

Between the Pages

By VirginiaR. <LC.VirginiaR@gmail.com>

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Summary: Lois and Clark team up to prevent a potential scandal from Lois's past from reaching her fiancé's attention.

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Part 1

Instinctually, Clark glanced up as Lois came down the ramp from the elevators into the newsroom. He took a deep breath and sighed before he could pull his eyes away and back to the data Jimmy had compiled for him, unable to focus on it.

It had been too many weeks since Perry's retirement bash when Lois had told Clark flat-out to 'get over' her engagement to Lex Luthor. She was marrying the billionaire and that was that. If Clark couldn't see how the man had rescued them all when he had bought the paper, then she no longer wanted to be partnered with him.

When Clark had rebutted that Luthor hadn't rescued Perry, Lois had said that until Clark apologized for that slanderous remark, she would no longer work with him.

Clark had steadfastly refused to apologize for speaking the truth. Fat lot of good it did him.

Therefore, here they were, in their current stalemate. Lois in blind denial about her billionaire fiancé as well as unwilling to acknowledge Clark's existence, other than those rare moments at work when she was forced to. Meanwhile, Clark — despite every effort — was still more in love with Lois than any other woman he had ever known.

It was his fault, Clark knew. She had always been stubborn; it was one of the endearing traits that he had learned to love about her. Stubbornly loyal to Superman, no matter what the world threw at him. How could he hate that? Still, Clark had pushed too hard on the subject of Luthor and Lois had dug in her heels — mostly because she could never admit defeat, or acknowledge that she ever could be wrong. Usually, he loved these quirks or traits as well, just not in this case.

So, he had remained. He wasn't about to abandon Metropolis, the Daily Planet, or Lois to Luthor while there was still hope.

His gaze was once more drawn to her, as it was whenever she entered the office. Her laughter could make his pulse quicken; sadly, he heard it only rarely these days. He missed his best friend with all of his heart and was willing to do almost anything to get in her good graces again, short of out-right lying to her about his true opinion of the Daily Planet's new owner.

Luthor had made Lois editor after Chip had been unable to handle the writing and grammatical side of being the editor-in-chief. Clark would never understand how the woman whose copy he had corrected on a daily basis while they were partners could do Perry's job, but Lois claimed that the position was only temporary until Luthor could find a suitable replacement for their former boss.

That had been two months ago and Clark doubted that Luthor wanted his future missus to ever investigate again. Did Luthor think that a management position would knock the drive out of his fiancée? Would it? Clark hoped not.

"Kent! My office! Pronto!" Lois called as she passed through the newsroom.

Clark's chin jerked up so fast in surprise, his neck actually pinched for a split-second.

"Today, Kent!" Lois roared again. "Jimmy, hold all my calls!"

"Yes, boss!" Jimmy replied. "I'll tell Susan."

Lois winced for a second, and Clark could see her slight embarrassment for having forgotten once again that Luthor had supplied her with an assistant to ease her workload. Clark suspected Susan was there more in a spying capacity despite, or maybe *because*, she was too good at her job. Since Susan's hire two weeks previously, Lois rarely left the Daily Planet building during the day.

Not wanting to be barked at a third time, Clark scurried from his desk to Perry's old and Lois's new office, catching the door before it slammed behind his new boss.

"Shut the door, Kent," Lois said, dumping her briefcase down unceremoniously on Perry's... *her* desk.

Clark had repeatedly asked that she call him 'Clark' during those rare moments they were alone, but so far she had stubbornly refused.

She plopped down in her chair in what had all the telltale signs of exhaustion. How had he missed the dark circles under her red eyes, the haphazard way she had applied her lipstick as if her hand had been shaking, and her slouched defeated demeanor?

"Sit!" she ordered, and Clark realized he had been staring.

He sat. "What's wrong, Lois?" he asked.

"Nothing's *wrong*, Kent, and it's Ms. Lane to... to..." Her eyes closed and her shoulders slumped. "Nobody. I could never lie to you, Clark," she murmured.

"I can recall a time or two you had no difficulty doing so," he replied softly.

She didn't rise to his bait and even half-smile. "I'm in trouble," she continued.

Clark's heart stopped for a split-second. 'I'm in trouble' didn't necessary mean pregnancy in Metropolis as it often did when whispered about unwed women in Smallville. Anyway, if Lois was pregnant she and Luthor could just move up their wedding date. It wasn't as if it was far off anyway.

He swallowed down these bile-filled thoughts despite the fact they were likely to give him indigestion.

"Do you need me to contact Superman?" he asked.

With Lois now the editor, Clark had become the paper's main source of Superman stories. He often felt it was the only reason Lois hadn't canned him behind after his repeated warnings to her about Luthor.

Superman's name did what Clark's earlier joke had been unable to do, bring a brief light to her eyes. "No. Actually, this is a job for Clark Kent."

Having no control over his heart, he could not stop it from swelling at her words. How could it not? Lois Lane wanted *him*. She *needed* Clark Kent. He had fantasized about this moment.

He leaned forward. "What can I do for you, Lois?"

"I need you to investigate something... something private."

"Private?" he echoed.

Had Lois finally stumbled onto one of Luthor's devious plots? He moved even closer to her desk. This was becoming better than his daydreams.

"Not a story," she went on. "Because it's too newsworthy."

Okay, not a plot. Another woman perhaps?

Clark waited for her to continue.

"I'm being blackmailed."

"Blackmailed?" Clark sputtered. He knew all of her secrets, or thought he had, and none of them was blackmail material. "Why come to me?" he couldn't help but inquire. "Why not ask your fiancé for assistance?"

She put her briefcase into her lap and gazed down at it, as if hoping she could hide behind it. "It's private."

He raised a brow at this declaration but didn't comment. What could be so private she would want it secret from her intended? Yet, not so secret to keep from him?

Reluctantly, she pulled a manila envelope out of her briefcase and set it on the desk. "This was slipped under my apartment door during the night."

Clark waited for her to slide the envelope over to him.

Lois set her hand on the envelope but more to hold it down than to move it. "Very private," she whispered, still not looking Clark in the eye. She exhaled and closed her eyes.

"Even from your future husband?"

"I... I told Lex that I..." She swallowed. "Uh... wanted to wait until... um... our honeymoon... to..." She glanced up at Clark and flushed a deeper shade of maroon than he had ever seen on a perfectly healthy individual and then shifted her gaze away again.

"You told Luthor that you're a virgin?" Clark guessed.

Lois quickly nodded. "Not in so many words, but I'm sure he thinks..." Her voice petered out.

"What about Claude?"

"That's why I know I can trust you, Clark. You know about Claude and never told anyone," she explained.

Clark glanced down at the envelope Lois still hadn't passed over to him. "Why don't you just tell Luthor the truth?" he asked. "I'm sure he would understand."

Okay. That wasn't exactly honest. Clark wasn't sure of that in the least. Clark, himself, would understand if Lois had lied to him and then came clean, but mainly that could be because he had been keeping a big secret from her. However, he wasn't Luthor. Nor was Luthor him.

Thank God.

Lois closed her eyes tightly and shook her head. "This isn't about Claude," she went on. "You remember Linda King? Of course, you remember Linda King! Do you recall that I told you that she not only stole my story, but also my boyfriend?"

Clark nodded slowly.

"Paul. Paul Bender was his name. He was editor of the Metropolis University newspaper."

"I recall you mentioning him," he prodded when she went silent.

"Well, while we didn't go all the... um... way... he did convince me to pose for some risqué pictures. It was just a game, he said. A flirtatious way to get me to feel more comfortable in my skin to get me to relax around him," Lois said. "He told me there wasn't any film in his camera." She took a deep breath and exhaled. "He lied."

Clark drew in a sharp breath as both of them looked down at the envelope on the desk. He lifted his gaze back to Lois's and pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose, glad he hadn't slipped into temptation. She nodded, finally letting go of the envelope.

As he pulled open the flap of the envelope, a couple of latex gloves landed on the desk in front of him.

"How dirty are these photos, Lois?" he teased, raising a brow.

"It's just one photo," she explained. "And the gloves are for fingerprints."

"Why don't you take it to Detective Henderson at the MPD if you don't want to risk fingerprints?" he asked, putting on the gloves.

Lois scoffed. "I'd never hear the end of it."

He nodded. Moreover, knowing Luthor, he probably had sources planted within the police department. Clark drew out the enclosed letter first.

Dear Lois Lane:

Who knew that Lex Luthor was marrying such a sex kitten? I bet he doesn't want the world to know how much of a tramp you are.

I'm selling the negatives to Love Fortress, International. The pictures will hit newsstands just in time for your wedding. Then again, if you'd rather buy them yourself, I'll let them go to you for a cool million dollars. LFI will pay me at least half that much, but I'm sure that they're worth more to you.

You have forty-eight hours to decide.

I'll be in touch.

The letter wasn't signed with more than a scribble that could be one of six letters or a combination of several.

Clark tilted up the envelope until the photograph slid out.

Lois covered her face.

The print was in black and white. Lois sat on a disheveled bed and appeared only to be wearing a grey Metropolis University sweatshirt. Her right knee was bent flat in front of her on the bed and the left was up against her chest. Her longer than shoulder-length hair had been brushed out of her face with her left hand, whose elbow rested on the knee against her chest. She stared at the camera with an expression Clark had only seen in his dreams... and while Lois had been high on pheromones.

He swallowed his thudding heart back into his chest and set down the print. "That isn't so bad."

"That was one of the tamer shots," Lois revealed.

"I thought you said Paul Bender had told you that there wasn't any film in the camera," he said.

She pressed her lips together.

"Are there more photos?" he asked when she didn't reply.

"I'm assuming there are and *no*, I haven't seen them, but I remember the photo shoot and... and... they get worse." She covered her face with her hand. "Will you help me, Clark?"

As if he could ever resist a plea of help from her.

"I'm guessing that you already contacted this Paul Bender fellow?" he asked.

"Of course!" she growled. "I hunted him down and confronted him this morning. He claims the camera with the photos still in it was stolen during his senior year at Metropolis U."

"That does widen the pool of suspects a bit," Clark murmured, tapping his chin in thought. "Even if you do get the negatives back, Lois, there's no guarantee that LFI hasn't already made prints enough for their readers."

"I know! I know! But, at least, I need to try," she exclaimed, hitting her fist against the desk in a manner resembling their old boss. "Lex hates reporters... well, other than me. That's why he started LNN and bought the Daily Planet to make sure the coverage about him and LexCorp wasn't slander-based."

