

...I Knew the Truth

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Summary: In this continuation to "Hurt Before", Lois is shocked to learn that Lex Luthor is not the only one having a huge secret and exposing Clark could even be the bigger story. Should she keep the secret of the man who saved her life to find out the truth about Lex Luthor?

Story Size: 63,964 words (351Kb as text)

This story is a sequel to "[Hurt Before](#)."

The world came back with a deafening roar that drove right into Lois' stomach. She blinked, as if to let light back into her formerly unseeing eyes. A cloud of white steam rose, veiling most of a rocket that stuck out like a giant finger against the otherwise cloudless sky. It was enormous despite the distance, carrying a shuttle on its back. It took Lois a moment to realize that it had to be the Colonist transport. Almost imperceptibly, the rocket lifted off the ground, sluggish in its struggle to defy gravity. Lois held her breath, watching in agony as the rocket desperately fought for every inch of height it gained. For long moments the pull of Planet Earth seemed just too forceful to overcome. But eventually, the transport picked up speed, soaring straight up into the sky. The giant rocket got smaller. Sunlight reflected off its shell, turning the space craft into a tiny bright spot that finally vanished in the distance.

Lois took several deep breaths, slowly letting the air out again. She closed her eyes, concentrating on this task until the feeling returned to her body, until she was certain that the air flowed through *her* nose, filling *her* lungs with some much needed oxygen. Then she dared to take another peek, trying to merge herself with the person that was standing on a field right in the middle of nowhere, desperate to pull in some air. How that was even possible, when only moments ago she had been dead, was beyond her.

A gust of wind brushed her face, carrying the faint scent of cut grass. Lois inhaled deeply; suddenly aware of so much more that was around her: the warm sunlight on her skin, the song of birds sitting in trees and the quiet rustling of leaves. No, she certainly wasn't dead.

Another sound caught Lois attention. She turned around and saw Clark, who was standing just a few feet behind her. One hand was stuffed deep into the pockets of his trousers; the other held a black case in a firm grasp. He studied his feet with an empty stare, looking just as detached from the world as Lois felt. Clark was still wearing the uniform of the ground staff. The bill of his cap stuck out of his other trouser pocket instead of sitting on his head. Other than that, nothing seemed to be amiss.

"Clark?" Lois said tentatively. Her voice rang unnaturally loud in her own ears.

Clark flinched ever so slightly. For the briefest of moments, he lifted his head just enough to meet her gaze. His expression was no longer empty, but rather one of a deer in head-lights. His acknowledgement of her presence was short-lived, though. He moved his lips in an attempt to speak, but no sound would come out. Seconds ticked by that seemingly stretched to hours. When the silence became deafening, Clark resumed staring at his feet.

Lois watched him, a huge lump forming in her throat. She

wanted to say something, but found that she couldn't. A million questions popped into her mind, whirling around until she was unable to form any coherent thought. The sudden sense of helplessness turned into anger that threatened to consume her. She felt she was about to suffocate on her own questions, while Clark just stood there. He let it happen, refusing to say anything at all, when one word from him might be the lifeline she could cling to. Clark remained silent though and stared at his feet, looking decidedly sick.

Everything that had happened since Lois had been inside the shuttle was nothing more than a blur, a jumble of images that made no more sense than the fading memories of a dream. It seemed impossible that the Shuttle had taken off already. She had been there but a moment ago. A variety of emotions rippled through Lois, once more stirring up the tangled mass of images in her mind and making them all the more confusing.

Lois was ashamed, because she had not really believed what Clark had told her about Luthor, not entirely anyway. When she had come to him the other night, she had been ready to give him a chance. His box had contained a vast collection of circumstantial evidence. Put together, it was a solid lead that still had to go a long way before it might turn out to be a story. She had been thrilled at first, but sleeping on it had put things into perspective. Her enthusiasm had been dampened. However, the material had helped Lois convince Perry that she needed to be inside the Shuttle. It had served her purpose well, but she hadn't really trusted Clark.

She was angry, too, because Clark had kept her from pursuing her ultimate goal — interviewing the Colonists. It was completely insane, but the more he had insisted on separating, the stronger her resolve had been to stay with him. There was nothing she hated more than being patronized. So, Lois had kept tagging along. She still wasn't sure if in the end, Clark had had her convinced — before they found the bomb.

It had probably been the latter. Her heart still fluttered at the memory of seeing her life tick down, all of a sudden reduced to seconds. In the line of her work, Lois had faced several dangerous situations. Her own death had never been more than a distant possibility. Lois still felt the numbness that had enveloped her body when in the blink of an eye she had realized that it was about to become reality.

She had never been a particularly religious person, but she had prayed when Clark had tried to disarm the bomb, hoping against hope that some miracle would save them. The odds had been stacked against them. With an alarming sound of bleeps fate had told Lois that she was about to be punished for her arrogance. Lois had closed her eyes, bracing herself for the inevitable. She had heard the - surprisingly dull - bang.

But the blast that was bound to end her life never came.

Lois shook her head, not allowing herself to think it. It could not be anything but a strange fantasy, conjured up by a mind that had not been able to handle whatever had really happened. She couldn't have seen what she thought she had seen just a second before her eyes had fluttered shut. Perhaps she was dead after all; perhaps the wind that tousled her hair was just a figment of her imagination...

...because men didn't *swallow* explosives.

But Lois heard her own pulse thump loudly in her ears; she felt her chest expand with every breath that she took. She couldn't possibly be dead, imagining all of this.

Taking another deep breath, trying to slow her rapidly beating heart, Lois studied Clark curiously. He was still standing half a step behind her. Nothing about his stance had changed. He could have been a statue, except that he was shifting forward and backwards, reminding Lois of a caged animal. Clark's expression was completely blank, devoid of any emotion, as if — mentally — he was miles away.

“Clark,” she tried again, not sure how to address the matter.

Lois wrote for a living, forming words into sentences had never been a problem. Her father had made fun of the Lane women’s sheer unstoppable chattering. Millions of questions whirled through her mind, but it seemed impossible to grab just one of them and turn it into something that would not sound like a complete jumble of words.

“Clark,” she repeated louder, more firmly.

Once again she got his attention. He stopped shifting and raised his eyes once more. His face was pale, his lips drawn into a thin line. Clark’s jaw was set tightly in a desperate attempt to appear unfazed, but there was a flicker in his eyes that betrayed him. Lois’ gaze wandered down towards the black case he held in his hand. Her breath caught as she recognized it as timer complete with explosives. She closed her eyes as the puzzle pieces added to a picture, she knew she had seen but still found hard to believe.

“Did you swallow that bomb?” Lois asked the one thing that consumed her thoughts.

“Yeah...” he conceded quietly, defeated.

His admission rendered Lois speechless, taking the wind out of her sails. If anything she had anticipated silence, being laughed at or flat-out denial. Lois blinked, trying to come to terms with the sober expression on Clark’s face. There was nothing to indicate that he might have been joking, that all this may have been an elaborate prank Clark had played on her.

“You swallowed a bomb,” Lois repeated calmly. “How...?”

“Does it matter?” Clark replied stiffly.

His facial muscles twitched in an effort to keep his expression neutral. But the dark pools of Clark’s eyes danced unsteadily, not quite able to look at her, but also never leaving her out of sight. Lois saw fear, too, and a burning anger that caused a shiver to run down her spine. Instinctively, she took a step back while in turn, Clark shrunk in on himself.

“I’m sorry,” Clark whispered in a voice laced with pain. Any hint of anger was gone. “Are you okay?” he asked quietly.

Hesitantly, he dragged his right hand from his pocket and reached out, as if to brush a loose strand of her tousled hair behind her ear. But he stopped the motion in mid-air, where his arm remained for a few awkward moments until he dropped it again. Stuffing his hand back into his pocket he studied her intensely.

“How...,” Lois muttered, words still failing her.

Clark’s expression turned into one of deep sorrow. “I’d beg you not to print any of this, but I’m well aware that would be too much to ask.” Heaving a sigh, he continued. “I guess you gonna find me more newsworthy than anything I told you about Luthor.” He sounded bitter. “I can’t blame you; I’m a reporter too...” Clark’s voice broke and a strangled sound escaped his lips as if he had a hard time fighting back his emotions in order to talk to her.

“Clark,” Lois said, for lack of anything more meaningful. Her mind was blank, devoid of anything but the impossible images of Clark that kept replaying.

“I know I’m not in the position to make demands,” Clark whispered softly. “But please Lois, keep on investigating Luthor.” His eyes widened with despair. “He needs to be stopped.”

A gust of wind hit Lois. She blinked and opened her eyes again to find Clark gone. Blinking again, Lois looked around, but he was nowhere to be seen.

“Clark!” she yelled in protest, suddenly sensing her limbs again. “Clark! Where the heck are you?”

She was met by silence. There was nothing left of him but the indentation his feet had left in the grass. Dazedly, Lois watched the blades of grass straighten up and cover the last bit of evidence that she hadn’t completely lost her mind. Shaking her head, she tried to get rid of the lingering numbness that encased her. And gradually, she felt much more like herself again, her angry self.

“Clark! You can’t just disappear and leave me here in the

middle of nowhere!” she hollered, but her voice was absorbed by the landscape. She got no reply, not even as much as an echo.

“Clark! Don’t even think you get off the hook that easily. You still owe me one hell of an explanation. Do you hear me?”

Lois started off going in the general direction she suspected Clark had taken. Though she felt that he was nowhere near her, her mind refused to accept the fact. Lois started running. No one could vanish from earth like that and she refused to even contemplate that she might have lost it. She was not seeing things; Clark had conceded that he had actually swallowed that bomb. But how was that even possible? That fink had not even had the decency to answer her questions. Lois increased her speed. Hell, she had not even gotten to ask them. If she was going to print anything, she was not going to settle for anything less than the whole story.

Lois’ breath came in panting gasps, but she had not come any closer to catching up to Clark. She was forced to slow down to a light jog. She finally came to a halt, admitting to herself that she was only going to get lost. She bent down, resting her hands on her knees and gulped in air. Sweat trickled down her face and her back and she used her sleeve to wipe it off her brows. Running herself to exhaustion had been a rather pointless exercise.

“Great, Lois. Just great,” she muttered to herself as she had finally managed to slow down her breathing. “The man swallowed a bomb. Who’s to say that he hasn’t got some other tricks up his sleeve?”

Straightening her stance, Lois took in her surroundings. Save for a few trees in the distance, there was mainly grass all around. With the recent torrents of rain it looked fresh and green. Lois bit back a soft curse as she realized that she had no idea where she was. Admittedly, that had been the case ever since she had last been in the shuttle. At least, she now had a fair idea how it was possible that one moment she was inside the Colonist Transport only to find herself moments later on some field. Clark must have used — whatever it was he had used — to get her out of there. But she would not rule out that she had lost consciousness somewhere along that way.

Lois cocked her head as she suddenly heard a low motor sound. She listened more carefully, trying to locate its source. It seemed to come from the line of trees to her right, she had seen most of the time she had been running. They were not that far away. Deciding to take the chance, Lois turned right, walking the short distance. It took a few minutes until she found her suspicion confirmed. There was indeed a road. The traffic was moderate, but still frequent enough that a hitch-hiker would not have to wait all day to catch a ride.

Lois looked over her shoulder, back to where she had come from. She had run a long way. Maybe, if she had been listening more carefully, she would have heard the road much earlier. She had been running parallel to it for quite a while. Though she hated to admit it, it was not true that Clark had dropped her off right in the middle of nowhere. It seemed he had indeed cared about how she got home on her own. Had he planned to vanish all along?

“But if you so clearly didn’t want to tell me what happened in the shuttle, then why did you stay with me in the first place?” Lois muttered, puzzled, as she made her way through the line of trees that separated her from the road behind it.

A frown creased Lois’ forehead as she leaned back in her chair to read what she had written so far. What could have been Pulitzer material, only amounted to a lame account of the events in the shuttle. To make things worse there was not a single word in her article that did not sound downright insane. Rubbing the bridge of her nose, Lois let out a small sigh. She had typed and erased sentences so many times she had lost count. Still she had only a headline that was at least somewhat presentable.

SHUTTLE LAUNCH — DISASTER AVERTED

The cursor blinked behind the last word, mocking her, like it had done so many times in the past hour. Lois bit her lips. If she planned on writing that story, she would have to sell it to The Inquisitor. It would certainly go well with all those far-fetched stories she usually did not even care to read. With another sigh Lois pressed the Back Space button. The letters vanished, slowly at first, but as Lois pressed more vigorously the article disappeared.

Instantly, Lois felt a pang of regret. Having to give up always left her with a bitter taste. Unable to face the now empty screen much longer, Lois got up from her chair, stretching her stiff limbs. The newsroom was busy as ever, buzzing with the noise of her fellow reporters chasing stories and talking to sources over the phone. Lois had been almost shocked by the sense of normalcy she had encountered upon entering the Daily Planet. Even now it only served to make her feel even more detached and uneasy than she already did.

It seemed impossible that she and Clark had snuck on board the Messenger just this morning. How could an entire world change so completely in a matter of hours, seconds really? Everything was turned upside down and not even writing — the one thing that had always helped her focus and sort her thoughts — did anything to help her.

As soon as her cab had stopped in front of the Daily Planet, Lois had stormed into the newsroom. The article she was going to write had already existed in her mind, polished and ready to be typed into her computer. It was supposed to be a great revelation about a philanthropist who was not what he seemed to be and a young reporter who was more than anyone could have ever imagined. But the carefully phrased article crumbled under her fingertips as she realized that nobody but her had seen Clark swallow the detonator. He had taken the timer with him when he had rushed off. And the remainders of the bomb were in high orbit, impossible to reach. Her story would sound even more ridiculous than the headline she had seen on Jimmy's edition of the Inquisitor the other day.

DIVINE INTERVENTION — I WAS SAVED BY AN ANGEL

Lois started as the events of that day returned to her mind. The article had been about the poor guy who had been dragged from the man-hole, semi-conscious. She had thought that Clark's suit had been ruined from the dust of the explosion. Not for one minute had she stopped to wonder why her own clothes had been perfectly fine. Burying her face in her hands, Lois tried to fight the onslaught of confusing images. Could it be that Clark had been the "angel" mentioned in that article? He had certainly saved her.

The notion led her back to their last moments in the shuttle. Lois had seen the fear in Clark's eyes; it had matched her own. Her heart started to pound in reminiscence of the moment. It played out before her mind's eye, as if she was there once again.

Clark had lowered his glasses, staring at the bomb intensely. All the while he had muttered under his breath 'No...no...no,' most likely unaware of what he was doing. His movements as he had picked a wire had been frantic, desperate - and Lois had seen her life ticking down. Forty seconds had not been enough to run, certainly not enough to cry for help. Picking a wire had been like grasping at straws to keep from drowning. Lois remembered that she had closed her eyes and prayed, for what must have been the first time in years. Lois still did not quite trust what her eyes had seen, then. Maybe the bomb had been a fake, maybe...

Lois lowered her hands again, resting them on her desk. She stared at the empty screen in front of her. There was just no way she could describe the strangest and most amazing thing that had ever happened to her. Nobody was going to believe what she had witnessed. How could they, if she hardly believed it herself?

"Lois?" Perry's voice resounded in the newsroom, somewhat

quieter than his usual bark. "My office," he added as Lois looked up and held her gaze just a little longer than he normally would, certainly trying to make sure she had actually heard him. At Lois's nod of agreement, he retreated back into his office, leaving the door ajar.

She got up stiffly, still experiencing this strange feeling of detachment, as if her body did not belong to her, as if nothing around her was real. All her colleagues seemed to belong to another life, another plane of existence that had nothing to do with hers. Lois crossed the short distance to Perry's office, opened the door and closed it behind her, effectively shutting out all the noise and the bustling activity that usually felt so familiar.

Inside the editor's office, Lois drew a shaky breath, inhaling the faint scent of sweat and ink, mixed with Perry's eau de cologne. She blinked, suddenly feeling a whole lot more grounded than she had in hours. Perry was sitting at his desk, leaning back in his chair, his gaze never leaving her. The photograph of Elvis looked down on her, a second pair of eyes that studied her intensely. Lois took a few more steps before she collapsed into Perry's tartan patterned wing chair, shrinking under the scrutiny of Perry and his idol.

"I take it you didn't find what you were looking for?" Perry asked matter-of-factly.

Lois opened her mouth to disagree, but just like before, she just could not find the words. Instead, she shook her head, realizing that in fact she was telling Perry the truth. She absolute could not have expected to find a man who swallowed explosives. Strangely enough, the more often she relived that memory, the less unsettling it became. Like she was actually adjusting to the thought.

"How do you know?" Lois asked, feeling that her more rational side was finally taking over again.

"I found this," Perry replied, handing her a sheet of paper that until this very moment had been lying right in front of him.

Lois took it from him. Her eyes caught on the first line that read 'letter of resignation'. Quickly perusing the rest of the text, she stopped as she recognized Clark's signature. Blinking, her gaze darted back to the beginning of the letter, where she found today's date. Lois' mind reeled as she gave Perry the letter back, wordlessly.

"Before coming to Metropolis, Clark mostly worked as a freelancer. He never stayed anywhere for long," Perry added by way of explanation. "I can't say that I know him very well and given his record this might have been expected..." his voice trailed off as he smoothed out the letter. His gaze suddenly darted towards Lois, focusing on her. "You wouldn't know anything about this, now would you?"

It was the second time Lois shook her head no, an automatic response rather than a conscious decision. Lois was not even sure she was actually lying. It absolutely baffled her to see Clark's resignation.

"He was so certain that Luthor was behind this sabotage. For years he's been trying to prove that the man is a criminal," Lois muttered, thinking that they had almost succeeded at doing just that. "Why would he give up?" she asked, despite the fact that the answer already dawned on her.

"Tell me something, Lois. Do you really believe there is a story? Or is this all just a conjecture of a troubled mind?" Perry asked.

For a moment, Lois considered mentioning the bomb. She knew Perry would take her word for it. But the absolute lack of evidence would lead to questions she had no answers for. All things considered, Perry was more likely to launch an investigation of Clark than of Luthor. And perhaps he would be right to do so. But Clark had saved her life and she felt that she owed to him the benefit of doubt.

"There is a story," Lois replied, instead. "It's what my instinct

tells me.”

“Yeah, mine, too.” Perry agreed and thoughtfully rubbed his chin. “Tell you what, I’m going to pretend I didn’t see this letter,” he said, stuffing Clark’s resignation under a pile of paper on his desk. “It’s going to take me a while to work through all that stuff.” A mischievous glint appeared in his eyes. “Now, go find me some news,” he added in his usual gruff manner, dismissing her with a wave of his hand.

Lois left Perry’s office deeply in thought. If possible, she was even more confused than ever before. Mere days ago, Clark had been on his own private vendetta against Lex Luthor and now he was simply giving up. For some reason, he even covered for Luthor, which probably was the strangest thing of all. Thinking of the last words he had said to her, maybe he hoped that he could hand the investigation over to her. Still, why did he no longer want to be a part of the one thing his life had apparently consisted of for the past couple of years, judging from the box of evidence he had collected? It just didn’t make sense. Moreover, why didn’t he use — whatever it was that he could do - to his advantage? And what exactly made him able to swallow bombs?

Maybe she was not able to write a story of the events in the shuttle, because she had no idea what kind of story that was supposed to be. It all seemed like some drug induced fantasy that first and foremost made her question her own sanity. Though she knew what she had seen, though Clark had admitted that it had really happened, Lois felt the need to prove it to herself that she had not completely lost her mind. Strolling back to her desk, Lois pondered how she was going to play things. Her gut instinct was telling her that unravelling the mystery that surrounded Lex Luthor and Clark Kent was finally going to win her the long desired Pulitzer. But at the same time, she had never had less faith in her own instincts.

When she had first met Clark Kent, she had thought she had already figured him out. The same had been true for Lex Luthor. In both cases, she couldn’t have been more wrong, apparently.

Taking a deep breath, Lois sat back down on her chair and reached for the cup of coffee that had been sitting beside her half-dead plant for the past hour. She took a large sip of the stale, cold beverage. Normally, by now she would have used it to water the plant, bringing it a bit closer to its ultimate demise. This time, however, she felt that gulping down that last bit of coffee seemed to do the trick. She felt more grounded, more back at her usual game. As she sat down the cup, she knew what she was going to do.

“Jimmy!” she yelled as soon as she had spotted her younger colleague.

He flinched, looking up from whatever he was doing. A frown crept onto Jimmy’s face and he tentatively put down the screwdriver, which was a dead give-away that his current assignment was repairing something for Perry. Nevertheless, he got up, his expression a mixture of both hope and dread. He did not seem entirely sure who of the two he feared most — Perry or Lois. His curiosity won, however and Lois smiled to herself as she watched Jimmy approach.

“Do you want to do something that remotely resembles the work of a reporter?” she asked.

Jimmy nodded eagerly. “Anything you want.”

“Good. You remember the article you read the other day? The one about the mysterious rescue during the incident down in the manhole right in front of the Planet?” Lois continued.

“You told me not to read stuff like that,” Jimmy replied.

“Yeah, well, I changed my mind.” As he raised his brows incredulously, she went on. “Not about ‘The Inquisitor’, mind you, that’s still a rag,” Lois said dismissively. “But I’ve got a feeling they might be onto something, though I’m pretty sure they have no idea it could become a real story. What I need to know is, if there are more rumors about mysterious rescues.” Lois got up

from her chair, picked up her bag and withdrew her wallet. She fumbled out a twenty dollar bill and handed it to Jimmy. “I want you to buy any tabloid you can get your hands on. Read them carefully and try to find any story that even remotely resembles what allegedly happened down the manhole”, she ordered. Another thought suddenly crossed her mind. “Oh, and Jimmy, can you find out if there investigation concerning the explosion of Dr. Baines helicopter has already turned up any results?”

Jimmy’s face lit up as she named his second assignment. “Consider it done,” he beamed.

“Don’t you dare forget about those tabloid papers,” she warned him, before she turned her attention at her computer screen again, trying to decide whether she was going to hint at the almost-sabotage of the Colonist Transport or whether she was going to omit that part for the time being.

Flashback

The warm light of the candle flickered, almost dying with a brief gust of wind. Lois tried to ignore the shiver that ran down her spine, concentrating on her notes as if there was nothing else of importance. And there really wasn’t, because she would get herself the interview of the century, no matter what. The dim candlelight and the sparkling stars above her were a distraction she could not afford.

Lois looked up, doing her best to remain professional. “Both your father and mother died when you were fourteen, correct?” she asked, all business.

“Why don’t I have my office send you a biography?” Luthor said, amused. The candle light cast a warm glow on his chiseled features, dulling the intensity of his eyes to a gentle honey brown. He put down his fork and reached for his glass of wine, taking a careful sip.

Before her mind’s eye, Luthor’s face merged with that of another man, she had had dinner with. Lois gave herself a mental slap.

“Because I don’t want the standard line. I want to know the real Lex Luthor: What makes you tick, what you want, what you strive for...” she resumed her interview, desperately hoping that she had not spent as much time staring at him all moony-eyed as she thought.

“Pleasure. The pursuit of pleasure,” he offered, swirling his glass of wine as if to prove his point. A smile crept across his lips. He was clearly flirting with her “Does that surprise you?”

Lois found it increasingly difficult to keep up her act of not noticing his advances. “I would have guessed you’d say ‘power,’” she replied neutrally.

“Power is a means, not an end,” Luthor clarified, setting down his glass. His eyes never left Lois, as if he was taking in every inch of her body.

Lois was suddenly all too aware of her cocktail dress, of its plunging neckline and lacy design. It perfectly matched the evening, the carefully set table and the romantic effect of the candles. But this was not really a dinner date, it was business.

“But, achieving power must give you pleasure,” Lois insisted and studied the man in front of her intensely.

He nodded, seemingly impressed with her. “Very good.”

Lois smiled at that, feeling that she was regaining her confidence. “You took over your first big company at age twenty-one, but there were rumors that the buy-out was coerced,” she went on swiftly, tapping her pen on her notes to underline the fact that she had done her homework.

Luthor’s lips became smaller, his eyes narrowed ever so slightly. Lois waited, trying to gauge if she was onto something. His silence spoke volumes. Lois’ heart started to pound with excitement. She had Luthor right where she wanted him.

“Is it true the Board of Directors were paid substantial, unreported fees?” She dug her nails into the soft spot she had

detected.

"Was the food not to your liking?" Luthor asked, reaching out to grasp her hand in his. His brows were raised in concern, his eyes sparkled again in that strange way they earlier had. A dizzying smile was back on his lips.

"Sure. It was delicious," Lois replied automatically, stunned at the sudden turn of their conversation. Luthor had caught her off-guard. It irked her that he had actually managed to get her off her line of interrogation. She lowered her eyes, trying to regain her composure. Her glance fell on her still full plate, making her cringe that he had caught her in a lie as well. Embarrassed, she added. "Sometimes when I'm working..."

"All work and no play... is that your credo, Lois Lane?" he asked, making Lois wonder who was interviewing whom.

She stiffened. "I don't think..."

Luthor interrupted her, his voice gentle. "Can't we just enjoy the evening? Enjoy each other? Let down your hair, Lois. Loosen the tie..."

"But I'm not wearing..." Lois objected, but her voice died on her lips as Luthor turned her hand palm up and unclenched the fingers.

"You're so tense," he murmured huskily. "Let the defenses down."

Lois heart-rate picked up once more, this time for a whole new reason. An involuntary flutter filled her belly as she looked at their entwined hands. His carefully manicured thumb rested on the back of her hand, stroking it ever so slightly. She remembered Lucy's speech on how she needed to date more. This was exactly what her sister had had in mind. But Lois' thoughts also drifted off to another shared dinner, far less fancy...

She withdrew her hand from Luthor's grip as if she had burned herself. "Lex, I think you have the wrong idea about this dinner," she said, suddenly uncomfortable. She desperately tried to remind herself that she was here for work. Lois found it far too easy to forget about that fact, which only increased her discomfort.

"I hope you don't think we're here merely because you are a beautiful young woman." Luthor's expression had turned serious again. "That wouldn't speak well for either of us." Lois felt his eyes on her, studying her intently. She had no problems visualizing him as the tough businessman that he was. "You wanted an interview. A scoop. I understand that. But, *quid pro quo*, let me tell you what I want." He leaned closer to her, as if he was about to tell her a secret. "My talent in life is not making money or juggling companies. It's character assessment. I sense things about you. Possibilities. Potentials. You have the intelligence, spirit, and vision to transcend the mundane."

His words lingered in the air, rendering Lois speechless. Her heart started to beat madly. Once again her thoughts wandered back to a particular conversation she had had with her sister Lucy. Luthor had put into words, how Lois pictured her own future. She wanted so much more than just to get the next scoop. She longed for her name to be mentioned in the same breath as Woodward and Bernstein. Her whole life through, she had aimed to be the best. A lot of people were put off by her tenacity, but Luthor did not seem to be one of them. His gaze still rested on her face.

"And, so there are no misunderstandings, you **are** beautiful," he concluded, sending her heart racing even more.

Lois lost herself in his eyes for a moment. She had a hard time picturing Luthor the way Clark saw him. Thinking about Clark, Lois managed to find her way back into the reality of the evening. Her gaze dropped towards her notepad and the tough questions she had written down that were still unanswered. Lois felt her cheeks burn with embarrassment. Luthor had completely thrown her off her game and it irked her. But judging from the past ten minutes, she was not going to get her questions answered. Some

way to follow in the footsteps of her idols- Woodward and Bernstein certainly would not have forgotten the Watergate Scandal over some stupid flirt.

"Lex, I have a story to write tonight. I think I'd better be going." Lois hurried to pack her things.

"No dessert?" Luthor asked, taken aback by her sudden change of attitude.

"No thanks, I never have dessert," she replied, hoping that little lie would help make her appear more professional. She knew, once she was home, she was going to dig her spoon into a large bucket of chocolate chip ice cream. Whether that would be before or after she wrote the story, she had yet to decide.

"Really? Luthor asked in mock innocence. "You don't know what you're missing."

End Flashback

"Lois?" Lucy took off her ear-phones and jumped up from one of the love seats, where she had been studying for college, listening to her favorite music.

Lois closed the door with a shove of her behind. The grocery bag slipped from her grip and the contents of the bag scattered across the floor, but fortunately nothing broke. A low moan of relief escaped her lips as Lois got rid of her shoes and thus freed her burning feet.

"Where have you been?" Lucy asked, checking her wrist-watch and kneeled down to gather the various items of food. "Why didn't you call to tell me that you were coming so late? I could have done the shopping."

"Would you have heard the phone?" Lois asked, raising her brows.

"I guess not," Lucy admitted, slightly embarrassed.

"I was out chasing a lead," Lois explained. "The store was on my way, anyway."

"Hard day?" Lucy eyed her sympathetically.

"Uh huh," Lois replied, watching her little sister as she took the bag and everything that had been inside it to the kitchen.

She felt guilty for lying to Lucy, since she had not exactly been chasing a lead. Right after sending Perry her article, she had packed her things and gone to the Apollo Hotel, the dump Clark had been staying at. Clark had checked out without leaving an address to reach him. Though that had not been completely unexpected, Lois was worried. She had spent the last few hours doing a lot of thinking about what had happened in the shuttle. Even though it still seemed completely impossible, she was convinced that the bomb had been real. That meant Clark had saved her life. By doing that, he had been forced to reveal a side of him that he had certainly not wanted her to know about.

< I can't ask you not to print what happened. > The words he had said on the field still rang in her ears.

The bomb had not been able to harm him. He could have let it explode and walk away unscathed. Nobody would have been alive to tell the story. But he had chosen differently and saved her life. She was not going to thank him by exposing him to the world, at least not without talking to him first.

Lois put her hand-bag on the sofa. It was heavy with all the tabloid papers she had stuffed inside. Then she slipped out of her coat, smelling the faint scent of smoke that made her feel even guiltier than before. After finding that Clark was missing, Lois had spent most of the evening sitting in a café and reading the articles Jimmy had highlighted, hoping to find out more about her mysterious colleague.

So far, she had read about a shadow stopping a bus with bare hands. The flying man who had been seen by a homeless guy seemed less believable. But these hacks who were writing for tabloid papers would print about anything that made for a good headline. However, reading the article about the explosion right in front of the Daily Planet again had strengthened her conviction

that indeed Clark had saved the guy. Even if everything else was just a hoax, it meant that two people already owed Clark their lives, three if one counted Lex Luthor.

Lois stretched her arms, trying to work out the kinks in the muscles of her back and followed Lucy into the kitchen.

"I was going to suggest Italian take-out," Lucy shouted and closed the door of the fridge. She flinched as she spotted Lois a few feet away from her. "Sorry, didn't hear you coming."

"Italian sounds good," Lois agreed and joined Lucy in front of the fridge. She opened the door again and took the carton of orange juice.

"I thought you might say that. Last time we ordered Chinese food, you seemed a little disappointed," Lucy replied with a grin, took a glass out of a cupboard and gave it to Lois.

"Thanks," Lois said with a sheepish smile and poured herself some juice. "Well, I was working late at the Planet with that new guy. After I tasted the take-out he bought us, this Chinese guy around the corner just isn't the same anymore."

Lucy wriggled her brows. "Because of the food? Or the guy at work?"

"Stop it, Lucy," Lois admonished her and put the carton of juice back into the fridge. "We're not going to talk about this dating thing again."

"You're always so caught up in your work. Why don't you allow yourself a little fun once in a while?" She asked, picking up the phone. "What would you like to eat?"

"I'm just not that good at dating," Lois said miserably and took a sip of her juice. "Guys keep asking me out, but after the first date, they seem to lose their interest."

"Because you scare them off," Lucy told her bluntly. "You're expecting too much. Dating should be fun; you turn it into an inquisition."

"That's not true," Lois protested. "I'm just being careful. Why should I waste my time on someone who's not seriously interested?"

"Lois, nobody is seriously interested on their first date," Lucy said with a hint of exasperation. "You're supposed to be testing grounds, see if you've got anything in common. Why can't you get past this Claude-complex of yours?"

"I am past Claude. I just learned my lesson," Lois stated. "And I'm glad I did it in time, before he had a chance to really hurt me."

"Not all men are jerks like him, Lois," Lucy reminded her.

"I guess not," Lois admitted softly. "But it sure doesn't hurt to double check. I'm going to head for the shower."

"You do that," Lucy agreed. "What do you want for dinner?"

"Lasagna," Lois replied, glad that her sister had decided to drop the matter for tonight.

Lucy dialed the number of their favorite Italian Restaurant and placed their order, before she went back to her spot on the sofa and put her ear-phones on, shutting the world out.

Lois set her glass on the counter and made her way to the bedroom. She opened the window and then turned around to undo the buttons of her blouse. Along with her skirt, the piece of clothing landed on her bed, as did her tights. Grabbing her bathrobe, Lois entered the bathroom, barely trying to stifle the yawn that escaped her lips. With a sigh of contentment, Lois stepped under the shower and turned the water on. She purred as the warm liquid hit her body and flowed over her back, soothing the lingering aches of the day that lay behind her.

Lois reached for a bar of soap and began to lather her body, trying to rinse off the memories that Lucy's mention of Claude had evoked. She did not want to think about him, the man she had dated. Lois had met Claude a few years ago, when she had still been pretty new at the Daily Planet. He was French and his accent had been kind of cute. It certainly had not hurt that he had been good looking, too. He had had a way with women. His

compliments had made her feel special and Lois had fallen for him, fast and hard. She had been over the moon when he had asked her out, spending hours shopping for just the right dress.

It had been a lucky coincidence that the lady's room had been closed for repairs on the day of their third date. Lois had chosen to use the men's room instead of walking down to the floor below, because she had been in a hurry. No one had seen her slip inside. When Claude and another one of her co-workers had walked in, Lois had gotten to know the man behind the charming exterior. Claude had made a bet that he was going to spend the night in her bed. That had not been his exact words, but Lois still blushed when she remembered what he had said.

Lois had spent that night crying and angry with herself that she even deemed Claude worthy of tears. Lucy had tried to soothe her, saying that she had most likely spared herself a night of lousy sex. Thinking of that comment, Lois chuckled softly as she laid down the soap bar and reclined her head to let the water flow down her neck. Lucy had probably been right.

Lois turned off the faucet and reached for a towel that she wrapped around herself. She felt better- clean again as she stepped out of the shower and onto the soft towel that lay on the floor. Lucy was right — not all men were jerks like Claude or her father. Paul for example had been a decent guy. Granted, he had fallen for Linda instead of Lois, but at least he had told her so, instead of leading her on.

After rubbing herself dry, Lois changed the towel for her bathrobe. Then she brushed her hair and tied it to a pony-tail, before she stepped out into her bedroom. A shadow in front of her bedroom window caught her eyes and she stopped dead in her tracks. The shadow returned her gaze, his eyes wide with shock.

"Clark!" Lois breathed.

For a while neither of them moved an inch. Lois did not even dare to so much as blink, afraid that he might be gone again the next time she opened her eyes. But he stayed, leaving Lois the time to wonder how it was even possible that Clark Kent was outside her window, one floor above the ground. Eventually, enough feeling returned to her body for her to move closer to the window.

"I... I just wanted to make sure you were okay," Clark stammered, self-consciously fumbling with his glasses. "I... I guess I'll just go." He turned in mid-air.

