

# And the Truth Will Set You...

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Summary: If Clark really loved Lois as much as he claimed, he should have known that marriage to Lex would make her miserable. He might have risked his ultimate secret to give her a chance to know the truth about her fiancé – even at the cost of his own future.

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Time Frame: Season 1 – Barbarians at the Planet

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## Chapter 1

Clark had an appointment. It was an appointment he wanted to miss – more than anything. But that wasn't an option. He had to go. Lois had asked. In all the time he'd known Lois Lane, he couldn't remember another occasion that he'd wanted to see her less than he did tonight.

He was still struggling with the feelings stirred up by his talk with Lois a few hours ago. After much agonizing, he had decided to tell Lois how he felt. He'd put everything on the line, and told her that he was in love with her. Clark had hoped that learning he had strong feelings would cause Lois to think twice about Lex. Maybe she'd even reveal that she felt the same way about him.

It had been a disaster. All he'd managed to do was learn that she thought of him as nothing more than a friend. The way she'd delivered the news, combined with the way she seemed ready to turn to Luthor, had left him angrier and more hurt than he'd ever imagined. Lois didn't want him. He wasn't even a consideration. Then to make things even worse, she'd asked him to tell Superman that she wanted to meet. As soon as she'd made the request, it had seemed obvious to Clark that she planned to say pretty much the same thing to Superman that Clark had just said to her.

Clark had spent the afternoon trying to figure out what to do. He had to stop her from going ahead and accepting Luthor's proposal. However, he couldn't bring himself to lead her on any longer as Superman. Especially not now that he knew the truth about how she viewed Clark Kent. Finally, he feared that if he went to see her as Superman, and she said what he thought she would, he was likely to lose his temper and say something he would regret. So here he was at Lois's door as Clark Kent. He stilled himself for what was to come and knocked.

After a few seconds, the door opened just a crack. Peeking around the edge, Lois asked, "Clark, what are you doing here?"

That would be clear soon enough, so he simply replied, "May I come in?"

Lois hesitated. "Well, I was sort of expecting..."

Clark could feel his spirit sag even further. "Superman, I know. I promise I'll be quick. You don't need to worry about me being here when he arrives."

Lois's face brightened. "So he'll be here?"

This was so frustrating. "Yes, you'll see Superman tonight. May I come in for a moment?"

"Give me a minute," Lois said as she closed the door.

A few seconds later, she returned and opened the door for

Clark to enter. She was wearing a robe. It was clear that she had put it on to cover something else. Clark saw some sheer fabric sticking out at the bottom. She seemed to be wearing some kind of nightgown. Could that be how she was planning to greet Superman? Clark felt a sudden surge of anger but quelled it quickly. It didn't matter.

Lois looked nervous. "Would you like to sit down?"

"No, I'll stand. This will be quick," he replied. "After... this afternoon, I decided that I can't stay in Metropolis."

Lois looked surprised. "Clark, it doesn't have to be that way."

She sounded sad. For an instant, his hope swelled, but the memory of her earlier words bit at him. "Yes, it does. Lois, the only reason I would stay in Metropolis is... well, you. I had such hopes. I... Never mind. I guess it was all just a fantasy."

Clark paused for a second. When he raised his eyes to Lois, all he could see was embarrassment. He took a deep breath and pressed on. "You asked to see Superman tonight. I guess you wanted to find out what he thought about you marrying Luthor?"

After a brief pause, Lois nodded silently and Clark continued. "Whatever else you might do, you shouldn't marry... him. Lex Luthor is a criminal," Clark pleaded. "I know you don't believe me and I can't prove it, but I know it to be a fact. Since this is the last time you'll see me, I hope you'll believe that I have nothing to gain by lying."

"Clark, you've never liked him." There was a barely hidden edge of anger in her voice.

He stepped closer to look her in the face. "Have you ever thought to ask why that might be?"

They held each other's gaze for a moment. Clark didn't see affection or even friendship in her eyes. Lois probably didn't see any either. After a few seconds she answered, "After today I think it's pretty obvious that it's simple jealousy."

He wanted to scream at her. Instead, he took a moment to calm himself once more. "I'd be lying if I said that wasn't partly true. Just the same, I've seen things that no one else has. Luthor is a criminal and as evil as they come. I pray that you don't go through with this. However, if you do go ahead and ... marry him, I hope you never have to discover what he is. I..."

But the words were no longer there. The hurt and anger in Lois's eyes were even more fierce than before. Clark could tell that this was it. He'd never have the chance to look into that most perfect face again.

Sure enough, at that second Lois found her voice. "I think you should leave." Her voice was so cold. It was as if his friend – his love – was no longer there.

Clark looked at the floor. Despite his intent when he came here as Clark, he'd managed to mess things up. But then again, it just didn't matter any more. As he started for the door Lois asked one final question, "Will Superman really be coming by tonight?"

Clark looked up at her. She hadn't said, "...or are you lying about that too?" but the implication was there.

Clark put his hand on the doorknob and turned to face Lois one last time. "After tonight no one will see Superman again. You see, Superman had the same reason for being in Metropolis that I did. Without that ... reason, there is no Superman – just Clark Kent."

Clark stepped into the hallway and closed the door, and that life, behind him.

## Chapter 2

"...without that reason, there is no Superman – just Clark Kent."

Clark's parting words played over and over in Lois's mind like a vinyl record with a scratch. He'd said it. No matter how much she tried to think she'd heard something different, she was sure.

It was well after 1:00 a.m. and Lois still sat in her living room. In those first few seconds, she hadn't put it all together. Or

maybe she'd just been in shock. By the time she'd digested what Clark had said, he'd been long gone. Up until that moment, she'd been so angry. Earlier today it had been hard enough to tell Clark she didn't feel... that way about him. When he'd shown up tonight, Lois knew it wasn't likely to turn out well. He had to have known that. How could he do this to her? He was her best friend.

Apparently he was something else as well.

Lois couldn't believe how much he'd conveyed in the few minutes he had been here tonight. He'd said the only reason he'd stayed in Metropolis was her. Lois wanted to believe he'd exaggerated. She was sure he loved this city and the Planet almost as much as she did. But the Planet was gone and, as much as she might love Metropolis, there were many other cities for Clark to choose from – especially when one had Clark's travel options. Lois knew that before Clark had come here, he'd never stayed in one place very long. He'd probably loved some of those other cities as well, but he'd never stayed. She guessed he never had a reason.

Then he'd gone so far as to call Lex both evil and a criminal. Before tonight, all he had said was that she needed to be careful of Lex. Tonight's accusations went far beyond anything he'd said before. When he'd called Lex – her almost-fiancé – those things, Lois had nearly lost it. Only the fact that she'd been shocked to her core by his accusations had prevented her from screaming at him to get out right then.

She'd finally come out of her shock enough to ask him to leave. When he'd arrived, Clark had said that this would be the last time she saw him. Before that moment, Lois would have never guessed that her last interaction with Clark would be to throw him out of her apartment.

But they weren't quite done. She'd been waiting for Superman. Clark had promised to deliver her message, but based on what she'd seen tonight, she'd doubted Clark's word. So she'd asked.

Then he'd said... it. She had seen Superman tonight. He'd been right here in the room. However, tonight he didn't meet her wearing spandex. It turned out that most of the time Lois had spent with Superman this past year, he was wearing something very different. Instead of a cape, he'd worn glasses. In the place of a bright suit, he'd worn a bright tie. Clark was Superman.

At first, she'd thought it had to be some kind of trick. Unfortunately, it all fit too well. Clark and Superman both arrived in Metropolis at about the same time. Their obvious resemblance – now that she really looked. The fact that Superman always seemed to be nearby when she needed him. The fact that of all people, it was only Clark who could get a message to the hero. His bout of amnesia that corresponded with Superman's disappearance during the Nightfall asteroid incident. Trask and his Bureau 39 crazies showing up in Smallville. The list was almost comical. How had she managed to miss all the clues? Then again, she'd seemed to have missed a lot of things where Clark was concerned.

For a moment, Lois wondered which ... face ... represented the real person. She shifted uncomfortably as the answer came. It was almost too obvious. Clark was real and Superman was the façade. She'd been to Smallville. She'd met his friends and family. There was that one woman, the waitress in the diner... What was her name – Maisie? She'd said that with Clark Kent, what you saw was what you got. Now *that* was a laugh. Lois rejoiced at the thought that perhaps she wasn't the most blind and dense woman that had ever been around Clark.

It had been Clark, not Superman, who had told her that he had ... feelings for her. If the "real" person was Superman, and he'd wanted to be with Lois Lane, he could have made that happen a long time ago. Clearly Clark didn't see Superman as real. He didn't want her to like the hero – the fake person – in the bright

suit. Clark wanted her to care for him as the person he really was. It was Clark Kent who had declared his love. It was Clark Kent that she had rejected. And it was Clark Kent who had just walked out of her life – and taken Superman with him.

Then there were the implications of the flip side of Clark's dual identity. Superman had called Lex an evil criminal. Superman, who of all people would be in a position to know, but might not be able to get evidence.

By the time she'd thought to go after him, Clark had been long gone. That was probably for the best. Clark needed time to calm down and she needed to absorb what he'd said. She would have what remained of the night to figure out what she was going to do next. Within minutes of Clark's departure, she had decided that her first order of business was to put a hold on her relationship with Lex. However she might feel about Clark – Superman – whatever he called himself, the new information about Lex was a message she couldn't ignore.

The next thing to do would be to ask Clark to stay. Surely he'd wait a day to see how she reacted to his revelation. They could sit down together and talk things through. Now that she knew the truth about Clark and more of why he disliked Lex, she wasn't sure about her feelings for any of the men in her life.

This morning she had been sure she loved Superman and uncertain of her feelings toward Lex. She'd also been certain that Clark was only a friend. Now she didn't know how she felt about anyone, but she was sure that she didn't want to marry Lex. The ease of that decision shocked her. Had she ever loved Lex? Clark had asked her that same question earlier today. If she was really considering marrying someone, shouldn't that answer be an easy yes?

Lex had pampered her. When she was with him she felt like ... royalty. But as she looked back at the time she'd spent with the billionaire, something seemed to be missing. Where was the spark? Where was the laughter? Where was the happiness? Sure, being treated like a queen sounded like a fairy tale come true. But what kind of marriage would that be? What kind of life?

From the moment Lex had surprised her with his proposal, she'd been in a daze. Up until that instant, she'd thought that her relationship with Lex was still in the early stages of getting to know each other. Starting with that moment, it seemed that she'd been caught in a whirlwind. Her decisions – more than that, the very direction of her life – seemed out of her control.

She really had needed the emotional slap in the face that Clark had delivered. Now, for the first time in weeks, Lois felt fully herself. She'd been letting circumstances – and Lex – make her decisions for her. She swore to never let that happen again. Some questions remained. What to do about Lex? And, probably more important, what to do about Clark? The one thing she was sure of was that she would be making her own decisions from now on.

She just needed to figure out what those decisions would be.

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Lois couldn't remember the elevator ride to Lex's penthouse ever taking so long before.

The doors opened and there he was. "Good morning, my darling," he greeted her.

His voice sounded different today. She'd always thought of it as cultured. Now it sounded... oily. What a difference a day made.

It was time for her act to start. Her plan was to tell the truth, but not all of it. "Good morning, Lex." She knew her voice sounded tired. That part wasn't an act.

He picked up on it immediately. "My dear, what's wrong? Please tell me I can help."

"No, Lex, I'm afraid this time you can't. You see, I didn't get very much sleep last night." In fact she hadn't gotten any sleep at all. "While I've been considering your proposal, I've had time to think about my life. I've decided that there have been too many changes for me to start a life-long relationship at this time. Other

than you, all my friends have scattered. I've lost the job I love and right now I don't know where my life is going."

"But darling, you have your new position at LNN," Lex offered brightly.

God, his voice sounded oily. She really needed to reevaluate her people-juice skills. Half the night she'd been kicking herself about how she'd misjudged Clark. Tonight she'd have to spend just as much time pondering how much of Lex she seemed to have missed. "LNN is a nice place, but television isn't for me. It just doesn't feel right. I need to be in the trenches. I'll be resigning from LNN today. I need to find my own place in the world in this new ... reality."

Lex's smile barely wavered. "My dear, you're exactly correct. This is the perfect time to start your life anew. How better to start a new life than with someone who loves you?"

She stared at him blankly. He'd said, "...someone who loves you." When she heard those words, it was Clark's face, not Lex's, that flashed in her mind's eye.

She turned away from Lex and stepped toward the window. The city was beautiful. She wondered for a second what it must be like for Clark to be above the city so often. She gathered herself and continued, still facing away from Lex. "No, Lex. I'm certain about this. So many things have changed... I need to ground myself before I can make any serious commitment." She fixed a neutral expression on her face and turned to him. "I have to approach this as the end of my old life. It probably doesn't seem fair to you, but I don't feel like I have any choice. Not only can't I marry you, I have to stop seeing you as well."

There was only the briefest of pauses before Lex replied. "You can't mean that. We've built so much together over these past months."

It sounded like an emotional, impassioned plea. However, Lois had made a point to be watching him carefully when she delivered her message. She'd caught him off guard. The emotion that he'd tried to project wasn't his initial reaction. For only the briefest instant Lois had seen his real reaction. There had been anger, then cold calculation. If she hadn't been looking for something just like this, she'd never had seen it. Lex's heartfelt pleading was an act.

"I'm sorry, but I've made my decision. Maybe in a year or so when I get my life back together, I'll be ready for a relationship. But for now I can't do this." The cold truth of her message made the delivery easy for Lois.

This time there was no hesitation at all. "I understand that you need some time. Take a few days and..."

"No, Lex! Please don't. This decision was hard enough. Fate seems to have cut most of my ties. It's up to me to cut the rest. I'm not happy about this path, but it's the one I've been forced down and I'll be damned if I won't make it my own."

Lex simply stared at her in seeming disbelief. It occurred to Lois that this might be the first genuine reaction she'd ever seen from this man. That thought almost brought a brief smile to her face, but she managed to maintain the tired and frustrated expression that she'd come in with.

She turned toward the elevator and was happy to see that the car had remained and the door was still open. Her last look at Lex reminded her of someone who had misplayed a poker hand and lost on the final draw.

That was certainly something to think about.

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Lex Luthor never lost a contest. At least, that was what all of his associates and competitors saw. He'd made mistakes from time to time, but whenever he did make an error, he stayed with the game. Even if by some set of circumstances he didn't win, he always made sure that his opponent lost. Usually a great deal more than they realized was at stake.

But this game was different. He'd known that Lois was likely

to be a greater challenge than any woman he'd pursued before. Most women fell into his arms as soon as he made his interest known. A few had taken a small investment of time and effort, but the outcome was never in doubt. That was not the case for Lois Lane... The same strength that made her worthy of his time meant that she demanded a larger investment. With the appearance of Superman and the obvious mutual interest between the new annoyance in town and the beautiful Ms. Lane, the challenge became both more enjoyable and more expensive.

He had been sure that she was his after he destroyed the Daily Planet. She had been devastated and appeared ready to accept his proposal, but something pushed her the other way. This development only meant that now there were other steps to take in the quest for Lois. Lex pushed a button on his desk to summon his assistant.

As the attractive and highly capable Mrs. Cox entered the office, she didn't say a word. She knew that when Lex was ready, he would make his wishes known.

"Mrs. Cox, my plan to win Ms. Lane has entered a new phase. I want her every move to be watched. Use human assets as necessary to track her movements around the city. Use whatever technology is appropriate to monitor her residence and automobile. Based on the current state of her perception of our relationship, I expect that she will seek employment in the city. Do not interfere, but if she finds a job, make sure that her workplace is also covered. Furthermore, I want Lois to be safe, but she must experience a time of professional difficulty. I think it would be a good idea if any sources of information she may have in Metropolis were to be unavailable."

Mrs. Cox didn't take notes. Written records – any written records – could fall into the wrong hands. Mrs. Cox was an extraordinary woman. She was capable, ruthless, and had a perfect memory. She simply nodded and asked, "Anything else, Mr. Luthor?"

Lex looked at her intently for a moment. "Yes. Follow up on the ex-military contact with the material that was supposed to be able to harm Superman. Lois changed her mind for a reason. I think it's time to take a more active role in removing that reason."

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Despite Lois's fervent knocking, Clark's door remained closed. It had only been a minute or so but it seemed clear that Clark wasn't home. If she were going to get inside, Lois was going to have to take stronger action than simply knocking.

She went to the planter a few yards from his door. She dug down an inch or so below the surface of the dirt in the very back and, sure enough, found a key. She had to admit that this seemed like a good hiding place. She wouldn't have found the key if Clark hadn't told her about it a few months ago.

Lois brushed the dirt off the key and opened the door. As soon as she entered his apartment, she was struck by a feeling of wrongness. At first glance, his apartment seemed the same as it had always been. The furniture was all there and each piece was in its proper place, but the feeling was undeniable. Then it hit her. All of his most personal possessions were gone. There were no family pictures and most of the collectables that Clark had picked up on his travels around the world were missing. With that realization, the energy went out of her. She'd known it was possible that Clark had been serious last night – that she might never see him again – but she'd deliberately discounted that possibility.

She needed to talk to him. She still had trouble wrapping her head around the version of Clark Kent that she'd met twice yesterday. She'd seen a darkness that she hadn't known he possessed. She knew that his actions came from his frustration – and his pain – at her dismissal of his declaration of love. But how could he blame her? He'd never made any serious advances... at least not as Clark. Why would he even think there was a chance

for anything between them?

But then she remembered the trip to Smallville. She'd had such fun when they'd danced together. Then, after the final battle with Trask, Clark must have noticed how moved she'd been when they'd held each other. Then there was the way they both reacted when he almost left Metropolis during the heat wave. The telling tenderness of that kiss... And finally, thanks to Miranda and her pheromone spray, Clark knew that she was attracted to him. Very attracted, based on the fragments that she could remember. Of course he saw all that. No wonder he was thinking about more.

With a wave of despair, she dropped and sat on the stairs in Clark's entryway. Damn Claude! If not for him...

But she couldn't lay all this on Claude, or even on herself. There was a big complicating factor in bright red and blue that had confused her. Didn't Clark understand that he'd made things much worse by his own actions? It was easy to see that Superman was attracted to her. How could Clark be angry that she'd responded to that?

Still, it explained so much. Clark wanted her to like him for himself, but he was only able to get her attention when wearing bright colors. Sure, she'd acted too much like a groupie in those early days. But that wasn't who she was. Clark knew that. If he thought she was that shallow, she seriously doubted that he'd be in love with her.

That thought made her uncomfortable. No wonder she'd worked so hard to avoid it. Clark was a friend. Okay, he was a good friend. No, that wasn't quite right either. He was her best friend. Her best friend was this nice, cute guy that she enjoyed being around all the time. And, if that pheromone stuff was any indicator, he was an individual that she found very attractive. There was so much there that she'd never taken the time to look at. She didn't want him to leave. In a fit of frustration she yelled at the empty apartment, "And that has nothing to do with your other job!"

Couldn't Clark understand that he bore some responsibility for her actions? He'd known that Lex was a bad egg, but he'd never said anything. For goodness sakes, one of the big problems here was that he'd spent so much time with her as Superman. He could have used one of those times to say something useful like, 'By the way Lois, Lex is a criminal.' Instead, those few times they were together and had the chance to talk, they both spent too much time looking at each other all moony-eyed.

She needed to do something. Looking around at the apartment, she realized that Clark might not be quite gone yet. He was Superman. If he really were gone for good, this apartment would be empty. He would probably be back for his furniture.

A note – she needed to leave a note! That thought energized her. Using this newfound energy, she jumped up and started rummaging around for some paper. Lois knew she had to be careful. The note had to be worded so that if anyone else read it, there would be no danger of his secret being revealed.

After a few minutes, she had something she thought would serve.

*Dear Clark,*

*I am very sorry about our fight. Please call or come to see me so we can finish the conversation we started in the park and continued in my apartment. I've had time to think, and have a better idea of what I need to do now that the Planet is not a part of my life. I would like to talk to you about my plans. You have been my work partner and friend for nearly a year. Please give our friendship a chance. At the very least, we should have a proper goodbye before we part company.*

*Always your friend,*

*Lois*

As she placed the note conspicuously on his table, she realized that there might be another option. She had the telephone receiver in her hand before she realized that the list of numbers

that Clark normally kept by his phone was missing. This time it didn't matter. She fished her own contact book from her handbag and there was the Kent's Smallville number.

Lois dialed and waited while the other end rang. It wasn't long before she had to concede that there was not going to be an answer.

She hung up and dialed the number again just to be sure she had done it correctly. The result was the same. The phone rang but there was no answer.

Well, she had the Kent's number and the note to Clark was in place. She could try again later from her place. As she left Clark's apartment, a dark fear rose in the back of her mind. What if Clark really was gone for good?

### Chapter 3

As Lois stood in the small box with strangers pressed against her on all sides, she considered her situation. It had been three days since she'd last seen Clark. Where was he? Then again, where was she? Physically, she was riding up an elevator to the bullpen of the most respected newspaper in Metropolis. The problem was that this elevator led to the offices of the Star. It was the most respected newspaper in the city only because the city's real newspaper was out of business.

The elevator door opened and her fellow passengers jostled her as they hurried to their desks. She couldn't avoid the feeling that these people didn't respect her. That had never been a problem at the Planet. At least not for several years. That had been her domain, and no one had dared mess with the top dog. Here, well, she was nothing more than a part-time freelancer.

She'd figured that even freelancing, Lois Lane would be treated with a great deal of respect. She'd been wrong. Too many people here had spent too many years trailing both her and the Planet. When she'd first walked in here two days ago, she'd been met with both fear and respect. When word got out that she was only freelancing, that pretty much disappeared. Oh, there were a few people here and there that made an effort to welcome her. Their motivation may have been respect, or it may have been pure self-interest. Whatever their reasons might be, after two days of mostly frosty receptions, Lois was grateful for the friendly faces she did encounter.

As she started across the newsroom floor, she was struck by the sterile feel of the place. It was an efficient and modern office, but it had no soul. On second thought, maybe this place had a soul, it was simply made of plastic and aluminum. Lois had seen these kinds of newsrooms before. When she was a young girl thinking about a future in news, she had imagined she would be working in a place like this. It had even seemed exciting. Then she saw the Planet and knew what it meant for a place to have soul. The Planet did. The Star didn't. When the business with Lex and Clark was finished, Lois guessed she'd probably be leaving Metropolis. She wouldn't work at LNN and the Star felt almost as unattractive.

She was here today to meet with the editor ... her editor. She reached Petersen's door and was about to knock when she saw him look up and wave her in. As she opened the door, he greeted her in a tone that was all business. "Good morning, Lois, please come in."

"Good morning, Mr. Petersen," Lois replied as she closed the door behind her. "You asked to see me today."

He motioned to a chair. "Let's get down to brass tacks. What's going on with Superman?"

Lois tried her very best to look confused. "I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"Don't give me that," he challenged. "You must know what I'm talking about."

Lois just stared back at him. After a few seconds, he sighed and continued with an air of exasperation. "Fine, let's go over the facts. On Monday afternoon, Superman helped clean up a multi-

car accident up on Highway 795. There were no major accidents on Tuesday so, at the time, no one paid much attention to the fact that he wasn't seen. On Wednesday morning, a small boat went down in the harbor and that afternoon there was a bank robbery. These kinds of incidents have been prime Superman attractors, but the big guy never showed. That was enough to get some people, including me, wondering. Finally, this morning there was a fire in one of the older apartment buildings at the edge of downtown. Eleven people died because no rescuers could get through the flames. In human terms, this represents the worst catastrophe in Metropolis in the last year, and Superman was nowhere in sight."

This was the first she'd heard of the fire. In that instant all she could think was that eleven people had died because Superman hadn't been there. They'd died because Clark left Metropolis. They'd died, and it was her fault. Her mind was being pummeled by flashes of thought. If not for... Clark would be... After a few seconds, she realized that she was risking giving away too much. She needed to get through this. She tried to still her thoughts and addressed her editor. "Mr. Petersen, it's a tragedy, and I'm surprised that Superman didn't help. What does this have to do with me?"

He must have noticed her shocked reaction but the tone of his reply revealed nothing. "The Star will be publishing that timeline in tomorrow morning's paper under a 'Where is Superman?' headline. Earlier this morning, I was looking at the dates and I realized that you came to the Star the same day Superman went missing." Petersen stood up and looked out the window. "Lois, I may not be Perry White, but I'm no fool, and I have connections. Yesterday afternoon I learned from our Society columnist that on Tuesday, you turned down Lex Luthor's offer of marriage. Not much leaks out of LexCorp Tower, but the story is, that he was very unhappy. Some people have speculated that one of the reasons he bought the Planet was in order to have a closer connection to you."

Lex's reasons for buying the Planet were old news, and anyway they didn't mean anything now that the Planet was gone. "Mr. Petersen, I don't know..."

He held up his hand. "I'm just telling you what I hear. Don't you think someone will find it interesting that on the same day you broke off your relationship with Lex Luthor, Superman went missing?"

He paused as if to give her the opportunity to reply, but she hadn't heard anything she considered worthy of a response. After a few seconds, Petersen continued. "You may not feel like you live in the spotlight, but everyone in the world saw you kiss Superman to send him off to intercept the Nightfall asteroid."

"What's that got to do with anything?" Lois snapped.

"I don't know," Petersen admitted. "But what will you do if the Inquisitor, or even something more respectable, suggests that you had a fight with Superman over Lex Luthor, and that's why Superman is missing?"

That was too much. The fact that she had a personal relationship with Superman was closer to the truth than he could be allowed to know. She wasn't sure exactly where he was going, but she wasn't here so that her personal life could sell newspapers. Lois stood abruptly and turned to head for the door while saying, "If all you want is tabloid..." She'd only taken a single step when she heard a plea from Petersen.

"Please don't go. I think you've misunderstood what I'm saying. I assure you that I'm not the enemy here."

Something about the way he spoke gave her pause. She'd done some research on Petersen before she came to the Star. He was smart and a class act. He'd been hired to try to take the Star up a notch. She turned and sat down. "Okay, but if I get up again, I won't come back."

"Fair enough," Petersen said as he sat down. "I want a win-

win for you and my paper. Like I said, you have a history with Superman. As of today, everyone is wondering where he's gone. Because of that history, you're going to be part of the story. You may not like it, but you know how these things go."

He was right, but this still had a tabloid feel. With a sense of trepidation she said, "Go on."

"It won't be too long before it's common knowledge that Superman is missing. Because of your history with Superman, your name will inevitably get pulled into the story. All that's left to make your life impossible, is to have word get out that you broke up with Luthor the same day Superman disappeared. When that happens, you know that some rag or another will make the very accusation that upset you a moment ago. At the very least, you'll need a friendly forum. Lois, I'm not interested in anything that belongs in a supermarket tabloid. As long as you're here, why don't we help each other? The Star can provide a haven and defend you if – when – the negative insinuations come up."

"That's very kind," she replied in a sarcastic tone. "What do you expect out of the arrangement?"

"You have to admit that this looks like some kind of soap opera. Some will look at the situation and call it a classic love triangle with you, Superman and Lex Luthor in the starring roles. Now, for the record, I don't believe anything like that happened, but I'm willing to bet that when the real story of Superman's whereabouts breaks, you'll be the person to have it. I want the Star to have that exclusive."

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As Lois rode the elevator down from the offices of the Star she was glad to have gotten out of the meeting without Clark's name coming up. When Petersen started reviewing timelines, she was sure he was going to include the fact that Clark disappeared on the same day that everything else had happened.

Lois couldn't believe Clark had acted so stupidly and disappeared the way he did. It wasn't that she thought he was stupid for leaving... Well, he was, but Lois could understand that part. She'd hurt him. Now that she understood him better – both sides of him – she could guess that avoidance was his primary means for coping with his uniqueness. That explained so much of how they'd gotten to where they were. Lois felt like she'd played both of their talks from Sunday over in her head a thousand times. Looking back now, she could see how much he was hurting. She understood why he left.

But having Superman and Clark Kent disappear the same day?! That was stupid. If Lex really is the criminal that Clark said, then what would it mean if Lex noticed the timing? That first night after Clark had left her apartment, Lois had been convinced that she'd have the chance to talk to him. She'd been sure that either Superman or Clark Kent would stick around for at least a week so that no one would have the chance to notice that they disappeared together. Unfortunately, he'd let his emotions get the better of him and now his secret was at risk.

