

# Under the Spotlight

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Rated G

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Summary: An alt-universe story in which Clark revealed himself to the world at 18 years old and is the most famous man/celebrity in the world. Lois Lane is the most famous/glamorous news discussion/talk-show host. What will happen when Superman is a guest on her show?

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“Welcome, ladies and gentleman. Tonight on *Under the Spotlight* we continue our series looking at the forgotten people in society. Outcasts, rejects, unwanted and despised, we all know they exist, we all sympathise with their plight, but then we all walk past them and pretend they don’t exist when the time comes to do something about it.

“Tonight is the turn of the most vulnerable of all: Children. Or more specifically, orphans.

“We have with us the director of Metropolis Coates Orphanage, Mr Geoffrey Holmes.” The sparkling Christmas lights which framed the faux door on the set blinked on and a middle-aged, short-rotund, jolly looking man stepped through to the sound of his name. “Mayor Frank Berkowitz”. Another man, shorter than the first but a little younger looking, entered the set through the open stage door, the light blinding his eyes momentarily as they adjusted. “Senator Jones, who is currently working on passing a bill to make adoption much quicker and easier.” A tall, slender, extremely attractive woman entered the stage and smiled. “Our own favourite son made good, Lex Luthor.” The next guest, tall and impeccably dressed, strode through the door with a wide smile already plastered on his face. “And finally, for the very first time on this show, the Man of Steel himself, Superman: Mr Clark Kent.”

The applause coming from the studio audience was quite resounding; louder than ever before, and she had been hosting this show for four years. A few cheers and whistles could also be heard. Lois hastily suppressed a shocked smile knowing that she was still live on camera after giving her opening lines. There was only one person that these unexpected calls of appreciation could be for ... and Lois could not fault anyone for their desire to make that appreciation known.

She turned to watch as the final guest appeared through the flimsy, pretend door. Her heart skipped about widely. It had been years since she’d suffered from stage fright: nerves before going on set, terror of getting all muddled up live on television. When the handsome, casually dressed, well-built guest turned to the audience and smiled, showing his perfect white teeth and the gleam in his eyes, Lois suspected it wasn’t stage fright causing her heart to pound. When he lifted his hand and waved in a most natural, friendly ... and slightly shy manner, she **knew** it wasn’t stage fright.

*He’s not gorgeous, not at all*, she stubbornly repeated to herself before striding across the set, stepping up onto the slightly raised platform, and taking her seat in the compère’s chair just as her final guest seated himself. She was on the left hand side of

the stage. A short glass coffee table was central, and to the right — her left — were the guests, seated in the order they entered. This placed ... him — Superman ... furthest away from her, on the very right of all the guests, from the view point of the audience. When the light above camera one switched green she turned and spoke directly into it.

“As usual we’ll be taking your questions. If you wish to pose any to our guests then please phone or e-mail, and when we come back in the second half we will see how well they do. I know, from previous experience, that your questions can sometimes be more direct, more personal, and even more difficult than mine.” She paused and raised her eyebrows. “And I was called ‘Mad Dog Lane’ in my college years as I’m sure you all know.”

The audience laughed along with Lois, and she settled back into her chair and turned her attention to her guests.

“So, first of all, Mr Luthor and Mr Kent. You two are actually orphans yourself.” She directed her gaze to the two men at the far end of the seated line. More specifically, to the one whom she had a hidden agenda for tonight.

“Yes, that’s correct, Ms Lane ...” began Lex Luthor in a quick rush of words. He leaned forwards and rested his elbows on his knees. His mouth was open to continue when Lois spoke over the top of him, completely brushing him off.

“In fact, when you first came out to the world, Mr Kent — I presume you’d prefer to be called Mr Kent rather than Superman based on how you are dressed?” Lois raised an eyebrow and when there was an answering nod she continued, “... you revealed to the world that you were actually an orphan *twice* over.”

The handsome man was giving Lois his full attention. He smiled when she finished and blinked a few times while glancing down at his hands before looking back up and replying. “Yes. When I decided to go public at eighteen I told the world that I lost my Kryptonian parents when Krypton exploded but then was lucky to be found by a childless Kansas couple. At the age of ten I was orphaned again when they died in a car crash.”

“And what happened to you after that?” Lois never wavered in her attention on the man seated opposite. Every word he said, every move he made would contribute to her personal plan: the plan which included her heart ... and this man.

“I went through the foster system. I had a few different foster families. Mostly they were excellent role models, just as my parents had been before.”

“Did you ever spend time in an orphanage?”

“No, I was always placed in a foster home.”

“Mr Luthor.” Lois turned her attention and held back a gasp when she saw the anger behind his eyes. *Clearly not happy that I cut him off before. But he has to understand that he’s not the most important or interesting guest on the show.* “What age were you when you were orphaned?”

“Call me Lex, please,” came the reply. Lois immediately increased her internal alert at the smoothness of his tone.

“Lex, then,” she acquiesced. Her job as host was a delicate balance of entertainment, friendliness, interviewer, and interrogator, and this was the time to play friendly.

His smile was both triumphant and calculating “Fourteen. I lost both of my parents at fourteen.”

“And did you go through the foster system? Did you spend time in an orphanage?”

“I was in an orphanage for a short while. I got my lucky break in business pretty quickly and was my own man by the time I was seventeen.”

“Mr Luthor ... Lex,” Lois smiled as affably as she could. “Would this orphanage happen to be the one you now own?”

“You would be correct, Miss Lane. Luthor House for Homeless Children was where I lived for two years, although it was called Green Street Orphanage at the time.”

