

Wrong Trilogy, Book 1: Another Dimension, Another Time, Another Lois

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Rated PG-13 for adult themes and WHAMs a plenty.

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Summary: This time Tempus succeeds in destroying Utopia with unrealized consequences. Now, it's up to Lois to save the day before time runs out. Set in an alt-canon-dimension (but not alt-dimension). A Dark Comedy, emphasis on *dark*. Wrong Trilogy, Book 1. Each book in this trilogy is stand-alone and can be read in any order.

Author's Comment: This is Book 1 of my Wrong Trilogy and is a prequel to Book 2. It is a stand-alone story, but I suggest reading it before reading Book 2. That being said, you may – however – read the three Books in any order (the wonders of time-travel stories). Should you decide that this story is entirely too dark for your taste, feel free to skip it and move on to the lighter Book 2. Book 1 is not required for understanding Book 2 (or, for that matter, Book 3) of the Trilogy. The Books are set chronologically in alt-Clark's life.

Author's Notes: I moved "Witness" to its rightful spot after "Man of Steel Bars". Flashback and/or dream sequences, as well as inner dialogue, are all shown in *Italics*. ~ Surrounds Lois' inner dialogue (replacing ".") ~

Prologue

Clark knelt beside her grave. He came here often just to talk to her, even though he knew she couldn't hear him.

Since meeting and falling in love with Lois Lane – that Lois Lane who was tossed into his dimension by Tempus – he realized that there could be no Superman without her... some version of her. Sure, he could rescue people, stop the bad guys, and breathe in and out, but without a Lois Lane he felt empty inside, unable to truly live. Without a Lois, there was only this façade; there was no Clark Kent, no one who truly understood him. Without her love and support, he didn't know how long he could keep up this life.

It troubled him that he was being selfish, that he would change this newly discovered Lois's destiny because *he* needed her, that she wouldn't get a choice in the matter... Not that she would choose the alternative.

True, he rescued people every day without this being a dilemma. He had even saved that *other* Lois before without this being a problem. This time it felt different. His motivation felt different. Even though he knew he was saving her so that her current fate would change, he was also saving her in hope that she then would save him from heartache. That was the selfish part.

If she knew why he was rescuing her, would she resent him? Would she think that he felt she owed him something? Would he ever be able to convince her that he would be happy just having her in the world? Breathing in. Breathing out. Knowing she was safe, hopefully happy. He would not expect anything nor should he. He would love her. He didn't require that she return his love.

Actually, it would probably be better for her if she didn't. Friendship would be nice though, having her available to talk with, to laugh at his jokes – pathetic as they might be, to challenge him. With Lois Lane in his world – or in this case, him in her world – he would be a better man... a better Superman.

Clark heard a sound behind him. Without turning his head from where it rested against Lois's tombstone, above her empty grave, he knew H. G. Wells had arrived to take him on his journey.

"Are you sure about this, Clark?" H. G. Wells asked him and not for the first time.

"We've been over this, Herb. Lois needs me. Without my interfer... help, she won't survive." And without her neither would he. "I promised I would save her."

"Lois is dead, Clark," Wells reminded him. "The decision is yours and yours alone."

Clark sighed.

"I know this was my idea, but now... I'm not sure," Wells went on. "I hate leaving any dimension without a Superman."

Clark nodded. He hated that too. "Isn't that why you suggested this in the first place? So her world wouldn't be without a Superman? If it doesn't work, I can always return. At least, this new Lois will have a second chance at life."

"I'll come back in three months, Clark, in case you decide to return home."

Clark took one last long look at the gravestone. He would miss her – *his* Lois. He didn't *want* to leave her, but the other Lois *needed* him. He closed his eyes and pictured her in his mind. '*I will always love you,*' he told her, reassured her... reassured himself. He would never – could never forget her. This woman he had never met, never saved.

He stood up and picked up his suitcase. He glanced around this 'world.' He would miss this dimension. It was so different from the one where he was going. This was home. He sighed. "Let's go," he told H. G. Wells.

Clark was taking a huge risk. If this other Lois discovered his secret, she would have the power to destroy him. Unlike any bad guy he had met, this woman had that power over him. Should she choose to be, Lois could be more deadly to him than Kryptonite.

Chapter One

Meanwhile, in another dimension at another time with another Lois...

"What do you mean baby Clark is dead?" Lois screamed at H. G. Wells.

The man had turned the color of ash. "He's not breathing," Wells responded in monotone, clearly in shock.

"That can't be!" Lois argued with him, taking the no-longer-glowing green rocks off the baby. "Clark? Clark?" she called out to the universe. "He can't be dead." She picked up the unmoving infant and held him to her chest. "He just needs to be away from the Kryptonite and get some sunlight," she explained to the author. "He can't be dead," she repeated. "He can't be."

Tempus – whom it took longer than expected to knock out – was starting to rouse himself from unconsciousness. He blinked his eyes a few times then he focused on Lois and the baby.

"You *killed* him, you sick deviant of a man! Who kills a baby?!" Lois hollered at Tempus, tears running down her face. She kicked the man in the stomach and then the crotch.

"It worked?" Tempus replied in a grinning daze, between gasps for air. His face froze and he murmured, "I feel funny." Suddenly, Tempus seemed more a collection of atoms and less a solid mass. A breeze passed through Rocky Cove and Tempus disappeared.

Lois turned to Wells. "Where did he go?"

Wells gulped. "I believe he erased himself from history. Superman or one of his descendants must have saved the life of

Tempus's mother, father, grandparents, or great-grandparents at some point. With Mr. Kent gone, Superman is no longer around to save them; therefore, Tempus was not conceived."

She set the baby down on the ground in a patch of sunlight. "Come on, Clark. Survive." She started to give the baby CPR. "You don't need to have superpowers, Clark. I just want my best friend back. Please." She didn't know what she was doing. She knew CPR for adults, but this wasn't an adult. This was a baby, a roughly three-month old infant, from another planet. She had no idea if she was doing any good, but she couldn't give up. She couldn't. This was Clark.

Wells set a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Ms. Lane."

"Live! G*d damn it, Clark. Live!" She begged the still infant as she rubbed his chest. "Live. You aren't allowed to die, Clark." Sobs wracked through her. "I love you."

Some time passed as she wept over the body of baby Clark. Wells set his hand on her shoulder again. "We need to go, Ms. Lane. I should get you back home."

Lois pierced him with a cold, sharp glare. "We aren't leaving Clark," she told him, her voice hoarse.

"All right, Ms. Lane. What should we do with him?" the writer asked softly.

"We should put him back in his ship. The Kents need to find him," she announced, getting to her feet and picking up the infant.

H. G. Wells seemed perplexed. "What would be the point...?"

She ground her teeth together and spoke through pressed lips. "Better than Bureau 39."

He nodded and they walked back to Shuster's field in silence. They found the ship and Lois set the body inside. She rested her hand on the globe. This was the same sphere Clark had found at the warehouse – the globe that Jack had stolen from him and then sold to some collector. Clark had never told her what he had learned from it. He... never could now.

She picked up the sphere. The green continents of Earth melted into red continents. "Krypton," Lois whispered and tucked the globe next to baby Clark. Maybe it had healing powers. Maybe it would save Clark from this fate. Then she picked up the lid of the ship and fastened it shut.

"Shall we return to the time-machine, my dear? Or do you want to say a..." H.G. Wells's voice petered out.

"How are the Kents going to know he's here? Clark said his folks had found him at dusk. They had seen the meteor crash and went to investigate and found him, but if the ship has already landed...?" Lois looked around. "It's almost dusk now. We need to do something to draw their attention to baby Clark."

H. G. Wells appeared unable to think. It would have to be up to Lois. Clark *needed* her.

"Would you be able to fly the time-machine...?"

Before she had finished speaking, Wells started shaking his head. "It doesn't 'fly'," he explained.

"We'll have to start a fire, then," she said and looked around for the necessary things to make a fire. "The smoke should get the Kents' attention and make them stop."

Soon, she had a small fire started.

"Blow!" Lois ordered to Wells.

He did as he was told.

She put some wet leaves on the fire to make it smoke. Before long the fire started to spread.

"Great, Lane," she admonished herself. "Burn down Smallville Forest."

They heard someone coming, and Lois grabbed Wells's arm, dragging him behind a group of trees.

"Hurry, Martha. We need to get this fire out before it spreads further. Take your shovel and dump dirt before the fire," said the same young Jonathan she and Clark had met earlier that day.

Lois was thankful she and Wells were upwind of the smoke and fire, thankful that they wouldn't be seen. Not thankful for the extra dose of smoke in her lungs. She got as close to the ground as possible and covered her nose and mouth with her jacket, trying not to cough. She didn't want Jonathan and Martha to see them.

In what felt like a matter of minutes later, Jonathan – with a line of black soot across his cheek – came into Lois's view. "Who do you think would...?"

"Jonathan!" Martha interrupted. "What's that?"

"Gosh, Martha, it looks like something out of the Saturday matinee at the picture show," said Jonathan, gazing into the sky. "If it crashed... yeah, it could have started the fire... maybe. Do you think it's a Russian space probe or something?"

"Or something from another world?" Martha suggested. "These markings don't look like anything I've ever seen before on Earth."

"Well, I know an 'S' when I see one and that's definitely an... Martha! Don't!"

Lois winced at the description of Superman's 'S' crest. She listened as Martha opened the lid of baby Clark's space casket.

"Oh, Jonathan. It's a baby!" Martha gasped with joy.

Lois's heart leapt. *Clark's alive?* she thought. *The Kryptonite didn't kill him?*

"Martha," Jonathan said coolly. "Don't touch him, honey. I don't think he's..."

Tears crept down Lois's face. Baby Clark was still dead.

"Oh, Jonathan," she could hear Martha sob. "To die so young. What a waste of life. If only..."

"I know, Martha. Come on. Let's take him home and give the fellow a proper burial," Jonathan suggested softly.

"Yes. Let's," responded Martha, even more quietly.

Lois waited until the Kents had departed with baby Clark before she spoke to H. G. Wells again. "You've got to stop this. We've got to go back in time to before Clark died and stop this from happening."

"I'm so sorry, Ms. Lane," said Wells as they started back to Rocky Cove and the time-machine.

"You *should* be. You're the one who brought Tempus into the past in the first place," she snapped at him. "We've got to fix this."

Wells nodded. "Though I don't know how."

"By going into the past one hour, maybe two – to before Tempus killed Clark – and saving the baby Clark," Lois growled with more than a little annoyance.

"But as you have seen Tempus wiped himself out of the future by this act, Ms. Lane." H. G. Wells stopped and gazed at her with sadness. "If Tempus no longer exists in the future for me to bring into the past as soon as we leave 1966 – this current time stream – it will be like Clark never existed at all. You will not remember him and neither will I."

Lois's jaw hung open. "Are you saying that rescuing Clark is impossible?"

Wells pinched his lips together. "I don't like to use that word, Ms. Lane. Let's just say, it will be more difficult, much more difficult."

"If Tempus doesn't exist in the future to come into the past to kill baby Clark, how come Clark's not alive?" she asked. It felt like a migraine headache decided to move into her head to stay.

"It's hard to explain, Ms. Lane." Wells sighed and collected his thoughts for a moment. "Because Tempus changed the timeline by traveling to this point and erasing himself from the future, he has shattered time."

Lois's brow furrowed in confusion. "What does that mean? Shattered time?"

"Time is like this line..." Wells picked up a stick and drew a line in the dirt. "Because Tempus changed history so drastically,

at the point where Tempus, me, you, and Mr. Kent arrived in 1966 – or probably more precisely at the point in time where baby Clark died – our timeline split or shattered into two separate dimensions.”

Wells drew an off-shoot of his line in the dirt, so it looked more like a ‘Y’. “In this line...” He pointed to a spot on the original line past where the two lines intersected. “Baby Clark still grows up to become Superman. Time wasn’t changed by our visit into the past, at least, not to any large degree.” He sighed and moved the point of his stick to the new shorter, off-shoot line. “This is us. Tempus created this new dimension by killing Clark as a baby and erasing himself from the future. As soon as we get into the time-machine and return you to 1995, you will no longer remember Clark or me or this visit to 1966, because it didn’t happen. Because Tempus shattered the timeline we – even I – can only move forward in time from this point in time. By shattering time – Tempus has closed, or broken, the door for us to go further back into the past.”

“So you can only go back in time to the point when baby Clark died?” Lois tried to understand.

“Precisely.”

“So, how are we going to save Clark, precisely?” she asked.

Wells took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. “I don’t know.”

“But it’s not impossible?” Lois threw his word back into his face.

“No, not impossible,” he said slowly, unsurely. “If I can figure out a way to change this new dimension’s future, so that Tempus does exist, that will repair the door into the past for us to go back and rescue Clark as a baby.” Wells extended the off-shoot line so that it went past the intersection point and ran parallel to the original line.

Lois stared at the two lines in the dirt. “And how exactly do you plan on doing that without being able to remember that Clark existed in the first place?” she inquired tersely.

“It shall be difficult,” he replied.

She crossed her arms. “So, what you’re really saying is that saving Clark is not impossible, just more like improbable?”

He gave a barely noticeable nod in defeat.

“I’m sorry, I don’t accept that answer. I refuse to forget my best friend and leave him to die in the past – to cease to exist.” They arrived at Well’s time machine. Lois sat down and opened her briefcase. She pulled out a notebook and pen and started writing. She described who Clark Kent and Superman were and what had occurred that day briefly. She wrote her contact information at the Daily Planet down at the bottom of the page. Then she tore it out of the notebook and handed it to Wells. “What do you know about Tempus? His parents’ names? Where he came from? Anything?”

Wells shook his head softly.

“I refuse to believe that *you* of all people would bring someone from the future into the past without knowing *something* about them, doing some kind of background check.” Lois flipped to a clean page, before handing him the notebook and pen. “I want you to write down everything you know about Tempus, every little thing. You will then give that to me. I’ll research this man and his ancestors, any of them I can find, and I’ll use all the resources at my disposal at the Daily Planet to locate them. In the meantime, you will use your time machine and go into the future. You’ll invent something or find someone who can invent something to either fix our broken door or who will help us figure out which of Tempus’s ancestors was supposed to be rescued by Superman and now won’t. Or maybe you will figure out a way to jump to another dimension – our parallel dimension – and their future, where you can figure out this information. Together we will save Clark.”

Wells handed his sheet of information back to Lois.

She scribbled at the top. *Clark Kent is real. Research Tempus*

to rescue Clark from dying in the past. H. G. Wells will help you. Lois slipped this note into the side of her briefcase.

As long as she held on to this hope of saving Clark from this fate, she wouldn’t allow herself to dwell on the fact that he was dead. Until she gave up hope completely, Clark would still be alive. She was still mad at him for never telling her his big secret and for letting some time-traveling future Neanderthal do the job for him. *Duh!* There was no way in hell she was going to let Clark die before she had a chance to tell him off some more.

Lois stepped onto the time machine and sat down. She slapped the bar in front of her as H. G. Wells stood there in a daze. “Okay, take me home, Wells. Let’s get started. We need to rescue Clark. He’s counting on us.”

Lois lifted her head off her desk and rubbed her eyes. Had she fallen asleep? At work? Her cheek felt damp. *Great, I’ve drooled.*

It must have been that investigation she had been working on into the wee small hours of the morning had drained her of energy. Mayson Drake’s death. She stretched, yawned, and blinked her eyes.

That had been one strange dream. She shook her head. It had seemed so clear, so vivid, so real. She had been in love with a man, a handsome man with dark hair and glasses, and muscular physique. *Him*, she could remember, his name, not so much. She remembered how he had taken her into his arms and floated them over the fence.

Lois thought about that one detail again. That didn’t make any sense. People don’t float. She shook her head. Anyway, her dream man had disappeared, literally. And there had been a baby. Their baby? The baby had dark hair, so it could have been. But the baby died too.

Her chest ached at the thought of her baby dying. She wished she could remember the baby’s name. She had never wanted children before, never considered it a possibility. But this baby... she pined for this baby in a way she had never longed for anything in her life before.

It was a fog. Blurry, yet, so intense. She had never felt for any real man what she had felt for... what’s-his-name in her dream. Not even Lex. She pushed Lex out of her mind; she didn’t want to think about him.

Lois remembered that they had yelled at each other – her and the man with the glasses. No, not yelled, argued. She had still loved him, but she had been mad. He had done something to make her mad – lied to her, most likely. That was what most men she met did, with the exception of Lex. Lex had always been honest with her, which was why Lois Lane hardly ever dated anymore. Which was why Mayson’s death had affected her so strongly. She would miss her one female friend, her best friend. She sighed.

If only she could meet a man who could sweep her off her feet like her dream man. Literally. Oh, to have a man like that in her life. She would turn to pudding in his arms. She scoffed at her foolishness. Men like that just didn’t exist, at least not in this universe. Dan Scardino was interested in her, but she wasn’t sure about him. He seemed more Mayson’s type. Lois just didn’t feel for him what she had felt for the man in her dream.

“Lois!” Jimmy ran up to her desk. “There you are. Eight minutes to spare. Perry’s birthday. Remember?”

She winced. She *had* forgotten. Again.

Jimmy pulled out a wrapped birthday gift from behind his back and handed it to her. “Love me?”

Lois rolled her eyes. “What did I get him?” she asked and then answered her own question, “Checked suspenders?”

“Yeah! How did you know?”

She wondered how she knew too.

Didn’t you get him checked suspenders last year? a man’s

seductive, somewhat hesitant, voice asked inside her head.

“Didn’t I get him checked suspenders last year?” she asked her partner.

“Gift horse, mouth,” Jimmy mumbled, scratching a nasty rash on his arm and then raising his voice. “Well, he liked them, didn’t he?” He turned and indicated their boss, standing across the bullpen and yelling at someone. It looked like Cat Grant. Oooh. That would make her day. Perry White was wearing said checked suspenders.

Lois felt like rolling her eyes again. *Terrific.*

“Do you have a card?” Jimmy asked.

“Card? Card?” Lois started patting down her pockets. She had a card, didn’t she? That seemed familiar. She stuck her hand into the side pocket of her briefcase and pulled out said card.

“Who has always got your back, Lois?” Jimmy winked at her as he scratched his arm again.

“You’re the best, Jimbo! Thanks.” She smiled appreciatively and then took a closer look at the red mark on his arm. “Wow, that must be some itch.”

He shrugged and tugged down his sleeve. “Oh, this. I get it every year around this time since I was a kid.” Jimmy was still a kid, a junior underling, but he was *her* junior peon, *her* personal photographer. No other staff writer had their own personal assistant or photographer, and she had both in one man. Perry loved her and, better yet, he knew Lois’s worth. Her boss knew who consistently brought in his front-page headlines.

“It looks painful. Isn’t there some kind of cream you can put on it?” she asked him.

“I’ve tried everything. My doc says not to worry about it though. It’ll go away.” Jimmy nodded and returned to his desk.

Lois noticed another piece of notebook paper that had fallen out of her briefcase pocket when she had retrieved the card.

She picked it up and looked at it. Scribbled across the top of the paper she had written: “*Clark Kent is real. Research Tempus to rescue Clark from dying in the past. H. G. Wells will help you.*”

Lois didn’t remember writing the note. She had no idea who Clark Kent was nor who, or what, Tempus was. H. G. Wells? The author? The *very* dead author? Please! *What kind of crap was this, Lane? Notes for a novel?*

Did she come up with this crazy story idea while out drinking the night before? No, she had been working on that Resurrection drug story with Scardino. She had turned it in this morning before passing out on her desk. Anyway, she knew better than to drink so much that she couldn’t remember. It hadn’t done any good for her mother, so how could it do her life any good?

The rest of the note was in someone else’s handwriting and was a list of some sort. She could hardly read the handwriting at all. “Hmmm. That’s strange.” She shrugged and tossed the paper haphazardly onto her desk. She grabbed the gift and yelled, “Happy Birthday, Chief!” as she crossed the newsroom towards her boss.

Chapter Two

Lois floated up and over the city in the arms of this handsome stranger, a handsome stranger who ate a bomb, saving the space shuttle Prometheus. Then he lifted her and the colonists up and took the whole spaceship to the space station. He flew. He was strong. He was modest. That bomb didn’t faze him.

She borrowed a space suit from the station and in his arms he flew her back to Earth. He hadn’t worn anything – other than his blue suit, his uniform. A bright blue skin-tight suit with cherry red shorts, which brought her attention to his muscular body, and the “S” crest on his chest. Too bad that big red cape covered his derrière.

She sighed, wishing she could cuddle up to him and kiss him. Oh, but he was above such petty, human drivel – he was too important, too perfect to waste time on romantic notions like that.

He was amazing. He was bigger, better, and braver than any man she had ever met. He was her own personal superhero. He embodied the word ‘super’. Yes, that must be his name: Superman.

“I’ll be around,” he called to her.

He better be! He was hers!

Those men had burst into the Daily Planet and put her – Lois Lane, defender of the people, Constitutionally-protected fourth estate – through the wringer! Hooked her to a lie detector. Please! Like she knew anything about the man to begin with. Superman. An alien? Well, if something looks like a duck, walks like a duck, talks like a duck, the chances are pretty good it is a duck. And Superman looked like no green-skinned alien, but – then, again – no man on Earth could be so perfect.

Especially not what’s-his-name, her clumsy, mud-brown eyed, junk-food eating, example of a Neanderthal “partner” – the way he had rushed into the Messenger warehouse to ‘save her’. Give her a break! She rolled her eyes. How could Perry assign her – Lois Lane, three-time Kerth award winner – a partner!?!

Lois had never believed in aliens. That was ridiculous. Small, silver-eyed, telepathic green fellows. Please! She lived in reality, not in fantasy-land. But Superman, she moaned. He could make her believe in anything. Anyway, he was Super-MAN, not SuperAlien.

She and Mr. Green Jeans were up in an airplane. Those psycho-military-rogue-government types were using them for bait. They wanted to kill Superman! Like Superman would hone in on her? Please! She could never be so lucky. They were going to throw her from the plane? She needed to distract them. Hack-from-Nowheresville was crushing on her. She could use that to her advantage.

“I want to kiss Clark good-bye,” Lois told them. She took her “partner’s” head in her hands and pressed an impressive kiss onto his mouth. He fell for the kiss, hook, line, and sinker. She could say one thing about Smallville, he sure could kiss. “Take the one on the right,” she whispered into his ear after the kiss.

Lois was falling, falling, falling. “Superman! Superman! Superman! Superman!” Oh, this was ridiculous. She was going to be a splotch on the ground. Henderson wouldn’t find one bone intact with which to identify her. “Superman! Superman! Superman! Help!”

Suddenly, he was there, and she was there in his arms. He heard her. He rescued her. He was real. It wasn’t a one-time meeting. He was hers! She was definitely his.

“You do read minds,” she murmured, breathless just being in his arms. Okay, and also breathless from having been pushed out of an airplane at twenty-thousand feet without a parachute and screaming her lungs out the last thirty seconds, but she would never admit that to anyone.

“Not really. But I do have pretty good hearing,” Superman replied with a smile.

Was he teasing her? Did he have a sense of humor? Did he find her suggestion ludicrous? Thank God he couldn’t read her mind. The things she had been thinking about him since he had first taken her into his arms... Oh, to actually do some of those things with him. She wondered if he was a man. Did he have all the parts of a man? If so, would he float if they made love? Would he move so fast...? Stop, thinking about these things, Lois! You’re a grown woman, for Pete’s sake. You’re Lois Lane, not Cat Grant. You’ll never make love with Superman.

Superman set her down on the roof of the Daily Planet. There was a missile headed straight for them. Bureau 39, Jason Trask, shot a missile at Superman! How dare he?! Superman rushed up to intercept it. The bomb exploded, and when the smoke cleared, Superman was gone. Missing. Disappeared. Forever.

“No!” Lois screamed, bolting straight up in bed. She was breathing so hard, she was almost panting, gulping for air. It had

just been a dream, a fantasy, a nightmare. Her skin still tingled from where Superman had held her. He was unlike any man she had ever encountered. “Huh.”

She had never thought of herself as the school-girl fantasy type. Romantic, definitely. But superhero fantasy? *Crazy, Lane. Just plain crazy.* She didn’t need a man to rescue her.

Lois fluffed her pillow, lay her head back down, and closed her eyes.

Perry came out of his office and even though Lois was waiting on hold, she flagged him down. “Hey, Chief, you ever hear of a covert government agency called ‘Bureau 39’?” she asked him.

With curiosity, he stepped closer to her desk. “You got something on this ‘Bureau whatsit’?”

“Thirty-nine.” Lois shook her head. “I heard about it somewhere. Just wondered if it really existed.”

“What does it deal with?” he asked her.

She looked down and shifted her pencil around on her desk. “Aliens,” she mumbled.

Her boss’s eyes bugged, then he spotted someone coming down the ramp towards Lois’s desk. “Jimmy!” Perry yelled and the photographer jumped. “My office. Pronto!”

Lois was thankful for the interruption. She couldn’t believe that she told Perry about something from her dream. What was wrong with her?

Jimmy asked her with his eyes if she knew what was up. She shrugged her reply.

She watched the office, but the door was shut and she couldn’t hear her boss shouting. Usually Perry only shut his door when he screamed at his staff.

A package arrived. Curious and tired of bad music, she hung up her phone. She cut through the tape at the bottom of the box and lifted off the lid. Inside was the most hideous mobile/statue thingy with pictures of a bunch of floating eyes and an upside-down mouth. Lois raised a brow. What the hell? She picked up the attached card.

Anyone can send flowers, Dan.

She pressed her lips together. Well, that had been a waste of money. Hopefully, he hadn’t paid much for it.

Lois was about to drop it in the trash when said gift-giver appeared next to her desk.

“Hi. I see you got it.”

She smiled politely at Dan and placed the ‘thing’ on her shelf instead. She would get rid of it once he was gone. “Oh... uh, yeah... Thanks. You shouldn’t have.” She hoped he never did again.

“I thought this would be something you could really appreciate,” he replied.

How? She wondered and moved on. “Well... So...”

“So, if you remember, a while back we talked about us maybe going out,” Dan said with ample amounts of Scardino charm.

Lois remembered him wanting to go out with her and her not being sure. “Dan, I’m flattered, I really am. It’s just... I’ve been seeing Clark...”

“Who?” Dan exclaimed.

“Huh?” Lois had no idea why she had said that. *Clark?* Who was that? Then she remembered. He was the man from her dreams. No, not the man *of* her dreams. That would be Superman. Clark was that hick reporter from Smallville of all places. The one she had kissed on the plane. Why would she ever consider dating him? True, he had been one hell of a kisser, but he was a figment of her imagination. Why would she tell Scardino she was dating him?

Her expression must have been muddled because Dan appeared concerned. “You okay, Lois?”

“Yeah, fine.” She shook her head and tried to concentrate on Dan. “Let me think about it.”

“Okay,” he replied hesitantly.

Great. The one decent guy to ask her out since Lex... Actually, Dan was the *only* guy who had asked her out since Lex had... It seemed like men were intimidated to follow in the footsteps of the third richest man in the world... since Lex had died in her arms.

Lois didn’t want to think about that, about Lex dying, about what might have been, about his last words being that he loved her.

And here she was already scaring Dan off.

Jimmy and Perry emerged from the Chief’s office. *Thank God! A distraction.* Then she felt a pang of remorse, because her photographer looked as if someone had run over his dog.

“Lois,” her boss said and then noticed Dan. “Agent Scardino.” Then Perry dismissed the DEA Agent out of hand.

“Jimmy, what’s the matter?” Lois asked. Her friend did seem a bit paler than normal.

“My doctor’s been murdered,” Jimmy told her.

“Alan Golden. They found his body this morning,” explained Perry.

“He just called me yesterday. Left me a message on my machine. I was gonna call him back today...” Jimmy’s voice faded.

“Lois,” Perry hinted with just her name.

“I’ll look into it,” Lois reassured him, grabbing her bag.

“Chief, I want to go with her,” Jimmy insisted.

“Now, Jimmy...” Perry resisted.

“Please, Chief, I’ve known Dr. Golden my whole life.”

His boss patted Jimmy on the shoulder. “All right, son. Go ahead.”

“Thank you.”

“Sorry to hear about your friend,” Scardino said to Jimmy before turning back to Lois. “They say that good things come to those who wait. I’ve got time.”

She smiled at him. Good, she hadn’t scared him off completely. What was the matter with her? Creating fake boyfriends? “Come on, Jimmy.”

The Chief stood at Lois’s desk with Jimmy, Lois, and Sarah – the latter being another life-long patient of Dr. Golden.

Lois and Jimmy had stopped Sarah from being kidnapped when they went to interview her. Sarah was twenty-two, just like Jimmy, born at Fort Truman, just like Jimmy, and had a rash on her arm that reoccurred every year, just like Jimmy. Something was certainly going on. The other patient, G.E. Mallow, who Dr. Golden had been trying to reach, had disappeared, according to Detective Wolfe.

“I don’t think it’s safe for you to go home, either of you, until we know what’s going on,” Perry was saying. “Lois, why doesn’t Sarah stay with you until the police are able to catch that blond guy Jimmy chased off?”

Lois felt uncomfortable. There was nothing worse than invasion of her privacy, especially by a psych major. She wanted to sneer at the suggestion, but everyone’s eyes were on her. “Can’t MPD find her a safe house?” she suggested, hating that it sounded like a whine.

“And lose the story, never. Jimmy, you’re staying with Alice and me.” This was not an invitation but an order.

“Thanks, Chief.” There really wasn’t any other response acceptable.

They all looked at Lois again. *Fine!* “Sarah, you can stay with me.”

“Thanks,” Sarah murmured gratefully.

“As long as you don’t analyze me,” Lois continued through pressed lips.

Sarah raised a brow and leaned forward towards Lois. “Just how long have you had this fear of self-discovery, Lois?”

Lois stared at the young woman. *She couldn't be serious. Oh, God! She is serious.* The reporter glanced at her boss with a loss for words.

Perry and Jimmy exchanged a look. Then Lois watched as the Chief faded away with a gesture that read, “I'm not touching that one”.

Thanks, Perry.

“You know, he didn't seem that special to me. Except for the flying and the uniform, he could be any ordinary guy,” said Clark from behind her as she was trying to get the sketch artist to get Superman's look just right.

“Ordinary? Give me a break,” Lois retorted before leaning in to examine the drawing closer. “What we've got here is an example of human evolution, before and after. Clark is the before. Superman is the after.” She glanced over her shoulder at Clark and his crooked glasses, his tie over his shoulder, his jacket slipping off his shoulder as he munched on a cake donut, with his hair a mess. “Make that the way, way after.”

Perry was pacing around the packed conference room of the Daily Planet. “Last night our publisher called me into his office and asked me one question. The question was: ‘How come the Daily Planet hadn't nailed down the Superman story since it literally dropped in our laps?’ Now, I took this as a personal criticism and I assured him that each, and every one, of my staff would chip in. Would not rest until Superman was ours. Now, is that clear?”

“No!” Lois stammered. “You can't be serious. I'm the one Superman flew with. I wrote the original piece. I found him.”

“Actually, he found you...” Clark corrected her.

“Thank. You. Kent,” she replied tersely. “Perry, this isn't fair. I should have the exclusive on the follow-up. Those are the rules.”

“The rules are off,” Perry rebutted her. “This is too big.”

“But he's mine!” Lois demanded, almost whining as she stood up. Then she realized everyone in the office was looking at her and had interpreted her words as she had said them, not as she had meant them to mean. “Mine... as in my story. Story, mine.”

She could hear Clark chuckling behind her. Wonderful. Just what she needed. Smallville thinking he was better than she was, that she was a joke as far as Superman was concerned.

“From now on Superman is fair game. Every reporter for himself...” Perry said, and then turned to Lois. “Or herself.”

Lois turned around and sat down on the table. “I'll find him,” she said more to herself than to Clark, who was sitting next to her.

“How? He could be anywhere. Mars. The north pole.”

“I'll find him,” Lois assured her colleague.

“What if he doesn't want to be found?” Clark asked her.

“What are you talking about? Why wouldn't he want to be found?” Just like some hack reporter to come up with a crazy idea like that.

“What if all this frenzy isn't what this guy expected? Maybe he's gun-shy,” Clark suggested.

“That's ridiculous. He has no reason to hide. Especially from me,” Lois responded. Superman couldn't possibly think that she would ever hurt him? Expose him? Would he? Not her? She would never do that to him. Not even – and she couldn't believe these words even passed through her mind – not even for a Pulitzer.

Cat Grant walked up from where she had obviously been eavesdropping on their conversation. Just like a gossip columnist. “Mmmm-huh. Wait a minute. I get it. You and Superman joined the ol' Zero Gravity Club up on the space

station, didn't you?” Cat laughed as if even the thought of this was preposterous.

“Excuse me?” Lois told her through pressed lips.

“Oooh. It's okay. Don't worry. Your secret's safe,” reassured Cat. “No one would believe it anyway.”

Lois turned away from the skank and saw that Clark was laughing at her. She couldn't believe it. Was that what Clark thought of her?

Lois opened her eyes.

Another dream. Another Clark dream. Another Clark dream about Superman. What was it about this man her subconscious could not let go of?

Lois fluffed her pillow and shifted her position.

Sometimes she dreamed of Superman. Sometimes she dreamed of this fictitious partner Clark. Sometimes she dreamed of them in the same dream, but never at the same time.

Some horrible dreams were just regular dreams with neither man.

It was strange that she never dreamed of Dan Scardino. Of course, with all these men in her dreams, she should probably keep the real ones real.

Lois closed her eyes. Maybe this time she would tune in to Superman and just Superman. There was nothing like being humiliated in one's dreams, well, better than in reality. Superman would never humiliate her. She closed her eyes again and pictured that sexy man in blue, hoping her subconscious would take a hint.

Lois heard that there was a bomb threat. She jumped into a Metro cab and rushed down to the scene. She had just gotten there, pushed through the crowds and had approached the old City of Metropolis Post Office when the bomb exploded. She was knocked to the ground.

No! Had Superman just gone in there? She thought he had. Surely a man who could swallow a bomb could survive. Couldn't he? But a building falling on him? Her head hurt, but as usual, she pushed past the pain and focused on the story.

Where was Superman?

As the smoke cleared, Superman stepped out the door. He seemed a little fazed, more surprised than anything, but certainly uninjured. Only his uniform – his cape slightly tattered around the hem and covered with dust – showed any evidence that he had been in the building when it had exploded.

“You're hurt,” he said to her, touching her forehead with a bandage. He had just been blown up in a building, and he only thought of her safety. She would never find anyone more super than that.

There was Clark, talking to the MPD bomb squad. When had Clark arrived? Where did Superman disappear off to? No, wait, it had been Clark who had been concerned about her head. Why... how had she confused the two men?

Someone had blown up Superman on purpose?

“That poor man,” she murmured.

“What man?” replied the ever-clueless farm boy.

“Superman. He comes here to help us... Can you imagine how he must he feel?”

“I think so,” said Clark.

Actually, that was a strange thing for Clark to say. Had he been attacked while trying to help someone? Did he really know what it was like to walk Superman's boots or was he just conjecturing – supposing – making conversation?

Had Lois been ‘attacking’ Clark since he arrived at the Daily Planet? Was that what he had meant? He had only been trying to help Lois, and she had done nothing but put him down, insult him, and try to hurt him – not physically, of course, but emotionally, mentally, or self-confidently. Was that even a word? Self-confidently? She shrugged.

Why had she been doing that to Clark? Maybe she should

stop? She considered that.

If Clark couldn't handle her ribbing, he might as well find out sooner rather than later that he wasn't ready for the big leagues. She would stop when he gave up or when he proved to her that he belonged. So far, he had done neither.

"You know I can tell a lot about you from the way you organize your kitchen," Sarah called from where she was preparing a bowl of cereal in Lois's kitchen. "I'm taking this course in applied psychology..."

Lois, her lips pressed together as she held on to the two big curlers in her hair, rushed into her kitchen to refill her coffee mug. "Sarah, I warned you not to analyze me."

"Oh, right," replied Sarah uncomfortably as Lois left the room again. "That's exactly what I would have said about you from the way you organize your kitchen," Lois's houseguest called after her.

The reporter stopped long enough to unroll her curlers and shoot a nasty look at the young woman. The doorbell rang, and Sarah volunteered to answer it. Lois just shook her head and continued back into her bedroom.

"Hi, is Lois home?" Lois heard a familiar male voice ask Sarah.

"Maybe. Can I tell her who's here?" responded Sarah.

"Yeah, I'm a friend," said Dan.

Crap! She needed to get out there and intervene but only half of her hair was styled and she didn't yet have her skirt on. Lois hurried to finish getting dressed as she continued to listen in on Sarah and Dan's conversation.

"A friend? A boyfriend? A friend friend. Or *just* a friend?" Sarah grilled him.

No, no, no! Sarah wasn't allowed to chase away the only man who had asked her on a date in the past year. Lois hopped out of her room, putting on her shoes.

"Gee, if I had known that there was going to be a test, I would have studied," Dan gave back to her houseguest as much as she was giving to him.

Sarah laughed.

"Who *are* you?" Dan asked as Lois rushed to the door.

Lois nudged Sarah away, explaining, "She's a friend."

"Just a friend," Sarah clarified before Lois could send her away with a 'leave us alone' look.

"What are you doing here?" Lois asked Dan.

Dan walked past Lois and into her apartment without invitation, sitting down on her sofa. "You're working on that murder of that Dr. Golden, right?"

"Ah... well..." Lois stammered at his rudeness, suddenly wary about having wanted him to drop by unannounced, and exchanged a perplexed expression with Sarah, who appeared concerned. Was Dan there in an official capacity?

"Well, I've been assigned to investigate a shipment of a drug called Tysian from Metropolis General," continued Dan.

"Yeah... So?" Lois inquired, crossing her arms. *Good for him. Did this mean he's staying a while longer in Metropolis? Or what? Why is he telling me this? What did it have to do with the price of eggs? Or, more importantly, her story?*

"So, I thought you might be interested to know that Tysian is a highly regulated drug that was ordered by Dr. Golden. Only — it turns out — that his signature was forged on the order form," Dan finished.

A-ha! Their investigations were crossing. *Again.*

"Why is Tysian so heavily regulated?" she asked.

"Well, nothing good," Dan explained. "Too much of the stuff can lead to an overload in the brain synapses, causing death."

Yep, not good. Why would Jimmy and Sarah's doctor, or someone impersonating their doctor, order Tysian? She wondered what the standard use for the stuff was and why was Dan

Scardino telling her about it. Had Dan come to her apartment wanting for them to work together again? Like they had with Resurrection? Lois thought that was a big no-no for government agents? Of course, Dan was known for breaking rules. Or was he just here to ask her on a date? And this Tysian lead was just a way to soften her up? Before Lois could ask him any of these questions, her phone rang. She shut the door and hurried to answer it.

It was Jimmy, calling from the office.

"Jimmy! What's up?" she asked him.

"I've dug up some information on Mallow," Jimmy replied.

"So what *are* you doing here?" Sarah asked Dan. "Really?"

At her intense expression, Dan stood up. "I was just giving Lois some information about her case."

Dan came over to Lois on the phone. She asked Jimmy to hold and looked at Dan expectantly.

They stood there for a moment just looking at each other. Did Lois really want him to ask her out? Did she really want to accept? *What would be the worst that could happen? No, don't think that! What could be the best that could happen? No, don't think that either.* She should never raise her expectations.

"You know what you two are doing is classic," interrupted Sarah between mouthfuls of cereal, indicating the two of them with her spoon. "You're both thinking the exact same thoughts, but you're hoping that the other person is going to talk first."

Lois shot her houseguest a glare.

"Um... Lois, there was something else I wanted to discuss with you..." Dan took another glance at Sarah.

"I... uh... left something in the bathroom," Sarah said, pointing her thumb over her shoulder as she finally realized her presence was hurting more than helping. "Excuse me."

With a sigh, Dan glanced at the phone on Lois's shoulder. "I'll catch you later," he told Lois.

She felt sad at his departure; it had been nice to have a man look at her that way again, like her input was important. That was just how Clark looked at her. She shook this thought out of her head.

"So, what did you find out about Mallow?" Lois asked Jimmy on the phone, with a wave at Dan as the DEA Agent shut the door.

As Lois drove to meet Perry's old navy buddy, Sailin' Whalen, her mind drifted back to her dreams from that morning.

Lois sat at her desk when her sister waltzed in wearing her — Lois's — grey suit.

Lucy started out by giving Lois a hard time. "Who called me last night, in tears, because she had stolen a story from Clark Kent?"

"I did not steal Kent's story," Lois defended herself.

"You stole it," repeated her sister. Lois could never pull a fast one on Lucy.

"I competed for it. And I won!" Lois retorted, putting her own spin on the facts.

Lucy didn't buy it.

"I stole it!" Lois confessed, mortified by her behavior. "I have never stolen a story before in my life. How could I do that? It's him! It's Superman!" Yes, she would let the blame fall where it belonged. It wasn't her fault. "I mean, ever since he held me in his arms... there's something between us, Lucy. I know it. There's this connection."

"You should be ashamed of yourself," Lucy told her.

"I am ashamed of myself. I'm ashamed of myself."

"And you'll never do it again?" Lucy coaxed her.

"I won't. Never again," Lois promised.

"And you'll apologize to Clark Kent?"

"Not in this millennium," Lois guaranteed her.

What was it about that Clark fellow that got under her skin?

Why would she break all her steadfast rules to steal his story, admit it to her sister, but not to the man himself? She was a cut-throat journalist, but she had never been *that* cut-throat. Had she?

Even her dream self knew she was too obsessed with Superman. Lois scoffed at this. Two versions of herself, and both were enthralled with a hot man in blue tights and a cape – she sighed – a man who could literally sweep her off her feet. This was bad. Really. Really. Bad.