Clark stared at her, wondering if she heard the words coming out of her own mouth.

She must have seen the chagrin plastered across his face because she gestured as if knocking her words away. "You know what I mean."

"You're saying Luthor got into the media business in order to control the freedom of the press?" he said, trying to keep the scoffing tone from his voice. He failed.

"Well, to protect his own interests," Lois rebutted.

"So, you're admitting that he bought the Daily Planet to get favorable press?"

"You're twisting my words!" she said, standing up and leaning towards him.

"Maybe you should try listening to your own words sometime, Lois, because the reporter I knew a year ago wouldn't have accepted a Public Relations job if her life depended on it!"

Lois crossed her arms and tried to out-glare him into caving. It didn't work. She had asked him for his assistance, after all. She sat down. "He'd be mortified, Clark, humiliated if these came to print."

He doubted that Lois meant on her behalf.

Clark picked up the photo. "Personally, I think it's sexy."

She snatched the picture out of his hand and stuffed it back into the envelope.

He handed her the letter. “If you love him that much, Lois, tell him the truth. If he loves you half as much as...” He cleared his throat. “If he loves you, he’ll forgive your white lie on why you wanted to wait until your honeymoon. He’ll understand that after dealing with scum such as Paul and Claude, you wanted to know his intentions were honorable and not a means to an end.”

Lois set her hand on his for a moment longer than necessary as she retrieved her blackmail letter. “I knew you’d understand. So, you’ll do this for me.”

Clark brought his hand back to his lap and rubbed the spot she had touched with his other hand. “Do *what* exactly? Act as your negotiator? Do you have access to one million dollars?”

“I’m not paying this scumbag! I want you to find the photos and steal them back.”

“Aha! Grand larceny. I’m not a private detective, Lois. I’m an investigative reporter,” he reminded her.

“The best one at the Daily Planet,” she returned.

The thrill of her words was deadened by the truth he knew that lay behind him. “*You’re* the best investigative reporter the Daily Planet has, Lois. Why don’t *you* find your own photos?”

“I don’t have the time, Clark!” She held out her hands to encompass the whole room outside the office walls. “I have a newspaper to run.”

Clark stood up. “The Lois Lane I used to know would’ve been thrilled at the challenge at running some nasty blackmailer over the coals.”

A sly grin spread across her face. “I was really hoping it was Paul. I would’ve enjoyed pulling out his spleen.”

“Lucky man,” Clark deadpanned.

“The truth is, Clark, the blackmailer obviously knows me and will see me coming from a mile away. You’re a nobody. You’re invisible. You’re so open and honest; nobody would ever suspect you of having an ulterior motive.”

He crossed his arms and stared at her in disbelief. She really didn’t listen to what she said, did she?

Lois went around the desk and patted Clark’s arm. “I mean that in the best possible way, Clark.”

“Gee, thanks, boss.”

Jack knocked on the door and opened it. “Mail call!” he said, handing Lois a pile of letters including another manila envelope.

A petite firestorm of a blonde secretary stormed into the office after Jack and grabbed the stack of mail out of Lois’s hands. “I’ll take those!” she announced before turning on Clark’s friend. “This is the last time, kid. I warned you that *I* am to open all of Ms. Lane’s mail from now on.”

“What are you going to do? Demote me from the mail room?” Jack scoffed.

The woman turned to Lois. “I’m sorry, Ms. Lane. It won’t happen again.”

“It’s okay, Susan. I can open my own mail,” Lois said, holding out her hand. Delegating to anyone not named Jimmy wasn’t Lois’s strong suit.

“It’s in my job description that I answer your phones, schedule your appointments, and open your mail, Ms. Lane,” Susan returned. “It won’t take but a few minutes.”

Clark snatched the manila envelope from the pile while giving Susan an apologetic smile. “Excuse me. Isn’t this that report you were just telling me about, Ms. Lane?” he asked, holding up the envelope so that Lois could see the familiar script and lack of a return address.

“Why ‘yes,’ it is, Kent. Good eye. The rest of you can go,” Lois said, dismissing Susan and Jack with a wave of her hand.

“Ms. Lane,” Susan said, standing her ground and holding out her hand. “What if that envelope is laced with a deadly poison or an explosive? If you let me do my job properly, your safety won’t

be at risk.”

Clark tilted his head to observe this petite woman who would dare speak so to Mad Dog Lane.

“Susan went through Army ROTC, Kent. She’s trained in handling explosives and to expect danger to come from anywhere,” Lois explained. “Don’t worry, Susan, I’ll have Mr. Kent here open the envelope and we’ll know in a few minutes whether someone was trying to kill me... by whether he’s still alive.”

“Have you had death threats, Lo... Ms. Lane?” Clark asked. This was the first he was hearing about it.

“Lex is overly cautious,” Lois went on with a shrug. “As you well know, Kent, a good reporter always gets death threats.”

“Mr. Luthor worries about your safety, Ma’am,” Susan corrected. “And you’re no longer a reporter.”

Clark took a large step backwards, out of the blast radius.

“*Don’t call me ‘ma’am’!*” Lois roared, pointing to the newsroom. “Out!”

Susan disappeared out the door with the rest of Lois’s mail, shutting the door behind her. Jack had left when Lois had kicked them out several minutes earlier.

Lois picked up her letter opener from her desk. Meanwhile, Clark quickly x-rayed the package to see that it, indeed, contained another suggestive photo, but otherwise was harmless. She pulled the envelope out of his hand and sliced through the flap.

Clark tsk-tsked this action. “Susan is going to be so disappointed if I don’t get the opportunity to die for you, Lois.”

“It’ll be our little secret,” she replied with a sly wink. She glanced inside the envelope but instead of removing the photo, sucked in a sharp breath. Almost just as fast, she clutched the envelope to her chest. “You know, I’ve been thinking that you probably have enough to go on with that first photo...”

Clark picked up his discarded latex gloves and put them back on. Then he held out his hand.

Lois eyed him warily. “Why weren’t you attracted to me when we were sprayed by that love perfume?”

He wondered if he looked as he felt, as if she had just hit him upside the head with a two-by-four. “Who says I wasn’t?” he said, tugging the envelope out of her gripe.

“You didn’t serenade me as Perry did to Rehalia nor did you try to impress me as Jimmy did with April Stephens,” she went on, holding tighter onto the package. “You didn’t even respond when I did the dance of the seven veils.”

“That’s not how I recall it,” he murmured, running his free hand through his hair. Her gaze told him she wasn’t going to let this drop. “I’m different than they are. I woo differently.”

“With patience, kindness, and understanding?” she scoffed.

He shrugged. “Some women appreciate...” Not only did he not need to excuse his behavior, he had allowed her to distract him. “What does this have to do with your current predicament?”

Lois straightened her spine. “Just curious. You didn’t seem any different than you normally do.”

He lowered his voice to a suggestive tone, “Maybe that’s because I’ve been wooing you since day one.”

The shock of that statement made her loosen her grip on the envelope and he was able to extract it. “A-ha!” he exclaimed with triumph.

“Hey, give that back!”

Clark poured the photo into the palm of his gloved hand.

It was another black and white photo. Lois wore only a men’s white button-down Oxford shirt with the sleeves rolled up to her elbows as Clark was apt to do on hot days. She had tied her long hair behind her head in a makeshift knot held by a pencil. She was sitting at a desk with a computer on it, turning away from the desk and towards the camera as she used to do here at the Daily Planet whenever she had wanted to speak with Clark. There was

a certain sexy librarian / secretary vibe to it or, in Lois's case, reporter.

Actually, the more Clark stared at the photo, and he couldn't stop himself from doing so, the more it appeared as if Lois had jumped out of bed with a brilliant idea and headed straight to her computer to write it up without bothering to get dressed in more than the first shirt she found beside her bed. A shirt that could've easily been taken off Clark's chest. He could picture a scene where he walked out of her bedroom, still wiping the sleep from his eyes, to find her so. The shock of that fantasy image socked him in the gut as strongly as a punch from his immature double had. Clark's knees buckled and he sat down.

He didn't want Luthor to see this print. He didn't want anyone to see it. Clark wished *he* hadn't seen it, because there was no way to un-see it and un-feel the emotions that had come with seeing it. He swallowed.

"That bad?" Lois asked.

He didn't answer as he flipped the photo over under the guise of looking for a developer's stamp. No such luck. He cleared his throat.

To Clark, it seemed to be a risqué photo. However, to those who didn't know Lois as he did, it still could be considered quite innocent by LFI standards. It was even the type of print that the editor of LFI might choose to leave out of the photo spread. Should these photos ever make it to the pages of that magazine, he hoped this one wouldn't be included... for Lois's sake.

"It's not too bad," he finally spoke, hoping that she didn't hear the catch in his throat.

She moved next to him to peer at the photo from over his shoulder. "I was afraid my underwear was showing."

Clark closed his eyes. "No."

"That's good, at least."

"Uh-huh," he said, standing up and handing the photo back to Lois. He removed his gloves and tossed them into the trash. "It doesn't appear to have another note enclosed. I'm going to... uh...go..." He pointed to the door with his thumb. "— get started."

Lois slipped the photo into the first envelope and nodded.

At the door, he turned back to her. "I'm going to catch this guy, Lois."

"Thanks, Clark. I appreciate it."

She looked so fragile and vulnerable, instead of her usual tough self. That combined with the emotional impact that last photo had on him, Clark felt an overwhelming need to protect her... more than his usual need to do so.

It wasn't until he was back at his desk that he remembered that she wasn't *his* to protect, no matter what his wishes might be. That honor belonged to Lex Luthor.

Instead of lessening with this realization, his desire to protect Lois doubled... tripled, even.

Lois needed Clark Kent to save her, and he wasn't going to let her down.

Part 2

Clark's first stop was to the mailroom. He caught sight of Jack, who was on a soda break, and waved.

"Hey, Clark," the young man said, closing his soda bottle. "What's up?"

Clark held up the envelope that Jack had just delivered to Lois's office. "Do you remember this?"

"Yeah."

"You didn't happen to see how this arrived into the Daily Planet mailroom, did you?" Clark asked.

"Interoffice mail," Jack said, flicking the corner of the envelope where a postal stamp usually went. "No stamp."

"This was sent to Ms. Lane by one of her coworkers?" Clark said. He hadn't been expecting that.

"Not necessarily. Anyone could've dropped it in someone's outbox and it would've been brought down here. It also could've been left for her at reception," Jack explained. "It's really not all that secure a process." He unscrewed his soda and took another sip. "What was in it?"

