

# The European Adventures of Lois Lane

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Summary: Lois thinks she's headed on an investigation in the Congo — but when her plane is mysteriously rescued outside of Paris, she is suddenly on the trail of the story of her life.

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I honestly love to fly.

At least, I did until now. The turbulence over the last hour has gotten progressively worse, and despite reassurances from our captain, it doesn't feel like it will improve before we reach Paris. If the turbulence wasn't bad enough, there has been a one-year-old sitting three seats in front of me who has been screaming almost since we left Metropolis. And no matter how many times the mother glances over her shoulder at me and the other passengers apologetically, I can't seem to forgive the woman for subjecting her child to what is obviously torture — namely, flying.

Did I mention that I love to fly? Normally I do. Normally I love watching the world get smaller below me, and watching all of my problems disappear with the distance. I always book the window seat, and when we left Metropolis, I was treated to the most beautiful golden sunset. The clouds were fluffy as cotton and the rays of the sun seemed to paint them in colors that would rival a canvas by Monet. I felt as if I could just reach outside the plane, the clouds would be solid beneath me, and would carry me away from the insanity that is my life.

But somehow, six hours later, as we reach the edges of continental Europe, we are in the middle of a thunderstorm. Don't they warn pilots about these things? Aren't we in a modern enough world that harrowing storms are avoidable? But according to our intrepid captain, the storm only worsened as we crossed the Atlantic. It is almost as if France is punishing me personally for having been stupid enough to fall for one of its countrymen. The French, it seems, have it out for me.

Ever since I took high school French, that country and I haven't gotten along. I always trip over the slippery verbs, and recently I managed to trip into a relationship that should have come with a warning label. His name is Claude de Bernac, which sounds all sexy and European, but that was as far as the name took him.

Since my high school journalism class, my life has been about uncovering the hidden truth — yet I didn't see this one coming. I had on love-blinders, if you will, and I promise never to wear those misguided shades ever again. Claude was tall, dark, and handsome. He was smart and sophisticated, and he told me I was the most amazing woman he had ever met. I mean, what girl doesn't want to hear this from six feet of handsome, right? Except, I should have listened with my computer turned off and my notebook closed. I should have seen the rat coming in his Giorgio Armani. The hunky Frenchman stole my story — but what's worse is that I let it happen.

I mean, I didn't hand over the files and agree that he could put his byline instead of mine on the article. But I may as well have. You see, I let him in and I fell in love — a fatal mistake in this business. I had been warned in college about the shark type journalists, who will do anything to one-up you on a story. I had had experience with that thanks to Linda King, who was once my

best friend. You'd think I'd have learned... But no, I had to experience one cut worse than being betrayed by a friend. I had to be betrayed by a lover.

And ever since I saw my story printed under his name two months ago, I've been looking for an excuse to leave Metropolis. Because things just snowballed from there. I found out he had slept with the "social" columnist Cat Grant, who gladly digs her claws into any man who happens to walk by. And then Claude got nominated for a Kerth Award for my story. Now, I protested and told my editor that he stole it, but I had no proof. Claude had really done a thorough job — stealing all of my files and copying them onto his computer, meanwhile erasing them from mine. He is the lowest of the low, the pond scummiest of them all — and yet, I couldn't prove it. People laughed behind my back, saying I was just jealous or upset because I had learned that Claude didn't really care about me. They have no idea how deep the betrayal goes — Claude de Bernac did irreparable harm to my already fragile trust in the opposite sex.

So I did what any sensible journalist in my position would do — I looked for an excuse to leave for a while, claiming I was hunting down the story of the century. If I have to rebuild my reputation, then I'm going to do it in style, with a story worthy of the Pulitzer, not just a Kerth. I am not planning on walking back in to the Daily Planet without a prize-winning story in my hands, even if I have to go to the edge of the earth to get it.

I am heading to Africa in a few days, to the Congo to follow up on some leads I scrounged up in Metropolis. There's a gunrunning operation down there that I am convinced is funded by big money in Metropolis, but I have to go there to get the evidence to prove it... My evidence is sketchy at this point, and it will be dangerous to get my suspicions confirmed. But it is the only lead I have that can get me far enough away that I can avoid looking at Claude's gorgeously smug eyes for a while. I just hope there's something usable there to write a story good enough to restore Perry's faith in me. And I simply refuse to go back to Metropolis empty handed.

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The turbulence is getting worse. People who were trying to sleep start waking up and looking to the crew to explain what is happening. Most of the window shades are drawn, though a few people open theirs to take a peek at the weather causing the turbulence. Just as quickly, they pull the shades down again, afraid of the chaos outside, I assume. We are all asked to stay in our seats and even the flight attendants are looking just a little bit worried, despite reassurances from our captain. Suddenly, I'm rattled by a huge jolt of motion. I swish up my window cover to look out and see lightning has struck one of our wings, snapping the edge off it! I'm afraid we are going to crash in earnest. The cabin goes dark, except for the emergency runner lights on the floor, and some sunlight from a few of the shades that are half-open. We start losing altitude and the pressure in the cabin drops. Oxygen masks come down, and I'm horribly reminded of every action movie I've ever seen with a plane crash in it.

I sit back, taking a few deep breaths, and try not to indulge too heavily in the feeling that my life is flashing before my eyes. Yet I can't help thinking of all the regrets I've had in my life. How I never let anyone in — except people who can hurt me, like Claude. How I pushed away my mother and avoided my father. How I get easily annoyed by my baby sister and her penchant for any man in jeans. How I didn't push myself hard enough to go after the Pulitzer sooner —

The plane is dropping quickly out of the sky. Passengers are panicking around me, while stewardesses are practically shouting in imploring us to remain calm — yeah, right! The screaming baby needs no apologies for his behavior now, and I squeeze my eyes shut as tears run down my cheeks. I think selfishly how I am only twenty-five, but then I look at the baby in front of me and

am reminded by how unjust life can be. You can try to do everything right, and you still might get the short end of the stick...

Suddenly, we are leveling out, even regaining a little altitude. People are puzzled as we were all certain we were done for. There is no accounting for how the captain is able to right the plane, not with a broken wing. I glance outside my window, trying to make sense of why we seem suddenly to be flying safely and are beginning a near normal descent into Charles de Gaulle airport.

I look outside, and then look again, baffled by what I see. The early morning sun is breaking through the clouds on my side, but I swear I see a hand on the broken wing. There seems to be a man outside the plane! How did he get there? What was he doing? I press the button above me for a stewardess, determined to help him. Maybe someone had it out for him and was trying to kill him? Maybe we got caught in the cross hairs of something bigger going on and that guy was the victim or the perpetrator — or something!

I feel my reporter's instincts kick into overdrive. I glance again, trying to lean to get a better angle to see out the tiny window, but all I see is a hand and maybe some of his arm. The sunlight is bright on my side, and the glare off the remaining part of the wing makes it hard to see anything clearly. The flight attendants are still trying to calm people who are in shock. We are getting closer to landing, but I feel like it is imperative that someone corroborates this story! I look again and press the button. I can see someone's still there, hanging onto the wing, but still no stewardess comes to me. I sigh with frustration, unbuckling my seatbelt and stand up. "Excuse me! Does anyone see that guy?" I ask people nearby, pointing outside my window, but people are too wrapped up in their own concern to take any notice of me.

A flight attendant waves at me to please sit down, though I refuse to do so. Just then, we hit the tarmac, and I'm bounced back into my seat, hitting my head on the light panel. I look again out the window, wondering what's become of the man dangling off the plane, but he's gone. Had he been killed when we landed? My stomach lurches in disgust, and I wave down the flight attendant.

At last — since we've stopped — she comes to my seat. "Yes?"

I glance out the window, now suddenly feeling a bit crazy. Had I really seen a man? I mean, it seemed like we were going to die and the mind can play tricks... I shake my head. "Nothing. Just — a little shaken up, is all."

Amazingly we landed. The captain's communication is restored and though he references and apologizes for the 'rough landing,' he acts like it was just another day at the office. I can't stop staring out my window, wondering what I just saw. Surely it wasn't a hallucination — the wing is staring at me, half-broken. Several passengers have noticed it, but no one else seems to have seen what I saw. They are simply too grateful to be alive as they hurry to get off this plane. As I descend the steps of the plane, I look around, searching for any evidence of a dead or injured man where we landed. I hear passengers around me swapping stories about how they think the pilot pulled off the landing, but I don't hear any mention of the man I am certain I saw on the broken wing of the plane. I jot down a few notes about what I hear to include in the story I will write about this. But I can't walk away without investigating the plane itself a bit further. So I pull out my press pass as I step out of line to inspect the wing. Security tries to stop me, but I insist that I am a reporter and they know this landing will be all over the front page tomorrow anyway.

"I want to speak to someone higher up. The public deserves to know about this incident!" I insist.

The two security guards confer and turn to call over a

supervisor. This is my chance. I duck around them to get over to the wing, knowing I have only a few seconds to inspect it.

I don't see any blood, or any other signs of struggle, other than the broken wing itself. It would have been impossible for anyone in the luggage compartment to get out to the wing, let alone hold on to it for any length of time, and I wonder again if I imagined it. I am about to walk away when I notice something. It could just be the bend of the metal, but on the smooth surface of the wing, just a few feet from the rupture, is an imprint — of a hand.

I pull out my camera and take a photo, quickly heading back to where I was talking to the guards. They apologize but insist that I can't take a look at it until the investigative police arrive. Since I already have my evidence, I say I understand and head on my merry way, trying desperately to hide the grin on my face.

I start walking to the terminal, wondering again about what happened. But one thing is for certain. This is front-page news, and I'll have a story to send to Perry within the hour.

After going through customs and getting my luggage, there are already reporters asking the people on board about their experience. I find myself smirking, knowing my first-hand account will be a far better story than what the reporters on the scene will write. I still listen, though, to those around me. No one saw what I saw, though a few mention the broken wing. I question my sanity a bit, but I have photographic proof that someone had held on to the plane... This picture could be my Pulitzer!

Normally my first instinct would be to call Perry. But I still have the puzzle about what I think I saw, and I hesitate. I am still a little shaken up over the whole thing, and I know news won't wait, but surely it can wait until I get to my hotel and think this through? It is after all, only about three in the morning in Metropolis...

I get in a waiting taxi and am whisked away to my hotel, between the L'Avenue de l'Opéra and the train station St. Lazare, a neighborhood that feels a bit like Metropolis in its shopping choices. I pull out my camera and try to remember some French to ask about getting my film developed.

"Où... les photos?" I try.

The taxi driver smiles and says, "Ah, voulez-vous prendre des photos?"

Prendre I know means 'take.' Afraid I'll be given the tourist trek around the city, which I don't have time for, I shake my head. "Non — pour développer?" I say with a gesture pretending I'm looking through already taken photos. I must look ridiculous, but he seems to understand my meaning.

With a disappointed shrug, he says something about asking at the hotel. I sigh, and look out my window, suddenly noticing for the first time that I am really in one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

We are riding along the river Seine. It's still pretty early in the day, but the sunlight is beautiful on the golden horsemen on one of the bridges, calming some of my anxiety from my adventure in the skies. I look to my right, across the river, and see a huge domed building. I ask my driver what it is, and he mumbles something that sounds like 'invalid' and 'Napoleon.' I make a mental note to look it up in my guidebook later. We ride on, and I'm struck by the contrasts here in Paris with the world I know in Metropolis. My city is surrounded by water; here, it runs through the heart of the city. The bridges here are beautiful and elegant, while most bridges in Metropolis are merely practical. There are parks in the middle of the city, but they seem to embrace the city around it, rather than shut it out like Centennial Park.

I lean back in my seat, suddenly wishing I had planned to spend more than just two days in Paris...

At last we make it to my hotel. It's off of the grand avenue, at

the top of which is the impressive opera house. I like to pretend I'm cultured enough for opera, but honestly, the lure of it has always been a bit beyond me. The taxi driver points to a small shop near the hotel with a Kodak sign in it, and I assume he's trying to tell me that I can develop my film there.

I say "Merci," and hand off my luggage to the concierge. My first order of business is to get this film developed.

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I pick up the film an hour later, and take my notes to a nearby café to finish my story. It's almost six in the morning back home, and I know Perry will be at the Planet soon. I have all of the details of my story except for the strange anomaly I saw. I think I would have chalked it all up to exhaustion and adrenaline, except I have a photo that says otherwise. It's sitting in its envelope in front of me, daring me to look at it and question my sanity. I take a breath and open the folder. It's as clear as when I saw it a few hours ago — there is a definite imprint of a hand on the plane. But what's even weirder is the imprint is deep in the wing — as if someone exerted pressure, and not just normal human-holding-on-for-dear-life kind of pressure.

I stare at the photo, and think back to those frantic moments on the plane. The picture is proof that I had seen someone, but what he was doing out there — I sip my coffee, a crazy idea forming in my mind. Had this man — actually saved our plane?

I laugh aloud — yet now that I've thought it, I can't let the idea go. I know that we lost electrical power, and the pilot had most definitely lost control of the plane. We had been heading for a nosedive when I spotted the man outside on the wing. But that was when we started sailing a bit more smoothly. I shake my head, torn between disbelief and thinking that if I'm right, then I'm on to the biggest story of the century.

But now I have to find this guy. And get him to confess to what, Lane? Being able to fly and being strong enough to rescue a plane out of the sky? It was utterly ridiculous, and would be beyond extraordinary if it were true. I down the rest of my coffee and pay, gathering my things. I know I have to at least get the story of the near crash to Perry. As for the possibility of a superhero rescuing us — that will have to wait until I can get more proof.

Because then, I'll have the story I've been waiting for. The story that will put Lois Lane back on top.

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I realize time is ticking past and I need to call Perry so he can get a heads-up on my plane story. I quickly gather my things and head for the door. My notebook and the picture are wrapped snugly in my arms as dreams of a Pulitzer start dancing in my head. Part of me really wants to tell Perry the whole truth, but the other part — the part that's an ace reporter — knows there is a greater story here and I need to find out the details first.

I head to the door, lost in my thoughts, when I bump into what feels like a solid wall. My papers and photo go flying and I snap off an angry retort at the man who has bumped into me. We lean down at the same time to gather my things, though I try to move faster, worried that he'll spot my picture. He passes me my bag and offers a hand for me to stand up.

As I take his warm, solid hand, I look up into his face, and I'm momentarily made breathless by what I see. He's broad-shouldered and handsome, with thick black hair that begs for fingers to be run through it. He's wearing smart-looking glasses that set off his strong jaw. His warm brown eyes burrow into mine, and I find myself at a loss for words — a rare thing, trust me.

"Sorry — mademoiselle," he says, switching between languages, which tells me immediately that he's an American.

"No problem," I say as I take back my things. I see him glance at my photo and then his eyes quickly meet mine. There's a brief moment where I swear he looked worried at what he saw,

but just as quickly it was gone.

He hands me my small Paris map book, which I haven't even cracked open yet. "Are you a tourist, then? I mean, have you been here before?"

"I — I'm just passing through, actually. Only here for another day," I say, my hand still tingling from contact with his.

"Oh," he says, seemingly disappointed.

"You?" I ask. He's in a suit, so I take a shot in the dark. "Are you here on business?"

"Sort of. I mean, yes. Yes, I am." He fumbles adorably with his glasses as he clears his throat. He's obviously flustered, and I'm terribly charmed by his bumbling. I hear vague warning bells in my head that I shouldn't give him the time of day, but my jump-first-ask-questions-later side pushes me forward, knowing I'll only be here another day, and it wouldn't hurt to indulge in a little flirtation, which could help repair my wounded ego a bit.

"Look, I'm sorry to bump into you like that. Could I buy you a coffee?" he asks. Then, maybe feeling the need to clarify he goes on. "I mean, we're both Americans — it's your first time in Paris... And I am sorry to run into you —"

I smile at his nervous ramblings, knowing my own penchant to babble. "Um, sure. Why not?"

As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I regret them. I need to phone Perry. I can't let myself get distracted by a handsome face. I look around for a phone booth and then glance apologetically at my sudden companion.

"Why don't you get a table? I have to call my office."

He nods, and I make my way to a phone booth in the cafe.

The phone immediately starts speaking French to me, and I have no idea how to dial internationally. There's a code for the States, so I try that, throwing in a few francs, hoping I'll get a connection. After a few frustrated tries, I finally make it through to the Planet.

"I need to speak to Perry White. It's Lois Lane."

I glance through the glass window at my sudden coffee date, when I notice I stupidly left my folder containing the picture and my notes with him. He hasn't touched them, thank goodness but I need to hurry up and talk to Perry before Mr. Handsome gets curious about my work.

At last, Perry answers.

"Perry! Hi, it's Lois! Look, just wanted to let you know I landed in Paris. But there was a freak accident with our plane. We got caught in a thunderstorm and a bolt of lightning cut through the wing. I thought we were goners but — we made it."

I hesitate. I really want to tell him about what I saw... But something tells me to keep it to myself a little while longer. I have to learn more first. Then, when I have all the details, I'll be able to give Perry the scoop of the century.

"That must have been one heck of a pilot," says Perry speculatively.

"Yeah," I say, the truth on the tip of my tongue. I shake myself out of it, watching as the cutie in the glasses waits patiently for me to get off the phone. "Anyway, I'll have the story written up and faxed to you within a few hours. You should have it in time for the afternoon edition."

Perry gives me a little praise, and I hang up the phone reluctantly. I have the picture to prove what I saw, but for some reason I can't explain, I want to hold back what I know from my editor. Part of me is worried, I know, that he just won't believe me. And since I have no way to explain further about who might have rescued the plane — it's just as well that I don't say anything yet. I need solid facts or I'll never be able to repair my reputation.

I make my way back to the table, and immediately slip the envelope with the photo and my notes safely back into my bag, away from prying eyes.

"Everything okay?" my new friend asks innocently.

“Yeah... “ I say. When he offers nothing in return, I prod, “So, what’s your name?”

“Clark Kent,” he says with a disarming smile.

“Lois Lane,” I say looking him in the eyes, daring him to recognize who I am.

“Of the Daily Planet,” he supplies to my surprise, and I feel flattered. “I’ve read your work. You’re very good.”

I take in the stroke on my wounded ego. “Thanks. I was good...” I say vaguely, thinking of my stupid mistakes with Claude.

“And now — you’re not?” he asks, apparently not buying my self-deprecation.

“Well, I am still good, I guess,” I say, the photo I failed to mention to my editor making me self-doubtful. “I mean — look, I don’t want to talk about it, okay?” I deflect.

He relents easily, suddenly looking up as the waitress approaches our little table. He looks at me, but I shrug helplessly. “I know only a little high school French.”

“What would you like?” he asks me, and I tell him I’d like a café latte.

He orders for both of us in what I can only assume is flawless French. I’m impressed, yet unfortunately also reminded of Claude. I look down at my napkin, questioning my sanity at having a coffee with this handsome stranger. The last thing I need right now is to get distracted by a man. I am tempted to just get up and bolt — but it’s just a coffee. A coffee with a handsome man won’t kill me.

Clark notices my discomfiture I think, as he looks at me apologetically again. “Is everything all right, Miss Lane?”

I smile despite myself. “Miss Lane”? Really? Where was this guy from? “Call me Lois,” I say.

Our coffees arrive. While I search the sugar container for something resembling a fake sweetener that I’m familiar with, I notice Mr. Hard Body throws in three teaspoons of real sugar.

“Quite a sweet tooth there, Clark,” I say good-humoredly.

He shrugs nonchalantly. “I like to live a little,” he says with that smile that should come with a warning label.

I figure it’s time to get down to brass tacks. Before I find myself swept up in those lovely chocolate brown eyes — and who doesn’t love chocolate? — I need to find out exactly who I’m dealing with.

“So, you’re here on business? What kind of business do you do?” I ask, trying not to sound too much like an abrasive reporter, but failing.

“Well, um, I’m a reporter too, actually,” he says somewhat hesitantly, and I suddenly feel my hackles rise. Not a reporter — anything but that. Could he know something about my story? Is that why he asked me for a coffee? I resist the urge to look in my bag and confirm that I still have all of my notes and the photo. I feel the blood drain from my face, seeing Claude’s betrayal happen all over again.

“So — come across any good stories, then?” I ask pointedly, hoping to catch him if he is interested in what I know. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice —

“No, not really. I’m only here in Paris, passing through, really. I am a freelancer and have been traveling across Europe.”

I almost breathe a sigh of relief. A travel writer. That’s pretty harmless.

“Oh, been anywhere interesting?” I ask, though part of me just wants to leave. I really don’t want to deal with another reporter — even if he just writes travel stories. I decide I will only give him until I finish my coffee. He may have all the time in the world freelancing, but I have a deadline.

“I just got back from Morocco,” Clark says. “The spice markets there are the best in the world — ”

He starts telling me about his travels, which sound interesting, but I honestly can’t take the time to listen to him. The

photo is burning a hole in my bag and I only have two hours before I have to get my article submitted. Besides, the last thing I need in my life is a handsome distraction — especially one with a reporter’s instinct.

“I’m sorry, Clark, really I am,” I say, cutting into his detailed description of some fruit seller in the Moroccan market. “But I have a deadline. I really have to go,” I stand abruptly and gather my things to leave.

He nods understandingly, and I try not to notice his look of disappointment. There’s an awkward pause as he looks up at me. “Could I take you to dinner tonight?” he asks.

I’m taken aback by this new offer and hesitate, seeing the earnestness on his face. “I — I don’t think that’s a good idea, Clark,” I say, trying to let him down gently.

“I’m just saying — you don’t know anyone in Paris. I know this city like the back of my hand. What do you have to lose? Let me buy you dinner.”

His offer sounds tempting. And it would be preferable to me ordering in and watching television in French that I won’t understand...

I waver, “All right. Meet me — here, at eight?” I suggest, not trusting him enough to tell him where I’m staying.

He smiles. “No problem. I’ll see you later... Lois.”

He stands up and takes my coat off the hook, holding it for me like a gentleman. His manners make me smile inwardly.

“See you at eight. Mr. Clark Kent,” I say, feeling his eyes on me as I head out of the café.

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I get back to my smallish hotel room and unpack my portable word processor. I try not to think about my little meeting with Clark Kent, and begin working instead on restoring my reputation with the story about the almost plane crash. I lay out my notes, setting aside the envelope with the photograph. I need to look at it again — is there any way I could include what I saw in the article and still retain my credibility? It’s so frustrating, because it could be a huge story — and yet, if I don’t have much to back it up, I could say good-bye to my reputation forever.

I sit with the photo in my lap a moment. I remember from journalism school that you have to sometimes resist the temptation to throw in a tantalizing tidbit when you don’t have all of the facts. But still — if I could use this photo to prove someone had literally rescued our plane out of the sky —

I open the envelope and my stomach lurches to discover that it’s empty! I search frantically through my bag and my notes, but it’s absolutely gone! The negatives are gone as well, which tells me that the photo wasn’t just lost, it was stolen!

Mr. Hard Body. Clark Kent must have sniffed out my story and is trying to scoop me! I should have known! How could I be so foolish after having been duped so recently by Claude? Foolish, Lane! I’m so angry with myself for having relented even for a moment. I’m not twenty-four hours out of Metropolis and already letting another reporter get the best of me!

And what does he expect at dinner tonight? Is he going to use my photo as blackmail to get the rest of the story? I simply can’t believe his gall — or my own gullibility!

I pace in my tiny hotel room. I need to calm down. I still have the basic story to turn in to Perry. I will deal with Mr. Kent later.

Sometimes I write my best work when I’m angry. I hope now is one of those times. Clark has no idea how thin is the thread on which my career hangs — but what would he want with a scoop like mine if he’s a travel writer? I sigh painfully as I realize how fully I was duped. Of course he’s not really a travel writer — that was just a ruse to get my trust. Who does he work for, I wonder?

I bang furiously on my keyboard, thinking how I will confront him tonight at dinner. He owes me at least that much for stealing my photo!

At last, I finish the story — without any reference to the

mysterious hand imprint on the wing. It's just as well. I had no proof besides the photo, and unless the mystery person steps forward, I have no one to corroborate my story. Lane, you should still be satisfied, I tell myself as I reread what I've typed. It's still a strong story.

After all, it's not every day that you fly on a plane that nearly crashes and live to tell about it.

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After I send my story to Perry, I begin to get ready for dinner with the backstabbing Mr. Kent. I decide to look as devastatingly beautiful as I can pull off, so he can see what he might have had the slightest chance with if he had played his cards right. Part of me wants to confront him the moment I see him, shake those handsomely broad shoulders of his, and berate him for trying to steal my story. But even I know that you can catch more flies with honey. I need to find out exactly what he knows and why he wanted my photo in the first place.

Clark is irritatingly punctual, not even giving me the chance to get angry with him for standing me up. He also looks quite delectable in his evening suit. This would be a very romantic date except for the fact that I haven't known him a full day and he has already betrayed me!

"You look lovely, Miss Lane," he says, and I roll my eyes, wondering how many gullible women he has lured into his arms with that line. I will not be taken in by his charming manners!

"So where are we going?" I ask coolly, avoiding taking his proffered arm.

"A little Japanese restaurant near here. Is that all right?"

I nod and we begin to walk. Inwardly I am fuming. I want so much to turn to him and berate him about the photo — but a girl's got to eat. And I certainly can't afford Paris dinner prices on the little I have saved up — and, my leeway on the Daily Planet expense account doesn't go as far as covering fancy dinners.

I hear my heels click angrily on the pavement as we walk side by side. We head off the main Avenue de l'Opéra and up a quiet side street.