"Clark, wait..." Lois called to him quietly. "I didn't get to thank you."

"Thank me?" he echoed, puzzled, turning again to face her.

"For saving my life," Lois explained and after a beat, she added. "I didn't expect to see you again."

"I didn't intend for you to see me," Clark admitted. With a sigh, he said, "Guess, I wasn't quick enough."

"No, I guess you weren't," Lois agreed with a small smile. "Will you come in?"

"I... no, it was a mistake coming here. You've already seen more than you should have," he said nervously.

"Relax, Clark. I'm not going to print any of this, I promise," Lois vowed. "If it makes you feel better, anything you tell me is strictly off the record. Unless you decide to sweep me up into your arms and fly us straight into the newsroom, nobody is going to believe me anyway."

His brows climbed towards his hair-line and for a moment, he just stared at her, completely taken aback. Lois opened her window a little further and flashed him what she hoped was an encouraging smile. Her heart however pounded in her chest, afraid that she had overstepped her boundaries and scared Clark off.

For long moments he remained hovering just outside her window, stiff like a statue until he eventually raised his knee enough to place a foot on the window sill. With another step he stood inside her bedroom, hands stuffed deeply into his pockets

and staring at his feet. He allowed Lois to close the window behind him. In the light of her apartment, Lois saw that he was clad in black. Tight jeans accented his slender waist and muscular legs. The shirt did little to hide the chest that she had spent several nights dreaming about.

"You... you're not going to print what you saw in the shuttle?" Clark asked hoarsely.

"Like I said, it's not like anyone is going to believe me," Lois replied.

"Guess, I didn't think about that," Clark said sheepishly and raised his head just enough to look at her with soulful brown eyes. Although she had spent hours in his presence, Lois had never realized just how deep those eyes were, how full of pain. She had never really looked past the glasses. Now they could not hide the flicker of fear, as his gaze darted through the room nervously.

"Clark, when I saw..." Lois started.

Clark interrupted her. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you," he gulped, uncomfortably. "I just..." his voice trailed off.

"Well, it would have been nice if you had told me that with you around a bomb presented no danger," Lois remarked, folding her arms in front of her chest. Clark blinked, staring back at her incredulously. It took Lois a moment to realize that he had not been talking about the bomb, but about himself. Her heart went out to him. "I was sure I was going to die, Clark," Lois said softly and reached out to lay her hand on his arm. He flinched at her touch, but did not retreat. "I wasn't scared of you."

Clark drew in a shaky breath. "You weren't?" he whispered.

"I guess I got a little freaked," Lois admitted soberly. "But I had time to think. You saved my life, Clark. And I'm pretty sure that you also saved that guy in the man-hole." His eyes widened at her words, leaving little doubt that her assumption was right. "What you do..." she paused, studying her partner, who still did not dare to look at her. "... whatever it is that you do, I think it's pretty amazing. You shouldn't hide yourself."

A shadow crossed his face. "I'm a freak, Lois," Clark said, turning his back on her. He looked out of the window, gradually shrinking in on himself. Resting his forehead against the glass, he whispered. "Believe me, not everyone would be 'amazed' at what I can do." He heaved a sigh. "People would be terrified."

"But why..." Lois started.

Clark turned around, breaking her off. "Because I'm strong enough to smash you with a dab of my pinky finger." He held up the finger as if to illustrate his point. "Because I'm so fast you wouldn't even know it was me," he said almost angrily. "I can burn things with my eyes or freeze them with my breath." His voice gradually faded to a whisper. "I could do all those things and no one would be able to stop me, because I'm invulnerable."

"If you were really capable of all those things, you would have let me die in the explosion," Lois stated simply. "You didn't need to save me. Letting the bomb explode publicly might have even helped you to prove Luthor's involvement." She adjusted her bathrobe and once again folded her arms in front of her chest. "That's all you ever wanted, wasn't it? You had Baines statement. It would have been a short way from there to linking the whole thing to Luthor. Yet, you saved my life."

Clark looked appalled. "I couldn't have let you die."

"My point exactly," Lois replied smugly. "So are you going to tell me a bit more about yourself?"

He stared at her, silently. For a moment, Lois wondered if maybe he had not heard her. But then, he shook his head, still not saying a word. Instead, he once more turned his back on her, this time opening her window.

"I can't," he said after what seemed like an eternity. "I've got to go."

"Are you coming back?" Lois asked. "I could use your help with exposing Luthor. You still got what's left of the bomb. Together, I'm sure we could prove that he planted it."

"I'm sure he didn't do it himself. He always hides his tracks well. Besides, we don't have the detonator anymore. I'm not going to explain to the public where it went. Believe me, it wouldn't do any good to tell anyone that we were inside the shuttle," Clark replied sadly.

"But Clark, if we published that the Colonist Transport was sabotaged, then everybody would know that there was someone else pulling the strings," Lois argued. "With your help and the bomb as evidence, we could..."

"I resigned, Lois," Clark broke her off. He opened the window again and stepped onto the sill.

"Perry didn't accept your resignation, yet," Lois told him.

Clark looked over his shoulder, pondering that piece of information for a moment. Then he shook his head again, this time wistfully. "I can't help you, Lois. Not anymore. It's too late."

The curtains billowed in a gust of wind and Clark was gone.

"Lois?" Lucy's voice was muffled by the bedroom door.

The curtains were still moving with the soft breeze that came in through the open window. Lois sat on her bed, staring into the night. She found it difficult to merge her image of Clark Kent with what he had told her about himself, even so she had seen the evidence. The shy man she had first viewed as nothing more than a hick she could not care less about, had abilities that went far beyond her understanding. Lois had no idea how she had been able to talk to him at all, after she had seen him *floating* in front of her window. Maybe that had been her reporting instincts kicking in, because now that she thought about it, she felt utterly confused.

"Lois?" Lucy asked and opened the door without knocking.

"What's the matter with you? Dinner is..." she stopped in mid-sentence and approached Lois with a frown. "Are you okay? You look like you've seen a ghost."

It took Lois a moment to acknowledge her sister's presence. "A ghost?" she echoed, blinking a few times trying to clear her head.

"Lois, the Pizza guy came like ten minutes ago. I must have called you a dozen times," Lucy stated and her expression turned into one of concern as she added. "Did something happen at work?" The bed budged as Lucy sat down beside Lois, laying an arm around her shoulders to offer comfort. "Tough story?"

"Uh huh," Lois muttered noncommittedly, not sure how to reply.

On the one hand, she was dying to share this out-of-this-world experience with someone; on the other hand, she knew that Lucy would think she had completely lost it. How could she ever explain something she was not sure she believed herself?

"This new guy at work..." Lois heard herself say and for the first time since her sister had entered the room, she really focused her attention on Lucy. "I... today I learned something about him..."

"Something bad?" Lucy asked sympathetically.

Lois pondered that for a moment. "I don't know," she said, remembering how Clark had told her he was dangerous. His eyes had belied that. "Not necessarily," she added slowly.

A strange expression crossed Lucy's face. "Did he tell you? Or did you find out?"

Taken aback, Lois stared at her sister, shocked by the fact that Lucy could read her like that. It was one of those moments that showed their special bond, something that Lois would rarely admit to even having existed. Lucy had named the thought that up until now had been nothing but a vague feeling of disturbance, something intangible.

"I guess you could say I found out," Lois muttered. "He didn't want me to know."

She wrapped her bathrobe more firmly around herself, got up and closed the distance to the still open window. She ran her

finger along the sill, where Clark had stood not so long ago. The curtain seemed to smell faintly of his aftershave. Or was that just an illusion, like perhaps the flying part had been nothing but an illusion?

“Is he angry with you?” Lucy prodded gently.

“I’m not sure, I don’t think so...” Lois replied, her voice drifting off as she continued to stare into the night. “It wasn’t my fault. It just happened.” She still had a hard time trying to make sense of Clark’s visit. Could he really be angry with her? Was that why he had quit? But why had he asked her to continue his work? Why was he giving up, suddenly refusing to give her the one piece of evidence they had? It did not make any sense at all. Did he act like that, because she now knew his secret? Or was there another reason? Did she even really know anything about him?

“You don’t want to talk about it?” Lucy asked, drawing her own conclusions of what little Lois had told her.

Lois turned back to her sister. “Not really, no. Telling you would mean betraying his trust. And I’m feeling that I might still need that. I believe Clark is on to something big.” Or so she hoped. For some unfathomable reason, Clark seemed scared and maybe that was all there was to it. But Lois was worried that there might be a more sinister explanation for his behavior.

“That sounds reasonable,” Lucy agreed with a small smile. “Dinner’s ready, if you still want some.”

“Yes, of course. I’m starving,” Lois replied. “Give me two minutes.”

Lois distractedly added cream and sugar to her coffee instead of her usual sweetener, while her eyes remained trained on the elevator’s doors. Every time they would open, her heart skipped a beat, her breath caught until she looked into the eyes of just another colleague she could not care less about. A sigh escaped her lips as she glanced down at her cup. If she took any longer to fix herself some coffee, it would start to look ridiculous. She took a sip of her coffee, covertly perusing the room.

Clark’s desk was still empty. At eleven o’clock that probably meant Clark was not going to come in. It should not have been a surprise; after all Lois had seen his resignation. Taking her cup back to her desk, Lois pondered why she did care.

During her years of working for the Daily Planet, she had seen people come and go. Most of them had lasted longer than Clark had. When she had first met him, he had struck her as one of those people who just were not cut out for life in the big city. Lois had a talent for recognizing this type. Her cheeks flushed as she remembered how she had put her foot into her mouth, telling him in no uncertain terms what she thought about the ‘Hack from Nowheresville’. It had been pretty embarrassing to learn that Clark had already won a Kerth Award. He was not just some greenhorn, he could well stand his ground.

She had barely known him for a month. By her usual standards, she would not even care whether he was coming in or not. There was a reason that some people called her ice queen. Lois did not make friends easily; she was slow to trust someone enough to let them within arm’s reach. But with Clark it was different. He was the contradiction to everything she believed in: working alone was better than working with a partner, men were unable to treat women as their equal and most importantly — men did not fly.

Sitting down on her chair, Lois took another sip of coffee and let out a sigh. Her gaze wandered back to Clark’s desk, involuntarily. It was still empty. She felt a sudden pang of regret that she did not quite understand. Was she actually missing *him* or just the chance to get to know someone so extraordinary? Lois decided to settle for the latter of the two options, though a tiny voice in the back of her mind insisted that she was not being honest with herself.

“Lois, there is a call for you on line one,” Jimmy yelled across

the newsroom.

Startled, Lois almost jumped out of her chair and spilled some of her coffee.

She recovered quickly though, “Thank you, Jimmy,” Lois replied and indicated with a wave of her hand that she would take the call at her desk.

Hastily she sat down her cup, a nervous flutter filling her belly at the thought of getting another chance to talk to Clark. She picked up the phone with one hand, while she unconsciously started to dab at the stains on her blazer, muttering a curse under her breath.

“Lois Lane, Daily Planet,” she said, her voice just a tad unsteady.

“Good Morning, Lois,” a male voice said and it took a moment for Lois to register to whom it belonged.

“Lex,” Lois replied, her heart starting to flutter as she felt both excited and disappointed at hearing his voice.

“I feel a little guilty for leading you on the other night. After all I promised you an interview...” Luthor heaved a small sigh. “I wanted to make it up to you.”

“You’re offering me the interview now?” she asked incredulously.

“Always straight to the point, aren’t you?” Luthor let out a soft chuckle. “I was thinking more along the lines of an evening at the opera. Tonight? Six o’clock?”

Lois opened her lips, her first impulse being to decline his invitation. But she stopped herself in time before she said something she might regret later. Clark’s plea to keep on investigating Luthor was still fresh within her mind. What would be a better place to start than the lion’s den itself?

She put a fake smile upon her face, hoping it would seep into her words. “That sounds nice,” she said sweetly. “Will you come pick me up?”

“It would be my pleasure,” Luthor said. “What’s your address?”

“1058 Carter Avenue,” Lois prompted, sending a little prayer to Heaven that her plan wasn’t going to backfire.

“Then I’ll be waiting in front of your door at six,” Luthor replied contentedly.

“I’m looking forward to it,” Lois forced herself to add.

“Me too. See you tonight, Lois,” Luthor said affectionately, his warm voice sending a pleasant shiver down her spine.

“See you tonight,” Lois whispered.

She put the receiver down, but involuntarily stopped the motion, staring into space. Her ears registered the faint signal of a free line, indicating that Luthor had already ended the call. It irked Lois that she obviously wasn’t immune to Luthor’s charms. She still felt a little flutter in her belly, because he wanted to go out with her. Despite her best efforts to view him as the enemy, it actually felt kind of good to be wooed.

Blinking to clear her mind of the unwanted thoughts, Lois finally hung up and sat herself straight. Once more, her gaze wandered across the newsroom. Her partner’s desk was still painfully empty. She wondered if Clark would approve of her methods — dating Luthor to get closer to him. But it was no longer his call — and honestly, it had never been. Clark had been the one handing in his resignation, which reduced him to the status of a source. And she was not going to let a source tell her how she was supposed to do her job.

“Lois, my office!” Perry bellowed through the newsroom, stirring her from her thoughts.

Startled, Lois jumped up from her chair. Only by chance did she miss tipping over her cup of coffee. She quickly secured the cup with one hand, while she waved her acknowledgment at Perry with the other. He retreated back into his office, an impatient expression on his face. His frown was all the encouragement Lois needed to get into the chief’s office as quickly as she possibly

could.

Mere seconds later, she closed the door behind her.

“Any word of Kent?” Perry asked without further ado, gesturing towards the chair in front of his desk, inviting Lois to sit down. His eyes conveyed concern.

“I went to his hotel, yesterday,” Lois offered. “He had already checked out.” Briefly she thought about mentioning his visit at her apartment. But Lois felt that Clark had not said anything Perry might find important — unless she could prove to him that Clark’s powers actually existed.

The editor’s shoulders dropped in disappointment. “You don’t happen to have that box of evidence you mentioned a couple of days ago?” Perry enquired.

Lois shook her head no. “He kept that to himself. I had hoped that maybe he would come by to give it to me in order to continue his investigation after he has obviously given up on it. But I figure, if he wanted to do that, he would have brought it in by now.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Perry nodded thoughtfully, his intense gaze resting on Lois. He studied her for a moment, unconsciously shifting his pen from one side of his desk to the other. He harrumphed before he spoke again. “I watched you this morning. Your attention seemed to alternate between the elevator’s doors and Kent’s desk. I might be drawing the wrong conclusion here, but I haven’t seen you this distracted in ages. Was there more between the two of you than this brief partnership?”

“Perry!” Lois protested, completely taken aback. Was her boss actually insinuating that she might be in love with Clark Kent? That was ridiculous. “I hardly know him. We were working together and surprisingly, he proved to be a pretty good partner. I could use his help investigating Luthor, if there even is anything to investigate. That’s all this is about.”

“Good,” Perry seemed satisfied and leaned back in his chair. “In that case — I trust you to get me one hell of a story. If Luthor has any skeletons in his closet, I’m sure you will find them. But in the meantime, please don’t forget that we’ve got a newspaper to publish. While I’m willing to give you the time you need to investigate Luthor, I can’t have my best reporter spend all her time on a wild goose chase, if it might turn out to be just that.”

“Sounds fair,” Lois agreed and got up, anticipating that their talk was over. As if on cue, Perry dismissed her with a wave of his hand. “I will bring you something better than the article on the launch of the Colonist transport,” Lois promised on her way out.

“I sure hope so,” Perry muttered in reply. “I sure hope so.” He resumed editing an article that had been sent to him, his expression once more as impassive as the one of Elvis on the picture that hung on the wall above him.

Lois went back to her desk, allowing herself one last look over to Clark’s. Not surprisingly, it was still empty. Shrugging off another pang of regret that threatened to take hold of her, Lois reached for her almost empty cup of coffee and poured the rest of the liquid over the pitiful excuse for a fern that currently resided on her desk. Then she drew a pad of paper out of one of her desk drawers and sat down on her chair. She took a pencil and drew a line, dividing the paper into two sections.

On the left side she wrote “Luthor guilty” and then she tagged the other column “Luthor innocent.” Letting out a soft sigh, Lois shifted on her chair as she started to fill out the two columns. His own project which was supposed to replace Space Station Prometheus quickly made it on the ‘guilty-list’. She thought back to her first interview with Luthor and added his reluctance to answer her questions. His donating money for countless charity organizations made it on the ‘innocent-list.’ Lois hesitated, letting her pencil hover over the sheet of paper. So far, the decisions had been easy.

Lois thought about what Antoinette Baines had said and how

little sense it made that she would sabotage her own career. If she was not just delusional, driven by some insane need for attention, then there had to have been someone else behind this ploy. Lois remembered that Baines had named her motive — profit. And who would profit from the early demise of Space Station Prometheus, if not Luthor who was almost ready to launch his very own Space Station — should the international program fail. Though she had by no means any proof for this particular accusation, she decided to write it on the left side. Still, there could be someone else behind this, someone she might not even have heard of, someone who had decided to kill Dr. Baines, before she could give away more details of their plan.

Lois put down her pencil, admitting to herself that so far, she had no more than a couple of unfounded allegations. What she needed was something solid, some kind of real lead she could follow. She skimmed over her list, her attention always returning to the same line — the explosion of Dr. Baines helicopter. Even if it turned out to be a dead end concerning a connection to Lex Luthor, following up on the investigation would certainly help her to write another article to go with the one on the Messenger disaster. A smile crept across Lois’ lips as she remembered that she had already told Jimmy to find out what the authorities already knew.

As if Jimmy had read her thoughts, he chose right that moment to walk by her desk on his way over to the coffee machine. He looked a little frightened as Lois jumped up all of a sudden and stopped him in his tracks.

“You got anything on the explosion of Baines’ helicopter?” she asked him, realizing with a sense of guilt that she sounded a little rude in her impatience to dig her claws into a new lead. For a moment, she felt the urge to apologize, but quickly pushed back the sentiment. Jimmy would probably suffer a heart-attack if she was to do something of that sort.

“Apparently, the investigation is still pending,” Jimmy replied, ducking his head. “I called the public relations offices of the NTSB and the FAA. Both were unwilling to give any statements and told me to wait for the press release.”

“Did you also call the DA’s office?” Lois enquired, her mood sinking by the minute.

Jimmy nodded and shrugged his shoulders. “I got the usual answer: ‘No comment’. They wouldn’t tell me anything about a pending investigation, much less if there was any hint of someone causing the explosion.”

“Figures,” Lois muttered with a sigh. “So, who is leading the investigation, the NTSB or the FAA?”

“Since an explosion was involved, it would be the National Transportation Safety Board,” Jimmy offered. “But that’s pretty much all the information I’ve got. Sorry, Lois.”

“Thanks Jimmy,” Lois said in a weak attempt to make up for her rudeness. Jimmy merely nodded at her, an expression of disbelief crossing his face, before he made a run for the coffee machine, probably deciding to get out of her reach, in case Mad Dog Lane would raise her head again.

Lois knew most of her colleagues called her that and were afraid of her. For the most part, she was proud of her reputation, because it meant she was respected. But it also made her kind of lonely, which only served to increase the strange sense of loss she felt over her missing partner Clark Kent. He had never seemed intimidated by her, quite the opposite in fact. Yet, she knew that he also respected her and that was a rare thing, in her book.

Lois cringed again at the unwanted feelings. For the life of her, she could not understand why she was thinking about Clark so much. She hardly knew him and the fact that he could fly was the only thing about him she should be interested in.

Looking at her notes, Lois realized that she had unconsciously scribbled down the names of the two agencies Jimmy had named. She blinked a few times as she looked at the first four letters —

NTSB. Her heart started to pound, as she realized that she actually knew someone working for this organization. She just was not sure if she actually wanted to contact him. Lois had seen Paul Myers no more than a couple of times since their college years, when he had been editor of their newspaper.

They had dated once or twice, before he had fallen for her best friend Linda. He had broken up with Lois, honorably before things had gotten really serious, on either side of the love triangle. Still, it had hurt and Lois had had a hard time getting over the premature end of their budding relationship. Her friendship with Linda had been pretty much ancient history after that incident. Later, Paul had decided that his success as an editor had rather been founded in his ability to organize than his talent as a journalist. He had changed his major to sciences and had finally entered the university to become an engineer. A couple of years ago, a mutual friend had told Lois that Paul had specialized in aeronautics and since he had not been able to get a job with the EPRAD, he had finally started working at the NTSB. Lois remembered seeing him there during a press conference, though she had no idea what that had been about.

Leaning back in her chair, Lois fought with herself whether to give Paul a call. He certainly was not one of her regular sources and with most of them she had spent years winning their trust, before she used them as informants. On the other hand, Paul was no stranger and once upon a time they had worked together well. Most importantly, it would not hurt to try — or so Lois hoped.

Straightening her stance, Lois picked up the phone and dialed the operator to get the number of the NTSB in Washington, D.C.. After a surprisingly short amount of time, she was put through to Paul and listened both to the ring tone and the frantic beating of her own heart.

“Myers,” the phone was answered a moment later.

“Paul? It’s Lois. Lois Lane,” she replied a little nervously, starting to wrap the chord around her index finger.

“Lois?” Paul asked, surprised. “It’s been a long time. How are you doing?”

“Fine, thank you very much. How are you?” Lois said pleasantly.

“Can’t complain,” he chuckled. “Are you still working for the Daily Planet?”

“Well, yes, as a matter of fact, I am,” Lois answered.

“So, what can I do for you, Lois? I don’t suppose you’re calling just to exchange pleasantries, are you?” he guessed, still sounding amused.

Lois felt her cheeks grow warm and was grateful that Paul could not see her. “Well, actually, I was wondering if you could tell me anything about the investigation on the helicopter explosion in Metropolis, two days ago,” she admitted.

“You’re working on that helicopter explosion?” Paul sounded surprised. “Is this going to be a local interest story or do you believe there is more to it?”

“Well, is there a hint that there may be more?” Lois asked immediately.

“I wouldn’t know, Lois. I’m not assigned to this particular investigation. But you should know that I couldn’t tell you anything before the press release, anyway,” Paul said soberly.

Letting out a small sigh, Lois hung her shoulders. “You used to be a reporter, too,” she argued.

“I edited your copies and tried not to let it show that I didn’t contribute that much, myself,” he quipped. “Lois, I understand what you’re trying to do and I feel like I still owe you one for hurting you, like I did, back in College. But I’m afraid, I really can’t help you. It would look suspicious, if I dug into anyone else’s investigation. I promise you’ll hear from me, if I find out anything, but I probably won’t. I’m sorry, but I think you’ll have to wait for the official statement.”

“Well, thanks, Paul,” Lois replied, disappointedly. “It was

nice hearing from you again.”

“Yeah, you too. I wish I could have been of more help,” he said softly. “Goodbye, Lois.”

“Goodbye,” Lois ended the call.

She hung up, but her gaze remained trained on the phone. She did not know what she had expected. Help? A condescending answer, advising Lois to mind her own business? Paul had been polite to the point of being awkward. Lois was not sure whether he was truly sorry about dumping her for Linda and what had become of their friendship afterwards, or if this was just his very own version of the governmental training of how to avoid the press. His reaction had confused her, so much so that she had not insisted on getting her answers.

Lois wondered if she might be losing her edge. First, Luthor had complimented her into forgetting her interview and then Clark had flown off without telling her the first thing about who or what he was. Paul seemed to be just another one in a row. Lois sighed and straightened her stance. Tonight, Luthor was going to give her some answers if it killed her. She would turn the tables on him and charm his pants off him - not in the literal sense of course — until he surrendered into telling her everything she ever wanted to know.

Lois was mesmerized as she watched the Queen of the Night, dressed in an elegant and opulent black dress. She stepped down a short staircase, handed her daughter Pamina a dagger and started to sing. Though she was not particularly fond of operas, Lois knew the aria and it never failed to impress her how it was possible to put so much fury into such a beautiful melody. She had heard the coloratura was one of the most difficult ones that existed, yet the opera singer seemed to sing it almost effortlessly. Lex had told Lois that Mozart, the composer of the “Magic Flute” had written the aria specifically for an extraordinarily talented soprano singer of his time. Until today, only a few singers had come close to her abilities.

Leaning back in her chair, Lois listened to the Queen of the Night ordering her daughter to kill her arch enemy Sarastro. The supertitles informed her, that Pamina was threatened to be disowned, should she not obey her mother. When the last notes died down, there was frenetic applause before the play went on.

Tamino and Papageno completed the three tasks the good magician Sarastro had assigned them with in order to get their respective girls, Pamina and Papagena. Finally, the evil plan of the Queen of the night was prevented and everyone lived happily ever after. Lois stood to join into the standing ovations the singers got and felt a little sadness as the lights came on and the people started to shuffle out.

“That was fantastic,” Lois breathed on their way out. “Thank you for taking me, Lex.”

For some reason, his first name now came naturally to her lips. Lois pushed the thought aside, figuring that now was not the best time to contemplate problems like that.

He smiled at her warmly. “Thank you for giving me another chance to make it better. I’m glad you liked it.” He held open a door for her, waiting until she passed through, before he followed her. “We could go to the opera again next week, if you like. They’re playing ‘Rigoletto’,” Lex offered.

Lois slowly shook her head. “Oh, that’s really kind of you, but I’m afraid I’m not that into operas. I liked the ‘Magic flute’ very much, partly because it wasn’t too difficult to follow the story line. My Dad dragged me to the opera a few times when I was a teenager. I never really understood what happened on stage.”

Lex chuckled. “Well, it certainly helps to read a summary, first. It took me some time to really learn to appreciate the genius of all those wonderful composers. But then, I did not have the money to go to the opera, when I was a teenager,” he added a little ruefully.

Lois just stared at him, realizing that he had let her get a short glimpse of his carefully protected past. But before she could dig any further, they had reached the checkroom where Lex went to fetch their coats. When he was back, the moment was gone. He helped Lois into her coat before he shrugged into his own.

“Are you hungry, Lois? I made reservations for the ‘La cullière,’” Lex said softly.

“The ‘La cullière?’” Lois exclaimed, taken aback at the mentioning of the restaurant that had three Michelin stars. “Isn’t that awfully expensive?” Lex just raised his brows mockingly. “Oh, right,” Lois muttered, slightly embarrassed and admitted. “Yeah, dinner would be nice.”

“Then let’s go.” Lex offered her his arm and Lois linked hers with his.

It was Lois’ second ride in the stretch limousine. One of Lex’ regular limousines had picked her up for the first interview. The limo they were sitting in now was even more comfortable than the first one, if that was even possible. The windows were tinted, barely allowing for light from the streets to come in. The sound absorption was excellent, effectively shutting out the city as soon as the chauffeur had closed the doors behind them. Lois knew that the quickest way from the opera to the gourmet restaurant led through darker parts of the city where people could only dream to make the amount of money in a year that Lex earned in a day. But it was easy to forget that among the soft leather seats and the quiet elegance of the car.

During the ride, Lois and Lex talked some more about the opera and the quality of the singers. Lex told her of other productions he had seen all around the world and raved about various composers in general and the Italian language in particular. Though Lois had difficulties joining into the conversation, she was amazed how knowledgeable Lex was. It seemed impossible to merge him with the monster Clark had made him out to be.

When they arrived at the restaurant, the usher already had seemed to be eagerly awaiting Lex and promptly showed them to their seats. A waiter appeared almost immediately, almost falling over himself to be helpful.

“I haven’t heard from Clark in a while,” Lex opened the conversation as soon as they had placed their respective orders and the waiter was gone. “I hope he is settling in well in his new job.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Lois said as non-committally as she could.

She had not been prepared to talk about Clark. Taking a sip from the glass of water the waiter had poured them each, Lois tried to sort her thoughts. Had Lex invited her to ask her questions about Clark? She distinctly remembered that she had agreed to meet him to get the interview he had bilked her out of. Judging from the course of the evening up until now, it was not going to be easy to turn the tables on Lex. Perhaps it was time she got started. And this could be a good opportunity to learn more about Clark.

“Speaking of Clark, how do you know him?” she asked innocently and put her glass down.

“We first met during a lecture series I did after I was awarded business man of the year,” Lex explained. “He addressed one of his fellow students in flawless Japanese and talked about a rather complex topic. I have to admit, I was intrigued. Unfortunately, being multilingual is not a common feat in our society. It turned out Clark was also fluent in French, German and Italian. Besides, his beautiful girlfriend certainly helped to catch my attention.” Lex let out a soft chuckle.

“Is that what your argument was about? His girlfriend?” Lois prodded eagerly, realizing too late that she might have overstepped her boundaries. She bit her tongue, silently praying that the evening would not come to its premature end.

But Luthor did not seem to mind, he just shook his head. “No,

Lana had nothing to do with it. I respected their relationship. After all, I owed Clark my life. Back then, I had an unhealthy thing for car races, I’m afraid,” he cleared his throat. “What I’m telling you is strictly off the record, of course.”

“Of course,” Lois nodded. Writing about Luthor’s involvement in illegal car races years ago was something she could let the tabloid papers handle.

“Someone tricked me, telling me about a race somewhere right in the middle of nowhere in Kansas. I was lucky Clark came by when he did,” Lex admitted. “I was mugged. They shot me and left me to die, when they didn’t find the amount of money they certainly had been hoping for.”

“That’s terrible,” Lois said sympathetically.

“Clark and I became friends. I tried to help him occasionally, but most of the time he insisted on making it on his own. I never really understood what drove the wedge between us,” Lex replied thoughtfully. “Or maybe I do, at least to some extent. Clark’s heart was broken and I seriously doubt that the wound ever healed completely. But that would be Clark’s story to tell. I don’t think he’ll ever be willing to reconcile if I went further into detail.”

Their conversation was interrupted by the waiter serving their drinks. Lex raised his glass of wine in a toast when they were alone again.

“To a beautiful lady and a very nice evening,” he said.

“It’s a nice evening indeed,” Lois agreed and clinked her glass to his.

They both drank their wine and Lois savored the rich taste, while silently musing if a broken heart was really all that was going on between Clark and Lex. Though she did not know Clark all that well, he did not seem like the type to seek revenge at all cost. Lex had denied ever having been involved with Clark’s girlfriend. He might be lying, but Lois could not quite figure out why he would do that. After all, it would not be the first time two men fell in love with the same woman and turned from friends into enemies. Countless poets had written about exactly that.

“So, how did you make yourself a millionaire, starting from scratch? Is this the famous tale of the dishwasher in a shabby restaurant or did you somehow get by Scrooge McDuck’s number one dime?” Lois asked.

“Back to the interview, I see,” Lex chuckled.

“Well, it never hurts to try,” Lois quipped and took her napkin when the waiter appeared again with the first course.

The night had passed without Clark appearing at her apartment. Lois had left her window open when she had gone to bed after Lex had brought her home, hoping that Clark would choose that way to contact her and maybe bring her his box of evidence. But he had not come. For a minute or two she had thought that there was a shadow outside as her curtains billowed in a gust of wind, but that had most likely been her overactive imagination. Now, she had a stiff neck and moreover was tired, because she had not slept well with all the noise outside.

Lois crossed the street and moments later stood under the globe that marked the entrance to the Daily Planet. She let out a small sigh, admitting to herself that lately, she had done little to deserve working for the famous paper. She should be out there chasing the story of the century, but really all she was doing was hitting dead ends. Sure, Luthor had been a little more forthcoming with details of his life, but none of it could help her either prove or refute Clark’s accusations. All in all, this smelled of a really slow news day and if Lois was not careful, she would soon be covering dog shows.

Taking a deep breath to brace herself, Lois stepped through the main entrance. She took a quick detour to the kiosk on her right, filling her stock of Double Fudge Crunch Bars, which was a sure sign of emotional distress. Hopefully, they would keep her up until she found another lead she could follow. After all, there was

still the press release concerning the explosion of the helicopter she was waiting for.

Lois went over to the elevators and took the next one that brought her to the newsroom. Stepping out, she quickly surveyed the place, hoping against hope that Clark had come around and would be sitting at his desk, ready to dive into a thorough investigation. Not surprisingly, his place was as empty as it had been the day before and probably would be until Perry worked his way through the pile on his desk.

A sudden surge of anger filled Lois and with a last glance at Clark's desk that would have killed any occupant instantly, she marched down the ramp to her own desk. Impatiently, she shrugged out of her coat and forcefully threw her handbag onto her desk. It toppled over, spilling the variety of rags. It was by sheer luck that the fern survived the onslaught, but then Lois had not had her first cup of coffee yet, which was only adding to her current foul mood.

"My, oh my," Cat commented, who had not been far from her desk. She turned around revealing yet another skin-tight, skimpy piece of clothing that hardly deserved the term 'dress'. "Trying to find some sense of fashion?" she teased as she eyed the assortment of tabloid papers. Those that lay on top were obviously meant for women who paid more interest in their looks than anything else.

"Look who's talking," Lois grumbled, starting to gather the journals in order to dump them unceremoniously into the trash can. She did not know why she had not already done that at home. Perhaps it was because Lucy was sure to drag them out again, leaving them for Lois to see for weeks to come.

"Aren't we cheerful, today," Cat replied, unfazed. "No wonder, Clark called in sick for the past two days."

"He called in sick?" Lois exclaimed, momentarily forgetting that she had vowed to herself to forget about her elusive ex-partner.

"Yeah, Perry said something along those lines," Cat said, raising her brows. "Don't tell me you didn't know?"

"We're partners, not a couple. He doesn't inform me of his every whim if you mean that," Lois spat, pushing past Cat to get her first cup of coffee.

That certainly was not going to save her day, but at least it might keep it from becoming any worse. Briefly, she considered asking Perry if Clark had actually called him. But since he had not known anything about Clark's whereabouts the day before, it was likely he had just told the staff Clark was sick to justify his absence.

When Lois returned with a steaming mug of coffee, Jimmy was already waiting for her at her desk. She sent a quick prayer to heaven that he did not bring more bad news. A faint sheen of sweat covered his forehead and his hands were trembling slightly. He held a sheet of paper and patiently waited for Lois to set her cup down, before he handed her the paper.

"This just came out," he managed to say, before he turned on his heels, making for a quick escape.

Lois sank onto her chair, closing her eyes and drawing in another deep breath. This obviously was one of the days she did everything in her power to deserve the title 'Mad Dog Lane'. The unpleasant thought crossed her mind that maybe Clark's absence was rather due to her off-putting personality than his strange set of abilities. She shook her head to clear it of the unwanted notion and studied the paper Jimmy had given her.

It was the press-release she had been waiting for and it had come sooner than she had actually expected. Quickly she perused the text, skipping the techno-babble to find the conclusion. According to the NTSB, the explosion of the helicopter had most likely been caused by scorching debris of the burning hangar. Essentially, Dr. Baines had caused her own death by blowing up the building. It was a case of poetic justice that surely would

make for a juicy follow-up piece, but it was not the news Lois had hoped for. The sickening realization sunk in that she had just hit another dead-end. It was official that despite the cup of coffee, her day had just made another turn for the worse.

Lois put down the paper and started to boot her computer. She thought back to her evening with Lex. He had provided her with a perfect explanation as to why Clark would be trying to bring him down. If the broken heart Lex had mentioned truly was Lana cheating on Clark, possibly with Lex, that would explain a lot. Lois still had a hard time seeing Clark come up with some elaborate conspiracy theory just to seek revenge for a love lost, but then stranger things had happened. Given his powers, he certainly had other ways to get back at Lex, though he probably did not want to reveal them to the world.

