

Claimed in the Congo: An Alt-Lois and Clark Adventure

By Mozartmaid [mozartmaid@gmail.com]

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Summary: H.G. Wells offers to take Alt-Clark back to find Alt-Lois, who had been lost in the Congo on a story. Their kismet meeting is the start of something wonderful, but they have a few things to learn along the way.

Author's Note: I'd like to thank Deja Vu for being my GE and doing a wonderful job editing this story.

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~CLARK~

His soul mate was out there somewhere, he knew it. Lost, alone, searching for her heart like he was searching for his. He knew it was absolute, real, and true after meeting the other Lois. He had felt his breath catch, his heart hammer, that spark of almost recognition... but then he had known it was a false read. She was the other Clark's Lois. The other Clark, who had a great family, who seemed to be the luckiest guy in the world... while he, who was just as generous, just as loving, and just as *super*, was alone, haunted, and without a family. It just wasn't fair. And he wasn't a petty man. But why had fate granted him a glance through to the other side of the mirror, into a world filled with love and wonderful people, eventually leaving him alone on this side of the looking glass? He *was* Clark Kent! He looked like him, he talked like him--he was even Superman, too. Yet he hadn't had the love of a family, he had had no Lois Lane to fall in love with.... It was cruel and unjust. Yet he didn't want to feel jealous of the other Clark. He didn't want to hate him. If he were just like the other Clark Kent, he wouldn't feel any of those things. They weren't supposed to be in his nature. [[Then why do they seem a part of mine? Where did I take a wrong turn? Why was Tempus able to ruin my life?]]

So, with these thoughts swirling in his mind, he couldn't believe his luck when H.G. Wells had turned to him and suggested they go search for his Lois. He could have kissed the little old man! Yes! If he could go back to the Congo, search it far and wide, then maybe his world would be as perfect as the one he had glimpsed ever so briefly, so tantalizingly out of reach...

~LOIS~

5 years ago... deep in the Congo...

It had been almost two months since she left Metropolis, the Planet, and civilized society. Almost two months since she had had a Double Chocolate Fudge bar. Almost two months since she had had ice cream or a proper shower or a decent cup of coffee. And what had she to show for it? She'd been on a wild goose chase through the jungle to follow a guy that she thought was the leader of a drug cartel, a guy they called Papa Ludu. A man who she thought was connected to a mafia group based in Metropolis. A thug who she thought was getting closer to realizing he was being tracked and who was getting her closer and closer to danger. But also someone who was getting her closer to a story that she thought could win her a Pulitzer.

Lois reluctantly sent off her latest notes to the Planet on the story from an outpost in the middle of nowhere. She had paid twenty

dollars, American, which was ludicrously expensive considering she didn't even know when or if the package would make it back to Metropolis. She sighed. [[Not like there's that much information in there to begin with.]]

It was all speculation. Well, mostly. The best she had was a photo she had taken of his weapons arsenal, which was almost run of the mill out here in land of the lawless. It had been nearly impossible to get the film developed, but with a few bribes, she had found a tiny hut with a guy who did it using outdated methods. Lois had prayed the negatives wouldn't be ruined. She had taken a camera Jimmy had given her last Christmas when she had confessed that she didn't own one. It was a great Nokia, with lots of lenses attached to it, and it used real film. Not that Lois knew what to do with it besides point and shoot. Jimmy had offered to give her some lessons, but she had never found the time. And the developing process was a complete mystery to her. She only knew it was a delicate operation. But thankfully, her prints had returned perfect, negatives included.

She had sent the prints along with her sketchy notes to Perry. She had the outline of a story, but she didn't have any names to tie this Papa Ludu character to in Metropolis yet. It was all still speculation....

When she had gotten the shot of the weapons arsenal, she had caught a glimpse of her villain as well. He was a heavyset tan guy, with dark hair and even darker eyes. His face was drawn taught, his mouth in a constant scowl. He carried a machine gun constantly across his back, and she suspected he packed other weapons on him as well. He had given her the creeps, and she had high-tailed it out of there quicker than an instant.

Once she had gained some ground, she had felt like a coward, though she'd never admit it to anybody. What kind of reporter was she if she couldn't get close to the main attraction? But instinctively she knew this guy was way tougher than most of the refined criminals she dealt with in Metropolis on a regular basis. This guy, she feared, wouldn't play nice.

She got further proof of that two days later. Again she had managed to sneak into the arsenal. This time, he was interrogating a guy in a suit.

"Why did Gainsley send you here? To spy on me?! I told him to send me *money*, and he sends a sniveling twerp like you!"

Lois wrote the name quickly on her pad, her heart pounding hard. [[A name! I've got a name!]]

"The--the money's coming, Mr. Ludu. I swear. One more week, and he'll have it." The guy swallowed, terrified. "He just sent me to--to confirm you had the next shipment lined up."

Papa Ludu shoved his gun in the man's face. "I don't take kindly to spies!"

"I'm not a spy, honest. He just sent me to--to check on things."

Lois felt for the guy, even if he was a criminal.

"I'll just bet he did," said Ludu before he pulled the trigger. The man slumped over, and Lois was thankful she couldn't see the full impact of that bullet.

She ran out of there and found Kawa, her guide. When she told him the events of what she saw, he shook his head.

"Papa Ludu powerful man, Miss Lane. You be careful. Be very careful."

That night, Lois couldn't sleep. This assignment was terrifying, much more terrifying than anything she had covered in Metropolis. At least there she could hide in her apartment, lock her half dozen locks, and dive into her comfort foods. Here, she was exposed and, as she would admit only to herself, scared.

She knew she had to get closer to the story, maybe even try to talk to this Papa Ludu character, and the thought made her blood run cold. Yet she was the best reporter out there--Perry trusted her to get the story every time. No matter the cost. [[Even if it costs my life?]] she asked herself. In college, they had given her the name Mad Dog Lane for never letting a story go. But just this once, she wished everyone didn't hold her in such high esteem. Just this once, she wished she

could run home scared and all would be forgiven.

It took her forever to get to sleep that night. She kept hearing that gunshot, seeing that man die, and watching the remorseless look on Papa Ludu's face as he did it. He wouldn't play fair if she got close to him.

Eventually, pure exhaustion pulled her to sleep...

She woke up in a cold sweat, gasping for air. Her soul felt like it had been ripped out of her, her heart screaming for a name she couldn't remember, couldn't know. She was surprised to find tears on her cheeks. Where were these intense emotions coming from? Sure, the jungle was dense and scary and way more intense than what she had bargained for, but what was that dream for?

She closed her eyes, trying to remember anything specific about the dream. If she could remember it, maybe she could analyze it and try to sort out what it meant...

[[I remember facing Papa Ludu, his gun in my face.... He was pushing me towards the edge of something, and then I was... falling... and then, flying? No, someone is holding me... a man? Did someone catch me? He had the kindest face, the sweetest eyes... but then *poof*, he was gone! I was falling again... and then I woke up.]]

She shook her head. It made no sense whatsoever.

"I think I've just spent too much time out here," she whispered to the dark tent.

She couldn't quite fall back asleep, though. It was hot and uncomfortable in the tent. She knew it would be cooler outside, before the light of the sun warmed the canopy of trees above to a humid sauna by midday....

Lois got out of the tent. She judged it to be around four in the morning. The sun was casting a purplish glow on the forest, just barely starting to hint at sunrise. She could see outlines of what was around her: the tent of her guide, Kawa, and the nearby small stream where they had set up camp. Kawa had been very helpful so far in keeping her safe. There was that day, about a week ago, he had saved her life from a horrible snake that had snuck into her tent. She had been about to lay down when her flashlight caught a shiny black coil on her bed. She had heard a hiss and backed out, screaming for Kawa. He seemed in awe of the King Cobra, which was swinging its head lazily from side to side, though she had only felt pure fear! But he was somewhat of a snake charmer and was able to get it out of the tent with his walking stick before slashing its head off with a knife. She still got the willies from thinking of that. [[If-no, *when* I make it back to Metropolis, I will never take for granted the comforts of a city! Give me a rat any day of the week over a poisonous snake!]]

She made her way to the stream, still trying to shake off the dream.... She could understand the terror and why Papa Ludu was taunting her in it, but who was that other man? That man that looked at her like he could see her soul. That man that could--fly?

The fresh air helped a little bit, but the jungle in the early morning dawn felt very surreal, and she could still feel the vestiges of the dream. Sheer terror one minute, utter bliss and safety the next. What did it mean?

Lois was surprised to see Kawa already awake, collecting some water by the stream.

"Good, you awake. I go make breakfast. Big day, today," said Kawa, heading back to the tents.

"If only that included coffee," Lois murmured ungratefully under her breath as she knelt to drink some fresh water.

"Miss Lane like coffee?" he asked in surprise.

"Yes! Why, do you have some? Some *real* coffee, now. Not that powder stuff they tried giving me when I first got here," she said, partly wanting to throttle the little old man if he'd been holding out on her.