The bump of the elevator reaching the ground floor startled Lois out of her muse. She needed to hurry to make a meeting with Sammy the Mouse. Once she'd decided that she needed to do something – anything – other than become Mrs. Lex Luthor, she'd figured her best course of action was to get back to what she knew. That's when she hit on the idea of freelancing as an investigative journalist for the Star. She wanted to stay in Metropolis for now, but didn't want to commit to any job on a long-term basis. Peterson had been ready to hire her in a second to join the staff. She'd had to do some fast-talking to convince him to bring her on as a freelance contributor.

Given all the trouble she'd had this week reaching her regular contacts, she'd felt fortunate to have heard back from Sammy. All of her contacts were good at providing information. While Sammy did give her information, his real talent was... artifacts. He'd once provided the key to a locker that contained the payoff

ledger for a major drug ring. Another time he'd left her a tape that contained a recording of a conversation that led to a story on industrial espionage. He was better at acquisitions than anyone Lois had ever met. Sammy was a small, thin kid with brown hair and, based on what he'd provided over the years, he could get in and out of places without being noticed. Lois believed that he might have a bit of a crush on her, but he was so shy, it was hard to tell. In any case, today he was the only informant in Metropolis that seemed willing to talk with Lois Lane.

Eventually she reached the site where she was supposed to make contact. It was way off the beaten path and she had to promise Sammy that she'd cover her tracks getting there. In accordance with his instructions, she took a seat on the empty bench and took out a book to read.

After a few minutes, she heard a voice behind her. "Lois, please don't react, don't turn around, and while we're talking, don't use my name. I can't be sure we're safe."

She held the book up higher to make it more difficult for anyone to notice that she was speaking. "What's this all about?" she asked.

The voice was barely above a whisper, but it was unmistakably Sammy's. "You did something that made someone with a lot of power very angry. Word is all over the street that anyone caught talking to you has a short life expectancy."

Based on the trouble she'd had getting her contacts to talk, this made sense, but was unexpected. "When did this happen?"

"About noon Tuesday," he answered. "From what I could tell, it all seemed to be coming down from the guy everyone calls the Boss."

The thoughts were like flashbulbs popping in her mind. Tuesday? Afternoon? The Boss suddenly wanted to make her life difficult? Could this be Lex's doing?

Then she remembered the Boss's reputation for ruthlessness. "Do you know if my life is in danger?"

"No, just the opposite," Sammy answered quickly. "Word is that you are to be unharmed. Whoever ordered this was worried that someone might try to gain favor with the Boss by helping you ... have an accident. You are untouchable, but unapproachable. I'd guess that he wants to make sure you have a hard time making it as a reporter in this town."

The Boss wanted her to have difficulty doing her job but didn't want her harmed. That was very interesting, but would have to wait for later. "Thanks for the warning," she said. "Do you have anything for me on the subject we discussed?"

"Yeah, there was this one guy, Sam Jacobson. He seemed to have some extra money right after the Planet went up."

That sounded like someone Lois needed to meet. "Where does he live?"

"The city morgue. Two days after the Planet exploded, he turned up full of holes."

That was going to make things more difficult. "Was he a freelancer or did he usually work for anyone in particular?"

"All these guys are freelance. There's a rumor that he's done work for the Boss several times."

A chill hit her. "So the Boss blew the Planet?"

"I don't know. Listen, Lois, I'm sorry but I need to be somewhere else."

"Thanks for taking the chance on me. I owe you big time."

"You'll make it up to me. I know that." There was a pause and Lois thought he'd gone. "By the way, what kind of fight did you have with Kent?"

"How did you know we had a fight?"

"On Monday, Sa... Well, my friend Sal was in the park. She said you two were having some kind of intense discussion. When it was over Kent looked ... not good. No one has seen him since. Did he finally tell you how he feels about you?"

"What do you know about Clark's ... feelings?"

She heard a chuckle. "I think everyone in the city knows but you." There was a pause. "Why not tell me what happened? We can call it partial payment on what you owe me."

It was none of his business, but Sammy was special. "We sort of had a fight. I haven't seen him since Monday either. Believe me, I've tried to reach him."

There was a pause as Sammy digested this. "Well, too bad. You two felt ... right."

They felt right? What did he mean by that? Enough of that subject. "Do you have anything else for me?" she asked.

Nothing but silence. It appeared that the meeting was over. It had been a very valuable one. In fact, today had been insightful all across the board. It seemed probable that the Boss had ordered the destruction of the Planet. The same Boss had ordered that she be cut off from information on the same day she'd broken up with Lex.

Could Lex be the Boss? A week ago, that would have sounded preposterous. But with what she knew now, the pattern was very suggestive. Lex bought the Planet. Then its destruction left her adrift. As the owner of the Planet, Lex was in a position to make sure that there was no pressure for a more thorough investigation that was absolutely necessary. The closing of the Planet was the driving force in the dispersal of all of her friends. It had left her floundering without direction.

The implication was staggering. Would Lex have done all that – spent that kind of money – to push her into marrying him? It seemed outrageous, but Lex had billions. In comparison to the financial resources he had available, the cost was negligible. Of course, much of this hinged on Lex either being the Boss or working very closely with the crime lord.

As Lois stood and prepared to leave the park, she was planning her next move. This was going to require help. Where was Clark?

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Lex surveyed the city with the calm assurance of a man that knows a good day when he sees it. Not that Lex Luthor had bad days. Others had bad days. For Lex, all days fell into two categories. There were days when he prepared for the future and there were days when the preparations bore fruit. Tuesday, when Lois announced her belief that their relationship was over, was of the former sort. Today was the latter.

"Mrs. Cox, what information do we have relating to the apartment fire this morning?"

"Eleven people from six different families died. The youngest was nine years old. The oldest was 87..."

Lex cut her off. "What about the survivors?" She was thorough, but sometimes failed to appreciate which details were important.

She changed course without hesitation. "There are survivors of each family living in Metropolis. In three cases, the family members survived by being out when the fire occurred."

"Have relatives of the victims been interviewed?"

"Yes sir. Per standing instructions we have identified those most likely to go on record blaming Superman for the deaths of their family members."

Lex turned to look out over the city. He could feel the smile growing on his face. "In battle one should always strike hardest when his opponent cannot retaliate." He turned back to his assistant. "I want all of our associates to push this as strongly as possible. Use the interviews with the survivors. Get more if necessary. LNN has a new editorial position: If Superman can't be counted on to be here when he's needed, then he should stay away. Make sure it's angry."

#### Chapter 4

Kissimmee, Florida, was the last place Martha Kent thought she would be spending this week. Not that she didn't like central Florida, but a trip to the home of Disney World was never high on

her list of things to do. Although she had to admit that she enjoyed the uniqueness of the trip they had all taken to Gatorland. The Gator Jumparoo was, if nothing else, fascinating. Who would have guessed that right across the street from a modern golf-course community in south Orlando, there would be a major reptile zoo? Even more interesting was the fact that the zoo overlooked a lake where hundreds of alligators lived in near-open conditions. Martha wondered how many people living on the golf course across the street knew that all of the hundreds of alligators on display had been captured in the immediate area. Kansas may not be the most exciting place in the world, but if the dog was late for supper at least you didn't have to wonder if he had become a snack for the local reptile population.

She was trying to make the best of this trip. After all, what is a mother to do when her son shows up in the middle of the night and declares that all their lives are over? Clark had appeared suddenly on Monday night and said that they had to disappear... forever! With some super-speed help, they'd packed up the farm on a moment's notice. Clark had just barely been calm enough to let Jonathan make arrangements with Wayne Irig to take care of the place while they were gone.

They had finally gotten Clark calmed down enough to explain what had happened. In a last-ditch attempt to save Lois from marrying Lex Luthor, their son had told Lois the secret of his dual identity. From the way he described it, things didn't go so well. Clark had come away terrified that Lois was going to tell Luthor the secret, and as a result, the three of them would be fugitives forever. At least that was Clark's opinion late Monday night.

Her son had wanted to head for a remote Andean village or the Canadian Northern Territories. Jonathan vetoed South America and Martha didn't like the sound of the remote reaches of northern Canada. Once it became clear that they weren't going to let Clark bully them into some hyper-remote location, they had an almost reasonable talk about where they could go. It had to be some place where they were likely to be overlooked for at least a week. Martha won the day with the argument that they still needed to be able to get news from the outside world. They needed to disappear and how better to do it than to disappear into a crowd? In this place, surrounded by thousands of other strangers, who was going to notice another small family? They'd found an inexpensive, but clean, motel run by a retired couple from Iowa. Clark had insisted that they pay for everything with cash to make sure they remained undetectable.

Martha had never seen her son so distraught. He was angry at Lois, angry at himself, and he was in more pain than she'd ever seen. Ever since they'd arrived, Clark had been in a funk. On Thursday when she declared that they were going to leave their room and do something, Clark just barely agreed. They had to stay away from the major attractions, since modern amenities meant modern surveillance. That suited Martha and she suggested they see the area and look for more old-Florida activities. That led them to the alligator park. Yesterday had turned out to be a pleasant change from the hiding-in-their-rooms that had filled their first two days here. The outing also seemed to help Clark get past some of his "they're coming to get us" phobia. He was still deeply depressed, but there was a little less stress in the mix.

Her men were out at the moment. Jonathan had convinced Clark to fly him back to the farm for just long enough to check on the place. Martha had used the time to go to the hotel office and buy a newspaper. What she saw on the front page convinced her that there might be an opportunity to get Clark to do something besides hide.

Clark hadn't been gone more than twenty minutes when the door opened and her son walked in. "Back so soon?" she asked.

"I dropped Dad off and checked Smallville and the area around the farm. There were no signs of any unusual activity at either place. Dad was making sure everything at home was in

order. Since things looked so quiet, I wanted to make sure you were okay. I'll go back and pick him up in a few minutes."

"I'm fine," Martha replied. "I picked up the morning edition of The Metropolis Star. Superman is on the front page."

"What?!" Clark exclaimed. "Lois didn't..."

"No, she didn't," Martha cut him off quickly. "There's an article about a major apartment building fire yesterday in the city. They are wondering why Superman didn't help."

He glanced at the paper for only a second and put it down on the nearby table. Then he dropped heavily into a chair. "Eleven people dead," he muttered.

"There's an editorial wondering what has happened to Superman. They have a timeline of your last few days in Metropolis. They know just about when you left."

"Mom, I... I wish there was another way. I don't like it, but that life is over. People die every day. I can't help everyone, even as Superman. The only difference is that this was Metropolis."

He tried to shrug it off, but Martha could see that the death toll from the fire was eating at her boy. "But that's the point. This was Metropolis." She paused for a few seconds. Maybe this was the time to ask that question again. "Clark, was it really necessary for you to leave?"

"We've been over this. I told Lois, and she's going to marry Luthor. She probably called him right after I left Monday night."

"I don't believe that. Lois is a sweet girl. She might be confused..."

"It's not confusion!" he cut her off angrily. "She... I..." He paused for a moment to collect himself. "She threw me out of her apartment. She threw me out and now she's going to marry Luthor."

Martha had seen many young people heartbroken in her time, but somehow never expected to see her son this way. He was acting stupidly but she and Jonathan had been reluctant to push him too hard. It did sound like Lois was going to marry Luthor. But Martha had met Lois. She had feelings for Clark. Strong feelings. If only he'd established more of a foundation first. But no, he had to drop the "I love you" bomb on a young woman who was already confused. "You said you told Lois that Luthor was a criminal."

"She never believed me before about him. Why would things be different now?"

"Clark, we've been over this. Because this time it was Clark *and* Superman that told her."

"I don't think that will make any difference."

Her son could be so exasperating. "You aren't giving her the credit she deserves. You need to get over being hurt and angry. Think about what she was going through. Didn't you say that the Daily Planet was just about her whole life?"

Clark looked sullen. "Yes," he muttered.

"You also said that Luthor is a smart man and that he did everything possible to confuse and deceive Lois."

"So?"

"Then how can you blame her for the way she reacted? Her whole world has been turned inside out and Luthor was doing everything in his power to get her to do what he wanted."

"But she admitted that I'm her best friend," Clark offered weakly. "And even if she turned Lex down, she was only interested in Superman, not Clark."

Martha stayed on the attack. "What could you expect? You've as much as admitted to having led Lois on too often when you were wearing the Suit."

"But she should have known."

That was too much. Martha reached out and slapped Clark's shoulder. "What? How?" she challenged.

"I don't know," he admitted. "It's just..."

That should be enough. All she really wanted to do was get Clark thinking. She switched back to "understanding Mom"

mode. “Son, it’s not only Lois that you need to forgive for all this. Strong feelings can confuse anyone about what might be the right thing to do. Being around her as yourself and feeling like you’re the one person that she didn’t notice. You did the best you knew how.”

She watched as he seemed to consider her words. He was so focused on Lois that he probably hadn’t realized he was also blaming himself for this mess. A few minutes alone would be good for him. “Why don’t you go pick up your dad and we can talk when you get back?”

“Okay, Mom.” He started for the door but stopped half way there, came back and hugged her. “Thanks. I hope you’re right about everything.”

“I do too, Son. Now go get your dad.”

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It wasn’t more than fifteen minutes before the door opened again. As Jonathan came in, he was talking to Clark over his shoulder. “I keep telling you, that’s all anyone’s heard.”

“What are you boys talking about?” Martha asked.

Jonathan came over and gave her a kiss. “I think we can go home,” he offered cheerfully.

She looked back and forth between her two men. Clark was shaking his head. “I don’t know, Dad. It sounds good but...”

“Would one of you please fill me in?” she asked.

Jonathan sat down and started to explain. “I called Wayne to check in. He said everything was fine. There haven’t been any strangers around our place or anywhere else in Smallville. The only thing unusual was that he’d gotten a call from Lois looking for Clark.”

“Did she say what she wanted?” Martha asked.

“She just said she wanted to talk to him. Wayne said that she sounded very upset.”

Martha tried not to smile as she turned to Clark. She failed. “Well?” she asked.

“Maybe she just wants the facts for the article to expose me,” he offered weakly.

“You don’t believe that any more than I do,” Martha replied.

“Wayne’s not the only person Lois called,” Jonathan added.

“What?!” Clark turned to his father. “You didn’t say she talked to anyone else.”

“I didn’t get the chance. I always have a hard time talking when you’re flying me somewhere.”

Martha put her hand on Clark’s shoulder. “Jonathan, please tell us what else you found out.”

“Well, I wanted to see if anyone was snooping around so I called the sheriff’s office and asked Rachel if she’d seen or heard anything. She said that no strangers have been around. Then she asked if I’d heard from Clark. Apparently Lois has called her every day starting Tuesday afternoon.”

“Every day?” Clark asked.

“Yep. Lois told Rachel that she and Clark had had a fight and Clark had said he was leaving Metropolis.” He turned to his son. “Apparently Lois was desperate to talk to you. From the way Rachel tells it, the last couple of days Lois has seemed almost in tears.”

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It was after 10:00 p.m. and Lois was sick of reading, sick of Ivory Tower, and sick of being by herself. She’d been especially tired every night this week. Not physically – the work she was doing was no more demanding than before. No, she was coming home each night mentally and emotionally exhausted. She knew that it was normal to come home some days drained of energy. That was just the way life worked. Lately, all her days had been tiring.

Lois felt very much the woman without a home. Sure, she had her apartment, but that had never really been home for her. Her home had been the Daily Planet. That was gone now. The idea of

freelancing for the Star had seemed so attractive. The demise of the Planet hadn’t put an end to crime and corruption. The work she so loved was still there for her. But she had to admit that, although Petersen was a good man to work for, he was no Perry White, and the Star just wasn’t the Planet.

The Star editor had bought into two themes of investigation for her contributions to the paper. The first was to be a standard business corruption series. That sort of thing always sold papers. The other was to be a complementary investigation that would delve more deeply into how corruption in business could lead to involvement with organized crime. Lois planned to deliver those stories. She needed a paycheck. The real reason for these two lines of investigation were to provide a cover for her to start looking more closely at Lex.

Even after Sammy had tipped her that she was off limits for most of Metropolis’s underworld, she’d thought she would only be minimally impacted. In one respect that was correct. Many of her sources had no connection with the darker side of Metropolis, so she still had access in business circles and city hall.

What she hadn’t counted on was the sense of social isolation. After the Claude fiasco a few years back, Lois had learned to be a loner. She had always done her investigations alone and that was how she liked it. At some point this past year, that had changed. Early on, she’d been certain that there was nothing she could learn from Clark. Now she was willing to concede that her earlier opinion might not have been correct. However, whether she needed him or not, she missed him.

Before Clark, it had been all about the win. Getting the story and the results of the investigation were everything. This year, working with Clark, she had come to learn that given the right circumstances – and working with the right person – the investigation itself could be fun. When she worked with Clark, there was an element of joy – of camaraderie – present in every day. Now that she was back on her own, that was gone. Plain and simple, she just missed him. She missed him terribly.

She wondered if she loved Clark. This past week had truly been the wake-up call she’d needed and she’d learned a lot about herself. After all the things that had happened on Monday, she’d cut all ties with Lex. In the intervening days she’d found, much to her surprise, that she hadn’t missed seeing Lex at all. What did that tell her? She had been considering marrying the man, but now that he was gone from her life, she felt no appreciable loss. Clark, on the other hand...

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As Clark approached Lois’s apartment he couldn’t help but think that if the situation wasn’t so tragic it would be funny. Last time he’d come, Lois had invited him as Superman, and he’d come as Clark. This time he was uninvited and he’d come as Superman. The one thing that the two visits did have in common was that he was as nervous this time as he’d been the last.

He approached her apartment from the air. He was in the Suit, but since this was not intended to be a return of Superman, he stayed above the buildings in the relative dark of the night sky. He was close enough so that when he concentrated he could hear Lois moving around in her apartment. She seemed to be alone so he went a little closer. Given the importance of this conversation, he risked looking in her apartment. What he saw almost knocked him out of the sky.

When Clark had come by on Sunday, he’d known that he would be telling Lois his secret. He’d used his special vision to check Lois’s apartment for surveillance equipment before he entered. He trusted Lois, but she was too close to Luthor. Clark had almost been surprised that he’d found nothing in that search. Things had changed in the intervening week. Now her apartment was full of well-hidden surveillance equipment. A careful scan revealed that every room in her apartment had at least one camera, even her bathroom.

Clearly she'd done something to anger Luthor. Only he would have the means and motive to do something like this. Clark couldn't talk to her in her apartment. He considered calling on the phone and talking to her as Clark, but it was likely that her phone would be tapped and she might say something that would reveal his identity. Hopefully she hadn't already.

He finally decided on a note. A quick side trip to the bombed-out Planet building provided a pen, paper and some tape. In less than a minute he had the note.

*Lois*

*I would like to speak with you but your apartment is bugged. If you are interested, please go into the alley just to the north of your building. I'll be waiting.*

*Superman*

That should be safe enough. Even if the surveillance equipment managed to detect the note, it wouldn't reveal anything compromising. There was always the chance that her apartment might be under external surveillance, so he didn't want to hover outside her window. Instead, Clark used super-speed to tape the note to Lois's window. Then it took several passes of tapping on her window before she came over to investigate. He felt a surge of joy when Lois immediately put on her coat and headed for the ground floor. Clark removed the note and a shot of heat vision disposed of it quickly. He headed to the alley to wait for Lois.

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It was all Lois could do to keep from running down the stairs of her building. When she'd heard the tapping, just the chance that it might be Clark had lifted her spirits more than she thought possible. Then, when she read the note, she had a decidedly mixed reaction. Clark was here, but her apartment was bugged. Her anger about her apartment being bugged was almost lost in the joy of Clark's return.

It was late enough that under normal circumstances she would never enter a dark alley. But the note had been in Clark's handwriting. Just the same, Lois had her hand on her pepper spray as she approached the shadowy area.

"Clark?" she whispered as she turned the corner.

"I'm here," came the reply.

Lois took another step and there he was. He was wearing the Superman suit but she didn't see Superman. She saw Clark. He'd come back to her, and the surge of joy was overwhelming. She never decided to rush over to him, but it happened just the same. For a moment, there were no words, just him and her arms around him.

At first he was stiff. She didn't mind. Given how they'd last parted, she'd expected that. After a few seconds he seemed to relax and she felt his arms surround her. The stresses of the past week seemed to melt away. Being there in Clark's arms brought her a sense of peace and joy that had been missing ever since Lex had first proposed.

She felt like she could have stayed in Clark's embrace forever. But all too soon she heard Clark's voice. "We need to talk."

At that moment she didn't want to talk, she wanted to hold Clark. Even more, she wanted to be held by him. His voice sounded so nice. The voice she'd heard on Sunday night had been full of anger. That wasn't the voice she'd come to depend on this past year. The voice she was hearing now was as different as night and day. This was her friend. Her partner. Her love... No, that was still too scary. After this week, she suspected that it might be true, but Clark was back now and there would be time to sort out the rest later.

"Lois?" he tried again.

"Please don't leave again," was the only response she could manage.

"I'll stay if I can. But we need to talk. I need to know what's been happening."

She looked up at him. There was concern... and something

else. She hoped it wasn't her imagination. "Okay, we can talk. Just don't leave," she said as she tightened her hug.

He looked around. "We need to go somewhere private. Hold on."

Right now that was a request she was happy to fulfill. She felt his arms get just a little tighter as they headed for the sky. As they cleared the rooftop of her building, Lois discovered that while flying with Superman had been great, flying with Clark was even better.

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The only place that Clark was sure they would have some privacy was high up in the Planet building. He'd been there only a few moments before, and had noticed that the building was completely clear of both people and surveillance equipment. He took them to their old newsroom. The area where he had first flown Lois through the window nearly a year ago was clear of debris and the glass was intact. There was enough light from the city and a partial moon so that they wouldn't be in complete darkness.

As he set Lois down, he was seized with a fit of nervousness. Lois's greeting had caught him completely off guard. Was it genuine? Was it because she wanted to see Superman? He'd come tonight with the sole purpose of talking to her but now he didn't know what to say. Finally he just stepped back and said, "Hi."

"Hi?!" she yelled. "Clark, what were you thinking?"

"Huh? About what?"

"You disappeared!" she shouted again. She didn't seem to be in a mood to mitigate her volume. "You left Metropolis!" Then in a softer tone, "You left me."

Part of him was thrilled at her being so upset that he'd gone. However, he also felt that given the situation, he'd had to go. "I didn't see that I had much choice," he replied defensively. "I had to convince you that what I knew about Luthor was genuine. You wouldn't listen to me. I thought you might listen to him."

"Him?" she asked. "What *him* are you talking about?"

"Superman. I figured that since you wouldn't believe me you might believe him." This conversation looked to be going badly again.

She stepped back and motioned at his body with her hand. "Clark. What in the world are you talking about? Look at what you're wearing. Right now you are talking out of *his* mouth."

He could feel that same despondency from the other night growing again. She didn't understand. "Never mind," he replied. "I'll take you back to your building and go. This was a bad idea."

In an instant, she had him in one of those hugs again. "No," she pleaded, her head pressed up against his chest. "I don't understand about you and ... him. But I know I don't want to lose you, whatever clothes you're wearing."

Her tone made it impossible to doubt her. And it felt really good when she held him like this. Maybe he should try a different tack. "Lois, first of all, have you told anyone about me? I mean my two jobs."

She released him and stepped back. "You mean the fact that Clark Kent has a part time job as Superman?"

Up until that moment, despite everything she'd said and done tonight, Clark still harbored doubts.. But with that one simple statement, those doubts shattered. She knew that first and foremost, he was Clark "You do understand," he said joyfully.

"I'm trying," she offered.

"Well, yes. If anyone found out..."

"Of course I haven't told anybody," she replied abruptly, cutting him off. "... I guess I understand why you never told me. You didn't feel you could trust me. But it's hard. I thought we were friends." She sounded so hurt.

"We are friends," he pleaded. "Part of me always wanted to tell you. It's just... you have to understand that my parents and I have kept this secret my whole life. It was scary enough when we

were only worried about the government coming to lock me up in some lab or imprisoning my parents. Since I created Superman, I have other enemies who are more dangerous than the government. The consequences of that information getting out were... I'm sorry, but I couldn't take the chance."

"What changed your mind?"

Clark sat down on a nearby step. He looked at the floor for a second to gather himself, then looked up at her. "I didn't know what else to do. I had to do whatever was necessary to make you understand what Luthor really was. It was my last hope to save you."

Lois came over and sat next to him. After a second, she reached out and took his hands in hers. "You did," she replied softly. "But Clark, don't you realize that you've put yourself at risk even with me keeping your secret?"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

She shook her head as if he were a slow student. "The timeline of Superman's disappearance is all over the city. I've been scared to death that someone was going to ask me if I noticed that you and Superman left on the same day. What would it mean if Lex or someone else noticed the timing and made the connection? That's what I was talking about a moment ago when I asked what you were thinking. I thought that you would keep either Clark or Superman around for a while so there wouldn't be anything for people to notice."

"Lois, I'm sorry but I was terrified that you would tell someone. That's why I had to disappear and get my family into hiding."

"Well, you needn't have worried because I didn't and I won't. Besides, since Tuesday your other reason for leaving Metropolis no longer applies."

She was still holding his hand. Her smile was so nice. He was afraid to guess what she meant so he just waited and let his confusion show.

After a second, she supplied the rest of the answer. "On Tuesday I went to Lex and told him I couldn't see him anymore. I quit LNN and I'm freelancing for the Star until I can decide what to do now that the Planet is gone."

He felt a surge of elation but tamped it down. "Why?" he asked cautiously.

"Because the Star is the best option I had where I could stay in Metropolis," Lois answered.

"Not that," Clark said. "Why did you break up with Luthor?"

"Because you told me what Lex is." She still sounded a little defensive, but she also managed to make it sound like that had been the only possible outcome.

His word as Clark had never been good enough before. "You mean because Superman told you what he is."

She suddenly looked tired. "Clark, please don't be this way." She paused and took a deep breath. "Yes, it was because Superman told me. But it wasn't so much that it was Superman, as it was that now I have some idea why you know things about Lex that I don't. In the past when you've told me to be careful of Lex, you never gave me any reason. Think about how it looked based on what I knew. You never gave me a basis for your dislike."

"Now you know why I know what I do," he offered.

Lois nodded and he started to ask *the* question. It stuck in his mouth and he ended up standing there with his mouth open for several seconds. Lois was uncharacteristically patient as she waited for him to continue. She must have seen that he had something important to say. Finally he took a deep breath and asked, "Where do we stand?"

She got that defensive look again. "What do you mean?"

Clark almost accused her of only being happy to see him because she knew that he was both Clark and Superman, but managed to avoid saying that. She seemed to be trying so hard, and he so wanted to believe. "Tonight you seem awfully happy to

see me. When we last talked... well, you threw me out."

Her comeback was immediate. "I never wanted you to leave Metropolis. When I asked you to leave my apartment, I did so because it seemed like you were making baseless accusations against... my then boyfriend. I've always wanted you as my friend. You know that."

"Lois, what do you want now?"

She stood and walked slowly away. After a few steps she stopped and turned around. "I want you back." She paused for a second to collect her thoughts. "I've managed to learn a few things this week. First, I missed you terribly – and I don't mean Superman. I missed my best friend and partner."

Clark felt another of those waves of joy wash over him. If only there had been some way to get here more easily.

She walked back and sat back down. "The other thing I learned is that I don't know who you are."

Clark started to interrupt but his mouth barely got open when Lois cut him off with a finger to his lips. "You aren't Superman. You're Clark. I'm beginning to understand that part. But you aren't really Clark either. At least, not the Clark I thought I knew. The Clark I knew was never worried about enemies and government labs. Don't you see that the Clark you show the world – the Clark I thought I knew – is no more who you are than Superman?"

That simple statement caught him completely off-guard. Somehow, he'd never really thought about that before. He used his powers all the time to make everyday chores a little easier, but no one ever saw that. So much of what he did – and didn't do – was based on who he really was. He could argue that Lois had seen all the important parts of Clark Kent, but who was he to tell her what she should think was important?

"Okay," he finally answered. "I wanted you to like me as Clark but I've never let you see the real me." As he said the words he felt a fear rising. What if Lois didn't like the real Clark?

Lois seemed to sense his fear and took his hands again. "I have a better idea of who you are now. I just need to figure out what parts are you and what parts are pretend. Now I know that when I see Superman all stiff and formal, that's just an act. And next time I see Clark afraid of anyone, that's the other face of the same act."

She reached out and brought her hand gently to his cheek. "I've learned that the source of all that's best in Superman comes from who he really is." She pulled her hand back and her tone turned more serious. "We should take some time and get to know each other. You need to see me when I'm past being infatuated with the hero. I need to see who you are when you aren't constantly hiding one part of yourself or another."

Clark still wanted to be cautious, but just couldn't muster the will. "So, when we figure out how to get Clark back to Metropolis, will you go out with me?"