"So, why me?" I decide to start him off easy, so by the time we are eating dinner I'll be able to get him to tell me exactly what he's up to.

"Excuse me?" he asks.

"Why did you want to take me to dinner?" I clarify, secretly thinking he probably wanted to probe into my story and ask about my mysteriously missing photo!

"Well, I told you," he says honestly, seemingly surprised by my question. "Since you don't know Paris all that well, the least I could do is show you around."

He says it innocently enough, but I know there is more to the story.

"So what brought you to Paris, then? A travel story?" I say a little sarcastically, imagining him gloating over having swiped my photo. Travel journalist, my Aunt Fannie!

"Well, actually, I'm on my way to Rome. But I like to stop in Paris when I can. And the Japanese restaurants here around Opéra have been getting quite a reputation. I figured it wouldn't hurt to try one of them. Ah, here we are."

We sit down, and we're each handed a huge menu. It's only in French and Japanese, neither of which I can speak. I glance helplessly over at Clark. "Will you order for me?" I ask, hating how dependent I sound.

"Sure. What do you like?"

I give him my rundown of the kinds of sushi I like and the things I avoid, like raw eel. I had a bad experience with it once — and no matter how good the restaurant, I plan to avoid it at all costs for the rest of my life.

Just before we are set to order, Clark excuses himself to use the restroom. I'm left to sit and point at the items Clark had chosen, utterly humiliated by my inability to speak any French to

the waiter except "Merci" and "Oui."

Clark seems to be taking forever in the bathroom, but at last, he emerges. "Get lost on the way to the boy's room?" I tease, as he sits back down at our table.

He brushes my comment off and settles into his seat. I stare at him a moment, thinking. I realize I'm trying desperately to size him up, but he doesn't register on any of my usual male categories. Yes, I'm sure he's betrayed me — but he also seems like a sweet, upstanding guy. The man is confident, yet he doesn't seem egotistical. He seems intelligent and honest — except that he isn't honest, which I plan to prove by the end of dinner.

He clears his throat, and I realize I've been staring. "Sorry," I apologize. "Just thinking."

"What about?" he asks.

"Well, you," I answer honestly. "Where are you from?" It's an innocent enough question, yet I see him blanch for just a second. I'm suddenly intrigued. Maybe he is hiding something under that gentlemanly exterior after all.

"Well, I'm from Smallville... It's in the Midwest, Kansas."

"Smallville?" I laugh. "Surely you're kidding. That is a joke of a name!"

"Honest truth. If I had a map handy, I'd show you. It's not far from Wichita."

Our sushi dinner arrives, and I try to make more small talk as I struggle with my chopsticks. Mr. Smallville manages them with no problem, I'm shocked to see.

"So how did a small town farm boy end up traveling the world?" I ask, genuinely curious about how a guy from a small town could end up as a reporter — and possibly one intent on scooping me.

"Well, I always loved to write. And in college, I found myself as a journalism major. And I figured, if I'm going to write about the world, I need to see it first. Actually, what I hope to do is a land a position at the Daily Planet someday."

I try not to glare at him. So that's what this is about? Was he trying to scoop me so he could get my job at the Planet?!

That was the last straw. "So, is that why you stole my photo?" I suddenly demand, unable to keep up the polite exterior any longer.

He looks up at me, a little offended. "What? What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the photo that was in my bag when I went into the café but had mysteriously disappeared by the time I got back to my hotel room!" I try not to draw the attention of people sitting nearby, but I can't help that my voice goes up an octave or two.

"If you thought I stole a photo from you, why did you agree to come to dinner with me, then?" he asks pointedly.

"Because I wanted to face you. So you admit it? You stole it, hoping to scoop my story!" I say, brandishing my chopsticks at him like an accusatory finger.

"What? No, I did no such thing! Will you please calm down? You're drawing attention to us."

Noticing he's right, I sit back in my chair, my chopsticks safely resuming their duty as utensils and not weapons of war. "Now, tell me about this photo. Maybe I can help you find it."

I scoff. "Yeah, right. I know you have it, Mr. Kent — and you just want to have the story that goes along with it! I know all about your type!" I say, realizing he is just as deviant as I had suspected.

"Look, I just want to help you. What was the photo of?" he asks innocently.

I cross my arms, looking across the table at his blameless chocolate brown eyes. What if he is telling the truth? Have I been betrayed so many times that I can't spot an honest man anymore? But — how else would the photo disappear? Had I really lost it? Have I lost my touch so badly that I have resorted to accusing an

innocent man?

I hesitate a moment, and then lean slightly towards him. “Are you really just a travel writer?” I ask, narrowing my gaze at him.

“What does that have to do with —” he begins, but I hold up my hand.

“Just — answer the question,” I demand, my chopsticks in the air, dangerously close to becoming a weapon again.

He pulls out his wallet and shows me a press pass that reads: Clark Kent, Travel Writer, Borneo Gazette.

I raise my eyebrows at that. “Borneo, huh? Long way from Kansas.”

He smiles a little as he replaces his wallet in his pocket. “It’s just a one-year contract. Like I said — it’s given me a way to write about and see the world. So — you can trust me, I promise. I’m not after your story, Miss Lane.”

Oh, he looks so innocent... The wounded reporter in me wants to hold all the details close to my chest and not tell a soul till I know more. But the woman, and the girl who is desperate for a friend in the world wants to trust him.

I debate a moment longer, but realize the story is already sent to Perry, and the photo is lost. If anyone does find it, it isn’t likely to be anyone who can do anything about it...

I sigh, “I better not regret this.”

He smiles warmly at me. “I just want to help.”

“Well, my flight over was pretty uneventful — except for the screaming baby —”

“Lois, can you hold that thought?” he asks suddenly. He sets his napkin down, looking a little bit worried.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“Uh — I just remembered I was supposed to meet this friend of mine... But he doesn’t carry a pager. He’s in the area though. I’ll be right back!” He says all of this as he stands up to leave, leaving me speechless.

How could he just up and leave like that? — especially after he finagled me into telling him about the photo in the first place! Weird guy!

Well, he won’t get a second chance to hear my story, that’s for sure!

I look around the restaurant, suddenly feeling very alone. Oh God, what if Clark doesn’t come back? What if he was just looking for an excuse to leave me with what will be a bill that I absolutely cannot afford? I feel my palms start to sweat with panic. This can’t be good. I was such a fool to come here with him anyway — and besides, I still don’t know if he was telling the truth about the photo —

I start to think of escape plans. I could just up and leave — it’s been done before. It’s not normally my MO, but I could do it. I’ve gotten out of tighter jams before, after all...

The waiter comes by several times and I debate whether I should just ask for the check and leave. But part of me hopes Clark hasn’t abandoned me. I kind of liked him — even if he is a reporter.

The longer it takes for him to return, the more my panic grows. I can’t even eat the rest of my meal. I feel totally abandoned and foolish.

Clark suddenly walks back in and I glance at my watch. He had only been gone twenty minutes, but it had been enough to work me up into a frenzy.

He sits back down at the table and looks over at me with concern. “Everything all right?” he asks.

I feel even more stupid. I had imagined all sorts of crazy scenarios in his absence, and they all sounded ridiculous now that he had come back.

“Sorry about leaving you like that,” he says kindly. “Now, where were we?”

I shake my head. “I really don’t want to talk about it, Clark. Can we just enjoy the rest of dinner?”

His eyes meet mine across the table and I suddenly feel terribly awkward. I had completely expected him to leave me in the lurch. It was so strange for him to leave like that, and yet come back.

I think he notices the bewilderment on my face because he looks at me with that boyish smile of his and asks with a half-laugh, “What is it?”

I feel myself blush. I was ready to paint him as sneaky as the rest, but now I am not so sure. I usually have a good instinct for people, but Clark Kent is a puzzle. He seems genuinely kind, and yet I get the distinct feeling that he is hiding something.

I move my sushi around on my plate a bit, thinking. I look up at him, wondering if he will come back to the issue of my photo. I am reluctant to bring it up again, not wanting to sound petty. I feel like if I accuse him again, I will somehow be in the wrong, though I don’t know why.

“Would you like dessert?” he asks.

I look at him sharply. “At a sushi restaurant?” I whisper, a little disgusted at the thought.

He laughs, “No, I know the best place to get ice cream, over on the Ile-St-Louis. It’s called Berthillon, and it’s world famous.”

“World famous ice cream? Now you’re talking!” I say with a grin. Excellent ice cream can make up for a lot, in my book.

Clark motions for the check and pays. I’m terribly tempted to try and see the amount, curious how much the lovely meal cost him — a reporter like myself, but he is circumspect with the check. He is a gentleman as we leave the restaurant, helping me into my coat and holding the door. I swear, they don’t make men like this guy anymore. Too bad I’m leaving tomorrow.

We start walking down towards the bridges, taking the side streets, which are quiet this time of the evening.

“Lois, I’m sorry I left earlier... But, I still want to help you — if you want,” he hastily adds.

I sigh inwardly. I had hoped he had forgotten. But he wouldn’t be a reporter if he didn’t try to follow up on a lead... And, I still need to find the photograph.

I hesitate.

“Lois, you can trust me,” he says, stopping in the covered passage that leads to the Louvre, just off Rue de Rivoli.

I almost want to stomp my foot in anger. I hate it when men say that! Because it always means just the opposite!

“Please don’t patronize me, Clark,” I say. “Look, I think you’re a nice guy and you mean well, but you missed your chance! I don’t share stories — it’s gotten me into too much trouble in the past. Now, I want to believe that you didn’t take my photo, but I hardly know you.”

He seems to chew on that a moment. “You’re right, I’m sorry... Look, let’s just walk and enjoy the rest of the evening. I promise I won’t ask about it again.”

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Walking back to my hotel, I’m surprised by how much I enjoyed the evening I had had with Clark Kent. After dinner, we had walked to the Seine and admired the golden glow of lights on the water. He took me to that little ice cream place he mentioned — and Rocky Road has nothing on the flavors there! I will have to go by there again tomorrow for another scoop...

We talked of mundane things, and Clark’s travels — He managed to make me forget for about an hour that I was a reporter on a mission. Something no one has been able to do — ever.

I hate that I went to dinner with him, because there is no possibility of a future — not even a short-lived dating future. He’s leaving for Rome tomorrow afternoon, and I am leaving for the Congo tomorrow night. I’ll never see him again.

I sigh in frustration as I enter my hotel room. I know it’s just as well. As wonderful as it was to be with Clark tonight, I still have a mystery to solve. I need to find that photo — and the story

behind it. Clark was a nice distraction, but first thing in the morning, Lois Lane the reporter has to get back to work.

I change out of my dress and slip into my pajamas. I turn on the TV, knowing I'll understand very little of it... I almost hope there are some 'Ivory Tower' reruns on. Even if they are dubbed in French, I've watched them so many times I would know what's going on.

When I start flipping through the channels, I stop on the news channel. They're showing a group of people who had been evidently trapped in a Métro car earlier this evening. It had apparently been ablaze and then the fire had mysteriously extinguished. Eyewitnesses said an extremely cold breeze was felt as the fire went out — like a ghost passing through the car. Well, at least from what I could understand — 'phantôme' means ghost, right? Like Phantom of the Opera?

Then the camera pans to the Métro car, where a door had been opened from the outside, though no one saw who opened the door. I stand up beside my bed, inching closer to the TV screen. It's hard to tell, but it looks like a hand pushed the door forcibly open — bending the frame of the door —

I make myself sit down on the bed. No one has noticed the detail, which is so apparent to me. *Someone* opened that door — and I think it's the same someone that saved my plane.

I obsessively go through my bag one more time, just in case I really had misplaced the photo. But of course it's not there.

I recline back on the bed, thinking. What is going on here? There seems to be someone out there, saving people. I wonder if it's just in Paris... and why hasn't the press picked up on it yet? I feel my blood pumping with excitement — and my stomach is in knots. I know this is the story of the century — and I somehow let the evidence for it slip through my fingers, and yet fate has presented me with the opportunity to recapture my evidence — if only I could get down to that Métro car and get a picture.

Excitement pouring through me, I toss off my nightgown and pull on sweat pants and a hoodie. It's after midnight, so I figure there's no need for me to work at looking elegant, even if I am in Paris. I'm just a reporter, and this story has my name written all over it.

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I head to the station that had the problem, and I suddenly wish I had donned something more flattering than my sweats. I forget that the lights are bright in the Métro, and even after midnight, Parisians look fashionable. But I brush it aside. I'm not here to be seen. In fact, I'm hoping I can get by any remaining security that might be at the station to snag a photo.

I have to change two trains, but I finally arrive at my stop, Arts et Métiers, one stop away from my destination, Réaumur Sebastopol. I wait until the passengers all clear the platform so no one will see me. The Métros have all been rerouted around where the accident was. I take a peek down the dark Métro tunnel, feeling a breeze coming from the abyss of darkness. At least I know no trains will be whizzing by as I make my way underground to the stopped Métro car. I take one last look around me, to make sure I'm not seen before walking the narrow path against the wall of the Métro tunnel.

The way is slippery, and I'm pretty sure I hear some rats squeaking nearby. But I can see the light on the other side, at the next stop, slightly blocked by the damaged Métro car. As I near the station, a rancid smell hits my nose, and I wonder if the station would be better named Réaumur Cess-pool! I've smelled some funky Métros in Metropolis, but none have come close to this particular noxious smell. At last, I make it to the station. No one seems to be around, which surprises me, as I expected to at least have to deal with a police officer or two. But just one work light remains on in the middle of the station.

Before I step back onto the platform, my eye catches a movement. Or more like a swift wind in the air. Then, standing

about twenty feet away from me, I see none other than my date from earlier, Clark Kent! He had appeared — seemingly as if out of thin air! I hang back in the shadows, watching him closely, trying not to breathe, lest I catch his attention.

Suddenly, I see him take the door of the Métro, and flatten it out with his bare hands! I realize in that instant, that this has to be my mysterious plane rescuer — and now, he's covering his tracks! I stare at him, in curiosity and maybe even a little fear. Who is this guy, and what is he capable of? But even though I'm nervous, seeing him bend steel to his will, I know that he isn't dangerous.

I am also now certain that he did steal my photo — he obviously doesn't want people knowing what he's doing. But it's so strange — why would he help strangers, only to disappear all the evidence of it? I slowly back into the shadows, not wanting him to see me. I realize how major a story I have on my hands — a man who can bend steel and fly?! This would put me on top for sure. But I have to tread carefully. I need to learn more about him first. Why is he here? Why does he hide?

As I make my way slowly back through the darkness to the other Métro station, I also realize that I will never make it to the Congo.

Because now I have a story to follow up on — in Rome.

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It was not a problem to change my ticket, but it will be harder explaining it to Perry. I can tell him I'm on a lead, but I don't know when I'll have enough information to give him the full story. I don't want to blow this. I kind of liked Clark. I don't want to hurt him, but he has certainly gotten this reporter's attention!

I made sure my ticket was for a little later in the day than Clark's. I don't want him to know I'm following him — okay, stalking him. But I am. My plan is to observe him for the next few days... I know I really want to interview him, but I have a feeling he would deny any claims I have. He's too mild-mannered to admit to openly saving the day. I start wondering if maybe I can help him. I could do an exposé on him to give him some confidence — and boost my career in the process.

But I need details, and the only way to get them is to watch him.

As I board the plane to Rome, I suddenly wonder if I was overly cautious in booking a later flight. Did Clark actually just fly to Rome, under his own power? I can't help imagining being in those strong arms of his, flying over the Mediterranean... I stop myself. I can't believe I'm even thinking about a man who can fly!

I look up at the flight board for my gate. I notice the gate for Casablanca, which would have been the first leg of my journey towards the Congo. Am I being ridiculous? Maybe I imagined more than I actually saw... and now I'm giving up a big story in the hopes of pursuing an even better story. I take a deep breath, accepting my decision — something tells me that Clark Kent is worth the effort.

Despite my adventurous flight over the Atlantic, I have no trepidation about getting back on a plane. I've traveled quite a lot in the States, when I was the cub reporter willing to hunt down any story. It got me some respect in the news business, but I haven't won any awards yet that would make my name well-known by all.

I have knots in my stomach as we fly towards Rome, though it has nothing to do with the flight itself. I want to learn more about Clark Kent, and I do want his story, but I know I have to ask myself how far am I willing to go to chase it down. What if he really wants to be left alone? He is a nice guy — yet, with his abilities, I know he could be so much more. Maybe, he just needs a little push. And I could be the one to give it to him.

When we land in Rome, I head to the hotel I booked from Paris. It's a little more rustic than the Paris one, but it suits me.

The colors are more muted, stronger, earthier. I have never been this close to the Mediterranean before, but I have to say, it's a nice change from Metropolis. My parents never traveled to Europe when I was a kid, and I only spent one semester abroad in Ireland with an exchange program. This is my first real taste of continental Europe — and so far, it hasn't been disappointing.

After I unpack, I head out into the city, to strategize how I will investigate Clark Kent — and maybe even get him to admit his secrets. How did he get his powers? And would he ever consider giving Lois Lane an exclusive interview?

As I sit outside at a café, it occurs to me that hunting down Clark Kent is not going to be easy. It was a chance meeting in Paris — and unless he has to rescue me — Wait. That's it! I almost spill coffee as I sit up straighter in my chair. I have to contrive an incident where I am in just enough danger that Clark will have to step out of the shadows and rescue me! Then, confronted with seeing me again and the fact that I know his secret, he will have to give me the exclusive!

I start formulating a plan in my head... maybe I could wander into a dangerous neighborhood late at night... or hire some goons to pretend to rob me. That would be safer and guarantee that I would need a rescue. I pay for my coffee and start wandering the cobbled streets of Rome, ruminating on my idea. I have to get his attention without him suspecting that I am on to him. And if he rescues me — would he stop long enough for me to see his face and call him out on his superhero feat?

As I ponder this, I step into the street, just as a speeding Miata is heading my way. I swear it seems as if time stops for a second, as I see my whole life flash before my eyes. But then, I feel sort of a rush of wind, and am suddenly standing back on the sidewalk, the Miata honking furiously that it had nearly missed me. It was him. I know it was — yet he is already gone! I'm tempted to call out his name, but I don't want him to know I've made the connection yet. Though I realize, he may already know that I am suspicious of him since I was supposed to be on a plane to Africa this afternoon.

I realize too that a set-up isn't likely to help me catch him in action. He just proved to me that he moves faster than a speeding bullet, and he won't sit still long enough for anyone to notice him.

This is going to be tougher than I thought.

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I wander the city for the rest of the afternoon, half taking in the sights, but really thinking about my superhero dilemma. Part of me regrets trying to chase him at all — he obviously doesn't want recognition. Would I have been better off salvaging my reputation by going after the story in the Congo? I could still go — but I am also intrigued by the challenge Clark Kent has presented to me.

I wonder how he got his powers... Was it a freak accident in a lab? Was he a soldier suped up by the government that went rogue, with his own agenda? I laugh at that thought. Somehow Clark Kent didn't seem like the soldier type — he is more... boy scout material, I think.

He knows I'm here in the city. I wonder if he will seek me out at all, if he knows I'm on his trail. I don't plan on telling Perry anything until I can speak to Clark Kent in person again. I hope he will open up to me... I mean, to be able to fly? Again I wonder what else can he do — and more importantly — how.

I head back to my hotel, my head full of theories about Clark Kent. I decide to toy with the idea of writing a story, just to see how it would read. Could I deliver his story and not use his name, thereby solidifying my place in journalistic history yet still keeping his secret? I know Perry will be able to read between the lines, though. He'll know I know, and he may demand that I reveal the identity of this amazing man — er, super man?

I definitely need to write out the story — just to see it all in

print and clarify things in my own mind. How much do I really know? How believable would the story be?

I sit at my desk and open my word processor. I start writing a follow-up piece about the near plane crash, and being rescued by a man who can fly... Then I write about the Métro car incident... I realize halfway through that it's obvious I've seen who the mystery rescuer is. I can't write the story without giving him an identity.

I put in a short paragraph about him being an international journalist, which is vague enough. I can't bring myself to write his full name, so I just substitute C.K. Can I make this article work with so little detail about his identity? People are also going to want to know how he got his powers — and I haven't a clue!

I hear a knock at my door, remembering I had ordered some laundry to be dry-cleaned earlier. What quick service!

I open it, still half-distracted by my article. I just don't know how I can write it without revealing more of the identity of —

I'm looking at the floor, but my eyes slowly wander upwards when I see the leather dress shoes... and grey dress pants... and a light blue dress shirt — with an oddly loud blue and gold tie — and then, him. The guy that has me distracted from my original mission and has me questioning my own sanity.

"It's you," I say breathlessly. I stare at him a moment. He shifts his glasses up his nose in an adorable gesture and clears his throat.

"May I come in? I'd rather not have this conversation in the hallway," he says, and I gesture for him to enter. I secure the door, and look over at my word processor. It's facing away from him, but all it would take is a little walk around the room and he'd know I was writing a story about him — or thinking about writing a story about him. But if I rush over and slam it down, he'll know something's up. So instead, I edge casually over to the desk, in the hopes of distracting him from it entirely. He looks pensive, and I feel terribly embarrassed. I think about the story I was writing about him, and though it portrays him in the best light possible, there is still a part of me that was thinking of sending it to Perry without a word to Clark about it. After all, he is halfway around the world — maybe no one would notice it here in Europe...

"Lois, I thought you were going to Africa," he says at last.

"Um, well, I was. I just — decided to take a detour," I say, realizing that though I know who he is, he doesn't necessarily know that I know... He could think... oh God, that I followed him here because — I was attracted to him!

I feel my cheeks flush scarlet. I can't decide what is worse. The thought that he would kill me if he knew I was chasing his secret or the fact that he thinks I am so lovesick over him after our little dinner that I gave up a story to chase him down in Rome! I feel nauseous. This is worse than embarrassing. This is humiliating.

"Lois, I — I don't know what to say. I'm surprised to see you here —"

"How did you know I was here?" I challenge, daring him to admit the truth.

"Actually, I — spotted you at the airport. But I couldn't catch up to you. I asked around and found out you were staying here."

I eye him skeptically. I just bet he did exactly that — except I know I booked a later flight than his, so he couldn't possibly still have been at the airport. And — he saved me from a Miata this afternoon. But I can't say that yet — because, actually, this gives me the perfect in with him. Why not pretend to be enamored of him? I can learn all of his secrets and then — we can see about that article being written.

I manage to reach behind me and close the word processor. I then look over at Clark and start walking towards him with purpose. I grab his hideously loud tie and pull him close to me. Even though I'm laying it on thick a bit, I do feel a rush in my

veins. I am attracted to this man — or super man, or whatever he is.

“Lois?” he asks in puzzlement, his voice cracking just a bit.

“I — I guess I’m just sorry that we only got that one dinner... and we didn’t even share a good-night kiss.”

I can’t believe my own boldness. But it’s working. He’s not asking me about my word processor or the photo — he believes that I followed him here because I wanted to carry our tryst a bit further.

“What about — Africa?” he chokes out, partly because I’m holding his tie hostage.

“Africa will still be there,” I say, leaning closer into him. I look into his chocolate brown eyes — he is so handsome. And maybe playing him a bit will be good for me. I will do my best not to break his heart — but it couldn’t hurt to repair my own ego, could it?

We stand there, practically nose to nose, and I wait. Why won’t he kiss me? I can tell he’s attracted to me as well... Come on, Kent. We’re both adults, I urge with my eyes.

“Clark? What are you waiting for?” I whisper.

He leans in, his breath on my cheek, smelling slightly of peppermint and fresh air. I realize he has been flying recently as I put my hand on his shoulder; the fabric is cool to the touch.

“I — ” he hesitates, but begins to lean in.

Our lips are about to meet, when I hear a buzzing noise coming from my table. It’s my beeper. I pull abruptly away, suddenly remembering that Clark Kent is just a story, and I have to tell Perry something about why I skipped Africa to come to Rome.

The spell is broken. “It’s work,” I say, looking around helplessly. “I have to tell Perry White, my editor, why I’m here,” I reach for my pager, stepping away from him. I realize I was more affected by his nearness than I had any right to be, trying to focus as I reach for my pager.

Thank goodness we didn’t actually kiss!

He appears to be searching for a reason for me to give Perry why I’m here, and I bless him for it. Why does he have to be such a good guy — and be the story of the century?

“I heard there was a jewelry heist in one of the palazzos... It’s not normally my thing, but you could certainly use that. I heard this isn’t the first time they struck. There was another theft about a week ago in Milan... It could be a big story,” he offers.

I want to kiss him in earnest now. A series of jewelry heists would be the perfect excuse to give Perry!

“Since you seem to know about it — how about working with me on the story?” I offer, before I can even think it through. He is a travel writer — and a secret superhero. Would he buy the bait so I can get close to him?

“I’d love to help you... But the byline should be all yours,” he answers, surprising me.

A selfless superhero? Careful Lane, or you might just fall for Clark Kent in earnest.

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After Clark leaves, with a promise that I will meet him at the scene of the latest jewelry heist in a few hours, I call Perry. He is surprised to hear I have decided to skip out on Africa, but he trusts my instincts. I feel my belly flop with nerves, knowing I’m gambling with Kent. Either he will open up to me and let me write a story about him in full disclosure, or he will realize I’m playing a double game with him and disappear. I still plan on writing the story either way, but it would be so much better if my reluctant hero backs me up.