"Something private," Clark replied.

Jack grinned. "Ah, Clark. You know we don't have any secrets here at the Daily Planet," he teased.

Ever since terrorists had taken over the Daily Planet back in early April, Jack had been dropping hints that he knew Clark's secret.

"We also don't repeat them haphazardly," Clark responded. "If we did, someone could get hurt."

"Don't I know it?" Jack scoffed.

"Do me a favor," Clark asked, tapping Jack's arm with the envelope. "If Ms. Lane receives any more mail like this one, can you divert it to my desk instead?"

Jack appeared wary but the sparkle in his eye told Clark he would. "Was it dangerous?" he whispered.

Clark shook his head. *At least, not physically.*

"I could get in trouble with the men upstairs," Jack warned. Meaning Luthor.

"What could they do? Demote you?" Clark said, echoing the words Jack had used against Susan earlier. "Just slip them into an interoffice envelope and direct them my way. Nobody will be the wiser."

"Will do, Clark. You going to tell me what this is about?" Jack asked.

No.

"We'll see," Clark said, heading out of the room. He paused at the doorway. "Any idea whose desk it could've been dropped off at?"

Jack shook his head. "Nah. It all gets mixed up when it's collected."

"Too bad. Thanks, Jack!" Clark called, heading for the stairwell.

At least, Lois wouldn't have to worry about Susan intercepting any of the photos and informing Luthor. Even a blackmailer didn't deserve a death sentence for threatening Lois.

Keeping secrets was certainly a recipe for marital disaster, but he knew Lois's fiancé was already holding much back from her. As Clark wouldn't mind if Lois and Luthor broke up, he would actively encourage Lois's behavior, especially since she had turned to him, Clark, for help. Clark would protect Lois from any consequences. Anyway, he rather liked that Lois trusted him more than her fiancé.

He knew it was also ironic that he held the opinion that the members of a couple should be completely honest with each other, as he had never told anyone his own secret. Then, again, he had never been engaged before, either.

Clark collapsed onto his sofa, respecting the hard work the police put into their jobs. Even with all his powers, investigating wasn't easy.

Jack had delivered one more picture after lunch and a fourth before the end of the day, saying he thought it was best if it didn't wait until the next day. The letters going through the mailroom meant that too many fingers touched the envelopes to distinguish the blackmailer's prints from the outside alone. Clark had needed to compare any prints on the photographs with those on the outside of the envelopes. As luck would have it, there weren't any fingerprints on the pictures themselves. At least, none that Clark's magnifying vision could discern.

In the third print, Lois was back in just her Met U sweatshirt lying on her stomach in bed, shyly gazing at the camera through her hair. In the fourth, she gave the camera a suggestive look while holding a banana.

The blackmailer seemed to have sent the photos to Lois in random order. Were they increasing in sexuality? Personally, Clark didn't think so, but the erotic factor was subjective. Clearly, they weren't in chronological order as Lois wore different clothes in the second picture than in the other three.

Clark wasn't sure of the blackmailer's motives for continuing to send Lois photos throughout the day — one at her apartment the night before, one at the office before work, one after lunch, and one after at the end of the workday.

Was the blackmailer just trying to remind Lois that he had quite a few of these photos? Was he doing it to drag out her torture?

Clark assumed the blackmailer must want Lois to go to Luthor with his demands. Otherwise, Lois wouldn't have access to that amount of money. Personally, Clark thought that meant that the blackmailer was a novice, because he didn't know with whom he was trying to play chicken.

After he received the third photo, Clark had tried to rendezvous with Lois, but she was heading into an editorial meeting with the department heads. Susan had come between him and Lois's elevator, telling Clark he would have to wait.

The afternoon had been fraught with Superman rescues and following Paul Bender's trail to see if he had lied to Lois about losing the camera. Paul Bender worked in corporate media relations for some bank, writing press releases touting how wonderful the bank was for foreclosing on so many delinquent mortgage holders. Clark could never understand someone bragging about making another person homeless. Apparently, after Lois spoke to him that morning, Bender had boarded a plane to Chicago for a conference. It counted him out as a suspect, unless he was working with a partner.

Clark now understood why the police found the paying of the ransom such an important investigative tool. He had one disqualified suspect and no new ones. Next, he merely had to narrow down the list of everyone else who could possibly have a grudge against Lois, or Luthor, to those with means and opportunity, not to mention the smarts not to leave any traces, but not enough smarts to leave Luthor well alone.

There was a chance that the criminal underground didn't know how dirty Luthor was, or only an elite few who did. Luthor was that good at hiding his tracks. His orders would trickle down the line of command until the one caught could honestly say he didn't know who had hired him. Clark, Jimmy, and Jack had discovered this — on their own time — while they had investigated how the Daily Planet board had given the newspaper away to the billionaire businessman. Without Perry's leadership and Lois's natural ability to catapult them past the illogical into the obvious, they felt blind.

Then, again, the blackmailer could just be someone who stumbled across the negatives and saw a windfall opportunity. Maybe he didn't have a beef against Lois or Luthor or know either of them personally or professionally. Clark didn't really believe that, due to the wording of the ransom note. Still, there was always that chance, and the blackmailer could merely have worded the note in a manner to lead authorities astray.

Clark rubbed his face under his eyes. Superman would need to get up and start his nightly patrol soon. He wanted to find Lois's blackmailer but he wasn't sure where to head next on his investigation. He hated to fail her.

A knock on his door startled him. He wasn't meeting with Jimmy and Jack this evening on the Luthor investigation. Clark hadn't been inspired to find new friends after losing Lois.

"Who...?" he mumbled to himself as he picked up his glasses from the side table. Before he put them on, he x-rayed the door. "Lois?" He shouldn't have been surprised, but it had been so long since she had visited his apartment, it had fallen out of the range of possibilities. He opened the door with his most cheerful tone,

"Hi, Lois."

"Well?"

He didn't like small talk, anyway.

"Come on in," he said, after she pushed past him and into his sunken living room.

"Have you found the negatives yet, Clark?"

"I'm still looking for the blackmailer," he confessed, shutting the door and following her down the steps.

"I knew I shouldn't have passed this on to you," she snapped, continuing into his kitchen.

So much for being the best investigative reporter at the Planet.

She returned with a wine glass, a bottle of red wine, and his corkscrew; the last two she handed over to him. He obliged her. When the bottle had been uncorked, he poured her glass half-full.

"Two more photos were sent to you," Clark said, nodding towards the envelopes on the coffee table as he set the wine bottle nearby.

Her eyes widened as she polished off the wine in her glass and dropped onto the couch. "Did you look at them?"

"Yes."

She buried her face in her hands. "What must you think of me?" she mumbled.

"The same as I did before seeing them," he admitted. "Only now, I know that a con man took advantage of you when you were younger."

She scoffed, "The story of my life." She poured herself another generous glass of wine. "I'll never be stupid enough to be hoodwinked by another con man again."

Clark shifted uncomfortably in his shoes. He could name two men in Lois's life who were lying to her; one was her fiancé and the other was him. With a sigh, he sat down next to her. "Why don't you tell Luthor the truth?" he asked. "Once he knows, the photos no longer have any power. So what if they're published in Love Fortress. They aren't even that risqué. Embrace that you were once foolish and that you have a sexy side, then move on with your life."

She lifted up her head and glared at him. "Would you be saying the same thing to Superman, if someone said that they had naked photos of him that were up for sale?"

Clark blanched, before trying to clear his heart out of his throat. He reminded himself a hundred and fifty times that Lois didn't know his secret, and then asked, "You're na...n... nude?"

Her lips pressed into a straight line. "No." She swallowed another gulp of wine.

Thank goodness for small miracles.

"But I might as well be." She reached into her jacket pocket and drew out another manila envelope that she promptly slapped against his chest.

Clark caught the envelope as it fell. Did she really want him to look at it?

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to pull his nerves of steel to the surface.

Opening the envelope along the slit she had made, Clark glanced down at the enclosed photograph, expecting it to be another innocent photo as the last one had been.

He was wrong.

Once more, the print was in black and white. Lois wore the white button-down Oxford shirt with fewer buttons fastened than not and the sleeves rolled up to her elbows, again. She crawled towards the camera across the bed, staring through locks of her long chestnut hair. Her knee had caught the hem of the shirt, holding it open far more than the Lois Lane he knew would ever care for anyone to see, even while undercover. While her chest was in shadow, it cast a mighty-fine silhouette of her bare chest. He could even see the bright whiteness of her bikini bottoms... underwear.

He drew in a breath that was loud enough for Lois to hear. “See!” She set her empty wine glass down next to the bottle.

Clark swallowed and handed the envelope back to her. “Did you receive another note?”

She shook her head, staring down at her hands. “What am I going to do, Clark? I can’t let these photos be published. It would ruin me. Nobody would ever take me as a serious reporter ever again. I’d be beyond humiliated. I might as well change my name, move to Kansas, and become a farmer’s wife.”

Clark could think of worse futures... such as her current plans. He smiled gently. “At least, I’d still run into you at the annual barbeque.”

“There’s an annual barbeque?” she asked, glancing up at him.

He chuckled. Kansas wasn’t *that* small. “No.”

“Oh.” She poured herself another glass.

He didn’t bring up the topic that, as the wife of a billionaire, the chances that her husband would allow her to continue in her chosen career were pretty darn close to nil.

“I’d never be able to look my friends and colleagues in the eye again,” she went on.

“You haven’t scared me off yet,” he replied, picking up the half-full wine bottle and removing it to his kitchen.

“Yeah. What’s up with that?” Lois asked, staring at him as she took a sip of her wine. “Why are you being so nice to me?”

His brow furrowed. “Haven’t I always been nice to you?”

“I have a Godzilla doll that proves otherwise.”

Clark laughed, and then shrugged. “Well, that was before I really knew you.”

Lois leaned her forearms against her knees and stared down at the wine glass in her hands. “This latest photo was waiting for me when I got home, tonight,” she said. “It really rattled me, Clark. I took your advice and went to see Lex before I came here. I was going to tell him everything.” She shook her head. “He has some business meeting tonight, so we didn’t have plans.” She closed her eyes. “I couldn’t tell him. I wanted to...but... but I couldn’t.” She bit her lower lip and took a gulp of air. “Lex didn’t have time for me. It was as if my showing up unexpectedly was an inconvenience to him. He didn’t even notice that I was upset.” She stood up. “God! You saw right off the bat that something was wrong and we hardly speak anymore... and he... he...” She set her wine glass down on his dining table.

