

The Other Shoe

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Rating: PG-13 (for mild language, a bit of violence, suggestive banter and nookie)

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Summary: Lois and Clark dating? Check. Lois being plucky and resourceful? You betcha. Clark testing the ethical limits of his super abilities? In big and little ways. Flirting? Uh-huh. Kissing? Sure! Action on a couch? Oh, baby, yes. Angst? Bring it! This story has a little bit of everything but an A-plot. Well, okay, maybe there's a tiny hint of one, but it's more decorative than functional.

This story takes place sometime shortly after “Whine, Whine, Whine.” It will jump back and forth between the present and the past. Section headers in italics (i.e., *Tuesday night*) indicate a past event. My eternal thanks go out to Brenda, Kate, Emily and Sarah who all made generous contributions of their time and talents to make this story safe for readers.

I owe mountains of gratitude and praise to Michelle, GE extraordinaire, who helped get this ready for the archive. Thank you for your time, your patience, and for saving me from myself!

These characters are not mine, but I am saving up to buy them. Sadly, I expect that might take an extremely long time.

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Friday night

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The room was starting to spin and Lois couldn't get it to stop. The faces around her blurred. Everyone seemed to be talking louder, and yet their words were all indistinct. It was suddenly so crowded, so unbearably hot in the bar, that she felt like she couldn't breathe. With horror, Lois realized she had been drugged. She weakly pushed her glass away and it tipped over. Her drink sloshed across the counter and dripped onto her lap, but she knew it was too late. Whatever was in there had already taken effect.

Her arms felt too heavy to lift and she started to slump forward. Someone took hold of her shoulders, and a deep voice cheerfully said, “Whoa there, sweetheart. I'll take you home now.”

It wasn't Clark's voice.

“No!” Lois tried to sound loud and forceful, but the word was swallowed up by all the noise in the room. Her uncooperative limbs hung meek and useless as she was half-lifted, half-dragged off the barstool. Her feet dangled below her, scraping across the floor, but whoever had her was strong enough that her inertia didn't seem to be slowing him down.

Where was Clark? Lois blearily looked around as she was hauled away, but he was nowhere in sight.

“Clark...” she moaned faintly, as if just his name would be enough to summon him from the restroom or the parking garage or wherever the hell he had decided to disappear to this time.

A rush of cool air bathed her face, and Lois dimly comprehended that she was now outside. Her brain screamed in panic, but she could offer no resistance. The toes of her shoes bounced across the sidewalk as she fought the black vortex that seemed to be sucking her under. A ripple of pain shot up her leg as one shoe came off and her foot smacked erratically against the concrete. Her stockings were going to be ruined, she thought,

which was crazy since that was the least of her worries at the moment.

“Upsy-daisy,” the man holding her said jocularly and hoisted her into the back seat of a car.

Her hands clawed over the slickness of a leather seat as Lois made another weak effort at escape. As darkness overcame her, she managed one last whispered, “Clark...”

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Clark paused in the alley and tilted his head.

Nothing.

He was imagining it; that was all. If Lois was saying his name right now, it definitely wouldn't be so mild. By now — if she was still here at all — she was most likely using his name as part of an expletive.

Back inside the bar, a quick scan proved him right. Lois had repaid his long absence by ditching him. Clark let out a frustrated sigh and grimaced. He had promised himself that tonight — no matter what — the he was going to tell Lois the truth. It seemed somehow ironic that the truth was probably the last explanation left to him now — the only excuse he hadn't given her.

In the distance Clark could hear the urgent wail of sirens. His shoulders slumped in resignation. It wasn't going to happen tonight. He'd have to grovel for forgiveness first thing tomorrow morning. And then — no matter what — he'd tell Lois where he went and why.

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Saturday morning

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The first thing Lois became aware of was the cloying smell of old creosote.

A dull throb pounded at her temples as a headache of massive proportions began to assert itself. Where the hell was she? Even with her eyes open, it was still dark. She blinked a couple of times to ascertain that, indeed, her eyes were really open. The air around her felt dank and chilly. Her entire body felt cold, especially her feet. She wiggled her toes and wondered where her shoes had gone.

“Hello?” Her throat was so dry that her voice was a raspy whisper. There was no answer.

Lois stood up slowly, uncertain where the ceiling was in the blackness. Nothing bumped her head and she was able to rise to her full height. She stretched her arms out and found nothing in front of her. The emptiness was disorienting, so she sank back to the floor. It was a hard floor, but it was covered with something soft, yet scratchy. She patted the material and realized it was a wool blanket.

Her hand bumped into something that made a sloshing noise, and Lois froze, startled by the sound. As the noise died out, she cautiously felt with her hand again and found it was coming from a gallon-sized plastic container. It was heavy when she lifted it. Something else whispered in the darkness as she set the container down. She felt again, finding a large plastic bag. It was lightweight and emitted a salty, fake-butter scent. Popcorn? Lois loosened the twist-tie holding the bag closed. Sure enough, the smell of stale popcorn greeted her.

Lois closed the bag and felt for the gallon jug again. The cap didn't twist; it was still sealed. Lois pulled away the plastic seal and unscrewed the cap and then took a cautious sniff. There wasn't a smell. She sniffed it again, but the contents remained a mystery. Lois took a wary sip and was relieved to find it was water. She replaced the cap and tried not to think about how someone was obviously expecting to keep her here for a long time. She shivered as dread and the cold both seemed to overwhelm her.

Lois hugged her arms to her chest in an attempt to keep warm. Why was she here? Who had brought her here? What was the last thing she could remember?

She thought hard and remembered... Clark. She had been on a date with Clark. They were sitting at the bar, killing time before a movie by giving each other flirty glances. His knee had been pressed against hers, and she had been fascinated by the motion of his Adam's apple when he swallowed. Then Clark had gestured toward the back of the bar and excused himself.

That way-too-familiar slow burn of resentment started all over again as Lois recalled that Clark had not returned in a few minutes. He hadn't returned after five minutes. Or ten minutes. It had been time for the movie to start, and she had contemplated going without him. Instead, she had stayed just to see how long it would take him to come back and what pitiful excuse he would concoct.

Clark had been gone for nearly fifteen minutes when she'd started to feel dizzy. There had been a hand on her shoulder, a voice in her ear and —

Her drink. That was it. Her drink must have been drugged. Who? Why? Lois tried, but she couldn't think of anyone in the bar who had seemed either threatening or familiar.

She wondered how long it had taken Clark to realize that she was missing. Or had he finally returned and assumed that she had paid him back by leaving? Or — oh god no — was that why Clark had never come back from the restroom? Had he been taken as well, while she sat fuming at the bar? Was he somewhere nearby, locked up in the dark just like her? Her heart sank at the thought that no one was looking for them. The police — and, more importantly, Superman — didn't even know that they were missing.

One thing was certain — she hadn't magically appeared in this dark prison. If there was a way to get her in here, there had to be a way to get her out. Lois stood up and stretched her arms out in front of her to begin feeling her way through the darkness.

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Clark waited until nine o'clock Saturday morning before calling Lois. After five rings her answering machine greeted him. Obviously she was cheating and using caller ID to avoid him. He should probably get used to it. After what he was going to confess to her today, he doubted if she was going to talk to him for a very long time.

Two blocks away from her apartment he stopped and bought a bouquet. Surely flowers would soften the blow when he revealed what he had been hiding. Lying to her, he reprimanded himself. You can call it anything you like, but she's going to call it like it is. You've lied to her.

The truth, he promised silently as he reached out to knock on her door. He was going to tell Lois the whole truth. And nothing but the truth.

She didn't answer. He knocked again. There was still no answer. Clark tipped his head and listened. He couldn't hear anyone inside. He slid his glasses down to take a quick peek. Her apartment was empty. There were no dishes in the sink. The coffee maker held a clean and empty pot. Lois had not made coffee that morning. There was simply no way that she would get ready for the day without caffeine.

Clark hesitated for a moment and then peered into her bedroom. Her bed was made. Clothes were lying across the middle of the bed. They were the same clothes that she had changed out of at the last minute when he'd come to pick her up the night before. The meaning behind those casually abandoned articles of clothing was stunning: Lois had not come home last night.

His heart seemed to skip a beat as a cold tendril of fear unraveled in his chest. Don't be paranoid, he warned himself. There were hundreds of explanations for why she might not have come home last night. And some of them were perfectly innocuous. She could have stayed with Lucy. She might have gone to the Planet. Or a hotel. Or a stranger had followed her and

—
Clark closed his eyes and listened intently, hoping that maybe, just maybe, Lois was in there and he had somehow missed her. The only sound in her apartment was the burble of the fish tank.

Lois really wasn't home.

His entire body tensed, his ears straining as he listened for even the faintest sound of her. He just needed a clue, a direction to search, and he'd be able to locate her. He filtered through hundreds of nearby voices and heartbeats in the space of a few seconds, but not one of them was hers.

He tried the doorknob and found it locked. What to do next? There was no sense in forcing his way into her apartment — she wasn't there, and she hadn't been there since last night. He'd start at the last place he had seen her — the bar — and trace her from there.

Clark set the flowers he'd brought in front of her door. Maybe Lois had only gone down the street to a shop, or she was out for a jog, or there was some other reason for her absence. When she came home, she would surely know who had left her flowers and why. In another hour maybe they'd be laughing about this. He would check at the bar and come back to find her home.

The bar was closed, but he could hear someone inside. Clark knocked, loudly and insistently, until the man inside relented and gave up mopping the floor. He opened the door just wide enough to glare out at Clark.

"I was here last night —" Clark began.

"Nobody turned in a wallet, sorry." The man started to shut the door and Clark put one hand on the door to stop him.

"No, please wait! I was here with a friend last night, we sat at the bar. Dark hair, pretty, late-twenties? She was drinking a white wine? Did you happen to see her leave?"

"Is she the one who got trashed and had to be carried out?"

"Trashed?" Clark shook his head. Lois' single drink wouldn't have been enough to get her drunk. The bartender had to be remembering someone else.

The man shrugged. "If she's the one I'm thinking of. She was pretty wasted, and her friend took her home."

Just to be sure, Clark fumbled for his wallet and took out the picture of himself and Lois with his Kerth. "Is this her?"

With a sigh and scowl, the man opened the door a little wider and took the picture to squint at it. After a few seconds he shrugged and handed the picture back to Clark. "Could be. Like I said, I wasn't really paying attention."

"Thanks," Clark said glumly and took the picture back. The door slammed shut, and Clark reluctantly turned away. Three steps later he froze and stared down at the gutter in horror.

A lone red high-heeled shoe was lying there. It had only been two weeks since Lois had found that shoe and its mate on sale and had exulted all afternoon about what a steal it was to find them for less than a hundred dollars.

Wherever Lois was now, she hadn't left voluntarily.

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Saturday morning

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Outside the bar, Clark scanned the buildings around him. There were apartments above the businesses, but none of them revealed a trace of her. There was no familiar heartbeat. Nothing except the memory of hearing Lois say his name.

Had it been that close? Had she been out front while he was in the alley? Had she called out for his help as they took her away?

If only he weren't following a trail that was now several hours cold. Clark berated himself again for not looking for her last night. If only he hadn't made assumptions. If only he had asked the bartender before leaving last night. If only he hadn't left her there to begin with. He should have let the world get by

on its own for just a few hours. He should have given that soft plea his full attention.

Who had taken her? And why? What were they doing with her? Clark balked at thinking about that one. He couldn't concentrate when he started contemplating what might be happening to Lois right now. Again and again his imagination played out the circumstances of Lois being carried out of the bar and calling for his help. She hadn't been drunk, or even tipsy, when he'd left her, of that much he was certain. Had someone drugged her?

Even in Metropolis on a Friday night, dragging an unconscious woman down the street might draw attention. Her shoe in the gutter made it appear likely that she had been taken away in a vehicle. He could check with the taxi companies and see if anyone remembered taking a fare from this location the night before.

Or maybe they had been parked close by?

Cursing himself again for not checking the night before, Clark scanned the parking structure at the end of the block. Lois' Jeep was right where they had parked it. He could practically hear the echo of their footsteps as they had walked through the garage. He remembered walking down the stairs with Lois ahead of him. He had been fascinated by the sway of her hips, delighted, as always, by the opportunity to watch her walk.

Why, why, why hadn't he checked last night before assuming that she had given up on him? Why hadn't it occurred to him that her car keys were still in his pocket? Because, he tortured himself, you were secretly glad for the reprieve from telling her your secret.

What if he had told her his secret? Heaven knows, he'd come oh-so-close to telling her more than once in the past week. What if he had worked up the courage to explain the real reason he was always running off? Would they still have gone out? Or would she have been safely at home last night hating his guts?

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Tuesday night

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Clark was watching a baseball game on TV when his senses came to sudden attention. He could hear Lois' heartbeat somewhere nearby, like a siren's call. He closed his eyes, focusing on the sound that was quickly becoming the center of his universe.

"Hi," she said in a breathy, girlish tone. "Have you missed me? I missed you." Lois made a small dismissive snort and chided, "Don't be so pathetic." Clark heard her sigh and then she tried again. "Hi. I wanted to bounce some ideas off you." Her footsteps paused and he heard her draw in a shaky breath. "That won't work. You could have called him. Just be yourself," she instructed and started to climb the stairs again. "Act natural."

Keep going, Clark silently urged her. Lois was working on a new story and had been secretive about sharing the details with anyone until she was certain it was, as she put it, "more than speculation." He hadn't officially seen her since Saturday night. Clark had, of course, cheated and found her doing surveillance near the docks yesterday afternoon. He had even toyed with the idea of visiting her as Superman, but dismissed it when he realized that would only draw attention to her efforts at being covert.

Her footsteps had reached the last landing on the stairs before his apartment. Galvanized into action, Clark stood up and swiftly scanned his surroundings. No dishes in the sink. No capes left lying around. His apartment was fit for visitors. He watched as her shadow appeared outside his door. She took a deep breath and let it out quickly before knocking. He let a respectable few seconds tick by and then moved to open the door.

"Lois, hi!" he greeted her, trying to strike a balance between surprise and delight.

Her answering smile seemed to light up his entire apartment. "Hi. Are you busy?"

"No, please." Clark stepped aside and pulled the door open wider. "Come in. So what's your big story? Or can't you say yet?"

Lois went down the stairs and stopped in front of his couch. "Do you know who Herman Twitchell is?"

Clark thought about it as he came down the stairs to join her. "The Alliance Technologies guy? He's one of the major donors for the new pediatrics wing at Met General."

"That's the one. He's the head of R&D at Alliance. His soon to be ex-wife went through nursing school with my mom. She contacted me because, according to her, his philanthropy is all a front and he's knee-deep in dealings with Intergang. I figured she was looking for revenge or leverage in the divorce or something."

"So what did you find out?"

"Nothing concrete — yet. But when I talked to him this morning, he was evasive."

"You talked to him or you confronted him?"

Lois shot him a sideways glare. Clark fought a smile as he pictured exactly how her "talking" to Herman Twitchell had gone. "You know, it doesn't hurt to make a little conversation with people before you question them. Be friendly."

She arched one eyebrow. "Is this that 'attracting more flies with honey' thing again?"

"Maybe." Clark sat down on the sofa and patted the spot next to him in invitation.

Lois remained standing and put her hands on her hips. "Why would you even want to attract flies, Clark?"

For half a second, Clark was convinced he had just crossed a line with her, and then he saw the barest hint of a smile tug at her lips. Was she deliberating picking a fight with him? It was entirely possible, especially since their last fight had ended in an embrace that had gone from nice to urgent in about two seconds flat.

Fine — he could work up a little fight if it meant making up afterwards. "I'm just saying that sometimes you come across as pretty, well, blunt."

"You make that sound like a bad thing. At least people know where they are with me. They don't wonder if I'm trying to finesse something out of them."

"I'm not talking about finessing anything out of anyone. There's nothing wrong with being nice to people."

"I actually came over here to be nice to you. But if you're going to antagonize me I'll leave."

He hadn't kissed her since Saturday night. Kissing her again was almost all he had thought about since then. "I'll be nice, I promise." Clark held up one hand in invitation.

She grinned at him and took hold of his hand. "How do I know you're not just trying to finesse something out of me?"

Clark winked at her. "What if I am?"

Her eyes darkened and her lips parted. In an instant, he had tugged her onto the couch and was kissing her. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him back with abandon. Lois leaned back, drawing him down until he was lying atop her. Her hands slipped beneath the armholes of his sleeveless shirt so her fingers could stroke over his back and shoulders. The soft pressure of her touch on his bare skin sent ripples of pleasure through him.

How was it that he could hold his breath for nearly an hour, but a few kisses from Lois could leave him completely breathless? When the need for oxygen became urgent, Clark shifted his attention to the ticklish spot just below her left ear that made her giggle whenever he kissed her there. How amazing would his life be if he could get her to make that low laugh again?

Lois obliged him with a throaty chuckle, and Clark grew bold

enough to set free the top button on her shirt to stake a claim to a new patch of bare skin. Her breath skittered, and she unbuttoned the next two buttons for him. He wasn't about to argue with that invitation.

The hem of her shirt had crept up, and his hand inexplicably found itself resting on the warm silk of her stomach. His thumb traced the indentation of her navel. He wondered what it would be like to kiss her there and feel the quiver of her abdominal muscles beneath his lips.

His hand moved higher and she whispered a long, slow, "Oh, Clark."

That seemed like permission, especially when her body arched closer to his. Her leg shifted so she could caress the back of his knee with her foot. At that moment Clark's entire life boiled down to two absolutes. The first was that he loved Lois Lane. And the second was that he had to tell her the truth before they went any further.

The sound of his phone ringing broke into their world of two. "Ignore it," he murmured into the join of her shoulder and neck.

She clutched at his hair, directing him exactly where she wanted the next kiss. The phone continued to ring. How many rings until his machine picked it up? Finally his machine whirred to life and his voice announced that he wasn't home.

"Hi, honey! You'll never believe who I ran into in town today. Do you remember Ben Gossard? He's now a volcanologist and he's been..."

"Is that your mom?" Lois asked with another of those throaty giggles that made him dizzy. "There goes the mood, huh? You might as well answer it."

"Yes, ma'am." He supported his weight on one elbow so he could remain sprawled on top of her while he fumbled for the phone. "Hello?" Clark tried to control his voice, but he could hear how husky it was.

"Am I interrupting something?" Without even seeing her, he knew his mom was grinning.

He quickly sat up, his cheeks flushing guiltily. "No. I was, uh, I was watching baseball." His mind whispered that he had been rounding second and headed for third base.

"Tell Lois I said 'hi.'"

He wiggled his fingers at Lois and mouthed, "She says 'hi.'" Lois propped herself up on her elbows. The movement caused her half-unbuttoned shirt to splay open further. She was unbelievably tempting right now and he fervently wished he hadn't picked up the phone.

"Were you still planning on coming home this weekend?" his mom asked.

"Uh —" For a second or two his mind blanked, still occupied with thoughts of Lois' cleavage. Home? Wasn't he home already? Oh, right, she meant Kansas. "I don't know," he hedged as he wondered just how set his mom was on a weekend visit. "Is it important?"

Lois tilted her head, curious to know what was important. Her lips were slightly swollen from their kisses, sending another pang of lust through him. He should never have answered the phone.

"Dad wanted some help with the east field, but he can check with the Rollins boys. They might be able to come over."

Clark had to look away from Lois so that filial obligations could come first. "I'll work it out. Tell Dad I'll be there on Saturday."

Lois shifted to a sitting position and squeezed his knee. Clark put his hand over hers to stop the distraction.

"Maybe you could bring Lois with you?" his mom suggested. "We'd love to see her."

"Yeah," he sighed. "Uh, I haven't started that project yet."

"There's no time like the present," she insisted cheerfully.

"Good night, Mom," he said firmly. She laughed and said goodbye. Clark hung up the phone before she could say anything else. Asking Lois to visit Smallville wasn't going to be nearly as easy as his mom made it sound.

"You're going to Kansas this weekend?" Lois asked.

"Yeah." This was the perfect opening. I'm flying out there on Saturday, he could say. I go out there just about every Sunday night for dinner. Mom's invited you. Airfare? Not a problem. I'll fly us. You see, I'm Superman...

And then she would take her hand off his knee and she would never voluntarily touch him again. Clark lifted her hand and kissed the inside of her wrist. He heard the slight intake of her breath and his pulse quickened in response.

Lois cupped his cheek and said, "I should probably go home now anyway. I have to be on the docks bright and early." Instead of getting up from the couch, though, she gave him a slow, lingering kiss. "You wanna come with me?" she whispered.

"Where?" he teased. "Home with you tonight or the docks tomorrow?"

Lois giggled and kissed him again. "Either one. Both. You choose."

Clark wanted to beg her to stay. Another ten minutes, twenty tops, and he'd be able to find the words to tell her the secret that stood between them. But then there would be the recriminations, and neither of them would get any sleep. It was better, tonight at least, to let her go. He kissed her again, and it felt bittersweet because he feared it might be their last.

"I'd better leave you here," she admitted when their kiss ended. "If you come home with me tonight, we'll never make it to the docks by five." There was an invitation in the breathy quality of her voice that told him she wasn't exactly saying no.

It would be heaven to spend all night holding her. It would also be a lie, if she didn't know the truth. Once she knew the truth, though, she might never trust him again.

"I'll walk you to your car," he stalled. Maybe he could work up the courage to tell her before they got there. Most likely he'd kiss her again as if it were the last time.

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Saturday morning

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Clark returned to the bar's door and began knocking again. The man inside muttered a few curse words, but grudgingly came over to open the door. Clark grabbed hold of the door as soon as it was open to prevent the man from shutting it.

"I'm sorry to keep troubling you, but this is important. The woman who was carried out last night, can you describe the man who was helping her?" Clark asked urgently.