Lois nodded, indicating her complete attention on the conversation. When it was clear that Lex had finished she smiled and then took over again. “Thank you, Lex. We’ll come back to the subject of Luthor House later, but now, Senator Jones?” She turned to the beautiful lady next to Lex. “What’s your story. Why are you here?”

“Well, I’m not an orphan like Lex and Superman — I mean Mr Kent — although I did live in the system for most of my childhood. I had foster parents but my mother was still alive.”

“And this bill you are attempting to get approved ... would that have anything to do with your childhood?”

“Yes, Ms Lane. The best hope for every child in care is the hope of adoption, the hope of a loving family that can devote themselves to you and you only. In the foster system and in orphanages, although the adults care, although they want to do their best for the children, they have to divide their time between so many. But adoption is a difficult, long, and complicated process. Did you know that of all the children currently in care only 22% are eligible for adoption? And of that 22% only 5% will actually be adopted?”

The Senator paused. Accustomed as she was to speeches, dealing with the public, setting her words correctly, she knew to take a breath at that moment and let the damning statistic sink in. “For every child adopted there are still another ninety in care. Nineteen of these are eligible for adoption but will miss out for one reason or another.”

“That’s quite a sobering thought, Senator,” Lois volunteered in a quiet, respectful voice. “Do you believe that your mother being alive was a barrier to **your** adoption possibilities?”

“I do. Those children with a parent still alive are far more likely to be looked over. Prospective parents don’t want to risk their hearts when there is a chance that the biological parent will stall the process, make a fuss, or even return to claim the child.”

“And you are planning to change this.” She encouraged the lady to continue.

“I am. This is only one of the many reasons I’m fighting for simpler adoption rules and processes. Adoption is a long and difficult process. If the process were simpler and quicker, then the adoption wouldn’t trail on as long, giving less chance of disruptions occurring. But more than that, I want to look at the rights of everyone in the process. The rights of the new parents, the rights of the biological parents, and most of all the rights of the child.”

“Mr Holmes,” Lois turned to the gentleman at the beginning of her line of guests, the first guest to appear through her door. “What do you think of this proposed legislation? How will it affect you, your job, the orphanage?”

“Well, Ms Lane. I see this as a positive change ... if it is approved. I’m extremely hopeful that it would increase those percentages that Senator Jones mentioned ... in the correct direction. Seeing more children in stable, loving homes — knowing that protection is in place for them also... it would be a dream come true.”

“Well, Christmas is all about dreams come true,” Lois chuckled and leaned forward towards the orphanage director. “So ...” she dropped her smile and looked more pensive. “It must be a difficult job but I would think that there are also very rewarding aspects. What would you say is the most rewarding part?”

“Gosh. That’s quite difficult to decide.” The slightly plump man, dressed in a jolly Christmas jumper, brought one hand up to his mouth. He stroked his chin and ‘hmmmed’ quietly. “When the kids leave, that’s both happy and sad. You fall in love with every child that comes through the door. To have to say goodbye is very hard. But it’s also wonderful to know that they are going back home, or going to a new home where they will be cherished, or even that they have grown up enough to make their own way in the world.” He brought down his hand. “I don’t know whether it’s

the **most** rewarding aspect of my job, but ...”

As his voice trailed off Lois noticed the murmurs of sympathy and understanding coming quietly from some of her guests and the audience. She brought the attention back to herself and looked into camera one. “So, we’ve been introduced to all but one of our guests. Each one is involved in the lives of orphans in some way. But the final guest has no direct links to orphanages or orphans. So ... why is he on the show, Lois? I hear you ask. Well, I think he may be asking the very same question himself. So let’s put him out of his misery. Mayor Berkowitz. I invited you on the show tonight so that you could explain why the city of Metropolis has repeatedly declined applications for new orphanages to be built. Instead, parking garages, malls, and office blocks were approved. I have here” — she reached out to the shin-high clear glass table which gently divided her from her guests and picked up a sheaf of papers — “the paperwork for three separate applications made via the Superman Foundation to build orphanages over the last four years. In each case they were passed over for unnecessary frivolities.”

“Ms Lane,” the shocked Mayor retorted. “I would have you know that I am **not** personally responsible for every decision made by the city council just because I am Mayor. Building permits are discussed and approved by a separate entity from my own office. If you have a complaint then I would ask that you direct it to the right people. And I would also like to say, it is your own opinion that these parking garages and office blocks are ‘unnecessary frivolities’ — not fact. Have you taken to sensationalising the news now? I thought you were more respectable than that.” His offense at her comments was quite clear.

“Mayor Berkowitz, this is an entertainment show as well as a news show. There is a certain amount of ‘sensationalism’ expected. But, believe me, I would never state, or imply, anything that doesn’t have a basis in fact.” She glared at her prey, fully confident in her ability to navigate this show in the direction she wanted. “Would you like me to list the number of parking garages we already have? How many parking spaces? How many shopping malls? Office blocks. I can give you statistics. Also, I **do** understand that you are not personally involved in these decisions, but as the elected Mayor, you are the representative, the figure-head of the city.”

“I am, and if you wish me to continue in that role then I would ask that you refrain from further damaging remarks. You are correct that I am a figure-head, and in that role I ... I feel responsible for my city. If you truly feel that an injustice has been done then please present the evidence. **But** I would ask that you do it through more official channels please.” The Mayor’s voice pleaded but was filled with sincerity.

“I may very well do that,” she countered and then abruptly turned to her next victim.

“And you, Mr Luthor!” Lois turned back to the impeccably dressed man she had inadvertently offended earlier. “Coincidentally, each of the approved businesses was a subsidiary of LexCorp. It seems you had a wonderful run of luck there with your building permits.” She raised her eyebrow and waited for him to respond.