Clark didn’t interrupt, unwilling to move as he watched her pace between his couch and dining table.

“Why am I marrying him?” she asked, throwing her hands up in exasperation.

Clark knew better than to try to answer a question he had been asking himself in vain for months.

“I don’t even love him. I mean, I respect him for... well, *appreciate* all the good he has done for Metropolis and for saving the Daily Planet, but... *love*? I don’t even know what that is.” She picked up her wine glass and took another sip.

“I don’t believe that,” Clark whispered.

Her gaze jerked over to him as if she had forgotten he was even there. “What? You mean Superman? Ha! That’s not love, Clark. True, I admire him. How can I not? He’s my hero, but he’s not even real!”

Clark sat up straighter. “He’s not?”

“He’s a school girl fantasy. There when I need him, gone when I don’t. He’s handsome and sexy and kind and generous, and, oh...” She closed her eyes as if reliving something in her mind. “God, he’s the best kisser in the galaxy.”

“Oh?”

“No offense, Clark, and you might be as close to second as they come...” She took another sip of wine.

Clark couldn’t help staring at her in surprise. *He* rated second... Well, technically, first and second... above Luthor? Above her fiancé?

Nice to know.

Also, not so nice.

“But... oh, there’s no comparison to Superman!” She closed her eyes and sighed with contentment. “When I kiss him — and mind you, it was just that one time before he left for Nightfall — I can hardly keep my feet on the ground.”

Clark knew the feeling.

“I’ve often dreamed what it would’ve been like to kiss him again. If Miranda’s Revenge spray had worked on him and he had pulled me into his embrace, professing his undying love...” She whimpered slightly with the thought, causing Clark to shift uncomfortably on the couch. “See! Total fantasy.” She set her wine glass back down on the dining table. “A woman can’t marry him, can’t settle down and have a normal life with him. He’s good for rescues and high adrenaline stuff...”

Like kissing? Clark wondered.

“But for the day-to-day real world? Eating breakfast or just hanging out? Someone I can spend the day with, go for walks in the park with, laugh with? Someone with whom I can both discuss the issues and bare my heart to, and then cuddle up next to and watch a movie? Nah. I can’t picture it.” She threw her hands into the air again. “So, that isn’t love either. Trust me, I wish it could be, but it isn’t.”

Clark knew he should just keep his mouth shut, but the words fell out before he could stop them. “Then why are you marrying him?”

“I’m not marrying Superman!” Lois roared with sudden laughter and then froze, staring at Clark. “Why? Did he say something?”

“No, Lois,” he clarified. “Lex Luthor. Do you sit and watch movies with him?”

“Operas. Theatre. Classical concerts,” she said with a flip of her hand. “All live. All in a crowd of hundreds. The only thing he watches on TV is LNN.”

“Ah.” *Sounds exciting.* Clark knew he shouldn’t say any more, but he couldn’t resist. “Do you discuss the issues?”

“Of course!” Lois scoffed. “Well, okay, not really. Lex doesn’t like to debate things. There’s his opinion and his opinion. He’ll tell you a hundred reasons why you’re wrong until you change your mind, but he never changes his.”

Uh-huh. “You’ve already said that you can’t...” Clark stopped himself. He didn’t want Lois to marry Luthor, but it had to be her decision. He had already tried and failed to be the messenger. He didn’t want to be burned again for being a buttinsky. “Never mind.”

“No, what?” she asked, sitting back down on the couch next him. She rested her hand briefly on his knee.

“It’s not important.” He tried to think how to segue back to his investigation of the blackmailer but his mind went blank.

She stood up. “Do you mean that I’m not as attracted to Lex as I am to... to *Superman* or... or... other men? That, if I was, I wouldn’t find being intimate with Lex as something I should wait for...?” She picked up her wine glass and polished off what remained. “Well, let me tell you something, Clark Kent, man of the world, who hangs off rafters with the likes of Cat Grant, that passion isn’t important in marriage. Actually, most surveys say that sex rate declines after marriage, and I’m just fine with that!”

Having her sex rate decline from zero?

“Sex isn’t everything, you know!” she snapped.

“I really wouldn’t...” He cleared his throat. “I never said that it was, Lois, but intimacy in marriage, being able to bare one’s soul to your spouse, should be.”

“Ha! Marriage is a contract; always has been. A business arrangement between two like-minded people for the betterment of their lives,” Lois said.

Clark decided that Lois was too upset by this discussion because she was spouting utter gibberish now. Why get married

at all if that was what marriage was? He held up his hands as a protective barrier between her and what he was about to say. “I’m just trying to understand, here. Okay? You don’t ‘love’ Luthor; you respect him as a businessman and philanthropist. You’re marrying him because...” This is where he was totally lost and needed to guess, “— because he saved the Daily Planet from financial ruin?”

“NO!”

Okay. “Because he can protect you? Not like Superman, but in his own way.”

“I don’t need a man’s protection!” retorted the woman currently being blackmailed for a million dollars.

“I didn’t think you did,” Clark replied, somewhat dishonestly, but he didn’t want to get into semantics at the moment. He decided to be more blunt. “Because he’s rich?”

“Don’t be an ass, Clark.”

“I didn’t think that was the reason, but I cannot picture wanting to get married without the deepest of love,” he explained. “I’m just trying to understand your logic. Help me out here.”

“I’m marrying him *because* I don’t love him!”

Huh?

She picked up Clark’s sports jacket from where he had draped it over one of his dining chairs and threw it at him. “Self-preservation, Clark! He can’t break my heart if I don’t give it to him!”

The error of that statement squeezed his anguished heart on Lois’s behalf, causing Clark’s jaw to drop. “Then why get married at all?”

“I... I... I...” she sputtered.

“You’re still young and more interested in your career than starting a family.” This was more an educated guess than a reiteration of a discussion point. “You don’t need his money or the protection it brings. You’re thankful and admire him for saving the Daily Planet from ruin, but as you said that’s no reason to marry him. You don’t love him. I’m baffled here, Lois. Why get married at all if this is how you feel about marriage?”

Lois looked down at her shoes. “Because he asked me.”

Clark’s mouth opened to say the most obvious of responses, but then closed it for his own self-preservation. He didn’t want to draw himself personally into their discussion, no matter how sorely he was tempted. He opened his mouth again, but couldn’t think of a single thing to say, so he closed it again.

Her eyes rose to his. “If I don’t marry Lex, I could fall in love with someone else.”

Clark held her gaze. *And?*

“Someone who, with my luck, will turn out to be another con man, and I won’t find out until it’s too late... and... and...” She shook her head. She picked up her wine glass, noticed it was empty, drank the remaining few droplets anyway, and then set it back down. “I don’t want to go through that again. I won’t survive another betrayal, another broken heart.”

Clark wanted nothing more than to pull her into his arms and promise to do everything in his ability, which was saying a lot, never to hurt her if given the opportunity to love her. However, he already knew that standing between them was a huge omission, or what she would call a lie, that could easily destroy their friendship, let alone any possibility for love. Instead, he stood up and taking her hands in his, said, “And what if that someone else isn’t a con man, but a man who wants nothing more than your happiness?”

Lois drew in a breath as she stared into his eyes. “Superman doesn’t date,” she whispered.

But I do. Clark bit his lips together to keep the words from slipping out of his mouth. He turned and picked up his sports coat. “Let me walk you home.”

“I drove.”

“Oh.”

“I figured we’d need the car while we worked on the investigation into the photos,” she said.

“We?”

Her gaze narrowed. “Yes, *we*. Do you think I’m going to sit idly by while there’s some stranger out there with naked photos of me?”

“You said you weren’t naked in them.”

She shrugged. “A figure of speech.”

Clark wasn’t so sure.

“Fill me in on what you’ve learned.”

He handed her the photos that had arrived through the mailroom. “I already have.”

“That’s it?” she gaped.

“There are no discernible fingerprints on the photos. Paul Bender left for Chicago on a business trip after you spoke to him this morning, so he either didn’t lie to you, again, or has an accomplice who is dropping off the envelopes.” He shrugged on his coat.

“You had *all* day, and *this* is all you found out?”

“I also wrote up two Superman rescues,” he reminded her.

“He wants the money tomorrow night! This should’ve been your top priority!”

He ignored that comment. “Our best bet is to camp outside your apartment building and see if the blackmailer stops by during the night to make another delivery.”

“This sucks,” Lois grumbled.

“He still hasn’t told you how to deliver the funds; so we know he’ll be in contact again.”

“Fine. We can use my Cherokee for the stakeout,” she said, moving towards his front door.

“No. You’re going inside and heading to bed. I’ll do the stakeout alone. I’ll sit on that bench across the street.”

“Not happening!”

Clark shut the door behind them, locking it. “You said it yourself. The blackmailer knows what you look like. If you’re seen sitting in *your* car across the street from *your* apartment building, he’ll keep walking and not make the delivery, and then we’ll have wasted this opportunity. Anyway, we need you to watch your apartment door in case he comes by from another entrance.”

She pouted. “But I want to do the stakeout.”

“You’re insane. You know that, right?”

Lois hooked her elbow around his as they walked down the stairs. “I’ve missed you, Clark Kent.”

He smiled.

The feeling was mutual.

Clark drove Lois home via her favorite Italian restaurant, where he picked up pasta for the two of them. He parked her car in the garage and accompanied Lois to her apartment where they ate their food and reminisced about the old times and Perry’s Elvis analogies. Clark didn’t bring up Luthor or the photographs and neither did she.

When Lois offered him a thermos of coffee to use on his outside stakeout, he didn’t refuse. She explained that at ten p.m. the alarm activated on the back door, so that the only way in and out of the building — by non-residents — was via the front stoop.

“Are you sure you’re going to be okay?” she asked as she handed him the thermos at her apartment door. “Outside on the bench all night without the protection of a car...”

“I can handle it, Lois, if the gangs don’t bother me,” he said.

“There aren’t any gangs in my neighborhood,” she retorted.

He gave her a ‘then, what do I have to worry about?’ expression. “At least, it’s summer this time,” he said, heading down the hall with a wave.

“Wait!” she called. “This time?”

Clark felt his cheeks warm. “After you were shot at last December, when Mr. Make-Up was after you.”

She leaned against her doorframe. “You stayed on that bench all night in the cold to look after me?” She said it in a tone that implied that she thought he was half-crazy.

He shrugged.

“It was just a car backfiring,” she said.

“I can tell the difference,” he reassured her. The bullets he had caught helped. Lifting up the thermos in thanks, he turned the corner out of her sight.

