having some on the side? Are you going to tell Clark?"

Seb lifted his hand to silence her. "Lois is on the verge of a really big story. She works in footy—most of the people in footy are male."

"She's *sleeping* her way to a story?" the woman squeaked. "With a footballer? Or a coach? Or one of—"

"No!" Seb dropped his hand and slipped it into the pocket of his jeans. "No, she's not sleeping with anyone."

"It sounds like she's sleeping with—"

"She's working on a story, and if she's seen in public with her sources, it's going to be a problem."

"You're trying to tell me Lois has guys in her unit so she can talk with them to get this story she's working on?"

Seb nodded. "And I know you're concerned about Clark getting hurt, but it would be really nice if you could—"

"*That's* why Clark wasn't upset when I told him? He knows about this?"

"Yeah."

"How do they get into her unit without being seen?"

"Lois needs to protect her sources. They can't just waltz up the driveway."

Esmeralda hesitated. "It's a big story?"

Seb had the feeling he was being sucked helplessly into a whirlpool that kept getting bigger and bigger. "I'm not sure when it will hit the papers, but—"

"Why didn't Lois tell me this when I accused her of cheating on Clark?"

"She has to keep it quiet," Seb said. "She doesn't want some other journo stealing her story."

"Then why are you telling me?"

This was firmer ground. "Because I've just had coffee with Lois, and she's under a lot of pressure. She's been working with Operation Payback, and she's really worried about the merger vote, and she's scared that she's going to lose her club."

"And she's probably missing Clark," the woman said with a level of empathy that was truly surprising.

"She is."

There was a silence, and Seb wondered if there was a way to leave without advertising his eagerness to escape.

"Thanks for telling me," she said.

"You'll keep it under your hat?"

"Yeah."

"And you'll cut Lois a break? She really needs it right now."

"OK."

"Thanks." Seb turned to go.

"My name is Esmeralda."

Seb shrugged with a self-conscious smile. "Sorry. I should have remembered."

"You might not remember my name, but if you come in, you'll never forget my—"

"Gotta go," Seb said. He turned and sprinted down the driveway without a backward glance.

* * *

"OK, the raids are organised and will happen simultaneously at two o'clock," Ben told Lois as he replaced the phone. "I still need to ask you some preliminary questions about the two men your friend overheard. We'll probably have to talk to him when he arrives in Melbourne." He smiled. "But I think it's well past lunchtime."

Lois nodded her agreement. She hadn't bothered with breakfast, and her only food today had been one third of a vanilla slice.

"What would you like?" Ben asked. "There's a milk bar down the road that will deliver to the station. Usual fare—pies, pasties, sausage rolls, hot dogs."

"A chicken pie?" Lois asked.

He grinned and picked up the phone again. "I'll order it."

* * *

"My flight leaves in two hours," Seb said mournfully. "Mum'll be here soon to take me to the airport."

"I know."

The only heartening aspect of his imminent departure was that Chris seemed equally crestfallen by their coming separation. Seb picked a piece of bacon from the Aussie pizza they were sharing. "I've had three wonderful days with you."

Chris answered his smile. "Me, too. I'm sorry I had to work yesterday and today."

"I couldn't completely take over your life," Seb said. "And anyway, I had some other stuff to see to while I was here."

"You'll be back Monday night for the vote?"

Seb nodded. "Will you go out with me on Tuesday?" he asked. "Whatever the outcome of the vote?"

"Yes," Chris agreed.

"Thanks." He wanted to steer the conversation away from Hawthorn's possible merger with Melbourne—it was the only subject they'd found where they disagreed. "Chris, there's something I need to tell you."

"OK."

Seb took a deep breath. This, too, could backfire, and this time, he could find himself under attack from two

directions. “It’s about Lois. She isn’t with a Hawthorn footballer.”

Chris tried to cover her surprise. “Lois’s private life is none of my business,” she said.

“Lois feels really bad that you jumped to that conclusion. There’s stuff going on in her life that she can’t tell anyone, so when you assumed, she didn’t correct you.”

A fine layer of pink had crossed Chris’s cheeks. “I feel like a fool,” she said.

“Don’t,” Seb said quickly. “Lois is one of the most honest people I know. But there’s one thing she values more than honesty, and that’s loyalty. That’s why she’s willing to lie to protect someone she cares about.”

“But *someone* was with—”

“She’s working on a huge footy story.”

“Does it have anything to do with Hawthorn’s merger?”

“I don’t know the exact nature of the story,” Seb said. “She wouldn’t tell me anything other than if it breaks open, it will be the biggest footy story in years.”

Chris released a low whistle. “She was with Browny this morning. I wasn’t expecting her in the newsroom until the weekend. When she walked out, they both looked preoccupied.”

“Please don’t be upset with her,” Seb said. “She hates that she misled you.”

“You know, there were times when I sensed she was unduly uncomfortable. I thought she just didn’t want to talk about her private life.”

“She does have someone,” Seb said. “Someone I think she loves a lot. You might meet him this weekend—that’s why I needed to tell you the truth.”

“If I’d seen Lois with someone else, that would have confused me a lot,” Chris said. “Lois doesn’t seem like the sort of person who would be involved with two men at once.”

“She’s not,” Seb said.

“Is he nice? The man you think Lois loves?”

“He’s a good bloke. He’s an American who worked at the Herald Sun for a few weeks.” Seb smiled. “That was long enough for him to fall in love with Lois.”

“Falling in love doesn’t have to take a long time,” Chris noted.

Her tone accelerated Seb’s heart. “No,” he said. “It can happen in an instant.”

Their eyes met and held as his heart catapulted wildly around his chest. He swallowed, his mouth dry. “I was wondering if… if you’d mind if I kissed you ‘goodbye’.”

Chris blushed a little, but she didn’t look totally against the idea. “I’d like that.”

His tongue ran nervously along his upper lip. “Perhaps we should do it now…”

She grinned. “Don’t you want your mum to witness our first kiss?”

“Preferably not,” he admitted.

Chris leant towards him, and her lips touched his.

* * *

Clark frowned as he read Mayson’s story about the gunman in the hospital.

She’d managed to write it in such a way that the presence of Superman appeared to have been a hindrance to achieving the desired outcome. He read and reread her story and couldn’t pinpoint a sentence that was unfair, but the pitch of her story was discernibly negative.

Of course, she didn’t know that the reason he hadn’t been able to see into the hospital was the jumble of lead pipes that ran through the walls. And because he didn’t want that information to become public knowledge, he was stuck with a report that made it sound as if his ineptitude had caused the incident to go longer than it needed to, thereby increasing the trauma for the young patients.

Actually, that assessment wasn’t completely unreasonable, Clark admitted.

No one had been injured, and the gunman had been captured, but for the first time, there had been disagreement between Superman and the police. He’d believed he had the speed to go in and keep everyone safe regardless of what happened. They had argued that he couldn’t take out a bomb and prevent shootings at the same time.

They still didn’t completely trust him—not when it involved the lives of their citizens. They hadn’t forgotten that he wasn’t like them. He was different.

Superman had appeared a lot recently, and Clark had begun to feel more relaxed when in the suit.

This had felt like a big step backwards.

He’d come away from the hospital feeling as he had so many times in the past—that whatever he did, he wouldn’t quite fit on Earth. He’d tried to quell his uneasiness by thinking ahead to his apartment where he would find Lois’s welcoming arms and soft mouth. Instead, it had been empty.

Paralysing fear had beset him as horrific possibilities had attacked his mind. Someone had taken her. Someone was hurting her. Someone was going to threaten her in an attempt to control him.

He'd been negotiating with the police and pandering to a gunman whose bomb hadn't even been particularly well-made, when his wife had needed him.

He couldn't even put words to what they might do to her, but his imagination provided graphic pictures.

He'd snatched his phone and called her cell, hoping it would work in Metropolis. He'd heard it ring, and his heart had plunged when the call had been disconnected.

He hadn't known what to do. Then, his cell had beeped, and her message had come through, and Clark had sunk onto his couch, his head in his hands as his galloping heart had pulsed burning blood through his veins.

She was OK.

This time.

Clark pulled his mind from his recollections and refocused on Mayson's story. He wanted to put the paper to bed and get to Melbourne. He would arrive mid-afternoon, hours earlier than the time Lois usually returned from Operation Payback.

But perhaps today, she could come home early. Last night, she would have gotten only a few hours' sleep.

He could hope.

Because his heart ached for her.

* * *

"*Moke?*"

Lois jumped at the sharpness of Ben's exclamation.

"Sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have shouted."

"You didn't," Lois said. "But you startled me."

He grinned. "Let's go back one step. The bloke in the black shirt, the bloke who was demanding money—the other guy called him 'Moke'?"

"Yes," Lois said. "That's what Clark said."

"Lois Lane," Ben said. "I think I love you."

"Excuse me?"

He just grinned wider at her confusion. "Have you heard of Marcus Kendray?"

"Ah… yeah… he's the bloke… he was in the horse-betting scam a couple of years ago, wasn't he?"

"That's him." Ben replaced his coffee on his desk. "Marcus Kendray—his 'friends' call him 'Moke'."

"He has friends?"

"Not in the sense most people have friends," Ben said with a smile. "He was an illegal bookie who was always willing to give credit to anyone down on their luck."

"Except that usually makes the debt bigger?"

"Usually," Ben said. "And Marcus doesn't take kindly to being owed money."

"What did he do?" Lois asked, trying to reconcile this conversation with the man she'd seen through the bookshelves in the Metropolis library only a few hours ago.

"The lucky ones, he strangles until they're unconscious," Ben said. "The unlucky ones never wake up."

Lois shuddered as she remembered the powerful muscles on the arms of the man wearing the black shirt. "You think Moke is *that* Marcus Kendray?"

"He had to go somewhere," Ben said. "We've been suspicious that he left Oz. We stopped finding bodies with a pretty row of bruises around the neck." He chuckled. "He probably thinks he's quite safe in Metropolis."

"Probably," Lois said. "If it is him, will you be able to get him extradited from the States?"

"Shouldn't be a problem at all."

"That's assuming they can find him," Lois said, already thinking Superman could help.

Ben scratched his chin. "This bloke, Clark—you said he worked at the Herald Sun for a few weeks?"

"Yep."

"Was it an exchange situation?"

"Yep." Ben's meaning hit Lois, and she smiled as she reached into her bag for her mobile. She tapped in the numbers and waited.

"Dan Scardino," came the answering voice.

"Hi, Dan. It's Lois."

"Lois." His surprise was strong enough to stretch across the continent. "How are you?"

"I'm good, thanks. You?"

"Great. It's good to hear from you, Lois. What can I do for you?"

"Dan, I need some information."

"Sure. What do you need to know?"

"Where do the Aussies hang out in Metropolis?"

"At a place called 'The Undercurrent'," Dan said. "It's an Irish Pub with great beer and friendly barmaids."

"Thanks, Dan."

"S'OK, Lois," Dan said. "Good luck on Monday with the vote."

"Thanks." Lois hung up and grinned at Ben. "The Undercurrent," she said. "Do you think Kendray would be stupid enough to mingle with the Aussies?"

"Yes, I do," Ben said with a grin. "Homesickness is a powerful thing."

* * *

Clark closed down his computer and left the dimmed and deserted newsroom. He climbed the stairs, emerged onto the roof, and flew to Melbourne.

* * *

Ben put another cup of steaming coffee in front of Lois and glanced at his watch. "We should hear something soon," he said.

"Thanks for letting me wait here," Lois said. "I'm on tenterhooks about whether I have a story or not."

"Even if the sweep comes up empty it doesn't mean the bugs were never there. The case may take longer to work, but if there's something there, we will find it."

"This is my first big story," Lois said.

"Do you only do sport?"

"Yeah."

"Get one of your colleagues to contact me tomorrow, and I'll make sure your paper gets the best of the information if we get Moke."

"Assuming it is Kendray."

"His name is 'Moke', and someone owed him money—that's a great start," Ben said. "It's the middle of the night in the US. We'll give them a call first thing in the morning for them. Hopefully Moke is spending his last few hours as a free man."

"What happens if you find evidence of bugs at the grounds?"

"We go from the AFL to the sound company to their technicians." Ben smiled. "It'll probably happen quickly. I'll keep you in the loop with emails."

"Thanks," Lois said. "Thanks for everything, Ben. You've made this really easy for me. Even when we were with the AFL administrators."

He smiled. "We footy fans have to stick together."

* * *

"Lois? Honey?"

There was no reply. Clark looked through the wall and into her bedroom in the desperate hope that she was making up for her extremely late night, but the unit was empty.

He pulled his cell from his pocket and looked at it, undecided. She was with Operation Payback, desperately trying to give Hawthorn a future beyond Monday. He really wanted to see her, but he didn't want it to appear as if he expected her to drop everything just because he was available to be with her.

Except he needed her.

He decided to have a shower and change into some jeans and a casual shirt. He'd do it at normal speed. By then, perhaps it would be late enough in the afternoon that he could call her and ask if there was any possibility of her coming home early.

* * *

"This is my wife," Ben said as he showed Lois the photograph in his wallet. "And those two little cuties are our twin daughters."

Lois looked at the photo of the indigenous woman and the two girls with light-brown skin. "They are adorable," she said, not having to exaggerate at all.

Ben grinned proudly. "Lucky for me they take after their mother," he said. "Even luckier for them." He snapped shut his wallet and replaced it in his pocket. "Sometimes people are surprised when I show them that photo. I guess that's not what they expect from a white guy."

"I think love is more important than anything else."

He smiled. "You'd consider a mixed marriage?"

Lois chuckled. Was marriage to an alien considered 'mixed'? "I'm in love with an American," she said.

The shrill of Ben's phone cut across their laughter. He lifted the phone to his ear. He listened for a moment, his smile growing wider. "Thanks." He replaced the phone. "Got 'em," he said to Lois.

"Got 'em?"

"Bugs at every ground." Ben shook his head in bewilderment. "They left them there, probably intending to use them again next year."

"Will you need to talk to Clark?"

"Probably not. How we knew to look for evidence is not as important as the evidence itself—particularly when it's this conclusive." He smiled. "It was a lucky break for both

the Victoria Police and the AFL when your friend overheard that conversation. As the details come to hand, I'll email them to you."

Lois stood. "Thanks, Ben."

Ben shook her hand. "Good luck with the vote on Monday. I hope Hawthorn survive."

"Are you gonna barrack for the Brisbane Lions?"

He thought for a moment. "If it were just me, I might," he said. "But I want my girls to barrack for a local club."

"Have you chosen one yet?"

"Tell you what," Ben said with a smile. "If the Hawthorn Hawks are still in existence on Tuesday morning, you send me a membership application, and you'll have yourself four new members."

Lois beamed. "How old are you daughters?"

"Three years old."

"I'll send you two little Hawk jumpers, as well."

* * *

"Browny?"

"How's it going, Flinders?"

She leaned back against the shop window, her mobile phone tight against her ear as the noise of the late-afternoon crowd flowed past her. "The story held up. Everything."

"Everything?"

"Yep. And a possible bonus that no one expected."

"Struth, Flinders. That's amazing—and to think Clark heard it…" Lois could easily imagine her editor shaking his head. "Are you coming in now to write it up?"

"I'd like to do it at home," Lois said. "If I come in, there are going to be questions, and I think I'll do better without a lot of interruptions. Is that OK?"

"Lois, you can write it up on the moon if you want to. Can you have it to me before seven?"

"Sure."

"Great work, Flinders."

"Thanks, Browny."

* * *

Clark secured a towel around his waist and wandered from the bathroom and into Lois's bedroom. He heard a noise behind him and a few seconds later, the key slipped into the lock of the front door.

It was Lois. It was her heartbeat.

Clark walked out of the bedroom.

She saw him and stopped.

She quarter smiled as their eyes met.

He half smiled—it was so good to see her.

Her smile widened to three-quarter strength, and her eyes dropped lower.

"You're home early," Clark said in a voice that wasn't quite steady.

"I have a story to write up," she said, her gaze meandering up to his face. "I'm hoping you will help me with it."

"Of course. What—"

"I have a deadline, but I reckon we have a few minutes to spare before getting started."

"OK."

"But only a short time," she said with an evocative look that sizzled his blood. "We're going to have to choose whether we want to talk over what happened last night, or whether we want to push that aside for a while and find other ways to make up."

Clark swallowed, not wanting her to know how much he *didn't* want to talk. Not right now. "Ah…"

Lois grinned. "Considering how you're dressed, I like the second option."

Without waiting for his reply, she reached forward and yanked the towel from his body.

Part 55

Lois finished a final reread of her story and looked at Clark for his reaction.

He'd already finished. "That's great, Lois," he said with an encouraging smile.

She was perched on his thigh, and his hand was slowly strumming up and down her back. "You think so?" she said, not able to suppress her qualms completely. "I've never written anything like this before."

His brown eyes were steady with sincerity. "It's brilliant."

Lois smiled. "Clark, I really appreciate your help. It was a lot easier having an investigative reporter right beside me."

"You did pretty well by yourself," he said. "You nailed a group of sound techs who were trying to subvert the Brownlow Medal process, and as a sideline, you helped the police locate a wanted murderer."

"We're not sure about the murderer yet," Lois cautioned. "The man I saw in the library might not be Marcus Kendray."

"But it could be," Clark said as he kissed her cheek. "Lois Lane—I think you have a natural talent for this."

"I was incredibly lucky to overhear what I did. The tough bit was writing it up so it was easily understandable." She smiled. "You were a great help."

"There's always an element of luck in chasing down a story. Sometimes a lead goes somewhere; sometimes it doesn't." Clark grinned. "Do I get to share the byline?"

"Do you want to?"

"No," he said, sobering. "I know you had to tell the police that I was the one who overheard the men in the library, but we shouldn't emphasise my involvement in this story."

"Pity," she said. "Lane and Kent—nice byline." She grinned. "Ah, well, you can share my bed instead."

"Hmmmm." Clark nuzzled into her neck and strung a line of kisses along her jaw. "That's a much better offer."

Lois put her hands on his shoulders to ease him away from her throat. "We should actually send the story," she reminded him.

"Oh… yeah… send it."

Lois grinned at the speed at which his mind had moved on from hidden bugs and Brownlow leaks. She sent the file to Browny.

Clark's lips had returned to her neck. "I didn't see you for over twelve hours."

"It's going to be twenty-four hours on Saturday when you're stuck on the flight to Melbourne."

"Don't remind me." He continued kissing her. "I missed you."

"Was it seeing me you missed? Or making love with me?"

He backed away and looked into her eyes. "Lois, honey, I love being intimate with you," he said solemnly. "But even more than that, I love being with you—whatever we're doing."

She folded her hand around his jaw. "I know," she said. "I was joking with you. The truth is that I love your fervour for many reasons—one being that I get to tease you about it."

Clark smiled in response, but it waned quickly. "We probably should talk. I didn't handle it too well when I got back to my apartment and found you missing."

"I left you a note."

"I didn't see it." He grimaced. "I didn't even think of looking for a note. As soon as I realised you weren't there, I just panicked. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too. I was tired, and I was really looking forward to telling you what I'd discovered. It was such a new experience for me, delving into old papers and trying to piece together what might have happened."

He brushed her hair back from her face. "You look like you enjoyed it," he said.

"I did."

"Were you researching Nigel St John?"

"Yes. I discovered that a few weeks after he left England, there was a drug bust in Cornwall near where he lived."

"Drugs?"

"Ecstasy. Imported from Europe."

"Do you have anything concrete to link St John with the operation that got busted?"

"No—other than place and timing."

Clark adjusted his glasses, and Lois knew he was trying to find a gracious way to tell her they'd need more than that.

"Do you ever get a gut feeling about something?" Lois asked.

"Sometimes," he admitted. "But Perry tends to insist on hard evidence."

"Then we'll keep looking until we find hard evidence."

Clark grinned. "Lois Lane, investigative reporter," he said. "One big story a day just isn't enough for her."

She smiled and kissed him. It was interrupted by the phone ringing, and they growled together.

"Don't they know I'm here with my husband and about to bed him?" Lois said with feigned irritation. She kissed Clark's chin, rose from his lap, and picked up the phone. "Lois Lane," she said.

"G'day, Lois. It's Seb."

"Seb," Lois said, smiling at the sound of his voice. "Have you managed to drag yourself back to Sydney?"

"Yeah," he said. "And I spoke with my mate from the Drug Squad. He made a few calls, and apparently one of the three guys who went down for the ecstasy operation started talking after he'd had a year in jail. He claimed there was a fourth person involved who had suddenly disappeared. There—"

"When? When did he disappear?"

"A few weeks before they were caught."

"A few weeks? Did the police follow it up?"

"Yeah—but there was no proof that this person even existed."

"Just like in Metropolis," Lois said. "Did you get anything else? Did the police talk with the other guys?"

"Yeah—they said there wasn't a fourth guy."

"Did he give a name of the missing man?"

"John Glisten."

"John?" Lois squeaked. She looked at Clark and said, "As in Nigel St *John*?"

"I guess so," Seb said. He let out a breath. "Lois, there's something else I need to tell you."

She could sense his uneasiness. "What, Sebby Boy?" she asked quietly.

"I talked to Chris," he said. "I told her you're with Clark, so if she sees him this weekend, there won't be any problems."

"Oh," Lois said. "How did you explain about the… the…"

"I didn't ask about the exact circumstances that led her to thinking you were with a player, and I don't want to know. All I told her was that you're working on a big story, and that you have to protect your sources."

Opposing reactions clashed within Lois—relief that the misunderstanding with Chris had been resolved so easily and concern about whether Seb had guessed more than he was saying. "Thank you, Seb," she said. "I'm sorry you got dragged into this."

"Lois, you know I'll help in any way I can… but …"

"I know. Your relationship with Chris is really important."

He chuckled self-deprecatingly. "I'm not sure you could call it a relationship yet."

"It sure looks like a relationship to me," Lois declared.

"I haven't asked her to be my girl yet."

"Are you going to?" she asked cheekily.

She heard his chortle. "I'll tell you if you tell me whether you're going to marry Clark."

Lois met her husband's gaze. "Yes," she said firmly. "I'm going to marry Clark."

"Wooo-hooo!" Seb screeched. "Lois, I'm so pleased for both of you. I wish I could hug you right now. You must be so excited."

"I am, but we're not announcing anything yet—not until we see what happens with the merger and decide where we are going to live."

"Does he live near Disneyland? Can I come and visit? Can I bring Chris?"

"Seb!" Lois said, her tone sharp, but her grin wide. "We haven't even decided where we are going to live yet."

Seb laughed. "I'm totally stoked for you, Lois. And in answer to your question—yes, I'm going to ask Chris to be my girlfriend. I'm just waiting until the dust settles from the merger meeting. She might hate me if Hawthorn merge with Melbourne."

"No, she won't," Lois assured him. But the mention of the merger meeting sobered both of them.

"See you Monday," Seb said more quietly.

"Yeah. Bye, Seb. And thank you." Lois returned the phone and settled back onto Clark's lap. "Seb is serious about Chris, and one of the men who was arrested, charged, and jailed for the ecstasy operation in Cornwall later told police that there was a fourth man involved."

Clark grinned. "Good for Seb," he said. "What happened to the fourth man?"

"He disappeared a few weeks before the bust… about the time Nigel St John left England."

"Lois…"

"I know," she assured him. "I know that we don't have much. And there must have been dozens of people who left that area at the time St John did."

"The police must have looked for him."

"They did, but they could find no trace. His name was *John* Glisten."

"That is probably one of the most common names for men," Clark said with gentle caution.

Lois removed his glasses and buried her hands deep into his hair. "I've talked enough about St John, and Brownlow leaks, and illegal bookies, and hidden bugs," she told him.

Clark smiled, his eyes already alight with anticipation. "You're tired of the life of an investigative reporter already? After one day?"

"Not at all," Lois replied. "But I can think of someone else I would rather be investigating."

Clark stood and lifted Lois, carrying her into the bedroom without ever breaking their kiss.

* * *

Lex Luthor sipped from his coffee as he read the morning edition of the *Daily Planet*. The front-page story was about the dolt who had thought that taking a revolver and a homemade bomb into a hospital was the best way to procure morphine.

However, it wasn't the gunman who had held Luthor's interest for nearly twenty minutes, but Superman. Or, more accurately, Mayson Drake's coverage of Superman.

She had never liked the alien, and in Luthor's opinion, she'd come perilously close to obliterating all her credibility when she had aligned herself with the dangerously delusional Jason Trask. She had had the good sense to back away from her allegations, and since then, she'd seemed willing to toe the accepted line—that Superman was an alien but one who was here to help.

This latest story was more carefully written than some of her previous propaganda, but a reader didn't have to be particularly perceptive to discern the disapproval weaved through each paragraph.

Why the change of tone?

The Boy Scout on steroids would make a powerful ally for a reporter.

So why was she trying to antagonise him?

Despite her stunt at the wedding, Drake wasn't stupid.

She had to have some level of competency. She was, after all, a highly successful reporter.

During their dates, Luthor had detected little that encouraged him to continue the liaison. Her monumental and very public faux pas at the wedding had done little other than hasten the inevitable.

Unless…

What if Drake knew *something* about Superman? A secret he wanted kept from public knowledge?

What if he knew Drake knew?

What if the sight of her at his wedding had been the reason behind his very embarrassing collapse?

That would explain her lack of concern at her eviction. Perhaps her reasons for being there had never been about public image, but about taunting Superman with the possibility that she might announce his secret at his wedding.

Luthor smirked. As he well knew, there was little pleasure in a quick kill. There was so much more entertainment in a slow, agonising death.

He reread the story.

Drake was *definitely* baiting Superman.

Two days earlier, Luthor had arranged a drugstore robbery—regular reminders of the need for prompt payment of protection money were always expedient—and Superman had arrived and ruined it. Until now, their paths had not crossed. The muscle-bound alien had mostly limited himself to rescuing those in danger from natural disasters or 'accidents' usually caused by human stupidity. If the caped alien imagined he could branch out as a vigilante, he was going to be stepping into Luthor's territory.

And everyone who did that was soon in a coffin.

It was achieved with such ease that occasionally, Luthor had fantasised about defeating a foe worthy of the battle.

Superman could be such a foe.

Whatever Drake knew about him, Luthor needed to know.

There were two ways to achieve that—one infinitely more agreeable than the other.

Firstly, Drake needed to report on more Superman stories. As a woman, she wouldn't be content to keep her knowledge to herself; instead, she would be compelled to hint at her secret. The more she wrote, the more opportunity there would be to uncover the precise nature of the relationship between her and the alien.

Providing opportunities for Drake to report on Superman's activities was not going to be difficult for a man with Luthor's contacts.

And an added bonus would be the opportunity to gauge the degree of Superman's intent to become an active fighter of crime.

Gallingly, the key might be Mayson Drake.

Which was why his strategy needed the second, less agreeable, aspect. It could be advantageous to continue his association with Drake a little longer. He needed to see whether a bottle of expensive wine and a thick coating of Luthor charm could loosen her tongue.

The coffee cup was empty and his cigar reduced to a stub when Luthor broke from his reverie.

Yes, he decided. He would start with a simple robbery and an invitation for a date.

* * *

"I think you were unduly harsh," Bill Henderson said.

"Harsh?" Mayson said, faking a smile so the cop wouldn't detect her annoyance at his impertinence in questioning her story. "There's not one thing that isn't fact."

"It reads like it was Superman's fault we waited to confront the gunman."

"It *was* because of him."

"If he hadn't been there, we would have proceeded in exactly the same way."

"Exactly," Mayson said triumphantly. "So despite all his powers, his presence didn't help at all and didn't lessen the trauma for those poor children."

"He wanted to go in earlier," Henderson said. "He was confident he could resolve the situation without loss of life or injury."

"Then why didn't you let him?"

"I would have," Henderson admitted. "But it wasn't my call. And we did get all the children and the staff out without a single injury."

"No thanks to Superman," Mayson muttered. She looked beyond Henderson to where Clark had emerged from the elevator and was walking towards his desk. "Hi, Clark," she said.

"Mayson." No one could ever accuse Clark Kent of being rude, but he did have the ability to amply convey his feelings with one word.

"Hi, Clark," Henderson said with a smile and a glance to his watch. "Nice life—being able to start work at this time of the day."

"Hi, Bill." This time, there was warmth in Clark's greeting. "I'll still be here long after you're in bed."

"Huh," Henderson said, sounding irritable, but still smiling. "If the bad guys cooperate and let me go home."

"It's been a quiet day so far," Mayson said, directing her comment to Clark. "After the excitement of the hospital hostages yesterday." He didn't respond as he kept walking to his desk.

"Hey, Clark?" Henderson said. "We did a job for some friends of yours this morning."

"Really?" Clark said. He stalled his progress and turned towards them. "Which friends?"

Henderson chuckled. "Not friends really—we did a job for the Victoria Police. Was that where you were? Melbourne? Is that in Victoria?"

"Yeah, it is."

"A guy called Marcus Kendray," Henderson continued. "He's been on their 'wanted list' for a couple of years—for murder."

No flicker of recognition crossed Clark's face. "You got him?"

Henderson nodded. "It was the weirdest thing," he said. "The way I heard it was that a journalist was chasing up a story about surveillance equipment, and Kendray's name came up quite incidentally. Now he's in custody."

"That's great," Clark said with a smile to Henderson. He continued towards his desk.

"Gotta go," Henderson said. "I'm sure there are criminals just waiting for me to catch them."

Mayson dragged her eyes away from where Clark was turning on his computer. "Thanks for the update on the hospital gunman," Mayson said, trying to sound sincere. Henderson was unusually helpful for a cop, and it was to her benefit to show him a little respect in order to keep the lines of communication open.

He waved and left the bullpen.

Mayson looked back to Clark. He was already engrossed in something on his computer screen.

Why had he shown so little interest in the news from Melbourne? Had he broken up with the football reporter? Was that why the mere mention of Australia had sent him scurrying to his desk like a rabbit caught out of his burrow?

Or was it something else?

Mayson stepped up to Clark's desk and waited for him to look at her.

Eventually, he did, his eyebrows raised in question.

"Are you still going to Australia on Saturday?"

"Yes."

"You don't sound very enthusiastic about it," she noted.

"I'm chasing up a story," Clark said.

"Are you still with that woman? The football reporter?"

"Yes."

Either he didn't want to talk about the football reporter, or he didn't want to talk with Mayson. The latter was probably more likely, Mayson admitted to herself. "Have a good time," she said.

"I won't be leaving for two days," Clark said, his attention already back to his monitor. "I'll probably see you around."

She turned away, annoyed that he'd managed to make his parting comment sound as if seeing her was an unfortunate consequence of working in the same newsroom.

After having returned to her desk, Mayson stared at her own monitor, but her mind was busy mulling over what had just happened.

If Clark hadn't broken up with the football reporter, there had to be another reason for his reticence to talk about the police arresting the murderer from Melbourne.

There had to be more to the story!

That *had* to be the story he was chasing.

That was why he hadn't wanted to discuss it.

He didn't want her to know. He didn't trust her not to steal his story.

Mayson felt a smile slowly shape her mouth. Kent was onto a story. If she watched him… followed him, it was going to be easy to steal his story right out from under his greenhorn nose.

If nothing else, it would teach him that Mayson Drake was not like a piece of fluff that could be easily brushed off.

As she surreptitiously watched, Clark stilled, as if hit by a sudden thought. Then he shut down his computer and stood from his desk. He passed her without even looking in her direction, his hand straightening his tie.

Mayson locked her computer and stood from her desk. Clark had disappeared—he must have gone into the elevator. She headed to the stairs and dashed helter-skelter down them. When she arrived on the ground floor, she remained behind the cover of the stairwell and waited for the elevator doors to slide open.

They did.

Three people emerged—all women.

Mayson shot out from behind the stairs and looked into the elevator car. It was empty.

Where was Kent?

She ran out of the main doors and looked both ways along the street. Clark was nowhere to be seen.

Where had he gone?

* * *

"Your story reads like you've been writing this sort of stuff for years."

Lois felt a slight blush at her editor's unusually generous praise. "Ah… thanks, Browny."

"Did Rubber help?"

She nodded. "Is that OK?"

"OK?" Browny exclaimed. "It worked like a charm. If I'd realised, I would have had you two working together when he was here." He eyed her directly. "You know I don't want to lose you, Flinders, but if you were to decide that your future is with Rubber, you've shown that you can write about stuff other than footy."

"You think I'd get a job working as a general reporter?" Lois gasped.

"Yeah, I do," Browny said with a sigh. "I'd prefer that Clark came here if you want to be together, but if you decide to leave, you'll get one of the best references I've ever written."

"Thanks, Browny."

"Did you hear they got Marcus Kendray in Metropolis?"

"Yeah, I did."

"The general editor has a bloke at the police station now. It might be another exclusive for the Herald Sun."

"Thanks for giving me a chance with this story," Lois said. "I was afraid you'd laugh at me and tell me to stop wasting your time."

"I've been in this game too long to dismiss something just because it seems farfetched." He picked up his pencil and gestured to the door. "Go," he said. "You have a footy club to save." He looked at her with a contemplative smile. "And make sure you do, Flinders, because I reckon that's my only chance of keeping you here."

As Lois left his office, her thoughts returned to something she'd been tussling with since last night. Seconds later, she bumped into someone and looked up to see Chris. "Oh," Lois said. "Sorry, Chris."

Chris smiled. "Hi, Lois," she said. "Congrats on the story. Wow. Who would've thought they'd be brazen enough to put bugs in the umpires' rooms?"

"Thanks, Chris," she said.

"I'm sorry about the misunderstanding—you know, when I thought you were with a player."

"There's nothing for you to be sorry about," Lois said quickly. "I'm sorry. I wish I could have told you the truth."

"It's OK," Chris said. "You got a great story."

"Yeah."

"Seb told me about Clark," Chris said tentatively. "Is that OK?"

Lois nodded. "He's arriving on Sunday, and he'll be at the vote meeting on Monday night."

"You must miss him," Chris said with a despondent look.

Lois chuckled and patted Chris's arm. "Like you miss Seb?" she asked.

"Yeah," Chris admitted with a wry smile. "But I've known him for less than a week, and he only lives an hour away by plane." She pushed a lock of blonde hair behind her ear. "Where did you stay on Saturday night? I hope I didn't push you out of the room."

"No, you didn't," Lois said. "There was something I had to chase up."

Chris grinned. "You seemed lost in your thoughts when you came out of Browny's office. Were you thinking about your story?"

"No," Lois said. "Something's been bothering me since last night, but now I think I've finally got it worked out."

* * *

Mayson stared at the profile picture of Lois Lane.

After losing Kent's trail, she'd come back to her apartment. It was early evening, and she'd met all of her deadlines already. The newsroom was not the ideal place to think, and she certainly didn't want to be caught showing any interest in either Australian football or Clark's supposed love affair with Lane.

There was something going on, and Mayson was not going to rest until she knew what it was.

Something nagged relentlessly at her thoughts. Two pieces of information were floating around her mind, and she felt that if only she could connect them, she would achieve a breakthrough.

Somehow, *that* woman was in the middle of it, but Mayson could not figure out how.

There was no inspiration to be found in staring at the woman's face. Mayson went through her Internet history and re-opened one of Lane's stories. Her eyes flicked over the words.

The woman didn't even have a decent grasp of the English language. She continually used plural verbs when singular ones were correct.

'Brisbane are threatening.'

Mayson shook her head in disgust.

Her eyes stopped at the paragraph she had mulled over days ago. It still made no sense.

'Brisbane's engine room proved superior with Voss's quick hands dominating the stoppages in a display that could only have increased his chances of taking home Charlie on Brownlow night.'

Mayson jolted upright… *taking home Charlie.*

That was what the Australian in the library had said yesterday. That Voss took home Charlie.

Who was Charlie? And what was 'Brownlow night'?

She searched for 'Brownlow' and discovered that the Charles Brownlow Medal was an award in Australian football—an award *informally known as Charlie.*

She now knew more about Australian football than she had ever wished to know, but it didn't explain Clark's behaviour earlier that afternoon.

Out of ideas as to where to go now, Mayson clicked on the main page of the site and saw a new headline… *'Brownlow Threatened' by Lois Lane.*

Mayson read the story and was able to discern that the Brownlow winner had yet to be announced. Someone had apparently used listening devices in an attempt to attain advance information for the purposes of laying bets on the result.

Surveillance equipment!

Henderson had said that a journalist had been working on a story about surveillance equipment—which had led, inexplicably, to the arrest in Metropolis.

Could it have been *this* story?

Written by Lois Lane? Whose boyfriend lived in Metropolis?

Mayson read the story again.

The report assumed that no one knew the result—but the man in the library had said that Voss would win.

Was it a guess? Lane herself had mentioned Voss in the earlier report. Or had that information actually been acquired and found its way to Metropolis?

The story was passably well written and reasonably clear, but for anyone in the business, it was patently obvious that there was a gaping hole in the progression—it contained no mention of why the police had decided to sweep for bugs.

The report was trumpeted as an exclusive, and Mayson got the very clear impression that this was earth-shattering news.

She reclined in her chair and tried to revise what she knew.

Yesterday, in a library in Metropolis, two Australians had been talking about Charlie, also known as the Brownlow Medal.

Lois Lane had written a story about this very Brownlow Medal. Mayson checked the date and adjusted the time zones. Lane's story had been written more than twenty-four

hours after the discussion in the library, so the story couldn't have prompted the discussion.

Was it entirely impossible that the discussion had prompted the story?

There was one obvious link between Metropolis and Lois Lane—Clark Kent.

Could he have heard some of the discussion in the library? Or perhaps heard something after the two men had left the library? He'd lived in Australia and reported on football. He would have realised the significance of their information.

Mayson hadn't seen him in the library, but she'd been searching for Albert's bald head, not Clark's dark one. Perhaps he'd been at one of the desks at the back.

If he had heard that the Australian men thought they knew the result of the medal, Kent could have told Lane—who could then have run to the police and eventually gotten her story.

Mayson reread the story carefully, and as she did, her excitement grew.

The story wasn't Kent's—she'd read enough of his work to know he hadn't written it. But she was sure she wasn't imagining the little touches—sentence structure and style—that pointed to Kent's involvement.

So… Kent had heard something in Metropolis. He hadn't been at the hostage situation in the hospital, so he could have been in or near the library. He'd informed Lane… and she'd written the story, with help from him.

Somehow, Lane's investigation had led to the arrest Henderson had mentioned… which seemed to add credence to the theory that the initial information had come from Metropolis.

All of that was entirely feasible.

But it didn't even begin to explain why Kent had been so unwilling to discuss it with Henderson this morning. Kent hadn't admitted to knowing anything, but Mayson was sure he did. His fingerprints were all over the story.

She hadn't seen Kent at the library, but she knew someone who noticed everything.

Mayson picked up the phone.

As she waited for her call to be answered, she clicked back to the profile picture of Lois Lane and stared at it as cusp-of-a-story anticipation began to well inside her.

There was definitely more to this, and Kent knew it. That was why he had brushed off Henderson with such elaborately feigned ignorance.

And Mayson intended to find out exactly what was going on. Then she would have the choice of stealing the story—if it were good enough—or using her knowledge to drive a wedge between Kent and Lane. If she, Mayson, couldn't have Kent, she was going to make very sure that a puffed-up, sports-writing trollop from Australia wasn't going to have him either.

* * *

Clark's phone rang on his desk, and he answered it. "Clark Kent, Daily Planet."

There was a brief silence, and then he heard a muffled giggle. "Oooohhh, very official, Mr Kent."

Clark smiled. "Lois," he said. "It's great to hear your voice."

"Yours, too. I can't wait for Sunday when you'll be here."

"Yeah." Actually, he couldn't wait for very early tomorrow morning when he would put the paper to bed and—emergencies permitting—fly to Melbourne to be with his wife.

"I have some information for you."

"OK."

"You need to follow up what Seb told me," Lois said. "I'm sure John Glisten and Nigel St John are one and the same person."

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"How can you be sure?"

"Because the letters of the word 'Glisten' are an anagram of 'Nigel St'," Lois answered. "Put that with 'John', and it's pretty conclusive."