"Yah, I have the coffee," he said with a smile. "Coffee is powerful magic here, Miss Lane. I use only when I must see clearly."

[[That's one way of putting it.]]

"Um, OK. I want to see clearly. Coffee, please?" Lois asked, hoping she said the magic words as she gave him her best smile.

Kawa laughed. "OK, Miss Lane. Lots to do today, yes, coffee good idea today."

Lois was torn between wanting to jump for joy and kill the man. *How* could he have been holding out on *coffee*!?

She was wide awake now, the possibilities of the brew making her salivate. The dream was forgotten. The addict in her was focused on one goal only.

Kawa took forever to make it, but it was well worth it. The first smells of it simmering in the makeshift French press were enough to drive Lois to distraction.

At long last, Kawa had a cup for her. She greedily took it out of his hands. She didn't care that there was no milk or fake sweeteners; the coffee was heaven. Honest to goodness, it was the best coffee she ever had in her life.

"I can't believe you've been holding out on me, Kawa!" she blurted. "I *live* for this stuff. And this is by far the best I've ever had!"

Kawa smiled. "Yes, but it powerful, no? No good to have head full all the time of coffee. My family make cocoa bean for many, many generations. We respect the power of the coffee. You should respect it, too."

She looked down at her mug, a small grin on her face. Power or no power, she would be sure he shared this every morning from now on. Now that she knew he had this--*perfection*, he had better not try to deny it to her. He had no idea who he was messing with.

Lois Lane would have her coffee!

~CLARK~

Before he had left present-day Metropolis with H.G. Wells, Clark had super-read through the archives on the notes Lois had managed to send to the Planet on her unfinished story. The most he had read was that there was a thug named Papa Ludu and that her guide was named Kawa. She had been tracking the thug through the jungle as he went from village to village setting up cocaine rings and looking for mules to get the cocaine to Metropolis. The guy had an arsenal of weapons, according to Lois, who had stumbled upon a shed filled with guns just outside what she suspected was his hometown. That had made Clark freeze in terror. [[Geez, Lois. What kind of danger are you putting yourself in?]]

Clark had an approximate location for where he thought Lois might be, based on the locations she gave in her notes. He suspected this Papa Ludu character would hide just outside the cities, but be close enough to them to do business in them. Once they traveled back in time, he had decided to head there alone as Superman, leaving H.G. Wells, or Herb, to explore the Metropolis of five years ago. Clark had set him up in a hotel for two weeks and prayed it wouldn't take longer than that to rescue Lois and bring her to Metropolis and to her future--with him.

He sighed. This wouldn't be easy, convincing Lois Lane to drop a story and leave with a flying stranger. But he figured if he could rescue her--and this part made him nervous--he'd have to let her get close to the story, really put herself at risk, so she'd be thankful for his help and then would hopefully accept his help and listen to him.

[[I'm banking on destiny, here. You've got to trust me, Lois. You've just got to.]]

~LOIS~

They had to get pictures of the drugs, and it would be even better if they could get pictures of Papa Ludu getting money for the drugs. Lois heard--through Kawa--that white men had been seen in Komono and that they were looking for Papa Ludu. They had been carrying metal briefcases as well, which Lois suspected contained quite a bit of drug money. [[If I could just get pictures of that exchange...]] she thought, her mouth salivating with the possibilities. [[Pulitzer, you are mine!]]

They had trailed the white men to Makaka, the only other largish city in the country. Kawa was nervous about Lois getting too close, but she put on a brave face and tried to convince him she had done this sort of thing before. Admittedly, she hadn't chased after drug lords with dangerous weapons and murder on their minds through the jungle

before, but she had had her fair share of chasing nut jobs around Metropolis. It had helped, though, that, in Metropolis, the police were usually nearby. But here, the law was what you made it.

"Look, we just follow them, take the pictures, and sneak out. That's all we need to do," she told Kawa.

He nodded, his calm wisdom not trusting the brash American he was paid to guide. "I wait here. I will not go into city with you, Miss Lane. That Papa Ludu carries a heavy curse. I stay here."

She sighed. "Fine. Have it your way."

She was determined to get the pictures and then get the hell out of there. It would be enough to finish her story. And besides, that dream had scared her last night, despite the almost rescuer.... She worried her number might be up soon if she wasn't careful.

Lois realized she was only armed with a camera and a knife, and she was a white woman in a strange African city to boot. She stuck out like a sore thumb wherever she went. But she had also decided that while a white man would still be conspicuous, he might be less likely to draw unwanted attention. So she had dressed herself up to look like a guy as best as she could with limited resources. This basically meant a fake mustache and taping down her breasts. She still tried to hide as she made her way around the city, not sure if it was better to appear as a tourist or someone on business.... Neither occupation seemed the norm in this poor town anyway.

She spotted the two men with briefcases. They were heading to a large shed across from what passed for a fruit market.

She followed as close as she dared....

~CLARK~

5 years earlier... in the Congo

Clark arrived in the Congo in record time, and it took him less than two hours to find her.

He spotted her in Makaka, one of only two major cities in Congo.

Besides, what other lithe figure could that be, hiding in the shadows of crates and trying to be inconspicuous? He saw through her "man" disguise instantly, as any man would, he scoffed. What was he getting himself into with this one? She was as daring and foolhardy and wonderful as the other Lois, there was no doubt. He just hoped he could time this rescue just right--in time to rescue both their lives... and from more than just thugs in the jungle.

~KAWA~

He worried about the white woman. She was crazy to chase after Papa Ludu. From his perch on the small hill, Kawa suddenly saw a red and blue streak arc across the sky like a magic star. He thought the strange colors were a sign. Maybe everything would be OK. Maybe the crazy American woman would survive this jungle and get home to her city, where she belonged.

~LOIS~

As she poised herself to take her prize-winning photo, she realized that the very thing she needed to get out of this crazy jungle--proof--might be the thing to also put her in the greatest danger. How could she forget that shutters on cameras make noise!?! Why couldn't Jimmy's fancy camera manage to have a quiet button on it?

They were talking, though. Maybe they wouldn't hear it....

Click

The three men froze. Lois felt her heart in her throat.

Papa Ludu gestured to his thugs to check the area around them.

Lois held her breath and tried to back out towards the door she had come in.

Then, she heard a click of another kind and a low laugh, "Well, well, what have we here?"

They forcibly dragged her to a chair and roughly tied her hands and feet, never removing the barrel of the gun from her back. Her disguise hadn't worked at all. And they knew she was American. And a reporter. Lois had been stupid enough to carry ID with her. Yet it might have also saved her life, because a missing reporter might cause many more questions than Papa Ludu wanted to answer.

But first, he had questions of his own to ask.

"What are you doing here, Miss Lane? City life get too boring?"

"I--well, uh... have always been curious about Africa?" she tried with a smile.

He was having none of it. He slapped her, hard and fast.

"Don't be smart with me. I have your life in my hands, don't you see?" Papa Ludu taunted with his gun.

Lois gulped, trying to summon courage she didn't feel. "And--won't it cause problems for you once word gets back that I'm--missing?" she said, refusing to use that other, more permanent word.

He laughed. "Possibly. And possibly no. The Congo is dangerous country. All sorts of things can happen to people who don't know what they're doing... especially pretty young reporters," he said with a grin, fingering her hair. "But I want to know what you know, first," he finished sternly.

He moved the barrel to her temple, doing a very effective job of intimidating her. "What kind of dirt have you sent to the Planet about Papa Ludu, huh?"

Just then, a lackey came in. "Sorry to bother you, boss. But, uh, Gai--the uh, other boss needs an answer now."

Papa Ludu looked disdainfully at the messenger boy and then back at Lois. He fired a shot above the boy's head as a warning, which made Lois jump out of her skin. Papa Ludu smiled wickedly at her, enjoying her fear. She could see possibilities play in his mind about what he might do with her, and she thought she might throw up from the sheer terror welling inside her.

"Don't try anything while I'm gone," he warned. He stood over her as if expecting an answer. She made herself nod.

He smiled, pleased with the results of his intimidation. She'd make a lovely plaything, he thought, and toys could wait.

"I will have a little fun with you later. I'll probably kill you, but I'll wait," he mused aloud.

"Raymond!" he called. "Keep an eye on her."

~CLARK~

She had done it. She was definitely in trouble.

Tied to a chair with a madman just outside... and a gun pointed at her head.

[[Care for a rescue, Miss Lane?]] he smiled to himself.

He decided he'd go in at super-speed. No one would see him, and he'd just slow down enough to grab Lois and get her safely out of there.... After that, well, he hoped she'd be thankful enough for saving her life not to kill him for ruining her story.

~LOIS~

She had done it. She was definitely in trouble.

[[Surely they won't kill me. I'm too much of a liability, aren't I?]] she asked herself, not feeling the least bit convinced and worrying whether any alternatives to killing her would be better anyway.

The lackey Papa Ludu had left her with seemed almost even less stable than the boss himself. He kept playing with his gun, and every time the barrel clicked, it made her jump, afraid he would accidentally set it off.