The report of the NTSB shed another light on the events of the night in the hangar. There were no hints that a third party had been involved in the helicopter explosion. Could it be that Dr. Baines had been delusional, thinking that there was anything to gain from sabotaging the space program? After all, it had been her words that had finally made Lois listen to Clark's accusations. It was possible that Dr. Baines had truly been the only instigator of the Messenger disaster. The bomb in the Colonist transport could have been placed by one of her minions, who either had been ill-informed or wanting to fulfill her legacy.

Flashback

"Lois, this is C.K...eh, I mean Clark Kent, a new colleague. C.K., this is Lois Lane," Jimmy blushed at his slip and stepped back, allowing Lois a full view of the man she had just been introduced to.

He wore a charcoal suit that had clearly seen better days, but was well-kept. His tie was ridiculous and looked quite a bit like the painting of a three year old. His face seemed to consist of glasses, the large frames dominating anything else. Still, he had an air of dignity that Lois found hard to compete with, given her current state of dress. After all, she had just returned from days living as a street kid. Pushing her own feelings of insecurity aside, Lois flashed the man before her a challenging glance.

Clark Kent leaned forward, inclined his head slightly and reached out his hand. "It's nice to meet you, Ms. Lane," he said politely. "I'm a great admirer of your work."

Hesitantly, Lois took the hand he offered and shook it. "Thanks." She was hard pressed not to roll her eyes. Where had Perry found that guy? "You're working late," she observed.

He looked at her as if she had caught him with his hands in the cookie-jar. "I'm just trying to catch up on the local politics," he explained and straightened his tie, unnecessarily. "I'm new to Metropolis."

"I figured as much," Lois replied, realizing in the last moment that she had voiced her thoughts.

Inwardly, she cringed, but quickly caught herself. It was just as well that Mr. Green-Jeans learned that whatever backwater place he had crawled out of had not prepared him to survive in the real world. His accent and his early twentieth-century manners screamed rural America, somewhere in the Mid-West she guessed. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got a story to write."

"She just busted a car theft ring," Jimmy beamed proudly.

"Congratulations," Clark said with a genuine smile on his lips.

Lois realized it was not true that his glasses hid his eyes, not completely anyway. His smile made them sparkle in the deepest shade of chocolate brown Lois had ever seen. The warmth of his smile was irritating to say the least, radiating through her with a force that weakened her knees. For the briefest of moments Lois felt like she was going to drown in those dark pools. Her breath caught, her heart stopped and with it time stood still.

Lois blinked to clear her mind, barely refraining from shaking

her head to get rid of the unwanted thoughts. She studied Clark again, setting her jaw, telling herself not to get carried away again.

There was not a hint of envy in Clark's eyes, which in Lois' book only confirmed her earlier assessment of his character. He did not have the spirit it took to best all others. He was easy prey to those who were used to having to fight tooth and nail to get what they wanted. Well, either he learned or he left, it was easy as that. In reply, Lois muttered something that could be mistaken for a grateful response and booted her computer, eager to write down her story. If she hurried, she could still make it into the Morning Edition. Perry had given her time until ten p.m., so she had 45 minutes left.

Clark and Jimmy returned to their work and the newsroom fell quiet again, except for the steady clinking of the keyboard as Lois typed her story. Occasionally, she heard the turning of a page as Clark obviously read an old edition of the Daily Planet. Then again, he turned to his computer and hit a few keys. She shook her head in disbelief. Whatever he was doing, it was no research for a current story. Did he really think that reading old papers would somehow help him to write the news? That was a paradox in itself. Still, it made her curious.

Roughly half an hour later, Lois had finished typing her story. Jimmy and Clark had left the building a bit earlier. Breathing a sigh of contentment, Lois leaned back in her chair and reread her article, searching for mistakes in punctuation and grammar that she needed to correct, before she could send off the file. When she was done with the corrections, she picked up the phone, informing the printing plant that tomorrow's edition was ready. Lois hung up again and shut her computer off with a pleased smile. It had been a good day.

She got up and fetched her coat from the backrest of her chair, starting for the elevators. She stopped mid-way, turning to look at the now empty desk of Clark Kent. Curiosity drove her back. Taking a quick look over her shoulders, Lois confirmed that she was truly alone in the newsroom, before she hastily went to his desk. It was painfully tidy, cleared of everything but a few pens that were neatly placed in a penholder. A quick perusal of his drawers revealed nothing else of interest. Lois snorted with disappointment.

She straightened, once again turning to head for the elevators. But something kept her in place, something about Clark Kent that irked her. Staring at his desk, she tried to understand what it was about this man that made her waste another thought on him. He was an average guy, substandard even with maybe the exception of his manners. In any case, he was no competition, posed no threat. So why did she care? Lois frowned.

Suddenly, it hit her and Lois relaxed, a smile creeping onto her lips. For the life of her, she could not understand why Perry had offered Clark Kent a job. There had not been any vacancies as far as she knew and Perry never hired anyone who so obviously lacked experience. Lois felt a lot better, now that she was aware what had sparked her interest. Fortunately, that was a question she could easily find the answer to.

With another glance over her shoulder, Lois made sure that she was still alone. Satisfied, she went to Perry's office. He was way too confident that his natural authority would keep nosy employees out. Maybe, his fear of his wife Alice added to the fact that lately, he kept forgetting to lock his door. Since his job as the editor-in-chief always kept him in the office until late hours, he had to hurry home in order not to incur Alice's wrath.

Today had not been any different from all the other days in that respect. The door swung open as soon as Lois pushed down the handle. Perry's desk stood in stark contrast to the tidy place Clark had left behind. It was covered in heaps of sheets and folders, a complete mess to anyone but the adept observer. Lois,

however, knew the secret system behind the chaos, she had studied Perry well. It took her only moments to find the right folder; the one in which Clark Kent had kept examples of his work.

She snorted as she skimmed over the first one that was dealing with the mating rituals of the knob-tailed gecko. It had been published in the Borneo Gazette. The second article had made it as far as the Smallville Press. Lois shook her head in annoyance. Reading his work, she had to admit that he had good writing skills, but it took much more to become a good investigative journalist. The third sheet of paper proved to be a letter of recommendation from one Professor Carlton, Midwestern University, Kansas. It was addressed to Perry White and from the looks of it, the two men knew each other, seemed to be friends even.

Lois flipped the folder shut. She had seen enough. Obviously, Clark Kent had been hired because of Perry's friendship with said Professor Carlton. Although, Lois found that kind of strange, it had not been unheard of. She shrugged it off and put the folder back on its place on the desk. If Perry hired a hack from Nowheresville to have someone to cover the dog shows, she certainly was not going to question it. If he made it that long in the big city, he might even take over the obituary section, once Andrew retired.

End Flashback

It was indeed a slow news day. After reading the press release of the NTSB, Lois had gone out to cover the hundredth meeting of the city council, which was traditionally open to the public. Listening to the politician's debate on renovating several playgrounds was not Lois idea of fun. She sat through the meeting, trying her best not to fall asleep. Now and again, she put down a note. But most of the time, she agonized about finding a new lead to continue her story. Regarding the meeting of the city council, she could compare notes with her fellow reporters later on. In times of pure boredom, it was an unspoken agreement to bury the hatchet and work together.

Lois smiled inwardly as she heard a soft snore beside her. After the playgrounds the debate had moved on to the trash collection services, a topic that was equally as controversial — not. Two weeks ago a strike had resulted in large pile-ups of trash all along the city. That story was old news now and the city council had no interest whatsoever to have that particular disaster repeated anytime soon. So they quickly agreed to meet all conditions in order to avoid another strike.

The rest of the meeting was no better than the beginning. After two hours, Lois was finally able to leave the city hall. She stepped out of the building and into the pouring rain. Quickly, she fumbled for the umbrella she kept in her bag, but by the time she had taken it out, she was already half drenched. Muttering a soft curse, Lois wondered if her day could get any worse.

So far, all she had to show for the day were three short reports on city politics, four reports if one counted the press release of the NTSB. Together they were barely enough to fill a column. Her evening with Lex had not amounted to anything printable, either. At least if she did not want to bore her readers to death. With a frustrated sigh, Lois raised her hand to hail a cab. She decided to head for the police station, desperately hoping to find herself a story she could write.

Regarding her initial plan to expose Lex Luthor, she was coming up empty. Even after spending the past two hours contemplating the problem at hand, she had no better idea than to contact Bobby Bigmouth. While he was the best snitch she knew, she had the distinct feeling that she would be wasting a fortune on food and would get no results. She did not even have any idea what she was going to ask him. Lois would need something a little more concrete on either Luthor or Clark. It would not do her

any good if she asked Bobby, whether he had seen a flying man. Clark was certainly more careful than that.

Finally, a cab pulled to a halt in front of Lois. She quickly closed her umbrella and shook it as dry as she could, before she climbed in and asked the cabby to drive her to the police station, already fearing that it would only be another exercise in futility.

Around noon, Lois was back at the Daily Planet with a set of police reports to fill a second column. She was a long way from producing anything front page worthy. A quick survey of the newsroom told Lois two things. Firstly, her colleagues were no better off than she was. Secondly, Clark was still missing.

Lois went to her desk and put down the bag of sandwiches she had gotten for lunch. Sitting down on her chair, she got ready to write the articles she had so far, however small they were. If worst came to worst, she could still use the decision of the city council regarding the trash collection services and blow it out of proportions to make for a good headline. Maybe she could interview a few employees and citizens later to create a good human interest story. The fact that Clark was better at that kind of stuff did not mean she could not do it. And if by any stroke of luck someone else had found front page material, then her article would still provide a decent page two. It was better than nothing.

Just as Lois took a sandwich out of her bag, her telephone rang. She picked up immediately. "Lois Lane, Daily Planet."

There was silence at the other end of the line. "This is the Daily Planet. You're speaking with Lois Lane," she repeated a little impatiently, but was still only met by silence.

Lois was about to hang up when she heard someone take in a deep breath. "Clark?" she asked tentatively. "Is that you?"

"No, Lois," a male voice replied thickly. "It... it's Paul." He sounded nervous.

"Paul?" Lois said surprised. She dropped her sandwich and hastily fumbled for a pad to take notes. "I didn't expect to hear from you. What's the matter?"

"Gotta make this quick, Lois," he said, his voice almost drowned out by noise that seemed to come from his end of the line. It sounded like traffic, rather strange for someone who was working in an office. "After our conversation the other day, I happened to have lunch with the guy who conducted the investigation concerning the helicopter explosion you asked me about. He told me about his case, saying that they found remnants of the timer in the debris. According to him, it was pretty peculiar. I believe 'a piece of art' were his exact words."

"Wait a moment, that sounds like the explosion was no accident," Lois mused, now sitting on the edge of her seat.

"I would certainly think so," Paul agreed. "Whoever built this bomb must have known what they were doing. It's highly unlikely that such a bomb was on board the helicopter for any other reason than to cause the explosion."

"But today your office released a statement, classifying the explosion as tragic accident, caused by the debris of the initial explosion in the warehouse," Lois stated.

"That can't be right," Paul said, taken aback. "My colleague told me that the official report wouldn't be ready before tomorrow."

"Well, obviously, he finished it sooner," Lois disagreed. "Paul, is there some way I can talk to your colleague? This could be something really big. I'm certain this helicopter explosion is linked to the sabotage of the Messenger a week ago."

Lois heard some more traffic, before the line went silent again. For long, agonizing moments she thought that Paul had hung up. She took in deep breaths, trying to calm her rapidly beating heart.

"I'll see what I can do, Lois," Paul said eventually.

"Thanks, Paul," Lois replied gratefully. "I thought you weren't going to ask around," she then added.

"I wasn't. He just told me," Paul objected. "Besides, I didn't

want to make any promises I couldn't keep."

"Thank you," Lois repeated. Before Paul said anything else, the line went dead.

Lois stared at the receiver in her hand. Her heart beat rapidly in her chest. She closed her eyes, whispering a silent prayer to thank whatever deity had blessed her with another lead. This was big. Only moments ago, she had been ready to drop the story altogether. Now, she knew that there had indeed been a bomb on board the helicopter. Moreover, someone had faked the official report to hide his tracks. This reeked of corruption, in an organization like the NTSB, no less. A flutter filled Lois' belly and suddenly, she couldn't start investigating soon enough.

Hastily, she fumbled for the press release. Earlier, she had paid no attention to the signatures at the bottom of the page. Now, she studied them thoroughly. There were three of them, two belonging to the chairman and vice chairman of the board. The third was the name of the person who was responsible for the current investigation. It was a man named Sidney Burke

"Jimmy!" Lois shouted across the newsroom, her impatience seeping into her voice.

His head shot up and he dropped whatever he was working at. Quickly, Jimmy scurried towards her desk, almost standing at attention as he reached her. "I need you to get me anything you can find on one Sidney Burke, who is working for the NTSB," she explained hastily, shoving the press release with the name on it into Jimmy's hands. "I want to know where he lives, where he went to school and so on. If there is anything, anything at all that might make him susceptible for being bribed I want to know that, too."

"On it, Lois," Jimmy confirmed and turned on his heels, eager to comply with her request.

Giddy with excitement, Lois jumped up from her chair and was already half on her way to Clark's desk to tell him the good news, when her gaze fell on his still empty seat. She huffed in annoyance, both at his absence and her own need to involve him in her story. Granted, it had been nice to share the success of their first story as partners, something she had never thought would happen. Still, the thought irked her that their short-term partnership might have been more to her than just a necessity.

Lois was a lone wolf and she preferred it that way. Clark had practically done her a favor by giving up, she tried to convince herself.

It was not easy though. Lois felt still a bit deflated at the missed opportunity of sharing her joy. Besides, she realized that there was not much she could do for now. She had to wait for Paul to call her about meeting Sidney Burke and Jimmy would not be back with his research for a few hours. Maybe, she should have looked into the guy on her own. Lois could not help the feeling that Clark might have come up with something they could do in the meantime, some other lead they could follow.

Lois walked back to her desk, her shoulders slumped. She sank onto her chair, turning her attention back to the boring stories she had been working on before Paul's phone call. Like Perry would say, they had still a paper to write. Thinking of Perry, Lois suddenly felt another rush of energy. She jumped up from her seat and quickly made her way to her editor-in-chief's office. Perry had sources in all kinds of places, the most illustrious of them all over Washington D.C.. Who was to say that he did not know someone in the NTSB as well?

Roughly thirty hours later, Lois sat in a shady bar of a dump in Washington D.C. that much reminded her of the Apollo Hotel Clark had stayed at. On such short notice she had not been able to find a more comfortable place to spend the night. The capital city was crowded with reporters and lobbyists lying in wait for the big scoop. The congress had spent the past few weeks arguing about a set of new laws regarding health care, which affected the tobacco as well as the pharmaceutical industry along with some minor

branches Lois had no real knowledge about. Since the Daily Planet held a little office in Washington as well, she hardly ever dealt with internal policies.

For the most part, Lois was glad she did not have to cover what she considered a dog show. Most of the meetings were not public, so her fellow reporters spent hours and hours waiting for someone to give a statement. While the laws were ambitious, Lois had no doubt that their real intention would be diluted to nothingness, once the lobbyists were done with the politicians. In Lois opinion there were far better ways to waste time. But the commotion on Capital Hill also meant that she was sitting alone in the bar, desperately waiting for her source to arrive. She had no one to keep her company and that made her own assignment all the more boring.

Stifling a yawn, Lois reached for her glass of coke and took a large sip. Her stomach was growling something furious and she could not help, but to stare at the assortment of nuts sitting on the bar. So far, she had deemed them too disgusting to eat, since who knew how many thugs had already dipped their fingers in the bowl. But with every passing minute they looked more appealing.

Perry White had been excited after Lois had told him about her suspicions regarding the helicopter explosion and the cover-up on such a high level. Her assumption that Perry knew the right people in Washington had been spot on. He had arranged for her to meet his source. Unfortunately, she knew little more about the guy than that he obviously had a thing for shady bars. That was another reason why Lois was staying at this dump. He had insisted on meeting in a part of the city where none of his co-workers were likely to go. She did not even know how to recognize the guy, which frustrated her most of all. He would find her — and that was why she could do nothing but sit at the bar and sip at her coke.

While she waited, Lois half-heartedly watched a game of basketball on TV. Time and again, she looked over her shoulder only to find the place just as deserted as before. Heaving a sigh, she turned her attention back on the TV screen, seeing a ball bounce of the basket without scoring a point. Even the game was boring, as two mediocre teams spent most of the time chasing the ball across the court. The score was low on both sides, almost even. Lois yawned and raised her glass to her lips once more.

The bell on the door gave of a soft ring as someone entered the bar. Lois' heart started to race, just as the other two times someone had come in and drowned a glass of beer only to leave again. She cautioned herself, warily looking over her shoulders. The newcomer strolled ahead towards the bar, lazily taking off his jacket. He wore jeans and a pullover, looking a lot more cultivated than anyone else she had seen at this place. He was slightly overweight.

Yet, he dropped onto one of the bar chairs a few feet to her right with an almost casual grace. Lois eyed him more thoroughly, estimating that he was around Perry's age, maybe a few years younger than the Chief. His once black hair had mostly grayed. He ordered a beer and for long moments nothing happened. Lois suppressed a sigh of disappointment as she looked back at the game, finding that none of the teams had won a point. She squinted her eyes shut. This day really could not get any worse.

"How's the game?" the man beside her asked in a warm baritone.

"Don't ask," Lois groaned and looked back at the man beside her, flashing him a tentative smile she hoped he would not mistake for flirting.

"That bad, huh?" He quirked an eyebrow.

"Worse," Lois replied and despite herself she chuckled softly.

"What's a young lady like you doing in a dump like this?" the man beside her wanted to know.

"Waiting for someone," Lois said as non-committally as she could. Inwardly, she rolled her eyes at the blunt advance.

"I guess, that someone would be me, then," the guy continued, making Lois wonder who was writing his lines. She could hardly stifle another groan as he offered her his hand. "James Russ," he introduced himself. "But most people call me Jim. You must be Ms. Lane, I presume. Perry told me, I'd find you here."

Taken aback, Lois turned towards the man beside her, quickly wiping the scorn from her face. She hurried to put on a smile instead and shook the hand he held out.

"Lois Lane," she said almost apologetically, trying to make up for her earlier wariness. "It's nice to meet you, Mr. Russ."

"Call me Jim," he told her with a brilliant smile that almost rivaled Clark's on his good days. "That way I don't feel quite as old."

"I'm Lois. Did Perry tell you why I wanted to meet you?" she asked cautiously. She felt herself warm to the man, who now that she thought about it, had an almost fatherly air to him.

"Well, he did say something about a faked report, but that is pretty much all I know," Jim shrugged and took a large gulp of his beer. "So, what exactly are you after?"

Lois quickly fumbled for the notepad she always kept in her handbag. "There was a helicopter explosion in Metropolis a couple of days ago," she explained while Jim Russ studied her thoughtfully, now and again sipping off his beer. "The official press release from the NTSB said that the helicopter caught fire and exploded as it hovered low over a burning building. I have a source saying that there was a bomb on board the helicopter and that someone in the NTSB must have covered it up, letting the real report vanish in favor of a fake one."

"That's a serious allegation, Lois," Jim said softly. "If you weren't working for Perry White, we'd be done talking now."

"I know this sounds like a bad conspiracy theory," Lois admitted. "But I watched the explosion. I'm not an expert, but I think that the helicopter flew too high to be hit by scorching debris."

Jim nodded slowly. "It's an unlikely cause for an explosion, that's for sure. Unlikely, though not impossible," he amended.

"What would you need to do to pull something like this off?" Lois asked.

"Bribe or blackmail several people in high places, I'd say," Jim mused. "Did you give your statement?"

"To the local police department," Lois told Jim, quickly eyeing the list of questions she had prepared before their meeting. Her stomach lurched at the thought of asking him after Sidney Burke. Jim seemed nice enough. Hence, she wondered if he would give her any information on the man. She still had Jimmy.

"The NTBS would definitely have taken your statement into account," Jim said slowly. "That makes the classification as an accident all the more unlikely."

"Someone must be pretty desperate to hope that no one will follow up on this story," Lois commented.

"Oh, I don't know. We're talking about the helicopter of this young scientist who sabotaged the Space program, aren't we?" Lois confirmed Jim's notion with a nod. "While the sabotage was on the news nationwide, the helicopter explosion did not make quite such an impact. I doubt that the story sparked the interest of many reporters, particularly since the launch of the Colonist transport was successful." Jim took another large sip of his beer, swirling the remains of the beverage in the now almost empty glass. "Besides, employees of the NTBS usually don't talk to the press. They'd be risking their jobs."

"I always keep my sources confidential," Lois assured him.

"Oh, I don't doubt that. I happen to know Perry White well," Jim smiled.

Lois finally worked up her courage. "Do you know the guy who signed the press release? His name is Sidney Burke."

Jim continued to swirl his glass, looking into it as if it held

some answers. Lois heart rate spiked with excitement. She felt that Perry's source was just as valuable as she had hoped he would be. But the longer he remained silent, the more she was worried that he was not going to answer her question.

"I do know him," Jim said eventually, his voice thick with emotion.

"Do you think he would be susceptible to bribe or blackmail?" Lois asked tentatively.

"Who wouldn't?" Jim retorted, anger seeping into his earlier so calm voice. As Lois flinched, his expression immediately softened. "What I'm going to tell you now is strictly off the record, are we clear?"

"Completely," Lois agreed, putting her notepad down to illustrate her point.

"Sidney Burke is a good man," Jim said emphatically. "But his wife was recently diagnosed with a rare, life-threatening disease. I don't know any more details than that. He loves her dearly. I've hardly ever seen two people so happy with each other as the two of them. If he really let himself be bribed, he certainly would have done it to help his wife."

"Could someone else be responsible?" Lois asked.

"A number of people," Jim replied. "But if it was someone else, it wouldn't be like Sidney to stay silent about it."

"He could be afraid to lose his job over this," Lois pointed out.

"That might be the reason, indeed," Jim agreed, drowning the last bit of his beer and already lifting his hand to order a new one.

He turned towards the bar again, effectively ending their conversation. Lois put her notepad back into her handbag, feeling that it would be futile to ask any more questions. They had returned to the starting point and once again were only two strangers in a bar who happened to sit next to each other, only a chair between them. Lois emptied her glass of coke and slipped off her chair. Her stomach growled angrily and she decided that it was time to grab a bite to eat before she headed to bed.

As she left the bar, Lois thought that she saw a figure in the shadows close to the entrance. But as she looked closer, the figure was gone.

Flashback

"Morning, Lois. Searching for your career?" Cat purred mockingly as she caught Lois crawling under her desk, trying to retrieve the documents one Samuel Platt had waved at her earlier.

Her first day into work after breaking the car-theft story had been a turmoil, even by Daily Planet standards. Samuel Platt had stormed into the newsroom claiming that the Messenger was going to explode, which in turn set the security in motion. The mention of an explosion drove them to the conclusion that Platt himself might be carrying a bomb. He had seemed pretty delusional, but Lois was too much of a professional not to follow every lead that presented itself, even if it might turn out to be a dead end. After all, it was impossible to tell what could turn out to be her Pulitzer. Admittedly, Platt's story probably was not going to be it. Still, she felt compelled to look into Platt's files, which she had swept off her desk by accident.

After Cat's taunting, Lois stood up with as much grace as she could muster given her awkward position, holding the files in a firm grip. She gave Cat a once over, taking in everything from her three inch spiked heels to the skimpy excuse for a jump-suit she wore. Her whole outfit seemed carefully chosen to make any men in her immediate area stop thinking about anything or anyone else but her. It certainly was not something Lois would chose to work in, at least not in her profession.

"Isn't it a little too early for you to be in, Cat?" Lois asked sweetly, having no intention to mince her words. "I thought ladies like you only worked nights."

"Part of my job as a society columnist ..." Cat replied,

smiling at her completely unfazed.

"... mud-slinging rumor monger," Lois corrected her.

Cat chose to ignore the comment. "... is to maintain an active social life. You remember what that's like ... or do you?" she continued smugly, studying Lois' appearance in turn and clicking her tongue disapprovingly at what she saw. "I guess that's a solid 'No'." She smirked. "I'd recommend a complete make-over in the ladies room before you try to impress Perry's new guy. From what I hear, he's been working for important newspapers all over the world." With that, she swaggered past Lois, her hips swaying suggestively.

Lois watched Cat as she made her way through the newsroom, leaving a bunch of drooling men in her wake. She headed straight for the coffee machine, where Clark Kent was just pouring himself a cup of coffee. It was as sure as death and taxes that she was going to hit on him, like she hit on any new male who dared to enter the newsroom, may he be employee or not. She was sort of marking her territory that way. Lois snorted in annoyance.

"What do men see in her, anyway? Don't they realize she's just looking for another notch on her garter belt?" she asked no one in particular and started a little as Jimmy appeared at her side.

He shook his head. "Pathetic," he agreed, sounding not completely sincere though. "Have you actually seen this garter belt?" he then inquired curiously, giving away that he was not immune to her charms, either.

Lois rolled her eyes and continued to watch the scene that unfolded just a few yards away from her at the coffee machine. Kent just put the pot down and added sugar and cream to his coffee, before he turned and practically ran into Cat. His eyes widened in shock and he barely managed to keep his coffee from spilling all over Cat. Lois could not help to feel a little disappointed at his dexterity.

"Excuse me," Kent muttered, either ignorant of the hungry look Cat threw him, or he was enjoying that she undressed him with her eyes. Lois was not completely sure, which of the two it was; all she saw was that Clark Kent did not squirm in the least. That kind of surprised her, given that he was from a town not even big enough for a proper name.

"Catherine Grant, 'Cat's Corner.'" Cat introduced herself, inching herself even closer to her victim.

"Yes, I've read your column," Kent said politely.

Cat offered her hand, arching her back in quite the right way to allow Kent the full view of her ample chest. Lois watched this uninhibited display of femininity with a mixture of fascination and disgust. Should she ever need to go undercover as a slut, Cat was the right example to learn from. Kent shook hands with Cat, keeping his smile formal. From Lois' point of view, it was impossible to tell whether he took the bait. But since Jimmy, who was standing next to Lois, was already mesmerized, it was a sure bet that he did.

"Then my reputation precedes me," Cat purred, fluttering her eyelashes.

"Among other things," Lois could not help but add under her breath, which earned her a soft chuckle from Jimmy.

"I know what it's like to be new in town. I'd be happy to show you around," Cat upped the ante, placing a perfectly manicured hand square on Kent's chest.

"That's very nice of you, Ms. Grant," Kent replied, withdrawing ever so slightly.

"Cat," she said in a husky voice as if her words were only meant for him.

"Cat," he repeated, sounding a lot less self-assured than he earlier had. "Maybe when I get settled," he replied vaguely.

Cat smiled in satisfaction. "It's a date," she stated, patting Kent's chest in confirmation, before she turned, leaving him to

admire her curves as she walked off with a trade-mark sway of her hips that left no man unaffected.

End Flashback

"I got your tea and those donuts, chief," Jimmy said, as he entered the conference room, opening the door with a push of his back.

He was juggling a cardboard tray that held three steaming styrofoam cups, one of them filled with the herbal tea Perry had wanted because of his blood pressure. The other two were cups of coffee, low fat cream and no sugar for Lois, black for Jimmy himself. Under his arm, he carried a carton the size of a shoe box with an assortment of donuts. Jimmy put the goods on the only free edge of the conference table, proud that he had fulfilled his task without dropping any of it and more importantly, without losing any of his donuts to hungry co-workers.

"Thanks, Jimmy," Lois said as Jimmy handed her the coffee.

Perry gave off a soft grunt. "Sit down, son," he muttered rather impatiently, not even taking the time to look up. Instead, he continued skimming through the folders, Lois had compiled. "What did you find on Sidney Burke?" he asked eventually.

Jimmy looked somewhat like a deer in head-lights. His gaze darted between Lois and Perry as if he was not quite sure if Perry had actually addressed him. Lois heart went out to Jimmy. She knew exactly how Jimmy felt right now. It was a rare occurrence that Perry got involved in stories beyond the act of editing after the story was written. To see the chief in the conference room outside of a staff meeting was unsettling to say the least.

During her time at the Daily Planet, Lois had only seen Perry do that once — when a story of a former co-worker had led to the White House. Back then, the lead had turned out to be a dead end but, understandably, Perry preferred being involved in the investigation over printing false accusations. While the NTSB was not the White House, alluding to bribery in the organization was dangerous terrain. A paper like the Daily Planet could not afford to lose its reputation over rumors.

While Jimmy stood frozen in spot, crouching in a strange position between standing and sitting down, Perry slowly looked up and closed his folders.

"Great shades of Elvis, Jimmy!" he barked, his gaze turning even more intense, as if he was trying to look right through the younger man. "Sit down and tell me what you've got."

Jimmy hastily complied, almost missing the chair that was right under him. "Nothing much that Lois wasn't already told by your source," he admitted, sounding guilty. He fell silent again until Perry let out and exasperated sigh and made an impatient motion, urging him to continue. "Sidney Burke; married to Rachel Burke for fifteen years. She grew up in Vegas, where he met her. No children. Recently, she was diagnosed with cancer. Apparently, her insurance does not pay for the treatment. Their attempt to get a second mortgage on their house was turned down by their bank," Jimmy rattled on.

Lois looked at Jimmy, secretly in awe of his research talents. Most of the time, she wondered how he even got that sort of information. Maybe, if it came right down to it, she probably did not really want to know.

"So, they're having financial problems," Lois concluded thoughtfully.

"Perhaps even more so than it might appear on the outside," Jimmy added cautiously. "There was a charge against him because of illegal gambling that was dropped for lack of proof. Burke met his wife in Vegas, he married her there. During his time as a college student he was rumored to be into gambling. I believe that he might actually be addicted to it." He harrumphed at the statement, seemingly afraid of his own boldness and shrinking under Perry's scrutiny. "It would certainly explain why he would be susceptible to bribery," Jimmy stuttered nervously.

For long moments, Perry said nothing except for an

occasional sigh that was as non-descript as anyone could possibly sigh. Lois' own mind raced a mile a minute, while she was teetering between being excited and disappointed. On the one hand, this seemed to be the first real lead; on the other hand, she could not imagine how she would get Sidney Burke to talk, if all of this was really true. He was never going to risk the life of his wife and give away who had asked him to tamper with the investigation. It was frustrating to have a second big scoop drop into her lap she did not really want to write, all things considered. At the end of the day, she was not sure if uncovering the truth was actually the right thing to do.

"Well done, Jimmy," Perry finally said, a heavy southern drawl tinting his voice. "Is there anything else you found out?"

Jimmy's face flushed at the praise. "It seems that Burke comes to Metropolis regularly. In his spare time, he holds safety workshops at the local flight training center." Once more, his eyes darted between Perry and Lois in obvious discomfort. "I know it's just a stretch — but maybe, just maybe, he is gambling here, too?"

"That's a great idea, Jimmy," Lois said, excitement winning over again. "Do you know when his next workshop is scheduled?"

Jimmy's face fell a bit. "I'm afraid, he won't return for another month," he replied apologetically.

"Oh," Lois mumbled disappointedly as the lead seemingly slipped right through her fingers again. She was about to give up hope of ever finding something solid, when an idea crossed her mind. "I think I know just the right guy to ask. If Burke is anywhere around any illegal gambling here in Metropolis, Bobby Bigmouth will find out." She jumped up from her chair, only barely waiting for Perry to end the meeting.

"Get on it, kids," he said, closing the folder and got up as well.

Lois did not wait for a second invitation to leave and rushed towards the door, stopping in the last possible moment before she would have crashed into it. She turned on her heels and darted back to grab her folder that also contained a photo of Mr. Burke, courtesy of Jimmy Olsen. Only seconds later, she left the office. In her mind, she was already dialing the number of the restaurant Bobby was currently working at, and simultaneously compiled the menu she was going to offer in exchange for his help.

In the meantime, she tried not to think about how slim the chances were that Bobby could actually help her. She was clutching at straws, desperately so. Granted, they had a photo of Sidney Burke. But walking into gaming dens and asking for players, possibly showing the photo around was not the way Bobby usually worked. At least Lois was pretty sure he didn't. The sheer amount of information he gathered sometimes made her wonder, as did his seemingly unquenchable appetite. Bobby heard a lot of rumors in the backstreets of the restaurants he worked at, sometimes as a dish-washer, sometimes as an assistant. He did not care what he did, as long as the food was for free.

Lois sat down and picked up the phone. Just as she was about to dial the first number, her gaze wandered to the pile of yellow press papers she had accumulated on her desk. Leaning back in her chair, she stared at the pile thoughtfully, the receiver in her hand completely forgotten. With a sense of disappointment, Lois realized that she was no closer to unraveling the truth about Clark than she had been before. Involuntarily, she wondered what he would have to say to the new lead. Would he be excited about it or would he laugh at her for being so foolish to believe she might actually be onto something? After all, he had spent years trying to expose Luthor. It was not likely that the billionaire was going to start making mistakes now.

Lois realized with sudden clarity that she was walking down a dangerous path. She pinched the bridge of her nose. This whole story held so many unknowns it was giving her a headache.

Realistically, she could not even be sure there was a story in the first place. She should not let herself be dragged into what might be just a private vendetta between Clark and Lex. All she had so far was what Clark had told her plus the words of a woman who was willing to sabotage her own space program. It was important that she did not base her investigation on the premise that Luthor was guilty. Clark's plea to keep investigating the man still tore at her heart. For that very reason she needed to be extra careful to remain objective.

That notion in mind, Lois leaned forward again to pick up the receiver, only to realize that she was already holding it in her hand. She pressed the button to end the current call and this time dialed the number. Moments later, someone answered the phone. Between the noise in the kitchen and the speaker's meagre knowledge of the English language, Lois could barely understand what he said.

Even so, she tried her luck. "Hi, this is Lois. Can I speak to Bobby, please?"

"Huh?" she heard, followed by a string of words, she was not even sure were supposed to be English.

"Bobby," she repeated, more firmly.

"Si, si," the man on the other end of the line said and Lois heard a thud as he put down the receiver on his end of the line. She only hoped that 'Si' actually meant 'yes' in his case.

Seconds ticked by that seemed to stretch into minutes.

"Yeah..." the sound was muffled.

"Bobby?" Lois asked, imagining her source chewing on something or another he had found in the kitchen. "It's Lois."

"Niche to .ear f. om you!" came the enthusiastic reply, confirming her suspicion. This could only be Bobby Bigmouth. She heard him swallow, before he continued. "How can I help you, Lois?"

She briefly told him about her suspicions concerning the investigation of the helicopter explosion in general and Sidney Burke in particular. "I want you to look around, see what you can find out about him - if he really is into gambling while he's staying in Metropolis," Lois said finally.

For a moment, all Lois heard was the clinking of dishes and pots in the kitchen. There were also chewing sounds, while Bobby hummed thoughtfully.

"That's a tough one," he said eventually. "I can't make any promises."

"I'm going to pay well," Lois vowed, silently wishing she still had Clark's help. The mere prospect of his Chinese take-out would make Bobby fall over himself to get her all the information she wanted.

"I certainly hope so," Bobby replied mischievously. "Bye, Lois." He ended the call and, as she listened to the free line, so did Lois.

