

# Green-Eyed Monster

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Rated PG -13

Submitted December 2011

Summary: Set in another dimension (but not alt-dimension), Lois works retail while Clark is a delivery man. Can they still find true love? What if canon Tempus visited this Lois and told her that she would fall in love with a 'flying, super strong, super fast Superman' before Superman had yet made his first public appearance? What would she do? A romantic comedy.

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## Monday Morning

Lois looked around. She felt like a tourist gawking at the thousands of books. This bookstore was taller than the courthouse, taller than the church steeple, taller than the tallest building in Smallville. Okay, it had been too many years since she'd been to Metropolis and she was starting to feel like a hick.

"This way," said the young man giving her the tour.

She turned and followed him past rows and rows of bookshelves.

"History. Politics. Religion," he said as they passed the different departments.

Lois wished she could remember his name. He was handsome for a kid. But he was definitely a kid; he couldn't be more than twenty, twenty-one at the most. At least five, maybe six, years younger than herself. Still full of hope and optimism that life hadn't driven out of him. She swallowed her pride and asked him his name again.

"Oops," he said, pulling his name badge from under his shirt. He smiled indulgently at her. "Jimmy."

"Oh. Right. Thanks." Lois felt embarrassed. How could she forget a name as easy as Jimmy?

"Health. Fitness. Reference. True Crime."

As they passed this section, Lois saw the most handsome blond man she had ever laid her eyes on. Part Brad, part Keanu, part Leonardo, and just a hint of Mel. Okay, maybe handsome wasn't the correct term. Beautiful. Yes. He certainly took her breath away.

A buzzer sounded in the back of the store, causing Lois to pull her gaze away from the Adonis in True Crime. Jimmy was already a good ten feet ahead of her. Oh, gosh. How long had she been staring? Jimmy waved at her. "Got to go."

A tall auburn-haired woman, wearing a skin-tight rainbow-colored dress, pushed past Lois.

"Cat?" Jimmy stepped in front of her, blocking her path, and trying to dazzle her with a smile, but plainly failing. "Can you finish giving Lois the tour? She's our new Periodicals Supervisor."

Cat looked back at Lois with an expression of disdain and sighed. With a roll of her eyes, she walked back to where Lois stood. Lois felt almost dowdy next to this knock-out. Her hair was a boring dark brown, cut in a simple pageboy style, while Cat's long auburn locks looked professionally styled. Lois could see every curve of Cat's body — she must overflow with confidence to wear something that form-fitting and bright. Lois glanced down at her black pantsuit with sensible shoes and her blouse buttoned up to her throat.

The woman thrust her hand out to Lois. "Cat Grant. Romance, Make-Up and Beauty Supervisor." She looked Lois up and down. "And you look like you could use all three."

Lois ran her tongue over her teeth, her spine stiffening as she thought of a suitable retort. She placed a smile on her face and shook Cat's hand, with an extra tight squeeze. "Lois Lane. Periodicals. Catty, was it?" Her brow rose as she spoke.

"Burn," she heard Jimmy mumble with a chuckle.

Cat sneered at her. "I don't have time to play tour guide to new

recruits, Jimmy. Deliveries await." She glanced at the golden God as he approached them and then murmured under her breath to Lois. "That one should come with a warning label."

Lois couldn't agree more.

"Claude," said the dreamy man, holding out his hand. He had some sort of accent, possibly French. "Travel and Reference."

Cat turned tail on them, pushing past Jimmy into the back room at the end of the aisle.

Lois could feel her heart pounding as she placed her hand in Claude's.

He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. "Ma chérie. Should you ever need anything, feel free to call on me." He stepped closer. "Day or night."

Her cheeks felt as if they were as bright as Cat's dress. This gorgeous man couldn't possibly be flirting with her? Men like him *never* flirted with her.

"Thank you," Lois stammered. "I'll do that." Oh, God. Had she really said that?

Claude grinned. "We should do dinner to celebrate your new..." He paused as if thinking of the correct word. "...*position* with Daily Books."

He didn't? Had he just asked her out on a date? No! Lois swallowed. "I'd like that, Claude."

Jimmy waved at her from the back room. She cleared her throat and gently pulled her hand out of Claude's. "I've got to go."

"We'll talk later, *mon amie*," he murmured as he faded back down the aisle.

Lois exhaled and then jogged to catch up with Jimmy. Her mind was still spinning and she doubted it was from Claude's cologne. A new job and a date. Her first week in Metropolis and things were certainly looking good.

Jimmy held the door open to the back room, which was filled with boxes upon boxes upon boxes. "This is Receiving!" he announced. "This is where I work. This is where the magic happens."

"So I see," Lois replied. She had spotted Cat leaning seductively — well, at least, with her butt pointing out as she leaned against a stack of boxes.

Cat was talking to a tall, dark-haired man with glasses. He was wearing some sort of uniform — charcoal grey shorts with a matching button-down shirt with a navy lightning bolt cutting across the front of it. Ah. A delivery man. So that was why Cat rushed to the back room when the buzzer sounded, she smelled fresh meat.

Lois didn't give him a second thought as she soaked in the amount of inventory that must come in and out of the store every week. More books than she had seen all together since college.

"Come on. You'll want to meet CK. You two will be working closely together," Jimmy told her, moving toward the freight elevator.

Lois looked around, but she didn't see anyone else in the room beside Cat and the delivery man. She continued to follow Jimmy nonetheless.

"Excuse me, please, Cat, but I cannot bring my deliveries in with you blocking the aisle," the delivery man said to the Romance supervisor.

Cat flipped over, this time leaning against the stack of boxes with her ample bosom pointed towards the ceiling. "Is that better?" she purred.

Lois chuckled at the delivery man's obvious annoyance at Cat still blocking the aisle. Luckily for Cat he seemed too polite to voice his thoughts.

The man's eyes jumped to Lois's and she noticed the annoyance in them changed to delight. He rolled his eyes slightly and Lois had to cover her mouth to stifle her guffaw. She had found a like-minded soul. As far as Cat was concerned, at least.

"CK," Jimmy said as they approached. "Meet Lois. Perry put her in charge of magazines and newspapers."

Oh, so the delivery man was CK. Lois waved, the man holding onto the precariously balanced cart of boxes as he waited patiently for

Cat to move.

“Clark,” the man corrected with a smile and then he chuckled. “I hope you’re thick-skinned.”

Lois’s tongue went over her teeth as her spine again went stiff. She turned her back on him as no snide retort came to mind.

*First Cat, now this guy. What is it with these city folks? Is a put-down considered a greeting here? So he doesn’t think I’m tough enough for this job? Humph! I’ll show him.*

He was just a delivery man, she reminded herself. At least Jimmy, Perry, and Claude had been nice to her. Calmer, she turned back to face them.

Pursing her lips, Cat glared at Lois and backed up two steps. “Clark,” she purred. “I have a box of returns for you.”

“Thanks, Cat. Just put them with the others,” Jimmy answered for the delivery man. “CK will get them after he brings up everything else.”

“And I have a truckload of Miranda books for you,” Clark replied, finally able to leave the freight elevator with his cart.

“Ooh,” Cat clapped with a bounce. “She’s coming in next week for a signing.” Only Cat seemed thrilled with this news.

“Cat.” Jimmy’s voice broke on her one syllable name. He cleared his throat and tried again. “Cat, I have filled up a whole v-cart with romance restock for you.” He held out his hand towards a corner filled with v-carts. The romance cart was the only full cart.

Cat rolled her eyes and finally stepped away from the boxes by the freight elevator. “Thanks, Jimmy.” She gave him no encouragement whatsoever, which was probably for the best as she was clearly a good ten years his senior, although she did wiggle her behind for Clark’s benefit on the way to get her cart. With a sneer at Jimmy, Cat grabbed her cart and headed for the exit. “Later, Clark,” she said, turning back to them with a wave. She had ignored Lois completely.

After Cat left, Jimmy turned to Clark. “Please, not a whole truckload of Miranda books.”

“Afraid so,” Clark replied. Then he turned to Lois with a smile. “I’ve got some boxes of magazines for you too.”

Lois was still frowning. She hadn’t forgiven him for his earlier comment.

“Come on, Lois. We’ll ride down with CK and I’ll show you where your Receiving room is,” Jimmy suggested.

She had her own delivery room? Lois didn’t like the sound of that.

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#### Monday — Lunchtime

Hours later, Lois was still wading through stacks upon stacks of magazines, trying to weed out the old issues. Her white blouse was streaked with dust and newsprint. She had at least four paper cuts, including a nasty one between her thumb and index finger. Now she understood Clark’s thick-skinned remark.

*Ha ha, delivery man. Very funny.*

There was a knock on her door and she turned around to see Perry peering inside.

“No one has seen you in a couple of hours. I came by to make sure you weren’t buried alive.”

Lois placed a more hopeful smile on her face than she felt. “Not yet.”

“Why don’t you take a break? Even Elvis didn’t record a hit single on his first day.”

Her shoulders sagged. “Thanks.” A break. She could use one of those.

“When you come back, you should go out and straighten the racks. It looks like they got hit by a three-year-old tornado.”

Lois sighed. Lovely. If it wasn’t one mess, it was another.

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#### Monday — Afternoon

At the end of her day, Lois returned to her Periodicals Receiving room — or ‘jail cell’ as she was starting to think of the tiny room — to retrieve her suit jacket. Just inside the door were three new boxes of magazines. Sitting on top was a brand new first aid kit with an

attached yellow sticky-note.

*Welcome to the salt mine*, someone had written in slightly cluttered script.

A smile curved her lips for half a moment. Someone had noticed. Then she looked down at her disheveled appearance with horror. Someone had noticed!

Lois opened up the first aid kit and put a bandage on her latest paper cut with a sigh, then hung the kit up on the lone nail sticking out of the wall.

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#### Thursday — Evening

Lois couldn’t believe she was sitting in the dining room at the famed Carlton House restaurant. Across from her, his blond locks dangling deliciously in front of his eyes, sat Claude. Lois took a sip of her wine. Wine! She couldn’t remember the last time she had been able to afford a glass of good wine, or even bad wine. She smiled over at Claude and sighed. He had been talking nonstop since they sat down, about his life in Metropolis and his career aspirations as an actor. He claimed to have two callbacks the following week.

Claude’s accent had completely disappeared. That first time it had been French. The next time British English. The next, Australian. Then New Zealand. German. Spanish. Georgia Southern. Russian. He had just been practicing his acting voices. Too bad. That French accent had been nice. Lois was beginning to wonder if there was anything genuine about the guy. She bet his hair color was fake too.

What was she doing? Lois scolded herself. She was getting out. She was eating real food, having a real conversation — kind of — with another person. Why in the world was she nit-picking over every little detail?

Lois had been rehearsing all of her stories for the last two days, since he had officially asked her to dinner, but she had yet had a chance to dazzle him with them. Any of them. Where was she from? Smallville, Kansas. Had she gone to college? Yes, a small liberal arts college he probably never heard of. What had she studied? English literature. What were her career aspirations?

*Since obviously the bookstore wasn’t it*, echoed her inner voice.

She wanted to write the great American novel. Once she had wanted to be an investigative reporter, but that career goal had just faded into the woodwork.

*To put it kindly.*

Why had she moved to Metropolis? Because if a writer was supposed to write what she knew, she’d better start living her life, so she would have experiences to write about.

As Claude paused to take a sip of his wine, Lois took this as her cue to finally speak. “Thank you, again, for inviting me out to dinner. It feels nice to show my feminine side again.”

Claude had looked appreciatively at her feminine side when he had picked her up. Lois had spent over an hour preparing for her date. Between showering, buffing and painting her nails, and picking out her dress, that first hour simply disappeared. It felt like she spent a second hour curling her hair alone. She had chosen a black dress that swooped down low in the back with her black heels. Simple elegance, her mother would say. Like her mother had ever eaten someplace as nice as the Carlton House! Lois sighed. She didn’t want to think about her parents, especially not her mother.

As Lois gazed around the beautiful ambiance of the restaurant, an alarm bell went off in her head. How in the world could Claude afford to eat in such an elegant place while working at Daily Books? She pushed that thought to the back of her mind. He wouldn’t have invited her here if he could not afford it. He must have personal or family money. Maybe he had recently booked a paid acting gig. And if he would allow her another word in edgewise, she would ask him. She wouldn’t squander her next chance on another ploy for a compliment to which he hadn’t responded.

Taking another sip of wine, Lois pasted a smile on her face. He really was quite beautiful. Too bad he didn’t have a personality to match. Well, she shrugged to herself, live and learn. She set down her

wine glass and told herself to make sure she was drinking plenty of water. She didn't need to get tipsy around Casanova Claude. He had already tried to make a move on her during their cab ride to the restaurant.

"*Wanted to get our goodnight kiss out of the way before the date started,*" he had told her.

Hello? First date, Claude. She didn't think so. One doesn't paw one's companion on a first date. She hardly knew the guy. Was that why he had asked her out? Because he thought she was easy pickings? Just a country bumpkin used to rolling about in the hay, because there wasn't anything better to do? No, she told herself. She was rushing to judgment. She had a habit of doing that. Claude must like her somewhat to take her to a place like the Carlton House.

Their food arrived and Lois gazed down at her prawns in appreciation. Fresh seafood was a luxury in their small community even for a doctor's family. Not that life had been rough. Not at all. Lois could have steak, chicken, or pork any night of the week while at home. If her mother was sober. If her father showed up.

She had moved back to Smallville after college and had gotten a job at the *Smallville Post* writing human interest stories — bragging and gossip column, she called it. She got tired of writing about others living their lives when it felt like she wasn't living hers.

Lois was tired. Exhausted, really. Her new job was a lot more physically demanding than she expected. Taking a bite of her prawns, she practically moaned. This beat frozen microwave dinners any night of the week. Hands down.

Claude grinned at her over his steak.

*Oh, God! You actually moaned and he heard you.*

She smiled at him. "This is really good. How is yours?"

"Like butter," he replied and held up a piece on his fork to feed her. "Try a bite?"

*Uh. No. I don't think so.*

She moved her plate closer to his, indicating he should set it down there. Instead he shrugged and popped it into his mouth. O-kay.

Lois took another bite of her prawns while trying not to look at the bandages that covered her hands. She had spent all week cleaning out the 'Periodical Receiving room' and every time she thought she had made some headway, three or six or nine new boxes of magazines would arrive. She was drowning in work and she could not see it improving any time soon. Most magazines changed over on a weekly or monthly basis; so no matter what she did, she would always be playing catch up.

"Thank you for the first aid kit," she told Claude, the next time he took a guzzle of his wine. She held up her hands. "It has really come in handy."

Claude laughed. "You've got a band-aid on every finger. Two on some," he chortled.

Ha ha. Lois didn't feel like laughing. "You don't get much in the way of paper cuts in Travel?"

Claude looked at her like she was nuts. "The only person who looks like a mummy here is you." He held up his perfect fingers and then reached over to her hands, giving them a squeeze.

Pain shot up her hands and she pulled away.

His lips pinched together.

"Sorry." Lois smiled, weakly, before wondering why she was the one apologizing. She hadn't wanted to hold his hand and it had hurt when he squeezed hers. "They still hurt," she explained.

Claude nodded, but he didn't look like he accepted her explanation. They ate a few minutes in silence, Lois not really wanting to share her life story with him any longer.

He wiped his mouth with his napkin and leaned back in his chair with a smirk.

*What exactly had you thought was so attractive about him again?*

"Should we do dessert at your place or mine?" Claude was looking at her hungrily.

Lois certainly didn't want him inside her apartment. He didn't seem the type of man to understand that 'no' meant 'no.'

"I don't think I have anything sweet to eat at my place except half a Double Fudge Crunch Bar," Lois answered as if he had actually meant dessert. "Anyway, I have to be at the store at seven tomorrow morning."

Claude sneered, leaning forward, and murmured, "I don't throw away good money on a date unless I get something in return."

Lois's eyes bore into his. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me," he replied, raising his eyebrows. "So?"

Lois looked at him like the piece of garbage he was. "No, thank you for your kind offer, Claude, but I'd rather be probed by an alien." Oh, God! Where had *that* come from?

Claude switched back to charming. "I'm sorry, Lois. That was rude of me. I shouldn't have been so blunt with you."

Lois set down her fork, her appetite gone. "No, you shouldn't have."

"Excuse me for a minute and then I'll take you home," he said, standing up with a smile.

"Thank you," Lois replied. She was trying to be diplomatic as she still had to work with the man. What she really felt like doing was walking out on him.

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One minute turned to five and then ten. The waiter returned and took their dishes and asked whether she wanted to see the dessert menu. Her stomach turned. Claude wasn't coming back, Lois realized. She had been left at this super expensive restaurant with hardly two pennies to pinch together holding the tab. The waiter returned after Claude had been absent for twenty minutes and gave her the check.

"Excuse me," Lois said hesitantly. "My date went to the restroom and hasn't returned. Is it possible for someone to check and make sure he's all right?"

The waiter looked at her with pity. "Of course." He knew as well as she did that her date was long gone.

After he left, Lois glanced down at the restaurant bill. All the color drained out of her face. Sixty-seven dollars? For two entrees and a bottle of wine. They hadn't had appetizers or dessert. And that didn't even include the tip.

Lois swallowed and cracked open her clutch purse. She currently had seventeen dollars to her name. She maxed out her credit card moving to Metropolis and paying the deposit on her apartment. She wouldn't even get her first paycheck until the following Friday, which was when she was planning on opening a new checking account. So she didn't even have any checks she could bounce to get out of there. That was one of the reasons she had jumped at this date so eagerly. She had seen ramen noodles coming up quickly in her future. Why, oh why, hadn't she stayed in Smallville until she had had more money saved up?

At least the prawns had tasted good, but she doubted she would be able to eat them again without thinking of Claude. The waiter returned and let her know that 'yes, indeed' her date had bolted and left her with the bill. Tears welled up in Lois's eyes, but she willed them not to fall. She wouldn't use tears to get out of this. She had learned a valuable lesson and she wouldn't allow herself any self-pity. Claude was a clod, but she should have never agreed to eat at such a restaurant without being able to pay her fair share.

Lois swallowed again, and gazed up at the waiter. "I'm sorry, but I don't have enough money to pay for this check. Perhaps you should send for the manager."

The waiter frowned and nodded at the inevitable.

The manager was sympathetic to Lois's cause, but refused to let her go without some kind of compensation to cover the bill.

"I only have seventeen dollars," Lois explained.

"We do take credit cards."

"Maxed out," she whispered.

"Although we don't usually take personal checks, I could make an exception..."

Lois shook her head.

"Perhaps I should call the police," the manager replied.

Lois pressed her lips together and took a deep breath. “And charge me with what exactly? Poor judgment when it comes to men?”

“Stealing.”

She blanched, finally allowing her pent up tears to fall. “Stealing?”

“Come on, Mr. Laderman,” said her waiter appearing out of nowhere. “Surely we don’t have to call the police.”

“I’ll pay for the food, I promise. But I’m new in town and I don’t even get my first paycheck until next week,” Lois pleaded.

“Why should I trust you to come back?” replied the manager.

Lois sighed and looked down. Well, wasn’t that exactly what trust was... a leap of faith?

“Didn’t Jesus call in sick?”

She glanced up at the waiter and then over at the manager. *Jesus?*

The manager contemplated this information for a minute before replying, “I am short a dishwasher this evening...”

Lois jumped at this chance. “I can wash dishes.” How hard could it be? She gazed at him pleadingly. “Please, don’t call the police, Mr. Laderman.”

“This way,” said the manager waving for her to follow him.

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Lois stumbled out of the Carlton House restaurant at quarter after midnight. Mr. Laderman had been nice, after all. He told her that if she ever needed a job to give him a call. Someone out there still appreciated a person who worked after agreeing to work. But she never wanted to work as a dishwasher again. Especially not in her formerly nice black dress and her heels.

Her feet were killing her and she didn’t even want to think what the steam had done to her face and hair. Or what she had spilled down the front of her dress. Every one of her newly painted nails was chipped and all of her band-aids had fallen off. If nothing else, Claude’s stunt had made her appreciate her job at Daily Books. There *were* worse jobs in the city than being Periodicals Supervisor at the bookstore.

Rain had started to fall while she was in the restaurant. At first, it had felt good on her hot, tired skin. But the rain started falling heavier and heavier until she could almost swear there was someone floating above her with a never-ending bucket of water. Lois was soaked through and shivering when she finally made it to a covered bus stop. She didn’t know exactly which section of town she was in or which bus would take her back to her cave or how often it ran. She was tired, lost, and sopping wet; not to mention every one of her fingers hurt and she thought she might be developing a blister on each of her feet.

Lois studied the bus map and determined that it was a straight shot back to her apartment via Bus #23. Thank goodness. When the bus arrived some fifteen minutes later, she happily boarded it. After traveling a few blocks, Lois discovered she was riding it in the wrong direction. She explained her predicament with the bus driver and was able to convince him — after some minutes of discussion — to give her a transfer.

Mr. Laderman had been so happy with her work that he had considered it fair trade for her dinner and refused to accept any of her money. She had just enough cash left to last her the next few days, having tipped her waiter ten of the seventeen dollars in her purse. It hadn’t been Eduardo’s fault that her date had ditched her without paying.

She stepped off the bus and into a puddle formed by a clogged storm drain. Terrific. Lois shook her foot once firmly on the sidewalk, but in the torrential rain it was basically pointless. As she hobbled to the corner of the dark and deserted street, a dog came out of nowhere — attracted to whatever combination of smells she had spilled down the front of herself, she figured — and knocked her flat on her back, causing her to hit her head against the sidewalk.

She didn’t know from where, but Lois found the strength to push the dog off of her and pull herself to her feet. She ran down the rest of the block with the dog at her heels. At the corner her shoes slipped on the wet pavement, causing her to twist her ankle, break the heel of her shoe, and fall into the street. She looked up and saw a pair of

headlights aimed directly at her dark and invisible body. Lois screamed.

A flash of blue and a streak of red came out of nowhere and suddenly a pair of strong arms held her. She smelled smoke and felt the wind on her face, then she let the darkness take her.

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#### Friday — Very Early Morning

When Lois awoke it was around two in the morning and she was lying on her futon couch that doubled as her bed. She was still wearing her black dress, but her broken shoes were neatly sitting between the couch and coffee table.

She had no memory of how she had gotten home. No memory of catching the other bus. No memory of trudging up the hill to her apartment building. No memory of unlocking the door to her building or walking through the main building out through the courtyard, past the swimming pool to the back building and her basement apartment. No memory past falling into the street and a pair of strong arms holding her.

*Impossible! That couldn’t have happened,* she told herself.

Lois dragged her sorry butt into the bathroom, threw her probably ruined dress into the laundry basket and climbed into the shower. As she rubbed shampoo through her hair, she felt a tender bump on the back of her head. Maybe that was why she had no memories of coming home, because she had a concussion from hitting her head on the sidewalk when the dog jumped on her.

Her father would tell her she should go to the hospital and have her head checked — if she told him about the incident. But her health insurance wouldn’t kick in until she had been with the bookstore three months; she had only been there a week. She would just have to deal and hope for the best. Maybe she should set her alarm clock to wake her every two hours, just in case. She closed her eyes and let the water rinse the bubbles out of her hair. With her eyes closed, she once again felt the sensation of falling off the curb and into oncoming traffic.

Her eyes flashed open. How in the world was she alive? There was no logical answer, besides that imaginary man with the strong arms, who smelled of smoke. And that wasn’t a logical answer, that was a fantasy. Lois scoffed at herself. Fantasy. Listen to herself. She had the worst night of her life and the only ‘logical’ solution her brain came up with was that a man saved her?

*Great, Lois! Something goes wrong in your life and you expect the answer to your problems to be a man,* her mind said, laughing at her. *Typical.*

Lois shook her head. She had had this argument with her mind many times before.

Turning off the water, she grabbed her towel. But how had she survived? Had she just imagined falling into the street? Lois set her foot on the closed lid of the toilet and rubbed down her leg with the towel. When she got down to her ankle, it certainly felt tender and sore. Hmmm.

Her dress should have been soaked through, but she hadn’t woken up with a chill or smelling damp and musky. After hanging up her towel, she took her dress out of the laundry basket. The dress was dry. How was that possible? She put on her nightshirt and went back to her living room and felt her futon. Dry. She picked up her shoes, sopping wet and dripping on her carpet. She threw them in the trash.

Okay. Her shoes were wet, but her dress and couch were dry? That didn’t make any sense.

Lois sat down on her futon couch, her head beginning to throb. She decided not to exert the extra effort to push the futon into a bed. Her purse — where was her purse? She found it on the floor on the far side of the coffee table. She must have thrown it there when she came in. It was open and some stuff had fallen out. Kneeling on the floor, she picked up her lipstick, her wallet, the five dollars and sixty-seven cents to her name, and her bus transfer.

She sat up. The bus transfer? If she had taken the bus home wouldn’t she have used the transfer? And if Lois had used the bus transfer to come home how could she be holding it in her hand? She

swallowed. How had she gotten home?

Lois glanced over at her front door. Only the door knob was locked. Her eyes went wide. The lock someone could turn and then shut the door to lock on their way out of her apartment. She was at her door a moment later, turning the dead bolt and fastening the security chain. She leaned against the door and then slid to the floor. Had someone brought her home? Who? How had *he* known where she had lived? Who was he? She knew without a doubt that those strong arms belonged to a man. A man who smelled of smoke.

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#### Friday — Mid-Morning

"Hi," a friendly, male voice said from behind her.

Lois jumped, knocking down a tall stack of magazines. Glancing back, she saw Clark standing in the doorway with yet another cartload of boxes for her.

"Sorry." He smiled, sheepishly. He stepped inside her cramped cell and extended his hand to her.

With a grunt, Lois blatantly ignored his offered hand and pushed herself back to her feet. Slowly, Clark withdrew his hand. He stood there and stared at her.

"I'm fine," she snapped more venomously than she should have.

"Are you?" he asked concerned.

Her ankle chose that moment to twinge and she lost her balance again, landing on her bottom this time. As she rubbed her aching ankle, the tears welled up in her eyes. She hadn't gotten much sleep after her realization that some stranger — some strange man — had brought her home. Had been in her apartment. Could have done whatever he pleased with her. Could come back. She shivered again with that thought, dislodging the tears.

Clark reached out to comfort her and she pulled away. She didn't want anyone to touch her. Anyone.

He dropped his hand. "Lois, are you okay?"

"I'm going insane," she mumbled.

"You'll get the hang of it. It's the backlog that's dragging you down," he reassured her.

Lois stared at him. He was squatting just a few feet away. He thought she was talking about work.

"Yeah. Right. I'm beginning to think I'm not cut out for Metropolis," she replied, wiping the dampness from her cheeks.

She saw something in his eyes at her words, but could not place the emotion. Pity? No. Fear? No. Sorrow? Disappointment? That didn't make sense either. The man hardly knew her.

"You had a bad week. Things can only get better."

Who was this guy? He sounded straight out of Smallville. She thought all city folk were pessimists like her.

Lois swallowed. "Clark," she whispered. She had to tell someone or she was going to fall apart completely. "I don't know how I got home last night. The thought terrifies me. I couldn't sleep. Look!" She held up her visibly shaking hands. "I'm a nervous wreck."

She looked up from her hands into his eyes and saw fear. Was he reflecting her thoughts with his eyes or was he scared of her?

"I'm not a drinker. And I don't do drugs," she snapped, pushing herself to her feet again. She wished she hadn't confided in him. "I bumped my head. The last thing I remember was falling into the street."

The fear in his eyes was gone. Now she saw concern again. "Really?"

"Then I woke up inside my apartment. I'm totally freaked. Did I get myself home? How? If someone else brought me home, how did he know where I lived?"

"He?" Clark raised an eyebrow.

Lois waved off his question. "I'm terrified, Clark. What if he comes back?"

"I'm sorry." He swallowed and appeared dismayed. "Do you really think he would hurt you? I mean, someone — this imaginary man — went out of his way to bring you home, safe and sound. That doesn't sound like someone to be scared of, does it?"

Lois's brow furrowed. "Are you defending him?"

Clark stood up and took a step backwards. "No. No. No," he stammered and then he changed his position. "Yes, I guess, I am. Not everyone is a bad guy, Lois." He pulled his cart into the room and stacked up the boxes on top of the three he had left the day before.

She looked at him skeptically. "Yeah, well, when I meet a good one I'll be sure to tell you. But I wouldn't hold your breath if I were you."

Clark grinned at her with a wink. "I can hold my breath a long time."

Lois rolled her eyes and started to pick up the magazines that had toppled over when he had entered the room.

"Occam's Razor, Lois."

She glanced back at him. "Excuse me?"

"It's the scientific principle that the simplest answer is usually the correct one."

Lois stood up and stared at him. "Meaning what?"

"You probably got yourself home last night and the bump on your head caused you to black it out. Makes more sense than some mysterious hero who saved you, flew you back to your apartment, placed you on the couch to sleep and then left, doesn't it?" Clark raised his brows. "Maybe not as romantic, or terrifying, as the case may be, but more logical."

Lois pressed her lips together. "Thank you, Spock."

Clark grinned.

She bent down over her magazines again and found some pieces of plastic. She was about to toss them into the trash when she noticed the security sensors and price labels. "Oh, great. Someone's been using my Receiving room to steal CDs." She sighed.

"What?" Clark stepped back into the room.

Lois jumped again, having thought he had left. This time he caught her before she knocked over another stack of magazines. She looked up into his dark eyes, murmuring, "Thanks."

He set her back down in the little clearing between stacks. "No problem. You said something about someone stealing stuff?"

She handed him the pieces of cellophane as she bent back over to see if there were any more hiding behind her magazine stacks. There were. In all, she found seven different CD wrappers. "Terrific. Just what my day needed. Perry's going to blame me."

"Why would he do that?" Clark asked, handing the pieces of plastic back to Lois.

"Because that's just the kind of luck I've been having lately." She groaned.

Clark smiled at her. "I think your luck can only get better."

"You're out of this world, Clark. Who thinks like that?"

He chuckled, taking hold of the handle of his delivery cart. "If it helps, I'll verify your story."

Lois looked at him in disbelief. "Thanks, Clark." She held out her hand to the doorway he was blocking. "After you."

"Oh, sorry." Clark stepped out of the way and allowed her to pass.

Although she didn't want to admit it to herself, Lois did feel better after talking to Clark. He was probably right about the Occam's Razor principle and all. Perhaps she was overreacting. She probably had gotten herself home somehow the night before. She didn't want to think of all the other things that could have happened to her if she had blacked out on the streets of Metropolis.

An overhead page requested Perry to come to the main check-out counter. Lois turned around, realizing she wasn't headed toward the quickest route, and bumped into Clark's broad chest.

She stepped back and growled at him. "Are you following me, delivery man?"

Clark pointed behind her. "The freight elevator is this way."

"Oh. Right. Sorry." Lois had no idea why that man put her on edge. Or why she felt she could bare her soul to him — a complete stranger. She just hoped she wasn't going to be this week's gossip in the break room because of it. She pushed past him to the escalators.

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“So, we’ve got a thief in our midst,” said Perry, sitting down at his desk.

“It’s not me,” Lois replied defensively.

Perry wiped that idea out of the air. “Someone is using the privacy of your Receiving room to steal from us. Hmm.” He pointed to the seat opposite his desk and Lois sat down. “Well, first off, we’re going to have to lock your door when you aren’t working in there.”

“What about deliveries? They can’t be left in the hall. Fire exit.”

“Right.” Perry nodded, flipping through the different wrappers.

“Aw. Our thief has good taste.” He held up one piece of plastic.

“Elvis.”

Lois rolled her eyes.

“Don’t knock Elvis, Lois. Everything you ever need to know about life you can learn from the King.”

She raised her brows, skeptically, at this pronouncement. O-kay.

“Like make sure your friends are trustworthy.”

“Excuse me?” Lois asked, not catching his drift.

“Cat told me she warned you about Claude,” he replied.

*Warning? Ha!* her mind scoffed.

Lois’s tongue glossed over her teeth. “Well, telling me that someone ‘needs a warning label’ is kind of a vague indication of his true nature. A bright red skull and crossbones tattooed on his forehead would have worked better.” She shook her head. She would get Cat Grant back someday. “So has he been bragging that he ditched me with the bill at Carlton House last night?”

Perry looked away. “Ah. No, not exactly.”

Lois froze.

“What you do in your off hours, Lois, is none...”

*He didn’t!*

“Oh, God!” She buried her face in her hands, humiliated.

“I would just recommend...”

Her hands dropped. “It isn’t true. Whatever he’s saying about me. It’s all lies. I wouldn’t touch a snake like him if...if...” Lois looked at Perry’s wide-eyed expression as she continued. “...if he was Lex Luthor’s son.” She leaned forward. “He’s not Lex Luthor’s son, is he?” Perry shook his head.

“Good. Never! Why do you think he ditched me at the Carlton House without paying the bill? Because I told him ‘no’. The no-good, lying...”

Her boss grinned at her. “There’s the fire you need to show your co-workers. Show them your mad dog face.”

“What?”

“Show them your mad dog face. Let me see ‘Mad Dog Lane’.”

“Mad Dog Lane?” she repeated incredulously.

“Show them they aren’t going to catch you crying in the ladies’ room later. Let me see that face.”

Lois still just looked at him, perplexed. “That’s not really who I am, Perry.”

“Lois, I wouldn’t have hired you on here if I didn’t think you could stand up to these guys. You work twice as hard as all the rest of them combined and I’m not going to allow them to push you around. But this isn’t school and I’m not your teacher. This is real life, you have to stand up to the bullies or they’re going to knock you down every chance they get. So, show me your ‘Mad Dog’ face.”

She rolled her eyes at him and then barked.

“Aw. What a cute little puppy. Try again.”

Lois was getting annoyed by this line of discussion with her boss. She was the victim here. She snarled at him again.

“Better. Again.”

Her eyes went wide as her tongue went over her front teeth. She scowled at him with a louder growl.

“They can’t hear you on the first floor. Again.”

*Again?* She snapped, “I’m not a dog and I refuse to bark.” She stood up and growled at her boss, “I’m warning you now I can’t guarantee I’m not going to slap that smirk off that good-for-nothing’s face the first chance I get. If you fire me, then you fire me. But nobody gets away with spreading lies about me behind my back. If Claude

wants to lie about me, he better have the guts to do it to my face. Now, if you don’t mind I have work to do.” She turned her back to him and marched to the door.

Perry applauded. “Welcome to Daily Books, Mad Dog.”

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### Tuesday — Lunchtime

Lois found a bench in the square across the street from the bookstore. It felt good to be away from the store. Away from the break room. Away from the gossip. The mud she could feel dripping down her face and back seemed to fade away here in the bright sunlight. It was harder to cry here than in the ladies’ room. Perry — or the Chief as she learned he was called — had been right about that.

That first day after her ‘date’ had been the hardest. The looks from her co-workers, especially the ones she still didn’t know, pierced her to her soul. To be labeled a harlot, a slut, before they even knew her name. She had spent most of that day in her cell cleaning, organizing, and avoiding her co-workers.

Three days ago, she thought things might be better. Nope. She didn’t know which was worse: that they believed those lies about her or that they believed them despite knowing Claude’s true nature and without learning hers. She didn’t deserve this punishment. Wasn’t it salt in the wound, after washing dishes at the restaurant?

Lois had tried to proclaim *her* innocence. Nobody listened. Her tale of virtuousness wasn’t as interesting. The day before yesterday she had taken a much needed day off.

Yesterday morning Lois had come into her receiving cell only to find that everything had been moved around since she had left on Saturday evening. She had stormed upstairs and had found Perry setting out the tills for the cashiers. Everyone had been starting to gather around for the morning meeting.

“What in the hell is going on, Perry?” Lois had yelled at her boss. “I take a day off and you give my job to someone else?”

“Good morning, Lois,” Perry had replied with a calm smile.

“Do you think I am unable to do the job you assigned to me?” she had asked bluntly, stepping up to him, toe-to-toe, nose-to-nose. After barking for him the other day, she had thought she had no fear of this man.

He had only raised an eyebrow. Lois had realized she was way out of line with her personal space and had taken a step back, but her anger hadn’t abated. “Well?”

“We are installing shelves for your back stock. It’s a fire hazard having all those magazines stacked on the floor. I had someone move your piles over for you.”

“Next time I would appreciate a head’s up before you send someone to unpack my receiving and process my returns. Otherwise you’re undermining my authority as Supervisor.”

Perry had smiled with a wink. “Noted, Mad Dog.” Then he had furrowed his brow. “Your receiving was unpacked *and* your returns processed?”

Lois had harrumphed at him, throwing up her hands. Obviously someone had felt she couldn’t do the job on her own. Either that or she had a type-A workaholic secret admirer. And she hadn’t appreciated Perry calling her ‘Mad Dog’ in front of all her co-workers, but Lois had decided she would address that issue with him later and in private.

*It’s been twenty-four, twenty-eight hours, since you made that decision, Lois, when are you planning on having that argument with your boss?*

Only Jimmy continued to treat her with kindness and respect. For that she would be eternally his friend. And Perry. The nickname ‘Mad Dog Lane’ had stuck. She shook her head. And Clark. But he didn’t count, really, because he was a vendor — an outside entity — not part of the hive. Still his bright smile the previous morning had been the ray of sunshine she needed to make it through the rest of the day. *If he* didn’t believe the lies... She sighed.

Clark probably hadn’t heard the gory details of her ‘lovemaking’ with Claude. About how she had tackled Claude when he came to pick her up for their date. How she had ripped off his clothes. How Lois

wouldn't let Claude leave, locking him in her apartment. How she had handcuffed him to her bed. *Her*. Lois Lane. Had done these horrible, horrible things to poor innocent Claude. *Ha!*

*I agree. Completely unbelievable*, chuckled her inner voice.

Lois closed her eyes, soaked in the sun's warmth and felt it dry up the metaphorical mud.

She hoped this morning would dawn and everything would back to normal. Nope. This morning the story took a new turn — down a darker alley — and her 'Mad Dog' face had reared its ugly head. She wished she could say she was ashamed by what she had done, by what she had said, but she wasn't. Lois grinned.

*Served Claude right. He would think twice about saying another word about your 'date' now.*

A shadow darkened her patch of sunlight.

"Hi, there, stranger. Mind if I join you?"

Lois opened her eyes to the silhouette of Clark. She raised a brow. "Are you sure your reputation can survive being seen with me?"

He chuckled. "I'll chance it."

Oh, so he had heard the rumors. The gossip had finally left the back room. Great. Lois scooted down to the edge of the bench.

Clark sat down and opened a small cooler-sized lunchbox. Guess hauling boxes around built up his appetite. The smells of the homemade food drifted over to Lois, making her stomach grumble audibly.

She blushed and turned away.

"I've got a roast chicken sandwich on sourdough if you'd like to share," he offered, holding it up.

Lois pulled the cheese sandwich she had bought at the vending machine from her pocket. "Thanks, but I've got my own."

He looked at her sandwich with skepticism, but then bit into his with a shrug. She could hear the crunch of lettuce and when he pulled it away from his mouth she saw the tell-tale signs of mustard on his lip and the drip of fresh tomato down his chin.

Lois realized she was staring and looked away. Her stomach grumbled again and she half-heartedly opened her plastic-covered, plastic-tasting cheese sandwich with little appetite.

Clark uncapped a 32 ounce bottle of Gatorade and drank half of it before going back to his sandwich.

Her attention was drawn back to him when she heard him open a bag of potato chips — a half-pounder. How did this guy eat so much and look so...? Her stomach grumbled again and Lois took a bite of her sandwich.

"Chip?" Clark offered her the bag.

Lois couldn't resist this time and stuck her hand in the bag with a smile. "Thanks."

Clark returned her smile with intensity. There was something about this guy in the sunlight. He seemed to positively glow. He closed his eyes, letting the sunshine cover his face.

*Lucky sunshine*, moaned her mind.

Lois shut it up by taking a bite of her plastic sandwich. Trying to fill the silence that her mind would fill with who knew what kind of thoughts, she said aloud, "I'm glad the rain finally stopped."

"Hmmm," he replied before taking another bite of his sandwich. "Nothing like a sunny day."

Lois sighed, taking another handful of chips. They tasted better than her plastic cheese sandwich anyway. "There's something about the rain — heavy rain — like we had the other night..." She shivered. Not knowing exactly where those words, that dark feeling, that fear came from. Rain had never frightened her before.

Clark glanced at her and she realized she was pouring her heart out to this man again. What was up with her?

"But the sun," Lois continued as if she hadn't exposed part of her soul to him. "The sun, like this, recharges my batteries. Makes me feel like I can take on the world. Do you know what I mean?"

Clark gave her another intense look. So intense Lois wondered what he was thinking. He leaned forward just a fraction of a fraction of an inch. There was something familiar about that movement. For the

briefest of moments, Lois actually thought he was going to pull her into those strong arms and press those lips against hers.

But then the moment was gone and Clark grinned. "Yeah," he finally replied, leaning his back against the bench. "I know exactly what you mean."

That almost a moment, that almost a movement left Lois breathless and... disappointed.

*Definitely disappointed*, corrected her mind.

Had she wanted him to kiss her?

*Yep*, interjected her mind again.

Oh, God! Where had that thought come from? She hadn't thought of Clark like that before. He was a delivery man, for Pete's sake. Not her type of man at all.

*Clark is all man, Lois. Very much your type of man. That smile. Those muscles...*

Lois opened her bottle of water and took a long swallow. Perhaps it was time to go back inside. She felt positively flushed with heat.

She gave up on her sandwich and dipped her hand back into his chip bag again and again. After her third handful in a row, she stopped herself. What was the matter with her? She was eating half of Clark's lunch. He obviously needed the calories more than she did.

*And yet... that man had not an ounce of flab on him.* Her mind positively drooled, imagining her fingers running over that six-pack stomach. Lois squelched her inner mind back down like a jack-in-the-box and sat down on top of it.

As Lois finished the chips in her hand, she slowly started to lick the salt off her fingers. She had a new paper cut she had forgotten to bandage it before heading to lunch and the salt made it sting. She saw Clark glance at her as she stuck one finger then the next and the next into her mouth and lick the salt off.

He swallowed and then took another gulp of his drink. "If you're ever in the mood for a home-cooked meal, I know a great little café..." Clark started to say.

Was Clark asking her out?

*Yippy!* She heard her mind shout from inside its box.

Her heart began to race in anticipation. Lois had to put a stop to this before it got any further. "I don't plan on eating out in this city anytime in the near future."

"Oh?"

Not after what Claude did to her the other night. How could she? She never wanted to be put in that position again. Lois looked down, feeling slightly guilty for the vehemence of her rejection. "I can't," she whispered.

"I promise you, the owners of this café would never force you to wash a single dish." He smiled, but Lois's heart hit her knees.

*He knows?* Even her inner passionate side was appalled.

"Excuse me?" The hairs on the back of her neck were standing at attention.

Was that fear in his eyes?

*It better be!*

Where had Clark learned about her dishwashing stint at the Carlton House? Had Perry told him? Had Claude told him the truth? No, Claude didn't even know the truth or how to speak it if he did. Her spine stiffened. "I meant," Lois continued as Clark didn't apologize, "that I don't date co-workers, Clark. And that includes vendors." It was a new rule and a good one at that — thought up on the spot.

"I wasn't asking you out, Lois," he clarified, stammering. "I was just telling you..."

Lois wiped his words out of the air.

*Yeah, right, delivery man.*

"Either way," she said, gathering up her stuff. "I can't afford to eat out right now. Thanks for the chips."

*And for that lava hot look that I'll be replaying in my daydreams and fantasies until the end of the millennium.*

Oh, God! Where had that thought come from? She had to work with this guy. "Bye, Clark."

Her inner voice had obviously pushed Lois off the top of her box.

Lois couldn't stay here with her inner passionate side loose. Out of control and wanting Clark. She couldn't be anywhere near him. Who knew what she might do or say?

Lois definitely had had enough sunshine. She raced to the street, did a quick back-and-forth look, and then ran across to the bookstore, rushing inside to the cool air conditioning.

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*That was cool, Kent. Really cool,* Clark told himself with a large dose of sarcasm and a real sigh as he watched her disappear back into bookstore.

Perhaps dinner with his folks at their café was not the best first date. And letting her know he had overheard her conversation with Perry like that, also a bad idea. When she had spoken to him about sunshine it took every ounce of his strength to stop himself from kissing her. He had never desired a woman more than he had at that moment. Lana surely had never brought out those feelings in him.

Clark had known from that first moment he had seen Lois almost ten days ago that she was different. Special. It was as if her heartbeat matched his... impossible, he knew. But he had memorized its sound and found comfort in its steady thump-thump-ba-thump. And then he had opened his mouth. He seemed unable to think around her.

He wished he could say it was his *one* regret — it was definitely his biggest regret — that he had never warned her about Claude. But Clark hadn't known how to word his warning to make it sound anything other than petty jealousy or envy. To be truthful, Clark had seen his own green-eyed-monster lurking around as well.

Lois hadn't given him a second thought and hardly a first glance on that first day — for that whole first week — he could tell. It felt the way he imagined a knife stab would feel, to listen to that beautiful heartbeat of hers quicken when Clark heard her speak to Claude. The way that slime had brought out the rose in her cheeks when he could not.

And then the other night in the rain... He closed his eyes in a wince. She had spoken about the rain like it was the boogey man. That night still haunted her. Clark knew he had something to do with that and for that reason alone he would never forgive himself.

He had just been returning home from fighting the latest tenement fire in Suicide Slum when he heard her scream. She had been cradled in his arms before he knew he was reacting. Her head brushed against his chest, absorbing his comfort, before she had passed out. That was when Clark knew he was in trouble, deep deep trouble.

Normally he just dived in and set the person straight, pushed them out of the way. Sight unseen. Deniable. But not Lois. He couldn't leave her on the street in that condition. Not in the pouring rain. Not in that neighborhood. So he had taken her home. Back to her apartment.

Clark had seen her leaving one morning on his way to work. True, he had seen her from the sky, not the ground. Perhaps he had been pulled in her direction due to that irresistible heartbeat of hers. He didn't know. But he knew where she lived, so he had taken her home. Another in a long series of bad decisions when it came to Lois. He had landed by the swimming pool, unfastened her purse, removed her keys, and opened her apartment door.

He could have just set her on the futon and left. That would have been the gentlemanly thing to do, Clark knew. But she still hadn't woken up and part of him was worried about that bump on the back of her head. He wanted to be there to make sure she didn't have a serious concussion. Also she was soaked through to her underwear. He swallowed, taking another drink of his fruit punch. He hadn't meant to peek. First he had been checking for injuries...

*Sure, keep telling yourself that, Kent. Maybe someday you'll actually believe it.* His conscience was an annoying best friend.

Clark's hand dipped into the cooler and removed a package of chocolate Ding Dongs. He ripped the packaging so quickly he almost dropped the chocolate cupcakes on the ground. Almost. Thank God for his lightning fast reflexes. Taking a bite of the chocolate goodness, he closed his eyes and let the events of that night flow through his memory again.

At least he hadn't removed her clothing.

*Bad. Very bad, Kent, for even letting that thought cross your mind, even for the briefest of moments, for even being tempted to touch her soft skin.*

Someday, maybe when she knew him much better. Accepted him for who and what he was. No woman had ever tempted him to break his vow before.

Then his conscience slapped him across the face. *She turned you down flat, Kent. You can't even get a date with the girl and you're thinking of a possible future with her?*

Hope. Clark always retained hope that someone would love him for himself, not for what he could do. And he wanted that someone to be Lois. He sighed. He knew it from the first time she rolled her eyes at Cat. He allowed a smile to form on his lips again.

That night he had saved her, Clark had known he should warm her up, dry her off with his heat vision, so he had. He liked doing things for her. Like blowing his cooling breath on her swelling ankle as he had held it in his lap.

That was also why Clark had joined Lois for lunch when he saw her sitting on the bench alone. He wanted to make sure she was getting enough to eat. He knew she wouldn't be getting her first paycheck from the bookstore until Friday. And her fridge and cupboards were practically bare as old Mother Hubbard's. Her purse had contained only five dollars and sixty-seven cents in it the other night.

The grumbling of her stomach had proved his theory right. Lois was hungry. More than hungry. He wished she had taken her up on the offer of his sandwich or dinner at MJ's Café. But Clark couldn't force her. He felt like he had already taken advantage of her to begin with. At least she had eaten some potato chips. Not exactly healthy, but it was something.

Clark had not been able to think straight and the words — his invitation — had just tumbled out of his mouth after watching her suck her fingers, blissfully unaware of what she had done to him by that simple act. He wanted to be the one to lick the salt off her fingers. To taste the salt on her lips. Her tongue.

He exhaled, causing a stray piece of an old *Metropolis Star* to blow high into the air.

*Down boy. It wasn't going to happen.*

Not anytime soon, at least.

Only when Lois had started to rouse herself from sleep, about twenty minutes after he had rescued her, had Clark left. She couldn't find him there in her apartment. How in the world would he have been able to explain his presence? He couldn't, so he had bolted.

*Bad. Bad Clark Kent.*

He wondered, not for the first time, if Lois even knew how incredibly stunning she was. He didn't think so. That she didn't made her even more attractive in his books. Clark had found nothing to detract from her. She was all positives. Okay. One thing. That darn wall that popped up every time he spoke to her. He was beginning to think he had installed it himself, how attuned it was to him.

Clark knew he didn't deserve her friendship, let alone anything more. He had scared her.

*Terrified her.*

She knew he — well, not *him* per se — but someone had rescued her. And it had scared her. She had admitted as much the other morning, when she confided in him. When she had let the tears fall he had drowned in every one of those drops of saltwater.

*You did that to her. You made her feel vulnerable. Unsafe. You. Clark Kent. Hero. Ha!*

He wanted to reassure her... wanted to tell her the truth — that he had been the one who had saved her. But he couldn't. She wouldn't have believed it of him anyway. So Clark planted doubts about her own intuition, hoping that lying to herself had given her some kind of comfort. He would have rather shouldered her pain for her.

Clark gathered up his lunch things and crossed the street to the bookstore. He needed to return to work. He had one more load to take up to Jimmy before starting his afternoon deliveries. As he entered the

bookstore, he saw Lois standing at her long magazine rack talking to some man. She wasn't talking to him as a customer, but as a friend. After ten days, Clark already had her different facial expressions memorized.

He turned his gaze away from her and almost bumped directly into Claude, who was heading toward the exits. Clark felt like strangling the man for what he had done — was still doing — to Lois. It would have been easy too, just close his hand and snap, Claude would be gone. Clark tamped down his anger. He had made himself a vow that he would never hurt another person, no matter how much they might deserve it.

"Excuse me," Clark mumbled politely.

Claude didn't even acknowledge his existence.

Clark got that a lot in this uniform. Either he was center of a delivery man fantasy — usually a woman's — or he might as well be the wallpaper. Hardly ever did anyone look at the man wearing the suit, except Lois. She had looked him in the eye and smiled that first morning they met. When she had rolled her eyes at Cat. Perhaps that was how she taken hold of his heart so quickly.

"Was that him?" That was the man with whom Lois was speaking. "That scum who ditched us the other night?"

Clark turned around on the escalator to watch them. *Us?*

Lois nodded.

"You work with him?" the man asked incredulously.

She looked away, but nodded again.

"Which department is he responsible for?"

"Eduardo. No." Lois smiled at the man and touched his arm.

Definitely a friend. The green-eyed monster roared inside of Clark.

He almost tripped off the escalator as it reached the mezzanine level, because he was distracted by Lois's conversation.

"He left my station, my table without paying. Without tipping. He left you with a check you could not pay... how can you defend him?"

Clark stopped next to the escalator and continued to watch. Oh. So, this was the waiter from the Carlton House restaurant. That was how Lois knew him.

Lois's tongue went over her teeth. Oops. Eduardo shouldn't have said that to her.

"Travel. Reference. Third floor, next to Humor," she replied with a flick of her wrist upwards. As she looked up she caught Clark watching her and she raised a brow at him. Then she smiled. It wasn't an angry smile or a resentful smile. It was a 'gotcha' smile.

Darn. She knew he had been asking her out on a date, because she just caught him watching her. Darn. Darn. Darn. He jogged as quickly as was humanly — not Clarkly — possible to the next escalator, laughing quietly to himself.

*Yep, she got you good, Kent.*

On the third floor he gazed back down at her again.

"Take it!" Eduardo was saying to her, trying to hand something to her.

Clark's brow furrowed and he focused intently on the man's hand. Folded inside it was a ten dollar bill.

"You earned it, Eduardo. There was no reason you should lose out on that tip just because my date ran out on us." Lois had tipped the man? Even with her limited resources?

Clark's heart soared. He loved learning new and wonderful things about her. She might have a stubborn streak to her, but at least it was a fair and just and honest stubborn streak. Every new little thing he learned made him more sure that Lois was the perfect woman for him.

"Take it, Lois. You need it more than me."

*Good luck with that, Eduardo,* Clark thought as he walked to Receiving.

"Yo, CK!" called Jimmy.

"Yo, Jimmy!" Clark returned the greeting. He liked the kid. He always had a smile or tidbit of news to relay to him. And he always treated him like a person, not just a delivery man.

Jimmy was chuckling. "Did you hear what Lois said about Claude this morning?"

Clark glanced around the room to make sure they were alone. Normally he wasn't a gossip hound, but this bit of news was about Lois. He couldn't resist. "No, what?"

Jimmy's chuckle turned into laughter and it was a minute before he could tell the story. "I heard this third hand, mind you." He laughed again. "According to Janet, she and Cat were discussing Claude's newest conquest in the break room..."

Clark pressed his lips together with a frown. He didn't like the direction in which this story was headed.

"Cat had been telling Janet something she had heard... about Lois and the Kama Sutra..."

Clark shook his head. *Lois and the Kama Sutra?* He'd bet she had never even cracked the cover of such a book.

"Anyway, Lois heard them. She looked Cat straight in the eye and said — and I'm quoting Janet here, 'Claude is a waste of time, let alone space. I prefer a real man, not a worm.' And then Lois apparently raised her eyebrows and wiggled her pinky at the two of them before leaving the break room." Jimmy burst into laughter again. "Then Cat replied, 'Maybe she did sleep with him, after all.'" Tears were running down the kid's face, he was laughing so hard.

"She didn't," Clark answered Cat's rhetorical statement.

Jimmy gestured dismissively. "I know. I know. But what a burn on Claude. Not one, but two women called him a literal worm."

"Teaches him to double cross Lois like he did," said Clark unable to keep the smile off his mouth.

"Mad Dog Lane, you mean?"

Clark raised a brow. "Mad Dog?" He hadn't heard that one.

"That's what everyone around here is calling her now." Jimmy chuckled. "Half of the booksellers are frightened stiff of her. Of what she might say about them. They are doing everything possible to stay on her good side."

Wow, she turned her reputation around with that one statement. *Good for you, Lois,* Clark called out to her with his thoughts. *Good for you.*

"Do you think she'd consider dating a guy like me? I mean, I know I'm a lot younger than..."

"No." Clark hadn't meant to interrupt Jimmy, but the word just jumped out of his mouth.

Jimmy raised a brow and repeated back slowly, "No?"

"She doesn't date co-workers anymore," Clark clarified, trying to make it sound like he had answered the kid instead of the green-eyed monster who had taken over his body.

Jimmy grinned. "Shot you down, did she?"

Clark chuckled, his cheeks dusted with embarrassment. He was completely transparent when it came to Lois. "Faster than a speeding bullet."

His friend patted him on the back with a sympathetic chortle. "If she turned you down, man, there's no way she'd consider me.

Probably best if we just remain friends."

"Probably best," Clark agreed. Lois could use a friend or two.

Perry came into the back room at that moment. "Oh, good, Kent. You haven't left yet. A word. My office."

Clark waved at Jimmy and followed Perry back to his office. He shut the door and sat down in the visitor's chair.

Perry sat on the edge of the desk. "What are you doing, son?"

Clark didn't follow. "Excuse me?"

"I thought we had an agreement. I'd hire you back — at a much higher pay scale than most everyone else in the store — and you would blend into the background."

"Sir?" Clark stared at him. Had someone seen him working at super speed?

"Now, Clark, you're the fastest shelve I've seen in twenty years and because of your other special... skills, you're the best weekend security guard with whom I'll ever have the pleasure of working."

"Thank you, sir," he replied. Outside of his folks, Perry White was the only person who knew of Clark's abilities.

The two of them had been opening the store one morning —

almost five years ago now — when a couple of masked gunmen had pushed their way inside and tried to get Perry to open the safe. Perry had balked — as it wasn't in the Chief's nature to kowtow to threats — and had grabbed the robber's gun. A struggle ensued. Despite being tied to a chair in the break room, Clark had broken free and made it to the office in time to stop the bullet before it hit Perry.

Then Clark had tied up the two robbers and called the police. The robbers had not been quite sure what had happened or how close to a murder rap they had been. The police had been disappointed to find the robbers had destroyed the security tape, so there was no photographic record of the events. Only the robbers hadn't removed the security tape, Perry had. He had seen... or more accurately known... what Clark had done to save his boss's life.

Perry had called Clark into the office a few days after the robbery and had confronted him about what really had happened. Clark had been hesitant to admit the truth until Perry had shown him the videotape evidence. Then the Chief had done something to cement their friendship forever. He had ejected the tape and handed it to Clark. Then he had said, "I don't know how or why you did it, son, but thank you."

Clark had worked at the store under Perry's management without regret for two years, until one day Clark realized that he could no longer ignore the numerous pleas for help he heard around the city. He needed a job with more flexibility to disappear; he needed to be available to help at a moment's notice, if he could. Perry had understood and had wished him well.

The year after that, when his parents' rent on the café's lease had been doubled — thank you, Lex Luthor — in an attempt to close them down and build condos, Perry had offered to give Clark a part-time weekend job as overnight security guard and book shelver. He was hired on at five times base salary — as Perry said Clark could easily do the work of five men and do it in one eight hour shift instead of forty hours — so that Clark could help his folks pay their rent without raising prices at the café. The only condition that Perry had was that Clark not draw attention to himself because if Daily Books' parent company — LexCo — found out that Clark was only working one eight hour shift instead of the forty on his paycheck — it would be both their hides on the line.

"But now I'm on the receiving end of irate tirades from my Magazine supervisor that someone has been doing her job for her," Perry continued as Clark's thoughts returned to the present. "Kent, you asked if you could put shelves up in her Receiving room and now you're assisting Lois with her duties?"

Clark looked down. He had smiled fondly when Perry mentioned Lois's irate tirades. He had been on the receiving end of a few of those himself. He could never get away with anything around Perry. The man was sharper than a tack and — as he had reminded Clark on several occasions — he hadn't become manager of the biggest bookstore in Metropolis because he could yodel.

Clark cleared his throat before answering, "There was a huge backlog when she started, Chief, and I was just trying to help her catch up. I guess I got carried away."

Perry raised a curious eyebrow at this statement and mumbled under his breath, "Better her than Cat."

Clark couldn't agree more. Then he remembered Lois's reaction to his dinner invitation at lunch. "You need not worry, Chief. Lois has made it clear she no longer dates co-workers."

His boss's eyebrows remained elevated as he gazed at Clark with a soft laugh. "That doesn't surprise me, son, after the number — or should I say numbers? — that Claude pulled on her."

"Isn't there anything you could do about him?" Clark asked for what felt like the tenth time. "Ditching her at that pricy restaurant was all but criminal."

Perry nodded. He had long since stopped asking Clark how he knew what had been said in private conversations. "I agree with you that he has gotten more out of hand, Kent. But officially we have no grounds for termination. All his exploits happen away from the store."

"Have you heard his latest lies about Lois? That's walking the line of sexual harassment."

Perry moved to his desk chair and sat down. "I know. I know. Which is why Claude has gotten an official reprimand and a stern talking to."

It was Clark's turn to raise his brow. *A stern talking to?* There had to be a better solution. "Cat needs to be removed as the female employee warning committee. You should tell the new hires..."

"Kent, as their boss — and as much as it pains me to say this — I represent LexCo. And as that evil representative, I officially cannot go behind one employee's back to warn another."

A reassuring smile graced Clark's lips. "You could never be evil, Chief."

Perry sighed. "Thanks." He shook his head. "Sometimes, I wonder though..."

"Then how about some charity?"

"What do you have in mind?" his boss asked hesitantly.

"I'm worried about Lois. She has hardly a penny to her name until her first paycheck arrives Friday. She was eating one of those awful vending machine sandwiches at lunch. She practically devoured my bag of chips."

"So ask her to your folks' café for..." Perry started saying before he cut himself off. "You already did." The Chief guffawed. "And she turned you down flat."

Clark gazed away, warmth rising to his cheeks. Was his interest in Lois *that* obvious? No wonder she turned him down. He turned the conversation back to his chosen topic. "When I took her home the other night I noticed she had hardly any food. That and her money troubles. I just want to make sure she had one decent meal in her before payday. She's already so thin as it is."

"What do you have in mind?" Perry repeated. "You want *me* to spring for her dinner? I don't think Alice would like that much."

Clark smiled. He doubted Lois would agree to go in any case. "You could always spring for pizzas for the break room. I know Jack and Jimmy love ham and pineapple." His smile turned to a grin at Perry's sneer. Then Clark chuckled. "I was thinking more along the lines of giving you a gift certificate to the café for you to give to Lois. It wouldn't seem like a handout and unlike a date, it would put the power, the control into her hands." At least he hoped so.

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#### Wednesday — Evening

Lois looked down at the gift certificate in her hand. That was so kind of Perry to give it to her.

"A bonus for all your hard work," he had said.

She smiled. Appreciation of her hard work always gave her a feeling of satisfaction. It was nice when someone noticed.

The beautiful sunshine from the other day was gone and the heavy rain was back. Lois stood at the front windows of the store not wishing to go out into the darkness. The sun hadn't gone down yet, but the steel grey of the clouds made it feel like it had.

Logically she knew that she would be okay walking to the bus stop in the rain. She knew it was just rain, just water from the sky. Yet...

Lois swallowed. Something else — something illogical — gripped her every time she tried to leave the store. Her hands started to sweat, her heart began to race and panic ensued. "It's just rain," she told herself again, trying to calm her crazy heart.

Forcing her feet to the doors, Lois looked out to the wet sidewalk and the puddles and took a deep breath. Her mind flashed to the other night — the dog chasing her down the street, twisting her ankle and falling towards those headlights. She saw headlights shining on the pavement — the reflection of those lights started to swirl and her knees buckled.

Suddenly, Clark's smiling face brought her back to the present. The headlights were from his navy MDS truck with the silver lightning bolt on the side. Clark waved and she was able to breathe again, distracted from her fear. Lois returned his wave.

He motioned for her to come out to him and her heart started to

race again. She shook her head adamantly.

Clark double-parked his truck and came to the door. “Can I give you a lift home?”

Her heart soared. Yes!

*Oh, God, yes.*

She wouldn’t have to be out in the rain alone. Once she got over this initial fear, she would be okay, she told herself. Lois pushed open the door. “Thanks, Clark. You’re a lifesaver.”

Clark wrapped an arm around her as they rushed over to his truck. It felt like he was protecting her from the rain. It was a feeling she liked. As she sat down in the passenger seat, she noticed how soaking wet he had gotten. His glasses were slightly steamed and speckled with water drops.

“Are you sure this is okay, Clark?” she asked, reaching into her purse to pull out a tissue. “I don’t want you to get in trouble for carrying an unauthorized hitchhiker.”

He grinned mischievously at her. “I won’t tell if you won’t.”

“My hero.” She laughed, reaching for his glasses.

Clark gasped and pulled away, color draining from his face.

“I’m sorry,” Lois apologized immediately. Whatever made her think of invading his personal space like that? She held out the tissue.

His face flushed red as he accepted the tissue and turned away from her to dry his glasses.

“Can I see what you look like without your glasses?” she inquired, suddenly curious.

Clark shook his head curtly, putting his glasses back on and dropping the tissue in the trash bag. “I should drive. I’m double-parked. Can you put on your seatbelt, please?”

“Oh. Right. Sorry.” Lois latched her belt.

They drove a while in silence.

The curiosity was eating at her. Lois tried to push the thought away but it would not budge. “Please.”

Clark glanced over at her. “Please, what?”

“Can I see what you look like without your glasses?”

“Why?” He drew out the word slowly.

This time it was her cheeks that turned rosy. “Just curious.”

“Lois, I’m driving.”

“Right. Of course.”

But that curiosity bug kept gnawing at her.

*Come on, Lois. Try harder.*

“I bet you’d look so different.”

He chuckled. “Is that so?”

“Have you ever thought about getting contacts?”

“No,” he answered quickly.

Lois raised a brow. “No. Not even once?”

“I don’t like the thought of sticking something on my eye,” he replied.

*That makes sense.*

They stopped at a red light.

*Without his glasses Clark’s deep dark brown eyes, those windows to his soul that draw you in with every breath would be irresistible, Lois. Try again,* her mind demanded. Her inner thoughts hated failure.

“Come on, Clark, I’m dying here. Give me a peek.” Lois smiled at him, batting her eyelashes.

The light turned green and the truck moved forward. “You’ll be dying disappointed, then.”

*Loser!*

She harrumphed and he chuckled again.

*I bet he would look sexy. Damp hair, no glasses.*

Lois licked her lips while continuing to stare at him. “I bet you’d be handsome,” she coaxed, editing the words from her thoughts.

He looked pleased at her words.

*Ah, flattery always works.*

“If I’m handsome without them, I’m betting you must find me equally handsome with them.”

*Guilty!*

Damn! Backfired. Okay. She would just have to ambush him when

he least expected it. Glancing down at her purse, Lois saw she hadn’t zipped it after getting the tissue. Her eyes caught sight of the gift certificate. “Hey, Clark, you know Metropolis pretty well, don’t you?”

“Lived here all my life, why?”

The truck stopped at another light and Clark turned to look at her.

“Have you heard of a place called MJ’s Café?”

Clark smiled. “Sure, Lois. It’s a great little place over on the West End. Why do you ask?”

“Perry gave me a gift certificate there as a thank you for all my hard work. I was just wondering where it was.” Lois pulled the envelope out of her purse and looked at it.

“He does that sometimes. I got one too when I first started working at the store. It’s his way of saying ‘Welcome’ to people who prove themselves during the first week. I wouldn’t brag about it though. He doesn’t give them to everyone,” Clark explained.

Her heart swelled with pride. Perry thought she was special even after she had yelled at him the other morning. Then her brow furrowed as she thought over what Clark had said. “You worked at the store?”

“Still do.” He grinned at her with a wink.

Lois nudged his arm. “You know what I mean.”

Finally the light was green again and the truck moved forward. “I worked full time at Daily Books when I was about twenty-two. I spent a couple of years before that at community college and then a couple of years traveling. Doing odd jobs until I earned enough money to move on to the next place. But Metropolis has always been home.”

“You folks didn’t force you to go to a four-year college?” The words slipped out before she could stop them.

Clark swallowed. “Sure, they wanted me to go, me too, but we can’t afford it.”

“I’m sorry. My big mouth runs away from me sometimes.” Lois touched his arm. She didn’t mean to, but she felt his muscle. “With arms like this you could have gotten a sports scholarship.” Oh, God! Had she said that aloud?

*Yep, giggled her inner thoughts.*

“I didn’t have time for sports. I’ve been working for my folks since I was twelve.” Clark placed a hand over hers and squeezed it. “And what would a college education give me other than what I already have?”

Lois tilted her head with a lighthearted smirk. “A mountain of debt?”

“Got that just fine on my own.” He sighed. “It would be nice for people to know I have more to offer than my ability to carry boxes.”

Lois realized he was still holding his hand on hers. She moved slightly and he let go, allowing her to retrieve her hand. But she didn’t want to. His regret tugged at her. “Was there something in particular that you wanted to study?” she asked, moving her hand to his shoulder and caressing it gently as she tried to comfort and reassure him. She felt bad having brought up the subject.

“Journalism. Mom says I have an unquenchable thirst for knowledge.” Clark laughed softly to himself. “Dad says it’s my stubborn resolve never to let the bad guys win.”

Lois realized she was still touching him and snapped her hand away faster than she meant to. He just felt so good. So good?

*Very, very good!*

Her eyes widened as she looked out the passenger window. This was Clark she was thinking about like that. Clark, the delivery... She winced. *She* had been one of those people who had been putting him in one of those boxes he delivered. She felt ashamed. He had been nothing but kind to her. She would strive to treat her friend better. Yes, friend.

*Yeah, right, missy,* scoffed her inner voice. *You keep on believing that.*

Clark was her friend, she told herself. Lois turned and smiled at him.

Clark gazed at her with such sadness, it stabbed her. Oh, crap! What had she done? She hadn’t been listening. What *was* the matter

with her? His desire to be a journalist had fallen flat in the truck because she never had responded.

*Yes, Lois, ask him about that, her mind told her. Show him that you had been paying attention That you care.*

But before she could form her question, he spoke again... murmured really, "So, did you want me to take you to MJ's Café so you could use your gift certificate? 'Cause it's in the opposite direction from your apartment."

"No. That's..." Her brow furrowed. "Clark, how do you know where I live? I just realized I never told you."

*Yeah, Clark?*

Clark cleared his throat before answering. "I saw you leave for work one morning," he admitted.

"Oh. Do you live nearby?" she asked, staring into his eyes when he next glanced at her.

*Please! Please, say yes! I want. To be. Your neighbor.*

He cleared his throat again as he pulled his truck up outside her apartment building. "Uh. No, not really."

*Aw, shucks.*

Lois raised a brow. "Not really?"

"You live between my place and the MDS Package Processing Center," he replied falteringly.

"Oh." That seemed a reasonable explanation. Of course that didn't explain his discomfort or his embarrassment. Lois wanted to believe him, give him the benefit of the doubt — really, she did — yet there was something in Clark's manner that told her that he wasn't telling her the complete story... the whole truth. "Thanks for the lift." She smiled warmly at him, before unbuckling her seatbelt. "You're a real lifesaver." He really was a lifesaver. She had no idea how she would have gotten herself home without his help.

Lois went to open the truck door, but she couldn't get it to open. She would need Clark's assistance in opening the door. She wasn't sure she wanted him to get that close.

*Sure, you do, honey.*

"Lois, do you want me to..." Clark paused, gazing at her, the sadness still in his eyes, as he reached over to unlock the door of the truck.

It tore at her gut knowing she had put that pain there. But she touched his shoulder and smiled. "I can make it from here, Clark. Thanks."

"Oh, no..." He glanced down, embarrassed. Then he returned her gaze. "I meant do you want me to come back — after I drop off the truck — and take you to MJ's Café?"

*He was asking her out again? Yes! Yes! Yes!*

Clark coughed. "So you can use your gift certificate?"

*Oh. Never mind.*

Lois squeezed his shoulder. So that was where the embarrassment came from. "Thanks, Clark. But I think I'll save it for a special occasion."

His mouth hung open as he mumbled, "Aren't you hungry?"

Lois laughed, standing up. "I *do* have food in my apartment, Clark. I may not be a gourmet cook, but I can heat microwave food with the best of them."

This information seemed to stun him. "You have food?" he stammered.

"Yes. I went to the grocery store yesterday and everything. I am a self-sufficient woman you know." She shrugged. "So, I did have to cave and call Daddy to wire me some money. And he would only send me one hundred dollars to tide me over until payday, but that was enough." She shook her head. She hated to beg, but for some reason her parents expected her to do so before they gave her anything. Oh, why had she told Clark this? He always seemed to get her to lower her defenses.

"Well, goodnight, then," he replied gruffly, moving into her empty seat and throwing open the sliding door to the truck.

Lois still felt bad about not paying closer attention to his outpouring of his soul. He had always listened so well to her. But he

didn't need to be terse. Perhaps it was because she had once again turned down his suggestion for a 'date.' She was tempted to change her mind and go, but she didn't want him to get the wrong idea.

*Kiss him!*

She leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Thanks again, Clark, for the ride." Why had she kissed him? Lois swallowed and spoke the words she had been meaning to say earlier. "I only wish..." she started to say as she took a step back, almost falling off the truck.

Clark caught her wrist easily, pulling her towards him, their faces now only inches apart. "Only wish what?" he asked her quite huskily.

*Pull off his glasses and press your lips to the man, fool!*

Lois's logical mind went completely blank. She had no idea what she had been going to say.

A few moments of silence passed and a smile grew on Clark's face.

Lois laughed and carefully stepped down off the truck.

"Goodnight, Clark."

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Clark watched Lois trot up the steps to her apartment building. At the door she turned and waved at him. After he watched her go inside, he glanced in his mirrors and pulled back into traffic.

"*I only wish...*" her words echoed in his head. They were going to keep him up all night as he wondered what she had been about to say.

The smile on his face grew into a grin he knew would show his dimples. Lois had kissed him. Sure. It had only been on the cheek, but he felt twelve again by how the simple kiss on the cheek made him feel. Yep. He was definitely not going to get any sleep that night. And if by a miracle he did — she would certainly invade his dreams again.

"Invade away," he called out to her in his mind. "I'll surrender willingly."

Forcing his thoughts away from his recent Lois dreams, Clark remembered her desire to see him without his glasses. He chuckled, doubting she heard 'no' often. It felt good to keep something from her. He was sure without his glasses to hide behind, his desire — his love for her — would have knocked her out of her seat and sent her running for the hills. Except... except for the rain.

Clark's chest tightened as he thought about hearing how her heart raced with terror from six blocks away. He had been worried that the truck wouldn't get him to Lois in time, but he couldn't fly to the store in this Metropolis Delivery Service uniform, especially while it was still daylight out. He only rarely allowed himself to do rescues during daylight hours, preferring to do them under the shield of darkness in his blue running suit and, sometimes, his red jacket.

His folks and he had been kicking around the idea of a better disguise — an alternative persona who would be known for doing rescues — so Clark would feel more comfortable, safer from discovery, allowing him to do rescues during the day as well. And since he didn't wear his glasses for his current night rescues, he doubted his alternative persona would wear glasses either. Another reason he had refused to reveal his true face to Lois.

Clark's mind turned back to Lois's racing heart. He hated that her fear was associated with him — his rescue of her. If he developed this alternative persona, maybe he would be given the opportunity to finally apologize to Lois. Finally help her overcome these fears. She had called him "her hero." He grinned at that compliment. Until then — Clark Kent was more than willing to rescue her.

A frown darkened these happy thoughts as he mentally kicked himself. Of course she wasn't going to allow herself to starve.

*Idiot!*

Clark cared so much for her and wanted to help her so much, he hadn't been thinking clearly. Lois was right. She *was* a self-sufficient woman. That was one of the things he liked about her. That she wasn't helpless, constantly calling out for help, constantly complaining about everything.

He had met plenty of women in Metropolis who pretended they couldn't do anything just to get him to do something for them. Clark didn't mind helping out if someone really needed his assistance. It

didn't make him feel big and strong to help someone who was pretending, it made him feel like a sucker. He would leave those women for men who didn't know how strong they actually were. Thank you very much.

Lois had kissed him! And she called him handsome, sort of. And she had complimented his muscles. He grinned like a schoolboy again. Perhaps he was piercing Lois's wall. He had made her speechless by pulling her to him when she almost fell out of the truck. And she had *kissed* him.

Okay, she hadn't said anything when he told her he had once wanted to be a journalist and that had hurt. She seemed to turn inward. Did Lois also have an unfulfilled dream? He scoffed. Of course she did. Everyone one at Daily Books had dreams. Jimmy wanted to be a photographer. Cat a stylist. Jack a musician. Claude an actor. Clark a journalist. And Perry... ?

Well, deep down, way down deep where his boss would never admit it to anyone, Clark always thought Perry wanted to be Elvis. Not an Elvis impersonator. The man himself. Clark smiled with a nod. Perry would have made a good Elvis, too. Oh, wait, Perry wanted to resurrect the *Daily Planet*. He shook his head with a sigh.

Lois. Kissed. Him. Clark grinned so large his cheeks would have hurt if he could feel pain. All in all not a bad turn of events.

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#### Thursday — Early Afternoon

Two men walked into the bookstore together. One was tall with dark blond hair and a smug expression. The other was short with glasses and dark hair mostly hidden under a black bowler hat. His lips were pressed together. They both wore suits. The tall man's suit was a stylish creamy tan which he had combined with an electric-blue tie. The shorter man's dark suit harkened from a time long past, when men were men and men thought women — like children — should be seen and not heard.

The tall man linked his arm with the shorter man's arm and practically dragged him inside the store. "I'm telling you, Herb, this dimension is a goldmine — a literal goldmine — of excitement and fun."

"Tempus, I would appreciate it if every time you escaped the sanitarium you would refrain from involving me in your little adventures," replied the shorter man.

"Escape?" Tempus chuckled with merriment as he rubbed his beardless chin. "If they didn't want me to leave, they should have put locks on the door."

Herb — better known to his friends as Herbert George Wells — sighed with exasperation. "Why do you keep insisting on kidnapping me, Tempus?"

"Because, Herb," Tempus said, stopping in front of the long magazine rack. "Internal monologues aren't anywhere near as interesting. Look around. Do you notice anything missing?"

H.G. Wells looked around the store and then focused on the magazine rack, scanning the titles. He knew instantly what was missing. Superman. Not a single magazine cover or newspaper had a photo of the superhero. "Are you trying to tell me that you have stumbled onto another dimension without a Superman?"

"Ding. Ding. Let's get the man a prize, shall we?"

"Is this dimension's Lois Lane missing as well?" Wells asked.

"No, Herb, think outside of the box. That's where the fun and excitement of this dimension begins. I went searching for our illustrious duo over at the *Daily Planet* and guess what? There is no *Daily Planet* in this dimension. They work here! In this bookstore. They are just regular folks trying to make a living and not a difference." Tempus snickered gleefully. "I knew you would enjoy this, Herb."

"Clark, too?"

"Oh, it gets even better. Clark Kent is a package delivery man. He drives a truck. A truck, Herb! Priceless, huh?" Tempus raised his hands in delight. "He moonlights here on the weekends as a security guard. A security guard, Herb. Isn't that precious?"

Wells raised an eyebrow skeptically at the other man. "What do you want of me, Tempus? Do you want me to turn him into a hero for you so you can destroy him like you tried to do to that other Clark Kent from that other dimension? I won't do it, Tempus. I tell you that now."

"Of course not, Herb. We're just anthropologists here studying the native people. No involvement. No touching, this time. Just observing," Tempus replied.

Herb breathed a sigh of relief. "I am proud of you, Tempus. Perhaps that sanitarium has done you some good."

Tempus scoffed. "Got you again, Herb. You are so gullible. You believe everything anyone ever tells you." He smirked. "No, in this dimension, I'm going to make sure that Lois Lane never falls for her hero. I know what you're thinking, Herb. Clark Kent always sabotages his own relationships better than anyone we know. This time I'll make sure he succeeds."

Wells scowled. "Tempus! You are despicable. You are lower than a snake in the grass."

"I'm growing on you, Herb. Just admit it." Tempus continued to grin as he looked around, rubbing his palms together. "Now, where is our heroine?"

Wells took a look around as well. Neither of them saw Lois, because she wasn't there. "Perhaps you were wrong, Tempus."

"No! I *am* right. I have seen Lois here slaving away on these very racks. Slogging magazines out to the display rack, her hands covered with bandages, and her blouse stained with dust. Ah, our poor heroine has been reduced to cleaning up other people's messes. At least she is still in the news business." Tempus took another glance around, disappointment evident on his face. "Perhaps she hasn't arrived to work yet."

Wells walked away from Tempus and over to a poster of a blonde woman holding a book *'Revenge Never Smelled So Sweet!'* The poster advertised a book signing event that was currently in progress.

"Tempus," Wells called to the other man. "Perhaps, we could wait upstairs at this event. We could look for Lois again when it's over."

Tempus looked at Wells with disdain. "Looking to buy a new perfume for your wife? Or is it for your girlfriend?" He leered at the other man. "I always wondered what would drive a man to travel his whole life through time. Then I did some checking up on *your* background, Herb. You've been a naughty man. A very naughty man."

Wells cleared his throat. "I still think that this event might be of some interest, Tempus. If you aren't going to take me home you should at least entertain me while I'm your guest."

"Fine. Very well, come along," said Tempus heading for the escalators. He then stopped and returned to the poster. "Miranda?" He glanced over at Wells, who was trying his best not look at Tempus. "Herb, do you know this woman, this Miranda?"

"No, should I?" replied Wells innocently.

Tempus's eyes closed to slits. "Do you know of her then, Herb? She wasn't mentioned in my 'Life of Lois Lane' class in college. I should know; I taught the class while getting my graduate degree in History of Superman."

"No? Then how could I know of her?"

"If I find out that you lied to me, Herb..." Tempus rebuked Herb with a slight growl.

"Wouldn't that be a plot twist, Tempus? Me lying to you instead of you lying to me?" said Wells.

Tempus raised his brow, but took the man at his word as they rode up the escalators.

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Lois walked into Receiving, her hands clasped together in front of her. "Jimmy!" she called to him as soon as she saw him. "Do you have any extra boxes of band-aids? I've already gone through all the ones in that first-aid kit you gave me."

Jimmy left the box he had been cutting open and came right over to her. "I didn't get... Whoa, Lois!"

The blood she was trying to stop by having her hands clenched

together had started to dye her fingers red.

Jimmy grabbed her elbow and led her back out of the room. “Come on. There’s a sink and a first-aid kit in the break room. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

A few minutes later, they left the break room with Lois sporting a large bandage on the knuckle of her left hand. She shook her head. “I can’t believe that I was so stupid, cutting my hand with that box cutter.”

Jimmy held up his hands, showing her his scars. “We all have war wounds, Lois. I’m sure I’ve got a few extra boxes of band-aids back in Receiving.” He punched in the security code for the door and started pushing it open, when they heard voices from inside.

Lois set her hand on Jimmy’s arm, halting him.

Claude was speaking, “I cannot believe Lois had the nerve to say I wasn’t a ‘real man’. Like that Ice Queen could know what a ‘real man’ was if one reached out and bit her.”

Jimmy swallowed, glancing back at Lois. “Don’t listen to that tool, Lois.”

*Was there no end in sight from this torment?*

“I’d say she has you pegged, Claude,” Cat responded. “I’ve known a few ‘real men’ in my time and you aren’t one.”

“Burn!” Jimmy grinned.

Lois couldn’t find the will to smile as Cat continued, “I could introduce her to some ‘real men’, but you’re right. The Ice Queen wouldn’t know what to do with one if he was handed to her on a silver platter.”

Thunder emanated from Lois’s throat as her tongue glided over her front teeth. “*Ice Queen!* I’ll show them. Now where can I find me a man?”

Jimmy pulled an imaginary knife out of his chest and handed back to her. “Here. I think you forgot something.”

She touched his arm. “I’m sorry, Jimmy, but...” Lois couldn’t think of a way of saying that she needed an example of a man, a man so completely manly — one that left no doubts in anyone’s mind — not a kid, without stabbing him with an imaginary knife again. “Maybe in a few...”

He smiled gently at her. “It’s okay, Lois. Just ignore them. You’re better than ten of them combined,” Jimmy said, pushing the door completely open. “Follow me. I think the box of bandages is over here.”

As Lois entered Receiving, Claude and Cat’s laughter greeted her like a slap in the face. She was halfway across the room when the freight elevator door opened.

Clark stepped out, pushing a large cartload of boxes. “Whew, Jimmy! What died in here?” he asked, before noticing her. “Lois!” He practically breathed her name. “Are you...?”

“Clark!” She grinned at him.

*Oh, yes! There was a real man. No one would doubt that,* her mind told her.

Lois ran over to him and wrapped her arms around his neck, laying her full body against his. “I just wanted to thank you for last night. It was magical. We should do it again soon,” she said loud enough for the others to hear.

He had stiffened at her first embrace, but relaxed at her words. “Sure, Lois. That would...”

Lois licked her lips and then pulled his face to hers. Their lips touched and Lois felt a pull as he encircled her with his arms, obliterating the paper thin gap she had left between them. His lips were soft and gentle, but she felt a need, a desire in them that when pressed to hers was contagious. Clark was indeed a remarkable kisser. She melted into the kiss, becoming one with Clark and forgetting the initial reason she had locked lips with him, until Claude’s voice hit them like machine gun fire.

“So, Lois, I see you finally found that alien to probe you.”

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Clark stepped out of the freight elevator into the Daily Books’ Receiving room, pushing a large cartload of boxes. The smell of fresh

blood hit his senses immediately.

“Whew, Jimmy! What died in here?” he asked with a wrinkled nose, before noticing her. That woman who had haunted his dreams the entire night. “Lois!” He practically breathed her name. His mind had been so engrossed in thoughts of her, he had forgotten to listen for her heartbeat on the elevator ride up. Clark instantly knew where the blood had come from. “Are you...?”

“Clark!” Lois interrupted, turning at the sound of his voice with the largest, happiest grin he had ever seen her sport. That smile was for *him*? Because of *him*? His chest tightened as Lois ran over to him and wrapped her arms around his neck, setting her full body against his. “I just wanted to thank you for last night. It was magical. We should do it again soon.”

He had stiffened at her first embrace as they had never had that much physical contact before, but he relaxed at her words. Had she felt the magic too when he drove her home the night before — felt the chemistry between them? It hadn’t only been him? “Sure, Lois. That would...”

Lois licked her lips and Clark could no longer speak. His eyes could not focus anywhere except her lips and the tongue that caressed them.

*What lucky lips,* said his mind enviously.

Did she know what she was doing to him? Then her hands slid up his neck to his head in a move that would require him to step away from her within the next few moments or have her know exactly how much she had invaded his dreams the night before. He had thought the licking of her lips would be his undoing until he felt her fingers in his hair as she pulled his face to hers.

*Oh, God!*

Clark realized a moment before it happened that Lois was going to kiss him. On the lips!

As their lips met, Clark felt pain for the first time since becoming invulnerable as every one of his nerve endings exploded with joy. His arms slipped around her thin frame and drew her closer to him. Feeling her body against his sent a second wave of explosions throughout his body. This was how it was supposed to be. Clark and Lois. Lois and Clark. One.

All the sounds of the noisy city dropped away. The teacher clapping her hands to attract the attention of her boisterous students. The policeman blowing his whistle a block away. The murmuring crowds waiting to get an autographed book from Miranda. All Clark could hear was the thump-thump-de-thump of Lois’s heart. Beating almost as fast as his normally beat, when it wasn’t doing this new staccato rhythm she had taught it.

Clark felt her tongue brush against his lips and gravity suddenly failed him. As he felt them start to slowly ascend Claude’s voice hit them like a bucketful of liquid nitrogen. “So, Lois, I see you finally found that alien to probe you.”

They fell that one inch to the floor with a hard jarring thud as Clark went ramrod stiff and took a step back away from Lois. Anxiety enveloped him. *Claude* knew he was an alien? *Claude*?

Lois still had her arms around Clark’s neck and moved her mouth to his ear, murmuring a soft, “I owe you one, Clark.” Then she stepped away, causing all his molecules that had joined with hers to be torn in two. A fresh new wave of pain struck him. Pain of separation. Pain of discovery. Pain of humiliation. Pain of rejection.

Lois crossed the room to the blond example of poor contraception use and slapped him hard across the face. “Clark is more of a real man in one minute than you’ll ever be if you had a hundred years to practice.” She swung her fist back again and Clark caught it, suddenly by her side.

“No, Lois. That’s enough,” he said, caressing the fist in his hand with his thumb.

Lois turned and stared at Clark, her eyes wide. Was that disbelief he saw? Could she not believe that she had kissed an alien so passionately? Or that one had kissed her?

“I’d best be getting these books out to the signing,” Cat stammered

with a glare at both Clark and Lois before pushing her cart of books out the door.

“Yeah,” Claude growled, rubbing his face. “Me too. Some moron has been coming in every day and messing up Travel. I better check it again.” He shook his head and stormed out the door.

Clark could hear Jimmy behind him cutting open a box. “Oh, Lois,” their friend called to her. “Don’t forget your new box of band-aids for your first aid kit.”

Clark pulled the flying box out of midair and handed it to Lois because all she could do was stare at him.

That was it? Everyone knew he was an alien and that was all the shock he was going to receive? They just accepted it as if he had said he was part Cherokee Indian. Then a new realization hit Clark, his mind punching him in the nose.

*Claude was being sarcastic. It was a joke. He never thought you were an alien.*

That was why nobody reacted strangely. Clark chuckled in relief. Embarrassed that his trustfulness was almost his undoing.

Lois opened the fist still gripped in Clark’s hand and grabbed the box of bandages from his other hand. “Thanks, Jimmy,” she said, leaving the room and leaving Clark in pieces on the floor behind her.

“Wow, man, you are one cool cucumber, CK. If Lois had just kissed me like that and cemented my reputation in this store as a ‘real man’ as opposed to a ‘worm’...” Jimmy snorted with laughter, wiggling his pinky finger. “I’d be a puddle of gratitude on the floor at her feet.”

Clark’s head snapped as he turned quickly to face his friend. “What?!”

“Um...” Jimmy swallowed, his face red as he found an invoice slip from his current box highly fascinating. “Lois overheard Claude and Cat call her an Ice Queen and that she wouldn’t know a ‘real man’ if she tripped over one. So then you walked in and she kissed you as if to say that you and her...” Jimmy shook the invoice, raising it in front of his face, as his voice faded away and he cleared his throat. “Thus disproving that a) she was an Ice Queen and b) she wouldn’t know a ‘real man’ if she met one.”

Clark felt a trickle of the remaining liquid nitrogen go down his spine. That kiss wasn’t real? She hadn’t meant it?

*Of course it wasn’t real, Clark. Lois doesn’t like you like that. She never did and she never will. Especially if she knew the truth about you, his conscience belatedly reminded him.*

Was that what Lois meant by she ‘owed him one’? Clark felt like taking the broom from the corner to sweep up the crumbs of his ego and throw them into the trash. There was no way to repair it.

He returned to his cart and dumped the boxes in a pile. Sulking, he headed back into the freight elevator. Clark needed a few minutes alone to organize his thoughts, figure out what he was feeling, and to re-analyze that kiss. He winced. The pain gripped him anew.

*Lois used you. She doesn’t feel the magic between you. She doesn’t feel anything for you. It wasn’t real.*

“CK,” Jimmy called to him and Clark caught the elevator doors, glancing over at his friend. “She could have chosen me, man. But she didn’t. She kissed you.”

Clark dropped his hand and let the doors shut as Jimmy’s words washed over him. *She kissed you.* He smiled, concentrating on that glimmer of hope. Lois had done more than kiss him. She had changed his life.

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A half-hour later down in the newsstand, Lois still pondered her kiss with Clark. What *had* she been thinking? That was Clark! Her one friend in Metropolis. Maybe if she pretended it had never happened, he would remain her friend.

*Friend? Ha! Lois, that King of Kisses will never be just your friend.*

She sighed. Only in the darkness of her room would she allow herself to think the truth. Lois would allow herself to remember how she had gone weak in the knees and completely forgot where she was

and why she had decided to kiss Clark. For a moment there it had even felt like they had been floating on air. Kissing him had been a good decision.

*Clark was definitely all man,* she thought, pushing down deep inside her the desire to moan aloud that kept rising every time she thought of that kiss.

But she was at work, Lois reminded herself. And Clark was... *... absolutely delicious?* her mind suggested.

Lois slapped her rebellious mind with the back of her hand. “A co-worker,” she amended. And she certainly did not date her co-workers any more. Look at the craziness that ensued since her one disastrous date with Claude.

*If Clark made you feel like this from one simple kiss in Receiving, imagine how you would feel if he kissed you alone in the privacy of your apartment,* her naughty mind put forward, conjuring up images to accompany her words. *Imagine if you did more than kiss Clark.*

Lois swallowed as she fanned a magazine in front of her face. My, it sure was warm in the store today. She wondered if the air conditioner had broken down.

She pulled a pile of weekly magazines off the rack and replaced them with the new issue. She turned to put the old magazines on her v-cart, when suddenly a man in a beige suit and an electric blue tie knelt down in front of her. “Excuse me,” Lois told him, trying to pass by.

“Lois, don’t think I’m galactically stupid. But I love you. I have always loved you. I will always love you and only you. Marry me!”

Lois stared with a raised brow at the man. “Pardon?”

“Please! This time can you fall for me? Just this once. Choose me instead of Superman,” the man continued.

*Superman?*

“Sir, you must have me confused with someone else. Excuse me,” Lois said as kindly as she could. “I don’t know you.”

“I am Tempus, your servant, your slave. I’m here to stop you from becoming known as galactically stupid yourself. Together we can rule the world. Well, this dimension, in any case.”

“No, thank you,” Lois said, forcing her way around him and dropping her pile of magazines on the v-cart. Her teeth ground together as she shook her head.

*Galactically stupid, huh? There’s a marriage proposal for the record books.*

The man was clearly insane.

“Aghhhh!” Tempus groaned, following her. “It’s too late. I was sure you hadn’t met Superman yet. I’ve seen no record of him here.”

“I have no idea to whom you refer. I don’t know any ‘Superman.’”

*Except Clark, her mind volunteered.*

Lois pushed that thought down.

Tempus stood up. “Big, brawny, looks good in blue? No? Super fast, super strong, and can fly in the air without a plane? Has a deep-seated desire to constantly rescue you from harm?”

A flash of blue and a streak of red came to her mind. *Superman?*

But Lois wasn’t going to give this psycho the satisfaction of possibly being right. “Haven’t met him. Does he have another name?”

“Well, most dimensions know him as ‘Superman’ but you know him as...”

“Tempus!” a shorter distinguished man interrupted breathlessly as he approached them. “I’m terribly sorry, Miss Lane. He escaped me.”

Lois raised a brow at a stranger knowing her last name. She glanced down at her name badge. Nope. It still just read *Lois*. Strange. “He’s lost his marbles.”

“Yes, Miss Lane. I’m afraid he has,” this older man said, taking hold of Tempus’s arm. “I’ll return him to the sanitarium now.”

“No, Herb. She doesn’t know about Superman. There’s still a chance for me.” Tempus knelt back down. “I love you, Lois Lane. Marry me! I have adored you since I was a child. Since my mom first told me of the love — the true love — Superman shared with his Lois. Since the first moment I saw that holographic image of you, I knew you were the one woman for me. I love your spunk, your drive, your determination, and your wonderful ability to drive Superman crazy.

The way you torture him with your wiles, those eyes, your stubbornness, and your body. I just know that together we could foil Superman once and for all and rule the earth. For without you, he is nothing. Marry me!”

“She can’t marry you, Tempus. You’re already married,” the older bespectacled man reminded Tempus and then he turned to Lois. “Your sixth great granddaughter Lois to be exact. A very bad match for her, I’m afraid.”

“I’m calling security,” Lois told them.

“Oh! Please do. I love meeting Clark Kent for the first time. It’s always so much fun,” replied Tempus with a roll of his eyes.

Was he being sarcastic? This nutso knew Clark?

*Clark! Ooooh.* Her inner voice snarled.

Lois’s eyes closed into slits. She would just bet these were friends of his that Clark sent to pay her back for using him that morning. For kissing him the way she had without meaning it. A dull ache throbbled in her chest. He hadn’t liked their kiss?

*But you did,* reminded her mind. *And you meant it.*

Lois pushed those thoughts aside as she growled, her tongue gliding over her teeth. “You know Clark?”

“Duh!” Tempus glanced over at his friend. “See, I told you, Herb. I am too late. She has already fallen for…”

“Tempus!” Herb interrupted once more, grabbing his friend’s arm again. “No need to call security, Miss Lane. Tempus and I were just leaving. Come on, Tempus. You’ve had your fun. Back to the time machine with you.”

“Who *are* you people?” Lois asked incredulously.

“He’s Herbert George Wells, famed author with achingly dull dialogue,” Tempus replied. “And I’m from the future. A future that is so dull and dreary, because everyone believes in the ideals of Superman and his wife and their descendents. Not your future, per se, but the future from another dimension where you, a hard-nosed investigative reporter, married your colleague and friend, who also happened to be Superman.” He sighed almost despondently. “Is there no chance for us, Lois? None at all?”

Lois took a step away from him in disgust and pointed towards the exit. “I’m counting to five, then I’m calling security.”

H.G. Wells pulled on Tempus’s arm, dragging him towards the door. “Come on, Tempus, you don’t want to be stuck in a lunatic asylum here anymore than you did in 1866.”

Tempus stared at Lois with longing as his friend pulled him away. “He’ll lie to you, Lois. He’ll keep things from you. He’ll break your heart a thousand times over in the name of keeping you safe. Don’t fall for him, Lois. He’s an alien — an outer space alien. He’ll charm you with his smiles, his politeness and his manners. Don’t fall in love with Superman! It will be the world’s undoing!” At this point the older man was able to get Tempus to the door. “A world where you marry Superman is a boring world indeed!”

“Don’t believe him, Miss Lane,” suggested his friend Mr. Wells. “Tempus got dosed by Miranda’s pheromone perfume ‘*Revenge*’ and isn’t himself. It was the only way I could subdue him to return him to the future. I would stay away from the third floor so you don’t become dosed yourself, Miss Lane.”

“Subdue me? But she has rejected me, Herb. What else do I have to live for?” whined Tempus, his fight gone for a half a second. “Wait a minute. How did you know this Miranda woman’s perfume was actually a mind-altering drug, Herb? You lied to me! Miranda wasn’t in the history books.”

“That’s because Lois asked that the event be removed. She didn’t want to be remembered for her Dance of the Seven Veils she did for Clark.”

Lois gasped. *She did what?! For whom?!*

“You tricked me, Herb,” Tempus said, respect for his friend showing in his voice for the first time, as they went out the door.

“Good for you. I never thought you had it in you, Herb. Seven veils, huh?”

Lois could still hear Tempus’s chuckles after the door closed. She

plopped herself down on a bench and set her face in her hands. What a crazy day! Why did demented stuff like this always seem to happen to her?

“Yo, Lo, are you okay?” a voice asked her. “What did those bozos want?”

She looked up and saw a young man — more of a kid than Jimmy — from the music department standing in front of her. He definitely had a style of his own: dressed all in black, with an earring dangling from his left ear, and his hair cut in a rockabilly mullet. She glanced at his nametag to refresh her memory. Jack.

“Just another day at Daily Books. A marriage proposal, I think? And a warning against falling in love with some super… guy.” Lois shook her head and knocked the words out of the air. “What next? A bomb threat? A giant asteroid attack? A tsunami? Alien invasion?”

“Something’s definitely up,” Jack agreed with her. “I’ve had three different women try to kiss me.” He got a disgusted look on his face. “I think one of them was Perry’s wife. She chased me downstairs from the break room.”

Lois squeezed her lips together trying not to let the giggles escape. “Thanks, Jack. That puts things in perspective. At least ‘Nick Bottom’ wasn’t handsy.”

They heard a scream from upstairs and looked up. A scream of terror, not delight. They saw Cat Grant run next to the railing on the third floor, which was a difficult task in her three inch heels and painted-on dress.

Chasing after her was Claude, his hands outstretched. “Come back here, you little tart. You know you want me,” he roared like a psychotic madman. “Once I catch you, you’ll have the pleasure of having me again in our own little spot. Right over there in the dark corner between Medical Reference and the Human Body.” His words sailed down to them as the store had gone deathly quiet and the background music just happened to be between songs.

“What the…?” Jack gasped and ran up the escalator to the third floor.

Before he got there, three other men in the store — not only employees — had tackled Claude. Jack looked down at her from over the third floor landing and gave her a thumbs up.

Lois shook her head. Maybe it wasn’t just her for once.

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#### Thursday — Several Hours Later

Clark stood in the doorway of Lois’s Magazine Receiving room, watching her and wondering exactly how to broach the subject of their kiss. Or even if he should. He didn’t really feel like being rejected. A hint of a smile crossed his lips.

*Who likes to be rejected?* his mind reminded him. *You have fantastic strength, Romeo, use it to make your legs work.*

Clark cleared his throat and ultra-spined across the small room to catch Lois as she fell over in surprise again. “Sorry.” She was going to suggest he wear a bell if he kept doing that to her.

Lois looked at his arms surrounding her and took a step away, her lips pressed together as her eyes looked at him through slits.

*Well, that answered your question, Clark. Jimmy was right. She used you. Lois has no feelings for you at all, except her usually animosity.*

Clark swallowed and took a couple steps back towards the door.

“What do you want? Up for more jollies?”

His brows went together in confusion. *She had kissed him. “Excuse me?”*

“What? The guys ‘from the future’ that you sent to pay me back for that little incident in Receiving wasn’t enough for you?” she snarled at him.

“Guys from what? What are you talking about, Lois?” he stammered. Had something happened while he was out making deliveries this afternoon?

Lois stood up and stared at him. “Are you going to deny that you sent two of your friends to mess with my head? Harrumph.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Lois.” Clark was

completely baffled.

“So, it wasn’t all a practical joke cooked up between you and your buddies?” she asked suspiciously.

“What?” he inquired with a confused shrug.

Her face went white. “You really don’t know?”

Clark stood up taller. “Did someone hurt you? Are you all right? Who were these guys? What did they do to you?”

Lois stumbled backwards to the wall and slid down to the floor. “You didn’t have anything to do with them?”

Clark stepped forward and knelt down beside her, murmuring, “What happened?” He hadn’t been here to protect her and some crazies had... what, exactly? He wanted to comfort her, but she obviously didn’t want to be touched.

Lois waved the incident out of the air. “Just some wackos came to my newsstand and proposed to me. I thought it was a practical joke, but with everything else that happened here today...”

*Proposed? To Lois? His Lois?* His green-eyed monster growled.

Clark’s brow wrinkled as he tried to concentrate on everything that she had said. “What else happened?”

Lois’s eyes focused off in space, growing larger. “How did he know? How had that guy known about Miranda’s perfume? Even the police...” She shook her head and focused on Clark again. “Claude has been fired.”

“Thank God! Did Perry finally come to his senses about what that jerk was doing to you?” Clark asked, unable to keep the smile from coming to his lips.

“No, actually. Claude physically attacked Cat and threatened to rape her in Medical Reference.”

Clark’s jaw hung open. “What?” he stammered. “He attacked Cat?” A hole opened in his chest. It could have been Lois. Then he felt instantly guilty. Cat wasn’t a saint, but no woman deserved to be attacked. Still ... if Claude had gone after Lois... physically hurt Lois... He pushed these thoughts from the forefront of his mind as he noticed his hands turning to fists. “Is she all right?”

“Some guys tackled him before he actually hurt her,” Lois replied, her face pale.

“I should have been here,” Clark told her, standing up and starting to pace.

“Clark...”

“If he had actually hurt Cat...”

“Clark...”

“Or if he had gone after you...”

“Clark!”

He stopped and looked at Lois.

“This really isn’t a great place to pace,” she told him, her hand over her chest.

Clark glanced around. Had he knocked over any of her precious piles of magazines? Nope. He turned to look at her and realized her heart was beating faster than normal. He smiled sheepishly. “Sorry.”

Lois took a deep breath and released it.

“So...” he started, going back to what she had said earlier. “You got a marriage proposal today, huh?”

Lois laughed. Clark liked that sound. “Just some escaped lunatic.” She waved the event out of the air. Like it happened on a daily basis.

*An escaped mental patient had proposed to Lois?* He felt that monster inside him growl again.

“Why did you think I had something to do with it?”

“Oh, he said he knew you,” she replied.

“How?” Clark didn’t know anyone in a mental hospital.

Lois shrugged. “He said he always enjoyed meeting you...” Then her brow furrowed. “... for the first time.”

Clark raised a brow. “How can he enjoy meeting someone for the first time more than once?”

Lois glanced away. “Well, he did say he was from the future and from another dimension.”

Clark chuckled. “Right. Mental patient.” He felt much better. Laughing helped calm his green-eyed monster. Being with Lois

helped.

*She used you!*

Clark returned to the doorway and leaned against it. He didn’t like that an escaped mental patient had fixed his fancy on Lois.

*You should just leave. Lois doesn’t like you like that.*

“Can I ask you a question that’s been nagging me?” he said, pushing his negative thoughts aside. He wasn’t quite ready or willing to leave Lois.

A hint of panic showed in her eyes as she swallowed. Then Lois gave a resigned sigh and waved for him to continue.

Lois didn’t want to talk about the kiss, so Clark decided to skirt the topic. “What did Claude mean earlier...” He swallowed. “... About you being ‘probed by an alien?’”

She blushed. Clearly Lois wasn’t expecting this question. “The other night — at the restaurant — when he said we should go back to my apartment for ‘dessert’...”

Clark felt his stomach turn — a part of him wishing he had punched Claude after all.

“I told him I’d rather be probed by an alien...” she continued, definitely not looking at him as her face was still red. “I hadn’t meant...” Her words faded as she clearly didn’t want to finish the thought.

*Of course, Lois had meant actually being probed by an alien. What Earth woman would want to make love to an alien?* Clark’s mind inquired. *Claude made it sound like she had meant sex.*

Clark had to agree with his thoughts on this one point. Lois would never like him that way, especially if she ever found out his folks had found him in some sort of spacecraft as a baby. He realized as her eyes searched his that he had left her statement hanging out there. “Witty,” he finally said, not knowing what else to say.

Lois shook her head. “More like tasteless. I don’t know why I said it. I don’t usually say things like that.”

“I’m sure he knew you meant that even if he had been the last man on Earth — not that you actually preferred aliens...” Clark stopped himself.

*Why are you even continuing this topic of conversation, Clark? Do you like torturing yourself?*

Lois laughed, smiling at him. “You never know. I haven’t met any yet.”

Clark returned her smile. His heart starting to beat for the first time in hours.

*She’s being sarcastic, you fool!*

He pushed this thought aside. And promptly decided to see how his feet were tasting today. “You said something about ‘owing me,’ Lois? Would you like to clarify that statement?”

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*Yeah, Lois. You ‘owe him.’ You ‘owe him’ an explanation. You ‘owe him’ for once again rescuing you. You...*

No! ‘Rescue’ wasn’t the correct word. ‘Rescue’ was the word that that crazy man had used for Superman. ‘Save’? ‘Being there’? Oh, darn. ‘Rescue’ would have to do. Lois did ‘owe him’ an apology for using him.