"Absolutely!" she answered enthusiastically. Clark wouldn't have thought she could smile so big and talk at the same time.

He could have sat there just looking at her smile and holding her hand for a lot longer, but they had other issues to deal with.

"Lois, we need a plan for my return." He felt relief at having his partner back. Lois would come up with a good story – he knew she could do that. "And your apartment is bugged," he continued quickly. "I've never seen anything like it. It is completely covered for both video and sound. There are even cameras in your bathroom."

So much for the smile that she'd been wearing. For a few seconds he saw nothing but anger, but then it flashed to a look of worry. "Oh, God! Your secret..."

"Don't worry," he cut her off. "Before I came in on Monday, I looked your place over. I do that all the time at my apartment. It was clean then."

"So my apartment was bugged after I broke up with Lex." Her

voice was cold. This was angry Lois, but that was okay. He liked angry Lois. As long as the anger wasn't being directed at him. "That was part of what I wanted to tell you," she said after a second. "When I told him we were through, I saw some of what you've seen. There's a darkness in him that I never noticed before."

So she had finally seen it. "You can't go back to your apartment," Clark warned.

She smiled a mischievous smile. "Sure I can. You see, my friend Superman..." she patted him on the leg "... came by tonight to tell me that Clark got my messages and that he and his parents are back from their family emergency. While he was visiting, Superman noticed that my apartment was bugged and graciously agreed to clear them out. You can do that, can't you?"

"Sure. But what if they come back?"

"Is there any reason Superman can't return tomorrow?"

"No," he answered. Lois clearly had this all figured out.

"Good," she said brightly. "Superman can clear out the bugs tonight and resume activities tomorrow. Clark can..." She brought both hands to his cheeks and held him with an intense gaze "... will – please – call me at least once a day to lift my spirits and keep up on developments in Metropolis. He can wrap up his business in Smallville in a week or so. In the meantime Superman can let me know if someone plants any more bugs in my apartment."

He could look into those eyes forever. "It sounds like a plan," he said with a smile.

"Good. Now let's go clear out my apartment so I can get some sleep. I'm suddenly more relaxed than I've been in a long time."

As Clark lifted her in his arms and flew out the window, he realized that he had one more question. "Lois, what in the world are you doing working for the Star?"

### Chapter 5

Harry Pearlman was rushing to get to work. Since his wife had died six months earlier, it seemed like he was always having to rush to get anywhere. That was mostly due to the time he spent with his seven-year-old daughter, Melanie. After his wife had died, she'd been his salvation.

He wasn't very good at organizing his new life, and that left him in a constant state of rushing around and trying to multitask. This particular morning, in addition to driving his car, he was drinking his coffee, reading a finance report for his department at work, and trying to find a radio station with the score from last night's Cubs – Yankees game. Unfortunately, his eyes were elsewhere when he passed the caution sign warning of construction on the overpass. Then he was distracted when another car blew its horn after he started to wander into their lane on his left. When he realized what was happening, he tried to recover by jerking his car to the right. At this point, he had the misfortune to overcorrect at the exact point on the overpass where the guardrail had been damaged by an accident the previous day.

As Harry's car burst through the weakened railing and he saw the other highway 60 feet below rushing to meet him, his only words were, "I'm sorry, Melanie."

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Lois loved her alarm clock. From the time she'd gotten her job at the Planet, and then an apartment of her own, she'd gotten up to the same alarm every day. The only problem was that there was no way to turn it off. Lois's alarm was the city of Metropolis. She had always been especially sensitive to the sounds the city produced. This was her city and it told her when it was time to get up.

Unfortunately, her alarm had been malfunctioning this past week. Every day this week she'd been getting up between 3:30 and 5:00 a.m. In the past when that happened, there was invariably a story breaking somewhere. This week, her system had not been working. Tuesday didn't count since that was the

night of no sleep after that meeting with Clark. On Wednesday when she woke up early, she went through her routine and headed out to find the story that she was sure had called to her. It wasn't there. Thursday she'd suspected that it was another false alarm but she'd headed out anyway. Again there was no story to be found. On Friday she just stayed in bed. She could feel that there was nothing going on. It wasn't the city waking her, it was her own dissatisfaction.

Lois opened her eyes at 6:12 on Saturday morning, and the world was right again. At first she thought it was just the joy that came from getting right with Clark. While that did bring a sense of warmth and well being, there was something else. Her city had called to her. News was happening out there. For the first time in more than a week, she could feel it. That made her feel almost as good as thinking about Clark.

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The fire was out and the reporters were waiting. Clark hoped that any questions would be about the fire, but he knew his absence would be the topic of the moment. He'd just finished talking with the fire captain and there really wasn't very much for Clark to report. He'd told the captain that the fire looked to be perfectly innocent and the source of the fire appeared to be electrical.

As the fire captain returned to his duties, Clark walked over to where the reporters were waiting. There was an immediate flurry of shouted questions, but almost all of them were variants on two issues. They were "Where have you been?" and "Why did you disappear?"

Clark held up a hand in a request for silence and was almost surprised when the reporters quieted down. "Some of you have asked why I've been away from the city for most of the past week. I'm afraid that I can't answer in detail. I have to point out that I was only gone a total of four days. In retrospect, I realize that I should have alerted some of the local agencies such as the police and fire departments that I would be temporarily unavailable. I will keep that in mind if circumstances require that I be away again." Clark figured that was enough to start and wanted to see where they were going to go with the questions.

There was an immediate shout from the back of the group. "What about the people that died while you were gone?"

Clark had known this one was coming. "I'm sorry that there was a tragic loss of life while I was away. I do what I do because I value all life."

"Do you feel responsible for the fate of those that died in the fire Thursday?" This came from a woman he didn't recognize.

He paused for several seconds while he tried to think of an answer. Then he remembered something Lois had once said. "A good friend once told me that even I can't be everywhere at once. I try to do the best I can."

Suddenly Clark heard something wonderfully familiar. It was a heartbeat. Lois was here. Clark had to fight to keep a huge smile from erupting. The other reporters wouldn't understand. Before he could look for her, he heard another question. "Where were you those four days?"

Good, back to questions he'd prepared for. "A dear friend in another part of the world died unexpectedly. I was able to be there for the end and I stayed to help the family. That's all I'll say for now."

The group seemed to be trying to digest that when a most pleasant voice spoke up. "Superman, can you tell us anything about today's fire?"

Clark could hardly believe how Lois's voice lifted his spirit. When he made eye contact, he nearly lost his detached Superman persona. "I'm afraid that there probably isn't anything particularly newsworthy here. I told the fire chief that this appeared to be an accidental fire due to old electrical wiring. Naturally, it will be up to the fire department to make a final assessment."

“Of course, thank you, Superman,” Lois said and turned away. She would recognize that the fire wasn’t especially newsworthy. However, her presence would allow her to use the fire as the hook for the story of his return. She had the details of the official story of his absence. In fact, she’d invented many of those details herself. Still, there was an even better story to mark his return. He needed to get word to her about the car rescue this morning. She needed to know that the fire wasn’t his first act.

A few more questions were shouted from the throng of reporters, but even if he answered them, he had no interesting information to convey. “I need to go,” he said abruptly, and headed for the sky.

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Petersen had been perusing her story for over half an hour. Perry had never taken that long to approve a story. Of course, at the Planet she’d been on staff. Perry never had to decide if a story was worth paying extra.

Part of the delay was almost certainly because she’d turned in two stories. After the brief meeting with Clark at the scene of the fire, she’d been heading for the Star to add the fire elements to her already-written story of Superman’s return. While waiting at a stop light, she had felt a rush of air and found a note in her lap. The note – in Clark’s handwriting – revealed that the fire had not actually been the first action of Superman’s return. He’d saved a driver who’d crashed through a barrier on an overpass from plunging onto a busy highway. The note had provided a name and a human interest angle: the driver was a widower with a young daughter. Lois had found the man and had the story. It turned out that the accident victim, Mr. Pearlman, knew of Lois’s association with Superman and was particularly forthcoming for the interview.

The story was good. The only way it might be better would be if Clark could write the touchy-feely side himself. However, as much as she would have hated to admit it a year ago, she’d learned something about this kind of writing from working with Clark.

She’d had to reconsider her plan for the story of Superman’s return. The rescue of Mr. Pearlman was strong enough to stand on its own. She’d ended up dropping the fire completely and offering the story of Superman’s whereabouts as a stand-alone piece. Others who had been at the fire this morning had generalities. Lois had the details. Thanks to Clark, she’d just turned in two front page stories. Her chances of paying this month’s rent had just increased by a substantial margin.

“Lane!” The bellow from Petersen’s office startled her out of her muse. Lois knew she’d just made his paper. She casually stood and headed for the office.

Petersen was waiting with his door open. She went in, sat down, and waited for him to make the first move. He closed his door and went back to his own chair. After a moment, he finally broke the silence. “Two stories?”

“There were two newsworthy items this morning,” she replied casually.

“The information about Superman’s whereabouts... he didn’t say anything about China when he spoke after the fire.”

“So?” she asked.

“Are you sure? Will Superman verify this?” Petersen seemed nervous at running a story based solely on her word.

“Yes. That is if anyone else can get him to talk about it at all.” Which Lois knew would not happen. Clark had promised that he’d back the facts and that no one else would get any details.

“Have you been holding out on me? Did you know this all along?”

“No. I got this in an interview with Superman that took place within the last 24 hours. Before that, I had no more idea where he was than anyone else.”

Petersen just stared at her for a moment. Then he picked up a

printout of the car accident story. “Where did you get this?”

“What do you mean? There’s a police report.”

“The report only talks about a broken railing and some unsubstantiated accounts of a disappearing car. No one else has heard of this yet. It happened twenty minutes before the fire, but there was almost no coverage of this incident. No one else on my staff even knew this had happened.”

“Do you doubt the story?” she asked.

“Not now. I had it checked out. I had to.” He looked a little defensive. “Everyone else will be saying that the fire was the first thing Superman did on his return to Metropolis.”

“Everyone else will be wrong,” Lois deadpanned.

“And the Star will be right,” he replied with a confident smile.

“We both know this was exactly the kind of story you wanted when I agreed to work with the Star.” Lois still wasn’t sure why he’d asked her to stick around. “Is there anything else?” she asked politely.

He smiled and shook his head. “How can I get you on staff?”

“I’m sorry, but I still don’t feel comfortable committing to anything beyond freelancing.”

“You’ll need a full time job,” he said. “The Planet is gone. Listen, Lois, a lot of us are working to make the Star a quality publication. We were fortunate enough to pick up several members of the Planet staff when it went down. I couldn’t believe it when we weren’t able to hire any of the Planet’s city beat team. I want some of that talent – your talent – here at the Star. Is there anything I can do to get you here on a permanent basis?”

She had to admit that it was fun getting involved again.

Getting back in a newsroom had been just the thing she’d needed. To her surprise, in many ways she didn’t miss the Planet as much as she’d thought she would. She’d never been that close to most of her coworkers. Other than Clark, the only people she really missed were Jimmy and Perry. And finally, the Star wasn’t nearly so bad as she’d imagined when she’d walked in that first day. Petersen was right – this wasn’t the same Star that she’d looked down on in years past.

At that moment, Petersen tossed the car accident story on his desk. “You know, this has a personal feel that reminds me of Kent’s work.”

She felt a flash of anger. “I haven’t seen Clark for several days and I don’t take credit for other people’s work.”

“Calmed down, Lois. That’s not what I meant. The style is reminiscent of Kent’s but I can see that you wrote this. I’ve looked at your work from before you teamed up with Kent. It’s top-notch stuff, all of it, but it is all hard edges. This has a softer touch that works well for this story. Do you think some of that came from working with Kent?”

“Clark is an excellent reporter,” she replied immediately. “I’d be a fool not to have learned from the time I spent working with him.” The words were out of her mouth before she realized how different her opinion was than it had been a year ago. The Lois Lane from the pre-Clark times would have never admitted that she could learn anything. Something had changed. Now she thought of herself as part of a team. A compliment to Clark was a compliment to her as well.

Petersen was looking at the car accident story. “I was just thinking that you two made a good team.”

“We did,” she said confidently. “Perry told me that he thought we could be one of the great teams in the history of the Planet.”

“You know how much I value you as a solo contributor, and the offer of a full-time position is still on the table.” He motioned at the car accident story on his desk. “When I read this, it reminded me of how powerful a team you and Kent made.” He paused for a second and then looked up at her. His expression was one of serious business. “I’ve been talking with the suits upstairs and I’ve been given the go-ahead to create staff positions for you and Kent. I know he hasn’t found a job yet. I’m betting he’d come

on board if you were here. Would that help convince you to consider joining the Star family?”

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Lex looked out over his city. It was kind of Superman not to make him wait any longer. The preparations had come together quickly and their nature meant that they had a short shelf life. After a few minutes he turned and pressed the call button on his desk. Within seconds, Mrs. Cox was standing before him.

“Please give me the details of Superman’s return,” Lex directed.

“As of noon today he has been involved in six incidents of which we are aware. This represents a much higher intervention rate than the average before his disappearance.”

Lex considered that. “Good. Have our resources at LNN and other outlets present this information in a way that will suggest that he’s trying to gain forgiveness by butting in more than normal. Do we have news assets tracking incidents where he did not intervene?”

“Yes. I am aware of two people that have died today under circumstances that might have been prevented had Superman been there.”

“Find a pattern that provides a basis to argue that Superman picks and chooses who he saves. If no pattern emerges, create one. The accusations don’t need to hold up. Simply having them in circulation will serve our needs.”

Lex paused for a moment to review other details of the anti-Superman campaign. “Are our people on the ground ready for their part?”

Mrs. Cox was ready with the information and responded immediately. “We have 97 individuals ready to heckle Superman if he makes an appearance. They are distributed around Metropolis in areas that are likely Superman intervention points.”

“And operation K?”

“We are set. Production of the material is complete and we are only waiting for your word and the proper opportunity.”

Lex was again struck by the quality of Mrs. Cox’s work. “All very good. Do you have anything that requires my attention?”

“Unfortunately, I do. There has been an interruption in the surveillance of Ms. Lane.”

“Please clarify.” Lex was sure the annoyance he felt showed in his voice, but no matter.

If Mrs. Cox noticed anything in his tone, she concealed it completely. “At 10:57 last night she left her apartment and entered an alley near her building. She was not seen leaving the alley. At 12:13 a.m. all of our equipment ceased functioning.”

“Everything stopped at the same time?” Lex asked.

“Yes, Sir. The equipment was disabled or removed from both her apartment and her vehicle. The monitoring of her phone at the Star is still in place and functioning.”

Lex considered the implications of the timing. “It appears that Ms. Lane had a late-night visit from Superman. I had hoped that he might not detect our equipment, but I’m hardly surprised that he did. No matter. Continue as possible using human assets and any remaining technology.” Lex considered this development for a moment. “She’s been using her work phone in her attempts to find Kent. Did she make another call today?”

“Yes, sir. She spoke with the Smallville sheriff again. The subject was essentially the same as every other day this week. The sheriff did report being in contact with Kent’s father, but had no information about the younger Mr. Kent.”

Lex was still unhappy about Lois’s distress over her missing partner. Once he had taken care of Superman, he would be free to remove Mr. Kent as well. There was one more avenue to explore. “Mrs. Cox, I will need all the information from our purchase of the Daily Planet on my desk before the end of the day.”

## Chapter 6

The Star newsroom showed more activity on a Sunday than

Lois generally saw during her time at the Planet. If she decided to take Petersen up on his offer, she’d need to find out why they staffed so heavily on Sunday. Lois was still basking in the glow of two Page One stories. They’d made the evening edition on Saturday and seeing her name on a page one byline lifted her spirit so much that it almost made up for the fact that this was the Star and not the Planet.

She was mulling over Petersen’s surprise offer to make positions for both her and Clark when the phone rang. She picked up the handset and answered with a short, “Lois Lane.”

“Hi, Lois. I hear you’ve been looking for me.” It was Clark.

“Clark, I’ve been so worried. Where have you been?” Lois made sure she projected as much concern into her voice as she could.

“I’m really sorry. I should have let you know where I was going, but we haven’t been getting along so well lately. I didn’t think you’d miss me.”

“Well, you were wrong,” she said definitively. “Listen, Clark. I know you weren’t happy about me getting married, but you’re my best friend. We have to be able to disagree at times without it threatening our friendship.”

“I know,” Clark replied. “I owe you an apology. I still think Lex is wrong for you, but if he is the man you love, then I’ll do my best to support your decision.” Clark did a good job of sounding like a friend trying to be understanding and supporting.

It was amazing to hear Clark work through the speech they’d written together. When Clark had discovered the bug on her work phone, it had seemed reasonable to overlook this bug as it provided a means to pass along false information. “Clark, I decided to say no to Lex. With all the turbulence going on in my life right now I can’t make a commitment like that.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Clark replied, exactly according to the script. She swore she could hear the grin that must be on his face. “I guess if you and Luthor are meant to be together, he’ll wait for you to get comfortable again.”

“Thanks, Clark. Your support means a lot.”

“Lois, we’re partners. I’ll always do my best to support you.” This was part of the speech. The idea was to convince whoever had tapped her phone – almost certainly Lex – that they were friends and partners but nothing more. Still, when he said it, it was like a warm wave washing through her. He would always try to do what was best for her, whatever the cost to himself. He’d proven that this week. He cared that much. That idea was both exhilarating and frightening.

She must have tuned out for a second because suddenly Clark was speaking again. “I saw the Star this morning. Those were great stories but it seems weird to see your byline in the Star.”

“It is for me too. But the Planet is gone and I have to move on. Before I came here I talked to some people I know about this situation. Petersen, the editor here, was brought in to bring some respectability to the Star. For now I’m only freelancing but I have an offer to join the staff.”

“It looks like it might be a good opportunity,” Clark said. “I’ve heard of Petersen. Last year he was rumored to be in the running for the editor’s spot at the Chicago Sun. He didn’t get it, but I heard it was a close thing. He certainly brings some respect to the Star. I’m happy for you, but I’ll miss working together.”

“Clark, he told me the same offer is open to you, too.”

There was an extended period of silence. She hadn’t talked to Clark since Petersen made this offer and this part was all off script. “Clark?” she finally asked.

“I’m here,” he replied quickly. “I’m just ... surprised. I mean, I know why he’d want Lois Lane, but why would he want me?”

“Because he believes that the two of us together are an investment worth making. Of course, you’ll have to meet with him yourself – that is, if you’re interested.”

He was quiet for a few seconds. “Lois, what do you want? I

remember that you weren't exactly enthusiastic about working with me."

"That was a long time ago. Honestly, Clark, I agree with Petersen. We do make a good team. Perry thought so, too, remember?"

"I'll think about it..." he said hesitantly. At first, his apparent lack of enthusiasm confused her, but then she remembered that they were on a bugged line. She almost missed when he continued. "...but right now my parents still need me here."

Clark had returned to their script. "What happened?" she exclaimed. "I've been trying to reach you all week. I was scared that something bad had happened to you."

"I'm sorry for worrying you. I got a message late Monday night that one of mom's cousins had an accident. I was lucky enough to see Superman and he gave me a ride to Smallville."

"Well, don't disappear again without letting me know where you're going. I could have used your help this week when Superman turned up missing."

"I really am sorry, Lois. Superman didn't say anything to me about going to China. That must have happened after I saw him."

"Yes. He told me he received news of his friend early Tuesday morning."

"I was sure surprised when Superman turned up missing," Clark said.

"Everyone here was too. His disappearance made people nervous. It's hard to believe that he's only been around for a year. It's nice to have him back." Lois paused for a minute. "Speaking of coming back, when will you be returning to Metropolis?"

"I'll probably be here in Smallville for another week or so. I left pretty quickly. Would you do me a favor and keep an eye on my apartment?"

"Sure, Clark. I went by last Monday but I'll swing by every couple of days to keep an eye on things."

"Thanks, Lois. Well, I have some chores to do. Call me if you want to talk."

"I will, Clark. Bye."

"Bye."

As Lois hung up the phone, she hoped that it had been worth the effort. If Lex was monitoring her phone that should be enough to convince him that Clark's disappearance had nothing to do with Superman's absence. Lois knew that she was probably worrying about this too much, but Clark risked so much for her and she wanted to err on the side of caution.

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Clark was nearing Metropolis. It hadn't been more than 30 seconds since he finished the phone conversation with Lois. By appearing as Superman in the city at what would appear to be the exact time of their conversation, he would provide more evidence that any connection between Superman's missed days and Clark Kent's absence was strictly coincidental. The call had been Lois's idea. Since her other calls to Smallville had been monitored, it provided closure to that part of the story.

He was still reeling from Lois's news. It was great, but he hadn't expected the job offer. When the Planet had closed, he was so worried about Lois that he had never considered applying to the Star. He'd heard that they were trying to upgrade their image, but he hadn't bothered to investigate. Petersen had a reputation as a capable and serious editor. The fact that Lois would even consider that job spoke volumes about her belief in the Star's increased respectability. In any case, he needed to talk to her without having to worry about being recorded. It sure sounded like she wanted to work together again.

Everything with Lois had become so complicated. What was their relationship? He knew what he wanted it to be. He knew what he hoped it was rapidly becoming. They had a promise of a date when he returned as Clark. He was just so scared. Could her change of heart be mostly a reaction to learning the truth about

him and Lex? What if when they did get some personal time together, she didn't feel the magic he did? Clark knew from hard experience to be extra cautious when things seemed too good to be true.

He was over Metropolis now and the sound of a gunshot cut short his confused thoughts. A little super-speed brought him quickly to a convenience store where he found a gunman attempting to leave. Clark stopped the gunman, disarmed him and tied him up with a cord from one of the store shelves. Only then did he look behind the counter. There was a middle-aged Hispanic man lying dead on the floor. He had a gunshot wound in the center of his chest. It looked like he'd been killed instantly.

A few seconds later a younger woman came running out of the back of the store. She barely glanced at Superman before falling to her knees by the dead man. "Papa," she cried. "Oh, Papa." After a second, she looked up at Clark. "Help, him!" she shouted.

Clark had used his X-Ray vision to look into his chest the instant he'd seen the man. His heart had been completely destroyed by the bullet. He'd been beyond hope before Clark had even heard the shot. "I'm sorry, Miss, but there was nothing I could do."

"You don't care!" she shouted through her tears. "You only help your friends. You're too busy with your friends in China to help an old Puerto Rican man trying to feed his family." She looked down at her father again and simply wept.

Clark was struggling for a way to reply when he realized that a crowd had started to gather outside the door. One man stuck his head in the door and surveyed the situation. Then he turned to some of the others and said, "Superman doesn't care about us. He's too busy watching out for his friends uptown. With him around, they cut our police service and more of us are being killed like this."

Then a younger woman spoke up. "Yeah. I saw it on TV. He said we aren't worth his time anymore. He's getting ready to move to China."

Then another man spoke up. "This group did a study. He only saves Whites and Asians." He turned to face Clark. "Why did you bother to show up at all? Did you think Jose was Asian? Did you let him get shot because when you got here you realized he wasn't one of your special people?"

Clark was speechless. No one had ever reacted like this before. He was still clueless as to how to respond when a pair of patrol officers arrived. It only took a few seconds for the older officer to sense the growing hostility. He cleared the shop and closed the door while his partner checked both the victim and the criminal that Clark had captured.

As soon as the area was secure, the officer came over and introduced himself. "Superman, I'm Officer Ramirez. Can you tell me what happened here?"

"I was flying over the city when I heard a gunshot," he explained, thankful to have a respite from the hostility of the crowd. "I arrived to find that man..." Clark pointed at the man bound in the corner. "...inside the store but trying to leave. When I got here he was carrying that gun." Then Clark pointed at the gun where it had fallen to the floor. "He dropped the gun when I captured him. I detained him until police could arrive."

"What about Mr. Sanchez?"

"I checked him with my X-Ray vision as soon as I saw him. He was already dead. The bullet went right through his heart."

Officer Ramirez looked at the crowd growing outside. "You'd better get out of here before this turns ugly. Please come by Precinct 17 tomorrow in case we have any follow-up questions."

"Of course," Clark replied. He looked at the angry faces on the other side of the door. "I don't understand," he said defensively. "I've never had a reaction like this before."

The policeman looked briefly at people beyond the door, then

turned back to Clark. “After that fire on Thursday LNN began running a series of media reports saying that you don’t treat everyone fairly. I saw one report that claimed you favored some people over others in your rescue activities.”

“What?” Clark almost shouted. “I’ve never done anything like that. I go wherever I’m needed.”

“I believe you. But this stuff is on television just the same.” He pointed toward the doorway. “I guess they’ve seen the same reports I have. You should get out of here.”

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As Superman disappeared over the skyline of Metropolis, one individual left the scene quickly. He sought out a relatively isolated vacant bench in a nearby park, pulled out a cell phone and hit 9 on his speed dial. After only a single ring there was a click indicating that someone had picked up. There would be no response from the other end unless there was a reason. After a second, he heard a tone that he knew to be the “give your report” signal.

“This is Joe Sampson, operative number 243. I just left a convenience store at 339 North Twenty-Seventh Street. There was a robbery attempt that turned into a murder. By the time I arrived on the scene, Superman was already there. Per standing instructions, I was about to make an accusation from the list when the daughter of the shopkeeper did that for me. I immediately followed up with a related statement. The tone of the crowd turned hostile quickly. About 30 seconds after I got there, Cecil Jenkins arrived and joined in. Roughly a minute later I saw Dorothy Samuels approaching but I waved her off since the group was already hostile. By the time Superman left the scene, he looked very shaken.”

Joe stopped and waited. There was a click and the line went dead. That was how “Ms. X” ran things. Nine times out of ten she never said a word. But Joe knew from experience that she heard everything. He also knew that her ears and voice were those of the Boss. He was glad things had gone so well. If incidents continued to go like this, Superman was sure to believe that the whole city hated him.

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An hour later Clark was at a complete loss. After that first incident, he’d thought that the negative reactions would be limited to the Metropolis’s Hispanic population. That proved not to be the case. In two other incidents, he’d been yelled at and once he’d even had a few rocks thrown at him. This didn’t make any sense. He’d missed rescues before without this kind of backlash. A few negative TV stories didn’t seem like enough to cause this kind of reaction.

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Lois had been run ragged all day. She’d known that Clark would be looking to make an appearance as soon as they’d completed their phone call. Sure enough, within a few minutes she heard a report of a shooting at a convenience store only four blocks from her location at the Star.

She’d arrived at the convenience store to find near-riot conditions. Superman had been too late to save the store owner. Even though he was only a few seconds late and in spite of the fact that he’d caught the shooter, the neighborhood seemed to be holding Clark responsible for the store owner’s death. When she tried to get to the bottom of what happened all she got was wild-sounding accusations that Superman only saved people he personally liked. Before she was done, Lois was glad that she hadn’t been recognized as the woman who’d kissed Superman during the Nightfall crisis.

Now she was back at the Star working on the story. She’d barely begun when Emily Griffen, one of the young interns, hurried over. “Ms. Lane, did you hear about the Superman rescue?”

She looked up at the young blonde woman. Emily had been

one of the people that had made a genuine effort to reach out and welcome Lois to the Star. She was energetic and bubbly in a way that reminded Lois of Jimmy. “Hi, Emily. Do you mean the convenience store robbery? It wasn’t really a rescue — Superman got there too late to save the victim”

“No,” Emily replied excitedly. “I was going out for some afternoon shopping when I came across an accident at the corner of Harrison and Fifth. Superman had just arrived and seemed to just be making sure people were okay when a woman started shouting at him to go back to China. It seemed weird because it was like she got angry for no reason. People were stopping to see what was happening when another man started up with more of the same. He was going on that these must be friends of Superman’s since he didn’t let them die. Within a minute or so more people started joining in and it was turning nasty.”

Lois was stunned. This was over the top. Even after what had happened in the convenience store, Lois would have never expected anything like this. At least at the robbery, the shopkeeper’s death might explain his neighbor’s irrational reactions, but why would people be so upset at Superman for actually helping the people at the accident scene?

“I’m working on a write-up of a shooting earlier today that has some similar elements,” she told Emily. “Superman showed up and people started getting angry. I thought it was because the store owner had been killed, but it doesn’t sound like anything like that happened at the car accident.”

“No,” Emily replied. “There were two cars and no one suffered any serious injury. All Superman did was check on people and help separate the cars.”

“Then what’s going on?” Lois asked.

“It must be all those TV and radio stories,” Emily replied.

“What stories?” asked a deep, masculine voice behind her. That was the last voice that Lois expected to hear today. At least, in person, and in this place.

“Superman, what are you doing here?” Lois asked. She was proud that she’d managed to avoid saying Clark’s real name. Still, addressing Clark as Superman, now that she knew who wore the suit, was going to take some getting used to.