Chapter Three

After Lois's meeting with Sainin' Whalen, she returned to the Daily Planet where she bumped into Jimmy and Sarah in the lobby, returning from a quick lunch. Lois had just finished explaining to them what the admiral had heard about Dr. Golden's 'mind control' studies as they arrived back to the bullpen.

"Jimmy! Where's that photo sheet you promised me a half hour ago?" Perry barked from behind them, causing the young photographer to jump.

"I'm on it, Chief!" Jimmy replied and then continued under his breath. "Who needs drugs to control people, when you can use fear?"

Sarah chuckled and Jimmy jogged off.

"Lois, you got three calls while you were out. All of them from someone named Scardino," Joe, another researcher, said, handing over the messages.

"Three calls?" Sarah asked, taking the messages out of Lois's hand. "Can we say a little persistent?"

"Maybe it's something important," Lois told her between pressed lips.

"Oh, let's see..." Sarah said, flipping through the messages. "What about dinner tonight? Dinner tomorrow? Lunch?"

Lois reached out for her messages, and Sarah handed them to her.

"That's *really* important." Sarah raised a brow. "So, what's going on between you and Dan?"

"Nothing that's any of your business," Lois retorted.

Sarah set down her books, pulled up a chair to Lois's desk, and sat down, waiting expectantly for Lois to explain. Lois looked at Sarah. Her gut instinct was to give the young woman the brush-off, but then Lois decided she needed to discuss her feelings with someone. At times, Sarah's pushiness reminded Lois of her sister Lucy. Lois sat down and leaned towards Sarah, lowering her voice.

"We met a couple of weeks ago. Our paths crossed on an investigation into the death of a friend of mine, Mayson Drake, an Assistant D.A. who..." Lois swallowed. It was still difficult speaking of Mayson. "Who I was supposed to meet for a deposition. I had been running late. Anyway, I saw her car explode. She had been inside."

Sarah patted her hand. "I'm so sorry. That must have been difficult for you."

"It was. It still is. Mayson was my best friend in Metropolis, my only real friend it seemed. After I had started dating Lex Luthor..." Her eyes clouded. Why had she brought up Lex Luthor?

"You dated Lex Luthor?" Sarah gasped. It seemed Lex's name still had weight in this town a year after his death.

"Lex and I had been on a date, when we got delayed here... in the office... by terrorists. They shot him. He died in my arms." A tear ran down Lois's cheek, and she wiped it away. "Just after he told me he loved me."

"Did you love him?" Sarah asked.

"Yes," Lois said automatically, but that wasn't really the truth. "No." That answer didn't seem right either though. "I don't know. No, not really, but our relationship was still new. It could have developed into love, I guess. I don't know. He was

Metropolis's largest philanthropist. He was powerful and well-connected. Who knows what it might have been or if there would have been more?" Lois shrugged. She liked talking about Lex less than Mayson.

Sarah stared at her for a moment. "If he had been broke and just a regular guy with no connections, what would you have thought of him?"

Lois's eyes widened. How dare Sarah ask her that? Did she assume that Lois had just dated Lex for his money and for the doors he could open for her? Had she? What had Lois known about the man himself? Really? Was she that shallow?

Sarah knocked the question out of the air with a flick of her wrist. "That doesn't have anything to do with Dan, or... does it?"

"No, of course not. Well, except that Dan is the first man who has asked me out since Lex died," Lois told her.

"Are you ready to be back out there?" Sarah inquired. "Is that why you're hesitating?"

Was she? Lois thought about that. Did her reluctance to say 'yes' to Dan have anything to do with Lex? "No. I don't think so."

"What about Mayson? Is it that being with Dan reminds you of the death of your friend?" Sarah pushed buttons that Lois didn't know had been installed.

She smiled at the young woman. "You'd make a great reporter."

"No, thank you. I'd rather stick with literal minefields in a person's psyche than figurative ones on the streets of Metropolis," Sarah told her with a wink. "Now, what's with the avoidance, Lois?"

"I don't know..." Lois looked down, shaking her head. She wanted to say 'yes' to Dan's invitations to dinner, but in her heart... her heart yearned for Superman. Her eyes bugged. *Superman?* She glanced up at Sarah who was still examining her. "I've been having some dreams about this other man and, well, Dan just pales in comparison."

"Dreams?" Sarah raised a brow with concerned interest. "Tell me about this dream man."

Lois gazed upwards before closing her eyes and sighing. "He's perfect. He's a..."

"Excuse me, Ms. Lane," Joe said, coming up to her desk and handing her a fax. "This just came through."

The reporter nodded her thanks as she took the paper. She glanced at Sarah. "Back to work."

Sarah pointed to her, standing up. "We're going to finish this later, Lois." Then she winked again. "At our next session."

Lois rolled her eyes, but she had to admit she did feel better since talking to the psych major. She couldn't believe that she was going to tell the girl about Superman. No, she would never tell anyone about him.

She looked down at the fax. It was about Katherine Wilder, the daughter of Alan Golden's old army partner at Fort Truman. She went to Perry's office, knocking on the open door. "Am I interrupting?" she asked.

"Ah... No. No, no, no," replied the Chief, glancing up from the photo sheet that Jimmy had just handed him.

"The Medical Association came through on Dr. Katherine Wilder," she told the two men. She turned the fax so that they both could see the woman's picture at the top. "Look familiar? We saw her when we were dodging the claws of Nurse Berke." Lois took another glance down at the paper, reading. "She's on the staff at Metropolis General."

"Hhhmm. That's where Dr. Golden worked," said Perry.

"Coincidence?" asked Lois, doubting it. There were rarely real coincidences in her investigations.

Suddenly, gunfire burst through the windows of Perry White's office; Lois, Perry, and Jimmy dropped to the floor. Perry dove under his desk. Lois curled up into a ball. Jimmy grabbed

his camera and slithered out of the door on his stomach.

Several minutes passed as the gunfire continued. Lois heard the approach of police sirens and crawled to the far side of Perry's desk away from the rain of bullets. When the barrage finally stopped, she did a crouching duck-walk over to the windows. What was going on?

She heard someone shout, "He's collapsed!"

Hesitantly, Lois peered over the window sill to see if it was over. She saw Jimmy taking photos of a young man with a gun. The shooter was lying still on the street.

A policeman cautiously approached the gunman and felt his throat. "He's dead!" he called to his partner with a surprised tone to his voice.

"But we didn't even have a chance to open fire," his partner answered.

The first officer shrugged. "He doesn't have a bullet wound."

Jimmy glanced up at Lois, waved to get her attention. When he was sure he had it, he pointed at the gunman and then he pointed at his own arm.

A chill crept down her spine.

Perry, standing next to her, spoke the words stuck in her throat. "The gunman's got a rash like Jimmy and Sarah. Could this be the missing G.E. Mallow? And had he been brainwashed?"

Lois glanced down at the fax still in her hand. It looked like she would be having a conversation with Dr. Wilder.

Lois sat alone in her car as she thought about her interview with Katherine Wilder. Had the woman been threatening her when she told Lois that bad habits could be hazardous to her health? It seemed like it. Plus, the good doctor seemed to be lying about her relationship with the bondsman who posted the bail on the blond man Detective Wolfe had picked up for trying to kidnap Sarah.

Lois tapped her fingernails on the steering wheel of her Jeep Cherokee. It was nights like this when she thought it might be nice to have a partner, or at least someone to talk with, instead of sitting there by herself. She had Jimmy, as much as he was, but Lois had suggested that he spend the night in, especially since someone was out to turn him into a brainwashed assassin.

Plus, Jimmy seemed genuinely interested in Sarah. Good for him. He deserved someone. She sighed. So did she.

As she waited to follow Dr. Wilder to wherever she might go that night, Lois thought more of Clark, the partner in her dreams.

"So, where do we start?" Clark asked Lois as he gathered up his stuff from the conference room table.

Lois raised a brow. *We?* The rookie would need her help on a story as big as Superman, but after laughing at her, he certainly wasn't going to get it. "We?" she chuckled. "There is no *we*."

Then Clark said the most ridiculous thing Lois had ever heard. "How do you know I don't have the inside track on finding Superman?" Please. As if!

But then not a couple of hours later, Lois overheard Clark on the telephone. "Really? He's there now? ... Great! ... Give me the address again ... 344 Clinton. Tell him I'll be right over. Don't let him leave."

Lois wasn't going to let him get the edge on her story. She burst through the doors of 344 Clinton Street. There stood Clark, talking to some portly — and that was being kind — fellow in a place that looked like it hadn't seen a tenant in years. A place abandoned mid-remodeling it appeared.

"Lois!" Clark gasped in shock.

"Where is he?" she demanded to her co-worker.

"Who?" he asked her in confusion.

Right, Smallville. Who else?

"Where am I?" She changed her question as the realization that Clark hadn't been coming to meet Superman dawned on her.

"My new apartment," Clark retorted to her humiliation.

Lois pressed her lips together. Maybe she had been right about partners all along: best to keep to herself, instead of trying to rely on others.

Of course, according to her dreams, she had been the one trying to steal Clark's story. It was a line she had never crossed. That was a line she *would* never cross. But then again, she had never come up against a story — or a man — like Superman.

Lois limped into the bullpen, a large black garbage bag and the heel of one of her shoes in her hands. Mud was smeared across what was left of her shoes, her calves, her skirt, her jacket, her neck and her forehead. She had bug bites covering her arms, legs, and chest. She looked like she had been lost for hours at the Metropolis Sewage Reclamation Facility, because she had been lost for hours at the Metropolis Sewage Reclamation Facility.

She had been sent on a wild goose chase. And what had she gotten out of it? A Godzilla doll dressed up in red shorts with a gold "S" painted on its chest. And what had Kent gotten with her out of the way? A Superman story. The Superman story. Her Superman story. The story that he was in Metropolis to stay.

She got up from her desk and walked over to Clark's. Well, more like limped with her missing high heel. Ever the gentleman, he stood up as she approached.

"You set me up?" she grilled him, knowing the truth, but needing to hear him admit it.

"Yes, I did," he confessed. Well, this was more than he had done when she had thrown the map in his face when she had limped in that morning.

"Congratulations, Clark. You win," she said, offering her hand to him. He had earned her respect by not fearing her and by not letting her steamroll right over him. She had promised herself to treat him as an equal once he had done that, though she had never thought he would. He sure had earned his stripes.

Clark reluctantly shook her hand. He looked like he felt bad for what had happened to her. Good! He should feel bad. Maybe he would be sure never to treat her that way again.

"I didn't win," he told her.

"You got the story, and you took me down a peg in the process. I guess I deserve that. You worked hard, and you earned your success." These words were hard for her to say, but after the way she had treated him, stealing his story, she knew she owed him the truth. And maybe this whole episode meant he would stop acting so moony-eyed around her. They were adults, and the Daily Planet wasn't high school.

"Thank you, Lois. That means a lot to me," he said.

"Well, I hope so," she replied smugly. "Cherish this moment because, Clark, you'll never experience this again."

"Hey, Lois," Clark called out to her while she walked back to her desk. "What have *we* got going on tomorrow?"

"Now, there you are using that word again, Clark. There is *you*. There is *I*. There is no *we*," she clarified for him. He was still determined to be her "partner". When would he learn she didn't need a partner?

"Not yet," he challenged.

"Not ever," she corrected.

"We'll see," he continued on. God, would this man *ever* let her have the last word?

"How long can you hold your breath?" she asked him as she left for the lockers. It better be a long time, Kent, because she was NEVER becoming his partner.

Lois chuckled and then sighed. She wondered what it would be like if Clark was sitting next to her right now. She glanced over at the passenger seat of her car.

Strangely enough, she could picture Clark there, looking at her like she was his entire world. She could picture him in her life, even as that partner she had vowed she never needed. For

some reason, Clark seemed like the type of guy for which she would make an exception. But with her luck, just as they started to talk about something serious or personal, like how she was dealing with Mayson's death, he would probably make some lame excuse and bolt... even in the middle of a stakeout. Typical!

Suddenly, there was a knock on the passenger side door. "Open up! Police!" called a male voice, jarring Lois from her thoughts. Then she saw Dan's face beaming through the window at her.

"Scardino, what are you doing?" she asked him as he climbed into her car, carrying a wicker basket. She couldn't help the smile that naturally came to her lips from this surprise, and she wasn't someone who liked surprises. Ever.

"I got dinner," he said. "Your office told me you were on a stakeout and I thought... hmm... you might get hungry." He pulled out a bottle of wine and proceeded to open it. "I got some great Thai food."

"How did you know that I liked Thai food?" she inquired.

"Lois," he said, laying on that Scardino charm again. "I *am* an undercover cop."

So, he had been doing his homework. Impressive. "What else do you know about me?"

Dan grinned and handed her a glass of Chardonnay, bouncing his eyebrows and avoiding the question. "Shall we toast?"

"To what?"

"How about: to the future?" Dan replied.

Lois's heart began to pound in her chest. "Whose?"

"How about ours?"

"You never stop, do you?" She shook her head. No matter what she said or did, he kept coming back for more, at a hundred miles per hour. She felt like hitting him with a Stop sign.

He chuckled and then his expression turned serious. "Lois... when you live the kind of life I do, you learn really fast that time is a precious commodity, and every minute that goes by that we're not together seems like a terrible waste."

For the first time in a long, long time, Lois actually found herself speechless.

Dan raised his glass. "*Carpe diem.*"

She chuckled. "Considering the hour, *Carpe* night."

He joined in her laughter as they sipped their wine.

"I hope you like it spicy. I got some chicken in coconut curry sauce," Dan said, opening the basket. "And of course, beef in peanut sauce with fried green beans."

"Sounds good. If you like it hot, you should try my rumaki some time," Lois countered. "It'll blow your socks off."

Dan smiled. "Just call it a date, and I'll be there."

Lois tensed. She liked Dan. She liked that he liked her. She liked that he was here. She liked that he was real, not imaginary. She liked that he wasn't going to give up on her, despite all of her hang-ups.

But...

She didn't know if she wanted to like him for more than a friend just yet. She certainly didn't want to rush into anything, and Dan seemed to live only in one speed: fast. She lived a dangerous life too as an investigative journalist, but that had just made her more cautious in her relationships instead of less. She needed to test the relationship waters before she dove in. She had been hurt too many times before.

"Dan, I like you," she admitted and watched as his big grin faltered.

They both heard the unspoken 'but' hanging between them.

"Look, Lois, as I told you, I'm willing to wait," he said, trying to stop her from breaking up with him before they had even had one date. "Unless this thing with Clark is... well... serious."

Lois's jaw dropped. She forgot she had told him she was dating a guy named Clark. "I have a confession..."

Dan's interest was piqued.

"Clark is my imaginary friend." She shot Dan a huge, embarrassed grin. That was better than explaining the truth: that Clark was a co-worker in her dreams, a man that she wouldn't dream of dating, because her heart belonged to Superman.

"Imaginary friend?" Whatever he had been expecting this hadn't been it.

"I use him as an excuse when I want to get out of something..." Lois told him. That seemed to be a viable explanation, and a good use for "Clark". She was definitely going to hang on to him.

"Like going out with me?" Dan's tone was light and his words rhetorical, but she could tell he was hurt by this confession. "Why are you telling me this?" Then his eyes brightened. "Is it because you've changed your mind?"

"As I said, Dan, I like you, and if this does develop beyond friendship, I don't want that lie hanging between us, but relationships aren't something I dive into. I've learned the hard way that I need to be cautious." She reached over and touched his arm. "Let me get to know you better before I decide if rumaki is a date or just a dinner with a friend." Then she laughed. "Or a death sentence. I'm really a horrible cook."

He joined her laughter. "I'll take that under advisement."

There was a festival of sorts in the streets outside of the Daily Planet. Everywhere Lois looked there were people selling Superman trinkets, Superman t-shirts, Superman balloons, Superman dolls, and photos with a Superman cut-out. There were little boys dressed up as Superman and grown-ups waving Superman flags. They were giving the Key to the City of Metropolis to Superman. 'He so completely deserved it,' thought Lois.

She waved and called out to him, but either he didn't remember her... No! Of course, he remembered her; he must not see and hear her in the din. With his Super eyesight or his Super ears, of course, he should be able to see and hear her. He looked uncomfortable and self-conscience with all the adoration, as opposed to Lex Luthor, who knew how to work a crowd.

The crowd faded, and Lois found herself at a charitable auction. Bid on a date with a bachelor for blind children. Nobody actually cared about the blind children. They cared, but that was not why any of them were really there. She had gone there to bid on a date with Superman, but he hadn't even noticed her, and she had been outbid. Way outbid. By forty-five thousand dollars. Superman had walked right past her like she was invisible.

So, she did something she rarely ever did. She went to drown her sorrows.

Lex Luthor came up to her at the bar and refilled his champagne glass, after she had refilled hers for the third time. Actually, the man was polishing his boots with a napkin. What was this, the wild west? It was an uncivilized move for someone like Lex, but personally, she didn't care. All she could feel was self-pity because Superman hadn't noticed her.

"I'm sorry that I had to cancel our lunch; it's just that Superman is such a big draw," she told Lex.

"Yes, and apparently, not only for you," responded Lex. It almost sounded like he was jealous of her attentions to Superman. That was ridiculous. Lex Luthor jealous?!

Lois glanced over and saw Superman laughing and holding the hand of the bejeweled woman who had bid that outrageous amount of money for one afternoon with him.

"I thought you'd like to reschedule," Lex continued.

She thought about that as she watched Superman with that wealthy widow. "Yes, I'd like that. Very much."

Lex raised his champagne glass to her. "So would I," he said and then drifted off.

Lois was left at the bar with a tentative date with the third

richest man in the world. Why did this thought depress her? She was still nursing her champagne when a familiar man sat down next to her:

"A date with Superman, huh?" Clark said.

Just what this evening needed: Kent to come and make fun of her. "What are you doing here? Barn dance let out early?" Misery loved company? Ha!

He chuckled. "I filed the Morris story. You're very welcome."

Frankly, Lois didn't care as she took another sip of her drink. "I was saving for Tahiti," she admitted to her colleague. "... but a date with Superman... that would have been a real adventure." She pictured Superman and her on the beach in Tahiti, him having flown them in for the afternoon. She sighed as reality set back in, her emotions on the edge. "Oh, Clark. He doesn't even know I'm alive. Maybe it was stupid of me to think that he cared."

"It's not so stupid, Lois," Clark murmured, again with a tone like he understood exactly how she felt. "Did you ever think that Superman was afraid to reveal himself? His true feelings?"

Lois thought about that. "Hhhmmmm." Was Clark saying what she thought he was saying? That Superman actually liked her? "Hhhmmmm." That would be nice. She had to admit that Clark was pretty observant. Maybe he had noticed something that she hadn't. Some way that Superman had looked at her when she wasn't looking at him, but that was a ridiculous idea. Lois was ALWAYS looking at Superman. How could she not? He was... well, Superman.

"Come on. I'll get you a cab," Clark told her as he helped her to her feet.

Then it was the middle of the night and someone was persistently knocking on her door. Lois dragged herself from where she had fallen asleep on her bed — on top of her covers and still in her robe — and over to the door. But when she got there, there wasn't anyone there. She went into her kitchen to get a drink of milk. She drank straight from the carton; something she would never do, if anyone else was there.

"Lois Lane?" a voice from the darkness of her apartment asked, startling her.

"Who's there? I've got a..." She grabbed a metal spatula and held it up. Pathetic! "...weapon!" In a defensive stance, she reached back and turned on the kitchen lights, but she still couldn't see anyone.

"Jimmy?! Where are you?" She slowly started approaching her living room. "If this is your idea of a joke, it's not funny!"

"No. It's no joke. It's just me," said that voice again, more hesitantly and nervously than before. Only this time the voice was coming from a head of a blond man, a head floating in midair without a body. "I'm the Invisible Man."

Lois screamed and fainted.

"Lois! Lois!" Sarah was shaking her awake. "You're having a nightmare, Lois. Wake up!"

Lois blinked her eyes and focused on the young woman. "Huh?"

"You were having a nightmare," Sarah said more softly, sitting down next to her on the bed. "Are you all right?"

The reporter pulled her knees up to her chin. "Yeah. A nightmare. Superman didn't even notice me." She sighed despondently.

Sarah raised a brow. "Superman?"

Lois gazed upwards before closing her eyes and sighing, relaxing into her pillows. "He's that man from my dreams, I told you about. He's perfect, really. He's a superhero. He's super strong, super fast, invulnerable, and he even flies. And when he holds me in his arms..." She shivered with another sigh.

"A superhero?" Sarah's jaw was hanging open now.

The reporter's defenses shot up. "Yeah. So what if he is? Everyone dreams of their perfect man."

"Sorry," explained the young psych student. "I just didn't expect that from you. You seemed so based in reality, but from everything you've told me about the death of your two friends, I can see why you'd be attracted by a superhero. Someone who could protect you from life's pain. Someone who could fly you away when life got too rough or fly you into the heat of a story. Someone who couldn't die. Yep. Definitely your perfect mate."

Lois smiled. It felt good to have someone validate her feelings for Superman.

"But Mr. Perfect is looking straight through you, like you're invisible?" Sarah asked. "Doesn't sound too *super* to me."

"Clark thinks that Superman is just shy, that he's hiding his true feelings for me," Lois explained.

"Clark? Who's Clark?" Sarah asked, confused.

Oh, crap. Why did she have to bring him up? Sarah was going to have her committed. Lois pushed Sarah out of the way and climbed out of bed. She went into the kitchen, opened her freezer, and pulled out her half-gallon of ice cream with the spoon still inside it from the last time.

"Lois?" Sarah asked again, taking two bowls out of the cupboard. "Who's Clark?"

Lois sighed. "Clark is my partner. Kind of. Sort of. In my dreams. It's like I'm reliving the last year and a half of my life in my dreams. Only now, my life is perfect."

"So, was this before or after you met Lex Luthor?" Sarah inquired as Lois filled her bowl with ice cream. "Is *he* alive and well in these dreams?"

Lois's brow furrowed. The first dream was set about the time she introduced herself to Lex at his White Orchid Ball. Only instead of going stag after Mitchell canceled at the last minute, she had brought Clark as her 'date'. So, Lex was definitely alive in her dreams. Did these dreams have to do with him? "Yeah, and he's jealous of my interest in Superman."

"And you have a partner at work," Sarah stated. "Do you need a partner?"

"No!" Lois exclaimed.

"You want a partner though?" her houseguest rephrased.

"No! Yes. Well, I don't know. I never thought I did, but Clark..." She sighed. But *what* about Clark? "He and I mesh together really well. I'm logical. He's emotional. I'm city. He's country. I'm pushy. He's polite. He's not afraid of me. He doesn't let me push him around. He actually stands up to me when he thinks I'm wrong, not that I ever am, mind you. But he also takes care of me like a best friend," Lois explained. "He's a yang to my yin."

Sarah raised an eyebrow. "Okay. So, in this 'perfect' dream world you've created for yourself, you've got two men or three men actually: 'the super man', 'the best friend', and 'the rich man', right? Are you involved with any of them?"

Lois shrugged and took a bite of her ice cream. "Love takes time. And I've got all the time in the world in my dreams to catch Superman's eye."

"But, Lois, that's all Superman is: a dream man, a fantasy. He isn't real. He doesn't exist. And never will. Clark is also a fantasy, but a different kind. He's your co-worker who you always beat out for stories. He supports you emotionally, but he also keeps you on your toes professionally, right? So, Clark's more real, but he doesn't exist either. And Lex? Well, he's dead."

The smile dropped off Lois's face. Why had she told Sarah about her dreams?

"Lois, it's classic, Psych 101." Sarah looked down into her dish of chocolate ice cream. "Okay, look, have you ever had Rocky Road ice cream?"

Lois looked at Sarah skeptically. "I think that's a bad example if you're going to be talking about relationships."

"Just a metaphor, Lois. Just go with me."

Lois scoffed, but continued to listen.

“Now, if I told you that you could have one ice cream flavor for the rest of your life. What would it be? Rocky Road or chocolate?” asked Sarah.

Lois had figured out the metaphor. *Men as ice cream. Good example, Sarah.* She smiled, leaning back against the counter. “Well... I don’t know. I guess I have to try the Rocky Road before I decide.” Was Superman Rocky Road? The answer was simple. Give her a spoon!

Sarah pointed at her. “That’s the point. Clark’s chocolate. It’s good and all, but you’ve had it.”

“Yes, but you can put hot fudge on it and whipped cream.” Lois grinned. “And nuts.”

“Right. You take the great guy that Clark is and add all the super hero bits and you get... Superman! *He’s* the sundae with the works. Chocolate ice cream, whipped cream, nuts, cherry.” The young woman smiled. “Bananas.”

“Oh, bananas,” Lois moaned as she rested her head on her palm and thought about eating *that* banana split. Her bowl of chocolate ice cream seemed to pale in comparison.

“Don’t take me there,” Sarah begged her.

Lois grinned. She didn’t think that Sarah was talking about food anymore, although, neither was Lois.

“Okay, now, this Scardino guy, he’s Rocky Road. He’s different, interesting, chunky. He’s a mix between plain chocolate and the sundae.”

“You know, Sarah, if you go around trying every flavor that comes out you’re going to get awfully fat,” Lois said, taking the last bite from her bowl, like she was one to talk.

“That’s what I’m trying to explain to you. Superman is the sundae. Do you really want to have a sundae *all* the time? He’s just a fantasy. He won’t seem so special if he’s around all the time. What you want is a little bit of this, a little bit of that. I’m telling you, Lois, it’s time to take out that little pink taster spoon and try Rocky Road.” Sarah got up, set her empty bowl in the sink, and went into the other room. “Anyway, you’ll always have your chocolate sundae in your dreams.”

Lois leaned back against the counter and thought about that. “Not necessarily.” She sighed. “I think I’d really miss my chocolate sundae if I couldn’t have it.”

Chapter Four

There was a knock at the door. Lois hadn’t gotten much sleep. Between her stakeout with Scardino, which kept her up until three in the morning, then her Superman nightmare and ice cream pig-out therapy session with Sarah, Lois was running only on one cylinder, or was it half a cylinder? Dan had called her about ten that morning and told her that his researcher was finally able to hack into Golden’s old military files; he was on his way over to tell her what they had found.

She was still in her grey morning sweats. After all that ice cream the night before, she had taken some time to work some of it off. If she was going to scare Scardino off with how she looked like in the morning, she might as well do it before they got intimate. Oh, God, was she thinking about getting intimate with Dan?

But luckily, the man on the other side of the door wasn’t Dan, it was Jimmy. “What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I think I left my wallet here last night,” he told her, following her into the kitchen, where she set down the plant she had been watering.

“I was just about to get dressed,” she responded, heading towards her bedroom. “Help yourself to some fruit.”

Lois pulled a blouse and vest set out of her closet. It was a bit conservative, but she didn’t want to lead Dan on. It wasn’t like she owned Cat clothes anyway. “I’m surprised that Perry let you go out alone,” she called to Jimmy. She held up the shirt in front of her as she looked in the mirror. “Katherine Wilder leave her

house?”

Suddenly, she saw a very angry, very determined Jimmy standing behind her in the mirror with her large kitchen knife. At the last second, she dropped her clothes and turned, grabbing his arm and twisting it away from her. The knife fell and scattered across the floor. She pushed Jimmy over, ran out of her bedroom, picking up the knife, and tried to open her front door. For some reason, it wouldn’t budge. Had Jimmy locked it?

Before Lois could try anything else, Jimmy seized her shoulders and threw her across the room. He was stronger than he looked.

Lois faced him and tried to talk sense into him. “Come on, Jimmy! Jimmy, it’s Lois! You’ve been brainwashed.”

Jimmy paid her no heed. He picked up her tall standing lamp and, using it like a pole, knocked the knife out of her hand. She kicked him in the gut, pushing him against her chair, which broke both her lamp and the chair, but it bought her enough time to get to the door and unlock it. Unfortunately, that was when Jimmy hit her in the back of the legs with the pole of the lamp, bringing her to the floor.

“What’s going on out here?” yawned a half-awake Sarah. “Jimmy!” she screamed, but he ignored her.

Jimmy sat on top of Lois and pulled the cord of the lamp around her neck as Lois tried to keep him from tightening the cord.

“Jimmy! Jimmy! Jimmy, it’s me! Lois!”

Sarah threw the plant that Lois had just watered at Jimmy’s head, but he ducked out of the way. She picked up Lois’s phone and instead of calling for the police, she threw it at him. Sarah wasn’t really helping, but at least she was distracting Jimmy from pulling the wire tighter.

“Jimmy, stop, please,” Lois begged as her front door opened and Dr. Wilder, Mrs. Wilder – the doctor’s mother – and some bearded guy walked into her apartment.

Sarah jumped onto Jimmy’s back to try and hold back his arms.

“Warrior,” Mrs. Wilder called out to them. “Stop!”

Both Sarah and Jimmy froze and turned to her for more instructions.

“Sarah, go stand in the corner. Jimmy continue to kill Lois Lane,” Mrs. Wilder finished.

The young woman let go of Jimmy and went to stand in the corner like a robot. Jimmy tightened the cord around Lois’s neck.

“You’re killing me,” Lois croaked.

“I don’t want to, Lois. *I have to,*” explained Jimmy, twisting the cord around his hands.

A risky idea flashed in Lois’s mind. Relaxing for a fraction of a moment, Lois closed her eyes and whispered, “I’m dead.”

Jimmy relaxed his hold on her, long enough for Lois to shift her body. She brought up her knees, pushing him off balance and towards her, then she head-butted him. “WARRIOR!” she shouted, guessing that was the code-word to controlling the brainwashed zombies.

The bearded man ran from the room.

“Hey, Lois, what did you do that for?” Jimmy asked, rubbing his head.

“Jimmy! Jump out the window!” ordered Mrs. Wilder.

He looked away from where Lois was coughing on the floor, trying to regain her breath. “I don’t think so, Lady.”

“Let’s get out of here,” said Mrs. Wilder as she and Katherine Wilder started for the door.

“Stop them,” ordered Lois, her voice still hoarse.

Both Jimmy and Sarah grabbed the two blonde women and held them with their hands behind their backs.

A few seconds later, a bleeding Dan Scardino brought, at gunpoint, the bearded man into her apartment. Dan looked between the Wilder women and the bearded man. “Something

tells me that you folks aren't Jehovah's Witnesses."

"Warrior," Lois repeated, collapsing on the floor in relief. She wanted to make sure that the Wilders didn't try to re-control Jimmy and Sarah while Dan was handcuffing the bad guys... or gals, in this case.

"Jimmy will be fine," Perry informed Lois in his office later that day. "Now, I can understand if you don't want to partner up with him anymore... uh... being that he tried to... um... kill you..."

Lois waved that idea out of the air. Jimmy was *her* lackey, and she wasn't going to lose him over a little brainwashing. "Well, as long as *I* get to still control him..." she started to say as she rubbed the red line on her throat.

"I just went to visit Jimmy and Sarah at the hospital. They're having the antidotes administered as we speak. He'll be deprogrammed and back at work later in the week," Perry told her. "Of course, being that he tried to kill you, you might still have a bit of leverage there without the drugs." He smiled knowingly.

She returned the smile. They both knew that Jimmy's guilt meter would say that he owed her for a long time in the future.

"But I don't want you to take advantage of the kid," Perry warned her.

Lois rolled her eyes. Where was the fun in *that*? With her lips pressed together, she returned to her desk.

"The last time I saw that expression on your face, you were sticking a plunger in my stomach," said Dan, appearing at her desk. He had a bandage on his forehead covering the gash he had earned during his battle with Jimmy prior to the photographer reaching her apartment.

"Hi," Lois said softly, still tired from her lack of sleep from the night before and her battle for life this morning.

"Hi... uh..." Dan said, pulling a notepad out of his jeans pocket. "I've got some background information on Tysian I thought you might want to know about..." He flipped through his notepad as he looked for the right page.

Sarah was right. Superman hadn't come to her rescue that morning when her life was on the line. He was just a fantasy. On the other hand, Dan had been there for her that morning. She had rescued herself, but he *had* been there. Plus, he was real, not imaginary. "The only thing I want to know is: would you like to go out?"

Dan's gaze returned to hers. He hadn't been expecting that question, and it made him speechless for a moment. She enjoyed that startled expression on his face.

"You mean, like on a date?" he asked uncertainly.

"Yeah, on a date," she clarified.

His face lit up with joy and enthusiasm. "Well... Yeah! I mean..."

"Great. You're on," Lois said, picking up her briefcase.

Still startled, Dan asked, "Just out of curiosity, did something happen that I should know about?"

Lois glanced over at Jimmy's empty desk. In her dreams, it was the one where Clark sat. She felt a tug of longing to have a man like that in her life. But he was just another fantasy. She shook her head and smiled at Dan. "Come on. How about a late lunch? Are you hungry?"

"Yeah, sure. How about an early dinner instead? Or I know this terrific ice cream parlor. Do you like ice cream? They make the best Rocky Road..." Dan gushed.

Lois felt a wave of familiarity to his ramblings. "Shut up, Scardino."

He winked at her. "Call me Dan." That was what he had kept telling her while they worked on Mayson's murder together when she had refused to call him anything other than his last name.

"Dan," she corrected, smiling. "So, they make the best Rocky

Road, huh? I'll have to try me some of that."

"So were you and Jena more than just partners?" Lois asked Scardino as she leaned back, setting her napkin on her empty plate. The Indian food at this restaurant was good, a bit spicier than she normally liked, but good. Bobby Bigmouth had recommended the place to her the last time she had brought him food. She would have to thank him.

Dan looked down. He liked to joke around, but she could tell he felt uncomfortable talking about the personal stuff. Sometimes looking at Dan was like seeing her feelings in a mirror. That thought gave her a chill.

In order to let someone really know you, you have to let them see you as you really are, Lois told herself. Was Dan letting her see the real him? *As soon as you let someone see you as you really are, they end up using it against you,* she then thought. She pressed her lips together. Certainly enough men had done that to her – used her own flaws and insecurities against her. So she had created this disguise of a tough-as-nails woman, but inside she was very different.

"Yes," Dan admitted. Then he changed his mind. "No."

Lois raised an eyebrow and waited. She had had complicated relationships like that. Take Lex.

"When you work with someone closely, like Jena and I did, naturally you form a tight bond." He sighed. "I was in love with her, madly in love." Dan shrugged. Lois guessed in an attempt to defuse the intensity of his words. "But to her, I was just her partner, a fellow agent. I had started to change her mind, wear her down. I had even pictured us getting married someday. But let's not talk about Jena..."

Marriage is about sharing everything you have, even if you don't feel like it, said a voice inside her head that sounded strangely like Clark. Was Clark pro-marriage? Of course, he was. He was from Kansas!

~So is divorce. Just ask my mother,~ she snapped back in her head.

Lois pressed her eyes together and shook her head. Was she having an argument with Clark inside her head while at dinner with Dan? Was this a dream flashback? Or something else?

"Are you okay, Lois?" Dan asked her, taking hold of her hand across the table.

She looked down at their hands and felt... nothing. Not hope. Not excitement. Nothing. With Lex she felt a little thrill of pride that the world's third richest person – second richest *man* – had been interested in her. With Superman she felt fireworks. But with Dan she was numb.

"I..." Lois swallowed. Lex was dead. And Superman a fantasy. Dan was real, she reminded herself. "I understand. Sometimes I wonder what would have happened with Lex if he hadn't been shot."

Dan nodded. "I guess we have more in common than I thought. I hadn't realized that you two had been so close."

You don't need to bid for my attention, Lois, whispered Superman in her ear.

Lois turned to look at Superman, but there was no one there. *You'll always be special to me, Lois,* Superman continued. *You're the first woman who ever...* His voice seemed to falter as if searching for the correct words. Her heart raced in anticipation.

"Lois. Lo-is..." called Dan, waving a hand in front of her face. "You seem a million miles away."

She was a million miles away. Superman just told her that she was special to him.

"Sorry, Dan. All I feel like doing is crawling into bed. Do you mind?" she asked before explaining. "It's been a long day, and I didn't sleep well last night."

His eyes popped for a moment, before he answered, his voice rough, "Sure. I'll just go pay the check."

Lois's brow furrowed. She couldn't wait to get into bed with Superman. *Dream* of Superman, she corrected as she felt her cheeks reddened. She was glad Scardino had already gotten up to pay and hadn't seen her blush. By the time he had returned, she had gotten her color back under control.

"Are you sure you're okay? Maybe I should take you to the hospital and have the E.R. doctors check you out," suggested Dan.

"I'm fine. The EMTs already examined me. I just need some sleep," Lois said, standing up. "Take me home, and get me to bed."

Dan swallowed. "Lois, I like you a lot, but I think that's a bit much for our first date," he teased her to let her know that her words could be construed another way.

Oh, God! What had she been saying to him? She decided to play it off like a joke. "So, no double entendre with your curry sauce?"

"No, thank you," Dan replied faux-sternly, taking her arm. "But if you want to give me a goodnight kiss at your door, I can honestly say it won't be turned down."

She patted his chest. It didn't feel as good as when she patted Clark's chest. There was something solid about the way Clark felt. She sighed. But Dan's chest was real, not imaginary. "Why don't we save that for a time when I'm right in the head?"

"So..." Dan paused as he unlocked her car door before going around to climb in the driver's side. "Never?"

Lois stood there for a moment, contemplating why she wanted him to actually *open* the door for her. She didn't need a man to open doors for her; so why was she suddenly expecting such chivalrous behavior from Dan? She pulled open the door and sat down.

Once they were inside the car, he repeated his jokey question, "Never? Or lunch in a couple of days and then dinner Saturday in a week?"

"I'd like that," she told him with a smile. And that was the truth. She hadn't been all there for this first date and it seemed like she was getting a second chance to make a first impression on him. She would take the opportunity and run with it. She needed to get Superman and Clark and her dreams out of her conscious mind and back into her subconscious. "Lunch, that is... and dinner."

She and Alan Morris – the original Invisible Man – were locked inside the air-tight vault at the Gold Repository and they were running out of air:

"Superman, where are you?" Lois gasped with her last breath.

Suddenly the wall crumbled and in came Superman. He took her in his arms and looked at her like there was no other woman in the world. He leaned towards her almost as if he were going to kiss her... oh, please, please, kiss her. Just this once!... but then the police SWAT team came in through the hole in the vault Superman had made.

Or at least, Lois thought Superman had wanted to kiss her. She was woozy from the lack of oxygen. He pulled her into an embrace instead, and in some ways that was better than a kiss. It showed her that she mattered to him and that he had been worried. Actually, his expression had reminded her of the way Clark gazed at her sometimes when he didn't know she was looking at him looking at her.

Superman scooped her into his arms and carried her outside. It was the most wonderful combination ever imaginable: Superman, sunshine, and fresh air. Lois could stay in that moment forever.

But the image faded as Lois's alarm clock reminded her it was Wednesday. Jimmy would finally be returning to the Daily Planet after his 'deprogramming' at the hospital. Not that she

would ever admit it, but she had missed the kid. It seemed quieter around the office without his silly comments and eager smile.

She really needed to stop thinking of Jimmy as a kid. He was twenty-two now. But for some reason 'kid' just seemed like the right word for him. Like a kid brother.

A huge bouquet of red and white striped tulips emerged from the elevator in the arms of the floral deliveryman. It headed straight for Lois's desk.

"Lois Lane, ma'am?" the deliveryman said to Lois, handing her his log. "Sign here, please."

She smiled at him and signed. "Thanks."

"Whoa! Lois! Agent Scardino on a stakeout at a florist's shop?" Jimmy teased, coming around the corner.

Lois decided not to dignify Jimmy's remark with an answer. "Oooh. A note." She opened it and began reading, "'Dear Lois. Sorry, but I need to reschedule lunch; I have to go out of town. Should be back by Saturday. Can't wait. Yours in tulips, Dan'."

She set down the note and sighed. At least it wasn't another hideous mobile statue thing.

Lois sat at her desk – once again on hold – staring at the card Dan had sent with the flowers. '*Yours in tulips, Dan.*' What did that mean? Her heart had ached with disappointment when she had read his note. That was something, wasn't it? Better than the numbness she had felt at dinner when he had held her hand.

She should really be working on the Intergang angle and how it connected with Multiworld Communications. Technically, since she was on hold, she was working.

Lois kept thinking back to her date with Dan. She had asked him to tell her about his current case: dead end. She asked him to tell her what he did for the DEA: change of subject. Dan told her that his work was strictly off limits. He would not, *could* not talk about it. He had said this while taking her straight home. They had both forgotten about the Rocky Road. Probably not a good ice cream flavor for a first date anyway, Lois thought to herself.

The sound of the hold music changed. Super. Kenny Loggins. If she had a partner, then she could leave him with all the boring 'calling everyone on the phone' and 'waiting for hours on hold' part of her job, and she could be out pounding the pavement, getting the story.

"Partners?" Lois grumbled to her boss.

"You and Kent. The experience of the battle scarred veteran paired with the hunger of the exciting fresh talent," enthused Perry as they walked out of the elevator and down into the bullpen.

"I'm not *that* scarred. And he's not *that* exciting," she clarified.

"Your tenacity. His tact. Believe me, Lois, the two of you... there's chemistry there. It's gonna make for great stories."

Chemistry? Her and Superman, without doubt, but her and Kent? He must be kidding.

"But... Perry, partnership is like marriage." This time it was definitely a whine.

"That's right. You've got to work at it," responded her boss.

"It takes patience and understanding and a willingness to be supportive," Lois told him, like she had any experience with either... a partnership or a marriage. Or even a long-term relationship.

"I know, honey," Perry said sympathetically, patting her arm. "Fake it. Now, go find your partner."

She turned around and saw Clark leaning against the receptionist desk. Had that been a hint of sadness in his eyes before he smiled at her? Had he heard what she had said to Perry? Did he not like being lumped together with her as much as she hated being lumped together with him? No, he had always wanted to be her partner. She remembered the day of the

Metropolis Sewage Reclamation Facility like it had been the day before. He had practically begged her to be his partner. Perry must have finally caved to shut him up.