At least he wasn't pointing it at her anymore.

Suddenly, Lois heard a low rushing sound. She barely registered what it could be before she felt her restraints loosened and she was suddenly up, out of that horrible building.... *Up?* And in someone's arms...

All Lois could do was stare. That face. She had seen that face... flying! Holy crap, they were flying! Just like in her dream! Only in her dream he had dropped her.... She had fallen in endless space, alone, afraid....

She grabbed on tighter.

"It's OK, Miss Lane. I've got you."

"You've got me? Who--who's got you?" she asked, freaked out.

The man who could fly simply smiled at her.

~CLARK~

She felt so right in his arms. He'd done it! He'd rescued her!

He wanted to kiss her--he wanted to yell with primitive delight that he had found his woman!

But--

He didn't want to scare her. She had no idea what was going on. He'd have to be patient. Calm. Couldn't blurt out the fact that they were soul mates and meant to be together. Couldn't blurt out that H.G. Wells had helped him go back in time to find her. Couldn't blurt out that there was another dimension out there, with another Lois and Clark who were just as amazing as they were.

No, he'd have to wait.

But for now, he'd delight in letting her discover Superman. He decided to fly her over the beautiful jungle for a while. Get her accustomed a bit to the idea of him, let her marvel at the world. And then maybe she'd listen.

~LOIS~

[[Oh my God, we're flying! HE'S FLYING! What?]]

Lois held on tight to her rescuer, trying to grasp all the thoughts assailing her head at the same time.

She was safe from the thugs. They had her camera. There went her Pulitzer. This was the guy from her dream. She was flying. Over the Congo. The rainforest was beautiful. She was flying--no, *he* was flying.... It was like a news bulletin ticker that kept tabs on her personal events. And barely any of it came together into one cohesive thought.

"So, are we going to land anytime soon?" she asked in a small voice, surprised she could talk.

"In a minute," he answered calmly. "Just look around...."

Lois did just that, gasping as she tore her gaze from his for a second and looked at the amazing view below them. The rich canopy of trees, and the birds that flew over them, birds that she hadn't realized could fly that high. [[I didn't know *men* could fly that high either!]] They were suddenly being sprayed by a waterfall as the man took her lower to get a better view. Then, they were sweeping over plains, giraffes and elephants playing and eating below them. The sun was beginning to set, painting the sky with pinks, purples, and golds. It was breathtaking.

Pulling herself away from the natural marvels below them, she looked up again at the man who flew. She realized she felt completely safe with this stranger. From her perch in his arms, she admired his handsome features and kind eyes as he looked down at her. [[*Am I dreaming?*]]

Without questioning the impulse, she reached out a hand and cupped his chin, turning his face so she could see his warm gaze. She felt a snap of energy, as if something had fallen perfectly into place, as if this meeting had been destined.

~CLARK~

He had flown her around the Congo, shown her the marvels of the earth, and, unwittingly, had shown her the marvel that was himself. She was relaxed in his arms, almost drowsy now. It was time to land, time to introduce himself and get to know Lois.

He found a clearing in the jungle. A large tree stood, covered with vines that had branches thick enough that a normal man could walk comfortably on, if he could get up that high. But Clark could. And just in case Lois decided she wasn't so happy with her rescuer... well, he could keep a better eye on her there.

Gently, he set her down on the thick branch, bracing her against the trunk. She simply stared at him. Questions were in her eyes, but her gaze was soft, patient. A rare moment for Lois. But then, no one had so literally swept her off her feet before.

"You know my name," she said suddenly, her head tilting to one side. "How did you know my name?"

"We'll get to that.... Are you... are you OK?" he asked, though he thought he knew the answer. He just didn't know where to start.

"Yeah, I guess so...." She sat up straighter. "My camera! All that time wasted for nothing!"

Clark sighed. "I'm sorry, Lois. May I call you Lois?"

She nodded distractedly. "Sure. But--what am I going to do?"

"Lois, they were going to kill you. I am certain of that. I had to

rescue you--"

He seemed as if he was going to say more, but then he thought better of it.

"So you know my name. What's yours?"

He felt silly telling her his name was "Superman"; he was still getting used to it himself. "It's--complicated. Where I'm from, they call me Kal-El. But in Metropolis, they call me Superman."

"Superman," she whispered to herself, mesmerized by the name, the fact that he hinted at being an alien not even registering.

"Whatever you prefer," he said, though he had actually really wanted to tell her to call him Clark. But that didn't seem right, not with him in the Suit and after that amazing flight. "Clark" had seemed too ordinary.

"Wait, you said Metropolis. Do I--do I know you?" she asked incredulously, mentally kicking herself for missing a story about a man who could fly!

"No, not--yet," he hedged. "Lois, I have a lot to explain to you. Please, just be patient as I sort out how to tell you all you need to know."

"OK," she said cautiously, watching him pace in the air, his large cape swishing around him. [[Whoever he is, he sure is impressive.]]

"You seemed certain that they were going to kill me. How do you know? I'm a well-known reporter. I didn't think I was in *that* much danger," she said, not willing to admit that was glad to be out of there regardless, glad she didn't have to test that theory.

He sighed. [[Lois, I'm from the future, I know you were killed in the Congo, and I came back in time to rescue you...]] he tried in his head. It sounded crazy, even to his ears.

"I knew from a... an unimpeachable source that you were in imminent danger."

She laughed. "You sound like a reporter."

He smiled. "Well... you're not off the mark..." he said, half to himself.

"So, Superman, how did you find me? Why are you *here*?" She gestured to the wild forest around them. Clearly, no matter how strange he was, he seemed even more strangely placed against this Congo backdrop.

"You were gone a long time from Metropolis," he started slowly, feeling the loneliness of the three years that he should have been getting to know her, should have been falling in love with her.

"Two months is hardly a lifetime! It was a big assignment.... Did Perry send you to look for me?" she asked suddenly.

[[That would be easier...]] he thought. But it would be hard enough to unravel this story for her, without adding any lies into it.

"No," he breathed out. "Actually, Perry is a politician now. And Mr. Olsen runs the Planet."

"Mr. Ol--*Jimmy*?" she asked, shocked.

"Yeah," he smiled. "But he didn't send me either. I--" he said quickly, then stopped.

"Yes?" She looked at him, waiting for him to clarify.

"This is so hard to explain!" he admitted.

"Look, just tell me. I'm willing to believe just about anything after being swept up in the arms of a man who can fly!" she said, crossing her arms in mock disgust.

Clark laughed. [[She is so charming.]] "OK, well, I met this writer... a very famous writer, actually." He glanced sideways at her, running his hand through his hair. "Oh, this is nuts! Even to my ears, and I lived through it!"

"Just tell me, Superman. I promise to believe you."

He sighed, "OK, OK. Let me just get out the story. I met H.G. Wells about a month ago...."

Clark quietly finished. "And, well, when I met the other Lois, I knew I had to go back and find you."

Lois looked at him, her eyes wide. She wanted to believe him, she really did. But it was all so fantastic! [[Yet wasn't he, this man in a blue suit and cape, also impossible and fantastic?]] she asked herself.

She made her decision. "I believe you."

He turned to look at her and then saw the truth of it in her eyes. He let out a breath he hadn't known he'd been holding in. The branches across from them swayed from the impact.

She walked up to him cautiously. "So, explain to me, is there a Clark Kent in this world, too?"

He nodded, a small smile on his lips. "Yeah, I am Clark. *This* is actually my secret identity," he said sheepishly, gesturing towards the Suit.

"And you're a reporter at the Planet, too?" Lois asked.

Clark nodded.

She was silent a moment and started pacing on the branch. Lost in her thoughts, she wasn't paying attention to where she was walking and slipped suddenly, falling towards the ground far below, and just as quickly, she was in his arms, floating on a cloud of air.

"Thanks," she said in wonder. She thought back again to her dream. He had let her fall in her dream.... Maybe reality would be kinder for a change.

"You're welcome."

He set her gently down on their branch. He was reluctant to let go. She held on to him as well, watching emotions play across his face. He gently reached up to stroke her jaw, noting a small welt where that idiot had slapped her. His face hardened a moment.

"What is it?" Lois asked in slight alarm.

"That--monster slapped you."

She lifted her hand to his hand on her cheek, instantly calming the anger that was building in him. "I'll be fine, really."

Clark let out a sigh and gently kissed the bruise on her cheek. "I promise you, Lois Lane, no one will ever hurt you again," he vowed.

Lois felt the impact of the intensity of his voice. This guy meant it, and it scared her a bit. "Please, don't. I'm fine, really." She pulled away, the force of this man a bit too much for her at the moment.

"I'm sorry, Lois. I have a--very strong protective streak in me, I guess," he said, one eyebrow arching charmingly.

She gave him a sidelong glance, "Hmm, and I'm guessing maybe you can do more than just fly?" she asked.

He nodded. "[Careful. You don't want to scare her.]" "Yeah, I--I'm invulnerable. There's nothing on earth that can hurt me."

"On earth?" she asked. "You mean--you're an alien?"