*But you aren’t going to give him that one, are you? Because you aren’t sorry. Not in the least.*

Lois pushed down her inner voice again. Clark was a friend. *Just a friend, she told herself.*

*Yeah and that’s all.*

She cleared her throat and realized that it had been over a minute since either of them had spoken and it was her turn. “I ‘owe you’ the opportunity to take me out to dinner. How about Saturday night?”

Clark raised a brow at her as his lips spread into a grin. “Saturday night isn’t good for me. I’m busy.”

*Busy!* Shouted her inner voice. *How could he be busy?!*

“And since you ‘owe me’ shouldn’t you be taking me out?”

Lois’s tongue ran over her teeth. “Excuse me?” she practically snarled.

“Lois, I know.”

Her eyes widened. “Know what?”

Clark leaned against the door frame and smiled at her; his body more relaxed than it had been a few minutes before, more confident.

*When he grins like that, his face makes the cutest dimples.*

“Jimmy told me, Lois. I know why you kissed me.”

*Humiliation galore! He knows you like him.*

Lois’s cheeks turned slightly warmer as she argued with her thoughts. No! He knows that she *used* him. “Oh.” She swallowed.

“And you’re busy Saturday night?”

“Uh-huh. I’ve got plans.” That smile was reaching his eyes now.

Ooooh. That man was waiting for her to ask him out. As if!

*You owe him, Lois.*

Not a date.

*Dinner, then? You said you were friends. Friends can have dinner, can't they, Lois? You both need to eat.*

Lois couldn’t afford that.

*You're making excuses. You have that gift certificate. And he didn't blow your cover by pushing you away when you kissed him.*

Okay. Fine. She would take him to dinner. She hated to admit when her inner voice was right. “I guess I do ‘owe you’ dinner. I’ll take you to MJ’s Café,” Lois said to Clark aloud. “But this isn’t a ‘date.’ This is a ‘thank you’.”

His grin practically exploded. “Thank you for kissing me?”

Her tongue crossed her front teeth again as she turned back to her magazine piles. “We could just forget it.”

“I won’t,” he murmured.

She glanced up at him. What had he meant by that? The kiss? Or that she ‘owed him’? Lois tried to ignore him as she went back to work, but could sense he was still standing there watching her. Therefore, it wasn’t a surprise when he broke the silence first.

“So?”

Lois glanced up from her v-cart. “Oh, fine. I guess I could take you out to dinner for not ratting me out to Claude and Cat. For not telling them that nothing happened between us. And for not telling them we’re just friends.” She *wasn’t* going to suggest a night. Lois could just picture her asking him about night after night. And hearing of all of his ‘busy’ nights compared to all of her ‘free’ nights would just be too much. “What night is good for you?”

“Sunday dinner would be nice.”

Lois sneered at his smile. “As friends.”

“Of course.”

“Can you pick me up? I don’t have a car.” Lois wished she didn’t sound so desperate. “Or do you want to meet there?” She guessed she could figure out how to get there by bus or splurge on a cab.

“That seems fair,” Clark replied. “What time?”

“Anytime,” Lois said absently. “I have Sunday and Monday off.” She paused. “No, that’s not right. I have Saturday and Monday off. How about six P.M.?”

“Six P.M., Sunday night. It’s a date,” called Clark as he left.

“It’s *not* a date!” she grumbled. And she heard him chuckle.

*Yes it is! Sang her inner voice. A date! A date! Lois has a date!*

“With no more kissing, it would hardly be considered a date,” she mumbled to herself.

*There could be kissing, hinted her passionate side. You liked the kiss upstairs. Why then no more kisses?*

“Kissing Clark complicates things,” she told herself.

*Then you sure opened up a can of worms, didn't you?*

“I don’t want or need a boyfriend,” she grumbled.

*Sure you do.*

“Clark is just a friend,” she reminded herself.

*A friend with benefits?*

Lois covered her ears. “Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!” she told herself. “Clark is just a friend.”

*Whatever you say, replied her inner voice. You're the boss.*

Lois heard another chuckle behind her and fell over. Didn’t anyone knock in this city?

“Losing an argument with yourself, Lois?” Perry asked with a

satisfied grin. Then the smile slipped and she saw sadness in his eyes.

“How can I help you, Chief?” she inquired, not wanting to pry and wishing to change the subject.

Perry cleared his throat. “I’ve been thinking. I believe I know who our thief might be.”

“Great news, Chief.” Lois smiled. She hated knowing someone was using her workspace for a crime.

“Have you seen Jack back here? Does he come back here to chitchat? Or anything?” Perry looked at her hopefully.

“Jack? Jack, from music, Jack?”

*Jack who got chased through the store by his wife Jack?*

Lois continued with a raised eyebrow. “Perry, that’s a pretty serious accusation.”

“There is something about him I just don’t like,” Perry grumbled.

“Do you have any proof? Anything more concrete that he’s the guy?” she asked.

“He’s poor. He works in the music department, which is right outside this hallway.”

Lois slid her tongue over her teeth. “This doesn’t have anything to do with your wife trying to kiss him earlier, does it?” she inquired quietly.

“No! Of course not. I have facts! Cold hard facts, I tell you,” he yelled and then his demeanor changed. His shoulders hunched. His face fell. He spoke softly with his head bowed. “No. No, I don’t. I just *want* it to be him. Twenty-five years of marriage down the drain.” He snapped his fingers. “Like that. Don’t ever get married, Lois. You love someone and then they just betray you for no reason, no reason at all.”

Lois placed a reassuring hand on his arm. “I know, Chief. My dad’s been cheating on Mom for over fifteen years. She hangs on — living with the pain — drowning her sorrows in a bottle.”

“So you think I should just cut my losses?” he asked, his eyes searching hers.

Lois didn’t want to be the impetus for any break-up. Suddenly, the voices from her two visitors ‘from the future’ echoed in her ears. “Are you sure she wasn’t drugged?”

“Huh? Who?” stammered her boss, confused.

“Your wife? Something a customer said to me earlier...” Lois shook her head. How could she explain the words of two psychos from ‘another dimension’?

“What? What? If you know something about this, Lois...” Hope glimmered in Perry’s eyes.

“I had some guys in my newsstand earlier — clearly insane — but...” She took a deep breath and plunged ahead. “They said that Miranda was spraying the people at her book signing with a pheromone perfume — a mind-altering drug.”

Perry thought about that for a couple of minutes. “That would explain some of the strange behavior at the bookstore today.” He raised a brow. “Did she get you?”

“No!” Lois gasped. Had her kiss with Clark gone throughout the store already? “Otherwise I would have danced the Dance of the Seven Veils. Or so I was told.” She snickered.

“Excuse me?”

She waved the words out of the air.

Perry continued to look at her with a strange expression and then shook his head. “So these ‘crazy guys’ in your department, did you catch a name? The police will want to know.”

Lois blushed and looked away. Her voice was barely audible when she responded. “H.G. Wells.”

“What?!” The Chief leaned closer.

She took a deep breath and raised her eyes to his. “H. G. Wells.”

“The author of *The Time Machine*?” Perry guffawed so loud and so hard, Lois took a step back.

“I told you they were crazy!” she said in her defense. Then she started to laugh as well. It had been ridiculous. “Apparently he developed a working model.”

Perry wiped a tear of laughter from his eye. “Oh, Lois, You’re priceless. Thanks,” he said, still laughing. “I needed that, but I doubt

even a time-hopping author is going to help repair my marriage.”

Lois shrugged. It had been worth a shot. “And don’t worry about me, Chief.” She laughed thinking about what Tempus had told her. “I’m never getting married.”

Perry looked at her with a raised brow. “Oh?”

“According to my wacky visitors from ‘the future’, I’m destined to fall in love and marry a superhero.”

Her boss stared at her. “A *what?*”

Lois continued to laugh, turning back to her magazine piles. “A super strong, super fast, super man from another planet who can fly without a plane.” She shook her head. “Wouldn’t that be a riot, if he even existed. I doubt such a man would fall for someone like me.” She glanced back over her shoulder expecting Perry to be gone, having not responded to her hilarious tidbit, instead she saw him still in the doorway, face pale, jaw hanging open. He appeared to be in a daze. Poor fellow. His failing marriage was just tearing him apart. “Perry?”

His eyes finally blinked and he cleared his throat, before tossing her a grin. “I wouldn’t give up on love so easily, Lois,” he said resting a hand on her boxes of magazines Clark had dropped off the day before which she hadn’t finished receiving after cutting her hand. “You never know what you’ll find around the next corner, honey.”

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*Meanwhile, back in the twenty-second century...*

The time machine appeared out of thick air into the gardens outside of the sanitarium.

“Oh, no, Herb. Not back here!” Tempus moaned. “Couldn’t you have taken me back to the Metropolis of 1997? I was really looking forward to meeting my great-great-great-great-great-grand-mother-in-law as an infant.”

“Do be quiet, Tempus,” snapped H.G. Wells. “Time again to go home.” He pulled a plastic bag containing a dead bolt off the floor of the time machine.

“Herb, you know you could be arrested for bringing that plastic bag into the future. That order we’ve got against plastic bags. I remember Lois joking that the law should be entitled the ‘Endangered Plastic Tree Act of thirty-six’.” He sighed. “They broke the mold after she was born.” As they walked toward the sprawling compound of recycled shipping containers, Tempus continued with another dramatic sigh, “I do hate how everything is recycled here in the future. Don’t you sometimes want to throw something away just for the fun of it?”

H. G. Wells ignored this statement and said, “I’ll go back and erase our presence in that other dimension and let that Lois and Clark discover their true love for themselves. Admit it, Tempus. This one time I bested you at your own game.”

Tempus removed a small remote from his pocket. “Oh, we couldn’t have you doing that, Herb, could we?” He pressed the button, exploding the interdimensional time machine.

“Tempus!” Wells stammered. “How am I supposed to return?”

“Precisely, Herb,” Tempus answered with a grin. “This way even if you built another machine, you’d never find the coordinates to that other backwards dimension. Knowing what you and I know about Lois Lane, she’ll fight her destiny to marry Superman tooth-and-nail, won’t she, Herb?”

“You meant for this to happen?” gasped Wells.

Tempus tapped Wells’s head. “When are you going to get it through your thick skull, Herb? I will always be two steps ahead of you.”

“You knew about Miranda? We wiped that event from the history books.”

With an exasperated sigh, Tempus rolled his eyes. “You might have wiped it from the history books, Herb, but not from people’s minds. I learned about it from Perry White’s unpublished autobiography *Elvis, Superman, and Me*, which I found in the Kent Archives.”

A moment later a brunette in a teal and purple suit landed between them and the still burning time machine. With one quick breath, she blew out the flames. She turned around and looked at them with

pinched lips, her arms crossed. “I should have known.”

Tempus smiled his best sarcastic, charming smile and opened his arms wide. “Hi, honey! I’m home! Miss me?”

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Sunday arrived at last. Lois couldn’t believe how excited she was at returning to work... especially this job. But after twenty-four long hours alone in her apartment staring at a blank computer screen, she was happy for the distraction. So much for her great American novel!

Maybe she should start out writing a romance. Lois had not been able to get her mind off of Clark and their impending non-date date. She sneered at the thought of having to rely on Cat Grant to make sure her romance novel made it to the bookshelf. She would need a pen name. Let’s see: Lois Lane... Lucy Lane? No, she wouldn’t want her sister to receive credit... Lola Dane? Not bad... *Lois Kent?*

Lois shook her head. Where had that name come from? She pressed the off-hours buzzer outside of Daily Books for the security guard to let her in.

“*I always enjoy meeting Clark Kent...*” Tempus’s voice echoed in her head.

“Ha-Ha. Very funny,” Lois grumbled to her inner voice. Don’t forget he had ‘plans’ for last night? A man like that must have women lining...

Lois saw movement inside the store and took a step back as the security guard unlocked the doors to let her in.

“Good morning, Lois,” said the guard. His voice sounded familiar.

Lois took a second look at the security guard. “Clark!”

He smiled at her before grabbing with ease the stacks of Sunday papers just outside the doors, dropping them on the floor of the newsstand and re-locking the doors.

Lois’s mouth hung open. *These* were his ‘plans’ for Saturday night?

Tempus’s voice echoed again. “*Go ahead, call Security. I always enjoy meeting Clark Kent for the first time.*”

Clark turned away from the door and saw her staring at him. He smiled. “Have a good day off?”

*I spent the day daydreaming about you*, murmured her inner voice. Lois really had to muzzle her horny side before it made her say something aloud. She cleared her throat. “Good enough.”

“I’m glad,” he said, heading for the escalators.

“Clark?” she asked, following him.

“Hmmm?”

“Is your last name Kent?”

He turned and raised a brow at her. “Why do you want to know?”

“Well, Jimmy calls you CK, so I’m guessing those are your initials, unless you have a middle name that starts with K. Kevin, Kirkpatrick, Calvin with a K of course, Kenneth, Killjoy — then it’s for your last name.”

“Jerome.”

Lois released a breath she hadn’t known she was holding. Tempus was wrong. The man was crazy just like she initially thought.

They reached the mezzanine level and Clark stepped off the escalator. “Clark Jerome Kent,” he amended.

Lois stumbled off the escalator, but she caught herself. He *was* Clark Kent! “Clark?” she asked again.

He stopped half-way to the next bank of escalators and looked back at her with a raised brow. “Lois?”

“Do you know a man who goes by the name of Tempus?”

He thought for a moment and then shook his head. “Not that I know of... But, then again, I meet so many people with my jobs...” He shrugged. “It’s possible. Who’s Tempus?”

“The crazy man who told me that Clark Kent was a security guard at the bookstore,” she replied.

Clark hopped off the up escalator and walked back to her.

*How athletic!*

She had never seen anyone get off an up escalator like that before. Even the adrenaline junkie that she always dreamed she could be would never try that.

“You mean the man who proposed to you?” Clark practically growled. “*That crazy man?*”

Lois raised a brow.

*Clark is jealous!* her inner voice happily sang.

She smiled and patted his chest. “Upset that he beat you to the punch, Clark?” She chuckled.

“No! Of course not,” he sputtered.

“Don’t worry, Clark. I turned him down,” Lois told him.

“I am just worried for your safety, that’s all.”

Lois sighed dramatically, stepping onto the up escalator. Reaching down to cup his jaw as the escalator moved her upwards, she replied in her best princess voice, “My hero.”

\*\*\*

Clark could continue to hear her laughter as she walked to the break room. He enjoyed hearing her laugh, even if it was *at* him. He knew he deserved her mocking laughter after his jealous outburst. Clark didn’t know what got into him. Since Perry had called him to the store the other night...

Clark shook his head. He still couldn’t believe it was true. The whole conversation with Perry had seemed surreal.

First, he had arrived at the store to find it closed and cordoned off by men in biohazard suits. He had been allowed to enter the store via Receiving as long as he did not venture farther into the store than the break room.

Perry had been in his office off the break room, his feet propped up on his desk, his tie loose around his neck. He had nodded at Clark’s entrance and asked him to shut the door. When the door had been firmly closed, his boss had come straight to the matter, “What are your powers, son?”

Clark had dropped — gently for him — into a chair. In the five years he had known about Clark’s abilities, Perry had never asked him so directly or bluntly about his extra skills.

“Perry! I can’t answer that question now. The store is crawling with police,” Clark had responded softly.

His friend had sighed and dropped his feet to the floor. “I’ll explain them in a minute. Trust me, Clark, when I say they aren’t here for you. Look around, I know you can, and you’ll see none of them have microphones or other recording equipment.”

Clark had lowered his glasses and, true to his boss’s word, none of the police officers seemed interested in them, the office, or even the break room. They were all focused on the events area of the third floor.

Once Clark had returned his glasses to their proper position on his nose, Perry had raised his brows and had asked, “So?”

The younger man cleared his throat. Other than his folks, he trusted no man more. “Speed, strength, hearing, x-ray and microscope vision, and invulnerability, you already know about,” Clark started keeping his voice low. “I can also heat things by looking at them and cool things by blowing on them. And my sense of smell, too, is enhanced. I can read a book as quickly as I flip through it.”

“And?”

Perry had known he was holding something back. Clark looked away, slightly embarrassed since he had never spoken with anyone about his special skills besides his folks before. “And I can fly.”

“Ah.” Perry had smiled and leaned forward, placing his fingertips together. “I thought so.”

“Has someone seen me?” Clark asked. “I try never to fly, except at night...”

Perry waved his worries from the air. “The police are here because Miranda sprayed her books and the people at her signing with a pheromone perfume,” his boss explained.

“Pheromones? As in those scents that animals secrete to attract a mate?”

The Chief nodded.

“Claude?” Clark asked.

Perry nodded. “And Alice.”

“Alice?”

His friend nodded again. “She chased Jack through the store.”

“I’m so sorry, Chief.”

“Me, too, Kent.” Perry cleared his throat. “Cat and several other employees who were working the event as well.”

Clark blanched. “Lois?”

His bossed chuckled. “No, son. She kissed you of her own free will.”

Clark’s cheeks had surely gone red from the revelation of this knowledge. “You heard about that?”

“Son, there isn’t anything that goes on in this store that I don’t know about.” At this point Perry stood up and walked to the cabinet that held the security videos. “The reason I needed you to come now was that the police will surely take these.”

“Oh, God!” Clark gasped. “I floated when Lois kissed me! Did that get caught on tape?”

Perry chuckled. “Did you, now? Does that happen to you often? Floating when a pretty girl kisses you?”

Clark cleared his throat again. “It’s never happened before.”

Perry had turned the full force of his grin on him at that point. “That must have been some kiss to make you float in less than thirty seconds.”

“No. The kiss lasted longer than that.” Clark had corrected Perry, although he hadn’t known why. “Two minutes, at least.”

Perry’s chuckles had been more pronounced that time. “Twenty-three seconds. I timed it myself. And no, you can’t see your feet leave the ground. It just looks like you go up on your toes.”

“But... But...” Clark stammered. It couldn’t have been that short of a kiss.

“Do you want to me to show you the videotape?” Perry had asked. Clark had adamantly shaken his head.

“It doesn’t take much of a kiss from a beautiful girl for it to seem like forever. Next time why don’t you try for less of an audience?”

*Next time?* Clark had gulped. Perry certainly believed there would be a next time kiss with Lois. Clark would be fine with that. But he couldn’t let himself be caught off-guard, should there be a next time. Thinking about that next kiss had almost distracted Clark from finding out the reason Perry had called him down to the store.

“Several... more than several customers got sprayed by the perfume as well. About seventy-five would be close to the exact number... including this guy...” Perry had pushed a surveillance video into the VCR and the magazine rack came into view. Lois was standing there holding a stack of magazines and staring off into space.

“What man?” Clark asked.

“Wait for it,” Perry told him.

Lois had snapped out of her daze and had started fanning herself with one of the magazines as a dreamy smile had graced her lips. Clark had never seen her look so vulnerable and sexy. He had wondered — and was even wondering now as he realized he was still standing in the middle of the mezzanine since Lois had touched him going up the escalator — what she had been thinking about to cause that dreamy smile.

Clark skipped up the steps of the escalator as he saw Lois start to come down. He wished he could go back down and watch the expression on her face as she saw the shelves he put up during the night. But he also didn’t want Lois to think he was following her around like a puppy. If he found the right spot in the floor, he could see her easily enough from the third floor. He hoped she would be delighted.

No more piles and piles of mini Leaning Towers of Pisa ready to fall at any moment with the slightest of bumps. He had left her piles on the floor for her to organize and put on the shelves. Perry had told him not to do too much for her. So Clark had just put up the shelves.

Clark glanced down through the floor, through the mezzanine floor, through the ceiling to... the music department. Shoot. He moved over about twenty feet further and was able to see the Magazine Receiving room better from this angle. Lois entered her room and Clark heard and saw her gasp in delighted surprise. Then Lois nodded her head with a ‘that will do’ nod, before she grabbed her scissors from

the tool caddy he had hung on her wall and headed out to the magazine rack to put out the morning papers. He sighed and whispered, "You're welcome."

He went into Perry's office and pushed a fresh tape into each of the security video recorders. He never left them on while he worked at super speed. As he pushed in the last videotape, he remembered the man on the tape that Perry had shown him the other night. Now, he had a name to go with that face. "Tempus."

He had no idea who that man had been, but Clark would certainly never be that man's friend as Lois had guessed. It had been painful to watch him kneel at Lois's feet and ask her to marry him. For most of the video Tempus had had his back to the camera, so Clark couldn't even read his lips.

A second man, wearing a bowler hat, had then arrived at the newsstand. Strange fashion statement for the 1990s. But this was Metropolis, a bowler hat wasn't the strangest accessory Clark had seen... even this week.

When this second man had turned toward the camera Perry had frozen the video. "Do you know who that man is?" his boss had asked.

"No," Clark had replied. "Lois had really only mentioned the first man... the one who proposed."

"That man is H. G. Wells," explained Perry.

"What?!" Clark had gasped with incredulous laughter. "*The H. G. Wells?* Perry, that's impossible! The man has been dead for..." He hadn't been able to finish his thought because Perry had held up his encyclopedia of 19<sup>th</sup> century authors at that moment showing Clark a photograph of the actual author. Clark had done a double-take, a triple-take, a microscopic-vision take. And each take had told him the same thing. That second man *was* H. G. Wells, the author of *The Time Machine* or an exact duplicate. "How is that possible?" His laughter had vanished.

"Apparently he had made a working model of his time machine," Perry replied. "At least that's what Lois was told. Either by the author or his insane friend. She didn't say which."

"You showed her this?" Clark stammered in disbelief.

"Of course not," Perry defended himself to Clark. "It seems that these men told Lois about *her* future. She thought they were clearly insane, but if she ever knew there was truth to their story, who knows what adverse effect that might have on her psyche... to know too much about your own future. As you can plainly see there is truth to their story. It was Lois who told me of the pheromone perfume. These men had told her. If that were true what else of their predictions of her future would also be true? Could you go undercover and find out what they told her? Everything, if possible. What were they doing here at this time? And why they are clearly interested in Lois."

"Maybe they were just sightseeing?" Clark had suggested with hope. "And then after being sprayed with the perfume, they were naturally attracted to Lois."

"That's what I thought at first as well, until I saw this..." Perry had rewound the tape to approximately forty-five minutes earlier.

The body language between the two men had been completely different in this earlier clip. The two of them were definitely looking for someone or something in the magazine department and Tempus had clearly been in charge, almost dragging the reluctant Wells into the store. When they hadn't found who or what they were looking for, only then did they go to Miranda's book signing at Wells's suggestion. Had Wells known what Miranda would do?

Clark's eyes had flashed to Perry's. "Why Lois?" His heart raced in panic for his friend.

"That's what I want you to find out. What did they tell her? It must have been important enough for them to come back in time."

"And cross-dimensionally," muttered Clark.

"What? Lois didn't tell me that. Only that the men had claimed to be from the future. Maybe they also told her what her life was like in another dimension." Perry shook his head. "I'd think I was going insane myself, except since meeting you I've learned to be more open-minded."

"Come on, Chief. I'm not that odd." Clark chuckled. He was as much a homebody as they come.

"Kent, you fly." And that had said it all.

"You want me to spy on Lois?" Clark asked incredulously, his eyebrow raised.

"No." Then Perry had given him a strange look, but did not say anything more about spying.

"Perry, he could have just been an impersonator. I've seen some pretty good doubles at some of the parties my parents have catered."

"How would an impersonator know about Miranda's perfume, Clark? How would he know..." Perry shook his head. "I want you to be a friend to Lois. Maybe she'll tell you what they said."

"I *am* her friend," Clark had stated as he wondered if Perry knew another prediction he wasn't sharing.

*And will you remain even that if you keep acting like a jealous boyfriend?* inquired his conscience.

"I mean be her best friend. Listen to everything, *everything* she tells you..."

Clark had pressed his lips together. "I already listen to her."

Perry had smiled then. "I'm not accusing you of anything, Kent." He had nudged Clark with his elbow. "You could practice your interviewing skills, but I have a feeling that she'd clam up tighter than a murderer in a room full of cops. Think of her like a source, who won't talk. Make her comfortable, woo her if you have to..."

Clark had begun to wonder if his boss wished he was still in the news business. His father had said that Perry had never quite recovered after the *Daily Planet* was bombed back in the 1970s. "Perry, I'm a delivery man, a security guard, a book shelve, a handyman, a kitchen prep cook, and even sometimes an anonymous rescue worker, but I'm not a reporter. And Lois is most certainly not a source. I am not going to 'woo her' for information. Anyway, 'wooing her' wouldn't do any good, she doesn't like me that way."

"No?" Perry had then laughed in disbelief. Did he know something that Clark didn't? "Okay. If you don't want to know what these two dimension-hopping men from the future wanted from Lois..."

Clark sighed. Perry always knew how to read him like an open book.

Clark shut and locked the security video cabinet before he left Perry's office. He walked to the third floor railing and looked down at Lois straightening up the Sunday papers.

That old newshound had gotten Clark's curiosity piqued. What was so special about Lois that two men would travel through time and across dimensions just to meet her? Clark smiled. *He* knew what was so wonderfully special about Lois. Why did it bother him so much that someone else thought she was special, too? Had Lois been right? Was it as simple as Clark not liking the fact that someone else had proposed to her?

Clark heard her gasp in pain as Lois got yet another paper cut. The smell of fresh blood wafted up to him and he stepped away from the balcony and tried not to breathe. He would fall for an accident-prone, thin-skinned, hemophiliac-like woman. The Fates had a sick sense of humor and must surely be laughing at him.

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The intercom to her apartment building buzzed.

"No! No! No!" Lois gasped. She glanced at the microwave: 6:00 P.M., exactly. Argh! He would be on time. She was nowhere near ready. She went to the intercom by her door and pressed the 'communicate' button. "Hello?"

"Hi, Lois!" said Clark's calm and cheery voice.

Lois resisted the urge to growl. How dare he be so calm for their non-date date? She pressed the intercom button again. "I'll be right out. Can you give me two minutes?"

"Sure," Clark replied, his voice sexy.

*Shut up!* she told her horny side for the fifth time since she had started to get ready. Lois had finally, finally figured out why she kept thinking of Clark in that manner. She must be rebounding off of Claude's horrible treatment of her. If she kept ignoring these thoughts,

they would eventually go away.

*Yeah, right,* laughed her inner voice. *I'm not going anywhere, Missy.*

Lois checked herself in the mirror again. She was wearing black pants, a silver blouse and sensible shoes. No little black dress for this non-date date. How nice was this restaurant? She ran to her front door and buzzed the front building intercom again. "Clark?"

"Yes, Lois?"

"Is this a casual restaurant or a nice restaurant?" she asked.

She heard him chuckle. "Both. Casual attire is fine, Lois."

"Thank God!" she replied.

"Shall I come in?"

"No, really, I'm ready. Give me just two minutes."

"Two more minutes?" he asked and she cringed.

"Longer, if you want to continue this discussion," she replied.

"I'll wait."

Lois double checked her purse, making sure the gift certificate was there, and added a few more items, including the twenty-dollar bill from her emergency money. She wasn't going to be hung out to dry a second time.

As she ran to her front door, she stopped and stared at her TV set and VCR and the videos she had rented the day before. She still wanted to see Clark without his glasses. A plan jumped into her mind and caused an evil grin to spread across her face. Then Lois turned back to her desk, opened her top desk drawer, and dropped the parking garage clicker into her purse.

Locking her deadbolt, Lois walked quickly across to the main building. She stopped dead in her tracks five steps from the main front door of her building. She could see Clark leaning against the railing, staring up into the sky.

Lois realized this was the first time she actually saw Clark — not the delivery man, not the security guard — but Clark Kent in his own clothes. He wore jeans and a short-sleeve button-down blue shirt. Her heart quickened. She hadn't thought the man could look any better; she had been wrong.

*Yum!*

This was a bad idea.

*Don't you mean 'good'?*

Clark glanced over at her as if he knew she was standing there staring at him. A smile grew on those lips...

*Those gorgeous full lips...*

... until it reached his brown eyes hidden behind those hideously outdated horn-rim glasses.

*Yes, you must do something about those.*

Clark stopped leaning against the railing in anticipation of her coming outside.

"Hi," he said as she opened the door.

"Hi," Lois replied, surprised she had found her voice. "You look good with your clothes on."

Clark pressed his lips together to stop himself from laughing, but it didn't work. Lois still saw the edges of his mouth twitching and wondered what he found so funny. Did she have toothpaste on her cheek?

"You look good with clothes on, too, Lois," he finally answered.

Her eyes opened wide as Lois realized what she had said.

*Smooth.*

"I mean out of your uniforms. This is the first time I've see you with *your* clothes on... not that I've seen you naked."

Clark raised his eyebrow.

*Really smooth, Lois.*

Lois jogged down the front steps of her building. "Is that what you meant?" she asked, defending her choice of words.

"Lois." Clark followed her down the steps and pointed off to the right as she had instinctively turned left. "Do you mind if we start this conversation over, instead?"

"Ohyespleasethankyou," she gushed. She hadn't meant to gush, but she did so all the same. "Good evening, Clark."

"Good evening, Lois. You look good," he said and then socked her gently on the bicep as if she were one of the guys.

Lois looked at him with a raised brow. "Why is this so weird?"

Clark shook his head and exhaled. "You mean it isn't just me? You feel it too?"

She felt a load off her shoulders. This felt awkward for him as well. "We'll work though it until it is no longer weird."

*Or you could just sleep with him?*

Lois was so glad she wasn't looking at Clark when this thought traveled through her mind. She wasn't the type of woman to jump into bed with anyone. Not that she was an Ice Queen either. She had had sex. Once or twice. With a couple different men. It just wasn't anything to think about afterwards. She had no idea why her inner passionate side was so attracted to Clark. Logically...

*Logically? You're kidding me, right?*

Clark stopped at an old white truck. "This is us."

Lois looked at the truck. Something was off. This truck screamed 'Smallville.' It did not scream 'Clark Kent.' "This is *your* truck?" she asked, trying but not quite succeeding at keeping the criticism from her voice.

Clark blushed a little as he opened her door. "I borrowed it."

Lois nodded. That made sense. *This* truck just did not fit him at all. As he shut the door and walked over to the driver's side door, she tried to picture what kind of car would fit the puzzle that was Clark Kent. The only one she could picture him in was her old Cherokee. She sighed. She missed her car.

Pulling on her seatbelt, Lois noticed him staring at her. "I miss my car," she mumbled.

"What happened to it?"

"I made the mistake of lending it to my sister," Lois replied.

"You have a sister? Younger or older?"

Lois glanced over at him. Clark seemed genuinely interested. "Younger. Lucy. She's the 'wild' child. I should have known better. When I used to lend her my clothes — 'lend' being a highly loose interpretation of the word because she used to take them without asking — she would then end up leaving my clothes wadded up on the floor of her room, smelling of smoke. My clothes always had a better life than I did."

Clark turned the key and the truck roared. "I always wanted a brother or sister."

"You can have mine," Lois volunteered.

"Not quite the same, taking yours. But thanks for the offer." He appeared amused by her suggestion.

"Let me know if you change your mind," she replied.

They were quiet a minute as he pulled into traffic.

"I have a confession," Clark admitted.

Lois turned her full attention on him. This couldn't be good.

Clark cleared his throat and glanced over to her. "I'm afraid you won't be able to use your gift certificate tonight."

Her tongue ran over her teeth as she tried not to snarl and she said, "I'm listening."

"When you asked when I could eat dinner with you and I told you Sunday dinner, it totally slipped my mind that MJ's Café is closed on Sundays and Mondays."

"Well, you might as well turn around because I can't afford to pay to take you out to dinner. And I'm not washing dishes again... for anyone. Ever." Lois crossed her arms and slouched in her seat. Strange. Her inner passionate voice was silent. Oh, wait, except for the sobbing. "You just thought to mention this now? Don't you think the perfect time to have brought this up was this morning at the store?"

"But then I'd miss the joy of your company," Clark replied with a hint of sarcasm.

Lois pressed her lips together and glowered at him.

"When I mentioned our dilemma to the owners of the café they generously offered to make us dinner, but only if we came as their guests."

"Oh." She turned and faced him. "Clark, why would they do that?"

Invite us to dinner?"

Clark looked a bit uncomfortable under her gaze.

*Good!*

Lois waited as she felt sure there was more to this 'confession.'

"To tell you the truth..."

"That would be a nice change," interrupted Lois.

"I have always, *always* been honest with you, Lois."

She raised a brow. "Have you now?"

It was his turn to look annoyed.

*Good!*

"Yes, I have, Lois. What do you think I've lied to you about?"

Lois knocked the question out of the air with the back of her hand.

"You were saying something about the complete truth?"

"I work at the café," Clark murmured. "And..."

"How many jobs do you have, Clark?" she asked, interrupting him once again.

He sighed. "Too many."

"Let's see. There's MDS delivery man, Daily Book's security guard," Lois said, ticking off the jobs on her fingers. "And MJ's Café. Anything else I should know about?"

Clark glanced at her and smiled cautiously. "I keep busy."

"Do you sleep?" She laughed.

"Sometimes." Then as the truck stopped at a red light, he turned to her. "Not recently."

Lois raised a brow. "And how do you have time to take me to dinner?"

"Even I have to eat sometimes." Clark was quiet a moment and then asked, "Do you still want me turn the truck around?"

"No." She sighed. "I guess not." Dinner out was still dinner out. And even better when it was on the house. "When was the last time you had a day off?" Lois asked, realizing just how much she didn't know about this man.

Clark sighed. The light turned green and the truck lurched forward. "It's been a while. I have tomorrow off, though."

"Labor Day. How appropriate. I'm glad."

"Are you?" he asked, brow raised.

Lois patted his arm. "You deserve it. Three jobs," she said with admiration. "I'm exhausted just working the one."

"Your job is more physically demanding than someone like Cat's. Now that Claude is gone, I bet you could take Travel."

Lois shook her head. "No, thanks. I'll stick to News."

Clark was silent a moment and then apologized. "I shouldn't have brought him up."

"No. It's not only that..." She pressed her lips together, but then forged ahead with her admission. "I've never been anywhere."

"Well, we're here," Clark said, pulling the truck over.

"Okay. So, I've been to Metropolis, but that doesn't really count."

"No, Lois. I mean we are *here*." He turned off the engine.

Lois hadn't been paying attention to their surroundings, only Clark.

*Much better view anyway.*

She glanced out the window at the small unassuming restaurant. It wasn't a dive. It wasn't a diner, either. Nor was it the Carlton House. The façade was painted in red and gold. 'MJ's Café' was painted in nice script on the window and on the hanging sign — almost like a British pub sign — by the front door. Clark had been correct. It was both nice and casual at the same time.

While she had been checking out the restaurant, Lois hadn't noticed Clark come around to her door. "You didn't have to do that," she told him as he opened the door.

"It sticks sometimes," he explained with a shrug.

Lois doubted the validity of that statement. Clark had good manners. He had such a gentlemanly disposition, he even refused to draw attention to his behavior. She had never met a man quite like him.

"Thank you," Lois said a bit belatedly and received a warm smile nonetheless.

*Warm? His smiles could melt steel.*

"Are you sure this is okay?" she asked him as he went to unlock the café's front door. "I hope this isn't an imposition."

"I hope so too. An imposition for you that is," Clark replied with a sheepish smile.

*There. That's the smile that could melt even the Ice Queen's heart.*

Lois winced as her inner voice hit that sensitive nerve. She had developed that nickname at college along the way — thanks to Paul, editor of Metropolis U.'s student newspaper and Linda King, her supposed friend — and she had never been able to shake it. It was one of the reasons she had transferred out of the huge university to the small liberal arts college. That was also why her co-workers' use of the phrase had caused that immediate — and disastrous — reaction in her. She didn't need that term to gain any ground here when she was once again starting anew. And, she corrected herself, Lois Lane was not an Ice Queen. She was selective, that was all.

*Of course you're not an Ice Queen, her passionate side apologized. How could you be with Mr. Hot Springs over there smiling at you all the time?*

Lois brought herself to the present and returned Clark's smile.

"There's something you ought to know about the couple who owns the café..." Clark began.

"What? Are they some crazy city people? Is she covered with tattoos and he into cross-dressing? Whatever it is, Clark, I can handle it," Lois retorted. What did he think? That she was some hick from the country who couldn't deal with strange people? And he said he didn't like to be pigeonholed.

Clark shrugged. "Okay. But don't say I didn't warn you..."

He opened the door to the cutest little restaurant. There weren't more than ten tables, each covered with an actual tablecloth and a small oil lamp. The walls were a burgundy red and decorated simply with modern art. There were also hanging flower baskets to add a touch of nature. MJ's Café reminded her of photos she had seen of European cafés. It didn't feel like Metropolis, but in this one instance — that was a good thing.

"Wow! Clark, this place is great," Lois told him. She felt much more comfortable here than she ever had at the Carlton House Restaurant.

*Maybe that has to do with the man more than the restaurant?*

"Thank you," answered a petite and very normal looking woman in an apron who entered the dining room from a swinging door to the kitchen. The woman took off her apron and dropped it on a chair. She was followed by a large man who, despite his serious expression, smiled at her with his eyes. Lois liked them both on sight.

*What was Clark talking about? These people are straight out of Smallville!*

"Lois, this is Martha and Jonathan, my..." Clark started.

"The 'M' and 'J' from MJ's of course!" Lois interrupted with a grin.

Jonathan's smile grew to encompass his lips. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you."

Lois's eyes went wide as they darted over to Clark's. He was conveniently looking up at the ceiling. "You've been talking about me, Clark?" What had he told them?

*Something juicy, I hope.*

Martha enveloped Lois in a hug. "Only good things, dear."

Lois hadn't been hugged like this since she had been a child — since her Grandma passed. Her mother wasn't a hugger and, well, her father had never been there for her emotionally. This hug was all-encompassing. Lois felt welcomed, accepted, and loved all within the span of that momentary embrace. Her feelings overpowered her logical side and tears danced in her eyes. Lois didn't know how, but she instantly knew that she and Martha would be lifelong friends.

"Clark, can I get your help in the kitchen, son?" Jonathan asked and the men disappeared, for which Lois was eternally grateful. She didn't need to have Clark witness her waterworks at meeting Martha.

Lois stepped out of the hug and wiped her eyes. "Oh, Martha! Can

I adopt you?”

The woman grinned. “I’d like that.”

“Clark has been trying to get me to come here since I met him. If I knew I’d be welcomed like that, I would have been here long before now.” Lois stopped herself from rambling.

Martha took her arm and led her over to a table set more comfortably than the others. It was set for ‘home’ with what looked like a hand-picked bouquet of wildflowers adorning the center. “Clark is special.”

“Oh, he certainly is,” Lois replied before she could stop herself. Then she decided she better let Martha know the truth. “But we’re only friends, co-workers at the store.”

Martha raised a brow. “Are you now?”

Lois leaned forward with a wink. “Of course. I already know my fate. My future is sealed, I’m afraid.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Did Clark tell you I was visited by some men from the future?” Lois grinned, hoping that Martha caught the skepticism in her voice as she told this too delicious, too hilarious story, she could no longer keep to herself.

“Yes,” Martha laughed. “He mentioned a marriage proposal I wasn’t supposed to bring up.”

Lois knocked that element of the story away with her hand. “Oh, yes, well, that man was trying to stop me from marrying my ‘true love’. Apparently my future husband will be ‘big, brawny and looks good in blue’.”

Clark’s boss smiled. “That sounds like Clark.”

Lois flushed. “Well, yes. I guess in a way. Blue is definitely his color. But this man also has a tendency to continually rescue me.”

Martha’s smile grew into a grin.

“Okay, I know what you’re thinking,” Lois continued. “Yes, that does sound like Clark, too. But it could also describe one of Metropolis’s finest.”

Martha nodded. “Granted.”

With a glance towards the door the men had disappeared through, Lois leaned forward and lowered her voice. “Apparently...” She laughed. How was she ever going to tell this story with a straight face. She pressed her lips together and took a deep breath, plunging in. “Apparently, my future husband is from another planet — a ‘Superman’ — mind you, with enhanced strength, super speed, and the ability to fly without a plane. He’s such a good-natured man — a literal superhero — and our love so true that the two of us... and our children... will transform the world into a virtual utopia — a boring place, but a utopia nonetheless.” Lois could not hold the laughter in any longer.

She gazed at Martha whose eyes went wider and her jaw hung lower as Lois’s story had progressed. “So, you see, Martha, there is no hope for a romance between Clark and me.”

*Liar, Liar, pants on fire!*

Martha swallowed and patted Lois on the arm, her words dripping with sarcasm. “Of course, dear. No hope. No hope whatsoever.” Then for some strange reason, the woman wrapped her arms around Lois and squeezed her tight. “I’m so glad he found you,” she murmured.

Lois’s brow furrowed. What was this woman talking about?

Martha let go of her and wiped her smiling eyes. “You are a riot, Lois. Clark needs to laugh more.”

Lois gasped. “No! No! No! We can’t tell Clark that story. He’d probably believe it was true.” Clark got so jealous of that crazy Tempus guy, who knew what her friend would think of her foretold ‘husband-to-be’.

*Yes! We don’t want to scare Clark off.*

Martha laughed and laughed. “You’re right about that, Lois.”

The men chose that moment to return with a pitcher of iced tea. Clark looked at them with a puzzled expression which, for some reason, made Martha laugh harder.

“I was just telling Martha of my visitors from the future,” Lois explained.

Clark’s gaze shot to his lady boss’s with a curious expression. Martha found her voice. “Oh, Clark, honey, I finished your new suit and laid it on your bed.”

“Mom!” Clark stammered, his face redder than Lois had ever seen it.

*MOM??!!*

\*\*\*

A few minutes earlier while Clark was opening the front door to his parents’ café, he had stopped and turned to Lois. He should really try and warn her that she was about to meet his parents. Try again, that was.

“There’s something you ought to know about the couple who owns the café...” Clark started to say before she interrupted him again. This was the third time he had tried to warn her about his relationship with the café owners. And the third time she had either changed the topic or interrupted him.

“What? Are they some crazy city people? Is she covered with tattoos and he’s into cross-dressing? Whatever it is, Clark, I can handle it,” she snapped.

If she wanted to ‘handle it’... Clark shrugged. “Okay. But don’t say I didn’t warn you...” He finally conceded defeat. If the Fates didn’t want Lois to know, fine, so be it.

*You’re going to regret this decision.*

Yeah, probably, he agreed with himself, but he *had* tried to warn her.

Clark opened the door and Lois gasped with pleasure, “Wow! Clark, this place is great.”

Why? Why did she keep saying all the right things? Making him like her even more.

*You mean like those guesses about your parents?*

He laughed softly to himself, trying to wipe the image of his mom as the tattooed lady and his dad dressed like Eleanor Roosevelt from his mind. No matter what, Lois sure knew how to keep him on his toes.

*Keep telling yourself that, Kent, said his conscience. If I remember correctly, this woman knocks you off your toes.*

“Thank you,” said his mom to Lois’s compliment as she entered the dining room. She took off her apron and dropped it on a chair. His dad followed her into the room.

Clark decided to try one more time. “Lois, this is Martha and Jonathan, my...”

“The ‘M’ and ‘J’ from MJ’s of course!” Lois said, interrupting him once more.

Clark threw up his hands. He had tried. She couldn’t fault him for that.

*Of course she could, Kent, and she will.*

Maybe it would teach her to stop interrupting him, though. Clark nodded.

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you,” said his dad.

*Oh, no. Here it comes... Wait for it...*

Clark knew Lois would slap him across the face with her glare, so he avoided looking at her.

“You’ve been talking about me, Clark?”

He smiled, sheepishly. How could he not talk about her? She was all he could think about.

His mom hugged her, whispering, “Only good things, dear.”

Clark could see Lois melt in his mom’s embrace and something inside of him seemed to turn off the gravity.

“Clark, can I get your help in the kitchen, son?” said his father.

*Oops.*

Dad had caught him floating. He would never hear the end of it. Clark followed his dad into the kitchen, but his mind and ears remained with the women in the dining room.

“Oh, Martha! Can I adopt you?” gushed Lois as soon as they were out of the room.

*I would like that.”*

Clark grinned at his dad. “They like each other.”

“Clark. Focus. Look at me. Listen to me.”

He shook his head and stopped listening to and watching the activity in the other room. “Yeah, Dad?”

“You really like this girl, don’t you?”

Clark cleared his throat. “We’re only friends, Dad.”

His dad raised a brow.

“Lois recently got burned by Claude. She’s not ready to trust again yet. I can wait.”

“*Blue is definitely his color,*” he heard Lois saying in the other room. Were they talking about him?

“Clark! Focus!”

Clark’s attention snapped back to his dad, chagrined. “Sorry.”

“I know you like Lois, Clark, but she makes you lose control. I don’t know if you need someone in your life who distracts you like that, especially now that you’re about to go public,” said his father.

“Or I could have everything I’ve ever dreamed about. A way to put my skills to good use to actually help people, while also having someone with whom to share my life.”

His dad’s brow went up again. “And you think she could be the one?”

*Yes! Yes! Oh, God, yes!*

Clark shrugged. “I don’t know, Dad. We’re just friends. Maybe someday if I can get her to notice me as a man, instead of as her favorite punching bag...” He smiled sheepishly.

“You floated in there, son,” his dad reminded him.

Clark looked down. “I know. I was just so happy that Lois liked you guys. I think she’s in love with Mom.” He chuckled and could hear Lois laughing, full belly laughing, in the other room. He could hear it without having to use his super hearing. She had never laughed like that around him. He wondered if they were still talking about him. Had his mom being telling her stories about him?

“Clark! Focus! You’re floating again.”

Clark dropped to the ground. “Sorry. Lois seems to have control of my gravity switch today. I’m so excited to see her away from the store, to hear her having a good time. She has had it so rough recently. First with Claude, then my botched rescue, and then those guys from the future.”

His father gave him a stern look. “Botched rescue?”

*Eeeps! You hadn’t told your folks about that!*

Clark glanced down at his feet on the floor. “Yeah. I rescued her a couple of weeks ago from being hit by a car and she passed out, so I took her back to her apartment. The next day she was all freaked out about how she got home. It was one of the main reasons I wanted the new suit. So I don’t have to hide anymore.”

“You aren’t going public just so you can admit to your girl that you’re the one who brought her home that night, are you, son?” His dad appeared concerned.

“It’s not the only reason, Dad.” His cheeks felt warm at his father’s ‘your girl’ remark. Lois was certainly *not* ‘his girl,’ no matter how much he wanted her to be. “I want to be able to help more during the day. I know I could have stopped that train wreck outside of Chicago last week and helped with search and rescue after the earthquake in Peru. Working only at night, hiding in the shadows, makes me feel a bit like a coward. I don’t like that feeling. There is so much more I could be doing to help.”

“Your plate is already quite full, Clark. What if this interferes with one of your other jobs? If you fly off too often, you could get fired.”

Clark sighed. That was one of his biggest fears, outside of everyone learning that he wasn’t originally from Earth. “Don’t worry, Dad. I will get the money for the restaurant lease. It’s still my number one priority.” He shook his head.

He had moved back home to save on rent and was working three jobs. The restaurant was packed every night and yet it still wasn’t enough. Luthor had threatened to raise the lease again. Clark knew there was going to be a day when they weren’t going to be able to come up with the funds. It was inevitable and that thought crushed him.

His dad set a hand on Clark’s shoulder. “If we fail, we fail, son. It won’t be because you didn’t try hard enough. Your mother and I know that. We need to figure out another way to raise the money. I hate that you don’t have a life because of us, especially...” His father glanced toward the dining room. “... with you so close to accomplishing your dreams.”

Clark could hear his mother laughing now. The women seemed to have really hit it off.

*“Of course, dear. No hope. No hope whatsoever. I’m so glad he found you,”* his mom murmured.

What the...? He had found her? Mom?! What were they talking about?

Clark turned his head to look through the wall at them. His mom was hugging Lois again and they were both laughing.

His mom let go of Lois and wiped tears out of her eyes. “*You are a riot, Lois. Clark needs to laugh more.*”

Clark rolled his eyes.

*Thanks, Mom, just what Lois needs to hear: another one of my flaws.*

His father took a pitcher of iced tea out of the walk-in. “Come on, son. The women folk are probably wondering what happened to us. Oh, wait. Can you cut up a lemon?”

Clark shrugged. It sounded like they hadn’t even noticed they were gone. Quickly Clark grabbed a lemon from the walk-in and cut it into wedges.

Lois gasped. “*No! No! No! We can’t tell Clark that story. He’d probably believe it was true.*”

What the...? What story? What had he missed?

His mom was laughing and laughing uncontrollably. “*You’re right about that, Lois.*”

What was so funny? Were they laughing *at* him? His mom wouldn’t do that.

“Just be careful, Clark. And keep your feet on the ground,” his dad reminded him.

“Yes, sir.” He grinned, dropping the lemon wedges into the tea. “We need to get back in there, Dad.”

When they returned to the dining room, Clark gazed between them with a puzzled expression which, for some reason, made his mom laugh harder.

*His mom knew he hadn’t heard what they were talking about and she thought that was funny? Thanks, Mom.*

“I was just telling Martha of my visitors from the future,” Lois explained.

Clark’s gaze shot to his mom’s with a curious expression. Would she tell him the story later? Somehow, he doubted it.

His mom found her voice. “Oh, Clark, honey, I finished your new suit and laid it on your bed.”

*My new secret identity suit? Mom, not in front of Lois!*

“Mom!” Clark stammered, his face flushed.

Lois turned to him, her eyes wide and her face pink. “Mom?!”

*Oh, crap. You really stepped into it now, Kent.*

Clark cleared his throat and smiled sheepishly.

Lois grabbed his arm. “Can I speak to you alone, Clark?”

His mom picked up her apron. “I should check on the chicken. Come on, Jonathan.” She was still chuckling. His dad looked as perplexed as Clark felt.

After his parents had left the room, Clark turned his full attention to Lois. “Yes, Lois, these are my folks. Martha and Jonathan Kent. I tried to warn you.”

Lois’s tongue slid over her front teeth. Not a good sign. “Tried?” she growled, her brow rising as she spoke.

*Yes, Lois, TRIED.*

Clark pressed his lips together. She seemed even sexier when she was angry at him. “You said you could handle anything...”

*Maybe it was because anger is the emotion Lois uses most often with you. Wonder why that is?*

Lois slapped him on the chest. “Ow! Clark! Do you have armor

plating under that shirt?" She looked down at her hand in surprise.

Clark took her sore hand in his and notched down his glasses. It wasn't broken. Thank goodness. "Shall I get you an ice pack?" He wanted to blow cool air onto her hand, but she wouldn't understand that.

*Kent, she's never going to accept the strangeness that is you.*

She tugged her hand out of his and stared up into his eyes. "No, I'll be fine."

Before he could step away, her sore hand was touching his chest again. Softly, gently, examining, probing.

*Does she know what she's doing to you? Keep your feet on the floor!*

Clark swallowed. "Whatcha doing, Lois?"

"You aren't a robot." It wasn't a question.

He cleared his throat. "Flesh and blood."

"Those must be some muscles..." Lois shook her head and stepped away from him, removing her hand.

Clark tried for nonchalance. "I work out." Kind of. Sort of. Not really.

*You did lift that car off that policeman last week. You did do 4000 push-ups before you took your shower this morning.*

Lois raised a brow. "When do you find the time?"

He smiled sheepishly. "I mentioned I wasn't sleeping well."

*Liar! You're not sleeping well because she keeps invading your dreams, not because you are working out.*

Lois pointed her index finger at him and looked like she was going to poke him with it, before she changed her mind and just pointed.

"You should have told me they were your parents, Clark."

"I tried. You kept interrupting me," he explained.

"You didn't try hard enough, big boy. Perhaps instead of saying 'Lois, this is Martha and Jonathan...' you could have said, 'Lois, these are my parents, Martha and Jonathan.'"

*Oh, yeah. That would have been better. Oops.*

She put a hand to her face. "What must your mother think of me?"

Clark raised a brow. "Why?"

"Because..." Lois glanced at him and swallowed what she was going to say, coughing. "No reason."

They had been talking about him. Clark couldn't stop the smile from creeping onto his lips. He wondered what she had said. Something good, he hoped.

*In your dreams, Flyboy.*

Clark shrugged. "What's done is done, Lois. We can't go into the past and fix it."

Lois pressed her lips together. "Well, if my time-traveling suitor stops by, I'll have him take me back in time to erase this humiliation from my life."

She better not. Wait. *Humiliation?*

"How have you been humiliated, Lois?" Clark inquired.

"I told your mom..." started Lois, but then she pressed her lips together.

He raised his brow. "You told my mom what, exactly, Lois?"

"Girl stuff," Lois replied vaguely.

"Girl stuff?"

"Stuff I wouldn't have said if I knew she was your mom," she finally admitted.

Had she said something about herself that she wouldn't want his mother to find out? What would it matter, if they were just friends? Clark smiled. Or did she tell his mom something about how she felt about him? Good stuff?

*Feet on the ground, Kent!*

Lois huffed in exasperation and lowered her growling voice, "Who invites his parents to join him on a first date, Clark?"

Clark grabbed the back of a chair, pulling himself to the floor. "A first date, Lois?" He grinned. "I distinctly remember someone telling me that this 'wasn't a date' on several occasions. Perhaps I should have my hearing checked."

Lois grumbled in frustration.

Clark let go of the chair and took hold of her hands. "Trust me, Lois, if I had known this was a real first date, I wouldn't have brought you to meet my folks, great as they are."

Lois looking into his eyes and it felt like she delved into his soul. The air in the dining room must have disappeared, because suddenly he realized he was holding his breath. Would it be so wrong to kiss her? Would he scare her away forever?

He let go of one of her hands and cupped her jaw with his palm. He could hear her heart beating fast and realized she was holding her breath, too. Was it in anticipation...

*Or in fear?*

Was he moving too fast? This wasn't even technically a date.

"Clark," he could hear his mom calling to him.

He should move. He couldn't move or this moment would be lost. When he was with Lois time seemed to slow, he could feel the length of every second and they never dragged. No wonder that first kiss felt longer than it was.

"So what did you learn about Lois?" he heard his father ask his mom.

"Stuff." He heard his mom pat his dad's cheek. "I'll tell you when I know Clark isn't listening. She told me all about her future husband."

What?! Clark turned his head towards the kitchen and in doing so broke his gaze with Lois.

She stepped away from him and went to look at the paintings on the wall.

Damn! Damn! Damn!

*You know what they say happened to that curious cat, Kent.*

That moment, that opportunity was lost. He would make sure it wasn't gone forever.

*Tempus told Lois about her future husband? His green-eyed monster roared. Who is Lois destined to marry?*

His mom was right. He didn't want to know. His newly mended heart cracked. No wonder Lois was humiliated. She liked him, he now knew that to be true — even if she kept denying it to herself. If she didn't like him she would have stepped away from him sooner. She wouldn't have been repeating to herself the other day that he was 'just a friend.' But she told his mom she was fated to marry another. Maybe she thought this future husband was just a lark. But Perry thought those men from the future were the real deal. And if they had told Lois the truth about this future husband of hers...

Could Clark continue to just be friends with Lois? To be in her life but see her with another? Kiss another? Love another? Marry another? Grow round with child belonging to another? Pain infused him as he realized how much he really cared for Lois. How much he loved her.

Clark wanted to fly off and scream in the agony of it all, but he couldn't do that to Lois. If he left now, she would never forgive him, never speak to him again. He would be lower than the slime under Claude's toes in her books. So, Clark would stand by her side no matter what. Maybe her future wasn't set in stone. There was always the chance that he could change the future. He might still be able to win Lois's heart away from this other man. He took hold of this tiny bit of hope in his hands. With careful tending he would grow this hope, making it flower into reality.

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Clark gripped the steering wheel of his dad's old truck. His mind was still spinning. Lois was from Smallville. *Smallville!* His parents' hometown. Where he had lived for the first two years after his folks had found him. She had lived there. Grew up there. Went to elementary school and high school there. The Lanes had moved to Smallville shortly after the Kents had moved away.

Lois had also been a reporter. Okay, it had been a human interest reporter for the *Smallville Post*, but still a reporter. His dream job. No wonder she hadn't said anything when he had told her about his dream career. It had been hers, too.

"Clark," Lois's voice interrupted these thoughts as she set a gentle hand on his arm. "You seem a thousand miles away."

"I still can't believe you're from Smallville," he replied.

"I know. And I can't believe Maisie works in your parents' café. The diner practically closed down when she left Smallville after Carl died. Small world, huh?"

"I keep thinking, if we hadn't lost the farm, if we had stayed in Smallville, you and I might have gone to school together." Clark shook his head. It was those Fates again, having fun at his expense.

"Oh? Were you thinking that we could have been high school sweethearts, Clark?" Lois teased. She chuckled when he blushed.

Yes, he had indeed had those very thoughts.

"You would have been some hot stuff football hero." Lois nudged his arm with another chuckle.

*Hot stuff, huh?* Clark liked the direction in which her thoughts were heading.

She was still chuckling. "You wouldn't have given this chess club president and math club whiz a second glance, Clark. Oh, no. You would have dated some blonde cheerleader, I'm sure. Like Lana Lang. Yep, that I can see. You wouldn't have given me a second glance."

As he stopped at a red light, Clark looked over at Lois. She *knew* Lana? Of course Lois did. He met Lana when she had come to Metropolis for an internship the summer after he had graduated from high school. He was working full time for the café then. They had had a whirlwind romance until she had crushed his heart.

Lana never thought he had any potential. Those were her exact words. "Clark Kent, I just can't see you going anywhere in life. You aren't worth my time or the effort. You have no potential." Those words still smarted. Two days before this announcement they had talked about becoming intimate — about going 'all the way'. Clark thought that he could trust Lana. He had even decided to share with her some of his special skills. He had planned on flying her away for a romantic weekend; instead, Lana broke up with him. Luckily, it was before he had revealed his true self to her. He had had trouble opening up with other women since then.

*You were a fool then and you're a fool now, Kent. Lois will break your heart and stomp on your dreams, just like Lana did.*

"I'm not sure about that," Clark said with a smile. He couldn't imagine never noticing Lois.

He could easily picture this other life, now. Football hero. Scholarship to Kansas State or MidWest. Journalism career. Star reporter at the *Metropolis Star* or other big newspaper. Clark sighed. Married to his high school sweetheart and writing partner, Lois Lane. Thinking about this other possible life made him more depressed than ever.

"You can't think about what might have been," Lois murmured as if she were reading his thoughts.

The light turned green and the truck lurched forward. "Of all those crazy predictions of my future that Tempus told me, the one that hurt the most to hear was that in the other dimension all my hopes and dreams came true. I was a top investigative reporter married to..." Her voice faded away as she stopped speaking. She turned to look at Clark and then shook her head.

"Married to... who?" Clark should have asked, but didn't. He didn't want to know. It wouldn't help this dull ache he had developed in his chest before dinner when he overheard his mom tell his dad that Lois knew of her future husband. He cleared his throat, knowing he should say something. "So this Tempus fellow came back in time to tell you who were going to marry?"

*Please! Please, don't tell me. I don't want to know.*

"I know. Crazy, huh?" She said with less conviction than she had the last time she spoke of this man from the future. Was she starting to believe him? "Actually he was trying to stop me from marrying him."

"Well, that explains his marriage proposal," replied Clark. Then he got the strangest thought. *Why?* Was Lois's future husband good and Tempus bad like had assumed? But what if Lois's future husband was a bad man, then maybe Tempus was a good guy after all? The thought of this man from the future who proposed to Lois as good made Clark's stomach turn. Try as he might, he could not think of that man as good.

"Clark, I don't want to talk of that man, okay?"

He smiled at her. "Fine by me."

Lois touched his arm again. Caressed it was a more accurate description. Her touch sent streams of electricity down his arm. "It's still early. Do you want to come in? I rented the *Lethal Weapon* movies yesterday."

Clark's heart leapt. She wanted to spend more time with him.

When he didn't answer right away, she continued, "Or are you exhausted? And just want to crash? You did do an all-nighter at the store last night."

"No, I'm fine," he said suppressing the urge to yawn. "That sounds like fun."

As Clark turned down the street where she lived, he noticed not a single free space to park. *No! No! No!* He sighed. The Fates were teasing him again. Giving him what he wanted and then yanking it away. "Let me know if you see a place where I can park?"

Lois grinned. "I can do you one better," she said reaching into her purse. "My apartment comes with a parking spot and since I don't have a car..." She pulled out a garage clicker.

Never had he wanted to kiss her more. Yippee! Alone in Lois's apartment, in the dark, cuddled up on the couch. Now, that was his idea of a date. He felt like he was getting his chance to thumb his nose at those darn Fates that had been plaguing him lately. Instead he looked at her and grinned as the words, "*Lois, I love you!*" rushed through his mind and rammed against his teeth, begging to be released.

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Forty-five minutes later Lois and Clark sat on her futon couch and the flickering pictures of her favorite Mel Gibson movie flashed in front of her eyes. Lois sat next to Clark, their arms brushed up against one another.

"This is my favorite part," murmured Lois.

When Clark didn't respond she glanced over at him. Although still sitting up, his head had rolled off to the side in sleep.

Lois grinned her evil grin and chuckled. Step one: complete.

*Time for the unveiling.*

Lois set down her popcorn bowl on the coffee table and moved closer to Clark. She didn't want to stop or pause the movie in case the change in sound disturbed him. She picked up his arm and draped it over her shoulder, allowing her to lean against his chest. She permitted herself a couple of minutes of snuggling with him to make sure the movement hadn't woken him up before she made her next move. Step two: complete.

Slowly, with both hands, she set her fingers on the rims of Clark's Buddy Holly-esque glasses. Gently and carefully, Lois pulled the offending frames from his face. Her heart beat quickened as she saw his true face for the first time.

With his glasses Clark had a boyish, slightly nerdy, but still charming appeal, but now... Wow! Transformation complete! Gone was the boyish appeal, gone was Mr. Charming. Hello, handsome GQ model!

Clark needed to rid himself of those horrible glasses so everyone could see...

*No! If everyone else knew how incredibly gorgeous Clark truly is without his glasses, Lois, you'll be fighting women off your man forever.*

Lois shook her head. She would keep Clark's good looks her own personal secret. She set down the glasses on her side table and leaned against his chiseled chest, resisting the urge to unbutton some of those buttons to look at what must be six-pack abs.

*Abs of steel, you mean,* thought her horny side as Lois stretched her hand that had slapped his chest earlier.

She returned her gaze to his face, basking in the perfection that was Clark Kent. All that was missing were those dreamy dark pools staring back at her. Those soft lips pressing against hers. Suddenly, her heart went into overdrive. Lois realized she had seen Clark without his glasses before. On the rainy night of the Claude monster, when Clark had rescued her from being run over by those oncoming headlights.

Lois remembered a flash of blue and a streak of red had come out of nowhere and then suddenly a pair of strong arms had held her. He had smelled of smoke and she had felt a breeze as she had gazed up into his face. Then...? Then...? That must have been when she passed out.

*Clark rescued me!*

Clark lied to her! *And* he said he had always been honest with her. Occam's Razor? Humph.

Lois was mad; so mad she felt like hitting him again. Then she remembered it hurt her more than him last time. Okay, hitting Clark was out.

She needed to think. And to think she needed to pace. But Clark's arm that had been around her shoulder had fallen down over her waist and pinned her against him. So, Lois couldn't pace. She couldn't move — really — without waking him up... and if he woke up with her in this position — basically sitting in his lap, snuggled up against his chest — *that* would cause more problems than solutions. And she would then have to explain why she took off his glasses. *His glasses!*

That was why he refused to remove his glasses the other night. He was afraid she would recognize him. She almost let a snarl escape, but caught herself in time. Snarling would certainly wake Clark up. And no matter how much she felt like yelling at Clark for lying to her, she certainly did not want him to wake up to find her in this compromising position.

Not that Lois thought that Clark would take advantage of her. Clark was no Claude. Thank goodness. She never would have invited him into her apartment, never would have put herself into this compromising position if she ever suspected even for a fraction of a second that Clark would press his advantage — and Mr. Hardbody definitely had the advantage over her. The way he had picked up those heavy bundles of Sunday papers this morning like they were gum wrappers!

But Clark wasn't like Claude. He had brought her home that night — while she was passed out nonetheless — and hadn't done anything more than lay her down and take off her shoes. And *lied* to her about that. That was a trait she definitely could not have in a boyfriend: dishonesty.

*Boyfriend?*

Lois gulped. No. That was not what she had meant. She had meant a friend who was also a boy.

Her inner voice giggled. *Clark is certainly a lot of things — but a 'boy' is not one of them. He is ALL man.*

She needed to move. She could not think straight lying here in Clark's arms, pressed up against his warm chest, gazing up at his perfect face. Lois swallowed.

*Go ahead, move! I dare ya.*

Oooh. Lois hated when her inner voice was right. She couldn't move. Partially because she *couldn't* move without waking Clark up and partially, if she let herself admit the truth,...

*The truth? Wow, I never I thought I'd hear that coming from you!*

Lois didn't want to move.

Clark was sweet and kind and had always bent over backwards to make her life easier at work. She bet he was the one who had left her the first aid kit that first day — definitely over and above the call of his job description. Not to mention, this gorgeous man liked her. *Her!* Never before had someone the caliber of Clark even given her a second glance — without beer goggles.

She knew she wasn't ugly. She was an attractive woman. Very attractive in fact. Lois knew that she was and if she put in the effort, if she dressed up — like she had for her date with Claude — she had no problem appealing to a higher quality of man. But Clark had liked her for herself without all that extra effort and despite her constantly treating him like mud, yelling at him, hitting him, and even using him to regain her dignity. He just kept coming back for more.

*Don't forget he also saved your life.*

Lois sighed. He had done that, too. She wondered what had happened that night. Had it been his truck that had almost hit her? Had

he scooped her up into those strong arms of his and had she recognized him on some subconscious level, allowing herself to pass out? Then the poor man had a damsel in distress in his arms and didn't know what to do. So he had put her in his truck. He had had three options: a) take her back to his place, which Clark never would have done — gentleman that he was — although she suspected that he still lived with his folks; b) take her to the hospital, which would have been more costly since she was broke and had no insurance; or c) take her back to her place. Since he had seen her leaving for work, he knew where she lived, so he had taken her back to her apartment.

*Obviously, since you woke up here.*

And her apartment key was marked '1B', so maybe he realized that 'B' stood for 'back building'. It made sense in a logical sort of way. Why hadn't he stayed?

*Stayed? Lois, what would you have done if you had woken up to find Clark in your apartment that night?*

Yes, that would have been worse. She would have screamed bloody murder and probably had him arrested for assault. Lois sighed. What other option did Clark have, but to leave? She wouldn't have listened to reason, not after what Claude had done to her that night. She would have thought the worst of Clark. And she hadn't really known him at that point.

But why hadn't Clark been wearing his glasses?

*It had been raining...*

True. Maybe he took them off because it was hard to see with wet glasses on. That made sense.

*And then you freaked out and cried to him about the strange man who had brought you home.*

Oh, yeah. What must Clark have thought? What guilt had he felt at not being able to tell her the truth? Maybe that was why he had assigned himself as her protector and friend. Why he let her treat him like trash and kept coming back for more? Maybe Clark *didn't* really like her as more than a friend after all. Earlier that evening she thought he had looked at her like he wanted to kiss her, but then he had turned away, instead. Lois sighed. Maybe Clark thought of her like a little sister. This idea tore at Lois's chest.

Why did this concept physically hurt? She had never sought more than a friendship from Clark. She had fought tooth-and-nail against their friendship developing into more. But if she admitted the truth of her feelings...

*Yes, that would be a nice change. I'm getting tired of arguing with you.*

When Lois looked at Clark, she did feel more than friendship. Why was that thought so scary? Was it because her parents had such a terrible and bitter marriage? True, she had a rotten streak with men. Was that why it so daunting to trust? Even someone as sweet and kind and considerate and...

*...smoking hot...*

*... as Clark.*

Lois's brow furrowed. Why had he smelled of smoke? He didn't smoke.

*Hello! Investigative reporter-wannabe... he cooks in a restaurant!*

Right. Right. Of course. It all fit. Clark Kent was her hero. Now, the big question: should she let him know that she knew the truth about him?

Lois stared at that handsome sleeping face, her fingers just itching to caress it and her lips...

No, not yet. She would get to know him better and see if he would confess the truth to her. Yes, better plan. Give him the opportunity to tell her the truth on his own. See if he treated her like a sister, a friend or more than a friend. It really didn't matter that he lied, now that Lois knew the truth. Knowing the truth was more important than knowing that Clark lied. As long as he never lied to her again.

*Better put the glasses back on him then.*

Lois sighed.

*Such a waste of a handsome face, to hide it behind this mask.*

Reaching behind her, Lois removed his glasses from the side table.

Slowly, and ever so gently, she slid them back onto his face. Just as she was about to remove her fingers from his frames, his pools of darkness opened and gazed into hers.

“Lois?”

“Hmmm.”

“Whatcha doing?”

*Oh, damn! Caught red handed.*

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Clark opened his eyes and there was Lois’s face just inches away from his face. Her hands were on his glasses and her heart was racing a mile a minute. Actually, he thought it was her fast heart beat that had gotten his attention.

“Lois?” he asked, not really able to say more with her that close.

“Hmmm.” Was she having the same problem?

“Whatcha doing?”

*Smooth, Romeo. Very romantic. You should have kissed her instead.*

Lois’s face turned bright red as she began to sputter. “It’s not what it looks like,” she rambled.

*What did it look like?*

That was when Clark realized that Lois was sitting in his lap. He raised a brow. “No?”

Lois let go of his glasses and grinned. She was trying to appear innocent, but she looked pretty darn guilty.

*I could live with that.*

She blushed more. “Okay, it is what it looks like. You had fallen asleep...”

“What?” he gasped. He didn’t.

*You did.*

“... and I was just taking off your glasses because I thought you’d sleep better with them off.”

Clark swallowed. She hadn’t planned on waking him up? She just figured he would stay the night? He *couldn’t* stay the night. He cleared his throat. “I should go,” he said, standing up.

“No!”

“No?” Clark asked. Her arms went around his neck when he had stood up and he realized his arms were wrapped around her waist, holding her against his chest. She felt good there.

Lois jumped out of his arms and reluctantly he let her go.

*Right. Why would she want to stay there, in his embrace?*

“Clark, you’re too tired to drive home,” she explained hurriedly.

He smiled. “I’m fine.”

Lois pushed gently on his chest. Was she hoping to get him to sit back down? “I’ll get you a pillow and a blanket.” She headed for her closet.

Clark glanced around, noting once again, that she still lived in a studio apartment and that her couch was also her bed. No, he *couldn’t* stay. “Lois, I cannot stay. You only have one bed which also happens to be your couch.” His voice broke as he spoke.

She pushed the blanket and pillow into his arms. “You’re staying.”

Clark grinned. She was arguing with him about *this*? “Really, I’m fine to drive, Lois.”

Lois crossed her arms and stared at him for a moment, then she went over to her VCR. “Well, if you’re so awake, I’ll start the next movie. It’s hardly ten o’clock. Sit down.”

Clark swallowed. If he sat down and fell asleep again... “I’m really tired, Lois. I should head home.”

Lois raised a brow. “Absolutely not.”

He could see that she didn’t want him to leave. Actually Lois was refusing to let him leave. Clark chuckled. He would like nothing more than to stay with lovely Lois, but if he fell asleep in her presence again, if she took off his glasses, if he started to float... No, he should go. “Really, Lois. I’m okay to drive.”

Lois pressed her lips together and crossed her arms. “Well, which is it, Clark? Are you fine to drive? Or are you too sleepy to watch another movie? You can’t be both.

Clark smiled sheepishly. She wasn’t going to take ‘no’ for an

answer. She *really* wanted him to stay. He wondered why.

“If you fell asleep on the drive home...” She gulped.

Lois was worried about him? He had to concentrate on keeping his toes on the ground for the first time since dinner.

“Really, Lois. I’ll be fine,” he tried to reassure her.

Clark watched as her determination faltered and her face fell.

“Oh. Okay. If you really need to go...” Lois glanced away, taking his heart with her.

Lois *truly* wanted him to stay. Was there another reason? Did she not want to be alone? Was she still being terrorized by thoughts of that mysterious stranger who took her home the night she fell into the street? Guilt overwhelmed him. He sat down on the couch.

“So, is this next one the one where Danny Glover sits on the explosive toilet?”

Lois looked over at him with a smile that radiated so much warmth, he felt rejuvenated by it. He would never be able to leave. Lois was his own personal sunshine.

She took the tape out of the VCR and put it back in its box. “I don’t know. I can’t remember,” she mumbled in response to his question. What had been his question?

*Danny Glover. Toilet.*

Clark’s eyes went wide. Had he really said that?

*Yep.*

“Do you need another cream soda?” she asked.

Clark shook his head and watched as she sat down right next to him. Closer than she had been for the first movie. She kicked off her slippers — when they had first arrived at her apartment, Lois had changed into something more comfortable, her sweats — and tucked her feet underneath her. She leaned against his arm. He swallowed. Much closer.

“Don’t worry, Clark. I promise, if you fall back asleep, I won’t invade your personal space again and try to take your glasses off.”

He released a breath he hadn’t realized he had been holding. She promised and he believed her.

“Wow! My A/C must have gone into hyperdrive; it’s freezing in here,” Lois said, shivering.

*Oops!*

Clark grabbed the blanket she had given him and covered her with it. She lifted up the edge of the blanket and covered his legs with half, so that they were snuggled underneath it together. Of course, that would be warmer.

*Basic survival techniques 101 — skin against skin...*

Oh, this wasn’t good. His mind... imploded. He could no longer think, because Lois had slipped her hand into his. She rested her head on his shoulder and was holding his hand. He was glad he had decided to stay.

Instinctively Clark shifted his position and moved his arm around her shoulders. When he realized what he had done, he braced himself, waiting for her to snap, waiting for her to yell. Minutes passed and instead of screaming at him — like she usually would — Lois settled in against him. She let go of his hand — she had still been holding it? — and rested it against his chest. Soon her breathing was slow and regular. Lois had fallen asleep in his arms. It felt like she belonged there.

Clark sighed and rested his head against the top of hers. If he died at this very moment, he would have died a happy man. It couldn’t get any better than this.

*Oh, yes, it could.*

Clark smiled. Yes, he guessed it could, but for now this was enough.

A stray thought disturbed this happiness. Lois was still bothered about that night he rescued her. As soon as he had gone public, Clark decided one of the first things he would do was confess his involvement that night. Well, his alter ego would. The man in the blue suit with the red shorts and cape with the yellow ‘S’ crest on his chest.

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Clark opened his eyes. A bright light had awakened him. He

blinked and rubbed his eyes. He was still wearing his glasses. Lois was curled up against his chest. He had fallen asleep in her apartment again. This time he hadn't minded. He could easily sleep every night with Lois in his arms.

*Down boy. Where's that light coming from?*

Clark glanced around Lois's apartment. The VCR clock read 4:02 A.M. The TV had gone to blue screen, but that had happened hours earlier and the light that woke him up was white light. It was almost as if it was calling to him.

There on Lois's bookshelf! That intricately carved wooden box. Clark gently moved out from under Lois, laying her down on the couch.

He moved to the bookcase and to the box with the light emanating from inside. The box had a small lock, which he could easily break. Instead he felt around for the key; he found it lying on top of the bookcase. Unlocking the box, Clark found a glowing globe inside. Unexpectedly, the green continents of Earth faded and were replaced by red land masses. Unable to resist, Clark reached out to pick up the globe. The instant his fingers touched it, the globe radiated a burst of energy filling the room for a moment with bright, pure white light. He took a step back and glanced at Lois. She was still asleep.

Suddenly a ghostly image of an older, white haired man stood before him. The man spoke. "My name is Jor-El. And you are Kal-El, my son."

Clark's heart was beating faster than he could ever remember it doing so before. Was this man speaking to him?

"The object you now possess has been attuned to you. That you now hear these words is proof that you survived the journey in space and have reached your full maturity.

*Oh, God! It is speaking to me.*

"Now it is time to learn your heritage. To that end, I will appear to you five times. Watch for the light. Listen and learn."

Clark felt a chill go down his spine. He was finally going to learn where he had come from. He had wondered about this for so long. The image of the man was pulled back inside the globe. It was replaced with another image — a hologram perhaps — of the same man working inside some kind of laboratory, but not any kind like Clark had ever seen on Earth before. The surfaces were white and clean. The man started to talk again, this time as a voiceover to the image.

"Time grows short and we continue to search. The immensity of space is both a blessing and a curse. In that mere infinite variety there must be some place suitable."

Clark's brow furrowed. 'Suitable?' Suitable for what? He felt something slide into his hand and realized that Lois had joined him.

"Hope and desperation drive us in equal measure. Lara works by my side. She's tireless and endlessly patient, considering what is to come. This is my greatest consolation. That we are together."

The voice disappeared as the light of the globe faded and went out.

"Clark," Lois whispered. "You're shivering."

Indeed he was. Truth be told, he noticed goose pimples on her arms as well. Clark reached over and picked up the globe. As he held it the green of Earth changed back to the red of Krypton. "Krypton," he murmured. He didn't know if it was a memory or knowledge given to him by holding the globe. He swallowed and glanced over at Lois. He had to ask. "Where did you get this?"

"My friend Pete and I found it in the creek at Rocky Cove, over by Shuster's Field."

Shuster's Field? That was where his parents said they had found him inside the spaceship. Had this globe been part of his ship? Outside of this fog, Clark's brain caught hold of something else Lois had said.

Pete? Who was this Pete fellow? How close was he to Lois? Was he an old boyfriend? Was *he* the man who would eventually steal her away from him? A growl emanated from deep inside Clark's chest.

Lois chuckled. She must have heard his green-eyed monster. "I was five, Clark." She trailed her fingers over his chest as she walked back to the couch. "Although, he did take me to his senior prom." She grinned at him as his eyes formed slits. "Along with our other best

friend, Rachel Harris."

She was teasing him. And he had fallen into her trap. Realizing this Pete character had no hold over her, Clark returned his focus to the globe.

He wondered how long it would be until the next part would be revealed to him. Would the small sphere answer all the questions burning inside of him? The not knowing had been gnawing at him for years. He never thought he would ever learn about his past, his birth parents, only to discover it here, where his possible future lived. He pulled his gaze away from the globe, still sitting in his outstretched hand — he hadn't wanted to let go of it — and over to Lois. What must she be thinking about all this?

Lois sat on the couch. Her arms hugging her knees to her chest. Her eyes were wide and stared into space, her mind deep in thought. The globe meant something completely different for her than it did for him. She now knew that life on other planets existed. No more doubt. No more question of what they might look like. She knew at some point an alien had not only come to Earth, but to her home town of Smallville, and she had evidence of that in her possession.

What would she do if she knew that very same alien — Kryptonian — was standing here in her apartment? Would that scare her? Would it terrify her to know that this same alien was the man she had kissed the other day? Would she be freaked out to know that same alien was head-over-heels in love with her? And wanted to do nothing more than hold her and comfort her? How quickly would she reject him if she knew all that?

"Lois?"

She turned towards him and held out her hand.

He gratefully took it in his as he sat down next to her. Clark cleared his throat. "Has it ever done that before?"

She looked him directly in the eyes. "No."

It really was attuned to him. It had sensed his presence in her apartment and had called to him. Clark gulped as he looked back down at the globe. He couldn't put it down. It was precious to him.

Lois grabbed the globe out of his hand and in anger lifted it to her shoulder as if she was about to throw it against the brick wall of her apartment.

"No!" Clark gasped. He knew he could catch it before it hit, but Lois would see more than he was prepared to reveal.

Lois looked at him first in shock at his reaction and then with a profound amount of despair. She dropped the globe and sat back down on the couch. He easily caught the sphere before it hit the ground. She buried her face in her hands and cried. He thought that a strange reaction. It was as if she was taking the presence of the globe, and what it represented, personally.

Clark set down the globe on the coffee table and wrapped his arms around her. He had seen her eyes dotted with tears on several occasions. Once from fear of what had happened that rainy night, once in frustration, once in anger and once or twice with pain from yet another paper cut. But he had never seen nor heard her cry with so much hopelessness, like her entire world collapsed on top of her. He hoped she would never cry like this again. He wanted so much to fix whatever broke inside her and make her once more into that happy, smiling woman who had snuggled with him until she had fallen asleep and who had teased him about her old friend just minutes earlier.

When she finished crying, Lois pulled back and looked directly into his eyes. "Clark, can you do something for me?"

"Anything, Lois," he replied, meaning it.

"Stay with me. I don't want to be alone."

Clark smiled as happiness filled him. He wasn't going anywhere. "Sure."

Lois took his hand in both of hers as she leaned against his shoulder. "Talk to me. I need to get my mind off of..." Her gaze shifted to the globe sitting on the coffee table. "... things."

It was a lot to take in. The knowledge that Earthlings weren't alone in the universe. He and his folks had lived with this knowledge his whole life. This was all new to her. "What do you want to talk about?"

he asked.

“If you could fly anywhere in the world, where would you go?”

He had already traveled the world and seen historical and geographical sites, animals in their native habitats, and art at the greatest museums. He knew what he wanted to say in response, the truthful answer. Clark would go anywhere in the world Lois was, for he only wanted to be with her.

When he didn’t speak right away, she said, “I’d like to go to the beach. I have never seen the ocean. I’d like to go to the coast and walk with my toes in the sand and see the expanse of the water in front of me.”

“That sounds nice; I’d like that, too,” he replied, knowing that someday he would fulfill this wish for her.

“Then it’s a date.” Lois chuckled. It was a sad sort of chuckle as if she knew that what she was about to say would never come true. “As soon as one of us can fly we’ll go to the beach.”

Clark joined his laugh with hers. Although his was full of hope, knowing her wish would most certainly come true. “Deal.”

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### Monday — Labor Day

A couple of hours later, Lois woke up to the smell of fresh coffee and pastries. As she rubbed her eyes, she heard Clark speaking on the telephone.

“I’m sorry I didn’t stop by, Dad. I didn’t want to be away long in case Lois woke up to find me missing.”

Clark had gone out for breakfast *and* come back. Lois smiled, liking that man even more. She had decided to stop fighting her inner passionate side...

*Thank you! About time.*

...and allow herself to like Clark. She wasn’t ready to make the first move, but she was more than willing to encourage him to make it.

“Dad!” Clark said in a tone that sounded almost embarrassed.

“No, nothing happened. I told you Lois and I are just friends.”

Well, *that* wasn’t encouraging. Maybe he didn’t like her that way after all.

“Something *did* happen, but I shouldn’t talk about it over the phone.”

Was he talking about her telling him to stay the night? About her snuggling in his arms? About holding his hand? About sleeping together on her couch? About talking until dawn?

“I’ll tell you and Mom about it later.”

Mom? Lois’s eyes focused on the globe still sitting on the coffee table. Oh, right. *That*.

*Well, at least he’s not telling Martha and Jonathan lies about you.*

Lois swallowed. She hoped Martha wouldn’t tell her son about Tempus’s prediction of her future husband. Lois couldn’t discount it as crazy-delusional talk anymore. She could no longer laugh at the story. It was no longer funny. Was it inevitable? She didn’t want to fall head-over-heels in love with some flying superhero. She liked Clark. She wanted Clark.

*Yippee!*

Oh, shut up!

*I thought you weren’t going to argue with me anymore.*

Clark lowered his voice. “Anyway, Dad, Lois isn’t like that.”

How sisterly.

*Are you going to let him get away with that?*

Lois smiled evilly. Nope. “Clark,” she called to him over the back of the couch in her most seductive voice, loud enough for Jonathan to hear. “Get off the phone and come back to bed.”

Clark turned and glared at her grinning face. She bit her bottom lip to stop herself from laughing. It didn’t work.

“No, Dad, Lois was only joking... *Dad!* I’ll talk to you later.” He hung up. “Very funny, Lois. That was my Dad.”

Lois laughed. “I know.”

Clark shook his head with his lips pressed together, but Lois could tell he was trying to stop himself from laughing as well. “Minx. You’re going to ruin my reputation.”

Lois stood up and joined him at her small dining table. “Improve it, you mean. A man’s reputation improves when he stays the night at a lady’s apartment.”

“While the lady’s reputation descends into the murky beyond,” he replied.

She winced. “Oh, right.” With a shrug she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and kissed his cheek. “We know the truth, don’t we, loverboy?”

Clark gazed up at her face. They were only inches apart after that kiss to his cheek. “Loverboy?” he inquired, his brow raised.

Lois smiled. “No?”

He took hold of her wrist that was still on his shoulder and with a gentle tug managed to get her to fall into his lap. Her heart started racing. Was this really happening? Was he going to kiss her again? She remembered that kiss from the other day and her racing heart almost exploded from her chest. Clark cupped her jaw in his hand and placed a soft, gentle kiss on her lips.

Lois moaned.

*Oh, that felt good. More please.*

Her eyes opened and saw him staring at her with heat in his eyes. Or was that just the heat from hers reflected there? Had he heard her moan from the pleasure of his kiss? The kiss that followed answered that question.

Clark pressed his mouth to hers and begged to let his tongue enter her mouth. She couldn’t refuse him. This kiss put the kiss at the store to shame. The fire between them was melting her into one big gooey mess. She needed him. More of him. Lois ran her fingers under the edge of his shirt and felt his hot skin and those six-pack abs.

“Oh, Clark,” she moaned again.

“Lois.” He was with her on this roller coaster ride of desire.

As he kissed down her neck she tried to get her shaking hands to work the buttons on his shirt. Finally she gave up and pulled, popping the buttons, and giving her free access to his chest.

“Lois!” Clark gasped in surprise.

“I need you, Clark.” She was moaning again. His skin felt so good under her fingers. Against her lips. She needed more of him.

He swallowed and whispered, “It’s too soon, Lois.”

Lois slid off his lap and, taking his hand in hers, led him over to her futon couch. Oh, why hadn’t they pushed it down into a bed last night? Giving up, she leaned her backside against the back of the couch and pulled him back into her arms for another earth-shattering kiss. She wrapped her legs around his hips and pulled him closer. “I want you more than anyone ever before, Clark.”

He cleared his throat, but it didn’t succeed in clearing the hoarseness from his throat. “Lois, are you feeling okay?”

She was kissing his chest now and glanced up into his eyes. “I need *you*, Clark. I feel numb and being with you is the only thing that will thaw this chill that has crept inside of me.”

Clark lifted her into his arms. “We’ve only had the one date and that was with my folks. It’s too soon.”

“I know you want me as much as I want you.”

“You do?”

Lois pulled back enough to smile at him. “Those jeans fit you much better last night.” Then she returned her lips to his. He shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot, but did not try to move away.

“I need to feel something, Clark. And I know being with you would bring me pleasure,” she whispered kissing down his neck. “I need to feel pleasure.”

Clark grinned. “Well, if it’s pleasure the lady requires...” He bumped her futon couch with his hip and, without its usual protest, her couch slid into a bed. He lay her down on the bed and disappeared into the bathroom.

Lois felt cold and exposed after the hotness that his body had supplied. He returned a minute later carrying a bucket full of water and a washcloth. Her brow furrowed. What was he up to? He pushed her pants leg up to her knee and took hold of her foot. Then he leisurely began to wash it. The warm water felt good on her foot, but she didn’t

understand what he was doing until he brought that clean foot up to his mouth.

Her eyes rolled back in her head from the sensations his tongue made on her toes. Oh, God. She moaned again, her body arching in desire. If he could make her feel like this just by touching her feet, she couldn't imagine what pleasures would come from actually making love to him.

Lois's other foot caressed his bare chest. It was too much. Too much. She moaned again. He set down her foot and crawled across the bed to her, kissing her lips. Her blood was boiling. She needed him like she had needed no man before.

"Make love to me. Make me feel like a woman should," she challenged. She wasn't going to let him leave without satisfying her.

Clark swallowed again. "Lois, I like you, but..."

Lois cut off his protestations with another kiss. She took his hand and put it under her shirt, letting him feel the soft skin of her stomach.

He groaned. "I want you, Lois. God, you don't know how much I want to be with you in that way, but..."

Lois cut him off with her mouth again. Then she moved to his ear. Sucking on it. Nibbling. She would convince him never to use that 'but' word with her again. He leaned over her as he lay next to her, his hand inching up the inside of her shirt. Lois pulled off his glasses and dropped them on the floor.

Suddenly Clark pulled himself away, all the way away, and back over to the dining table. "We can't, Lois. Not now." His hands were shaking as he rubbed them through his hair.

Lois walked over to him and made him look at her. That perfect face gazed at her. "Why not? We are both consenting adults."

Clark pulled that sheepish smile of his out and blushed. The man was too adorable. He kissed her cheek and whispered, "I don't have any precautions."

Well, if that was all... Lois pressed her body against his, her mouth against his. "I'm willing to chance it, if you are."

"Lois! You don't know anything about my history. What kind of women I've been with. And I trust you, but that's a big step."

Lois raised a brow. "I know I'm disease free. You don't seem to be the type of man to sleep around."

"I'm not, actually..." He blushed again.

"So?" Lois tugged his hand and brought him back to the bed.

"Make love to me, Clark. I need this."

"Are you using me again, Ms. Lane?" he asked, an eyebrow raised as he kept those lips of his from kissing her.

"No, Clark. Not *any* man will do. I only want you, Clark Kent." As she said this, Lois ran her fingers across that perfect chest of his and then down that handsome face, and knew she spoke the truth. Could this man be any more hot and delicious? Did he not know what his body was doing to her? She started kissing down his neck to his chest.

His voice cracked as he spoke. "But if we make love without precautions, Lois. I could... you could... we might make a baby."

Correct. Her raging hormones had made her forget about that part. Biology 101.

Lois stopped kissing his chest and looked at him. She thought about how she was feeling, this desire that was overpowering her like it had never done before, she thought about this kind, sweet man, who worried, yet kept a clear head though his body desired her as much she desired him. No man would ever be better for her. Every cell in her body wanted him, needed him. She kissed his lips. "I'm willing to take that chance."

"Lois! If you get pregnant, I am going to want to be a part of that baby's life. This isn't a decision to make so lightly," Clark cautioned her. "Or in the heat of passion."

"Stop talking, Clark. Make love to me. I need to feel something real right now and you are more real than anyone I've ever met. If something happens, it happens. We'll get married."

"You would marry me?" He seemed shocked at this announcement.

Lois smiled at him. "Gladly. And it would be my choice whom I'm

marrying, not someone else's. But I need this right now... I need *you*, all of you."

Clark covered her mouth with his and as quickly as he had pulled away before, he rejoined the passion party. He was making her delirious with his kisses, melting her in a way she never felt she could, touching her inner womanhood and making her toes curl. Her heart was racing faster than it ever had in her life. Lois pressed her chest against his bare chest and moaned. She even felt like they were beginning to float again.

"Lois?"

"Hmmm."

"You awake?"

"Huh?" Lois blinked her eyes and she was lying back on her futon couch, alone.

*Oh, yes, I really should have had you take off your shirt before you pressed your chest against his.*

It had been a dream. Just a dream. A hot, horny, wild passionate dream. Had she really begged Clark to make love to her? Had he really been the one with the clear head about precautions? Had they agreed to get married? Oh, God! It was a dream. She groaned, covering her face with her hands.

"I've got to go, Dad. Lois is awake."

But it had felt like heaven when Clark had sucked on her toes. Lois's body still tingled all over. The passion was still there, despite it only having been a dream. She still wanted Clark in that way. She still desired him. Oh, God!

Clark sat down next to her on the couch.

Would she be able to look at him again? She turned away.

"Are you all right, Lois? Your heart is racing, you're flushed and you're breathing heavily. I heard you moaning. Were you having a nightmare?"

Was her heart beating so loudly that he could hear it? She reached out to him and he took his hand in hers. Her eyes turned towards him, all the fire burning inside of her scorching him with her look. "I was about to make love to you."

Clark's jaw dropped. "Pardon?"

Lois wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed a kiss to his lips. "I was making love to you, Clark. Mmmm. And it felt good. Very good. We should try it for real one of these days." She licked her lips, then she licked his. "Once we've picked up some precautions."

Clark joined her kiss, their tongues joining and dancing. He lay with her back down on the couch. "Oh, Lois."

"Oh, Clark," she moaned again.

"Lois, I asked if you were having a nightmare?" Clark's voice made her eyes pop open again. She had fallen back asleep with Clark sitting next to her. She had started to kiss him in her dreams again. What were her body and mind doing to her?

*Don't tell me to 'shut up' ever again, Lois.*

Lois cleared her throat and sat up, looking at Clark, sure her cheeks were flaming. "Ah, no," she admitted with an exhale of air. Oh, God! She needed to catch her breath. "Not a nightmare." Her grin was too big and entirely too falsely innocent.

Clark raised a brow. "Then what were you dreaming?"

Lois's eyes went wide. "You and I were..." she stammered. She *wasn't* going to tell him what they had almost done her in dreams. She coughed. "Rock climbing."

*Quick thinking, Lois. I would have gone with having horny sex, but rock climbing works.*

"I was in your dream?" he asked. The hint of a smile on his face grew larger. "Really?"

Lois swatted at him. "We were rock climbing. I fell and you caught me."

He grinned. "Sounds like fun. I got us some pastries and coffee."

"Yummy! Food." Lois jumped up. She needed to splash some cold water on her face. Dip her body into a pool of ice cubes. She had to turn off this passion and fast. "Pardon me. I've got to..." She pointed to the bathroom and ran.

Once in the safety of her bathroom, Lois leaned against the door and exhaled again. She went to the sink and splashed cold water on her face, but it didn't work. She would have to try a shower. Oh, God! She had almost made love to Clark in her dreams. Twice! And it had felt wonderful. "Clark, you can suck on my toes anytime you want," she murmured to herself with another delighted moan.

She heard a crash in the other room.

"Shoot," Clark mumbled.

"Something wrong?" Lois called out to him.

He cleared his throat. "No. Well, yes. I spilt juice all over the pastries."

Clark had bought her juice. She moaned again. The man was too wonderful. She *needed* that cold shower.

"I'm going to have to go get us some more. Don't worry. I'll clean up the mess," he finished saying.

"I need to take a shower," she admitted. "Why don't you swing by your place and pick up your new suit? We'll make a day of it." After the horniness of her dreams, she wasn't going to let Clark get away from her. Maybe she would get that kiss today after all. Just a kiss, though. No need to rush things.

"What?" he stammered as she heard another crash.

"The new suit your mom said she put on your bed? It isn't a swimming suit? Please, don't tell me it's a business suit," Lois said. Dressed only in her fluffy robe, she opened the bathroom door and glared at him. He was picking up the remnants of her dishes off the floor. "If you tell me you are applying for yet another job..."

Clark grinned. His pseudo-innocent grin was as bad as hers.

"I'll walk the streets of Metropolis before I let you get a fourth job, buster," she said, shutting the bathroom door again. Lois sighed and then whispered, "If you get another job, Clark, I'll never see you."

She heard Clark clear his throat again. "Okay, I'll pick up some new pastries and my swimming suit and come back here in, let's say, an hour? Does that give you enough time?"

"Yes, an hour. Sounds good." She could deprogram this horniness in an hour. Otherwise she was screwed. She winced. Bad word choice. If she couldn't get rid of it in an hour, who knew what she might do to Clark when he walked in her door with pastries and dressed only in a swimsuit?

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Clark ran down the street at blur speed.

*Maybe my dad was right. Lois is certainly a distraction.*

Clark had never had butterfingers in his life — thank you, extra speediness. In the course of one minute Lois made him drop not only the bottle of orange juice — on top of the pastries no less — but also the wet dishes he was removing from the table.

*"Clark, you can suck on my toes anytime you want."*

He had no idea where the toe sucking idea had come from or why she had said it and it wasn't something he had ever considered before, but now... Clark shook his head. Now, he couldn't think of anything else. It seemed so intimate, especially since they had only shared that one kiss and that was at work. Between thoughts of that first kiss and toe sucking, Clark was ready to explode. He took off into the air, flying northward.

*Then* Lois had suggested he go get his new suit and that they spend the day together. Crash went the dishes. He would have to replace them. At first he thought she knew, especially in light of their 'flying' conversation that morning. Hello, butterfingers. She hadn't liked the idea of him getting another job. She would 'walk the streets first.' Well, he couldn't have Lois turn into a streetwalker! He laughed to himself, knowing that would *never* be an option for Lois.

Clark dove into the icy waters of the Arctic. Ahhh! Much better. He felt like he was getting back to his normal temperature. For some reason he felt he would need to build a home-away-from-home up here if he continued to see Lois. Just thinking about her made his blood boil with passion.

*There's another way to release some of this desire, Kent. You could kiss her.*

He could. Clark smiled. He decided that after thinking about kissing Lois, he needed to do a few more laps. Then he climbed up a nearby iceberg and flew home. Lois was expecting him back in less than an hour and he still had to pick up his swimsuit and some new pastries. He cleared his throat. And some new dishes.

His wet jeans were uncomfortable. He should have gotten his swimsuit first, but his need to cool off was stronger than his need to be comfortable. Anyway, he didn't want to tell his folks about Lois's globe with the thoughts and desires of Lois pulsing through his body.

Clark landed in the alley behind the café. He didn't know how to explain his wet clothes to his mom. His dad would understand without explanation. Clark unlocked the alley door to the café and took the backroom steps up to the small two-bedroom apartment above the café.

His mom stood in the kitchen, cleaning up the breakfast dishes, and glanced at him when he entered.

A smile flashed on her lips. "Bit nippy out there, Clark?" she asked.

"No," he replied and headed to the bathroom to change. That was when he realized that ice had formed on his jeans. Ooops. There was no fooling his mom.

Clark rinsed off in a lukewarm shower for about twenty seconds, dried off, and then wandered into his room with a towel wrapped around his hips, in search of some clothes and his swimsuit.

"Clark, do you have time to try on the new suit," called his mom. "Or is Lois expecting you?"

He glanced at the clock. "I have a few minutes," he replied, looking down at the blue suit on his bed. It seemed brighter than he remembered and not his normal choice of clothes at all. Dropping the towel, he spun into the new 'secret identity' suit. He didn't know if he called it the 'secret identity suit' because it would let Clark Kent remain 'secret' or if it was because the guy he would become in this suit was *his* 'secret' identity.

His mom came in and stared at him. "Wow."

"You don't think it's too tight?" Clark shifted back and forth, looking at himself in his mom's full-length mirror. "Do you think Lois will recognize me?"

His mom patted him on the arm as she peered around his shoulder with a chuckle. "Nobody's going to be looking at your face, Clark."

Clark's eyes bugged as he blushed. "*Mom!*"

"They don't call them tights for nothing." She grinned as his blush deepened. "Don't be surprised if Lois is in shock at first."

"Where's my boy?" his father called entering the bedroom, his expression startled when he spied Clark. He cleared his throat. "You don't think they'll recognize you?"

Clark could see his father hoped not.

Removing his glasses, Clark said, "I don't think so, because I won't *be* me." He put on the glasses and then took them off again.

"Oh," replied his father, finally seeing the transformation.

Clark glanced over at the clock. He still had over half an hour until Lois expected him back. "There's something I wanted to tell you about," he said to his parents. "Let me change and then I'll tell you what happened last night."

His mother raised a brow, then she grinned. "Oh, Clark! I knew you two were perfect for one another."

"*Mom!*" Clark wondered why both his folks expected the worst behavior from him just because he hadn't come home. "I haven't even kissed Lois yet!"

"Yet?" said his dad with a raised brow. "Something happen in the last hour to switch your mind from 'just friends'?"

Clark covered his face with his hand, hating that his folks could read him like an open book.

His mom patted his dad on the shoulder. "Let's give him a minute."

His dad nodded and left the room with her, closing the door behind him.

Clark heard his mom lower her voice, out of politeness more than

necessity, “He came in covered in ice.”

His father chuckled. And Clark groaned. There was a reason he was completely honest with his folks. They knew the truth whether he told it to them or not. But there were still some things he wished they would just pretend not to notice. He took one last look in the mirror and nodded. Not bad. Not bad at all. Nobody would know it was him.

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#### Following Saturday Evening

The week went by in a blur. Clark had spent his day off — Labor Day — with Lois. He knew this great Danish pastry shop in Copenhagen and had procured more breakfast Danishes (Wienerbrød) for them. Then they had gone down to Centennial Park where a street market of food and crafts, complete with live music, was being held. They had wandered around looking at the different booths and then sat down on a blanket and ate hotdogs — had Lois really eaten three? — while listening to music.

After a while, Lois suggested returning to her place for a dip in the pool. Her exact words were something to the effect of: *If we don't get out of this heat and into our swimsuits, I'm going to just die.*

And he couldn't let that happen. Clark grinned. He had practically fallen into the pool to cool off after she emerged from her apartment in that form-fitting and quite revealing maroon one-piece. She had tried to convince him to take off his glasses — the minx never gave up — while he was in the pool. She had even jumped on his back and tried to dunk him. She hadn't succeeded. Thank you, extra strength.

Clark chuckled as he thought back to that day. It had been one of his happiest and he kept thinking back on it all week.

Lois had fallen off his back, splashing into the water. She had popped back up in front of him and reached up to his face, his glasses specifically. So, he had pinned down her arms by wrapping his arms around her.

*You should have kissed her!*

Clark sighed. Yes, he should have. She had stopped fighting him, gazing up into his eyes. She had actually looked willing. Clark even remembered starting to tilt his head toward her. Why hadn't he gone through with it?

*The kids.*

Oh, yeah. The kids. A whole group of them had descended upon them at that moment. Clark wanted to kiss Lois and had sensed that she wanted him to as well, but the kiss that pulsed through him at that moment had been anything but G-rated. He hadn't wanted another audience for this new first kiss, either. So he let her go and had stepped away.

He figured he would get another chance later, when they were alone. But Lois had forgotten to put on sunscreen and had ended up red and crispy by the time they went back inside her apartment. He could hardly hold her hand without a protest coming to her lips. Why did Lois have to keep reminding him how invulnerable she wasn't? Clark had wanted to cool her hot skin with his breath, but that would have brought up other issues he wasn't ready to discuss. He offered to rub her all over with aloe instead, and had even flown off to procure some, but Lois insisted upon doing it herself.

Clark admitted that rubbing her hot skin with his hands would have been a bit intimate.

*Not as intimate as sucking her toes!*

He blushed, turning away from these thoughts. He still couldn't get that image out of his mind. Why *had* she said that? Did she desire him as much as he desired her? He shook his head. *Impossible!* No one could be as full of desire as he was feeling — had been feeling for Lois since they had first eaten lunch together on that park bench — and that craving for her was turning into bone-headed jealousy.

Lois had come to work on Tuesday in a dress which could have easily been called translucent. It wasn't her usual work attire and every single man within a five-mile radius had noticed. He was sure she had worn that dress because her sun-burnt skin was still too painful for clothes. Clark shook his head. No, she *had* been wearing clothing. But that thin, white lacy number made him think otherwise. He swallowed.

It had been painful for him to watch as numerous men admired Lois. He did not know how long he had stood there and stared as man after man approached her. Some had asked for help, some had asked her advice, and one or two had blatantly asked her out. They all flirted with her and she had responded to their kindness, flattery and gentle teasing. She accepted their smiles, laughed at their jokes, but always said 'No' for their requests for coffee or dinner. He hadn't been able to help thinking each time a man approached her... *Was this the man who would take her away from me? Was this man her future husband?*

Clark knew he had no claim on Lois. He didn't have the guts to get past this fear of her future rejection of him. He wondered which would be worse, never getting close to Lois or losing her to another man after having gotten close? He couldn't decide which torture would hurt him less. His green-eyed monster was consuming him.

It wasn't until Lois noticed him standing on the third floor, watching her, and she had smiled at him — the most genuinely happy smile he had seen on her lips the entire time he had been staring at her — that he remembered he still had boxes to deliver. He had waved and she had returned his wave. Lois still liked him and only him.

He was beginning to have nightmares of shadowy figures taking Lois away from him.

*Lois isn't yours for someone to steal, Kent. Until you kiss her, until you come to some agreement with her, she is free to date and kiss whomever she pleases.*

Clark winced. He knew that and yet, he kept hesitating. After coming back from a late night trip to Lois's apartment on Wednesday to see the next installment of the globe's message, his mom had started to ask if he had kissed Lois and he had growled — *growled!* — at his mom. He had never done anything like that before. He knew his mom only wished the best for him, but he was so frustrated with the lack of progress he had made in his relationship with Lois. And he knew he had no one to blame but himself.

The second message — a continuation of the first theme — had freaked Lois out again. He would have willingly taken the globe from her possession — as it did rightfully belong to him — but she had taken the globe out of his hand and locked it back in that wooden box.

He didn't know why she had such a love/hate relationship with the globe. Why did she want to continue to possess the sphere when it obviously gave her no pleasure and caused her nothing but dread? Could he start a relationship with someone who feared and hated everything that he was? Even if he loved and desired her more than anyone he had ever met? Was the concept of someone like him so horrible? Would he ever be able to change her mind? This was partly why he stood outside the Metropolis International Airport, in the back of his dad's truck, watching the unveiling of the new 'super' plane: the Colossus. He was compounding his misery by watching all those news reporters and journalists getting ready for a flight of a lifetime.

When Clark had been a boy, he used to ride the bus down here to the airport and watch the planes take off. He had wondered where they were headed and the different places they would land. He had wanted so desperately to fly in one of those planes — to travel the world, see and feel history and culture one-on-one. If his special skills hadn't developed, he might have joined the Air Force, just to learn how to fly.

He hadn't been out to Tealboro, to the Metropolis International Airport in particular, in years, not since his hearing made the loud roaring of the planes intolerable. Clark laughed to himself. Then — of course — he discovered *he* didn't need a plane to fly. It was the most freeing of experiences. He loved it, just as he knew he would. That was one of the happiest moments of his life. All these additional abilities were worth the bother, the secrecy, the extra care he had to take with everything, if it meant he could fly. It was like the fudge frosting on the birthday cake his mom made him every year on his 'birthday' — not really necessary, but making the whole thing all the better.