"Howdy, partner," Clark said, waving a blue folder at her. "What sounds better? 'Kent and Lane'? Or 'Lane and Kent'? 'Kent and Lane'? 'Lane and Kent'?"

"Neither," responded Lois, annoyed. Truthfully, she liked Clark. As a colleague. A reporter. And maybe even as a person. She just didn't want or need a partner.

"'Lane and Kent' definitely," replied Jimmy from behind Clark.

"Why?" asked her 'partner', turning around.

"Tradition. Abbot and Costello. Martin and Lewis," explained Jimmy. "The straight man always goes first."

Lois pressed her lips together. Terrific. They're making jokes already. "Either way, it will never work," she informed Clark.

*"Come on, it won't be **that** bad," said an ever-optimistic Clark.*

*"It will be **that** bad. It will be **worse**," Lois replied.*

The sound of a dial-tone in her ear let her know that whoever she had been on hold with had hung up. Had they ever come to the phone? Had she heard them? Was she too distracted with the memory of becoming Kent's partner? Either way, she hung up the phone. No point of remaining on the line.

Lois shifted some papers around on her desk, trying to find something, anything to connect Multiworld Communication's Bill Church, Jr. to Intergang. Perry's yelling matches with Mr. Stern were getting progressively worse. Their publisher would be selling the Daily Planet and the only bidder at the moment was Multiworld Communications.

No. Not memory. It couldn't have been a memory, unless it had been a recollection of her dream, which truthfully, didn't make sense. How come she could remember her dreams so vividly recently, when she never had before? It was like they were invading her conscious self. She shook this line of thought out of her mind and went back to work.

Chapter Five

Jimmy leaned against Lois' desk as she talked on the phone with the Daily Planet's publisher. "Mr. Stern, Lois Lane here... Well, no, Perry isn't in right now, because he had to... uh..." She looked at Jimmy wide-eyed, trying to think of an excuse to explain the Chief's absence. "Had to..." Suddenly, an idea struck her. "Meet a source that would only talk to him."

Jimmy gave her the A-OK hand signal with a big grin.

"Uh... No, we haven't gotten any more on the Intergang connection, but we're working on it," Lois continued into the telephone as she watched Jimmy's grin fade. "Well, yes, I know I speak for Perry when I say that it would be a bad idea to sell... Oh, sure, no problem... Well, say hello to the Eiffel Tower for me," she said, trying to sound chipper. "Oh. You're in Rome now. Ciao!" With a sigh, Lois hung up the phone.

"Why didn't you tell him that Perry had been kidnapped?" Jimmy asked.

"Because that's the one thing that would make him sell. One more crisis and BOOM! We all will be writing headlines about Oprah's latest diet. We've got to keep this thing quiet," Lois explained.

The travel editor ran up to Lois and Jimmy and held up two photos. "Bali or Seychelles?"

"Perry isn't here now, Karl," Lois told him.

"I need an answer now. The Sunday magazine closes in five!"

Lois looked between the two pictures with a shrug. "Well... Run both."

"That means I need more copy," complained Karl.

Lois' eyes grew large as she realized that she had just doubled Karl's workload.

"Oh, God!" growled Karl, who ran off.

The next morning, Lois was back on the phone with the publisher with more excuses. "No, Mr. Stern, I haven't seen Perry this morning... Maybe he had car trouble... Yes, I realize that Multiworld Communications needs an answer in forty-eight hours... You know, you might want to reconsider your position on... Oh, of course... Well, I'll tell him to call you as soon as I see him." Her cheeks hurting from all her fake-cheerfulness, she hung up phone.

What was she going to do? Perry was kidnapped. The police had nothing but her sketch of the man who kidnapped him, but they had accomplished zip. She was running the Planet solo and trying to find her boss at the same time. This was exactly why she needed a real partner. Someone off whom she could bounce ideas.

"You're waiting for me to talk about it... to open up. See, this is exactly why I hate partnerships," Lois stated the obvious to her new partner.

Clark put down his pencil and actually sounded annoyed when he asked, "Why?"

"Because your partner is always there for you whether you want them there or not. Because your partner is there to share your troubles. Well, I don't feel like sharing," she announced.

Clark held up his hands and paper in mock-defeat.

"Okay, so I don't get along with my father," Lois admitted. "Big deal."

"No big deal."

"I mean haven't you met anyone so wrapped up in their work that they don't have time for anyone or anything?"

"Is this a trick question?" Clark asked, apparently saying that those words could describe her.

"Okay. Okay. But at least I don't have kids."

"Oh, Clark." Lois sighed to herself. "Where are you when I need you?"

Jimmy walked up behind her and handed her a pile of photo sheets. Lois didn't even look at them before handing them back to him. "Jimmy, I have to go out for a while. Hold down the fort." Then she walked out of the newsroom as he stood behind her, his mouth ajar.

"Isn't that what they said to Jim Bowie at the Alamo?" he called to her.

Lois removed a message taped to her computer. The fresh air from her walk around the block had done her worlds of good. The hotdog sustenance hadn't hurt either. Well, not yet, at least. She was ready to face the hell that was her life again.

"Jimmy!" she called out to her partner in crime, who came running. "Bobby Bigmouth called. He's identified the police artist sketch of Perry's kidnapper. Gene Newtrich. He's a soil engineer."

"Soil engineer and part-time kidnapper," responded Jimmy.

She continued to read down the note. "We've even got a working address."

"What are we waiting for!?" said Jimmy with enthusiasm.

Lois shook her head. "Sorry, Jimmy. One of us has to stay here."

Jimmy rolled his eyes and lowered his voice. "You do realize that the Chief wouldn't want me in charge, don't you? I'll go, and you stay."

"You do realize that Perry isn't going to care if I don't find him," Lois retorted, throwing the strap of her briefcase over her shoulder and heading for the elevators.

As she rode the elevator down to the street level she could picture the same type of conversation with Clark...

"Clark, I think I should go alone..." Lois said, grabbing her briefcase and putting on her coat.

“Okay,” Clark replied, taking a step back.

“It’s just that he would be more comfortable...” she continued, explaining.

“More comfortable talking to someone he knows. I get it. Go.” He nodded, sending her on her way alone.

Lois stood there speechless. Clark had agreed with her? “Sometimes, you surprise me.”

That would be a nice change: a partner who backed her up and didn’t argue when she was clearly in the right.

Lois walked up to the door of Gene Newtrich’s office and looked at the security keypad to open the door. “There must be a zillion combinations to that thing,” she mumbled to herself. How in the hell was she going to get inside? She tried to look through the smoky glass of the door, but no such luck. It was just too dark. Then, she tried to type combinations into the keypad, hoping that some random mishmash of numbers would work.

Five minutes later she was still standing there, typing away. Nothing.

She heard someone coming, whistling. She went around the corner of the hallway and hid. A janitor came to Newtrich’s door and opened it. She watched which numbers he plugged into the keypad and then gave herself a fist-pump ‘all right!’ gesture.

A few minutes later the janitor left and Lois typed the same numbers into the keypad. *Success! Ha!* Who needed a partner with computer know-how, when she had brains, tenacity, and dumb luck?

The sixty-four thousand dollar question was why a soil engineer was in on a plot to kidnap Perry. She went through drawers randomly. She saw maps and files. Nothing of interest jumped out at her. Over by the door she found some building plans. “Newtrich has got to be tied to some larger organization,” she told herself. She flipped over some papers and underneath found the substructure plans for Cost Mart. “Newtrich works for Cost Mart! Cost Mart is run by Bill Church, Jr., which means that Newtrich might work for Intergang.” She folded up the plans and snuck back out of Newtrich’s office.

Now, it made sense who had kidnapped Perry. This was the type of stuff they needed down at the police department. Only she couldn’t tell them without disclosing her act of B&E. *Crap.* She would have to visit Cost Mart on her own. First though, she needed to study these plans.

“What are you writing?” Clark inquired, sitting down next to Lois at her desk.

“The story,” Lois stated the obvious.

“Saying what?”

“Dr. Sam Lane is performing these surgeries secretly,” she said, reading off her computer screen as she typed.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Sure, I’m sure.”

“Well, I’m not so sure we were at your father’s office last night,” Clark told her.

Lois turned to look at him. “What?”

“Maybe I was home asleep. And you were watching a late movie on TV,” he suggested.

“What is with you?” Lois gazed at Clark like he had lost his mind. “We took those pictures?”

Clark put the photos taken at her father’s office of the mechanical body parts into his inside jacket pocket. “What pictures?”

“Clark, this is the biggest scandal in boxing history.” There she went, stating the obvious again.

“No doubt about it,” Clark agreed with her. “Look. We print this, whoever killed Allie is going to want your father out of the way, too.”

Lois swallowed, realizing what he said could very well be

true.

She sighed. Clark had been right, she thought to herself as memories of her dream distracted her from the Cost Mart plans again. Unlike what happened in reality, in her dreams it had been Clark who had found her father’s secret office behind his bookcase instead of her.

Strangely though, when she had gone to her father’s office with Clark, there had been an earthquake; yet, there hadn’t been one when she had gone there by herself. Must have been some weird component of the dream state. True, when she had been there alone – in real life – she had almost been caught by Max Menken and one of his boxers. Although, luckily for her, they hadn’t seen her duck into her father’s examination room and out another door.

Lois knew that Clark’s suggestion had been right, because that was exactly what had happened to her father when the article had been published, instead of buried as it had been in her dream. Her father had gone underground and ended up in witness protection after he had agreed to turn state’s evidence against Menken and his boxers.

She hadn’t seen her father for longer than five minutes before he was relocated. Five minutes to tell him she loved him, and five minutes for him to tell her – for the first time in his life – that he was proud of her, despite all that had happened to him because of her article. She wondered if she would ever see Dr. Sam Lane again. Some of the cyborg boxers had been taken into custody, some disappeared, so her father still had a reason to hide.

Was that what her dreams were? Wishful thinking? Or was it something else? Was it a window into another life?

Lois went back to studying the plans. And back to coming up with bukpi. She wished Clark was real; she could use his input. Of course, if Clark had been real, she would have ended up in Perry’s doghouse for pulling her punches on her father’s involvement with cyborg boxers.

Lois stormed out of Perry’s office past a whistling Jimmy. “I’ve seen it before, but I’ve never been in it.”

“What’s that?” Jimmy asked, following her back to her desk. They passed Clark, who joined them.

“Perry’s doghouse.”

“Police academy graduation,” Clark said, telling her of his ‘doghouse’ story.

“Nice.” She went to get a cup of coffee. She had some auto show crap. Clark went along with her and she told him, “I guess we’re not partners anymore.”

“Guess not,” he agreed.

“I’m sorry, Clark. Really.” She actually was being honest with him. She liked working with Clark.

“It’s just as well.”

“Yeah, you’re right. It’s just as well. You don’t want to be partnered with a hypocritical reporter who talks a good game but backs off the minute things hit too close to home.”

Clark smiled. “Yes, I do.”

This Clark fellow better stop saying things like that to her or Superman might have competition for her heart. She grinned for the first time all day. Who was she kidding? Superman had no competition.

Eduardo walked up to her desk and looked over her shoulder at the plans. “What’s this?”

“Cost Mart substructure plans. I found them...” She cut herself off. No need to spread her evil deeds around. “Never mind.”

He glanced at her knowingly, and then took another look at the plans. “This might be something, Lois. There are two full basements in these plans,” he told her.

“They need lots of room for excess merchandise?” Lois guessed.

“Look,” Eduardo said, pointing at what he was describing.

"The loading docks line up to this first level basement. But this second basement is only accessed through this one passenger elevator."

"Which means they don't use the sub-basement for storage. What do you think is down there?" she asked him.

"How in the hell should I know? Cost Mart's your story, Lane." Eduardo shrugged.

"Thanks, Eduardo," Lois called to his departing back as her phone rang. She picked it up and, still focused on the plans, said, "Lois Lane."

"Lois!" she heard Perry's voice whisper to her over the line.

"Perry!" she gasped. Jimmy walked by, and she caught his eye. "It's Perry." Back into the phone she asked her boss, "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I'm a prisoner. Bill Church, Jr. has me. He's head of Intergang," he said.

"I knew it! I knew it!" She turned to Jimmy. "Bill Church is the head of Intergang. He's holding Perry prisoner."

"That's great!" exclaimed Jimmy. "Ask him where he is."

"Oh, right. Perry, where are you? Perry? Perry?" She set the phone back down. "We got disconnected."

"At least we know he's alive," Jimmy reminded her.

"Yeah," Lois agreed with him, her eyes drawn back to that sub-basement on the Cost Mart plans. *For the moment.*

Lois wasn't sure how to get that sub-basement elevator door to open. Jimmying it with a paperclip took time and wasn't working. The elevator door opened and there in front of her stood Perry with a couple of thugs behind him.

"Lois! Run, honey, run!" he barked.

She turned to run and one of Bill Church's men cocked his gun and shouted, "Stay where you are!"

Lois froze and turned back to Perry, Bill Church Jr., and his two henchmen. Some heroine was she.

"Ms. Lane," Bill Church, Jr. said with a sigh. "Your timing couldn't have been worse." He turned to the man Lois recognized as Gene Newtrich and asked, "Is there room for two in that landfill?"

Perry pushed his elbow into the henchman behind him and then karate chopped him on the back. With this distraction Lois tried to run again, but Gene followed her. Taking her boss's example in stride, Lois used one of her martial arts moves to knock Gene in the neck, flooring him. As she turned to run off, Bill Church Jr. grabbed her, holding her against him at gunpoint. By this time, Perry had the other henchman's gun and was pointing it at them.

"Nobody get excited and Ms. Lane might live to see another sunset," Church told them, his gun pointing at Lois' neck. "Perry, put the gun down. This gun has a delicate trigger mechanism, and I wouldn't want it to go off accidentally."

With a defeated shake of his head, Perry did as he was told.

"How about us?" said a voice behind them.

They all turned around to find Inspector Henderson and a couple of uniformed police officers standing behind them. Lois took the momentary diversion to punch Church in the gut and get him to drop the gun. After a small scuffle, the officers had the billionaire in custody.

Lois embraced her boss and then turned to the inspector. "How did you know we were here?"

"I got an anonymous tip from one Jimmy Olsen," replied Henderson with a smirk. "He told me I might want to check out the sub-basement at Cost Mart, because otherwise Ms. Lane was going to make the MPD look bad again."

The reporters laughed. "At least he did it anonymously," Lois said with a wink to her boss.

Perry's laughter caused Lois to peer into the Chief's office.

She saw Jimmy standing by her boss's desk.

"Lois, get in here!" Perry called to her, waving her inside. She walked up to the desk.

"I was just telling Jimmy how I stopped one of Church's henchmen with a karate chop. You know, Elvis was into karate."

"It was impressive," Lois backed up Perry's story.

"Almost as impressive, I'm sure, as your story, Chief," said Jimmy, unfolding the paper revealing Perry's story, *Billionaire Church Revealed as Head of Intergang.*

"Well, I haven't had a byline in seventeen years," Perry told them proudly. "It's nice to know I still got the juice."

"Nice to know that Mr. Stern's not selling the paper," Lois agreed with her boss.

"Oh, I think we're safe for a while," he told her.

Lois nodded and headed back to her desk, where she found a message from Dan, saying he wouldn't be back in time for their date that night. She sighed. Guess she was spending another night celebrating with her old friends: Ben & Jerry.

As she started straightening up the papers on her desk, her mind began to wander.

"This is terrific follow-up," Perry told Lois and Clark, reading their copy. "By the way, Kent, where were you when all this went down?"

"I went for help," Clark replied, but Lois could hear the hurt in his voice at their boss's implication.

"No criminal charges against Dr. Lane... oh, that's great," Perry continued reading, ignoring Clark's response. "Oh, this is nice, Lex Luthor offered to testify as a character witness before the medical ethics board. Well, good for Lex," said the Chief, turning to his reporters. "You know he carries a lot of weight in this community. Well, it looks like my instinct was right... you're a great team. Circulation should hit the roof with this piece."

"So, I guess that means we're partners full-time now?" Lois asked, reading between his lines.

"No, no, no. Let's not overdo a good thing. Only when the time is right," said Perry, tapping his head. "And only on special stories." Their boss tossed back their copy and headed for his office.

"What did he mean, 'where was I?'" Clark asked her almost whining.

"You were looking for help," Lois said, supporting him. "Come on. Let's get something to eat." She headed towards her desk to grab her briefcase, but for once Clark didn't follow.

"I'm not hungry," he said, clearly moping. She could tell it had hurt his pride, what Perry had said.

"Clark, if it makes you feel any better, even Superman got there too late," Lois told him, turning back to her desk. He still didn't follow. "Are you coming? Or are you going to stay there and sulk?"

Clark tossed down his pencil, set his jaw in his palm, and pouted, glancing at her with puppy dog eyes. Did he want her sympathy? Please! She rolled her eyes, tsk-ed him, and walked away. She wasn't going to beg, and she could do without a celebration dinner with a surly partner.

Lois sighed and went to pull on her coat. In her dreams, holding off on the story had allowed her father to get the goods on Menken. Her father didn't get his medical license suspended. He didn't need to go into witness protection, because Superman had caught all the cyborg boxers and they ended up in police custody.

It was weird though. Lex Luthor shot Max Menken both in reality and in her dreams. It had been because of that incident that she really started to care for the billionaire. She didn't understand why Superman wasn't the man to rescue her in her dreams. He had arrived, but only *after* Lex shot Menken. Sure, Superman was busy dealing with and catching the cyborg boxers at the time. Why were her dreams showing him in less than favorable light

when they had never done so before? Superman was her hero. Shouldn't he always be heroic?

Picking up her briefcase, she thought again how Menken had taken her at gunpoint into the alley. Lex had come out the back door of the Daily Planet building and Menken had *turned his gun on Luthor*. "You double-crossing..." he had said, before Lex had shot him.

A cold chill dripped down her spine. Lois hadn't been in danger. The only gun pointed towards her at that moment was Lex's.

Lex hadn't saved her; he had shot Menken to shut him up. Why did Menken call Lex a "double-crossing" something or other? *How* had Lex double-crossed Menken? It didn't make sense.

Had Lex been involved with the cyborg boxers? Lois knew that Lex had kept his fingers in many, numerous pies. How had Menken financed her father's research? From where had the money come? Sure, he had money from boxing and his gyms, but *that* much? Was that why Lex volunteered to speak on her father's behalf with the medical ethics board, before her father had gone into witness relocation? Or had he done that because of her?

She set down her briefcase. Lifting up the receiver of her phone she called MPD. "Inspector Henderson? Lois Lane. Is there any way I could take a look at the evidence in my father's case? Menken's gym and the cyborg boxers?... Yes, I know it's closed, but something doesn't feel right." She rolled her eyes at his questioning her curiosity. "I was just wondering, where did Menken get the money to finance the surgeries?" She sat down in her chair and shrugged out of her coat.

"You know you should have discussed this with me before you took this on," Clark told Lois, setting down his coffee on her desk. "I mean, we're a team."

*Yeah. Sure. Right. **That** was what he meant. Men! "Sometimes players have to wait on the bench while other players run with the ball."*

"You're in over your head in this one, Lois," Clark replied. Thanks for the vote of confidence there, partner. Lois picked up her coffee. "If you can't handle the heat, stay out of the story." She took a sip of her coffee. It burned her tongue. That was strange. A minute ago her coffee had been cold. She shrugged it off. "Besides, I'm first and foremost a professional. And I would never do anything to compromise my personal safety or the integrity of my work."

Jimmy walked up behind her with a suit bag in his hand. "Lois, this just came for you. The dry-cleaner said he had a terrible time with the... uh..." He unpacked the 'outfit' – a yellow leotard with bright yellow feathers around the neck and wrists, as well as a feather tail. "... the feathers."

She grabbed her costume away from Jimmy but not before seeing the smirk across his and Clark's face. Great. So much for her integrity.

Lois walked down the street outside the Daily Planet. There was music, balloons, and joy in the air. It was the Daily Planet Carnival for charity. She had been looking forward to this for months. Why didn't she feel happy to actually be there? She was eating cotton candy, the best fair food available... well, next to caramel apples. She sighed. Was it because she was there alone? Or that her life felt empty for some reason?

Her dreams had progressed to her time at the Metro Club. Instead of backing her up at the office, Clark had invaded her undercover turf, because he felt she couldn't handle the assignment on her own. What was with her subconscious anyway? She *had* handled the undercover work just fine on her own in real life. Why, suddenly, did subconscious think she had

needed the backup of her partner?

"Step right up! Step right up, folks," hollered Jimmy. "And have your futures told by Madam Blavatsky. She knows all, she sees all, and she tells all."

She couldn't help but smile at Jimmy's sales pitch. "How much of my dollar is going to charity?" she asked him with mock suspicion.

"One hundred percent! One hundred pennies of your dollar will go to charity. See your destiny with Madam Blavatsky!" Lois chuckled, taking a bite of cotton candy. "Okay, I'm sold."

"Lois, is that you?" Perry asked hopefully, emerging from the tent dressed... well, dressed up as a carnie fortune-teller, a female one: dark wig, turban, and long red nails. "Honey, I cannot keep these fingernails on. How in thunder do you women..." He adjusted his falling boobs. "... put up with all of this is beyond me?" He grabbed a man passing on the street. "Come on..." He pulled the man into his tent. "Come on, Lois!"

A man with dark hair, glasses, and a flannel shirt passed by on the street. "Clark?" she murmured and automatically went to follow him.

Perry returned at that moment and took her shoulders, guiding her towards the tent. "Lois, I'm about to lose a customer," he said, in his female Madam Blavatsky voice.

She nodded and entered the tent with him to fix his nails.

Less than a minute later she heard shouting, "Look out! Look out! I can't hold this!"

Lois dropped Perry's hand and stepped back out of the tent to see a man on a crane over the stage, teetering with a huge speaker. He was yelling for another man, playing guitar below him, to move. The other man couldn't hear him due to his headphones.

It's too dangerous, Lois could hear Clark tell her.

A sudden chill gripped her. "Clark?" she whispered, looking around. Why had she heard his voice? It must have been in her mind. Clark didn't exist, she reminded herself, and yet, she found herself looking to the sky and hoping to see a flash of blue and red from another man whom she didn't expect to see either. "Superman," she said aloud, but her call went unheeded in the din.

"Hi, Lois," said Dan, suddenly appearing out of the crowd with a grin. "You call?"

"Look out below! Get out of the way," the man holding the speaker hollered, but the guitarist continued to ignore him. "I can't hold it! Look out below!"

Lois gasped and turned into Dan's chest as the speaker fell and flattened the guitarist.

"Great shades of Elvis!" Perry shouted, pulling off his wig. "Somebody call the EMTs! Come on, Scardino, Olsen, and you there..." Their boss pointed to a burly man, waving him to follow. "Let's see if we can move that speaker off that man!"

There was a blonde woman standing at the side of the stage and screaming, "*Calvin?!?*"

Lois just stared at the scene unfolding in front of her as Dan went with Perry and the others.

Superman hadn't come. He didn't exist. Why couldn't he exist?

Chapter Six

*Clark was dressed in a navy sailor's coat and distinctive 'man of the docks' appearance. He was even sporting a mustache and goatee and different glasses. **This** was his disguise?! Please. If Lois could see straight through it...*

"I came to see the show," was his lame excuse.

"You will ruin everything," Lois said, pacing her small dressing room.

"It looks like you're really close to the story," he retorted,

heavy with sarcasm.

"I am. For your information, I spent the entire afternoon with the leader of the Metros, in his inner sanctum..." Okay, she had been serving drinks and trying not to get her butt pinched, but still...

"Wearing this?" Clark asked softly, touching the yellow feathers around the neck of her chicken costume. She slapped his hand away.

"And who are you supposed to be? Popeye the sailor man?" she retorted. If he was going to make fun of her costume...

"Five minutes," the stage manager called from in the hall outside her dressing room. She rushed to the door and shut it, so no one would see her together with her partner.

"Go away," she told Clark in a hissing whisper.

"I'm here to back you up," he informed her.

"I don't need back-up."

"I think you do. I mean, how did you get so close to this guy anyway?" he asked, sounding distinctly jealous.

Great! Clark was the overprotective, jealous type. Just what she needed in a partner. If she made him think she wasn't as sweet and innocent as he obviously believed her to be, maybe he would back off.

"He's a man. I'm a woman. Do you want me to draw you a diagram?"

Whatever response was on Clark's lips died, when the stage manager called to her again, "Places! That means you, sweet thing."

"What did you find out so far?" he said instead.

"Johnny and his sister don't actually see eye-to-eye. There's some type of power struggle going on. Now, fly!" Lois told him, shooing him out of her dressing room.

"And miss your debut?" He chuckled. "I think I'll stick around."

"Clark, you will stick out like a sore thumb," she warned him.

"Well, thanks for worrying, but..." Clark started.

He was interrupted by a knock on her door by the stage manager, "Let's go!"

"I think you're on..." Clark continued with a pinch of her cheek before leaving out the curtain. "Sweet thing."

If Lois had time, she would wipe that smirk off his face with the floor, but she was wanted on stage, so it would have to wait. She shot his departing back one last growl before going to the mirror and removing her robe. She checked that her chicken's head hat was on straight and her butt wasn't showing too much out of the bottom of her leotard. Show time! God, sometimes she hated undercover work.

Dan caught up with Lois at a booth where she was knocking down milk bottles with a baseball. She was angry, angry at Dan for blowing her off, angry at Clark for thinking she wasn't up for a little danger in her work, and angry at Superman for not existing in the real world.

"What are you doing here?" she snapped at Dan without giving him the regard of looking at him when she spoke.

"Are you mad at me, Lois?" Dan asked as if it were a new experience with him.

Oh, please. Why in the world shouldn't she be mad at him? He sent her flowers to break their lunch date. A box of chocolates arrived after his last minute phone call to cancel their dinner date. Chocolates! And then he showed up here, at the festival, without prior notification that he would be coming. Right. She should be ecstatic. She threw one last baseball and stormed off. "Yes, I'm mad at you."

Dan grabbed her prize and followed after her. "Me? Why me?"

"Because you showed up here unannounced and just assumed I'd be free to see you," she growled.

"You are, aren't you?" he asked, handing her the crab-thingly prize she had just won.

Gee, thanks. Just what every woman wants to hear – her lack of a social life stated so baldly. "And because you think gifts solve everything!" Lois pressed her lips together, shaking her toy. "And you won't talk to me about your work," she said, getting to the crux of the matter.

"Hold on, Lois. You know that's not personal. And I'm here because I want to be with you whenever I can," he replied with his usual amount of Scardino charm. "It's not some dumb guy thing, Lois. I'm a federal agent and you're a reporter. Our professional loyalties conflict. Not to mention the fact that if you know too much about what I'm doing your life could be in danger."

He didn't just say that, did he? "Oh, so that's what this is? You protecting the little woman?"

"Sometimes," Dan admitted.

"I don't need protecting," Lois told him straight out.

"What do you need? What do you want, Lois?" he asked. She threw up her hands and stomped off.

"What are you talking about?" Lois asked confused.

"Toni asked me to meet her at the club this afternoon," Clark said, smiling nervously.

"For what?"

"Well, I'm a man. She's a woman. Would you like me to draw you a diagram?" he retorted as his nervous smile turned beaming.

That line sounded familiar, Lois thought, pressing her lips together as she crossed her arms. He better not be implying that he would cross that line? He was her partner. Hers!

Perry came through the newsroom and passed by Lois' desk. "Lois. How's the..." Her boss paused as he took in her outfit. "... undercover work coming?"

"Fine, Chief..." Lois replied, lifting her raincoat up higher on her chest. "Fine... fine..."

"Well... I didn't think you'd..." He chuckled with a glance at Clark. "... chicken out on me."

Clark laughed with Perry as their boss walked off and Lois glared at her so-called partner. She owed him a good throw-down, but it would have to wait. She had a story to write.

Lois' home phone rang.

"Hello, Lois," said Bobby Bigmouth's voice in her ear.

"Did you get what I was looking for?" she asked him.

"I don't see any duck. I wanted Peking Duck, Lois," he told her.

"They didn't have duck. You have to order it in advance."

Lois rolled her eyes as she dried her pots and pans. Once a month, she cleaned all her kitchen items to get rid of the dust so no one would notice she really didn't cook.

"Oooh. Slippery Shrimp! I love Slippery Shrimp. Mmmmm. Nirvana."

"What?" she asked, confused.

"It's what you asked for. A code name. Project Nirvana. Hey, Lois," Bobby continued. "Are you sure your boyfriend Scardino is with the DEA?"

"He's not my boyfriend," she corrected.

"All right. All right. It's a figure of speech," replied Bobby with a chuckle. "According to what I'm hearing on the street, he's not DEA. He's FDA."

"What?" Had Dan been lying to her?

"Food and Drug Administration, Lois," Bobby explained. "He's one of those guys who can say 'yes' or 'no' to guys who want to market new drugs."

"Well, you must have the wrong Scardino," she responded. Dan better not be lying to her.

“All right. All right,” Bobby said between bites. “If you say so.”

“Well, what else did you get?” Lois asked, picking up some sticky-notes and a pencil.

“Project Nirvana has something to do with Intergang. I don’t know what, and I’m not sticking my neck in that noose and you didn’t hear it from me, and that’s all I know. And you know what else: we’re even.”

Whoa! Bobby Bigmouth was scared of Intergang? “Bobby. Bobby. Bobby!” she tried to interrupt.

“Great dumplings, Lois,” Bobby said before hanging up.

“Bobby?”

Terrific. He was gone.

“Lois, I had no choice. Now, Toni will stop looking for a leak.” Clark turned and picked up something from the other counter to finish making his tea. “At least my cover’s still safe.”

“Well, Merry Christmas! And Happy New Year!” Lois threw up her hands in mock joy.

“Sometimes on a team, the person carrying the ball gets hemmed in and she has to hand off to another member of the team, who’s in a better position to score,” he said with a pleasant smile. He really liked tossing her words back into her face, didn’t he? And what in the hell did he mean by ‘score’?

A knock at his front door interrupted that very question on her lips and they both looked at the door.

“You better go. She’s here,” he told her.

“Who? How do you know who it is?” she asked incredulously.

“Because I’m expecting a... dinner date,” he said. Then he clarified. “Toni.”

“Oh.” So **that** was how it was, was it? Was that with whom he was going to ‘score’? Lois ground her teeth together. Was **that** how he did his undercover work, did he? “I get it. You don’t have to draw me a diagram.”

Toni knocked at the front door again.

Clark crossed his arms and smiled at Lois with satisfaction. “You’re jealous.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Jealous? Are you out of your mind?” Lois scoffed. She wasn’t jealous! That was ridiculous. She was in love with Superman. Clark wasn’t even a blip on her radar. Please! Ha! Only... Only... Only...

He grabbed her shoulders. “You better hide, Lois. She can’t see you here.”

If he was going to blow **her** cover, maybe she should blow his! “I don’t want to hide!” She fought him as he pushed her into his bedroom.

“I’ll find some way to distract her and then you sneak out,” he suggested.

“No!” Lois continued to fight. “Ya!”

Clark held up a finger to her face in a warning to keep quiet. Lois heard him go and open his front door as she simmered in his bedroom.

“Once again, I’m in your debt,” Toni told Clark. “I thought I’d pay you back with a home cooked meal. How does lasagna sound?”

“Delicious,” Clark responded.

Lois rolled her eyes. “Delicious!” she mouthed. Of course he would fall for a woman who could cook! Men! They were all alike. She heard the door shut and then their feet coming down the stairs.

“Nice place,” Toni said.

“It belongs to a friend of mine. He lets me stay here whenever I’m in Metropolis,” replied Clark, waving at Lois to stay hidden. She crossed her arms and glowered at the two of them.

Clark put his hands in his pockets and plied Toni with his charm. “You know you don’t have to do this.”

“I want to,” she told him, unpacking the bag of groceries she had brought with her.

“Do you always get what you want?” he asked.

“Not always. How about you?”

“Let’s see,” Clark said, turning Toni around, dipping her, and pressing a kiss to her lips.

The nerve of that man! Lois’ jaw dropped. He was supposed to have a crush on her! Then Clark waved for her to leave as he kissed Toni. Oh, so it was just a cover for Lois to escape. Yeah, right. Well, she knew when she wasn’t welcome, she thought and tiptoed out of the apartment. She stopped to take another glance at them and Clark, somehow knowing this, continued waving her out.

When she was at the door, Clark lifted Toni up from the dip.

Toni’s attention was glued on Clark. “You don’t waste any time, do you?”

Lois rolled her eyes. Clark wasn’t **that** good of a kisser. Then she softly shut the door behind her.

Yeah, he was.

She sighed as she recalled the kiss they had shared on Trask’s airplane. She stood at Clark’s door for a moment and remembered that kiss again. How Clark’s lips had felt against hers. How she had felt in his arms. How safe and protected. How treasured he had made her feel. She pursed her lips again. Now, he was kissing Toni Taylor – the head of the Metros – with those lips! The jerk! Those were **her** lips!

No. That’s not what she meant, Lois told herself, marching down the steps back to her car. She wasn’t jealous of Toni. If she was jealous of Toni, it would mean that she had feelings for Clark... And she most certainly did not have feelings for Clark!

‘Okay,’ Lois admitted to herself as she sat down in the driver’s seat of her car. She **did** have feelings for Clark.

She had angry, mad, fists of fury feelings for her partner, but certainly not romantic feelings!

Lois sat up in bed, adrenaline rushing through her blood.

“Oh, no. No. No. No.”

She pulled her knees up to her chest and ran her fingers through her hair. She had totally wanted to switch places with Toni and be the one kissing Clark.

Lois handed Sarah a bowl of chocolate ice cream. “I just want one man, one whole man. Is that too much to ask for?” she said, starting to pace her living room. “And what do I have to choose from? I have one man who’s really wonderful, but he’s a figment of my imagination. I have one guy who’s really exciting to be with, but he won’t talk to me about his work. What do people talk about if they don’t talk about what they did all day? And one guy who is out of this world – literally.” She plopped herself down on the sofa next to Sarah and started to dig into her own bowl of ice cream.

“I thought you had given up the Superman fantasy,” Sarah replied.

“Well... my head has, but my heart is... uh... conflicted,” Lois snarled with tight fists.

“So it would seem,” replied Sarah, taking a bite of her ice cream.

“Could we just go over my options?” Lois suggested.

“One wonderful guy, who doesn’t exist. One exciting guy, who wants to control the conversation. And one superhero who is unattainable – literally. Oh, should I throw in the dead guy, too?”

Lois rolled her eyes. “No. I’ve given up on him.”

“I thought you said that his body was stolen from the morgue. Maybe he’ll come back to life,” Sarah suggested with an eerie tone to her voice, wiggling her fingers. “Oooooohhh.”

Lois raised her eyebrow and pressed her lips together. Like that would ever happen.

“Don’t look at me like that, Lois. It’s just as likely as you

ending up with a man from your dreams, isn't it?" the psychology student reminded her.

Sighing, Lois acknowledged nonverbally that once again Sarah was right.

"Or, it could be, that none of them is right for you," Sarah recommended, thankfully getting back on topic.

"You know, you seem to have this new annoying little habit of repeating back to me everything I just said," Lois told her.

"I just learned it. It's called reflecting. Sometimes we can't hear what we're saying unless someone reflects it back," Sarah replied, setting down her bowl of ice cream and holding up her hands to impersonate a mirror.

Lois gestured back to her in the same manner. "They make me really mad!"

Sarah chuckled, picking up her bowl again. "And what do you think you might want to do about that?"

Lois thought about that for a moment and then screamed in frustration.

There was a knock at her door. She approached it with her usual caution.

"Who is it?"

"It's me, sugar blossom," said a strange voice. "Dan."

Lois opened the door with annoyance.

"Hello, I'm doing a survey of women who resent having gifts sent to them. Please answer True or False," said Dan, pretending he was taking notes. "Wrapping paper offends me?"

Lois refused to answer.

"Uh-huh. I'm psychologically unable to receive gifts?" he continued with a big silly grin.

Still no answer.

"Gifts are okay, I just can't stand the guy sending them?"

"It's not about the gifts, Dan," Lois told him, walking away from the door. "It's about trust."

Dan sighed, his smile falling from his face, and followed her inside.

"It's not just dangerous for you to know what I'm doing, Lois, it's dangerous for me," he told her, sitting down on her sofa.

"That's not what I'm saying, Dan," Lois said, entering the living room with a tray of food. "I'm saying, you don't trust me."

Their conversation was interrupted by Dan's beeper, causing him to growl in frustration. "I... uh..." Dan started to say as Lois looked over his shoulder at his beeper, memorizing the number of the person who just paged him.

Lois covered up her snooping under the guise of handing him a cup of coffee.

"You're looking for something that doesn't exist," he said, pocketing his beeper again. He sounded distinctly distracted as he continued speaking, "The perfect man. The perfect relationship. The perfect life." He stood up. "Excuse me," he told her, heading for her phone.

She poured herself a cup of coffee and smiled knowingly to herself. "Nirvana?"

"What?" he gasped.

"The perfect life," she restated. "Nirvana. Utopia. Camelot. Eden."

"Yeah. Those places don't exist, Lois. The real world is what we have to deal with," he stated, being more serious than she had ever seen him before.

The curtains behind him fluttered in the breeze, causing Lois to look past him and into the darkness.

Dan looked down at his beeper with a roll of his eyes. "Super."

Lois imagined Superman landing at her window and being annoyed at finding Dan in Lois' apartment. A hint of a smile appeared on her lips. Would Superman be jealous of Dan?

Lois picked up the phone at work and dialed the number she had seen on Dan's beeper the night before.

A recorded voice answered. "You have reached the office of Charles Knox, president of Omnicorp. Please leave your name and number and the purpose of your call. Thank you for calling Omnicorp." Beep.

She hung up with pressed lips. Looking around the office, she saw Jimmy and Perry absorbed in some sort of nature program. She got up and approached them.

"Jimmy, I need you to do some research. I need you to find out everything you can about Omnicorp and Charles Knox. He's the president."

"Okay," Jimmy responded, his eyes never leaving the television.

"I'm going to meet a source," Lois told them.

"Okay," Perry replied in the same monotone voice as Jimmy. He also was completely absorbed in the TV.

She looked between the two men and shook her head.

Dan walked down a dark hallway, late at night. He was dressed uncharacteristically in a suit and tie. Lois almost didn't recognize him. Even his hair had been combed and was under control. He walked past and then turned back to a bespectacled, balding man in an adjacent hallway.

Dan held out his hand to the man. "Hi, Charles Knox, right? Dan Scardino: FDA." When the man ignored his hand, Dan pointed at the man's briefcase. "Is that...eh... the money?"

The man lifted up the briefcase, unfastened the locks and opened it up so Dan could see the bundles of money inside. "Let's talk dates," the man said to him.

Dan's natural silly personality slipped out. "We hardly know each other, but hell, if you're paying..."

Mr. Knox pointed his finger in Dan's face. "Go be Chuckles the Clown on *your* time. On my clock, shut your mouth."

Dan took a deep breath.

"Now," Knox continued. "We want FDA approval on the drug, and we want it by the first of the year, and we want it guaranteed."

"You got it," Dan agreed.

Knox set the briefcase down on the ground and left.

Dan rolled his eyes and picked up the briefcase. He turned and looked around the next corner of the hallway, before heading to the elevator. Had he heard her?

When she saw that Dan was alone, Lois made her move. She stepped up behind him and said, "So, this is what you didn't want me to find out about?"

His eyes popped in surprise as the elevator dinged. Dan grabbed her arms and took her inside with him. Then he double-checked that no one saw them talking before the elevator doors shut.

"Lois," he hissed, turning to her. "There are things going on that you can't know about."

"Really?" she replied, leaning against the wall of the elevator and glancing down at her notepad. "Like you posing as a corrupt FDA researcher and the man you just met with is the president of Omnicorp, who wants you to push through a new pain killer called Nirvana that the DEA thinks might have mind-altering effects?"

"How do you know that?"

"Because I'm a reporter. A *reporter!* Remember?"

"Lois, I need you to stay out of this," he insisted.

"So that's why you won't talk to me about your work? You don't trust me," she replied. "You think I'm going to print whatever I'm going to find out about this, don't you?"

"Lois! Stay away from this," he ordered.

"Excuse me?" Lois retorted, stepping out of the elevator.

"Stay..."

“What am I? A house pet?” she snapped as the elevator doors started to close on him.

He pushed his way out of the elevator, but not before the door shut on him and the briefcase.

“I want you to know I would never use someone close to me just to get a story. So, here, I want you to have these,” Lois said, throwing her notepad at him. “These are all my notes on your *stupid* case. Good luck!” She turned on her heel and marched out of the building.

“Hi,” said Clark, coming up behind Lois in the newsroom.

“Where have you been?” she asked, filing some paperwork. “I’ve already finished the story.”

“Well, save room for a sidebar on Toni Taylor. I’ve just been saying goodbye,” he told her with a slight shrug.

“A touching farewell, I suppose,” she replied, heavy with the sarcasm, as she walked back to her desk.

“She wasn’t all bad.”

“Well, nobody is all bad, Clark, or all good,” she explained to her naïve partner. “Except Superman.”

“Naturally.”

“Superman, for example, would not have tried to cut me out of the story by ratting on me to the opposing team. It’s a good thing I got myself back into the game and scored the winning touchdown,” she gloated, crossing her arms in pride.

“Well, sometimes, the quarterback has to fake a throw to his primary receiver in order to free up his secondary target,” responded Clark, obviously a lot better versed in football jargon than she had expected.

“I’m getting really tired of fumbling around with all these football metaphors.”

“Me, too,” he agreed. “I pass.”

“Let’s drop the ball, okay?”

“Okay.” He grinned. “But tell me, honestly...” Clark continued, leaning against her desk so their faces were less than a foot apart. “You weren’t the slightest bit jealous of me and Toni Taylor?”