Leaning back in her chair again, Lois felt frustrated that there was little else she could do besides hoping that either Paul or Bobby would get back to her with new information. All that was left for her to do was another session of skimming through the tabloid papers she had accumulated, hoping that she would find anything on Clark. It was a daunting occupation, since she already knew that she was not going to find anything substantial. Clark had vanished into thin air — literally. So much so that she was starting to wonder if she might have dreamt him up in all his weirdness.

Maybe that was the reason she had become so focused on Lex Luthor. That and the fact that she felt she owed Clark her life. Her approach was anything but professional. Maybe it was about time she thought of another way to find her former partner besides leaving her window open and reading tabloid papers. Her gaze fell on the door to Perry's office. She had sneaked in once to take a peek into Clark's file; she could do it again. Maybe it held some answers.

"Lois, there is a call for you on line two," Jimmy yelled through the newsroom, effectively waking Lois from her musings.

"Thank you, Jimmy," she replied, straightening in her chair. With a flutter of excitement, she pushed the right button on her phone, before she picked up. "Lois Lane?"

"Good afternoon, Lois," Lex Luthor replied affectionately. "It's nice to hear your voice."

"Hello, Lex," Lois said a little stiffly. He was not exactly the man she had hoped she would be talking to.

"It's been a while, Lois. I was a bit worried when I didn't hear from you," Lex went on.

"I was on an assignment in Washington," Lois explained, half-heartedly. She did not want to give away too much, lest he might become privy that she was onto him. But was she really?

"I hope it went well," Lex said, not sounding like he was all that interested in her talking about her work.

"Yeah, pretty well." That was hopelessly exaggerated, but it sounded better than the truth and did not warrant any further questions. "What can I do for you, Lex?"

He chuckled softly. "Actually, I was wondering if I could do anything for you, Lois. How does dinner sound? My penthouse? Seven o'clock?"

"Oh," Lois breathed, not completely able to keep her surprise to herself.

She felt a sudden pang of discomfort, urging her to decline his offer. First and foremost, she felt that things were progressing too fast. Three dates in the course of a week was not how she usually started seeing someone. The thought alone set her insides on fire, fuelling her uneasiness. Was she actually seeing him? She had to be, because she could not honestly claim that she had interviewed the man. Moreover, she was not sure that meeting him again mixed well with her earlier decision to remain objective. Lois could not afford to let herself be drawn into his world of luxury.

"I'm going to send someone to pick you up," he said in a way that left no room for protest. He either was not used to being turned down or he simply would not take no for an answer.

"Sounds great," Lois replied with a bravado she did not quite feel. It was the Mad Dog Lane part of her talking again, the one that dug her teeth into a story, refusing to let go before she got to the bottom of it.

"Then it's settled," Lex said and she could hear the smile in his voice. "See you tonight."

"I'm looking forward to it," Lois heard herself answer and moments later she listened to a free line. He had ended the call, making it virtually impossible for her to change her mind.

Staring at the receiver in her hand, Lois wondered what that meant. Flattered as she felt at Luthor's attention, she could not help but be suspicious of it. Would he be as forthcoming if she did not know Clark? Shaking her head to get rid of those confusing thoughts, Lois put her own receiver back in its place. Clark's paranoia was clearly rubbing off on her. It was paramount that she stick to her plan — learn as much about Luthor as she possibly could and see where it led her. With that plan in mind, Lois pushed her lingering uneasiness aside. She was a reporter in pursuit of a story. It was completely irrelevant what Luthor hoped a third date might encompass, at his place no less.

Fortunately, her worries had been unfounded. Lois stifled a yawn as she walked up the stairs towards her apartment. She turned around one last time. Lex' limousine was already filing back into what little traffic there was at the late hour. The lights got smaller and vanished completely as the car turned into the next street, rushing back to Downtown Metropolis. Lois fumbled for her keys, wondering once again how many things she carried in such a small bag. Of course there always was her notepad, complete with a set of pens, even though it was unlikely that she was ever going to put them to use with Lex.

Lois let out a small sigh as she finally found what she was looking for. Sticking the key into the lock, she turned it around to open the door.

Dinner with Lex had consisted of delicious food and an easy conversation. He was well read and had travelled most of the world. His penthouse seemed a whole lot more comfortable when he was not hosting a party. Lex had shown her his treasures, one of them being the sword of Alexander the Great. Surprisingly, Lex was a lot more open when he was not being interviewed. He had given her a tour, including his study, a room she would probably have snuck in during the ball, had it not been for Clark catching her attention. All in all, Lex had been the perfect host, always there at her beck and call. But unfortunately that also meant that he had left her no opportunity to find out more about the man behind the facade.

Lois closed the front door behind her and slipped out of her uncomfortable shoes. When she had returned from the Daily Planet, she had dressed in a hurry, choosing the items of clothing she had found first. The shoes were right if the motto was “dress to kill”, they weren’t exactly ideal for traipsing about a vast penthouse. Letting out a soft sigh, Lois picked up her shoes and curled her toes in contentment. Then she went on, taking the stairs up to her apartment.

She desperately hoped Lucy had filled the fridge; else she would have to go to the convenience store on the corner of the street. Perry had stayed late, making it all that much harder for Lois to get to Clark’s file. It was the reason she had been in such a hurry in the first place. Now she knew that Clark Kent was from Smallville, Kansas. She was pretty sure she had heard or read the name before. But that was all the same to her, because she would probably forget it again, if she had not written it down.

It was some town in the middle of nowhere, at least a four hour drive from Wichita, the closest airport. Given that she had no idea where the Kent’s lived exactly, she would have to ask around in order to find them and hopefully Clark as well. Taking all that into consideration, it was unlikely that she would accomplish all that in a day, fly to and back from Kansas and still be ready for work the next day. Rolling her shoulders to relief the tension building there, she pondered if she should ask Perry for a few days off. He certainly would not consider this chasing a lead, at least not until she was ready to tell him about the man who could fly. Since that was probably going to get her into a psychiatric ward rather than on the front page, she had no choice but to take a vacation. Lois was not quite sure that it was worth the effort.

Before she could make up her mind, she had reached her floor. Once again she fumbled for her keys. She was surprised to find her door unlocked, since she expected Lucy to be out. Her sister worked as a waitress, trying to earn the money she needed for college. Usually, she stayed with a friend after her shift, because the diner was on the other side of town.

“Lucy?” Lois said as she stepped into the apartment. She inhaled sharply, as she found everything she owned scattered across the floor.

Her two love-seats were knocked over, the pads lying on the floor. The show case stood wide open, the mockup book row was nowhere to be seen. One of her two Kerth Awards lay on the floor, thankfully unharmed. The fish tank was about the only thing in her living room that seemed undisturbed, save for her fish that was hiding somewhere in the water plants. Grabbing her purse like a weapon, Lois went further into the room, careful not to step on any of her belongings. Her gut twisted painfully, as she imagined someone rummaging through her stuff, trying to find something worth stealing. It sickened her.

A loud thud stopped Lois dead in her tracks. Her heart skipped a beat. “Is there someone there?” she asked, her voice trembling. “I carry a weapon!” she warned, cringing at the sight of the pitiful purse. Who was she trying to convince?

The sound of steps sent her heart racing. Every cell in her body screamed for her to run away, but she couldn’t. It felt like she was glued to the spot, unable to even move a finger. A large guy stepped out of her kitchen and into her living room. He wore a black mask that hid everything but the cold stare of his steely blue eyes. They fixated on her with an intensity that was scary beyond his appearance. He lifted his hand, ever so slightly, his line of sight following his movement, making sure that Lois’ attention was on the gun he carried.

“Oh, do you?” he whispered, his voice low, but no less threatening. A spark of amusement ignited his eyes as he watched her trembling and clutching at her purse for dear life. “Hands up, where I can see them,” the thug ordered calmly.

“I don’t have anything of value,” Lois muttered, unable to keep her fear from seeping into her words. “If you leave now, I won’t call the police,” she heard herself promise.

Utterly mortified, she remembered all those useless hours of self-defense training. It was a completely different thing to find herself looking down the barrel of a gun that was pointed at her. Not a single one of her moves would work in a dress with a skirt so tight that it was difficult to put one foot in front of the other. Her pulse was thundering in her ears as she had no other choice than to comply and lift her hands. Lois stared into the cold eyes in front of her, unable to tell what this guy was thinking. Had he come for money? Given the state of her apartment, he had to know she was not rich.

“You won’t be calling the police either way, I made sure of that,” he made a gesture towards the phone in her living room. The cord was cut. “And I think I’d like to stay.”

“My sister will be coming back any moment now,” Lois lied, silently sending a prayer to heaven that she might be wrong, and at the same time hoping that she was right. Lucy should not be here, it would only put her in danger. On the other hand, Lois would give just about anything not to be in this situation alone — and helpless

The guy just shrugged. “The boss wants you to be less nosy. Maybe your sister would be willing to help convince you.” The mask moved into what had to be a smirk. “I’ve heard you can be pretty stubborn. Is that so, Ms. Lane?”

The casual tone of the housebreaker stood in stark contrast to his gun that in Lois’ eyes seemed to be growing by the minute. He stepped closer, lifting his hand to grab her. Lois’ mind was flooded with the memory of a man sitting in a chair, his feet dangling in a bowl of water, electrical current running all along his body. Her gut clenched in fear, her throat constricted, making her gag.

“No!” she breathed and her defiance returned with vengeance. Balling her hands into fist, she lifted them to shoulder level, ready to push the guy off.

“I see.” His chuckle sent a cold shiver down her spine, but it also fueled her anger. How dare he laugh at her? Lois took a step back, but the guy was quicker, clutching her arm in a steely grip. Lois let out a yelp as he pressed the tips of his finger into the nerves running along the inside of her arm. The strike of her fist fell short as she tried to hit him. Roughly, he manhandled her towards the kitchen, pressing his gun to her temple. Like her first strike, any other attempt to defend herself remained futile. Her attacker only increased the pressure of his gun.

With a hard shove, he pushed her back against the wall, knocking the wind out of her lungs. His body pressed into her, making it impossible for Lois to move. In one swift motion he covered her mouth with his hand, effectively muffling the scream that had been about to escape her lips.

“I wouldn’t even think about it, if I were you,” he recommended, inching even closer to her face, so that she could almost feel his breath even through the mask. His cold eyes bore into her, making her insides freeze over with fear. “You’re way

too bold for your own good. Dr. Baines sabotaged the Space Program — that's all you need to know. Do you understand?"

He ran the barrel of his gun along her jawline, as if stroking her. But the threat in his motion was unmistakable.

"Do you understand?" he repeated as she failed to reply.

Lois' mind ran a mile a minute. One part of her brain desperately tried to find a way to escape the clutches of her attacker; the other wondered who would send someone after her for following up on the helicopter explosion. She had to be closer than she thought she was. If only she would still be able to use that to her advantage. The cold metal of the barrel pressed harder against her cheek, another proof of her attacker's insistence on getting an answer.

"I am warning you, Ms. Lane," he said through clenched teeth. "I'm not kidding. You stay off that little investigation of yours or I will kill you. Tonight, or any other night following this one — I will find you, no matter what, no matter when. Is that clear?" His right index finger twitched dangerously, threatening to pull the trigger.

Lois' eyes widened. Her breath came in panting gasps as she desperately tried to get in some air through the firm grip of his hand. Instinctively, she nodded, no longer doubting that this guy was going to carry out his threat. The man's finger relaxed almost imperceptibly, his grip was as steady as before.

"I'm going to leave now. You're not going to scream, you're not going to call the police. You don't even move as much as a finger. And just to make sure, you don't forget to take me seriously..." He struck out, raising his fist to hit her. His blue eyes sparkled at the prospect of what he was about to do, his mask twitching into a grin that was visible despite the fabric. His fist rushed forward to the sound of shattering glass. In the same instant, the man who had been about to hit her was pulled back violently.

A shot rang out and Lois squeezed her eyes shut, bracing herself for the pain to hit. It never came. Instead, she heard a brief struggle, followed by a thud and a soft moan. Curiously, Lois opened her eyes again, not sure she believed what she saw when she looked into soft brown eyes.

"Clark!" she breathed.

"Are you okay?" he asked nervously, his gaze darting between her and the man who lay spread-eagled at his feet.

Lois just nodded, watching Clark as he tensely bent down to feel the man's pulse. He heaved a sigh of relief as he obviously found what he was looking for. Then he picked at his glasses, lowering them and staring at every inch of the man intensely. When he was finished, he pushed his glasses back up on his nose and got up again, seeming satisfied.

"He's just unconscious," Clark said, looking particularly glad as the guy's lids already started to flutter. A line of worry creased his forehead, as he focused his attention on Lois again. "He's not going to be happy, when he comes to. You're not safe here, Lois. I'm sorry, but I can't let anything happen to you," he added, reaching out to take hold of her arm.

Though his grip was just as firm as the other man's had been, he was also a lot gentler. Still shell-shocked, Lois let him drag her towards him. In one swift motion, he swept her up into his arms. Gravity seemed to lose its effect on her as he rose from the floor and floated through the broken window. Stifling a yelp of surprise, Lois wrapped her arms around Clark's shoulders to steady herself. In tune, he adjusted his grip on her to make her position more comfortable.

For a moment, neither of them said a word, both eying each other warily as they rose higher up into the sky. Now and again, Clark looked around nervously, as if he was afraid to be seen. Speeding up, his eyes darted between Lois and the sky that lay ahead of them. The noises of the city faded, replaced by the rustling of the wind in her ears that made any conversation

impossible. They rose higher until even the skyscrapers seemed small. Eventually, Metropolis turned into a sea of millions of lights that rushed underneath them, fading to darkness as they passed the city and flew above the country.

Lois' mind was in a jumble as she was trying to take in what was going on. It had all happened so fast. The break-in, the attack on her and the rescue — it all seemed like a weird fantasy. She felt that she had to pinch herself in order to believe that she was flying — actually flying in the arms of a man whose existence she had been beginning to doubt. That in itself brought on an elation that stood in stark contrast to the terror she had felt earlier. It was all so overwhelming that Clark was already slowing down and descending into the darkness, when Lois was starting to wonder where they were heading.

Only moments later, Clark landed and gently set Lois down to stand on her own feet. He took a few steps back, seeming more comfortable with the distance between them. The moon cast an eerie light on him, giving his complexion a ghostly pale tone.

"You okay?" Clark asked again, tentatively. He eyed her thoroughly, this time refraining from lowering his glasses.

"I... I think so," Lois muttered, confused.

She had spent days looking out of her window. More than once she had seen a shadow there, certain it was him until — eventually — reality would crush her hopes. But this felt real, though a lot like the first time he had shown her his powers. A warm wind played with her hair, carrying the scent of grass. A tree stuck its branches into the sky. The ground was soft and slightly wet under her naked feet.

"Where are we?" Lois asked, as her senses finally came back to her.

Clark harrumphed. "Smallville," he replied bashfully.

"Lois..." he started again, but soon broke off, the single word he had uttered almost lost to the wind.

"Smallville?" Lois echoed, uncomprehendingly.

"Yeah..." he breathed heavily, looking at his feet. "I... I couldn't leave you there, Lois. It was too dangerous. I'm sorry."

He lifted his head ever so slightly, his gaze meeting hers for the first time in what felt like forever. His dark brown eyes looked worried, darting up and down her body, as if he was again trying to make sure that she was indeed unharmed. That was the moment, when it all came back to her — the fist that certainly would have done more than give her a black eye, the shot ...

"Thank you for saving me," Lois whispered, once more completely overwhelmed. With a pang of guilt, she studied his form, realizing that she had not stopped for a moment to see if he was all right. But other than a deep sense of discomfort, she could not read anything on his face that would hint to injury.

"You're welcome," Clark replied gently, his voice trailing off, as if he had no idea how to go on from here.

He just stood there, on a field right in the middle of nowhere, trying to appear impassive. However, his eyes belied him, two dark windows to his soul that clearly showed his fear. His lips that were capable of the most amazing smile were drawn into a thin line, not completely able to hide that he was trembling ever so slightly.

"I was hoping that you would come back, Clark," Lois said as the silence between them became deafening.

"You were?" he raised his brows and let out a short, mirthless laugh. "Of course, you were. I would make for a great cover story. The reporter and the freak," he added bleakly.

"I don't think you're a freak, Clark. Flying with you was the most amazing thing I ever experienced," Lois disagreed, feeling her anger rise. "You saved me, twice now. I owe you not to write about you, if that is what you want. But would it really be so terrible if everyone knew about you?"

"Yes, it would," he said, not caring to elaborate. "Why are you dating Luthor?" he changed the topic, instead. "I thought you

had understood how dangerous he is.”

“I’m trying to investigate him. It’s not that easy. You of all people should know that.” Lois defended herself.

“Tonight’s attack was his doing, Lois,” Clark warned her. “You should be more careful around him. Don’t let him get too close to you.”

“Don’t tell me how to do my job, Clark,” Lois retorted, darting her index finger at him accusingly. She hated being patronized. “You ran away, expecting me to do all the work. And now you complain about my methods?”

“I ...” he started, but Lois was beyond the point of arguing.

Suddenly, it dawned on her, that he had interfered with her work on an even deeper level than she had realized earlier. “And what on earth possessed you to take me to Smallville? Investigating Luthor was your idea, if I remember correctly. How am I supposed to do that here? I was finally getting somewhere on that helicopter explosion!” she ranted on. “Besides, there’s not a flicker of evidence that Luthor is guilty of any of the things you accuse him of.” Out of spite, she added. “Personally, I think he is quite a nice guy.”

Clark opened his mouth, but no word would come out. His eyes narrowed. A muscle was working in his jawline, as he looked at her. In the pale moonlight, it was hard to determine, what was going on inside his head, not that it had ever been easy. Perhaps he was contemplating, whether to take her back to Metropolis or to fly off again, leaving her alone right in the middle of nowhere. Lois had no way of knowing. The wind brushed through her hair, tearing at her clothes, peeling off the layers of rage she had wrapped herself in. As Lois’ anger slowly subsided, the memories of her ransacked apartment and the attack returned with a vengeance.

“I’m sorry, Clark,” Lois choked out, almost against her will, as the memories became overwhelming. “I didn’t mean it like that. You really think that Luthor sent this guy after me?”

His stern expression softened into one of sympathy. Slowly, he nodded. “I heard him talk over the phone. He ordered someone to search your apartment, trying to find out how close you had gotten to him during your short trip to D.C. He wanted the burglar to leave a mess, hoping he could intimidate you into dropping your investigation altogether.” A saddened smile creased his lips. “I don’t think he was aware that the burglar would stick around to take the intimidation part into his own hands.”

“So, I might really be onto something with the helicopter explosion,” Lois concluded, not entirely sure yet that she was thrilled about that fact, given what had happened in her apartment.

“Yes, you might,” Clark conceded. “But it also means that he will strike again, if you come any closer to him. Next time, I may not be around to save you.” His expression darkened. “I should never have asked you to go after Luthor.”

“It was my decision to keep on investigating,” Lois stated, somehow managing to sound a lot more confident than she felt. “And I’m not looking into Lex Luthor in particular. I’m trying to find out what happened to Dr. Baines. That is my right as a reporter and I’m not going to let anyone keep me from doing my job. Not even you. I have to go back to Metropolis.”

She knew she sounded like a pouting child. Being patronized tended to bring that out in her, worse even when she felt that the other party was right. The thought of walking back into her apartment and facing the destruction there sent chills down her spine. Her five-lock-protected castle had been violated and it scared her.

“It’s too dangerous to go back there, Lois,” Clark hedged, clearly not comfortable with what he was going to say next. “You have no idea what you’re getting yourself into. You may or may not continue your investigation; you may or may not find any evidence on his involvement in the explosion of Dr. Baines helicopter. No matter what you do, he’ll come after you.”

Lois furrowed her brows in confusion and folded her hands in front of her chest. “Why?” she asked simply.

“Because, after what happened tonight, he knows for sure,” Clark said ominously.

“Knows what?”

“About me — what I really am,” Clark muttered unhappily.

If someone had asked Lois, how she had ended up in a cozy farm house with a cup of hot chocolate in her hands, she couldn’t have explained it. To her, it seemed like one moment she had been standing on a field, and the next moment she was sitting there on the sofa with an elderly couple. What had happened in between was a blur of bits and pieces. She remembered a dim light on the front porch of a house that had been surprisingly close to the field Clark had landed on. She had been shaking hands with two sleepy strangers wearing their bathrobes and finally, Clark’s smiling mother had insisted on a hot beverage.

By some tacit agreement, Clark’s last confession had forged a truce between the two of them. Now they were all in the living room, sharing hot chocolate. Jonathan Kent, Clark’s father, sat across from Lois in a wing chair, examining her with calm curiosity. His wife, Martha, shared the sofa with Lois. Martha’s eyes were darting back and forth between Lois and her son, Clark, who was pacing up and down in front of the fireplace. His cup, containing an extra helping of marshmallows, sat on the table, seemingly forgotten.

“So, is it true — you know about our son?” Jonathan Kent broke the silence.

Clark stopped pacing immediately, a look of surprise on his face as if he had not expected his father to start the conversation. “I had to show her, Dad. You know that. I couldn’t let her die,” he explained, before Lois had a chance to say anything.

Jonathan’s scrutiny remained trained on Lois. “Are you going to publish any of this in that paper of yours?” he asked, giving Lois the distinct impression that he knew a lot more about her than she did about him.

“I promised Clark that I wouldn’t, unless he said it was okay. I owe him that much after he saved my life,” Lois said defensively, feeling a little intimidated by the large man, who had the appearance of a teddy bear, but just as certainly would be fighting tooth and nail if necessary.

“After what happened tonight, the debt is not strictly on your side, Lois,” Martha chimed in and eyed her son warningly. “I think it’s time to tell her the complete truth, Clark.”

“Are you sure, Martha? We don’t know her all that well and she is a reporter, for Heaven’s sake.” Jonathan said.

“Hogwash! If she had wanted to print the story, she could have done so days ago!” Martha disagreed. “Besides, she already knows about Clark’s powers. How much worse could it get?” There was a smile on Martha’s lips, but the seriousness in her voice was unmistakable. It was obvious that she, too, was worried, even if she did her best to hide that fact.

Clark, who had kept standing in front of the fire place the entire time, raked his hand through his hair and heaved a sigh. His lips were drawn into a thin line, giving his face an even more ragged edge. His eyes were filled with dread, as his gaze met Lois’, ever so briefly, before he lowered his gaze again, staring at his feet. This brief moment however, brought on an epiphany. Ever since Clark had revealed his powers to her during those fateful seconds inside the shuttle and the short meetings afterwards, Lois had never once stopped to wonder what his revelation might mean for him. Now she realized with sudden clarity, how scared he was - and not only about the possibility of being exposed to the world. She had the feeling that he was hiding an even bigger secret.

“Everything you tell me is strictly off the record,” Lois vowed. “What makes you think that Luthor knows about you,

Clark?" she asked in as gentle a voice as she could.

Heaving another sigh, Clark closed the distance between them, picking up his cup of hot chocolate, and sat down on the second sofa. Rolling the cup between his hands, he did nothing but watch the marshmallows dancing around in the liquid. The silence lasted so long, that Lois was beginning to doubt he was ever going to break it.

Finally, Martha could not take it anymore. "We don't know for sure that Luthor knows."

"Now, he does, Mom," Clark said darkly. He looked up again, his focus solely on Lois. "You remember Luthor's ball, how I told you that I saved his life?" Clark waited for her to nod before he continued. "He was mugged on a street right in the middle of nowhere in Kansas. Whoever did it was careful to do it as far away from the next town as possible. The emergency services would never have reached him in time. It was a fluke that I was driving down that same road. When I found him, I sent the girl I was riding with back to the next emergency phone." Clark fell silent for a moment, taking a deep breath. "I managed to cauterize his wound with my heat vision, but Luthor was already pretty weak. I knew he probably wouldn't survive the wait for the emergency services to arrive. Lana had always had a pretty bad sense of distance. It was a safe bet that she wouldn't notice if I flew him closer to the next city. I thought Luthor was too out of it to care."

"But he noticed," Lois concluded.

Clark nodded. "I think he did. At first, there were only minor clues. He kept inviting us to have dinner with him. He exerted himself to establish a close friendship; he got me an internship at the New York Times and pulled strings to get me a job there after graduation. He also got Lana a job with his corporation. This whole thing made me uncomfortable, but I figured he was just grateful for being alive." Full of self-contempt, he added. "I was so naive, then."

"The New York Times," Lois whispered impressed, but managed to control herself in time. "Don't you think that he was really just grateful?"

This time, Clark shook his head. He swallowed hard as if what he was going to tell her next was a sensitive subject. "Luthor also got closer to Lana. Not in a romantic kind of way, but I think the friendship he forged with her was stronger than ours had ever been — on her side anyway. Lana had always dreamt of a life in the big city. He was offering it to her on a silver platter." Clark took off his glasses, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "I was in love with Lana and I wanted to marry her. But I knew that was impossible unless I was ready to let her know the truth about me. So, one night I told her ..."

As he broke off, the same impatience filled Lois that always rushed through her when an interviewee did not get to the point. But the look of sorrow in Clark's eyes told more than words ever could. By the time he did continue, she almost wished that he had remained silent.

"She was terrified of me," he whispered, jumping up from his place on the couch and walking over to the fire place again.

Any words of comfort stuck in Lois throat, threatening to choke her, as she watched Clark. His head was hanging low between his shoulders; his hands were balled into fists. Suddenly Lois felt like an intruder, a voyeur witnessing someone else strip bare to reveal his very soul.

"I returned to Smallville," Clark went on, seemingly ignorant of the turmoil he had caused in Lois. "A couple of days later, Luthor visited me as I was working on the neighbor's farm. We talked while chopping wood. He told me that he had seen Lana and that she was taking the break-up just as badly as I was." He turned to face Lois, something flickering in his eyes that she could not quite fathom. "When I had my back turned on him, Luthor attacked me with an axe."

Lois gasped, staring at Clark open mouthed. "But you weren't hurt, were you?" she ground out, figuring that was the logic conclusion.

Again, Clark shook his head. "There was something on that field that weakened me - a green glowing rock," he continued. "I didn't know then that such a substance even existed and I didn't find the rock until many months later. It robs me off my powers. That day, I was lucky I hadn't been too close to this rock or my injuries would have been a lot more serious. I had a large cut across my back and started to bleed profusely. The last thing I heard him say before I lost consciousness was 'This shouldn't have happened.'"

Lois still stared at Clark, not knowing what to say. But she didn't have to, he wasn't yet finished.

"Luthor brought me to my parents since he didn't know how to contact an ambulance out here. He claimed that it had been an accident," Clark finished his story. "With enough distance between me and that rock, I healed eventually. It took me days until I was completely back to my old self again." Once again, he swallowed hard, setting the glasses back in place. "The next thing I heard was that Lana had died in a car accident," he said with irritating calmness.

His expression turned matter-of-fact. "I believe Lana told him about me," Clark concluded. "She was confused after I had revealed myself to her and I cannot exactly blame her. She needed a friend. Maybe that was what Luthor had been hoping to become all along, drawing Lana as close to him as he had — that she would turn to him."

Clark's face was still a mask of poorly disguised anguish. He sat down again, downing his cup of hot chocolate in on large gulp. "That's what she must have done. Luthor finally had the last piece of the puzzle and he came right to me to get his evidence. He would have succeeded, if it hadn't been for the strange glowing rock that robbed me off my powers. When his attack on me did not supply him with leverage that he wanted against me, he must have decided to kill Lana. She could have reconsidered, could have proven what kind of a man Luthor really is."

The living room of the old farm house fell deadly silent. None of its four occupants seemed to know what to say, least of all Lois. She found it hard to merge the man she had gotten to know with the picture of Luthor Clark had just drawn. If any of what Clark had told her was true, it certainly explained the deep rift she had witnessed during the White Orchid Ball.

"Clark, you were unconscious when Luthor brought you here. You didn't see the despair in his eyes, when he thought you were going to die," Martha said quietly. "He was inconsolable, offering us all the help money could buy. It wasn't until we cleaned your wound, revealing that it was fairly superficial that he calmed down somewhat. It could have been as he said; it could have been just a terrible accident."

"Mom!!" Clark argued, his eyes narrowing in anger.

She held her hands up defensively. "I'm just playing the devil's advocate here, Clark. You know, I'm on your side, honey. But if you truly want Lois to help you, she needs to hear the full story, not just your version."

His shoulders sagged and he bent his head in acceptance. "I'm sorry, Mom."

"You better be," she added, her eyes twinkling with mischief, making Lois wonder what kind of a woman Martha Kent was, even more so, when Clark's mother finally turned to her. "This was a bit much for one evening, wasn't it, honey?" she asked, her voice full of sympathy. Barely stifling a yawn, she continued. "I believe it's time for all of us to get some sleep. Jonathan and I need to get up early." The couch rebounded slightly as she stood up. Jonathan, too, rose from his wing chair, straightening his bathrobe.

"Good night," the two older Kents wished in unison.

“Good night,” Lois replied automatically, eying Clark wearily, who was still sitting on the other sofa, brooding over what his mother had said.

“Clark will prepare a room for you, Lois,” Martha added and once more said “Good Night” before she followed her husband upstairs to their bedroom.

As if on cue, the old clock sitting on top of the fire place started ringing twice, announcing that another hour was over. Stirring from their silent musing, Lois and Clark looked at each other. Neither of them was sure what to say now that they were on their own again.

There was so much going on inside Lois’ head that she did not know where to start. The order in which her acquaintance with Clark was progressing seemed completely off. By some accident, she had been entrusted with his deepest secret and she had absolutely no idea how to handle that. And judging from the expression on his face neither did Clark. Now she had been invited to sleep in his home, which was another source for conflicting emotions. Should she be grateful for being safe, assuming that what Clark had told her about Luthor was true? Or should she be angry for being dragged from her home without her permission? After all, she hardly knew Clark, much less his parents, who could be harboring the same powers as he did. Perhaps, and her heart started to beat wildly at that thought, she was in more danger here than she had ever been in Metropolis.

“Are you tired?” Clark asked eventually

“I couldn’t sleep, anyway,” Lois admitted.

“Yeah, me neither,” he muttered softly, his honey brown eyes resting on her. He was still holding the empty cup of hot chocolate in his hands. “Can I get you anything, Lois?”

“No, I’m good,” she said, her voice quivering, because she really was not, far from it.

He had no trouble seeing through her flimsy veneer of bravery. “I’m sorry, Lois. Mom was right. This was a bit much for one evening.” He set his cup on the table. “Perhaps, I should have left you in Metropolis, it wasn’t exactly fair of me to bring you here. After all, we hardly know each other.” He gulped. “I can only hope that now that I told you everything I know about Luthor, you will forgive me for being so bold. After what happened to Lana, I was afraid that Luthor would use you to get to me.”

“Why would he use me?” Lois asked, curiously.

“The guy who attacked you shot me square in the chest before I knocked him out,” Clark confessed. “If Luthor learns that, he will know that my powers really exist. He will certainly assume that you know about them as well.”

Lois nodded her understanding, studying Clark’s face in silence. It was no question whether he was genuinely concerned. From years of experience as a reporter, Lois could usually tell if anyone was hiding anything. And she would dig her teeth into it, until she uncovered the truth. Thinking about it, she felt that Clark had nothing left to hide. He would tell her whatever she wanted to know about him. With Lex Luthor, it was different. He presented a shiny version of himself, always trying to impress the people around him. Getting to know the real man, Lex Luthor, would take long hours of peeling away all those layers of self-importance.

Heaving a sigh, Lois straightened her stance. “Where do we go on from here, Clark?”

“I don’t know. This is new to me as well,” Clark shrugged. “Perhaps we should start at the beginning,” he replied with a vague hint of a smile. Inching forward, he offered her his outstretched arm. “I’m Clark.”

“Lois,” she said, returning his smile.

“It’s nice to meet you, Lois.” His smile became broader, infectiously so.

“So, is this where you have been all this time?” Lois asked

defensively. Despite herself, Lois felt drawn to Clark. She desperately wanted to be mad at him for taking her to Smallville against her will, for leaving her at all, for so many things she was not able to name all of them. But his smile and the pain in his eyes, they made it so infinitely more difficult to keep the professional distance she had imposed on herself. “At your parent’s house?”

“Most of it, yes,” Clark admitted, his expression sobering. “It all happened so quickly, I didn’t think — I just... swallowed the detonator. When I flew us out of the Shuttle, you didn’t even seem to register what was happening. I stuck around to make sure you were all right — that was when it all came crashing down on me,” he said softly, swallowing visibly. “You knew my secret. I was certain that it was going to be Lana all over again, plus a series of articles to expose me to the whole world.”

Lois nodded thoughtfully. “That was my first impulse. I wanted to write the story of the century, tell the world how I had escaped certain death. I had the whole article finished in my head. But when I started typing, I realized that I had been the only witness and that I barely knew anything about you, besides that you could swallow bombs.” She smiled ruefully. “Later, I stopped to think what such an article might mean for you. And I felt that you didn’t deserve to be treated like that.”

“Yeah, you said that,” Clark replied and cracked a small smile. “All I could think about was that you knew my secret; that everyone was going to find out. I panicked and rushed back here, trying to convince my parents to leave the farm. They refused and managed to talk me down somewhat until I was ready to wait and see what was going to happen.” He swallowed again, hard. “I could barely believe that my face was not printed all across the evening edition.”

Clark studied his hands intently, as if trying to memorize every line. In truth, he was trying to avoid Lois. It did not take a genius to guess as much and Lois was pretty good when it came to reading people. Although he had taken her to his parent’s house, Clark was not comfortable with her being here. For him it was just a necessary evil, because he was even more afraid of the alternative - Lex Luthor finding out the truth about him. That only made it so much harder to stay angry at him for taking her to Smallville.

“The night you visited me — I told you I was not going to print the story. Why didn’t you come back to the Daily Planet?” Lois asked. “You could do so much more there than you can do here, hiding yourself.”

“I’m not exactly hiding myself,” Clark snapped back. “Luthor knows where my parents live, remember? I can’t leave them alone.” He looked at Lois angrily, but his gaze quickly faltered. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to yell at you, it’s not your fault,” he added apologetically.

Lois took his hand in hers, squeezing it gently. “It’s okay, Clark. It’s been a rough night for both of us.” Figuring, that maybe the best course of action was to give him time, Lois yawned in an exaggerated manner. A second yawn followed the first, taking her a bit by surprise. “I’m kind of tired, now,” she said, realizing that it was not just an excuse.

“Of course,” Clark replied quickly and got up from the sofa. Moments later, Clark was on his way to prepare his bed for her, insisting that he sleep on the couch.

Clark was already up and about doing the dishes, when Lois came downstairs into the Kent’s kitchen after a short fitful night, filled with nightmares. Helpless against the yawn that cracked her jaw, she barely managed to hide it behind her hand. Clark obviously heard her and turned around, a cautious smile playing around his lips.

“Good morning, sleepyhead,” he said, letting the plate he was just cleaning slide back into the foam. Grabbing a towel, he dried

off his hands. “What can I get you? Coffee? Some toast, eggs?” he offered, obviously eager to turn over a new leaf in their relationship.

“Coffee is fine,” Lois replied, a bit ruffled by the normalcy of the situation. After everything she had learned about Clark, seeing him wash the dishes seemed just slightly off.