Something was happening. The press conference outside the plane was breaking up and the reporters were being led onboard. This plane was huge — titanic almost. Clark started at this description. He hoped

his analogy had been a bad one. He glanced over his shoulder at the dark storm clouds rolling in from the sea. He knew a bad storm was brewing. It was the reason he had told Lois he would pick her up and take her home after work tonight, despite having only two hours between the end of her shift and the beginning of his security guard shift at the store.

Clark looked back out at the bay, not at the brewing storm this time, but at the water. He had understood without her clarifying that when Lois had told him she wanted to see the ocean, this wasn't what she meant. Somehow, he just knew she was talking about the tactile experience of the sand and the heat of the sun on her skin that she wanted, combined with the water.

Hob's Bay, while technically being the 'ocean', lacked the beach part of the equation. The coast line around Metropolis was more rocky than sandy, except that one stretch by Senre Ville on St. Martin's Island. Sure, Lois could easily hop on a bus or the metro train and go there. And, yes, she could see sand — if she paid the entrance fee and pried the people apart, she could see an inch or two of sand between them. He somehow knew that a beach to Lois was an empty stretch of sand and he couldn't wait to share it with her. He had already picked one out in his mind.

Focusing his gaze back on the reporters, Clark recognized the *Metropolis Star's* princess — the blonde and beautiful Linda King. She either was the luckiest reporter in the world or she *made* news occur just by being there. He had always been suspicious of how she always 'happened' to be at the right place at the right time. No one was that lucky. Clark sighed. Unfortunately, he wasn't really in a position to investigate her further.

Clark leaned against the cab of his dad's truck and watched as the doors of the 'super' plane closed. How he wished he could be one of those lucky reporters. He still had never had a chance to fly in a plane. He doubted Lois had either. It wasn't how he *really* wanted to fly with her, but it would be better than nothing.

He heard a crack of thunder and saw a flash of lightning as a spattering of rain started to fall. That storm seemed nasty. The 'super' plane was supposed to fly around Metropolis, then along the coast past Gotham City, circle around Boston and head back to Metropolis. A short three-hour tour. He felt another chill of danger creep down his spine as he hopped out of the back of the truck. He shook it off, blaming it on too much TV as an adolescent.

Clark watched from beside the truck as the 'super' plane taxied down the runway. It took off into the air over Metropolis as another flash of lightning lit up the evening sky nearby. The little boy inside him cheered as the plane passed overhead. *There is just something about planes I still love*, he thought with a smile. Still the safest way to travel, so he heard.

He wore his new secret identity suit under his security guard uniform. Not that he was expecting someone to need his help, and he privately hoped that no one would tonight while he was locked in the store. Perry had made the pay so good that it seemed almost worth the sacrifice to his rescue duties to take that one night off. He knew he was going to have to leave Daily Books again soon, only he didn't know how he and his folks and MJ's Café would survive without the extra money.

He pushed these thoughts aside as he stretched. The extra layer of clothing from the suit, despite being skin-tight, had made the uniform more snug. Clark would have to remember to ask Perry for a larger size.

The plane was circling over the downtown area of Metropolis now, giving those drooling reporters a bird's eye glance at Luthor Towers. Clark spit out the bad taste that rose in his throat at Luthor's name. The man was selfish, arrogant, pig-headed and most certainly up to no good. Clark didn't trust the man. He again wished he was in a position and had the free time to investigate the man further.

There was another crack of lightning, this time over Metropolis, and very close to the plane. Too close in fact. If the plane got hit by lightning while over his city, more than the passengers' lives would be

in danger. The pilots must have realized the same thing and the plane rose higher into the air and started to head for Gotham City. Clark nodded. *Wise move.*

Clark got back into the truck and turned it around in the vacant lot. All the other gawkers had already left. He was the last one.

The plane turned and started to circle Metropolis again.

*What were they doing?* Then Clark nodded. *The powers-that-be hadn't liked that the pilots had cut the tour short.*

He shook his head. Flash over safety. That was how innocent people got hurt.

The Fates must have read his mind. No sooner had the plane reached the Metropolis skyline again when a bolt of blue struck the left side of the plane, puncturing the wing and knocking one of the four engines loose.

Clark stopped the truck and spun out of his security guard uniform — leaving it neatly folded in the cab of the truck — before flying into the air in less than six seconds.

He could hear the screaming passengers in the plane as it started spiraling above his city. Landing on the busy streets of Metropolis, Clark caught the falling engine with ease and set it gently on the sidewalk. Then he flew back up and took hold of the broken wing as he guided the plane back to the Metropolis International Airport. He glanced towards the passenger windows and saw Linda King staring at him, her jaw hanging open. There were several flashes of light from inside the plane and he realized that he was getting his photo taken.

*Well, there was no more hiding in the shadows anymore now, Flyboy.*

Clark would be on the cover of the morning edition of at least the *Metropolis Star* tomorrow and probably more papers than that. Hopefully nobody would recognize him. He set down the plane on the tarmac and flew into the air with a slight salute to the pilots. He disappeared into a blur of speed to go retrieve the engine before it got looted.

When he arrived back at the airport with the missing engine, he noticed the passenger door was now open and the emergency slide deployed. Linda King pushed past her fellow reporters and jumped out as he set down the engine.

"Linda King, *Metropolis Star*," she called in way of a greeting. "Who are you?"

"A friend," he replied, slowly lifting himself into the air.

"You owe me an interview."

Clark raised a brow. "Do I?"

"How do I contact you?"

"I'll be around," he responded vaguely.

"You're mine!" Linda screamed at him.

Clark chuckled, rising more into the air. Actually he belonged to Lois.

"My exclusive!" he heard her yell at him as he disappeared into the sky once more.

He flew around the city then back to his dad's truck. It was almost time to go pick up Lois.

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Lois didn't know what to do about Clark. Every time she thought he was about to kiss her, he hadn't. After her hot and heavy morning dream about him, all Lois wanted him to do was kiss her. Other than that one flaw, Clark was acting like the perfect boyfriend.

*You mean 'friend'*, sighed her passionate side, who had been in a funk since that almost-kiss in the pool. *He's not officially yours until you can get him to admit he likes you with a kiss.*

Lois was frustrated beyond belief. She knew that Clark liked her. He had spent his whole day off — the first he had had in a while — hanging out with her. Since then she had caught him staring at her several times at the bookstore. He had come right over late Wednesday night after she had called him about the globe having started glowing again.

Once she could have discount as a fluke. Maybe Lois had misunderstood what it had been saying. Two times was real. Tempus's

Superman could actually exist. If this globe did not belong to him, it belonged to another alien — and one alien on Earth was more than enough for her to wrap her mind around at the moment. Thank you very much. She admitted to herself that she had once again gone unHINGED about the globe in Clark's presence.

*Maybe that's why he hasn't kissed you, Lois. You're too hysterical.*

She had not been hysterical, Lois corrected herself. Okay, maybe she had cried uncontrollably once again at the thought that her life was being written by someone other than her. But she was over that now. She knew she would not cry again at the glowing globe, unless it told her something insane about Superman.

*Like what?*

She had no idea.

*What could be crazier than a man who flies?*

So far the information from the sphere had been more like a story and not scary at all. Actually, Lois had been a bit relieved. As far as she could tell from the globe's pictures, this alien would look like an Earthling. Maybe this other dimensional *her* wasn't completely insane. And if what Tempus told her was true, though she was still trying to convince herself that everything he said was the rambling of a mad man, then this 'Superman' fellow was enough of a man to father children. Why did she keep thinking about this 'super' man with whom she would share true love? She had no idea.

Truthfully, Lois couldn't think about liking anyone more than she liked Clark. She was beginning to wonder if there was something about herself that was making him pause.

*You mean besides your wacky phobias?*

Clark had had a touch of melancholy all week as well. Lois couldn't pinpoint what it was, but he wasn't as talkative, as quick with his jokes or smiles, and she kept catching expressions of profound sadness on his face. It couldn't have to do with her, could it? He couldn't possibly be unsure of how she felt about him, could he? Hello, she had practically begged him to stay the night! They had held hands while watching the movie. She had fallen asleep in his arms. They had held hands in Centennial Park on Monday. How many times did a woman have to stand in front of a man looking up at him before he got it through his thick head, she wanted to be kissed?

*Quite a few, I guess.*

Lois was ashamed at her behavior. She sighed. She was at the point of desperation. She did not like this feeling, so she had decided it was time to become proactive.

She took the last stack of new magazines from her v-cart and put it on the rack, pulling the old issue.

*You shouldn't have called Martha.*

Yeah, probably not. Lois sighed, again.

*What girl calls a boy's mother to ask if he likes her?*

She had not asked Martha that, Lois defended herself.

*Really? Sounded like it to me.*

Sure, Lois had asked Martha if Clark was okay.

Martha had been busy and had said that Clark had a lot on his mind at the moment.

*Could she have been more vague?*

Then she had asked Martha if she had told her son about what that crazy man from the future had told Lois. Maybe that was what was bothering Clark.

Martha had laughed and had said, "Honey, you wouldn't be calling me, if I had."

Lois hadn't quite been sure what Clark's mom had meant about that. She had been just about to ask her to explain when Martha had continued, "Lois, we're starting to get slammed. I can't talk now. If you get the opportunity, kiss Clark. If that doesn't clear things up..."

"Excuse me, Martha. But did you just tell me to 'kiss Clark'?"

That couldn't have been what his mom said.

Martha had laughed. "Ask Clark, Lois. Then if that doesn't clear things up, come by the restaurant on your next day off and we'll see if we can put Humpty Dumpty back together again."

Oh, right. That made more sense.

*I still think you were right the first time, she told you to 'kiss Clark'. That's what you should do.*

Lois wheeled her cart back to her Receiving room. Kiss Clark? The answer seemed so simple. But what if she kissed him and she had been wrong and Clark didn't like her as she liked him?

*Then I guess he'd be kissing a fool,* sang her inner side.

She couldn't go on like this. Either Lois was going to have to take her relationship with Clark to the next level *or* she should just give up on Clark and prepare herself to be wowed by this 'Superman' whenever he decided to make himself known.

Lois nodded. Clark it was then. At least she would know it was *her* making the decisions in her life, not fate.

About an hour before the end of her shift, Lois and Jack noticed that the bookstore had almost cleared out.

"This is so strange for a Saturday night," commented Jack, looking around at the empty store. "Saturday night is one of our most busiest nights of the week."

"It could have something to do that huge colossal plane that was being revealed tonight. Even Clark said he was going to check it out. Or it could be the storm."

Jack elbowed her lightly with a nudge, nudge, wink, wink. "Clark, huh?"

Lois raised a brow and had replied, "Yes, Clark."

*You want to make something of it?*

"I'm just joshing with you, Lois," Jack chortled, not at all intimidated by her intimidating voice.

She liked that about Jack. He didn't care one whit what anyone else thought about him. He liked himself and everyone else could accept him for who he was or they could just hang for all he cared.

Jack went behind the counter and straightened a display there. "I'm just saying, good for him. Clark finally found someone he liked and went for it."

*Oooh. Talk to Jack. Maybe he knows what's up with Clark.*

"We're just friends," Lois said, reorganizing a specials display as an excuse to stay at the counter.

*Stop telling people that or one of you is going to start believing it. Although since Clark hasn't kissed you...*

Jack scoffed, "Yeah. Right."

*Yea! Jack didn't believe you!*

"I heard about that kiss in Receiving last week," Jack continued. "If you're 'just friends', you're friends with benefits and I just can't see Clark having one of those kinds of relationships. He's not that type of guy."

Lois had forgotten about that kiss in Receiving. Well, not *forgotten* forgotten. She had forgotten that there had been witnesses. Lois smiled. Yes, Clark was a good guy. She would have to agree with that assessment. Maybe she should just give Clark more time.

*Chicken! Kiss the man already! Then — at least — you would know where you stood with him.*

Lois stepped away from the counter as that slimeball Ralph ran in. He reminded her of Claude only not as subtle.

"Wait until you hear what just happened!" Ralph gasped.

She flipped up a hand. "I'm going to process my returns. Call me if we get any customers." Knowing Ralph, his 'big news' was probably some woman's boob falling out of her shirt.

"Gotcha, Lois," Jack replied, leaning over the counter to hear Ralph's 'news'.

Lois shook her head. She had never seen more people into gossip in her life. And she was from Smallville!

Clark showed up just before eight o'clock, leaning against the door frame of her 'jail cell.' "Looking good," he said with a relaxed smile.

Lois glanced back at him and returned his smile.

*Kiss him! Just go up and kiss him like you've done it a thousand times before and you're going to do it a thousand times more. It would be completely natural.*

She was at work and she didn't want their second first kiss to be here. "It's shaping up nicely, isn't it? These shelves have made all the

difference. I feel like I'm finally getting a handle on things."

"I'm glad," he had replied and he did look glad. He looked happier than he had all week. Perhaps he had finally resolved whatever issue had been bothering him. She hoped so. A more confident Clark Kent — she could get used to that.

*Don't you mean 'live with' that? And don't tell me to 'shut up'!*

Lois's smiled grew with these thoughts. She had learned her lesson about telling her passionate side to shut up. Living with Clark, huh? It would be nice to have him around all the time. To wake up to that handsome face looking at her in the morning. But one thing at a time.

*Oh, yeah, Baby!*

Clark's brow furrowed. "What are you thinking about, Lois? You are positively glowing."

*You, handsome.*

"You," Lois replied out loud.

*Oh, my God! You listened to me?*

Lois walked up to Clark and set a hand on his chest. "You look different tonight."

*Subtle.*

"It's the uniform..."

"No," Lois corrected, still standing next to him, leaning into him. "It's you. You must have had a good day."

His face broke into a large grin. "The best."

"I'm sorry I missed it. You'll have to tell me all about it on our drive back to my apartment."

Clark's face faltered slightly at these words.

"Or not," she rambled on. Her heart crumbling as she stepped away from him. "I completely understand if you can't take me home tonight. You've got a long night ahead of you and..."

He took hold of her hand and with a slight tug brought her back next to him. "Why don't you go clock out and get your things, Lois?"

*Yippee! He's still driving you home. He still likes you.*

Lois didn't want to move away from him to go upstairs and get her things, but she forced her legs to move. She would much rather be away from the store with Clark anyway than be here with him. "What time do you have to be back?"

"Ten."

"I really do appreciate this, Clark. I know this is really inconvenient and a bother..."

Clark smiled indulgently at her.

*Smiled?*

"You are neither inconvenient nor a bother, Lois, and you know it. Now scoot."

Lois beamed at his praise. Oh, she could quite easily fall for this more self-confident man.

*Fall? Lois, you're already splattered on the sidewalk for this man.*

Lois jogged up the escalators to the third floor, clocked out and grabbed her stuff out of her locker. As she came back down to the ground floor, she saw Clark talking to Jack.

"So, what are they calling him?" Jack was asking Clark.

Lois raised a brow. What were they talking about?

The kid looked at Lois with a curious expression on his face, then shook his head as if he was dismissing the thought that had arisen there. "Here comes the missus," she heard him say.

Lois shot Jack a look, but Clark just turned and smiled happily at the sight of her. She liked the ease and comfort Clark displayed, resting against the counter. There was something extra sexy about him tonight.

*And he didn't correct Jack! Good sign.*

"Ready?" Clark asked, approaching her.

*In every way.*

Lois nodded.

"I was able to find a spot just around the corner." Clark grabbed an umbrella leaning against the doors and opened it, after he held the door open for her.

*He's such a gentleman, gushed her inner voice.*

"What were you and Jack talking about?" she asked, not able to

hold in her curiosity any longer.

Clark gazed at her and didn't answer right away. "The plane."

"Oh. How was it? Big?"

"Huge." He shrugged and then mumbled, "Not heavy, though."

Lois slapped him playfully on the chest as she chuckled at his joke, "You pick up heavy things all the time then?"

His grin hinted at secrets which he wasn't revealing, the jokester. "You'd be surprised."

"You're a riot, Clark."

"Actually not," he continued, wrapping his arm around her.

"You make *me* laugh, Clark," she said, relishing the embrace.

"My pleasure, miss," he replied, tipping his imaginary hat. They arrived at the truck.

*My pleasure actually.*

Clark walked around the truck and slid into the driver's seat. He shook out the umbrella and stuck it behind his seat.

Lois wondered if he brought the umbrella for her or for him, so his glasses wouldn't get wet, tempting her to pull them off his face again. She sighed. He really was so handsome without those horrible frames.

He glanced at her. "What?"

Lois blushed. "I was just thinking how handsome you would be without those horrible frames."

*Wow! The truth again.*

Clark pressed his lips together. "Lois, you promised."

"What?" she gasped, innocently. "Are you blind without them?"

He shrugged.

"Oh, I know, you're afraid you'll shoot laser beams out of your eyes and you might burn me." She laughed. "Your glasses are all that protect me from certain death."

Clark stared at her.

"Breathe, Clark. I'm only joking."

He released his breath and then replied with a hint of sarcasm, "I knew that. But, yeah, you're right about the laser beams, Lois. So stop trying to take off my glasses, please."

Lois leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Whatever you say, Clark." She giggled.

Clark turned the key and the radio blared '70s rock at them. *We will, We will, Rock you!*

She reached over and turned it off. "I feel like silence. Just us. That OK?"

"Sure." Clark looked over his shoulder and pulled out into traffic. He was quiet a minute.

Lois wanted to hold his hand, but since the truck was a stick shift he would need his right hand to drive.

"Do you really hate my glasses?" he asked quietly.

Guilt stabbed her. "Oh, no, Clark!"

He glanced over at her.

"Well, okay. Yes. I'm sure we could find you a better style, that's all. Something more 1990s and less..."

Clark raised his brow as her voice faded. "1960s?"

She smiled sheepishly, reaching over to pat his arm reassuringly. She was having trouble keeping her hands to herself.

*Because he is so absolutely delicious.*

"Forget I said anything, Clark. I like you just the way you are."

She rested her head on his shoulder. "Don't ever change."

Clark sighed. He didn't sound reassured.

They reached her apartment building a few minutes later. It was amazing how much quicker it was to travel in Clark's truck than it was to take the bus. He found a space directly in front.

"Here we are."

Clark didn't seem interested in walking her to her door. Maybe he didn't like her after all. Lois raised her head off his shoulder and scooted towards the passenger door. Had she been throwing herself at someone who really wasn't interested?

Lois opened the door. "Fine. Well, thanks," she snapped.

"Lois, please. Not tonight," he groaned.

*Not tonight?*

Lois sneered and slammed the door. “Not tonight,” she muttered. “Then when? Never seems most likely.” She marched up her front steps.

Clark opened his door and started to follow. “Lois! Why are you mad at me?”

*The nerve of that man!*

She turned and threw her hands up into the air. “Me, mad? That’s rich, Clark. You’re the one that’s mad, not me.”

“What? I’m not mad at you.”

“Humph! Well, you have a funny way of showing it.” Lois dug her keys out of her purse and opened the front door to her building. She didn’t hold the door for him, but he caught it and continued to follow her.

“Lois, you aren’t making any sense. How am I treating you like I’m mad?”

They were out by the pool now. Lois turned back to him. “You don’t know? You don’t know! How dense can one guy be?”

“Dense? How am I being dense, Lois?” he asked, following her into her apartment.

“Well, if you have to ask...”

“That’s not fair. You’re obviously mad at me. Now you’re doubly mad at me for not knowing why you were mad at me in the first place. Why don’t we just cut this argument in half and you tell me what’s wrong?”

Lois threw her stuff on the coffee table. “You’ve been acting weird all week.”

“I have?” Clark seemed surprised.

“Weird is the wrong word. Sullen. Was it something I did?” She put her hands on her hips, pressed her lips together, and stared at him.

*Yeah! What about that?*

“I’ve been sullen?”

Lois rolled her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Lois. Have I been treating you badly?” he asked, concerned.

“No! You’ve been wonderful. Very friendly.”

*Almost like a brother.*

Clark’s brow furrowed in confusion. “And you haven’t liked this?”

Lois threw up her hands. “What more do I have to say?”

He continued to stare at her as Lois glowered at him.

*Could he really not know?*

Eventually, Clark sighed. “I don’t know what slight I’ve caused you, Lois, but if you don’t want to be friends anymore...” His whole demeanor fell as he reached for the door.

Lois ran to him and placing her hands on either side of him, slammed the door shut. “No! Don’t go!”

“I’ve got to get to the store for my shift,” he murmured.

“You still have time,” she told him. “I don’t want you to leave like this.”

He looked at her, his whole countenance hopeful. “So you still want to be friends?”

She leaned towards him. “Breathe, Clark.”

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*Breathe?*

How could Clark breathe with Lois so close? She had her hands on either side of him, pinning him to the door. Her whole body leaning against his. How could he possibly breathe?

“Breathe?” he finally was able to ask.

“You told me once that you would hold your breath until I found a good man in Metropolis. So, I’m telling you to breathe,” she whispered.

Clark’s chest began to ache.

*Lois met someone? Today? Not today of all days. Please, Lois, don’t tell me about this today. Don’t ruin today.*

“You’ve met someone?” he sputtered.

A hint of a smile danced on her lips. “Yes.”

He swallowed. “And he likes you?” Clark shook his head. “Of course he likes you. How could he not?”

Her smile grew larger. “Yes. How could he not?”

“Stop teasing me, Lois,” he murmured.

“Am I teasing you, Clark?” Her tongue licked those smiling lips.

He felt a chill go down his spine.

“Are you going to go out with him?” He winced.

*Do you really want to hear about that, Kent?*

“I hope so.”

“He hasn’t asked you out?” Hope blossomed.

“Not, yet.” Lois’s smile was positively glowing. This man made her happy.

“Is he an idiot?”

Lois giggled softly. “I don’t think so, but...” She shrugged, leaning closer. “It would explain a lot.” Her chest was pressed against his chest now.

Clark raised a brow. Her face was really close to his. Were her arms getting tired? His heart felt like it was wedged in his throat, making it impossible for him to breathe.

“Clark. Breathe,” Lois whispered, before pressing her lips to his.

Clark’s eyes went wide as he realized Lois was kissing him. *Him!* She wrapped her arms around his neck and pushed herself even closer to him. Clark let his eyes drift shut as his arms encircled her, soaking in the essence that was Lois. Her tongue asked permission to enter his mouth and he willingly complied, deepening the kiss.

The kiss from the store was nothing compared to this kiss. This kiss was better. It was real. She wanted him. Lois liked him. They were alone. She was kissing him because she wanted to kiss him. *He* was the man she liked? *He* was the idiot?

Clark lifted Lois into his arms and carried her over to the couch. Of course, he was the idiot! No wonder she had been mad at him. She had wanted him to kiss her and he hadn’t. Clark’s happiness cup overflowed. Lois liked him. She was making it difficult to keep his feet from rising off the floor. He sat down on the couch and put Lois on his lap. She ran her fingers through his hair and moaned.

His heart made a leap. He had made Lois moan with contentment. His pleasure cup had flooded the room now.

Lois moved away and his nerve endings cried out in disappointment.

Clark opened his eyes and looked at her

She was smiling as she licked her lips. “Was that so hard?”

He beamed and pulled her back in for another kiss. She came willingly. He was in heaven!

Clark had rescued a plane full of reporters. He had saved his city from a plane crashing into the streets, possibly killing a bunch of people. And Lois kissed him. Lois liked him. This was the best day ever!

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Clark skipped down the street. He was positively floating and it wasn’t just because he could. Lois’s kisses had made it impossible to touch the ground again. He felt silly and carefree, like Gene Kelly in *Singing in the Rain*. He wasn’t much of a singer, though. Maybe he could do his own rendition called *Flying in the Rain*. He grinned at this ridiculous thought.

Actually that wasn’t correct. He hadn’t stopped grinning since leaving Lois’s apartment. He hadn’t wanted to leave, but he had to get to work. Probably best if he didn’t outstay his welcome. As long as Lois wanted to kiss him and he had no place to go, he would have stayed. Not good. Nope. Not gentlemanly. No, sirree. But certainly heavenly. And after having her sleep in his arms last weekend, why would he ever leave unless she asked him to? Hence outstaying his welcome. So it was for the best that he had this shift at the store to take him away. Clark pulled open the door and skipped inside. He saw Jack and showed him his grin.

“Lois kiss you goodnight, huh?” the kid asked.

Clark raised a brow at him. “Jack, I don’t kiss and tell.” But his grin gave him away.

Jack laughed. “Man, you just did.”

*Oops!* Oh, well.

Clark shrugged and jogged quickly up the escalator. The store was still fairly empty. It was going to be a quick close. He stuck his lunch into a locker and clocked in. Seeing Perry in his office, Clark popped his head in.

“Hi, Perry.”

His manager waved him inside. Clark entered and then Perry indicated he should shut the door. Clark’s brow furrowed as he shut the door.

His boss stuck out his hand. “Good job, son.”

Oh, this was about his save earlier. Clark did not think his grin could get any bigger, but it did. He shook Perry’s hand. “Thank you, Chief.”

“A head’s up would have been nice.” Perry chuckled. “My eyes almost popped out my head when I looked up on my dinner break and there you were flying overhead holding up that colossal plane.” He cleared his throat. “That’s some costume. Nobody’s going to think it’s you.”

“I hope not, Sir,” replied Clark, seriously.

“What did Lois think of your new get-up?”

“I don’t know; she didn’t mention it.”

Perry raised a brow. “You didn’t tell her?”

Clark shook his head. “It’s a little early in the relationship to announce that I’m a flying alien in tights.”

“Possibly,” his boss spoke slowly, hesitantly. “But this isn’t something that’s going to be easy to keep secret from your girlfriend. You’re international news, son.”

“Already?” Clark gasped.

Perry laughed at the younger man’s obvious discomfort. “Did you think you’d only make the local eleven o’clock news? You are unique.”

Clark shrugged. “I just want to help. I don’t want a big deal made.”

“Well, son. A big deal is going to be made. People are going to want to know about you. All about you.”

Clark sighed and sat down opposite his boss. “It felt good to help out. I hate hiding in the shadows, picking and choosing where I can least be noticed. Now I don’t have to worry about that.”

Perry smirked. “No hiding in the shadows in that suit.”

“It’s actually quite comfortable.”

His boss raised a hand to stop this conversation thread. “You’re going to be leaving us — at the bookstore — soon, aren’t you?”

“I don’t want to. I still need the extra paycheck for the café’s lease,” Clark replied sadly. “But, yeah, if I end up being as big of a deal as you say, people are going to notice if I consistently miss rescues on Saturday nights.”

Perry nodded. “That’s thinking like a reporter. And the first people who will notice are the criminals.”

“I’m not a policeman, Chief. I don’t think the men and women in blue will take kindly to that kind of assistance,” Clark responded.

“Kent, I know you. You aren’t going to be able to ignore someone getting mugged on the streets, or a bank robbery with hostages, or a gun battle in Suicide Slum. As long as you don’t hurt anyone, you turn over any criminals to the police as a citizen’s arrest, and you follow the letter of the law, I think Metro’s police will be happy for the help.” Then his boss smirked again. “Good thing your suit is blue, too.”

Clark raised a brow at this joke. “I don’t hurt people, Perry.”

“It’s going to be tempting, especially with people like our Boss out there.”

“I made myself a vow when I discovered how very strong I am, never to hurt a human and especially never to kill one. Every person has a little good in them...” Clark’s statement was tempered as his grin returned for a moment. “... no matter how big of a jerk he or she may end up being.”

“Kent, we both know The Boss is more than a jerk.”

Clark stood up with a nod. “Yes, but that still doesn’t change things. I’m not going to let someone else being evil change who I am.”

“Glad to hear it, Kent. If you need any help navigating your first

press conference, let me know.”

Clark’s brow furrowed. “Press conference? I’m not having a press conference.”

“No, but the Mayor is. And he has invited the superhero to join him.”

“Great.” Clark’s tone did not match his word.

“Spend part of tonight preparing a statement and bring it by my house in the morning. I’ll give it a once over,” suggested his boss.

“Thanks, Perry, I’d appreciate it.”

His boss patted him on the back. “And I’ll work on helping you find a job with a bigger paycheck where you can have the freedom to be you. I’ve got ideas on that front.”

Clark smiled. Perry always had ideas.

“Thanks for the help, Chief. I’d better get to work.” He stopped at the door, not quite sure how to say what he knew needed to be said.

“Please don’t tell anyone, even Alice.”

“I have never said a word, Kent. I wasn’t planning on starting now. Not even to Alice.”

Clark released his breath. “Thank you, Sir.”

Perry waved him out of the office. “Get back to work, Kent.”

He shot his boss a smile and left the office.

The store was now closed. It was his job to check to make sure all the customers had left and to lock up. It was amazing how some people would sit in a back corner and not leave despite the overhead announcements that the store was closed. In the past he had found people hiding out in the restrooms too. Clark shook his head, hoping this wasn’t going to be one of those nights.

As he wandered the store, Clark’s thoughts drifted back to what Perry had told him.

*A big deal is going to be made.*

He guessed that shouldn’t surprise him after what he had done. Was that where all the customers were — at home, watching him on LNN? He hadn’t had a chance to check out the coverage or what they were saying about him. Everything he had heard on the radio on the way to the store to pick Lois up had been genuinely positive.

*Lois!* He hadn’t thought about her for five whole minutes. He sighed as he allowed his mind to coast over their kisses. She liked him. Really, really liked him. And he liked her.

*Like, ha! You love her.*

He did. He really, really did. Clark laughed quietly to himself. She had gotten mad at him because he hadn’t kissed her. How could he not love that woman? He was pleased that she had forced their relationship forward. He *had* been a dense idiot for hesitating.

*Now you’ll truly be torn in two when she leaves you for the man she’s destined to marry.*

Clark didn’t want to think about that and pushed that thought away. Tonight Lois wanted him and that was enough. It was almost too much joy for him to wrap his mind around. He felt like flying through the city and screaming at the top of his lungs: *Lois likes me!* Which he would never do, tempting though it might be. That would be too revealing. He didn’t want Lois’s name associated with his other persona. Her name could be entangled with Clark Kent’s all she wanted it to be though.

*Like Mrs. Clark Kent?*

Maybe. Someday. Clark’s smile grew back into a silly grin. That would be nice. Wonderful. Fantastic. He closed his eyes for a moment and imagined himself coming home to an idealized house with an idealized white picket fence. Lois greeting him at the door, her stomach round with child. Gosh, pregnancy agreed with her. It made her glow. He kissed this idealized wife, scooping her into his arms and...

*Are you kidding me? What is this? The 1950s? That will never be your life. And Lois would never be that sort of wife. Nor would you want her to be.*

Clark opened his eyes and continued his rounds. True. He could never picture Lois as a stay-at-home wife, cooking and cleaning and raising their children. He didn’t even know if he could father children

with an Earth woman, but he wouldn't mind trying with Lois. Over and over and over.

*Feet on the ground, Kent!*

Clark swallowed. Okay. No more thinking of being *that* intimate with Lois until he had had a chance to disconnect the surveillance videos. He knew he hadn't raised his hopes of ever being that close to a woman, not after Lana had rejected him so soundly in that department. And with everything else about him, he would be surprised if he ever could have a relationship progress that far, but he could dream.

*Fantasize, you mean.*

Oh, yeah. If the ardor of Lois's kisses were anything to go by...

*Feet on the ground!*

Right. At the store. No thinking about making love to Lois. No matter how much his mind kept drifting in that direction. He chuckled. Would she want him to suck on her toes?

*Kent, she practically invited you to do so last weekend.*

Clark cleared his throat, switching the direction of his thoughts once more. What would Lois think of his other persona? Would she come unglued as she had with the globe? Would she be relieved when he — his other persona *he* — finally told her that he had rescued her that night she had fallen into traffic? Would she be angry? A big possibility with Lois. She got mad at him for not kissing her, so angry was a definite possibility. Luckily, she would be mad at his other persona and not at him.

*If you want to move your relationship past kissing, you're going to have to tell her the truth about that someday, Kent.*

Someday. But thankfully not today. He would climb that mountain when he got there.

*If you get there.*

When, Clark corrected. He trusted Lois. But he wasn't going to allow thoughts of Lois leaving him for another man to enter his mind. Not tonight. Tonight he was a hero and Lois liked him. He was in seventh heaven and planning on staying there.

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### Saturday Night — Near Midnight

Clark set down his pen and looked at the chicken scratch statement he had come up with for the press conference tomorrow. He would take no questions, just give his statement. He hoped it would be enough.

He glanced at the clock. It was late, going on midnight. He had been alone in the store for roughly an hour. He liked the silence of being here by himself. He liked shelving books at fast speed. It was a challenge, being careful at top indoor speed. But tonight, tonight he wanted some music and he wanted to hear what was being said about his other persona.

Clark borrowed Perry's radio from his boss's office and set it on the main cashier counter on the third floor. He could have hooked it into the store's P.A. system, but with his good hearing, it was completely unnecessary. As he went to turn on the radio the store's phone rang. It had never rung on one of his overnight shifts before. Clark reached over and picked it up.

"Daily Books," he said tentatively.

"Clark?" her voice made his skin tingle.

"Lois. Is everything all right?"

"Uh-huh," Lois said, but for some reason he didn't believe her. "I just missed you."

Clark smiled as he sat down on the counter. "I miss you, too. Lois, don't you work at the crack of dawn tomorrow?"

"You know I do," she replied.

He had offered to leave her the truck for her to use in the morning, knowing he was perfectly able to zip to work on his own, especially after her kisses left his gravity control seriously on the fritz. But she hadn't known any of that and had refused his offer, believing he would be late if he didn't take the truck.

Clark realized she sounded a bit breathless. "Lois? Did you have another nightmare?"

There was a pause before she laughed. "Clark, I told you, I *didn't* have a nightmare last weekend..." Then her laughter turned into nervous giggles.

"You what?" Clark murmured, he could hear her heart racing.

"I had been dreaming of you and me..." she paused again.

"Oh, right, the rock climbing."

"No, Clark. We weren't rock climbing."

Clark's mind went in a thousand different directions at lightning speed and then stopped on an image of him sucking her toes. Heat rose in his cheeks. "Oh," he said, his voice cracking on that one word.

"I was dreaming about..." her husky voice faded.

Was Lois about to whisper into his ear in the middle of the night her intimate dreams about the two of them? He swallowed. "Maybe you shouldn't tell me," Clark suggested. He would likely go crazy being locked in the store if he heard her tell him what exactly she had been dreaming about.

"Are you sure, Clark?" Lois teased him.

"Do you feel safer whispering these things to me knowing I cannot rush right over there?" he inquired.

"Don't be ridiculous, Clark. I never feel safer than I do in your arms."

His heart soared. "I..." Clark didn't know how to respond to that statement using words.

"I dreamed that we were kissing," Lois admitted in a rush.

"Oh." Clark's silly grin was back. "Really?" She had wanted him to kiss her a week ago? So much so that she had dreamed about it? He really had been a dense idiot!

Lois laughed flirtatiously. "No, not really, but I'm not going to tell you what we were actually doing."

Clark joined her laughter. "Tease." He was floating above the counter now. "Go to sleep, Lois."

"Goodnight, Clark."

"Sweet dreams, Lois."

"Ooh. Do I get to dream of you?" She bubbled with laughter again.

"Goodnight, Lois," Clark said, hanging up before she could say more about her dreams. He hadn't thought his day could get better. He had thought wrong. Lois was fantasizing about kissing him, about *more* than kissing him. Clark spun around in midair with joy. There couldn't be a happier man on the planet.

Clark floated down and turned on the radio, then flew into Receiving and pulled out the cart of shelving Jimmy had left for the 'weekend book shelvers.' He set the cart down by the counter as the DJ came back on.

"And that was *Flash* by Queen dedicated to Metropolis's new savior from the guys down at City Hall. I don't know if the man in blue... and red... and with the big 'S' on his chest would like to be compared to a football hero, but what the hey. I also played *Blue Suede Shoes* dedicated by Perry. Yo, Perry, I'm looking at the LNN footage and, sorry, dude, he's wearing red boots. Only the suit was blue. And then finally *These Boots were Made for Walkin'* by Nancy Sinatra dedicated by Cat. Um... Kitty Cat, I'm thinking those boots were made for Flying! What's with the shoe references, tonight? Do we have a new foot fetish epidemic in Metropolis? Anyway, this is Lenny Stoke, The Soundman, coming to you from WMET — all rock, all the time. We're taking dedications all night long for our new superhero. 'Let's see if we can get that man to dance!' say the ladies down at the Apricot Diner on Third who have dedicated this oldie from KC and The Sunshine Band, *Get Down Tonight*."

Clark laughed, flying around the store, putting books away here and there.

After a station break, the DJ came back on. "It's Lenny Stoke, The Soundman, again. DC — sorry, girl, I cannot pronounce your name, if my life depended on it — suggests we call our new hero Mr. Fahrenheit, after the Queen song, *Don't Stop Me Now*! Mr. Fahrenheit, huh? I know the women of Metropolis thinks he's hot stuff in those tights, but Mr. Fahrenheit? We'll have to think about that one. And

what is with all the Queen requests tonight? Is there something about a man in tights that makes one naturally think of Queen?” Lenny guffawed. “Well, all you homophobes out there, better watch what you say from now on, just in case. I doubt you want to make this man angry. Here is DC’s request, *Don’t Stop Me Now!*”

Clark laughed with a shake of his head. Well, that was an interesting take on his new suit. He had never had any doubts where his interest lay in that department. Let the masses think what they wanted of him. He and Lois knew the truth.

The song started and Clark’s feet began to tap to the beat, then his hips started to move. He twisted across the open space and ended up sliding on his knees on the slick tiles surrounding the handrail overlooking the ‘pit’. The books on the cart forgotten as he danced around the store, the music making his body express the joy in his heart. Suddenly, he was spinning midair over the open space in the center of the store.

As the song ended, Clark landed on the carpet of the ground floor crouched on one knee. He glanced up to see a homeless man staring at him through the window. Clark shrugged with a smile at the man and waved, then jogged up the stopped stairs of the escalator back to the third floor. As he stepped off of the escalator, he saw a bright light and heard Jor-El’s voice.

*“There is no longer any doubt. The chain reaction has begun. As panic spreads, the population awakens too late to its fate. Our future is inevitable.”*

The globe! That was why Lois had called him. Why her voice had sounded shaky. Why her heart had been racing. Clark was amazed and a bit dismayed that he could see and hear the sphere’s message from so far away. Amazed that the globe and him were so attuned to one another. Dismayed that Lois could, would, and did activate it without him.

Lois *had* called him, probably to tell him about the globe, only he had distracted her by talking about her dreams. He wouldn’t take back that conversation for the world, but he still wished he hadn’t sidetracked her. Obviously her fear of the sphere was now gone if she felt comfortable enough activating it, touching it without him there.

*“At last the computers have located a suitable destination. A planet physically and biologically compatible with Krypton whose inhabitants resemble ours, and whose society is based on ethical standards which we, too, embrace in concept, if not always in deed.”*

That was what they had been looking for in the previous message. Something was happening to the planet Krypton and they were looking for a new planet on which to live.

*“The inhabitants call it, simply, Earth.”*

The light and image of his birth parents faded. Clark sat down on the floor and thought about what he had just learned. He had been sent to Earth on purpose. Did that mean that others from Krypton had also made it here? If so, he had just announced his presence to them in a big way. Would they try to contact him? Would he finally meet others like himself? What would that mean for planet Earth? Would they want to help Earth, like he did? Or...

Clark thought about what Jor-El had said, *“Ethical standards we too embrace in concept, if not in deed.”*

... Or not?

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### Sunday

Lois paced by the front doors of Daily Books. She felt bad about not telling Clark about the globe glowing again. She had meant to — that was why she had called him — only they had gotten off the subject. She placed a hand to her warm cheeks. She couldn’t believe she told — a bit — about her erotic Clark dream to *him!* Somehow it was easier to share secrets in the middle of the night over the telephone. Had he been there in person...

*If he had still been in your apartment after midnight, Lois, you wouldn’t have needed to tell him about your dream; you could have lived it instead.*

Why did her thoughts always go there as she was about to see

Clark? The man was apt to think she was perpetually flushed.

*You are. For him.*

To divert herself from these thoughts, Lois pressed the buzzer and looked in the window in hopes of catching her first glance of Clark since the night before.

*Addicted much?*

Lois smiled with a roll of her eyes. A bit, she confessed to herself. His kisses were...

She saw the escalators start to move. Shadowing her eyes from the morning sun, she finally got a glimpse of Clark coming down the escalator. He saw her peering through the window and his face lit up. He was happy to see her.

*Duh! The last thing you said to him was that you were dreaming about him. Of course he’s happy to see you.*

Clark approached the door and then glanced down at his watch. “Lois, it’s barely six-thirty. I’m not supposed to let anyone in until seven o’clock,” he called through the door.

*Damn!*

Lois held up a small white bag. “I brought breakfast.” She batted her eyelashes and held up a carrying tray with two cups of coffee.

“I guess I could make an exception this *one* time,” he replied, pulling his keys off his belt. “But you better not make this a habit or you’ll get me in trouble.”

*He’s always bending the rules for you, Lois. The man is smitten.*

She was too, she acknowledged to herself. There was just something irresistible about Clark Kent.

As he opened the door, she handed him the items from her hand — which he accepted without question, the gentleman — freeing her to wrap her arms around his neck and pressing a kiss to his lips.

“Good morning, Clark,” she murmured.

He swallowed. “Lois, I am on duty.”

She took the breakfast items back from him and sauntered into the store.

“You can’t take a five minute break and greet me properly?” she asked innocently.

Clark grinned wickedly at her and she felt like melted butter under his gaze. “Perhaps a few minutes.” Before he locked the doors, he easily brought in the huge bundles of Sunday papers.

*Oh, you’ve got to feel those muscles again.*

Clark looked down at the cover of the *Metropolis Star*, distracted from her.

Lois started up the escalator. “You can read the paper later, Clark, but if you don’t come up soon, I can’t guarantee there will be any donuts left.”

Clark double-checked that the front doors were locked and then followed her up the escalator. He caught up to her before she reached the break room. He took the coffees from her once again and held open the door to the break room.

Lois put her items in an empty locker and went to set the bag of donuts on the table, when a pair of strong arms surrounded her. His lips hungrily found hers and Clark pulled her closer. The emotion of their kiss was so strong, Lois could feel it release a desire deep inside of her; a desire never before released. She dropped the donuts and wrapped her arms around his neck. Then as his kisses continued, she felt the need to climb up his body to become even closer to him. Clark must have sensed her need because his hands moved down her back and lifted her up. Lois wrapped her legs around his hips and locked her ankles around his backside.

“Lois,” he moaned as she squeezed her legs.

“Clark,” she replied with her own moan. Then Lois remembered where they were. She unlocked her ankles and slid down his firm body with a sigh of regret. Reluctantly, she pulled her lips from his. “Maybe we should have breakfast.”

“I’m happy to survive on your kisses,” he murmured, bringing his mouth back to hers.

Lois smiled and set her hands on his chest. “There’s something I want to tell you.”

With a regretful sigh of his own, Clark stepped away. “Do you know what you do to me?”

Lois’s smile grew into a silly grin. “I have an inkling.” She looked around for the donuts and found the bag on the floor. “Oops. I hope they aren’t too smashed.”

“I don’t think we stepped on it, so they’re probably only a little bruised,” he said hopefully, sitting down at the break table.

She opened the bag. “I got a glazed, an old fashioned, a jelly and a...”

“Ooh! Cake! My favorite,” said Clark, taking that one. Then he belatedly apologized.

“I was hoping you like those,” Lois replied with relief. She hadn’t known what kind of donuts Clark liked so she had gotten a variety. She liked how his eyes lit up as he grabbed that donut, just like a little boy’s. She was amazed at how alert he seemed after staying up all night. She was dragging her feet and she had gotten five hours of sleep — more or less.

Clark shot her a smile. “Usually people go for the glazed — bringing only that kind.”

“I aim to please.” She laughed.

He took her hand in his. “You always please me, Lois.”

*If he keeps talking to you like this, you’re going to be seriously in love with him — and soon.*

Lois returned Clark’s smile and attempted not to repeat her thoughts aloud to him. It was too soon, way too soon to be speaking of love, even in jest.

Clark took a sip of his coffee, then tried not to wince, failing miserably.

“Not sweet enough?” she asked.

He stood up and retrieved some sugar packets and creamer from the snack counter. “I’ve got a bit of a sweet tooth.”

Lois smiled coquettishly at him over her cup. “Is that why you like me?”

Clark laughed. “You, Lois, are both sweet and spicy.”

*Nice save after that laughter, big boy.*

Lois watched as he opened packet after packet of sugar and poured them into his coffee. “Clark, how do you eat like this and look...” she held up a hand towards him.

*Absolutely delicious? ... Extra nibblicious? ... So gorgeous? ... Completely irresistible?*

“... as good as you do,” Lois finally finished, glancing away.

*Chicken! Clark would love to hear how much you crave his body.*

Clark knew how much she craved his body by her kisses, she didn’t need to verbalize those thoughts.

He shrugged his response, but his smile didn’t fade. After he finished fixing his coffee, he reached back and took her hand again. “There was something you wanted to tell me?” He flashed her a grin. “I don’t know if I could handle more revelations about your dreams,” he teased.

Lois glanced away from his eyes for a second, then returned his gaze with intensity. “Your loss.” She grinned, her eyebrows moving up and down, as she watched him swallow.

Clark cleared his throat. “Is that what you wanted to talk to me about?”

She chuckled and squeezed his hand. “No.” Then she launched into what happened with the globe. He listened to everything she said, hanging on her every word.

She knew why the sphere fascinated her. She wondered what Clark thought about an alien living amongst them. Did this thought scare him? Thrill him? Make him nervous? She wished he would share his feelings about what they had learned from the globe. She knew she was mostly to blame for not knowing how he felt, because of her previous hysterics. But now that she was calmer, maybe they could discuss what he was thinking.

“And the sphere responded when you touched it?” he asked, his voice in awe.

Lois smiled reassuringly. “Yes. Same as you. Sorry, handsome,

there’s no special connection between you and the globe. Anyone can activate it, it seems.” She had been teasing him, but she observed a hint of sorrow shadow his face, but then she saw him draw it back, so she wouldn’t notice.

Did Clark think he had a unique bond to the globe? Had it made him feel important? Did he think that the globe hadn’t done anything until he entered her life? Lois put her other hand on top of his. “Some of us think you’re pretty special nonetheless. Don’t take it personally, Clark. The only one who should is the alien himself.”

Clark smiled indulgently at her. “I wish you had mentioned it last night.”

Lois flushed and glanced away. “I meant to, Clark, but then you distracted me with talk of my dreams.” She licked her lips. Thinking about that dream always made her want to kiss Clark. He must have read her mind, because he cupped her jaw with his palm and lightly kissed her. His touch set her on fire. She wrapped her arms around him and slid onto his lap, deepening the kiss.

“How is it that no woman has laid claim to you before now, Clark? I just can’t stop kissing you.”

Clark winked at her. “Don’t worry about me, Lois. I’ll get used to it eventually,” he teased, then kissed her again. “If you can get used to me finding you irresistible.”

*Ooh. Love this man!*

“But...”

*Oh, no! Not the ‘but’ word again...*

“... if you don’t move back to your chair, I may end up walking funny today,” he murmured between her kisses.

Lois raised a brow. “Are you saying that I’m too heavy?”

Clark returned her brow, raising his with equal measure, and gave her a “do I look *that* stupid to you?” glance. “Are you going to make me spell it out for you? We are at work.”

Lois gave him one last kiss and a naughty grin before moving back to her chair.

He exhaled and tried to focus on his donut and coffee for a minute in silence, but failed as he kept glancing over at her. Finally, they both broke the silence with laughter and Lois took hold of his hand once more.

“Clark, does the thought of an alien...” No. Lois shook her head. Leading question. “Knowing that there is an alien on Earth, how does that make you feel?”

He swallowed, looking down deep into his coffee cup in thought. “Excited, but I know he scares you...”

She wiped his words out of the air. “We’re not talking about me or my feelings, I’ll explain them later. I want to hear what you think. So you’re excited?” She motioned for him to continue.

“You aren’t scared of him?” he asked in shock, almost incredulously.

Lois smiled indulgently at Clark. Tempus had already told her that the alien was good; so good that a utopian society was built on his ideals. She hoped she wasn’t the type of woman who would ever fall for a bad man. “Okay. I’ll answer this one question, then I *want* to know what you feel.” She took a deep breath, trying to organize her thoughts and then continued, “How I feel is complicated. All that we’ve learned from the globe and ...” She didn’t want to tell Clark what Tempus told her. “... I have to believe deep in my heart that the alien is a good man or I’ll go crazy. Don’t ask me how I know, I just do. Now, can you...”

Clark took both her hands in his. Looking into her eyes, he said, “Lois, I lo...”

Lois placed her fingers to his mouth. “Clark, I’ve shared my feelings, now you.”

He smiled at her — a big happy smile that reached his eyes, cupped her jaw in his hands and placed a soft kiss on her lips.

“No distractions, Clark. Please.” She placed a hand on his chest and pushed him gently away. “I’ve got to clock in soon.”

“I’m nervous about this last message from the sphere. What if there are more aliens than just this one man? What if they aren’t all

good?”

“If there had been more than one, don’t you think we’d have heard something before now? Pete and I found the globe over twenty years ago,” she said not wanting to think about an alien invasion.

“Maybe they are hiding like he has been,” Clark suggested, his eyes wide and fearful.

“Clark, did the sphere say anything to you — in that first message — before I woke up to lead you to believe this? Any information about the man giving the message?”

He stared at her for a minute without speaking. Was he thinking about her question? Or was he debating whether or not he should tell her the truth? Finally Clark said, “He said that there would be five parts to the message.”

“Five parts? Five parts?” Lois threw up her hands in frustration. “You know, if these were large messages or full of information I could understand that. Why didn’t it just give us the whole message at once instead of making us wait a couple of days between each part?”

“I couldn’t agree more, Lois.”

*How come each time he looks at you, it seems like he likes you more? Where is this man’s flaw? He’s too perfect. No one — especially a man — can be this wonderful.*

Lois’s head was spinning. Her passionate side was turning logical, almost wary. She pushed these thoughts aside. She could use some Mr. Wonderful in her life at the moment. “We’ve only seen three out of the five messages. Let’s reserve this fear until we have more information.”

“You’re right. This is all conjecture,” he responded, exhaling.

“Complete conjecture.” Lois bubbled with laughter. “Who knows if we’ll ever learn more about this alien than what the sphere tells us? We may never even meet the man.”

Clark stared at her. “Ah, Lois, there’s...” The after-hours buzzer sounded, cutting him off. “That’s probably the Assistant Manager. I better go.” He stood up reluctantly. “Thanks for breakfast.”

“Anytime,” she replied.

He flashed her a grin before heading out the door.

*Great. You just told him you’ll make him breakfast ‘anytime’. As if a man wouldn’t take that to mean something else entirely.*

Clark’s not like that, Lois reminded herself, but she felt her cheeks flush nonetheless.

*Clark’s not like that? Scoffed her inner voice, mocking her. He’s a man. They’re all alike. See, he didn’t throw away his trash even.*

Lois threw away her stuff and then Clark’s, hoping he was done. She clocked in and then made her way downstairs to put out the Sunday papers.

She passed Clark on the mezzanine level and he grabbed her wrist gently. “Lois, I’ve got to go change the security tapes, then there’s something you need to know.”

Lois smiled warmly at him. Was he going to tell her he already told his folks he was bringing her to Sunday dinner again? She thought the world of Martha and Jonathan, but how about a real date, just the two of them? She pulled him under the overhang, so the Assistant Manager, who had just gone upstairs, wouldn’t see them and pressed another kiss on his lips.

“What I’d like is another movie night.” She waggled her eyebrows at him and grinned wickedly.

Clark smiled sheepishly. “I’d like that too, but it would have to be an early one. I have to work first thing tomorrow with MDS. Let’s just play it by ear.”

Lois looked at him with a pout and batted her eyelashes.

*You should be ashamed of yourself, Lois! Grow a backbone, girl.*

She sighed, knowing her inner voice was right. “Well, okay, I should really get to work.” She pushed past him.

“Lois, I’m not turning you down,” he said in a slightly exasperated tone.

She flipped her hand at him.

“I’ll come down in a minute and we’ll talk.”

“Whatever, Clark.” Lois continued walking down the escalator. “I guess we’re not official.”

She heard him groan behind her and smiled mischievously.

*Let him suffer!*

Lois went into her Receiving room, grabbed her scissors and went to put out the morning papers. She cut the twine off the first bundle, *The New York Times*, and put it on the newspaper rack. She went to the next paper, the *Metropolis Star*. Lois went to put it on the rack as well, but stopped, when something caught her eye. A photo of *Linda King!*

Ooh. That witch — that so-called best friend of hers — had stood and laughed when Paul called Lois an Ice Queen. Had helped drum Lois out of Met U’s journalism department. Had stabbed Lois in the back, stealing Lois’s article which had then won the Met U Bulletin’s prize for best sophomore journalism. Lois’s prize. Lois had hunted down the leads. Lois had done all the research and Lois had written the first draft of her story. But she made the mistake of giving it to Linda to proof while she went to her psych class. Lois had come back to her room to find her story, her notes, even her back-up copy, and her best friend were all gone. And Linda ended up with *her* prize!

Lois had gone and cried to Paul — the student paper’s editor — who had sympathized her right into his bed. The next morning he announced to the entire paper’s staff that Lois Lane — the Ice Queen, no less — was willing to sleep her way onto the front page. Linda had laughed with delight, keeping the byline. Linda had claimed *her* prize for the story on the professor who was selling grades for sex with his female students.

*Ironic!*

Lois unfolded the *Metropolis Star* to see what her old rival was faking her way through today. There, next to the photo of Linda King, was a picture of a man flying under the huge plane Clark had gone to see the day before. Why was a man under the plane?

*Flying under the wing?* her inner voice gasped

A man dressed in a blue suit, a red cape and shorts, and a bright yellow ‘S’ on his chest, just like the white ‘S’ on the chest of the man from the globe. The photos and colors started to swirl together before her eyes. She blinked her eyes and focused harder. There was another photo of the man carrying one of the airplane’s eight engines — holding it in midair.

The headline read: *‘Met Star First To Talk To Flying Hero.’*

*Super Strong, Super Fast, Flying Man from Another Planet, who looks good in Blue*, Tempus’s words rang in her ears. Lois dropped the paper on the floor and went to the cover story on the *New York Times*. *‘Flying Man Saves Colossus Plane’*. The *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Gotham Gazette*, and the *NY Post* — all the papers had photos of this man flying through the air saving the huge plane. None of the papers had anything better than a grainy close-up photo of her ‘super’ man.

*Yours?*

No. Not hers. Clark was...

Lois’s eyes formed slits.

*Clark!* her inner voice growled at him as well.

“Clark!” Lois snarled.

“Yes?” Clark replied softly, suddenly behind her. “Oh.”

“Oh?” Lois turned around and hit him with a rolled-up newspaper. “*Oh?* Did you forget to mention something to me?”

Clark smiled sheepishly.

“Don’t give me your cute face, Clark,” Lois snapped, hitting his arm again with the rolled-up newspaper.

He swallowed. “This was what I wanted to talk to you about,” he responded innocently.

“Don’t think you’re going to get out of this so easily, Clark. I know you went to the airport to watch the launch of the new plane. Did you see this?”

“Yes,” he admitted. “I was there.”

“You knew this had happened when you came to pick me up last night.” It was a statement, not a question, but he answered it anyway.

“Yes.”

Lois hit him three times on the bicep with the paper. Granted, it wasn’t as hard as she wanted to hit him for lying to her, but it helped

defuse her anger. “Did you ever suspect that I would want to know about this?”

“I...” Clark looked at the rolled-up newspaper. “Lois, that’s the store’s paper, not yours.”

“I’ll pay for it and don’t change the topic.” Lois stared at him, waiting for an answer. When he didn’t reply right away, she said, “Well?”

Clark smiled sheepishly again. “I forgot the question.”

“Were you going to tell me about this?” she asked. Her terse voice was below a holler, but barely.

“I told you I had something to tell you...”

“Last night? Why didn’t you tell me about this *last night*?” She was screaming at him now.

“Truthfully...” he began.

“That would be a nice change,” she rebuked.

“Lois, I have...”

“Clark, don’t even try to go there. By not telling me about this you lied to me.”

Clark’s eyes went wide. “I never meant...”

“And yet you did, Clark. You lied by omission.” Her voice seemed more in control, less ranting, but that was only because her heart felt like it had stopped beating.

“I didn’t mean to deceive you, Lois. When I saw you last night it knocked all other thoughts out of my head. All I could only think of was you,” he murmured.

*What a weak excuse!*

Lois pulled the *Metro Star* off the bench and held it up to him.

“This! This is why you were smiling last night. Why you had ‘the best’ day. You knew you had found the true owner of the globe and you never once thought I’d want to know about it? How is that ‘only thinking of me’?”

Clark winced. “I’m sorry, Lois. You’re absolutely right. I should have told you.”

“That offer I made upstairs to get together later...”

Clark gulped.

“Off the table. Gone. Goodbye.” Lois turned back to the newspapers and started to pick them up off the floor.

“I’m sorry, Lois. You have every right to be mad at me...”

Lois twisted back around and pointed a finger in his face. “Mad? *Mad*? Clark, I’m beyond mad. I am so angry that you need to leave right this moment before I say something we both will regret.”

Clark nodded as she turned back to the newspapers. “I thought you were different, Clark,” she whispered. “I thought you wouldn’t try to hurt me.” She turned back to look at his reaction to her words, but he was gone. He had left when she had asked him to.

*How could he leave? You weren’t done making him feel guilty.*

Lois knelt down on the floor, the tears slowly falling from her eyes. “He’s gone,” she murmured to herself. “He can’t hurt you anymore.” She covered her face with her hands as she silently cried.

*Clark’s gone. He can’t love you anymore.*

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Everywhere Clark went in the store he could hear Lois’s almost silent sobs. He had done that. He had caused the woman he loved pain, because he hadn’t told her about ‘the Flying Man’. He sighed.

How does one gush about seeing oneself fly through the air and save a plane? Yes, of course, Clark was proud of what he had accomplished. And, yes, he had wanted nothing more than to share the whole story with her play-by-play. But he didn’t know where he would have begun telling Lois what his other persona, his other self, had done the day before.

“*I thought you were different,*” she had said.

Oh, he was different from other men, all right. So different, in fact, that Clark had to lie about himself so no one else found out. This was exactly why he hated lying. Someone always got hurt.

“*I thought you wouldn’t try to hurt me,*” she had said then.

Clark hadn’t *tried* to hurt her. He was just really good at it. He sighed again.

Lois was right. His excuses were just that, excuses. Last night he had still been worried that she would flake or freak or who-knew-what when he told her the hero — the alien, whose globe they had both been watching — was now out and about saving people in Metropolis. It hadn’t been until this morning after she had explained to him that she wasn’t scared of the alien that he realized maybe Lois was made of sterner stuff.

When Lois had told him that she knew, deep down in her heart, the alien was a good man, Clark had been so thrilled, he’d almost told her he loved her. Right then and there. She always said the right thing. But now he was glad she had interrupted him. That hadn’t been the correct time to tell her that he loved her. It would have been too soon, especially in light of him not disclosing his earlier rescue of the plane.

*He’s gone. He can’t hurt you anymore.*

Oh, God! What had he done? He didn’t want to hurt Lois. He never had wanted to make her cry. Anger he could handle. Madness she could recover from. But pain, hurt... that was something she might never forgive. Clark needed her to forgive him. He couldn’t lose her due to his own stupidity. He knew she was going to leave him for her future husband someday, unless he could convince her otherwise that he was the right man for her. But he couldn’t lose her now — now when they had only just gotten together. She couldn’t just slip through his fingers already.

Clark wandered around the store, letting in employees as they arrived. All the joy from the night before was gone. The memories of their shared kisses were just memories. After unlocking the doors for the day, Clark walked up the escalator and went to clock out and grab his stuff. When he was back on the ground floor, Clark took a deep breath and turned towards Lois’s Magazine Receiving room. He stood in the doorway and watched her for a minute, wondering what he could possibly say.

“You aren’t helping by sneaking up on me, Clark,” Lois said, before glancing over her shoulder at him. She was still mad at him but calmer than she had been earlier. Unfortunately, calmer didn’t necessarily mean better.

His heart started to beat again. Just hearing her speak his name made his heart soar. Clark knew he was in trouble and it wasn’t because she was mad at him. He was so in love with this woman, there was no turning back. “I really am sorry, Lois. I should have told you. What I did was inexcusable.”

“Ya think?” She was still organizing her magazines, not facing him. But at least she wasn’t kicking him out.

“Would it help if I told you that I like you so much that when I’m around you my mind turns to mush?” He grinned hopefully.

Lois looked at him with a raised brow. “Well... that would explain a lot.”

Had he heard a slight titter to her voice? Was she forgiving him?

Lois sighed and turned to face him, leaning against the wall. “Did I ever tell you about my parents?”

Clark shook his head. He believed the less speaking he did, the better for him.

“My parents aren’t like yours, Clark. I wasn’t raised in a happy, loving home. My father has been cheating on my mother for over twenty years. It started out with small lies. He couldn’t make it home for dinner. Then the lies got larger. Going away to a ‘medical conference’ when he was going on a romantic rendezvous in Kansas City. Lucy and I watched as, with each new lie, our mother would die a little bit. He thought he was saving her from pain, but she knew the truth. We all did. Now he doesn’t even bother lying anymore, because she’s so far gone in the bottle she wouldn’t even remember.” Lois looked him straight in the eye and he saw the pain, the unshed tears. “So, when I discovered you had kept *this* from me, I... I... saw history repeating itself.”

Clark was at her side in a second and wrapped his arms around her. “I’m so sorry, Lois. I will never do that to you.” He kissed the top of her head. “I am not your father.”

Lois was quiet for a minute. “I’m glad you’re not my father, Clark,

because that would bring a whole slew of other problems to our relationship.”

He cracked up. He couldn't help himself. Firstly, because her literal interpretation of his words had made her smile. Secondly, because he was so happy that she still considered what they had a relationship. And thirdly, she was pretty darn funny to crack jokes while she was mad at him. He knew he hadn't been forgiven yet, but maybe she had unlocked the door to his doghouse.

Clark didn't want to go. He wanted to stand there, holding her until she broke away. But he had that press conference at noon and he wanted to review his statement with both his folks and Perry before he went. Clark kissed Lois on the cheek — not wishing to press his luck — and stepped out of their embrace. “I'd better go and let you get back to work.”

“You have any plans for today or are you going to go home and crash?” she asked, moving back to sorting her magazines.

He gulped. How could he reply to that and stay honest? “I have some errands to run this morning, but a nap sounds good right about now.”

Lois smiled at him. “Drive safe.”

“Thanks, I will,” he said as he moved back through the doorway.

“Oh, Clark.”

Her voice drew him back. He glanced at her and saw an intense, determined expression on her face. “Don't keep anything else from me.”

Clark nodded with a sinking heart, wondering how in the world he was ever going to dig himself out of this hole.

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### Sunday — Around Noon

Lois pushed her way through the crowds to the front. She had no problems using her elbows and a well-placed knee when push came to shove. She had used her precious funds to take a cab all the way to Centennial Park on her lunch break, just so she could see this ‘Superman’ in person. She needed to see for herself this man — this super fast, super strong, flying Superman — that Tempus was so sure she would fall in love with. So sure, that Tempus had come back in time and across dimensions to convince her not to marry him. A man like that couldn't be properly judged by a grainy newspaper photo.

Linda's article mentioned that the mayor had invited ‘the Flying Man’ — really *that* was the best name anyone had come up with? — to his press conference. A small part of her hoped that Superman *wouldn't* show up and would make the mayor look like a fool.

*Politicians, ha! Always ordering people around, even superheroes.*

Of course, that small part of her wasn't the part that had just paid her lunch money to a Metro cabbie. If Superman was coming, Lois hoped he showed up on time, because as it was she would be back to work late.

“Well, look what the cat dragged in. What are you doing here, Tiny Town?”

Lois rolled her eyes. She would end up next to her nemesis. “Get your facts straight, Linda. The town is called Smallville. And I'm here — same as you — to take a look at the hero.”

“This is a *press* conference, Lois,” Linda King goaded. “You *aren't* press.”

“I still write for the *Smallville Post*.”

*Why are you explaining yourself to this hack?*

“*Smallville Post*?” Linda started to chortle. “I can just picture you back home with your farmer husband and your three kids. Although that would mean the Ice Queen opening her legs willingly to a man more than once and for some reason I can't picture that happening. Kill anyone else lately?”

Lois raised her brow, refusing to rise to Linda's bait.

“I didn't know they let booksellers write for newspapers,” continued Linda, flipping up Lois's name badge that Lois had forgotten to remove. “Oh, Lois, how quaint. You got out of Tiny Town, after all. Aww. That means you haven't found a man who can accept you, ice-cubes and all.” Linda gazed at her with a sarcastic pouting

face, her laughter still seeping through.

“Not that it is any of your business, Linda, but I happen to have a perfectly wonderful boyfriend,” Lois snarled.

The admission only made Linda chortle louder. “He doesn't mind a cold fish for a bed partner?”

Lois's face flamed at Linda's words. She searched for a suitable retort when she heard a male laugh from her other side. She turned to see Jimmy standing next to her.

“Lois? A cold fish?” Jimmy laughed harder. “Ms. King, I think your sources have been pulling your chain. The Lois I know can set fire with her...”

Lois put her hand on Jimmy's arm. “I don't have to explain myself to her.” Then she mouthed a silent ‘thank you’ to him with a smile, which he returned.

“Is this cute puppy your boyfriend, Lois?” Linda couldn't contain her laughter.

*What was the matter with this woman? Doesn't she have anything better to do?*

“*Me?* I wish,” replied Jimmy with mirth. “Lois is dating one of the most sought-after men in downtown Metropolis for the past three years running. The most beautiful women I've ever met have thrown themselves at him, but the only one I've ever seen snare him is this woman right here.”

Lois looked at Jimmy with surprise. “Really?”

“Really.” He nodded. “You saw Cat that first day...”

Lois hadn't forgotten. And Clark *only* wanted her? Huh. Funny world.

“There must be something seriously wrong with him,” Linda continued to taunt her.

Lois saw red. If Linda wanted to make fun of her that was all fine and good, but nobody — and she meant *nobody* — made fun of Clark Kent, except her! “He is the nicest, sweetest, kindest, most loving, generous, and devoted man I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. And he's the sexiest and most gorgeous man of my acquaintance. No offense, Jimmy.”

He grinned with pleasure. “Hey, I don't mind being included in the same breath as him.”

Linda raised a skeptical eyebrow at Lois and Jimmy. “Does this fabrication of your collective imagination have a name?” Then she looked past Lois as her jaw fell open.

“His name is...” Lois turned to see what Linda was staring at and looked straight into a pair of bright red boots. Her eyes moved up his legs to a skin-tight primary-blue bodysuit with red shorts that left little to the imagination. Her view moved up to a broad chest emblazoned with a sun yellow crest of an ‘S’. All this she had seen in the color photos in the newspapers. Her eyes continued to move up until she was gazing into the deep brown eyes of... “Clark. My boyfriend's name is Clark.”

It was at that moment her brain caught up to her tongue.

*Clark is Superman? Your Clark? An alien from the planet Krypton whose globe you have sitting on your bookcase? This is the man Tempus didn't want you to marry? Your true love? Clark?*

Her knees went weak and Lois reached out and took hold of Jimmy's shoulder. He was busy taking photos.

*Didn't Jimmy recognize his buddy from the store? Didn't anyone? Was it just her?*

Lois realized Superman was staring at her as much as she was at him. He looked like he expected her say something. So she tried to speak. “You're...? You're...? You're...? Super... Super... Superman?” Her tongue for some reason picked this moment to stop working.

“Superman? I am *so* using that!” murmured Linda from beside her.

*No big surprise there, Linda. Isn't that how you get all of your stories?*

Superman — Clark smiled at Lois. “Thank you, Lois.”

This got Linda's attention. “How do you know *her* name?” she snapped. “Superman!”

He crossed his arms across his chest, which Lois recognized as a move to feel less exposed after making that faux pas. To everyone else he seemed more intimidating. “I have excellent hearing, Ms. King. I heard your discussion from miles away.”

Lois took a step back away from the stage.

*You shouldn't be here. This is wrong, all wrong. You need to get away from here. Away from him. He has heard everything you have ever mumbled to yourself about him!*

With a glance at Linda, Lois could tell her old friend looked as mortified as she felt.

*Serves her right!*

Lois took another step back and then another and another, all the while keeping her eyes locked with Superman's.

“Where are you going?” asked Jimmy, still by her side.

“I can't be here. I have to get back to work,” she murmured.

Without thinking, she pointed to Superman and then at herself. “We'll talk later.”

She saw him give a barely noticeable nod before he broke eye contact with her and looked at the Mayor who had been greeting him.

Lois then turned and shoved her way through the reporters, who were all pushing her back towards the stage. When she finally broke through, she placed her hands on her knees, trying to catch her breath. Her heart was racing a mile a minute. She could not think. Her brain too full of thoughts and they were all jumbled together. She could not hear anything but the blood rushing through her head. She could not see, her eyes were blurry with unshed tears. She stumbled forward, her knees still weak.

Suddenly a hand took hold of her elbow and a voice told her, “You're coming with me.”

She blinked her eyes and saw Jimmy. “Thank you,” she sputtered and let him lead her off.

Once she was sitting in his old Mustang with a bottle of water in her hand, Lois started to calm down. She still could not wrap her mind around the fact that her new boyfriend was Superman. It was as if her brain were floating separate from her body.

*No. No. No. This couldn't be right.*

She couldn't think about this.

“Drink some water, Lois. It will make you feel better,” said Jimmy from beside her.

Lois turned and looked at him.

*What? Water. Right. Good idea.*

She unscrewed the lid and took a sip, and then another. He was right, it did make her feel better. “What were you doing there?” she finally asked.

He grinned. “Same as you. Looking at the Big Guy. Perry called me at home this morning and suggested I go. Good opportunity to practice my live action photography skills.”

*Oh, right. The camera.*

“But you left before it had hardly started.”

“True.” Jimmy laughed softly. “But I had already used up a roll and you looked like you could use some help.”

Lois patted his arm. “Thank you. That's twice you saved me today. Maybe you're the true Superman.” She smiled.

*Nope. Sorry. That title belongs to Clark.*

Okay. Her brain had recovered from the shock and was shooting wisecracks at her again. Lois took another sip of water.

“Superman? Wow, Lois, you're amazing. Everyone else had been calling him ‘the Flying Man’ and you pull ‘Superman’ out of thin air. I hope you get the credit for naming him.”

Lois sighed. “Not with Linda on the job. That woman would steal the Declaration of Independence if it weren't under armed guard.”

“Bad blood, huh? And here I thought Cat was catty.” Jimmy shook his head. “Whew! That woman takes the cake.”

“Can we not talk about her?” Lois asked, her stomach juices starting to roil. The last thing Jimmy needed was her to throw up in his classic Mustang.

“So, do you know Superman?” her friend asked delicately.

Lois raised a brow and was tempted to say, “You introduced us.” But she couldn't. She wasn't yet ready to verbalize this new truth in her life. “He saved me a couple of weeks ago from being hit by a car.” She took another sip of water.

“Whoa! You mean he's been around for a while?”

*You have no idea, Jimmy.*

“I guess so,” was what Lois said instead. “I didn't realize until today when I saw his face that it was him. Clark said he was a figment of my imagination.”

*No, what he had said was ‘Do you really believe some mysterious hero saved you, flew you back to your apartment, placed you on the bed to sleep and then left?’*

And here Lois had already forgiven him that transgression.

*Not anymore, Buster!*

And if Clark thought she had been angry this morning? Ha! He hadn't yet seen the depths of her fury. If he thought *that* lack of disclosure was even in the same league with this *new* discovery of his deceit...! Lois shook her head and took another sip of water.

“Lois, did you get lunch?”

She turned and stared at Jimmy. What did lunch have to do with Superman?

*They are both wholesome and delicious?*

“You look a little pale. I figure you left on your lunch break to go to the news conference, so I was wondering if you had had time to eat,” Jimmy clarified.

Her stomach rumbled in response. It had been a long morning since that donut and coffee with Clark. Had that just been *this* morning? Had she really attacked him? Plastered herself to him like honey on a bear? Oh, God! She had made out with Superman!

*And he made out with you!*

She couldn't, wouldn't let her mind take her there.

*Already there, babe. And you know you can't stop me, don't you?*

“Lois, are you sure you're all right? You seem a bit spacey,”

Jimmy asked her.

Right. Jimmy. Car. Keep brain here. Lois smiled at him. “Just a little tired. I didn't sleep well last night.”

*Ooh! I remember last night's dreams,* her inner voice said with glee.

Lois needed to keep talking. She couldn't let her mind remind her of her late night fantasies. “So, photography, huh? I'd love to see your photos sometime. I took an Intro to Photography class once and I was horrible, plain horrible. Just give me a fully automatic, point-and-shoot camera any day. I envy you if you can understand those knobs on the lens. I could never get the hang of it. If I got the depth right, the focus was wrong. Or was it vice-versa?” She paused to take a sip of water.

*Clark's hands had trailed down your body as his lips had followed...*

“So, Jimmy. How about you? Have a girlfriend? Sold any photos? Talk to me, Jimmy. I need to stay out of my mind,” she stammered.

Jimmy glanced at her with a raised brow, his lips pressed together. “Stay out of your mind, Lois?”

She nodded and then they both laughed at the silliness of it.

“You have no idea, Jimmy,” Lois told him and took a gulp of her water.

“Lois, you are a one-of-a-kind babe.”

She gave him a look at the ‘babe’ remark.

“I mean woman.” He cleared his throat. He reached into the backseat and pulled a small paper bag into the front seat, tossing it at her. “Here. Eat.”

“Jimmy, I can't take your lunch,” Lois said politely, while opening the bag and peering inside.

“It's just a PB&J, Lois.” He snickered. “I can make another one when I get home.”

“What is with the men in this city?” Lois asked, taking a bite of the sandwich. “They're always feeding me. Do I look starving or something?” she said, with a full mouth.

“I have no idea,” he murmured in amusement. For some reason

she didn't believe him. Jimmy pulled the car up to a red light. They were almost back to the store now. The city was starting to seem familiar again. "You wouldn't, perchance, have a younger sister?" he asked cautiously.

Lois nodded. "Yes. Lucy. She's the wild child."

Jimmy's jaw dropped. "Wilder than you? Does she swing from vines and beat her chest like Tarzan?"

Lois indulged him. "Sometimes."

"Oh, I've got to meet her."

"I don't know, Jimmy. I'd need a full medical write-up and a list of all your sexual partners."

He nodded like she was serious. "Okay."

Lois bubbled with laughter as she patted his arm. "I'm joking, Jimmy. You're too sweet. She'd..." 'Eat you alive' sounded bad, even if it was the truth. He might take it the wrong way. "... wouldn't know what to do with a guy as wonderful as you."

"Thanks, Lois. I think," he replied. After a moment of thought, he said, "I can be a bad-ass."

Lois raised a brow as he pulled the car over to the park across the street from the bookstore. "Not improving your chances for an introduction, Jimmy."

"Oh. Right. Sorry."

She smiled and kissed his cheek. "Thanks for the sandwich and the ride. You're a lifesaver. And for that I'll introduce you, should she come to town and..." Lois opened the car door. "... keep herself out of jail."

Jimmy's eyes bugged.

"Oh, Jimmy," Lois chortled, stepping out of the car. "You're too easy."

He returned her grin, obviously happy she had been joking. "Take care, Lois."

She waved at him and shut the car door.

*Take care? Why do you need to take care? You can do anything! Superman's your boyfriend.*

Lois sat down on her and Clark's bench to finish her sandwich. She just couldn't face going inside the bookstore yet.

"I need to recharge my batteries first," she murmured, closing her eyes and letting the sunshine wash over her. She felt a slight breeze come across her face.

"I feel like that myself sometimes," replied a familiar voice in a slightly lower octave than she was used to.

Without opening her eyes, she replied, "Aren't they missing you at the press conference, Superman?"

\*\*\*

*A little while earlier above Centennial Park...*

*What in the world was Lois doing at the press conference?* Clark asked himself.

Clark had heard her heartbeat first, then her voice. She wasn't supposed to be on this side of town. She was supposed to be at work. He was having serious second thoughts about attending this press conference at all. It would have been much easier to do an exclusive with one reporter instead of a group of them, but who? Linda King certainly wanted the honor, but after what he heard of her conversation with Lois, did he really want to give it to her?

Perry had dissected his statement and put it back together. Wow, that man was an excellent writer. Clark could see he loved editing. It was probably why Perry spent all his free time editing and publishing that freebie weekly paper *The Planet* — named in honor of his beloved and deceased *Daily Planet*. It was probably why his wife had gone after Jack instead of her own husband when sprayed with that pheromone perfume. Clark had hoped the incident would have been a wake-up call for his boss, but more than likely not. Some people couldn't see what was right in front of them.

Speaking of which, Clark looked down to Lois standing there at his feet, arguing with Linda King about why she had the most wonderful boyfriend. He hadn't meant to pay Lois any direct attention. Actually, Clark had meant to act as if he didn't know her at all —

personally — while he wore the blue suit. But he just didn't have the willpower to ignore her when she was telling people what she liked about him and how much.

*She's not talking about you, Flyboy. She's bragging about her boyfriend Clark Kent. In this suit you aren't him or your life would no longer be yours. Keep your distance.*

Lois noticed him — or more accurately, his boots — and leisurely, took him all in. Clark never felt more like a piece of meat than under Lois's careful gaze. When she reached his face she said "Clark" and his heart plummeted to the ground. Had she recognized him? Then she continued speaking and he was pleased to discover that she was still talking to Linda. "My boyfriend's name is Clark."

Maybe Lois hadn't recognized him after all. Thank goodness. The last thing he needed was his girlfriend outing him at his very first public appearance. He wondered what she thought of his other persona. Then he saw a spark of knowledge in her eyes. Something about him seemed familiar to her. Had she identified him as the man, the blur, who had rescued her that dark and stormy night?

"You're...? You're...? You're...? Super... Super... Superman?"

*Superman?*

Well, okay, Clark guessed that was better than that circus acrobat name of 'the Flying Man' that all the papers and TV stations had been calling him since last night.

"Thank you, Lois," he replied, naturally and automatically. How could he not thank her for calling him super?

"How do you know *her* name?" spat Linda King. "Superman?"

Yep, that name was here to stay. Definitely not giving his exclusive to the *Metropolis Star*.

"I have excellent hearing, Ms. King. I heard your discussion from miles away."

Okay. Admittedly, that was the wrong thing to say at this moment. Both women looked shocked and dismayed, Lois even more than Ms. King. So much so she was backing away from him now. "I can't be here," she was mumbling — not, he realized, to him but to Jimmy.

Jimmy Olsen from the bookstore's Receiving room was taking photo after photo of him. *What was he doing here?* Did Perry post a memo on the bulletin board?

"I have to get back to work," Lois continued, still backing up.

This was bad. Really bad. His first press conference and he had tunnel-vision for his girlfriend. It was best that she left. She was definitely a distraction. He still couldn't pull his gaze away from her. She pointed at him and then at herself, saying, "We'll talk later."

*Oh, yeah, Flyboy, she definitely knows that this 'Superman' guy rescued her and she knows you remember her too. But at least she doesn't know that you — Superman — are also Clark Kent or you — her boyfriend — would really be in trouble.*

Clark nodded slightly to Lois and then turned to greet the Mayor who was walking towards him with an outstretched hand. Was it just him or did this slimeball politician look just like Sonny Bono?

*Concentrate Superman!* his inner voice told him — which also for a moment sounded more like his dad than himself. *Shake his hand. Show them you are friendly.*

The last thing Clark wanted his other persona to be was a photop, but he had flown himself into this mess by showing up at this three-ring circus. Thanks, Perry.

He briefly shook the mayor's hand and glanced out into the crowd to see if Lois was fine. She was standing with her head bent over her knees, appearing as if she was going to be sick. Then Clark saw Jimmy approach her and he smiled. She would be all right. She wasn't alone.

*Focus!*

Right. Press conference. Statement. Then he could leave.

"Will you be taking questions?" asked the Mayor whose self-satisfied grin was cracking the man's face in two.

Clark didn't respond directly to the Mayor as he stepped up to the microphone to say his bit. He mentioned coming from another planet in passing. He really didn't know enough about his home planet of Krypton to say more. He talked about assisting when and where he

could. He mentioned being there to stay. And that Metropolis was his home. The longer he spoke the more his confidence grew. He could do this. Now that he knew Lois was safe with Jimmy, he could more easily concentrate on the task at hand.

As he stepped away from the microphone the reporters started shouting out their questions to ‘Superman’. Clark raised a hand into the air and took off into the sky. *Always leave them wanting more*, Perry had told him.

As Clark flew through the sky, he wondered what he was going to do about Lois. He had meant to confess his rescue to her before this, but that ship had now sailed. He needed to apologize again. He sighed. Was that going to be the basis of their relationship? Him messing up and begging for her forgiveness? He hoped not. What he would really love was what she suggested earlier. Cuddling on her couch, pretending to watch movies as they made out. But she had canceled that date when she sent him to the doghouse.

“*Get away from me!*” he heard a woman scream. Perry was right. He couldn’t ignore anyone in trouble. He followed the voice to an alley where a man held a gun on a well-dressed woman. Clark landed behind her, so that the mugger could see him first, then as the man raised his gun Superman zipped in front of the woman to protect her.

“I wouldn’t recommend that,” warned Clark.

“You’re that guy from the plane!” the mugger gasped in shock. The shock lasted about seven seconds, until the man pulled the trigger. Three bullets in quick succession flew at the hero. Clark caught them all and then dropped them on the ground as he wiped his hands.

“I told you that wasn’t a good idea. Someone could get hurt.” Clark focused on the gun, heating it up with his heat vision until the mugger dropped it.

“Man, you’re a freak!” the mugger turned to run out of the alley, only to find the way blocked by a policeman.

“Officer, this man tried to mug this woman,” announced Clark.

“He caught the bullets like it was nothing,” gushed the grateful woman, wrapping her arms around Clark’s neck. “Thank you! Thank you!” She pressed a kiss to his cheek.

Clark cleared his throat and took a step away. “You’re welcome.” Then he gently moved her towards the policeman who was reading the mugger his Miranda rights.

The mugger wasn’t listening. “He *heated* up my gun, man, with his eyes! He’s a freak, I tell you. A freak!”

“Uh-huh,” said an unconvinced officer. “Sure. And if I had stopped you, I’d be a freak, too.”

“He’s a Godsend,” corrected the woman.

The policeman looked at Clark, really taking him in for the first time. “Thank you... uh...”

“You’re welcome,” replied Clark, before taking off into the air. He really did need a name for this other persona of his. Lois had called him ‘Superman’ which seemed to have caught on at the press conference, but Clark couldn’t call himself that. Could he? How arrogant would he sound?

Lois. He sighed. What was he going to do about her? He flew over to the store, hoping to catch just a glimpse of her. There she was, sitting on their bench, the sunshine caressing her face. “I need to recharge my batteries first,” she murmured to herself.

Clark landed beside her. “I feel like that myself sometimes.”

She didn’t even open her eyes when she replied, “Aren’t they missing you at the press conference, Superman?”

Well, Lois was definitely sticking with the name.

“I said what I had to say,” he responded.

Lois cracked open an eye. “Linda is going to be disappointed.”

“Probably,” he agreed. He liked the ease with which she was talking with his other persona. No fear. No awe. She had said she wasn’t scared of the alien from the globe. This current calmness seemed so at odds with how she had reacted at the press conference. She was quiet, which wasn’t like Lois. Was she waiting for him to say something? Oh, right. The apology. That was why he had wanted his other persona to talk to Lois in the first place.

“I would like to apologize...”

“About time,” Lois interrupted under her breath and Clark resisted the urge to wince. Yep, that was what she had been waiting for.

“... for frightening you the other night...” he continued.

She looked at him, perplexed. “Frightening me?”

Was she bound and determined to make this as difficult for him as possible?

“Yes, frightening you. When I rescued you from falling into traffic.”

Lois stared at him intensely. He wished he could read her mind and know what she was thinking. Finally, she said, “The blur of blue and red...” She nodded. “And the smell of smoke?”

Clark shifted from one foot to the other. “I had just come from fighting a fire at a tenement house...”

“Oh.” Lois nodded again and then her tongue flashed across her front teeth. Oh, no. She was mad. She shook her head and laughed softly to herself. “And here, all this time I thought Clark had rescued me.”

*She had?* He gulped, but didn’t respond.

Lois continued. “How stupid of me. Occam’s Razor! The probability of a ‘Superman’...” She flung her hand out at him as she spoke of him with her designated title, “... rescuing me is more likely than someone I knew finding me and taking me home in his truck.”

Well, that explained the anger. Lois stood up. “I’ve got to go.”

“Lois, I hope you can forgive me,” he murmured.

“Forgive you? For what? Rescuing me? Never! I’ll love you forever for that,” she snapped.

He raised a brow. *Would she now?*

Lois pointed at him. “Oh, don’t you be getting any ideas in that big head of yours, Buster. I meant appreciate you for rescuing me and you know it.”

Clark glanced around. This had been a bad idea. They were starting to attract a crowd. He lowered his voice, “Perhaps this isn’t the best time and place to discuss this, Lois.”

“I didn’t invite you to visit me here,” she snarled, marching to the street. “If you still want to talk, I’ll see you after work. My place. If you haven’t forgotten where that is amid all the women you take home in the middle of the night in this city. And don’t get any heroic ideas about picking me up from work either. I’ll get myself home. Thank you very much.” Lois ran across the street, barely missing a car. She turned and looked at him over her shoulder with a raised brow, angrily retorting to his unvoiced thought, “Like you wouldn’t have saved me.”

As Lois pushed open the door of the store Clark realized he had created a monster. He lifted himself into the air wondering why he didn’t think her boyfriend would be let out of the doghouse any time soon.

*At least she doesn’t know that Superman is also Clark or you would really be in trouble, Kent*, his conscience repeated to him.

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#### Sunday — Around 4:00 P.M.

Lois unlocked her apartment and went inside. She felt hot, sticky, and tired. She hadn’t slept well the night before and she had a series of surprises... she shook her head... surprises. All she wanted was to climb into a bath and wash away her day, her heartache. Too bad her basement apartment only had a shower stall, no tub.

It had been busy at the store all afternoon. Lois had sold out of newspapers before she had left for the press conference, keeping one of each of the papers for herself, which she now dumped on the coffee table. But people kept coming in and asking for more. Apparently, the *Metropolis Star* sold out all over town. The paper did a rare afternoon edition — with a new article including the press conference — which had been delivered right before Lois clocked out at three o’clock.

Superman was certainly news. Big news. And Clark Kent was Superman. Clark Kent, her boyfriend, was from another planet. And he had lied to her about it. Okay. Sure. She could understand that. If she was from another planet, she would probably not be going around bragging about it either. Lois couldn’t understand what it was with her.

Was she the Universe's cosmic joke? She had started to like Clark to keep herself from being available for Superman and then BAM! Clark ended up being Superman! *Ha ha, Universe. Really funny.*

*I thought so, too.*

Now it was too late. Lois sighed. She really liked Clark, but she didn't know if their relationship could overcome this huge lie. Or if she wanted to be destiny's plaything. Clark should have said something to her sooner. He should have told her the truth about himself before revealing himself to the world.

Her tongue went over her front teeth. She bet Martha was having a good laugh at Lois's expense, knowing her son was Superman the whole time. Had she really kept Lois's secret about her future husband from Clark? Martha had told Lois that if she had told her son, Lois wouldn't have been calling Martha about what was bothering Clark. So was Martha saying Clark was nervous about moving their relationship forward? Lois thought about this as she peeled off her work clothes.

Clark had seemed to like her. Jimmy had said that women — like Cat — were constantly throwing themselves at Clark, but, to Jimmy's knowledge, he hadn't dated any of them before her. She jumped into a cool shower. For all she knew Clark had women all over the world. Jack had said 'he wasn't that kind of guy,' but who really knew Clark? He had been lying to everyone, not just her, about who he really was. Not to mention the lipstick on his cheek when he had visited her at the park across from the bookstore. Lois had been thinking about that lipstick smear on his cheek all afternoon and where it might possibly have come from.

Lois stepped out of the shower and dried off. Wrapped in her fluffy robe, she went out into her room to dig through her dresser. No shorts.

*Great. Metropolis was going through an end-of-summer heat wave and you forgot to do laundry.*

She found a cotton sundress in her closet and threw it on. It was butter-cream yellow with spaghetti straps and a circle skirt. She had only worn it once or twice — a gift from her mother and not really her style — but it was the coolest, clean item of clothing she owned.

Lois had just finished combing her wet hair when she heard a knock at her door. She wondered who it could be. She didn't know anyone in her building and no one else had a key to get through the front building.

*Clark still has your parking garage clicker in his truck.*

Lois pressed her lips together. That was right, she had told him to come by after work, so they could finish their argument. Personally, she didn't feel like arguing any more. She was tired.

Something fluttered in her stomach. Butterflies? Was she nervous about talking to Clark? He was still the same man she couldn't keep her hands off of this morning. Only her perception of him had changed since she learned he was her supposed true love. What hadn't changed was her anger at him for lying to her on multiple fronts.

"Coming, Clark," she called, jogging to the door. "About time you..." She opened the door to find not Clark, per se, but Superman — blue suit and all — standing there instead. "Oh," she said in surprise. Had Clark given up being Clark for good? "Sorry, I was expecting Clark." She stepped back to let him in.

"Lois, may we speak outside? It would be best if I wasn't seen coming and going from your apartment."

Lois raised a brow and leaned against her door frame. "You've never had a problem coming into my apartment before."

Superman moved away from her doorway.

Lois held up her finger for him to wait, ran inside and grabbed her sandals, before closing her door and joining him by the pool. "If you don't want to be noticed everywhere you go, may I recommend a less flashy suit?"

Superman held out his hands and looked down at himself. "You don't like the new suit?"

She smiled with pleasure. This suit left little to the imagination. She walked right up to him and set her hand on his crest. "Of course, I like the new suit. I *love* it." She grinned naughtily at him. "Very sexy."

Superman gulped and removed her hand from his chest. "I shouldn't have come here," he said glancing around.

"If you fly off every time we start to talk we'll never move past this," she told him.

"People will get the wrong impression, Lois."

She rolled her eyes. "You won't come into my apartment. You don't want to talk to me out in public. It's either one or the other. Choose one." When he didn't respond, Lois shrugged and turned back to her apartment. "Let me know when you make a decision. Frankly, it would be more private for me to yell at you in my apartment."

Suddenly he was standing between her and her apartment door. Lois glanced over her shoulder at where he had been, then back at him in his current position. "That's going to take some getting used to."

"Lois, may I take you somewhere private?" he asked softly.

Lois swallowed. "You mean —" She pointed up and a hint of a smile appeared on his lips as he nodded. She released her breath. "Okay. That would be new. What do I do?"

His hint of a smile grew larger as he scooped her up into his arms. "Hold on."

Lois wrapped her arms around his neck. "I wasn't planning on letting go."

"I'm going to take off fast," he warned her, and before she could have protested they were above Metropolis.

"Wow!" Lois murmured as she looked at the view. "This is amazing."

"Are you cold?" he asked concerned. "We can still go back and grab you a sweater."

Lois shook her head. "You're quite toasty."

He laughed. "Why thank you, Miss Lane."

"Where are we going?" she asked as they flew away from the city. They were moving quite fast, but neither the wind nor the air temperature bothered her.

"Some place you'll like, where you'll be free to yell at me to your heart's content without anyone observing us."

"Good." Lois nodded. She knew she had not forgiven him — nowhere close to it — but at the moment, with the thrill of flying racing through her veins, she had no desire to tell him off or yell at him. She leaned her head against his. "This is beginning to feel familiar."

Soon they landed on a sandy beach surrounded by rocky dunes. Behind the dunes was a tropical forest, closing the beach off from the world. She could hear birds twittering and something howling a sort of hooting grunt that reminded her of the dog pound from Arsenio Hall's talk show. She thought it might be monkeys. It appeared that no one was around for miles. Just beach, ocean, blue waves, a few copses of trees, some pelicans, hermit crabs, and the two of them. And the monkeys, of course.

The air was hot with just a hint of humidity but it was still cooler than Metropolis had been. Lois took a deep breath, filling her lungs full of salty air as Superman set her down on the sand. She kicked off her sandals, wallowing in the sensation of the warm sand flowing between her toes. Walking to the water's edge, she allowed the cool — but not cold — water to dance across her feet. An iridescent spiral shell glimmered in the water beside her. She picked it up and gazed back at Clark, a satisfied smile on her lips.

"Cheater," she called to him.

Instantly, he was by her side again. "Why do you say that?"

She placed the shell in the pocket of her dress, so she had a free hand to touch him. She placed it on his arm. "How could I possibly yell at you here?"

He appeared happy that she didn't feel like yelling at him, after all.

*Imagine that!*

There was something different about Clark when he wore the Superman suit. He was more serious, more confident, sexier in a completely different way. Maybe it was the absence of those horrible horn-rimmed glasses. Maybe it was the freedom to be himself for once. Maybe it was the skin-tight suit.

“So you aren’t mad at me anymore?” he asked softly.

Lois raised a brow. “You made me feel crazy, like I couldn’t trust myself or my own instincts. And you lied to me.”

“So, still angry?” he asked. “I don’t want you to be mad at me, Lois.”

“That makes two of us,” she replied tersely.

“What can I do to help?” Clark inquired.

*Kiss me!* suggested her inner voice.

Lois held up her hands to the stunning beach. “This helps.”

Another hint of a smile graced his lips. “I hoped it might.”

“Tell me the truth. Tell me *who* you are and tell me *where* we are.”

Clark laughed in surprise. “Is that all?”

“It’s a start,” Lois replied as they started walking down the long empty beach. Her with her feet in the water, him a few feet away on the dry sand. She wished he would move closer, hold her hand, reassure her that he was still the man she thought he was when she kissed him the night before. But she guessed the salt water would wreak havoc on his leather boots.

“Costa Rica.”

“*Costa Rica?* As in Central America?” she stammered. It had only taken them minutes to get there.

Clark nodded. “Papagayo Bay to be exact. I wanted to take you to Langosta Beach, but it isn’t as private and there are sometimes...” his voice faded as he glanced away.

“Tourists? Sharks? Jellyfish? Crabs? Fishermen? What?”

“Skinny-dippers,” he murmured.

Lois chortled and then teased him with a wink. “Modesty becomes you, Superman.”

“Maybe...” He shook his head. “Langosta has beautiful sunsets.”

*Was Clark about to suggest skinny-dipping?*

No. He was about to suggest watching the sunset, Lois corrected her wayward mind.

*Skinny-dipping with Clark? Hmmmm.* Images followed these thoughts. Lois swallowed, stopping to get her fingers wet and press them against her neck.

“Hot?” Clark asked.

*Extremely!*

“A bit,” Lois replied with what she hoped was an innocent smile. Her being mad at him didn’t stop her from being attracted to him. She lifted her skirt above her knees and waded deeper into the surf. She glanced over at him, biting lightly on her bottom lip. “Are you sure you don’t want to kick off your boots and join me? The water feels really cool and refreshing.” She lifted her skirt even higher and waded even deeper. “Divine.”

Superman swallowed, the heat looking like it was finally getting to him, and then he shook his head. “I’m fine. Thanks.”

*Let’s see if that man can resist a ‘come hither’ look.*

Lois turned her back to the ocean and looked Clark directly in the eye, licking her lips.

“Uh... Lois?...” Clark’s hand raised and he pointed beyond her. “Wave.”

Her brow furrowed as she glanced behind her in time to get slapped in the face by said wave. The water retreated and Lois stood there feeling — and she guessed looking — like a drowned kitten. Her gaze thundered at him where he tittered on the beach.

“Feel better?” he asked innocently.

“Much. Thanks,” she sputtered, coming ashore. “So much for super speed.”

“You weren’t in any danger,” he replied, unable to hold in the laughter any longer.

Lois pressed her lips together after running her tongue over her front teeth. She didn’t know if it was getting doused or the fact that he hadn’t ‘rescued’ her or a combination of the two, but her ardor was now completely gone.

*Waterlogged, you mean,* coughed her inner voice.

Clark, trying hard not to stare at her, gulped.

Lois glanced down and noticed that her free flowing sundress now

clung to her body tighter than his blue suit did to his. She raised a brow at his obvious discomfort. She ran her fingers over her hair and shook off as much water as she could.

*Reap what you sow, Big Boy!*

“Would you...” he stammered.

*Oh, now? Now he was affected by her body? Now?*

“Would I what?” she snapped.

Clark swallowed. “Would you like some help drying off or do you want to just air dry?”

Lois put her hands on her hips. “You hiding a towel in that suit?”

“Stand still,” he requested as he started to stare intensely at her legs. A few seconds later, her skirt was blowing again in the breeze.

*He hadn’t been joking about the laser beam eyes,* gasped her inner voice.

“Shall I finish?” he murmured with a quick glance to her eyes.

Lois couldn’t speak so she just nodded dumbly and held out her arms.

“Close your eyes,” he whispered and Lois blindly obeyed.

Moments later her chest and face were caressed in warmth.

*If he keeps this up, you’ll have to take another dip in the ocean to cool off again.*

Lois exhaled and opened her eyes. “Thanks.”

He shrugged as if it were nothing.

“Is that how I ended up dry the night of the storm? The night you rescued me?”

“Yes.”

Lois nodded. It made sense now. She checked that mystery off her list.

“I hadn’t wanted you to catch cold,” he added.

*That would have been the cherry on the top of that horrible sundae.*

“Any other hidden talents?” Lois asked.

“A few,” he replied modestly.

“Such as?” Her curiosity was piqued now.

He was quiet as they continued to walk down the beach.

“Honesty?” she suggested in jest.

“Yes. I believe in the truth at all times.”

Lois pressed her lips together and raised a brow at that statement.

Clark glanced at her. “That’s one of the reasons for the new suit. It felt dishonest hiding in the shadows. When you lie, someone always gets hurt.”

“Ya just figure that one out, did ya?” she scoffed.

Clark touched her gently on the arm. “Rescuing you made that clear to me.” As he spoke his hand slid down her arm to her hand.

A series of tingles danced up her arm with his touch. Holding hands felt right — almost intimate — as they continued down the beach. She stopped and faced him, taking his other hand in hers. “So all of this was because of me?”

“Partially,” he replied. Glancing down at their clasped hands, he let go. “I’m sorry. I should never...” He continued walking.

Lois jogged ahead of him and stopped him with a hand to his chest. “It’s okay to hold my hand. I won’t break.”

Clark removed her hand from his chest, dropping it. “You have a boyfriend, Ms. Lane. It was wrong of me to take such liberties. I won’t do so again.” He continued down the beach, leaving Lois standing behind him, her jaw hitting the sand.

*Boyfriend? What boyfriend?*

The only man she was remotely interested in was him.

*You mean Clark.*

Superman was Clark! Or was it Clark was Superman? Chicken and egg. It didn’t matter. What was he talking about? Did Clark think she had another boyfriend? After the way she had kissed him? After she had told him what her father’s cheating had done to her family, did he think...?

Clark turned back to look at her after realizing she wasn’t following him. “Is something wrong?”

“What? Who?” she stammered incoherently.

“Why Clark, of course.” He smiled indulgently at her. “You defended him quite vigorously at the press conference to Linda King.” Her eyes popped out of their sockets as she stared at him. *After spouting off about honesty and truthfulness, the man had the nerve to pretend to you that he was two men?*

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Lois looked stunned. More than stunned. In shock. Had she completely forgotten about Clark in the presence of his tight-wearing alter-ego? *Were* they boyfriend and girlfriend? Or were they just dating, but not exclusive? “Did I misunderstand? Is Clark *not* your boyfriend?” he asked, feeling like he was standing on the edge of lover’s leap, his life hanging on her answer. Oh, God, had Lois fallen for Superman?

But Lois continued to stare at him, dazed and confused. Then her eyes hardened into slits, her tongue slid across her front teeth, and her voice grew cold and thunderous. “*That* remains to be seen.” Then she stomped off down the beach, her whole countenance stormy. She was angrier at Clark than she was this morning. She was livid.

*Yep. No doubt about it. Clark Kent was back in the doghouse, his conscience informed him.*

He jogged to catch up with her. “Sometimes it helps to talk about it. Do you want to tell me what’s wrong?” he asked hopefully.

“You want to know what’s wrong with Clark Kent?” she scoffed, rolling her eyes. “*You!*”

“Pardon?” Superman inquired, floating backwards in front of her as she continued to stomp down the beach. “Me?”

“Yes, *you*, Superman!” she snapped. “Clark is bound and determined to lie to me about everything that has to do with you.”

Superman gulped. “Does he? I wonder why?”

Lois came to a sudden halt. “*Why?* Why? He’s *your* friend why don’t *you* ask him?” She turned around and started marching back the way they had come.

Superman zipped around to the front of Lois again. “My friend?”

She glared at him. “You going to deny that you know him? Well, don’t even try it! Because he knows everything about you.”

“He does?” he stammered.

“Don’t play idiot with me, Superman! Clark practically told me that you had saved me when I fell into the street. ‘A mysterious hero who flew me home and put me on my bed.’ Sound familiar? Why do you think I believed him to be my hero?”

Oh, darn. He had said that, hadn’t he? That was before he had decided to come out of hiding.

“And if he’s lied to me about *you*,” Lois continued, she was still moving at a brisk pace. “What else has he been lying to me about? Maybe he has girlfriends all over town for all I know.” She stopped abruptly again and patted Superman’s cheek. “Even you, wholesome cowboy, had lipstick on your cheek when you visited me after the press conference earlier. Are *you* hiding another life as well or is what I see what I get with *you* too?”

His hand automatically went to his cheek. “I got kissed when I saved someone from being mugged. It was nothing,” he explained.

“I bet it wasn’t ‘nothing’ to your girlfriend,” hollered Lois, storming off.

She was really mad. Maybe he should let her stomp around the beach until she cooled off.

“I don’t have...” a girlfriend, he started to say, but that wasn’t really true. Lois was his girlfriend, at least he wanted her to be. At least, he hoped she still would be.

Lois stopped several paces ahead of him, her hands in fists. She didn’t turn around, her spine stiff and her voice rough, “You don’t have a girlfriend, Superman? How *convenient* for you. Maybe I’ll dump Clark and the two of you can hit the town together, trolling for women.”

*Oh, that went badly, Flyboy. Get yourself out of that one.*

Clark swallowed. Not knowing exactly what to say. He didn’t want to lie to Lois, but also didn’t want to talk to her about his — Superman’s — private life. Why couldn’t they stick to safe topics?

Like why he was on Earth? Not that he knew the full answer to that question either. He knew as much as she did. What were his super powers? How fast could he fly? What did he want to accomplish here on Earth? Anything that wasn’t about his private life.

Lois stormed off again and this time he let her go. He knew he was going to have to tell her something to get himself out of this hole. For some reason he felt he had fallen deeper into that hole than he had been earlier.

Superman sat down under the shade of a gnarled and water-warped tree and stared out at the ocean, wondering what he should do. He loved Lois. He knew that for sure now. But it was *way* too early in their relationship to reveal all his secrets to her. On the other hand, if he kept on this road of deception and omission, there wouldn’t be a relationship left — if he hadn’t ruined that chance already.

*Just like you to screw up love within twenty-four hours, Kent.*

Clark knew he probably shouldn’t have let that wave hit her. But she really needed to cool off, flirting the way she had with Superman. His green-eyed monster had just taken over and held him back from reacting in time. He sighed and then scoffed at himself with a shake of his head. Jealous of Superman! He was out of control.

*You got your punishment though, didn’t you, Kent? That dress was practically see-through when wet.*

Clark remembered. There wasn’t any way he could forget how that thin material clung tight to her body like a second skin. It made his blue suit seem positively baggy in comparison. He gulped.

*But it sure did cool her off!*

Oh yeah. No forgetting that or how angry it had made her. Clark heard her heartbeat coming closer before he drew his gaze away from the water and back to the most beautiful woman he had ever met.

Lois stopped next to him, crossing her arms and waiting. After neither one of them spoke, she finally asked, “What?”

“Are you really going to break up with Clark because of me?” He gazed up at her with his entire heart.

Lois pressed her lips together, staring at him. Then she said, “If I break up with Clark, it will be because he lied to me about you. Not because of you.”

*If, not when.* Clark’s heart started to beat again. Slowly, unsurely, and in-sync with hers.

“Clark doesn’t want to lie to you. He was trying to protect me.”

“I thought you were invincible,” she stated, brow raised and her arms still crossed.

A slight hint of a smile brushed his lips. “Nobody’s invincible, Lois. I may be invulnerable, but certainly not invincible.”

“What’s the difference?” she asked.

“Invincible mean I can’t lose. Invulnerable means nothing can hurt me,” he said casually as if he had such a frank open conversation about his abilities every day. It felt good to admit these things to Lois. It felt like he was finally telling her the truth.

*That’s because you are finally telling her the truth, Kent.*

Lois sat down next to him, covering her bent knees with her skirt. “I don’t think you’re invulnerable either. My argument with Clark seems to have hurt you a lot. Some ‘Superman’ you are,” she teased, elbowing him gently.

“Hey, that was *your* name for me. I didn’t choose it,” he reminded her.

“What does Clark call you?” she asked. “Maybe I’ll call you that instead.”

*Yeah, Flyboy, what does Clark call you? Oh, yeah. Me, myself and I.*

“My birth parents named me Kal-El.” He spelt it.

*Nice bend around the truth there, Kent.*

Lois’s brow furrowed as she studied him. He wondered again what she was thinking. “Have you known Clark long?” she asked grudgingly.

“Since we were kids,” Superman admitted. “When I first developed my abilities.”

Her jaw dropped. “He’s been protecting you... hiding you for that

long?”