Lois grinned. Oh, he was going to play *that* card, was he? “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” she denied. “Me, home alone, in a shumpy robe, crying into a tub of Rocky Road.” Ha! Showed him! It had been plain chocolate, not Rocky Road. “In your dreams, Kent.” As she said these words, Lois felt herself narrow the space between them by half.

For some reason, he kept smiling, as if he were perfectly at peace within her personal space.

“In. Your. Dreams,” Lois repeated.

Lois pulled her Jeep Cherokee into her parking space under her apartment building. She sighed and leaned against her steering wheel. She had a real man interested in her for the first time in a year and all she could do was think about Clark... the man of her dreams.

Chapter Seven

Lois put on her full-length, pale-pink, silky nightgown with matching robe. She had bought it over a year ago after Lex had saved her from Menken. She had thought that maybe, someday, something might develop romantically between her and Lex and she wanted to be ready. Instead Lex had died before their relationship had ever made it that far, before she had ever let it get that far.

She wasn’t quite sure *why* she had put on the nightgown. It wasn’t as if she hoped Dan would show up and whisk her off her feet. She didn’t. Actually, Lois really didn’t want to see him after their fight earlier that night. So, for whom had she put on this outfit?

Lois took off the robe and climbed into bed, turning off the light. She tossed and she turned, unable to get comfortable.

Was she hoping that a superhero would show up at her window and take one look at her in this nightgown and... *What?* Nothing. She sighed. Superman had always been – would always be – a fantasy, that unattainable goal of perfection. She scoffed at herself. Nirvana.

Lois turned the light back on. Sleep was avoiding her. She looked at the telephone. She got out of bed and pulled a romance novel off her shelf: *Where the Lost Aprils Are*.

Lex was dead. He had died in her arms, professing a love for her that she had never returned. Sure, she had admired the man: his accomplishments, his connections, his generosity. Now, she was beginning to think she never really knew the man behind the façade.

She looked at her bedside telephone again, this time placing her hand on the receiver.

Dan. She didn’t know what to think of Dan Scardino. He obviously didn’t trust her. She knew that discretion was an essential part of his job, but if he thought she was the type of person to blab everything she heard from her ‘boyfriend’ on the front page the Daily Planet... well, he really didn’t know her at all.

Truth be told, the one person she wanted to call on the phone at this moment and talk to... wasn’t Dan. It was her best friend; not Mayson, but a man who didn’t have a telephone... well, not one that Lois could access any more than she could Mayson’s.

Lois climbed out of bed and got dressed in her black leggings, a tank top, and a navy flannel shirt she had used once on an undercover assignment. It reminded her of the flannel shirts Clark often wore on his days off.

She walked out of her building. It was late, and she knew it probably wasn’t the best time of night for a stroll, but she wasn’t doing herself any good lying in bed and not sleeping.

344 Clinton Street. It wasn’t that far away. Actually, from her dreams, she knew exactly where Clark lived; she hadn’t needed to do the drive-by she had done on her way home from her stake-out on Scardino earlier. She knew she had never walked down Clinton before, even though it was nearby, even if she did almost daily, or nightly, now in her dreams.

She needed to go and look at the apartment and prove to herself that it wasn’t the same place as from her dreams, prove to herself once and for all that Clark didn’t exist. He was a figment of her imagination. If she could do that, then she could move forward towards forgiving Dan for not trusting her.

It was a long walk because she had taken it slow, but Lois made it there in less time than she expected. She felt kind of silly – kind of nervous – as she stood on the sidewalk outside of his building. She knew she was at the right locale, although she recognized it more from her dreams than by the building number. Reluctantly, she climbed the steps. Higher and higher. She kept hoping that around the next bend, the next corner, the building would change and it would stop looking like Clark’s home.

Before she knew it, Lois was standing in front of his double front doors. It looked exactly the same. She swallowed. Here it was; the moment of truth.

Hanging from her wrist was a miniature flashlight. Either she beamed her flashlight into some stranger’s apartment, and they called the cops on her and she spent the night trying to figure out how to explain her way out of her actions without sounding insane, or her light would show Clark’s apartment: the apartment with the staircase just past the door down into the living room, where his couch, coffee table, and TV were.

She took a deep breath and let the light shine in. There were no curtains blocking her view into the dark apartment, because no one was living there. She could see the staircase down into what should be Clark’s living room, but it was covered in dust and debris. Piles of newspapers and paint cans littered the place. Lois took a step back, her hand up at her mouth.

It looked just as it had when she had barged inside that day she thought Clark had been meeting Superman. The apartment appeared to be in the same condition: abandoned because Clark didn't exist to move into it. She switched off her flashlight and ran down the stairs.

As Lois approached her apartment she saw a familiar figure sitting on her front stoop.

"Hey," said Dan.

"Hey," she replied.

"I thought..."

She waved for him to stay seated as he started to stand. "Go on... Sit down."

"I thought about what a jerk I was," he told her.

She sat down next to him and rested her hand on his knee a moment. "Oh, Dan."

"I thought given the size of my jerkiness, I thought maybe roses, maybe jewelry, maybe a Lear jet..."

"We both overreacted."

"I didn't bring you anything, Lois, because I don't want to dazzle you. I just want to be with you, so can we..." He motioned towards the door with his head. "... talk?"

"Sure," she replied, patting his knee and standing up. "Come on inside."

Then next morning, early enough that Lois hadn't gone to work yet, but late enough that the sun had already made its appearance, she was on the phone with her substitute therapist and friend, Sarah.

"So, basically, what you're saying is..." Lois said to Sarah. "That all my life I've attracted men that are controlling or incomplete or downright liars because... because..." She was at a loss.

"Keep going," Sarah encouraged her.

"Because I like being treated that way?" That couldn't be right. "But if I like that kind of man, and I get that kind of man, why am I not happy?"

"We both know you like chocolate, right?" Sarah asked.

"Is it that obvious?" Lois mumbled.

"But you know it's not good for you. The older and wiser we get, the less tolerance we have for something that's not good for us," Sarah told her, sounding older than her years.

Lois sighed in defeat. *Please tell me, she thought, that Sarah doesn't want me to give up chocolate, too?*

"You're not a victim, Lois. So, stop acting like one. You know who you are going to end up choosing. You've known it all along. There's only one answer. The problem is accepting the fact that you're scared; you're scared of moving forward with your life, scared of moving closer to someone new, scared of letting go of the tight control you have over your life and your emotions enough to let someone in. So, you need to ask yourself, are you ready for that next step?"

"How come you never ask the simple questions?" Lois inquired.

"Hey, Lois, I would if I knew any easy answers," Sarah replied.

Lois and Dan sat next to each other in the gallery of the courtroom, waiting for the trial of the Wilder women to start. The Wilder women were the doctor and her mother who had kidnapped Jimmy and Sarah, brainwashed them using the drug Tysian, and turned them into assassins. Perry, Jimmy, and Sarah sat on the other side of Lois.

Sarah leaned forward and looked encouragingly at Lois with a nod towards Dan. The reporter saw the DEA Agent intercept the glance. Fantastic. Dan reached over and took hold of Lois' hand.

"Not now, Dan," she whispered, moving her hand away. She

didn't want anything, *anything*, to distract that slimy lawyer, the one that the Wilder women had hired to defend them. "We need to talk afterwards."

"Oh, great. The 'we need to talk' talk," she heard Dan grumble to himself. He leaned back and spread out his arms – one of which went behind her back – and started bouncing the knee of his crossed legs, anxiously.

Sarah – who had still been leaning forward – caught this exchange and gave Lois a pointed nod. Lois gave a quick shake of her head.

A buff man sporting a grey business suit and a pony tail, sitting behind Scardino, stood up and walked out of the courthouse. Lois hardly noticed him, except that his exit caused her skin to form goose-bumps. Was she developing a Spidey-sense? Why had that man left? Why had he even been in the courtroom if he was going to leave during the opening arguments?

Do you smell something? Lois heard a serious male voice whisper in her ear.

"Superman?" she murmured. She hadn't smelled anything, only now...

Dan turned his eyes to her. "Huh?"

"I smell something. Do you smell something burning?" Lois asked, leaning towards Dan.

"No," he replied with a casual shake of his head before refocusing on the trial. Then he stopped. "Yes."

"Smoke!" they both exclaimed at the same time and jumped to their feet.

Dan looked behind their bench. "Bomb!" He grabbed the smoking briefcase as people started running from the courtroom screaming.

Perry, Jimmy, and Sarah ran out the opposite end of the bench. Lois stood there stunned that it wasn't her Spidey-sense that had warned her of the bomb, but her Super sense... Superman.

Dan ran into the center of the courtroom, set the bomb under the judge's huge and now abandoned desk. Then he returned to Lois, pulling her down between the benches and covering her with his body just moments before the bomb exploded. The desk shattered, shooting pieces of wood throughout the room. Parts of the roof crumbled down upon them from the jolt.

When it was over, Dan shifted from his protective position over Lois and shook dust and debris off his back. "Are you okay?" he asked her.

Lois nodded.

"If I had to guess I'd say that was meant for me," Dan said. "I better call in the lab guys."

"Lois, honey?" Perry called, coming back into the courtroom and waving away the smoke to see.

"I'll see you later," Dan told her with a pat on her arm before heading out the exit.

Lois still didn't speak, didn't move other than to nod.

Superman. Superman had saved her life. Superman had saved the life of everyone. And he didn't even exist.

Lois, she heard a male voice call her name. She turned and looked around the newsroom. There wasn't anyone close by. That was strange. She resumed typing.

Jimmy walked by her desk. "Jimmy! Did you hear something?"

"Like what?" he asked.

"It sounded a little like my name. You didn't say my name, did you?" she inquired.

"No." Jimmy glanced around. There wasn't anyone who appeared to be calling to her.

Lois, the voice repeated.

"There it is again." She froze and looked around.

“Lois, I didn’t hear anything,” Jimmy told her and shook his head, walking off.

Lois.

“Clark,” Lois whispered, again searching for him, her blood rushing with anticipation. But he wasn’t there. He wasn’t there because he wasn’t real.

There was a knock on Lois’ apartment door. She opened it to find a copy of the Daily Planet with the headline *Omnicorn’s Knox Arrested* in big letters being held in front of her face.

“Congrats!” said Dan, lowering the newspaper to show Lois his beaming face.

“Dan.” Of course. Who else would it have been? “Come on in.”

He lowered the newspaper further to show that he had brought her a bouquet of flowers.

Lovely.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t help myself,” he admitted as he walked inside, handing her the flowers.

Lois carried the flowers into the kitchen and pulled a vase out from a cabinet under her counter. “I wanted to...” she called to him. Then she noticed he was right there in the kitchen with her, not waiting in the living room, and she lowered her voice, “Thank you.”

Dan smiled at her and leaned against her counter, stealing a grape from a bowl of fruit she had been washing before he had knocked. “My pleasure. Just don’t make it a habit.”

Lois shrugged. It wasn’t a habit, per se. It was just her life. “I’ve been thinking...”

“Oh, right. The ‘talk’.” He rolled his eyes. “Do I need to sit down?”

She set the vase of flowers on her counter. “I don’t know... but I want...” She wasn’t sure what she wanted. Actually, she was sure. She wanted Clark Kent, but Clark wasn’t real. He was a figment of her imagination, just as Superman was. Well, not quite as much as Superman. Superman was more on the fantasy end of her imagination. Dan was real. She needed to live in reality if she wanted to remain sane and not hear voices calling to her when nobody was there. Lois waved her hands through the air. “Kiss me!”

“What?” Dan choked on the latest grape that had entered his mouth.

“I want to move our relationship to the next level. I want you to kiss me,” Lois told him, standing up straighter. She closed her eyes and puckered her lips and waited... And waited. And waited.

“No,” Dan replied.

Lois winced. “Get out!” How dare he? He had been throwing himself at her for weeks now, only to suddenly withdraw?

“No,” he repeated. “Not like this.”

“You’ve been leading me on,” she snapped at him, marching to her door. She twisted all the locks but still could not get it open.

“No, Lois,” Dan repeated again and caressed her arm with his hand. “I’m not rejecting you. I just don’t want our first kiss to be forced.”

She still felt humiliated. “Forced?!” She just wanted to get it over with, so that they could move on.

He reached for her hand, and he took it in his, leading her to the couch. “I want our first kiss to be natural, memorable for how wonderful it will be, emotionally based, not fear based. I’ve been thinking about it for a long time now, and I don’t want to ruin it by rushing into things.”

“Rushing?” she echoed.

“You’re not ready, and, as I told you before, I’m willing to wait until you are,” Dan whispered.

Lois leaned against his chest, relaxing as he wrapped an arm around her shoulder. “Wait?” She didn’t want to wait. This kiss

had been hanging in front of her all day like an omen, taunting her, growing bigger and heavier with its implication.

Dan kissed her forehead in the way Clark was apt to do when she was feeling bad and Lois melted further into his chest, wishing it felt like Clark’s chest. Wishing it *was* Clark’s chest.

It could be nice, she tried to convince herself. Dan really wasn’t a bad guy. He liked her. He was willing to work with her and accept her for the mess that she was. He was real.

She glanced up at him and he seemed blurry through her unshed tears. “Why is this so scary?” she asked him.

“Because you’ve been hurt before. Me, too. It’s scary for me as well, Lois. That’s why I want our first kiss to be perfect,” he murmured, brushing away the tear that crept down her cheek with his thumb.

“I don’t want perfection, Dan. I just want to feel...” Protected? Safe? Trusted? Special? Cherished? Loved? Clark made her feel all those things. No. She just wanted to feel something. *Anything*. She had been numb too long.

“Come on.” He nudged her shoulder with his. “Let’s go celebrate. Let me take you out for dinner. You hungry?”

Hungry? Possibly. Even her stomach was numb. She nodded.

“Do you like hot dogs?” he asked, pulling her to her feet.

Celebratory hot dog? Lois laughed, her mood instantly lighter. Sometimes Dan was too much, just the kind of too much she needed. “Yes, I like hot dogs,” she told him.

Dan had stopped moving, and Lois bumped into his chest. She glanced up at him to see why he had stopped and suddenly felt his hand on her cheek. His lips lightly graced hers in a simple, natural, everyday kiss.

It didn’t make her feel like a prized possession like Lex’s kiss had.

It didn’t make her feel like she was floating like Superman’s kiss.

It didn’t tug at her heart and soul like Clark’s kiss.

But it did make her feel something. She raised her hand up to his head to pull it back when he started to move away. He came back willingly for the second kiss, deepening it.

When he moved away again, she murmured, “Perfection.”

Not because it was the best kiss she had ever had. It certainly could not compare to the passion of kissing Superman when he was doused with Revenge nor to the love of Clark’s kiss when he left during the heat wave. But because it was just the kind of kiss she needed at that moment. It, at least, was real.

Lois walked into the newsroom the following Monday morning with a new outlook on life. She hadn’t had a single Superman / alternative life dream all weekend. She felt good, and it showed. It must have showed because as soon as she sat down at her desk she overheard a conversation between her boss and her photographer.

“Jimmy!”

“Yeah, Chief?”

“Who’s that at Lois’ desk?”

“Lois.”

“Nah. I know my top investigative reporter and that ain’t her. Sure, she has the general features of Lois, but it can’t be Lois. Lois doesn’t smile like that. Lois doesn’t glow.”

Jimmy finally got that the Chief was joshing with him. “Now that you mention it, Chief. There is something other-worldly about that woman. What do you think it might be?”

“She could be a clone.”

“Do you think she was brainwashed?”

“Possible, Jimmy. Possible.”

“Hypnotized?”

“Or maybe that toe-dragging boyfriend of hers finally got around to remembering that she’s a woman and that he’s a man.”

“Ya think, Chief?”

"Very funny, guys," Lois interrupted, shooting them a nasty look.

Perry bounced his eyebrows at her. "So, Lois, you and Scardino have fun this weekend?"

She rolled her eyes. "No comment."

"Oh, come on, Lois. What did you two do?" Jimmy needed her.

"Gentlemen, and I *am* using this term loosely, they do call it a private life because..." She coughed for emphasis. "Because it is meant to be private."

"Oh, he definitely kissed her," her boss said to Jimmy with a side-long glance.

"About time."

The Chief raised his voice so that the whole newsroom could hear. "Lois Lane and Dan Scardino finally kissed. Who had this weekend in the pool?"

Lois plopped her head down on the desk. Just let this day be over.

Perry set a hand on her shoulder. "Lois, honey, just teasing you." Then he lifted his hand and his voice, "Paulson, over to the courthouse. Church is having a pre-trial hearing this morning. Go see what's up with that."

"Yes, Chief," called Paulson with a wave from across the room.

Jimmy slid into the chair next to Lois' desk. "So?"

Lois raised her head and gave him a look that he didn't need translated.

"Later, then. Gotcha," Jimmy said, jumping to his feet.

With a sigh, Lois started to move papers around on her desk. The Wilder trial had been postponed while the bomb was being checked into to see if it was related or unrelated to the women or if it was targeted at an unnamed DEA agent, who had happened to be in the courtroom at the time. Omnicorp Knox arrest? Already written. Was there something else she could be working on? Was there something to distract her from memory of Dan's lips on hers when he had kissed her goodnight the night before?

Too late, and the memory flooded her once more. She sighed. She recalled their first kiss and how she had compared it to her first kiss with Superman...

Her brow furrowed.

Superman had kissed her?

When had he?... She didn't... he hadn't... *Revenge!* Oh, God! She was remembering dreams she hadn't even had. How was that possible? The Revenge outbreak had happened months after the Metro Club incident. Lois' hands began to shake as she ran them through her hair. She closed her eyes and pictured again kissing Superman out on the tarmac after he had caught Miranda... after he, himself, had been dosed with Revenge.

"Lois Lane, I love you," Superman told her, and it took every ounce of her willpower to stop from throwing herself into his arms.

"Oh, Superman, you don't know how long I've waited to hear you say those words," she gushed, enthralled not only by his words but their possible meaning. "Oh, but you're not yourself. So, I couldn't take advantage of the situation." It was tempting, oh, too tempting, but if Clark could stop himself from benefiting from her infatuation, she could be as noble with Superman.

Superman nodded with understanding. He, like Clark, would not take advantage of her while under the influence of mind-altering drugs.

Unlike some other men. Lois grimaced, pushing out of her mind the thought of what had actually happened after the models had visited the Daily Planet. She returned her thoughts to her Superman fantasy.

"Oh, what the heck!" she exclaimed and pulled Superman's face to hers.

He didn't kiss her.

She kissed him!

Superman hadn't stopped her from kissing him; in fact, he actively joined in on the kiss. She wrapped her arms around the Man of Steel, and he embraced her as well, dipping her and deepening the kiss.

It was the most divine kiss – if kisses could be described as divine – she had ever felt.

She and Superman had let themselves go, allowed the pleasure of the moment to carry them away.

Never had such a kiss thrown open the doors to Lois' wanton side.

Never had Lois known she had a wanton side until she had kissed Superman.

He made her feel like a woman in a way no man ever had.

If Lex hadn't pulled them apart, they might have floated into the sky from the pure joy of it.

Lois opened her eyes and exhaled. Oh, man, Superman could curl her toes with his kisses. If only he were a real man. She sighed with desire and with regret. She forced that fake kiss out of her mind, locking it into an inner cabinet to be explored again later when she was alone. As far as fantasies went, Superman took the cake, and he was welcome to eat it as well.

She went back to straightening her desk. She hadn't been able to push all thoughts of that passionate kiss with the superhero out of her mind. She felt positively flushed. Dan certainly hadn't made her that hot with *his* kisses.

Lois instantly felt chagrined by these thoughts. It wasn't Dan's fault that he couldn't hold a candle to her fantasies. No man could.

Anyway, Dan's kisses had been chaste in comparison. If she were going to judge his kisses properly, she should compare it apples to apples, instead of apples to... well, a hot fudge sundae with whipped cream, nuts, and cherry on top. If she were to compare Dan's kisses with anyone, it really should be Clark.

Her brow furrowed again as she picked up a file and fanned herself. Kisses? Clark had only kissed her that one time in Trask's plane, hadn't he?

She closed her eyes and once again brought up her first kiss with Dan to the forefront of her mind. Let's see, she had contrasted Dan's kiss to Superman's, but she had initially also measured it up to Lex and to Clark.

Lex was understandable. She *had* kissed him on several occasions, and even less passionately than the chaste kiss she had shared with Dan. So, between those two, Dan was the clear victor in the kissing department. Although, in Lex's defense, their relationship hadn't progressed far enough for their... she sighed. Actually, it had. But Lex had insisted on treating her like a prize porcelain vase with which he needed to treat with care.

Lex and Lois had dated, but she had never been able to fall in love with him or feel like they were in a relationship, because she never felt loved and desired by him. Treasured, yes. Respected, yes. He wanted her, yes. But desired? Not so much.

A woman wants to know that she affects a man, physically. She wants to know that she causes him to sometimes lose control just being around her. Lex had never lost control. Ever. Even when Miranda had sprayed him with Revenge, Lex had stayed in control. Perhaps he had loosened his grip on a string or two of that control and complimented her more specifically than usual, but that had been it.

Superman's kiss had made her feel desired. In fact, Superman's kiss had made her feel like the most desirable woman on Earth, in the universe. But, she reminded herself once more, Superman was just a fantasy, and if her fantasy couldn't make her feel desired, no one could. Yet, Lex never had made her feel that way. Not once.

Unlike Clark. Lois winced. She didn't want to think of Clark. Thinking of him always made her chest ache. True, a part of her

had been happy not to see Clark in her dreams over the weekend. But another – a larger – part of her missed him.

If she were going to evaluate Dan's kisses, it really should be against Clark's – all three of them. Lois realized she was still fanning herself with the file and immediately stopped before she started the newsroom gossip mill to go into overdrive. Thank God, Cat wasn't in yet. Why did thinking of kissing Clark make her hot all over? Oh, right. The second time he had kissed her had been when he had said goodbye during the heat wave.

That didn't make sense, and she thought about that again. She hadn't dreamed about that incident either. She dropped her head into her hands. What was wrong with her? She was having memories of imaginary men from her dreams and yet the memories were of dreams she couldn't remember. The memories were there, somewhere in her head, but they were being elusive. Unless they popped up the forefront of her mind like that Superman kiss or – Lois gulped – or when Clark had kissed her goodbye.

She remembered that kiss like it had happened yesterday. It was the kiss that had made her start to see him as a man and not just her partner. Maybe she had dreamed about it, but hadn't been woken up by the dream, so it had stayed in her subconscious. Clark had been going to leave Metropolis and head back to Smallville.

Smallville, Kansas. What a name! She shook her head, like there could ever... Lois gazed over at her computer.

No. It does not – could not – exist.

She pulled her keyboard in front of her and pulled up the Daily Planet's atlas program. It took a few pages and even more clicks to get to a close-up of the state of Kansas.

The screen blurred in front of her. She blinked to clear the tears from her eyes as her heart thudded in anticipation. That couldn't be right. Yet, there it was! Located between Wichita and Topeka.

Smallville.

Lois' eyes went wide. How? She had never written a story on Kansas. She had never traveled through the state, never even gave the state a second thought until Clark Kent. She hadn't even made it through the entire 'Wizard of Oz' book, and Lucy had been obsessed with 'Little House on the Prairie', not her. There was no logical reason why Lois would have ever looked at a map of Kansas. There was no reason she should have this information bouncing around in her head. Okay, Smallville might be a real place, but Clark Kent was certainly not real. End of story.

She cleared the screen and went back to cleaning her desk. She needed a distraction. She needed a story. She needed some fresh air. She needed a Double Fudge Crunch bar, a whole box of them. She reached into her desk drawer and pulled out... nothing.

Darn! Her top box was empty. Lois picked up the box, flattened it, and tossed it into the recycle bin. There sitting on top of her second box of Double Fudge Crunch bars was a piece of notebook paper. She tossed it onto her desk and pulled out a candy bar. She would hit the gym tonight. Dan was out of town, so she could spend an extra hour on the Stairmaster.

Lois tore open the candy bar with her teeth, spit out the tab, and stuck the chocolaty goodness into her mouth. She sighed, finally relaxing as the smooth silky flavor filled her taste buds. She glanced down at the paper she had removed from her drawer.

Her hand fell from her mouth and what remained of her candy bar dropped to the floor.

At the top of the piece of notebook paper was written in her handwriting: *Clark Kent is real. Research Tempus to rescue Clark from dying in the past. H. G. Wells will help you.*

Lois' hands began to shake and she pushed her chair as far away from her desk as she could. "No," she told herself out loud. "It can't be." It must be a coincidence. It couldn't possibly be the same guy. It couldn't.

No. No. No. No., she thought.

Clark Kent wasn't real. He was her partner in her dreams. He wasn't real.

Then why had she written herself a note, telling herself that he was real? A note she didn't remember writing, despite it being in her handwriting. Her hand went to her mouth. Was Clark real? And if *he* was real... What did that mean about Superman?

No, she told herself. Even if Clark somehow had once existed in an alternative universe, there was no possible way that Superman was anything more than her fantasy. He was just too wonderful, too special, too perfect, too out of this world to ever have been real.

But what about Clark? His apartment existed. His hometown existed. Why didn't he exist? She stood up and walked to her desk, leaning over to read the note without actually touching it.

... rescue Clark from dying in the past.

Tears formed in her eyes and she wiped them away. *Clark died? In the past?* Clark didn't exist because he had died before he was supposed to? He was supposed to be here? At the Daily Planet? As her partner? But for some reason he died, stopping that event from ever happening? Was that what she was telling herself in the note?

No, that couldn't possibly be right.

That was insane.

But then, how did she have these memories?

Clark was a figment of her imagination. Just like Superman. Well, okay, *not like* Superman. Actually, he was the opposite of Superman in many ways, but imaginary just the same.

Lois nodded to herself and went to retrieve her chair. Back at her desk, she wadded up the piece of notebook paper and held it over her trashcan.

But...

What if he were real?

Her heart started to beat a rhythm she had only felt since Clark had kissed her lips and told her goodbye.

She loved Clark. She might not admit it to herself in her dreams, but she loved him. If he were real...

Lois flattened the notebook paper on her desk and tried to press out all the wrinkles.

If there were a way to save him... to make it so he *did* exist...

Eduardo walked by and Lois flagged him down, glancing again at that strange note she had pulled from her desk drawer.

"Hey, Eduardo, you ever heard of someone named 'Tempus'?"

Her colleague shook his head. "Tempus isn't a 'who', Lane, but a what."

"A *what*?" she repeated.

"Tempus means 'time' in Latin. Didn't they teach you anything in school?" he told her before continuing on his way.

"Apparently not," she snapped back. Like Latin was something she would ever need in 1995 Metropolis.

"Research 'time'..." Lois murmured to herself as she reread the note. "...to save Clark?" How did one research 'time'? What had she been thinking when she had wrote that? Why didn't she have a recollection of writing the note?

Lois focused again on the line *Clark Kent is real.* Oh, if that were true? *Research Tempus to rescue Clark from dying in the past.* Clark was real, but he had died in the past? How had he died? How could he have died in the past? Researching time would save Clark? And how could researching time save someone who had already died? Why would she phrase "time" as "Tempus" if she didn't know that Tempus meant time? And why in the world would a dead science fiction author – not to mention how? – help her save Clark?

Okay, she would pass on the "Tempus" and "H.G. Wells" references for now and instead look at the rest of the note. The handwriting wasn't all that clear; it certainly wasn't hers either.

She pressed her lips together. She pulled open a different desk drawer and removed her magnifying glass, hoping she might be able to read the note more easily if the letters were larger.

After studying the note a while longer, she came to realize several things. First off, the characters on the right side of the note were numbers.

Secondly, the person who had written the original note was of European origin. She recognized the tail at the top on the number 'one' as well as the lowercase 'g' appearance of the number 'nine'. Not to mention, the 'zero' with the line through it and the seven that looked more like a backwards capital 'F'. Claude used to write his numbers like that. Whoever wrote this note was from Europe. Americans weren't taught to write like that.

Thirdly, the numbers were cased together in groups of four numbers: xxxx – xxxx. Was it a phone number? No, phone numbers had seven not eight digits to them.

Fourthly, and perhaps not lastly, some of the words on the left hand side of the note were possibly names. Jamesison? Thurtonian? Marianna? People's names? Place names? Ship names?

Lois sighed, rubbing her temples. She was not going to figure out a way to save Clark today; that was obvious.

She needed to get out, get some fresh air, and clear her head. What had Perry said? Church was having a pre-trial hearing? Yes, she would go to that.

Chapter Eight

"Mr. Church, are you bitter about your time in jail?" a reporter asked Bill Church, Jr. as he walked out of the courthouse.

Lois' jaw dropped and her feet froze on the bottom step. *What in the hell?*

"No. No. I'm certainly not bitter," answered Church. He spotted Lois on the edge of the group of reporters and made a beeline to her. "Ah! Lois Lane!"

"Don't tell me you made bail?" she said, stunned.

"Bail?" Church chuckled with glee. "No. They're dropping the charges."

"*What?!*" she roared.

He winked at her. "All you need is a good lawyer," he replied, pointing back at his resident Intergang crocodile. Bill Church, Jr. continued down the courthouse steps, talking to the swarm of reporters surrounding him. "Anyway, I've just signed to write a book about the whole experience; it's called *Why This is The Greatest Country on Earth.*"

Lois rolled her eyes and shook her head. Here was another billionaire able to get away with kidnapping and attempted murder. Why was she surprised? Lex had...

Lex? Surely Lex hadn't been like the Churches? Lex had been a good man, an honest businessman, a philanthropist. He wasn't someone who would kidnap or murder...

Except he had.

Lex had killed Max Menken.

In cold blood.

Right in front of her.

Suddenly her thoughts gravitated to what Lex had said to her that night he had visited her apartment, following his discovery of her undercover work at the Metro Club.

"I only know that if I were a smart reporter looking for answers, looking for the source of all the problems in West River, I wouldn't look any farther than Toni Taylor," Lex had said.

Lois had taken him at his word and hadn't looked any farther. Why had she done that? She never took anybody at his word, especially a man. Yet, Lex had always had a way of making her do just that by telling her what he had thought she should do. And she had followed his suggestions, like she had no brain cells of her own.

God, Lois said to herself as she shook her head, *you're blind when it comes to men.*

After Toni had ended up in prison, the Riverside district had all been bought up by Lex – and at fire sale prices at that – and he had moved forward on his own redevelopment plans. Until his death.

Lois shook her head. It was at times like this, she wished Lex were alive, so she could ask him for the truth. But Lex was dead. A light bulb came on above her head, making her eyes pop. Lex may have been dead, but Toni Taylor was still very much alive. It was about time Lois paid Clark's old flirt a visit.

The year inside had not been good to Toni Taylor. Gone was the casually confident woman who had coolly taken over the Metro Gang from her brother Johnny. The brother had been killed when the Toasters had come in to do some damage at the Metro Club. Lois and Toni themselves had barely made it out alive. Lois shook her head.

Johnny *had* survived in her dreams. Lois didn't know how the addition of Clark Kent to the equation had changed things so drastically. Clark had told her that he had saved Toni in the fire, too, and that was why she had offered him a job as bartender. How had Clark had time to save both of the Taylors? Lois knew that Clark was wonderful, but did he have secret powers as well? Was he an ex-navy SEAL or something? He certainly had the body for it.

Lois pushed all thoughts of Clark out of her head. She wasn't here to learn about Clark. She didn't even want to think about Clark at the moment. She was here to learn about Lex Luthor, the *real* Lex Luthor.

She sat down at the table where the ex-head of the Metros sat. Toni's well-coiffed hair had been cut short and there was a scar across her cheek which had been added since the last time Lois had seen the woman. Toni's eyes also had developed a hardness that Lois didn't recognize.

"Well... Well... Well... If it isn't the late, great Lola Dane," Toni scoffed with a sneer at the reporter. Lois and Toni had never been friends, even without the addition of Clark Kent.

"Hi, Toni. I wanted to ask you about your relationship with Lex Luthor," Lois said, getting down to business.

A slow curl of a smile came to Toni's lips as she leaned back in her chair. "Ah... I was wondering when you were going to discover your idol was made of brass instead of gold."

Lois swallowed the bitter taste that suddenly appeared in her mouth. "What do you mean?"

Toni chuckled. "I heard he was shot and died in your arms, dying trying to save you." Her laughter became harder, more harsh, almost evil. "A bit anticlimactic for such a man, don't you think? *Ironic?*"

"How?"

"Come on, Lola." Even after learning Lois' real name, the woman had refused to call Lois by it. "You wouldn't be here if the scales hadn't finally fallen from your eyes." Toni had hit the nail on the head with that remark. "You want to know my relationship with Lex? Officially or unofficially?"

"Unofficially?" Lois echoed, a chill making the hairs on her arms stand-up. Then she remembered what Lex had told her. "Lex said that you had offered him a partnership of sorts."

Toni shook her head with pity. "I didn't offer Lex anything. I thought at the time I had been the one in charge but, the truth of the matter is, I was putty in that man's hands. I had fallen into his carefully orchestrated trap. Lex got what he wanted out of our relationship and left me with the trash to be picked up."

Lois pulled out her tape recorder. "Do you mind?" she asked, knowing this was probably a story she would learn more from on second hearing.

Toni shrugged. "Why not? It's not like he can follow through

on his threat from the grave, can he?”

The reporter turned on the tape recorder.

“I loved Johnny. It was Lex who convinced me that I’d do a better job at managing the Metros. He wanted to get rid of my brother as head of the Metro Gang. Johnny was running it into the ground by not moving with the times. Lex wanted to build a ‘Riverfront Redevelopment’ project on our turf. Johnny was giving him a hard time.” Toni rolled her eyes. “Johnny was really good at being a thorn in someone’s side if he wanted to be. Lex came into the Metro Club one night for a late pick-me-up...”

Lois’ brow furrowed in confusion. *Pick-me-up?* Lex wasn’t into drugs, was he? No. Not Mr. In-Control. “Do you mean a drink?”

Toni laughed heartily from her belly. “Oh, Lola, honey. Did you really think our waitresses dressed that way for tips alone?”

Lois’ shocked expression made Toni laugh harder. “What? You didn’t know you were being groomed to be a gentleman’s companion?” She smirked at Lois’ discomfort. “I wonder what little Miss Innocent Reporter would have done with a solicitation charge?”

The reporter took a deep breath. Toni wasn’t done with her story, and Lois desperately wanted to hear it. For now, she would discount the idea that she had actually gone undercover as a call-girl instead of waitress as pure payback for putting the woman in jail and not really true. “So, Lex Luthor came into the Metro Club...” Lois led Toni back to the topic at hand.

“And we hit it off. He invited me back to his penthouse for dinner later that week and discovered we had mutual interests in the West River. Over the course of the next couple of weeks, I’d come to his penthouse for a late night supper as we daydreamed about getting rid of Johnny and making the Metros go legit. Then one night Lex suggested we stop fantasizing and make it a reality. It was Lex who gave me the four prototype ‘Toaster’ guns. It had been developed and discarded by a division of Luthor Weapons a few years before.”

Luthor Weapons? Lois made a note on her pad. That – at least – was a fact she could double-check. Perry would want independent corroboration of Toni’s story.

“I had caught four guys trying to set fire to an old warehouse and hired them to torch West River,” Toni continued. “— but the whole plan had been Lex’s.”

“If that were true why haven’t you told this story before? Why didn’t you tell anyone about Lex’s involvement at the time of your arrest?” Lois responded, defending her old boyfriend.

“When he visited me while I was tied up at the torched garment warehouse, Lex insinuated that he could have me killed in prison if I said anything,” Toni explained with a shrug. “After he died I figured what was the point? Legally it doesn’t change anything – accusing a dead man of a crime.”

“Why tell me, then?” Lois asked warily.

Toni sighed. “Lex and I were seeing each other during the time he was also dating you. I should have been suspicious when he tossed you that rose.” She shook her head. “That’s how gentlemen used to choose companions at the club, by offering her a rose. If she accepted it, then it meant she accepted everything that came with it. If she didn’t, then the man would have to try elsewhere. It was Lex’s way of telling me that we were over and he had moved on to his next conquest.” Toni scoffed at herself.

Lois thought about that rose she had caught from Lex at the end of her song. Had he really expected her to bed him after that? Was that the real reason he had stopped by her apartment after her shift at the club?

“And I had thought he had done it so others in the club wouldn’t know we were lovers,” Toni finished.

Lois raised a brow. “Are you saying that you and Lex... had progressed past dinners?” This really shouldn’t shock Lois. Had she actually thought Lex had been as celibate as her during their

relationship?

A sly grin crept to the corner of Toni’s mouth. “As you know, there was nobody quite like Lex between the sheets.”

Lois’ jaw dropped. She couldn’t believe *that*, at least not in a positive way. Lex had been so reserved, so cold. She then informed Ms. Taylor, “Lex and I hadn’t... we weren’t intimate.”

“But you and Lex dated for months,” Toni remarked.

“Yes,” Lois almost whispered as she looked away.

“Why would he bother with you?” Toni inquired. “What were you to him? You weren’t rich. You didn’t have anything he wanted.”

Lois pressed her lips together at the offending statement, refusing to dignify it with a response.

Toni studied Lois. “Good God! By not giving yourself to him, you presented a challenge to Lex, a puzzle for him to solve.”

“Excuse me!” Lois snapped. “Lex loved me!”

Toni raised a brow. “Lex Luthor didn’t know the meaning of the word. He used someone until he had gotten from them what he needed and then he discarded her like trash.”

“Really?” Lois took in this information with a grain of salt.

“Really. I’ve had the opportunity to speak with Miranda – you know that perfumer who created that Revenge drug – once or twice in here before she got killed. She had a similar experience with Lex.”

Lois gulped as Toni chuckled. She hadn’t heard of Miranda’s death and then made a mental note to look it up in the archives.

“You presented Lex with a problem: your goodness, your naiveté, your quest for justice, your dogged search for the truth. Could he form public opinion through you? Well, obviously he could. Could he make you turn against everything you held most dear? Would you hand your very soul to the devil without knowing it? Pity he died before ever finding out.”

“Lex was not the devil,” Lois said, getting more uncomfortable by the minute in this room as if the walls were closing in on her. “He never would have treated me like that!”

Toni sighed. “Why not? That’s how he treated me. That’s what he did to Miranda. And I bet an extra year in this hell hole that we weren’t the only ones.”

The guard entered the room. “Time.”

Lois grabbed her recorder and switched it off. “One last question,” she said, standing up. “Do you know a Charlie King or a Clark Kent?”

Toni shook her head and shrugged as the guard led her back to the door. “Should I have? Did they work for Lex?”

“No,” Lois replied, closing her notebook. “He doesn’t exist. Neither of them.”

“Lois!” Perry called as she returned to her desk after a detour to the Fudge Castle. “Honey, did you hear?”

Lois stared at the Chief with confusion. Hear what? Had she missed some big event because of her Toni Taylor interview.

Looking at Perry with interest, she waited.

“Bill Church, Jr. They set him free on a technicality after that bastard kidnapped me!” Perry growled.

Oh, *that*. With a resigned sigh, Lois nodded. Old news. “I heard.”

Her boss raised a curious eye brow at her reaction... or lack thereof. “Doesn’t it make you want to do an exposé of the D.A.’s office?” he suggested lightly.

“Not really,” she replied honestly.

“Not really? Then pray-tell what are you working on that holds more interest to you?”

Lois continued to stare at Perry, unsure if she wanted to share her latest findings about Lex yet or if she wanted to wait for more concrete facts.

She remembered Toni’s accusations of Lex.

Lois felt as dead as the man who literally died in her arms. A

man, whom, until recently, she thought she had known, but now knew had been using her. What was more humiliating was that others had known about Lex's character and hadn't told her. She lowered her gaze from the Chief without a word. Of course those who knew weren't the type of people to confide in her in the first place.

"Lois, honey? Is something bothering you?" Perry asked softly. There was no fooling her boss.

Actually, after her interview she felt more raw than her usual hard-boiled self. Lois stood up without another word and brought her tape recorder into his office. She rewound the tape, hit play, and left as Perry re-entered. "I'm going to find Bobby," she informed her boss.

If anyone knew Lex's true nature, it was Bobby Bigmouth.

Lois stopped at her favorite Italian restaurant and bought a four-course meal. Then she sat in her Cherokee, waiting for Bobby to appear. She had left messages at all of his message spots. The food smelled heavy as her earlier ice cream sundae, with the works, upset her uneasy stomach. She needed to feed Bobby well if she wanted him to tell her all that she wanted to know.

Was this why Superman had come into her dreams? To show her the truth that she had been blind to before? Was Superman her subconscious' way of telling her to review all of her interactions with Lex? That made sense. Her subconscious wanted to make sure she didn't miss the information as it reviewed it, so it had concocted this superhero fantasy it knew she wouldn't be able to resist. What she didn't understand was how Clark had become tied into these memories.

"Lane! An appetizer and tiramisu? What have I done to deserve the royal treatment?" Bobby asked from her backseat, a cannelloni already dangling from his lips. As usual the man had entered her car without a sound.

"Bobby!" Lois gasped and then waited a moment for her voice to catch up. "Have I thanked you recently for not being evil?" Her hand clutched at her chest to calm her heart.

Bobby's eyes closed suspiciously as he folded the food bags within his arms. "You called me to thank me?"

"No."

He relaxed a bit. "Do you need more information on that boyfriend of yours? Dan?"

Dan? Lois thought blankly, having no idea about whom Bobby spoke for a moment. *Oh, Scardino.* Between Clark and Lex she had forgotten all about him. She placed a fake smile on her face. "No. As I'm sure you already know, Dan and I are fine."

"I don't doubt it. I heard the man finally kissed ya. About time," Bobby replied, less nervous about her taking back the food she had brought him.

"Is anything that happens within my apartment walls actually private?" she snapped.

His lips curved upwards. "He also kissed you at the restaurant last night, Lois," Bobby reminded her.

Oh, right. Lois decided to switch the channel back to the one she wanted to focus on. "What have you heard about Lex Luthor's involvement with Max Menken, the Toasters, and Toni Taylor?"