Clark shut the newspaper and folded it nicely, setting it down next to him on the bench. He had now read the entire Daily Planet, at human speed, cover to cover, including the want ads. Only three more hours, give or take, until sunrise.

Most pedestrians had gone to bed hours ago and the automobile traffic had dwindled to almost nothing. He’d been listening to Lois sleep since around midnight. First, she fell asleep on her settee, and then she woke up and dragged herself to bed twenty minutes later. The late night revelers had already wandered home after the bars and nightclubs closed around two. Occasionally, a drunk or a graveyard shift worker would come down the street, but overall it was quiet.

He leaned forward and rested his forearms on his knees to put his hands together as he gazed unseeingly through the darkness at Lois’s well-lit front stoop. He had purposely not let himself think too much about his earlier conversation with Lois about Luthor and her crazy ideas about marriage. Clearly, she was scared. Clark didn’t know if what she had said was true about her marrying Luthor because she didn’t love him and was protecting her heart, or if she had merely felt angry that her fiancé hadn’t paid her heed when she had visited him earlier. Nor did he know if her cold feet were due to stress from being blackmailed or if she seriously had doubts on whether she should marry Luthor. Clark wished it was the latter, but wouldn’t be surprised if it were the former.

Clark hoped that his advice about not needing to get married at all hadn’t fallen on deaf ears. With Lois, one never knew if one’s words had an impact or not, because she would never admit it if they did.

Unfortunately, previous experience with his former partner told him that the more Clark pushed, the more she would dig in her heels to prove herself right. *She* had to be one who decided that Luthor wasn’t good for her. It was the only reason he stopped trying to convince Lois that her fiancé was the criminal mastermind that Clark knew that he was. Lois being blind to Luthor’s faults would only make her declare that such flaws didn’t exist the more he pointed them out.

Lois and her friend Molly had drifted apart because of Lois’s negative views on Molly’s boyfriend. Clark hadn’t noticed until it was too late that his friendship with Lois was taking the same route. If he didn’t want to lose Lois forever, he needed to support her decision — no matter how idiotic and insane it was — either way. By staying her friend, through thick and thin or through Luthor and a publicity scandal, it was the only way to guarantee that Lois might turn to him for help when she finally did discover the truth about her intended, as she had with this blackmail scheme.

Clark didn’t harbor any... or many... daydreams that Lois would switch her affections to him. She had already informed Clark that she only thought of him as a friend and loved him like a brother. Even if she did think he kissed better than Luthor.

His brow furrowed.

Lois had strange ideas about family.

Anyway, she was still quite enamored with Superman, even if she was in denial about it.

Clark closed his eyes and let his mind retrace those moments when Lois gushed about what a wonderful kisser she thought Superman to be, and how she wished he had kissed her at the airport after Miranda’s arrest. He had been seriously tempted to take that opening given to him to profess his love to Lois, but then his better judgment had gotten the better of him.

Had Superman told Lois how he truly felt, would she have hesitated more before accepting Luthor? Clark didn’t want to dwell on what ifs. While Lois wanting a relationship with Superman was a million times better than her being in one with Luthor, it still wouldn’t have done Clark any good. And probably not Lois either.

His eyes flashed open. Lois’s heart rate had increased and he heard her gasp and sit up in bed. He took a quick look up and down the street to make sure that he hadn’t missed anything and then covered his eyes to reduce the temptation to gaze inside Lois’s apartment. Tuning his hearing away from her apartment was a little more difficult.

He heard her take and exhale a few deep breaths and then push back her sheets to get out of bed. Clark lowered his hand. She probably only had a nightmare. With everything that was going on in her life, Clark would’ve been more surprised if she didn’t have any. He heard her bedsprings creak lightly as she stood. He started humming to block out the sounds around him, not wanting to invade Lois’s privacy any more than he already had.

After a few minutes, he glanced up at her bedroom window, suspecting that she had now returned to bed. He knew how hard it was to go back to sleep after a terrifying nightmare and he guessed she was now taking further deep breaths to clear her mind and help her sleep. He wondered if she would be able to sleep. After all those times that he had dreamed that Superman had arrived too late to save Lois, Clark had been unable to go back to sleep. He usually donned his uniform and went for a late night flight. Saving people helped take his mind off his nightmares allowing him to sleep again.

Her curtain twitched and, tilting down his glasses, he focused more intently upon her window.

Lois wasn’t back in bed. She was standing at her window. Beside her window, actually, peering down at him. He shifted his gaze, bumping his glasses back in place, before she could realize that he could see her. If he had the vision Clark Kent supposedly had, he never would have been able to see her standing there in the shadows.

He leaned back on the bench and picked up the Daily Planet again. The next edition should be delivered soon. He tried to ignore Lois’s gaze burning through him and to act natural but it was unnerving. Why was she staring at him? It wouldn’t have taken more than a quick glance through her window to see that he hadn’t broken his word about his stakeout. Why continue to stand there and watch him?

Clark picked up the thermos and poured himself another cup of coffee. It had cooled down, despite the warm night and he was tempted to zap it with a little heat. With Lois watching him so intently, he had to settle for merely warm instead of his usually scalding coffee. He took a sip and tried not to outwardly wince. He should have added more sugar. At least, when it was extra hot, he didn’t notice the lack of sugar so much. How could she stand such bitter coffee? He glanced up at Lois’s window and wondered if she would mind if he buzzed her apartment and asked for a quarter cup of sugar.

He guessed ‘yes’. He was only there to blend into his surroundings and notice any suspicious characters. If the blackmailer was watching Lois’s apartment building, Clark really didn’t want to give himself away by approaching it.

Shame.

He might have been able to get away with super speeding to

his apartment for some sugar, but not with Lois watching him. He glanced back up towards her window.

Was she mad at him? Why? What had he done this time?

Okay. He had suggested that she would be better off without Luthor. Clark might be a little biased, but it wasn't as if he were lying or anything. He glanced up to Lois's window under the guise of taking another sip of coffee.

Lois didn't look angry, just perplexed.

Weird.

Maybe she wasn't even looking at him, *per se*. Perhaps she was just staring unseeing out her window while she thought of something else.

Unable to pretend to drink this bitter brew any longer, Clark bumped up his glasses long enough to feign rubbing his eyes and used the distraction to heat up his coffee more. Only, now, the steam from the coffee fogged up his glasses.

He moved the cup further away from his face and allowed the steam to dissipate, only to have the coffee slosh, spilling on his knee.

Terrific. Super man he wasn't. No wonder his glasses disguise was so convincing. Such a misnomer as Superman only helped him hide in plain sight more easily.

Clark gave up trying to drink the coffee and poured it in the bushes next to the bench before patting himself dry with yesterday's Daily Planet. He returned the thermos lid and leaned back on the bench where he was able to look once more up at Lois's bedroom window.

She was no longer there.

Tilting down his glasses, he peered past the bricks into her apartment. She had gone back to bed, so he pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose.

Gosh, he hoped she had returned to bed before he had acted like such a goober. He exhaled his pent-up breath that he had been holding pretty much since he noticed Lois at her window.

Small miracles. He would take them every day.

Dawn burst around the edges of the building on Lois's street bringing not only the energizing sun's rays, but also a dusty pink glow to the sky. Just in time, too. Clark's eyelids were starting to droop. This bit of sunlight was just the morning pick-me-up he needed.

"Clark?" a familiar female voice called out to him.

He glanced around and saw Linda King. She had emerged from the other side of the park behind him.

"Linda?" he replied, sounding just as puzzled. "Hi!"

Linda walked up the bench shaking her head and stealing the words from inside his head, "What are you doing here?"

"I'm... uh..." He didn't want to tell Lois's biggest rival from college about her current blackmail problem.

"Stalking Lois?" she suggested.

"Of course not!" he said, perhaps a tad too adamantly.

Linda sat down next to him. "Uh-huh. Clark, I think the world of you; I do, but don't waste your life like this. She's engaged to Lex Luthor now. She's never going to dump him for the likes of you."

"Thanks," he said wryly through pinched lips. "I mean... We're just friends."

"Right," she said, continuing with the disbelieving tone. "That's why you're out here and she's in there." She patted his shoulder. "Friends don't let friends sleep on park benches."

"I wasn't sleeping!"

"This isn't a trial, Clark," Linda teased. "So, you became a little obsessed with your partner." She shrugged. "It happens to the best of us."

"I'm not..."

"Clark, it's just after six in the morning, and you've clearly been hanging out on this bench across from Lois's apartment all

night. If I know Lois, she won't be leaving for another hour. Isn't it a little early in the day to start lying?"

"So, Linda, what brings you here? How did your movie deal go?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Ugh." She shrugged again. "First, Superman refused to endorse the film, so it fizzled into non-authorized status. Then, it ended up airing as a made for TV movie on some forgettable cable channel. Finally, my role as Lois Lane was left on the cutting room floor. They *recast* me!" She harrumphed. "It was *my* story, *my* script! They couldn't even let me have that one teeny-tiny role!"

"Linda... um... Lois's involvement in the Carpenter case was a little more than just a teeny-tiny bit."

"Of course *you'd* say that! You're obsessed with the woman. My advice to you, Clark, is to go home and get some sleep. Quit your job at the Planet, if you haven't been fired yet, and fly back out to L.A. with me tonight. Leave Metropolis behind you like a bad dream and be freelance for a while. Just sail on the wind and see where it takes you."

He started to shake his head. He wasn't going to give in, and let Luthor win, not yet. Anyway, he had already done that and the wind had brought him to Metropolis.

"Clark, I know you think the world of Lois, heaven knows why, but she isn't this wholesome goody-goody that she pretends to be. She has a dark side and it isn't pretty. One of these days, you're going to wake up and realize that she's only marrying Luthor for his influence and money. I recommend you leave her and this life behind before she dashes all your ideals." Setting her hand on his, Linda ran her index finger across the back of his hand. "We were a good team once. I bet we could be better than before, if it were just the two of us."

Clark took hold of Linda's hand and pulled her closer, setting his other hand on her waist. His fingers dipped into the large pocket of her jacket and extracted a manila envelope. Gazing over the top of his glasses, he glanced through the outer wrapping to confirm the contents: a photo of Lois dressed only in a negligee. Holding up the sealed envelope, he shook his head. "Linda," he scolded. "How could you?"