I head out into the city after my call with Perry, intent on finding out what the papers in Italy have already said about this jewelry heist. I know I’m being ambitious, hoping to understand the Italian, but I am confident that with a dictionary in my hand I can at least find out the basic facts as a starting point for my own

investigation.

When I go to the newsstand, I’m relieved to find a paper in English, written by the Italian press called ‘Corrieri della Sera.’ I pay a few lire and settle down at a café near the Spanish Steps to get as much background as I can from the local press.

Unfortunately, there is little said about the heists... I know from experience with the Daily Planet that our international versions of top stories aren’t as detailed as the originals, and I have a sinking suspicion this may be true for this paper. All the paper says is that a diamond necklace was stolen, worth a lot of lire — I can’t make the exact conversion, but my estimate is that it’s over 2 million US dollars. No suspects were named, but police believe it was either someone highly skilled or at least someone who worked at the palace.

I sigh and glance at my watch — I have about forty-five minutes before meeting Clark at the Palazzo Barberini. I hope to beat Clark to the Palazzo to do some snooping of my own and find out if anyone has been recently hired or has left since the jewelry theft.

I consult my map and plan my route to the Palazzo. I would try and take a tram, but the maps for those are tiny and confusing, and the metro in Rome is nothing to speak of. So, I’m off on foot... A true city girl, I’m attracted to the busyness and bustling feeling of Rome. What unsettles me a bit — and not necessarily in a bad way — is how everything feels so old and foreign.

The streets are uneven, and the colors of the buildings in the sunlight often distract me, making me lose my footing now and then when I look up. Everything looks like a movie set, and I can’t help but feel like I’ve stepped into another world.

In a moment of me admiring the dramatic statues in the Piazza Navona, I feel a tug on my arm. I turn, and see a small boy scamper off with my bag. I shout ‘Hey!’ and run after him, my impractical heels having difficulty finding an even footing on the cobblestones. I tumble head first into the stone pavement, humiliated on two counts. I can’t believe a smart city girl like me allowed herself to be robbed — by a kid, no less! — and that I didn’t have the grace to catch myself before I fell. I get up, my wrap floral dress a little worse for the wear, and my pride bruised a bit more than my elbow.

One man comes over to help me up, saying something incomprehensible in Italian. The best I could understand was ‘normale’ with a shrug of his shoulders, which I best interpret as ‘this happens all the time.’

I say ‘grazie’ and brush off his offer for further assistance. I am grateful that at least my passport is safe in my hotel room — but my credit cards, my pager — everything else has been taken.

I hear the bells chime across the city, and I realize I only have fifteen minutes to meet Clark, leaving me no time to investigate on my own. I really don’t want to face him like this. I want to appear capable and alluring — not bruised and in need of rescuing.

As I limp away towards the rendezvous point, I realize I could use the situation to my advantage and appear the helpless damsel in distress. But I resist wanting to play on Clark’s sympathies. I want to get him to open up to me because he trusts me, not because I manipulate him into trusting me. I hate women who manipulate — like Cat Grant. I refuse to be that girl.

At last, I make it to the Palazzo Barberini. Clark is waiting on the steps, looking more handsome than I remember. He sees I’m a little worse for the wear and comes over to me immediately.

“Are you all right? What happened?” he asks solicitously.

For just a moment, I think of tossing myself into his arms and playing up the drama. But it’s just not me. So instead, the armor comes up, and I push him away.

“Fine. Nothing a little investigating won’t cure. So, what’s the story?” I say brightly.

His concerned gaze meets mine, and I look away. I don’t

want his sympathy — I want his trust. And if I become the simpering damsel, there's no way he will tell me the secret that he keeps so close to his chest. He needs to see I'm strong, capable, and can be counted on.

I look back up at him, willing him to see I'm fine. After a moment, he nods. "I read the paper and talked to one of the security guys. This palazzo is mainly a painting gallery. The jewelry stolen was from the private collection in the main house. It sounds like an inside job."

I nod. "Are they letting people back into the museum?"

"Yes, that is still open. But I don't see what good it will do to go poking around there. What we need —"

"— is to know who works there," I finish for him, and he looks at me with happy surprise.

I stop a moment too, pleased that we are on the same wavelength.

"Yeah, exactly. So I found out that there was a crop of new hires about two weeks ago, shortly after the heist in Milan. Three men and two women were hired from an agency that supposedly does a thorough vetting job for important clients. The agency has an English name though; it's called Personnel Matters."

I look at him with stunned admiration and maybe just a bit of jealousy. "You did your homework, Kent. I'm impressed. Are you sure you're not an investigative journalist?" I tease only slightly.

He has the grace to look humble and shakes his head. "No, but I somehow find myself investigating stories more than I mean to."

I'll just bet he does. Having superpowers has to make one curious, I would think. And a superhero with an altruistic streak would certainly be loath to let unsolved crimes go by the wayside.

"So, do you think there is anyone we should talk to here? I can check the Daily Planet database later for the company name... that could be our next lead."

"How far are you willing to go to pursue it?" he asks, and I suddenly wonder by the soft tone of his voice if he's talking about more than this jewel heist story.

I self-consciously push my hair back behind my ear. "Well, um... I don't know, Clark. How — how far are you willing to go?" I ask, hearing a shaking in my voice that I didn't expect. He steps up closer to me and gently rubs his thumb over the side of my jaw.

"Are you sure you're all right?" he asks, making my insides melt, his eyes looking me over for damage. I've seen how strong he is, yet he keeps it all in check. His touch is feather light on my face, yet I know it will leave a mark — on my heart.

I step away from him, trying to focus. "I'm fine, Clark. Really, I am," I say, feeling far from it.

"Um, so... what do you think we should do?"

Some misguided ideas cross my mind that make me blush, but I quickly shake myself out of it. I want to see the extent of Clark's abilities, and one way to test him is to get him to do some investigating with me.

"Well, I was thinking of getting inside the palazzo. You know, see what we can see. Maybe talk to some of the people who work there."

"I don't think we'll find much in the museum," he says with uncertainty.

I roll my eyes at him, glad that he still has something to learn from me. "We only start with the museum — the goal is to get inside the palazzo itself. Now come on! And try to keep up!" I say, tugging him towards the ticket window to the museum.

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We enter the museum, and I tell Clark to leave his jacket and tie at coat check. I want him to look more casual in case we have to blend in. He seems skeptical at the idea, but suddenly notices I am not carrying a purse.

"I — er, lost it," I mumble, hoping he'll drop the subject.

He touches my arm, gently coaxing me to look at him. "Lois, were you robbed? Is that what happened on your way to meet me?"

I nod, but shrug it off. "It's no biggie. I'll call my credit card companies when I get back to the hotel. It happens all the time in Metropolis."

His thumb gently strokes my forearm and my heart starts doing flip-flops at his touch. "Let me know if you need anything, okay? Anything. Just ask."

I nod and regretfully pull my arm away from him. I'm still astonished at how such a powerful man can also have the capacity to be so gentle. Just another little mystery to solve about Clark Kent.

We head into the museum, pretending to care about the Caravaggios and the Raphaels the museum has on display. I immediately start looking for closed off areas that might lead into the main house.

It's late in the afternoon, and lucky for us, there don't seem to be many of the obligatory museum workers whose job it is to make sure you don't touch anything. I also note that there are not many security cameras around — only near the valuable pieces. This will help our chances of slipping into the lived-in part of the palazzo without being seen.

At last I see a corded off stairway. I wave to Clark who seems genuinely interested in some painting with a woman draped in some diaphanous gown. In annoyance, I call to him and eventually he comes over.

"What did you find?"

"This!" I say triumphantly, ducking under the rope. "Come on!"

He hesitates for just a second, but then quickly follows me. We find ourselves in a marble stairway. There are several doors, and the ones I try are locked. I glance at Clark, and he semi-inconspicuously pulls down his glasses and shakes his head.

He turns to me, "I think we should try further upstairs."

I try not to let my jaw drop, but I think he may have just literally looked through those solidly closed doors! It's just a theory, but I will definitely keep an eye on him using that particular trick again.

He beats me up the stairs and suggests we try the door in the middle. I don't have my handy credit cards to try and swipe through the lock, but I do have a bobby pin. I pull one out of my hair and start jimmying the lock. But these are old European locks, and I think they work differently than the standard issue ones I've often come across in Metropolis.

I glance at Clark. "I can't get it open."

"Here, let me try," he offers. "Look down the stairwell and make sure no one's followed us."

I give him a wry smile, betting he's about to do something only he can and wants to have me out of the way to do it, but I do as I'm told. When I turn back, he has the door open — imagine that.

"Well, guess you're useful for something after all," I tease, trying to see if there was any damage done to the lock, but Clark's hand is covering the handle.

He smiles bashfully and gestures that I should enter first.

We are suddenly in a plush, carpeted hallway. It's a little narrow, and I wonder if we got lucky and found ourselves in the servants quarters.

I gesture for Clark to follow me as if I know where I'm going, which I do not. But I can't help smirk at the idea that this powerhouse of a guy is willing to follow little old me around. Could he really be doing it because he's falling for me? I feel flattered and a little guilty if it's true. I'm only using him for a story after all. Lois Lane cannot have another love debacle on her hands. Right now, it's time to focus on the career, and hopefully

I'll manage to get Kent to help me get back to being top banana at the Planet.

I hear some girls chatting in Italian. Great. I forgot that little detail. How are we supposed to find out what they know when we can't speak the language?

Clark suddenly steps ahead of me and begins talking to the two maids — in Italian. Is there no end to the man's talents?

"Scusiamo, io sono Clark Kent, uno reporter americano e io cerco informazione della collana rubata?" he says in a lilting voice. I wonder just how many sides there are to Clark Kent... the flying superhero, the European linguist, the Houdini who sees through doors and gets through locked ones...

The girls giggle and answer him. Obviously, they are swept up in his handsome good looks, which irritates me irrationally. I cross my arms and pretend to understand something of what is being said.

My ears perk up when I hear the name Lex Luthor.

"What's he doing here?" I ask, though Clark motions for me to wait a moment as the girls finish telling him their story. Lex Luthor is a famous philanthropist in Metropolis and someone whom I've suspected for a while has been involved in less than savory dealings. In fact, he was one of my 'out there' suspects for who might be behind the gunrunning in the Congo. Suddenly, this jewel heist story just got very interesting.

We leave a few minutes later, with the girls still smiling and giggling. Clark doesn't say a word until we are back wandering in the museum.

"What was that all about? And when did you learn to speak Italian?" I ask, still surprised by his skill. Are languages another one of his powers?

"One question at a time. I learn languages easily," he answers casually. "And yes, they did mention Lex Luthor. Do you know who he is?"

"Unless you've been hiding under a bushel, you should know who he is, too! He's an important and very rich philanthropist in Metropolis. But —" I hesitate. This is my story after all, and the more I tell him, the more likely he could do the whole story himself. I just don't want to be in that position again...

He seems to notice my dilemma and looks directly into my eyes. "Lois, it's okay. I won't steal your story. Scout's honor," he says, raising his three fingers in a scout salute that is so adorable I relent.

"Okay, okay. I know..." I say, knowing I have enough dirt on him so that even if he does double-cross me, I could have his story printed before you can say, 'stop the presses!' "Lex Luthor is known for a lot of charity work. But he also is a billionaire. His company makes ordinary household products like paper towels and plastic cups. But I recently discovered he also has a whole other hush-hush branch of LexCorp that is called LL Industries, and they do all this secret technology work... I also think he has his hand in a few other pies around the city, including some mob dealings — which is where my lead in Africa came from —"

"Lois — you're babbling. Get to the point," Clark says, shaking me out of my Mad Dog Lane babble mode.

"Oh, sorry. Anyway, it would be great for my — um, our story if I can tie Lex to these thefts," I correct myself, hoping he doesn't focus on me calling the story my own. "So what did Mopsy and Flopsy upstairs have to say to you?"

"Well, they are not the new hires from Personnel Matters, but they do know the gossip around the palazzo. It seems Mr. Luthor was here for dinner about a week ago with an opera singer. And the opera singer was admiring the necklace Mr. Brandini, the owner, had on display. Apparently, Lex offered to buy it from him, but Mr. Brandini refused, saying it had sentimental value or something. And get this. It is the sister stone to the Hope Diamond." He pauses to let that sink in a minute. I feel my eyes grow wide as saucers as the story seems to grow bigger by the

minute. "Legend has it that the Hope Diamond was stolen from a statue of Sita, a goddess in India. The diamonds were the eyes. It was always assumed that the second diamond was lost... but here it has resurfaced."

I am intrigued by his story. This will make a heck of an article and I feel my reporter juices pumping.

"Did you learn anything else?" I ask, still reeling from the fact that Lex Luthor is somehow tied up in this.

"Yes, in fact. Apparently the opera diva Lex Luthor is seeing is performing tonight at the Teatro Costanzi." He suddenly gives me a megawatt grin as he offers me his arm. "Lois? How do you feel about seeing an opera tonight?"

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With my credit cards stolen, I have to rely on the wardrobe I already have for the opera tonight. Back in my room, I stare at the two evening dresses I have packed, trying to determine which I should wear tonight. I need to be stunning, but I also should wear something that I can move in freely if we end up doing some investigating backstage. I have a long burgundy dress and a flirty black one that is mid-length. Somehow the black one seems too sweet for the opera, so it will have to be the long burgundy one, even though the short train on the back will make any daring movements absolutely impossible.

As I dress and do my hair and make-up, I can't help the flutter of excitement I feel in my stomach. I can't wait to see Clark dressed up in a suit again, and even though I know nothing about opera, I've always thought it would be romantic to go to one. Clark took care of the tickets this afternoon, and I have no idea what we are even seeing, except that it is in Italian.

Since we got a late start, we decided to skip dinner together and just meet at the theater at seven-thirty, as the opera starts at eight.

I arrive just a little bit late, but Clark is there, looking so handsome in his black and white tux that it would give James Bond a run for his money. I cover a small smile as I take his arm, deciding that hanging out with Clark is far better than trudging through the jungles of the Congo would have been.

"So, what exactly are we seeing, Mr. Kent?" I ask playfully as he hands me my ticket.

"Cosi fan tutte, a comedy by Mozart," he says unhelpfully, as I only recognize the name Mozart, but know nothing about his music. "The title means 'they are all like that.'"

"Who? Men?" I say, trying to bite back the bitterness in my tone.

"No, actually, women," he says, concealing a smile at my retort.

"So, what is it about?"

Clark describes the basic plot as we walk through the lush marble lobby, and are ushered to our seats. "It starts out with two sisters who are in love with two men. They praise them and say how none can compare to them. The men, with the help of a devious 'friend', say they need to test the fidelity of the women."

"Ha!" I scoff. "It's the men who should be tested for fidelity!"

"Well, they are tested as well, but it's not the main point of the plot. Anyway, the men pretend to go off to war and return dressed as Albanian princes. Each tries to woo the other's love."

"I'm sure the women are smart enough to see through that disguise! After all, it's not the clothes that make the man! No one could fool me for a second in a disguise..." I say, confident in my ability to see through ruses — it is part of my job, after all.

"Anyway, one of the sisters resist, and the other succumbs, but by the end, both the girls have fallen in love with the other suitor."

"That is ridiculous. And I suppose the men are blameless in this little scheme?" I ask, feeling a little smug that my suspicions about the inanity of opera are proving accurate.

“Well, that’s what makes this opera so interesting. The ending libretto is ambiguous as to who is to blame, and even who ends up with whom. It’s up to the director to decide how it ends,” Clark finishes, sitting down next to me in our little box.

I’m prepared to be bored and even annoyed by the opera after Clark’s little summary, but as the music starts, I’m completely carried away to another place. Yes, the plot is silly, but it also shows how ridiculous people can act when they are in love — or when they think they are in love. It’s not until the middle of the first act, though that I remember the opera diva, as her necklace suddenly catches the light.

“Clark!” I lean over to whisper in his ear. “Is that the necklace that was stolen?”

He pulls down his glasses and looks over them. I wonder again what he can do with his eyes... someday I hope he’ll tell me. He nods, “Yes. I can’t believe she has the audacity to wear it on stage like that. If anyone who knows about the theft is here tonight...”

“We have to get backstage at the end and try to talk to her,” I say, settling back into my seat.

Clark looks over at me and smiles. “So you like it? You don’t mind staying till the end? I mean, we could go during intermission —”

I shake my head, “No, it’s fine... I mean, I like it.” I try to tell myself that I have just discovered a passion for the opera, but honestly, I am almost more enjoying sitting next to Clark Kent.

The next act has me more intrigued by an opera than I ever thought could be possible. I find myself edging ever closer to Clark during a love duet about hearts pounding and passion. My hand slips into Clark’s, and he gives it a gentle squeeze. I glance over at him, and he offers me a sweet smile that has my insides fluttering with excitement. Is it the opera or the man that has captured my attention so completely?

I’m swept up by the music more than the story, and I definitely feel more than I’ve allowed myself to feel in months. There are moments that have me laughing — like the maid pretending to be a doctor to cure the men who have pretended to be poisoned. Who thinks up these plots?! But there are also moments that have me near tears, with the sheer passion and joy of the music. I’m so happy that Clark brought me here, even if it was just for a story. I know, that however this all turns out, going to the opera with him will be a memory that I’ll cherish forever.

When the final curtain falls, we don’t sit around to applaud for half an hour, like the rest of the audience seem prepared to do. We have to get backstage to talk to the diva in the necklace.

She played the more serious sister, and I wonder if she has a formidable offstage personality to match the intensity with which she sang tonight.

Clark leads me outside and around to the back of the opera house. The air is warm, and the full moon is just starting to come out. I still feel the vestiges of the magic created in the opera house, and I don’t want to lose this moment.

I suddenly stop and pull Clark’s arm to look at me.

“What is it, Lois?” he asks.

I look up at him, thinking of how since the moment he rescued my plane out of the air he has intrigued me. He’s one hell of a story, but he’s also an incredible guy as well. I have this feeling that it could all end any second. That he’ll see through my motives or he’ll just disappear because he can. And I can’t let him go without knowing, what it would be like —

I suddenly reach around his neck and pull him towards me. He gets the idea and pulls me closer to him. Our lips meet, and I feel the electric intensity of passion between us. My heart is beating a mile a minute, and my hands can’t help themselves from pulling him closer, feeling the long planes of his back, the strength of his arms, and the silkiness of his hair.

Moments later, we stop kissing, though both of us are

breathing a bit raggedly. I feel as if I’ve just drunk a fine champagne. I almost want to dance with the joy of it, of him. I suddenly don’t care who he is or where he is from or how he got his abilities. All I can think is that Clark Kent is one hell of a kisser.

“Lois,” he says intensely, holding my hand to his chest.

I realize I have to stop him. I can feel he wants to confess his heart to me, and I don’t want him to. I don’t want to hear that the kiss affected him the way it did me. I don’t want to fall for him — I can’t! Even with this necklace story, I still need his story... Don’t I? If he’s a secret government agent or some experiment gone awry, the world needs to know about it — doesn’t it? And if it helps boost me to international renown —

I take a step back from him, terribly torn. He’s a reporter, as well. I still don’t know how much I can trust him. After all, aren’t I being just as double-crossing by trying to scoop his own personal story? Suddenly I’m nauseous, sensing this has all gone wrong. I should just let the Clark Kent story drop, yet the reporter in me tells me that would be a stupid thing to do. I need his story to save my career. A jewelry heist is one thing. But a super powered man — is a completely different ballgame.

“Lois? What is it?”

“Nothing... I’m fine. I think we need to hurry, though. Who knows how long after the applause we’ll have to talk to the diva?”

He seems hesitant, and I know he wants to talk about the kiss we just shared. But I can’t let him. I pull him along instead to the backstage entrance.

It’s much easier than I thought it would be to get inside. No one is standing guard except for a stagehand finishing a cigarette. She doesn’t give us a second glance as we walk right past her into the backstage entrance. I guess people don’t expect snoopers after an opera — maybe that’s only at rock concerts.

We spot the singer at a backstage dressing table. But just as we are about to approach her, I see Lex Luthor and three Italian police officers in tow approaching her from the other side of the stage.

“That’s her. I told you it wasn’t me who stole the necklace!” Luthor says, pointing at the singer.

Clark and I move to the shadows to watch the scene unfold behind some of the offstage scenery.

The soprano looks up in horror and then in shock as the policemen come towards her with handcuffs. She glances at Lex and starts screaming at him in Italian.

“Io non sono un ladro! Era un regalo! Lo ha dato me!” she is crying, stomping her foot, and gesturing wildly at Luthor. Lex is saying something in Italian to the officers, but in a lower voice.

I glance at Clark, and he shakes his head. “She says she’s not a thief. That it was a present from Luthor. But Luthor says she has stolen other things from him as well.”

I look back at the drama unfolding before us, and sure enough, a gold watch is found in her bag by one of the officers. She looks in shock at the police, but she has lost her case.

“She obviously has been set up!” I cry to Clark, indignant. “We have to prove that Luthor set her up!” I am almost ready to jump in and tell the police myself that the singer couldn’t possibly have stolen the necklace, that Luthor is not the most honest of men, that — But Clark’s hand on my arm stops me.

“Lois... do you really want to get further involved in this? I mean... it could be a big story, but it could also be dangerous if what you told me about Lex Luthor is true.”

“Clark! She’s innocent. The least we can do is try to help! If I send a write up about this to Perry tonight, the international press will be all over it, and they will have to start investigating Luthor. Come on, Kent! We have a story to write!”

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On the way back to my hotel room, all I can think about is the

kiss that Clark and I shared after the opera. The strains of the music still play in my mind, and the sensation of being in Clark's arms still resonates in my body. I'm helplessly smitten, right when I can least afford to be.

At least I have the jewelry heist story to write with him. I glance over at him in the cab, wondering what it would be like to do this sort of stuff all the time with him in Metropolis. Would he ever consider working for the Daily Planet? I know he has some sort of superhero agenda tied up in his travel writer persona, but a selfish part of me would love to work side by side with him on a daily basis.

I stop myself. Am I really saying that I'd like him as a partner? That I can trust him? Maybe... yes. No. I mean, he still hasn't even hinted at what he's capable of to me. Maybe he still doesn't really trust me. And why should he? I have the makings of a Pulitzer Prize winning story on my word processor about him, if only I could get him to talk to me about it.

I think about just questioning him, blatantly. But I know that would be a mistake. If he's worked so hard to hide what he's really capable of, then he is quite likely to take off and leave me if I press him on it. And that scares me. I'm starting to like having him around...

At last, we arrive at my hotel room. It almost feels like a date, still dressed up from the opera and just enough sexual tension from that kiss between us to make me interested in what could happen next, but we still have work to do.

"I think we could use some coffee," Clark says, heading over to the little counter top with coffee supplies.

"That's perfect. I'll start writing," I say, pulling out my word processor.

While Clark is busy with the coffee, I open up my computer and connect the cable for the internet. Clark is taking forever with the coffee — it's an Italian press, which takes some patience to work with. I've just been ducking down to the nearby café in the morning, not even daring to attempt working that bizarre contraption.

I open a new file, feeling guilty about the file about Clark on my computer. I am tempted to come clean with him, but I know it wouldn't end in him doing the same with me. If he knew I was pursuing him because of a story, I'm certain that he'd disappear out of my life forever. And while losing the story on him would be disappointing, losing his company would hurt even more.

Finally, Clark comes over with a steaming cup of coffee. I take a sip, shocked by how much stronger it is than the Daily Planet sludge I'm used to. "Now this is a cup of coffee!" I say brightly.

Clark nods, taking an appreciative sip. "Yeah, the Italians are really good at opera and coffee. Though Turkish coffee is even better in my mind..."

He starts describing to me his coffee experience in Turkey while I start on writing the story. Eventually his attention is drawn back to what I'm writing and he pulls up a chair beside me. We decide to write an editorial on whether or not an opera diva could be considered guilty of stealing the jewels or was it more likely her billionaire boyfriend set her up. Clark suggests that we don't mention Lex Luthor by name until we have more proof. My fingers are itching to include his name in the story, but even without Luthor it still reads as an interesting piece that will definitely need a follow up.

I look over at Clark as he reads back through the story for errors, and I feel excited at the thought of writing another story with him. Oh, what am I saying? I should be doing this alone — I should be trying to figure out how Clark got his powers! I should not be fantasizing about having a partner! It's how I got myself into this mess in the first place!

I sigh, and Clark glances at me a little defensively. "What? That comma is misplaced — I didn't change the meaning, I only

—"

"No," I shake my head, secretly enjoying watching him squirm. "There's one thing missing in this article."

Clark looks seriously at the page, thinking hard. "I don't think so. It reads pretty easily — your editor will be pleased."

I swing the keyboard slightly over to face me and take control of the mouse. I go back to the top of the document and stop at my byline.

"It's missing your name," I say, typing it in next to mine. "You did say you are a freelancer, right?"

"Lois, you don't have to," he says, but he looks pleased.

Yes, I do, I think, wanting to appease my own conscience. If I do end up using his story in all of this, I want him to know that I am not always selfish. That I can recognize when someone is genuinely helping me.

"Perry will be pleased that I have a partner on this. He's already relieved I didn't go to the Congo. Besides, you wrote half of it — your name deserves to be on there with mine. And didn't you say you hoped to write for the Daily Planet one day?"

Clark suddenly grins happily, and I feel my insides melt with pleasure. "Thanks, Lois," he says. "You're a good friend."

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"Lois, this is a great little story you sent me — has a real human interest angle with the opera singer. Not your usual line, but it suits you," Perry was saying to me on the phone the next day.