Bobby took a forkful of pasta and studied her as he chewed — unusually silent. When he swallowed, he finally spoke, "A four-course meal for information over a year old about a dead man?" He sounded suspicious again.

"I hoped the more food, the more you would tell me," she admitted. "I need to know."

"There were rumors around the time that Luthor was shot that the Boss had also been killed," he told her.

"The Boss? Bobby, why didn't you tell me?" she inquired.

Bobby shrugged. "You never asked."

Lois ground her teeth. "Tell me everything you know, Bobby. Did Lex lie to me?"

"Yes," he stated baldly.

"Did Lex date other women while we were together?"

He stopped eating and gazed sadly at her. "Yes."

"Why didn't you warn me? Why did you let him play me for a fool?" she sputtered, in disbelief. She had always thought of Bobby as... well, maybe *not* a friend, but at least a *friendly* source.

"You didn't want to believe it." He was digging back into his pasta.

"If you say 'love is blind' I'm taking the tiramisu back," she warned him.

"No, not love. Ego. Your pride wouldn't listen," Bobby clarified. "You wanted to believe the line he fed you, Lane, because his attention made you feel important. If it's any consolation that towards the end, his last few months, he had cut most of his ties with the other women."

"He had?" Lois felt a little flicker of hope that she hadn't been a complete sucker. That Lex had at least been honest at the end about loving her. Then she caught the disclaimer and her heart sunk. "Most?"

"Well, there was Mrs. Cox and the Japanese twins." Bobby shrugged. "Perhaps they had been *just* employees..."

"Japanese twins?" Lois echoed.

"Yes, they were his live-in concubines. I heard he had them sterilized when he had hired them, so he could have his way with them whenever, wherever, and however he liked." At her expression which must have been full of revulsion, he clarified, "Mind you, they were just rumors."

"Can you get me their names?" she asked, her jaw muscle twitching. It was another lead. She had no desire to ever speak to Mrs. Cox. She had always hated the woman. She believed the feeling had been mutual.

"I'll ask around," Bobby replied hesitantly. "They didn't speak English."

Lois glowered at him, not wishing to be discouraged and also not wishing to discuss her deceased boyfriend's sexual habits. Thank God she had decided to wait with Lex. "Did he have anything to do with Max Menken's boxers and my dad?"

"Gee, Lane, I thought it was well known that Menken wore briefs," Bobby retorted with a chuckle. Then he held up his hands in self-defense. "Sorry, it was too tempting. I had heard of the two of them meeting on several occasions. Apparently Menken was the middleman between Luthor Weapons Division and..." He paused as he gazed at Lois with sadness. "A doctor who was working on Luthor's super soldier project."

Lois forced the bile in her throat back down into her stomach. So, Luthor was behind the cyborgs her father was working on for Menken. The boxers must have been the test study. Was *that* why Luthor offered to go before the Medical Ethics Board on behalf of her father? He didn't want to lose his Dr. Frankenstein? She was glad her father had turned state's evidence at the end and ended up in Witness Protection. She only hoped it was enough to save him from Luthor's grasp. Those cyborg boxers were still at large.

She realized that Bobby was oddly silent as he watched her. "You okay, Lane?" he asked between bites.

Lois waved away his concerns. "Tell me everything. Tell me about the women Lex used to get what he wanted." She wanted to hear about everyone, but she would start with the painful stuff first.

A half smile appeared at the corner of Bobby's mouth. "This is starting to sound like more than a one meal meeting."

Terrific.

Antoinette Baines. Miranda. Toni Taylor. Lena Harrison. Mrs.

Cox. The Japanese concubines. Gretchen Kelly, MD. Diana Stride. Claudette Wilder. Amber Lake. Lisa Rockford. Lois Lane. And those were just some of the women Lex Luthor's name had been linked with during the few years before his death. The ones that Lois had recognized. Lex had also screwed over lots of men. Lois didn't think quite as literally, but who knew? This Lex Luthor was a complete stranger to her, so perhaps.

Dr. Kelly had been Lex's personal physician. Lois had met her after Lex's death. Odd woman. Now the strange possessiveness the woman seemed to have over Lex's body made more sense, if she had known him intimately. Lois shivered in disgust. She had always wondered if the good lady doctor had been involved when Lex's body went missing from the morgue. Not enough interest to check it out, just a stray thought. It still wasn't something she really wanted to check into.

Lois finally opened the last lock on her front door and went inside her apartment. She closed and locked the door before heading directly into her bedroom. She pulled out that pink nightgown and robe set and threw them into the trash. Even though she had never worn them with Lex — *thanking God every minute of every day for that!* — she doubted she would ever be able to put them on again without vomiting.

She peeled off her clothes and stepped into a shower as hot as she could make it without scalding her skin. Lois scrubbed her entire body until her skin hurt. After drying her hair and getting dressed into sweats she had bought after Lex's death, she went through all of her clothes, stacking them into three piles: worn while with Lex, never wore around Lex, and couldn't remember. The first and third piles were going to be washed or dry-cleaned again. The dress she had been wearing when they had first kissed would die a fiery death. Luckily, her clothes from hostage night at the Daily Planet were "evidence" and already out of her reach. She hoped they had met a similar end.

Lois had hired professional cleaners — or actually Perry had hired them for her — after Jimmy had attacked her, so her apartment surfaces had already been industrially cleaned. She now removed fabric cleaner from under her kitchen sink and went to scrub down every seat, sofa, and chair Lex had touched in her apartment while they had dated. She knew she was being paranoid, especially after all this time, but she knew she wouldn't feel comfortable in her apartment until it was done.

She had done the same thing to her rug after the pheromone incident. Then she had rearranged her furniture to remind her less of that night.

When every piece of fabric seating had been cleaned, Lois went into the bathroom and threw up the bile that had been sitting in her stomach all day. She couldn't hold it in any longer.

She wished that Clark were there to hold her, take care of her, to tell her it was over, and her life could only get better now that Lex was gone. Only Clark wasn't there. He'd never be there.

Lois leaned against the wall next to her toilet, pulled her knees to her chest, and let out the tears she had been holding in since she had come across that note this morning. She missed Clark with every fiber of her being, which was crazy because she had never actually *met* Clark. He didn't exist. How was her life supposed to get better without him?

Chapter Nine

Lois sat at her desk in the bullpen. She just sat there. She didn't currently have an active story, well, unless one counted following around the Church Group's police state forces at all hours of the day and night.

What was the point of sleeping? When she closed her eyes she either had nightmares of Lex or fantasies of Superman or, worse yet, more dreams of what her life with Clark would have been like. Maybe she should consider those "dreams" nightmares as well. She had been avoiding her bed like the plague and just

catching a few zzz's here and there on the sly. Like while at the office, where it was too loud and distracting to fall into REM sleep.

She felt dead tired like a zombie and probably looked like one too. Everyone seemed to be avoiding her like one, three. She had actually made Wally run out of the office in tears an hour earlier, not that she minded or felt guilt about it; she hadn't. He deserved it after bragging about his mayoral call-girl scandal article. She rolled her dry eyes. Like *that* wasn't the same story he tried to push through while the Chief had been held hostage by Bill Church, Jr. a few weeks earlier. Same bad story. Same bad info. She shot it down before Perry could. Speaking of which, her boss wasn't happy with her either.

Someone passed by her desk and dropped off some phone messages. They didn't say "Hello". They didn't pass "Go". They didn't want to go straight to Lois Lane's "Jail". They swooped in like Superman and anonymously left the papers on her desk and disappeared again.

Lois choked back a sob. *Just like Superman*. She was hearing voices again, hearing them while she was awake: his and Clark's. Not that she was ever fully awake or asleep lately, so technically it might be considered dream state.

Her eyes shifted down to the piece of paper. Dan called. *Again*. She wadded up the message and tossed it into the trash. She didn't want to talk to him and hear his uber-happy voice hum in her ear, or hear the latest excuse he had for staying in DC. She could live without that.

A shadow darkened her desk as someone dared to lean against the partition that separated her from lesser reporters. "Have I done something to offend you?"

Lois glanced up and saw Dan gazing at her with a curious interest.

"Dan," she stated, not having the energy to say or do more.

"I was getting worried about you, Lois. You weren't returning my phone calls and, according to the florist, you put a cease and desist order on all flowers. Then I saw this..."

Dan tossed a copy of yesterday's *Daily Planet* onto her desk. The headline: *'Toni Taylor says Lex Luthor was Mastermind Behind the Toasters'* screamed up at her, causing her head to throb.

"Why didn't you call?" he asked.

Lois raised her shoulders but couldn't even complete the shrug.

Dan knelt down beside her desk, closer, more intimate. He took hold of her hand. "Lois?"

"What was there to say, Dan? The man whom I had admired and thought loved me, and who I had considered loving in return, had turned out to be a maniacal madman bent on stealing my soul." Lois lifted her gaze to his. "What if you had discovered that Jena had actually been an undercover plant for Intergang? Would there be anything I could say or do to make you feel better?"

Dan's expression changed to one she had never seen there before. Had she actually slapped him across the face? She couldn't remember. He pulled her into his arms and held her. "I'm so sorry, Lois," he whispered. His lips kissed her cheek. "You shouldn't have been dealing with this alone."

No! Her mind and body screamed.

Dan kissed her again, this time closer to her mouth.

Lois stiffened, recoiling from his unconditional love. This feeling was too foreign.

He caressed her wet cheek.

Why was her cheek wet? *Oh, God!* She was crying. *No!* Lois Lane does not break down and especially not in the newsroom.

Her hands went to his chest to push him away.

Dan moved his lips to hers and gently whispered a kiss onto her mouth.

Push! Her mind screamed. Her fists pulled instead and deepened the kiss as a sob escaped.

“What’s going on out here?” boomed Perry’s voice.

Yea! Her boss would rescue her from this man who was determined to make her feel something.

“Scardino!” Perry was growling now.

“Mr. White,” Dan replied, but refused to move away from her embrace.

“About time you showed up!”

Crap. Perry was in on it.

“Get her out of here. Take her to bed and keep her there for at least twelve hours!” the Chief ordered.

Lois’ head bobbed up.

What?! gasped a voice inside her head, which strangely sounded like Clark’s.

A smile crept to Dan’s lips. “Excuse me?” At least, she wasn’t the only one who heard that double entendre.

Perry actually had the audacity to blush. “Sleep. That woman needs it. You’re going to make sure she gets it. Use your weapon to keep her there, if you need to.”

Dan raised an eyebrow at her boss.

Lois decided it was best if she just buried her head in the DEA agent’s chest and died now. That was when she heard the titters around the office. Wonderful. *Everyone* had heard what she had.

“Your gun!” Perry clarified with a wave of his arm to silence the room. “And the rest of you, this is the Daily Planet, not the *Dirt Digger Weekly!* Get your minds out the gutter!” He returned to his office and slammed his door shut.

“You heard the man, Lois. I’m to take you to bed,” Dan said, expressing with his smiling eyes that he seemed to like that idea very much indeed.

“Fine!” she retorted angrily, pulling her briefcase out from under her desk. “Let’s go!”

“What?” Dan gulped with surprise.

“You want to get me to bed. Fine.” She glowered at him before storming to the elevators. “Be careful what you wish for, buster.” Lois pressed the elevator button three times while she waited for Dan to catch up. She turned and looked over her shoulder, wondering where he was.

Jimmy was shaking Dan’s hand and gazing at him with sympathy.

The elevator doors opened and Lois called to her occasional boyfriend, “You don’t get your butt up here now, buster, and I’m going to start without you.”

Dan jumped and rushed to the elevators, making it inside just before they closed to the cheers of her office. “We don’t have...”

“Damn straight, you’re not going to get any of this!” Lois let him know as she gestured to her body.

Dan sighed.

Another man echoed with a sigh of relief, a man who wasn’t in the elevator with them.

“I certainly am *not* going to bed,” she called out to Clark, waving her fist in the air. How dare he tell her with whom she could and couldn’t have relations! If she wanted to have sex with Dan, she would.

Please, Lois, you’re exhausted, Clark whispered in her ear. *You need to sleep. I’ll be there with you.*

Lois winced at his words. Her shoulders slumped. She missed him too.

“Where are we going then, Lois?” Dan asked uncomfortably from beside her.

The last place she wanted to go was her own apartment. Even after all her cleaning, she could still picture Lex there. “Your place.” Her brow furrowed as she realized she didn’t know where that was. “Where *do* you stay when you’re in Metropolis, Dan?”

He smiled weakly and shrugged an embarrassed shoulder.

Clark, Lois, and his parents, Martha and Jonathan Kent, were all laughing when they walked into the Kent farmhouse. Jonathan carried the suitcases and Martha held a bag of corn from the festival.

Martha exhaled. “It’s just an old farmhouse, but it’s home,” she explained to Lois, as she stood next to a modern type painting.

Lois stared at the painting wondering what it was.

Martha noticed her gaze. “Oh, it’s my latest. What do you think?”

Lois still was at a loss on what to say about the painting. She never had been one for art, but she was determined to make up for her mess-up earlier with Jonathan, when she accused him of being a closeted cross-dresser, by being overly enthusiastic, even if it wasn’t exactly how she felt. “I like it.”

Martha grinned encouragingly at her.

“What is it?” Lois caved.

Clark’s mother looked at her as if it were obvious. “It’s a bowl of fruit.”

It was?

Thankfully, Clark jumped to her rescue. “Mom, Lois and I need to receive a fax tomorrow.”

“A fax?” Martha said hesitantly.

“A facsimile. It’s a machine. A person can put a piece of paper in at one end and the person at the other end can get a copy if they have a fax machine too. It’s sort of technical,” Lois explained helpfully.

“Oh, I was just thinking that if you’re expecting something,” corrected Martha, uncovering her fax machine. “I should check the paper.”

Embarrassed, Lois started to ramble her excuse. “Uh... I didn’t mean... that I... I just... I... I... I... I don’t even have a fax machine.”

“Oh. Out here these days, you have to have one,” Martha told her.

Lois smiled with a sigh, determined to keep her mouth shut from that point onwards. She could see Jonathan, and hear her partner, pressing their lips together to keep the chuckles from escaping. Both men were failing miserably.

“Uh... Lois, you’ll be in Clark’s room. Clark, you’ll be on the couch,” Martha told them.

Lois was looking at Clark as he nodded his understanding.

“Unless you two are...?” Martha said suggestively.

*Lois turned to look at Clark’s mother as her words sunk in. The reporter’s eyes bulged. “No! We’re not!” She chuckled with a roll of her eyes and then she repeated herself softly, “Ah. No. We’re not.” They were certainly **not** that kind of partners.*

“Oh!” Martha nodded with an oopsy grin. She grabbed her husband’s arm as he was about to sit down and dragged him off to the kitchen. “Jonathan! Why don’t you help me?”

Jonathan was clearly at a loss as to why. “What?”

*Finally Lois was alone with Clark. No, not **finally!** She exhaled. Only, finally, she could stop being on her best behavior.*

“Not exactly what you had in mind, huh?”

Lois pressed her lips together skeptically. “Well, let’s see. So far I’ve been given a glimpse of ritual crop worship, treated as your girlfriend, and I insulted your parents. No, no, I couldn’t have planned this.” She shook her head in amazement.

Clark chuckled. “You’re having more fun than you want to admit.”

“Oh?”

“True. You had three hotdogs at the festival,” he reminded her.

“Well, that goes to show you how much you don’t know about me. I only eat like that when I’m miserable,” Lois told him. Like she would ever tell him the truth: that she ate like that all the

time and then spent all her waking hours in the gym. She'd never tell him that! Nor would she tell him the truth: she liked Smallville. Everyone, including his parents, were so nice. Nice! Just like Clark. She hadn't even heard his parents argue. Not once. It wasn't normal.

"Oh," he scoffed in disbelief.

"You boys go ahead and make up the couch," Martha suggested as she and Jonathan came back into the living room. Jonathan was holding a pile of sheets and blankets for Clark's 'bed'. "I'll show Lois to her room." As they left the room, Martha asked her, "You aren't allergic to down pillows, are you?"

Clark's mom was just too wonderful and thoughtful for words. No wonder Clark was the way he was.

Lois awoke in bed. A warm body snuggled up behind her. For a moment, she reveled in the feeling, pretending it was Clark, yet knowing it was not. Unfortunately, a moment was as long as her conscience would allow her. It was a strange, unfamiliar bed.

Strange and unfamiliar mean the same thing, Lois, a voice whispered in her ear. *Unless you meant strange as in odd.*

She rolled her eyes. ~Clark, stop editorializing my thoughts.~ "Good morning," Dan murmured, kissing her cheek. "This feels nice. Maybe next time we can try it with a bit less clothing."

Lois was still fully dressed in her suit. Well, her shoes were off and her jacket, but she still wore her blouse and slacks. "Mmmmm," she responded without making reservations. He was right. This did feel nice.

"You fell asleep on the couch while we were watching *Lethal Weapon*." Dan pulled her closer to his chest. "I hope you don't mind."

"What time is it?" she asked, wiping the sleep from her eyes and attempting to sit up.

"You've only slept for nine hours. According to your boss, you need three more hours of bed time," Dan informed her without actually being informative as he held her. "So, what's your weapon of choice for me to keep you here? I have my preferences, of course..."

"Breakfast," Lois replied quickly, before he suggested something a bit more intimate. "Room service?" Her mouth felt fuzzy from lack of cleaning. "Do you have any complimentary toothbrushes that came with your room?"

Dan pouted and gave her some puppy dog eyes that might have worked, if she hadn't recently found out that the beau before him had been yet another in a long line of creeps.

"I'm not ready, Dan. You promised not to rush me," she reminded him.

He nodded and loosened his grip. "I'm sorry, Lois. You're absolutely right." He sighed. "Can I just say, and that it's no surprise to some of us here, that you happen to look fabulous in the morning?" he said, pouring on an abundance of Scardino charm into his smile which accompanied these words. It helped lighten the heaviness that had settled onto her chest when she thought he had been pressuring her a minute before.

I told you after our first night at the Lexor that you looked pretty decent, murmured Clark's voice. *Because you do. Nobody looks 'fabulous' first thing in the morning, Lois, case in point...*

Lois focused on the man in bed with her and noticed he had a definite case of bed head as a lock of his longish hair stuck straight up in the back. She stifled an unintentional giggle behind a hand. Dan quickly patted his head.

"Thanks," he muttered, turning to climb out of the other side of the bed.

"Wait!" Lois said, reaching out to touch his arm as she wished Clark's words hadn't made her react like that. Dan hadn't deserved her laughter.

He stopped, glancing back at her.

Her hand moved up his arm to his cheek.

Dan leaned closer with hope in his eyes.

She ran her thumb over his cheek. "Thank you, Dan, for rescuing me from myself."

A smile lit in his eyes. "Anytime." He moved closer and she accepted the kiss he placed on her lips.

Her hand fell from his cheek to his neck before pulling him towards her. Dan relaxed against her shoulder, then against her side. She turned towards him so that their chests touched. Dan set his hand on the bed to steady them, so they wouldn't fall. It worked for a few moments, then he reached up to use it to embrace her and they fell onto the bed, Dan on the bottom. The movement jarred their lips apart.

Lois stared down at him, speaking the words flowing through her mind, "That was *nice*." It was clear to both of them her words were an understatement.

Dan's smile broadened as his arms encircled her once more. "If you thought that was *nice*..." He rolled them over so that he was on top. He gazed into her eyes as his hand ran over her hair. "Lois," he whispered, his lips about to descend on hers again.

Suddenly, Lois felt her heart beating way too fast; it had gone into panic mode. She wasn't seeing Dan anymore, but Ralph. His slimy hands pinning her down – the first time in her life being unable to fight off her attacker – while his cigarette stained yellowed teeth pulled the buttons off her blouse, and his humid breath blowing against her chest...

She was unable to breathe. She pushed hard against his chest. "No!"

Dan nodded and pulled back. "Right."

Lois followed his movements, sitting up. Air filled her lungs, but her blood still pounded in her ears. She knew Dan wasn't the regular scum that she attracted. He wasn't Ralph. Now that he wasn't lying on top of her, her panic seemed unjustified. She knew Dan was a good man. He hadn't been trying to assault her, no matter what it had felt like to her.

She rested her hand against his cheek again and he lifted his eyes to hers, searching for whatever had made her flinch. She needed to say something to fix this or she would lose the only decent man whom she had ever dated. "I like you, Dan. You aren't like the guys I've dated in the past."

"Psychopathic billionaires?" Dan threw out, a clear attempt at humor, and then grimaced at his mistake as she dropped her hand and stood up.

"Yeah. Like him," Lois said, walking towards the bathroom. "And the other not-so-rich psychopaths I've dealt with." She stepped into the bathroom, ready to close the door on yet another relationship. Something made her pause. What was she doing? She had just told herself that Dan was a good man, yet here she was pushing him away. He stopped when she said stop. He pulled her from the edge of her sanity. He was real. Alive. Here. Now. Not lost in time.

She opened the door and caught sight of Dan sitting on the bed, silently swearing at himself. She leaned against the doorframe, a smile dancing to her lips, and watched him until he noticed her.

"Was there...?" Dan asked, slightly embarrassed, unsure, and a little less like his cocky normal self.

"I like to drive," she told him, hoping he would understand what she was saying. Something she had never told another man before. Something she had never trusted another man enough to tell him.

"Okay?" Dan was plainly lost with her analogy.

"I'm a terrible co-pilot..."

Wrong metaphor, Lois.

"Back seat... side car driver? Whatever!" She ran a hand through her hair and tried not to let that jealous voice inside her head that sounded like Clark talk her out of finishing what she

wanted to say. “It’s a control mechanism. If I’m not steering... I tend to get nervous, panicky... more likely to slam on the brakes. Let me do the driving, and you’ll get where you want to go a hell of a lot faster.” Lois raised her brows, asking him if he understood, if he was okay with that.

Lois watched the confusion grow on his face until realization dawned. It seemed to take forever, but it was probably closer to seconds. He leaned back against the pillows, his hands resting behind his head, and beamed at her. “So, what you’re saying, is that you like to be on top?”

She returned his grin and added a wink to let him know he guessed correctly, before returning to the bathroom.

Lois and Dan walked hand-in-hand down her hall to her apartment. They had spent the morning talking, laughing, and having a leisurely breakfast in bed, then kissing some more. Dan had seemed to have gotten her message and hadn’t charged ahead, pulling her into the abyss.

“Well, that was nice,” Dan said, repeating her words from earlier. “We should do that again sometime. How does tonight sound?”

She smiled and pulled out her keys. “What do you have on the schedule today?”

Dan shrugged. “Grunt work, I could probably blow it off until later. Did you want to play hooky?”

Lois was about to say something about liking work when Clark’s words echoed in her memory bank. *Haven’t you ever played hooky, Lois? It’s just, you know... fun. Being someplace, doing something you’re not supposed to be doing.*

Suddenly, she realized Clark was right. She needed to try something new. “Hooky sounds like fun,” she whispered, leaning against Dan. “I’ve got to shower and change...”

“Showering sounds good,” Dan agreed, wrapping his arms around her as he kissed her.

A boost of adrenaline from knowing she was going to be doing something she shouldn’t, because she really should be working, rushed through her. Lois deepened the kiss and soon their embrace with Dan wasn’t just a kiss anymore; it was more. “Do you want to come in?” she asked huskily.

“Is that a trick question?” Dan murmured between kisses, his breath as ragged as hers.

Lois bit her bottom lip. “Only if you want it to be,” she replied naughtily, knowing her words could be taken more than one way.

“Lois,” Dan moaned, turning her doorknob and getting them out of the hall. They stumbled backwards into the living room, but never let go of one another.

Dan froze and pulled her closer, but not affectionately. He glanced nervously around the room. “Something’s not right. Wait here,” he told her.

Yeah, right, she agreed sarcastically.

“Lois, do you often leave your living room windows unlatched?” Dan asked, drawing out his gun.

She stared at her tall living room window off the fire escape. It was open a crack and a cool morning breeze tickled her neck. “Super...” Lois breathed his name.

“Or did you leave it open for me?” Dan interrupted as he shot her a mischievous grin.

True, Dan was known to come in – usually uninvited – through her living room windows, but she hadn’t left it open for him.

She hadn’t remembered leaving it open at all.

Maybe she had.

With her lack of sleep recently, she could see herself leaving her window open in case Superman all of sudden burst into reality and, realizing he couldn’t live without her, needed to see her. She didn’t recall doing that, but her memory wasn’t exactly

without holes at the moment. “No, I don’t remember...”

Dan nodded, all business, as he held up his hand for her to wait where she was. He walked through her kitchen and then down the hall to her bedroom. Soon, he called to her, “Lois, do you have a grey exercise mat that you leave just outside your bathroom?”

Lois raised her lip with a confused scowl. “No,” she responded, pulling herself away from her windows and down to her bedroom.

Dan was kneeling down in front of said mat, looking at some wires. He glanced up at her. “It looks like someone has paid you a visit.”

She gulped, saying the first name that came to mind. “Joe Arlo.”

“Joe-the-Blow?” Dan repeated, standing up. “Yeah, this looks like his style. Any reason in particular he’d be after you?”

“I visited his hotel room yesterday morning. He was making something and had a Metropolis Museum of Art map in his toolbox. Perry and I thought he was in town for the ‘Church Group’ fundraiser at the museum this Saturday because Bill Church, Senior, has been buying up art left-and-right. The museum goes ka-plow and Church’s new investment suddenly becomes much more valuable than before,” Lois explained their theory.

Dan took a step towards her and wrapped a protective arm around her shoulders. “It looks like someone thought you were getting too close.” He led her out of the bedroom and back into the living room. “Too bad. It doesn’t look like we’ll be able to play hooky after all.”

Picturing Superman at her windows and seeing the bomb on her floor, made all her passion for Dan fly out the window.

Only Superman had never been there.

Lois felt something else towards Superman, a tingling feeling. There was something that reminded her of how she felt when she thought of Clark, something that wasn’t easily transferred to another man. Lois bit her lip as she walked to her living room windows, hoping, searching for a blur of blue, a flash of red, a golden ‘S’.

Dan dropped the phone and rushed to her side, moving her away from the windows. “Lois, someone is trying to kill you. Could you not make it easier for them, please?” He indicated that she should sit down on the sofa and picked up the phone again. He set it to his chest. “You’re not staying here alone tonight,” he ordered, putting the phone back to his ear. “Sorry. This is DEA Agent Scardino. I need a bomb squad over at Lois Lane’s apartment. The address... oh, you have it.”

Lois’ jaw tightened. She wasn’t, was she? It was her apartment. Her life. Her decision on who she’d share it with. She picked up her briefcase, pulled out her cell phone, and flipped it open. “Jimmy, I need you. My apartment. Now.” She closed her phone.

Soon, her apartment was crawling with MPD, the bomb squad, tech people dusting for fingerprints, and smirking inspectors. Okay, only one inspector, but that smirk was big enough for two. Only Henderson could make Lois feel like an idiot for doing her job well. Finally, Jimmy arrived.

“What’s up?” her photographer asked, glancing at the mob scene tramping through her stuff.

“Someone planted a bomb in my apartment. I need photos for my story,” Lois stated the obvious.

“Anyone we know?”

“Joe – the Blow – Arlo,” she replied, waving towards her bedroom.

Jimmy nodded with no surprise and went to worm his way through the police to the crime scene.

“What’s he doing here?” Dan asked, speaking to her for the first time since Henderson et al had arrived.

“Jimmy? He’s my partner and where I go, he goes,” Lois snapped, standing up. “Since I *need* a bodyguard, I choose him. At least, I can still get my job done.”

“Bodyguard?” Dan voice softened. “I was hoping for that job.” His Scardino smile slipped onto his face. “Your body is very important to me.”

“You’re busy,” she reminded him. “Jimmy will make sure nobody touches my body.”

Henderson chuckled nearby.

Dan’s head turned towards the police inspector. “Not that it is any of your business, Inspector, but Lois was talking to me.”

Lois rolled her eyes.

Henderson held up his hands in mock self-defense, adding, “You mean *about* you, Agent.”

She crossed her arms. *Boys!*

Dan returned his gaze to Lois for a moment, confused. He still didn’t get it that Henderson understood her better than he did. “Do you think it’s safe enough to pack some of Lois’ clothes for tonight?” he asked the police inspector.

Henderson craned his neck around Scardino to glance at Lois and his chuckles reappeared. “Probably not.”

“What’s that...?”

“I’m not going anywhere, Dan,” Lois told him.

“See,” mumbled Henderson.

“What?” Dan disagreed with her. “You’re staying with me tonight and that’s final.”

“Ooooh.” Henderson editorialized from behind them again.

“Do you mind?” Dan retorted. “This is a private conversation.”

Henderson’s smirk was back. “First of all, no, it’s not; half the guys here heard it.” The titters around the room seconded that remark. “Secondly, I do mind. I enjoy watching Lois clean the floor with DEA Agents.” He shrugged. “But, hey, that’s just me. And thirdly, I’ve gotten... No, I can’t say it out loud or all bets are null and void.” He grinned at Lois’ scowl.

“I’ll take that bet,” called a man from across the room. “This one’s different, Henderson. He can take her.”

Scardino turned to look at the room full of men with disbelief before taking Lois’ arm and dragging her into the semi-private hall. “What in the hell was that about?”

“I’m not staying with you tonight, Dan,” Lois informed him in no uncertain terms. “Thank you for last night, but I’ve got things to do and people to investigate, which I can’t do if I’m sequestered.”

“Lois, you can’t be serious. Somebody is trying to kill you,” Dan’s tone had changed to patronizing.

“And this is different from every other day, how?”

Jimmy joined them in the hall. “All set,” he told her, completely unaware he had walked into a private conversation.

“Jimmy, Dan doesn’t want me to be alone tonight. Can you stay with me?” she asked her photographer without moving her focused gaze from Dan’s face.

“No prob, Lois. You’re the boss.” Jimmy shrugged. “I had nothing going on tonight anyway, in case you cared. Hey, now we can go to the Church art thing tomorrow together.”

“Sure,” Lois replied as she watched as realization slowly appeared in Dan’s eyes. She turned to Jimmy. “I’m driving.”

“Like there would be any other way,” Jimmy joked, heading down the hall.

“Lois,” Dan pleaded softly.

She had explained to him that very morning how important control was to her and the first chance he got, Dan tried to take it away.

“What? I’m playing by *your* rules. You didn’t want me to be alone tonight. I won’t be alone.” Lois raised a brow at Dan. “Give me a call if you want to date a grown woman, instead of a little girl who needs your protection.”

“Lo-is,” Dan groaned.

“And make sure the boys lock up when they leave. I’ve got a story to write,” Lois said with a flip of her wrist as she followed Jimmy down the hall. God, she hated it when Clark was right.

Chapter Ten

Lois brought Jimmy some blankets and set them next to him on the couch. “Sorry about the accommodations.”

“It’s okay, Lois. I’m used to sleeping on the couch,” Jimmy teased.

She wondered if he was referring to their weekend at the Lexor over a year before, when she had gotten the bed – both nights. Seniority had its perks.

Or the time he had crashed on her sofa after they had been exposed to Miranda’s Revenge perfume and Ralph had followed her home. Okay, true, she had been working the dock strike and hadn’t been sprayed. Actually, Jimmy had followed her home too, but she had allowed him to stay after Ralph had pushed his way into her apartment on some phony-baloney excuse, and Jimmy had to pull him off her. At least, Jimmy on pheromones wasn’t an acquaintance rape waiting to happen. Still, she had locked her bedroom door that night.

Or was he referring to the night after she had witnessed the murder by Mr. Make-Up, Sebastian Finn? Lois would have crashed at Jimmy’s place, but his cramped quarters made a frat house look quiet, cozy, and clean.

“Thanks, again, Jimmy. I appreciate it.” She decided after all the times he had helped her out, it was about time he heard some gratitude.

Jimmy leaned back against the couch and raised a brow. “So, why aren’t you letting Dan be your bodyguard?”

Usually what she liked about Jimmy was that he never probed too deep or asked her the hard questions. Lois pressed her lips together. “I don’t know. He went all over-protective on me...”

“You don’t want a boyfriend who worries about your safety? Especially after finding a bomb in your bedroom?”

Lois remembered how Clark snuck his way into her story at the Metro Club. She had hated him for it, but when push-came-to-Toaster, she had been glad he’d been there. “Well, when you put it that way...” She was beginning to wonder if she had made too big a deal of Dan’s overreaction. *Great*, she groaned inwardly to herself. Was she going to have to apologize to Dan?

“Don’t worry about it, Lois. Guys like Scardino enjoy the chase,” Jimmy reassured her.

Well, at least she wouldn’t have to practice saying... ugh... I’m sorry. She shivered.

Jimmy bent down and pulled out a magazine from his overnight bag. “Goodnight,” he said with a wave.

“*Love Fortress, International?*” Lois scoffed.

“Hey! I don’t comment on your reading material,” Jimmy said, offended. “Spencer Spencer is my man. There are some thoughtful hard-hitting stories in this magazine.”

Lois rolled her eyes. She had heard that argument before. “It’s a skin magazine, Jimmy, and I can’t believe you brought that into my home.”

He raised his hands in disbelief. “He takes on serious topics. I read it for the stories.”

“Sure you do. I bet a magazine like that is a front for who knows what... prostitution – at the very least,” she told him.

“Come Monday morning, I’m going to do an all-out investigative dig on your ‘man’ Spencer Spencer and Love Fortress Corporation and see what pops up.”

Jimmy grinned. “*You’re* going undercover at the Love Fortress?”

Lois glowered at him. “Nobody knows where Spencer Spencer’s real Love Fortress is, but I bet I could... if it came up

in my investigation. I meant find the place, not that I'd go undercover there as one of his floozies." She shivered his disgust. "Been there, done that."

"Yeah, but you didn't know you were signing up to be a call girl with the Metros when you went undercover at the club," Jimmy said, ribbing her.

Lois went to closet, pulled down her spare pillow, and threw it at him – a perfect shot in the back of the head.

"Just stating the facts, there, Lois!" He laughed.

"Ha ha." Lois marched to her bedroom and slammed the door shut.

Standing outside the art museum, Lois held a complimentary glass of wine in her hand and tried to appear as just another guest at the show.

Last night after filing her story about the bomb in her apartment, she rewarded herself with a good night's sleep. Mmmm. She had dreamed of that November when the heat wave had struck Metropolis – over a year ago. This time instead of pollution and global warming, the city government had blamed Superman for the rise in temperatures. She scoffed at the thought. Lois couldn't believe that the people of Metropolis... that *she* had been so naïve to believe them – *him*, Lex Luthor. Not that *she* had, unlike other reporters.

Lois might as well add the nuclear plant's leak to the list of Lex Luthor's devious deeds that she had learned about since his untimely death. She shivered. She couldn't believe she had liked him, had bought his lies. He had ended up being the worst liar of them all because he had made her feel like a blind fool, both professionally and as a woman. Good riddance.

She closed her eyes and thought again of the kiss Clark had given her – late at night in the office. She felt Clark cup her jaw in his hand. He leaned towards her and placed his warm lips on hers, no subterfuge, no undercover masquerades, but because he wanted to. He loved her. Her mouth opened slightly as she once more experienced Clark telling her goodbye as he could no longer live in the city that had kicked out its hero.

She had woken up that morning, crying and begging Clark not to leave, not to fade away in the morning's light. But like in her dream, when the heat wave nightmare was over, Clark was still not there.

Jimmy had even heard her crying and knocked on her bedroom door to find out what was wrong. What could she tell him? She was dating a terrific, if not over-protective, man but she longed for someone else? Someone from her dreams? Someone whose voice whispered in her ear when he wasn't there?

Dan appeared out of nowhere, dressed in a suit and tie for a change. Lois wondered if he felt as uncomfortable as he looked.

"Hi," he said, full of boastful charm.

Oh, look, it's Mel Gibson, Clark's annoyed voice popped into her head.

"Hi," she replied to Dan, ignoring Clark. After Jimmy's rebuke the night before she had been feeling a bit guilty of her treatment of Dan. "Look, there's something I have to say..."

He smiled. "Me, too."

Lois couldn't help but return his smile. He appeared to feel remorse for his patronizing behavior the day before. Maybe their relationship could withstand yet another bomb blast. Before she could say anything else, Perry moseyed up beside them.

"Bomb squad boys are in the museum, dressed as guards, doing a sweep. Be out here in a few minutes, so let's get ready for an exclusive," he murmured, setting his hand gently on her shoulder for a moment before he turned away from Lois, spotting someone across the patio. "Olsen! Where's your camera, boy?" He marched off to yell more at her photographer.

Lois shook her head, taking another sip of her wine.

"Anyway, I guess we should try and find the bomb, catch the bad

guys, blah-blah-blah, so we can get out of here and talk."

"Good plan," Dan replied. "Except the whole part about you finding the bomb. Do you have a death wish or something?"

She pressed her lips together. Had this man heard a word she had said the previous morning in his hotel room? So much for full-disclosure. "How about you let me do my job and you do yours before I change my mind about what I had to say?"

Dan gave her a mock salute, then leaned close to whisper, "So, who here's selling illegal drugs?"

Right. DEA. But it was too late, Dan had made her smile again. She leaned close to him and replied, "Anyone here with the last name 'Church'."

He grinned. "Ooooh. Are those pigs in a blanket?" he asked, scooting off to an hors d'oeuvres table.

She followed him. "It's salmon pâté on a cracker."

Dan shrugged and stuffed one in his mouth. That man had a cast iron stomach; no wonder he survived her rumaki.

"You should really try one of these," he suggested, turning to Lois and accidentally knocking the sticky hor d'oeuvre against her white dress.

She brushed the crumbs off her dress. Her purse slid off her shoulder and landed with a thunk on the ground. As she picked up her purse, she inadvertently grabbed a bit of the tablecloth as well. There was something under the table. She scooted underneath for a closer look, realizing she had found the bomb. It looked big and nasty with lots of wires and a big container of boiling or bubbling who knew what.

"Lois?" Dan called. He must have realized she disappeared. Observant, that one. She reached out to pound on his shoe, when she heard Perry's voice.

"You know, Scardino, I kind of took a private vow to steer clear of you two, but I can't help myself..."

Lois rolled her eyes and smacked Dan's shoe. He jumped. "Lois!" Dan glanced down at her and she waved. "Lane!" he continued, growling with annoyance. Oh great, had he thought she meant something else?

"Oh, come on, stop playing around here," Perry snapped at him.

She pounded on Dan's foot again and indicated that she found something under the table with both her eyes and a hand gesture.

"You've got to make up your mind on how to treat her and be consistent," Perry went on, not having noticed her. Way to be observant there, Chief. "Now, go get her!" Lois' boss nudged Dan, bumping him into the table.

"Lois!" Dan called panicked, bending down and lifting up the tablecloth.

"Lord, it's worse than I thought," mumbled the Chief, backing away from the table.

"Bomb!" Lois hissed, crawling out from under the table.

"There's only four minutes left on the clock."

"Go! Get Perry and as many people as you can away from here, now," ordered Dan. "Where are those bomb squad guys?"

"The guards!" Lois reminded him.

Dan nodded and ran to find a guard.

Lois turned to search for her boss and caught sight of Mindy Church, who looked at the table and then Lois standing next to it. Her eyes widened and then she backed up with a nasty glare of frustration at the reporter. *Bingo! Thanks for the confession, Min.*

The DEA Agent returned with a guard in time to catch sight of Lois tackling Mindy Church about fifteen feet from the hors d'oeuvres table with the bomb. He shook his head as he walked up to assist.

"Looks like somebody here knew about the bomb," Lois informed him, sitting on top of the woman in the skin-tight pink dress that could have easily been pilfered from Cat Grant's closet.

Dan grabbed the blonde out from under Lois and held tightly

onto her arm, so she couldn't run off. He used his other hand to help Lois to her feet. "You just don't know how to run from danger, do you?"

Lois grinned and flipped up his tie. "It's what you like about me."

"Are you two a thing?" Mindy cooed in her baby voice. "You are! Not a happy thing, but still a thing."

"Let's go get something to eat, Mrs. Church," Dan insisted, leading her towards the bomb. Mindy refused to be led forward. "That looks like a confession to me," he said to Lois.

Lois agreed with a nod.

"Bomb's defused!" announced a member of the bomb squad, coming out from under the table.

Mindy glowered at Lois as Dan passed the blonde to another guard. "This one confessed. Arrest her."

"I most certainly did not!" retorted Mrs. Church, her baby voice suddenly gone.

Lois raised an eyebrow at Dan.

"How do you do that?" Dan inquired with amazement. "I bet if we dropped you in the middle of the Atlantic you would land on some lost mine from World War Two."

Lois shrugged and wrapped her arms around Dan's waist.

He grinned, lifted up her chin, and placed kiss after kiss on her lips.

Lois woke up and started to brush her teeth to find the water shut off. Great. What a way to start the day. Luckily, she still had that bottled water she had bought earlier in the week on a whim. She telephoned the landlady to find out about the pipes and was told her landlord, Mr. Tracewski, was already on the job, but that it would take several hours to fix. It looked like she would be showering in the locker-room again today. She had barely hung up the phone before someone had knocked at her door.

It better not be Clark, informing her that he sat on that bench across the street all night in the cold night air, watching her apartment. No matter how much Lois thought the world of her partner, that was just creepy. She was a witness, not a victim. Frankly, she really didn't want Clark to see her in her schlumpy pajama shirt and boxer shorts. If it hadn't been laundry day – some time earlier in the week – she wouldn't have worn them. Especially knowing that if something had happened and Superman had needed to come into her apartment to rescue her the night before...

Oh, God! Why hadn't she thought of that? What if it was Superman on the other side of the door checking up on her and he saw he like this? Clark was one thing, but Superman was something else entirely. She would definitely do laundry today. Only the water was out. Well, she'd certainly be purchasing herself a nice feminine set of pajamas or maybe something silkier...