“Hello, Lois. The incidents you were discussing weren’t the only ones today. I decided I needed information from someone who would know what’s going on.”

While Clark was talking, Lois looked around the newsroom. Everyone was frozen in place staring at the hero. It reminded her of the first time Superman had put in an appearance at the Planet. Poor Emily looked like her eyes were about to pop out of her head. “Well, Superman, you came to the right place but I’m not the right person. Fortunately, Emily here seems to have some idea of what’s going on.” Lois turned to the young intern. “Superman, I’d like you to meet Emily Griffen. She’s been helping me settle in here at the Star.”

Superman reached out to shake Emily’s hand. “I’m glad to meet you. You’re fortunate to be working with Lois. She’s the best there is. Now, can you tell me anything about what’s going on?”

The young woman seemed to shake herself out of shock. She reached out and took his offered hand. “Wow,” she said, almost breathlessly. “Everyone said that you and Ms. Lane were friends but ... meeting you in person is so... wow.”

Lois almost laughed as she watched Clark react to the blatant adulation. Knowing that it was Clark under the famous suit explained so much. He hated that kind of reaction. He hid it well, but he hated it just the same. In a flash, she realized that watching Emily was almost like looking in a mirror. No wonder Clark hadn’t trusted her attraction to Superman. This girl just furnished a critical insight into the problems that had existed — and to some extent still did exist — between her and Clark.

After a few seconds, it became clear that Emily had lost all track of the question. Lois tried to drag her young colleague back

to reality. “Emily, you said something about things you’ve seen on the TV and heard on the radio that might explain what happened today.”

That snapped the girl out of it. “Yes,” she stuttered. “I keep the TV on in my apartment all the time. Mostly on LNN. You know, to make sure that I’m up on any breaking news. Well, it started right after that fire on Thursday.” She glanced back and forth looking for confirmation that they knew what fire she was talking about. Lois nodded and she continued. “At first it was just some of the pot-stirrers – you know, the people that seem to be paid to complain about a person or some policy – who started complaining about Superman. They were trying to make it his fault that the people died in that fire.” She turned to face Clark. “By Friday night I was hearing more and the tone had gotten even worse. Some of those commentators were throwing out allegations of favoritism in who you saved. Then after Ms. Lane ran the story about where you’d been, these same talking heads started going on about you probably being racist.”

Lois could see that Clark was taking this hard. He looked confused and dejected. It actually reminded her of how he looked in her apartment on Monday night. She was not going to let this happen. “Emily, you said this started on Thursday?”

“Yes. In the beginning it had all been about the apartment fire,” she answered a little defensively.

“And it was on LNN?”

“That was where I first saw the harsh criticism,” she answered with a little more confidence.

This conversation was veering into sensitive territory. She needed to get Clark alone before they could discuss it further. “Emily, may I speak with Superman privately for a moment?”

Lois could see Emily’s spirit drop at being excluded. “Of course,” she answered.

As Emily turned to leave, Clark called to her. “Ms. Griffen, thank you for your input. I have a feeling it will be very helpful.”

That seemed to make her feel better. “I’m happy to help.” Then she walked away with her head held high.

Even with Emily out of earshot, Lois thought that the middle of the newsroom was still too public. “Superman, may I speak to you in a conference room?”

“Sure, Lois,” he answered, with a slightly confused expression on his face.

Lois led them to one of the small interview rooms just off the main office area. When they were both inside, she closed the door and the privacy blinds. Then she turned to Clark and pointed at her eyes and then her ears. It took Clark a few seconds to figure that she was worried about bugs. Finally, he started looking around carefully. After a thorough review of the room, he spoke up. “It’s okay. We’re not being monitored.”

“Those allegations... it has to be Lex’s doing.” She practically spit the words out. “But why?”

Clark leaned back against a table. “I don’t know. I think he’d always planned to come after me sooner or later. The timing suggests that it has something to do with you, but I’m not sure that fits. Before Friday, you hadn’t been around Superman for weeks.”

Lois thought for a minute. Then a thought came to her like a loose thread popping up. “How do you think Lex reacts to not getting what he wants? I mean, based on how you’ve interacted with him as Superman.”

Clark barely took time to think. “He sees everything in life as a contest. And from what I’ve seen, nothing is ever over until he wins.”

“I hate to say it, but I think you’re right. I think he sees my... rejection of him as just another move in a game. All my friends are gone. I’d guess he’s making sure that Superman isn’t around to help me either. If he was going to do something against you anyway, this may have just been convenient timing.”

Clark seemed to consider that for a moment. “If you’re right – and I believe you are – what can I do? I can’t see that he’s doing anything illegal. People have the right to say what they think.”

Lois considered the problem. Maybe Lex would back off if she asked. “What do you think about my talking to him?”

Clark looked stunned. “You mean Luthor?”

“If we’re right, and this is partly about me, then maybe I can get him to back off. I’m betting that he thinks I might be interested in getting back together sometime in the future. If that’s true, then I should have some influence.”

He reached out and took her hand. “Lois, I’m trying very hard not to have this sound jealous or petty, but I believe he’d find a way to tell you exactly what you want to hear and then continue with his plan, whatever it is.”

Clark was probably right. Besides, she was happy to accept any excuse where she wouldn’t have to pretend to still be interested in Lex. “So what are you going to do?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he answered in a dejected tone. “I have to trust the people of Metropolis. Now that I’m back and helping as much as I can, I should be able to win the people back to my side. If I keep having these negative encounters, maybe I should address the public. I can arrange to speak in front of city hall and try to counter these ... lies. I’m sure there’s no pattern of special treatment or discrimination. All I can do is make my best case and see what the people of Metropolis choose to believe.”

Somehow, Lois knew it wasn’t going to be that easy.

## Chapter 7

As Lois started to get ready for bed Monday night, she couldn’t help but wonder if she was being watched. Sure, Clark had said that he’d keep an eye on her place and warn her if any more surveillance equipment showed up, but with the day he’d had it was possible that he’d forgotten.

By all accounts, today had been even worse than Sunday. She’d heard several reports of incidents where Superman showed up to help and things had gone poorly. As had been the case on Sunday, in several of these encounters one or more people had subjected Superman to verbal abuse. It hadn’t happened every time. In fact, in some cases people went out of their way to show their appreciation. Still, there were several negative incidents. It had to be tearing Clark apart.

She was about to change for bed when she heard a tapping on her window. She went over to the source of the sound and, sure enough, it was Clark.

“Come in,” she offered. Once he was inside, she opened with the greeting that they’d agreed on. “Superman, what a surprise. What can I do for you?”

He looked almost embarrassed. “It’s okay, Lois. Your apartment is clear tonight. There is a man down the street who looks like he might be watching your place. From where he’s sitting, I’m sure he would have seen me come in. I should probably keep this short.”

“Nonsense,” she replied with an air of irritation. “Lex, or whoever is behind all this, knows we’ve been meeting.” She moved over to the sofa. “Would you like to sit?”

Clark immediately sat down in the chair she’d indicated. It was only after he sat that Lois realized that her invitation was surprisingly similar to the one she’d made when they met in this room exactly one week earlier. That time, Clark’s refusal to sit had foretold so much of what was to come. The seemingly minor fact that tonight he accepted her invitation without hesitation signified so much about the changes of this past week.

“What brings you by tonight?” she asked.

Clark blushed slightly. “Mostly I just wanted to talk,” he said sheepishly. “The way people have reacted since I’ve come back has me shaken.”

He sounded tired. That reaction was exactly what she’d have expected from Clark when facing a situation like today. Before

last week he'd never let her – or anyone else for that matter – see that side of his personality when he was dressed as Superman. “Try not to let it get to you. Emily and I spent most of the day today researching the anti-Superman media. It appears that Lex has thrown all the resources of LNN behind this smear campaign.”

“I know,” Clark replied tiredly. “I just wasn't ready for anything like this.” He paused for a second, and then looked up at her. “You don't know how much it means to me to have your support.”

There it was again, that warm, fluttery feeling in her stomach. Superman talking with Clark's voice was a devastating combination. There was no denying the attraction she felt for this man. Also, Superman or not, he was vulnerable. He needed her, and that made him even more attractive. Who else could be there to give Superman a hug when he was down? “You'll always have my support, Clark, no matter how you're dressed,” she offered.

He looked like he was struggling for a reply. After a second, he stuttered, “I...” but whatever he planned to say died on his lips. After another second he said simply, “Thank you, Lois.” His expression said much more. The look in his eyes took her back to the park bench last Monday.

Unfortunately, there was another emotion there as well. His eyes reflected stress and fatigue. She'd seen that look before also. Several times over the past year, Clark had come into the office looking like he was carrying the weight of the world. Now she knew why. Tonight that burden was extra heavy. Clark needed her.

She thought back to some of the times over the past year when he'd needed her support. Then she remembered the Trask incident in Smallville. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course,” he answered. “I don't want to have secrets from you anymore.”

“After you left last Monday, I got thinking about some of the time we've spent together. With what I know now, many of the incidents make a lot more sense, but one doesn't. What happened with Trask in Smallville?”

Clark was quiet for a moment. “What are you wondering about? A lot happened that week.”

“For tonight how about just filling me in on the parts I don't know. I remember the parts I saw very well.”

“Okay. That green crystal stuff Trask was after...”

“Green crystal? You mean the rock we called Kryptonite?” Lois asked.

“Yeah. It really could hurt me. When I got close to it, the pain was indescribable. It also made me sick and took away my powers.”

“So when you weren't feeling good that first night... that wasn't allergies?”

Clark flashed a smile in her direction. “You do remember that trip well. Anyway, I don't have any allergies. That was my reaction to that stuff.”

“So at the end, when Trask was about to shoot you...?”

“I didn't have my powers,” Clark supplied. “Trask knew that I was helpless and was going to kill me.”

“So, at the end, none of that was an act?”

“No, Lois. Why?”

“I was remembering when we held each other after Rachael shot Trask. Somehow, I'd managed to forget that moment until after you left the other night. You'd seemed so... scared.”

“I was. I don't think Trask would have stopped with killing me. I was afraid that he would have killed you and my family for having supported me. I was scared for all of us.”

Lois thought back to that moment. When they'd held each other, it had been... There had been emotions at play in that moment other than fear, but that was for another time. “So Kryptonite can harm you?”

“Yes. I just hope there isn't any more out there.” Clark paused

for a moment in thought. “But it looks like Luthor has found something just as effective.”

“You mean the way people are reacting?”

Clark nodded. “I can only help as Superman as long as people accept what I do. I've never wanted the adoration that some...”

As he stopped short, Lois remembered Emily's reaction yesterday and her own reaction from months ago. She decided to reply only to the first part of his comment. “We're going to get your public image problem fixed. I spoke with Petersen today and he's going to fight on your side just like Perry used to do.”

He smiled a little at this. “Have you seen Perry?”

“Not this past week,” Lois replied. “Alice got him to take a cruise. They're in a ship touring the Caribbean. I think they'll be back in another week or so.”

Clark looked melancholy again. “I miss him. I can't believe how much we've all lost. I wish there was some way to undo all that happened.”

“Clark, I'm sorry. I know it's all my fault...”

Clark cut her off with a plea. “No, that's not what I meant.

Lois, please, for me, don't beat yourself up over what's happened. Luthor is almost unbelievably good at the deceptions he practices. If anyone is to blame, it's me. I could have told you what I knew a lot earlier.”

Lois shook her head. “I'm not sure it would have done any good. I had it in my head that I wasn't going to believe you about Lex.”

“I should have told you as Superman.”

Lois considered that for a moment. “Okay, I'll give you that one,” she offered. She crossed the room and sat beside him. “We are where we are. I'll tell you what: I'll stop blaming myself if you promise to do the same. Deal?”

“Deal,” he replied almost reluctantly. Then he glanced up at the clock. “I should be going.” They both stood and headed toward the window. As he neared the opening he turned to Lois. “Thanks for letting me bend your ear tonight.”

The vulnerability behind those words tore at her heart. Some had called Superman the “Man of Steel.” Whatever powers he might have, now that she was getting to know the whole person, that description couldn't be further from the truth. Almost without thinking Lois flowed over to him and gave him the strongest hug she could muster. “Anytime,” she replied softly.

After a few seconds, something about his posture caused Lois to pull her head back and look up. She found herself only inches from Clark's face as he gazed down on her. For once in her life she didn't think as she brought her lips to his.

At first, Clark seemed startled. Then she felt his arms pulling her even closer, and the nature of the kiss changed. She'd kissed Clark before. She'd also kissed Superman. Those had been nice, but they hadn't been like this. This was so much... more. Clark was kissing her. For real. No hiding... No holding back... No pretending... And it was unbelievable. It was as if her whole being was involved. His taste... His scent... The way his arms tightened around her in those seconds... And finally, the exquisite feel of his lips. All of her senses were saturated and all of the sensations were wonderful.

Lois had no idea how long it continued. Time seemed to have lost all meaning. However, at some point they separated. She looked up and could see that he felt the same sense of wonder that she was feeling.

“Wow,” Clark whispered. “I really need to get back to Metropolis as Clark so we can have that date.”

To Lois, that idea sounded better every second. “I'll be here. And in the mean time, I promise that I won't be going out with anyone else.”

Clark smiled brightly and stepped toward the window. “Good night, Lois.”

“Good night,” she replied as he cleared the window and

disappeared to the sky.

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When Lex Luthor arrived at his office each morning, his usual first order of business was to go to his desk and review his schedule for the day. He was always amused by the fact that his schedule was an inversion of his life. He generally kept about 20% of his day free for contingencies. Of the time he allotted for business, he spent two-thirds on his legitimate operations while one-third was spent on his more... covert endeavors. It was a fascinating mix because the income structure of his empire was the inverse of the time he spent. His underworld operations accounted for 70% of his income while the legitimate business, which consumed nearly 70% of his day, accounted for only 30% of his income. Lex had worked the distribution out long ago. This was the maximum ratio that could be sustained while still maintaining the appearance of being a legitimate businessman.

This morning he didn't go immediately to his desk. This was going to be a special day and as such it should be recognized. Lex first walked to the balcony and looked out over Metropolis. Today the city would become his again. After a few minutes he walked to his desk, signaled for his assistant, and turned back to the view. A few seconds later, he heard the door, then a few footsteps, then silence.

"Report," he said without turning away from the view.

Ms. Cox's voice answered immediately. "Superman has called a press conference for 10:00 a.m. on the steps of city hall. The size of the crowd should be more than adequate for our team to go unnoticed."

"You've removed the individuals that Superman has encountered so far?"

"Yes, sir. We are fortunate that he decided to take this step so quickly. He has only encountered 34 of our people in the three days since his return. We will have 32 of the remaining team members at the press conference."

"We started with 97 operatives. Based on your report, we have 63 people that he hasn't seen. Why are we only using 32?" Lex asked.

"Because of the sensitive nature of this phase," Ms. Cox answered confidently. "The 32 that I have instructed to attend the press conference are known to be reliable and have deep ties to the organization. I felt that we would be better served to hold those that are less proven in reserve."

"Very well. Please continue."

"All other aspects of the plan are in place," Mrs. Cox replied.

"There will be crowd control police at the event?"

"Yes. We made sure that the police learned that an anti-Superman faction plans to throw rocks and other debris at Superman during the event. Through other channels we have encouraged just such acts. I believe it is highly probable that Superman will be hit with everything from rocks to eggs before he gets half-way through his announcement. Of course, our people have been instructed to take no action other than verbal attacks."

He turned to face Ms. Cox. "Do I need to reiterate how important it is that today go perfectly?"

"No, sir. I have done everything in my power to assure the success of the plan. I've overseen many of the aspects personally."

"Good. You may go." As the door closed behind her, he turned back to the window. This should be a very interesting day.

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Lois could hardly believe the size of the crowd. In her experience, only the press attended this kind of announcement. A few people might stop and listen as they happened to be passing by, but there were never very many. Today there looked to be well over a hundred people gathered in front of city hall. Since she was there as a reporter for the Star, she made a point to get some opinions from the people that had come. She also tried to get a

feel for why all these people were here.

It was obvious from the first that the mood of almost all the non-press in attendance was decidedly negative. That fit with the idea that there was more in play than just interested citizens. Sure, some people would be swayed by the slanted rhetoric coming from LNN, but to have so many people seemingly accepting those lies just didn't fit. If many of the people were sent to cause trouble, it would explain a lot.

When several uniformed police officers showed up only a few minutes before Clark was scheduled to arrive, Lois wasn't sure if it was a good thing or not. Their presence should help with crowd control, but the very fact that the police thought extra officers would be necessary didn't bode well for Clark and his speech. This development set off more alarms for Lois. The presence of the police suggested that somehow they knew there would be a crowd. In light of what Lois had learned from talking to people this morning, and her growing suspicions that there was organization behind the scenes, the presence of police was especially disturbing.

Right at 10:00, Clark, dressed as Superman, dropped out of the sky. She smiled as it occurred to her that Clark was usually prompt, whatever he was wearing. He stepped right up to the cluster of microphones and began to speak. "Good, morning. Thank you for coming. I want to thank the city of Metropolis for allowing me to address you in this way today."

Lois could see that he was very nervous. She glanced around at the crowd. So far, so good. Everyone seemed to be listening. She turned back as Clark continued. "As many of you know, a close personal friend of mine in China died early last week. I spent several days with the family to help them past the crisis. During that time, I was out of touch with the rest of the world. Unfortunately, while I was gone, there was a fire here in Metropolis that resulted in the deaths of several people. I'm truly sorry that I was not here to help."

Suddenly there was a shout from behind Lois. "Liar!" Then from another direction. "Go back to your Chinese friends!" Lois was about to turn to see who was yelling when an egg came flying at Clark. In a leisurely-looking motion, he caught it and set it on the podium in front of him. In rapid succession, there were a series of other objects thrown. He caught all but two, resulting in a rapidly growing pile of unbroken eggs, ripe tomatoes and even a few rocks. The other two objects, one egg and one tomato, had broken in flight and Clark used super-speed to avoid them. After a few seconds the bombardment stopped. It appeared that even these people could see the futility of throwing things at Superman. It probably also helped that the police were moving to arrest the individuals who were throwing objects.

Clark gathered himself and continued. "Please understand that I'm only here to help. Remember that I get nothing for what I do. I help because I can. I care about people," Clark pleaded. "I value all life. I've always done my best to serve as many as I can. I've never..."

A movement to Lois's left took her attention from Clark. There was an MPD officer just in front of her. She was surprised to see him standing there, since most of the police had gone after the people that had been throwing things at Superman. He was staring intently at something off to Lois's right. She was about to see if she could make out what had caught his attention, when she realized he was slowly, but quite deliberately, beginning to ease his gun out of its holster.

Lois looked frantically along the path of the officer's gaze. At first, she saw nothing. Then she saw a man reach inside his coat and pull out a gun. The officer must have noticed a suspicious movement. Lois expected a shout from the policeman. It didn't come. The man wearing the coat lifted the gun and, very professionally, took aim at the podium. Lois couldn't wait for the officer to act. She launched herself at the man just as he fired his

first shot. The world seemed to slow down as she jerked her eyes to see what Clark would do.

At the instant of the shot, Clark's hand shot up in a move similar to, but much faster than, what he'd done when catching the objects that were thrown earlier. Lois thought her heart would stop when Clark's hand seemed to explode in a cloud of red blood. She was almost at the shooter, but before she could get to him, he fired again and again. She finally reached the shooter. He was about to fire a fourth shot when she knocked his arm down. Then she felt an intense stabbing pain in her right shoulder as, at the same instant, she heard what sounded like a shot from behind her.

She suddenly felt very weak. As everything started going dark, she heard another shot from behind. She could feel herself falling but didn't seem to have the strength to do anything about it. Her last sight was of Clark on the podium. The entire left side of his chest was awash in blood and he was collapsing to the ground. With a profound sense of loss and missed opportunity, she surrendered to the blackness.

### Chapter 8

Bill Henderson hated it when the coroner's van pulled away. Every time he watched this particular vehicle depart a crime scene, he felt a surge of negative emotion. Often it was a sense of loss because of a seemingly unfair or particularly untimely death. Other times it was with a feeling of cold justice when some evildoer got the end that they deserved. Today he barely felt anything at all. This day his thoughts were filled with concern for the passengers in the ambulance that had departed earlier.

Lois Lane had a superficial scalp wound and a bullet embedded in her shoulder. Shock and blood loss had made her condition serious. She was unconscious, and the paramedics wanted to get her to the hospital as quickly as possible. The lead paramedic had asked Bill who Lois's nearest relative was. The hospital would notify them of her condition. Bill knew that Lois wasn't very close to her parents and felt that she would probably rather have one of her friends present when she woke up. However, he knew that procedures would dictate that the hospital look for the nearest relative for information and guidance.

Bill had been more than a little frustrated as he struggled for which of Lois's friends to notify. He'd tried to call Kent, but Lois's reporting partner didn't appear to be at home. Bill knew that all the other people she'd been closest to had scattered when The Daily Planet closed. The best he'd been able to do was leave a message for Lex Luthor. He'd seen the social pages of the newspaper and knew that Lois was dating the billionaire. Bill was sure that Lois would want someone she cared about to know how she was.

Superman was in far worse condition. The initial impact to his hand had been shocking to watch, but the actual damage was surprisingly minor. The bullet, made of some sort of green crystal, had barely penetrated into his hand. It had gone through his skin but stopped after less than a quarter inch. The surprise had come when the paramedics peeled off his suit. Despite the fact that everyone in the crowd had seen only three shots from the gunman, Superman had four chest wounds to go with the one in his hand. He'd been shot five times. There was a second shooter.

Two wounds were in his left shoulder. The first had behaved very similarly to the palm wound and had barely penetrated the hero's skin. The second had gone in deeply and the crystal had shattered. The other two wounds were right in the center of his chest. One of them had barely penetrated the skin, just like the bullet that hit his palm. The other looked like it would have been fatal if it hadn't hit one of Superman's ribs. Whatever allowed the green material to penetrate Superman's skin seemed to be less effective against the hero's bones. The green bullet had cracked his rib but the bullet had shattered. It made a messy hole but it didn't penetrate very deeply into his chest.

Still, Superman was barely alive. His breathing was erratic and he was showing signs of poisoning. The paramedics were uncertain of how to treat the hero and had looked to Bill for guidance. For his part, Bill wished Lois were available. If anyone would have an idea, it would be her. The way the crystal glowed was very disturbing. It seemed obvious that this material was the key to hurting Superman. Could it be harmful in other ways as well? Bill finally suggested that the paramedics remove all the green crystal that they could, and otherwise treat Superman just as they would any other patient. He looked human. Hopefully he'd respond to what a human would. If not, there was nothing else they could do. Bill also made sure that every speck of the green crystal that they removed ended up in an evidence bag.

One of Bill's own people had been interviewing Officer Smith. Bill had never seen a situation like this. Smith had acted quickly in taking down the man that had shot Superman. But he'd discharged his gun under circumstances that seemed odd at best. What was worse, the two shots he'd fired had both hit Lois Lane. The shot that had grazed Lois's head had also seriously complicated the investigation. It had gone through the throat of the shooter and destroyed his carotid artery. Superman's assailant was dead from blood loss before the paramedics could arrive.

As Bill approached Smith, he focused on trying to remain calm. "Officer Smith, you realize that there will have to be an investigation of today's events."

"Yes, Inspector," he replied, obviously nervous.

"What were you thinking!?" Bill demanded, suddenly angry at the completely irresponsible behavior of the young officer.

Smith recoiled at the outburst from his superior. Then he steadied himself and responded calmly. "I saw that man pull a gun and aim for the podium. I reached for my gun, but before I could do anything, he'd fired. By the time I had my gun out and was about to yell for him to freeze, he'd fired the second shot. This time I saw the slug hit Superman and I saw the burst of blood from his chest. I looked back at the gunman and in that instant I thought I had a clear shot. I made a snap decision to fire. I didn't see the woman until I had squeezed off the second shot."

Bill just stared at the young officer. It seemed a straightforward case of bad judgment under pressure, but something didn't feel right. In any case, this wasn't the place to interrogate a police officer.

"That'll be it for now. Once I see your written report, I'll probably have more questions. I'm sure you know that it's standard procedure for you to be put on administrative leave pending a fuller investigation of the shooting."

"I understand, Inspector."

As Bill turned and started one last circuit of the area, he couldn't help but believe that this case was going to get very complicated before it closed.

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Lex starred at his desk. This was not the pleasant afternoon he'd expected. Superman wasn't dead and Lois had been shot. LNN had covered the press conference live, and Lex had made a point to watch. It had unfolded almost exactly as planned. Almost....

The fools who had accepted the anti-Superman message were more accommodating than he'd imagined. He had been worried that no one would throw anything at Superman. Mrs. Cox had instructed their people that they were not to throw debris. Lex had only his assistant's word that some idiots would spontaneously do just that. However, she had been confident that with some prodding, the more radical members of the crowd would provide the physical assault. As usual, she had been exactly correct.

Lex had been disappointed that the hero had been able to catch or avoid all the objects thrown his way. He had fervently hoped to see Superman with literal egg on his face when he got his just desserts.

However, any disappointment was more than made up for when Superman was shot. The image of his hand exploding in blood was one that Lex would relish forever. And the look on his face had been priceless. That combination of surprise and pain... Lex had replayed that tape at least a dozen times. The Kryptonite had worked. The explosions of blood on his chest as subsequent shots hit were wonderful. LNN would certainly put together a documentary on this shooting that would show the impacts over and over. The pleasure it would bring him would be almost endless.

But when the LNN camera swung over the crowd to show the shooter, Lex's heart skipped. There were two bodies on the ground. Lex had always been able to recognize his possessions instantly. That was Lois, and she was bleeding. It had taken more time than he would have imagined to regain a measure of control. It had been several hours and he now felt just calm enough to speak with Ms. Cox. Even so, it was with barely controlled fury that he pressed the call button for his assistant.

As she entered the room, he could feel the anger starting to get away from him. He paid her very well to make sure these kinds of complications didn't take place. He needed to be extra careful to avoid letting his irritation lead him to an ill-considered act. Lex ended up resorting to a calming mantra that he rarely needed to use. "Best served cold," he kept repeating to himself as she came across the room. Mrs. Cox finally reached the center of the room and stopped. "Report," he said with as much control as he could muster.

"Ms. Lane is scheduled for the ICU at Memorial Hospital. She came out of surgery to remove the bullet from her shoulder fifteen minutes ago. She is still in recovery. She is doing well and there are no indications of lingering injuries from the shooting."

"What of Superman?" Lex snapped.

"Information on him is restricted. Since Ms. Lane is an ordinary citizen, we haven't had too much trouble extracting information on her condition from the hospital. In the case of Superman, we will have to depend on more covert sources. I have been able to discover two facts. First, his special abilities are gone. The paramedics were able to pierce his skin with an IV needle. Furthermore, based on the preliminary paramedic's report, once you strip away the powers, he appears to be completely human."

That was surprising. Superman was supposed to be an alien. "In what way is he human?"

"His blood appears to be human blood. His organs were, to the extent that the paramedics could determine, all present and in the same place as a human. And finally, when they administered medications for trauma, his body reacted the way a human's would."

Lex considered this for a moment. Based on this evidence, it appeared that any story of Superman being an alien must be untrue. That recording device must have been an elaborate hoax. Still, the fact that meteor rock was the key to harming him suggested that the source of his abilities, if not the man himself, was extraterrestrial. But that could all wait for later.

"Can you explain how Superman survived?"

"As you know, while Donaldson was the visible aggressor, we had a sharpshooter on the roof across the street. She reported firing two shots and claimed that they were both within inches of the presumed location of Superman's heart."

"Is this individual reliable?"

"Yes, sir. This is our top assassin. She has never failed an assignment before."

"Do we have confirmation of what she claims?"

"We appear to. The paramedics that attended Superman report four chest wounds. Two were in the area of his shoulder and two were in the vicinity of his heart."

"Then how did he survive?"

"Not all of the bullets penetrated deeply. It appears that even using the Kryptonite bullets, Superman's body was difficult to penetrate. We had anticipated this and the cartridges were mixed with a special high-velocity propellant to make sure they had the maximum possible penetration capability. Obviously it didn't work as well as we hoped."

"Were we able to recover any of the Kryptonite?"

"Not yet. As you recall, we had enough of the material for six bullets. Four were made from the pure crystal. The other two were constructed from the residue from machining the first four. Five were fired into Superman. The sixth remained in the chamber of Donaldson's pistol and was recovered by the police. As for the spent rounds, to the best we can determine at this time, all that Kryptonite ended up in Superman's body."

"Let me know when we recover any of the material, either from Superman or from the police evidence room."

