

# Don't Be Cruel

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Summary: What if Clark went to Kansas after Lois rejected him in “Barbarians at the Planet” and before Superman went to her apartment? An AU for the Season One finale.

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Thoughts are in italics.

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Some dialogue in this story is taken from the Lois & Clark episodes “Barbarians at the Planet” and “House of Luthor” written by Dan Levine & Deborah Joy LeVine. Some dialogue directly quoted and some adapted. Comparisons of Clark's friends with Superman's inspired by dialogue from the Lois & Clark episode “That Old Gang of Mine” written by Gene Miller & Karen Kavner.

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## Day 1 – Night

Clark flew back from Kansas more slowly than usual. He wasn't sure what awaited him in Metropolis. His heart had already shattered once today, and he was not looking forward to the conversation Superman needed to have with Lois.

This was one of the worst days of his life. It started with Lois giving him a tour of LNN, trying to convince him to join her in the enemy's camp. She put a happy spin on everything, but he just couldn't see it. He'd never seen a workplace so sterile and soulless—it was a perfect fit for the soulless man who owned it.

Unfortunately the conversation with Lois went downhill after that.

After convincing her to talk to him privately, he foolishly poured his heart out to her. And in typical Lois Lane fashion, she rebuffed his heartfelt declaration of love.

Then she didn't really answer his question about whether or not she loved Luthor. But she was seriously considering Luthor's proposal. Giving Luthor much more time and consideration than she gave Clark, in the process scattering what was left of the pieces of Clark's heart.

She apparently thought Clark was only jealous of Luthor. And Clark's declaration probably only added to that image. She had no concept of the fear he harbored of how Luthor would manipulate and change Lois. And the danger she faced by staying close to that monster.

To top it all off, she stomped on the remains of his shattered heart, reducing him to her personal minion when she requested, no instructed, him to contact Superman for her.

To pledge her undying love, he suspected.

*Oh Lois, how could you be so cruel?*

*Have I been kidding myself to think you considered me, Clark, your partner and friend?*

*Was Clark just an underling you could use to get what you wanted without considering his feelings?*

*Without seeing that he was a man who could love you?*

*Or did you think he was not worthy of loving you?*

*Great! Now I'm having whole conversations with myself in the third person. Mom will have a fit. That is if I ever tell her.*

He hoped that Lois was not that shallow. That she was confused and maybe upset. Well, he might just find out the truth tonight.

And maybe that's why he'd been reluctant to face her. He just didn't want to shatter his image of Lois.

The Lois he had caught glimpses of under her hard exterior.

The Lois he fell in love with.

Not the one he saw today.

That one had crushed his hopes and dreams, and left him hurt, angry and confused.

So he turned to the two people who'd always accepted and loved him.

Unconditionally.

His parents had given him that unconditional love since they found him in his spaceship.

From that moment on, they accepted and loved him. They protected him. Whether from government agents looking for a spaceship or speculation about his unusual adoption—which the town gossips decided was because of his “illegitimate” birth. And they continually showed their love even recently by covering for him and nursing him during his first exposure to kryptonite and helping him regain his memory after Nightfall.

They had always supported him even if his decision wouldn't have been their first choice, like when he traveled the world or became Superman.

They were the best parents he could have asked for.

He always knew he was their son.

No matter what.

Forever.

It was to that place of comfort and home that he went today to nurse his wounds. And once again found unconditional love and support.

While he believed in fighting his own battles, he was glad he had decided to fly to Kansas for their advice. They were sympathetic about his conflicted feelings of love, anger and hurt.

Confirmation that his responses were normal and understandable soothed him. Even more than the glass of buttermilk and oatmeal raisin cookies warm from the oven he'd found comfort in since childhood.

His parents always knew what to say, and what not to say. Their common sense and wisdom helped him to realize that Superman could not be cruel or hurtful to Lois. And he needed to remember she saw him as two different people. She rejected Clark, not Superman.

His mom told him she thought Lois saw herself in love with Superman, and unlike her father she was being monogamous in her love. She thought Lois couldn't see her love for Clark because she was blinded by the superhero and she saw Clark originally as a competitor, then later a friend.

*Patience. I can do this.*

Following his parents' advice, he methodically put his own pain aside. Just like when he methodically folded his laundry, stacking the folded clothing aside in piles before putting it away.

And tonight his new mantra became “Don't Be Cruel.” If he had to repeat it every five seconds to keep his cool he would.

So he put aside his feelings, instead focusing on what to do next.

Only after he finished with Lois would he take out the hurt and anguish, allowing himself the luxury of venting, probably with primal screams.

Surely he could do that on a glacier in the Arctic. Or even better, one in the more isolated and colder Antarctica.

Now he needed to focus, to gently let her know that Superman could not have a relationship with Lois, or to at least delay that

decision without pushing her into Luthor's waiting arms and bed.

That very thought sent cold shivers down his spine. He stopped suddenly over the Appalachian Mountains and found his hands trembling. He flew higher above the clouds. Here, in the space between Earth and the stars he could find solace and quiet. No calls for help reached him here, just the silence his soul craved.

Lying back as if on a bed, he floated and relaxed, using relaxation techniques he'd learned in his travels as Clark. He stayed in his special place until his hands stopped trembling, and he felt calmer and in control. After all, Superman could never lose control.

Especially not in front of Lois "Mad Dog" Lane.

While Lois could lose her temper over something as trivial as a cup of cold coffee or a stale donut, she had no idea just how much control of his temper and emotions he exercised on a daily, sometimes hourly, basis.

Especially with Lois Lane.

These thoughts were getting him nowhere. He chuckled to himself at how appropriate that thought was from the person Lois had called the "Hack from Nowheresville."

So he repeated his mantra, over and over again.

*Don't Be Cruel.*

*Don't Be Cruel.*

*Don't Be Cruel.*

It became ingrained in his very soul. He could match its syllables to the beating of his heart. So it became a part of him. When he finally felt in control again, he headed for the city he loved and Lois.

Too quickly the flight ended, and he found himself hovering over her apartment. While he normally wouldn't scan her apartment without her permission or her being in danger, this was not by any means a normal day.

Whatever a normal day was for him.

He was reminded again of his parents' advice. Martha's gentle voice earlier today masked her frustration and anger. He was floored when she suggested that Lois might try to seduce Superman. Until that moment he hadn't even considered that possibility.

Using his super-hearing first, he didn't hear any sounds from the apartment except her breathing and heartbeat. Lois's breathing was calm and regular, and although her heartbeat was slightly elevated, it was not distressed. It sounded more like anticipation or mild anxiety. And just hearing it once again soothed his soul.

Wondering what he'd find when he looked, he prepared himself for the worst. He avoided scanning the more private areas of her apartment.

Uncomfortable at violating his own code of ethics by using his senses to see and hear her, nevertheless he recognized its necessity to get a better idea of what she planned—and to at least have an inkling of how to respond.

Only Lois Lane could make Superman violate his ethics for love.

Yes, he still loved her. Right now he wasn't sure he liked her actions very much, but Clark was very sure he still loved her. He couldn't turn his love off as easily as he could the kitchen faucet or a fire hydrant.

He sighed and wondered why he was responding so quickly to her summons. Surely someone somewhere had a job for Superman.

He listened, stretching out his hearing to the surrounding city.

Nope. No such luck. Tonight was quiet.

Well, he thought, he could always take the coward's way out and hightail it back to the Kent farm for additional comfort and advice.

What was he thinking?

Why could he calmly face down Jason Trask after becoming powerless from kryptonite, an amnesia-causing asteroid and

terrorists holding the Daily Planet hostage, but the very idea of confronting Lois turned him into a mass of quivering red-and-blue Jell-O?

She held that power. Until he could trust she wouldn't run to Luthor, she couldn't know that she held that power, or how much she meant to him.

And there was the other **BIG** issue. He didn't know if his shattered heart could survive another onslaught tonight.

So he set aside his concerns about ethics and cautiously scanned her apartment, starting with the living room.

And found her.

Lois was curled up on her sofa dressed only in a thin low-cut nightgown with spaghetti straps, reading a book.

Clark shook his head and smiled to himself at his mother's accurate insight. So, consciously or unconsciously, Lois was going to try to seduce Superman. His first reaction would have been anger, and he suspected he would have made a cutting remark he'd later deeply regret.

Instead he blushed, sure that his cheeks matched the scarlet of his cape.

Turning off his super vision, he took a deep breath. Next he recited the Gettysburg Address in Japanese, again in Portuguese, and then counted backwards by sevens from one thousand in Dutch. When he was sure his face was a normal color, he cloaked himself further in the cool, aloof superhero persona whose shattered heart was not hanging together by a thread.

He reminded himself that Lois believed Superman and Clark were two different people. If she remained close to Luthor and he discovered she knew how close Clark and Superman were, Clark knew that her life and those of his parents and friends would be in danger. He knew Luthor would not hesitate to use any means to find out his secrets and destroy the superhero.

Clark had one chance to do this right.

He could do this.

More than Superman, he was Clark Kent.

He had always been Clark.

And saving Lois was a job only Clark Kent as Superman could do.

Clark knew Lois better than anyone. He could see the nuances in her body language and hear the subtle emotions in her voice—without superpowers.

If things went badly, he could walk or fly away, and Superman could vanish. Clark, however, needed to survive. Superman could disappear as quickly and mysteriously as he had appeared to save the space shuttle, but Clark would be shattered if Lois got herself more closely entangled with Luthor.

And Clark had family and friends who needed him, and he needed them.

Superman, on the other hand, was alone.

No family.

No friends.

Superman didn't go to a ball game with Jimmy.

Or listen with amusement to the Chief's endless supply of Elvis stories.

He couldn't spend an afternoon fishing with his dad. Or help him fix the tractor.

Superman didn't have a mother who baked him cookies. Or whose modern artwork he supported.

Nor did Superman watch a video and eat pizza with Lois. Or listen to her rant on a tangent while secretly loving every word. Or tease her about creating words to win at Scrabble.

Of course Lois didn't know that, and might never know or understand. Sharing those truths would require a level of trust in her he currently didn't have.

Not as long as she was close to Luthor.

And both parts of him would be devastated to lose Lois completely.

He reminded himself to focus on the next step. Not on what-ifs and maybes in the future. And stop putting so much pressure on this one conversation. He planned to keep the conversation going, and if necessary, continue it another day.

Hopefully Lois would agree.

While the idea of pursuing Lois as Superman felt like shards of kryptonite penetrating his wounded heart, if it was the only way to prevent her from marrying Luthor, he would save it as a last resort. If only Lois could understand how much safer she, his parents and friends would be if she had a relationship with Clark. Maybe he could stall. Not give her a definite yes or no. Convince Lois that he needed time, or that they both needed time to figure out how or if a relationship between Lois and Superman could work. Yes, he recalled his mom's reminder to not make decisions for Lois but to include her in decisions.

*Thank you, Mom.*

And he'd have to decide what he could tell her and what he could not... and when. And that could not be decided on the spur of the moment, without risking his family and friends.

*Oh, Lois, if only you saw Clark as a romantic interest this would be so much less complicated! I could have told you everything.*

Instead he felt trapped, wading through the minefield of white lies and half-truths that was his life. It was exhausting, even for someone with super stamina. And if "Mad Dog" Lane decided to examine his inconsistencies closely, he'd be in big trouble. She'd latch onto them as a hungry dog holds onto a bone, and he had no doubt that she'd tear more than his heart to shreds without kryptonite.

One step at a time, he reminded himself. Don't get ahead of yourself.

*Don't Be Cruel.*

First, meet Lois.

If she makes a more obvious seduction attempt, well, his parents reminded him to react as Superman the superhero, not Clark the man.

*Why did I create Superman again?*

*Oh yeah, so I could stay in Metropolis and grow closer to Lois. Well, it certainly wasn't working as I thought or hoped it might. But I could still help people without risking exposure to the world. So at least that part of it was successful.*

He sighed.

He was over-thinking this.

Again.

No matter what happened, he would let her start talking. Listen with both his ears and heart while watching her body language. Don't make decisions alone for this independent career woman. Good advice from Mom and Dad. Now if only following it was as easy as listening to it.

And he reminded himself again, remain the superhero. Concerned, but never angry or hurt. Don't give her any reason to turn to Luthor for comfort.

*Don't Be Cruel.*

The estrangement of Lois and Clark had shattered his heart. Thinking about also cutting all ties with Lois as Superman was more painful than kryptonite.

If that happened all that remained of Clark and Superman would be an empty suit.

And yet if she married Luthor, he was sure that would happen... if Luthor didn't kill her first.

Steeling himself for the potential battle ahead, he flew down to her apartment.

With a whoosh, he entered and stood just inside the open window. The breeze he generated ruffled her hair, and she turned towards him. Her face lit up in recognition.

Arms folded across his chest and feet comfortably spread apart, he struck his best superhero pose and silently waited.

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"Superman!" Lois softly exclaimed.

"I heard you wanted to see me."

"Yes. Please come in. I'll just put on a robe."

"Either that, Lois, or I'll come back at a more appropriate time. If you weren't expecting company, I mean."

It was Lois's turn to blush as red as Superman's cape.

*Good. Maybe that will derail her seduction plans. Remember: Don't Be Cruel.*

"No, I'll just be a moment," she said as she quickly turned and sprinted towards her bedroom.

He turned, looking out the window at the night sky. And cooled his emotions by repeating "Don't Be Cruel" over and over—in a different language each time. He got to 150 different languages when he heard the sound of her soft footsteps returning. And he slowly turned to face her.

She was wearing a robe that matched her nightgown. It was an improvement, although it still highlighted her body's curves and left too little to the imagination. He decided to ignore it, focusing on her face.

Lois shyly edged towards him. "Thank you for coming, Superman. I'm just trying to figure out... well, there've been a lot of changes going on in my life and I'm trying to make the right decisions, but I can't until I know how you feel." Lois walked closer, put her hand on his chest and tenderly asked, "Superman, is there any hope for us? You and me? I'm so completely in love with you that I can't do anything else without knowing."

He took a deep breath, exhaled, shook his head and quietly but firmly replied, "Lois, I do care for you. But there are things about me you don't know, that you may never know."

Lois interrupted him, looked at him with her soft doe eyes and said sincerely, "It doesn't matter! I know **you**. And I don't mean you the celebrity or you the superhero. If you had **no** powers, if you were just an ordinary man leading an ordinary life, I'd love you just the same. Can't you believe that?"

*Oh Lois, if only you knew! Why couldn't **your** mantra be Don't Be Cruel to me? How do I answer you without telling you who that ordinary man is, without hurting you?*

He shook his head again, clearing his thoughts. As he took a step back her hand fell away from his chest. He closed his eyes and then opened them. Looking directly at her he said sincerely, "Oh, Lois, I wish I could. You don't know how much I wish I could believe you. But under the circumstances—"

Pausing for a moment, he then continued, "But let's put that aside for a moment. Lois, what do you want out of a relationship?"

"What do you mean?"

"Let's start with this. You say you love me. Yet you've been dating Lex Luthor. And I don't understand. Just how serious are you about both of us?"

Lois lowered her eyes. "Well, Lex has asked me to marry him. So I guess it's pretty serious."

Her admission hung in the deafening silence between them.

Lois looked uncomfortable, and Clark wondered just what she was thinking.

*Don't Be Cruel.*

Pushing aside his irritation and pain, he forced himself to calmly and quietly ask,

"You guess?"

"To be honest, Superman, I think that Lex is more serious than I am. I wanted to know how you felt before giving him an answer."

Clark squeezed his eyes shut.

*Did she understand how manipulative that response was? Was it intentional or not?*

He opened his eyes and asked, "Why Lois? Are you holding his proposal in reserve if I say 'No'?"

Lois blushed again. "I guess so—"

He interrupted, "Is that fair to either of us? No, don't answer that. You should know this feels very close to blackmail. And I've never responded well to threats."

Lois looked at him in horror, her mouth open.

"No, Superman! That's not what I meant!"

Her eyes filled with tears, and she mumbled so softly he wouldn't have heard it without his super-hearing, "How did I get to be the bad guy here?"

"I'm not trying to make anyone the bad guy."

Lois gasped and stared at him as she realized he heard her.

"Yes, Lois, I heard that. I'm just trying to understand what is going on, and hoping we can both see each other's point of view. The last thing I want to do is hurt you."

He paused, took a deep breath and then continued, "But Lois, the truth is I haven't been able to figure out how Superman can have a relationship with any woman. The tabloids and paparazzi would have a field day. To say nothing of criminals, and anyone who wanted to control me. My close friends and family would be constantly watched, and I fear their lives would be in constant danger.

"And yes, before you say anything I know that you are very capable of taking care of yourself. That's not what I mean. There are some very determined people out there who want to destroy me. You saw that with Trask. How he treated you, Clark and his parents just because he thought you and Clark knew how to contact me. What would he or someone like him do to my girlfriend, wife or children? I don't know if I can live with that fear."

"Oh. I never thought... I mean, I didn't know how you felt."

"That I have fears and hopes? Yes, Lois, I told once you **I am a man**. I'm honestly not sure I could continue being Superman in that kind of environment. And consider this: if it became widespread knowledge that I was close to you, would it also put your family and friends at risk? I can't be everywhere at once."

"I didn't think about that... You must think I'm stupid."

"No, I never thought that! I'm only bringing this up because I've had longer to think about it and want you to understand the challenges anyone faces in a relationship with me. Another consideration is could you do your job as an investigative reporter if the tabloids, criminals and government followed you everywhere?"

"Actually, I'm a producer right now. Working behind the scenes."

"Is that what you want?"

"I honestly don't know. I-I'm just starting the job."

"I'm just surprised. I never pictured you as a producer in TV news. But if it makes you happy, that's great. There's something else you need to consider, though. Will your job be there if you and I are an item?"

"What do you mean?"

"Lois, you work for Lex Luthor. I don't know if your job has anything to do with his proposal. I am concerned no matter how you answer him; you may not like the outcome. And before you decide to accept his proposal we should talk about what I know about him, but can't prove."

Lois whirled on him, asking angrily, "Are you going to attack him like Clark does?"

*Great, Kent. You've unleashed "Mad Dog" Lane. Just what this conversation didn't need!*

*Don't Be Cruel.*

He took a deep breath, and coolly met her glare. "Lois, I know things about him because of my special abilities. And Clark knows what I know."

Lois narrowed her eyes at him and coldly asked, "What do you know?"