"Oh!" Lois said to herself opening the door; it wasn't Clark. Wow, Mr. Tracewski, putting the 'super' in super. She chuckled at her lame joke before letting the man in and heading into her kitchen. "Mr. Tracewski, your wife said it would be a couple of hours. As you can see the water is not exactly working. I've not been able to..." She turned back to her landlord and saw him walk stiffly into her apartment. She had never seen the man so rigid. "Mr. Tracewski, are you all right?"

Mr. Tracewski stepped towards her and wrapped his hands around her neck.

*Thank God, her self-defense courses automatically kicked in. What happened next was kind of a blur. She fought her **super** super tooth-and-nail. Literately. She actually bit the man. Was that before or after she had kicked him in the jaw? Suddenly, Clark was there, talking to the man. Why was he **talking** to him? She wondered as the room went dark.*

The next thing she could remember was that she was in

Clark's arms. He was on the floor, holding her, and she was coughing. Breathing, more gasping for air than breathing. But Clark was there. Clark was there. Clark was there.

Lois reached up as well as she could and wrapped her arms around him just to reassure herself.

"Clark," she whispered, 'was there.'

"Clark" had said he would protect her.

"Clark" had said someone wanted to kill her.

"Clark" had been right.

She felt Clark's arms pull her tightly against his chest, and she felt safer than she had ever felt before.

Safer than if she had saved herself.

Safer than with any man she had ever met.

Safer than with Superman.

Lois never wanted to leave.

Her eyes opened into her dark bedroom. Lois knew without looking at that clock that it was still the middle of the night.

"Clark," she whispered, her voice sounding hoarse like Mr. Make-Up's strangulation had just occurred. "He tried to kill me."

I'll find him, Clark said out of thin air or memory.

"No," she told him, trying to pull the man, whose voice she kept hearing, back into her arms. All she caught was air. "Please, don't leave me," she pleaded.

Okay, I won't, he replied. *I'm here. I'm right here. I'm here.*

Only Clark wasn't there. She was all alone.

Lois pulled her lock picks out of her briefcase and started to work on the door. It was an old-fashioned lock so it took a little longer than she would have liked to get it open. Finally, she was able to turn the knob. She put the lock picks back into their little case, and the case back into her briefcase, before withdrawing her flashlight.

She knew better than to try the lights. First of all, she didn't need to draw unwanted attention onto herself. Secondly, she figured that the power wasn't turned on. She carefully maneuvered around the empty paint cans and the piles of newspapers to make it down the stairs.

It was Clark's apartment all right. She could see the landing where he had put that little cart, the landing that overlooked his joint living room and kitchen. She could see the built-in bookcases – currently empty – where he would have kept all his books and mementos. She could see the brick archway that led into his bedroom.

Side-stepping around more piles of debris, she headed into that room. Shining the light around the room, she could see the spiral staircase leading up to his loft and the bank of windows looking out to his patio that faced a brick wall. She touched the brick archway, leaning against it, not exactly sure what she was looking for.

Lois had known with one hundred percent certainty that she wouldn't find Clark here. She had known that before she had left her apartment. She hadn't found him the other night when she had come. It was just an empty shell without Clark and yet, despite that, she felt closer to him here than she had at her apartment... than even at the newsroom where she must have spent more hours with him than anywhere else.

It was quiet here. It reminded her of him: his serenity, his kindness, and the fact that his door was always open to her, no matter what the reason or what the hour.

She walked through the area – as best she could – where Clark's bed usually was located and through the other archway into the kitchen, circling back into the living room. There were a couple of tall stacks of newspapers near where Clark would have put his sofa. She sat down on the floor and leaned gently against one of the stacks, making sure not to send it toppling.

He really wasn't there.

She rested her head on her knees and, although her entire

being ached at his loss, she didn't cry. She closed her eyes, thinking back over every memory dream she ever had about him. She relived every caress of her cheek.

Every time he had looked at her as if he could see deep into her soul.

Every smile.
Every laugh.
Everything.

Lois! Clark's voice called to her out of the stillness.

She opened her eyes to his apartment. Oh, crap. She had fallen asleep. She understood by the fact that she could now see around the apartment that the light came from the windows not from her flashlight. She looked down at the object; her flashlight was out. Had she turned it out or had she left it on, letting the batteries die? Not really wanting to debate that question at the moment, she replaced it in her briefcase.

Lois stood up and brushed off the dust from her pants and coat before stretching and heading up the stairs to the front door. At the doorway, she heard voices outside and the sounds of people clomping up the stairs.

Her heart began to race. Were they coming here? Should she stay and hide? Or should she make a run for it?

Run!

Yeah, she was thinking the same thing. Swiftly, Lois went through the door and around the back corner – away from the staircase leading to Clark's apartment – where she pressed herself up against the wall.

"I should have the key here," a man was saying and Lois could hear him jingling keys.

"It's already open," a different man's voice said and she winced. Hadn't she shut the door?

"Open? Oh, I hope squatters haven't moved in," grumbled the first man's voice again.

Lois took a chance and stole a glance around the edge of the building. Her heart, which had just started to calm down after making it around the corner, started pounding in her chest again.

The man with the keys was the same portly man she remembered seeing Clark with when she thought he had been meeting Superman. The. Same. Man. The landlord was real. He wasn't a figment of her imagination.

"So, do you still want to see the place or not?" the portly man asked the younger man in the suit. "I did get up extra early to show it to you."

Lois stole another glance around the corner to get a better glimpse of the new prospective tenant. Could it be Clark?

Sandy blond hair.

Not Clark.

'He's dead,' she reminded herself. 'Stop looking for him everywhere.'

The men walked into the apartment and Lois took this opportunity to run to the stairs and out of the building entirely.

Ten days later, Lois stood with a half dozen of her colleagues in front of the TV sets in the newsroom as LNN announced, "... and Love Fortress International had no response to this morning's *Daily Planet* story. The paper reported the Love Fortress magazine and night club operation were little more than a cover-up for crime, including gambling, prostitution, and money laundering..."

Doesn't LNN know that as a business – honest or otherwise – Love Fortress cannot 'respond' to...?

Perry's voice spoke over the announcer's and cut off Clark's dig on LNN's lack of grammatical correctness, "Well, you sure scooped that pretty boy!"

Lois turned around and smiled, basking in his pride. "Hi, Perry."

"I just stopped by to congratulate you. This is a heck of a story," he replied with a grin. Nobody could be happier whenever they scooped LNN, so she guessed Perry had a pretty good life.

Jimmy joined them, but his lips were pressed into a line. He wasn't happy about her exclusive. "Yes, that is a heck of a story, Lois." His words were the opposite of his tone.

"Jimmy, weren't you assigned to this piece, too? I was kind of under the impression that you two were permanent partners," Perry said with a wink.

"Well, we're not **permanent** permanent partners yet, Chief," Jimmy said, shooting daggers at Lois as they walked back to her desk.

"No, that would be a big step, Chief," Lois agreed in a playful tone, trying to keep the self-satisfied grin off her lips.

"The kind of thing a person would have to think through,"

Jimmy retorted with another laser sharp gaze at his partner before he caved. "Lois! I cannot believe the number you did on my man, here." Jimmy groaned, tossing his latest copy of *Love Fortress International* onto her desk.

Perry picked up the magazine, chuckling. "Son, that's a skin book." That didn't stop the Chief from flipping through it.

"Spencer Spencer takes on serious topics, Chief. I've read him so much, I feel like I know him," Jimmy tried to sell his snake oil to their boss.

Perry continued laughing and Jimmy took back his magazine before the Chief walked off.

Lois rolled her eyes. *Isn't this where I walked into this conversation?* she asked herself. "No one knows him, Jimmy, he hides out from everyone."

"If I had the looks, the cars, the women he has, *I'd* hide out from everyone too," her photographer retorted.

Saved from furthering this discussion, Lois answered her ringing telephone. "Yes?" She covered up the mouthpiece and whispered to Jimmy, "It's Spencer Spencer."

"Oh, my God! The man himself," Jimmy replied reverently.

Lois hushed Jimmy before uncovering the receiver. She said, all business, "Hello?"

"Ms. Lane. Lois. Spencer Spencer here. Quite a colorful article you did on my little operation. I'd like to make you a proposal," Spencer purred into the phone. "What would you say to meeting with one of my spokes models, and let's give you an accurate picture of my world? I can make it worth your while."

Luckily, Lois' faux charm-detector went off immediately; with all her exposure to Scardino she knew the fake stuff when she heard it. "Mr. Spencer, I have an accurate picture of your world and a truly disgusting place it is. Read part two tomorrow." She hung up.

"Lois!" Jimmy gasped.

"Mister Charm," she muttered. "Probably sitting there in his legendary silk pajamas, drinking absinthe, girls massaging him..." She grimaced. "I've had enough exposure to that world, thank you."

Jimmy threw up his hands and walked off.

Lois chuckled and saw Dan standing over by the vending machines. She wondered how long he had been there. He looked like he was fighting the machine for a soda. She got up and went to join him. "I know you think I'm not thinking about it. Just because I'm not talking about it, doesn't mean I'm not thinking about it."

Dan had dropped the bombshell on her after the art show the previous weekend that he was thinking about asking for a transfer to Metropolis office, so he could be closer to her. Before he made any decisions, he had wanted her opinion. She hadn't said 'yes', but she hadn't said 'no' either.

"Lois... relocating is a very big step. I said I'd wait and I will wait," he said, finally extracting a soda from the machine. "—

until you're sure about us."

"I'm glad you understand." She sighed, stealing the rest of the coins out of his hand. He was finally starting to be aware of her control issues.

"Of course, if I was the paranoid type, I might think you'd been avoiding the whole thing," Dan went on. Frankly, he still sounded pretty paranoid to her.

Lois set a hand on his chest and laughed. "Of course not! *Avoid* it? Of course I'm not trying to avoid it." She plugged his money in and extracted a plastic cheese sandwich from the machine. "Did you ever notice how lousy the cheese sandwiches are in this machine?"

"What?"

"Oh, I'm just saying you can't get a good cheese sandwich. I'd kill for a piece of Camembert, the really good kind from France. You notice it's tough to get good Camembert outside of France?" she said, prying back the plastic wrap covering her sandwich.

"I'm so glad you're not *avoiding* this whole thing," Dan replied so sarcastically it dripped from every word. "Very, very happy about that."

Lois didn't know what was holding her back from moving forward with Dan, except... except that she was still having trouble sleeping. She was afraid to close her eyes and fall into her dream world.

The thought of moving forward with Dan seemed ridiculous if she figured out the clues on that piece of paper and could somehow save Clark. Saying "yes" to Dan felt like giving up on Clark, and she just wasn't ready to do that yet.

Perry came by from the stairwell. "Oh, Lois. You busy?"

"No, no. I was just speaking with..." Lois said, turning towards Dan and noticing he was no longer there. When had her boyfriend wandered off? Or stormed off? She hadn't noticed which, or when. "Nobody, apparently." She shrugged and headed for her boss's office.

As soon as they were in his office, he started in on her. He brought up the dark circles under her eyes. Between her Lex Luthor articles and the Churches trying to blow her up numerous times, and now her latest in-depth article on Spencer Spencer, he was worried about her health.

"Perry, I'm fine. Don't worry about me. I'm not working too hard," Lois reassured him. "Can I go back to work now?"

"Now, Lois, I read you like a book. Things get a little rough in your life, you wrap yourself up in your work..." Perry said as he closed the office door. "— like it was going to save you."

"Look, Chief, I've got to draw the line here," she said, putting her foot down on his interference. "I have a professional life and I have a personal life, and Dan wants to move to Metropolis to be closer to me." Tears came to her eyes out of nowhere. *Oh, God!* Why was she bringing this up to Perry?

"Lois, don't you think you ought to try dating first?"

"Well, you see..." *I'm in love with a man from my dreams.* "I really like Dan..."

"Then there's no problem," Perry replied as if the matter were solved.

Lois looked at her boss as if *he* were crazy. "Yes, there is Perry!" *I like Dan, but I love Clark. On the other hand, Clark's not real and Dan is. Well, actually, Clark's real too, but he's lost... out there somewhere, waiting for me to rescue him. Only I don't know how.*

How could she explain the mess that was her life without being locked in a padded cell? "Have you ever thought you found someone who was exactly right for you, but then you found out some... *thing*, that you never knew about them that you thought could wreck it all?" *Well, that summed it up nicely, there, Lois. Here's your key to the psycho ward, she told herself.*

"Yes."

She was floored. *He understands?*

"After Alice and I got married, I found out her right leg was an inch shorter than her left..." Perry continued.

"Chief..." Lois tried to explain that their two problems weren't even in the same hemisphere of being alike.

"She used to wear these shoes with little wedges in them, made in Portugal," Perry went on and Lois got absorbed in his story. "And on our wedding night, we're standing there in front of each other... uh... in the... all together..."

Lois blushed. She couldn't believe that Perry was telling her this story.

"And she's listing off to the starboard. Her secret was out. But, you see, it didn't make any difference to me, because I love her," Perry finished.

Her boss really did understand her. That was just the story Lois needed to hear. She shouldn't give up on Clark because she loved him. It didn't matter to her that he somehow died in the past. He was supposed to be here in the present, and she would continue to work on those clues until she figured exactly how to rescue him from dying in the past and bring him back into her future.

Then she realized neither she nor Perry was speaking; he was just looking at her, waiting for her reaction to his story.

"Oh, Chief, that's beautiful," Lois told him with all the emotions flowing through her.

Her boss smiled.

Right answer, Lois, and thanks for not giving up on me, Clark whispered in her ear.

~Never, Clark.~

"Listen now." Oh, dear, Perry wasn't finished giving advice. "You and Dan have got to deal with whatever it is, and I don't mean over a sandwich at your desk."

Dan? Oh, crap, Perry thought she had been talking about Dan? "Where do you mean?" she was somehow able to mumble, hoping her boss wasn't going to give another piece of advice about taking her boyfriend to bed.

"Get out of town, so you can focus on what really counts."

"Oh, well, Perry, I think I'm disciplined enough to not be distracted by work," Lois started to ramble, trying to find a way to get herself out of this conversation. The phone rang and her boss picked it up.

Actually, maybe Perry had a point. She needed to get out of town. Go to Smallville! Check out things on the ground, so to speak. Do some reconnaissance. See how much of her dreams was real and how much — Superman — was just dreams. It had been forever since she had taken a vacation day. She wondered if the Daily Planet could live without her for a week. Or two. She would take two weeks if it meant spending all her time focusing on rescuing Clark.

"It's for you," Perry said, handing her the phone.

"Hello?... Yes, what?" Lois told the person on the other end of the phone who was telling her about some headless corpses in a shallow grave. "Are you sure?"

He was sure and wanted to know if she was interested in checking them out.

"Yeah! Yeah, I'll be right there." Lois hung up the phone.

"My police source just said that they just found four bodies, all male, in a shallow grave. First two identified as being last seen at one Spencer Spencer's club, Love Fortress!" She turned to run out the door, but then she realized, she forgot to tell her boss the best part. She giggled as she turned back around. "And get this! They were all *headless*." She grinned in victory. Jimmy's false idol was going down!

"Good Lord."

She went to run out the door again until the Chief's voice stopped her.

"Hey, Lois!"

Lois turned back to look at him.

“A word to the wise. Honey, there will always be another headless corpse, but true love comes around maybe once,” he reminded her.

O-kay. That was weird advice even for Perry. Lois continued out of his office and almost plowed right into Jimmy.

“Hey, Lois, I guess you haven’t seen your desk?” he told her.

“My desk?” she repeated in confusion as she headed towards the object in question, only to find it covered with another huge bouquet of flowers. *Terrific.* “Let me guess: Dan?”

He appeared from behind the pillar next to her desk with a big grin. “Yes, of course,” Dan announced with a wink. “Who else?” He put his elbows down on her Spencer Spencer research binders as he gazed at her like a love-sick puppy.

She sighed. This was just what she needed. “Dan. That’s so...” Lois searched for the correct term.

Annoying? Excessive? Over-the-top?

~Shut up, Clark. Like you wouldn’t do the same thing.~

“Sweet,” she finally chose, although Clark’s suggestions had been closer to the mark.

A-ha!

Lois pulled the binders out from under Dan’s elbows.

“But?” Dan inquired.

“We have to talk.”

Dan looked uncomfortable with her use of *those* words.

I don’t know, Lois, those sounded like good words to me,

Clark said in that jealous tone he got whenever she talked to Scardino. The only other time she had ever heard Clark use that tone was in her dreams whenever she talked about or to Lex.

“And we *will* talk, Dan,” Lois pushed her way through the awkwardness. “Right after I get back. I’m sorry. I just have to get this statement, but we’ll do this,” she called to him as she carried her stuff out of the office. “I swear!”

Lois glanced back at Dan as she stood at the elevator and witnessed a moment of despair crash over his expression before he hid it behind another one of his charming smiles. She sighed. If she wasn’t in love with another man...

Chapter Eleven

Lois walked out to her car to find it blocked in by a freight truck.

“Great,” she grumbled. As she went to find the driver to ask him to move, her phone started to ring. Balancing her binders precariously, she reached into her purse and pulled out her cell phone. “Yes, hello?” she said into her phone.

“Ms. Lane, you have an overseas call. Please hold,” a man on the other end told her.

“No! No! I can’t... Argh!” she said to deaf ears, already having been placed on hold. “Oh, yes, I’ll hold...” She continued to pace in front of her car looking for the driver of the truck. “Hello?... Hello?... Hello?... Hello?... Hello?... Hello?” she repeated into the phone, hoping someone would pick up.

“Please hold. I’m transferring,” the voice on the phone finally said.

“Yeah. I’m holding,” she said into the phone. *Who in the world is calling her from overseas? Did this have to do with her Spencer Spencer article?* She noticed someone removing boxes from the truck in front of her, and she flagged him down. “Hey, do you think you could get someone from Maintenance to move this truck. I’m blocked in.”

The man said he would.

“Hello?” she said, hoping her call would come through and tell her what so important as to call her on her cell phone.

She heard a creak or a groan of metal above her and glanced up. The Daily Planet flagpole tipped and started falling almost directly on top of her. Lois froze in her spot, dropping both her binders and cell phone on the ground, not to mention her jaw.

Next thing she knew, she heard a crash and she was laying on the sidewalk five feet away with Dan Scardino on top of her. The flagpole had flattened the newsstand she had been standing in front of moments before. Dan was littered with the debris from said newsstand.

“Are you all right?” he asked, shaking his head and sending dust particles off from his hair.

“Yes,” she breathed. “I know that doesn’t seem like enough to say... Wow, look at you...” she mumbled. She could feel Dan shaking. *From fear?* Had he been as afraid for her safety as she had been? “You’ve gotten me out of a lot of jams, but I’ve never seen you like...”

Dan kissed her, cutting off the rest of her gratitude.

Once again balancing her Spencer Spencer research binders with the addition of a huge gift basket, Lois stumbled into her apartment. She had just had time to dump her binders and drop her keys down when there was a knock at her front door. Unable to see around the gift basket – ‘large enough to flee Cuba in’ according to Perry – to look through her peep hole, Lois just opened her door.

Dan leaned against her doorframe. “You forgot to ask, ‘who is it?’”

She rolled her eyes and slammed the door in his face. *Jerk!*

He knocked again as she walked into her kitchen to throw away the gift basket. She ignored him. He knocked again, louder. Between pressed lips, she called out with Mindy Church sweetness, “Who is it?”

“Dan,” he answered in a silly voice.

“Who?”

“Dan!” he repeated tersely.

“I don’t know anyone I’d want to let in my apartment by that name,” Lois responded, crossing her arms and refusing to answer the door.

“Your idiot of a boyfriend, who you soundly need to hit in the head with a 2x4 for once again interfering with how you live your life,” he replied.

Lois opened the door with a satisfied smile. “Oh, him.”

“I’m sorry,” Dan instantly apologized. “I did it again, didn’t I?”

She nodded at the obviousness of that statement.

“How is it that I’m allowed to save your life, but not criticize how you open your door without checking for bad guys?” Dan inquired, following her into the apartment and shutting the door behind him.

Lois didn’t dignify that question with a response.

With more intelligence than he had shown recently, he decided to move on. “Want to tell me what that thing was?” he asked with a hint of jealousy. Probably because the gift basket had been larger than the desk-covering bouquet of flowers he had brought her when he had stopped by the office earlier.

“Promotion for some stupid tropical resort,” she told him, walking into the kitchen and pulling out the only thing in her cupboard, a box of chocolate cookies. She returned to the living room to sit down on her sofa. She set down the box and took a bite of a cookie. “Perry is practically forcing me to invite you to go with me.”

“Me?” Dan raised a skeptical but delighted eyebrow as he sat down next to her.

“Perry thinks it would be good if the two of us had some time together outside of Metropolis to focus on our relationship, to decide what we *really* want,” she said, standing back up to retrieve her binders.

“Doesn’t sound all that bad of an idea,” he replied.

“I told him ‘I’m too busy,’” she said.

“Yeah, well, your work would be a lot safer than spending an uninterrupted weekend alone with me,” Dan teased.

“Hold it. Hold it!” she retorted, lifting up her hands. “I’m not the one canceling dinner and lunch at the last minute to rush off to some undisclosed location to meet a source... oh, wait, that could be me, but it hasn’t been. Four of our last six dates were canceled or delayed because of *your* job.”

“What are you saying?” Dan asked.

Did she really need to idiot-proof it for him?

If the shoe fits...

~Oh, shut up, Clark!~ she groused at that jealous voice inside her head.

“I’m saying I don’t think you could let the Drug Enforcement Agency get along without you for two whole days,” Lois clarified, taking another bite of her cookie.

“And you would rather write about other people’s lives because it would be less dangerous than living one of your own,” he tossed back at her. “Which, knowing your life as I do, I’m surprised you’ve lasted as long as you have.”

She pressed her lips together. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Dan said, before he got an uncomfortable expression on his face and shifted his body position. His beeper must be vibrating.

“Someone *want* you?” she asked innocently.

“No,” Dan lied, shifting his position again and looking even more uncomfortable.

Lois took the last bite of her cookie with a grin as she waited for him to fold.

“Yes,” he grumbled, pulling his beeper out of his pocket and walking to her telephone. He dialed the number, talked into the receiver for a few minutes as she started flipping through her binders. Eventually, he returned. “I’ve got to go,” he apologetically admitted.

Big surprise there.

“Go,” Lois insisted. If she had a meeting with a source, she wouldn’t want him holding her back.

Dan walked to the door and opened it. “You know, I could do it, if you could.”

“Wanna bet?” she dared him.

He laughed nervously and nodded. “Bet.”

Lois grinned, taking a bite of another cookie. He was so totally going to lose, but there was nothing he could do about it. That resort didn’t even have telephone service.

Dan winked at her and left.

Sighing, Lois took another cookie out of the box.

What was she doing? Didn’t she just decide that very afternoon that she was going to Smallville and investigate Clark? Figure out how to save *him*? Not run off on some romantic tropical vacation with Dan.

When she had gone to Perry to ask for the time off, he had misunderstood and offered her the promotional trip to her own private island resort to work on her relationship with Dan. She couldn’t very well tell her boss that she didn’t want to go off with her clearly smitten boyfriend, who had just saved her life – again – but instead wanted to go chase down leads about some man she had met and fallen in love with in her dreams. That would be a one-way ticket to Bedlam.

And maybe Perry was right. Perhaps a weekend in the sun, relaxing at some fancy resort was just what she needed... before she left on her solo vacation to search for her true love.

A small white motor boat with a blue canopy meandered through the islands off the coast of South America. Lois could hear the call of tropical birds and the titter of animals. She could smell the fragrance of lush flowers and the salt of the sea air. It was hot and humid and, despite all that, felt wonderful. She was starving for some of that famous tropical fruit everyone was always raving about. That bland airline meal she had picked at, and reluctantly eaten, happened hours ago. She thankfully had

bought and eaten a large Double Fudge Chunk Bar upon arriving at the duty free shop at the Rio airport. She only wished the heaviness in the pit of her stomach and the dried salt on her cheeks would go away.

The boat finally approached a dock. The captain unloaded her three suitcases and a couple of beach chairs.

“Excuse me? Do you know where we check in?” she asked him as she stumbled along in her high heel cork beach shoes with the first of her bags. He waved vaguely up the small beach and into the trees. “Well, the brochure said something about a ‘welcome hoki luau.’” The man completely ignored her. “I guess, we’ll just wait for the hotel jitney,” Lois mumbled, pulling on her stylish white sunhat.

Jimmy climbed out of the boat with her umbrella – she did burn easily for a brunette – and his one small bag. He seemed happy to be there. He wore his sunglasses, shorts, and a Hawaiian shirt that really should have been left on the rack at the store. She didn’t blame him. When one got called, two hours before departure, to go on a romantic tropical beach vacation in the islands because the boyfriend – or should she say *former* boyfriend – of one’s partner had been called into work at the last minute, one was allowed to be ecstatic about it.

“I know what this is. Casual elegance, Lois,” Jimmy was saying. “We shouldn’t be distracted by the simple rustic beach, into thinking that there really isn’t a...” He turned back to the boat, but the captain had already cast off and left them standing on the dock. “You’re kidding me. I thought these fancy places had better service than that? I didn’t even have a chance to tip him. Did you tip him?”

Lois shook her head. “Nope.”

They stood on the dock for minute longer until they could no longer see the boat. With a sigh, they each picked up one of Lois’ remaining suitcases and moved ashore.

Lois relaxed on the sun chairs, her umbrella unfurled against the heat of the day, as she waited for Jimmy to return from his trek in search of said tropical island resort. Relaxed was the wrong word. Grumbled probably fit her mood better. *Perry!* She swore at her boss from under her breath once more. If she hadn’t listened to her boss, if the Chief hadn’t meddled, she could be on her way to ... well, Kansas.

“Are you working?” Jimmy scoffed, sitting down the other beach chair.

“I’m writing my will,” she retorted. Actually, she was writing down everything she could recall about what Clark had told her about himself, but that wasn’t something she was planning on sharing with her partner. “That way when they find our bleached bones, someone will know my last wishes.”

He leaned back with a sigh. “Well, if these are my last minutes, who better to spend them with?”

Lois refused to look at him, instead groaned inward looking to the sky and wondering why she had invited her partner to join her on this bad idea to begin with.

“Alone in paradise with a beautiful woman. It’s almost biblical.” Jimmy shot her a grin.

She returned a scowl and put down her umbrella. Obviously Jimmy hadn’t done much in the way of reading the Bible. She got up and tried to walk around. She thought better when she paced. Unfortunately, pacing in these non-beach shoes was a trial at best. “While you were out looking around, you didn’t happen to find any proof that there actually is a hotel now, did you?”

“No,” he reluctantly admitted. “But why wouldn’t there be a hotel?”

“Well...” Lois hated it when Jimmy was right. “Maybe no one built one or maybe we’re on the wrong island or...” Her eyes opened in fright as her imagination went wild. “Maybe this is a penal colony.” She could hear Jimmy chuckling at her

theories. “Or maybe no living being has ever been here in the history of the Earth. Why don’t you go and take another look around?” she suggested.

“No, Lois. Use your head. Look...” He pointed towards where they disembarked from the boat. “There wouldn’t be a dock here unless this was some kind of inhabited island. Secondly, this place is too nice for a penal colony, if they still have those nowadays. Let’s just wait for the hotel to come out looking for us. They’re expecting us, so when we don’t show up, they’ll look for us. If you’re so desperate to find the hotel, I’ll lend you my shoes and you can go tromp through the tropical vegetation. I’m staying here.”

Lois sighed. She hated to do so, but she gave Jimmy another point. He was being logical. What he said made sense. Only... only, something about this place, this whole trip felt off to her, and she didn’t like that. “You know what we need. We need a flying superhero to come and save us and fly us back to...” She flipped her hand. “The closest bit of civilization.” Wherever *that* might be. Rio?

“Yes, Lois. But there’s no superhero here. It’s just Joe and Judy Regular.”

She scowled at him again. He didn’t have to remind her of that. She looked off towards the water. “Superman, where are you?” she whispered in defeat.

Eventually, Lois took off her impossible heels and paced in her stocking feet, but even that seemed futile. The boat ride had taken them around forty-five minutes, if not longer, so it would be stupid to try to swim back to wherever it was they had come from. She plopped into her chair with an exasperated sigh.

Jimmy blissfully ignored her. He had opened his shirt and was soaking up the rays.

She pressed her lips together. “You’re going to burn.”

“Oh, right,” he said and started digging through his bag. “I picked this up in the gift shop at the Rio airport.”

He showed her a brown bottle of what she could only imagine was goo, but was probably suntan lotion.

Jimmy confirmed her theory. “It’s supposed to give me a natural Brazilian look. That should impress the ladies when we return home, huh?” He bounced his eyebrows.

Ugh.

She heard a sound, and it wasn’t one that she liked. It sounded wild and animalesque. Gulping, Lois hesitantly turned her head to look past where Jimmy was sitting. There, standing at the edge of the beach, was a tiger, a large and very hungry looking tiger. She knew coming to this island was a mistake.

Jimmy opened his bottle of goo and started slathering it upon his bare chest, unaware of their reception committee. With a grimace, Lois covered her mouth and nose at the smell, which was a mixture of turpentine, coconuts, and tar. It was noxious at best and rivaled only the Metropolis Sewage Reclamation Facility for the worst smell in the history of smells. She wanted to cough. She wanted to throw up. She wanted to ask Jimmy to go feed himself to the hungry tiger just to get her away from that smell, but she didn’t. She couldn’t move. She didn’t want to breathe. She didn’t want to attract that big cat’s attention any more than they already had. She had no idea how they were going to escape the animal.

Then Lois saw the tiger wrinkle its nose and run off.

With an amazed chuckle, she held out her hand. “Why don’t you give me some of that stuff?” she asked, when she was finally able to speak again. She had no desire to get closer to that smell, but it was worth it if it repelled wildlife. She coughed to clear her throat as Jimmy shrugged and poured a dollop of brown stuff into her hand. “Jimmy,” she said as nonchalantly as she could. “Have you ever heard of tigers in South America?”

“Paranoid much there, Lois?” He laughed, pouring more goop into his hand. “No, Lois, tigers reside in India and southeast

Asia. Here we have panthers and jaguars, but I doubt they’d be on an island this far from the mainland either. The worst we’re liable to come across are snakes and some big ol’ nasty bugs. Nothing to worry about.”

Lois swallowed down the bile stuck in her throat. *Snakes? Bugs? Other than mosquitoes?* She hoped this tiger repellent worked on those too. With much disgust she started rubbing the sticky stuff on her arms. She belatedly realized that it probably would stain her nice white travel dress, but since they were going to die on this island, what did it really matter?

More hours passed by before Lois and Jimmy decided nobody was on their way and they should hunt for some food and water. It was better than staying on the beach and being hunted herself; luckily, they hadn’t seen another hide nor hair from the tiger. She dug through her luggage and changed into a pair of shorts and skimpy top that basically covered her bra, tying in a knot at the center of her chest. Thankfully, she had also packed some flat white sandals. This outfit was much cooler and one hundred and ten percent more comfortable.

Jimmy eyed her choice of apparel appreciatively until her looks-could-kill expression convinced him to look for food. Sometimes she wished she had heat-vision.

What this weekend would have been like if Scardino hadn’t bailed on her at the last minute, Lois had no idea. He had been working on a case of some missing transplant drugs, the kind that helped reduce the chance of rejection by the host body – she couldn’t remember the name. He was afraid that someone was using it to do some unscheduled transplants on their own. In other words, human organ trafficking. It was all very interesting, but off-the-record.

Just as he had arrived at her apartment to go to the airport, Dan had gotten beeped to come into the office on another lead. With a shrug, a kiss to her cheek, and a mumbled apology, Dan had run out the door, claiming he would catch up with her at the airport. Lois hadn’t waited until her front door had closed; she had picked up the phone and called Jimmy. She wasn’t going to hold her breath for supposed boyfriend to catch up with her now.

After rescuing her from the falling flagpole, her resistance to his charm had wavered. Dan had shown that he really cared for her as he risked his life for hers again, but it seemed only during those times when her life was in danger did she really matter. Heaven forbid he put her ahead of his job for two days running...

Lois found a pool of water where it seemed a small creek emptied itself. She tried to bend down to fill their one water bottle full of water. Two seconds later she fell headfirst into the water.

Jimmy chuckled, coming back into view carrying with a small bunch of bananas. “Whatcha doing?”

“I thought a swim might be nice,” she retorted. She pooled her hands to take a sip of water.

“Eww, I wouldn’t do that, Lois,” he suggested. “Who knows what kind of germs are floating around in that pool?” He grimaced. “Let’s see, if we can get a fire started and we’ll boil the water before we drink it.”

“If you’re taking orders, I’ll have a double café espresso with non-fat milk and whipped cream,” Lois said between pressed lips, dropping the water back into the pool. Jimmy had earned himself another point.

“I saw some coconuts back there. I’ll see if we can crack one open on a rock to use for a pot.”

Yep, heat-vision would definitely be coming in handy about now.

He set down the bunch of bananas and reached over the edge of the pool to help her out. With a jerk of her hand, Jimmy plopped into water next to her.

“Refreshing.” He gave her a nasty glare and her expression

sweetened.

“I thought so too,” Lois replied with a bat of innocent eyelashes before she splashed him. She climbed out of the pool and reached down to help Jimmy.

“No, thanks, Mad Dog. I’ll help myself,” he told her, moving down the pond.

“Sorry, Jimmy. I just hate being laughed at,” she confessed, still holding out her hand. She would have been dead meat, literally, if it hadn’t have been for Jimmy and his goo. At least the dip in the pool had rinsed off some of the sticky substance. It never had rubbed in properly.

This time, Jimmy accepted her help and she pulled him from the pool. “Thanks, Lois.”

“You go find those coconuts and see if you can crack them while I get changed again, and try to start a fire.”

“You? A fire?” Jimmy seemed genuinely surprised. “You got some matches in one of those suitcases, Houdini?”

“No, but I did happen to take one year of girl scouting before my parents broke up.” She patted her head with a finger. “Let’s hope some of it stuck.”

“My apologies, boss,” he said with an elaborate bow.

Lois raised a brow. “Partner.”

Jimmy smiled. “Partner.”

Lois started the fire using the old string on a stick trick, even though Jimmy had volunteered the use of his camera lens to intensify the light. Her partner heated up a coconut and banana soup for dinner. They leaned back against a large rock and passed their one coconut “bowl” between the two of them.

“Do you want to hear something funny?” Jimmy asked after they had been quiet for some minutes.

“Oh, please!” Lois pleaded. She could use some humor after the day they had undergone.

“Me, too. Whatcha got?”

She slugged him on the arm.

Jimmy coughed. “I’ll go first then.” He exhaled and rubbed his bicep. “I got another postcard from my dad. He’s been in Vegas, blowing up some old casino. Before I got your call, I had been thinking, more like daydreaming, that maybe he’d visit me this weekend.”

Lois glanced at Jimmy, an unfamiliar ache of guilt tugging at her chest. She knew that Jimmy and his father had never had a terrific relationship. He idolized his dad, and his dad kept letting him down time after time. Jimmy had eventually transferred some of his paternal worship onto Perry, who had been more than happy to accept it, being that his own sons had given up on him years ago. “I’m sorry, Jimmy. You didn’t have to come,” she said softly.

“What? A weekend with a beautiful woman on a tropical island or one spent at home waiting for my dad not to show...”

Jimmy shrugged. “That’s a no-brainer, Lois.” He smiled at her.

She kindly returned it.

“He didn’t say he was coming... My dad hasn’t been to Metropolis in four years. And he isn’t one for using the phone. I just get the postcards every once in a while. Anyway, it was nice to have my job to fall back on. I’m kind of hoping he does show, and I’m not there to welcome him with open arms this time.” Jimmy sighed. “Well, a handshake at least.”

“Little boy blue and the man in the moon,” Lois replied.

“Huh?”

She shook her head. “An old Cat Stevens song,” she explained.

“Oh.” Obviously not catching the reference.

“My turn,” Lois said, slapping her knee. “I’m glad you’re here with me instead of Dan.”

“Really?” Jimmy replied with a hopeful eyebrow.

“It was getting too serious, too fast between us, and, well...”

She looked away. “I don’t love him.”

“Oh?” He seemed more interested.

Lois sighed, putting a hand to her head. “I tried... but someone...” She winced at her gaff. “Something keeps getting in the way.”

“Someone?” he inquired softly, again with too much hope.

She pinched her lips together, not wanting to tell him of the man from her dreams. Telling her pseudo-therapist Sarah was one thing. Telling Jimmy was quite another. The note she had written to herself had said that Clark was real, but that he had died. His voice kept whispering to her, inside her head, where only she could hear him. Not only did Clark talk to her, but he answered when she responded. So, either she was tiptoeing down the road to Nuttsville or somehow she had this otherworldly connection with Clark. She hoped, rather than knew, that it was the latter. It was the uncertainty that scared her.

Lois didn’t believe she wasn’t crazy; so, Clark must somehow be reaching out to her from beyond the grave. Acknowledging Clark’s existence out loud would be the quickest route to a padded room, she knew, but if she kept all these shaky feelings bottled up much longer they were going to explode. Maybe there was a way to talk about Clark without revealing that he wasn’t real.

“I met someone,” she reluctantly admitted. Well, not technically met.

I’ll accept that answer, Clark whispered.

“Then why aren’t you with him?”

Lois took a sip from their coconut, still not looking at Jimmy. “He’s... gone.” Talking about Clark out loud hurt, like she was experiencing his death again for the first time all over again. She took a couple of deep breaths to control her emotions. The last thing she wanted to do was cry on Jimmy’s shoulder.

“Gone?” Jimmy said weakly. “Oh, Luthor.”

She coughed, almost spilling their bowl. “No! Ugh. God, no! Do you really think I could have feelings for that... that...?” She shivered. Finally she found a phrase to describe her deceased boyfriend. “Sorry waste of a human being?”

“Human waste of a human being,” Jimmy mumbled and then cleared his throat. “Sometimes you can’t help who you fall in love for. Love is love, Lois.” He tossed her an apologetic smile. “I’m glad it isn’t him.”

“Cl... He’s a reporter...” Lois knew she couldn’t say more about her working relationship with Clark without giving away the fact that he didn’t exist... not outside her dreams in any case. She laughed. “He’s a bespectacled farm boy from Smallville, Kansas.”

Jimmy gazed down at their soup warily as if the coconut soup had psychedelic effects. “A farm boy? From Kansas? You?”

Lois shrugged. “He’s sweet. Kind. Considerate. Selfless. Genuine. Smart. Honest. Trustworthy. He treats me better than any man...” Ever. “I’ve never met another man like him... he’s unique.” *I love him.* She sighed.

“I bet *he* wouldn’t have followed you home after being sprayed by Revenge,” Jimmy grumbled.

She thought about the dream she had lived the night before. She had woken up that morning in tears. Clark had been such a gentleman when *she* had been dosed with Revenge. She couldn’t believe she had showed up at his apartment in a harem costume and practically begged him to make love to her. Clark had too much respect for her to take advantage, even when Lois knew he had been dosed as well. Not too much respect to bruise her ego, because he had finally caved by the next morning. Unfortunately, her dream self had gotten to her senses back by then.

Unfortunately?

~My dreams,~ she reminded Clark. ~If I want to make out with you in *my* dreams, I don’t see why you should get a say so.~
Thanks. But I don’t have the power to change your memories

or your dreams. I'm just an echo. A figment of your wishful thinking.

Lois sighed. She knew that. That dream had been so much different than the experience she had lived in reality.

"Oh, Lois, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have..." Jimmy was instantly apologizing, misreading her reaction.

She held up her hand. "It's okay, Jimmy." She pulled her knees up to her chest, thinking of Clark. For some reason, Clark always made her feel better. She thought, with a wry smile, of how she had believed he had looked like Superman. Ha! Wouldn't that be a lark?! If Clark was Superman? She rested her head on her knees. Oh, to have her ideal man and her fantasy man rolled up together into once nice delicious package. Now, *that* would be a fantasy.

"Lois?" Jimmy said gently, almost a whisper. "I've been thinking."

She glanced over at him as he awkwardly paused.

"After what Toni Taylor said about Luthor... and what you found out about him and Menken and some of the other people he dealt with..." Jimmy paused again as if he didn't want to voice the words.

"Uh-huh," Lois encouraged him to continue.

Her partner cleared his throat. "Do you think Luthor might have been the one behind Ralph's murder?"

Lois sucked in a breath and grimaced as gristly images filled her head. First, what Ralph had tried to do to her while he had been laced with pheromones. Secondly, what had happened to him several weeks later – just days after she had mentioned the event to Lex to explain why she couldn't move their relationship forward just yet. She pushed these two thoughts immediately back out of her mind. Reaching over, she took Jimmy's hand and squeezed it. "Thank you, Jimmy."

"Hey," he said with embarrassment. "I tried to kill you myself. Let's just call it even."

"Some things are worse than death..." She gulped, leaning against his shoulder. "But nobody should have to die like that, not even Ralph."

Without Lois wanting them to, the crime scene photos her police source had shown her flashed through her mind again. Ralph had been beaten up, stripped naked, tortured with things... forced where they shouldn't, mutilated, and then left hanging upside-down to bleed out. He had been covered by rats when police finally discovered him.

She pushed the image away again and replaced it with another one from her dreams that always made her feel better: Clark holding her tightly in his arms and rocking her back and forth. Mr. Make-up had just attacked her and Clark had saved her. She could still hear her echoing voice, 'Please. Don't leave me.' She could almost feel Clark's arms holding her once more.

I won't. I'm here. I'm right here. Even though she knew Clark wasn't really there, she could feel the memory of his lips brush the top of her head. *He can't hurt you anymore.*

For some reason, these words combined with Clark's embrace always seemed to calm her. Even if they were as far from the truth as truth could get.

"I'm going to have to disagree with you there, Lois," Jimmy interrupted this memory. "Ralph got what he had coming to him. Not that I would have..."