"How could I? That witch ruined my life! First, she told the Ethics Board at Metropolis U that I stole her story, which put a black mark on my career before it even started. I've had to work twice as hard as she has to make it in this business because I wasn't Perry White's little darling," Linda snapped with a sneer. "The same Perry White whose job she stole, I might add. That's gratitude for you. That job at the Star was my ticket to fame! Carpenter loved me; he gave *me* all his choicest stories. They may have been illegally gotten stories, but they still put me on the front page. Lois accuses me of sleeping my way to the top and then what does she do?" She flicked her hand over to Lois's apartment building. "She gets engaged to her new publisher and skyrockets up to the editor's position in the same week. Come on, Clark. We *both* know Lois didn't get that job because of her grammatical skills."

"Lois has worked hard for her accomplishments."

Linda groaned. "Oh, please! She was on the front page her first year out of MetU. I bet she's never even seen the inside of the Wedding Registry's office or had her byline on the Obits page."

"And blackmailing her evens the scales?" he replied.

She shrugged. "It's not as if it were her money. It's a drop in the bucket to Luthor." Linda looked Clark up and down. "How'd you find out anyway? Taking up stealing her mail?" She grinned. "So, is that why you're here? Got a taste of her naughty side and now hoping you might get a glimpse of some more?" Her grin reminded him the Cheshire Cat's. "Wait until you see today's shot!"

"No!" Clark returned. "I'm here to catch you."

“Me?” She tilted her head and stared at him. “Luthor hired you to bodyguard Lois? You? Isn’t that like hiring the fox to guard the hen house?”

“What?” He shook his head, completely perplexed by her analogy. “No! I don’t work for Luthor.”

“Really? Then who signs your paycheck at the Daily Planet?”

Clark’s spine stiffened. He hated being reminded of that fact.

“See?”

“Linda, Lois asked me to find her blackmailer.”

“You?” she gasped. “Oh, no. Luthor’s not going to like that.”

“If you’re lucky, Luthor will never find out about your little money-making scheme, Linda. Why don’t you just hand over the negatives and we don’t have to involve him at all?” he asked, pocketing the newest manila envelope and holding out his hand to her.

“I can’t. I don’t have ‘em.”

“Fine. We’ll go to your hotel room or wherever you have them squirreled away, and then you can give them to me.”

“No, you don’t understand, Clark. I *can’t* give them to you. It’s not that I don’t have them on me. I don’t have them at all. I’ve already sold them.”

Clark’s jaw dropped. This was his biggest fear. Lois was going to be devastated. “Spencer Spencer?” he asked.

“No,” Linda replied with a sly smile. “Lex Luthor.”

The sound of an aluminum can hitting the sidewalk made Clark realize that they weren’t alone. At the far end of the park, some twenty feet away, some kid was digging through the garbage searching for soda cans.

“I don’t understand. What?” Clark said, drawing his attention back to Linda. “What do you mean ‘Lex Luthor?’”

“I sold the negatives to Lex Luthor.”

Clark stared at her before hissing, “Then why are you blackmailing Lois? She doesn’t have that kind of money.”

“Actually, it was his idea,” Linda said.

He blinked his eyes. Either it was too early in the morning for even *his* brain to comprehend this or Linda King was insane. It didn’t make sense. “W...? Why?” he sputtered.

“Who knows? I think he was curious what her reaction would be.”

O-kay. Clark could kind-of see that. Logically, he couldn’t make sense of torturing the woman he was going to marry, but they were discussing Lex Luthor... reason need not apply.

“I mean,” Linda went on when Clark still didn’t speak. “I’m betting Luthor wanted Lois vulnerable and to come to him in her hour of need.” She rolled her eyes. “Sounds like the kind of patronizing stuff guys pull all the time on their girlfriends, just to feel needed... You know, the big hero.”

“That’s sick!”

She shrugged.

Something clicked in Clark’s brain, but before he could speak, a can flew through the air and clocked Linda in the back of the head, causing Clark to jump to his feet.

The young man was pointing at Linda and screaming, “That’s a lie, and you know it!”

Linda whirled around to face her accuser as she rubbed the back of her head. “Lois?”

Clark’s eyes widened. *No. It couldn’t be.* Instantly, he turned his gaze towards Lois’s top floor... and empty... apartment. Jimmy had always said that Lois was a master of disguises but he’d never thought she could pull it over on him. Anyway, when had she snuck out?

“Lex isn’t behind this,” Lois growled.

Linda took in Lois’s getup. “Nice look.”

Lois whipped off the sandy colored wig and baseball cap. “Stop changing the subject.”

“God’s honest truth, Lois,” Linda said, holding up her hand as if swearing an oath. “I sold him the negatives about a month

ago for five figures. He called me up last week and asked me to do it again, only to bump up the asking price. He said that he’d give me a portion of the ransom.”

“Lex isn’t behind this!” Lois shouted. She was adamant and sounded as if she was convinced.

So much for her doubts about her fiancé, Clark thought. Then again, that had always been a pipe dream.

“I’m sorry, Lois, truly I...”

“Oh, shove it!” Lois retorted. “We both know you’re not.”

Linda paused for a second to consider that. “Okay. You’re right about that. Who cares if you’re getting your just desserts? You’re still engaged to the third richest man in the world. We’re even.” Linda stood up to leave, but Lois blocked her path. “Take it up with him, Lois.”

“We’re not done yet,” Lois said. “Did you meet with Lex directly? Face to face?”

Linda sat back down. “Well, no. I met with his butler. Some English gentleman with a white goatee, but he paid me in cash. Fifty-K. Lex must have authorized it.”

Lois looked over at Clark. “Nigel...”

“St. John,” Clark finished with a nod. He turned to Linda. “Was it Luthor who you spoke to over the phone?”

Linda shifted her eyes back and forth between them standing in front of her as if dawn was slowly arriving to her brain. “No... but...”

“But what? I told you it wasn’t Lex,” Lois said. “Where are the rest of the photos?”

“Uh...” Linda swallowed. “Back at my hotel.”

“Where?” Lois demanded, leaning in.

Linda lifted her chin. “Somewhere safe.”

Lois reached for her former friend, but Clark was able to put his arm between them before Lois’s hands hit her target.

“What should we do with her while we search?” he asked.

A slow grin eased across Lois’s face, replacing the look of abject fury. “I knew I... uh...” She cleared her throat. “I know.” With a bob of her head that told him to bring Linda, she headed across the street.

“Linda’s cocky,” Clark said, pointing at the corner of a photo sticking out from inside the hotel’s Bible.

“You don’t know the half of it,” Lois replied, flipping through the book before pressing it to her chest in slight embarrassment.

Even without using his x-ray vision, Clark knew that they had found the photos. He went to sit down at the desk as Lois removed the pictures and put them inside an envelope. He had seen enough of them to last him a lifetime. Anyway, pining for a woman who was clearly in love with another man, even if the guy was the worst man Clark had ever met, was pointless. He wondered how often and for how long he would have to remind himself of this.

“Now, what?” he asked.

Lois glanced up from where she tucked the envelope of photos into her briefcase. “It’s over.”

“Nigel St. John still has the negatives,” he reminded her.

“He won’t use them. Lex would kill him,” Lois replied.

Clark raised a surprised eyebrow at this accurate appraisal of the situation.

“Metaphorically,” she clarified.

He wasn’t so sure about that, but he didn’t want to get into that old argument again. He stood up. “So, you’ve got it from here?” he asked, knowing when he was being dismissed.

Lois held out her gloved hand to him. “Thanks, Clark. You’ve been a real...” She stopped herself as he took her hand in his, giving it more of a slight squeeze than a shake. “Thanks. I couldn’t have done it without you,” she went on, more softly.

“That’s not true.”

“Take the compliment, Kent,” she ordered. “Even if it’s a wild exaggeration.”

He nodded and released her hand. “Yes, ma’am. You’re welcome, Lois.”

At the door to Linda’s hotel room, Lois paused, turning to Clark once more. “We make a good team, you and I.”

Clark gently smiled. He liked the sound of the present tense.

“Anytime,” he said, knowing that there’d never be any more times. If she married Luthor, Clark would move away, unable to watch as Lois’s soul slowly died. If he, Jack, and Jimmy were successfully able to prove Luthor was behind bribing the Daily Planet’s board to sell the paper for dirt, Lois would never speak to any of them again. Her rant from the night before must have been the ramblings of woman who had drunk too much wine on an empty stomach after being slighted by her fiancé. Clearly, Lois loved Luthor enough to know that he would never blackmail her.

Still, Clark meant the word. *Anytime*. He didn’t have the strength to refuse her aid.

“You know, Clark, I believe you genuinely mean that,” she replied, and then chuckled. “Even if I knocked at your door at three a.m.”

“Why not?” he said, opening the door and passing through to the hall. “You’ve done it before.”

“I *never!*” Lois gasped, following him so that she could slap his arm for suggesting such a slander.

“Well, let’s see, there was that time when you...”

“Okay. Okay,” she interrupted in defeated laughter. “You win!”

It felt like old times. It felt better than old times. It felt as if he should wrap his arm around her waist and pull her to his chest, before pressing all his love onto her lips in a kiss that would lift them both off the floor with pleasure. Yet, it also felt as if his heart contracted within her closed fist, causing his eyes to shut in a pained wince as his life force slowly started to ebb from this wound. He searched for some inner strength and used the drop he found to push a weak smile to his face.

“Good luck, Lois,” Clark said, ducking into the stairwell and heading up instead of down. He didn’t feel like extending this awkwardness through an elevator ride down to the lobby.

There was an annoyed message from Lois on Clark’s answering machine when he returned home late that afternoon. Apparently, Linda had been able to free herself and escape from Lois’s apartment before Lois had made it home from the hotel.

It took two phone calls to learn that Linda had switched her booking to an earlier flight and hightailed it out of Metropolis before noon.

Clark hoped that meant that Linda was safe from any retaliation from Luthor once he found out about her involvement in the blackmail scheme. St. John, on the other hand, had known the viper he was dealing with when he had started this nasty business. While Nigel might need protection, Superman wasn’t anyone’s bodyguard.

This whole scenario had turned out better than it could have for Lois. Unfortunately, it was the exact opposite for Clark. Not only were photos of a scantily clad Lois seared onto his memory cells to torture him for eternity, this experience reminded him of why he had fallen for her in the first place: her wit, her stubbornness, her vulnerability, and her ability to catch him off guard. He loved that Lois came to him in her hour of need and, yet, hated that she returned to Luthor stronger and more determined in her decision to marry him.