He tried not to feel a sense of loneliness as she said those words. But he looked at her closely and realized she was curious, not condemning.

"Yeah, from a planet that was destroyed called Krypton..." he said quietly. "But I was raised on earth... by two adoptive parents who are lovely people--were lovely people," he finished sadly, thinking of his parents, who had died, and of the other Clark, who still had his.

"How did they die?" she asked, walking up to him to lay a hand on his arm.

"A car crash when I was ten..." he said, not able to get out more because of the guilt that he held within in him. The fact that he couldn't rescue them, that he dreamed about that accident much more than he would've liked...

"I'm sorry," she said simply.

"Thanks."

She kept a hand on his arms, which were crossed across his chest. "So you can fly and are invulnerable. That's pretty amazing... or 'super,' I should say?" she said archly.

"I, uh, can do other things as well," he said, debating how much he should tell her, but at the same time unable to resist the temptation to share everything with her, something he hadn't been able to do with anyone.

"Oh? Like what?"

"Well, I'm very, very strong. And my--eyes hold special powers."

She nodded, thinking about how those eyes held some special powers over her.

He explained about his heat vision and x-ray vision and about his super breath. "I can also hear very far. It allows me to hone in on when

someone is in trouble."

She eyed him warily, taking her hands off him and stepping back a little.

"Sounds like you could be a dangerous guy," she said without judgment.

"I could be, but I choose not to be. I promised my parents and myself a long time ago that my abilities would only be used for good, for helping others." He gently took her hand, looking into her eyes.

"You do believe me, don't you?"

"Yes. I think if you were dangerous to me, you would've done something before now. And besides, there's something about you--" she began, thinking about her dream.

He nodded encouragingly. "What?"

"This is going to sound really silly, but I actually dreamed about you before I met you."

His breath caught in his throat. [[She dreamed about me?]]

"Yeah, it sounds crazy. But the night before I met you--last night, actually--you... you saved me in a dream."

He smiled warmly at her, gently squeezing her hand. "I told you that our destinies--well, I can't explain it. But I told you about the other Lois and Clark. Maybe, maybe there's something between us as well," he finished quietly.

She squeezed his hand in answer and then stepped back.

She sat back down against the tree, thinking about all he had told her.

Clark was afraid he had said too much. "I'm sorry," he said suddenly.

"About what?" she asked in genuine surprise.

"About--I mean, I didn't mean to--to scare you."

She shook her head. "No, don't apologize. I just have a lot to think about, OK?"

He nodded, not entirely convinced.

She leaned her head back against the tree, silent a moment. Then she began forming a plan aloud. "Well, I assume you can get us back to Metropolis?" she asked.

Clark smiled. "Sure, whenever you want to go."

She nodded. "Soon, but not yet. I can't have spent two months here for nothing, Superman. I need that picture to finish my story."

"Don't they have your camera? They may have destroyed it."

"Yes, I think so, but I have a spare at my campsite. I have to go back and try to get some evidence, surely you see that?" she asked.

"You said you work at the Planet, that you're a journalist. Surely you understand the significance of this story?"

"Yeah, I guess so..." he grudgingly admitted.

She warmed to her idea. "And since you said you're invulnerable, why, what's the worry?" she smiled.

"I am, but you're not, Lois. And that's the 'worry.'"

"Look, you said that the other Lois and her Clark are great partners. Why don't we do a test run, for us? Try it out, see how it can be?"

He liked that idea. It had been great working with the other Lois. Obviously, she and the other Clark worked so well together, why couldn't he and this Lois be just as good a team?

She walked up to him and touched his arm. "I may even eventually let you share my byline," she said, thinking she had given him the ultimate concession, something he absolutely couldn't say no to.

But it wasn't the byline he couldn't turn down; it was the warm way her eyes twinkled. The way he felt so good in close proximity to her. That was what he couldn't say no to.

"OK, but I think you should go back with Clark. Are you ready to meet him?" he asked, a secret smile on his lips.

"I don't understand. I thought *you* were Clark."

He laughed. "You'll get used to it. It gets confusing living as two people, so I tend to talk about myself in the third person. Step over to the trunk and hold on. This stirs up a bit of a breeze."

She did as he said, watching him warily. He suddenly turned super-fast in place. Then gone were the boots, the blue suit, and the red

cape. There before her stood another man. A gorgeous man in khakis and a short-sleeved button-down white linen shirt. He wore glasses in this other persona, his hair soft around his forehead, made for fingers to run through....

She thought she was more impressed with this GQ model than the guy in tights. This was a man a girl could get close to, could--

"Lois?" he asked, worried by her stunned stare. "Would you prefer I turned back into Superman?"

She shook her head vigorously, "No!" Then, less vehemently, "I mean, no, you're fine. You're better than fine. Actually--"

He suddenly realized her problem, and it made him grin. She liked Clark better than Superman! She stepped up to him, no hesitancy this time in her movements, and reached up to kiss him. He pulled her close to him, one hand on the small of her back and the other stroking her hair off her face.

She was dizzy with emotion. Running her hand through his hair was as wonderful as she thought it would be... better, even. The kiss was soft at first, but then it turned passionate, hungry. Their tongues were playing an ancient game, each tasting the other, yet giving and full of promise. Finally, it was Clark who stepped back.

"Wow," she breathed.

"Yeah, 'wow' is right," he said.

"Why did you--why did we stop?" she asked shyly.

"Lois, we just met. That was amazing, but--well, let's get to know each other first, OK?"

She nodded. "But you said the other Lois and Clark are soul mates, and that sure as hell felt like--"

"I know. And I believe that's possible for us as well, but Lois and Clark were friends for two years before anything serious happened. And although I don't expect us to wait that long," he said, seeing the disappointment in her face and feeling his own, "I still think it's a good idea if we take things slow."

He couldn't believe these words were coming out of his mouth. He who had fantasized what it would be like to kiss and make love to Lois. But he knew he was right. They at least needed to get out of the jungle alive and back to Metropolis; then they'd see where things took them.

"You're right. Slow. Yeah," she said, not thoroughly convinced. She wanted so much to kiss him again, to check if it was for real, that impact she had felt in his arms.

"Besides, I just want us to get your pictures and get out of here alive. Then we can see about other--possibilities."

"So, when do we head back?"

It was full night now. He wanted to stay there with her in that lovely tree, with the myriad of night sounds to lull them to sleep, but he knew their best chances were now, before the thugs would suspect that they'd return. Maybe they could get in and get out with no fuss....

"How 'bout right now?" he said and then spun into the Suit with a smile, holding his arms out to her.

"Thought you'd never ask!" she laughed, jumping into his arms again. She couldn't resist. She leaned up and kissed him again.

"Work before play, Lois. Work before play," he said, grinning, as they headed up towards the stars and back to Papa Ludu's lair.

Papa Ludu was gone. The drugs were gone, the men with the briefcases--all gone.

Clark was relieved, but Lois was furious.

"I can't believe this! There goes the Pulitzer! There goes the best story of my career!" She threw her hands in the air. She wanted to blame this on Superman, she really did. It was his fault, after all. But she just couldn't summon the anger towards him. She was mad, yes, at the situation, but--he had rescued her. He had flown her over the tops of the jungle like no one could *ever* do. He had kissed her like no one else, too.

But maybe she could be a little angry at him, though. He had distracted her spectacularly. He had shaken up her world, turned it upside down, really--and she'd still have to go back to Metropolis with

an incomplete story.

Lois sat on the dirty bench outside the small building where her career disappeared and sighed heavily.

Clark felt completely helpless. He wanted to apologize, yet, at the same time, he felt ridiculous doing so. He had saved her. Didn't that mean something? Didn't it mean something that he might have saved something else precious as well, a possible life together that would have otherwise been fraught with loneliness?

Suddenly, a man on spindly legs approached them from the shadows. He was walking slowly, leaning heavily on a cane and coughing, carrying something in his hands.

At first, Lois didn't see him in the dark, and she was too blinded anyway by her own emotions to notice.

"Miss Lane," he said, a huge grin on his face, though his eyes spoke of pain. "I have it for you, Miss Lane!"

It was Kawa, and he held her camera.

"Kawa! How did--?" But the question died on her lips.

As Lois reached up to hug him, she saw that Kawa was injured. He winced as she reached for him.

"Kawa?" she asked, worried.

"It's OK, Miss Lane. Here is your camera. I got you your camera..." he said, coughing. He held a handkerchief, and Lois was alarmed to notice it was dark. He was coughing up blood!

Tears sprung to her eyes. Had her guide and sometimes friend risked his life for her stupid camera?

"Kawa, here, sit," she said, feeling guilty and wondering if there was anything they could do. [[Did Superman have healing powers?]] she wondered wildly. But glancing at Clark, he seemed just as alarmed.

Clark had begun to immediately assess Kawa's injuries. With his x-ray vision, he detected a bullet lodged in Kawa's chest causing internal bleeding in his right lung. The old man didn't have much time.