Clark picked up a pen and jotted down 'Glisten'. "That's assuming it's spelled with a 't' and not a double 's'."

"That's why I didn't get it straight away."

"You could have something, honey," Clark said.

"You think so? You think it's a real lead?"

Clark smiled at the eagerness in her voice. A bolt of inspiration flashed through his mind—what if he and Lois could work *together* on stories? They'd be a great team. "It's definitely worth following up," he said. "I'll contact the police in Cornwall and email a picture of St John to them. They can show it to the guy who told them about Glisten."

"You have a photo of St John?"

"Uh-huh. It was taken in the morgue."

"Ewww."

"I saw your Brownlow story on the 'net," Clark said. "Front page, huh? Congratulations, honey."

"Thanks for all your help. You deserved to share the byline."

There was silence, and Clark grinned, figuring they were both remembering what he had gotten to share. "I should go," he said. "This call is going to cost you a fortune."

"Bye, Clark. I love you."

"I love you, too."

Clark replaced the phone and looked up to the row of clocks set to international times. It was past midnight in London. He did a search for an address and then wrote a quick email to the Devon and Cornwall Police saying that he might have further information on a case and requesting that someone contact him.

* * *

"Albert speaking." That was another of her source's idiosyncrasies—he didn't use his surname.

"Albert, it's Mayson." He wasn't one for small talk, so she began her questions. "Did you go to the library yesterday?"

"Naturally. We had an appointment." That was his way of scolding her for her tardiness.

"Did you notice two Australians there?" Mayson picked up her pen in readiness should Albert have any information worth noting.

"Yes. One arrived at seven and a half minutes to two and the other arrived five minutes later. They were still there when I left."

That meant there had been less than three minutes for Albert to have heard any of their conversation. "Did you hear what they were talking about?"

"One owed the other money."

"Did they talk openly?"

"No. They went to the last of the non-fiction shelves and held their conversation at the far end of the row, near the 980s—General History of South America."

"Were their voices raised?"

"One seemed panicky and eager to please; the other seemed coolly resolute."

"Did they talk about sports?"

"No, they talked about the repayment of the funds owed."

"Do you know my colleague? Clark Kent?"

"I know of him. I've seen the posters. He wasn't in the library."

"Are you sure, Albert?" Mayson asked. "It's really important."

Albert didn't reply. He never answered questions he considered superfluous. Could Clark have arrived in the short time between Albert leaving and her arrival three minutes later? It was possible, but if Clark had slipped into the library unseen by either Albert or Mayson, he would have only heard the end of the conversation between the Australians.

That could have been the bit where the man owing money offered information about the medal.

Knowing Albert would have no patience for waiting while she sorted through the possibilities in her mind, Mayson fired the first question that sprang into her head. "Was anyone else in the library that you'd never seen there before?"

"Yes. There was an elderly gentleman—bald on top, probably in his mid-seventies, doddery, and with a walking stick."

"Was he listening to the Australians?" Mayson asked as her eyes lingered on the photograph of Lane. Her looks were patently mundane.

"When he enquired of the librarian as to the whereabouts of the large-print section, she had to considerably raise her voice for him to hear."

Perhaps Clark had overheard the men somewhere else, although it was hard to see why they would need to have the conversation twice. Of course, it was possible that either one of the men had told someone else. "OK, thanks, Albert. The payment will be in your account."

"Don't you have any interest in the other stranger in the library?"

"There was someone else?"

"Yes. A young woman."

"Did she listen to the conversation between the two Australians?"

"No, she was working on the microfiche scanner. With four rows of shelving between her and them, it is highly improbable she could have heard them."

Mayson began doodling on her notepad, almost sure now that Albert would have nothing useful. "Could you describe her, please?" She was paying him for this information—she should get everything she could from him.

"Dark hair—I couldn't estimate the length because she was wearing a cap, and most of her hair was tucked into it. The lack of bulkiness in the cap suggested her hair wasn't overly long—possibly shorter than shoulder length. Classically shaped mouth. Clear skin. Small ears with one understated stud in each lobe. Long, graceful neck. Average height for a woman, slim build."

Mayson's eyes had lifted to the photograph on her computer screen. If Albert had been looking at the same image, he couldn't have described Lane more accurately. "What colour eyes?" Mayson asked lightly. "Mid brown?"

"Yes."

Mayson lurched in her seat.

It couldn't be.

"Did you hear her speak?" she asked, suddenly breathless. "Did she have an accent?"

"She enquired about use of the microfiche scanner. She had a slight accent, possibly Midwest."

"American Midwest?"

"Yes."

Mayson smiled grimly at the improbability of her leap of logic. Lois Lane was in Australia writing momentous stories of international significance about who would take home Charlie; she wasn't in Metropolis eavesdropping on two of her countrymen—however much their exchange coincided with her story. "Thank you, Albert."

He'd hung up before she had uttered his name.

Mayson leant back and chewed on the end of her pen.

Lane hadn't been in the library, but somehow, she'd known to look for listening devices.

Mayson had been an investigative reporter for nearly a decade, and she had never searched for bugs on a whim. There had to be a reason—it could be tenuous, but there had to be something to instigate the search.

And in this case, the reason had to involve Metropolis if it were Lane's investigation that had led to the arrest this morning.

Clark Kent was the missing link. He had to be.

It was just after eight o'clock. Kent would be at the Planet for at least another four hours. Mayson closed down her computer and left her apartment.

* * *

Clark received a reply from England within half an hour. Across the Atlantic, someone was working late. He wrote a brief summary of Nigel St John's murder case and attached copies of his stories and a photograph of the dead man.

He sent the email, pondering Lois's reaction when he heard back from the Cornwall police.

If St John were the mysterious Glisten, she would be jubilant. Clark would be happy, too. He'd thought this story was dead.

If St John wasn't Glisten, Clark hoped Lois wouldn't be too upset. The stark reality was that the life of an investigative reporter was littered with dead ends and leads that petered out to nothing.

* * *

Mayson let herself into Clark's apartment after having easily picked the solitary lock. Kent had lived in Metropolis for nearly two years, but he still hadn't shaken off his hayseed habits.

She went into his bedroom. Her gaze moved quickly from the neatly made bed. She didn't like to dwell on the memory of waiting there for Clark.

Continuing into his bathroom, she opened the cabinet door. It contained the expected things—toothpaste, cologne, deodorant. The razor was a cheap disposable, which surprised her. Kent always looked so smooth, she would have guessed he used a top-of-the-range razor.

There was only one toothbrush and absolutely nothing to suggest that a woman used this bathroom.

Mayson closed the cabinet door and moved back to the bedroom where she searched through the closet. Clark's suits and business shirts shared the space with his enormous collection of ties that hung in orderly fashion on a tie rack.

There were no female clothes.

In the kitchen, Mayson opened the fridge. It was almost empty. Like most bachelors, Kent probably ate out more than he ate in. He was at the Planet in the evenings, so there would be little need for meat and fresh vegetables.

Everything indicated that Kent lived here alone.

Mayson sighed in frustration at herself. Why was she even looking for the signs of a woman's presence when she'd already concluded that Lane could not have been in the library yesterday?

As she turned to leave, Mayson noticed a small piece of paper on the floor. She picked it up and read it: *NSJ—old newspaper reports.*

It wasn't Kent's handwriting.

The paper was flat. It had never been folded, and it showed none of the small creases that hinted at having been

stuffed into someone's pocket. If Kent hadn't brought it here, someone else must have been here to write it.

Who?

Perhaps it was a neighbour. Or perhaps Jimmy had come for lunch one day.

The writing was too neat to be Jimmy's illegible scrawl.

Did Kent have other friends? People who didn't work at the Planet?

Mayson had never really thought about him having a life outside of work.

She replaced the paper on the floor and left Clark's apartment deep in thought.

* * *

The detective from Cornwall replied, thanking Clark for his information and saying she had worked on the case six years ago. She said she would take multiple photos to the prisoner tomorrow morning to see if he identified St John as being Glisten.

It was nearly two in the morning in England so Clark should know one way or the other in six to eight hours. By then he would be with Lois.

He grinned, looking forward to witnessing her excitement if it were confirmed that John Glisten and Nigel St John were the same person.

Then, *she* could help *him* write his story.

* * *

Mayson arrived back at her apartment, her mind still wrestling with the problem of how Lane had discovered that someone had used bugs to try to ascertain the winner of the medal.

She sat at her computer and read the story again.

Lane had been very careful to suppress any possible suggestion that someone knew the outcome of the medal. The story read as an *attempt* to corrupt the process, not a success.

Yet in the library, the Australian had said that Voss would take home Charlie.

Lane's story didn't mention Voss or—as far as Mayson could discern—any other possible winner.

Sudden comprehension exploded in her mind, and Mayson smiled. Lane knew the outcome and was keeping it quiet so she could supplement her reporter's salary with gambling.

Wouldn't that be obvious, though? Even in Australia, wouldn't someone realise that?

And whether Lane intended to use whatever information she had for financial gain or not, it still didn't adequately explain how she had known to look for the bugs.

It possibly explained Clark not wanting to speak about it with Henderson. Although Mayson could not imagine straight-guy Kent ever being involved in anything untoward.

Lane must have gained the information in Australia. The story read as a scoop rivalling Watergate, but someone in Australia had to know. One of the sound technicians must have talked.

But if that were the case, why not say so in the story?

Was she protecting her source?

Even if she was, that didn't adequately explain why Kent had pretended he had no interest in Henderson's comment about the arrest.

Or how Lane's story could lead to an arrest in Metropolis.

Mayson clicked back to the main page of the site and read the headlines. Her eyes stalled on the second one.

'Kendray arrested in Metropolis'.

Mayson clicked through to the story and stared at the accompanying photograph.

It was the guy she'd seen in the library yesterday!

* * *

Clark ducked out of the newsroom just after eleven o'clock to do a quick patrol as Superman. Everything seemed quiet.

Back as his desk, he opened his original notes on the murder of Nigel St John and began a skeleton story that he could develop if the photo of the victim was identified as John Glisten.

Half an hour later, he messaged Lois. '*Nearly finished here—any chance you will be home early?*'

A few minutes later, he received the reply. '*For you, anything!*'

Clark grinned and set to work on the final details of tomorrow's early edition.

* * *

Mayson couldn't sleep.

Dozens of questions hammered her brain, and all of her efforts had brought no plausible explanation.

Somehow, Lois Lane knew the details of a conversation between two Australian guys in a library in Metropolis. She'd written a story, and one of the men had been arrested.

It must have been Clark who'd overheard the conversation.

But Mayson often went to the library to meet Albert, and she had never seen Clark there.

So, if Clark hadn't been there, how did Lane know?

The woman Albert had described sounded like Lane… except for the accent… maybe she'd learnt something from Kent during those weeks he was in Australia.

But—

Mayson leapt from her bed and returned to her computer. Five minutes later, she had found the phone number of the sports editor of the *Herald Sun*—a man called Paul Brown.

She dialled the number and waited.

"Paul Brown, Herald Sun."

"Mr Brown," Mayson said. "My name is Mary Daniels. Could I speak with Lois Lane, please?"

"Ms Lane isn't in the office."

"When are you expecting her to return?"

He paused, as if deciding how to answer her question. "Ms Lane is on leave at present. She won't be returning until at least the middle of next week."

"Oh," Mayson said. "She asked me to contact her with information. I wasn't aware she is on extended leave. I saw her byline on the front-page story today."

"Can I take your number, Ms Daniels?" Brown asked. "I will pass it on to Ms Lane."

Mayson recited a fake number similar to the one she'd found for the editor—eight digits and starting with a 'nine'. "Thanks for your help, Mr Brown," she said sweetly.

Mayson hung up. Brown hadn't corrected her when she'd guessed that Lane was on 'extended' leave.

And he hadn't given any explanation as to how she had written a front-page story while on leave.

What if Lois Lane wasn't in Melbourne? What if she were here—in Metropolis—with Kent?

What if the woman in the library had been Lane?

Why would Kent keep her presence a secret? Why not take the opportunity to use Lane to drive home his aversion to a relationship with her, Mayson? And why was he planning to fly to Melbourne this weekend?

Mayson rubbed her forehead in frustration. She should have printed out the photo of Lane and taken it to Albert.

She would do that tomorrow. If Lane was in Metropolis, Mayson was going to know.

Mayson returned to bed, her mind rolling through the possibility that Kent had brought his floozy to Metropolis and kept her hidden.

As she pulled the blankets to her chin, her phone rang.

Mayson arose, wondering who could be calling her at this late hour.

It was a female voice, slightly muffled and unrecognisable. "There's a security alert at the Met Bank," the voice said. "Possible robbery."

Before Mayson could ask for further details, the caller hung up.

* * *

Clark closed down his computer and made for the stairs to the roof of the Daily Planet building. It was after midnight, but earlier than he usually got away. He would do a final patrol as Superman and then, assuming no emergencies, fly to Melbourne.

He'd only climbed three stairs when his hearing picked up the sound of a police siren. Stifling his groan, he flew up the stairs and spun into the suit.

* * *

Luthor took a deep drag of his cigar and smiled at his personal assistant. "All done, Mrs Cox?" he asked.

She nodded as she removed the thick mitten from the phone. "All done. Drake will be scuttling towards the Met Bank as we speak."

"May she get a good story for her efforts," Luthor said smoothly. "And she will—if the costumed alien cooperates."

* * *

Lois wasn't sorry to be leaving Operation Payback early.

The atmosphere had become sombre. Even those people who had steadfastly believed Hawthorn would prevail were now, in the shadows of the vote, no longer confident of the outcome. It was Friday afternoon, but that cruisey verge-of-the-weekend feeling was missing.

There were finals to be played but not involving Hawthorn.

And, from Monday night onwards, she might not have a club.

Her mobile rang as Lois left Richmond station and headed for her unit. She saw it was from her editor. "Hi, Browny," she said.

"G'day, Flinders. Do you know someone called Mary Daniels?"

"No."

"She rang here and said you'd asked her to contact you."

Lois shook her head, even though Browny wouldn't see her. "No," she said. "I don't recall that name, and I wasn't expecting any calls."

"Have you had other suspicious calls today?"

"No. Why?"

"We tried to steer your story clear of any possibility that the bugging of the umpires' rooms had yielded information about the result of the Brownlow, but that doesn't change that you would be the obvious person to ask."

"You think she wanted me to tell her who'll win this year's Brownlow?" Lois gasped.

"Could be," Browny said. "It was a weird call—there were delays and some echoing."

"Did she say what she wanted?"

"No, she just asked for you," Browny replied. "Where are you now, Flinders? Operation Payback?"

"No, I left early. I'm almost home."

"What are you doing tonight?"

"Staying at home." With my husband.

"There's no footy tonight. You're not going out?"

"No. I want an early night before the North-Brisbane final tomorrow."

"Keep your door locked," Browny said sternly. "And don't open it to anyone you don't know."

"You think people will come after me wanting to know if I know the winner of this year's Brownlow?" Lois asked, feeling apprehension begin to bubble through her mind.

"Flinders, I don't want to scare you, but you need to be careful. This is a whole new ball game—it's not just footy anymore."

Lois looked around her, half expecting someone to be following her. There was no one who seemed to be giving her any undue attention. "I'm sure I'll be fine, Browny."

"Lois, I'm serious here. If anyone does threaten you—you give up those names. The Brownlow medal isn't worth getting hurt over."

"I'm sure I'll be fine," Lois repeated. "Clark will be here on Sunday. I'll be with him for a couple of days, and by the time he leaves, this furore will be mostly forgotten."

"I took down the number the woman, Mary Daniels, gave me," Browny said. "I called it and got the souvenir shop in Swanston Street."

"Does Mary Daniels work there?"

"No. They'd never heard of her."

Lois's chest tightened a little. "Thanks for the warning, Browny."

"Do you want to come and stay the night with Sue and me?"

No, she did not. "No, thanks, Browny. I'll be careful, I promise."

The line went silent for a moment, and then Lois heard a deep breath. "Don't open your door, keep the windows locked, and don't take any silly risks."

"OK. See ya, Browny."

Lois walked the final few metres and turned into her driveway. Esmeralda came out of her door and smiled in her direction.

Sheesh, Lois thought. Surely Esmeralda wasn't after a Brownlow tip.

"Hi, Lois."

"Esmeralda."

"I saw your story in today's paper."

Uh-oh. Esmeralda did want a tip. Lois hadn't even known she was interested in footy.

"You got on the front page."

"Yeah." Lois pushed her key into the lock, hoping Esmeralda would get the hint that she didn't want to talk.

"I'm sorry, Lois."

Lois spun around. "What?"

"I'm sorry I thought you were doing something wrong, and I'm sorry I told Clark you had men in your unit."

"Ah… thanks," Lois stammered.

Esmeralda turned to go. "Have a good weekend," she said.

"Um… you, too."

Esmeralda went into her unit, and Lois pushed open her door. Despite his earlier text, Clark wasn't there.

Lois sighed. There had probably been an emergency requiring Superman. All she could do was hope that it would be resolved quickly so her husband could come home.

* * *

Mayson entered the Daily Planet building. She had come to the newsroom to write up the bank robbery story, although it was unworthy of either her talents or the further interruption to her sleep. Two men, definitely not from the

top echelon of criminals when it came to intelligence, had managed to disable the bank's primary security, but it hadn't occurred to them that a financial institution would have a back-up system. The alarm had been raised, Superman had come, and by the time the police had arrived, the would-be thieves were neatly secured to a light pole outside the bank.

Mayson's real reason for coming to the Planet was the hope that she would see Clark. The idea of his woman being in Metropolis refused to leave her mind.

It wasn't the fact that Lane wanted to be near Kent that was important, but that they had gone to such lengths to keep it hidden.

And—weirder still—she didn't appear to be living with him.

How could she be in Metropolis and yet there be no indication in his apartment that she had even been there?

Except for the note!

Mayson stopped abruptly, her mind reeling.

The note!

'NSJ—old newspaper reports.'

The microfiche!

The unknown woman in the library had been working on the microfiche.

Mayson Drake squealed with triumph.

Lois Lane was in Metropolis!

She'd been in the library, and she'd been in Kent's apartment.

That was how she'd heard about the bugs. *That* was how she'd gotten her story. *That* was why there had been nothing in the story about how the police had known to sweep for bugs.

What it didn't explain was why her presence in Metropolis was such a carefully guarded secret.

Was she here illegally?

Kent wouldn't have any part in that.

Was she using another identity?

Why?

Mayson left the elevator and scanned the newsroom. Clark was at his desk in the otherwise empty bullpen.

She boldly walked up to him. "Hi, Clark."

He looked at her in surprise. "Mayson! Did you hear about the bank robbery?"

"Heard about it, went to the scene, got the story," she said. And discovered your little secret, she added exultantly to herself.

"Good work," Clark said. "Can you get it to me in less than half an hour?"

She stared at him for a long moment, wanting him to stew under her gaze. "Are you in a hurry to get home?" she mused.

"I'm hoping to get the story in this edition," he said calmly. "From what I heard, it's not a huge story, and if we don't get it into the morning edition, it probably won't be newsworthy by the afternoon."

Mayson nodded thoughtfully. "And it's always nice to finish up here and get on with our personal lives." She stared at him.

Clark waited for her to move away, and when she didn't, he said, "The story, Mayson? Please?"

As she turned towards her own computer, doubts swamped the conclusions that only moments ago had seemed so definite. Clark hadn't shown any signs of alarm at her questions. He probably thought she was hinting about them—her and Clark—having a personal life together.

No, Clark, she thought. *We've moved on. It's no longer about having you for myself but ensuring there is no happy ending for you and the Australian tart.*

Wherever she is.

Part 57

Half an hour later, Mayson submitted her story about the failed bank robbery. Although Clark opened the file with some misgivings, she had kept to the facts and included neither glowing praise nor subtle criticism of Superman.

He'd expected her to leave once she'd finished her story. She hadn't, and Clark refused to admit—even to himself—that he wasn't all that comfortable being alone with her in the quiet newsroom. He finished a final check of the morning edition and closed down his workstation.

"Goodnight, Mayson," he said, hoping her reply would be minimal.

She stood as he passed her, and Clark had to suppress his groan of dismay. "Care to walk me home?" she asked as she fell into step beside him.

"No," he said. "But I'll hail a cab for you."

Mayson looked at him with an inscrutable smile that made him want to turn and run. "What do you have to do at this time of the night that is so pressing you can't see a colleague safely home?" she asked.

"A cab will see you safely home."

"So you are in hurry?" she persisted. "To get somewhere? Or to see someone?"

Clark sensed that her comments had underlying meaning, but he had no interest in trying to decipher it. "It's late," he said wearily. "And I have a flight to Melbourne early Saturday morning."

"Ah, yes," she said with a knowing nod of her head. "The flight to Melbourne."

She was definitely acting strangely, but Mayson's behaviour followed no rational pattern. "Would you like me to get you a cab?" he said in an even tone that he hoped would convey that he was not going to be drawn into a prolonged conversation.

Mayson smiled. "You *are* in a hurry," she noted. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you had someone waiting for you."

The elevator doors opened, and Clark stepped in. "Are you coming?" he asked.

She hesitated, and the doors had begun sliding inwards when she finally moved forward. Clark lurched to hold the door open for her, and she smiled up at him. "Thank you."

To Clark's relief, Mayson said nothing as the elevator jolted downwards. When they reached the ground floor, he gestured for her to go first, and glancing through the entrance doors, he saw a waiting cab. "There's a cab for you," he said, rushing forward with his hand raised.

"How will you get home?" Mayson asked from behind him.

Clark opened the cab door. "I like to walk."

"And you don't want company."

"We live in different directions."

She sent him a look that said she knew that wasn't precisely the truth, but she didn't comment as she climbed into the cab.

Certain she would watch him until she'd rounded the corner, Clark slid his hands into his pockets and began to walk nonchalantly in the direction of his apartment. Once he was safe from Mayson's prying eyes, he slipped into an alley, shot high above the city, and flew west.

He landed in Lois's unit, and as she turned to him, his air current fluttered though her hair. Her smile welcomed him, and her arms surrounded him.

He held her closely against his body and let her presence saturate him.

It felt like coming home, and it was so sweet.

"You OK?" Lois asked.

Clark nodded but didn't loosen his arms. "I just need you."

"Trouble? What delayed you?"

"Bank robbery. Thanks for coming home early. Sorry I'm later than I thought I would be."

Lois eased back and looked into his face with concern. "What happened?" she asked. "Did something go wrong? Did someone get hurt?"

"No. I heard the alarm, and after that, it all went smoothly."

"Did you get the bad guys?"

"Yeah." Clark kissed his wife, and her essence spread through him like warmed honey. He moved deeper, his tongue searching for its mate, but she backed away, ending what had felt to him like a beginning. He tried to read the expression on her face. "Are you OK, honey?"

Lois smiled—perhaps in apology, perhaps in reassurance. "Can we talk?" she asked.

"OK," he agreed. He sat on the couch, concerned despite Lois's smile. She sat next to him—her body turned towards him—and she took his hand in hers. "What do you want to talk about?" he asked.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

"About the hostage situation. The one at the hospital."

"It ended well," Clark said lightly. "The gunman was arrested, and no one got hurt."

"I read Mayson's report."

"Oh."

Lois shuffled closer and put her other hand on his arm. "She made it sound like you had hampered the rescue, and I'm sure that wasn't the case, so I wondered what happened."

"I wanted to go in as soon as I got there," Clark said. "I was sure I could disable the bomb and disarm the man without anyone getting hurt. But the police were already gathered outside the hospital when I arrived, and they weren't sure because the gunman said he had a bomb so sensitive, my arrival would detonate it. Because of the lead pipes in the walls, I couldn't get an adequate look at it. So, we waited for reinforcements, and then we strategized, and then, basically, I went in and disabled the bomb and disarmed the man."

"Mayson skimmed over the actual details of your part and concentrated on the delay."

"Yeah."

"She's trying to provoke you. She thinks that because she has the green rock, she can write whatever she wants."

Clark nodded. Lois's hand was gliding along his forearm, and he wanted to close his eyes and relish her touch.

"But that doesn't explain why you didn't tell me."

He had to resummon his brain cells to action. He hadn't realised how tired he was until he'd sat on the couch. It was only late afternoon in Melbourne, but his body no longer marched to the step of any time zone. Lois was watching him, and lingering concern had deepened the brown of her eyes. "I got back to my apartment, and you weren't there," he said, endeavouring to keep all reproach from his tone. "When you came, you were really tired, so I brought you back to Melbourne."

"You were here last night," Lois said. "Why didn't you tell me then?"

She didn't seem annoyed, although Clark couldn't be completely sure. He offered her a smile. "I was having too much fun making up," he said. "And then we worked on your Brownlow story."

"I know you would've felt terrible about the police not fully trusting you," Lois said. "And Mayson emphasising the indecision rather than the outcome would've only made it worse." She brushed back the lock of hair on his forehead. "I wish you'd shared it with me."

"I was OK," Clark said. He lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed it. "I figure it's not unexpected that there will be a few teething problems as the police get used to working with me."

"You needed me," she said. "But I didn't realise."

Clark felt the cover of her love settle over him as he realised that any acrimony Lois was feeling was directed at herself and not him. "Honey," he said as he stroked her neck, "you can't blame yourself for this. We both live busy lives—in two cities on different sides of the world. We'll always try to be there for each other, but—"

"But I feel as if I failed you."

"You didn't." He smiled into her troubled eyes. "We've been married for almost six days. Most couples are still on their honeymoon with nothing to worry about except having a good time and getting to know each other. We've had murder investigations, and Brownlow leaks, and green rock, and hidden cameras."

"Not to mention Mayson Drake," Lois said resentfully.

"Mayson can't hurt us," he said with quiet confidence. "She thinks she can, but she doesn't have the green rock."

"I got so mad when I read her story," Lois admitted. "I wanted to go to Metropolis and order her to leave Superman alone."

Clark chuckled and placed a pair of kisses on her hand. "Lois Lane can't do that," he reminded her.

"Ultra Woman can."

Clark moved from her hand and touched kisses along her forearm. "I have a better idea."

He heard her chuckle, and he smiled around his continuing kisses. "Does it involve going to bed?" Lois asked.

"Sounds great… 'cept for Esmeralda. She gets antsy if she hears banging."

"She apologised."

"She what?" Clark broke from his trail of kisses and looked up. "She apologised?"

"She said she was sorry she'd told you I had other men in here."

"What happened?"

"I don't—" Sudden comprehension lifted Lois's eyebrows. "I bet Seb told her that I've been keeping secrets because of the big story I've been working on. That's what he told Chris."

"The Brownlow story?"

"I guess so."

Clark grinned. "Then we're fine—you'll just have to keep coming up with humungous stories so Ezzie doesn't ask too many questions."

"And if I can't keep coming up with humungous stories?"

"The excuse has a limited lifespan," he admitted. "So we should definitely make the most of it."

Lois smiled. "Have you heard back from England yet?"

"No," Clark said. He checked his watch. "I should hear in a couple of hours. I suggest we use that time wisely and go to bed. Then if there is a story, you can help me write it."

Lois didn't answer verbally. She leant forward and kissed him an unequivocal invitation. Clark lifted from the couch and drifted them slowly to her bed.

* * *

Darkness had fallen outside when Clark switched on Lois's computer and opened his email account. "They've replied," he called to her.

She came running from the bedroom. “Really? What do they say?”

Clark speed-read the email and then turned to Lois with a wide grin. “You did it,” he said. “You found out why Nigel St John left England, and in the process, you uncovered a huge clue to his murder.”

“St John *is* Glisten?” Lois squeaked.

Clark nodded and pulled Lois onto his lap. “You are amazing,” he said.

“I knew there had to be more to the story.”

Clark brushed a light finger down the curve of her cheek. “Lois…”

“Uhm?”

“Have you ever considered that you could write stories other than footy?”

She dropped her eyes to where her hand was resting on his hastily donned and untucked shirt. “Yes,” she whispered. Her head lifted. “Yes,” she repeated with more surety. “I’ve thought about it.”

“Have you thought about working with me? Long term? Writing general news? Investigating cases?”

“In Metropolis?”

Her face held so many more questions than the one she had voiced. “Not necessarily,” Clark replied.

“In Melbourne?”

“I’m not suggesting anything specific, honey,” he said. “I just wanted to know if you’d considered it.”

“I enjoyed it,” Lois admitted. “I enjoyed researching St John and trying to put all the pieces of the puzzle together. I felt great when the bugs were found in the umpires’ rooms. And I enjoyed the challenge of writing something so different to what I usually do.”

“You are a gifted footy journo,” Clark said. “I told you that at Kardinia Park the day you took me to Geelong.”

Lois smiled at him. “The day you warmed my socks?”

He nodded. “And the day you held my hand for the first time.”

“You weren’t worried that I’d fall into Corio Bay, were you?” Lois asked. “You just wanted to hold my hand.”

“Guilty.” Clark held out his hand, and she put hers in it. “Lois, I hope you believe that I won’t ever force you into doing anything you don’t want to do.”

“I want to be with you,” she said in a small voice.

“And you will be with me.”

“I’m going to vote against the merger and hope like crazy that the Hawthorn members give our club a chance to rebuild,” Lois said. “But that is going to make it difficult for us to be together openly.”

“We will work out something,” Clark said.

Lois smiled tremulously. “I can’t dump an old love just because a new, exciting love has come into my life.”

Clark lifted her chin and kissed her gently. “I love your loyalty,” he said. “I love that Hawthorn will always have a place in your heart. I love that when Hawthorn was threatened, you worked harder, made sacrifices, and never, ever gave up.”

“If I had given up, we could be thinking about getting married as Lois and Clark. We wouldn’t have to hide away all the time.”

“I wouldn’t have you any other way,” he said. “The Lois Lane I know and love never turns away from something she cares about.”

“I care about you,” she said as her hand skimmed across his face.

Clark felt his heart respond to her touch. “We should write the story,” he murmured.

She regarded him with an amused expression. “That’s not what you’re really thinking,” she said.

“No,” he agreed. “I’m thinking that I should go to Metropolis a lot earlier than usual so I can talk to Perry and get the St John story in the afternoon edition. And I’m thinking that if we get it written now, there might be some spare time before I leave.”

“Some spare time?” she said as her fingers undid the top button of his shirt.

“We should write the story first,” Clark said, although he made no attempt to stop her from undoing his second button.

“We should,” Lois said. “But I work better with inspiration.” She undid the rest of his buttons and spread open his shirt. She sighed with satisfaction as she devoured his chest with her eyes. “OK,” she said. “Now I can write.”

* * *

“Some of the questions have answers, but we still don’t know who killed St John,” Lois said after they had finished writing their story.

“And we don’t know why,” Clark added.

“We do know there is a reasonable chance that it was drug related.” She wrinkled her brow. “Is the Boss involved in drugs?”

"We know so little about him," Clark said. "But drugs seem to be a part of most big crime organisations."

"I still think that St John and the Boss are linked," Lois said. "The Boss would have the resources to fund an undocumented life such as St John had, and we now know St John was involved in crime."

Clark kissed her. "Keep thinking about it, Ms Lane. I'm always willing to listen to your ideas."

She grinned. "How long until Perry will be at the Daily Planet?"

"About three hours."

"Do you want food, sleep, or sex?"

Clark grinned. "You do have a way of setting out the alternatives in a wonderfully forthright manner," he said. "And I'd like all three."

Lois chuckled. "Then I guess all we have to decide is the order."

* * *

Early Friday morning, Mayson walked across the newsroom to her desk. In her pocket, she had a printout of the photo of Lois Lane. She was meeting Albert in the library at ten o'clock. Yet another of his quirks was that he wouldn't meet her anywhere except the library—and it didn't open until ten.

Soon, she would know with certainty whether the woman at the microfiche had been Lois Lane.

Mayson reached her desk and turned on her computer. While it was starting up, she walked to the coffee machine.

She heard a movement in Perry's office and looked up. The door opened, and to her surprise, it was Kent who walked out. He hadn't been in the office this early since he'd changed his work schedule.

"Great story, Clark," she heard Perry call.

Mayson watched as Kent returned to his desk. She took a second cup and poured another coffee. Olsen stopped at Kent's desk, and they laughed over a shared comment. Mayson waited until Jimmy had moved on, and then she picked up both cups and took them to Clark. She placed one in front of him and waited for his response.

He looked up at her. "Thanks."

She hitched her leg onto his desk, lamenting that she had chosen to wear a pantsuit today instead of a short skirt. "You're here early."

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"I'm following up a story."

"A story you can't do this afternoon?"

"I got an email from England; they're in a different time zone."

She inched further onto his desk. "What's the story about?"

"Nigel St John, the guy who was murdered a few weeks ago."

Mayson nearly spat her coffee across his desk. "Nigel St John?" she exclaimed. "As in NSJ?"

There was no immediate response to her question. "I suppose so," Clark said as if that association had never occurred to him.

Mayson skimmed her finger around the rim of her cup and then deliberately fixed her gaze on Clark. "Did you look in old newspaper reports?"

This time, there was a reaction to her question, but Kent smothered it quickly. "I still have leads to chase up," he said. "If you're interested, my story will be in the afternoon edition."

Mayson wasn't going to be pushed away. Not this time.

"I want to talk with you," she said in a low, cold voice.

"I have a st—"

"Your choice, Kent," she said. "Either we speak here—and the entire newsroom listens—or we speak in the conference room."

Kent seemed to take a moment to decide. Then, with a sigh, he rose from his seat and strode to the conference room. He opened the door and walked straight in. The fact that he didn't open the door and wait for her to enter first gave ample evidence of his agitated state of mind.

Mayson closed the door and stepped forward. "I'll get straight to the point," she said.

"I'd appreciate that. I have work to do."

"I know you're not going to Australia tomorrow."

Kent's mouth dropped with what looked like genuine surprise. "Really?" he said. "Have you checked with the airlines?"

"No."

"Then I suggest you do. Assuming you can cajole them into revealing private passenger information, you'll find that I have booked a ticket to Melbourne on a flight leaving Metropolis on Saturday morning."

"Did you book one seat? Or two?"

His eyebrows rose in question. “One,” he said as if it were obvious.

“How is Lois getting home?” Mayson asked. “And why would you be going to Australia when she’s here in Metropolis?”

He shook his head in bewilderment. “Lois isn’t here,” he said. “She’s in Melbourne.”

“She isn’t at her paper,” Mayson fired at him. “She’s on leave.”

“You called the Herald Sun?” Kent gasped. His shock was gratifying.

“Yes,” Mayson said lightly. “I know she’s here, and to confirm it, I called her paper, and her editor said she was on extended leave.”

Kent pulled his right hand out of his pocket and lifted it in the gesture he used when he wanted to claw back control. “Mayson,” he said. “You’re not going to understand this, but Lois is on leave because her football club is under threat of being merged with another one. She’s been campaigning to keep that from happening.”

Mayson laughed at his feeble explanation. “She’s left her job to save a football club?” she sneered.

“Yes,” Kent said earnestly. “Unless you’ve been there, you could never understand how important football is in Melbourne.”

“Important enough to put a career on hold?” Mayson said with contemptuous disbelief.

“Yes,” he insisted. “She’s been volunteering with a group called Operation Payback to try to stop the merger.”

“And you seriously expect me to believe that you’ve fallen in love with a woman who would do *that*?” Mayson demanded.

“I really don’t care what you believe.”

“You should,” Mayson said. “You should care a lot because I can prove that Lois Lane was in the library in Metropolis on Wednesday afternoon. I can prove that is how she knew to look for the bugs for her story about the medal. And I know that it was her story that led to the arrest of the Australian Henderson was talking about. The Australian who just happened to be in the library at the same time as Lois Lane.”

With each of her assertions, another layer of impassive mask had settled on Kent’s face. “Lois is in Melbourne,” he said stonily. “I am going there on Saturday because the vote that will decide the future of her club happens on Monday night.”

“You’re flying all the way to Melbourne because of a football club?” Mayson said incredulously.

“Yes, I am,” he stated firmly. “It’s important to Lois, and I want to be there for her.”

Mayson shook her head. “Australia turned you into an even bigger joke than Kansas did,” she said.

“Is that it?” he asked, and there was harshness in his voice now.

“No,” Mayson snapped. “I want to know about the note on the floor of your apartment—the one suggesting that the key to St John’s murder was to be found in old newspaper reports.”

“That’s how I got the story,” Clark said. “Nigel St John was involved in a drug operation in Cornwall before he moved to the States. He left just prior to it being busted. The bust was reported in the papers.”

“So why was the note in your apartment?”

His eyebrows narrowed. “Mayson,” he said, “a more pertinent question is why *you* were in my apartment.”

“I’m an investigative reporter,” she threw back at him. “I investigate.”

“That doesn’t give you the right to break and enter.”

She smirked. “But you’re not going to make a complaint, because as I’ve already told you, I can prove that Lois Lane was in Metropolis on Wednesday.”

He swung around and headed for the door.

“Kent!” Mayson screamed.

He stopped but didn’t turn to face her.

“The note wasn’t in your handwriting,” she said with cold triumph.

“I have sources, too, Mayson,” he said.

“Is one of your ‘sources’ a brunette with brown eyes and __”

“Mayson,” he said, low and intense. He wheeled around, and the depths of anger radiating from him felt like a slap to her face. “Everything you’ve told me sounds like you’ve been stalking me. It sounds like the ravings of a woman who can’t accept reality and can’t control her obsession. I love Lois. I will never love you. And if you go into my apartment again, I will report it to the police.” He turned and stormed from the conference room, slamming the door behind him.

* * *

At his desk, Clark pretended to read the document on his computer screen.

Inside his chest, his heart was thumping. Inside his head, his mind was whirling.

Mayson knew Lois had been in the library in Metropolis!

She knew about Lois's Brownlow story. She knew it had led to Kendray's arrest.

Was that all she knew?

She hadn't mentioned Superman or Ultra Woman.

With an effort far greater than he needed to circumnavigate the globe in less than the blink of an eye, Clark turned his attention to the story.

He needed to contact Henderson and tell him about the development in the St John case.

Clark was glad now that his cautious nature had prevented him from mentioning Lois's involvement to Perry, but she was weaved through his entire story. This was really her story—she had done the research, she had chased up the lead, she had co-written the story, and it was impossible to think about the story without also thinking about Lois.

Which led back to Mayson.

How much did she know?

After leaving the conference room, she'd come over to retrieve her cup of coffee and take it back to her desk. Clark had ignored her.

He didn't want to be in the same room as her.

He didn't want to look at her blonde head and wonder what she was planning to do next.

Clark stood abruptly, deciding he would go to the police station instead of calling Henderson.

On the way, he detoured to his apartment. Once inside, he inhaled deeply and detected the very faint trace of the rather sickly perfume Mayson used.

She *had* been here.

He saw the note on the floor and picked it up.

It was Lois's handwriting.

And Mayson had seen it.

Clark scrunched it in his fist. He hated the thought of Mayson having even the slightest contact with Lois.

He deposited the note in his pocket and surveyed his apartment, looking for anything else Mayson might have noticed.

Other than when he'd been here with Lois on Wednesday, he'd spent very little time here since their wedding. Even before that, he'd fallen into the habit of dropping in for only seconds to change his clothes or have a quick shower.

He x-rayed through the ceiling into the roof space. His spare Superman suits were there—untouched.

His apartment was a little dusty, but there was nothing visible that spoke of his double—triple if you included being Superman, a Metropolis reporter, and a Melbourne husband—life. He crossed to the other side of the room and blew the dust out the balcony door.

Despite his warning, Clark believed there was every chance Mayson would come back. He went to the drawer next to his bed and took out his passport and airplane ticket and secured them in his jacket pocket. He wouldn't put it beyond Mayson to steal them.

Then he locked the door and headed for the police station.

* * *

Luthor poured himself a glass of red wine.

Superman had dealt with the attempt to rob the bank with such ease that it hardly constituted a story.

Lex needed something more dramatic, something more in keeping with Mayson's skills.

He sipped from the wine, his mind working.

A gas leak.

Multiple gas leaks. Happening simultaneously.

He would see how the caped alien coped with that.

And how the blonde hackette would write it.

There was a soft knock on his door. "Come in, Mrs Cox," he called.

