

Not So Ordinary After All

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Rated: PG

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Summary: In a continuation of the author's story "Ordinary Like This," following an angry revelation that takes place at the end of "Barbarians at the Planet," Lois, with a little help from her friends, begins to see through Lex Luthor.

A/N: This is a continuation of my story: Ordinary Like This – an angry revelation that took place at the end of BaTP. You should probably read that before you read this.

There are anachronisms here — I've got Lois and Clark using the WAN and all other sorts of technology that didn't exist commonly when the show aired. So sue me.

"Pull the car up to the curb. That's fine." Lex Luthor impatiently opened the door to the limousine before the driver could get out and come around. The jewelry box in his pocket was a reminder of the goal before him. The cup of freshly brewed decaf, fat-free double latte and raspberry white-chocolate scone in his hands were just ammunition he would use in one more battle toward that goal.

He had a spring in his step and a smile on his charming face that caused people to give way for him and admire him as he passed. Those who knew who he was looked on in awe that the man had been seen in their very apartment building — storing this tidbit of gossip as a bragging right for years to come. The few who didn't know who he was simply smiled in admiration of the handsome, confident man as he passed.

Even Mrs. Krebs, the occupant of apartment 108, was grudgingly impressed with the gentleman caller of her neighbor that morning. He was quite an improvement over many of the riff-raff and scoundrels that darkened the door of Lois Lane.

Lex knocked softly on the door of apartment 105. He had a key for the door — he had a pass key for the entire building since he had purchased it on a whim a few weeks previously. But he felt that Lois would need her privacy. For now.

He had maneuvered deals that shook the world. Financial institutions quaked where he tread. Princes bowed before him. Presidents changed policies for him.

But Lois Lane remained hesitant.

He offered her the world on a plate. Anything she wanted — power, prestige — it could all be hers. Could have been hers for days now.

And still, she remained hesitant.

Lex smiled and shook his head slightly at the sheer perversity of her. Perhaps that was what made him love her — the fact that she remained unattainable. Perhaps, once he had conquered Mount Lane, he could have peace in his soul again. Interestingly, a large part of him hoped that wasn't the case. He had come to enjoy being in love.

After what seemed to be an eternity, he heard the locks begin to tumble. The door opened slowly, and he saw his prize, his beauty. His Lois.

Though it was obvious she was fresh from the shower, she was rumpled, dressed in jeans and a shirt that had obviously seen better days. Though he didn't classify himself as a snob, Lex knew that appearance was an important building block in reputation. He wouldn't have his reputation besmirched. It wasn't

that Lois didn't know how to dress. The red dress from the party, the white dress from her lounge act, the burgundy dress from their night in Rome: they all stood in his mind as a testament to the hidden beauty of Lois. That she was an exquisite diamond in the not-always rough was just another facet of Lois that fascinated Lex.

She smiled distantly as she opened the door wider to let him in. Even in her obviously exhausted state, she didn't miss the prying eyes of her neighbor.

"Good morning, Mrs. Krebs," Lois said in a resigned voice as she closed the door. She heard the door to 108 close sharply, as though Mrs. Krebs was insulted at the insinuation that she might be spying on her neighbors. Lois didn't hold the woman's curiosity against the elderly lady. All things being equal, Lois liked the old bat. She figured they had a lot in common and wondered if she'd end up just like Mrs. Krebs one day — unleashing her endless and insatiable quest for tidbits of information on her unsuspecting neighbors. As she pondered the situation, Lex took in the state of her apartment.

There were files divided into piles, printouts, calendars, and a notebook all strewn in a somehow organized way onto the kitchen/dining room table. Her computer wasn't powered on but was instead plugged in, charging its battery. There were a few cups and glasses — some with liquid but most empty.

There was an overall energy in the disorganization that raised Lex's curiosity. Lois was working on a story, but it wasn't for LNN. Her assistant would have informed him if Lois were working on anything new.

"Lois, darling, what on earth have you been up to? Am I working you too hard over at LNN? Or is your office there not comfortable enough for you to work in?"

Lois blushed slightly at the reminder that it was he who paid her salary, and now she was investigating him. She didn't know if she'd find anything, but the mere fact that she now suspected there might be something behind Clark's accusations made her feel nervous.

"Oh, it's nothing, Lex. At least, I don't think it's anything. I had some ideas on some stuff I had from back at the Planet. If it panned out, I thought I'd take it in to work. If not, well, no harm in me spending my off hours honing my skills, is there?" Going on the offensive was a tactic that had always worked well for Lois. She arched a brow at Lex as she smiled at him.

"No, no. Of course not, my dear. Your free time is obviously your own. But I must say, if I'd known you were burning the midnight oil, I would have made this caffeinated." Smiling, he handed her the cup. He felt an almost animalistic appreciation for the sensual way in which she closed her eyes inhaled the scent of the brew. Gods, she was beautiful.