"Are you kidding me?" The barman sighed and shook his head. Obviously this guy wasn't going to go away anytime soon, so he closed his eyes and tried to remember. "Okay, yeah. I think he was tall. And he was wearing a Red Sox hat. I remember it because I hate those sons of bi —"

"He was alone?"

"There was just the one guy carryin' the one gal out last night. He was sittin' right next to her, and she started to kinda fall off the stool, and he said he'd take her home. That was it. He acted like he knew her."

"Had they been talking to each other?"

The bartender's forehead furrowed as he tried to recall. "I don't remember. Mind you, it was pretty busy last night. I do remember she was flirting with a guy when she got here. He wasn't wearing a hat, though." The man frowned. "No, yeah, the hat guy was sitting on her left side. The guy she was flirting with was on her right. He left, but it seems like she was saving the spot 'cause I saw her shoo people away from sitting there."

"And she never spoke to or seemed to recognize the guy on her left, the one with the hat?"

The man shook his head. “I’m sorry, I don’t remember him saying anything to her except that he was taking her home. He’d been there next to her long enough that I figured they were together.”

“How many drinks did you serve her?”

“I — ” The bartender looked up, his expression nearly as stricken as Clark’s. “Geez, I didn’t think about it at the time. I think I only ever gave her the one drink. It’s possible Mike, the other guy working last night, served her, but she was on my side of the bar.”

Clark let go of the door and fished in his pocket for his card. He found one and handed it to the man. “Would you please call the police and tell them everything you just told me? The woman’s name is Lois Lane, and she’s definitely been kidnapped. Her car is still parked in the garage at the end of the block, and she never came home last night. Tell them that I’ve gone to ask Superman to look for her and I’ll be in touch with them as soon as I can. If you remember anything else, or if Mike knows something that can help, please call that number and leave a message for me.”

The man looked at the card and then back at Clark. “I’m so sorry. I thought he knew her.”

Clark gave him a tight smile and turned away. He hurried around the building and into the alley. For a moment he stood in the exact same spot as the night before and trembled at the memory of hearing Lois say his name. Then he swiftly spun into the suit and lifted up into the air to begin a methodical search, block by block, of Metropolis.

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Saturday morning

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The darkness was oppressive.

Lois could hear a steady plinkity-plunk of rain above her. That had to mean that the roof was metal, just like the walls. Was she in a shipping container or a railroad car? Wherever she was, the floor was wood, not metal. As near as she could figure, her prison was about seven feet wide and thirty feet long. It wasn’t moving, so there was a scant amount of comfort in that. She had found what felt like a large sliding door, but no amount of tugging or swearing could get it open. For a few panicked seconds she had wondered if it was soldered shut, but she told herself that whoever had left her here wouldn’t have given her food, water and a blanket if they were intending to seal her up forever. Would they?

She combed her memory, trying to recall who had taken her, but everything after she realized her drink had been drugged was so hazy. Lois tried to think of reasons that someone would kidnap her, but grew depressed when she realized there were numerous people who might hold a grudge against her. Was this for revenge? For ransom? For kicks? Should she be grateful that she was alone in the dark and not tied to a bed while some pervert groped her? Or were they waiting for her to wake up first?

Lois cracked her knuckles, hating that she felt so helpless. She had yelled for Superman until she was nearly hoarse before reluctantly acknowledging that she was probably too far away for him to hear her. Her stomach growled — a reminder that she hadn’t eaten since yesterday afternoon. She and Clark were going to have a late dinner after the movie — that had been a poor decision. She should have insisted on dinner first. But how could she have known that meal would turn out to be so important?

What time was it, anyway? She pressed the night light button on her watch. Its blue-green glow seemed unnaturally bright and she had to blink a few times to be able to see that it was nearly ten o’clock.

Morning or night? It had to be morning now, didn’t it?

She held the button down and lifted her wrist, trying to use the watch’s light to peer into the blackness around her. It was no

use. The dim glow did very little to reveal her prison.

Discouraged, Lois tipped her head back against the wall behind her and fumed.

A couple of minutes later Lois loosened the tie on the bag of popcorn as her stomach gurgled in anticipation. She was on her third mouthful before it occurred to her that the popcorn or the water might be drugged. Then again, why would they go to all the trouble of locking her up in this dark space just to drug her again?

Feeling thirsty, Lois closed the bag and set it aside. Her hand swept back and forth until she found the water jug. She took several long swallows and then wondered if she ought to ration the water more carefully since she had no idea how long she’d be trapped there.

Where was she? Was she sitting in the rail yard of Metropolis, or had she been taken somewhere else? She had been out cold for over twelve hours. Assuming that her captors had driven at an average speed of 60 mph, she could be over 700 miles away now. It was Saturday morning and she had the weekend off, which meant it might be Monday before anyone knew that she — and possibly Clark — was missing.

Had Clark been taken too? If so, he wasn’t anywhere nearby or he would have yelled to let her know he was there when she was calling for Superman. Wouldn’t he? Or was he still out cold? Was he hurt? Her mind skittered away from that idea, not wanting to picture what might have been done to him if he had struggled.

It would be better for everyone if Clark weren’t missing. Lois allowed herself a grim smile at the realization that she was actually hoping Clark had decided to run one of his compulsive errands last night. If he had, it meant that he might already be trying to find her.

But what if he had gone to visit his parents this morning like he had planned? What if he thought she was paying him back by ditching him last night and he didn’t bother to check before leaving town? Her chest tightened in panic. No! It couldn’t have happened like that. The odds were much more likely that Clark knew she was missing. And if Clark couldn’t find her right away, surely he would ask Superman to help?

Or did Superman have bigger fish to fry? If he were searching for anyone right now, it probably wasn’t her. Clark was her only hope. He might have his faults, but she couldn’t think of a single time Clark had let her down when it was really, really important.

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Wednesday morning

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It was just after 5 a.m. when she pulled up in front of Clark’s building. She saw a dark figure detach from the shadows and stride towards her. Her entire body quickened in anticipation as she recognized that broad span of shoulders. Clark got in and leaned across the seat to kiss her. She turned her head and he got her lips instead of her cheek.

“Good morning,” he murmured and kissed her again.

Yes, Lois thought. It was a very good morning. It was a glorious morning to be alive. Its only flaw was that she couldn’t spend the whole day making out with Clark. She reluctantly broke off their kiss and started driving.

“So you never did tell me why you think Herman Twitchell is involved with Intergang,” Clark said.

“Well, as near as I can tell, Twitchell is living in the Alliance Tech warehouse down by Pier 11.”

“I’m not sure I see the connection. Maybe he’s trying to save money?” Clark suggested. “After all, he’s getting divorced. Maybe he can’t afford both a mortgage and a lease?”

Lois shot him a sideways glance. “Oh, please. The guy is loaded. It’s not the money. His wife thinks he’s a front for

Intergang's smuggling operations. I think he's living there to keep an eye on things."

"Any things in particular? What's he supposed to be smuggling?"

"I don't know yet. Actually, I think he's smuggling stuff in for them, not out. See, Alliance Tech gets shipments all the time from overseas. They come in off the ships in those huge metal containers."

"Customs has to check those containers before they're cleared to go on to Alliance Tech," Clark pointed out.

"Ah, but what if Twitchell has an insider who can get to the containers before Customs sees them and sends them on as if they have been checked? I've been watching the docks the past few days, getting a feel for the process. Do you have any idea how many hundreds of containers arrive each day? And how easy it would be for one or two of them to slip through the cracks?"

Clark shrugged, apparently conceding her point.

"So we're going to watch the warehouse today and see what gets delivered. Every container is numbered. We take down the numbers and then check them against what actually cleared Customs."

Lois stopped the Jeep and then backed into an alley between two warehouses. The position gave her a front row seat for the Alliance Tech warehouse across the street. The alley had been a godsend — she could park there and not be out in the open.

Clark stretched out his legs and settled in. "How many containers have been delivered this week?"

"Sixteen so far. I gave the list to Jimmy last night, and he's going to check the Customs database for me today."

A couple of minutes of silence went by while Lois dreamily remembered the night before. What might have happened if his phone hadn't rung? How far had she been willing to go? How serious was Clark about their relationship? How serious did she want him to be?

Her palms became clammy as she realized that what she really wanted wasn't just Clark's kisses. She wanted him. His smile, his touch, his laugh, and the simple comfort of his company. She wanted to spend every minute possible with him. She was — although she hated to admit it — falling for him.

How was it that an uncomplicated farm boy could exert such a hold on her? Hadn't she always pictured the man she would fall in love with as being urbane and sophisticated? Someone who was more like... well, Lex? Lois shuddered at the memory of her former fiancé — now back from the dead and locked away on Stryker's Island. She looked over at her partner and wondered if Clark had any idea of the emotional turmoil he was causing her.

He must have sensed her gaze because his head turned and he gave her a smile. For half a second she thought he looked nervous, but she quickly dismissed that as a trick of the dim lighting in the alley.

Clark cleared his throat. "What are your plans this weekend?"

Wasn't he going to Kansas? Or was he looking for a reason to stay in Metropolis? Lois berated herself for being far too optimistic. Clark was making conversation, nothing more.

"It depends on how this stakeout goes, I guess." Lois hesitated and then added, "Aren't you going out to visit your folks?"

"Yeah." Clark nodded and shifted uncomfortably in the seat. His right knee began to bounce.

The thought crossed Lois' mind that, if he was already feeling cramped in here, he was going to be absolutely miserable in another hour.

"Maybe," Clark added quietly.

"Maybe?" Her ears perked up. Was he thinking about staying in Metropolis instead? Please, God, let him want to spend the weekend with her. "You're not sure?"

His knee began to bounce even faster, setting the Jeep to

rocking slightly. What in the world was up with him? It was way too early in the morning to be this anxious, especially for Clark, who was usually maddeningly calm. Even his words were jumpy. "No. I mean, yes. I'm going to Kansas. I just thought that, maybe, uh, you'd like to come with me?"

Lois was shocked into silence. He wanted her to come out to Kansas with him this weekend? In the space of a single second she comprehended just how monumental a step forward in their relationship this would be. Her joy at his wanting to spend time with her was quickly replaced by terror that he wanted to spend time with her. They'd be on his turf, not neutral ground. If things turned sour, she couldn't simply go home.

He turned in the seat to fully face her, his expression earnest. "You don't have to worry about the airfare —"

Another wave of panic washed through her as he spoke — did she really want to be beholden to Clark because he paid for her ticket, too?

"I don't know," she blurted out before he could complete the offer. "This is kind of a huge step, isn't it? I mean, yeah, I've already met your parents, but this would be different. Your mom tried to put us in the same room last time, remember? God, I think I'd die if she did that again."

Clark simply stared at her, his mouth still open to speak, but it appeared that his enthusiasm for the idea was gone now. Lois wanted to kick herself. It had only been a month since she had promised Clark she wasn't going to run from the idea of them together, but here she was running like her life depended on it. She might as well have literally fled the car when he made the offer. She had hurt him. Even the dim lighting didn't hide how deflated he looked.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "Can I think about it and get back to you?"

Clark's attention shifted to something outside the window behind her. Lois turned her head to see why. The unexpected sight of a grinning face mere inches away from her own made her jump. "Dammit, Bobby!" she yelled as she realized who it was.

Bobby Bigmouth laughed and opened the back passenger door to get in.

"How did you know where to find us?" Lois asked.

"Please. You think it's a secret that you've been parked here every morning for the past three days? If you want to go incognito, Lois, you should lose the vanity plates."

She saw Clark turn his head, no doubt so she wouldn't see him laugh, and it sent a flicker of irritation through her. "Great. So I've been sitting here for nothing? Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"This way was so much more entertaining." Bobby gave her a smug grin in the rear view mirror. "I'd have let you sit here all week, but I have something important to pass along. And before you ask, this one is gratis. But you should probably give me whatever's in that bag on spec."

Clark handed him the white paper bag containing the pastries that she'd brought. "What do you have?" he asked.

"A list of names." Bobby popped half a doughnut in his mouth but was still able to speak distinctly as he chewed. "Jim Harward, Terry Wilson, Boyce Edgemont, Leo Madsen. What do they all have in common?"

Lois thought about it and then shook her head, absolutely clueless. The names only sounded vaguely familiar to her.

After several seconds, Clark spoke up. "They've all been apprehended by Superman. Harward and Wilson were with the Toasters. Edgemont was robbing a bank. Madsen was fencing stolen goods."

"Bingo. You should buy the man another doughnut, Lois. Those guys, and several others who our caped friend has had personal contact with, have all been offered a million dollars if

they could come up with something big and juicy about Superman.”

“A million dollars?” Lois sputtered. “By who? And why?”

“Got me. There’s an 800 number to call if you have something to say. Here.” Bobby handed a business card to her. The words *Information Wanted* were printed on it along with a toll-free phone number. “I just thought, seeing as you guys have ways to contact Superman, you might want to warn him that someone’s gunning for him.”

Bobby crumpled up the pastry bag and reached between the seats to grab Lois’ coffee. He took a sip and wrinkled his nose. “Ugh. Where did you get this from?”

Clark’s knee had started bouncing again. Lois knew just how he felt — this was upsetting news, to say the least.

“Who gave you the card?” Clark asked.

“A guy I know.” Bobby let out a small belch and opened the car door. “He’s between jobs, so he’s definitely not the one behind it. If I hear anything else, I’ll be in touch.”

The back door wasn’t even shut yet when Clark practically ripped the business card from her hand. “I’ll take this one,” he said as he opened the door and got out of the car. “You stay and watch the warehouse. I’ll meet you back at the Planet later and let you know what I find out.”

“Clark?”

He ignored her and shut the door. Thoroughly irritated with him now, Lois yelled his name again but Clark continued to walk away. She hit the horn and he turned around, his expression startled. Lois rolled her window down to talk to him.

“Get back in the car. If Bobby knows I’m here, then Twitchell probably does too. There’s no sense in sticking around here. Besides, how were you planning on getting back to the Planet? It’s not like there’s an abundance of cabs in this part of town.”

Clark hesitated, but returned to the Jeep. There was a heavy silence as they drove in the direction of the Planet. Was Clark angry with her because she had turned him down? Did she dare to ask him about why he was going out there in the first place? All she had caught last night was that his mom thought it was important. It had to be important, didn’t it? Sure, there were cheap fares to be had, but he couldn’t very well afford to fly out there on a whim, could he?

Lois wondered if she had blown her chances with Clark. She should have said, “Yes, I’ll go to Kansas with you.” She wanted to explain to him that she had been caught off guard by his invitation, but Clark’s brooding demeanor only increased her anxiety, so she said nothing.

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Saturday morning

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In the end, the subject of her going to Smallville had not come up again. Lois was still conflicted about whether spending the weekend out of town with Clark was a good idea or not. It would be wonderful to spend so much uninterrupted time with him. It would also mean trusting Clark with far too much power in their relationship.

Now, stuck in this chilly, oppressively dark prison, Lois would much rather be sitting next to Clark on a plane. Hell, she would be happy to be sitting in the cramped confines of her car in the midst of another interminable stakeout. Anywhere would be better than here — wherever here was. Lois picked up the edges of the blanket, wrapping them around herself in an attempt to keep warm.

Then she blinked a couple of times, disbelieving her eyes as a tiny shaft of daylight shone through the floor.

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Saturday night

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The sun had started to set by the time Clark had checked

every square inch of Metropolis’ six boroughs without finding even the slightest trace of Lois. He circled back to her apartment for at least the hundredth time that day. She still wasn’t home. The flowers he had left propped by her door that morning had wilted. Clark picked them up, his heart breaking. Lois had been missing for over twenty-four hours now.

Dejected, he flew to the mid-town precinct and changed into his regular clothes in the alley across the street before heading inside. Clark asked to speak with the detective handling her case, Lieutenant Hess, only to be told he had gone home for the evening. Even though he understood that the man had a life outside of work, it still sent a surge of frustration through Clark that everyone else’s world hadn’t stopped because Lois was missing.

The sergeant on duty promised Clark that they would contact him the moment they learned anything. He tried to cheer Clark up by explaining that a plea for information was going out on the evening news. There had to have been someone in the bar or outside of it who saw something. By morning, the sergeant predicted, they’d have a solid lead.

Clark realized in a moment of blinding helplessness that there was nothing left that he could do. There was nowhere in Metropolis that he hadn’t looked. Whoever had taken Lois had hidden her so well and so far away that even Superman couldn’t find her. He had sometimes felt helpless in the past, but never had his powers seemed so utterly useless to him.

Discouraged, Clark ducked into the alley and changed into the suit again. He flew to Lois’ apartment even though he knew he was going to find her windows dark. The possibility that she might never come home again caused him to half-fall, half-land on the fire escape outside her bedroom window. One of her living room windows was open slightly, but Clark sat down outside instead, his back against her building, and stared off into the distance. What had started that morning as panic was now a cold and empty numbness that seemed to permeate his very soul.

He shivered and drew his cape around him. His head bowed, and he was overcome all over again by the memory of her whispered plea for help. His throat began to close off and he fought the urge to cry. Without a task to concentrate on, it was almost impossible to suppress his fear and grief.

His thoughts turned dark as he wondered where Lois was. Was she safe right now, or was someone hurting her? His body tensed, his hands forming fists at the thought of someone deliberating causing her pain. It was his fault. It was entirely his fault. He should never have left her. He should have done something when he heard her call out his name. He should have checked instead of assuming.

If only she had called out for Superman last night. That would have caught his attention. But she hadn’t, and he couldn’t help wondering why. Had she guessed his secret while she was waiting for him to return? Or was it because Superman no longer occupied her thoughts?

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Wednesday morning

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The world seemed to have shifted on its axis in the last hour. For a few brief and terrifying seconds, Clark had actually started to tell Lois his secret. She had interrupted his confession with a barely concealed panic that left him second-guessing her feelings for him. If an invitation to visit Smallville could scare her that much, he was now doubly worried of what her reaction would be to the truth about her hero.

And then Bobby Bigmouth had shown up and destroyed what little equilibrium Clark had left. It wasn’t the first time that someone had tried to discover who Superman really was. Lois herself had been frighteningly tenacious when he first started wearing the cape. Time and — he hoped — friendship had

tempered her reasons for seeking the truth. Someone else, someone with deep pockets, was serious about tracking Superman down.

The drive from the docks to the Planet seemed to be taking forever. More than once Clark was tempted to ask Lois to pull over and let him out. It was only the fact that he'd have to come up with an explanation for why that kept him silent. Clark took another deep breath and let it out slowly as he tried to calm himself down.

So close. He had been so close. He had been seconds away from telling her everything. Another cold wave of panic engulfed him at the thought of giving someone else that much power over him. Especially now, when he had proof positive that knowledge about him could be dangerous to him and lucrative for someone else.

That wasn't fair, he chided himself. Lois would never betray Superman no matter how much money they offered her.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Lois glance over at him. Clark turned his head, ostensibly to look at the window, but mostly because he was starting to feel claustrophobic. How was it possible that they hadn't reached the Planet yet? Was she driving slower on purpose? They were only a few blocks away now, but traffic seemed to have slowed to a crawl.

There had been a spot near the curb that was open, but Lois pulled into the underground garage. Another three excruciating minutes ticked by while she circled lower and lower looking for a space. Clark forced himself to move at normal speed as they walked together to the elevator. The subject of her coming to Smallville hung between them, making the silence uncomfortable, but Clark had no idea how to address it.

"It has to be someone local," Lois said as they stepped into the elevator. "Don't you think?"

"Local?" Clark had no idea what she was talking about.

"Definitely. I mean, it could be someone from outside of Metropolis, but it seems more likely that they're local. I guess we really won't know anything until we call the number."

The number. She was talking about his stalker. "I'll call the number when I get to my desk. Maybe you can start compiling a list of all the criminals Superman's had contact with in the last year?" The elevator doors opened, and Clark stepped into the newsroom and made a beeline for his desk.

"Oh, like hell," Lois shot back as she followed close behind him. "You can make the call, fine, but I'll be listening in on the other line."

There was no way to dissuade her without creating suspicion, so Clark gave in and agreed.

The line rang twice before a woman answered. "You have information?" She had a slight drawl and her voice sounded like she smoked at least two packs a day.

"Maybe," Clark said. "But first I want to know who I'm calling."

"I'm just the answering service, hon. When this number rings, I take down whatever you tell me and pass it on."

"Pass it on to who?"

She sighed. "You're lucky it's a slow day, or I'd be hanging up. I don't know where the info goes. I type it into the computer and, I assume, the client has access to the database."

"How many people have called?"

The woman let out a short barking laugh. "I'm supposed to be the one asking the questions, you know."

Lois waved to catch his attention but Clark ignored her. She scribbled onto a notepad and held it up for him to read. *Where is she? Company name?*

"Please?" Clark asked. "I'm a friend of his. Put yourself in his shoes for minute — surely you can understand how upsetting this is for him?"

There was a short pause, and Clark was afraid she was simply

going to hang up. He heard the flick and spark of a cigarette lighter. There was a deep inhale and a long, slow exhale.

"I started covering this line about four days ago. There've been maybe fifty, sixty calls. Only a few of them actually left a message."

"What did they say?" Clark asked.

"Ah-ah," the voice turned coy. "I'm not allowed to tell you who's called or what they said."

"Were you given a checklist or any idea about what kind of information the client wants?"

"Yeah, there's a list. Do you know where he lives? Does he have a family? What's his real name? What makes him vulnerable?"

A cold sweat suddenly seemed to have encapsulated Clark's entire body. His hands started to shake as he thought about what someone might do with that information. "You said that a few people have left messages?"

The woman's voice dropped, becoming conspiratorial. "If you're really his friend, then you probably know more than anyone else who's called. Why don't you tell me your name?"