His personal assistant entered. "You called for me, Mr Luthor?"

"Yes. I wish you to call Ms Drake and arrange a date for tonight."

"Ms Drake?" she repeated, doing a poor job of hiding her distaste.

Luthor covered his smile. He was well aware of Mrs Cox's opinion of Mayson Drake. "Yes, please." He thought for a moment. "Something extravagant. Perhaps a trip in my private jet. Ask Ms Drake if she would like to suggest a destination."

Her mouth pursed with disapproval, Mrs Cox crossed to his desk in the far corner of the room and picked up his phone. Luthor continued reflectively sipping his wine as he allowed the melody of her voice to wash over him.

The conversation ended more quickly than Luthor had expected. He smiled at Mrs Cox, assuming the date had been arranged.

"Ms Drake declined your offer," Mrs Cox told him.

Luthor straightened in his leather seat. "She declined?"

"Yes."

"You made it clear it was a date with Lex Luthor? And that we would use my private jet to go anywhere she desired?"

"Yes," Mrs Cox said. "I made that abundantly clear."

"You couldn't have misinterpreted her answer?"

"No."

"Thank you, Mrs Cox."

Like the well-trained servant she was, Mrs Cox understood that to be a dismissal and left the room.

Luthor lit a cigar. Mayson Drake had *something*. Something that she thought was worth more than a connection with the third-richest man in the world.

She had to have something on Superman.

And Luthor would discover it…

Because the alien showed every indication of becoming a real problem.

* * *

Clark flew from light to darkness over the Pacific. It would be almost midnight when he arrived in Melbourne. He hoped Lois would still be awake. He was—as always—looking forward to being with her. Every moment away from her felt as if something essential was missing from his life.

But his heart went cold at the thought of telling her about Mayson.

He landed in her unit, and Lois looked up from the book she was reading. She sprang from the couch, her face alight with excitement. "Clark!" she said. She put her hands on his arms and grinned jubilantly. "Guess what? I've worked out the identity of the Boss."

Part 58

Clark stared at Lois, mesmerised. She grinned at him, her eyes shining with exhilaration and her mouth so totally kissable that it drove every other thought from his mind. "You've what?"

"Lex Luthor is the Boss."

The shockwaves from that bold statement were enough to wrench his attention from his wife's lips. "Luthor? Lois, that's not… He's a businessman and a very generous man. He contributes to many charities and—"

"He takes the money illegally and gives some of it back publicly so everyone thinks he's a good bloke?"

"Ahhh…" Clark shook his head, trying to grasp this startling development. "Lois, I'm not sure about this."

"You said you didn't trust him."

"I don't," Clark admitted. "But that doesn't mean I think he's the Boss."

"Remember the prisoner who was killed in jail?" Lois said. "Remember what he said just before he died? 'The truth is right in front of you.'"

Clark nodded. "Yeah, I remember that. I've never been able to figure out what it means."

Lois put her hands on his shoulders. "Take me to Metropolis, and I'll show you."

"No," Clark said sharply, as the mudslide that was Mayson Drake tumbled into his mind. "You can't go to Metropolis."

The sharpness of his voice drove the triumph from Lois's face. "Why not?"

"Because Mayson knows you were in the library on Wednesday."

Her hand covered her mouth, and her eyes grew wide with alarm. "Mayson saw me? And recognised me?"

"You saw Mayson?" Clark fired back before he could stop himself.

Lois didn't flinch. She dropped her hand from her mouth but didn't return it to his shoulder. "Mayson was in the library. When I saw her, I hid between the shelves—that's how I heard the blokes talking about the Brownlow."

"You didn't tell me Mayson was there," Clark said quietly.

"As you've already said, there wasn't much time when we met at your apartment after I returned from the library."

"Is that the only reason you didn't tell me?"

"No," she said, and her eyes regarded him with an expression that bordered on playful. "I knew you'd worry."

"Lo-is," Clark said. She hadn't smiled exactly, but her manner had begun to loosen the cords that had been pulling tight across his chest since his confrontation with Mayson. "You should have told me."

"Sorry," she said, looking out from under the fall of her hair. "But I didn't think she'd seen me."

"It seems she did," Clark said, being very careful to match her tone.

Lois vehemently shook her head, and her hand landed on his chest. “No,” she insisted. “If she’d seen me, I’m sure she wouldn’t have slunk away without challenging me.”

“It’s not important how she knows,” Clark said. “We have to deal with the fact that she does.”

“You told me that Mayson gets good stories, right?” Lois asked.

“Yeah.”

“So, she’d be skilled at drawing conclusions. She’s never met Lois Lane. She probably doesn’t know for sure that I was in the library. She might think it’s a possibility—for whatever reason—so she threw it at you just to see how you’d react.”

“She knows you’re on leave. She called the Herald Sun.”

Lois grimaced suddenly. “Ugghhh,” she groaned. “Mary Daniels.”

“Who?”

“Someone calling herself Mary Daniels rang Browny and asked for me. He thought she was chasing info about the Brownlow result, but I bet it was Mayson Drake. The initials are the same.”

“Does Browny have caller ID on his phone?”

“Not on his desk phone,” Lois said. “But none of that matters. Mayson can’t prove I was in Metropolis. You just keep telling her that I’m in Melbourne, and we’ll be OK.” She smiled reassuringly. “We’ll be OK.”

Clark wasn’t convinced, but they’d spent enough time discussing Mayson Drake. “What did you want to show me in Metropolis?”

Lois grinned. “Actually, I wanted to go to Mayson’s apartment.”

“Why?” Clark asked as his apprehension flooded back. “The opal?”

“No,” Lois assured him. “Nothing to do with that. And I didn’t want to go to her apartment per se, but to the top of her building, the place where you left me when you went to throw the green rock into space.”

“OK,” Clark said slowly.

“From the top of that building, if you look across the city, there’s something right in front of you.”

“What?”

“Luthor’s building. It’s right there in your face. I remember thinking it was like he was panicked that someone wouldn’t notice his wealth.”

“*That’s* why you think Luthor is the Boss?” Clark said, trying to keep his scepticism well hidden.

Lois nodded. “Luthor’s rich. The Boss has to be rich. Is there anyone else in Metropolis who flaunts his wealth like Luthor does?”

Clark thought for a moment. “No,” he admitted.

“The proceeds of his crime are right in front of you,” Lois said. “Just like the prisoner said.”

“Lois,” Clark said. “You do know we can’t print this, don’t you?”

She chuckled. “Of course I know we can’t print this,” she said. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t keep digging, keep asking questions, keep making connections. In fact, I think we should pay Mr Luthor a visit.”

“We should?”

“Yes. As Superman and Ultra Woman. I think we should ask him some questions about the hidden cameras in the honeymoon suite of his big opulent hotel.”

“He won’t admit to knowing anything.”

“No, but we might be able to see something or notice something while we are there.” She smiled up at him, tapping her forefinger on his chest. “How do you feel about a little *super*-surveillance?”

“Ahhh…”

Lois grinned. “You’ve done it, haven’t you?” she cried. “You’ve used your super-skills to help solve cases?”

“I have on occasion,” he admitted.

“Brilliant,” she said happily. “That’s gonna make this so much easier.”

“We can’t go now. We can’t risk Mayson—”

“*That’s* about Clark and Lois. *This* is about Superman and Ultra Woman.” Lois took him by the hand and led him to the couch. Once there, she pushed him to a sitting position. “Get comfortable,” she said.

Clark did as he was told.

Lois knelt across his lap, one leg on the outside of each of his thighs. She smiled at him, and it felt as if one smile from her could chase away all the demons wrought by Mayson Drake.

“We’ll be OK,” she said softly.

“What if May—”

Lois slid his glasses from his face and placed them on the lamp stand. Then she put her arms around his neck and slumped onto his chest as her fingers dived through his hair.

In her embrace, the dread that had been threatening to erupt inside him slowly subsided. She said nothing—just held him and stroked his hair. He eased his hand under Lois's sweater and rubbed up and down the skin of her back.

From where her head lay on his shoulder, her mouth periodically kissed his neck. He felt her body relax against him.

"Are you going to sleep?" he said quietly. "It's nearly midnight for you."

"No," she said. "I'm just enjoying being with you. I'm letting our togetherness seep into both of us so we will be able to decide what to do next."

"Lois, I don't think I should stay here tonight."

He'd expected she would lurch from her position on his shoulder and insist it wasn't necessary that they change their routine. Instead, she calmly said, "Why not?"

"Because I think I should get back to Metropolis. If Mayson is airing her suspicions publicly, I want to be there to try to counteract them before they become a wildfire of rumour and gossip."

Lois's hand continued to massage tranquillity through his hair. "Even if she thinks she saw me in the library, she can't prove it," Lois said. "There are no official records saying I was in Metropolis."

"Once Mayson thinks she has a story, she doesn't let go easily."

"You once told me that she got up at a function and announced she was engaged to you."

"She did."

"So other people know about her obsession with you?"

"Yes."

"If she pushes this too much, she's going to look like a whack-job woman who can't accept that you've moved on to someone else. Anything she says is going to lack credibility."

Her hand, her touch, her presence was bringing perspective to Clark. "You think if she claims something highly unlikely—such as you being in Metropolis—no one will believe her?"

"She thinks she saw me in the library on Wednesday afternoon Metropolis time," Lois said. "Just a few hours later, I was in Browny's office. Soon after that, I had coffee with Seb. Then, I had a meeting with a detective called Ben and two AFL officials. I have witnesses who will confirm that it isn't possible for me to have been in Metropolis when Mayson thought she saw me."

"Without Superman, that is," Clark said.

"But no one knows there is a link between Lois Lane and Superman," Lois said. "Does Mayson have photographs?"

"She didn't say."

"I suspect she didn't see me, but that someone told her I was there or described me to her later."

"What do you think we should do?' Clark asked.

"I think you should stay here for a while. Just a couple of hours—try to get some sleep maybe. Then I think you should go back to the Planet and treat Mayson as if she's nothing more relevant than a woman who has made some bizarre claims."

"You think this could just pass over?"

"I hope so." Lois straightened off his shoulder and looked down at him with a smile. "It'll be OK, big guy," she said. "We're together—and together, we can deal with anything Mayson throws at us."

"I'm sorry I sounded angry that you didn't tell me Mayson was at the library."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

"I guess we're both still getting used to this whole marriage thing."

"We are," Lois agreed. She smiled cheerfully. "But think about how good we'll be at it when Lois and Clark get married."

Clark smiled. "Can I take you to bed?"

Lois sighed happily. "Mr Kent," she said. "You can take me anywhere you want to."

* * *

Mayson arrived at the library at seven minutes to ten. There were librarians inside, but the doors weren't yet open to the public.

Five minutes later, Albert emerged from a cab and sauntered towards her.

"Hi, Albert," she called when he was still fifteen yards from her.

He said nothing until he was standing next to her. "Do you want the information I had for you on Wednesday?" he asked.

"No," she said. "That story is dead and buried." She took the printout from her bag, unfolded it, and held it towards Albert. "Is this the woman you saw in the library on Wednesday? The one using the microfiche scanner?"

Albert accepted the paper and stared at it for an agonisingly long time.

"Well?" Mayson said impatiently.

"It's not a good photo."

"Could it be her?"

"It could be," Albert said. "I would say it was more likely than not to be her, but I couldn't make an unequivocal identification."

"I pay you for precise and accurate information."

"And I give you information as accurate as I have," he said. "When I'm not sure, I say so."

"If you had to make a call one way or the other—is it her?"

"If I had to make a call, I would say that it is her, and the cap and casual clothes I saw were attempts at a disguise," Albert said. "Or it could be a close relative, such as a sister, or it could be a complete coincidence that two women look so much alike."

Mayson snatched back the paper. "Thanks, Albert," she muttered as she turned back to the road and hailed a cab.

* * *

Mayson had planned to return to the Planet, but instead she turned in the opposite direction. She had been so sure that pedantic and observant Albert would be able to give her a definite answer. And she had been sure that his answer would confirm that the woman in the library was Lois Lane.

Disappointed and discouraged, Mayson trudged into her apartment.

She had no proof.

And without proof, no one was going to believe anything she said about Kent or his floozy.

From her bag, her cell phone rang, and Mayson jumped. Perhaps it was Albert calling to say that, on further reflection, he could make a positive identification.

"Mayson Drake."

"Ah, Mayson," came an oily voice she immediately recognised as belonging to Lex Luthor. "How are you this beautiful morning?"

He sounded like he was high on something. Probably power, she thought bitterly. "I am well, Mr Luthor," she said crisply.

"Mayson," he said. "I was sure we had progressed beyond such formalities. Please, call me Lex."

"Mrs Cox called me earlier this morning with an offer of a date," Mayson said. "I made my answer perfectly clear."

"Is there a reason you are no longer open to my invitations?"

"I am a career woman. I don't have the time for frivolities."

"It isn't because of the unfortunate incident at the wedding, is it?"

"No," she said quickly. "Of course not."

"Please call me if you reconsider."

"Thank you, Mr Luthor." Mayson disconnected the call and turned on her computer. For all of Kent's insistence that he was going to Australia this weekend to see Lane, Mayson couldn't shake the belief that he was hiding something.

And she was not going to rest until she had uncovered his secret.

* * *

Clark kissed Lois before leaving.

She stirred and murmured, "Bye, big guy. See you tomorrow."

"I love you, Lois."

She smiled sleepily.

At the Planet, Clark exited the elevator and glanced across to Mayson's desk. To his relief, it was empty. He crossed the newsroom and went into Perry's office.

"Back so soon?" the editor commented. "Henderson is impressed with you. With the information you provided, they've got somewhere new to take the St John case."

"Has Mayson said anything to you?"

"Why?" Perry said quickly. "Is she bothering you again?"

Clark made an indefinite gesture.

"She is," Perry guessed with a sigh. "I had hoped that was over. With you away in Australia and then being so obviously enamoured with Lois, I had hoped Mayson had moved on. She's been going out with Lex Luthor, you know."

"Yeah," Clark said. "I'm not sure about that match either."

"It's better than her pestering you," Perry said darkly. "When do you fly out?"

"Saturday morning."

"Tomorrow?"

"Ah… yeah." Sometimes it was hard to remember which day it was.

"And you are going to return Wednesday?"

"Yep."

"Take a couple of extra days."

Clark didn't reply.

Perry grinned. "Take a couple of extra days," he repeated. "I can manage here. And hopefully, you being out of the office for nearly a week will help Mayson realise how serious you are about Lois."

"I'm not sure, Perry."

"Why?" He chuckled. "Don't you think I can handle this ol' paper without your help anymore?"

Clark tried to smile. "I know you can," he said. "But if Mayson starts saying stuff—you know, like her announcement that we were engaged—I won't be here to defend myself."

Perry's eyes narrowed. "Do you really think anyone is going to believe one thing that woman says about you?"

"I…"

Perry's grin exploded. "How about you take two weeks and come back married?" he suggested. "That should send an appropriately convincing message to Mayson."

"Ah… uhm… I think Australian marriage rules have a waiting period."

"I was joking, Clark," Perry said.

"Oh. Sorry." Clark stepped towards the door. "I'll follow up the St John story and see if there is anything concrete from the drug link."

Clark left Perry's office. Mayson's desk was still unoccupied, and for the first time, he felt a wisp of optimism that her speculation would cause no further damage.

* * *

Mayson stared at the profile picture of Lois Lane, but there were still no answers to be found.

Her mind was numb from spinning in ever-decreasing circles. It was time to consider the absolutely ridiculous because trying to be logical had achieved nothing concrete.

What if… what if Lois Lane was a career woman of the ilk of Mayson Drake? What if—despite being a football writer, which was a mammoth drawback to this scenario—she was a sophisticated woman who had laughed at Clark's clumsy attempts to seduce her?

Now *that* was amusing.

What if he'd picked the lock into her apartment and waited for her in her bed—only to have to leave hours later because she had better things to do than be seduced by an American yokel?

It made for pleasant speculation, but it didn't help determine whether Lane was in Metropolis.

Mayson copied the photo and enlarged it on her screen. That just made it grainier and more indistinct.

She reduced it again and used her mouse to draw wobbly glasses on the face. That didn't have the absurd effect she had hoped for, so she clicked on 'undo', and the glasses disappeared.

What if…

There had to be other—crazily irrational—theories.

What if Lois Lane had an evil twin sister who was in Metropolis to kill Kent for daring to chase after her sister?

What if Lois Lane had an even-more-evil twin sister who was in Metropolis to steal Kent for herself?

What if Kent ended up having to deal with *both* of them? That would be like a puppy being mauled by two hungry lionesses. Mayson would happily buy tickets to watch that contest.

What if there was only one Lois Lane, and she flitted between Metropolis and Australia because she wasn't really a sports journalist—that was merely a cover, and a brilliantly effective one because who would ever think that a sports-writer actually had a functioning brain? What if she were really a spy?

How could she commute between Metropolis and Australia quickly? That wasn't hard—not now the world knew about Superman.

Perhaps… Mayson giggled. What if… what if Superman worked with this Australian spy and, as a favour for a friend, brought Lane to Metropolis so she could spy on Kent and make sure he wasn't cheating on her?

Or maybe Superman brought her for conjugal visits?

Maybe that was why Clark had suddenly decided he wanted to work the late hours. He spent the mornings in bed with Lane during her hours of darkness.

Mayson grinned. Sometimes it was fun to imagine the impossible.

It gave her brain a pleasant change from always trying to find hard evidence that stupid people did stupid things.

Somewhat to her surprise, she felt no annoyance at the thought of Kent and Lane in bed together. He was passably good-looking, but under his business suits, there probably

lurked the body of an underdeveloped adolescent. She'd never really wanted Kent—she'd just wanted to prove that she could have him. She'd moved on to much greater prey.

Superman.

Her initial thoughts for use of the green rock had involved demanding he inform her about his activities so she could get exclusive stories. As time had passed and she hadn't had the chance to talk with him, she had reviewed her ideas. It had been fun to flirt with him and watch Ultra Woman react like a jealous kitten.

Perhaps she could use the green rock to test Superman's commitment to his marriage.

Initially, his alienness had seemed creepy, but she had to admit that seeing him with Ultra Woman had shown him in a new light—which, Mayson realised, was probably exactly the effect they had hoped for.

Was the marriage even real?

What if Ultra Woman was little more than a prop? What if the wedding extravaganza had been only about showing how 'human' the alien was?

Mayson had heard a rumour that the Star had been hoping for honeymoon pictures but there had been none.

If the marriage hadn't been consummated, it wasn't a marriage at all, but merely a publicity stunt.

In the interview, they had been careful to avoid any background information about Ultra Woman. They'd said she was human, but that didn't narrow it down much.

She was obviously female—the suit had done little to conceal that.

And probably in her late twenties.

With an American accent.

Mayson wrinkled her nose as she tried to recall the exact intonation of Ultra Woman's voice. Her accent had been American—definitely not Southern, perhaps Midwest.

The large pink mask covered enough of her face to make identification an indefinite business.

But Mayson had seen her without the mask—for the briefest second—in the bathroom at the wedding. Mayson had come out of the stall and caught one glimpse of the bride in the mirror just prior to her replacing the mask.

Mayson closed her eyes and tried to recall that memory.

She gave up after a few seconds.

She had spent way too much time staring at the picture of Lois Lane—so much so that now Mayson couldn't visualise the image of Ultra Woman without it morphing into Lois Lane in a mask.

Mayson took the printout of the photo of Lane from her bag. With a red pen, she drew a mask on the face. She held up the now-crumpled piece of paper, and her breath erupted into shooting darts that exploded through her lungs.

The face of Ultra Woman stared back.

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Mayson lurched from her seat and paced the length of the room.

Lois Lane?

Ultra Woman?

It couldn't be possible.

On Wednesday morning, Ultra Woman had been in Metropolis. Mayson had gone to the cafe and seen her there with Superman.

And on Wednesday afternoon, someone whom Albert thought was 'more likely than not' to be Lois Lane had been in the library.

Ultra Woman had a slight Midwest accent.

Just like the woman in the library!

Mayson felt hysterical laughter sweep through her.

It all fitted together perfectly.

And it gave a feasible explanation for how Lois Lane had heard the conversation in the library and been back in Australia a few hours later to write the story. Being married to Superman made long-distance travel a cinch.

Mayson picked up her phone and called Kent's desk. She listened to the dial tone and took a gigantic breath to settle her cavorting heart.

"Clark Kent, Daily Planet."

"Clark, it's Mayson."

"Mayson. Are you calling in a story?"

"Not calling it in—not yet," she said. "But I have the biggest story since Superman appeared."

"You sound distressed… as if you've been running. Are you in danger? Where are you? Did someone hurt you?"

"I'm at my apartment. You need to come here now."

"Mayson…" His speech had acquired that weary intonation he often used when speaking to her. "… you know I don't come to your apartment."

Mayson was tired of his patronising attitude. “Listen to me, Kent,” she snapped. “I am offering you one chance to hear about this before I splash it all over the front page of the Planet. And if Perry won’t print it, I’m sure every other editor across the entire United States will snatch it up. I *will* write the story, and it *will* be published, and it *will* change your life forever. So do yourself a favour, greenhorn, and take the lifeline I’m offering you—because if you don’t, you will pick up tomorrow’s paper and see your gullibility on public display.”

“May—”

“You’ve got fifteen minutes.”

She slammed the phone into its holder and tried to steady her breath.

She’d always known that Clark Kent was naïve, but this took it to new levels entirely.

* * *

Clark hurried to Mayson’s apartment at brisk walk. He couldn’t arrive too quickly—she knew he had been in the newsroom just moments ago.

His heart was pounding in his chest as he tried to gather his scrambled thoughts. Whatever she said, whatever she knew, whatever she threatened, he had to protect Lois and his parents.

Nothing was as important as protecting the humans who had accepted him—the people who loved him.

* * *

Mayson sat at her computer and opened the Metropolis Star site. She brought up the wedding photograph of Superman and Ultra Woman.

Now, she had no doubt.

Lois Lane was Ultra Woman.

Why? How? She didn’t know. That would come later.

But one thing she did know—there were two possibilities regarding Kent.

Either he was the singularly most stupid man that had ever walked the Earth…

Or he was Superman.

She stared at the man in the blue spandex. The hair was different from Kent’s. The posture was different. The expression was different. Physically, it could be Clark Kent. Her eyes glided over the broad shoulders and muscular contours of the alien’s chest. Mayson shook her head. It was highly doubtful that *that* body belonged to Kent.

And who could imagine bumbling Clark Kent being able to fly and possessing such strength? That was as preposterous as some of her earlier speculation about Lane had been.

But, Mayson thought with a gratified smile, she didn’t have to imagine.

She could prove it.

Mayson rose from the chair and went into her bedroom.

She opened her closet, slid the shoes sideways, lifted the hatch, and removed the book. From its pages, she took out the small piece of green rock and carefully placed it in the pocket of her woollen jacket.

It would be safe there—safe and effective.

If Clark Kent was Superman, he would walk two steps into her apartment and be exposed to the green rock. He would collapse, his hands clutching desperately at his chest.

And she would know.

Mayson smiled in anticipation.

She would know his secret. She would have total power over not just Superman, but Clark Kent as well.

If the green rock had no effect, she would know Kent had been duped by—of all people—a football reporter from Australia.

Kent had said he loved Lane.

That ‘love’ was going to be the perfect lever to force Kent to do her bidding.

Mayson smirked victoriously.

Kent had humiliated her with his cold rejection.

Revenge would be devastatingly emphatic and oh-so-sweet.

* * *

Lex Luthor pressed the ‘rewind’ button on his VCR remote control. The tape whirred back for a few seconds, and then he replayed the scene for the fifth time. The camera swung from the ranting Jason Trask to the floor where the alien lay, reduced to a contorting mound of primary colours.

In the background, Trask’s demented spiel continued as he expounded on takeovers, and green rock, and energy sources, and saving planet Earth from those dastardly aliens—all seemingly without the need to draw breath.

Luthor had watched as the drama had unfolded live. He’d had the foresight to tape it, because even then, it had been obvious that whoever prevailed—be it Superman or Trask—had the potential to be a problem.

Trask had died only hours later.

Superman had overcome the first major challenge to his powers—and it had changed him.

Until the confrontation with Trask, Superman had shown no inclination to use his powers for anything other than rescuing people from emergencies.

But that had changed.

In the past week alone, the caped mutant had foiled two robberies that Luthor had planned—the drugstore and the bank.

In the big picture, neither mattered. But the alarm bells were clanging loudly. Superman could be the one individual with both the motivation and the ability to threaten the empire Luthor had so meticulously built.

And for that, he had to be eradicated.

Luthor rewound the tape again and leant forward. It didn't look like an act; it looked like genuine agony. The man who could take a bullet without so much as flinching had been in real pain.

Trask's voice droned on—detailing how, by removing all traces of the green rock from Earth, he would rid the aliens of their power source.

Trask had expelled the green rock into space, but Superman's powers had continued unabated.

Indeed, he had increased his proclivity for poking his nose into things that were not his business.

The stricken alien filled the screen, and Luthor paused the tape.

That was how he'd looked at the wedding.

Until… until Mayson Drake had left.

Whatever had caused his distress during the confrontation with Trask had also been present at the wedding.

It was so obvious, Luthor was astounded that it had taken him this long to realise the truth—the green rock was *not* Superman's power supply but his nemesis.

Mayson Drake did have knowledge, but more importantly, she had means.

She had to have some of the green rock.

Trask had taken the Daily Planet staff as his hostages. Mayson had been at the EPRAD base just prior to the green rock being hurtled into space. She could have stolen some. Alternatively, Trask could have given some to his staunchest ally as insurance.

It didn't matter how she had acquired it.

She wouldn't accept his invitation for a date, but Luthor was sure there was something he could offer her that she wouldn't be able to refuse.

Some of the green rock remained on Earth—and Luthor intended to have it.

* * *

It had taken Clark nearly ten minutes to cover the distance between the Planet and Mayson's apartment. Now, for the first time ever, he stood outside her door.

He closed his eyes and hauled in a long, slow breath.

Whatever she wanted, he was going to need to think quickly and smother any revealing reactions. Assume nothing, he counselled himself. Admit nothing. Agree to nothing.

He raised his hand and knocked.

Mayson opened the door within seconds. Her face confirmed his worst fears. She knew something. And she intended to use it against him.

"Clark," she said brightly. "You came."

"You told me to come."

She stood back to let him in and then closed the door behind him. Clark pushed his hands into his pockets and waited, trying to ignore how much this felt like entrapment in a spider's web.

The feeling intensified when Mayson stepped up to him, and to his horror, put her arms around his neck.

His hands shot from his pockets and took a firm grip on her elbows. He stepped back, putting distance between them. Her arms dropped, and she slid her hands into the pockets of the jacket she was wearing.

"Don't do that, Mayson," Clark said. "You know I don't feel that way about you."

"It was merely a sign of affection between two friends," she said. "You take everything waaaay too seriously, Clark."

Mayson had always been bold… on edge… unpredictable. Now, she reminded him of a bomb about to detonate.

Clark tried to clear his face of all expression. "What do you want?" he asked.

"I want you to stop using that superior tone with me," she said.

"You know why I respond to you the way I do."

"Sure I do," she said with a laugh that cackled through his brain and squeezed the knots in his stomach tighter. "You

think you're better than me because you didn't succumb to my attempts to get you into my bed."

"I don't think I'm better than you," he said. "I just want to know why you've summoned me here."

"Because I have something to tell you that most people would have worked out already. It's possible, of course, that you know, but somehow"—she looked him up and down with abject contempt—"I don't think so."

"Could we do this without the theatrics?" Clark asked.

"You don't know, do you?" Mayson shook her head incredulously. "You don't have any idea what I'm about to tell you."

Clark waited and said nothing.

"The woman you're so taken with? The one that you supposedly love?"

Ice slithered through Clark's veins. This was about Lois. "What about her?"

"She's a married woman."

"If she were married, I'm sure she would have told me."

"No, she wouldn't have," Mayson said with certainty. "She probably realises you're as naïve as a newborn kitten."

"I trust Lois."

"Not only is she married," Mayson gloated. "But I attended her wedding."

Surely, Mayson couldn't know that Lois was Ultra Woman… could she? Again, Clark decided that silence was his ally.

"Last weekend, while you were having a lovely folksy time in Smallville, Lois Lane was getting married right here in Metropolis." Mayson chortled. "Oh, the irony, the irony—it's beautiful."

She did know! "Mayson, can you stop talking in riddles? You're not making any sense."

"It's simple, hayseed," she spat as anger laced her disdain. "The woman you say you love… The woman you're chasing halfway around the world to visit… The woman you want to spend the rest of your life with… that woman, Lois Lane is—when you're not looking—Ultra Woman. Who is married to Superman."

Clark felt as if his head were splitting down the middle.

The only meagre—and it was very meagre—compensation was that Mayson looked as if she had plenty more to say. He wasn't going to have to speak for at least a few minutes.

"You look shocked," she said gleefully. "But now that I've pointed it out for you, you must realise the truth. Perhaps you had niggling questions about her. Perhaps she said things that just didn't quite add up. Perhaps you'd call her, and she wouldn't answer her phone and never had any reasonable explanation for not taking your call."

Mayson paced away and turned like an uncoiling spring. "It all fits," she said exultantly. "It explains how she could be in the library on Wednesday and only hours later follow up her story in Australia. It explains Ultra Woman's complete dearth of anything resembling class." Mayson stepped closer, and her eyes narrowed. "You didn't believe me, did you, Kent? I told you Lois Lane had been in Metropolis, and you didn't believe me. If you even bothered asking her about it, she probably bamboozled you with details of how she got the medal story, and that was enough for you to figure stupid Mayson had been imagining things again. It wasn't possible for Lane to be here and be in Australia just a few hours later. But I bet you never thought about Superman, huh?"

Mayson grinned, clearly relishing her own brilliance and his speechlessness in equal measure.

"You didn't know, did you?" she persisted.

Clark didn't reply.

"You didn't know you are dating a married woman. Oh, Kent, that is perfect. You! Of all people, Mr Boy Scout, Mr Morality, Mr Straight-Guy is dating a *married* woman. I knew you were dumb, Kent, but I have to say this has surprised even me."

She pranced to her computer and wiggled the mouse. A wedding photo came onto the screen—a wedding photo of Superman and Ultra Woman.

Clark took advantage of her turned back to gather his thoughts. Was it worth trying to raise some doubts to shake her conviction? She hadn't said how she knew. Did she know for sure? Or had she guessed? "What about the interview?" he asked. "I was still in Melbourne when Ultra Woman was at Superman's interview. I was with Lois then."

Mayson spun from where she'd been gazing at the wedding photo on the computer screen. "Do you remember the exact time of the interview?" she fired at him. "I do. Do you remember exactly what you were doing? Do you know for sure that Lane was with you?"

He gave the slightest shake of his head, deciding it was much less dangerous for Mayson to be the one doing the talking.

"The interview was at nine o'clock on a Tuesday morning," Mayson said triumphantly. "That means it was late at

night in Australia." She smiled, but it was more of a sneer. "I know you, Kent. I know your aversion to being intimate with a woman unless you've bound her to you for life. Don't try to tell me you were in bed with Lane during the interview, because you'd only known her a few weeks then, and I simply won't believe you."

Clark let that one pass without comment. "I'll be in Melbourne this weekend," he said.

"You're still going?" Mayson shrieked. "After everything I told you?"

"I will be with Lois," he said. "If Ultra Woman makes an appearance, we'll know Lois isn't Ultra Woman."

"You'll be with her all weekend?"

"Not the weekend. I arrive on Sunday, and I'll be there for at least two days."

"The *whole* time?" Mayson persisted. "Including the nights?"

Clark was torn between which of the two admissions was likely to cause the least damage. He nodded. "The whole time."

Mayson whooped. "This just gets funnier," she said. "Not only are you dating a married woman, but you've also just admitted that you've been sleeping with a married woman. Have you thought about what happens to you when Superman discovers you've been having an affair with his wife? Oh, Kent," she sniggered, "you are going to be mashed to a pulp."

Clearly, the prospect of that thrilled her.

"I don't believe you," Clark said.

"Then you are even more stupid than I thought."

"Do you really think that Superman—with all of his powers—wouldn't know if his wife were having an affair?" Clark said. "Do you really think the wife of Superman would even look at an average guy like me? You saw them together at the interview. Did they seem as if they were in love?"

Mayson paused, and for the first time, Clark saw a speck of indecision in her face. "They *looked* close," she conceded.

Clark wasn't sure whether he should fall back to silence or try to take advantage of her doubts. "Do you really think a football reporter from Melbourne would be a good enough actor to fool you into thinking she was in love with one man when she's in love with someone else entirely?"

"Don't fool yourself, Kent," Mayson said. "If your little piece of Down Under skirt is sharing herself between you and Superman, it won't be *you* she's in love with."

"Lois says she loves me. I believe her."

Mayson shook her head, and it seemed a measure of melancholy had come over her face. "Kent," she said. "After the way you continually rejected me, I should be happy that your world has come crashing down, but I just feel pity for you."

"I don't want your pity."

"No, but you need my help." Mayson left the computer desk and stepped closer. "Clark," she said, and her friendly tone was more disturbing than her hysterical ravings. "I have the means to bring down Superman. We could do it together. When Superman finds out that you've been sleeping with his wife, there won't be much left of you. Your only hope is if I rid the world of Superman. I get the story, you get the satisfaction of revenge over the slut who has made such a fool of you, and you won't have to worry about Superman coming after you or your parents."

"No," Clark said.

Mayson raised her eyebrow and gave him a chilling smile. "This is your only chance, Kent," she said. "I have all the power. If you side with me, you will come out of this with little other than your conscience dented and your ego mangled."

"No, Mayson. I won't help you bring down Superman."

"What about Lane?" Mayson said cattily. "Surely even a heart as sanctimonious as yours would get some pleasure out of the demise of the woman who has strung you along so easily?"

Clark tried to wipe all emotion from his expression. "I love Lois," he said because in all this clutter, that truth shone like a beacon.

Mayson's eyes turned cold, and her mouth twisted to a cruel sneer. "Then we are going to have to do this the hard way," she said. She looked at the watch on her wrist. "You have three hours to make your decision. Be back here at five o'clock."

"What decision?"

"Everything I know—that Lois Lane is Ultra Woman, that she's been having an affair with you despite her marriage to the alien—*everything* will be in my story tomorrow."

"Perry won't print it."

"Carpenter will. And he'll pay big bucks for the exclusive."

Clark knew she was right. Having paid for the wedding and not obtained the honeymoon photos, the Star would jump at the chance to print any dirt on Superman and Ultra Woman.

"There is one way to buy my silence," Mayson said.

Clark didn't want to ask, but he had to. "How?"

"By announcing our engagement in tomorrow's *Planet*."

Part 60

"I don't love you," Clark grated. "I will never love you."

Mayson knew that. She'd always known that. Now, that knowledge didn't hurt, but it did ignite the desire to hurt back. "You are so drearily old-fashioned," she said. "You'll find life much easier once you realise that the best marriages are business arrangements and that love is only to be found in childish fairy tales."

"I won't marry a woman I don't love."

"Then the woman you think you love will be splattered all over tomorrow's Star, and Lois Lane's life as she knows it will be effectively over. She'll become the primary target for anyone wanting to control Superman—assuming, of course, that Superman doesn't get to his adulterous wife first." Mayson marched past Clark and opened the door of her apartment. "I'm a fair woman, but I'm not a patient one," she said. "You have three hours to make your decision—either we announce our engagement, or the story goes ahead. You will be back here with your answer by five o'clock. If you don't come, I will call Preston Carpenter and offer him enough delicious scandal to triple his circulation."

"Don't you have a contract with the Planet restraining you from selling stories to other publications?"

"When you have a rich influential uncle on the board, you don't have to honour contracts," Mayson said airily. "If the Planet were stupid enough to sack me, they would lose the best investigative reporter in Metropolis and the wealthiest and most generous of their board members."

Kent didn't move. It appeared as if his rather shallow reservoir of ideas had run dry.

Mayson gestured through the door for Clark to leave. "Five o'clock, Kent. Not one second past."

He walked out of her apartment. Mayson closed the door and leant against it. She had definitely not imagined that his first visit to her apartment would end like this, but on reflection, it was more satisfying than if she had managed to lure him into her bed.

He had looked like a broken man.

Her phone shrilled, and Mayson jumped at the sudden sound. As she crossed the room, her hand slipped into her pocket, and her fingers curled around the green rock. "Mayson Drake," she said into the phone.

"Mayson."

It was Luthor's voice. For all of his money and position, she didn't need him. She had the green rock to control Superman. She had Clark over a jagged barrel with his soft underbelly rammed against the spikes. She knew Superman's wife was leading a double life that included sex with someone other than her husband. "I've already told you that I have no interest in accompanying you on a date," she said coldly.

"This isn't about a date," Luthor said as if he had moved on. "I've heard a whisper, and to show that I am a man who bears no grudges, I have called you so that you can get the story."

"What story?" Mayson asked quickly.

"It's been a long-standing open secret that the engineers are worried about the state of the gas pipes under the city," Luthor said. "They are extremely old and in dire need of replacement. Unfortunately, no one is prepared to take either the backlash of the people who would be without gas for a considerable time or the cost involved in replacing the pipes."

"Is this a history lesson or a story?" Mayson snapped.

"The city engineers are going to conduct tests this afternoon," Luthor continued, unaffected by her tone. "These tests are against the specific advice of other experts who believe that any extra pressure could cause cracking."

Mayson hesitated. She didn't trust Luthor. Refusing his date could have been a little too much like provoking a cobra. "How do you know all this?"

"You said you didn't want a history lesson."

"Which pipes? Which part of the city?"

"If you go to Centennial Park, you will get the best vantage point without placing yourself in any direct danger."

A cold sheet fell across Mayson's heart. "And how do I know that you aren't directing me to the most dangerous place?" she asked. "I'm sure my death would cause you no grief."

"That's true," Luthor said smoothly. "But despite your many annoying tendencies, you are the foremost reporter in this city, and without you, I would have to rely on reading the incomprehensible claptrap spewed out by Linda King or the soft homely mush that Clark Kent writes."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Now you want a lesson in the psychology of my mind?" Luthor asked, sounding amused. "When there's a story in the offing?"

Mayson slammed down the phone.

In her other hand, she still clutched the green rock.

Should she take it with her?

If this were true—if the tests did cause damage and threaten life—Superman would be there.

She could produce the rock, and while he was debilitated, she could make a few of her own demands.

But…

Gas leaks were serious.

If something went wrong, a leak could easily escalate into an explosion, and many lives would be in danger.

Including hers.

And, galling though it was to admit it, if something did go wrong, Superman could be her best chance of living long enough to write the story.

There would be other opportunities to introduce the green rock.

Mayson scurried to her bedroom and laid the precious stone in its hiding place. She closed the trap door and precisely placed the shoes. Her time to use the green rock would come.

But it wasn't now.

* * *

Lex Luthor replaced the phone and smiled as he settled back in his soft leather chair.

Mayson Drake didn't trust him. She had realised—too late—that snubbing his offer of a date was fraught with danger.

"Not this time, Mayson, my dear," he said. "Not that I care if your pretty blonde head is splattered on the Metropolis sidewalk, but there's no way I'm going to risk obliterating the green rock."

He picked up the phone to make his second call—to order a thorough search of her apartment. It would be phenomenally stupid to leave the green rock unguarded, but Luthor had learned long ago not to assume that others matched his acuity for the game.

* * *

Clark looked down on his sleeping wife, his heart heavy with the burning wish that he could protect her from the damage Mayson was attempting to inflict on their lives.

But there was no way to shield her. He had to wake her and tell her.

He laid his hand on her shoulder and shook her gently. "Lois?" he said quietly. "Lois, honey? You need to wake up."

She opened her eyes and smiled immediately she saw him. "Clark," she said. "It can't be time to get up yet." She shuffled away from him. "Come to bed."

He sat on the bed and swept back the hair from her face with a loving touch. "Lois," he said, "I need to tell you something."