Clark had racked his brain all afternoon on what he could have done differently to change this outcome and never came up with a solution. With the exception of going back into the past and changing it somehow, Clark knew that the only true way to save Lois was to quadruple his efforts to topple Luthor’s empire

before the wedding. Lois might never forgive Clark, but at least her eyes would finally be open to what kind of man she was engaged to and prevent her from falling under that man’s thumb completely.

Rescuing Lois from Luthor might not make Clark’s life any better, but he hadn’t gone into the hero business to improve his own life. Allowing Lois the possibility of a future free from Luthor was all the reward he wanted. That he did this knowing it could ruin their friendship was his cross to bear.

As Clark pulled open the drawer of his side table to remove the notes from his investigation into Luthor and LexCorp, he was interrupted by a knock on his door. He glanced at his watch. Jimmy and Jack weren’t supposed to arrive for another hour. Clark hadn’t even had time to order the requisite three pizzas. He tossed his folder onto the dining room table and jogged up to his front door. Opening it, he said, “I wasn’t expecting...” The words dried on his tongue.

“Saints alive, Kent! Of course, you weren’t expecting my help, but we both know you could use it,” answered the jovial southern gentleman on the other side. After two more beats of Clark gaping at him, the man continued, “I am welcome, right?”

Clark shook himself out of his astonishment and clasped his old boss on the shoulder in greeting. “Chief! Of course. Please, come in.” He backed away to let Perry White into his apartment, still staring at him as if seeing an apparition. “How great to see you! You couldn’t have arrived at a more opportune moment.”

“So I’ve been told.” Perry dumped his bags next to the sofa. “You know, I was twiddling my thumbs by that phone at my new beach front condo just wondering when you’d realize that you needed this old hound dog.”

“Always, Chief. I hadn’t realized that you needed a formal invitation,” Clark responded.

“Well, at least, I still have some friends not above asking for help when they truly need it.”

Clark’s brow furrowed. Who had invited him? Jimmy?

“Hi,” Lois’s voice sounded from Clark’s open doorway. “I had the devil of a time finding parking in your neighborhood, Clark.”

Twice, in as many minutes, Clark felt winded by surprise. He moved towards her before stopping himself from gathering her into his arms and pressing his gratitude against her lips. It took two whole steps before he remembered that she wasn’t his to kiss; she never had been and never would be. He gripped the handrail leading up to his front door.

“Hi?” Clark hadn’t meant for it to sound like a question, but he had never expected to see Lois Lane gracing his life, let alone his apartment again. He tried to cover up his confusion with a smile.

“Is this what you have so far?” Perry asked from behind him.

Clark turned to look at the Chief and then back at Lois as she shut his front door. What were they doing here? He returned his gaze to Perry. “Uh...”

Lois walked down the steps and set one hand on Clark’s back and the other on his stomach in a makeshift hug that was the most intimate touch they had had in months. Clark was unable to stop his arm from going around her shoulders to return the embrace.

“I figured if we’re going to bring Luthor down,” Lois said, leaning into Clark’s chest and surrounding his waist to draw him closer before letting go, and moving towards their former boss. “— we’d need the Chief to help us continue where you left off.”

“Us?” Clark sputtered in the least nonchalant way possible.

Lois glanced back at him from where she was looking at Clark’s notes from beside Perry and smiled at Clark. “Us, partner.”

“No offense, Lois, but what makes you think that I’m investigating your fiancé?” Clark closed his file, pushing it to the center of the table and away from them. He then took her arm and

guided her towards his sofa.

Perry chuckled as he sat down at the table and pulled the folder towards himself once more.

She glanced back towards the papers Perry was perusing and then at Clark as if he was an idiot. Or, more accurately, as if asking if he thought she was one. “Former fiancé. I broke the news to Lex this morning after I phoned you about Linda. Then he told me that Chip would return as editor come Monday.”

“Sucks, doesn’t it, honey?” Perry said from behind her. She nodded in agreement.

Clark sat down on his sofa, mostly because he lost the ability to stand. “But... but... but...” He held his hand out to his front door. “You *defended* Luthor just this morning!”

Lois sat down next to him. “You heard Linda. Lex didn’t have anything to do with blackmailing me.”

“So, you *dumped* him?”

“Was I too hasty?” she replied. “I know. I should have seen your evidence first.” She stood up and turned to head back to his dining table.

Clark grabbed her hand to stop her. “No. No. I mean, how did you...? Why did you...?” There were too many questions buzzing in his mind to choose the correct first one.

She looked down at his hand holding hers. Before he could let go, she squeezed it, knocking him breathless. “You wouldn’t lie to me, Clark.”

“No, I...” He *was* lying to her.

“I should’ve realized that months ago. I thought you were jealous of Lex,” she said.

“I...” Actually, he *was* jealous of Luthor.

“I realized yesterday, after you dropped everything to help me...” Lois sat down next to him again, still not having let go of his hand. “— that even if you loved me like a brother, you would’ve reacted the same way. I should’ve given you the benefit of the doubt.”

Clark lifted his gaze from their joined hands to look into her eyes. “I’ve never loved you like a brother, Lois.”

“Still in the room,” Perry called from the dining room table.

In the silence that followed, Clark heard Perry turn a page of paper. Clark felt the heat rise in his cheeks. “I mean...”

Lois squeezed his hand once more before whispering, “I know.” Then, she slowly let go.

Clark’s chest filled with sunshine. He cleared his throat and tried to recall what they had been discussing before a world of hope opened up to him. “Except, you defended Luthor this morning to Linda.”

“He was innocent,” Lois explained with a shrug. “If he were trying to get my attention, he wouldn’t have brushed me off last night.”

“Luthor is hardly innocent,” Perry said from behind them, stealing the words from Clark’s lips.

“Nor was Lex innocent when he killed Max Menken in order to ‘save’ me. Linda was right when she suggested that Lex could be putting me in jeopardy in order to rescue me.” Lois shook her head. “I wish I had seen it then. Max Menken even said that Lex was trying to frame him. Being kidnapped and Lex saving me by shooting Menken blinded me that I didn’t even question those words, or that Lex’s bullet had shut Menken up. What I should’ve asked Lex was how he knew Menken? Why did Menken think Lex was setting him up?” She stood up and set her hand on Perry’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, Chief; I let you down.”

Perry patted her hand on his shoulder. “Don’t let it happen again!”

Clark cracked a smile out of the side of his mouth.

“So before I went to Lex’s office, I swallowed my pride and called my father. He said that he had spoken to Luthor after the cyborg boxer incident and he offered my father a cushy job at LexLabs. However, the patent for anything my father created

would then belong to LexLabs, so they parted ways. Two weeks later, the medical board revoked my father’s license to practice medicine.”

“Circumstantial,” murmured Perry.

“Yeah. I know,” Lois said. “My father also said that Menken had never told him who was backing them. He had always let himself believe it was Menken, but he doubted that even Menken could have afforded to spend all the money they had on their research.” She let go of Perry’s shoulder and turned back to Clark. “So, today, I asked Lex about Menken and what the man had meant with his accusation. Lex merely said Menken was a mad man. Menken had lost everything and had kidnapped me as a last grasp effort to gain control of his life. He was a ranting lunatic, Lex said.”

“Seems plausible,” grumbled Clark.

“Right! Lex is more slippery than... a... an eel.”

“The term is a warthog’s back side, darlin’,” interjected Perry.

“Did you tell Luthor about Nigel St. John’s involvement with the photos?” Clark asked.

For the first time, the Chief raised his gaze from Clark’s Luthor file and focused his attention on Lois. “Photos?”

Lois glared a storm cloud at Clark.

“Ooops,” he mouthed. Clark honestly thought that she had told Perry what had happened.

“Someone tried to blackmail me with some risqué pictures...”

“Of you and Kent?” Perry asked.

“*No!*” Lois exclaimed. “Clark and I are only friends... partners... best friends, really... it doesn’t matter. Anyway, as a good friend told me recently, I have a great life. I don’t *need* to get married.”

Perry’s brow furrowed. “Who said anything about marriage?”

“Not me.” Clark shrugged away Lois’s storm cloud, trying not to let a grin escape.

“Terrific!” Lois said, clapping her hands together once sharply. “We’re all in agreement then.”

Their old boss shot Clark a questioning expression on Lois’s sanity. Clark decided to act as if he didn’t understand.

“The photos aren’t important,” Lois went on. “Did I mention...?”

Clark’s front door opened after a quick double tap.

“Hey, CK!” Jimmy said, walking straight into Clark’s apartment. “Chief! Lois said that she phoned you.” Jack followed him inside, shutting the door.

“Good thing I have nothing to hide,” murmured Clark under his breath before saying more loudly, “Hi, guys.”

“Lois, do you want the good news or the bad news first?” Jimmy said.

“Bad news?” she echoed.

“Someone leaked a semi-naked photo of you onto the Internet,” Jack said.

“They *what?*” Lois snapped.

Jimmy glared over his shoulder at the teen. “Hey! I was going to tell her!” Turning to Lois, Jimmy held up a hand in self-defense. “Don’t worry. You were covering...” He waved his hands around his torso. “— everything.”

“Who knew you were once hot, Ms. Lane?” Jack said before stepping out of range.

Lois focused on Jack so sharply, she could’ve cut him in two with laser vision. Luckily, it wasn’t one of her powers.

“The good news,” Jimmy continued. “—is that on a normal private dial-up connection it takes fifteen minutes to a half an hour to download.”

“Good news? Then why were you having such a hissy fit while it loaded?” Jack asked.

Jimmy scowled at him to shut up. “The *bad* news is that LNN

picked up on the story and has been covering it and the picture non-stop for the last hour.”

Lois screamed so loudly that only Superman and dogs could hear her. When she again found her voice, and Clark his hearing, she told Jimmy to continue.

“When they questioned Luthor, he said that he had only just learned of the photos...”

Her eyes closed on the plural form of the word.

“— and that you two had a disagreement about the freedom of the press and personal privacy and that you decided to part ways.”

“Ha!” she scoffed. “Nice spin.”

Clark rubbed her arm. “How about some good news?”

“Oh, right, CK,” Jimmy said, opening up his laptop on Clark’s coffee table. “It’s up and running.”

“What is?” Clark asked.

A large Cheshire-sized grin spread across Lois’s face; he was relieved that she worked on the side of good and not evil. She slid her arm around Clark’s waist again and gave his stomach a friendly pat. “Did I mention that I left a listening device in Lex’s office while I was there?”

“That’s my girl!” Perry said with a jovial chuckle, joining them at the couch.