Clark's muscles went slack in relief as he realized no one had given her anything worth knowing yet. Lois waved the notepad with its scribbled questions emphatically at him. "First tell me where you're located," Clark said.

She sucked in another drag as she considered whether to answer him. Finally she said, "Florida."

"What's the name of the service you work for?"

He pictured the smoke curling around her as she thought about answering. "Voice Connections. Now it's nice talking to you, sugar, but unless you're going to tell me your name or you have something else worth saying, I'm gonna have to let you go."

"One more thing," Clark pleaded. "Are you the only one answering this number?"

"I don't know," the woman said. "Ask the front office. Bye now."

It took another five minutes of digging to locate the Voice Connections office in Atlanta. It only took a thirty second phone call for Voice Connections to tell him that their client list was confidential.

"Now what?" Lois asked.

Clark shook his head. "I don't know. It doesn't sound like there's anyone out there who has the information they want."

"I don't know about you," Lois said, "but I don't think making a list of criminals is going to be helpful. We need to find a way to lean on Voice Connections. Do you know anyone in Atlanta?"

It was exactly the opening that Clark needed to get out of the newsroom. "Maybe," he said and stood up. "I'll need to run home and grab the number. I'll get back to you."

He was too spooked to change into the suit in broad daylight, even if it was in a back alley, so Clark hailed a cab and went home instead. He thought about calling his parents, but paranoia whispered that people already associated him with Superman. Someone with a million dollars lying around spare would surely be able to tap a phone line or two.

Clark wanted to yell in frustration at the feeling of being hunted by an unknown enemy. There was no sense in flying to Atlanta to harass Voice Communications. Clark suspected that any name he might be able to get out of them would only be an alias who had paid in cash.

He paced the confines of his apartment and considered his options. He had always been so careful to keep his alter ego separate from himself. He had always been vague in answering the personal questions that people put to Superman. His first option was simply to maintain the status quo. No one had the answers his stalker was looking for, so it stood to reason that he was still safe.

Or he could leave. He could go somewhere else and start over with a new name and never put on the suit again. That would protect him, his parents, and everyone else that he cared about. This certainly wasn't the first time he had considered leaving Metropolis. He had nearly left a month ago; he had even gone so far as to pack up his apartment when Calvin Dregg had sued Superman.

That wasn't the only reason, his mind whispered. You were leaving because you thought Lois was in love with Dan Scardino. You only stayed because she wanted you and not him.

How could he possibly leave now, when everything he had ever dreamed about was finally within reach? He had a job he loved, friends he cared about — and he had Lois. He looked at his couch and thought about how, only last night, she had been in his arms. He couldn't leave her.

What if he stayed in Metropolis, but gave up being super? That idea was just as hard to contemplate as leaving Lois. It was selfish to stop helping people simply to avoid a little scrutiny. Was his privacy really worth someone else's life?

The sound of sirens caught his attention. Clark didn't even hesitate. He spun into the suit and shot out of his apartment faster than any watching eyes could see.

A few blocks away from the Planet, a water main had broken. Clark helped with the clean-up while the city's engineers dealt with fixing the pipe. As the mess began to recede, he spotted Lois on the opposite side of the street. She waved at him, gesturing for him to come over.

"Superman, I know you're busy, but I need to speak to you." She leaned closer to him and dropped her voice. "It would be best if we could talk in private."

Clark knew exactly why she wanted to talk to him. There was no way around it, so he might as well let her tell him. "Were you going back to work?" he asked.

She gave him a small, pleased smile as she realized what he was about to offer. "Yes."

"May I fly you there?"

"Sure! Are you done here?"

"Yes."

Lois ducked under the *No Parking* sawhorse that had been set up to hold back the crowd. Clark placed one arm across her back and scooped up her legs with the other. He heard her heartbeat quicken, and his raced to match hers when she threw her arms around his neck to hold on. As he lifted them both into the air, he marveled at how perfectly she fit in his arms. Flying with Lois in his arms was a feeling that never failed to thrill him. Today the sensation was mitigated by the fact that he would lose the simple trust she gave him so freely if she knew the truth.

As soon as he set her down on top of the Daily Planet building, she handed him the business card Bobby had given her that morning. "Someone is offering a million dollars for information about you. Clark and I have been working on it, but we still don't know who's behind it."

Clark nodded. "Thank you. I did hear about this, but I haven't been able to find out much either."

Her dark eyes studied him, and he was certain she could see right into his soul. She could certainly guess how upsetting his day had been, but she had no idea that she was actually part of the reason he was so stressed.

"I know I don't know you well, but I hope you realize that anything I do know is not for sale." Lois reached out and touched his arm. "You're my friend, not a story."

A stab of guilt shot through him, and he was barely able to choke out, "Thank you." Clark hesitated and then added, "Your friendship means a lot to me, Lois. More than you realize."

She didn't blush or look away the way she usually did when Superman paid her a compliment. Instead she gave him a smile that was more compassion than flirting, and he realized that she

had truly given up the last vestiges of her Superman fantasy. Her heart had beat faster because they were flying, not because of him. He should be glad since it meant that her feelings for him as Clark had taken precedence, but a tiny little part of him mourned the loss of her hero worship.

"Thank you." Lois touched his arm again, sending a familiar pang that was equal parts guilt and lust racing through him. "I don't think you have much to be worried about, really. When Clark and I called the number, the woman who answered pretty much admitted that no one who's called had anything to say."

Clark nodded glumly.

"I, uh —" Lois said haltingly. "I'm so sorry."

"For what?" Clark asked, thoroughly baffled.

"I'm sorry that you give of yourself so freely and yet there are people out there who want to hurt you." Lois gave him a sympathetic smile. "For whatever it's worth, I'm honored you'd consider me a friend. If there's ever anything that I can do to help you, well, just ask."

He knew he should tell her. In that moment Clark wanted nothing more than to drop to his knees and confess everything. "Lois," he managed to say in a voice suddenly thick with emotion, "thank you."

Off in the distance a siren began to wail.

Lois chuffed out a laugh. "It sounds like someone else needs you. I meant it, though. You know where to find me if you need me."

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Saturday night

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Clark wished he had told her everything, right there and then. He should have told her that she was his best friend and that he was deeply in love with her. He should have told her that if she would trust him with her heart, he would trust her with his secret.

He would give anything right now to know where she was — to know that she was safe. Somewhere in this city there had to be someone who did know what had happened to her. An appeal on the news had netted nothing — not that he really thought it would help. The kind of people who would know where Lois was weren't going to call the police tip line out of the kindness of their hearts. They were motivated by baser means — revenge, money or power.

In an instant, Clark knew how he could find her. He lifted into the air and flew swiftly in the direction of Suicide Slum. Bobby Bigmouth knew lots of shady people. It was entirely possible that one of them knew what had happened to Lois. It was also possible that they would be willing to make a trade.

A million dollar secret was a small price to bring Lois home again.

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Saturday morning

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There was a seam in the floor, only a half inch wide and a few inches long, but it revealed definite, delicious daylight. Lois tried to peer through the crack, but it was too narrow to see much. She poked it with her fingernail but was unable to get more than a few tiny splinters free. Lois fixed her gaze on the small beam of light and assessed her situation. She had nothing she could use to dig at the hole. If only she'd still had her shoes, she could have used the heels. She absentmindedly scratched at her wrist.

Her watch! Lois took it off and, using the metal bracelet, scratched at the seam, shaving away a few tiny splinters of wood, which dropped through the crack. She let out a frustrated growl and peered again through the crack. If she squinted, she could make out a wooden beam and gravel. She had to be in a railroad car.

Lois ran her fingertip along the edge of the crack. The wood was smooth, and she cursed herself for helping to polish it when

she rubbed it with her watch. At one end, though, she could feel the way the wood rose slightly. She tapped the crack at the edge of the rise and tried to think if she had anything that she could use to jimmy it up. She tried the band on her watch, but it was just barely too thick to fit into the crack. On the off chance that it might work, she shimmied the edge of the blanket beneath a splinter and tugged. A jagged inch-long piece came up with a crack. Encouraged, Lois worked the blanket beneath another splinter and pried it up as well.

After nearly an hour, using her watch and the blanket, she had widened the seam in the floor to two inches wide and about five inches long. Her view of the world now included definite train tracks beneath her. Judging by the plant growth, she was on a shunted line. It was obviously going to be a long process to get out, but Lois was buoyed by the realization that it was possible.

As she worked at the floor, Lois thought about all the reasons she had to get out of there. First, of course, was that she had no idea what her captor planned to do with her. She had plans of her own, and they didn't include being someone's prisoner. She still had a Pulitzer to win. She was going to be the first female Editor-in-Chief of the Daily Planet, preferably before she was 40. And, while she would deny it if anyone were bold enough to bring up the subject, she wanted to get married and have a family. She wanted to kiss Clark again. She wanted to do a lot of things with Clark, actually. She wanted to spend a weekend in Smallville with him. She wanted another walk in the rain with him. . . .

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Thursday night
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It wasn't an official date, but Clark had insisted on buying her dinner after work. All day long Clark had been watching her, his expression speculative. Tonight, if he asked her to go to Smallville with him, she wasn't about to blow it. As they left the restaurant, Lois didn't want the evening to end yet, so she suggested walking the ten or so blocks to her apartment.

"It's supposed to rain tonight," Clark said with a glance up at the sky.

Lois shrugged. "Will you melt?"

He grinned at her and proffered his arm. "Maybe. But I'm willing to risk it."

"Me, too." She took hold of his arm and tugged him in the direction of her apartment. A long rumble of thunder echoed loudly in the artificial canyons of the city.

"We could run for it," he suggested.

Lois tightened her grip on his arm. "Nah. Let's risk it."

Clark's answering smile made her realize that he didn't want the evening to end yet either. "Maybe we should walk slower?" he suggested.

They slowed to an amble. A few fat drops of rain fell, but they were easily ignored. Lois leaned her head against his shoulder as they walked, utterly content as she luxuriated in the almost electric crackle between them. Ask me, she silently willed him. Please, Clark, ask me again.

Without warning, the slow drops of rain changed into a torrential downpour. Both of them were shaking with laughter as Clark stepped into a doorway alcove and pulled her close against him. His fingers smoothed a strand of wet hair off her forehead. "I guess we should have run for it after all," he said.

"Hindsight is always perfect."

"No, this is perfect." Clark kissed her cheek and then began to leave a trail of kisses down her neck. "God, you smell good."

The world suddenly ceased to exist beyond the wide arc of his shoulders. Lois closed her eyes and tipped her head back to give him better access. "It's a new perfume. You like it?"

"Mmm." He nibbled softly at her collarbone. "What's it called?" His mouth went lower still, leaving a soft kiss where the V-neck of her shirt came to a point.

Lois gasped out, "De... Desire."

She felt his smile on her skin and then his head lifted. "See," he told her as his hands moved to frame her face. "Perfect." His lips claimed hers in a slow, deep kiss.

He was wrong, Lois thought as she kissed him back. This wasn't perfect. Perfect would have been this moment in a much more private setting. "We should go," she whispered between kisses. "We can't do this here."

"Do what?" Clark's body started a slow, seductive sway against hers.

Did he have any idea what it did to her when he held her like this? For over a month now they had been slowly inching closer and closer to the point of no return. Lois didn't think she could take it anymore. This had to be why it was called sweet surrender. Never before had she been willing to give up everything — body and soul — to someone else. Lois broke the kiss, gasping for air as her entire body started to shake with frustration because they were much too far away from her apartment.

Clark buried his face in her neck and raggedly said, "I need to tell you something."

Lois was already breathless, and his words made her that much more dizzy as she realized he was about to confess he was in love with her. She tightened her arms around him and whispered, "Mmmm. Tell me."

Clark took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He raised his head and gave her a regretful smile. "No, you're right. We can't do this here." He took a reluctant step back, out into the rain, and held his hand out to her. "Your place?"

Lois didn't need any more encouragement than that. In an instant she had taken his hand and was flat-out running towards her apartment. She was so impatient to get back to kissing him that she grabbed him before her door was fully opened, pressing her body tightly against his.

Clark kissed her thoroughly as they stumbled inside her apartment. She pulled at his jacket, yanking it off his shoulders only to get it tangled on his arms when she tried to remove it entirely. Clark took over for her and peeled off his coat while she kicked the door closed and shed her own jacket. He sat down on her sofa with a laugh and patted the cushion next to him. That was a nice idea, but it wasn't going to be nearly enough for her. Lois sat on his lap instead.

"Now where were we?" she murmured as she leaned in to kiss him.

"We were... going to talk..." he answered between kisses.

Lois shivered, impatient to hear him say, "I love you." She was sorely tempted to tell him exactly that, but she didn't want to go that far out on a limb if it turned out he was just marking time. She kissed his neck, unable to get enough of the taste of his skin. "So talk."

"I, god, Lois — " His words turned to a groan as she nibbled on his earlobe.

"What?" she giggled, infused with a sense of power when she felt him tremble. "What's wrong?"

"You make it really difficult for me to think straight sometimes."

"You don't seem confused," she teased. He certainly didn't. Just like her, he knew exactly where this was leading. His hands had already started making tentative strokes beneath her shirt. He always started slow like this, and she wondered if it was part of the thrill for him to have her insist they keep going.

"We... I...god... I need to talk to you."

"So talk. I'm not stopping you." She lightly stroked her fingernails over the back of his neck and gave him an inviting smile.

Clark made a sound that was half-groan, half-laugh. "You're distracting me."

"So show me. Words are overrated. Show me what you were

going to say.”

He considered it and then nodded. “I could do that.” He sat up straighter, his expression no longer teasing. His hands moved to loosen his tie, and her entire body quivered with anticipation. There was showing, and then there was *showing*. Show me you love me, Clark, she thought. Show me and I’ll show you. If only he weren’t taking so damn long — was he actually hesitating?

“Let me?” Lois put her hand on his so she could take over for him.

He nodded, his eyes heavy-lidded with desire. His hand dropped — an invitation for her to continue. Lois had the distinct impression that both of them were on a precipice, and she couldn’t help wondering what was going to happen afterwards. But damn, this was going to be worth it. She could tell just by the intensity of his expression as she unfastened the top button.

He licked his lips nervously. “I’ve wanted to tell you this for so long.”

Happiness rippled through her. “Have you?”

Clark nodded again, his eyes closing as she loosed the second button. She could practically hear the words *I love you* in the quiet rumble of his voice even though he wasn’t actually saying them. Her hands started to tremble as she realized that she honestly, truly, absolutely loved him. God, she was in trouble.

Lois leaned forward and kissed his cheek, feeling his jaw flex beneath her lips as he made a muted little moan. “Maybe I already know what you’re going to tell me,” she whispered.

“Oh?” His fingers combed into her rain-damp hair, gently securing it away from her face so that he could see her clearly. “What is it?”

She shook her head and grinned at him. “You say it first.”

He took a deep breath, and she found it adorable that he’d be this nervous. She wanted to hug him, just to reassure him that his feelings were definitely going to be returned.

“It’s probably not what you think.” His hands smoothed over her hips and along her ribs in a soft caress.

Keep going, she thought as his fingertips drifted lightly past the side of her bra. Don’t hesitate, and especially don’t stop. One of the sweetest, yet most frustrating, things about Clark was that he never assumed he could pick up where they had left off the last time they were in a clinch.

“You don’t know what I’m thinking,” she said coquettishly even as she wondered if she was really that obvious.

His hand cupped her cheek, tilting her head so their eyes met. “I can guess.”

She shook her head and bent to nuzzle his jaw, enjoying the rasp of late-day stubble she found there. “You think you know me so well, Clark. But you don’t.”

He obviously wasn’t feeling the same urgency that she was, so Lois decided it was time to encourage him a little. She took the tip of his finger in her mouth and gave it a playful nip. Clark let out a gasp and she couldn’t help giving him a triumphant grin. Yeah, she knew him pretty well, too.

His thumb gently stroked across her lower lip. “Sometimes you wear bright red lipstick,” he said in a husky whisper. “But you usually wipe it off and go with a more muted shade within an hour of putting it on.”

She rewarded him with a kiss, happy to know that he was paying such close attention to her mouth. “Oh yeah? What else?” she demanded.

“You claim you drink your coffee black, but you add two sugars when you think no one is watching.”

Lois made a face at him. “You’re not exactly wowing me with your powers of observation. Any half-decent stalker would know those things.”

He seemed to consider that for a moment, and then he said, “Ah, but only a first-rate stalker would know that you start out sleeping on the left side of the bed, but by morning you’re

hogging the whole thing.”

Surprised, she could only gape at him. “How do you know that?”

He shook his head and gave her a rakish grin. “Lucky guess.” Still thrown for a loop, she shook her head. “Nuh-uh. That’s way too specific. Have you been stalking me, Clark?”

Clark laughed and caught her head between his hands, kissing her again until they were both breathless. “Admit it,” he whispered when they came up for air. “I have excellent sources.”

Teasing each other about having a better source was a long-standing inside joke between them. Lois gave him a delighted smile as their workaday game suddenly took on a new dimension. “Who’s your source?”

He stroked her cheek. “That’s kind of what I’m trying to tell you.”

Lois giggled at that. She wasn’t sure which one of them was more addled, but she was pretty sure that he had completely lost all sense of logic. She was quickly losing her ability to reason, and that was entirely due to the pure need she could see in his eyes.

“Don’t change the subject, Clark.” She pulled free the knot of his tie and tugged the loosened article off before tossing it over her shoulder. Her fingers started to shake as she realized that she was undressing him and that soon — hopefully very, very soon — he’d be undressing her.

“I’m not changing the subject. I’m just, uh, I’m nervous.” He kissed her again, deep and long.

Lois marveled at the thought of Clark — a world expert in innuendo and no slouch in the kissing department — being nervous. Her fingers had suddenly become too uncooperative, so she gave up unfastening the next button and moved her hand to his cheek instead.

“We’ll go slow,” she whispered in what she hoped was a sultry tone.

His eyes closed and she saw him swallow reflexively. Then his body tensed and his eyes flew open.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, worried that maybe he was changing his mind.

He shook his head and murmured, “Nothing,” before gently, but oh-so decisively, kissing her again.

Was he really nervous? Or did he think she was? He needn’t worry about that; she had never felt this blindly eager to continue before. All he had to do was say “I love you,” and then he’d see some real action. Instead of speaking, though, he tensed again.

“Wait.” Clark shifted her off his lap and onto the cushion next to him. “Maybe we’re going too fast.”

“Maybe we’re not going fast enough,” she teased, starting to feel a twinge of anxiety that he was actually going to pull a Clark and leave.

Clark grabbed his jacket and stood up. He ran one hand through his hair as he started for the door. “Let’s sleep on it,” he suggested as he opened her front door. “This is a big step. I want you to be absolutely sure.”

And then he was gone. After a couple of dazed seconds, Lois followed him to call him back, but he had already disappeared. Had he literally run away? This was just like him, wasn’t it? Here she was, ready to break every single one of her rules for him, and he was fleeing into the night. Lois didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

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Saturday afternoon

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Lois still didn’t know. Dr. Friskin was always asking her “How does that make you feel?” and Lois never had an answer.

This tangle of euphoria and confusion was exactly why she avoided relationships. She had certainly known before she became involved with Clark that he was prone to running off.

And yet that had not stopped her from falling for him so hard that it sometimes sent her into an ice-cold panic.

Was he really nervous about taking the next step in their relationship? That couldn't be so — not when he wanted her to come spend a weekend with his family. Or had he rethought his offer? He certainly hadn't asked her a second time.

Damn Clark anyway for being so easy to fall for. Damn him for his smile, his sense of humor, and that way he had of making her feel like she was the center of his world — until something else came up. Damn him for being so hopelessly entangled in her life and in her heart that, no matter what, she was never going to get over him.

As another slender sliver of floor came up, Lois allowed herself a frustrated growl at how slow her progress was. She could get her hand and wrist through the hole now, but it was taking too damn long to widen the hole enough to escape. If there was a faster way to do this, it unfortunately was not occurring to her. Like a rat running through a familiar maze, her thoughts circled back to Clark.

Yes, she didn't have the best instincts when it came to men. Claude, Lex, Dan and host of other miscreants were testament to that. In each of those cases, though, there had always been, at the back of her mind, an unease — an unwillingness to let them completely in. Clark was the only man she actually trusted. He wasn't trying to conquer her. He was the only one who had ever put the brakes on or who had wanted her to be certain of her feelings before taking that step.

As the day wore on, Lois stopped occasionally for sips of water and a handful of popcorn. She was feeling more and more frantic as the hours passed — certain that, at any moment, her captor was going to check on her and she'd lose her chance at freedom. The edges of the blanket became torn and frayed, and she couldn't help but wonder which one would give out first — the floor or the fabric.

The light from outside the car began to fade until she had no light left to work by. According to the now-cracked face of her watch, it was almost nine o'clock. The hole in the floor was barely wide enough to fit one of her legs up to the knee through it. No matter which angle she tried, she simply couldn't get more of her out than that. Lois was exhausted. Her muscles ached from exertion and the tension of her situation. Her arms were shaking with fatigue, and her hands stung from the multiple slivers she had acquired.

Lois stood up and stretched her arms and back, hating that all she could do was wait for morning. She sat down against the wall and opened the bag of popcorn. She slowly ate a few handfuls, letting each individual kernel dissolve in her mouth so the meal would last longer. Then she washed it down with several sips of water. With her dinner completed, Lois picked up the large and jagged splinter she had decided to use as a weapon if her abductor returned. She wrapped what was left of the blanket around her and gave in to the exhaustion.

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Sunday morning

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There was a rumbling noise all around her, and Lois sat upright in alarm, her hand tightening on her makeshift weapon. Then she realized that the noise was too loud to be a vehicle. The entire train car was vibrating; it had to be a train going by outside. Weak daylight was coming through the hole in the floor. Lois fumbled for her watch and saw that it was half past six o'clock.