Lex thought for a moment. That seemed to clear up his questions relating to Superman, at least for now. The Kryptonite would prove valuable if somehow Superman managed to survive. The challenge would be to determine how to use it more effectively next time.

Now, to the important topic. "Mrs. Cox, please explain the circumstances and decisions that led to Lois being injured." Lex knew there was genuine menace in his tone. She had to understand the magnitude of his displeasure.

Mrs. Cox straightened her shoulders. "Ultimately it was my error. I chose this policeman based on his skill with a pistol and his ability to get assigned to this operation without raising questions. I directed him to make sure that after a minimum of three shots hit Superman, Donaldson would be in no condition to provide any evidence to the police. I had stressed the importance that Donaldson had to be silenced even if a bystander might be injured. Two factors led to Ms. Lane's injuries. First, when planning the operation, I did not consider the possibility that Ms. Lane would be in the line of fire. Second, since Smith is not a member of our usual organization, he was never briefed on Ms. Lane's protected status."

It was a reasonable explanation. There would be no value in pointing out that he would not tolerate a repetition of this error. She knew the price of failure. Unfortunately, she was too important to punish for this single offense, no matter how much he would enjoy it personally. Still, someone had to pay for what happened to Lois. The Boss had declared that she was untouchable, yet she'd been injured. This could lead to the belief that his directives could be violated. "This policeman..."

"Smith," Mrs. Cox supplied.

"Does he have a family?" Lex asked.

"Yes. A wife and a baby daughter."

Lex considered how best to reward someone that risked the life of a woman that he coveted. His mind flashed back to his mantra and he had his answer. "It's sad when a man loses his family during the holiday season. Arrange a tragic accident for Smith's wife and daughter. Schedule it for the day before Christmas."

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There were muffled sounds that Lois didn't recognize. Where was she? Her thoughts felt muddled and she didn't feel right. It wasn't until she noticed movement, or at least changes in light, that she realized her eyes were open. Then she heard a vague, muffled voice. She tried to concentrate, but everything, even sound, seemed fuzzy and indistinct. She tried even harder and the sounds started to form themselves into words. "Are you awake? Ms. Lane, can you hear me?"

Lois looked toward the sound. After a few seconds, the hazy blue blob resolved to the form of a nurse in surgical garb.

"What?" Lois managed weakly.

She heard the nurse's voice again. It sounded as if the source

were far away. “You’re at Memorial Hospital. You just came out of surgery to remove a bullet from your shoulder. Do you remember getting shot?”

Suddenly she remembered blood on the Superman suit. “Clark was shot.” Her intent was urgent but her voice was slow and sloppy.

“No, Lois. Superman was shot. Then you were hit in the shoulder by the policeman trying to stop Superman’s shooter.”

“I was shot?”

“Yes, Lois. But you are going to be fine.”

It was starting to come back to her. “Is Clark okay?”

“Lois, who is Clark?”

Everything was so confusing. Trying to think was like swimming in molasses. But thinking about Clark felt so nice. An image from his visit the other night slid into her mind. “Clark is my partner. He kisses really nice,” Lois answered groggily.

The face disappeared. Then she heard voices, but they sounded like they were a world away.

“...awake and asking for someone named Clark. It sounds like he’s her boyfriend.”

A new voice answered. “There’s no Clark on her admittance information sheet. Just a note about Lex Luthor.”

Then louder. “Jenny, can you spare a minute?”

“What’s up?” Another new voice.

“Didn’t you say you knew something about Lois Lane?”

“Yeah, I loved her articles in The Daily Planet.”

“She’s asking for someone named Clark. She says he’s her partner.”

“Oh, I know. She must mean Clark Kent. The two of them co-authored a bunch of stories for The Daily Planet before it closed. I saw his picture once. He’s a real dreamboat.”

“Okay, that explains it. Has he been around?”

“No. The only person that’s been in was that policeman, Henderson.”

Things were beginning to get clear, but trying to think still felt like swimming in goo. Then Lois heard the nurse’s voice again. “Lois, Clark isn’t here. You remember that The Daily Planet went out of business, don’t you?”

“Yes,” she managed weakly. “Clark left but he came back to me.”

“I’m sure he did, Lois. I’m sorry, but he isn’t here now. I’m sure he’ll be in to see you. Besides, you’ll probably be out real soon and you can see him yourself.”

How could she see him if she was out of the hospital? He was badly hurt. Then it clicked, he’d been in the Superman suit when he’d been shot. She’d been asking for Clark. Stupid drugs. She took a second to try to get control of her slippery thoughts. “I’m sorry, I just feel so confused. Clark had to leave Metropolis last week and I’ve been missing him.”

“That’s okay, dear. When people are coming out of anesthesia, things can seem very confused at first.”

“Is Superman okay?” Lois asked. “I remember seeing him get shot.”

“He’s still in surgery. I’m afraid that we don’t have any news beyond that.”

“Please let me know when he’s out,” Lois requested. Then she felt a wave of fatigue and, seemingly on their own, her eyes closed.

“Lois, do you still feel tired?” The voice was far away again.

“Yes,” she barely managed to answer.

“Go ahead and rest then. Your body has been through a lot. You need to rest so you can heal.”

Then from a distance, “She’s really struggling. Who was her anesthesiologist?”

“Harris,” came the reply.

“Well that explains it. He always gives his patients too much. Last week we had this guy who was babbling about being his own

mother and father. You’d think someone would talk to Dr. Harris about using lower dosages on his patients.”

“Not unless it’s another doctor.”

“Someone should say something.”

“Don’t do it, girl. That’s a quick trip to unemployment.”

A tiny voice way in the back of Lois’s mind whispered the word ‘investigation’ but Lois was too tired to think. The voices continued, but faded to a confused murmur as Lois began to feel like she was floating. It felt like flying with Clark. He’d be okay. He had to be.

## Chapter 9

Lois’s bed felt hard. It was also cold. She tried to snuggle lower under the covers, but as soon as she moved, a sharp pain shot through her right shoulder. That brought her to alertness and her eyes popped open.

She looked around quickly. She was in a hospital room. Not only that, but one wall was all glass and looked out onto a nursing station. She recognized the style of the room. She was in an ICU. It was coming back to her. The press conference. The shooting. Clark! Was he okay? She needed to get out of here and find out what was going on. She started to climb out of the bed. That turned out to be a mistake. At the first hint of movement, that sharp pain in her shoulder came back with a vengeance.

Lois looked at her right arm. It was in a sling and heavily bandaged. Then she remembered press conference. Just as she’d reached the person shooting at Clark, she’d felt pain in her right shoulder. What could have happened?

Lois tried to move again. The combination of pain and fatigue was overwhelming, and she had to concede that she wasn’t ready to go anywhere. She looked around for a call button and sure enough, it was right next to her left hand. It took only a few seconds of fumbling to press the button.

Through the glass, she saw a nurse at the station look her way. The woman called to another nurse who started toward her room. “Good morning,” the nurse said as she entered Lois’s room. “My name is Peggy and I’ll be taking care of you today.”

“Hi,” Lois replied. “Can you tell me where I am and what happened?”

“Sure, dear. But first, how do you feel?”

Lois almost tried to brush her off but, having been around a lot of medical professionals, she quickly realized that it would simply delay things. “My shoulder hurts deep inside. I feel achy all over but otherwise I feel fine.”

“Good. As for how you ended up here, you were shot in your shoulder by a police officer. He was trying to get the guy who was shooting at Superman.”

Lois remembered the scene and the sharp pain in her shoulder. “How is Superman?” Lois asked urgently.

Peggy chuckled. “The police inspector that came by earlier told us that would be your first question. Normally we can’t talk about a patient’s condition, but there’s a note in your folder that you have been designated as Superman’s next of kin.”

“What? How did that happen?”

“I don’t know how it happened, but there are forms in both of your folders affirming the relationship. You can probably get that changed, but then no one will be able to talk to you about Superman’s condition.”

“No,” Lois said quickly. “I’m glad someone did that. I was just surprised. So, how is Superman?”

“He’s alive, but he’s in a coma.” The nurse lifted her arm and pointed at the wall to Lois’s left. “He’s actually in the room next door. In fact, that’s why you’re here. Your injuries wouldn’t normally land you in ICU but the police wanted you near Superman so that one guard could watch both of your rooms.”

“Can you tell me any details about what happened?”

“I don’t know much more than was on the news. He was hit by several shots with some kind of bullets that hurt him. He was

in surgery for nearly 10 hours while the surgeon dug out the bullet fragments. Superman's hand is pretty messed up and so is his chest."

Lois was sure that the bullets had to be Kryptonite. "I have information that might help with his treatment. Would it be possible for me to talk with his doctor?"

"Of course. That's probably part of the reason that you were identified as a relative."

"Thanks," Lois said. "Can I see Superman?" Lois asked.

"I don't know. On our documents you're a relative, but the guard hasn't let anyone in his room that isn't on his list. Even the nurses and doctors that go in there have to have clearance."

"I should be on that list," Lois protested. "Do you know who made it?"

"No, but that police inspector wanted to be notified as soon as you were awake. If you feel up to talking, I'll let my supervisor know and she'll call the police."

"I'm ready. Anything if it'll get me in to see Superman."

Lois watched the nurse go back to the station. She spoke briefly with the woman that Lois guessed was the supervisor and then started back. "We're going to notify the police. You'll probably have a few visitors today."

"Really, who do you mean?"

"I imagine your boyfriend will be coming by," Peggy replied brightly.

The only person that was even close to carrying title was in a coma next door. "My boyfriend?" Lois asked.

"Lex Luthor. We don't get celebrities visiting very often."

Lois felt a cold chill. "Lex isn't my boyfriend. We broke up last week."

The nurse looked suddenly uncomfortable. "I'm sorry. His name was on your contact list. We thought..."

"Don't worry about it." Lois was not excited about seeing Lex, but whatever Lex was up to, Lois was sure she'd have a better chance of finding out what was going on if she kept that channel of communication open. That quote from "The Godfather" came to mind, "Keep your friends close but your enemies closer." Lex definitely fell into the second category.

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Peggy hadn't been gone more than ten minutes when she heard a knock on her door. She looked up to see a handsome man with red hair. "Ms. Lane? I'm Dr. Anderson. I'm Superman's doctor."

Lois was instantly awake. "Can you please tell me how he's doing?"

Dr. Anderson responded with a huge smile. "Inspector Henderson told me that would be your first question. With privacy laws the way they are, he figured that if we didn't find some way to talk to you about Superman's condition, you would have to be... well, he said we'd probably have to tie you down and gag you. Since that was clearly unacceptable, he worked with a judge to expedite the ruling of your next of kin status. You might want to thank him when you see him."

That was very thoughtful of Bill. "I will," Lois replied. "So what's Superman's condition?"

"There were multiple gunshot wounds. The bullets seemed to be able to penetrate his body, but not reliably. One went into his shoulder and another hit a rib and shattered. Superman's rib is broken, but it stopped the bullet and probably saved his life."

"Were the bullets made of a green crystal?"

The doctor's face grew hard. "Why do you ask?"

It was clear to Lois that she'd hit the mark. Lois looked out the window. There were nurses and aids coming and going. "Would you please close the door?"

The doctor looked confused for a second then closed the door. While he did that Lois made sure the intercom was off. "I really do know more about Superman than most people. That green

crystal is called Kryptonite. Did you get all of it out of Superman?"

"We were able to remove all of the larger pieces. The two bullets that penetrated more deeply shattered. We removed the larger fragments and we did our best to get it all, but there may be some very small fragments remaining. We had to balance the effect of the fragments against the time he'd been in surgery."

"Under normal circumstances Superman heals much faster than a normal person," Lois explained. "But Kryptonite is poisonous to him. Based on what Superman has told me about his previous experience with Kryptonite, if there is any left in his body, it could kill him."

"He's in a coma. If what you say is true, we may need to risk a second surgery. Is there anyone else that you'd suggest I talk to for authorization?"

"No. Just me," Lois answered quickly. She figured she could call Martha and Jonathan and relay their wishes. "But with the pain killers I'm getting, I'm not sure I'm competent to make that decision today unless it's an emergency."

"It won't be today," the doctor replied. "I want to watch him for 24 hours. If he's worse tomorrow morning I'd like to talk about going in again. We would have to remove some more tissue in the vicinity of the wounds. Since Superman isn't exactly a normal patient, I've been in contact with a scientist out of Star Labs to get input on how best to treat him. I'll see if the STAR Labs scientist can suggest anything that will allow us to locate any tiny fragments might still be there."

"Please do whatever you can," Lois pleaded. "The world needs Superman." And she needed Clark.

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Lois found it hard to stay awake. Her doctor had come by and told her that that she would stay overnight and that if everything looked okay in the morning, she'd be discharged.

Based on her conversation with Peggy, Lois had been expecting visitors this morning. She was reading a magazine when she heard a voice at the door. "Lois, I was so worried." It was Lex. He came in and walked to the side of her bed. He looked like he was genuinely concerned about her condition.

She composed herself. "Hi, Lex. Thanks for coming by, but it wasn't necessary."

He looked hurt. "Lois, I know you wanted some time to find yourself, but you can't expect me to turn off my feelings. I was watching the coverage of Superman's press conference. When I saw you on the ground my heart almost stopped."

He sounded far more sincere today. Maybe he wasn't as bad as Clark had thought. Then she shook herself. What was she thinking?! It must be the drugs again. How could she forget all the things she'd seen these last ten days? Whatever Lex did or didn't do, this all started because of LNN. Suddenly she felt an overwhelming surge of anger. "Lex, this whole mess was your doing. My getting shot... Superman getting shot... You did all of it. Just leave." Her voice was bitter and angry. She knew she was angry, but usually she was better at keeping her opinions to herself. Part of her was wondering where this was coming from but she didn't seem to be able to control it.

Lex's mouth dropped open. "Lois, what..."

She felt another rush of anger and the words came boiling out again. "I saw the LNN talking heads rousing the public against Superman. Tell me, Lex: What does the L in LNN stand for?" She paused for only an instant but Lex seemed frozen in surprise. Then she continued in a tone of sarcastic surprise. "Wait, I know. It stands for Luthor." Her voice switched back to pure anger. "It was **your** people on **your** station that did this to me. Why are you here? Did you come to shoot me again? Just get out!"

Lex was standing there as if he'd been slapped. He clearly didn't know how to react to Lois like this. "But, Lois, I..."

Lois could feel the rage burning. "Get out!" she yelled.

Then Peggy was at the door. “Sir, you need to leave.” Without another word, Lex turned and started to leave.

Lois was still angrier than she could ever remember as she watched Peggy stop him just outside the door. Peggy had lowered her voice but Lois could still hear their exchange. “Mr. Luthor.”

“What?” Lex replied shortly.

“I’m sorry, but I didn’t think to warn you ahead of time. The medication that Ms. Lane is on can cause people to lose control of their anger. I’ve seen this before. The littlest thing can cause people to blow up.”

Lex seemed to consider this for a moment. “I see. When she calms down, would please tell her that I would like to see her but only if she wants me to come by.”

“I will.”

Lex glanced back into her room and then turned away and was gone in an instant. Peggy came over to the door. “Lois, are you okay?”

The anger was still there but not nearly so intense. “Yes. Peggy, what happened?”

“I am so sorry, Lois. If I’d known there was a chance you’d get upset, I would have warned you. One of the possible side effects of your medication is that some people have a hard time keeping their emotions in check. It’s usually only a problem if a patient gets angry. Because of the way you reacted, I’ll be talking to your doctor about reducing your medication. In the meantime, if you feel yourself getting angry, take a deep breath.”

“I’ll try,” Lois replied. As Peggy walked away, Lois reviewed what she’d said to Lex. She’d known what she was saying and these were all the things she wanted to say. However, normally she’d have never actually voiced that anger. There probably wasn’t any harm done. She hadn’t revealed anything that she shouldn’t, and Lex deserved it. Still, unless there was some way to take Lex down immediately, she should probably apologize. The Godfather quote came to mind again. There was more to gain by maintaining a cordial relationship with Lex. She’d see about getting the medication adjusted and try to see him tomorrow.

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It was mid-afternoon before she had her next visitor. “Lane, is it safe to come in?”

“Come on in, Bill. It’s good to see you.”

Bill Henderson came in and sat in the guest chair. “How do you feel, Lois?”

“Pretty good,” she answered. “I’m noticing the pain more than I did this morning. They had to change my pain meds after I tore Lex’s head off.”

Bill smiled and shook his head. “I heard. The nurse warned me before I came in that I was not to get you angry.”

“I think I’ve got a handle on things now. Bill, first off I wanted to thank you for making arrangements for me to have access to Superman’s condition.”

Bill laughed. “Well part of it was self-preservation. I didn’t want you coming after the hospital staff or me. Besides, he needs someone close to him having that sort of input.”

“Still, I really appreciate you taking the time to make this happen,” Lois said. “I owe you and I won’t forget. Now, can you get me on the list to see Superman? I know he’s in a coma. I just want to be able to hold his hand and talk to him.”

“Sure, Lois. I’ll take care of it before I leave. Have they said when you’ll be able to go home?”

“Maybe tomorrow. They’re going to let me know in the morning.”

“Lois, at the press conference, what happened?”

“That’s what I wanted to ask you. Why didn’t your officer do something sooner?”

“I don’t understand,” Bill replied.

Lois was about to reply when Bill held up his hand. “Why don’t you walk me through the events that preceded Superman’s

shooting?”

“Okay. Right after people stopped throwing stuff at Superman I saw this policeman acting... I don’t know... fidgety or something. Then I saw him start to take out his gun. It was really slow, sort of like he was waiting for something to happen.”

“Hold it,” Bill interrupted. “Was this before Superman was shot?”

Lois felt a surge of irritation similar to what she’d felt when Lex was here. “If you’ll let me finish I’ll get to that,” she replied sharply.

Bill looked startled by her reaction. “Sorry. Go ahead.”

She took a deep breath. Lois reminded herself that Bill was her friend and was here to help. “I saw the officer looking at something over to my right. I looked that direction to try to see what had caused him to take out his gun. At first, I didn’t see anything, but then I saw that guy reach into his coat and pull out a gun. He started shooting and I charged him. I remember knocking his arm down. Then I remember pain and hearing a shot from behind me.”

Henderson was quiet for a moment. “Lois, are you sure? I mean of the sequence.”

“Of course I’m sure!” There was that anger again. This time she made sure to wait until the anger had passed. Bill seemed to sense what was happening and just waited for her to continue. After nearly a minute, Lois felt like she could go on. She forced herself to be calm. “Yes, Bill. I’m certain of what happened. The officer had his gun out and was watching the guy before anything else happened. It was the officer’s actions that caused me to notice the gunman.”

Henderson was quiet for a moment. “What do you think happened?” he asked.

“Honestly, Bill, I don’t know. When I saw the guy pull the gun out, I remember thinking that the officer must have seen something suspicious. Once the guy shot Superman, I don’t remember thinking much of anything. I still can’t believe your officer waited so long, and then when he finally decided to act, he shot me.”

“Neither can I,” Bill replied somberly. “Lois, the internal investigation is still underway and it wouldn’t be fair for me to speculate until I’ve had the chance to interview the officer.”

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Lois was finally alone with Clark. She’d gotten on the admittance list in the early afternoon, but waited to see Clark. She kept hoping Clark would wake up but it never happened. It was now just before 7:00 p.m. As she looked at Clark, she was struck by how little he looked like Superman right now.

She sat in the chair by his bed and took his right hand in hers. “Can you hear me?” she asked. “I hope you can. You need to get well. A lot of people need you. I need you.” She was struggling for words. She desperately wanted to talk to him, but she didn’t dare use his real name. She could call him Superman, but she didn’t want to call him that when they were alone. For all the good it enabled him to do, Clark didn’t want to be known as Superman. Lois would never again risk him thinking she cared more for the false-front than she cared for the person.

She stayed like that for nearly fifteen minutes. It was so frustrating. She wanted to talk to him. She wanted to tell him how afraid she was that he might die. She’d finally found him. He’d been there for a year but he’d been hidden.

She needed to go. Just the exertion of sitting here was starting to affect her. She stood, but instead of turning to go, she leaned over so she could whisper in his ear. “I love you, Clark.”

## Chapter 10

As she rode the elevator up to Lex’s office, Lois felt a very different kind of nervousness than she’d felt just over a week ago in this same elevator.

Earlier this morning she’d been discharged from the hospital.

Her doctor had offered her the option to stay for another day, but she'd declined. If she could have remained in the room next to Clark, she might have been tempted, but the hospital needed that room in the ICU. Besides, she had too much to do to waste time sitting in a hospital bed. If they were ready to let her go, she was getting out.

She'd gone home just long enough to freshen up and change. While she was home, she did her best to not worry about whether or not the bugs had been replanted in her apartment. Lois stayed only long enough to take care of her personal necessities and call Lex.

In the past twenty-four hours, she'd had plenty of time to look at the problem of how to conduct an investigation into the events at Clark's press conference. Each time she thought about how satisfying it would be to simply blow Lex off for good, she remained convinced that her chances conducting a successful investigation of Lex were much higher if he continued to believe she was almost his girlfriend. So here she was. Her shoulder felt especially painful since she'd deliberately skipped a scheduled dose of her pain reliever. She had to have her head clear for this conversation.

The elevator door opened and there was Lex waiting patiently in the middle of the room. "Good afternoon, Lois," he said. His voice carried a note of caution that she hadn't remembered hearing before.

"Lex, I'm so sorry about what I said in the hospital," she lied. "I barely remember it," she lied again. "I just remember being so angry and all the anger gushing out. I couldn't control it. Can you forgive me?" That request was the biggest lie of them all. She was trying her best to duplicate the way they'd interacted before she'd learned the truth about him... and herself.

He seemed to take a long time to consider a reply. Then it hit her, he was calculating possible responses against his goals. "Of course I forgive you," he answered after what was really only a very short time. "I still hope for a future where we're together." She'd expected him to come over and try to kiss her. To Lois's relief he turned away and walked to the window. "It wasn't as if there were no grounds for your anger," he said. After a few seconds spent looking out over the city, he turned to face her. "You know I own many companies..."

She only nodded and he continued. "Your accusations in the hospital were correct. I am responsible for what my organizations do and say. I promise you that I had no idea that LNN had developed an anti-Superman editorial policy."

Lois almost laughed out loud at such an outrageous statement from a man known to micromanage everything. She started to wonder if anything that either of them said today was going to be the truth. She squelched that thought as Lex continued. "I put an end to that policy last night and I have sent word throughout LNN that anyone who feels the need to push an anti-Superman message is welcome to find employment elsewhere."

At first, she was surprised at this statement. She knew that it would be too easy to verify this claim, so it was probably true. Then she realized that the LNN propaganda had already achieved its goal. Now the news network could take an apologetic stance for a policy gone awry. With Superman in the hospital and in a coma, there was no upside to being against the city's hero. This was nothing more than just another calculation. However, Lois didn't want to reveal that she understood that aspect of the change in LNN policy.

"Thank you," she said, hoping that she sounded sincere. Her mind raced for what kind of question she'd ask if she really believed that story. "Do you know what happened at LNN that started this ... policy? I wasn't there very long, but I didn't see anything that would suggest this level of anti-Superman bias."

Lex sat down behind his desk. "I looked into the source of their position. After the apartment fire last week, there was an

editorial meeting where the senior staff reviewed interviews of people who had lost relatives in the apartment fire. From what I understand, some of the interviews were quite moving. It was in that meeting that one of the editors suggested this policy."

Lois thought she saw an opening here. "May I have that name?" she asked. "I think it would make a good story on the consequences of policy decisions by broadcasters. I promise I'll be fair. If this person really regrets the decision, it would provide a good chance to get an apology to Superman on record."

Lex barely hesitated. "The man feels terrible and asked that his identity be kept confidential. I've agreed to give the person the chance to redeem himself. I'm going to treat this incident as a misguided attempt to represent some frustration at Superman's failure to respond." Lex paused for a moment. Lois was about to reply when he continued. "And let's face it, this is ratings season. I think there was an element of trying for better ratings."

As she watched, she had to admit that Lex was an incredibly good liar. At every level – his choice of words, body language and the tone of his voice – he was projecting an image of an executive that regretted what his organization had done. If it weren't for what she knew from Clark, she would have bought his feeling of regret, hook, line and sinker. She went over and sat down in the chair on the other side of Lex's desk. "I can't believe they would attack Superman for ratings."

"I was shocked myself," Lex replied smoothly. "To be honest, despite the fact that I own LNN, it isn't my primary source for news. The first clue I had of LNN's condemnation of Superman was when you ... tore into me at the hospital."

"Lex, I really am s..."

He cut her off with a motion of his hand. "Lois, I know that what you said to me was a combination of the drugs and your frustration with LNN. I have to admit that in that moment I had no idea what was going on. Your outburst was certainly a wake-up call to my responsibilities as the owner of a major media outlet in Metropolis. But, as unpleasant as it was to be on the receiving end of your outburst, some good may come out of it."

Lex just paused. He was clearly waiting for Lois to ask. She finally gave in. "What?" she asked with a forced smile.

"This episode has made me realize the real impact of the loss of The Daily Planet. News reporting in this city is out of balance. That must be corrected as quickly as possible. Therefore I've initiated the process to re-open that fine newspaper."

Lois was glad she was sitting down. That announcement might have knocked her off her feet. "That's great news," she replied enthusiastically. "Why didn't you do this when the Planet first closed?"

"When the Planet was bombed, I made a financial decision to close the business based on a simple dollars and cents calculation. Now I realize that there were more factors than I'd accounted for. If the Planet was operating, I'm sure the Superman situation would not have gone unanswered. And of course, had I realized how it would impact you ... us, I would have never let it close. Whether or not you let me back in your life, I hope you'll consider returning to the Planet. The city needs you almost as much as I do."

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It was with a feeling of relief that Lois entered the Star building. Lex had kept her for more than an hour talking about the rebirth of The Daily Planet. When Lex had sprung the plan to reopen her beloved newspaper, it had seemed too good to be true. She'd immediately had visions of Perry back in his old office bellowing that she needed more facts before he could print her latest story.

Unfortunately, the more Lex outlined his plan, the more that image faded. He was planning to reopen the Planet all right, but it would not be the newspaper she knew. He was talking about bringing in some senior staff from LNN to serve as the core from

which to build. The more Lex talked about his great plan for reviving the Planet, the more Lois became convinced that while this new publication might carry the name of The Daily Planet, it would not be the same paper.

Toward the end, she'd found it difficult to feign enthusiasm for the project. She'd finally escaped by claiming a combination of fatigue and the need to check in at the Star. Lois figured she must have been successful in convincing Lex of her enthusiasm for the Planet project, because as she left he said something about continuing the planning next time she stopped by. Then he kissed her hand. Lois hoped she'd managed to hide the level of discomfort – even revulsion – she'd felt when his lips touched her skin.

The elevator door opening to the Star newsroom was like a breath of fresh air. This afternoon something about this place felt different. Lois looked around. The bare desks and fluorescent lights were the same, but the atmosphere felt... more alive. After another glance around the room, she had it. The Star hadn't changed, she had. She was beginning to think of this as her place. She'd barely started across the room when her young de-facto assistant Emily saw her and came running.

"Lois, I'm so glad you're okay. I'm sorry that I didn't get the chance to see you in the hospital yesterday. I did try to come by in the morning, but the receptionist said you were in ICU and that visiting was restricted."

The young woman reminded her so much of Jimmy. "That's okay, Emily. Thank you for trying. I wasn't very good company most of the day because of the pain killers."

Emily smiled knowingly. "Well, I still feel bad," she offered. "It's been crazy around here. Mr. Petersen has been beside himself. I heard him talking to himself late yesterday. He was muttering something about 'Lois Lane' and 'should have known' and stuff like that."

Lois almost laughed at that. A good shaking up was something the Star needed. "So, Emily, what do we know about the man that shot Superman?"

A look of disappointment crossed Emily's face. "You didn't read the story on the front page of the Star?"

"No," she replied apologetically. "I've been reading it every day, but I didn't get a paper in the hospital. I got out this morning but I've been busy since then. If we have the whole story, then I can read our paper to get up to speed."

"We really don't have much," Emily said. "The man's name was Richard Donaldson. He was 43 years old and born in Louisville, Kentucky. He spent some time in the military, but was discharged for emotional instability. About ten years ago, he dropped off the radar. We've been unable to find any records of him from the time he left the military until he showed up in Metropolis on Tuesday."

Some elements of the man's background sounded familiar. Military background... Dropped off the radar... Lois's remembered Trask and his Bureau 39 crazies. This guy sounded like he might fit that mold. She'd have to find a way to look into that later.

Lois suddenly realized that she'd zoned out while talking to Emily. "How was our coverage of the shooting incident yesterday?" Lois asked.

