

# Mind's Eye

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Summary: Lois Lane prides herself on her ability to easily extract complex details from seemingly unimportant sources or pieces of evidence on her quest to discover the truth; however, when it comes to a certain "hack-from-Nowheresville," she avoids looking beneath his nerdy, farm boy charm, focusing her analytical skills solely on the enigmatic superhero in red and blue. However, following an accident, she gains a special power that every reporter wishes they had. What will she discover about Metropolis' resident hero, and what will that mean for Clark?

Story Size: 23,398 words (129Kb as text)

Author's Note: This story was found in June of 2016, unfinished, residing in the corner of my hard drive that housed the rest of my fanfic — from stuff that was written in 2000 all the way up to my most recent story that was just completed a month ago. The last save date on this one was January, 2007. Reading through it, I found myself enjoying the story, but then it just...ended, mid-scene. The story was about 2/3 done at the time, and it seemed a shame to just leave it like that, especially considering how much I enjoyed re-reading it. So, more than 9 years after last touching it, I decided to finish it. And this is what came out. Hope you enjoy!

Also: I do not own the characters of Lois, Clark, or Superman. Standard disclaimers apply.

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It was as Lois was in midair that the ship she had just leapt from exploded, the hot rush of air propelling her outward, away from the wreck, and ultimately, into the cold depths of the ocean. She opened her eyes as she was forced under the waves, seeing the distorted shape of the fireball in the distance, and marveling for a moment at its stark beauty. The feeling quickly passed, though, as her lungs began to burn from lack of oxygen. She struggled toward the surface, taking a large gulp of air as her head finally broke through. The fireball that had engulfed the ship was now largely gone, replaced by a regular, almost calming blaze that illuminated the surrounding ocean, which was now littered with debris. It would only be a moment, Lois thought, turning her eyes toward the sky. Superman couldn't miss an explosion, especially not one this close to shore, and in no time she would be in his arms, flying to somewhere drier and more pleasant. She allowed herself to enjoy the thought, but before her fantasy could be fulfilled, something crashed into the water with a loud splash mere inches from her.

Startled, Lois turned toward the sound. Most of the items floating in the water around her had been whole mere moments earlier, before meeting their doom in the blast. But as her gaze found the object that had come oh-so-close to hitting her, it dawned on her that maybe the explosion hadn't destroyed everything. Even in the dim light from the soft orange glow of the fire, it wasn't hard to tell that it was a bottle bobbing in the water next to her, its elegant curves indicative of an item that was delicate and probably quite valuable. Lois tilted her head slightly as she reached into the water and cupped her hand beneath it, raising it up for a better look. She turned it back and forth, smiling slightly as the light glinted off its surface. Out of the water, it was even more beautiful than she had originally thought, if that was

possible. She wondered what exactly the bottle held, and how it ended up on the yacht of a first-class low-rent slime-ball, but before she could truly ponder those questions, a wave washed over her. Reflexively, her grip tightened around the neck of the bottle, but that only served to pop it into the air with a wet squeak. As it fell, she angled herself underneath it, and after a moment, it landed gently against her chest.

Nice catch, Lane, she thought with a smile as she reached down to get a grip on the bottle again. But before she could, it began to glow with a yellowish light and smoke began to come from the top. Transfixed, Lois found herself unable to move as more smoke poured from it, curling around and circling above the bottle, defiant to the gusty winds that stirred up the waves around her. Eventually the smoke started to take on a shape, at first vaguely that of a man, then more clearly so. He appeared to be...a genie. A really small genie, who had just materialized from the strange-looking, mysterious bottle.

"You have to be kidding me," Lois muttered. The genie, who had been hovering quietly above the bottle, his legs crossed and his arms folded together, came alive at her words. His eyes popped open, and a startled expression formed on his face.

"I am not this, 'kidding me' person, I assure you," the genie said. "My name is Julian, and I am here to grant you three wishes."

"Three wishes, right," Lois said, pondering reaching down to pinch herself. The chill of the water, though, and the uncomfortable way her clothes were clinging to her body were proof enough that she wasn't dreaming. Maybe it was a practical joke or something. Looking around, though, Lois couldn't see anyone who might be watching.

"It's cliché, I know," the genie said with a sigh, waving his hand in the air. "But what can a genie do? It's not MY fault that one of my fellow genies just happened to help a guy who's good at penning tall tales."

"I just have trouble believing this is happening, that's all," Lois said, the distinct feeling coming over her that maybe she was experiencing hypothermia or something. She was a professional reporter, right? And professional reporters didn't talk to genies, did they?

"Cast your wish, and we shall see," the genie said with a smug smile. Well, Lois thought, there probably wasn't any harm in trying it out. And if she were hallucinating, well, maybe it would make the experience a little more fun. Okay then, she decided, make a wish. At the moment, she fervently wished that she was at home, dry. At the same time, though, making a wish to be on dry land would negate a possible rescue by Superman, something that she would never miss if given a choice. Maybe, she thought, the first wish should be completely outrageous.

"I wish..." Lois started, wracking her brain for the best possible wish that she could have granted. Money would be the easy answer, but her time with Lex taught her that money didn't necessarily equate to happiness, and there was only so much that money could buy. Besides, it didn't take much creativity to wish for a few million dollars, and even in her dreams, Lois prided herself on thinking outside the box. There was always world peace, but then she probably wouldn't have anything to report on, as awful as the thought was. After a moment, one idea popped into her head, and the more she thought about it, the more certain she became that it was absolutely perfect. It would be a wonderful skill for a top-notch investigative reporter to possess. The world could be hers. Politicians could never grease their way out of an interview; bad guys and scumbags could never distract her with a charming smile and flattery.

"I wish I could read other people's thoughts," she finally said with a wicked smile.

As soon as the words were uttered, the air began to crackle with electricity, raising goose bumps on Lois's arms. Suddenly,

with a bright flash, the genie disappeared. “Granted,” he said, the bright light overtaking everything around Lois with a loud boom. Then, just as suddenly as it had come, the light faded and the world went black. The bottle, still nestled against her chest, was no longer glowing, the air was no longer filled with smoke. Even the blaze on the boat seemed to be gone now. Only the stars above interrupted the total darkness, the gentle lapping of the waves around her the only sound.

It was then that two strong arms slipped underneath her, plucking her from the water and lifting off into the cool night air. She made sure that the bottle was still firmly against her chest before she looked up to see the face of her rescuer. She smiled reflexively as her eyes met his, and she couldn't help but notice him smile ever so slightly in response.

“Thank you, Superman,” she said.

“You're welcome Lois,” he answered. They flew in silence for a moment, eyes locked, before he looked away. “Just out of curiosity, what brings you out this way tonight?” he asked. Lois could feel a blush rise on her cheeks, and she quickly turned her face away from him to try and shield her embarrassment. What was it about being with him that caused her to act like a self-conscious schoolgirl?

“Well, I stowed away on the boat of Jimmy the Rat after hearing a tip that he was going to be meeting a business associate out here tonight. I thought I could get some juicy stuff, but as it happened, I picked the night when the Rat was supposed to be exterminated.”

<Figures,> the voice of Superman said, but it wasn't her ears that heard the word. Startled, she turned toward Superman again, but he appeared to be as stoic and neutral as ever. That voice, though...stoic wasn't the word she'd use to describe it. She blinked a couple times, wondering if it was just another figment of her imagination. But even as she looked at his face and his unmoving lips, his voice entered her mind again. <See, this is why you never go to the movies. Aside from not having a date, you know that somewhere in the middle, probably during the good part, Lois will require rescuing.>

He...? What...? Lois blinked again, not quite sure whether to be indignant, amused, or extremely scared. Her mind just had to be playing tricks on her. But, then again, what if it wasn't? As odd as it might seem, wasn't this her wish? If she didn't know any better, she'd certainly think that these were Superman's thoughts that she was hearing. Holy cow, she thought, her head spinning as she felt herself descending dangerously toward panic.

As Lois looked toward Superman, she saw apprehension etched on his face, probably in response to the confusion that was undoubtedly radiating from her by now. She tried to smile at him, and although the gesture seemed to soften his expression somewhat, he still seemed concerned. “Well, I'm just glad you're okay. Jimmy the Rat wasn't so lucky,” he said, the words definitely coming from his mouth this time.

Lois shrugged. “After all these years, I'm getting pretty good at spotting bombs.”

Superman frowned. “I just wish you wouldn't get yourself in situations where you had to, that's all. One of these days I might not be here to save you.”

The warning was the same every time he rescued her, the words very familiar to both of them by now. She had no doubt that what he said was sincere, and she always tried, however half-heartedly, to convince herself that maybe it would be wise to be more cautious, that maybe someday she would fall victim her sometimes overzealous drive to get the story at all costs. Invariably, though, her mind came back to the fact that, despite the warnings, Superman really had been there for her whenever she needed him. And realistically she had to admit that any attempt to scale back her dangerous reporting work would result in fewer opportunities to get that big story, and it would certainly mean that

she would see less of Superman. That alone made her unwilling to heed his warnings, no matter what the possible cost. She just had to make sure he wasn't halfway across the country when she went on her assignment, that's all.

It was usually at this point that she made some flippant comment, something that wouldn't exactly say that she was ignoring his advice, but was said in a way that could make both of them smile. Lois bit her lip, pondering whether or not to ask him if they should swap calendars so they could coordinate her next rescue. But before the words came, she heard his voice in her head again, and she could only stare at him in surprise.

<If I ever lost you, I don't know what I'd do,> he thought. She searched his face, but his expression didn't betray his thoughts. It was possible she had imagined the words — words that she had always wished to hear from him. He had never explicitly said anything that would lead her to believe that he harbored any feelings toward her, although it didn't take much imagination to think that he did just from the bare emotion that she saw in his eyes every time they met. Of course, her romantic side had always imagined that emotion to be love, even as her more practical side suggested that it was the same simple compassion that he had for anyone who was in trouble. Still, all the meaningful glances she had received from him in the short time that they had known each other didn't betray even a fraction of the emotion that the words in her head just did, and Lois found herself overwhelmed. She wanted to hug him and shout for joy, but she also wanted to hear him actually say the words. As flattering as it was to know that he cared for her, it still didn't seem real, and she knew that it wouldn't until she heard it with her ears instead of her mind.

Too late, Lois realized that her thoughts had led her to sigh loudly, drawing the attention of her hero. His eyes looked toward her even as his head faced forward, a small smile playing across his lips. He gently drew her in more closely toward his chest, and instantly she felt more at ease.

Maybe it would be best to stop pondering the meaning of phantom words in her mind and just enjoy the moment and let the adrenaline subside, she thought. Lois diverted her eyes downward and decided that experiencing the city from the arms of Superman was something that she could never tire of. The New Troy shoreline rapidly approached, the docks beyond quickly giving way to the Metropolis financial district. As she watched the city flash by below her, she valiantly tried to relax, push aside her earlier thoughts and forget everything that had happened in the last few minutes and just observe, but she found herself unable to. His words kept repeating themselves in her mind like a broken record, her subconscious making note of the sound of his voice and the deeper meaning attached to the statement. If a stray glance or meaningful expression could fuel her romantic feelings for him for so long, she knew that his statement tonight would lead to happy day dreams for a long time to come, and there was nothing she could do to stop them.

The words became like a mantra, a soundtrack to the flight, and eventually occupied all conscious thought. It was only after she started mentally replaying a song and forced them to stop she became aware of his voice entering her mind again. Curious, she concentrated on the new information, and after a moment she found herself smiling.

<In 1979, George Brett led the Kansas City Royals in hitting percentage and home runs,> Superman's voice said. <Remember when we went to a game that year? It didn't seem like anyone could stop him. The American league batting title went to, uh...it wasn't Brett, was it? No, some other guy...>

Lois had to stop herself from laughing. The city presented itself in all its glory below them, while the stars sparkled above. In his arms was someone more than capable of holding an interesting, intelligent conversation, and all Superman could think of was baseball. Lois liked to think that she had something to do

with that. And maybe it was further proof that maybe his feelings for her ran deeper than he let on. Still...why the Kansas City Royals fixation? Nobody liked the Kansas City Royals. He continued to mentally review various useless statistics all the way back to her apartment, Lois doing everything in her power to hide her amusement at his particular distancing technique.

Eventually, they approached her window which hung slightly ajar out of habit. His baseball dialogue ceased as they floated into the apartment, signaling the end of their trip and her return to the real world. She tightened her grip on the bottle as he lowered her to the ground and stepped away. It was amazing, she thought, a half smile forming on her face. He had plucked her sopping wet from the ocean and held her tightly against his chest, but he didn't appear to have gotten a drop of water on him. Meanwhile, the short flight had left her soaked to the bone, and now somewhat chilled.