She slowly pushed herself to an upright position and stretched, wincing as her muscles protested. Lois ate two handfuls of popcorn and took a very long drink of water. Then she returned to the tedious task of ripping up the floor.

It was almost ten o'clock when she had widened the floor

enough to get the majority of both legs through. She stretched with her toes, but the ground was still too far away. She hoisted herself back inside, cursing her hips and swearing she would go on a no-corn diet if she ever got out of here.

Lois stood up and eyed the floor in disgust. She had developed an instinct for the boards. She could tell by the edges just how rotten or solid the board was and how difficult it was going to be to pry up. The boards remaining around the edges of her escape route were all looking to be far too unyielding.

Lois got back down on her hands and knees to take a closer look. She squinted at the end of the plank on the right side of the hole. It was possible that she might be able to work the blanket beneath the edge of the board. If she stood up to get enough leverage — and the blanket didn't tear — she might be able to pull it up in one piece.

It was worth a shot.

Her fingers shook with a barely-contained anticipation as she worked the blanket beneath the edge of a board. It fit! Her heart started to beat faster as she realized she might just get out soon. Lois stood up and stretched her arms and back, readying herself for a last-ditch effort. Then she gripped the edges of the blanket together and used all her weight to pull in the opposite direction. The wood made a small cracking noise as it started to give way. Grimly determined, Lois adjusted her grip on the blanket and leaned back with all the strength she had left. With a loud crack, the board came loose and sent her sprawling.

Giddy with joy, she shimmied through the hole in the floor and crawled from beneath the boxcar. Her eyes squinted, trying to adjust to the brilliant sunshine. The air outside was fresh and much cooler than it had been inside.

The track the train had gone by on earlier was running parallel to her left. On the right side of the unused line there was a dirt road. There was no sign of her abductor and no second train car in sight where Clark could be held hostage. The shiny new padlock holding the door to her prison shut sent a chill through her. She had to get away from this place — and she needed to do it quickly.

Lois crawled back beneath the boxcar and poked her head and shoulders through the hole in the floor to retrieve the blanket, the popcorn, and the half-empty jug of water. Then she clambered from beneath the boxcar a second time and stood up.

Which way to go?

She ruled out following the road. If her abductor came back, that was most likely where he'd be coming from. She didn't seem to be near an urban area, so she guessed she was either north or west of Metropolis. With nothing around to guide her, she decided to go in the direction the train which passed her had gone. Eventually she would have to come upon civilization.

Hopefully that would happen before her kidnapper returned and found her missing.

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Sunday morning

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Bobby had not been in any of his usual haunts. Clark had widened his search, watching for both Bobby and Lois as he scoured every inch of Metropolis for a second night. As he looked, Clark weighed what kind of information he would reveal. The name *Kal-El* seemed safe enough. He also doubted that one small truth would be worth a million dollars. He would have to play it by ear, assuming he could find someone who actually knew where Lois was. The sun had been up for a couple of hours when he finally located Bobby asleep on a couch in a suburb west of the city. He debated how best to approach him before settling on doing it without a cape.

Clark knocked on the door. The woman who answered looked so much like Bobby that Clark decided she must be his sister or a cousin. She gave him a wary once-over when he asked

for Bobby. He must have looked harmless enough because she told him to wait and shut the door.

“Clark,” Bobby said in obvious surprise after he opened the door. “How did you find me here?”

Clark ignored the question. “I’m sorry to bother you this early on a Sunday morning, but it’s important.”

Bobby yawned and scrubbed at his eyes. “Did you even sleep last night? You look terrible.”

Clark shook his head. “I’ve been looking for Lois.”

Bobby’s expression softened. “I’ve put out feelers to everyone I know. She’s irritated a lot of people, but no one is fessing up.”

“What if you offered them something in return?”

“Like what? A reward?”

“A million dollars,” Clark said, trying desperately to keep his voice even.

Bobby’s eyebrows shot up. “You don’t have that kind of money.”

Clark had to swallow to work his voice free before offering up the unthinkable. “I know things about Superman that I’d be willing to trade if Lois is returned safe and sound.”

Bobby stared at him in obvious disbelief. “You’d betray Superman to find her?”

“It’s not a betrayal. Superman said that if that was what it took...”

“Don’t,” Bobby cut him off and stepped outside, shutting the door behind him. He took Clark’s arm and led him away from the house as he continued, “Don’t do it. Go home. Get a couple hours of sleep and think about the consequences.”

“I have thought about the consequences,” Clark insisted. Bobby had no idea that his entire night had been spent weighing the cost of revelation. “Please. Superman has searched everywhere, and she’s not in Metropolis. She could be anywhere now, and I could be wasting valuable time looking in the wrong direction. Make the offer, please.”

Bobby stopped propelling him away from the house and held up his hands in an appeasing gesture. “The thing is, if the wrong sort of people hear that you have that kind of information, you might disappear just like Lois has. In fact, it’s entirely possible that someone took her for that very reason.”

Clark looked away, hating that Bobby was right. It was one of his worst nightmares come to life — Lois in danger because of her proximity to Superman.

“You know what else?” Bobby continued. “The whole thing could be a setup. Who’s to say that they’re really going to give away that million? What if you trade something for nothing? Then both Lois and Superman are screwed.”

The thought had occurred to Clark, but he had discounted it because he needed a solution to cling to.

“I’m still waiting to hear back from a few people,” Bobby said. “I swear I’ll call you the second I hear anything. Okay? You should go home and get some sleep, or you’re going to be more of a liability than a help.”

Clark did go home, but only long enough to put on a fresh Superman suit. Then he flew straight to the police station.

“Hey, Superman,” the desk sergeant waved to clear him through the security gate. “Did you find her?”

Clark shook his head. “Not yet.”

“They’re in Conference Room B. Go on in.”

Inside the conference room there was a white board with Lois’ picture and a timeline. Seeing her picture drove home for Clark once again that this wasn’t a nightmare; it was real. Lieutenant Hess was laying out for the five officers in attendance what they had — or didn’t have — so far. No demand for ransom had been made. One of his detectives had tracked down the video surveillance from the ATM across the street from the bar, and he was on his way in with it. As Hess spoke, a burly man in casual

clothes came into the room.

“This is Sgt. Hadley from the Ninth,” Hess gestured at the newcomer. “He says he was in the bar the night Ms. Lane was taken.”

Hadley moved to the front of the room to address them. “I was sitting on the other side of your guy. He had on a Boston Red Sox cap. Tall and lean, but not what you’d call skinny. Very short hair, maybe a crew cut; you couldn’t see much of it for the hat. I had the impression he’d been in the military, and it wasn’t just the haircut. He sat up straight, not slumped, you know? Good posture. Disciplined.”

“Is there anything else you remember about him?” Hess asked.

Hadley stared into the Styrofoam cup of coffee he was holding as he tried to recall. “Yeah, he had a tattoo on his upper left arm. I couldn’t really see it with his sleeve there, but it looked like the bottom of a V or something. Something with a point. Anyway, it all happened pretty fast. She knocked her drink over. It spilled everywhere. She kinda started to fall off the stool, and he was quick to help her. He said he’d take her home. She didn’t fight him, so I thought they knew each other.”

“No one was with him?” Clark asked. “Did anyone hold the door open for him as he left?”

“I wasn’t watching, Superman. Sorry.”

A plainclothes detective came in with a videotape and loaded it into the VCR. Lt. Hess picked up the remote and pressed play. The timestamp in the top right corner read “6:44 p.m.” As soon as the tape started, Clark’s heart sank. The footage was too grainy and the camera had been too far away for even his super vision to pick out many details.

“Clark Kent said he left the bar to return a phone call around 8:00,” Hess said and pressed fast-forward. The tape sped up.

“There,” Clark said as he recognized himself and Lois going into the bar just after 7:30. “Let it play from here.”

Hess stopped the tape and backed it up so that everyone could watch the distant, blurry image of them entering the bar.

“Back it up again, please,” Clark asked, and Hess complied. Again, he and Lois entered the bar, but this time Clark was watching the man wearing a ball cap who had just come into frame. “That man,” Clark said to Hadley. “Does he look like the man who took her?” On tape, the man walked up the street and followed them into the bar.

“Run it again,” Hadley asked. He squinted at the screen as the man once again followed them. “The build is right, and he’s wearing a hat, but this is lousy footage.”

The tape continued to play. People entered and exited the bar, but there was no sign of Lois. And then, just after 8:21 p.m., the man with the hat came out of the bar half-dragging, half-carrying someone. Only a few seconds ticked by before a dark sedan pulled up. The man opened the back door and ducked, apparently placing Lois inside. Then he straightened up and got into the front passenger seat. The sedan pulled away.

Clark closed his eyes. At that exact moment he had been only seventy feet away behind the building, completely oblivious to what was happening out front. He had spent nearly an hour yesterday standing in front of the bar, searching for a clue only to find none. Hundreds of cars drove down that street each day, and there were no tire tracks he could follow. The only trace that Lois had been taken was her shoe, now in evidence here at the station....

“What about the shoe Lois was wearing?” Clark asked as an idea came to him. “Has that been tested? Maybe whatever he used to drug her splashed onto it when she spilled her drink.”

Hess gave him a weary nod. “It’s in the courier box for the state lab, Superman. But it could be days, or even weeks, before anything comes back.”

“We don’t have that kind of time. I know a couple of people

at STAR Labs,” Clark said. “Would you let me take it there for testing? They might be willing to give it top priority.”

Hess frowned, clearly hesitant.

“I’ll sign the chain of custody,” Clark volunteered. “I promise they’ll follow all the necessary protocols.”

After another short deliberation, Hess agreed. Clark signed the paperwork and took the shoe, enclosed in an evidence bag, with him to STAR Labs.

At STAR Labs the news wasn’t promising. A swab of her shoe was taken, and the lab tech informed him that it could take hours to complete the testing. Clark told them to get started. He assured the tech he would stay close and check back often. He flew into the air to begin another grid search of Metropolis. First, though, unable to stop himself, he flew past Lois’ apartment. Just in case...

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Thursday night

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Lois had long since gone to bed, but Clark couldn’t help flying past her apartment to check on her. He still wasn’t sure if it was regret or relief that he was feeling over his close call a few hours earlier on her couch. For the first time ever, he had actually tried to ignore someone’s cries for help. The guilt he felt about that had compounded when he arrived at the scene of the subway accident and saw the carnage. Rescues like tonight’s reinforced for him the fact that he couldn’t give up being Superman, no matter what kind of pressure or spotlight it brought him.

Not for the first time, Clark desperately wished he could ask Lois what he should do. His parents were wonderful and supportive, but he didn’t want to have to give them the entire back story every time he needed counsel. Lois knew his job, his friends, and the intricacies of life in the big city in a way his parents never would. Tonight was a prime example of why he so desperately needed someone besides his parents to go to for advice. Yes, they knew he wasn’t a child, but it would be extremely awkward to ask them how far he could take a physical relationship before he had to tell his girlfriend the truth.

It was Lois he needed to talk to. She was his best friend. She was the first person he wanted to talk to whenever anything, big or little, happened. He needed her judgments, her opinions, and her advice. But should he burden Lois with a secret that would forever change their relationship? What if he told her everything and she couldn’t forgive his deception?

Lois rolled over in her sleep, beginning her trek to the left side of the bed. That was his side of the bed, though he doubted she knew that. So many nights he had glimpsed her reaching out in her sleep and wished that he could be the one she was reaching for. His conscience told him he shouldn’t be spying on her like this. But Lois knew full well there was a man flying around Metropolis, and she still left her curtains open. If that wasn’t an invitation, then what was?

What should he do? Tell her and risk losing her forever? Back off and break both their hearts? Stay or go?

Trust her, his heart whispered. Trust her with everything. She trusted you first.

His throat tightened with emotion as he acknowledged that Lois was willing to trust him far more than he deserved. Even after her panic attack in the car yesterday morning, she had agreed to go out to dinner with him tonight. She had kissed him and brought him back to her apartment with the certain understanding that their relationship was no longer “just friends.” Clark knew that, for Lois, opening herself up to a serious relationship was a very big and scary decision. What she didn’t realize was that having a relationship with him wasn’t the scary part; it was the strings that came with his love.

She had to know. She deserved to know. Whether she continued as his friend or as more than that afterwards was her

choice. Just like yesterday morning in her car, Clark began to shake at the thought of actually telling someone his secret. Covering up and holding back were the habits of a lifetime for him. It had seemed so much easier to tell her a few hours ago. It had seemed natural, the right time to tell her. Now, in the cool night air with no welcoming arms around him, Clark could scarcely comprehend giving someone else that much power over him. Especially when he wasn’t sure what her reaction would be. Lois might hate him. It was certain that she’d never again look at Superman with undisguised awe.

He simply couldn’t lie to her anymore. He couldn’t leave her with flimsy excuses that not only made her question his feelings but also deepened her own insecurities. He had to take that chance and trust her with everything. Once she understood what a leap of faith this was for him, maybe she’d know that telling her he was Superman was the deepest declaration of love he could ever make.

Tomorrow, he promised her silently. No matter what, he would tell her the truth tomorrow.

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Sunday night

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It was almost midnight when a lab tech came through the door and waved at him. “Superman? We found traces of a drug on the shoe.”

“What kind of drug?”

“Flutoprazepam, also called KB-509. It was invented in Japan in the early ‘70s and used primarily as a muscle relaxant or for short-term insomnia.”

“So it could knock someone out?”

“Absolutely. It’s in the same pharmacological family as flunitrazepam. You know, roofies? But this is some high grade stuff. I made a few calls, and there’s one lab in Metropolis that’s currently working with KB-509 as an anticonvulsant. It’s still in clinical trials, but that’s at 0.5% strength. The dose in her drink was around 2%.”

“It wouldn’t have killed her, would it?”

“No. It would have knocked her out for quite some time, but it doesn’t look like this was a lethal dose.”

“So whoever did this has access to the drug at a higher potency than anyone enrolled in the clinical trial?” Clark asked. “It has to be someone at the lab? Or could a test subject save up enough to get that dosage?”

“The most likely source would be someone with access to the undiluted supply. A test subject couldn’t get that strength no matter how many samples they combined.”

“You said there was a local lab working with KB-509? Which lab is it?”

“Alliance Technologies.”

Clark’s entire body went cold at the name of Herman Twitchell’s employer. It was impossible that was merely a coincidence.

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Early Monday morning

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The world seemed so wide and darkly empty, and Lois felt very, very alone. She was huddled in a cove of trees twenty feet from the railroad tracks with the blanket wrapped around her, shivering as the cool night air seeped deep inside her. The merest sliver of a moon hung in the sky, and there were endless stars, but not nearly enough light to see by. Why had she always supposed that everything was so quiet in the country? It wasn’t quiet at all. The night was alive with a cacophony of chirping insects and hooting owls. The constant background noise and the chill of the night were terrible, but they weren’t the reason sleep was eluding her.

She was going the wrong way.

The sun had set in the direction she was walking, which meant she was headed west. Metropolis was on the coast, somewhere behind her. Every step she had taken in a bid for freedom had actually taken her further away from home. Circling back carried a greater risk of being caught, so she had decided to keep going west. There was also the hope that her abductor would assume she had gone east toward home.

What time was it anyway? There was no way of telling since she had left her watch behind in the train car. Lois tipped her head back and looked up at the stars. She was willing to bet that Clark could tell time just by looking at the stars. Clark probably would have known which way was north by how the trees grew or which way the breeze was blowing. Not for the first time, she wished Clark were there. It would be so much less scary and lonely to have him there with her.

Where was he now? Did he know she was missing? Was he looking for her, or was he fast asleep at this hour? What about Superman? Was he looking for her yet? What if he actually did come to rescue her? Obviously, she'd be grateful, but...

Her mind quailed at thinking about the superhero in anything other than the vaguest terms. Ever since Friday morning, thinking too much about Superman made her feel like she was betraying Clark. Lois pulled the blanket tighter around herself and tried to redirect her thoughts. She closed her eyes and pretended that she was back in that doorway with the rain pouring down and Clark was about to kiss her. Her head dropped back as an imaginary Clark's lips touched hers ...

...And then her traitorous mind pictured Superman instead. For a few seconds Lois let go of the guilt that dating Clark and daydreaming about Superman usually caused her and wondered what might have happened...

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Friday morning

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Lois had hoped that arriving late at the press conference would mean she could skip the speeches and use the media packet to fudge her way through a three-paragraph blurb of a story. Instead, the groundbreaking ceremony for the new pediatrics wing at Met General had been delayed by technical difficulties. Even worse, she had just been cornered by Randy Egan from the Star.

"Are you in for the win today, Lane?" Randy asked, making the question sound more like a dare.

"I don't know," she hedged. "I'm only subbing for Rob, so..."

"Then you're in." Randy slapped a slip of paper into her hand. "Rob already paid his dues for this month. We have one slot left, and it's all yours."

Lois unfolded the paper and read the two words inscribed on it. When she looked up to give it back to Randy and be more forceful in her refusal, he had disappeared. She balled up the paper and stuffed it into her pocket.

Her gaze fell on Herman Twitchell. He was standing a few feet away and staring at her like she was something he'd found on the bottom of his shoe. As much fun as it would be to needle the man a little more, Lois turned away and continued scanning the crowd for Superman. He had been so sad on Wednesday night, and the despondent look in his eyes just before he left was still troubling her.

There! She caught a glimpse of red cape at the far side of the dais. The slump of his shoulders made it look as though he was still fighting inner demons. Before she could move in that direction, though, Superman disappeared behind the backdrop. Lois wondered if she should disturb him and then decided that he definitely needed a friend. She threaded her way through the crowd and peeked around the corner. He wasn't there. She moved along the scaffolding holding up the backdrop to check out the

space behind the stacks of unused chairs. She was almost there when she heard a deep and familiar voice say, "Lois?"

Superman came around the tall stack of equipment and gave her a dazzling smile that instantly made her rethink her earlier assessment of his mood. Impressed, Lois asked, "How did you know it was me?"

He closed the distance between them and held his hand out to shake hers. "I'd know your heartbeat anywhere."

It wasn't just his words that flustered her at that moment. It was the intense way he said them combined with the gentle pressure of his hand holding hers and the way his eyes darkened. Speechless, Lois stared up at him while her mind raced to comprehend that Superman might actually be able to differentiate her heartbeat from anyone else's. His hand lingered several seconds longer than was polite before he — reluctantly, she felt — let go of her hand.

"What brings you here today?" he asked. "This doesn't seem like your usual story."

Lois mentally shook herself back to being poised. "It's not. Rob Brimley had a family emergency, and Clark had the sudden urge to re-interview a source, so I was apparently the next on deck."

Superman leaned closer, and she had a heart-stopping moment as she realized he was deliberately invading her personal space. He must have just laundered the cape or something, because he had the sunny-fresh scent of a familiar soap. She was still trying to place where she knew that smell from when he murmured, "Mmmm. Desire."

"Wh — what?" she choked out. Was he making an overture, or did Superman actually recognize the perfume she was wearing?

Lois felt even more off-kilter when he winked at her and conspiratorially whispered, "Which phrase did you get?"

"Phrase?" she parroted, too surprised by the question to answer it. Did Superman actually know or care about the press corps' game of cliché bingo to get through dull photo ops? All thoughts of perfume scattered as she tried to switch conversational gears. It was that much harder to do when he was standing so close. "What phrase?"

"C'mon, Lois. I know all about the phrase game." His fingers brushed through her hair, tucking a small section behind her left ear as he leaned down to whisper, "I have excellent sources." The heat of his breath tickled across her cheek like a kiss, and then his hand moved from her hair to her shoulder.

Good god! Superman was — unmistakably — flirting with her. Never, ever, before had he touched her without having a very valid reason to do so. To have him doing it now, in such a possessive way just after he had admitted that he knew the sound of her heartbeat and the name of her perfume, left her feeling completely tongue-tied. And it wasn't just that he was being flirtatious — he was acting as if they did this all the time.

"Uh, I didn't pick mine," Lois blurted out, grateful to have found her voice again while the weight of his hand was still resting on her shoulder. "I was a last-minute replacement, so I got here after all the good ones were taken."

Superman raised an eyebrow, silently encouraging her to spill.

"Nuclear disarmament," she said glumly.

"Ouch." He made a face and gave her shoulder a soft squeeze before taking his hand away. "Tough break."

Lois shrugged, both relieved and disappointed that he had stopped touching her. "It's a stupid game, really."

He laughed — a quick short bark that seemed oddly familiar to her. "Translation: you've never won." His eyes twinkled in a tease, and she had another moment of déjà vu. But when had Superman ever bantered with her before?

"Everybody knows that Randy cheats," she sputtered,

needing desperately to say something when Superman showed no signs of leaving her personal space anytime soon. “He wins all the time.”

“All the time?” Superman pressed, cocking his head inquisitively. “Then why does everyone keep playing his game?”

“Well, okay, not *all* the time. Clark won a couple of weeks ago, and he took me to dinner. Not that he wasn’t going to take me to dinner anyway. Uh, we were already going out that night.”

Superman gave her a knee-weakening smile. “So it’s not a stupid game?”

“No, it’s definitely a stupid game.”

“Because Clark won and you didn’t?” Superman teased.

She stifled the sudden urge to smack his arm and shot back, “Clark just got lucky, that’s all.”

“Did he?” Superman’s eyes twinkled mischievously.

Lois could feel a blush spreading across her cheeks at the apparent innuendo. “Not like that,” she protested.

“Not like what?” Superman asked with feigned innocence. He suddenly seemed closer than ever to her even though Lois was almost positive he hadn’t actually moved.