"That's a separate discussion, but basically that he's involved in a lot of criminal activities. He's probably the biggest criminal in

Metropolis, and maybe this part of the country. I really don't know how far his influence extends."

"A criminal? You can't just throw that accusation out there without explaining. And why didn't you tell me before?"

"As I said, I don't have any proof. I know from what I've seen and heard, but I don't have recordings of our conversations or videos of his activities. The proof I've had has disappeared, sometimes quite conveniently. And I haven't told you for a couple of reasons. I've thought you were closer to Clark than to me, and he's tried to talk to you. If you didn't want to hear it from your partner, why would you want to hear it from me? If I told you, I was concerned it could put your life in more danger."

"So you make decisions for me now? Or maybe it's you and Clark. Do you two talk about me behind my back?"

"What? No, Lois, it's not like that. I'm not deciding things for anyone, especially you. Actually my delay in telling you was probably more indecision than a conscious decision. My relationship with Clark is complicated," he paused and sighed. "It's one of those things you don't know about. And before you ask, I'm not going to tell you any more about it tonight. But you still haven't explained what you want from me in a relationship. Would you be happy not being able to tell anyone about our relationship? That includes your friends and family."

"Well, I'm not all that social anyway. I don't have that many friends I talk to about personal matters except Clark, and I'm not sure he's still my friend. We haven't exactly been getting along lately. And my family, well I'm not close to any of them. So, no, I wouldn't need to tell anyone."

"Lois, you deserve to have your relationship as open or as private as you want. But not as some clandestine affair that makes you feel dirty or like a mistress. And wouldn't you feel that way if you had a boyfriend or husband who couldn't publicly acknowledge your relationship? Do you expect to go out on dates? I'm not exactly inconspicuous in this outfit, you know. Before you answer, I don't want that kind of relationship so it's probably a moot point anyway. I am willing to consider a relationship if we can figure out the logistics, but having any kind of relationship with Superman may not be what you want. You need to seriously consider this."

"So are you saying there's hope for us?"

"I'm saying there's a lot to consider. Yes, I'd like there to be hope for us. But I don't know how it would work or **if** it could work. And the first thing you have to decide is whether or not you are going to accept Lex Luthor's proposal.

"Lois, no one wants to be second choice. Not me and not him. You have to decide what you want. Who do you see spending your life with? With whom can you build the life you both want? Is that Lex Luthor, me—or someone else?"

*Like Clark? Please?*

Lois stuttered, "I-I d-don't know."

"Then consider taking the time to make the right decision for you. I don't want to pressure you into a decision, so there's no time limit as far as I'm concerned. Search your heart for the answers you need."

He cocked his head, staring out the window and listening. "I'm sorry Lois, but someone needs me. Can we continue this talk another time?"

"Sure. Go. I have a lot to think about. Thanks again for coming tonight."

With a nod and a whoosh he flew out her window.

Lois stared at her open window.

She watched the curtains fluttering long after Superman's departure. She found herself frozen in place.

She couldn't think, speak or move.

Stunned at what had just happened did not begin to explain how she felt. She wasn't sure how long she stood there. It was as if her mind and body had shut down, and needed to reboot like a

frozen computer.

Tonight was confusing. There was something off about Superman tonight. He seemed distressed with an underlying tension. His speech was different, hesitantly spoken as if every word was cautiously calculated.

She stood up again and paced in her living room as she thought over the events earlier. There was something more there. She was missing something, but what?

*Where was the superhero, the one who always had a smile for me?*

*The one who just a couple of weeks ago had teased me about how special I was because I caught bombs instead of bouquets?*

*The one who seemed to look directly into my heart?*

*Tonight, he wasn't here.*

Instead, she saw someone who was serious and distant. He seemed tense and uncomfortable. If she didn't know better, she'd think he was in pain. But he was invulnerable. He was troubled as he confessed his fears. Obviously, he was vulnerable when it came to matters of the heart. So maybe he was in pain tonight. Not physical, but emotional pain.

*Who had dared to hurt him? And how?*

*They'll have to answer to me!*

*How dare they cause that wonderful man pain!*

Would he tell her? Actually she didn't see any reason why he would confide in her. Not unless he could trust her with his heart. And he couldn't tonight. It was obvious he couldn't trust her with knowing everything about him, so how could he trust her with his heart? She slumped, dropping back onto her loveseat.

She thought about what else he'd said tonight.

He worried about how his enemies might hurt his potential girlfriend, wife or children.

Obviously that was a very real fear he carried with him. How long had he worried about that? Before Trask appeared? Probably. It sounded as though he had seriously considered it for some time.

Before tonight Lois had no idea he carried such worries. He never seemed burdened by them before now.

Her perceptions of him seemed wrong. Was she overconfident to think she knew him so well? Then again, tonight was the longest conversation they'd ever had. Even longer than her exclusive interview.

Tonight he never addressed her confession of loving him with or without his superpowers. That seemed to bother him.

*Why?*

*What about that statement made him change the subject rather abruptly?*

She thought about exactly what she'd said. "I know you. And I don't mean you the celebrity or you the superhero. If you had no powers, if you were just an ordinary man leading an ordinary life, I'd love you just the same."

And his reply, "Oh, Lois I wish I could. You don't know how much I wish I could believe you. But under the circumstances—" And then he abruptly changed the subject.

*What circumstances?*

*What would make him think she didn't love him as an ordinary man?*

One of her professors in college said to look for the simplest explanation to a puzzle. That advice had served her well, and her leaps of logic in investigations often came about after applying that principle.

*So what was the simplest explanation here?*

*The circumstances that would make him not believe I could love the ordinary man living an ordinary life would be...*

*Oh. My. Gosh.*

*He must be that ordinary man! It was the only thing that made sense.*

Somewhere she must have met him as Ordinary Guy living his ordinary life. Not only had she not recognized him, but also to her

chagrin, she realized she must have brushed him off. Maybe even in "Mad Dog" Lane mode.

No wonder he thought she couldn't love him as Ordinary Guy! He might even think she disliked or hated him.

*And he changed the subject because?*

He didn't want to discuss it. Maybe because then she'd know he was also Ordinary Guy.

*Why?*

Surely he must know how she'd always admired him. And she told him tonight she was completely in love with him.

She told Superman. Not Ordinary Guy.

*And that's important because he thinks of himself as Ordinary Guy?*

*That can't be right! Why on Earth would Superman, that wonderful man who could do so many things ever think of himself as ordinary? It just didn't make sense. Unless... did he want to be ordinary?*

Why? Ordinary is nothing special. Ordinary is what most people are. Most humans.

Lois had spent her life striving to be extraordinary, and Superman was born that way.

Maybe she needed to look at this through his eyes. As the only survivor of his people, he was the lone Kryptonian among billions of humans. How would that make him feel?

*Alien? Even alienated?*

*Isolated?*

*Different?*

*But in his case, different was great! Didn't he see that? Or maybe he needed someone to remind him of that fact.*

*Could Superman want to be that Ordinary Guy? He said he was a man, with a man's feelings. Did he want to be human?*

*To belong? He wanted to belong and be normal?*

*Then why would he fly around as Superman?*

*What did he say when I first met him? He was here to help. So Superman was here to help. Firefighters, policemen, first responders all need time to recover from their shifts. And isn't that what he is in many cases? He's a first responder, an unofficial fireman and policeman, and so much more.*

*So maybe Ordinary Guy lets him recover from rescues and all the horrors he must see on a daily basis. And maybe he liked being Ordinary Guy. Could the Superman suit be a uniform so he could help when needed without exposing himself as Ordinary Guy?*

*What had I thought before tonight?*

*That between rescues he just hovered, in the sky looking for the next person to help?*

*Or maybe was rescuing someone in the world twenty-four hours a day?*

Actually, she realized she'd never thought much about it.

And if he was Ordinary Guy, he probably had a job, friends and maybe a family. Obviously that part of his life he kept under wraps. With good reason, she realized. If anyone suspected, the government, tabloids and public would hound him until they discovered all his secrets. And would indeed use his family and friends to get him to do what they wanted. Or to destroy him, like Trask tried to use Clark, Lois and his parents. To her horror she realized that's what she wanted to do months ago when he first appeared. Use him to uncover his secrets and get her Pulitzer.

*Did he know that?*

*What if Clark told him?*

*Or maybe he heard her? How far does his super-hearing work anyway?*

Something else she didn't know about him.

How she must have hurt him—both of him.

*AARGH!*

She buried her head in her hands in embarrassment.

She was wallowing. And Lois Lane did not wallow!

What could she do now?

She had to figure this out and make it right.

*Where do I start?*

*What did Superman say?*

He said the first thing she needed to do was to decide whether or not she wanted to marry Lex. Apparently he wouldn't do anything until she decided that.

*Wait, what was it Superman said about Lex?*

Superman had said that he knew but couldn't prove Lex was a criminal. Of all the possible things she thought she might learn tonight, that was not on the list. She knew Lex had a reputation for ruthlessness in business.

*A criminal?*

*Why would the city's biggest philanthropist be a criminal?*

It didn't make sense. But what if... if the opposite were true, that a criminal was the city's biggest philanthropist? Then it was a great cover. Suddenly Lex's refusal to rebuild the *Daily Planet* or to provide for its employees except her took on ominous possibilities of his underlying motives. She didn't like where her thoughts were going, but felt she needed to continue.

Jumping up, Lois began to pace back and forth, thinking hard.

She trusted Superman.

She believed Superman when he said Lex was a criminal. But she hadn't given Clark the same consideration. Instead she'd opted to believe it was all personality conflict. And after today in the park, she thought it was jealousy.

Thinking back, she realized Clark and Lex didn't get along. Lex had even killed at least one of Clark's stories.

*Why? And what did Lex know about journalism? Sure he owned LNN, but what newspaper experience did he have? Surely he must delegate. His multiple businesses couldn't succeed if he micromanaged like he did at the Planet. What was different about the Planet? Maybe his recent acquisition of it had something to do with his hands-on approach. Or maybe because the fact that the Planet was in serious financial difficulties.*

*And what about Perry and Lex?*

Initially Perry seemed to welcome him. Within a day though, Lex had hired Chip as Perry's supervisor. That's when Perry left the newsroom, opting to take early retirement. Chip was a kid out of business school who had no experience in journalism. He may not have had any previous jobs. No wonder Perry quit! It was humiliating and beyond insulting.

The loss of her mentor and surrogate father was painful, and she was still reeling from the shock.

She thought about Lex pushing Perry out as a business decision.

*Why had Lex humiliated and alienated a journalist as experienced and respected as Perry? Even if he wanted to get rid of Perry, wouldn't easing him out of his position be a better business decision? It certainly would have been better for morale.*

*Which raised the question of whether or not Lex wanted the Planet to succeed. Did he consciously or unconsciously want the Planet to fail?*

And then there was Jimmy, whose newsroom job disappeared after Lex took over. Since then Jimmy had been cautious around her, not discussing Lex. Jimmy had seen her reactions to Clark's concerns and accusations. Probably Jimmy didn't want to have her unleash her temper on him. He was understandably upset about losing his job.

Moving Jimmy from the newsroom didn't make sense. He was her favorite researcher, and a budding photojournalist to boot. His skills were wasted in printing or wherever he had been sent. And he was like the younger brother she never had. And one of the few people she could depend on. Just like Perry and Clark.

*Come to think of it, hadn't Lex suggested if Clark wasn't happy with his editorial decisions he could leave the Planet? At least that was the newsroom gossip. Why had I dismissed it*

*instead of asking Clark what happened? Lex said that Clark didn't like him, while he claimed to hold the utmost respect for Clark.*

*But did he?*

That's not how he acted when they were all taken hostage a couple of weeks ago. He had dismissed Clark's suggestions, and acted superior all night. Yet it was Lex who got shot, and Clark who saved his life.

She wondered if Lex had ever thanked Clark. Not while she was around anyway. She had thanked Clark, and Perry was impressed with Clark's skill, she recalled. Jack didn't say much, but his attitude towards Clark had changed by the end of the night. So maybe he changed his mind about Clark.

Why had she so easily sided with Lex that night? Was it because she was on a date? That was scary, if she was actually changing her personality when around him. Would that last? And what would be his reaction if she disagreed with him?

Did she side with him that night it because he seemed so composed and wanted to take charge... to be in control? Clark was also calm until Lex pushed his buttons too far.

In retrospect Clark's suggestions were safer than either hers or Lex's.

*Clark was right. Darn it!*

*What had Fuentes said when Lex offered him money? Oh yes, he'd rather have the police after him than Lex. If Lex were the businessman and philanthropist he portrayed, why would Fuentes say that?*

*He wouldn't.*

Fuentes must have known something about Lex she didn't. *Could Lex's involvement explain why he changed his mind about killing the hostages? Was refusing to negotiate with Lex and killing the hostages be a way to prevent retribution from someone who was a bigger criminal than Fuentes?*

Wow, she really didn't like the way her thoughts were leading. Still, it was a puzzle that she felt she had to complete.

She thought about Superman's absence that night. He had arrived at the last minute to save her and Fuentes after they fell off the scaffolding. Apparently he had watched, listened and waited for the most opportune time to act. Just like Clark had suggested they all do in the conference room. Oh, she hated when someone was more right than she was! And in this case, it was two people—Superman and Clark.

Losing Perry as editor in chief, moving Jimmy and antagonizing Clark—the second-best city reporter and the only reporter she could partner with—didn't make good business sense. At least what she knew about business. And in the process, she had lost the three people closest to her.

Lois halted her pacing. A cold shiver went down her back.

*I. Had. Lost. My. Three. Closest. Colleagues.*

*Why?*

Suddenly she felt like she was being manipulated... by Lex.

And then she had an epiphany. One of her leaps of logic. Lois, her family, friends, colleagues and even the *Planet* were all pieces on a chessboard.

*Could that be it?*

Did Lex see the *Planet* and those she cared about as pieces on a chessboard? Was he playing a game of chess, which is effectively a game of war? Maybe he believed all was fair in love and war? Or was she reading too much into this? No, she didn't think so. Who was Lex competing against? Was she the queen, a pawn or his opponent? How could she play if she didn't know the game was being played or the pieces? Or was that the way Lex routinely won business decisions? No, she definitely didn't like the way her thoughts were turning tonight.

*Pawns. Jimmy and Jack were pawns, as were others in the newsroom. Who was who?*

Actually, it didn't matter. Continuing this analogy, with a ruthless player, they were all expendable in pursuit of winning.

She had learned that the hard way in her high school chess club. She remembered that some of the members didn't care how they won, just that they did. And humiliating their opponents seemed to be part of their joy in playing.

Suddenly the Planet's bombing took on a more sinister connotation. What if... if Lex had somehow been behind it? He didn't like Jack; that was evident from the confrontation they'd had in the newsroom. Could he have framed Jack? Or paid someone to do it, more likely. Would he? That went beyond ruthless business practices. People could have died if not for Superman! Jimmy broke his arm and others were hurt. And all those people lost their jobs. Thinking of the employees with families who now had no income made her stomach queasy.

*How could anyone deliberately hurt that many people to gain, what?*

*Could this whole thing have been an elaborate game of chess to win me?*

*How callous was that? Or am I being ridiculous? Surely Lex was not that ruthless and cruel to hurt so many people in the pursuit of one woman.*

*Or was he?*

*What do I really know about Lex?*

Thinking about it, she was amazed to discover how little she actually knew about him. Did she know enough about him to accept a marriage proposal? Earlier today she would have said yes. But now, if any part of this was true the answer was definitely no.

Was she in love with him? *No.*

Did she love him enough to marry him? In all honesty she had liked and respected him, but now she wasn't so sure. Oh, she was flattered by his attention. To be honest, she didn't love him. And she realized with a start she didn't trust him with her heart.

She sat down with a sigh. This was almost too much to think about. No, she started this and she would figure it out.

What she really needed was to talk to Clark. But after today, she wasn't sure he was talking to her, let alone willing to brainstorm about the man who had asked her to marry him.

So what did she know about Lex from personal experience?

In reviewing their dates and other encounters, she realized just how secretive he was, and how good at avoiding her questions. He could change the subject so smoothly she didn't realize until later what had happened. And she admitted recently she wasn't even noticing he did that, even afterwards. Worse, lately many of their conversations had become him asking her questions. He never gave her an interview with enough information to print.

*What had happened to Lois Lane, the city's best investigative reporter? Was she so flattered by his attention that she stopped investigating? And it was embarrassing to admit she had never really started an investigation of Lex. Instead she had begun dating him.*

*Were all their dates orchestrated?* Thinking back on them, not once had he asked her what she would like to do on a date before he had made plans. When he called it was with an itinerary already set. The few times she had declined, he made her feel like it was her fault she had other plans.

Why had she tolerated that behavior? From anyone else, she would have gone into "Mad Dog" mode and verbally eviscerated him for making assumptions.

Never had they planned things together. Usually he even prearranged their meal. Oh, the food was delicious, but it would have been nice to be asked what she wanted rather than have him assume he knew. If she didn't know an hour ahead of time what she wanted, how could he? Was this what she wanted in a husband?

Well, she admitted, it was romantic—every little girl's fantasy—to be treated like a princess, living the jet set lifestyle. The truth was, though... she hadn't been a little girl for many years. Long before her father finally left. And she did not like being treated

like a child.

Why hadn't she stood up to him for his behavior? It was condescending, insulting and humiliating. And Lois Lane did not normally allow anyone to treat her that way. It was usually a surefire way to unleash "Mad Dog" Lane—or worse. Was she so dazzled and flattered by Lex that she allowed him to make decisions for her? Or was it something else?

The bottom line was she didn't know why she tolerated Lex's behavior. And she decided she'd figure that out later—maybe a lot later. She definitely didn't like it. She wondered if she was more annoyed at herself for not seeing this before, or at Lex.

Lex. He enjoyed taking her to the opera. Who else did she know with season tickets to the opera, let alone box seats? Lois thought they were probably the best seats in the house. While the performances were breathtaking and the music beautiful, she had to admit she hated trying to follow the story in a foreign language she didn't understand. She often found her mind wandering less than halfway through the performance. And the mystery of following the details without comprehending the words usually gave her a headache. She found the translated synopses in the program not as detailed as she'd like, and usually felt she was missing the subtleties of the story. If Lex followed it, he never offered to explain, and she never asked. Was she too embarrassed or intimidated to ask? Another thing to consider in the future...

Why had she pretended to enjoy herself at the opera? Was she trying to impress Lex? Or was she, as Clark had proclaimed once, a snob?