"I could--take him to the nearest city.... Surely there's a hospital--"

Kawa shook his head. "No mind, friend. I've had my time. It's OK. I did what I must.... Besides, hospital is two day's ride."

Lois and Clark exchanged meaningful looks.

"We--we could get you there much faster--just a few minutes--" Clark began.

Kawa shook his head, struggling to breathe. "No, I have no time.... I must... I must tell you--" he struggled, before another cough racked through his thin body.

"What happened?" Lois asked Kawa, reaching for his hand to comfort him.

"They left. I came to look for you. I saw them leave. But another man, he come later. I didn't see him until it was too late. He... was an evil man, Miss Lane. I found your camera there--"

Another cough and more blood.

"Take it easy, Kawa," Lois soothed.

Kawa nodded, but he was determined to continue.

"But this man, he--saw me and asked if I knew you. I didn't say nothing, Miss Lane, I swear. Then he asked me if I saw a man who could fly.... I didn't mean to give nothing away, I swear, but he saw it in my eyes...."

Kawa started to cry, feeling his own guilt.

"Please, don't Kawa. You couldn't help it.... Who was this other man?" she asked, looking helplessly up at Clark a moment before turning back to Kawa.

"He... he laughed and said he had something for the man who could fly... and then, I tried to leave, but--he shot me. I fell, and he thought I was dead, I guess. So he left. I think--I think he look for you, Miss Lane." Kawa looked knowingly at Clark, and Clark thought this old man knew his secret, that he must have seen him and knew him to be the same man who could fly.

"I am--tired, Miss Lane," Kawa said. "I'm happy to know you. Miss Lane?" He gestured for her to come closer.

"Yes?" she asked, sensing he wanted to say something just to her. She looked up at Clark, and he turned away so Kawa could have a

private moment.

Kawa nodded towards Clark, "This man, he good for you, Miss Lane. I see it. He have powerful aura, a strong man. Your protector. He love you."

Lois felt tears well up in her eyes. "I know," she whispered. "Thank you, Kawa. For everything."

Kawa coughed again, a painful, heart-wrenching sound, and then, slowly, his eyes fell back into his head. He breathed out once more... and then was gone.

Lois shook her head. "I can't believe he--he's gone! He died trying to help me finish my story, Clark! That foolish, wonderful man! How can I ever forgive myself!?"

She turned to Clark's arms, sobs shaking her.

"It's not your fault, Lois," he said.

"Not my fault? How can it not be my fault? If I wasn't so damn stubborn, chasing after stories, this man would never have had to worry about me or my stupid camera!"

Clark didn't know what to do, but he also knew that they were still in danger. The only person who could be here in the middle of nowhere who knew anything about him would have to be Tempus.

Suddenly, Clark felt a splitting headache, a pain he had only experienced once before. It was so intense he stepped out of Lois' arms and fell to the ground. He felt nauseous and heard a ringing in his ears. All his power seemed to be draining from him, leaving him in excruciating pain.

"Clark?" she asked, more than alarmed.

All she knew was that he was from another planet. He had said he was invulnerable. What could be doing this to him? She put her hand on his forehead, as that was where the pain seemed to be concentrated, trying to soothe him.

"What--what can I do?" she asked in a weak voice.

Suddenly, they heard laughter coming from the shed. Tempus strode forward, a glowing green rock in his hands. The green of the rock cast an unnatural glow on his laughing face which sent shivers of terror through Lois.

"Who are you? And what have you done to him?" she cried.

"Me? Well, didn't your little hero tell you? I'm Tempus!"

He came nearer, enjoying this immensely. "Oh, poor Lois. Her Superman is not so super now, is he?" Tempus whined in mock sympathy.

"Behold, Kryptonite!" he said triumphantly. "Radioactive material from his home planet! The one thing that can destroy Superman!"

Lois looked in horror at the green rock and then back at Clark. He was huddled over, in obvious agony.

"What--what is it--doing to him?" she asked, a little panicked.

"Why, killing the Man of Steel, of course!" Tempus came even closer to them, waving his rock proudly.

Clark managed to pull Lois down to hear him. "You--you have to get it away from him. Away from me," he managed to say.

Lois stood up, ready to put some of her Tae Kwan Do classes to the test. But Tempus had other ideas.

"Ah, Lois, Lois. Can't you see it's no use? That your boyfriend has been rendered helpless?" He pulled out a gun and pointed it at her. "I think it will be oh so much fun for you to watch as your beloved hero dies. Why don't you come back to the chair that Papa Ludu had all picked out for you to watch the show?"

Tempus set the Kryptonite next to Clark, but not so close that Clark could immediately reach it, even if he could summon the strength to toss it away. Clark thought he was going to black out from the pain, but he did all he could to stay conscious.

"Yes, I think it will be fun for you to watch your hero die... and then I'll enjoy killing you," he said softly in her ear as he reached behind her to tie her hands to the chair.

She managed to knee him in the groin and spit in his face at the same time.

He paid her back with a slap across the face. "I'd be careful if I were you, Miss Lane, or I may decide to kill you first!"

He still had to tie her feet. She thought she had one last chance left to stop him, and she took it.

She swung her leg up to kick Tempus in the jaw. He staggered, trying to right himself and aim the gun back at Lois. She managed a second kick with her other leg, hitting him square in the chest so the impact made the gun fly out of his hand, to land within a few feet of Clark.

"Clark! Get it!" she cried, trying with her hands tied to hop in the chair to where Tempus lay momentarily stunned.

She stood up awkwardly in the chair, managing to sit the four legs over Tempus' upper body. Her legs were free, so she held her foot to his throat. "Hurry, Clark! I don't know how long I can hold him like this!"

Clark could barely focus on what Lois was saying. The pain was blinding. [[The gun... Something about the gun...]]

He forced his eyes open, feeling like his head was splitting open as he did so. There it was, about three feet from him. With a groan, he lunged himself towards it, incidentally giving him some small distance from the Kryptonite.

He had the gun. Lois, expecting him to immediately aim it at Tempus, who was getting closer to overturning her in the chair, was surprised when Clark turned the gun on the Kryptonite. Just before he released the shot, he aimed it just below the base, so the rock itself wouldn't explode but would be sent out somewhere into the forest surrounding them. He shot once, and it bounced just a few feet. He gritted his teeth, having pulled himself to his knees. He fired angrily at it again, this time managing to send it into a small river a few meters away. He sighed with relief when he could make out the rock being carried down the river away from them.

Just that moment, he heard Lois cry out again. Tempus had overturned the chair, and he was not happy. He reached for Lois' throat, trying to throttle her in the awkward position of her lying on the ground, sitting in a chair, her hands tied.

"Take your hands off of her!" said Clark, the gun now aimed at Tempus. He had pulled himself to his feet. He was dizzy as hell, but he had to try and make Tempus think he was regaining his strength.

Tempus shoved at Lois and turned away from her for a moment, but only to scoff at Clark. "Right, like Superman would kill me," he laughed.

"Don't tempt me, Tempus," he said. Clark came closer to them, feeling himself stagger just a bit. It took all of his willpower to stay on his feet. If he could just get close enough to Lois, maybe he had enough of his heat vision left to break the binds.

Clark stumbled again. He felt nauseous, the world spinning around him. He fell to the ground just as he felt someone take the gun from his hands.

Lois had managed to get free of her binds. She aimed the pistol at Tempus. "Superman may have such qualms, but I'm not sure I do," she said bravely. Tempus watched this with mild interest. She primed the gun but just couldn't pull the trigger. But Tempus didn't have to know that. She decided to shoot it off just above his head to scare him a little bit.

It worked. It made Tempus jump in surprise, giving her the advantage she needed to kick him to the ground again, this time face down. She stepped one foot on his back, still holding the gun to his head. Then, a silver glint belonging to something that had fallen out of his pocket caught her attention. Car keys? That made her look around. Did Tempus have a car nearby?

"Clark! Can you tie him?" she called over her shoulder, grabbing the keys and pocketing them.

Clark was barely conscious on the ground she saw as she twisted a bit to see him. "Oh, God," she whispered. She'd have to get them out of there herself.

She reached for the rope nearby. Tempus struggled beneath her, swinging his arms wildly in an attempt to grab her ankle. Needing to do something to stop him, Lois closed her eyes shut and squeezed the trigger towards the side of him, accidentally hitting his hand. She shot

off his pinky finger! He screamed in agony.

"You vile bitch!" he got out, staring unbelievably at his hand.

She felt like she was going to be sick at the sight of so much blood, but the action had rendered Tempus harmless for now.

So she took off around the corner, looking for a vehicle. She spotted a Jeep behind the building and started it. Lois sped the Jeep around to where Clark lay; he was barely moving.

"Clark! Clark, wake up! You have to wake up!" she cried desperately, gently tapping his cheeks.

"You have to help me get you in the Jeep!"

"What? Oh," he said.

He made a lunge to move his body, and Lois gave him an extra shove, trying to push him up a bit further. He was half out of the Jeep. She felt tears of terror and worry stream down her face.

She managed to turn him around and got his legs in the rest of the way.