“Ms Lane ... Lois,” Lex supplicated. “LexCorp, and its many subsidiaries, constantly have applications submitted for planning, development, proposals, grants and much more. To focus in on only three of them and try to claim conspiracy is quite irresponsible.”

“Mr Luthor,” Lois refused to call him Lex, although she had acquiesced at the beginning of the show just to settle him. “I mentioned no such thing as conspiracy. I believe the word I used was coincidence.” She tilted her head to one side and smiled.

A chuckle from the audience rippled out onto the stage and Lois turned to acknowledge them.

“So, would you say that you are ... concerned ... for the welfare of the city’s orphans then, Mr Luthor? I mean, you couldn’t possibly have known that your applications would deprive these children of a safe home, could you?” Lois smiled brightly at the end of her speech.

“I assure you, Ms Lane. I contribute greatly to increasing the standards of living for orphans in this city. As you know, I personally fund the Luthor House for Homeless Children. Why, last month the proceeds of my White Orchid Ball were all funnelled in that direction.”

Lois smiled again and leaned back, putting one leg over the other. She crossed her arms. “But Luthor House is the *only* orphanage you fund. The Superman Foundation” — she tilted her head to the quiet, handsome gentleman to Lex’s left — “takes applications for funding from every other orphanage in Metropolis and further afield.” She turned to address Superman directly. “Isn’t that true, Mr Kent.”

“Uh,” he coughed and shifted in his chair to sit up straighter. “That’s true. The Superman Foundation is basically a grant funding system. Anyone can apply for funds and, hopefully, be approved. Applications from orphanages are a reasonable percentage and are pretty constant.” The smile which came over his face as he looked into her eyes made the world fade away.

*Get a grip Lois. This is not the time to regress to your teenage crush. Tonight is about extinguishing that crush.*

“So you ... that’s the plural ‘you’ referring to the Foundation ... do not limit your funding, whereas Mr Luthor has quite clearly chosen exactly who is worthy to benefit from his money.”

“Uh, no. Our limits are very few, and mostly government rule based.”

“But,” she paused and frowned, as if in sudden confusion. “Superman is clearly associated with Mr Holmes and the Coates Orphanage. You visit every Christmas, bring gifts, decorate the tree. It’s a well-documented tradition. In fact, the media have, in recent years, been banned due to the intrusion they caused when trying to film three years ago. Wouldn’t that be considered favouritism by you, Mr Kent? I am not aware that you visit any other orphanages.”

“Ms Lane,” he leaned forward. “I would love to visit every orphanage in the city, but I don’t have the time. Plus ... I have actually been turned away from Mr Luthor’s orphanage, but I must make it clear that whomever I chose to spend my time with in no way reflects the status of any grants at the Foundation. I can assure you of that.” He rested his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands together. “Visiting the Coates Orphanage on Christmas Eve. Yes, it has become a tradition. Yes, it is the only orphanage that I do this for, but it is something that I feel I have to do. Something I want to do.”

“Tell us about it, Mr Kent.” Lois softened her voice and she rested back in her chair again.

He didn’t immediately begin to speak. In fact the only sounds to be heard, for a few moments, were the hushed breaths of the audience. He looked down at his clasped hands and smiled, then he looked back up to the camera. Directing his comments to camera three, currently facing him, he began to weave a picture.

“It started eight years ago. Coates was the first orphanage to be granted some funding. It was on Christmas Eve. I decided to present the news in person, but when I flew overhead I noticed the ... “ He paused and sighed. His eyes closed for a moment. “The tree was small, the decorations were threadbare, a little girl was crying in the corner of the yard, and that’s just a portion of what I saw in that moment. My heart broke for all these people. I knew I was bringing great news, but it would mean nothing to the children, and they wouldn’t see the benefits for months. So ... I flew straight past without landing and ...” He stopped again. This time there was a blush on his cheeks. He brought a hand up to his mouth and coughed self-consciously. “I managed to get some

donations from nearby shops.”

Lois raised her eyebrows in surprise. *Playing down his part there. What a simple way to say that Superman turned up and played on the heartstrings of local merchants urging them to give to the orphans down the street.*

“I returned an hour later bringing supplies. When I spoke to Geoffrey and gave him the good news about the grant funding he was ecstatic. But when I stopped and helped all the children to decorate the new tree ...” His voice trailed off and he looked over to the man who was sat at the very opposite end of the five guest chairs.

“Superman, you have no idea how much we appreciated that. While we were still decorating the tree you brought, the gifts started to arrive. Shopkeepers with arms full of toys, and clothes, and food.” There were tears in the jolly man’s eyes. “I cried that day. I’m nearly crying now,” he chuckled.

“Geoffrey. How many times have I asked you to call me Clark?”

“I ... I can’t do that. You’ll always be Superman to me and the kids.”

Clark dropped his head once more and clasped his hands together again. “The simple joy that I brought to the children, the joy it brought to me ...” He looked up at the camera. “That’s why I return every year.”

The studio was silent. Lois didn’t know what to say or how to get the show back under her control. And she didn’t know if she even wanted to. This man was ... Super. Quite clearly his nine years as the world’s most famous man had given him plenty of experience with the media. He had a way of weaving a story, of capturing your concentration. She truly felt as if she’d been there on that first day. “Uh,” her voice failed her. She noticed the light on camera number one turn green as the number three light turned red. Immediately shocked back into action she blurted out the first thought in her head. “Can you come decorate my apartment this year?”