She re-opened eyes that had fallen shut and wriggled to a semi-sitting position. She gazed at him, blinking against the weak light of the bedside lamp. He saw the apprehension bloom in her face and knew she had discerned that he brought bad news. "What happened?" she asked.

The fear in her voice was like a barb to his chest. He couldn't find the words to break it to her gently. He took her hand in his and said, "Mayson thinks Lois Lane is Ultra Woman."

Her body tensed. "Mayson doesn't know Lois Lane."

"She does. She knew about your Brownlow story, and she knew about—"

"Does she know that you're Superman?"

"That thought doesn't seem to have occurred to her."

Lois's eyebrows dipped in contemplation. "So, she thinks I'm cheating on Superman with you?"

Clark nodded disconsolately. "I'm sorry, honey," he said. "My dual identity just keeps getting you into trouble."

Lois eyed him, and the concern on her face twisted through his heart. If she'd fallen in love with a normal man, she could have avoided all of these complications. "How does she know?" she asked.

"She didn't say."

"What are we going to do?" Lois asked. "I don't think people will dismiss this as the ravings of a jealous woman."

Clark let out a long breath. "It gets worse," he warned.

Her grip tightened on his hand.

"She gave me an ultimatum," he said. "The only way to keep her story—including that Ultra Woman is having an affair with Clark Kent—out of tomorrow's papers is if we, Mayson and I, announce our engagement."

Lois muttered an expletive. She hauled in a deep breath and released it slowly. Then she looked directly at Clark. "How long do we have?"

"Less than three hours."

Lois straightened her posture and rubbed her eyes. "OK," she said. "We have some time. There has to be a way out of this, and we will find it."

"I am not going to agree to an announcement of the engagement," Clark said firmly.

"What if it's the only way to keep her from going public?"

"I will call a press conference and explain *everything*," Clark declared. "That would be preferable to anyone thinking I would marry that woman."

"Agreeing to her demand might be a way to buy us some time," Lois said.

"No."

His adamant response elicited a wan smile from his wife. "You wouldn't do it?" she asked. "Under any circumstances?"

Clark cradled her hand in both of his and solemnly gazed into her eyes. "When we talked about Superman and Ultra Woman getting married, we agreed that we weren't going to do it unless it was real. I made vows to you. I promised you that I would love only you for the rest of my life. Nothing is going to change that."

"I didn't say anything about you loving her."

"I am married," Clark said with steely determination. "I am married to you. I am not going to even pretend otherwise."

"Superman is married," Lois said gently. "As far as the world knows, Clark Kent isn't married."

"Then perhaps it's time we changed that," Clark said. "Perhaps it's time I made it clear that regardless of the clothes I am wearing, I am me, and I am married, and I am in love, and I am totally committed to one woman."

Lois put her hand on his cheek and smiled into his eyes. "I love you for your conviction," she said. "But let's not throw away our chance to see if there is another way out of this."

"Do you have any ideas?"

"No," she admitted glumly. "But we have three hours to think about it."

From Clark's pocket, his cell rang. He slipped it out and saw the number displayed. "It's Mom," he told Lois. He took a moment to steady himself before answering. "Hi, Mom."

"Clark," she said urgently. "Have you heard the news?"

His heart thudded low into his stomach. "What news?"

"There are numerous gas leaks in Metropolis. One spark, and there will be a massive explosion. They're calling for Superman."

"OK, Mom. Thanks." He hung up the phone. "Gas leaks," he told Lois with heavy regret. "I have to go."

"Of course you have to go," she said quickly. "It will give me time to work out how we are going to fix this."

He gave her a quick kiss and shot from her unit and towards Metropolis.

* * *

Luthor dialled the number for his third call.

He was a man who believed in being sufficiently prepared that, regardless of the outcome of any given situation, he would be the one left holding all the aces.

"Pearce," came the familiar voice.

"Luthor."

"Who? When?"

"Mayson Drake. Prepare now, set in position next time I call, activate if—and when—I OK it."

"Her computer?"

"Good."

"Home or office?"

"Home."

The line clicked dead. Luthor slowly replaced his phone and lit a cigar.

"Welcome to the game, Ms Drake," he said as the smoke drifted lazily upwards. "If you play your cards well, you might live long enough to enjoy it. If not… ka-boom!"

* * *

For half an hour, Clark worked systematically to restore the pipes, using his super-breath to clear away the leaked gas so it was safe to use his heat vision to close each leak.

Once the situation had been secured, he landed next to the group of police officers. They were dressed in black bulky suits, with rounded face masks and tubes connected to their oxygen tanks. The city was eerily quiet. The police had ordered all citizens to get into a building and stay there.

Henderson—almost unrecognisable in his gear—stepped forward. "Is it safe?" he asked, his voice muffled.

Clark nodded. "I have checked all of the pipes and repaired the holes."

"They were holes? Not cracks?"

"That is correct. This was not an accident, or even a series of accidents that could have occurred due to climatic conditions. This was sabotage."

Even through the mask, Henderson's horror was evident. "Who would want to do that?" he asked. "If enough of the gas had escaped, or if there had been an explosion, everyone's lives would be in danger."

"Once your engineers have checked the air quality, you can lift the lockdown," Clark said.

"You're confident it's safe?"

"Very confident."

"Were there any clues?" Henderson asked. "Anything to suggest why someone would do this?"

"It looked like mindless vandalism."

A footstep rapped loudly in the silence of the deserted street, and Clark swung towards the sound. Mayson Drake—wearing no protection against either gas or explosion—walked out from behind a tree. She approached the group with brisk steps and stopped next to Superman. "Can I ask you a few questions for my story?" she said.

"What are you doing out here, Mayson?" Henderson demanded, his annoyance evident. "We put the city in lockdown."

"I'm a reporter," she said coolly. "I don't get the best stories by scuttling away every time there is a hint of danger." She looked directly at Superman with a coy smile. "And once I heard Superman was here, I knew he would keep the city safe."

"You shouldn't be here," Clark said.

"Well, I am," she returned. "So how about you answer my questions so I can get on with my job?"

Mayson Drake was the absolute last person Clark wanted to be with, but he nodded tersely. "Two questions," he said. "My time is limited."

Instead of immediately asking a question, she gazed at him with a shrewd smile. "How's your wife, Superman?"

"You get two questions, and you use one to ask about his wife?" Henderson said incredulously.

"She's well," Clark said. "One more question."

"How can we be sure that your repairs will keep this from happening again the next time the pipes are tested?"

"The pipes weren't being tested," Henderson said. "This was sabotage."

All of Mayson's composure and swagger peeled away, and her face paled to alabaster. "Sabotage?" she gulped.

Henderson nodded. "Someone did this deliberately."

Without another word, Mayson wheeled around and sprinted away, her heels tapping loudly on the empty sidewalk.

Superman looked at Henderson and shrugged.

* * *

Clark landed in Lois's unit, and she rushed to meet him with such purpose and intent that he knew she had thought of something. "Is everything OK in Metropolis?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "But it wasn't an accident."

"Someone caused the leaks deliberately?"

"Yeah." His kiss was hot and quick, with a tinge of desperation. "What are we going to do?" he asked. It was a request for information, not a statement of despair.

"This is like it's three-quarter time, and the opposition have a good lead and are coming home with a tail wind," Lois said. "You can either accept that you're beaten, or you can fight it out. The best way forward—the *only* way forward—is bold and fearless attack. You need to trust your teammates and yourself."

"What are you suggesting?" Clark asked, unable to glean anything from her analogy.

Lois sighed. "It's flimsy," she said. "About the only thing going for it is that it's better than sitting here and doing nothing."

"I couldn't think of anything," he admitted.

"I think we should get into the suits and pay Luthor a visit."

Clark could not see how that was going to help their situation with Mayson, so he said nothing and waited for Lois to continue.

"I am sure Luthor is the Boss," she said. "If we pay him a call—under the pretence that we are there to discuss the cameras in the honeymoon suite—we might find something… *anything*… to support that theory."

"Are you suggesting that if we can find something, we could print it tomorrow, and it could knock Mayson's story off the front page?"

Lois grimaced. "Nah. That's a possibility, I suppose, but I think the Star, having missed out on the honeymoon photos, will consider dirt on Superman and Ultra Woman—an extramarital affair no less—to be their first priority."

"I agree," Clark said. "If Mayson offers Carpenter her story, I can't see anything replacing it on the front page - not even the identity of the Boss."

"My thoughts were more about trying to barter with Mayson," Lois said. "She understands that knowledge is power, and she's more than willing to use it. We could offer her the Luthor story in return for her not printing the 'Lois Lane is Ultra Woman' story."

They were going to have to discover something earth-shattering—and with solid backup evidence—for Mayson to even consider that deal. "Even if she agrees, there are no guarantees she will keep her word," Clark said. "She could take the Luthor story today and still print the Ultra Woman story tomorrow."

"But if you agree to the engagement, there are no guarantees she will keep quiet about what she knows," Lois said earnestly. "I thought about this while you were gone, and I realised that if we give in to her on this, it will become a string of similar situations. Every time she wants something, either from Clark or Superman, she will threaten to publish what she knows."

"Except if we are supposedly engaged," Clark said, his aversion to the idea sitting like acid in his mouth, "it will be her fiancé she is exposing. Mayson is very careful to ensure that the dirt she throws doesn't land too close to home."

"Hhmm," Lois conceded grimly. Her resolve had deflated. "Maybe it's not a workable idea."

"It's a start," Clark said with an encouraging smile. "But we need more than that. We need an explanation for how Lois Lane was in Metropolis."

"Anything we say is going to introduce the possibility of a link between Clark Kent and Superman. If we say that Lois is with Clark and that the Superman wedding was simply a ruse so he appeared more human, that is going to admit that Clark and Superman are close."

"And it sends entirely the wrong message about both men's attitudes towards women," Clark said. "As if they are something that can be traded and loaned on a whim."

Lois wrinkled her brow. "Why didn't Mayson even consider that Clark Kent could be Superman?"

"I don't think she has a high opinion of Clark," he said grimly.

"Did you go to her apartment?"

"Yes," Clark admitted. "She insisted."

Lois smiled briefly. "That explains it; she would have tested you with the green rock."

"Uggh," he said. "That's probably why she tried to hug me."

"Maybe." Lois's thoughts had moved on. "I suppose, even in this situation, you would prefer not to lie?"

"I might have to," Clark said, though he wasn't comfortable with his concession. "The problem with lying is that it tends to lead to other lies, and the pit just keeps getting bigger."

"Could we say that Clark had discovered something about Superman's past? You're an investigative reporter… Just because Mayson couldn't find out anything about Superman, that doesn't mean Clark couldn't. Perhaps you found out about… him coming from Krypton. Instead of writing what you discovered, you and Superman became sort of friends. I mean, the world has accepted that Superman can have a wife, why not a buddy?"

"Until someone wonders why Superman and his 'buddy' are never seen together."

"True," Lois said. "But at least if we are forced to concede that Lois was in the library in Metropolis, we have an explanation. Superman brought Clark's girlfriend from Australia because they were missing each other."

Clark nodded thoughtfully. "It's not watertight," he said. "And it doesn't explain how two friends are in relationships with women who look so alike."

"Nothing is going to explain that," Lois said with a sigh.

"But Superman, Clark, and Lois will stick to the same story," Clark said. "It's not going to be easy to prove they are all lying."

Lois's eyes met those of her husband. "We go and see Luthor?"

Clark couldn't see an obvious way forward, but Lois did seem to have the knack of looking in the right places for answers. "OK," he said. "We visit Luthor."

Lois stepped away. "My suit is hidden in the bedroom," she said. "Can you get me into it, please? We need to hurry."

Clark spun around Lois, spun himself into the Superman suit, and then he picked up Ultra Woman, and they flew towards Metropolis.

Part 61

Lex Luthor sat back in his chair and examined the green rock.

It was beautiful. Intricate. Mystical. Unearthly.

He rotated it slowly, and the sunlight caught the different hues, giving the appearance of movement from within.

As if it had life. A force. Power.

It was easy to believe it had come from a place far away.

And that it had the power to overcome the strongest man on Earth.

With this little rock in his possession, he had no further need of Drake. Had that dim-witted woman really believed that a subfloor cavity was the appropriate hideaway for something so priceless? Luthor shook his head in disbelief. Perhaps she had thought that three pairs of shoes would provide adequate camouflage.

With this little rock in his possession, he had no need to fear Superman.

The phone cut across his satisfied smile, and he answered it. “Lex Luthor.”

“Pearce. It’s in place. One word from you, and I’ll activate it by remote control.”

“The down payment will be in your account today. The balance will be paid upon her demise.”

As Luthor returned the phone, a soft knock sounded. He slipped the green rock into the interior pocket of his jacket. “Enter.”

His personal assistant walked in.

“Mrs Cox,” Luthor greeted cheerily.

“Superman and Ultra Woman are here. They wish to see you.”

To hide his surprise and delight at such a timely happenstance, Luthor reached for his case and took out a long cigar. He lit it before replying. “Did they say what they wanted?” he asked.

“No. Only that they wish to speak with you.”

Luthor drew from his cigar and then slowly blew the wafts of smoke into the air. “Send them in,” he said.

“Yes, Mr Luthor.”

Mrs Cox left the room, and Luthor sprang from the chair. His antagonist had come to him, on the very day that Luthor had obtained the green rock. He clenched his fist in anticipated triumph.

Ultra Woman’s presence was an added bonus. She was female. Luthor knew he possessed a charm that most women found irresistible. The possibilities for advantage were boundless…

* * *

Mayson tore along the corridor and, with shaking hands, released the three locks into her apartment. Once they were free, she shoved at the door and raced into her bedroom. She wrenched open the closet and stared as her breath rattled through her body.

Her shoes were untouched, precisely aligned exactly as she had left them.

She fell to her knees and swept them aside.

She raised the hatch.

The book was there.

She lifted it from the hole and jerked it open.

It was empty!

The green rock was gone!

Luthor had stolen it!

The book slid from her hands and thudded onto the floor. She continued to stare into the hole as comprehension doused her mind.

Luthor had attempted to entice her away with suggestions of a date to an exotic destination. When that hadn’t worked, he’d achieved his objective with the lure of a story.

Mayson moaned in frustration and resentment as she stood. He must have arranged for the pipes to be sabotaged. How else could he have known in advance?

And he was so darn smug that he had lied outright about the pipes being tested. It was as if he had wanted her to know she had walked right into his trap.

If he had the contacts to do that, this couldn’t be his first foray into crime.

Months ago, Mayson had secured the first-ever in-depth interview with Lex Luthor. She’d been elated; only now did she realise that she’d missed the real story.

Mayson kicked the book into the hole and slammed the trapdoor shut with a savage swipe.

Luthor would pay.

He would pay for taking something that was hers.

He would pay for thinking she was easy prey.

She didn’t have the green rock anymore, but she knew who had instigated the gas leaks.

Perhaps there was a way to use one to reclaim the other.

* * *

Mrs Cox showed Superman and Ultra Woman into Luthor’s office.

They walked forward steadily—joined at the hands, their capes swishing in unison.

Luthor fixed his eyes on Superman’s face as the distance between them lessened. The alien’s expression didn’t change. There was no contorting of his features. No sudden onset of pain. No horrified realisation that the hazardous green rock lurked nearby.

Luthor stepped right up to Superman and offered his hand.

The alien slipped from the attachment with his wife and shook hands with Luthor. His grip was firm but restrained.

The alien and the green rock were within touching distance—much closer than Mayson had been to him at the wedding—and there was no discernible effect.

“Superman,” Luthor said in businesslike fashion. Either the rock or the superhero was a fake.

“Mr Luthor,” Superman said.

“And Ultra Woman.” Luthor offered his hand to the woman. Her grip was softer, but her eyes were harder.

And cold.

She didn’t like him.

Luthor lifted her hand and dipped his head to kiss her. She jerked her hand from his grasp and then had the impudence to wipe it on her costume.

Luthor pretended not to notice her snub. “Would you like a drink?” he asked, his eyes drilling past the mask and into those of the woman. He’d rarely met a woman who was immune to his charm. “Name any vintage, and I will be able to accommodate you from my collection.”

“No, thank you,” Superman said. “We have come to ask you some questions.”

Luthor’s eyes didn’t move from the woman. “Would you like a drink?” he asked in the melodic tones that women loved. He gave her his most potent smile.

To his surprise, her expression darkened. “It has come to our attention there were cameras hidden in the Lexor honeymoon suite that was provided for us following our wedding,” she said.

“Cameras?” Luthor said with feigned astonishment. “There were cameras in your rooms?”

“Yes, there were cameras,” she said, clearly not convinced of the legitimacy of his surprise. “Our suspicion is that the Metropolis Star considered honeymoon photos to be due recompense for the cost of the wedding.”

“I am truly sorry that happened,” Luthor said, his attention not shifting from the woman. “I hope you will accept my sincere apologies and believe me when I assure you that I had no knowledge of this.”

Despite the intensity of his gaze, Ultra Woman didn’t waver. “No damage was done,” she stated. He noticed that she made no comment about whether or not she believed him.

With some difficulty, Luthor dragged his eyes from the woman; he found her poise fascinating. Superman stood with his shoulders back and his arms folded, completely unaffected by the presence of the green rock. Surely, it couldn’t be a fake. “Are you interested in ancient weaponry?” Luthor asked.

“I’ve never really had the need for weapons,” Superman replied.

Luthor gestured towards the cabinets where his historical swords were housed. He placed his cigar in the ashtray and extended his gesture in invitation for them to peruse his collection. Once their attention had swung towards the display, he slipped the green rock from his pocket and opened his palm towards Superman’s red cape.

The alien turned—still showing no ill effects—and Luthor quickly thrust his hand into his trousers pocket. With his other hand, he pointed to the nearest weapon. “This sword belonged to a hero of mine, Alexander the Great.”

Superman nodded, his face showing nothing more than polite interest.

Luthor felt a spark of anger at the man’s insolence. He swept the sword from the wall and held it towards the couple. With an even quicker movement, Superman unfolded his arms and stepped in front of the woman.

“You looked disproportionately concerned, Superman,” Luthor noted.

“I don’t like anyone threatening my wife.”

“But I’m sure you would always protect her.” Luthor stepped forward and placed the tip of the sword on the ‘S’, right next to the man’s heart. Above the weapon, their eyes met. There was no fear in Superman’s steady gaze. Either he really was the invulnerable alien, or his delusional belief was strong enough that he thought the spandex would save him. With a swift movement, Luthor withdrew the sword a few inches and then plunged it forward.

It felt as if he had attempted to sink it into a slab of steel. The reverberations jarred painfully along the length of his arm. Luthor withdrew the sword and quickly checked it for damage. It appeared unharmed. He returned it to the cabinet.

“You felt the need to test me,” Superman said impassively.

“It’s not difficult to dress up in a costume,” Luthor replied. “You came to my home uninvited and accused me of serious breaches of privacy. I wanted to be sure of your identity.”

“If I had been a human in a suit, you would be facing a charge of murder.”

Luthor made a vague gesture with his hand. He picked up his cigar and inhaled on it with careful indifference. Inside however, he was grappling with the unsettling realisation that he stood toe to toe with an adversary who would not be easily defeated.

This game had begun.

"Any further tests?" Superman asked.

"That will be sufficient for now," Luthor said, matching the alien's cool composure. He gestured towards the door. "I am a busy man, and I have a very important call to make."

The woman took a long moment to respond. Her eyes, once so cold, now burned with anger. "I'm sure our paths will cross in the future," she said.

"I look forward to it," Luthor replied.

He followed the couple as they walked from his office. Mrs Cox stood from her desk.

Luthor edged closer to her. "See to it that the visitors leave the building," he said quietly. She nodded her understanding and slipped a small piece of paper into his hand.

Luthor returned to his office and shut the door. He unfolded the note.

'Ms Drake has called several times. She says it is urgent that she speak with you.'

Luthor returned to his desk. He took the green rock from his pocket and examined it.

What was it?

Mayson Drake had had the real thing at the wedding.

Could she have done something to the green rock to damage it?

Unless…

Was it possible that this green rock was a decoy?

Was Drake that smart?

Where was the real piece of green rock that she'd brought to the wedding?

Regardless of the truth, while there remained a chance that a piece of the green rock was in her apartment, Luthor couldn't activate Pearce's deadly bomb.

He was going to have to set up an emergency for Superman. If Superman collapsed when Mayson arrived to report on it, Luthor would know she had the green rock with her. Then, he would have to arrange a mugging.

If Superman was unaffected, Luthor would know the green rock was somewhere else, most likely in her apartment.

Luthor viciously stubbed his cigar into the ashtray. He had no patience for unnecessary complications.

* * *

As soon as they left Luthor's building, Clark picked up Lois and flew into the air. She rubbed his chest through the suit. "I assume he didn't hurt you?"

"Not at all," Clark assured her. "But I didn't like the way he was looking at you."

"He is an evil man," she said, stifling a shiver as she remembered the cruelty embedded in Luthor's eyes. "He's driven and ruthless and cold-blooded. If you had been an imposter, he would've killed you."

"Do you still think he's the Boss?"

"I'm more sure than ever."

"Smoke particles were found in St John's clothing, and —"

"Let me guess," Lois said. "They were smoke particles from cigars."

Clark nodded. "What are we going to do now?" he asked. "Even if Luthor is the Boss, we don't have enough evidence to print it, and I doubt Mayson is going to accept it as compensation for giving up the 'Ultra Woman is Having an Affair' story."

"Did you see anything in Luthor's office? Anything incriminating?"

"No."

"That's hardly surprising," Lois said. "He hasn't remained undetected this long by being sloppy."

"What are we going to do?" Clark repeated. "I have to give Mayson an answer in just over an hour."

"We're going to keep on attacking," Lois said. "Take me somewhere quiet. We need to think through everything we know about Luthor. The answers are there—we just have to make the connections. Then… we'll take what we have to Mayson."

"You are not coming," Clark said firmly.

"I think I should," Lois said. "I think we are better as a team."

Clark looked ready to argue the point further.

"Let's work out what we've got first," Lois said quickly. "Then we'll work out how we are going to deliver it."

* * *

Lois and Clark landed on top of a small mountain that had a generous covering of trees. Clark put his finger to his

mouth to indicate for Lois to stay quiet and then concentrated his hearing. There were sounds of various animals and birds, but no speech—nothing to indicate any human presence.

He nodded to Lois.

"Luthor," she said thoughtfully. She took ten steps away and turned. "He was creepy."

"Yeah."

She stopped pacing long enough to look at her husband. "Do people often feel the need to test you? To prove you really are Superman?"

"No. But if I've just flown in, they don't need a test. We walked into Luthor's office."

"Did it seem to you as if thrusting a sword into a man's chest wasn't a big deal for him?" Lois asked. "Almost as if he's killed before?"

"That's exactly how it seemed to me," Clark replied. "But that isn't evidence."

Lois dismissed that point with a vague hand gesture. "There still has to be a reason why he felt compelled to test you—a reason why he had doubts about whether it was really Superman in the suit."

"I've never been face to face with him before."

"It's not normal behaviour to want to spear someone through the heart with Alexander the Great's sword just because it's the first time you've met," Lois noted dryly.

"No."

"There has to be something else," she insisted. Her pacing continued. "We're missing something. It's right there. I can feel it."

* * *

"Superman and Ultra Woman have gone," Mrs Cox said. "And Ms Drake is on the phone again."

"I'll take the call now," Luthor said. He picked up the phone. "Mayson, my dear," he greeted as if they were old friends.

"You stole the green rock from my apartment." Her animosity crackled through the phone line.

So, she had discovered it was missing. Was she calling him in the hope that her fury at its loss would convince him he had the real piece? Or did she think this piece was real? "You have green rock?" he asked in surprise.

"I had the green rock, and you stole it," she said, sounding right on the edge of hysteria.

Was this an act? Or was she really as upset as she appeared? With his free hand, Luthor picked up his cell phone. "You sound distraught," he commented.

"Of course I'm distraught," Mayson fired back. "You set me up. You put thousands of lives in danger just to get me out of my apartment and clear the way for you to break in and steal the green rock."

Luthor opened the message menu of his cell phone. "I remember reading a report where Superman confirmed Trask's conclusion that the green rock was his power source," he said. "A report written by you."

"He was lying," she said quickly. "I proved that when I took the green rock to his wedding."

So Luthor's deductions had been correct. "You caused his collapse?" he said, injecting surprised admiration into his tone and expecting Mayson would lap it up like a cat with cream.

"I know you arranged for the gas pipes to be sabotaged," she said, ignoring his accolade. "They weren't being tested—somebody deliberately damaged them."

"The gas pipes?" he said. "Did you get the story?"

"Oh, I got the story," Mayson said menacingly. "Enough of a story to make the police very interested. Enough of a story to encourage Henderson to look very closely into all of your dealings."

Luthor tapped in the message: *Activate*. "Do you have proof?" he asked. "Henderson tends to be particular about evidence."

"I have contacts. I will get proof, and I will tell Henderson everything I know unless you return my property."

Luthor's thumb pressed the 'send' button, and he began to click through his contacts to Pearce. "That sounds like blackmail, Mayson."

"Are you threatening me, Luthor?"

Luthor reached Pearce's number and paused. Drake had to be dealt with… permanently. But in doing so, he didn't want to surrender a chance to get the real green rock. "I have no need to threaten you, Ms Drake," he said. "You have nothing on me."

"I want that rock back. It's mine!"

An idea bounced into Luthor's brain—a way to prove whether this was an elaborate hoax. "Well, my dear," he stated calmly. "That's going to be problematic."

"Why?"

"I'm using it."

"Using it? What for?"

"It's a piece of alien green rock with the capacity to render Superman powerless. What do you think I'm using it for? A paperweight?"

"You have Superman?" she gasped.

Mayson believed him! She believed in the power of the green rock. Someone—probably the alien—had duped her, but she was too stupid to realise. "Superman and Ultra Woman paid me an unexpected visit."

"And you *captured* him?"

"As you have already surmised, I have the green rock."

Her silence spoke volumes. With a triumphant snigger, Luthor pressed the button and sent the message. "But… but… why would you want to capture him?" Mayson said eventually.

"A man with those powers is a danger to the citizens of Metropolis," Luthor said. "This is my city, and I will protect it."

He'd shocked her into silence again.

Luthor chuckled. "You don't seem to believe that tests were ordered on the pipes."

"Superman said it was mindless vandalism."

"You're a reporter, Mayson. If you do a little digging, you will discover the truth about what is really happening here. You will learn who rules this city."

"Why should I believe anything you say?"

"It's your choice, Ms Drake. But if you swallow your pride and investigate this story despite your distrust of me… If you turn on your computer and do the research, I can guarantee that you will be on the front page of tomorrow's *Daily Planet*."

"You're saying there is corruption in the city?"

On Luthor's cell, the 'new message' symbol appeared. He opened it. '*Done'*, it read. Luthor smiled. "Goodbye, Mayson," he said.

He replaced the phone before she had the chance to respond.

Then he took the green rock and positioned it on top of a pile of papers.

* * *

"Clark!"

Lois's sharp cry pierced the silence of the lonely hilltop. "What is it?" he asked quickly.

"Luthor is going to kill Mayson!"

"He's going to what?"

"He's going to kill Mayson. I just realised it. His weird behaviour—he must have the green rock. Perhaps Mayson gave it to him. Or he stole it. That's why he needed to test you. Now, he knows the green rock is a fake."

"But *kill* Mayson?"

"He's evil," Lois insisted. "He killed Nigel St John. He'll kill Mayson for tricking him."

"He said he had an important call to make." Fear clawed at Clark's heart. "We're probably too late," he groaned.

Lois leapt into his arms. "We need to get back to Metropolis and find Mayson."

Clark shot into the air. "She'll be in her apartment," he said. "Waiting for Clark."

* * *

Mayson pushed the button to turn on her computer.

There was a flash of light.

And then everything went black.

Part 62

Clark stared at his shoes.

He was perched on an uncomfortable seat in the ICU waiting room—leaning forward, head bowed, shoulders slumped, hands clenched.

He'd failed on every front.

He'd been too late.

He'd taken Lois into a treacherous situation—an explosion no less. What had he been thinking?

He'd… for one second—less than a second, he'd entertained the thought that his life would be easier if Mayson Drake died.

Condemnation cloaked his heart.

He was Superman.

He stood for life.

Clark heard a far door open, and he groaned. He wanted to be alone. He needed to be alone. Advancing footsteps echoed loudly in the hushed atmosphere where death hovered. He didn't need to look up to recognise the gait.

Perry White came closer, but Clark didn't move. He didn't want to face anyone. Not even Perry.

The editor sat in the chair two across from Clark and put his hand on the younger man's shoulder. "Any news?" he asked in that soft Southern accent.

Clark shook his head. “They aren’t telling me much. I’m not a relative.”

“But she’s still alive?”

“Yeah.”

Perry’s hand dropped from Clark’s shoulder. “What happened?”

“Someone put a bomb in her computer. She turned it on, and it blew.”

“Eduardo’s at her apartment now. No one else got hurt. The people at the scene say Superman was there.”

“Yeah,” Clark said despondently. “He got there a second too late. A piece of the hard plastic covering had already hit her head before he could protect her.”

“Without him, Mayson would be dead,” Perry said. “Apparently, he brought her to the hospital.”

Clark clenched his hands tighter and didn’t comment.

“Eduardo says Ultra Woman was at Mayson’s apartment,” Perry continued. “Superman probably wanted to get back to her. Separated from him, she would be an easy target for any nutcase wanting to blackmail him.”

Clark didn’t want to talk about Ultra Woman. He had carried his wife—his vulnerable, beautiful, trusting wife—into an explosion. He closed his eyes as pungent nausea twisted through his stomach. “He didn’t protect her very well today.”

Perry’s grunted softly. “You make it sound like this was his fault.”

Clark dragged his hand through his hair.

“Why were you there?” Perry asked. “I thought you didn’t go to Mayson’s apartment.”

“I don’t,” Clark said. “But Mayson had contacted me about a story she was going to write. I was supposed to meet her at five o’clock.”

“Did you arrive before the explosion? Or after?”

“After.”

A nurse approached, and both men stood. “Are you friends of Mayson Drake?” she asked.

They nodded. “How is she?” Clark said.

“She’s very lucky to be alive. She has a major head trauma.”

“What’s the prognosis?” Perry asked.

“It’s too early to say,” the nurse said. “We’ll know more when she wakes up.”

“Is it guaranteed she will wake up?” Clark heard himself ask.

“Nothing’s guaranteed,” the nurse said gently. “Not with head injuries.”

“Will you let us know if there are any changes?” Perry asked.

“Ms Drake will be in an induced coma for at least another twenty-four hours,” the nurse said. “Complete rest is essential for her recovery. You’re both welcome to stay if you want to, but it’s probably best if you go home. You can call the hospital for updates on her condition.”

“Thanks,” Perry said.

The nurse gave them a parting smile and walked away.

Clark sat down, his eyes fixed ahead. He didn’t see the waiting room wall—he saw the explosion… and Lois.

Perry sat beside him. “When’s your flight to Australia?”

“Four o’clock tomorrow morning.”

“Then go home, pack, and try to get a few hours’ sleep. I’ll see to tomorrow’s edition.”

“I can’t just leave her here,” Clark protested. “She’s alone. Not one of her family has come to the hospital. Not even her uncle from the board.”

“You’re not thinking of delaying your trip to Australia?”

“I don’t know.”

“Clark, when I called you and asked you to come back to Metropolis early, you said it was imperative that you be back in Melbourne for this Monday. I know it’s important to you and Lois.”

“It is, Chief, but—”

“Mayson Drake is not your responsibility.”

“She’s a colleague.”

“Look at me, Clark.”

Clark turned his attention from the floor and slowly faced his editor.

“Listen to me real good, Clark,” Perry said solemnly. “Mayson made her choices about how she lived her life. That doesn’t mean she deserves to be where she is, and I know everyone at the Planet will hope for the very best for her. But you made a decision a long time ago about Mayson’s place in your life. What happened today doesn’t change that.”

“I think I know who did this to her.”

“Can you prove it?”

"No."

Perry put his hand on Clark's shoulder. "I want you to go to Melbourne. I want you to spend at least a week with Lois. If anything changes with Mayson, I'll contact you."

"It seems callous just to leave her."

"It's the best thing you can do for her."

"Leave her to deal with this by herself?" Clark demanded.

"If you don't, you know what will happen?" Perry said earnestly. "When she wakes up and finds you here, she's going to think you've chosen her over Lois. She's going to think she has a future with you. Maybe—in the short-term—that might help her recovery. But Mayson doesn't understand friendship. That's why there's no one else here—no family, no friends—only her editor and the work colleague she has harassed for months. If you try to be her friend, she will demand more and more from you, and that will harm what you have with Lois."

Clark said nothing.

"I've been watching you since you got back from Australia," Perry continued. "You're different. There's always been something about you… as if there's a barrier between you and the rest of the world… as if you weren't really sure how you fit. I figured it was because you were a Kansas country boy trying to find his way in the big city. I thought all you needed was time." He grinned. "I was wrong—it wasn't time you needed, but a certain young lady from Australia."

"I love Lois more than I thought it was possible to love anyone," Clark said—mostly to himself.

Perry must have heard, because he chuckled. "So take the advice of an old man and make sure you're on that flight tomorrow morning."

"You really think that's what I should do?"

"No," Perry said, his eyes twinkling. "I think that's only half of it. Once you're there, you should do the rest. You should propose to Lois, and if she accepts, you should get the preacher booked and get it done before even thinking about coming back to Metropolis."

"You think I should extend my time in Australia?" Clark asked in surprise. "And get married?"

"Yes, I do," Perry said. "I think it would be the kindest thing you can do for Mayson. It's the kindest thing you can do for yourself. And if Lois loves you as much as you love her, it's the kindest thing you can do for her."

"What if Lois agrees to marry me, and we decide to live in Melbourne?"

"Then I've lost one of the finest young reporters I've ever had," Perry said pragmatically. "But I'd prefer that to having you at the Planet without Lois."

"Mayson won't be able to work for a long time," Clark said, refusing to give voice to the possibility that she might never return to the Planet. "If I go, too, how are you going to manage? I came back from Melbourne early, so you don't overdo it and have another health scare."

"Alice's ultimatum shook me, Clark," Perry said. "I realised that I had allowed my priorities to get hopelessly awry. The Planet had taken over my life. Having you as the assistant editor worked wonderfully. It gave me the time I needed to reconnect with Alice. She gives me perspective. She helps me to look beyond the next edition and see the big picture."

"But you'll be two reporters down," Clark persisted.

"I've suspected since I asked you to come back that your heart was split between Metropolis and Melbourne," Perry said. "I have been chasing two excellent reporters. One of them will arrive next week, and the other is considering my offer of a position at the Planet."

"You won't allow yourself to get overworked again?"

"Alice won't allow it," Perry said with a deep chuckle. "The love of a good woman is the greatest fortune a man can have."

Clark stood. "Let's get back to the Planet," he suggested. "Eduardo might have something by now. And I'll call Henderson to see if they found any evidence in her apartment."

Perry looked quizzically at Clark as he rose from the seat. "You really think you know who did this?"

Clark nodded. "I'm sure. And I'll be working on it while I'm in Australia."

Perry grinned. "You're going? You'll be on that flight?"

"Yeah, I'm going," Clark said. "And I'm determined that the person who did this to Mayson is going to be brought to justice."

Perry pushed the hospital door open. "Clark," he warned, "your time there should be about you and Lois."

Clark felt some of his heaviness lift as they left the hospital. "It will be," he said. "You know the St John story? The drug link back to the Cornwall ecstasy bust?"

"Yeah."

"That wasn't my work. That was Lois."

"Lois?"

"I wrote the story—with some input from her—but she was the one who kept chasing the leads until they went somewhere."

Perry grinned. "Any chance she wants to live in Metropolis?"

"Would you give her a job?"

"I'd give her a trial." They climbed into a cab. "Daily Planet," Perry said to the driver. He turned to Clark. "When we get to the Planet, I want you to take some time out for a few minutes. Call Lois. You need to talk with her."

The dejection came flooding back.

He'd put Lois in danger.

She hadn't been hurt, but every time Clark thought about how easily she could have been killed, he felt sickened by his own idiocy.

Then… to emphasise his ineptitude, he had delivered her to Melbourne and left her. It was true that he had wanted to get back to Metropolis and find out if Mayson as still alive, but the greater truth was that he hadn't been able to force himself to look into Lois's eyes.

If he had seen condemnation there, it would have killed him.

He knew he deserved it… but to *see* it… to see her disappointment in him… to see the erosion of her trust… it had been easier to mumble an excuse about Mayson and fly away.

"You need to call her," Perry repeated.

"OK," Clark said. "I'll go somewhere quiet and talk to her."

* * *

Lois hauled herself from a fitful doze and winced as darts of pain shot through her elbow and into her upper arm.

She was still slumped on the couch. She hadn't moved since the first moments after Clark had left—the moments when she'd collapsed, shocked and exhausted.

She hadn't moved.

Hadn't changed her clothes.

She was still in the blood-splattered Ultra Woman suit.

She turned her head enough to be able to see the clock. It was almost nine o'clock on Saturday morning. She had a game to cover—the Essendon-West Coast semi-final at the 'G.

For the first time in her memory, she could muster no enthusiasm for a game of footy. She didn't want to go. She didn't want to move. She wanted to sit here, as she had sat here since Clark had brought her home, asked if she were OK, and flown back to find out if Mayson was dead or alive.

It felt like the end of the day—not the beginning.

At some point, her phone had beeped with a message, but it was out of her reach, and Lois hadn't been able to find the energy to rise from the couch to retrieve it.

The blood had dried to a scratchy crust.

It had happened so quickly.

One second, they were flying towards Metropolis, and the next, she'd been consumed by a noise so loud that its assault had felt physical. Clark's arm had pinned her to his side, and she'd felt Mayson's limp body as it had jostled against her.

After what had seemed like a long time, the sound had ebbed to an eerie silence, and all Lois could remember was the crackle of the flames as they burned the very little that had been left of Mayson's computer.

Clark had lowered her to her feet amongst the debris. Then his arm had released her. When Lois had looked up, he was holding Mayson, who was unconscious and had blood weeping a red river through her blonde hair.

His eyes hadn't met hers, and Lois had known instinctively what he was thinking. In those few seconds before speech had been possible, he'd already shouldered the blame for Mayson being hurt. And more than that, he was torturing himself with the realisation that he had put his wife in danger.

He'd taken Mayson to the hospital, and Lois had used the time alone to pull the torn spandex sleeve over her gashed arm.

Clark still didn't know she had been injured.

He'd assumed the blood on her was Mayson's. And it was. Most of it.

How was Clark going to react when he found out that she had been hurt?

Lois was worried about him.

She couldn't chase the image of his face from her mind.

He'd looked so defeated… so aghast… so burdened with self-recriminations.

If Mayson died…

Over an hour had passed, and he hadn't come.

He was hurting—and this time, he hadn't come to her.

Lois hauled herself to her feet and went into her bathroom. She gingerly peeled away the bloodied Ultra Woman

suit and turned to the mirror to examine the gash that started at her elbow and jagged a path up the back of her right arm.

The wound was no longer bleeding. It was about six centimetres long and probably just short of being deep enough to require stitches. She must have been hit by flying shrapnel.

She needed to clean it and dress it, but it was going to be awkward. She would have to do it one-handed and rely on the mirror to be able to see.

The wound had to be covered. If Clark came to Melbourne before boarding his flight to Australia, she would say it was nothing more than a minor scratch.

But if he didn't come soon, she would be at the footy, and they wouldn't have any time together until his flight arrived tomorrow evening.

During the long hours of the flight, Clark would have nothing to do except obsess over what had happened.

She had to talk to him before then. After her shower, she would call him and ask him to come. If necessary, she would beg.

Lois turned on the taps and stepped into the flow of hot water, hoping that, as it cleansed the blood from her body, it would also ease away her fatigue and shock.

* * *

Clark stood on the top of the Planet building.

He wanted Lois. It was like an ache that had been gnawing at him since he'd left her in Melbourne and returned to Metropolis.