"How is it that you knew exactly what I needed this morning, Lex?" Lois asked after taking a small sip of the perfect coffee.

Lex walked to the kitchen and pulled a small plate from a cupboard. He prided himself on the fact that he didn't go out of his way to look at her notes. Knowing she would be bothered by his overt interest in her incomplete work, he made a mental note to have Nigel check up on what Lois was doing. She had gotten herself into trouble so many times in the past with her work, and Lex couldn't bear the idea of her being in trouble again.

"If you'd let me, Lois." Placing the still slightly-warm scone on the plate, Lex deposited it gently on the counter before returning stand close to her. "If you'll let me... I'll always find you just what you need. Anything in my power." He stared into her eyes, using his finger to gently but firmly hold her chin when she blushed and started to pull away.

He slowly lowered his mouth to place a gentle, almost reverent kiss beside her lips and then another just below her ear. Then he pulled back and drew himself up.

"But I hate to see you working yourself to the bone on your

days off. Should I send an assistant your way? After all, I want my prize anchor looking her beautiful best on Monday.”

Lois let out the breath she'd been holding and shook her head. It was so hard when Lex got too close to her, though she couldn't quite put her finger on why. He never felt out of control. From the kisses they'd shared, she knew he was skilled. He never unleashed the passion he seemed to hold for her, he just gave her glimpses of it. He didn't make her uncomfortable.

On the other hand, she didn't see stars when he kissed her either. From the few times she had kissed Clark, she knew stars were definitely on the agenda. Stars, clusters, galaxies... And something in the admission of this made her feel a little more free. Smiling, she gathered her thoughts.

“No, Lex. I'll be fine. Besides, there's nothing your makeup artists can't cover up. Except a few pounds. Which I'll gain if you keep plying me with these wonderful pastries and treats.”

“Anything for you, Lois.” Lex repeated, but somehow the moment he had striven to create was gone.

Lex had watched Lois pull away from him mentally. Something was building her barriers again, those barriers he had worked so hard to demolish. He wanted Lois confused, dependent on him. Seeing the sparkle in her eyes made him uneasy.

He hadn't gotten where he was without learning how to read faces. He read hers now and didn't like what he saw. There was an awareness, a confidence that he hadn't seen in weeks — not since the last big story she broke — certainly not since he'd taken the time to remove all the familiar pieces of her life.

Something had changed. He needed to find out what it was.

Lois closed the door on her uninvited breakfast partner with a silent sigh of relief. She had momentary worries that her notes were easily read and might tip Lex off to the fact that she was investigating him. But she reassured herself that wouldn't be the case. He hadn't looked at the table closely, and even if he had, she had learned (after Claude) to organize and code her own research in a way that only a good deal of work would reveal what she was doing.

Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't out to get you.

Still, the impromptu visit reminded her of two things. The first was that she needed to be careful with this work. If Lex was any fraction as corrupt as Clark suspected, Lois's investigation could be dangerous. Lois had investigated plenty of powerful, corrupt people in the past. And when people with power were about to be toppled — and knew about it — those were the times when bad things had a tendency to happen to Lois.

Not that she believed Lex was any more corrupt than your average successful businessman. He was just too... personable to be evil. Things like experimenting on children and blowing up manned space craft qualified as evil in Lois's book.

Lois prided herself on what she called her 'slick meter'. She could almost always gauge when a businessman or politician was trying to pass as honest. Her meter told her just how much grease the dude was using to squeak by. Lex was obviously slick. Heck, Lois herself would bend the rules 'til they resembled a pretzel if it meant getting the story.

Understanding that Clark was a boy scout, Lois wrote off some of his concern as intolerance for rule-breaking. The knowledge that Clark and Superman were one and the same person only intensified this judgment.

But Clark had more than mistrust and disdain in his voice when he spoke of Lex. There was some jealousy, she was sure. But there was something else, too. Dislike. Maybe even hatred.

Clark, the most tolerant of all people she had ever met, hated Lex Luthor.

On the surface, she knew Lex. But she didn't really know

him underneath it all. She believed, however, that she did know Clark now. Last night's talk had pulled the wool from her eyes. What's more, she trusted Clark. Yes, he had lied to her. But she understood why. What's more, the fact that he lied somehow counteracted the fact that he was Superman. He was super-human, yet at the same time, he was not super-confident. His blunder made him more approachable.

Somehow, Lois also found a new truth dawn. Besides trusting Clark, she also trusted the way she felt for him. She didn't know exactly what it was she felt, but it was more, much more than she felt for Lex.