The laugh which resounded all around the studio finally brought her fully alert. “So, actually, even though it is the same orphanage every year ... seeming like favouritism ... in fact, it’s more of a symbol. A symbol of what the Superman Foundation can do for whoever applies. Am I right, Mr Kent?” *Please, please let my years of experience be riding me through this superbly*, she prayed. Over the years she had met and challenged many people on this show. Nerves were a constant companion but had long since been defeated and put in place. Whatever happened on the show, Lois was always in control. But, for some unknown reason, she worried that the internal war between her heart and mind was showing externally. What if the millions watching live on television, not to mention those who would catch up later ... what if they could see that she had a serious crush on this man?

“I guess so.”

Lois had to bite the inside of her cheek when he smiled again. *I thought repeated doses of something was supposed to immunise against future attack. These smiles are just getting more deadly instead.*

“Well, I think that’s a good place for a break. We’ll be back after this.”

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Clark felt the moment the cameras stopped rolling. Over the years he’d learned to recognise the hum of a rolling camera. The buzz was almost constant in his life, along with the click of the other type of camera. When he’d decided, nine years ago, to let the world know he existed, to keep himself safe by putting himself out into the public leaving the government no way to capture him without the whole world knowing, he never realised what it would really mean to his privacy. He had none, or very little. He was the most famous man on the planet. Realistically he had known at eighteen that people would be fascinated with him.

He even recognised that he was reasonably good-looking. Combine the two ... he knew that the press would follow him around. But nine years later it had only gotten worse. The fascination continued even though he'd repeatedly told his fantastic story. There should be nothing new for the fans any more. But they still craved every morsel through the media. And the adoration, by practically every girl and woman he met, twisted at his gut.

Glancing across at the host of this show he smirked inwardly. *There's one woman that I wouldn't mind gazing at me adoringly.* He watched as she leaned over the side of her chair to listen to the director whispering in her ear. She nodded and then he ran off. *The horror and embarrassment when women throw themselves at me ... offer ... themselves to me.* He shuddered internally. *If she were to ... offer herself to me ...* The shudder turned to a shiver up his spine.

If he was every woman's fantasy, then Lois Lane ... she was every intelligent man's fantasy. And he was definitely an intelligent man.

*Under the Spotlight* was required viewing in his mind and had been for many years. When he'd received the invitation to be a guest his immediate feeling had been elation. Although they were both famous they had never crossed paths. It was his opportunity to meet her, to see if she lived up to his ... crush. Possibly even to let the flame blow out and move on. But his assistant cautioned him. Lois Lane was well known for leading guests into a false sense of security with her affable charm, and then blindsiding them with something she wanted to expose. He'd argued that he had nothing to conceal, nothing to worry about. Her reply had been a simple 'hmmm'. Not that his assistant believed there was anything for Lois Lane to uncover, just that Clark was still too naive for his own good, especially in the light of his high-profile life.

As the director came back and handed some slips of paper to Lois Clark smiled. She'd done exactly what his assistant predicted, only to Lex Luthor. Admittedly she'd also challenged him, to a small extent, about his visits to the orphanage. Possibly that would be the worst of it.

Clark watched as Lois read through the white slips then crumpled them and slid them down the side of the chair, out of sight. She lifted her head and turned to her guests. "Just one minute now," she smiled, and his eyes met hers. It was as if a vice were crushing his heart. Clark suspected that his crush on this famous woman would be gone by the time the programme ended. Gone because 'crush' would be an inadequate word to use from this moment on.

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"Welcome back to *Under the Spotlight*. We have a few questions from the public that I'll be asking in this section. One of our guests tonight is the youngest Senator of this decade. Senator Jones, can we return for a while to the topic of your bill? Sally Jackson from Seattle has brought up a point that was also worrying me. While the idea of a quicker and simpler adoption process might increase, in a positive direction, those statistics you mentioned earlier, isn't there a greater chance of mistakes? Surely the number of safety guards, and time to check the prospective parents against those guards, would decrease."

"No. I'm determined that part of this bill will include provision for easier and quicker access to exactly the same information and resources that can determine the suitability of parents." Senator Jones leaned forward and gestured with her hands. "Although it could take time in the beginning I want there to be central access points to all the different databases countrywide meaning that information can be checked, cross referenced, and double checked at the push of a button rather than five different social workers having to contact each other on numerous occasions."

"All right, you are ready to safeguard the children from unsuitable parents, even with the shorter and simpler system, but what about the opposite? What about the natural parents that may be hoping for their child to come home? A quicker adoption might mean that they miss out on this chance, not having got their lives turned around in time. And the child would miss out on growing up with their biological family."

"Any parent who is desperately hoping for their child to come home will most probably not have put them up for adoption. I said before that only 22% of children in care are eligible for adoption. That leaves 78% who are in foster care or orphanages who are not allowed to be adopted, for whatever reason. Some of them will be because the parent has not given up on the hope of their child coming home. But ..." sighing, the Senator nodded in acknowledgement of Lois' actual question, "there will be times when a parent does both; hopes for their child to come home, yet realises the small chance of it ever happening. They may allow their child into the adoption process. What would happen in this case? Yes. The quicker system would, by default, give shorter deadlines to biological parents. While this cannot be helped I am hoping that the legislation would clearly state the legal rights of all parties involved. And these rights extend throughout the adoption process and even afterwards."

"Mmmm," Lois nodded. "You did mention that before. You seem to have covered all angles with this bill. And it's this coming Tuesday, I believe, when it is being debated?"

"Yes."

"Well, I wish you the best of luck then."

"Thank you." The Senator smiled and turned to the other guests who all seemed to be whispering their words of hope too.