She had always been so understanding, so supportive. But this time… Would it seem as if he'd chosen Mayson in preference to Lois's safety?

It wasn't because it was Mayson. If it had been anyone else, he would have felt the same.

He'd never been able to explain why he felt responsible for everyone's safety, and he knew that any attempt was going to sound as if he felt some latent affection for Mayson.

He didn't.

He felt numb.

He couldn't believe he had flown into an explosion with Lois in his arms.

And he couldn't stop thinking about it.

Every time he closed his eyes, he could see again the hurtling debris.

Since he'd met Lois, he'd gone to her whenever the responsibilities of being Superman had threatened to overwhelm him.

He needed her now.

She hadn't replied to the message he'd sent her telling her that Mayson was still alive.

He should have gone to Melbourne earlier.

He should have faced her… faced her accusations… begged for her forgiveness.

He had to go now, although their time together would be short. If he didn't go now, he wouldn't see her until his airplane landed at Tullamarine Airport.

He launched from the roof and flew southwest at top speed.

Towards Lois.

* * *

Lois secured the towel under her arms and examined the wound in the mirror. It didn't look too bad now that the blood had been washed away. It would heal.

She would heal.

She needed Clark…

But first, she needed to dress her arm. She opened the bathroom cabinet and brought out the antiseptic cream and a strip of bandage.

She had to be the one do it. If she asked anyone for help, she was going to need an explanation, and her brain just wasn't up for creative stories.

She heard a sound, and her heart leapt as her throat constricted.

Clark was here.

She was naked. He would see her arm. If she called out asking him to wait until she was dressed, his fractured mind was going to create all sorts of erroneous reasons why she felt the need to cover up.

"Lois?"

"I'm here, Clark. I'll… ah… just be a moment." She quickly pulled on the first clothes she found—jeans and a loose jumper. There was no time for a bra or tee shirt. She ran a hasty comb through her damp hair, took a deep breath, arranged a nice smile on her face, and opened the door.

His face depicted the entire spectrum of her anguish—uncertainty, fear, regret, pain, confusion. Her smile faltered, and she stepped closer to him. "Is she dead?"

"No," he said in a voice that sounded strangled. "She's badly injured. Head trauma." His hand lifted the slightest amount, and Lois threw herself into his arms.

Clark held her, but it was restrained. As if he wasn't sure. As if he was afraid that he would hurt her. As if he had constructed a barrier between them. She clung to him, using all of her strength to meld them together. His arms remained loose.

Lois felt a spark of anger. It landed on the dry tinderbox of her strained emotions and ignited them. She put her hands on his shoulders and forced their bodies apart. "Don't do this to us, Clark," she said.

He looked dumbstruck.

"Don't do this," she repeated. "I know exactly what you're thinking. I've known from the second I looked into your face, when the dust was literally still settling. We are going to talk, and you are going to see sense, and you are going to accept that you did nothing wrong."

"Lois! I carried you into an explosion."

She nodded. "And?"

He lifted his hands in self-reproach. "I can't believe I took you into such a dangerous situation."

"What were you supposed to do, Clark? Drop me?"

"I shouldn't have taken you back to Metropolis. I should have left you on the hill. You were safe there."

"Safe?" she spat. "I would have been alone, abandoned, and lost in a country I had entered illegally."

"You wouldn't have been abandoned," he exclaimed. "I would have come back for you."

"And what if Luthor had found some green rock somewhere and put it in the bomb? What then?" She poked his chest. "Then we'd both be in an awful mess."

"I took you into an explosion," he said with disbelief and self-recrimination in equal measure.

"We have always said that the most important thing is that we are together."

"But not when there are bits of computer flying around the room."

His words fired an image into her mind that broke something inside her, and Lois knew she was going to have to either laugh or cry. She began shaking… smiling inanely… as uncontrollable sobs shook her body.

Clark lifted his arms towards her, but she held up her hands to stop him. "No," she cried, shaking her head. "Right now, I don't need your arms. I don't need your comfort. I need you to work through this with me so we can both move on."

His arms dropped in defeat. "For one moment… I…"

"You thought her death would solve a lot of problems," Lois said.

He nodded, his eyes filled with shame.

"So did I," Lois said as tears tumbled down her cheeks. "For a lot longer than a moment. Had it been my choice—to save her or to let her die—I don't know what I would have done. You barely even thought about it. You saw someone who needed your help, and you gave it."

"And put your life in danger."

"No," Lois said heatedly. "My life could never be in danger when I'm with you. You would always find a way to keep me safe." She stared at him through the wells of tears. "You took some of the hits for me—I know you did."

"I took you into an explosion."

"If you'd taken the time to take me somewhere first, Mayson would have died, and you'd feel even worse than you do now."

His only response was a rapid blink of his eyelids.

"Clark, I need you."

"And I failed you."

"*Listen* to me, Kent," Lois said, roughly backhanding her tears away. "I need you now. Right now, I need stuff from you and you're not giving it to me."

He swallowed. "What do you need?"

"I need you to smile."

His jaw dropped. "Lois…"

"You have all those super-impressive abilities, but you've never realised that, for me, your most powerful power is your smile. It rights my world. It puts the pieces of my life back together when they've crumbled. It reaffirms that everything will be OK." She looked at him and offered a wobbly smile. "I love you, Clark."

He looked at her with those soft brown eyes that she adored, and she saw that some of the morose shadow had dissolved. "Lois…"

"Smile, darn you," she said. Her emotions erupted again, and this time, it was laughter that shuddered through her body as her tears leaked again.

Clark hovered with indecision.

"I know the Mayson's situation is gravely serious," Lois said. "I know we still face the awful problem of what she

knows about us and the fear of how she is going to use it. I know that you have such high expectations of yourself that you feel devastated whenever you think you've failed. I know you have a flight to catch and I have a game to cover. But none of that changes that I need us to be OK."

"Lois, I saw you. In Mayson's apartment, you… you were so shocked, so confused, so hurt. That was my fault. I did that to you."

"That wasn't because of the bomb," she exploded. "That was because I could see what you were feeling and I knew how much you were hurting."

Clark shook his head, and his mouth tried to form a word, but nothing came out.

"Yes," Lois said, answering his unvoiced question. "It wasn't being in the middle of an exploding bomb that upset me, it was your pain, your…" Her resolve crumbled, and her tears fell again. "Smile, big guy," she pleaded. "Just give me one smile."

He shot her a look that was mostly apology but held a tinge of what she hoped was amusement. "I can't smile when you're crying," he said. "I just can't."

Lois used the sleeve of her jumper to sweep the moisture from her eyes and cheeks. She hauled in a breath and smiled at him.

He answered with a smile that started slowly and then unfurled to something breathtaking.

And her world began to heal.

* * *

As Clark smiled at Lois, he pushed everything else from his mind.

He was with the woman he would always love.

For now, that was all he needed.

He lifted his arms, and she rushed into his embrace. He held her closely against his chest, relishing everything about her—her scent, her feel, the sound of her heartbeat, the little after-tremors that rippled through her body.

Soon, he was kissing her—kissing her the way he had kissed her early in their relationship. Kisses that weren't leading anywhere. Kisses that were wonderful in themselves, because he was with Lois and she loved him.

After many minutes, she drew back. "Thank you," she said.

"Lois… I love you," Clark said. "I love you so much."

"I need you to do something else for me," she said.

"What?" he said. "I'll do anything for you."

She grimaced. "This is going to be hard," she said. "I know I'm asking a lot from you."

"Whatever you need, I'll do it for you," Clark promised. "Whatever."

She took his hand. "Come and sit down," she said.

He did, and his doubts came creeping back.

When they were seated, she looked into his face with solemn eyes. "Clark," she said, "it's nothing serious—I'm fine—but I got a little injury in the bomb, and I need someone to dress it for me."

He clamped down on the response that almost flew out of his mouth. "You got hurt?" he said with more equanimity than he would have thought possible.

Lois nodded. "It's just a bit of a gash—nothing serious," she said. "But it's in an awkward place. It's difficult for me to access."

"Where?"

She touched her left hand to above her right elbow. "Behind here," she said.

"Can I see it?"

She nodded. "And then will you dress it for me? And accept that this happened and it's not your fault?"

"I took you into—"

"And accept that it's not your fault?" she repeated.

His shame dissolved in the steady warmth of her love. "OK," he said.

She smiled her thanks, and he knew she was hoping he would smile back.

He did.

She chuckled.

"You should let me look at your arm," Clark said. "You need to get to the 'G."

"And you have a plane to catch in a few hours."

He put his hand on her cheek and used his thumb to wipe away the last of her tears. "Will you meet me at the airport?"

"Nothing will keep me away."

"Thanks."

Lois grasped the bottom of her sweater and peeled it over her head.

Clark gasped… and Lois shook with laughter.

"Kent," she said, "you're *supposed* to be looking at my arm."

* * *

The paper had been put to bed. The onerous task of writing and editing the story of the attack on one of their own was done. It was past midnight when Clark and Perry stood in the centre of the bullpen.

"I'm serious," Perry said with his trademark grin. "Don't even think about stepping into this newsroom again until you are a married man."

Clark nodded. "Thanks for everything, Chief." Then he turned and walked out of the Daily Planet building. It felt like 'goodbye'. It felt like he was walking away, closing the book on a chapter of his life, a chapter that might never be reopened.

Part 63

Clark ducked through the airplane door and stepped into the jet bridge with genuine relief. Twenty-four hours of confinement was a long time.

Particularly when, without the benefit of the flying crate, he could have saved himself twenty-three hours, fifty-nine minutes, and fifty-five seconds.

But that didn't matter. Not now.

He was back in Australia, and he had some time.

Time to be with Lois.

Time to make decisions about their future.

He was here for at least a week. Seven days and seven nights. They could go out, they could stay in… They could be together.

His footsteps quickened as he followed the stream of passengers down the wide sweeping hallway. He turned up his hearing, searching through the din for that one special heartbeat.

There it was. Slightly accelerated. Could a heartbeat sound happy? Hers did.

Clark bounded down the final steps, through the doors, and into the general area of Tullamarine Airport.

And saw her.

Looking around.

Looking for him.

She was beautiful. Like warmth on a cold day. And she was here for him.

Clark couldn't wait any longer. He jogged towards her, and after only a couple of steps, she turned and saw him. She ran to him and threw herself into his arms. He swung her around and then kissed her extravagantly.

"Oh, Clark," she said when he finally released her mouth. She smiled up at him. "Welcome to Oz."

"It's so good to be here."

"Any more news on Mayson?"

"No change." He took her hand and headed for the baggage carousel. He didn't want to talk about Mayson. That would be like smearing slime on a precious painting.

Lois smiled up at him with irrepressible excitement. "I'm so glad you're here," she said. "I've been counting down the minutes all day. I think I would've died if your plane had been delayed."

"How's your arm?"

She shrugged nonchalantly. "It's fine."

"Really?"

She grinned and nudged her shoulder into his side. "Isn't that your suitcase?" she said, pointing to the moving luggage. "CK? That's you, right?"

Clark grinned to let her know she hadn't fooled him with her neat sidestep and then bent low to haul both of his suitcases from the moving belt. Lois took the smaller one from him and slipped her hand into his.

"To the car park?" he asked.

She chuckled, her eyes shining. "This way," she said.

They walked through the big glass doors and into the cool evening sunshine. When they came to the walkway that led to the car park, Lois ignored it. A few moments later, she guided them to the front door of the Hilton hotel. She turned to him with an exultant grin. "Feel like a second honeymoon?" she asked.

"Lois?" Clark said, the possibilities vaulting through his mind.

"It's been two days. After such a lengthy time apart, I figured it would be wise to stay here," she said. Stretching up to whisper into his ear, she added, "There are probably laws against making love as we drive along the freeway." She shot him an alluring smile, raised her eyebrows in unmistakable suggestion, and opened the door into the hotel lobby.

* * *

"Lois, this is incredible." Clark adjusted his position to redirect the jet of warm water to a different place on his back.

Lois smiled at him. "I thought a room with a spa would be fun," she said. "And I wanted you to know how much I

appreciate you spending all those hours on the plane so that we can be together openly."

"This is like paradise," he said. "Here… with you… in a Jacuzzi. It's perfect."

She flicked at a mass of bubbles on his chest. "In Oz, it's a 'spa' or a 'spa bath', not a 'Jacuzzi'."

He grinned lazily. "I'll remember that."

Lois laid her head on his shoulder, and Clark dropped a kiss in her sweet-smelling hair.

"We've been married a week," she said. "So much has happened. It was time we got back to our neglected honeymoon."

"I have a surprise for you, too," Clark mentioned casually.

She lifted from his side so abruptly that a frothy wavelet of water splashed up his chest. "You do?" she asked excitedly.

"Uh-huh."

She waited, her eyes alight with anticipation. Clark said nothing, prolonging the moment so he could savour her smile.

"Well?" she said with dizzy impatience.

"Perry told me not to go back to Metropolis for at least a week."

"A week?" she screeched. "A *whole* week?"

"Yep," Clark said. During his flight, he'd joyfully anticipated the coming week many times, but the moment he'd looked forward to most was when he would share the news with Lois. "At least a week, he said."

"Where are you staying?" she asked. "I've only booked this room for one night." She rubbed her finger across his chest. "Please tell me you're not staying with Gazza."

"Where do you want me to stay?"

"With me."

"What about Esmeralda?"

"She seems to object to other men being in my unit—not you."

"I would like to stay with you," Clark admitted hesitantly.

"The alternative is that we're apart for six nights."

"That would be unbearable."

"I know you would prefer that people know we are married," she said, leaving a track of white foam as she skated across his pec muscle with her fingertip. "But we're not trying to deceive anyone—we're just keeping a secret that is essential for you to have a normal life."

"And you."

"The three people you care about most know we are married," she reminded him.

"What about Ron and Barb? And Seb? I want them to be happy that you're with me. I don't want them to think that I'm taking advantage of you."

"Seb thinks you're great. And all Ron and Barb want is for me to be happy."

Clark smiled down at her and swept a damp lock of hair from her temple. "Are you happy?"

"Right now? Deliriously," Lois replied. "We still have some things to work through, but I have faith in us. Whatever happens, we'll be together, and we'll be OK."

"I want to be with you every moment possible during this next week," Clark said.

"What about Superman?"

"I'll do some patrols, and if I hear of an emergency, I'll go. Is that all right?"

She nodded. "It's fine."

"Thanks."

Lois grinned. "I can't believe that we can have a whole week together. It's going to be wonderful." She pressed her mouth to his, and her tongue darted forward. He playfully closed his lips over her tongue, trapping her. Another memory slipped into his mind, stretching his mouth to a wide grin, and she easily slipped from his hold. "What?" she asked, her face a mixture of curiosity and amusement.

"That wasn't all Perry said."

"What else did he say?"

"I think his exact words were, 'And don't even think about stepping back into this newsroom until you're a married man.'"

Lois grinned wider. "I could easily fall in love with your editor."

"He's married," Clark informed her.

"So am I," Lois said. "And I'd really like to make that fact public."

"I would, too," Clark said. "But it might be sensible to wait. Tomorrow, we will know the outcome of the merger. And perhaps the situation with Mayson will be clearer."

Lois ran her fingers through his hair. “You know what?” she said. “I’m tired of being sensible. I’m tired of waiting. And I’m tired of secrets.”

Clark winced. “You’re married to an alien,” he said. “Secrets are part of the deal.”

“Not *that* secret,” Lois said. “The secret of how much we love each other.”

“You think we should announce that we’re getting married?” Clark asked, not able to keep his surprise from his tone.

“Yes,” she said. “I do.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow. I think we should tell everyone tomorrow.”

“But we don’t know—”

“The best way to lose a footy game is to spend too much time concentrating on what the opposition will do,” Lois said. “It’s much smarter to concentrate on your own game. Get that right, and everything else falls into place.”

“And our game is getting married?”

Lois smiled. “Sounds good to me, big guy. Let’s concentrate on that.”

“What about Mayson?”

Lois stared at her hand on his chest for a moment as her expression became serious. “Clark,” she said as her eyes lifted to his, “I think we need to talk about what happened at Mayson’s.”

Little shoots of anxiety surfaced in the calm sea of Clark’s relaxed mood, but he refused to allow them a foothold. “What do you want to talk about?” he asked evenly.

“It was a blur,” Lois said. “I’m not even completely sure what happened.”

“I heard the noise of the explosion first,” Clark said. “That was as we reached Metropolis. I zoomed into Mayson’s apartment with my vision and saw her being hit by the debris. Her knees started to crumble, and without thinking too much, I flew into the room and huddled her against me.”

“You had no choice but to take me with you,” Lois said.

Clark exhaled a long breath. “Later, I realised that I hadn’t even thought about what I should do. I just reacted.”

“Which is exactly what I’d expect you to do.”

“If I were alone, maybe,” Clark said. “But you were with me.”

“And had there been any specific danger to me, you would have reacted just as quickly and just as decisively to keep me safe.”

“I took you into the middle of an explosion,” Clark said ruefully. “How much more specific could it get?”

Lois smiled, and the little lift of her eyebrow said that they’d been through this and she wasn’t going to back down. “Don’t you realise how I feel, Clark?” she said softly. “When I’m with you, I’m safe.”

“What about your arm?”

Lois glanced down to where a waterproof dressing covered her wound. “It’s fine. If you promise me you won’t freak out, I’ll think about letting you see it later.”

Clark felt humour touch his mouth and had to work to keep from smiling. “I do *not* freak out,” he said.

“Yes, you do,” she corrected. “But I love you, and explosions don’t scare me at all—so long as I’m with you.”

“You trust me that much?”

She snuggled back into his chest. “Yes, I do.”

Clark slid his hand through her hair as he reflected that Lois was right. They could spend their lives worrying about what others would do. Or they could enjoy being together. If Mayson woke up and printed her story, he and Lois would find a way to counter her attack.

“Do you think she’s gonna make it?” Lois asked.

“I don’t know. Perry sends me updates every few hours, but so far, there’s been nothing other than ‘no change’.”

“Do you think there’s a chance she’ll forget what she knows?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s hard not to hope that she forgets.”

“Yeah.”

“Thanks for talking about the explosion,” Lois said. “I know you didn’t want to.”

“We should be able to talk about anything,” Clark said.

“Now we’ve talked about it, we can move on.” He heard the smile in her voice, and immediately the gloom brought by the mention of Mayson melted away. “We can discuss getting married. Again.”

“I was planning to take you to Melbourne’s most extravagant restaurant and go down on bended knee and ask you —”

“Clark, you don’t have to propose again,” Lois said. “The first time was so romantic.”

"I want it to be perfect for you this time," he said. "I had intended to ask you later this week. I don't think it's fair to expect you to make it public when so much is still unknown."

"If we're going to tell everyone tomorrow, perhaps you should propose now."

Clark chuckled. "Here? In the Jac— Sorry… In the spa?"

She lifted from his chest. "Why not?"

Clark caressed the soft skin of his wife's face. The heat from the Jacuzzi had given her cheeks a pink glow. "Lois Lane," he said. "I love you. Would you marry me? As Lois? Openly? In front of our friends and family?"

Lois smiled at him. "Yes, Clark," she said. "I want everyone to know how much I love you."

He grinned, marvelling again that Lois Lane had accepted his proposal… twice! "I have a confession."

"You expected me to say 'yes'?" she teased.

"I did," Clark admitted. "But my confession is that I don't have another ring. I thought—"

"You don't have to give me another ring."

"I thought that because so many decisions were made for you in our first wedding, you might like to choose your own ring. Perhaps we can talk to Seb."

"That's a nice idea," Lois said. "Thank you."

"This time, it's going to be perfect," Clark vowed. "No green rock, no Mayson, no spandex suits, no Linda King… and a honeymoon that isn't squeezed into a couple of hours."

Lois chuckled. "Most of those are what you don't want," she said. "What do you want?"

"I want you to have a wedding day you will always remember with a smile," Clark said. "Nothing else matters."

* * *

"Are you sure about this?" Clark asked as they walked into the Herald Sun building the next morning.

Lois grinned at him. "I have never been more sure of anything."

A minute later, they entered the sports newsroom, and Gazza and Banjo rose from their desks to greet them. "Rubber," Gazza said as he reached to shake Clark's hand. "You still can't keep away from us."

"No, I can't," Clark said with a sideways glance to the reason he couldn't stay away.

"What are you doing here?" Banjo asked. "With the vote happening tonight, I would've thought things would be hectic at Operation Payback."

"They are," Lois said. "We're heading there this arvo." She looked around the newsroom. "Is Chris in?"

"Nah," Banjo said. "She's gone with Bluey to Princes Park."

Gazza grinned. "So… have you got another big story? Something that will shake the foundations of football? Perhaps you have proof that the umpires are being paid to ensure the interstate clubs get a charmed run?"

Lois laughed. "No. Nothing like that. We just came to see Browny."

Banjo grimaced theatrically. "Bad idea," he said. "If you value your life, you won't go into his office."

Gazza glanced towards the editor's office. "Since Saturday, when Brisbane slaughtered Carlton by ninety-seven points, we reckon Browny has devoured at least three copy boys," he said.

"Eeek," Lois said. "I forgot about that."

"You *forgot*?" Banjo said. "Do you have a death wish?"

Lois grinned. "We'll risk it. Clark will look after me."

Gazza turned to Clark. "Hey, Rubber," he said. "Assuming you survive the cranky Bluebagger, let's get together for a drink before you go back to the States."

"Sure," Clark said as he turned towards Browny's door.

They knocked and entered. Browny looked up from his desk with a scowl. "Have you come to gloat?" he barked.

"No," Lois said lightly. "We've come to tell you we're getting married."

A surprised grin wiped the frown from Browny's face. "You're getting married?" he said. He stepped around his desk and offered his hand to Clark. "Well done, Rubber." He put his hand on Lois's shoulder and kissed her cheek. "And Flinders. Congratulations to both of you."

"Thanks, Browny," Lois said, beaming.

"Soooo," Browny said. "Do I get both of you… or neither?"

"We haven't decided yet," Clark said.

"If you want to live in Melbourne, you have a job at the *Herald Sun*, Rubber," Browny said. "In Sport with us, or if you'd prefer, I reckon the General Editor would be happy to have you in his newsroom."

"Thanks, Browny," Clark said. "Thanks a lot."

"Can I make the announcement?" Browny asked with a nod towards the newsroom.

Lois looked at Clark. "Sure," she said.

Browny picked up the crate and led them into the newsroom. He clambered up, and all heads turned in his direction. Lois's eyes landed on Gazza, and he gave her a wild smile and a gleeful 'thumbs-up' sign.

"Listen up here," Browny said from the top of the crate. "Flinders and Rubber are gonna get married."

A cheer erupted, and Clark smiled down at Lois as her workmates streamed forward to surround them with good wishes.

* * *

Clark stood from his seat as he saw Ron and Barb Wilton enter the restaurant. They spoke briefly to the waitress before approaching the table where Clark and Lois were waiting.

He watched with some concern as they greeted Lois. The vote that would decide the future of Hawthorn was only hours away—and it had split the allegiances of this family. To his relief, there was no discernible hesitation in the embrace. They greeted him with warmth, too, and then all four sat at the table. "Thanks for coming," Clark said. "Sorry for the late notice."

Barb smiled. "When Lois called, it sounded like it was important."

There was a moment's silence as Ron and Barb waited for either Lois or Clark to elucidate.

"Is this about the merger?" Ron asked.

"No," Lois said quickly. "We all love Hawthorn. We all want the best for our club, even though we disagree on the way forward. Nothing more needs to be said about that."

Both Ron and Barb looked relieved. Barb smiled again. "Is there a reason you wanted to see us?" she asked.

Clark took Lois's hand in his. "Yes, there is," he said. "I love Lois, and I want to marry her. I know you are both important to her, so I'd like to ask that you give us your blessing."

Their reaction was immediate and genuine. With delighted smiles—and in Barb's case, a few tears—they rose from the table and drew Lois into their arms. Barb wiped her cheeks and smiled at Lois. "We've been hoping for this news," she said. She included Clark in her smile. "We think he's perfect for you."

Lois smiled radiantly, and elation swept through Clark. "I think he's perfect, too," she said.

* * *

"Are you OK?" Clark asked anxiously.

"Yeah," Lois replied, although her stomach had coiled to rigid knots and the tightness across her neck was ramming fiery rods into her brain.

"I didn't know what to expect."

"Me either," she said. "But this…" She glanced around the main hall of the Camberwell Civic Centre. "I don't know if this is good or bad."

They had arrived at the merger meeting early and waited in the foyer for Lois's turn to vote. By the time she had slipped the piece of paper into the box, the queue had extended out the door and onto the footpath.

The atmosphere was rife with desperation. Many members were dressed in their Hawthorn jumpers. Many carried signs protesting the merger. Many wore the mantle of resentment like a badge of honour.

Initially, Lois had welcomed their passion and the realisation that the overwhelming sentiment was anti-merger. She had begun to hope that maybe… *maybe* Hawthorn would be saved tonight.

But now…

Lois and Clark had moved into the hall where, over the past hour, the crowd had swelled to a rumbling, agitated sea of brown and gold.

A couple of board members appeared briefly at the door next to the stage. A howl rose—an angry, defiant howl that simmered on the edge of control.

Lois's stomach felt as if she had swallowed a handful of tacks.

The level of nervousness reminded her of the hours before a Grand Final, but the tone was different… worse… because this wasn't Hawthorn preparing for battle against another club—this was Hawthorn against Hawthorn.

One family member against another.

Lois's thoughts skipped to Ron, Barb, and Seb. She glanced around the room for them and was glad when she couldn't see them. During lunch earlier that day, they had pushed aside their differences. That was not going to be possible in the frenzied aggression that prevailed as the crowd waited for proceedings to begin.

Around her, scraps of conversation carved through the atmosphere. There was bitterness. And shock. And disbelief. And bewilderment. How could a club that had won five flags in the past fourteen years be facing extinction? How could it have gotten this bad this quickly?

And there was fury. How *dare* they try to take our club?

This was war.

Civil war.

And the predominantly anti-merger army looked in no mood to back down.

Unconditional commitment and refusal to give up had always been the Hawthorn signature. Now, the very characteristics that had shaped this club were turning inwards.

Lois glanced to Clark.

His face mirrored her apprehension.

This was going to get ugly.

The hall had filled to beyond capacity, and the officials were turning back people wanting to enter. Had the board not realised how many members would be here? Had they not anticipated this reaction?

Lois clasped Clark's hand, and he gave her a tense smile.

Comprehension dawned with icy reality. This was no longer about the vote. This went deeper—this threatened the core of Hawthorn. The damage done tonight might never heal.

From the midst of the mayhem, the Hawthorn theme song arose, gaining momentum with each word.

Lois couldn't sing. The opening line—'We're a happy team at Hawthorn'—brought spurts of hot tears that stung her eyes. Clark nudged her gently, and she saw that he was offering her a clean handkerchief. She took it with a wobbly smile and wiped her eyes.

The song—*their* song—continued, but it wasn't sung in triumph, or in joy, or in unity, as it had been sung so many times before.

This time, it was the war cry of the warriors who had come to fight for their club.

The song finished, and as the final notes died away, a chant resounded—"No Merger! No Merger!" It grew louder and louder as it echoed around the room.

Lois swallowed down her rising nausea. Hawthorn couldn't end like this. The very fabric of her club was being torn and mauled—by its own people.

Finally, the chant faded, and a few minutes later, the board—Hawthorn people, past players, men who had loved and served this Club—took their seats on the stage… to the thunderous and unbridled boos of the people who had cheered them so many times in the past.

They looked shocked at their reception. Lois was sitting amongst the crowd, and the noise was like a living monster, circling its prey with brutal intent. She could only imagine what it must feel like to be the target of such unchecked rage.

It took a few minutes, but eventually the pandemonium of fury settled to a fragile truce, and the meeting began.

The first three speakers represented the board and put forward the case for the merger.

One of them was Allan Jeans. Allan Jeans—the man who had coached Hawthorn through the glory years of the eighties. Allan Jeans—'Yabby'—a man who was loved and revered by the Hawthorn faithful… but even that mountain of shared history couldn't save him as the lash of the crowd's anger turned on him.

Having said his piece, Jeans sat down. The look on his face churned Lois's stomach. These people loved Yabby—now they were turning on him like a wounded viper.

As each speaker advanced the cause of the merger, so the crowd's reaction intensified. Something had to give. Clark put his arm across Lois's shoulder and drew her closer to him. She could feel the tension emanating from him.

There was a pause in proceedings, and it seemed as if the outcome of the meeting hung precariously in the balance. Not the vote—but whether the hostility would erupt into violence.

Clark leant low against her ear. "Lois," he hissed, "these people are going to riot."

"No," she said desperately. "That can't happen. That won't happen."

Don Scott—the instigator of Operation Payback—came to the microphone. The tone of the crowd changed—still combative, but now in support of the man they saw as their hero.

He waited for silence. "These gentlemen deserve a little more respect than you're giving them," he said in calm counterbalance to the unchecked ferocity. "This is not Hawthorn-like."

The tide turned. It was palpable. Lois felt a small release in the tension strung through her body.

But then Scott spoke, and he spoke with all the fervour of the captain who had led this club to two flags. He spoke of the Hawthorn they loved. He spoke of a club that stood for something. He declared that the merger wasn't an equal merger, but a takeover—and that to vote for the merger would be to sign the death warrant on their club.

He lifted a footy jumper to the crowd. It was a combination of Melbourne and Hawthorn. The boos rose again, loud and rebellious and unrelenting.

Don Scott ripped the Velcro gold hawk from the jumper and held it up—now recognisably Melbourne and with nothing to represent the brown and gold of Hawthorn. The crowd erupted in reaction to Scott's gesture that had so forcibly demonstrated that to merge would be to surrender.

All the ground he had gained with his conciliatory statement was lost in the surge of rage at the sight of the Melbourne jumper. People lurched to their feet, pointing and screaming in protest. Clark's arm closed around Lois's shoulders.

It took time, but order was finally restored and question time began.

Hawthorn heroes from the pro-merger side were loudly heckled as they attempted to justify a merger that, in the eyes of the majority of the crowd, could not be justified.

Lois watched as the framework of her club unravelled. Her head throbbed, her neck ached, and her throat constricted against a choking bundle of emotion that pushed higher and higher. She could no longer take in the individual questions, and the answers had become a distorted blur. Unless the board had managed a masterstroke with the proxy votes, it was going to be a resounding win for the anti-merger side.

But at what cost?

If this were victory, it felt like defeat.

Don Scott took the microphone again, and the noise of the crowd slowly died down. "Tonight," he said. "Tonight, it is 'us' against 'them'. From tomorrow, it is 'we'—from tomorrow, we move forward, we rebuild, all of us… together."

Lois looked around the hall—into the reddened faces still contorted with anger—and hoped that, somehow, it might be possible.

Part 64

Clark followed Lois into her unit, still feeling a significant measure of relief.

He'd known that Lois was not going to be hurt physically at the meeting—not with him there—but the atmosphere had hovered near boiling for such an extended time that it seemed almost miraculous it had ended without violence.

There had been anger. And passion. And an outpouring of emotion so intense he'd had to keep reminding himself that this was about a football club.

But clearly, it was a football club that many people loved. A club that many people were willing to fight to save.

Lois turned, and the bleak agony on her face tore at his heart.

They had driven home in silence. Her higher-than-normal heart rate, her willingness to allow him to take the wheel, and the rigid expression on her face had warned him to be careful about what he said.

Now, he sat on the couch and gently guided her onto his lap. "Do you want to talk about it?" he asked.

"It was awful," Lois said brokenly. "It… it was just like my family. Like when Mom and Dad fought and screamed and shouted and tore each other apart… until finally, there was no family left anymore."

Clark ran his finger down her cheek. "Hawthorn aren't finished yet," he reminded her softly. In his opinion, sending the inflamed crowd home before counting the votes had been necessary to ensure everyone's safety—although he knew the extra waiting time was going to be excruciating for Lois.

"Even if we vote against the merger, I'm not sure we can recover from this."

"Hawthorn has ninety-four years of history," Clark said. "That can't be destroyed in one night."

"But… but there was such anger, such hatred… such…" Lois snatched a tissue from the box and swiped at the dampness in her eyes. "We are supposed to be a *family*."

"It wasn't hatred, honey," Clark said. "Remember one of the first things you told me about footy? You said if you don't care, you might as well stay at home and knit."

Lois laughed—a shaky, on-the-edge-of-control laugh. It activated a swell of tears, and she rammed the clump of tissues into her eyes.

"Tonight, we saw how many people care deeply about your club," Clark said. "Tonight, we saw the commitment of the people who love Hawthorn. If the merger is avoided, Hawthorn will make it. That's what I saw tonight."

"But some of us—some of the family—are going to be devastated. Whatever the result, some people are going to feel as if they've lost their club. Some friendships of lifelong standing won't survive what happened tonight."

"Are you worried about Ron and Barb? And Seb? You don't think this will harm your relationship with them?"

Lois shook her head. "I caught a glimpse of Ron, but I couldn't get through the crowds to him. He looked pale and in shock. This would have felt like betrayal to him." She dried her eyes with the tissue. "But I'm worried about Seb and Chris. Their relationship is so new—it's just beginning.

They don't have any history as a couple to get them through this."

"Chris voted against the merger?" Clark asked.

"Yeah. And Seb always thought the merger was our only chance."

"Did you see Chris there? Or Seb?"

"I waved across the room to Chris as we were leaving. I didn't see Seb all night. He was probably with Barb."

"We'll go and see Ron and Barb soon," Clark said. "Perhaps we could call them tomorrow and invite them to come for a meal. I'll cook."

Lois gave him a watery smile. "Thanks."

"Try not to worry," Clark said. "Everything at the meeting indicated the merger will be easily defeated."

"The board organised a system of proxy votes. I'm not sure how many they had before the meeting even started."

"Did you hear anything about the Melbourne meeting? Was it as intense as the Hawthorn one?"

Lois shook her head. "I haven't heard."

"The merger will only go ahead if the members of *both* clubs vote for it, right?"

Lois nodded. "That's right. It only needs one club to vote 'no', and the merger is off." She placed her palm along the line of his jaw. "Clark," she said solemnly, "we've talked endlessly about what happens after this vote, but we've never made any concrete decisions. We just said we would wait until we knew Hawthorn's future."

"We'll know soon," Clark said. "Then we can decide what we are going to do."

"If Hawthorn merge, I'm leaving Melbourne."

Clark's eyes leapt to meet hers. "But this city is more than Hawthorn to you," he said. "It's your home, and your friends, and the Wilton family, and your career."

"And I love my life here," Lois said. "But I want to be with you."

Clark didn't want to assume anything. "So… you'd move to Metropolis?"

"Yeah," she said. "I don't know what I'll do for a job, but I'll be with you."

"Perry said he'd give you a trial."

That piqued her interest. "Working at the Planet?" she said. "With you?"

"Would you like that?"

"I don't know." Lois smiled bleakly. "But working on the St John story was fun."

"I think we'd be a great team," Clark said, not able to stifle his enthusiasm.

"Do you really think that the ability to write a decent match report could translate into becoming a general reporter?"

"In your case, yes, I do," Clark said.

"Would you help me? Help me to learn all the new things I'd need to know?"

Clark smiled. "You mean the way a beautiful woman called 'Flinders' helped me when I arrived in Melbourne not knowing one thing about footy?"

"You adapted really well," Lois said.

"And you will, too."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." Her smile died. "It's going to be tough having to start again."

His dream had already begun taking root and was shooting forth with wondrous possibilities, but Clark knew there was a question he had to ask. "What will you do if Hawthorn don't merge?" he said quietly.

Lois looked into his eyes, and he read her answer.

"You'll stay here," Clark said.

"I'm sorry, Clark," she said. "I can't walk away. Avoiding the merger is only the first step. There is so much more to be done. And because of the financial situation, much of it will be done by volunteers."

The disappointment hit him hard—which was incompatible with what he'd always known—that if Hawthorn survived, Lois would feel a compelling sense of responsibility to help rebuild her club.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"It's OK," he said. It wasn't, but he couldn't let Lois guess the truth of his feelings. She had been through an emotional minefield today. "When will we know the result?"

"Ron is going to call me as soon as he knows."

Clark needed to escape from her gaze. "How about I make you a drink of Milo?" he offered. "And I'm sure you have some Tim Tams in the pantry."

She laid her hand on his arm. "No," she said. "Thanks, but no. I couldn't eat or drink anything." Her chin wobbled. "I just couldn't."

"It's OK to cry, you know," Clark said. "At the meeting, I could feel your efforts to hold everything together. It's just us now."

"But if I cry, you'll try to comfort me," Lois said.

"Is that a bad thing?"

"You'll make me cry more." Her little gush of laughter quickly morphed into a sob.

Clark snuggled his wife into his arms, and her face buried into his chest. His fingers stroked across her shoulder, and he crooned words of comfort as the pent-up anguish convulsed her body.

They didn't speak for many minutes, with her soft sobs and his responding solace the only sounds to disturb the silence. Her tears stopped, her shaking stilled, and Clark felt her body relax against his.

"When I was a little girl," Lois said in a hushed voice, "I would go to my room and cry like this every time my parents had a fight."

"I wish I could have been there for you then."

She took his hand in hers and cradled it against her chest. "Me, too," she said. "Then I wouldn't have felt so alone."

"I guess that feeling of isolation was one of the reasons why Hawthorn became so important to you?"

She nodded. "I feel as if I've already lost one family. I don't want to lose another one."

"Do you really feel as if you've lost your parents?"

"In every way that matters," she replied miserably. "If my mom knew I was crying over a football club, she would tell me to stop being so stupid. My father would probably tell me to pick another club, as if it were as simple as choosing a new brand of breakfast cereal. They have never made any effort to understand my life."

"Is that why you didn't want to call them and tell them we're getting married?"

"Yeah," Lois said. "Today was emotional enough. I didn't need Mom's shocked disapproval and Dad's blatant disinterest. Maybe tomorrow night."

"Is that how you think they will react?"

"Mom has never approved of anything I've done, and I can't see that changing now I've decided to do something she failed at so spectacularly. Dad will make a pathetic attempt to say the right things, but I doubt his mind will even register the news—it just won't be as important as whatever work he is doing at the moment."

"Aww, Lois," Clark said.

She put her hand on his cheek and managed an ashen smile. "It's OK," she said. "I've accepted that's how it is with my parents. I can't change them. I have the Wiltons; they love me." Her smile deepened. "They were so happy for us, weren't they?"

Clark smiled, remembering how enthusiastically Ron and Barb had reacted to the news of the engagement.

"And I have you," Lois continued. "I have everything I need."

She didn't include Hawthorn. Clark wasn't sure whether that was significant or not.

With a long shuddery sigh, Lois settled again into the crook of Clark's arm.

As they waited together, he found his mind jumping from thought to thought. It was never easy to wait for an answer. And this answer would have such a telling effect on their future.

They had finally arrived at the fork in their lives—the time for decisions. If Hawthorn merged with Melbourne, it would be easy.

Except…

The demise of her club would devastate Lois.

And then there was Mayson—lurking like a storm cloud that threatened to burst over their lives at any moment.

Perry's last text had said the doctors had decided to discontinue the medication that kept her in an induced coma. Clark couldn't hope that she wouldn't wake up, but Mayson had knowledge that could threaten everything that was important to him—his relationship with Lois, his career, Superman, and even his parents being able to continue their quiet life on the farm.

The phone scythed through the silence, and they both jumped. Lois sprang from the couch and answered the call. She listened for a few moments and then replaced the phone.

"Melbourne voted 'yes'," she announced. "They've agreed to the merger."

"And Hawthorn?"

"No news yet."

She settled back onto his lap, and silence draped over them again. Clark's mind kept forming little visuals of him with Lois… in Metropolis… openly married… working together at the Planet. How perfect that would be—but he couldn't allow himself to dwell on that. Not yet.

Lois had been quiet for a long time. "What are you thinking about?" he asked.

"What do you think I'm thinking about?" Lois asked in a tone several shades brighter than he'd expected.

"You've been quiet for so long it could be anything."

"Guess."

She sounded almost lighthearted. Was she resigned to the fact that the fate of her club had been decided and there was nothing more she could do?