While Lex's penthouse was furnished beautifully and professionally, it often seemed cold and impersonal to Lois. Was that the latest in interior design? Or did it reflect his personality? Or maybe both?

And she had become part of Lex's social circle. Well, sort of. She didn't feel like she belonged. They had other interests than she did. And when she had attempted to talk about topics she was interested in, including their jobs, Lex smoothly changed the subject. Too often she was either at Lex's side while he led the conversation, or was left to chat with the wives and girlfriends while the men went into another room to discuss business. Lois had little in common with the other women, and found their discussions boring, inane or both. She was never left one-on-one with any of Lex's friends or business associates. So she couldn't develop either social relationships or cultivate them as sources.

How could she ever consider doing that her entire life?

She couldn't.

Did she really want to be part of LNN? Broadcast journalism really held no interest for her. Lex offered her the job of producer, saying it was a promotion from reporter or even anchor. She would work behind the scenes but get no on-air recognition for her work. Maybe she'd get her name in the credits at the end of a program. Credits that no one ever looked at. More importantly, she'd be giving up her chance at a Pulitzer. She would no longer be an investigative journalist, and likely would not qualify for a Kerth or Meriwether either. With a start, she realized she still wanted her Pulitzer.

Then she realized something amazing. She saw Clark winning that Pulitzer with her! When did that happen? When did she begin to think of them winning joint awards? When had Clark Kent become that important to her? From the start, he had gotten under her defenses. And even though it was only a few hours since she last saw him when he had left the park with hurt feelings... she missed him.

Was she really a part of LNN? More and more she felt isolated. Cut off from the *Daily Planet* and her friends. Her family was scattered, with Lucy in California, her father buried in his work and her mother in rehab once again.

Lex had saved her from Max Menken when she and Clark investigated those cyborg boxers. He also didn't blow her cover at

the Metro Club. Unlike Clark, who had. But did she really hold that against Clark? That was early in their partnership, and he was afraid for her. It was her idea to go alone into the Metro Club. And she never did ask Perry if it was Clark's idea to go undercover. Or maybe Perry had suggested it and let Clark take the blame? Clark had taken responsibility when he left the *Planet* to go undercover at the *Star*, and she never found out whose idea it was first.

She had to admit that it was because Toni Taylor went to Clark's apartment that Lois followed her and got the information on the Metros and Toasters. And grudgingly she admitted, to Clark's credit, he hadn't tried anything remotely similar since.

Then there was that weird copy of her apartment in Lex's bunker during Nightfall. She hadn't dwelled on that, but in retrospect it was creepy. How did he make an exact copy of her apartment, unless someone broke into her apartment without her knowledge? While Lex had seen her living room a few times, the details in that apartment reminded Lois of profiles she'd read about stalkers. Why hadn't she seen that before? Another sign she'd missed that Lex was dangerous.

Even if he wasn't dangerous, she realized earlier that she didn't love him, and right now she didn't trust him. She was flattered by his attentions. And while that would be enough to go out with him in the past, it wasn't enough for her to marry him.

So she couldn't marry Lex. Or continue seeing him.

Should she turn down his proposal? Tomorrow?

What should she do? Go undercover? If she did, she'd be going alone into a situation she didn't understand. Clark wouldn't be there, and she wouldn't have the resources of the *Daily Planet* behind her. And worse, if Lex had fooled her so far how could she trust her instincts where he was concerned? Would she even know if she were in danger? Too many ifs, and this time she would take the time to check the water level before jumping in.

With a shiver, she realized she was cold. And her current outfit was not comfortable. So she went to her bedroom and changed into a soft cotton knit shirt and pants. She blushed as she thought about her aborted attempt to seduce Superman. Well, if he came back tonight, he'd find her in a different outfit and maybe they'd both be more comfortable.

She decided she needed some tea. Clark had given her a jar of loose-leaf herbal tea that was supposed to help clarify thoughts. Lois felt tonight she needed it, and was grateful to Clark for his thoughtfulness.

As she waited for the water to boil, she thought again about her meals with Lex and those with Clark. How different were her meals with them! While Lex determined the place and food, Clark was more interested in what she wanted. Even the first time, when Clark brought that amazing Chinese takeout, he brought a selection rather than assuming she'd like a certain dish. Since then, he always asked her what she wanted. With chagrin, she realized she'd rarely asked him what he wanted. It was almost always her choice, whether pizza, Italian, Chinese or something else. The most independent decision he ever made regarding food was bringing her takeout coffee fixed the way she liked it and surprising her with French pastries. Well, she could change that. Assuming he still wanted to be her friend after today.

After the water boiled, Lois steeped her tea. Just like Clark had shown her. As she did, she realized Superman was right that she didn't know him very well.

*Did he like tea?* She had no idea. She didn't know what he liked to eat, or even how often. He'd told her once he didn't have to eat, but that didn't mean he didn't ever eat. And just because he didn't have to eat didn't mean he didn't enjoy eating.

*What did Superman like to do to relax? What was his taste in music or videos?* She had no idea.

She already knew Lex's preference for opera in a foreign language; any language other than English she suspected. Whether or not she was interested in it made no difference to him. Actually

it often seemed immaterial, she fumed.

Unlike Lex, Clark seemed happy to watch a video with her in one of their apartments. He always asked what she wanted to see and where. If she had no preference or told him to choose, he'd usually bring a selection for her to make the final choice. Once he brought that Italian movie they both wanted to see. Clark spoke Italian from his travels. He would stop the video when he disagreed with the English subtitles. They laughed at the differences that his knowledge of Italian made. He amazed her with not only the ability to listen to the audio while reading the subtitles, but also with his thoughtfulness to explain the discrepancies. For Lois, even with the delays of translation, the time flew. That was in contrast to how it often dragged at the opera.

Lois poured herself a mug of tea, and sat down. She realized that despite his urbane exterior and sophisticated tastes, Lex could not hold a candle to Clark for manners and genuine thoughtfulness.

Clark liked lots of different music, and had a fairly extensive collection of recordings. His apartment was furnished in an eclectic blend of things he'd picked up in his travels and mementos, with both new and old furniture. It worked and made a comfortable home, much more so than either her apartment or Lex's penthouse. And he had done an amazing job of repairing and painting the apartment. The glimpse she'd seen before he moved in showed it had been an absolute wreck.

She didn't know Clark's Metropolis friends outside of work. But most people at the *Planet* had been his friends, and apparently everyone in Smallville liked or loved him. Even though he hadn't lived there in several years.

*Did Superman even have any friends? If he was Ordinary Guy did they know who he was?*

While she considered him a friend, she definitely knew less about him than she did about Perry, Jimmy or Clark.

Her thoughts turned to Ordinary Guy. *Was he lonely? Did he have friends?*

While one of her fantasies was to be Superman's friend, she apparently wasn't Ordinary Guy's friend. Had she totally blown it? And did he more than care for her as a friend? Just because she felt a connection didn't mean he did.

A single tear silently ran down her cheek.

If she had accepted Lex's proposal, she knew she would have lost the two most important men in her life... Superman and Clark. And right now she wasn't sure which one was more important.

Did that make her shallow? Earlier this evening she had proclaimed her love for Superman, now she was focused on Clark. And until a few minutes ago she'd been seriously considering Lex's proposal.

*What did all that mean? It was so confusing.*

Of course, her actions may already have caused her to lose Clark. She remembered the anguish on his face as he abruptly turned and walked away from her in the park.

*No!* She couldn't lose Clark. She'd have to find some way to be his friend again.

And Superman. She had hurt him at some point as Ordinary Guy. Or maybe how differently she had treated both of him hurt him more.

*Who was he?*

*Superman or Ordinary Guy?*

*Or some combination of both?*

She'd have to find out if they were to become closer.

Then she remembered a quote from somewhere. ***Love is not whom you can see yourself with, it is who you can't see yourself without.***

While she'd been comparing how different her life was with Lex, Superman or even Clark, which one did she see herself not

living without?

She thought about the last few months. She remembered her encounters with all three men. How upset she was that Lex had tried to turn her interview into a date. What really upset her though about that interview was that Clark was right about Lex. And she had failed to see it! Did that confirm that Clark knew other things about Lex, and she'd missed them too?

Worse, had she dismissed his concerns only because he was from a small town and less experienced? Well, he'd certainly proven himself on investigations. Why couldn't she accept his suspicions as easily as he accepted hers?

Maybe she was really a snob.

Or was it because she hated to admit she was wrong?

Or maybe it was because she had to be tough to deal with difficult men all her life. She was a woman in a man's world, and they did not readily accept her or her ideas.

Except for a very few.

Perry.

Jimmy.

Clark.

And Superman.

From that first day, Clark had accepted her. He listened to her ideas, and more often than not, after expressing his concerns or doubts he would still follow her lead. She wondered if he would follow her to the ends of the Earth one day. Yes, she could see him doing just that if he could.

Superman said he always read her work. He never seemed to lose his temper with rescuing her, no matter how often. And if anyone could follow her to the ends of the Earth, it would be him. Heck, he'd probably beat her there!

Except for tonight, her encounters with Superman were during rescues or interviews. He had ignored her during the Bachelor Auction, although Clark had been there to comfort her later.

It was Clark, not Superman, who rescued her from Mr. Make-up disguised as Mr. Tracewski. And Clark held her when she was upset. *Why was it so hard to see how good it felt to be held by Clark?*

And she had to admit it felt great to hold Clark after Trask tried to kill him at the Kent farm last fall. And she loved dancing with him at the Corn Festival, and yes at the White Orchid Ball. Although she wasn't ready to tell him she enjoyed their dance at the ball. No use in him getting conceited.

So who was it she saw herself unable to live without?

The answer was clear.

She could live without Lex. So why had she thought of accepting Lex's proposal? Actually, she hadn't been thinking, just reacting for a while now.

Lois was both surprised and embarrassed to recognize that the one person who would make her life incomplete by his absence was... Clark. As soon as she realized the truth, she knew what she had to do. She needed to apologize to him and tell him how she felt. She didn't know if she was "in love" with him, but she did know she loved him as a close friend—her best friend—and he was a big part of her life.

But maybe she was just a teeny tiny smidgen in love with him? She had fallen hard for him after being sprayed with Miranda's pheromone potion. She shuddered to remember her behavior, including the Dance of the Seven Veils, although she still didn't clearly remember dancing it. The pheromone was only supposed to work if there was already an attraction there. Could her subconscious have known what she consciously denied? That she felt more for him than the love of a friend or brother? And he was so gentlemanly and understanding. Anyone else would have taken advantage of the situation. After all, she did when Superman was sprayed with the one hundred percent solution!

And there was no question that Clark was telling the truth today. As she thought about it, he showed how he loved her every

day. Whether asking her choices of movies or dinner, bringing her coffee just like she liked it, respecting her as a work partner or just in being her friend, his caring was obvious. And no one else could make her laugh over something as silly as recalling the names of the seven dwarfs or Santa's reindeer. She smiled at the memory of all those trivia games he graciously won, yet never collected their bets. When she won, she would be sure to collect! And his teasing was always gentle, not unkind.

She remembered she had told him shortly after they met not to fall for her because she didn't have the time. Apparently he didn't follow that advice... or was she really telling herself not to fall for him?

And the kisses they shared. Wow! No one had ever kissed her like Clark. Especially the only one she was sure wasn't a cover—the one when he left during the heat wave. Gentle kisses that spread heat down to her toes meant something, didn't they?

What did she really know about being in love—lifelong love—anyway? Her parents were not good examples. And her past relationships were federal disasters. In retrospect, what she'd felt in the past seemed more like crushes or lust. To her embarrassment, even her love of Superman seemed more like a schoolgirl crush than a lifelong commitment to love and be loved.

Thinking about Clark always being in her life made her feel content, comforted and complete.

And Superman was right. She didn't know him well at all.

She didn't notice as another tear trickled down her cheek. Suddenly the stresses of the last week overwhelmed her. Instead of unleashing her anger, the floodgates opened. She dissolved in a deluge of tears and sobs.

At first she cried for the *Planet*. She cried for Perry's retirement, and how she would miss her mentor and surrogate father. Then she cried about missing the clues about Lex and Ordinary Guy. And even how blind she'd been to Clark's caring and—yes—love.

As her tears continued, she realized that she wasn't crying just for her own pain caused by someone else or for a fictional television or movie character's pain.

For the first time she could remember, Lois Lane was also crying for those *she* had hurt.

The two men she had hurt deeply.

She was crying both for Ordinary Guy—the man who wore Superman's suit—and for Clark.

Overwhelmed with that realization, her torrent of tears continued.

An hour later, Lois slowly stopped sobbing, drying her tears.

She realized she had needed that emotional release. Now she felt tired, but renewed. Taking some deep breaths, she felt the overwhelming need to take charge of the situation.

So what could she do to fix this?

Well, first of all, she could apologize to Clark. She realized she had been out of line to ask him to contact Superman for her.

How? Clark was always very forgiving. She could explain that she was surprised and once again jumped in without checking the water level. He knew she did that regularly. She would also tell him her epiphany that she needed him in her life.

She hoped that Clark would agree to do what she should have suggested the first time Clark told her that he was uncomfortable about Lex. Together they would investigate Lex and find out his secrets, and if there was anything illegal in his life. With the *Planet* gone, they'd find a way to get the evidence and figure out where to publish it later.

Lois switched on LNN, where they were saying that Superman had left the scene of an apartment fire some time ago. He was amazing in the video they showed of him rescuing a child. He cradled the child as if she was the finest antique porcelain. It looked as though he was softly whispering to her, probably words of comfort. Then he gently turned her over to her parents and the

paramedics. When the LNN crew tried to get a quote from the child, there was a momentary flash of anger on his face before he resumed the neutral mask of Superman.

Was that the key? That, Superman not Ordinary Guy, was the mask? No wonder he was hurt when she confessed her love to Superman after having brushed off Ordinary Guy in the past!

If Superman were coming back to her apartment, he probably would have already arrived. Lois asked herself if she wanted to face him tonight. No, she realized she didn't think seeing him tonight would help.

Did she need to see anyone tonight?

She wasn't ready to face Lex. What about Clark? Yes, she needed to talk to him about both today and Lex as soon as possible. She had to try to make things right between them.

Lois washed her face, re-applied her makeup, brushed her hair, grabbed her purse and keys, called for a cab and then headed out the door to wait in the foyer. She needed to face a certain mild-mannered reporter tonight. This wouldn't wait until tomorrow.

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The Superman emergency when he left Lois was a fire in an apartment building. He rescued everyone, including two firemen who had been trapped. There were no deaths or serious injuries. The fire seemed to have started from faulty wiring, although arson could not be excluded. Superman's findings were inconclusive, so he left the investigation to the fire department.

Speaking with the fire chief, he made sure there was nothing more he could do at the scene. He told the chief that he needed to be elsewhere, so wouldn't be speaking to the press.

With the *Planet* gone, it was just too painful to talk to reporters right now. And after his emotional roller coaster with Lois as both Clark and Superman, followed by his efforts fighting the fire, he was exhausted physically and emotionally. The press would just have to deal with his absence. He had no patience for the LNN crew rudely clamoring for his attention. They were the only press there anyway.

And because Luthor owned LNN, there was no way they would get an exclusive from him.

Ever.

He gently lifted off until he was out of camera and human sight, and then changed direction to rocket towards Lois's apartment. Hovering over her apartment, he scanned it. She was still in the living room, but now dressed in a shirt and slacks. She was sobbing, and it looked like she was going through an entire box of tissues.

His fatigue immediately forgotten in his concern for Lois, he quickly scanned the rest of the apartment, hallway and areas surrounding her building for hidden dangers. He released a breath he didn't realize he was holding when he found no immediate threats. His fear for her safety diminished.

So what was bothering her?

Had he unintentionally been harsh and, despite his best efforts, been cruel?

*What'd I say?*

He reviewed their conversation quickly, but couldn't be sure what might have caused her to cry. He hoped he hadn't been unintentionally cruel or unthinking.

Hearing her cry so desperately tore at his heart. How could he help?

Then he heard her whisper, "Oh, Clark, I'm so sorry."

*What?*

He started to lose altitude from shock, and then quickly floated back into position. She was apologizing to Clark even though he wasn't there? Why?

He knew he wouldn't get any answers floating out here. But he also knew Lois. She didn't like to show her vulnerability. He doubted she'd want Superman to see it. Clark on the other hand, had seen her vulnerable before, and she had accepted his comfort.

And he was covered in soot and fumes from the fire, which Clark couldn't explain. So a shower and clean clothes were needed first.

As he headed towards his apartment he heard a cry for help. A woman was being mugged and it looked like her assailants had more in mind than simple robbery. He quickly subdued the assailants, found a policeman to arrest them and flew the woman to the emergency room. He then gave the police his statement.

Next he flew home and showered quickly. He spun into a clean suit and casual Clark clothes. Then he spun back into Superman, locked the balcony door behind him and headed towards Lois.

Pausing in mid-air, he realized he needed a reason for Clark to show up at her apartment tonight. Well, if nothing else he could express regret for his earlier behavior. While he wouldn't apologize for or take back his declaration of love, he could apologize for not easing into it more gently. For trying to go from friends and partners to something more, which was unexpected and too abrupt. She probably felt like she'd been pole-axed, especially with everything that had happened in the last week—the Planet bombing, Luthor's proposal and his own behavior. He could tell her had been an idiot or a lunkhead. She would buy that at least. And maybe even laugh with him.

That might work. It was certainly better than some of the lame excuses he'd given her on the fly when Superman was needed. Or maybe he'd come up with something better later. Or not. Or maybe she wouldn't ask why he stopped by.

Who was he kidding? This was Lois Lane! He couldn't be so lucky.

With at least a plan, even if it wasn't a brilliant one, he headed for her apartment. Out of sight and hovering above her apartment, he was surprised to see her in front of the building getting into a cab. Had he taken that long?

Where was she going? He sure hoped it wasn't into Luthor's arms. He felt the need to discreetly follow her. Metropolis and the world would have to wait tonight. Superman and Clark were on a mission to protect Lois.

And then his super-hearing kicked in. Lois gave the cabbie his address! For the second time, he lost altitude from shock.

Gathering his wits, he realized that since he was here, he could still follow her cab and make sure she arrived safely.

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Lois climbed into the cab and gave the driver Clark's address. She settled into her seat. The cab's radio was on, which was unusual. The driver sheepishly explained that there was a marathon of Elvis tunes on this station, and this hour they were playing his and his wife's favorite one. Lois said it was fine.