"Thank you for being there for me once again," Lois said, her shoes sloshing as she shifted her weight. "If it wasn't for you..."

"I'm just glad I could help," Superman said, cutting her off and taking another step back. She could almost feel him sigh as he took a long look toward her, his steely exterior hiding any emotion.

"I do enjoy our impromptu flights above the city, though it would be nice to meet under different circumstances," Lois said, hoping to lighten the mood.

Superman's mouth twitched in response, although his expression seemed almost sad. <If you only knew,> he thought, the words heavy. His eyes probed her for a moment, then the words came in her head again, this time almost causing her jaw to drop out of sheer surprise. <She's wet and it's chilly in here, and you're not noticing that fact at all. It's definitely time to go.>

"Goodnight, Lois," he said, nodding politely to her, then quickly lifting off the ground and disappearing through the window. Well, that was interesting, she thought, her gaze moving downward and seeing the source of his comment. Her new talent was already beginning to reap some rewards. Who knew that underneath the cape and the spandex, Superman wasn't the stiff and formal superhero that he let on to be? His personality was very different from what she had ever imagined. And quirky, she thought with a grin. There was a definite swing in her step as she kicked off her shoes and headed for the bathroom and a nice warm shower, placing the bottle on her end table along the way. The Man of Steel was not immune to a little mental innuendo, and it had been aimed at her tonight, a fact that she found herself to be almost proud of. One thing was for sure, it would be pleasant dreams for Lois.

And she sure couldn't wait for tomorrow.

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It took less than a day for Lois to decide that she would rather not be able to hear all the deepest darkest thoughts that lurked in the minds of others. As fun as it had been to get beneath the façade of her favorite superhero, most people simply weren't that interesting. It was a depressing revelation, but she supposed she wasn't really all that surprised. What was it that SHE usually thought about every morning on the way into work? Or while she's drinking her coffee? Or fighting the crowds on the busy Metropolis sidewalks? Certainly not anything earth-shattering or even particularly interesting. Apparently, she wasn't alone in that respect.

Soon after arriving at work that morning, Lois told Perry she was going out to work on a hot lead she had received, although "lead" was a little deceptive. It was more of a trial run of her new talents, which was sure to bring her something that could end up being a lead, but Perry didn't need to know that. Besides, it wasn't as if she had any other hard news to work on at the moment. The boat explosion from the night before had already been covered by the overnight crew, and her lead on the late Jimmy the Rat wasn't

substantial enough to warrant a story of yet, although she could see it solidifying once details of the gangster's estate emerged. For the time being it was just her and the minds of Metropolis. How many devious little secrets could be hidden there, factoids that may never be discovered if not for her valiant efforts? There had to be several out there that could spawn some sort of investigation, solve a long-standing mystery, or bring justice to someone who thought that the world had forgotten about their past indiscretions. It was with optimism, then, that she pulled up a chair at a local sidewalk café to begin her investigation.

Her first target was a woman sitting at a nearby table, sipping a latté and watching the crowd pass on the sidewalk. While listening to the woman mentally review her grocery list, Lois lamented the fact that she couldn't actually dig around in her mind for secrets, because the thoughts she had managed to hear so far had been eye-crossingly dull. Even so, Lois stuck with it, hoping that it would eventually pay dividends. The woman's thoughts eventually turned to cooking supper that night, leading to a mental tirade about how ungrateful her husband was. She started mentally listing all the ways in which the man was a poor excuse for a human being, in stunning detail. Lois actually found herself feeling sorry for the man as she forced herself to turn her attention elsewhere. Strike one, she thought, deciding to aim her mental powers at the waitress next. If anyone needed a definition of what constituted mental clutter, all they needed to do was tune into that poor girl's brain. It seemed like a thousand different thoughts were flying around in there all at once, the topics ranging from which patron ordered what to whether or not her hair was perfect to what the weather forecast was for the rest of the week. It was enough to make Lois crazy, and she ended up looking for a new target very quickly.

The experience didn't really get any better than her initial encounters. Lois decided after a while that listening to personal introspection was very boring. Even after all the caffeine that she had consumed, she found her eyelids drooping as the hours slid by without any results. After a while, she started toying with her abilities, trying to see how far the range was, or whether she could toggle it on or off. The most exciting part of the morning was when she was finally able to flip that mental switch that would turn off her newfound talents and allow her a few moments of peace. As she rose from the café to make room for the lunchtime crowd, she decided that maybe it was best to keep the private thoughts of others private for the rest of the day and leave her talents for when there was a guaranteed payoff.

Her feet were dragging noticeably when she finally wandered back into the Daily Planet building without her promised lead. She avoided eye contact with Perry as she slinked to her desk, hoping to find something, anything, to occupy her time. Hopefully some brilliant scoop would present itself, so she could avoid any talk of what she had been doing all morning. Some story just had to be out there waiting for Lois Lane to give it the treatment it deserved. At the thought, Lois looked toward the desk of her partner, a wide smile forming on her face. Clark seemed blissfully unaware of her presence, engrossed in something or another, papers scattered across his desk. Not that she would ever muscle in on his story, but they WERE partners in an officially unofficial sense, and his work always seemed to be better with her input. Besides, he looked like he could use a little help, even if he didn't know it yet.

With a sly smile, Lois rose from her chair and sauntered in the general direction of Clark's desk, nonchalantly surveying the documents that he had in front of him, intending to survey the situation for now and assess how she would offer her help. The papers looked official, the seals of the city and state government atop some of them. Keep walking, she told herself, but she couldn't seem to pull her eyes away from his desk. It wasn't any surprise then that after a few more steps, her foot connected loudly with a trash can, drawing the attention of everyone on the floor.

Never one to fall victim to an embarrassing moment, Lois kept on walking, her eyes forward now, off toward destinations unknown...maybe the coffee machine.

A warm cup of brew later, Lois took off toward Clark's desk, this time with a new sense of purpose. "Hey, Clark," she said cheerily as she approached his desk, drawing his attention. As usual, he regarded her with a light, friendly smile. Sometimes it was too easy.

"Hi, Lois. What've you been up to? Haven't seen you around much today," he said, and her grin faltered for a moment. She felt the momentary desire to take a peek into his mind to see what his thoughts on the matter were, but she held back, remembering her earlier vow.

"I, uh, had a hot lead," Lois said, waving her hand dismissively. "Looks like you have one, too."

Clark's eyes narrowed somewhat, and his smile became crooked. She didn't even need to read minds to gauge his thoughts, she decided. He knew what she was up to, although he seemed to be far from upset. "It's nothing that hot or that interesting," he replied, an amused tone in his voice. "Tracking political contributions and how effective they end up being. Stuff like that."

"Wow," Lois said, cringing. Who knew there were facts out there waiting to be discovered that were even more dull than the grocery lists and mental appointment calendars that she had seen all morning?

"Well, it is educational to see how the political process works. Interest Group X gives big money to Politician Y, and surprise, surprise, nine months later Politician Y ends up introducing legislation that gives a big boost to Interest Group X. It's one of those things that you always figured happened, but seeing it put together like this is...just..." Clark stopped, cocking his head to one side, as Lois let out a yawn.

"Oh, don't stop," Lois said as soon as she could, drawing a chuckle out of Clark. He smiled at her for a moment, appearing as if he were going to say one of his infamous quips, but he never got around to it. It was probably just as well, Lois thought, the sound of a police dispatch seemingly filling the air around her. Clark seemed to notice it as his head turned sharply toward the windows and his eyes became distant. It was odd, Lois thought, as the dispatcher urgently announced a fire at a midtown office building, that nobody else seemed to hear the sound. Confused, she looked toward Clark again, only to see a look of panic on his face.

"Lois," he said sharply. "I'm sorry, but I just remembered that I have an appointment to get to."

Lois blinked at him in disbelief. An appointment? He heard the dispatch, right? Surely whatever it was could wait. "You...?" she started, but the words wouldn't come.

"When I get back, I'll get you caught up on this story. Maybe you can find an interesting angle."

"Okay," Lois said, bringing a smile from him. With that, he shot out of his chair and walked quickly toward the stairwell, his hand on the knot of his tie. Lois remained perched on the corner of his desk, too shocked to realize at first that the sound of the dispatch seemed to go away as Clark left the room. Strange. Well, she thought, looking around, nobody else was heading toward the doors. Maybe they really didn't hear what she heard. And maybe, just maybe, there was a scoop out there for her after all. Pity Clark and his appointment, she thought as she rose and went to fetch her bag. The high rise fire was all hers.

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Even with the benefit of whatever it was that had allowed Lois to hear the original dispatch for the fire, the relatively long taxi ride across town delayed her just enough to land her in the midst of a frenzy of activity as she arrived at the scene. The Metropolis Fire Department had the area cordoned off for a block on either side of the fire — their fire engines lined up inside the ring of

barricades further serving to block any view of the activity on the ground. Lois managed to fight her way through the thick crowd of onlookers and other reporters to get as close as she was able to the scene, although the long block of busy street between the barricades and the fire wasn't close enough to allow more than a glimpse of it. The building itself was engulfed in smoke and flames, ladders perched beside it raining water down upon the fire. Superman was there, flying in and out of the blaze faster than Lois could track, usually emerging with someone in his arms, depositing them at a waiting ambulance before disappearing again. Every now and then he took a few moments to aid the firemen, to aim their hoses at unseen hot spots or provide them better access to the fire. All in all it was a very mundane scene, as far as fires in Metropolis went, but Lois knew that now, for her, it could be considered an opportunity.

It was true that she had decided to mothball the mind-reading powers, at least when it came to using them on the unsuspecting average citizen of the city, but Superman was still fair game. And now, when he was doing his super feats, would be a perfect time to crawl inside his mind and try to hear what he really experienced as he did his duties. It was one thing to imagine what she would think or do in his place, but to hear his thoughts firsthand and uncensored, that would be something else entirely. What was it like to walk through unimaginable heat with the knowledge that it couldn't harm you? How did it feel to move faster than the human eye could conceive? Would he be filled with confidence as he faced disaster, or would apprehension and self-consciousness lurk beneath his steely facade? Up until now, the answers to those questions had been known only to him, and she intended to change that. Summoning all the power in her possession, she concentrated on him and closed her eyes, waiting for that tenuous mental link to establish itself, but not really knowing what to expect.

Immediately a scream pierced her consciousness, causing her to flinch as her eyes opened abruptly. The woman next to Lois gazed pointedly in her direction, but nobody else appeared to have heard the noise. Although, now that her eyes were open, Lois couldn't hear it anymore, either. With a start, she looked toward the building, wondering if she had heard something that Superman had also heard. Up until now, she had only heard the thoughts of others, not experienced the sights and sounds as they did. But... maybe he had been so fixated on the sound that it became his thoughts. Or maybe Superman's mind simply worked differently. It was an intriguing idea, but it was beside the point right now. Concentrate, Lois thought, taking a deep, calming breath and closing her eyes once again.

The scream came again as soon as her eyelids fluttered shut, then the sound of a series of wracking coughs. The smell of ash became almost overpowering, the crackle of flames steady and regular. Then came the mental images, the pictures beautiful and disturbing at the same time. Orange colored the world, the bright yellows and blues of the flames shooting up the walls and licking the ceiling with the rush of hot air, the currents causing the fire to form swirls and waves. All around her, droplets of water seemed to dance in slow motion, their teardrop shapes distorting the light from the blaze and reflecting miniature pictures of the surroundings. On the floor, a woman lay crumpled, her arms outstretched toward the door, her chest heaving as she seemed to cough almost agonizingly slowly. Lois's heart clenched with compassion, even as she realized that some of the emotion must be coming from Superman. Fluidly, easily, a pair of arms clad in blue, Superman's arms, slipped beneath the woman and brought her toward his chest even as he turned to exit the building. Flames stood between where he was and the exit, but he didn't flinch as he walked right through them, the blue of the sky finally becoming visible past the charred interior of the building. Gracefully, he exited and floated to the ground, depositing the woman on a gurney. Up until that point, there had been an underlying sense of

urgency driving his motions, but as he turned back toward the assembled masses, that urgency seemed to fall away. His eyes immediately found her amongst the crowd, and she could see herself standing there, her eyes closed, a look of peace on her face.

Lois gasped, her eyes opening once again. In the distance, Superman stood next to an ambulance, his dark eyes locked onto her, his face unreadable. He seemed magnificent, standing tall against the flurry of activity from the police, paramedics, and firemen, his cape flapping gently in the light breeze, the slight layer of grime that covered his features making his figure that much more impressive. But at that moment, Lois couldn't help but feel that somehow it was the sight of her that gave him strength. <Lois,> he thought, then looked back toward the fire, and with a blur of motion he was gone.