Superman shrugged. “I guess so. We look out for each other.”

“Kind of like brothers?” she inquired as she drew in a breath, her eyes going wide for a moment.

He shrugged again.

*No, not like brothers. Like a huge secret you couldn't share with anyone else.*

“So you're impervious to harm. What does that mean exactly?”

“Well, take that mugger I mentioned earlier, he shot me three times and I was able to catch the bullets and turn them to dust.”

“No?” she gasped.

Clark nodded.

Lois leaned against him. “In that case, I think the name ‘Superman’ fits you just fine. Wow!” She was quiet for a minute. “Thank you for saving me, by the way.”

He smiled, his heart feeling like it was floating. Lois didn't sound mad at him any longer. “You're welcome. Anytime.” He winked at her with a nudge. “Just don't make a habit out of it.”

“Deal.” She laughed. “No more running into traffic.”

He liked how quickly her mood had changed. One moment she had been yelling at him and the next she had been teasing and laughing with him. He wondered what he had said to change her mind about him. But he wasn't about to go stick his red boot in his mouth and ask.

She turned and faced him, legs crossed. “Do you have other cool tricks?”

Clark raised an eyebrow at her terminology. “Dogs do ‘tricks’, Lois. I have abilities.”

“Sor-ry,” she replied with a playful sour look to let him know she was saying it in jest.

He thought about this for a moment thinking of the best way he could explain what he could do.

Lois tilted her head and batted her eyelashes. “Please.”

He smiled at her, tempted to kiss that slight pout off her lips.

*You aren't allowed to kiss Lois, Flyboy. She's Clark's girlfriend, he reminded himself.*

“Perhaps I could show you. Please keep in mind it's been a few years since I've tried this and the sand here has some shells and rocks in it and isn't the cleanest sample, so it might not turn out.”

Lois rubbed her hands in anticipation and grinned. He loved that she seemed excited about learning more about him instead of being scared.

Clark zipped up and down the beach until he found the perfect little black stone in just the right size and shape. He returned to the tree where Lois sat and smiled nervously at her. “Okay. Here goes nothing.”

“Can you walk me though what you're doing, in case you move too fast for me to see?” she asked, gazing up straight into his eyes.

“Sure. First I'm going to melt the sand with my heat vision.”

Her jaw dropped as she stared at him, but didn't say anything.

Clark concentrated on a spot of empty sand several meters away from the tree and Lois until the sand was so hot it melted into liquid glass.

“Now I'm going to pick up and shape the liquid glass as I cool it with my cooling breath,” he explained with a quick glance back at her to catch her reaction to his words.

Her eyes went wide as she swallowed. Still she didn't speak.

Clark's hands moved quickly though he kept them slow enough for her to watch the slow, steady progression from sand to liquid glass to sculpture come to shape before her very eyes. When he finished, he dipped the completed object into the sea and then returned to Lois, his crude fish with a black eye outstretched in his hands as a gift to her.

Lois carefully reached out to touch it, but before her fingers met the animal, she stopped. “Is it cool enough for *me* to hold it?”

“It should be, but just in case...” Clark blew softly on the sculpture and then handed a very frosty fish to her.

Lois took the fish but then almost dropped it. “It's freezing!” she announced.

Clark had caught the fish and handed it back to her. “The sun will warm it up soon enough.”

Lois caressed the fish in her hands and then gazed at Clark with a look of admiration he had never before seen from her.

He swallowed at the depth of her praise.

“It's beautiful, Kal. Thank you.”

Clark's heart doubled its already quick beat at her casual use of his Kryptonian name. It was almost intimate, but it was definitely said with friendship in mind. He loved Lois more. How? He did not know. But every time he thought he could not possibly love this woman more, she showed him a new part of herself and he just did. She had accepted and befriended the Kal-El side of him, simply and without fear. He was the luckiest man in the universe.

*Until she finds out you've been lying to her. Then you'll be dog food.*

“I'll treasure this forever. You're quite the artist,” she continued, a sweet smile brushing her lips.

“My mom always encouraged me in the arts,” he replied and then kicked himself. Lois was now going to ask him about his mother.

But she didn't. She was still mesmerized by his crude fish.

“I bet she did,” she murmured, letting him know she was still paying attention. Then she glanced over to him. He was drawn to her. Instinctively he leaned closer about to kiss her when she turned away. “Clark would love this beach.” Her voice was rough and full of the emotion he felt. She stood up and started walking again. He followed, making sure he kept ample distance between them.

*Stupid mistake, Flyboy. You don't want her to dump Clark for you!*

Lois turned around and smiled playfully at him. “You've got to bring me and Clark back here someday.” She sighed. “Or maybe that other beach you mentioned.”

“Langosta,” he murmured. Lois was thinking of a future date with Clark? Good news. Good news indeed!

She walked backwards down the beach as she talked with him. A wicked grin danced on her lips as she winked at him, “Don't tell Clark, but I can so see us skinny-dipping at a deserted beach like this. Making love on the sand.” She closed her eyes and moaned a little. “Well, not right on the sand, definitely on a blanket — otherwise too gritty.”

Superman's jaw dropped as he stared dumbly at her. She imagined making love to him? He swallowed.

*No, you idiot, with her boyfriend, Clark. Fly away now! This instant, before you try to kiss her again.*

This time Clark listened to the advice from inside him. Lois was less than a dot below him when he heard her yelling at him.

“I told you *not* to tell Clark!” Then Lois laughed.

Clark stopped midair and laughed himself. She thought he was rushing off to tell Clark?

*Tempting. Very tempting.*

Oh, if she only knew the truth...

*Lois would dump you faster than... He couldn't think of an apt analogy... A speeding train perhaps? Anyway, pretty darn quick.*

Clark rushed up to the Arctic to do twenty laps by his favorite iceberg. Yep, definitely a little cottage, right here, with a couple of changes of clothes for after his icy swims. Lois had just told Superman she wanted to swim naked with Clark? To make love to Clark? His supposed best friend? Had she bonded that well with Superman already? Or was she just teasing him? Could Lois possibly know that he Superman was also Clark?

Nah. She couldn't possibly know that. His disguise was perfect. She had never seen him without his glasses. She hadn't once addressed Superman as Clark. Always Superman or Kal. She had even told him when she had answered the door, she had been expecting Clark. No, she didn't know. She was just confiding in a new friend how much she wanted her boyfriend. A new friend she had almost kissed.

*Don't go there. You almost kissed her. She turned away.*

Lois turned away from the kiss and then starting talking about making love to Clark. Was that her way of telling Superman that she

and Clark were very serious, to keep his hands and lips off her? Especially if he respected his friendship with Clark? Yes, that must be why she told Superman about wanting to make love with Clark. Not because she could possibly actually want to... Oh, that would be heavenly though, wouldn't it? Mmmm. Making love to Lois on the beach. The sun, the surf, the sand... Forget the beach. Making love to Lois ANYWHERE. He grinned and did another twenty laps. He really needed to get Lois back to Metropolis so she could kiss her boyfriend again. Correction, so her boyfriend could kiss her again.

Zippering back down to Costa Rica, he spun into his Clark clothes long enough to pick up a couple of frozen treats in the small beach town of Tamarindo, before returning to Lois on their beach.

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Lois waded in the surf up to her knees, keeping a close eye on the waves as she waited for Superman to return. She needed to cool off. She couldn't believe she told Clark's twin brother that she wanted to make love to Clark. Her face flushed with heat again.

*I keep telling you, Clark doesn't have a brother.*

Of course, Kal-El was Clark's twin. It was the only reasonable explanation. Clark couldn't possibly think she was stupid enough to believe he was two people, could he? No, the only logical solution to why Kal looked exactly like Clark was that he was his twin brother.

*Even though Clark told you that he had always wanted a sibling. That's when you offered him Lucy, free of charge. Remember?*

Yes, Lois remembered that conversation. But Clark had always lied about everything to do with Kal-El, to protect his brother from the cruelty of us humans. Kal was sweet and kind and funny with a wicked sense of humor, yet fragile. He loved his brother so much that Kal even went into a funk when he thought Lois would break up with Clark because of him. That was loyalty.

*That was a man worried you were going to break up with him. Because Clark is Superman!*

No, absolutely not. Clark couldn't be Superman because then that would mean he had been lying to her, keeping stuff from her after she had told him specifically not to. And then it would mean that Lois would have to break up with Clark — even though she really didn't want to — because she couldn't let someone else decide her destiny. She *had* to be in control of her life. She had to know that what happened to her was *her* decision and not God's or fate's or destiny's. *Hers!* Lois Lane's!

But she admitted that she was attracted to Kal and knew he was attracted to her. She had been drawn to him, like a moth to a flame.

*That's why you almost kissed him. Deep inside you know Kal-El is Clark!*

Lois secretly hoped that Kal would bring Clark to her and prove to her crazy mind that she was right. She was starting to miss Clark. Go into withdrawal from his addicting kisses. Perhaps that was why she was tempted to kiss Kal, because he looked like Clark.

*You've been hanging out with Clark all afternoon,* her inner voice reminded her.

Lois heard a soft thump on the sand behind her and then Kal spoke, "Lois, I've brought you something."

She dropped her skirt and turned around in a rush, her heart pounding in anticipation, "Clark!" But he wasn't there. Only Kal holding a cup of something out to her. She sighed. "Sorry, Kal. I thought you went to get Clark," she murmured, approaching him and taking the cup. It was a snow cone of sorts. "What's the creamy stuff?" "Sweetened condensed milk."

Lois raised a skeptical eyebrow at that interesting concoction, then shrugged, digging in. It was sinfully delicious and refreshingly cool. "Thank you," she finally remembered to say after several mouthfuls.

"You're welcome," he replied, eating from his own dish.

Lois reached out and touched his arm. "I don't want you to think I'm ungrateful or that I don't like your company, but I miss Clark," she confessed to him. "We had a date tonight — or at least I still hope we do. I'm so ashamed at the way I treated him this morning."

"Nothing more than he deserved," Kal mumbled.

*He's got that right.*

"Oh, no! Clark was protecting you. I understand that now. I admire him for it. He's a good friend to you." Lois beamed at him, but Kal's smile, strangely, didn't match hers. It seemed unsure.

"I only wish he had felt like he could have trusted me with his secret, your secret, before it blew up in his face this morning," she continued after another bite of her snow cone.

Kal gulped. "Clark trusts you, Lois."

"No, he doesn't. But I'll prove myself trustworthy, somehow." She took a couple more bites as she thought. "Oh! I've got it. Why don't I write an article about you for the *Smallville Post*? I know it's not the *Metropolis Star*, but I'm sure I could get them to publish it — maybe even get it in tomorrow's paper. We could have it say whatever you want it to say..." Lois smiled at him as she stuck another spoonful of creamy icy dessert into her mouth.

Superman looked thunderous. "Was *this* why you showed up at the press conference? Is that why you agreed to meet me? For an exclusive?"

Lois's heart crashed. "No! Of course not, Kal. I was thinking only of you... and Clark. He could help me write it. We could share the byline and he'd finally be a real reporter. Just like he always dreamed of being."

Kal stared at her; the storm dissipating. "You heard that?" he finally stammered.

*See, I told you. They're the same man.*

"Were you there — in the back of the truck — when Clark drove me home that night?" Lois gasped.

With a sigh, Kal warily tugged his ear.

"Right. Super hearing. I forgot about that." She shot him a grin, teasing. "I'll have to watch what I say from now on."

Kal grimaced. "I don't listen in on *all* your conversations, Lois."

Lois's smile faded as her brow rose. "Only some of them? What does Clark think about that? Listening in on his private conversations with me?"

He shrugged. "Clark's used to it. We don't keep secrets from one another."

*How can they, Lois? Clark is Kal!*

Lois's eyes went wide. "You're not going to tell him what I said about making love to him, are you?" She switched her snow cone to the other hand, placing the colder hand to her flushed face.

Kal smiled naughtily at her. "He feels the same way about you."

*Did Clark just tell you he wanted to make love to you, too? Hot stuff!*

Lois gulped. "Really?"

Kal's naughty smile disappeared as his face turned serious. "But know that Clark doesn't rush into intimate relationships, Lois. He needs to be sure about a woman before allowing the kind of commitment that comes with that kind of intimacy. Clark was burned by love before so he's extra cautious."

*Poor Clark.*

"Oh, poor Clark." Lois looked sadly at Kal. "Thank you for telling me. I won't pressure him to..." She tilted her head and studied Kal. "You aren't just telling me this so I won't make love to Clark, are you? There wouldn't be an ulterior motive for you to come between Clark and me, is there? Mr. Honesty?"

*Oh, course not. Hello? Anyone home, Lois? Kal is Clark!*

Kal swallowed. "I hope I never come between Clark and one of his girlfriends."

Lois's brows shot up as she stepped towards him. "*Girlfriends?* Are you telling me there are other women in Clark's life besides me? Is that why you are trying to warn me away from him? Why you are telling me not to rush into bed with him?"

Kal took a step back. "No! Absolutely not. Hypothetical future girlfriends."

"Oh! So you're saying there's no future for me and Clark? That I should give him up now? To save myself the heartache that is sure to come if I stay with Clark?"

“No! No! No! Don’t do that. Clark loves you.” Kal dropped his snow cone and took hold of her arms gently with both of his hands. “He wants nothing more than to spend the rest of his life proving to you that he’s worthy of your love, but...” Kal’s voice faded and he stood there staring at her without another word.

*Clark loves you?* stammered her inner voice in shock. *Clark loves you enough to spend the rest of his life with you? Clark wants to marry you?*

Lois’s knees felt weak. Good thing Kal already held on to her arms so she wouldn’t sink down to the sand. She swallowed, staring at Kal, waiting for him to continue.

His wide eyes told her he wanted to do anything but go on.

“Oh, no. You can’t stop there, Kal. The cat’s out of the bag now. But *what?*” She waved him on.

“I should take you back to Metropolis,” he mumbled, letting go of Lois’s arms.

Her knees gave out completely and he caught her a fraction of a second later, keeping her upright. “Kal, please. But *what?*”

He glanced away and whispered, “But he knows you’re going to leave him someday for someone else.”

*Martha!* snarled her inner voice. *She didn’t!*

Lois felt the muscles start to work in her legs again. “Did Clark’s mother tell him...” She gulped as her eyes widened as she stared at Kal. “... or *you* what I told her? Does Clark *know* about what that man from the future told me? Do you?”

*Same thing, isn’t it, deary?*

Kal shook his head. “No, not the specifics. Clark just overheard his mom telling his dad that you know who you’re going to marry.”

Lois shrugged off Kal’s hands from her arms. “No. I. Don’t. Know. Who. I’m. Going. To. Marry. Because *I* haven’t made that decision yet. Me, myself and I will determine who *I* will marry. Not fate. Not God. Not destiny. And certainly not some time-traveling, dimension-hopping lunatic from the future. But I can tell you this one thing for certain. It isn’t the man Tempus told me it would be!”

*You just told Clark you weren’t going to marry him.*

No, I just told Kal I wasn’t going to marry *him*.

*Same difference because they are the same man.*

Oh, shut up!

Lois marched back to the weathered tree and sat down on one of its gnarled branches to put on her sandals. She picked up her glass fish and put it in her other pocket from the seashell. Then she stomped back across the sand to Kal and crossed her arms. “Take me home. I have a boyfriend who’s probably worried sick about me and whom I would very much like to kiss. Maybe I’ll even make love to him tonight. Who knows? My decision. Not yours. *Mine!*”

He gulped. “All I was trying to say was not to rush into anything. That’s all.”

Lois glared at him. “Maybe I’ll just run off and marry Clark and live happily ever after with him, whether you like it or not.” She harrumphed.

Kal’s face lit up with genuine happiness. “I would like nothing more, Lois. Honestly.”

*See, I told you. Clark Kent.*

“Unless,” he continued reluctantly. “...you were marrying him just to spite that man from the future. Please promise me that you won’t do that to Clark. Only tell him you love him, if you truly love him. Only make love to him when it’s making love. Only agree to marry him when you are absolutely sure no other man will do. Please can you promise me that, Lois? That’s all I ask.”

*Clark Kent. Clark Kent. Clark Kent,* sang her inner voice.

Lois looked at this man in front of her. What had she done? Gone was the strong self-confident man with his shoulders back and head held high, who knew he could do anything. She missed that man. She had crushed the spirit of that man and all that remained was super-mush-man. Unconfident. Worried. Practically groveling for her not to break Clark’s heart.

Lois took a deep breath and exhaled all of her pent up anger. She

needed to fix this mess she had created. Reaching up she caressed his cheek. “I’m sorry, Kal. You’re absolutely right. You are a good friend to Clark. He’s lucky to have you in his life. Defending him against crazy women like me.” She dropped her hand and started to walk down the beach again. “I’m so sorry. I warned Clark this morning that I say things in anger that I don’t really mean.” She sighed. “Now I’ve gone and demonstrated just that. Yes, I like Clark. I like him very much. The way I feel when he kisses me — like I’m floating and I never want to stop — I sometimes wonder if I like him too much and that scares me. But I don’t know if I want to marry him or anyone else for that matter. When I moved to Metropolis, getting married was the last thing on my mind. But now — since Tempus predicted my future — it’s all I can think about. It’s frustrating and debilitating to think I’m making decisions in my life because of that lunatic. I feel like I have no control over my future anymore. Do you know what that’s like?”

She turned around and realized that Kal hadn’t followed her like she thought he had. He was still back down the beach where she had caressed his cheek. She raised a brow and crooked her finger for him to join her.

He shook his head. “I can hear you just fine from here, Lois.”

Lois snapped her fingers and pointed next to her. “Get your cute, tights-wearing butt over here,” she demanded.

Kal shook his head again.

“What? Do you think I’m going to slug you?” she asked, getting peeved again. Then they caught each other’s eyes and they both laughed.

He moved closer. “I’m sorry, Lois.”

“I’m sorry too, Kal. I like you and I would like for us to be friends,” she said, gazing at him, but there was something more than friendship in the gaze he returned.

*That’s because it’s Clark looking at you, you fool,* her exasperated inner voice muttered. *Clark Kent who loves you and wants to marry you.*

“I like you too, Lois.” Kal moved even closer to her.

Lois put a hand on his chest. “I’m Clark’s girlfriend, Kal. And he’s your best friend,” she murmured. There was something about Superman that drew her in and attracted her like no other man. Then she acknowledged it must be because he looked like Clark.

*He is Clark,* Lois’s inner voice was losing energy, losing force.

Lois smiled at Kal, a longing tugging at her heart. “You look too much like him,” she whispered.

He seemed startled by this admission. “I do?”

Lois laughed. “Don’t look in the mirror much, do you, Kal?”

Kal went to step closer to her. “Lois, I...”

Lois pushed him gently away with her hand. “Go get your trash, Kal, and then it’s time to take me home.”

Kal exhaled and then nodded. “It’s better this way,” he murmured.

“Please, don’t,” she whispered. “My life is complicated enough as it is. *I want* us to be friends, Kal, but if you can’t accept that...” Her voice faded. She couldn’t come between two brothers. Between Kal and Clark. She wouldn’t do that to Clark... to either of them.

*They aren’t brothers! They are the same person!*

“I want to be your friend, too, Lois,” he responded softly, leaning his head against hers.

Lois wrapped her arms around his neck and Kal scooped her up into his arms, stopping only to pick up his snow cone cup from down the beach, before heading up into blue of the sky.

“So, did you tell me everything about yourself?” she asked.

“A man has to have some secrets, otherwise where’s the mystery, the allure?” he said, mocking her.

“I meant all about your abilities.” she corrected, trying hard not to laugh through her pressed lips.

“Speed, flying, strength, heat vision, super hearing, cooling breath, invulnerability.” He thought for a moment. “Did I mention I have x-ray vision?”

Lois gulped. “No.” Then she bubbled with laughter. “Although after that wave soaked me I doubt there’s much of my body you

haven't seen already."

Kal grinned naughtily. "Nope."

She slapped him gently on the shoulder with one hand, not wanting to let go enough to give him a proper slug.

He looked at her as if he was tempted to kiss her again and at this distance or at this height there wouldn't be much she could do to stop him. She was completely at his mercy.

Lois swallowed. "I like you, Kal," she said, her voice rougher than she wished. "I really think we could be friends, but you're going to have to stop looking at me with such smoldering desire."

He silently raised an eyebrow as if questioning her word choice.

"I like Clark. I'm *with* Clark. I'm not going to cheat on Clark, especially with you. I would never do that to him." Lois's voice was low, but she knew with his enhancements he could hear her just fine.

*The question is, though, Lois, whether you're speaking to him or to yourself? Admit it, you're attracted to this Buns of Steel side of Clark and you know it.*

Lois tried not to think about that as they descended into Metropolis. Evening had come to their fair city while they had been at the beach, but cooler temperatures had not come with it. Kal landed gently by the pool, which surprisingly was still deserted. He set her down, and for a moment Lois kept her arms around his neck.

"Thank you, Superman," she murmured. Then taking a deep breath, she let go and stepped away. "Don't be a stranger."

Superman smiled at her and rocketed into the sky. Lois shaded her eyes, searching for him.

"Lois," a voice from behind her called. Turning around, she saw Clark coming towards her from the direction of the parking garage. Despite the heat, he was dressed in a long sleeved shirt and jeans.

See, they can't be the same man, Lois told her mind. Kal went that way and Clark came from the other direction.

*Super speed*, sighed her inner voice.

"Was that just Superman?" Clark asked her.

*You're kidding me, right?*

Lois laughed, shaking her head. "I know, Clark."

He swallowed, his eyes wide and questioning. "Know *what*, Lois?"

She closed the distance between them and wrapped her arms around his neck, whispering in his ear, "I know you know Kal, Clark. He told me everything. You can stop lying to me now."

Clark's arms encircled her waist. "I can?"

"You better if you want to keep dating me," she murmured, pressing her lips against his.

He willingly accepted the kiss and deepened it as if he had been thinking about nothing else the entire day.

She ran her fingers through his hair, holding onto his head, pulling her body closer. "Clark," she murmured. She *had* missed him. "Aren't you hot in those clothes?"

"Mmmmm."

She wanted nothing more than to get out of this dress and float in the cool water of the pool naked with this man. She desired nothing more than to feel her body pressed up against his; the water making sure that their kisses didn't overheat them. She wanted to feel his skin against hers, to run her fingers over his muscles, his body.

His kisses burned through her, melting her inner core and causing an eruption of passion inside her that made her feel as if she could spend decades making love to this man and it still wouldn't be quenched. "Oh, Clark."

*Just one question, Lois, that has been nagging me. How is it possible for Kal to be from another planet with super powers and yet at the same time have a human twin brother Clark who is without super powers?*

Lois pushed herself away and stared at Clark. Her breath was rough and her heart was racing. She wanted to make love to this man, she realized as she stared at him. *Make love*. She was in love with him. In love with Clark Kent. In love with Superman. Superman was Kal-El and Kal-El was Clark Kent.

*I'm going to the chapel and I'm... gonna to get married. I'm going to the chapel and I'm... gonna get married*, sang her inner voice. *Going... to the chapel... of love.*

Lois started to shake her head. "No. No. No. I can't do this. I like you too much. I want you too much." She stared straight into his eyes. "That's why I can never see you again." She turned and ran into her apartment, slamming the door.

She leaned against the inside of her front door, trying to catch her breath, and looked at the mess that had once been her apartment. A scream burst out from inside of her.

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Sunday — Around 6:00 P.M.

*What the...?* Clark thought.

He stared at Lois as she stormed off and slammed her apartment door.

*Lois likes you too much to ever see you again? Are you going to leave after such a pronouncement?*

No. Clark shook his head, jogging up to her apartment door. He was just about to knock when he heard her blood-curdling scream.

"Lois!" he shouted, placing a hand on her doorknob.

She opened the door and threw herself into his arms. Not in passion. Not in anger. In fear. Her heart raced and her blood pounded through her veins.

"Oh, Clark. I'm sorry. So sorry. Please tell me you'll forgive me," she pleaded.

*Music to your ears.*

But Lois wasn't talking about the words she, just a minute before, had hurled into his face. She was in anguish. For *what* was she apologizing?

Then she pulled away so fast that even *he* got dizzy. "Although you're as much to blame as I am."

"Me?" He had no idea what she was talking about.

Her eyes went into slits and she spat out the name, "Kal."

"Oh." Clark's brow furrowed. "What did he do?"

Lois rolled her eyes and pressed her lips together and with a flick of her wrist, pushed her apartment door back open.

It took Clark less than a fraction of a second to see that her apartment had been ransacked. His arms tightened around her and he pulled her to his chest. "Wait here."

"It's *my* apartment," she rebuked.

"Let me just make sure whoever did this is gone. Please, Lois," he beseeched.

Lois's wide eyes stared at him as she gripped him tighter. Finally she nodded, letting him go.

As Clark walked inside, he noticed that not only had her apartment been ransacked, it had also been robbed. Her TV, VCR, and computer were all gone. Her futon mattress turned over and sliced with a knife. Whoever had done this had been searching for something. Money? Lois didn't have any of that. Drugs? Lois? Never! Jewelry? She wasn't the type.

He stepped over the contents of her bookshelves on the way to the bathroom; everything had just been dumped on the floor. He glanced into the bathroom. Same destruction — no one hiding. In the kitchen — luckily Lois wasn't a hoarder when it came to food — he did a quick x-ray scan of the cabinets, no one hiding there either. As Clark returned to the main room he glanced in the empty closet. The door was open and her clothes dumped on the floor.

"Okay, Lois. No one's here," he called to her.

Lois hesitantly entered and took another look around before joining him by the dining table and folding him into her arms. "I'm so sorry, Clark."

*Why does she keep apologizing to you? Unless...* Clark's heart stopped.

She stepped away from him and picked up the intricately carved wooden box she had kept the globe in. Her eyes were wide and full of pain. The box was cracked from where the lock had been broken. Of course, it was empty as well.

“The globe?” Clark’s dry mouth stammered as he felt as if his very soul had been stolen along with the sphere. *This* was why Lois had apologized.

*Lois knew how much it meant to you. How could she know that? Unless she knew...*

“I should have given it to you...” She sighed and then continued, “... to give to Kal... the other night. Only...” Her voice faded as her damp eyes met his. “I didn’t know then how very close you two are.” She punched him gently on the shoulder before pulling his numb body into her embrace again. “If you had only told me, Clark, how close you are...”

*Lois is comforting you? Her whole apartment has been invaded, stolen or destroyed and she cares only for you and your loss? Kent, if you ever lose this woman, it will feel worse than losing that globe.*

Clark cupped Lois’s jaw in his palm and gently kissed her lips, not with the passion they could hardly control outside, but with all of his love. “Lois, I...”

Lois smiled weakly at him and placed her fingers over his lips. “I know.” She took a deep breath and exhaled it. She set her forehead against his. “Kal told me.”

“You don’t want to hear me say it?” he asked.

*Didn’t every woman long to hear a man tell them that they loved her?*

Lois’s sad eyes didn’t match the smile brushing her lips. “No, Clark. I’m not ready to hear you say it yet,” she whispered. “I’m full of experiences for today. Let’s save that for another time when I’m better able to appreciate it.”

*How come as soon as she told you not to tell her you love her, you can no longer think of anything else to say?*

Clark finally found some words. “I don’t deserve you.”

He felt Lois nod against his cheek and then she stepped away surveying her room with another sigh. “So true, Clark. So very true.”

He felt like laughing at her words, but there was truth behind them and thinly veiled resentment. Lois didn’t believe he deserved her. Was that why she didn’t want to hear his professions of love?

*To coin a phrase from Lois, ya think?*

Lois picked up her red telephone off the floor, put it back on her desk and then lifted up the receiver again. “I’m calling the police. We need to find whoever did this. We need to get that globe back. In the wrong hands... Hello? Metro P.D.? Yes, I’d like to report a burglary... Yes, I’ll hold.”

Clark shivered from another chill dancing down his spine.

*Yes, in the wrong hands the globe could undo all the good Superman wants to accomplish in this world. It could put his parents and Lois in danger.*

Who knew what other secrets the sphere might hold? Other secrets he wouldn’t want revealed.

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Finally a policeman — Officer Henderson — showed up. He was tall and thin with graying dark hair and a wry smile.

“Where are the people to dust for fingerprints?” Lois snapped after the man had looked around and handed her a form to fill out.

“There have been lots of smash-and-grabs in this neighborhood lately.” The policeman shrugged. “If we dusted for prints at every crime scene we wouldn’t have anyone on the streets to help stop crimes in progress.”

“Except Superman,” Lois mumbled.

“I recommend you fill out that inventory sheet I gave you and keep your door locked from now on,” Henderson suggested.

“Well, how in the hell was I supposed to know that Superman was going to swoop in and take me off to Costa Rica?” Lois practically hollered at the man. She lowered her voice when she saw Clark wince. She had tried hard not to blame him.

*Even though it was his fault,* agreed her inner voice.

Clark was suffering enough at the loss of his precious heirloom.

Henderson coughed, incredulously, disbelief infused into his thinly disguised chuckle. “You were off with Superman?”

“I was interviewing him, if you must know,” Lois explained.

Clark covered his face in embarrassment.

The excuse sounded weak to her ears as well.

*Well, it’s true... if we write up that article... oh, yeah. The computer was stolen.*

The officer’s eyebrow shot up as his lips pressed together to stop himself from laughing out loud as he glanced over his shoulder to Clark, who only shrugged.

*Thanks. Thanks a lot, Clark.*

Clark joined Lois and shook the policeman’s hand. “Thank you, Officer Henderson. We appreciate you coming.”

*Just like men to bond over the humiliation of a woman.*

“You’re welcome,” responded an almost shocked Henderson. He appeared as if he rarely heard gratitude.

*Like your appreciation for his assistance is bouncing off the walls there, Lois.*

She sighed and also reluctantly thanked the policeman. “When do you think I’ll get my stuff back?”

Henderson glanced at Clark with a ‘you’re kidding me’ expression.

“Lois has lots of respect and confidence in the Metropolis P.D.,” Clark clarified. “She recently moved here from Smallville, Kansas.”

Henderson’s eyes darted between them and then couldn’t resist the bait. “Well, Ms. Lane, you aren’t in Kansas anymore. Your stuff is gone.”

Lois gripped Clark.

*The globe? No!*

Clark grimaced at this harsh delivery of news as well.

“Let me take some photos for my report while you fill out your form,” Henderson pulled out a single-use camera from his pocket. “Oops. This one has been used. Let me go get a fresh one from my squad car.” He let himself out.

Lois leaned against Clark, guilt overwhelming her. “Oh, Clark. The globe!”

He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her forehead. “Stop apologizing, Lois. I’m sure... Superman feels as much — or more — to blame. At least you weren’t at home alone when it happened.” He pulled her tighter against him. “You’re coming home with me tonight.”

*Yippee!*

“Am I?” Lois asked. “No. I’ll stay here.”

“Lois, your bed... and...” Clark looked around at the damage that surrounded them. “You aren’t safe here by yourself. Come home with me. You can sleep in my bed...”

*Was that an offer? Blunt much?*

Clark swallowed. “And I can sleep on the couch.”

*Oh.*

Lois shook her head, pulling out of his arms. He was too good of a man. The more time she spent with him, the more her resolve turned to pudding. She could not allow herself to fall for this man.

*Well, Clark has been and still is lying to you.*

Yes! She wished she could hug her inner voice. Thank you. Lois could not in good conscience marry... She shook her head. ... Love... She winced this time... Date? Yes. She could not date a man who kept lying to her. Lois sighed. Why did this thought bring her heart so much torment? No, she couldn’t break up with Clark tonight while he was grieving the loss of the globe. Even she wasn’t that cruel.

Clark gazed at her with a heartfelt smile.

*How can you break this man’s heart, Lois? How?*

Lois swallowed and then realized Clark was speaking. “Huh?” she answered.

“Let me go run off and get us some dinner. You’ll be safe while Officer Henderson is here. I should be back before he leaves, but if I’m not, I want you to lock up. You still have your keys, don’t you?”

*Keys?*

Lois glanced around but didn’t see her keys or her purse anywhere. She closed her eyes, remembering. She had come home and dropped her keys and the Superman newspapers and purse on the coffee table. She opened her eyes. No purse. No keys. And even no newspapers.

She gasped covering her mouth. “They stole my newspapers! Who would steal newspapers?”

Clark’s brow furrowed. “What newspapers, Lois?”

Lois pressed her lips together. She couldn’t tell him that she had spent some of her precious money...

*Egad! No money!*

... to buy one of each of the newspapers which had Superman articles prominently displayed on their covers.

*Yeah, Lois, he might think you have a crush on Superman or something.*

Lois had to tell Clark something. He was staring at her, waiting for her to answer. “The newspapers I hit you with this morning. I told you I was going to buy them,” she replied in a rush as she felt her cheeks get warm from the lie.

*Distract him!*

“I dumped them on the coffee table with my keys and purse.”

As Clark bent down and looked around the coffee table, she wanted to yell at him, ‘You *do* have x-ray vision, don’t you?’ but she resisted. She didn’t feel up to *that* argument tonight.

Then he gazed Lois in the eyes again. “You are coming home with me, Lois. I refuse to leave you here when someone has the keys to your apartment.”

“I’m *not* going home with you, Clark,” she corrected. Then she held out her hands. “Anyway, I have nothing else to steal.”

Clark pulled her into his arms. “You have the most precious thing in the world. Yourself.”

Lois gulped.

*Who would want to steal you?*

“I’ll call my landlord and have him change the locks,” she stubbornly informed him.

Clark stepped back and stared at her.

Lois turned away under his scrutiny.

“You once said you never felt safer than in my arms,” he whispered. “Has that changed?”

*I don’t remember him offering to sleep in your arms. Actually the offer was distinctly out of his arms.*

Guilt stabbed her. She didn’t want to hurt Clark. But she could not let someone other than herself choose her future.

*So you’re still planning on breaking up with him? Exactly how are you going to do that without hurting him?*

Lois had no idea how to answer that question, so she answered Clark’s inquiry instead. “No, Clark, of course not.” She smiled at him, honestly. “I’ve just had a long day. I need some time alone to think.” She couldn’t tell from his reaction if he believed her or not.

Clark sighed. “I’ll pick up a new deadbolt and doorknob when I go out. Pizza okay?”

She nodded. Clark kissed her cheek and went outside just as Henderson came back in with a new single-use camera.

As she watched him go, Lois realized that Clark was too good. Too kind. Too wonderful.

*Too sexy. Too loveable. Too yummy. Too kissable. Too generous. Too helpful. Too caring... Too perfect for you.*

Lois sighed. Exactly. Too perfect for her to trust. Too scared to trust her. Too much of a liar for her to be involved with. She shook her head and went to see what else there could possibly be missing from her life.

A while later, Lois gave her completed form to Henderson as she led him to her front door. “If you hear anything, anything at all about my stuff...” She looked at him with wide hopeful eyes. He just shook his head.

As Officer Henderson opened the door, Lois saw Clark standing on the deck of the pool talking to an unnatural blonde in a conservative swimsuit with a towel tossed casually over her shoulder. “Did you lose something that was irreplaceable?” Henderson asked her, looking down at her form.

Lois stared as Clark laughed at something the blonde said and her tongue coasted over her front teeth. “That remains to be seen.” She

walked out with Henderson and stopped next to Clark, offering the duo a friendly smile she did not feel. “Hi.”

Clark glanced over at her. “Lois! Lois, this is Mayson Drake. We went to high school together. She lives upstairs from you,” he explained, pointing above her basement apartment. “Mayson, this is...” As he paused to look at Lois, clearly trying to find a word to describe their relationship, Lois easily slipped her arm around his waist and smiled warmly at him. The movement caused him to falter, before a pleased smile appeared on his face. “My girlfriend, Lois Lane.”

*There we go, big guy. Was that so hard?*

Lois held out her hand to shake Mayson’s. The blonde’s smile faded a brief moment then she shook Lois’s hand.

*That’s right, deary, Clark’s not available.*

“I was just telling Clark here I recently started working at the D.A.’s office. I’m sorry to hear about your break-in.”

Lois’s eyes trailed up her building before returning to Mayson’s. “You didn’t happen to hear or see anyone suspicious about, between four and six this afternoon, did you?”

Mayson matched her eye contact. “Just a man in tights and a cape with whom you seemed quite friendly.”

*Oh, no, she didn’t!*

Lois did not feel the friendship in the smile she gave as she replied, “Close family friend.” She gave Clark’s waist a brief squeeze.

“Very close,” she heard Mayson mumble under her breath.

Lois’s tongue went over her teeth.

*You want to fight nasty, Blondie — if that is your natural hair color — I can fight nasty.*

“What do you do, Lois?” Mayson inquired.

“Clark and I work together at Daily Books,” Lois replied innocently.

*5, 4, 3, 2, 1...*

Mayson’s eyes dashed from Lois over to Clark and back. Lois’s smile deepened into a natural one.

*Oh, I’ve got your number now.*

“Clark,” Lois said, turning to him. “If you were going to get that stuff, you’d better go before the stores close. Sunday night and all.”

Clark nodded. “Oh, right. Nice to see you again, Mayson. Hey, I’m going to grab a pizza. Would you like to join us?”

Lois turned and stared at him.

*He didn’t just do that, did he?*

Clark glanced at Lois nervously, realizing his error only after the words were spoken.

Lois smiled warmly at him as if he had done nothing wrong. “Yes, Mayson, join us. It will help us get our minds off of the break-in.”

*Friend, close. Enemies, closer. Got it!*

Clark released a held breath and went to kiss Lois’s cheek. She turned her head at the last moment and made the kiss on the mouth. Clark smiled gleefully at the change and then waved at them as he jogged off to the parking garage. Once he was out of sight, Lois started in on her reconnaissance. “So, you know Clark from way back. What was he like as a teenager?”

“Funny. Sweet. Helpful. Honest. Busy. I had the hugest crush on him,” Mayson admitted. “With Clark what you see is what you get.”

Lois licked her lips. “Yes, he is a hotty.”

“Clark works at the bookstore?” Mayson asked almost dismayed. “Doing what?”

“Security guard,” Lois replied, watching Mayson closely.

*Yep, there was that nervous tic again.*

“Actually, that’s only one of his jobs...” Lois began.

“Jobs?” Mayson swallowed.

Lois sighed with high respect for Clark. “He also delivers boxes — packages for MDS.”

“A delivery man?” Mayson repeated.

“And he does something for his parents’ restaurant.” Lois shrugged. “Prep cook, I think.” Made sense with his abilities.

Mayson pressed her lips together.

“Oh, and he just got a fourth job...”

And as if to announce what it was, Superman flew by overhead.

*Hi, handsome!*

Lois smiled. “Speaking of hotties, what do you think of Metropolis’s newest citizen?”

Mayson shivered. “Oh, I can’t be around anyone in tights. Don’t even try to get me near an ice rink, a gym or a dance studio. I was in Gotham City a few years back and saw some trapeze artists — a whole family of them — fall to their deaths in front of me.” She shivered again. “Ever since then people in costumes like that, especially with capes, make me sick to my stomach.” She coughed. “If *that* man plans on staying in my town on my turf, one of us will have to leave.”

*Can I place my vote now?*

Lois raised a brow. Interesting development. “Superman is here to help. Why would you want him to leave?”

“Help? Ha!” Mayson scoffed. “Take this afternoon for example. He stopped a mugger by heating up the guy’s gun, thus burning off any fingerprint evidence. Plus, the mugger probably wouldn’t have shot his gun if ‘Superman’ hadn’t shown up. Sure, he caught all the bullets this time, but next time someone could get hurt. Just because he’s bulletproof, doesn’t mean the rest of us are. Then he flew off without leaving a statement.”

Mayson was apparently anti-Superman. Lois liked this woman less and less.

*Oh, too good. Lois, 2 points. Mayson, 0.*

“You two seemed close though,” Mayson looked at Lois square in the eye.

“Me and Superman or me and Clark?”

“You and the Flying Man.”

“What are you implying?” Lois asked, her lips pursed.

“I heard you break up with Clark. You were quite loud,” the blonde replied.

*Lois 2, Mayson 1. Damn, back in the game.*

Lois raised a brow.

“And I noticed that Clark didn’t know if the two of you were still together, hence his pause while introducing you. So don’t you go on pretending he isn’t up for the grabbing should I want him.”

*Double damn! Lois 2, Mayson 2.*

Lois wasn’t going to lose Clark to this bottled blonde, so she laughed. “Oh, that!” She laughed harder as she thought of a response. “Things aren’t always as they appear. As a lawyer, you should know that. Take Clark working four jobs and still living with his folks...” Lois paused as Mayson’s eyes widened.

*Lois 3, Mayson 2.*

“Sure, it could mean something bad, like an unhealthy attachment to his mother. Now while they’re close — so close that Clark took me to have Sunday dinner with his folks on our first date...”

Lois watched as Mayson gulped.

*Lois 4, Mayson 2.*

“I happen to know it’s because he’s trying to pay down some big debt.” Lois hoped she was in the ballpark with this guess.

Double gulp.

*Lois 5, Mayson 2.*

Lois’s brow furrowed as she continued, “True, I haven’t asked Clark how he got in debt, I know it isn’t school loans, because he never went to college...”

Mayson’s eyes were so wide they were almost crossed-eyed.

*Lois 6, Mayson 2.*

“Maybe it’s credit card debt or alimony or even child support, but I happen to know Clark is a good man and if he has a debt he’ll work hard until it is repaid. Even if he has to forgo things like rent on an apartment of his own, or a car payment on his own car, or even a night out with me.”

Mayson’s thumb somehow made its way to her mouth and she started to chew on it.

*Lois 7, Mayson 2.*

Then Lois smiled grandly, and nailed the final nails in the coffin of

Mayson’s interest in Lois’s man. “I happen to know — for a fact — that someday, not today or tomorrow or maybe even next week, but someday Clark and I will marry and live happily together forever. He told me himself this very afternoon that he loves me and wishes to spend the rest of his life with me proving he deserves my love.”

*All true and now for the little white lie to put you over the top.*

“For you see, Mayson, what you thought you overheard and what was actually meant are two very different things entirely. What Clark and I were arguing about was whether or not to announce our engagement now or later, which is why he hesitated while introducing me as his girlfriend. I told him it was much too soon to let everyone know we were engaged. So you see, things aren’t always as they appear.”

Mayson’s jaw was hanging wide open now. She snapped it closed and her eyes formed slits as her arms crossed her chest. “Engaged, huh? Where’s the ring, Lois? Was it stolen during the break-in?”

*She’s still trying to score points?*

Lois chuckled indulgently at her. “Clark doesn’t have money to buy me an engagement ring, Mayson. Nor does he need to. Some of us don’t need a man to buy us jewelry to prove his love.”

*Check mate!*

“But should you wish to join us for pizza when you finish your swim, feel free,” continued Lois cheerfully, knowing full well that Clark was safe from the clutches of the blonde.

“No, that’s okay. I just remembered I have an early briefing and deposition in the morning,” stammered Mayson backing away not only from Lois but from the pool as well and towards the stairwell leading to her apartment.

“Oh, well. Some other time then, Mayson. Nice to have met you,” Lois said with a shrug returning to her basement apartment.

*That’ll teach her to try and steal your man!*

Lois closed her apartment door and leaned against it for the second time that day. She exhaled and tried to calm her racing heart.

*You do realize that you just told Mayson that you and Clark are engaged, don’t you?*

Lois had no idea what had come over her. When she had seen Clark and Mayson laughing, something inside of Lois had just snapped and out crawled this lying, sneaky, ferocious monster. Clark was hers and until she knew what exactly she was going to do with him, hers Clark would remain. She sighed. Then an evil grin appeared on her lips. It had sure felt good to tell Mayson off, though.

*Oh, yeah!*

Lois checked her watch. Clark hadn’t been gone quite ten minutes. He had to go to the hardware store and the pizzeria. Perhaps she would have time for a phone call before Mr. Super Ears was back in range.

Lois went over to her desk, picked up the phone book off the floor, searched until she found the number. It rang three times before a sweet voice answered, “Good evening, MJ’s Café, Martha speaking.”

“Hi Martha, Lois here. Just a few quick questions while Clark’s out getting pizza.”

There was a slight pause before Clark’s mother replied, “Okay.”

“Clark was adopted, right?”

“Yes.”

“And he doesn’t have multiple personalities?” Lois doubted he did, but she was covering all her bases.

Martha laughed. “None that I’ve noticed.”

Lois nodded and took a deep breath, holding it while she asked, “And he doesn’t have a twin brother, does he?”

The pause was longer this time, the laughter a mere echo from before, “Not that I’m aware of, dear.”

*Well, that settles it. Clark has been lying to you.*

“Could you tell your son to please stop lying to me, then?” Lois demanded.

“If *you* don’t want him to lie to you, Lois, then talk to him. Tell him yourself,” Martha responded.

The younger woman sighed. “I’ve tried that.”

“And?”

"I don't think he knows how to stop," Lois replied, exasperated.

"Hmmm. Maybe you should come by the café tomorrow for breakfast and you and I could work this out," Martha suggested.

Lois suddenly remembered she no longer had a purse, ID, bank cards or money. "I can't. My purse was stolen in the break-in."

"The *what?!?*" Martha gasped.

"I was sure Clark would have stopped by on his way to get pizza to tell you. My apartment was robbed this afternoon while I was out walking on a beach in Costa Rica with Superman," Lois explained.

Martha cleared her throat. "Superman?"

"Yep. Superman," Lois repeated.

"And that would be that man you told me about last week?"

Clark's mom asked cryptically.

"The same one."

"Uh-huh. You better come here for a one-on-one, Lois," Martha recommended.

"I was thinking the same thing." Lois paused in thought as she wondered how she was going to afford to get across town. Then she smiled and said circumspectly, "Clark did invite me to stay the night. He's worried about my safety."

"I am too, dear. Best take him up on the offer. I'll ready the couch. We'll talk after Clark heads off to work in the morning."

"Okay." Lois released the breath she had been holding. "Thank you, Martha."

"You're welcome."

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When Clark returned from Chicago with the pizza and the new locks, he found Lois had spent the time he was gone straightening up the mess that used to be her apartment. Her clothes were back in her closet. The stuff that had been tossed off the bookcase had been replaced. He saw that on the shelf next to the now empty wooden box, she had placed the glass fish he had made her and the seashell from the beach. He smiled at their location of importance. Then his smile faded, doubt tugging at his heart. Those weren't gifts from him, but gifts from Superman, Kal-El.

*Lois did greet you with quite an enthusiastic kiss, if I recall correctly, Kent. And in case you forgot, you ARE Superman.*

Yes, Clark found this jealousy of himself ludicrous and yet it was still there. Lois liked Kal-El more than Clark was comfortable with. True, he was partly to blame. They were supposed to have just that one conversation, where he apologized for scaring her after his rescue of her, and that was supposed to be it. Never to cross paths again. But then he — Superman he — had flown her down to Costa Rica for that talk. He had taken her to the type of beach she had always dreamed of going to and he had flirted with her while they were there. It was *his* fault that his girlfriend was falling for Superman. He had wanted so desperately to share those things with her which he — Clark he — could not. Clark sighed. A fine kettle of fish he had made for himself there.

Lois had told him that Mayson changed her mind about sharing pizza with them.

*Yes, that was stupid of you to invite Mayson without checking with your girlfriend first, Kent.*

Clark hadn't been thinking straight. It felt good to talk to Mayson, having her soothe his bruised ego with her clear attraction to Clark Kent, especially after Lois had been sending him mixed messages all day. He hadn't even been sure Lois still wanted a relationship with him when he left her apartment. But then Lois had arrived and wrapped her arm around him like it was completely natural. She had then kissed him gently on the lips as if that was how it was when they greeted one another. Announcing quite plainly that she was Clark's girlfriend to Mayson and the world. Clark had felt ecstatic with pleasure.

Lois and Mayson seemed to get along and he could still hear them talking nicely to one another after he blasted into the air as Superman. It would be good for Lois to make some female friends.

*Right, so she could spend her spare time with them instead of you?*

Lois placed some plates on the dining room table. "I turned on the

oven to reheat the pizza."

Clark's brow furrowed. "It's not cold."

She flipped open the box and steam rose from gooey mixture of cheese, tomatoes and crust. She grinned appreciatively at him. "I've never had *hot* takeout pizza before, Clark."

He returned her grin, happy to have brought her pleasure in this simple way.

*You'll never have to eat cold take-out again with me as your boyfriend, Lois.*

Being west of Metropolis, Clark knew it would be easier to find open hardware stores in which to buy the locks in Chicago's earlier time zone. Then Clark had gone and swung by to pick up some Chicago-style deep-dish pizza, three-cheese pesto with tomato slices to be exact.

As they ate their pizza, Clark couldn't resist asking, "So, what did you think of Superman?" Though truthfully he was apprehensive of her answer.

Lois's face lit up as she smiled at him. "I loved him. Simply loved him. I can see why he's your best friend. He is so sweet and kind and funny. Flying with him will be one of the highlights of my life." She leaned over and kissed Clark's cheek. "He's quite fragile, isn't he?"

Clark swallowed, his pizza seeming to catch in his throat. "Fragile? He's not fragile, Lois."

"Sure, he is. He worries about you. He even told me not to hurt you." She smiled at Clark with so much love in her eyes that it melted the cheese in his throat. "He's a good friend to you. I look forward to getting to know him better. Oh!" She jumped up from her seat. "I didn't show you the adorable fish he made me. He melted the glass and everything." She ran over to the bookcase and brought the fish to Clark. "Isn't it beautiful?"

Clark's eyes weren't focused on the sculpture he had made for her, but on her. Lois glowed, positively glowed, as she gushed on and on about her afternoon with Superman. He gulped down his pizza.

Lois set the fish on the table and wrapped her arms around his neck, "I wish you trusted me enough to introduce him to me earlier, Clark." She pressed a kiss onto his lips. "I sometimes just don't know what to do about you."

"I trust you," Clark mumbled. But even to him the words sounded false.

*How can you say that you trust her, when you believe she's thinking of cheating on you with that Superman fellow? Oh, wait, he's you.*

Lois raised a brow and slid back into her own seat causing Clark to feel empty. He closed his eyes and shook his head at himself.

*Yep, you did that, Kent. Your distrust in her made her move away. Made her stop kissing you. Snap out of it unless you want to lose those kisses forever.*

"Clark?" Lois murmured.

"Hmmm," he replied his mouth full of pizza and his thoughts far away.

"Tell me about Superman."

He looked at her sadly.

*Really? She still wanted to talk about that guy? Doesn't she know that Kal-El isn't real? He is just a part of the package that is Clark Kent.*

Lois reached over and caressed his cheek. "I'm not going to leave you for him, Clark. I promise you that. He can't hold to a candle to you."

*Was his anguish written so plainly over his face?*

"I was just trying to get to know you better through him," she continued. "Try to understand better the puzzle that is Clark Kent."

He gazed at her and saw truth in her eyes. Clark no longer wanted to talk. No longer wanted to eat. He only wanted to kiss Lois. Express to her the love he felt for her. He lifted her off her seat and pulled her back into his lap, pressing his lips to hers.

Lois laughed. "If you don't want to talk about him, just say so. You don't need to try to distract me."

“Can I help it if I find you irresistible?” he murmured, kissing her again.

“No, I guess not. I am pretty irresistible,” she admitted. “But if you keep this up, it will be midnight before we get back to your apartment.”

Clark looked at her in confusion.

*Before we get back your apartment? Has she changed her mind about coming home with you?*

Clark felt whole again, knowing that she really did feel safer with him than without him.

Lois glanced around her apartment with a shiver. “I’ve decided new locks or no, I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep here tonight.” Then she grinned naughtily at him. “Not by myself anyway.”

*She didn’t just say what you think she just said, did she?*

“And if you stay here,” she continued, staring him deep into his eyes, her fingers dancing across his chest, “I guarantee you, neither of us will sleep.”

Clark gulped. “Yes, my place would probably be better then.”

*Chicken! You would love nothing more than to make love to this woman, Kent. What are you so scared of?* growled his horny Green-Eyed Monster.

Making love to this woman, of course, Clark admitted. It wasn’t an everyday experience for him and he doubted it was for her either, despite her numerous casual references to being intimate with him. She had been more than overt in letting him know that she wanted him in that way. He gulped again. But he couldn’t help remembering Lana rejecting him so plainly after they discussed moving their relationship in that direction. It would crush him if Lois did the same to him.

*Then maybe you should just sleep with her before she can reject you, the monster inside of him suggested.*

Clark sighed.

*Oh, yeah, like that would be better? Making love to the woman of your dreams only to have her dump you for another man.*

“I can’t,” he murmured through her kisses, lifting her up and returning her to her chair.

Lois stared at him. “I know, Clark. Kal told me you don’t jump into bed with women. I guess that’s why I felt comfortable enough to tease you. I’m sorry.”

Clark stood up and started pacing, fury at himself causing him to shake. “He told you. He *told* you. I’ve kept his secrets for years and he meets my girlfriend and within two hours, he tells her I have intimacy issues. Did he tell you I’m a virgin, too?”

Lois gasped in surprise.

*No. But you just did.*

He ran into the bathroom, slamming the door. He was out of control. Humiliated. Clark couldn’t believe he had just told her that. He had never told anyone that. He had gone on dates off and on over the years, but he had never allowed himself get that close anyone, always fearing what they would do once they found out about his abilities. Knowing that sex — especially with someone he desired with every fiber of his being, like Lois — could lower his self-control so completely that he might show his true self. That was why he had never made love, because he believed he shouldn’t reveal himself to anyone except to someone he loved, someone he trusted completely. And when he did finally did make love, he wanted the experience to be one of intimacy and not one where he had to spend the entire time gripping tightly on to his control; otherwise, what would be the point? He sat down on the closed toilet and buried his face in his hands.

Lois made him want to lose control like never before. She desired him as he desired her, if her kisses were any gauge. He wanted nothing more than to fly her back to Costa Rica and go skinny-dipping with her among the waves and make love to her on the beach.

“Clark?” he heard her say through the bathroom door.

“I’ll be out in a minute,” he answered as if nothing was wrong. As if he hadn’t completely and totally embarrassed himself with the woman of his dreams.

He washed the grease from the pizza off his hands. Then he took

off his glasses and splashed cold water on his face. It didn’t help. As he went to hang up the hand towel again, it slipped off the rack and landed in the trashcan. Clark picked it up and noticed inside the trashcan an open box of condoms. His hands began to shake as he picked it up. Out slid three condoms into his palm. Three condoms left in a box of ten?

Clark opened the bathroom door and stomped across the room to Lois. He held up the box of condoms. “What’s this?”

She gulped, her eyes wide, staring at him. “Trash.”

He raised a brow. “Trash?”

Lois turned away from him. “Yes. Trash.”

“May I ask with whom you used the other seven condoms from this box?” His eyes were in slits.

She looked at him, pain and tears dancing in her eyes from his accusation. “They were stolen,” she whispered, her voice wavering. “By the burglars.”

Clark’s lips pressed together as he looked at her skeptically. “Stolen?”

“Yes, stolen, Clark. *You* are my boyfriend. I bought them to use with you,” she snapped. Turning around, she dug through the papers on her desk. Finally extracting a grocery store receipt from the pile, she shoved it in his face. “I bought them last Thursday so that we could have them on hand in case *we* moved our relationship forward. I wanted to be prepared.” Her voice had dipped an octave lower as she spoke slowly, succinctly, and on the edge of tears. “The box was full this morning when I left for work and it was open when I returned from the beach. I didn’t trust using the others in case they had been tampered with. So, yes, they are now trash.”

This time it was Lois who ran into the bathroom and slammed the door. There really wasn’t anywhere else to run to in this apartment.

Clark glanced down at the receipt in his hand. Chocolate bars. Ice cream. Coffee. Creamer. Condoms. Crackers. Chocolate-chip cookies. He looked at the date. Yep, three days ago.

*Wasn’t that before she kissed you, Kent?*

His eyes widened. Lois not only had been thinking all week about kissing him, but wanted to be prepared to... to... he gulped... with him. Clark Kent? He went to the bathroom door and knocked. “I’m sorry, Lois.”

“Be out in a minute,” she called, her voice sounding rough like she was crying. He winced. He looked down at the box of condoms again.

*Why would the burglars open the box and leave condoms? Why not just take the whole box?*

He poured the remaining condoms into his hand and focused on them, *really* focused on them. There in the center of each one was a pin-prick, hardly noticeable to the naked eye, as if someone had stabbed each condom with a needle or push-pin. They *had* been tampered with. Clark swallowed.

*If you and Lois had used these condoms...*

Clark’s brow furrowed. It was too much. The thoughts and questions swirling around in his head made him dizzy and he sat down on the floor, leaning against the wall next to the bathroom.

*Someone had come to Lois’s apartment looking for something. What? The globe? Nobody knew about the globe, but you, Lois and your parents. Someone who would steal Lois’s keys to possibly return to her apartment another time. Someone who was interested in her Superman newspapers. Someone who would take the time to open a box of condoms and tamper with them, hoping what? Hoping in her terror Lois would make love to someone and get pregnant? Or were the perps just pranksters? Teenagers? Someone who thought what they were doing was funny? It certainly wasn’t funny to you, Kent. If you and Lois had used these condoms...*

Lois opened the bathroom door and knelt down beside Clark. He gazed up at her, still in shock from learning about the sabotaged condoms. Her face looked tired and damp from tears. It had been a long day for both of them. Slowly, carefully, she slipped his glasses back onto his face. She cradled his jaw in her hands and placed a kiss on his lips. “I will *never* cheat on you, Clark. Please trust me.”

Clark couldn't breathe. In his anger over the condoms, he had left his glasses in the bathroom after washing his face. Lois had seen him without his glasses. She hadn't been shocked. Had she recognized him as Kal-El, as Superman?

Lois kissed him again. "I like you, Clark, very much. Too much for my sanity sometimes." She awkwardly smiled at this admission. "I want you to know that I am attracted to you. Sometimes more than my sanity can handle as well. I would like to share how much I like you physically someday. But if you aren't ready, I'm okay with that, too. I can wait." She kissed him again and again and again.

Clark's thoughts dissolved with her barrage of kisses. He tossed the box of condoms away from them and wrapped his arms around her, laying them down on the floor in each other's embrace.

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Lois smiled as she looked over at Clark who was working diligently at replacing the deadbolt lock on her door. He must have sensed her attention and glanced over to where she was sitting at the desk. His gaze was lava hot and she evaporated under it.

"Stop it, Clark, or we'll be here all night," she teased.

He grinned and went back to work on the lock. Clark was quite handy to have around.

*Maybe you should suggest he move in with you, so you can have him around all the time. Full-time security.*

Lois bit her bottom lip and tried not to think of those kisses they shared after she returned his glasses to him. If they had had some condoms... Lois shook her head.

*You said you would wait for him, idiot. Remember?*

Yes, she remembered. But if his kisses drove her crazy with craving for him, what would his naked body actually do to her? A rumble from deep inside her emerged as she stared at Clark.

He glanced back at her, merriment dancing across his face. "Stop it, Lois, or we'll be here all night," he teased her right back. His smile grew into a naughty grin that practically floated her off her chair.

*You said you would wait until he was ready, Lois. You should have told him you were already ready.*

What? The box of condoms she bought wasn't enough of a hint?

*Touché!*

Lois glanced back down at her notepad. It had been so long since she had written anything long hand, she felt rusty. With another deep breath, she couldn't resist Clark any longer. She stood up and walked over to him. "Clark? Do I have all of Superman's powers listed correctly here?"

She hadn't told him that she knew the truth about his other identity and he hadn't asked her. She was okay with this truce for the moment.

Clark glanced at her notepad. "You forgot x-ray vision," he told her.

*And speed reading.*

"Superman only mentioned that skill in passing. Maybe I should keep some mystery and allure for the future," she replied with a wink at him.

*"And invulnerable is spelled v-u-l-n, not v-u-n-l."*

Her lips pressed together. "Nobody likes a smart-aleck."

Clark stood up and pulled her into another breathtaking kiss.

"Have I mentioned how irresistible you are?" he murmured.

Lois's knees weakened. "Not in the last fifteen minutes."

He started to let go but she clung to him. He raised a brow and she let go with a little flush. "Sorry, there's something magnetic about you."

"Well, I'm done here. One deadbolt and one new doorknob. Here are your new keys," he said dangling them in front of her. "Want to try her out?"

*Nope. I want to try you out.*

Lois gulped. "How about you do that and I'll stay inside, in case it doesn't work."

Clark raised a brow. "Was that a remark on my handyman skills?"

*Just thinking about how handy that man would be skinny-dipping.*

She cleared her throat. "Not at all."

He stepped outside and Lois watched as the deadbolt switch locked and then unlocked with the key. Then the doorknob did the same.

"It looks like it works," she called.

Clark opened the door and stepped back inside, dropping her keys in her palm. "Ready to fly?"

Lois's jaw dropped.

He blushed. "I mean 'go to my folks' place'. Not *fly*, fly. Drive. In the truck, of course. I didn't ask Superman to pick us up."

"I'm not quite done with this article," she said, ignoring his rambling and tapping her pen against the notepad.

"It's a little late to get it into Monday's paper, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes. I guess so."

Clark glanced up and off to the right. Then he turned and looked at Lois with a worried expression.

"Something wrong?"

"I just remembered an errand I need to run," he said quickly. "The truck is low on fuel. I should really fill her up before we head back. It will give you time to pack an overnight bag and finish your article."

*Maybe he flew here and forgot to pick up the truck.*

Lois stepped up to him and pressed a kiss to his lips. "Don't forget about me."

"Never." He grinned and jogged out the door.

She watched as he jogged around the corner towards the parking garage and then looked up as she heard Superman blow by overhead. "Stay safe, Clark." She sighed.

*You need to move.*

Lois's brow furrowed as she closed and locked her door. Move?

*If Clark's ever going to move in with you, you need something higher with a balcony where Superman can take-off and land without being seen by everyone. You live in a basement with windows almost too small to crawl through.*

Yep, she would have to move. This place was a little too small for the two of them anyway. A place with a private bedroom would be nice too.

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### Sunday — Night

It was after ten by the time Clark was able to pick up the truck from outside the café and head back to Lois's. He couldn't believe how long it had taken him to fight that last tenement fire. There were lots of people living in that building and then the fire spread to the next building and the next. The fire department thanked him for his assistance in locating all the victims, so they could concentrate on fighting the fire. Clark appreciated their gratitude. It made him feel like part of the team.

What he didn't like was leaving Lois alone in her apartment for so long after it had been broken into earlier in the day. He hoped she wasn't going crazy with fear. Lois was probably worried about him being gone so long. Or not, if she had recognized him as Superman.

*Had she? Had Lois looked into your eyes without your glasses and seen the man with whom she had spent two hours at the beach? Or had she just seen you, Clark Kent, without your glasses?*

Had Clark been paranoid all this time about Lois seeing him without his frames, only to have her not recognize him? Or had she recognized him and just not said anything?

*Lois would have said something.*

His brow furrowed.

*Wouldn't she have?*

She had still spoke of Superman as being another person while she was working on that article she was sure the *Smallville Post* was going to publish. But then again, so had he. Maybe it was best if they didn't acknowledge this truth between them. Safer for her.

Clark was also having second thoughts about giving Superman's exclusive to Lois. It would draw too much attention to his girlfriend. Why would Superman give his exclusive first interview to someone from a small-town paper? He — Superman he — had already given Lois too much attention: at the press conference, coming to see her at

the bookstore, and even visiting her at her apartment. He was worried people were going to start noticing all his specific attention given to this one woman. Would they make connections from Lois to her boyfriend Clark and thence to Superman? Perhaps even the people who broke into her apartment did so because of him... trying to find dirt on him. And they found the mother lode with that globe. If so, what were they thinking about when they tampered with the condoms? Did they want Lois to become pregnant with a half-alien child? He sighed. If that was even possible. Maybe he was being paranoid. Could they have tracked her down so quickly?

Superman should really give his exclusive first interview with someone with no ties to Clark whatsoever, someone from a big city paper, like the *Metropolis Star*. But if Superman gave his exclusive to Linda King after hearing what he had from Lois's earlier discussion with the woman, Clark would *never* be forgiven. As Superman or his best friend. There was some sort of bad blood between Lois and Linda; what it was, he did not know. Then, again, Linda King wasn't the only reporter at the *Metropolis Star*.

Not wanting to think about this anymore, Clark turned on the radio.

"Hello, everyone. Lenny Stoke, again, and that was *Age of Aquarius / Let the Sun Shine In* by the Fifth Dimension, dedicated by Molly and everyone at Molly's Greenhouse Bookstore to Superman." The DJ paused a moment in thought. "I wish I could say something profound or even funny but, Molly, I think you've nailed that one. This is the dawn of Aquarius. Next up, Mary visiting from Gotham City says we need to play Bonnie Tyler's *Holding Out For A Hero*. Well, duh! I can't believe it took 24 hours before I got this dedication. People, this one should have been obvious. My question to you, Mary, is... are you saying that you'll take Superman as your hero or are you still 'holding out' for yet another hero? If so, girl, you are hard to please! Good luck with finding a better hero for Gotham City, Mary. Metropolis will be happy to keep Superman."

Clark laughed, tapping his hand on the steering wheel to the beat of the music. He was still singing along with Bonnie Tyler as he pulled into Lois's parking garage. He turned off the truck and slid out, still dancing to the song inside his head. Well, not exactly in his head. Someone somewhere was listening to Lenny Stoke's Soundman show and he could hear it with his super hearing. He danced up the stairs to the deck of the pool. He slid up to Lois's door with a grin and knocked.

No answer. Clark tilted down his glasses and with his x-ray vision saw Lois huddled under a blanket on her futon staring at the door and shaking with fear.

"Lois?" he called tenderly, yet loud enough for her to hear. "Open up, honey. It's Clark."

She turned her back to the door and buried her face in her hands. "Leave me alone."

*Oh, great, Flyboy. How long were you gone?*

"I'm sorry, honey. I had trouble..." Clark's voice faded. He hated lying to her to excuse his behavior. "Please open up."

Again no answer.

"Lois, please. At least let me know you are okay," he asked through the door. His heart ached at causing her pain once again.

Lois lifted her head out of her hands and stared at the door. Actually, glared would be more accurate. She wasn't only frightened, she was mad. At him. Again.

*You should have kept a copy of the new keys for yourself, Kent.*

He sighed. Technically, that wasn't his right. He didn't live here. He leaned against the wall opposite her front door and crossed his arms.

"I'll wait here all night if I have to, Lois, to make sure you stay safe."

He watched as her glare softened. A few minutes later she took a deep breath and finally stood up to approach the door.

"Is that really you, Clark?" she asked, glancing through the peephole.

Clark waved with a sheepish smile. "Really me."

Lois unlocked the new deadbolt and cracked open the door to get a better look at him.

"Hi, Lois," he said, stepping towards her with outstretched arms. Suddenly, an overnight bag was shoved into his chest.

"You owe me. Big time, Kent," Lois grumbled.

"I'm sor..." Clark started.

"Can the apologies. I've had it up to here," Lois said indicating her neck, "with your apologies. Let's go. Your mom better have some kind of chocolate dessert on hand for me."

A smile grew on Clark's lips. "That, I can guarantee you."

She slammed her door, pulled her keys out of her pocket, and tossed them to him as she marched across the deck of the pool towards the parking garage. He locked her apartment door and pocketed her keys with a shrug. At least she trusted him enough to still come home with him. Or she was terrified enough. He sighed. Well, he wouldn't have to worry about her coming on to him with his folks in the next room.

Yea, lucky him.

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### Monday

Lois didn't need to be at work until noon on Monday. Jonathan Kent gave her a lift to the bookstore in his truck. At first, it felt weird sitting in the truck with Clark's father after having gotten used to being in it with Clark. Lois liked Jonathan. He was comfortable with silence in a way she appreciated that morning. It gave her time to reflect on her after-breakfast conversation with Martha.

By the time Lois had awakened that morning at almost eight, Clark was already at work. Lois was still angry at him for disappearing for what seemed like hours the night before, only to show up like nothing was amiss. And that was after she had forgiven him for treating her so badly after sifting through her trash.

*Men!*

When Clark had left to run his 'errand,' Lois realized how every little sound or voice seemed to be amplified in her small basement apartment. Several times she had heard voices pass by and fear had gripped her as she wondered if it were the thieves coming back. She couldn't believe she had actually considered staying by herself in the apartment that night and was glad that Clark had offered to let her stay with him.

Then another hour had passed and still no call and no Clark Kent. Lois, in her anger, had phoned in her story to Terry, her old editor at the *Smallville Post*. She had conveniently forgotten to add her boyfriend's name to the byline as promised.

*You really should call Terry and remedy that, Lois.*

Lois had explained to Terry about the break-in, so he had switched on his mini-cassette recorder and she had read him her article over the phone and he said he would type it up for her. Terry had always been good to go above and beyond for his reporters like that. Even a human interest nobody like herself. She only wished that she had photos to go along with the article. He had told her not to worry about that, as there were so many freelance photos of Superman out there they could easily pick one up off the wire.

Terry was thrilled at the exclusive and even told Lois that he still had connections at the *Wichita Eagle* with whom he might share the article, knowing it was too big of a story to be limited to their small-town press. Lois's heart had thudded loudly in her chest. Wow, the *Wichita Eagle* had a subscriber list of over fifty thousand. Never had so many people read the words that she had written.

*Clark would love to share in some of that praise, too, missy.*

Lois looked down at her hands in her lap, feeling guilty. Yes, she really ought to call Terry once she got to work and tell him that Clark had worked on the article with her. Actually without Clark...

*And without his interest in you...*

... there would have been no article.

She had seen in that morning's *Metropolis Star* that Superman had been busy fighting fires that had broken out in tenement houses in

Suicide Slum, which was why it had taken him so long to return to her the night before. Lois's brow furrowed. Hadn't Kal — Superman — Clark said that he had been fighting the same type of fire the night he had rescued her from being hit by the car? How many fires had broken out in apartment buildings in that area of Hob's Bay recently? She was beginning to wonder if there was an arsonist behind it all.

Martha's breakfast was the best breakfast Lois had ever eaten in her whole history of food. No simple bowl of cereal, banana, and orange juice at the Kent house. Oh, no. There were scrambled eggs with ham, chives, and parmesan cheese. There were thick slices of bacon and homemade crispy hash browns. Toast on homemade whole-wheat bread with homemade and home canned apricot jam. Coffee that smelled so good, it had floated Lois out of her bed and into the kitchen before she had actually woken up. And to top it all off, fresh homemade cinnamon rolls. Lois had never eaten so much for breakfast in her life.

"Can I move in with you?" she had practically begged Martha after seeing the spread.

Clark's mom had laughed and had replied, like they ate like that all the time, "It's just breakfast, dear."

*How in the world does Clark eat like that on a daily basis and still look like Mr. Hardbody? Must be a Kryptonian thing.*

Whatever it was, Lois wanted it. A slight flush came to her cheeks. She meant his metabolism.

*Yeah, right. We all believe you.*

Then Martha sat down with her while she ate. The Kents had already finished their breakfast hours earlier — farm habits apparently were hard to break, even in the city. Jonathan had taken the truck to check out the fresh produce market after dropping Clark off at his MDS delivery job. So it had just been the two women.

"I'd be more than happy to throw out Clark's twin bed and get you guys a queen, if you're serious, Lois," Martha had continued, straight-faced, before sipping her coffee.

Lois had practically choked on her toast at that statement. "Martha!" she had said when she was finally able to speak.

Then they both had laughed, Lois realizing that Martha had only been teasing her.

*Well, Lois's inner voice had told her. Two can play that game.*

Lois had raised a brow and had said, "You and Jonathan wouldn't move the bed yourselves anyway, not with Clark able to pick it up with one finger."

The laughter had slipped off Martha's face.

"And should Clark and I move in together, we'll need a place with a private back balcony or deck for take offs and landings, don't you think?" Lois had gone on, looking at Martha as she had peeled a piece of her cinnamon bun and plopped it into her mouth. "Maybe a secret compartment for his blue suits and red capes." She had thrown that in, just in case she hadn't made herself clear.

*Don't forget his red shorts. The shorts make the outfit. And his boots...*

Martha had just stared at Lois as she took another sip of her coffee, then a smile had hinted at her lips again. "Been thinking a lot about that, have you?"

*Yes! Yes! Oh, God, yes!* her inner voice had moaned.

Clark's mother had given back as much as Lois had thrown at her.

"A bit," Lois had admitted. "He's nice to have around."

Martha had glowed at this simple praise of her son. "Who? Superman or Clark?"

Lois had thought about the right way to say what she was feeling. "There's only one. Clark is the one who is nice to have around."

*And Superman? Well, he's just eye-candy.*

"Yes, he is. But the two of you aren't going to go anywhere with you not speaking with him."

*"Me! Clark's the one not talking, Martha."*

Clark's mother had raised her brow. "Honey, I don't have to have Clark's hearing to know you refused to even say goodnight to him last night."

Lois had gulped, concentrating on her food.

*She knew about that?*

"He disappeared for hours on me last night," Lois had explained in a tone that bordered on whining. "No reasonable excuse either, just gone." She had waved her hand as if it were taking off into the air.

That was when Clark's mother had passed her the *Metropolis Star* with the article about the tenement fires.

"I should have known it might be something like that," Lois had mumbled, chagrined.

*It says here that he saved over fifty people from smoke inhalation and death.*

Martha had sighed. "Lois, you need to understand that Clark has always been alone. When he was thirteen and getting strong — really, really strong — he made up his own mind not to tell anybody. He said he wanted to fit in." She shook her head. "But he never could, not really. It broke my heart, watching him having to hide so much, afraid he would always be alone."

"But he will always be alone if he can't find the confidence to tell me the truth," Lois had tried to rationalize to his mom. "Try as I might, all the lying..." She had sighed. "I need him to be honest with me. I can't just tell him I know. It needs to be his decision to tell me the truth, so he doesn't keep lying. That's why I need you to tell him to tell me the truth."

Martha had laughed. "Is that how things work in your mind, Lois? That I make Clark's decisions for him?"

Lois had blushed, looking down. "He's worried I'm going to leave him for the man that Tempus told me about," she had whispered.

"But that's Clark!" Martha had stammered, exasperated.

"He doesn't know that and I'm not going to tell him. I'm not even sure I can follow destiny's plan, but... but every time I try make my own plans for the future... I realize..."

Martha had waited as Lois had searched for the right words.

"I don't know how to leave him. I like him too much and I don't want to hurt him," she finally had confessed. "No matter how many times he has lied to me, angered me, made me scream in frustration..."

*And there has been a lot of frustration...*

Lois had sighed. "I still want him and only him."

*In every way humanly possible and a couple that may only be possible with him.*

Martha had patted her shoulder. "That's how Jonathan makes me feel sometimes."

She had moved her gaze to Martha's face.

"Some of us call it 'love'."

Lois shook her head adamantly. "No. No. No. Clark and I just started dating a week ago. It can't be love yet... can it?"

"A week ago?" Martha had asked, taking another sip of her coffee.

"Yes. When he brought me here for dinner. Wasn't that a date? I know I told him it was a non-date date. But it really was a date, wasn't it?"

Martha had shrugged. "Oh. Yes, I guess so. You see, in Clark's mind, you didn't start dating until that first kiss. That's how he's rationalizing it. It's too soon."

"Soon? But our first kiss was ten days ago!"

"Really?" Martha sounded surprised.

*Clark hadn't told his folks about the kiss in Receiving?*

"Well, it wasn't a real kiss... or it wasn't meant to be a real kiss... only once I started kissing Clark, I discovered I didn't want to stop..." Lois had glanced over at Martha, realizing that she was rambling on again, and to his mother no less, and flushed. "Did you put jalapeños in these eggs?"

*It isn't that kind of hot pepper that's making you blush, girly.*

Martha had grinned with glee and a shake of her head. "You're right. That couldn't possibly be love."

Lois had eaten in silence for a few minutes, trying to let her face return to its normal shade. Then she had bitten her bottom lip, lowered her voice, and plunged forward, "Can I ask you something? Woman to woman?"

Clark's mother had leaned forward in anticipation. Then a thought struck Lois and she had to ask, "Can he hear me?" Martha's lips pressed together as she thought. "Yes, if he's listening. No, if he's not."

*Well, that clears things up.*

"Do you think he is? Listening, I mean," Lois had asked, hoping not.

His mother had shook her head. "I'm sure he would have stopped by to apologize to you by now, knowing that you know, and having learned that he has nothing to worry about from that man from the future's prediction, had he been listening."

Lois had released a breath she hadn't known she had been holding. "I'm having some difficulty..." she had blushed again, but continued nonetheless, "... moving our relationship..." she had been sure she must have looked like a lobster by the time she had finished, "... forward."

"Forward?"

"Past kissing..." Lois mumbled.

"Oh?" Martha had gulped.

Had Clark's mother been surprised by Lois's dilemma or that Lois had brought it to her attention? Only Lois didn't have another woman in her life she trusted to ask these questions to. She certainly could not confide in *her* mother.

"Perhaps it's best that you two wait until you've worked out the whole truth and honesty predicament first," Martha had suggested.

*But I don't want to wait!* her inner voice had pouted.

"I was kind of hoping that becoming more intimate might nudge him in that direction," Lois clarified.

"Oh. I see."

"But he seems to be a bit reluctant." Her voice had been barely a soft whisper by this point.

"Really? Clark?" Martha had seemed surprised and slightly curious.

"No, your other son Kal," Lois had snapped impatiently. She hadn't known if it was Martha's surprise or her own crazy thoughts that pushed her to snapping.

*Oh, so maybe Clark is able to... just not with you. Do you think he lied about being a virgin? No, men don't lie about that. Maybe his mom doesn't know.*

"But Clark's head-over-heels in love with you," Martha had stammered, confused. "He has been for weeks."

*Truly? Weeks? Goody, goody, gumdrops!* Her inner passionate side was so reveling in this information that it regressed several decades.

Lois had leaned forward towards Martha. "Is he...?" She had then blushed and turned away, not able to ask the question on the tip of her tongue.

*Not to his mother, Lois! No, even you couldn't ask that question to his mother. Clark would have told you if he wasn't, wouldn't he have? And if he ever heard you ask that question to his mother, Clark would never be able to look at you again. Never! End of relationship, never.*

"Is what, dear?"

*Didn't Tempus tell you that your descendants help create the utopian world that he hates? Wouldn't that mean that Clark is built like a human male? Anatomically correct, that is.*

"Never mind," Lois mumbled, stuffing her mouth full of cinnamon roll to stop herself from saying more.

Martha had furrowed her brow in confusion and then her eyes widened, understanding. Clark's mother had laughed and laughed so hard in surprise that she could hardly stop. When she had been able to speak again, taking off her glasses and wiping the tears of *joie de vivre* from her eyes, she had said, "Yes, dear, he is."

*Thank God!*

"Thank goodness," Lois had gushed and concentrated on her breakfast once again. Finally, her curiosity on another thing that Kal-El had told her about Clark had gotten the better of her. "Kal mentioned that Clark got burned once by love. Do you know that story?"

"Kal?" Martha had asked.

"Kal-El."

"Uh-huh." Martha had stared at her waiting.

Lois had gulped. "For a while there yesterday I thought Kal — Superman was Clark's twin brother. It made more sense than his constant lying."

"I don't know if I could have handled *two* of him." Martha had laughed. "At once."

"Well, I had thought that Kal was born with all the powers and Clark was just... well, Clark."

"He is."

"Yes, I know." Lois had sighed. "That's why I love him so."

*Love?*

"Love?" Clark's mom asked, her eyebrow raised and questioning.

"No! Like. Like. Definitely like," Lois had clarified, extremely poorly. Neither her inner voice nor Martha believed her.

Clark's mother had taken another sip of her coffee and then had stood up and walked to the sink. "If you want to know about Lana, dear, you should ask Clark."

Lois's heart clunked around her ankles. "Lana?" And then fury had rumbled inside of her. "*Lana Lang?*"

"You know her? Oh, yeah, I guess you would. She was from Smallville, too, wasn't she?" Martha had murmured softly.

"Ya'd think Clark would have mentioned that," she said through gritted teeth.

"It was a long time ago, Lois. Don't give Clark a hard time about it. She treated him poorly," exclaimed his mother.

"Poorly?" Lois harrumphed with a roll of her eyes. "It's not *Clark* I'm angry at, Martha. Lana is a witch, a sorceress, an evil enchantress, bent on destroying young men. If she had anything to do with Clark's phobia..."

"Phobia?" Martha had asked, brow raised, but Lois had knocked the word out of the air. "She treated other boys badly as well?"

"Most definitely," Lois had snarled.

"What happened?"

Lois had gulped thinking sadly of her friend who had given her the globe. "He died."

She heard a siren and it pulled her back to the here-and-now, sitting inside the truck with Jonathan. Lois then saw an ambulance and a firetruck roar by. She tilted her head to see better out the front window of the truck, hoping for a glance of Superman, but he wasn't there. Probably best if Superman didn't chase ambulances anyway.

If Lana had done to Clark what she had done to Pete... Lois shook her head. And he still hadn't recovered from it. Lois would have a lot of work to do to piece together that poor man's ego.

Lois sighed and glanced over at Jonathan.

He noticed her glance and smiled sheepishly.

*Oh, that is where Clark picked up that facial expression.*

Jonathan finally broke the quiet, not by saying anything about his son, but by asking if Lois knew Wayne Irig.

"Mr. Irig? Sure. Mrs. Irig always had the best caramel apples on Halloween," Lois replied with a smile. "I went to school with their son Chuck."

"Ah, that's right." Jonathan had nodded. "Helen had just given birth when we left town."

They spoke of Smallville. What had changed. What was the same. It was obvious to Lois that Jonathan missed his hometown. It was a good place to be from. If her parents didn't still live there, she would probably even have said that it was still a nice place to live. Sometimes distance was a good thing.

"Why did you leave?" Lois asked.

"Blight, drought, and then a flood. I couldn't keep up with the payments. The farm and house were foreclosed," Jonathan explained with a regretful sigh. "We didn't want to leave."

"Why don't you move back?"

"And do what? I'm a little old to start farming again after all these years, even if I could afford the land," Jonathan said wistfully. "And

Clark isn't interested in it." Then he gave her a rare smile. "Though he'd be a great farmer."

*Clark would be great at anything he placed his mind upon.*

"The diner where Maisie used to work closed down last year. Nobody wanted to eat there without her. Smallville could really use a good place to eat," Lois hinted suggestively.

Jonathan sighed. "That's too bad. Martha and I always enjoyed eating there."

"Maisie's gossip drew in more people than the coffee. She seemed to brighten up the place and make people forget that the food was only so-so. She has been missed."

"She's given up the gossip trade here in Metropolis. She's become more taciturn since Carl died," he murmured, concentrating on the road.

"I noticed that the other night," agreed Lois, thinking about the woman who had interrupted their Sunday dinner the previous weekend to borrow Martha's iron. It had been a pleasant shock to each woman — Lois and Maisie — to find the other with the Kents.

"You know I had heard rumors that she left town after she cracked up at Carl's wake. Embarrassed herself and couldn't face the townsfolk again. Apparently she got drunk and started spouting off a crazy story from back when they were dating. It was the mid-1960s and she and Carl witnessed some secret government agency digging up Shuster's field and hauling off a..." *space ship*. Lois's voice faded. Maybe it hadn't been a crazy story after all. That would explain why Carl had started drinking. And why Maisie had been more interested in other people's business than in telling people her own.

Jonathan gasped. "Hauling off *what*?"

*Oops. The cat's out of the bag now, deary.*

"Superman's space ship," Lois murmured.

Jonathan jaw dropped.

*You might as well tell him you know. It will make it easier on Martha.*

"I know Superman is from Smallville. Or at least arrived there. The space ship story and globe clearly go together," Lois told him.

Jonathan glanced over at Lois, then muttered, "So they found it."

"Guess so. You'll have to ask Maisie about the details."

He sighed. "At least they didn't get the globe." Then Jonathan sighed again.

*He must be remembering it got stolen out of your apartment and somebody else has it now.*

Lois's heart ached. "I'm so sorry, Jonathan. I would have given it to Clark, if I had known how close he and Superman were."

Jonathan patted her hand on his arm. "It's not your fault."

His words were reassuring, but for some reason Lois didn't feel at peace. She asked him to drop her off at the corner, down the block from the bookstore. The thieves hadn't found her emergency money hidden in the toe of her oldest and smelliest pair of running shoes.

Lois had called the bank first thing after breakfast to cancel her ATM and credit cards and to let the banks know that they were stolen the previous day. Luckily, there was no way the thieves would have guessed her PIN. It was Pete Ross's birthday. Lois sighed. She had been thinking more about him in the past few weeks than she had over the last few years.

Lois thanked Jonathan for the ride and went into the small convenience store to buy a calling card. Martha had packed her one of those chicken sandwiches that Lois had drooled over that first day she and Clark had shared lunch. If she had parents as wonderful as the Kents, she wouldn't want to leave home either. But she knew that wasn't why Clark still lived with his folks. She would have to ask him the real reason, one of these days.

Lois walked into the bookstore and returned the wave Jack gave her. She dropped her stuff in her break room locker and put her sack lunch in the fridge. She still had a couple of minutes before she had to clock in, so she went over to the payphone located between the restrooms and called Terry.

"Finally, Lane!" he barked at her. "I've been trying to reach you

since last night."

"I spent the night at a friend's, Terry, not really wanting to stay at my place. What's up? Did you need me to clarify something?" she asked.

"The *Wichita Eagle* ran your article in this morning's edition," he announced.

"What?" she gasped.

*Clark's going to kill you.*

"My former editor was ecstatic at your exclusive," Terry told her. *I bet he was.*

"I made sure the article was credited to the *Smallville Post* though," Terry continued.

"But, Terry, that's why I'm calling. I forgot to tell you that I wrote the article with my partner," Lois stammered.

"You with a writing partner, Lane?" Terry guffawed. "When have you ever needed a partner? When have you allowed yourself to be partnered up with someone? Hell, girl, you wouldn't let anyone but me look at your copy. If I recall correctly the town council elections..."

"Terry!" Lois interrupted. "Can you add Clark's name to the *Smallville* edition or not?"

"Okay. Okay." She heard him shuffling papers around on his desk. "Shoot. What's the guy's name again?"

"Clark Kent."

"*Clark Kent*?" Then Terry laughed. "Is he related to the *Smallville* Kents?"

"Yes, he's Martha and Jonathan Kent's son," Lois admitted.

"*No!* You found Martha and Jonathan? You're kidding me, right, Lane?" Terry exclaimed.

"Were they lost?" Lois asked hesitantly, becoming curious.

"No. No, I guess not." Terry's voice calmed down. "I bet Wayne Irig knows where they are. Not that he'd talk if you broke the man's fingers. Next you're going to tell me you know where Maisie is."

"Yes. She's working for the Kents at their restaurant," Lois responded.

"Lane! Superman, the Kents, and Maisie! Were you this good of an investigator when you worked for me? Why didn't you ever say anything?"

*You're darn tooting I was.*

"I did say. And if I recall you said I was good only for human interest and fluff pieces," she retorted gruffly.

"I take all that back now. When did you arrive in Metropolis?" he asked.

"A little over a month ago," Lois said slowly, wondering where he was going with this line of questioning.

"You're the best reporter I've ever met."

*About time he noticed that.*

Lois glanced down at her watch and noticed she was supposed to have clocked in a minute before. "I've got to go, Terry. Can you send me a copy of my article?" she asked.

"Gotcha, Lane. I'll throw in a copy of the *Wichita Eagle* as well. Oh, and the check for your story. And don't be surprised if the *Metropolis Star* comes knocking at your door."

*Like you'd ever work for a paper stupid enough to hire Linda King.*

Lois hung up the phone and let a grin of exhilaration spread across her face. *Her* article was on the front page of the *Wichita Eagle*! Thank you, Superman.

*Clark's going to be mad as hell when you tell him, Lois.*

She pressed her lips together as she returned to the break room to clock in. He didn't need to know about the exclusion of his byline from the *Wichita Eagle* and his name would be on the *Smallville Post* article. She would still share the check, and that should placate him.

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Clark stomped into the Receiving room at Daily Books from the freight elevator.

"Hey, CK. Something wrong?" asked Jimmy warily.

Flipping open the newspaper in his hands, Clark flashed the

headline to Jimmy.

“Lois went on a date with Superman?” Jimmy voice wavered in disbelief. “*Our* Lois?”

Clark shot him a look.

Jimmy cleared his throat. “I meant *your* Lois, of course.”

“Where is she?” Clark growled.

“Down at the newsstand. Where else?” Jimmy retorted as if he weren’t her keeper, which he wasn’t.

Clark exhaled. “Sorry, Jimmy. I just didn’t know about this.”

“Yeah, I could see how her two-timing on you with a superhero might tick you off.”

“I meant the article,” Clark snapped.

“You *knew* about the date?” Jimmy’s jaw dropped.

“It. *Wasn’t*. A. Date.” Clark spoke the words slowly, enunciating each word.

“O-kay.” Jimmy took the paper out of Clark’s hand and skimmed the article. “Superman picked her up at her apartment. He flew her down to a beach in Costa Rica in just a few minutes. Wow, he’s fast. He made her a glass fish — without any tools — super cool. He told her all about himself and his powers. He bought her a snow cone. He brought her back to her place.” Jimmy slapped the paper back against Clark’s chest. “Sounds like a date to me, CK. All that’s missing is the goodnight kiss. You have every right to be furious. I knew that there was some connection between them at the press conference, but she denied it.”

Clark’s heart dropped into his shoes. “What?”

“The way Superman was staring at her and the way Lois was staring at him. I just had a feeling that they knew each other. It was kind of obvious. You weren’t there, CK. She said it was because he rescued her a few weeks ago, which is also what she said in the article, but now...” Jimmy shook his head. “I’m not so sure that was all.”

*If Jimmy noticed something amiss at the press conference, did anyone else? Oh, God, if anyone thinks that she’s actually dating Superman...*

“Lois is not cheating on me. She promised me that.”

Jimmy raised an eyebrow at that remark. “But you must have thought she was to have had that conversation with her.”

*Oops, that made it sound worse than you meant it to.*

“How well do you really know her?” Jimmy asked as Clark figured out how to walk himself out of this mess.

*Evidently not as well as you thought, Kent.*

Clark glanced down at the photo above the fold of her and Superman in front of the bookstore the previous afternoon. Someone had taken a photo of them together. Since they had seen this, maybe someone had also heard Lois invite Superman to ‘meet her at her place after work’. Maybe that someone — or someone who knew that someone — was the thief who broke into her apartment and stole the globe. He sighed. The break-in *was* his fault. He had been careless with Lois. Superman had shown her too much attention. He had to remedy this and fast. But first, Clark Kent needed to confront Lois about his missing byline.

Clark didn’t respond to Jimmy’s question before leaving Receiving and heading downstairs. She wasn’t at the newsstand, so he checked her Magazine Receiving room. She was squatting on the floor picking up some magazines that had fallen off her cart. The three boxes he had delivered several hours before were still sitting just inside the door. He cleared his throat to let her know he was there.

Lois turned and her face lit up. She was genuinely happy to see him. *This* was the woman who wouldn’t even tell him goodnight the previous night? Guess she had forgiven him for whatever transgression he had committed.

She ran up and threw her arms around him. “Oh, Clark! Guess what! The *Wichita Eagle* picked up my article... *our* article... from the *Smallville Post* and published it in this morning’s edition. That’s over fifty thousand people who read *our* article. We’re *real* reporters!”

Clark’s lips pressed together, correcting her, “You mean *you* are a real reporter now.”

Lois stepped back. “Excuse me? No, I mean *us*. *We* wrote the article together. Without you to introduce us, there wouldn’t have been an article.”

His eyebrow raised and he flipped open the newspaper he had picked up in Los Angeles that morning, when he went to help with a fire out in the hills east of the city.

“The *LA Times*!” Lois gasped, then her eyes sought out his. “I didn’t know they had picked up the story as well.” She unfolded the paper. “*Date*? It wasn’t a date. It was an interview.” She slapped the paper. “If I had been a man they wouldn’t have put this headline on the article. How sexist.” She read on. “Where’s your byline?” She slapped the paper again. “You know if they had gotten that right, I bet they wouldn’t have put that headline on the article.”

His voice was cold and hard. “Yes, Lois, where is it?”

“I don’t know,” she said rather quickly and keeping her eyes on the paper, instead of him. “I told Terry that I had written the article with my partner. *You!*”

*Had she now? Partner, eh?*

“We’ll call the *Times* and have them issue a correction,” she continued.

*Like anyone would notice that tucked in between classifieds and obits.*

“I doubt anyone would believe that Superman flew the pair of us down to Costa Rica, anyway, would they?” He crossed his arms. “I’d have been a third wheel on that date.”

Lois looked him square in the eye and raised her brow. “You and I both know you haven’t any reason to be jealous, Clark. I’m *not* dating Superman. I’m dating *you*.”

“It sure doesn’t look that way to the rest of the world.”

“Well, the rest of the world can take a flying leap for all I care,”

Lois spat at him. She dropped the newspaper on her unopened boxes and placed her hands on his crossed arms. “*We* know the truth.”

“And what truth would that be, Lois? That you used me to gain access to Superman and then cut me out of the picture as you went on to fame and glory with *your* Superman exclusive? Is that it?” As his eyes focused deeply into hers, he saw the pain he was inflicting upon her with his words before her anger flared.

“You know damn well that wasn’t what happened,” she retorted.

“Do I?” he asked more calmly than he felt. “Maybe the editors got it right. The article sounded like a date to me and even to Jimmy. Maybe you’ve been lying to me this whole time. Maybe something *did* happen between you two. I thought I knew you, but...”

“What?” Her laughter seemed harsh, scoffing, and disbelieving.

“You’re actually going to try and tell me that you think that Superman and I were actually on a date? That something happened between us, is that it, Clark?” she accused him, the laughter in her voice gone as quickly as it had come.

He swallowed.

Her hands were on her hips now. “Are you *really* going to go down that path? You better not get me started on the topic of lying, buster, because you know I’d win *that* argument, hands down.”

Clark just stared at her. A part of her still hadn’t forgiven him for lying to her about knowing Superman.

Then Lois set her hands on his chest and placed a tender kiss on his lips. Her hands started caressing his chest as her words turned soft and gentle, almost babyish in tone. “Yes, you’re right, Clark. That’s where all those missing condoms went. It was love at first sight. Kal and I just couldn’t help ourselves. We were knocking hips all over that beach and even once or twice in the water. Mmmm. The water on our naked skin...” She moaned, pressing her body against his. Her voice, though still babyish, had developed a harder, nastier tone. “Seven times and we just couldn’t stop. Maybe it was more. It was the highlight of my life. He’s absolutely fantastic!” She placed another soft kiss on Clark’s lips, thin with anger. “I will never forget it. I still have sand in cracks I didn’t even know existed. Perhaps even now I’m pregnant with Kal’s love child.”

Clark gulped, knowing her biting words were as false as her tone.

*Yet they still sting, don't they? You know that they are lies and they still hurt.*

Lois pushed him out the door as her voice rose. "How *dare* you accuse me of doing anything like that with Superman? You know how much I like you. You know that Superman could *never* do anything against you. You have no right to come in here and accuse me of any wrongdoing, Clark, especially with Superman. I would *never* cheat on you. Do you really think Superman is the type of man who would take a woman on a date knowing darn well she is in a committed relationship?"

*Committed? Relationship? Kent, you're the one who needs to be committed.*

Her hurt, furious eyes stared at him. "Do you think he would do that to you, his best friend, knowing that you 'love me and that you want to spend the rest of your life with me'?" Her fingers made the quote in the air with the words he had spoken to her on the beach.

*You've got a bad case of athlete's tongue. You need to fix this.*

"No, he wouldn't," Clark admitted sheepishly.

"Glad to hear it," she snapped.

"Lois, I'm..." Clark muttered from the ashes of his dignity.

"Damn straight, you better be sorry. Get out of here." Lois pointed out the door. "When you've had a chance to grow a pair and actually trust me, then you can come back." She held out her hand. "Give me my apartment keys."

Clark reached into his pocket and withdrew her keys. He had liked knowing they were there, tangled up with his keys.

"I hope you didn't make copies because with an attitude like that, Clark, you aren't moving in anytime soon," she thundered, pocketing her keys.

*Move in? Had she actually liked him enough to bounce that idea around in her head? Of the two of them living together? Sleeping together? Sharing their lives? That committed of a relationship?*

"Move in?" he mumbled. His mouth was dry and he tried to clear his throat, but it didn't work.

Lois had gone back to picking up her magazines off the floor.

"Yeah. I had thought it might be nice having you around more. Full-time personal security, you know. Protecting me from my phobias and nightmares, sharing Danishes and coffee, laughing at each other's stories, cuddling in front of the..." She sighed. "But now..." She glanced back over her shoulder at him and he saw the unshed tears glistening in her eyes. "You aren't the man I thought you were, Clark Kent." She blinked and the tears crept down her cheeks.

He knelt down beside her and set a hand on her shoulder. "Lois, I tru..."

Lois shrugged off his hand. "Go, Clark." Her voice was low and tired as if she didn't want to argue anymore. "Just go."

At the door Clark tried one more time. "I still love you, Lois."

Softly, almost so quietly that he needed his super hearing, she whispered, "I'm beginning to think you don't know the meaning of the word, Clark."

Clark nodded. He was beginning to think he didn't either.

*You know the meaning of 'love', Kent. It's the execution that trips you up.*

He rode the escalator back up, instead of jogging up as he usually did. Then he rode up the next one the same way, her words still echoing inside his head. *You aren't the man I thought you were, Clark Kent.* Lois had smashed his dreams to smithereens and yet he was the one who had made her cry. She knew that he knew she had been telling the truth about her 'interview'. Yet, he still accused her that more had happened, even though he knew nothing had.

*Why had you done that, Kent? Unless you deliberately wanted to hurt her?*

Lois knew that Clark knew that she hadn't done anything with Kal-El.

*If it had, Kent, so what? You are Kal-El. And he is you. Had she done something with Superman, she technically wouldn't have been cheating on you.*

Clark thought about the way Lois had pressed against his chest and told him all those things she hadn't done with Superman on the beach. She had made it sound wild and meaningless and dirty. She wanted him to be disgusted by the images she was putting into his head, because she was disgusted with him for not trusting her. He sighed.

*I'll agree with her there, Kent. You're pretty disgusting.*

Clark entered Receiving and raised a hand at Jimmy as he passed by.

"Well?" Jimmy asked, glancing up from opening a box.

"Somehow I went from being the one being wronged to being the one in the doghouse again," Clark muttered.

*And in the doghouse you belong, Kent.*

"Man, how is it that women always have all the power in a relationship?" Jimmy shook his head.

"Men's hearts are more vulnerable because when we fall in love, we fall body and soul?" Clark proposed.

Jimmy's jaw dropped. "I didn't know we were talking about love, CK. Man, no wonder you're her puppet on strings." He patted Clark's back. "I'm sorry."

"Don't feel bad for me, Jimmy. I'm doing a great job of cutting my strings off, one by one. If I keep this up, soon I'll be a free man again," Clark said as if that would be a punishment worse than death. He sighed. "I think I got some more boxes for you in the truck."

Jimmy nodded. "How did you end up in the doghouse? If you don't mind me asking?"

Clark looked away and cleared his throat. "Even though I knew nothing happened I accused her of cheating on me."

*You are a heel, Kent.*

"Ouch! Why'd you do that?" Jimmy asked.

Clark pushed the button to call the freight elevator. "Because we wrote that article about Superman together. And I wasn't credited for it."

His friend's eyes bugged out of his skull. "You wrote the article with her?"

Clark stepped into the elevator and gazed at Jimmy. "There is more to me than a bunch of uniforms."

"No. No. I didn't mean... I just didn't know you wrote," Jimmy explained. "Wait!"

Clark hit the hold elevator button as he listened.

"Have you ever thought about writing for Perry's *Planet*? I gave him some of my photos from the press conference with Superman. He's going to publish them in this week's edition. I'm sure if you wanted to get your name in print, CK, the Chief would be more than willing to use your talents and you wouldn't have to depend on the kindness of your girlfriend. You could make a name for yourself without it being attached to hers."

A hint of a smile tugged at Clark's lips as that suggestion bounced around in his mind. "Thanks, Jimmy. You're right. I don't *need* a writing partner." He sighed. "I just liked the idea of being partnered with Lois."

*You liked the idea of her name being attached to yours.*

Clark let go of the button and the doors closed.

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Hours following his conversation with Jimmy and his blow up with Lois, Clark came back to the book store. After returning the MDS truck, his deliveries complete, he had walked around downtown thinking about Jimmy's advice, wondering why he had never thought about asking Perry to let him write for his weekly paper before. He had sighed, knowing the answer. Lana.

*Lana told you that you had no potential and that you would never amount to a hill of beans. Why did you believe her? Why did you take her words to heart? Just because you thought yourself in love with the girl doesn't mean you should have let her squash your hopes and dreams, Kent.*

Earlier that afternoon while out on his walk, Clark had come across the old Sarah Bernhardt Theatre in the midst of being demolished. Using his x-ray vision he saw that there was a woman on

the stage reciting lines from Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. Clark had seen it performed in Russia, in Russian, while traveling around the world after a couple of years attending community college. It had always been one of his favorite plays. He'd seen the wrecking ball starting to sway and known he had to save her. Clark had lowered his glasses and zapped the controls of the wrecker with his heat vision, before going in to talk to the woman on the stage.

Clark had gotten Beatrice's whole story. It was an interesting one and seemed to parallel the life of the old theatre. They had been friends a long time — Beatrice and the Sarah Bernhardt.

As he continued walking, after finally being able to convince Beatrice to leave the building, Clark realized what a great story it would make, Beatrice mourning the death of her old friend. He had zipped home and had started typing on his old typewriter.

Here Clark was, hands shaking, wondering if Perry would red ink this story like he had with Superman's first speech. He hated to bother the Chief at the bookstore with something for *The Planet*, but Clark couldn't wait to see what his old friend thought.

Clark had found Perry, sitting at his desk, staring at the security monitors. He was so focused that when Clark had cleared his throat, the Chief had actually jumped.

"Hey, Kent. What are you doing here?" Perry asked so quickly it seemed almost a brush-off.

Glancing over at the video screens, Clark didn't see anything out of the ordinary. His eyes were automatically drawn to Lois. She seemed to be in an intense discussion with a bearded customer.

Clark pulled his eyes away, pushing down the claws of his green-eyed monster that wanted to escape and knock over the monitors. "Jimmy said you might want to use some of my stories for your weekly paper, *The Planet*. I was wondering if you'd be willing to take a look.

Perry hemmed and hawed as he crossed the room to Clark. "I don't know, Kent. I don't print fiction. Just the facts."

*Well, that wasn't encouraging.*

"It's not fiction, Chief. Just something I wrote about the razing of the old Sarah Bernhardt Theatre," Clark said, holding out his folder.

Perry reached out and halfheartedly took it.

*He doesn't want to give you a chance. The only reason he's looking at it is because he knows you. He'll never want to print it in his paper. He's just being polite. In a minute, he's going to kick you out of his office for wasting his time. Lana was right. You're a nobody. You'll never be who you really want to be. You'll always just be this delivery truck driver who happens to save people on the...*

"Kent, you wrote this?" Perry asked, flipping through the sheets again.

"Of course," Clark answered taken aback and slightly more defensively than he normally would be. "I know it's not Pulitzer..."

"No. No, it isn't, but it's darn good."

*Darn good?*

"I like it."

*He likes it?*

Perry smiled encouragingly at him. "It's a bit green, but much better than that schlock you brought me the other day."

Clark looked down at his shoes.

*He really liked it?*

"If you have got more stuff like this, I'd love to see it. Mind you, I only accept articles on a piece-by-piece basis. But if you bring me more stuff like this, I can see us working together outside the store — for a long time to come." Perry held out his hand.

Clark lifted his gaze from his shoes and smiled, joy filling his heart and countenance. "Thank you, sir. I won't let you down," he replied, shaking Perry's hand.

*You did it! You did it all on your own. Not hanging on the hem of your girlfriend's skirt. You, Clark Kent, did it!*

"And if you have any stories about Superman, I wouldn't mind taking a look at those too," Perry added with a wink.

Clark laughed. "I think I might be able to get you a quote or two."

"You tell Lois yet?" Perry asked.

Clark glanced over his shoulder at the newsstand monitor. Regret filled his heart as he saw she wasn't there. "No." Then he remembered his missing byline. The ache of that betrayal hadn't yet gone away. "I'm not ready to share my secrets with her."

"She might surprise you, Kent."

Clark's lips pressed together. "Lois is nothing if not full of surprises."

Perry raised a brow. "Trouble in paradise?"

Clark sighed. "Let's just say, you should ask her about her 'exclusive'."

"Exclusive?" Perry repeated, but Clark just shrugged. "Son, can I give you a piece of advice?"

*Could you stop him if you tried, Kent?*

"I don't know what she did or what you think she did, but it's my opinion that she will defend Superman... well, his image... to the death."

*What?*

Clark's brow furrowed in confusion. "Did she say something to you about Superman?"

The Chief swatted Clark lightly with the folder as he headed to his desk. "No, not exactly. It's just a feeling. If you truly like the girl, Kent, everything else doesn't matter. Love is a leap of faith." Then Perry grinned. "And I hear nobody leaps like you do."

Clark rolled his eyes. Perry and his Superman jokes were getting old fast.

He watched as his boss suddenly leaned against his desk and stared over Clark's shoulder. "What in the King's name?"

Clark turned and saw on the monitor that the bearded man was grabbing Lois's arm. Before he knew it he was standing at the third floor railing looking down at the two of them with his own eyes.

"So, I'll see you Saturday night then, beautiful," the bearded man was saying to Lois.

Clark's teeth ground together as he saw Lois give the barest of nods, jerking her arm away from the man.

"It's a date then." The bearded man leaned over to kiss Lois's cheek.

A growl escaped from deep within Clark.

Lois pushed the man away. "Don't touch me!"

The man put a finger under her chin. "Be nice to me, Ms. Lane, and this will all go away nice and quiet. Fight me..."