"Thanks, Perry. I hope to have a follow-up for you soon —" I begin, but Perry interrupts.

"But who the hell is this Clark Kent? And why is he on your byline?"

I swallow, knowing this was coming. "Well, he's a freelancer I met in Paris. We — were on the tail of the same story and, well, we ended up writing it together," I say, feeling my cheeks flame.

"You? Working with a partner? I thought you learned your lesson in that department, Lois," Perry chides. I knew he wasn't going to buy it. "Is there more you aren't telling me?"

I feel embarrassed that it suddenly looks like I can't hold my own alone. That maybe I met someone who I feel something for and am letting it interfere with my work. I can't let Perry think that about me. He'll never trust me to go solo again. Oh why did I put Clark's name on the byline? Why? Because he deserved it, and you know it.

"Lois? What exactly is your interest with this Clark Kent character?" Perry persists.

The reporter in me suddenly takes over; the woman who fought through journalism school and worked her tail off for a spot on the Daily Planet's payroll starts speaking and I can't shut her up. "Well, actually, Clark might be a story all on his own. I can't say much more than that, Perry, except — he's pretty incredible. But I'm working with him to get the real scoop. I have to get him to trust me first, to confide in me. This one might be the big fish I've been looking for. You just got to trust me."

"I do trust you, Lois. I just hope you know what you're doing... Is this Kent character dangerous?" Perry suddenly asks, assuming his parental role that he does from time to time, a side to him that I find as endearing as I do aggravating.

"No, Perry. He's not dangerous. He's — well, I'll tell you more when I know more. But for now, just know I'm safe with him. I'll call soon when we have the follow-up to the jewelry thief piece, okay?"

"Okay, Lois. Just be careful."

I hang up the phone, feeling slightly ill. I did it. I put Clark under Perry's radar. Clark's secret will have to come out eventually, one way or another — especially if Perry starts questioning me more about him. I only hope that Clark confides in me before I'm put in that position.

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I meet Clark later that afternoon for a coffee at a sidewalk café.

“Perry loved our story! He’s looking forward to the follow-up,” I say cheerfully as I sip my latte and conveniently leave out the part about me mentioning why I was willing to work with a partner.

“That’s great! I really appreciate you sharing your byline, Lois,” Clark said, beaming a heart-stopping smile in my direction. “You helped me realize a little dream of mine, to write for the Daily Planet.”

I am torn apart by guilt; he seems to trust me so implicitly, and I fear I’m walking an ever finer line between being his friend and betraying him.

I shake off the feeling and go straight to business, avoiding my conscience all together. “I think our next step should be to interview Lex Luthor,” I suggest. I’ve been dying to get an interview with him in Metropolis for months. And this could be a perfect in!

“Is that a good idea, Lois? He probably knows who you are — and if he is as suspect as you say, do you really want to get on his bad side?”

“Clark, I appreciate you looking out for me, but I don’t think we need to worry about anything. We simply go to his hotel and say we are concerned about the allegations brought against his girlfriend. He doesn’t need to know why we are there exactly. And maybe he’ll give something away — or maybe,” I say leaning in conspiratorially, “we can do some snooping while we’re there!”

“You seem to enjoy snooping,” Clark says in a teasing manner.

I shrug casually. “It goes with the territory — but it is a lot of fun!”

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“Venice?” I turn to Clark with annoyance. Just when I think I have Luthor in my sights...

Clark and I questioned the front desk at the luxurious Westin Excelsior for nearly an hour until we finally got it out of one of the bellhops that Luthor had left for Venice this morning. We — well, I should say I — almost got us kicked out when I pushed the issue, but luckily Clark is a smooth talker, and very diplomatically explained that we were looking out for the billionaire, trying to keep him out of a scandal or some such nonsense.

That’s when a bellhop pulled us aside and said that Luthor was on his way to the famed City of Bridges.

“We have to go after him!” I say, thrilling as well to the thought of seeing that enchanted city. “We could be in Venice by this evening, Clark!” I say, seeing his eyes sparkle with the idea as well — but we could be there even sooner if he let me in on his little secret. I can only imagine what it would be like to fly in Clark’s arms over Italy to Venice...

“Hold your horses there, Lois... I think we should try to talk to the opera diva first. You know, get her side of the story?” he suggests reasonably.

“Absolutely,” I relent, and shake myself out the daydream. “Let’s go then.”

As we walk side by side through the cobbled streets, I get the feeling something else is weighing on Clark’s mind. I am almost afraid to ask him, thinking of all the little ways I’ve tricked him into trusting me — honestly, he has all the reason in the world to be worried.

Clark eventually seems to screw up some courage and turns to face me, his brown eyes serious and compelling. “Lois? As much as I’m enjoying pursuing this story with you — I can’t help feel that’s all this is about — a story.”

That stops me dead in my tracks. Because it is true. This is all about his story.

“What do you mean, Clark?” I ask innocently, but inwardly my heart’s in turmoil.

“I mean, I thought we were doing this story to get to know each other — maybe even romantically?” he asks with some confusion. “I mean — that kiss the other night — was — ”

“Spectacular,” I say almost unconsciously under my breath, remembering, but quickly recover. “I mean, yes it was — nice. But — what are you asking me, Clark?”

He seems to struggle to muster up some more courage, but eventually looks me in the eye again, his earnest expression cutting through my heart like a knife. “I guess — when this story is all over — what then? Will we just go our separate ways?”

I haven’t thought of that. I have only thought of the end result — of somehow getting Clark’s story, and hopefully getting him to support me writing it. But — beyond a story?

Maybe I could turn this back on him. He’s the travel writer — the man who has to be everywhere at once — and the only person who can pull it off more credibly than anyone else I’ve ever met before, too.

“Well, don’t you have an obligation to the Borneo Gazette?” I ask forcefully. “I mean, what if your next assignment is in South America or Australia? What then, Clark?”

“The Borneo Gazette is only a stepping stone for me, Lois...” He looks thoughtfully at me, maybe even a little hopeful. “Do you think — I mean, if it were possible — do you think there could be a place for me in Metropolis? At the Daily Planet?”

I turn to him with a quizzical expression, wondering why a powerhouse like him, with his amazing abilities, would want to settle into working in one city as a journalist. The whole world could be his. I don’t flatter myself for one moment to believe that he would want to do it just for me, even if there is an obvious attraction between us. He had mentioned, after all, that he had always dreamed of writing for the Planet. But the look in his eyes — he seemed to be looking for more from me that just this one story.

“Clark — ” I begin, torn between wanting to let him down gently that I can’t make any such promises and wanting to give him hope that he could have exactly what he wanted. “Can we just finish this story? And see where the road takes us?”

He sighs, seeing that I am not ready to give him any sort of commitment — partner or otherwise — and nods in acquiescence. “Sure. Maybe this story will get your editor’s attention. And maybe you could put in a good word for me?” he asks me hopefully.

I start walking again, not looking at him. Thanks to me, Perry now knows that Clark Kent is a story in and of himself. No doubt, Perry would hire him — but he’d want to know the whole truth about him first. One way or another, I have to get down to the bottom of the mystery that is Clark Kent.

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The diva has left the building — er, prison.

Apparently, it pays to be an opera singer. They need her at the opera house tonight because some bigwig refuses to listen to a stand-in, so she was released on bail. This gives Clark and me an extra shot at interviewing the people backstage, and also hopefully the diva herself.

No fancy dress tonight, though. Clark, after a little coercion from moi, has agreed that we need to get backstage during the performance. This will require some undercover work, namely pretending to be part of the cast.

We stake out nearby the opera house, waiting for said cast to arrive. Our goal is to blend in and say we’re part of the chorus. We don’t have to wait long, as by seven o’clock, singers are arriving. I tug at Clark’s sleeve and we head towards the door.

“Is this really going to work, Lois?” he asks doubtfully.

Honestly, I’m not sure, but there doesn’t seem to be anyone manning the door. People are just going in willy-nilly.

“Sure? Why not? Let’s go!” I say, following a guy into the stage entrance.

I tap Clark on the arm purposefully, “Tell this guy we’re replacements for the chorus and ask where we can get dressed.”

Clark rolls his eyes, but breaks out his Italian and charm. The guy is friendly, though he looks at Clark a bit skeptically. He eventually accepts Clark’s explanation and points us down a hallway. Perfect! We’re in!

As we make our way, we hear a soprano warming up. I’m pretty sure it’s our diva and I gesture to Clark to follow me.

“She sounds busy, Lois. Maybe we should try during a lull in the action on stage…”

“Clark! This may be our only chance! Now, come on!”

Clark and I make our way to the dressing room and knock on the door.

“Scusi, Buena sera, Madama,” Clark begins when she opens the door. I hadn’t paid much attention the other night, but now I notice how beautiful she is in person. Her curly brown hair is piled high on her head, accenting her round brown eyes and her small up-turned nose. She’s standing in front of her mirror in an eighteenth century corset and stockings, petite and beautiful. I try not to feel a stab of jealousy as Clark talks to her sympathetically.

She gestures wildly with her hands and seems outraged as she explains something to him. I assume she’s describing the circumstances of her arrest. When Clark mentions Luthor’s name, her face scrunches up and she crosses her arms angrily. By her expression, I’m guessing she is no longer enamored of the billionaire.

A few moments later, another knock sounds on the door. I assume it’s time for the show or something, but instead a messenger pops in with a note for la diva.

“Grazie,” she says and reads the note. “Signor, cosè molto interessante! Beissimo!” she cries, gesturing for Clark to read the note.

I feel totally out of the loop and wait for Clark to clue me in.

“What’s going on?” I ask at last, seeing the diva grab onto Clark’s arm as he reads.

“It seems Madama Costini has been freed of all charges. They found the supposed thief,” he says, but then leans towards me confidingly, “But I’m guessing it’s more likely they found the scapegoat that Luthor paid to set her up.”

Clark turns to ask the singer something else and she nods, “Sì, io lo penso assai.”

Clark nods at me in return, “She agrees. She told me the reason he’s going to Venice is that there is a rare green gemstone discovered there, brighter than an emerald. She said it was brought there by some wealthy Americans twenty-odd years ago and suddenly Luthor has an interest in it.”

“Maybe we can catch him at his own game,” I say, thinking of the advantages we have on our side with Clark’s abilities.

“You seem awfully sure of that,” Clark says with surprise, making me a little uncomfortable. Had I just given something away?

“Well, why not? Lois and Clark have done well so far — now we have the follow-up story to declare Madama Costini’s innocence, and we have a lead on Luthor. What more do we need?”

Clark smiles and then turns back to the diva, “Cantano bellissima questa sera! Ciao, Madama.”

She smiles in return. “Grazie mille, Signor! Ciao!”

We leave her dressing room and head back towards the backstage area. “I guess it’s pointless to get dressed up then, huh?” I say, feeling a little let down as I eye a ruffled maid’s costume that I would rather die than admit that I’d like to try on. I secretly love undercover work.

“You sound disappointed, Lois. I’m surprised. Can you actually sing opera?” he asks me with a teasing note in his voice.

“Passably, yes — maybe, I don’t know…” I say, knowing the limit of my talents probably doesn’t include opera. “But we wouldn’t have had to sing. Anyway, it’s a moot point. The diva is free of all charges, and we have a lead. Now all we need to do is head to Venice. Could you book us a hotel?”

“One room?” he asks, and I detect a hint of nervous anticipation in his tone.

“Well, why not? We’re adults. I am still out some credit cards, remember?” I say a bit more caustically than I mean to, recalling Perry harrumphing at me about being more careful.

Luckily, my Rome hotel was already paid for, but I have no way of pre-booking another hotel. And heck, I admit that being confined to a hotel room with Clark Kent has its appeal. I don’t know what is tempting me to play with fire, but I have a feeling my boy scout won’t let a lady sit out in the cold.

“Well, it is high tourist season. Will the Planet reimburse our expenses? This isn’t exactly a Gazette story so — ”

I roll my eyes, knowing I’ll have to sweet talk Perry a bit. “It won’t be a problem,” I say confidently. “Let’s just hope we can get a hotel at all.”

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I always thought that taking a train across Europe would be a highly romantic experience. I never counted on the intrinsically slow nature of Italians, which apparently extends to their train system. We literally have been stopping every half hour for at least fifteen minutes at every stop. I look longingly at Clark, wanting desperately to ask him to whoosh us out of here and up into the skies towards Venice, but I know that is impossible.

But I can’t resist saying, “Why didn’t we just fly?”

I have the pleasure of seeing him squirm at this a second, and I try to hide my smile. What must it be like for him to be able to fly — and to have to hide it at every turn?

“It would have been much quicker to just hop on a plane,” I qualify, letting him off the hook.

“I hate planes… and besides, what better way to see the countryside?” Clark says, gesturing to the lush rolling Tuscan hills around us.

“I suppose so,” I answer, though the summer heat is making it difficult to appreciate the scenery around us. Italians apparently don’t believe in air conditioning or gratuitous use of deodorant, and the train car is stuffy and full of sweaty passengers. “I just hope Luthor doesn’t skip town before we can get there.”

*A strong, oily odor suddenly catches my nose, which is a difficult thing to do considering the odiferous confines of the train. I look at Clark, who wears an expression that tells me he has smelled it, too.*

*“That’s odd,” I say. “It smells like — ”*

*But before I can say anything further, Clark stands up and says to me, “I — need to find the restroom.”*

*He says it so panicky and moves so quickly towards the back of the train, that I am certain he is checking out the smell of burning oil. In this heat, I could easily imagine a fire breaking out on the train, and I know that Clark will somehow figure out how to stop it. I am tempted to follow him and see exactly what he does, but the ticket controller appears just as I am about to stand up.*

*“Biglietti, per favore,” he says, barely looking at me but writing something in his semi-official looking notebook.*

*“Just a sec,” I murmur in frustration, trying to keep an eye on where Clark is heading as I stand in my seat to dig through my purse for my ticket. Of course, I can’t find it there, so I look in my work bag. I at last pull it out and hand it to the grumpy ticket man.*

*Clark reappears a moment later, looking frantic and with a smudge of soot on his face. I look behind him and see a train technician waving at Clark to come back. The man’s face is wide with astonishment and maybe just a bit of fear, and I realize that*

*Clark has been caught doing something...super.*

*The man starts calling out in Italian and passengers around us suddenly take an interest in Clark and begin asking questions. The train worker is eagerly pushing towards us, and the excitement is growing in the train car as news of whatever Clark just did starts spreading.*

*Clark looks helplessly at me, but offers me his hand. "Do you trust me, Lois?"*

*I swallow, tamping down my excitement. I wonder if this is the moment I will finally learn the secrets of Clark Kent.*

*I eagerly reach for his hand and nod, "Of course, Clark. I trust you with my life."*

*That seems to be enough for him, as he nods curtly to me and I see his jaw clench in determination.*

*We stand up and his arm is suddenly wrapped tight around my waist. I think I hear him whisper, "Hold on," and we're suddenly out of there, up and over the train and into the skies...*

"Lois? ...Lois. Wake up, we're here."

Clark is standing above me, holding out his hand to help me out of my seat. I have a momentary flashback to the dream, but realize that's all it was — a dream.

I take his hand and he smiles at me. "I can't believe you slept most of the way."

"Well, I am saving up energy for Venice... I didn't say anything in my sleep, did I?" I ask, suddenly self-conscious.

"No, nothing you wouldn't say to my face, Lois," he answers with his charming smile. "Come on, we have our hotel to find."

The train station Santa Lucia is right on the edge of Venice. We step out and it's like we're suddenly in a postcard, complete with gondoliers and lush Italian villas all around us. The sun is warm and bright, making the lagoon waters that surround Venice look aquamarine. Clark leads me to the ferries that serve as trams around the city.

We are crammed together like sardines with other tourists who I assume are Venetians. As an old woman bumps me with her bag, I am tossed into Clark's chest. Finding close proximity to him more comfortable than rubbing elbows with nearby passengers, I linger there into an almost hug.

I feel his hand rest on the small of my back and feel my heart begin to palpitate at our nearness. I look over Clark's shoulder at the view around us and can't believe I'm standing in his arms in one of the most intriguing and beautiful cities in the world.

We get to our stop, just past the famous Rialto Bridge, a large white bridge with room for a tiny market on it. Clark pulls out a map, but looks perplexed.

"It can't be that hard, Clark. It's not rocket science! What street are we looking for?" I ask, snatching the map from him.

I have to admit, the map is an unhelpful tourist map, only laying out the important streets and attractions. Our hotel appears to be on a canal, which means we either have to swim, fly, or take a gondola. Since I have no inclination of getting into Venice's murky waters, and Clark has been reluctant to share his super powers with me, the expensive gondola ride is our only option.

"Gondola, anyone?" I turn to Clark with a smile.

"Those things are too overpriced — neither one of our papers would expense it. Let me see the map again."

He takes it back from me and I start to lose my patience. "How else can we get there?"

"Maps of Venice are notoriously inaccurate. There has never been an exact map of all of the streets in the city. Part of the charm is getting lost. Though I think we can get to our hotel this way..."

Clark takes my hand, pulling me through the labyrinth of streets, vaguely in the direction of our hotel. I'm fairly certain we've got turned around and are heading in the complete wrong direction, when at last we arrive at a street entrance to the hotel.

"Well, I'll be," I say in surprise. "Who knew you had an inner

compass?"

He seems to take that as the compliment it was. "I learned how to navigate directions in boy scouts."

I bet you did Mr. I-can-see-through-walls...

We arrive at last to our humble little room. And I mean little. There's only one queen size bed, and it takes up practically the whole space. I try not to think about sharing that bed with Clark, but move instead to look out the window. All I can see is the building across from us and hear the low swish of gondolas passing by in the canal below us from three stories below.

I turn back to Clark and he looks at me apologetically. "This was all I could find. I'll gladly sleep on the —" he looks around, noting that the only furniture in the room is an armoire, a small table and two chairs. "— the chairs. You can have the bed."

As generous as this offer is, it's totally impractical. The chairs are small and don't even have arms on them. I give him a pat on the shoulder, admiring his chivalry, as I laugh, "Clark, it's no big deal. I trust you. We'll share the bed."

I swear I see him gulp at this prospect and it makes me continue to giggle. Can Clark really be so innocent? All the more reason to understand his reluctance to share his secrets, I suppose, though I wish he would open up to me, even just a little.

"So, where do you think Luthor is hiding?" I ask, changing the subject from the awkward topic of the sleeping arrangements.

"Actually, he's not hiding. He's in plain sight," says Clark cryptically so I ask him to elaborate.

"I, uh, heard that he's hosting a masked ball this evening."

Sure he heard, I think to myself. Super-style probably.

"A masked ball? Wasn't Carnivale months ago?"

"Yeah, well, I guess it doesn't matter when you're a billionaire," Clark grumbled.

"I suppose... and how did you, um, hear about this party? We only just got to Venice."

"When we, you know... Checked in. I overheard someone mention it," he says quickly, and I swear he's turning red.

I know he's lying, though I nod. "Right... you overheard it..."

He looks at me oddly and I wonder if he knows I know... something about him. I put on a bland smile, covering the moment of awkward almost acknowledgement of his super skills. "Well, I guess that leaves us in need of a costume, right?" I say brightly.

Clark looks relieved and nods. "Yeah... so, let's go explore the city."

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Exploring the city is not as easy as it sounds. The canals make navigating where you want to go pretty tricky, unless there is a bridge nearby. After some strange turns and false starts, we end up on the main street with all of the tourists swarming around us. Admittedly, we are also tourists, but I like to try to blend in at least a little.

Clark and I have fun going in and out of various shops, trying on different masks. I try on a bright yellow one, but I feel like I look like a canary... or a chicken. Clark tries on several different ones, including a Harlequin patterned one and a hilarious mask with a long nose. We both have a laugh over that one.

At last, Clark picks up a black Zorro type mask, and I suddenly have an idea. What if Clark had a secret identity? Maybe he's been so reluctant to show anyone what he can do because he's afraid he would lose his private life, sort of like that dream I had on the train... But if he had a disguise, he could maintain his private life and still help people.

I smile and tell him the mask is a good choice, but turn away from him as I contemplate this — and my article. My article could do more damage than good if it's not handled properly. Maybe I should tell Clark that I know about him, that I want to help him. I don't even have to mention my article... He has so

much hero potential, yet he hides it deliberately.

Clark and I purchase our masks; mine a dark blue number with silver stars and silver and black streamers and Clark, his simple black Zorro mask.

As we walk back to our little hotel room, I grab on to Clark's arm. "So... do you like our masks? Do you think they'll get us in to Luthor's party?"

"If we're careful, I suppose so..."

I roll my eyes, "We don't need to be careful. We need to get in!"

"I have a feeling with you, that won't be a problem," he sighs and I can't help but laugh because he's right. I'm pretty good at getting in just about anywhere.

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Clark and I head out later that night to the Palazzo Dario, apparently a famous and cursed house in Venice, for the party.

"Why do people say it's cursed?" I ask as we leave the hotel, the desk clerk having mentioned this bit of lore when we asked for directions.

"Well, apparently, all of the owners of it have died. But it's beautiful and has a prominent place on the canal. And technically, Luthor doesn't own it; he's just borrowing it for the night," Clark explains as we find our way to the Grand Canal.

We cross a bridge and walk leisurely along the Grand Canal until we come to the Palazzo Dario. Three tiers of arched windows are the villa's prominent feature, and like quite a few buildings in Venice, the villa sort of lists slightly to one side. In fact, one can get seasick just walking around Venice, as water is constantly moving under and through the city and adjusting the foundations of buildings.

As we head in through the garden, Clark stops me and points to an engraving on the entranceway in Latin. "I think this may be the origin of the legend of the curse: *genio urbis Joannes Dario sub ruina insidiosa genero*. My Latin is a little rusty, but basically it means 'I see Joannes Dario in insidious ruin under this city.' Nice guy, whoever added that bit to the property."

Actually, it gives me the creeps. I grab onto Clark's hand and we head to the door where a line has formed for people to go in to Luthor's party.

A man is standing there in a Turkish outfit, checking names off his list.

"Clark, I don't think our masks are enough! We need to know who's on that list!" I whisper to him, but he seems to have it all under control.

"Shh, Lois... I am trying to —"

"Read lips?" I suggest for him helpfully, trying not to laugh, since he obviously has no better idea how to explain what he's actually doing.

Clark nods vaguely in answer and then tilts his head. Though the voices are low at the front of the door and even in front of us, I'm assuming Clark can somehow tune them in. I have to admit, he sure is a handy guy to have around in a pinch.

At last it's our turn to present ourselves to the Maitre D'. Clark gives him some Italian names and we are miraculously waved in.

I smirk a little, wanting to push the issue for him to tell me at last how exactly he does what he does, but our setting quickly distracts me. I've been to some fancy parties in Metropolis, but never have I seen such Old World decadence as this on display.

The ceilings are low and wooden, supported by alabaster columns. The yellow walls almost look golden in the wash of light from the chandeliers and nearby candles. I feel entirely out of my element, yet I'm enchanted by the soft colors and the sound of a string quartet playing in the other room. The windows are open, letting in a cool evening breeze from the canal. An elaborate dinner buffet is laid out in one corner of the room, manned by servants dressed in Turkish outfits.

"What's with all the turbans?" I ask Clark, who seems to be a natural fountain of knowledge when it comes to customs and history.

"The architecture is based on Turkish styles. Luthor must be keeping with that theme."

I nod, suddenly hearing a stir in the room. "Hey, I think our host is about to make his appearance."

Clark looks to where I'm pointing. We are on the far side of the room, so I tug him to follow me to get a better look at Luthor. I feel confident that he won't recognize me with my mask, though I wish I had gotten one like Clark's that ties around the back instead of carrying mine on a stick.

"Buena sera, amici!" says the Metropolis billionaire, who doesn't even bother wearing a mask to his own masked ball. "I'm so happy to be here in Venice with you all tonight. I missed out on Carnivale season and so, I thought we'd have a little of our own fun while I'm in town."

People all around us applaud. I think I spot some of the pilfered jewelry on Luthor, but I can't tell for sure. I pull Clark through the crowd to get a closer look. I notice a green gem stone that I think is the stone the opera singer in Rome mentioned. As we get closer, it suddenly glows brighter.

Clark trips at my side and I admonish him to be more careful. But when I turn to look at him, I notice he suddenly appears very ill.

"Lois... I... need to sit down," he says, unexpectedly leaning heavily on me. He starts to feel like a stone wall about to topple on my shoulder, so I do my best to quickly pull him over to a chair.

"Clark! What's wrong?" I ask frantically. For a guy with some kind of super powers, it seems terribly strange that he would just all of a sudden fall ill.

I feel his forehead, which though a little warm, seems nothing out of the ordinary. "I'll be right back," I say, stepping over a few feet to get him a glass of water.

I sit down next to him and hand him the glass. "Clark? What happened?"

"I — I don't know," he says, taking a sip. "I feel a little better..."

My attention is drawn back to the small dais where Luthor is standing, as he calls our collective interest to a coffer on the stage.

"Madame e uomini," he says, clasping his hands together. "I want to share with you a treasure. An American treasure that was brought here about twenty years ago. I've managed to convince the Lido family to part with it, and I intend to return it to Metropolis where it belongs."

I look anxiously back at Clark, who still looks a little pale, but seems to be doing a bit better. He looks worriedly at the box next to Luthor and I'm beginning to have a suspicion that something to do with Luthor's box is causing Clark's sudden illness.