"I'd say it's very good. We don't have all the answers yet but we have as much information as anyone."

"I guess I have some reading to do. Would you please bring what we have to my desk?"

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It had taken nearly an hour to review the material from the shooting. Lois had started with the Wednesday morning edition of the Star. She had to admit that the coverage was good. They had all the details and they'd managed to cover the event without having the feel of a tabloid circus show. Petersen really had turned

this paper around.

That took her mind back to Petersen's offer of a full-time permanent position. As part of her breakup speech, she'd told Lex that she was determined to deal with the changes that had been thrown at her and make them her own. Could the Star be part of that future? So much would depend on what Clark wanted to do.

When she realized that she didn't want to make a commitment without involving Clark, Lois became worried for a moment. She asked herself if it was pathetic to be unwilling to commit to a work decision without knowing what her – maybe boyfriend – wanted. Lois now knew that Lex had been manipulating her in the time leading up to his proposal. She was more determined than ever to avoid letting something like that happen again. In hindsight, she feared that if she had stayed with Lex, she might have turned into little more than a porcelain doll with no will of her own.

Was she at risk of something similar with Clark? Was she making decisions driven by Clark's needs and not her own? She didn't think so. Working with Clark was both fun and exhilarating. When they disagreed over courses of action, they made decisions together. Lois had to admit that she usually bullied Clark into going along with her plan, even if he thought it risky. Then it hit her. She regularly told Superman what to do. It's hard to think of yourself as pathetic when you regularly order around the most powerful man on the planet.

That made her feel better. This wasn't about being some kind of pathetic dependent little woman. This was about planning a future that included her best friend and work partner.

At that moment she heard the sound of a chair being dragged to her desk. She looked up to see her editor sitting down across from her. "Good afternoon, Mr. Petersen," she said cheerily.

He shook his head. "Lois, my name is Ernie. Would you please call me Chief or Ernie? When you say Mr. Petersen I keep thinking my dad is behind me."

Lois couldn't quite bring herself to calling him Chief. Not yet. That was Perry. "Okay, Ernie, I'll try. What can I do for you?"

"Well, you can tell me that you've decided to join the staff. Any chance of that?"

"Not today," she replied pleasantly. "But I did talk to Clark. How serious were you about having both of us on staff?"

"I can't afford to make job offers that aren't legitimate," he replied in a no nonsense tone. "I believe that having the Planet's top investigative team would increase both the respectability and the bottom line of the Star. If I didn't think it was good for business, I would never have brought it up."

"Clark is still busy with family issues in Smallville. I told him about your offer but I need to follow up. Have you heard from him?"

"No," Petersen answered. "So there's a chance you'll both come over permanently?"

"We've talked about it and... well, no promises but there's a good chance."

Petersen looked like she'd just handed him the keys to the city. "I hope we can make it happen. Should I call him myself?"

"No," she answered, probably too quickly. "He's busy with family issues right now. Next time I talk to him I'll suggest he call you as soon as possible."

"Fair enough," Petersen answered. "So, Lois, what do you plan to do to follow up on the shooting?"

"I've read the coverage that we ran on Wednesday, and Emily brought me the background material. There are some glaring holes in this. I'd like to work with whoever you've assigned the story to for a follow up."

"When I found out you were getting out of the hospital today, I took a chance and didn't assign anyone. I noticed that you've been using Emily for research so I had her collect what you have in front of you. Was I correct in assuming that you want the

story?”

“Absolutely!” Lois replied sharply.

Petersen just smiled. “So, what do you need? Is Emily okay or would you like someone else for research?”

“No. Emily has been great. But I will need someone with one other skill. Emily says she’s not much of a computer hacker. Who’s the best you have at getting into – difficult to access – computer systems?”

Petersen was slow in responding. “I’m not sure we have anyone that I can recommend on staff. There was no one here with those skills when I arrived, and I’ve been wary of most of the people I’ve interviewed. Some of them seem to have the right skills but I didn’t trust them.”

“I know a guy,” Lois replied. “He was our top computer researcher at the Planet. I was planning to bring him in as my own assistant and pay him myself. But if you need someone, you might want to interview him.”

“What’s his name?” Petersen asked.

“James Olsen.”

“I remember that name. Wasn’t he listed as a contributor to your exposé of the space program last year?”

“Yeah. He’s been a behind the scenes contributor to several of my stories. When either Clark or I would need deep research, especially if it involved digging out computer information, we went to Jimmy.”

Petersen paused for a moment. “Bring him on for this investigation. I’ll pay him. If I like what I see, I’ll consider bringing him on board. But I need to see him. Your recommendation counts for a lot, but I make my own hiring decisions.”

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By the time Lois was finished laying the groundwork for her research into the shooting it was late and she was tired. However, due to an afternoon telephone call, she was now entering MPD headquarters instead of her apartment.

She’d stopped by the hospital before coming here. She’d hoped that seeing Clark would lift her spirits. It didn’t. He was still in the coma and, if anything, he looked weaker than before. Lois had hoped to speak with Dr. Anderson, but he was away. Lois’s mind flashed back to the image of Clark lying in the hospital bed. He’d looked so weak. While she was in his room, she couldn’t get the phrase, “you can’t die” out of her mind. Before she left, Lois had made the point to whisper “I love you” in his ear just like last night. She hoped that at some level he’d hear her.

Once she was inside MPD, Lois was passed through to Bill Henderson’s office. When she arrived, Bill was waiting with his door held open. “Lane, please have a seat. I was surprised you were working. I called your apartment first thinking you’d still be recovering.”

As she settled into his guest chair, Lois didn’t remember it feeling so comfortable when she’d sat here in the past. She really was very tired. “Too much to do,” she replied slowly.

“So you are handling the investigation for the Star.”

“Yes. I’ve seen some patterns I don’t like.”

Bill looked at her thoughtfully for a few seconds. “I agree with you. We tried to run a background check on the shooter and hit a brick wall. It’s like the man dropped off the face of the Earth about ten years ago.”

Lois thought back to the moment of the shooting. She tried to concentrate on Donaldson but she couldn’t stop thinking about the actions of the MPD officer. “I have an idea about Donaldson, but first I was wondering what you can tell me about how I ended up being shot.” She was nervous about accusing a police officer of anything improper with no real information.

“Lois, you know I can’t discuss an ongoing investigation.”

“C’mon, Bill. I promise this is all off the record. I’m just

trying to put the pieces together. I won’t print anything and I won’t tell anyone.”

Bill gave her a very stern look. “If I didn’t owe you so many favors... Okay, I’ll tell you that he submitted his written report today and it is fairly consistent with what you told me in the hospital.”

Lois was surprised. The way Bill had pressed her about the timing of when the officer took out his gun she’d been sure that the stories were not going to match. “So why didn’t he act more quickly?”

“In his report he says that there wasn’t enough time.”

“He’s lying!” Lois insisted. “His gun was out in plenty of time to do something besides shoot me.” She hadn’t intended to be sarcastic, but it leaked through anyway.

Bill looked very stern and several long seconds dragged by before he spoke again. “Lois, are you still sure of what you told me in the hospital? You had a lot of pain killers in your system.”

“Certainly! Your guy was watching Donaldson before the man did anything suspicious. He pulled his gun and had it ready. I’d swear he was waiting for him to shoot.”

“Do you realize what you are suggesting?” Bill challenged.

“Unfortunately, I do,” she said seriously. “I trust you, but I think some of your fellow officers may have been compromised.”

“We both know that happens. So, are you willing to share anything else?”

Lois wondered if this was the time to tell Bill what she knew about Lex. There might be some advantages if Bill knew what she suspected about Lex, but it would also increase the risk that Bill might say or do something that might tip off some policeman on Lex’s payroll. After a moment of consideration, Lois decided to keep her information about Lex to herself – for now.

“I’m sure that this was no crazy person acting alone,” Lois finally said. “The whole thing was too organized. Even the crowd... It seemed far too large.”

“You’re right,” Bill replied quickly. “But all I’ve got to go on are the people that were arrested for throwing debris at Superman. They all check out with basically clean records. A few of them have been arrested before for disorderly conduct, but nothing serious. Mostly anti-government rallies and such.”

Bill paused. Lois would have sworn he was going to say something else but nothing came. Lois decided to share her one more piece of information. “Bureau 39,” she said.

“What?” Bill replied.

“Do you remember them from last year?”

“Sure. They were the group that did that fake raid on the Planet then threw you and Kent out of a plane. But I haven’t heard a thing since that warehouse turned up empty.”

“Bill, this all has to be for you only. I’ve got my own investigation to run, but I want whoever was behind this. Did you see my article about Bureau 39 from Smallville, Kansas?”

“No. Sorry, Lane, but I don’t catch everything you write.”

“Other than me and Clark, they were the only people that knew anything about Kryptonite.”

“Kryptonite?” Bill asked.

“The green crystal that can hurt Superman.”

“So you think the shooter got it from them?”

“Not just that. I think Donaldson was part of Bureau 39 for those years he was missing. If you can find a way to get information about that group, I bet you’ll find out what our mysterious Mr. Donaldson was doing.”

“I’ll do that. And I’ll do it as quietly as possible.”

“Good. In the meantime I hope you’re being careful with the Kryptonite you recovered.”

Bill looked alarmed. “Is it dangerous?”

“I don’t know. But I can practically guarantee that if you take your eyes off it for more than a minute, it will disappear from your evidence locker.”

“Well, I thought it might be sensitive stuff. I have all that we recovered on the scene and all of the fragments that were removed from Superman during the surgery. Right now it’s locked up in a special safe in the evidence room. If what you say is true, we’re in luck since this safe has a very restricted access list. It’s the heaviest and most secure safe we have. I didn’t like way that green crystal glowed when it was near Superman so I put it behind as much metal as I could.”

“Still, Bill, you need to watch it carefully. The people that set up this shooting can probably take it right out of your safe.”

Henderson just chuckled. “You worry too much. Now you should go home and get some sleep.”

At the mention of home, Lois remembered that her apartment might be bugged again. “Bill, I’m sure that I won’t be sleeping well until this is all over.”

## Chapter 11

Lois always wondered if her dislike for hospitals originated with her problems with her dad. Probably not, since lots of other people hated being in hospitals who didn’t have their lives ruined by demanding yet distant fathers whose infidelities destroyed their home. Then again, it probably didn’t help.

She’d found a message from Superman’s doctor on her answering machine when she got home last night requesting her presence this morning. She’d arrived half-an-hour before the time Dr. Anderson specified so she could have some time alone with Clark. As she sat beside his bed holding his hand, she couldn’t help but be more worried than ever. There was no question... Clark looked even worse than he had last night.

“Ms. Lane?”

The voice from the doorway startled her. She looked over quickly. “Yes?”

“I’m Doctor Anderson, we spoke on Wednesday.”

“I remember. How is Superman? He looks weaker.”

“Unfortunately, you’re right. His vitals have been falling. I believe his best chance to recover is for us to go in again and try to get the rest of the green crystal out of his system.”

The thought of them cutting on Clark worried her. “Do you think you know where the Kryptonite is?”

“Kryptonite?” he asked. “Is that the green crystal?”

“Yes.”

“We know where all of the remaining larger crystal fragments are located. They show up just like glass chips on an X-ray so we didn’t have any problem finding them. There are only three small pieces that we missed on Tuesday, one in his chest and two in his shoulder. Considering that he was hit five times, I’m just pleased there wasn’t more.”

Lois was glad she was sitting. “He was hit five times? The reports said that there were only three shots. In fact, I remember knocking the shooter’s arm down after the third shot.”

Dr. Anderson suddenly looked nervous. “I, um... Well, since you’re acting as next of kin, you should probably know. There were five bullets in three areas. The one in his hand and the two in his shoulder appear to have come from in front and below his location. There were two more impacts centered over his heart where the wounds suggest that they came from an elevated position.”

Lois’s mind was racing. Two shots right at his heart... From an elevated position... There was a sniper! “Do the police know this?!” she snapped.

“Of course. Inspector Henderson himself asked that the information not be made public. I’m sorry, but I know that Inspector Henderson spoke with you. I assumed that he would have told you.”

“No, he didn’t,” she responded in a surly tone. “But I’ll be talking about it with him later this morning.”

“So, Ms. Lane, about the... Kryptonite?”

That snapped her back to her reason for being here. “You have

to get those pieces out of him,” Lois pleaded. “Is that what you needed to ask me about?”

“Not exactly,” Anderson replied. “I’ve been working with a scientist out of STAR Labs to try to understand what we’re seeing. He’s developed a detector, sort of like a Geiger counter for this Kryptonite, and his instrument is detecting Kryptonite in his tissues where there aren’t any apparent crystal chips.”

“What? How is that possible?” Lois asked.

“We believe that when the crystal bullets shattered, they created a spray of microscopic particles. These have saturated the tissues that surround the wounds.”

“So what can you do?” Lois asked.

“We have two choices. First we can remove the chips and hope that getting the larger crystals out of him will be enough for his body to start healing itself. The other option is that in addition to removing the crystals, we remove all the surrounding tissue that shows a presence of the crystal. The risk of the first approach is that while it would be considerably less invasive and would inflict less trauma to his system, there might be too much poison left when we were done. We’re convinced that the second approach will solve the poison problem, but we’re worried about removing so much tissue. In his weakened condition, that alone could threaten his life.”

“And you want me to pick which one?”

The doctor looked uncomfortable as he replied. “I’m just glad that you’re in a position to be able to provide us guidance. If you weren’t here, there would be no one to speak for Superman on this decision.”

Lois looked at Clark. It was clear that he was in pain. She remembered how he’d looked in Smallville and how he’d described the pain of Kryptonite. She turned back to Dr. Anderson and squared her shoulders. “You have to get **all** of the Kryptonite out of him,” she said clearly, making a point to stress the word “all.”

“Will you sign a release to that effect?” the doctor asked, his tone still serious.

Lois didn’t hesitate a second. “Yes.”

The doctor seemed to relax. “Good. I think that is the best answer. This green Kryptonite seems to be more danger to him than the loss of tissue. We’ll take him in to surgery in a few hours.”

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Lois was fuming. Under any other circumstances she’d be worrying about Clark’s surgery. But Clark’s doctor had provided a distraction that might prove valuable today.

She’d gone directly from the hospital to Bill Henderson’s office at MPD. Bill wasn’t there, but they’d let her sit in a waiting area until he returned. Lois had tried to get them to let her wait in Bill’s office, but she had no luck with that request. Either they were especially disciplined, or her reputation preceded her.

It had been nearly half an hour when Bill walked up looking relaxed. “Lane, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

She almost snapped at him right then, but just managed to contain herself. “Bill, we need to talk in private.”

His face turned serious. “Okay, follow me.” He turned and started for his office. Bill held the door and after Lois had entered, he closed the door and took his seat behind his desk. “What’s this about?” he asked.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the sniper?”

For only an instant, he looked surprised. “How did you find out?”

“Does it matter?”

“This time it does,” he responded in a very serious tone. “I’ve done my best to keep a lid on that information. So far as I know, only the paramedics, the surgical team and five people here in the department know that there were more than three shots fired. So please, Lois, you have to tell me where you got that information. I

need to know where the leak came from.”

Lois froze for a moment. Bill had crossed the line and they both knew it. They’d had this discussion many times before. Lois didn’t give up her sources. “Bill, how can you ask me to give up a source?”

“Because, Lois, this time you aren’t in this as an investigator, you’re part of it.” He sat up and leaned over his desk toward her. “You’re the one that broke up the shooting. You were one of the victims. And you’re the one who’s acting as the primary victim’s next-of-kin. With all that’s at stake, I think you need to be more concerned about helping me get to the bottom of this.”

She just stared at him for a minute. He had a point, but giving up a source went against everything she believed in as well as many years of protecting sources. “Bill, would it be good enough for me to tell you that this source isn’t a threat to your investigation?”

Bill’s expression remained cold. “No. Whoever your source is, I need to find out who else they may have told. Lois, this could compromise everything I’m trying to do. It might even be a threat to Superman’s life.”

“It won’t,” Lois insisted.

“Lane, I know how you feel about this. But not matter who this is, the very fact that they said something to you means that they might have spoken to someone else. I can move quickly if I know who this is.” He paused for a moment. “Are you willing to risk Superman’s life?”

That wasn’t playing fair and Bill knew it.

“Lois, please,” Bill pleaded. “I know how you feel about this. I’m trying to do what’s best for you and him.”

Lois knew she was going to end up regretting letting go of a source, but these were extraordinary circumstances. “Fine! But in exchange for my source I want your promise that you’ll share your information.”

“Will you promise not to publish anything I tell you until I give you the go ahead?”

That was almost as hard. She hated to make that kind of promise. It basically put Bill in control of her story. But this was about much more than a story. “This time I’ll agree. I won’t publish the information you give me or anything I learn based on that information until you’re ready.” She took a deep breath. “My source was Doctor Anderson. As you pointed out, I’m serving as Superman’s next of kin and we were discussing treatment options. He thought you’d already told me about the extra bullets when you and I talked on Wednesday. I’m pretty sure he hasn’t said anything to anyone else.”

Bill considered this for a moment. “I’ll still need to talk to him.”

“So, Bill, why didn’t you tell me? You know you can trust me not to wreck your investigation.”

“I’m sorry, Lois, but I was trying to find the right time. The only real chance I’ve had since you’ve been out of the hospital was late yesterday. I knew how much this was going to upset you and I decided to let you get a good night’s sleep. I was planning to tell you this morning. I don’t expect you to thank me, but I was trying to do what I thought best for you.”

She glared at him. Knowing Bill, that was probably true and he was trying to take care of her. Men! “Fine!” she snapped out. “So let’s talk about the case. Have you made any progress in tying Donaldson to Bureau 39?”

“Give me a break. We talked late last night and it’s still before 10:00 a.m. Besides, after your comments last night I’m being more cautious than ever about with whom I share information.”

“I’ll be starting the Star’s investigation in earnest today. Do you know anything about this sniper?”

“Well, we’ve analyzed the trajectory. The bullets appear to have been fired from an upper floor, possibly a rooftop, of a building across the street. So far, we have nothing to go on. Based

on the timing, the place where Superman was hit, and the lack of evidence, it looks like a professional job.”

Lois had been sure of that from the moment she’d learned about the extra bullets. “Bill, this whole thing stinks of a setup. You’ve been out on the street. Are that many people really mad at Superman?”

“Well, a few are. With all that’s been on the news about him deserting Metropolis for China, I’d expect a little dissatisfaction.”

“But rocks and eggs? That just doesn’t feel right.”

“I agree. I’m just saying that there are people who seem to have bought into the LNN line. I’ve seen the interviews of those people we arrested on Tuesday morning. They really were angry at Superman. It’s amazing how easy it is to get some people upset. Still, from what I’ve seen, most of the city is completely behind Superman. A lot of people seem to be upset with LNN for the attacks.”

“Bill, think about the bigger picture.” Lois held up her hand and started counting on her fingers. “First, LNN attacks Superman. Then there are a series of incidents where people accuse Superman of improper behavior, which moves Superman to call a press conference. Then a gunman appears with bullets from a little-known substance that can harm Superman. And he’s backed up by a sniper.” She stopped and waited to see where Bill would go with those parts.

“You’re saying that all of this was part of one comprehensive plan against Superman?” Bill asked.

“I don’t see another explanation where all the parts fit so well,” Lois replied.

“I see your reasoning,” Bill said. “But are you seriously suggesting that someone in a very senior position at LNN was involved in a plot to kill Superman?”

Lois hesitated. If Bill was going to conduct any real investigation, he deserved to know what he was up against. Now that she knew there had been a sniper, Bill needed to understand Lex’s involvement. “You know I was dating Lex Luthor?”

“Sure.”

“Did you know I broke up with him?”

“No. None on my business.”

“In this case it is. One of the reasons I broke it off was that Superman revealed to me that Lex is heavily involved in crime in Metropolis. Based on what Superman told me, and what I’ve learned on my own, Lex is very close to the figure known as The Boss. In fact, the more I see, the more I believe he may be the Boss.”

Henderson leaned back in his chair. “Lane, I don’t have time for fairy tales.”

“Think about the role LNN has played in this mess in light of what I just suggested. You have to admit that the pieces fit very well.”

Henderson was quiet for a long moment. Lois finally felt that she should push the issue. “You know I’ll go ahead with my own investigation. I’m not asking your permission. I just thought you should you know what you are up against. I believe that Lex is either the Boss or his partner. What you believe is up to you.”

Lois got up and started for the door. She’d just touched the doorknob when she heard Bill’s voice. “I believe you.”

She turned to face him and he continued. “That fits with some crime patterns I’ve seen over the past few years. But it doesn’t make either of our jobs any easier.”

“No, but we’re better off understanding what we’re facing,” she said. “I’ll let you know if I come up with anything.” She was about to turn the doorknob when she thought of a loose end. She turned back to Henderson one more time. “What do you think the story is for the officer that shot me?”

Bill’s face turned cold. “I told more than I should have last night. He’s under administrative review. I can’t express an opinion.”

She just stared at him for a few seconds. She should have expected that reply. “Well, what you believe is up to you, but I believe he was paid to make sure Donaldson would be in no condition to talk. And I’ll bet he was told that collateral damage was not to be a deterrent.” Lois watched but Bill never even twitched. “Like I said, just my opinion.” She opened the door and stepped out. At the last second she stuck her head back in. “Just the same, watch your back.”

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As Lois approached the conference room at the Star, she had to remind herself that worrying about Clark would do him no good. The meeting with Bill had been a good distraction for a few minutes, but she needed to get the investigation started.

As she entered the room she had to admit that it was great to see Jimmy. Under other circumstances, she’d have expected him to be watching for her arrival. However, something much more interesting had caught his attention. Emily seemed to find Jimmy’s company equally distracting, but there was work to be done. “Good, morning,” Lois said as she cleared the door.

“Lois,” Jimmy yelped in a startled tone, clearly embarrassed at missing Lois’s arrival.

“Good, morning, Ms. Lane,” Emily said in much calmer tones. “How is your shoulder this morning?”

Lois closed the door and sat down in the chair at the head of the table. “It’s aches a little, but it feels much better than yesterday. So, have you two been getting acquainted?”

“Sort of,” Jimmy answered defensively. “When you asked me to come in, I expected I’d be working solo like I did at the Planet.”

“Not this time,” Lois said. “I think there’s plenty for all of us. Especially in light of my injury.”

“I’m happy to see you up and around,” Jimmy said quickly. “When I watched the LNN coverage and saw you on the ground, I was scared you might be...”

“Not yet. But we need to get to work. I have a list of issues to investigate. I’ll leave it to the two of you to figure out how to split the work. Jimmy, I expect you to do the majority of the computer based work but that’s only a suggestion. First, there’s the LNN angle. The network started an anti-Superman campaign. We need to try to find out where the directive for that campaign came from. I’m not sure you’ll be able to find out much but we need to try.”

“Ms. Lane?” Emily interrupted. “This sounds more like investigative reporting than research.”

“You’re right, it is,” Lois answered. “I can’t realistically investigate LNN because of my past association with Lex. Too many people know who I am. Within minutes of my showing up someone would make sure Lex knew I was there. Jimmy knows that sometimes story research means in-the-field investigation. Do you think you’ll be up to it?”

“I think so,” Emily replied. “It’s just that I’ve never done anything like this before. I don’t want to mess up.”

“You won’t,” Lois replied, trying to project confidence in the young woman. “Jimmy’s been through some of these with me. I’m sure that together you will be fine. I know you aren’t a seasoned investigator, but there’s no better way to learn. Okay?”

Emily nodded. “Great,” Lois said. “Now, we need a deep background search on both of the shooters at the press conference. We need to see if there is any link at all between Donaldson and Bureau 39.”

Lois paused as both of her young colleagues jotted down notes. When they finished Lois continued. “I also want to see what we can find out about the policeman that shot me and Donaldson. We know his name but the whole situation feels wrong. I’ve worked with and around police officers for years and his actions don’t fit the situation. Two things stand out. He discharged his weapon without first yelling for Donaldson to stop. Then he shot even though another person was in the line of fire. I

know the police will be investigating, but there’s nothing wrong with looking for information about his background as an officer. Something may turn up. I also want you to look into his personal and financial situation.”

“You think someone paid him off,” Jimmy accused.

“Yes. That’s the only idea that makes sense. I think he was paid to make sure that Donaldson was silenced *after* Superman was shot.”

“Wow,” Emily whispered.

Jimmy replied with a hushed laugh. “If you are going to work with Lois very much, you’ll get used to this sort of thing.”

Lois just smiled. Jimmy was right. Her investigations did seem a bit more ... intense, than most other reporters. “Okay, I still have a few more issues to go over and then we’ll need to split up the work.”

As she outlined the remainder of the plan for the investigation and she watched the two young people interact, she became more confident that they would work well together. And they might have the potential for something more.

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At this rate, Lois figured that before too long she’d know the whole hospital staff on a first-name basis. She was the only person in the surgical waiting room. She looked around her for what must be the fiftieth time since she arrived. This was a quiet room with a white tile floor and bad art on the walls. It did make the perfect place for people who were too nervous to be able to enjoy any environment. A few minutes after she arrived she’d even picked up the twelve-year-old Sports Illustrated and opened it to look inside. That was how out-of-it she was.

She had been there nearly twenty minutes before Clark’s doctor came out to see her. She must have been fretting, because she stood nervously as soon as she saw him approaching. Lois meant to ask about the surgery but she ended up just waiting for the doctor to say something. Lois Lane without an opening question... she really was completely out of sorts.

Doctor Anderson had apparently seen this sort of nervous reaction before. “The surgery went well,” he said in a confident tone of voice.

“Were you able to get all the Kryptonite out of Superman?” she asked anxiously.

“Yes,” Dr. Anderson replied. “The detector from STAR Labs worked very well. Since this material seemed to be so toxic to Superman, we were very careful. As we removed the contaminated tissue from Superman, a nurse moved it to a different room. We didn’t consider the surgery finished until the detector was completely silent.”

“So how is he?” Lois asked.

“He’s still unconscious. We’re treating him just like we would an ordinary patient that had been through a similar procedure. It’s still hard to believe that he reacts so much like a normal person. I mean, once the powers are gone, everything else about him, even his blood type, is perfectly human. He’s O-positive by the way. Anyway, for now all we can do is wait.”

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As she drove slowly toward her apartment, Lois was in a decidedly down mood. Somehow, she’d been sure that once the Kryptonite was gone, Clark would get well immediately. The fact that he hadn’t, wasn’t necessarily a bad sign. After all, he’d been through a lot. However, the lack of an instant super-speed recovery was still very disappointing. She just wished she could talk to someone.

Then it hit her. Martha and Jonathan! They needed to know more than what was being released to the press. She’d meant to call them earlier in the day, but other things just kept coming up. She couldn’t call them from home since the phone might be bugged. Still, the Star building had a pay phone in the lobby.

Less than ten minutes later, she was doing something she

hadn't done in years. She was placing a collect telephone call.

While the operator was negotiating the call, Lois actually had a flash of fear that Clark's parents might refuse the call. Had Clark told them that she'd broken up with Lex? Those fears peaked the instant she heard Martha answer the phone with "Hello?"

"Will you accept a collect call from Lois Lane?" the operator asked.

"Of course," Martha replied.

"Very well," the operator said. "Ms. Lane, you may proceed with your call." Then Lois heard a click as the operator disconnected.

"Lois, we saw the news, are you all right?"

"Yes, Martha." Lois wanted to talk about Clark but was nervous talking on a line where the operator had negotiated the call. "Martha, this is probably being paranoid, but there's another phone here. Could you call me back on that phone? I just want to be sure we have a private line."

Martha understood immediately. "I understand, Lois. Please give me the number of the other phone."

Lois gave her the number of the phone next to the one she was using. Only a few seconds after she hung up, the other phone rang. Lois picked up the phone. "Martha?"

"Yes, Lois. Is Clark okay?"

"Oh, Martha. I'm so sorry. I wanted to call sooner, but until tonight, I didn't think to call on a pay phone. My work phone is tapped and I'm afraid that my home might be again too."

"I understand, dear. Please, is Clark okay?"

"He's in a coma. He was shot with Kryptonite bullets."

Martha's reply was much calmer than Lois had expected. "We figured that. Have the doctors been able to help him?"

"Yes. With his powers gone because of the Kryptonite, his doctors have been able to treat him like any other patient. I don't know how that's possible, since we know he's an alien. But with his special abilities removed, he seems just as human as you and I."

"Well, when he was little, before he got the powers, he was just like any other boy. So what have the medical people done?"