“Make yourself comfortable,” Clark invited her, gesturing towards the table, while he got a mug out of the shelf and poured coffee from the pot sitting on the coffee maker. Without even asking, he added low fat cream and just the right amount of sweetener, stirring the beverage before he handed it to her.

“Thank you.” Lois took a sip, finding that it was exactly to her liking. “You know how I like my coffee?” she asked, surprised.

“I guess, I do,” Clark replied with a shrug and pulled out the chair opposite to hers. He eased down, giving her time to take another sip of her coffee, before he continued. “Lois, I think we should talk,” he said with an expression on his face that reminded Lois of someone who was about to rip a band-aid off. Whatever he was about to say, he wanted to get it off his chest as soon as possible, before he even had a chance to reconsider.

“We already talked yesterday,” Lois pointed out, mischievously, deriving some perverse pleasure from teasing him for reasons she could not even name.

“Yes, we did,” Clark squirmed and raked his hand through his hair, a gesture, Lois had learned, that meant he was nervous.

“Well, actually, this morning Mom made me realize something,” he stalled, looking at her with puppy dog eyes, as if he wanted her to guess what he was about to say. Clark was such a pitiful sight, that Lois instantly forgot about teasing him some more. Instead, she looked at him expectantly. “Taking you here yesterday was a spur of the moment decision. And though you’re welcome to stay here as long as you want to, I kind of forgot that you won’t be staying here forever. I mean, I guess you wouldn’t want to, plus it wouldn’t solve the problem with Luthor.”

“You still think he’s going to come after me?” Lois asked.

Clark nodded. “It’s only logical. He must know by now that he was onto something all along — with the bomb in the Space Shuttle failing to go off and the tale his goon is going to tell him.”

“Assuming that he planted the bomb and sent the goon...” Lois took another sip of coffee, looking straight at her former partner.

A frown creased his forehead. “You still don’t believe me,” he concluded. “I told you, I heard him order the break-in. How else could I have been there in time?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps you were watching over me, like you did for the past couple of days,” Lois said, reading on his face that her notion was spot-on. “Don’t you dare deny it - I saw you in front of the bar in Washington.” His silence, complete with the blushing of his cheeks was answer enough. “Relax, Clark. I do believe you. But we’re a long way from being able to prove anything.”

“That we are,” he agreed with a sigh. “Did you get anywhere following up on the helicopter explosion?”

Lois lowered her gaze, giving him a short shake of her head. “I’m still waiting to hear from Paul, a guy I know at the NTSB. It looks like the final report was faked and he wanted to see if he could get the author to talk to me,” she explained. “But I don’t think that he will.” Lois told Clark what she had learned in Washington and what Jimmy had found out later.

“I see,” Clark said, as she was finished. “So unless either Jimmy or your source come up with anything, you’ve hit a dead end.”

“It certainly looks that way,” Lois conceded quietly. “I could ask Bobby if he knows anything about the thug who broke into my apartment, but beyond that I’m running out of ideas.”

Clark merely nodded, resigned. It was obvious he was not

particularly surprised at her lack of success. After all, he had spent years on this futile hunt and had not expected quick results. Still, it stung. Lois had never been good at admitting defeat — a trait that had contributed a lot to making her the reporter she was. She refused to take no for an answer, and she certainly was not going to accept it this time.

“I just wish I had not dragged you into this,” Clark muttered unhappily.

“Rubbish,” Lois disagreed. “You dragged me into nothing. I have run into it myself. Do you really think I wouldn’t have tried to get onto that Shuttle to interview the Colonists, despite Perry saying I couldn’t? I would have died there, if it hadn’t been for you, Clark.” She looked straight at him, ensuring that he heard every word that she said. “I’m not going to go into hiding now, Clark, and neither should you. If Luthor really poses a threat, he needs to be brought down. I’m not going to sit by idly and watch him commit crimes. You should be helping me instead of sticking your head in the sand.”

“This is not what I’m doing!” Clark protested heatedly. “Can you imagine what will happen when Luthor has his suspicions about me confirmed? He will stop at nothing to get me. You still have no idea what kind of a man he is. He will threaten the people around me to use my powers for his own benefit.”

“Then it’s all the more important that we put a stop to this!”

Lois insisted. “You have the bomb he planted, that’s a start. Maybe we could prove that the bomb in the helicopter and the one in the shuttle were built by the same person.”

“One of those bombs went off, Lois. I doubt there is much left that would help us to prove anything at all,” Clark argued. “And I couldn’t risk leaving any evidence of my powers for Luthor to find. I threw the remains of the bomb into the sun.”

“You did what?” Lois asked, incredulously. She was not sure whether she was more shocked by the fact that Clark had destroyed their one piece of evidence or by the way he had disposed of it. A flying man who could throw things into the sun — that simply was too much to wrap her mind around.

“You experienced first-hand what happens when Luthor feels threatened,” Clark reminded her softly. “It’s too dangerous to try and get any closer to him, Lois,” he said, conflicted.

“Why don’t you let me be the judge of that, Clark?” Lois replied warningly. “Don’t you dare patronize me! I can take care of myself.” Memories of the previous night returned involuntarily, making Lois feel a lot less self-confident than she wanted to let on. But she was not going to give Clark the satisfaction of winning this argument.

He chose to let the matter drop and pushed his chair back, before he got up. “I’m going to see if I can find out what Luthor is up to — how much he already knows,” he said instead.

“You can’t just run off and leave me here,” Lois protested. “I’m very well capable of going back by plane.”

“I’m sure that you are,” Clark replied, already half on his way out of the farmhouse. “I won’t be long.”

Seemingly ignorant of, or maybe in his case, invulnerable to the look she threw him, he left the house. Lois remained alone in the kitchen, fuming, her only company a half-emptied mug of coffee.

“Clark!” she yelled angrily. “Get back here now! I’m warning you!”

Lois grabbed her cup more firmly, ready to throw it against the door that had been bold enough to let him pass through. However, she managed to catch herself in time, remembering that she was not at home. So she allowed herself no more than a frustrated growl, vowing that she would be gone before he could return, no matter how quick he was. Lois was almost half out of the door, when she realized that she was not even wearing shoes, much less did she have any idea where on earth she was exactly. It could take her months to get to the nearest airport, for all she

knew. Almost at the verge of tears, though she was never going to admit to that, she dragged herself back to the chair, drained of all energy.

It was right at that moment that the door of the old farm house was opened once again and a smiling Martha Kent entered the kitchen, carrying a bunch of vegetables in a wooden basket.

Flashback

For the hundredth time since the morning had started with the devastating news of the Messenger explosion, Lois wondered if she could have done things differently. Probably, she should have — believed in Platt's claim— instead of dismissing him as the nutcase he appeared to be. Granted, it had not been the first time he had stormed into the newsroom, telling some outrageous story that later turned out to be nothing but hot air. Still, there had to have been a difference, some sign that this time, he had been telling the truth and Lois had missed it.

She had failed and that never sat well with her. Lois was not one to sit idly and right now she felt the burning need to do Samuel Platt justice. Channeling her nervous energy into pacing, Lois paced up and down in front of Perry's desk, whose owner seemed annoyingly unfazed by what had happened. He just settled into his chair more comfortably, resting his hands on the surface of his desk. All the while he kept watching her with that mixture of fatherly understanding and slight impatience that always drove Lois up the wall.

"I'll need a task force. I can't cover this story alone," Lois explained, throwing her hands in the air.

"You can have Jimmy," Perry offered generously.

Lois could not believe her ears. "Chief, we're talking about the space program..." she clarified.

Perry raised his brows. "All right. Take Kent," he said, taking a folder from the pile on his desk, indicating that he was not going to argue.

Lois started. "Kent?!" she repeated incredulously, blinking several times, just to make sure she was not dreaming. Had Perry listened to one word she had said? Had he any idea at all how big this was?

"Kent," Perry confirmed adamantly, before Lois had a chance to ask him any of those questions.

She was not ready to give in, yet. She had failed Platt once, she was not going to do so again. "What about Myerson?"

"Busy," he replied, annoyance gradually creeping into his voice. He opened the folder and started to read.

"Burns?" Lois offered, already sensing that it was going to be futile.

"Budapest," Perry said without even looking up.

It was his way of telling her that he did not want to argue about his decisions. Lois knew he was not going to change his mind; she had tried that more often than she cared to admit. Her boss could be as stubborn as a mule, though for the life of her, Lois could not understand why he was acting like this now when it really mattered. Maybe it was her own fault, maybe she had gone too far in the past. She had to admit that she had never worked well with partners, had driven away most of them and none too kindly. But she was not going to risk her story over that.

"Forget Kent," Lois told him, folding her arms in front of her chest, showing him that she, too, could be stubborn.

"He's a good man," Perry insisted, finally looking at her again. Surprisingly, there was a hint of a smile on his lips. Was she hallucinating, or was Perry enjoying this?

"He's a hick. From 'Smallville.'" she rolled her eyes. "I couldn't make that name up."

Perry did not waver. "Kent or nobody."

Nobody," Lois replied firmly, but at the same time felt her determination crumble. "Why don't you just hang an albatross around my neck?"

It was no use trying to deny that she needed help with the investigation. This story was just too big to ruin it over her ego. Grumbling, she added. "Fine, but don't tell me I'm not a team-player."

Perry leaned back in his chair, a contented smile on his lips. "Did you know that Bruce Springsteen once tried to sneak on the Graceland Farm, wanting to see the King?" Lois shook her head in an automatic response to Perry's eclectic knowledge of Elvis trivia. She hardly ever got his point. "Well, he didn't get to see him. They threw him off the property."

End Flashback

"Good morning, Lois," Martha Kent said affectionately and sat her basket onto the counter. "Did you sleep well?"

Lois felt herself shrink a little. "As well as could be expected," she muttered into her cup, not really knowing what else to say. Anger and frustration were still raging inside her, but she was unable to direct her fury at the gentle woman in front of her, who had welcomed a total stranger into her home. That was odd, really, because usually, Lois did not care who she lashed out at. Clark's mother, however, had that kind of aura around her that just would not allow such behavior, regardless of what Lois wanted to do.

As Martha watched her, her smile turned into one of sympathy. For the briefest of moments she turned around and took the coffee pot that sat on the coffee maker, then opened a cupboard and withdrew a mug. Both things in her hands, she walked over to Lois and sat down at the table next to her. Martha poured herself a cup and then offered Lois to refill hers.

"It's a lot to take in, isn't it?" she said. It was a statement rather than a question. "This is a big secret to drop onto someone. We've had all Clark's life to get used to his powers. You on the other hand never asked to learn any of this."

"You're not like him, are you?" Lois asked, carefully studying the petite woman beside her, who raised her cup to her lips and took a cautious sip of her coffee.

Martha shook her head. "We found Clark, when he was still a baby," she explained with a tender smile on her lips that lit up her face. "He was so small, almost lost in the tiny capsule that held him..." her voice trailed off and she straightened on her chair. "Jonathan and I had been married for years, then. After years of trying, the doctor had told us that we would never be parents. We had started to look into adoption, but had been denied. Those were desperate times. We both were trying to come to terms with the fact, that we would never be the kind of family we had hoped to be." Martha's smile faltered with the memory.

It was evident, which were the lines those times had edged into her face. Lois' heart went out to her. Though she had never really felt the need to have a family of her own, thanks to the strained relationship between her parents, Lois understood that it had been Martha's dream. If anyone had told Lois years ago that she was never going to make her way as a reporter, she would have been totally devastated.

"One night, we drove by 'Shuster's field' and saw a bright light in the sky, like a falling star, but much closer," Martha continued. "I don't know what compelled me to check it out. Thinking about it now, it seems rather pointless. It was as if something was calling to me. So I asked Jonathan to stop, which he had already done all by himself." She chuckled softly and took another sip from her cup. "He was just as excited as I was; as if he knew our life was going to change forever. We opened the gate to Shuster's property and after a few minutes, we saw it — a tiny capsule, silver with a faint blue glow. As I opened it, I looked into the two brown eyes of a baby boy and I fell in love for the second time in my life." She ended with a small sigh and put her mug back on the table.

"Have you ever found out, where he had come from?" Lois

wanted to know. “Who his birth parents were?”

Again, Martha shook her head. “Several weeks later, people from the government appeared in Smallville. Jonathan and I argued a lot about this, but upon seeing these people, I couldn’t bring myself to handing Clark over to them. It was the time of the Cold War. We figured that Clark had been some kind of space travel experiment, either by the Russians or NASA. I was afraid for him, so we remained silent.”

Lois slowly nodded. The idea of someone sending a baby into space sent a cold shiver down her spine. But she also wondered what it must be like for Clark, not knowing where he was from. Though, generally, she thought that family was overrated, she could not imagine what her life would be like without Lucy in it — or even her parents.

“When he was older, Clark started to develop his powers. At first, he was just stronger and faster than average, but it soon became apparent that there was more.” Martha added. “It was difficult for Clark. Often, he was terrified of himself, terrified that he would unintentionally hurt someone. For weeks on end, he refused to go to school. Instead, he barricaded himself in his tree house that he had named his ‘Fortress of Solitude.’”

“Aww...,” Lois muttered involuntarily as her heart ached for this much younger Clark Martha was telling her about.

“All he ever wanted was to fit in, to have a normal life. When he fell in love with Lana Lang, he thought that he had finally found that special someone he wanted to have a family with,” Martha continued. “I believe the night before he told her his secret was the last time I truly saw him happy.”

The last pieces of the puzzle fell into place. Lois remembered what Clark had told her about Lana the other night. All his youth, he must have carried this fear of being rejected for who he was inside him. Perhaps he had been wondering the same thing about his birth parents, if they had abandoned him, because they had been afraid of him. More than once, Lois had heard Clark call himself a freak with self-disgust. But now, she finally understood. No wonder, Clark had been devastated by Lana’s reaction upon learning about his powers. No wonder, he had been keeping his distance from Lois, ever since he had been forced to reveal himself in front of her.

Lois felt the last remainders of anger seeping out. The one question that remained was if Clark could overcome those scars.

If only people knew what good he had already done. The space program would have been cancelled without him; the worker who had been caught down inside the manhole would be dead, not to mention Lois herself. Those were only the incidents Lois knew of. For a while the two women kept sitting across the table, looking at each other occasionally and drinking coffee.

“You’ve been keeping his secret the entire time,” Lois observed eventually.

“It was Clark’s decision to keep his powers hidden. I must admit that we weren’t exactly making a strong case against it,” a weak smile played around Martha’s lips. “Jonathan and I were always afraid that those government agents would return some day and take Clark away from us.” She paused and reached out to cover Lois’ hand with hers, squeezing it gently. “It’s good to have someone to talk to about my son, besides Jonathan. He’s a good man, don’t get me wrong. But talking to another woman is just ... different.”

Lois slowly nodded. She too, had enjoyed this conversation immensely. It was not just because she had finally learned more about Clark than he had so far allowed her to see. Martha’s presence was comforting in a way that Lois no longer cared whether the information she got would ever be turned into black ink on a white page of a newspaper.

“Thanks for entrusting me with this,” Lois said simply, returning Martha’s gesture with her other hand. “I promise you, I won’t print any of this unless I get Clark’s permission.”

“I know,” Martha replied softly, a mischievous glint appearing in her eyes. “It’s not like people are going to believe you, anyway, unless Clark chooses to reveal himself publicly.” She winked at Lois, indicating that she believed Lois’ intentions were honorable.

A thud outside on the porch interrupted their conversation. Only moments later, the door was pushed open as Clark entered the kitchen. His hair and shirt both looked a bit ruffled from the flight. He ran a hand through the stray locks that had fallen into his face and straightened them. As he spotted Lois sitting at the table with his mother, he stopped dead in his tracks. His gaze was darting back and forth nervously as he looked at the two women. It was as if he did not know what to say.

Martha obviously had no intention of waiting. “Where have you been, Clark? I certainly didn’t raise you to leave a poor woman alone in the kitchen of two perfect strangers.”

Clark’s expression turned sheepish. “Sorry, Mom, Lois. I was in Metropolis,” he explained, before Lois had a chance to object and tell Martha that she was not a ‘poor woman’. “I wanted to see if Luthor was already onto Lois in order to get to me. It seems that the guy who attacked her has not yet had the guts to admit that he has failed Luthor.”

“According to what you said, he shouldn’t have attacked me in the first place,” Lois added, which Clark confirmed with a nod. “If Luthor is as evil as you make him out to be, the guy who broke into my apartment is not going to advertise that he threatened to shoot me,” she concluded simply. “So stop worrying so much, take me back to Metropolis and help me expose Luthor.” To emphasize her words, Lois stood up and crossed her arms in front of her chest.

Clark stared at her with wide-eyes. “I...I can’t,” he stuttered quietly.

“What you really can’t do is hide yourself forever,” Lois pointed out. “Running off is not going to accomplish anything. If you want to get Luthor, you’ve got to start attacking. You’ve got all the trump cards on your side. You should start playing them.”

Clark shook his head, biting his lips. “You don’t know anything about me, Lois.” His gaze drifted over to his mother, silently begging her for help. Martha pretended to miss his plea, got up, went over to the counter and started to occupy herself with the vegetables she had fetched from her garden. She did not strike Lois as the type of woman who could actually be ignorant to her son’s wishes, unlike her own mother. Ellen Lane had never noticed much besides a bottle of vodka and the shortcomings of her husband and two daughters.

Shaking off the unpleasant thoughts, Lois turned her attention back to Clark. “I for one know that you’re a hero,” she insisted. “You’ve saved me three times now; you saved Jimmy, the guy in the man-hole and at least two dozen colonists, not to mention all the staff that was still on board the Shuttle. I’d bet a month’s salary that I would find more if I really started looking into it,” Lois went on, not really sure what she was trying to get at. Clark’s reluctance to go the whole way irritated her beyond belief. Why did he have to make his own life so difficult?

“I like to help people whenever I can, but that doesn’t make me a hero. There are countless others that suffer every day and I don’t do a thing about it,” Clark replied sadly, his hands stuffed deeply into his pockets. “You did not see the fear in Lana’s eyes when she learned about my powers, Lois. Many people would consider me a threat, if they knew about me. I don’t want to be responsible for a stampede.”

“You could help Metropolis without having to expose yourself, if you don’t want to,” Lois objected and got up from her chair to approach Clark. “People suffer under Luthor without even being aware of it. All I’m asking is that you help me. I’m not sure I can do this alone. He has hidden his tracks well. As long as he doesn’t know for sure your powers really exist, we could go places no one else can.” Gently, Lois laid a hand on his shoulder.

Relaxing slightly, Clark withdrew his hands from his pockets, but still shook his head. "I've been using my powers for years and it hasn't helped me in the least," he muttered with a growl of frustration.

"Now, you've got someone to help you. I know Metropolis and I might know just the right people to get to Luthor," Lois said quietly. "Let's find this guy who broke into my apartment. I must have been close to Luthor for him to resort to such measures. Sooner or later, he will start making mistakes. We should not let this opportunity slip by."

"She's right, Clark," Martha chimed in softly and put down the potato she had just been peeling. Drying her hands off on her apron, she approached her son. "You knew you wouldn't be able to hide yourself forever, you've tried that already." A sad smile played around her lips. "Perhaps, it's time to take the bull by the horns."

It was already dark when Lois and Clark returned to Metropolis. The flight had been uneventful and mostly spent in silence. On Lois' part, that had been due to her utter amazement. Though it was the second time she had seen the world from above, cradled in the arms of this strong and yet gentle man, it was the first time she could actively enjoy it without the stress of just having been mugged. Clark on the other hand, remained a mystery to her. As soon as his feet touched the ground in a dark alley not far from Lois' apartment, he hastily set her down just taking enough time not to inadvertently hurt her. Lois still was not sure whether he had agreed to come with her simply to keep her safe from Luthor's thugs while she met Bobby in one of the worst parts of town or whether he had actually come to stay.

Deciding, that it was no use musing about his intentions, Lois had a look at her watch. "We still have time before we meet Bobby," she said, briefly looking at Clark, who was straightening his clothes. "I need to get changed and then we should collect the food we ordered."

"I still don't get why you had to call three different take-out places," Clark spoke for what had to be the first time since they had left Smallville.

"You'll understand it, once you get to know Bobby," Lois replied with a grin. "He's insatiable. Besides, we're going to ask a lot of him. He's going to demand a decent payment."

She started for her place, hoping that Lucy had already begun to clean up. Lois had called her sister at her friend's, for once glad that Lucy usually did not attend any lectures before afternoon. Lucy had been shocked to hear about the break-in and had promised to change the locks even without Lois needing to ask her to do it. Then, Lois had called the police, demanding to be put through to Inspector Henderson. Though housebreaking was not his usual department, he was one of the few cops in town that Lois inherently trusted.

During her years on the beat, their paths had crossed more than once. Over time, they had forged a fruitful albeit reluctant truce. Lois occasionally let Henderson in on the results of her investigations; in return he sometimes gave her an exclusive. The gruff cop would never admit to it, but Lois felt that she was more to him than just another reporter who made his life difficult. So, when Lois had called, Henderson might have been grumbling, but he still had been willing to listen. As she told him about the intruder and that she might have stepped on the wrong set of influential toes, he had promised to send someone who would handle the investigation with care. Plain-talking, that meant someone would look into the break-in who was not on the take.

A few minutes later, Lois and Clark stood in front of her apartment building. Lois felt her heart beating nervously. The dark brown door looked so very innocent, just as it had the other night. Even though Lois knew that the locks had been replaced — Lucy had called her back to let her know that she would leave the

keys with the Sitkowitz' who lived a floor above them — she was wary of going back into the house.

Clark must have felt her hesitation. "There is no one there," he said gently and placed his hand on the small of her back in a reassuring gesture. As Lois turned towards him, he immediately withdrew the hand, looking somewhat embarrassed.

Stifling a groan, Lois just nodded and took her key out of her handbag to open the front door. Together, they climbed up the two flights of stairs to get up to the second floor. Lois knocked at her neighbor's door. All too quickly, Arnold opened it, muttered a greeting and handed her the keys without further ado. The noise in the background indicated that he was just watching a basketball game, which explained why he was so short-spoken. While Lois was grateful that she did not have to deal with the endless babble of a well-meaning Michelle, she was not sure whether she liked the idea of having no further excuse to stay away from her apartment. Despite Clark's assurance that there was not going to be an intruder this time, she still felt uneasy.

"We'll be quick. I'm just going to change into some fresh clothes," she said to Clark, wondering if she was informing him or trying to give herself a pep talk.

The trip down to her apartment was over in no time and Lois found herself fumbling with a new set of five locks, trying to find the right key for each of them. She managed eventually and stepped back to let Clark in ahead of her. He hesitated briefly, probably trying to figure out whether the circumstances made it appropriate for him to walk ahead of a woman. Sometimes, Clark was so irritatingly polite that it simply drove Lois up the wall. At other times, he was just plain annoying and most of the time Lois was not even sure which was which. In another life, she certainly would have given him a hard time about his Boy Scout behavior.

Realizing that she was again trying to stall the inevitable, Lois finally set foot into her apartment and winced. It looked almost worse than the evening before. The police had once more turned everything upside down to secure the evidence. Only the two love seats in the middle of the living room were upright again and a little space on the table had been cleared, where Lucy had left the remains of the take-out she had ordered before leaving for work.

This time, she did not manage to stifle the groan that escaped her lips. "It's going to take forever to clean up all this mess," she grumbled unhappily and went over to the table, picking up Lucy's mess as a meagre way of getting started. She took the garbage to the kitchen and then headed for her bedroom, hoping that there was something left to change into. "I won't be long," she promised with a quick look over her shoulder.

Clark just nodded, standing in the middle of her living room, hands stuffed deeply into his pockets. Of all the things that were amiss in her apartment, her life really, Clark probably stuck out the most. He looked a little lost, his hair slightly mussed and his clothes seemed too large for him. All in all, he was a pitiful sight, one that Lois did not want to indulge in. Forcing her attention back on the things at hand, she rushed into her bedroom and pulled open the drawers. She threw a longing glance towards the bathroom, but ultimately decided against having a shower. Bobby Bigmouth was not a patient man.

With regards to the dark streets which Bobby usually roamed, Lois chose a pair of jeans and a grey sweater and left the fancy clothes she had worn for her date on her bed. Given all the mess in her apartment, one more item lying around did not really matter. Within minutes, Lois left her bedroom and went back into the living room.

As she entered the room, she froze with a gasp. Not only was Clark gone, but the place no longer looked a mess. The furniture was where it belonged with all the drawers put back in place. What had been lying on the floor was arranged in neat piles. The pictures were hanging straight again with the exception of those which had been broken. There was not a single piece of glass

lying around and if Lois was not mistaken, everything was dusted off — the single part of the previous mess that had been Lois' own fault. Amazed, Lois went towards the kitchen, finding it equally neat. A dark blur whirled in front of the sink, adding clean dishes onto a pile that grew with breathtaking speed.

"Clark?" she asked quietly, one part of her afraid to startle him, the other too stunned to speak any louder.

The blur took shape as he slowed down, gradually turning into Clark, who had rolled up the sleeves of his dark shirt. His hands dripping with white foam, Clark quickly dried them off on a towel, before turned around to face Lois. His expression looked a little sheepish, much like a child who had been caught with his hands in the cookie jar.

"I'm sorry... I hope you don't mind my rummaging through your stuff..." he stuttered and ran his hand through his hair. "You sounded so unhappy when you saw all this mess, so I thought I could help."

"I don't know what to say," Lois muttered, still slightly dazzled and giving her sparkling kitchen a once over. "Thank you, I guess."

Clark hung his head. "I really should have asked you first," he said apologetically.

"Are you kidding me? You don't happen to be looking for a room in a shared apartment, do you?" she joked, winking at him. "Because your powers would sure come in handy."

"So, you're not mad?" Clark asked tentatively, as if he was not quite able to believe she had left him off the hook that easily.

"Over hours of housework I don't have to do? I wouldn't dream of being mad!" Lois replied firmly. "And now come on, we've got a source to meet." She laid a hand on his back, urging him away from the sink. On her way through the living room, Lois grabbed the car keys and threw one last glance at her neat apartment.

Indeed, she felt like a huge weight had been lifted off her shoulders. With all her possessions arranged in piles, it was not going to take long to put them all back where they belonged. Strangely, she did not mind at all that Clark had gone through her stuff. Perhaps, it was because someone else had already invaded her privacy in a way that had been much worse. Given that Clark had only touched the stuff already lying on the floor, he had not really done anything she could resent. But maybe, and that thought worried her a bit, it was because Clark had won her trust and inexplicably was becoming a friend — something that had never come easily to Lois.

"We've got to get going," Lois said more to herself, as Clark was standing right behind her.

She shook off the uncomfortable musings with a shrug of her shoulders as she opened the door with the same determination that had earned her the title of Mad Dog Lane. Clark followed her quickly and quietly watched her as she deftly ran through the procedure of locking the door with five sets of keys. Lois did her best to ignore his gaze on her and stormed off as soon as she was done.

She almost ran down the flight of stairs, drawing in a deep breath as the cool night air welcomed her outside. It seemed to be the first one in a while and felt so good as if Lois had just narrowly escaped suffocation. As Clark joined her on the street, she instantly felt his quiet presence. It was equally as comforting as it was disconcerting, a constant source of confusion that only got worse over time. Lois risked a glance at her former and present, though reluctant, partner, trying to merge his mild mannered appearance with the powers he hid underneath his black shirt. It was impossible.

"Ready?" he asked as he caught her glance and raised a brow.

"Sure," Lois replied, giving herself a mental slap. She grabbed her car keys more firmly and purposefully strode over to the parking lot.

Less than half an hour later, Lois had her car parked on the outskirts of Suicide Slum. Metropolis' very own version of London's Soho. The quarter called "Riverview" housed the less fancy part of Metropolis' night life, which consisted of all kinds of restaurants, run down theaters and shady bars. It was a world of its own where the people seemingly spoke anything but English, a multicultural melting-pot that was just the perfect place for a snitch like Bobby Bigmouth.

A delicious smell filled the car, emanating from the various bags and boxes Lois had stashed on the back-seat. They contained an assortment of all the things Bobby loved and unfortunately, he was not the only one. Lois's mouth watered as she thought about the spring rolls, which sat on top of one of the bags. She bit her lips. There was not a doubt in her mind, Bobby would notice if she took one. He always did.

"So, all this food is just for one person?" Clark asked and turned around to have yet another look at the impressive pile.

"You're going to be surprised how quickly that will be gone," Lois replied, following Clark's gaze with a longing glance of her own. "That's Bobby's version of payment. He's one of the best informants I have ever had. If anyone knows what's happening on the street, it's him."

"And you think that he knows who broke into your apartment?" Clark went on.

"If he doesn't, I'm sure if anyone can find out, he can," Lois said confidently.

"We'll see," said a third voice from the back-seat of the car.

Lois and Clark both turned around, startled. Somehow, Bobby Bigmouth had managed to sneak inside and was already rummaging through the various bags. His ability to get inside her car without Lois even noticing it had always baffled and also worried her. That he could pull that trick with Clark was an even bigger testament to his excellent qualities as a snitch. Bobby wore a white shirt as he usually did. It was covered in remnants of brown and red gravy, not to mention all the fatty stains. He pulled out one of the boxes, opened it and only moments later was chewing on the spring rolls.

"Working with a partner now, Lois?" Bobby asked between bites.

"I'm sorry, Bobby," Lois apologized. "This is Clark Kent. He's helping me with the Messenger story."

Bobby nodded, taking yet another bite, while beside Lois, Clark watched him with a mixture of fascination and disgust. Lois knew exactly how he felt; she had been down the same road several years ago. But now was not the time to become sentimental. She needed to discover what Bobby had found out, before he had eaten up his payment.

Lois jumped right in. "What can you tell me about Sidney Burke?"

Bobby swallowed down a mouth full of food, a concession to Clark, obviously. "You were right about the gambling part," he told them. "As far as I heard, he usually gambles in a club belonging to the Metros. Very discreet. It's going to be tough finding him there. They don't let anyone in without an invitation, which you only get if you know one of the gamblers." He shrugged, indicating that this was something he still needed to find out. "Plus, they never play at the same spot, but meet in different back rooms of bars."

Lois groaned in frustration. "Please don't tell me, we've hit yet another dead end," she pleaded.

Bobby gave her a lopsided half-smile and dug his teeth into a slice of pizza. "I'm afraid so," he replied, but promised, "I'll see what else I can find out, though." He started to gather all the bags that sat on the back-seat.

"Wait," Lois said. "There's something else. Someone broke into my apartment the other night and I'm sure it was to make me

drop this investigation. Any chance you can find out who did that and, more importantly, who hired him?"

Bobby shrugged his shoulders. "I'll ask around," he replied. "Anything else? You gonna have to bring something more tasty than this." He gestured at the boxes with a slight look of disgust. It was a complaint Lois did not take too seriously. Bobby loved playing games with her and he would never admit to being satisfied, a trait he had in common with her.

"One last question. I promise you the best Chinese take-out, you've ever had," Lois vowed with a look at Clark, remembering the fabulous food he had brought one night in the Daily Planet. As he caught her glance, he seemed slightly alarmed, but Lois chose to ignore that. "Have you ever heard of someone who controls every illegal activity here in Metropolis?"

"You mean someone like the 'Boss'?" Bobby smirked, searching his food boxes for something else. He paused a moment, obviously enjoying the reaction he evoked in both Lois and Clark. They were sitting at the edges of their seats, almost breaking their backs as they stared at Bobby. With pleasure, he dug his teeth into a piece of cake.

"Come on, Bobby, tell us what you know," Lois practically begged. "You mean there really is some criminal mastermind?"

Bobby took his time chewing on the cake, but eventually he said. "I wouldn't exactly call him a criminal mastermind. The 'Boss' is not the only one controlling the underworld. As far as I heard, there are also the Metros and Intergang trying to get their piece of the action." Taking another bite, Bobby continued, his voice slightly muffled. "But I wouldn't be surprised, if the 'Boss' would try to destroy the Metros and take over their part. I heard their business was pretty much run down."

"Do you know who this 'Boss' is?" Clark asked, causing both Lois and Bobby to flinch in surprise. He had been quiet for so long, there had been starting to forget that he was sitting beside her.

But her focus quickly returned to Bobby, who shrugged his shoulders. "No one does," the snitch said. "He's more of a rumor than a real person. Could be a woman, for all I know. But somehow, I doubt that." Once again grabbing the remaining delicacies, Bobby opened the back door and slipped out. "See you." With that he was gone.

Lois and Clark looked at each other, baffled. For a moment, neither of them said anything. Both were still trying to process the information Bobby had just given them. Lois felt caught in a strange mix of enthusiasm and disappointment. It was as if someone was offering her a bone, leaving it dangling in mid-air, just out of her reach. No matter how hard she tried, any information she got just led to more questions, which ultimately led her to a dead end. Though Bobby had provided them with another clue that Clark's theory about Lex Luthor was actually right, they still had nothing more substantial than an alias for a person that might or might not exist.

Clark heaved a sigh, putting all of Lois thoughts into one sound. "We're not getting anywhere," he said, frustrated.

"If Luthor really is the head of Metropolis' leading criminal organization, there must be some sort of proof," Lois insisted. "Maybe it's time that we break into his apartment."

Clark shook his head quietly. "It's too dangerous, Lois. Besides, I already tried that - to no avail."

"You broke into his lair?" Lois asked, raising her brows in surprise.

"Not literally, no. But I searched it from the outside," Clark corrected, pointing at his eyes. "X-ray-vision," he explained. "Lois, as much as I appreciate the idea, I'm pretty sure he has cameras everywhere. He will know it was us."

Lois mulled over that for a while. "We could always cut the power," she proposed, realizing just as she said that, how many holes that plan had. "There's got to be some way," she insisted,

though for the life of her she could not have said which way that was supposed to be. Impossible was not a word that sat well with her.

She looked at Clark, who hung his head. He had probably gone through all the possibilities countless times before. If proving Lex's illegal affiliations was as easy as breaking into his apartment, he would certainly have done it already. Lois let out a frustrated breath.

"Sooner or later he will start making mistakes," she said without much conviction.

"Yeah, maybe he will," Clark replied lamely and lifted his head to lean it against the backrest. "I don't think we will accomplish anything tonight. You should go home and get some sleep, Lois. I'll stick around and keep watch in case Luthor tries to send anyone else after you."

Immediately, Lois opened her lips to protest, but reconsidered as she remembered the uneasiness she had felt upon entering her apartment. Though she hated to admit to any weakness, she would indeed sleep a lot better knowing that Clark had an eye on her place.

"Don't you need some sleep as well?" she asked instead and turned the ignition key, her eyes still trained on Clark as the motor softly roared to life. He answered her question with a shake of his head, his eyes flickering in silent defiance. Clark did not need words to tell her that he would not budge, no matter what she thought about his protectiveness. But there was also something else, something far less obvious in his eyes that irritated Lois. "You really don't need to sleep, do you?" she whispered, taken aback. At Clark's side, it was so easy to forget that he was so much more than the ordinary man he pretended to be.

Again, he shook his head. "I do need sleep," he said defensively and his face hardened into the impenetrable mask she had seen so many times before. "Just not as much as you do. Go home, Lois." He reached for the handle to open the door and left her alone.

"Clark," Lois protested and reached out to try and hold him back. Her hands grabbed only thin air.