Luthor laid his hand on the box in preparation of a big reveal. "Ladies and gentlemen, I present here, to this select group, a rock whose properties my scientists believe could be our next natural energy source!"

He opens the lid, revealing a large glowing green rock, and Clark suddenly collapses against me.

Luthor goes on about how the rock was previously undiscovered, and then on about some nonsense about how it has a radioactive property to it that would be perfect for clean energy, if only his team can locate the elusive mine where the rock came from. The audience is captivated by it and Mr. Luthor, but I am more concerned about how to help Clark.

I turn back to him, who even though sitting down, looks like he's struggling to stay upright.

"Clark! Clark!" I cry to him frantically in a low voice, trying

to shake him to focus on me and yet not draw attention from people nearby. “Look at me! What’s wrong?”

He starts sweating — something I’ve never seen him do! — and I worry that he is getting worse.

“Lois, you have to get me out of here... I’m... not well,” he says weakly, reaching for my hand.

“I can see that!” I say worriedly, getting more alarmed by the second. I stand him up, moving his arm so it’s wrapped around my shoulder. “Can you walk?”

He nods, and we start heading towards the balcony. Let me tell you, half-carrying a tall, superpowered man, is no easy task. It’s like he’s made of lead or something.

I move him to the far side of the room, where we can get on to the balcony that overlooks the river. I hope the fresh air will help him. I sit him down on a bench and kneel in front of him, reaching up to cup his face between my hands as I try to get him to look at me.

“What’s wrong, Clark! You have to tell me!” I say, searching his eyes.

I glance over his shoulder, and see the crowd in the room is still distracted by the glowing box of rock being discussed by Luthor. Essentially, we are alone, and as I look back at Clark, I suddenly feel the gulf between Clark and me because of his secret. I have no idea how to help him, and his stoic silence about what is wrong is sending me into a near panic.

The silence I have been keeping about what I know about him has finally gotten to me, and I feel the dam of tears start to break, worried over how to help him.

“Clark, listen to me. You can tell me what’s going on,” I begin. “I know you’re different... I — know that you’re — special. And I want to help... you have to tell me what’s wrong — ” I implore, tears beginning to clog my throat.

I look up at him, seeing the pain he’s in and how his eyes widen at my confession. “What do you know, Lois?” he asks raggedly.

“I just know that you can do things that no one else can. That — you can fly!” I say breathlessly, just saying it aloud feeling thrilling and terrifying at once. “You — you rescued my plane in Paris, didn’t you?”

He doesn’t answer, seeming to get weaker, but his head lolls to the side.

“Clark!” I cry in alarm, moving his head to look at me. “What is it that’s doing this to you?!” I blurt out in frustration.

“Lois — we have to get out of here — ” he murmurs and I nod, glad to have something to focus on, to do to help him. I wipe the tears from my eyes, and manage to swing Clark’s arm over my shoulders again.

We head back inside to the party with the intention of making a beeline to the door, when I hear a voice behind me say, “Is that Lois Lane of the Daily Planet crashing my party? Has the Planet finally found the resources to go international?” says the voice in a scoffing manner.

I freeze and manage to turn with a weakened Clark on my shoulder to face Lex Luthor. I realize I left my mask on the balcony, having been so concerned about getting Clark out of there.

“Sorry, Mr. Luthor, I couldn’t resist,” I say with a small forced smile. I hope that Luthor can’t see the tracks of my tears and doesn’t look too closely at Clark. His mask is all askew and nearly soaked through with sweat.

“My people have told me you’ve been hounding me for an interview for quite a while, Miss Lane. But sneaking into my party, all the way in Venice is a little extreme, even for you,” he says, tsk-ing at me in a condescending manner.

“Well, I, um, hope maybe we can have that interview?” I try to say gamely, though honestly my attention is much more focused on Clark, as he feels less and less stable at my side.

“What happened to your date, Miss Lane?” Luthor says, stepping towards us.

“Um, the lobster didn’t agree with him,” I say, making a move to swing Clark back towards the door. “We’ll just be leaving...”

As Luthor gets closer, Clark appears to get worse, and I notice Luthor’s green ring starts glowing. I suddenly get the connection and realize that the rocks Luthor has are poisonous to Clark!

I turn away from Luthor in the hopes that he’ll let our little intrusion pass and let me and Clark out of there with no trouble.

“Miss Lane, I would hate for word of my new energy source to hit the press before I’m ready. Can we agree that when I am ready that I will grant you the exclusive interview — but only if you don’t say a word about it beforehand?”

“Absolutely, Mr. Luthor,” I say, pleased to be offered an interview at last with the magnate, but nervous that Clark has all but collapsed on my shoulder.

Luthor steps closer to us, and pats Clark on the shoulder with his beringed hand, causing Clark to wince. “You should get dates made of stronger stuff, Miss Lane. Asabi will see you out.”

We get out of the house, and I help Clark make it over to a long stone bench in the garden. He’s still sweating a bit and breathing heavy. “Clark? You okay? Do — do you want to go to a hospital?” I ask, but as I pretty much expected, he shakes his head. Whatever his secrets are, I doubt he wants doctors prodding around them.

“No... no doctors. I’ll be... fine, I think.”

“Clark?” I say, still a bit frantic, as he won’t look me in the eye. I have no idea how that rock hurt him, but I’m worried it’s permanent or is somehow still affecting him.

“I just need a moment...” he says. I sit with him there, so many things unsaid between us. He knows I know now, and I’m terrified that as soon as he feels strong enough, he’ll disappear and never tell me the truth about himself. And I want to know not just because of my story, but because, well, I like Clark — a lot, if I’m honest. I can’t imagine what it must be like to carry the burden of his secret alone, but if he would trust me with it — well, hell, I may even kill the story, if he really wants me to! I just want him to be all right!

I sit with him on the bench, and he lies down, laying his head in my lap. I stroke his hair, taking off his mask and look down into his eyes, my own still wet with tears.

“Clark?” I ask quietly after a moment, “Do you have any idea what caused this?”

He shook his head, “I’ve never seen it before — Lois, I’ve never felt so weak, so — ill in my life.”

“Clark...” I begin brokenly. “Can you tell me... about — ?” But I can’t continue, unsure even how to phrase my question. I want to know where he got his powers, what all he can do, and why. Moreover, I want to know why he feels forced to hide it all.

He smiles weakly at me and reaches for my hand, laying it on his chest. “Lois, I’ve never told anyone about me...”

“Are you — a government experiment?” I ask and I’m relieved to see a smile on his face.

“No. No, I’m not. Honestly, I barely know myself how I do what I do.”

I puzzle over this a minute, carefully watching him. He’s breathing more normally and he’s stopped sweating, but he still seems pretty weak.

“Do you think it was that rock Luthor had?”

“I’m not sure, but I think it must be... All I know is that at the moment, I feel like I could barely hold a puppy, let alone an airplane...” he mutters.

I venture tentatively, “So it was you? In Paris?”

His eyes look up at me, the glare from the lights reflected on his glasses. I take them off, so I can see his eyes.

“It was you, wasn’t it?” I whisper, stroking his hair.  
 “Yeah, it was me,” he answers, his eyes not meeting mine, and with a tone of defeat in his voice.

He begins to sit up and I hand him back his glasses. “I... think I’ll be okay,” he says.

The air is still around us, and only the faint sound of music is heard coming from the house. I feel like there’s so much to say to him and I hope now he’ll answer some of my questions...

Story or no, I suddenly just want to help him, to understand him. “Let’s get back to the hotel and talk. What do you say?” I ask, and he takes my hand.

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Clark and I make it back to the hotel. He seems to get better by the moment, but he’s quiet. We don’t say a word until we reach the safety of our room.

“Clark? How do you feel?” I ask tentatively.

“Well, normal, I suppose,” he says with some confusion.

“Normal for you?” I prod.

“Well — ” he pauses a moment and pulls down the rim of his glasses, staring intently at one of our walls. Then his shoulders slump, defeated.

“What is it?” I ask, intrigued and hopeful that he’ll fill me in.

He looks at me a little embarrassedly and shrugs, “Well, normally, I can — see through things, like walls.”

So I was right!

“You can?” I say, trying not to give away that I already suspected as much. “What else can you do?”

“I — was born this way, sort of, with special abilities.” he admits. He turns to me, eyeing me carefully and I realize he’s trying to decide how much he can trust me with.

“Clark, I only want to help. To understand you,” I say, even as the article on my hard drive taunts me. What will it be, Lois? The man or the story?

His expression appears sad, and more than a little worried. “Lois, you have to understand that knowing my secret is dangerous. It’s why I — try not to stay in one place too long.”

He takes off his glasses, looking at them in his hands. “I became a reporter because it was the best way to be right on top of what’s going on in the world. I even thought of becoming a cop, but I couldn’t stomach the thought of ever having to use a gun. And I went international — ”

“ — because it was easier to stay hidden?” I suggest, and he nods.

I walk over and sit next to him, taking his hand. “Clark, what you can do — it’s amazing and — ” I hesitate.

“ — newsworthy?” he says derisively, and I cringe.

“It is — but, Clark — I promise. I won’t say anything until you’re ready,” I say, realizing that I only hope I can keep my promise. Perry is going to want to know the scoop on Clark, and the story on my computer makes me sound like a hypocrite.

“Ready?” Clark scoffs fearfully. “Lois, no one can know my story. Ever. It’s too dangerous. For my parents. And now for you.”

I see his Zorro mask on the coffee table and I reach over to pick it up. “Have you ever thought of a disguise?” I say, voicing my idea from earlier.

He shudders, “What? Like some comic book figure? No thank you!”

“But wait, Clark, think about it a second,” I say, warming to my topic. “If you had a disguise, then maybe you could stop running, settle down somewhere and have a normal life.”

He takes the mask from my hands, contemplating it. “I don’t know... I’ve hidden for most of my life. I can’t imagine stepping into the spotlight as some dressed up superhero... And besides, I first have to get my powers back...”

“Do you feel any better?” I ask with concern.

“Yeah, just like a normal guy,” he says, shrugging sheepishly.

He sits on the bed, playing with the mask and his glasses, and I can tell he simply has no desire to discuss this further with me.

I sigh and move towards getting out my pajamas. “Look, why don’t you get some sleep. Maybe you’ll feel better in the morning.”

He looks up at me with a lopsided grin. “So, I guess that means we share the bed?”

I’m relieved to see him teasing me, giving me hope that he isn’t entirely defeated. I give him a playful smile. “Sure. Just don’t try any funny business, mister!” I say teasingly, and head to the bathroom to put on my pajamas.

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I look at myself in the mirror, thinking about what Clark had told me — or didn’t tell me. He still is secretive about how he got his abilities, and it seems that that secretiveness is stemming from a desire to protect his parents.

My stomach is in knots, thinking about what I’ve told Perry and what’s on my laptop. Can I brush it all off? Could I erase the story and tell Perry that I was wrong? Clark is such a nice guy — no matter how big a story he is — and I can’t just out him for the sake of a headline. Especially now that I know there is something out there that can hurt him. At the same time, I don’t like him skulking about in the shadows either. He has true hero potential, if he could just find a way to use his abilities and still have a private life as Clark Kent.

I’m contemplating this as I head back into the room. Clark is on his side, his eyes closed, but I’m fairly certain he’s just pretending he’s asleep.

I get in bed next to him and turn off my lamp. I resist the urge to reach out to him, to hold him. He seems so lost and alone in the world.

I lie awake restless, feeling guilty about my article. Maybe I don’t have a right to publish it, at least not until Clark is ready. I’m torn, honestly. Because I feel like if he could get a little nudge, he wouldn’t be so afraid of the spotlight. But if I print the story without him knowing, I will have betrayed his trust. I know all too well what that feels like, and I never want to cause him that kind of pain.

I’m suddenly itching to get on my laptop. I glance at the clock and see that almost twenty minutes have passed since I crawled into bed. Maybe Clark really is asleep and he won’t notice if I work on my computer.

I get out of bed in the dark, and go over to my laptop on the desk. I know the light will be bright when I turn it on, but hopefully it won’t wake Clark. And if it does, I can just tell him I’m working on a follow-up story about the strange rock we saw tonight.

I open the password-locked file and repress a sigh. This article has Pulitzer written all over it — but I simply won’t use it to destroy Clark.

I start hitting the delete key, backing up over the part that hints at C. K., the travel journalist extraordinaire being the man behind the superpowers. I read through it again, debating whether I should just delete the whole file or keep it hidden on my computer. If I ever do convince Clark to step into the spotlight —

“Hey, whatcha doing?”

Clark is suddenly in front of me and I jump, thinking he was tucked safely away in bed. I panic and hit another button, trying to close the file. But instead, I see a bar flash up on the screen that reads ‘sending.’ My story, about a super powered man who rescued a plane out of the air and saved a burning metro car, is being sent to Perry’s computer! And I can’t stop it!

“No, no, no!” I say helplessly to my screen.

“What’s the matter?” Clark asks, coming around to look at my computer screen.

“Um, nothing... just a — computer glitch,” I stall, in a panic. Can I call Perry and tell him to ignore the story? Oh, God, I know

that won't work — he's going to want more details, a picture — he's going to want to print it!

I feel sick to my stomach. I've done it. I've betrayed Clark. He'll leave me, like all the others, and this time it will be entirely my fault.

"Lois? What's the matter?" he asks, coming to stand by my shoulder as I helplessly try to cover the screen with my fingers.

"Um, it was a story about the rock we saw tonight. I didn't mean for it to be sent yet. But... I can't stop it," I stammer powerlessly.

"Was it incomplete?"

"The important parts are there... but... Clark, I have to call Perry. Now. It's imperative," I blabber, beyond panicking.

The file finishes being sent, revealing my story again on the screen. My fingers can't cover it enough and Clark gently removes them from the screen. He reads it over my shoulder and I just want to crawl up on the floor and die.

"I'm so sorry, Clark," I say earnestly, feeling tears start to form, though I try to hold them back. "I didn't mean for it to happen this way."

I can't turn to look at him, but I can feel that he is suddenly closed off to me. Whatever connection I had felt with him is gone — destroyed by my own careless ambition.

"I should have realized you had put the pieces together sooner," he begins quietly. I hear pain in his voice — the pain of betrayal. "That was why you came to Rome, isn't it? That photo you had... you knew — you knew it was me then?" he asks calmly, though with a chill to his tone that frightens me.

I force myself to turn and look at him. "Clark — please, you have to understand! It started out as a story, yes — but —"

"But what, Lois? You needed a story and I was the perfect candidate. I understand. You wanted to get back on top and you had to use anyone you could to get there," he says bitterly, each word stabbing a wound deeper into my heart. It hurts so much because it's true.

"I was erasing it! I meant to erase it — and I hit the wrong button! It was all a mistake, Clark!"

"Yes, it was. I should never have trusted you, Lois," he says, reaching for his coat. I step over to him to stop him.

"Please, don't go! I'm going to call Perry and kill the story! I swear! You have come to mean much more to me than a story! I'm so sorry, Clark!"

"I have to go," he mutters, stepping around me towards the door.

I feel desperate, so scared that he will walk out of my life forever. I have to make him understand!

"Clark, please! Don't you see? What else should I have done! I saw you save our plane! Of course it was a story! A huge story!" I cry desperately. "And I only made the connection that it was you when I saw you in the Paris Métro! That was after we met! I didn't know what to do! I —"

He points an accusatory finger at my word processor, his voice shaking as he speaks, "You've had that story on your computer longer than that. If you — if you cared at all, you would have killed the story when we were still in Paris, Lois. You followed me to Rome for the story!"

I feel defeated, knowing he's right. I only had the story on my mind at that point. It wasn't until the other night, when we kissed and shared the opera together that I realized that I was falling for him.

"Clark, please! I will do everything I can to kill the story — but if Perry insists on publishing it —" I take a deep breath. I know how this will sound, but I think it could be the only option — and the only chance I may have of seeing him again. "I can tell your story how you want it to be told, Clark. I'm sorry to have — betrayed you like this, but please, if it goes to print, let me help."

"Right, so you can go win your Pulitzer?" he says sarcastically, cutting me to the quick. "I'm sorry, Lois, but it's over. Whatever it was... Good-bye," Clark, full of hurt, moves to the door as he speaks, slamming it behind him.

I crumple to the floor, feeling more devastated than I have at any point in my life. I blew it, in so many ways. Clark could have been The One, and I was too blinded by my own pain and circumstance to see it.

And I may have just lost him forever.

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Tears stream down my face as I struggle to stand up, shaken. I walk over to the phone, my nerves making my struggle with the dialing codes and Italian operators worse than normal, but at last I make a connection through to the Planet.

"It's Lois Lane. I need to speak to Perry White immediately!" I say forcefully, wiping the tears off my cheeks with a tissue.

I'm put on hold for a moment, but then the connection is lost. In frustration I slam down the phone again and redial, with a little more success this time.

"I was disconnected. Lois Lane for Perry White. Please hurry!" I say to the Daily Planet operator in near panic. All I can think of is Clark leaving, to go God knows where, never to be seen or heard from again. At least not by me. I've lost him! I've lost him forever!

"Lois?"

"Hi, Perry. Yes, it's me. Did you just get my article?" I ask frantically, hearing the strain in my voice.

"I sure did, but Lois, honey, it's a little far-fetched don't you think? I mean, I know you were almost in a plane crash, and we heard about the fire in the metro. These incidents obviously happened — They have even baffled experts on both sides of the ocean... But Lois, I simply can't print it as is."

Relief fills me and I close my eyes, blessing Perry for having a cool head. I guess it's true that he didn't become editor of a major metropolitan newspaper because he can yodel. It takes me a moment to come back to the conversation as I struggle to calm down, and I ask Perry to repeat what he said.

"It could be a story — there's obviously something going on over there, but Lois. I need more proof. Now, what have you got on this Kent fellow you've been writing with? You said something about a story there?"

I quickly gather my thoughts, as I have to make sure that no matter what, Perry does not make the connection between my story and Clark Kent. "It was nothing... just my overzealous reporter's instincts kicking in," I laugh nervously into the phone. Tears constrict my throat as I think of Clark. I have no idea if I'll ever see him again. I almost mention Clark's desire to someday work at the Planet to Perry, but my doubt of ever seeing him again stops me. I don't know if he'd even accept an offer to work at the Planet now.

"Lois, from the first day you came into my office I knew you had a good nose for a story. Now you've got two leads that haven't amounted to a hill of beans. Is everything all right?"

The concern I hear in Perry's voice is almost my undoing. But I have to pull it together and let him know that I still have what it takes to be his top reporter. Lois Lane may be down, but she's certainly not out.

"That jewel heist story I sent the other day — I have a follow-up on that," I say quickly, reminding him. I suddenly get a little excited again as I think back to the party. I was so distracted with Clark's reaction to the rock that I had almost forgotten about Luthor! "Get this... I got into a party tonight and none other than Lex Luthor was the host! He's peddling this green mineral he found as the next clean energy source. But I'm not so sure about how he wants to use it. He wanted it hush-hush, which seems a little suspicious to me."

"Luthor, huh? Didn't you tell me a few months ago you

thought he might not be all that he appears?”

“Exactly... so... I will do a follow-up on that.”

“Sounds good. Keep me posted, Lois. And stay out of trouble!”

“Thanks, Chief,” I say affectionately and hang up the phone.

I sit quietly for a moment, thankful that I at least know that the story won't go to print. But I still lost Clark. I don't know if I'll ever see him again, but at least his secret will be safe.

I sigh, looking out the window, up at the moonlit sky. An incredible loneliness sweeps over me as I realize I'm back to square one.

Only now, my heart isn't just broken... it's shattered.

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I don't know how long I sat on the floor wallowing in self-pity, but when I look up again I see that it's almost one in the morning. I should feel some measure of relief that the story won't go to print, only all I can picture is the hurt look on Clark's face when he left the hotel.

I lie down in bed and close my eyes, and still see it. I had put the story before the man and even though I realized it, it was still too late to keep from losing him.

I turn over on my pillow, trying to get comfortable but it's no use. I'm exhausted, but can't fall asleep. All I can feel is the empty heartache, knowing that Clark is gone for good.

I glance at my clock and see it's after 2 AM... I'll never get any sleep now.

As I toss and turn in bed, my thoughts go back to the party this evening, and the rock that had hurt Clark. What exactly was Lex Luthor doing with it? And why would he want to use it for energy when it obviously has properties that affect some people? Granted, Clark is a special case, but still — that rock seems to have dangerous powers that can't necessarily be good for the environment.

In frustration, I kick off the covers. I can't do anything about getting Clark back, but maybe I can help him in some small way by somehow stopping Luthor from using that rock in his new pet project. It at least gives me something to do — and may keep me from going crazy over how to win Clark's trust back... if I ever see him again.

I get dressed and head out into the quiet streets of Venice. The narrow alleys and passages are all well-lit, but oddly empty. I'm so used to Metropolis where there are always people in the streets at all hours of the day and night, that this emptiness creeps me out a bit. I don't have Clark's sense of direction, but luckily there are signs that point to the main streets and to the main canal. I decide to head to the Grand Canal, mainly so I can more easily find my way back to Luthor's villa, but also to get out of the deserted streets.

A few blocks from the villa, I hear what sounds like a fistfight coming from straight ahead. I'd rather not venture into the lonely back streets of the city, so instead, I make my way closer to where they are fighting. I stick to the shadows so I won't be seen or heard. Two men are standing in a small square, throwing punches at a third man. I mostly see only shadows, as there is only one streetlamp in the far corner of the square. I hope I can sneak by without them noticing me, so intent are they on pummeling their victim.

“Where's Lois Lane? We know you were with her tonight,” I hear, and stop in my tracks. I back up into one corner the square, crouching by an ancient well, and focus all my attention on what's going on. Cold realization knifes through me. They have Clark!

“Mr. Luthor doesn't take kindly to reporters snooping around in his business. We want to know what she told you. If she prints what she saw tonight —” said the man ominously.

“I told you... I don't know anything,” Clark says weakly and I feel surprise and gratitude that he is trying to protect me,

especially after what I did.

The men punch him again, and I hope that Clark will somehow regain his strength quickly to fend them off. He throws a couple of good punches, but I wince as one fist locks with his jaw. I watch from the shadows, tempted to even up the odds in Clark's favor a bit, but suddenly I see another figure step out of the shadows that stops me from making my presence known. It's Lex Luthor. His green gemstone ring blinks wickedly in the yellow streetlight.

“Gentlemen, we'll find Miss Lane. This one is obviously no more use to us. Get rid of him,” he says in a chilling voice that at once confirms my suspicions about the billionaire's character.

Clark, who now is lying on his side, bleeding and out of breath, seems relieved they have stopped. Yet I see the two goons come up behind him a few seconds later with a rope and tie his hands behind his back and his feet. What are they going to do to him? I am prepared to follow wherever they take him, yet I watch in horror as the two goons lift Clark and swing him into the canal!

Clark's name comes out of my mouth in a gasp. The goons quickly leave with Luthor and I rush to the side of the canal. The water is murky and God knows how deep, yet I can see air bubbles coming to the surface.

I look around, looking for something or someone to help. There is no one, and Clark's only chance is me! I kick off my tennis shoes and squeeze my eyes shut, trying not to think of the scariness of diving in such stagnant city waters. Instead, I think of Clark, who has been selflessly saving people for who knows how long. I think of Clark, giving me the best kiss of my life after the opera. I think of how I've come to quickly rely on his companionship — and how quickly I shattered his trust with my story.

I dive in; the waters are much colder than I expected. I feel around in the dark, trying to locate him with my both my hands and feet. I can't find him. I come back up for air in frustration and try to see if the lights of the city can help me out at all. Not seeing anything below the surface, I take another deep breath, thanking my parents for scuba lessons when I was fifteen. I dive back in, reaching as low as I can.

I open my eyes under water for a mere second, catching at last a glimpse of Clark's white shirt. My lungs are burning for air, though I reach one inch further and grab onto his shirt. He's heavy as a stone, but he seems cognizant as I feel his arm reach for my hand. I pull, and I feel him struggle. I can't hold my breath any longer though, and quickly go up to the surface for more air.

He's still down there, alive, and struggling! I take another breath, determined that I will get him in the next dive. He seems ready for me this time, as he grabs onto me when I reach him. But he pulls us both down lower. I start struggling, wondering what's happening. But just as quickly, we're rocketing to the surface, up and out of the water, and land, side by side on the sidewalk of the canal.

I cough water out of my lungs and turn to Clark. He's lying on his back, his glasses gone, and his eyes closed. His hands are unbound, but his feet are still tied. I reach over and untie them, then move to check his vitals.

“Clark!” I cry fearfully, and roll him over to put my ear to his chest. My body feels heavy from the strain of diving in the cold waters, and I'm shivering, but I can't worry about that yet. I need to make sure Clark is all right.

As I lean on his chest, I realize he's not breathing! I put my ear to his chest, desperate to hear a heartbeat. I know he somehow jumped or flew us out of the water, so I know he's alive, but I don't know by how much. I start pumping on his chest, like I've seen medics do. I don't have any actual CPR training, and I hope that whatever makes him super will help him

survive me pounding on his chest. I plug his nose and blow into his mouth, resuming pumping on his chest at where I hope is the right spot. At last, he gasps and turns on his side, coughing up whatever water is in his lungs.

“Clark!” I say through tears, throwing my arms around him. “You made it!”

His arm comes around me and we both sit up, waterlogged, cold, and bedraggled. We look out at the dark canal for a long moment, contemplating what had just happened.

“You — you saved me, Lois,” he says with incredulity, his voice thick from the waters or tears. I can’t tell which.