A commercial ended and the DJ said, "Next up is one of Elvis's most popular songs. Originally recorded by Elvis in 1956, it was released as a single with 'Hound Dog.' Both reached number one, the only time in history both a single and its backside song reached number one. He sold over six million copies of the song by 1961. It became a staple of Elvis's live performances until his death in 1977."

Pausing dramatically, after a moment he asked, "Are those enough clues for you to recognize 'Don't Be Cruel'?"

The song began and Lois found herself listening—really listening—to the lyrics. She soon was quietly humming along.

After the song finished, the cab driver turned off the radio. "Thank you for indulging me in that trip down memory lane. 'Don't Be Cruel' was my wife's favorite song."

"Was?"

"Yeah, she died a few months ago."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you. After hearing that song as a teenager, she took it to heart. She made it her life's mission not be hurtful or cruel. She was the only person I knew who had people like grocery clerks

and receptionists go out of their way to help her. We had twenty-five years of wedded bliss because of it. She insisted we follow the Biblical edict to not go to bed angry, and we never did. I'm so grateful she was that way. When she passed in her sleep there were no harsh words or thoughts between us. Only love."

Lois found her eyes tearing as she softly said, "That's a beautiful story. Thank you for sharing it." She thought that she also knew someone who people went out of their way to help because he was kind and cheerful first—Clark.

"You're welcome. It's the best instruction I ever received. Well, here's your destination."

Lois paid him with a generous tip. Tipping generously was something she rarely did, but Clark would do automatically. When she had first watched him leave a generous tip, she thought he was naive. To her surprise, she found that his smile and kindness plus a generous tip actually got him better service the next time.

She looked at the cab driver's name and made a mental note to ask for him next time she called for a cab. Then she got out of the cab and climbed the steps to Clark's building. The driver waited for her to get safely inside. A bit of old-fashioned chivalry she didn't often see in Metro cab drivers. With a wave of her hand, she acknowledged his kindness as she entered Clark's building.

Once inside, she paused and reflected on what happened in the cab. *Was the key to lifelong commitment forgiveness and working together, never staying angry at each other overnight? Could it be that simple?*

Lois thought about her mother who held onto hurts, her temper and hard feelings for years, as if they were badges of honor. And what did that get her? A broken marriage, two estranged daughters and a never-ending battle with alcoholism.

Was that who Lois had become? Someone who was unable to forgive and forget mistakes in others and herself, learn from them and move on? Someone who had forgotten how to show kindness to others?

Thinking about other mothers, she couldn't imagine Martha Kent holding onto grudges like Ellen Lane. Although she thought even Martha would likely make the exception of people who threatened her family. She would bet if Jason Trask were still alive, Martha would not easily forgive him for nearly killing Clark, Jonathan, their neighbor Wayne and Martha herself. She smiled to herself at the vision she suddenly had of a furious Martha defeating Trask with farm implements. She'd bet on Martha any day.

She shook herself and determinedly headed for Clark's apartment.

As she stood in front of his door, she became more anxious. Would Clark want to talk to her? What if he wouldn't even let her explain?

This was Clark. He always listened. She had to believe he would listen and hoped he could forgive her.

After taking a deep breath, she steeled herself and knocked.

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She heard movement in the apartment followed by footsteps coming closer. The door opened, and Clark was there. He wore a black polo shirt and dark trousers with rumpled hair. He had a quizzical look on his face.

"Lois?"

After swallowing she replied softly, "Hi, Clark. Can I come in?"

"Sure," he cautiously replied. Moving out of her way, he ushered her into his apartment, then closed and locked the door.

She took careful steps down his stairs, and slowly turned towards him. She seemed to lose her voice, and suddenly began to shake.

"Lois!" In an instant Clark was by her side, ready to support her. He wasn't sure if he should touch her or not, so stood next to her. He quietly asked, "Would you like to sit down? Do you want

something to drink?"

She nodded yes, and let him steady her by taking her arm, guiding her to the sofa. As Clark went to get her a glass of water, she thought only he would be the perfect host just hours after she had broken his heart. She blinked back tears as he handed her the glass of water.

Clark sat down in the chair. In this seat he was close enough to be supportive, but still kept some distance between them. He sighed inwardly as he realized a few weeks ago he would have sat next to her, gathering her in his arms.

As she got closer to Luthor, they lost their closeness until the final remains were shattered this afternoon in the park. As he watched her sip her water her shakiness decreased gradually. She took some deep breaths, and focused on her glass. Her heartbeat was racing when she came in, and after a few minutes it was only slightly faster than normal.

He had no idea what to say at this point, so decided patience was the answer. If necessary, he would find out if super-patience could be another of his powers. He sat back in the chair, and adjusted his body language to be as non-threatening as possible. And as Clark quietly waited, he mentally recited his mantra "Don't Be Cruel" in multiple languages.

After a few minutes, Lois found her voice. "Clark, I'm so sorry!" She looked at the floor, not able to face him.

Clark gently replied, "Lois, I don't understand. What are you apologizing for?"

Lois took a steadying breath. "I was selfish and unthinking to ask you to get Superman like that, and well, I hope you can forgive me. I didn't realize how hurtful that was, but I do now.

"I asked you to get Superman because it's the easiest way to get a hold of him without screaming for help in an emergency. He's never told me how to contact him for non-emergencies. I guess that should have been a clue that he isn't as close to me as I thought. I realized afterwards how inconsiderate I was of your feelings."

Clark was surprised at her insight. He didn't know what to say about that. He certainly couldn't tell her how close Superman was to her right now. Now was not the time to divulge that secret. He was afraid if he said anything, it would be a smart remark about how she never seemed to care about his feelings before. No, he wouldn't go there. That would anger her. After all, she had come to him.

He took a few deep breaths. When it seemed as though Lois had nothing more to say just now he decided to respond. He gathered his thoughts, and then softly said, "Lois, I believe you're sincere and accept your apology. I will do my best to forgive and forget."

Lois winced as the implications of his words sank in. This was not something that could be fixed tonight with a simple apology. She then tentatively asked, "Are you mad?"

Taking a deep breath, he said, "I was. Not now. Now I'm disappointed, and hurt."

"Oh. That's worse than mad, isn't it?"

"Lois, I don't know. For the first time in my life today, I confessed my love. And you told me you want to just be friends. I've never done this before, so I don't know what to expect. Do you understand I need time to work this out?"

"I guess so."

Suddenly needing more space between them, Clark got out of the chair and walked to his balcony door, looking out at the balcony. He took a few deep breaths before steadying himself.

He turned to Lois. "I want to apologize to you, too. This afternoon I was abrupt and took you by surprise. I realized afterwards it came out of the blue. And maybe you felt ambushed or cornered. That was never my intention, and I'm sorry."

She shrugged. "Yeah, it was a surprise. Maybe we've both been reacting to events. Thank you Clark. I forgive you."

Clark nodded. "Before you came over, I decided I was going to apologize to you. So I am glad you're here." He paused and then asked, "Would you like coffee? I also have cream soda, or can make tea if you prefer."

"Coffee is fine."

Clark went into the kitchen and started the coffee maker. He steeled himself for whatever Lois wanted to discuss. His mother had sent some chocolate chip cookies home with him this afternoon, so he put several on a plate to serve with the coffee.

While the coffee brewed, Clark put the plate of cookies and a stack of napkins on the coffee table. Turning towards Lois, he said, "Those are Mom's chocolate chip cookies. Help yourself."

He went back into the kitchen, poured two mugs and fixed them the way each of them liked. He brought them back, set them on the coffee table and sat down.

Lois took a bite of her cookie, "Mmmm, these are wonderful." Clark just nodded, and sipped his coffee.

"I came over to apologize, and because I need your help, Clark."

Looking into his coffee mug as if it held the answers to the universe's puzzles, he quietly replied, "Lois, I'll help you if I can."

She stood up and began to pace. "Clark, I did a lot of thinking tonight. Superman made me realize a few things, and I thought about how little I know about either him or Lex. Then I began to think back about my encounters with you and both of them. And I realized I felt manipulated."

She saw Clark grimace and then quickly elaborated, "Oh, not by you. By Lex. I've been reacting to events instead of doing my job. Will you tell me everything you know about Lex?"

He sighed. "Lois, I'll tell you. The problem is, I don't have hard evidence to back up much of what I have to say. Evidence against him seems to conveniently disappear. Much of Superman's evidence is in conversations that were not recorded, and he can't confirm them with, as Perry is fond of saying, 'Hard Facts!' Superman and I have combined our information, so some of my information is mine and some is Superman's."

"Okay. I'll keep that in mind."

Clark took a long sip of his coffee and gathered his thoughts. "It all started at the White Orchid Ball..." He described every encounter with Luthor and each suspicion both Clark and Superman had, starting with Luthor greeting Clark with Alexander's sword at his throat during the White Orchid Ball and ending with the bombing of the Planet. Not only did he describe the events, but he also described why he believed that Luthor was responsible for multiple deaths starting with Commander Laderman and also for injuries and destruction of lives and property.

She sat in stunned silence for a few minutes, processing what she had heard. Shaking her head, she said, "And I thought I was the city's best investigative reporter. How could I miss so much?"

"Lois, you can't blame yourself. Luthor is very good at protecting and cultivating his image. Perry was fooled. And he was an investigative reporter before either of us was born. Think of all the employees, legitimate business associates, reporters, detectives and others who were and are still fooled. The only reason I was initially suspicious was because he confronted me at the ball with that sword, which got my attention. He let down his guard with Superman, because he was a rival and an obstacle to his evil empire. And he's made a special effort to court you and to hide his nefarious dealings from you."

"Is that everything?"

"I think so, although most of it is without proof. I have a file on Luthor, although because it's late I suggest we don't start on that until tomorrow."

Lois sat mulling over everything he'd said. She realized it was not only the things he said, but also the way he said it. Never had she heard such vehemence in his voice. If anyone could find the

good in someone, she thought it was Clark. Yet in his description of Lex's involvement, it was clear that Clark believed Lex was a criminal mastermind and evil. She shuddered, wondering just what Lex had done to evoke such a response in Clark. Was it the culmination of months of interactions and events? Or was there something more personal involved? Before tonight if anyone had asked, she would have said she knew Clark better than anyone else. And one thing she knew was that he didn't hate anyone. Apparently, he did hate Lex. She hadn't seen the depth of his feelings until tonight.

"Clark, why didn't you tell me about your research? Never mind, I probably wouldn't have listened. Well, I'm listening now. Why is this so personal to you? What has he done?"

He realized this was dangerous territory. It was personal, but mostly because it was personal to Superman. That made it personal to the man under the suit, but Lois didn't know he was Clark. He took a moment to think about his answer. Maybe he could make it personal if he approached it right.

"The hardest thing for me is the children he's hurt. You remember Amy Platt don't you? Now she'll grow up without her daddy. Not because he died in an accident or from an incurable disease, but because Dr. Platt was murdered for trying to save the space station. He died a hero, yet his killers tried to discredit him and make it look like the suicide of a drug addict!"

"Superman and I believe that Dr. Baines was behind his death and that she was working with Lex Luthor. He had his space station all planned and ready to go if Space Station Prometheus failed. Do you recall when we were chained in the hanger what she said to us about 'seizing the high ground'?"

Lois nodded yes.

Clark continued, "He said almost exactly the same thing to me when I met him in his office at the White Orchid Ball. I think you were out of the room and may not have heard him."

"Luthor admitted in front of Superman that he knew Metamide was dangerous and probably deadly, yet he still tried to convince the kids to take it. Lois, he was involved in experimenting on innocent children! There was no one looking out for those kids. At the very least there should have been informed consent by a legal guardian, even if court appointed."

"And what about the clone? He was child-like in many ways. It was Superman not the clone's 'father' who was with him when he died. He was in pain and there was nothing Superman could do. His so-called father knew about his suffering."

"Superman is convinced the clone was created to destroy Superman, to kill him and then probably destroy his reputation. Who had the money, the access to technology and the hatred of Superman to do that? Lex Luthor is the only one that comes to mind. How could anyone create a child even if he physically looked like an adult and then stand by while he suffered without trying to help?"

"If he's responsible for the Planet bombing, think of the families of all the employees now out of work. Maybe I feel for these kids partly because I'm adopted, and my biological parents died when I was a baby. I know the pain of not knowing who your biological parents were, and worse, why they left you."

"I don't trust Luthor. And frankly it scares me to think about how close the two of you have become, and whatever he really has planned for you. You're one of my closest friends. Yes, Lois, I take this very personally."

He got up from his chair, took his mug to the kitchen and carefully placed it in the sink before he shattered it in anger. Then he stalked over to his balcony door. He stared out tensely, opening and closing his fists. Never before in one sitting had he unburdened himself with the events of the past few months. He could feel the anger coursing through his body. He needed to get control. When he felt the heat going to his eyes, he slammed his eyelids shut. And pretended to continue staring out at his balcony

with his back to Lois.

He concentrated on his mantra, reciting *Don't Be Cruel* over and over in multiple languages. Gradually he felt the tension left his muscles, and then he cautiously reopened his eyes.

Lois looked at Clark. His anger was palpable, coming off him in waves. He kept his distance from her, and his body language was also protective, distant. After helping her to the sofa tonight, he made no further effort to touch her. Sitting in the chair instead of next to her on the sofa, she could feel the distance between them. In his eyes she had seen the depth of his pain. She longed to hold him, to share his pain.

*What?* She did?

Yes, she admitted.

To her shame she realized again how she had hurt him today. In his body language, if not his words, he projected that he was protecting himself from further hurt by her.

How well she knew that feeling! Her father, Paul and Claude had each in his own way broken her heart and then stomped on the broken pieces.

And hadn't she done just that to Clark? Unintentionally maybe, but the results were the same. He had been the one to get under her barriers, to reach the real Lois. And she had repaid him with arrogance, barbs and breaking his heart today.

She took a swallow of her coffee, gathering her thoughts. This was more urgent than investigating Lex. And she was the one who needed to fix this. Up until now Clark had always been the one to make things right between them. Lois Lane never apologized or backed down. She didn't want Clark to turn into the cold impersonal workaholic she had been when she first met him. No, he was too compassionate, too full of life. After all, he made even boring stakeouts fun. She needed to fix this, and find a way to start healing his heart.

She was the only one who could do this.

She would fix this.

How?

Lois puzzled over what to do. Finally, she got up and stood next to Clark. Gathering her courage, she softly said, "Clark, we need to talk. Not about Lex, but about something else I discovered tonight. Will you come back and sit down so we can talk? Or do you need some more time?"

Clark looked at her and replied, "I'll be there in a bit. I just need a few more minutes."

"Okay." And Lois quietly walked back to the sofa.

It took Clark those few minutes to compose himself. When he was ready, he walked back to the living room and sat in the chair again.

"Go ahead, Lois. I'm ready to talk."

She turned and faced him, looking sincerely into his eyes.

"Well, tonight I thought about what you'd said, and also what Superman had said. I thought about how my future could look, and made a startling discovery. Clark, I don't want to marry Lex. Actually, I'm not sure I'm ready to marry anyone right now. I can live without Lex and Superman, but I realized I want—no need—you in my life."

Clark was stunned. "You do?"

"I don't know if that means love or not, but I'd like to find out. If you're agreeable that is, and can wait for me to figure it out."

"Lois, I have waited my whole life for you. Right now I'm not ready for marriage either. I think we both need to discover things about each other and ourselves before we make that commitment. I'll wait for you if you wait for me. We can go as slowly as we need. Just don't shut me out of your life."

She shook her head. "I won't." Then with a tremor in her voice, softly asked, "Can we start with a hug?"

Silently he nodded, stood up and opened his arms as she simultaneously stood, launching herself into his waiting arms. She clung to him as he gently enfolded her. Once again tonight tears

silently tracked down her cheeks. While she couldn't verbalize what she felt, it felt right and her heart sang, recognizing him as her lifeline.

Initially startled with the intensity of her embrace, Clark relaxed in the moment. He gently held her, rocking back and forth while slowly rubbing circles on her back. She relaxed into his embrace and her tears slowed until they stopped.

They forgot the pain of the last weeks, giving each other comfort. Lois felt and Clark heard their hearts beating in synchronization.

Both recognized how right it felt.

Like coming home.

Only better.

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After a few minutes, they separated. They sat next to each other on the sofa in silence until Lois spoke.

"Wow."

Clark chuckled. "That's what I thought. For two reporters who make our living with words we sure don't seem to have much to say right now."

Lois sat thoughtfully for a few minutes. Then suddenly she jumped up and began pacing. Clark silently watched her until she spoke.

"Clark, have you ever felt like your life is being played on a chessboard?"

Without waiting for him to answer she continued, "That's how I've been feeling. That Perry's retirement was to get him out of the way. That Jack and Jimmy were pawns and were removed from the newsroom and my life. I'm even questioning whether Jack was framed. And I never trusted him! When the *Planet* was destroyed my job, colleagues and friends were all gone. My family is scattered, with Mom in rehab in the Midwest, my father buried in his research at Lex Labs upstate and Lucy in California. I felt lost, and still feel in shock. Thinking about all that has happened, I feel my life is out of my control. And worse, it feels like someone else is in charge. And that makes me angry. So, it feels like I'm on a chessboard. And the worst part is I don't know who the players are, or even who is what piece. Other than the pawns, which could be everyone except Lex."

Clark sat stunned, realizing Lois had spoken without seeming to take a breath. Then a slow smile spread across his face as he watched her get more and more animated and agitated.

Lois turned to look at him, raised an eyebrow and asked, "Do you think this is funny?"

He just quietly said, "No, not funny. I'm not amused. I'm happy. You're back."

She paused mid-rant and said, "What? I've been here the whole time."

"No, you haven't. You haven't been yourself since the *Planet* was bombed, maybe even before. This is the real you. The woman who can take leaps of logic and put together clues no one else can. This is the three-time Kerth award winner who wants a Pulitzer before she's thirty. I missed you."

Lois just stared at him. Then she returned his smile. "So what do you think of chess?"

"I think it is a brilliant analogy. I also think that Lu-Lex forgot that the most powerful piece on the board is the queen. What do you think our next move is?"

"The queen, huh?" Lois smiled, "Lex has no idea what he's done and who he's messing with. It's not just the queen. I'm hoping it will be Lane and Kent, the city's best investigative team."

"I'd like that very much."