Once more, Clark’s arm automatically encircled Lois’s shoulders. He felt at home there. She must have felt the same, because instead of pushing him away, she pulled him towards her, squeezing his waist. They stood like this behind the couch, watching Jimmy work wonders on his laptop with Jack and Perry at his side.

It was nice having the team back together again.

Epilogue

Clark and Lois stood across the street from the Daily Planet, looking up at the globe spinning above the entrance to the newspaper building.

“We did it!” Lois announced. “We managed to prove that Lex was about to blow up the Daily Planet. Good job, Kent!”

“Thank you, Lane,” he replied. “We couldn’t have done it without you!”

Lois looped her arm around Clark’s, and grinned. “No, you couldn’t have. I was essential to the team.”

He chuckled. “How modest of you to say so.”

“Are you saying I wasn’t?”

He patted her hand and smiled. “Of course not. With your assistance, we were able to speed up the discovery process ten-fold; however, without your help, I’m sure the guys and I would’ve *eventually* come up with enough evidence on our own...”

“Oh, so you’re saying that I was useless. That I would’ve better served the team as a damsel in distress for you to rescue at the last second, an unknowing idiot in a white dress willing to marry one of the biggest crime bosses Metropolis has ever seen,” she said, jerking her hand free.

“You could never be useless, Lois. It goes against your DNA,” Clark replied.

She put her hands on her hips. “So you think I’m a gullible idiot then?”

“What? No. Lois, I never said that!”

Lois pointed at him. “But you *thought* it!”

“Never once crossed my mind,” Clark insisted. *Stubborn woman who never listens to reason, on the other hand...*

“I know. I know. I got myself into another federal disaster of a relationship,” she said, ticking the numbers off on her fingers. “Firstly, he lied to me. Secondly, he hid his true self, his true nature from me. Thirdly, he was willing to humiliate me on a national scale by releasing those photographs.”

“I would never do something like that,” Clark said, trying to

get back on the inside of that metaphorical wall that just shot upwards between them.

“What? Lie to me? Please, Clark. I’ve never met a more honest man and a more horrible liar. So, it couldn’t be that.”

He swallowed.

“How about hiding your true self?” She looked him up and down. “Impossible!” she scoffed.

Clark shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other as he crossed his arms, glancing away.

“Even if you could embarrass me on a national scale, I doubt you would’ve tried to use those naked negatives against me,” she said.

“You weren’t naked in them,” Clark reminded her.

Her jaw dropped. “You didn’t look?”

He ran an exhausted hand down his face. There was no winning here, was there? Of course, he had looked and, no, she hadn’t been fully nude in those pictures.

“If you ever wanted to show me what you looked like...uh... without clothes on, I’m sure you would take me to a motel room... or someplace private and remove them,” he teased.

Her gaze narrowed.

That had sounded funnier in his head.

Clark raised his hands in self-defense and was about to tell her that he was ‘just joking’ when she grabbed the lapels of his jacket and pulled him against her chest and said breathlessly, “Shall we go now?”

“*What?* No!”

“You don’t want to see me naked, Clark?” she asked.

“No, of course I do.” *Oh, crud.* Had he said that aloud? “I mean...” Could he ever talk himself out of this hole? “I love you for your mind, not just your body.” *That was worse.* “Your spirit. Your personality. Your sense of humor. Your intelligence. Your never-say-die attitude. The way you always admit it when I’m wrong.”

That last one cracked a smile on her face.

“Your generous nature. The way you take every setback as an opportunity to become better. Your loyalty.” Well, at least, to Superman. He drew in a breath to continue digging himself deeper into this hole when she took hold of his arm once more.

“And I love that you only admit that you love me as a way to distract me from the fact that you want to see me naked,” she replied, moving them down the road.

He tripped over a crack in the sidewalk. “I said...?” He quickly reviewed his last rambling monologue. He swallowed. He had. “I also love how you never hold things over my head when I misspeak.”

“So, you don’t love me?”

“If I admitted to being a liar who’s hiding something huge from you, would you hold it against me?” He said this with a big, hopeful grin.

She looked up at him from the corner of her eye. “I’ll take that under advisement,” she said, holding tighter onto his arm. “I’d also say that you’ve now lost your opportunity for me to take you to that hotel room.”

He tripped over another crack. Had she been serious? No. She was merely testing him.

“Some things are worth waiting for, are worth earning,” he whispered.

“Oh, really? And how much would you have to earn for the privilege of seeing me naked?” she asked wryly.

“Your respect,” he replied. “Your trust. Your love. Your desire to see me in the buff as well.” He grinned, nudging her. “You know the typical things.”

“Well, that’s just... just ridiculous. Why would I want to do that?” Lois said, looking away, but not before Clark had seen her face turn as red as Superman’s cape.

“Oh? Are you saying that I’ve earned one of those already?”

he couldn't stop himself from saying. "It must be your respect."

"Of course. That's it," she said, somewhat breathlessly and with overt relief.

"No, you agreed way too quickly. It must be your trust."

They both laughed.

"With you having just told me that you're lying to me and keeping a big secret from me? That's doubtful," she scoffed. She took his hand in hers. "You do realize I'm going to figure it out, don't you?"

"If anyone could, it would be you, Lois," he replied. "I just might end up telling you first."

"Where would be the fun in that?"

"In knowing that you could finally see me... um... unclothed," he said, adding an oversized grin.

"Aha! I figured out your secret!" she announced, pointing her finger into the sky. "You want to *pose* for naked pictures for me!"

"Ah. No," Clark said. "I personally think having a camera in the bedroom is a very bad idea."

"Oh, I wouldn't take them." Lois giggled. "I'd send Jimmy."

Clark laughed and then said with dead seriousness, "Not in a million years."

"No?"

He adamantly shook his head. "No."

"What if I had the camera?" she asked.

He stopped and wrapped his free arm around her waist, raising her hand to his lips for a kiss. "If I'd earned your love, respect, and trust, despite this big secret and lie..."

She tilted her head back to look him in the eye. "Only one lie then?"

"It's more of an omission." He lowered his face towards her.

"You were saying?" she interrupted, glancing down at his tie. "About having earned my respect, love, and trust..."

"Then I wouldn't squander any time alone with you playing around with a camera," he whispered.

"Squander?" she echoed.

"Every moment with you would be precious, even if I had a hundred years of them. Why take pictures, when I could have those memories instead?"

"Yes, why indeed?" she said, softly. "So, you're saying that you won't try to seduce me until I know your secret?"

He ran his fingers through her hair. "Do you want me to seduce you?"

"I meant have sex."

He smiled. "Do you want me to make love to you, Lois?"

She turned away, her face red again, but she didn't step out of his arms. "You're avoiding the question."

As had she.

"I won't make love to you until you know, Lois," he promised into her ear. "I respect you too much to do otherwise."

"Respect or love?" she asked, turning back around. Her face was now a mere inch away from his. He could feel her breath against his lips.

"Both," he replied, speaking the word into her mouth. He took her dare and closed the gap between them, sealing this promise with a kiss.

Her arms slid up his chest and wrapped around his neck, placing one foot between his feet and pulling him closer. He tightened his arms to make sure that he didn't lose his grip of her. As her lips moved over his, the noise from Metropolis faded away and it felt as if suddenly he and Lois were alone on the street. When they broke for air, sound rushed back to Clark like a freight train, causing him to take Lois more securely in his embrace.

She rested her head against his chest. "But you don't trust me enough to tell me your big secret now?"

"Well, not so long ago, you were engaged to Luthor; it's best if we take this slowly," he replied.

"Gee, thanks, Clark," she said dryly, lifting her head to stare him in the eye. "Do you always kiss women you don't trust?"

Clark pretended to think about this. "Not always. There was Toni Taylor, but that was just a diversion to let you escape unseen."

"How many women have you trusted with this secret?"

"There's a taxi," he said, stepping out of her embrace to wave it down. "I've just discovered a great Italian restaurant in the city." He opened the door of the now-stopped cab, but Lois didn't budge.

She crossed her arms. "How many?"

"That's not really a first-day-we've-kissed kind of question, now is it?" he retorted, resting his hand on the curve of her back and kissing her cheek. "After you."

Lois reluctantly entered the cab. Once he had sat down and given the driver the address of the restaurant, he turned to face Lois and saw she had her arms crossed and had that 'not going to let this drop' expression on her face. "The first day we kissed was right before Trask's men threw me out of his plane..."

"You jumped," Clark amended.

She waved that detail away. "And that was over a year ago. I've kissed you twice more since then."

"Three times more, actually... Well, including today, five times in total," he corrected. "To be fair, I'm not including the kisses..." *All sixty-four of them.* "— you gave me when you were drunk on Revenge."

"No, four."

"Five."

Lois stared at him, and he could see the wheels starting to turn inside her head. Her fingers started to count out the different kisses: Trask's plane, when he quit the Daily Planet during the heat wave, in the honeymoon suite, and just now.

"Four."

"Five." He leaned back and grinned. He had photographic proof. The picture had been splashed across the front page of the Metropolis Star. His mom had shown it to him within her Superman scrapbook.

Lois stared at him as if trying to recall that fifth time. "How many?"

Clark leaned over and whispered in her ear. "None."

Her lips pressed together in a line, clearly not believing him. "You're a strange man, Clark Kent." She waved a finger at him. "I figured you out once before. I'm going to figure this out, too. Just you wait and see."

He smiled. "I can't wait."

THE END

Author's Note: I just wanted to remind readers that in this story, Superman didn't pretend that he had been affected by the Revenge perfume and, therefore, didn't kiss Lois at the airport (in front of Lex Luthor) after Miranda was apprehended. This is why there were only a combined four kisses between them (not counting the kiss from right before they entered the cab in this final scene, which would make five). One — Trask's Plane. Two — Heat Wave departure. Three — at the Lexor. Four — Nightfall kiss (as Superman), Five — Just moments before.

Many thanks to my Beta, IolantheAlias, for her all of her comments, corrections, and assistance over the years. My muse is fueled by your endless supply of Beta goodness. Thank you.

Disclaimer: This story was inspired by the characters created by Jerry Siegel & Joe Shuster as they were portrayed on the *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman* television series, developed by Deborah Joy LeVine. The characters do not belong to me; they belong to themselves (although Warner Bros, DC Comics, and the heirs to Siegel and Shuster might disagree). Many thanks to all the writers on the above-referenced show.

Also, in case you hadn't guessed from my borrowing one of the lines from the song, this plot was inspired by the J. Geils Band's 1981 song "Centerfold".