And that brought her to her final conclusion for the morning. She needed to find a way to tell Lex “no.” Not “maybe”. Not “not right now”. A clear and defined “no.”

One thing she did know about Lex was that he didn't take no for an answer about anything easily, if at all. And in this case, Lois felt she might even hurt him. He treated her with such tenderness sometimes — such as delivering coffee and a scone for her breakfast. Lois believed that, in his way, Lex loved her. And breaking things off with him was going to be tricky. She had never been good at the whole “personal” thing, and having two men battling for her feelings was two more than she was used to.

Walking to the kitchen to discard the scone — despite her telling Lex the contrary, he almost never knew what she wanted; this morning was a prime example: it had been a full caffeine morning, if any was, and she didn't like wasting her chocolate points on white chocolate which was too sweet for her taste — Lois was once again surprised by a knock on the door.

As she looked through the peep-hole, she let out a sigh of relief. He had forgiven her.

The eastern sky was turning a pearly pink when Clark landed quietly on his balcony. He was exhausted mentally and physically, but he knew he wouldn't sleep. There was a depression in him that would forbid sleep. He would toss and turn with guilt, trying to forget about the night before while at the same time trying to think how he should have handled things differently.

Stripping off his costume, he turned the shower on full blast. Perhaps a good, long, steamy shower would help ease the tension in his muscles. He took his time lathering himself, trying to will the hot water into the knots in his shoulders. It was to no avail though. One memory of Lois's tear-filled, angry/hurt eyes put all the knots back.

Clark walked to the kitchen to look through his refrigerator. It was too early to call his parents yet, let alone call on them. But he looked at the phone longingly. It was then he noticed the blinking message light. The disjointed computer voice informed him:

“You have one new message. Message One Received Saturday, Two-ten AM...”

“Clark. It's me. I just wanted to say... to ask you... I need time. Things are so different for me right now. Please... don't write me off, okay? I need my best friend. You've put up with me this long. I'm relying on your Smallville heart to give me some time to sort my head out. Things went badly tonight, but somehow I feel a little clearer than I have in weeks. I don't know how to explain it — I guess maybe the whole Planet thing knocked me harder than I thought it had. But I'm feeling more Mad Doggy today... and I want to thank you for that.” Hearing her chuckle warmed Clark deep inside. It was a sound he hadn't heard in weeks. He could almost hear the confidence coming back to her, and hearing it made him understand *that* was what had been missing. Her self-confidence.

“The truth hurts, but it also sets you free. I've been forced to face a few truths in the last couple of hours, and I have a feeling there are a few more waiting to show themselves to me, now that I'm willing to look. So, please, just wait for me. Don't give up on

me, ok?”

Clark could hear the tears in her voice. Could it be that easy? Could she forgive him his temper and his childishness? And could she honestly think he would ever give up on her? Smiling for the first time in what felt like days, Clark decided a leisurely walk to Lois’s apartment was in order. He packed up his research notes and laptop, with the idea that maybe Lois would like to work together one last time, and headed out into the beautiful morning.

Walking slowly toward Lois’s apartment building, Clark watched as the subtly extravagant limousine pulled away.

Luthor, visiting his latest investment, no doubt.

Clark took a deep, cleansing breath and reminded himself that Lois was not the enemy. She didn’t deserve to bear the brunt of his anger – anger at Lex Luthor for being so good at masquerading evil and anger at himself for his own inability to pull the mask from Luthor.

No, Lois was his friend. She was one of the few people he knew *could* see through the ruse Luthor had laid. He just had to find the way to do it. Making her angry was probably not the best way.

He slowly walked to the staircase and mounted the stairs to the building. Looking up, he waved in Mrs. Krebs’ direction – she noted his appearance regularly and had approved of him months ago. He knew he had her approval as she would nod at him now, instead of sharply pulling out of sight when he waved.

Smiling again, he raised his fist to knock quietly on Lois’s door. There was almost no hesitation before the door opened and revealed Lois.

Heavy-eyed from lack of sleep, Lois watched Clark carefully as he quietly shut the door behind him.

“Busy night for you?” she asked to disturb the tangible silence.

Shrugging, Clark leaned one shoulder against the wall in a desperate attempt to re-establish their casual relationship. “Yeah. That was a pretty bad wreck. If the Planet were still employing me, I’d be writing an exposé about these Alpine tunnels and how dangerous they can be.”

“Speaking of which...” Lois moved to one of her piles of documents. “I was checking up on the Planet. On how much insurance was on the Planet before its untimely demise. You were right on that score. Lex lied to me about that. He could have easily rebuilt.”

“The question then would be, why didn’t he?” Clark posed carefully.

“And, even more importantly, why buy the Planet, destroy it, and refuse to rebuild? If Lex was behind the explosion, as you seem to think. It’s not like the insurance money would have been worth the trouble. Especially to the world’s third richest man.”