"Well, I think we need a game changer. We need to play a different game. I don't know about you, but I don't like to play a game that I don't know the rules to and can't see the board. If we were at the *Planet*, we'd get Jimmy to do some research. Maybe

we should work backwards, starting with the Planet's bombing."

"Lois, I've been doing some digging. I think you're right about Jack. I'm planning to talk to him tomorrow. That bomb was complex. Jack wouldn't have the funds—"

"Or the knowledge to make it. What about motive?"

"Jack's newsroom job was eliminated in so-called 'cost cutting.' He quietly took the demotion to printing because he needed to get Denny out of foster care when Jack turns eighteen. He needed—"

"His job and good references. He seems to love Denny and—"

"Would do anything to protect him."

"So he's the scapegoat, not the bomber."

Clark continued, "I found hints there may be more than one insurance policy on the *Planet*. If so—"

"Lex lied to me! And it's likely there was more than enough to rebuild the *Planet*."

"Assuming all the policies pay and that Luthor Corporation or Lex Luthor is the beneficiary. And I have that file I started a few months ago on him if you want to see it."

"You bet I do! Tomorrow or the next day. I don't think I could focus tonight. But Clark, if this is true why would Lex buy the *Planet* and then turn around and destroy it?"

"You."

"Me?"

"Lois, it's a military strategy. Lu-Lex is a student of Sun Tzu and other historical military strategists. Isolate the enemy, and then you can defeat him."

"I'm the enemy?"

"Maybe. The question is, are you the enemy due to your investigative skills? Or are you really a romantic interest? Or maybe both?"

"What?"

"All is fair in love and war. Could he be viewing love as a game of war?"

"Maybe."

"Lois, do you remember the tests that Superman went through when he first arrived?"

"Tests? No, I don't think so—"

"The dual jumpers, the bombing of the Carlin building?"

"Those were tests?"

"Testing speed and invulnerability. Luthor as much as admitted to Superman they were tests. Superman disappeared when Luthor told him if he stayed more people would get hurt. And when he first met Superman he said, 'Let the games begin.'"

"That's awful!"

"Yeah, it is."

"Do you think I'm responsible for the Planet bombing?"

"NO! Don't ever think that! Whoever bombed the Planet is solely responsible. What I'm trying to say is he thinks of everything as a game to win. And you're right, we don't know what game is being played. We don't know the players, and we don't even know what the endgame is."

"So Lex's goal could be to marry me and control the stories I write, or don't write. I'm in an office at LNN that is away from the action, and basically I have no authority or responsibility. I'm not doing investigative work—"

"And are isolated. Cut off from the *Planet*, your colleagues, your friends, your family."

"And Superman. This may sound conceited, but I wonder if Lex asked me to marry him because he loves me, wants me out of the way or because he can take me from Superman? Although I'm not sure Superman ever really had me."

"What do you mean?"

"Just something he said, that he's not sure he can have a romantic attachment to anyone. How sad is that? He must be so alone, the last of his kind with no friends or family from Krypton.

And he can't publicly have a family or friends. Too dangerous for them, and he'd be at risk to be manipulated to keep them safe."

"When you put it that way, it is sad and lonely."

"Clark, we've only talked about part of what I wanted to say. Before I came over tonight I realized how little I know about Lex. When I ask him a direct question he rarely answers, changing the topic or giving an evasive answer. In answer to your question from this afternoon, I realized tonight that I don't love Lex. If even a fraction of what you and Superman suspect is true, he's much worse than I thought. I can't marry him. And I want to work with you to find out. If he's dirty, we'll bring him down."

"So, what are you going to do?"

"That's one of the things I wanted to talk to you about. I thought about going undercover, working at LNN and maybe accepting his proposal or delay answering him."

After a pause to remind himself of his mantra, Clark chose his words carefully. "Lois, tell me what you want me to say. I don't want to fight with you. I feel like I'm walking a fine line here. Do you want my opinion, or do you need a sounding board first?"

"I don't know. I guess I need to work through this without judgment or prejudice. Can you do that?"

"Lois, I don't know. All I can do is try. You know how I feel about him, and it's scared me to think how close you've become. If you need to talk without me saying much, I'll do my best. Please let me voice my opinion though before you make any final decision."

"I can do that. The thing is, I'm also afraid that if Lex has been able to manipulate me without me seeing it, he may be able to continue to do so. And he keeps his business dealings from me. I'm thinking my job at LNN would be a distraction. I'm not sure I'd learn much from either him or LNN. I need help deciding what to do."

Lois listed several options and Clark made occasional suggestions. Over the next hour they discussed the pros and cons of each. Finally, they decided the best plan was for Clark to see Jack as planned the next day. Lois would go to work at LNN and look at her job and workplace from her fresh perspective before making a final decision.

"Clark, tomorrow night is Perry's retirement party."

"You're still going, aren't you?"

"Yes, of course. We both need to go. Lex is sending a car for me, and I'll be able to take Perry, Jimmy and you home. We'll have a designated driver, so if we have too much to drink or are just too emotional to go home alone, it will be a safe ride. You can come too. Although..." her voice trailed off as the germ of an idea grew.

"What?"

"Clark, do you think there might be a spy at the party? Someone reporting to Lex?"

"I hadn't thought about it, but why not? It could be someone who is getting paid, for information or someone who thinks the information would be of value for a job. Technically we're all his ex-employees, so someone might feel loyalty to him, especially if that person were annoyed with you or me. Or both of us."

Lois outlined her plan for the party. Together they made some adjustments, and she called a cab. Clark walked her to the cab, and then went back into his apartment while listening to her heartbeat. He walked inside, locked the door then spun into his suit and took off from his balcony. Superman followed her discreetly to make sure she got home safely.

She did, and once inside her apartment got ready for bed. She fell asleep almost as soon as her head hit the pillow.

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## Day 2

The next day started out with Lois in her new office. She really had nothing to do, so started looking through her clippings, especially those about Superman. A disturbance in the newsroom

brought her out of her office. Worried about a possible CNN scoop, the news team had been frantic and contemplated going on air without confirmation of the facts. Perry would have been appalled! Lois used her sources so they were able to go on air with additional accurate details. Afterwards she basked in the praise of her colleagues. Yet she couldn't help but compare it to the *Planet*—when she had written the stories that eventually led to her three Kerth Awards, when she had uncovered the ring of car thieves by going undercover, and more recently when she shared the investigating and limelight with Clark.

Here at LNN she would get the respect of her colleagues, but no public acknowledgement that she did all the work for others to take the credit. Unless the story won an award and she was listed as the producer. That was unsettling, and Lois realized that wasn't her. She wondered for a moment where "Mad Dog" Lane had gone. And could Lois survive without "Mad Dog" in her professional life? The LNN celebration also paled in comparison to Perry's celebrations. Today there was no acknowledgement by her immediate supervisor that she had gotten a scoop for LNN and beaten the competition. With a start, she recognized there was also an emptiness that hurt her heart without Clark by her side.

After work, she hurried home to change. Lex was providing the limo for her to get to and from Perry's retirement party, which was tonight. The last thing she felt like was acting happy and upbeat, yet she would do it for Perry. She was going to miss him and everyone at the *Planet* terribly. Lois didn't even realize how on edge she was as she headed out to the party.

After seeing Lois home and making a patrol rather than going to bed, Clark had showered at human speed in his apartment then traveled to Kansas for a home-cooked country breakfast. His parents welcomed him with open arms, and were pleased with how he handled himself with Lois the night before. They thought he did well, and were delighted about how he and Lois planned to work together. Knowing Lois's tendency to go undercover and throw caution to the wind in the heat of an investigation, they cautioned him about the dangers if Luthor became suspicious.

He shared his concerns about who had really bombed the *Planet*. His parents agreed it was awfully convenient for the evidence to turn up in Jack's lunchbox and apartment. And even if Jack were a serious suspect, how did a former street kid working as a gofer have the knowledge or resources for the bombing? Jonathan and Martha reiterated their belief in Clark and his instincts. After hugs and promises to keep his parents informed, Clark returned to his apartment to nap before going to see Jack after lunch.

Luthor had hired Jack's lawyer. Jack was convinced the lawyer wasn't interested in helping him. Clark offered to find an honest lawyer, and promised to keep digging into who really blew up the *Planet*. Jack was relieved that Clark believed he was framed, although he did ask Clark if Superman could spring him from "Juvvie Hall." Clark told him no, and left with new determination to bring Luthor down for destroying the *Planet* and so many lives.

The party started off harmless enough, with Perry reminiscing. After awhile he sang "Lonely Teardrops" and regaled the group with a new Elvis anecdote. Then a belly dancer drew him away from the table dancing. Everyone chuckled, and expressed their pleasure that Perry was enjoying himself.

The atmosphere changed when Jimmy turned to Lois and asked, "So how's the new job, Lois?"

She replied, "Great! Broadcasting is a whole new world. It's so exciting."

There was an uncomfortable silence at the table as if no one knew what to say.

Clark bit back a sharp retort. "How does it compare to the *Planet*?"

"Oh, nothing could ever replace the *Planet*, but I for one am

not sitting around obsessing about it."

"Well, I'm **trying** to figure out how the *Planet* failed. What we know is only the tip of the iceberg."

"Clark, can I have a word with you in private?"

The rest of the table remained quiet and gave each other uncomfortable glances as Lois and Clark got up and moved to the hall of the restaurant.

Lois whispered, "This is perfect! We can stage our fight here. Keep your eyes open so we can see if anyone is watching us carefully or getting close enough to listen."

She sounded angry as she turned on Clark. "You're ruining Perry's retirement dinner!"

Looking astonished, he retorted, "Me?! I'm not the one gloating over my new job. To a roomful of people who are **out** of work by the way."

"Gloating?"

"All you've talked about is your new job and your new life at LNN."

"And all you can do is sit around whining in your beer."

Clark shook his head. "I can't believe you'd say that. What about how bragging about your new job makes those who worked longer than you at the *Planet* feel? Or how about those who now find themselves unexpectedly without a paycheck to support their families?"

"They're not my problem."

"Well, I care about what happens to them. The *Planet* was the best place I ever worked."

"Maybe it's time to move on. Have you thought that maybe I'm showing them how to move beyond the *Planet*?"

"I can honestly say that didn't cross my mind. Lois, how many other *Planet* employees now have jobs thanks to Lex Luthor?"

"I don't know."

"I do. None. Zero."

Lois gasped. She really hadn't thought about anyone else's jobs.

Clark continued, "That's how the 'Great Philanthropist of Metropolis' treats those who work for him. Is that the kind of man you want to be your employer... or your husband?"

"Clark, **that** is none of your business. I know why you're doing this."

"Oh you do, do you?"

"Yes. You told me your feelings and you were hurt. I'm sorry about that Clark, but all this is just sour grapes."

"What? You don't know me very well if you think I am more concerned about my hurt feelings that the welfare of those unemployed *Planet* employees and their families. Lois, what if I find evidence—"

Lois snapped, "Just stop! You're talking about a man I trust and admire."

She took a deep breath then continued, "If you really cared about me, you'd let me—no, you'd **help** me be happy. I've gotten a good job working for a man who wants to spend the rest of his life with me. What's wrong with that?"

Clark stared at her. Taking a deep breath, he forced his voice to be soft and gentle. He didn't want this fake argument to escalate. Although he was beginning to wonder how much of it reflected real hurt and anger.

"I don't even know how to reply to that. Apparently you trust Luthor more than me, and I'm sorry you feel that way. All these changes have happened so fast, it's almost as if someone were pulling the strings to keep us off balance. And—"

She interrupted, "I suppose you have someone in mind for pulling those strings?"

Clark heard the anger in her voice and saw it in her face. Either "Mad Dog" Lane was making an appearance tonight or Lois was acting perfectly. He continued in character to speak softly and gently.

"As I said, I'm looking for evidence. Lois, I do not want to fight with you—especially not tonight. I may not see some of these folks again for a long time—maybe never again. I don't want to add strife to the pain of losing the *Planet* and the Chief's retirement."

Haughtily she replied, "Well, it's too late for that. You crossed the line when you told Superman about your feelings and Lex's proposal."

Clark gaped at her. "Lois, what are you talking about? Who told you that?"

"No one. I figured it out"

"Well, you figured wrong. Unless you hear it from the person I spoke to or me, don't tell me what I did or did not tell someone. That conversation never took place," he sharply replied.

Which was technically true, Clark thought, because he didn't actually talk to Superman as Clark. Or vice versa.

"Then how did he know?"

"Lois, Superman has his own sources, including super-hearing."

"Does he listen in on private conversations?"

"Will you listen to yourself? It sounds like you trust Luthor more than Superman! You were just upset thinking that Superman and I talked about you, and now you want to talk about him."

"Fine!"

"Lois, we should get back to the party."

She sarcastically replied, "And have a really good time."

As she turned towards him away from the crowd, the hint of a smile started. She whispered, "Good job." Relief flooded through him as he realized it was an act. When he caught her eye out of the line of sight of anyone else, he winked quickly and silently followed her back to the party.

The rest of the party was uneventful. There were too many people to determine which one or two might be informants. Perry continued to dance with the belly dancer and seemed to enjoy himself. Clark left the table and mingled, while Lois stayed at the table next to Jimmy.

They left together, with Perry obviously inebriated. He sang "Lonely Teardrops" on the way. Jimmy poured him into the limousine.

Jimmy commented, "It must be nice to have a free limo at your disposal."

Staying in character, Clark clenched his teeth as if he was preventing himself from offering a sarcastic comment. He couldn't help thinking that with Luthor nothing was ever free.

Lois noted the tension in Clark's face, and was surprised when he remained silent. When the silence stretched for several minutes, she turned to him and asked, "Are you coming?"

He bit out, "I'd. Rather. Walk." Then he abruptly turned on his heel and stalked towards his apartment.

Lois stared at him as he walked away. She remembered how bereft she felt when he kissed her goodbye and walked out of the *Planet* during the November heat wave. She'd almost forgotten how that was the Luthor Nuclear Plant's fault. Amazingly, she felt worse as she watched Clark walk away tonight, even though she knew their fighting was all an act. Who knew Clark was such a good actor? She was astonished to see him raise his head when she whispered, "Clark." He kept walking, though. She stood transfixed until he was out of sight. When Jimmy and Perry diverted her attention, she silently slid into the seat next to Jimmy.

The limo driver took Jimmy and Perry to Perry's house. Both Jimmy and Lois helped him out of the limo and into his house. Jimmy was going to stay the night. Lois then had the driver take her home. The stress of the last few days was exhausting.

When she opened her door, there was an envelope inside on the floor. She opened it and found a card with the Peanuts gang on the front and inside simply said, "I'm glad we're friends." And it was signed "Still your friend, Charlie King." Lois smiled as she

recognized the alias Clark had used during their investigation of the Metros. She hugged the card to her chest as she realized he once again knew exactly the right thing to say, or in this case, to write.

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### Day 3

In the morning, Clark had a leisurely breakfast. He knew Lois was going to see Luthor late this morning, and he planned to have Superman available watching and listening. He left about thirty minutes before her appointment, and flew high above her apartment.

He carefully listened and heard her steady, mildly elevated heartbeat. He was relieved it was consistent with anxiety or excitement, not fear.

*Good.*

He patiently waited until she left and then followed her from a distance high above the clouds. A lifetime of practice had honed his patience, although Lois frequently tested those limits.

As her cab approached Lex Tower, he found a spot on the roof of the nearby Seigel Building, which had no cameras installed for surveillance. Spinning into a black polo shirt and pants, he retreated into the shadows of the roof's machinery and ducts. He could clearly see and hear Luthor in his penthouse. Even if Luthor came out onto his balcony, he would not see Clark. And both media and police helicopters also would not spot him in the shadows. If anyone did spot him, with Superman's slicked back hair and without his glasses in his black outfit, it was unlikely they would recognize him as either Clark or Superman.

He followed Lois's progress up the penthouse's elevator. When the doors opened, Mrs. Cox coolly greeted her and escorted her to Luthor's den.

As she stepped off the elevator, Lois took in the penthouse surroundings like she hadn't before. She felt the coldness of the impersonal yet professional decor. She couldn't help but compare it to the homey feeling of Clark's apartment. Even her own apartment with its uncomfortable loveseats held treasures that an astute observer could use to discover parts of the real Lois Lane. The penthouse showed no such personal touches. No doubt Lex had hired the best interior designer. She wondered if the added chill in the air reflected Mrs. Cox's feelings or if it was due to her new knowledge of Lex, and what she planned to tell him.

Lex stood up as she entered and with a smile exclaimed, "Lois, my dear! I'm glad you're here. So, how was the retirement dinner?"

Lois sighed and said, "Painful."

She studied him as he replied, "I'm sorry. I wish there was something I could do to help."

If she hadn't been looking closely she would have missed the fleeting smile and look of triumph that passed over his features before his face took on the appearance of concern and dismay.

He took her in his arms. Surprised, she stared at him.

"What is it, Lois?"

"Nothing. It's just, do I really know you? Know enough about you?"

"My life is an open book. Shall I read it to you?"

Lois nearly burst out laughing at the banality of his words. For the first time she heard the insincerity and arrogance in his voice. She swallowed, and then quietly replied, "Only the parts you wouldn't want anyone else to know."

"Okay. I started with nothing because I became an orphan at age thirteen."

"It must have been terrible."

"Yes, but it made me strong." After pausing dramatically he continued, "I'm no saint, Lois. I've done questionable things in pursuing success. Unfortunately, that's the nature of big business."

"Sometimes out of jealousy or frustration, I've over-reacted."

"I've been ruthless towards my enemies."

"But as God is my witness, I swear to you, from this moment on, I will change. I no longer want to hurt anyone."

He walked over to his desk, took out the engagement ring box and brought it back to Lois. He got down on one knee and proclaimed, "Lois, I'm ready to devote my entire life to you, utterly and eternally. Will you marry me?"

Lois stared at him, thinking back on Clark's declaration of love in the park and the conversations she had with Superman two nights ago and with Clark later that night. All she heard was the insincerity in Luthor's voice, which she couldn't reveal to him.

Taking a deep breath she slowly replied, "No, Lex. I can't marry you. You deserve much more than me."

"Lois, why? Is there someone else?"

"No, there's no one else. Lex I've never considered marriage as an option. My parents bitterly divorced. I've spent my adult life concentrating on my career. And now that's gone."

"Surely not. You're a producer at LNN."