Lois noticed how much more quickly the flames seemed to flicker in front of her than they did when she saw them through his eyes. Water cascaded from the hoses, the drops moving with the speed that water usually did when it fell. She wondered for a moment if she had experienced what it was like to move faster than the world. Was that what it was like for him all the time? Did the rain hang in the air and the people move in slow motion? Did speeding bullets slow to a crawl, just asking to be plucked from the air? She wanted to laugh just thinking about the sheer joy it must bring to experience those things, but she couldn't laugh — not here. The tenuous mental link that she still had with him told her that everyone seemed to be safe now, and that Superman had turned toward more businesslike tasks, but nobody else knew that. She did allow herself a smile, though, at the experience.

As the fire died down and the crowds began to disperse, Lois decided to move on. It was time to go back to the Planet to write up the story. Then there would be plenty of time to revel in what she had seen that day from her hero.

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Clark wasn't at the Planet when Lois arrived. Whatever appointment he had, apparently it had been fairly long. As she finished her story and proofread the copy, he still hadn't arrived. She was beginning to get worried, but as she finally hit the "submit" button and forwarded it on to Perry, he emerged from the elevator, seemingly a little worse for the wear. His eyes never left the floor and he wandered slowly down the walkway and toward his desk. She held up her hand in greeting, but he didn't look her way. He seemed preoccupied, she thought, a voice in the back of her head telling her to take a little peek to see what had upset him. It was tempting, she thought with a rise of her eyebrows, but there were certainly more conventional ways of getting the information.

"Hi, Clark," Lois said as she rose from her desk. He looked up, a small smile finally forming on his face as his eyes met hers.

"Hi, Lois," he said, his attempt at cheerfulness not wholly successful in driving the flatness from his voice.

"How was your appointment?" she asked as she leaned against his desk. His smile faltered, and at that moment an image materialized in her vision, then just as quickly went away. With the image came a rush of emotion so powerful, it felt like a punch to the stomach.

"I don't really want to talk about it," he said, looking away from her, a sour note in his voice. Lois's breath caught in her throat, and she tried to summon the image that she had seen and sort out the feelings that had come with it. It was hard to know what exactly it was, but she just knew that it was bathed in orange and contained a shape that vaguely resembled a man. The thought brought sorrow, the depths of which were hard for her to fathom. Lois took a step back, gasping at the intensity of her grief and the sudden feeling that whatever it was that she had seen was all her fault. No, she thought, not her fault, but...Clark's fault.

She turned to him in astonishment, wondering for the first time where it was he had really gone and what he had seen. She contemplated reaching out to him with her mind, trying to

understand what it was that he thought he had done, but she couldn't. Clark was her friend, and he apparently was very upset. It was hard not to feel compassion toward him, although it surprised her how badly she wanted to ease his pain away. Reflexively, she reached out, her fingers gently brushing his shoulder. "It's okay, Clark," she said with a smile.

He turned toward her, his eyes dark, and Lois quickly drew her hand back, the smile dropping from her face. Her gesture had been more intimate than she had intended, its affects apparently stronger than she would've ever realized if not for her new gifts. What would've seemed like a look of deep friendship that was directed her way was now accompanied by another emotion, this one equally as strong as what he had felt earlier. Lois took another step back, intending to retreat to her desk, but she couldn't tear her eyes away from his.

"Thank you, Lois," he answered, his voice heavy. Lois nodded, unable to speak for a moment.

"I, uh, should get going," she said, pointing her thumb toward the elevators and taking another step away from him. Clark nodded in response, a grateful smile on his face, and finally Lois turned away from him, walking quickly toward the elevator. Suddenly, the air in the newsroom was too thick, the walls too close. She needed to get home, immerse herself in a tub of chocolate ice cream, and try to figure out what it all meant.

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As soon as Lois entered her apartment, she made a beeline for the sofa, tossing her keys onto a side table on the way. On the drive over, while trying to process the various images and emotions that had been directed her way that afternoon, she had decided that the whole mind reading thing was beginning to become a bit too much. Lois sank into the couch and closed her eyes, leaning forward to cradle her head in her lap. The experience at the fire itself was magnificent and intense, and vivid in a way she would've never thought possible. She had been inside the mind of Superman, she'd done and felt what he'd done, and she had no doubt about that. It was like living a dream, and in some ways, it was hard to return to her drab life after such an experience. But Clark...

The image that he'd projected into her mind sprang into her vision again, causing an involuntary shiver to work its way down her spine. It was strange how similar that image was to the one's that she'd see through Superman's eyes, down to the orange glow and the accompanying odor of char and smoke. Maybe her mind was playing tricks on her or maybe her wires had gotten crossed and she'd become confused, but she could almost swear it was from the same fire. But what was the image exactly? Lois suspected the answer to that question was what caused her negative reaction. The fact that the darkened, charred shape at the center of her vision looked like a man could mean that it was a man at one time — a man who had not been saved, despite the presence of Superman.

Knowing that such an image came from Clark was confusing, to say the least. Lois hadn't seen him at the fire, and he had told her himself that he had another appointment at the same time. So why would he be seeing charred corpses? With a sigh, Lois shook her head slowly and sat up, her hand reaching for the television remote on the side table. Between that ugly vision and the other scary emotion that Clark had unconsciously projected to her, she was too overwhelmed to deal with it all at the moment. It was time for the early news, and nothing helped chase away the problems like scoping out the competition.

As fate would have it, the opening story of the evening was the fire. The facts seemed pretty straightforward, the footage familiar enough. Lois could've written the story easily, and with a smile she remembered that she had, in fact, written the story earlier that afternoon. But there was one little item in the TV news that hadn't made her story, and as the newscaster spoke, she felt

the goose bumps rise on her arms.

“Despite the efforts of Superman, one person was found dead inside the building. The name of the victim is being withheld pending notification of the family.” The television showed the burnt building from afar; the picture trained on the upper stories, where Superman stood inside a broken window, the blue and red of his uniform standing out against the charred remains of the office. Firemen had made their way around him, and after a moment, their eyes followed his, and they each took off their helmets, holding them to their chests before looking away. Superman’s expression was hard to read, but his eyes looked pained. In an instant, he took off into the sky, and the picture changed to a view of the commentator. “Metropolis fire department officials state that preliminary tests indicate that arson may have been involved.”

The last words from the television barely pierced Lois’s consciousness. Her eyes were wide, she knew, and she was slowly scooting down the couch and away from the television. “Clark,” she whispered, knowing that there was no way that he could be amongst the group that had found the body unless he was just on that screen. Only one logical solution presented itself. It was possible that there was another fire in town, at wherever his appointment was, or maybe that he moonlighted as a Metropolis firefighter. But it was more probable that he saw that body because he was... Superman. It made sense, she supposed. Who had been around when she heard the distress call in the newsroom, and who had been the only other person to hear it? Who was the only person besides Superman who she’d had such a strong mental connection to? And who was a closet Kansas City Royals fan?

“Who is this Clark fellow?” came a voice from very nearby, and Lois jumped off the couch with a yelp. As she came to a standing position, she saw the form of her genie hovering above the floor behind the couch, a thin wisp of smoke curling across the room and connecting him to the bottle, which now occupied a spot on her bookshelf. Lois stared at him for a moment, waiting for her heartbeat to slow down before finally giving him his answer.

“He’s my coworker. Well, my partner, really.”

“He sure has an interesting wardrobe,” the genie answered, and Lois had to stifle a giggle. If that wasn’t the pot calling the kettle black. The genie’s hat alone would make him stand out in any crowd, but that was beside the point. Lois turned back toward the television, where another of Superman’s feats was being shown — a rescue during an afternoon traffic pile up.

“Oh, no, that’s not Clark, that’s Superman,” Lois said, bringing a knowing smile to the face of the genie.

“But you just called him Clark,” he said, and Lois opened her mouth to answer, but the genie pointed to his head and nodded. “You’ve put your new gifts to work. It always happens, you know. Things are never what they seem. People are very good about putting up facades until someone crawls inside their head.”

Lois smiled gently and nodded, sinking back onto the couch, turning slightly so that she could observe the news and the genie at the same time. “How did you know?” she asked.

“Oh, you’re hardly the first to wish to see into the minds of others, and your friend is hardly the first to have his secret revealed.”

“Really?” Lois asked, wondering who else had been put in a similar situation, while at the same time chiding herself for having wished for such an unoriginal talent.

The genie nodded. “Secret crushes, mainly,” he said with a wave of the hand, his smile knowing. “Something tells me that may be the case here, as well.”

Lois looked down, her cheeks warm. If only the genie knew. The feeling of unadulterated love that had come from Clark after she had reassured him was still overwhelming. She tried not to think about it, and she refused to try and connect that emotion to the possibility that he was Superman. It was too much, too soon. “I

don’t even know for sure that Superman IS Clark. All I have are some pictures I saw in my mind’s eye.”

“If you insist,” the genie said, and Lois began to get the distinct impression that she was being toyed with.

“I just wish he would come right out and tell me. It would make things so much easier.” As soon as the words were uttered, Lois’s eyes grew wide and she brought her hand up to her mouth, but it was too late.

“Granted,” the genie said with a wink, and as before, the thunder came with a bright flash of light and he was gone. Just like that, the power seemed to go out for a moment in her apartment, sinking everything into relative darkness before the lights gently flickered on again. The television had reset to a channel carrying only the steady hiss of snow, and the clock on the VCR was flashing 12 AM. And, Lois realized with a feeling of dread, there was a knock on her door.

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As Lois cracked open her door, her worst suspicions were confirmed. There, standing in her hallway, was Clark Kent, a rather exaggerated smile on his face. He seemed eager, although his eyes appeared to be somewhat vacant. Trying to put on the most hospitable expression possible, Lois swung the door open. “Clark, won’t you please come...”

“Lois, I’m Superman,” he said, his voice a little too loud. Lois was too shocked to say anything for a moment, and she just stared at him, jaw agape. His eyebrows were raised in anticipation, every fiber in his being hanging on her reaction to his announcement. Even when no reaction was forthcoming, he still didn’t move, and after a few seconds, Lois forced herself to push past her initial shock and do something. Nervously, she looked either way down the hall, noting with relief that nobody else seemed to be around to hear his announcement. Quickly, she grabbed his arm, pulling him inside the apartment, dopey smile and all, slamming the door behind him.

The movement appeared to have an effect on him. The almost painfully eager smile faded into a confused frown, and he began to blink, his hand coming up to his forehead. Lois ushered him to the couch, and he gladly sat. “Would you like anything to drink?” Lois asked, realizing too late that she didn’t keep anything in stock besides bottled water. It was with some relief that she saw him shake his head, although she was becoming worried about his apparent disorientation. Without any more thought, she sat next to him. “Clark?” she said, and he turned his head toward her.

Her heart skipped a beat as their eyes locked. With her new knowledge, and his declaration a moment ago in the hallway, it was hard to believe that she ever saw Clark and Superman as two separate men. Superman’s characteristic steely strength might not be present in his eyes at the moment, but it was definitely there beneath the confusion. Likewise, Clark’s quick humor and easy smile were a long way away, but she knew it would only take an offhand comment on her part to coax them to the surface. In his soft, chocolate eyes she now saw all aspects of his personality, and it was almost overwhelming. She blinked and turned away, pushing the impending heavy thoughts and emotions to the back of her mind. There was nothing to think about anyway, she told herself. This was just Clark, reliable, good-natured, sensible Clark on the couch next to her, and he needed her help.

“What just happened?” he asked, his voice a little shaky. Lois looked down at her hands, wondering how exactly the genie’s spell had worked on him.

“Well...” Lois started, trying to think of a way to phrase her answer.

“I mean, one second I was hovering above the city, then I... was...” Lois looked curiously at Clark, whose eyes had now gone very wide, a look of shock on his face. “Uh, well, what I meant was...” he stammered, but Lois stopped him.

“I have something to confess,” she said, rising off the couch.

She quickly walked toward the bookcase, carefully picking up the bottle and heading back toward Clark. “Last night, when that ship blew up, I happened to find this bottle floating in the water.” She sat down on the couch and handed the bottle to Clark, who now seemed more confused than ever. “I know that you’re not going to believe this, but I accidentally rubbed the bottle and, well, a genie popped out.”

“Why do I feel like I just stepped into a fairy tale?” Clark asked, the first hint of a smile forming on his lips as he took the bottle from her. He looked the bottle over, turning it back and forth, as she continued.

“While I was bobbing in the ocean waiting for my rescue, I made my first wish.” Clark’s eyebrow rose as he looked at her, and she managed a self-effacing smile. “Of all the things in all the world to wish for, I ended up wishing I could read other peoples’ thoughts.”