“Depends on how he got that title,” Clark said cynically.

“Listen, before we get into all of this,” gesturing to all the piles of Lois’s research, Clark continued. “I was wondering if you’d like to get some breakfast?”

“No, thanks. I’m not so hungry this morning.” Lois looked at the cup of coffee growing cold on the counter. “But I could use some more coffee?”

Clark also noticed the coffee and realized that he once again was second in offering Lois something that Lex had offered first. Beating down the monster of jealousy that threatened in his chest, Clark smiled. “Let’s go to an internet café. That way we can work and talk and drink.”

“Oh, and let me guess. You want to go to the Point, right?”

“Hey, they’re convenient, the internet access is good and free, they have big enough tables for us to spread out, and they have great coffee.”

“Oh, and it doesn’t hurt that they make the best muffins this

side of Smallville, right?” Lois teased.

“Well, we could go to Smallville for muffins if you want, Lois. But I thought you said you weren’t hungry?” Clark teased right back.

Lois had turned to gather her things into a bag and just momentarily hesitated. Already he was acting as if her knowing the secret was second hand. She wondered how many times he had slipped in front of her, and she had missed it. Not that it mattered now.

“Let me carry that for you,” Clark’s hand brushed Lois’s as he grasped her tote. Somehow even this casual touch seemed to hold an awareness for Lois that it wouldn’t have had a week before. Was it because she knew it was Superman she touched? Or was it because she knew that, with every gesture, every smile, every touch, Clark was re-confirming the fact that he loved her? The jumbled thoughts confused her.

Clark noticed her hesitation and confused it for discomfort. “Lois, if you want to be alone for a while... I know that you said you needed time, but I just thought we could compare notes...”

“No, Clark, it’s okay.” Lois interrupted him. “I just... things are different, you know? I have all these different images of you in my head now, and I’m trying to figure out who you are and what I am to you.”

“Lois, I’m Clark Kent. And you are everything to me.” Clark spoke quietly but with such sincerity that Lois couldn’t look away. There was still a part of her that was embarrassed to have such attention. But the way he said it, Lois knew it was nothing but the plain truth.

“But,” Clark continued, with a less serious tone. “I also understand that you’re not quite ready for all of that. And I’m sorry to push it on you. My excuse is that I’ve waited so long to say it, I don’t know how to hold it in anymore. I can promise, however, that once we get down to business here,” Clark lifted both of their bags with the notes in them. “We’ll have more than enough to talk about of a non-personal nature.”

Lois smiled. “You’re right, partner. Plenty of stuff to talk about already. Let’s head out.”

“Nigel, we have work to do.”

“Mr. Luthor?” Nigel looked up from the small, blunt pistol that he was cleaning. He hadn’t used it in ages, but it was cleaned and checked for precision regularly. Nigel was a man whose precise habits left little to imagination, but who was utterly dependable. Lex smiled at the thought that one aspect of his life, at least, remained always constant. At least, as long as the checks were cashable.

“It seems that my carefully laid plans are being thwarted somehow. There’s a splotch on the horizon, and I want to know what or who it is.”

“Ms. Lane, sir?” Nigel kept his voice even, not revealing any thought he might have on the situation.

“The inscrutable Lois Lane, Nigel. She seems to have found her feet quickly.” Lex paced to the window, searching the horizon as if the answer to his problem lay there. Turning back to Nigel, Lex shook his head. “Much too quickly for my comfort. I don’t want to believe that I’ve underestimated this particular opponent. The goals are too important. What can you tell me?”

Nigel pulled out a personal organizer and uploaded a file.

“She met with Clark Kent in the park yesterday. They apparently had a verbal altercation, and she left quite upset, visibly. She finished the day at the studios, put in an hour at her gym, then returned to her apartment, where she remained all evening. She had no visitors.”

“No visitors, Nigel? Not even the boy scout?”

“The man we had watching the window was told to move on by a beat officer last night, sir. Apparently we don’t have coverage in that precinct.”

Lex shook his head, disgusted. “We’ve never needed to bribe officers in that part of the city. No business there. Ahh, well. Never mind.” Lex sat in the chair behind his desk and leaned back. “I must admit a part of me rejoiced to see the defiant spark back in her eyes. She’ll give me such sons, Nigel.”

Nigel remained silent, knowing that Lex was thinking out loud and needed no outside input.

“However, I don’t want her getting too curious about certain circumstances right now though. I need you to find out what she’s up to. It wouldn’t do for her to get into anything that might endanger her or me.”

“Full surveillance, sir?”

“Avoid the private places of her apartment, Nigel. Just the kitchen and living room need be under our eyes. And your eyes only.”

“Yes, sir.”