Lois looked around and considered who to speak to next. A quick inventory of the points she wished to cover made her realise that they were all 'attacks' so she deftly inserted a light-hearted section and turned to the two guests immediately to her left. "Mayor Berkowitz. I think the audience would like hear about what you and Mr Holmes discussed during the commercial break. Would you be willing to share?"

The short man looked startled and almost a little scared for a moment. He raised a hand and scratched his cheek and then his mouth began to turn up. The smile on his face was quite clearly an embarrassed smile. "Well, Ms Lane, Geoffrey here mentioned that all his workers are running around Metropolis Centennial Park on New Year's Day dressed as Santa or an Elf. It's an open event but obviously they are running in aid of the orphanage." He shifted in his seat. "Um. I ... I asked if anyone could take part with them ..." He looked over at the chubby older man who was grinning back like a little child. "It seems that I'm going to be joining."

Lois raised her eyebrows and a smattering of applause trickled from the audience. The Mayor sat himself up much straighter and lost his embarrassed look.

"I'm announcing my intention right now, that I aim to raise five thousand dollars in sponsorship. All for Metropolis Coates Orphanage." He had a proud look on his face as the tiny applause from before grew into a resounding cheer. Lois knew that he was serious. This was also no re-election stunt. Mayor Frank Berkowitz was well loved and only just recently elected anyway. Even when she'd challenged him earlier on the bad permit decisions, she'd known it wasn't his fault personally.

"Well ... Mayor. Frank. I will pledge, right now. You can count on my support." Lois smiled. It was always nice to be surprised on her own show and, also, to be the bearer of a little scoop of news. The topics she covered were usually already out in the general public awareness. "I just hope, for your sake, that it isn't snowing." The applause turned into laughter.

Lois turned to the audience and waited for the sound to die away. "So," she looked into camera two. "Anyone else willing to

volunteer themselves?” She turned away from the camera back to her guests. “Senator?”

The lady laughed. “Unfortunately I have to be in Washington.” Lois nodded.

“Superman?” she asked, teasingly.

He laughed too and looked down at his clasped hands. That seemed to be his natural reaction when embarrassed. “I don’t think it would be a fair contest if I took part, Ms Lane.”

“No, I guess not,” she smirked.

“Mr Luthor?” Lois turned to the other guest. She could feel the hostility radiating from him. Challenging him in such a way, on live television, had possibly been a mistake, but she never backed down from a challenge. She’d already pointed out that he only ever supported his own orphanage. And ... she couldn’t think of a more unlikely person to see in a Santa suit ... or running for charity. But ... maybe she’d get another surprise.

“Unfortunately, I have an appointment in Milan on New Year’s Day, so I will not be in Metropolis. I am most distressed at that. It would have been a wonderful opportunity.” His smile and tilt of the head probably came across to the viewers and audience as caring and charming, but Lois had become more and more concerned by this guest as the evening wore on and she saw his acting for exactly what it was: façade. All a carefully woven façade. She was also pretty sure that the appointment in Milan was fake. Or at least, it did not *yet* exist. Most assuredly an extremely competent assistant would have one booked by the end of the evening leaving Lex seemingly legitimate and truthful. All those thoughts raced around in her head. They dove around in her chest and stomach until she could no longer hold in her distaste.

“So, Mr Luthor, are you saying that, if you were in Metropolis, you *would* take part in the run? Would help to help raise money for the Coates Orphanage? Because as we’ve already established, you only ever seem to support Luthor House.”

“Touché. I think you have assessed me pretty accurately, Ms Lane. I have no need to take part in a ‘fun run’ to raise any money. I am willing to donate significant amounts at the stroke of a pen.” His tone was warm and genial but Lois imagined a more lofty undertone and it turned her stomach once more. She also noticed that he had only answered the first half of her question.

“Actually. As well as limiting your giving, in terms of orphanages, to only Luthor House, you ... as trustee ... limit the receiving also. Luthor House, since you took over, has never applied for a grant or funding from any other source.” Lois found this very unsettling and knew she was not managing to keep this out of her voice.

“And why should they need to?” Mr Luthor widened his eyes in horror. “Why, when I can supply everything they need? It’s absurd.”

“And speaking of limitations on funding ... Mr Kent.” Lois turned abruptly to the gentleman seated on the far side. He gulped as their eyes met. “The Superman Foundation, although it gives out many grants, the guidelines and rules are very strict. Mr Charleston from New York points out that these people need help. Why are you restricting the flow of money out to the community?”

“Ms Lane, any rules and regulations we follow are not of our own making. Believe me, if we could give out money to every needy person that came to the door we would do so, in a flash. But the government would audit us constantly, probably find some way to file charges of fraud or avoidance of taxes or something, and then eventually shut us down altogether. We follow these rules, the rules that you claim are limiting funds, for the sole purpose of **keeping** those funds available to the world.”

“Well, that may be, but even so, applications languish for months. I’m also lead to believe that some of the rules you follow **are** of your own making. Surely you can see how that delays and limits your funding?”

“You could be right. I would expect that, as well as following government regulations, we also impose some guidance of our own, but I would hesitate to ask for these extra rules to be removed. If we were to walk the government line to finely — without our own extra safety zone from these rules — then what would stop us from crossing, if by accident, on any occasion. No, we will not allow ourselves anywhere close to dubious territory, or we deny *\*every\** future applicant by the very fact that we no longer exist.”

“Then perhaps you can assure you me that the reason this application”- Lois flung a brown cardboard folder over the glass coffee table — “has been in your system for nine months is quite innocent, and you are only following protocol.” She watched as Mr Kent leaned forward and slid the folder over. As he picked it up she took a deep breath for courage. This was her chance to show herself that Superman was not as Super as her heart believed. This was the moment she took on the Man of Steel. “Little Surrey Orphanage in Trenton, New Jersey, has heard nothing from your foundation, Mr Kent, since their simple application for funding to repair their leaking roof. In the ten months since part of their roof collapsed one quarter of the children have been sleeping doubled up.”