<She can read my thoughts? Oh, no!> the words practically screamed from his mind, his horrified expression giving them a little extra punctuation.

“Oh, no, indeed,” Lois said with a smile.

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For a man who made his living from crafting the English language, the total lack of words that Clark found himself mired in was disturbing to say the least. His mouth opened and closed once or twice, and he knew that he had let out a small squeak at some point, but he couldn’t seem to put together anything coherent. Lois just stared at him, her eyebrow cocked and a small smirk on her lips. Inexplicably, the first thought to cross his mind was to wonder if she knew how entirely beautiful she was.

At the thought, her smile seemed to fade, her expression quickly morphing to one of timid discomfort. Her reaction was enough to drive the reality of the situation home to Clark. If Lois could read his thoughts, then it wasn’t too much of a stretch to assume that she had discovered that he and Superman were the same person. The thought left him a lot calmer than he had imagined it would, and the fact that she had now turned away from him, apparently embarrassed, told him that she wasn’t necessarily proud of her actions. But still, it left a lot of questions. Why did she listen in on his thoughts? How much had she heard exactly?

Well, she said that she had first made her wish the night before, right before he came to rescue her. That would mean the she had been able to listen in on what he was thinking during the flight home and at her apartment. Suddenly, Clark’s eyes went wide and his cheeks began to burn. Surely she wasn’t listening in when he...? Did she know that he had seen...? Clark looked pointedly in her direction, and she only bobbed her head once, affirming his worst case scenario.

“Oh, God,” he said as he leaned back on the couch and covered his face with his hands. He almost felt violated, naked. At the very least, he felt disappointed. On the other hand, maybe it was Lois who should feel violated, naked, and disappointed. After all, he had been gawking at her last night. The way her wet clothes had clung to her body had been hard not to notice. Still, how was he to know that his thoughts weren’t his own? Wasn’t he entitled to a little bit of mental privacy? It was hard enough keeping up an exterior façade when he came to her as Superman, and it would’ve been nearly impossible to keep up a mental façade as well. Once she had first tuned into his thoughts, it would’ve only been a matter of time before...

“It’s not like that,” Lois said, jarring him out of his mental tirade. Clark manipulated his hands so that he was looking at her through a gap in his fingers. Lois sighed, her gaze locked onto some faraway point. “At first it kind of happened by accident. Last night, Superman’s thoughts, YOUR thoughts, entered my mind on their own. I didn’t try to listen for them, I wasn’t entirely sure that I even could listen for them, but they were in my head just as surely as if I had heard them with my own ears. I had always

assumed that there was more to Superman than he would let anyone see, but last night was the first time that I knew for sure. That small success made me hungry to uncover other hidden thoughts and facts, so as soon as I could, I put my ability to work.”

“I trained my new little toy on the average masses to try and see if I could find something newsworthy lurking in the minds of my fellow Metropolitans. Suffice to say, there’s not much of interest in people’s everyday thoughts.” Lois gave a self-deprecating smirk and turned toward Clark. “It was decided somewhere between hearing about a cabbie’s secret rash and listening in on a passing businessman’s deepest Star Trek fantasy that maybe it was best to keep private thoughts private.”

She tucked a rogue strand of hair behind her ear and looked away from him. “Superman, on the other hand, was fair game. It seems kind of hypocritical, I know but...” She looked up again. As she had spoken, Clark found his hands slowly pulling away from his face, his panic subsiding. Lois’s eyes locked into his, and he felt his heart rate speed up a little. “I don’t know what it is, but there’s a strange connection between us. I can feel your moods without even wanting to. If I close my eyes, I can see what you see and hear what you hear. It goes beyond simply eavesdropping on thoughts, and I can’t stop it.”

“So, this afternoon, at the fire...?” Clark asked. He distinctly remembered seeing her standing there, her eyes closed as if she was trying to shut out the world around her. Maybe she was just lost in his mind, in his experiences.

Lois smiled wistfully and looked into the distance. “I saw raindrops dancing in slow motion, and felt fire tickling my skin... your skin. The sights, the sounds, the smells... it must be incredible to be you, to see what you see.” Her gaze turned toward him, and he couldn’t help but smile. After a year of being Superman, a year of using his powers on a continual basis, he had almost forgotten what it had felt like the first time that he had found he could move fast enough to cause the rest of the world to come to a virtual standstill around him. Such experiences were commonplace anymore, though, especially as he found himself stretching the limits of his abilities, trying to do more than he had ever contemplated before, often times not succeeding.

On its own, the sight of the charred man found in the building today entered his vision again, and his smile abruptly faded. “Not everything I see is incredible,” he said with a sigh.

Lois cringed, evidently seeing the same mental image that he had, and shook her head. “I guess I never realized that before tonight,” she said softly. There was a moment of silence, then she began talking again, her tone reserved. “I finally put one and one together this evening, after watching the news and understanding how it was that you could have seen something so gruesome.” She gestured at the bottle, which was now sitting on the coffee table. “In a case of impeccable timing, the genie popped out while I was in the middle of my revelation, and we got to talking. I made an offhand comment that I wished that you would tell me yourself, and the next moment...”

“I was at your apartment,” Clark said, nodding his head. It was a perfectly reasonable hypothetical request, he supposed, but when in the presence of a genie, wishes tended to come true. He squinted his eyes, furrowed his brow, and tried to recall just how he had happened to find himself inside Lois’s apartment, just what it was that the genie had done, but he couldn’t.

“It’s funny,” he said, looking at her. “I don’t remember feeling compelled to do anything. I don’t even remember telling you... you know.” He gave her a weak smile, well aware that, even though she knew the truth about him, he was hesitant to bring himself to acknowledge the fact.

Lois scooted closer to him, putting a hand on his arm. “Look, Clark, I feel terrible about all this. I had no right to intrude on your thoughts or force you to reveal secrets that you weren’t ready to divulge,” she said. With a sigh and a slight smile, she continued.

“The reporter in me wants to know the truth so badly that sometimes I go overboard in order to get it. I don't know if you noticed.” At Clark's shrug and knowing smirk, her smile became timid. “Sometimes my zeal ends up hurting my friends or makes me look shallow and single-minded. I like to think that I'm NOT those things, and I can even be a good friend if I want to be, but it's awfully hard to argue with the facts, especially when I'm sitting here, facing my best friend, and apologizing for my complete disregard for his privacy.”

She opened her mouth to continue, but suddenly smoke began to rise from the bottle on the table. Despite Lois's touch and the compelling sincerity that she was directing at him, Clark found himself transfixed at the growing, almost pulsating cloud forming in front of him. It was a little ironic, he supposed — a man who could fly and do however many other amazing things fascinated by some smoke and the promise of magic — but he couldn't tear his eyes away. After a moment, a man materialized from the smoke, his attire odd to say the least.

The man blinked a couple of times, then looked at Clark with an amused smile. “You must be Clark. I almost didn't recognize you out of your colorful outfit.” Lois gave a strangled cough, the implication clear enough. The genie cocked an eyebrow and wordlessly looked at her for a moment, then he turned back toward Clark. “If it's any consolation, you're hardly the first man to fall victim to an unintended wish.”

“Really?” Clark said, too overwhelmed at the moment to say much else. An already unusual situation was quickly descending into the surreal, and Clark had to fight the urge to pinch himself to confirm that he wasn't just imagining things.

“Oh yes,” the genie replied. “Kings have been deposed, wars have been started, and that's just the tip of the iceberg. You wouldn't believe me if I told you some of the more infamous mistakes.”

Beside Clark, Lois crossed her arms across her chest and looked at the genie with disbelief. “After all that we've seen and heard, I think I'd believe about anything at this point,” she said, and Clark nodded absently.

The genie looked at her, sizing her up for a moment, then shook his head sadly. “The platypus,” he answered. “Tiny Tim. The Carter administration. Some guy got drunk in a bar and started munching on the house peanuts, then became curious as to what would happen if a peanut farmer were made president. He was so embarrassed at the outcome that I don't think he ever drank again after that night. Or ate peanuts.” The genie squinted and tilted his head as if lost in thought, then he raised his eyebrows and looked back at his companions.

Clark had never really been sick before, at least not that he could remember, but he was pretty sure that the uncomfortable throbbing in his head at that moment was the beginning of a headache. It was understandable, he supposed, especially given the mental overload that he was currently experiencing. In the space of a few moments he had found out that Lois discovered his secret, genies exist, apparently he was as susceptible as anyone else to errant wishes, and platypii weren't originally part of God's grand design. On its own, his hand wandered up to the bridge of his nose, slightly displacing his glasses as he began to rub.

“Of course, there are other historical events that were undone by virtue of a wish. Those leave an interesting hole in history, let me tell you,” the genie said, his voice thoughtful. “Which brings me back to my point, my boy. Don't be too perturbed at falling victim to an errant wish. At least you weren't wished out of existence.”

Clark closed his eyes, lowered his hand, and tried to give his best smile despite the now fairly intense throbbing in his head. “I, uh, appreciate that,” he said, opening his eyes. At the genie's not quite humble acknowledgement, Clark turned toward Lois. “I think I should probably get going,” he said.

“Yeah,” Lois said. “This is all probably a little... overwhelming.”

“You could say that,” Clark said, standing up. Lois's expression was worried, if not a little hurt, and he couldn't help but wonder if she interpreted his departure as a negative reaction to her actions, when that wasn't the case. Well, he amended, the news she had revealed and her new knowledge had at least a little to do with it, he just needed to go somewhere where there was a little more air, no genies, and plenty of familiar sights.

If Lois had picked up on his thoughts, they apparently hadn't comforted her. “We can talk tomorrow,” Clark said to her with a nod, then turned toward the door. He heard her sigh as he closed it behind him and quickly walked to the stairwell, changing into the suit as soon as he verified that he was alone. He quickly took off to the roof, then into the night sky. His headache seemed to ease almost immediately upon leaving the building, but the knowledge the genie had imparted upon him, and the fact that Lois knew his secret, were enough to ensure that it would be around for a while.

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Even though the sun had gone down and most of Metropolis was starting to settle in for the night, the second precinct station was alive with activity. Lois remembered a cop making an offhand comment to her once, something to the effect that prime time at the police station started when the television prime time ended. She had never doubted the statement, and in fact recalled that most of her run-ins with the underbelly of Metropolis society had taken place after dark, including the one the night before. Early in her career, she had been able to snag many stories around town by taking advantage of her ability to write coherently even when she was practically a zombie due to lack of sleep, making the rounds of the police stations, including this one, and looking for something that the public might just be interested in reading.

She tried to tell herself that her presence at the station tonight wasn't a much needed mental diversion or a short vacation from genies, partners, and superheroes. Her life wasn't at all different now than how it had been the day before, she tried to convince herself, but one look around the station was all it took to expose the lie. Who was she kidding? Black was now white, up was now down, Superman was now something less than a God in a cape, and Lois Lane, a Kerth award-winning reporter and senior journalist, was standing in the middle of a dingy police station, hunting down a lead that could most certainly wait until morning. Okay, she admitted, she WAS in desperate need of a distraction, but at least she didn't come to the station without purpose. She did have a legitimate reason to be there, had some real information to gather, and now that she had ventured to the station, she certainly wasn't going to leave empty handed.

“Hello?” she said loudly, leaning over the grimy counter to ring the bell on the reception desk. Several of the criminals handcuffed to nearby chairs shot her dirty looks, but she didn't care. “Excuse me?” she said, ringing the bell a few more times. After a moment, a perturbed cop rushed over to the desk and snatched the bell away as Lois raised her hand to ring it again.

“What?” the cop asked, his voice steely. Lois crossed her arms across her chest and looked at him for a moment, resisting the urge to poke around his thoughts, find out his reason for tardiness, and use it to score a few points. Her abilities could score points in other ways, she thought with a sly smile.

“Lois Lane, Daily Planet,” she said. “I'm looking for some information.”

The cop shoved the bell in a drawer and looked at Lois with annoyance. “Jeez, don't you reporters ever take a break?” he gestured around the station. “We're a little busy right now, in case you haven't noticed. Come back in the morning or park it for a while and we might be able to get to you....”

“All I need is a name,” Lois said. “The guy found in that fire this afternoon.”

At her words, the cop's eyes narrowed. "We haven't ID-ed him yet," he said, but his thoughts said something else entirely. They had known his identity almost as soon as they had found him. More surprisingly, though, they had also known right away that it hadn't been the blaze that had killed him. Even though someone had gone to a lot of trouble to set the fire, it hadn't been able to conceal the single gunshot to the man's chest and the bullet buried in the wall behind the body.

Lois smiled knowingly. "Is that so?" she said, and the cop nodded. He mentally groused at her pushiness, but his expression didn't reflect his thoughts. No matter, Lois thought. She had the information she needed. "Do you think you'll know in the morning?" she asked, keeping up the act.