Flustered, she looked down and her breath came up short when she realized she was only a few inches away from the *S* on his chest. Not for the first time she wondered what compelled someone to wear Spandex so form-fitting that the whole world could clearly make out the definition of every muscle on his body. Really, he might as well be naked. From a distance the suit was a distraction. Extended proximity was scrambling her brain. For a few seconds her traitorous hormones wondered what it would be like to kiss Superman the same way she had kissed Clark last night.

She couldn’t keep staring at his chest, so Lois tipped her head back and tried to think of something intelligent to say to him. And then the world seemed to slow down around her when she saw the undisguised adoration in his eyes.

“We should talk,” he said as his hand cupped her cheek.

“Oh,” she managed in a dry whisper. The intensity of his expression and the heat of his touch squeezed out what little air was left in her lungs. “Wh — what about?” she asked.

“Us.”

She could only gape at him as she wondered why, after two years, Superman had picked now to finally acknowledge he had feelings for her.

“I — I’m sorry. I can’t.” His expression clouded, so she rushed to explain why. “Clark...”

Superman froze and his eyes widened. “Please don’t hate me,” he whispered.

His words only added to her inner turmoil and confusion. Lois pulled away from him and took an unsteady step backwards. She shook her head in utter bafflement. “What? I could never hate you. Why would you think that?”

There was an electronic squeal and a disembodied “Testing, testing, testing,” came from the loudspeakers.

Superman winced, no doubt from the high-pitched squeal. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have —”

“Nothing happened,” she said quickly, more to reassure herself than him. “Forget about it.”

Apparently she had said the wrong thing, because he suddenly looked even more stricken. “I thought you, uh... I thought...”

“It’s not that I haven’t wanted this in the past. It’s just that I can’t, not anymore. But we can still be friends, right?” she asked. Her stomach felt like it twisted into a tight knot when he shook his head in apparent frustration.

Whoever was operating the microphone continued their checkdown. “Testing, testing. Can you hear me in the back?”

Superman’s shoulders straightened and his features took on the aloofness that was his usual expression. “We should get back

out there,” he said in a voice that was now as distant as his mannerisms.

Lois nodded numbly. It felt like she had just lost something, but she couldn’t put a name to it.

Superman politely gestured for her to go ahead of him. Lois paused before turning the corner of the backdrop to give him one last look.

He wasn’t there. He must have flown away, presumably to disguise the fact that they had been alone together behind the backdrop. The fact that he wanted to hide their unplanned meeting made it seem that much more illicit.

Lois went to her seat, her mind and senses still reeling as she reviewed their encounter. If only she could have been a little more self-possessed and a lot less awestruck. She should have asked Superman how he knew about the phrase game and worked up to the really interesting questions. Had he deliberately set out to learn her heartbeat? Or had that just happened? Did he know anyone else’s? Why on earth had he even confessed that to her? What had he hoped to gain? Why, after two years of polite friendship, had he suddenly decided to turn on the charm?

Lois was so involved in her inner thoughts that she wasn’t really paying attention to the press conference she had been sent to cover. She was pulled from her reverie when a wave of muffled gasps and murmurs went through the press corp. The small crowd in attendance was applauding politely as the dignitaries moved into place to pose with the gold-plated shovels for the symbolic ground-breaking.

“What happened?” she asked Randy Egan, who was sitting next to her. “What did I miss?”

“Superman,” Randy said the name like it was an oath.

“Congratulations, Lane. You just won the jackpot. Superman said his top two priorities are children’s issues and nuclear disarmament. If it was anyone else, I’d think that you cheated, but it’s friggin’ Superman.”

Her mind blanked for a moment. Superman had knowingly — *deliberately* — just thrown the phrase game in her favor? That made zero sense at all.

“What did I win?” Lois asked, looking past Randy to try to locate the superhero. Maybe he wasn’t really Superman? Maybe he was another clone who didn’t respect boundaries?

“A spa weekend at the Plaza,” Randy told her. The irritation in his voice made it seem likely that he’d already booked his massage. “I’ll send a runner over with the voucher this afternoon.”

As Randy stalked away, Lois caught sight of Superman shaking hands with the hospital’s director. She stared at him, willing him to look in her direction. When he didn’t, she got the sinking feeling that he was avoiding her. Why? She hadn’t asked him to cheat for her, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that he was somehow disappointed or upset. He finally glanced over at her, and she lifted her eyebrows in an unspoken question. Superman quickly looked away and then, even more swiftly, lifted off into the clear blue morning sky.

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Monday morning

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Running through the events of Friday morning in her mind wasn’t helping. Lois still felt as confused as she had that morning. She had never asked Superman to cheat for her, so she could rationalize that it was a clean win. Why had he done it? What possible motive could Superman have had? Was it possible that Superman found Randy to be as unapologetically self-centered as most of his colleagues did? It was unthinkable that her shining example of truth and justice had thrown away his ethics simply to flirt with her.

And there was the biggest question — *why flirt with her?* Why do any of the things he did that morning? It was as if

Superman had become a completely different person for those few minutes behind the backdrop. Yes, she had seen him in unguarded moments before, but that was all they had been: moments. She had only had glimpses — a second or two where she had seen him vulnerable or amused or angry — but never once had he shown her that kind of prolonged familiarity.

It had to have been on purpose. If he could hear her heartbeat, then he had to have known full well the effect his actions had on her. So why had he upped the ante by continuing to flirt with her? Was that why he had avoided her after the press conference? Was he ashamed or embarrassed? Why did he think she was going to hate him? Why flirt with her at all when he had always been so adamant that he could never get seriously involved with anyone? More than once in the past she had thrown herself at him, only to be politely rebuffed. Had the emotional strain of all those rescues finally got to him?

The eastern sky was beginning to lighten. In another hour or so Lois would be able to start walking again. She pushed away her thoughts of Superman. This was exactly why she had avoided thinking about it. It was too confusing. It was much better to think about Clark and how he had almost told her that he loved her. When she finally got home, she was going to beat him to the punch and tell him she loved him first.

For a few minutes Lois closed her eyes and imagined being home. First she was going to take the world's longest and hottest shower. And then she was going to go see Clark. She pictured him opening his door and wordlessly taking her in his arms. If she concentrated hard enough, she could practically feel his arms wrapped around her as one of his hands rose to cup the back of her head. She loved it when he held her like that, loved the way it made her feel cherished.

"I love you," she whispered out loud, acclimating herself to saying those words when he'd actually hear them. "Clark, I love you."

He'd say it back, of course. He had practically said it to her on Thursday night.

"I love you," she said again and giggled as a rush of affection for Clark swept through her. No one, not even Superman, had made her feel the way Clark did. Well, okay, maybe Superman had come close... No! She wasn't going to dwell on it. Her choice was definitely made.

"Clark, I love you." She said it louder this time, announcing her feelings to the lightening horizon. It really wasn't that hard to say after all. Dammit, why hadn't Clark just said it to her? Why play coy about it? This was a man who obviously had deep feelings for her. He had invited her to spend the weekend at his childhood home, after all. He had been insisting all week that they needed to talk.

Lois sat up straighter, trying to bring back the thought that was eluding her. What was it Clark had said?

"I need to tell you something."

That took more effort than a simple *I love you*. And then, at her apartment, instead of just spitting it out he had said...

"We... I...god... I need to talk to you."

"So talk. I'm not stopping you." She lightly stroked her fingernails over the back of his neck and gave him an inviting smile.

Clark made a sound that was half-groan, half-laugh. *"You're distracting me."*

"So show me. Words are overrated. Show me what you were going to say."

He considered it and then nodded. *"I could do that."* He sat up straighter; his expression no longer teasing. His hands moved to loosen his tie...

At the time she had thought he was going to physically show her he loved her. Now that supposition seemed silly. He could have just said it. God knows he said lots of other things instead,

things that took much more effort than three little words.

"I've wanted to tell you this for so long."

Happiness rippled through her. "Have you?"

Clark nodded again, his eyes closing as she loosed the second button. She could practically hear the words *I love you* in the quiet rumble of his voice even though he wasn't actually saying them. Her hands started to tremble as she realized that she honestly, truly, absolutely loved him. God, she was in trouble.

Lois leaned forward and kissed his cheek, feeling his jaw flex beneath her lips as he made a muted little moan. *"Maybe I already know what you're going to tell me," she whispered.*

"Oh?" His fingers combed into her rain-damp hair, gently securing it away from her face so that he could see her clearly. *"What is it?"*

She shook her head and grinned at him. "You say it first."

He took a deep breath and she found it adorable that he'd be this nervous. She wanted to hug him, just to reassure him that his feelings were definitely going to be returned.

"It's probably not what you think."

So what was it? Her mind raced, running through the rest of their encounter on Thursday night as she tried to suss out a clue about what he was trying to tell her. There was something he said that night that was off. Something that she had been too distracted to fully process. Something about her lipstick or her coffee or...

"...Only a first-rate stalker would know that you start out sleeping on the left side of the bed, but by morning you're hogging the whole thing."

Surprised, she could only gape at him. "How do you know that?"

He shook his head and gave her a rakish grin. *"Lucky guess."*

Still thrown for a loop, she shook her head. "Nuh-uh. That's way too specific. Have you been stalking me, Clark?"

Clark laughed and caught her head between his hands, kissing her again until they were both breathless. *"Admit it," he whispered when they came up for air. "I have excellent sources."*

She concentrated harder on the memory. It was there, it was just there, the niggles at the back of her mind that was bothering her.

Lois gave him a delighted smile as their workaday game suddenly took on a new dimension. "Who's your source?"

Clark stroked her cheek. *"That's kind of what I'm trying to tell you."*

That's what was wrong! It was insane to believe that Clark wanted to take a break in the middle of one of the most intense make-out sessions they had ever had simply to tease her about a source. Lois began to shake as she realized who else had claimed that he had excellent sources.

"C'mon, Lois. I know all about the phrase game."

Superman's fingers brushed through her hair, tucking a small section behind her left ear as he leaned down to whisper, "I have excellent sources."

Was that just the mother of all coincidences?

"Translation: you've never won." His eyes twinkled in a tease, and she had another moment of *déjà vu*. But when had Superman ever bantered with her before?

There was only person in the world who teased her like that on a regular basis. There was only one person who had been trying for days to talk to her about something...

"...I've wanted to tell you this for so long..."

"...It's probably not what you think..."

"...That's kind of what I'm trying to tell you..."

"...We should talk..."

"...Please don't hate me..."

In a mind-blowing instant it all became crystal clear. Lois' breath caught in the back of her throat, and she had to gasp to get

any air.

How had she not recognized that mischievous gleam in his eyes? How had she not recognized the way her body tightened with excitement when he touched her? Clark was the one who thought he had excellent sources. Clark was the one who knew what perfume she was wearing.

It was Clark who had flirted with her and then flown off into the morning sky. It was Clark. It had always been Clark. Clark was Superman.

Her body tensed. Lois tried to fight the sensation, but it was too late. Her stomach was already upset from all that popcorn, and the shock of her partner's secret was simply the last straw. Lois groaned and crawled away from the blanket so that she wouldn't be sick anywhere near her only shelter.

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Monday morning

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Clark had spent all night flying in circles over Metropolis as he searched for both Lois and Herman Twitchell. There had been no sign of Twitchell at the Alliance Tech warehouse. Clark had checked the docks, the Alliance Tech headquarters in midtown, and Twitchell's penthouse overlooking Centennial Park. Twitchell was nowhere he should have been. Had Lois' interest spooked the man into leaving Metropolis?

As the horizon began to lighten with the dawn, Clark was beginning to feel dizzy and exhausted. He had spent the last three nights scouring the city to no avail. More and more his fruitless searches seemed like looking for an invisible needle in a haystack. There were so many people in Metropolis that even a cursory check of each of them was time-consuming. He grudgingly admitted to himself that the lack of sleep was making him sloppy, but it was impossible to consider resting when he had no idea where Lois was.

As was his habit, he flew past her apartment whenever he was in the vicinity. Her alarm clock was sounding, but there was no one there to awaken. Clark caught a glimpse of his reflection in her bedroom window and realized that he couldn't continue to appear in public as Superman unless he shaved first. He flew home to take a shower, but then the blinking light on his answering machine caught his attention.

The first message was from his mom, wondering why he had not come to visit. It seemed like his promise to come home over the weekend was from another life. He should have called, he realized, but he had known there would be no comfort in telling his parents what had happened. Their concern would only have deepened his guilt and anxiety. The second message was Lois' mom, begging him to call her if he heard anything. The third was from Lt. Hess, asking him to check in because they had some additional questions to ask him.

Clark skipped cleaning up and went straight to the precinct. Hess was in a staff briefing, so the desk sergeant pointed him to a chair to wait.

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Friday morning

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Clark was in a limbo of both anticipation and dread, waiting for Lois to return from the press conference. Would she say anything? Of course she would — the real question was why he had done it. He had been wrestling with the ultimate consequences of his ill-advised actions for the past half hour.

What had he been thinking? Just because he had resolved to tell her didn't mean that she actually knew. And yet he had been unable to hold back when he realized that they were alone together. It had been amazing to drop his guard and simply be himself around her. For just a few precious moments he had been certain that everything was going to work out. And then reality came crashing down around them and he realized — far too late

— just how much worse he had made things.

He was never going to see that look of unabashed awe on her face. He would never again be her infallible hero. He owed her more than the truth now. He owed her a huge apology. He had definitely gone too far now to not finish what he'd set in motion. The secret that was standing between them was going to come out whether he told her or she figured it out on her own. Clark wondered which scenario would cause her to hate him more.

The distant thrum of her heartbeat reached his ears, and he realized she was in the building now. He steeled himself that in a minute or two he was going to suggest going somewhere private so he could try to explain.

As she stepped out of the elevator Lois looked preoccupied, and his pulse raced as he wondered if she had already figured him out. She dropped her bag on her chair and came over to stand in front of his desk.

"How was the press conference?" he asked in what he hoped was a casual tone.

Still distracted, Lois replied in a faraway voice, "Weird." She picked up the Kansas snow globe he used as a paperweight and frowned at it, sending another wave of panic through him. She knew. She had to know. She realized now why he said her flight to Kansas was on him. "Have you ever told Superman about the phrase game?"

"Why?" he hedged and half-hoped she was about to call his bluff.

Lois shrugged and set down the snow globe down. She began to straighten the stack of file folders sitting on the corner of his desk so that they were all perfectly aligned. Clark waited, his heart pounding, for her answer.

"I won the phrase game this morning," she told him. "Except I didn't really win it. Superman asked me what phrase I had, and I was so surprised that he even knew about the stupid game that I told him. I never would have thought he'd use it in his speech." She looked up, meeting his eyes for the first time since she had come over. "It was deliberate, Clark. It had nothing to do with his speech, and I never asked him to do it. It was just so weird." Lois leaned in and continued in a low, urgent tone. "I think there's something wrong with Superman. Like maybe there's another clone out there or something."

Clark gaped at her as a swell of relief raced through him. "What?" he managed to rasp out.

Lois gave him an enthusiastic nod, apparently thinking his surprised reaction matched her own. "I'm not kidding. He flirted with me. He never flirts with me. And what makes it even weirder is that I told him that we're dating."

Clark shifted uncomfortably in his seat. How could he possibly explain his actions? Telling her that Superman definitely had been flirting with her was going to bring up questions he couldn't answer in the middle of the newsroom.

"Would you like to go and get a coffee?" he asked.

"Now?" Lois frowned at him. "I have two stories to complete before lunch or Perry's gonna —"

Before she could finish, Perry leaned out of his office and barked, "Lois! Clark! In my office — *now!*"

Lois gave Clark an I-told-you-so look. "This can't possibly be good," she muttered under her breath.

"The Alliance Tech smuggling story," Perry asked Lois without preamble as they entered, "where are you on that?"

"Nowhere new. Someone had me cover the children's hospital press conference this morning," Lois shot back.

Perry sat down behind his desk. "You can knock out the children's hospital story in twenty minutes. I asked where you are on the smuggling story."

"There was one container that showed up at Alliance Tech on Tuesday that wasn't on the Customs manifest. I've been trying to get someone from either the warehouse or Customs to give me an

on-the-record quote.”

Perry crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back in his chair. “You really think they’re going to confirm it for you?”

“They might be persuaded. I have pictures of the container arriving, and Jimmy hacked into the Customs mainframe this morning and printed out the original manifest. If they claim that container didn’t show up, or add it to the manifest, I’ll have them.”

Perry nodded approvingly. “Get down to the docks and find someone willing to go on record. I want something concrete by four o’clock.” He waved at the door to dismiss her, and they both turned to leave.

“Hold up there, Clark. I’m not done with you.”

Lois smirked at him and hurriedly left before Perry could change his mind and call her back.

“Your story on the subway accident last night? I’m wondering if the switch that failed is from the same manufacturer as the one that short-circuited last week. Get on it.”

Clark nodded and left Perry’s office. Lois was gathering together her notes as she prepared to leave. Clark went straight over to her and touched her shoulder. “Lois, can we talk later?”

A faint tremor ran through her, the sensation tickling his fingertips. “About what?” she asked as she turned to look up at him. “That big step you were too nervous to talk about last night?”

His cheeks grew hot with a mix of lust and embarrassment but he continued to meet her gaze. “Yes. I’m sorry I left like that last night — truly.”

“And are you sure?” she asked, her voice wavering a little with anxiety. “You’re not going to run out on me tonight if you get cold feet?”

“I’m not going to get cold feet,” he assured her. “I’ve never been more certain of anything in my whole life than I am about my feelings for you.”

“Oh,” she whispered as her posture became perfectly still.

“Please go out with me tonight? Anywhere you want. You call all the shots, okay?”

“Am I paying you two to chit-chat?” Perry yelled from the door of his office.

Clark clasped his hands together, ready to beg if that was what she required. “Please?”

Her answering smile ratcheted his pulse into overdrive. “All right. Pick me up at seven-thirty, and we’ll go see that movie you vetoed last week.”

Clark gave an exaggerated wince to let her know she had managed to inflict a blow. “Like I said, you call all the shots.”

“I want that one in writing.” Lois patted his shoulder as she moved past him to walk up the ramp to the elevator. She pressed the button and then turned around to look over at him. “Seven-thirty, right?”

Clark nodded.

She gave him a wicked grin. “I can’t wait to hear your excuse when you don’t get there until eight.” The elevator doors opened and she stepped inside.

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Monday afternoon

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The door across the hall opened and Lt. Hess came into the hall. He nodded at Clark in greeting and gestured for him to follow. “Thanks for coming in so quickly. I was wondering if you knew of any connection between Lois and Herman Twitchell?”

Clark fought to keep his expression even. He had neglected to pass on the information about KB-509 the night before. Had STAR Labs called to give Hess an update?

“Lois was looking into possible smuggling at the Alliance Tech warehouse.”

Hess frowned. “Did Twitchell know about that?”

Clark nodded. “Yes.”

Hess’ frown deepened and he dropped his voice to say, “If I tell you something, will you promise me not to publish it until I give you the okay?”

“Of course.”

“An officer checking on a stolen car found abandoned yesterday afternoon also found the body of Herman Twitchell nearby. There was a woman’s red high-heeled shoe under one of the seats along with traces of blood on the backseat that match your partner’s blood type. It’s going to take a couple of weeks for a definite DNA test.”

It was information overload. Twitchell was dead. They had found Lois’ missing shoe and, possibly, her blood.

“Traces of blood?”

Hess gave him a grim nod. “If she was killed, it wasn’t in the car.”

“Any fingerprints?”

“The car was wiped clean. So either they were sloppy when they left her shoe there or the killer didn’t think it mattered.”

“How was Twitchell killed?”

“His throat was slit.”

“Where was the car found?”

“About a hundred miles south of here, just outside of Stanton.”

Was Lois dead? There was only a trace of her blood, but Twitchell had been killed outside the car, so it was possible that Lois had been taken out first, too.

“Do you have an estimate for Twitchell’s time of death?”

Clark asked and tried to remember if he had seen the man when he searched Metropolis the first two times.

“Sometime Sunday morning,” Hess replied. “Did Lois mention anyone else she was looking into on that smuggling story?”

Clark shook his head. It dawned on him that he was holding back information from Hess. “I saw Superman this morning, and he asked me to pass along to you that Lois was drugged by a substance that’s currently being researched at Alliance Tech. STAR Labs can give you all the particulars.”

Hess looked thoughtful. “I’ll give them a call.”

“Do you need me for anything else?” Clark gestured at the door.

“No. Thanks for coming in. I’ll be in contact if we learn anything else,” Hess replied. Clark turned to leave and then stopped short when Hess added, “Oh, and Clark? Mum’s the word. We haven’t released the news about Twitchell yet, so if I see it on the news you’ll never get so much as a traffic report from me in the future.”

Clark nodded his understanding and left the building as quickly as he could without drawing attention to himself. He ducked into the nearest alley and spun into the suit. Within seconds he was airborne and racing south towards Stanton.

A couple of miles north of the town he saw an open field near the river. Yellow crime scene tape had been strung up between the field and the highway. Clark landed in the field and looked around. The place was strewn with litter; it was obviously used as a dumping site by more people than just Twitchell’s killer. Clark lifted into the air again and scanned the river. Relief flooded through him when he didn’t find her. He closed his eyes and concentrated, listening for Lois, but he couldn’t detect even the faintest trace of her.

He began to fly in ever-widening circles, covering the hundred miles between Metropolis and the dump site and then another hundred in each direction from the field without finding Lois. As he came close to the outskirts of Metropolis, Clark could hear the high-pitched squeal of the alarm on Jimmy Olsen’s watch. He raced to the Daily Planet, using the large windows above the newsroom for the fastest entrance.

Jimmy immediately stood up and waved at him. “I’m sorry, I’ve been trying to find you all day, and then I remembered that —”

“What is it, Jimmy?” Clark asked. There were times when Jimmy could babble as much as Lois, and he was simply too impatient to politely wait him out.