“Of course I did. Clark, I’m so sorry — I — ” I can’t get out anything more coherent after that, as I suddenly fall into helpless sobs. “I never meant to — hurt you, Clark. I was so blind — stupid — Claude made me so angry — I — ” I went on and on, blubbering like a baby. But I had to pull myself together; he had to know that I had talked to Perry, that his secret wouldn’t be revealed.

“Clark — I killed the story. Or rather, Perry killed it,” I admit. “He said there wasn’t enough evidence in the article and he’s right. You don’t have to worry, Clark. No one will know about you, unless you want them to know. I’m so sorry... so sorry, Clark,” I say, my eyes grimy with the water from the canal and my own salty tears. It wasn’t until after I stopped talking that I realized Clark had managed to pull me into his arms at some point.

“It’s okay. It will be okay,” he murmurs in my ear, an undeserving balm to my betrayal.

We are quiet a moment, until Clark breaks the silence, his voice distant and sad, “I — almost let them kill me, Lois. Or at least I didn’t stop them from doing their worst,” he says and I look at him in shock.

“Why would you do such a thing?” I ask in horror, cupping his cheek to bring his face around to mine.

“I thought — it’s all over. My secret. I thought... that you didn’t really care about me. When they threw me in the canal and I got away from that ring Luthor wore, I finally thought of my parents. That’s when I started to try and get out of the ropes. I thought I had to get back to them and protect them from the fallout of your article... And then I would disappear...” He turns to me, his eyes full of a cautious gratitude, “But it wasn’t until I saw you diving into those waters to save me that I began to hope again.”

I reach around and hug him again. “Look, I know we’ve only known each other a few days... but Clark — I wouldn’t dive into those icky waters for just anybody,” I say, my voice trembling between laughter and tears. “I am so sorry that I betrayed you. I did get caught up in my own story — but you” — I sigh, shaken by the emotion of the night. “You took my breath away and I just didn’t know how to handle it.”

My arms wrap around his neck and we lean in, forehead to forehead. “I don’t know where we go from here. But — can you give me a second chance?” I ask tentatively, looking into his soft brown eyes for any sign that he can forgive me.

He suddenly leans in further, and our lips meet. Passion and relief soar through my core, and I feel like I can’t get enough of him. Our kiss grows deeper and more ardent, as his fears and my insecurities melt away in the wave of a burgeoning love that washes over us. I realize how deep I’ve fallen for him — I’m terrified, yet I trust it, as I trust him. His arms wrap tighter around me, and my fingers feel the corded muscles of his neck, his whole being welcoming me home.

Clark manages to stand up, carrying me in his arms as he makes our way back to the hotel.

My tears continue to fall, as I feel my heart at last letting him in and acknowledging the things I did wrong. Despite my mistakes and despite his weakness, Clark is still strong enough to

carry me — and all of my baggage.

And all I want is to help him carry his.

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I start shivering the moment we step into the hotel. The waters were much colder than I had expected, though Clark seems to be doing fine.

We say little to each other on the way back, though I think an unspoken understanding lies between us now. I know he tried to protect me from Lex’s goons, and he knows that I risked my life to save his. It doesn’t make up for what I did, but I hope it’s a start, a bridge to earning back his trust.

I quietly excuse myself to the bathroom and take a hot shower. More tears spring to my eyes, and I’m not at all certain why. I guess I was so afraid I had lost Clark because of that stupid article, and then I almost really lost him! But he’s here, safe and sound, and I can only hope that he will let me help him now.

When I come back in the room, Clark passes by me with a small smile and goes to take his own shower. There is a tension in the room that feels unresolved, and I know Clark is still worried about something. I brush out my hair and put on my pajamas, waiting for him to return to the little room.

He comes in a few moments later, wearing sleep pants and a black t-shirt. My mouth waters just looking at him; he is a beautiful man, but I’m also learning he has a gracious heart. I sit down next to him on the bed and touch his shoulder. “What is it, Clark?”

“Lois, even though your article wasn’t printed — it’s still out there, in your editor’s hands. I read it, and though the trail doesn’t lead directly back to me,” he sighs heavily and I feel the burden of my actions weigh on my shoulders. “I just worry what would happen if the truth ever did get out. I worry about my parents. What would happen to them...”

“Why? Because they have a hero for a son?” I say encouragingly, still not understanding his desire to hide from the world. “Clark — I would think they would be proud of you, for stepping into the spotlight — ”

He pulls away from me, and walks over to the window, shoving his hands in his pockets. “Lois, you don’t understand... I am not some government experiment — I — ” he looks at me expectantly, yet holds back. “I can’t tell you.”

I wince at this, wanting more than anything for him to trust me again. “Clark, I won’t say anything unless you want me to, I promise. Clark, I want to know about you, because I want to know you. Not for a story, just because — you’re the greatest guy I’ve ever met,” I say simply, my heart on my sleeve. He’s already exposed his weak points to me, the least I can do is try to be honest with him from here on out.

He runs his hand through his hair and glances at the clock.

“I can’t explain everything here, Lois... and not now... I feel better, like the effects of that rock may not be permanent, but — can you just let it all drop for now?”

He looks so tired and uncertain. I nod and make my way over to my side of the bed.

I get under the covers and turn to face him. His eyes watch me. I can see affection in them, but also wariness. I think he wants to believe in me, but I have hurt him. I’m exhausted and more tears come to my own eyes, so emotionally spent. Clark reaches to turn out the light and then quietly whispers, “Come here.”

I gladly move into his embrace, a situation that only a few hours ago I thought would be impossible. I don’t know what it is that draws us to each other, but it’s stronger than anything I’ve ever experienced. The hard-bitten reporter in me is mute with awe; she would have never expected this turn of events.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper, barely even realizing I’m saying it until I feel the gentle squeeze of Clark’s arms in response.

I still feel so cold from the water, but I realize that I would do it again in a heartbeat if it meant having this moment with Clark. The feelings I have for him terrify me — because even though I trust him implicitly, I worry that he feels he might never be able to trust me again.

“You’re shivering, Lois,” he says with gentle alarm in my ear.

He rubs his hand up and down my arms, starting a different kind of shiver in my body. I sink deeper into his arms and I begin to feel a little warmer. There’s no demand from him, as I would expect from other men. There’s only comfortable rightness, a sense of peace, despite all of the questions and doubts between us. We lay like this for what seems forever, or maybe it is just for a moment.

But the security and consolation I find here, in Clark’s arms, I want to hold onto forever.

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I wake up to warm sunshine on my face. I reach across the bed, but Clark isn’t there. Panic hits me a moment until I open my eyes fully and see him by the window looking out at the canal. The sun is shining on his perfect bare chest, and I relive a delicious memory of pillowing myself on that bit of perfection last night.

I suddenly sneeze and shiver a bit, realizing I must have caught a cold during our watery excursion.

My sneeze catches Clark’s attention. “Bless you,” he says, handing me a tissue.

“Thanks,” I say, taking it.

I lay back in the bed, my head starting to pound. I feel a bit miserable actually... which makes me ask, “How do you feel?”

He looks at me with a boyish smile, his hands on his hips. “Actually, I feel — super.”

“Does that mean you have your powers back?”

He nods. “Yeah, I do... But Lois, you — you don’t look so well,” he says in some sympathy.

“I’m freezing,” I say, secretly hoping he’ll come back to bed and warm me up.

“I can help with that,” he answers with a grin that tells me he gets my drift.

But instead of crawling into bed with me as I expect, he stands over me and asks me to lie still. Puzzled, but game to whatever he has planned, I wait a moment, watching him. He seems a little hesitant, embarrassed even, when suddenly, the comforter feels warm and toasty. I look questioningly at him.

He points to his eyes, giving me a shy smile. “Heat vision.”

“Really,” I say in awe, naughtily thinking of how that little trick could be used in other ways...

He brushes it off with a shrug before I can question it further. I’m glad he feels like he can trust me with showing me his special skill, yet I can tell he’s not ready to explain it all to me yet. “Look, you need to rest... But we can’t stay here in Venice. Luthor is looking for you. I thought we might go to the Mediterranean for a bit.”

“I really don’t want another train ride, Clark. And getting on a plane when you’re sick —” I complain, already even dreading moving from this lovely toasted comforter.

He looks at me like he’s cooking up a plot and I’m suddenly intrigued. “What is it?” I ask, loving that he looks so playful.

“Well, how would you feel... about flying — with me?”

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Clark and I stand in the tiny alley behind the hotel. The roofs are so dense in this part of Venice that it would be highly unlikely that anyone will see us taking off. Our bags are packed and he tells me to wait a moment. In a swoosh of air the bags are gone and so is Clark. I look up in the sky, but all I see is the glare of the sun, and maybe a speck of something that could be Clark, but anyone just looking up would think it’s a very large bird... or a very tiny plane. I’m not left to wait for him for long, though, and

within moments, Clark is back by my side.

I feel my heart beat with anticipation. I don’t care if I have a slight cold. All I can focus on is being seconds away from flying in the arms of the man of my dreams. The man of my most impossible, improbable, out there dreams!

He scoops me up in his arms, my legs dangling over his left arm, as his right cradles my back. I wrap my arms around his neck, breathing in his clean shirt and his own particular scent that makes my toes curl.

He whispers, “Ready?” I nod, excitement pouring through my veins. We suddenly move straight up and above Venice, the rooftops looking like a patchwork quilt of browns below us. I hold on tighter to Clark as we sweep towards the Mediterranean, my heart in my throat at the view, and overwhelmed by the amazing man who has stolen my heart.

We fly over the Tuscan hills of Italy, rolling green hills peppered with tall spiky trees, peculiar to the area. It’s not long before we see the Mediterranean Sea itself, spread out in all of its glory below us. This far north, the sea is a crystalline aquamarine that changes in the light between green and cobalt blue. We sweep past Nice and Monte Carlo, shimmering jewel-like cities on the coast.

But the scenery only holds my attention part of the time. Because flying with Clark Kent is... wow. I thought I loved flying before, but this trip is spoiling me for any future travels in an airplane. Give me CK-Express, all the way!

Soon we slow down and I ask Clark where we are.

“Marseilles. It’s the oldest port town in France.”

As we come into land on a hillside, the afternoon sun shines golden on the mauve, pink, and sandstone city. The hundreds of sailboats in the harbor are surrounded by the city itself, a haven for sailors for centuries.

When we finally touch ground, I’m reluctant to leave Clark’s arms. I cling to his neck. Wanting to show him in some way what he just shared means to me, I smile and kiss him chastely on the cheek. “That was... wow,” I say stupidly, hearing how lame it sounds even to my ears. But the wordsmith in me is simply too gob-smacked to come out with anything more coherent.

He smiles charmingly in return and gently sets my feet on the earth. I’m a little unsteady and I hold on to his arm a moment longer.

“It’s all right, Lois. You can lean on me,” he says gallantly, and I take his arm as we turn towards the city.

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We wander aimlessly through Marseilles for the rest of the afternoon, trying to put both my mistake and Clark’s secret out of our minds. I think we both realize that we need some time just getting to know each other. As much as I don’t want to jump into a relationship and while I’m sure Clark is trying to figure out just how much he can trust me, there is definitely something between us that can’t be ignored. But nothing is going to move forward until we can be completely honest with each other. Even I — the queen of federal disaster relationships — can admit that. As for Clark, I think he’s been alone for such a long time, that he has no idea how to open up about himself — or at least open up about his super side.

Throughout the afternoon, he avoids any reference to what happened at Luthor’s party or with my article, and instead regales me with stories of growing up on a farm. Before meeting Clark, I would have chalked up this topic to being an automatic snooze fest. However, I find his quaint life in Smallville surprisingly endearing. He tells me about his parents, who sound kind and supportive — the very opposite of my dysfunctional family. And although his parents seemed to be the ones to instill in him a sense of responsibility about his powers, they also raised him with an underlying fear. And while I give the Kents kudos for raising such an amazing son, I want more than anything to take

the fear about sharing his powers away from him. I wish I knew what the key was to getting him to step out of the shadows and into the light. The world needs a hero like Clark Kent.

“Tell me about yourself, Lois,” he asks me now, having told me everything fit to print about the Kents and his life in Smallville.

“Well, I grew up in Metropolis... I have a younger sister, Lucy... and I went to Met U for journalism. As for all the details in between —” I hesitate. Not because I don’t want him to know more about me, but I’m afraid that he just won’t understand. That compared to his perfect childhood in Smallville, I’ll look sad and pathetic, and I don’t wear those attributes well.

“Lois, you can tell me. No judgment. Honest,” he smiles and squeezes my hand gently.

“Well, my ‘home’ — if you can call it that — was not full of farm chores and home cooked meals around the dinner table, talking about your day,” I begin, the coziness of the Kent farm still fresh in my mind from Clark’s description. “At my house, Mother would often be sitting in the lounge chair getting drunk, while Daddy burned steaks on the barbeque, trying to explain why he was kissing Mrs. Belcanto in the church parking lot...” I say in a painful rush, thinking back to those strained years of my youth before my parents finally gave up the pretense and got a divorce.

“Oh, Lois... I’m so sorry,” Clark responds, his tone sincere. Usually when I admit to guys about my family’s sordid past, they are either turned off entirely or full of pity. I don’t sense that Clark pities me, just that he understands and accepts me.

His open heart prompts me to go on, telling Clark more about myself than I have ever told anyone. “‘Trust’ was never in my family’s vocabulary. So I sort of grew up assuming everyone had a secret, which is what lead me to journalism. I wanted to uncover the truth and deliver justice in a way that had always been denied to me,” I admit bluntly.

But seeing the look of almost horror on Clark’s face I try to explain why it’s different with him. “But Clark, since I’ve met you, I’ve realized that sometimes a secret can be a necessary thing, even if it doesn’t make sense,” my tone softens as I stop in the street and turn to face him. “You know, you were right before. I had been only after your story, your secret because I thought as a journalist, the world has a right to know — but the more I’ve gotten to know you, the more I realize that sometimes it’s not uncovering the hidden secret that matters. It’s getting to know who a person is because you like that person, even when they have a secret. Clark, there’s something about you that just makes sense to me. So I’m willing to trust that you have a secret for a reason, and I promise I won’t pry,” I finish, looking up at him earnestly.

Clark cups my cheek in his hand, his soft brown eyes searching mine. I feel so vulnerable and yet entirely safe when he looks at me like that.

“Thanks, Lois,” he says softly. “I promise, when I’m ready — you’ll know all of my secrets,” he assures me as we resume our walk.

I ruminate over this a moment, still frustrated that he won’t fill me in on details about himself just yet, so I try another tactic. “Why did you leave, though? If Smallville was so wonderful, why get a job with the faraway Borneo Gazette?” I can’t help probing. “Call it the reporter in me, but I really want to know,” I jab his arm playfully.

He lets out a big puff of air as if preparing himself for something and pulls us off the main street so we can talk in semi-privacy. “Lois, you know some of the things I can do —” Some? What else can he do? “People in small towns talk. I left before people could get suspicious of me or my parents. And besides, I do feel it’s my obligation to help where I can. Only it gets complicated — especially when I get nosy reporters on my trail,”

he says crossing his arms, though his playful tone belies the sharp words.

“I guess I deserved that,” I mutter.

He punctuates his statements with hand gestures. “But you do see my point? Lois, I’m willing to forgive you because I do know what it’s like to be a reporter and to feel the need to chase down a story.” He looks at me earnestly, moving closer to me. “But, can you understand why I don’t want mine splashed all over the news?”

“But Clark, that’s my point! It doesn’t have to be Clark Kent’s name in the headline. I keep telling you that you need a disguise — then you could have a private life and maybe —” I stop myself, unable to say what I really want to say.

“And maybe what, Lois?” he asks softly, and I wonder if mind reading is one of his super skills.

I glance away from him, totally undone by the look of encouragement in his soft brown eyes. “And maybe you could settle down... in Metropolis. Look, I’m sure Perry would hire you,” I assure him, meanwhile mentally backpedaling on how I could introduce Clark to Perry without raising my editor’s suspicions about what Clark really can do.

“It sounds like a dream, Lois. But I need to be out there, helping people where and when I can. And trust me, it’s better if I keep moving from place to place. Even if I find a place where I’d rather be...”

He looks so sad and lonely when he says this, yet I don’t see why he won’t give my idea a try. I’m so sure Clark could pull off wearing a costume and keep his personal life... Besides, with that body in spandex, who would be looking at his face?

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“How about a trip over to Chateau D’If?” Clark suggests a little later after walking around the harbor.

“Okay... what is it exactly?” I ask, as usual, completely oblivious to many of the historical landmarks in the cities I visit.

“It used to be a prison. It was also the inspiration for ‘The Count of Monte Cristo,’ after an infamous prison break,” he says, but I look at him blankly.

“Is that like the Three Musketeers?” I ask, trying to catch the reference.

He nods with an indulgent smile in my direction. “Close. At least written by the same guy.”

Clark must see my slightly lost expression because he quickly adds, “But I also hear there are great views of the Mediterranean from there.”

“Better than from above it?” I half-whisper with a giggle. “I don’t think anything will top that, Clark. Ever.”

He looks at me with a pleased smile and then leads us over to the ticket counter for the boat trip to the chateau.

The hum of the motor makes it difficult to talk as we cross the inlet, but I enjoy the trek all the same. I love the wind in my hair and the crisp smell of the sea, as it reminds me of my earlier flight in Clark’s arms. Speaking of Clark, he comes up behind me, wrapping his arm loosely around my waist. We look out across the horizon, admiring the deep blue of the water and the contrasting jagged sandstone cliffs that make up the island where the chateau is located.

At last, we are let off the boat onto the tiny island. Clark and I walk hand in hand up a hill to the chateau itself. We wander around the outer wall, admiring the view of the sea, and Clark points out various landmarks across the way sprinkled around Marseilles. He then rambles on about more of the history and lore surrounding Chateau D’If, but I ignore most of what he says and just take in the beauty around us, wishing I had my camera.

We wander back into what Clark tells me is the main ‘keep,’ which to me seems just to mean the main building. It’s about four stories tall, square in shape, with an open roof. Each level has several prison cells, and the open format makes it possible to see

all the levels above and below.

As we walk back in at the top level, a boy about six or seven is playing on the railing. His parents have their backs turned to him and I roll my eyes at the carelessness of parents on vacation. But suddenly, the boy pulls himself up to nearly stand on top of the railing. I glance at Clark, and almost in the same moment, I see the boy slip and tumble over the side.

“Clark!” My call comes strangled out of my mouth, as I know he’s the only one who can do anything to save the boy in time. Sure enough, quicker than I can blink, the boy is in Clark’s arms as he sets him gently back onto the ground.

The parents turn around just then, and the boy, though flabbergasted at having been rescued by a man who can fly, immediately begins telling his parents what happened.

“I just pulled you back from the rail, son,” Clark explains, giving the boy’s parents an expression that says you know how kids exaggerate.

The British tourists look puzzled, especially as their son continues to babble on about the man who can fly. Clark plasters on a smile and then looks at me helplessly. He quickly says his good-byes and comes to my side, taking my arm.

“Let’s get out of here,” he mumbles, and he ushers us away before any more questions can be asked.

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“Clark, look, that was a perfect example why you need a disguise!” I say when we get back to the hotel room.

“No, that’s exactly why I need to stay hidden. Don’t you see? If people start realizing that a man exists who can fly and is invulnerable, has super speed, and can hear long distances —” he shakes his head in frustration. “I’ll never be left alone!”

My mouth drops at the list of powers he just names, but I quickly cover my shock and move to sit next to him, hoping he’ll see my point.

“Clark, that’s exactly why you should become a public hero! And if what you say about superspeed is true, then you should have no trouble getting in and out of a disguise lickety-split!”

He looks at me helplessly and then shakes his head, burying it in his hands. “Lois, it will never work...”

“Will you at least think about it?”

His eyes turn to me, incredulous, like he can’t believe how pushy I’m being. But I can’t and I won’t relent. First, for him — so he doesn’t have to hide what he can do... and maybe, for me as well. Because if he had a secret persona, then maybe he would be inclined to stay in one place. Maybe — he could work at the Planet with me... and we’d see where things go.

“Lois... I think you mean well, but you just don’t understand. My parents raised me to hide these abilities. Otherwise, I could end up in a lab somewhere, being dissected like a frog. If they knew —” he says ominously.

I cross my arms in exasperation, not understanding why when he has all these abilities he’s so terrified of showing them to the world. “Knew what, Clark? What is so horrible about being able to help people that you feel the need to hide?”

His brown eyes bore into mine, full of doubt and fear. But then he suddenly looks resigned and he lets out a long sigh. “I think the only way I can convince you that this is just foolish is to take you to meet my parents. Maybe they can talk some sense into you.”

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After a long flight in Clark’s arms, we finally land at the Kent farm. I’m a little sleepy, having dozed off several times during the long if rather comfortable flight. Clark sets me on my feet and I stumble a bit. I grab onto his shoulder as I smile up at him, “It will take me a second to get my land legs back.”

He smiles in return and gently rubs my shoulder. “Take your time.”

After a moment, I finally turn to take in the scenery around

us. We’re definitely back in America, as I notice the rambling old farmhouse set amid a golden field of wheat in front of us. As we walk up the porch, there is an immediate sense of hominess here that makes me understand a little bit about why Clark feels so strongly about protecting it.

“Mom?” he calls as we enter.

A petite blonde woman comes rushing over to us, a grin on her face. “Clark! I’m so glad to see you! I didn’t think we’d get a visit for another month!”

He hides it quickly, but I see a trace of guilt on Clark’s face. He’s been busy traveling the world... and trying to save it.

“Mom, I’d like you to meet —”

“Lois Lane,” I jump in, reaching to shake her hand.

Mrs. Kent looks back at Clark and then at me again with a puzzled expression, and Clark looks a little embarrassed.

“We met in Paris,” Clark sort of explains.

Mrs. Kent’s smile widens and she gives Clark a little wink. He rolls his eyes and then quickly changes the subject.

“Is it all right if Lois and I stay for supper? There’s something we’d like to talk to you and Dad about.”

“Of course, honey,” Clark’s mom answers, though she gives me a curious look. “Your father will be back in about an hour. Dinner will be ready shortly after.”

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The Kent farmhouse is a far cry from the cute cafes and restaurants in Europe, but part of me likes it here better as I’m quickly charmed by the cozy atmosphere. I watch in awe as Mrs. Kent cooks up dinner, and though I try to help, she promptly sees that I have no skill in the kitchen and sends me to help Clark set the table.

“It’s a really nice home here,” I say, coming up next to him as he lays out the forks and knives.

“Thanks, I’m glad you like it,” he responds with an easy smile.

Just then, the front door opens and a man who I assume is Clark’s father enters the house. Mrs. Kent comes marching in and helps her husband with his coat.

“Jonathan, I told you to leave those boots on the porch. They track too much mud in here,” she admonishes, though she reaches up to give her husband a kiss.

“Oh, I forgot, Martha,” Clark’s dad says as he steps back on the porch to shed his boots.

When he comes back in, Martha gives him a beaming smile. “Dinner’s almost ready... And Clark’s brought a girlfriend,” she stage whispers with a grin, but both Clark and I hear her clearly.

“Clark? It’s been a while, son. That Borneo newspaper keeping you busy?” Mr. Kent says, coming over to give Clark a hug.

Clark brushes off the light reproach and turns to me. “Dad, I’d like you to meet Lois Lane. She’s also a reporter. For the Daily Planet.”

I shake Jonathan’s hand and can’t help but feel happy if not surprised at the note of admiration in Clark’s voice.

“Dinner’s ready!” Martha calls and we all head to our respective seats.

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After dallying with small talk for the first half of dinner, Martha and Jonathan can’t contain their curiosity any longer and ask us how we met. Clark and I exchange glances and give them a watered-down version that does not include me chasing him down for a story or my near printing of said story.

I, however, casually mention flying to Marseilles and Clark’s parents exchange looks of worry.

Clark jumps in, “I’ve told her about my abilities, Mom and Dad. It’s okay.”

They don’t look convinced, so I chime in, “Honestly, I think it’s wonderful what Clark can do.”

“Just please, don’t print anything in the Daily Planet about our son,” says Jonathan fearfully.

I feel my cheeks flush with shame thinking of the near miss, but Clark covers my hand in his, encouraging me.

“I’m not planning to, not without his permission,” I clarify. “But — I do have an idea that I think would bring Clark back to the States on a more permanent basis and make it much easier for him to help people.”

I hear Clark sigh in resignation, knowing I’m determined to bring up the costume idea, but his parents lean in with curious looks on their faces. They obviously would love to have their son closer to home.

I take a deep breath, knowing this is my big sell. I have to get them persuaded to my side, so perhaps they’ll persuade Clark. “I think that if Clark had a disguise of some kind, he could rescue people in another persona, meanwhile retaining a personal life as Clark Kent.”

All three Kents exchange looks of uncertainty, but I push ahead. “All I’m saying is that Clark will help people no matter what he’s wearing because that’s who he is. But if he could do it in a disguise, I think he could be so much more.” I glance at Clark, who I notice has found another pair of glasses at some point since we arrived at the farmhouse. “I think Clark could be a symbol for goodness, for hope. People need him... And meanwhile, he could also live as normal a life as possible as himself...”

The dinner table was quiet a moment. I look down at my plate, certain I’ve lost my case. But then I hear Martha clasp her hands together and when I look up, she’s beaming.

“I think it’s a great idea, Lois. I’ve believed for years that Clark had his abilities for a reason. And I could certainly sew something for him...”