"Don't hold your breath," the cop answered. "And when we do know a name, rest assured that we'll hold a press conference so that you and the rest of your pals know."

"You're a peach," Lois said sarcastically with a saccharine smile. Some cops just loved aggravating reporters, and somehow those cops all ended up manning the night desks at local precincts. The cop just grinned, and Lois didn't say anything further as she turned on her heel and left the station. It was time to get back to the office and find out all she could about the dead guy in the office building. With any luck, her new mind-reading power will have produced one good thing: a scoop, hopefully in time to make the printing for the morning paper.

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Clark only had a few moments to gather his thoughts before the first rescue call came. A large accident on the freeway had snarled up traffic for miles, causing a chain reaction of other accidents that ended up being more serious than the one that caused the mess in the first place. The hero work helped to clear his head, and by the time he had taken the final victim to the hospital, he felt grounded in reality once again.

After things calmed down again, he took to the air, hovering above the city, letting the currents guide him. As he floated on his back and looked toward the stars, he tried to process what had happened at Lois's apartment. Thoughts and emotions swirled in his head, none particularly willing to assert itself, none really sure what to make of the new situation. Only time would tell whether Lois's knowledge of his secret was a good thing or not, or whether he was justified in the feeling of dread that lurked within in him. He couldn't change what had happened or go back to the comfortable, if not schizophrenic, relationship that he had had with Lois only a day earlier. If there was any certainty to come out of tonight, really, it was that things were going to be different.

There was one other certainty, he reminded himself. His thoughts were no longer private. Lois had discovered his identity not through an investigation or by getting close enough to Clark to finally see him beneath the spandex, but by poking around in his head and eavesdropping on his thoughts. For all he knew, she could be listening in on him now, although he had no clue what the range of her new abilities was. The idea that his thoughts were always accessible to her was frightening, and he found himself tensing up, even as the gentle breeze and superb view tried to work their calming influence. It would be very easy to be angry with Lois, all things considered. She hadn't been honest with him, at least not at first, and she had taken from him more than just his secret. With her actions, she had taken his security, shaken his confidence, and made him doubt her intentions. But the more Clark thought about it, and the more the negative emotions tried to take hold, the more he realized that he just couldn't be mad at her. Even stronger than the consternation at what happened was the idea of what could've been. Lois was under no obligation to tell him that she had discovered his secret and could've just as easily kept the knowledge to herself and tried to exploit it. In the meantime, she could've seen things through his eyes that were even more embarrassing than a brief glimpse at her wet, clingy

wardrobe. Rather than try to take advantage of him, she had freely admitted her mistake, and given an apology that was sincere, if incomplete, with regret plain in her eyes. No, he thought as he brought his hands up and locked them behind his head, he couldn't be mad at someone who had always been such a good friend to him in both his guises.

Recalling Lois's apology, one thing stuck in Clark's mind. They had a connection, she had said, something that had made it very easy for her to sense his thoughts, sights, and sounds. She couldn't help but feel close to him, and he had to admit that the reverse was true, as well. Granted, Clark couldn't read her thoughts and couldn't close his eyes and experience the world from her point of view, but that didn't mean that he didn't feel connected to her. From the minute he had first seen her, he knew that there was something between them, something tangible. He had always assumed it to be deep, usually unrequited love, and maybe it was, but maybe it was more visceral than that.

Clark shook his head and tried to push the thought away. Many nights had been spent pondering the mystery of Lois and the status of their relationship, but she was still just as much of an enigma to him now as she ever was. Unfortunately, she knew exactly who he was now, down to his very thoughts. With a sigh, Clark changed his position in the sky and looked toward the city, almost willing someone to call for help and save him from further ponderings. A moment later, his wish was granted. With a relieved smile, he took off, gladly getting lost in his work once again.

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When Lois had started to receive the first information about the dead guy found in the fire, she had been sure that there was a mistake in the search. Working on the story about Joey the Rat must've tainted her results or left some bias in the search software. Repeated searches using different programs and computers had corroborated her original results, though, and she realized that the story she was hoping to exploit as an exclusive scoop might end up being that and more. The data, if true, might help bring down organized crime in Metropolis.

The man who died in the fire was named Sal "Moneybags" Morocco, a financial partner of Joey the Rat. The two had several business ventures that were known to the powers that be, and probably several more that weren't. Sal had last been seen alive the night before at an Italian restaurant in a part of town notorious for organized crime, meeting with Joey and a third associate, a man named Ronny Fingers. Now that both Sal and Joey were dead, it was a good bet that Ronny, as the sole remaining shareholder in their businesses, would be a much wealthier man. That gave him a motive, and Lois would bet dollars to donuts that he was the man behind the two fiery deaths. Still, in order to confirm her suspicions in time to make the printing deadline, she'd need more than a hunch and some shady transactions. She needed to get to Ronny Fingers, preferably before the police found the connection, detained him, and kept all the juicy statements that he was sure to make for themselves.

As she grabbed her purse and hastily started to exit the newsroom, she felt a stab of something — caution maybe? — that compelled her to pause for a moment. Superman's warning from the night before suddenly replayed itself in her mind, along with the sentiment that followed. Maybe this time she should look before she leapt, maybe this time she should take his advice to heart. After all, she was trying to pursue a gangster who had just killed two men and would probably do the same to her if he found her on his tail. She had a lot to live for, especially given the very recent changes in her life, but....

Lois closed her eyes, clenched her fists, and took a deep breath. She was a professional and still alive even after following countless bad guys and megalomaniacs. Superman, Clark, always espoused dire warnings about the possibility of what could be if he were somehow unable to save her, but he probably kept a closer

eye on her than she had ever realized. Whether it was from the skies or from his desk at the Planet, Clark had her back. It was a sentiment that, if it were about anyone else, would be almost creepy, but not with Clark, never with Clark. With him it was comforting, soothing, giving her confidence even in the face of very real danger. He might argue that it was foolish confidence, but he had yet to complain about the stories that they had gotten as a result. Her mind made up, she opened her eyes and stalked toward the elevator, practically punching the button in her enthusiasm. Soon enough, she was driving across the city toward the last known address of Ronny Fingers.

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After a bit of a slow start, action on the crime front had started to reach a fever pitch as the night wore on. Maybe there was something in the water, Clark mused as he stopped his fifth robbery of the night, part of a litany of activity that also included shootings, gang wars, and a twelve-year-old kid's joy ride in his grandmother's Oldsmobile. It was enough to make Clark wonder if his presence was doing any good at all. The worry was rhetorical at best, of course — the benefits of his presence measured in lives and property saved as a result of his actions that night alone. Still, it was easier worrying about the state of law and order in Metropolis than it was to think of his personal life, and the stigma of what had happened that night. His headache was at least gone for the time being, and the activity was giving him a good excuse to not have to go home and think about how to proceed with Lois.

Even though Clark was actively not thinking about Lois, there was a part of him that was always attuned to her to some extent, and that part had been sending him warning signals all night, signals which only intensified the harder he tried to ignore them. By the time he made his way to the police station to drop off his latest robbery suspect, the desire to fly above the city and track her down was overpowering. Before he got the chance, though, a very familiar scream reached his ears. It was close, he realized, roughly depositing the robber in front of a startled cop. In a flash, Clark was rushing toward the scream, which seemed to be originating from the yard of a very high scale mansion near a notoriously mobbed-up part of town.

"Help!" Lois screamed again, and as she did, Clark found her crouched down in a row of bushes surrounding the mansion's patio, staring down the barrels of guns pointed at her by two very large men. Without hesitation, Clark flew down and snatched the guns away from the men, turning them into useless pieces of metal with one squeeze of the hand. The men stepped back, startled, as Clark finally came to a stop between them and Lois.

"This is none of your business, Superman," one of them said, quickly regaining his composure. Both men were familiar, Clark realized, recognizing their faces from news coverage of a famous mobster's trail. Superman had never actually confronted these men, although it was not from lack of trying. They were generally smart enough to conduct their business privately, and they left enough evidence of their actions to let people know that it was the mob behind the crimes, but not enough to identify any of the individuals involved. Tonight, though, they had apparently underestimated the loud voice and sheer determination of their victim.

"Attempted murder? I'd say that's my business," Clark answered, his voice steely.

"Our word against hers," the second man said, crossing his arms across his chest defiantly.

Lois, who was still breathing heavily from the shock of the situation, didn't hesitate in answering him. "Me and the power of the press. When I'm done, the whole city will know what kind of slime balls you are."

"The press knows better than to write about the people in this neighborhood. They know what will happen," the second man said

with a smirk.

"Gee, that sounds like a threat," Clark said, grabbing both men by their shirts and roughly pulling them toward him. He tensed himself and readied for takeoff, but glanced over his shoulder first. "Are you going to be okay here alone for a few seconds?" he asked Lois.

She looked at him, her expression very different from what it usually was during a rescue. Under normal circumstances, she would greet him with an eager smile and eyes that were a little too wide, acting like nothing so much as a love struck teenager who had just met the object of her affection for the first time. Shortly after his arrival, usually while she was cradled comfortably in his arms above the city, her personality would begin come through as she tried to explain how it was that she had ended up near death... again. The conversation would degrade into their usual banter, impersonal and sterile while, at the same time, almost uncomfortably intimate. She acted so much differently toward Superman than she did toward Clark, although he supposed that it was partially his fault. Superman didn't challenge her, Superman didn't make snide comments or small jokes just to get a rise out of her; he didn't have to.

As Lois locked eyes with him now, though, there was none of the giddiness or expectancy that he usually saw, only gratitude and, if it was possible, embarrassment. Clark smiled weakly, bringing the same reaction from her, then took off toward the police station, the two gunmen in tow. He wound up at the same station he had just left, depositing the gunmen in front of the same bewildered police officer, although this time he stopped to explain the presence of all the men. In a matter of moments, with his work done, Clark was back in the skies returning to Lois.

She had taken the minute or so that he had been gone to stand, brushing the dirt and grime off her clothes and looking toward the now ruined guns with a quirked eyebrow. As Clark landed, her gaze slowly turned to him, although she seemed almost hesitant to look him in the eyes. After a moment, though, she did. "Thank you for the rescue," she said, her voice hoarse, a crooked self-effacing smile on her face.

Clark grinned. "It's a tough job, but somebody has to do it," he answered. Lois's smile grew shy at the joke, and she looked away from him, tucking a rogue strand of hair behind her ear. Clark was aware of the fact that he was projecting something other than the usual Superman stoicism, but he didn't see the point in keeping up the façade, especially since Lois knew the truth. "Do you, uh, want me to take you home?" he asked after a moment, pointing his thumb in the direction of her apartment.

Almost immediately, Lois shook her head vehemently. "There's a genie at my place, and if I have to see him again, I might just scream," she said, and Clark couldn't disagree with the logic. "Besides, we have some things to discuss, and I'd rather not have an audience."

Clark's grin faded at the thought of the impending conversation. "So," he said, thoughtfully turning an eye to the sky. "The top of the Trade Tower? A secluded Tibetan mountaintop, an uninhabited oasis in the Sahara, or...?"

"Your apartment," Lois said quickly, causing Clark to look at her with surprise. Normally she would jump at the chance to have just one extra flight with her hero, to go somewhere with him that would allow them to steal a few moments alone. He was offering her the world, wherever she wanted to go, and she chose his apartment.

"Seriously?" he asked. Lois laughed lightly and stepped toward him.

"Yes, seriously," she said. "Your place is comfortable, it's familiar, and it's, well, normal," she said with a shrug. Her smile faded as she looked expectantly at him, waiting for a reaction one way or the other.

"Then my place sounds perfect," Clark said, bending over

slightly to pick her up. Maybe normalcy and familiarity was what they needed right now, he decided. In a world where everything seemed to be upside down, his apartment still remained the same, a place where both of them knew what to expect. If, in the course of whatever conversation was to follow, things felt too surreal, they could each call on memories of better times had at his apartment and be comforted.

It only took a few seconds to make the short trip through the skies to his place. He landed in the middle of his living room, setting her gently on the ground. Usually, Lois's hands would linger on his shoulders after flying, as if she was trying to cling to him to keep him from leaving, but tonight they didn't. As soon as her feet touched the ground, she stepped away, her eyes never leaving his face. For a moment they just looked at each other wordlessly, neither really certain how to start the conversation, her expression telling him that her feelings were conflicted. Soon enough, though, Lois's gaze shifted from Clark's face to his chest, giving him the motivation he needed to break the stalemate.