Lois walked around to the driver's seat, spotting her camera near the door. She grabbed it with a sad nod towards Kawa, who lay dead nearby. She took one last look at Tempus, who was still writhing in agony. She didn't know if he'd die, but she wasn't about to wait around to find out.

She sped off into the direction of where she and Kawa had set up camp the night before.

Tears were streaming down her face. All she could see, over and over, were images of Kawa dying, the blood gushing from Tempus' hand, and Clark struck down. She could barely see the dirt road for her tears and wasn't entirely certain she was even heading in the right direction to get to camp. But at least it was light now. She knew to follow the river... [[But am I on the left or right side of the river?]] Kawa had explained something about upstream and downstream, but she hadn't paid much attention, thinking she'd have him there to sort her out.

"Poor Kawa," she whispered sadly.

Clark stirred next to her.

"Sup--Clark?" she asked, turning to him. "Are you any better?"

"I--I--no, not really," he said, barely able to open his eyes.

She took a better look at him and was alarmed to see him perspiring heavily. She reached up a hand.

"Clark, you have a fever!"

Thank God she spotted the campsite just up ahead. Maybe the water from the stream would help him.

When she stopped, she went to her tent and grabbed a pot to get some water from the river.

It was still cool enough to drink this early in the day. She took a sip for herself and then went back to Clark.

She touched his forehead, moving a lock of hair off his face. "Can you try to drink this?" she asked. She had no idea if it would help, but she figured it couldn't hurt. And at least she was doing something.

Clark managed to swallow. "Thanks, Lois."

She felt the tears well up again. She didn't understand the instant connection she had felt to this man, but she knew she needed him. "You'll be all right, Clark." [[You have to be.]]

Visibly worried about their prospects, she asked, "Do you think you can move? If we can get you out of here, I can set you up in the tent so you can rest."

He shook his head. "No, I need to stay outside. In the sun."

She gave him a puzzled look.

"It--it makes me feel better."

"Well, OK," she said, unconvinced, "but we should at least get you out of this Jeep. Do you think you can make it to that tree over there?"

He nodded.

Lois supported him as best she could. He was very heavy, and she had a hard time getting him to move. Suddenly, he tripped over a rock and landed on her, stopping himself from crushing her by landing on his hands just in time.

They were nose to nose.

"Hi," he said, loving the position but wishing he didn't feel like hell.

"Hi yourself," she smiled. "Um, should we try this again?"

"Yeah, but first--" He nuzzled into her neck, giving her little kisses. Kryptonite-induced, barely conscious kisses, but they still gave her a shiver of pleasure.

"Clark!" she laughed. "As nice as this is, we need to get you over there to rest. You're a mess!"

"I know," he said, and he collapsed on her again, this time definitely not awake.

She managed to pull herself out from under him and tried to wake him again. "Clark?" she said, trying not to feel too worried. If he had been able to play with her like that, he might be all right after all.

Eventually, she woke him up again and got him propped against the tree.

"Just... rest."

Lois cried until there were no more tears. She cried until she was shaking, until her head hurt. But it didn't seem to be enough. Kawa was dead. She had shot Tempus. And Clark... he upset her more than all of it. This man who was supposed to be invulnerable had been rendered helpless by a single, horrible rock! She had no idea if he would return to normal.

She checked on him every half hour or so. She was relieved he was breathing pretty normally, but she was still anxious that he wouldn't pull through. He still had a fever, and there was no medical assistance for miles. But he was from another planet, and even if they could find a hospital, she knew there probably wasn't much that could be done for him.

She couldn't believe she was rationalizing all of these strange events. This man who could fly, who had touched her soul as no one ever had, who had in a few short hours had become so important to her... How had this happened? She couldn't explain it. All she knew was that there was this inexplicable bond between them, as if it had always been there, like two magnets coming together when they are in close enough proximity to one another. He baffled her and took her breath away at once. She couldn't lose him. She had to know more, know if this was real or only a strange dream in the strangest of places.

At one point, he started tossing and turning in his sleep. She sat by him, trying to soothe him with her presence.

"It's all right, Clark, I'm here," she whispered, choking on fearful tears as she watched him shift fitfully on the tiny mattress.

He blindly reached out for her, and she grasped his hand. He seemed to calm a bit with her touch, though his breathing was still a bit ragged.

She felt helpless, and she hated that feeling. She had to do something. After Clark went back to sleep and the tears dried up, she started pacing, started getting angry. Angry at the unfairness of life. Angry at that bastard for shooting Kawa. Angry that Tempus tried to kill Clark. That Tempus had wanted her to *watch* him kill Clark!

The camera still sat in the Jeep. She eventually pulled it out and stared at it a long time, thinking. She thought about Kawa, the kind guide that she'd sit up talking late at night to. He seemed to have a wisdom about him, could assess her character in a glance. But he was also generous and maybe a little foolish. Kawa had given his life to bring her something that he thought was so important to her. It was a rash, terrible thing to do. And the guilt of it would haunt Lois for the rest of her days, whether or not it was really her fault. But she had the camera. She had her evidence, her proof, and a name. She could write that story.

She suddenly felt renewed purpose and energy. She went to the tent to grab her notepad but stopped a moment when she noticed Clark was awake by the tree.

"Are you feeling any better?" she asked, stroking his brow, noticing it was slightly cooler to the touch.

"Yeah," he nodded. "The sun is... helping."

"Good," she smiled warmly, hoping to hide her worry.

She turned away, moving to head towards the tent to start her story.

"Lois?" he asked, stopping her with a touch.

"Yeah?"

"Come here a minute," he said, holding out his arms to her.

She went into them instantly, feeling those tears starting up again.

"I thought I might lose you when we had just barely found each other," she whispered.

"You saved me, Lois. I'll never forget that."

She pulled back a little to look in his eyes. "I did what I had to."

He gently wiped her tears with his thumbs and kissed her on each of her cheek reverently.

"We'll be OK, Lois. Everything will be OK."

Lois spent the rest of the afternoon writing. She wrote like she had never written before. She included the story about Kawa in her article, wanting him to be remembered as a hero. She wrote everything she knew to take down that bastard Papa Ludu. She wished she could destroy Tempus with her pen as well but decided the details of that would have to be obscured a bit. The world didn't need to know about a time-traveling maniac and that substance he had had that could hurt Superman. She instead wrote him in the article as one of Papa Ludu's thugs; she had a hunch, anyway, that Papa Ludu was probably in cahoots with Tempus if not actually employed by him. And she knew this piece would just be the first in a series, because she was going to do everything she could to put Gainsley away in Metropolis as soon as she got back.

It was evening when she had finally stopped writing.

"Can I interrupt the world's greatest journalist for some dinner?" asked Clark, offering some fruit and nuts he had found nearby.

She turned to him with a smile. "Feeling better, I take it?"

He nodded, but she saw a line of worry cross his face.

"What is it?" she asked, coming to him immediately. "You are getting better, aren't you?"

He sighed. "Yeah, I am. It's just that--well, I don't have any of my powers."

"What? How do you know?"

He looked at her pointedly, "I know. I've been exposed to Kryptonite once before, but not for that long... so I have no idea if the effects will be--permanent or not."

"Kryptonite? What is it exactly?" Lois asked.

"A meteorite from my home planet, Krypton. It became radioactive when it landed here... and I think it could've killed me."

She stepped over to him, embracing him. "But it didn't. You're alive. That's all that matters..." [[...with or without your powers,]] she thought.

She looked in his eyes, and she saw fear there that worried her.

"I haven't felt so helpless--since, since my parents died," he said. "I hate that Tempus has that power over me! That he has managed to rob me of everything to try and ruin my life!" Clark said bitterly.

"Not--not everything, I hope," Lois said, reaching for his hand.

Clark smiled apologetically, clasping his two hands around her small one. "No, not everything. I managed to find you...."

"And he only has that power over you if you let him, Clark. Surely you see that?" she asked in surprise.

He sighed, feeling more vulnerable by the second, "But what good am I without my powers?"

"Clark, stop it! I may not have known you for a long time, but I can tell you that the powers do not make the man. It's how you use them that defines you, which means how you use them comes from your character. I thought you were made of sterner stuff than this, Clark," she said with disappointment.

He hung his head, "I'm sorry, Lois. You're right. I--I'm letting all this get to me."

He was ashamed. In her voice, he had heard the other Lois comparing him to her Clark. That guy wouldn't wallow in self-pity. He wouldn't let a power-crazed maniac get the better of him. He'd make

the most of the situation, no matter what faced him. And now he had his Lois. She wouldn't abandon him. He could face anything with her by his side. It was time to learn what being a hero was all about.

Clark gave himself a mental shake and spoke with determination, "We'll stay here another day. I am already feeling better. Maybe my powers will come back. At least I should know by tomorrow if they are likely to come back... and then we'll form a plan. Either I'll be able to fly us back to Metropolis, or we'll take the Jeep to the closest large city and fly back the old-fashioned way."