“Mom —” Clark groans.

“We should at least try, honey,” Martha says, glancing between me and Clark as she gives me a reassuring smile.

“But won’t people recognize our boy? Won’t they wonder who and what he is?” asks Jonathan a bit pessimistically.

I wonder about the ‘what’ in his question but Martha quickly answers with a laugh. “Jonathan, I think Lois has a point. And besides, if we put Clark in some brightly colored spandex suit, I hardly think people are going to be looking at his face!”

I smile back at her, happy that she sees my point. The men at the table groan with uncertainty, but I think with Martha Kent on my side, I have won the battle.

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Clark left me with his parents while he flew back to Marseilles to get our things. We plan to stay in Smallville at least a few days to get Clark into a costume, and according to the TV, Lex Luthor is back in Metropolis anyway. It seems my overseas adventures are over, at least for now.

While Clark is gone, I sit around the kitchen table with the Kents drinking a cup of tea for my little cold, and listening to stories about Clark growing up. I thought this would be filled with awkward moments and vague explanations, but instead I heard endearing stories about Clark lifting his first sofa, outrunning a herd of horses, and then the slightly more embarrassing stories of Clark learning to use his other special abilities. I wondered if Clark would mind his parents telling me about all of this, but I figured he wouldn’t have left me alone with them if he hadn’t wanted us all to get to know each other.

So I sip my tea and sit back, learning a little about the mysteries that surround Clark Kent.

It’s funny, a week ago I had thought I needed to go to the most dangerous corners of the earth to feel alive and focused again. Now, I feel like I am right where I need to be, listening to two adoptive parents telling me stories about their superpowered son.

Wait — adoptive?

“Where did Clark come from when you adopted him?” I ask, thinking it’s an innocent enough question.

But the cozy atmosphere in the room lifts as Martha and Jonathan Kent glance at each other uneasily. I obviously hit a nerve here.

“Look, I appreciate you explaining the why about Clark, but obviously the how is a bigger secret.” I sigh, slightly frustrated that all of the Kents seem to only go so far in telling me the truth about Clark. I meet the gaze of both of his parents, hoping to reassure them that I am only trying to learn about Clark, and not undermine him. “I mean the best for Clark. I just want to understand him... I — I think I’m even falling in love with him,” I admit before I can stop myself, surprised that admission is so close under the surface. I’ve barely acknowledged this to myself, and I don’t know why I suddenly said it, but it feels right.

I look across at Clark’s parents and feel a tightening of emotion in my chest I suddenly want to be a part of their secret little club, to at last feel like I belong somewhere. Clark is the first person I’ve ever met that I feel entirely at home with, and I just hope that his parents will eventually feel the same about me.

But I don’t want them to think I’m trying to pry the truth out of them. They already know I’m a reporter. They can’t help thinking that I’m only fishing for a story. So I try to be as honest with them as I’d like them to be with me. “I... I didn’t mean to say that. I know what you must think. Clark and I have only known each other for five days... but these five days have been the most extraordinary of my life,” I breathe out in a rush of remembrance... the plane rescue... seeing Clark bend steel in the Paris Metro... his kiss... flying in his arms...

“I don’t want you to feel like I’m pushing anything here.

Clark already said he’d tell me when he was ready. And I’m willing to wait until he is...” I lean forward in my chair, looking the Kents straight in the eye. “But you have to realize that when Clark does make his appearance as his new alter-ego, there will be questions. Not about Clark Kent, but about the hero. And we should all help him prepare how best to answer them.”

“And you mean how to answer them in the Daily Planet, don’t you, Miss Lane?” says Mr. Kent with some skepticism.

I nod, knowing that was coming. “Look, all of the newspapers around the nation — heck, around the world! — are going to want to know who this new superhero is. As I’ve told Clark, when he’s ready to tell his story, I’ll be happy to tell it how he wants it to be told. Trust me, it’s much better than the tabloids picking up the story and running with their own theories...”

Mrs. Kent nods in agreement as I speak, then turns to her husband. “She’s right, Jonathan. Clark is ready to step out in the public eye... We have to trust her to tell a version of the truth that will satisfy the public and not have them hounding after Clark to reveal his identity.”

I smile and nod encouragingly, so happy to have met an advocate in Martha Kent. Just then, we hear a whoosh outside the door and Clark is back with our things.

I stand up to greet him, but become quickly alarmed when I notice his face is covered in soot and his shirt and pants are torn.

“Clark, what happened?”

He sets the suitcases down and takes off his glasses to wipe them clean. “A fire in Madrid, on the way back,” he says casually, dusting off some more soot on his pants. “But it’s all right. I saved a family... I just need to go change.”

Clark takes off up the flight of stairs and I stare at his departing broad shoulders, admiring how easily he takes responsibility, especially without any praise or recognition. It just makes me love him that much more. I turn around and see Clark’s parents watching me.

“You really do care for him, don’t you, Lois?” asks Mrs. Kent gently.

I nod and give her an assured smile, “Yeah, I do.”

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I wake up the next morning in Clark’s bed. As per the orders of his parents, he slept downstairs. I thought it was a quaintly old-fashioned arrangement, but neither Clark nor I mentioned we had already shared a bed in Europe and had not in fact devolved into lust-crazed individuals. But, his parents’ house, their rules, I suppose.

I slept soundly, comforted by the creaking sounds of the farmhouse, and being surrounded by things that were just so — Clark. I had taken a few minutes last night to peruse his shelves, admiring his high school football trophies and odd little knickknacks that bespoke of a youth full of happy memories. Lying in his bed, I easily had felt Clark’s presence and in that comfort, had fallen instantly asleep.

“Morning, sleepyhead,” I hear now and rub my eyes, stirring out of slumber. The bright yellow sun streams through the curtains, and I see Clark leaning against the doorframe, wearing jeans and a blue and red plaid shirt watching me.

“Did you sleep well?” he asks, walking over to me, as I sit up a little in bed.

“Yeah... what time is it?” I wonder, feeling like I somehow overslept.

“Just after nine,” he answers with a grin.

“Is that all?” I grumble, tossing myself back under the covers. “Unless Perry pages me I’ll just lie here a little while longer...” I murmur, but then sit right back up. “Oh my gosh! Perry!” I cry, remembering that my wallet and pager were stolen in Rome. “I usually check in once a day — he hasn’t heard from me and I don’t know what I will tell him about Luthor — ” I start in a panic.

Clark’s reassuring hand rests on my arm, stopping me. “Relax, Lois. While I was getting our things in Marseilles, I heard about an art heist... I don’t think it has anything to do with Luthor this time, but I wrote up a piece this morning, figuring you’d need something... and I think we should tread carefully about what happened at Luthor’s party anyway,” he says, and I presume he’s referring to the rock that knocked him for a loop.

I give him a quick kiss on the lips, thoroughly grateful for his help with the backup article. “You’re my hero,” I say sincerely, meaning it in a hundred different ways.

I pull back from the quick kiss and meet his eyes. His eyes move to my lips, and we lean in about to kiss properly, but instead his smile widens. “How about some breakfast?”

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After a delicious country breakfast, complete with ham and grits, Mrs. Kent announces that she is ready to start on Clark’s costume. He grumbles appropriately, but I think I see a look in his eye that he’s ready to tackle the challenge, and might even be looking forward to it.

Clark and I make our way to the living room as Mrs. Kent gathers her supplies. She comes trundling in with stacks and stacks of fabric, and Clark goes over to help her set it all out around the room.

She beams at me, telling me her ideas as she sets up her sewing machine. “I went into town early this morning and found yards and yards of spandex on sale. The clerk gave me a strange look, but I just said I was helping with the neighbor’s Halloween costumes this year.”

Clark rolls his eyes and looks over at me, crossing his arms across his chest. “Please, just try not to make me look like a clown, Mom.”

We go through swatches of color choices, first looking for colors that might help Clark blend in. But greens, blacks, and grays just don’t suit the goal here. I remind Mrs. Kent that we need something to make Clark stand out, to make him a larger than life hero, so that mild-mannered Clark Kent could never be

associated with the alter ego.

She drapes various loud fabrics and patterns on Clark that make him look like everything from a circus performer to Elvis. She also quickly cuts out a few test patches and, going off my Zorro idea, we try out a number of different masks. But none of them seem to work, and especially not with his glasses. He looks more like nerd than a hero.

“Well, I don’t see why I should wear the glasses when I’m helping people,” he says, taking them off. “Besides, the only reason I wear them is to keep me from using my abilities in inopportune moments... As this... hero-whatever,” he says with a vague wave of his hand, “I’ll need full access to my abilities.”

“Yes! And it will also help distance Clark Kent from your alter-ego,” I add. Mrs. Kent is still mixing and matching colors to find the right combination. I eye Clark critically, appreciating how handsome he looks, even when wearing his blue and red flannel shirt. In fact... he looks very good in it — maybe even hero good?

“What about blue and red, Mrs. Kent?” I ask, my gaze fixed on Clark. “We had that red cape cut to try with the green, but did we try blue?”

“No, I don’t think so. Give me about twenty minutes, and we can try one in blue... this pattern is pretty straightforward...”

I walk over to the sewing area, which looks like a rainbow exploded in the floor, and fish around for the prototype red cape. Clark’s a tall guy, and Mrs. Kent cut quite a long cape for him, so I struggle a bit to bundle it up in my arms and bring it over to him.

“Do I really need a cape?” he asks, eyeing it suspiciously as I sort out which end is the top.

“I think it will look good when you’re flying,” I say, liking the mental image of Clark in a cape... and maybe little else...

“It will help with the aerodynamics, I think,” Mrs. Kent calls from behind her sewing machine.

I unfurl the yards of fabric and drape it around Clark’s shoulders. I unbutton his shirt a bit and tuck the collar in, tacking the cape inside to try and get an idea how he’d look in it with a blue suit. “Well, I love the cape, but the flannel’s got to go, Farmerboy,” I kid and Clark pulls me onto his lap as we plop on the sofa. I wrap my arms around his neck, fiddling with his cape behind him.

“Thank you, Lois,” he says simply, out of the blue, and I fix my attention on his eyes. He’s smiling happily, and seems more relaxed than I remember seeing him since I met him.

“Whatever for?”

“I know it’s ridiculous, but I’m actually looking forward to this whole costume thing. I think there’s real potential in the idea. And as much as I love traveling around the world, I really would like to be one place for a while.”

I continue to play with his shirt, and the cape that keeps slipping from it, my fingers finding their way to his chest. “And... could that place be Metropolis?” I ask, my heart moving to my throat as I fill with hope.

“Well, I would like to meet your editor first... you know, see if there’s a job possibility there,” he hints good-naturedly, though I cringe a bit.

I sit back from him a little, my eyes suddenly focused on a speck of dirt on his shirt.

“Lois? What is it?” he asks, his voice warm with concern.

“Clark... I have to tell you something,” I say firmly, determined that I lay all of my cards out on the table. “Now, let me preface this by saying that I’ve done all I can to disassociate you from the article I sent Perry... but I did sort of hint that you might be a story, too...” I say, wincing in shame.

He sighs, sets me aside off his lap and stands up, the cape slipping out of its tenuous hold in his shirt. “When were you going to tell me this?”

“Well,” I grimace, “I’m telling you now,” I start gamely, but keep talking, hoping he’ll understand. “But Clark, I think if we can debut your alter-ego before I introduce you to Perry — and you play up your mild-mannered, charming farm boy self, I don’t think he’ll notice.”

He runs his fingers through his hair, and pulls his collar out of its tucks. “I really hope you’re right, Lois.”

Just then, Mrs. Kent comes over to us, slicing through the tension as she holds out what look to be shiny blue pajamas to Clark. “Okay, Clark, try this on.”

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“Clark?” Mrs. Kent calls from outside the bathroom. “Does it fit?”

Silence from behind the door.

“Clark?” she asks again, glancing at me. “Come out so Lois and I can see.”

“Um... I really don’t want to, Mom,” Clark says in a voice that is almost squeaky.

Mrs. Kent and I share a giggle, but she tries again. “Come on, Clark. It can’t be that bad.”

We wait a moment longer, and then Clark opens the door, his hands on his hips, which draw my eyes to his waist... and lower.

I feel my cheeks flush, “Oh, my...” I say a little breathless.

Clark harrumphs and crosses his arms. “I look ridiculous.”

When I can focus again, my gaze takes in the full effect. The spandex highlights every little perfect detail of his body, and with his arms folded across that chest, well, he cuts quite an imposing figure.

“Hmm... maybe we can... sort of cover that area,” Mrs. Kent grumbles, walking over to her sewing machine. She digs around and comes up with a pair of red spandex briefs. “Try these over the suit,” she says, and I burst out laughing.

“Are you serious? Do you really think I should — draw attention?” he shudders embarrassedly, covering the, er, offending area with the briefs his mom hands him.

I try to contain my giggles over Clark’s maidenly modesty, while Mrs. Kent looks at him frankly. “Well, like Lois and I keep saying, Clark — people will definitely not be interested in looking at your face.”

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After a few more additions, Clark is ready to try on the full costume with the cape. This time when he steps out of the bathroom, both Mrs. Kent and I are speechless.

“I look silly, don’t I?” Clark asks nervously, walking over to a mirror.

“Clark,” I say, coming up behind him. “You look amazing.”

His eyes catch mine in the mirror, and his lip twitches in an almost smile. He stands up straighter, slicks his hair back with his fingers and takes another look at himself. “You think so?”

“Definitely,” I smile, glad I don’t have heat vision, as I’m sure I would catch Clark’s cape on fire with the dirty thoughts starting to spin around in my mind as I eye him in the suit.

“Wait! Clark, I think something’s missing,” said Mrs. Kent, coming up behind us. She holds up a large patch with a stylized ‘S’ on it. She comes around to the front of Clark and lays it across his chest. It definitely looks better.

“What does it stand for?” I ask, wondering too where it came from.

“We don’t know,” said Mrs. Kent, adjusting the patch until it sits squarely above and over Clark’s pecs. “It was on Clark’s baby blanket when we found him.”

“Found him?” I query in surprise, and wonder how a baby like Clark could get left anywhere. “So, you didn’t adopt him then?”

Mrs. Kent exchanges a look with Clark and he nods slightly, as if he is giving her permission to tell me something.

“Lois, we found Clark... in a field... and — in a spaceship,”

she says in all seriousness. “We think... well, that he came from another planet.”

I look at Clark with fresh eyes, who is looking back at me nervously in the mirror. His shoulders slump slightly and he seems uncomfortable with the topic. “How do you feel about your costume clad hero now, Lois?” he says in a slightly defeated tone.

I come over to him, laying my hand on his massive, shiny blue chest. “Clark... I think you’re wonderful, and the world is about to find out just how wonderful you are, too,” I say confidently and he smiles warmly in return, relief filling his eyes.

“I hope you’re right,” Clark says, sounding more confident.

“I am right. You’ll see.”

Mrs. Kent moves me out of the way so she can start pinning the patch in place, and I stare at it a moment. “And you have no idea what it stands for?”

Both of them shake their head. “Well, I’m pretty sure people are going to wonder... Why not have it stand for your alias?”

“And what alias do you think would work, Lois?”

“Well, with all the things you can do — I mean, superspeed, the vision thingy, and flying — you’re more than just an ordinary man, Clark,” I state, assessing the possibilities. “I think you are the suped up version of your everyday hero... how about — Superman?”

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“Clark, I need to get back to Metropolis,” I say a few hours later, after having helped Mrs. Kent tidy up the fabric-strewn living room.

Clark sighs and gazes contemplatively at his new suit slung over the sofa. “And you really think people will buy into Superman?” he asks warily. “You don’t think people will be afraid of me?”

I step over to him, and lay my hand comfortingly on his chest. “Clark, I have no doubt that Superman will be the greatest hero Metropolis has ever seen — the world has ever seen! And we’ll make sure that people understand you’re here to help. Especially with this reporter writing your story,” I add playfully, trying to lighten his spirits. He’s obviously already feeling the responsibility of what it will mean to live a double life, and I don’t want him to fear it — but embrace it. I glance up at him, meeting him in the eye. “Clark, it will be okay. You’re not doing this alone. You’re parents are wonderfully supportive — and I’m here.”

“I know, Lois,” he says softly, cupping my cheek in the way that sends shivers down my spine. “It’s just, when you’ve hidden so long like I have, it takes a lot to believe that people will accept you.”

“Clark, they will. Trust me. The world needs more heroes these days... But we must find a moment that’s good enough for your debut. Either a big rescue or a good PR moment... I don’t know, but we must be on the lookout for it. Which is another reason to get back to Metropolis,” I start pacing, beginning to check off a mental to-do list. “But I don’t want to step a toe into the Daily Planet until I have a top story — which will either be you or Luthor, frankly...”

In my maelstrom of plans, I happen to glance back at Clark, who still looks decidedly worried. “What is it, Clark? I told you, we’ll write your story together, when the time is right — ”

“No, Lois. It’s Lex Luthor. Do you really have to pursue that right now? He’s dangerous. As soon as he learns you are back in Metropolis — ”

I interrupt him, seeing where he’s going. “What’s dangerous is letting him get away with whatever scheme he’s planning, Clark. Anyway, he’s back in the city, and I know guys who know guys who can figure out what he’s up to without me getting directly involved.”

He eyes me with uncertainty, no doubt seeing danger in my

methods — but then he lets out a light laugh of exasperation. “Lois... are you always like this?”

I simply grin at him in return. “You’ll get used to it!”

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Clark drops me off at my apartment a short time later. On the way to Metropolis, he complained that his costume was too tight under his regular clothes, but honestly, it only made me giggle. I still can’t wipe the delectable image from my mind of him stepping out of the bathroom in just the blue suit. Darn right it’s tight! And in all the right places too!

As we start to fly over the city, I get a little misty-eyed. It’s so beautiful up here... I snuggle a little deeper in his arms, my heart full of emotion as I think of how distraught I was when I left this city. And now, here I am in the arms of the most amazing man. Almost unconsciously I cling tighter to him. I worry what will happen if I can’t convince Perry to hire him. Or worse, if the whole Superman thing doesn’t go over as well as I hope it will. I’d never admit it to Clark, because I believe in him, but it will take some very good PR on my part and support from the Planet to really sell the idea. Clark has to sell it too... But I worry that if it doesn’t go just right, he’ll leave...

I get pulled out of my musings as Clark asks for directions to my apartment. I navigate him to it, slightly amused at looking for my apartment from a bird’s eye view. Never thought I’d be coming in for a landing on my back doorstep before! At last, he sets me on my balcony, and I’m quite happy to be home again. “You know, it doesn’t matter how far I travel, I’m always happy to come back to Metropolis.”

“I feel that way about Smallville. But I will admit, there is something that calls to me here in the big city,” he says, gazing out across the Metropolis skyline with a look I thoroughly recognize as a burgeoning love for this great city.

“Mmmm... I know what you mean,” I say, taking in the distant noises of cars and life and the buildings that surround my neighborhood.

Clark tears his gaze from the skyline, and suddenly pulls his glasses down and looks intently at my apartment wall. “Whatever are you doing, Clark? My apartment is perfectly safe, I’m sure,” I say with some amusement.

“Well, Luthor may not know you’re in town just yet — but it doesn’t mean I put it past him to spy on you... But everything looks fine from here.”

“And what are you going to do now?” I ask, fumbling through my keychain for the key I never use, the one to my back door balcony.

His eyes come to rest on mine, and then slightly lower, and I thrill to realize he’s thinking of kissing me. I step up to him, turning my face up to his. “Well, I need to look for an apartment,” he begins, but I think he’s beginning to be distracted by other thoughts.

I give him a little smile that I hope appears sexy. “You could always stay here with me, Clark,” I suggest, but as I expect, his farm boy sensibilities are a little offended at the idea and I almost laugh.

“Lois, I’m happy to date you — but we’re still getting to know each other,” he starts, but I hush him up quickly by placing my finger on his lips.

“We can keep getting to know each other... especially in one of my favorite ways,” I whisper, leaning up to kiss him. His arm comes around my back, pulling me to him, and my hands find their way to his hair. His tongue explores mine, sending a delicious shiver down my spine. All too quickly, he pulls away.

“Maybe we can meet for dinner later?” he suggests, and by his breathless tone, I surmise that he is more affected by our kiss than he lets on.

“Here in Metropolis or further afield?” I tease, imagining flying in Clark’s arms again across the Atlantic... or to Hawaii...

“Well, it will be too late to eat dinner in Europe... so how about we stay in Metropolis tonight? I’ll be back to pick you up around eight?”

“I can’t wait,” I smile.

He reluctantly steps away from me, squeezing my hand gently as he lets me go.

“See you then, Lois.”

“Meanwhile, don’t try saving the city without me!” I chide lightly, as he starts to lift away.

“Don’t worry, Lois. When it’s time for me to make my appearance on the world’s stage, you’ll be the first to know.”

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It’s nice to be home after all of my adventures. My fish have been taken care of by my neighbor, and seem to have survived the experience. I have a stack of mail to sort through, but I don’t mind.

I think about the torrent of emotions I was going through in those days before I left for Europe. Evidence of it is still in my apartment: a few dishes left in the sink, my untidy bed, and my closet and dresser drawers slightly spilling over in disorder. I had been hurt, humiliated, and completely lost. Now, even though I am uncertain exactly what my future with Clark will hold, I believe there can be one. I’m hopeful that we’ll manage to get him a job working with me at the Planet, and I plan on helping him manage his second job moonlighting in tights as much as he’ll let me.

I check my messages, including the remote ones that I would have been alerted to if I hadn’t lost my beeper. A disconcerted Perry is on one of them, asking about a follow-up to the Luthor story. I really have nothing to give Perry, which isn’t good at all. The longer I wait to chase down Luthor, the more time he’ll have to wriggle his way out of whatever he’s planning. I think of calling a few of my contacts, like Bobby Bigmouth, but honestly, I don’t want anyone to know I’m back yet. I don’t want Luthor to get wind of it, and I don’t want Perry to know until I have my big story lined up.

I sigh, looking at the clock. It’s only just after three. I have plenty of time before my date with Clark. I know Clark would worry if he knew what I was thinking, but I don’t want him anywhere near that green rock stuff, which we might encounter again if he went with me to investigate Luthor. I need to find out what that sneaky magnate is up to, and I’m going to have to do it on my own.

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I swing open my closet door, searching for a viable disguise to sneak into LexCorp. I smirk a little as I eye my quirky wardrobe. Is it any wonder that I had thought of putting Clark in a disguise? I’ve been dressing up since I was three!

I snatch my long red wig and a generic overalls work suit, hoping to blend in with the maintenance crew. If I plant myself as one of the lowest on the totem pole, it should be doubtful anyone would recognize me. As an afterthought, I grab a black baseball cap.

I stuff my disguise in a black duffel bag and head out of my apartment. I think briefly of calling Clark to tell him what I’m up to, just in case it all goes wrong. But just thinking of him facing that green rock again makes me nauseous with worry. Besides, I’m not going to confront Luthor. I merely want to have a look around and see what I can see.

I leave my things in a locker at a nearby train station, and I slip into the ladies room to change into my disguise. I take one last look at myself in the mirror, pleased by the transformation.

A while back, before I left for Europe, I had a guy dig me up a work badge for LexCorp Towers. I had no intention of using it then, but I’m sure glad that I have it now. I easily sneak in at the basement employee entrance. But finding my way to Luthor’s penthouse will be another matter altogether. At least I know the

general direction. Up.

I take a few wrong turns, oddly ending up in a wine cellar. I guess when you're a billionaire you need a cache of wine even at the office!

At last, I find an elevator and take it up as far as it will go. It stops on the 60th floor, as the last ten are evidently for privileged personnel only. "Drat," I mutter, stepping off the elevator to look for a stairway entrance.

I walk down a few innocuous hallways, uncertain how I'll get off this floor besides taking the elevator back down. But having come this far, I'm not going to back out now.

I see a tall beautiful black woman approach a different elevator that has a key swipe pad next to it. This has to be the elevator that leads to Luthor's suites. I remember seeing a cleaning crew cart down another hallway, and I quickly double back to see if it is still there. Luckily it is, and I quickly run to grab it.

I race back to the elevator just as the woman steps in.

"Wait! Please!" I cry in a faux French accent.

The woman doesn't even glance at me, but luckily the cart jams the door open so I can get in.

I almost offer an explanation, but the woman is either preoccupied with something, or I am totally below her radar.

"Mr. Luthor does not like his employees taking the main elevator," she addresses me coolly, still not looking at me, but burying her nose in a day planner. "If he sees you, he'll fire you. Better get off before I do if you want to keep your job."

She pushes a button, and shortly the elevator stops at the 64th floor. "Merci," I say and quickly exit.

This floor looks like a hotel, with lots of doors leading to who knows where. But I need to get up to the penthouse. I watch the elevator floor indicator and see that the woman gets off at the top floor. I try calling it back down, but notice there is another card swipe pad. The elevator won't come back down to this floor without the key card.

I start wandering the hallways, looking for another way up, slowly pushing my cart. I notice security cameras above me, and my heart is pounding with worry that any moment I'll be discovered. At last, I come to a stairwell.

I abandon my cart and begin to climb. Two flights up, I try a door, and as I feared, it is locked. I have a feeling they will all be locked, but I continue climbing. At the 70th floor, I'm a bit out of breath, but try one more time. Nothing. I rest against the door a moment, thinking I was foolish to have come here, especially without my handy superpowered boyfriend...