"The meeting?" Clark said. "The result of the vote? The fact that Melbourne voted for the merger, and everything now hinges on Hawthorn?"

"No—none of that."

"Mayson?" he asked hesitantly.

"No."

"The Wiltons?"

"No."

"Seb and Chris?"

"No."

"Luthor?"

"No," she said. "But we are going to get him."

"We'll need proof."

"We'll get it," Lois said. "I know he's the Boss, and I know he arranged the bomb in Mayson's apartment. We'll keep working until we find the proof we need."

Clark didn't want to discuss either Luthor or Mayson now. "What were you thinking about?"

"Our wedding."

"Our wedding?" he said with surprise. "You were thinking about that, even though you said…"

She turned his chin so their eyes met. "Surely you didn't think that what I said before about staying here to help Hawthorn meant I'd changed my mind about us getting married as Lois and Clark?"

"You want to be married despite living in different countries?"

"I want to be married," Lois declared. "To you. Openly. Nothing could change that." She smiled, and it soothed some of the uncertainty that ached inside him. "Is it OK with you if we discuss our wedding?"

"Ah… yes. Of course."

"We need to make some decisions. What are your thoughts?"

"I want to marry Lois Lane."

Her laugh whispered through the stillness. "Other than that?"

Clark thought for a moment and then said, "Other than that, I'd really like for you to have whatever you want."

"Whatever?"

He chuckled, wondering what she was thinking. "Whatever," he reiterated. "I want to be the groom. I want you to be the bride. I'd like my parents to come. That's it."

"Are you hankering for the full traditional white wedding? In a church? With lots of bridesmaids? And flowers? And classic cars? And a triple-tier white cake with a little bride and groom on the top?"

No, he wasn't. But if that was Lois's dream wedding, that's what they would do. "If that's what you want, I'll help in every way I can."

She was silent for a few moments—probably, he surmised, imagining her dress, or her bridesmaids, or the flowers, or the church. "Which country?" she asked. "The States? Or Australia?"

"Your choice," he said. "Although we met in Melbourne, and it's coming into summer here."

"So, you're not thinking of having a long engagement?"

"Honestly?" Clark said. "If it were possible, I'd suggest doing it before I go home."

"That'd be quick."

"I realise it can't be organised in a week," he said. "And isn't there a law about submitting a form a certain time before the wedding?"

"Yeah, the 'Notice of Intended Marriage' form," Lois said. "It has to be lodged at least one month and one day before the wedding."

"So it's not going to be possible," Clark said, trying to mask his disappointment. "It was an improbable idea anyway."

"Uhmm," Lois said. She sounded distracted by other thoughts.

"Will there be a waiting time for the church?" Clark asked. Perhaps they could complete the form and he could come back in a month.

"For some churches, there would be a long wait," Lois said. "But from what I've heard, the real holdup will be somewhere to have the reception."

"How long?"

"If we want it to be on a Saturday, probably at least twelve months."

"Oh," Clark said. Twelve months seemed like an eternity. "Do you really want it on a Saturday?"

"Yes, I do."

Clark couldn't really see how the day mattered, but he was committed to giving Lois her idyllic wedding, so he said nothing. "Maybe we could make some preliminary bookings in the next week," he said. "I'm not sure how helpful I'll be, but if you want to do this together, we could get started. I don't want you to feel that you have to do it all."

She smiled warmly at him and slid her hand through his hair. "Is it really so important to you that I get exactly what I'd like?"

"Lois, you've given me so much," Clark said. "You've accepted my differences, you've had to tolerate people thinking terrible things about you because of me, you've loved me like no one else ever has, you've allowed me to share your body, you didn't complain when your first wedding was stark and functional, and you get dressed up in that suit—all to help me. I want to give something back, and I know weddings are important to most women, so it will be my pleasure to give you exactly the wedding you want."

She grinned suddenly. "This is going to be fun."

Clark brushed his fingertips across her cheeks. "I didn't know you wanted a traditional white wedding with all the trappings," he said.

Lois laughed. "I don't."

"Until now?"

"No. Not even now—that's the last thing I want."

"Oh." Now, he was confused.

"And if you're honest, big guy, you don't really want that either."

"Well… no… not if it means having to wait a year."

"Have you always dreamed of having your bride walk up the aisle towards you dressed in a beautiful white dress?"

"I've always dreamed of being married to a woman I loved with my whole heart," Clark said. "I didn't really think too much about the details of the wedding."

"How do you feel about the white dress?"

"Ah… that's what most brides wear."

"Does it bother you that the white dress traditionally represents the bride being a virgin? Because, as you well know, I'm not."

"Lois, if you want to wear a white dress, you wear one, honey," Clark said. "It doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. This is our wedding."

Lois chuckled. "I'm trying to find out what you want," she said. "Can you stop being so accommodating for just one moment and tell me what you really think? If I didn't wear a white dress, would you be disappointed?"

Clark thought about it. "No," he said. "I want to marry you. The colour of the dress really isn't important."

"And if your parents and any of your friends came and they thought it was an unusual wedding, would you be embarrassed?"

"Lois," he said, suddenly wary, "what *exactly* do you have in mind?"

"I have the perfect idea," she said enthusiastically. "The perfect time, the perfect place, and best of all"—she leant forward and kissed him—"the perfect man."

"Perhaps you should tell me about your ideas," Clark said.

She smiled. "Perhaps I should. I'm thinking we should get married on—"

The jangling phone interrupted her words. Lois glanced to Clark as all her cheerfulness drained away. She slowly rose from his lap and picked up the phone.

"Ron?" she said. Clark stood, too, but halted two steps behind her.

There was silence for a long moment. Clark deliberately refrained from turning up his hearing.

He saw Lois's shoulders begin to shake. "Thanks, Ron," she said in a faraway voice. She replaced the phone and stood in statue stillness.

Clark stepped forward and put his hand on her shoulder. "Lois?" he said hesitantly.

The little shudders increased, and he could feel her quivering under his touch.

"Lois?"

She turned. Her face revealed nothing.

"Lois?"

"No."

"No?" he breathed. "The merger is defeated?"

Lois nodded. "I hope they are wrong," she said in a small, shaky voice. "I hope they are wrong."

"Who? You hope who is wrong?"

"All those Hawthorn people who believe we cannot survive alone. I hope they are wrong, because if they are right, all we've done is bought ourselves a longer time to die."

Clark folded her into his arms and clasped her against his chest. She wasn't crying now, but she held herself stiffly as if tension had seized body again. Clark gradually increased the pressure on her back until he felt her relax against him. "You can do it," he said. "This will be the start of a new era for the Hawthorn Football Club."

She moved away from him, and when he saw her face, his heart leapt at the tiny smile budding on her beautiful mouth. "How would you know?" she challenged. "You're a Yank who three months ago didn't know a Collingwood ruckman from a Carlton rover."

Clark smiled. "Ah, but I've learnt a lot since then. And the thing I've learnt most is that nothing is impossible when people are willing to fight for something they love, something they believe in. All that feeling we saw tonight, all that commitment, all that passion—that is what will rebuild your club."

"*Your* club?" she asked, smiling through moist eyes. "I thought you barracked for Hawthorn, too."

"I do," he said.

"Then it's *our* club," she said firmly.

Clark nodded—and tried not to think about how close they had come to having a life together in Metropolis.

* * *

"Clark?"

The ICU nurse reacted abruptly to the sudden sound of the voice as it spiked above the quiet drone of the medical equipment. The patient's eyes were closed, and her face was impassive, but there was no doubt that she had spoken. "Ms Drake?" the nurse said. "Mayson?"

There was no response.

"Mayson? Wake up, Mayson. Talk to me. Who's Clark?" The nurse gently shook the young woman, but there was no further sign that she was regaining consciousness.

The nurse noted the time on the patient chart and paged the doctor.

He arrived five minutes later. "What happened?" he asked as he swung into the room.

"She spoke. She asked for Clark."

"Clark? Is that her husband? Brother? Son?"

"There's nothing in her notes. Her next of kin is listed as her uncle—a Stephen Drake."

"Has he been in to visit her?"

"Not on my shifts."

"Has she had any visitors at all?"

"Marli said there were two men here the night she was brought in. They were work colleagues, I think, not relatives."

"She's a reporter for the Daily Planet, isn't she?"

"Yes. That's right."

"Call the editor and find out who this Clark is. She needs him here with her."

Part 65

It was late—very late—but Lois knew sleep was not going to be possible anytime soon. The raging whirlpool of emotions spawned by the meeting had intensified as she'd waited for the outcome of the vote. Now, she felt as if pure adrenalin was flowing through her veins.

"Would you like that Milo now?" Clark asked.

Lois's instinctive reaction was to decline. Her ideas for utilising her surge of energy had been running more towards a hot, super-charged session in the bedroom than a quiet, calming drink on the couch. But Clark—having supported her unwaveringly all day—now seemed tired, so she smiled at him. "Thanks."

She watched him move into the kitchen, and the thought occurred to her that perhaps her husband's mood was more due to disappointment than weariness. His efforts to appear unperturbed heightened her suspicions.

With a blaze of inspiration, she understood.

Clark had allowed himself to hope—not that Hawthorn would merge, but that he and Lois would have a life together in Metropolis. Unwittingly, she had dangled the possibility before him. For so long, he'd refused to be tempted, but tonight, he'd allowed himself to dream—probably for just a few seconds—and now, it seemed as if his dream had been snatched away.

Perhaps they should forego the Milo after all.

Lois had completed only two steps towards her husband when the phone again interrupted them. She hesitated and considered ignoring it. It was probably about the merger meeting, and now that she knew the result, everything else could wait until tomorrow.

It continued ringing, and—thinking it could be Ron or Barb or Seb—Lois crossed the room and answered it.

It was Matty from the Cheer Squad. "Lois," he said excitedly. Loud background noise blared through the phone

line. “There’s a whopping big party happening in the Past Players’ Room. You need to get yourself here.”

“A party?” Lois said. The result had gone their way, but she wasn’t sure that tonight’s events were something to celebrate.

“You bet,” Matty said. “We still have our club! And this place is rocking!”

“I’m not sure, Matty,” Lois said. Stuck fast in her mind were the memories of the faces of the vanquished—Ron, Yabby, the Hawthorn board—as they had braved the fury of fellow Hawks. “It’s late.”

“Ah, don’t be such a wowser, Lois,” Matty said. “This is the beginning of a new era for Hawthorn. You should be a part of it.”

“I’ll think about it, Matty.”

“See you soon,” he said happily and hung up.

Clark came from the kitchen, a Milo in each hand and an unopened packet of Tim Tams dangling from the fingers of one hand. “Who was that?” he asked.

“Matty. From the Cheer Squad. There’s a party happening, and he thinks I should go.”

“Do you want to?”

“I’m not sure.”

“You must be tired.”

“I know I should be tired,” Lois said. “But I also know that I couldn’t sleep.”

“Then let’s go.”

The fact that Clark didn’t even hint that her lack of sleepiness could be put to good use in the bedroom confirmed what Lois had already surmised. He was devastated—and working double time to make sure she didn’t notice. “Perhaps we should stay here and talk,” she said. “We need to decide how this decision is going to affect our future.”

“We know how this decision is going to affect our future,” he said quietly.

There was no accusation in his tone—not from Clark. And he almost managed to keep his disappointment concealed, too.

“I think we should stay here and talk,” Lois said. “I’m not sure anything that happened tonight is worthy of a party.”

“I’d like to go,” Clark said.

“Why?”

“Because it’s my club, too, remember? You said so.”

He was hoping for time—time to get his emotions under control before she had the opportunity to probe them too deeply. “Don’t try to pretend this is about you, big guy,” she said with an easy-going smile. “You want to go because you think I should go.”

“You gave so much to this campaign,” Clark said. “You gave your time, and your energy, and your emotional investment. And despite some of the things that happened at the meeting, Operation Payback was successful. You convinced the Hawthorn members that their club can survive without merging.”

“You really think we should go?”

Clark returned the cups and the Tim Tams to the kitchen and picked up her bag. “Yes,” he said decisively. “I think we should go.”

* * *

“Clark?”

The nurse’s attention jolted from her notes to her patient. “Mayson?”

The patient’s eyes shot open, and she searched frantically. “Clark?” she said, her voice desperate. “Clark?” Fear flooded her face, and she grabbed the nurse’s arm. “Where’s Clark?”

“We’re trying to locate Clark,” the nurse soothed. Actually, the editor of the *Daily Planet* had said that Clark was abroad, but this wasn’t the time to risk upsetting the patient. “You need to rest.”

Mayson’s grip loosened, and her face crumbled. “He’s dead, isn’t he?”

“Clark isn’t dead.”

“He killed him.”

“Clark is fine.”

“Then why isn’t he here?” Mayson demanded. “I know he would want to be here with me. He’s dead.”

“No,” the nurse said. “I spoke with Mr White. Clark isn’t dead.”

“He killed him,” Mayson said as a tear squeezed from her eye and trickled down her face.

The nurse patted Mayson’s arm. “I’ll call Mr White again,” she said. “I’ll ask him to visit so you can talk to him about Clark.”

Mayson closed her eyes. But that didn’t dam her tears.

* * *

The Past Players’ Room was indeed rocking.

It was noisy and jubilant.

Noisier and more jubilant than it had been since Grand Final Night, 1991.

The Hawthorn people were happy. Unified. Victorious.

Within five seconds of walking into the room, something within Lois rose to meet the intense Hawthornness that pulsed through the atmosphere. It felt like coming home.

Matty approached at a speed that would have been impressive for a man half his age and swept her into his arms. "We did it," he proclaimed. "We did it."

Those words reverberated through the blare of triumph.

We did it.

Lois hugged Matty and then saw Chris in the corner of the room. Grabbing Clark's hand, Lois hauled him forward. "Come on," she said. "There's someone I want you to meet."

Chris put down her orange juice, and the two women hugged for a long moment. "We did it," Chris said, her eyes shining from behind pools of unshed tears. "We still have Hawthorn."

Lois nodded and fought down her own tears—happy tears this time. They still had Hawthorn. The reality was beginning to sink in. They still had Hawthorn. The battle had been long and hard-fought and bitter, but they had won. She turned to Clark. "Clark," she said, "this is Chris Torrens. Chris, this is Clark Kent."

Chris grinned widely as she greeted Clark. "I've heard rumours about you two," she said. "The newsroom was buzzing with gossip about a wedding."

Lois grinned happily. "The gossip is true," she said. "Clark and I are getting married."

Chris flung her arms around both of them. "I'm so happy for you," she said. "Congratulations."

"Thanks," Lois said.

"I'll get us some drinks," Clark said. "What would you like?"

"I'll have a beer," Lois said. "Tonight, I just want to be one of the blokes."

"Chris?" Clark asked.

"Another juice, please."

Clark walked away towards the bar.

Chris turned to Lois with a euphoric grin. "Now I understand why no Hawthorn player could compete for your attention," she said.

They giggled together, but then Lois sobered. "Have you talked to Seb?"

"Yeah. I rang him. He said he was happy for me."

"Did you ask him to come here?"

"Yeah, I did, but he wouldn't. He said he'll see me tomorrow."

"He's probably with his parents," Lois said. "Ron looked like a shattered man tonight."

"I wish this could have been done another way," Chris said.

"Me, too."

Clark arrived with their drinks, three people Lois knew from the Cheer Squad swarmed over to their group, and the celebration hurtled on long into the night.

* * *

Perry White stepped hesitantly into the ICU room. The nurse saw him and came over to meet him. "You're Mr White?" she asked in a quiet, serene voice.

He nodded. "Perry White." He glanced to the bed and saw Mayson in the middle of a throng of medical equipment. "I'm Mayson's editor. How is she?"

"She's sleeping now," the nurse said. "She was awake briefly about an hour ago."

"You said on the phone that she'd asked about Clark."

The nurse nodded. "She believes he is dead. She's very upset about him."

"He isn't dead. He's in Australia."

"Australia?"

Perry detected the underlying question. "Ms Drake isn't with Clark," he said. He leant towards the nurse and lowered his voice. "Mayson has wanted to be with Clark for a long time, but he has made it very clear to her that they won't ever be together."

"Oh," the nurse said. "That's going to make things complicated."

"Will it affect her recovery?"

"It's hard to say. The next time she wakes up, she might have forgotten that she thought he was dead. She might remember that she isn't with Clark. Sometimes, memory can return in a very haphazard fashion."

"What should I do?" Perry asked, feeling horribly out of place in the starchy, unfamiliar environment. "Should I speak to her?"

"Go and tell her you hope she'll be feeling better soon. Perhaps mention something about the paper—how everyone is missing her and how they send their best wishes."

"Should I mention Clark?"

"No. It's best not to." The nurse sighed. "I'm going to ask for a psychiatry consult."

Perry was shocked. "You think it's that bad?"

"I think we need to ensure it doesn't get that bad. She's said very little, but we already know she believes that Clark is dead and that he would be with her if he could. That's enough to indicate she's going to need some help to get through this."

Perry nodded, not sure what to say.

The nurse smiled at him reassuringly. "Go and talk to her for a few minutes," she advised. "Mayson needs to hear a familiar voice."

* * *

When Lois awakened, it felt like the morning after a Grand Final win.

There was overwhelming satisfaction.

They'd won.

Hawthorn had been saved.

There was tiredness of body, but it couldn't hinder a spirit that soared.

By the time Lois and Clark had left the Past Players' Room—with dawn peeking over the horizon—she had been buoyant. Hawthorn had been saved. There was still much to be done, but the mighty Hawks had won their chance.

When Lois had arrived back at her unit with Clark, she had toyed with the idea that celebratory sex could be the perfect way to end the day, but she had been too tired and too emotionally drained to contemplate anything other than sleep.

Now, it was morning—the fresh sunrise on a new era. An era when Hawthorn would rebuild, reunite, restore.

Questions had been answered. Extinction had been avoided. The future pages of the story that was the Hawthorn Football Club were blank, waiting for its people to take up the challenge and carve a new beginning.

She needed to be here.

She needed to be a part of the next chapter.

She couldn't walk away.

Clark knew that. He'd accepted that. But it had hurt him.

She twisted in his arms and took a moment to study his sleeping face. She loved him so much. His support had been so steadfast. He'd never ridiculed her love for Hawthorn. He understood.

His eyes flickered and opened, and he smiled at her. "Good morning," he said. "How are you feeling?"

That was so like Clark—his first thought was always her well-being.

Lois sighed happily. "I feel great," she said. "Now, it finally feels like we won. It feels like we can put the disunity and anger of last night behind us. It feels like we can move forward."

"And you want to be involved?" he said.

Lois searched his face for disappointment or resignation, but he was doing an accomplished job of masking it. She nodded. "I can't walk away," she said. "Not now."

Clark smiled, but it didn't look entirely genuine. "I could move to Melbourne," he suggested.

"Do you want to?"

"I want to be with you."

But that was only half of the story, and she knew it. "You want to work at the Planet, don't you?"

Clark didn't answer for a long moment, and his eyes avoided hers. "Yeah," he said. "Perhaps in some ways, Metropolis for me is like Hawthorn for you. After so many years of drifting around, I found a home there. I became Superman. It's something I believe in. It's more than the job—it's a part of me. I'm a part of it… a part of the people there… a part of the future."

Lois nodded. She understood.

"I still think we should get married," Lois said. "Soon."

"Why?"

"Because I want everyone to know that we are together and that our togetherness is solid and permanent and complete, even if we live in different cities."

Clark eased from her embrace and rose from the bed. "I'm going to have a shower and get into the suit. It's about time Superman made an appearance in Metropolis."

She heard the water run for a few seconds, and then Superman looked down at her. "I won't be long," he said. "Try to get some more sleep. You must be exhausted after last night."

He kissed her, tried to smile, and was gone.

Lois sighed as she snuggled into the warmth left by Clark's body.

She had to do something. She had to find a way to show Clark that her commitment to Hawthorn didn't diminish her love for him.

Sleep refused to return to a mind that was wrestling to find a clear way forward. Half an hour later, Lois rose, showered, and made herself a strong coffee, hoping the shot of caffeine would bring inspiration.

It did.

Before the coffee was half gone, she had a plan.

Pushing away her cup, she jotted a quick note for Clark, picked up her bag, and scooted out of her unit.

* * *

"I want my computer. I have to write my story."

"Ms Drake. Mayson. You are recovering from a serious head injury." The nurse took a calming breath and tried to contain her rising frustration. They'd been having this conversation for over five minutes.

"I know who killed Clark," Mayson said without a trace of emotion. "I need to write the story. I'm a reporter."

"You're a patient in the ICU. You need to rest and recover from your injuries."

"I need to write my story."

"You cannot have a computer."

"Can I have paper and a pen?"

The nurse hesitated. Perhaps allowing the patient to write down her thoughts would assist her in regaining clarity. "All right," she conceded. "You can have paper and a pen."

"And when I've written my story, you'll get a courier to deliver it to Perry White?"

"OK."

The patient smiled in triumph. "This story is going to win a Kerth," she predicted. "I'll remember to thank you when I make my acceptance speech."

* * *

Lois knocked on Browny's door, and he looked up at she entered his office. "Congratulations," he said. "You did it. You saved Hawthorn."

"Thanks," she said as she plopped herself down in the chair.

"Which leaves you in a dilemma," Browny said.

"Yep."

"You want to be with Rubber, whose life is in Metropolis, but—having campaigned so fervently to keep Hawthorn from merging—you feel obligated to stay here and make it work."

Lois nodded.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to marry him. Before he goes back to the States."

"Why?"

"So he knows I am serious about him. So he believes me when I say I want to spend the rest of my life with him. So he understands that I need to help Hawthorn for a time, but that it is a temporary thing and my relationship with him is a permanent thing."

"Are you worried that he won't wait for you? Is that why you want to marry him so quickly?"

"No. I know he will wait. But I don't want him to have to wait."

Browny reclined against the back of his chair and tapped the pen on his desk. "How will being married make it easier to live on different sides of the world?"

"Being married will mean that everyone knows we are together—that's our plan, that's our future, that's what will happen."

"Once Hawthorn is stable again?"

"Yes."

"And what if that doesn't happen? What if Hawthorn teeter on the edge of extinction for five years… ten years perhaps? Is it fair to ask Rubber to wait so long for your wedding to progress to a marriage?"

"No. I would set a limit. Two years. No more. Then I'll go and live in Metropolis with Clark."

"Why not get married in two years?"

"Because Clark needs to know now that I am serious about this."

"What are you going to do if he forces you to choose between him and Hawthorn?"

"He won't force me," Lois said. "He understands. He knows this isn't about whom I love more. It's about responsibility and finishing what you start."

"Why did you come to me?"

"Because Clark's time here is limited. I'm hoping he will stay for two weeks, but that would be the maximum."

"Does he have to be back in Metropolis for work reasons?"

"Yes."

Browny sighed and tossed the pen on the desk. “And you want to get married in Melbourne?”

“Yes, I do.”

“And you know that Australian law says you have to give at least one month’s notice of intent to marry?”

“But that can be shortened if a Prescribed Authority approves,” Lois said.

“And you know that Sue’s brother is a big-wig at the Births, Deaths, and Marriages Office?”

Lois nodded.

“And you want me to put in a good word for you?”

“Only if you think it’s a good idea,” Lois said quickly. “I’m not asking you to do anything that makes you uncomfortable.”

Browny hesitated, huffed, and then his eyes levelled in hers. “I want your word that it will be no more than two years,” he said. “It’s not fair on Rubber to make him wait any longer than that.”

“Two years,” she agreed. “Maximum.”

“Regardless of the situation at Hawthorn then.”

“Regardless.”

“And you’ll take October to December off every year and go to be with your husband?”

“Are you offering me three months off every year?”

“No,” Browny said. “I’m ordering you to take three months every year—without pay. If I’m going to endorse this, I want it to have some chance of working.”

“OK.”

“And if you get pregnant, you go to Rubber. A kid needs both parents.”

“We’re not planning—”

“Hhhhmmff,” Browny snorted. “Kids don’t always wait to be planned.”

“OK,” Lois agreed. “If I get pregnant, I’ll go.”

“And January to September, you work five days a week. You can have Tuesdays and Wednesdays off to volunteer at Hawthorn.”

“Browny…” To her dismay, Lois felt tears push into her eyes. “Thank you.”

He pointed at her, his smile gone from his mouth but still lingering in his eyes. “And I expect you to work your butt off when you’re here. I want the best stories, thoroughly researched, skilfully written, constructed with flair, and submitted *on time*.”

“Yes,” she said eagerly. “Yes, the best stories, every time.”

“I’ll talk to my brother-in-law.”

“Thank you, Browny. Thank you. This means so much to me.”

“Now, get out of here,” he said. “Some of us still have work to do.”

Lois jumped from the chair, hesitated, and decided not to risk everything by hugging her crusty editor. However, she couldn’t just leave. “Will you come to my wedding, Browny?” she asked. “I’d really like you and Sue to be there.”

He seemed pleased by her invitation—although he tried to hide his reaction. “Ah… thanks, Flinders.”

“You’ll be there?”

“We’ll be there.”

“And you’ll talk to Sue’s brother? About shortening the time?”

“I should have an answer for you by the end of the day.”

“Thanks, Browny. I really appreciate—”

“You’re supposed to be getting me stories. It’s September, which—in case you’ve forgotten—is finals time. Is there any chance I’ll get anything usable from you in the next two weeks?”

“Can Clark work with me?”

“I have numerous column inches to fill, and I need good copy. I don’t care who gets the byline so long as I get the story.”

Lois smiled. “Done,” she said. “I’ll be back with Clark in a couple of hours.”

* * *

Perry stared dumbstruck at the paper in his hand.

The scramble of words veered wildly from the lines, and the punctuation was erratic, but the assertions were blatantly clear.

It *couldn’t* be true.

It had to be the product of a damaged and confused mind. They had already established that Mayson’s memory was unreliable and her thinking befuddled.

This couldn’t be true.

But…

Perry picked up the phone and called Bill Henderson.

* * *

Back in her unit, Lois poured boiling water onto the coffee granules in the bottom of her cup. She'd hoped Clark would have returned from Metropolis, but her home was empty.

Loud, impatient thumps sounded on her door, and Lois jumped. She crossed her unit—her mind already forming excuses as to why this was not a good time for a visit—and opened the door.

Seb stared back at her, grinning like an overexuberant five-year-old on Christmas morning.

"Seb," she said, smiling in response to his high spirits.

He stepped into her unit, swung her into his arms, and proceeded to waltz her across the floor.

"Seb! What are you doing?"

"Celebrating."

Lois planted her feet. "Celebrating what?" Then, she knew. "You and Chris?" she squealed excitedly. "Oh, Seb, that's—"

"No," he said. "We have a date tonight, and I hope that then I'll have even more to celebrate."

She waited for him to explain, but he didn't. He took her hand and continued dancing. It didn't seem to bother him in the slightest that his partner was dragging her feet. "You bought a Melbourne store?" Lois guessed.

Seb stopped moving and stood there, grinning with delight. "Nope."

"Then what?"

"I'm not going to tell you."

"This can't be about last night."

He shrugged, still grinning blissfully. "Not really. Congratulations, by the way." He leant forward and smacked a loud kiss on her cheek. "Well done, Lois. You saved our Club."

Lois withdrew her hands from his grip and placed them on her hips. "Seb," she said. "What is this about? You're worrying me."

His excitement moderated a few degrees, and he thrust his hands into his jeans pockets. "I want you to come with me."

"What? Now? Clark's visiting. He's staying with me."

"Clark can come, too."

"He's not here at the moment. He'll be back soon. I should wait for him."

"Leave him a note," Seb said. "I want you to come with me now. I have something I want to show you."

"Seb, I—"

"Lois." His blue eyes softened. "Come with me," he cajoled. "Please. There is something I want to show you."

"I should wait for Clark to come back."

"You can tell him about it later."

Seb reached for her arm, dislodged her hand from her hip, and pulled her towards the door. "When you came to my shop and asked for the opal, I gave it to you. You asked me to trust you, and I did. Now, I'm asking you to trust me."

He was right. She couldn't refuse Seb.

"OK," Lois said. "Can I finish my coffee first?"

"No," Seb replied. "Just come with me. There'll be time for coffee later."

Part 66

"Any hints?" Lois asked as Seb drove them south along Punt Road.

"Nope," he said. His high spirits hadn't waned. In fact, he seemed to be getting more excited as they drew closer to wherever they were going.

"We're going in the wrong direction to be visiting your parents," Lois noted.

"Mum and Dad don't know about this yet," Seb said. "I wanted to tell you first."

"We're too far south to be going to Glenferrie."

He shot a laughing glance sideways. "True."

"Are we going to the beach?" Lois persisted. "Do you have a new surfboard you want to show me?"

"No."

"Does this have anything to do with last night?"

This time, Seb didn't answer immediately. "Before last night," he said after the short pause, "I had decided what I was going to do if the merger was defeated."

"When the members voted 'no', you went ahead and did it?" Lois deduced. "Whatever 'it' is."

He grinned at the frustration in her tone. "Patience, Lois," he said. "You'll know soon enough."

Lois reined in her smile. “Are you OK with what happened last night?” she said. “It got pretty feral there for a while.”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“I didn’t see you there.”

“Mum and I left after we’d voted.”

“You didn’t stay for the meeting?”

“No,” Seb said. “We heard some of it from the foyer while we were waiting to vote. We decided there was nothing more we could do, so I took her to a movie.”

Lois sighed. “I reckon that was the smart choice.”

“I dunno,” Seb said. “It was a momentous night in Hawthorn’s history. You’ll always be able to say you were there.”

“I’m glad you and Barb weren’t subjected to the fury of the crowd. It was vitriolic at times.”

Seb shrugged. “I voted ‘no’,” he said as if telling her something she already knew.

Lois’s head jolted towards him. “What?”

“I voted against the merger,” Seb said, keeping his eyes firmly on the road.

“But… but you were so convinced that the merger was the only way we could move forward.”

Seb turned left into Toorak Road. “I was. But when push came to shove, I couldn’t vote against my two best girls.” He turned to her with a wink. “And, just quietly, I think Mum voted against it, too. Not that she will admit it—unless Dad does.”

Lois was stunned. “You voted *against* the merger? Because of us? Chris and me?”

“Mostly,” Seb said. “But… also… when I picked up the pen and saw the words written on the ballot paper, I just couldn’t do it. I couldn’t be a willing party to the extermination of my club.”

Lois put her hand on his arm. “I hated that we were on different sides, Seb.”

“Me, too,” he said. He turned left into a residential street.

“Seb?” Lois said. “Why are we going to Toorak?”

He turned to her with a mysterious grin. “You’ll see.”

* * *

Bill Henderson paused in the hospital corridor and skimmed the paper Perry White had given him.

Either Mayson was brilliant… or she was delusional.

Her allegations were unequivocal… and mind-blowing.

Less clear was how she had arrived at these allegations.

And that was going to be the tricky part.

Henderson had worked hard to stay on good terms with the reporter. Her information was sound, her intuition was inspired, and she was usually willing to bring him into the loop before her story hit the newsstands.

But none of that changed the fact that she was a difficult woman—headstrong, opinionated, arrogant, unscrupulous, ruthless, and manipulative.

And with a particular aversion to anyone questioning her conclusions.

This time, her ‘story’ read more like the unhinged plot of a trashy paperback than something that belonged in any creditable newspaper.

But it was written with compelling certainty. There was no doubt that Mayson believed every word of her staggering claims.

And what claims they were…

… That Superman had caused the damage to the pipes that had resulted in the gas leaks.

… That Lex Luthor had used prior knowledge of the gas leaks as the means of getting Mayson out of her apartment.

… That Superman had planted the bomb in Mayson’s apartment.

Despite the chaotic ruminations and speculative leaps, Henderson couldn’t ignore her assertions. These were serious allegations, aimed squarely at two of the most prominent people in Metropolis—and by a respected journalist, no less.

He folded the paper and slipped it into the pocket of his jacket. The door to Mayson’s room was open, but he tapped lightly and waited for the nurse.

She walked over to him with a welcoming smile.

“I’m Inspector Henderson, Metropolis PD,” he said. “I need to talk with Ms Drake.”

“Is this a police matter? Or is it personal?”

“It’s a police matter.”

“I’m not sure Ms Drake is well enough for a formal interview.”

“Yes, I am,” Mayson said from the bed. “Come in, Bill.”

She was sitting up, but her face was pallid, and although she was no longer in the ICU, she was surrounded by a variety of machines. Henderson stepped forward as the

nurse hovered in the background. “How are you?” he asked Mayson.

“My head still hurts,” she said. “But they tell me I’m lucky to be alive.”

Henderson nodded. Under normal circumstances, he would have filled the conversational gap with a comment about Superman having saved her, but given the assertions in her story—and the fact that he wasn’t sure if she’d been told she owed her life to the superhero—those comments seemed best left unsaid.

“I’m guessing this is about my story,” Mayson said.

“Yes.”

“You want to ask me questions?”

“Yes. But only if you’re up to it.”

Mayson turned to the nurse. “Could you leave us alone, please?” she asked. “My discussion with Inspector Henderson must be confidential.”

The nurse hesitated for only a second. “I’ll be at the nurse’s station,” she said. She looked directly at Henderson. “Buzz me if there are any problems.”

Once they were alone, Henderson pulled the chair closer to the bed and sat down, surreptitiously studying Mayson. Perry White had said she was confused about some things, and before being allowed into the ward, the head nurse had issued a stern warning that the patient wasn’t well enough for a lengthy interview. “Your story packs a powerful punch,” Henderson said, figuring it would be safer if Mayson directed their conversation.

“And you want to know what evidence I have?”

Henderson nodded. “Being honest, Mayson, from what you’ve written, it’s not obvious how you arrive at some of your conclusions.”

“Of course not,” she said. “I had to put in enough that Perry took it seriously, but I wasn’t going to risk a courier stealing my story.”

She didn’t seem to be suffering too many adverse effects.

“If I wasn’t stuck in here, I would conduct the investigation and bring it to you as the finished product—incontrovertible evidence leading to proven facts,” Mayson said. “However, the doctors won’t give me an estimate of when I’ll be released, so I want you to pick up my case—on the condition that when you have the evidence, you will ensure that I get the exclusive.”

That sounded like typical Mayson. “If there’s a story, I’ll make sure you get the information first.”

“There’s a story,” Mayson said confidently. “Where shall we begin?”

“Perhaps with the gas leaks,” Henderson suggested. “You claim in your story that Superman sabotaged the pipes but because it was not his intention to endanger any lives, he used x-ray vision to pick places that would be least likely to lead to an explosion.”

“That’s correct,” Mayson said. “Lex Luthor called me and informed me of the details of the emergency. However, he lied to me because he said that the leaks would be the result of council-authorised testing—which we both know isn’t true.”

Henderson nodded.

“After Luthor called me with the information, I went to the scene. I saw you there talking with Superman.”

“Yes,” Henderson said. “But that doesn’t even come close to establishing Superman as a suspect.”

“It proves I had prior knowledge.”

“You have many sources,” Henderson said. “If you’re going to name someone—particularly someone like Luthor—you need proof.”

“Check the phone records,” she suggested. “You will see that Luthor called my apartment.”

But, as she had to know, that wouldn’t prove what had transpired during the phone call. “Perhaps we should continue,” Henderson said.

“As soon as you told me that it was sabotage—not imprudent testing—I knew that Luthor had lied, and I realised why.”

“Why?”

“Because he knew I had a piece of the green rock, and he figured that I wouldn’t take it with me to an emergency involving Superman, so it was most likely it would be in my apartment. He needed me out of the way so he could send someone to steal the green rock from me.”

“You believe that the vandalism to the pipes—which could have resulted in a major disaster—was merely about getting you out of your apartment?” Henderson asked, trying to keep the scepticism from sounding in his question.

Mayson nodded. “Obviously. If Superman had intended real damage, don’t you think he could’ve simply smashed the pipes beyond repair?”

Henderson didn’t respond immediately. He was beginning to doubt he would get anything of value from Mayson. However, she didn’t seem perturbed, so he should probably continue with his questions. “Your story says that the green

rock is not, as surmised by Trask, the energy source for Superman, but in fact causes him pain and a considerable weakening of his powers."

"That's true," Mayson said. "I proved that at the wedding."

"The wedding?"

"The wedding of Superman and Ultra Woman. I took the green rock to the wedding, and as soon as Superman was exposed to it, he collapsed—just as he did when Trask had the green rock at the base. My intention was to prove the effect of the green rock, not to stop the wedding, so I started taking photographs, knowing that I would be removed. Once I'd left—or more accurately, once the green rock had been removed from the vicinity—Superman recovered, and the event was able to continue."

"How did a Planet reporter get an invitation to what was a Star event?"

"Luthor was one of the sponsors. I went as his partner." She grinned. "Supposedly."

Henderson chose not to follow up on the hinted-at tangent. So far, they'd covered small, sub-parts of the story, but he was no closer to comprehending how they fitted together or how they led to Mayson's allegations against Superman and Luthor. "So Luthor witnessed the effect of the green rock on Superman at the wedding and concluded that you had some in your possession—hence the phone call to get you out of your apartment so he could steal the green rock?"

"Exactly," Mayson confirmed. "I realised as soon as you told me there had been no tests; I ran home, and, as I had expected, the green rock was gone."

"You believe Lex Luthor took it?"

"Not him personally—obviously. I mean, he couldn't, could he? But someone—probably Ultra Woman—took it while I was getting the story of the gas leaks."

Ultra Woman? She was involved, too? Mayson hadn't mentioned her in the notes. "If Ultra Woman had been in your apartment, don't you think someone would have noticed?" Henderson asked. "Pink spandex doesn't blend easily."

Mayson ignored his attempt at a joke. "She would have been in disguise. I know for a fact that she was in the library on Wednesday, and no one noticed her then."

"So Ultra Woman, in disguise, went into your apartment and stole the green rock?" Henderson said. "What did she do with it?"

"That is yet to be seen," Mayson said. "I guess it depends on whether she is working with Superman, or whether she intends to use the green rock to bring him down."

Each new thread of information seemed more farfetched than the one before it. And nothing Mayson had said gave credence to her allegations. "What did you do when you discovered the rock was missing?" Henderson asked.

"I called Luthor and confronted him."

Why did Mayson assume there was a connection between Luthor and Ultra Woman? Realising the explanation for that could be a long story, Henderson decided simplicity was his friend. "What did he say?"

"He lied again. When I demanded that he return it, he said he had captured Superman and was using the green rock to hold him."

"Why would Luthor want to capture Superman?"

Mayson giggled. "Clearly that was a lie, too."

Obviously. But Mayson seemed to believe other, equally outrageous, notions. Why stop short of accepting that Metropolis's richest man had imprisoned its superhero? "How can you be sure?" Henderson asked.

Her glimmer of disdain at his question was short-lived. "Because very soon after that, Superman rescued me from the explosion."

So, she had been told about Superman's part in her escape from certain death. "In your story, you allege that Superman planted the bomb in your apartment," Henderson said evenly.

Mayson nodded. "Once Superman knew the green rock had been stolen from my apartment, he planted the bomb. It fits perfectly because everyone saw him saving the city, which means he has an alibi. Of course, an alibi isn't worth much when someone can fly between two places at superspeed. He could have easily left the pipes for a few seconds, planted the bomb, and been back at his 'rescue' without anyone ever knowing he'd left."

"Why would Superman plant a bomb in your apartment and then save you from it?"

"Because it wasn't me he was trying to kill. It was Clark."

"Superman was trying to kill Clark?" Henderson gasped. That hadn't been in her story.

"Yes."

"Why?" Henderson asked. "And why put a bomb in your apartment if the intended victim was Clark?"

"Superman knew Clark and I had arranged to meet at my apartment at five o'clock," Mayson explained. "Superman

figured I would be at the Planet writing up the gas leak story. He wasn't expecting I would work out that he'd stolen the green rock. He assumed that Clark—who didn't know about the gas leaks—would go to my apartment for our meeting and would be there when the bomb detonated."

"But you were in your apartment? Superman rescued you? Because he didn't intend to kill you?"