The Point was bustling that morning, as it always was on Saturday mornings. The two reporters picked up coffee then moved to a table in the corner. The sheer number of people coming and going in the restaurant almost guaranteed privacy, and the free network access was a plus. They settled down to work, refilling their cups and exchanging notes randomly. Clark excused himself a few times for Superman appearances, but otherwise, they were uninterrupted.

“Okay, Clark. Let’s go to the one thing we know for sure that Lex has ties to: the Planet. He was the owner, fair and square, as far as we know.” Lois held up her hand, indicating Clark to stay silent. He had told her of the research he, Jack, Jimmy, and Perry were doing, but it was tangential to her train of thought. “Lex legally owned the Planet, and there was plenty of insurance to rebuild it after its untimely demise. He lied about the insurance. He *lied* to me about it. Why would he do that?” Lois looked at Clark and could see that he was holding something back. “Spit it out, Clark.”

“Lois, I don’t understand how you think his lying is such a monumental thing. He’s a sleazy businessman. They lie all the time.”

“Clark, this is different. I’m telling you, it’s different.”

“Why is it different? Because he lied to you? Do you think he tells you the truth just because he claims to love you?” Clark could feel the bile rising in his throat then stopped. He was doing it again.

“Well, I seem to have a track record with men who claim to love me lying to me, eh?” Lois said with cold calmness.

Clark took a deep breath looked into her eyes. “Lois, I’m sorry. I was way out of line with that last jab. All I can say is that I make mistakes too.”

Lois sighed. “Clark, I’m sorry too. I promised myself that I wouldn’t throw that... you know... stuff in your face. I’m just so used to winning arguments, no matter the cost...” Lois said, reaching for Clark’s hand. Then she laughed, “And if you ever tell anyone from the Planet that you got an apology from me, I’ll be forced to kill you. I have a reputation to uphold, you know.” The mood lightened slightly and Clark smiled.

“Now tell me why do you think it’s important that Luthor lied to you about the Planet?”

Lois hesitated. “Well, it goes to motivation on the whole thing. Why did he buy the Planet in the first place? He’s not branched much into old media – he tends to go with new technology wherever he can. Why wouldn’t he want to rebuild what he just bought? And if he did want the Planet gone, why? Why would he go to all the trouble to coerce the board into selling, only to destroy it?”

“Well,” Clark started, trying to look at the argument from a dispassionate angle. “If you take over a business and get rid of it, it’s usually because of competition. Do you think that the Planet

was considered competition for LNN?”

“Uhn-uh,” sipping her latte, Lois shook her head. “Television considers itself a completely different – better – beast than print news. LNN is live with the action – the Planet was hours behind. No competition there at all.” Shrugging, Lois looked down to her laptop again.

The two started reading and writing again, but Clark stopped, lost in thought.

“Well, there was something there that was competition for him, Lois,” Clark stated quietly.

“What do you mean, Clark?” Lois asked, distracted.

“You. Your attention was completely taken up by the Planet. Now, it’s not. You’re free... for him.”

“Clark, that’s ridiculous.” Lois laughed quickly but stopped when she saw the look in Clark’s eyes. “Clark, I’m just a woman. No way would he risk jail just for my attention.”

Clark sighed. “Lois, I don’t believe that Luthor even thinks jail is a possibility for him. He thinks he’s above mortal laws. But tell me this – how much time have you spent with Luthor since the Planet was destroyed? How much time with your friends, your family, even on your job?”

Furrows in her brow, Lois thought about what Clark was saying. “Well, with the Planet gone, most of my friends are gone, too. You, Perry, Jimmy, Cat... my routine was completely open. My sister just got a scholarship to UCSD, so I don’t really see her anymore. But, Clark, he gave me a job. If he wanted my attention...”

“He’d make sure you were working on a job where he knew where you were.” Clark interrupted, voicing the sudden realizations he had. “He’d make sure that you knew you owed him your living. He’d be sure to subtly remind you of that. He’s trying to control you – keep your opponent off balance. It’s classic military strategy.”

“Clark, I can’t think... I don’t believe...” shaking her head, Lois looked out the window. “You’re describing some pretty scary behavior there, Clark. I can’t believe that I would ever be that important to anyone, even if I could believe that he could act like that.”

Clark said nothing. He believed that he had found the truth. He knew first hand that Lois could, indeed, be that important to someone. She was life itself to him. And to Luthor, maybe the same. But he kept his thoughts to himself, instead going back to his current search.

“Oh, God, look at the time. I’ve got to get to the office before the security guys make it impossible to get in. You wouldn’t believe how Nazi-like they are after business hours.” Clark looked up and smiled slightly, but the smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Don’t look like that, Clark. I’ve got some resources there that I just don’t have here. And while I’m there, I’m going in to type up my resignation letter, get some of my personal items out of there.”