Jimmy waved a stack of photos. “Wasn’t the guy who took Lois wearing a Red Sox hat?”

“Yes.”

“Lois took a whole bunch of pictures earlier this week when she was watching the Alliance Tech warehouse. We developed the roll from Tuesday right away, but she never saw any containers delivered on Monday, so I didn’t get to it until this morning. There, that guy.” Jimmy handed him one of the pictures. Lois had been focusing the camera on the container number, but just to the left of it was a man wearing a Red Sox hat. Unlike the grainy surveillance footage shot outside the bar, this one showed a clear view of the man’s face.

“Jimmy, I want you to take a copy of this down to Detective Hess.”

“Okay.” Jimmy hesitated and looked up at him in concern.

“How’s Clark doing? Do you know?”

“He’s out looking,” Clark answered. He saw the flicker of worry in the younger man’s expression and realized then that he still hadn’t shaved. All around the newsroom he could see the tilt of heads as his colleagues craned their necks to gawk at a disheveled-looking Superman.

“Thanks, Jimmy,” Clark told him and swiftly left the newsroom. He landed in an alley near the Alliance Tech warehouse and changed into street clothes. Setting aside the fact that he looked terrible, it would be better to blend in than to stand out while he looked for the man with the Red Sox cap.

As Clark passed the Receiving office he caught a glimpse of a Red Sox pennant on the wall inside. The door was open, so he went in.

“Yeah?” a female voice asked from his left. “Can I help you?”

Clark turned to face the woman. A nameplate on her desk identified her as Cindy. Needing a reason to explain his presence, Clark said the first thing that came to mind. “I’m looking for Mr. Twitchell.”

“He didn’t come in today.” Cindy picked up a pen and a pink message pad. “You want to leave a message?”

“No. That’s okay.” Clark gestured at the baseball pennant on the wall. “Who’s the Red Sox fan?”

The woman looked over at the pennant and made a face.

“Sadler. He didn’t come in today either.”

“Sadler? Does he have a tattoo on his arm? Something with a point?”

The woman gave a weary nod. “Yeah, that’s him. Dave Sadler.”

“Do you know where I can find him?”

“He’s probably off torturing kittens somewhere.”

“Please?” Clark pressed. “It’s important that I talk to him.”

The woman narrowed her eyes at him as she assessed his sincerity. Finally she shrugged. “He has a place over in Suicide Slum. The Regent Apartments or the Regency or something like that. My younger brother lived there years ago. It sounds fancy, but it’s a hellhole.”

Clark thanked the woman and left. Ten minutes later he had found the Regent Arms Apartments. The woman’s assessment was dead on. There weren’t many people in the building, and the ones who were there were downwardly mobile. A couple of strung-out junkies watched cartoons while a baby wailed in the next room. An elderly man shuffled slowly up the stairs.

In apartment 3B there was a man with a dagger tattooed on his left arm. He was meticulously sharpening a KA-BAR knife.

The long blade made an ominously hypnotic shwack-shwack sound as it slid over the whetstone. Taped to the wall in front of him was yesterday’s front-page article: “Daily Planet Reporter Missing.”

A heart had been drawn around the picture of Lois.

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Monday afternoon

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Lois had never before felt this lost. She had no idea where she was or even what time it was. She had been walking for what felt like days, but the empty landscape around her still showed no signs of any kind of civilization.

She could no longer bring herself to eat one more kernel of popcorn even though her stomach was a tight, gurgling knot. Just thinking about the salty snack was making her thirsty, but there were only a few swallows of water left in the plastic jug, and she knew she should conserve them. Again and again Lois found herself shading her eyes to look skyward. Her despair deepened each time she saw nothing but empty blue above her.

Where was he?

Clark had to be looking for her. He had to know by now that she hadn’t ditched him on Friday night. Surely one of the perks of dating Superman was that if you went missing he’d move heaven and earth to find you. By now he also had to know that she wasn’t in Metropolis. The trouble was, neither one of them had the faintest clue where she was.

Dating Superman. She had been dating Superman! Her best friend could fly and see through walls. Every time she thought about how it felt to kiss him or how (and where) he had touched her, she’d start to feel shaky all over again. It was strange to realize that she didn’t have to give up the Superman fantasy and could give free rein to all the possibilities her fevered imagination could concoct. Stranger still was the fact that she could no longer picture kissing Superman. Try as she might to project the suit into all those heated embraces she had shared with Clark, she simply couldn’t do it. Those moments were too private, too special, to alter them to fit a schoolgirl’s crush.

Lois looked up at the sky again. It was still empty — still a bright and happy blue that was a complete mismatch with the despair she felt inside. A trickle of sweat stung her eye, and she rubbed her arm across her forehead. The humidity was terrible, so she decided to take a break in the shade of the trees off to her right. She picked her way gingerly over the crushed rocks lying parallel to the tracks to the much softer fallen leaves and bare ground. The shade felt heavenly as she sat down and leaned back against one of the trees.

As nice as this spot was, if she could wish herself anywhere right now, it would be home. Lois thought about the simple pleasures she’d taken for granted: a hot shower, a soft bed, and the stack of take-out menus on her kitchen counter. As soon as she got home she was going to order the #4 special from Ming’s Palace and take a shower while she waited for the delivery boy to arrive.

Once she was clean, she’d call Clark and ask him to come over. Lois pictured opening her front door to find Clark standing there. He’d smile — that same half-shy, half-knowing smile that he gave her just about every time he caught sight of her. And she’d say —

She’d say nothing. Even from this safe distance she couldn’t think of anything to say to him. No wonder Clark said he was nervous on Thursday night. Just thinking about seeing him again was making her jittery.

What if they hadn’t been interrupted on Thursday night? What if she had undone one more button and exposed the familiar blue suit? Lois tried to imagine what her response would have been, but it was impossible. Even knowing the truth, she couldn’t picture Clark in Superman’s suit. It was bizarre that the

man who had caressed her last week could bend steel bars with those same hands. What if she said something to Clark and she was wrong? What if they weren't really the same man?

But what if they were?

Her thoughts scattered when she heard a sound, almost like a whisper, coming from behind her. Lois stood up quickly and called out, "Hello?"

There was no answer although her ears strained to hear one. And then excitement coursed through her as she realized that she could see the glint and sparkle of water through the trees. Lois picked up the water jug and worked her way carefully through the undergrowth. The trees ended abruptly at the water's edge, leaving her standing in cool mud that felt like heaven on her sore feet. Lois shaded her eyes and squinted, scanning the edges of the fair-sized lake for signs of life. There was nothing but water and the distant ridge of a low mountain.

Her heart sank as she realized there were no buildings in sight. At least she had water again, she comforted herself as she filled the jug. She raised the jug up and wrinkled her nose at the swirl of floaties inside it. Should she walk further into the lake and try again? Lois dumped the water out — it wasn't as though she had a schedule to keep after all. She waded knee-deep into the lake to fill the jug again. Once it was full she capped it and let it float on the surface of the water as she took another look around.

The lake was in a wooded valley. For half a second something seemed to glitter at the far end of the lake. Lois shaded her eyes and looked, but she couldn't see anything. Had it just been sunlight on the water? Should she continue following the railroad tracks or work her way to the other side of the lake? She couldn't help looking heavenward in the hopes that she wouldn't have to make that decision. A flock of birds came skimming over the tops of the trees, but they were alone in the sky.

He wasn't coming.

The odds were against his finding her at all. Lois decided her best bet was to continue following the railroad tracks. They had to lead to some kind of town eventually. She had at least two days worth of water now — three if she was really careful with it. She waded out of the lake and took one last look. If she ever figured out where she was, she should bring Clark back here. He could probably tell her all sorts of useless facts about how the lake was formed....

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Fourteen months earlier

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"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Clark asked.

Lois sniffed and shrugged. It was nothing more than a view of a lake from a roadside rest stop. After nearly three hours in the car, she had pulled over simply for the chance to stretch her legs. Clark could admire the scenery all he wanted; she was more interested in plotting her revenge. After the fiasco at the sewage treatment plant, Perry had insisted on her and Clark making the drive north for a story on state parks. It was such an obvious ploy to get them alone together that Lois had immediately resolved not to give either Clark or Perry the pleasure of wearing her down.

"They're actually one lake." Clark gestured at the water.

"What?" she snapped. It was a huge source of irritation to her that Perry had paired her with a fount of useless knowledge. This was one time she when wasn't going to get sucked in to one of Clark's gee-whiz conversations.

"The twin lakes, East and West? They're actually one lake. Just like Huron and Michigan."

"Huron and Michigan are not the same lake," she corrected smugly.

Clark flashed her one of his mega-watt grins. "Hydrologically speaking, yes, they are."

Lois hugged her arms tighter across her chest, hating that he

had baited her into talking to him. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Huron and Michigan are connected by the Straits of Mackinac. But it's not a case of one flowing into the other. The water flows both ways, depending on the wind and the weather conditions. They have the same surface elevation, and they rise and fall together. They're the same lake."

"Huh," she offered by way of an answer. He was damn lucky she was talking to him at all.

"By that reckoning," Clark continued, apparently as oblivious to her bad mood as he had been all day, "it's actually the largest of the Great Lakes. Well, if you're going by surface area. If you're calculating it by volume of water, then Superior is still the largest."

Lois leaned back against the car as she lost any nascent interest the conversation might have held for her. To her great relief, Clark stopped talking in favor of picking up pebbles and skipping them across the water. And then the silence between them began to stretch out awkwardly. It wasn't like when they had been in the car. Then she'd had the radio on and had pointedly turned up the volume each time he tried to engage her in his mindless prattle. Now it was beyond obvious that she was ignoring him on purpose. Even though she had a righteous reason for her anger, it still felt rude.

Should she suggest leaving? The thought of returning to the car made her feel restless. Even worse, she'd be cooped up with Mr. Cheerful again. God knows what other useless trivia he would inflict on her in an attempt to make conversation. What if she drove off without him? Lois discarded the idea almost as soon as it occurred to her. Perry constantly let her get away with a lot of crap, but he wouldn't stand for that one.

Clark came over and leaned back against the car to join her. "How long are you going to be angry with me?" he asked softly.

Her cheeks flushed from both anger and embarrassment. Did he really want to have it out here in the middle of nowhere? Fine. She could do that.

"Why the sewer reclamation plant?" Lois asked, trying to keep her voice even and failing. "Why not, I don't know, some remote corner of Centennial Park? Or some back alley in Suicide Slum?"

"I'm sorry about that. I didn't think about all the mosquitos and the, uh, mud. I wasn't trying to take you down a peg, though. I just wanted, I don't know, to keep you busy for a while."

"While you got the story?"

"While I got the story," he confirmed.

He didn't sound at all smug, and that bothered her even more. He ought to gloat. He ought to bring it up in staff meetings and make jokes at her expense, but he hadn't. And now he was being honest and forthright and even apologetic about it, and it was driving her crazy.

Clark cleared his throat and then asked, "What bothers you the most about that? That I got the story or that it was a Superman story?"

Lois pursed her lips. That had to be a rhetorical question. "You getting a Superman story doesn't bother me." She studied his profile. "Why does it bother you so much that I like Superman?"

Clark shook his head. "It doesn't bother me that you like Superman."

"Well, it shouldn't. I couldn't be any clearer that there will never be anything between us."

He smiled. "I think you'll have to be a lot more specific. Are you talking about us or you and Superman?"

Lois glared at him. "There is no 'us', Clark. There never will be."

His right shoulder lifted in a half-shrug. "There's no you and Superman either."

“You don’t know that for certain,” she shot back in haughty indignation.

He raised his eyebrows in silent surprise.

“Okay, there’s not,” she grudgingly admitted. “Not yet, anyway. But there will be.”

“How do you know?”

“Because! Haven’t you ever met someone and you just knew? You knew it the moment they looked at you? Or the moment they touched you for the first time and there was just this spark that made you gasp because you just... knew?”

He blinked, and his mouth opened as if he were about to say something. When he didn’t, Lois wondered if it was because he actually felt that way about her. Clark’s admiration for her wasn’t exactly a state secret, after all. Suddenly she felt an almost kinship with him. Here, at last, was someone who could relate to her and not find her completely pathetic.

“The first time I met Superman, after he’d lifted Prometheus into space, he came back to EPRAD and offered to fly me to the Planet. And there was this moment when he took me in his arms that...” Lois let out a frustrated sigh; she was never going to be able to explain it to anyone, not really.

“That what?” Clark prompted.

Lois studied his expression, looking for the slightest hint that Clark was winding her up simply to tease her about it later. His dark eyes were serious, and she thought again about how he hadn’t exploited her humiliation at the sewage reclamation plant. Besides, if the worst happened, she could always deny she had ever told him anything.

“I — I know better than to believe in people. In general I mean. That’s what makes me such a good journalist — being skeptical. And yet when this total stranger showed up who could eat bombs and lift space stations, I trusted him. When he asked me to fly with him, the thought crossed my mind that I should turn him down. How the hell could I be sure that he really was going to take me back to the Planet? I mean, he could have taken me off somewhere and killed me, and no one would ever find my body. But I knew — I just *knew* — that he wouldn’t hurt me. And the same way that I knew I could trust him, I knew that there was something there between us. It’s the way he touches me, Clark. There’s something there in the way he touches me.”

Feeling mortified that she had said too much, Lois tried to gauge Clark’s reaction. She had his full attention, and she suddenly realized why Clark’s sources would tell him anything. He was always so genuinely interested in listening to other people. His interest made her want to keep explaining.

“He feels it too,” she added. “I know he does.”

His forehead furrowed a little. “How?”

Heat rushed to her cheeks as she realized just how personal the conversation was about to become. But it was important, somehow, to prove to Clark that this wasn’t just some schoolgirl crush.

“He lingers.”

“Lingers?”

“I did some research. There’s all sorts of video out there of Superman rescuing people. He’s always very polite with them, and as soon as he sets them down, he stops touching them. With me he lingers. His hand stays on my waist or my arm or shoulder. I’m pretty sure he holds me closer than most people when he’s flying with me, too. There’s something there, Clark. I swear I’m not making this up.”

Clark cleared his throat softly. “I didn’t know he did that.”

“Well, he does.” Relief flooded through her that Clark didn’t think she was crazy. Her estimation of him went up a few points as she realized that, just like her sewer escapade, he wasn’t going to lord this over her in the newsroom. She grinned at him and gave his arm a friendly punch. “I’m sorry if I came down hard on you. Just because we’ll never be more than friends doesn’t mean

that we can’t be friends at all, right?”

Clark rubbed at his arm. “This is how you treat your friends?”

Lois dug in her pocket to find the car keys and then held them out to him, a peace offering. “Here. It’s your turn to drive.”

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Monday afternoon

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Hindsight was a terrible thing. Lois cringed now to think about how blind she had been. No matter how many times she had behaved like a lovesick fool over Superman, Clark had never taken advantage of the situation. Superman had never made a move on her — at least not until Friday morning. He had politely turned her down each and every time she had thrown herself at him. Only now did she realize how painful it must have been for Clark that she was enamored with the hero and not the man.

And yet, even after she spurned him last year to chase after his alter ego, he had still been her friend. If their places were reversed she would have been spiteful and vindictive. Clark had shown up after the disaster that had been her near-wedding and had comforted her through that long night while she had heaped recriminations on herself. Despite all his warnings about Lex, Clark never once said, “I told you so.”

With a jolt she put it all together. That cage in Lex’s basement had been made of kryptonite. It wasn’t until Arianna Carlin shot him with that kryptonite bullet that she had realized that there really was something that could kill Superman. No, make that Clark.

Lois flinched at the memory of Superman pale and sweaty and in tremendous pain on the floor of Arianna’s office while she dug that kryptonite bullet out of his shoulder. That had been Clark! How much more frightened and shaky would she have been if she had known whose life she was actually saving?

There were people out there who were actively trying to kill her best friend. At this very moment, there was someone offering to pay a million dollars to learn what she now knew. Clark didn’t — he couldn’t — think that she would tell?

Lois stumbled as she realized that his secret was exactly what he had been trying to tell her for the past week. He was willing to trust her, quite literally, with his life. She had been indirectly right the first time she tried to guess what he had to tell her. There could only be one reason Clark would go that far: he loved her. Telling her his secret was far more binding than any declaration of love. Telling her meant he saw them together forever. What was it that he told her on Friday morning?

“I’ve never been more certain of anything in my whole life than I am about my feelings for you.”

She looked up, but the sky above her was still empty. There wasn’t even a cloud in sight.

Once she made it home should she tell him that she knew? Or should she wait and see if he still wanted to trust her with his secret?

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Outside the Regent Arms Apartments, Clark weighed his options. Lois wasn’t in the building, so his choices were narrowed down to two: he could wait and follow Sadler in the hopes that he’d lead him to Lois, or he could confront the man directly.

Blood, his mind whispered. Traces of Lois’ blood had been found on the back seat of that car. Wherever Lois was, she was hurt — if she were even still alive.

Sadler stopped sharpening the blade and set it down. Clark’s eyes couldn’t help but follow the path of the lethal metal blade. Sadler had killed Herman Twitchell with that knife. Had he also used it to hurt Lois? Then Clark saw something that made his blood run ice-cold. He refocused his gaze, narrowing in to make sure that he was actually seeing what he thought.

Next to the knife was a business card that read *Information Wanted*. Below the words was a phone number that Clark now knew by heart. Sadler wasn't after Lois; he was after Superman.

Was he holding Lois in the hopes of blackmailing Superman for information? Or had he tortured Lois to try to get information out of her? Clark's hands curled into fists at the thought. How long would Sadler have tortured her when she had nothing to reveal? In the darker recesses of his mind, Clark's memory had stored all the times he had heard Lois cry out in pain or call for his help. All those terrible moments, all the screams and muffled cries for Superman, began to replay in his imagination.

She had come so close to death so many times, and yet he had always managed to reach her in time. It was unthinkable that he had found Sadler too late to save her. His imagination supplied the details, showing him exactly how Lois had gasped and called out for his help as she lost her struggle against Sadler. Never before had he wanted to make someone pay for the pain they had caused like he did at this moment.

Clark closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He couldn't confront Sadler as Superman, especially not if there was a chance that Lois was still alive. He couldn't risk giving anyone proof that Lois was special to Superman. In the space of a few seconds Clark changed out of the suit and hurried up the stairs to knock on the door of apartment 3B.

After several seconds the door opened. "Yeah?" Sadler asked in a bored tone.

"I'm looking for Lois Lane," Clark told him.

For the briefest moment Sadler's eyes widened in surprise. Then he feigned ignorance. "Who?"

A tremor of rage shot through Clark as he realized that Sadler was going to lie about it. Clark pointed across the room at the newspaper clipping on the wall. "You know exactly who I'm talking about. Where is she?"

Sadler shrugged elaborately. "How the hell would I know?"

"I was there," Clark bluffed. "I saw you. The police have videotape of you carrying Lois out of the bar that night."

"Why aren't the police here to arrest me?"

Clark didn't have an answer for that. Sadler smirked and opened the door wider, gesturing for Clark to come in. A quick glance confirmed for Clark that the knife was no longer lying on the table. Sadler no doubt thought that he was about to get rid of a loose end by inviting him inside.

"Tell me where I can find her, and I'll leave now," Clark said.

"Look, buddy, either you come in, or I close this door. I ain't having this conversation in the hallway."

"Let me see your hands first," Clark demanded.

Sadler let out a hollow-sounding laugh but complied, holding up both hands to show Clark that they were empty. He stepped back further into the apartment and gestured again for Clark to join him. Clark ducked his head, sneaking a quick peek over the top of his glasses, and found the knife nestled in a sheath on Sadler's belt. Sadler's untucked shirt hid the weapon's location.

Clark grudgingly stepped into the apartment, and Sadler shut the door.

"I saw on the news that the police want to talk to everyone who was there on Friday night," Sadler said. "I even thought about calling them, but all I saw was you leaving her there all by herself. You want to blame anyone, blame yourself. A pretty girl like that is bound to attract attention."

"If she had your attention, then maybe you know what happened to her?"

Sadler shrugged. "Got me. She ain't here, that's for sure. You're welcome to look around if you don't believe me." He gestured at the threadbare room. "Go ahead. You don't need a warrant."

Clark knew that he couldn't risk turning his back on Sadler. His situation was fast becoming dangerous, though not for the

reasons that Sadler might suppose. Whatever else happened, Clark couldn't risk having Sadler attack him. It wouldn't take the man long to realize something was up when stabbing him with a knife yielded no results.

"Okay," Clark said evenly, "so she's not here. Where is she?"

Sadler's eyes narrowed. "What makes you so sure that I know?"

"Like I told you, there's surveillance footage of you carrying her out of the club."

Sadler's pulse quickened as he realized that Clark might be telling the truth. Clark decided to press his advantage while he still could.

"The police are on their way here. I'm offering you a trade. You tell me where she is, and I won't stop you from leaving before they get here." Clark moved so that he was standing between Sadler and the door.

Sadler let out a nasty sounding laugh. "You're not very good at bartering. You've already told me what I need to know."

"Tell me what I want to know, and I'll step aside."

Sadler's head tilted as he sized up Clark. "So were you two dating or something?"

Were? The past tense caused Clark's breath to catch. "Just tell me where she is."

"She had a rockin' body, that one. Did you ever get a piece of that?" Sadler took a step towards Clark, his expression changing to a leer. "I did. Man, she was a sweet piece of a —"

Sadler didn't get a chance to finish. Three nights' lack of sleep combined with the anger and fear that had been pent-up for days. Clark acted on enraged instinct, and his fist met up with Sadler's nose. Sadler stumbled backwards and ended up sprawled on the couch. A flicker of worry shot through Clark as he wondered about the ethics of attacking someone who couldn't possibly hurt him. And then he thought again about how Sadler had hurt Lois, maybe even killed her. He heard Lois' last breathless gasp of his name as Sadler abducted her. Cold rage drove Clark to lock the deadbolt on the door before turning back to confront Sadler again.