"Excuse me for a second," he said, turning on his heel and heading for the bedroom and a change of wardrobe. Faster than the human eye could see, he spun out of the suit and into a t-shirt and jeans as he progressed through the bedroom, slipping on his glasses before coming to a stop in archway to the kitchen. Lois's eyes were on him as he stopped, although she seemed almost relieved to see him in street clothes. The change seemed to jar her out of her thoughts, and her expression became guarded as she turned away.

"I, uh, still have one wish left," she said, her gaze turning toward his couch. "I was thinking that maybe the best thing to do would be to wish that I had never had any wishes to begin with." She looked back toward him and continued, her tone businesslike. "I could wish away this whole thing, and go back to not knowing about your secret."

The stab of disappointment that cut through Clark was unexpected, and he couldn't help but frown. "Is that what you want?" he asked, unable to keep the hurt from his voice.

Lois's eyes seemed to soften at his question. "I thought that's what you would want. It's the only fair thing to do."

Clark nodded gently, and supposed it made sense. It was the most expedient way out of the situation, the kindest and easiest option to set things right and not have to deal with any consequences. The motivation behind her statement didn't make the disappointment go away, though, and he knew it wouldn't until she gave it a reason to. "But is it what you want?" he asked, more emphatic this time.

Lois sighed and looked away from him again, her hands playing with the hem of her shirt. "I don't know," she answered softly. "I've always fantasized about knowing Superman, not in the same superficial way that other people do, but on a more personal level. What makes him tick? What kinds of things does he enjoy? What's his favorite food or book or television show? Part of me thought I was on the path to discovering things, chipping away at his exterior one rescue at a time, but now I realize I had no idea." She paused to collect her thoughts, but there was a note of sadness in her voice that was almost heartbreaking. "At the same time, Clark, you were the one person who I thought I knew everything about, and I thought I could trust to be honest. After all the time we've spent together, our close friendship, all the late nights and shared stories, I find out that's not true, either. And how did I manage to become enlightened to these new truths? Not from honest conversation or shared confessions, but through a genie." Her voice began to waver, and she sniffed once, steeling her resolve before looking him in the eye again. "Obviously it's not something that you wanted me to know, and that above anything else makes me almost anxious to go back to the fantasy."

Clark's eyes went slightly wide as he looked at her, acutely feeling her rejection, almost not wanting to breathe. Part of him

wanted to shrink back at her consternation, to take her words at face value and go unquestioningly back to the way things were. At least the status quo, as frustrating as it was, held promise. She would flirt with him in one guise and rebuff him in the other, and he would hold out hope that someday she would direct her advances toward Clark instead of Superman. It was tempting, certainly, but something deep inside of him was tired of the dance, and he didn't believe that Lois was as angry as she let him believe. She lacked perspective, and maybe, once she saw his side of things, she wouldn't be so quick to give up her new knowledge.

"But it is something I wanted you to know," Clark said, keeping his tone even. "I just always hoped that I wouldn't have to tell you."

Instead of easing her fears, the words seemed to have an opposite effect. She crossed her arms across her chest and narrowed her eyes, making it clear that she was no longer vulnerable to his charms. It was a defense mechanism, Clark knew, and it would make it very hard to reason with her rationally, although he would certainly try. "So I'm dense, that's it? Or maybe I'm not worth telling. It's too much fun keeping me in the dark, right?"

Clark took a couple steps forward, but Lois didn't flinch. "No," he said urgently, comfortingly. "That's not it at all. It's just..." He stopped and sighed, looking at her, willing her eyes to meet his, but without success. "I was hoping that you'd see the things that you loved about Superman in me. We're the same person Lois, but while you worshipped Superman, sometimes it seemed like you had little more than a grudging acceptance of me."

"That's baloney and you know it," she said, her voice hard, her stance still confrontational. "Maybe we didn't get along well at first, but you've become the closest thing I have to a brother." The anger in her voice was in stark contrast to her words, and under normal circumstances the dichotomy would be almost funny. As it was, though, it just served to highlight how far their relationship had fallen in the span of mere moments.

"Okay, fine," Clark said, her impatience beginning to wear off on him. "You have made it clear that you would never let our relationship be more than that. Superman was all that mattered, and you certainly weren't going to give up your fantasy for some hack from Nowheresville." He paused for a second to give her the opportunity to reply. When she didn't, he took another step forward, and this time Lois flinched, uncrossing her arms and blinking. "Please, Lois," Clark said, reaching out toward her. "You can read my thoughts, so read them now," he said.

He closed his eyes and summoned memories of interactions with Lois, both as Superman and as Clark. The memories highlighted the stark differences in the way Lois treated his two personas, and he was sure the emotions that the memories held, the disappointment and sadness, would follow the images into her mind. Lois gasped, apparently receiving his thoughts. As Clark opened his eyes, he saw a look of confusion mixed with sadness cross her face. "You were in love with a fictional character, Lois," Clark said. "The man you thought you loved doesn't exist. There's only me."

"I only pursued that fantasy because Superman, you, made me believe that there could be something there." She gestured at him, her voice animated but no longer angry. "I wasn't going to walk away from Superman when there was still hope that he might feel the same way for me as I did for him."

"He did... I do," Clark said, frustrated. "But I wanted you to want me for who I am, not what I can do."

"So why did Superman lead me on?" Lois asked. "Why the intimate nighttime flights, why the significant looks and special attention and veiled statements on how important I am to you?"

"Because it's just as frustrating for me as it is for you," Clark said. The conversation had gotten more emotional as it went on,

and he had to stop for a moment and calm himself down. “There comes a point where I’ll take what I can get, and if that means letting something slip as Superman in order to get that special look from you, then so be it.”

Neither of them spoke for a few seconds, each trying to absorb everything that had been said. It struck Clark that they both wanted the same thing, but they were both too stubborn to do what it took to ensure a happily ever after. They both constructed invented realities and did whatever it took to keep their lives comfortable and predictable. Rather than take the step that would make the fantasy come true, they continued the status quo, probably because they both knew it was just as possible that the ending wouldn’t be a happy one.

“Why do we do this Clark?” she asked. He realized that he had been looking past her, lost in his thoughts, and noticed with a start that she had taken a step toward him, closing the gap so that they were only a couple feet apart. “Why do we insist on making everything harder than it has to be? Why do we ignore the truth and indulge ourselves in daydreams of what we would like to happen?”

The corners of Clark’s mouth tugged up as he shrugged. “Because the truth is scary?” he said.

“I mean, I guess I always knew that you had a thing for me. And I guess, if I think about it, there were some definite similarities between your two identities.”

“We could pass as twins with very different wardrobes,” Clark said, now in full grin.

Lois gave him an irritated glance. “I’m just saying that I understand your frustration, and I share some culpability in the situation,” she said. “Lord knows that, brilliant investigative reporter that I am, I could’ve tried a little harder to put the clues together. But you have to admit that this was your fault, too.”

“I’m not denying it,” he said. “Look, I might be Superman, but when it comes to dating or trying to figure out the mysteries of the feminine mind, I am just as clueless as the next guy. Worse, in fact, since my... unusual circumstances have made me reluctant to get too close to anyone, especially women.” He tried to keep his voice light even while stating the simple truth, hoping to melt her stubborn resolve, and it seemed to be working. “So I acted like an idiot, and, yes, made my share of mistakes. Your fabled hero isn’t perfect, after all.”

Lois gave a half smile, reached out, and cupped his arm. “I think I like him better this way, though.” They smiled at each other for a long moment, then she dropped her eyes and sighed. “To tell you the truth, I’m no good at relationships, either. I’ve found all sorts of truly embarrassing ways to have my heart broken, and it’s made me not want to even start down that path again without some sort of guarantee. So I end up chasing fairy tales.”

“Or magic genies,” Clark said.

Lois cringed. “He just sort of showed up,” she muttered.

“But he gave you the means to an end, and ultimately you got what you wanted. You got the truth, warts and all.” There was a long pause as he looked at her, smiling lightly. “And I’m glad you know.”

Lois shifted her weight somewhat shyly, her smile growing. “You are?”

Clark gestured toward his couch, and they sat down together, now mere inches apart. He took her hand in his almost absently, and she didn’t move to stop him. “Granted, it’s not how I wanted you to find out, but now that you know...” He shrugged. “It’ll be nice to have someone to talk to, and I won’t have to keep making all those excuses to disappear when something comes up.” He paused and thought about all the times he’d had to leave her in some awkward situation or another, secretly hating himself for the lies and deception. He could see her smile fade and eyes go wide as she picked up on his thoughts, and for once he was grateful for the fact that she could see into his mind. Leaving her was never

what he wanted...

“But you had no choice,” she said, finishing his thought. Clark nodded. “And I always came back.”

Lois looked down at their intertwined hands, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath before meeting his eyes with hers again. “I don’t want to wish this away,” she said, her voice soft. “Now that I can finally see you for who you are, I’m seeing the rest of the world differently, too. Moving backwards at this point isn’t an option.”

Hope welled up inside him, sending a little shiver down his spine, bringing a reflexive grin. It wasn’t an admission of love, but it was a statement of understanding, the first step along the path. Maybe the rest could come with time. “And moving forward...?”

A smile spread slowly across her features, reaching her eyes and setting off a devilish sparkle. “Maybe I’ll let you buy me dinner,” she said.

“How generous of you,” he said teasingly.

Her free hand started to play with a loose thread at the end of his t-shirt sleeve. “If you’re good I might let you take me to a movie, too.”

“At least if I’m there with you, I know I won’t have to leave in the middle somewhere to snatch you from the clutches of certain death.”

“That almost sounds like a challenge,” Lois said, looking at him through her eyelashes.

Clark was going to make another quip, but then he remembered the circumstances that brought them to his apartment in the first place. “Speaking of which... I have to ask: what were you doing at a mobster’s house tonight with guns pointed at you?”

Lois seemed to be caught off guard for a moment at the sudden change in topic, and she blinked a couple times before relating to him the tale of Moneybags Morocco and his business associates. Her tone was straightforward as she spoke, and no detail was spared. She was objective and methodical, like she always was, but Clark found that he didn’t hear her words anymore as a comforting warmth spread through him. She hadn’t pursued her lead that night to distance herself from their earlier encounter with the genie, as much as she probably told herself that was the case, or because there was a potential story there, since that was still pretty thin. A throwaway sentence in her narrative, one she probably hadn’t even thought much about as it came out, told him that she had been spurred by what she had seen in the images projected from him, and by the guilt he had broadcasted at the thought that his inaction had caused a death at that fire earlier in the day. After a moment, he became aware that she had finished speaking and was now looking at him with curiosity. He gave a self-effacing grin.

“You did all that... for me?” he asked.

It seemed for a moment that she was going to rebuff him in the way she always had before, immediately denying that her feelings played a part in any of the actions she undertook in obvious pursuit of a story. But her eyes quickly softened, then she looked away from him, seemingly embarrassed. “I guess I did,” she said softly. “I couldn’t let you think that you caused that man’s death. I never realized what it was that you saw out there, how it made you feel, and if I could do something about it...” she stopped and looked at him, slightly wide-eyed. He knew she could feel what he felt, think what he thought, but he couldn’t stop an overpowering sense of love from coursing through him as she spoke. Even if she couldn’t look inside his head, he was pretty sure that it would’ve been plainly written in his features, in his eyes.

She gave a nervous chuckle. “It’s really hard to think straight when you look at me like that,” she said.

“So stop thinking” he said, his voice husky, his face moving slowly toward hers. His eyes fluttered shut as he closed the gap between them, brushing his lips lightly against hers, pausing momentarily before leaning in closer and engaging in a deep,

profound kiss.

This wasn't the first time he had kissed her — not the second or third, either, but it was different from those other ones in so many ways. Their previous kisses when he had been wearing the suit had all felt like stolen moments, forbidden actions from two people who had been spurred into uncharacteristic action by circumstance. They had been hungry, passionate, but lacking in any deeper emotion; they were kisses between two strangers. A couple of times he had kissed her as Clark, but each had been more of a ruse than anything else. And while those kisses had been tender, with maybe a spark of something else, they also lacked that deeper connection.

Tonight, though... Tonight was the culmination of their past experiences, their shared knowledge, and the unrequited feelings that had lingered between them for so long. It had felt dishonest before to try and tap into his deeper feelings for her while in either guise, since she really didn't know him, not really, but now there was no reason to hold back, and apparently she felt the same way. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that she could feel his emotions, but the way she responded to him, the sensations that her touch arose in him, were more incredible than he could've possibly imagined. For an indeterminate amount of time he let himself get lost in it, get drunk on it, before he forced himself to pull back, not wanting the experience to degenerate into something that they weren't ready for yet.

As he became aware of the world around him again, he realized that one of his hands was now cupped under her jaw while the other was wrapped around her back. Her hand was on the back of his head, her thumb messaging a sensitive spot under his ear, while the other hand rested uncomfortably high on his thigh. They both took heavy breaths as their lips parted, and Clark couldn't help but smile widely, almost painfully so.