"Clark!" she repeated, but the door closed behind him with a heavy thud that ended their conversation quite effectively.

A sudden burst of anger surged through Lois. She could not believe that Clark was doing it again — leaving her alone with more questions than answers like he had done on the field after the launch of the Colonist Transport. How dare he ignore her? Lois wanted to smack his head against the car frame in order to knock some sense into him. Hurriedly, she turned the car off and opened the driver's door, ready to tell him her mind and at the same time knowing full well that he was almost certainly already gone. That only fueled her anger.

"**Clark Kent**," she yelled furiously, but made it no more than a few steps into the night, before she literally ran into Clark.

He stood like a column in the night, barely visible in the darkness of the alley. His posture was tense; he had lifted his head ever so slightly. Lois rubbed her arm that felt as if she had run into a wall, her anger at Clark momentarily forgotten. He was engrossed in whatever he was doing and completely ignorant of her presence. Lois was about to say his name once again, when she heard it.

"Help," someone screamed in the distance. "Oh god, help me, please. No!" The caller was female and there was a tone of despair in her voice that tore at Lois' heart. "No! No!" The voice died down to a muffled cry.

Clark started running and with a gust of wind he was gone. Lois could only guess in which direction he was going, but her feet were moving before she had consciously decided what she was going to do. She hurried back to the car and jumped behind the wheel. The car roared to life as she turned the ignition and moments later, she followed the route she assumed Clark had

taken, driving towards the screaming woman.

The streets became darker, if that was even possible, as she drove further into Suicide Slum. Usually, Lois avoided this part of the city when it was dark. Instinctively, a shiver ran down her spine, causing her to shrink a little behind the wheel. She grabbed it more firmly until her knuckles turned white. Lois had read way too many reports about muggings in Suicide Slum, which did not only happen to people who were careless enough to take a walk in the dark. But her curiosity won the silent battle with her fear and she drove on.

A dark figure crossed the street in the distance. Lois blinked, trying to determine if this could be Clark. It was impossible to tell. The headlights caught another figure, no two of them, Lois corrected herself silently and could not stifle a gasp of surprise as she indeed recognized Clark in the company of a small woman. She clutched at her clothes, trying to hold them together in front of her chest, shaking like a leaf. As she slowed the car down, Lois could see that Clark was talking to the woman. The trembling became a little less pronounced and she nodded.

Clark lifted a hand and signaled for Lois to stop. With another glance at the distressed woman, he approached the driver's side of the car and patiently waited for Lois to lower the window.

"This woman was almost raped," he said quietly. "I just came here in time," he added and for what seemed like the first time ever, Lois saw something on Clark's face that resembled contentment. "I talked to her and she wants to go to the police."

Flashback

Still grumbling, Lois left Perry's office. She had asked for a task force and had ended up as a babysitter. Two Kerth Awards in her showcase should be proof enough that she was a great reporter: Perry should know he could trust her instincts. Woodward and Bernstein surely hadn't been forced to teach some hick the ropes while they had investigated the Watergate Scandal. Lois rolled her eyes, bracing herself for what was to come. She didn't have the time to look after someone who couldn't keep up. But if she wanted to break the story, she would have to. Tough luck.

Clark Kent was sitting at his desk, deeply immersed in some work as she approached him. Curiously, he looked up from his computer and flashed her a polite smile.

"Let's hit it," she said curtly, turned on her heels and went off.

"Mind if I ask where we're going?" he asked, unimpressed and slowly rose from his chair.

"To interview Samuel Platt," Lois replied, unable to hide her impatience. This Clark Kent was unbelievable. Pointedly, as if she was talking to a very dense person, she added. "He's convinced that the Messenger was sabotaged. I'll brief you on the way. Now, come on!"

Again, she walked off, this time determined not to wait for him to follow her. She had offered him his chance; he could take it or leave it. She didn't care, either way.

He joined her on her way out, shrugging into his coat. An empty elevator arrived and they stepped inside. Lois pressed the button for street level and once more turned to Clark. "Let's get something straight. I didn't work my buns off to become an investigative reporter for the Daily Planet just to baby-sit some hack from Nowheresville." The doors closed and the car began to move. "And another thing. You're not working with me, you're working for me. I call the shots. I ask the questions. You're low man. I'm top banana. That's the way I like it. Comprehend?"

Clark just raised his brows. "You like to be on top. Got it," he said wryly as the elevator stopped. Not waiting for her reply he stepped out. "Are you done, or is there something else you need to tell me?"

"Don't push me, Kent," she warned and followed him.

"You're way out of your league".

"If you say so, Lois," Clark said good-naturedly.

Lois wanted to add some more, but nothing came to mind. That was a rare occurrence and it irked her. Somehow, Clark didn't fit the mental image she had of him. She had not expected him to act so completely unimpressed. He was neither intimidated nor did he tell her to get lost like any other male might have. It was confusing to say the least.

Moreover, he kept ignoring her little speech during the interview with Doctors Platt and Baines. While Clark let her ask most of the questions, he chimed in whenever he deemed necessary. Much as Lois wanted to interrupt and put Clark in his place, she had to admit to herself that his contribution was important. Since she could not complain about his work, she was as annoying as she possibly could be. It was no conscious effort on her part and inwardly she cringed at her own attitude, but she was not able to stop herself. It had always been difficult for her to admit that she was wrong about someone or something, even more so when her behavior called for her to make an apology.

So, Lois was miserable when she and Clark returned from their interviews. Particularly since Clark had flirted with Dr. Baines to get information. Inexplicably, Lois had felt a twinge of jealousy as she had seen Clark smile at Baines. He had the most amazing smile, making her weak in her knees just watching him. And this smile had not even been directed at her, quite the opposite in fact. Clark had remained utterly professional around her. She tried to convince herself that she wanted just that, after all it was one of her three rules to never get involved with a coworker. Still, she felt that lump in her throat, heard that tiny voice in her head that sounded a lot like her sister Lucy. It was her own fault that Clark would never smile at her like that - she was just too off-putting. She was angry at herself and as a result she had tried her best to make Clark's day even more miserable.

As soon as the elevator opened its doors to the news room, Clark stepped out and then walked over to his desk. A huge weight seemed to fall from his shoulders and Lois could not exactly blame him. She was not proud of herself and would try to forget about the day over an episode of 'Ivory Tower' and a carton of chocolate, chocolate chip ice cream. Trying her best to maintain her tough facade, she went to fetch some coffee, which for now had to do. With her cup in hand she sat down at her desk.

Meanwhile, Clark had returned to his own computer and was just about to sit down when Cat approached in her usual manner. She sat down on the edge of Clark's desk, crossing her legs so that her skirt inched a little higher, revealing more of her shapely legs. She leaned in on him, giving him a view of her ample cleavage.

"Any plans for tonight, Clark?" Cat purred.

"Not yet," Clark said with a shrug, seemingly ignorant of her intentions.

Cat ran a hand along his arm. "Well, we could drink champagne, you could show me your Kerth Award and then..."

Lois heard no more, she almost choked on her coffee. Her surprise was not lost on Cat. She turned around, a huge grin on her face.

"Wait, don't tell me you didn't know that," she said, her chuckle soon turning into laughter as she realized that her notion was spot on. "You should see your face! I don't believe it. Lois Lane, world famous investigative reporter didn't know that her partner is a Kerth Winner." Cat obviously took great pleasure in rubbing it in. "Uh, oh... knowing you, Lois, I guess some apologies are in order: I better leave you to it." Still laughing, she went off. "See you later, Clark."

Lois looked at Clark, still shell-shocked, wishing that the earth would swallow her up.

End Flashback

Lois barely managed to stifle a yawn as they were on their way back to her apartment. Their visit with the police had taken slightly longer than she had anticipated, keeping them busy until the small hours of the morning. It was one of the reasons Lois was grateful that Clark had offered to drive. The other reason was that she needed some time to think about the enigma that was Clark Kent.

She watched him while he kept his eyes trained on the street before them, not once wavering in his attention. Sure, he had never been quite the talkative guy, but she was getting the impression that he was actively avoiding her. That was strange, because he had been more relaxed, almost happy even after saving the woman. Now that they were alone, he was once again retreating into his shell. Why was he doing this to himself, Lois wondered, keeping his distance from everyone else? His mother, Martha, had told her that hiding his powers had been Clark's decision, one he had made even before Lana had hurt him so badly. Was it because of Lana and Luthor that he lived this half-life, always on the run? Why was he doing this to himself, when helping others was the one thing that seemed to make him happy?

"I'm glad that you could help that woman," Lois said softly.

"Yeah, me too," Clark murmured mono-syllabically.

"You're a hero, you know that?" Lois went on.

That got his attention. He briefly turned to look at her, raising his brows. Then, he shook his head.

"No, I'm not," Clark disagreed.

"Yes, you are. You've saved my life, at least twice now. You saved that woman from a terrible fate. Thanks to you, the Colonist Transport did not explode and poor Amy Platt now has a chance to get healthy," Lois enumerated.

"That's nothing special," he shrugged her off. "I could do so much more, and yet I don't — for fear of discovery. For every person I saved, there are countless others I didn't help," he said unhappily. "I'm not a hero, Lois. Do you know how many times I've moved, because I was afraid someone was onto me? I've lost count."

"But anything you can do helps to make this world a better place," Lois insisted, feeling the urge to comfort him. "When you rescued that woman — it was one of the few times I truly saw you smile."

"It feels good to help people," Clark admitted softly. "When I'm rescuing someone, all those weird powers suddenly make sense. My whole life, I never felt like I belonged anywhere. Those few moments I can put my powers to good use — I know why I'm here." He heaved a sigh, a dark shadow crossing his face. "But Lana made me understand that I will never be anyone but a stranger on this world. She was terrified of me, of what I could do and I cannot exactly blame her. If the world ever found out that a single person with such powers existed..." His voice trailed off and he fell silent again.

Lois wanted to disagree, but words failed her. In a way, Clark was right. The idea of a being as powerful as him was terrifying in itself. If anyone had told her of his abilities, she probably would have been scared, too. But she knew without a shadow of a doubt that Clark would never hurt anyone. He was a good man, who rather spent years trying to prove Luthor's guilt instead of using the short cut.

"I think you could convince them that you are one of the good people," Lois said after a while. "Not everyone is like Lana."

Clark glanced at her briefly. "You're an exception, Lois, not the rule," he replied sadly. "Besides, Luthor would certainly try to exploit my special talents. He knows where my parents live, remember?"

"So this really is about Luthor?" Lois asked. "Does that mean you would stop hiding yourself if he was out of the picture?"

"Can we please drop the topic?" Clark begged and clenched his jaw.

"No, we can't," Lois said heatedly. "The truth is that we will never bring Luthor down if you keep ducking away all the time. And even if we did succeed, what would your life be like? You'd still be hiding. Is that what you want? I can't believe that and it kills me to see you this unhappy."

Clark slowed the car down, pulling in at the side of the street. "It's not like I have a choice about it," he shot her an angry glance, daring her to say another word. "All I ever wanted was to be like all the other people — have a normal life, marry someone and have kids. I was a fool to believe that I could ever fit in." There was so much pain in his voice that it tore at Lois' heart. But she felt that giving in and letting it go was the wrong thing to do.

Lois returned his gaze, unfazed. "Why?"

"You know that," Clark said stubbornly, his knuckles turning white as he gripped the steering wheel more firmly. "Luthor would instantly know it was me. Everyone would know what I am. People would either try to use me or be scared. I'd never have a life."

Lois shook her head, slightly. "You keep saying that - but what about now? Do you really have a life now?" she asked softly, running a hand over his, loosening his tight grip with that small gesture. His eyes followed her slow movements and his tension visibly dissipated. For a moment neither of them said anything. Clark just watched Lois, his eyes wandering across her face. "What did you do when you left the Planet?" Lois eventually went on. "Stay with your parents?" Clark's lips opened, but no words came out. He swallowed. "Keep watch over me?"

"You..." he ran his tongue across his lips to moisture them as if his mouth had suddenly run dry. "You noticed that?" He asked hoarsely.

Lois merely nodded, she had figured as much. Clark had known about her trip to Washington, he had been there right at the moment she had needed him most. Last but not least, there were the dark shadows she had seen in the dark streets of Washington or in front of her window. Clark was her guardian angel, but he was also a person who deserved a life.

"Clark — trying to hide your powers is what sets you apart. If you were less of a human and could stand by and watch people suffer, it might just work, but that is not who you are." Lois finally said. "I believe people would be a lot more accepting of your powers than you think they would. The tabloid papers are already speculating about a mysterious savior."

"What?" Clark asked, alarmed.

"Don't worry, they've got nothing tangible." Lois tried to calm him. "What I'm trying to say is: none of the articles I read while I was trying to find you were negative. If you would help publicly, then people would see all the good you can do. The guy you saved in the manhole was thankful, not scared."

Clark shook his head. "How would that help me to have a life? All I ever wanted to be was Clark Kent. If I went public and would show everyone how powerful I am, how could I still be a reporter? People would only ever see the freak," he said bitterly.

"Not if you become someone else," Lois suggested, not sure if that had been her plan all along. But all of a sudden, she saw the answer to Clark's problems with such clarity that she was wondering why she had not thought about it before. "Get yourself a flashy costume. Separate the hero from the person you really are. People will be too amazed by the things you can do to really look at the man underneath the outfit."

Clark shot her a disbelieving glance, his forehead creasing in a frown. "You really think that?" He did not sound convinced.

Lois, on the other hand, more and more felt herself warm up to the idea. "Look at yourself in the mirror, Clark. You're a bespectacled boy-scout. Believe me: no one will suspect a thing," she replied, positively giddy.

"Luthor will know it is me," Clark objected. "This is a bad idea."

Strangely, the more Clark protested, the surer Lois became that it was going to work. Just like Clark had no proof that Luthor was really a bad guy, Luthor could not be sure that Clark actually had powers. All he knew was what Lana Lang had told him, which had been almost instantly disproven by a fragment of the rock Clark had told her about.

"I don't think he will be sure of his suspicions," Lois said slowly. "Perhaps he will start to wonder if the guy with the powers had been someone else all along. You said he was pretty out of it, when you flew the car closer to the next city." She waited for him to confirm the fact with a nod before she continued. "He hurt you, badly. That's the one thing he knows for sure. Everything else could be conjecture of the troubled mind of a girl who had just broken up with her boyfriend." Lois concluded smugly.

Clark immediately opened his lips to disagree with her, but he soon closed them again, thoughtfully. He was still shaking his head, but with much less conviction. Obviously, Lois had at least gotten him to consider her plan.

"Do you really think he wouldn't recognize me?" Clark finally asked.

"At least, he's going to have his doubts," Lois insisted. "And maybe, we could stage something similar to the events in Smallville to dissuade him. Besides, even if he did recognize you, I don't think he would expose you publicly. If everyone knew you were Clark Kent, he'd have no leverage."

The next morning, Clark's desk was not empty, when Lois entered the newsroom. Clark sat there, deeply immersed in reading through a pile of folders. Not quite sure if she dared to believe her eyes, Lois stopped dead in her tracks instead of walking down the ramp to the bullpen. As she watched, Jimmy walked over to Clark's desk and dropped another set of folders on it. Clark in turn lifted his head and mumbled something. It was almost as if he had never been gone.

As if he was suddenly aware of Lois' presence, Clark turned his head to look at her. A small smile spread across his lips, barely visible if one did not know what to look for. Somehow, that minute reaction broke the spell and Lois felt herself able to move again. She walked down the ramp in swift strides to make up for the time she had lost staring at her colleague. On her way, she shrugged out of her coat and draped it over the back of her chair. Figuring that coffee was the best way to put herself back in the game, Lois quickly made her way towards the coffee machine.

She was not the only one. Clark joined her only moments later. "Good morning, Lois," he said softly.

"So, you decided to come back after all," Lois stated somewhat pertly and crossed her arms in front of her chest. "Didn't you say it was too dangerous?"

He took a cup from the stand and filled it with coffee, then added low fat-cream and just the right amount of artificial sweetener. Handing Lois the steaming mug, he replied. "Last night, I spent a long time thinking about what you said."

"About everything I said?" Lois asked, raising her brows and took the cup he offered, albeit reluctantly.

She could not completely squash the feeling that she was making it too easy for him. It was stupid, of course. After everything she had learned about him in the past one and a half days, nothing about being Clark was easy. But still, he was a guy and had acted quite stupidly. Lois had never been very forgiving when it came to such behavior, particularly after her father had left their family. It irritated her that, with Clark, it was something else entirely.

"Yeah, about everything," he confirmed and heaved a sigh. "I'm still not sure this is a good idea."

"Well, it's a risk, I give you that," Lois admitted. "But it is also the best chance we have. I still haven't gotten anything from

Paul. Bobby Bigmouth could not tell us much about Sidney Burke, either. If some..." she paused briefly, mouthing the next part "... larger than life hero would appear in a flashy outfit..." she raised her voice slightly. "... Luthor would certainly feel the need to act and start making mistakes."

Clark did not reply, but instead began to fix himself a cup of coffee. A slight ticking in his jaw told Lois that he was mulling over that piece of information. His cup ready, filled to the hilt with full fat cream and four spoons of sugar, he went back to his desk, still not saying a word. Figuring that he would probably remain silent for a while, Lois followed him.

She went around his desk and set her cup down on one of the few remaining spots that was not covered in folders. Curious, she picked one of them up and began flipping through it. Skimming the pages, she found that she was reading notes of a former, now retired colleague on a story that had been printed years ago, before she had even started working for the Daily Planet.

She dropped the folder and took another one. The date was a bit more recent, but not by much. "What are you trying to find here?" she wanted to know.

Clark looked up, returning from whatever place he had been. "I asked Jimmy to get me old stories from the archive. Bobby told us that there are different criminal organizations trying to control the city. I want to see if I can gather any names from those old stories, maybe find a hint if Luthor could be responsible for the demise of any of these organizations." By the look on his face, Lois could tell that so far his efforts had been futile.

She reached for a third folder. "And what are we going to do, if we find anything?" she asked.

"I know it's a long shot," Clark muttered unhappily.

Lois shrugged her shoulders. "Since we don't have much of anything, yet, I believe it could be worth the effort," she said thoughtfully. "But we should look at all this stuff after work. Perry is going to kill us if he catches us on a wild goose chase. He told me that he's willing to turn a blind eye to what we're doing as long as we get some stories, which is not going to happen this way."

Clark instantly closed the folder he had been working on. "What do you suggest?"

"I'd say we attend the staff meeting that starts in a few minutes and work on the stories Perry assigns us," Lois said firmly. "Later, we could check with the police and see if the woman you saved last night is willing to talk to us. After all, publishing a description of the culprit could help them identify the man. Besides, I want to see if there is any news on the guy who broke into my apartment."

"Sounds like a plan," Clark agreed, not completely able to stifle a small sigh of disappointment.

"Did you talk to Perry, already?" Lois changed the topic rather abruptly.

Clark nodded. "He didn't say much though, just that he was glad I changed my mind. He did not even ask me why I wanted to quit."

The rest of the day mostly consisted of boring legwork — another slow newsday. Perry had not been able to offer them much besides a minor press conference. The mayor had mostly been talking about city finances and how it was not possible for the city to continue to fund several shelters for homeless people. This could have made for a decent human interest piece. The problem was that Lex Luthor had stepped in and made a generous donation. He had not appeared in person, but had sent one of his assistants to make the offer. Obviously, the press conference had not been the right stage for him to pose, or so Clark had said.

Behind Clark's remark, Lois had sensed he was grateful that he had not encountered the billionaire. Truth be told, Lois herself had not been so keen on meeting him either. It had been two days since their last date and while that had gone rather well, there was

still the break-in into her apartment. The idea that Lex Luthor had ordered it and had only taken her to dinner to keep her occupied did not sit particularly well with her. Lois was not sure how she was going to react if she met him again. Speaking of whom — Lex had not called her ever since. Perhaps she should not consider this odd, after all the man was busy. But his recent advances had been so frequent that Lois could not help but wonder.

With so many things on her mind, Lois barely registered events as the day went by. They checked with the police and ended up with a detailed description of the almost rapist. Unfortunately, the examination of Lois' apartment had not turned up much besides a set of fingerprints that was not registered in the data base — which meant they were pretty much useless. The woman Clark had saved had been so grateful that she was willing to add a small interview to their article. So after their visit with her, they went back to the newsroom to write their articles. It was already afternoon when they returned. But still, neither Paul nor Bobby had called with any news.

Almost an hour later, Lois was editing Clark's article on the press conference while he worked on hers on the near-rape. She could not help but admire his writing style for he was able to turn even something as boring as that conference into an interesting read, complete with background information on the city's current financial situation. It was obvious that he had spent some effort researching the topic.

Now and again, Lois stole a glance at Clark. He sat in his chair with his shoulders slumped, his attention not entirely on her article. He would look up every so often, staring into thin air for a while, a frown on his forehead that became more pronounced with every time he did so. Sometimes he flinched, though he did his best not to. Lois could see the tension in his every muscle even through his shirt. One time he even broke a pencil into several pieces as he closed his hand into a tight fist.

When Lois was finished with Clark's article and had sent it over to Perry, she could not bear to watch Clark anymore. She got up from her chair and walked over to his desk. He looked up from his work and flashed her a weak smile that soon faltered into an expression of sheer misery.

"What's the matter, Clark?" Lois asked, walking around his desk and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Are you okay?" He merely nodded, but Lois saw a muscle working in his jaw. "Because you don't look like it."

"Coming back to Metropolis was a mistake," he replied sadly, put down his pencil and leaned back in his chair. Lowering his voice to a whisper, he continued. "Ever since I entered the newsroom I've had to listen to two muggings, a car accident, a fire on the other end of town ..." He fell silent and Lois felt that he had done so for her sake as much as his own.

As a reporter she knew how excruciating it was to watch or hear other people suffer without being able to do a thing about it. Lois experienced it every time she wrote an article about sick children or homeless people. Every time she was hoping against hope that she would somehow be able to make a difference in their lives; that she could push the politicians or companies who could help in the right direction. Too often her efforts were futile.

Lois gave Clark's shoulder a squeeze to comfort him. At the same time she wondered if now would be a good moment to mention the hero again, the one who she was sure could solve so many problems not only for Clark but for Metropolis. Any other day, Lois would probably have jumped right into the conversation, but Clark had barely returned to her and the Daily Planet. His composure seemed still too fragile to risk it confronting him with his biggest fear. Lois had seen the look in his eyes when Luthor had been mentioned, that brief moment of panic before not Luthor himself but his assistant had entered the room where the press conference was being held.

"I'm beginning to wonder if maybe you are right," Clark

eventually said, much to Lois' surprise. He sounded so weary that it cut right through Lois. Taking off his glasses, he rubbed the bridge of his nose and suddenly looked old far beyond his years. "This city is slowly killing me. Every time I listen to someone in need and do nothing about it, I die a little inside." He leaned back in his chair and put his glasses back on. Yet, this was one of the few moments he did not hide behind them. "I cannot take this any longer, Lois," he added quietly. "I barely sleep anymore, I'm running on empty and those few days I spent with my parents did not help in the least. If anything, it only made things worse."

That evening, Lois and Clark once again sat with the older Kents, this time around the dining room table. A steaming mug of tea had replaced the hot cocoa, as if somehow the beverage had to fit the conversation. Cocoa equaled revelation, tea equaled heated discussion — or so it seemed. After Clark had kind of made a decision concerning Lois' suggestion of becoming a superhero, he had taken her to Smallville to introduce the idea to his parents. They had been addressing the pros and cons for a while now and Lois still had no idea what the result of this discussion was going to be. While the Kents liked the general idea that Clark wanted to stop running, they also feared for his safety.

"I don't know about this costume thing, Clark," Jonathan Kent said for the umpteenth time, rolling the mug of tea between his hands.

"It'll work. It has to," Clark replied, each time sounding a little less convinced and a bit more defensive. "If I have an effective disguise, I won't have to worry about people finding out about me. Maybe I'll even be able to fool Luthor," he added and it was clearly visible that he did not believe his own argument.

"It does not matter, whether Luthor recognizes him or not," Lois joined the conversation. "Just like I said, even if he suspects the truth about Clark, he would not benefit from exposing him. What Clark might risk is confirming Luthor's suspicions. Personally, I think Luthor will be a lot more careful this time to check the facts before he acts."

"We'll throw him a bone and hope that he's going to take the bait," Clark added with sudden eagerness, determination written all over his face.

"Throw him a bone?" Lois raised her brows in confusion.

"Yes, of course," Clark insisted. "Luthor is nothing if not meticulous. He will want to know what he is up against. All he could possibly know is what Lana told him, which was not much to begin with. When he injured me, he learned that Lana had been wrong about at least one thing she told him," he concluded almost triumphantly, obviously warming up to his topic. "I bet he's going to test me — and start making mistakes."

Leaning back in his chair, Clark looked at the three people around him. Not all of them seemed convinced, least of all Jonathan Kent, who visibly mulled over what Clark had just said. Lois felt an uncomfortable twitch in the pit of her stomach, suddenly not quite sure if proposing a costume for a superhero had been the right thing to do. Strangely, the more Clark liked the idea, the less optimistic Lois felt about it. She feared that he was getting his hopes too high. There still lay a rocky road ahead of them.

Martha Kent was the only one who did not look back at Clark, dazed. She stood, almost the same look of determination on her face that had been on Clark's. In that moment they were so much alike that it was hard to believe she was not his biological mother. She was the living proof that parental care was much more important than genetics.

"Come on. Let's get started," Martha said, effectively ending any further argument.

"But Martha ..." Jonathan tried one last time.

"The way I see it, we either watch our son run for the rest of his life, or we help him fight his demons," Martha declared. "We

did not raise him to sit by idly while other people suffer. So we shouldn't expect him to do just that." That said, Martha turned on her heels and left the kitchen, quickly making her way upstairs, Clark following in her wake.

Lois watched them leave, feeling slightly dazed. Truth be told, she had not expected to win her argument so effortlessly. Sure, they had talked about it, but in the end it had been almost too easy. So instead of enjoying her victory, she was beginning to wonder if all this was not some huge mistake that was going to cost them. Perhaps, she felt like that because she suddenly found herself alone in the kitchen with Jonathan Kent, the single person who still had reservations.

They shared a look and for long moments Lois feared that he was going to give her a piece of his mind. And he would be right to do so, after all Lois did not know the first thing about this family. She had done what she did best — dive right in without checking the water-level. Now that she had succeeded in convincing Clark, a million reasons came to mind why the whole thing was a bad idea.

Jonathan Kent still held her gaze and took a large sip of his tea.

"I guess, she's right," Jonathan finally said with a sigh. "You know, it's my fault that Clark has always been this lonely. I was afraid for him when we learned about his powers. Martha told you how we found him. Federal agents snooped around a few days after his ship crash-landed on Shuster's field. To investigate the meteorite that went down over Smallville, they said." A deep, rumbling laugh shook his large frame, so short and mirthless that he did not need to elaborate on what he thought about that. "There were too many agents and too few scientists on the scene, if you ask me," he continued and took another large sip of his tea.

For long moments, he fell silent, staring into space. It was one of the few times that Lois did not know what to say. In the eerie silence of the kitchen, other sounds became incredibly loud — the ticking of the clock on the wall, the soft whir of a sewing machine that Martha Kent used upstairs, her own heart-beat that was pumping her blood with ever increasing speed.

"Weeks went by but nobody came for Clark," Jonathan eventually continued and Lois flinched as she suddenly heard his voice again. "We relaxed a bit, but there was always this fear that somebody knew that it had been a little boy instead of a meteor who had dropped from the sky. While Martha had her hands full caring for this small life, I spent long hours on the field thinking about the future. I was afraid that someone would make the connection and take Clark away from us."

Jonathan took a deep breath. "When Clark was older, I kept warning him not to show any of his special talents, else someone was going to take him away from us and dissect him like a frog." His gaze once more rested on Lois. "It was not exactly fair of us to install certain ethics in him and at the same time expect that he watches other people suffer when he would be able to make a difference," Jonathan concluded thoughtfully.

He fell silent again, leaving Lois the time to mull that over. She certainly understood Jonathan Kent's motivation to warn his son. Knowing that the first person Clark had entrusted his secret to had reacted like she had, explained a lot about Clark's reservations in letting other people know about him. It was a dangerous secret to reveal. People were afraid of others because of less — like having a different skin color or believing in another deity. Given what Clark was capable of — might be capable of if it was not for his kind heart — people had every reason to fear him.

Her conscience screamed at Lois that she was making the worst mistake of her life. What made her believe that a simple costume, no matter how sophisticated, was enough to keep people from recognizing Clark? How could she expose the man who had saved her life and was quickly becoming a friend? What did she

think endangering his parents like this — because, just like Clark had said, Luthor knew where they were living.

Lois suddenly felt like the enormity of the possible consequences for Clark was going to suffocate her. Mumbling something that could be taken for an excuse, she got up from her chair and stumbled upstairs, following Clark and Martha and the constant whir of the sewing machine. The upper floor was dark but for a thin light that shone from underneath the door to the master bedroom. Lois slowed down and let her hand sink that was already touching the handle.

Facing this renewed conversation, she suddenly did not feel so sure anymore. What would Clark and Martha say? Would they listen to her after she had practically done everything in her power to convince them this was a good idea? Lois took a few deep breaths, trying to fight down her nervousness. The sewing machine went silent and Lois heard her own breathing like strikes of thunder.

"What about that one?" Martha's voice was muffled by the door. She sounded tired and drained. Looking at her watch, Lois found that more time had passed than she had thought.

"I don't know," Clark replied hesitantly. "It's certainly colorful."

Unable to wait any longer, Lois knocked at the door.

"Come on in," Martha invited her.

As Lois stepped into the room, she saw a pile of different fabrics lying around on the bed. There were also some outfits sprawled out. Martha was half lying, half sitting on the bed, a measuring tape draped around her neck. She looked rather spent and gave Lois a weak smile, before her attention turned towards the bathroom door just a moment before Clark stepped out. Her eyes widened immediately and she sat up straight.

Lois' own breath caught as she saw him clad in blue spandex with a long red cape, red boots and bright red briefs with a yellow belt. The fabric was so tight that it enhanced every inch of his amazing physique. Lois' eyes barely made it up to his face.

"What do you think?" Clark asked. A frown creased his forehead as he looked at himself in the mirror. He took off his glasses to study the effect.

"One thing's for sure," Martha muttered, her eyes resting in the same region that Lois could not help but focus on. "Nobody's going to be looking at your face."

"Mom!" Clark exclaimed, his expression turning stern. He crossed his arms in front of his chest.

The effect was amazing. His whole stance slowly turned into that of a stranger. Lois felt like she was looking at him for the first time. Only the slightly wavy hair and that stubborn look that always fell into his face reminded her of the old Clark.

"Well, they don't call them tights for nothing," Martha replied with a chuckle and got up to have a closer look at her son. "I don't know..." she muttered to herself. "...something's missing. Something..."

Suddenly Martha's eyes lit up and she turned around to kneel before the bed. She bent forward to look underneath, a smile playing around her lips. Moments later, she pulled a large trunk out from under the bed and opened it. It was stuffed to the hilt with old photos and other mementos, one of them a neatly wrapped dark blue baby blanket. Martha unfolded it, revealing a diamond shaped sign with a red rim and a red "S" on a yellow background.

"I'd forgotten about that," Clark muttered reverently as he looked at the blanket, the same sparkle in his eyes that was in his mother's.

"The blanket we found you in... so long ago," Martha replied and held the sigil on the baby blanket in front of Clark's chest.

It was as if the last part of the puzzle suddenly just fell into place. Lois knew without a shadow of a doubt that this was right. No, it was not just right, it was perfect. Clark was no longer just

clad in a costume; he had become a symbol of hope, someone everybody was going to look up to.

"You look amazing," Lois breathed, still mesmerized by the diamond shaped symbol that was going to be so much more than a patch on a blanket.

"Your parents would have been proud of you," Martha added, her cheeks glowing. "We are."

"Thanks, Mom," Clark said, seeming a little insecure. He turned and looked at himself in the mirror. "I'm not sure about the cape."

"Really?" Martha sounded surprised. "I love it."

"It'll look great when you're flying," Lois confirmed eagerly.

"The only thing we need to decide now is what kind of mask you're going to wear," Martha mused aloud, still working on the blanket. She walked over to her sewing machine, eyeing the remaining fabric.

"I don't think he should wear a mask," Lois chimed in.

"People are going to believe he's got something to hide. They're going to wonder what he looks like without one. No, I think it's better if he hides in plain sight."

Martha and Clark both raised their brows in disbelief. "What if someone recognizes Clark?" Martha asked.

Lois just shook her head. "I don't think they will..." she insisted, remembering her own insecurities about this and how quickly they had been brushed away when she had first seen Clark in his guise. "...because it won't be Clark."

"I won't let anything happen to you guys," Clark said solemnly.

Martha gave her son a warm smile and ran her hand through his hair. "Oh, honey, it's not us I'm worried about. I'm afraid what will become of your life if the world finds out."

"It doesn't really matter anymore, Mom," Clark replied seriously. "Lois is right — the way things are now I don't have a life, I just hide myself away and slowly die inside. I can't go on like this. Going public is a risk I have to take if I ever want to change anything."

Lois was surprised when she realized that Clark was a lot less optimistic about his role as a future hero than she had thought he was. She had come upstairs to warn him of the potential risks, but upon seeing him had completely forgotten about that. Now, she became aware how naive she had been to believe that she had actually convinced Clark of her idea. The truth of the matter was that he had simply given in, not necessarily to her constant nagging but more to the onslaught of his senses and the hopelessness of his situation.

"I don't believe anyone is going to recognize Clark," Lois repeated, her voice sounding a little weak in her own ears. "This is going to work," she emphasized, a tiny voice in the back of her mind adding <It has to.> She kept that to herself and gave a short nod into Clark's and Martha's direction, then she left the bedroom and made her way back downstairs.

Her gut was tied in knots. One part of her wished that Clark would back off in the last moment; the other prayed that the whole hero idea was going to be a success. Having to wait was the hardest part. She wanted to be over and done with it, no matter the consequences, just like ripping a band-aid off. Even worse was that she could do nothing to help the events unfold in their favor. Lois had hardly ever felt so helpless. Staying with the Kents only made matters worse. What were they going to say if her idea destroyed their son?

Feeling numb, Lois sank onto the couch next to Jonathan Kent, who had switched on the TV and was watching the news. Lois barely paid attention to the screen in front of her, too occupied with her own thoughts. A short while later, Martha and Clark joined them in the living room.

Jonathan looked over his shoulder and smiled as he saw Clark in his brand-new and now complete costume. "That's my boy," he

said proudly.

Lois felt her stomach lurch in panic. Who was she trying to fool; of course people were going to recognize her partner. She should have insisted on a mask! But before she could say anything, the anchorman reported about a major landslide in South Asia. In the blink of an eye, Clark was gone.

Martha and Jonathan looked at each other slightly concerned, but gave in to their fate. Soon the three of them were watching Clark as he dragged people out of the mud and flew them to a safer place. Soon after that, the news reported that he had rescued an airplane from crashing into the Pacific. It did not take long for the news about the mysterious red and blue Superhero to be broadcasted on every channel the Kents could switch to. And just like Lois had predicted, nobody seemed overly scared. Clark's actions spoke for themselves.