"Where is she?" Clark crossed the room to stand a few feet away from Sadler.

Sadler stood up and used the tail of his shirt to wipe at the blood streaming from his nose. The knife was no longer strapped to his belt, and he was holding his right hand slightly behind him. "Ask Herman Twitchell," he said defiantly.

Clark shook his head. "We both know Twitchell's dead."

Sadler grinned. "Aw, they found him already? You want to blame anyone for her death, blame Twitchy. He's the one who wanted her dead. But he couldn't just accept that she was gone, no. He wanted a guarantee, some proof. Well, he got it. He's as dead as she is."

Clark's mind refused to accept that Lois was really gone.

"Where is she?"

"You're a broken record, man. It's getting on my nerves." Sadler lunged at him and Clark quickly shifted so that the knife slid cleanly through only the material of his shirt. The momentum of Sadler's attack sent them both crashing to the floor. Clark rolled away as Sadler made another jab with the knife. When Sadler lifted his arm to try again, Clark grabbed his wrist and slammed the man's arm against the floor. The knife skittered away and disappeared beneath Sadler's couch.

Sadler started to crawl toward the knife, but Clark grabbed him, trapping the man face down beneath him. "Where is she?"

Sadler's response was an anatomically impossible suggestion. Clark leaned more weight on him to hold him still, but that only increased Sadler's struggle to get free.

Clark flipped Sadler over and moved his arm to rest across Sadler's throat. He pressed down until the man gasped for air.

"Where is she?"

“Dead,” Sadler wheezed with a laugh.

A red haze filled Clark’s vision, and his hands shook with the urge to make Sadler pay. “Where’s her body?”

Sadler shook his head and cursed at him.

Clark applied a little more pressure, and Sadler began to cough. His hands pulled uselessly at Clark’s arm.

“If she’s dead,” Clark told him, “then I don’t care what happens to me. If you tell me where she is, I’ll let you go. And if you don’t...” Clark pressed down a little harder and felt a small measure of satisfaction when he saw Sadler’s eyes go wide with fear.

“Okay,” Sadler gasped as he ceased struggling. “Uncle.”

“Where is she?”

Sadler gurgled and spit out some blood. “Railcar. Abandoned railcar.”

“Where?”

“Upstate. Outside Avery. Let me go.”

Clark dragged the wheezing Sadler over to the radiator. He pulled off his tie and swiftly bound Sadler’s hands behind his back before securing him to the radiator.

“You said you’d let me go!” Sadler screamed, enraged by the double-cross. He swore a blue streak as Clark crossed the room and picked up the phone. He dialed Detective Hess’ direct line and told the officer who answered that Herman Twitchell’s murderer was in apartment 3B of the Regent Arms.

Then Clark left, running down the stairs and nearly tripping in his haste. He sped into the alley, spun into the suit and lifted into the sky heading north to Avery.

Two sets of railroad tracks split in the town, one going north and the other going west. He followed the northbound tracks, but after several miles, he still hadn’t seen an abandoned railcar. Had Sadler lied? Clark circled back to follow the westbound tracks. A few miles out of town he saw a railcar on a shunted line.

The only sound coming from the railcar was the ticking of a watch. Sadler hadn’t lied; Lois was dead.

Clark fell from the sky, dizzy with grief as he realized he was going to find Lois’ body inside. How much had she suffered? He wasn’t sure he could bear knowing. Clark didn’t bother with the lock; he simply ripped the door off and tossed it away.

The rail car was empty.

It looked like a small bomb had gone off. There were hundreds of splinters of wood, a couple of pieces of popcorn, a woman’s wristwatch, and a hole that looked like it was the right size for Lois slip through.

After a moment of stunned surprise, Clark couldn’t help laughing in exhausted relief. Lois had escaped. Sadler had no idea who he was messing with. If anyone could free herself from a locked train car by sheer dint of will, it was Lois Lane.

Clark turned in a circle. Where had she gone? She probably wouldn’t have followed the road in case Sadler came back. He scanned the tracks but couldn’t tell which way she had gone. She must not have gone east, or he would have seen her already. He closed his eyes and listened intently but couldn’t hear her. Clark lifted into the air and began to follow the tracks west. Please, he prayed, please let me find her. Let her be okay.

Several miles from the railcar he saw a lake. He scanned the shores, looking for Lois. At the south end of the lake, maybe thirty feet from the tracks, there were footprints in the mud. Clark flew lower to get a closer look. Whoever had stood there had been barefoot, and he knew that Lois was missing her shoes. The footprints circled back into the woods, so she must still be following the train tracks.

Clark flew back to the tracks, his hopes rising as he followed them further west. Lois was alive — she had to be. And then he heard it — the faint, familiar cadence that he had spent days trying to locate. In the space of two heartbeats he closed the distance between them to land in front of her. He had never felt

this happy, and it was impossible to come up with the words to tell her how overjoyed he was to see her. Instead, he pulled her close against him in a tight hug as he said her name over and over in a fierce whisper.

“It...it...it’s you,” Lois sputtered, pushing against his chest so she could tilt her head back to look up at him. “It’s really you, isn’t it?”

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It took a few seconds for Lois to process what was happening. One moment she had been grimly trudging forward, and, in the next, she was caught up in a tight embrace while a familiar voice crooned her name. Startled, she acted on instinct and tried to push away to see who had her even as her brain registered the oh-so-identifiable primary colors of his suit. Her lips began to form the name — Superman! — only that wasn’t really his name, was it? Instead she blurted out, “It...it...it’s you. It’s really you, isn’t it?”

“Are you okay?” he asked, smoothing her hair back so he could see her face. “Did he hurt you?”

Lois’ arms and legs began to shake and the *S* on his chest blurred as unexpected tears of happiness filled her eyes. He was really there! Her ordeal was over.

“I’m f...f...fine,” she choked out in a shaky stutter. Her numb fingers let go of the tattered blanket she’d been carrying and it dropped to the ground, puddling around her ankles.

“Are you cold? You’re shaking.” He gently rubbed her shoulders, as if to warm her up.

“Am I?” Lois started to pat the *S* but then stopped herself, feeling suddenly self-conscious to be touching him. “I can’t believe you’re here. I can’t believe it’s really you.”

He gave her one of his most dazzling smiles. “You had to know I was looking for you.”

“I did. I knew you would. I’ve been watching the sky and — wow — here you are. Gosh, look at you.” She peered up at him, feeling like she was seeing him clearly for the first time ever. Gone was the aloof mask of Superman, replaced by an expression of joy and relief that he wasn’t even trying to hide. He was unshaven; his cheeks and chin were dark with stubble. His hair looked like it hadn’t been combed in a couple of days. Had he really been flying around Metropolis looking like this?

He lowered his head, touching his forehead to hers. “I thought I’d lost you forever,” he whispered.

Lois closed her eyes, overwhelmed by the emotion in his voice. Without the super-suit distracting her, the simple, sweet familiarity of this moment came into focus. Nearly every date with Clark had ended just like this, with him whispering one last goodbye before reluctantly leaving her. Only this time he wasn’t about to leave her; he was there to bring her home.

“Thank you for finding me,” she murmured.

“You’re welcome.” His head lifted and his hands cupped her cheeks as he looked at her as though he were trying to memorize her face. “You’re more than welcome.” He shook his head in amazed happiness. “You’re alive. Thank you for being alive.”

“You thought I was dead?”

His fingers tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “The man who took you said he’d killed you. That he’d hurt you...”

In an instant Lois understood just how hellish the past few days must have been for him. She remembered all too well the frantic hours she had spent searching for Clark after Johnny Corben had kidnapped him right in front of her. How much worse would it have been if he had been missing for days without a clue? How much more devastated would she have been if Corben had told her that Clark was dead?

His thumb brushed over her cheek, a feather-light caress that belied the strength his hand possessed. “Lois, I...I know this is probably not the best time, but I really need to tell you something.”

Her heart seemed to stutter in her chest as she realized what he was going to say, how completely he was about to trust her. She opened her mouth to tell him that she already knew, but his eyes were so dark and serious that she was transfixed into silence.

"I... uh... I tried to tell you this before, but it just never seemed to work out." His hands dropped from her face as he swallowed hard. "I've never told anyone this before..."

"Really?" she blurted out in astonishment. "No one? Ever?"

He paused and his eyebrows knit together in confusion. "What?"

"Your parents know, though, right?"

"My parents?" he echoed. He took a step backward, running one hand nervously through his hair. "My parents, uh —"

"I'm sorry! Clark, I'm so sorry." Lois covered her mouth with one hand but couldn't seem to stop herself from talking. "I didn't mean to interrupt. Go on with what you were — oh. Oh gosh. Sorry." She sputtered into speechlessness as she realized she had inadvertently said his name.

Clark froze, staring at her in stunned silence as all color seemed to leave his face. After a few seconds he cleared his throat and quietly asked, "How long have you known?"

"Since this morning," she managed to whisper. The realization sank in that he wasn't denying it. As certain as she had been about Superman's true identity, it was still a shock to know she was right. "I guess you could say I had an epiphany."

Clark made a sound that was almost a laugh and took another nervous swipe at his hair. They eyed each other uncertainly for several long seconds, and then he let out a shaky exhale. "How angry are you?"

"You think I'm angry?" She stared at him, aghast that he would think she'd be that petty.

His cheeks colored and he nudged a pebble with the toe of his boot. "I just thought you might —"

"Wow," she murmured, still taken aback. A flicker of anger shot through her that he could misjudge her so completely. "Give me some credit! Not everything is a story to me! I mean, yeah, sure, when we first met Superman was more of a story than a friend. But I would never have exposed you just because I could. At least, I don't think I would have. Did you think I would?"

Clark shrugged and looked away. "Maybe," he said softly. "When I first became Superman you were pretty relentless." He looked her in the eye, and she could see the past hurts she had inflicted. "I couldn't take that risk. Not back then. And now, after all the lies I told you, I wasn't sure you'd forgive me."

"So why —?" Lois hesitated and then plunged ahead. She had to know the answer to this one. "Why take the risk at all?"

Please, her mind urged him. Tell me it's because you love me. Tell me it's because you trust me. Tell me it's because you want me that close to you.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "You trusted me first." His eyes opened, looking deeply into hers. "Once I realized that, I couldn't lie to you anymore."

"I trusted you first? With what?" Lois wracked her brain, but she couldn't think of any secrets she had spilled to him.

"With you." He smiled at her. "Just you. You stopped putting up walls whenever we were alone together, and you would just be you. Did you really not recognize that you were doing that?"

"That's what people do, Clark, when they're in a relationship."

"I never thought I'd see you that way. When we first met, I honestly didn't think anyone would ever see you that way."

Lois glanced at the *S* on his chest. "Superman did."

"That's not the same thing at all."

"I know." Lois sighed and looked down at her bare toes. "I know what you're saying. And you're right. I never intended to let you — or anyone — in. I don't know how it happened."

"But it did happen." He sounded as though he still didn't

quite believe it.

She met his eyes again. "Yeah."

He gave her a shy smile. "For what it's worth, your disguise is probably much better than mine."

Lois shrugged. It couldn't have been too great a disguise if he had seen through it so easily.

He smoothed his hair back again, almost getting it to the slick 'do she normally associated with Superman. "So, um, what gave me away?"

"Nuclear disarmament." Lois smacked the *S* lightly in mock-irritation. "What in the world were you thinking, throwing the phrase game for me?"

Clark ducked his head. "I overheard Randy Egan pumping the hospital's publicist for details on her speech. It was obvious that he was going to cheat, so I beat him at his own game. If you hadn't shown up out of the blue like that, I was going to give it to Sam Price from the Post. He was muttering about having drawn *labor dispute* as his phrase."

"Oh," she whispered as a surge of disappointment shot through her. It had been much more exciting when she thought that Superman had compromised his principles solely for her. "Well... thanks for choosing me to flirt with instead of Sam Price."

He fought a smile and shook his head slightly. "I wasn't going to flirt with Sam. I wasn't intending to flirt with you either, but when we ended up alone, well, I was working up to telling you the truth."

"At a press conference? You couldn't find a better place to tell me?"

"I promised you I was going to tell you everything the next time I saw you."

"What?" Her forehead furrowed in confusion. "When did you promise me that?"

He gave her a nervous smile. "Thursday night. I came back to talk to you, but you were asleep. I almost knocked on your window to wake you up, but I chickened out."

"Knock on my window?" Lois stared at him as another puzzle piece fell into place. "That's how you knew which side of the bed I sleep on? Just how many times have you been outside my bedroom window?"

His cheeks flushed. "I check on you sometimes — but only if I'm near your neighborhood. I'll fly past and listen for you. I only peek inside if you leave the blinds open. I swear it's not like I hover out there and watch you sleep or anything. It's just a glance."

Lois gaped at him, not knowing what to say. It was astonishing enough to find out that her boyfriend was Superman. It was mind-boggling to think that he had used his superpowers to check on her. Lois cringed inwardly as she realized she probably shared some of the blame. She had known perfectly well that there was a man flying around Metropolis who favored her windows. That was most of the reason she had traded the oversized t-shirts she used to wear to bed for short silky nighties that left a lot of skin on display. How many nights had she hoped that he would fly by and see her?

And he had! He actually had! Lois suddenly felt torn between elation that she had been right about Superman's crush on her and the strangely hollow letdown that her fantasies had been centered on her best friend and not some unobtainable demigod. In the next second her breath caught at the realization that her best friend was really, truly, actually Superman.

"I'm sorry," Clark said earnestly. "Lois, I'm so sorry. I promise it will never happen again —"

"I knew," she admitted softly. "Or I kinda hoped that maybe you would come by. I mean, I didn't know it was *you*, but I knew Superman was out there, and sometimes I did leave the blinds open for him. I guess I was sorta trying to... seduce you." Lois

blushed furiously at how much she had just revealed.

Clark's eyes widened and his jaw worked a little, but no words came out.

"So you didn't actually see me, did you?" she asked anxiously when he still didn't say anything. "I mean, if you were just glancing, then you didn't really see me. Right?" Or what I was wearing, she mentally added. It would be miraculous if she managed to come out of this conversation with just a little dignity still intact.

Clark blushed and swallowed hard. "There was this one time." He paused to clear his throat. "You fell asleep on top of the covers, and you were wearing this black... uh... black teddy. I almost flew into the wall." He gave her a hopeful little grin. "You did that on purpose?"

It was her turn to blush again. "Maybe," she admitted. She let out a little giggle at the thought of Superman so distracted that he flew into her building.

Clark laughed with her, and his smile turned teasing as he said, "I wish I'd known you wanted me to look..."

Even knowing that it was Clark wearing the suit, Lois still felt flustered to have him flirting with her. "I didn't know it was you," she rushed to explain. "I would have done a lot of things differently if I had known it was you."

"Like what?"

She rolled her eyes. "God, just about everything."

"Do you know what I would do differently?"

"What?"

"This." His hands settled on her hips, urging her to move close against him. "I've always wanted to fly with you this way."

He was so much taller than her, especially now that she wasn't wearing any shoes. "What? Just —" Lois' hands fluttered up his biceps to illustrate vertical flight — "whoosh?"

"I could get you home a lot faster this way," he explained, taking hold of the ends of his cape to pull it closed around her. "Okay?"

"Oh. Sure. Yeah, okay." Lois instinctively wrapped her arms around him as her world narrowed to only the solid length of his body against hers and the scarlet-tinged tent encircling her. She had taken liberties with Superman before — stealing a kiss or letting her hands linger a few seconds longer than was polite — but this was the first time she had ever touched Superman beneath his cape. All those heated kisses she had shared with Clark had never felt as intimate as this moment. Her cheek came to rest against the rapid beat of his heart beneath the thin, slick material of the suit.

"Ready?" he murmured.

Speechless, Lois could only nod. It felt like her stomach had been left behind when they lifted into the air.

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The sun was setting when they reached the outskirts of Metropolis. The long deep shadows of dusk were good cover to hide them as they drew closer to Lois' neighborhood. The past half hour — finding Lois, their conversation, and now flying with her — had been the most surreal of his life. Clark had never been so aware of the turbulence of flight before. Having Lois' body pressed as close as a lover's against his own had turned each jolt or bump into an inadvertent caress. The light stroke of her fingers on his back and the heat of her breath on his chest were starting to make him feel dizzy.

Clark slowed to float just outside Lois' apartment. "Almost there," he explained as he changed his hold so that one hand was free to open her living room window more fully. They drifted inside and touched down. Reluctantly, he let her go and stepped back.

"I guess, uh, I should turn a light on, huh?" Lois scurried to the other side of the couch and switched on the table lamp. "That's better," she said although her voice sounded uncertain.

Clark had never before felt so exposed in the suit as now when Lois knew who he really was. She knew, and all she was doing was staring at him. Should he try to explain again? Beg her forgiveness? Let her bring up the subject first? Leave? He crossed his arms over his chest like that might hide his disguise.

"So —" Lois finally said in a breathless tone. "Did you need to go now? Or can you stay and talk? It feels like we should talk, doesn't it? Except I'd really like to clean up a little first if you can wait that long. Can you wait? You can watch television or read or something." Her hand waved at the stack of magazines and catalogs next to one of her sofas. "Or we can talk tomorrow, if that works better for you."

Relief flooded through him that she wanted him to stick around. He didn't really want to leave her, but it was obvious that they both needed a little time and space to adjust to this new reality.

"I could use some cleaning up myself," he told her. "How about I come back in an hour and bring dinner with me? Anything you want, just name it."

Lois began to edge backward towards her bedroom. "Sure. I don't really care what we eat. Surprise me." She started to turn around and then paused. "Hey, Clark?"

"Yes?"

She hesitated for a few seconds as her gaze skittered over the *S* on his chest. "I, uh —" Her attention shifted to some point just behind him. "Nothing with corn in it, please."

Clark couldn't stop himself from grinning at her as he remembered the kernels of popcorn scattered around the empty boxcar that had been her prison. "Nothing with corn, I promise."

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Lois silently cursed herself as she walked into her bedroom. There were so many things she wanted to say to Clark, like "Your secret is safe with me" or most especially "I love you." Instead she had told him, "Nothing with corn." Her mood worsened when she caught sight of herself in the bathroom mirror. Traces of mascara were smeared beneath her eyes — the perfect complement to her sunburned nose. Her hair was a rat's nest of tangles. It must be true that love was blind because there was no way Clark had not noticed her disheveled appearance.

She stripped and got into the shower. After four days in the same clothes, it was a relief to get them off. She shampooed her hair, wincing as the suds seeped into the splinters she had acquired during her escape. Lois put a conditioner in her hair and then lathered every inch of skin. After rinsing off, she stood under the showerhead, luxuriating in the simple pleasure of heated water running over her skin.

Once she felt half-human again, she got out of the shower and wrapped a towel around her. Lois scrutinized herself in the mirror as she combed her hair. The dirt and smeared makeup were gone now, but there was nothing she could do about the sunburn. She found her tweezers and pulled free as many splinters as she could. There were a couple that were simply too deep to get; she'd have to wait until they worked themselves closer to the surface.

Why hadn't she told Clark that she loved him? It had seemed so easy to do when she practiced the words out in the wilderness. But then, that was before she figured out his secret. Sure, she had told Superman before that she loved him, but that was nothing compared to how she felt about Clark. Superman had been a crush. Clark was real. Clark was her best friend. It would be far, far worse to be rejected by Clark than by Superman. Even scarier was the realization that Clark wasn't going to reject her. She knew his secret, and even more importantly, he *wanted* her to know that secret. Just like the splinters in her hands, she was in too deep to get out easily.

Full of nervous energy, Lois went into her bedroom to get dressed. What should she wear? Something casual, obviously, but

how casual? The clothes she had tried on and then discarded on Friday night were still lying across her bed. She stared at the jumbled pile without comprehension; her mind was much too busy thinking about Clark. Had he come back yet? Was he out there? It hadn't quite been an hour since he left, but surely it took him a lot less time to shower?

After checking to make sure that her towel was still on tightly, she tiptoed to the bedroom door. She'd just take a little peek and see if he was out there. Just before she reached the door, a floorboard creaked beneath her, and she froze. She was being foolish. If Clark was out there, he could easily hear her. This was the same man who had admitted that he could recognize her heartbeat in a crowd of reporters. Hell, he could see through walls. For all she knew, he had watched her shower. Not that she really thought he would. Would he?

Probably not. Unless he was lying about only glancing when she left the curtains open in invitation. Except for that one time... She grinned all over again at the thought of Superman distractedly flying into the side of her building.

Impulsively, Lois dug through her lingerie drawer to find the teddy that had preoccupied Clark so much. The whisper of silk against her skin felt like a secret Clark could easily discover if he tried. But would he? Again, the answer was "Probably not." Still, after four days in the wilderness, it was an indulgence she had more than earned. Lois picked up a sweater and jeans from the pile on her bed and put them on as well.

When she came out of the bedroom, her living room and kitchen were still empty. "Clark?" she called out.

There was no answer. The curtains fluttered on her open window, but he didn't materialize. Lois glanced at the time display on her microwave. She still had a few minutes, give or take, until he returned. Should she dry her hair and attempt to style it? Or would that make it appear like she was trying too hard? Her thoughts scattered at the soft knock on her front door. Lois froze, her heart pounding in anticipation. That had to be him.

She forced herself to walk slowly to the front door. It's just Clark, she told herself. Forget about Superman. Forget that he flew you home tonight. Forget that he's trusting you with the secret that would make your career and ruin his life. Forget that you're wearing that teddy. For a second or two, Lois considered running back into her bedroom to change out of it but decided it would take her too long. The guy had super-hearing, and he no doubt knew that she was standing on the other side of the door from him. Her numb fingers took hold of the doorknob, but she couldn't get them to actually turn it.