"Where did that come from?" Lois asked, surprise evident in her voice. Clark could only manage to shake his head. "If I knew that was waiting for me, I think I might have told my insecurities to take a hike a long time ago."

They kissed again, though this one was kept mercifully short. "If I knew this is what would happen if I told you about Superman, I think I might have blurted out the truth back there at the Messenger and saved us a whole lot of suffering," Clark said, giving her another quick peck on the lips.

She giggled. "Maybe I should thank the genie for bringing us this new bliss," she said. At the words, though, their bodies stiffened and their eyes grew wide.

"The genie," they both said in unison, and suddenly the magic was gone. They removed their hands from each other and scooted apart, Lois moving to subconsciously straighten her clothing. After a moment she stood, looking toward his door. "I need to take care of him sooner rather than later," she said, then looked quickly toward the clock before gesturing toward it. "And the story. I'm running out of time to write something up and get it in the morning edition."

Clark allowed himself to relax into the couch cushions. "What, the mobster story?" Lois nodded. "I think you should hold off until tomorrow for that one."

She crossed her arms across her chest. "Why? It's big news."

"Well, how did you find out the name of the man killed in the fire?"

"The cop at the desk knew, I kinda heard him think it." Clark arched an eyebrow, causing Lois's posture to become a little less rigid. "I mean, I was told by an anonymous source."

"Uh huh," he said, sitting up. "And what did you find out at Ronny Finger's place?"

"That his security is pretty good," Lois said. "Okay, I never actually got inside to do any snooping."

"So...you really don't have anything yet."

"I have two mobsters in jail on attempted murder charges,"

Lois said, pointing at him. "And a nice quote from Superman about it...just as soon as you give me one." Clark just looked at her for a moment, his expression unchanged, until finally she acquiesced. "Fine, we can flesh it out tomorrow. But in the meantime, I still have that third wish to get out of the way."

Clark stood and walked toward her, glancing at the clock and taking note of the time. "You don't necessarily need to do that right now. In the meantime, though..." he gestured toward the window. "The sun will be coming up in a half hour or so. Maybe we can go watch it."

"What, on the balcony?" Lois said, craning her neck to look through his bedroom and out the back window, no doubt trying to visualize the view from there.

Clark walked past her, then quickly changed into the suit before reaching the back door. "No, I was thinking of someplace with a better view," he said, opening the door and gesturing toward the world outside with a sweeping wave of his hand.

Lois smiled genuinely, gratefully, and walked toward him without hesitation. He couldn't tell if it meant that she had made peace with his dual identities, but her reaction seemed to indicate that she had. Without another thought, he gathered her into his arms and took off.

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The eastern sky was fading from a navy blue to violet to black as Lois's eyes turned toward the horizon. Clark was sitting cross legged in the air, as if he was resting on some invisible couch, and Lois sat on his lap, her back leaning against his chest and her head resting on his shoulder. One of his arms wrapped around her midsection and the other rested on her knee, with her hand on top of it. If not for the setting and the sound of his cape flapping in the wind, it would be easy enough to forget that she was with Superman, the man who had haunted her fantasies for so long. All she had to do was close her eyes and she could smell Clark's aftershave; all she had to do was say a few words, and his gentle voice would answer her. If she licked her lips, she could still taste him and feel the lingering memory of his soft lips on hers. There was no question that she was in the company of Clark, and also no question that he was the one person she wanted to be there with, powers or not. This is what she had sought for so long, she realized. She had always thought that she had wanted some fantasy date with Superman, some one-on-one time above the clouds with undying expressions of love, but without Clark's personality behind Superman's façade, it just seemed so hollow somehow. And she was beginning to see that declarations of love weren't worth nearly as much as real demonstrations to that effect.

It was amazing how much her mind had changed in just the last day, Lois thought. Heck, even in the last few hours. She had gone into the evening fully intending to return things to the status quo and forget everything that she had learned through less than honest means, to jump back into the nice little box she had built around her feelings and blissfully go about her life. She didn't need complications like love; she certainly didn't need to know that her fantasy hero was real, attainable, and undeniably in love with her. She liked having something pleasant to dream about at night, and not knowing Superman's secret gave her something to work toward every day — the thrill of the chase, as it were. Knowing that it was Clark under the spandex led to some uncomfortable feelings that she would have to face if she decided to move forward with the new status quo. Because, although she would never admit it to even herself, deep down she had harbored a flame for him even before the genie turned her life upside down. She had buried her feelings under a heavy blanket of personal rules and dictates — she could never date a co-worker, she couldn't get involved personally with someone she was involved with professionally, and of course she had to keep herself available for Superman — but that didn't stop her from noticing that he was almost painfully handsome. It didn't stop her from getting jealous

whenever he even talked to another woman, and it didn't stop her from noticing his myriad other charms. But she had left their relationship at friendship, because breaking her rules and pursuing him would mean having to reexamine the priorities in her life. Once she found out, though, she very strongly wanted to pursue him, to throw out all the dumb rules and mental constructs that had kept them apart, and she balked.

Without her values, who would she be? If she threw away everything that made her who she was, then what would take its place? The thought of losing herself terrified her, and so she decided to keep things unchanged. But then Clark talked with her, opened his mind to her, and made her see things from his perspective. And suddenly the prospect of living life NOT knowing him was far worse than any scary feelings or hypothetical damage done to her psyche, and she decided to move forward after all. Then he kissed her, and that sealed the deal.

She gave a contented sigh and tried to take in the scene around her. From several miles in the sky, Metropolis looked like a gleaming jewel, the growing light from the east reflecting off the glass of the skyscrapers, tinting the city with color that was punctuated by the lights that were on in the buildings all around. "Is this something you do often?" she asked. "Watching the sun rise from up here, I mean?"

"Sometimes," he answered softly. "I prefer watching it back home, though. There's just something about seeing the sunrise over a wheat field, the world all around silhouetted against the sky..." Her mind received whispers of old memories from him, and she had to admit he had a point. "I just don't have the time to go back there and experience that very often."

She gave his hand a squeeze. "You'll have to show me sometime," she said.

"I'd like that," he answered, and they fell into silence for a moment. Lois took the opportunity to open her mind, to welcome in the thoughts and feelings that seemed to radiate from him, not wanting so much to hear the words in his head, but to experience the world the way he did. Closing her eyes again, the sounds of the city below began to trickle into her conscious — a baby crying, a woman singing in the shower, a couple fighting, a coffee maker bubbling. The sounds of thousands of televisions tuned into dozens of channels, of radios and telephone calls, of cars operating in the street and trains operating below then, all filtered through her mind. Then, suddenly, a faraway scream, caused her eyes to pop open, though behind her Clark didn't flinch at all.

Her breath had caught in her throat, she realized, as Clark started to speak. "Spider," he said, the smile evident in his voice.

Lois was caught off guard for a moment, but she couldn't help but laugh once her mind was able to process it. "How did you know that?" she asked, though she supposed the answer to that question was probably obvious.

"Occam's razor," he said. Lois turned her head to look at him in question. "It basically says that the most probable answer is generally the correct answer. There are a lot more spiders, rats, and roaches in this city, and by extension people who are startled by them, than criminals." He then smiled and raised his eyebrows. "Plus, I looked."

Lois smiled back, then turned toward the city. "The way you perceive the world below, the things you hear... it must be overwhelming sometimes."

<Hear what I hear,> he thought, knowing that she could hear him. At his prompting, she closed her eyes again and let the sounds of the city wash over her. <This is just Metropolis,> he thought, the sounds from before filtering through her mind for a few moments, until suddenly there were more, overpoweringly more. <And this is the whole eastern seaboard,> he continued, and the cacophony was almost too much for her to bear. But then he applied a mental filter, and the thousands upon thousands of sounds reduced to a few dozen, and she felt herself relax, unaware

that she had tensed up at the onslaught.

His voice entered her head again, and he began to give her an audio tour of the world as he heard it, applied through the various filters in his mind. The sounds of traffic, the sounds of wildlife, the sounds of children, the sounds of industry, a litany of screams that never seemed to end, and so many other things. Most interesting was the sound of the sea, of waves breaking on shore, of the riptide stirring up the sand from the seabed, and of the fish cutting through the water, ultimately finding their meals. Eventually all the sounds faded away, and all Lois could hear was a single heartbeat, growing louder by the second, accompanied by a mental picture of her, seated in Clark's lap with her eyes closed.

Lois opened her eyes and broke the connection, knowing that the way he had guided her through his perception of the world spelled out quite clearly how he viewed her and her place in it. Through all the clutter, through all the noise and chaos, she was the center of his attention, her heartbeat the one sound he always came home to. It was somewhat overwhelming to think about just how much she meant to him, and it made it hard to resist turning around to kiss him again. But for now she just wanted to enjoy this moment, enjoy the sunrise as it continued to unfold in front of her, and enjoy getting to know him for who he really was deep down inside.

"Unless I'm out actively patrolling the city, I usually filter most of it out," he said, aware that the mental connection between them had been broken. "You can go crazy listening to all that's going on in the world."

"But what about the actual cries for help? What about the screams that aren't just false alarms?"

His mind rattled off crime statistics that she was already quite familiar with, doing the math to equate their frequency to portions of the day. A mugging every 15 minutes, a break-in every 20, and so on. "When I created Superman, all I wanted was to help, but in the beginning I didn't fully comprehend what that meant or how it would work. As time has gone on, though, I've figured out that there's a balance. It's probably theoretically possible for me to, say, stop all the gun violence in Metropolis, but that would make being Superman a full-time job. I would never have time for friends, for a job, to do the things that I enjoy in life. It would mean losing myself to blue spandex, and that's not something that I'm willing to do. I was Clark first, and that's who I will always be. It's lead to some uncomfortable trade-offs, and I end up ignoring a lot of the bad things that happen, but that's the cost of living my life, and hopefully the world will understand. Besides, even lending myself full time to crime fighting wouldn't stop all the bad in the world, and it won't change human nature. But maybe what I can do will offer enough hope so that others will pick up the torch and run with it when I can't."

Lois reached up and placed her hand on his cheek, running in down his jaw, before gently tilting his face toward her, and turning in for a small kiss. "I never imagined..." she said, her eyes locking in on his for a second before she turned back and regarded the scene in front of her. The sky was now fading into a reddish color, and the sun wasn't far from peeking above the horizon. "I had fantasized about what Superman... what you did and saw and thought, but I never imagined how much of yourself you had to give to do what you do, and what kind of personal toll that took. It makes me want to know more."

His arm around her midsection tightened, and she snuggled in at his touch. "Well, it seems to me that telling such personal stories is first date territory." She didn't even have to look at him to know that his seriousness from earlier had been pushed away, and a smirk was most likely plastered on his face. "Anyway, I still have all sorts of juicy secrets to ferret out of you, I'm sure."

"So you're asking me out to level the playing field?" she asked teasingly.

"If I say yes, are you going to refuse me?" he asked, playing

along.

"Probably not," Lois said. "You're just lucky you're such a good kisser."

"Good," he said. "But, please promise me when the time comes, that I will be allowed to have private thoughts again." His voice was still light, but she had no doubt that the words were serious. <I might have one or two secrets left in here that I'd like to keep until at least the second or third date.>

She chuckled lightly. "Might I remind you that we'd be at my apartment right now taking care of that if not for your little detour up here?"

"I wanted to show off a little, sue me. But you have to admit, it's a beautiful view." Lois didn't have to close her eyes to know that he was looking at her instead of the horizon as he spoke. It didn't diminish the truth of the statement.

"It certainly is," she said softly. Deciding that turnabout was fair play, and that she, too, had access to a view that was better than currently being provided by mother nature, she pulled her legs in and twisted in his lap, turning her gaze to his face. "I'm really glad you let me experience it with you." Their eyes locked together, and she instantly felt herself get warmer. He had that look in his eyes again, the one that spoke of barely contained desire, and she decided that the experiences he had given her that morning were worth a reward. Without another thought, she leaned in and engaged him in another kiss, this one at least on par with the one they had shared in his apartment. The sunrise was completely forgotten for quite a while as she explored his mouth, and her hands worked their way around his body, hanging up somewhat on the cape. It was that, and the fact the hand that had found its way through his hair was now coated in a layer of whatever product he used to plaster it down on his head, that brought her back to reality again. As she broke the kiss, she had to suppress a laugh as she noticed that his hair, normally so well kept even after the biggest disaster, was now a complete mess. She absently wiped the goopy hand against her jeans, glancing down as she did, and gasping at what she saw.