“You’re going to quit right now?” Clark asked, a little shocked. Lois the reporter would kill to get an inside position in any organization she was trying to take down. Maybe she was finally starting to get scared of Luthor.

“No, no. I just want to have the letter ready for when I have to hand it in. It’ll be easier if my assistant isn’t there, breathing down my neck. Should I meet you back here when I’m done?”

“Naah, I think I’m going to go meet up with the guys. See if they’ve put anything together today.”

“Okay, then. I’ll see you tomorrow?” Lois asked, hesitantly.

“Yeah, I’ll drop by tomorrow morning, okay?”

Pulling the strap of her bag over her shoulder, Lois looked down into Clark’s open, upturned face. Something in it – the kindness, the honesty, she wasn’t sure what – just appealed to her. It always had. She caressed her hand over his cheek. “Yeah, partner. See you tomorrow.”

Nigel placed the last pin-sized camera into the wall and noted that even though he had taken great care not to disturb things, the low quality of the plaster in the walls had led to dust on the floor. Sighing, he got out Lois's vacuum cleaner and gently erased the signs of plaster on the floor. Then he tromped through the room, erasing the marks of the vacuum cleaner.

His talents were being wasted, he knew, following this reporter around. A part of him understood just what it was about Ms. Lane that captivated his employer. She was, in her own way, as ruthless as Luthor himself. She would be a formidable enemy and a marvelous prize to win.

So far, she hadn't cost the Luthor empire much. There had been some expenditures but no more than Mr. Luthor would normally spend when courting a new... escort. Her bedding price actually had been quite low, considering the profit made from the Planet. But still, there was something in the situation that had Nigel's back up. Something was not quite right.

He made a mental note to check his own retirement plans over carefully, just in case, that evening, after he reported the success of the evening's ventures to Mr. Luthor. Better safe than sorry.

As Lois let herself into her apartment and put her heavy bag on the floor, she marveled at how much business the various arms of LexCorp did in a year. Her bag was full of disks and printouts – enough to ruin her eyesight, she was sure. She felt no guilt at using Lex's own networks to get the information she wanted but was a little worried that maybe she'd left a trail. She had cleared her search caches and temporary files from her computer at work. It would have to be enough. She thought of the carefully-folded resignation letter in her bag. If it wasn't enough, she'd just tender that letter a little earlier than she planned.

While she was waiting for printouts, she had looked around her office, she noticed how few personal things there were. Oh, it was a beautiful office with a view, if one cared for such things. She would have given almost anything to be back on the newsroom floor with that awful dead plant on her desk. Even her favorite coffee cup had been replaced with an LNN mug. Nothing fit there. Even if Lex was innocent, LNN was not her place. She needed to find her place again before she could make any life-changing decisions.

She started unloading her notes onto her table and decided to clean up a bit before getting back down to work. The place was a mess. As she walked around picking up glasses, she noticed that her stack of mail wasn't as she had left it. She had a definite system regarding mail, and the catalogs weren't in the right order any more. Turning a trained eye around her apartment, she noticed that other things weren't as they should be. The floor was a little cleaner than she had left it – almost as if a vacuum cleaner had been run.

The more details she noted, the more nervous she got. She had had break-ins before- whenever she was on a big story, it was always a possibility that the target would figure out what she was after and would try to scare her or find out what she knew. But this was different. No one knew she was working on a story.

Maybe she was being paranoid, again, but she had learned early on to trust her senses.

Gathering her things back into her bag, she got her keys and headed to Clark's apartment. She didn't notice, as she pulled away from her building, that a black sedan followed at a discreet distance.

When the knock came on the door, Jack fell silent and went to the bedroom. Jimmy and Perry both looked to Clark who shook his head – he wasn't expecting any company that night. He surreptitiously scanned the door and saw Lois, looking more than

a little nervous.

Opening the door, Clark smiled reassuringly. "Hey, Lois. Come on in! We were just about to order pizza."

Lois brushed past him, dropping her bag on the couch. "Hey, Perry, Jimmy." She reached over to hug Perry, feeling the comfort of old friends work at the knot of anxiety in her stomach.

"Hello, Darlin'. Clark told us we might see you tomorrow, but I'm glad to see you tonight! You are a sight for sore eyes."

Lois returned the embrace, then pulled away. "As good as it is to see you guys, I'm here for help."

"What's going on, Lois?" Jimmy asked.

She looked toward Clark. "Someone was in my apartment. I'm sure of it. It was a mess, I mean, it's almost always a mess. But I know my own mess. And someone messed it up."

Clark hid a smile. Only Lois could make a statement like that. Only he would understand what she meant.

"Lois," Clark interrupted. "Did you ask your neighbor if she saw anyone go into your apartment?"