She stepped away from the man and glanced up. She knew Clark was watching her. He caught her eye and saw fear there. He didn't know if it was the bearded man she feared or Clark for finding out that she agreed to go out with that other man.

"*Supervisor to main cashier,*" came an overhead announcement, causing Clark to wince at the deafening sound.

"I've got to go," Lois said, walking quickly away from the man and jogging up the escalator.

Clark focused in on the bearded man, wondering who he was. He seemed familiar but Clark did not know from where.

Lois reached the third floor and Clark walked up to her, his teeth still grinding from her deceit.

"What are you doing here?" she stammered, glancing over her shoulder and moving away from him.

"Obviously learning about the real you," Clark muttered, following her.

"Clark, you don't... You can't be here."

He raised a brow. "I can't, can I?"

Lois moved down an aisle of books. "He can't see us together. It will only make matters worse."

Clark took her arm. "Make *what* worse, Lois?" he asked, his voice low.

"Trust me, Clark. Stay here."

*Trust her? Doubtful after hearing her agree to a date with that... man.*

Lois left him standing in History as she jogged to the end of the

aisle and then back up the next one — Religion. She stopped almost directly opposite him and started straightening books haphazardly on the shelf. “It isn’t what it looks like, Clark,” she murmured.

“It looks like you made a date with that guy,” Clark grumbled. “After telling me you’d *never* cheat on me.”

Lois’s eyes slammed into his over the bookcase. “Only a man who doesn’t trust me would believe that, Clark. I’m trying to protect you,” she muttered, glancing away.

“I can protect myself, Lois,” he responded gruffly. “Especially from a man like that.”

Her eyes caught his and the fear was back. “Please don’t, Clark. Trust me. For once in your whole life, trust me. It’s not what you think.”

A customer passed by and Lois went back to straightening books. She moved down to the far end of the aisle and whispered. He had to use his super hearing to hear her. “We can’t talk here. Pick me up at the corner by the convenience store at 8:15. Please.”

He walked to the end of his aisle and leaned against the shelves looking directly at her. “What if I’m busy?”

Lois raised a brow at him as her eyes met his, then she scooted down the aisle. “If you’re busy, then you’re busy, Clark.” She took a deep breath, trying to calm her racing heart. “But if you’re ‘busy’ because you don’t trust me and you think I’m lying to you and that I would ever want anyone other than you, then why don’t you break up with me now, so I know whether we’re in this together or I’m all alone.” Her voice wavered as she spoke.

Despite knowing he still did not trust her, Clark also knew that he could not leave her alone to deal with whatever it was that was bothering her. “In *what* together?” he asked again.

“I told you. I can’t talk about it here. He may be watching me. He must not see us together. It would only make things worse.”

The fear he had seen, Clark realized wasn’t *of* him, but *for* him. “What’s going on, Lois?”

“Tonight, please, Clark. I’ve got to go talk to Perry,” she murmured, heading towards the break room. Then she stopped and glanced back at him. “Has Perry ever met Kal?”

It was a strange question and the directness of it set him on edge.

Clark moved closer to her, but still put an aisle of bookshelves between them. He didn’t like all this cloak and dagger stuff. “Lois, I’m not leaving you here while you’re afraid,” he said, avoiding her question entirely.

She sighed. “I thought as much.” Then Lois looked at him with tenderness he hadn’t seen in her eyes since he left to fight the fire the night before. “I’ll be fine, Clark. He wants something else from me. I was able to stall him until Saturday. Maybe by then...” She walked off to the break room without even a backwards glance at him. At the door, she paused. “Go. And keep Kal away, too. If he shows up, I’ll lose you both.” She opened the door and went inside.

Clark swallowed, wondering exactly what it was about the bearded man that scared Lois so.

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#### *Earlier that day*

Lois was still furious at Clark hours after he left. She wanted to do nothing more than break her knuckles across the perfect plains of his face. She exhaled. Unfortunately, that would be exactly what would happen if she tried such a stupid move. She *would* break her knuckles.

*That man’s picture is next to the word stubborn in the dictionary. Why does he refuse to see reason and not see that you know the truth about him? Isn’t he supposed to have ‘super sight’?*

Lois wheeled her cart full of restock back out to the newsstand.

*If the man is going to continue to be blind, you’re going to have to tell him you know.*

Lois sighed. She was getting tired of humoring him. She was to the point of either telling him she knew or just giving him up entirely.

*Yes, I thought that was your original plan. Why do you keep hanging on to this man for whom you’re obviously destined? Who’s in charge of your life anyway?*

When Clark wasn’t being so pig-headed, he could be so wonderful, loving, and sweet. That was the man she couldn’t give up. That other part of him could take a flying leap for all she cared.

*Flying leap? Really, Lois? What good would that do?*

Lois chuckled to herself. Yes, that was pathetic, she admitted.

A man entered her newsstand area and stood next to her. Lois moved down the rack filling in the holes and straightening the magazines.

*How come it only seems to take minutes for your department to go to hell in a handbag?*

The man followed her down the rack. She returned to her cart, more for personal space than anything else.

She turned and was facing the man. He was tall, like Clark, with dark blond hair and a beard. He wore a tan suit, which Lois could just hear Cat say shouldn’t be worn after Labor Day. His penetrating gaze gave her an uncomfortable chill. In a weird way, he seemed familiar, but she didn’t know from where.

“Excuse me,” she said, moving away from him.

“Good afternoon, Lois,” he replied.

She froze to her spot. That voice. She knew that voice. It haunted her nightmares. She heard it talking to her, doing its voiceover to her thoughts whenever she thought of Clark: “*Big, brawny, looks good in blue.*” She swallowed and turned around to focus her attention on him again.

“How do you know my name?” It was the first thing she could think of to say and even Lois knew it wasn’t the right thing.

The man flashed her a charming thousand-watt smile full of teeth. “Duh!” he replied, flipping up her nametag.

*Right. Nametag. At work. Treat customers with respect even if they don’t deserve it.*

Lois raised a brow about him touching her and took a step back. “If there isn’t anything I can help you with?” Lois said in a tone that indicated there wouldn’t be, before heading back to the rack. He followed her.

*Ignore him and he will go away.*

“Actually, Lois, I was hoping you could join me for dinner Friday night,” he purred.

*Really? Ugh. Never!*

“I’m busy,” replied Lois, silently thanking Martha for asking her to help out catering a party for Lex Luthor that night.

“Saturday night?”

*Persistent, isn’t he?*

Lois turned and faced him. “I have a boyfriend. A big, brawny, boyfriend who looks good in blue.”

This time it was his turn to raise a skeptical eyebrow. “Nice alliteration, Lois.”

“Thank you,” she said more politely than she felt.

“I doubt your big, brawny, boyfriend in blue would mind you having dinner with little old me.” He grinned with those teeth again.

“Actually, he’s a very jealous man. You should know. You’re the one who told me to date him. Remember, Tempus?” Lois exclaimed, unable to hold back her knowledge any longer. She stared the man straight in the eye. “So you’re back from the future, are you? How’s Utopia? Still boring you to tears, is it? Felt you needed to come back and propose again?”

For the first time since the man entered her department several weeks ago, Lois saw shock cross those cheekbones causing his eyes to pop in a manner she was sure was a new experience. “Pardon?”

“Well, the answer is still the same resounding ‘no’. So go back home, Tempus, and leave me alone,” Lois said with perhaps too much merriment in her voice. Then she couldn’t resist a wave of her hand. “Shoo.” She turned away from him and went to the far end of the newsstand to start straightening again.

“You know my name?” Tempus asked her, suddenly by her side again.

Lois rolled her eyes. “Let’s see if I can remember it correctly. ‘Oh, Lois, I am your humble servant, your slave Tempus. I love you. I have

always loved you. I have loved you since first my mother told me the story of your true love. Don't be galactically stupid this time and marry me instead.' How'd I do?"

"Galactically stupid? I love that. Do you mind if I use it?" he asked.

"Be my guest, since you told it to..." Lois stopped and stared at the man.

*He doesn't remember?*

The man pulled out a folder from his satchel. "Lois? Lois..." He flipped through the pages on a ledger inside the folder. "Ah. Here we are. Lois Lane, Periodicals Supervisor. That's you, isn't it?"

*He doesn't remember her name?*

Lois reached over and tugged on the man's beard. It was real.

"Really, honey, not before the first date."

She snatched her hand back. "How long have you had that beard?"

"Years. Much easier than shaving," he replied, staring at the papers in front of him.

*It's him. He sounds like him. He acts like him. Hell, he even dresses like him.*

"Do you have any brothers?" Lois stammered.

"Sadly, no. Mother said they broke the mold the day they made me."

*I don't think they did, but I'll put in a recommendation.*

"You don't remember proposing to me? The day of the Miranda book signing?" Her head was starting to spin.

*It is him. He even admitted that Tempus was his name. So, how could it not be him? Who else could he be?*

"Ah. I remember reading about that in the company newsletter. Is that when this delusion happened? Were you one of the employees exposed?" he asked, glancing up from his papers. "I don't happen to have those records with me. But I could always check back in the office."

Lois coughed. "Office?"

"Yes, I'm an auditor with LexCo. I'm here to investigate a Mr. Clark Kent. Do you know him?" he inquired, glancing up from his papers at her.

"You work for LexCo? The parent company of Daily Books?" Lois stammered. "Here to investigate Clark Kent?" She shook her head. "Where is your ID badge?"

"Oh, sorry," Tempus pulled out a laminated LexCo photo-ID badge, complete with clip, and held it up for her inspection. B. Gerald Tempus.

"B.?"

The thousand-watt smile returned. "Barron, but don't tell anyone. I do prefer people to call me by my last name, like you did. Have we met before?" He winked at her. "Perhaps in another life? I'm inexplicably drawn to you." He dropped his badge back into his bag. "I feel like we are destined to be together."

"No. It must have been someone else," she responded, but even to her the words sounded hollow and false.

"Pity."

*Head back in the game, Lane. This man is from LexCo corporate offices. Here to investigate your boyfriend.*

"What do you want with Clark?" Lois asked, trying to sound nonchalant, but assuming she failed miserably.

He raised a brow. "Have you seen Clark Kent in the store today?"

"Today? The man spends more time here than a bad sci-fi novel," Lois admitted.

*Don't tell him that's because he's delivering boxes with MDS.*

"Really? That is surprising. I have him down here as only working one day a week and getting paid five times your daily income. Now, does that seem fair to you?"

Lois's eyes widened from that bombshell. Her jaw hung open.

*Clark? Your Clark? Honest Clark? Law-abiding Clark?*

"There must be some mistake," she said falteringly. "That can't be right."

"That's what I'm here to find out." Tempus put his paperwork

back into his bag. "Now how about that date for Saturday night?"

*He's kidding, isn't he?*

"Still have that boyfriend," Lois mumbled.

*For the time being. Until he gets arrested for misappropriation of LexCo funds. Then it's goodbye, Superman.*

"Big, brawny, blue? Oh, right. Him." Tempus stared at her. "He wouldn't be Clark Kent, would he?"

*Lie!*

"Clark? Kent? Me? No. No. No. Just friends. Colleagues. Hardly know the man." Lois started backing away from Tempus.

*It's becoming clearer by the moment how little you know the man.*

"Shame. Clark Kent works the overnight shift on Saturday nights. Security guard, you know."

"So I've been told," murmured Lois.

*By you. Future you. Other dimensional future you.*

"And if Clark Kent were this big, brawny, blue boyfriend of yours, he wouldn't miss you on Saturday night." His thousand-watt smile blinded her. "He would never have to know."

*Very big, very brawny, very blue boyfriend. He'd know.*

"My boyfriend has friends in high places..." Lois began.

*Sky high places...*

"He always knows where I am."

*X-Ray vision.*

She had backed up so far she hit a display table. She was out of the newsstand area. "I really need to get back to work. Nice meeting you, Tempus," Lois sputtered, turning around and quickly straightening the books that had been jostled on the table when she had bumped it. When they were tidy again, she sped back to her Magazine Receiving room.

Lois leaned against the bare wall next to the shelves full of her back stock magazines.

Clark Kent? Misappropriation of funds? No. That doesn't sound like Clark. He was such a good guy. Law abiding. Honest.

*Smoking hot.*

Not now!

*In debt. He told you he was in debt.*

Lois had thought he was joking.

*You thought he was being honest enough about it to use it to scare off Mayson.*

She had never gotten around to asking him why he still lived with his parents and worked three jobs. Was it to save money to pay off that debt? Alimony? No. A man who was still a virgin had no ex-wife.

*Actually a man afraid to have sex was more likely to have an ex-wife than a wife.*

Lois shook her head. That wasn't it. That probably eliminated child support payments from the list as well. Gambling? Credit cards? Medical bills?

*Hello? Superman does not incur medical bills.*

Lawsuit?

*With his super strength? It's a possibility.*

Lois threw up her hands. This was ridiculous. There was no way she would know why Clark was accepting a paycheck equal to hers for a job he only did one night a week, unless she asked him. Or Perry. Perry had to know. How could a man run the largest bookstore in Metropolis and not know one of his employees was getting paid for five times as many hours than he actually worked? He had to know. And if he knew, it meant her boss was in on the deception.

Her heart began to ache. She liked Perry. He had worked too long and too hard to have it thrown all away. So when this investigation was over, both Perry and Clark would be in jail. She shook her head. No. She wouldn't accept that. Claude in jail — yes. Perry and Clark — no!

Lois noticed that one of the boxes delivered that morning had fallen over while she was out at the newsstand. Someone must have bumped it. And if someone had bumped into it, it meant that someone had been in her back room when she wasn't there. Who was there and what had they been up to?

She righted the tumbled box and started to refill the contents. One of the magazines had come out of its plastic wrap. She removed the rest of the plastic and went to throw it in her trashcan. But the trashcan was already full. Wasn't it empty when she had started her shift? Lois pulled the pieces of cellophane out of the trash.

*Oh, no! The thief had struck again.*

Lois turned to take the CD wrappers to Perry only to find her way out blocked by Tempus.

"What do you have there?" he asked. His tone was friendly enough but she doubted its sincerity.

"Trash. Excuse me, but customers are not allowed back here," she said, pointing back to the music department.

"I'm not a customer. As auditor, it's my job to go into every room in the store. I check to make sure nobody has been stealing from us." Tempus grabbed the plastic out of Lois's hands. "Hello? What do we have here?"

"I just found these. I was taking them to the store manager," Lois explained.

"And yet you told me it was trash." Tempus raised his eyebrow with glee.

Lois felt a chill.

*Why is the man so happy?*

"It looks to me like we have a thief in our midst."

Lois swallowed.

"A beautiful, raven-haired thief," Tempus continued.

"I am no thief," Lois protested, defending herself. "I *found* these and I was about to turn them in."

"I bet you were." There was that thousand-watt smile again. "But there is no one here to corroborate that story, is there? Just you and me. And I *found* you with the evidence in hand."

"I didn't steal anything," she retorted. "If you're looking for an excuse to search me..."

"Honey, you aren't hiding CDs in that outfit," he agreed, but for some reason it both sounded and felt like he had x-rayed through her clothes to discover that answer.

"Well, then? All you found is a bunch of CD wrappers, which I was about to turn in to my manager..." she started saying as he stepped into the room. Lois backed up to get away from him but he kept coming closer and closer. There wasn't much space to back up into.

"One call and you'll be behind bars tonight, Lois," he told her, his leer quite close now.

"Circumstantial evidence," she muttered softly.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. Enough to hold you. Enough to get you fired."

"Perry wouldn't fire me," she stammered, trying hard to believe her own words. "Perry doesn't believe I've been stealing."

Tempus shrugged. "Mr. White has no choice in the matter. He has his own problems to deal with."

Lois swallowed. Then she found her backbone. "Well, do what you have to, Tempus, I'm innocent. I know it and you know it."

"I don't care." He lifted a finger and traced her jaw. "You could persuade me to care."

She pushed him away. "Don't touch me."

"I could make it all go away. Or I could call the coppers. Your choice," he drawled. "Either way, it doesn't matter to me."

"What do you want?" she snarled, her voice low.

"A date on Saturday night. That's all."

Lois stomped past him. "Call the police then. I'm not going out with you."

His voice stopped her in her tracks as she reached the doorway. "You won't be able to help your friends from jail. One little, itty bitty date and it all goes away: the stolen CD and the misappropriation of funds." Tempus moved closer to her, his voice murmuring, "Think about it, Lois. You would be able to keep your job. Mr. White, his job. Clark Kent, his job — well, at the normal rate. I couldn't let him get away scot-free, now could I? And I wouldn't have to fill out

paperwork. Win-win."

*No, Lois! Don't agree to it. Agreeing to the date is tantamount to admitting guilt. Don't do it. You thought Clark was angry about his missing byline...*

Lois's heart ached. She knew deep down Clark was a good man. An idiot when it came to women, but still a good man at heart. She couldn't believe he would do something so horrible as stealing from LexCo. Agreeing to the date would buy her time. It was only Monday. She would have until Saturday night to clear herself, Perry, and Clark. It wasn't a good option. Truthfully, both options sucked. But Tempus was right; she couldn't do anything from the inside of a jail cell.

*Blackmailers never stop after the first taste, Lois.*

She knew that. She had seen all the movies.

Taking a deep breath, Lois nodded once and then headed out to the newsstand to finish putting out her magazines. She bent down and picked up another pile of magazines off of her cart. When she stood back up Tempus was there, standing next to her again. She pushed her way past him and he grabbed her arm.

"I want to make sure we're clear," he told her.

"We're clear."

"So, I'll see you Saturday night then, beautiful," Tempus purred.

Lois gave him the barest of nods, jerking her arm away.

"It's a date then." He leaned over to kiss Lois's cheek with those scratchy whiskers.

Lois pushed him away, snarling, "Don't touch me!"

Tempus defied her by putting his finger under her chin and tilting her face so that she looked at him. "Be nice to me, Ms. Lane, and this will all go away nice and quiet. Fight me..."

Lois stepped away from Tempus and glanced up. It was an automatic reflex. Clark always seemed to be standing up on the third floor watching her recently. She had gotten used to gazing up to see him smiling down at her, loving her from a distance. Clark was there now. This time he seemed thunderous. All he was missing was long white hair, robes, and a staff, and he could double for Zeus.

*If Tempus connects you to Clark, he'll add a conspiracy charge to your rap sheet. If he finds out Clark is your boyfriend and gets wind of your date with the real big, brawny man in blue, would he link Clark to Superman? More could be lost than your freedom, Lois. Clark needs to stay free. What would they do to a man like him in jail?*

She had to protect Clark from that man, no matter the consequences. No matter the outcome. Superman was worth saving. Clark was worth saving.

"Supervisor to main cashier," came an overhead announcement, causing Lois to jump at the suddenness of it.

"I've got to go," Lois said, walking quickly away from the man and jogging up the escalator. When she reached the third floor, Clark was there to greet her. "What are you doing here?" she stammered, glancing over her shoulder and moving away from him.

"Obviously learning about the real you," Clark muttered, following her.

Lois's heart started to race faster than it had downstairs. "Clark, you don't... You can't be here."

He raised a brow. "I can't, can I?"

Lois moved down an aisle of books. "He can't see us together. It will only make matters worse."

Clark took her arm. "Make *what* worse, Lois?" he asked, his voice low.

She shook off his loose grip. "Trust me, Clark. Stay here."

*Trust you? He knows you agreed to a date with Tempus. Why should he trust you? He didn't even trust you when you went out with himself in the blue suit.*

Lois left Clark standing in History as she jogged to the end of the aisle and then back up the next one — Religion. She stopped almost directly opposite him and started straightening books, not paying attention to what she was doing. She needed to get Clark to leave before Tempus spotted him or worse, them together. "It isn't what it looks like, Clark," she murmured.

“It looks like you made a date with that guy,” Clark grumbled. “After telling me you’d *never* cheat on me.”

*He would bring that up!*

Lois’s eyes slammed into his over the bookcase. “Only a man who doesn’t trust me would believe that, Clark. I’m trying to protect you,” she muttered, glancing away.

“I can protect myself, Lois,” he responded gruffly. “Especially from a man like that.”

*Men! There is more to protect himself from than a fistfight. If he doesn’t leave, you could lose him forever.*

Lois stared into his eyes, pleading, “Please don’t, Clark. Trust me. For once in your whole life, trust me. It’s not what you think.”

A customer passed by and she went back to straightening books, pretending that Clark didn’t exist. Then she moved down to the far end of the aisle and whispered, knowing he could hear her, not caring that he knew she knew his secret. “We can’t talk here. Pick me up at the corner by the convenience store at 8:15. Please.”

He walked to the end of his aisle and leaned against the shelves looking directly at her. “What if I’m busy?”

*When Will Clark Get It Through His Thick Skull? You Can’t Be Seen Talking!*

Lois raised a brow at him as her eyes met his, then she scooted down the aisle. “If you’re busy, then you’re busy, Clark.”

*Gotcha. Superman rescues take priority over you. Got the message, loud and clear, big boy.*

She took a deep breath, trying not to let him see how with each word he was breaking her heart more. “But if you’re ‘busy’ because you don’t trust me and you think I’m lying to you and that I would ever want anyone other than you, then...” She swallowed, trying to keep the tears at bay. “... why don’t you break up with me now, so I know whether we’re in this together or I’m all alone.” Her voice wavered as she spoke.

Lois would not cry. Not now. Not here. Not anymore. This problem was bigger than them. Protecting Superman was bigger than their relationship. She knew that. She got that.

“In *what* together?” he asked again.

*Again with the questions! Listen for once! We’ll talk later, Clark.*

“I told you. I can’t talk about it here. He may be watching me. He must not see us together. It would only make things worse.” Lois allowed herself to glance over at him, trying to convey to him what was going on with her eyes.

Clark’s voice got firmer, deeper, almost sounding like Kal’s. “What’s going on, Lois?”

“Tonight, please, Clark. I’ve got to go talk to Perry,” she murmured, heading towards the break room. Then she stopped, knowing the answer to her question almost as it popped into her head. Glancing back at him, she asked, “Has Perry ever met Kal?”

Clark moved closer to her, but still kept an aisle of bookshelves between them.

*Finally, he’s getting it that this is dangerous business.*

“Lois, I’m not leaving you here while you’re afraid,” he said, avoiding her question entirely.

She sighed.

*So Perry knows. That will make things easier when you confront him.*

“I thought as much,” Lois replied. She took one last look at him, wondering if she would ever be able to be held and comforted in those arms again.

*Tell him not to worry. There are still hours until you get off work.*

“I’ll be fine, Clark. He wants something else from me,” she continued, answering his question.

*Not that Tempus will ever get it.* Her inner voice shivered with disgust.

“I was able to stall him until Saturday. Maybe by then...” She didn’t know what they could accomplish between now and then, so she walked off to the break room without even a backwards glance at him. She paused as she typed in the code to the break room door. Lois

spoke softly knowing he was still watching her and knowing he would still be able to hear her, even over the noise of the store. “Go. And keep Kal away, too. If he shows up, I’ll lose you both.” Then she opened the door and went inside.

“What in blue blazes...?” Perry stammered, meeting her halfway across the break room.

Lois didn’t answer him until they were back in his office with the door closed and she could face him privately. “You’re stealing from LexCo?”

Perry’s jaw dropped. “No! I’m not stealing.”

“Then why is Clark getting paid five times more than my hourly rate to work overnight once a week?” she asked, a brow raised and her arms crossed. “He couldn’t have done that on his own.” When the Chief didn’t answer right away, Lois rolled her eyes and sighed. “I know you know Kal.”

“Who?” He genuinely seemed baffled by this name.

Lois was beginning to lose her patience. “Superman.”

“Oh.”

When her boss didn’t elaborate, she said, “Clark told me. How did you meet him?”

“Clark?” Perry asked evasively.

“Super Clark,” Lois said between clenched teeth.

“Oh. You *do* know.” Perry pressed his lips together and sat down at his desk. “He saved me from being shot during a robbery a few years back.” He exhaled with relief like it was the first time he had ever spoken the words to anyone.

“Well?”

“Well what?” he snapped back.

“The money? Tell me why you’re stealing from LexCo,” she bellowed.

“Why don’t you say that a little louder, Mad Dog? I don’t think they heard you in Gotham City,” Perry replied softly.

“I’m putting my life on the line for you two, so I want some answers.”

“Who was that man who grabbed you downstairs?” he asked.

“Tempus. B. Gerald Tempus to be exact. An auditor from the corporate office.” She raised a brow and watched as Perry’s face went ashen.

“He told you about Clark’s paycheck?”

Lois nodded. “Now you tell me.”

“If he thinks we’re stealing funds, why did he tell you? Why didn’t he just come in and arrest us?” Perry asked. “Does he know about Clark?”

She rubbed a hand down her face as she dropped into a chair. “I don’t know. He’s blackmailing me. If I agree to date him, he’ll lose the paperwork on the extra funds.”

“Clark’s not going to like that,” her boss stated the obvious.

“Ya think?” She stared at him. “I need to know, Perry.”

The Chief sighed. “Clark needed the money, so we worked it out that he got paid fairly for his time.”

“Fairly?” Lois asked skeptically.

“He agreed to work at super speed one night a week shelving books and doing odd jobs, like putting up your shelves, and I agreed to pay him what it would cost if I hired regular people to do the same work,” Perry explained.

“So what you are saying is that at super speed Clark can accomplish in eight hours what I can in forty?” she clarified.

“No, more like two hundred average employee hours, but Clark wouldn’t take more.” Perry let a small smile slip onto his face. “An average employee like maybe a Ralph or a Claude or a Sophie. You’re not an ordinary employee, Lois. You’re extraordinary. Not very respectful, but still extraordinary.”

“Don’t try and butter me up,” Lois rebuked him with a sneer. “And you and Clark justified this to yourselves by calling it ‘fair pay’?”

Perry shrugged. “From a certain point of view...”

“From a certain point of view? What is this, ‘Return of the Jedi’? This is real life, Perry.” She exhaled in aggravation.

*At least Clark wasn't trying to steal money from LexCo. He was using his abilities to do a job faster. If he couldn't slow down time to give him more opportunities to do more jobs...*

"We've got to do something about this," Lois told her boss.

"Because unless you and Clark want to go to LexCo and tell them why this one employee has honestly earned a week's paycheck for one night's work, you're still in a jam. I'm doubting one date with Tempus is going to solve all our problems. And, personally, that's one date too many for me." Lois stood up. "We have until Saturday night to come up with solution." She walked to the door.

"So, Clark tells me you got a Superman exclusive," said Perry casually.

Lois froze, closed her eyes and sighed. "Clark and I wrote up a piece about Kal..." She shook her head.

*You've got to stop referring to his super side as Kal. Nobody else knows that name and one of these days you're going to say it when you shouldn't.*

"...Superman, flying me down to Costa Rica, as an interview. I wrote it for the *Smallville Post*. It got picked up by the *Wichita Eagle* and also the *LA Times*."

"You wrote it or Clark and you wrote it?" he inquired.

Lois winced. "Clark and I. But his byline is missing."

"Missing? Or omitted?"

She turned around, her hands clenched. "Okay. Fine, I admit it. I thought he ditched me last night and that really ticked me off, so I didn't tell my editor that he wrote the piece with me when I phoned it in."

"Ouch!" Perry shook his head. "You know being a reporter has always been his dream."

Lois looked down at her shoes, chagrined, and murmured, "I know." Then she lifted her gaze at her boss. "I did call my editor and correct the mistake this morning. How in the hell was I supposed to know my article had been picked up for the morning edition by some major newspapers?" She pointed at Perry. "And, you know, it's all his fault. If he had just told me that he was you-know-who and that he had gone off to fight fires in Suicide Slum, I'd have included his name last night."

Perry looked skeptical. "His fault?"

Lois stood up straighter. "Yes, I'm sticking with that analysis of the situation." She nodded.

"And it's never going to happen again?"

"No." She pouted with a slight roll to her eyes. "No, I won't do it again." Then she waved the idea out of the air. "Like Clark and I would write anything else together again. It was a one-shot deal." A wistful smile danced onto her face. "I did enjoy shooting ideas and lines back and forth. It was nice. Fun. Cozy."

*Cozy?*

Lois hit herself on the forehead. "That's why other-dimensional me married Clark. He was her writing partner."

Perry raised a brow. "Writing partner?"

"Tempus, that guy from the future I told you about, said that in his dimension I was a hard-nosed investigative reporter who married her colleague who just happened to be Superman." She flipped up her hands. "Who knew?"

His jaw dropped. "Lois, didn't you just say the name of the man from LexCo was named Tempus as well?"

"Apparently, I'm stalked by all incarnations of Tempus. The one from LexCo is from *this* dimension. I thought he was the other guy at first too, but he had no recollection of proposing to me or telling me about my 'big, brawny and blue wearing' husband-to-be." She shrugged.

"You told that guy from LexCo that you're engaged to Superman?" Perry spoke slowly and in disbelief.

"No," Lois retorted. "I told him I had a big, brawny boyfriend who looks good in blue." She grinned faux-innocently.

*Like Tempus would never connect the dots.*

Perry grimaced. "Why? Why — in the King's name — would you

do that, Lois?"

"Well, I thought he was the other guy back to razz me some more. How in the hell was I supposed to know he was a different Tempus, one from our dimension?" she explained.

Her boss nodded. "That's why you pulled his beard. I wondered about that."

Lois took a step back, in shock. "Have you been spying on me, Chief?"

Perry pointed to the security monitors behind her.

"Oh." Lois pointed back over her shoulder with her thumb. "Well, I'm going to head back to work while I still have a job."

"So, am I going to hear wedding bells soon, now that you and Clark have everything out in the open?" he asked with a wink and smile.

"Yeah. No. Clark still hasn't told me his secret. And, personally, I'm getting sick of faking that I don't know. We don't ever seem to do anything other than fight and make out. It just doesn't seem like a strong basis for a relationship."

"Fiery," said Perry.

Lois just shrugged.

*Could be if you could ever get him past first base.*

"What secret do you know that he hasn't told you?" her boss inquired.

"That he's Superman, of course. He's under this delusion that I can't..."

"He *hasn't* told you?" Perry repeated back to her.

"No. Why do you think we keep fighting?"

*Not for the make-up sex, that's for sure.*

"Lois, you told me that Clark told you that I knew he was Superman." Perry glared at her.

"And he did."

"How exactly did Clark do that if he thinks you don't know he's Superman?" the Chief asked incredulously.

"Because when I asked Clark if you knew Superman, he completely avoided the question. He says he doesn't lie and since he always takes everything to the nth degree, he must mean it. So, sometimes with Clark, you have to read between the lines to know what he's actually saying." Lois pressed her lips together in annoyance.

"You got me to admit that I know he's Superman on a hunch? And you scooped every other reporter in the world with a one-on-one interview with Superman?" Perry replied in wonder, with respect. "You *are* an investigative reporter at heart, Lois. I could use someone like you to write for *The Planet*."

*The Planet? What Planet?*

"Unless you want stories submitted from a jail cell, we need to find a way out of this mess. By the way, the thief struck again," she said, placing her hand on the doorknob.

"The thief? The CD thief? Where are the wrappers?" Perry asked.

"Tempus took them. He thinks I'm the thief. It's just his word against mine," she responded, shoulders slumped. She took a deep breath and stood up straighter. "I've got work to do." She opened the door and left Perry's office.

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### Monday — Night

Clark sighed as he turned the key of the truck and pointed it in the direction of the bookstore. A part of him wondered what he was doing. Lois had told Clark to trust her and he was having difficulty doing so. Not only had she cut him out of his first byline, she had agreed to go out with another man. But evidently the latter action had taken place under duress. Lois was worried about *Clark*. That bearded man had somehow threatened him.

*And Kal?*

Something was off about that whole conversation over the bookcases. A couple of times Lois had spoken so softly that Clark *had* to use his super hearing. Had she realized he could still hear her? Or had she thought she was still speaking loud enough for him to hear

her?

*She knows, Kent. She knows you're Kal-El.*

But Lois referred to Superman, not once but twice, as Kal. As someone other than himself.

*Wouldn't it be easier if she knew without you having to tell her? No more hiding from her. No more secrets. No more holding so tightly onto the ropes of your control, burning your hands every time they slipped. You would be free to be yourself around her.*

That did sound nice. If she still wanted to have a relationship with him, that is. Clark had felt like Lois had dumped him when she had told him to 'grow a pair'. And then she had asked for her keys back. He knew he should have returned her keys when he left for work that morning — left them on the dresser or something — but he had wanted a plausible excuse to see her again.

*Passive-aggressive much there, Kent?*

When Lois had accused him of telling her he loved her without actually *demonstrating* to her how he loved her, Clark had realized she was right. He kept telling himself that he loved her — not to mention, kept trying to tell her — but his actions spoke differently than those words. She was right about that. He needed to work more on that if he didn't want their relationship to implode entirely.

Maybe they had gotten too close too quickly. But how could he backpedal on his love when he had finally found the one person he wanted to spend the rest of his life with? Personally, he was ready for fast forward.

Perhaps he had no right to be angry at her for accepting a date with another man. But then again, when Clark told her that he might be 'too busy' to pick her up, Lois told him — in her roundabout way of speaking — that if he didn't *want* to pick her up, then he might as well break up with her. So, she still thought of them as a couple. The shattered remains of a couple perhaps, but still a couple.

The fact of the matter was, what Clark really wanted to do — if he lived in an ideal world, which he didn't — was to swoop down and take Lois home in his arms. He wanted to tell her that he *was* Kal-El. Or — since he would be in the Superman suit — tell her that Kal-El was Clark Kent. He would then apologize for being such a blockhead, beg for her forgiveness, and spend the night making up.

Clark sighed again. But he didn't live in a perfect world. Superman had already paid Lois so much attention that he had actually gotten a question about her after putting out a fire from a car accident. He had been able to ignore the inquiry with the excuse of taking someone to the hospital. What if someone asked him again about Lois? Would he be able to fly off in avoidance? What could he say and still be truthful? "Lois and I are just friends?" That didn't really sit in the truth category. "Lois Lane is dating Clark Kent?" That was true, he hoped. The real truth would be "Lois Lane is in a hugely complicated, often confusing, relationship with his alter-ego Clark Kent."

*No, obviously not that one, Kent.*

Lastly, Clark wouldn't spend the night making love with Lois. Even though he wanted to do nothing more, because — frankly — the thought terrified him.

*Lois is going to leave you, Kent. Leave you for that man Tempus told her about.*

And to make love to her and then have her leave him for that someone else. Clark didn't know if he could ever recover from that.

*Yeah. It would be better **not** to be intimate with her and then lose her; his conscience stated, every word dripping with sarcasm. Because then you would have all those fond memories of **not** making love to look back upon.*

Clark felt like hitting the steering wheel in frustration but resisted. He really could not afford the repair bill.

Trying to get his mind off dwelling on Lois, Clark turned on the radio. The dedications to Superman had finally ended.

*Too bad. It had been nice to hear from the fans.*

Clark tried to focus on the advertisements, so his mind wouldn't drift back to thinking about the possibility that Lois knew he was Superman and had been taunting him.

*Too late.*

He turned the corner by the bookstore as music started playing again. *Did You Ever Have To Make Up Your Mind?* by the Loving Spoonful.

"Where is she?" Clark muttered. Here was the corner and she wasn't on it. He glanced at his watch: 8:25 P.M.

*Oh, crap! You're late!*

Clark hadn't meant to be late. Actually he was usually conscientious about being on time, on being early in fact. He turned the corner and drove down the street, looking for her. His headlights lit up someone sitting hunched at the bus stop. Clark's heart ached at seeing Lois so forlorn. He pulled the truck up next to the bus stop, cranked down the passenger window and called out to her, "I'm sorry I'm late."

When Lois flashed her eyes at him, he expected the usual expression of anger but it wasn't there. Relief flooded her countenance and, for some reason, that emotion worried him more than her anger.

"Clark," she said nothing else as she stood up and walked to the truck, getting in. They were quiet for a few minutes, listening to the music, before she said, "I don't deserve you."

*So true. So very true. She deserves someone much better.*

"I'm sorry, Miss. But I must have picked up the wrong woman. I was supposed to meet Lois Lane and though you look just like her..." Clark replied with more levity than he felt.

Then the strangest thing happened, Lois smiled warmly at him and kissed his cheek. "You're right, Clark. *I do* deserve you."

*Did Lois just admit that you were right and she was wrong?*

"I owe you an apology. More than one apology honestly," she continued.

*Oh, my God! This isn't Lois Lane. It's a clone!*

"I was really cruel to you this morning, Clark. I said some hurtful things I wish I could take back."

*Zombies! Yes, zombies must have eaten her mind, leaving her with mush between her ears.*

She sighed. "And the truth is I did put your name on the Superman article. Only I didn't do it until today. By that time it was already too late. I'm sorry."

*Her passion is gone. It's like you blew out her fire with your super cooling breath and there is nothing left but this empty shell.*

Clark glanced over at Lois and graced her with a tender smile. Then he reached over and squeezed her hand.

"The truth of the matter is that you made me mad last night and I did it on purpose," she said, her pilot light starting to flicker again. "If you had just told me that Kal needed you to help with those fires in Suicide Slum." She glared at him. "Instead you just left me there wondering what the world had happened to you, why you weren't coming back, and what I had done to anger you." She was practically hollering at him now.

*There is the woman you love with all her spit and fire. She isn't a clone and wasn't attacked by zombies. Thank goodness.*

"Well, aren't you going to say anything?" she finally snapped.

Clark smiled at her with amusement, knowing he was going to regret the words before he even spoke them, but he just couldn't resist. "I thought you were up to here with my apologies."

Lois screamed in frustration and Clark laughed quietly to himself.

They didn't speak for a few minutes as he let her simmer in her anger. Finally, she said, softer than he expected, "Is that true? Is that how I make you feel?"

"What?" he asked, having no idea to what she was referring.

Lois nodded to the radio. *When A Man Loves A Woman* sung by Percy Sledge was playing.

*Oh, yeah, Kent. That's your anthem.*

He smiled sheepishly at her. "Sometimes."

*Like every second of every day since you first saw her roll her eyes at Cat in Receiving.*

"Oh, yeah. Well, you make me feel like that sometimes, too," she said sharply, turning to look out her window.

Clark's heart skipped a beat, then two.

*Did Lois just tell you that she loves you? Tell her! Tell her right now that you're Kal-El. That you are Superman.*

"I'm sorry, Lois, for last night and this morning. I was cruel and thoughtless and..." His voice faded. She didn't want his apologies. And he was tired of always begging for forgiveness.

*Tell her.*

"Lois, there's something..." Clark pressed his lips together.

*No. You can't tell her until she tells you about that man at the store.*

"Who was that bearded man?"

Lois swallowed and turned her overcast eyes back to him, making him miss her usual sunshine. "Ah, yes, him." She didn't appear anxious to speak about him.

"Please, Lois, tell me."

"Tempus."

Clark pulled the truck off to the side of the street and turned off the radio, so he could concentrate fully on her. "The man from the future?"

*Yes, that was why he looked so familiar.*

Lois shook her head. "No. I thought so at first as well, but the beard threw me." She reached over and took his hand. "He's from the corporate office and is investigating you for misappropriation of LexCo funds."

Clark's jaw dropped. "Me? What? Never!"

Lois squeezed his hand, reassuringly. "Your paycheck is five times higher than it should be, Clark."

His mouth went dry.

*Oh, God! You're done for, Kent.*

"I'm not..." he stammered unable to give the details to clear himself.

Lois smiled at him tenderly. "I know. Perry explained that Kal comes in during your shift and shelves books at super speed. He's getting paid — through you — for working forty hours, because at super speed it's like five people coming to shelve for eight hours."

"Truthfully, Lois, there's something..."

She held up a finger. "This Tempus guy — the auditor from LexCo — promised to lose the paperwork from the investigation into you and Perry, if I went out with him."

"No!" Clark shouted. "Absolutely not, Lois. I won't let you do this."

Lois raised a brow. "Won't let me?"

"That's right. I won't let you, Lois, do this for me," Clark replied sternly.

Lois cupped his jaw in her hand and gently placed a kiss on his lips, effectively erasing part of his anger. "I'm not doing this for you, Clark. If he finds out that we're dating then I could be roped into a conspiracy charge."

"Conspiracy for what? Dating me? You weren't involved in this deal Perry and I made."

"True. But I know about it now, and if I don't report it — which I won't — I'm a conspirator. Also, Tempus threatened to have me arrested for stealing CDs."

Clark's anger was back. "You're no thief."

"He walked into my Receiving room right after I discovered more CD wrappers and accused me of stealing," she murmured.

"There's no way that evidence would result in a conviction," he reassured her.

"I know, but it's still his word against mine. He's a LexCo auditor. I'm some nobody from Smallville, Kansas. It's enough to put me in jail. And if I'm in jail there is no way for me to help you and Perry and Kal," she explained.

*No matter how she excuses her actions, Kent, she's still doing this to save your butt.*

"Lois, there's something you should know about Kal and me. We're..."

"No!" She unbuckled her seatbelt and pressed her lips to his,

cutting off his confession.

The passion of her kiss made it impossible for him to do anything but deepen it.

"Don't tell me," she murmured.

"You have been begging me to trust you, Lois. Please, let me show you how much I trust you by telling you..."

Lois kissed him again.

A grin of amusement came to his lips when she once again let him breathe. "What are you doing?"

"You were right not to trust me, Clark," Lois informed him. "I am totally untrustworthy."

Clark leaned back and crossed his arms thoughtfully. "Are you now?"

"Yep."

"Do you want to illuminate for me how you are untrustworthy?" he asked.

Lois bit her bottom lip and took a deep breath. "I told Tempus — this LexCo Tempus — that my boyfriend was 'big, brawny, and looks good in blue'."

Clark's teeth ground together. "You told someone who works at LexCo that you were dating Superman?" He spoke slowly, enunciating each word.

"No! You're big and brawny and look good in blue, too." She grinned at him with faux innocence. "I just realized later that — in light of the article in the *LA Times* — you could be easily confused with Superman."

"Lo-is!"

"I thought he was that other Tempus," she said in a rush. "You know the one from the future, who knows all about me and who I've dated. By the time I realized that he wasn't, the damage was done." Her eyes looked at him apologetically. "See, absolutely untrustworthy. So don't tell me any of your secrets."

Clark wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her next to him. "Just one?"

"No!" Lois gasped, covering her ears and humming loudly to herself.

His eyes expressed the laughter he felt bubbling inside of him as he pressed his lips to hers. "I love you, Lois Lane. Blabbermouth or not."

\*\*\*

### Tuesday

Lois slammed down the phone. "Oooh! That woman!" If she never had to talk to Mrs. Cox again, it would still be too soon. "I'll give him the message," she quoted the woman in a nasally tone and added a sneer to boot.

*I just bet she will,* agreed her inner voice with sarcasm.

Lois rubbed her temples. She felt as if she had been on the phone all day. First, she had called the insurance company to report the break-in. At least her father had insisted that she get renter's insurance in the 'big city.' Eventually she would get reimbursed so she could get a new computer, TV, and VCR. Then she phoned her parents to tell them about the break-in.

*Like you really wanted to make that phone call.*

Then an hour of her mother trying to convince Lois to move back home.

*Ah, no thanks, Mom.*

To the *LA Times* and the *Wichita Eagle* to have them post a correction to her article by adding Clark's byline. She had been ever so tempted to drag the *LA Times* editor through the wringer for his "Date with Superman" headline, but resisted. It was too early in her life to start burning bridges. Then to Terry in Smallville again to have him reconfirm her addition of Clark's byline to the other papers.

Next up was a call to the Metropolis PD to find out that no progress had been made with the 'investigation' into her burglary. She wondered if her old tennis partner's dad, Louie, could help. Angela had always said her dad knew guys who knew guys.

Lastly, to Mr. Luthor's office. Yes, that was a long shot. But Lois

figured since she had less than a week, long shots were the way to go. If she told the reclusive billionaire CEO that he had an employee who was trying to blackmail her for those ludicrous theft charges — she wasn't planning on mentioning Clark or Perry — then maybe Tempus would be fired for sexual harassment or employee misconduct before their Saturday 'date'.

She hoped Clark and Perry were working on their own contingency plans. But as she had the day off and hadn't seen Clark since he dropped her off outside her apartment building the night before, she had no idea what those plans might be.

Once again Clark had gotten that distracted expression on his face as he pulled the truck up outside her apartment building the night before. It was the same one he had gotten before his disappearing act on Sunday night and Lois realized he had heard someone who needed his help. He had gazed at her apologetically and tried to explain.

She had only let him get out Kal's name before she kissed him quickly and bid him a friendly, "See you later." He had breathed a sigh of relief and had driven off.

Lois hadn't expected him to take her words so literally, though. A knock on her door woke her up late in the night. Without her TV she had had trouble zoning out to fall asleep. She had glanced at the microwave clock in the kitchen — 1:36 A.M.

*Who in the hell could that be at this hour?*

"Who's there?" she had called nervously, hoping it wasn't the burglars.

*Right. Because burglars always knock first.*

"Lois?" a soft voice inquired.

Lois had looked through her peephole and saw Superman, not Clark. Her heart had plummeted.

*Why? Oh, why hadn't you let him share his secret with you? Until he does, you're not allowed to even kiss this side of him.*

"Clark asked me to stop by to make sure you were okay," he had said when she had opened the door. He had looked exhausted. Dark circles under his eyes had been more from sadness than sleep deprivation or physical exertion. Dust in his hair had aged his appearance, making him seem older than his mere twenty-eight years.

"What have you been up to, Kal?" she had asked, backing up. This time he had allowed himself to come inside.

His eyes had spotted her bed made up for the night, and obviously used, and he had turned to leave. "It's late, Lois. I'm sorry. I should..."

"Sit!" Lois had insisted, shutting her door and pointing to her dining room table. She had known he would never sit on her bed. She had gone into the kitchen and gotten him a glass of water, wishing she had something better, like juice or wine or anything. "Or would you like coffee?"

"This is wonderful, Lois. Thank you." He had taken a sip of the water and then had stared at the glass.

Lois had sat down next to him and took hold of his hand. "Do you want to talk about it?"

He had shifted his gaze and did not even try to mask the love in his eyes.

She had wondered if he had realized what he was doing by giving her that obvious 'Clark' expression.

"Earthquake. China."

Lois had pulled him into her arms and just held him as he had rambled.

"There was so much death. I mean, I did save a lot of people. But so many..." He shook his head. "Even if I had come during the quake, I don't know what I could have done. Calm the Earth? Maybe? Hold it down. Perhaps? I'll have to try that sometime."

"Anyone ever tell you that you're pretty super, Kal?" she had murmured.

He had actually chuckled at her pathetic joke. "Once or twice."

"Fighting Mother Nature takes a bunch of courage," she whispered. "And you won't always win. But you need to remember that there are a lot of people alive tonight because of you."

Lois hadn't known how long they had sat like this, him in her

arms, before Kal had reluctantly pulled back. "I should go." He had stared at her, longing in his eyes. They both knew she knew the truth but without him actually saying the words, this façade, this wall between his alter ego and her remained. "Thank you for the water," he had finally said. They had both known that wasn't actually for what he was thanking her. "I just... I'm glad you're okay."

Lois walked him to the door. "Tell Clark I'll see him tomorrow."

Kal's face had brightened at these words. "At the store?"

"No. Here. I've got the day off."

"Here?" he had repeated and she had actually seen his eyes dart to her bed, before resting on her face. "He would like that. You're all he thinks about." Then he opened his eyes wide with a light roll of annoyance. "You're all he talks about." Kal had then opened the door.

"Is that so?" she inquired, leaning against the doorframe. "Could you give him something for me?" And then without waiting for his answer she had kissed his cheek.

Kal had pressed his lips together trying to seem serious and intense, but the glow of happiness had shown in his eyes. "I'd rather not."

Inside Lois's head had flashed the image of Superman kissing Clark's cheek and she had tried hard not to laugh. "Okay, you keep that one. At least I didn't kiss you on the lips."

"Thank goodness," he had muttered with relief.

Lois had let the laughter escape and caressed his cheek for a moment. "Goodnight, Superman."

"Goodnight, Lois," Kal had said with one last sigh. "Lock up."

It took all of her willpower *not* to pull him back into her apartment for an earth-shattering kiss. But she had made her bed and she would be sleeping in it, alone. Plus she was pretty sure he wasn't carrying condoms in that suit. At least, he better not. And her supply had been destroyed by the repulsive burglars.

*You could have just made out with him for a while,* her inner voice suggested.

After Lois had watched him fly off, she had locked her door and gone back to bed. Sleep, however, eluded her as she argued with herself about why she hadn't let Clark tell her his secret.

Lois knew the truth and he trusted her enough to share his deepest secret with her. At the moment, that was enough. It scared her how quickly she had fallen for Clark Kent. It frightened her how easily she had given in to her fate to love this 'super' man. She truthfully wanted nothing more to have Mr. Buns of Steel in her bed and to have him stay the night, but she knew once she did, there would be no turning back. Kal had told her as much on the beach.

If Lois allowed Clark to tell her his secret, she would effectively be tearing down this wall between them. Not having any secrets, although wonderful, would lead to making love. And she had promised Kal she wouldn't make love to Clark unless she loved him. And if she agreed that she loved him in this most intimate way, what would be stopping her from marrying him and spending her life with him, thereby fulfilling alternate-Tempus's prophecy? Did she really want *that* man in control of her future? Making her decisions about her life?

True, making love or even admitting love to a man did not mean a lifetime commitment in this day and age. Lois knew that. But Clark wasn't an average, everyday man. He had already admitted to her that he was still a virgin. She assumed this was because he was different and it was difficult for him to open up emotionally and, therefore, physically with another. She had realized the night before that, for Clark, agreeing to make love to him was tantamount to accepting a marriage proposal. And Kal had already told her that Clark wanted to spend his life with her.

While Lois admitted to herself that she did indeed feel something strong for Clark, she wasn't quite sure it was love — a lifetime love. She had never really been in love before, so she wasn't quite sure if it was love that she was feeling. She just knew Clark made her feel like no other man ever had.

And since Clark's kisses drove her wild with desire, she could just imagine what actually making love to the man would do to her. Would

she become completely addicted to him? Would she give up everything to be with such a man? Was that what she really wanted? To lose herself in a relationship? To get married and have kids? At twenty-six?

There was one last reason she no longer wanted Clark to tell her that he was Superman: the deniability factor. At this moment she was 99% sure Clark was Kal-El. If he told her the truth, actually spoke the words to her, then that last one percent would be gone and she was not someone who should be trusted with such a secret. She was a reporter. What had she done with their romantic trip to the beach? Front page news!

And secondly, Lois had practically told this dimension's Tempus that her boyfriend was Superman. *Out on the sales floor!* Even if modern Tempus didn't catch her clues, someone else could have overheard them talking and Clark's secret would be out. And she doubted Clark would be all that pleased with those results, especially since it had been like pulling a crocodile's tooth to get him to admit it to her.

So Lois had decided not to move her physical relationship with Clark forward. She just wanted to revel in his kisses — as she couldn't deny herself *that* pleasure. She would continue pretending that Clark and Kal were best friends, or maybe twins, until she finally made a decision about where their relationship was headed. Or at least until they got out from under LexCo Tempus's thumb.

Lois had stayed home for most of the day, making those phone calls, except for the one trip she made out to her bank to withdraw enough money to cover her everyday expenses until the next payday. Everyday expenses like laundry.

She picked up her laundry basket and keys. She made sure her apartment door was locked at all times now. No more break-ins of opportunity.

Lois was halfway across the courtyard to the main building's laundry room when Ralph and another equally slimy man exited the main building heading for her.

"Lois!" Ralph called to her excitedly.

*Great. Just what this day needed!*

"Ralph," she acknowledged him as she continued on.

"We were just coming to see you," he announced, causing her to stop.

"Why?" Lois asked carefully as she turned around.

Ralph's buddy took an inordinate amount of interest in her darks and she pulled the basket away. "This is my friend, Leo. He's been begging me to introduce you," Ralph sputtered.

"Leo Nunk," the tall, grey haired man said, holding out his hand.

Lois used the excuse that her hands were full not to shake it. "Lois Lane," she said hesitantly. The she shifted her gaze to Ralph's. "Begging, huh? Why would you want to meet me?"

*It wouldn't surprise me if money had been exchanged in this deal.*

"I would like to interview you," Leo replied with a leering smile.

"Why me?" she said, staring coldly at the man.

*He better not say anything about...*

"You're Superman's girlfriend," he responded, effectively side-swiping her with this information.

*That.*

"What?!" she gasped, gazing at Ralph's delighted grin. "No, I'm not. Ralph, you know better than that. Tell your moron friend here I'm dating Clark." She turned on her heel and started marching to the laundry room.

"Me thinks she protests too much," Leo said excitedly.

She turned back, balanced her laundry basket on her hip, and pointed a finger at him. "Which paper are you with?"

"*National Inquisitor*," he said proudly.

"Figures," Lois muttered. "Superman and I are just friends.

There's my quote. Now, get out of my building before I call the super to have you thrown out."

"The 'Super' as in Man?" drooled the tabloid reporter. Ralph, on the other hand, appeared close to wetting himself.

"Tempting, but no," she retorted. "I mean my building manager."

"You got any of Superman's shorts in your basket, Ms. Lane?" Leo asked, trying to get another peek inside.

"Out!" Lois hollered at him, pointing to the exit.

Ralph tugged on Nunk's sleeve. "Let's go, Leo."

Leo smirked at her. "This isn't the last you'll see of me."

"Lovely," she mumbled, stomping though the door to the laundry room.

Lois threw open a washer and shoved her clothes inside. Then she dumped a too-large scoop of detergent onto the clothes. She slammed down the lid and promptly dropped her handful of quarters onto the floor.

"Great," she grumbled and started crawling around on the floor to find them. She glanced up as a pair of black tennis shoes stopped next to her.

"Can I help?" Clark's voice inquired.

"No, I've almost got them... Damn, one of them rolled under the washer."

Suddenly the washing machine tilted back and exposed her quarter. Without looking at him, Lois whispered, "Don't, Clark, please."

"Lois, look at me," he insisted.

She glanced up and saw that he was tilting the washing machine back by pushing it with his hip, like a human would. Lois grabbed the coin and stood up. "Thanks," she snapped.

Clark set down the washing machine with a heavy thud. She pushed the quarters into the machine, twisted the dial to the correct setting, and then pressed the 'start' button.

"Are you mad at me?" he asked softly.

"No!" Lois growled.

Clark raised a brow.

She sighed and wrapped her arms around him. "Sorry. Ralph just showed up with a tabloid reporter pal of his, begging for an interview with Superman's girlfriend."

He sighed. "I was afraid that might happen."

Lois sat down on her washing machine and stared at him. "Want to elaborate on that, cowboy?"

Clark lowered his voice and stepped closer to her, so that even if someone had bugged the laundry room they wouldn't be able to hear him over the machines. "Kal has been getting questions about you."

"Did he tell anyone about the kiss I gave him to give to you?" she inquired.

A smile slipped onto his lips. "He never passed it on. Mind if I get it straight from the source?"

Lois wrapped her legs around him as her arms encircled his neck and she pressed the kiss that had been burning inside her since his middle-of-the-night visit the night before.

"Wow!" he announced when she finally let him go. "I'm glad he didn't pass that one on."

Lois laughed.

"Actually..." Clark pulled her against his chest again, his mouth next to her ear. "If you had kissed him like that last night, I doubt he would have left."

She swallowed and then plowed ahead. She needed to let him know about her decision. "I've been thinking and you're right. It's too soon for us to become intimate."

Lois could tell that he was trying to hide his disappointment from her, but he couldn't erase the sadness from his eyes.

*What? Had he changed his mind? Now? Now, he changes his mind?*

"Oh?" Clark gulped.

She kissed those delicious lips of his again and then leaned over his shoulder, so she could whisper in his ear. "I still love you, Clark, but I want to make sure it's the right kind of love before we... you know."

Elation spread over his face. "You love me?"

"I thought you knew that," she said, surprised. Hadn't she told

him?

*Not in so many words.*

“Always nice to hear, though,” he murmured, kissing her again.

“How about we move this conversation to your apartment, Lois?”

“Can’t. I’m not going to leave my clothes available for any thief or tabloid reporter to steal them. The jerk actually asked if I was washing Superman’s shorts.” She rolled her eyes.

Clark glanced around. “You were just going to sit here? No magazine? No book?”

Lois sighed. “The decision was kind of made for me on the way to the laundry room.”

He nodded with understanding.

“Oh, wait. I have something for you.” Lois reached into her jeans pocket and pulled out her keys. “I had the super make me an extra set.” She pulled off the extra keys and set them into the palm of his hand. “So, you can check on me anytime you want. I want you to know that I trust you.”

“I don’t deserve you.” Clark pressed his lips against hers. Then he placed the keys back in her hand. “Thank you, but I shouldn’t have these.”

A pout formed on her mouth. “No?”

He nodded. “No.”

She sighed. “Okay.” Lois slowly licked her lips and he pulled her into another embrace. While he was otherwise distracted, she slipped her hand into his pocket and deposited her keys.

Clark froze and then cleared his throat. “Whatcha doing?”

*Guess you can’t get away from sticking your hand down his jeans pocket without him noticing.*

Lois placed an innocent expression on her face. “Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

She gently kissed his lips and then whispered into his ear, “In case you want to check on me without waking me up.”

Clark winced, resting his head against hers. “Oh, sorry. He did wake you up. Oh, Lois, you should have said something.”

Lois placed a hand on his chest. “It was okay, Clark, really. I’m glad he came.” She let a sheepish smile slip onto her lips. “Anyway, he reminds me of you.”

He looked deeply into her eyes. “Lois, please. We need to talk about this. Kal and I are...”

“No,” she interrupted.

“Will you stop doing that?” Clark groaned, exasperated.

A silly grin appeared on her face. “No,” she said, shrugging.

*He can love you or leave you. This is who you are.*

“Why won’t you let me tell you the truth?” he asked quietly, cautiously.

Lois looked down. “Because I need to be able to deny it. When people ask me... I need to be able to look them in the eye and honestly tell them ‘no’. Do you understand?” At these last words she raised her gaze to his.

Clark laced her fingers in his and nodded. “How come you always say the right thing?”

She laughed. “Oh, you definitely don’t know me.”

His expression brightened at her laughter. “Hey, how about I make us... darn.”

“Darn? Like socks? No thanks.” Her laughter became giggling.

He shook his head. “I was going to offer to make dinner, but...”

“Oh, not again. Now? Is he calling you now?” Lois hated the whine that was coming out of her mouth. “Can’t we just have one conversation that isn’t interrupted?” She called up to the ceiling.

“No,” Clark stated, before squeezing his lips together. “It isn’t that, Lois. Tonight I promised my folks I would help them prep for the party on Friday.”

“Oh,” she murmured.

*Feeling bad enough now, Lois?*

“I’m sorry, Clark. I was just hoping for some us time.” Lois ran her fingers over his chest. “Come by later? We can snuggle and watch...”

*What? The wall?*

“Just snuggle.” She glanced up into his eyes. “Maybe talk.”

Clark’s lips curled up into a merry little smile. “Snuggling with the possibility of talking? Hmm. Sounds like heaven.” He pressed his lips to hers in what she was sure was supposed to be a quick goodbye kiss, but she deepened it, pulling him closer and wrapping her legs around him again.

Suddenly the washing machine went to the next cycle and started to vibrate. Lois gasped, her breath becoming ragged. “You’d better go, Clark.”

“I can’t,” he murmured, kissing her again.

Lois moaned. “Oh, yes, Clark. You definitely need to go. Now!”

“I can’t, Lois, unless I take you with me.”

*He should take you, Lois. Take you anywhere he wants to go. Fly you to the moon, just take you with him.*

Clark stepped back and Lois realized she was still glued to him, but the exotic vibration stopped as soon as he had removed her from the washing machine.

She blushed and slid down his body. Lois licked her lips and placed a gentle kiss on his lips. “I wish I could say I’m sorry,” she whispered, somewhat breathlessly. “But I’m not.”

He looked at her with a fire in his eyes that had nothing to do with his heat vision. “I’ll be back later to finish that kiss.” Clark took a step away from her and then rushed back and picked her up again, embracing her again with yet another kiss.

In what felt like moments later, Lois was sitting on the washing machine in the laundry room alone. Out of breath, she kicked herself for promising take things slow.

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Wednesday Morning — Very Early

Clark landed just outside of Lois’s apartment door and listened. Her breathing was slow and regular. She was asleep. X-raying through her door, he could see her sleeping on her futon bed.

*What are you doing here, Flyboy? It’s the middle of the night. She doesn’t want you to wake her up. That’s why she gave you... No! Don’t even think of going in... Kent!*

Clark reached behind himself and under his cape and withdrew the keys she had given to him. He stared at them in his palm. She had practically told him it was okay for him to visit her in the middle of the night to check on her.

*You have already checked on her with your x-ray vision. Go home!*

Clark sighed. He really didn’t want to go home. He wanted... no, needed to hold Lois. Or, more accurately, he needed her to hold him like she had the night before.

*This is how this whole mess started, Kent, with you entering her apartment uninvited.*

His heart ached and the only thing that soothed that ache of failure was Lois. No matter how fast he was or how strong he was, people were still going to die. He was beginning to think this whole Superman persona was a mistake. What good was he doing? Really?

*People are alive because of you, Kent. Lois told you that.*

Yes, but there were so many others he couldn’t save. Deciding between the gang fight and mugging. The home invasion and the robbery. The drowning victim and the one in the burning house. Someone would always lose out.

*Tell yourself the truth, Kent. That’s not the real reason you’re here in the middle of the night, is it?*

No, Clark disagreed with his conscience. He hadn’t come to make love to Lois. Actually, he was relieved when she told him that she wasn’t ready to make love to him, despite loving him.

At first, he thought Lois was telling him that she didn’t love him at all when he had been so sure she had told him — in her roundabout way — that she did. But when Lois explained it to him in the laundry room that she didn’t want to lie to people when she told them she wasn’t dating Superman, Clark had decided that was probably a good idea. And until he told her himself, she would have enough wiggle room to still stay within the truth. Personally, at the moment he would

be happy to just snuggle with Lois. An all-night cuddle, but a snuggle nonetheless.

*But, admit it, you find all this double talk around the truth pretty darn arousing?*

Clark sighed again and put the keys away, knowing it was for the best. As he turned to fly off, he heard the telltale clicks and whirs of a camera rewinding. Looking around, he saw a flash of movement by one of the walls surrounding the courtyard between the buildings. A fraction of a second later, he was standing on the wall, searching the alley that lay beyond it. He heard that pounding of feet as someone ran. He followed the sound but found only a pre-dawn jogger to whom he almost gave a heart attack for landing so close by and so suddenly.

“Sorry,” he apologized after a quick scan. No, the jogger was just a jogger. No camera equipment.

Clark heard a car door slam and then another and then another. Why was there so much activity in this neighborhood in the middle of the night? He landed in front of the first car. The driver was dressed in black with his face blackened. A burglar? Clark crossed his arms and glared at the man as another car passed by them. The man raised his hands. Clark scanned the car quickly. No camera equipment, but a TV, a stereo, some jewelry, and even some golf clubs.

*Well, the man is either moving in the dead of night or guilty as all get out.*

Clark sighed. He wasn’t the man with the camera though and Superman couldn’t let one burglar go, just to search for a photographer. No matter how damning the photos he took might have been. Clark picked up the car — man and all — and flew it to the nearest police precinct, the Twelfth.

As he set the car down, Officer Henderson was just coming through the doors. He looked at Superman and then at the car with the man inside. “Superman, what are you doing?”

“I discovered this man on Maple Street behind Ms. Lane’s apartment, Officer. He seems to have some items in his possession that don’t belong to him,” Clark replied.

Henderson sighed. “Okay, I guess lunch can ...” Then he stopped speaking, taking a closer look at Superman. Then he shook his head. “Come inside and we’ll start writing up the paperwork.”

“Why don’t you process this man and his car first? When you are ready for me to sign a statement, you can reach me through Clark Kent,” Superman said, itching to head back to Lois’s neighborhood and continue searching for the photographer, despite knowing the man was probably long gone.

Henderson stared at him again, before nodding. “O-kay, Superman. I guess we can do that.” He bent over and looked at the man inside the car who still had his hands raised. “Hi. I’m Officer Henderson. I’ll be your arresting officer tonight. You have the right to remain silent...”

Superman took off into the air and zoomed back to Lois’s apartment. He searched the neighborhood but, as he guessed, the photographer had disappeared. Clark flew back to the wall, where he assumed the man had been sitting when he took the photos of Superman at Lois’s door. He walked the wall from one building to the next, before plopping down on the wall and setting his head in his hands. He couldn’t believe how stupid he had been visiting Lois in the middle of the night.

*Yep. That was pretty unintelligent there, Kent.*

How many nights had the photographer been stationed on this wall? Had he seen him visit the previous night as well? Had he witnessed him leaving and returning with Lois for their now infamous date? If he had, wouldn’t the photos have already come to light? Either way, Clark felt that her apartment was no longer secure. He — Superman — could no longer visit her at her home. But, before he left tonight, he felt that there was one last nagging and highly remote detail he needed to double-check. He scanned the area for other peeping Toms before jumping down from the wall. Using super speed, Clark opened Lois’s apartment and went inside.

\*\*\*

Wednesday

Lois marched to the front doors of Daily Books and rang the buzzer. She was still mad at Kal... Clark... what’s-his-name! She did not give him a set of keys so that he could wake her up in the middle of the night and drag her butt off to his parents’ place. She didn’t care if he did it ‘for her safety’. Super powers did not give Clark the right to make dictatorial decisions over her life.

*A discussion first would have been nice. Asking your permission would have been the thing to do. But nooooo.*

Jimmy moseyed up next to her and didn’t speak. Actually, he was looking at her like sour grapes.

*What did you ever do to him?*

Lois smiled. “Good morning, Jimmy.”

“Morning,” he replied brusquely.

*Obviously there is nothing ‘good’ about it.*

Suddenly he turned to her. “I can’t believe you would do that to CK!”

*What?!*

Lois’s eyes bugged. “What did I do?”

Jimmy rolled his eyes. “CK is the best, Lois. I strive to be like him and you... you...” He couldn’t finish.

*“I what?”*

“And they say men turn bonkers over a pretty scantily-clad girl,”

Jimmy exclaimed, throwing his hands into the air.

*“What?!”* Lois snarled.

*He better not be implying what you think he’s implying.*

“You know what!” Jimmy spat back. “Your affair!”

*Affair? Doesn’t someone have to be married to have one of those?*

“Affair?” Lois asked, confused.

“You’re cheating on CK! He loves you, Lois. How could you?” he shouted.

*A-ha! Finally no more beating around the bush.*

“No, I’m not,” she replied coldly.

Jimmy gazed at her skeptically. “Even CK thinks...”

“He does not!” Lois corrected him with a roar. She took a deep breath and lowered her voice. “Whatever is going on with Clark and I is between us. *He* trusts me.”

Jimmy harrumphed in disbelief.

*Oh, is this what it’s going to be like dating a guy with a secret identity? Because you can certainly do without this!*

Lois pressed her lips together. “It’s not what you think,” she muttered, hating to have to explain herself to someone she thought was a friend. “Besides that, it’s none of your business.”

Finally Perry arrived and opened the front doors to let them in. Lois grabbed the stacks of newspapers outside the door. Jimmy just proceeded in without an offer to help.

Their boss watched him and then looked over at Lois as she grabbed the last bundle. “What’s up with him?”

Lois sighed. “Don’t ask.” And then without meaning to, she continued, “Apparently I’m cheating on Clark with Superman.”

“That could pose a problem,” the Chief said sympathetically, yet with a hint of a smile.

Jimmy hadn’t waited for them and was already up on the third floor headed to the break room.

Lois glared at her boss. “Tell me about it,” she grumbled. “Speaking of problems, any solutions come to mind on our little Tempus problem?”

Perry swallowed uncomfortably as he relocked the front doors. “I’ve got my feelers out,” he murmured.

*Whatever that means.*

“I really don’t want to be going on that ‘date’ come Saturday night,” she said, starting up the escalator. “Who knows what he might try?”

“Clark wouldn’t allow that,” Perry reassured her. “He’ll keep you safe.”

Lois rolled her eyes. “I’ve had it up to here...” She pointed to her neck. “With his over-protective side. Do you want to know what my

boyfriend did to me last night?"

Her boss sputtered and blushed as he clearly had no response to *that* question; finally he said a simple, "No."

Lois pressed her lips together as she looked up.

*Men!*

She stomped off the escalator and over to the break room. Perry waited as she slammed her stuff into her locker and clocked in. "He broke into my apartment in the middle of the night, packed me an overnight bag, and flew me over to Clark's apartment 'for my protection'," she shouted at Perry.

The Chief glanced over at Jimmy, who still hadn't left the break room — and who was now starting at her, his mouth ajar — and then back at Lois with a raised brow.

She waved aside Jimmy's presence.

"He broke into your apartment?" Perry asked skeptically.

"He borrowed Clark's keys," she mumbled with annoyance.

"CK knows Superman?" Jimmy stammered.

"Clark has keys?" Perry asked, just as surprised.

"Yes," Lois drawled, answering two questions with one word.

Then to Jimmy, "They're the best of buddies. How do you think we met?"

"Really?" Jimmy gasped, still surprised.

"I'm sure he would introduce you if you asked," she snapped.

"Lois," Perry warned her.

She rolled her eyes again and glared in his direction. "Fine! I've got work to do." Lois would acquiesce to his years of experience on this matter and keep her mouth shut.

"I think Mad Dog has rabies," she heard Jimmy say as she strode out of the break room.

\*\*\*

Clark pushed his cart of boxes down the ground floor hallway towards Lois's Receiving room.

So, on a scale of one to ten, with one being ecstatic and ten livid, Jimmy had said Lois was a twenty-five. She had been so ticked off at Clark she had actually told Jimmy that her boyfriend knew Superman. That Clark had actually introduced them. Wouldn't it blow his friend's mind if Clark told Jimmy that it actually was he who introduced Lois to Superman?

Clark exhaled. Lois had given him the silent treatment at breakfast again. And worse than that, his folks had actually sided with her.

"You're in a relationship now, son," his dad had said. "You need to make your decisions together."

Okay. Yes. He could see their point. Only after the run-in with the tabloid photographer, and then having found that not one but two bugs had been planted in Lois's apartment, Clark had seen red. He hadn't thought through his actions; he had only reacted. Granted, he had reacted badly. Waking her up and forcing her to leave with him, not even allowing her to pack her own overnight bag, was probably not the best way to convince Lois her safety was at risk.

He just knew he couldn't let her sleep on in blissful ignorance until morning, unprotected. And he couldn't have stayed there with her, because if Superman was called away in the early morning hours... No, he had not wanted to leave her alone.

*Right, and it had nothing to do with how cute and cuddly she looked lying asleep in her bed. And how much safer you were with the two of you at your folks' place instead of hers.*

As Clark pushed the cart into Lois's back room, she glanced over to him, fire in her eyes. He was glad to be the one with the super powers, because if her eyes could shoot laser beams, he would be a pile of ashes by now.

"Hey," Clark said casually.

"Hey, yourself," she snapped back.

*Yep. Still past ten on the livid scale.*

"What's that?" she inquired, a smile dancing to her face for the first time all morning as she pointed to the cellophane-wrapped delectables sitting on top of the boxes. "Did you bring me apology brownies?" She picked up the brownies and smelled them with a

satisfied sigh.

*Apology brownies? Good to know. Chocolate soothes the savage beast.*

Unfortunately, he owed Lois the truth. He promised himself to always tell her the truth from now on. And the truth was he hadn't brought them for her. Clark swallowed in anticipation of her reaction to his forthcoming words. "Sophie gave them to me," he admitted.

"Sophie? As in second floor Art and Architecture Sophie?" Lois growled.

*Oh, good. She's taking it well.*

"Actually, I believe she's Cooking, Gardening, and Wine Supervisor," he corrected, making a bad situation worse.

*Do you have room in your mouth for your hands, Kent? Because you are now out of feet to chew on.*

"And why is Sophie from the second floor making my boyfriend brownies?" Lois asked, her voice low and her eyes fierce.

*Cheer up, Kent. She still considers you her whipping boy.*

Clark gulped. This wasn't exactly the way he had wanted to broach the subject. "They are sympathy brownies because of this." He lifted up the copy of *Dirt Digger Weekly* he had picked up that morning.

Lois pulled the paper from his hand and looked at the cover photos of her and Superman outside of her apartment on Sunday. "No big surprise there after my run-in with Leo Nunk from the *National Whisperer* yesterday."

"*Inquisitor*," he corrected automatically, and then bit his own tongue to shut himself up.

*"Inquisitor! Whisperer! Whatever!"* she shouted.

"Lois, please," Clark said, trying to calm her down.

"Please? Please? Oh, now you are suddenly remembering your manners?"

He winced. He deserved that. Keeping his volume low, he continued, "Kal found a photographer staked outside your apartment and two listening devices hidden in your apartment. I was worried."

She raised her hand. "I've already gotten the lecture, Clark. That was still no reason to tell me to get dressed at three o'clock in the morning to be moved to a safe location, no questions asked. I would have been fine at home! Or you could have had Kal fly you over to protect me. I wasn't able to sleep a wink at your place, I was so mad."

"I know," he murmured. "I'm sorry."

"Are you going to send him here to check on my work space too?" she muttered as she began to tear off the covers of a stack of outdated magazines.

Clark paled. He hadn't thought about the store being vulnerable. They had had too many revealing conversations recently in this back room. He tilted down his glasses and gave the room a quick scan. It was clean and he relaxed again. He took the three boxes off the cart at once and set them on the floor. "How about this? I'll come by at noon and treat you to lunch." He tried his charming smile on her and said coaxingly, "I'll throw in some of Sophie's brownies."

Lois glanced at him from the corner of her eye. "Are they any good? I take it she's one of those women who cooks?"

Clark shrugged nonchalantly. "The fudge she gave me at Christmas was mouthwateringly good."

Lois pressed her lips together again.

*Perhaps that wasn't the correct thing to say at this juncture, Romeo.*

Clark set down the last box and stepped over to her, wrapping his arms around her. Lois squirmed for a minute and then calmed. As he ran his hand over her hair, he said, "I reacted badly, true. I feel terrible that your security, your home, has been compromised because of Kal. I was trying to make a horrible situation better and I only made it worse. I'm sorry. I love you so much and I keep screwing up..." He shook his head. "I fear I'll never be the perfect boyfriend that you want... need... deserve."

"I don't want perfection, Clark. I only want you," she told him, resting her hands against his chest.

*What was that? Was that supposed to be a compliment?*

“Promise to not screw up again?” Lois asked.

Clark sighed and kissed her forehead. “I don’t think I can promise you that, Lois. I can promise to *try* not to screw up again... but with my track record?” He shrugged. “Really, I am trying, Lois.”

She lifted her chin and placed a soft kiss on his lips. “Try harder.”  
*At least she isn’t piling on the pressure.*

Someone cleared his throat behind them and Clark jumped away from her. Just what he needed, to be caught kissing his girlfriend when he was supposed to be delivering boxes.

“Sorry to interrupt, Kent, but Superman said I could reach him through you,” Officer Henderson said from the doorway.

“Right.” Clark nodded. He had stopped by the police station again after dropping Lois off with his folks and typed up his statement about the burglar he had apprehended. “How did you know I would be here?”

“I didn’t, but I knew she might be,” Henderson said, indicating Lois with his head. “And I figured she would know how to contact you.”

“What’s the message?” he asked curiously. He had signed the statement, hadn’t he?

*Well, Superman had signed it with a big S and a wavy line.*

“There is a jumper at the Lexor Hotel. I thought Superman could...” Henderson started before he was interrupted.

“Lois, lunch?” Clark kissed her cheek.

She waved him on. “Go! Go, find Superman.”

Clark beamed at her and then grabbed his cart, disappearing down the hall.

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Lois turned to the police officer. It was the same man to whom she had reported her robbery. She glanced at his name badge to refresh her memory. She wondered what the W. stood for.

*William? Wallace? Webster? Waldecker?*

“Henderson, was it?” she asked, knowing darn well that it was.

The policeman nodded at her, yet he appeared as if he wanted to bolt with Clark.

“We’ve got some new information about the break-in at my apartment,” she informed him.

She had captured his interest enough for him to warily remain.

“Okay. Shoot.”

Lois picked up the copy of *Dirt Digger Weekly* that Clark had left with the boxes.

*Oooh. He forgot the brownies as well. Losers, weepers.*

She tried to look casual as she flipped through the tabloid looking at the photographs.

“If you are searching for an apology for my reluctance to believe your Superman story the other day, you aren’t going to get it,” he told her.

She pressed her lips together and shut the paper. “Ka... Superman found two bugs hidden in my apartment last night. He thinks that they may have been planted there during the robbery.”

Henderson stepped forward. “Bugs?”

“Listening devices,” she clarified, setting down the tabloid.

“I know what they are, Ms. Lane. What were they doing in your apartment?” he asked.

“Isn’t that *your* department, Officer?” she inquired innocently.

“Where are the bugs now?”

Lois shrugged. “You’ll have to ask Clark. Should I tell him to drop them off at police headquarters?”

“Precinct twelve, care of my attention, would be good. Do you think the break-in was a cover-up?” Henderson said, glancing down at the tabloid on the boxes.

“I don’t know. Either that or the burglars came and went and someone else planted the bugs. Either way,” Lois said, picking up the tabloid and slapping it against the officer’s chest. “I think we have a witness.”

“Witness? Who?” He looked down at the tabloid now in his hands.

“The photographer?”

Lois moved next to him. “See that photo there. That was taken before Superman flew me off to the beach.” She pulled the paper out of his hands and flipped it to another page. “This photo was taken after he brought me back home. See how my hair looks different. And there, that in my hand is the glass fish Superman made for me.”

“And if he took the photos before and after, the photographer must have been there during the crime. He may have gotten a photograph of the thieves.” Henderson appeared impressed by Lois’s reasoning.

*See, Officer, Clark doesn’t just like me for my rapier-wit and good looks.*

Lois felt pleased that Henderson finally noticed her intelligence. It was a small victory, but she would take what she could get. “I would appreciate it if you could keep us apprised on the status of your investigation.”

He raised a skeptical eyebrow. “That’s not how this works.”

She had been about to offer Henderson their copy of *Dirt Digger Weekly*, but with that small reaction Lois realized that she herself might be able to find out more information on her own. “Of course not. I completely understand,” Lois said as she reached over and tugged the paper out of his hand, folding it. “I should really be getting back to work. I’ll remind Clark about those bugs.”

“I’d appreciate it, Ms. Lane,” Henderson replied.

“No problem,” said Lois cheerfully as she turned her back on him.

*“That’s not how this works,”* her inner voice repeated with a nasally tone, a sneer, and a scoff.

\*\*\*

The morning hours flew by and Lois felt her stomach rumbling. She wondered how close to noon it was getting and whether she should just cave and eat the rest of his brownies. If Clark hadn’t packed her overnight bag, she would have her wristwatch with her now and know how soon her boyfriend would show up.

She pulled a stack of new weekly magazines off the v-cart and set them on the shelf. A photo of Superman holding the colossus plane graced the cover. Two weeks — even one week ago an alien on the cover of such a magazine would have been considered a joke or an advertisement for Hollywood’s latest blockbuster. Now? Clark had changed history.

“Ms. Lane?” a voice from behind her inquired.

*Oh, goodie. Another one.*

Lois had been defending herself against tabloid reporters and Superman groupies all morning. It appeared that another tabloid had printed photos of her and Superman at the press conference and arguing outside the bookstore, afterwards. There would never be an end to her misery.

“Look, I’m trying to work here. I don’t...” She turned around at this point and faced a tall man with longish, wavy, sandy brown hair. Lois began to stammer as her heart beat loudly against her chest.

“Daniel Scardino? You’re Daniel Scardino!”

He smiled at her and her knees went weak.

“I know,” he said smoothly.

“I loved you in *Resurrection* where you played the FBI agent trying to find the bomber who blew up that pretty blonde D.A. You were so romantic. I even dreamed once that *I* was the reporter whom you plied with gifts and shared sweet kisses with.” Lois sighed.

*Okay, Lane. I’ve got to put a stop to this. You’re gushing.*

Lois swallowed and blushed as Daniel Scardino’s smile grew larger.

“You dreamed that you broke the heart of your writing partner by running off with me?” he asked softly, reaching up and brushing a lock of her hair out of her eyes.

She shrugged, unable to say any more.

“I was wondering if I could take you to lunch,” he said, stepping closer.

“Me? Lunch? Why?” she squeaked.

*This is a dream come true. Daniel Scardino! Wow!*

“Because you’re dating Superman,” he simply replied.

Lois's heart hit her feet and rebounded back up into her chest with a thud.

*Oh, yeah. Your boyfriend. Great, Scardino is another fan. So much for daydreams and fantasies.*

"I. Am. *Not*. Dating. Superman," she growled, glaring at him.

Daniel Scardino stepped back and raised his hands in surrender.

"Okay, you're not dating Superman. But you've talked to him. You know him better than anyone else on this planet. And, right now, that's what I need."

"Huh?"

Scardino took her arm and he led her away from the crowds at the newsstand. "There's talk in Hollywood about making a Superman movie, Lois. I *want* to play Superman. Let me take you to lunch and you can tell me how to be Superman, so I can get the part. Please."

Lois raised a hand to her face to hide her giggles.

*This guy? Superman? I think not.*

She shook her head. "I'd love to help you, Mr. Scardino, but..."

"Call me Daniel," he said sweetly, pouring on the charm.

She ignored his interruption. "But I already have lunch plans with my boyfriend."

"Big Blue is coming here?" stammered Daniel, obviously caught off guard.

"I am *not* dating Superman," Lois repeated. "My boyfriend's name is Clark. And I'm expecting him momentarily. He'll be here at noon." She instinctively looked at her wrist again. It felt naked without her watch.

"I don't think he's coming," said Daniel.

"Why's that?" she asked gruffly, raising an eyebrow.

"Because it's a quarter to one," he replied, showing her his watch. Lois gulped.

*What happened to Clark? Where is Clark? He promised...*

She closed her eyes as the truth hit her. Superman. She took a deep breath and slowly she released it.

*He isn't coming.*

"Clark must have been held up at work," she managed to say through the pain.

*Clark loves you, Lois. He would be here if he could. It was probably an emergency. Soldier on.*

"I can take you to lunch. My treat," Daniel was saying. "There's a nice restaurant down the street. You need to eat."

*What was it about men and force-feeding her?*

"A girl has to eat," coaxed Scardino.

*A girl? Losing points by the moment there, Danny boy.*

Lois glanced up to the third floor where Clark usually stood when he watched her, but he wasn't there. As her gaze came down she caught sight of Miss Blonde Buxom Brownies on the mezzanine. Lois turned to Scardino. "Tell you what, Mr. Scardino, I'll let you take me to lunch as long as you let me interview *you* for the *Planet*."

He grinned with glee. "If you insist and, please, call me Daniel."

"Let me just clock out and make a phone call and I'll be right down," she said, grabbing her cart.

A few minutes later, Lois picked up the telephone, dropped in her quarter and dialed the number on the piece of paper in her hand.

"Hi, Mrs. Cox. It's Lois Lane again. Did you happen to give Mr. Luthor my messages? You did? Great. When can I...? No. At the company meet-and-greet in December won't do. I need to see him before the end of ... Okay. Yes, I understand he's a busy man, but what I have to tell him... No! I won't hold... ARGH!" Lois slammed down the receiver.

*Hating that woman more and more!*

Lois plodded down the escalator stairs. Daniel was leaning against a pillar reading that weekly magazine with Superman on the cover. He folded it under his arm as she walked up.

"Ready?" she snapped.

"Uh. Yes," he said, his smile wavering.

"Sorry, I've been trying to get a meeting with Lex Luthor and I keep getting the runaround by his assistant," Lois admitted as they

walked to the door.

"You get the interview of the century, of the millennium, and now you're trying to nab number two?" Daniel chuckled.

She stopped at the door and crossed her arms, looking the action superstar up and down. "Forget something there, Scardino?"

He appeared perplexed.

"The magazine? I don't have lunch with shoplifters," she stated.

"Oh!" He blushed, pulling the magazine out from under his arm.

"I'll just go pay for this."

"You do that."

Daniel came back a few minutes later holding up a receipt. "Can I blame my forgetfulness on the most incredible pair of brown eyes?"

Lois rolled said eyes, pushing open the doors. "Can it, Scardino."

"Daniel. Please call me Daniel."

Almost a half-hour later as they sat on the patio of the restaurant down the street from the bookstore, Lois pushed her plate away. "I really should get back to the store."

Daniel reached across the table and took her hand. "Wait!" He lowered his voice, his eyes gazing deeply into hers. "Tell me the truth. You're really dating *him*, aren't you? Because I'm telling you, I'm excited more about re-enacting a romance with you than wearing that suit."

A roar of wind sounded overhead as Lois grimaced and pulled her hand back. "Daniel, I have spent the entire lunch telling you that I'm not dating..."

Dan looked skyward. "Was that him?"

Lois's tongue glided over her front teeth. "Yes. My boyfriend is a very jealous man. And, no, he isn't Superman. But Superman is a friend of mine and Clark's and if you want his permission to play him in a movie..."

"Permission?" Dan's eyes opened widely in amusement. "I don't need his permission, Lois."

"You don't think Superman has legal rights over his image and name?" she scoffed.

Suddenly an explosion shook the restaurant. Lois jumped to her feet. It had come from behind her. The same direction Superman had just flown a few minutes before.

*Clark!*

"I've got to go." Lois hurtled over the ropes surrounding the restaurant's patio and ran down the sidewalk in the direction of the explosion. She saw smoke rising from the Carlin Building and a huge crowd of people and reporters cordoned off outside. She pushed her way through the crowd, her heart pounding against her ribcage.

*Please be all right. Please be all right.*

A moment later a slightly disorientated Superman emerged from the building. He appeared smoky, a bit singed, and dusty from debris, but otherwise unharmed.

"Are you okay?" Lois called out to him, reporter fashion.

His eyes found hers, softened a moment, and then darted to the side, checking out the rest of the crowd. When they returned to her, they seemed hurt and angry. "I'm fine," he replied.

Linda King was inside the barricade and was just pushing herself to her feet. Superman bent down and scooped her off the ground. She had a minor cut on her forehead that was bleeding. Eagerly the blonde reporter wrapped her arms around Superman's neck as he took off into the air.

Lois gasped, her heart turning to stone.

*He did not just ignore you to fly off with Linda King?*

She continued to watch where they disappeared into the sky.

"Go ahead," said a voice from beside her. "Tell me again how there's nothing going on between you."

Lois glanced next to her and realized Daniel Scardino had followed her from the restaurant.

*Oh, God! Clark had seen Daniel take her hand at the restaurant when he flew by!*

She turned and stared Daniel straight in the eyes. "Superman and I are just friends," she said again, believing her words were becoming

more true by the second. She slowly pushed her way through the crowd and back to the bookstore.

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#### Thursday — Mid-afternoon

Clark stood on the third floor looking down at Lois. He hadn't talked to her since the bomb went off the day before. His mom had said he was jumping to conclusions and perhaps he was, but Clark couldn't get the image of that pretty-boy actor holding Lois's hand out of his mind.

*At least you didn't stalk her at the restaurant, Kent. You didn't watch her laugh and talk to Scardino from atop another building. And you kept your cool and didn't land in front of their table and punch the guy to Manhattan, tempting though it might have been. You didn't do an impersonation of a gargoyle and sulk... much. There were worse things you could have done when your girlfriend went out to lunch — a lunch she was supposed to have shared with you — with another man.*

Henderson had tracked him down at his parents' café the previous night. Lois had told the policeman about the bugs and he came by to collect them from Clark. Apparently, Henderson had a friend at the prestigious S.T.A.R. Labs — a Bernard Klein, PhD. — who owed him a favor. Henderson had been surprised that Lois hadn't passed along the message to him but, then again, Clark hadn't spoken with her since he went to save that first jumper. There had been three — all within a line-of-sight of each other on opposite sides of Metropolis and all within minutes of one another. It couldn't have been a coincidence.

The policeman had two messages for Superman. Firstly, the bomb at the Carlin Building — which happened to be owned by one Mr. Lex Luthor and named for one of the man's ex-wives — had been remotely operated. There had been video cameras planted inside that had nothing do with in-house security. Someone had been watching for him and blew up the building once he got there. Not good.

The second message was about the photographer who took the photos of Superman and Lois which had showed up in Randy Goode's *Dirt Digger Weekly*. He had been found dead, shot, his place ransacked and every negative in the place taken. It had been Lois's suggestion that Henderson should question the photographer regarding the break-in at her apartment.

*You're in love with one smart cookie there, Kent.*

Again, it was information Clark would have gathered earlier and from Lois herself if he hadn't missed their lunch date due to an electrical fire at one of the amusement parks on Hell's Gate Island. Superman had been kept busy all the previous day. Clark had almost not been able to complete his deliveries for MDS in time.

Someone was testing Superman. Testing his abilities, testing his weaknesses and his strengths. Clark wondered who? He wished he could discuss this with Lois, or at least get one of her all-encompassing comfort hugs. But he knew if he even tried he would probably say something stupid, like throwing it in her face that his girlfriend shouldn't be having lunch and holding hands with other men. Or mention his giving a one-on-one interview with Linda King, which he was sure Lois knew about, since the article had been front-page news on the *Metropolis Star* that morning. He just knew there was going to be hell to pay for that one. He was trying to get the tabloid heat off his girlfriend. And using Linda had been a convenient excuse with her injury.

*Excuse? Please, Kent. You know Lois and Linda have some kind of history. Your girlfriend made you jealous and you were throwing it back in her face. And using your Superman persona to do it. Low, man. Really low. You are out of control.*

Clark was sure there was some innocent reason behind Lois's lunch. There always seemed to be. Lois claimed to love Clark, but knowing that there was some man out there she was destined to be with, who wasn't him, grated him raw and made him doubt her loyalty, even though she never had herself done anything to make him question her. He could not listen to reason, not while his green-eyed monster held him by the lapels. He had even refused to talk to her when Lois

had called the café the night before.

Actually his mom's exact words to Lois had been, "The big chicken won't come to the phone, Lois." Just like his mom to side with Lois and not to gloss over the truth for him in his time of need.

Clark had then heard — only because he could never block out her voice — Lois asking his mom to tell him not to come over that night because she was going to bed early. Actually, Lois was all stressed out because she thought Superman had been blown to bits that afternoon and then wouldn't talk to her about it. And because she was so exhausted from lack of sleep from the night before last, when she had been forcibly removed from her apartment for her protection. His mom, of course, had fully understood and the message would be passed on.

Lois was worried about him. Lois was still angry at him. And Lois was hurt that he once again didn't trust her. He sighed. He was out of control. That was why he wasn't down on the ground floor talking with Lois, begging for her forgiveness. He missed her, but somehow he knew he was in the wrong *again*. He had overreacted *again*. And, this time, he was afraid he had gone too far. She was bound to dump him after this latest move. Personally, he didn't want to give her the opportunity. So, like the big chicken his mom told Lois he was, Clark was avoiding her, by keeping his distance. But he couldn't stay entirely away. He loved her too much.

Perry walked up and stood next to him. He didn't say anything for a minute as they both watched Lois work two stories down. "Lois turned in an interview with Daniel Scardino for the weekly *Planet* this morning. According to the article, the man is doing a sequel to *Resurrection*."

"Hmmm," was all Clark would allow himself to say.

"She's a darn good writer," Perry continued. "Not as good with imagery as you, but she's good at laying out the facts. I bet if you two partnered up..."

"There's no partnership, Perry. We'll do better on our own."

"That so? Huh? You want to hear something funny? That Lois told me off the record? It seems that Scardino is obsessed with Superman; so much so that he wants to play him in the movie version of..."

Clark turned to his boss. "Movie?"

"Yeah. You know Hollywood. They already have writers working on a screenplay. Apparently they are playing up the romance between Superman and that woman — Lois Lane — who interviewed him."

Clark wanted to groan and cover his face, but he felt numb. His life was being taken away from him before it had hardly begun. "Isn't it typecasting," he deadpanned, leaning against the railing again, "if all the characters that guy plays fall in love with reporters?"

Clark watched as a delivery man arrived with a bouquet of flowers. First he took it to Jack at the register, but the cashier just pointed the man to Lois at the newsstand. Smiling, his girlfriend accepted and signed for them. She then took the bouquet back over to the cash counter.

Jack finished with his customer and crossed over to her. "Who are they from?"

"Clark, I hope, but..." Lois's voice trailed away as she sighed.

*She knows that they're not from you. What you need, Kent, is a huge box of apology chocolates. An MDS truck full should do it.*

"Ralph said Clark stopped by yesterday while you were at lunch. Clark was really angry when he heard you had left with Dan Scardino," Jack told her.

Lois scoffed and shook her head. "I should have known better than to leave a message for Clark with Ralph. He was supposed to tell Clark to join us at the restaurant if he showed."

*Gee, thanks, Ralph, for the botched message.*

"Why did Perry put that moron in charge of music anyway? That man can't tell the difference between Elvis Presley and Elvis Costello. Do you know he actually recommended Michael Bolton to someone who wanted dance music?"

Clark repeated this tidbit to Perry as they watched Lois open the card that accompanied the flowers.

“Ralph came highly recommended,” Perry murmured as an excuse. “Make some good choices,” he said, nodding towards Lois. “Make some awful ones.” He shrugged. “You’ve got to watch out for Jack. He’s astute, that one. Bratty as they come, but smart.”

Lois blanched at the card, tearing it to shreds.

*Oh, good. She didn’t like the sender.*

Jack raised an eyebrow to this action. “Who are they from?”

“My date for Saturday night,” Lois mumbled.

“Huh?” Jack asked.

“Just my local neighborhood blackmailer,” Lois told him, turning back to the sales floor with the bouquet.

“Tempus,” Clark said to Perry as they watched Lois trying to figure out the best way to dispose of the flowers. He had some ideas that included using his heat vision and target practice. “You got any ideas on how to get Lois out of our hole?”

His boss slipped a secretive smile onto his lips. “I’ve got a couple of thoughts. You keep an eye on Lois; I’ll handle LexCo.”

“I’ve got my shift Saturday night,” Clark reminded him.

“Get her out of her date and safely squared away at your folks’ and get here by ten. I’ll handle the rest,” Perry said mysteriously. Then he added softly, “I might have to fire you.”

Clark shrugged. “I might have to quit.” He looked down at Lois as she handed the bouquet to an elderly lady on the way out of the store. “Lois isn’t going to like being ‘squared away’ anywhere for her protection or not.”

“You’ve got a spitfire with that one.” Perry grinned wickedly.

“Good thing Superman has super cooling breath.”

Clark rolled his eyes.

*Great. Another one of Perry’s Superman jokes.*

“Superman’s not dating her, Chief, I am.” Clark sighed. “Until she catches me long enough to break up with me.”

“Then I recommend you leave off the vulture routine,” Perry suggested.

“I’ve always known she was going to break my heart. I just didn’t know my own stupidity would be the cause,” Clark said, shaking his head.

“Lois isn’t going to break your heart, Clark.”

“Sure, she is. Lois knows who her destiny is — that other man, the one that guy from the future predicted for her. I’m just...” Clark didn’t know quite what he was to her. “... Mr. Right Now, I guess.”

“She’s not going to leave you for someone else, Clark,” Perry informed him.

Clark glanced over at his boss. Did Perry know about Lois’s future husband? He had always thought there was something the Chief was holding back from him.

“That other man. He isn’t real, Clark. He doesn’t exist.”

“But... But...” Clark stammered, his head spinning. No, that can’t be true. He couldn’t have been stressing all this time over someone who doesn’t exist.

“Trust me, Clark. She can’t marry a job description, only a man.”

Perry patted him on the back. “Shouldn’t you get back to work, son?”

*Cryptic and not at all informative. Thanks, Chief!*

Resigned, Clark nodded. “Yeah. I should return the truck.” He turned away from the railing as Perry walked off.

“Hi, Lois,” said a voice from his past and more recently from his nightmares.

“Well, well. Look at what the Cat dragged in,” replied Lois with annoyance.

Clark turned slowly around and gazed over the railing again.

“See, Lana, I know everyone in town. Even her. You owe me five bucks,” said Cat before issuing them a wave and disappearing up the escalator.

“Lana Lang,” Lois stated with a shake of her head. “What are you doing here?”

“Actually, it’s Lana Harrington now,” Clark’s ex-girlfriend corrected.

“I know. We got the press release.” Lois crossed her arms.

Lana pulled out a business card and handed it to Lois.

With pinched lips, Lois reluctantly accepted it. “P.R.? You are in Public Relations?”

*Yeah, that would be a bit of a stretch,* thought Clark’s nasty conscience.

His ex-girlfriend placed her best fake smile on her lips. “Of course, Lois. Everyone loves me.” She gave a flip of her hair.

Clark wasn’t buying this routine and, he was glad to see, neither was Lois.

“Everybody knows you know Superman. It’s in all the papers,”

Lana continued. “I don’t believe you’re actually dating him, because that would be preposterous. He obviously is in dire need of some help with the press and I’m offering my services. Give him my card, would you? For old time’s sake?”

Lois handed the card back. “No.”

*You can’t lose that woman, Kent. You know that, don’t you?*

Lana refused to take back the card, persisting with her sweet-talking hard-sell voice. “Oh, come on, LoLo. I know we were never close in school, but do it for Smallville.” She gave a little bounce and a smile when she mentioned their hometown.

*LoLo?*

Lois raised a brow at that request, continuing to hold out the card. “You don’t represent the best of Smallville, Lana. You never have. And don’t call me LoLo. *We* were never friends.”

“I was surprised to hear that you and Pete weren’t married. I always had a hunch about you two.” Lana was still trying to be nice. It was an odd thing to witness. She must have really wanted him as a client.

*Like that would ever happen.*

“Pete’s dead, Lana,” Lois said coldly.

Clark got a chill. Lois hadn’t told him that. From Lana’s expression he doubted she knew either.

“When?” Lana stammered, her face white and her façade falling.

“Summer after you graduated.”

*Isn’t that when you dated Lana, Kent?*

Lana gulped. “That long ago. Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

Lois looked skeptically at other woman. “My guess is that after the way you treated him most people figured you didn’t care either way.”

Lana sat down on the bench in the newsstand after giving Lois a sharp glare. “That’s not true! I loved Pete.”

Lois scoffed. “If that’s how you treat the people you love, Lana, I pity the congressman.”

“You don’t know anything about it, Lois. What Pete and I had was special. He was my high school sweetheart. He just expected more from me than I was ready to give.” Lana’s voice made it sound like her heart had been crushed, but Clark knew better.

*Doesn’t one have to have a heart for it to hurt?*

“That so? I was his best friend, Lana. I know the truth.” Lois wasn’t buying Lana’s horse dung either, he was glad to see.

“You weren’t there...” Lana wailed.

Lois stepped closer and looked Lana in the eye. “Actually I was. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but I came by to return Pete’s math notes. I heard everything.”

Lana gasped.

Lois went on. “How you told him you loved him. How you wanted to spend the rest of your life with him. How the two of you should book a hotel room on prom night for your first time. All those were *your* ideas.”

“Well... well...” Lana stammered.

“When was that? A week before prom? Pete was so excited, he even bought you a ring. He cashed in his first semester’s college tuition savings to buy it. Against my advice and his folks’ wishes, mind you, he was going to propose.” Lois’s voice was hard as she pressed these harsh truths on Lana.

Clark swallowed. This story sounded all too familiar. He had not made plans to propose to Lana, but revealing his secret was a pretty close second. His brow furrowed. Hadn’t Lois said she had gone to

prom with Pete?

*You know this story all too well, Kent. You know what's coming next.*

"And who ran off to KU with her cousin to attend a frat party instead? Who left him a note — a *note* — saying she wanted to break-up? After she had dated him for over two years? Who told him she was 'too young' to be tied down, especially to someone who would never accomplish anything in his life? That he had no potential? And he was too stupid to be more than a fry cook at the local burger joint?"

*That speech sounds familiar as well.*

"I *never* said Pete was stupid!" Lana said in her defense.

Clark noticed she didn't deny Lois's other allegations.

"So, what are you saying, Lois? That Pete killed himself over *me*?" Lana actually appeared horrified at that thought.

Lana hadn't wanted Pete dead, just pining after her for years. Wondering what he did wrong. Never in his life had Clark felt more like a sucker. For letting this woman control who he was, long after she had gone. Both Clark and Lana hung on Lois's answer.

Lois lowered her head and admitted with a heavy heart, "No." Suddenly Lois's fierce expression looked guilty. "He died of a rattlesnake bite while off camping by himself."

Clark wondered if there was more to this story she wasn't telling.

Lana released a breath of relief. No, his ex-girlfriend wasn't to blame. She would forget this conversation and her high school sweetheart as soon as she left the store; of that Clark was positive. She had abused him like she had Pete, and never looked back.

"Well, it's been good catching up with you, LoLo... Lois. It's too bad about Pete. He was a nice guy. Give Superman my card and have him give me a call," Lana said, standing up and straightening her outfit.

"Don't hold your breath, Lana," Lois said, her lips pressed together and her voice low.

"Yeah, and why's that? Are you going to be petty and not give him my card?" Lana sneered. "Grow up."

Lois glanced up and caught Clark's eye. He wondered if she knew he had been there all along, because her expression showed no surprise. Then she leaned over and whispered in Lana's ear, knowing full well he could hear every word, "Superman is also good friends with Clark Kent."

*Lois knows! How in the world did she know you dated Lana?*

Lana jumped back aghast. "No!"

Lois nodded with another quick glance up to him on the third floor, "And Superman listens to his friends."

*Oh, funny, Lois!*

His girlfriend leaned close to Lana again and whispered, "You seem to have a knack for screwing over, screwing up, and yet *never* actually..."

*"Supervisor to the third floor cash wrap for a return. Supervisor to the third floor cash wrap,"* blared the overhead announcement so loudly Clark felt like heat blasting the speaker above his head.

*What? What did Lois say to Lana? Did she just say what you thought she said? To Lana?!*

Lois tore up the business card into tiny little pieces and then threw them at dumbfounded Lana like confetti. Then she waved her fingers at Clark with a sweet little smile.

*The minx!*

Lana glanced up and saw Clark. He grinned at them with merriment he did not feel and waved back in the same manner. His ex-girlfriend turned white as a ghost and bolted for the exit.

Lois pointed at him, glaring, and whispered, "Wait. Right. There."

*Oh, crap!*

She grabbed her v-cart and headed back to her Magazine Receiving room. As soon as Lois was out of sight, Clark casually turned away from the railing and slowly walked towards the third floor Receiving room.

Clark waved at Jimmy and said, "Hey, if you see Lois, could you tell her I have to go return my MDS truck and I'll talk with her later."

*Chicken!*

"Oh, man. I don't want to deliver *that* message, CK." Jimmy chuckled, pointing at him with both his index finger points pressed together. "Mad Dog on the warpath is *your* problem and *your* problem alone."

Clark grimaced with a roll of his eyes. "I know." He pressed the freight elevator button.

Jimmy laughed. "Man, you are toast."

*You have to agree with your friend there, Kent.*

The doors of the freight elevator opened and Lois stepped out, wrapping her arms around her boyfriend's neck. "Gotcha!"

Clark gasped. He hadn't expected her to do an end-run interception.

"Jimmy, do me a favor and run over to the break room and clock me out, would you?" she called to the younger man. "If I let go of Mr. Slippery Magoo here, he'll disappear on me again."

Jimmy laughed. "My pleasure, Mad Dog!"

"Don't call me that," she growled.

The young photographer held up his hands in surrender as he backed out of Receiving.

"Okay, Lois. Let me go," said Clark to his new necktie.

"Nope. You and I need to have a serious conversation about boundaries and your lack thereof. And if I let go, you'll run off. You're a definite flight risk," Lois answered, holding on to him tighter. "Now push the down elevator button and let's find us someplace private where we can talk."

"Please, Lois. I really need to return my MDS truck." He pushed the down button and the elevator doors shut.

"It can wait. I can't," replied Lois.

Clark listened, hoping to hear a call for help. "I think Kal..."

Lois didn't believe him. "Don't even try it, Clark. Kal's not calling. Tsk-tsk. Lying. Bad, bad boy." Her words were teasing, but her tone was not.

*I'm sure if you looked hard enough, Flyboy, you could find someone who needs Superman's help.*

"You're really not going to let go?" he asked when they arrived to the ground floor. The elevator opened out into the alley. There was his empty MDS truck still waiting to be returned to the package center.

Lois shook her head.

Clark pressed his lips together, trying hard not to laugh. "Then how am I going to drive?"

"You aren't," Lois told him. "There isn't any place in Metropolis private enough for this conversation. Up, up and away, big boy."

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Lois held tighter on to Clark's neck as he maneuvered them around to the backside of his MDS truck, blocking them from the Daily Book's security camera.

"Lois," he said softly. "I really need to return the truck. And then we can talk. I'll drop you off anywhere in the world and meet you there within the hour. I promise."

"Perhaps you should have thought of that before you stood at the third floor railing, watching me for the past hour," she told him.

Clark gulped.

*Good. He hadn't known you noticed him walk up an hour earlier. He should be feeling uncomfortable.*

"I'm going to rocket up, hold on," he informed her, giving in to her demands. He wrapped an arm around her waist and bent his knees slightly.

Lois did remember that first flight was Kal. This time it would be different. This time he knew she knew. This time it was with Clark.

Moments later they were hovering over the city. "Where do you want to go?"

*Doesn't Gorgeous here know you'd go anywhere with him?*

"Rocky Cove." It was the first place that popped into her head. Probably because of her discussion with Lana about Pete.

"I've never flown there," Clark admitted, sheepishly. "I might need some directions."

“You haven’t been back to Smallville?”

*That can’t be right.*

“No, I have. I flew to Shuster’s Field once to check out the crash site after. . .” He looked away.

“After Lana broke up with you. Yes, I know. Your mom mentioned you dated a while back. And from your hesitancy towards intimacy, I guessed the rest.”