While Clark was obviously enjoying himself immensely, he also was a bit camera shy. Most of the pictures that were taken of him showed nothing but a blur. Martha and Jonathan Kent seemed relieved that there were only a few good photos of their son. However, none of those pictures showed any resemblance with Clark.

The torrential rain of the monsoon in South Asia combined with wind and mud had slicked back Clark's hair and made it seem a lot darker than it really was. Gone was the stubborn lock that softened his features. There was a sparkle in his eyes that Lois had never seen before; born of the deep satisfaction being able to help brought him. His eyes appeared larger without the heavy frames in front of them, more intense, more mesmerizing. Clark's stance was completely different, straight and proud, which added at least four inches in height. This was not the same man.

The newsroom had never been busier in the entire time Lois had been working there. It was as if someone had let a tornado loose to wrack havoc. Hardly anybody was sitting at their desks. Her fellow co-workers were scattered across the whole newsroom, some of them staring at the various TV screens that showed news reports from all over the world. Others were hastily chatting on the phone, either trying to confirm sightings of the superhero or simply to talk about the fantastic events of the previous night. Nobody seemed to care for Perry's occasional bark as he was trying to call his reporters to order.

'Superman' was the name people whispered on the streets, looking up to the sky each time he was mentioned as if by some twist of fate he would magically appear. Where the name had come from exactly was anybody's guess. Someone must have started it and everybody else had quickly adopted it until it seemed so natural that it would be literally impossible to introduce another.

On their flight back to Metropolis Clark had complained about how presumptuous it sounded. Lois found that it was just right. Truth be told, she was a little jealous that someone else had gotten to name the hero. By all means, that should have been her privilege. But seeing how happy Clark was to be finally able to help more than made up for this inconvenience.

After he had dropped Lois off at her apartment he had gone for another patrol, this time throughout Metropolis. During a quick breakfast and her ride to the Daily Planet, Lois had heard several reports about Superman on the radio. Clark was still busy when Lois entered the newsroom, or maybe he was waiting to see if the people he knew would guess he was the superhero. Judging from the fact that no one seemed to notice Clark's absence, Lois hoped that nobody had drawn the connection.

"All right, kids. Conference room. Staff meeting in five," Perry yelled above the newsroom, this time loud enough for everyone to flinch.

For a brief moment, the constant buzz of the various conversations died down and several pairs of eyes turned towards

their editor-in-chief.

“Great shades of Elvis! Don’t look at me like I’ve grown a second head,” he barked. “We’ve still got a newspaper to print. No time for idle chit-chat.” Storming back into his office, he closed the door with a loud thud behind him.

Taking the hint, the various groups quickly dissolved and people rushed back to their desks. Lois went to drape her coat over her chair and started to gather her notes on past stories, just like all the others. Nobody dared to incur Perry’s wrath, because that could very well be the last thing you did in your working life as a reporter.

The five minutes passed quickly and soon Lois and her colleagues were sitting in the conference room. Clark slipped in a moment after Perry entered the room and straightened his tie. Besides Lois, no one even looked at him, causing her to let out a small sigh of relief. All eyes rested on their editor-in-chief, eagerly waiting what he was going to say about the story of the century.

Perry was unfazed by the undivided attention everyone paid him. Quite the opposite, he thoroughly enjoyed it. His gaze wandered across the room in silence while the tension gradually became palpable. Lois felt herself shrink a little under his scrutiny and she was not the only one. There was a fine sheen of sweat on every forehead Lois could see in her immediate vicinity. Perry’s eyes conveyed an unspoken accusation, demanding why there was no even a single article on the previous night’s events.

Leaving his reporters dangling for a while, Perry finally harrumphed. “Good morning everyone,” he said with a false smile. A chorus of ‘Good morning’ resounded, causing Perry’s smile to crumble. His brows narrowed. “Well, I don’t think this is a good morning,” he told them off. “Personally, I wonder why there even is anyone here to hold this conference with after the biggest story ever literally dropped into our laps.” He cast another intense look across his reporters, causing them to shrink even more. “Granted, we’re not LNN, we can’t broadcast events as they happen. But did you happen to read what the sign on the front door says, when you entered the building this morning? We’re called the ‘Daily Planet’ - not the ‘Weekly Planet,’” he barked.

Jumping up from his chair he started to pace through the conference room, eying each and every reporter on his way. “What I mean is — go out there and get me some stories on this ‘Superman’. What did he do? Where did he come from? How long has he been here? What’s his agenda? Can he actually fly or is this just some elaborate trick? I want pictures, quotes... There’s got to be more for this evening’s edition than this...” He held up the morning edition. The front page article had obviously been switched at the last possible moment. Now it consisted of a blurred picture that might have shown anything between the superhero and a plane and a small article underneath the headline ‘Mysterious flying man aides with landslide’.

Perry took a deep breath, clearly heading for the climax of his speech. “Think. What could draw him out? Use your instincts. Beat the bushes. Turn the stones. Get me Superman!”

Flashback

Lois looked at her watch, finding that it was already past time to call it a day. She had worked on the Messenger story, sorting her notes and thinking about how she was going to approach the investigation. Clark had helped her, but after Cat had dropped the bomb, their conversation had been reduced to a minimum.

She was just wondering how to come clean with Clark without needing to grovel, when her telephone rang.

“Lois Lane, Daily Planet,” she said.

“Hi Lois,” Mitchell replied, sounding miserable. “I’m terribly sorry, but I have to cancel our date. I have a bad cold.” He sneezed as if to prove his point. “I hope you’re not mad at me.”

Lois rolled her eyes. Just when she had thought that the day could not get any worse. “No, Mitchell, I’m not mad,” she said into the phone.

“It’s just that I think I should better stay in bed,” he elaborated.

Lois sighed quietly, thinking that Mitchell did not sound as if he had a stuffy nose. “If you’ve got the sniffles, you’ve got the sniffles.”

“After all it is better to be safe than sorry. You know how it is - you start out thinking it is just a cold ...” he went on.

“Yes, that could lead to complications,” Lois interrupted him with all the patience she could muster.

“I’ll call you as soon as I’m feeling better,” he promised eagerly.

“No, don’t call me. I’ll call you,” Lois replied sweetly only to slam down the phone. Mitchell, the hypochondriac, was only one more name that she could wipe off her list. Honestly, it had not been all that unexpected. He had never been a serious candidate anyway. Still, it stung to be stood up because of a mere cold, if he even had one that was.

Snorting in disgust, Lois would have liked to simply forget about Mitchell. He was not worth wasting another thought on. Only, this had not been just any date. He was supposed to have been her escort to the White Orchid Ball. Of course, she could go alone. Why would a woman need an escort anyway? Wasn’t that awfully outdated? Still, she could not help but feel like a failure, if she went alone, announcing to the whole world that she was not even able to find a date for one evening.

Looking around, Lois spotted Clark, who was still sitting at his desk. He had been watching her, but now quickly averted his eyes. Everyone else had already left the newsroom, returning home to their families or empty apartments, respectively. After today, Clark was probably the last person she should ask. But there was nobody else left, and truth to be told, she wouldn’t know who else she could ask if the bullpen was still crowded. Why did she keep driving people away?

Sighing inwardly, Lois got up from her chair and walked over to Clark.

“I don’t suppose you own a tuxedo?” she asked tentatively.

Clark looked up from his work, mildly curious. “I can get one,” he said. “Why?”

“Oh,” she did her best to sound casual instead of begging.

“Well, the man I was going to Lex Luthor’s ball with has the flu, and ...”

“Yes?” Clark prodded.

“... well, I was wondering if you’d like to ...” Lois hedged but then decided it was better to just spit it out. “Look, do you want to take his place or not?”

“I’d rather not,” Clark said bluntly, focusing back on his work.

Lois could not believe her ears. “Are you crazy? This is the social event of the season. Everyone who’s anyone will be there and you’re just lucky that I’m being stood up - and you don’t want to go?” she started her usual rant, almost going into full Mad Dog Lane mode until she noticed his look. Pausing, she took a moment to think about what she had just said and felt a blush creep up on her cheeks. “Oh my gosh, I just did it again, didn’t I?” she muttered self-consciously.

“If you mean that you were treating me like a hick — then yeah, you did it again,” he replied sourly.

“I’m sorry, Clark. I know we didn’t start on the best of terms ...” Lois backpedaled.

“That’s one way to put it,” he interrupted her curtly.

“When Jimmy introduced us and you told me that you were from Smallville, Kansas, how was I to know that you were already a seasoned reporter with a Kerth under your belt?” Lois desperately tried to explain herself, completely failing to keep the

contempt from her voice as she mentioned the town.

"Snob," Clark muttered and turned his attention back to clearing his desk.

"Come again?" Lois asked, taken aback.

"I said you're a snob, Lois." Clark repeated unfazed. "You didn't even stop to read my work before you formed your opinion of me."

"I already apologized," Lois said, realizing with shock that she was fighting a losing battle. This was not what she had imagined asking him out would be like. "Look, like it or not ... we're partners now ..."

"Oh, are we?" Clark threw in acerbically.

Lois bit her lip, feeling that she probably deserved this reaction. However, she pretended to ignore his remark. Why did she not just tell him to suit himself? She could very well go alone. Still, Lois heard herself continue. "... and Lex Luthor is a story. I ..." she stopped herself, amending "we're going to land Luthor's first one-on-one interview if it kills me ... eh ... I mean us. And I will not walk into his party unescorted. This is ..."

"Then find someone else, because I'm not going." Clark cut her off, snatched his coat and started for the elevators.

"Clark, please ..." Lois stepped in his way, flashing him a sweet smile. "This could be my only chance at getting this interview," she all but begged. "I've been trying for months to get hold of Luthor. This could be another Kerth ... a Pulitzer even. Of course, we would share the by-line," she added as a peace offering.

"O... kay," Clark said grudgingly.

Not quite able to believe she had actually won, Lois grinned. "Then, it's a date. Meet me in front of Lex Tower. Nine," she said gladly.

"Make no mistake, Lois. This is not a date — it's business," he snapped.

End Flashback

Lois tightened her coat around herself, trying to ignore the cold, humid air that was slowly creeping through every layer she had put on. Blowing her warm breath onto her hands was not helping much and the last burst of Clark's heat vision was already wearing off — again. It was dark, save for the light of the city reflected by a thick layer of clouds that covered the sky. The dim illumination was enough to reveal Clark's still form. He was sitting a few feet across from her, staring into the air, almost motionless since the last rays of sunlight had vanished beneath the horizon. His face had that far away look Lois had seen enough of to last a lifetime.

She knew it meant he was listening to something only his ears were able to hear, waiting and hoping for some miracle that would change the course the day had taken so far. Though Perry White's speech had sent everyone into bustling activity, even the most ambitious reporter could not change the fact that it was a slow news day. Lois and Clark had been roaming the streets, knowing full well that any Superman related story would simply fall into their hands.

The occasional wail of sirens that resounded in the streets had gotten their hopes high, but there had been only two incidents for Superman to help with: a car pile-up and a bank robbery. While both had been spectacular to watch, they had ultimately been quick to write up. By afternoon, Lois and Clark had been no closer to the ultimate Superman front page story than they had been in the morning. Fortunately, and that was the only thing Lois actually found soothing about their situation, the same was true for everyone else.

The city seemed to have drifted off to a quiet slumber, a state that was rare even for the hottest days in summer when half the population fled to a vacation somewhere in the cooler, more rural parts of the east coast. It was even rarer for the rainy days of fall,

when the dark parts of the city became even darker, covering the underworld's sinister business dealings. Clark, being Clark, had instantly suspected Lex Luthor to be responsible for the unexpected hiatus and had suggested this stake-out at the top of Lex Tower right above Luthor's penthouse.

This was where Lois and Clark had been sitting since dusk and according to the expression on Clark's face would continue to do so until dawn. Not able to stifle a sigh, Lois got up and stretched her numb legs, trying to bring back some warmth into her body. She was hard pressed to admit it, but she was long since ready to call it a day.

A set of head-phones lay forgotten next to the spot she had been sitting on. With Clark's help Lois had placed a bug close to an open window, enabling her to listen to what was going on inside the penthouse, too. But listening to Luthor's evening routine had been rather boring, though admittedly enlightening as well. Now she knew without a shadow of a doubt, that the man was a self-absorbed egomaniac. Other than that, there was not much information to be gained and Lois was beginning to feel that continuing their observation was going to be futile.

"Clark, do you really think that he's going to do anything tonight? It's almost midnight," Lois said, her teeth chattering with every word she said.

She drew her coat even tighter, realizing with a sense of guilt that she was in fact complaining about a stake-out. Perry would have a field day if only he knew. It was one of the reasons she had turned down almost any partner her editor-in-chief had come up with. Knowing her own stubborn streak, she could relate to Clark, who was desperate to finally bring Luthor down.

"Never mind," she muttered the instant he looked at her.

The expression of surprise on Clark's face turned into one of sympathy as he registered her shaking form. Lowering his glasses, he bathed her in another burst of heat vision, gently warming her up. Then he slid his glasses back on his nose and gave her a self-conscious smile.

"No," he replied, dejectedly. "You're probably right. I'm just not quite ready to admit it." He smiled at her again, sadly this time, and with a regretful shrug he returned to listening.

Lois watched her partner. The constant tension in his shoulders had visibly receded through the course of the day. A faint, but contented smile was constantly playing around his lips now as if a huge weight had been lifted off his shoulders. It softened his features, marking the real difference between the man and the hero he had created. Even the fact that their stake-out had so far been completely pointless had not managed to completely wipe that smile off his face.

The creation of Superman had changed something about Clark on a deeper level than just the smile it had brought onto his lips. He was less detached, less reserved. Today, he had even joked with her, something that had seemed completely impossible just a few days ago. Clark was gradually letting her get through the thick defensive wall he had built around himself. Lois felt that she was just catching a glimpse of what Clark might be like when he was truly happy.

Even this hint of a smile was infectious. The longer Lois studied him, the more she forgot about her own discomfort. Lois felt a pang of satisfaction that it had been her idea that had brought this change along. She had helped repair at least part of the damage that Lana Lang and Luthor had done. That made her glad as much as it made her angry at the two people who had hurt Clark so much as to turn him into the lifeless hull he had been, existing just to stop Luthor from hurting anyone else. Lois sent a silent prayer to Heaven, begging that they would succeed. She desperately wanted to get to know the real Clark.

"Maybe Luthor is inactive because he is still wondering if it was really you wearing the cape?" she suggested in a jest.

"He'd have to be galactically stupid not to draw the

conclusion,” Clark replied, his faint smile widening into a half-grin. Lois could tell that he was just as much amused as he was worried “I can’t believe this is actually working, Lois. When I stepped into the newsroom this morning, I thought that someone was going to recognize me for sure.”

Lois shook her head, whispering. “You didn’t see yourself on television, yesterday. You look so different in the suit, it’s incredible. Embarrassing as it is, I’m almost certain you would have fooled me, too,” she admitted.

Clark weighed his head. “Nah, I don’t think so. You’re the smartest reporter I know. You would have seen right through my deception. I’m beginning to believe it’s a good thing that I had to swallow that bomb right before your eyes,” he let on quietly.

Though Lois felt flattered at his compliment, she did not share his opinion. Knowing how she had reacted to seeing him in the suit for the first time, she probably would have been completely blinded by his appearance. As little as she had seen of Superman yet, he seemed to belong to a plain of existence that was unattainable for a mere mortal. The incredible things he was capable of gave him the air of a god rather than a man. But Lois thought that she would have been even more impressed with his moral code. He was using his powers to help, still abiding by the rules when he could so easily have taken the law into his own hands.

Lois was not someone to easily admit her own weaknesses. But she strongly doubted that she would have wanted to see the human being underneath the suit, because that would have meant her hero could be flawed. Strangely, knowing the real Clark made Superman seem all that much more like a hero. That was the most confusing thing about the truth.

Suddenly Clark gestured at her to take the head phones. “I’m hearing something,” he said excitedly.

Lois quickly complied, putting on the head phones just in time to hear a door close. Several pairs of feet resounded on the floor, at least one pair of them clad in high heels. For a moment the shuffling of feet was all Lois could hear. What was said was barely above a whisper, not loud enough to be picked up by the bug they had placed. Lois wondered if Clark could understand what was being said. She was about to ask him, when suddenly Luthor spoke up.

“Thank you very much for following my invitation on such a short notice,” he said seriously.

“What’s this about, Luthor?” a man with a British accent asked.

“I’m sure you all watched the news,” Luthor replied curtly. “Do I really need to explain to you what the arrival of this so-called ‘Superman’ means for our business?” The way he emphasized his words it was no question that he really meant *my* business, not saying it simply for the sake of keeping up appearances. Luthor huffed in annoyance, the small sound revealing more about his real character than a thousand words ever could.

Lois felt goose-bumps creeping up her arms that had nothing to do with the chilly night air. Her curiosity, however, had been piqued. This really could be it — the proof they so desperately needed. Clutching the head-phones a little tighter, Lois resumed listening to the conversation that was going on downstairs. She heard soft murmurs of consent.

A woman asked, “So what do you propose?”

“I suggest we find out what kind of a threat Superman really poses,” Luthor answered, sounding more composed now. He paused, giving the others a bit time to think before he continued. “What do we know about Superman?”

There was another brief silence, so intense that Lois felt it would have been possible to hear the proverbial pin drop.

“Man, he can really jump ...” a second man said, waiting a beat before he added. “... for a white guy.”

Lois made a mental note that at least one of Luthor’s goons was either Hispanic or Afro-American. Clark would probably know. He had lowered his glasses deep onto the tip of his nose. Before she had a chance to ask, Luthor chimed in.

“Yes, but how far? How high? Is he, for example, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound?” he concretized the question. Naturally, there was no reply.

After a while, the British guy asked. “He’s immensely powerful.”

Luthor added. “How powerful? More powerful than an avalanche? More powerful than a locomotive?” Again, his question was met by silence.

“He’s still a man,” the woman finally said, sounding bored. “All men are weak.”

Luthor ignored her comment. “Obviously, we know very little,” he said sourly, pausing briefly to let that sink in. Returning to business, he continued “I have designed a series of tests for Superman. I’ll need your help.” For a moment there was silence, but there had to be some kind of non-verbal conversation, because Luthor groaned “Yes, Monique?”

Lois wrote down the name, quickly and listened to Monique’s suggestion. “Let me hire a couple of shooters, and I’ll turn Superman into a large wet spot. Tests won’t be necessary,” she said, obviously not too impressed with Superman so far.

Luthor’s voice was dangerously calm. “Have you ever read Sun Tzu’s ‘The Art Of War’?”

“I’m waiting for the Reader’s Digest version,” she replied, unfazed.

Lois heard another soft groan from Luthor, before he explained like a teacher to a particularly dumb child. “Sun Tzu was a general of ancient, Imperial China. He teaches us, I’m paraphrasing of course, that ‘knowledge precedes victory; confusion precedes defeat.’

Monique did not take the bait. “Really? Well, an Uzi precedes a bloody mess. Even in China.”

It was obvious Luthor’s patience was wearing thin. “Let’s do it my way,” he barked. “In fact, I’ve a very special role planned for you during the testing.” It sounded very much like a threat.

A shiver ran down Lois’ spine. Luthor wanted to test Superman? What kind of tests exactly did he have in mind and what exactly was his intention? Did he want to know what Superman was capable of or did he want to draw him out to find out if he really was Clark?

“When do we start?” the ‘Not-White’ guy asked, as Lois had secretly dubbed him.

“Now,” Luthor said coolly. “We’ve got a lot to do. Nigel, remind me to get back to you later, I have a very special assignment that needs your attention. But first things first ...”

Lois listened as Luthor explained what kind of tests he had in mind, each of his words proving what kind of a man the self-professed philanthropist really was.” Again and again her eyes darted towards the tape recorder, making sure that it was running. With each passing moment, her excitement grew. This was going to be the story of the century, almost bigger than Superman. Clark had been right about Luthor the whole time- he actually was pure evil.

“This is huge,” Lois said for the umpteenth time, clutching a steaming mug of tea, desperately trying to get some warmth back into her body. Clark had already tried to help out, but that had been as futile as the tea was going to be. Lois was not cold because of the icy wind, this chill ran much deeper. “Luthor needs to be stopped. He risks killing people just to perform some stupid tests.”

Clark looked a little green around the gills. “He wants to draw me out. And if that doesn’t help — you know what he told Nigel.” He lowered his gaze, staring into space and biting his lip.

Lois' heart tightened in her chest. Yes, she remembered — Luthor was going to try and expose Clark. But this time he made sure that any potential blood would not be on his hands. Clark had warned her about Luthor. But until tonight, Lois had not really understood that this man would really stop at nothing to achieve his goals. He considered Superman to be a challenge, an enemy he wanted to know more about.

During her years as an investigative journalist Lois had seen and heard many disturbing things. Even so, she had never listened to someone who could so casually order a murder or had the power to make his minions risk their lives just to test someone else. His influence made Lois think of a guru of some obscure cult rather than a crime lord. His ability to hide his evil side under a mask of politeness and charisma made him all the more dangerous.

"Becoming Superman was a bad idea," Clark said quietly, interrupting Lois train of thought. "Luthor is not going to back down, if by some miracle I manage to dodge being exposed this time." He got up, obviously no longer able to remain seated. He paced the living room nervously. "I should have stayed off his radar."

Lois lifted a brow. "You were the one who suggested throwing Luthor a bone," she argued. "Don't you remember? And now you're already giving up? Clark, Luthor is not going to be a nicer person just because you throw in the towel. If anything, you becoming Superman gave us the chance we probably wouldn't have gotten any other way. We've got his evil business dealings on tape," Lois pointed out, wondering why he did not see that on his own. Maybe, after spending years of trying to bring Luthor down, he could not imagine that finally he was so close to reaching the finish line. "He ordered two murders and a suicide, if Superman is not going to come to their rescue. That's all the evidence we're going to need."

Clark simply shook his head. "Having his voice on tape is going to be useless if it comes to a trial. Besides, we did not acquire it legally," Clark said dejectedly. "And even if we found some police officer who was willing to listen, I'm not going to let these people die, just to bring Luthor into jail."

Lois felt a smile tug at the corners of her mouth as Clark mentioned the police. "I know just the right guy to give that tape to," she whispered, completely enamoured with her idea. "Remember Inspector Henderson?"

"He investigated Platt's death, didn't he?" Clark asked.

"Yes, he did," Lois confirmed. "I've met him during several investigations. We're not exactly on friendly terms since he does not always agree with my methods. But he's a decent, upright police officer and I'm positive he's going to listen. Believe me, I'm the last person willing to admit that I need help," Lois confessed with a self-conscious smile on her lips. "Still, I think we should talk to him, show him everything we've got on Luthor."

Clark did not reply. He just looked at her thoughtfully, mulling over what she had said. Lois could practically see him think, silently arguing the pros and cons until finally, almost imperceptibly, he gave a nod. Breathing a sigh of relief, Lois took a sip of her tea that was still warm but no longer steaming. Even so, warmth instantly spread through her body, fueled by the fact that they now had a plan. Lois felt the same pleasant tingle in the pit of her stomach that accompanied the chase of every good story. Involuntarily, she checked her watch, finding that it was still too early to get started.

"We've got a few hours before Luthor is going to act out his plan," Lois said softly.

Again, Clark nodded. "You must be tired. I should be going so you can get some rest."

"I'm not tired," Lois protested, only to be betrayed by a jaw-cracking yawn. Smiling self-consciously, she admitted. "Alright,

maybe I am. But what about you?"

"I already told you I don't need to sleep, at least not much," Clark said defensively. He clearly did not like to talk about himself.

Lois watched him for a moment, her heart going out to him. He looked so lost, small despite his broad frame.

"Where are you going to stay?" she asked.

Clark shrugged. "Around. With my folks - I don't really know. Perhaps Superman should do another patrol." He vaguely pointed outside as if to illustrate his point.

"What are you going to do, if we succeed in bringing Luthor down?" Lois asked.

"That's something I'll consider when the time has come," Clark replied matter-of-factly. "I'm not going to count any chickens before they're hatched. Now if you'll excuse me. I'll see you later at the newsroom."

Without waiting for her to say anything else, he stepped towards the window, opened it and with a whoosh, he was gone.

"Clark, don't you dare..." the rest of her protest died on Lois lips. Baffled, she stayed behind on the sofa, having no choice but to stare at the billowing curtains. Anger rose within her, bubbling up in a stream of curses Lois muttered to herself, since there was no one else to listen. She could not believe he had run off again.

"Fine, leave me alone. See if I care," she shouted, though she knew very well that he probably would be too far away to hear her. However, that did nothing to quench her anger. If anything, she became even more furious. The bitter truth was that she did care. She could not quite explain it, but Clark had come to mean a lot to her, even more so since she shared his secret.

Lois huffed in annoyance, fighting back the tears that were all of a sudden threatening to roll down her cheeks. It wasn't like her to be so sensitive. She knew she could blame it on the lack of sleep, that and the fact that her life had been on the line twice in the course of a week. Still, she did not want to go there, not again. The experience with Claude had been bad enough. No way was she going to cry because of a man. Never again, she silently vowed to herself, but found that she was already faltering in her resolve.

The problem with Clark was that she knew exactly where he was coming from. Lois had little hope of ever winning his heart. He had been deeply hurt and it was actually a miracle that he was trusting her enough to let her help him. However, once Luthor was behind bars, Clark would almost certainly be gone.

He was the only partner she had ever been able to tolerate. They were as close to being friends as she had ever been, except maybe her friendship with Linda. But she had betrayed Lois.

"You're still up?" Lucy asked out of nowhere.

"God, you startled me," Lois gasped in surprise. She had completely forgotten about her sister.

"I thought I heard voices," Lucy said softly, stifling a yawn. "After the break-in I was afraid that maybe the robbers had returned. I had trouble sleeping, just thinking about what happened. Oh, Lois, this must have been so terrible for you. Are you okay?" she continued, rivaling Lois in full babble-mode.

"Clark was here, my colleague from work," Lois explained with a sense of guilt. "I'm sorry we woke you up."

"That's alright," Lucy replied, a glint in her eyes. "So, did you two have a date?" she asked giddily, her earlier worries obviously forgotten. She sat down on the love-seat next to Lois, the last remnants of sleep wiped off her face.

"We have been working," Lois replied. "a stake-out."

"Oh," Lucy muttered, disappointed, barely refraining from rolling her eyes. "Typical," she added with an exaggerated sigh. "I thought you liked this guy."

Lois opened her mouth, ready to lash out at Lucy, telling her to mind her own business. She did not feel like discussing her love life or lack thereof with her little sister. Besides, she was not

even sure she was interested in Clark that way.

<Yeah, right,> she thought self-consciously, <and why else would you bite her head off?>

"I do like him," Lois said quietly, deciding that it was far better to be honest with Lucy and more importantly with herself. "Unfortunately, it's a little more complicated than that. Someone in Clark's past hurt him badly. I'm not even sure he will ever trust me enough to become friends." She sighed. Let alone more than friends, Lois added mentally. She cringed. That was just her luck

A few hours later, Lois was sitting at her desk, desperately trying to stifle a yawn. The night had been awfully short and she had not been sleeping well. Nightmares had plagued her - of Clark leaving her or turning her down after she had uttered a particularly sappy declaration of love. She still blushed at the memory of it, though it had just been a dream. Worse even, Lois still felt the pain of being rejected as if it had actually happened.

Her morning coffee had tasted stale and her appetite had been noticeably absent. Try as she might to blame the uneasiness in the pit of her stomach on some bad take-out, there was no denying that Clark was more to her than just a partner she could tolerate. Lois had told Lucy that she considered him a friend. But if she was completely honest with herself, Lois was beginning to wonder if Clark, however inadvertently, had swept her off her feet. Just when had that happened?

With that worrisome thought in mind, it had taken all her will power to prepare herself for work. In the end, Lois had given herself a mental pep-talk, trying to convince her aching heart that she could not possibly be so far gone as to depend on Clark for her well-being.

That point had finally managed to let her spring into action. Afraid to lose her edge, Lois had raced towards the Daily Planet. As soon as she had arrived at her desk, Lois had checked her voice mail, hoping to hear from either Paul or Bobby Bigmouth. While the former remained silent and did not answer his phone, Bobby Bigmouth had called to tell Lois that Sidney Burke had been seen in a club in Riverside. He would call her again if he knew where she might be able to run into him. Satisfied with the results so far, Lois had gone to pour herself another cup of coffee. She was just taking a sip as Clark stepped out of an elevator.

He, too, looked a bit ruffled. It wouldn't surprise her, if he had slept just as badly as she had. His head hung between his shoulders as he trotted down the ramp into the bull-pen. With a slight nod, he greeted her and made his way to join her at the coffee machine.

"Good morning, handsome," Cat purred as he passed her desk.

"Morning, Cat," Clark replied shortly, obviously not willing to take the bait. He quickened his pace, leaving Cat behind. One notch less in her garter belt, Lois thought with a sense of satisfaction and could not keep from grinning triumphantly in Cat's direction.

"Good morning, Clark," Lois greeted and took a cup from the shelf, pouring some coffee for Clark as well. "I'm sorry, I don't know how you take your coffee," she said apologetically, cringing at her own ignorance. Maybe it was for the better that she did not have a chance with Clark. She would be a lost cause trying to woo him.

"That's all right," Clark replied, revealing at least a small smile. It sent Lois' heart racing. What on earth was wrong with her? She had never before reacted to him quite so strongly. She had to admit that an attraction towards him had been there in some hidden corner of her mind, stored away behind a heavy door. But last night's dreams had obviously broken the seal and now those suppressed feelings were bubbling to the surface. Quietly, Clark added an incredible amount of creamer and sugar to his coffee. Just watching him made her skirt feel tighter.

"Luthor did not start his little project, yet," he informed her. "I did a long patrol this morning, everything is quiet so far."

"I know," Lois said, dragging her eyes off him with some effort. She nodded towards her desk. "I've been listening to the police band on my radio." Clark raised an eyebrow. "Don't look at me like that, I don't have your hearing abilities," she defended herself.

"Hey, I'm just surprised," Clark said.

"That's because you're still Mr. Green-jeans, Kent," Lois replied teasingly, as they went towards her desk. "Oh, Bobby called this morning. He might be able to let us know where to meet Sidney Burke."

"Really? That sounds like good news," Clark let out a sigh. "Finally."

Before he was able to say anything else, the radio on Lois' desk crackled.

<Attention all units. Code four. Possible jumper, Lexor Hotel. Crowd control and negotiation teams to the Emergency response requested.> the police dispatcher announced.

Lois and Clark looked at each other. "This is it," Lois said excitedly and stopped herself just in time before she did something stupid like hugging him. Instead, she drowned her half-dead plant with the rest of her coffee. Then she grabbed her coat and her hand-bag, before she rushed towards the elevators.

"I'll see you there," Clark agreed, sounding just a tad nervous as he rushed towards the stairs.

Lois smiled to herself, as she hurried down towards the street to take a cab to the Lexor Hotel. Nothing was better than a story to keep her mind off dangerous territory. She was not even annoyed that Clark had not offered to take her with him. Some distance between them was just what she needed to get back on the right path. She and Clark were working partners, a great team. With his help she would forever get the inside scoop, always be there first. That was so much better than a broken heart, which any attempt at a relationship would certainly result in.

A sonic boom announced his departure and shook Lois from her musings. Before she could even consider getting the scoop, she needed to hail a cab. The rush hour had not yet abated and not a single yellow car seemed to be in sight. Impatiently tapping her foot, Lois held her arm half raised. Seconds stretched to ages until Lois finally spotted a cab turning into the street. She waved her arm and placing two of her fingers to her lips she produced a piercing whistle, sending a quick prayer to heaven that the car was not already occupied.

However, she was lucky as the driver stopped in front of her. She opened the back door and got in.

"Lexor Hotel," she ordered as she fastened her seat belt.

The driver silently complied and pulled into the traffic. Lois let out a breath she did not realize she had been holding and closed her eyes for a brief moment. This was it - the first tentative steps to a big story, her Pulitzer possibly. A rush of excitement ran down her spine and settled deep inside her stomach. She touched her bag to reassure herself that the tape was actually inside. They would go to talk to Henderson after this first test, as soon as they knew without a shadow of a doubt that Luthor was serious. Once they had Henderson's help, Lois and Clark could start building their trap.

Going through the speech Lois had prepared for Henderson, Lois felt that she had done everything in her power to make this work. She would get the scoop and Clark would be free. The tingle in her belly intensified, but Lois quickly brushed the feeling aside for later evaluation. She needed to focus on the here and now.

As she opened her eyes, Lois wondered for a moment where she was. The street around her did look vaguely familiar, but the cabby was either taking an extensive detour, or...

"Are you sure we're heading to the Lexor Hotel?" she asked,

a tad of annoyance in her voice. "Because it doesn't look like it." Lois cursed herself for not paying attention. After all, she knew that cabbies could never be trusted. If she had wanted she could have published a book on all the weird incidents she had experienced inside and out of Metropolis' cabs. Now she was going to miss the action. One more reason she could not afford to waste another thought on her traitorous feelings.

"Okay, take the next turn," she said without even trying to hide her anger.

The cabby appeared completely unfazed. "No can do, Miss," he replied, his eyes meeting hers only through a brief look into the rear view mirror. He pressed a button and the back doors locked.

"Hey!" Lois yelled in protest, pounding against the screen that separated the driver from the back section. "Stop this car and let me get out, now!"

"Soon," the driver promised, once more glancing at her through the mirror before he turned his attention back on the street.

"Where are we going?" Lois asked, but the cabby ignored her. "Hey!" Again, she pounded against the screen, furiously. The cabby did not even flinch. Realizing that she was not going to get an answer, Lois muttered a curse and focused her attention on the door, trying to open it, but to no avail.

Giving up for the moment, Lois studied her surroundings to find out for herself. They were quickly approaching the darker parts of the city, Riverside and Suicide Slum. The cabby finally pulled to a halt in front of a shabby building that, in happier times, had probably been part of a factory. A tall, burly guy with a mask stepped out, waiting until the cabby had unlocked the door before he manhandled Lois out of the car. As hard as Lois tried to fight back, all her attempts to strike out fell short. Seemingly out of nowhere he produced a rag and covered her mouth and nose before she even managed to think about yelling for help. The sweet odor of chloroform clouded her senses until everything went dark around Lois.

A pounding headache was the first thing Lois noticed when she came to. She groaned into a gag that was just loose enough to not be suffocating. Further assessing her current predicament, Lois found that she was strapped onto a chair with her hands tightly bound behind its backrest. Her legs were firmly secured to the chair as well, making it extremely difficult to move more than her fingers, face and toes. Another groan escaped her, thoroughly muffled by the gag.

Still dizzy with the remnants of chloroform, it took some effort for Lois to open her eyes to a dimly lit room. Slowly, her surroundings swam into focus. The floor and walls consisted of concrete, gray which was depressing and deteriorating in several places. On the far wall were some blinking lights, which on second look belonged to a console. They added to the impression of a bunker. Next to the console were several TV screens, appearing almost anachronistic in their environment. They were showing the program of LNN and what looked like security camera footage.

"How nice of you to join us," a familiar voice said.

Luthor! Lois's heart skipped a beat. Though he was smiling in much the same manner as he had on their dates, there was nothing remotely charming about him now. The cold glint in his eyes sent chills down Lois spine. She closed her eyes, desperately fighting against the sudden panic that was taking hold of her.