Lois’ heart pounded violently as she watched him open the folder and read. Within seconds he closed the folder and placed it back down. “Ms Lane, I ...” He gulped and looked away. Her stomach lurched when she saw the sorrow, undisguised in his eyes. “I cannot give you an answer about any particular application in the system. I assure you, from quick perusal of the file, that there is nothing of note that should have delayed it, and I will initiate an investigation into this particular situation the first moment possible.” He nodded, but Lois noticed a tightness in his neck. He didn’t smile as genuinely as before and he didn’t look as relaxed in his chair.

“Well, Mr Kent. I look forward to hearing about a resolution then,” she narrowed her eyes and attempted to sound victorious, but she worried that she came across as suddenly adoring. “Mr Holmes, have you ever had to deal with anything like that? I would guess that building maintenance is a constant drain on your resources. Has there ever been a time when your resources didn’t cover your ... needs?”

“Thankfully, since I’ve been at Coates Orphanage, we have been well funded. Oh, don’t take that to mean that we are comfortable. It takes a lot of work, dedication, fundraising and well received donations to be where we are. Without the fundraising applications that have, thankfully, been approved over the last few years then we could quite easily be in the same position. We did have a plumbing disaster last year, but we had been anticipating it and already had approval for the funds required to replace the pipework.” The rotund gentleman sighed and brought a hand up to scratch his forehead. “I do remember hearing about a situation from before I was director, though. There was a significant amount of time spent replacing rotten floorboards years ago and the children had to double up, just as those in New Jersey are having to at the moment.”

“I would guess that it makes a difficult situation even harder,” Lois spoke in sympathy. “Do you have a counsellor ... psychiatrists ... who help with bringing up the children?”

“Yes. Every permanent staff member is trained in at least basic counselling and we have doctors, nurses, psychologists, and more on our books. They pay regular visits and are part of the children’s lives. Unfortunately these are often negative situations, so we also try to integrate them in a positive way: reinforce positive relationships too.”

The Mayor suddenly sat forward. “That’s a wonderful idea, Geoffrey. But doesn’t that put greater strain on your resources?” He seemed genuinely concerned.

“We do have financial provision for medical treatment for the

children, but actually a lot of these people volunteer a certain percentage of their time. We are extremely grateful.” His smile was wide and his eyes glistened. “In fact, I would like to take the opportunity to thank the man who has been our paediatrician for the last twenty five years. Dr Stuart has been looking after our kids for a quarter of a century, visiting on Saturdays for ‘games day’ as well as regular clinic during the week.”

“Aww,” Lois drew the cameras back onto her. “Mr Holmes, that’s lovely. That someone could give of himself so freely for so many years. It take a special kind of person to do that.” Murmurs of agreement from the audience along with her guests brought out a smile. She glanced along the line of guests until she made it to the end ... and to ... him. *Definitely a special kind of man to give time, to give his talents, to give ... himself ... to the world.* “And on that note it is time for another break. We’ll be back again after this.”

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“Amanda!” Clark called out loudly as he landed abruptly in the main office at the Superman Foundation.

“Yes, Clark. I saw.” She came scurrying out of an office to the right with a pile of papers in her arms. “I’ve been watching the show and when she blindsided you I immediately came down here to start looking.”

Clark let out a breath. He didn’t need to explain. He only had two minutes and she was already on it. Amanda Cox was his personal assistant and she was the most efficient woman he had ever met. He hated having a personal assistant. He didn’t really have a ‘job’ at the Foundation, he was just the figure head, but it was unfortunately a necessity. The number of appointments he had to juggle, along with his spur-of-the-moment rescues, meant that his life required a lot of administrative help. But if he had to bear this, then there was no one better than Amanda to have the job. “Any luck?” he asked.

“Yes. The application was assigned to Rose Delgado when we received it nine months ago.”

“But Rose ...” he stuttered

“Yes, Clark,” came her soft reply.

“Then what happened? I thought her portfolio would have been distributed around.”

“It was. All the paperwork should have been handed over, but I’ve just checked and her filing cabinet was never emptied. I’ve just been in there and pulled all these out.” She lifted her arms indicating the pile of papers.

Clark sped over and took the pile from her. Within four seconds they were in neat piles on the desk and Clark had one folder still in his hand. “It’s here, Amanda. It seems that the file was ... incorrectly filed, and because Rose ...” he sighed again and dropped his head. “Amanda,” he lifted his head again. “This pile is filing for closed applications, this is an expenses claim she never placed with HR, this pile is to go to finance and”- he picked up another file like the one he still held in his hand -“this is another application that looks to have missed being passed on. Please deal with these tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir.” Amanda nodded. Clark knew that he’d been talking in his Superman voice. She only ever called him sir in serious situations.

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“Welcome back. While we were off air one of my guests disappeared for a minute.” Lois turned to the man who had been the most troublesome guest ever. Oh, he wasn’t troublesome as a guest; he was perfect, but her heart, her mind, her equilibrium were all troubled. “Superman, did you fly off for a rescue?” she chuckled hoping for a light moment. Much of part one and part two had been heavy attacks against her guests, in fact only Mr Holmes had got off without even one tiny accusation. Even Senator Jones had needed to rebuff accusations that her short, simple bill might have detrimental effects.

“Uh no, Ms Lane.” He shook his head. “I promised myself that only a real emergency would draw me away from you tonight.” His eyes caught hers and he smiled. She imagined a blush on his cheeks, but that would only have been wishful thinking. Still, her heart raced again. His words made it seem as if she were the most important thing in the world to him this evening.