Lois smiled and leaned in to kiss his cheek. "That sounds more like it, Superman," she whispered.

Clark had offered to sleep in Kawa's old tent. But it had been such an awful day that Lois just couldn't bear to sleep alone.

"I trust you, Clark. It's OK. Sleep here with me." She looked up at him, her eyes open and honest.

He couldn't resist her. "You drive a hard bargain."

She got in under the covers and was surprised to see Clark just lay above them.

"Won't you be cold?" she asked.

He smiled charmingly. "Not with you sleeping by my side."

She whacked a pillow playfully at him. "Behave," she said with a laugh.

They settled down into the tent. Lois turned down the lamp and snuggled close to Clark. He wrapped an arm protectively around her.

The only sounds were their breathing, as they found a comfortable rhythm together, and the distant sounds of the nearby forest.

"I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't found you, Lois," Clark spoke softly.

She reached for his hand. "You're a pretty special guy yourself."

She felt him shift up so he could look at her. "You don't know what it was like before... and then, when I met the other Lois and Clark and saw how much they loved each other... and I thought that I had been meant to meet my own Lois, but that she--that I had been robbed of you--"

She saw him swallow to calm his emotions. "And then I found you.... It's a miracle, Lois. One I'll always be grateful for."

She smiled sweetly, "Oh, Clark." She reached up, and they kissed tenderly. She ran her fingers through his hair, and their lips played together in a sweet kiss.

"Told you this was a bad idea," Clark muttered, but not meaning it.

Lois giggled. "I think it was a most excellent idea."

They kissed again but didn't let things get carried away further.

Eventually, Clark settled back down beside her, pulling her to his chest.

They were asleep in moments.

Lois was dreaming she was flying. But there was an arm around her. Superman was holding her. They were flying over the tops of trees....

Her eyes suddenly opened. She turned and *fell* out of Clark's arms. How did--?

She stared up at him, floating just inches above her. She stifled a giggle. [[This is new,]] she thought.

She rolled out from under him carefully, as she didn't want to startle him and have him fall on top of her. The Man of Steel falling from mid-float could be a dangerous operation, as his earlier fall had nearly proven.

When she was safely out of range, she got up on her knees and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Clark?" she asked. [[Is it dangerous to wake a man while floating? Is it like sleepwalking?]] she wondered, another giggle rising in her throat.

She tried again. "Clark?"

Still didn't budge.

"Superman?" she tried tentatively.

Nothing.

"Superman!" she tried louder.

"Huh?" He awoke and, like a ton of bricks, landed heavily on the ground as predicted.

Lois was thankful for her quick thinking to get out of the way.

"You were floating, Clark," she said happily.

"What? Oh, yeah, I do that--"

"You got your powers back--" "I got my powers back!" they said at the same time.

She reached over and hugged him.

"I knew everything would be OK," she said.

"Hey, that's *my* line," he said as leaned down for a kiss.

The flight back to Metropolis was amazing. Lois had always loved flying anyways, and doing it like this, in this man's arms--it was indescribable! He would hold her close, parallel to him, so she felt as if she were the one doing the flying. They headed west, away from the sun as it rose; sometimes it was a strong ball of fire that lit their way, and other times it was a warm glow that washed them both in a golden hue. They played over the ocean with dolphins, freaked out a few flocks of birds when near the shore. Sometimes they flew as fast as Lois could handle, cool air breezing through their hair and ears, making conversation impossible. And sometimes they flew with Lois cradled in his arms, drifting slowly, just talking and getting to know each other.

If Superman was alone, he would have made it back to Metropolis in less than an hour. But with Lois, his precious cargo, it took almost four hours. Four hours of pure bliss. They had perfect weather, no rain, no storms, a little wind. He told her everything. About growing up in Smallville. About growing up with his powers, how they were his curse and blessing. How the other Lois had told him about Superman, and how it felt to finally feel like himself in the Suit. How it was all a secret, but that he had to do the most good he could in this dark world, which came with sacrifices.

"I know about that feeling, about wanting to do good," she had responded quietly. "It's what I try to do with every story I write. Try to fix this broken world, taking down one criminal at a time."

He then talked about the loneliness of being Superman. About how for most of his life he felt like he didn't belong, that he would never find love, never have a family. How he had wandered the world in his late teens and early twenties. All the things he learned, all the places he saw. Everywhere was a new discovery, a new language, a new culture. But he never felt like he belonged. He was always an outsider, wanting desperately to find his place yet always feeling completely alone, even in a crowd of people.

Lois empathized with this as well. She thought of the many lonely nights in her apartment. The feeling of standing on a subway platform with a crowd of people and yet feeling invisible, utterly isolated from a real life. A reporter's life was a lonely one. Always chasing the next great story, trying to save the world, and never belonging to anyone.

She confided in him about her few attempts at love. How Claude had wooed her, made her think he loved her, but all the while having other ambitions in mind.

"I thought he'd steal my Congo story. He had taken credit for a few other minor stories that were mine, and I wasn't about to let it happen again--not for a story this big. So I decided to go to the Congo myself. To get away from him, partly. But also to claim the story for my own. He couldn't exactly take the credit for it when *I* would have the proof I had been here. But it's been a disaster from day one. If it hadn't been for Kawa helping me along--and then you, I don't know what would've happened."

"I'm sorry about Claude," Clark said softly, holding her close.

"I never thought I would ever be able to trust anyone again," she said, tears in her eyes.

Clark held her tighter. "I hope you can learn to trust me."

The harbor of Metropolis shimmered before them, coming up on the horizon. It was early dawn, the stars disappearing into the morning light as the city awoke from its slumber.

"I think--" she swallowed the lump in her throat, trying again. "I think I already do."

As they neared the city streets of Metropolis, Lois was reluctant to rejoin the world. The flight with Superman had been the most amazing experience of her life. [[And it's one thing I can't write about. Well, can't publish anyway.]]

They landed near the Planet. It was very early in the morning, and mainly only street cleaners were out. They descended in front of the globe, each lost in the other's eyes.

"Clark," she started, desperately wanting to articulate the emotions welling up inside her.

"Yeah?" he asked softly, his hands gently caressing her face.

"Thank you." It was the most profound thank you of her life, and she thought he understood. It was a thank you for the flight and rescue, sure, but it was also a thank you for revealing who he was to her, for rescuing her heart, and for the possibilities that lay ahead of them.

He gazed at her another moment, and then like two magnets unable to resist each other, they leaned in for a slow, thorough kiss. She reached her arms around his neck, wanting to feel as close as possible to him, but thinking it just wasn't close enough. She felt tears well up, tears of joy and the tears of longing finally finding release.

When they finally pulled away from each other, pure bliss on each of their faces, the sun had come up. Metropolis was once more a vibrant city, thrumming with activity.

"I--I need to get up to the newsroom. I want to give my story to Perry personally," said Lois. She wanted to hold on to the dream, but she was also still a professional and anxious to get the Congo story in print.

Clark nodded. "OK, and I need to--Herb!"

"Huh?"

"H.G. Wells! I forgot--he's at a hotel. I have to talk to him, to let him know I found you!"

"Right," Lois looked around, suddenly wary. "H.G. Wells, the writer from another dimension in time and space... Does that mean we--we'll travel forward into time?"

"Five years time. Remember? I told you H.G. Wells took me *back* in time to rescue you."

"Oh, right," she said in a small voice, feeling a little dizzy. "Why do we have to time travel at all? Why can't we just stay here and pick up our lives from here?" she asked.

"Well, maybe we could... But Tempus is still here... even if slowed down by his injury. I doubt he'll stop hunting us--"

"And he will stop when we go to the future? That doesn't make sense, Clark."

"No, I suppose not.... I don't know. All I know is I love you, and I will do anything to be with you. But I want to talk to Herb first. Maybe he knows something we don't about what to do."

He found Herb at the Excelsior Hotel, enjoying cable television and room service.

"Television is such a marvel, you know. Though it is dangerous. One can hardly get any writing done when distracted by constant chattering in the background," Herb said, not looking up as Superman entered.

Then, he sat up, realizing who had come in the room.

"You... you didn't find her, then?" he asked, disappointment in his voice as he noticed Superman was alone.

"No, I found her all right. But I have some questions. I mean, what happens now? Do we go forward to when you found me? Or should Lois and I just stay here? And what about Tempus? I mean, when we get back to the Metropolis of the future, won't he try to break this up?"

"One question at a time, my boy!"

"We ran into him in the Congo.... I feel like a hunted dog! I mean, is there no way to shake this guy besides killing him?" Clark asked, clearly frustrated.

"Well, Tempus coming after you in any time is a distinct possibility.... But, you know, I had been thinking of something while

you were gone, an idea I have... Since we are essentially undoing what Tempus did by rescuing Lois, why don't we go one step further and potentially stop him completely?"

Clark was intrigued with this idea. "Go on."

"Now, it's all theoretical, mind, but it might be worth a try. What I am thinking is sending you two forward to when you were originally supposed to meet. Exactly when you were supposed to meet. So, two years into the future. We'll base it on the other Lois and Clark's timeline. Since Tempus was unable to disrupt their lives permanently, if we can send you two to the precise moment you were supposed to meet, maybe it will create a paradigm shift in time, righting everything!"