"That's the other thing I came to tell you today, Lex, I'm very grateful that you gave me the opportunity at LNN. The truth is, I don't fit in there. I'm a print journalist and—"

Lex interrupted, "With these changes, why not start over with someone who loves you?"

Immediately Lois thought of Clark, but pushed those thoughts aside. Brusquely she said, "Lex, let me finish. This is difficult enough for me to say without the interruptions."

Startled to see her dare to speak to him in a sharp tone of voice, anger crossed his face before his mask of concern returned. Both Lois and Clark from his vantage point noticed.

More gently Lois said, "What I'm trying to say is that I need time to decide what I want to do with my life. I've lived my whole life in Metropolis, and I never considered living anywhere else. Now with the *Planet* gone, I'm not sure if the memories will allow me to stay. I'm resigning my position at LNN and going to take my time to decide what I need. I suppose the phrase seems almost trite, but I need a clean break from everything to 'find myself.'"

"I see. Are you sure there's no one else affecting this decision? Superman, perhaps?"

Lois knew that her next words were among the most important she'd ever spoken. She needed to protect all her family and friends, including Superman.

"Superman? No. I admit I had a crush on him. He explained to me that he couldn't have close friends or loved ones. I'm sorry to see him so alone, but that's the life he's chosen. And I need to respect that.

"My family is scattered, with Lucy on the west coast, Mother in rehab and Daddy busy with his research. Perry is retired and my other colleagues from the *Planet* are searching for jobs all over the country."

"What about Kent? Isn't he still here?"

A chill went down her spine as she looked into Lex's icy eyes. Her voice trembled and her eyes became tear-filled as she hesitantly replied, "Clark... Clark and I have had major disagreements over the past few weeks." She looked down, paused, took a deep breath and continued, "It came to a head last night at the dinner. With the *Planet* gone, we're no longer partners. A-after last night we're n-no longer friends."

No one could tell from her body language, facial expression or voice that she was lying. Only Clark knew by listening to her heart.

Lois watched carefully as various emotions fleetingly crossed Lex's features. She realized he wasn't at a loss for words, but rather like a chess master was calculating his next moves before he replied, "I'm sorry. The loss of friendships can be as painful as divorce. Perhaps I've been too anxious. Let's continue to see each other as friends. More informally, we'll get to know each other better. You'll see how I can change. With time, I'm sure you'll see how devoted I am to you. And how much you have changed my

life."

Steadying herself, she said, "No, Lex. I appreciate the offer and your feelings. I need time away. I don't want to hurt you but I don't love you like you need to be loved. And as I said before, I don't want to marry anyone. I'm not sure I'll be staying in Metropolis. I've been saving for a trip to Tahiti, and this may be the perfect time to take it. Please show how much you care by honoring my decision and not contacting me. When I'm ready to talk to you, I'll let you know."

"Of course I'll respect your decision. Allow me to show you to the elevator?"

"Thank you, Lex. You respecting my decision means a lot to me."

With that, they walked to the elevator. He called for it, and kissed her hand before she stepped into it and descended to the lobby. Once there, she caught a cab outside and headed for her apartment. Seeing how he had tried to manipulate her today and realizing how she'd allowed it in the past both humbled her and made her furious. She felt dirty after such close contact with Lex, so decided she needed another shower.

Once the elevator doors closed, Luthor's countenance clouded and he turned to Mrs. Cox. "We have work to do. Come into my office." Turning on his heel, he briskly entered his office as Mrs. Cox followed.

Clark followed Lois's heartbeat as she returned to her apartment. He continued to monitor her heartbeat for distress or danger as he watched and listened with growing horror and anger as Luthor and Mrs. Cox conspired.

They discussed...

That Mrs. Cox's informant confirmed Lois and Clark had had a serious fight last night, and they were not speaking to each other, now barely tolerating each other...

How Lex had acquired the *Planet* through a combination of bribery and blackmail of the board of trustees...

How they'd framed Jack for the bombing and planned to "neutralize" him...

That Luthor knew Superman came to Earth as a baby and that he determined to find out where and when in order to kill his family, with Superman's full knowledge and when powerless to prevent it so he would suffer...

At this point, Clark had to close his eyes and calm down while consciously preventing his heat vision from vaporizing Luthor. He turned more and more pale as he heard Mrs. Cox and Luthor calmly discussing...

"Series K," in which Lex Labs was creating a cage made of kryptonite to trap and torture Superman. Luthor was uncertain at this point whether his ultimate goal was to keep Superman imprisoned and weak, torturing him physically and emotionally for years, or if he just wanted to kill him quickly and painfully...

A test of kryptonite to be sure of its potential before finalizing the cage and also the backup of making kryptonite bullets...

Ordering full surveillance of Lois, including tailing her and installing surveillance cameras and microphones throughout her apartment. Tracking devices were to be installed discreetly in her purse and shoes...

Doing a full background check on Clark Kent to find out any weaknesses or vices for potential blackmail material. Luthor remained undecided as to his fate, believing that Lois still cared enough for Kent that it could be advantageous to threaten to hurt him if she didn't do as Luthor wished.

Clark realized how conveniently Luthor forgot or never acknowledged that Clark had saved his life when the terrorists invaded the *Planet* building a few weeks ago. He also realized with increased horror whom Jack had sold his globe to, how close Luthor came to learning about Kansas and how the globe's theft might be contributing to Luthor's plans to kill Jack.

He shuddered to see and hear the callousness in their

discussion, ordering killings and the destruction of lives as routinely as if they were ordering lunch.

He was almost glad when Luthor realized he had forgotten to activate the room silencer. As Luthor strode onto his balcony, Clark moved further into the shadows and remained inhumanly still. After a few minutes, Luthor returned inside and activated the room silencer. Mrs. Cox went to her desk. Apparently their meeting was over.

Remaining in the shadows, Clark pondered the list of atrocities Luthor had committed and planned in the future. There a transformation came over Clark. Under normal circumstances, this would not have happened for another two years. Instead, here on the roof of the Seigel Building in downtown Metropolis, Clark Kent—mild-mannered investigative reporter who was also the superhero Superman—added a third aspect of his personality to the mix.

His body language changed. He stood taller than Superman, and acquired a regal presence.

In that moment, his revulsion and rage at this discussion he'd monitored had awakened his dormant military Kryptonian persona that could one day become—

Lord Kal-El, Supreme Commander and Ruler.

Of course Clark didn't know this. He realized he was suddenly thinking more like a military strategist but didn't know why. He thought maybe it was a new superpower. He knew that he and Lois needed all the help they could get. So, having experienced developing unexpected superpowers in the past, he simply calmly accepted and worked with the changes.

After making sure that Mrs. Cox and Luthor had completed their meeting, Clark spun back into his suit and flew to the 12th Precinct. Superman spoke with Inspector Bill Henderson about the hit being ordered on Jack. The inspector promised to get Jack to a safe house. Superman offered his services if there was any hint that Jack would not be safe. They made arrangements that should Superman be needed, Henderson would contact Clark Kent.

Next he flew off in one direction, then when out of sight turned towards his apartment. There he called his parents. Clark told them of the probability of a background check by Luthor's people. Martha and Jonathan promised to alert Sheriff Rachel Harris. They'd explain that a dangerous criminal masquerading as a businessman was looking to stop Clark's investigation of him, without giving any additional details. Between Rachel and his parents the entire town would know that any requests for information should be viewed as suspicious, and go through Rachel's office. Smallville would close ranks to protect the Kents.

After the call, Clark decided to check on Lois. He spun into the suit and flew to her apartment. He spotted the driver of a black sedan watching her apartment house from across the street. He also noticed a couple of other suspicious people sitting on the bench across from her apartment.

Flying unseen onto the roof, Clark spun into his black clothes without his glasses. He left his hair in Superman's style, and headed from the roof access to Lois's apartment. Scanning the hallway and finding nothing amiss, he walked up to her door and knocked.

Lois came to the door, and looked through the peephole. Not recognizing the tall dark-haired man, she asked, "Who's there?"

"It's your friend, Kal."

Puzzled, Lois was about to ask further questions when Clark realized her confusion. He said, "Lois, I'm the friend you met on the space shuttle. The one you went with back to the newsroom."

"Oh!" she exclaimed and quickly opened the door. "I didn't expect you--"

"Lois, can we continue this inside your apartment? I need to talk to you privately."

"Oh, sure. I'm sorry. Come in. Can I get you something to drink?"

"No, thanks."

He walked into her apartment, and she closed and locked the door behind her.

"What can I do for you?"

"Is it okay if we sit?"

"Sure!"

After waiting for her to sit, Clark scanned the apartment then seated himself. "Lois, I wasn't sure if you'd recognize me and I didn't want to give my full name as Kal-El. I'm glad you recognized me and understood who 'Kal' is."

"It took me a minute since I'm used to you dressing differently and using the window."

He nodded. "As you and Clark asked, I followed you to your meeting with Lex Luthor. I stayed after you left and heard some disturbing plans you need to know about. I just scanned your apartment for bugs and it's clean. Before I leave I'll check the phones also. If you leave the apartment, assume that bugs have been placed while you were gone. And the safest precautions would be to consider keeping your door and windows locked, with the chain on the door."

With that, Clark filled her in on what he'd learned. He told her about the watchers. And then he explained that he didn't come to her window as Superman to prevent the watchers from knowing he was there. The only thing he didn't share was the information about his arrival on Earth as a baby and the risk to his parents. Instead he explained it as the risk to his friends. He also suggested that she not visit Clark as Lois, since Lois and Clark were supposed to not be speaking to each other.

"Oh, I have a solution. I won't visit Clark, but his male cousin will."

"Lois, you'll be disguised as a man?"

"Yup. That's how I broke the car theft ring before you came."

"That's impressive. I, um, wouldn't think that w-would work," he stuttered as he blushed.

"That's the main reason it will work. Who would expect Lois Lane to be dressed as a guy? We need to work out the logistics. Maybe I can stay with Clark. I may need to leave town and Clark's cousin not arrive for a few days to shake the tail. I hate being out of the loop, even for a few days. It may be the safest alternative."

"Do you have somewhere to stay?"

"No. I do have my vacation money, so that's not a problem."

"Lois, I'm sure Clark's parents would put you up for a few days. Why don't you consider talking to him or them about it?"

"That's a good idea. And no one would suspect I'm staying at my former friend and former partner's parents' farm. It would only be a few days, right? I'm not much of a country person."

"Yes. I can give you a lift there and back if you like, so there won't be a trail. You could get on a train and look like you're traveling elsewhere. Then I'll help you disappear from the train."

"You'd do that?"

"Sure. I'll even ask the Kents if you can stay, if you like."

"That would be nice. Thanks."

"Do you have something to eat? I'm suggesting you don't want to go out right now, and a delivery person could also be a risk."

"I hadn't thought of that. This stinks, you know?"

"I know. And I am sorry. I assume it'll be hard on you because you're used to investigating on your own. I strongly suggest that you consider not going out alone and not meeting Luthor alone again. I didn't like what I heard. I've never been both that fearful and furious as I was listening to Luthor and his assistant gloat and laugh about their crimes. It's awful the people they've hurt without a thought for the damage they caused."

With anyone else, Lois would become defensive and her first reaction would be an angry retort that she could take care of herself. With Superman or Kal-El, she realized he was genuinely concerned about her. And she'd never seen any sign of him acting

superior to women. So she replied, “With what you’ve told me, I’ll agree on one condition. That you, Clark and anyone else we involve in this investigation do the same. At least as far as not seeing Lex alone.”

He paused before answering, and Lois continued, “Is kryptonite really dangerous?”

“Unfortunately, it is. The first time I was exposed to it I blacked out. I didn’t know what it was. I lost my powers for a couple of days. And if exposed long enough, I could probably die. I don’t think I need to ask, but I will anyway. Please, Lois this information must remain between you and me. Oh, Clark also knows so you can talk to him about it.”

“As far as anyone else is concerned, it’s a mythical rock. And thanks for trusting me with that secret.”

“Lois, I do trust you. My life is full of secrets, and I’m not ready to share most right now. I don’t know if I should apologize for that or not. I’m not sorry I’m keeping the secrets, but I am sorry it means excluding you. Does that make sense?”

“Yes, it does. And knowing how dangerous kryptonite is and that it exists changes things. It makes it even more imperative that you not see Lex alone.”

“Why?”

“Lex has contacts in the military. Remember Shockwave and the tsunami? It would not surprise me that he learned about kryptonite through those contacts. Bureau 39 was an offshoot of the military. And maybe the military has a weapon that has the potential to harm you. Or maybe that ‘Series K’ is not limited to a cage and bullets. I still can’t believe he’d want to cage you like an animal.”

“Believe it. I do.”

“Are you taking other precautions?”

“Yes, but I don’t want to discuss them now.”

“Still, I think you need to be vigilant. Can you feel kryptonite from a distance?”

“If it’s not in lead. Lead blocks radiation and I assume the radiation from kryptonite.”

“You know, I wonder if it has any long-term dangerous effects on humans. Trask seemed to think it was safe, but maybe some of his paranoia was from handling the stuff.”

“Could be.”

“And you need to be sure you’re not in a situation where you’re alone with Luthor or someone who works for him.”

Thoughtfully, he replied, “That makes sense, although it may be nearly impossible in some rescues. I’ll definitely be more vigilant. And I can scan people for lead containers. From what Luthor said, I’m concerned about everyone in this investigation and those close to us. And in the spirit of equality of the genders, what’s good for you should be good for the guys, right?”

“Yes!”

After pausing, Lois shyly asked, “Can I ask you a couple of questions?”

“Sure. I’m not prepared to answer all questions though, so I may not answer or give you the complete answer you want.”

“Fair enough. This is just between us. When we’re alone, can I call you Kal?”

“Sure.”

Taking a deep breath she then asked, “Are you Ordinary Guy?”

“What? Who?”

“Oh, did I say that out loud?”

“Loud enough for me to hear it anyway.”

“Um, can you forget I said anything?”

“On one condition Lois.”

“Condition?”

“Yes.” Clark stalled to figure out what to say to her. He was so surprised at the sudden turn in conversation that he didn’t know what he felt about her question, let alone how to answer her.

Should he be outraged? Angry? Confess all? In his mind’s eye he saw a gloating Trask lighting a match to burn his parents and Wayne Irig while alive. Then Trask morphed into Luthor. No, this was not the time or place for **that** confession. And he really wanted to do it as Clark, not Superman.

He took a deep breath and then stood up. Looking out her window, he focused on the roof and building across the street. He stayed away from the window so no one on the street would see him, and in scanning saw no microphones or cameras aimed at her windows. He paced in back and forth, trying to figure out what to say.

Continuing his mantra over and over. *Don’t Be Cruel.*

The silence stretched on for several minutes as he thought of possible responses, then discarded them. Finally, he stopped, and turned to face her. Standing tall and straight with his arms across his chest and even though he was out of uniform, there was no doubt that **Superman** was about to speak.

Then he cautiously spoke, “Do you trust me?”

“Yes! Of course I trust you.”

“Then prove it. Promise me you’ll drop this line of thought and don’t even think about researching it. It’s a distraction, possibly a fatal one. Trask almost killed Clark, his parents and neighbor thinking Clark knew that information. I know Luthor would do the same. And both of them would consider torture a reasonable way to get that information. There can be no distractions or we will lose this war. And it is a war. After what I learned today, I’m convinced we’re dealing with a sociopath who is likely also a megalomaniac. And he’s hiding as the city’s philanthropist.”

Lois had been thinking how she could research who Ordinary Guy was. She realized with dismay that Lex with all his resources could very well find out if she did make any inquiries, online or off. And she desperately wanted Superman to trust her. She bit her lower lip and said, “You’re right. I promise to drop this. I do reserve the right to ask you again in the future.”

She saw the gleam of humor in his eyes as he responded,

“Now, you wouldn’t be Lois Lane if you didn’t.”

Nodding her head in the affirmative she then asked, “Should we make a list of those we can trust? Who else can help?”

“Sounds like a plan. Who do you suggest?”

Thoughtfully she replied, “Clark, of course. And Perry, Jimmy and Henderson. Jack is probably on that list, but he’s in custody.”

“Good start. I think we should assume everyone else is potentially compromised unless we’ve all agreed they’re okay. If anyone has a suspicion, that should be enough to not trust that person for the time being. Why don’t I ask Clark to ask Mr. White, Jimmy and maybe Inspector Henderson to meet as a task force with you? I may need to meet with one or more of you separately. Since I’m not exactly inconspicuous in my uniform, and I’d rather not share this disguise with anyone else. You’ll keep this disguise confidential, won’t you Lois?”

“Of course. You didn’t even need to ask.”

“You and Clark at least should meet tonight. His apartment may be the best place, if you can get there in disguise. Do you need anything else? Food? Something for your disguise?”

She shook her head no. He checked her phones, and found them clean. They made arrangements for Clark to call her when a meeting was finalized, hopefully for that night. She and Clark would think of how to get her to his apartment without discovery. They’d discuss it when he called. She promised to stay in the apartment until then.

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When Clark left Lois, he flew to S.T.A.R. Labs. There he met with Dr. Bernard Klein, a new researcher who was helping Superman. He picked up eight of their supersonic Superman watches that he had previously commissioned. The Superman Foundation would reimburse S.T.A.R. Labs for them. He planned

on giving one each to the task force members and his parents as added insurance in case one of them needed super help. For appearances sake, Clark would also get one.

"Thanks. I really appreciate this."

Dr. Klein replied, "It's my pleasure. After all you do each day, including saving the world from Nightfall, it's the least we can do to show our gratitude."

He took off from S.T.A.R. Labs and flew to Kansas.

Landing behind the barn, he spun into jeans and a plaid shirt and then headed for the farmhouse.

Inside, he found his parents having a snack in the kitchen. Martha stood up, came over and gave him a hug. They exchanged greetings.

"What brings you here, son?" Jonathan asked.

"I have some special watches for you. Remember the one that Jimmy had when Lois and I were in Smallville?"

"Yes, you said that was how you knew your powers were back."

"Well, I have enough watches for each of you to have one, and for everyone that will work with us on nailing Luthor."

"Us, huh?" Martha asked.

"Yes, Mom. Lois and I are forming a task force," Clark replied. Over warm oatmeal raisin cookies and buttermilk he then proceeded to fill them in on their plans. He also demonstrated how the watches worked. While he didn't think Luthor would do anything to his parents, he had decided that he'd rather be overcautious than overconfident.