"Mrs. Krebs? No, I hadn't thought to do that. She's probably better than most security systems now that I think of it. But it just kind of scared me. I mean, it's not like I've been covering a lot of hard-hitting news at LNN, there wasn't anything stolen that I could see. In fact, if I didn't *know* better, I'd think I was imagining it."

"Lois, honey, you have a nose for these things. If you say there was a break-in, there was. Do you want one of us to go back with you?"

Taking a moment to think about it and steady herself, she shook her head. "No, I can handle it. It just spooked me. So, pizza?" She put on a smile that Perry and Clark saw through, but the determination that they both saw in her gaze was comforting.

Lois Lane, ace reporter, was back.

She hadn't been home for more than half an hour when there was a knock on the door. Peeping through the hole, she saw Lex for the second time that day. As she undid the locks, she took a deep, calming breath.

"Lois, darling, I know we didn't have plans this evening, but I just couldn't bear to end the day without seeing you. But what's this? You're looking peaked. Is something upsetting you?" Lex asked in a concerned voice. Somehow, though, Lois was sure that there was something else under the concern. A curiosity... almost impatience? Or was she reading too much into things?

"I'm sorry, Lex. It's just that..." she hesitated, wondering how much to reveal... "Someone was in my apartment..."

Lois caught a momentary expression in Lex's eyes – surprise mixed with something else, perhaps anger. The expression faded as quickly as it appeared, leaving behind a look of concern.

"Someone was in your apartment? You're sure?"

"Yes. I asked Mrs. Krebs if she saw anyone, and the man she described... Lex, she said it was the same man who delivered other things to me – usually things you've sent. She described Nigel to a tee. What was Nigel doing in my apartment when I wasn't there, Lex?"

"If you're sure it was Nigel, then I'm sure there was a good reason. Nigel has been looking into the properties that LexCorp owns lately – perhaps he was doing spot checks on the apartments in your building?"

Lois looked at Lex in surprise. "You never mentioned that you own my apartment building."

"Lois, darling, I'm not one to point out the difference in our current – standards of living, shall I say? Yes, I'm your ultimate landlord. I don't think a thing of it, really. I did believe, however, that it would make you feel somewhat... inferior. I didn't tell you for your own comfort, Lois. It means nothing to me."

Lex moved closer to Lois, delicately sniffing for the scent he had given her and disappointed when he did not smell it. "Lois,

you don't belong in this apartment. You belong by my side. Don't make me wait any longer. Say yes." He planted a possessive kiss on the nape of her neck.

Lois barely concealed her shudder of revulsion.

"Lex, I just don't think..." She was silenced by his finger placed delicately on her lips.

"Shhhh, my darling. I don't mean to push you. I know your life is confusing right now. I'll be the port in your storm, Lois. I'll take care of you as no one else can. Trust me."

"Lex..." Lois tried again to interrupt, but Lex just smiled.

"Trust me, Lois."

Strangely, a part of her still wanted to. She had no real evidence that he was the psychopath Clark believed him to be. He was either a very, very good actor, or he was innocent.

A few days passed, and Lois balanced her work at LNN, spending more time with her friends and her covert investigation of Lex. Knowing he wasn't what he seemed to be was one thing, but another, more sinister aspect of him was starting to appear.

Lois put down the cappuccino slowly as the dots connected in the document in front of her. She and Clark were tracking down all of the most recent business deals that Luthor Enterprises had completed. She was working on the real estate subsidiaries when a name leapt off the screen at her. A quick search confirmed her suspicions.

Lex's company had very recently purchased a few pieces of real estate in Metropolis. That in itself was not strange. But the fact that he bought exactly one high-rent apartment building, and it happened to be the one that Lois lived in was a very large coincidence.

He was her current employer. He owned her former employer. He owned her apartment building, and though he had told her that fact himself, he hadn't mentioned that he had just purchased the apartment building – for no known reason, as it didn't seem to connect with any of the other purchases at the time.

Clark's suspicions from the other day had seemed so absurd. But now, they were looking disturbingly possible. She wondered, slightly nauseated, if he was pulling other strings in her life.

"Clark, can I use your cell phone?"

"Sure, Lois." Clark barely looked up from the list he was compiling to hand her his phone. He glanced up, though, when she left the table. The look on her face worried him, but he kept himself from listening in on the conversation.

Five minutes later, Lois came back to the table and began typing quickly. She handed back the phone with a quick "thanks" but didn't spare him a glance otherwise. Frowning, Clark watched as Lois stopped typing and sat back in her chair. Her startled, worried eyes stared at her computer screen as if not able to understand what was written there.

Looking up, Lois noted the concern in Clark's eyes with a wave of her hand. "I'm okay, Clark. I swear."