Herb beamed, clearly pleased with his conjectures.

"It sounds too good to be true, but I think it's worth a shot. Lois is turning in her Congo story at the Planet. Do you think you'll be ready to go in a half hour?"

"Whenever you are, my boy!"

"According to Herb, we might be really close to beating Tempus. I mean, he didn't kill Superman. And you escaped the Congo! So there may be hope that taking this last step--"

--going forward in time to when the other Lois and Clark met, we can stop him." Lois' head was reeling because of all that she was expected to believe. She wouldn't have taken any of it seriously if it wasn't for the very real evidence of Superman and the Kryptonite. His reaction to that had been just a little too real for her tastes.

"Well, we're not absolutely certain it will work, but it's worth a go," said H.G. Wells behind her.

"And if not? If the world is still overrun by Tempus?" asked Lois.

Clark sighed. "I don't know. I guess we can either fight him from there, or we go back to where I started...."

"This is all so confusing," said Lois.

She looked up at Clark. He gave her a sympathetic pat. "I know. I told you, it doesn't make sense... but if there is any chance we can stop Tempus from messing with our lives further--"

"Then we have to take it. OK, Mr. Wells, take us back to the future!"

~CLARK~

The Daily Planet, Fall of 1993

He had a story in his hand, and Perry was reaching out to shake his other one.

"You know, Kent, there's one attribute I value as much as experience, and that's initiative. Welcome to the Daily Planet."

Clark had a strange sense of *deja vu*. He looked around the office, as if seeing it for the first time. By the door stood the most incredible woman he had ever seen. Lois Lane.

A feeling hit him in the gut at the sight of her. *He knew her*, though how he knew her, he couldn't say. It was as if there was an instant connection, yet it was also more than that. He thought she *knew him* too, that he had revealed his largest secret to her. A feeling of panic rose in him, but in an instant it was gone. How could she know him? She barely looked at him. Lois stood against the doorjamb like she couldn't wait to be out of there, like she merely put up with indulging Perry in his new pet hire.

[[Lois?]] his eyes asked her from across the room, seeking recognition. But all she did was roll her eyes, recross her arms, and sigh.

Wait, Perry was talking...

"Lois, why don't you take Clark with you on that space station story?"

~LOIS~

She couldn't believe she was paired with this hack from Nowheresville! [[*Smallville?* Please! You couldn't make that name up!]]

Lois looked at her new "partner," insulted Perry had called him that. But she hadn't really let herself *look* at him. [[He's just a pretty

face... nice body, too.... No! Stop it! You've worked too damn hard to get where you are to let some hack distract you!]]

But even Lois was stopped in her tracks for just an instant. When she looked at him, really looked at him in his eyes, she saw something there that nearly knocked the wind out of her. [[What the hell is that?]] she asked herself. [[Better to ignore it. I don't have time for farmboys...]]

~CLARK~

"Clark? Are you coming home for supper?" asked Martha over the phone.

Clark was still a moment. He had this strange sense of sadness come over him. [[Weren't my parents--*dead?*]] he asked himself, feeling guilty about the question, as the proof of their existence was anxiously waiting an answer on the other end of the phone line.

He couldn't explain the lump in his throat, the feeling that he had been given back a gift that he had been robbed of too early.

"Yeah, Mom, I'll be there," he finished quietly.

"I've been working on some ideas for this costume of yours, Clark. Are you ready to try them on?" Martha asked, a twinkle in her eye.

"Are you sure this will work, Mom?" said Clark after trying on dozens of ridiculous spandex costumes. Finally, he had settled on a red and blue one. It seemed--right, comfortable, as if he was already in the habit of wearing it.

"Honey, no one will be looking at your face," said Martha with a laugh. "Besides, people will only see what they want to see... But it's missing something..."

She went over to the bed and pulled out a box from underneath it. "This was with the blanket we found you in."

She held up an "S" symbol outlined in yellow. Clark felt his skin prickle as she laid it across his chest... as if all the pieces of destiny were coming together....

~LOIS~

A bomb!

How could she get anyone's attention before the shuttle was launched?

Suddenly, a man in a blue suit and red cape came striding in. All she could do was stare as he took the bomb and--ate it!

Who was this remarkable man?

Lois felt dizzy. [[This remarkable man... this man who can eat bombs... Have I... *have I met him before?*]]

~CLARK~

Lois, in his arms. This felt so right!

The look in her eyes... he'd seen it before, but it had never been for *him*, had it? She surely hadn't looked at Clark that way in the few weeks he'd known her...had she? And this was his first appearance as the hero. Why then did that look in her eyes terrify him and warm him all at once?

~LOIS~

"What's the 'S' stand for?" asked Perry from behind her.

All she could do was stare, unable to shake a sense of *deja vu*, of knowing. But she was certain about the answer to the question. It was like his name had been her part of her knowledge all along.

"Superman."

~CLARK~

The pheromone drug made him remember. Not directly, just incidentally... that look of adoration in her eyes--it was as if all the pieces had suddenly fallen into place. He had been tempted to tell her, to let her seduce him, and then he'd reveal all: reveal his heart, his secret, and their hidden past. But a cooler head had prevailed. Lois had returned to her usual self, and then, he just couldn't get the words out.

But he remembered everything. Tempus, and telling her he was Superman--or rather telling her he was Clark--and taking Wells' idea to heart and going forward to the exact moment they were destined to meet.

Except neither of them had counted on memory loss.

And the jump in time to a moment of destiny had worked--so far. No hint of Tempus anywhere.

But all the ground they had gained in that deep forest, all that he had revealed of his deepest secrets, was all for naught. She didn't remember him. She fawned over him as Superman, sure, but Clark? She could care less.

But he knew that would change, right? If he was to go by the other Lois and Clark's story. If he could just wait until the truth came to its inevitable revealing, they might come out of this unscathed and stronger for it.

Besides, what really scared him was the possibility of losing his parents again. He worried that if he tried to tell Lois what had happened, she'd either tell him he was crazy and *really* write him off, or worse--what if it was all an enchantment and saying the words made it all go *poof* again? Could he risk that his parents could disappear back to the forever that they had so magically returned from?

He simply couldn't. He couldn't tell her. If--*if* she figured it out on her own, then fine, they'd face the consequences together. But the possibility that he could lose both his parents and Lois at the same time was one he simply couldn't--wouldn't--risk.

So he'd go on playing the fool. He'd bide his time until the inevitability of fate would eventually--hopefully--bring them together. And until then, he'd drop the subtlest hints to Lois about him being Superman, watch and see if she'd fall in love with him and accept the truth carefully laid out before her.

He'd already fallen in love with her all over again. That had been easy.

So he would keep those memories in the clouds over the Atlantic with her as his talisman to hold onto during the many nights he'd spend alone--until...

Until Lois figured it out.

Or until she fell in love with him again and he knew for certain that she'd never let him go.

~LOIS~

Lois would dream.

She could never tell anyone about these dreams, especially not Clark or Superman. She would be deep in a jungle, searching for something. Or facing a pistol in a dirty shed in the middle of nowhere, only to be rescued by Superman. And then, there was the kind African man, sitting in a pool of blood, and she couldn't help but feel it was all her fault. And a man's hand bled in front of her, a man's hand that she swore she had shot!

And here was where the dream really confused her... she would imagine that Clark and Superman were the same person! She'd awaken, shaken by a kiss she had shared somehow from both of them, as one man, and this confused her most of all. [[It couldn't be true! It simply couldn't!]]

These dreams would haunt her. But when daylight came, she'd tuck them away, determined not to deal with the confusion they stirred in her... or the horror. She refused to look at her feelings for Clark or why they were so entangled with her feelings for Superman. She was simply determined to not dwell on the implications of those dreams.

Concrete evidence of the truth was just under her nose, though, if only she'd look at it, in the shape of a folder buried deep in her closet. A leather-bound folder held all the answers, which, if found, would make a thousand shards of glass come together in a clear reflection of the truth. If Lois Lane cared to take notice of what was in her closet, she'd find the leather-bound folder that read: "Pulitzer Prize for 'Congo Cartel: The taking down of Papa Ludu' by Lois Lane."

But Lois sometimes avoided looking too carefully at things that were closest to her. She was cuttingly incisive when looking at others, but she could be terribly wide of the mark when looking at herself. So she was entirely capable of not seeing the truth, even if it was out there in plain sight lying in a closet or even staring at her every day behind a pair of glasses.

Epilogue:

~H.G. Wells~

Clark hadn't suspected a thing! Herb was sure Clark thought he had remained sitting in this dusty hotel while Superman had been off having all sorts of fun rescuing Lois.

Well, Herb had mulled over all his conjectures about time travel days ago and had decided he had time to squeeze in one more good deed for Utopia...

All he'd done was pay a visit to certain Martha and Jonathan Kent around about 1976....

THE END