Clark hooked his free arm under her knees so that she was in a cradle position. “So you going to tell me what really happened with Pete?” he asked, subtly changing the subject.

*No, he doesn’t really want to open up that can of worms.*

“We have more important things to discuss than my history, Clark,” Lois stated, her eyes burning into his. “Like why there is a photo of you flying Linda King into the newsroom on the cover of this morning’s edition of the *Metropolis Star*? And why she’s looking at you like she just joined the mile high club without a plane?”

“Well, Linda did have a head injury,” Clark said.

*Is he trying to deflate your anger with humor? That ain’t happening.*

“Linda, is it now? She worm her way into your good books already? Did she tell you how I tried to sleep my way to the top of the Metropolis University’s student paper? Did she mention that the incident got me banned from the paper? Even though it wasn’t true. Did she happen to tell you that she stole *my* article on the professor who was sleeping with students for grades? Or how it won the equivalent to the Kerth award for articles written by a sophomore student?” She was still yelling at him when they reached the outskirts of Smallville.

“We didn’t really talk much about you,” he replied truthfully.

“Only that Lois Lane was dating some bozo named Clark Kent.” Again his humor fell flat.

“That patch of trees over there,” Lois said, pointing. “But since this is close to where Maisie and Carl saw the government men take the spaceship maybe you should double-check we’re alone with your vision gizmo.”

“Vision gizmo?” he replied with a slight shake of his head. Then instead of lowering her down, he went higher into the sky. “What’s this about Maisie and a spaceship?”

She recounted the story she had told to Jonathan a few days earlier.

“Lois, I don’t want you to think I’m being paranoid, but do you mind if we go elsewhere?” he asked.

*His father must have really put the fear of discovery into him. And since he’s flying around in his MDS uniform...*

“There’s an old abandoned farmhouse near the Irig farm. That should be private enough.” Lois pointed him in that direction.

She felt his arms tighten around her. “Abandoned?”

They hovered above the farmhouse and barn for a minute before Clark set them down. He let go of her and started wandering around staring at the house.

“I thought you checked it out from above,” she said.

“This is my folks’ old place. I recognize it from the photos,” Clark murmured.

Lois couldn’t believe she hadn’t connected the dots and winced at her insensitivity. “Oh, sorry. I should. . .” She pressed her lips together. “Do you want to go somewhere else?”

Clark sighed. “No. This is as good as any place for you to dump me.”

Her tongue glossed over her front teeth. “Break up with you? Is that why you’ve been avoiding me, Clark?” she thundered.

“After what you just told me about Linda, I can’t see you forgiving me any time soon.” He shrugged. “Plus, you were holding hands with Dan Scardino. You’ve clearly moved on.”

“He took hold of my hand to stop me from leaving, Clark,” Lois growled. “This is the first time I wish you actually *had* been spying on me. Then you’d know the truth instead of jumping to your own idiotic conclusions.”

“I’m not an idiot, Lois,” he snapped back defensively.

“I know that! Which is why I want you to stop acting like one,” she yelled.

“Are you telling me that you’re *not* attracted to that guy?” He raised a skeptical eyebrow at her.

“Of course, I’m attracted him. He’s *Dan Scardino!* Movie star!” Lois told him. “But do you really think I’d be interested in that wannabe when I have the real thing?”

Clark threw up his hands in disbelief. “Well, if it’s not him, maybe it will be the next guy who makes eyes at you. Who knows — with my luck — Lex Luthor will be swept off his feet by your beauty. How am I supposed to compete against his money and influence and power?” he fired back.

“Yeah, he probably will. I seem to have that effect on men,” Lois replied tersely, her hands on her hips. “But that doesn’t mean I’ll fall for him, does it? Hello? He’s twice my age! For some inexplicable reason, I love you. If I was going to leave you, I’d have done it by now.”

Clark crossed his arms and silently watched her.

She started to pace, muttering to herself, “You’re exactly how he described you. He was right about everything else; of course, he would be right about this too.” She looked fiercely into his eyes, pointing her finger at him. “Do you know how many times you’ve broken my heart for my own protection? Not to mention all the lying? For a man who wants to be known for being truthful you’d think you would have started with me! The only reason I’ve stuck around this long is that I know this must be some crazy phase you’re going through. Because there is no way I’d marry and have children, let alone start the beginnings of an Utopian society, with a man as jealous, obstinate, and blind as you’ve been acting lately.”

Clark froze and stared at her, his mouth agape.

Lois rolled her eyes. “But I’m starting to think it isn’t a phase. That this insane man you turn into from time to time is the *real* you.”

“You’re right, Lois,” Clark admitted, knocking some of the fire out of her.

“I am?”

“I have been an idiot. A stupid, blind, obstinate, jealous idiot and I will understand completely if you never want to have anything else to do with me.” Suddenly Martyr-Man was gone and Self-Confident Man was back. “But I’m asking you to please give me one more chance to prove to you that I’m the man you want and deserve.”

Lois just stared at Clark. He looked almost like a different man. Something in the way he held his shoulders slightly back, his spine straighter. A light in his eyes that hadn’t been there before, started to glow and the sadness she had seen pouring out was gone. She didn’t know what effected the change, but it was startling. The gaze that held hers went down deep into her soul, setting it on fire, while at the same time dousing out the flames of her anger. The quitter was gone and the hero now stood before her.

Her heart began to race, her knees turned to jelly and her brain had been erased just by this one look. Lois finally blinked once and then again as she stepped towards him. With that one little movement Clark swept her into his arms and kissed her.

It was not an “I’m Sorry” apology kiss.

It was not a “Forgive Me” kiss.

It was not even a soft and tender “I Love You!” kiss.

It was a nerve-ending exploding, Lois’s inner core of womanhood melting, “I’m Going to Make Love to You Until You Hit a High ‘C’ with Pleasure Because I Hunger for You and Desire You and Want to Love You More than You’ve Ever Felt or Ever Known You Could Feel” kiss.

Lois pulled herself out of his arms and stepped back, breathless and slightly dizzy as her gaze bore into his with disbelief. She stuck a finger in her ear and shook her head, trying to quiet her inner voice, which was still hitting that high ‘C’.

“Clark?” she said, finally able to speak.

“Yes, Lois?”

“Am I awake?”

A somewhat perplexed and amused smile came to his lips. “As far as I know, yes. Why?”

“Because the one time you’ve ever kissed me like that has been in my dreams, right before we’ve made love.” She took a deep breath and exhaled. “Because if this is real life and I’m awake, you better not use that kiss again until you’re ready to back it up with more.”

Clark stepped forward caressing her arm with his hand. “Duly noted.”

“Because next time I may not be able to stop myself,” she told him in earnest.

Clark placed a soft and tender “I’ll Always Love You” kiss on her lips, then murmured in her ear, “Then the next time I kiss you like that I better make sure I’m packing some precautions.”

Lois’s lips pressed together as she pushed him away. “I’m not kidding, Clark. If I hadn’t stopped us, we’d be buck-naked rolling around on the ground in the gravel right now.” She stomped off towards the old barn.

“Check. Precautions and a more comfortable locale. Got it.” Clark chuckled, following her.

She turned around and stuck a finger in his face. “I’m serious, Clark. You don’t know how close I was to ripping off your clothes,” Lois roared at him.

“Precautions, comfortable locale, and a change of clothes. Gotcha.” He nodded.

“Argh!” Lois shouted. “I’m still mad at you. How dare you make me want to make love to you while I’m angry.”

Clark gave her one of his sheepish “I Can’t Help Myself” shrugs.

And Lois screamed in frustration again. “I love you and want you so much, Clark Kent, I could overpower you in an instant and make you mine if you turn me on like that again. And don’t you think I couldn’t just because I’m not as fast or as strong as you.”

Clark gulped and nodded. “I believe you.”

“Good! Because I don’t want our first time to be a hormones-raging and we-can’t-control-ourselves boinkfest. Got it?”

“Precautions, comfortable locale, a change of clothes, and romance. Got it.” He grinned wickedly.

“Wipe that smile off your face right now, buster,” Lois said, turning to him and pointing her finger in his face once more. “Because there won’t be any marathon lovemaking sessions unless you change your behavior.”

Clark opened his mouth only to have it covered by her fingers.

“Yes, I know. Food and water, too. Got it. Ha ha. No more hiding from me?”

He nodded.

“No more jumping to conclusions. You think I’ve done something wrong, you ask me about it first,” Lois demanded.

Clark nodded again.

“No more telling me what to do. Just because you have super powers doesn’t make you in charge of my life and my decisions.”

He nodded again.

“No more flying off with Linda King.” Lois glared.

Clark lowered her fingers from his lips. “I was trying to get the media’s attention off you. I thought if Superman was seen with other reporters...”

“He would start to look like a fickle womanizing alien sex god?” Lois asked.

“No!” he gasped.

“That’s how he’s going to be portrayed if you don’t give him a more aloof, asexual personality pronto.”

“Well, the interview with Linda did get the ‘Lois Lane is dating Clark Kent’ quote out there,” he said defending his actions.

“She already stated as much in yesterday’s story, Clark. All I’m saying here is I want you to talk to all reporters equally at the scene and no flying off with anyone. *Especially* her.”

He nodded. “Noted.”

“And stop believing that I’m with you until something better comes along. I’m *with* you because I love *you*. When you’re not acting

like a lout, you are the warmest, sweetest, kindest, most intelligent man of my acquaintance. I’m *with* you not because some man from the future said I would be. I’m with you because — for some reason I cannot fathom — being with you hurts less than being alone.”

*Don’t forget that he’s sexy as all get out.*

“What exactly did those men from the future tell you, Lois? I’m ready for you to tell me,” Clark said, taking hold of both her hands.

Lois took a deep breath. She had told him more than she had meant to already. Slowly, she exhaled.

“He said that I would marry a super strong, super fast, super man, who could fly without a plane. An alien from another planet with whom I would share a love so durable, so true, mothers would share the story with their children. Our love, your goodness, and that of our children would be so compelling that a Utopian society would be built to emulate it.”

“No pressure there.” Clark gulped.

Lois let go of his hands and turned to look at the old barn. “He also said that you would lie to me. Keep things from me and break my heart a thousand times while trying to protect me. That you would charm me with your politeness and manners.” Lois glanced back and saw Clark smile tenderly at her, relief in his eyes.

“And from all that, you thought it was me?” he teased.

Lois gave him a sour expression and turned away again.

*How dare he make jokes while you’re yelling at him!*

Clark wrapped his arms around her, pressing his chest into her back and resting his head on her shoulder. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he whispered. “Why did you let me believe you were going to leave me for another man?”

His breath in her ear was making her knees weak again. She leaned back, allowing him to hold her up. She melted into his warmth. “I didn’t know at first that you were Kal. I mean, I *did*, but then when you refused to admit it, I started to doubt myself. I tried to convince myself that Kal was your twin brother. I didn’t...” She swallowed.

“Like him? Want him?” Clark suggested.

“Oh, no! I hated myself because I *was* attracted to Kal. I thought I was turning into my own father. I couldn’t believe I would do that to you. I like *you* — the Clark you. I didn’t want to like Kal. I didn’t want Tempus to be right. It felt like by loving you I was allowing that man to have control over my life. I fought falling in love with you tooth-and-nail.”

Clark chuckled softly. “*That*, I noticed.” He kissed her cheek.

“What changed your mind?”

“Who says I changed my mind, Clark?” she said, pushing away from him. She could feel him reluctantly letting her go. “Nothing’s set in stone. That’s why I didn’t tell you. I don’t want you to think you can get away with murder and that I’ll still love you. Because I can still walk away, if you continue to act the way you have been.”

He wrapped his arms around her again. “I won’t. I’ll be the perfect boyfriend. I promise.”

Lois turned around and rested her head on his chest. “Just be yourself, Clark. I don’t want perfection. It’s okay to mess up. Just not in the ways you have been.” She placed a tender kiss on his lips.

“Anyway, as I hear it, make-up sex is worth a fight now and again.”

*Hey! I was going to say that.*

“Are you sure... you still...” Clark swallowed. “... with me?”

*Definitely.*

Lois smiled. “I’m sure.”

*Actually it’s a non-negotiable part of this truce. If he doesn’t make love to you soon, you’re out of here. Right? Lois? Right? Lois!*

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he murmured into her ear.

“You won’t,” Lois reassured him.

“What if I lose control?” he asked.

“We’ll go slowly at...” She started to say and then changed her mind, pulling back to look him in the eye. “Clark? Have you ever lost control before?”

Clark blushed and broke eye contact. “That first time you kissed me at the store, I... uh...”

“Started to float?” she volunteered.

When Clark nodded, Lois grinned and gave him another kiss. “And here I thought it was you who made me feel that way, because you were such a good kisser.”

Clark returned her grin. “I am. No other man can actually make you float like me.”

Lois liked the way he was teasing her. She liked this open, honest, and confident Clark.

*If just kissing you makes him float, what would real intimacy do?*

She decided to keep this thought to herself. If Clark thought they might float while making love it might make him even more self-conscious.

“Whatever happens, happens, Clark. I trust that you won’t intentionally hurt me.” Lois leaned against his chest to whisper in his ear, “If your kisses are anything to go by, you’ll probably be so wonderful you’ll never be able to get rid of me.”

*3, 2, 1, Blast off!*

“So are you ready for another one of those kisses?” Clark asked.

*Told ya!*

Lois patted his chest. “Down boy. This is neither the time nor the place.”

Clark pulled her against his chest and kissed her cheek. “Okay, you let me know when you’re ready and I’ll be ready,” he told her, but she heard a slight waver to his voice.

“You sure about that, cowboy?”

“I’m willing to try anything to make you happy,” he replied. Then he added, “And keep you by my side.”

*Oooh. My decision? Mmmm. You might live to regret that, Clark. So, let’s see. There seems to be a nice grassy area over behind the house... Lois? Now is good, right? How about now? Now? Now! I said, NOW! Argh! You’re not listening to me, Lois!*

“Let’s wait until we’ve made it through the weekend at least and then see where we are. Okay?” Lois told him.

*Wait?* Her inner voice pouted.

“Make it?” Clark asked.

“No point in starting something if we all end up in jail,” she said with a sigh.

*Even more reason to start right now.*

“We’re not going to jail, Lois. If worst comes to worst — even though I earned that money fairly...”

Lois raised a brow at his word choice.

“... I would pay the money back. Somehow,” he said.

“Clark, why do you need all that extra money?” she asked, realizing she had never brought up the topic.

“Rent.”

“You live with your folks, Clark,” she reminded him.

“To save money, not because I’m one of those guys who needs Mommy to do his laundry,” he clarified.

Lois pulled out of his embrace to take his hand as they walked. “Who does your laundry now?”

Clark laughed. “I do!”

*Good for Martha!*

“Glad to hear it.”

“I moved back in with my parents two years ago, so I could put my rent money towards the restaurant’s lease,” he explained.

“Why don’t your parents just raise the prices on the menu to cover the extra costs?”

Clark sighed. “They did, but they didn’t want to raise them so high that we lost our customers.”

“The café seems to be doing well. Why would your landlord raise the rent so much?” Lois shook her head.

“We were told land values in the neighborhood had gone up and, therefore, so did the taxes.” Clark pressed his lips together in annoyance. “But my guess is that he wants us to move so that he can demolish the building and pat his ego with another tower.”

“Whoa there, Clark,” said Lois, setting her hand on his chest. “Want to try that one again?”

“Lex Luthor owns the building,” Clark admitted.

“Lex Luthor? The philanthropist and C.E.O. of LexCo?” Lois asked in surprise. “You’re acting as if this is personal.”

“It is personal for me. This lease is up for renewal again next month and we just know he’s going to raise it again. And we’re barely scraping by as it is, even with my extra jobs.” Clark sighed. “I’m going to need to find something that pays more than Daily Books but...”

“You’re not going to make me walk the streets, Clark,” she teased.

“What? No!” he gasped, so lost in his problems he didn’t recognize her joke.

“A joke,” she reassured him. “You have too many jobs as it is.” They were back at the old farmhouse. Lois climbed the front steps to the porch and sat down on the porch swing.

Clark gave her his panicked look again.

“What? Is it going to fall down on me?” she questioned him, holding out her hands.

He relaxed and followed her up the steps. “It might.”

“You want to do a structural test?” she inquired, pointing to his eyes.

Clark looked around for a moment and then sat down next to her. “What I want is another one of your kisses.”

“What?” she mocked surprise. “You prefer those to talking about Lex Luthor’s personal vendetta against the Kent family?”

Clark wrapped his arms around her pulling her close. “Well, when you put it that way...”

Lois giggled. “Clark!”

“No?”

*Yes! Yes! Yes! A thousand times yes!*

“Yes!” After a minute, Lois giggled again.

“What?” he asked, between kisses.

“Nothing.” She waved it off.

“No? It was something. What?” Clark stopped kissing her to look her in the eye.

Lois blushed. “I was just wondering what it would take to make you float again? Or have you already become immune to my kisses?” He grinned, slightly abashed. “Never! Just some self control.”

She set her hand on the blue lightning bolt on his chest of his MDS uniform. “How about... Oh, Clark. The truck! You’ve still got to return the truck!”

Clark sighed and then kissed her lightly. “Truthfully, I liked your idea better. But you’re right. Work first. Shall we?”

“How about you drop me off outside of town and meet me back here after returning the truck?” Lois suggested. “In an hour; say, at the park?”

“Do you think that’s a wise, Lois? Everyone will wonder how you got home so quickly from Metropolis,” he said as they went down the steps.

She looked at him mischievously. “Haven’t you been reading all the tabloids, Clark? I’m Superman’s girlfriend. I get around.”

Clark gave her a sour look.

“Fine,” she snapped, wrapping her arms around his neck for take-off. “Take me back to Metropolis. You’re absolutely right. It’s much too soon to meet my folks.”

“What? No!” He scooped her up. “I’m sure Superman would fly us out for that!” He appeared much too pleased by her suggestion and kissed her again.

“No. You’re right. It’s too soon. Maybe in five... no, ten years...”

“Lo-is,” Clark said exasperatingly as he blasted them into the air. “It’s a wonderful idea. I would love to meet your folks.”

*No! Not the parents. Lois, what were you thinking? They’ll scare him off.*

“Daddy’s a little overprotective and... well, Mom’s a lush. How about we wait until after we’re married?”

“Married?” he shook his head. “I don’t remember a proposal.”

“Of course there was. Kal told me that you wanted to spend your life with me,” she reminded him.

Clark grimaced as they floated above the clouds. “Oh, that twin brother of mine. Kal’s always telling you my secrets.”

Lois laughed and kissed his cheek.

“But the truth of the matter is I’m still a free agent. Fate doesn’t have a hold on me. Maybe I won’t want to marry you after all,” he taunted her.

*Not so funny, when he tosses your words back at you, is it?*

Lois pinched her lips together. “Very funny. Maybe Lex Luthor will fall for me after all,” she said loftily. “And here I was thinking about inviting you back to my place tonight.”

*He was only joking, Lois! And I know for a fact you weren’t thinking anything of the sort. You never listen to me.*

“Truce!” Clark called, quickly setting them down in a patch of trees out of town. “How about we both take this one day at a time?”

“Okay,” she replied, kissing him. “Neither of us is tied to destiny. Got it. So, it’s too soon to meet my parents.”

“I’ll still love you, Lois. Nothing will ever change that. Even meeting your folks,” he reassured her. “You still liked me after meeting *my* folks.”

Lois laughed. “How could I not? Actually, I liked you *more* after meeting Martha and Jonathan.”

He smiled. “I love them. And I’m sure I’ll love your folks too,” he told her, kissing her forehead.

She was beginning to regret her hasty joke. She had never planned on introducing him to *them*.

“One hour. The park in the center of town. See you there,” he said, before kissing her lightly and taking off into the air.

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#### Thursday — Night

Clark brought them back into the alley behind his folks’ café. He had then popped his head in to tell his dad he was taking their truck to drive Lois home. His dad actually had asked him if he would be bringing the truck back that night. Subtle, Dad.

*Yeah, you didn’t answer his question either, Kent.*

Clark smiled. No, he had not. Lois was inside Daily Books grabbing her stuff that she hadn’t gotten earlier when she was playing his human necktie. He let his smile turn again into a silly grin. He loved that woman. How could he not? She knew him, understood him better than any woman — save his mom — had. And Lois still loved him and desired him.

He couldn’t believe what an idiot he had been, being jealous of *himself* of all people. Tempus came from the future to convince Lois not to marry *him*. He, *Clark Kent*, was the man with whom Lois was destined to share true love. *Him!* Clark chuckled to himself. The thought had never even been a possibility in his mind. Duh! It seemed so obvious now. Why wouldn’t a crazy man from the future try and stop them from falling in love? He *was* Superman! Of course people even in the future would try and stop him.

If Clark were a stronger man — emotionally — he might even see this as a red flag. That being with him would put Lois in danger. But he wasn’t a stronger man, he knew he would do anything to make Lois happy and keep her safe and he knew — oh, what happy joy — that the best way to do that was to love her and be with her.

*Oh, darn!* his conscience muttered sarcastically.

Yes, being with him would, and had, garnered Lois attention that she wouldn’t have otherwise. But she was a strong woman — intellectually and emotionally — and she could handle it. Actually they made a very good match. He sighed. Together they made each other stronger. Together they could do anything. He liked that thought.

Clark was still nervous as hell about sleeping with her. Afraid what he might do. Afraid he might be too different — not physically. He knew physically he was almost identical to a human man — but what about the *other* stuff?

*Lois told you that you and your children create a Utopian society based on your beliefs.*

Yeah. No pressure there.

Clark had always wondered if he could have children with an

Earth woman.

*Well, that question was answered. Precautions are a necessity.*

Oh, gosh. He didn’t have any. He gulped. Perhaps he should go and run inside that convenience store there and get some. Oh, God. What would Lois think if she saw him? Of course, she had bought some herself *before* they had even kissed. Yes, he should go get some. He turned off the engine. That way they would be all set. Or would that offend Lois that he assumed she was ready? But if she wasn’t agreeable and she caught him buying them would that offend her into being even less willing? Or if she was ready and he didn’t buy any, then they couldn’t... No. It was better to be prepared, even if he wasn’t ready.

*Ready? Of course you are, Kent. You’ve wanted this woman since you met her. Since you first shared lunch with her. You want this woman.*

Clark knew that. He opened the door to his dad’s truck and put his keys in his pocket. He could do this. He was just buying condoms. He had never done *that* before.

*Actually, you did once before.*

Don’t think of Lana. Lois is not Lana. Lois was better for him.

One foot in front of the other. Into the store. Exhale. Good. Oh, for goodness sake! Look at the selection! Sizes? They came in sizes? For her pleasure? That sounded good. Or was it too much? Edible? Eww. No. He thought not. Glow in the dark? What kind of whackos were out there? What kind had she bought? He would just get the same.

Clark grabbed a box and took it to the counter. The old man at the register gave him a ‘good for you’ grin and Clark flushed with embarrassment. He would never buy anything at this store again. He would always be known as the man who bought condoms. And he definitely could never go into this store with Lois. Then the old man would know with whom Clark had used the condoms. Superman’s girlfriend! Oh, God! What was he doing?

He handed the man his money and got his change and his purchase in a plain brown bag. Oh, why did he feel so dirty? It was natural. Wonderful, even. And yet, he felt like he needed a shower after that experience. No. He would never buy anything there again. He wouldn’t be able to show his face in there again. Next time he had to buy condoms, he would fly over to Gotham City.

*Next time?*

Clark smiled as he walked out of the store. He liked that thought.

An arm encircled his waist and the most beautiful woman in the world kissed his cheek. “Ready?”

*Absolutely not!*

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#### Thursday Night — Later

Thankfully, Lois hadn’t been ready either. Phew! Clark had always known this would be a big step, but as it loomed right in front of him it seemed huge. He had been so nervous on the drive to her place that Lois had noticed and asked why he was so quiet.

It was probably best if the first time they made love wasn’t on the same day he met her parents, he mused. In preparation for that momentous occasion, he had gone home to change after returning his MDS truck. His bosses at MDS were going to start wondering why the truck had been returned so many hours after his last delivery. He had better not be late again tomorrow.

Clark had picked out a pair of khaki pants and the navy blue shirt he had worn on his first “date” with Lois.

He found Lois waiting for him at that little park in the center of Smallville, just as she had said she would. She had taken him not to her folks’ house, but to the little diner in town, with a huge “For Sale” sign in the window.

Lois turned to him and said, “Wouldn’t this be the perfect place for MJ’s Café to move to?”

“MJ’s Café isn’t moving,” he corrected her.

“Sure it is,” she told him. “If Lex Luthor wants to demolish the building where it’s currently located, it will have to move at some point. You and I both know Lex Luthor always gets his way. Maybe

we can work out a way for your parents to come back here.”

“My folks don’t want to move back to Smallville, Lois,” he told her. “They love Metropolis.”

“Do they, Clark?”

And then with those three little words, he realized she had been right. *He* loved Metropolis, but his folks had never felt at home there. Sure, they competed with the big boys with their little café. He knew his mom loved the museums, art galleries, and culture, but she hated the constant battle to survive. His dad never had fit in. He preferred the farmer’s market to anything else in town.

“I just hate to think of Lex Luthor winning this one battle,” he murmured.

“Ah, this one battle perhaps, but not the war.” Lois’s arm wrapped around his waist. “Your parents would be happier here, I think. And Smallville could use a good place to eat. This place was only decent on its good days. People came more for Maisie’s hospitality than the food. Without her, it just went downhill,” she told him.

“She’s done wonders for MJ’s Café. But it’s just a pipe dream, Lois. My folks are barely scratching by now. How could they afford to move back to Smallville and start anew? Where would they live?” Clark shook his head. “If they won the lottery perhaps...”

“I’ve got some ideas on that front,” Lois said. “And once we get you out from under Luthor’s thumb, you’d be free to start living life for you. Your parents would like that.”

*If they were going to play pipe dreams...*

“What about me? Where would I live?” he inquired, pulling her to his chest.

And then Lois had said the words that had given him the confidence to get out of the truck and buy those condoms later that evening. “You could always bunk with me until you got your feet on the ground.”

“But you only have the one bed which doubles as your couch,” he playfully reminded her.

Lois kissed him and said, “We could always share.”

Clark pulled her to him and said, “You win, Lois.”

“Win?”

“Your pipe dream, Lois, sounds better than any I could think of,” he told her.

Lois gazed at him with that saucy look of hers and told him, “Oh, that’s not a pipe dream, Clark. That’s totally doable.”

He pulled her closer and whispered, “You’re turning off my gravity switch, Lois.”

She laughed and said, “Then I’ll wait until it’s a little more private to tell you my pipe dream.”

Clark sighed. That woman could not possibly make him happier.

*Oh, yes, Kent, she can and she will... someday.*

He grinned. Oh, yeah, he guessed she could.

Clark almost had a heart attack meeting her father. Dr. Sam Lane had opened the front door of the simple Arts and Crafts home and smiled with delight at seeing his daughter. Kissing her cheek, he said, “Evening, Princess. What are you doing in town?”

Lois wrapped her arm around Clark’s elbow and pulled him close. “My boyfriend wanted to meet you,” she announced.

*Thanks, Lois.*

Dr. Lane looked Clark up and down. “So, you’re Superman?”

Clark’s jaw dropped open.

“No, Daddy. This is Clark Kent,” Lois giggled.

*Thanks again, Lois.*

Dr. Lane was no idiot. Clark instantly knew where Lois got her smarts.

“Is that so?” Dr. Lane said disbelievingly. “Come in. Come in. Ellen, Lois brought Superman home for dinner,” he called to his wife. That had been his heart attack moment.

Lois’s mother was as petite as her father was tall. She had come in and kissed each of Lois’s cheeks and then smacked her husband on the chest. “Don’t be ridiculous, Sam. Lois isn’t dating Superman. She’s dating a fellow named Clark.” Lois’s mom briefly shook his hand and

then disappeared back into the kitchen, saying, “Does he look anything like Superman to you, Sam? *No!*”

Dr. Lane eyed Clark suspiciously nonetheless and muttered, “Well, at least he’s got the good sense not to meet his girlfriend’s parents in tights.” As he shut the front door, he called to his wife, “Then how did they get to Smallville?”

“How should I know, Sam? Why don’t you ask them?” Ellen Lane shouted back from the kitchen.

“How did you get here?” Dr. Lane asked.

Flabbergasted, Clark glanced at Lois.

*She warned you not to visit her folks. You should have listened to your extremely smart girlfriend, Kent.*

“We flew, Daddy. Superman gave us a lift on his way out west. He and Clark are good friends,” Lois lied through her teeth.

Dr. Lane pressed his lips together and crossed his arms. “Uh-huh.”

“Why don’t you fix them a drink, Sam?” Ellen Lane yelled from the kitchen.

Clark glanced at Lois. “Water would be just fine with me.” He didn’t need to be the cause for Lois’s mom to get drunk. Unfortunately, alcohol had no effect on him.

“Water sounds great,” agreed Lois.

Dr. Lane rolled his eyes and whispered to his daughter, “Your mother stopped drinking cold turkey since she saw that article you wrote in the *Wichita Eagle* on Monday. She said if her daughter could interview Superman, she could stop drinking. So, we’re a dry household at the moment.” Dr. Lane evidently believed the jury was still out on his wife’s newfound sobriety.

“Miracles never cease,” Lois mumbled, clearly agreeing with her father.

And the evening had gone downhill from there. Two hours later, when they finally said they had to go, her father inquired how the young couple would be getting back to Metropolis.

“Superman said he’d stop back by and pick us up, so we should really not keep him waiting,” Lois replied, dragging Clark through the door with a wave.

They had walked three blocks before Clark had been able to speak again. “He really thinks I’m Superman,” he stammered. “I don’t think he liked me.”

“Hey, you’re the one who wanted to meet them. I would have been just fine postponing that night for a few years.” Lois groaned. “Of course, he didn’t like you, Clark. You’re boinking his little girl.”

“I most certainly am not,” he gasped.

*If you were going to be disliked for something, it should at least be something for which you are guilty.*

Lois had then wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. “He doesn’t know you’re a gentleman, Clark. Even if you were Superman...” She winked at him. “You still wouldn’t be good enough for his little girl. Take me home, Clark. I’m ready for some alone time with you.”

When they had finally gotten back to her apartment — after picking up his father’s truck, her stuff at Daily Books, and the condoms — Clark had been a nervous wreck. He hadn’t known how to make the first move or even if he should. Or if he should wait for an obvious clue from Lois. He decided on option number three and was ever so glad he did.

Lois told him that she was going to get ready for bed. He gulped. This was it: the do-or-die moment.

“You are welcome to stay and cuddle, Clark...”

His heart practically exploded at these words.

“But don’t expect more than cuddling tonight.”

Relief flooded through him. He had never been so glad that he had left the decision up to her.

As much as Clark loved Lois, he did not know how much of a gentleman he would be lying in a bed with her and he hadn’t wanted to take that risk. She was not ready and God knew *he* wasn’t ready. His body didn’t always listen to reason though.

Clark checked her place once more for bugs. It had been clean.

And he kissed her goodnight. Actually, her goodnight kiss had switched off his gravity and made him want to stay the night.

It was Lois who brought them back to Earth. “You’d better go, Clark, before we do something neither of us are ready for.”

*But... But... But... Kent bought condoms!*

Clark nodded and kissed her cheek once again, bowing to her wishes. As he left, he checked for sleazy photographers but found none.

*Oh, no. Why would they be there when Clark Kent was there? No, they only were around when Superman made middle-of-the-night visits.*

Clark still needed to clear his thoughts as he drove home in his dad’s truck, so he turned on the radio.

“Howdy, all you Superman fans out there. It’s Lenny Stoke, The Soundman again. And that was *Fly like an Eagle* by the Steve Miller Band, dedicated by some of your anonymous fans over at the Fort Truman Air Force Base. Before that was *Bad Moon Rising* by Creedence Clearwater Revival, dedicated by Jason and the guys at the Discount Used Office Furniture Warehouse on Bessolo Boulevard.”

Clark’s brow furrowed. *Bad Moon Rising?* That didn’t sound positive, unless they meant Superman would save them from a ‘bad moon rising’. But for some reason he didn’t think that was the meaning they intended.

“Next up the rock ballad *The Flame* by Cheap Trick, dedicated by a group calling themselves the Toasters, who asked me to relay this message. ‘Stay off their turf and they’ll keep the flame away from your girl.’ Whoa! Not cool, man, to go after Superman’s bit of fluff.”

Clark turned off the radio. He had heard enough. He parked the truck and ran up the back stairs to the apartment he shared with his folks.

Before he even opened the door, he could hear his mom on the phone, “He’s just coming in, Lois. Hold on.”

Clark grabbed the phone out of his mom’s hand. “Sorry,” he quickly apologized. “Lois, did you just hear the radio?”

“Radio? No. I wanted to tell you I found something in my bathroom cabinet as I was getting ready for bed and it kind of freaked me out.”

Clark carried the cordless phone into his bedroom and shut the door. His mom didn’t need to hear his confession, “The condoms?”

“Yes!” she gasped.

“I bought them.”

“Thank goodness. I thought the burglars had come back...”

Clark wished he was relaxed enough to chuckle at her jump in logic. “Lois, on the radio just now, a group of guys called the Toasters phoned in to Lenny Stoke’s Soundman show and threatened Superman’s girlfriend if he didn’t leave their turf alone.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I’m...”

“Clark, do you think they could be the ones behind all those fires in the Suicide Slum?” she asked.

“Lois, that’s not important...”

“Sure, it’s important, Clark. You’ve got a suspect in all those arson fires. You should definitely mention it to Henderson or whoever Superman mentions things like that to at the police. Oh, Henderson wanted you to drop off...”

“Yeah, I got the message,” Clark interrupted. “Lois, Superman is going to come get you and bring you to my place.”

“No!” Lois protested.

“No?” Clark was stunned. Didn’t she realize this was a viable threat on her life? “Lois, you are in grave danger. If anything...”

“Then *you* come. You come and stay with me, Clark. Or *you* come and take me to your place. Superman cannot be seen here.”

Clark exhaled in relief. “I’ll hop in the truck and be over in a few. Thank you, Lois, for keeping a clear head,” he said. “I don’t know what I’d do if something ever happened to you.”

“I love you, too, cowboy. See you in a few,” she replied, hanging up.

Clark clicked off the phone and smiled.

*You gotta love that woman, Kent. Here you were trying to protect her and she goes and protects you right back.*

He sighed and returned the phone to his mom.

“What’s the matter?” she asked, concern written all over her face.

“Some guys threatened Superman’s girlfriend on the radio,” he told her. “I’m heading back to pick her up.”

“Clark.” His mom grabbed his arm. “We’ve got to get it out there that she’s *Clark’s* girlfriend, not Superman’s.”

“I’m trying, Mom. If you or Dad have any ideas, I’m open to them.” He sighed and then kissed her cheek. “I met her folks tonight. Her dad hates me.”

His mom smiled. “He must know he has a serious contender for his daughter’s heart.”

Clark smiled at his mom and gave her a quick hug. She always knew just what to say.

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A half-hour later, Lois and Clark returned to his parents’ apartment. Martha was still awake.

“Jonathan said to tell you that you’re welcome here anytime,” Martha informed Lois as Clark put her things down in his room.

Lois smiled gratefully. “Thank you.” Then she leaned closer to Clark’s mom and whispered, “I could really use some chocolate.”

“Nerves always give me the munchies, too,” Martha told her, taking a deep, rich, chocolate pie with a graham cracker crust and meringue topping out of the fridge.

Lois glanced to see that Clark was still out of the room and lowered her voice more. “Cramps.”

Martha sympathized and cut her a huge piece of pie. “No wonder Clark came home tonight.” She laughed.

“Martha!” Lois gasped. “He’ll hear you.”

Which only made his mother laugh harder. “Of course, he can *hear* me. He’s only in the next room. Lois, he can hear you at the bookstore from here if he tried. We tend not to have any secrets in this family,” Martha said, patting Lois on the arm.

*Right. Super hearing. Good going there, Lane.*

Lois bowed her hot face as Clark returned into the room.

*Oh, goodness! You hadn’t meant to tell Clark about your period.*

“Mmmm. That looks good. Can I have a slice?” Clark said, thankfully not responding to their whispered conversation.

Martha raised a brow at her son.

“And I can get it myself. Milk, Lois?” he asked.

“Thank you,” she murmured, hiding her face under her hair, unable to look at him.

Martha kissed Clark’s cheek. “I’m off to bed. See you kids in the morning.”

“Night, Mom. Thanks.”

“G’night, Martha,” Lois said with her mouth full of pie.

After Martha had shut her bedroom door, Clark sat down next to Lois. She still couldn’t look at him.

“Not feeling well?” he asked softly.

Lois darted her eyes at him and then back away. “Stomach cramps,” she murmured.

He nodded. “You think you should eat Fudge Pie on an upset stomach?”

Lois put the full force of her disbelieving gaze on him.

*Please tell me he’s not that naive.*

Clark swallowed. “Oh.”

*Phew!*

With a glance towards his parents’ room, Clark lowered his voice some more, “Is that why...” He blushed and didn’t finish his sentence. She reached over and took his hand. “Yes.”

He nodded again.

“Are you going to tell me why you’re hiding condoms at my place?” she asked, also keeping her voice low. If he could ask humiliating questions, so could she.

“Well, I’m certainly not going to be using them here!” he stammered.

Lois tried not to giggle at his embarrassment. “That’s true. Although with my place being stalked by criminals and the tabloids at the moment, it’s probably not the best place either.”

He gulped but did not reply.

Lois stood up and kissed his cheek. “We’ve got at least a week to find someplace better. There’s no rush.” She placed her dishes in the sink.

Clark came up behind her and put his dishes in the sink as well. “No pressure there,” he murmured.

“You know it won’t be my first time, Clark. I can wait until you’re comfortable,” she said, relishing his warmth as he washed the dishes with his arms surrounding her.

“Can you?” he whispered into her ear.

Lois’s knees turned to jelly.

*Oh, God, no!*

“Trust me, Clark. You’ll be the first one to know when I can no longer wait,” she replied hoarsely, pushing out of his arms and running into his bedroom to grab her overnight bag, before heading into the bathroom.

When she returned to his room, her PJs on and teeth brushed, Clark was waiting on his bed, wearing his Superman suit.

“Is it my turn for the couch?” she teased.

*Those aren’t his PJs, you silly.*

Clark stood up and moved away from the bed. “I was going to fly out to speak with someone at the police station about the threat against you.”

Lois climbed into his bed and raised a brow. “Dressed like that? It doesn’t really shout ‘she’s *not* my girlfriend’.”

Clark sighed, yet continued to stand there awkwardly.

“Was there something else, Clark?”

He nodded. “Someone activated the globe last night.”

Lois opened her arms and he sat down beside her, letting her hold him. “How do you know?”

“The night you activated the sphere — the night we first kissed — I saw a bright light and the images and Jor-El’s voice...” Clark told her.

“Jor-El?”

“My birth father. Lara is my birth mother,” he confessed.

“This was told to you in the first message, the part before I woke up?” she asked.

“Yes.”

*You always knew he was holding something back. Not anymore. Love this new man.*

“What did this latest message say?” Lois inquired, running her fingers through his hair.

“That the globe would navigate the hyperlight drives — for the spaceship — and that they were sending me to Earth,” he said.

“So it was no mistake that you came here?”

“No.”

“And whoever has the globe knows that you came to Earth as a baby as well?” Lois murmured.

“Yes, and that I’m alone.” Clark sighed.

“You are not alone, Clark.” Lois held him tighter. “You have your parents and Perry.”

He glanced up at her and his gaze was so intense that her heart began to race.

*Didn’t you forget someone in that list, Lois?*

A hint of a smile crept to the edge of her mouth. “Do I need to even say it?”

Clark cupped her jaw with his hand, placing a soft kiss on her lips.

*Me! Me! Oh, me too! Yes. Yes. Me! Me! Me! You’ve got me, babe!*

“Since you have a connection with the globe, do you think if it got activated again you could track it, home in on its location, its power?” she asked.

Clark pulled back and looked at her eye to eye. “Maybe. Possibly.” A satisfied smile grew on his face. “Yeah. I think so.” He placed another gentle kiss on her lips. “Goodnight, Lois.”

“Goodnight, Kal-El.” Then Lois gasped, covering her mouth and looking around quickly. “You don’t think that Clark saw us, do you? He gets awful jealous.”

Clark’s grin reached his eyes. “Minx.” As he floated off of the bed, she blew him a kiss. He did a fancy swirl in the air as he caught it, before disappearing.

Lois settled down into Clark’s bed, happy to have his scent surround her, yet wishing she had the man with her instead.

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Lois woke up several hours later to find a human shaped shadow in the room.

She gasped and Clark was instantly by her side, apologizing, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. I just forgot to get my PJs earlier.” *He can wake you up anytime, anyplace.*

“It’s okay, Clark. What did the police say?” she asked, sitting up and wiping the sleep from her eyes.

“I decided that you were right and didn’t mention the direct threat against you, only the part where the Toasters should be suspects in those fires I’ve been fighting in the old Hob’s Bay. I bumped into Henderson as I was leaving. He said that they had been getting calls to the station all night about people worried about your safety. He said Superman should tell Clark that the police were now keeping an eye on your building,” Clark said, running his hand over her hair. “I’m grateful to the boys in blue.”

*I prefer my protection in the form of red, blue, and yellow.*

“I’m sure Mayson is, too,” Lois admitted wryly. “And it’s nice to know that Officer Henderson at least knows I’m *your* girlfriend, not Big Blue’s.”

He pressed his lips together. “One down, ten-plus million left to go.” He went to stand up, but didn’t.

“Was there something else?”

*I know. He wants to sleep with you. Say yes.*

“No.” Clark stood up. “Yes.” He sat back down, taking hold of both of her hands.

*See, I told you.*

“Your first time wasn’t with that guy from college, was it? The one who got you fired from the student paper?” he inquired.

*Oh, no. He did not just go there!*

Lois’s eyes opened wide as she stared at Clark.

He stood up as she glowered at him. “Never mind,” he stammered. “It wasn’t important. Goodnight, Lois.” He super sped out the door, shutting it behind him.

Tears welled up in Lois’s eyes.

*Why couldn’t he have just kissed you and held you and loved you? Why did he have to bring up those old memories? Why? Why? Why?*

“No, Clark,” Lois murmured. “That... that was my second time.”

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Clark sat down on the couch and buried his head in his hands.

*How could you have been so insensitive, Kent?*

Lois was being so kind and caring and patient with him, he just thought that maybe something horrible had happened during her first time.

“No, Clark,” he heard her whisper from the other room. “That... that was my second time.” He could hear her barely constrained tears.

“I’m sorry,” he replied, hopefully loud enough for her to hear.

“Me, too. He was a real jerk.”

Jerk was the kindest of the words bouncing around in his head to describe that guy.

Lois sighed. “I’m not an Ice Queen, you know.”

His head snapped up.

*Isn’t that what Jimmy said Claude and Cat had called her?*

“I never thought you were, Lois,” he replied.

“I told Linda once, before she betrayed me, back when I thought she was my friend. I told her about my...” Lois took a deep breath. “My first time. She’s the one who nicknamed me the Ice Queen.”

*Kent, you’re about to find out why you crossed a line by giving Linda an interview.*

“Because he died.”

Clark winced. That was what she hadn't told Lana. What she hadn't wanted to tell him earlier.

*Pete.*

“He was in such a horrible place after Lana dumped him. Depressed. Alone. I gave myself to him, not because I loved him as more than a friend, but because I wanted to heal his fragile ego... I wanted my friend back, not this shell of a man that remained after she had dumped him.”

Clark focused on the closed bedroom door, willing himself not to look through it.

*You don't really want to know this, do you, Kent?*

No, he didn't. But it happened a long time ago. It was Lois's ancient history. He was her future. And he couldn't stop listening if he tried.

“Only afterwards, I realized I did care for him. I did love him as more than a friend. I was supposed to go on that camping trip with him. Only my father found out at the last minute and forbade me to go. I snuck out and went to Pete anyway. I came back home late that night so my father wouldn't know. Then the next day when I returned, I found... found...”

Clark couldn't hold himself back any longer. She needed him and a second later, he was holding her as she cried onto his shoulder.

“I always blamed Lana for his death, but I knew... it was my fault. He died because I didn't stay. *I killed him. Me!*”

“You didn't kill him, Lois,” he whispered.

“Sure I did,” she sobbed. “If I had been there, I could have done something; I could have saved him.”

A chill went down Clark's spine. Those words sounded familiar. “Trust me, Lois, when I tell you that it wasn't your fault. Just because you cannot rescue someone who dies doesn't put their death in your hands.” He kissed the top of her head.

“But it feels that way,” she told him.

“Yes,” he agreed. “It sure does.”

Lois scooted away from him and, for a moment, he thought she was distancing herself from him. Then he realized she was only making room for him on the bed.

Clark lay down next to her with care, holding her in his arms. It felt right. Comfortable, yet not sexual. Just tender, loving. Right.

Clark thought Lois was falling asleep when she spoke again. “It must be difficult, this life you've chosen for yourself.”

“It can be. At times,” he replied, running a hand over her hair. “And it chose me more than I chose it. I feel I was given these abilities for a reason and that reason must have been to help. I can't stand around and know I can help and then not help. That's just not who I am.”

“Exactly,” she agreed, her arm draped over his waist in a hug.

He tilted her chin so he could see her face. “What do you mean?”

“It's who *you* are, Clark. *You* cannot stop yourself from helping.”

Lois gave him a little smile. “Someone else given these abilities would turn to crime. They would use the abilities to improve their own life. *You* are Superman, not only because you can do super things, but because you yourself are super.”

Gazing into her eyes, Clark saw no humor, just love. He lowered his lips to hers and kissed her. He made it a soft, tender kiss, knowing that it could easily turn to more. She had already told him ‘not tonight’ and he had left the precautions back at her place.

For the first time in his life, he felt no nerves, no qualms about making love, especially to this super woman in his arms. He knew when the time was right for both of them he would have no fear about making love. “You're pretty special yourself, Superwoman.”

Lois laughed. “I am *not* Superwoman.”

“No? I think if you had my powers, you'd be super, too,” he replied.

“No,” she said, snuggling against him. “Terrific. Wonderful. Gorgeous. Stupendous maybe. But not super.”

Clark chuckled. “Yes. All of the above. You'd be the most ultra

woman of them all.” He grinned. “That's who you are, my Ultra Woman.”

“Ugh. That's just awful, Clark,” she groaned with a hint of laughter. She reached up and pulled his head to hers. There was something in that kiss that set him on fire. He opened his eyes and saw the same desire in her eyes. They came together and kissed again.

Her fingers danced across his tummy causing a sensation he had once heard described as butterflies, but had never felt until now. His hand slid under her shirt and up her bare back, where her bra usually would stop him.

*That's right, Kent. No bra. She's just in shorts and a t-shirt. Ready for bed.*

Clark pulled Lois closer. The feel of her bare skin against his hand sent shivers dancing up his arm and to all his extremities. It no longer felt like they were in bed, but floating on a cloud.

When Lois took off his shirt, Clark knew he should stop them, but then had started kissing his chest and he found he could not. Normally, he could hold his breath for approximately twenty minutes. He had now found an exception. When Lois touched him that time dwindled down to around twenty seconds. His heart beat faster than he ever remembered it beating before. In anticipation maybe. In pleasure without a doubt.

It was only when she started to remove her own shirt that Clark remembered where they were. Well, not exactly *where* they were.

“Lois,” he murmured, lowering her shirt back down.

“Mmmm,” she responded, still kissing him.

“If you take off your shirt, I won't be able to stop,” he warned her.

“Then don't stop,” she whispered between kisses.

*Oh, God, she is making this difficult.*

Clark cleared his throat and tried again. “Lois, I love you...”

“And I love you, Clark,” she replied, kissing down his neck.

“Lois, believe me, I would like nothing more than to make love to you right now...” he said, his willpower quickly dissolving as her hand slid up his leg.

“So, make love to me,” Lois said, pressing her lips to his again. Her tongue became entangled with his.

“Oh, God, I wish we could, Lois,” he moaned, not being able to stop himself from kissing her.

She pulled back and gazed at him. “Why can't we, Clark? We're both adults.”

Clark grimaced as his face flushed. “My parents are in the next room, Lois.”

Her eyes opened wide and she started to giggle. “You're right, Clark.” Lois looked so sweet and innocent and charming as she bit her swollen bottom lip that her next words took him by surprise. “Unless we are really, really quiet.”

She wrapped her legs around him, pulling him back up to her, and he came willingly. Who needed a big bed when they had the whole ceiling?

“Clark,” she murmured as he went to remove her shirt, his fingers roaming over her skin.

“Mmmm,” he replied between kisses.

“We left the condoms at my place, didn't we?” she stated more than asked.

Clark groaned as that realization splashed him like a dive in the Arctic. He lay down next to her. “Yeah.”

She curled up into the crook of his arm. “When we get the timing right, Clark, this is going to be fantastic.”

He kissed her head. “Oh yeah.”

She was quiet for a few minutes as they snuggled.

“Clark?”

“Hmmm?”

“Are we lying on the ceiling?” she asked gently.

“A bit,” he admitted.

Lois held on a little tighter to him. “That's new.”

“Hmmm,” he replied, not knowing exactly how to reply.

“Do you sleep on the ceiling a lot?” Her question sounded

cautious, wary.

“No. But it’s quite comfortable. I could get used to it,” he teased, rolling back on top of her. Slowly, he floated them back down to the twin bed, Lois now lying on his chest.

“You better be careful, Clark,” she said, cuddling against him again.

“Why’s that?”

“I’m becoming completely addicted to you,” Lois replied.

“I’m already addicted to you, Lois.”

She giggled. “We’re doomed, Clark. What kind of future can a couple of junkies like us have?”

A multitude of images flashed through Clark’s mind, all of them good. He sighed as he pulled her close and a satisfied smile crept onto his face. “We’ll make do, Lois. We’ll make do.”

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#### Friday — Late Afternoon

Lois clocked out with an exhausted sigh. It had been an impossibly long day. The groupies had stopped by every hour. Asking for autographs. Asking if Superman was taking her to lunch. Asking to have her photo taken with them. Asking if the blue suit came off. Asking if Superman was picking her up after work.

Dan Scardino stopped by again and she sicced Jack on him. She ran to take her fifteen-minute break upstairs and then phoned Luthor’s office one last time. This time she used the alias Lola Dane, reporter for the weekly *Planet*. Still no go on the meeting.

No matter how many times the *Metropolis Star* printed the quote that Lois Lane was dating Clark Kent, no matter how many times *she* told people, everyone still thought she was Superman’s girl. Clark refused to have Superman flat out deny it because the Man in Blue didn’t lie. To him, Lois was his girlfriend. And since he was Superman, he couldn’t deny it. Semantics!

Her long day was going to be even longer. Lois hadn’t even started getting ready for working at the Luthor party that night. It was her last chance to contact the reclusive billionaire and get him to fire B. Gerald Tempus, so she wouldn’t have to go on her blackmail date.

And lastly, it had been a long day because she couldn’t get her mind off Clark and their hot and steamy, yet still not sexual night. Her body was still stiff from coming to the edge of pleasure, tasting it, but not being able to jump in. A small part of her wished they had gone ahead and made love.

*What’s life without a little risk?*

But the larger part of Lois knew that she needed to make their first time more than a glorified groping session at his parents’ apartment. That man of hers turned Lois into a silly teenager at his touch. Which wouldn’t be so bad if her brain didn’t turn into that of an unthinking gooey teenager as well.

*Who are you calling a teenager?*

Lois tossed her overnight bag over her shoulder and walked down the escalator.

“Lois!” she heard a voice calling to her. She glanced back and saw Jack jogging up. “Clark asked me to walk you to your bus stop, in case he didn’t make it in time to get you.”

She rolled her eyes with another sigh. “I’ll be fine, Jack.”

“He said you’ve been getting threats since those tabloid photos came out. He’s worried,” Jack explained, walking out of the store with her.

*Your boyfriend. Can’t live with him. Can’t shoot him.*

“He excels at that,” Lois responded.

“Yeah. He’s quite a super guy,” replied Jack.

Lois turned and faced the kid. “Excuse me?”

Jack looked her directly in the eye. “You heard me.”

Her jaw dropped, then just as quickly she snapped it shut and pretended she hadn’t heard what he had just said.

Jack grabbed her arm and kept them walking. “Lois, I know you won’t believe me, but this is bigger than you and your boyfriend.”

“What are you talking about?” she stammered.

“Perry didn’t tell you?” He shook his head. “He didn’t tell me

either, but I figured it out.”

“What?”

“Don’t you think it’s strange that the people Perry has hired to work at Daily Books are all specialists in their departments?”

Lois gaped at Jack as he continued.

“Joe Schwartz is an ex-vice cop. Benny Paulson used to work for the City. Pete Thompson was the official sportscaster for the Gotham Knights before he lost his voice to throat cancer. Sweet Sophie from second floor apprenticed under famed French chef Monsieur Bouchard. Cat knows the dirt on everyone worth knowing from Boston to DC. Even Claude was well traveled. Where do you think he picked up all those accents? And Clark... well, he was just a coup.”

Lois ignored the comment about Clark and said, “What are you saying? That Perry hired all of us for some *other* reason than working at the bookstore?” She stopped walking and placed her hands on her hips when he nodded. “Then why did he hire you? Or me for that matter? I’m no expert in anything.”

“Well, he hired me because he felt he owed me something. And you... you were a fluke,” Jack acknowledged and quite poorly at that. She raised a brow. “A fluke?”

“Honestly, he probably just hired you because you agreed to take the job. We’ve gone through six Periodical Supervisors in as many months. Why do you think it was such a mess when you got there?”

Lois’s tongue glossed over her front teeth. “So you’re telling me I’m the biggest sucker in Metropolis? Great.” She turned and stormed off down the street.

“You’re right, he probably hired you because you had experience on that small town gazette...” He waved his hand.

“*Smallville Post*,” she corrected.

“That’s the one. He probably didn’t realize you would be his diamond in the rough,” Jack’s vague description soothed her bruised ego a bit, but she still had no idea what he was trying to say.

“What is bigger than me and Clark?” she asked, slowing down to look at him again.

*Directness is always a good policy.*

Jack took her elbow and continued down the sidewalk. He lowered his voice, “Perry is trying to rebuild the *Planet*.”

“His weekly...”

“No, the **Daily Planet**,” he told her. At her dumbfounded expression, he went on. “Back in the day, the *Daily Planet* was the newspaper. It rivaled the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*. Lex Luthor bought the paper in the mid-70s and ran it into the ground. Finally he blew up the offices in 1978.” Jack spoke this last part through gritted teeth. “Three printing plant workers were killed in the explosion.”

*What is he so worked up about? Jack couldn’t have been more than a toddler in 1978?*

“Perry used to work for this *Daily Planet*?” she asked.

Jack nodded. “Foreign Correspondent in the ‘60s and then Investigative Reporter. The best, so I hear. He’s got a Pulitzer, a couple of Merriweathers, and five Kerths hiding in a closet somewhere.”

Lois’s jaw dropped open again.

*Perry? Sweet, yet gruff rough bulldog of a manager Perry?*

Jack continued to pull her down the sidewalk.

“Wait.” She shifted free and faced Jack trying to understand his elaborate conspiracy theory. “Perry thinks Lex Luthor blew up the *Planet*. Why would Luthor do that? And if he had, wouldn’t he have been prosecuted for it?”

Jack shook his head in pity. “What? Do you think only guilty people end up in jail? That’s not how the system works, Lois. The more money someone has, the more someone can get away with stuff. My dad was Perry’s research assistant when Luthor took over the *Planet*. He got demoted ‘temporarily’ to the printing plant.”

“Jack?” Lois said softly.

*You now know how Perry owes Jack.*

“Yes, my father was killed in the explosion. My mom was pregnant with Denny at the time. The cops ‘found’ bomb-making stuff

in Dad's car and pinned the whole thing on him, so Luthor and LexCo Insurance refused to pay us the life insurance money the families of the other killed workers got."

Suddenly puzzle pieces fell into place and Lois's tongue crossed her front teeth for a second time in this conversation as she said, "You're the one stealing CDs." It wasn't a question.

"Yeah."

*Wow! Jack has Clark's sheepish expression down pat.*

"Perry told you about my blackmailer." Another statement.

"Hey, I'm sorry about that. I asked him if he knew anything after you got those flowers," Jack admitted.

"So, are you going to confess and get me off the hook?" Lois pursed her lips, knowing the answer before he said it.

"Hell, no! Luthor and LexCo owe Denny and me big time. I'm not going to jail while that man still walks around free. If it weren't for the Boss, Denny and I wouldn't have ended up in foster care," Jack snapped.

"The Boss? Please, you're all acting like Luthor's the head of some big crime syndicate." She threw up her hands. "The man donates money to hospitals, art museums, and science foundations. He employs over a million people in this city. He's not some huge crime boss." She shook her head and continued stomping down the street.

"They don't all drive garbage trucks or cement mixers and talk with a Jersey accents, Lois," Jack said, following her.

She rolled her eyes. "So far I've seen no proof that the man has a personal vendetta against the Kent family, framed your father, or blew up Perry's famed newspaper. Lex Luthor is a businessman. I'm sure you are all ants in his life and when he walks, some ants get squished. That's corporate America, Jack. Always has been, always will be. The rich get richer, the poor get poorer. It doesn't make him evil. You guys are crazy."

"Okay," Jack said, although not in agreement. "How about this, Lois? Clark said your apartment got robbed recently, right?"

Lois flipped up her hands. "Yeah. So. Big city. Bad things happen."

*You still need to call Angela's dad Louie and see if he knows guys who know...*

"Did you also read in the paper that the man who plastered your and Superman's photos across *Dirt Digger Weekly* was found shot?"

Lois stopped. "What? Randy Goode was shot? There *is* justice in the world."

"No, Lois. The photographer who took the photos."

*The photographer you sent Henderson to find? Did Clark know about that?*

"Maybe," Jack went on dryly. "... he was just another ant. Or maybe he saw something or someone he shouldn't have entering your place."

Lois spun around and pointed her finger in the young man's face. "If you're implying that Clark or I or Superman..."

Jack laughed. "Listen to yourself, Lois. No, I told you. This is bigger than your boyfriend problems. Much bigger."

"I don't have boyfriend problems," she shouted, louder than she probably should.

Lois's inner voice tentatively raised her hand, *I know of a problem...*

Jack grinned, wiggling his eyebrows. "I bet you don't."

Lois harrumphed as she sat down at the bus stop, arms crossed.

He stood next to her. "Just think about what I said."

A classic Mustang pulled up to the bus stop. Jimmy leaned over the passenger seat and called out the window to her. "Hi, beautiful. Need a lift?"

Lois's eyes darted to Jack and she bolted for Jimmy's car.

"YesThankYouVeryMuch," she gushed, opening the door.

Jack leaned in through the open window as he closed the car door. "And don't worry about tomorrow night, Lois. Perry's got it covered."

Lois snapped her belt. "Drive!"

Jimmy waved to Jack and pulled into traffic.

"You're a lifesaver, Jimmy. I've always thought Jack was a little strange, but clearly he's nuts." She exhaled. "You should hear some of his conspiracy theories." She shook her head. "I live..."

"I know. CK gave me directions," Jimmy informed her.

"What?!" she gasped.

*How dare that alien sex god...*

"He asked me to give you a lift home and then over to the Luthor party," Jimmy explained. That was when she noticed his attire: black pants and a white button down shirt.

*A head's up would have been nice, Clark.*

"You're working the party?" she stammered. It was amazing that anything surprised her anymore.

"Yeah. When MJ's Café caters, it's all hands on deck," Jimmy said, turning the car left on yellow. "The tips are worth it."

Lois raised a brow. "I suppose you're in on Jack's crazy theories, too."

Jimmy shrugged. "I think it'd be pretty cool, if he were right. Working for a real newspaper, getting out of the back room. Feeling the sunlight on my skin every now and again. It would explain why Perry is always encouraging my photography." He frowned. "Of course, other than those few Superman shots, he hasn't bought anything. My first year at the bookstore, I felt more like I worked maintenance, the stuff the Chief had me do. It was CK who encouraged me to stand up to Perry, tell him I was more than a glorified gofer." He chuckled. "Personally, I'd be happy to be full-time somewhere. I could finally quit delivering pizzas on the weekends."

She shook her head. "You're not full time? You're there as much as me."

"Seven hours a day, five days a week. Thirty-five hours. It took me a year before I got benefits. The only ones who get forty hours are the Supervisors and Managers. All the rest of us cashiers and minions, we're part-time," Jimmy explained. "LexCo policy."

"You're not in charge of Receiving?"

He smiled indulgently at her. "Me? No, I wish I were. Rochelle's Receiving Manager. You haven't met her yet. Her daughter just had a baby, so she's been on leave since you started. She'll be back next week."

Lois took in the man sitting next to her as if for the first time. It felt like everything she knew about everyone was wrong. She leaned back in her seat and focused on the street in front of them. Why couldn't she have a normal boyfriend? A normal job in a normal company? And a normal life? In a normal city?

*And give up Clark? No way! You've finally got him where you want him. One more night like last... Hello Nirvana! Normal, believe me, Lois, is highly overrated.*

"CK says some guys have been threatening you," Jimmy started to say after a few minutes of silence.

"Not me, per se," she said, sinking down in her seat. Lois was tired of this subject already. "Superman's girlfriend."

"Right." Jimmy went silent for another minute. "But everyone — everyone who doesn't know you, who hasn't seen you and CK together — thinks that's you."

"Uh-huh."

How were they ever going to dig themselves out of this hole? She knew someday it would all blow over when the next celebrity scandal hit the fan, but until then, her life wouldn't be her own.

Jimmy chuckled. "You know what you need. You need the media spotlight on you —"

"Been there. Got that."

"No. I mean, you and CK as a couple," he corrected.

Lois rolled her eyes. What could she and Clark do as a couple that could knock her and Superman off the front page of the tabloids?

Jimmy began to titter. Lois glanced over at him.

"No," he told himself as his titters turned into chuckles. "That's too... no..." Then his chuckles flowed into a guffaw of laughter.

"What?!"

*Men! Why couldn't they ever say exactly what they were thinking?*

Jimmy pulled the car up to another red light and gazed at her as he drowned in his laughter. He wiped his eyes at her sour expression.

“Well?”

Finally he was able to speak when the light turned green. “You and CK could always...” and laughter overtook him again.

Lois waited. She would push him into her pool to knock it out of him if need be, but they were grasping at straws. Any idea at this point was worth considering.

“Get married...” Jimmy spat out at last. “Oh, God, that was funny.”

Lois’s mouth hung open, mesmerized by this idea.

*Oooh. Can I vote on this one? I say, yes. Yes! Yes! Tie an old ball and chain to that man. Make Clark yours. He wouldn’t have any excuses left for not making love with you. Condoms or not. Yes! Yes! Yes! And you’d have him home every night in your...*

“We’ve been dating for less than two weeks,” she stated. “That’s a little sudden, don’t you think?”

*Happens all the time. True love has no bounds.*

“What?!” Jimmy gasped, giggles overtaking him again. “You thought I was serious?”

*Think about it, Lois. If you and Clark were to get engaged — not even married, just engaged — then Superman could state truthfully during one of those times reporters were clamoring for comments from him about how happy he is on the engagement of his two friends Clark and Lois. If Superman said that, no one would believe you and Superman were more than friends.*

“Lois?”

“Hmmm,” she said, coming out of her reverie.

“You’re not taking me seriously, are you?” Jimmy’s panicked eyes darting to hers. “I mean, I know CK likes you and all, but I’ve got to be honest with you. A guy will only go so far — even if he *really* likes her — for a girl he’s only been dating for a couple of weeks.”

Lois turned to young photographer, giving him the full force of her evil grin. “So, you’re saying that Clark really likes me, huh?” Then she added an innocent bat of her eyelashes just for fun.

*One, two, three, four, five eyelash bats — there. That should be enough to give that young man a coronary.*

“Lois?”

“Yes, Jimmy?” Bat, bat went her eyelashes again.

“You aren’t laughing at my funny idea,” he stammered.

*Jimmy is now picturing Clark dropping him off Luthor’s balcony after he tells his friend what he suggested to you.*

“Oh, I’m sorry, Jimmy. Ha ha,” she said, giving another evil grin to the young man.

“CK’s going to kill me,” he muttered to himself.

*Told ya!*

“This is it. Right here,” she said, pointing to her building.

“Wow! How did you get an apartment here? It doesn’t even look like it has fleas or rats or anything,” he gaped, pulling up to a spot down the street.

“Well, it’s a basement efficiency.”

“But it’s got a pool! Do you know how many apartment buildings in Metropolis have pools? One! And this is it.”

Lois shrugged, stepping out of the car. “Someone must have been murdered there. Coming up?”

Jimmy gulped. “Yeah. CK asked me to make sure you were safe.”

Bat, bat went her eyelashes again as she jogged up her front steps. “Make sure you smile and wave for the paparazzi.”

“Papa...? Lois!” said Jimmy, finally catching on that she was joking.

“What? Can’t you picture next week’s *Dirt Digger Weekly*?

‘Superman’s floozy is mid-town Madame.’” She spread out her hands as if showing him the headline.

“You wouldn’t give an exclusive like that to the *Inquisitor*?” said a slimy voice as Leo Nunk popped up from around the edge of the building.

Jimmy stopped, not sure if he wanted to be seen with her.

“Ugh,” Lois groaned, pushing past the older man. “Leave me alone, Nunk.”

“What? No quote today, Lois?” Nunk asked, faux pouting as he followed her across the courtyard.

“Jimmy, why don’t you tell the man the latest rumor?” She smiled at the kid.

*You’re awful, Lois. Don’t you do it! Don’t even think about doing that to Clark. Not when we’re so close. So close to heaven.* Her inner voice sighed.

Jimmy blanched and shook his head.

“Don’t worry...” She winked at Jimmy. “Nunk here wouldn’t be interested unless it involved Superman.”

“Or Superman’s girlfriend,” Nunk volunteered. “This is the only place where he’s known to make repeated visits. Hang out here long enough and he’s bound to show up. Ain’t that right, Lois?”

“Because Superman and I are friends, Nunk. Just friends. We were introduced by my boyfriend — yes, *boyfriend* — Clark Kent. Spelled just like it sounds. Come on, Jimmy,” she growled, opening her apartment door. “And, Nunk, rumor has it that Superman also has friends at the Twelfth Precinct. Why don’t you hang out there instead? You’re more likely to catch sight of Superman there. And maybe they’ll arrest you for loitering.”

As Jimmy passed Nunk, the sleazeball reporter handed the kid his card. “Just in case she ever crosses the line.”

“Ah, thanks,” Jimmy muttered politely, taking the card.

Lois rolled her eyes.

*Or maybe you should just move back to Kansas with Ma and Pa Kent.*

\*\*\*

Clark was cleaning champagne glasses at the bar when he heard a familiar heartbeat enter the Luthor penthouse. He glanced up and saw Lois start down the main staircase, trailed by an apologetic Jimmy. Clark watched as Lois searched the room for his friendly face, carefully scrutinizing the other wait staff his folks had hired.

He knew he should have told her about the ‘bodyguards’ he’d assigned to accompany her home from the store. But it was six of one or a half-dozen of the other: she would either be angry at his suggestion and then dodge said bodyguards, or she would be furious at him for breaking the truce rules and getting caught in his trap. He went with the second option, hoping their night of almost-passion would be enough to calm her down by the time the party had ended.

Clark did wonder, though, why Jimmy was looking at him apologetically.

*If only one of your abilities was telepathy.*

But would Clark really use that power if he had it? No, probably not. He sighed, instinctively raising his hand in greeting to catch Lois’s attention. Her eyes narrowed to slits and her mouth puckered in fury as she caught sight of him.

*God, Kent, that woman is fiery hot when she’s mad. Maybe **that’s** why you’re such a slobbering moron around her.*

Clark knew he should apologize, should give her one of his sheepish looks, but instead a full-blown lustful smile appeared in its place. He hadn’t been able to get almost making love to her out of his mind all day.

Lois stomped across the room to him and slapped him across the face. “That’s one, Clark. Two more and I’m gone. Got it?”

He nodded, his sheepish expression finally making its appearance. “You look beautiful tonight, Lois.” She did. She had styled her hair more than she did at the store and was wearing a touch more make-up.

She lowered her voice, hardly loud enough for a normal man to hear. “Flattery will not get you back into my bed, buster. You are not the boss of me.”

Clark nodded. “I’d rather have you safe and sleep alone than be in bed with a dead woman.”

Lois grimaced. “That’s gross, Clark.”

*Dense. Idiot. Yep, that’s you to a T. Say goodbye to your goodnight kiss.*

He took hold of her wrist and brought her around the bar to him, where he wrapped his arms around her waist. “I worry about you.”

Still glowering at him, she informed him, “Abusive stalker boyfriend 5; protective boyfriend 1.”

*Yikes! That’s bad, Kent.*

Clark swallowed, letting go. “Noted. It won’t happen again. I’m sorry for not discussing it with you earlier, Lois.”

Lois pushed her way free of his arms. Then he saw her take in the whole Clark Kent package, moving from face to feet to face again. She didn’t have to speak to convey her appreciation. So, she liked the black pants, crisp white shirt, black vest, and bowtied bartending uniform. Lois liked a well-dressed man. Good to know. Good. To. Know.

*She still wants you. Naked and in bed. She’ll forgive you. Eventually.*

He felt the roots of the tree to pull himself out of this dirt hole materialize in his hands and he could see the sunlight shining just above his head.

*One of these days you are going to have to take her on a real date to a real restaurant. A date where you can get dressed up in your one dark suit and one of those artistic ties you keep ogling at in the window of L.L. Emporium for Men. A date where she would dab perfume in places you would love to sniff — like behind her ear and behind her knee — and she would wear a dress, enhancing those curves your fingers tasted last night and those long legs you saw when she came out of her apartment in her swimsuit.*

Some of that animal desire he had had to shelve the night before came back full force and he pulled her back into his arms, tilting his head towards hers.

“Toots! Come back!” a male voice from across the room ordered, distracting Clark and causing his head to bolt up.

“No, absolutely not, Johnny. I’m not your little plaything as your mood fits. I saw you giving that ginger-haired woman a private audition at the club last night. We’re through. *She* can fill in for me tonight,” scoffed Toots, the loud and bottle-blond imitation of a female bombshell, as she marched up the stairs to Luthor’s front door.

“She can’t sing!” the big muscle of a man Johnny stormed after Toots, grabbing her arm. “We promised Luthor live entertainment tonight. You’ve got to perform.”

“Let go of me!” Toots demanded, trying to pull free.

“The show must go on,” Johnny informed her, dragging her towards the stairs.

“It can go on without me!” Toots screamed.

“I believe the lady asked you to let go,” Clark said, suddenly at the base of the stairs.

“Stay out of it, barkeep,” said Johnny dismissively.

“Yeah, Johnny, I said let me go,” repeated Toots with a lustful look towards Clark.

“I can sing,” Lois said, appearing at Clark’s side.

Johnny gazed at her with an appreciative leer.

“No!” snapped Clark. He didn’t want Lois anywhere near that brute.

“No?” Lois asked, brow raised as she tilted her gaze towards her boyfriend.

“Is there a problem here?” inquired a tall, model-thin, elegantly dressed brunette woman. She held an open binder and seemed almost too stunning to be in charge.

Johnny graced Mrs. Cox with a placating smile as he lessened his grip on Toots, who took the opportunity to pull free and disappear out the door. “No problem. No problem at all, Mrs. Cox,” he said.

“Glad to hear it. Mind keeping it down? Mr. Luthor doesn’t like disruptions,” Mrs. Cox’s cold tone left no room for argument.

Johnny glanced over his shoulder to see the door slam after Toots. “My apologies, Mrs. Cox. It won’t happen again.”

“See that it doesn’t, Mr. Taylor. I’d hate for Mr. Luthor to hear of it,” Mrs. Cox said, the implied threat behind her words not lost on any of them.

Clark could see fear in Johnny’s eyes as he gulped. Mrs. Cox

registered the emotion with satisfaction before disappearing into a private room.

Johnny came down the stairs to where they were standing. “You can sing?” he quizzed Lois.

“Yes,” she answered with pride.

“Okay.” The man looked her over once again.

Johnny’s clear interest in his girlfriend caused Clark to cross his arms and scowl at the blond thug.

The man obviously liked what he saw. “I think we’ve got some costumes that will fit you. This is a one-shot deal. This does not mean I’m hiring you for the club. Got it?”

Clark couldn’t help but chuckle as he saw Lois’s tongue glide over her front teeth and she turned away from them. “I could always stick to waitressing.”

*Lois is expecting some gratitude for her assistance? From Johnny Taylor? Head of the Metros?*

“Fine,” Johnny admitted a stalemate. “Let’s call it an audition. What’s your name, babycakes?”

She turned around and placed her hands on her hips. “Lois. Lois Lane.”

Clark swore the man actually turned a new shade of green as he gasped, “Superman’s squeeze?”

“Mine,” Clark said, stepping between them, his arms still crossed.

Johnny exhaled in relief as he dismissed Clark as a threat.

Lois pushed her boyfriend out of her way. “I’m nobody’s ‘squeeze’, Clark,” she stated, holding up two fingers.

*Great. What have you done now, Kent? You defended her honor... or was it Superman’s reputation you just defended? Crap! When will you learn to keep your mouth shut?*

“Either way,” Johnny said, wiping a hand over his face. “I’m not having tabloid queen Lois Lane singing tonight. You got another name?”

*You’ve got to agree with him there, Kent. The less Luthor knows of Lois the better. You should never have let Mom offer her a job. Although ‘let’ and your mom usually got a similar response as it did with Lois.*

“Lola Dane,” Lois said at the same time Clark suggested, “Wanda Detroit.”

Both Lois and Johnny looked at him dubiously, before ignoring his recommendation completely. “Okay, Lola, come with me. Let’s go class you up.”

Clark took hold of her wrist as she stepped to follow Johnny.

“I’ll be all right, Clark.” Lois winked at him. “Remember, I’ve still got Superman on my speed dial.”

Clark saw Johnny stiffen at the comment and smiled.

*Maybe there is a perk to people knowing that Lois is tight with Superman.*

Lois went to follow the Metro leader, but gave Clark one last roll of her eyes as she mouthed the name ‘Wanda Detroit’ with a shake of her head.

“What was that about?” Maisie asked coming up from behind him with Jimmy and his mother.

“Lois is filling in as the entertainment tonight. Apparently, she can sing,” Clark said, still not liking his girlfriend anywhere near that gangster.

“Oh, yeah, that’s right. She was Kansas State finalist twice in Jazz Choir,” Maisie replied with a nod.

His mom patted his shoulder reassuringly with a teasing grin. “Don’t worry, Clark. She’ll be easier to keep an eye on if she’s on stage.” She had kidded him non-stop all afternoon about the couch being unslept upon when she and his father woke up that morning. “Maisie and I are heading back to MJ’s. Your dad’s on deck here tonight.” With one last chuckle, his mom kissed his cheek and disappeared towards the kitchen and the staff entrance.

“Don’t hate me and I’m sorry,” Jimmy mumbled.

Clark turned to him, confused. “For what?”

Jimmy gulped. “You don’t want to know. But, with my luck, Lois

will tell you.”

Clark nodded with a sigh.

*Anything more to do with Lois? Jimmy is right, you don't want to know.*

\*\*\*

Clark started pouring champagne into glasses as he heard the jazz band from Johnny's Metro Club start to warm up.

*I got lucky in the rain*

*One day when I had nothing to do for an hour...*

*I walked around in a shower.*

It was only as Clark heard her voice that he glanced over at the stage and saw Lois. She had changed into an evening gown that hugged her curves, skin-tight to her hips, but then falling to the floor in waves. Deep maroon in color with shimmering beads zigzagging every which way across her body. Strapless, except for the silvery beaded straps rising from just above her chest up to her neck — Clark swallowed as he guessed — and down her back. There was no way she would ever fade into the background looking like that.

*I had reason to complain*

*One moment I was sadly in need of a song,*

*The next moment you came along...*

Lois turned her head slightly and caught his eye. A hint of a smile appeared on her lips. She was singing this song to him.

*Then... the heavens smiled at me,*

*My heart said 'how lucky can you be?'*

*Things like that, you can't explain,*

*I only know that I met the love of my life*

*When I got lucky in the rain.*

Clark returned her smile. Yes, it had been raining that night he rescued her, hadn't it?

*Things like this... you can't explain,*

*I only know... that I met the love of my life,*

*When I got lucky... lucky in the rain.*

He could feel his heart beating in his throat. How did he end up being the luckiest man on the planet — maybe even in the universe, he would venture — to have met Lois? There were a thousand places he could think of where he would rather be at that moment. All of them included Lois; none of them included where he was or what he was supposed to be doing.

Johnny clapped his hands once, breaking Clark out of his reverie. “Okay, babycakes,” he told Lois. “You proved you can sing.” The man exhaled with a grin.

*Yeah, I'd be grinning too if I were that man. Lois saved his ass from letting Lex Luthor down. And beautifully, at that. Man, you are in love with a stunning woman, Kent.*

“Clark!” snapped his father.

“Yeah, Dad?” inquired Clark with a start. He hadn't even heard his father walk up.

“Don't you think that glass is full enough?”

Clark glanced down at the overflowing glass of champagne he had been pouring and pulled the champagne bottle upright. He picked up the dishtowel and started mopping up the excess.

“I take it Lois has arrived?” his dad said, scanning Luthor's great hall.

Clark nodded towards the stage when his father's glance returned to him, confused.

“Oh, my goodness, Clark!” his father gasped, raising his hand to his chest.

“Yeah, Dad,” Clark agreed. “The singer stormed out. Lois offered to fill in.”

Jonathan turned away from Lois and focused on his son, lowering his voice. “Your feet on the floor?”

Clark grinned like a lovesick teenager as his gaze caressed his girlfriend in that dress. “Yeah, Dad.”

Lois was talking to the band. He could hear them discussing a set list.

“I take it we won't be seeing you at home later tonight, Clark?”

Clark swallowed and shifted his focus for a moment to his father. “I hope to God not, Dad.” Then he grinned happily.

*She wasn't the only one who got lucky in the rain.* Clark sighed.

“Do you think until then, you could concentrate on the task at hand?” inquired his father.

Clark dragged his eyes off Lois and back to his dad. “Yes, sir.”

“Your mother and I would appreciate it, son.” His father nodded, took one more look at Lois with a shake of his head. “We wouldn't want to upset Luthor.”

“Yes, sir,” Clark replied as he father returned to the kitchen.

Clark wiped off the glass of champagne that had overflowed and added it to a tray of champagne glasses as the band struck up another song.

*I've wined and dined on Mulligan stew,*

*And never wished for a turkey.*

*I've hitched and hiked and grifted, too*

*From Maine to Albuquerque.*

Jimmy walked up to take the tray off the counter. Instead, he just stood there and stared toward the stage.

*Alas, I missed the Beaux Arts Ball*

*And what is twice as sad*

*I was never at a party*

*Where they honored Noel Ca-ad.*

“CK,” Jimmy finally said, picking up the tray. “Forget what I said earlier. For some strange reason, I doubt you'll be mad at all.”

Clark furrowed his brow, wondering again to what his friend was referring.

Jimmy patted him on the shoulder. “I might be sorry, man, but I seriously doubt you'll be.” He shook his head in pity and moved on.

Clark's eyes followed his friend for a moment before returning to the task at hand.

*But social circles spin too fast for me*

*My hobohemia is the place to be.*

Clark allowed his eyes to pass over his stunning girlfriend again with another sigh. Suddenly a tall, well-dressed man blocked his view of Lois. His suit alone easily cost more than Lois had earned since starting at Daily Books. It was Lex Luthor. The Boss was talking to his personal assistant Mrs. Cox.

*I get too hungry for dinner at eight.*

*I like the theatre, but never come late*

*I never bother with people I hate*

*That's why the lady is a tramp.*

Luthor's gaze shifted away from his assistant to Lois for a moment, and then again for a longer moment. Clark saw him notice and appreciate Lois before returning his attention to his employee. “I see you have handled everything to my satisfaction, Mrs. Cox.”

“Thank you, Sir,” replied Mrs. Cox.

*I don't like crap games with barons and earls*

*Won't go to Harlem in ermine and pearls*

*Won't dish the dirt with the rest of the girls*

*That's why the lady is a tramp.*

Clark watched Luthor walk up the stairs towards his private rooms. He paused at the railing overlooking the living room and Clark saw him gaze at Lois again.

*I like the free, fresh wind in my hair,*

Lois moved her hands up her cheeks and into the air on these words and rocked her hips slightly. Clark wondered if she was thinking about flying with him. He was certainly thinking about it.

*Life without care, I'm broke, it's oke.*

*Hate California, it's cold and it's damp.*

The green-eyed monster inside of Clark told him to jump over the bar, take the billionaire by his lapels and dangle him off Lex Towers by his toenails until he promised to keep his greasy gaze off Clark's girlfriend from that point onwards.

*That's why the lady...*

*That's why they call the lady...*

*That's why the lady is a tramp.*

Instead, Clark rested his hands on the bar and took a deep breath. He only exhaled once Luthor nodded his approval of Lois again and continued towards his private rooms. Clark did not like Luthor paying an ounce of attention to his girlfriend, but hated his own reaction to said attention even more.

Luckily, Lois's gaze didn't shift once towards the reclusive billionaire. Clark sighed with a contented smile. She was happy being Clark Kent's girlfriend. Lois would be leaving that evening with him. It would be *his* arms holding her when she went to bed that night. It would be *his* lips she kissed. It was *him* that she loved. And there was no satisfaction in the world better than knowing he had bested Luthor in this one thing: Lois's love.

\*\*\*

The party was in full swing. Guests milled about drinking champagne and nibbling off the trays of food being carried around. MJ's Café outdid itself with the culinary delights and Clark had heard more than a few guests moan in pleasure after taking a bite of food. His dad was taking point in the kitchen, plating out the food onto trays and managing from there. Clark was in charge of the bar and champagne service.

Lois's voice, singing in the background, kept a smile on his lips the entire evening. Clark endured being so close to the man who had ruined so many lives of people he knew, knowing it was easier with Lois there to keep his mind partially focused on her. He had noticed Johnny Taylor rubbing his hands together at his good luck. Lois's act had brought more class to Luthor's party than Toots ever could.

Everything was running smoothly until Clark heard the distant sound of fire engines — lots of them. He sighed. He could tell they were heading towards Hob's Bay... Suicide Slum. Had the Toasters struck again? He hoped he wasn't too late. Clark flagged over one of their regular helpers to take over for him at the bar and popped into the kitchen to inform his dad that he was 'taking a break.'

Clark wasn't sure where the best place to do his old switcheroo to Superman would be. Did Lex Luthor have surveillance cameras around his own home? Or up on the roof? There were too many guests to do it even on the balcony. So Clark found the stairwell and ran down to the street at top speed, changing on the way.

As Superman blasted into the air, he heard Lois's voice, "Lola Dane and the Metro Jazz Band will now be taking a ten minute break."

Superman paused as he came level with Luthor's penthouse and caught a glimpse of his beautiful girlfriend at the microphone. He also saw Lex Luthor just coming down the main staircase. He turned down the fire before Lois's voice halted him.

"Lex Luthor, why haven't you returned my calls?"

Luthor seemed momentarily startled, as was Clark. She had the attention of the entire room focused on her. Lois could never be a wallflower if she tried.

*Lois has been calling Luthor? Why?*

The billionaire approached Clark's girlfriend. "I can assure you, I'll never make that mistake again, Ms. Dane." The man leered at her.

*Ah, Flyboy, that wasn't a leer. That was just a smile. He is surrounded by all his friends.*

Clark wasn't going to change his assessment of the expression on the man's face. Luthor took her hand in his as he escorted her off the stage.

"Lois Lane, Mr. Luthor," Lois introduced herself, murmuring loud enough for only Luthor and himself to hear, and not using her alias either, Clark noticed with chagrin. "I've been trying to reach you all week."

The sirens pulled him to the other side of town, yet the sight of Lois with Luthor tugged him to remain. Lois caught sight of him out the window and raised an inquisitive eyebrow. He would ask Lois about this conversation later. For now, he would have to just trust her. The people of Suicide Slum needed him. Superman exhaled and flew over to where he saw the billows of smoke rising into the night's sky.

\*\*\*

*A few minutes earlier...*

"Lola Dane and the Metro Jazz Band will now be taking a ten minute break," Lois said into the microphone, wishing it would have been a half-hour break. It had been years since she had sung so many songs in a row and she could use a drink of water. The dress she had picked out of Johnny's assortment of costumes seemed to have done the trick. Clark had practically poured an entire bottle of champagne into one glass after seeing her warm-up number, so he must approve.

*Why was he so surprised that you clean up nice? If he had gotten his act together and taken you on a real date before now, he could have seen gorgeous Lois before this moment.*

As Lois went to switch off the microphone, her eyes caught the movement of a tall, well-dressed man coming down the stairs. It was the same man she had noticed walking through the room earlier while she was warming up. The man who had admired her singing. Now, he wore a tailored tuxedo and seemed to be garnering the attention of everyone he passed.

*Ah, the reclusive billionaire. Go ahead, Lois, you aren't going to get another chance like this one!*

"Lex Luthor, why haven't you returned my calls?" she said into the microphone, her eyes staring into his. She had only wanted to draw his focus to her but she had gotten everyone else's as well.

*Ooops.*

A debonair smile graced the rich man's lips as he approached her. "I can assure you, I'll never make that mistake again, Ms. Dane." Lex Luthor took hold of her hand and escorted her off the stage.

*Wow. Lex Luthor knows your name! Oh, wait. That's not your name.*

"Lois Lane, Mr. Luthor," Lois introduced herself, murmuring loud enough for the two of them to hear. She didn't need to attract more attention than she already had. "I've been trying to reach you all week." Suddenly, a flash of red cape caught her attention outside the window.

*Clark! Was he spying on her again?*

Lois caught her boyfriend's eye over Luthor's shoulder, asking him with an arched eyebrow: what he was doing? She wondered who he trusted less — Luthor or her? Superman nodded at her and then disappeared in a streak. There must have been an emergency; otherwise, he wouldn't have left the party.

Luthor followed her gaze out the window. "Boyfriend troubles, Ms. Lane?" he inquired, partly in jest.

*Had he seen Superman? Or was he just guessing? Obviously he knew the rumors between her and the Man in Blue.*

Lois focused her attention back on the billionaire. "No. Why do you ask?"

"It looked like you saw something out my window. And out that window there is nothing but the Metropolis skyline," said Luthor.

"Just admiring the view," Lois lied. She was tired of discussing her relationship with Superman and therefore dodged the topic entirely.

*It wasn't entirely a lie, Lois. You love Clark in the skin-tight blue suit. He does make for a nice view in the night's sky.*

Luthor held out his arm. "Actually, I have a much better view out my office window."

*No, I think Clark's flown off already.*

Lois rested her hand on Luthor's arm as they walked to his office. He had many books and antiques lining the shelves of his office, but she was drawn to the glass French doors behind his desk. "Exquisite," she murmured, admiring the view. It was almost as nice as flying with Clark. Almost. Now that she had Luthor's attention and privacy, Lois wasn't quite sure how to bring up the topic of Tempus.

"You are a woman of many talents," said Luthor, drawing closer to her.

*"Am I?" she inquired, turning from the window.*

*This man doesn't know you from Eve. That's quite an assumption.*

"Singing. Writing. And getting the attention of unique men," he responded with a slight chuckle to his voice. He picked up a remote from his desk and pushed a button. The doors to the balcony glided open. The cool night air encircled her, causing her to shiver as they

stepped outside.

*Boastful. This man thinks he's in the same league as Clark? Ha! And who has a remote control for their French doors? Please!*

Lois pressed her lips together. She wanted to tell Luthor that she could garner the praise of many men, not just the unique ones, but she needed to stay on his good side. She had a rare one-on-one opportunity with the man and she'd better not squander it. "I am also an employee of LexCo."

If Luthor was surprised, he hid it well. "Are you?" He shrugged. "I have many employees. Let us hope your talents aren't being squandered in your current position." He stepped closer to her again. "Perhaps we could find you another position more to your liking."

*Is he hitting on you? Your boss's boss's boss?*

Lois moved away from him and looked over the cement railing. "I haven't been calling you about a promotion, Mr. Luthor."

He smiled, liking her response to his inquiry. "Lex."

She swallowed. This was more difficult than she had imagined. If she didn't do this correctly, the whole Tempus date fiasco would blow up in her face and she could end up in jail. She shivered again. The breeze was quite cool.

Lex wrapped an arm about her bare shoulders. And, while Lois appreciated the warmth he provided, it only reminded her that it was Clark's warmth she desired. "This is the tallest building in Metropolis, Lois. I must confess a certain pleasure in knowing that everyone in the city has to look up in order to see me," Luthor said, oozing charm.

*Did other women fall for that garbage? If he only knew how many of those ants down on the streets of Metropolis would never look up to him, no matter how high he lived. Ugh. This guy is so full of himself. Don't you think, Lois? Lo-is?*

Lois stepped casually out of his embrace and back inside his office. "Lex, I appreciate you taking the time to speak with me. I have a problem of some delicacy. I..." Her words faded as she saw Mrs. Cox standing at the office door.

*Time's up! Hate that woman!*

"Mr. Luthor," Mrs. Cox said to her employer, ignoring Lois completely. "Your guests are starting to wonder at your absence."

"I should really be returning..." One of Luthor's arms went around Lois's waist this time and his other hand indicated that they should go back to the party. "Perhaps we can revisit this discussion tomorrow night over dinner, Lois." He glanced over at an almost scowling Mrs. Cox. "I did have a cancellation tomorrow night, did I not, Mrs. Cox?"

"Yes, Mr. Luthor." His assistant's face seemed pinched at the thought of Lex with Lois.

Lois glanced at him.

*Tomorrow? But your date with Tempus is tomorrow night! Of course, no one but Tempus said you had to show up to it.*

She smiled with relief. "I would like that, Lex. Thank you."

They stepped out of the office together. Lex's arm slid off of her waist as he took her hand to kiss it. "Then, it's a date."

Lois saw Jimmy staring at her. He could not have heard Lex's words, but his eyes still gazed at her in disbelief. "Not a date, Lex," she corrected. "A meeting."

"Oh?" Lex raised a brow. "It was my understanding that you and Superman are not exclusive."

Lois slipped her hand out of his. "That is true, but..."

"Then tomorrow night, Lois. I shall look forward to it." Lex nodded to her before turning to Mrs. Cox.

"The ambassador wanted a word before he had to leave," Mrs. Cox said, glad to have Lex's full attention as she indicated the direction that he needed to go.

Lois exhaled. Okay, tomorrow night, she would have Lex Luthor's full attention and they could discuss his firing B. Gerald Tempus for sexual harassment.

*Over dinner? Are you nuts? You are dating Clark! Clark! And you accepted a dinner date with a man that he hates.*

Not a date, she corrected her inner voice. A dinner meeting.

Jimmy sidled up next to her. "Smooth, Lois."

She sighed. "What is?" she said, knowing full well what he was about to say.

"The way you got an interview with Lex Luthor. The man never grants interviews," replied Jimmy.

*Or not.*

Lois smiled at Jimmy with a slight shrug.

*It's not an interview, Jimmy. It's a date.*

It wasn't going to be a date. And it wasn't an interview either. It was a meeting. Over dinner. To discuss Tempus.

*Are you going to tell Clark?*

"Babycakes, time's up! Back on stage," Johnny said with a pat to her bottom.

Jimmy took a step back as Lois's fiery gaze settled on the head of the Metro Club.

"Let's get one thing straight, Johnny. You. Don't. Touch. Me. Do so again and I'm back to waitressing. Got it?" she growled. "Speed-dial, remember?"

Johnny put his hands up in surrender and quickly faded into the background.

"Lo-is! Are you nuts? That guy is the head of the Metro Gang," Jimmy mumbled under his breath, walking her back to the stage.

"The what?" she asked, lifting her long skirt slightly to climb the steps.

"Ask CK," Jimmy said, turning to hold out his tray of appetizers to some more guests. Then he turned back to Lois with a perplexed expression. "Who's on speed-dial?"

Lois grinned evilly with a double eyebrow bounce. "Clark's friend in blue."

Jimmy pressed his lips together to try to stop himself from laughing. "You're priceless, Mad Dog. Priceless."

"Get 'Priceless' a bottle of water, would ya?" Lois graciously smiled at him, batting her eyelashes.

*Jimmy needs a nickname. Any ideas? Squirt? Nah. Jimbo?* Her inner voice sighed. *I guess that will have to do.*

"Priceless," Jimmy murmured with a shake of his head as he went to find her a bottle of water.

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It took over an hour before Clark could return to his post behind the bar. Lois was back on stage, looking sexy as always. The fire had been bad, but luckily the fire department was now answering those calls in droves and with much faster response times since he had tipped off the police about the probable involvement of the Toasters in that part of town.

Clark was dying to ask Lois what she and Luthor had discussed in his absence, but he was needed behind the bar and she was busy on stage, so that would have to wait.

"Whoa, man," Jimmy said, coming up to the bar and waving his hand in front of his face. "I knew you were on break, CK. I didn't know it was a smoke break."

Clark grimaced, sniffing himself. Was it *that* bad? He hadn't taken the time to rush home for a quick one-minute shower afterwards. "I don't. But the people around me were..." He cleared his throat. "Smoking."

Jimmy nodded. "You missed it, CK. Lois actually got an interview with Luthor."

*An interview? She had been calling Luthor all week for an interview? And he granted it to her? Like that? The man never gave interviews.*

"Really?" Clark asked, filling Jimmy's tray with champagne glasses again.

"And she has Johnny from the Metro gang shaking in his loafers." Jimmy chuckled, patting his friend on the back. "Good luck with that woman, CK. She's high maintenance."

*Yeah, he needed all the luck he could get with her.*

Clark took another glance over to that woman he loved. Her hips started to sway as the music began.

*I never cared much for moonlit skies*

*I never winked back at fireflies  
But now that the stars are in your eyes  
I'm beginning to see the light.*

Lois took hold of the microphone and concentrated her attention on him. Clark grinned as his heart started thumping in his throat. She was singing to him again.

*I never went in for afterglow  
Or candlelight on the mistletoe  
But now when you turn the lamp down low  
I'm beginning to see the light*

This woman was too seductive to be let out in public.

*Used to ramble through the park  
Shadow boxing in the dark  
Then you came and caused a spark  
That's a four-alarm fire, now.*

Clark laughed softly to himself. *He* was a four-alarm fire?

*I never made love by lantern shine  
I never saw rainbows in my wine  
But now that your lips are burning mine  
I'm beginning to see the light.*

Did his girlfriend just tell Clark in a song that she wanted to make love to him? Clark grinned, wishing he could zip over and give her a kiss. He sighed, concentrating on keeping his feet glued to the ground. As soon as she finished her set at the end of that song, Clark grabbed a bottle of water and walked over to the stage.

The party was starting to break up and Clark was happy to have a few minutes with his girl.

"Hi there, beautiful. Thirsty?" he asked, holding up the water.

Lois took it and smiled at him. "Help me down?"

He grinned, mumbling, "Don't tempt me."

Lois raised her skirt slightly and headed for the steps. Clark lifted her up and brought her the rest of the way to the floor.

"You sing magnificently, Lois." As he had her in his arms, he whispered, "You should be outlawed as highly combustible in that dress."

Lois giggled, sitting down on the edge of the stage. "Thanks."

"I can't wait until after the party," he murmured, bumping her shoulder lightly with his.

Lois playfully elbowed him as she blushed. "Clark!"

*Oh, good, she understood your meaning.*

"Hello, Lois," Lex Luthor said, suddenly beside them.

*How is Luthor on a first-name basis with her?*

Clark stiffened. He hated that this man was interrupting his first moment in hours with Lois. But he couldn't be seen goofing off with his girlfriend in front of the client.

"I need to get back to work. Excuse me," Clark said curtly, professionally, nodding back at the bar and then walking away from them. Fading into the woodwork was the trademark of good service. He couldn't do or say anything that would cause a scene. His folks would never forgive him.

"A friend of yours?" Luthor asked her.

"Yes, Lex. A good friend," Lois replied carefully.

*Lex? She's on a first name... Friend? You're just a friend?*

"Boyfriend, you mean," Clark muttered under his breath, glancing back at them.

*Why didn't she just tell Luthor that?*

"Oh? I thought you said earlier you weren't seeing anyone?" Luthor inquired.

Clark arrived back at the bar and turned to glare at Lois and Luthor.

*Not seeing anyone?*

"No, Lex. I said..." Lois began, standing up.

"I wanted to ask where I should have my driver pick you up for our date?" whispered Luthor as his hand touched her arm.

*Date?*

Clark felt like he had lost his powers. Like he had been punched in the stomach. It wasn't an interview, it was a date! He closed his eyes

and started to grind his teeth together. It was loud enough that he couldn't hear anything else being said in the room. He really didn't want to hear or see any more of Lois's and Luthor's conversation. He felt like flying off to the Arctic to scream his lungs out.

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*You made this mess, Lois. It all started with that first lie — that white lie you told to shelter Clark.*

"A friend of yours?" Luthor had asked Lois.

"Yes, Lex. A good friend," she had replied carefully. Clark was Superman and this man already had tied her together with the Man in Blue. She didn't want to him to tie her boyfriend to Superman as well. She had seen Clark glancing back at them.

*Oh great. Clark heard that comment. He's taking it the wrong way.*

"Oh? I thought you said earlier you weren't seeing anyone?"

Luthor had inquired. The man was altogether too happy that she hadn't told him she was dating the 'help.'

*Fabulous. Clark heard that as well and is now glaring at you.*

"No, Lex. I said..." Lois had begun to explain, standing up.

"I wanted to ask where I should have my driver pick you up for our date?" Luthor interrupted her again as his hand touched her arm.

"It's not a date," she had stated again quite clearly with a glance at Clark as she stepped away from Luthor.

*Clark isn't listening? He still looks like you kicked him in the crotch. Oh, Clark. Why do you listen to things you shouldn't and not listen when you should?*

"It's a meeting," Lois had continued. "You can tell your driver to pick me up at Daily Books at quarter to eight." Then she had smiled, not wanting the animosity she was starting to feel towards this man to ruin her chances for his assistance with Tempus.

"I wonder," Lex had coaxed, his words seeming slicker than they had earlier this evening after his dismissal of Clark. "Do you do requests?"

Lois sighed.

*Yep, Lois, that's how you got yourself into this mess.*

She was tired of singing. It had been a long day and an even longer night. All she wanted to do was go home and cuddle with her ticked-off boyfriend — tell him that she still loved him and only him. "That was our last set," she told Lex, indicating the band packing up with a nod of her head.

"Boys," Lex said, turning to them with a slight clap of his hands.

"Do you think you could favor me with one last number?"

The band leader instantly jumped to his feet. "Of course, Mr. Luthor."

"Yes! Yes! Mr. Luthor, the band will play one last number for you. Whatever you want," Johnny gushed, suddenly appearing from the side of the stage. "Lola, go sing."

Lois glared at Johnny.

"Why Don't You Do Right?" Lex requested, taking her hand and kissing it. "Do you know that one?"

She nodded wearily. "Sure, Lex." She lifted her dress and climbed the steps back to the stage as the musicians unpacked their instruments again.

The band started to play and Clark finally opened his eyes once more, letting Lois know that he was listening to her. She stared at Clark for a long moment, tears glistening in her eyes, before turning her attention to Lex.

*You had plenty money 1922*

*You let other women make a fool of you*

*Why don't you do right like some other men do?*

*Get out of here and get me some money, too.*

Lex grinned. He seemed to enjoy her singing about forcing some man to go out to become rich. As if that was important. He obviously considered himself 'some other men' who had done right.

*You're sitting down wondering what it's all about*

*If you ain't got no money, they will put you out*

*Why don't you do right like some other men do?*

*Get out of here and get me some money, too.*

Lois glanced over to Clark and saw that he was watching her. She could tell from his expression that he thought she was singing this song to him. She wasn't. It was Luthor's request. She was singing it to him. She returned her gaze to Lex.

*If you had prepared twenty years ago  
You wouldn't be wanderin' now from door to door  
Why don't you do right, like some other men do?  
Get out of here and get me some money, too.*

Another glance to Clark and she saw he wasn't looking at her anymore, but he had a tension to his jaw that hadn't been there before Lex had interrupted their conversation ten minutes before.

*I fell for your jivin' and I took you in  
Now all you've got to offer me's a drink of gin  
Why don't you do right, like some other men do?  
Get out of here and get me some money, too.*

Clark wiped down the counter of the bar, took the last tray and headed for the kitchen. Lois closed her eyes in a flinch as if he had struck her across the face, letting that last tear drop down her face.

*Why don't you do right, like some other men do?  
Like some other men do?*

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### Late Friday Night

Clark hadn't wanted to hear Lois's excuses. She, once again, seemed to have plenty of them. Lois had denied she was dating someone to Luthor. She had told Luthor that Clark was just a 'good friend'. And then she agreed to a date with the billionaire. The very man who had ruined her boyfriend's life for the past two years. How could he forgive and forget that? Even with Lois.

On the trip back to her place in the truck, Lois had tried to explain to Clark that it wasn't a 'date' date with Luthor. The reference to a non-date date had his hairs standing on end and Clark had said something in anger of which he wasn't proud. Something for which Lois would probably never forgive him. He had told her that by agreeing to go on a date with Luthor, she had finally made the transition to being a streetwalker. If he could have taken back the words, grabbed them with his super speed as they hung between them, he would have. They were uncalled for. And even now, seconds after speaking them, he regretted it.

Lois gave him a stare so menacing, he was glad he was the one with heat vision. "Pull over, Clark!" she told him, her voice cold. "If I'm a streetwalker, then I'm walking the rest of the way home."

They were close to her place, so he pulled to the side of the road to let her out. He didn't really feel like fighting her decision.

As Lois got out of the truck, she turned to him and said, "I didn't tell Lex about us because I didn't want to put *your* name — Clark Kent's name — out there for him to latch onto, become familiar with. I wanted him to rid us of Tempus without drawing the spotlight onto you. I wasn't making a 'date' with Luthor, Clark, and I told him as much. I can't help what he believes. I made an appointment to discuss Tempus's sexual harassment blackmail with him. And if you hadn't shut me out, you would have learned that." She then slammed the truck door in Clark's face.

*No! No! No! You screwed up royally this time, Kent! Go after her!*

Clark jumped out of the truck and ran after her, but she only held up her hand to silence him.

"I don't want to argue anymore, Clark. You've proved to me without a doubt that you don't trust me." Her upheld hand caressed his cheek. "I love you, Clark, but I don't see how we can move past this. I cannot be in a relationship with someone who doesn't trust me."

"I *do* trust you, Lois," he tried to explain. "It's *him* I don't trust."

Her eyes gazed at him sadly.

*She doesn't believe you, Kent. Why should she?*

"No, you don't trust me, Clark," Lois's voice sounded hoarse as if she held her emotions in check. "If I told you it was snowing tonight, I want to know you would believe me even if it was ninety degrees out."

"So you want me to believe you even when you flat out lie to me?" he asked her, perplexed. That couldn't be what she meant?

Lois shrugged and started to walk home. "You define love your way. I'll describe it my way."

"Oh. So, now I'm your mother and you're your father?" he retorted.

Lois's stride faltered for a moment, then she continued on without looking back. "The only difference, Clark, is that I *never* would have cheated on you."

Clark was about to run after her when he realized that she had spoken about their relationship in the past tense. Instead, he ran into a nearby alley so fast that what was left of his heart remained bleeding on the sidewalk where Lois had dropped it. He spun into the blue suit and blasted into the sky, colder than he had ever felt in his life.

He flew to her place and saw that the police detail was there, watching Lois's apartment. Even if she didn't trust that he loved her enough, he needed to make sure that she would be safe. Then he went home. His father and mother were unloading the van they had rented for the event when he landed.

Clark helped them finish unloading it in less than a minute and then sat down at the dining room table, his head in his hands. His head and chest throbbed in agony over losing Lois.

*Idiot! She was protecting you and you called her a whore! You drove away the best woman you will ever find. She loved you, accepted you, and even desired you, and you just pushed her away. You just couldn't believe that someone would love you so much as to risk her life for yours.*

"I thought you were staying at Lois's tonight," his father said, coming into their apartment.

His mom elbowed her husband and then came to rub her son's shoulders, knowing what was wrong without him speaking a word. But he spoke them anyway.

"Lois broke up with me." His words made it sound so final, so over. He felt cold, numb... dead.

*Well, that's what happens when your heart stops beating, Kent. You die.*

"What did you do?" his mom asked, sitting down next to him.

"Who says that I...?" Clark started and then stopped at her skeptical expression.

*Mom's right, Kent. You screwed up.*

He sighed. "Lois made a 'date' with Lex Luthor."

"Excuse me?" Martha said in disbelief. "No. I don't believe it, Clark. She loves you."

*Not anymore.*

Clark shrugged. "And when she made the date she told him she wasn't seeing anyone."

His mom's jaw dropped.

"I'm confused, son," said his father. "I thought you said she broke up with you. These all sound like reasons for you to have broken up with her."

*You never would have broken up with Lois, Kent, any more than you would have torn off your right arm. Fight, yes. Leave her, never.*

Clark rolled his eyes. "Apparently, it wasn't a 'date' per se but an appointment to discuss that man at LexCo who's blackmailing Lois."

"Wait! Hold on a second, Clark. Lois is being blackmailed?" his father asked.

*Time to tell them the truth, Kent.*

Clark rubbed a hand down his face and then launched into an explanation of the Tempus from the corporate offices.

"You're being investigated?" his dad gasped. "Clark, you should have told us."

"Perry said he has an escape plan," Clark murmured with a shrug.

*You don't deserve to 'escape', Kent. Not after what you did and said to Lois. You deserve to be caged like the menace to society that you are.*

"Oh. So, Perry has a plan and Lois is trying to solve the problem another way. What are you doing about it?" his mom wanted to know.