Mayson smiled exultantly. "See?" she crowed. "It all makes perfect sense, doesn't it?"

No, it didn't. And it certainly didn't bring Henderson any closer to understanding how she'd arrived at such damning conclusions. "Mayson, I can't see any motive for Superman to kill Clark."

Her smile turned secretive. "You would if you knew the truth about Ultra Woman."

"Ultra Woman? You didn't mention her in your report."

"Clark and I had an agreement about not printing that. But he's gone now, so it probably doesn't matter anymore. Except, it's not nice to speak ill of the dead."

Perry had mentioned that Mayson seemed convinced of Clark's demise. "Clark isn't dead," Henderson said. "He wasn't at your apartment when the bomb exploded."

A shadow of doubt floated across her face, and her eyebrows converged. "I'm sure he's dead," she said. "Maybe he didn't die in the explosion, but Superman would've found another way to kill him. When I had the green rock, there was some hope that I could protect Clark, but without the green rock, he didn't stand a chance."

"Mayson," Henderson said, "you've given me no good reason why Superman would want Clark dead."

Mayson frowned for a long moment. "Clark and I had a deal," she said. "That's why we were meeting at my apartment. I said I wouldn't reveal the secret."

"I understand that, Mayson," Henderson said kindly.

"But without it, my story doesn't hold up."

Henderson was glad he hadn't had to say it.

She shrugged. "Ah well, Clark's dead now. He won't be keeping his part of the agreement, so I guess I don't have to keep mine."

Henderson said nothing. He didn't want to push Mayson into anything that might distress her. And he was reasonably confident that nothing she said was going to prove her allegations.

"Clark had an affair with Ultra Woman," Mayson said with matter-of-fact nonchalance. "He didn't know that the woman he was seeing—with a thin layer of gaudy spandex—was none other than Ultra Woman. I found out and warned Clark. He didn't want to believe me, but there were too many coincidences for there to be any other explanation."

Henderson decided it was time to end this. Clark Kent having an affair? That assertion had just pushed Mayson's story from questionable conjecture to dangerous delusion. "That's why you think Superman planted a bomb in your apartment?" he demanded.

She'd discerned the change in his tone. "What are the chances that Superman didn't find out?" Mayson said emphatically. "He is superfast, he has x-ray vision, and he can hear long distances. What are the chances his wife could get away with having an affair?"

"But with Clark Kent?"

"Clark didn't know she was a married woman," Mayson stressed. "He had no idea until I told him."

"Mayson, Superman has always been about using his powers for good. Even if he knew his wife was having an affair, I don't think he would attempt to kill anyone."

"But it wasn't just because of the affair," Mayson said. "Clark and I were going to investigate Superman. I knew about him damaging the pipes, and I knew about him stealing the green rock. I think he was worried that Clark and I together would be a formidable team—even without the green rock." She smiled sadly. "We were going to get married."

"You and Clark?"

She nodded. "Our engagement was going to be announced the following day."

"You were going to marry him?" Actually, Henderson had wanted to say, 'He was going to marry *you*?', but he'd had a lot of experience in wording questions in ways that didn't obliterate his chances of getting an answer. "Despite believing he had an affair with Ultra Woman?"

"Clark was very naïve," Mayson said. "I figured he needed someone like me to keep him out of trouble, so I asked him to marry me. He was going to give me his answer at five o'clock."

A small light of understanding flickered in the confusion of Henderson's mind. "You did a deal? You would keep quiet about the affair, and in return, Clark would marry you?"

"You've leached every last ounce of romance out of it, but yes, that was the agreement. I was trying to save Clark's soft country-boy hide."

That—the deal—did sound like something Mayson would do. Her harassment of Clark hadn't been a secret. Could this—all of this—be the creation of a mind so steeped in jealousy, it had become unbalanced? That theory seemed more possible than anything else Henderson had considered. "But if Superman had done these things—and he knew that you knew—why did he save you from the blast? If he'd hesitated just a few seconds, you would be dead, and then you could never tell what you know."

Mayson smiled coyly. "I have dated Superman," she boasted. "Perhaps he is considering dumping his unfaithful wife and replacing her with me."

"But you've just finished telling me you were going to marry Clark," Henderson exclaimed.

"I'm not sure if Superman knew that," Mayson said. "We hadn't announced it officially. But if he did know, that gives him extra motivation for killing Clark."

"Mayson," Henderson said, softening his voice, "you've been really helpful. I'll chase up the leads you've given me, and—"

"Are you going to arrest Superman?" she demanded.

"I will investigate," he said.

Her eyes turned hard. "You don't believe me, do you?"

This needed to finish. Henderson couldn't just walk out, so he tried to reason with her. "Mayson, you know I can't arrest anyone without evidence."

"I've given you evidence."

"You haven't given me evidence. Not about the gas leaks. Not about the affair. Not about who planted the bomb."

"I did give you evidence about the gas leaks," she insisted. "Weren't you listening?"

"Yes, I was listening, but I can't see how you can be sure that Superman damaged the pipes."

"He knew about the damage *before* it happened. That's conclusive proof."

"How do you know he knew about it before?"

"Because he called me and told me."

"You said Luthor called you and told you."

Mayson looked at Henderson as if he were possibly the dumbest cop in the entire northern hemisphere. "You weren't listening, were you?" she said.

Henderson had to make sure she didn't get distressed. "I tried to follow," he said lamely.

"But you didn't," she snapped. "If you'd paid proper attention, you would have come to the only feasible conclusion—just as I did."

"Which is?"

"That Lex Luthor is Superman."

* * *

Seb pulled up outside a high front fence in a quiet Toorak avenue.

Lois turned to look up and down the leafy, slightly undulating street. She estimated that every one of the large, majestic homes would command a six-figure price tag.

"Who do you know who lives here?" she asked Seb.

He climbed out of the car without answering and then bent forward to lean casually on the door. "Come on, Lois."

She scrambled out of the car and brushed off her faded jeans and worn tee shirt. "Seb, I'm not really dressed for visiting."

He laughed at her. "I promise you will be all right," he said. He took her hand and led her to the gate. When they arrived, he stopped and fumbled in the pocket of his jeans. He pulled out a bunch of keys that included a small black device. "Ah-ha." He pressed the button, and they heard a clunk on the other side of the gate. Seb pushed it open.

Lois passed through the gate and gasped. The house was snuggled into an arc of silver birch trees. The deep red of the brick flamed brightly against the ghostly grey of the trunks and the speckled green of the new leaves. The house was low and rambling and meticulously symmetrical—except for a rather oddly placed turret that rose into the sky from the right extremity of the building. "It's beautiful," Lois breathed in awe. She pointed at the turret. "But what is *that*?"

"A tower, I reckon," Seb said.

"It looks like an afterthought," Lois said. "As if a mischievous child snuck into the architect's office and drew on his plans with a crayon."

Seb smiled. "Shall we go in?"

"In?" Like a flash of lightning across a dark sky, Lois understood. "This is yours?" she squealed. "You *bought* this place?"

Seb grinned. "Wanna come and look at it?"

* * *

"Mayson, that isn't possible."

A wave of tiredness swept over Mayson. Her head hurt. Her brain felt as if it had become clogged with clay. “Of course it’s possible,” she said impatiently.

“You told me you were Lex Luthor’s partner at Superman’s wedding. You said you took the green rock and because of that, Superman collapsed.”

Mayson rallied her brain cells from the mist of her exhaustion. This was important. She had to make Henderson believe her. She grabbed onto a thought as it swirled past like a carousel. “Have you ever been inside Lex Labs?”

“No.”

“Ever wondered what they do in there?”

“Ah… science?”

The stupid cop wasn’t taking this seriously, and Mayson’s annoyance felt like spikes being driven into her head. She had to make him believe. “Cutting-edge science.”

“That doesn’t mean they can make two men out of one.”

There was another reason. Mayson knew there was something else. Something floating just out of reach… The space station! “Think about it,” she said. “When the space station Prometheus was threatened, who had a ready-made replacement?” She glanced to the cop and saw that he was going to need more convincing. “A *space* station. A *space* station.” It was easier to repeat herself than to try to construct new sentences. “An alien… space exploration.”

“The wedding, Mayson,” Henderson said quietly. “Luthor was there. Superman was there.”

“Obviously, Luthor was the fake,” she said. “The one in the suit was Superman. He was the one who was affected by the green rock.”

“Two men in one place usually means they are two men, not one,” Henderson said.

Desperation flooded Mayson’s flailing and battered brain. Luthor—she had to think about Luthor. Everything had been so clear. Now it was hopelessly muddled. Luthor. “Luthor’s past,” she said. “It’s shrouded in mystery. His parents died when he was young… so did Superman’s. Luthor has no brothers or sisters… Superman said he was the sole survivor when his planet was destroyed.”

“Mayson, thousands of people lose their parents when they are young and don’t have any siblings.”

“Consider this.” Her breath was coming fast now. She needed to convince him before her mind would no longer obey her demand for coherence. “An alien arrives on Earth—he has powers, but no contacts, no money, no way to enter society. He needs a human persona. When I researched Luthor for the interview, I found no obvious source for his wealth. With Superman’s powers, getting rich would be easy, but that’s only one side. He needs a human face to be able to use all of that money to his advantage.”

“Luthor has been in Metropolis for nearly twenty years.”

“Superman has never said that his arrival on Earth was recent.”

Henderson’s questions stalled, and Mayson drove home her advantage.

“Luthor rarely appeared in public,” she continued. “For years, he was a complete enigma. The popular myth is that he rose from rags to riches, but exactly how he achieved that has never been clear. Then, he established Lex Labs. They worked on disguises—masks that allow one person to look like someone else. And once that technology was achieved, Superman appeared… for no apparent reason. Not long after that, Luthor finally agreed to my long-standing request for a personal interview, because he’s now secure in both of his identities.”

Mayson could see that Henderson was tottering on the edge of belief. She summoned her weary and unravelling mind for one final effort.

“Who was pretending to be Luthor?” Henderson asked. “At the wedding?”

“I don’t know. Someone Luthor trusts. What better way to protect the secret than to have Luthor and Superman appear together at such a public event? And having Luthor partner the city’s best reporter was a masterstroke. For an alien, he shows occasional flashes of intelligence.”

Henderson had gone a little pale. “I’ve never seen them together, but—”

“Hah!” Mayson said. Her job was nearly done.

“… but I think Lex Luthor is a few inches shorter than Superman.”

“Superman wears lifts in those big red boots of his.”

“Mayson, this is… this is unbelievable.”

“A man can fly. He can lift a train. He can see through walls. Don’t talk to me about unbelievable.”

“But this…”

She had to get to the important bit. Time had almost gone. “Are you going to investigate Luthor?”

“I’ll make some enquiries. But, Mayson, Perry won’t print this—not yet. Not until my investigation is complete.”

“Will you give me your word that I get the story?”

He nodded. “When did you realise?”

She'd done it. Henderson believed her. "Earlier today." Or was it yesterday? It didn't matter. "Suddenly, everything fell into place."

"I should contact Clark and tell him," Henderson said gravely. "If his life is at risk, he needs to be told."

Clark? Mayson searched through the dark nebulous clouds of memory. "Clark's dead," she said.

"No, he's not," Henderson said. "He's alive. He's in Australia."

Australia! That word hacked a deep gouge through her brain. There was a woman… the reason why Clark kept leaving. There was something about her. Something that Clark didn't want anyone to know. Something Kerthworthy. "He went to see that… that football reporter…" Mayson scrunched her eyes closed and squeezed the bridge of her nose. "There was something about her… something I was trying to work out before the explosion. Something… I can't remember… she took home Charlie."

"Who's Charlie?" Henderson asked.

Mayson shook her head, feeling disoriented. Alone. Lost. "I don't know," she whispered desperately. "He fits in somewhere, but I can't remember where."

"It's OK, Mayson," Henderson said gently. He stood and patted her shoulder in a fatherly fashion. "You did great. You remembered so much."

"But Charlie is important," Mayson said fretfully. "I know he's important. He… he worked in the engine room."

Henderson reached across her for the buzzer.

Mayson clutched his forearm with both hands. "I think he worked in the engine room at Lex Labs. And he killed Nigel St John. With a cheap, disposable razor."

From behind Henderson, the nurse appeared. She gently eased Mayson's hands from the cop's arm. "You need to rest now, Mayson," she said in a wonderfully soft voice. "I'm sure the inspector has asked all the necessary questions."

Mayson fell back against the pillow and closed her eyes.

Her mind felt as if it had been crushed. Everything that had once been so clear… so important… so necessary… it all slipped away to blissful oblivion.

None of it mattered. Not anymore.

Part 67

Henderson walked out of the hospital room and paused a moment to savour the sanity and normalcy of the corridor. His interview with Mayson had felt like a sandstorm in a desert—murky, disorientating, and very uncomfortable.

Was there any reality in what Mayson had concocted?

If there was, it was going to be close to impossible to discern the scraps of truth from the jumbled riot of a broken mind.

Lex Luthor is Superman?

Clark Kent had an affair with Ultra Woman?

Henderson shook his head to try to clear the debris from his mind.

He began slowly walking away. Mayson had lived without considering how her actions would affect others. She had refused to be restricted by ethics or hindered by principles. She'd blatantly shunned honour and flaunted her lack of compassion with something akin to pride.

But what he had just witnessed was sad.

He passed the nurses' station, rounded the corner, and only just avoided ramming into a broad blue chest. "Superman!"

"Inspector Henderson."

Henderson stared into the face of the superhero. There was nothing about his features—not his mouth or the shape of his jaw or the underlying bone structure—that was reminiscent of Lex Luthor.

Superman sidestepped as if to continue. "Are you intending to visit Ms Drake?" Henderson asked quickly.

"Not visit her," Superman said. "But I wished to enquire about her progress."

"She has regained consciousness," Henderson said. "But she is very confused."

"Have you spoken to her?" Superman asked.

His chest was broad, his shoulders were wide, and his arms were sculpted around hardened muscles. "Yes," Henderson said. "She made some allegations—mind-boggling allegations—and I've questioned her, but she has no evidence to substantiate what she claims to be the truth."

"You're not going to continue the investigation?"

"I will continue to try to find the person who planted the bomb in her apartment, but I don't believe Mayson has anything that will assist in the case."

Superman nodded tightly. "Thank you, Inspector."

As the caped superhero turned and walked away, Henderson studied the powerful build that rippled under the close-fitting spandex.

No amount of science was going to transform Lex Luthor into that!

* * *

Lois slowly scanned the row of windows that lured the colour and freshness of the garden into the room. “Seb,” she said excitedly. “This house is incredible. It’s so big, but it has so many cute nooks that make it feel just like a cottage. This little room is perfect. It faces north, so in winter, it will catch whatever sun there is, and with all those windows and the beautiful garden and the deciduous trees, it’s like a piece of heaven.”

Seb grinned, clearly pleased by her excitement. “You like it?” he asked, rather unnecessarily.

“It’s amazing. Even though it’s empty, its character shines through.” Lois gestured to the corner. “I can just see a comfy couch here… with loads of cushions and a good book. Can I come and visit?”

Seb leant against the doorjamb, his arms folded casually across his chest and a boyish grin splashed across his face. He looked about as far removed from a Toorak property owner as was possible.

He hadn’t responded to her request, and the realisation of that, together with the mysterious smile on his face, aroused Lois’s suspicions. “What are you going to do with it, Seb?” she asked. “Is this your way of telling me you are moving to Melbourne?”

“No,” he said. “I’m hoping to be in Melbourne a lot more, but I can’t move here—not for a couple of years.”

“I thought you were planning to open a Melbourne shop.”

“I was,” he said. “But I bought this instead.”

“It’s lovely,” Lois said. “But I can’t understand what it could possibly have to do with the vote last night.”

“I found this when I was here last week. The owner is a widow who remarried in June and moved in with her new husband. She put this on the market, I loved it from the moment I saw it, the exhibition took care of the deposit, and here we are.”

“But isn’t there usually a settlement time?”

“Yeah. It’s not officially mine for six weeks. They have to do all the legal stuff with title deeds. But I’ve paid the deposit and signed the contract, and the agent said I could have the keys for an hour—seeing as the place is empty.”

“Seb Wilton, Toorak toff,” Lois teased. “But I still don’t get how this is related to last night’s vote.”

Seb stared at his thongs-clad feet for a long moment. When he looked up, he shrugged. “You can’t leave Melbourne,” he said. “Not now.”

She nodded in agreement. “I’m not leaving—not yet.”

“So, you’re gonna need somewhere to live.”

Lois felt her mouth drop open. “You’re offering me the chance to live here?” she gasped.

“Not offering,” Seb said. “I’m asking if you would live here. Keep an eye on the place for me.”

“Seb!” Lois hissed. “I can’t afford the rent on a place like this. I couldn’t even afford half of it.”

“I’m not asking you to pay rent,” he said. “I’m asking you to look after my home for a couple of years until—hopefully—Chris and I get married and move in.”

“Seb, I couldn’t live here rent-free.”

“Why not?”

“Because this is an investment, and you’ll need a return on it so you can buy that shop when you move to Melbourne.”

“Lois, I’m not going to argue with you about money,” Seb said firmly. “I’m asking you to move in here. I need someone I trust to look after the home where I hope to live with my wife and bring up our kids.”

Tears pushed into Lois’s eyes. He’d bought it for her. Sure, he was trying to justify it with talk of the future, but he’d done this for her. “If you’re hoping to marry Chris in a couple of years, you don’t need a home in Melbourne now,” she pointed out.

“No,” he said quietly. “But you do.”

“I have my unit.”

Seb snorted derisively. “With Esmeralda monitoring every sound she hears and broadcasting every move you make?”

“It’s not ideal,” Lois admitted.

“This is,” Seb insisted. “This will give you privacy. The fences are high. The trees are established. The land is big enough that the neighbours aren’t on your doorstep.” He grinned suddenly. “Do you like the tower?”

Lois laughed as she swallowed down her tears. It was so typical of Seb to buy a Toorak mansion and be enthralled most by the tower. “Yes,” she said. “I like the tower.” She wandered out of the sun-drenched room and into a large area that was wide enough to be a room but seemed to have the function of a corridor. “It’s so big, Seb. I’m going to feel like I’m rattling around in a castle.” He’d followed her, and she turned to him.

“I never said you had to live here alone.”

Lois glanced into his blue eyes. He gazed back steadily. “Are you thinking Chris could live here, too?” she asked.

"No, not Chris."

He was saying more than he was saying. "Clark will be in Metropolis," Lois said.

"He can stay here when he's not in Metropolis."

"We're engaged."

"Yeah, Mum told me."

The epiphany hit Lois with the force of a speeding train. Seb *knew*. He knew *everything*.

The roomed tilted crazily, and she groped for the nearest wall. Seb's hands landed on her shoulders, and he steadied her. "Are you OK?" he asked.

She nodded, took a step towards the wall, and propped against it.

Seb knew.

He leaned his shoulder against the wall in mirror image of her stance. He peered into her face, concern evident in his blue eyes. "Are you OK?"

"You know, don't you?" Lois said quietly.

"You asked me not to know."

"How? How did you work it out?"

"Lois, I know you need a home. I know this is perfect for you for the next few years. I don't want to know anything else."

"How?"

"Lois…"

"How?"

Seb took one hand from his jeans pocket, jangling the keys in his palm. He tossed them into the air, caught them, and shot her a look that reminded her of a much younger Seb who knew trouble was looming. "You were supposed to believe that I bought this place for Chris and me and that you're doing me a favour by looking after it."

"If you thought that story was going to fool me, you should stick to jewellery," Lois advised.

He chuckled sheepishly. "I was never any good at creative writing."

Lois smiled at him with overflowing affection. "I know you know," she said. "You might as well tell me how you know."

"What gave me away?"

"The fact that you knew Clark and I had announced our engagement and you didn't even congratulate me."

"Would you believe me if I said I was so excited about the house that it slipped my mind?"

"No," Lois said. "The only way it wouldn't be foremost in your thoughts is if you knew that this wedding is little more than public necessity."

He acknowledged that with a slight shrug and an inhibited grin.

"How?" Lois persisted.

"Remember how, when I was a kid, Mum tried to get me to read all sorts of books, but I wouldn't?"

"That's right," Lois said, smiling at the memories of the repeated confrontations between mother and son. "Barb bought you dozens of books, but you just weren't interested in anything except 'Hawk Talk' and—" She stopped and gulped as the pieces snapped together. She met Seb's eyes and multiple layers of communication flowed between them. "… and comics."

"I loved comics," Seb said. "I loved reading how the heroes used their powers to fight against the bad guys." His mouth curved to a self-deprecating grin. "I still read them."

"I didn't know."

"We haven't lived together for a long time, and you stir me enough about what I eat and what I wear. It didn't seem smart to give you ammunition about what I read."

Lois studied him as uneasiness crept upon her. "Does my teasing bother you?"

Seb laughed. "Honestly?" he said. "I love it. But you'd obviously forgotten about the comics, and I didn't see the need to remind you."

Lois chuckled with relief and returned to the main thrust of their conversation. "So, when a real-life hero appeared, I guess it was to be expected that you would notice."

"Yeah," Seb said. "From the beginning, I read everything I could about him. I watched the reports on TV when that moron, Trask, tried to kill him. And I knew he was getting married the night of the Sydney final."

"And then I came to your shop…"

"I'm a jeweller, Lois."

"I took off the rings!"

"Most rings leave a tiny ridge."

"You saw it?"

Seb reached across and took her left hand. He lifted it towards the light, and Lois saw the faint indentation—the telltale evidence that she had worn her wedding ring overnight. "I can tell the width of the ring and the fact that

it's a little bit too tight," he said. "My guess is that it wasn't professionally fitted."

"It wasn't."

Seb continued. "You'd asked me not to try to work it out, and I didn't. But then Esmeralda said that you'd had a bloke in your unit when Clark was in Metropolis. I know you, Lois. I know you would never ever cheat on Clark. I know how much you'd hate anyone to think you were doing that to the man you love. I know you'd only let them think that if you were protecting something else—something more important to you." He smiled apologetically. "And I work with opal every day. I couldn't help but notice how much it resembles… the other stuff."

"Have you told anyone?"

Seb winced as if she had struck him. "Lois," he groaned.

"Sorry," she said quickly. "But I know you are close to your parents, and you've already told me that you don't want to have to choose between Chris and me."

"I don't," he said. His grin returned. "But despite this discussion—which you forced on me—I don't know anything for sure. And that's the way I want it to stay."

"What are you going to do?" Lois asked.

"Buy a house with high fences and a tower," he said simply. "I reckon that should fix most of the problems."

Lois felt a tear break free from her right eye and slide down her cheek. "Seb," she said as she wiped her forearm across her face. "I love you. I'm glad you know—"

"I don't know anything," he cut in. "I don't want to know anything."

"How long have you known?"

"There wasn't a specific moment—the pieces drifted together gradually. At first, it was like a wild, improbable germ of an idea that was fun to imagine because it couldn't possibly be true. You know, like kicking the winning goal for Hawthorn in a Grand Final. Or taking a specky. Or riding the perfect wave."

"You must have known last week; otherwise, why would you have been looking for a house in Melbourne?"

"If Hawthorn didn't merge, you needed somewhere in Melbourne to live—no secrets there."

"Will you come to my wedding?" Lois asked.

"I'll be there with bells on," Seb said. "And I'm sorry I didn't congratulate you earlier. It's not that I'm not stoked for you, it's just that you're—"

"—already married."

Lois bounced off the wall at the sound of the new voice. Clark walked across the room. When he reached them, he offered his hand to Seb. "I couldn't find my wife," Clark said. "But I didn't need to worry. I know she's safe with you."

Seb was staring at Clark, shock etched on every pore of his face. "H…how much did you hear?"

"Enough."

Seb clawed back some of his composure. "I… I believe congratulations are in order… and there's a wedding being planned." He finally noticed Clark's outstretched hand and hurried to respond.

"There is," Clark said as the two men shook hands. "But we haven't set a date yet."

"Yes, we have," Lois said. "Grand Final Day."

"In two weeks?" Seb whooped.

"Less than two weeks." Lois smiled at her husband. "You said I could arrange whatever I wanted, so I did. Grand Final morning—before the game. And then, a proper honeymoon, followed by three months in Metropolis."

"Three months?" Clark gasped.

"Browny says he won't let me work here between October and December."

"What about Hawthorn?"

"There's a lot to be done," Lois said. "But we're a team, and the team isn't going to fall over just because one person isn't there."

"You'll return to Melbourne in January?" Clark asked.

Lois nodded. "To work at the Herald Sun, to volunteer at Hawthorn, and to—"

"And to live in your home in Toorak," Seb said. "Three months will give me some time to get it perfect for you—perhaps a coat of paint."

"It's perfect already," Lois said.

"I guess it is," Seb said. He gently punched her arm. "Now that Clark's here."

Lois grinned. "You can't tease me about Clark," she said. "Because I know how infatuated you are with Chris."

Seb didn't argue. "I'd like to give you a wedding present," he said.

"There's no need. I mean"—Lois motioned around the room—"this is more than enough."

"I think your wedding should be a meeting of two worlds," Seb said. "The Melbourne footy journo and the Metropolis reporter."

"How are we going to do that?" Lois asked.

"By bringing some of Clark's family and friends to Melbourne for the wedding."

"Are you offering to pay for their flights?" Lois gasped. "That's too—"

"It's not too much," Seb said. "You should invite your parents, too."

They wouldn't come—Lois knew that. But she wasn't going to spoil this incredible day with thoughts of them. "Seb, I still say it's too much."

"Lois," Seb said solemnly, "I've always known how lucky I am that you're in my life, but it wasn't until I thought I might lose your friendship over the merger that I realised exactly how much you mean to me. Please, let me do this for you."

Lois smiled as she wiped the dampness from her eyes. "OK," she said. "Thank you, Sebby Boy."

Seb kissed Lois's cheek and then turned to Clark. "I'm sure you already know how special she is," Seb said. "But you should also know that if you ever hurt her, I'll come after you, even though you're S…stronger than me."

Clark grinned. "Will you be my best man at the wedding?"

Shock again coated Seb's face. "You're kidding, right?"

"Nope," Clark said. "I'd like you to be my best man. Would you? Please?"

"I'd love to, mate," Seb said. He grinned. "Do you like the tower? Will it work OK as a…" His hand made a flying motion.

"It'll work perfectly," Clark said. "Thanks, *mate*."

* * *

Perry entered the little office and sat on the proffered chair. What was it about these places that made you feel so darned uncomfortable?

From behind her desk, the psychiatrist regarded him over her half-moon spectacles. "I'm Dr Vandenberg. Thank you for coming, Mr White."

"I was surprised at the request," Perry admitted. "I had thought that this would be a family matter."

"Ms Drake's uncle is unavailable, so he suggested I consult with you."

Perry couldn't help wondering if 'unavailable' was a euphemism for 'uncaring'. He nodded for her to continue.

Dr Vandenberg glanced at her notes. "After a number of sessions with Ms Drake, I don't believe she is ready to resume her normal life."

"You think she needs more time off work?"

"More than that, Mr White. I'm recommending that she be admitted to the Neuroscience Center for further treatment."

"The Neuroscience Center?"

"Ms Drake is very confused. Her memory is returning, but her perception of reality changes daily, sometimes hourly. Of most concern is that she doesn't seem aware of the disparity of her comprehension."

"She wrote a story making some serious allegations."

"If you are wise, you will dispose of that story in the trash and never think of it again." The psychiatrist closed the file. "I know Ms Drake was a respected journalist, but that person is gone."

"Are you saying you don't think she will ever recover?"

"I'm saying that you shouldn't underestimate the severity of Ms Drake's condition."

"May I see her?" Perry asked.

"For just a few moments," she replied. "Try to talk about something neutral such as the weather or the flowers on the bush outside her window."

"Are there any topics I should avoid?"

Dr Vandenberg sighed. "Many," she said. Ticking them off on her fingers, she listed, "Superman, Lex Luthor, Clark Kent, Ultra Woman, Nigel St John, Charlie, football reporters, libraries, Australia, gas leaks, green rock…" Having run out of fingers, she lifted her hands in despair. "… and, as of this morning, Dan Scardino."

"Dan?"

"This morning, she was convinced that Dan is leaving Australia to come to Metropolis to marry her."

Perry stood from the seat. "Thank you," he said.

"Will you continue to visit her? Once she is at the Neuroscience Center?"

"If you think that will help her."

"It will," the doctor said. "Other than Inspector Henderson, you're the only visitor she's had."

* * *

"Was that a 'yes'?" Lois asked gleefully.

Chris stared back, her eyes wide as a delighted grin lit her face. “You want *me* to be your bridesmaid?”

“Yes!” Lois said.

“What about your sister?”

“She isn’t coming.”

Clark put his hand over Lois’s and squeezed gently. No one from her family was coming. Lois had tried to pretend that she didn’t care, but Clark knew she did.

“I would *love* to be your bridesmaid,” Chris said.

“There are two things I should tell you first,” Lois said.

“What?”

“It’s gonna be on Grand Final morning. But don’t worry, it’ll be finished long before you need to get to the ‘G to cover the game.”

“OK,” Chris said. “A Grand Final wedding—that sounds like fun. What’s the other thing?”

“I choose the colours you wear.”

Chris looked at Lois blankly. “Isn’t that usually the case?” she said. “That the bride chooses the colour scheme?”

“You’ll be wearing brown and gold,” Lois informed her.

Their shared laughter pealed around the Hawthorn Social Club. “That’s perfect,” Chris said.

“Do I have to wear brown and gold, too?” Seb asked with an indolent smile.

“You bet, Mister,” Lois informed him.

“What about me?” Clark asked. “What do you want me to wear?”

Lois speared him a playful look that he knew meant she had thought of a response that couldn’t be aired publicly. “I haven’t decided yet,” she said. “But I’m sure we’ll think of something.”

“I have it,” Chris said eagerly. “Seventies-style brown suit, shiny gold shirt, brown velour bow tie.”

Clark subdued his smile enough to attempt a frown. “Being the bridesmaid does not give you the right to humiliate the groom,” he said severely.

“Can I humiliate the best man?” Chris said with a pointed look at Seb.

Clark’s cell phone rang amid the laughter, and he pulled it from his pocket. It was Perry. “Excuse me,” he said as he rose from the table. He walked to a quiet corner and lifted the cell to his ear. “Hi, Perry.”

“Hi, Clark. How’re you doing?”

Clark grinned. “I’m doing fantastically. I took your advice; Lois and I are getting married.”

He heard Perry’s rumble of laughter. “When?”

“September 28th.”

“Wooohooo! Quick work! Is the wedding in Melbourne?”

“Yep. Will you come? You and Alice?”

“Ah… I’m not sure, Clark. I’d have to think about it. The Planet, you know?”

“If it were possible, I’d love to have you here.”

“OK. I’ll see what I can arrange.”

“Thanks, Chief.” Clark paused, not wanting to put a dampener on his elated mood. He had to ask, though. “How’s Mayson?”

“That’s what I’m calling about,” Perry said. “She’s not well at all. She’s being moved into the Neuroscience Center.”

Clark felt the breath whistle through his teeth. “Why?” he asked quietly.

“Because she is so confused about everything. She remembers something and then forgets it again. For a time, she was sure you were dead. Oh, by the way, has Henderson called you?”

“No. Why?”

“Apparently, Mayson was convinced that Superman intended to kill you. Henderson thinks the chances of that having any credibility are close to zero, but he thought you should know.”

“Ah, thanks,” Clark said. “Did Bill say why Mayson thought Superman wanted to kill me?”

Perry cleared his throat. “Nothing you need worry about. The point is that Mayson has totally lost all grip on reality. When I visited her, she told me that Ultra Woman is married to Lex Luthor.”

“Ultra Woman and Lex Luthor?” Clark gasped. “How did she arrive at *that*?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Perry said. “Sadly, no one is going to take her seriously for a long time.”

It was sad that Mayson was in such a bad way. However, it also meant that Ultra Woman’s identity was safe, and Clark’s overwhelming emotion was relief. “Thanks for letting me know, Chief,” he said. “Don’t forget—the wedding is on the 28th.”

"I'll see what I can do," Perry said. "Give my congratulations to Lois and tell her I'm looking forward to meeting her."

"We're having a week's honeymoon, and then we'll be in Metropolis for three months."

"Both of you?"

"Both of us. Were you serious about giving her a trial at the Planet?"

"Sure," Perry said.

"Thanks, Chief. See you soon."

Clark hung up and turned back to the table. Seb and Chris were laughing together. Lois had gone. He hurried over to them. "Where's Lois?" he asked.

"Don't panic, mate," Seb teased. "She went into the kitchen to talk to Bantam." He put his arm across Chris's shoulders. "Sit down and drink the coffee you were raving about."

Clark did. But he tuned in his hearing just long enough to catch a few words and assure himself that Lois was OK. When he switched back to normal hearing, Seb and Chris were talking about the house in Toorak.

Clark slowly sipped his coffee. The secret of Ultra Woman's identity was safe. On the other hand, for the first time, someone had worked out the truth about Superman's identity. Clark had dreaded it happening, but now that it had, he felt nothing but a sense of peace.

Seb was family. It felt right that he knew.

* * *

Clark landed Lois on the doorstep of his parents' farmhouse. They tapped on the door and entered without waiting for a reply. His parents looked up from where they were eating breakfast.

"Clark!" his mom said. "Lois! How wonderful to see both of you."

After the round of hugs, Clark and Lois sat at the table, and Martha put cups of coffee in front of them.

"How are you?" Jonathan said.

Clark lifted Lois's left hand—resplendent with a brand new 'Sebastian Stone' engagement ring—for them to see. "Lois and I are getting married," he said.

His parents smiled together. "That's wonderful," his mom said. "When? And where?"

"September 28th," Lois replied. "In Melbourne. And we'd be honoured if you would come."

"To Australia?" Martha said. "Next week?"

"I'm not sure, son," Jonathan said, his eyes glinting with amusement. "I want to get all the new fencing done before winter sets in."

Clark shot from the kitchen, fenced two fields, and returned to the table in less than a second. All three grinned at him. "Did you just do what I think you did?" Lois asked.

He nodded and then looked to his parents. "You'll have to travel the conventional way. If you agree to come, I'll bring your tickets to you."

"You'll get the tickets?" Martha said. "No, really, Clark, we can—"

"They're a gift from a friend of mine," Lois said. "My parents and my sister can't come, so it's important to both of us that you are there."

His mom smiled. "Of course we'll be there," she said. "We wouldn't miss it for the world."

Part 68

Alice White and her husband, Perry, were ushered by Gazza —who had met them at the airport—into a bright room that was rollicking with laughter and noisy celebration.

That nice young reporter, Clark Kent, saw them, smiled widely, and hurried to greet them. "Perry! Mrs White! Thank you for coming. How was your flight?"

"The flight was surprisingly good," Perry said. "We both managed to get some sleep."

A young woman came up beside Clark, and Alice immediately understood several things.

Why Clark had been so reluctant to leave Melbourne.

Why Perry had felt the need to chase up new reporters for the Planet.

And why Clark now wore the air of a man who had everything his heart desired.

"Perry, Mrs White," he said. "This is my fiancée, Lois Lane."

The pride in his voice brought a smile to Alice's face—Perry's, too—and a catch to her heart. There was something irresistible about young love, and these two had it in spades. "Ms Lane," Perry said, "I'm so glad to finally meet you."

"Please, call me Lois," she said with a welcoming smile that encompassed both Perry and Alice. "Thank you both so much for coming."

The next couple of hours passed in a blur of new faces, some novel and delicious foods, and animated Aussie accents—the two predominant topics being tomorrow's wed-

ding and tomorrow's 'grand final'—which Alice quickly surmised was the biggest football game of the year.

She and Perry spent some time with Clark's parents—the lovely couple from Kansas whom she'd met on a previous occasion when they'd visited their son in Metropolis.

Perry spent a long time talking with a large, loud man who introduced himself as Paul Brown but insisted on being called Browny. He was Lois's editor, and by the end of the conversation, their beer glasses were empty and they had agreed upon the logistics of how they were going to share the two love-struck reporters.

Alice had noticed a confident and casually dressed young man whom she had initially assumed to be about fifteen. It was only later when she glanced across the room and saw the same young man kissing a very attractive woman that she'd had to revise her estimate of the young man's age. Alice had later overhead Perry talking with Clark, and she had been shocked to discover that the flamboyantly excitable 'kid' was the one who had paid for their flights as a wedding present for Lois and Clark.

They met an older couple, Ron and Barb, whom Alice had assumed were Lois's parents. They weren't. Apparently, Lois's parents lived in the US and hadn't been able to come for the wedding. However, when Ron had called for quiet and proceeded to make a speech that included a lot of jokes at the expense of the about-to-be-married couple, he did so with such affection that Alice had whispered in Perry's ear that he *looked* every inch the proud father.

It was obvious that Lois's friends were delighted she was with Clark. It took Alice a little while to work out that when they mentioned 'Rubber', they were referring to Clark. She wondered how they had arrived at that association but decided it would be diplomatic not to ask. It took her a lot longer to deduce that 'Flinders' was the bride-to-be.

The party was still going strong when the rigours of the long flight started to show on Perry's face, and Alice asked Clark if he could call a cab to take them to their hotel.

"You're not staying in a hotel," Clark said. "Gazza, Banjo, and Browny all offered for you to stay at their places. Browny won by threatening the other two with having to cover the speeches at one of the Grand Final Breakfasts tomorrow."

Clark called over a tiny woman whom he introduced as Sue. She wouldn't hear of anything other than leaving the party early to look after her guests. Soon, Alice and Perry were being swept through the dark Melbourne streets as Sue pointed out local landmarks in her quiet Australian accent.

* * *

Perry had figured out quickly that this wasn't going to be a conventional wedding.

Firstly, there was the time. Who got married at eight o'clock in the morning?

When Perry had asked Paul Brown about the timing, he'd said that the Grand Final was to be played that afternoon, and if the wedding wasn't done and dusted by eleven at the latest, people would leave anyway.

Which added to the quirkiness. The bride and groom could have chosen any day—why this one? Perry had only been in Australia for fourteen hours, but he'd realised that the foremost topic of everyone's conversation was this Grand Final. Last night, Clark had tried to explain its importance, but Perry must have been suffering from the effects of the long flight, because very little had made much sense.

This morning, as they'd driven to the wedding, Paul had passed a large stadium and told them that this was where the Grand Final was to be played. It wasn't yet seven thirty, but there were small crowds of people milling about—some dressed in blue and white, others in red and white.

Ten minutes later, they'd arrived at the wedding venue. If the time had been unusual, the place was extraordinary. Clark and Lois had chosen a sports ground. It did have a stately Art Deco grandstand, but it was rammed between a street and a train line, and eucalyptus trees grew on the terraces. However, the grass was soft and green—if a little worn in places—and it was clear that someone had put in a lot of effort attempting to imbue it with a wedding atmosphere.

The colours of choice were not typically nuptial either. Brown and a deep yellow colour prevailed… they were *everywhere*. The trees, the grandstand, the wire fence, and the four tall posts at each end of the ground had been dressed in abundant streamers and ribbons. From the rafters of the grandstand hung a huge sign—'Lois … Clark' with a gold heart between the names. The railing that circled the sports field was dotted with balloons—brown and yellow, of course—that danced cheerily in the early morning breeze.

On the field, chairs awaited the guests—two blocks, with an aisle between them. The aisle had been decorated with a series of large brown bows with posies of yellow flowers in the centre of them.

Adding to the overall effect was the fact that a considerable number of the guests wore various versions of what was probably a sports jersey. It was hardly typical wedding attire, but in this setting, it didn't seem entirely out of place.

At the top of the aisle—between the seats and the grandstand—was a little stage with a short flagpole on either

side. An American flag fluttered on the right side with its Australian counterpart on the left.

Perry felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see Clark.

"Good morning, Chief," Clark said. "And Mrs White. I hope you both slept well."

"We did," Perry said. He grinned. "Who would've thought you'd be married in a sports stadium?"

Clark grinned back. He looked as if he were in danger of exploding with happiness. "This is Glenferrie Oval," he said. "Home of the mighty Hawks."