There is at least one more level of stairs to go, and because I've made it this far and I'm curious as to what can be on the next level, I continue to climb. This door has a long push handle across it, but doesn't seem attached to any alarms, so I go through it.

I'm on the roof. I step outside, and I'm immediately three feet from the edge of the tallest building in Metropolis. I can't even see the street from up this high. Feeling a moment of vertigo, I quickly step back so I'm pressed against the entrance to the roof. I hear a loud noise from behind me and I realize it's a helicopter. I edge my way around the roof entrance structure, and see Lex Luthor himself heading to the helipad carrying the box I had seen in Venice. I move closer, sticking to the edge of the building, and a gust of wind suddenly snatches my cap and skews my wig. Before I can right it, Luthor sees me!

"Grab her!" he shouts to one of his goons.

I yell and spin around, heading back the way I came. Only the door is locked shut! I slam at it helplessly, and then feel two strong men grab me on each side. "Let go of me!" I cry angrily. They drag me over to where Luthor is next to the helicopter. He pulls my wig off and grins wickedly at me.

"You do love disguises, don't you, Miss Lane?" Then he

looks to his goons and gestures to the helicopter. "She's coming with us. I don't have time to deal with her here. But I want to keep an eye on her."

I protest, realizing how stupid it was to come here all alone, without even telling Clark what I was up to. But before I can even kick again at the goons holding me, a handkerchief comes to my mouth and I'm suddenly very sleepy...

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I wake up in the luxury helicopter, tied into a plush leather seat, with my feet and hands bound. I'm facing away from Luthor and his copilot, so they can't know I'm awake. I glance around me and see the box of green rock is strapped into the seat next to me.

I lay my head back, straining to hear what they are talking about over the muffled noise of the chopper. I close my eyes, in case anyone decides to check on me, and let my head slip down. It's best to appear as innocuous as impossible, at least until we land.

"We're about 35 miles out of Smallville, Mr. Luthor. But I just heard a tornado warning come through the wire. We should head back to Metropolis and try another day..."

"No, we'll make it. I've been searching for this rock too long... If there's a depository as large as my men say there, then I want to see it. I'm the only one who can confirm it is the same type of mineral from my sample. We'll be fine. Continue the course."

"But Mr. Luthor —" the pilot protests, and I silently agree.

"I don't pay you to second guess me, Captain. Now, stay the course!" Luthor answers in a tone that brooks no argument.

I begin to worry in earnest. Luthor is sending us into a death trap!

As we near Smallville, winds are obviously starting to pick up. The helicopter is still on course, but it feels like we're being tossed around a bit. The box with Luthor's rock in it tumbles to the floor, tossing the green mineral into a corner.

"Sir, we need to turn back! Now!" the captain cries, his voice filled with anxiety.

"No! No twisters have been sighted yet, Captain. We'll make it. We're almost there!"

We continue a little ways further, and I watch the storm brewing outside my window. Thunder and lightning abound, and I suddenly see a terrifying sight as a twister starts forming out of the clouds.

I can keep silent no longer, and I cry, "A tornado! There! It's forming!"

Luthor peeks behind the seat at me, but notices his precious rock on the ground. He crawls over the seat to pick it up, but as he bends to get it, I kick him in the rear with my bound feet, knocking his head on the door. I struggle to unbuckle my seatbelt, as I cry over my shoulder, "Turn this thing around, Captain!"

"I can't! The winds are driving it now!" he screams in return.

My seatbelt is a latch belt, and I manage to get my forearm under the clip and scoot forward in my seat to loosen its length. I crawl out from underneath it and land with a thud on the floor of the helicopter. We're starting to fishtail a bit, but I have to give credit to the captain for keeping us as steady as he has.

I know our only real chance is Clark — if he even knows I'm up here! But he can't come anywhere near the chopper with that green rock!

I scoot towards it, debating how I can get rid of it. Luthor suddenly stirs awake, though he seems a bit out of it. He reaches upwards to lift himself up, though his hand grabs for the door handle!

"Mr. Luthor!" I cry, but it's too late. The door swings open, just as we dip sideways. He manages to pull himself up, but the rock slips to the edge, about to teeter out of the chopper. I realize this could be my chance to get rid of the thing once and for all

and I slither a bit further on the floor and kick it out.

I glance up at Luthor, who looks at me with hateful anger. “You — what have you done?!”

Furiously, he pushes on my shoulder, sending me almost out of the chopper entirely! I can feel the winds licking at my heels, and the chopper dips sideways. I slip out further, and I grab onto the side of the door with both of my tied hands. I can hear the winds whistling fiercely around us. I glance up and see Luthor looming over me. The winds begin to howl and I realize we’re about to be sucked up into a funnel!

“Help!” I cry, wanting desperately to call for Clark. “Help, please!”

Luthor gets knocked to his feet by the shifting chopper, and my grip is slipping from the rail, when suddenly, I feel arms wrap around me. It’s him. He came!

“I’ve got you, Lois,” he says in my ear, as he tucks me into his arms. I see they are wrapped in the blue spandex, and even in my distress, I can’t help but smile. His moment to become Superman has finally arrived.

Suddenly we’re pulled away from the winds, and before I can blink Clark sets me down by the storm cellar on his farm. Mr. and Mrs. Kent are there, and they quickly take me inside. The winds are less here than they were in the air, but the storm is rapidly increasing. I glance at Clark, new in his suit, his cape fluttering behind him.

“I have to go, Lois. You’ll be safe here,” he says, taking off into the air.

I climb down the stairs of the cellar, and we pull the doors closed above us. I watch through the slats, unable to keep my gaze from the sky as Clark — no, Superman — flies back up to rescue the helicopter.

Soon, the winds become too great and I can’t see anything further, so I step back into the cellar with the Kents.

I glance at them and smile. “This is it. This is his moment. The moment heroes are made.”

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Mr. Kent dug out an old radio he had left down here in the storm shelter just for these kinds of emergencies. It takes him a while, but at last we get a channel from Wichita, even if it is a little crackly.

“...three more twisters spotted in and around Smallville. Everyone is advised to take cover as winds pick up...”

It seems an eternity as we wait. A million thoughts go through my head... Did Clark rescue Luthor’s helicopter? Was Luthor still wearing that ring? Will Clark be able to get away before it can hurt him?

“He’ll be fine, Lois,” his mom says to me, patting my arm, apparently seeing the worry on my face.

I wonder if she knows... Clark had seemed completely oblivious as to the existence of the green rock before Venice...

“Mrs. Kent — ”

“Please, call me Martha. You’re practically family now, Lois,” she says with a warm smile.

I smile weakly in return. Although I’m touched by the gesture, I’m worried about what could happen to Clark. “Martha — do you know about a green rock that affects Clark? When we were in Venice, Mr. Luthor had a large sample of it, and he said it had come from here, Smallville.”

“I’ve never seen any green rocks around here. And how could it affect Clark?”

“It hurt him,” I begin warily.

“What do you mean, it hurt him?” she responded in some alarm.

“It made him weak — he even briefly lost his powers.”

She looked fearfully at me. “We’ve never seen anything that can hurt our son... And why are you telling me now?”

I told her my harrowing tale of being in Luthor’s helicopter

and about pushing out the large chunk of rock.

“Luthor thought he found a deposit of it in Smallville. He brought his sample to check it against what his men found... But he also wears a ring made of the stuff and I just worry what will happen to Clark if he gets too close — ”

“Hush a moment! I think they’re talking about Clark — ” Mr. Kent interrupted, his ear bent close to the radio.

“...two of the twisters never touched ground. Inexplicably, they seemed to have been rerouted, as if the wind suddenly changed direction...”

We all exchange relieved glances.

“Is his breath really that strong?” I ask, mentally going over the catalogue of super powers I know about.

Martha shrugs, “Well, he once sneezed and sent the tractor almost a mile away... so I think it might be possible...”

“...just in. Mr. Lex Luthor, Metropolis’ philanthropic billionaire, has been rescued from his storm-ravaged helicopter. We don’t have details yet, but we know he was rescued out of the sky... More later, when we understand what exactly happened...”

I smile broadly at the Kents. “Clark’s okay, then! And the world has just heard their first story about Superman, though they don’t know it yet! It means I have to get cracking on the Daily Planet’s story... I hope Clark gets back soon. I want Perry to get this ASAP,” I say, getting up from the stool I was perched on as I look for pen and paper in the musty shed. There’s got to be something to write with down here...

I glance at the Kents, and they eye me with a worried expression. “Are you sure this is a good idea, Lois?” asks Mr. Kent.

I do my best to reassure him. “Clark will pre-approve every word, I promise. He’s already made himself a hero — we simply need to give him a proper introduction.”

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About an hour later, we were able to return to the farmhouse. The electricity was out, but Martha was kind enough to set me up with her old typewriter and a few candlesticks.

I had scribbled some notes on cardboard with a pencil I had found in the shelter, surprising both of Clark’s parents with my resourcefulness.

I begin writing my piece on Superman, meanwhile worrying what is taking Clark so long to return. The storms have passed, and besides the electricity being off, everything seems to be all right.

I’m busy typing away, when I see a figure on the back porch. I know it’s Clark and I rush over to open the door for him.

I throw myself in his arms, noting that his uniform smells of cool air and even a little smoke.

“Lois,” he breathes with relief into my hair, planting a kiss on my forehead.

“What happened? Is everything all right?” I ask as we step into the kitchen. He looks a little tired, but there’s also a spark of excitement in his eyes. His hair is tousled, and there are smudges of dirt and soot all over him; he looks wonderful.

“Lois — it was amazing,” he began, taking a seat at the kitchen table while I pour us some lemonade. “After I left you, I went back to the helicopter. The look on Luthor’s face was priceless. I’m pretty sure he thought he would always be the only truly powerful man in Metropolis,” Clark says a bit smugly, but then shrugs his shoulders as if shaking off the moment of one-upmanship. “Anyway, I instructed him to take a seat, which he did and strapped himself in. I landed them just outside downtown Wichita. He was dumbstruck, Lois. I don’t know if he was grateful or angry, but I hope it changes his perspective on some things...”

I reach over and put my hand on Clark’s. “What about the ring? I didn’t notice if he had it on. I was so worried — ”

Clark’s eyes met mine, full of warmth that I am so concerned.

“I was fine, Lois. I did see the ring. Which is why I directed him to stay in the helicopter. If I had picked up him and his pilot, I would have fallen like a stone out of the sky... Don’t worry, he has no clue that his rescuer and the guy who stumbled all over himself at his Venetian party are the same man.”

“That’s a relief... You know he found a deposit of the stuff. That’s why he was in Smallville.”

Clark, to my surprise, nods. “More about that in a second... Now the twister I saved you from did land. I couldn’t stop it, but I saw two others forming across the horizon. I was able to blow those two off course, so they never even touched ground. Then, I flew back to where the one landed, and immediately felt the green rock in the ground. It was near Shuster’s Field, where my parents found me. But the twister actually helped. I watched from a safe distance as it scattered some of the rock, and buried the rest of it underground. The remaining bits above ground are not enough for Luthor to bother with... I think he’ll drop that project now. At least, I hope so.”

I nod in satisfaction, glad that Mother Nature was able to lend a hand. “And the third twister? What happened?”

Clark’s buoyed spirits seem to fall a bit. He clears his throat and then continues his story. “I wasn’t in time to stop it...It — took out a small town. I flew down after, and blew out a few fires, helped rescue a few people. But it wasn’t enough, Lois. There were a few injured... and so many people lost their homes...” He lays his head in his hands, his elbows resting on his knees.

I rub his back soothingly, under his cape. “Clark — but you did so much. The people are grateful for what you did, I’m sure.”

He nods, and glances up at me. There are tears in his eyes, but a shining hope there as well. “I was so worried what they would think — seeing this caped man flying around them — but they were all so happy to see me when they saw why I was there. After they got over their initial shock, they just asked me to help. And I did... It was — really rewarding.”

I smile at him, and lean over to kiss his cheek. “I told you that you are a hero.”

He gives me a lopsided grin, and then notices my typewriter. “Already writing your piece, I see,” he says, though there is no recrimination in his voice. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

We spend the next hour or so going over my article, and adding things to it. What it boils down to is the birth of a superhero. We decide to lead with “Superman saves billionaire and towns in twist of fate” as the main headline. If I can write a glowing few sentences about Luthor, then maybe he’ll back off my tail, at least for a while. We also decide that we will tell Perry that I got a ride back with Luthor from Europe, and that was how I got my interview — well, sort of interview. If you call spying at an exclusive Venetian party and being held captive on a billionaire’s helicopter an interview! But I know I have enough information to make the article work. We will mention he’s working on a green energy project, but not go into details about the mineral. That way, I will have all my bases covered: an ‘interview’ with Luthor, painting him as a normal businessman struck down by a twist of fate, and distance Clark from the story altogether by not including him in the byline.

I still have my sights on taking down the billionaire, but I think it will have to wait for another day. Clark’s debut is more important; the real meat and potatoes of the story is explaining who Superman is and why he is here. We work on that bit well into the night, knowing the wording will have to be perfect. I even convince Clark to let me take a picture of him in the suit. We stage it so he’s in the air, in profile, so there’s no doubt he can fly.

And since Clark’s name is not even in the byline, there’s no possible connection between him and Superman, so I can introduce Clark to Perry a few days after the article runs.

Having our plan worked out, and the article written, I am now exhausted. Clark excuses himself to change out of his new work uniform, and I rest my head on the kitchen table.

Just for a moment...

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“Lois! You’re back!” Perry beams at me the next morning when I come into the bullpen.

“And I’ve got a heck of a story for you, Chief!” I say, waving my copy at him excitedly.

“I hope it’s about this flying man I heard rumors about last night. Not a single news outlet knows how to explain it, so they’ve been tiptoeing around the story. Some are saying the pilot who reported it was just in shock and didn’t know what he saw,” Perry says, but quickly gets engrossed in reading my story.

I wait expectantly, and after a moment, he looks up at me with a smile. “Great shades of Elvis, Lois, this is fantastic! And — have you actually talked to this Superman?”

I nod, handing him the photo of Superman and say what Clark and I had worked out the night before. “He only had a moment after he rescued the helicopter, but yes. I got the exclusive, Chief! And even a photo!” I only feel a little stab of guilt in that Clark can’t take direct credit for some of the story. But he needs to be off the byline in order to sell the new superhero.

“So you got your interview with Luthor, after all. Well, good going, Lois. We’re glad to have you back. And this has got to go to print right away. We’ll beat all the other papers in the country with this!” Perry says gleefully, and then over his shoulder he shouts so the whole newsroom hears him, “Copy!”

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The next morning, Clark is at my door bright and early.

“Hey there,” he says, and flashes this morning’s Daily Planet at me. My article is above the fold and I smile ecstatically at him.

“Perry loved it! And the rest of Metropolis will, too! I’ve already gotten calls from several media outlets. They want to meet Superman, and I’m the only connection they have so far.”

Clark’s smile vanishes. “What did you say to them, Lois? Because I don’t want people thinking you can just call me up on the phone. I have no doubt that criminals would want to take advantage of that.”

I shake my head, reassuring him. “No. I said it was a fluke meeting, that I have no idea if I will see you — er, him again. But Clark, I think the next step needs to be a press conference. You know, introduce yourself to the city. State that you want to stay in Metropolis. People are endlessly curious about you...”

“I know,” he says resignedly. “That’s been part of my problem, even before the costume. But hopefully if Superman makes a few public appearances explaining himself, then that will be all that’s necessary.”

I grab my coat and briefcase and then smile at Clark. “So, are you ready to meet the editor of the world’s greatest newspaper?”

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I watch Clark as we enter the Planet building, his gaze soaking up every detail. The building itself is about eighty years old, and it definitely has an imposing style to it that I hardly even notice anymore. We stop outside in front of the globe, Clark staring at it in awe.

“I can’t believe I’m really here,” he almost whispers.

I laugh good-naturedly at his open admiration. “You’ll get used to it, Farmboy,” I say, tugging him along. Honestly, I do know what he means. I remember the first time I stepped into this hallowed building, thinking of all the great reporters that had gone before me. And seeing that wonder in Clark secretly makes me smile.

When we get up to the bullpen, no one even notices Clark. He has his hands in his pockets, and he keeps looking around a bit like a lost tourist as he follows me closely.

My heart starts fluttering as we near Perry's office. I hope Perry is off the scent of Clark being a story, and he will just see him as a good journalist — and a potential new-hire.

I tap on his door, and he waves us in, finishing up a phone conversation.

"... Okay, Alice. I'll see you at eight... love you, too. Bye."

"Chief, I'd like you to meet Clark Kent," I present with a bit of aplomb, and Clark reaches to take Perry's hand.

Perry smiles, then his expression turns a little suspicious as he glances back at me. At first, I feel my throat close up with fear, wondering if he'll call me out about Clark being a story — or worse, mention Superman and Clark's name in the same sentence. But as Clark's 'interview' gets underway, I begin to realize Perry's suspicions stem from another source.

"So you were a reporter in Borneo, huh, Kent?"

"Yes, sir. Though I'm from Kansas," Clark says frankly, and we all move to have a seat. Clark waits till I'm seated before he follows suit, and I see Perry takes notice of the gesture.

"And you two met in Paris?" Perry says with that suspicious squint still in his eye, looking at me and then at Clark.

I step in, trying to keep the business at hand — getting Clark a job here — on track. "That's right, Chief. Clark, er, Mr. Kent and I sent you a few stories while I was over there."

Perry leans back in his chair, crossing his fingers on his chest as he thinks a minute.

Suddenly, he looks us both square in the eye. "Now, I don't think office romances are a good thing. They go too easily awry, as you well know, Lois," Perry says sternly, this pointedly directed at me, and I feel myself blush.

Clark glances at me with a 'now what?' expression, and I get it entirely. Do we let Perry know that there is something between us and risk Perry sending Clark unequivocally packing?

Clark clears his throat and pulls out his CV and some articles. "Here's some of my work, Mr. White. Miss Lane here is just helping out a fellow reporter," he says. So it's the colleagues route/no sparks angle. I roll my eyes. Perry won't buy it.

Perry reads over Clark's papers carefully, every now and then glancing at us with an unreadable expression. Then, he sets them down with a thwack on his desk and nods. "All right, Kent. You can have a trial run. Work with Lois on a few stories..." Perry points at me. "Your first assignment is to do a follow-up on Superman. See if you can find out more about why he's here and what he's doing."

It takes all of my effort to not look over at Clark at this mention and give him a conspiratorial wink. "We'll do our best, Chief," I manage with a straight face.

As we get up to leave, Perry pulls me aside, while Clark politely waits by the door. "There's not a doubt in my mind that you two are smitten with each other. But Lois, honey, please be careful. I don't want what happened with Claude to happen with Clark. I trust your judgment on his reporting skills — the pieces you turned in together were certainly strong — but he still has to prove himself to me, you hear? No free rides."

I nod gratefully to Perry. "I'm sure you won't be disappointed."

Just then, Jimmy rushes in and runs smack into Clark, scattering papers everywhere. Clark bends to pick them up, apologizing profusely. He pushes his glasses up his nose, and he awkwardly hands back the papers to Jimmy. I realize suddenly that he did it slightly on purpose. I had suggested to him to play up the mild-mannered farmboy... I guess he took me at my word.

"Let's get out of here, Kent. We've got work to do," I say, purposefully stepping around Jimmy.

Clark follows me and I flash a quick smile at him. "You were perfect," I whisper when we're clear of Perry's office.

"I don't know if your boss really likes me though," he answers with some trepidation.

I plop my stuff on my desk and look at Clark resolutely. "He's your boss now, Kent. And you'll win him over soon enough," I wink at him, to soften the blow of my hard tone.

Clark suddenly turns his head as if he's listening to something.

"What is it, Clark?" I ask, worried.

"Fire — down on 16th Street," he says in a low voice so as not to attract attention. He glances over his shoulder at Perry's office. "What should I do?"

I grin at him, and tug playfully on his tie. "Go save the day — I'll be right behind you to get the scoop," I say gleefully.

Clark suddenly smiles and starts taking off towards the elevators.

I grab my coat and a notepad, and I notice Perry watching me.

"Got a lead already, Lois?"

I simply grin and wave at him as I head out of the bullpen. "Keep the presses warm, Perry! I have a feeling I'll be back with a headline!"

And so it begins...

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## EPILOGUE

~Paris~

We sit outside a quiet café on the Ile-St-Louis, right in the heart of Paris, about to enjoy an authentic Parisian meal. Clark flew us here for our 'anniversary' — a month ago today we entered each other's lives and changed them forever.

"Here's to almost one month working at the Planet, Clark," I say lifting my champagne glass to his.

"And what a month... Never in all my wildest dreams could I imagine working for the Planet and finding a way to use my abilities out in the open."

We clink our glasses together and take a sip.

"And here's to your nomination for the Pulitzer, Lois Lane," Clark adds with a wink in my direction. "Maybe next year an article with both our names on it will get the nod."

"I couldn't have done it without you, Clark, and you know it," I say honestly, still a little guilty that our relationship had started because of my blind ambition to get his story.

He shrugs and takes another sip. "I'm just glad everything worked out," he says, his focus shifting to our meal that has just arrived. I can't pronounce a thing Clark ordered for us, but as I dig in, all I know is I'm eating a lovely chicken with asparagus and mashed potatoes — all of which sounded better in French but taste as heavenly in any language.

As I enjoy my meal, I realize there is more I want to say, need to say to him. I put my fork and knife down and look over at the man that has changed my life in so many ways in just a few short weeks. "Clark," I begin hesitantly, though with just that one little word, I suddenly have his entire attention. I clear my throat, summoning courage, as Clark stops eating and patiently waits for me to continue. "I know sometimes I put up a tough front, especially at the office — but you do know, don't you?" I fumble with my napkin, thinking of the few dates we've been on, the kisses we've shared, and all of the little adventures we've had in between. But I've never said those three words — I guess I'm still afraid that he'll suddenly walk away from me, uncertain if he really thinks I'm worth sticking around for.

Clark reaches across the table and takes my hand, "Know what, Lois?"

I clear my throat, looking at my plate, unable to meet him in the eye, just in case his feeling isn't as strong as mine... He scoots his chair closer to mine, and with his other hand, he lifts my chin so I'm forced to look in his eyes. "Know what?" he asks, softer, in a tone that melts my heart.

I sigh, take the plunge, Lois, I silently coach to myself. Then, suddenly it's not hard, as I look in his eyes and I see there what

I've seen all along. A friend, a partner — and I just know — he's the one.

"I love you," I breathe, and it's as if I open a door to a world of new possibilities with those three words. I'm suddenly taken aback by the sheer force of it.

I realize now that Clark has always been more than a news headline to me, and certainly more than the man in a cape who flies.

He's been my story... my own private knock-your-socks-off-you-won't-believe-this story.

Because I see it there in his eyes — he loves me, too.

THE END

Appendix:

Paris is all about the cafes. Here are some pictures to help give you an idea:

*Editor's Note: Please view the HTML version of this story for clickable links:*

<http://www.lcfanfic.com/stories/2012/european.html>

Terminus Cafe, which is in the neighborhood of Opera where Lois' hotel is, where I picture L&C having their first meeting, across from St. Lazare train station:

[Terminus Cafe at Concorde Opera](#)

[Exterior Terminus Cafe](#)

[St Lazare train station](#)

But to give you an even better idea of the neighborhood, here is the famous Cafe de la Paix:

[Cafe de la Paix](#)

[Cafe de la Paix, exterior](#)

[The Louvre arcade](#) where Lois and Clark stop a moment.

[Berthillon ice cream](#)

[Paris at night](#)

ROME!

All the places I mention are real. Some you may know already, some you may not...

[Spanish Steps](#)

[Palazzo Barberini](#)

[Piazza Navona 1](#)

[Piazza Navona 2](#)

[Teatro Costanzi](#)

Remember this line?

"I find myself edging ever closer to Clark during a love duet about hearts pounding and passion."

[Here's](#) a really excellent version of the duet (a little risque too!), with English subtitles. For those of you not used to opera, the first part is recitative, or speech singing — wait about 2 minutes in for the duet to start.

Così fan tutte is one of my favorite operas! My nickname, Mozartmaid, comes from this opera's Despina — she's a little like Lois, though she's much more practical than her. Feisty, smart, and has been wounded in love. From the same company, [here's](#) 'In uomini' which has Despina tell the girls how they should not trust men, but learn to use them to their advantage.

Clark gave you the short version, but [here's](#) a more detailed version of the synopsis of the opera.

Only the best for Lex Luthor: [Westin Excelsior, Rome](#)

[Grand Canal, Venice](#) Take your pick — every picture is beautiful!

[Rialto Bridge, Venice](#)

Palazzo Dario/Ca' Dario

"Palace Dario is a beautiful palace on the Grand Canal not far from the Salute church. It is finely decorated with many coloured marbles and Istrian stone. It was built for Giovanni Dario,

originally from Dalmatia, in 1487 and designed by Pietro Lombardo. From its very earliest beginnings though, the building has been deemed cursed because its owners have all, even up until recent times, have seen cruel deaths. Inscribed on a part of the building, is a message in Latin: "genio urbis joannes dario" in "sub ruina insidiosa genero" that maybe confirms the curse theory.

[Venice, Ca' Dario curse](#)

[Pictures of Palazzo Dario](#)

[More information about Palazzo Dario](#)

[Venice from the air](#)

[Marseilles](#)

[Chateau D'If](#)

[Inside Chateau D'If, where the boy fell](#)

[This](#) is the cafe I'm picturing for the final scene.