Clark gulped, the truth burning a hole in his stomach. "Nothing." "Nothing?" his dad stated. "That doesn't sound like you."

*Sure it does, Dad. An idiot who sabotages his own relationship before it has time to take off. A do-nothing ne'er-do-well? That's our boy Kent here in a nutshell.*

"What else can I do? Besides pay the money back. Only we don't have it any more, because we used it to pay the lease on the café," Clark explained.

"How much is it?" his dad asked.

"Almost two years worth of paychecks from Daily Books."

Jonathan's son sighed. "But I don't want to pay the money back. I earned it! I *did* work shelving as many books as it would have taken five people working an eight hour shift each... more!"

"But they can't know that, son," his father simply stated.

"I know that, Dad. If only Luthor hadn't raised our lease."

His dad threw up his hands. "The great Perry White and his grand ideas!"

His mom took hold of her husband's hand. "Laying blame won't solve this. No matter whose idea it was, Clark accepted the proposition. He took the money."

*Yep! All your fault, Kent. You ruin everyone's life you touch. Lois was just trying to help you by keeping Tempus away from you and you pushed her away.*

They were all quiet for a minute with these heavy thoughts, before Martha Kent spoke again. "So why did Lois break up with you?"

*Because you don't deserve her.*

"Because she says I don't trust her," Clark said.

"Ah." His mom nodded. "And why is that exactly, Clark? She told you what that man from the future told her, right?"

"Yes." He groaned, burying his head again.

*Yep! You screwed with destiny and ended up with zippo! Lois is your soul mate and you thought that meant you didn't have to try.*

Clark glanced over at his mom with a sour smile. "Thanks for the head's up about that, Mom, by the way."

She chuckled, patting his hand. "I knew you'd figure it out, sooner or later. You can't live your life by what someone else predicts for you. You live your life by what you want."

Clark sighed. "I want Lois."

Jonathan Kent pushed himself to his feet. "What are you going to do about it, Clark? You aren't going to win Lois back plowing fields of snow."

*What?*

His mom smiled up at his father with love. And his father returned the gaze with tenderness.

Clark looked at his parents with a shake of his head. "So, you think I should crawl back to her on my hands and knees?"

His mom patted his hand again. "No, dear. Fly back. It's faster."

"Where's my truck?" his father asked.

Clark winced.

*The truck!*

"I left it about two blocks from Lois's." He went to the telephone and dialed his favorite phone number.

*Please, Lois. Please, pick-up. Please, tell me it was a huge mistake. That you still love me. That you want me back. Please!*

It rung off the hook. "She doesn't want to talk to me," he muttered, setting down the receiver.

"Or she's in the shower," his mom suggested.

*Plowing fields of snow?* His conscience repeated his father's words. *What was he thinking?*

The craziest idea popped into Clark's head and he smiled. He ran into his room, grabbed his winter coat and then kissed both his folks' cheeks. "You're brilliant. Don't wait up!"

If his folks had waved, he hadn't noticed, because he was already out of Metropolis.

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Lois banged around in her kitchen in her fluffy bathrobe trying to make something worth eating. Her fury at Clark was still unabated.

*Streetwalker!*

She threw a pot into the sink. She didn't really want ramen

anyway. She wanted real food.

*You're your father!*

It was a tossup, which of Clark's two insults was worst in her opinion.

*Was she being difficult? Was she being unreasonable? Wanting a man who claimed to love her, heart and soul, to believe whatever she told him, no questions asked?*

*Of course not! You deserve a man who will love despite all the lies that you tell him.*

Lois heard a knock at her door and her head snapped up.

*Who is that? The Toasters? Clark? Neighbors complaining about the noise? Which do you dread more?*

She picked up her ladle and walked slowly, quietly over to her door. She took a glimpse through the peephole and saw Clark waiting on the other side. Her heart still raced, but it changed its rhythm.

*Clark! Oh, yea! He hasn't given up on you. He still wants you. He still loves you.*

"Clark," she whispered, not wanting to call out to him. Her heart was broken. Talking to him wouldn't fix that. "There isn't anything else to say."

"Can I have one minute, Lois? Please. Sixty seconds. I promise. That's all I ask," he replied.

*Time to make him grovel!*

Lois bit her bottom lip. What could he say in sixty seconds to change her mind? She didn't think she would understand him if he tried super speed talking.

*Give him a thirteenth chance! He's worth it.*

She took a deep breath, glanced over at her microwave clock, and said, "Okay. Go!"

"No, Lois, with the door open," Clark stipulated calmly.

Lois sighed wearily. Did she really want to face him for a whole minute? Look into those eyes that she loved for sixty seconds, knowing he would probably disappoint her again? Break her heart again.

*What are you, Lois? Chopped liver? You can handle sixty seconds. Find your spine and use it, woman!*

She could handle sixty seconds... SIXTY seconds of Clark before slamming the door in his face.

Lois jogged into the kitchen and set the timer for ninety seconds and then proceeded to unlock her front door. "Okay, Clark, what...?" She gaped at him. In those few seconds it took for her to turn on the timer, he had put on a winter parka.

*Clark has lost it.*

Her eyes darted past him to something white shining in the courtyard light just beyond him. "What the...?" Lois stepped out of her apartment and towards the huge pile of snow, partially blocking her door from the rest of the world. She turned and inspected Clark for lunacy.

"I should've believed you when you said it would snow, Lois. I'm sorry," he said, his head bent in contrition.

Lois's eyes formed slits and she pressed her lips together.

*Oh! Did the cute little sex god think you would run to his arms and ply him with kisses after what he called you earlier this evening?*

Dipping her hand into the cold, slowly melting, yet still fresh snow, she pulled out a huge handful and threw it at him.

Clark looked like he expected this and zipped up the parka before the first snowball hit.

"Clark Kent!" Lois yelled at him, heaving more snow at him, this time using the ladle to form more perfect and compacted snowballs.

*Ooooh. That man just makes your insides boil! He infuriates you all the time! And then he goes and does something like this to show you he loves you and is willing to believe anything you tell him. How dare he?!*

"You make it impossible to stay angry at you!" she screamed, hitting the snow with her ladle. Then a spurt of laughter escaped from somewhere deep in her chest.

*You said it was going to snow tonight and Clark made it snow.*

She continued to chuck clumps of snow at him. And he allowed her to do so until the ding of her microwave timer went off.

*He loves you! He made it snow for you!*

“Are you done?” he asked.

“Nowhere near it, Buster!” she replied still pelting him with snow. She had dropped the ladle by this point, it slowing her down, and just used her hands.

Out of nowhere Clark tackled her, landing both of them in the soft pile of snow. Then he gradually — for him — started piling snow on top of her. She scooped it off herself and tossed it at him just as quickly. Soon they had melted into a mutual puddle of laughter.

When she was able to talk again, she asked, “How?”

Clark shrugged. “It helps to know Superman.”

Lois boxed his ears with her frozen hands and pulled his face to hers. She hadn’t meant to kiss him. Not ever. Never again. And certainly not less than an hour he had called her a streetwalker. But the man had traveled to the ends of the earth to prove to her that he believed her — that he loved her — and then let her pelt him with snow to get her anger out.

Clark lifted her off the snow and carried her back into her apartment without once breaking their kiss. His skin was warm against hers and she didn’t want to let go, but he set her down inside the door. She shrugged out of her now soaking wet robe.

“I love you, Lois,” he said, pulling off his winter coat. Underneath, she saw he was still wearing his bartending uniform from earlier that evening. She hadn’t noticed that when she looked through the peephole at him.

*Hello, sexy!*

Lois was dressed only in the shorts and t-shirt PJs she had worn the previous night, when they had almost made love. The expression on his face told her that he recognized her PJs and he stepped forward, placing his cold hands on her hips. Her eyes closed in anticipation of his hot and passionate kiss. What was unexpected was him pulling her hips towards his to demonstrate exactly how ready and willing he was.

Lois’s hands automatically went to his chest. “Not tonight, Clark.” He slightly pouted and kissed her anyway. “No?”

“No,” she said decisively. “I don’t want our first time — your first time — to be after a big fight.”

Clark continued kissing her, moving his lips down her neck. “I don’t mind.”

“No, Clark. You deserve better... we deserve better... than make-up sex for your first time... our first time.” Her knees weakened as his mouth reached the base of her neck as she said this.

“O-kay, Lois,” he agreed, suddenly letting her go. She almost sank to the ground but he caught her, picking her up and carrying her to the futon couch. He bumped the couch with his hip, but it didn’t budge. He bumped it again. Nothing.

“It’s stubborn,” Lois said, jumping out of his arms. Pulling, tugging, and pushing, she finally got the bed to lie down flat. She lay across it on her stomach as she gazed up at him.

“As I was saying, Lois...” Then he grinned. “I need a shower. I could wait...” He sat down on the edge of the bed. “... an hour?”

Lois laughed, rolling onto her back. “It’s not like swimming, Clark.”

“Mmmm. Lois *and* swimming.” Clark leaned over and kissed her again. She wrapped her arms around his neck, holding him to her.

*I’m thinking the same thing, Clark. Mmmm. Clark and swimming.*

“No!” she said, pushing him away. “Don’t tempt me, Clark.”

*Tempt away, Clark. Lois’s resolve is dwindling.*

“O-kay.” Clark drew back slowly, pulling her inner Lois to the surface. He tugged his tie off and dropped it on the end of the bed. Then he unbuttoned his vest. “Do you have a towel I could use?”

“Huh?” gulped Lois. Her eyes followed his hands, watching as they gingerly opened each button on his shirt. Instead of his chest, she saw an undershirt and, under the undershirt, the hint of a blue suit.

Clark leaned over and kissed her lips. “May I use your shower? I’m still a little smoky from earlier.”

“Take me with you,” she murmured, wrapping her arms back around his neck.

A grin spread across his face as he scooped her up. “With pleasure.”

They were at the bathroom door before Lois realized Clark had misunderstood. “Clark, I’m not going to take a shower with you.”

“No?” There was that cute, little pout again.

“No.”

He lowered his arm, allowing her feet to touch the floor.

“I love you, Clark.” Lois went to the closet and returned with a towel. “I even want you, Clark.”

His smile told her that he felt the same.

“But I refuse to make love with a man the same day he called me a cheating streetwalker,” she informed him and pressed the towel against his chest. “If you are going to stay the night, I recommend bathing out there first.” She pointed towards the front door and the pile of snow of the other side. “Because if you don’t cool off, I’m not letting you anywhere near my bed.”

Clark gulped. Message finally received.

*Good!*

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### Saturday Evening

Clark rushed into Daily Books. He was late. Later than late. It was already after eight o’clock. Way after. Lois got off at eight and was supposed to meet that Tempus guy after work. When the man sent her that bouquet of flowers yesterday, he had told her he would pick her up at the store when she got off her shift. Clark had meant to be there early, before eight. But some kids got stuck on a train track with a train coming, and then Superman made sure the kids got home after the rescue.

He had been going to suggest that Lois clock out before quitting time and let him whisk her away to his folks’ apartment. He didn’t want Lois to go on the blackmail date at all. He had gotten himself into this mess; he would get himself out. The CD stealing charges were bogus anyway. There was no way Tempus would make them stick, especially a week after finding the wrappers.

Lois wasn’t at the newsstand. He hadn’t expected her to be. She wasn’t in her Magazine Receiving room or the break room. Clark forced himself to take a calming breath and closed his eyes to listen for her heartbeat. She wasn’t in the store. He was too late.

Clark plodded down the escalator steps.

“Hey, Clark!” Ralph called to him from the music department’s customer service counter. “I’m sorry about fouling up that message from Lois earlier this week.”

Clark turned his dark mood towards the oaf. “Lois also mentioned you siccing a tabloid reporter on her at her home.”

Ralph held up his hands. “Okay. Okay. I’m scum. Lois already read me the riot act tonight.”

Clark moved closer to the counter. “Did you see Lois leave tonight?”

“Yeah. She said she had an appointment and clocked out early, grabbed her stuff and bolted.”

Clark’s brow furrowed. *She did?*

“She even stood up that bearded guy. Boy, was *he* mad.” Ralph chuckled. Then he remembered to whom he was speaking. “It wasn’t a date,” he reassured Clark. “She told me as much when she left him that note with me.”

*Lois stood up Tempus?!*

“Note?”

“Yeah. She told me that some guy with a beard would be coming in and looking for her about eight. And to give him the note, if he did,” Ralph explained.

Clark raised a brow. “And did you give him the note?”

“You’d think I was a damn telegraph office all the messages Lois leaves with me,” Ralph complained. “Yes. I gave him the message.”

“What did it say?” Clark asked.

“How should I...?” Ralph started before Clark’s expression

intensified. “Okay. Okay,” he admitted, picking up the trashcan and pulling out a crinkled note from it. He tossed it to Clark. “Tell Lois I quit. I’m not going to be her messenger anymore. That Tempus guy threw that in my face.”

Clark was amazed how long it took to drag the whole story out of Ralph. He flattened the note out on the counter.

*Sorry, Lois had written. I got a better offer. Lois*

Clark laughed softly to himself, flinging the note back into the trash and thanking Ralph. The gall of that woman of his. Standing up her blackmailer! He started to whistle as he left the store.

*Thank God, Lois was safe.*

Clark loved Lois. And he was a very, *very* lucky man that she loved him at all.

*Do you think she’s still mad at you?*

He had never heard of rolling in snow increasing a man’s ardor. Clark sighed. He deserved and would gratefully accept any and all punishment that Lois dished out to him. No matter how long it lasted or how torturous it would be. And it was certainly a form of torture.

He loved and desired this beautiful woman. He knew Lois loved and desired him as well. She wanted him, she had told him so. She had even invited him to spend the night... cuddling with her in her bed. The condom box nonetheless sat unopened in the next room. Snuggling and sleeping, nothing more. So close, yet still too far away.

Clark never imagined he would get as close to a woman as he had with Lois. Now that he had tasted the passion she could unleash in him, felt the warmth of her skin under his fingertips and her body pressed against his... Clark swallowed. Knowing he could have made love to her last night if only he had listened to her, talked with her instead of shutting her out, given her the benefit of the doubt and not assumed that what he saw and heard was actually what was seen and said. He needed to behead his green-eyed monster or it would be the death of him.

*“I refuse to make love with a man the same day he called me a cheating streetwalker,”* her words continued to echo in his ears almost twenty hours later.

Oh, yeah. He definitely deserved any punishment Lois gave him. He was lucky she was talking to him at all. He was simply relieved she had accepted his big pile-of-snow apology.

Clark had over an hour before his shift started at the store. He drove over to visit Lois at her apartment. He would have flown, but Superman wasn’t allowed to make any public appearances at her place. He knocked on her door, but she didn’t answer. He checked his watch. If Lois had taken the bus home, she should have been back by now. He lowered his glasses and did a quick peek inside. The apartment looked the same as it had when they left this morning. Empty. No sign of a struggle.

He waited for another fifteen minutes out by the pool. There was still a small mound of snow left from the night before. When she didn’t appear, Clark hopped back into his dad’s truck and drove over to the café.

Neither Maisie nor his folks had seen Lois at the restaurant. He even checked upstairs at their apartment. Nope. She just had disappeared. He tried calling her place again, but the phone rang off the hook.

*Where could she be? Luthor’s?*

No. Clark couldn’t imagine the man making a date for the evening after meeting a woman for the first time. Even if that woman was Lois. Nor would Luthor make an appointment for a Saturday night. He must be booked solid for months. No, Lois must be off somewhere by herself.

*Movie? Out to dinner?*

Yeah. Maybe. Lois knew Clark was working that night and she didn’t want to go anywhere Tempus could track her down. That must be it. No reason to panic.

Clark got back in the truck to return to the store. As he drove he once again listened in to The Soundman show on the radio.

“Tonight we’re taking dedications for Metropolis’s latest

lovebirds. Superman and his main squeeze Lois Lane,” Lenny Stoke announced. “That was just *New Kid in Town* by the Eagles, dedicated by... I’m sorry, did you get this down right?... A Happy Girl in Metropolis? I’m shaking my head, people. I think there’s going to be an opening soon on my production staff. All right. What’s coming up next? Carole King? Yes, Carole King singing *I Feel the Earth Move*. Who dedicated this?... You don’t know. What do you mean ‘you don’t know’? Okay, people, I definitely have an opening on my production staff! This is unacceptable. Unacceptable. Anyway, Superman, here’s Ms. King...”

Clark bubbled with laughter at The Soundman’s exasperation. It felt good to laugh after the last hour of alarm. And Lois certainly knew how to make the Earth move under his feet. Thanks to whoever dedicated that song to them.

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It was almost time to clock in when he arrived back at the store and Clark hoped that perhaps Lois had mentioned something of her plans for the evening to Perry.

The Chief glanced up when Clark stuck his head into the office. “You get Lois squared away, safe and sound?”

*Or not.*

“She’s disappeared,” Clark informed him as he stepped all the way into the office and shut the door. “Ralph said she stood Tempus up.”

Perry raised a brow. “Ralph said?”

Clark looked down with a shrug. “Superman had to rescue some kids. It was after eight by the time I got here.” He glanced up at his boss. “Lois didn’t say anything to you about ditching her blackmailer?”

Perry shook his head. “No. She did ask me about Luthor though and the *Daily Planet*. Have you been telling her tales about me?”

“No,” Clark replied and then asked, “Is there anything to tell?”

“Must have been Jack. Kids.” Perry shook his head. “What? No. I still have feelers out. Nothing definite. Did you bring the money?”

Clark nodded. “From last night’s tips. What is it for?”

“To pay your employees,” Perry said with a grin.

“What?” Clark stammered, perplexed.

His boss waved off his question. “Go, make sure all the customers are out. The closers are leaving early tonight.”

Clark furrowed his brow in confusion, then shrugged. The Chief had never let him down. He trusted him and went to do his job.

At ten thirty, all the customers were out and the tills counted. Perry led all the closing staff to the front doors. It was a good half-hour earlier than usual.

“But we haven’t had time to really straighten,” petitioned Ralph, who hadn’t wanted the half-hour dock in pay.

“Clark and I will handle it tonight. Go home, kiss your wife and children goodnight,” their boss said, shooing the staff out the front doors.

“I’m not married!” objected Ralph as Perry waved him off. Ralph stomped down the sidewalk.

Clark shut and locked the doors. “So are you going to explain your ‘big plan’?” he asked.

Before Perry could answer, there was a knock on the door.

“Your night crew.” His boss beamed. “A few part-timers who agreed to work an extra shift under the table one night a week with you.”

Clark looked at him like he was nuts.

“They can’t get full-time, but when you noticed you were getting a week’s paycheck for one night of work, you arranged this deal. They get the extra shift under the table and you were able to ease your guilty mind over the extra funds in your paycheck. And I didn’t have the hassle of paperwork and phone calls to the corporate office to straighten the whole thing out.” Perry half-shouldered. “It’s still not one hundred percent legal, but one thousand percent more honorable and less suspicious. LexCo can’t fault you if you actually paid workers to work with the extra funds in your paycheck. And the government can’t *really* fault you because you did pay taxes on the extra income.” His

boss gave him a quick glance.

“Yes. I pay my taxes.” Clark shook his head as he walked to the front door. He could see Jimmy and Jack waiting for him to let them in.

*No wonder Perry said he might have to fire him. Not one hundred percent legal. Per-ry!*

Clark opened the door allowing Jimmy and Jack to saunter in. As he went to close the door again, Jimmy stopped him.

“Wait, CK. Sarah’s coming.”

*Sarah?*

A serious dark-haired woman close to Clark’s age came to the door.

“Sarah, this is Clark,” Jimmy said, introducing them. “Sarah started about the same time as Lois. She cashiers on the third floor.”

“Clark? Clark Kent?” She looked him over head to toe in his security guard uniform. “*The Clark Kent? A security guard?*” She appeared disappointed.

“*The?*” Clark stammered, staring quizzically at her.

*When did you become famous? When did someone add an article before your name?*

He watched as she glanced over her shoulder to a man standing stiffly across the street at the park and shook her head. “I read in the paper that you were dating Superman’s girlfriend.”

Clark craned his neck for a better look at the man across the street. “No. I’m dating *my* girlfriend. Superman doesn’t date. Who’s that?” he asked, nodding to the man across the street staring at them.

Sarah smiled indulgently at Clark. “My bodyguard.”

“Where’s Milton?” Perry groused.

Distracted, Sarah and Clark both turned to their boss.

“Milton?” Clark asked.

“Milton Applegate! He’s the fourth,” Jimmy explained. “Here he comes.”

They all turned and watched as a tall, geeky guy with glasses, someone Clark recognized as a quiet customer service bookseller, lumbered up the sidewalk.

“Fourth?” Clark asked.

“Your paycheck is four times higher than it should be. You’ll be sharing the extra four parts with these people here,” explained Perry. “For the work they put in tonight.”

“This isn’t your only job, is it?” Sarah asked Clark.

Clark snapped his attention back to her.

*Why is she so interested in him?*

“Ah, no. I also work for MDS, delivering packages,” he murmured. He couldn’t shake the feeling that this woman seemed familiar. Perhaps he had delivered something to her before and she couldn’t place him, like he couldn’t place her.

“A delivery man?” Sarah’s shoulders fell as she shook her head. “Never mind. It was a shot in the dark anyway. We’ll go to Plan B.”

*Plan B?*

Sarah looked Clark over once again. “Too bad,” she murmured to herself. “He was kind of cute, too.”

Clark took a second good look at the woman again and asked the question on the tip on his tongue. “What’s ‘Plan B?’”

Sarah shrugged. “I marry and get impregnated by Ching ...” She nodded to the man across the street. “And try to pass his child off as yours, claiming you died after our wedding night. Either that or Ching fights Lord Nor to the death, instead of you, for the honor of my hand in marriage.” She said this as if she were simply talking about the weather.

All four of the men stared as Sarah rode the escalator upstairs. And then Perry, Jimmy, and Jack turned and looked curiously at Clark, who appeared as dumbfounded as the rest of them.

*That will teach you to ask stupid questions, Kent.*

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Earlier Saturday Evening — around 8:30 P.M.

Lois entered the same penthouse apartment she had come to the night before. Same impressive staircase. Same beautiful artwork on the

walls. But other than that, the room was completely different. The stage and the bar were gone. Furniture that must have been removed for the party had returned. It was decorated in a style she had always admired: classic and a bit austere in its discomfort. When she finally had money to buy new furniture, she would probably gravitate to knock-offs of pieces like this.

*Can you really see Clark agreeing to furniture like this, Lois? This is not his style at all. He wouldn’t be able to put up his feet and watch the game on furniture like this.*

Lois didn’t know why she let her inner voice go on so long about Clark. They were just dating, not buying furniture together.

Lex’s head of household, Nigel St. John, had picked Lois up at the bookstore and was presently leading her across the room.

“Wait here,” Nigel told her. “Mr. Luthor will join you shortly.”

Then the man paused, taking another glance at her slightly dusty work attire: black slacks and a gold blouse. Comfortable, yet stylish, had been the look she had been going for. Obviously, Nigel didn’t approve. “Did you need someplace to change, Ms. Lane?”

Nope. She recognized a dig at her clothes when she heard one. “Into what?” she asked, holding out her arms and showing him her lack of baggage.

“I’ll see if I can find you something more suitable,” he suggested.

“I didn’t know that a tie and jacket were required to meet with Lex,” she sneered, dropping Luthor’s first name on purpose. She had had enough of the put-downs from Luthor’s staff. First Mrs. Cox and now this guy.

“As you wish, Ms. Lane,” Nigel replied with a slight bow before leaving the room.

*Good riddance!*

“Hello, Darling!” Lex purred, entering the room with his arms outstretched.

*Darling?*

“Hello, Lex,” Lois said politely.

Each time she met the man, she liked him less and less. She did not know why. He was all charms and smiles, platitudes and compliments, but next to Clark’s...

*... everything...*

*... sweetness and charm...*

*... and rocking bod...*

Lex seemed phony. She could never picture herself attracted to him. Sure, by dating a man like Lex, she could buy the world. But Clark would give her the world. With Clark she wouldn’t always be dining on caviar and pâté, but who would want to? Hello, calories! She couldn’t imagine going for a walk through a festival in the park with Lex, or eating hot dogs, or splashing around in the pool.

*Or having steamy hot passionate kisses on a big pile of snow.*

On the other hand, she couldn’t picture Lex Luthor ever using the word ‘streetwalker.’

*Unless he was ordering take-out.*

Eww! Lois pushed her inner voice back inside the box it had escaped from upon meeting Clark. Lois needed fewer sarcastic comments and more focus for this meeting.

“Come. Let me show you my latest plans,” said Lex, taking her arm and leading her into his office. His welcoming manner was a little off-putting, being that he acted like they were old friends despite having just met.

There was an easel that Lois didn’t remember from the night before. The top page was a sketch of a tower similar to the one they were currently in. It was tall and had the name Luthor on it, but other than that, it was not very architecturally interesting.

*Compensating for something there, Lex?* her inner voice scoffed from inside its box.

A little nagging voice inside of Lois made her approach the easel. She flipped up the sketch and saw it sat directly on top of MJ’s Café just like Clark told her it would. It infuriated her how often her man was right.

“Lex?” she asked. “You want to tear down MJ’s Café to build

another tower?”

“I can make space in the building for them, if you prefer,” he generously offered.

“And what will they do for income until then? Where will they live?” she asked.

Lex seemed a bit put out that she cared more about the people affected by the tower than the tower itself. “I have given them every opportunity to move.”

“By doubling their rent? If you want to build your obelisk so badly, why not just offer to buy out their lease? You’ll get them to move out sooner and they’ll have the funds to actually move. Wouldn’t that make more sense than playing chicken with their lease?” she suggested.

“Stunning woman, beautiful singer, talented writer, and a brain to boot.” Lex shook his head.

*There he goes cataloguing your assets again.*

Luthor went to a mini-tape recorder on his desk. “Mrs. Cox, have the legal department draw up a contract to buy out the owners of MJ’s Café. Fifty thousand... no, better make it seventy-five thousand dollars.” He clicked off the recorder. “There. Will that put your mind at ease?”

Lois’s jaw dropped open.

*Clark’s so going to kill you for interfering with his parents’ restaurant.*

Lex grinned mischievously at her reaction. “See. I’m not a bad guy.” He held out his hand. “Shall we eat?”

Caviar was definitely served as an appetizer, but after one polite taste, Lois couldn’t help thinking of the fish eggs Pete had used for fishing. The linguini alfredo with shrimp was delicious, but for some reason reminded her of Clark.

Perhaps it had been the pasta her boyfriend had brought back the night before, after taking his shower. Simple spaghetti and meatballs with a still-warm loaf of authentic Italian bread and a bottle of Italian house red. It had felt like Clark was seducing her with food. They had laughed and talked late into the night, drinking the whole bottle of wine.

Clark had spoken of his travels and places he wanted to share with her. She had once again posed the question of where he would fly to, if given the opportunity. He had simply answered, “Wherever you are.”

Lois had a feeling it was the answer he hadn’t given her the first time she had inquired. She liked that Clark had reached a point where he felt comfortable being himself around her, able to say what he truly felt. Despite loving the emotion that came with his vague answer, Lois had still felt it lacking. So — as a good reporter — she asked it again. If he could take *her* to anywhere in the world — which he had interrupted her to tell her he could with a slight wink — where would he like to take her first?

Clark must have thought about this question before, because he didn’t hesitate. He had wanted to take her back to that beach in Costa Rica. Not to the exact one he had taken her to — because she had revealed it in the article; they were sure they would never be able to go back unnoticed — but that other beach, the one Kal had mentioned was used by skinny-dippers. For some reason, their conversation had been sidetracked there.

*It was all those kisses you gave him. I agree, he should take you skinny-dipping... or anywhere Clark wanted to go in the all-together.* Her inner voice coughed. *Like that shower you turned down earlier.*

Lex was talking about his life — how he had gotten rich at such a young age, trying to impress her with his skills at business and the power he exerted in Metropolis — when her mind had wandered to her night with Clark. But she reined in these thoughts and tried to politely listen to what Lex was saying. If for no other reason, he was telling her stuff he had never told another reporter.

*For a man so well known for shunning the press, he sure likes to talk about himself.*

But was he really saying anything? Lois wondered as she listened to him give opinions but still dance around topics.

When the dinner dishes had finally been cleared and Lois had emphatically turned down his offer of dessert twice — only one of which she speculated was really an offer of food — it was time to turn the conversation to her dilemma with B. Gerald Tempus. It was for this reason alone she had limited herself to only one glass of wine.

“The reason I asked for this meeting, Lex, was because of the treatment I have received from one of your auditors,” she told him.

Lex had held up a finger, asking her to wait as he pushed a button on a hand-held intercom remote he had removed from his jacket pocket. “Nigel, can you bring that file we discussed earlier into my office.” The billionaire stood up from their private dining table in his living room. “If we are going to discuss business, we should adjourn to my office.”

Lois agreed, standing. Lex had been trying to become more intimate at dinner; perhaps in his office, he would be less so.

Nigel entered the private room with a thick folder. Did Tempus have so many complaints against him?

“That will be all, Nigel. You may dismiss the staff for the night, I shan’t be needing them.”

Nigel gave Lois a cool once-over before replying, “As you wish, Sir,” and closing the door behind him.

Was Lex planning on driving her home himself? Or sending her home in a taxi? Or was he anticipating her remaining for the night? All those thoughts combined with Nigel’s parting glance, sent shivers of foreboding down her spine.

Lex indicated she should sit in a guest chair as he himself sat behind his desk, all business.

Lois launched into an explanation of what happened with B. Gerald Tempus earlier in the week. She edited out all mention of her ‘big, brawny, blue boyfriend’ and the investigation into Perry’s and Clark’s padding of Clark’s paycheck. She did include Tempus’s threat of having her arrested for stealing and his offer to cover it up if she went out with him.

“And when is this date to take place?” Lex inquired.

She lowered her head and blushed slightly. “Tonight.” She raised her eyes to his and said, “I left him a note telling him I had gotten a better offer.”

Lex laughed in delight as he opened the folder. “Aren’t you worried that he will go after your boyfriend since you didn’t show up to your blackmail date?” he questioned, the amusement remaining in his eyes at her shock. “Shall I continue?” Lex asked her, tapping the folder. “Or shall we retire upstairs for the rest of the evening?” His smile broadened as he registered the revulsion in her expression. “You might actually learn to enjoy it, my dear. And if you don’t protest, I’ll let you take a few pages from your folder. I guarantee you, there aren’t any copies.”

Bile rose in her throat as she realized that it wasn’t Tempus’s file he was holding, but a file on her.

“Tsk-tsk. Regretting not taking up my offer of dessert earlier? If you had been willing, I might have thrown in the whole file.” Lex shrugged. “Yes, I agree. Where would have been the fun in that?”

“Never!” Lois finally snapped.

“No?” Lex said, only somewhat disappointed. “Oh, well. Shall we see what’s in here, then?”

Lois swallowed down the bad taste in her mouth. It seemed Lex wasn’t going to force the issue. And she wished she could exhale in relief, but found she could not, as her eyes focused on that thick folder.

“Shall we start at the beginning? Here’s a photo of you and Superman at the press conference,” he said, holding up a photo of herself and Superman making explicit eye contact. “As I watched the press conference unfold on LNN, I wondered about the identity of the woman whom Superman was so clearly attracted to. The woman Superman knew by name and, indeed, who named him Superman.”

As her tongue crossed her teeth, Lois tried to keep her anger at bay.

“Then we have the photos that *Out in Public* acquired.” He held up a copy of that tabloid, showing she and Clark arguing after the press

conference, when Superman had come by the bookstore. “If it had only been the press conference, we all would have forgotten you by now. Now you cannot deny that you and Superman have a definite relationship. . . chemistry, shall we say?” He looked down at the tabloid again. “Looks like a lover’s spat to me? So? What did Big Blue do to anger you?”

Lois pressed her lips together, refusing to let him have the satisfaction.

“No?” Lex shrugged. “Then I learn that Superman’s girlfriend works for me!” He laughed with glee. “As a bookseller in my tax write-off of a bookstore. And, as last Sunday progressed, Lois Lane returned home to find. . . Now, darling, you know the saying: ‘Once, shame on you. Twice, shame on me.’ I wonder what thrice would be?” Still laughing, Lex pulled out the *Dirt Digger Weekly* with which Lois was already quite familiar. “Guess who was waiting for you again? Not only waiting for you, but he flies you off on a date right then and there. Really, Lois? You shouldn’t be surprised by your sudden fame and notoriety.” He took a highlighter out of his drawer and drew a picture of a neon sign above their heads reading *We’re an item!* “And then you have the gall to say you aren’t dating him.”

“I’ve heard enough. You don’t have anything but tabloid speculation in that folder. I’m leaving.” She stood up to walk out.

Luthor simply pressed a button on his remote locking his office door. “Sit back down, my dear. You’re not going anywhere until you call your boyfriend. I’ve got a business proposition I would like to discuss with him. Just one simple ‘Help Superman!’ will do.”

“I’m not dating Superman,” she stated as she tried to open the door despite hearing the bolts latch. With each shake of the doorknob her anger grew. She refrained from banging on the door and screaming for help. Luthor’s staff — from what she knew of them — wouldn’t pay her any heed and she didn’t want to get Clark’s attention, as that was exactly what Luthor wanted.

“Of course you aren’t,” he scoffed. “According to my man Tempus, you have . . .” He flipped a couple of pages in the folder. “A ‘big, brawny, blue boyfriend’.”

*Lex knows about your conversation with Tempus? Word for word?*

“I must admit, I was surprised to find out from him how amenable to blackmail you are. Why do you think I asked you out last night? Did you actually think it was because I was interested in you?” Lex laughed for a moment and then stood up. He walked over to where she was standing with her arms crossed. “I must admit there is something about you.” He ran a finger down her cheek and she turned her face away from his touch. “I knew you had that ‘date’ with Tempus set up for this evening. And I knew, like any woman, you’d drop him for me in an instant.”

With a huff of displeasure she moved away from him.

“I wanted this date for one reason and one reason only. You are going to tell me Superman’s secret identity. It’s as simple as that, Lois. I know you know it.” Lex went back over to the file on his desk and picked up another photo: Superman standing at Lois’s door staring at a set of keys in the palm of his hand in the middle of the night. His motivation was clear. Superman wanted to go inside her apartment. And everyone would know it was her apartment from the *Dirt Digger Weekly* photo spread.

Lois could feel her heart pounding against her chest. The photographer that Clark chased down the alley the night he found the bugs and whisked her off to his apartment — it hadn’t been a tabloid photographer. It was one of Lex’s spies!

“You couldn’t get this close to a man and not know. You want to protect him, keep these photos out of the press, stop me from ruining his Boy Scout image, and to protect — ” Lex flipped over another paper, “ — Clark Kent from finding out about your afterhours visitor. One who is more than willing to do with you what your boyfriend won’t.”

*Did Luthor just imply that he knows that Clark’s a...*

“And here I thought ‘blue’ in reference to your boyfriend was his suit color. That was until I got the transcripts from the listening

devices my men left at your apartment.”

Lois blanched.

*The bugs! Lex Luthor — billionaire, CEO, philanthropist — was the one who bugged your apartment as well?*

He came over to her and whispered, “I’m curious if you would be willing to divulge a little secret? Were you ever able to crack that nut?”

Lois’s knee came up and struck his groin. “You mean like that?”

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It felt weird, odd, and strange even, shelving books at human speed. Even at this speed, however, Clark had done twice as many carts as the others. Sarah was the exception — she kept pace with him.

Clark finished shelving the fiction on his cart and was moving over to sports when he stopped at the windows. There was a brief lull in the music Jack was pounding through the store and Clark once again listened for Lois. He had called her number at midnight, but she hadn’t answered.

If she had gone out to dinner and a movie, she should have been home by then. He had telephoned his folks, but they hadn’t seen or heard from her either. Clark knew if she was truly in trouble, she would have called out to him — if she could.

And it was this thought that had Clark stopping by the windows to listen for her again.

Music pounded into his ears as Jack’s next music choice — was that Nirvana? — switched on. Resigned, Clark went to turn away from the windows as something caught his eye. Ching was still standing in the same spot, in the same position, that he had been in when Sarah had arrived.

“Enough!” Perry shouted. “Enough! Jack, turn that trash off. Time to play something recorded before 1990!”

*Hear hear!*

Clark couldn’t help but chuckle, agreeing wholeheartedly with Perry.

Sarah joined Clark at the windows and gazed down at Ching.

“He’s still there,” Clark said, stating the obvious.

“I know. I don’t need his protection here, but he insists,” she replied, a rare smile gracing her lips.

“Out of love?” Clark asked, glancing over at her.

“Duty.” She nodded. “Ching is a good lieutenant.”

At her words, Ching’s shoulders seemed to shift slightly with pride.

Sarah noticed this as well. “The best,” she said fondly.

Ching looked up at them.

The music suddenly died and the silence of the night was heavenly to Clark’s ears.

“Take it from a man in love, Sarah. That’s not duty,” Clark informed her.

Ching stepped back into the shadows, but Clark felt and saw his glare nonetheless.

*Why does it seem like the man can hear every word you speak?*

“Why do you think Superman hasn’t tried to rule the people of Earth? He could easily,” she inquired innocently. “Do you think he’s scared to take his rightful place as God?” She was just carrying on a conversation. There was no emotion in her voice but curiosity.

He stared slack-jawed at her.

*Who is this woman? Besides crazy?*

Clark swallowed the bad taste from his mouth. “Superman doesn’t want to rule over us. He wants to help us.”

“Like a good little servant?”

“No!” He hadn’t liked her implication. “Because he *can* help. We were all put on this Earth for a reason, and he believes he was given his abilities to help mankind.”

“From themselves?”

“Sometimes.” Something was off about this conversation, but Clark could not put his finger on what. “And to make his home a better place.”

Sarah raised a brow. “Home?”

Clark shrugged at her skepticism. “Adopted home, then.”

“What about Krypton?” Sarah asked.

*She had picked up on his one brief mention of Krypton from the press conference?*

“I don’t know.” Clark was beginning to think there wasn’t a Krypton left to save. “He said Earth and Metropolis are his home now. I believe him.”

“What if his home planet wanted him back?” she said.

*It’s too late for that. Krypton is surely gone. Earth is your home now. Even if some other planet needed your help, could you just leave Lois? She is your heart and without your heart, you would only be a shell of a man.*

When he didn’t answer, she went on, “This ‘love’ you spoke of... it sounds pretty powerful.”

Clark sighed. “It is. For love a man could move mountains.”

“Why would a man want to do that?”

He glanced at Sarah again, expecting a slight curling upwards of her lips at her joke, but instead she looked completely serious.

“Metaphorical mountains, Sarah,” he clarified.

“Ah.”

*Either she’s the best straight man to your comedy routine you’ve ever met or she’s one odd duck. I’m leaning towards the latter.*

“For Lois, you would move mountains?” she asked, turning her full attention on him.

“Yes.” Literal and figurative ones. For Lois, he would do anything. *Even believe her when she tells you an obvious lie?*

What seems like an obvious lie, Clark corrected himself. Lois would not lie to him.

*What about her lie of omission, Kent? What if she didn’t tell you about breaking her date with Tempus because she was really going out with Luthor?*

Lois loves me, Clark told himself. If she met with Luthor, it wasn’t romantically.

*Then where is she?*

Where indeed?

Sarah wandered off to continue shelving, leaving him still staring out the window.

Clark exhaled and closed his eyes, savoring his moment alone to wade through the silence. He listened through the hum of machinery and computers working all night, the clicks of the traffic signals, TV and radio broadcasts, and the occasional horn, siren, and car alarm... listening for Lois’s heartbeat... for her voice calling to him.

After a minute, he sighed. Nothing. As he turned towards the Sports Department, he heard her.

*For once in my life*

Lois wasn’t screaming.

*I’ve got someone who needs me*

She wasn’t calling for help.

*Someone I’ve needed so long*

She wasn’t even having a conversation — with herself or anyone else.

*For once unafraid*

*I can go where life leads me*

*And somehow I know I’ll be strong.*

Lois was singing.

*For once I can touch*

*What my heart used to dream of*

*Long before I knew*

*Someone warm like you*

*Could make my dreams come true.*

And, if he hadn’t listened to her sing to him the entire evening the night before, he might not have recognized her voice. But he had, so he did. Could she be at the Metro Club? No. There was no music accompanying her.

*For once in my life*

*I won’t let sorrow hurt me*

*Not like it’s hurt me before*

Her voice was melancholy and slightly rough with an emotional

edge he could not place.

*For once I’ve someone*

*I know won’t desert me*

*I’m not alone anymore*

He knew with his heart that she was singing to him, to let him know she was okay.

*For once I can say*

*This is mine, you can’t take it*

*As long as I know I’ve got love, I can make it*

It was moments like these he wished he could communicate back with her.

*For once in my life*

*I’ve got someone who needs me*

Perry walked up to him, “Clark...”

*At least for once I can say*

*This is mine, you can’t take it*

*As long as I know I’ve got love, I can make it.*

But Clark didn’t want to hear what his boss had to say, so he held up a finger to ask him to wait. Then he pointed to his ear and said, “Lois.”

*For once in my life*

*I’ve got someone who needs me*

Perry nodded in understanding and kept quiet. Clark walked behind the cashier counter and telephoned Lois’s home number.

*For once in my life*

*I found someone*

It rang off the hook. She wasn’t at home. Clark hung up the phone in time to hear the end of her song.

*For once in my life*

*I’ve got someone who needs me.*

Then she whispered, “I know you’re worried, but I’m okay, just lying low. Get through the night and I’ll see you in the morning. I’ll repeat this message again in an hour, if I can. If I haven’t fallen asleep. Watch out for the wrath of Tempus. I love you.” There was nothing more.

Clark turned to Perry. “She said to ‘watch out for the wrath of Tempus’.”

“Where is she?” Perry asked, his voice low.

Clark’s brow furrowed. “I don’t know. Somewhere without a telephone, I’m assuming, but close enough that I could hear her. She’s still in Metropolis. She said she would repeat the message in an hour to let me know she was okay. She said she was fine, just laying low.” Clark shook his head. He had this nagging feeling that she was lying to him. He took a deep breath. “It’s snowing in Metropolis tonight,” he told himself.

“What?” Perry gasped, looking out the window. “It is?”

Clark chuckled. “No. Just a little reminder to trust Lois.”

“O-kay,” Perry said skeptically.

Clark exhaled, feeling much relieved that he had heard from his girlfriend. There could be a blizzard outside but that nagging little doubt would still be there.

*Why would she lie to you?*

Perry patted his back. “Don’t worry about the LexCo auditor, Kent. Our little shelving party should take care of him.”

Clark wasn’t listening; he was focused on what Lois had said. *‘I’ll repeat this in an hour. If I can.’*

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#### Early Sunday — Middle of night

Lois squirmed against the ropes and ancient Roman shackles Lex used to restrain her. The more she moved, the more the ropes seemed to tighten instead of loosen. She glanced over at the antique clock on Luthor’s bookshelf: 2:17 in the morning. It had been at least four hours since Luthor trapped her in this office, maybe more. Seventeen minutes since she sang the last song to Clark. She hated lying to Clark, telling him she was okay when she was actually being held hostage by a psycho billionaire.

*You should have listened to Clark and Jack and Perry and...*

Luckily, Clark wasn't the type of man to tell her 'I told you so,' because he definitely had told her so.

*If you had only listened to him you wouldn't be in this predicament now.*

Luthor went to bed around an hour and a half ago. Or was it two and a half hours ago? Her head was getting fuzzy between the several blows he had gotten in during their fight and her lack of sleep. Lex had set the alarms and taken the file and the security remote with him. The only way she was leaving this room was if she called "Help, Superman!" or if Lex let her out when he came back at six. He promised to come back by then. If she still hadn't called for Superman, Lex said he would give her one more chance to tell him Superman's secret identity before he had Clark arrested for stealing funds from LexCo.

At least, he hadn't figured out that Clark was Superman. How had Luthor known that Superman had a secret identity? Simple, just as Jack guessed, Luthor was behind the break-in at her apartment. He had her globe.

*Clark's globe, you mean.*

Luthor had even shown it to her. He knew from Jor-El's fourth message that Superman had come to Earth as a baby. And if he had come as a baby, someone must have adopted him and, therefore, had a real life and a family, whose safety Superman would want to guarantee above all others.

Lois glanced up at the box Luthor had left out to taunt her as she thought back to what the man had said and done.

Lex had brought down the medium-sized wooden box from a shelf. Unlike her simple natural carved box she had bought ten years earlier at the Corn Festival, Lex's box was stained a deep turquoise-blue and had large lead brackets on the corners and a large bolted latch. Luthor had taken out a set of keys and unlocked it, revealing the semi-transparent globe that Pete's mother had given to her after his funeral, and her heart ached.

When Lex began to reach his hand into the box, she screamed, "No!"

"No?" He raised an eyebrow at her outburst.

"If you touch it, Superman will know," Lois shouted, trying to lean forward to stop him. "He senses when it has been activated." Then she gasped, realizing her error.

*Bad, Lois. Very, very bad.*

A smile had grown on Lex's lips. "Does he now? I wondered about that. Maybe you're expendable after all. I can just call your lover with this."

"Clark is my boyfriend, not Superman," Lois had restated her mantra, but Lex wasn't buying it.

*Me either, by the way.*

Lex also had a file on Clark. His goons had been watching her place as well as the tabloid photographers. Clark had become a person of interest when he had shown up after Superman dropped her off. Who was this other man in Lois Lane's life?

"So we did some research on this Clark Kent fellow as well." He held up a photo of her and Clark — out of the blue suit — making out after they had returned from the beach. "I'm assuming it's the same Clark Kent with whom you wrote the newspaper article." He flipped another page. "Clark Kent, the virgin, covered that, didn't he?" He grinned wickedly at her. "Clark Kent, son of Jonathan and Martha Kent, owners of MJ's Café. Didn't think I tied that together, did you? Did you really think I was seriously going to offer them seventy-five thousand dollars for their business?" He laughed.

*Let me at him! Let me just wring his neck...*

"Clark Kent, your boyfriend currently being investigated by my LexCo auditor Tempus for misuse of company funds. Actually Tempus and I didn't really care about Clark's little bump in salary until you jumped at the chance to rescue him with that blackmail date. It had just been a plausible excuse to talk with you, see what you would tell Tempus about Superman. And then you went and admitted there was something to hide by allowing yourself to be blackmailed. I had hoped

for better behavior from you."

*Terrific, moral advice from your kidnapper.*

Lois glared at him, but kept her mouth shut. Her heart was beating so loudly and racing so fast, she hoped that Clark couldn't hear it from all the way over at the bookstore.

Lex had shaken his head with a tsk-tsk. "Your boyfriend is locked inside Daily Books as we speak. He's busy working, guarding the bookstore overnight like he does every Saturday night. So he won't be there to notice when you don't come home tonight." He laughed in anticipation of what he was going to say. "What am I saying? He wouldn't have noticed anyway! You don't sleep together! Priceless."

*Oh, yeah. Well, one night with Clark would be priceless! More money than Lex's got. That's for sure. One night with Lex on the other hand... Hey, Lois, we've got a penny here somewhere, don't we? Make sure you get change.*

Lex shook his head. "So you might as well make yourself comfortable, Lois. You're staying here until you call your lover Superman to come and rescue you." He leaned forward again and focused intently on her. "Why haven't you called for him to come and help you yet? Are you afraid he might not show up? He's not much of a Superman, if he doesn't help his friends in need, now is he?"

"He wouldn't know to come if I don't ask for his help," she replied.

Lex had rested back in his chair, his fingertips resting together. "Just out of curiosity... According to my LNN reporters, you're the one who named him Superman, not Linda King. Was that before or after you tried out the merchandise?"

"Superman and I are not lovers," she had informed him honestly through gritted teeth and scowl. "We're just friends."

*Stop saying that! It hurts enough when bozo here reminds you of your boyfriend's lack of sexual experience... especially with you. You don't need to rub it in as well.*

"Right," he had said slowly, still not believing her. "That was Clark last night, wasn't it? The bartender you were talking with at the end of your set? He seems to like you well enough. He didn't like my choice of songs though, did he?" Lex chuckled. "You must like him sufficiently to be agreeable to Tempus's blackmail date. But how much can you really care about him, cheating on him with Superman? Of course, from what I hear, women can't seem to resist a man in tights."

*Depends on the man, her inner voice had retorted. You in tights, Lex, totally resistible.*

Lex had closed the box as he continued with his obnoxious chuckle. "We'll hold off on this for now. We'll wait until you get up the lungpower to call Superman to come and rescue you. Perhaps a night of being tied to a chair will change your mind. You have until 6:30 A.M. when Tempus arrives at the bookstore to have your boyfriend arrested. Either you call Superman and bring him here tonight to discuss the terms of your release or Clark gets arrested at the store tomorrow morning. Your choice."

*Ooooh. Hate that man. Actually starting to hate everyone and everything to do with LexCo Corp.*

Luckily, the globe hadn't been glowing so Luthor wouldn't have been able to activate it if he tried.

*You should have thought of that before opening your big fat mouth, Lois!*

Lois strained against the ropes once more in the semi-darkness of Luthor's office. She was going to have to come up with another way of getting out of this pickle she had gotten herself into. What were her options?

*Call Clark to rescue you?*

That was what Lois really wanted to do. She wanted to call to Clark, consequences be damned. To have him snap the ropes and break the shackles and fly her away far from here. To have him hold her in his arms and kiss her lips.

But that was also what Luthor wanted. Alarms would go off when Superman burst through the balcony door, alerting Lex of his arrival. Even if Clark got her away scot free, there was still the blackmail

folder of information Lex had been gathering all week. All the notes from his spies and bugs, those photographs, and who knew what else? So, no, she couldn't call Clark. She needed to keep him away.

*Free herself?*

Tried that, didn't work. Lex had tied the ropes quite tightly and the Roman shackles from his antiques collection were actually in good shape. She sighed. No freeing herself. And even if she did somehow escape, Lex still had the remote control for unlocking the doors. So, the only way out would be through the window with Superman or if someone let her out through the main door. Next.

*Telephone for help?*

Oooh. There was an idea. Lex's office phone was sitting prettily right there on his desk. Lex had only tied her arms, but her legs were free. If she could just hop the chair closer to the desk...

Lois decided to give it a try. Hop! Hop! Teeter... Whoa. That was close. She almost fell over.

*It wouldn't do you any good to be lying on the floor. And this chair looks sturdy enough that you don't really think it would break if you did fall over.*

Hop! Hop! Okay, she had made it to the desk. Now what? She could hardly scratch her nose, let alone reach the phone from here with her hands tied to the arms of the chair.

*What about your feet?*

Her feet? Lois looked down at her feet. She shrugged. It was worth a shot. Better to try and fail, then never have tried at all. She was able to kick off her shoes easily enough; it was freeing her toes from her knee-high socks that would be a problem. As she worked on getting the toes of one foot up the other pants leg, her mind wandered back to her fight with Lex and how she had gotten herself into this jam in the first place.

After kneeling him in the crotch, Lois stomped his foot, elbowed him in the ribs and dove onto the desk to grab the security remote. She pressed a button, but instead of unlocking the door, a three-dimensional map of Metropolis slid out from a secret compartment in the wall. It showed a model of a whole new riverfront community situated in Hob's Bay, including shops, restaurants, condos, parks, and a marina.

*Hey, isn't that where Clark keeps having to fight fires over in Suicide Slum?*

Lois pressed another button and the door to the balcony opened, a cool breeze slapping her in the face. It had been hinting at rain all day.

"Perfect time for you to call your lover, Lois," Lex told her, when he found his voice. He picked up an old pistol from a display on his desk. "Give me the remote, Lois," he said, pointing the gun at her. "I keep this one loaded."

She held up her hands and continued circling, still holding onto the remote. "You're behind the Toasters, aren't you? Behind the fires in Suicide Slum?"

"I prefer the name Hob's Bay or Riverview, don't you? And what's a little fire?" Lex shrugged. "A forest fire will rid the overgrowth, allowing fertile soil for new things to grow."

"People live in those buildings that the Toasters are burning, Lex! Families," Lois said, but she saw that he was unmoved by her pleas. She had never realized how much he truly believed everyone beneath him was an insignificant ant. "You may have fooled me, Lex. But there are many people out there..." She flung her hand out to the balcony. "Who will never look up to you."

"Hands in front of you, Lois," he said, ignoring her words and stepping closer. He rubbed a hand on his chest where she had elbowed him. "Actually, sit on the floor, legs crossed, hands above your head."

"What if I say 'no'?" Lois pressed another button on the remote and the Riverview model slid back.

*Darn!*

Lex held the gun up higher, cocking it. "As I said, I don't need you since I have the globe."

Lois swallowed, continuing to press buttons. A lock released, but it was for one of his display cases and not the door. As she glanced down

at the remote to figure out which button to press next, the billionaire leapt forward and hit her across the face with the butt of his gun.

*Hey! That hurt!*

She stumbled to the desk, dropping the remote. When she had gotten her bearings, she backed up towards the balcony doors, taking hold of the sword on display there. Only as she tried to lift it, she realized it was much heavier than it appeared.

*How did soldiers ever fight with these things?*

Lois was only able to raise the blade as high as her knees and, when she tried to swing it towards him, tumbled forward, missing him entirely. Lex, more nimble than he looked, had dodged her swipe easily. He stepped up behind her and pushed her down onto the desk, knocking the sword from her hands.

"I don't want you dead, Lois. Not yet, anyway," he had said, holding her down on the desk with his knee. "I like your spirit."

Lois had never felt more exposed than she had pinned to the desk, that man's knee holding her down. She felt real fear that night, a terror she hadn't felt since almost being hit by that car the night Clark had first rescued her. If Lex had even tried to touch her backside, she would have called out to Clark in an instant, screw the consequences. She loved Clark, but she wouldn't have endured that for anyone. Luckily Lex's mind hadn't been on such things.

*Thank goodness!*

"It would be such a waste," he muttered. "A beautiful singer such as yourself."

As Lex ran his finger down her jaw again, Lois tried to push herself off the desk but he back-handed her across the face. He pushed her back onto the desk and grabbed one of her wrists, then the other, snapping on the shackles from the display case. Obviously, he hadn't been prepared for taking a hostage either.

"My own little songbird." Lex pulled Lois off the desk, throwing her back into the chair. Making sure that she couldn't knee him or kick him with her legs, he relocked the shackles around each arm of the chair, leaving the chain between them dangling in her lap. Afterwards he produced a rope and tied her arms more securely to the chair. Her head had been pounding from both his slap and the strike of the gun and, though heightened with adrenaline, it had been of no use whatsoever at that very moment. Obviously, antique shackles couldn't do the job they used to do. But the combination left her completely unable to move her arms.

Lois squirmed as her toes finally reached the top of her sock and tried to slide it down. Her foot slipped and she had to start over again from the beginning. It was a slow and arduous process, but eventually she freed her foot from its sock. She climbed the desk and arched her back as she reached the phone, turning it to face her, all the while trying not to tip her chair over backwards. Okay, she wasn't familiar with this type of phone. With another arch of her back her foot pressed the 'speakerphone' button. Nothing. She must need to press a phone line. She pressed another button and got a dial tone. Carefully, Lois used her big toe to press 9-1-1.

*"That extension does not exist. Please hang up and dial again,"* a pre-recorded message informed her.

Lois pressed the speakerphone button, essentially hanging up, and thought for a moment.

*Extension?*

So, it wasn't an outside line. Lois arched her back and started the process again. Speakerphone. Line. Nine for an outside line and then 9-1-1.

"Nine-one-one. Please state the nature of your emergency," said a woman's voice.

Lois's heart nearly burst with happiness. "I'm being held against my will at Lex Luthor's penthouse," she said in a rush. "Please send the police immediately."

"O-kay," the 9-1-1 operator said slowly, actually sounding skeptical. "Lex Luthor? The billionaire?"

*Aren't the people at 9-1-1 supposed to believe everyone who calls in? Isn't that their job?*

“Yes, Lex Luthor. He’s gone insane and has tied me to a chair in his office. Please send help,” Lois requested more forcefully.

“If you are tied to a chair how are you able to make this phone call?” the woman asked.

*You’re kidding me, right?*

“With my feet. Please send someone,” Lois pleaded. She could hear the woman typing and exhaled with relief.

“What is your name?”

“Lois Lane.”

“*The Lois Lane?*” The typing stopped and the woman actually started to laugh. “Okay. Now, I’ve heard everything. This line is for emergency phone calls only. Please place your prank calls elsewhere.”

“No, this is *really* Lois Lane and I’m *really* tied up in Lex’s office. Please, believe me!”

“Lady, if you’re *really* Lois Lane, why don’t you just call Superman for help?” the operator asked.

“I want MPD to rescue me! Isn’t that your job?” Lois scoffed. She was burning bridges, but this operator was ticking her off.

“Lady, I don’t know who you are. But if you were really tied up in Lex Luthor’s office and you were really Lois Lane, you would have called for Superman to help you. Since you haven’t done that, I’m going to log this call as another crank...”

“I’m *not* a crank caller!” screamed Lois.

“We get roughly three calls a night — more on the weekends — to 9-1-1 telling us that Lex Luthor is personally doing something to them. MPD is no longer able to issue warrants based on 9-1-1 calls of this nature to enter Mr. Luthor’s penthouse residence, especially in the middle of the night,” the operator informed her brashly. “If you are really Lois Lane and you are really tied up, I recommend you call your boyfriend and get him to help you. There is nothing we can do.”

“Superman is *not* my boyfriend!” she yelled. Lois gritted her teeth and tried to speak calmly, “Call Officer Henderson. He knows me. He’ll vouch for me. Please.”

*There’s a personal reference for you. The man already dislikes you and thinks you’re bonkers.*

“I’ll make a note of your call in the log. But, as I told you before, I cannot send officers to the locale in question,” the operator told her.

“But Lex has threatened to kill me!” Lois was yelling again.

“Ma’am, I need to hang up now. We have real emergency calls waiting,” the woman said and then was gone.

As the dial tone buzzed in Lois’s ear, her heart thudded into her belly.

*So much for 9-1-1.*

Lois screamed in frustration, kicking the phone off the desk to shut it up, as tears dripped down her cheeks.

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Clark sat at the break room table looking down at his bag of chips. He wasn’t hungry. Not even for one of his favorite snack foods. The others were chit-chatting at the table, but all he could think about was Lois. He had heard that first song at one o’clock and a second song at two. Nothing at all at three o’clock. He hoped that it was because she had fallen asleep, safe wherever she was. Clark knew he wouldn’t hear anything in this back room with all the chatter. He stood up and dumped his chips into the trash and left without saying a word.

The radio that Perry had set up to play Lenny Stoke’s Soundman show still blasted from the main cashier counter. Lenny Stoke had signed off an hour or two earlier, but music still poured out. Clark had less than fifteen minutes before the next top of the hour.

*Ain’t no sunshine when she’s gone*

*It’s not warm when she’s away*

*Ain’t no sunshine when she’s gone*

*She always gone too long anytime she goes away.*

Clark walked around the store straightening books, biding his time until 4 A.M. and the next Lois report.

*Wonder this time where she’s gone*

*Wonder if she’s gone to stay*

*Ain’t no sunshine when she’s gone*

*This house just ain’t no home anytime she goes away.*

Even when he turned off the radio, it still wouldn’t be silent. The pitter-patter of rain added to sounds he had to sift through to hear Lois. He wondered if that was why he hadn’t heard anything at three o’clock, because of the rain.

*I know*

*I know*

*I know*

Clark heard a low rumbling sound and then another. He sighed. One was thunder. The other, a freight train.

*Hey, I oughta leave the young thing alone*

*But ain’t no sunshine when she’s gone*

*Ain’t no sunshine when she’s gone*

*Only darkness every day*

Clark looked toward the huge windows overlooking the boulevard behind the main cashier counter. The storm clouds had made the night seem darker than usual.

*Ain’t no sunshine when she’s gone*

*This house just ain’t no home*

*Anytime she goes away.*

Tonight felt so different from last Saturday night when he was here dancing to Queen, knowing Lois was safe at home dreaming of him. Lois was still whispering sweet nothings in his ear, but despite them being closer than ever, he felt farther away.

*I know*

*I know*

*I know*

Almost time. Clark walked over to the radio to turn it off. His hand hovered above the switch.

*Hey, I ought to leave the young thing alone*

*But ain’t no sunshine when she’s gone*

*Ain’t no sunshine when she’s gone*

*Only darkness every day.*

Clark didn’t need any extra distractions, even though that old Bill Withers song fit his mood perfectly. Lois had been his sunshine from the moment he had first seen her soaking in the rays that day in the park across from the store. And his sunshine, she would always be.

*Ain’t no sunshine when she’s gone*

*This house just ain’t no home*

*Anytime she goes away.*

Setting his hand down on the boom box, Clark turned off the radio with a sigh. The vacuum that filled the room seemed to increase his sense of hearing.

“Clark.”

Hearing her speak his name so clearly actually made him jump with surprise. He had been expecting another song. He hadn’t been expecting to hear from her so soon. Her voice sounded hoarser than it had at two o’clock and more tired. If she was truly okay as she said she was, why wasn’t she allowing herself to go to sleep?

“I need to confess something,” Lois continued. “That night you caught me taking your glasses off, I was actually putting them back on.”

Clark laughed softly to himself with a shake of his head. Well, that explains how she had seen so easily through his perfect disguise.

There was a flash of lightning and a crack of thunder.

“... can hear me with this weather — it’s really coming down now — but it makes... better knowing you’re out there listening... if you’re not.”

He would always be there to listen to her. The weather was making it more difficult to hear her but, when he concentrated, he caught most of what she was saying.

“Rain like this... remind me of you, knowing you’re out there keeping people like me safe.”

Her words made him feel hopeful that she had gotten over her terror of storms. He didn’t want her to have any fears remaining from that night. He still felt guilty having made her afraid in the first place.

“Do you know what I’d... like to do right now?” she asked.

Clark grinned. He knew what he would like to be doing.  
 “Brush my teeth,” she answered and he guffawed.  
 Okay, so maybe they weren’t on the same page at the moment.  
 “Oh, I guess that wasn’t very romantic, was it?”  
 Clark heard her chuckle.

“I’m so tired I feel like I could sleep for a week,” Lois said, yawning.

‘Go to sleep, honey. Rest,’ he coaxed her with his mind.

Clark didn’t hear any more and assumed she finally had. Turning towards Receiving to refill his shelving cart, he was startled to hear her voice once more.

“Tell Perry... won’t make it in tomorrow,” Lois murmured, her voice so much softer than before that he wasn’t sure if he had heard her correctly.

He turned back towards the windows as his brow furrowed.

“I love you, Clark... Always.”

Her voice sounded so final, he wanted to rush out to find her. But he knew he could not without her speaking to him, doubting even he could hear her heart beat in this weather. He walked to the windows and setting his hand on the glass, he closed his eyes and concentrated his thoughts on her, willing her to hear him, “*And I love you too, Lois... Always.*”

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*“And I love you too, Lois... Always.”*

Lois gasped, her drowsy eyes flying open. “Clark?” She glanced around. It sounded like he was in the room with her. Almost inside her head. But looking around, she saw she was still alone, still tied up in Lex’s office. And she sighed in despair.

Clark loved her. She had known this, even before she imagined hearing his voice just now. Had he been listening to her? Had he heard what she had been saying to him? Lois wanted to call to him. She wanted nothing more than to be in his arms flying home. But if she called to Clark, Lex would win.

Lois needed to find another way to escape, get the file and globe and get out of there. Without the remote, she wouldn’t be able to get either the balcony or the office doors unlocked. Without Clark, she wouldn’t be able to leave via the balcony anyway. The police refused to even consider Lex a suspect in her kidnapping.

If only she had been able to lift that huge sword. Lois glanced over at it. Sword. With sharp edges! Maybe she could cut the ropes with the sword. More hopping involved. She had tried sliding the chair, but on the carpeted floors, sliding just didn’t work.

Hop! Hop! Hop! Crash!

Lois fell over, her face just inches away from the sword. Her head pounded. The room swirled. Actually, Lois thought as the sword blurred in front of her eyes, didn’t she just hit her head against it? The sword swam in and out of focus as her eyes pooled with tears of pain. Finally, she just closed her eyes letting the darkness overtake her.

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### Sunday morning — Just After Six

A splash of cold water and the chilly breeze woke Lois up.

“Rise and shine, darling. Sleep well?” Lex stood above her with a now empty glass of water. He had also opened the balcony doors. “I see you didn’t call Superman during the night.”

Lois could see the faint glimmers of dawn turning the sky a rosy shade of pink. The storm clouds had moved on and left only silvery ones in their wake. She had made it through the night. She hadn’t called Clark to rescue her. For that, she was proud of herself. She would have to trust in Perry and hope his plans to thwart the LexCo auditor were good ones. If she could hold on until eight o’clock, when Clark officially clocked out, she could finally allow herself to call to him.

*Just a few more hours, Lois, you can do it.*

Lex yanked her chair into an upright position. “Made a decision about Superman, yet?”

“I’m not calling Superman, Lex,” Lois told him more forcefully than she felt. Her head still throbbed and she wished she had a hand

free to rub her sore neck. “Even if I did, you wouldn’t be able to blackmail him. He has done nothing wrong. We aren’t lovers, no matter how much proof you think you might have on him.” She glanced over at the clock. It was just after six in the morning. She hoped Clark hadn’t worried too much when she hadn’t spoken or sang to him at five or at six.

Lex pulled his phone up from the floor. “I see you had a busy night. Did I forget to warn you that the police are under strict orders to never disturb me for 9-1-1 crank calls?”

Lois sneered at him, but otherwise said nothing.

“Don’t want to talk to me? Fine. Let’s see if there was anyone else you wanted to talk to last night?” Luthor picked up the mini-cassette recorder he had used the previous evening to record his message to Mrs. Cox about the MJ’s Café and flipped a switch, causing it to rewind. “I had it set on voice activation. So, whenever you spoke the machine turned on. I figured you wouldn’t be able resist burning those super ears of his.”

Her eyes widened.

*Oh, crap! Did you say anything to Clark that would tie him to Superman?*

Lois didn’t think so, but she couldn’t remember clearly.

Lex stopped the recorder and hit play and a shiver went down Lois’s spine as she heard her own voice fill the air.

*All of me, why not take all of me?*

*Can’t you see I’m no good without you*

*Take my lips, I want to lose them*

*Take my arms, I’ll never use them*

*Your goodbye, left me with eyes that cry*

*How can I go on, dear, without you*

*You took the part that once was my heart*

*So why not, take all of me.*

“Ah, my bird in her gilded cage sings so beautifully,” Lex said, stopping the tape and fast forwarding. “That’s an interesting plea for help as I’ve ever heard. Guess he didn’t catch the hint.”

Lois gulped. Lex really truly had recorded everything she said during the night, when she thought she was alone.

*Please, please, let nothing you said to Clark be anything revealing.*

Next, he stopped at her conversation with the 9-1-1 operator. Lex laughed through this entire bit. “Oh, darling. You’ve made my day.” He grinned with nasty good humor. “Insane, am I, Lois? Tsk-tsk. That’s not very nice, after I let you stay the night in my beautiful home.”

He fast-forwarded further. This time it was just sounds of her sobbing. “Oh, Lois. Did you not have a good night?” he teased, moving the tape forward again.

“Clark,” Lois’s voice echoed back to her.

“Clark?” Lex’s brow furrowed in confusion. “You were talking out loud to your boyfriend, not Superman?” He shook his head, disappointed. But he continued to listen anyway.

Lois nonchalantly shrugged, the shivers threatening to make their way over her body not something she could dismiss as a result of being doused by Lex.

*“I need to confess something,”* the recorded Lois continued. *“That night you caught me taking your glasses off, I was actually putting them back on.”*

There was a crack of thunder and the pitter-pat of rain could be heard on the recording.

Lex opened the folder on his desk. Lois recognized it as the same one he had had the night before.

*“I don’t know if you can hear me with this weather — it’s really coming down now — but it makes me feel better knowing you’re out there listening, even if you’re not. Rain like this — downpours — remind me of you, knowing you’re out there keeping people like me safe. Do you know what I’d really like to do right now?”* she asked, pausing slightly. *“Brush my teeth. Oh, I guess that wasn’t very romantic, was it?”* Lois chuckled softly on the tape. *“I’m so tired I feel*

*like I could sleep for a week... Tell Perry I won't make it in tomorrow. I love you, Clark... Always.*" Then there was a long pause. "Clark?"

Luthor clicked off the recorder. "Clark? No?" He flipped through the photos in the file. "It couldn't be. It can't be that simple."

Lois squeezed her eyes shut, willing the tears of defeat not to fall.

"Clark Kent?" Lex chortled and then cheered. "Yes. Yes! I see the resemblance now. Oh, God! How could I have been so blind? The glasses. Of course, right there for everyone to see. You're not dating the superhero, you're dating the secret identity!" His laughter was uncontrolled now. "And he's a virgin!"

*Let me at him! Let me at him! Just one good punch. Kick, whatever. He'll wish he was never born!* screamed Lois's inner voice. She could feel that part of her struggling to escape, wishing it had heat vision to turn the man to ashes.

"Superman's a virgin. Oh, this is priceless, Lois. Thank you. Thank you. And that's why you were so overprotective of him when Tempus accused him of stealing money from LexCo. Why you jumped on board with the blackmail attempt. You didn't want Superman to get arrested. Oh, Lois! This is the best gift I have ever been given. I know now that Superman is guilty of a crime, who his family is..." Lex cupped her jaw in his hand with a squeeze. He was standing to the side of her chair, so she couldn't kick him. "And who the love of his life is. He belongs to me now. Virginity does make sense given his powers. Wouldn't want him to tear you in half in his excitement."

Her inner voice's gnashing teeth in anger sounded like swords clashing and felt more like a demon wishing to free itself from her corporeal body just to tear Luthor in two.

Outwardly, Lois merely glared at him, grinding her teeth together so she wouldn't lose control and let her inner demon say something else she would regret. She had already revealed too much. Way too much.

"I'm ready for you to call Superman... or shall we just call him 'Clark' now?" he asked.

"Never!" she spit out at him.

"Lois, don't take it personally. You put up a grand fight." Luthor grinned with glee. "You didn't reveal anything willingly. I guess I could stand on my balcony and scream 'help, Superman' myself — but the retribution wouldn't be so poetic, now would it?" He turned back to his desk and set a hand on the turquoise box. "Or —"

Lois gulped as she focused her attention on the box for the first time since before calling 9-1-1. A light glimmered through the edges of the lid.

*No! Not the globe! He can't call Superman with the globe. Lois, you've got to stop him!*

Lex opened the box and exposed the glowing globe. "Let's see what else we can learn about our strange visitor from another planet."

"No!" Lois yelled, struggling in vain against her ropes again.

"No?" Lex raised a brow. "Oh, that's right. Touching the globe sends for your boyfriend, doesn't it? Kudos!" He reached into the box and lifted out the globe.

At his touch the globe filled with bright light and Jor-El's voice emerged. *"I try to picture where you are now as you hear this last chapter."*

"No!" Lois screamed again. "Don't come, Superman! Please don't come!" she pleaded to the universe, hoping against hope Clark heeded her.

Lex crossed over to her. "Well, we can't have you doing that, now can we?" he said, holding the globe in one hand as he pulled his handkerchief out of his breast pocket and stuffed it in her mouth with the other.

Jor-El continued speaking throughout, *"What do you look like? Are you alone? What have you become? Lara and I will never..."*

Lois glowered at Lex, kicking the globe free from Luthor's hand and causing the globe to fly through the air. Jor-El's voice cut off at the lack of touch, but instead of falling, the globe levitated above Luthor's head.

"Now look what you've done!" Lex snapped. He jumped up,

trying to grab it, but every time he did the globe shifted its position to remain out of his reach.

*Why doesn't he just float up and get it? Oh, yeah, it's not his globe!* taunted her inner voice with a sparkle of merriment.

Luthor climbed onto his desk, but it was still out of reach. He leapt off, his fingers almost touching it before he fell to the floor. The globe floated out onto the balcony. "Come back here, you stupid thing," Lex grumbled, following it outside, still trying to jump up and catch hold of it.

Lois watched — her eyes wide — as Luthor climbed onto the table on the balcony.

*Is he nuts? Sorry, correction. He's insane! Psycho! Balmy! Crazy! Lost it completely! That table is wet from the storm.*

The sphere still hovered midair just out of his reach. Gingerly, Lex stepped from the table to the balcony's cement railing, moving ever so slowly along it, closer to the globe.

Lois protested this action, but her words were lost due to the handkerchief in her mouth. Her heart jammed into her throat as Luthor took one more step toward the floating globe, grasping it in his hands, causing a bright beam of light and Jor-El's voice to emerge.

*"I try to picture where you are now as you hear this last chapter."*

Luthor's foot slipped. He tried to hold onto the globe and keep his balance without flailing his arms, but it proved impossible. He let the sphere go free once again to stop himself from falling. Euphoria spread over his face as he released a breath of relief. Luthor reached up towards the globe once more.

*Just give me some of Superman's super breath...* pleaded Lois's inner voice to the heavens. *If only Luthor hadn't gagged you...*

The morning breeze picked up and nudged Lex slightly off balance again. He shifted his feet trying to regain his equilibrium, only this time, his expensive shoes lost their traction entirely. Luthor flapped his arms in vain as he fell off the railing into the nothingness beyond. Lois gazed wide-eyed as he disappeared from sight. For some bizarre reason, the man didn't even scream.

The globe still floated in the air above the balcony.

Lois realized that with her mouth muffled, her hands tied, the globe out of any human's reach, and the office door locked from the inside — she had no way to escape and no way to contact Clark.

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*At the same time Lois was getting her wake-up splash of cold water in the face, Clark was wandering aimlessly around the bookstore.*

Five o'clock and then six o'clock came and went with no more messages from Lois. As the city's noise increased with dawn's light, so did the chance Clark would miss hearing her voice. Her last message had a finality to it that had chilled him to the bone. But without her calling out to him, he had no idea how he was supposed to find her in a city of ten million people.

"Kent?" Perry's voice pulled him out of his reverie. "Everything all right? You aren't nervous about the LexCo auditor, are you?"

Stressing about Lois had made him completely forget about Tempus. He knew he should be more anxious about the situation, but all he could think about was Lois and why she had never gone home. "I'm worried about Lois," he told his boss honestly.

"She's a big girl and can take care of herself," the Chief told him, patting him on the back reassuringly.

"Yeah, right," Clark thought.

Clark raised an eyebrow as his boss's assessment of the situation and Lois's common sense. "During her last message she told me to tell you that she wouldn't be coming in today."

"That's not like her." Perry's brow furrowed, his shoulders hunching.

*Exactly.*

"Wait a minute," said Perry with a perplexed expression. "She's not scheduled to work today."

Clark's brain raced a mile a minute.

*Was that a clue? A hidden message? Or just a mistake?*

“Excuse me,” Clark mumbled as he jogged down the escalator steps, running when he reached the ground floor. A moment later, he was at her Magazine Receiving room door.

*Please! Please! Let Lois have left you a note telling you where she went.*

He turned the knob and opened the door. A quick glance around the room told him she hadn't. He exhaled in defeat, turning to leave. Then he noticed that the first-aid kit was in a different location. Instead of hanging from the nail in the wall, it was sitting on top of a stack of magazines on the shelves. He picked it up to hang it in the proper spot. As he did so, it burst open. The latch had not been secured. Inside the first-aid kit were no bandages, just a note with Clark's name scrawled across the front.

*A little too subtle, Lois, complained that nagging voice inside his head. Too well hidden.*

Clark took the note, tearing it open.

*I love you, Clark. If you are reading this, it means you have earned the right to tell me 'I told you so'. But God help you if you ever do. Lois*

“I'm not that stupid, Lois,” he mumbled out loud to himself with a chuckle as he slipped the entirely too-vague note into his pants pocket. As he wandered back out through the music department, a bright light blinded him, making him stumble and almost crash into a display of CDs.

*“I try to picture where you are now as you hear this last chapter,”* Jor-El's voice filled his ears.

*“No!”* Clark heard Lois scream. *“Don't come, Superman! Please don't come!”*

“Lois?” he whispered, his heart felt like it had flash frozen. Lois had found the globe. Or more accurately, whomever had the globe also had her.

*“What do you look like? Are you alone?”* Jor-El's voice continued. *“What have you become? Lara and I will never — ”* As suddenly as the voice started, it stopped. That couldn't have been the end of the message, could it? No, it had been cut off. Whoever had the globe had let it go. Despite Lois's warning, Clark knew he needed to go. He needed to find her.

Clark jogged to the front doors where he found Perry and the others gathered.

*You cannot leave now without undue attention placed onto you.*

“Well?” Perry asked.

Clark shook his head. “Lois is in trouble. I just know it. I need...”

“To find Superman?” his boss finished.

The younger man nodded.

“You're not going to be able to finish your shift?” Perry inquired, even though they both already knew the answer to that question.

“No,” Clark admitted, handing the Chief his keys to the store. “I'm sorry.”

“Well, I'll cover for you this one time, Kent. Don't make this a habit,” his boss said with a wink. “Time to pay your workers.”

*Right. The extra funds you brought. Your excuse for the extra pay you had not reported to LexCo. All that and it looks like Tempus is a no-show.*

Clark pulled out his wallet and divided the money equally into four parts. “Thank you,” he said, handing the money to Applegate. The quiet man said nothing as he accepted the money.

“Nice to have met you,” Clark said to Sarah, handing over the cash. “I appreciate your help.”

Sarah looked down at the money in her hand and then back up to Clark. “You are a good man, Clark. You keep it. I can't use this where I'm going,” she said, holding out the money to him.

“It's yours,” Clark told her, refusing to take it back. “You earned it. You keep it.”

She turned to Perry. “Thank you for the job, Mr. White. My work here is done. It is time I return home.”

“You're quitting, Sarah?” Perry replied, sounding almost stunned. “I have never had someone with a perfect till for a month straight and

you shelve almost as fast as Clark, here. If you ever need a recommendation...”

She raised a brow at ‘almost’. “Thank you, Mr. White. That is very kind.” Sarah sighed, giving the money in her hand a look of exasperation as she pressed together her lips.

“Hey, if you're giving it away, I'll take it!” suggested Jack, holding out his hand.

The woman looked at the young man and then shrugged, setting the money into his palm.

“Jack!” Perry admonished him.

“Hey, she's giving it away,” Jack explained.

Perry took the money out of Jack's hand and returned it to Sarah. She placed it in her pocket, resigned.

“Mr. White!” Jack whined.

“I am sorry we did not suit, Clark. I would have liked...” Sarah glanced over her shoulder and stopped speaking.

They all followed her gaze and saw a bearded man standing outside the door. Tempus. He held up a LexCo I.D. badge and hollered through the glass, “Open the doors, Kent.”

Clark took a step backwards as he once again saw the bright light and the voice of his birth father. *“I try to picture where you are now as you hear this last chapter.”* Then, as suddenly as it had come, it disappeared.

Clark handed both Jack and Jimmy their pay as their boss opened up the doors.

“I'm sorry, we don't open for several more hours,” Perry said to Tempus, holding up his hand so that the man could not enter.

“I've got to go,” Clark said, trying to step around Tempus.

“Where do you think you're going, Kent?” Tempus said, grabbing his arm and pushing him back inside the store. “I've asked the police to meet me here to arrest you,” the bearded man announced. “All of you.”

“I don't think so,” Sarah said calmly and coolly.

“What have we done wrong?” retorted Jimmy, not so coolly or calmly, as he pocketed his money.

“In the store without authorization,” Tempus said.

“That is a Daily Books rule...” Perry took the man's ID badge and examined it before tossing it back to him. “Mr. Tempus, auditor for LexCo. And hardly an arrestable offense. And as store manager, they have my authorization.”

Suddenly Clark's ears filled with screaming, lots of people screaming — maybe twenty people. He brought his hands to his ears and winced. His heart thudded in his chest.

*What just happened?*

Clark opened his eyes to see Sarah had her eyes shut as well, but her face didn't seem disturbed by the terror.

*Of course, she's not bothered by the terror, Kent. She would have to be Kryptonian to hear those screams.*

Tempus shoved his way into the store and relocked the doors, pocketing Clark's keys.

*So much for rescuing Lois.*

“How about stealing?”

Jack blanched. “I haven't stolen anything,” he lied.

“None of us have,” corrected Jimmy.

“Kent here has been getting paid four times more than his shift allowed,” Tempus told them as a police cruiser pulled up in front of the store. “A-ha! Here they come now.”

“I'm not going to jail,” Jack said, backing up and appearing ready to dash away like a rabbit.

Clark grabbed his arm. “Nobody is getting arrested, Jack,” he said as his eyes focused on the officer stepping out of the vehicle.

It was Henderson. He waved at Clark, but before he could close his door the policeman leaned back inside to take a radio call. Clark tried to hear whether the call had to do with the screams he just heard, but Perry's voice made it hard to concentrate.

“Again, LexCo's problem. Anyway, Kent here has been using the extra funds to pay part-time workers, such as these people here, to

shelve books on Saturday nights.”

“Working under the table!” Tempus yelled, again making it impossible for Clark to hear Henderson’s call.

Perry rolled his eyes.

Henderson walked up to the doors and knocked on the glass.

“Finally!” gloated Tempus. “The police.” He pulled Clark’s keys out of his pocket and unlocked the door, before pointing at Clark. “There he is, Officer. Arrest that man!”

Henderson looked at Tempus and then with a slight shake of his head, muttered, “What for?”

“For misappropriation of LexCo funds, of course,” Tempus demanded as if Henderson was an idiot.

Henderson raised a brow. “That’s a white collar crime. You’ll have to submit your evidence to the D.A.’s office and have them issue an arrest warrant. Then, and only then, would I be able to make an arrest.” He turned his back on Tempus and faced Clark. “Hey, Clark, your parents said you’d be here. Do you know where Ms. Lane is? According to her security detail, she didn’t come home last night.”

“Lois has a security detail?” Jack stammered.

“She has been getting death threats,” Clark said simply. It was why he had been so relieved to hear to singing and talking with him during the night and why he really needed to leave the store.

“Perhaps she went back to Costa Rica with Superman?” Applegate suggested.

Every head turned to Applegate in disbelief, even Sarah.

*The first time the man speaks all night, Kent, and he hypothesizes that your girlfriend is cheating on you.*

“Nah. Lois wouldn’t do that to CK. She scheduled a meeting with Lex Luthor the other night to interview him. I didn’t catch the particulars but it could have been for last night,” volunteered Jimmy.

“Lois broke our date to interview Lex Luthor?” Tempus threw his hands up in disgust and shock.

“Date? Why in the hell would she make a date with you?” accused Jack, pointing a finger at him. Then Clark watched as the light bulb flickered on in his eyes. “You! You’re the man blackmailing Lois.”

Henderson turned back to Tempus. “Blackmail, huh? Now, there’s an arrestable offense.”

“She was stealing CDs!” exclaimed Tempus and then pointed at Clark. “And covering for that guy.”

“Uh-huh. And if she’s a CD thief, why isn’t she in jail? Why is she still working in the store?” Henderson asked, pulling out his handcuffs and rattling them in his hand. “Sounds like extortion to me. Maybe I should just take you down to the station.”

“It’s not blackmail if she never shows up,” Tempus said, backing up to the door. Then he pointed at Clark. “He’s Superman!”

Clark threw up his hands in defeat and shook his head.

*You will never win, will you?*

Henderson raised a skeptical eyebrow at the auditor and he jerked his thumb at Clark. “Really? Him?”

“Yes, Lois said she had a ‘big, brawny, blue boyfriend’.” Tempus continued to hold his hand up to Clark. “Hello? Duh?”

They all turned to stare at Clark as he shrugged sheepishly.

*One week! One whole week and there goes your secret identity, Flyboy. His conscience sighed. It was good while it lasted. What am I saying? This has been the worst week of your life! Memories of Lois kissing him flashed across his mind. Then again, it has also been the best week of your life.*

The policeman chuckled. “That could also describe me. Big, not so brawny, but I dress in blue. Maybe I’m Ms. Lane’s boyfriend.”

“Clark’s security guard uniform is also blue,” Sarah reminded them.

“CK? Superman? Oh, now that’s funny!” Jimmy chortled. “Right! Nah, Superman hasn’t been around that long and I’ve known CK for years. Anyway, if he was Superman, Lois would have told me after the press conference. She could hardly think, let alone think straight.”

*Yep. She knew who you were from that very moment. You should have been honest with her from that first moment, Flyboy.*

Perry spoke up, two fingers pointing at Tempus, “Either he’s Superman and not guilty of overpayment of funds because he could easily do the work of five people or he’s been misappropriating funds for years from LexCo. You can’t have it both ways.” He held out his hand. “Either way, you shouldn’t have his keys. And, as I told you before, Kent has been paying part-time workers who LexCo refuses to promote to full-time by giving them an extra shift during the week. All those so-called extra funds have been used to pay your workers. Employees — I might add — doing work for the bookstore and, therefore, should have been paid by LexCo.”

“I tell you, he’s Superman!” Tempus hollered again.

At that moment, a man floated down from the sky, dressed all in black. He landed on the sidewalk behind Tempus. The security guard’s jaw fell open, as did Perry’s. Clark recognized the man as Ching. He turned to Sarah in shock.

*Aren’t you, Kal-El, supposed to be the last son of Krypton? his conscience asked him.*

Sarah had her eyes closed and Clark could hear her voice inside his head. *“Is the navigational computer from Lord Kal-El’s ship secured, Ching?”*

“Yes, Lady Zara. I gave the globe to that woman he loves,” replied Ching.

Lois has the globe! Oh, thank God! He exhaled in relief. It meant she must be fine. Then his brow furrowed. *Lord Kal-El?*

Applegate pointed at Ching and stammered, “Superman!”

Tempus spun around and stared at the man in black. “Superman?”

Jack scoffed, “That’s not Superman.”

Both Perry and Clark shot the kid a ‘shut up’ look.

“Sure it is, Jack. Didn’t you see him fly? Only Superman can fly,” Jimmy corroborated. “He just looks different because he’s not in the blue suit. Gosh, I wish I had my camera on me.”

*I’m thankful he does not.*

Henderson looked back and forth between Ching and Clark, settling on Clark with a raised brow. Clark shrugged with a perplexed expression.

*Okay, so besides Perry, your folks and Lois — and possibly Lois’s father and Jack — Henderson knows your secret identity, Kent. Good to know. At least Jimmy’s still clueless.*

“I need to go find Lois,” Clark said, heading towards the door again.

Perry grabbed the keys out of Tempus’s hand and unlocked the door. The auditor was still in shock.

*Tempus must really have thought you were Superman.*

“Wait, Clark!” said Henderson. “Let me walk out with you.”

Sarah stepped forward as well. Clark took a step back to let her pass first.

“Goodbye, Clark,” she said with a rare smile. “Thank you for all the great advice.”

*Advice? You gave this Kryptonian Lady advice?*

Clark stepped outside and reveled at the clean, fresh morning air. For a while there, he thought he would never escape the store. He looked over at Ching and Sarah who were staring at each other, yet not touching. He could hear their silent discussion.

*“I told you he would not be worthy of you, Lady Zara. Let me be the man to defeat Lord Nor for your honor,” Ching thought to Sarah — Lady Zara. “As I should have been from the beginning.”*

*“Watch your tongue, Lieutenant Ching,” Lady Zara responded with her thoughts. “Lord Kal-El is a good man. But I cannot put a man who works as a lowly servant for the Earthlings as leader of New Krypton, no matter his heritage. He does not have enough experience with being a leader. If we had time — time for him to grow into this Superman persona he has created — perhaps he would grow into the type of man New Krypton needs. Unfortunately, we don’t have time, Ching. We will process the dissolution of our infant marriage bond when we return to the ship.”*

*“Infant marriage bond?” Clark thought.*

*“Fortunately for you, Lady Zara, Lord Kal-El is not the only man*

able to move mountains on your behalf,” replied Ching with his thoughts.

“Clark?” Henderson said, pulling him away from the couple’s thoughts.

“Sorry, Henderson. I need to ask this ‘Superman’ something,” Clark replied, glancing at the officer before turning back to Ching and Sarah, but they had already disappeared.

*No! They know where Lois is!*

“Superman?” Henderson asked, his brow raised.

Clark cleared his throat. “Perhaps he’s just changing into his blue suit.”

Jimmy and Jack left the bookstore and waved to Clark as they walked in the opposite direction. Applegate crossed the street into the park. Perry and Tempus were still arguing within the store. Clark slowly walked down the sidewalk, away from the front doors.

Henderson couldn’t help the smile that curled up on the edge of his mouth. “I need Superman’s help to coordinate something. It seems that Lex Luthor took a swan dive off his penthouse balcony this morning.”

“What?” Clark stammered. “He’s dead?” The man who had tormented his life for the past two years was dead? Was that the cause of the screams he heard?

*Lex? Lex Luthor? Killed himself? Never!*

“The 9-1-1 operators got a strange emergency call around three this morning. Some woman claiming to be Lois Lane said that Lex Luthor kidnapped her and was holding her hostage in his penthouse office,” Henderson continued. “She used me as her reference to verify her story.”

“MPD has Lois?” Clark said with relief.

*Yay! Lois is safe.*

“No, as I said before, we don’t know where she is. We aren’t allowed to respond to 9-1-1 calls to Luthor’s residence without a password. Apparently, it has become an urban ritual for teenagers to call 9-1-1 and pretend to be a victim locked in Luthor’s penthouse. Last spring, he sued the city and said he would bankrupt us if we continued to send police to wake him up three times a night from these bogus calls. Not wanting to be bawled out by the mayor every time this happened, the city council and the Chief of Police were more than happy to cross Luthor’s penthouse off their list.”

Clark’s brow furrowed. “I don’t recall hearing or reading about that lawsuit.”

“It was settled secretly out of court. You didn’t really expect the *Metropolis Star* to cover something like that, did you?” Henderson asked.

“No, I guess not.” Clark shook his head. He really didn’t want to get into a discussion about the *Metropolis Star*’s shoddy reporting practices. “You want me to ask Superman to do a fly-by of Luthor’s penthouse?”

Henderson’s car radio started squawking and the officer held up a hand. “Let me take this. Can you contact Superman and tell him to discuss the particulars with me?”

Clark nodded as he started jogging down the street. “I’ll go contact him now.”

Around the corner and down the alley behind the bookstore, Clark spun into his blue suit and leapt into the air, landing in front of Henderson’s patrol car.

“I understand you wanted to see me, Officer Henderson,” Superman said with his arms crossed. “Have you been able to locate Lois Lane yet?” Clark was hopeful that was what the page on the radio had been. Unfortunately not.

“Actually, it’s Detective Henderson again, Superman,” Henderson corrected. “I was demoted for insubordination, but the brass just reversed that decision. I’m off of patrol, starting tomorrow.”

“Congratulations. It couldn’t happen to a better man,” replied Superman.

“That was the guys up at Lex Tower. Apparently when they went into Luthor’s penthouse, they were not able to enter his private office because the door was locked from the inside. When they knocked on

the door, no one answered,” the detective informed him.

Clark swallowed, feeling sick.

*That doesn’t bode well for Lois’s wellbeing.*

“I was wondering if you would mind giving me a lift,” continued Henderson. “So that I could enter from the balcony side.”

Superman raised a brow. “Shall we take your car or mine?”

“Excuse me?” stammered Henderson.

“Shall I fly you over with or without your car?” Superman clarified.

“Oh. Right. Probably shouldn’t leave this here,” said the policeman, getting into his car. “Thank you, Superman.”

Clark nodded at him and then lifted up the car, repositioned himself directly underneath it and took off into the air just as Tempus left the bookstore.

The LexCo auditor grumbled to himself, “I just know he’s Superman. Next time, I’ve got to plan better.”

A minute later, Superman set Henderson’s patrol car down a block away from Lex Tower outside of the cordoned-off area. With an audible sigh of relief, Henderson exited his car. Superman picked him up and rose into the air.

“Would you mind if I asked what the insubordination was for?” Clark asked.

Henderson chuckled. “After the decision to let Lex Luthor stay outside of police jurisdiction, I asked the Mayor and City Council how they felt about being in Luthor’s pocket. Apparently, they didn’t like that too much. If we find Clark’s girlfriend up here, I have a strange feeling we’re going to be having a special election soon.”

At these words, Superman heard the familiar THUMP-THUMP-DA-THUMP of Lois’s heart.

*She’s alive! his conscience sang. Luthor didn’t kill her.*

He set Henderson down on the balcony and was at Lois’s side a fraction of a moment later. Her eyes were closed and her head sagged in sleep. Gently, he pulled the handkerchief from her mouth.

Lois jumped at this action as her heart started racing. She turned to look into his eyes with more joy than he had ever seen there before. “You came,” she whispered, her voice hoarse.

“Always,” he murmured in return, drawing a finger down her face as he memorized every line and pore, assessing the damage Luthor had effected there. She had a sizeable bump near her forehead, a gash on her cheek, and her lips had dried blood on them. Her hair and shirt were slightly damp as well. “Always.”

Her tongue flashed over her teeth as she saw Henderson enter the room. “Took you long enough.”

“Nice to see you too, Ms. Lane,” Henderson replied, heading for the door.

She lowered her voice, so only her boyfriend could hear her. “Ya think you could untie me now, Kal. I desperately need to —” Lois paused as she licked her dry lips.

“I know,” Clark murmured, resting his head against hers. “Me too.”

“— Pee.”

\*\*\*

Sunday Morning — Just after seven

Surprise and then a brief smile came over Superman’s countenance as he nodded. “Right.”

*Well, what did he expect? That you would make out with him in front of Henderson? Please! Especially in this office where you’ve already been bugged once.*

“Hold on!” Henderson called and Superman’s hands paused over the ropes. The policeman pulled out an instant camera and snapped a photo of Lois glaring at him. “Okay, you can free her now.”

“Got enough photos for the album?” Lois snapped at Henderson. She wouldn’t forgive MPD’s bungling of her 9-1-1 call anytime soon. Henderson shrugged and returned to Lex’s office door.

“I have been tied up since about ten-thirty last night,” Lois clarified to Superman as he tore the ropes from the arms of the chair.

“I understand,” Superman said, as he shot a beam of heat vision

into the locks on the shackles, melting them sufficiently for him to widen the rings holding her to the chair. Just like him not to want to damage the antiques too much. “Clark is worried sick.”

Lois stretched out her arms and then shook her hands. Then she bolted to the private bathroom she had seen Luthor use to wash his hands the night before. She pulled open the door behind the bookcase and shut it behind her.

Relieved of her aching bladder and having cleaned up her face a bit, she returned to Luthor’s office.

“Hey, Lane, how do you open Luthor’s door?” Henderson asked, continuing to rattle the doorknob.

*Like that would work. Been there, tried that! Try Superman.*

“He has a security remote that controls everything in his office, from the balcony doors to his secret plans to revitalize Hob’s Bay Riverfront. It’s on his desk,” Lois replied, taking a moment to grab Superman’s hand and give it a reassuring squeeze. “I can’t wait to see Clark as well,” she whispered to him, gazing up into his eyes. She let go of his hand and sat back down in her chair to put her shoes back on. The simple act of bending over made the room lurch. She took a deep breath and hoped that Clark hadn’t noticed. “Did you save Luthor?”

Superman shook his head. “I found out about it afterwards.”

Lois sighed. “He didn’t even scream. Who falls off a building and doesn’t scream for help?”

“Someone who knows he doesn’t deserve it,” said Henderson, searching Luthor’s desk.

“I don’t judge those I save,” replied Superman, crossing his arms. “Everyone has a little good in them.”

Lois rolled her eyes.

*Not agreeing with you there, Big Blue.*

Henderson found the remote and started pushing buttons.

Shoes finally on, Lois reached for the turquoise box and felt dizzy all of a sudden, grabbing her head instead.

Superman scooped her up into his arms. “I’m taking you to the hospital,” he told her, flying out the window.

“No!” she snapped. “I’m just tired, Kal,” Lois amended, lowering her voice. “I’ve hardly slept. We’re not leaving without the globe.”

“You don’t have it?” Superman responded, turning them back to the office. “I thought…”

An image of a flying man dressed in black, snatching the globe out of the air flashed across her mind.

“It’s back in the box. I think,” she said.

*That couldn’t have been real. If it was, then it means Clark isn’t alone here on Earth. That there might be women, as well as men, like him. He would want to be with others like him instead of you. No. The image of the flying man in black must have been just a delusion caused by the knock to your head.*

“Good. You’re back,” said Henderson as Superman set Lois back down in the office.

*So much for ducking in and grabbing the globe before bolting back to your apartment for a much needed day of passionate sex.*

“You never told me how Luthor fell, Lois. Did he jump? Was he pushed?”

*Yeah, you pushed him off the balcony and then tied yourself to a chair.*

Lois sat back down in her chair and pointed to the box sitting on Luthor’s desk.

Superman removed the globe out of the turquoise box. “He was going after this,” he said, holding it with the handkerchief Luthor had forced into her mouth. He must not want Henderson to hear the final message from Jor-El. She didn’t blame him. Enough secrets had been revealed already.

“Exactly,” Lois agreed with Clark. “Luthor stole Superman’s globe from my apartment and when he took it out of the box this morning, it started floating. He climbed onto the railing to try and grab it, but instead he fell to his… his…” She swallowed, trying not to think of the man falling into nothingness. “He fell.”

“That is the globe you mentioned on your stolen inventory list?”

Henderson replied in awe, staring at the glowing orb. “No wonder he kidnapped you.”

Lois shrugged. “It’s not like I know all Superman’s secrets. We only met a week ago.”

Superman gave her an intense look that gave her the feeling of being ravished… in a good way. Lois gulped, trying to keep a clear head for her discussion with the policeman.

*Who cares what Henderson thinks? Come here, Man of Steel, this girl wants some red cape action.*

“Right.” Henderson nodded towards her arms. “We’ll need to photograph those wounds as evidence.” He tossed his camera to Superman as he pushed another button on the remote and the office door unlocked. “Hey. I think I got it.”

*Typical. You press sixteen million buttons and get tied to a chair. He pushes it four times and the door unlocks.*

Lois blinked her eyes as she glanced down at the red rope burn lines etched onto her arms as Superman took a few photos. Suddenly, everything that happened to her the night before seemed real instead of out of a nightmare. “Evidence against whom?” she murmured as the room began to spin. “Luthor’s dead.”

“Enough, Lois. This isn’t exhaustion. I’m taking you to the hospital,” Superman told her as the cool morning breeze caressed her face. She didn’t recall ever leaving Luthor’s office.

“No,” she mumbled with a whole lot less strength than before. “I can’t afford it, Kal; I don’t have any insurance.”

“I’m taking you to a doctor, Lois, whether you like it or not,” he said, kissing her forehead as he flew through the air. “I’m not going to lose you to a concussion.”

She snuggled against his shoulder. “How about we go back to my place and make love instead?”

Superman pursed his lips together. “Later.”

“I hate doctors,” Lois muttered.

A sneaky smile slipped onto his face. “Not this one.”

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### Sunday Morning — Just before seven — Kansas Time

Superman landed on the path in front of the Lanes’ house in Smallville. It was still very early on Sunday morning — Kansas time — and he hoped that he wouldn’t be garnering the attention of their neighbors. He jogged up the front steps to the porch and rang the doorbell.

Lois had fallen asleep on the flight over — at least he hoped it was sleep — and he personally didn’t want to let her out of his arms after spending the night worrying about her.

“Who in tarnation is ringing our doorbell before seven in…?” Dr. Lane’s voice thundered throughout the house before he opened the door, still wearing his PJs and a robe. Anger melted away to shock and then concern when he saw who Superman was holding. “Superman?” he finally stammered.

“Dr. Lane?” the Man in Blue asked as if they hadn’t met before. “May we come inside?”

Lois’s father stepped away from the threshold and let Superman carry his daughter inside.

“Lex Luthor kidnapped Lois and held her captive all night,” Superman continued. “She became a little dizzy when we rescued her this morning, but refused to be taken to a hospital.”

“Sounds like my pig-headed daughter.” Dr. Lane nodded. “Follow me,” he said, leading Superman down the hall to what the hero guessed would be Lois’s old bedroom.

He was correct. Dr. Lane threw back the bed sheets and Superman gently laid Lois down on the twin bed. Lois’s father left them alone for a minute, Clark assumed to get his medical bag. Clark pulled the sheets back up and over Lois, then ran his hand over her hair. Setting his hand on top of hers, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath while he listened to her familiar heartbeat. The sound of it calmed his racing heart.

“Excuse me,” said Dr. Lane gruffly and Superman went to stand on the other side of the room, while her father examined her. After

taking her blood pressure and her pulse, Clark watched him inspect her arms and the wounds on her face. Her father checked her eyes, despite her being asleep.

As Dr. Lane examined his daughter, Clark took the opportunity to explore Lois's old bedroom. There was a stack of old high school newspapers on one corner of her desk. He had a similar stack in some box, somewhere in storage. On the top shelf of her bookcase he saw a framed photo of Lois, another girl, and stocky young man with blond hair.

Clark picked up the picture. Pete Ross. The photo must have been from the senior prom that Lois and her friend — Clark blanked on the other girl's name — had dragged Pete to after Lana had dumped him. Lois and her friend were wearing dresses that obviously had been borrowed at the last minute from their mothers' closets. Lois's dress was definitely not her style or taste. It was navy blue with white bows. He shuddered. Lois must have really cared for Pete to put on that dress to make him go through with his prom. In the photo, Lois and the other girl gave the cameraman huge smiles; Lois's didn't reach her eyes. Pete's eyes just looked vacant and distant. Oh, yeah, Clark remembered all too well how he had felt after Lana had left him.

He went to put the photo back and found on the shelf a newspaper clipping from the *Smallville Post*. It was Pete's obituary, which included a reprinting of Lois's eulogy. She was some writer, some friend, some woman. She was something else. And, despite everything he had said and done, Lois loved him. Clark was the luckiest man alive.

He set down the newspaper clipping and gazed at his girlfriend again. "Is she going to be okay?" he asked her father.

The doctor turned to Superman with a familiar glint in his eyes and nodded. "Lois might have a slight concussion. What happened exactly?"

"She was tied to a chair with both ropes and shackles when we found her." He gulped. "I... she... we haven't had time to discuss what actually happened. I don't think she got much sleep last night."

Dr. Lane harrumphed. "I'll wring his neck if he did more to her than what I see here."

Superman paled. He hadn't even entertained such thoughts, but Lois's behavior when he had entered the office led him to believe these were the extent of her wounds. "Lex Luthor is dead."

"Good." Dr. Lane raised a brow at him. "You do it?"

"No! Absolutely not, Dr. Lane! Like you, I have taken a vow to help people, not hurt them," Superman informed him.

"Wait until you have children of your own, then you'll realize that those vows come with exceptions," replied the doctor. His eyes widened as he sized up Superman. Sam Lane stood to his full height, crossed his arms, and bore his icy stare into Superman's, eye-to-eye, man-to-man. "Can you even have children? With an Earth woman?"

Clark gulped, then mimicked Dr. Lane's stance. He did not want to have this conversation with this man, but he refused to back down. A part of him wished he was already flying back to Metropolis. "I don't know, sir." The 'sir' was thrown in for good measure. "For all intents and purposes I am a man, just more so."

"Are you and her..." Dr. Lane indicated his daughter with a nod of his head. "Taking precautions?"

Clark wanted to turn his head away in embarrassment, but he stood his ground. "Your daughter and I have not been intimate."

*You should have chosen your words better there, Kent. I definitely heard an implied 'yet,' and I'm betting he did too.*

Dr. Lane's eyes formed slits. "Good."

*Great! Dear ol' Dad loves you.*

"How could you let this happen to my daughter?"

"I am not your daughter's keeper," Superman responded. "She is her own woman and makes her own mistakes. I protect her the best I can, when I can."

Her father nodded, acknowledging his daughter's foolhardiness. "Thank you for bring my daughter home, but you can go now," Dr. Lane dismissed him.

Superman was torn. He didn't want to leave Lois. He wanted to stay by her bedside holding her hand. But, technically, *he* wasn't Lois's boyfriend, Clark was. And he did want to return to Luthor's office to see what else he could discover happened between Luthor and Lois. Finally, he conceded with a nod. "Please let Lois know that Clark will call her later to see how she's doing," Superman informed him.

"Clark?" repeated Lois's father skeptically.

*Nope. No fooling the Lane family.*

"Lois's boyfriend," Superman reminded him, not giving an inch.

"Right." Dr. Lane's lips pressed together. "*Him.*" Lois's father opened up his medical bag and pulled out a business card. Taking a pen off of Lois's desk, he wrote something on the back of the card. "Our home number." He held out the card to the superhero. "For Clark."

"I'll make sure he gets it." Superman nodded, then he wrote down his folks' home number on a notepad on Lois's desk. "In case you need to reach Clark, if..." He swallowed gazing at Lois. "If her condition changes. His folks are Martha and Jonathan Kent. They are good people."

Dr. Lane raised a brow. "His *folks*?"

"The people who raised him," Superman clarified.

"Are they from Earth or wherever you're from?" Dr. Lane asked.

*Oh, yeah. He knows.*

"They are from Smallville, Dr. Lane. As far as I know, I am the only one of my kind on Earth," Superman said, believing that to be the truth. Lady Zara and Ching were probably long gone by now. He might never learn who and what they were exactly.

Dr. Lane nodded. "I'll give you a minute and then I want you gone before Ellen wakes up. I don't want her to see you here." He left the room but the door remained open a good six inches.

*Nope. Not even Superman is good enough for that man's daughter.*

Clark knelt down beside Lois, taking her hand in his. "Lois, sweetie, wake up. Lois?"

Her eyes, heavy with sleep, refused to open, but her head moved slightly at his voice.

"I've got to go now, honey," he whispered, leaning his head against hers. "Your dad is kicking me out."

Lois's eyes stayed shut, but her head turned towards him, her lips murmuring, "Kiss me, Clark."

How could he refuse such a sweet offer?