Before he left, Martha surprised him with a new suit. Dr. Klein at S.T.A.R. Labs had created the fabric that was tougher than normal spandex. The colors were identical to the blue and red that was world famous. The fabric was bulkier because included in the threads were lead filaments to give him some protection against the deadly kryptonite radiation. Preliminary testing at S.T.A.R. Labs was promising, although he hadn't shared his exposure to kryptonite with his parents. Martha had also made a pair of gauntlets for him, also made of the blue fabric with the cuffs trimmed in the red. She was unsure if he would or could use them, but wanted him to have the option.

Additionally, Jonathan had bought lead foil, and they had lined a pair of boots for Clark with lead. And they gave him extra sheets of the foil that he could fold and carry discreetly. Clark spun into the new suit, boots and gauntlets, which Martha pronounced a satisfactory fit. They said goodbye with hugs, and then Clark flew to his apartment.

Superman was able to get Lois out of her apartment and onto Clark's balcony after dark without the watchers suspecting anything. The meeting went well, with Jimmy and Lois planning to work on the board of directors angle. Lois would work from the Kent farm for the next few days, then return as Clark's cousin. Perry would use his contacts to look into how much the *Planet* was insured for before the bombing. He also planned to talk to the circulation manager and former *Planet* executives to find out what exactly was the extent of the financial woes of the paper. And when it had started. Plus, he would be talking to possible investors about buying the *Daily Planet*. The media mogul Franklin Stern was at the top of his list of potential investors to contact.

Henderson was assembling a trusted task force in the MPD and DA's office to have warrants and teams ready to search and arrest when needed.

Clark would be looking into the shadowy figure called "The Boss" who seemed to be responsible for the crime in the city. Clark suspected Luthor worked with "The Boss" or was him. Superman would be available for whatever the team needed. Clark distributed the watches and explained how to use them. He cautioned everyone that Superman could become annoyed if the signals were abused.

Lois would be reviewing their research and looking at the

whole picture, initially from Smallville and after a few days from Metropolis. Her leaps of logic and insights would prove invaluable. In her role she actually would be in charge of the directions the investigation would take. That appealed her since her instincts were to be involved in the collection of evidence. Due to her association with Luthor, everyone including Lois realized that wasn't practical, safe or in the best interests of the investigation.

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### Day 5

Lois slept better than she had in days. She awoke to the smell of coffee and breakfast. Looking at the clock, she realized it was 6 AM, which was 7 AM in Metropolis. She stretched and felt rested. Changing quickly, she ran a brush through her hair and headed downstairs.

Martha greeted her pleasantly. She offered Lois a cup of coffee, and told her to fix it as she liked. When Lois expressed surprise to see her favorite artificial sweetener and creamer, Martha explained that Clark had told her. It reassured Lois to know that Martha and Clark cared enough to see she had this small comfort of home. Over breakfast, Lois told Martha and Jonathan about her part in the investigation. Since she had nothing specific to do today, she asked if she could help with anything.

Jonathan's morning chores were done, and he was headed out to town for some errands. He suggested that Lois stay with Martha today. It would be easier for Lois to remain unseen inside the house. Lois found herself agreeing, feeling she needed time to decompress from the stresses of the past few days.

When Martha shooed her out of the kitchen, Lois found herself in the living room. She looked at the pictures of Clark at various ages. She noticed there were no pictures of him from several years, which she guessed were in junior high school. She asked Martha about it when Martha entered the living room.

"Oh honey, that was a difficult time for Clark. The pictures of him are too sad to show."

"Really? I rarely see him sad or upset these days. What made him so sad, if it's not too personal?"

Martha invited Lois to sit. They both sat on the couch. Martha sighed. "What has Clark told you about his childhood?"

"Not much. He said he was adopted, and I guess I always assumed it was a happy childhood. He certainly seemed loved by the people we met in Smallville, welcoming him home."

Martha weighed her words, honed by years of practice with not telling a blatant lie while preserving Clark's secret. "Clark's adoption was a private adoption. To protect him, we had the records sealed. And the gossip mill in a small town... well, this was the 1960s, and that kind of adoption usually meant that the child was born out of wedlock. At least that's what the town's gossips decided.

"In junior high, at the same time he started puberty with all the changes that entailed, his friends became aware of the gossip. He overheard cruel comments about his biological parents, and he couldn't refute them. You see, we didn't know who his parents were, and there was no way to trace them. The kids he had defended and befriended since kindergarten suddenly turned away from him. If they didn't talk about him, most of them didn't support him either. It was a very lonely time for Clark. We don't display pictures of that time because it brings back too many sad memories. And I mean memories for Jonathan and me. Clark never mentions it, but I get so angry just thinking about the cruel way the gossips treated Clark."

Lois found herself with tears in her eyes. Suddenly she knew exactly why Clark had never engaged in gossip at work. And any lingering doubts she harbored that Clark might talk about what she confidently shared with him disappeared forever as she spoke with Martha.

Uncharacteristically for Lois, she replied, "Martha, please.

Don't say anything you don't want to say. And don't share more than you think Clark would want you to share. I can see how awful that time was, and in this one instance even though I'm an investigative reporter, I don't want to discover more information." And she bit her tongue to keep from asking the hundreds of questions that jumped to her mind. But this was Clark they were talking about. She had already hurt him at the park, and no way would Lois hurt him again, at least not intentionally or this soon.

"Thank you, Lois. I know how curious this must make you. And I love you for not pressing me for more. Let me finish, though. From the time he was a small child, Clark always stood up for the smaller kids or those who others singled out to tease or torment. Suddenly, when he needed someone to support him he found himself alone. And many of the kids he thought were his friends also seemed to enjoy the stories and teasing him.

"The only one who supported him quietly yet steadfastly was Rachel Harris, who's now the sheriff. I think that's the real reason they went to their senior prom together. Clark was her friend when the most popular girls in school made fun of her. Both of them supported each other in good times and bad. Jonathan and I had always taught him not to respond in kind with cruel words or with violence. Clark honored that, and never retaliated. He would walk away from provocations and became known as a loner.

"He did find solace in writing and joined the school paper. Even became the editor his senior year. In the paper he worked with other kids who the most popular kids ignored or tormented. Together they found strength. That's where he learned first-hand the lesson that meekness is not a weakness.

"In Sunday school Clark had learned that there is strength in meekness. I think initially he found it was a lesson that was more theoretical than practical. Jonathan often quoted Swami Sivananda, 'Humility is not cowardice. Meekness is not weakness. Humility and meekness are indeed spiritual powers.' And Clark adopted this. He can explain it better, but during his world travels he discovered that meekness is a universal strength many spiritual advisors seek and teach.

"I don't know what you see when you see the meekness and humility in Clark. I can tell you what I see though. I see the underlying strength that others miss. And more than that, I see Jonathan. You see, Jonathan is exactly that kind of man. And if Clark were his biological son I don't believe he would act any more like Jonathan than he already does."

"Oh, Martha, I had no idea. I always thought Clark had, well kind of a perfect childhood. Maybe a little like a Norman Rockwell painting. He almost always seems so positive and upbeat. You'd never know that anyone had ever hurt him."

"Lois, no one has a perfect childhood. That's part of life, I think. Everyone copes differently with what happened. Some people get angry and irritable, while others respond to the same events by becoming gracious and kind. Would you like some tea and a scone?"

"I'll take the tea, Martha. But if you don't mind, Clark shared with me how much he loves your tea and scones. And the first time I try one I'd really like it to be with him. Do you mind?"

"Of course not, honey! I think that's lovely."

Martha excused herself with tears in her eyes and retreated to the kitchen. She knew Lois was special the first time she met her. Now if Lois would only realize how much she loved Clark. Martha suspected Lois was in love with Clark, but didn't yet realize it. Or couldn't admit it either to herself or to anyone else.

A few minutes later Martha brought them both iced tea, and then pulled out her scrapbooks and photo albums. Together she and Lois spent the next few hours poring over them as Martha shared happy stories of Clark's childhood.

Lois enjoyed learning more about Clark. Even more than when she was in Smallville the first time, she came to see new depth to his character. And she was falling more in love with him

the more she learned. What surprised her most was discovering the loneliness he felt as a child. Her respect for him and her shame at her own behavior towards him grew.

Over lunch, Jonathan asked Lois about her planned disguise. Lois explained it, and Martha volunteered to help. Lois had seen the Halloween costumes Martha had made in the past for Clark and was impressed with Martha's skills. Especially when Jonathan relayed that Martha often made them without a "store bought" pattern, instead making her own. He also proudly told Lois about Martha's costume designs for the local community theater.

While Martha looked through Clark's old clothes for ideas and possibilities that could be altered to fit Lois, Jonathan and Lois headed to the barn. Lois was introduced to the barn cats and to the two milk cows. Jonathan promised to show her how to milk the cows with the evening milking. He mucked out the stalls while she was there. And to her surprise, the smells weren't as annoying as she thought they would be. She could smell hay and earth mostly.

Jonathan showed her the farm machinery and explained the purpose of each one. He calmly explained how the farm was actually a small business, and not only included farm machinery but also the fax machine, computer, cell phone, other office equipment and supplies. When in town, Jonathan had also bought a copy of the *Metropolis Star* for Lois to read. Lois was touched at his kindness in bringing her a *Metropolis* paper. He told her stories of Clark and the farm animals.

And asked her if she'd like to take a walk around the farm.

"Jonathan, I thought I needed to stay near the house and barn."

"Oh, we'll be out of sight of the road. Just thought you'd like to see there's more to the farm than the barn and house."

"Okay, let's go!"

He showed her the pond where Clark had caught his first fish. And as they toured some of the fields, he shared more stories of Clark as a boy. As they were walking back, they passed Clark's tree house.

Lois looked up and asked, "Is that a tree house?"

"Yes, Clark and I built it when he was around ten years old."

"What does the sign say?"

"Fortress of Solitude."

"When did he name it?"

"Shortly after it was built."

"What a sad name. And a mouthful for a ten-year-old child! But how is it accessed? There aren't steps, and the branches look too high to reach from the ground."

He winked and said, "Well, Lois, that's why we have ladders."

"Can I see it?"

"Sorry. That's Clark's private place. Without his permission, no you can't. I think, though, he'd like to show it to you himself. And it would mean more to you for him to share that part of his life with you."

"Clark has more secrets than I ever guessed!"

*Lois, if you only knew,* Jonathan thought. He winked and said, "Well, maybe someday if you're lucky he'll share all of them with you."

They laughed together and walked back to the farmhouse.

As promised, Superman arrived that evening with a stack of research for Lois to review. There was a long note from Clark included, and Perry had included one as well. Superman reported that Perry, Jimmy and Clark were working hard and looked forward to Lois joining them in a few days. Lois told them she'd decided on the name "Logan" for her identity as Clark's cousin. Superman suggested that she use one of the family surnames. Kent and Clark were the two most closely associated with Clark, with Clark being Martha's maiden name. Lois promised to talk it over with Jonathan and Martha and get their input. She thought Clark should approve the final decision.

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**Days 6 – 8**

The rest of her visit to the Kent farm was spent in learning more about Clark and his parents, going through the material Superman brought and working with Martha on her disguise. Lois felt the contrast between her parents and Clark's even more acutely, and grew very fond of Martha and Jonathan. Martha often referred to Lois as "honey." Lois surprised herself by finding it heartwarming, not condescending. Tears would come to her eyes when she thought about how they had accepted her into their home, and freely given her the love and acceptance her own parents rarely did. She enjoyed Martha who was quietly efficient without being overly aggressive. And Lois found comfort in Jonathan's quiet strength and dignity. Lois thought she could learn much more from both of them, and hoped she'd have the opportunity in the future.

Before she left, Martha and Jonathan took her aside. They told her they couldn't predict the future, but as far as they both were concerned she was now family. If she ever needed anything, she should call. And they hoped she'd visit again under more pleasant circumstances. Lois stood speechless with her jaw dropped when they told her that.

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**Evening, Day 8**

When Superman arrived to take her back to Metropolis, he was surprised to find Lois as "Logan Kent" waiting for him. He was impressed with the disguise, and generously complimented Martha and Lois/Logan. After a few minutes they flew back to Metropolis. Superman dropped Logan off in an alley next to the bus stop. From there Logan arrived at Clark's apartment via cab to avoid suspicion.

He followed Logan above the clouds until Logan safely reached Clark's apartment. Perry and Jimmy greeted Logan, and heartily approved the disguise. After Superman stopped a nearby mugging, he changed into his Clark clothes and arrived at the apartment shortly after Logan. Over the next couple of weeks both Jimmy and Perry met with Clark and Lois during the day and for dinner at Clark's apartment before spending nights at Perry's house. Alice was still in Florida, and remained safely there during the investigation.

Clark gave Lois his bed, and he slept on the couch. That allowed him as Superman to come and go without disturbing her. Although Metropolis and the world remained unusually quiet so that his unexpected disappearances were few and far between.

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**The Next Two Weeks**

The investigation proceeded. Some days were slower than others. Often one member would become frustrated at a dead end, and another would be excited about a lead. They worked together like a well-oiled machine. Two weeks after Logan's arrival in Metropolis, they had enough solid information that Perry was satisfied in taking it to Henderson. Jimmy and Logan would take it early the next day.

Clark as both himself and Superman surprised the task force with the military precision he used when discussing plans and objectives. He was wholly focused on the daunting task ahead, yet as Clark still retained his good humor. Clark organized the steps needed to accomplish each task, checking them off as they were successful. He refused to concede failure or defeat, instead taking what seemed to be a loss and turning it into a win. The rest of the task force thought Clark was behaving more like a football coach than a reporter. The truth was it was the Lord Kal-El aspect of his personality peeking through.

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**Two Weeks After Lois Returned to Metropolis as Logan**

Late the next morning, there was a call from Mrs. Cox asking Clark to contact Superman to discuss Lois Lane. Clark, Jimmy, Lois and Perry all heard the call when Clark replayed it back on

the answering machine. Everyone agreed it was likely a trap, and Superman should not answer it. Lois said it best when she asked, "Since when is Superman at Luthor's beck and call, anyway?" Perry, Clark and Jimmy all silently wondered when "Lex" had become "Luthor" in her mind.

Everyone decided the next step was up to Henderson, as they awaited word of his warrants. The only thing that made their investigation bittersweet was Perry's inability to entice an investor to buy the *Planet*.

That afternoon, there was a fire in an apartment building on the edge of Suicide Slum that raged out of control. When Superman arrived, he sought the fire chief, asking what he could do to help. Evacuating the living was a priority, so Superman helped the firefighters do that. After almost everyone was evacuated, he heard a child's cry and heartbeat in an apartment. Following the sounds, he arrived in a bedroom of the apartment. Searching for a child, what he found instead was a doll in a bed with a tape recorder playing. Turning around to exit, he suddenly found himself surrounded by six firefighters. Opening his mouth to explain, the firefighters all opened lead boxes they carried, exposing him to kryptonite.

Making a split-second decision, he used his super-speed to activate a hidden button on his belt before he collapsed. A moment later, one of the faux firefighters put a lead-lined hood over his head. He was grabbed and strapped on a gurney. The kryptonite pieces were placed next to him. Covering him completely with a sheet, the thugs moved the gurney to a waiting ambulance. Unseen by the real firefighters, the ambulance took off and headed for Lex Tower. The faux firefighters also left unseen in the ambulance and an accompanying paramedic vehicle.

The underground parking at Lex Tower was deserted when they arrived except for the security guard, who expected them and let them in wordlessly. They pulled next to a special elevator only for VIPs where Mrs. Cox met them. She used her key card to escort the men with their captive to the wine cellar. The gurney had to be left outside the cellar door, so they unfastened the straps and grabbed Superman, partially carrying and partially dragging him down the stairs. The kryptonite pieces were carefully collected, returned to their boxes and placed in a bag, which was handed to Mrs. Cox when she exited the wine cellar.

Once in the wine cellar, the thugs dropped him into a cage leaving the hood on his head. They locked the cage, handing Mrs. Cox the key. Superman was alone in the cellar. In less than five minutes, Luthor arrived.

Luthor went to a remote control device and turned on the glowing green bars of the cage. He stepped up to the door, asking, "And how are we feeling today?"

He was rewarded with a groan from Superman.

With false sympathy Luthor cooed, "Oh. A little green around the gills?"

He laughed, never having been in a better mood. "I, on the other hand, am feeling wonderful. Today is the first day of my new life. I am going to marry Lois Lane and no one will stand in my way. 'She's beautiful and therefore to be wooed. She is woman, therefore to be won.' Since you are from another planet and simply muscle without brains, you wouldn't know that's from Shakespeare's *Henry the Fifth*."

"This must be hard for you. Knowing I'm outside this cage, free to marry whomever I choose and live my life fully while you only lie here helplessly and suffer."

Stepping into the cage, Luthor pulled off the hood. Superman didn't move but stared at him. Triumphant at his enemy's defeat, Luthor proclaimed, "Lois is a bit too independent, don't you think? Don't worry. I'll fix that. I will be meeting her soon and convince her that her future lies with me."

The only response he got was another moan from the superhero on the floor.

Then Luthor broke out into song, singing “Tonight” from *West Side Story*.

With that, he dropped the hood back on top of Superman’s head and left the cage, relocking the door as he left. Leaving the key on a wine barrel he gleefully announced, “So near and yet so far.” With that he climbed up the steps with a spring in his step still singing to return to his penthouse office.

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Once he was sure he was alone, Superman peeked out from under the hood, which no longer covered his eyes. Clark scanned the wine cellar and identified the cameras in the room.

*Only Luthor would record the agonizing death of an opponent, and probably spend the next few years watching it over and over,* he thought.

Not dwelling on what Luthor planned do with the tapes, he quickly fried the cameras with his heat vision. Then he carefully and silently stood up, looking at the cage door. With a blast of heat vision, he cut through the lock mechanism, and then the cage door swung open.

He found it more difficult to use his heat vision, so quickly found the remote and turned off the power to the kryptonite bars before exiting the wine cellar. He didn’t want to completely lose his vision and hearing by exposing his head to the deadly radiation more than necessary. He cautiously used his super senses to check for surveillance, including electronic, human and canine. Once safely outside the cellar, he moved at super-speed to the nearest stairwell where he found the exit. As soon as he cleared the exit, he looked around and seeing no one and no cameras rocketed into the sky for direct sunlight. He avoided Luthor’s balcony view and traveled just slowly enough not to leave a sonic boom.