"He's had two surgeries," Lois said. "The first surgery was right after the shooting to get out the bullets. The second one was earlier today and they went back in to clean out the rest of the Kryptonite. It's all out of him now, but he's still suffering from the effects of that poison being in his body. Do you have any suggestions that I can pass along to the doctor?"

"No. I wish I did. He's never been hurt before, so I don't know what to suggest."

"Okay. Well, his doctor seems capable, and they have some scientists from STAR Labs helping out. I promise I'll tell you as soon as I get any more information."

"Thank you. How are you doing? We saw that you got shot that day also."

"I'm fine. My right arm is in a sling. Mostly I'm worried about Clark. I just want him to be okay."

"I hope so too, dear. We're so glad that you're there for him." There was a slight pause before Martha continued. "He told us you that you two had mostly straightened out your... misunderstandings."

"We have. At least, we've made a lot of progress." Suddenly she felt a catch in her throat. "Martha, I'm just so scared. I feel like I've finally found him and... I don't know what I'll do if he..." She couldn't go on.

Several seconds passed without a reply. Then it hit Lois that this had to be at least as hard on Martha as it was on her. It was her son that was struggling in the hospital. "I'm sorry, Martha. I know this is hard on you and Jonathan."

"You don't need to apologize. We're all worried about him. Now, why don't you go home and try to get some rest. You need your strength to recover. And Clark will need you healthy when

he gets out of the hospital."

"I think that's a good idea. Thank you, Martha."

Lois was about to hang up when she heard Martha's voice again. "Lois?"

"I'm still here," Lois replied quickly.

"When all this is over, we'd love it if you and Clark could come out and spend a weekend with us on the farm. Ever since you spent those days with us last time, Jonathan and I have thought of you as family. Even if you and Clark end up just being friends, we'd love to have you as part of our family."

Family... Being part of a family, and being happy about it, was a combination that Lois hadn't experienced in years. And this family. She loved Martha and Jonathan. She loved Clark, she knew that now. Being part of his family too. It was too... perfect.

"Lois?" Martha was still on the phone.

"I'm here," Lois said quickly. Why was she starting to cry? "I'd love to come out and visit. I'll be sure to get Clark to fly us out as soon as he's better." Lois hoped Martha couldn't hear her voice cracking.

"Dear, I know Clark is going to be fine. I don't know how. I just do." Martha sounded so confident.

The tears started to flow. "I'm just so scared," Lois choked out.

"Honey, my son may do some pretty stupid things sometimes. Lord knows you've seen more of that than most, but if something's important, he always comes through. He's going to get through this. Now, why don't you go home and as you're going to sleep, think of ways to torture Clark when the two of you are in Smallville."

Clark's mom was so special. "I'll do that. And Martha... I love you."

"We all love you too, dear."

As the phone clicked dead, the tears kept leaking from her eyes.

## Chapter 12

At 5:00 a.m. Lois finally decided that it was close enough to morning to get out of bed. It had been a very long night. The previous nights had already taught her that sleeping with her arm still hurting was challenging. Tonight there was an extra surprise. Sympathy pains.

At least that is what she figured they must be. After talking to Martha, she went straight home to bed. She was nervous, and no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't get her mind off Clark. Part of her kept hoping for a call from the hospital telling her that Clark was awake and that he was asking for her. That call never came.

Instead, she used some meditation techniques she'd learned long ago to force herself to relax. Once she'd finally drifted off, it didn't seem like she'd been asleep more than a few minutes when she woke up with sharp, localized pain. There were three spots. Her left hand, left shoulder and her ribs.

The first time she woke up, the pain was so intense that she was sure that she'd been stabbed. It was only after she came fully awake that she realized that she was feeling the pains in the same locations that Clark was hurt. Just to make sure that something odd hadn't happened, Lois went to the bathroom and turned on the light so she could look at herself in the mirror. Sure enough, she was unharmed.

Lois woke up twice more that night with similar pains, the last one being just before 5:00 a.m. Each time the pain seemed the same, but at least it wasn't so scary. She just wished she knew why this was happening. It seemed that becoming involved with Clark carried its own set of special surprises.

After the 5:00 a.m. incident, Lois got out of bed and started her day. She had wanted to get an early start, but 5:00 a.m. was not what she'd been planning for this Saturday morning.

After breakfast, she headed straight to the hospital. Given the

nature of her evening, she wanted to check on Clark. This morning she wasn't worried as much as she was curious. She kept telling herself that sharing Clark's pain had to be an indication that he was getting better. Lois realized that she was no longer worried about whether or not Clark was going to get better. Now her concern was how long it would take.

She arrived at the hospital too early for regular visiting hours, but this time she was happy to play on her status as next of kin to gain admittance to his room.

As she sat and watched him, she couldn't help but think he felt different somehow. When she'd been with him yesterday morning, the experience had left her afraid. He'd been dying.

Today was completely different. He was still weak – incredibly weak – she could sense that. But he was holding his own. That awful poison was out of his system now, and he would get better. It might take a long time, but he would recover.

Suddenly she heard the sound of someone clearing his throat behind her. She looked over to see a balding, middle-aged man standing in the doorway. As soon as she made eye contact, he stepped in. "Hi," he said, while reaching out to shake her hand. "I'm Doctor Bernard Klein. I work out of STAR Labs. Are you Lois Lane?"

"Yes," she answered. "STAR Labs... Are you the person that designed the Kryptonite detector?"

At the mention of his invention, Dr. Klein's smile grew larger. "Yes. Although all I did was modify a high-sensitivity Geiger counter that I was working on for another project. That green crystal is slightly radioactive and shows up on regular high-end radiation detection equipment. It would have been very unlikely that anyone would be able to develop a completely new type of detector so quickly."

Lois decided she liked this Dr. Klein. He seemed nice and, more importantly, he'd helped Clark. "Whatever you might think of your efforts, Dr. Anderson told me that your detector made the surgery go much better, so I want to thank you."

Dr. Klein blushed at this. "I'm happy to help Superman any way I can." Then he looked at a chart he'd had in his hand when he arrived. After studying it for a moment, he looked up at Lois. "I understand that you are acting as Superman's next of kin."

"Yes," Lois answered cautiously.

"The surgery seems to have improved his situation," Dr. Klein offered. "Before Dr. Anderson removed the... Kryptonite, his vitals were trending steadily downward. That seems to have stopped and we're looking for signs of improvement."

Lois knew he was getting better. She just didn't know how she knew. "I'm sure he's getting better," she offered.

Dr. Klein looked at the chart again. "I wish the chart showed it. Ms. Lane, one of the reasons I was called in, is that I've been leading the Superman research at STAR Labs."

Lois wasn't sure she liked the sound of that. "Superman research?" she asked.

Klein held his hand up defensively. "Nothing bad, I assure you. STAR Labs set up my group shortly after Superman first appeared. Most of his abilities seem to defy the laws of science as we know them. We try to understand how he does the things he does. Anyway, one of the questions we've looked at is where he gets the energy necessary to be... well, super."

"Dr. Klein, please, are you going somewhere with this?"

"Yes, sorry. Several of us think he gets his energy from the sun. I'm sure you remember similar speculation during that heat wave incident. If that's true, we may be able to speed his recovery by exposing him to sunlight. I believe that if his system was provided with an appropriate energy source, he should heal more quickly."

"That sounds fine," Lois said. "But did you notice that it's raining outside? From what I saw of the forecast it will continue all day."

Dr. Klein was nodding quickly. "I know. Unfortunately, the weather isn't cooperating. But I have something that should work just as well. I'd like your permission to bring in a special exact-spectrum sun lamp. We have a device that duplicates the spectrum of the sun perfectly. It's similar to a full-spectrum lamp but much more advanced. This lamp is very bright and reproduces the specific absorption bands of the sun. If Superman does get his power from the sun, this is the closest we can get on a rainy day. I'd like to try it and see if it seems to make any difference in his recovery."

"Would there be any risk to Superman?"

"Not unless there's some reason to believe that sunlight will hurt him. Besides, if we decide to try this device, we'll monitor him even more carefully than we are doing now. If there were to be any detectable downturn in his condition, we'd stop immediately."

"Well, then, it's fine with me." Anything to help Clark get better.

"Great. Could you come with me to see Doctor Anderson? I'd like him to know that you agreed to this procedure. We were already leaning towards trying this treatment, but he'll be glad to know we have your support."

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Stepping off the elevator at the Star was almost beginning to feel normal. Lois's time here had seemed a roller coaster ride but now things were settling down. Despite the obvious differences between this place and the Planet, she was starting to have a similar feeling of "coming home" that she had felt when she entered the Planet bullpen. That was a feeling that two weeks ago she'd feared she would never know again.

As she headed for her desk, she saw Jimmy leaning over the Emily's small desk. He was pointing out something to the young woman. That was part of the change. Emily was a joy to work with. Now with Jimmy here too, this had the real feel of home.

Lois reached her desk to find several notes all saying the same thing. Lex had called. Based on the notes, even though it was only just 10:00 a.m., he'd already called twice. There wasn't anything to talk to Lex about, so she pushed the notes aside.

Lex probably wanted to talk some more about the rebirth of the Planet. Lois didn't know if she was up to another day of feigned interest in the project. The possible reopening of the Planet had crept into her thoughts during the sleepless hours last night. In many ways, the idea of the Planet reborn under Lex's control was worse than simply letting the grand lady die. If Lex took this project forward, there would be a newspaper in Metropolis that carried the name and the face of the Planet, but wouldn't have the old girl's soul. Lois knew it would break her heart every time she saw that paper. Just thinking about it made her heart ache. That kind of pain that could drive her from Metropolis. With Clark, of course.

The challenge for today was not to let herself get distracted. She had an investigation to run. Lois was about to head to Emily's desk to talk with her associates when she spotted them heading her way. When they arrived, she greeted them with a cheery, "Good morning."

Emily replied first. "Good morning Ms. Lane."

Before Jimmy could say anything Lois realized that if she was going to make this her home, she needed to start getting more comfortable. "Emily, please call me Lois. Having you call me, Ms. Lane all the time makes me feel like I'm old enough to be your mother. So, Lois?"

Emily was blushing just a tiny bit. "Okay," she answered.

"All right," Lois said. "So what do you have for me?"

They pulled nearby chairs up to Lois's desk and sat down. After looking at each other for a second, Emily said, "You go first," to Jimmy.

"Last night I started seeing what I could find out Officer

Smith. You know, the policeman that shot you. I was able to... um, get access... to his financial records. They tell quite a story. It's amazing what you find in loan application documents. Especially when someone is applying for loans with multiple banks. I spent the entire evening putting all the pieces together."

Jimmy paused for a second but Lois made a motion for him to continue. "It all starts when he got married early last year. He and his wife bought a house in a nice neighborhood that was barely within what they could afford with both their incomes. Then, within a month of moving into the house, his wife lost her job and discovered that she was pregnant. Now the joker, about a month later they discovered a major water leak under the slab of their house that wasn't covered by their insurance. It cost thousands of dollars to fix that they didn't have. They were about to lose everything when he suddenly came up with enough money to pay off all his debts."

"I agree, that could be suspicious," Lois said. "Were you able to get any information on where the money came from?"

"There were several deposits over a period of a few weeks." Jimmy replied immediately. "The two largest were checks from what looked like a grandmother in Texas. I'm working on getting into her records now, but as far as I can tell, the grandmother's bank isn't tied into any computer network. Sorry."

"No, don't be sorry. That's a great start for a half-day's work. Stay with it for at least another day. Do you have anything else?"

"Not from my side of the investigation," Jimmy answered.

Lois turned to Emily. "Emily?"

"One of my classmates from Met U has been at LNN for about six months. Do you remember Sandy Jenkins from when you were at LNN?"

Lois thought for a moment. "No, sorry. I never got settled in there."

"That's not surprising. She said that she saw you around the office when you were at LNN. She's really jealous that I'm working with you. Anyway, I called her yesterday and she was able to walk me around LNN this morning."

Lois was suddenly worried that her young friend might have given too much away. "What reason did you give her for wanting to see LNN?"

"I told her that I'd heard you talking about LNN and it made me curious to see how the other half lived. There is some truth in that claim. Did I do anything wrong?" she asked defensively.

"No," Lois replied quickly. "This whole situation has me jumpy. Please continue."

"I met her at the apartment and we went into LNN together. She starts at 5:30 a.m. and I shadowed her for about two hours. I'd asked her not to mention where I worked, so she introduced me as a friend from school. No one looked at me twice."

"I don't believe that," Jimmy interjected.

Emily blushed at the complement and turned to Jimmy. "Well, some of the guys were a little flirty. But I made sure to play the part of Sandy's school friend and nothing more." Then she turned back to Lois. "I was able to work their recent Superman policy into conversations twice. Sandy didn't know anything except that the decision to attack Superman came from high up. But there was this one guy, Jerry, who claimed to have overheard a meeting of the senior staff where they were talking about the Superman policy. He insisted that the senior managers seemed angry and a little scared. He told me that from what he heard, none of them wanted to attack Superman like this. They were told to do so or get out. There are rumblings all over the station that Zimmerman almost quit over the whole mess."

"Zimmerman?" Jimmy asked.

"The senior editor at LNN," Lois answered before Emily could reply. Then Lois continued. "If Zimmerman was against it, then the policy came from the board of directors... or someone at that level. When I was there, Zimmerman had the final say on all

policies. If he got something shoved down his throat, he can't be happy."

"I can't really say," Emily said. "Based on your warnings I was making sure to keep as low a profile as I could. I was careful about pressing questions and, of course, I never saw Mr. Zimmerman."

"That's okay," Lois said. "This is as much as I could have expected to get out of LNN. If this thing breaks open, then Zimmerman might be willing to speak up later. I bet he knows exactly where that directive came from." Lois paused for a minute to assess their situation. "Emily, unless you have an especially promising lead, I'd like you to back off the LNN angle."

"Sure Ms... Lois. I was going to ask you about just that. I wasn't sure where to go short of some of the more aggressive techniques that you're famous for."

"No. We don't want to risk that," Lois answered quickly. "So, if we set LNN aside, that leaves Donaldson and Smith. I have an angle that I want to work myself for Donaldson. Would you be okay working with Jimmy on Smith? While he's working the computer side of the money trail, why don't you see what you can find out through other means? From what Jimmy has learned, Smith's problems seem to have started with some everyday bad luck. Given that he's known to have shot a Star employee, it shouldn't raise any eyebrows to have a Star reporter asking questions about his background."

"Do you think they'll talk to me?"

"Maybe not, but there's no harm in asking." Lois thought for a minute. "Why don't you approach this as if you were doing a human interest background piece? Explain that you are new at the Star and you don't get to do real work. That way when you start asking about his family, the questions shouldn't raise any undue suspicions."

Lois could see the wheels turning in Emily's head. "I see it. You're right, that should work. Even if I don't learn anything, it shouldn't make anyone overly nervous."

"If either of you find anything that needs my immediate attention, let me know. Otherwise we'll meet again tomorrow morning."

As her two assistants went to tackle their respective assignments, Lois turned to hers. She doubted that Donaldson had just arrived in Metropolis the day he started shooting. Bill had told her that when the police examined the body, there was no evidence on him at all. Nothing in his pockets. Nothing at all on his person. If he'd been staying in a regular hotel, the police should have found his room already. Lois was hoping that one of her contacts might be able to turn up a lead.

Unfortunately, she'd learned a week ago that almost none of her contacts would talk to her. Today her list had exactly two names. Bobby Bigmouth and Sammy the Mouse. She hadn't been able to reach Bobby last week so Lois didn't know if he was going to be willing to help her. Sammy had already proven that he'd support her.

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A very tired Lois Lane entered Memorial Hospital at 7:00 p.m. that evening. Some parts of her afternoon had been very successful. She'd reached Bobby and he'd agreed to see what he could find out. It made her feel good that her two most reliable snitches hadn't abandoned her.

Bobby had been out of town last week visiting his sister. Lois felt obligated to warn him of the injunction that no one was supposed to talk to her. She liked Bobby and didn't want him inadvertently walking into trouble. He'd been offended that she'd thought he wouldn't already know about something like that. Bobby had pointed out that the warning was not to get caught helping Lois Lane. He didn't plan to get caught. Just the same, he didn't have anything... yet.

For Sammy, Lois had left a message. The young man could

rarely be reached by phone. Lois had dropped copies of a note in a few locations around the city. It was nothing more than a scrap of paper with a rough drawing of a mouse on one side and a stylized 'L' on the other. In the past when she'd used this method to request a meeting, Sammy had always contacted her within 24 hours. She would have to wait for him to respond so she could explain what she needed.

When Lois reached the ICU she was surprised to find Clark's room empty. There was a nurse she didn't recognize walking by, and Lois took advantage of the opportunity. "Excuse me?"

"Can I help you with something?" the nurse asked.

"Superman," Lois said, pointing at the empty room. "Where is he?"

The nurse looked her over again. "Oh, you're Lois Lane. I'm sorry, but I didn't recognize you. After all, you were only with us for two nights."

"That's okay," Lois said hurriedly. She wanted to know what happened to Clark. "Can you tell me where Superman is?"

"Sure. They transferred him to the fourth floor this afternoon. It was before I came on shift so I don't have any of the details. If you head up there, you can probably see him."

When Lois reached the fourth floor, she had to show her driver's license before the head nurse would tell her where Clark's room was located. As she approached the room, she saw a policeman standing outside the door. As the officer watched her approach, his expression never changed. Lois had a fleeting thought that MPD must be hiring from the Buckingham Palace guards.

"Good evening, officer," Lois said when she reached him. "I'm Lois Lane. I believe you will find me on your admittance sheet. I'd like to see Superman."

"I'm sorry, ma'am. You can't go in." His tone was professional.

She almost got angry but knew that it wouldn't help the situation. "I believe if you check your list, you'll find I'm on it," she said with exaggerated patience. "Here's my ID," as she offered him her driver's license.

"I know who you are, Ms. Lane. It's not a question of security. I can't let anyone in his room unless it's either an emergency or with the clearance of the head nurse."

Lois glared at him for what must have been a full 30 seconds. He just looked calmly back. Definitely Buckingham Palace. "Fine!" she said curtly, and headed back to the nursing station.

For each of the 54 steps that it took to reach the station, Lois was fuming. The nurse could have told her that the guard wouldn't let her in. Instead, she'd decided to play a joke. Fine! Lois would share some of her amusement and see if you really could peel paint off the walls by yelling. A tiny voice was trying to tell her that was not acceptable behavior for a hospital, but the other, very angry voice in her head completely drowned it out.

As she reached the station and was about to let go with volley number one, another voice changed the entire picture. "Ms. Lane. Nurse Martin called me and told me you were here." It was Dr. Klein.

Well... that was better, but she still wasn't in Clark's room. Since Klein was here, he was a viable target. "Why can't I see Superman?" she barked.

The scientist was clearly unprepared for Mad Dog Lane. He took a step back defensively before answering. "You can," he replied quickly. "We just need to turn off the lights before you go in."

"Lights? What lights?" Lois asked, still angry.

"Remember, we talked about them this morning. We've been using a solar lamp treatment. There are monitors on Superman. To make sure we track his progress properly, we have to be sure to log each time anyone enters the room and we turn out the lights."

"I just wanted to see him for a minute. Why couldn't I just

duck in quickly?"

"Because we have to turn out the lights, and that affects his recovery," Dr. Klein answered. He nodded at the head nurse, picked up a clipboard and motioned towards Clark's room. "Ms. Lane, I'll be happy to let you in. Please follow me." And he started down the hall.

Lois was right behind him. "Why did you move him? Is he doing better?"

"He's doing much better," Klein replied. "He still hasn't regained consciousness yet but his vital signs turned up as soon as the light hit him. That's why we moved him. You'll remember that in the ICU room, the wall that faced the nursing station was glass. That didn't work so well when we started the light treatment. The lights are very bright." They had reached the door and now the guard simply stepped aside. Dr. Klein turned back to her and said, "You might want to shield your eyes."

The scientist checked his watch, jotted a note on the clipboard, and opened the door just a crack. The brightness inside the room was overwhelming. Dr. Klein reached in and the light disappeared. Then he opened the door the rest of the way and stepped in.

Lois followed him in, and there was Clark. He was lying on top of the sheets wearing only what looked like a Speedo bathing suit, some kind of protective goggles for his eyes, and his bandages. Lois couldn't help but think that even injured he was magnificent. After a few seconds, Lois snapped herself out of simply admiring Clark and looked at his injuries. The bandages masked the extent of the damage, but he didn't look to be in that bad a shape.

She turned to Klein. "Has he been awake at all yet?"

"No. We were surprised at first, but now I think it's part of how he heals. Since we started the light therapy..." He pointed at the three lamp fixtures surrounding the bed. "...his vital signs have been climbing steadily. About two hours ago, his tissues started regenerating at a highly accelerated rate."

"When do you think he'll wake up?" Lois asked.

Dr. Klein paused only a moment before answering. "It's just a guess, but my theory is that once his body is healed and recharged he'll wake up. Based on his progress today, that should be by morning."

### Chapter 13

L loved this beach. The green water splashing against the black beach was so relaxing. Together, the colors of the ground and water provided a perfect contrast to the orange sky.

Of course, no matter how beautiful the setting, it would be impossible to enjoy without her partner. She squeezed K's hand and he immediately responded with a squeeze of his own. "We should spend some time here after this assignment," she offered.

She felt more than heard a small laugh from her partner. "Are you so looking forward to the end of this assignment?" he asked. "I thought we were just getting to the good part."

"Yes, we are," she said. "Although for a moment it looked like this was going to turn out to be a very unpleasant cycle."

"It worked out. But you're right. I hate those assignments when we aren't together." She could feel the sadness radiating from him as he remembered those unpleasant assignments.

"Those are hard on both of us," she replied. "But they're rare. We usually manage to find each other."

"Yes," he replied. L could sense his joy at the prospect of being together. Then he continued. "So, you don't care for this assignment?" K asked.

He was teasing and they both knew it. "That's not it," she insisted. "I know how important this one is. And you're right, we are getting to the good part," she replied with a laugh of her own. "But it's been nearly a hundred cycles since our last break. We need some time to ourselves."

She could feel the amusement radiating from him through

their link. When they were on assignment, their bond was what she missed most. Sometimes there was an echo, but it was no more than a pale shadow of the connection they shared in their natural state. Then L felt a change coming from K. “It’s time to go back, isn’t it?” she asked.

“I wish we could stay longer,” K mused.

“We were lucky to have this time. This was a very unusual circumstance,” L answered. “I doubt this chance will come again during this assignment. But we’ll be together.”

They shed the illusion of bodies and came together for just an instant before leaving this plane to return to work.

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Lois woke up to the phone ringing. For a second she was confused. There was an image of a beach... and Clark was there, but it wasn’t exactly Clark. Then the phone rang again and the remnants of the dream disappeared. She picked up the phone.

“Hello?”

“Ms. Lane, this is Dr. Klein.” Lois recognized his voice.

She was suddenly alarmed. “Did something happen to Superman?”

“Nothing bad,” he answered in a reassuring tone. “I just wanted to tell you that he’s gone.”

“Gone?”

“I’m sorry. I’m not saying this well. A few minutes ago Superman woke up and left the hospital.”

“How did he leave?” Lois asked.

“According to some of the staff, he walked into the stairwell and disappeared.”

He’d probably gone to the roof and flown away. “Do you know if his special abilities are back?” Lois asked.

“We know that some of them are. At his 2:00 a.m. check, the nurse found that his IV had worked loose. She tried to restart the IV, but the needle wouldn’t penetrate his skin. Based on the way he disappeared I would assume that the rest of his abilities are back as well.”

Lois’s mind was spinning. What to do? Should she try to contact Clark, or wait for him to come to her? Then she heard Dr. Klein on the phone. “Ms. Lane?”

“I’m sorry. My mind wandered for a moment.”

“When you see Superman, would you please ask him if he’d be willing to see me at STAR Labs? If we could know more about him, we’ll be better prepared if he gets hurt again.”

“I’ll suggest it to him. Thank you for everything. And please give my thanks to Dr. Anderson.”

“I will.”

As Lois hung up the phone, her mind was in full spin. Smallville... his apartment... where would he go? But that was all silly. Once Clark decided to see her, he could be there in seconds. He’d almost certainly gone to Smallville to assure his parents that he was okay. If so, he’d probably call her at the office. She had work to do anyway, so she had her destination.

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Lois glanced around the empty elevator as she rode up to the Star offices. The lobby had been almost, but not quite, deserted when she’d come in at 8:02 a.m. The calm Sunday morning environment would give her the chance to compose her thoughts and plan the next move of the investigation into Clark’s shooting.

Lois stepped out of the elevator to a nearly empty office. She paused only a second before starting for her desk. There were a few weekend staffers present, but no one had even bothered to look up. When her desk came into view, she was surprised to see a man in her chair.

For the briefest instant, she felt a surge of anger that someone would make himself at home at her desk. Then he looked up. It was Clark. Lois dropped her handbag and started running. He barely had time to stand before she reached him. Her arms flew around him. He felt healthy. He felt strong. He felt... wonderful.

It was only with a small part of her mind that Lois noticed that his arms had gone around her just as eagerly as hers around him. As the seconds ticked by Lois realized that the longer they stayed this way, the better it felt. Being with Clark felt so right. How had she missed all this? How had she almost let it slip away? Without loosening her grip in the slightest, Lois whispered softly, “I missed you.”

There was only the briefest pause before Clark responded, “I came as quickly as I could.” After another few seconds, she felt Clark shift as he said, “This is great, but I’d like to look at you.”

Lois relaxed her grip and they separated enough to look at each other, but not so far that they lost contact. She wanted to feel him, even if it was just holding hands.

Clark studied her face for a moment, then reached up and wiped away a tear that had started down her cheek. “You look tired,” he said tenderly.

She choked off a giggle. “I haven’t been sleeping well. I’ve been worried about someone very dear to me.”

“Anyone I know?” he asked mockingly.

“Maybe,” she said in a teasing tone. Then she thought of Smallville. She leaned in close and whispered, “Have you told your parents that you’re well?”

He pulled her close. That felt so nice. However, the reason was to whisper in her ear. “I went back to Smallville to check in with them. I stayed long enough to shower and change clothes. Then I came right here. I wanted to see you as myself. I... I just had to.”

“I’m glad you came,” she offered. They’d managed to return to a hug. It felt just as good now as it had a moment ago. After another few moments she conceded that the Star offices were not the place to make up for all the time they’d lost in their relationship. Reluctantly she loosened her grip and stepped back. This time it was Clark that made sure they continued to hold hands as they separated. Maintaining physical contact was fine by Lois.

“Mom and Dad filled me in on what happened at the press conference. How’s your shoulder?” He almost sounded scared.

“Better every day,” she replied, trying to sound positive.

“Today’s my first day without my arm in a sling. The doctors told me that I was exceptionally lucky and that the bullet did surprisingly little damage.”

“You could have been killed,” he whispered.

“So could you,” she replied. There was more Lois wanted to say, but for now just being here holding Clark’s hand seemed to be enough.

“So, Lois, are you working on Sundays now?” Clark asked. He was clearly trying to move onto a less personal topic. She could see in his eyes that part of him would prefer the more personal conversation, but all that would be better somewhere else.

“I am for now.” Lois answered as she reluctantly released his hand. She was about to sit down when she heard someone clear his throat. She turned to see the weekend editor offering Lois her purse. “Good morning, Lois. You dropped this.”

“Thanks, Jerry.” She indicated Clark. “Jerry, this is Clark Kent, my best friend and writing partner from The Daily Planet. Clark, this is Jerry Simms. He’s the weekend editor here at the Star.”

Jerry offered his hand. “Mr. Kent, it’s a pleasure to meet you. Naturally, I’ve seen your work. I’d just like to say that your piece on the Sarah Bernhardt Theater was some of the most moving writing I’ve read in a newspaper.”

Clark shook his hand. “Please call me Clark. And thank you. In some ways, that story was my first collaboration with Lois.”

Jerry looked at Lois. “I don’t remember your byline for that story.”

Lois snickered. “What Clark means is that he wrote the story

after I refused the assignment. I still came out ahead on that deal. He got a job at the Planet and I got the best reporting partner ever.”

“So, Clark. There’s a rumor that you might be joining us at the Star.”

“Maybe,” Clark replied. “I’m hoping to talk to Mr. Petersen tomorrow. I’ve been dealing with some family issues in Kansas and just got back last night.”

“For a newsman you sure picked a bad time to be out-of-town. However, I know family issues don’t happen on a convenient schedule. Fortunately we had Lois here.”

“Lois is the best there is,” Clark provided. “And for the Superman stories that have dominated the last few weeks, you couldn’t have done better.”