*I distinctly remember you refusing an even sweeter offer of making love, Kent.*

Clark blew lightly to shut the open bedroom door. "I love you, Lois," he said before gently setting his lips on hers.

Her arms encircled his neck, pulling him closer, deeper. "Stay."

"You need to rest, Lois, and you're not dating the man in this suit. I feel more comfortable around your folks as Clark. Although, I doubt we're fooling your father," he told her with a slight nervous chuckle.

"Superman. Clark. Naked, you're the same man," Lois murmured as her hands slid down from his neck to his chest. Her touch leaving a path of warmth in its wake. "I never got to make love to you. And I want to... I really, *really* do..." Her voice grew rough and hoarse with desire as her hands traveled down to his stomach.

*Does she think she's the only one on that page?*

Superman swallowed, unable to move away as she touched him, shivers of delight coursing through his body so he moved closer, kissing her again. Her hands on his body electrified his senses. "This isn't a good time, Lois," he reminded her.

"And that's the man I want to make love to me..." she continued as if he hadn't spoken. Her hands grabbed hold of his yellow belt and pulled his hips towards her. "... just once. Please, Clark, before Luthor kills me."

*Good God, Kent! She's dreaming. Or she's delusional. You can't make love to her like this.*

Clark hadn't planned to, especially not here. He set his hands on hers and removed them from his shorts, setting them back down on the

bed before wrapping his arms around her. “I love you, Lois. We’ll make love once you’re back in Metropolis. I promise.”

“I love you, Clark, but I want to show you how much I love you before Luthor tells the world you’re Superman,” Lois said, her hands grabbing onto his waist again and sliding downwards, under the edge of the waistband of his shorts, this time.

*Had Luthor discovered your secret before falling off his tower? Goodness gracious, Lois! What are you doing?*

He cleared his throat. His voice broke and he cleared his throat again, trying to get back to his Superman timbre, “You don’t need to show me you love me with your body, Lois. It’s your heart and soul where true love lives,” Superman murmured, pulling her hands out of his shorts with his trembling ones.

*Good thing her hands were in the back of your shorts, not the...*

“Okay, Superman, time’s —” Dr. Lane opened the door to his daughter’s bedroom, catching Lois leaning intimately against the Man of Steel’s chest with her hands on his hips as he held her in his arms.

*Mortification!*

“Lois!” Dr. Lane growled at his daughter as he lifted an eyebrow and his lips pressed together. His tongue went over his teeth as he scowled. “Clark! Kitchen. Coffee. Cream?”

“Yes, sir, and sugar,” Clark replied, bowing his head in defeat.

Dr. Lane nodded curtly and left the room.

Clark gently laid Lois back down and kissed her forehead.

Standing up, he spun back into his Kent clothes, the security guard uniform. He pulled his glasses out of his shirt pocket and set them on his face.

As Clark reached the door, he heard Lois giggle and then whisper, “You need to stop breaking my rules, Clark. Do you know how long I’ve tried to escape from here?” She tittered again. “Enjoy your talk with Dr. Daddy.”

*Crap! She set you up. Humiliation and punishment. Thanks a lot, Lois.*

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### Tuesday — Lunchtime

Clark regarded Dr. Lane’s business card as he stood by the phone booth. He knew by calling during the middle of the day, he would miss having Dr. Lane answer the phone. After having the ‘what are your intentions’ talk with Lois’s father the other morning, Clark felt avoidance was the best policy.

*Which is why you’re calling Lois on your lunch break, Kent. Now pick up the phone.*

His mother had called him a chicken again. What was he supposed to do? The conversation with Dr. Lane hadn’t gone as well as Clark would have hoped. Clark had told Lois’s father that he and Lois had yet to become intimate. Sadly, still true. He had told the man he was in love with Lois and planned on someday asking her to marry him, once they got their lives in order and were a little more settled. And Dr. Lane had practically thrown him out of the house. It was plain to see that Dr. Lane did not want an alien for a son-in-law. He sighed.

*Nothing like alienating the in-laws, Kent.*

Lois was still in Smallville. After two days of catching up on her sleep and resting, she claimed she was fully recovered, except for the rope burns on her forearms and the couple of stitches Dr. Lane gave to the gash on her cheek.

Perry had been able to convince the CEO of Daily Books, who in turn convinced LexCo Human Resources, who then in turn got approval from the LexCo Board of Trustees to give Lois the week off with pay. In light of the Chairman of the Board kidnapping her and an auditor blackmailing her, the LexCo Board of Trustees decided to grant Lois the week off with pay, and then promptly fired Tempus.

Clark smiled. That thought — LexCo having actually fired Tempus — always brought a smile to his face. This Tempus wasn’t a time-traveling dimension-hopping man from the future with all the answers to their future lives on the tip of his tongue. This Tempus was just an ordinary man with ordinary abilities and unemployed. Clark’s smile turned into a grin. Then he sighed.

Officially, LexCo had let Clark Kent — security guard — go as well. He didn’t like being fired. He didn’t like the failure of it. Of knowing that what he and Perry did was intrinsically wrong. Even if they were Robin Hooding, stealing from rich LexCo to pay taxes to LexCo. What the corporate offices didn’t know was that he and Perry had already decided that Clark Kent, security guard, had to go. He hadn’t yet officially put in his notice when he received his pink slip, though.

*Well, at least you have your Saturday nights free again.*

Now he could use that time to fight crime...

*...spend time with Lois...*

... make Metropolis a better and safer community in which to live...

*... spend time **making love** with Lois, I meant...*

... and catch up on his reading.

*Give me a break. You can read a book in less than a minute. Call her already!*

Clark was hoping Lois was ready to return to Metropolis. He missed her. Metropolis seemed empty without her. But he was persona non grata at the Lane house at the moment. Her apartment was still under surveillance by the MPD, not only because they felt that they owed her due to the 9-1-1 debacle, but also because the Toasters were still out and about. Clark hoped Superman would catch the Toasters soon. It would make a great homecoming gift for Lois. But, so far, the Toasters were proving to be elusive.

*You’re stalling, Kent.*

Henderson had become a great ally at the MPD. He had expedited the return of Lois’s purse and briefcase from the Luthor penthouse crime scene. Strange though, Clark never remembered Lois having a soft leather briefcase before. The initials L.L. were etched in the leather over the flap. Who else’s briefcase could it be except Lois Lane’s?

The contents turned out to be exceedingly confusing to Clark as well. A folder full of information on and photographs of Lois, himself, and Superman. A mini-cassette tape with the recording of everything that had been said in the office during the night. All the sweet nothings that Lois had whispered to him to let him know that she was okay. It was obvious that this wasn’t Lois’s folder; it must have been the blackmail folder than Lois mentioned in passing while she was trying to ingratiate him with her father. Clark and Lois still hadn’t been able to have a detailed conversation about what had happened at Luthor’s apartment. Those were conversations to have face-to-face, not over the telephone.

*Speaking of which...*

The globe’s final message from Jor-El had given Clark the closure he had needed with his birth parents. It seemed that little Kal-El had not been abandoned into space, as he had thought before the discovery of the globe. He had been saved by Jor-El and Lara just prior to Krypton’s destruction. What the message from Jor-El had failed to mention was the presence of New Krypton — the new Kryptonian homeland for which a group of pioneers had gone in search of before Krypton had exploded. Why had Kal-El been sent on another path, particularly in light of the existence of his infant-marriage bond to Lady Zara?

*Thanks, Dad.*

Luckily for Clark, Ching had downloaded the history of New Krypton into the globe when he had recovered it from Luthor’s penthouse. Clark wanted to tell Lois all about the New Kryptonians, but he knew she would flip once he explained about Lady Zara.

Actually, everything that he had learned about Krypton and New Krypton from the globe made him glad that Lady Zara didn’t consider him worthy enough for a match with her. Not that he would have zipped off across the universe because of some old tradition of his birth parents’ civilization. Kryptonians had strange customs...

*Who marries off infants anymore? Betrothals are one thing, but marriages?*

... and food...

*What is that blue liquid in the hologram?*

... as well as archaic traditions...

*Concubines? Please. You tell Lois about the concubines and she'll give you your marching papers once again.*

Clark knew he would have to tell Lois about the New Kryptonians, but that was another one of those face-to-face topics.

*Pick up the phone already! Her father is at the clinic. He won't answer and tell you to never see his daughter again. Call Lois already before she thinks you don't care anymore. Call her!*

Clark picked up the receiver of the pay telephone at the park across from Daily Books. This park seemed like their park. Clark could think of no other place from which to phone the woman he loved.

"Hello," said Ellen Lane. Clark breathed a sigh of relief.

"Hello, Mrs. Lane. It's Clark. Can I speak to Lois?" he asked, hoping his voice wasn't shaking in fear.

"No, dear. I'm sorry, Lois went out for a walk," replied Mrs. Lane.

Clark felt as though his heart shriveled up like a raisin. "Oh." He swallowed his disappointment.

"I hear congratulations are in order," Mrs. Lane said.

*Congratulations? For what? Had Dr. Lane told her about Superman? No. He hates that his daughter is dating Superman and doesn't think his wife stable enough for the information.*

"Excuse me?" he stammered.

"I heard Lois and her father talking last night," she replied cryptically.

Was there anything Dr. Lane would say to his daughter or vice versa that could result in congratulations? Nothing came to mind.

*Unless Lois told her father she was pregnant.*

No, that would be impossible. Dr. Lane knew they hadn't been intimate. Clark decided to go with evasive and see if he could learn more. "Oh, really?"

"I'll be disappointed not to come visit you in Metropolis, but Sam and Lois think this cold-turkey approach to my sobriety is cause for concern. My family thinks that if I'm serious — like I wouldn't be serious — I should actually check into rehab. So to prove to them that I'm serious, I'll be unavailable for a month or so," Mrs. Lane told him. Actually, she was being quite revealing to a man she had only met twice.

"Good for you, Mrs. Lane. I know that would make Lois very happy," he said, hoping it was the correct thing to say in such circumstances.

Mrs. Lane laughed. "I don't worry about Lois, Clark. With you by her side, she won't even notice I'm gone."

Clark loved that he had a cheerleader in the Lane camp. Even if she was a recovering alcoholic cheerleader. Beggars couldn't be choosers.

"And, Clark, call me Ellen. We're family."

*Liking Lois's mom more and more. Family? Had Lois stood up to her Dad about him? She must have told her father that she was going to keep dating Clark no matter what her father thought. Yes, Clark did deserve congratulations. He had the best, most stubborn girlfriend ever and nobody — not even her dear ol' Dad — was going to tell her what to do.*

"Thank you, Ellen. Tell Lois I called," he told her. And, then just for fun, he added, "And that I love her."

"Of course you do, dear. Bye," said Mrs... Ellen, hanging up the phone.

Clark grinned, doing his favorite quarterback dance next to the phone booth. He had won over one of Lois's parents.

*Yea! One down, only one mind left to change.*

He practically skipped back to his MDS truck.

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### Wednesday night

Clark couldn't believe it. Actually, he could. With their luck, he should be able to predict things like this happening by now. His relationship with Lois seemed to be the poster child for Murphy's Law.

But, somehow, they had once again let those darn bullies — the Fates — slam them against the lockers of life.

They had been having a nice, romantic evening at Lois's place. Superman had picked her up from Smallville after Clark received a panicked phone call from Lois when he got home from work that afternoon. He believed her exact words were, "Rescue me, please! I can't stand another minute of this torture."

Clark chuckled softly to himself with a shake of his head. Lois and her parents. That was a relationship that was going to take a long time to heal.

So Superman had 'rescued' Lois from her folks' place and brought her back to Metropolis. In reality, they stopped by the café to pick up his dad's truck, because Superman was still barred from making personal appearances at Lois's apartment. Clark sighed. If he could redo his Superman debut, he would never have attended that press conference or — or should it be and? — told Lois about his Superman persona that first night the globe had glowed.

He still didn't know how they were going to remedy the rumors about Lois and Superman swirling out of control. *Dirt Digger Weekly* had a photo — Clark had no idea how they had gotten it — of Superman flying off with Lois after rescuing her from Luthor's penthouse. And *National Inquisitor* had photos of her and Luthor from the man's party — one where the billionaire's hand was touching the bare skin of her back — and accused her of cheating on Superman with the now-dead CEO.

Superman had yet to capture the Toasters, so MPD continued to keep an eye on Lois's apartment building. The Toasters were still wreaking havoc in Hob's Bay, despite Clark Kent's article — tying Luthor's planned riverfront development and the arson-related drop in property values of said community — that Perry had published in the most recent issue of *The Planet*. A hint of a smile came to his face. His first major story. He had even scooped the *Metropolis Star*; Perry had gleefully informed him when he showed Clark his solo byline.

In fact, Clark had wanted to share the byline with Lois — his source, his partner — but she refused, telling him, "I owed you one, Clark."

He laughed out loud.

*Then she had added, "Don't ever expect this to happen again."*

*Love that woman! That fiery, seductive, hard-nosed woman.*

Oh, why had he rushed out to buy dinner? He hadn't really been hungry. For food. True, her stomach had been rumbling but... If they had just skipped dinner and moved straight on to "The Chocolate Course" as Lois had longingly called dessert... Clark sighed.

Then Lois's intercom buzzer would have caught them mid-bliss, instead of when they had sat down to eat. A slight growl escaped Clark's lips. "Lucy Interruptus" he decided to call her sister who had chosen *this* night — the very evening Lois returned from Smallville — to descend on Lois without invitation. Lucy had nowhere else to stay and there was only the one bed. Clark hadn't wanted — honestly, he hadn't — to share it with both the Lane sisters.

Clark switched on the radio, trying to get his mind off the fact that he and Lois wouldn't be consummating their relationship until Lois's sister left Metropolis. And with his and Lois's luck, that event wouldn't happen for weeks.

*Weeks?* groaned that nagging voice inside his head.

*I'm not talking 'bout moving in*

*And I don't want to change your life*

*But there's a warm wind blowing*

*The stars are out and I'd really love to see you tonight.*

This song on the radio didn't help Clark get the evening's events off his mind.

*Yeah, you didn't get much of a chance to see her tonight. Flying with Lois in the warm wind was nice. You really should have taken her somewhere else besides Metropolis.*

Lucy had also brought Lois's Jeep Cherokee back from the dead. Apparently, Lucy knew people who knew people who knew how to fix cars in Kansas City. She had driven the SUV into Metropolis and

needed to park it somewhere off the street, which is why he was currently in his dad's truck, driving it back to the café, and Lucy was eating his dinner and sleeping in — what was supposed to be — his bed with his girlfriend. Clark sighed. At least Lois had walked him out to the truck.

Lois had kissed him and told him not to worry. "We will figure out a solution somehow," she had told him as she took the garage clicker from his truck. She seemed so upbeat. So sure of their love, he couldn't help but be moved by her determination. He guessed she was used to her sister descending on her life and screwing it up. No wonder she had tried to foist Lucy on him when he said he wanted a sibling.

*Now that I know what she's capable of... no thank you, Lois.*

"Lenny Stoke, the Soundman here. And that was *I'd Really Love to See You Tonight* by England Dan and John Ford Coley, dedicated by... Oh, you've got to be kidding me. I'm rolling my eyes here, people. Has the entire state of New Troy turned to porridge? Professor Daitch and the boys at EPRAD Center. Really? This was the best song choice you could come up with? Before that was *Wind Beneath My Wings* by Bette Midler, dedicated by Lynn. Baby, I'm loving the red cape as much as everyone, but I don't think it counts as wings. If I get any more ballad requests, I'm going to fall asleep." To demonstrate this, Stoke yawned loudly.

"Please! All right, before Bette, we had ABBA, *Take a Chance on Me* from Penny working late at Diticom, wishing that if Lois really isn't your girlfriend to 'take a chance on her.' Okay, people, this is the last time I'm saying this and the last time I'm playing that song tonight! The other night I played it every hour of my shift! No more! Once a night for ABBA is enough." Stoke groaned. "As you can tell, I've been forced to have another night of 'Dedications to our Star-Crossed Lovers' Superman and Lois Lane. Love them. Hate them. I don't care... I personally am in the 'sick of them' camp. Okay, next up for the Metropolis Outdoor Adventurers Society *Ain't No Mountain High Enough* by Michael McDonald. Well tough, Adventurers, the Marvin Gaye / Tammi Terrell version is better. I'm playing that one." Clark heard the sound of papers flying into the air. "If you need me, I'll be at the corner bar buying a pint."

*Listen, baby, ain't no mountain high enough  
Ain't no valley low, ain't no river wide enough, baby  
If you need me, call me, no matter where you are  
No matter how far, don't worry, baby,  
Just call my name, I'll be there in the hurry,  
You don't have to worry...*

Clark chuckled. Now, there was the perfect song for him and Lois. *Now, if you could only get her to call your name when she's in trouble.*

He rolled his eyes. The attention on Lois and Superman's relationship was getting worse. He was almost to the point of agreeing with the Soundman.

*Nope. This isn't going away anytime soon.*

Clark needed to do something about it and fast.

Suddenly, the music stopped and Lenny Stoke started talking again, "Hold on! You're kidding me, right? No? Well, patch her through. Hi, there. Welcome to the Soundman Show. Is this the real Lois Lane?"

Clark pulled his truck to a stop at a red light and turned up the volume.

*Please, don't let it be Lois.*

"No! Like I told your producer, this is *Lucy Lane. Lu-cy!* Lois's sister."

Clark hit his head on the steering wheel.

*This couldn't be good.*

"Lois Lane's sister? So you've got the inside scoop on your sister. Are you ready to tell Metropolis the real dirt on Lois? Let's hear all about it from her inner circle. How much of a skank is your sister, really?" said Stoke. Clark could hear the man rubbing his hands together in merriment.

"My sister is not a skank!" Lucy roared into the phone. "You big

bully. And she would never cheat on her boyfriend, so I wish everyone would stop saying that."

Someone behind Clark honked their horn, and he realized the light had changed without him noticing.

"So, you've met her boyfriend? Met the Man in Blue?" Stoke asked Lucy.

"Sure, I've met him and he's a big sweetie, a perfect gentleman, and a hunk to boot."

*A hunk? Clark Kent? She must be talking about you, Kent, because she's never met Superman.*

Lenny Stoke laughed. "Well, honey, nobody is refuting that."

"Lucy, who are you talking to?" Clark heard Lois's voice in the background. Good, at least she didn't know what her sister was up to. Unfortunately, Stoke had heard her as well. "Is *that* Lois? Put her on!" he demanded.

*No! No! No!*

"It's for you," Lucy said a little too willingly.

*AAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!*

The car in front of Clark was stopped and he had almost forgotten to brake. This wasn't good. He needed to pull off to the side of the road, if he was going to listen to this disaster in the making.

"Hello?" said Lois.

"This is Lenny Stoke," announced the DJ.

"Who?" Lois asked, confusion thick in her tone.

"Lenny Stoke. The Soundman," he clarified incredulously.

"Who?" Lois repeated, puncturing the man's ego with that one word.

Clark grinned.

*Go get 'em, Mad Dog!*

"The SOUNDMAN!" Lenny Stoke shouted.

Clark chuckled and pulled the truck off to the side of the road. He could hear Lois covering up the phone.

"Who is this guy, Lucy? Is he some tabloid reporter?"

"From WMET!" screamed Stoke.

Clark guffawed. How many times had he listened to this show while driving in the truck with Lois? Did she really not know? Or was she just pulling this man's chain.

A moment later — Lucy must have told her — Lois said, "Oh. You." Disdain tainted her tone. "I know you. My boyfriend listens to your show."

"Did you hear that, Metropolis? Straight from Lois Lane's lips! Superman — himself — listens to The Soundman Show!" The DJ laughed with glee. "This ratchets Supes up two notches in my book, knowing he's a fan of rock-n-roll!"

"Oh? You play rock-n-roll?" said Lois coldly.

Clark chortled.

*Sic 'em, Mad Dog!*

Lois continued, "And who said anything about Superman?"

"You did!"

"Let's get this out to all your listeners right now. I am *not* dating Superman. My boyfriend's name is Clark Kent," Lois told him.

Clark loved that Lois could say this and still be completely honest. "Superman" wasn't his name. It was his title. And other than that time they went to the beach, she and Superman had never been on a date. Also correct.

"And *he* would appreciate it," Lois went on, frost emanating from every word, "if you would stop referring to Superman and me as lovers."

"What? No mile-high club? No horizontal rumba? No hide the 'S'?"

Clark gulped, hoping his girlfriend would hang up on the DJ. He could picture her tongue crossing her teeth and just knew she would not.

"Superman is above such base human needs," she said through what sounded like gritted teeth.

*Actually, you aren't. You just have really bad luck.*

"Really? Above?" Stoke snickered. "One hundred feet above?"

“Please, listen to yourself! Superman is a good, truthful, and just man who has come to Earth to help us. This kind of talk upsets my boyfriend and I know he’s listening...” Lois’s anger lessened to a soft plea. “Please, stop. Clark is a very jealous man.”

‘I am?’ thought Clark.

*You are! Terribly jealous. Think about how you reacted to Scardino and Tempus and Luthor and all those other nameless guys who ogled your girl.*

But that was before Clark knew that Lois loved him, really loved him. Before he knew that she would never leave him for someone else. That was before he realized he and Lois would be together forever.

A sense of calm came over Clark, erasing the annoyance Lucy’s visit had stirred up in him. They had plenty of time. This new calm soothed the anger that had been building up at Stoke for his nasty insinuations of Lois and the Man in Blue. Clark didn’t like what the DJ was telling his girlfriend, but he knew Lois could handle whatever verbal assault the man dealt her.

“And *why* is Clark jealous, Lois?” Stoke asked her. “Because he knows there’s some truth to the rumors. In the past two weeks alone, you’ve been photographed with not only Superman, but also Dan Scardino and Lex Luthor.” Lenny Stoke enjoyed berating Clark’s girlfriend way too much. “You’re an arousing, trashy brunette, just my type. Maybe I should throw my hat in the ring and ask you out.”

Lois snarled. “I’d rather...”

“Be probed by an alien?” suggested Stoke.

Clark drew in a breath and heard Lois do the same. Lenny Stoke had sources of his own. Had he been in contact with Claude?

“I hear you like that. I’m sure that could be arranged. I dedicate this song to you, Lois. Julie Brown’s *Earth Girls are Easy*.” The Soundman’s interruption essentially cut off whatever nasty retort with which Lois had been about to zing him.

*I was nude sunbathing on my patio*

*When he was checking me out from his UFO*

*Guess he couldn’t take it ‘cause he lost his cool*

*Crash landed in my swimming pool*

*So he beams over to me,*

*Starts licking his lips,*

*Stroking his antenna and wiggling his hips*

*I’ll be nice to him, but I’m not that dumb,*

*I know lust no matter what planet he’s from*

“Clark!” He heard Lois calling to him. “*Don’t do anything. He’s not worth it. Just change the channel and go home. Please, Clark. He’s not worth it.*” Her voice wasn’t coming through the radio. He was hearing it with his super hearing.

*He said, ‘Earth girls, Earth girls are easy,*

*Earth girls know how to please me,*

*Earth girls, Earth girls are sleazy.’*

Clark knew the song was meant to offend Lois, and possibly him as well, but it was so ridiculous and silly. He couldn’t help but laugh. He looked over his shoulder, switched on his turn signal and pulled out into traffic.

*‘Earth girls, Earth girls are easy,*

*Earth girls know how to tease me,*

*Earth girls, Earth girls are easy.’*

When the song finished, but before Lenny Stoke came back on the air, Clark pushed the button switching over to the News Radio show to which his dad listened. Clark had had enough of The Soundman’s Show to last him a lifetime and hoped he wasn’t the only one in Metropolis who felt that way.

“This just in, just moments ago fire erupted in yet another tenement building in Hob’s Bay. What? Not only at that apartment building, but it seems someone has seen flames over at the Metro Club as well. Superman! Where are you?”

*Perhaps it’s best if you stay off rock-n-roll stations, anyway,* suggested his conscience as he pulled into the alley behind his parents’ café and into the parking spot where his dad kept the truck. Two seconds later, Superman was on his way to Hob’s Bay.

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### Sunday night — Late

Lois dragged herself off her bed and over to her phone. She had to make it stop ringing.

“Hello?” she mumbled.

“Superman caught the Toasters!” Clark practically sang into her ear.

“What?” Lois stammered, sitting down at her desk chair.

“The Toasters. Superman froze them. Okay, maybe just a bit of frostbite, but they’re in custody,” he told her.

She glanced over to her sister sound asleep on the futon and rubbed her eyes once more with a yawn. “That’s great, honey.” She still wasn’t fully awake.

“You’re safe.”

Lois smiled. “I’m always safe in your arms.”

“But you’re not in my arms,” Clark reminded her, lowering his voice.

“Yeah, and how long would it take you to change that?” she asked.

“Too much time,” he replied with a sigh.

Lois laughed, knowing that even one extra fraction of a second would seem too long for him. “Are you calling off my police protection?”

“I’m leaving that up to Henderson and the guys at MPD. They still feel pretty bad about letting you down the other night, so my guess is you’ll have them watching your place for another night or two. Or, at least, doing regular patrols.”

Lois knew it wasn’t only the MPD who felt guilty about her night spent tied up in Luthor’s office.

“Personally, if I had my way, I’d dip you in Kevlar,” Clark went on.

“Good thing you’ll never get your way again,” she retorted, tucking her feet underneath her and settling into her chair.

“I’ve gotten it before?” he asked dubiously.

She chuckled, resting her chin on her knees. “On occasion, I might let you slip one in just to keep you on your toes.”

“Gee, thanks, honey. I feel so loved,” Clark lovingly teased.

*Good, he knew he was loved.*

“It’s not your fault. You know that, right?” It was one of the things she had wanted to reassure him about tonight before her sister had so rudely interrupted them. “I’m going to do stupid things, now and again. It doesn’t make it your fault.”

“I should have...”

“You did warn me. And Jack warned me. And Perry warned me,” she plowed on and over his self-pity. “I don’t listen, Clark. I’m more stubborn than a mule. You’ve got to understand that about me. Unless you are saying something I want to hear, I might not be able to hear you. And even then...”

“I love you, Lois,” he murmured.

“Now *that*, that I heard,” she responded as a smile.

“You scared me.”

“I know.” That was what she had been trying to avoid by not telling him she was meeting with Luthor.

“I don’t like being scared, Lois. It’s a new feeling for me,” Clark confessed.

“So, what do you think you should do about that?” she asked, throwing the problem back to him.

“You told me it was snowing when it wasn’t, Lois.”

Lois winced. She hated when he threw her words back on her. “I’m sorry, Clark, that I broke that trust. I was trying to protect you.”

“And *I* was trying to make sure you really were fine after your ordeal with Luthor. You booby-trapped me with your father. That wasn’t fair,” Clark told her.

She faux gasped. “Clark Kent! You know darn well, there were no boobies involved.”

*There should have been,* grumbled her inner voice.

There was a pause before he chuckled. “You’re changing the subject when you know I can’t fly over there. Play nice, Lois.”

Lois grinned naughtily. “I wish you were here.”

“With you *and* your sister?” Clark asked mischievously.

*Clark! He’s a naughty boy!*

“No!” No, Lois hadn’t meant that. “I wish she was there and you were here.”

“Me, too,” he replied and Lois exhaled in relief.

*Me likey big Boy Scouts, too.*

“I was trying to protect you,” he continued, returning the topic back to Luthor. “I’m the invulnerable one, remember? It doesn’t do you any good if you don’t let me use it to protect you every once in a while. You’ve got to let me do that, please, Lois. It’s my best trait.”

“It’s your best trait?” she repeated back to him. Lois wanted to use the word ‘invulnerability’, but she refused to mention anything that might let her sister know Lois was also talking to Superman.

“My ability to protect you,” Clark clarified.

*Sweetie alert!*

“Oh.” Lois smiled and decided to tease him again. “And here I thought it was your ability to love me.”

Lois sensed him smile over the phone as he admitted, “Okay, my second best trait.”

“Oh?” She couldn’t help herself. “I thought that was your ability to make me mad.”

“That’s not my second best trait, Lois. That’s my worst trait,”

Clark corrected.

“But you excel at it so well!” she exclaimed, flabbergasted.

*He does, doesn’t he?*

Clark laughed as she hoped he would. “You promised no more running into traffic, Lois. Luthor was a semi with no brakes.”

“I know,” she whispered. Clark was certainly a Man of Steel Resolve. No matter how often she tried to shift him off this topic, he returned to it.

“No more bad weather reports?” Clark requested.

Lois thought about this request. “What if something is discovered that could harm you and the bad guys that have me are making me call to you so they can hurt you?”

“That’s quite a ‘what if’ there, Lois.” He sighed. “If it makes you feel better we can come up with a key word or phrase to warn me of any possible danger, but know I’m coming for you no matter what.”

*How about ‘Time for Sex’? No, that might be interpreted differently by whomever’s holding you... Hmmm. How about you call for ‘Super Sex God’ instead of Superman?*

“Even if doing so will kill you?”

*Hello? Lois? Invulnerable is invulnerable!*

“Lois, there’s nothing out there that can harm me...”

“You haven’t exposed yourself to everything in the world. What if eating crickets kills you?” she threw out as a possible scenario.

“Actually they are quite the delicacy in...”

Lois grimaced. “Ew! I kiss those lips?”

Clark laughed. “You certainly do and quite well at that.”

At the mention of kissing her lips, Lois started running her fingers over her mouth. It had been far too long since she had received a kiss from him. She closed her eyes and pictured Clark kissing her. Imagined him pulling off her shirt, touching down her body and kissing her bare skin. Kissing her lips again, as her bare skin mingled with his bare skin.

“Lois?”

“Hhmm?” she murmured, her foot falling off the chair and knocking her fully awake again. “Sorry.” She tried to return her focus to the conversation at hand. Her body was tingling just from thinking about him. “Huh?”

“What were you going to say to Stoke before he interrupted you?” Clark asked.

“I’d rather have electro-shock therapy.” Lois smiled. “Did you get my message?”

“Loud and clear. I will no longer be listening to Metropolis’s best rock station.” He sounded slightly disappointed. “I’ll miss the music.”

“We can buy you some CDs.”

“I like that word,” he murmured.

Lois’s brow furrowed. What was he talking about? “Which word?”

“We,” he replied simply. Yet his voice saying that one word made Lois’s body tingle again.

“I like it too, cowboy.”

\*\*\*

#### Thursday morning

Clark looked down at the thin envelope in his hand, again. District Attorney’s Office, Investigative Division, Mid-Town branch. He rarely, if ever, delivered packages to the District Attorney’s Office. It wasn’t on his usual route, but someone down at MDS headquarters said that he had been personally requested as delivery man. He wasn’t overly surprised to see that the package was for Mayson Drake, and sent by Mayson Drake. He had felt some chemistry when they had met the day of the break-in and was flattered when he overheard Mayson tell Lois that she had had a crush on him in high school, but he wasn’t interested in a relationship with Mayson. Clark loved Lois. No one could ever change that.

After looking at the map and also asking directions from the security desk in the lobby, Clark finally found the correct office. He opened the door and saw a series of cubicles.

Mayson’s desk was one of the ones in front. She instantly jumped to her feet upon seeing him, flushing slightly. “Is that for me?”

*She knows it is. Is she blushing at being so obvious or because of the lie?*

“Hi, Mayson,” Clark said cheerfully, pretending he didn’t know she had requested him personally. She was a nice woman and he wouldn’t mind being friends — just friends — with her. “Yes, it is. Can you sign here?”

Mayson signed his log and stared into his face a moment. “Can I walk you back to your truck?”

*Wouldn’t it be wonderful if you could say that is the first time you’ve heard that line before? What is it about the MDS uniform that just caused women’s hearts to race all over Metropolis?*

It couldn’t just be the shorts because Clark had on the winter uniform: long pants and long sleeve shirt to hide the Superman suit he had on underneath. He did miss those shorts though.

“Uh... Sure, if you want to...” he agreed with a slight stammer. He was trying to be polite. Mayson was an old friend. But this whole situation was beginning to feel like a set-up... and not the good kind.

Mayson brought the package she had had him deliver to her along with her, opening it as she indicated the direction towards the elevator. “I’ve known you a long time, Clark. And despite it being almost ten years since graduation that I’ve really seen you, I know you’re still the same man.”

*What is she talking about?*

Inside the elevator Mayson handed him the contents of the envelope. “First thing Monday morning, this was filed with my division.”

Clark read through the pages carefully. From what he could understand through all the legalese, Tempus had requested an investigation into Clark Kent and his padded paycheck. “Are you going to have me arrested, Mayson?”

*If so, is she warning you to head out of town? If not, what is she up to?*

“Lois said you were in debt. Can you tell me what for?” she asked.

*Lois told her what?*

“I’m not in debt,” he replied.

“Then why all the jobs? Why the extra money in your paycheck?” Mayson inquired, staring at him. “Lois told me that you worked four jobs.”

*Lois told her what? 1 — MDS. 2 — Daily Books. 3 — MJ’s Caf . 4 — ?*

Then a light went on. Superman!

*That isn’t a paying gig. What was Lois thinking?*

“The rent for my folks’ caf  more than doubled two years ago. I work so many jobs to try to keep it afloat,” he answered.

The sharpness in Mayson's gaze softened. "Lois said it was probably something reasonable, because you were an honorable man."

*When had Lois told Mayson all this? Back when her apartment had been broken into or more recently?*

"Which is why you live with your folks?" Mayson stated more than asked as they left the elevator.

Clark nodded, almost not in shock that Lois had mentioned that as well.

They passed through the doors of the building. His truck was parked across the plaza on the side street in the loading zone. Mayson raised a brow and moved her gaze to the no parking sign.

"Are you going to ticket me, Mayson? This isn't my usually delivery route."

"How about I give you a warning?" Mayson shook her head and leaned against the open door of his truck. "Why haven't you announced your engagement to Lois?"

Clark's eyes bugged.

*Say what?*

"Excuse me?" he asked as soon as he found his voice.

Mayson pressed her lips together. "I should have known she was lying about that."

*Lois told Mayson they were engaged?*

Clark felt so happy that he had to concentrate on keeping his feet on the ground. "She wasn't lying. I did tell her I wanted to spend my life..."

"Proving that you were worthy of her love?" Mayson finished with a sigh.

*Lois told Mayson that as well? He hadn't realized Lois and Mayson had become such good friends. And by telling Mayson that you were engaged didn't Lois accept your haphazard proposal on the beach? Of course, it was Kal who had told Lois that Clark had wanted to spend his life with her. But Lois had known the truth about them really being just him, even then.*

Clark wanted to hit himself in the head for not seeing earlier how clearly Lois had recognized him from the press conference. He hadn't realized what an intelligent, observant woman she really was. Another stupid mistake. A silly grin slipped onto his face, instead. "I didn't know she was telling anyone."

"Why keep it a secret? Obviously if you tell people she's engaged to you, nobody will think she's fooling around with some weirdo vigilante in a cape," Mayson wondered.

*O-kay. Mayson isn't a fan. Got it. Good to know.*

Clark grimaced, not quite knowing how to answer Mayson's inquiry. Yes, becoming engaged to Lois would enable Superman to tell everyone honestly that Lois Lane was not his girlfriend. The truth would be that she was his fiancée not his girlfriend. Finally, he sighed. "Her father doesn't approve of me." That, at least, was the truth.

"Well, this isn't going to help with that," Mayson said, glancing down at the request to have him investigated for stealing funds from LexCo. She took the paperwork and tore it half and then in half again.

Clark's jaw dropped. "Mayson?" He didn't know what to say. "You can't..."

*Hey, I'm just as dumbfounded as you are.*

"Call it an early wedding present," Mayson told him, stepping into the truck and kissing his cheek. "There isn't any proof that you orchestrated the funds to be added into your paycheck, only that you never contacted LexCo's human resources about it. I doubt that there's an arrestable offense there. If they really cared about the missing funds, LexCo could always sue to have you repay them. Anyway, I hear the guy that filed the claim was fired later the same day for trying to blackmail Lois into sleeping with him."

*Sleeping?*

"Just a date," Clark corrected as his heart raced with this new wording.

Mayson shrugged. "Most blackmailers I know up the ante after the first payment. Sex, I'm sure was his ultimate goal."

*You knew that too, Kent, which is why you didn't want Lois to go*

*on that date.*

But Mayson had said it so bluntly, his stomach churned with acid. Just the thought of some man forcing himself onto his... "Thank you, Mayson. It would be nice to start our life together with a clean slate."

"Don't thank me," Mayson told him. "I didn't do anything. This..." She held up the torn-up papers. "... got lost in the circular file. If LexCo wants to pursue this, I'll have to reopen the case. My guess, though, with Tempus gone from LexCo, it's going to die from neglect."

Clark wanted to thank her again but didn't dare, so he just smiled gratefully.

"I'll see you around, Clark," she said, backing off his truck. "Oh, and can you tell Superman to stop dropping big piles of snow in front of your girlfriend's apartment, I almost broke my neck slipping on it the next morning."

Clark waved at her as he turned off his hazard light. "Will do, Mayson."

\*\*\*

Thursday — late morning

Clark walked into the freight elevator at Daily Books still in somewhat of a daze.

*Lois told Mayson you were engaged. Lois wants to marry you.*

It was so obvious. Why hadn't he thought of it?

*Ah, Kent, you aren't always the best at reading Lois's signs.*

He wished he had asked Mayson *when* it was that Lois had told her they were engaged. But he hadn't wanted to press his luck by giving her the impression that he really didn't know anything about it.

"Hey, CK!" Jimmy greeted him with more enthusiasm than usual. "So, what did you think of Lois's sister, Lucy? Do you think she'll go out with me?"

*Huh? What? Jimmy wants to date Lucy? Yeah! Jimbo should take her, Kent! Lucy's available every night this week. Tell him to keep her, even! You and Lois wouldn't mind. You'll even volunteer to bring her stuff over to his apartment now... this very minute.*

Clark blinked his eyes trying to calm his racing brain. "What?" He couldn't possibly have heard his friend properly. He and Lois didn't have good luck, only bad luck.

"What. Did. You. Think. Of. Lucy. Lane?" Jimmy asked slowly.

"I don't know. She kind of descended on us during dinner and kicked me out," Clark told him.

*You really don't know when to shut up, do you, Kent? Tell him she's beautiful and available.*

"She did?" Jimmy said, sounding worried.

"No, not really," Clark tried to clarify with a reassuring smile. "They wanted to talk and I gave them some space."

*Not technically, but a better spin on things.*

"She's so beautiful," Jimmy gushed, his cheeks turning slightly pink. "I've had butterfingers all morning since meeting her. Do you think it's too soon to ask her out?"

"No!" Clark told him too quickly.

"No? I shouldn't ask her out?" Jimmy asked, dejected.

"Yes! Ask her out. For tonight even. Show her the sights of Metropolis. Nobody knows the city like you do," Clark suggested, hoping he didn't sound too eager. He started taking the boxes off of his cart. Then Jimmy's words penetrated the fog inside his brain. "You met Lucy this morning?"

Jimmy grinned, clearly ecstatic at Clark's approval, as he cut open another box. "Yeah. Lois brought her by. She had told me that if Lucy ever came to Metropolis she'd introduce me and Lois lived up to her promise. That's some girlfriend you have there, CK. Lois even convinced Perry to give Lucy a job. You know, to replace Sarah."

Clark's eyes widened in shock. "Lucy is *moving* to Metropolis?"

*Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!*

"Yeah, isn't it great? She's moving in with Lois. Didn't Lois tell you?"

*No! No! No! No! You knew the Fates would be pulling the rug out from under your good luck, but this is just plain cruel.*

“Must have slipped her mind,” Clark choked out. He and Lois were never going to consummate their relationship. Would he ever be able to spend the night with Lois again? Sleep with her in his arms? Where and when would they be able to make love? Not at his folks’ apartment. No, not a good idea. Not at her apartment either, it seemed.

*AAAAAARRRRRRRRRRRRRRGGGGGGGGGGGGHHHHHH*  
*HHHHH!*

“Oh, wait!” Jimmy started patting his pockets. “Lois left me a message to give to you. She said she tried calling you at home but you had already left for work.” Finally, he pulled out a note and handed it to Clark.

Clark’s heart pounded against his ribs as he reached for the note.

*What is Lois going to say? Is it a note of apology? Or a note of condolence?*

He broke the seal on the back of the envelope and pulled out the card.

*Morning, Sexy! Lois wrote. Clark liked the tone of this note already. Have Kal fly you to NYC. Meet me for lunch at the boat pond, Central Park, noon. I’ll supply the food. Lois*

Was it just a trick of his imagination or had he heard the cracking of his ribs as his heart nearly exploded from his chest?

*What in the world was Lois doing in New York City?*

Clark glanced down at his watch: eleven-thirty. His trip to the D.A.’s office had messed with his typical delivery schedule and he was here much later than usual. Clark quickly emptied his cart and returned to the freight elevator. He had a few more carts of boxes to bring inside before he could break for lunch. “Take my advice, Jimmy, ask Lucy out. Do you need her phone number?”

Jimmy eyes glowed. “No. Lois convinced Perry to start Lucy today, so she’s coming back here at noon and working until eight tonight.”

*This day is getting better and better. Lois told Mayson you’re engaged, meaning she wants to marry you. You discovered a way to get the rumors of her and Superman out of the press. Lois wants to meet you for a romantic lunch in Central Park. Lucy will be away from the apartment until at least eight tonight. Lots of time to do things between four and eight.*

Even if he tried, Clark would not have been able to remove the grin from his face.

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Lois paced nervously at the boat pond. Did Clark get her message? Would he be available to meet her for lunch? Had she made this trip to NYC for nothing? She glanced at the clock over at the mini-boat rental booth again. Five minutes to noon.

*You’ve been pacing for fifteen minutes already, Lois. Sit down. He’s not supposed to meet you for at least five minutes.*

Her hands were sweating and she wiped them on her skirt. All of a sudden she heard a familiar swoosh in the sky. She wasn’t the only one to look up.

“What was that?” Lois heard people around her wonder.

*Ah, those naïve New Yorkers. Don’t they know Superman when they hear him?*

Lois smiled. She didn’t have to wonder. She knew. Her boyfriend was on his way. She ran her fingers over her hair and picked up the bag with their picnic supplies in it. How long would it take...?

“Hi,” said Clark breathlessly from behind her. “Am I late?”

*Never! Five minutes early too. Loving this man, Lois! Loving this man!*

Lois’s smile grew into a full-blown grin as her bag slid from her hand and she enveloped him into her arms, pressing the kiss onto his lips that had been burning inside her since the night before. Clark relaxed into her embrace and eagerly returned it.

*Um.... Lois. I hate to interrupt, but aren’t you on a time schedule here? Doesn’t he have to be back on the job within an hour?*

Lois pressed her hands against Clark’s chest, dragging her lips from his. Right. Schedule. No distractions. Must follow her plan. “I can’t do this anymore,” she breathed, her heart racing. She didn’t want

to stop kissing Clark. She wanted to push him onto the grass and tear off his clothes.

*Later. Stick to the plan.*

Right. Later. If everything worked out, she would be making love to Clark whenever she liked.

*Well, not whenever... you would still need to eat, go to work, sleep... but other than that... sure, that sounds good... in your spare time... every single minute of it.*

“Come on. We need to talk,” she said, picking up the bag with the picnic stuff and then taking hold of his hand.

“I’d rather kiss,” he murmured, bringing her back to his lips.

Lois allowed another minute of kissing before her inner voice reminded her again of their time schedule.

“I don’t want to stop,” Clark whispered.

*Me either!*

“We don’t have time to keep this up, Clark. Let’s eat lunch,” Lois told him, dragging him away from the boat pond and towards the lawn. She spread out the blanket onto the grass and started to unpack the food.

Clark lay down next to her and plucked a green grape off the bunch she had just unloaded and put it between his lips. Lois released a moan of desire, causing him to smile. He picked another grape with a wicked grin, set it between his teeth and glanced at her with waggling eyebrows.

Lois attacked him for a bite of grape, pushing him down onto the blanket. He didn’t seem to mind and actually deepened the kiss.

Clark rolled her over, so that he was lying on top of her. “Let’s forget about lunch and go find a room.”

*No! You can’t make love to him. Not now!*

Lois pushed his chest. “No, Clark. I can’t... you can’t... Let’s eat and talk. I’ve got some pasta salad.”

Clark groaned, sitting up. “You’re killing me. Don’t you know what pasta does to me?”

She grinned at him evilly.

*Oh, does it? Him too? I see carb fest at the Kent household for many years to come.*

Lois pulled out some paper plates and piled them with sandwiches, pasta salad, chips, and fruit that Clark started to laugh.

“Hungry, Lois?” he asked, taking his plate.

She gave him such a desirous, slow burn of a gaze that he set down his plate and kissed her again. Food forgotten, they again lay down on the blanket.

*Um... Lois, I hate to interrupt, again... but don’t forget that you and Clark are out in public, not in the privacy of a room...*

Lois pushed Clark’s hand off her thigh and scrambled back to a sitting position, moving as far away from him as possible and still be on the blanket. She straightened her skirt and hair again and picked up her lunch. “I can’t do this anymore,” she told him again.

*You’ve got to stop saying that to him or he will think you mean something else.*

“Neither can I,” Clark agreed, pulling himself up on his elbow. *Or not.*

He tilted down his glasses and looked at her from over the top of them. “Which is why we should go find a room.”

*Oh, not those gorgeous eyes. Does he not know what those beautiful, vibrant, radiant eyes do to you?*

Lois smiled at him, scooting farther away. “Stop it.”

He grinned and batted his eyelashes innocently.

*Oooh. Evil, evil man. He does know.*

“Clark.” Lois could not be so close to him without touching him. She placed a hand on his shin. “If we start...” She swallowed.

“If?” he inquired again with that charming smile of his.

She cleared her throat. “When we start...” Taking a deep breath, she plowed on ahead. “I won’t be able to stop.”

That smile grew larger. “Who wants you to stop?”

Her hand grabbed hold of his pants by his ankle as she closed her eyes and counted to ten, trying to stop the blood rushing to her skin, to

her extremities, making his very touch irresistible. She flashed open her eyes. “No. I mean for hours.”

“Hours?”

*Hours? Don't you mean days?*

Lois's voice grew deeper as she fixed her gaze on him. “Countless hours.”

Clark gulped. “Oh.”

“So we need to talk,” she said, letting go of his pants leg. She closed her eyes and took another deep breath, reviewing her prepared statement in her mind. “You love me, don't you, Clark?”

“Since the first moment you looked at me and rolled your eyes at Cat. Yes.”

Lois opened her eyes and swallowed. He was giving her that expression of ravishing her again.

*He's not making this any easier.*

She stood up and started to pace.

Clark continued to lie on the blanket as his eyes followed her.

“And would you still love me if I came into a lot of money? Lots and lots of money?” She wrung her hands together, not able to look at him.

He sat up, his face abruptly serious. “Lois, did you do something illegal?”

“Of course not!” she said, pressing her lips together.

Clark relaxed and drew his his knees to his chest. “Are you expecting to come into some money?”

“You never know!” she replied vaguely. “Would that change the way you feel about me?”

He chuckled. “I don't think you'd let money change who you are inside. So, no, it wouldn't stop how I feel about you.”

She sighed a breath of relief.

“Hhmmm, dating a rich girlfriend. I could get used to that. Would that make me your kept man?” He grinned.

Lois rolled her eyes and moved on with her questions. “And would you still love me if ever I got sick? I mean really, really sick. You'd still love me?”

His snickers disappeared as his serious expression returned. “Lois? Are you all right?”

She nodded nervously, still not looking at him.

“Of course, Lois. Nothing could stop me from loving you.” Clark shifted to his knees and took hold of her arm, stopping her pacing. “Are you sick?”

Lois waved his question out of the air.

“Lois?”

She turned and faced him. “Do you age, Clark?”

“Excuse me?” he asked and raised a curious brow.

Lois knelt down next to him, taking his hands in hers, lowering her voice, “I know you're strong and invulnerable, but does that mean you won't get older?”

“I don't know, Lois. I never thought about it. I came here as a baby and I've aged regularly since then, but now?” Clark shrugged. “I don't know what a Kryptonian's life expectancy would be here on Earth.”

She placed her hands on his face, looking deep into those eyes.

“Would you still love me when I'm old, grey, and frail, stooped with age, and speckled with liver spots, if you still looked as you do today? Would you want to leave me and be with a younger woman with your liveliness, energy, spirit, and youth?” She swallowed. “Someone still attractive like you?”

Clark cupped her jaw with his palm. “You say that like you could ever be unattractive, Lois, which is impossible. You are the most beautiful woman I have ever met and I will love you forever. It doesn't matter how you or I might change with age or even if you or I should die. I will never be able to stop loving you.”

Lois stared him straight into the eyes, her racing heart clogging her throat.

*Okay, Lois, now for the sixty-four thousand dollar question.*

She swallowed her heart down with a gulp. “Then marry me.”

*Ah, Lois, you forgot to word that in the form of a question.*

A smile brightened his entire face. “I thought you'd never ask.”

*You didn't... Oh! Oh! Oh!* Her inner voice was practically hyperventilating. *That was a yes! Oh, Lois, he wants to marry you! Kiss him, girl. Kiss him!*

But before Lois could, Clark closed the small gap between them and took possession of her lips. Kissing Clark had always been the most sensual experience of her life. How could the Man of Steel have lips so soft and warm, hands so gentle, and a tongue...? Heat radiated throughout her body as her cells tried to join with his through her clothes and his.

Lois's inner voice cleared her throat again. *Um, Lois. I hate to interrupt. But Clark has to be back at work soon and you need to finish your plan or you can't make love with him tomorrow.*

Lois jumped to her feet, grabbing all the food and dumping everything in containers back into the bag. She threw everything else away.

“Lois?” Clark asked, a startled expression covering his face. “What's wrong?”

She shot him a grin. “Nothing. I just have some paperwork for you to fill out.” She pushed him off the blanket, folded it up, and stuffed it into the bag as well. She held out her hand to Clark. “Let's go.”

“Where?”

“To get our marriage license, of course.”

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Clark floated back down to his truck and spun back into his MDS uniform.

*You're engaged! You are not only engaged, you are practically married. Lois made you sign up for a marriage license. Right there on the spot in NYC. And a marriage license in the state of New York was only valid for sixty days. You and Lois will be married — husband and wife — in less than two months.*

He was having difficulty keeping his feet on the ground.

*It's not even October and it feels like Christmas has already come!*

Clark's brow furrowed. *New York City?* That would mean the marriage license was only valid in the State of New York. He and Lois would be getting married in NYC? Why did Lois want to get married in New York? Why not Metropolis? Why not Smallville? He had forgotten to ask and she hadn't supplied any answers. Was this what Ellen Lane had meant that she couldn't make it to Metropolis? Was this what she meant when she congratulated him? Had Lois already told her folks that she wanted to marry him?

Well, Clark knew Lois had already told his. Lois had Clark's birth certificate and her birth certificate with her. Clark's birth certificate had been issued upon his adoption. No one had claimed a missing baby found in Smallville and, within the year, he had been officially Clark Jerome Kent, legal child of Martha and Jonathan Kent.

Clark hurried to finish his deliveries. Bringing people their packages more quickly than ever, he made it back to the MDS Processing Center with his truck by three-thirty. He was about to clock out and rush over to Lois's for an evening of celebratory engagement bliss — Lucy was at work and hopefully going out with Jimmy afterwards — so he and Lois would have her apartment to themselves.

“Yo, Kent!” one of his bosses called out to him.

“Yes, Joe?” Clark said, wondering what was wrong. Had he missed a package in his enthusiasm to head to Lois's?

“You're dating Lois Lane, right?”

A grin slipped onto Clark's face, erasing any annoyance that might have been there because of *how* his boss knew who his girlfriend was. He was just too happy about their engagement to do anything but grin. “Yes.”

“These packages just arrived for her. I'll let you sign for them and take them now, so you don't have to wait for them tomorrow,” Joe said with chortle, handing him a medium-sized square box that could easily hold a basketball, and an MDS shipping envelope.

*O-kay. That was strange.*

“Thanks,” Clark responded, signing the log and taking the packages.

“See you Tuesday, Kent,” Joe replied with a wave.

Clark froze. “You mean tomorrow. It isn’t a holiday weekend.”

His boss tossed him a wicked grin. “Your girlfriend telephoned earlier and asked if you could take Friday and Monday off. Guess she has some secret plans for you.” Joe’s eyebrows went up and down, naughtily. “I can’t believe it. You beat out Superman for Lois Lane. *You.*”

Clark shrugged sheepishly and carried the packages out of MDS Processing Center.

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Clark pulled his keys to Lois’s apartment out of his pocket. He had practically — okay, he *had* flown here. But he landed in that alley two blocks away and stomped the rest of the way. What was up with Lois? Calling *his* boss and requesting that they give him two days off? Just because they were officially engaged didn’t mean she could...

He stopped before putting the key into the lock and started to laugh. Was he actually mad because *she* was controlling *his* life without his permission?

*Isn’t that the same thing you keep doing to her? Waking her up in the middle of the night to take her to your folks’ without asking? Assigning her bodyguards to escort her to Luthor’s party without telling her first? Taking her to her father’s for a medical review without her okay?*

The door opened and Lois stared at him.

Clark saw her puzzled expression and laughed harder. Through his laughter he managed to say, “MDS. Delivery!” And he held out the packages his boss had given him.

“Oh, thanks, Clark,” Lois said, taking the packages and moving away from the door.

He followed her inside, shutting the door and taking off his glasses to wipe his eyes.

“Something funny?” she asked, setting the big box on her coffee table and opening the smaller one.

He waved off her question as he shook his head.

*She had to have been there.*

“Oh, good. They arrived. I was afraid they wouldn’t get here in time.” Lois said, tossing the envelope onto her desk.

Clark glanced over at her desk curiously. Then he moved his gaze over to Lois. His laughter suddenly disappeared as he realized they were alone and she had asked him to marry her.

*Actually, she told you to marry her.*

He swooped her into his arms and pressed a kiss onto her lips. Lois eagerly accepted his embrace. Clark backed up to the futon and fell onto the couch, cushioning their fall with a bit of levitation. He pushed on the back of the sofa, but it didn’t budge.

“The first thing we’re going to buy is a proper bed,” Clark mumbled.

Lois lifted her head with a chuckle. “What? Hating the futon?” Then she glanced off the side of him. “Are you happy to see me? Or do you always float when you fall into bed?”

“I’m happy to see you.” He reached up and kissed her. “I was especially happy to hear that Daily Book’s newest employee will be working until eight tonight.” He wrapped his arms around Lois and turned them over in midair, so that he was on top and then gently lay them down on the sofa.

“Clark,” Lois mumbled between kisses. “Do you remember what I said at the park this afternoon?”

Clark grinned. “Something about the most beautiful woman in the universe wanting to marry me.”

“Before that,” Lois said, still kissing him. Actually, her kisses were making it impossible for him to concentrate or put together a coherent thought.

When he didn’t — or more correctly, couldn’t — answer, she continued, “I told you we needed hours.”

Clark had a vague recollection of her saying ‘hours’ about something. “We have four until Lucy gets off shift — more if Jimmy takes her out afterwards,” he told her, kissing down her neck towards

her chest. She moaned her approval, so he figured he must be doing something right. He started to unbutton her blouse, but she set her hand on his to stop him.

“Countless hours,” she murmured. She sighed and then pushed him gently on his chest and he floated up enough for her to sit up and then he sat down next to her.

“Countless hours?” he repeated.

She smiled and nudged him. “Days would really be better.”

Clark gulped. “Days?”

*Lois wants to make love to you for days?*

Lois turned and took hold of his hands, gazing deep into his eyes. “When I make love to you, I’m not going to want to stop. And when I need to sleep, I want to do so in your arms. I want your face to be the last thing I see at night and the first thing I see in the morning.”

“I want all of that too. Can’t we start that, right now? Here? Tonight?” he asked.

“Clark, we could make love tonight...” Lois began and he didn’t want to hear any more as he leaned forward to kiss her again. She stopped him with another hand to his chest. “But then a couple of hours from now, probably about the time I’m ready to paint your body with chocolate and lick it off...” She flushed a bit with this admission.

*Toe sucking and now this! You’re engaged to one kinky woman, Kent. Lucky dog!*

“You’ll have to get up and get dressed and head back to your little bed at your folks’ place and Lucy will come back here ready to crash.” Lois raised her eyes back to his. “After I make love to you, I know you’ll be the only person I’ll ever want to sleep with again.”

Clark felt simultaneously aroused, comforted, and splashed with Arctic water by her words. “Then I’ll take tomorrow off from work, Monday too, and we’ll go someplace just the two of us,” he suggested. “Make it a long weekend.”

Disappointment crossed her face. “Aw. They told you.” Lois got up and walked to her desk. The top two buttons of her blouse were still unbuttoned, revealing more of her bosom than she usually did. Not as much as Cat Grant, granted, but still a much nicer view.

*Down boy! She’ll be yours soon enough.*

“Did I ruin your surprise?” he asked, trying not to let her see the desire rising again in his eyes.

“Yeah.” She pouted a little and then picked up the envelope he had brought her from MDS. “In this envelope I have two plane tickets to upstate New York.”

*Plane tickets?*

“Um... Lois. We don’t need plane tickets to get out of town this weekend,” Clark tried to explain.

A big grin came to her face. “Sure we do. Clark doesn’t fly, Kal does. Clark is going away with his fiancée. Kal is staying in Metropolis, saving lives.”

Clark opened his mouth and pointed at her, but nothing came out. Finally he said, “You know we’re the same person, right?”

Lois laughed. “Of course I do.”

He expelled a held breath.

“But they don’t know that,” Lois went on, gesturing towards her front door — to the universe in general.

Clark’s heart came crashing down and only his super speed stopped it from smashing into smithereens.

*Is this why she wanted to marry you? To get herself off the cover of the tabloids?*

And whose fault it was it that she was on the cover of the tabloids in the first place? Clark argued with his conscience.

*Superman’s.*

Clark knew that Lois loved him. He was just jumping to conclusions again. He knew in his heart of hearts that Lois wouldn’t marry him unless she loved him and wanted to be with him. Yet, his heart was still sitting in his hands ready to hurl itself to the floor again at the slightest indication that this logic was unsound. He took a deep breath and spoke. Unfortunately, the words were said through clenched teeth. “Let me get this straight, you want to fly in a plane to upstate

New York with me, Clark Kent?"

Lois nodded.

"And then you want to publicly marry me, so everyone knows you aren't dating or sleeping with Superman? Then you want super-me to fly back to Metropolis, flashing some cape, so everyone thinks Superman is in town instead of upstate New York making love to you?" His hands started to shake, making it almost impossible to keep hold of his fragile heart. He glanced up at Lois. "Will I be sleeping in my bed in Metropolis too?"

"Clark," Lois said calmly, sitting next to him and placing her hands on his.

He shifted away from her, not wanting to lose hold of his heart.

"This is why I didn't want to get the marriage license until tomorrow when we arrived at our destination," she continued. "I was going to announce that I wanted to marry you and suggest the trip all at once, giving you only moments to pack before we caught our plane, because otherwise I knew you'd jump to the wrong conclusions."

*Wrong conclusions?*

Clark exhaled. His heart now hovered in the air in front of him; not back where it belonged, but no longer weighing him down.

"I love you, Clark. I want to marry you and spend the rest of my life making love to you," Lois said and squeezed her hands that were still resting on his.

*So far, so good.*

"I know that after I make love to you I will want you to stay and live with me forever and ever," Lois went on. "So, after our trip I wanted you to move in with me, here, until we can find a better apartment with a private balcony for Kal."

*She wants to live with you starting this weekend? So soon? She wants their life together to start right away? Hot diggity dog!*

"What about Lucy?" the dusty logical side of his brain sputtered.

Lois smiled at him indulgently. "Your folks said she could stay with them until we got a place of our own. Then she could move back in here and take over my lease."

Clark gazed into her eyes, searching for something — one last detail to jumpstart his heart again.

"I'm not forcing you to elope with me, Clark. I wanted that option on the table, just in case it was something you were agreeable to. I had hoped we could just run to the justice of the peace and get married if we wanted to this weekend." She sighed. "But it doesn't work like that in New York State. You've got to wait twenty-four hours between getting the license and getting married. And their offices aren't open on the weekend. So, if we had rushed off we couldn't have gotten married... and... and..." She swallowed sadly as she glanced away. It sounded like the beat of her heart had slowed down to a quiet Thump, Thump. Then she turned the full force of her fury onto him. "Damn it, Clark! I want to marry you! But getting married this weekend is your choice. I knew it wouldn't be fair to plan all of this secretly and not leave you an out if you weren't quite ready for that next step. So I have made reservations for two rooms at the hotel."

"We're not sharing a room?" he sputtered.

*What would be the point of heading out of town if you are still staying in separate rooms? You do that in Metropolis just fine.*

"Oh, no!" Lois grinned, her face bright red. "I wasn't clear. I made two reservations at the hotel, not one reservation for two rooms. That's not an option. We *are* making love this weekend, Clark, no matter what."

Clark watched as his loud and strong heart slammed into Lois's chest, causing her heart to explode with heartbeats.

*I guess you could sleep with her since she insists on making a weekend of it.*

"I plan on canceling one of the room reservations. One of the reservations is for a regular room..." She winked. "With a king-sized bed. And the other is for a honeymoon suite under the name of Mr. and Mrs. Kent. The decision on which room we'll be staying in is up to you." She stood up and picked up the larger box that he had brought her and carried it into the kitchen. "I've told you which option I prefer,

but I will agree with whichever choice makes you feel more comfortable."

Without a moment's hesitation Clark knew he wanted to stay the weekend in the honeymoon suite with Lois, but it felt wrong to get married without giving her a ring of some sort. "Can I think about it and give you my answer tomorrow?" he asked.

"Of course," she said; a frown marring her perfect face as she started waving the kitchen knife she was using to open the box in his general direction. "No pressure."

"Shall I get us some dinner?" he asked, standing up and heading towards the door. Despite his invulnerability, he didn't really want to be around her in her current mood while she was holding a knife.

"You do cook, right, Clark? Because I can only reheat. And this living arrangement is going to bankrupt us if we keep eating out all..." Lois said, opening the box and then with a startled gasp, she slammed the top of the box shut, turning around and putting herself between it and Clark.

"What is it?" he asked, stepping towards her.

Lois waved him off, shaking her head, her face deepening in color with each moment. "Nothing. Nothing. Just a wedding present from my Dad."

"You told your father that we're getting married?" Clark stammered.

*And Dr. Lane sent a gift?*

Lois nodded. "Of course. I had him dip into the wedding fund he set up for Lucy and me for the plane tickets, the hotel reservations and... other stuff."

Clark crossed his arms, his lips pressed together, and he raised an eyebrow. "And how did you convince him to do that? The man hates me."

An instant later, Lois was at his side, her hands resting on his crossed arms. "Daddy doesn't hate you, Clark. Really, he doesn't. He doesn't like all this negative publicity surrounding me. He doesn't like that I got physically hurt by Luthor. He doesn't like that people are threatening me because of our relationship."

"I don't like that either," Clark murmured.

"Daddy's a big softie really. He's also a worrier." She kissed him. "I told him that you and I were going to get married and there was nothing he could do to stop it."

Clark deepened the kiss. How could he not after a testimonial like that?

"Then I told Daddy if he didn't do this for me," Lois said, kissing over to Clark's ear. "I would turn the planning of our wedding over to Mom and it would end up costing him a small fortune."

*Did Lois just admit to blackmailing her father into accepting you as his son-in-law?*

Clark shrugged, pulling his fiancée closer. Whatever works.

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Friday — late afternoon

Clark stood in the sunshine outside of the chapel, holding a bouquet of peach-hued flowers. Lois had stepped into the powder room to change into her new white dress. He had worn his one and only charcoal grey suit over his blue suit on the plane and, therefore, didn't need to change. Lois had wisely not wanted to risk her new white dress.

She had suggested they leave Metropolis right after his unexpected post-breakfast wedding proposal. He probably shouldn't have waited until this morning to give her Nana Clark's engagement ring. What Clark should have done was to rush home last night, pull his father away from his customers and into the office to open the safe so he could get the ring and fly back. Or Clark could have just told Lois that yes, he would marry her the next day but he wanted to give her a ring first. But he hadn't.

*Admit it, Kent, you were a little peeved that you didn't get a chance to propose to her. She was ramming this whole wedding down your throat like you had no choice in the matter. You made her wait until this morning to let her know that she couldn't expect to*

*constantly steamroll over you like that. There are two of you in this relationship, and both of you need to make big decisions like this together.*

Truthfully, Clark had always wanted to propose properly to Lois. Didn't all little boys daydream of proposing to the woman they loved?

*Nah, just you.*

Clark shifted his feet, lightly kicking a pebble, only to send it as far as the river instead of to the moon. He was still upset with the Kal side of him for admitting he wanted to marry Lois as a method of digging himself out of one of the holes he had created on the beach.

*It worked though. You got out of that hole, didn't you? And into this one.*

He had thought he still had time to plan a proposal, believing that Lois was nowhere near as ready for that step in their relationship as he was. Then, yesterday morning, Mayson hit Clark over the head with the news that his girlfriend had already informed her that he and Lois were engaged.

*You should really ask Lois one of these days when it was she did that. And why?*

Then, yesterday at lunch, Lois had proposed to him, kind of.

*Demanded is more accurate.*

Even then Clark thought he still had time to get in a proposal of his own. But when she had dropped it in his lap last night that she wanted to get married the next day "if he wanted" — he had grabbed hold of that window of opportunity with both hands and tugged.

And here they were in Niagara Falls, New York, about to be married. Although they hadn't left Metropolis right after breakfast. They had needed to make a stop first. Lois hadn't hated him or punished him for making her wait to hear his answer on the room reservations. Thankfully, she had been true to her word.

Lois really only wanted to make love to him this weekend. Making their love legally binding was just icing on the cake. So, after he had made breakfast for her and Lucy, and slipped in his proposal with Nana Clark's ring, he and Lois had gone down to Mazik's Jewelry store and picked out a couple of gold wedding bands.

*I liked that you chose Posey rings that were inscribed 'vu et nul altre': you and no other.*

Clark looked over at the Niagara River rushing onward to the Falls. He couldn't believe how much his life had changed over the past month... actually, six weeks since he met Lois. And all of it was because of the woman who had asked *him* to marry her and spend the rest of his life making love to her.

*That's not exactly what... never mind.*

His smile grew into a glowing satisfied grin. If he had told himself two months ago he would be getting married today, he would never have believed it. But, then again, he probably wouldn't have believed in time travel, other dimensions or that he would be a primary-color-clad, tights-wearing hero either. Or that he had been fired or was now starting a new side career as a reporter for Perry's weekly *Planet*. Or what an incredibly dense idiot he had been to the woman he loved — so much so that he had actually called her a "streetwalker". He wanted to ask Lois if she had forgiven that grievous sin — because she had never mentioned that she had — but he wisely decided not to bring up the issue. He wouldn't have believed that Lex Luthor would no longer be a thorn in his side either — or in the land of the living. Or that he would have learned about his home planet of Krypton or that he had been married when he was a... Oh, damn!

*You should probably mention that last one to Lois before the wedding, Kent. Start off your life together with a clean slate.*

Or end his life as he knew it. Lois was liable to leave him at the altar for omitting this nugget of information from her.

*But what would she do if you waited until after the honeymoon? Well, at least you wouldn't be a virgin when she left you.*

No. Clark wouldn't do that do her. He had to tell her today, before the ceremony.

The door of the chapel opened, and there stood the most enchanting vision in ivory. Her sleeveless cowl-necked dress flowed

down her long legs to her ankles. The dress was shorter than traditional wedding gown, but equally as elegant. As Lois walked down the steps of the chapel to him, the click-clack sound her open-toed slingback sandals made as she walked caused Clark's gaze to dart to her slender ankles. When she reached him, she glided her fingers across his chest and then she made a slow circle so he could drink in the entire effect. Behind her, the dress draped low across her back and moved with her, sliding across her skin like a series of lover's kisses with each gentle step. It was so low in back that Clark dared his thoughts not to think what she could possibly be wearing underneath it. He swallowed, wanting to do nothing more than grab her hand and fly down the aisle and get her back to the hotel so they could hang up that perfect dress.

Lucy's borrowed hair clip pulled a lock of Lois's hair aside, revealing her right ear and the curve of her neck underneath. Just gazing at her filled him with warmth, which spread from his heart throughout his body. At his expression, her smile grew. "You approve, then, Clark?"

He could do no more than nod.

She held out her hand and, instead of taking it with his, he handed her the bouquet of peach roses he had bought when she went in to change. He knew he had promised her no super powers in Niagara, but every bride deserved a bouquet. As she drew up the flowers to drink in their scent, Clark knew he had done the right thing. She moved the flowers to her left hand and held out her right hand again. "Ready?"

Again, Clark could only nod. Everything about Lois took his breath away. They walked up the steps together and entered the chapel. At the door when the organ music began to play, Clark's logical side finally caught up with him. "Lois, there's something I need to tell you."

Lois held up a finger to the minister and organist and pulled him back out the door. "Clark, you don't have to tell me, I know that you and Kal are the same person."

He shook his head. "Not that."

"Does this have anything to do with Kal?"

Clark wasn't quite sure how to answer that question.

"Because I know all there is to know about Kal, right?" Lois asked him, her eyes fixed with his.

Suddenly, Clark was unsure. Had he told her everything he knew about his super side? Had he forgotten some smidgen of a fact that she would torture him with later if he didn't reveal it at that moment?

"Yes. This isn't about Kal."

*Actually...*

"Are you gay?"

"No!" he gasped, shocked that she would even think that after everything they had been through.

"Do you have a voice inside your head telling you what to do?" she asked curiously. "An annoying, sometime nagging, very horny voice telling you things at inappropriate times?"

*Hey! I resemble that remark.*

"Well, actually now that you mention it... yeah, I do," Clark admitted sheepishly, a slight flush rising to his cheeks. "How did you know?"

"Me too," Lois said with a smile and shrug as she led him back up the steps. "As long as you don't always do what that voice tells you to do."

"Less and less. Do you?" he asked curiously, following her.

She grinned mischievously. "You wish!"

Clark wondered if it were Lois's inner voice that had suggested the toe sucking as Lois opened the door to the chapel once more.

*Um... Kent. Weren't you going to tell Lois about Lady Zara?*

The wedding march started playing again and Clark stopped, murmuring, "Lois, there's still something I haven't told you."

Lois pinched her lips together and then pulled him outside again. "What?! What is so important that you have to interrupt our wedding, not once, but twice to tell me?"

Clark gulped.

*Nice going there, Flyboy.*

“Do you have some secret wife somewhere that you forgot to mention to me?” Lois inquired exasperated.

*Ding! Ding! Ding! Get that lady a sledgehammer with which to hit you.*

“Well...” Clark began sheepishly.

Lois’s hand slipped out of his as she put them on her hips. “*Well?*” “Don’t get mad...”

*Ooooh. I wouldn’t have started with that, Kent.*

“Don’t. Get. Mad?” she repeated through clenched teeth.

“When you-know-what exploded, it turns out I wasn’t the only survivor,” he said in a rush and looked at her hopefully.

Lois gulped and lost a shade of color from her face. “I’m listening.”

“Apparently my birth parents were royalty of some sort or another and I was married as an infant to...” Clark tried to explain.

Lois held up a hand. “*Lord Kal-El?*”

He nodded hesitantly.

“Married as an *infant?*”

Clark nodded again.

“On...” She waved a hand through the air, so that they both knew she meant Krypton.

“Yes.” He swallowed.

“Okay. And how did you learn about this? The globe?” she inquired.

“No. Not really. Lady Zara kind of told me,” he admitted.

“Uh-huh. So, some woman...”

“Sarah. The cashier from Daily Books,” Clark interrupted, just because he liked the taste of these fancy shoes of his.

“*Sarah?* Sarah, the cashier, is this Lady Zara person? And she told you that you were some sort of prince back home and that the two of you were engaged?” A small smile broke through Lois’s demeanor. “And you believed her?”

“Kind of. She didn’t really tell me, tell me. She told her bodyguard, and I sort of overheard them talking. And not engaged, Lois, married.” He shot her an embarrassed grin.

“Uh-huh. And what made this conversation so...” Lois waved a hand through the air. “... riveting that you actually believed them instead of thinking she was just some nutso stalker? Believed her enough that you would interrupt our wedding, twice, to tell me of some crazy ritual back on...” She waved her hand to represent Krypton again.

Clark gulped and murmured, “Because they were speaking telepathically.”

Lois froze and reached out her hand to steady herself against him. “You can read minds?”

*Oh, honey, I wish.*

His sheepish look reappeared. “Apparently.”

A buzzer sounded in Clark’s brain. *Wrong answer!*

She gulped, and then her eyes bore into his. “Have you *ever* read mine?”

“No! Never! I don’t know how, I just happened to *overhear* their conversation. I would never...” His brow furrowed, then his shoulders straightened and he retorted, “Do you think it would be possible to be this much of a lunkhead if I could read your mind?”

Lois paused a moment in thought. “Granted.” A small smile appeared on her lips before disappearing. “So, what this boils down to is that theoretically you’re already married?”

“Well... No,” he replied, glancing down at his shoes. “I don’t think so.”

Lois’s lips pressed tighter together as she waited.

“Lady Zara rejected me as her husband because I was only a mere delivery man and security guard here on Earth. She didn’t think I had what it took to be leader of New Krypton,” Clark confessed softly.

*You hadn’t wanted to be married to Lady Zara, but that had still stung a bit, hadn’t it, Kal-El?*

“She told Ching — her bodyguard — that she would dissolve our

union so she could marry him,” Clark continued.

Lois threw her arms around him, pressing her lips to his. “Oh, Clark! What is it with my planet that makes all the women here, even the visitors — me being the sole exception, of course — completely blind to your potential?”

Clark didn’t know the answer to that question, but he decided to leave it rhetorical as he happily accepted her praise, love, and kisses. “Shall we get married then?” he asked, dragging his lips away from hers.

Her eyes twinkled with delight as she winked at him. “I thought you’d never ask.”

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Clark carried Lois over the threshold of one of the honeymoon suites at the Lexor Niagara.

*Thank you, Daddy Lane!*

The bellhop stood just inside. He had deposited their suitcases on some luggage racks near the dresser and waited. Clark set Lois down and tipped the man, who saluted in thanks and shut the door after him — moving the ‘Do Not Disturb — Honeymooners in Love Inside’ sign to the outside knob as he left.

*It’s those extra touches that put the fine in refinement.*

Lois kicked off her shoes and held out her arms. “Clark...”

“Hold on!” Clark told her as he looked around the room.

*WAIT! If he thinks he can pull a disappearing act NOW...*

Clark seemed to be studying every inch of the place. Then he locked the door and even added the chain. He closed the curtain for complete privacy and, then turning, gifted her with a look of smoldering desire. “Hold still.”

*Hold still?*

Lois watched as her husband disappeared into a blur as candles suddenly got lit, lifting the near total darkness and then she heard the pop of champagne. Clark stopped in front of her and handed her a glass of bubbly. “Hungry?” he asked. “There are chocolate dipped strawberries with whipped cream.”

*Not for food.*

Her gaze darted to the delectables on a small dining table by the windows. Lois licked her lips. “Later.”

She set down her champagne flute on the table next to her and crossed to Clark. He seemed nervous again, fidgety. Lois removed his glass, setting it down before he broke it in his stiff fingers. Pulling his glasses from his face and placing them on the table next to his champagne, she kissed one eyelid and then the other. She took his hands in hers and drew them around to her bare back, pressing her chest against his.

“Clark...” was all she was able to whisper before he closed the distance between their lips. His warm hands caressed her back dipping under the edges of her dress.

*Oh, yes, liking this backless dress more and more.*

“We’re going to wrinkle your gown,” he murmured, kissing down her neck to her shoulder, causing one of the straps to slip down her arm.

*Easily remedied.*

Lois shrugged her other shoulder causing that strap to slide down, lowering the bodice further. Clark took a step back to admire her barely-covered body. He seemed to be vibrating in uncontrolled super speed. She gasped as he vanished in front of her. “*Clark!*”

“Wow! That was terrific, honey. Was it as good for you as it was for me?” Clark yawned and Lois’s head snapped over to the bed where her husband lay, wearing only his sleep shorts, and sipping his champagne.

*She hadn’t moved. “What?!”*

**NO!!**

A grin slipped onto Clark’s lips and he was by her side again. “Just joking.”

*Not funny!* giggled Lois’s inner voice.

Lois glared daggers at him as a growl escaped.

“Don’t tell me you weren’t fearing that scenario in the least?” he

teased, running his finger down her shoulder, knocking her dress further down her body.

Lois wrapped an arm around his neck and pulled his mouth against hers fiercely as one dress strap, and then the other slipped over her hands leaving a puddle of fabric on the floor by her feet. Clark's hands continued to caress her bare skin and lifted her to his hips.

"Hold that thought," Lois whispered, sliding her legs down his muscular body to the floor. Covering her chest as she went, she padded over to the table with the strawberries, the hot melted chocolate for dipping, and the whipped cream. She bit into a berry and then picked up the bowl of whipped cream. She sauntered back to her husband and threw the contents into his face.

Clark nodded, licking the whipped cream off his lips as he wiped his eyes clean. "Okay. I'm thinking I deserved that one." He wrapped an arm around her bare waist. "Even?"

"You're lucky it wasn't the melted chocolate," she said, reaching up and getting a finger full of whipped cream for her mouth.

"Later," he murmured, lowering his messy face towards her.

"Oh, no, you don't!" Lois shrieked with a delight, running off. "Help! Superman!"

Clark threw his hands up in exasperation as he rolled his eyes. "Now! Now, she calls for Superman!" He zipped in front of her. "If it's Superman you want..."

She ran off in the other direction. "No fair, Clark!"

"Fair?" he retorted, super quickly grabbing a towel from the bathroom and wiping more whipped cream from his face before he tackled her on to the bed.

Lois continued to laugh, tossing a pillow at him. "No super speed?"

"I promise," Clark replied, holding up hand in a Boy Scout pledge, before lowering his face to hers. "Super slow." He kissed down her neck to her shoulder. At her collarbone, he glanced up at her. "Shall I start with your toes?"

"Later," she murmured, bringing his lips back to hers. Her hands explored the planes of his chest.

Clark paused long enough to gaze into her eyes. "I love you, Mrs. Kent."

*Mrs. Kent! You never said anything about taking his name!*

"I love you too, Mr. Kent," Lois replied as her hand went even lower on his belly.

*A little formal, aren't we?*

"Lois!" Clark moaned, pulling her body to his.

*That's better.*

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An effervescent translucent goddess in white with red, flowing long hair, floated up to the ceiling. A brilliant green-eyed man joined her. He pulled her into his arms and pressed his lips to hers.

"Ivy," he moaned. "You, Goddess of Mischief, I've caught you at last!"

A blaze of lightning and a blast of thunder rattled the windows outside.

She ran her fingers through his dark locks. "Oh, Envy, you know how Zeus hates it when you call me a Goddess."

The man exploded in anger. "I'm Zelos, not Envy! Envy's my twin brother!"

Ivy giggled and ran her fingers over his chest before pointing to the couple making love beneath them. "Right. Just like Clark there is Superman's twin brother."

The green-eyed man turned his back to her and harrumphed with crossed arms.

Ivy floated around and kissed him. "You know it's only you who I love."

"Do I?" he said archly with a raised brow.

"Of course! No one else's eyes glow such a radiant green as yours," she murmured, plying him with kisses. "I would know you anywhere. Haven't I proved that to you by now?"

"Oh, Ivy," Zelos groaned with desire, pulling her into his arms and

kissing her again. "Let's take a break and go back to Mt. Olympus for a spin, just the two of us?"

Ivy pouted playfully. "What fun would that be? It's sooooo boring up on the mountain. That's why we decided to live among the mortals, remember?" She walked her fingers up his arm and over his shoulder. "Why don't we stay with this couple a while longer? They're lots of fun."

"I almost felt like a real god inside that body," Zelos said enviously, but then pursed his lips. "No. Didn't you hear his wedding vows? He's banished me forever."

"You must admit they were more fun than that actress and the president..."

Zelos looked away. "Without my jealousy, who am I?"

She shrugged. "I wouldn't know. For the thousands of years since we met, you've wanted to tear apart every man who has looked at me and every man I've looked at, even though you're the only man I've ever loved."

Zelos lifted his gaze to hers, a smile tugging on the corners of his lips. "We could play hide-and-seek again."

"Nobody hides like you do," murmured Ivy flatteringly, wrapping her arms around Zelos again. "Look where you hid — a man from another planet — and I still found you. I will always find you."

He took her hand in his, pulling her towards the windows. "Come. Let us find new playmates."

Ivy glanced back at the couple on the bed, letting go of his hand. "Go ahead. I'll catch up."

"You'll catch up?" growled Zelos, his eyes growing brighter. "Admit it! You like him! You like that flying alien usurper more than me. No matter what he does, he will never be a true god."

She flipped her hand at him. "You never trust me. I tell you that I love you. Not good enough. I search for you over and over for millennia, but still it isn't what you want. These people are new and exciting. I want to amuse myself here a while longer and you say 'no'. Like them, I never agreed to obey you. You go find a new playmate..." She licked her lips and grinned mischievously at her soul mate. "I'll play here with Lois's mind until I can get them to create a playmate of my own. It's your turn to catch me!"

Zelos's green eyes were more luminescent than she had ever seen them. "You stay here, Ivy, and I will have Zeus turn me into something that can kill that man. Then, you'll be mine again."

Ivy laughed. "Go ahead and try, Zelos. He's Superman. He's invincible."

"You never listen!" He shook his head shooting her once last glare with his glowing green eyes. "Clark's not invincible, Ivy, merely invulnerable. I'll be something that can take away his aura, leaving him quite vulnerable. I — on the other hand — will always be invincible!" Zelos roared, flying out of the honeymoon suite with a sonic boom.

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## Epilogue

### Ten Days Later — Monday Morning

Lois and Clark walked out of the elevator into a hectic and new Daily Planet newsroom. She wondered if her face matched the dreamy expression on Clark's, exposing their make-out session in the elevator to the light of day.

Clark's goofy grin made Lois's heart race. How did she end up so lucky to be married to this invulnerable hunk with a heart of gold? She went to take a sip of her coffee and instead found a cake donut. She smiled, setting a gentle hand on Clark's shoulder. He turned from gawking at the chaos around them to glance at her and found a donut in his face. Chuckling, he took the donut and passed her the coffee.

The first one to notice them as they walked down the ramp into the bullpen was Cat Grant. "Clark! Where have you been?" Then she scanned him up and down and gushed with approval. "Liking the new look. I'll miss those shorts though." She ran her fingers across his chest, flipping up his tie.

"Thank you, Cat. Lois..." Clark started saying before the woman

turned to his wife.

“Lois! I see you finally found the softer side of Sears,” Cat said snippily.

“Thanks, Cat,” Lois replied kindly, running her left hand with the gold band on it through her hair. “I haven’t had much time to go shopping lately; been busy.”

*Been busy making love to my husband,* her thoughts finished.

“I know — that asteroid,” Cat answered with a roll of her eyes.

“Whoa, CK” Jimmy said, descending on them. “Loving the new specs!”

Clark grinned, touching his new wire rimmed glasses with a wink to his wife. “They were a wedding present from Lois.”

Cat, who had started to walk off, returned. “Wedding present?” Her jaw dropped, and she grabbed Lois’s hand. “No! So those rumors were true?”

“I thought you worked the rumor trade, Cat,” Lois said with a nod, gazing at her man.

Cat harrumphed. “Is that why you didn’t show up last week with the rest of us?”

Lois exchanged another knowing look with her husband. “We were stuck in Niagara. No flights into Metropolis because of Nightfall.”

*Except on Superman Express.*

With a roll of her eyes, Cat sauntered off.

“Congratulations again, guys,” said Jimmy, nodding with understanding.

“Hey, I hear a little bird put this marriage idea into Lois’s head,” said Clark to Jimmy.

Jimmy blanched. “Oh, really?” He pleaded innocence.

“Thanks, Jimmy,” Clark said with high spirits, holding out his hand to shake his friend’s. “I owe you one.”

Lois wrapped her arms around her husband’s waist. “Two actually. He introduced us as well.”

Jimmy coughed uncomfortably. “Come on. We saved you some desks over here.” He gave them a tour on the brief walk to the two empty desks near each other, but not next to each other.

The door to a glass-walled office flung open. Perry stood there looking so worn that he appeared to have slept in the office. But his eyes shone with happiness and his whole body awake with joy as he shouted, “Olsen! Where are those photos of Superman?”

“On it, Chief!” Jimmy called. “Anyway, congratulations.” He ran off.

“Annie, what’s up with the markets? Have they recovered from Nightfall and Luthor’s demise? Wally, where are you on Luthor’s succession plan? What’s happening with LexCo? Get on it, people!” Perry’s voice boomed as reporters scattered. “Cat! How are you doing with that Ian Harrington bribery scandal?”

“Great!” she responded. “It turns out the Congressman was also skimming money off his re-election campaign as well. Apparently, he has a call-girl he likes to visit on a regular basis he didn’t want his wife to know about.” She shook her head. “Poor Lana.”

Perry pointed two fingers at her. “Verify your sources. Write it up!”

“Yes, sir!” Cat replied with a mock salute, sitting down at the desk facing Lois.

The new bride tried not to grumble as she sat down, annoyed with the new desk assignments. At least she couldn’t see the gossip queen through the bulletin board partitioning their desks.

“Lane! Kent! Where is your follow-up to...” Their boss started to bark, when Clark held up a paper. “Nightfall?”

“I had to type it up my old typewriter,” Clark apologized. “We haven’t had a chance to replace Lois’s computer yet.”

Perry grabbed the paper out of his hand, scanning it with a slight nod. “Great shades of Elvis! A Superman exclusive, Kent? He hasn’t been seen in days. Some even wondered if the asteroid killed him. We here at the *Daily Planet* didn’t believe that hogwash, though,” their boss said with a knowing smile to his newest writing team.

“No, sir. He was just resting,” Clark responded with a glance to his wife. “Apparently, the asteroid is the biggest thing he’s dealt with so far.”

*Resting? Ha! He didn’t stop making love to you all weekend.*

Lois slipped her hand into Clark’s.

“I knew you had potential, Kent. Great job!”

“Thank you, sir,” Clark replied with a proud smile.

“Hey, my byline is on there too,” snapped Lois to Perry’s back. “I also worked the interview.”

*Worked? You two wrote that story while breaking in your new futon mattress, if I remember correctly.*

“Right. Good job, Lane, in snaring Superman,” the Chief called before closing the door to his office.

*Ha ha, Perry, very funny,* scoffed Lois’s inner voice.

Clark kissed Lois with a knowing grin. “I’m proud of you, wife.”

Suddenly Cat’s head popped over the partition as she leaned against with her arm. “Does this whole wedding thing mean I owe you a gift?”

Lois looked at her co-worker a moment, thinking.

*Do you really want a gift from this woman?*

“Did you say you were writing an article about Ian Harrington cheating on his wife with a call-girl?” Lois stole quick glance to her husband as he wandered towards his desk. “No, Cat. I think that will be gift enough.”

“Okey-dokey. Fine by me,” said Cat, and then pointed at her. “Are you ever going to tell me about the bad blood between you and Lana?”

Lois looked her in the eye. “Nope.”

Cat scowled and disappeared behind the partition again.

Clark rolled his chair over to his wife and murmured, “Minx,” before kissing her cheek.

*Oopsie, there, honey. Missed my mouth. Try again.*

“Thanks again for the new briefcase,” Lois said, patting the soft-side leather briefcase with the initials L.L. etched into the side.

“Actually, that was a wedding gift from Henderson,” Clark replied.

She looked down at the satchel with a little cynicism. “Really?”

Clark nuzzled his mouth next to her ear, sending hot fiery chills down her body. “Inside I found a folder full of photos of you, me, and the S-man, and a mini-audiocassette of your night in Luthor’s office.”

Then, as he moved away, Lois’s body audibly rebelled with a moan.

“Get a room,” Lois heard Cat call from over the partition.

*Great! Just what you need, an eavesdropping desk mate. Hey, weren’t Lex Luthor’s initials the same as yours?*

Lois dropped her new hand-me-down briefcase on the floor under her desk. “Remind me to thank the detective. Oooh. I could bake him some cookies.”

Clark gazed at her as a series of expressions crossed his face: disbelief, worry, dread, skepticism, and fear. She found this last emotion most interesting. It meant Clark was going to tell her the truth about her cooking skills. She waited patiently as he carefully chose his words.

“Not everybody is invulnerable, honey. How about a simple ‘thank you’ instead?” he finally replied.

Her tongue crossed her teeth as she hissed at her spouse. “Are you implying that Superman didn’t like dinner last night?”

Clark was saved from answering as their boss threw open his office door again and barked at them, “Lane! Kent! No canoodling in the cubicles. What are you two working on?”

Lois’s husband rolled his chair away from his wife with an expression of grateful relief. “Nothing, yet, sir. Just settling in.”

“There is no settling in the news business, son. Settling leads to atrophy, which leads to death,” Perry informed him. “That’s why Elvis did three shows a day in Vegas.”

Jack walked by at this moment. “Didn’t Elvis die, Chief?”

Perry pointed two fingers at him. “Go get me some jelly donuts from Lucille’s and tell her they’re for me.”

“Go get them yourself, Pops! It’s not in the job description. Anyway, I’m researching the rumor that Lenny Stoke — radio DJ

extraordinaire — is being deported. It looks like someone forgot to renew his temporary green card.”

“Don’t call me ‘Pops!’”

Lois jumped up. “Oh, Perry, can I cover the deportation hearing? Please?” She knew she was practically begging, so she stopped. Mad Dog didn’t beg.

“Lane, I’ve got something else for you. Jack, give your data to Ralph to write up. He may have flies in the attic but at least he can string two words together,” replied their boss with a shake of his head.

“Thanks, Chief.” Ralph practically preened at this ‘compliment.’

“Not him!” groaned Jack. “Why him? I’d rather go back to Daily Books.”

“I’ll assign you two to work together permanently if you keep calling me Pops,” growled the original Mad Dog.

“Got it, Chief,” replied Jack, defeated.

“Lane, at ten o’clock I want you at City Hall. Five members of City Council, the Mayor, and the Chief of Police are all resigning,” their boss told her, a grin slipping onto his face for a moment. “All thanks to Lois here! She really knows how to shake up politics in the Big Apricot.”

“Yeah, get kidnapped by a rich psycho,” muttered Cat. “None of us could ever do that.”

“For now, Kent, I’m partnering you with Lois,” Perry explained.

Clark had returned to her side, his hand at the base of her back. “Forever,” her husband murmured only loud enough for Lois to hear. Then he raised his voice. “Got it, Chief.”

“Shadow her. Make sure she doesn’t get lost. Do what she tells you to.”

“Already doing that, sir,” her husband replied, and she elbowed him.

“Good!” Perry lowered his voice to just above a whisper, “And see if you can pick me up some more of those Paava leaves, will you?”

Clark nodded before Perry returned to his office with a hand to his neck taking his own pulse.

Her husband wrapped his arms around Lois, singing, “Ain’t no mountain high enough. Ain’t no valley low, ain’t no river wide enough, baby. To keep me away from you.”

She cleared her throat. “I’ve got an idea, Clark. You cook. I’ll sing.”

“Sorry, just have that tune stuck in my head.” Clark grinned like a fool in love, which was okay with her. “Hey, I forgot to tell you,” he went on. “We’ve been invited to MJ’s Café for dinner. My folks called while you were in the shower this morning.”

*Oh, is that where you disappeared off to? Leaving poor Lois to shower alone.*

Clark nudged Lois, guessing her thoughts. “Get this. It appears that the last order Luthor gave was to buy out the owners of MJ’s Café for seventy-five thousand dollars! The Board of Directors at LexCo wants to honor his dying wish and sent around a contract to do just that.”

*Finally Lex Luthor has done some good with his money. He may have won many a battle, but the Kents finished the war triumphant.*

“Wow! That’s great, Clark. Now, they can finally move back to Smallville,” Lois exclaimed with delight.

“I was thinking of asking Mayson to look the contract over for them.”

*Mayson Drake? No! Must keep that woman away from your man!*

“You know, Clark, I’d hate to disturb Mayson with that,” Lois suggested gently, playing with his tie. “She’s probably flooded with work from all those criminals Superman keeps catching. Her roommate Constance went to law school with her. Let’s ask her instead.”

A sly smile graced his lips. “What’s wrong, Lois? You afraid Mayson might spill the beans to me about our secret engagement?” Lois flushed.

*How did he know about that?!*

“Who knew you were such the capable planner?” He laughed

softly, and she elbowed him again.

“Be nice. You heard the Chief. I’m top banana in our partnership,” she sniped.

“Right. You like it on top. Already got that memo,” he replied with a wink.

Lois’s eyes widened as she glanced around to see if anyone heard him. “Clar-K!”

He grinned with an eyebrow bounce before pulling himself away to answer his phone. “Clark Kent, Daily Planet.”

Lois returned to her desk as well and pretended to do research on the resignation of the City Council members. She was actually trying to eavesdrop on her husband’s phone conversation.

Cat popped her head over the partition again, holding out a business card. “Lois, no gift, but I can get you an appointment with Lawrence, my hairdresser. He takes new clients on an invite-only basis.”

Lois raised a brow. What was up with Cat?

Obviously, the gossip queen read her mind as she responded, “I feel bad about not warning you properly about Claude. Maybe if we had worked together we could have gotten rid of him sooner.”

*Cat is apologizing to you about Claude? Was it possible his attack on her had caused some brain damage?*

Lois must have had a stunned expression on her face, because Cat continued, “I’ve been doing some soul searching recently, you know, with Nightfall and all.”

*Ah. That explains it.*

“Actually, Cat,” Lois said slowly, the bait too tempting. “Clark and I got together because of that night. So, I should really be thanking you.”

*Rubbing salt in the wounds, are you?*

“What?!” Cat snapped.

“Who do you think comforted me when I was so distraught over Claude’s treatment of me?” Lois grinned, batting her eyelashes innocently.

*All true, too. Okay. Now, you can cross “pay back Cat” off your to-do list.*

“Well, that’s great. How wonderful for you,” Cat said, her lips pressed together. “Whenever you want to cut off that mop you insist is all the rage, here’s Lawrence’s card.” The woman flung the card at her like a discus.

Lois picked up the card and stuck it in her brand new rolodex. She could use a trim. New husband, new job, new life. Why not a new haircut as well? Nah!

She turned on her computer to try to figure out where to start researching those City Council members. Her eyes darted to the elevator as she heard it ding, wishing for another distraction from her tedious assignment. Out stepped a petite, bespectacled, older man with salt-and-pepper hair hiding under a bowler hat and a lifetime of living etched on his face. Lois’s brow furrowed.

*It couldn’t be.*

“Wells?” Automatically she gravitated over for a closer look.

He appeared much older than the man who had visited her back at the end of August.

“Mr. Wells? What are you doing here?” Lois asked him.

“Miss Lane! I wasn’t sure if I had gotten the right dimension. So much has changed here,” he replied, gazing around.

“Actually, it’s Mrs. now,” she said, holding out her left hand.

Mr. Wells gazed at her warily. “Congratulations, I think? May I ask who the lucky man is?”

Lois felt an expression of pleasure fill her face as it always did when she thought of her husband. Feeling a bit naughty, she responded, “Not that man Tempus said I’d marry, that’s for sure.”

He blanched. “No?!”

Lois glanced over her shoulder to see Clark approaching them from the vending machines. She grabbed her husband’s arm and pulled him over to the time-traveler. “Clark, let me introduce you to H.G. Wells. Mr. Wells, this is my husband, Clark Kent.”

The men shook hands. Clark glanced at her and then back at Wells, the man's identity suddenly striking her husband.

"Clark...?" Wells stammered. "Ms. Lane, you know..." Then he looked at Clark. "You did tell her that you're... you're..."

Clark snapped his fingers. "Damn! I knew there was something I meant to tell you, Lois."

She grinned, hugging his arm. "Of course I know, Mr. Wells. I've always known thanks to Tempus."

"So, he didn't change your future?" Mr. Wells stated with relief more than asked.

"Quite the contrary. If it wasn't for your friend Tempus, I'm sure it would have taken Lois years instead of weeks to realize how we were perfect for one another." Clark kissed his wife's cheek as he returned her hug.

"You must thank him for us, won't you?" suggested Lois. "It's simply the best wedding present we've received yet."

Amusement lit up Mr. Wells's eyes. "It would be my pleasure to do so, Ms. Lane. My deepest pleasure. I must be off then. Glad to know you didn't need my help setting things right after all." The man practically chortled with delight as he backed up towards the elevators. "Nice to have met you, Mr. and Mrs. Kent." He paused, a curious expression filling his face as he pointed at them. "You didn't have any problems then with...?" He gulped with a slight flush. "Never mind. Obviously not. Good day to you," he finished saying with slight bow before disappearing into the elevator.

*What in the world was he talking about?*

Lois and Clark gazed at each other and shrugged.

"Who was on the phone?" Lois asked, walking with Clark to the coffee machine.

"That was Floyd from the Clinton Street apartment. He can meet us there at 4 P.M. to fill out the paperwork," her husband told her.

"I don't know, Clark, that isn't the greatest neighborhood," she said.

"It has a private balcony," he reminded her.

*Right! You forgot about that. You can't stay in your basement apartment; plus your sister is probably driving your in-laws up the wall.*

"All right, Clark," she gave in.

"Whatcha need a private patio for?" Jimmy asked, walking by and holding a pile of photo proofs for Perry.

Lois and Clark stared at each other and didn't answer as they returned to their desks.

Cat popped her head over the partition again. This seating arrangement was *not* going to work.

"Hey, you're friends with Linda King, right?"

"I wouldn't use the word 'friends,' but yeah, I know her." Lois rolled her eyes and hoped Cat would disappear again.

"I just heard some juicy gossip about her, but if you're..."

"Spill it," Lois demanded as Cat grinned in victory.

"I hear she's banging Preston Carpenter, publisher of the Met Star," Cat announced. "That's why she's always getting the best stories."

"Oh, that kind of rumor," Lois replied, disappointed as she sipped her coffee. "That's essentially what the old boys' network said about me and Superman, too. They just can't stand it when a strong woman beats them out of a story." She sighed. Only with her there was a grain of truth to the rumors. She didn't sleep with Superman for a story. Well, she did sleep with him — not much *sleep* sleep, lately — with Superman, but that was because she was married to him. She didn't marry him for the story.

*Mmmmm. Not sleeping with what's-his-name... your husband... Missing the honeymoon routine already.*

"Oh, well, yeah, possibly." Cat's voice pulled Lois out of her daydream of making love with her husband. "But Linda King had dinner with Carpenter at the Press Club last night and then was seen leaving his house this morning in the same clothes. Are those just old boys' network type rumors?" Cat asked, slipping back down to her

desk.

*Look who's sleeping her way to the front page now!* giggled Lois's inner voice.

Lois didn't have time for her revengeful gloat dance before their boss's office door slammed open.

"Kent! Standoff at the gold depository. Apparently, it's being robbed by invisible men." Perry rolled his eyes and shook his head in disbelief. "Go check out the real story."

*Invisible men? Has Metropolis gone insane?*

Lois's jaw dropped, but Clark just nodded and adjusted his tie. "On it, Chief."

Jimmy shook off the strangeness of Perry's announcement as he handed their boss the photo proofs and turned back to Lois, repeating, "Whatcha need a private patio for?"

*Obviously this happens all the time in Metropolis. Good to know.*

Lois replied with the first words that popped into her head, "I like to sunbathe in the nude."

*Say what?*

She grabbed her briefcase and called after Clark as he started heading for the stairs. "Hey, partner, wait up, I'm coming too."

"Sorry, Lois. Perry tagged me for this one. You've got City Hall, remember?" Clark told her as he backed towards the stairwell.

"Paulson can take City Hall. I want invisible men!" Lois roared as the newsroom went silent.

"There's no pleasing you, is there?" Clark chuckled with a shake of his head.

"The story! Jeez, people! The story!" Lois clarified.

Clark whistled the chorus to *Earth Girls are Easy*, and then shot her a wave from the exit to the stairwell. She ran to catch up with him, but he was already gone.

Lois growled and stomped back to her desk, slamming her briefcase back underneath. She would have followed him, but she had no idea where the gold depository was. She would have to have another discussion with her husband about their partnership! She wasn't going to be left behind on Superman stories.

*No, sirree! Not when you've got the inside scoop.*

"Nude sunbathing?" Jimmy walked by her desk, still laughing and shaking his head. "Poor Clark."

Lois took hold his arm. "Jimmy! Do you know where the gold depository is?"

"Well... ah..." stammered the young photographer, looking like a cat eyeing something shiny.

"Do you want to get photos of the invisible men or not?" Lois grabbed her briefcase and dragged him to the elevators before he could respond. "I thought you would. Let's go!"

"I thought Clark was handling the gold depository story?" Jimmy finally choked out.

"He's my partner and partners don't ditch each other. Got your camera?"

Jimmy nodded. "Lois," he said hesitantly as they waited for the elevator. "You know you can't nude sunbathe even on a private patio anymore. Not with Superman flying around town."

*Yeah, I'm guessing he might hit a building or two if you started doing that.*

"Oh, right. I forgot about him," Lois said with a shrug. "He's a good guy; I'm sure he wouldn't peek."

"Lo-is!" Jimmy groaned as she laughed.

Lois grabbed his arm and dragged him into the elevator. "You're too easy, Jimmy. Way too easy."

THE END

**Nightfall Honeymoon is a sequel to this story.**

\*\*\*

**Disclaimer:** Inspired by the characters created by Jerry Siegel & Joe Shuster and portrayed on the *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman* television series, developed by Deborah Joy LeVine.

Many thanks to all the writers on the show, especially Deborah Joy LeVine, Dan Levine, Jack Weinstein, Bryce Zabel, Lee Hutson, Brad Kern, Tim Minear, Eugene Ross-Leming, Brad Buckner, Thania St. John, and John McNamara and many other scriptwriters from whom I quote directly. Other than their borrowed dialogue, this story is entirely my own. Spock is a character from *Star Trek* created by Gene Roddenberry. Gatorade is a trademarked sport themed beverage made by PepsiCo. Ding Dong is a trademarked chocolate covered cake made by Hostess Brands. *Return of the Jedi* is a movie written by George Lucas and Lawrence Kasdan.

**Music Disclaimers:** The following songs, mentioned in my story, were in no way written or performed by me. I thank the artists for inspiring me. *We Will Rock You* and *Flash!*, written by Brian May, performed by Queen. *Don't Stop Me Now!*, written by Freddie Mercury and performed by Queen. *Singing in the Rain* — Sung by Gene Kelly from the movie by the same name, lyrics by Arthur Freed, music by Nacio Herb Brown. *Blue Suede Shoes*, written by Carl Perkins, sung by Elvis Presley. *These Boots are Made for Walkin'*, written by Lee Hazelwood, sung by Nancy Sinatra. *Get Down Tonight*, written by Harry Wayne Casey and Richard Finch, performed by KC & the Sunshine Band. *Chapel of Love* written by Jeff Barry, Ellie Greenwich, and Phil Spector, performed by The Dixie Cups. *Age of Aquarius / Let the Sun Shine In*, written by James Rado, Gerome Ragni, and Galt MacDermot, performed by the Fifth Dimension. *Holding Out For A Hero*, written by Jim Steinman and Dean Pitchford, performed by Bonnie Tyler. *Did You Ever Have To Make Up Your Mind?* by John Sebastian, performed by The Loving Spoonful. *When A Man Loves a Woman* by Calvin Lewis and Andrew Wright, performed by Percy Sledge. *Fly Like an Eagle* written by Steve Miller and Steve McCarty, performed by the Steve Miller Band. *Bad Moon Rising* written by John Fogerty, performed by Creedence Clearwater Revival. *The Flame* written by Bob Mitchell and Nick Graham, performed by Cheap Trick. *I Got Lucky in the Rain* — by James McHugh / Harold Adamson, Sung by Peggy Lee. *The Lady is a Tramp* — by Rodgers and Hart for the musical “Babes in Arms”, sung by Dame Shirley Bassey. *I'm Beginning to See the Light* — by Duke Ellington, Harry James, Johnny Hodges, & Don George, Sung by Peggy Lee. *Why Don't You Do Right?* — written by Kansas Joe McCoy, Sung by Peggy Lee. *New Kid in Town* performed by the Eagles, written by Don Henley, Glenn Frey and J.D. Souther. *I Feel the Earth Move* written and performed by Carole King. *For Once in My Life*, performed by Michael Buble, written by Ron Miller and Orlando Murden. *Ain't No Sunshine When She's Gone* written and performed by Bill Withers. *All of Me* written by Gerald Marks and Seymour Simons, performed by Billie Holiday. *I'd Really Love to See You Tonight* written by Parker McGee, performed by England Dan and John Ford Coley. *Wind Beneath My Wings* written by Jeff Silbar and Larry Henley, performed by Bette Midler. *Take a Chance on Me* written and performed by ABBA. *Ain't No Mountain High Enough* written by Nickolas Ashford and Valerie Simpson, performed by Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell. *Earth Girls are Easy* written by Julie Brown, Charles Coffey, Terrence McNally, and Sterling Smith, performed by Julie Brown.

**Gratitude:** I would like to Lynn S.M.'s muse for graciously stepping into the role of Lois Lane's inner (passionate) thoughts after she completed her work on [With Apologies to Female Hawk](#). And for AntiKryptonite for letting me borrow her inspiration of Clark's discomfort with the smell of blood from [Four Scents Worth](#). Thanks also to Bobbart (especially [Rumors](#)) for inspiring Lois's hot dream sequence. I would also like to thank my Beta Readers, Lynn S.M., DW, and IolantheAlias for their generous chuckles and LOLs. Your laughter has kept me going... and going... and going... Thank you. I would also like to thank my super wonderful G.E. Marcelle for going over and beyond the call of duty. Thank you for all of your hard work.