“Really. Then where did you go?” She was actually a little curious now.

“I ...” He shifted in his seat. Now he really did look to be blushing. “I returned to the Foundation and have an answer for you about Little Surrey Orphanage.” Murmurs around the audience caught her attention. Were they as shocked as she was? Even though the world had lived with Superman and all his powers for just short of a decade, there was still something awe inspiring to think that this man really existed. It blew her mind away, to realise that he could make it across the city and back in just the time of a commercial break.

“You do?” she breathed out, almost a whisper.

“Yes. The application has been approved.”

Lois tilted her head and wrinkled her brow. “That’s quite convenient.” Her tone changed abruptly. All evening she’d been searching for a way to discredit this man. Not to discredit him to the world, she truly believed he was a good man. She needed to discredit him to her heart. She needed to get rid of this crush which had been with her since her teenage years, since he revealed himself. The only way she could do that was to prove that he had flaws, made mistakes, didn’t always get everything right. And now it seemed he actually might be manipulating the system. It really was convenient that the application had been approved only today. He was clearly lying to avoid any negative press about the languishing application. It was at that moment when she realised that she actually didn’t want to discredit him. She didn’t want to lose the hero that resided in her heart. But she had, she’d knocked him off the pedestal. Overwhelming sadness swept through her body and she had to gulp deeply to hold back a sob.

“Not at all, Ms Lane. There was nothing convenient about this situation at all.” He looked down at his linked hands, voice full of bleak emotion. “This funding application was assigned to one of our workers the day it arrived. She began work on it, preliminary work, and then she ...” He paused and unlinked his hands then looked up. “She has been on long term sick leave ever since. When I arrived at the Foundation a few minutes ago I was passed the application by my assistant. Thankfully she was watching the show and went looking the moment you brought the subject up, Ms Lane.” He turned to look straight at her and acknowledge her part in this.

“I’m sorry to hear about the worker on long term sick, but surely her work load was passed on.” *Okay, here comes the claim that it was conveniently approved only this morning.* The anger in her heart was unbearable. She was angry at him for disappointing her, for no longer being the perfect hero. She was angry at herself for badgering him into this — leading to that very loss of her hero.

“It was passed on,” he acknowledged, “but it seems that some paperwork was filed incorrectly. Had the original worker returned to work in just a few days I’m convinced that **she** would have realised almost immediately, but the new case worker ...”

“Didn’t know anything was missing?” Lois interpreted what he wasn’t saying in amongst the words he was speaking. The application had been lost. “But this application has been nine months. How long is this long-term sick?”

“I would prefer not to talk about that on live television. The woman in question is seriously ill. There are delicate and difficult emotions involved and family members that ...” He sighed and she registered the glistening in his eyes. “This worker, she was

dedicated, lovely, sweet ... but she is in hospital now.”

Lois felt her heart melting. There was no dissembling, no pretence or ‘coincidental’ timing. Suddenly he was her hero again. The compassionate, yet strong, man that was regularly portrayed as such by the respected media, was clearly sat directly across from her, proving that portrayal to be the truth. “And the application? What now?”

“I have **personally** approved this application only five minutes ago.”

“Well, Mr Kent. I thought you were an advocate of sticking to the rules, otherwise how could you be guaranteed to stay in business, so to speak? Plus I distinctly recall you stating that any favouritism you showed had nothing to do with the Superman Foundation.” Though the words exited her mouth with her usual ‘Mad-dog’ fire she no longer believed them. Nine years of hero-worship, nine years of getting to know this man through his works portrayed the world over, told her exactly why he’d done it, and she knew that it was the only choice he had, the only choice he could live with.

“I think you are twisting my words and my meanings, along with dismissing the fact that different circumstances can lead to entirely different interpretations of a situation. There is no favouritism here. I do **not** approve applications — although I could if I wished — for the express purpose of *avoiding* favouritism. In this case I quite clearly have nothing to gain from approving this funding as you yourself are the one who raised the situation, pointing out that they have been overlooked. I feel terrible that this could have happened and am invoking my right to approve. This is a special situation and I do not want these children to wait any longer. In regards to the rules and regulations we need to follow ... let me assure you that I read the application and I am confident that they are all fulfilled.” His rebuttal of her challenge confirmed her thoughts. He couldn’t live with himself if there were people suffering and he had the ability to help.

“You read it? The whole application. And how can you possibly know, in under five minutes, that this application passes all levels of your regulations?” Lois was now fighting against herself. Some part of her consciousness was making one last attempt to prove that this man was not worthy of her crush, her adoration, her heart or of the name Superman.

“Um, Ms Lane,” the young Senator spoke up. Lois turned to look at her, trying to control the red fire in her burning cheeks. “He’s, well he’s Superman.” Lois immediately felt the life drain out of her. The Senator was answering. Of course he could do all that in just a commercial break. He was super-fast, he read at super-speed, he had an eidetic memory. She turned to look at him. Part of her brain was expecting to see a triumphant, arrogant, proud look on his face. If she’d had this argument with Lex Luthor then there would be no doubt of what she’d see in **his** eyes. But the larger part of her knew ... was ready ... for the sheepish, embarrassed look.