Though Clark had told her about Luthor's real character, though she had listened in on his sinister plans the other night, it was something else to experience it firsthand.

"I'm sorry for the inconvenience, but I wasn't sure you would follow a less forceful invitation," Luthor said softly, still not losing the scary smile. It was unsettling to hear him so casually talk about a kidnapping, as if it was just a dinner party.

Lois' mind reeled as the full implications of her situation hit her. Luthor knew. Somehow he was a step ahead of them, turning their own trap against them before they had even managed to establish it. Lois had had the tape, which now either was in Luthor's hands or left on the backseat of the cab. Without it, how was Clark to convince Henderson? If he would actually work up the nerve to go to the Inspector, that was.

A curse escaped her lips, which the gag reduced to a strangled sound.

"I know this is a terribly one sided conversation, but unfortunately that can't be helped. You see, I need you to stay silent until I'm ready." Luthor went on. He looked at one of the screens, showing footage from a camera on top of a roof.

Lois followed his gaze and watched a black guy who was standing dangerously close to the edge of the building. He was looking down, balancing on the ledge, teetering on his toes and giving the people that surrounded him quite a scare. Lois could see the nervous expression of the man trying to talk the jumper down. He carefully tried to approach the jumper, stepping back and forth according to his progress or lack thereof. Then, Superman landed on the roof, taking the jumper's arm, causing a sudden change in his whole demeanor. He stepped down instantly, as if he had just been waiting for the hero to arrive, which was likely the case. A little confused, Lois wondered if the footage could be live. She had no idea how much time had passed since she had been captured, but she suspected that these events had taken place some time ago. She was proven right when the video started to replay.

"I started to conduct a series of tests on Metropolis' new superhero," Luthor explained and pushed a button, starting another video on the same screen. It showed a front of windows that probably belonged to a sky scraper. A figure fell down only to be caught in mid-air by another figure clad in blue and red.

"He's faster than a speeding bullet," Luthor commented, pointing at a counter that had been stopped by an impressively tiny split of a second.

Lois let out a grunt.

"But where are my manners?" Luthor said, making it sound as if he was answering a question. "Did I really forget to mention how you fit into the picture?" He flashed her a smug smile. "This might come as a surprise, but you know Superman a lot better than you think. Better than anyone else I might say, except maybe for me and his parents, of course. He is in fact..." he paused, as if leaving time for some imaginary drumroll. "your partner Clark Kent." Falling silent again, he gave her a moment to let that sink in.

Lois dutifully raised her brows, trying to give her face an expression of shock, which was difficult with the gag still in place.

Luthor seemed to be satisfied, though. He nodded knowingly, the smile still not leaving his face. "I, too, had trouble believing it at first. Well, you were asking how we came to know each other. I told you that he saved my life. Years ago, I was lured into a trap, built upon my foolish love for fast cars and dangerous races. I was forced to stop right in the middle of nowhere. My attackers first shot and then mugged me. Thanks to Clark I had a chance to learn from my mistakes. He found me. While I was in the car, I suddenly had the weirdest experience - I was flying. At first, I thought I had probably been hallucinating; after all, I had a gunshot wound. Thankfully, I decided to stick around and find out if there was more to Clark than met the eye. Imagine my delight, when a mutual friend turned to me and told me everything about Clark. And what I learned was better than even my wildest dreams had suggested," Luthor paused, giving Lois time to process the information.

She sucked in a breath, grateful that Luthor did not know the real reason for her surprise. It was unnerving to hear how Clark's

assumptions about Luthor had been spot on.

“I tried to put his powers to the test, but unfortunately I couldn’t prove that they really existed.” Luthor continued. “For years, I kept an eye on Clark, tried to reestablish the connection that had unfortunately been severed when I ordered the death of his girlfriend.” As he said those words without even a hint of remorse it became obvious that Luthor had no respect for life. Lois found it difficult to reconcile this cold man with the charming one she had dated a couple of days ago. “But it wasn’t until the appearance of Superman that my suspicions about him were confirmed. You, my dear Lois, are going to help me uncover the whole truth. Don’t you think that’s just the right task for a formidable investigative journalist like yourself?”

Once more he turned towards the console and pushed a few buttons. LNN News appeared back on the screen as did the front of a building. A door was opened to Lois left and Luthor’s Indian manservant stepped into the room.

“Asabi, right on time,” Luthor said contentedly.

Asabi just nodded and joined Luthor at the console. With another button Luthor increased the volume of the TV.

“...and now back to the scene,” a serious looking anchorman for LNN News said. “Linda Montoya is in front of the Carlin Building. Linda, what can you tell us?”

The picture changed to a young woman, who was standing in front of a building. A yellow and black tape reading “Do not cross” was right next to her. Flashing lights announced the presence of emergency vehicles.

The reporter began to speak. “If you’ve just joined us, the original report of a bomb planted in the lobby of the Carlin Building has now been confirmed. Currently, the Bomb Squad is awaiting the arrival of what they term a ‘containment blister’,

as well as a team of deactivation specialists. Once the blister is in place, they’ll attempt to neutralize the threat. Meanwhile, the building has been evacuated and we’re being told to move back. So, for now, this is Linda Montoya...”

Her voice trailed off as more and more voices started to shout and cheer, causing an ever growing uproar. Then, the reporter cupped her ear, listening for a moment.

“He’s here!” she then announced excitedly. “Superman is here and may be about to enter the building.” She lowered her voice, addressing her crew. “Can we get a shot of that?”

The camera turned towards the building, zooming in on the stairs. A moment later, Superman dropped out of the sky and landed on the steps. He swiftly climbed the rest of them and went into the building.

“Now, as a first step, we need to assess if Superman really is invulnerable,” Luthor explained and took a small case that Asabi handed him. “You wouldn’t know anything about that, now would you?”

He grinned at Lois and pushed a button. The effect was instant. An explosion rocked the Carlin Building. Smoke and debris erupted through the door and the windows taking shreds of glass with them. The camera shook and fell down, the footage shifting in a ninety degree angle.

Luthor pushed another button, activating his own surveillance camera. The Carlin Building was seriously damaged. Smoke still rose from the door and windows, slowly clouding the view. There was no sign of Superman.

Lois’ breath caught, her mind reeling. Had something happened to Clark? Wasn’t he invulnerable after all? Or was there a limit to his powers he simply hadn’t known about, because naturally you did not run into bombings just to find out? Could this be part of his plan, if he even had one, that was? The seconds dragged on agonizingly slowly and fear for Clark took hold of Lois. Her throat tightened as she could not help but wonder if she had actually lost him. Maybe he would just seize the opportunity

to disappear, feigning his death to be free of Luthor. With Clark, there really was no telling. Lois closed her eyes, desperately trying to keep any tears at bay. She could not cry and give away that she, too, knew Superman’s real identity. Not as long as there was hope to bring Luthor down and convince him that Clark and Superman were two different people. And she could not quite bring herself to showing so openly how much she cared.

After what seemed like an eternity, Superman stepped out of the building. He stood tall and solid as a rock. His cape hung in shreds, but otherwise he looked fine. His gaze wandered around, taking in the destruction the bomb had left. The street was covered in gray dust that swallowed up any colors. People were running around, some of them injured and others trying to help. Even the footage managed to convey the fear and confusion of the victims. It had to be so much worse at the scene.

Superman’s jaw was tightly set. Anger radiated from his eyes, but that was the only indication he gave of what was going on inside him. Lois was not sure, if it would even be visible to anyone but her and Clark’s parents.

“Very well,” Luthor seemed strangely content. “I think we can safely say that Superman is invulnerable.” He smiled viciously; completely unfazed by the havoc he had wreaked just to prove a point. Lois found it hard to believe that someone so charming and cultivated could also be so cruel. But Luthor was the living proof. “Now, we only need to establish if Clark Kent is, too. He managed to fool me once, but that is not going to happen again. And you, Lois, are the bait that is going to lure him to me.” Luthor chuckled. “Don’t you think it’s ironic how the women Clark loves always end up at my mercy?”

This time Lois did not have to fake her surprise. Luthor thought that Clark loved her? How little he knew! They were barely even friends. Clark tolerated her, because he had to. Due to adverse conditions, she had learned his secret. He had entrusted his future to her investigative skills. But instead of helping him, she had let herself get caught by Luthor. If by some miracle he managed to undo the damage she had done, he would never want to see her again.

His demonstration finished, Luthor left Lois to her thoughts. He walked out of the room without another snide remark. Asabi followed in his wake and closed the door behind him. Lois even heard a key turning in the lock, as if her bindings were not enough to ensure that she remained where she was.

Lois found herself alone in the room. She tried the ropes, seeing if they would give if she struggled against them. If anything, they became even tighter. Lois let out a sigh, which was almost impossible through the gag.

Closing her eyes, she could not help but relive the events of the day, so far. She should have insisted on going with Clark, she should have called for his help when that had still been possible. They should have contacted Henderson first thing in the morning... She could go on and on like this. Only, that did not help in the least.

Lois could only hope that Clark would find the courage to go to Henderson. He did not have the tape - that was probably still lying on the backseat of the cab. All things considered, their trap had been turned on them. On the plus side, nothing Luthor had said indicated that he knew Lois and Clark had been overhearing his plans. So, maybe, just maybe their plan could still work, if... There were a lot of ifs that came to mind.

Lois cringed inwardly. She should be out there with Clark, instead of being strapped to this chair.

Lois let out a breath. She was alone in the room and it was long past time that she did something about her situation. Crying for Superman was impossible as long as she was still gagged. She couldn’t loosen the ropes, so she needed something to help her cut them.

Lois tried moving the chair. With some effort she managed to

hop it a few inches to her right. Looking down, she studied her bindings. She would be able to get rid of them once her hands were free

Okay, now she had a plan. Lois examined the room, turning the chair slightly so that she could look all around.

Her first impression that she was in a bunker was obviously accurate. There had always been rumors about private bunkers belonging to the richest part of the upper class. Most of them had probably been built during the cold war. This seemed to be one of these bunkers, by the looks of it built in the sixties - perhaps after the Cuba crisis. The concrete had become damaged in some places and after a while Lois could even spot a small section where the steel lay bare. It was a long shot, but frankly the only chance she had to free herself.

Setting her jaw in determination, Lois started to move the chair in that direction, hopping one inch at a time. The legs screeched across the floor, resounding in her ears like strikes of thunder. Startled, Lois interrupted her efforts, expecting Luthor or one of his goons to return any moment. Nothing happened.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Lois went back to her task, trying her best to be as quiet as possible. Still, she made a lot of noise.

It took her ages to move the chair towards the steel bar. Finding the right angle to try breaking the ropes seemed to take just as long. Lois was drenched in sweat as she began rubbing the rope against the steel bar. She felt the rope cut into her wrists and getting hot, but otherwise Lois had no idea if she made any progress. Since her hands were tied behind the back of the chair, she could not check what she had achieved so far. Lois' shoulders ached with every move.

When she could not take it anymore, she paused, feeling tears prick at the corners of her eyes. This was not how she had pictured her day. Lois had wanted to gloat in front of Henderson, presenting to him the city's worst criminal who had committed his evil deeds right under the nose of Metropolis' finest. She had been so enthusiastic that she and Clark had finally found a way to bring Luthor down. Why hadn't she insisted on seeing Henderson first thing in the morning? He would have believed them as soon as the two jumpers had showed up.

Lois wondered what Clark was doing now. Was he already searching for her, or was he so busy being Superman that he had not yet noticed her absence?

Gritting her teeth, Lois resumed her efforts to get rid of the ropes. Luthor would be back soon and start doing whatever was the next step in his plan. She needed to be able to warn Clark before then. If only she knew what Luthor was actually planning. He would try to test Clark's invulnerability, that much was certain. But how?

As Lois' shoulders tired once more, her mind drifted back to what Luthor had said about Clark. Could her partner really be in love with her? Lois didn't think he was. Lana had made sure that he would not give his heart easily.

And what about her feelings for him? She had not really allowed herself to think about that particular issue. But now that her shoulders cried out with each motion, she was glad about the distraction. Did she love him? Love was perhaps too strong a word. Lois certainly liked Clark. He was kind and considerate and strong in a way that had nothing to do with his special powers. He could have found himself a hole to hide in; he could have killed Luthor in a moment. Yet, he hadn't chosen the easy way. Lois remembered how much she had missed Clark, when he had run off after she had learned his secret. Truth be told, she already missed him again and not just because he would have her out of here in a second.

Clark was so easy to talk to, once he had let her through the shell he had erected around himself. They had just gotten to know each other and she already felt that there was so much more to him than he had allowed her to see. He was a good reporter, too,

and he respected Lois. That was a rare thing. So far, the men in Lois' life had either been condescending or scared of her.

She had known Clark for some weeks, yet Lois already dreaded the moment he would leave Metropolis behind the way he had left so many other places.

The Daily Planet was a better place with him there. Honestly, she didn't know if she loved Clark. He had quickly become a great friend and she desperately hoped he would stick around until she found out if he could be more. He could be worth risking her heart for.

Lois focused her attention back on the rope, rubbing it up and down against the steel. She thought that the bindings felt less tight, but that could very well just be wishful thinking. However, she would not give up so soon.

Luthor had left the TV on. LNN was repeating the local news, showing Superman as he caught a woman in mid-air. The sound was once again mute, so Lois had nothing but the pictures and the Chiron to get information. Another report on the bombing of the Carlin Building followed. Apparently, there had been several victims with minor injuries, but no fatalities. Only two people had been brought to the hospital, but neither of them was in critical condition.

The news switched to another topic, announcing that a body had been found in Hobb's Bay. The police had so far been unable to identify the victim. It was a man, probably in his late fifties, who had supposedly committed suicide. A connection to the clubs around Riverside was likely.

Lois grunted into her gag. This was a perfect day to report the news as it happened. But instead of winning herself a Pulitzer, she sat here strapped to this stupid chair.

The rope suddenly gave way. Sending a quick thanks to Heaven, Lois shook off the ties and rubbed her now free wrists to restore the circulation and get some feeling back into her hands. Allowing herself a small smile, Lois lifted her arms to untie the gag and get rid of the remaining ropes.

Wiping the sweat from her brows, Lois drew in a deep breath. It felt good to be free again, but also kind of unexpected. Her first impulse was to yell for Superman and again she wondered why she had not thought of this option back in the cab. But on second thought, she closed her mouth again. If Luthor heard her, he would come running. Maybe, that was what he had been waiting for all along. But wouldn't he have left her without a gag if he had?

The point was that Luthor wanted to prove that Clark was Superman. While Lois had already known as much, she still had no idea what kind of trap Luthor had set up. However, what she did know was that it somehow involved Clark coming here. So, the best she could probably do to save him was to escape on her own.

Taking another deep breath to calm herself, Lois headed for the door. Since there was no window, it was the only way out. She examined the lock, finding that it would be relatively easy to pick, if she found something she could use as a tool. Pressing her ear to the door, Lois listened to what was going on the other side. It was silent, save for the sound of steps in the distance. But gradually, the sound increased as whoever was outside approached.

Lois hastily looked around, but other than the chair found nothing she could use as a weapon. Deciding it was worth a try, she rushed back. The chair was heavy, though. She barely managed to lift it above her head. Before she had a chance to think of something else, a key turned in the lock and Asabi entered the room.

Within a moment, he had spotted Lois standing there with the chair in her hands she should have been tied to. He did not raise a brow, he just closed the door behind him.

"Put down the chair," Asabi said simply. It didn't sound like a threat, not even like an order. The Indian did not seem all that

intimidating, either. Lois felt pretty ridiculous all of a sudden. Wondering if he might be hypnotizing her, Lois remained where she was. Her arms became heavy, making any attempt to attack someone with the chair almost impossible. Asabi did not move. Still, Lois knew that she would never make it to the servant and take him out with the chair. That might have worked if the element of surprise had been on her side.

Reluctantly, she set the chair down. Assuming one of her taekwondo stances, she slowly approached Asabi. His eyes followed her every move, his features however were carefully schooled. Not even a twitch of a brow gave away what he was thinking. Lois knew that she had no choice but to take the bull by the horns. It was either that or giving up, and she was not the type to just throw in the towel. Her stomach did a nervous somersault as she closed in on Asabi, preparing to land the first blow. She drew in a ragged breath, her gaze briefly flickering towards the door. Luthor was nowhere in sight. A battle one on one was doable, Lois encouraged herself silently. Then, she launched her first attack.

Asabi ducked away or blocked each of her strikes effortlessly, appearing so calm and composed that it was absolutely infuriating. But hard as Lois might try, she could not land a single blow. Lois felt herself tire due to her fruitless efforts. She never saw Asabi's hand coming, just felt it brush against her neck and then suddenly everything went dark.

"Oh, you're finally waking up," Luthor said through the haze of her mind. Lois felt herself drift through the fog that clouded her view and muffled any sound. She blinked a few times until the room around her became clearer. It still consisted of grey concrete walls. As she managed to pry her eyes open, Lois looked into the smiling face of Lex Luthor.

"What a pity that you tried to expose me, Lois. I think the two of us would have made a great couple," he mused, sounding as if he was actually serious. "You certainly would have been more fun than that country hick Lana. After she had told me everything I had wanted to know about Clark, she stuck around, crying her eyes out over him. She kept rambling how she had been so much in love with him, but who could have guessed that he was a freak... It went on for days," Luthor spat with disgust. "At first, I thought that she might be useful to keep around. But she was also a threat to me, should she ever decide to go back to Clark. Besides, knowing that boy-scout and his need to do something about the injustice in the world, I figured that he was far more likely to reveal the truth about himself if Lana was killed." He grinned, putting a cigar to his mouth as if to celebrate his own ingenuity. "I must admit it was a pleasure to get rid of that dull and boring woman. You on the other hand... it's actually a shame that it's got to end like this. With your looks and independent personality, it would have been an interesting challenge to make you a suitable wife. Now we're never going to find out, are we?"

A chill ran down Lois' spine as she listened to Luthor's threat. She could not help but wonder what would have happened if Clark had not warned her about Luthor. Would the billionaire really have pursued her? Would she have seen through the mask he wore for the public? She could only hope that her reporter's instincts would have kicked in.

But none of those things would ever happen now. Lois shook her head, trying to clear the last remaining cobwebs. Once again, she was gagged and tied to the chair. Luthor still wore that cold smile and looked at his watch.

"Clark should join us any moment," he announced smugly. "You left him a message, telling him to meet you here." As Lois eyes widened, Luthor answered her unspoken question. "I recorded your voice during our dates. My scientists managed to emulate the pattern, enabling me to create any message I want."

Lois swallowed, hoping that Clark would see through Luthor's scheme. She hated the fact that Clark had been right all

along. It had been a mistake to get involved with Luthor, even if it had been just for an interview. The worst thing was that in the end it was all for nothing. Their plan had worked on some level - Luthor had taken the risk to kidnap her. But she probably wouldn't live to tell the tale. And once Luthor managed to expose Clark, her poor partner would lose his freedom. If only she had a way to warn Clark, if only...

"There we go," Luthor interrupted her train of thoughts. He pointed at one of the screens that showed footage of a surveillance camera. Lois recognized Clark immediately as he stood outside a door. He looked around as if he was searching for her. His gaze flickered towards the surveillance camera, then again to the door that stood slightly ajar. Tentatively, he tested it, opening it just a crack. He peeked inside and after a moment slipped into the building. The camera changed to another one on the inside. Clark pressed himself to the wall underneath the camera and vanished from the picture. Now and again there was a quick shot of him as he tiptoed down the hallway.

Luthor smiled and took a radio set from the counter. "I think it's time we show Mr. Kent the way." He turned his attention on Lois. "What do you think? Will he give his secret away right now?"

Lois watched helplessly as two of Luthor's goons appeared on the screen, both of them holding up guns. Clark raised his hands as they approached him. One of the goons took Clark's right arm and twisted it behind his back, manhandling him down the hallway towards another door. As Lois heard the steps, she knew that they were close to her position.

A moment later a handle was turned and the door swung open. Clark was ushered inside, still held in the firm grip of a burly guy. At Luthor's nod, the goon let go. Clark looked around and his gaze caught Lois's. His eyes widened.

"Lois!" he breathed. "Are you okay?"

She couldn't do anything but grunt to express all the things she needed to say. But Luthor took the lead, anyway.

"So nice of you to join us, Clark," Luthor sneered. "I believe Lois had become a little worried that you would not come to save her."

"Let her go," Clark said quietly. "This is between me and you." His expression was stern, his jaw worked in barely concealed anger. Only now did Lois see a small trail of dried blood on the side of Clark's forehead. A gauze pad was taped on a spot above his right brow.

"Nice try," Luthor commented, as he spotted the dressing. "Did you really think that some gauze and a smear of artificial blood are going to fool me a second time?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Clark replied calmly. "I was at the site of the bombing and got hit by flying debris." He lied without even batting an eyebrow. Lois knew that he couldn't have been hurt there. But what exactly did Clark have in mind?

"I'm not in the mood for playing games," Luthor snapped and turned towards the goon. "Rip it off," he ordered gruffly.

The goon complied, ripping the dressing off in one swift motion. Fresh blood oozed from the wound. Luthor stared at it, taken aback. Lois could practically see the wheels in his mind turning as he searched for an explanation. Unlike Luthor, Lois knew what must have happened. Clark had exposed himself to the substance that could take away his powers. So, he had anticipated a kind of test. Lois could only hope that he had taken other precautions before walking into this trap.

"This must be some trick," Luthor concluded. "Don't play me for a fool," Luthor spat and produced a gun that he trained on Lois. "Unfortunately, I can't afford any witnesses," he continued. "You two came far too close to revealing my little secret. I can't have that." He flexed his index finger dangerously.

"Luthor, don't!" Clark yelled.

“You can save her. I know you can,” Luthor replied, unfazed, a maniacal grin on his face.

Clark started for Luthor, taking the man who held him by surprise. He let go of Clark, who reached Luthor just as he pulled the trigger. He had lunged for Luthor and dragged him towards the floor. The gun went off, but the bullet hit the wall, far away from where Lois was sitting.

A fight ensued as Clark tried to wrestle the gun from Luthor’s grip. But the billionaire was not willing to give up. He landed a few punches in Clark’s face, giving him a split lip. In the meantime, the goon tried to help his boss, who actually had no intention of being dragged out of the fight. For a while the fight seemed almost even, as the three men rolled around in a heap of limbs. The gun fell from Luthor’s hands and was shoved out of reach.

As if on some secret sign, the door flew open and other goons entered. One of them carried something that resembled a gun. Lois started to yell a warning, but belatedly realized that she was still gagged.

For a moment, the goons just watched the fight until once again Clark regained the upper hand, pushed the goon off and pinned Luthor to the floor. Then, the one with the gun fired. Lois’ breath caught. Instead of a bullet wires flew from the muzzle. The tips embedded themselves in Clark’s back and gave off an electric shock. Clark tensed and grunted before he lost consciousness and buried Luthor under his large frame.

The fight was over. Lois watched in shock as Luthor’s goons dragged Clark’s unresponsive body aside and helped Luthor get up. Then, one of the goons turned to Clark again, checking on him. Now, it was unmistakable that Clark really was without his powers. If this didn’t serve to dissuade Luthor that Clark was Superman, Lois didn’t know what would. Clark was walking on dangerous ground and personally, she wouldn’t mind if Henderson barreled in right about now.

Luthor ran a hand through his hair and straightened his tie, erratically.

“He’s out cold,” the goon said with a contented smile.

Luthor’s eyes sent daggers at him, daring the goon to say another word. His smile faltered instantly and he stepped aside, leaving room for Luthor to check on Clark.

“It can’t be!” He growled frantically. “I’ve seen you walk out of an explosion unscathed.” Luthor took off Clark’s glasses, his eyes darting back and forth, giving the smallest indication that his conviction was beginning to waver.

“You must be able to control your invulnerability somehow,” Luthor muttered. “I know who you are! And I’m going to prove it.” As he got up and turned to Lois, there was something maniac about his gaze. “I’m going to force you to use your powers.”

Luthor smiled viciously. “I guess we need to find another way to die for you, my dear Lois,” he threatened. “Bring him to our pool,” Luthor ordered. “And then get her.”

Lois felt her throat tighten in fear. Her heart started to beat madly. She closed her eyes, willing Clark to wake up or Henderson to come and rescue them. Instead, all she could do was watch as the goons dragged Clark out of the room.

“Did you think he would save you?” Luthor taunted her. “Too bad, he is more concerned about his secret than your safety. But perhaps you can help convince him.” He reached for the gag and pulled it down roughly. “I bet you can. After all, your life will depend on it.”

“You’re out of your mind,” Lois shouted, scared. “Clark isn’t Superman. Don’t you see that?”

“Well, in that case I’ll be rid of the two of you, won’t I,” Luthor replied, turning his back on her.

“Help! Help! Superman!” Lois cried, hoping against hope that someone would hear her. Their whole plan had backfired and terribly so. If Henderson really was anywhere near them, why

hadn’t he already come? Maybe Clark had rushed to her rescue right after exposing himself to the stuff that could rob him off his powers. She had hoped that thanks to her influence, he wouldn’t be so scared of Luthor as to make such rash decisions. Lois had to face the possibility that she was wrong about that.

The goons returned and untied her. But one of them always kept a gun trained on her while the other held her in a firm grip. Hard as she might try, she did not manage to struggle out of it. She could not help but follow as they manhandled her down the hallway towards another door. Their progress was slow, because Lois did put up a fight. But in the end, Lois was shoved inside the room where Clark already lay sprawled on the floor. It was narrow, about three times the size of a phone booth.

The door was slammed shut behind her. As Lois regained her footing, she turned to find that the door looked much like one she might find in a ship. It was made of sturdy steel with a bull’s-eye in the upper half. Something about the door had her worried. But she did not have the time to dwell on that feeling.

“Clark!” she cried and ran towards him. He did not move. She knelt down beside him, patting his cheeks. “Wake up, come on, wake up.” Lois managed to elicit a moan. “That’s good, now open your eyes,” she pleaded.

Clark complied, his lids started to flutter and with some obvious effort he pried them open.

“Lois?” he croaked and looked around. “Where are we?” he asked and slowly came to his feet.

“This is my very personal pool,” Luthor used this particular moment to reply to Clark’s question. Obviously, he had been listening. His voice crackled through a speaker. “In a minute, I will start flooding the room with water from Hobb’s Bay. When the police find your bodies floating in the bay, there will be no doubt that you drowned there. Such a pity.” Luthor chuckled. “The same thing happened to poor Mr. Burke. After all, I couldn’t have you find him.”

He fell silent. Instead, Lois heard water splash out of a pipe in the wall. “Now, Clark, you can choose to let her die or to show me what you’re capable of.”

The speaker crackled again and then fell silent. Water still splashed from the wall, a large pool quickly building underneath. Soon, the water had reached their feet and was covering the whole floor.

“He’s not Superman,” Lois repeated, scared, her eyes darting to Clark.

He looked down at his feet, a worried expression on his face. The water was already pooling around their ankles and ever rising.

“I’m so sorry,” Clark said quietly. He closed his eyes, his jaw worked and his brows furrowed in concentration. Every fiber of his being seemed tightly wound. Lois didn’t need to ask what he was doing. It was obvious from the strained expression on his face that he was willing his powers to work. It tore at her heart to see his growing despair as his attempts remained futile. “I’m so sorry,” he repeated, abashed.

“Don’t be,” Lois said, trying to drown out the voice of fear that kept complaining about Clark’s lack of foresight. “This is Luthor’s doing, not yours.”

Clark just threw her a glance, not at all convinced. He started to push against the door until sweat was covering his forehead, but the door wouldn’t give. He grunted in frustration.

Lois looked down at her feet where the water had already reached their knees. They needed to get out of here and soon. Though she felt at the verge of a major panic attack, she knew that she needed to stay calm, for Clark’s sake as much as her own.

“What about Henderson?” Lois asked, in as sensible a manner as she managed.

Clark shook his head. “He wouldn’t talk to me. I met him at the site of the bombing. He said that he doesn’t talk to the press. I

didn't even get to show him the tape.”

Lois studied Clark's face, which remained unreadable. She hoped that his answer meant help was on its way. It wasn't like Henderson to just send someone away. He might be grumpy, but he would listen. Besides, Clark hadn't had any tape to show Henderson. Lois was positive that Clark had lied to let her know what was really going on without giving Luthor a hint. Well, she was almost positive - after all there was still the option that she was wrong about Henderson and that Clark had forgotten... No, she wouldn't go there. Help was on its way.

“Then, we need to think of something, and quickly,” Lois said, looking around for another way out. “Help, Superman!” she again yelled on the top of her voice.

Meanwhile, Clark had taken off his jacket, trying to block the water pipe. It was just another futile attempt to delay the inevitable. The water kept rising, already splashing around their hips. Lois closed her eyes, sending a quick prayer to heaven. If Henderson was really going to come, he should do it soon.

His jacket completely soaked with no success to show for, Clark, too, stopped to struggle and stilled. “It was a pleasure working with you,” he said quietly, sincerely. “I don't think I ever met anyone quite like you.” A myriad of unspoken words loomed in the dark pools of his eyes, but all he said was “Thank you.”

Lois felt her voice catch in her throat. Fear was bubbling up again, but also these barely defined feelings she had for Clark. She didn't want to lose him now, didn't want to die or watch him go, if, by some miracle, Henderson would turn up in time. The water had risen to their chests and was rapidly making it difficult for Lois to stand on her feet. Instinctively, she clung to Clark. He pulled her in an embrace and she buried her head in the crook of his neck, suddenly feeling so safe and secure that their dire situation was almost forgotten. He smelled good, of aftershave and soap. His warm skin was soothing against hers, brushing away any discomfort caused by cold water and wet clothing. And suddenly her lips were on his, warm and hungry and desperate. She wanted to get a taste of what one way or another was never going to be. And inexplicably, Clark returned the kiss. He even deepened it, as he opened his lips in a gentle welcome of her tongue that timidly slipped forward to explore the possibilities of a budding friendship, which should be so much more.

“Help is on its way,” he whispered against her lips as he broke the kiss. “At least I hope it is.” Lois heard the doubt in his voice, the fear that whatever he had told Henderson had not been enough or that he would be too late. And she wanted to kiss him again to make it all better.

“It was a pleasure working with you, too,” Lois replied instead, feeling the sudden need to confess it all. “Clark, I think I'm in...”

“Lane, don't tell me you're in trouble, again,” a voice crackled through the speaker, interrupting her. Lois spotted Inspector Henderson behind the bull's eye, smirking. “We're getting you out of there now.”

The water began to fall instantly and only minutes later, Lois and Clark stood in front of the Inspector, dripping wet.

“You sure took your sweet time,” Lois remarked sourly and gratefully took a blanket that a police officer handed her. She looked over to Clark, who was pulling his own blanket around his shoulders. He didn't return her glance, his attention firmly on Henderson. The moment of magic was nothing but a memory.

“Luthor put up quite a fight. It turned out; he didn't want to be arrested,” Henderson replied wryly.

“Where is he now?” Clark asked, a slight tremor in his voice. He seemed tense, as if he was afraid of what Luthor would tell the police.

“Unfortunately, he preferred death over a long sentence in prison,” Henderson said quietly. “We thought we had secured all exits, but there must be a secret elevator that leads from this

bunker directly to Luthor's penthouse. He fled to his penthouse, obviously hoping he would be able to get away in his helicopter. When that didn't work, he jumped.” Henderson shook his head. “Three jumpers in one day. That must be something of a record, even for Metropolis.”

Three weeks later, Lois and Clark were still basking in their success. Henderson had kept his word, granting them the exclusive on everything that was uncovered regarding Lex Luthor. As a result, they had been constantly busy, writing article after article about all the sinister dealings that Luthor was involved in. Clark's box of evidence had been a great asset.

The extent of Luthor's crimes had been a surprise even to Clark. Luthor had led his organization from the bunker under Lex Tower. It had belonged to an older building that Luthor Corp had torn down. According to the building plan, the bunker had been demolished to make room for an underground parking lot. It was just another example of Luthor's ability to hide his tracks. Since the bunker was lined with lead to shelter from radiation, Clark had never seen it during his investigations.

It had taken two days until Clark had regained his powers after the exposure to the rock. People had expressed their shock about Luthor's tests. Lois had explained Superman's absence as a result of those tests; he did not want to endanger people around him because some lunatics insisted on finding out more about him. A flood of letters had hit the Planet, begging for Superman to return.

That, more than anything, had helped convince Clark to don the suit again.

A few days later Superman had even dared to give Lois an interview, much to Perry's delight. A couple of Superman exclusives had followed, making the Daily Planet by far the most successful newspaper in Metropolis and, possibly, the world. After only a few weeks of working together Lois and Clark had already been acknowledged as one of the best reporting teams the Daily Planet had ever had.

In Lois's book, things couldn't have been better. But even three weeks after Luthor's death, Clark was still living in a cheap hotel. At first, Lois had blamed it on the workload. But she had to admit that she was beginning to worry. She had taken it for granted that Clark was going to stay, now that Luthor was no longer a threat. Superman was the disguise that would allow him to lead the normal life she knew he had always wanted. There was no reason for him to leave, was there? So why wasn't he settling down?

It had occurred to her that he had never actually made a plan for what would happen after Luthor. He had come to Metropolis to bring the billionaire down. Now that he had succeeded, he didn't really have a reason to stay, either. She couldn't expect that one frantic kiss would compel him to stay.

Lois was already dreading the loss of the friend she had found in Clark. If she was completely honest with herself, she hoped that they were going to be more, one day. She thought that Clark considered her a friend as well. But was her friendship enough to draw him to Metropolis? Would he prefer the quiet rural life that allowed him to sleep?

Lois felt a lump in her throat as she was on her way to meeting Clark. About an hour ago, Clark had suddenly dashed off, probably to be Superman. A little later, she had found a note on her desk.

<Meet me at 344 Clinton Street> it had said.

Lois had no idea, if this was work related or not. Maybe Clark was going to show her one of those obscure places with the most delicious food, which were only visible to him.

She was afraid that they would share a meal over which he would eventually say goodbye.

Lois rounded the corner into Clinton Street. It was one of the

uglier parts of the city. Soon she found the right number and started to climb up stairs.

Someone, probably Clark, had used chalk to draw arrows on the walls. She followed the route they were marking until she stood in front of a door. She knocked, but the door already swung open. Tentatively, Lois stepped inside and looked around. A short flight of stairs led into a larger room.

The place was in bad shape. A large, dirty window allowed for a bit of light. Cob webs covered the walls and most of the rubble that lay on the floor. It seemed to be a storage room, which had not been used for years. Dust was everywhere. A couple of cupboards hung on the far wall that once upon a time had probably belonged to a kitchen.

“What a dump,” Lois muttered under her breath. “Clark?” Lois said louder, announcing her presence. He stepped around a wall that separated the room from another section. “Where are we?”

“My new apartment,” Clark replied with a grin.

“You’ve got a knack for dumps, don’t you?” Lois asked, a smile spreading across her lips. A rush of relief went through her. “So, you’re going to stay?” she said excitedly, giving into her sudden need to hug him.

Clark returned her embrace, drawing her close until she could once again inhale the soft scent of soap and aftershave. His arms were so strong and yet so gentle, making her feel safe and secure like she never had with anyone else.

“Why would I ever leave you?”

THE END