The gasp seemed to bring Clark fully back to the world of the living, and he looked around in surprise for a moment before smiling shyly. They were now at least twice as high up in the air than they had been before the kiss, and the change in altitude meant that the top of the sun was now blazing brightly over the ocean. "I could make some inappropriate comment here about what exactly you do to me..." Clark said, and Lois tried to appear scandalized, though she found the fact that he employed such innuendo while in uniform to be amusing. Though it was hardly surprising, she reminded herself, considering what she had overheard the night before.

"Noted," she said. "And I could probably point out that I could give kryptonite a run for its money when it comes to exploiting your weaknesses." She trailed a finger down his chest, and earned his best smile as a reward.

"So, hey, look — the sun finally came up," he said, nodding toward the horizon. His arms remained locked around her, as if he was ready to change position. "I suppose that means we should get going." He was uncomfortable, she realized, and it occurred to her that his comment about her affect on him was more substantive than he had let on. Taking mercy on him, she nodded, and he shifted his grip so she was resting in his arms, then they started toward her apartment.

"It's a shame I'm going to have to give up my new gifts just as they were beginning to bear a little fruit," she said. "And it seems like a waste of a perfectly good wish to undue a previous wish." She looked at him, a plan forming in her mind. "You know, Clark, I might be running out of wishes, but that doesn't mean that you can't..."

"No."

"You don't even know what I was going to say."

"You might be the one with the power to read minds, but I know you. And you're going to ask me to summon the genie and get three wishes of my own."

Lois scoffed, then crossed her arms. "Well, yeah. So what's wrong with that?"

"Why I do I need any wishes?" Far from sounding upset or stern, his voice seemed almost amused. "I mean, I have a pretty good life, a job I like, a nice apartment. You're still speaking to me, and even letting me kiss you every now and then, so how bad can things be?"

A blush rose on Lois's cheeks, but even his very sensible arguments didn't mean that she was going to give up the idea. "What about a wish for happily ever after? Who wouldn't want that?"

"Why do I need a wish to get that? We seem to be moving that way just fine without any help."

"Don't forget that it was a wish that got us here in the first place. We weren't exactly an item before then."

"True," he said with a bob of the head. "But that didn't mean that we wouldn't have gotten there eventually on our own. I had been tossing around the idea of asking you out even before the genie intervened. Anyway, now that you know all there is to know about me, now that we know we're...compatible, there's nothing stopping us from taking the next step. I trust us to get there on our own."

Lois looked away from him and sighed. "The problem is, when it comes to relationships, I don't trust myself," she said, her voice small.

His arms tightened around her, and his eyes got soft. "I trust you. And I love you. Shouldn't that count for something?" Her throat tightened up at his words, and she found she couldn't speak. At her nod, he continued. "Anyway, if we did wish for the mythical happy ending, I would find myself wondering at every turn whether it was love or magic driving our relationship. I'd much rather have the real you, your real thoughts and feelings, good, bad, or otherwise, and not some illusion."

Lois cupped his face as a tear formed in her eye. "When you put it that way," she said, trying to deflect the emotion, even as it touched her in a way that she didn't think was possible. He said that he loved her, he wanted to be with her, and when he said those words, especially while wearing the suit, she knew that it was the absolute truth. The corner of his mouth tugged into a skewed smile, and she couldn't help but return it.

She wanted to study his face more, get lost in his eyes again like she had earlier, but she realized that they were slowing down, and it only took a glance around to see that they had reached her apartment. A second later Clark landed on the roof, bent slightly, then placed her in front of him. It was time to return to reality.

Lois strode toward the stairwell door with purpose, pausing only as she heard a rush of air behind her. A quick glance over her shoulder showed that Clark had changed into normal clothing, which was probably just as well. Although Superman's late night rendezvous were a regular occurrence in her apartment, the rest of the building didn't know that, and it wouldn't do to be spotted walking with Superman through the hallway. Picking up the pace, she reached out and tugged open the stairwell door. "What about wishing to be rid of all the kryptonite in the world?" she said as he followed her into the stairwell.

Clark gave a noncommittal grunt. "It just kinda feels wrong. It's the only other thing out there that comes from the same place as I do..."

"It can kill you, Clark," Lois said, glancing back again to look at him. Maddeningly, he just shrugged. Never let it be said that Clark Kent couldn't be stubborn, she thought. They walked in silence the rest of the way to her apartment. Once there, Lois quickly worked her way through the series of locks, opened the door, and made a beeline for her bookcase and the stylish bottle

currently residing on the upper shelf. Once she heard Clark close the apartment door behind him, she reached out and grabbed it, making sure that her hand rubbed against it before she got a firm grip. Clark was already positioned in front of her couch, and Lois went to join him, setting the bottle on the coffee table before sitting down.

Almost immediately, the now familiar light show began, and smoke curled out the top of the bottle, followed shortly by the genie. He seemed to be caught off guard at being summoned so early in the morning, and his usual hat had been replaced by something resembling a sleeping cap, his clothing seemingly somewhat wrinkled. As he fully materialized, he stretched theatrically, rubbed his eyes, then squinted slightly until he caught sight of Lois and Clark. His sleepiness seemed to disappear instantly.

"Ah!" he said, rubbing his hands together. "You have come to make your last wish!" Lois only nodded in response. "Your colorful friend is by your side, so the previous two must be successful. Oh, it is always so pleasing when the wishes I grant make a positive difference in the world. So what is it that you desire now?"

Lois looked at Clark, took a deep breath, then turned back toward the genie. "Well, I—"

"Don't tell me, you want to do something altruistic for me?" The genie said, a pleased look crossing his face. Lois wasn't quite sure where that notion came from, though she wondered how many of the genie's former masters had followed the script of Aladdin and tried just that.

"What, you mean set you free?" Clark asked.

"Pfft. Heavens, no," the genie said with a wave of his hand. "A genie has to be tethered to a bottle. Set me free from this one and I just have to find another one to call home. The bottles that your society produces these days — soda bottles, I think you call them — just don't have the style of the ones that were produced in my youth. Besides, I just got this one furnished the way I like, and would be very happy to keep it that way for a while, thank you."

Next to Lois, Clark arched an eyebrow, then reached up to pull down his glasses as he squinted at the bottle. He was probably using his x-ray vision, she thought with a start, her mind summoning images of times that he had done the same thing in the past, though she had always figured he was just near-sighted. Now she knew better. With a slight shake, Lois jarred her mind away from that topic and regarded the genie again. "So what did you have in mind?" Lois asked the genie, who smiled at the question.

"Well, even genies need companionship. I am not a stranger to the programs on your television, and they have shown me that there are, ah, feminine genies in the world, that apparently military men dream of once a week or so. It's been so long since I've been able to talk to another genie, even longer since I've been in contact with one so beautiful...." His eyes looked wistfully off into the distance. Lois felt a brief stab of pity toward the enigmatic little man, though it didn't last. It wasn't hard to remind herself what she was there for, and it certainly wasn't to make life easier for genies.

"I don't know about companionship, but maybe we can offer you a place to park your bottle that's quiet and has a decent view?" Clark said. Lois looked at him questioningly, but his expression was reassuring. "It won't even take magic to get you there."

The genie seemed disappointed, but he quickly composed himself and offered a nod. "I must say, a nice, quiet place does sound delightful after spending some time in this infernal city. So much noise, and it never stops."

"Tell me about it," Lois and Clark muttered simultaneously under their breath. "Jinx," Clark added, winking at her. Lois rolled her eyes, then continued with her plan.

"Before we get started, I wanted to thank you for everything. I actually am grateful for what you have done for me. For us," she

said, giving a smile to Clark.

The genie took off his hat and bowed deeply. "It was my honor. And I appreciate your kind words. So many people take their fame and riches and forget about poor Julian."

"Yes, well, that being said, I'm going to have to undo some of your work." Lois hesitated for a moment, knowing that this was the moment of truth. Then, with a deep breath, plunged ahead. "I wish that I can no longer read the thoughts of others."

The genie straightened up, placed his hat back on his head, and nodded. He didn't seem surprised or disappointed. For the centuries that he had been doing what he was doing, he had no doubt seen everything, and Lois highly doubted that she was the first to wish away what she had sought in the first place. With a bright flash of light and a low rumble of thunder, the genie's voice boomed, "granted," then he disappeared, and the room was still.

"Well?" Clark said after a moment. "Did it work?"

"I don't know. Think something." He looked at her and raised an eyebrow. They looked at each other for a long minute, neither speaking, a smile creeping across her features as the silence continued on. "Nothing," she said, prompting a grin from him, though his eyes spoke of relief.

"Okay," he said, clapping his hands together and standing up. "I better go take care of this thing like I promised," he said gesturing toward the bottle. He moved to pick it up, but Lois grabbed his arm and stopped him.

"Unless you want your wishes, I wouldn't touch it. It would only take one rub to bring him back again." Clark cringed slightly at the thought, and Lois looked around, quickly locating a small bag to put it in. She quickly grabbed the bottle and dropped it into the bag, handing it to Clark. "So where ARE you taking it?"

"Smallville," he said. "I have a little hiding place there with... some other valuables." As soon as the words left his mouth, an image entered Lois's mind of a glowing globe in a small wooden building with a view of a wheat field. It was Superman's globe, and she should have no reason to know it was there, but Clark knew. Stunned, Lois tried to maintain her expression, to not give away the fact that they were still connected somehow, and Clark seemed none the wiser as he turned and walked toward her window. "I'll be back in a minute. Did you want me to pick up some breakfast while I'm out?"

"Sure," Lois said, and like that, he was gone. Lois collapsed back onto the couch, staring blankly at where he had been standing. Somehow, the residual effect of the magic had lingered, and she could still experience some of the world through Clark's eyes. How was that? Would it last? Should she tell him? A million thoughts and possibilities swirled in her mind, which, she realized, was suddenly fatigued after the very long day and sleepless night that she had just experienced. Maybe it wasn't worth saying anything about now, or at least not until she was able think more clearly. Maybe she just needed some time for things to get back to normal. Maybe it was all some sort of illusion from her sleep deprived brain. Maybe they were so deeply connected that she didn't need magic to experience the world through his eyes. Maybe....

Clark reappeared in her apartment at that moment, interrupting her thoughts. True to his word, he had been gone exactly one minute, and he was holding a bag from a bakery, the smells radiating from it making her recognize how hungry she was. "Are you going into work this morning?" he asked as he headed toward the kitchen. Lois stood and followed him, grabbing some plates before meeting him at her center island.

"I have a gangster to bag. Of course I'm going in," she said. "I was actually kinda hoping you would help me with that."

"How?" He removed a couple pastries from the bag and placed them on the plates.

She gave him a sly look. "I never did get a chance to get inside Ronny Fingers' place. And you have some talents at your disposal

that can get us what we need from a distance without having to have another run-in with his goons.”

He gave her a sideways glance. “You do understand that Superman stands for truth and justice and all that, right? Visually breaking and entering doesn’t exactly fit the bill.”

Lois carried the plates over to the table and sat down. “But I’ve done plenty of actual breaking and entering with you as my accomplice, so obviously you’re somewhat flexible on that if it means bringing in a bad guy.” He gave her a perturbed glance, but she just smiled and took a large bite of her food, melting in her chair with a moan as the taste finally registered. How was it that he knew where all the best bakeries were?

Her reaction to the food seemed to soften him up, and he even smiled a little as he began to eat, too. “What about helping me with my story? You know, following the money in politics?”

Involuntarily, Lois yawned, and she had to quickly cover her mouth or risk the contents spilling out. Clark seemed amused as she waved her hand and quickly finished her bite once the yawn passed. “Not unless you want me to pass out at my desk,” she said.

Something mischievous gleamed in his eye. “Maybe you could take a nap now and just come in late. I’m sure Perry would understand.” Lois gave him a look that meant to convey that she would take his suggestion over her dead body, but then he started in on the finer details of his story. “Did you know that bills sponsored by special interest groups have an incredible success rate in the House? As a matter of fact...”

Lois yawned again, and felt the sudden urge to throw something at him. He just laughed, and she knew that he would exploit this new toy mercilessly until he got her to admit defeat. “Uncle,” she said once that yawn was over, throwing up her hands and laughing with him.

This was her new world, she realized. It wasn’t the life she had known, the solitary one with singular focus on her job and her hero. It also wasn’t the life that she had fantasized about for so long, the one filled with constant excitement and a mythical hero without faults. This was a shared life, with Clark by her side to tease, to get her meals from exotic locales, and to show her the world from his perspective. With him, it seemed like anything was possible, even things that had seemed completely impossible only a couple days earlier. Above all, though, she knew that he loved her, and she couldn’t deny that she loved him back fiercely with all her heart. She found that she looked forward to wherever it was that this new life took her, starting with her breakfast and going from there.

THE END