"The team Lois roots for?" Perry asked.

An inscrutable expression crossed Clark's face. "Ah… no," he said. "She barracks for them. They… ah… they don't say they 'root' for a team here."

Perry skimmed over Clark's black suit, white shirt, and bow tie—noting that the latter item was yellow with a brown trim. "I half expected you to be completely rigged out in brown and yellow," Perry joked.

"Gold," Clark said. "It's not yellow, it's gold. That was one of the first things Lois taught me."

"Oh," Perry said, unable to see how the distinction was important. "We're sorry we had to leave the party so early last night."

"That's totally understandable," Clark said. "You'd only been off the plane for a couple of hours."

"I can't be away from the Planet for more than a few days."

"I appreciate you both making the trip," Clark said. "It's wonderful to have you here."

Alice smiled. "But we were at the party long enough to realise that you and Lois are wonderfully suited."

Clark's grin broadened further. "She liked you both, too," he said. "Although she's a bit nervous about her first day at the Planet."

"She doesn't need to be," Perry said. "I had a talk with Paul. He speaks highly of her, and I got the impression that his praise is not easily won."

"It's not," Clark agreed. "But people won't know who you're talking about if you call him 'Paul'. He's known as 'Browny'."

The youthful-looking man with blond hair—dressed identically to Clark—pranced up them. He thrust his hand towards Perry. "G'day," he said. "I met you briefly last night. I'm Seb."

"Perry White. And this is my wife, Alice."

"Pleased to meet you." Seb turned to Clark and slapped him energetically on the back. "Dad and I got shooed out of the house early—secret women's stuff—but when I left, your bride was looking exactly how every woman should on the morning of her wedding."

"Is she OK?" Clark asked. "Is she nervous?"

"She's so excited, she can hardly sit still. And by the end of the day, she's going to have strained facial muscles from the incessant smiling. But she also has this most amazing serenity—as if she knows she's doing exactly what she's always wanted to do."

Clark chuckled happily. "I can't wait for her to arrive."

Seb grinned. "I guess you'll both be at the Grand Final this afternoon."

"Absolutely," Clark agreed solemnly. "Couldn't possibly miss the Grand Final."

Perry searched Clark's face to see if he were serious. He and Seb burst out laughing, and Perry joined in, a little relieved.

"Sadly, we can't go," Clark said, not looking sad at all. "Lois gave her ticket to Bessie Bellchambers."

"Who's she?" Seb asked.

"A lady who has followed the Swans since she was a little girl. She used to go to their games with her father."

"Do you think Sydney can win it for her?" Seb asked.

"I dunno," Clark said. "North have had a great year."

Seb turned to Alice with a disarming smile. "Sorry," he said. "But it's Grand Final Day, and we all suffer from Footy Fever on the last Saturday in September."

Alice smiled. "I believe we have you to thank for the airplane tickets."

For the first time, Seb's ebullience waned. "Aw, it's nothing," he said. "I'm so glad you could come. I know how much it means to Lois and Clark."

"Are you her brother?" Alice asked.

Seb grinned. "No," he said. "But she lets me pretend I am."

* * *

Martha Kent looked around the big, colourful sports stadium and couldn't help smiling. It wasn't anything like her dreams for her son's wedding, but despite the fact that they were on the other side of the world, there was a welcoming atmosphere that felt wonderfully familiar.

And anyway, the place didn't matter.

What mattered was that her son had never looked so full of joy.

Martha and Jonathan had had four delightful days since arriving in Melbourne. Lois, having moved in with Ron and Barb, had given them the use of her apartment, and Clark had bunked at Banjo's house. Lois and Clark had worked on stories for Lois's paper, but there had been plenty of time for them to show their American visitors the sights of Melbourne.

Every moment they had spent with their son and his wife had further confirmed what Martha already knew—that Lois Lane was exactly what Clark had dreamed of for so long.

When they had first outlined their plans for Wedding Mark II, Martha had tried to hide her doubts. But now that she was here, it was perfect.

The cool, sunny morning… the light frosting of dew on the grass… the scent of spring in the air… the laughter of family and friends.

And her son, about to begin—publicly—the most important journey of his life.

* * *

The car glided to a stop at the gates of Glenferrie Oval.

While waiting for Ron to open her door, Lois's eyes dwelt lovingly on the place that had become her home when she had no home.

In her opinion, the grand old lady that was Glenferrie Oval had never looked better. Seb and Chris, aided by an army of helpers, had vibrantly dressed her in her natural colours.

Lois looked through the small crowd of guests and located Clark. He was looking towards the car, and she caught him pushing his glasses back up his nose. She grinned. "I love you, big guy," she whispered, knowing he would hear.

He lifted his hand in a secret gesture of response, and Lois's smile deepened to a chuckle.

For her—for both of them—the stilted and impersonal wedding of Superman and Ultra Woman had been the beginning of their marriage. But this was going to be fun.

Ron opened the door and offered his hand. Lois took it and slid from the car.

She stood for a moment and waited for Chris to join them. Her bridesmaid looked stunning in a brown and gold gown of shiny satin. Lois didn't notice Chris's natural beauty as much anymore. Chris was just Chris—great friend, fellow Hawk, colleague at the Herald Sun, and, most importantly of all, the woman who had captivated Seb's heart.

Ron placed Lois's hand into the crook of his arm and smiled. She could see tears glistening in his eyes, which very nearly unloosed hers. "Ready?" he asked.

Lois nodded, and together they passed through the gateway. Once inside Glenferrie Oval, she took two paces to the left and—standing exactly where the little lost American girl had stood over eighteen years ago—she hugged the man who had welcomed her to Hawthorn.

"Thank you," Lois whispered in his ear as she embraced him. "Thank you for everything."

When Ron released her, the wells in his eyes had deepened. "We received much more than we ever gave," he said. "We wanted another child so much. The doctors couldn't understand why Barb couldn't conceive. Then… you came."

Neither Ron nor Barb had ever told her of their yearning for another child. Lois felt a tear trickle down her cheek, and Ron's large hand brushed it away with utter gentleness. "I love you," Lois said. "And Barb and Seb. It's an honour to be a part of your family."

"It wouldn't be a complete family without you," Ron said. He glanced down onto the ground. "And Clark, too."

They slowly traversed the black asphalt hill and stepped onto the oval together. Lois wore flat shoes and a tea-length dress—necessities when the wedding was to be held in the middle of a footy ground.

Ahead, an aisle lined with brown bows and bunches of gold clivia beckoned her forward through the friendly, loving faces of their guests.

And, beyond them was Clark. Her man. Her husband. Her partner. Her lover. Her best friend.

He looked sensational—as she'd known he would. The jacket accentuated the breadth of his shoulders. His dark hair glistened as it caught the early rays of sunshine.

Next to him stood Seb—her brother. He was looking rakishly debonair, though Lois knew he would be itching to get out of the suit pants and jacket and into some denim shorts and one of his effervescent shirts. She met his smile, and his gaze moved behind her. His expression changed to one of stunned adoration, and Lois giggled. Watching Seb in love was such fun.

But much as she loved them, this wasn't about Seb or Chris.

This was about Clark, and her heart overflowed with joy.

He was looking at her with eyes full of love… smiling that amazing smile and looking totally jubilant. She hadn't realised it until now, but the thing she had missed most

about their first wedding was Clark's smile. Now… here… he didn't have to be Superman. He could be Clark—the man she would love forever.

* * *

Clark watched Lois walk towards him.

He was sure he'd never been happier than he was at this moment. It had everything—the almost tangible love of the people here, the slowly strengthening warmth of the newly risen sun, and the tall majestic grandstand where Lois had first allowed him to glimpse her life—overlooking them like a proud matriarch.

But most of all, this moment had Lois, as did all the best moments in his life.

Lois. He couldn't even begin to express how much he loved her. For so long he had feared there would be no true mate for him on this planet. But all his lonesome yearning had found completion in the woman who now approached him.

He'd found her.

And she looked so radiantly beautiful, his heart cavorted inside his chest.

His gaze drifted lower to take in her outfit. Clark had been curious about what she would wear, but every quest for hints had been met with unwavering assurances that he would find out on the wedding day.

Somewhat to his surprise, she was wearing a—mostly—white dress. It curved across her chest and under her arms, closely fitting down to her waist, where it fluttered out to drop below her knees. The bottom of the dress made him smile. Little brown bows were dotted just above the hemline—probably about ten of them in all—with shiny gold ribbon looped between them.

Clark felt Seb elbow him. "I reckon we've got the two most beautiful women in the world," he whispered—loud enough that at least the first three rows of people could hear him.

Clark heard their ripple of laughter and turned to grin at Seb. "I reckon we have," he said—not much quieter.

Then, Lois was next to him. Clark leant across her to shake Ron's hand. He met the eyes of the older man. "Thank you," Clark said gravely.

Ron nodded and went to sit in the front row between Barb and Martha.

The wedding began.

Clark and Lois had written their own vows. They had wanted something that spoke from their hearts, but something that in no way discredited the validity of the vows they had made three weeks ago in Metropolis. This was a family celebration. That was when their marriage had begun.

The celebrant finished his opening address, and it was Clark's turn to speak.

"Lois," he said. "I was a foreigner in a strange place. I was different and not sure that I belonged. Then, I met you. You made it so easy for me to fit in, but more importantly, you showed me where I belong. You taught me that belonging is not about a place, but a person. I know I belong with you."

Clark stopped. Smiled. Allowed those last few words to echo across Glenferrie Oval.

"From the first, I appreciated your friendliness and welcome, but before we had travelled from Tullamarine Airport to the city, I knew that I wanted so much more with you. I was in love—with a natural, beautiful, honest, down-to-earth footy reporter, who didn't even know how close she came to breaking my heart when she informed me that her heart belonged to Hawthorn."

Lois smiled, and her grip on his hand tightened.

"I know that these people, this place, and this football club will always be dear to you, and I am so grateful that you have made room in your heart for me. My greatest joy is that you agreed to marry me, and I want to spend my life loving you, protecting you, and doing everything I can to ensure that you are always happy.

"I promise you my faithfulness. I promise that I will stand with you in good times and bad. I promise that as long as my heart beats, it will beat for you. I love you, Lois."

Lois smiled as she expelled a shuddery breath. "I, too, have had times of being alone," she said. "But out of that lonesomeness came so many wonderful blessings—friends, a career, and a footy club family that starts with Ron and Barb and Seb and finishes with every single person who loves Hawthorn. It's true that my blood runs brown and gold, but a greater truth is that my heart yearned for someone else. Someone who would love me… understand me… encourage me… and inspire me. Someone I could trust totally and love extravagantly.

"I love you, big guy. I love your steadfastness, I love your unshakable commitment to do what you know is right, I love your honesty, I love your generosity of spirit. I promise you that I will always be faithful to you in word and deed. I will support you and encourage you, and regardless of what the future brings, my heart will always belong to you."

* * *

Barb Wilton looked at the four figures standing in front of her. She had given birth to only one of them, but they were all her children.

And she was so proud of them.

More than proud. She was thrilled that Seb and Clark seemed almost like brothers, despite the short time they'd known each other. There was a bond between them—an unspoken understanding. Barb figured it centred on Lois. Both men loved her—though in vastly different ways—and that love had resulted in mutual respect and affection.

Clark's maturity and cautious nature perfectly balanced Seb's 'she'll be right, mate' enthusiasm.

She knew Lois and Clark would spend time in Metropolis, but she was confident the four-strong alliance would survive the separations.

The vows slipped into a more traditional phase.

"With this ring, I thee wed."

Clark was a fine man—a good bloke, as Ron would say. Clark said he would love Lois for the rest of his life, and Barb believed him. Believed not only that he intended to do it, but that he would.

And Lois was everything any woman could hope for in a daughter. Barb sent a quick thought across the miles to Ellen Lane, hoping that she would come to her senses and realise what she had while it could still be salvaged.

The vows ended, and Ron slipped his hand into hers. Barb looked across at him and smiled tremulously. This was their dream, too.

* * *

"You may now kiss the bride."

Clark bent low and kissed his beautiful Lois.

His wife. Officially. Legally. Publicly.

Forever.

"I love you, Lois," he whispered as their mouths drew apart.

She smiled. "I love you, Clark."

* * *

The bride and groom walked slowly down the aisle, hugging the well-wishers.

Perry noticed that several people had begun bringing platters from the building across the road and were filling the trestles behind the stage. They were all dressed in smart black pants, white cotton shirts, and that brown and yellow… ah, *gold* sports jersey that seemed so popular in these parts.

They laid out copious amounts of food—the most popular item being cold chicken. They circulated among the guests, filling glasses with champagne.

Banjo—one of Lois's colleagues from the paper—explained that 'chicken and champagne breakfasts' were very popular during the Spring Racing Carnival, which would begin soon after the final throes of the footy season had died away.

It was a wedding in the middle of a football ground, with a colour scheme of brown and gold, held early on a crisp spring morning in the middle of Melbourne, Australia, where the guests ate chicken for breakfast, swilled down with champagne.

When Clark Kent had first stepped into Perry's office two years ago, the editor could not have envisioned this would be how the young reporter would marry.

But somehow, it seemed exactly right.

* * *

"Am I allowed to call you Mrs Kent now?" Clark asked.

It was late afternoon, and the bride and groom were standing on the balcony of their hotel room overlooking the city of Melbourne. Periodically, a distant roar resonated from the MCG where the Grand Final was being played.

They hadn't watched it.

The football reporters had begun leaving the wedding soon after ten o'clock, but the remainder of the guests had moved into the Social Club where Bantam had baked up a storm in honour of the wedding. He'd made hundreds of bite-sized chocolates, all decorated with the gold letters —'L' and 'C'—entwined. He'd made hedgehog with gold frosting, and golden cupcakes, and vanilla slices topped with chocolate.

The crowning glory had been the wedding cake—three tiers of brown and gold splendour.

Lois and Clark had cut the cake—and then danced across the floor of the Social Club to the Hawthorn theme song. They played the song again, and all of the Hawks—led by the Wiltons and Chris—had gathered around the bride and groom and sung with gusto.

Then, while the rest of the city watched the 1996 Grand Final, Lois and Clark had begun their real honeymoon in a room—with no cameras—high above the city of Melbourne.

Lois grinned at his question. "Here's the deal, big guy," she said. "You can call me Mrs Kent only under certain conditions."

"Being?"

"You must be naked."

Clark chuckled as he put his arms over his wife's shoulders and kissed behind her ear. "Are you sad to be leaving Melbourne for three months?"

Lois leant back into his chest. "No," she said. "I'll probably miss it, but I'll be with you, and that's all I need."

"Three months to be together, just like any other couple," Clark said with a sigh of deep contentment. "And when you come back, you'll have a home—with a tower."

They both laughed. "Seb was so excited about that tower," Lois said. "I assume you'll visit—regularly."

"Only if the Lady of the Manor permits entry to stray Americans."

Lois laughed again. "You'll be summoned."

"Summoned, huh? That sounds like fun."

She turned to him and smiled. "There are rules, you know? That a husband who can fly must regularly use his ability to visit his wife."

Clark decided they had spent enough time on the balcony. It was time to return to the bed. He nuzzled into Lois's neck, his mind already jumping ahead. He applied sufficient restraint to his thoughts to try to recall their conversation. "Rules?" he murmured from where his lips were exploring the soft skin along her shoulder. "We have rules?"

"Sure," she said. A low groan escaped from her mouth, and Clark felt the reverberations of it sizzle across his nerve endings. "Aussie Rules."

Epilogue

September 27, 2008—Grand Final Day

Clark Kent climbed the last few steps and checked the tickets in his hand.

"Are these our seats, Dad?"

"This is us."

His nine-year-old daughter—decked from head to foot in brown and gold, including her number 15 jumper and her scarf that proudly proclaimed she was in her tenth year of membership—looked back at him. "Eight seats?"

"Yep."

The girl walked along the empty row, plonked herself down, and planted her Hawk flag between two seats. "I bags sitting next to Seb," she said.

Clark settled his four-year old son onto a seat and sat next to him. The boy looked up with eyes that were replicas of his mother's. "Do you think we'll win, Dad?" he asked anxiously.

"I hope so," Clark answered fervently.

"We will," his daughter said, her voice devoid of all doubt. "We are Hawthorn."

"Geelong only lost two games all year," her brother said doubtfully. "And they slaughtered Port Adelaide in last year's Grand Final."

"We have Hodgey," his daughter declared.

Clark hid his grin. Sometimes, he wondered if Victoria thought Luke Hodge had more powers than Superman. "We know the Hawks will do their best, Austin," Clark said as he rested his hand on the boy's small shoulder. "We'll just have to hope that will be enough."

Austin smiled at him, and Clark hugged him closer.

"Dad?"

"Yes, Victoria?"

"Are Hodgey's ribs OK?"

Uncertainty had crept into his daughter's tone. "He says they're OK," Clark said.

She considered his statement for a long moment, and he knew what was coming next. "Do you know for sure?" she asked. "He was crunched bad last week."

"Victoria," Clark said with just a hint of admonition, "Hodgey says he's OK. Do you think Clarko would've picked him to play if they had any doubts about his fitness?"

Victoria accepted his reply with a tiny smile. Clark knew his secret was absolutely safe with her, but she did enjoy pushing the boundaries sometimes. He figured that shouldn't surprise him—after all, Victoria Kent was Lois Lane's daughter.

His son tapped on his arm, and Clark smiled down at him. "Do you think Mom will cry if we lose?" Austin asked.

"Maybe," Clark admitted. "But if she does, her two best men will give her a hug, and that will make her feel a whole lot better."

Austin smiled, dispelling his concern. Clark couldn't always see a lot of himself in his son but one trait they shared was how much they hated Lois being upset about anything.

"We're not gonna lose," Victoria said. She grinned knowingly at her dad. "But I still reckon Mum'll cry."

"It won't be the first time she's cried over Hawthorn," Clark said.

Victoria's jaunty confidence waned a little. "Imagine if we win," she said in a voice loaded with yearning. "Can you imagine how awesome that's gonna be?"

"The last time Hawthorn were in a Grand Final, I hadn't even met your mum," Clark said.

"Did you go to that game?" Austin asked.

Clark chuckled. "No, I didn't," he said. "I didn't barrack for Hawthorn then."

"He didn't even know Hawthorn existed," Victoria said. She held her hand towards him. "Can I read the *Record*, please?"

Clark handed her the Grand Final edition of the *Record*, and Austin slid across one seat to sit next to his sister and look over her shoulder. Clark glanced down at the number 23 on the back of his son's Hawk jumper, and his memories wound back to the day in Geelong when he and Lois had strolled around the boardwalk at Eastern Beach—the day she had told him about another Grand Final and another Hawk wearing the number 23 jumper. Clark had wanted so much to hold her hand. Twelve years and two children later, and he still loved holding her hand.

The years had passed so quickly. Tomorrow was their twelfth wedding anniversary—officially. They'd celebrated their real anniversary three weeks ago with a family stopover in Hawaii on their way to Australia for the finals. How many times had they flown over the Pacific in those years?

At least fifty, Clark realised. And that didn't include the thousands of times he had secretly flown to Melbourne to see Lois. Or the times he'd been in Melbourne and flown back to Metropolis to be Superman. Or when—once he and Lois had moved permanently to Metropolis—he'd brought Lois to visit Seb and Chris in what they had dubbed 'The Tower House of Toorak'.

The first two years of their marriage had brought challenges. The efforts to rebuild Hawthorn had been long and arduous. Pressing financial needs had meant that on-field results had suffered, and they'd finished second bottom on the ladder in 1997, bettered that by only two places in 1998, climbed to 9th in 1999, and finally tasted finals again in 2000. However, success had been both limited and short-lived, and it had petered out to more disappointing years.

Finally, at the end of 2004, the winds of change had swept through Hawthorn. Alastair Clarkson, 'Clarko'—a man who had played for Melbourne on the fateful night of the merger match—had been appointed to the senior coaching position, and he had orchestrated a youth-oriented rebuilding program to develop a team that could be competitive in finals.

But that had all been in the future during the early years of their marriage. Lois had lived in Metropolis for three months each year, working for the Planet—initially as a junior reporter. The 'junior' part of her status had dropped away when, during her stay in 1997, the team of Lane and Kent had finally gotten incontrovertible proof that Lex Luthor was the Boss and the one who had ordered the placement of the bomb that had changed Mayson Drake's life forever.

Perry White had begged Lois to stay and be Clark's permanent partner in work as well as in life, but her mission at home wasn't yet done, and after Christmas, she had returned to Melbourne.

Their lives had fallen into a pattern that—although not ideal—was workable. Thanks to his superpowers and the privacy of Seb's Toorak house, Clark had managed to see Lois almost every day of their marriage.

Then, at the end of the 1998 season, Seb had returned to Melbourne and married Chris, they had moved into the Tower House, and Lois had relocated to Metropolis. Clark still brought her home regularly—officially, they spent about three months in Australia each year.

Clark smiled as he recalled the night they had told Chris the secret. It had been two days before her wedding, and Lois and Clark had decided it would be unfair to expect Seb to keep something like that from his wife.

The four of them—Clark was in Melbourne for the wedding—had been eating together in the dining room of the Tower House.

"Chris," Lois had said, "there is something we need to tell you."

The soon-to-be-bride grinned happily. "Seb eats fairy bread?" she guessed.

"He does," Lois said. "But that's not what we need to tell you."

"Seb's already married?" Chris said, trying to look as if she really thought that was a possibility.

"No," Lois said. "It's about Clark."

"Oh, I know *he's* already married," Chris said lightly.

Lois had grinned. "No. Something else."

"OK."

"He's Superman."

Chris had spooned a chunk of chocolate-ripple ice cream into her mouth as if Lois's disclosure contained nothing of great note.

"Did you hear me?" Lois asked.

Chris swallowed and nodded. "Sure, I heard you."

"Don't you believe me?"

"Of course I believe you."

Lois had looked shellshocked. "That's it?" she exclaimed. "That's all you're going to say?"

Chris had burst out laughing. It had taken a considerable time for her to regain enough composure to speak. "What would you like me to say?" she'd finally spluttered.

Lois's eyes had narrowed. "You knew, didn't you?"

"No," Chris said. "But I've seen how Clark begins to look fraught if he's away from you for half an hour. There is no way he'd go back to Metropolis and leave you here if it really meant he wasn't going to see you for months on end."

"So, you *did* know?" Lois said.

"At first, I figured that Clark must know Superman," Chris said. "They both come from Metropolis, so it seemed plausible. I assumed that, to stop Clark getting unbearably morose, Superman brought him to Melbourne regularly to see his wife." Chris put down her spoon, wiped her mouth with the napkin, and grinned at Lois. "Of course, Superman is married, so I guess that means you must be Ultra Woman."

Lois had nodded, and both women had laughed riotously.

Lois still made an occasional appearance in the spandex suit, although she'd taken long breaks from being Ultra Woman during her pregnancies. When people enquired—and they did frequently—Clark said that he and Ultra Woman would welcome a child into their lives and remained deliberately vague. They both felt it was important that no one suspected Victoria and Austin had any link with Superman and Ultra Woman.

A squeal of delight from his daughter shattered the course of Clark's memories. She pushed past him to rush towards Seb and Chris as they slowly climbed the stairs.

Seb unfurled his arm from around his wife and hugged Victoria. "Hi there, Little Miss America," he said with a wink towards Clark.

"I am not Little Miss America," Victoria said firmly.

"You sound like Little Miss America," Seb persisted with a teasing grin.

"No, I don't," Victoria asserted. She was right. During their frequent visits to Australia, Victoria spoke like a born-and-bred Aussie. She had the accent, she used the slang, and she called Lois 'Mum'. As soon as they arrived in the States, she reverted to the all-American kid. Clark had noticed that Lois did it, too—although not as noticeably, and probably not as consciously, as their daughter did.

Seb placed his wriggling three-year-old son on the ground, shook hands with Clark, and ruffled Austin's hair.

"How are you feeling, Chris?" Clark asked.

Her hands rested on the very large abdomen that bulged under the Hawthorn jumper she wore. "I'm just hoping that I don't go into labour during the game," she said.

Seb grinned. "Imagine that! Imagine being born on the day Hawthorn win their tenth flag. That would be soooo cool."

Chris swatted his chest. "If I have to go to hospital during the game, you're coming, too," she said.

Seb kissed her cheek. "And I wouldn't miss it for the world. I was there at Max's birth, and I have no intention of missing the arrival of the second Master Wilton."

"It's a boy?" Clark asked.

Both Seb and Chris grinned. "Yep," he said. "It's a boy. The only bone of contention is his name. Chris wants to call him 'Cyril'."

Clark grinned. "Because of Rioli?"

"Exactly," Chris said. "Cyril's going to play a blinder today."

Seb tried to look dismayed. "Sometimes, I think she loves Cyril Rioli more than she loves me."

Chris caressed his cheek. "No, I don't," she said. "And anyway, he's about half my age."

"What about Crawf?" Clark asked. "You could call your son 'Shane'."

Chris turned around to show Shane Crawford's number 9 on her jumper. "I will always love Crawf," she said. "He's been at Hawthorn for seventeen years and never played in a Grand Final. If we can get him a premiership today…"

Her voice trailed off.

"She can't even think about Crawf winning a flag," Seb said, smiling down at Chris. "If she does, she gets all emotional."

Chris wiped her eyes. "It's the pregnancy hormones."

Seb put his arm around her shoulders and kissed her tenderly. "If Rioli wins the Norm Smith Medal, you can call our son 'Cyril'. Deal?"

"Deal," Chris said, smiling again.

There were dual shrieks from Austin and Max, and they both tore down the steps to where Barb Wilton was making her way towards them. She hugged the two little boys and then greeted everyone else.

"How's Dad?" Seb asked.

"They're all quietly confident," Barb said. "He messaged me and said it feels just like the dressing rooms before the finals in the eighties—they're determined that nothing will come between them and the flag."

There was silence for a moment.

"Do you think we can do it?" Chris asked.

There was another silence.

"Geelong have been the best team all year," Barb said.

"But it's about who's the best team on the day," Seb said.

"We'll do it," Victoria said with the confidence of youth. "We have Hodgey and Mitch and Cyril and Buddy. This is our year." She smiled at Chris. "We have to do it for Crawf."

Seb turned to Clark. "Where's Lois?"

"She went down to the Cheer Squad," Clark replied. "She should be here soon."

* * *

Lois Lane watched as about thirty members of the Cheer Squad—those who were to raise the banner for the team to run through—filed onto the ground. They looked magnificent in their brown-and-gold top hats and flowing capes.

Lois couldn't help feeling nostalgic as she watched them walk around the boundary. It had been such a gloriously happy time in her life—cheering on Hawthorn every week, getting drenched when it rained, going onto the ground to do the banner, singing the song after a victory…

She scanned the ground. The mighty MCG was looking spectacular. It was filling quickly and close to capacity already. There were large portions of the crowd wearing the blue and white of Geelong, but it was the abundance of brown and gold that brought tears to Lois's eyes. For a club that had had only twelve thousand members back in 1996, this was a statement of strength and unity.

It was time to get back to her family.

Her other family.

Her wonderful husband and their two beautiful children. Maybe the Wiltons had arrived by now, too.

A few minutes later, she joined them all and took her seat between Clark and Austin. Her son leant against her and smiled. He had Clark's smile, and as Lois realised, that guaranteed him a *lot* of female attention in future years.

Lois reached across her son to pat her daughter's arm. "You OK, Vic?" she asked.

Victoria smiled, but it was strained. Lois knew exactly how she felt. They both wanted this so much. Last night, when Lois had gone to say goodnight to her daughter, they had talked about how much this meant. Victoria had asked a couple of questions, and before Lois knew it, she had launched into the story of Operation Payback and the fight against the merger in 1996.

When she had finished describing the night of the vote, Victoria's face was aghast. "I knew there was something about a merger," she said. "But I never knew it came *that* close."

"It came perilously close," Lois said grimly.

"I'm so glad we won," Victoria said. "I can't imagine not having Hawthorn."

"Neither can I," Lois said. "And one of the best parts is sharing it with you."

They had hugged, and Lois had left the room—overwhelmed with thankfulness that her children could share her love for the Hawks.

The beep of her mobile phone dragged her back to the present, and Lois pulled it from her bag.

'Good luck to the Hawks today, love Dan and May.'

"Who's it from?" Clark asked.

"Dan Scardino."

Clark's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "When was the last time you heard from him?"

Lois thought back. "I think he sent a text when Victoria was born."

"What did he say?"

"Just 'good luck' for today." Lois read it again. "He signed it, 'Dan and May'."

Clark grinned. "Sounds like he found himself a woman."

Lois texted a quick word of thanks and replaced her mobile in her bag. She slipped her hand into Clark's as she watched the players complete their warmup.

"You OK, honey?" he asked.

"I'm nervous," she said. "I want this so much. It's been seventeen years. I want a flag we can remember together."

Clark kissed the top of her head.

"Thank you," Lois whispered.

"For what?"

"For understanding. For never trying to loosen the ties I have with Melbourne."

"I wouldn't do that," Clark said. "After all these years, I understand."

"You were always understanding," Lois said. "Even when you didn't understand."

They laughed together, and Clark leant forward to drop a kiss on her mouth.

"Any regrets?" he asked. "Do you ever wonder what your life would be like now if you'd married a regular Aussie bloke and stayed permanently in Melbourne?"

"Not one regret," Lois said. "I have everything. You. The kids. A great job and a lovely home in Metropolis. Hawthorn and my family in Melbourne. I really do have everything."

"I'm glad you feel like that," Clark said. "Because I have everything, too. And it's all because of you."

His eyes dipped to her mouth, and he slowly moved forward to take possession of it.

"Mum! Dad!" Victoria called. "Stop it! That's gross."

The laughter erupted, and Clark winked a promise to Lois.

* * *

It was a great game.

An evenly poised first quarter led to a second quarter where Geelong totally dominated the play, but their inaccurate kicking for goal kept Hawthorn in the game. A seventy-metre goal from Clinton Young in the shadows of half-time gave Hawthorn a narrow lead of three points.

There was half-time entertainment, but it passed in a blur for Lois. In her heart, she had to admit that Geelong looked the better team. If it hadn't been for their wayward kicking at goal, they would be well ahead.

But Hawthorn had shown typical Hawk determination. One half to go. Two quarters. An hour of football.

She looked along the row. Barb, Chris, Seb, Victoria, Austin—their faces reflected her inner fears and hopes. Max's voice piped above the drone of crowd noise. Lois felt Clark's arm slide across her shoulders. "The Hawks will be OK," he said quietly.

She managed a tight smile and willed half-time to pass quickly.

A few minutes later, two mid-teenage girls—similar enough in looks that they had to be sisters—tentatively approached Clark. Lois turned to them and realised they weren't looking at her husband, but at her.

They smiled timidly. "Ah… you're Lois Lane, aren't you?"

Lois smiled. "Yes, I'm Lois."

"You got the story about Brownlow leak back in '96?" one of them said. "The one where the umpires' rooms had been bugged?"

Lois smiled, surprised that they had recognised her and shocked that they recalled the story. "Do you remember it?" she said. "Surely, you must have been too young."

"We were three," they said together.

"I'm Megan," one continued.

"And I'm Meredith," the other said.

"Hi, Megan and Meredith." Lois laughed. "You were reading my stories when you were three?"

"No," one of them said. "But our dad is the detective who worked with you on that case."

Lois delved into her memories of her first big story—and the time she had spent in the police station waiting for the result of the sweep for bugs. "I remember… the Lions supporter… ah… Ben! That's right, Ben."

The girls grinned. "You sent us a Hawk jumper each, and we started going to all of the Hawks games with Mum and Dad."

"You're still following the Hawks?" Lois said. "That's great."

"Thanks to you," Megan said.

Lois looked behind them. "Is your dad here?"

"Nah. He and Mum are overseas. They are going to be spewing that they missed the Grand Final."

"How did you recognise me?" Lois asked. "I haven't worked in Melbourne for a few years."

"Dad cut out the paper clipping. It was one of our favourite bedtime stories—how we all started barracking for the mighty Hawks."

Lois grinned. "Thanks for coming over and introducing yourselves."

"Thanks for steering our dad in the right direction," Megan said. "I have loved Changa for years. I can't imagine barracking for any other team."

"And I love Cyril," Meredith added.

"Go, Hawks," Megan said.

With a wave that included the whole group, the two girls walked away—one wearing 33 on her jumper and the other wearing 10.

Clark smiled at Lois. "Two happy converts," he said. "Did you really send them jumpers?"

"Yep. I met their dad just before the vote meeting, and he said that if Hawthorn survived, his family would become members."

"Looks like he kept his word," Clark said.

Now the diversion had passed, tension twisted through Lois's stomach again. "Let's hope today is the day they are rewarded for their loyalty," she said.

The third quarter was more of the same. Hard, tough, tight football as two great teams fought for ascendency.

Then—suddenly, unexpectedly—it broke wide open. Five goals in three minutes.

All to Hawthorn.

Three euphoric minutes where the Hawks rose above the contest to dominate—and unlike Geelong, they made it count.

Twenty-nine points ahead.

Geelong retaliated with two quick goals, reducing Hawthorn's lead to seventeen points. The three-quarter time siren sounded, and Lois let out a long shudder-spiked breath.

A quarter to go.

One quarter.

Half an hour.

Hold on, she begged silently.

Please hold on.

Please don't let them come back.

Seventeen points.

Please let it be enough.

Clark covered Lois's hand. "See the score?" he asked.

"Ah, yeah," she replied. "We're seventeen points up."

"Eighty-nine," Clark said. "Our score is eighty-nine—the year we beat Geelong by six points."

Lois felt her tension loosen enough to allow a smile. "Let's hope, hey?"

"We'll be fine," Clark said. "The Hawks don't lose grand finals from this position."

"I hope you're right."

"So do I," Victoria said, her voice tight with tension.

Lois reached across Austin and squeezed her daughter's hand. "It'll be OK, Vic," she said. "Do you really think Hodgey and Mitch will let this slip?"

Victoria smiled. "Not Hodgey," she said. She lifted her Hawk number 15 jumper from her bag—the day had gotten too warm for jumpers—and pulled it over her head. "I'm going to be wearing Hodgey's jumper when he wins his first flag."

Five minutes later, the siren sounded, and the final quarter began.

The first few minutes were tight. Then Buddy goaled from outside fifty metres. A few minutes later, Mitch booted a left foot goal.

And from then on, it was a blur.

With three minutes to go, the Cheer Squad began singing the Hawthorn theme song. Lois looked across to Barb and saw the tears running down her face. Chris was crying. Seb was trying not to. Victoria was grinning, her hands wrapped around her flag, her body perched on the edge of the seat in anticipation of the final siren.

"Do you think we're gonna win, Mom?" Austin asked.

"I think we are," Lois said, hardly daring to believe. "I think we are."

Time slowed. Lois urged it forward, craving the finality of victory, but also wanting to revel in these final few minutes when everyone knew.

After seventeen years—hard years when extinction had come knocking—the flag again belonged to the brown and gold.

The siren sounded, and Lois leapt from her seat in pumping, gleeful celebration. She hugged Clark. She hugged Austin. She hugged Victoria. She hugged the Wiltons one by one. She even hugged the strangers who'd sat behind them throughout the game.

But they weren't really strangers. They were part of the Hawthorn family.

And the Hawthorn family was celebrating.

Ten electric minutes later, the official presentation began with the announcement of who had won the Norm Smith Medal—for the player judged best on ground.

"It's going to be Cyril," Chris said excitedly. "There was the goal when he crumbed it off Buddy. The tackle on the wing when he beat three Geelong players." She patted her bulge. "G'day, little Cyril."

The announcer took the microphone. "The winner of the Norm Smith Medal is—from Hawthorn—Luke Hodge."

"Hoooood-
ddddddgggggggggeeeeeeeeeeyyyyyyyyyyyyy!!!!" Victo-

ria screamed. She turned to Lois, her face alight with exhilaration. “Hodgey won the Norm Smith.”

Lois kissed the cheek of her excited girl. “He deserves it; he played a superb game.”

Seb was grinning at Chris. “Sorry,” he said. “No ‘Cyril’.”

“What about ‘Luke’?” she suggested.

Seb grinned even wider. “Perfect,” he said. “Luke Wilton—born in a Hawthorn premiership year and named after a legend.”

The presentations continued as twenty-two children—dressed in full Hawthorn gear—came onto the stage one by one and placed a premiership medal around the neck of each Hawk player.

Last was Sam Mitchell.

After receiving his medal, he waited while Clarko was presented with his medal, and then they were handed the 2008 premiership cup. They lifted it high—to the ecstatic roar of the Hawthorn faithful.

A part of Lois’s brain was recording this for future recall while, simultaneously, another part was replaying the memories of the past. Other Grand Final victories. Crimmo. Champion players. And the night of the merger meeting when she had feared that the fabric of Hawthorn had been too badly torn to ever recover.

It hadn’t.

And now, twelve long years later, they were reaping the rewards of the battle fought and won that night.

Their membership was over forty thousand. It had grown steadily—even in the years when there had been little on-field success.

They had lodged a profit every single year since 1997 and were debt free.

And now, they had the champion team.

The Hawthorn theme song reverberated around the MCG.

And the Hawthorn Family sang in jubilant celebration together.

* * *

Early the next morning, the stream of brown and gold began to seep into Glenferrie Oval. The Hawks no longer trained here, having been forced to seek larger and more modern facilities, but the heart of Hawthorn was here, and it was here that they gathered on the warm Sunday morning.

At the far end of the ground, the Grand Final was being replayed on a large screen. Groups of people were sitting on the grass, watching. Behind them, numerous kids kicked their footballs in a chaotic clutter of flying balls.

The air sizzled with victory. Anticipation, too. The players were to arrive soon—bringing the premiership cup with them.

Lois—one hand in Clark’s and one in Austin’s, with Victoria in front of her—walked through the gates and down the little slope.

“Can I go and kick my footy?” Austin asked, looking up at his dad.

“Sure, son,” Clark said. “Stay close to the fence. We wouldn’t want to lose you in all those people.”

Austin nodded and took his football to the oval.

“I’ll go and kick it with him,” Victoria said.

“Thanks, Vic,” Lois said.

“I’m doing it for me, not you,” she replied with a grin.

“Oh?” Clark asked.

“It’s your anniversary,” Victoria said. “And we’re at the place where you got married. I reckon it’s a fair bet that you’re about to start kissing.”

Clark grinned. “Good idea, Victoria.”

His daughter wrinkled her nose. “Do you *really* still enjoy kissing?” she asked. “After all these years?”

“I sure do,” Clark said. “Your mum is a supreme kisser.”

“I’m out of here,” Victoria said as she hurried away.

Clark put his hand on Lois’s back and guided her to the corner where the fence met the grandstand. She backed into the brick wall, and he leant against her. “Twelve years,” he said quietly. “And you are even more beautiful than the day you were my bride.”

“Aww, Clark,” Lois said. She put her arms around his neck and reached up to kiss him. Before their lips met, her mobile phone sounded from her bag. She groaned but snatched the phone and checked the caller’s ID. “It’s Seb,” she said. “Hi, Seb.”

“G’day Auntie Lois,” came Seb’s elated voice. “Luke Wilton was born twenty minutes ago. A strong, healthy young man who will one day play centre half forward for the mighty Hawks.”

“Congratulations, Sebby Boy,” Lois said. “That is fantastic news. How’s Chris?”

“As beautiful as ever.”

“Is she up for visitors this afternoon?”

“You bet,” Seb said. “See you then.”

Lois slipped her phone into her bag and returned her full attention to her husband.

“The baby arrived?” he guessed.

“Yep. Twenty minutes ago. We can go and visit them this afternoon.”

“That’s great,” Clark said. “But for now, all I want is to kiss my wife.”

“Is it true what you told Vic?” Lois asked. “Do you still enjoy kissing me after all these years?”

“I enjoy it more than ever,” Clark said. “And I love you more every day.”

“I love you.” Lois tightened her arms around Clark’s neck and kissed him… slowly, deeply, thoroughly.

And in the background, the Hawthorn song echoed across Glenferrie Oval.

Again.

The End.