“We know. Anyway, I have some work to do.” Jerry started to leave, but stopped and turned back to Clark. “Clark, this isn’t the Star of years past. We’re doing good things here and we’d love to have you. The Lane and Kent byline would add a lot to our paper and help get over the credibility hump that we put ourselves in from years past.” Then the editor started back to his office.

“He seems like a good man,” Clark said as he watched the older man walk away.

“He is. A lot of people here are excited by the prospect of being a quality news source.” Lois sat down at her desk. “So, are you going to give me a hand in my investigation?”

“Of course,” Clark said as he dragged up a chair. “We’re Lane and Kent. What are we investigating?”

“Our shooting,” she said quietly.

Lois spent the next ten minutes bringing Clark up to speed on the investigation. When she was finished Clark asked, “Do you really think there will be a loose end here?”

“My gut is telling me that this is our best chance. We know that the Boss almost never leaves loose ends. This time the whole operation went south and there are more opportunities than usual.”

“So what is our next move?” Clark asked.

“My plan was to go back over all the information we have. I want to see if we’ve missed anything. I’m hoping to hear back from Bobby or Sammy.”

Clark looked around and noticed that the desk adjacent to Lois appeared to be unoccupied. He pointed at the empty space. “Do you think I can use that desk for today?”

Lois glanced at the desk indicated. “Sure. All the desks here are for visitors and temporary assignments. Since I’m only freelancing, I don’t get a desk in the staff area. That one’s vacant, so go for it.” As he sat down Lois moved a pile of papers to the center of his desk. “Here’s the collected data from the shooting. Why don’t you go through this to get you up to speed? I need to spend a few minutes straightening up before I lose track of where things are.”

“Sounds good,” Clark said, as he reached for the papers.

While Clark was coming up to speed, Lois started cleaning off her desk. Today was a day of transition. Clark was back and she felt more confident than ever that together they would crack the case wide open. This was a good time to pause and make sure she had a plan for the rest of the investigation. The first step was to organize her evidence and leads. In simplest terms, that meant she needed to clean up her desk.

She’d only just started putting some of the research in drawers when she spotted a crumpled piece of paper. It was in a middle drawer and only a corner was sticking out. If this had been the Planet where she had years worth of junk in her desk, she might never have noticed. In this desk, with the drawers almost empty and everything new, the old, crumpled paper stood out.

Lois pulled it out and looked at it. There was a drawing of a mouse. This was from Sammy. The only other thing on the paper was cryptic, ‘11:45 – same.’ There was no date. Could he mean

today? She’d have to go today just in case. Sammy might know that she was coming into the Star every day. It’s also possible that he would be watching for her to show up. In either case it didn’t matter, she was going today.

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“I’m not sure I should be here,” Clark said as the clock passed 11:50.

“Clark, I told you. Sa... He knows you and he likes you. If he doesn’t come, it just means that the note was for tomorrow.”

“I hope you’re right,” Clark said softly.

“She is,” came a whispered voice from behind. “Hi, Kent. It’s good to see you back. Sorry I’m late, but there were some people at the edge of the park that made me nervous. I waited for them to clear the area before I came over.”

“No problem,” Lois said. “The fact that you left a note convinced me that this was going to be big.”

“I put some extra effort in on this,” Sammy said. “When you got shot, it became personal. Give me a minute to get clear, then look by your feet. And don’t open the bags. The phone should have prints.”

It was only a few seconds before Clark spoke up. “He’s gone.”

“He said to wait a minute.”

“Lois, my powers are back. No one is watching us and Sammy is already several hundred feet away.”

She reached to her feet and found two plastic bags. Inside the larger one was a note that said ‘Donaldson’ with an address. There was also a cell phone. The smaller bag contained only a note similar to the one in the other bag. This note had an address and the name of Sam Jacobson. As she stared at the contents of the two bags, the magnitude of the leads hit her. She turned to Clark who had also been examining the bags. “Who’s Sam Jacobson?” Clark asked.

“Sammy tipped me that he’s the guy that bombed the Planet building,” Lois answered.

Clark looked at the bags again. “So Sammy just handed the addresses of the Planet bomber and the... Superman shooter?”

“And the shooter’s cell phone,” Lois added, “...possibly with his fingerprints. Do you realize what this means?” she asked.

“Yes,” Clark answered immediately. “We’re going to owe Sammy favors forever.”

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Clark opened the door then held it allowing Lois to enter first. It was nice to see that despite the time away, his apartment hadn’t suffered for his absence. During the days he was active as Superman last week, he’d stayed away from his apartment. Clark Kent had still been in Kansas and it simply wasn’t worth the risk of anyone noticing activity in his apartment when he was out-of-town.

After the meeting in the park, they needed some place to plan the next step. Fortunately, Clark’s apartment was only a few blocks from the meeting point.

“It feels weird to be home,” Clark said as he followed Lois through the door.

Lois turned to him in a sudden movement. She pointed at her eyes and ears then made a sweeping motion around the room. Clark couldn’t believe he’d forgotten to check for bugs. He’d just been so distracted at being home again that he didn’t think. A quick review of his apartment with his special vision revealed that no surveillance had been placed in his absence.

“We’re clear,” Clark said as he finished his scan. “But I’m glad you thought to remind me to check. I usually remember to look, but I guess I was distracted today.”

“It’s something I’ve learned since you found those bugs in my apartment,” Lois replied. “Always assume you might be under surveillance. By the way, would you please check my apartment again? It would be nice to be able to change clothes and not have

to worry if Lex is watching.”

Clark’s expression turned dark. “I’ll make sure your apartment is clear before tonight.” Then he continued into the center of his apartment. Everything was pretty much as he’d left it. He did spot one difference. There was a note on his table that hadn’t been there when he’d left. Clark picked it up and read it quickly. The note from Lois touched his heart. Then he turned to find Lois watching him intently.

“I’m sorry that I put you through this,” he said, holding up the letter.

“I’m not,” Lois said. “I wish we could have found a better way to communicate sooner. But if you hadn’t done what you did, I’m afraid I’d have said yes to Lex. Based on what I know now, that couldn’t have turned out well.”

Clark set the note down. “We have our relationship issues to work out, but for right now I think we need to decide what to do about the evidence Sammy just gave us.”

Lois barely hesitated. “We search those places.”

He knew she was going to say that. “Lois, what do we want out of this?”

“What do you mean?” Lois asked.

“What’s our ultimate goal? Are we looking for a story or are we trying to take down the people that destroyed the Planet and planned that... assassination attempt?”

Lois started to reply, but stopped before saying anything. Clark knew that Lois’s first inclination was always to get the story. But this time there were far bigger issues at stake. After a few seconds Lois answered. “The story has to come second. We need to make sure that whatever we find isn’t just good enough for a story, it will need to hold up in a trial.”

“Exactly. Believe me, Lois, I’d love to go right to these addresses and see what’s there. But if we do that, we run the risk of contaminating evidence.”

Clark was expecting Lois to go on about him being too timid. To his surprise, she responded immediately in a completely different manner. “After our shooting I’ve been trying to work more closely with Bill Henderson,” she said. “I believe we have an agreement where if we take this to him, he’ll keep us in the loop.” Lois stopped for a few seconds. Clark could practically see the gears turning as she considered their next move. After a moment she continued. “I think you’re right that we should wait for Bill and a search warrant to enter those places, but do you think he’ll be able to pull a search warrant on the evidence we have?”

“I’m afraid not. Sammy gave us great leads, but I’m not sure it will be enough for a judge,” Clark replied flatly. “We’ll probably need more than just these scraps of paper for a search warrant.”

Lois thought for a moment. “I think we’ll be all right for Donaldson. If Sammy was right and Donaldson’s prints are on the phone, then we have a link that should be strong enough for a search warrant. But for Jacobson... I’m afraid we’re going to need more than just that scrap of paper.”

“You told me Jimmy is working on this with you?” Clark asked.

“Yes,” Lois answered.

“We have these two addresses. We should see if Jimmy can do some of his computer research magic. There may be computer records...”

“I doubt it,” Lois said, cutting him off. “Clark, I’ve been around this city a long time so please trust me on this. There won’t be any records. If we had a few days, we might be able to dig up some more information on these addresses. Even then, it would be a roll of the dice whether or not we actually found anything.”

Clark barely hesitated. “I do believe you,” he said confidently. “Sometimes I worry when you act quickly or throw yourself into a

dangerous situation, but usually your knowledge and judgment are spot-on.”

It looked like Lois was going to challenge him on the ‘usually’ part of that remark. He hoped she wouldn’t because the only error she’d made that Clark could think of at that moment was Luthor. Clark didn’t want to seem to be rubbing her face in that. Fortunately, after a moment, Lois said, “Fine. So, you tell me, what do we do now?”

“I think it’s time to give Bill a call.”

#### Chapter 14

It was 5:30 a.m. Monday morning and there were seven people standing in a dark hallway. Lois couldn’t help but think that this place was almost too cliché as a hideout for an assassin. Besides herself and Clark, there were the building superintendent and four police officers. Henderson was in charge, assisted by a female lieutenant named Chris Jones and two forensics specialists. Clark and Lois were under strict orders to stay out of the way and touch nothing. Bill had stressed that last part to Lois several times.

The reporting partners had spent much of Sunday evening working with Bill. They had told him everything except the name of the source that provided them with the clues. Bill wasn’t very happy with the situation, but he went with it. After what he’d gone through when Lois gave up Dr. Anderson as her source about the sniper, Bill knew better than to press too hard.

Right from the beginning, Bill had been certain that if Donaldson’s prints were on the phone, he’d be able to convince a judge to issue a search warrant to look for evidence relating to Superman’s shooting. As for the Jacobson address, neither Lois nor Clark could convince Bill to even ask for a warrant. However, Bill was of the opinion that if the first address proved to be the place where Donaldson had stayed, it would demonstrate the credibility of the source and provide support for the overall accuracy of the information. That could be the lever to get a search warrant for the Jacobson address.

Lois and Clark had talked at length about which place would be likely to provide better evidence. Donaldson was clearly transient in Metropolis. He’d been brought in to be the expendable triggerman for the Superman shooting. Jacobson was interesting because of the bomber’s possible ties to the Boss and therefore, possibly Lex. The connection was more tenuous, but he was a Metropolis native, and that meant there might be more to learn at his place. Whichever turned out to be more valuable, because of the evidence in their possession, Donaldson’s apartment had to come first.

So here they were. Bill had woken up the building superintendent fifteen minutes ago. The man claimed to know nothing about this apartment. He said that he had only met the man once, and didn’t remember any details. Considering the state of the building and the location, Lois was sure he made a habit of not remembering details.

Bill knocked on the door and called out, “This is the Metropolis Police. We need to speak with any resident.” He was certainly loud enough to be heard through the door.

They all just waited, looking at each other. Well, most of the group did that. While the rest of the group watched the door, Lois looked at Clark. He shook his head ever so slightly. Lois was sure that Clark had already inspected the apartment and knew it to be empty.

Bill repeated his request once more before he had the superintendent open the door. The inspector went in first followed by Chris.

Lois started to inch in when she felt Clark’s hand on her shoulder. She turned to glare at him but he never stopped smiling. “We agreed to do this Bill’s way,” he said.

She started to complain but knew Clark was right. Bill had extracted a promise to do this by the book. Leave it to Clark to make sure she kept her promises. Despite the gravity of the

situation, she felt a glow of joy just from working with Clark again. She ended up smiling and sticking her tongue out at him. His eyes went wide for just a second before a smile was beaming back in her direction.

Before Lois could do anything else, Chris was at the door motioning them all to come in. “Ms. Lane, Mr. Kent, please don’t touch anything without getting clearance from either me or Inspector Henderson.” Then she disappeared back into the room.

Clark and Lois went in last. The forensics team immediately went looking for prints. Bill had told them that it would be essential to link this place to Donaldson. Even if there were no evidence here, if they could link this apartment to Donaldson, it would demonstrate the accuracy of the information they’d gotten from Sammy.

They wandered around the apartment for a few minutes, but it turned out to be a disappointment. There was luggage and some personal items that might link the room to Donaldson, but there were no smoking-gun type clues.

After touring the small apartment for all of a minute, Lois turned to Clark. “Did you see anything?”

“Not really,” he answered.

Lois leaned in close, “I mean, using your unusual observation skills, did you see anything?”

Clark lowered his voice to a whisper. “I picked up some prints. I think they’re Donaldson, but I can’t be sure. The forensics team is working the areas where I spotted most of them. We’ll just have to wait to see if they match.”

“I don’t think there’s any reason for us to stay,” Lois suggested.

“I agree.”

Lois called to Henderson. “Bill, thanks for letting us tag along, but I think all the evidence from this place will be coming from your scientific team.”

It looked like Bill was ready to laugh. “I told you both that was likely to be the case. You didn’t need to come.”

Lois was about to answer but Clark beat her to it. “We know, Bill. But we wanted to be here just in case there was a surprise.”

Clark barely finished when Lois jumped in. “How long until you can get the warrant for the other place?”

“As soon as we match the prints here with Donaldson, I’ll be heading back to Judge Jensen,” Bill answered. “We’ll probably be ready just after noon today. I’ll call you as soon as I get something.”

“We’ll be at the Star,” Lois offered. “But we’ve had some problems with phones being tapped, so when you call, please be as nonspecific as possible. Something like, ‘I’m leaving now,’ will tell us all we need to know.”

“Fair enough,” Bill said.

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Clark thought that riding up the elevator to the Star offices felt surprisingly comfortable. Of course, Lois was beside him and, at this moment, she was holding his hand, so it was no wonder that it felt right.

He had decided that it would be best if Superman made no appearances for a few days. Clark was still worried about the issue of making sure that Clark Kent and Superman were viewed as different people. Sure, it was unlikely that anyone would see a connection, but it was best to not take chances.

Yesterday had been hard. He’d heard calls for help a few times, but none of them were serious and managed to fight off the temptation to zoom to the rescue. He figured that today would be long enough and he’d make sure that Superman put in an appearance tomorrow. Still, if there was a major disaster or emergency today, he knew he’d respond.

When the elevator opened, it was immediately clear that the Star was much busier on a Monday than it had been yesterday. He was about to accompany Lois to her desk when he realized that

Petersen’s office was occupied. “Lois, is that Petersen?” he asked his partner.

Lois looked in the direction of the editor’s office. “Yes,” she answered.

“Could you introduce me? It wouldn’t be polite for me to simply start working at one of his desks without checking in.”

Lois simply flashed him a quick smile and headed for the office. When they reached Petersen’s door Lois knocked and waited. Clark smiled at her patience. This clearly wasn’t the Planet.

As soon as Petersen heard the knock, he looked up and immediately motioned them in. “Good morning, Ernie,” Lois said to her editor. “This is Clark Kent.”

Petersen came around his desk and extended his hand. “It’s good to finally meet you Kent. I’d heard you were in here yesterday.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Clark replied. “I got into town and... well, if Lois was here, that was how I was going to spend my day.”

The editor glanced back and forth between the reporters. “Well, I’m glad you came by. I’d like to discuss your plans for the future.”

“That’s one of the reasons I’m here,” Clark answered.

“I need to work up my notes from the raid this morning,” Lois interjected. “Why don’t I do that while you two talk?”

Lois left the room and Clark watched her through the glass as she made her way back to her desk. When he turned back to Petersen, he found the man watching him intently. Petersen glanced in the direction of Lois’s retreating form. “She sure is something,” he commented.

Clark glanced briefly in her direction. “Mr. Petersen, you have no idea.”

Petersen laughed at that. “I believe you,” he commented. “Now, let’s talk about your background and what we might be able to do for each other.”

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It was 1:27 in the afternoon and Clark was doing his best to keep Lois calm.

Petersen had sent Lois – which meant both of them – out to cover a pro-Superman rally at 11:00. There were several citizens’ groups that wanted to send a message to Superman that the recent attacks didn’t represent the opinion of all the people of Metropolis. Clark was touched at the expression of support. Lois kept looking for an ulterior motive. However, all the people seemed on the level, and despite Lois’s best efforts, she couldn’t find any connections to Lex or Lexcorp.

When they’d finally made it back to the Star, there was a message waiting from Bill Henderson. All it said was, “I have the paper and am on my way.” The message was more than half an hour old. They’d managed to miss Bill’s call. That was when Lois had lost her temper.

By the time they reached the address, Bill’s team was well into the early stages of their investigation. It was the same team as before, except for one younger officer Clark didn’t recognize guarding the door. Lois and Clark were trying to convince the young officer that he should let them enter when Bill appeared. “It’s okay, Charlie. Let them in.”

The officer stepped aside and they entered the apartment. Clark immediately knew there would be more to find in this place. He leaned close and whispered in Lois’s ear. “I smell explosives.”

Lois’s only reaction was to nod her head slightly. “Bill, have you found anything?” she asked.

Bill hesitated before answering. “You remember our agreement that you don’t publish anything until I give you the go-ahead?”

“Yes,” Lois answered.

“Kent?”

“You know that I’ll honor any agreement you have with Lois,” Clark answered quickly.

Henderson simply nodded. “You should listen to this.” He walked over to what looked like an answering machine. “It seems that Mr. Jacobson recorded all of his phone conversations. This was the last one on his machine.”

Bill pressed a button on the machine.

First was a man’s voice. “Hello.”

A woman’s voice. “This is X. Is it ready?”

“Yes.”

“Remember that it must be timed for between 11:15 and 11:45.”

“It will.”

“Good. Your final payment will be made after the package has been delivered.”

Then there was a click and Bill pressed the button again. He turned to Lois. “Do you remember the day that the bomb destroyed the Planet building?”

“Of course,” Lois replied. Clark thought she looked more shaken than he’d expected.

“This was recorded the day before the building was destroyed,” Bill said. “The bomb went off at 11:20. I think we may have our link.”

Lois was looking at the floor and didn’t reply. Instead, she shivered and looked cold. Clark was holding her before he even realized what he was doing.

After a few seconds, Lois straightened up and looked at Henderson. “That day... I had lunch with Lex. I remember because he’d made a point that his limousine would pick me up exactly at 11:00. He’d stressed that he had a special lunch planned and made me promise that I wouldn’t miss the appointment. I... I’d completely forgotten how insistent he was that I not be late that day.”

“I hear you, Lois,” Bill said in a very serious tone. “But that’s still only circumstantial.”

“There’s more,” she said. “The female voice on the phone... I recognize it. That’s Mrs. Cox. She’s Lex’s personal assistant.”

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It was 6:00 a.m. and Lois couldn’t sleep. It probably had something to do with the fact that she was in Clark’s bed. Clark had a very comfortable bed. She was sure it would be much more comfortable if Clark were here beside her. That really hadn’t even been a possibility... yet.

Yesterday had passed in a blur. The jackpot they’d hit in Jacobson’s apartment more than made up for the lack of evidence in Donaldson’s. Jacobson’s place wasn’t a residence, it had been a workshop. More precisely, it was a bomb factory.

After the apartment raid, she’d gone back to the Star to write up the Superman rally. It was great having Clark there because not only did his talent for touchy-feely stories help, but he could also provide those special insights as to how Superman would react. She’d ended up submitting the story under the Lane and Kent byline. This was the first of what she increasingly suspected would be many stories with that byline in the Star.

Late in the afternoon, she’d called Henderson from the same pay phone she’d used to call Smallville. The phone records from Jacobson’s apartment had come in. The call from Cox originated from a number that had also called Donaldson’s cell. The recording of Cox’s voice might not be admissible evidence, but Bill revealed that his own team had found a link between Cox and that phone number that he felt would hold up. Bill told her that he planned to arrest Cox in the middle of the night. He hoped that by Tuesday morning there would be enough evidence to move on Lex.

Lois had wanted to be there for every move, but Bill vetoed that. Now that he was convinced of Lex’s involvement, he was worried about someone tipping the billionaire off that Lois was

spending too much time with the man investigating Superman’s shooting. Clark had sided with Bill and they ended up spending a quiet evening in. Clark made dinner and they watched old movies.

When it came time to go home, she had made a comment about being comfortable here. Clark had immediately volunteered his bedroom. She’d been tempted to decline, but the reality was that she really did prefer to sleep here.

She looked over at the clock again. Now it read 6:09 a.m. Lois was about to haul herself out of bed when she heard a knock at Clark’s door. The early morning left it quiet enough that she didn’t have to strain to hear Clark answer the door.

“Inspector Henderson,” she heard Clark say.

“Good morning, Kent. Is Lane here?”

Several seconds ticked by without a reply. Clearly, Clark didn’t want to lie, but didn’t want to embarrass her either. “I’m here, Bill,” she called out. “I’ll be out in a minute.”

Lois pulled on the sweat shirt and top that Clark had loaned her. As she dressed, she wondered about her feeling at being caught in what could be an embarrassing situation. She realized that she wasn’t concerned what Bill might think, at least not with respect to her spending the night in Clark’s apartment.

She walked out into Clark’s main room to find Bill sitting at the table. The blanket and pillow on Clark’s couch was in plain sight. “Good morning, Lois,” Bill said. “I went by your place first. When you weren’t at home, I figured there was a good chance that you’d crashed here.”

“Yeah,” she replied. “It got late and I didn’t feel like going back to my place. Clark was kind enough to make room. So what brings you here?”

Bill suddenly looked nervous. “Luthor is dead,” he said in a cold tone.

Lois felt her legs start to buckle. Before she could think Clark was there holding her shoulders. “Lois, are you okay?” Clark asked.

Was she okay? Lois wasn’t sure. Lex was dead. Whatever he was, that man had asked her to marry him only a few weeks ago. “I... I’m not sure.” She found it hard to compose her thoughts. “Bill, what happened?”

“We picked up Cox late last night. I thought she would only be the next step in a long investigation to get Luthor, but she surprised us. Not only did she come peaceably, she immediately offered us a deal. Apparently, she’s been collecting evidence on Luthor for some time to use as her own personal insurance policy. What’s important is that she gave us a teaser. She had a recording of Luthor telling her to set up an assassination.”

Lois was doing her best to stay with Bill as he worked through what had happened. “She had the arrangements to try to kill Superman on tape?” Lois asked.

“No. The tape she provided was...” Bill stopped and seemed to consider his words for a moment. “This was related to the Superman incident. Do you remember Officer Smith? Bill asked.

“Sure. The guy that shot me,” Lois replied harshly.

“Luthor was on tape ordering Cox to kill his family.”

This was too much. Lois didn’t even know how to respond. Clark’s hands on her shoulders provided barely enough support to keep her upright. Bill waited a moment but once it was clear that she wasn’t going to say anything, he continued. “We used that to get an arrest warrant for Luthor. We raided his penthouse at 4:00 a.m. this morning.”

“You said he was dead,” Clark pointed out.

“I’m getting to that,” Bill said. “We were lucky. Luthor had been drinking and was too tired to resist. We were coming out of his building when the shooting started. Someone had tipped Officer Smith, and he was waiting.”

Epilogue:

Clark had an appointment. It was an appointment he was determined not to miss. But that wasn’t going to happen. Lois had

asked.

The odd part was that this appointment was in the house where he'd grown up, in Smallville.

It had been three weeks since Luthor's death. There had been quite an outcry that first day. A police officer killing the city's leading citizen... Smith's actions served to motivate the city attorney to cut a deal with Mrs. Cox. They didn't need her information to prosecute Luthor, they needed her information to turn public opinion.

He and Lois had joined the Star as staff reporters a week later. Luthor's death had left the possible rebirth of the Planet in limbo. Lois didn't want to leave Metropolis, and if Lois wanted him to work with her at the Star, there was nothing else left to consider.

For Clark, those three weeks had felt like heaven. He'd spent almost every evening with Lois. They'd been to dinner, movies, the theater and even a baseball game. Every time they did something together, it seemed more enjoyable than the time before. Their work partnership was better than ever. Lois had even stopped complaining about Clark correcting her spelling.

They'd finally gotten the chance to take a long weekend in Smallville. The first two days had been great but Lois and his mom had cooked up something special for their last evening in town.

Clark had just returned from dropping his parents off at a hotel. His mom and dad were spending the night away, leaving the house for him and Lois. Clark didn't know what to make of this. He'd tried to get something from his parents, but his dad claimed not to know what was going on, and his mom wouldn't say.

He approached the door unsure of what to do. After a few seconds, he decided to knock.

After a few seconds, the door opened just a crack. Peeking around the edge, Lois said, "Hi."

God, he loved her smile. She was playing at something, but Clark wasn't sure what. Lois was clearly in a good mood, so it was easy to play along. "May I come in?" Clark asked.

She smiled a mischievous smile. "Well, I was sort of expecting..."

Now he recognized this scene. "Should I come back as Superman?"

Her smile got ever wider. "No, silly. Why would I be waiting for Superman when I can do so much better?"

"So who are you waiting for?"

She didn't reply. Instead, she stepped back, opened the door and motioned him in.

As Clark entered the house, he smelled food cooking. He turned to Lois. "You made dinner?"

"You sound surprised. Don't you think I can cook?" Lois asked.

Clark realized that he'd strayed into dangerous territory. "I, um..."

Then Lois laughed. "Relax. We both know that I'm not much of a cook. Your mom helped me with a basic dinner. It won't be complicated, but as long as I take it out of the oven when the bell dings, we'll have dinner."

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The evening passed quickly. Dinner was delicious and they talked about... everything. Growing up, working, their experiences at the Planet, and their hopes for the Star. It was the best evening Clark could remember.

When he saw the clock on the mantle hit 11:00 p.m., Clark finally felt moved to ask the question he'd avoided all evening. He was on the sofa and Lois was across the room in his dad's chair. The evening had been wonderful, but to Clark it felt like their physical separation represented some kind of barrier that was still between them. "Lois, tonight has been great, but what's it all about?"

She paused and was clearly nervous. "My whole world

changed that night you... told me the truth about... well, everything. With your help, I've gotten a good start on putting my life back together, but there are some loose ends that I need to ask you about."

"You can ask me anything," Clark replied.

"It's very important that you tell me the truth. I want you to think about the questions I'm going to ask. If you can't tell me the truth, then... Well, I don't know. Please try, even if it's something that you don't think I'll want to hear."

It was clear to Clark that this was very important to Lois. It was also obvious that she planned to ask some hard questions. "I... I'll do my best," Clark said.

She took a deep breath. "Back when I first met you as Superman, did I seem like some kind of shallow groupie? I mean the way I reacted to Superman."

Clark felt his shoulders droop. Couldn't she have started with something easier? He knew the answer, but he'd never planned to tell her. Now it was Clark's turn for a deep breath. "Yes, but, Lois..." But he couldn't think of what else to say. He'd always thought that was exactly how she acted. "Yes," he said once more with resignation.

He waited for the explosion, but all that he got was, "Thank you."

That wasn't the response he'd expected. He looked at her questioningly, hoping she'd elaborate.

"When I met... Superman, I was astounded. He... You were so... Anyway, I was acting like a schoolgirl," she supplied. "I was worried that you wouldn't have the courage to tell me the truth. So, can you forgive me – I mean really forgive me – for that reaction as well as all the other things I did in those early days?"

Clark almost answered quickly. But Lois wanted real, thoughtful answers. Had he really forgiven her? He thought about it for a few seconds but it didn't take long before he was sure of his answer. "It's been a long year and we've both had some chances to learn from some of those early mistakes," he explained. "I really believe I understand how that happened. I've seen others overwhelmed by an encounter with... Superman... and many people – especially women – overreact after a rescue. So, yes, Lois, I can and have forgiven you."

Lois just nodded. "Why didn't you tell me about Lex sooner?" she asked, in an almost casual tone.

"Because..." he started to reply. Then he froze. Clark knew he didn't have a good answer for this one. After a long second, he decided to try for the truth as best he could. "I don't know. I was all confused. I knew what Lex was, but I couldn't get any proof. And then, when you were with him..." Clark didn't know where to go from there so he just stopped.

"What?" Lois asked insistently.

He did his best to look her in the eye. "You already know how I feel... felt... about you... right from the beginning. Lois, when I look at you I... When I saw you... thought of you... with Luthor... I didn't trust my judgment. I was so... jealous. I didn't trust my motives. Whenever I thought it was time to say something, I'd look at you and get all confused again."

Then Clark's words ran out. This all sounded so pathetic. "I don't have a good reason," he finally said. "I messed up and I'm sorry."

She sat silently for a moment, then stood. She moved around the coffee table and sat beside him. "I forgive you," she said softly. "I sort of have to. You're my best friend... and the best thing that's ever happened to me."

"Does that mean we're done with questions for the evening?" Clark asked.

"Not quite," Lois answered. "I have one more." He swore he could hear some of the nervousness from earlier in the evening. "Clark, will you marry me?"

He felt like someone had turned on one of Dr. Klein's sun

lamps. All he could think to do was throw his arms around his love and pull her to him. “I love you, Lois,” he said as they held each other. “Of course I’ll marry you.”

THE END