Meanwhile, Luthor basked in knowing Superman was dying in a cage in the wine cellar. He stood on his balcony, smoking a fine cigar and looking down on the city that was one again “his.” Smiling like a Cheshire cat, he inhaled deeply and knew that he had defeated his greatest foe. He reveled in the thought that his next big decision was whether it would be more pleasurable to keep the superhero around for a while and continually torture him or to kill him quickly. His thoughts were interrupted by a commotion in the office.

His office doors were thrown open, and Inspector Henderson burst in with a group of MPD’s finest, Perry White, Lois Lane and Jimmy Olsen.

Stepping back into the office and surveying the group with fury, Luthor asked, “What is the meaning of this?”

Before Inspector Henderson could say anything, Perry replied, “The meaning, Luthor, is that you’re through. We have all the evidence we need against you.”

Inspector Henderson added, “I have a warrant here charging you with arson and other crimes too numerous to mention.”

An infuriated Luthor replied, “You’re out of your minds. All of you.”

Henderson began to read him his rights. “You have the right to remain silent. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney—”

Luthor interrupted, “Will you stop that! I can afford a **thousand** attorneys. I’ll have your head... badge for this. Someone get the Governor on the phone! Wait, make it the President, make it—”

Henderson grabbed Luthor’s arm, but Luthor twisted free, using karate moves on two nearby policemen who tried to restrain him, and headed for the balcony.

Firmly, Henderson said, “It’s over, Luthor. You have nowhere to go. Give yourself up.”

Mrs. Cox was brought in handcuffed.

Luthor turned to her and said, “Et tu, Mrs. Cox?”

She shrugged at him.

Next Luthor looked at Henderson and then looked over the

balcony ledge. He climbed up on the ledge, shouting, “Lex Luthor will not live in a cage!”

Henderson cried, “Luthor, no!”

Luthor calmly replied, “Did you know this is the tallest building in Metropolis? Top of the world!” With that he threw himself over the edge.

Henderson reached for him, but missed. Before he could look over the edge, Superman appeared, carrying a very angry Luthor like a sack of potatoes, and landed softly on the balcony.

Superman turned to Inspector Henderson. “I think this is yours.”

Almost cracking a smile Henderson replied, “Thanks. Your timing is perfect.”

Luthor sputtered, “I thought kryptonite is poisonous to you!”

As he turned Luthor over to the waiting policemen who promptly restrained and handcuffed Luthor, Superman deadpanned, “Apparently not.”

Henderson turned to him and asked, “So we should add attempted murder to the charges?”

Superman nodded, “Yes, and assault, unlawful imprisonment and interfering with emergency services to start.”

Facing the superhero, at that news Henderson did break into a rare genuine smile that only Superman could see. Then he whispered, “By the way, we’re here because your signal worked.”

Superman whispered back, “Good to know. I’ll be sure to thank Dr. Klein and tell him his modified GPS worked.”

The next few hours were spent giving statements to the police. Superman had given his statement and was getting ready to leave when Lois approached him.

“Are you really okay?” she asked in a whisper. “You had me scared.”

He looked around, saw no one was able to overhear them and quietly replied, “I’m fine.”

“But Mrs. Cox said you were exposed to you-know-what.”

He leaned close to her and whispered, “Game changer. Special new suit. And Luthor’s thugs covered my head with a lead hood so I couldn’t see. What they didn’t know was that it protected my vision and hearing from exposure.”

“Did you really fall unconscious?”

“No. That was an act. All this is off the record.”

“Of course! I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Thanks, Lois.” With a wink he left by the balcony, flying into the sky. Unseen, he flew in a circle before checking Lois’s apartment. The MPD and FBI had just finished removing surveillance equipment planted by Luthor’s hirelings. They cleared her apartment of surveillance equipment, which was confiscated as evidence. After that she was allowed to return to her apartment. Clark in both personas would continue to routinely scan both of their apartments for hidden surveillance equipment. His diligence was at least partially due to his Lord Kal-El persona. He returned to Luthor’s penthouse as Clark, who escorted Lois to his apartment.

Lex Luthor was arrested and placed in isolation on suicide watch. Jack was released the next day from protective custody. Lois moved back into her own apartment. Jack and Jimmy stayed temporarily with Perry.

Henderson made sure that the kryptonite cage and pieces were recovered and destroyed. Additional kryptonite was confiscated with a search conducted simultaneously at Lex Labs.

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### One Week After Lex Luthor’s Arrest

Lois, Clark, Perry, Jimmy and Jack met on the sidewalk in front of the Daily Planet building. The front entrance was boarded up, the area cordoned off with “BUILDING CONDEMNED” signs on the entrances.

Jimmy spoke with a sigh, “I wish they’d get it over with and tear down this old place.”

Perry replied, “Yep, too many memories.”

Lois quietly added, "Most of them good."

After a moment, Perry brightened and said, "There's a lesson to be learned here."

Jack grumpily replied, "Why am I not surprised?"

Ignoring him, Perry then said, "We ought to appreciate what we've got when we've got it."

Lois looked at Clark, who was looking at the building. He felt her stare and turned to her. Quickly she changed the subject.

"It's my fault. All of it. If Lex hadn't wanted me so badly he never would've destroyed the *Planet*. Why me?"

Clark answered her, "Because Lex Luthor always wants what he can never have."

In a near whisper, Lois said, "He almost did."

Clark passionately replied, "No, he didn't. You said 'No.' You didn't accept his proposal. And even if you had, you never would have gone through with the wedding."

Lois looked gratefully at Clark, tried to reply, but couldn't speak. Clark stepped towards her and she stepped into his arms for a hug.

Perry interrupted the silence saying, "I know I've said this before, but I hate the idea that Lex Luthor got his way—" Pointing to the condemned building, he continued, "Even in this one thing."

The booming voice of Mr. Stern was heard. "He didn't."

Coming closer, he pointed and exclaimed, "Look!"

A flatbed truck pulled up to the building. Workmen removed a tarp covering a large object on the truck bed: the *Daily Planet* globe. Then, a crane began to move it into position.

Everyone was astonished. Perry was the first to find his voice, saying, "Great Shades of Elvis!"

Mr. Stern informed them, "We start on the building next week, but first I thought we'd announce to the world we're back in business." Turning to Perry, he continued, "I reconsidered your proposal. I agree with you, Mr. White. Metropolis needs the *Daily Planet*. Besides, resurrecting what he tried to obliterate suits me fine and will annoy him for years. I can just see him in his lonely cell being aggravated at what he's lost, and that what he tried to destroy has found new life. I wonder if I should arrange for him to get a subscription delivered daily to his cell..."

Perry chuckled. "He'd likely claim that was cruel and unusual punishment."

"Oh, and I had some ideas about modernization."

Perry warily asked, "Modernization?"

"Yes, improvements, expansions. Would you like to see the plans?"

Mr. Stern headed over to the plans with Perry, Jimmy and Jack following him. Perry added, "Mr. Stern! Now wait just a doggone minute!"

Lois and Clark were left alone.

Looking at the globe, Clark said, "I've never seen anything so beautiful in all my life."

Lois looked at him and saw him in a newfound light.

"You never gave up. On the *Planet*, on your friends, on me."

Clark looked at her. "I couldn't. You've just named almost everything in the world that's precious to me."

"I don't think I've ever, **will** ever meet anyone quite like you."

Clark grinned and thought, *You don't know how true that is.*

Then Lois and Clark simultaneously started to speak. She said, "Let me go first, please."

He replied, "Okay."

"Clark, I'm sorry... about a lot of things. But most of all that I didn't tell you what I decided after I spoke with Superman after we spoke in the park. I've been afraid. Afraid of being hurt, and that you'd changed your mind about me... about us."

"I haven't wanted to admit it to myself, but Clark I more than need you in my life. I love you."

"Like a brother?"

"No. I love you like a woman loves a man. Her man. I am **in**

**love** with you. And it scares me that I'm going to mess this up."

"Lois, I love you. I've loved you from about three seconds after I met you. I loved you when you were considering Luthor's proposal. I love you today. I'll love you tomorrow and I'll love you forever. That won't stop."

"How do you know? My parents thought that when they got married..."

"Lois, we are not your parents. I don't know how I know, I just do."

"What do we do next?"

"Well, I'd like to date you. But before we make any plans, there's something I need to talk to you about. Privately."

"Is it a bad thing?"

"Not necessarily. That's up to you."

"Me?"

"Yeah. Come on. Let's go somewhere private. Your place or mine?"

"Mine is closer."

"And if you're mad at me afterwards, you won't have to leave."

"You're scaring me. Can you give me a hint?"

"I'm adopted. And I want to tell you about my biological parents. But not here on the street..."

Lois took his arm, and they silently walked to her apartment.

When they reached her door, she unlocked all her locks and they went inside. Throwing her purse on the side table, she turned to him and asked, "Do you want something to drink or can we discuss this now?"

"I'm fine. Why don't you sit down?"

Lois sat on one of her love seats while Clark nervously paced in back and forth in front of her. Gathering his thoughts, he turned and faced her.

"Lois, I told you I'm adopted. What I didn't tell you is how my parents adopted me, and that until recently I knew nothing about my biological family."

She nodded yes, and uncharacteristically said nothing, allowing him to continue.

"My parents found me when they think I was around three months old. They found me in a neighbor's field."

"What! Why would anyone abandon a baby? I'm sorry, please continue."

He smiled and sat down. "Actually, they were driving home and thought they saw a meteor. My mom, well you've met her. She's as adventurous and inquisitive as you. She and my dad had just received the news that they were turned down as adoptive parents after they had been told they couldn't have a child of their own. They were devastated.

"Anyway, as they were driving Mom and Dad saw this streak of light in the sky. And Mom convinced Dad to stop and check it out. They thought it was a meteor. Instead they found a small spaceship with a baby inside. Me. They took me home, and Dad hid the ship. When some government men came around a couple of days later, they pretended not to know anything about a meteor."

"Wait. Your parents found a baby in a space ship, and they just took care of you? And there were government agents looking for you?"

"Well, yeah. You have to understand my parents. The major reason they were denied adopting a child was because they had been arrested in peaceful civil rights demonstrations. So their opinion of overly aggressive government types was already pretty low. They told everyone that I was the illegitimate child of Mom's cousin. Or at least that's the story that ended up in the Smallville gossip mill. And they never disputed it, preferring to not say anything rather than lie outright.

"And Mom and Dad... well, Mom told me that they didn't care if I was a government or Russian experiment or a Martian, I

was **theirs**. And that was that.”

Lois took his hand in hers and with tears in her eyes softly said, “Oh, Clark.”

“I couldn’t have asked for better parents. They loved me as their own, and protected me fiercely. When I was old enough, they had a talk with me about my unusual adoption. And they instilled in me the need to hide my origins, and eventually my abilities. Dad said they were concerned someone from the government would discover me, take me away and dissect me like a frog.”

“That’s awful!”

“Lois, you have to understand. They were petrified of losing me, and what could become of me. I wasn’t always invulnerable, and of course they never were. I never really understood how right they were until Trask tried to kill us. He had my ship, you know. The globe I took was from it.”

He continued his story, filling her in on growing up, his travels and what he knew about Jor-El, Lara and Krypton. He explained how the idea of Superman came from her comment about bringing a change of clothes to work. She wanted to hear everything and was patient. She understood why he hid his abilities and his second job from everyone, including her. If she were in his shoes she would not have trusted Lois Lane so quickly.

And to her chagrin, she realized in stealing Clark’s story, she had actually stolen **Superman’s story**. Of course Clark had Superman’s globe! It was **Clark’s globe**. She also cringed inwardly at how she had dismissed or belittled Clark over the past year. Mostly she was quiet, although she did ask an occasional question for clarification.

She even amazed herself in that the famed Lane temper never emerged. She was not angry with him. Maybe she was a little hurt and definitely embarrassed at how she’d treated both of him. Fawning over Superman while ignoring and belittling Clark. As he talked, she fell deeper in love with him.

When he finished, she said, “So I was right.”

“You figured it out?”

“That you were Superman? No, I meant that you think of Ordinary Guy, that is you—Clark—as the real person and Superman as the disguise.”

“That’s what you meant when you mumbled about Ordinary Guy?”

“Yeah. I did get it right, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did.”

“But you know you’re wrong.”

“What?”

“Clark, I don’t know the real you. Yet. The Clark Kent I know can’t fly without an airplane or bend steel in his bare hands or any of the other things you can do. And Superman doesn’t have a job, family or friends. So you are a combination of them, and yet different. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah. That’s something else I love about you, Lois. You understand me better than I understand myself.”

“Well, I am Lois Lane. And I think I told you once that my job is to look beyond the external. The flashy suit and pair of glasses may have blinded me, but I still saw beneath both disguises. Even when I didn’t know they were disguises.”

“I guess you did.”

“Will you let me see the real you now?”

“Lois, I have no secrets from you. Yes, I’ll give you all the time you need to know me if you’ll let me see the real you, too.”

“I will. Clark, why tell me now?”

“I trusted you to not look for Superman’s identity, and you didn’t. I don’t think it’s fair to continue this without you knowing everything.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Lois, I owe you a lot. You accepted Superman when he first arrived. It’s thanks to your articles that he was accepted so easily. If LNN had gotten there first, I’m sure the perception would be

completely different. And although you’ve protested at times, you accepted a greenhorn partner as a full partner. I wanted to show you how much I trust you. And my parents do too, by the way. I discussed telling you with them.”

“You did?”

“Sure did. They both thought it was time.”

“How about a hug?”

“Absolutely!”

They both stood and stepped into each other’s arms. Lois tipped her head up and Clark looked into her eyes. They saw the love in each other’s eyes. Cautiously, he bent towards her and gently kissed her lips. She memorized the feel of his lips on hers, the smell of him, the gentle sound of his breathing, and how safe she always felt in his arms no matter what clothes he wore. Then she initiated a kiss filled with all the love and passion she could muster. Momentarily stunned, he soon returned the passion-filled, toe-curling kiss.

She sighed as she leaned her head against his chest, hearing his heartbeat. And Lois knew she was right about something else. She was in love with Clark Kent. She couldn’t live or even visualize living without him. And she knew without him saying a word that he felt the same.

Coyly she looked at him and asked, “When’s our first date?”

He laughed and replied, “Tonight?”

She nodded yes.

“I’ve said it before, and I’m going to continue to say it until long after you believe it. Lois, I’ve loved you from the beginning, and I’ll love you forever.”

“Clark, I think I loved you from the first, too. I was scared to admit it until I saw you as Superman on the shuttle. I love you now and will love you till the end.”

And they did.

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### Epilogue

Eight months later, Lex Luthor escaped from prison a few days before Lois and Clark’s wedding. He had some bizarre plan to kidnap Lois from the wedding, substitute a clone and transfer Lois’s and his souls into new clones so they could start new lives in Switzerland. Unfortunately for him, Lois was so distraught about the last-minute wedding changes insisted on by the wedding planner her mother Ellen had hired that Lois and Clark had quietly eloped.

Superman and the MPD recaptured Luthor, who was placed in isolation in a maximum-security prison cell. Five years after that he was found dead in his cell. Cause of death was unclear until the coroner revealed a brain tumor. Subsequent search of his cell revealed hidden kryptonite in the binding of his handwritten journal. His journal showed he was convinced it would protect him from Superman’s wrath. He never understood that Superman was satisfied justice was served because he was in prison for life with no hope of release.

Further study at S.T.A.R. Labs showed that long-term exposure was a health hazard to humans. As a result, the kryptonite was classified as extremely dangerous to humans and was stored only in the highest-level biohazard lab at S.T.A.R. Labs. Luthor’s body was cremated after the coroner finished with it. By special request of all the proper authorities and government officials, Superman hurled the urn containing his ashes into the sun after experts confirmed the ashes were not contaminated with kryptonite.

After getting released from jail, Jack stayed with Clark and went back to school and got his G.E.D. Thanks to a scholarship from the Superman Foundation, he was able to go to college at Met U. He and Jimmy shared an apartment until Jack graduated from college. When Jack turned eighteen, he was granted guardianship of his brother Denny thanks to the intervention of Perry White, Inspector Henderson and Superman. Denny moved

in with Jimmy and Jack. Jack studied business and after college got an internship at the Superman Foundation. He earned his M.B.A. part-time while working. Eventually he became the Superman Foundation's Chief Financial Officer (C.F.O.), and eventually its C.E.O.

Denny followed in his brother's footsteps, going to college and later getting an M.B.A. He became the C.F.O. and eventually C.E.O. of the charitable organization in Gotham City, the Thomas and Martha Wayne Memorial Foundation. He worked closely with its founder, Bruce Wayne.

Perry, Jimmy, Lois and Clark went back to work at the *Planet* when it reopened. Perry stayed as editor in chief until his retirement at age seventy, when joint chief editorship was passed to Lois and Clark. He and Alice had a brief separation and divorce. They reconnected after about a year and remarried, and then remained happily married.

Jimmy became a world-famous photojournalist, earning multiple awards as Jim Olsen. He met Angela the Christmas after the *Planet* reopened. They had a brief courtship, and then went their separate ways. After two years apart, they found each other again and eventually married. When Lois and Clark became co-editors in chief, Jim became the *Planet's* online editor. He never forgot his early days at the *Planet*, and the friendships Lois and Clark extended to him. Those just starting out would find a kind word, an understanding ear and sage advice from Jim, who often served as both official and unofficial mentor for newbies.

Inspector Henderson went on to have a distinguished career, which included a memorable tenure as the chief of police. He retired with many accolades and honors, including the key to the city given to him by Superman. It was the only time both Superman and Henderson were noted to simultaneously be emotional enough to have their stoic masks slip with moist eyes.

Dr. Bernie Klein became a great friend of Superman, Lois and Clark. Eventually he was let in on the family secret when Lois unexpectedly became pregnant. Typically humble, Bernie said he was never so glad to be so wrong about his findings than when he had determined that a Kryptonian man could not have children with an Earth woman. He went on to distinguish himself with multiple inventions benefiting mankind, the profits of which made financial status of S.T.A.R. Labs stable. And also secured his own job and financial future.

Shortly after their first date, Clark told Lois all about his "Don't Be Cruel" mantra. They both adopted it, promising to never go to bed angry just like Martha and Jonathan had promised each other about thirty-five years before. Their professional and personal lives were never dull or boring. Martha, Jonathan, Lois and Clark all had long happy marriages with their houses filled with love and laughter, often supplied by additional generations of Kents.

THE END