He's your best friend, she continued her pep talk. Your partner. That guy at work who constantly edits your stories and insists on triple-checking all your quotes. A flicker of irritation shot through her. Yeah, she could definitely hold her own against that guy. Lois took in a deep, calming breath and opened the door.

Clark was smiling before she got the door completely open. He had changed into jeans and a dark t-shirt. He was now clean-shaven and holding a pizza box. The short sleeves of the shirt strained to contain his biceps, and Lois gaped at him in awe, blushing to think that she had been held in those arms — and not just to be rescued.

"Wow," she breathed and then quickly added, "Mario's! I love Mario's pizza."

"No corn," he said with a teasing smile. "Just like you asked."

Lois stepped behind the door to let him in. As he moved past her she caught a whiff of oregano along with the familiar scents of Clark's soap and aftershave. There was something different about him, but it wasn't until he turned around at her table that she realized he wasn't wearing his glasses.

"I called your mom," he told her as he set the pizza box

down. "I called Perry and the police, too. I told them all you were home safe but that you were exhausted and would get in touch with them tomorrow."

God, it wasn't just his arms — the entire t-shirt was tight on him. Was it more distracting to her now because she knew what kind of strength actually lay beneath the fabric? Her mind reeled to think that only a week ago she had been sprawled across his couch while those strong hands had explored her body. None of her Superman fantasies had ever been as amazing as the reality of Clark's touch on her bare skin. Her eyes wandered back up to his face. He was looking at her like he was expecting a response. What had he just said? Something about how she should call her mom? No — he had called her mom — that was it.

"Great. Thanks," she said weakly and shut the door. Lois took a couple of steps forward and then held back. It made her feel jumpy to think about sitting down at the same table with him and eating like it was any of the ordinary evenings they had spent together. Especially since lately their evenings had ended in long, deep kisses with a little petting thrown in for good measure.

Clark stood next to her table and tilted his head slightly, no doubt wondering why she wasn't joining him. Several seconds of silence ticked by before he quietly asked, "Is everything okay?"

Lois hugged her arms to her chest, suddenly self-conscious about her choice of underwear. "Sure. Yeah."

He gestured at her table. "Shall we eat?"

"Okay."

When she still didn't make a move, his eyes narrowed a little in curiosity. Lois hugged herself tighter as she wondered if he could see the teddy. She fervently wished she had left it in the drawer at this point. Seducing Superman was an abstract daydream. Seducing Clark was something she had ample experience with — and it had never required lingerie.

"Look, Lois, if you're tired, we can talk tomorrow. I don't want to —"

"No!" she cut him off and took a few shaky steps towards the table. "I'm sorry. I didn't think it would be this weird, you know, once you were in regular clothes."

His jaw tightened in an apologetic smile. "I can put my glasses on if you think it will help."

"It's not that!" she hastened to reassure him. "I like seeing you like this. I like knowing that I'm one of the few people who get to see you like this. I love, uh —" Her stomach growled, which only made her already-shaky knees feel even weaker. What little nerve she had worked up disappeared completely. "We should eat before it gets cold."

He pulled out a chair for her. "Ladies first."

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Clark had never felt this happy before. Never in his life had he been more content than this moment when Lois was alive and well and knew his secret and the future stretched out, full of promise, in front of them. After the waking nightmare of the past few days, it was amazing to be sitting here in her apartment, watching her almost obscene glee as she devoured a slice of pizza.

More than anything, he wanted to pull her into his arms and never let her go again. He could have happily cradled her in his arms and walked all the way back to Metropolis, just to be able to hold her for so many uninterrupted hours.

Apparently sated, Lois tossed her crust back into the pizza box. "How did you know where to find me?" she asked.

"You lost one of your shoes outside the bar. The lab found traces of a drug called KB-509 on it. It seemed like more than a coincidence that Allied Technologies is developing KB-509."

"Herman Twitchell was behind it?"

"Twitchell and one of his employees, a guy named Dave Sadler. A bank camera across the street caught a man wearing a baseball cap taking you out of the bar. The bartender and an off-

duty cop both remembered that he had worn a Red Sox hat. You took a picture of a guy wearing a Red Sox hat when you were watching Alliance Tech's warehouse. I tracked Sadler down, and he confessed."

Lois paused in selecting a new slice of pizza. "Just like that?" she asked skeptically. "You asked and he spilled? Did you show up on his doorstep as Superman?"

"No," Clark choked out a denial. Leave it to Lois to ask the one question he didn't want to answer. "I didn't talk to him as Superman."

Her eyes narrowed, and he knew she sensed blood in the water. "And...?"

Clark pushed away his plate, his appetite gone. The food he had consumed felt like a lead weight in his stomach. Lois' earlier skittishness had worried him, but she had relaxed once they started eating. Now those few minutes were going to be nothing but a brief and happy memory. Once she knew the whole truth, she was going to want a lot of distance between them, and he could hardly blame her.

"I did something terrible," he admitted softly. "I broke all my rules for you."

She furrowed her forehead. "What rules?"

Clark scrubbed his face with his hands as the memory of the agony of not knowing where she was washed over him again. "I...god, Lois, I was so lost without you. I would have done anything. You were gone. Just gone. There was no demand for a ransom, nothing. After two days of searching I went to Bobby Bigmouth and offered to trade my secret —"

"You told Bobby?" Lois went wide-eyed in disbelief.

"No. I asked him to find someone who knew where you were, and I'd give them information on Superman so they could claim that million-dollar reward. He flat out refused to help me. He said it wasn't worth the risk."

"He was right. Superman is worth so much more than I am."

"Not to me," he told her.

Her cheeks colored slightly, and then she leaned forward, not about to be distracted from the real point of his story. "So you didn't tell Bobby. What rules did you break?"

Overwhelmed with shame, Clark looked down at his clenched hands. "I hit Sadler," he confessed. "I hit him because he told me that he had ra —" He couldn't say the word. Even now, when he knew it wasn't true, the claims Sadler had made caused Clark's blood to turn hot with rage. "He told me he had hurt you. He boasted about it, about how much you had suffered, so I broke his nose."

Clark dared a glance at Lois only to find her expression unreadable. Did she hate him now? Did she understand how many years of self-discipline had been tossed aside in a moment of anger? Would it scare her to know that, even now, buried beneath his guilt there was still a part of him that took satisfaction in having hurt Dave Sadler?

He needed to see some kind of reaction from Lois, needed to know what she thought of her hero now, so he looked her straight in the eyes as he continued to explain, "Even after his nose was broken, he still wouldn't tell me anything except that you were dead. I lost it. I tortured him until he told me where you were."

Lois still hadn't moved, but she didn't seem frightened either. Her eyes gazed steadily at him. After several agonizingly long seconds that felt like an eternity, she finally spoke. "Tortured him how?"

"I threatened to kill him."

She frowned slightly. "That's it? You broke his nose, and then you threatened to kill him? What else?" Lois pressed. "Did you break his legs or burn holes in him?"

"You don't think breaking his nose was enough?" he asked in astonishment.

Lois waved a dismissive hand. "Clark, people break each

other's noses all the time. It doesn't take super-strength to do that. If you had used super-strength, wouldn't it have killed him?"

"You don't understand. I lost control and I acted on impulse. I wanted to kill him. I wanted to hurt him as much as he said he had hurt you. I wanted to make him pay."

Lois leaned forward, her eyes looking straight into his. "So why isn't he dead? If you had really lost control, wouldn't he be nothing but a smear on the wall right now?" Her expression softened but was no less earnest. "I think what really happened is that your instincts held you back."

Clark gaped at her — this was a possibility he hadn't considered. "I don't know. Maybe," he whispered.

"If you hadn't strong-armed that guy, do you know where we'd be right now? You'd be flying around Metropolis looking like death warmed over, and I'd be eating stale popcorn out in the middle of nowhere. You did what you had to do, Clark. You did what anyone would have done in the heat of the moment."

"I —"

She held up one hand to forestall any disagreement. "Don't argue with me, Clark. You know I'm right. If it had been Jimmy who broke his nose and threatened to kill him, would you think he was in the wrong?"

Clark let out a half-laugh at the thought of Jimmy fighting with Sadler. The laugh disappeared as Clark realized Sadler would have no doubt used his knife to kill Jimmy. Sadler had certainly meant to kill him when he invited him inside. Lois was right — the only use of his superpowers had been when he'd moved faster than Sadler to get rid of the knife.

Relief flooded in to replace the guilt he had been feeling. Mixed with the relief was another emotion, one he had only ever felt in small doses until just this moment. It took him a few seconds to find a word for it and the best he could do was "whole." For the first time in his life he felt whole. This was what he had longed to have for so long. He'd wanted a friend, a confidant, someone who wasn't bound by familial ties to encourage him. He knew Lois well enough to know that she would give him the unvarnished truth. She had certainly never held back her opinions in the past, and he could trust her now.

The weight of years of secrecy seemed to fall from his shoulders in an instant. Lois knew him. She knew him better than anyone ever had or ever would. There was nothing he couldn't tell her. There was nothing to hold back from her anymore. For the first time ever, he was completely free.

"Thank you," he whispered in a voice hoarse with emotion.

"For what? I can appreciate that you have to be careful, Clark, but —"

Clark jumped in to change the topic. He didn't want to talk about Sadler ever again if he could help it. "Tell me something: how did you get out of that railcar?"

Lois shrugged. "There was a crack in the floor, so I pulled the wood up until the hole was big enough to squeeze through."

Her attempt at insouciance was ruined by a pleased little grin, but Clark was still amazed by her ingenuity. She was amazing, even more amazing than Superman in his opinion. Superpowers were cheating. Everything Lois accomplished was through sheer will and determination.

"You did that with your bare hands?" Clark reached over and took hold of her hands. They were so small and yet so capable. He looked at them in wonder. She had typed out award-winning stories with those hands. She had saved his life, using a letter-opener to remove a Kryptonite bullet. She had run her fingers through his hair, had slapped his arm in irritation, and had torn up the floor of a railroad car with them.

"Not exactly. I used a blanket and my watch, too."

Their eyes met and he found himself breathless. "You never cease to amaze me, Lois," he told her earnestly. "I love you."

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He loved her! Lois had known he did, known that he *had* to, but it was still thrilling to actually hear him say the words.

“I — ” Once again, her lips just wouldn’t form the words that her entire being was practically shouting. All she had to do now was repeat the words back to him, but she couldn’t do it. Instead her hands started to shake, and a cold sweat broke out on her skin.

“I...” she tried again, and finally words poured out of her. “I wish I would have had some gloves, you know? I got lots of splinters and...uh...I think I still have a few I couldn’t get out.”

Clark lifted her hands, turning them over to inspect her palms. His forehead furrowed in concentration as his eyes narrowed. There was the slightest sensation of heat, and then he pressed a gentle kiss into her left palm. “There,” he whispered and gave her a lopsided smile. “All gone.”

Lois swallowed hard but still couldn’t work her voice loose. She wanted to apologize and tell him that she really, truly loved him back, but all she could choke out was, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Clark gave her a dazzling smile that did nothing to help her regain her equilibrium. His fingers traced a delicate pattern on the palm of her left hand, ratcheting even tighter the coil of excitement low in her belly. His eyes darkened, and her breath caught as she recognized she wasn’t the only one feeling the primal pull of desire.

“Why me?” she managed to whisper. “Out of all the people in the world? You could have anyone you want. So why me?”

“Haven’t you ever met someone and you just knew? You knew it the moment they touched you and there was a spark?” As he spoke, one hand lifted to cup her cheek, and his thumb traced over her lower lip to emphasize the word “spark.”

Lois couldn’t stop herself from gasping. Spark? Was he crazy? That wasn’t a spark. That was a full-blown five-alarm fire that was one kiss away from combustion. Then it dawned on her that she had once told him the same thing about Superman.

“Maybe,” she allowed with a sheepish grin. “But you didn’t really answer my question. Why me?”

“You’re Lois Lane,” he said like that could explain everything. He leaned forward, and for a breathless couple of seconds, she was sure Clark was going to kiss her. Instead his hand dropped from her cheek, and his expression turned thoughtful.

“I knew who you were before we ever met. I’d read your work, and I was hoping I might catch a glimpse of the famous Lois Lane when I came to interview with Perry. And then this drop-dead gorgeous woman came storming into his office, full of energy and drive.” He smiled at the memory. “God, you were intimidating. Especially after you shot down all my attempts at charm and flat out told me not to fall for you.”

Lois flushed. “It wasn’t you. I’m like that with anyone I don’t know.”

“I didn’t know you either,” Clark said wistfully. “And yet my instincts said that someday I would trust with everything.” He gave her a rueful grin. “I honestly thought I was delusional until the night we got tied up in the EPRAD hanger and you told me about how you’d broken all your rules. That was when I realized you were hiding in plain sight, just like me.”

“Then I guess my disguise isn’t better than yours. You saw through me first.” After only a few days, her mind noted glumly. He had seen through her practically since the beginning.

“Only because you let me. If you hadn’t confessed about breaking all your rules, I might still think that Mad Dog Lane was the real you.”

“I hate that people call me that,” she whispered. “I’m not a bitch, not really.”

Clark shook his head. “I never said you were.”

Lois searched her memory. “You said I was snob once.”

“I’ll bet you were being a snob at the time,” he gently shot

back. “But that’s not the same thing.”

“No,” she said in a choked voice. “It’s not.”

He stifled a yawn, and she realized how exhausted he must be. “When was the last time you slept?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Lois knew she should tell him to go home and get some rest, but she didn’t want to see him leave. He couldn’t leave before she’d had the chance to tell him that she loved him. She reached over and touched his cheek. His eyes closed, and a faint smile played at the corners of his mouth.

“You should get some sleep,” she said softly.

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Disappointment shot through Clark. Yes, he was tired. God knows he had tapped the last reserves of super-strength flying back to Lois’ apartment earlier that night. She was absolutely right — he needed sleep. But his need to be near her was just as critical. It was only the realization that she had to be just as exhausted that made him summon one last show of willpower.

“All right,” he whispered and opened his eyes. “I’ll call you in the morning.”

Clark stood up and Lois joined him. He heard her pulse ratchet into a gallop just before she quietly said, “I wasn’t asking you to leave.”

He froze, his mind racing through scenarios ranging from his sleeping on her couch to a drowsy spooning in her bed to a gloriously naked Lois in his arms. Stuck on that last fantasy, all he could murmur was, “Oh.”

She clearly had no idea about his heated thoughts because she gave him a sultry smile and said, “If a girl can’t trust Superman in her bed, who can she trust?”

Clark had to clear his throat to find his voice. “You’re the only woman in the world who shouldn’t trust Superman in your bed. Especially if you’re going to wear that teddy.”

Her eyes widened in astonishment. “You looked!?”

He gave her a small, smug smile. “That’s a scoop-neck sweater. Of course I looked.”

“Oh my god!”

“That was exactly what I thought.” Clark nodded in feigned solemnity.

Lois blushed and clapped one hand to the neckline of her sweater as if to prevent any future sightings. The gesture made Clark smile. It was rather endearing that she was trying to hide something that a week ago she had actively encouraged him to explore.

She must have had the same thought because she rolled her eyes and said, “Well, I guess it’s not like you haven’t seen that before.” Her hand fluttered away and her shoulders straightened, as if daring him to look.

His gaze traced the neckline of her sweater and then moved up to that spot on her neck where she was ticklish. He already knew how her skin would taste. He could hear the low, throaty laugh she’d make when he kissed her there. “I should go now,” he whispered regretfully.

“No, please?” She took a step closer to him, close enough that they were almost touching. Her head tipped back, her dark, luminous eyes gazing up at him. “Please stay.”

It suddenly felt like he was underwater. His entire body felt slow and heavy. He had said the words in jest, but she really shouldn’t trust him at this moment. “Lois,” he started to warn her, but her proximity was intoxicating, and he really, really wanted to stay.

“Please? I...I need to talk to you.” Her hand took hold of his wrist, and he followed her, unresisting, to the sofa. Lois sat down and he joined her, his senses drinking in the sight, smell and sound of her. Her heart was racing, and her movements were all shaky, giving away how nervous she was even as she snuggled up close against him. “Is this okay?” she asked.

Clark closed his arms around her, and his cheek came to rest on top of her head. “It’s perfect,” he murmured.



Lois shivered closer against him, remembering the last time he had told her, “It’s perfect.” They had been making out in a building’s alcove while the rain poured down. This close to him, it was easy to slip into the memory of his kisses. Maybe it would be easier to kiss him first and then tell him that she loved him? Or would that just make her more nervous?

Her hand smoothed over his chest, stopping where the *S* would be. It was still so odd to think that Clark had been Superman all along. It was even more strange and amazing to know that Clark was an alien. The one person in this world she could relate to better than anyone else was the one person in this world who wasn’t supposed to be here. Was it fate or luck that had brought them together? Did it really matter now? He was here; she could hear his heartbeat as well as feel it beneath her fingertips.

“Can you really tell my heartbeat from anyone else’s?” she asked in a whisper.

“Yes,” he admitted. The quiet rumble of his voice tickled against her cheek.

“Did you...uh...did you memorize it on purpose?”

“No, not on purpose. It was a gradual thing, really. I didn’t fully realize I could do it until that time you were locked in a bank vault, and the only way to find you was to listen for you. After that I sometimes found myself listening to you without really meaning to do so. I’ll make an effort not to if it bothers you.”

“It doesn’t bother me,” she said quietly. “I was just wondering.” Lois closed her eyes, listening to the strong, steady cadence of his pulse. The sound was comforting, but maybe that was because she was snuggled up against him. She wondered what it would be like to listen to the same sound from across the room. What would it be like to be able to eavesdrop so effortlessly on someone else? No wonder Clark had made rules for himself.

“Clark?”

“Hmm?”

“What other rules did you break? You said you broke all your rules.”

She felt him tense. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly before he spoke. “All my life, what kept me safe was hiding. Having superpowers isn’t the kind of thing you want anyone else to know. So I had rules to keep me and my parents safe. Rule number one was to never tell anyone.”

“You broke that one today,” she whispered.

“You needed to know the truth. There was no way our relationship could advance if you didn’t know the truth.”

Lois suppressed a grin. It would be so easy to get sidetracked here, but she really wanted to know what his other rules were.

“What’s rule number two?”

“I could never use my powers to hurt anyone.”

“We’ve established that you didn’t break that rule. Number three?”

“I could never use my powers if anyone was watching. Becoming Superman was a way of circumventing that rule. Actually, becoming Superman broke more than just that rule.”

“Oh? How’s that?”

He shifted restlessly. “Rule number four was to never stay in one place for longer than a few months.”

“Yeah, you definitely broke that one.”

“Only because I broke rule number five. Once I broke that one, the rest was pretty much inevitable.”

“What’s rule number five?”

“Don’t fall in love.”

“Really?” Lois lifted her head to look at him as shock waves

reverberated through her. “You were never going to fall in love with anyone?”

“It could get complicated if I did.”

“Complicated? You’re saying that you became Superman so you could stay in Metropolis because you’d fallen in love with me?”

“See? Complicated.”

Lois was speechless. He really had broken almost all his rules because of her. This was even more amazing than wondering if Superman gave up his principles for her. Clark Kent had gambled everything for her. He had donned a cape and tights and submitted to two years of put downs because he had known she wasn’t really Mad Dog Lane. All of it, everything that had happened, he had done it for her.

“I love you.” The words were barely a murmur, and any other man might not have heard them. She knew he did because he smiled.

“Clark, I love you,” she said the words again, delighted by both his reaction and the easy way the words rolled off her tongue. “I wanted to tell you earlier, but I kept chickening out. I don’t know why. It’s not nearly as scary as I thought it would be. I love you.” She kissed his bottom lip. “I love you.” She kissed him again, longer this time. “Thank you for breaking all your rules, Clark.”

“Only for you, Lois. Only for you.” Clark kissed her back, and she opened her mouth, deepening the kiss even as she moved onto his lap. She couldn’t get close enough to him.

When the need for oxygen exceeded her need for Clark, she reluctantly broke the kiss. Lois giggled as he continued to leave kisses on her forehead and cheek.

“Mmm. Do you remember what my rules were?” she asked breathlessly.

“Never get involved with a story.” He kissed the tip of her nose.

“I break that one all the time,” she admitted with a laugh.

His mouth moved, leaving a kiss on her jaw. “Never let someone else get there first.”

“It’s happened.” Lois tipped her head back to give him better access.

“Never sleep with someone you work with.” He kissed her neck, and Lois couldn’t help her reaction at the sensation. Clark knew her so well. He always found that exact spot that sent a rush of heat through her and made her laugh at the same time.

“I’m about to break that one,” she confessed.

Clark stood up, cradling her in his arms. “Yes. You definitely are.”

THE END

And now a word from our sponsor:

My thanks to everyone who read this on the boards and took the time to offer up feedback. It’s a well-documented fact that stories get posted because their authors have an insatiable need to know what the readers think. I feel very fortunate to have such dedicated (and persistent) readers.

I owe a world of thanks to the wonderful ladies who helped me at varying stages of posting this story. To Kate, Emily and Sarah I say “THANK YOU!” Thank you for reading and for commenting and for all the encouragement you gave me. It made a huge difference, and my only regret is that I can’t find enough words to express my gratitude.

It is not exaggerating at all to say that I never would have gotten this story done without the heroic efforts of Brenda. She was with me from the first — nudging me along and patiently reading (and re-reading) parts until I got them nailed down. Brenda, I thank you for your sense of humor and all the snarkilicious comments that made me laugh. Thank you for the

insights that saved this story and kept me on track. Thanks, really, for just being you. Mmmmmwwaaaahhh! (It's okay. You can wipe your cheek off. I won't be offended. <g>)