He nodded. “I ... I read it at super-speed, Ms Lane. And I am familiar with all our rules. Believe me ... they passed.” His gentle tone was the final straw. Her heart and mind gave in ... became of one thought. *I’m in love.*

“Ahhh,” she floundered. “Th...thank you then, Mr Kent. And the children of Little Surrey Orphanage thank you too.” Her voice gained confidence and she continued. “Well, I’m left with only one more question from our viewers.” Lois coughed and smiled. “Mrs Treacher of Boston asks, um ...” she blushed and grinned. “Superman, would you, rather than Santa, deliver her presents this Christmas? She says she will be waiting at the bottom of the chimney to give you *your* present in return.” Lois pursed her lips then nibbled them before bursting out into laughter along with the audience and all but two of the guests.

Lex quite clearly didn’t find it amusing that Mr Kent was so much more famous, sexy, desirable ... nice. And, as for Mr Kent

— Superman himself — the reason that he wasn’t laughing ... well that was because he was blushing profusely instead. He clearly didn’t realise that he was famous, sexy, desirable and ... nice.

When the laughter finally died down Lois looked to camera one and smiled. “So, that’s it for tonight. Thanks to all our guests: Mr Holmes.” He nodded into camera two. “Mayor Berkowitz.” Another guest nodded. “Senator Jones.” She smiled and replied a thanks. “Mr Luthor.” A stiff nod came from the fourth guest. “And Superman: Mr Clark Kent.” The handsome man picked up a hand and shyly waved into the camera. “And next a quick round up of the news for today. Keep watching for *News at Ten* with Carmen Alvarado and Murray Mindlin.”

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The lights began to dim and the cameras slowly pulled away. Lois knew that the credits would be rolling up the screen for viewers at home. As she turned to speak to the Coates Orphanage Director to give the impression of gentle conversation to the public, her heart began to race once more. *This must be the fifth or sixth time*, she thought to herself. This time, rather than the proximity of Clark Kent causing it, it was the thought of him leaving — no more proximity — that suddenly distressed her.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw the lights on the cameras go out. She could hear the murmur of the audience as they made their way out of the studio. She breathed a sigh of relief in one moment and then looked over at Clark Kent in the next. He was already standing to his feet. Lois slowly rose along with all the other guests. She watched in growing anticipation as he turned to each of the other guests, shook hands and spoke something encouraging. She couldn’t hear the words for the sound of blood rushing through her ears, but she could be pretty certain that his words would be positive. Clark Kent didn’t seem to have it in him to be negative. He made his way along the line until finally reaching her.

“Ms Lane,” he started and her knees quaked nearly sending her back into her chair.

“I’ll, ... walk you to your dressing room, Mr Kent, i ... if you’d like?” She smiled as confidently as she could. Being in the public eye, on live television, had given her many opportunities to hone her acting skills. But, there was a significant possibility that they had failed her tonight. She’d have to watch a re-run to be certain how she’d come across to the audience.

His answering smile coincided with the stage lights returning to full brightness and she had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from sighing at him. “Thank you.”

Walking away from her other guests without even a simple goodbye, she led him in the direction of the dressing rooms. Not that he needed leading. He’d obviously been in the dressing room before the show started. As her high heels clacked on the tile floor backstage she frantically tried to come up with some way to delay the inevitable. Her brain ran over every scenario she could think of from stumbling on her ankle, shouting ‘Help Superman!’ and demanding he take her to hospital all the way to her favourite fantasy of planting a passionate kiss on his lips.

“Well, here’s your dressing room, Mr Kent.” She stopped and turned to see him waiting behind her. She felt a wavering smile touch her mouth and she worried that her voice had been just as shaky.

“Thank you, Ms Lane, but ... uh ...” he looked down at his feet. A half smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “There’s nothing that I need in that room. I ... uh ... should just say goodnight.”

“Oh.” Lois’ heart stopped beating. All the nerves, all the fantasies and dreams of nine years ... this was the end of it. He was leaving. “Oh, all right. Goodnight then.”

Standing in a bleak grey corridor in the depths of the studio she gulped and looked up into his eyes. The world seemed to fade

away and all she could see were the deep, warm eyes that were gazing back at her. *Is it just my imagination, or are his eyes a little bright ... watery ... hopeful ... wistful?* No doubt that was exactly what he was seeing in hers. After only a moment he blinked and then cleared his throat.

“Well, Ms Lane. Thank you for having me on your show. I’m a big fan and I had a really nice time.”

“Me too,” she replied dreamily. “Uh,” she cleared her throat in an attempt to dispel the mood which had captured her soul.

“Yes, well. Thank you for coming on Mr Kent. To have you on *Under the Spotlight* was a real scoop for me.” She smiled.

“If you ever want me on your show again, I’d be more than happy to oblige. Just contact the Foundation.”

Lois’ mouth dropped open. *Again, I might get him on the show again!* Suddenly her heart was racing once more. This wasn’t the end ... or it didn’t need to be. All she needed to do was come up with a subject for a future show that would lend itself to having Superman as a guest.

“Well, that’s if the city gives me the night off,” he continued with a self-deprecating smile.

“Oh, how often does that happen ... that you get the night off?” she asked, genuinely intrigued.

“Sometimes,” he murmured in reply.

“Liar,” she immediately called out, teasing him. Suddenly she knew exactly what he’d meant with the tone in his voice. “You should have said never.” His only reply this time was a smile and a sigh. “Then what about tonight?” Her face dropped. “You ... you’re not even having tonight off, are you? You’re off to ... to ...” — her hand reached out and did a gentle wave — “aren’t you?”

“Goodnight, Ms Lane,” he nodded his head and turned away. After one step down the corridor he turned back. “It was a pleasure.”

Lois watched as he walked down the empty grey corridor. At the end was a fire exit. No leaving by the main exit for Superman: too public. He pushed it open and stepped out into the night. “No, Mr Kent ... the pleasure was all mine.” And then, because he truly deserved the name, she continued. “All mine, Superman.”

THE END