Lois patted his cheek. "I know you wouldn't have, Jimmy."

Luckily, she and Jimmy had been in the middle of the stake-out at the Lexor at the time and had airtight alibis for Ralph's murder. Not that either of them had reported the incident at her apartment to the authorities... just to Perry, who had promptly fired Ralph. Not that Perry had acted with decorum himself during the whole pheromone outbreak at the Planet, but there were certain lines that should never be crossed, under the influence or not.

"Of course, I don't know how Luthor would have found out about it, unless..." Jimmy looked down at her.

"Yes, I told him," Lois confessed.

"Would he have...? I mean, we both know what the Boss was capable of, but do you think Luthor liked...?" She heard more than saw Jimmy suck his lips inside his mouth to stop himself from saying anything further.

Lois swallowed. "I've never told anyone this, Jimmy, but Lex had what he described as an 'ark' built underground. Basically, it was a bunker that had supplies and room to hold three hundred people in case Nightfall had actually struck." She took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. "He invited me to move into it with him. He had actually replicated my apartment in it. He asked me informally, mind you, to be his 'companion' if the rest of the world was destroyed. So, yes, he liked me enough."

Jimmy's jaw fell open.

"I turned him down!" Lois said in her defense. "If the world was going out with a bang, no way in hell was I going to miss it."

He hugged her with the arm around her shoulders. "Of course, you would. You're not one to hide from life's problems."

"Awwww. Aren't they adorable?" said a strange voice as two men appeared out of nowhere, pointing guns at them.

"Okay. Now, I'm wishing I didn't accept your invitation, Lois," Jimmy mumbled, holding up his hands.

Chapter Twelve

Lois and Jimmy found themselves chained up in some kind of underground dungeon. She had been swearing under her breath at Perry, Dan, herself – for not having stood up to either of the two aforementioned men – and Clark for not being here with her.

Hey! What did I do? Clark asked.

~You went and died on me,~ she reminded the voice inside her head silently.

I'll be more careful next time, he retorted in a teasing tone. *I hate to have inconvenienced you any by dying.*

Tears pooled in her eyes as she admitted to herself – reluctantly – that yes, Clark did have it worse than her.

"Lois," Jimmy's voice said from the next cell over, interrupting her moment alone with Clark. "There's something I've always wanted to tell you..."

"Jimmy," she said quietly, having an inkling of where he was headed.

"No, Lois, please let me finish," he said, plowing ahead. "I have admired you for a long time... years actually."

"Jimmy," she interrupted again, louder this time, really not wanting this information to be more than an unspoken theory.

"I love you, Lois."

The words now hung between them. "You don't want to fall for me, kid. I can't take hurting another decent man right now. I'm a mess. I can't be intimate because I freak out if someone holds me wrong. I don't know if my head's screwed on tight or if my brains are falling out. I'm hearing things. I don't know if the man I love exists anymore." Lois exhaled as those pesky tears dripped down her cheeks. "I can't lose you too; you're the only friend I have left."

"Nobody's perfect," Jimmy responded in that optimistic tone of his that always made her smile. "And it needed to be said, since I know we'll be dying in the next few minutes..." his voice wavered.

"Why? Have you heard something?" she replied wryly, trying to bring levity to their situation while changing the subject.

Jimmy took her change of topic and ran with it. "That big muscley jerk took my watch. The watch my dad gave me for my birthday a couple years back." He sighed. "Do you know it automatically changes the time to whatever time zone you're in? It was like the coolest thing my dad ever gave me and that thug stole it!" Jimmy rattled his chains, trying to get free. Neither of

them liked this medieval torture chamber. “They wouldn’t have stolen it if we were going to survive.”

“Right. Because thieves always kill those they steal from,” she mumbled.

“Huh?” Jimmy stammered.

Lois turned and faced her friend, telling him in no uncertain terms, “I’m not dying today.”

“What?”

“I’m not dying because some psycho rich man has got it in for me,” she repeated. “Clark needs me,” she whispered to herself, speaking his name aloud for the first time since mentioning him to Sarah.

Always.

She harrumphed. ~Of course, you could have showed me a little more affection while we were both under the influence of pheromones.~

Like that wouldn’t have blown up in my face, Lois.

“Who’s Clark?”

Dammit, she grimaced. Jimmy had heard her speak Clark’s name. “The man I love,” she admitted reluctantly.

“I thought you said he left you,” Jimmy said with confusion. “And since you don’t love Dan, I thought...”

“I’m naturally going to fall for you?” Lois said with a roll of her eyes. “I love you, Jimmy, I do, but like a brother – a little brother.”

I’ve heard that one before.

~Not helping matters, Clark!~

“Can you at least tell me where on your list I rank?” Jimmy asked with hope.

Lois groaned. “I don’t rank the men in my life, Jimmy.”

He looked at her with a puppy dog expression.

“No!”

“I’m tied up in chains here, Lois. Give me something to live for.”

She snorted. “Fine!”

This should be enlightening.

~You really don’t know *how* to be quiet, do you, Kent?~

I had a good teacher, he retorted.

~Smart aleck.~

“Mel Gibson,” Lois started, knocking Clark down a peg for being an obnoxious know-it-all. “Clark... CK, for short... um...” She wasn’t ready to say the full name of her dream man out loud to anyone yet; she would just tell him old Jimmy’s nickname for Clark. She didn’t really want to include this Jimmy on the list at all, but having saved her life once again on the previous day, she felt like she should throw him some kind of bone. “Brad Pitt, Antonio Banderas, James Olsen, and Dan Scardino.” Dan only got last place because *he* wouldn’t have bought horrible tiger-repelling suntan lotion at the airport, he had failed to treat her as an equal, and, oh yeah, stood her up... AGAIN. At least Jimmy knew who was driving their relationship. *Her.*

Jimmy exhaled with relief. “I can live with that. So basically if we removed the three old guys who wouldn’t be caught dead with an investigative reporter.” He grimaced. “Bad choice of words. Anyway, if any of them were found dead in Metropolis, I bet you would find them first.”

“Flattery will not move you up the list,” she warned. “And those actors aren’t much older than I am.”

“If this CK guy doesn’t want you, would you settle for me?” Jimmy suggested. “If we survive this dungeon and make it back to Metropolis and everything, would you give me a chance?”

Lois tugged on her chains, hoping to break her way free. She concentrated at the lock on the cell door of bar, wishing again that *she* had heat-vision. But since she had never been able to get the Force to work either, it was doubtful she would instantly become Superwoman...

You don’t need heat-vision to be a super woman, Lois.

She ignored Clark and tried to think of another way to get herself out of this conversation. Finally, having tried everything else, she took a deep breath and screamed, “Help! Superman!”

Lois, Clark groaned in agony. Please stop.

Jimmy raised a brow at her odd request for help. “Uh... Lois? ... Whatcha doing?”

“Well, what if there was a superhero out there with super-hearing, and he was looking for us, but couldn’t find us because we were locked in this lead-lined bunker?” she explained, not making a dent in his skepticism.

Oooh! She had forgotten to add Superman to her fantasy list of men vying for her. ~Let’s see, if I bump Mel Gibson down to third and put Clark back in his rightful first place spot, I could slide Superman into second...~

Superman would come in second to me? Clark replied, his voice cracking in awe.

~Well, he may look hot in skintight spandex and be a fantastic kisser, but he still lives in my daydream castle in the sky. In other words, while he does show up amazingly well in my dreams, I haven’t yet gotten him to manifest himself in reality,~ she justified her crazy logic. ~You, on the other hand, Clark, keep me company both in my dreams and out and also happen to be a fantastic kisser. Therefore, you have beat him out for the top slot.~

Lois felt a sense of calm come over her as a warm relaxing feeling radiated throughout her body.

“Superman?” Jimmy scoffed. “Wonderful, Lois, you really have finally dropped off the deep end.”

“I’m not insane. I’m just hypothesizing that since Batman exists, why not a Superman?” she retorted.

~Want to back me up here, Clark? Got any great factoids to support my theory?~

I really don’t think anything I could give you would help your sanity defend any.

“What?” she growled at Clark.

“Huh?” Jimmy replied.

“I thought I heard something,” she said as an excuse on why she had answered Clark out loud.

They were silent for a few minutes again, listening to hear if anyone was coming. When it was clear that no one was coming, Jimmy went back to Lois’ least favorite topic of conversation. “So, there’s no way I’d even get a chance?”

“Look,” Lois snapped, hoping to find a way to shut him up. “Would it make you happy if I told you that if neither of us find anyone by *your* thirtieth birthday, I’ll go on one date with you? Until then, can we just drop the whole subject?” she said, pleading to have one man in her life not treat her as a sex object.

Hate it that you’re so loveable, Lois? Clark chuckled. *That was some bone you threw him.*

“Oh, you want me to be your fall-back husband?” Jimmy gushed. “I can live with that.”

“One date,” Lois snarled.

“So, can I tell people we’re engaged?” he continued as if she hadn’t said anything.

“No! It’s one date. *One date!* Eight years from now. If you don’t have someone and I don’t have someone. And we’re both alive,” Lois corrected him, her voice rising with each word.

Jimmy grinned. “I can wait.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” Lois grumbled. “I plan on being happily married to Clark by then.”

If that’s a proposal, I accept.

She could feel Jimmy’s gaze on her, so she turned and raised a questioning eyebrow at him.

“Uh... Lois, just yesterday you were planning on coming on a romantic weekend with Dan,” Jimmy reminded her. “And now you’re saying you want to *marry* this CK fellow. Isn’t that kind of quick? Especially for you.”

She would have shrugged, but her arms were tired from being suspended above her head for so long. Jimmy was completely correct. What if after she found Clark, he wasn't the man of her dreams?

It wasn't like that hadn't happened before.

It had.

Often.

Actually every time.

"You're right, Jimmy. You're absolutely right. I haven't even met..." She coughed. "Seen him in..." She searched for the correct word. "Forever. I don't know if things will work out between us. I don't know. All that I know is that I think about him all the time. I can't get him off my mind. I dream about him every night and wonder what my life would be like with him in it. And, yes, I tried to forget him by getting into a relationship with Dan. That clearly was a mistake." She rolled her eyes up to the chained hands above her head. "I know that now. Look at me, I'm out of control, I'm babbling. I never babble."

You're kidding, right? You're a brook.

"I heard that!"

"What?! I didn't say anything," complained Jimmy, staring at her with wide eyes.

"You were thinking it," she grumbled, daring him to say differently.

Jimmy shrugged.

"Okay, so maybe I babble a little, but never about men. Ever! But Clark's different," Lois said, still defending him. "He's not like other men."

You can say that again, Clark mumbled in agreement.

"So, if Mr. Wonderful is the one, why aren't you together now?"

"I didn't know he was 'the one' at the time. He was just my best friend and then when I saw him kissing T... another woman..."

"He kissed another woman?"

~Yeah, Toni Taylor,~ she scoffed inside her head. ~How was it, Clark?~

Not as nice as kissing you.

"It was just a distraction, so I could get away..."

"Right," Jimmy said with a heavy dose of disbelief.

"It was!" Lois defended Clark again. "He *loves* me."

"Uh-huh."

"*He does!*" she roared.

I do.

"Sounds like it. So, he kissed this other woman and..."

"I stormed off. He accused me of being jealous. I claimed to be angry at him butting into my story, but the real reason was because of that kiss. Then the more I thought about it, the more I realized that I was angry because I wanted him to be kissing me, not her."

"I know that feeling," Jimmy mumbled.

"I was jealous; I just refused to acknowledge it at that time," she admitted.

"So what happened to CK?" Jimmy asked.

"He left town. Disappeared."

"Disappeared?" he questioned doubtfully.

"Yeah. Well, I'm not sure what happened. That's why when I... we get out of here I'm going to spend my vacation – the next couple of weeks – hunting him down. And when I find his butt, I'm going to drag it back to Metropolis with me, where he belongs."

"Sounds like he has commitment issues," her partner replied.

Lois heard something that sounded like a key in the lock and her eyes flashed in that direction. "Clark's not like that!"

"Uh-huh."

The door opened and in walked the henchmen who had captured them out by the pond.

"Finally! I thought I'd ended up in hell," Lois mumbled, more to herself than to her captors.

"I want my watch back," Jimmy demanded, either ignoring Lois' comment or he hadn't heard it.

"Pipe down," the bearded thug responded, opening the door to Lois' cell. "Your host requests the honor of your company upstairs." He unfastened her hands from the manacles and dragged her from the cell.

"I think I'll have to pass. As much as I'd like to leave this torture chamber, I forgot my party clothes," Lois said, rubbing her wrists.

"Spencer Spencer said it was a come as you are," the man retorted.

"Not Spencer Spencer!" Jimmy said with dismay. "He's my man."

"I told you he was scum," Lois called to her partner as she tried to break free from the strong man with the gun. "Maybe you'll think twice about whose dating advice you'll take from now on."

"Let us go!" Jimmy yelled, pulling on his chains. "Or I'll cancel my subscription to *Love Fortress International!*"

The henchmen both looked at Jimmy as if they couldn't care less, but the distraction was long enough for Lois to use her elbow to jab the strong one's gut.

"Hey, hold it," said the bearded man, jabbing a syringe into her thigh. "Nap time, honey."

Lois lost all will to fight and to keep her eyes open and suddenly felt extremely relaxed and tired.

The last thing she could remember was hearing Clark's voice echoing through her head, *Fight it, Lois! Fight it.*

"Come on. Wake up," some male voice coaxed through a thick fog. It wasn't Clark's or Jimmy's.

Lois felt extremely tired, but at least she was sitting down. She didn't want to wake up, but someone was slapping her cheeks.

"I've had lousy dates before, but this is ridiculous," the deep voice continued. He sounded quite full of himself.

She pulled her eyelids open to find herself tied to a chair in some ornate and tackily decorated office. Whomever had slapped her face was now gone. Her chair was surrounded by six crossbows at close range. Either someone was paranoid, or her reputation had preceded her. Lois couldn't think of another reason for the overkill on the weapons.

Facing her was a man with what could have been either badly highlighted, sandy blond or salt-and-pepper hair and a goatee; Lois wasn't quite sure which. He was sitting inside some kind of wood box with only his head exposed so he had to drink his martini with a straw. Classy.

"Hi-ya, toots. I'm Spencer Spencer. Welcome to my windowless lair," he told her.

"*You're* Spencer Spencer?" He wasn't at all what she expected. She examined his box thingy closer. It seemed to be some kind of medical device on wheels. "I thought you'd be..." She couldn't think of a single polite thing to say that wouldn't make him activate the crossbows. "– taller."

"You look lovely when you're revolted," he spit out at her.

"I don't know what you've got going on here, but..." She had no hope. Not even the suggestion of hope of being rescued. What could she possibly say?

Tell him something, Lois!

"Authorities will be here any minute."

"You mean your six foot some-odd tall DEA agent of a boyfriend? Well, that would be just hunky dory with me," he said with a big smile. "I much prefer his body to Shorty downstairs..."

Lois gulped, not knowing what to make of that statement.

“But doubtful, since we’re not on American soil. You know, I was going to kill you for all that crap you wrote about me, but then I thought you might like an exciting career opportunity,” he said, trying to charm her again.

It really wasn’t going to work; she didn’t know why he was trying. “What do you mean?” she asked suspiciously.

“You can be my sex slave,” he suggested.

“Kill me,” she stated. ~Sorry, Clark.~

“I know. I know. The body. Maybe I shouldn’t hide it in a box. Maybe you imagine it worse than it is.”

“Maybe,” Lois responded cautiously.

“You couldn’t imagine worse than this!” he roared at her. “My only chance with girls like you is shooting them up with cobra venom and then it’s iffy, but all that’s going to change now, thanks to modern medicine.” He pushed a switch with the side of his head. A curtain fell, revealing a painting of a tall, debonair Spencer dressed casually in a button-down shirt and slacks.

Lois shrugged. “You don’t look so bad. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“That’s not what I look like now,” Spencer informed her with annoyance. “That’s what I would have looked like if your DEA agent boyfriend hadn’t decided to blow you off.”

The headless bodies, whispered Clark.

“The headless bodies! It was you!” Lois gasped. Dan had said something about transplant drugs being stolen and having a new lead. The four headless men! Of course. She beat Dan to the punch, yet again. Too bad she wouldn’t be able to live long enough to rub it in his face.

Spencer grinned at her leap in logic. “Oh, yes, you’ll do nicely as a sex slave. I always liked a little spunk in the bedroom.”

There was a commotion outside the door, and the strong man pushed Jimmy into the office. “He said he’s willing to give you what you want.”

“No!” Lois shouted. “Jimmy, *no!*”

“Shut up!” Spencer snapped at Lois as he looked the young photographer up and down. “I don’t know...” He turned to the thug. “Blow!” He refocused his attention on Jimmy after the thug had left. “Mess up, and she’ll look like a goalie for a dart team.”

“Okay, Spencer, here’s the deal,” announced Jimmy. “I’ll give you whatever you want, but Lois has to be set free.”

“What?” Spencer responded, surprised.

“Jimmy!” Lois pleaded. She didn’t want him to lose his head.

“How good of shape are you in?” Spencer asked him.

“I’m drug free. I eat well. I exercise. My body is in top condition,” Jimmy bragged with some embellishment.

“No, he’s not. Jimmy lives on pizza and junk food. He gets winded running down the block...”

“Lois,” Jimmy groaned, shooting her a pleading look.

“I think you should also know, this man is insane,” she told Spencer.

“Lois!” her partner scolded her.

“That really doesn’t matter, honey. I’m not going to need his head,” Spencer reminded her. “How old are you, kid?” he questioned Jimmy.

“*What?*” the young photographer exclaimed with a frightened glance at Lois. “What did he mean by that?”

“Jimmy,” Lois warned.

“How old are you?” Spencer repeated to the young man, taking another look at him. “And take off your shirt.” He glanced over at Lois. “Your other boyfriend is what thirty? Older?”

“I’m twenty-two.” Jimmy slowly started to unbutton his shirt and murmured to Lois under his breath, “What does he want exactly?”

“Your body,” Lois murmured back with a head bob towards the picture behind Spencer. “Literally.”

Her partner’s eyes popped wide open as his hands went up defensively. “Well, you caught me, Spencer. It’s just like she said. I use drugs all the time. If it isn’t prepackaged and full of chemicals, I don’t eat it. I never exercise. I have heartburn and diabetes. The doctors have given me six months to live.”

Lois rolled her eyes. Jimmy lied worse than Clark. Correction. No one lied worse than Clark.

Thanks.

“Pescado! Get your butt in here!” Spencer yelled and a dark-haired man wearing a suit sauntered in. He didn’t look like an average everyday thug. “How much time have I got?”

“The way your vitals are going, sir, forty-eight hours. Possibly less,” replied the man with a Spanish accent. “Then you’ll be too sick to operate.”

Lois swallowed. *This* man was Spencer’s doctor?

“He isn’t the specimen I wanted...” Spencer looked Jimmy over once again. “I’d hoped I’d be taller... Nevertheless, Doctor, prep for surgery.”

“Let Lois go,” Jimmy pleaded for her again. “She doesn’t have anything to do with this.”

The psycho magazine publisher grinned at Jimmy. “I’m not letting her go. You wanted to have sex with her. I’m giving you this chance.”

Jimmy gulped. He shot Lois an apologetic glance as the strongman thug returned and hauled her friend away.

Lois paced back and forth in her cell. She had to help Jimmy. She wouldn’t be able to live with herself if they cut off his head.

Think, Lois. How can you get out of here? Did you check the door to the cage? Clark suggested.

“What? Did Superman heat-blast it or something?” she muttered out loud, because she was alone in the room.

I don’t think they shut it properly.

Lois walked to the door and sure enough, the cage door had closed, but not enough to latch. “I love you, Clark!” she cheered.

I love you too, honey, but I’d prefer not to be married to a former sex slave.

She ignored Clark’s comment as she crossed to the door of the room and peered out. Up a floor and down a hall, she found the operating room, where they were still prepping Jimmy for surgery. He was strapped down to a surgical table. Somehow she was going to have to get into that room.

As she snuck around a corner, Lois found Pescado’s nurse getting dressed. Finding a loose brick, Lois knocked the woman out and stole her surgical garb, including a cap and mask to hide her hair and face.

Lois walked into the operating room and glanced down at Jimmy. He looked up at her, fear in his eyes as he begged for mercy. She winked to let him know it was her.

Jimmy tugged at his straps, trying to get free.

Some vote of confidence there, Jimbo.

Pescado was checking the equipment. “Heidi, check his bindings,” he ordered.

Lois nodded, crossing to the far side of the operating table, where she loosened instead of tightened the straps that held Jimmy’s wrists and head down.

The doctor turned to young man holding up a syringe.

“Time to go nighty-night,” said Spencer with glee from his box behind Pescado.

“After I get his head off,” Pescado explained to Spencer. “I’ll freeze his body with liquid nitrogen.” He pointed to the tank above Jimmy.

Jimmy gulped and shot another panicked glance at Lois as the doctor cleaned his neck once more.

Lois came up beside the doctor, trying to think of a way to distract the man.

“After I finish giving him this shot, Heidi, I want you to hand

me the scalpel,” Dr. Pescado informed her.

She nodded – as she was pretending to be Heidi the nurse after all – and set her hands down on the tray of surgical instruments. Jimmy flinched as Pescado pinched his arm to pop a vein for the tranquilizer, but Lois hit the doctor over the head with the tray before he could inject it into Jimmy’s arm. She grabbed the syringe, stabbing the doctor with it instead.

“Guards!” shouted Spencer. “Get this woman out of here!”

Jimmy unfastened the rest of his bindings and pulled himself up with the cord to the liquid nitrogen.

“Jimmy, no!” Lois screamed, diving over the table and knocking him off to the other side. The operating table fell down next to them.

The cold liquid air blew onto the doctor instead, freezing him as he passed out from the sedative, and he thudded down to the floor.

“Admit it, Lois, you like...” Jimmy started to say, before the first shot rang out.

The room was filling with a nitrogen fog and the guards couldn’t see at whom or what they were shooting. Lois pulled the operating table between them and the doorway. She and Jimmy hid behind it as bullets bounced around every surface of the room. They heard a thunk and the shooting stopped.

“Superman?” Lois whispered in hopeful disbelief, her heart banging against her ribcage.

They peered over the top of the table and saw a man standing in the foggy doorway with the two guards knocked out at his feet. As the fog cleared a little bit, Jimmy said, “Dad?”

Dad?

The man crossed his arms, staring at Lois and Jimmy. “A little far from home, aren’t you, son?”

“I’m on assignment,” Jimmy responded stiffly, climbing to his feet. “Lois and I came to check out a romantic island resort.”

Mr. Olsen took an obvious gaze around the destroyed room and raised a brow. “How does it rate?”

“I’m going to give it a fail,” Jimmy said, turning to his partner and holding out a hand to help her up. “Lois?”

“Definitely,” she said, still wondering how Mr. Olsen, so-called structural engineer, had found them.

“Romantic?” Mr. Olsen examined Lois with his eyes again.

She pressed her lips together at the obvious once-over as she took Jimmy’s outstretched hand and got to her feet.

“Lois is the woman I’m going to marry,” Jimmy announced, tossing a joking grin towards Lois, taunting her to deny it to his father. He must have heard that crack about him torturing her down in the dungeon.

Mr. Olsen craned around his son to take a better look at her. “Is this true?”

“Yes,” Lois replied, matter-of-factly, calling Jimmy’s bluff.

“What?” gasped Jimmy.

What?! Clark sputtered at the same time.

“If neither of us find the person of our dreams by the time I’m forty, Jimmy has graciously offered to marry me, so we don’t die alone, and I have accepted,” she explained.

Lois, that’s a dinosaur sized bone!

~He offered to lose his head to save me. Anyway, I have already found the man of my dreams,~ she told Clark with a self-satisfied smile. ~So, Jimmy will never get his chance.~

“Well, then, I guess I should introduce myself,” Jimmy’s father said, holding out his hand. “Jack Olsen.”

“Lois Lane.” She shook his hand.

“Who’s the guy is in the box?” Jack asked with a nod towards Spencer Spencer.

The liquid nitrogen fog had dissipated enough for her to see over to the back corner of the room where Spencer Spencer had been located. He was dead. Shot through the head by one of his guard’s bullets. Heidi was crying over the frozen body of Dr.

Pescado.

Lois and Jimmy exchanged a look and she decided to let him field that answer.

“Spencer Spencer,” Jimmy replied. “He wanted to attach his head to my body.”

Jack raised a brow to that information. “Well, it looks like I got here just in time,” he said, wrapping an awkward arm around his son’s shoulders. It was an uncomfortable embrace that ended seconds later.

“How exactly did you do that, by the way?” Lois asked, following the two men out of the operating room.

Jack shrugged. “The watch I gave Jimmy has a GPS – or Global Positioning System – device on it. I just homed in on the watch. When I dropped by the office to ask you to lunch, son, Mr. White said he didn’t know where you were, because you were supposed to be at work.”

“On assignment with my partner Lois Lane, Investigative Reporter,” Jimmy answered. “I guess Perry didn’t get my message.”

“Then Lois’ boyfriend showed up, looking for her...”

Lois rolled her eyes. Lovely. Just what she needed.

“Ex-boyfriend,” Jimmy grumbled. “Wait! My watch.” He turned around and pulled it off the inert wrist of the strongman. “Thank you,” he told the man before dropping his arm back on the ground.

“But why would you look for us?” Lois wasn’t convinced she was being told the whole story. “How could you get here so quickly?”

Jack Olsen smiled with a shrug. “I have friends.”

“Friends?”

“My dad’s ex-army, Fort Truman, remember. He’s got friends everywhere,” Jimmy responded by way of an explanation. Sometimes he could be so naïve. “Oh, Dad, remind me to tell you what Dr. Golden did to me.”

Lois still wasn’t convinced by Jack’s vague tale. “Tell me more, Jack.”

“What matters is that you two are safe,” replied Jack with more evasion.

“Who do you work for again?” Lois questioned.

“Olsen Civil Engineering.”

Uh-huh.

“Dad blows up some of the biggest stuff in the world,” Jimmy gushed.

Lois didn’t doubt the validity of that statement.

“Your boyfriend... Dan,” Jack said, not giving up on that title for Scardino yet, even though she had. “– was worried because after the DEA raided the Love Fortress corporate offices, he found information that Spencer Spencer – I liked the exposé, by the way – lives on a private island east of Rio, near where the two of you – Dan and you, that is – were supposed to be spending this weekend. Since *you* hadn’t come to work either, we agreed it was too many coincidences.”

“On assignment,” replied Lois. “Thankfully Jimmy stepped in when Dan backed out at the last minute.” She smiled at her friend.

Jimmy shrugged. “Some of us prefer to spend the weekend with a live woman to headless dead men,” he replied, trying for casual but not quite carrying it off.

“I called a few old army buddies and presto, here I am.” Jack sighed. “And you didn’t even need me.”

“Of course, I need you, Dad!” Jimmy clarified. “If you hadn’t clobbered those thugs...”

Lois jumped in. “We could use a lift home.” If he gave them that, she would be willing to overlook his preposterous cover story. For now.

“I’ve got a heli outside,” Jack said, nodding in the direction they should go.

Good riddance, Love Fortress! Hello, Smallville!

Chapter Thirteen

Back at her apartment, Lois sat on her sofa. She was freshly showered and happy to be home; yet, at the same time, itching to be off.

“Lois, I’m really sorry about your island vacation,” Perry apologized to her over the telephone. “I’m sure you’re too overwrought to put words...”

“I’m sending you the story as we speak,” she interrupted, clicking ‘send’ on her laptop.

“Terrific!” her boss said with enthusiastic relief. “Will I see you two in the office tomorrow?”

“Well, I don’t know about Jimmy; after all he was the one who was almost beheaded. I was just being recruited as an unwilling sex slave,” she said, finally able to laugh about their experiences. She shook her head. Sometimes her life was stranger than fiction. “I believe Jimmy said he was going to catch up with his dad. Me? I’m ready for that vacation you tried to sell me on before this whole mess. I’m taking a week... no, two. I need to clear my head, reset my priorities.”

“Two whole weeks? On vacation? You?” Perry couldn’t hide his disbelief. “Lois, honey, Dan is good for you. If it wasn’t for him...”

“Chief, please. Don’t defend him. When it comes down to it, he wasn’t there for me when he said he would be. If it hadn’t been for Jimmy, my cobra-venom filled, sexually assaulted body would be washing up on the shores of Metropolis.” She thought about the tiger. “Or worse.” Then she reviewed those choices again. Nope, she would have rather been eaten by the tiger.

“Okay, Lois, let’s not sugar coat things...” Perry continued. “You know my thoughts on this subject. You sure you want to go off on your own, right now?”

“Why? Does some other psycho billionaire, who I don’t know about, got it out for me?” she scoffed. “I’ll be fine. Don’t worry, Chief. I plan on looking up an old friend.” Lois typed Kansas into her map program on her laptop as someone knocked on her door. “Got to go; my dinner’s arrived. See you in two weeks.” She hung up the phone and walked to the door. Glancing through the peep-hole, she saw a large pizza box. “I ordered Chinese!” she said to the person on the other side of the door.

The pizza box lowered and was replaced by a large box of chocolates. She could see Dan’s hopeful face peering over the top of it.

“No, thank you,” she said through the door, not opening it. “I gave at the office.” She returned to her laptop and typed in a request for directions from the Topeka airport to Smallville.

“Lois,” Dan called. “Open up, babe. We need to talk.”

Babe? Is he nuts?

“Apparently,” she grumbled, still ignoring the man at her door.

“Lo-is!”

“Dan,” she said, not getting up from her seat. “The last man who called me ‘babe’ is currently underground at Whispering Pines Cemetery. For your safety, it’s not recommended that I open the door.” True, she hadn’t killed Ralph herself, but dead he was.

“Lo-is,” Dan pleaded again. “Let me apologize.”

“No.”

“Please give me a second chance.”

“Second? You blew your second chance months ago, buster,” Lois retorted.

“Lois, can we please not have this conversation through the door,” Dan begged.

With a groan, Lois stood up and walked to her front door. She unfastened her locks and swung open the door. “Dan, I don’t want to see you anymore. Whatever I felt for you is gone.”

His face fell. “What?”

“I don’t love you. It’s not working between us. I’m with someone else now,” Lois stated coldly, starting to shut the door. She had no patience left.

“Who?” Dan growled, sticking his foot in the doorway. “And don’t dare tell me it’s Clark...”

“Jimmy,” she replied without hesitation.

Jimmy?

“Jimmy? That kid?” Dan scoffed.

“Jimmy’s a man. I’m a woman. Do I need to draw you a diagram?!”

“He tried to *kill* you!” he reminded her.

“Irrelevant.” She waved a hand through the air, wiping away that issue. “Maybe it could have been you, but it wasn’t. You had more important things to do than spend an uninterrupted weekend alone with me. So, you see, it’s over between us. I can’t go back. I’d much rather be with a man who’s there for me even when there aren’t bombs going off and people trying to kill me. Please leave.” She kicked his foot out of her doorway and shut the door in Dan’s shocked face. She relocked her locks and returned to her laptop.

Lucky Jimmy.

“Dan told me not to tell him it was you,” Lois replied. “So, I gave him what he asked for.”

Um... Lois...

“No, Clark, nothing happened with Jimmy. Never been there, never going there, would rather die,” she said, scrolling down the screen.

I don’t think Dan asked for that, Lois. You didn’t have to embellish the truth.

“What? You want me to call him back and apologize?” she scoffed. “Fat chance. That man never takes ‘no’ for an answer. I had to phrase it in a way that he knew that my ‘no’ meant ‘never again’.”

Remind me never to break your heart, Clark gulped.

“I don’t think you’ll ever forget this, Clark,” she mumbled, saving the map and heading to a weather website to check out what she should pack.

I believe you might be right there, Lois.

Lois pulled her rental car into a parking space outside the Smallville Diner. She was starving, not having eaten since picking at that in-flight meal. She really ought to start bringing her own food on flights, she told herself. She had thought about driving all the way from Metropolis, but after looking at the map, she determined it would take a minimum of two twelve-hour days in the car – one-way – just to get to Smallville.

She instead dipped into her Tahiti fund and bought herself one coach ticket to Topeka and a week in a convertible, saving herself between forty-eight to ninety-six hours of research time for the extra expense. She didn’t know if she was going to find anything in Smallville. She hoped to find something: a birth record, a death certificate, a school transcript, someone who knew Clark at some point. She needed to know, once and for all, that she wasn’t crazy.

She opened her car door and went into the Smallville Diner. It was just as she pictured it: rows of booths lining the windows and a scattering of free-standing round tables, each covered with a checkered plastic tablecloth. There was also a long counter for individual seating.

“Please Seat Yourself” invited the sign, so she did. There was one booth open in the back by the restrooms. Not ideal, but she didn’t want to sit at the counter. Actually, she was kind of surprised that the diner was still busy at – she glanced at her watch – one forty-five on a Tuesday.

“Hi, there,” the friendly blonde waitress said, sliding a glass of ice-water across the table in front of Lois. “You waiting on

someone, hon?”

‘All my life,’ Lois thought, before answering out loud. “Just me.”

“Okay. You’re not from around here, are you?”

Still dressed in her Metropolis clothes, Lois figured she indeed stuck out in the middle of Nowheresville, Kansas. She knew she should have worn her jeans.

“And you’re not here for the cattle auction, are you?” the waitress guessed correctly again.

“That obvious?” Lois joked, more to herself than at the waitress. “Vacation.” She took a sip of her water and accepted the offered menu.

“You driving between Wichita and Topeka?” the woman hazarded a guess. “You’re a little off the beaten path. You lost?”

This waitress asked more questions than Lois had while interviewing the President. Of course, Lois had only been allowed the one question. She pressed her lips together, still wishing she had come up with something better. ‘If you had twenty-four hours to spend doing anything you want, how would you spend them?’

If you were a major league baseball player, which position would you play and why?

~Potato. Tomato,~ Lois retorted.

Lois raised her eyes and focused them on the waitress, realizing that the woman was still next to the table, waiting for her answer. What had she asked? The waitress’s hair was styled differently and she was wearing a uniform instead of jeans, but – Lois blanched – this woman had been in her dream. Lois searched her brain trying to remember the woman’s name. Then she noticed her nametag: Maisie. Of course! “Neither,” she informed her.

Maisie knows everything about everyone. If there’s information to be had in Smallville, Maisie has it, Clark whispered in her ear. Tread carefully.

Lois couldn’t believe her good luck. “I’m searching for a friend of mine. I’ve misplaced him,” she continued, dismissing Clark’s groan of humiliation.

Maisie eyed her skeptically and Lois had to agree with her assessment. Only someone like Clark – a one in a million type man – would know two such different women.

Lois pulled her gaze away from Maisie’s to the menu, deciding it was best not show her hand too soon. “So, what’s good?”

“Everything,” Maisie informed her. “But we’re out of pulled pork and meatloaf. Oh, and the peach pie. The cattlemen wiped us out.”

Lois took another quick glance at the menu. “I’ll take a burger, fries and...” She flipped a page. “Is that real ice cream shakes?” she asked in amazement and saw a softening of Maisie’s hard expression. “Chocolate, please.” At least, she wasn’t one of those city girls.

Maisie took the menu and disappeared behind the counter. Lois retrieved a notebook from her briefcase and started to review everything and everyone she could remember from when she and Clark had come to Smallville to investigate the “EPA” digging up Wayne Irig’s farm.

Wayne Irig. Martha and Jonathan Kent. Rachel Harris. Lois added Maisie’s name to the list.

Wayne’s my dad’s best friend and neighbor, Clark had told her when they had come to Smallville in her dream.

Clark had taken Rachel – now Sheriff Harris – to the prom. It wasn’t much to go on, but Lois had somewhere to start. Back on the island she had started to jot down everything personal she had learned about Clark since he had started at the Daily Planet. She decided to review these facts again now.

He was a year older than her, so born in 1966, graduated high school in 1984. He had played football at Midwest University

and graduated with a degree in journalism, probably in 1988.

Lois made notes. How did he pay for college: football scholarship or student loans?

Before that, Clark had grown up on his parents’ farm in Smallville, and after college he had traveled the world, including Borneo, Nigeria, England, and China. Where else would he have picked up Chinese? Can one *pick up* Chinese? Had he studied the language in college? He also knew French. Lois added France to the list.

She glanced up as Maisie set down her chocolate shake. The diner had almost cleared out in that time. “Where did everyone go?” she asked the waitress in awe. “Was it something I said?”

Maisie chuckled. “Cattle auction. All week. Next auction starts up at two thirty.”

“Oh.” *Well, that explained it,* she thought before another brainchild struck her. “It’s not as crazy as the Smallville Corn Fair, is it?”

“Festival,” Maisie corrected before going on to reassure her. “Oh, no. It’s fairly tame. The cowboys can get rowdy at night, but other than the extra mouths to feed and more trucks in town, most people wouldn’t notice them.”

Lois released a breath of relief. “I’ll be in town a few days. Is there a hotel you can recommend?”

Maisie looked at her with pity. “Oh, honey. We’ve only got the Gold Nugget Motel out by the state road, on the edge of town. I wouldn’t recommend it to the likes of you, anyway.”

The woman from Metropolis didn’t know whether to be insulted or relieved. Had there been a gold rush in Kansas? Must be a ‘nugget’ of golden corn.

“Plus it’s probably booked up with cowboys,” Maisie continued. “And we’ve got the smaller Smallville Inn here in downtown. It’s a bit pricier, but nicer too.”

“Thank God!” Lois thought.

“But I happen to know it’s full up with ranchers this week.”

Her heart dropped. *Crap.* The nearest town was forty-five minutes away. “Terrific,” Lois grumbled. “Isn’t there anywhere else? A bed and breakfast? A room I could rent for the week? Something?”

“Well...” Maisie hemmed and hawed.

“Anything!” Lois pleaded. She could tell Maisie knew of a place and the reporter leaned forward in anticipation.

“Some friends of mine have kind of a working farm vacation resort thing. You know where city folk pay to come and pay to work, eat, and sleep on a real farm. It’s not really a BnB, although food’s included. You earn your keep. Doing chores, collecting eggs, milking cows, and the like.”

That forty-five minute commute wasn’t looking too shabby in light of her only option for staying close to town.

“I can call and see if they have room,” Maisie volunteered.

“Can you ask your friends if I can pay extra instead of doing chores?” Lois suggested. Chores would dig into her precious research time. She had come to Smallville to look for Clark, not to get her farm on.

“I don’t know if she’ll accept, but I’ll ask. I know funds are limited and the chores a plenty since the accident,” Maisie responded with a sigh.

Accident?

A ding of a bell announced Lois’ burger was ready and her stomach growled in response.

Less than a minute later, Maisie set down the plate and a bottle of ketchup. “Who’s your friend? Maybe I can point you in the right direction?”

Lois took a bite of a thick steak fry and moaned with satisfaction as she pondered her choices.

This was it. Either Maisie would tell her what she wanted to know or protect her own, as Clark said people were apt to do. With Clark dead – Lois winced every time she thought those

words, because her heart contracted in physical pain – what possible reason was there for Maisie or anyone to hide? Still, Lois didn't want to say his name. What if she hit a brick wall? But – on the other hand – how was she going to find out any information if she kept Clark's name to herself?

Not yet, Lois. We don't know how or when I died. It's best if you do some digging first before asking questions.

Lois decided that Clark was probably right about erring on the side of caution. It wasn't her usual form, but this wasn't her typical case. She wouldn't want to spook anyone by dropping Clark's full name too soon, no matter how tempting it was to know if Miss Know-It-All Smallville had heard of him. On the other hand, she hadn't come half-way across the country to not ask the hard questions. "I'm looking for a friend of mine who went missing, someone named..." She pressed her lips together and then exhaled. "Kent," Lois finally spit out.

Maisie gave her an apologetic smile. "Sorry, hon. I don't know any Kent in Smallville. Let me go call The Farm and see if they've got room for you." She knocked on the table, despite it being Formica instead of wood, and took a few steps back towards the kitchen before stopping. The waitress turned back to Lois and asked, "You don't mean Martha and Jonathan Kent?" Then she waved that idea out of the air. "Nah, the Kents aren't missing. I'm betting you mean someone with the first name Kent, right?" She shrugged and continued on to the diner's kitchen.

Lois felt like she had fallen through the ice of a frozen pond. The French fry in her mouth was calling to be swallowed, but instead she coughed it out into her hand. She started to shake as the icy shivers and goose bumps overtook her. She pressed her frozen hands to her face only to remove them from the sweating heat she found there.

Clark Kent was real. His hometown existed. His parents lived there. Lois was getting closer to Clark with every moment. Would she really find him?

You're the best reporter Metropolis has ever seen.

There had to be some record of Clark somewhere. She couldn't have created all these facts out of thin air.

She took a bite of her burger to warm herself up.

Maisie didn't return until Lois had finished. "I talked to Martha. She says she has room. She doesn't know of any local Kents beside her and her husband Jonathan. Are you sure it's 'Kent'? There's Ken Small of the Smallville Smalls, but if I were you..." Maisie lowered her voice. "I wouldn't seek him out. He's a few ears short of a bushel, if you know what I mean."

Lois nodded even though her brain went numb at Martha's name. "Martha? Is that Martha Kent?"

"Yes. How do you know Martha?" Maisie inquired suspiciously. Then she rolled her eyes and answered her own question, "Oh, right, I mentioned the Kents earlier, silly me."

"You said that there had been an accident," Lois probed.

"Jonathan broke his spine a few years back and can't walk. He's stuck in a wheelchair. It's been tough going for a while and they sold off a fair portion of the farm to the Irgs. Plus, Martha's had to take over most of the duties at the farm herself. She hires hands when she can, but everyone else has their own lands. They hit upon this B&B idea. They are the sweetest couple. I promise you'll love them." The waitress grinned. "They make me believe in true love, even if I haven't found it for myself." Maisie noticed a new customer walk into the diner and went to greet them.