Clark sat back, patiently waiting for Lois to talk about what she'd found that bothered her so much.

"The thing is, if it's coincidence, it's a whopper of one. It seems that Luthor Enterprises and her various arms have had quite a few tie-ins with the Lane clan lately. My father's new research grant in Des Moines is funded by Lex Labs. My sister's scholarship program – which awarded exactly one scholarship – is underwritten by a grant from Artus Bene Facio. That's one of the philanthropic branches of Luthor Enterprises. The clincher is my apartment building. It wasn't even up for sale. But it was sold one month ago to Lex – well one of his companies."

Concern colored Clark's eyes, but he remained silent. He didn't know exactly what to say.

"Well? Aren't you going to say anything?" Lois asked. She was feeling more vulnerable than she had since finding Claude

had stolen her story. She felt as though she had been completely taken for a fool. Even Superman hadn't fooled her like this – no one had warned her that Superman had a disguise. Clark had warned her about Luthor. She had chosen not to listen.

"I don't know what I can say. Except that it *might* be a coincidence. He might be helping out your sister and your father as a favor to you, but he didn't want to embarrass you by letting you know. If I had a lot of money, that's how I'd do things."

"Right, Clark. Lex as a humble, behind-the-scenes benefactor. I don't think so. If he wanted to help Lucy and me, he would have made the scholarship applicable to the university of her choice. Why would he require UCSD as the school she attend? And my father had a fully-functional state-of-the-art lab here in Metropolis. Why should he be required to start from scratch in Des Moines? His kind of research isn't cheaper there – the materials and scientists who work with him are mostly on the East coast."

Clark knew the answer. It was a classic battle-maneuver. Isolate your enemy from his allies. Divide and conquer. Luthor was a student of Sun Tzu. But Clark said nothing. Finally, Lois's eyes met his. There was panic mounting in them.

"He has me trapped, doesn't he? It's like that spider we saw on that show. Funnel something or other? All those snares, fine as silk and just as strong, trapping me into his lair."

"Lois, you didn't get trapped. You got out. He doesn't hold the controls now."

Lois looked down at his hand, holding hers, comforting her. Clark was coming to be everything to her. If it hadn't been for him... she didn't want to think about it. But did she love him? Was what she felt friendship and gratitude?

There was too much going on for her to think straight. She needed time. She needed distance.

And she needed to get the hell away from Luthor.

She tried to break it off gently. She quit her job at LNN, citing personal reasons. She didn't refuse to see Lex; she didn't return his gifts. These moves would have made enticed him in his hunt. She tried instead to be boring — yesterday's news. She had cut most of the ties but knew, as long as his attention, like that of a king cobra, was still on her, she wasn't safe.

Clark checked for exactly where the bugs were in her apartment, and when he found they didn't go into her personal areas, she packed her clothes and personal things without fear that Lex would see her doing so. Keeping her boring façade in place, she visited with Clark, Jimmy, and Perry, spending gradually more time with them but making it clear she wasn't doing anything interesting. Citing financial reasons, she cancelled her lease and began taking job interviews in other cities.

She wrote a "Dear Lex" letter to Luthor, as she now thought of him. Lois always knew she was better with writing than she was with talking. And she wasn't an actor – she couldn't pretend at this point to be anything but repulsed by his presence. She gave her reasons – reasons she hoped would be a salve to his pride. She said that she cared for him but that he cared more than she did, and it would never be enough for him in the end. She said he was a wonderful man who deserved the best. She went on to hope that he understood by settling for her, he'd be shortchanging himself.

She believed none of it, of course, but all she really wanted at that point was to get out from under his microscope. Then, when he was least expecting it, she'd take him down.

He had messed with her – and if it hadn't been for Clark, she never would have even recognized it. Would she have ended up like her mother: bitter, disappointed, and finding solace in the bottom of a bottle? She owed everything to Clark for opening up her eyes to what was going on. It had been such a blow to her ego, but Clark had helped her see that it had been all so well

orchestrated, Luthor's campaign of control.

She had never been the target of something so insidious. Direct attacks were nothing new to her, but she had nothing in her experience that would have prepared her for the underhanded machinations of the brilliant evil that was Lex Luthor. Underestimating him had cost her, and a lot of other people, dearly. The collateral damage – her father's former employees, the other workers from the Planet — would haunt her with guilt for years.

But she was fixing it all now. Luthor would fall. Between her and Clark, Luthor would pay for his crimes.

THE END

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Does it really end there? In my mind it does. Of course they take him down. No clones need apply. Of course L&C end up together. And the New Kryptonians can take a hike. I just wanted a story where Lois saw through Lex with a little help. Because, after all, as un-ordinary as CK, is Lois is not so ordinary, either!