Lois set both of her hands on the table to steady herself. Jonathan was in a wheelchair? Martha had taken over the farm work? They rent out their house to guests? They've sold part of the farm? She tried to take deep breaths but somehow she started hyperventilating instead. The room began to swim.

Lois, please. I need you to be calm.

At hearing how uneven Clark's usually composed voice sounded, she got control over the tears filling her eyes and was

able to breathe again. ~I'm fine.~ She wasn't, but she wasn't going to let Clark know it.

Maisie walked back up. "But if you don't feel like chores, I can call Lawrence and see if they have room at their motel." She gave Lois a grimace as if she didn't recommend it.

Lawrence? Oh, right; that was the name of that town forty-five minutes away. "No, I'll stay with Kents. Who knows, maybe they have a handsome son or farmhand for me to fall in love with," Lois insinuated, knowing full well that Clark was their son.

"Nope, they never had any children and, sorry, all the hunky farmers in town are taken." Maisie winked at Lois. "Martha's hired Owen Poister as a farmhand..." She raised a lip in disapproval. "Sweet as can be, but I don't think you'd find him much to look at."

Lois' jaw dropped as Maisie's words echoed in her mind. *They never had any children.* How could that be? Clark had to exist. He *had* to. There were too many coincidences for this one fact to be wrong: Clark's landlord in Metropolis, Clark's parents, Maisie, the Irgs, and Smallville for heaven's sake. No, Clark existed, and Lois wouldn't rest until she got to the bottom of why nobody knew about it.

Lois got the directions to the Kent's farm from Maisie. Even though Lois had been there in her dreams, it wasn't like she had driven.

Clark was being his usual reticent self. She didn't have a problem with that – him still being a voice inside her head and all, a voice which she seemed to follow blindly and argue with occasionally. It wasn't like she had put two and two together and come up with sixty-four. She knew hearing Clark's voice – and Superman's that odd time or two – wasn't normal... or sane.

And Lois wasn't following Clark's commands like some nutso with an AK-47. *He* hadn't suggested that she go to Smallville. That had been her idea and her idea alone. She had still kissed Scardino despite Clark's objections. So, in her opinion, in spite of everything, she was in full control of her mental capacities.

Clark wasn't the type of man to beg or coerce or belittle or be nasty. Not in her dreams and not as a voice from beyond. Lois always liked that he had this quiet confidence about him, as if he was in on some big world secret – like he was the President's son or something – that was his "get out of jail free" card. He would never cash it in. He wanted to make it on his own merits, but knowing it was there as his back-up plan made him daring and was part of his charm.

In her dream-life and in reality, Clark was the only one in the office – save Perry – who stood his ground when she went on one of her rampages. He was the only one willing to tell her 'no' to her face. She trusted him. He seemed only to fear for her safety. So when she had one of her cockamamie plans, instead of trying to talk her out of it until he was blue in the face, Clark just usually went along. Maybe he had Superman's unlisted phone number.

Then Lois laughed, glancing down at the directions that Maisie wrote out on the napkin. Lois had forgotten for a moment that Superman was just a figment of her imagination in these dreams, a way for her subconscious to point her towards the bad that Lex had done in her real life. Her latest dream – point of fact – seemed to disprove this theory though, because in it Lex wasn't the bad guy. He had been the victim. Lois shook off this thought.

Apocalypse Consulting. She had found the story on her spoil-herself-rotten night at the Lexor. She treated herself after enduring several weeks of sleepless nights at home after Ralph had forced himself on her. The Lexor was a treat, indeed: silk sheets, a big screen television, a sunken tub, a huge gift basket of snacks, and Security just a phone call away. Everything that a

woman needed to pamper herself.

Lois had been in said sunken tub, relaxing in a bubble bath when Lex had called and offered her company. *No, thank you*, she had explained again.

Actually, she hadn't treated herself. It had been Lex who had proposed that she spend the night at the Lexor after she explained what had happened with Ralph, and she had taken him up on the offer. She had insisted on paying for it herself but found the room comped "care of management" when she had arrived. Only when Lex had asked about the view had she noticed Congressman Harrington in the building across the street. Luckily, she had her briefcase with accoutrements handy.

Perry had put her and Jimmy undercover the next few nights as a honeymooning couple. Lois doubted anyone actually believed them to be a real couple. Not the front desk clerk. Not the bellhop. Not the maid. Especially since Cat had accompanied them to demonstrate all the toys with which the honeymoon suite came equipped. The writer of *Cat's Corner* had to see for herself Lois and Jimmy as a married couple.

Lois had decided not to tell Lex about the investigation, not wanting to look like she was using his gift with another man. She didn't care that everyone else knew. Lois refused to share the room or story with any other reporter but Jimmy. Between Claude and Ralph, it was amazing she was willing to trust another reporter again.

I'm not like them.

"I know," she whispered.

Her mind drifted back to last night's dream. Lois could say this much for Clark, he was much better company than Jimmy, who didn't like to play games and only wanted to watch mind-numbing TV.

Lois had still broken into Apocalypse Consulting alone, just as she had in real life, but this time the sprinklers went off, drenching the offices and herself. She hadn't had time to find the video of the tsunami and warn Lex because of it or discover that her credit card had fallen out of her bag. She also ended up tied up on the docks with Congressman Harrington before she could nail his sorry butt to the front page for taking bribes. Luckily, Clark found them and Superman was there to save the day.

"Clark," she murmured with a sigh.

Her mind now meandered back to the dreamy kiss they shared on the hotel bed because the maid had barged in on them. Somehow Clark had known... Maybe he hadn't... Perhaps he had thrown the camera and Lois onto the bed as an excuse to kiss her and the maid just happened to walk in at that point and time.

You know I'd never have done that, Clark whispered.

"No, you aren't the type of man to tell a woman you love her," she snapped. "Especially with your lips."

What are you mad at me for?

"Why do you think?"

Only silence answered her angry retort.

Lois sighed before finally replying to his question, "You didn't kiss me because you wanted to, Clark. You kissed me as a distraction."

I was just doing what you asked.

"Asked? I asked you to kiss me? Ha! I never did any such thing, and you know it."

Suddenly a memory from her undercover stint at Metro Club flashed across her brain...

Clark tossed Lois over his shoulder as she struggled to get free. That no-good partner of hers.

"You'll pay for this, Kent. I swear you will," Lois informed him in no uncertain terms.

"It's King, remember," Clark hissed back at her with a spank to her bottom.

"Benedict Arnold is more like it," she mumbled as the door of the club opened and one of Toni's henchmen watched.

"Make sure you throw out that trash," the henchman said. "I had no choice," Clark told Lois as he walked her away from the backdoor.

"You had a choice!" Duh! "You could have pretended that we were sharing some fleeting moment of passion, but you didn't think of that, did you? No!"

"No, but I'll remember it the next time we're in a closet," Clark retorted as he paused in front of the two dumpsters behind the club.

"Don't even think about it," she told him.

"It's for your own good, believe me."

"No! No! Noooooooooooooo!" she screamed, as he dumped her unceremoniously onto a pile of rotten vegetables.

"So that night at the Lexor was you 'pretending that we were sharing a fleeting moment of passion?'"

It was only fleeting because you weren't ready for it to be any longer.

"I knew I was right. You didn't want to kiss me at all. I was just a distraction," Lois said, her voice rougher than it should be when one argued with someone who wasn't there.

Trust me, Lois, I wanted to.

"How? How can I trust you, Clark?" Lois threw up a hand in disgust. "You're just a voice inside my head. Probably not even Clark's real voice, just my wishful imagination supplying answers to all of my questions."

Clark sighed. *I wish there was a way I could refute that, but there isn't.*

"See, I'm just some wacky woman from Metropolis trying to reconnect with the parents of her ghost boyfriend. So tell me, Clark," Lois said in her best reporter tone of voice. "If you were really there, describe the kiss from your point of view."

I didn't hear any complaints, he recalled.

"Exactly!" Lois shook her head.

What's that supposed to mean?

What kind of lunkhead was this guy she had fallen in love with anyway? Did she have to spell it out for him? "If you didn't hear any complaints, why did you stop kissing me?"

Oh.

~Oh?~

You do realize that these feelings you have for me now, aren't how you feel about me in these dreams, right?

"I guess you'll never know that for sure, now will you?" she shouted into the dead air. Sadly, Lois had to admit Clark was right... to a point. Not that she would ever say so verbally. She didn't do that.

Even though Clark was the sweetest, kindest, most open, most honest, genuine, most all-around good guy she had ever met, he had already hurt the dream her — on several occasions. True, they were all unintentional, but that didn't stop her heart from aching. It didn't stop him from inadvertently nudging her towards other men, men who couldn't hurt her with their unattainability.

The first time was when Clark told her, albeit teasingly, that he wasn't attracted to her, while being exposed to pheromones, after she had thrown herself at him. Secondly, when he kissed her and then abandoned her during the heat wave. And thirdly, at the Lexor, when he kissed her... and stopped kissing her as soon as the maid had left, not a minute later to make sure the maid wasn't coming back, but the instant the door had shut. He had just gotten up and picked up the camera like nothing had happened.

Lois herself had laid there and had to catch her breath for at least five seconds, because that was what kissing Clark did. It took her breath away. It was why she kept thinking about his kisses outside of her dreams. It was why she was lost in the middle of nowhere trying to determine if he had truly lived, so she could start to work on how to figure out how to stop him from dying... in the past. So she could make this dream man a

reality.

She hated that in these dreams she treated Clark as a buddy and Lex as an ideal. True, she had been attracted to the scumbag in real life as well. What Lois just didn't understand was how she still could be fascinated with Lex in these dreams after everything she had learned about the man? Why would her subconscious still like Lex with Clark standing right next to her? Those aspects of the dreams felt more like nightmares.

How she could still go and have dinner with Lex after confessing – under the influence of Revenge – her true feelings for Clark? She knew that her feelings had been real. Even her dream self knew, though she tried to deny it to herself. Liking Clark scared her in the way liking the unattainable Lex Luthor or Superman didn't. Clark was within her reach, and because of that, she was within his. Lois knew that if she let Clark touch her, he would have the ability to hurt her more than someone like Lex or Superman ever could. Her dream-self knew somehow that these two men would never open their hearts fully to her, that they would always be holding something back from her... it was what attracted her, the mystery behind the closed door. Clark had no mystery. What was it that dream Maisie had said about him? Oh, yeah. "What you see is what you get."

Lois had once asked Clark which power he would rather have invisibility or flight... She had always thought invisibility was the answer. Now she wondered if her true answer should be x-ray vision. If she could see into the soul of men and see whether or not they were good or evil... Now *that* would be a superpower worth having.

Thinking of superpowers reminded her of Superman and his super-duper kiss from the tarmac after he caught Miranda's Revenge plane. She didn't have long to revel, because there was the sign pointing to The Farm's driveway.

About time.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Lois questioned, once more focusing on her driving.

Do you have to drool over Superman all the time?

"I didn't ask you to eavesdrop on my thoughts," she rebutted. "And it's not 'all the time'."

Lois, I don't have access to your memories, only to what you are currently actively thinking about. The way you were thinking about that kiss with the Man of Steel...

"I bet he is," Lois moaned.

Really makes me feel that you lied to me about being numero uno on your list.

She bit her bottom lip as she pulled up next to a truck. "I bet you'd look hot in the blue suit too," she murmured suggestively.

Lois! Clark squeaked. My folks!

Lois threw up her hands. ~Where? Where are your folks? Right. Not anywhere where they can hear me arguing with their dead son. If you're going to insist on being persnickety, I'll just stick with our inner dialogue,~ she grumbled. ~I hope we find out how you died soon, so I can get you out of my head and return my thought setting to private.~

Clark didn't respond as she climbed out of her car and popped the trunk to retrieve her suitcase.

The farm and farmhouse looked pretty much the same as it had when she and Clark had visited in her dreams. Perhaps not as well maintained, but Lois hadn't expected it to be without Clark. It felt weird walking up to a real house that she had dreamed about, but never before visited in real life. She got that eerie feeling she had when she had visited Clark's apartment that first time.

Her gaze fell onto the new wheelchair accessible ramp built onto the front porch and suddenly Jonathan's accident seemed more real than the gossip at the diner. She took a deep breath and exhaled. She needed to keep in control of her emotions. Okay, here went everything.

As Lois shut the trunk, she spied Martha coming out of the house. She was just as Lois dreamed her to be. Martha smiled. It was a friendly smile, but it was nowhere as reminiscent of the smile Lois had first seen on the woman's face in her dreams. This woman might have her great big love in Jonathan, but Lois could see she wasn't complete. Like her, Martha wasn't whole without Clark.

"Hi, I'm Martha Kent," Martha said, holding out her hand. "Maisie said she had sent us a tourist from town. I didn't catch your name, though."

Lois walked up the steps of the house, wanting nothing more than to envelop this woman in her arms in their shared loss.

"Honey, is everything all right?" Martha asked.

It was then that Lois realized that one of tears she had been pushing down deep inside her had escaped and rolled down her cheek. "Fine," she croaked. "Dust."

"Oh. Sorry. Dirt road. It gets like that in the summer," Martha said with a shrug, leading the woman from Metropolis into her home.

Jonathan rolled his wheelchair into the living room. "Hello," he said before holding out his hand. "Jonathan Kent. Welcome to The Farm."

Lois reached to shake his hand, trying to keep her emotions in check. There were so many filling her she didn't know where one started and the next one ended. Guilt. Heartache. Loneliness. Love. Happiness. And then back to guilt. She didn't know if the emotions were entirely her own or if Clark's agony at seeing his father in a wheelchair was affecting her – or if it was a mixture of both. "Lois Lane," she finally sputtered.

Jonathan rolled back to let her pass. "Where are you from, Ms. Lane?"

"Lois, please," she corrected him, sitting down on the couch so that they would be eye-level. "Metropolis."

"You're far from home," Martha replied.

Lois nodded and gazed around the living room. She remembered distinctly seeing memories and keepsakes of Clark's while at the Kent house in her dreams, but now there was not one photo of Clark. Had they erased him from their lives? She couldn't picture Martha or Jonathan doing anything like that. They loved their son so much. Maybe they just didn't keep his photos out where their guests could see them and ask uncomfortable questions.

"Can I ask what happened?" Lois inquired, doing just that.

Jonathan shrugged. "I fell off a ladder while painting the barn. Stupid, really..."

"Jonathan!" Martha admonished him. "Accidents happen. They don't make one stupid."

Lois touched Jonathan's arm briefly. "I'm sorry."

I should have been here.

"Maisie said you were looking for a man," Martha inquired with a glance at her husband. "A man named Kent."

Jonathan chuckled, taking hold of his wife's hand. "I hope you're not disappointed, but I'm already taken."

"The Kent I'm looking for is closer to my age," Lois answered with a wink at Jonathan. "Perhaps you have a handsome son you're squirreling away in the basement..."

Martha stopped behind Jonathan's chair, her hand gripping her husband's shoulder. "I wish," she said, her voice rough. "I can't have children."

Jonathan covered her hand with his. "We can't."

"I'm sorry," Lois instantly apologized for her tasteless joke. Maisie had told her as much; Lois had just hoped... "I'm sure you would have made a wonderful mother... parents to any child out there."

"If we ever found a babe..." Martha stopped as both she and Jonathan's faces drained of color. "Excuse me, I need to..." Her hand covered her mouth and she ran out of the room, clearly

overcome.

“It’s been almost thirty years, you’d think...” Jonathan’s voice trailed away. He cleared his throat. “Since we discovered we couldn’t have children,” he explained.

Lois dragged her eyes away from where Martha disappeared into the kitchen. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t know...” She dropped back down onto the couch, her chest tightening as she once more held her tears at bay. She wanted so much to share her pain with these people. Share their pain. She hadn’t known for sure until she had seen them deny Clark with her own eyes. They weren’t lying. They had no children.

The reporter stared into Jonathan’s face searching for some clue, some hint of Clark there. Nothing. They looked nothing alike. They didn’t share the same eyes nor build, hair, or complexion. Clark looked nothing like his parents. Yet, Clark existed – she knew that, deep in her heart, that was true. These people were his parents in her dream. She wouldn’t let this setback destroy her goal.

Then the answer smacked her in the face and she couldn’t believe she hadn’t seen it before.

“You couldn’t adopt?” Lois said weakly, clutching at this last shred of hope that had just popped into her mind.

“No.” Jonathan shook his head and left it at that. That one word did more to crush her spirit than anything else.

Martha returned and handed Lois a form to fill out: liability release for doing the chores and a price list for the week’s stay. “Meals are included,” Clark’s mom informed her.

The price seemed too fair for people who needed to have strangers do their chores instead of being able to hire more hands. Lois wondered if that was because she was expected to do chores, because they didn’t know better – not that she would ever make *that* assumption again – or because they needed to keep the price low to attract people to the middle of nowhere in Kansas.

“I really do need some time in town to look...” Lois said before her voice faded. If she couldn’t find Clark here on The Farm, how could she find evidence of him in town? “As I mentioned to Maisie, I’m willing to do chores, just nothing anywhere near the animals. I’d pay more for the exemption,” she offered, hoping they would take her up on it, not only for her sake but theirs. Clark would never forgive her if she had it in her power to help his folks and didn’t.

“That’s not necessary,” Jonathan began to say before Martha interrupted him.

“Of course, it’s necessary. The low price is in exchange for doing chores. If she’s not willing to do chores and is willing to pay for the privilege not to...”

“She said she’d do chores, Martha,” Jonathan argued.

Lois was beginning to suspect that Martha hadn’t burdened her husband the extent of their debt. Maybe it was time to compromise. “How about I pay extra to not do as many chores?”

They negotiated a price that felt more generous to Lois, yet still fair to the Kents. Then they settled down to discuss chores.

“What farm experience do you have?” Jonathan asked.

“None,” Lois replied.

“Do you cook?” Martha inquired.

“Not if you like to eat,” Lois answered.

Martha and Jonathan exchanged a look.

“She can muck stalls,” Martha suggested with a shrug.

“What?!” Lois’ eyes widened and she moved to pick up her bag and bolt for that motel in Lawrence.

Lois, you threw Jimmy a dinosaur bone...

~Fine! But I don’t want to hear word one about my Superman fantasies ever again.~ Lois let go of the handle of her bag.

Deal.

She pressed her lips together, then forced herself to say, “That sounds reasonable.”

Martha seemed impressed by Lois’ quick turnaround. “I’ll

show you the ropes tomorrow. Dinner is served at six o’clock sharp. You can clean up afterwards, while I feed the animals. Let me show to your room.”

Lois grabbed her suitcase and followed Martha upstairs. They stopped outside the same room where Lois had stayed previously – in her dreams – Clark’s old room. Lois’ heart began to beat faster in anticipation.

Martha unlocked the door and then handed her a set of keys. “The other key is for the front door. We ask that you restrict your comings and goings to before ten o’clock at night as a courtesy to the other guests. We have breakfast after the animals are fed and the eggs gathered, so around seven in the morning, but that means we meet for coffee at six.” She turned and paused at the stop of the stairs. “And we ask to be notified should you bring home any guests.”

Lois’ jaw dropped before she quickly reassured Martha’s departing backside, “That won’t be happening.”

“Good!” Martha replied from the stairs.

Lois exhaled, carrying her suitcase inside the room and shutting the door. ~You better be worth it,~ she murmured too softly to be considered outside of her thoughts.

She set her suitcase on the chest at the foot of the twin bed and took a glance around the room. She could see nothing of Clark’s. Then again, if his parents were using this as a guest room they probably would have removed anything personal. She sat down on the bed and buried her face in her hands, once again asking herself what she was doing in Kansas.

“What am I doing, Clark?” she whispered. When he didn’t answer, she said, “I’m sorry about your dad.”

Farm accidents aren’t uncommon. If I had been here...

Clark sounded so lost she wished she could wrap her arms around him. It was his biggest weakness and what she loved most about him, that he cared too much.

Lois clapped her hands together decisively. She couldn’t sit around here crying about things they couldn’t change, when there was research to be done. “Come on, Kent, we’ve got a couple hours left before dinnertime. Let’s run into town and find your birth certificate.” She stood up and picked up her briefcase. Clark didn’t respond.

Chapter Fourteen

~What do you mean, you don’t think we should look for your birth certificate?~ Lois hissed at Clark after she parked the car in front of City Hall. She spoke inside her head because she didn’t want to be overheard, since she had the top down on the convertible.

Don’t get upset if you don’t find anything.

~Clark? You want me to find you, don’t you?~

Of course, but... His voice faded.

~But?~

Just don’t be surprised, okay? Anyway, the details of my birth aren’t important. To rescue me, the note said you have to stop me from dying. It’s my death that’s important.

Lois rolled her eyes. Yeah, how was she supposed to concentrate on the day he died, if she had no way of traveling through time to stop it? She dropped her head on the steering wheel.

Lois?

“Time!” she said, flinging up her hands.

A couple walking on the sidewalk turned around and shot her a strange expression.

What?

~Tempus is time!~ she repeated what Eduardo had told her.

~I’m supposed to research *time*. Time-travel! H.G. Wells... author of...~

‘The Time Machine’! Of course. A hint of Clark’s usual optimism shone through his words before fading again. *The dead*

author of *'The Time Machine'*.

Lois sighed. ~Right~ She shoved open the door of her rental car, bringing her briefcase with her. ~But since we don't know on what day you died, let's start at your birth and work forwards.~

Oh. I see.

She shut and locked her door, which almost seemed pointless with the roof down and, well, being in Smallville. Then again, as she well knew, crime could happen anywhere. She went inside and looked at the directory, finally deciding on Vital Statistics.

Lois approached the clerk at the appropriate counter. "I'm trying to find the birth certificate for a friend of mine. He was born in 1966. I believe he was adopted in Smallville."

The clerk handed her a form. "It will be fifteen dollars and I'll need to see a state issued photo ID."

The out-of-towner looked over the form. ~Clark, what's your birthday?~

I'm not sure. Adopted, remember.

Lois groaned and filled out Clark's name on the form and the year. "I'm not quite sure on his birthday," she said, passing the form back with her driver's license and cash.

The clerk looked over the form and then raised his eyes to hers. "I don't know who this guy is you're looking for, but I can tell you right off the bat that the Kents don't have any children." "Can you just do the search or not?" she asked sharply.

Flies with honey, Lois.

~I don't like flies, Clark. Why would I offer them honey?~

"I'll see what I can do," replied the clerk, gesturing behind her. "Have a seat."

Lois sat down in a huff. ~You have to have a birth certificate, Clark. Or you couldn't be issued a driver's license or a press pass or be able to rent an apartment or get a bank account or attend college or get a passport and travel abroad. All of which I know you've done.~

I told you this was a bad idea.

She crossed her arms, annoyed. Why couldn't Clark just tell her his birthdate? Why hadn't she looked at his driver's license the last time he opened his wallet to pay for something? She would have to concentrate on that tonight when she went to sleep, if she could. She had no idea if she could control what she did or looked at or said in her dreams. Probably not, or she wouldn't act like some virginal school girl every time Superman made an appearance.

I don't think you act like a blushing school girl with Superman.

~Thoughts. My own!~ she reminded him.

Lois sat for an hour waiting for the clerk to call her back to the window. Alone. Twiddling her thumbs. Bored out of her skull. Clark wasn't talking to her, and she missed him. Her gaze focused blankly at the generic poster on the wall. The tagline was "Nutrition: It's Good For You!" Her eyes rolled up to the ceiling.

Perhaps she shouldn't have snapped at him like that. The man already had access to her inner most thoughts, fantasies, and dreams, would it really be so bad if he commented with reassurances every once and a while? She was happy that he had. It had reminded her that he was exactly the type of man she had thought he was: good, kind, decent, wholesome, all-American ghost. She sighed and got to her feet as the clerk waved her back to the window.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Lane, but there's no one matching that description born in Smallville in 1966," he told her.

"Excuse me?" That couldn't be right. She looked past him to his desk and saw a dusty old book sitting on his desk. He certainly had done the legwork. "Is that the ledger? Can I see it?"

The man shrugged and brought the book to the window, flipping it open to the correct year. "As you can see, only seventeen baby boys were born in Smallville that year. And as I know each of them personally, I know that none of them can be

the man you are looking for." He slammed the book shut. "He must have been born elsewhere."

Lois groaned and turned away from the window.

Thank you.

"Thank you," she called back ungratefully to the clerk. ~Don't you start patronizing me, Kent. Look what it did for Scardino.~

The clerk did the legwork you asked for. He did his job and he answered the question you asked. Just because he didn't come up with the answer you were looking for is no reason to be surly. I warned you...

~So, you're talking to me again? Just to tell me you told me so?~ she growled at that voice inside her head.

Fine. I'll shut up.

"No!" Lois said out loud and then winced. Damn, he got her to admit that she liked having him talk to her. She hated the silent treatment. ~You better not be smiling,~ she snapped.

I wish I could, Lois. I wish I could.

Lois crawled into her twin bed that night both mentally and physically exhausted. She didn't know why having conversations with Clark drained her of so much of her energy. Perhaps it was the stealthy way she had to be deceitful with the Kents about knowing their son.

Clark had been fairly quiet after they... she... had returned to his parents' house. She wondered if he was there somewhere in the background of her psyche, sulking. He hated that he hadn't been around to catch the ladder that caused Jonathan's accident. He hated that his folks were forced to open their home to strangers – for money – just to make ends meet. He hated that he couldn't help, that he couldn't be there for them, that he couldn't wrap his arms around them and hold them.

Lois knew all this without him saying one word. It was just another example of how wonderful a man Clark was that he cared so much about his parents. Then again, if her parents had still been together and in love after thirty-some odd years... she exhaled and pulled the covers over her.

Thank you, Lois.

"For what, Clark?" she murmured into her pillow. She felt like she had done more today to disprove his existence than prove it.

For doing this. For helping out my folks. For not giving up on me. For everything.

"So, you owe me one," she mumbled.

I guess if you save me, we'll finally be even for all those times I've saved you. Clark chuckled softly, regretfully. It wasn't as if he regretted saving her, but regretted that he couldn't do it anymore, which didn't make any sense.

~'All those times', Clark? What, twice after I witnessed Winner's murder? And one of those was from a skateboarder.~ Lois' eyes started to droop.

Right. Twice. Clark sighed and then grumbled, *I saved you at the Metro Club as well.*

~Huh?~

Goodnight, Lois.

"Goodnight, Clark."

As Lois stepped up to the outer doors of Clark's building, she heard a yell in the neighboring alley. She turned to look down the alley and found a dusty Clark, picking himself up out of a pile of trash. That was a strange place for him to be at a time like this. What was it with Clark and trash lately?

"Clark, what are you doing here?" she asked. Did he think recreating his accident would help recover his memories?

"I live here," Clark explained. That had to be one of the worst excuses he had ever given her.

Unable to help herself, she chuckled. "No, you don't. Not in

the alley.” She continued towards him. “Did you hear something?”

Clark grabbed her arm and turned her back the way she had come. “Uh. Yeah. That was me. I was looking... for clues.”

“Here?” Lois said, trying not to scoff. Yep, Clark had thrown himself into a pile of trash to get back his memories. Poor Clark. “Are you feeling okay?”

“Sure, fine,” he replied with a smile.

She almost believed him.

“Any news about Superman?” Amnesiac Clark just sounded odd as he changed the subject. He didn’t sound like Clark, and Lois still wasn’t used to it. It was like he was pretending to be himself.

“No, not yet,” she said with disappointment. She had kissed the red caped man before he left to battle Nightfall and, yet, Lois felt no guilt at wanting to spend her final minutes with Clark. She liked Clark. Even broken, he made her feel... whole.

“What if... he’s confused, like me?” Clark asked her. “And he wants to help, but he can’t.”

That made sense. Of course, Superman would want to help. That was who he was, but he ate a bomb in front of her. He got blown up in a building. He stopped a tsunami. The only thing that ever reportedly could hurt him was Kryptonite – but there wasn’t any proof that stuff existed. There was no way he could be confused “like Clark”.

“Superman wants to help... and he will,” she finally said.

“How can you be so sure?” Clark questioned.

“I know Superman,” Lois replied, reassured by this one fact she knew to be true. No one on Earth knew Superman better than she... well, not anymore.

“Well, I’d like to know him too, so, I can believe that,” Clark said as they continued to walk out of the alley. He must have been feeling the weight of the asteroid bearing down on them like the rest of humanity.

It sounded so weird to have Clark not know anything about Superman. He had known the Man of Steel as well as Lois and, at times it had seemed to her, even more so.

“Could you tell me about him?” Clark continued, almost pleading.

Lois smiled, as she always did, when she thought about Superman. What could she say? He was “Super” and he was a “Man”. She had nailed it on the first try. “Superman... is the type of man who makes things happen. I mean, he’s good looking and good, but the thing you notice most about him is how much you can count on him. I remember the first time he saved me... and only me...” When she had been pushed out of Trask’s airplane. When she was sure that her life was over, no second chances, no do-overs, Superman had been there for her. She really did count on him... all the time. Only Superman hadn’t saved “only her” that day. Superman had also saved Clark.

Lois realized that she had kept on walking, but Clark was no longer following. She turned back to him and he had a different expression on his face – like he was no longer pretending to be himself. “Clark? Are you remembering something?” Oh, please!

He smiled a big smile, a Clark Kent has the scoop of the century smile. “Yeah. I think so.”

Lois sighed in relief. She would much rather spend her last minutes on Earth with Clark, than his twin pretending to be him. “Well, let’s get back to the Planet. There’s a story to write. I mean, everybody’s meeting there for impact.”

Clark set his hand on her arm briefly and she felt a sizzle of... something tingly. Electricity? Magnetism? “Lois, wait. Can I meet you there?” he inquired. “I have something to do first.”

She smiled and tried not to roll her eyes. An overdue library book perhaps, Clark? “Sure, don’t be long,” she said, walking off.

He stopped her again. “Lois. Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For whatever it is that you’ve done for me that makes me feel so good about you,” he said with that Clark Kent charm she loved so much.

“Oh, Clark,” Lois said, caressing his neck down to his chest for a brief moment. Touching him like this increased that tingly feeling she had felt before. She could feel it dancing around her whole body now. She wondered what it was: Fear? Anticipation? Butterflies? “Whether or not that memory of yours comes back, I want you to know I think you’re terrific.”

“Likewise.”

She really did admire him, and Lois knew in her heart of hearts that Clark admired her too. She just wished he would say it... could remember it... could tell her one time before time ran out... “I mean, I love you.”

Clark’s eyes popped in their sockets. He was in shock and he wasn’t telling her that he loved her too.

Oh, God! Oh, God! What had she done? Lois thought that if she told him she loved him, again – this time stone cold sober – he would finally admit his true feelings for her.

She needed to hear someone say it to her before her life ended.

Someone who believed it.

Maybe Clark still had no memories of loving her.

Or perhaps she was wrong and Clark didn’t love her, like she loved him.

Oh, God! She **did** love him like she had told him she had.

Why wasn’t Clark speaking?

She better say something else. A disclaimer. Yes!

“Like a... a brother,” she clarified.

His shocked expression turned to understanding as he nodded.

Lois laughed away her confession as if it had really been a gaffe and walked off, wincing in pain as soon as she had turned the corner so that Clark couldn’t see her. She set her hand on the building and took a couple of breaths of air, trying to keep the tears from forming.

She loved Clark.

And Clark really didn’t love her.

She should have known when he hadn’t been attracted to her while under the pheromone’s influence.

Well, that was that. She had tried. Loved and lost, as they say. Now, she knew. Clark was her friend and only her friend. Her best friend. She would make that relationship work... somehow. She would push these thoughts and feelings she had for her best friend into the darkest corner of the deepest closet in her mind and be done with them.

At least, Superman still loved her... and, barring that, there was always Lex.

Lois did love Superman, but she had never thought anything would ever come of it. She had hoped, but never really believed. He was Superman after all. Above all these petty human desires, except when inebriated on pheromones. At least, **he** had expressed **his** love for her. Maybe she should try harder there, now that she knew that there could never be anything with Clark.

Lex’s admiration might not touch her soul as much as Clark’s had, but she liked him well enough. Though, not enough to be as invested as she had been with Clark; therefore, a barrier between her heart and the pain of rejection she currently felt would protect her from ever having to feel this way with the billionaire.

When her tears were firmly at bay, she took a couple more steady breaths and then marched off towards the Daily Planet, ready to move on with her life, whatever Nightfall determined that life to be.

Several blocks away, Lois heard it. The familiar swoosh of Superman taking flight and she turned to look up into the sky, catching only a glimpse of his red and blue before he

disappeared into the heavens. It was like a breath she had been holding tight against her chest finally was able to be released.

Yep, Superman would always be there for her, in the nick of time. Lois knew she could always count on him. He would never let her down.

After the final shovel load from the stall, Lois once again thanked her lucky stars that she had been born and raised in the city. This was dirty, stinky work and although it wasn't difficult, she could quite easily live without it for the rest of her life. She couldn't believe that there were people from the city who actually *paid* the Kents for shoveling... manure. And to think, she herself had negotiated with these people to pay *more*. She would never underestimate Martha again.

Usually a wise choice.

~Ha Ha, funny boy,~ she grumped at the voice inside her head, the voice who had begged her to help out his folks, promising to help her with the chores, and from whom she hadn't heard *once* that morning.

I'm at your beck and call, Lois.

"Bull!" she snapped, dropping the shovel on top of the wheelbarrow full of soiled wood shavings before picking up the handles of the wheelbarrow to push it outside to the pile Martha had shown her after breakfast. When Clark didn't respond right away, she went on, "Where were you when your mother wanted me to gather eggs? I asked not to be around livestock and the first chore they give me is fetching eggs..."

You're kidding me, right?

"The moral support would have been nice," she said, reaching the pile and upturning the wheelbarrow onto the compost. "I'm telling you, I'm seriously thinking about changing my mind about you. I didn't come all the way out to the middle of Nowheresville..."

I don't know, Lois, Clark interrupted as she hoped he would.

'Secretly hoped' was more correct, but she wasn't sure if she had any secrets from the man since he moved inside her head. "Go on."

"Did you say something to me, Lois?" Martha asked, leaning out of the hayloft above her.

Lois gulped. She had forgotten to speak silently to Clark. She had thought she was alone. "No," she called up to the woman. "Just talking to myself." Then she added to herself, 'And your son.'

I'm sorry, Lois. I should have warned you. Mom's great at sneaking up on people.

~Is that where you get it from?~ she sniped rhetorically, moving upwind from the compost pile and leaning against the fence of a corral. She eyed the horse running around inside of it with suspicion, in case it thought of joining her. When it showed no interest in her, she exhaled with relief. ~Clark, I don't think she's your mom. I haven't seen any evidence of you in the house. Maybe someone else adopted you.~

Martha and Jonathan Kent are the only family I've ever known, Lois. They're my Mom and Dad. Where did you look?

~All the common rooms and the unoccupied bedrooms upstairs. I want to check out the basement...~

That's a good idea. Since my folks opened the house up to strangers it's possible they don't want their personal life on display. Maybe my father's office...

~That's their bedroom now. First floor and all,~ Lois reminded him.

Right. Clark's voice sounded soft and full of guilt.

~It isn't your fault, Clark. Accidents happen.~

I should have been here for them... for him.

~Clark!~ Lois felt like swearing at the man. ~Are you going to stick on the farm for the rest of your life? You have a life in Metropolis, a job, friends who love and admire you. I'm certainly

not giving that up to come and muck stalls for the rest of my life, so you can watch your parents like they were two-year olds.~

Nor would I ask you to.

Good! ~Nobody will blame you for not being here. You're dead after all. It's not like you decided to die, right?~

He hadn't committed suicide, had he? No, not Clark. He loved his family too much. She couldn't see him give up on life. Hell, he hadn't given up on life, he was still living – even if it was vicariously through her.

No, Lois. I don't think so. I really don't know. It's so frustrating... to know that I lived, but not have all the memories in focus or in a spot where I can reach them at a moment's notice.

~Sorry, my mind isn't up to par,~ Lois griped.

Not everything is about you, Lois. I'm the one not up to par here. It's like I lived, but can't remember it. Like that time I got amnesia and forgot who I was.

~Amnesia?~ She didn't want to remember that part of her dreams, of the pain it caused her when he hadn't said anything when she told him she loved him.

During Nightfall. I... I bumped my head...

~Oh, right. You fell into some garbage during the eclipse. You got amnesia from that? Is that where you disappeared off to while I was covering Superman?~ She was trying to be casual, hoping he didn't know how far along she had progressed with her dreams.

Not like her dream-self had really noticed Clark's disappearance at first. Her focus had been all-consumed by the Man in Blue. Lois wasn't keen on who she was in these dreams. How could she only miss Superman and not the wonderful man at the next desk?

It was so strange living through that time again in her dreams. They didn't feel like dreams anymore, but nightmares – especially in light of Clark's non-answer to her confession of love. Not to mention everyone else panicking, fearing that life was going to end, causing them to do and confess things that they wouldn't have otherwise. Even EPRAD had thought the asteroid was going to hit until the end. They had sent up the Asgard Rocket to blow it up, but – Lois rolled her eyes – it missed. The one chance to save the Earth, and the damn rocket had *missed its target!*

Lois still remembered standing next to Perry in the newsroom, holding his hand as they watched the countdown clock on LNN tick closer to zero. And then nothing. *Nothing!* Not even another eclipse. It was like everyone on Earth was holding their collective breath. One minute passed, then another and another. Then someone on the street started cheering. It was over. Nightfall had passed by Earth!

It didn't hit? It missed Earth? Clark seemed as astonished as she had felt... as everyone had felt.

Everyone had thought that Nightfall was going to destroy the planet: EPRAD, NASA, the Russians, the President and even Lex had built his ark. Her brow furrowed.

Lex must have known about Nightfall in advance. There was no way he could have had that bunker ready to go in four days' time – even with his resources. Then she remembered that back when the Messenger and Prometheus had blown up, Lex had offered up his own Luthor Space Station.

The creep! Lex had known for months – possibly years – that Nightfall was coming, but instead of warning the people of Earth, he had built himself an underground lair to save three hundred of his closest friends. Ugh. She shivered with disgust again about having believed his lies.

It all seemed kind of silly to still fear Nightfall in her dreams, when she knew that the asteroid came close but never stuck the planet.

It passed by Earth? Clark repeated, still sounding

dumbfounded by this development.

~It had been close. Twenty-seven thousand miles outside of Earth's atmosphere or thereabouts.~ Or had it been one-hundred and twenty-seven thousand miles? Lois shrugged. Professor Daitch had been convicted of gross negligence, inciting riots, etc. Poor man. He didn't deserve the censure. Sure, he had made a mistake, a *huge* mistake, but better to err on the side of caution than not. It was probably best to lock him away for his own safety due to the number of death threats the scientist received after the scandal broke.

It missed?

But that was yesterday's news.

~Let's go into town,~ Lois suggested to the grumbling Clark, pushing off the fence post and heading for the house. ~See what they have by way of school records on you.~

"Lois, don't forget to refill the stalls with clean shavings," Martha called from up in the hayloft.

The reporter stopped in her tracks and grimaced. ~You owe me big, Smallville.~ She straightened her work gloves, grabbed the wheelbarrow off the compost pile, and headed around the side of the barn.

It missed?

That night Lois sat at the dining room table, her head throbbing.

Clark had, once again, dived into his quiet sulk upon returning from town before dinner. There had been no record of a Clark Kent ever having attended school in Smallville, which was strange because in Lois' dreams Rachel Harris had said that Clark had been her prom date. It would be pointless to go to Midwest University and check their records. If Clark had never attended high school, the chances of him ever having made it to college were pretty slim. Of course, Clark had never made it to Metropolis either. When had he fallen off the grid?

After visiting the Smallville High, Lois had spent the rest of the afternoon flipping through the last ten years of the *Smallville Post* archives to see if there were any records or obituaries on Clark. Nothing. Not even a whisper. It was as if he had never existed.

She couldn't believe someone from Smallville could die without it showing up in the *Smallville Post*. They were so thirsty for news in this small town that every accident, every school award, every pothole, every fair prize, every piece of gossip was reported in the paper, and even then it was hardly the size of the Daily Planet's Metro section. Tomorrow she would check the next ten years back 1985-1975.

Could the reason that there was no mention of Clark anywhere in Smallville be because Martha and Jonathan had home-schooled the boy and hid him away in the basement? Lois just couldn't imagine them doing that to Clark, especially now that they had opened their home to paying guests. Next on her list was exploring said basement after they had gone to sleep to see what they might have stored away.

"Everything all right?" Jonathan asked.

"A little bit of headache," Lois admitted, rubbing her temples.

"Didn't find your illustrious Kent then?" he teased.

"No," Lois grumbled, accepting a piece of apple pie from Martha. "It's like he disappeared off the face of the Earth."

"Nonsense," Martha said with a reassuring nod. "People just don't disappear. Maybe you've got the wrong town, dear. And Kent is a fairly common name, both as a first and as a last name."

Lois wanted to correct Martha, knowing darn well as a reporter that people 'disappeared' all the time, but she didn't feel like an argument. "No. This is the place," Lois said, tempting Clark to interrupt to tell her to 'shut up'. He hadn't said word one since they... *she* had returned to the house.

"How do you know?" Martha said with curiosity.

~Oh, I don't know. His parents are here. I've met them before... but only in my dreams. Oh, by the way, they're you.~ No, Lois couldn't tell Martha that.

"He's always telling me stories from back home. Smallville isn't a name I could come up with on my own. It's so..." Lois noticed both Martha and Jonathan's expressions and decided it was probably best not to knock their hometown. "Quaint."

"Oh," Martha replied with a smile, clearly humoring her.

"So, what's *your* Kent like?" Jonathan asked.

"He's tall, six foot easily, with dark hair and the kindest eyes..." Lois swallowed, realizing she was starting to gush about these people's son. There was something about Clark that screamed he was someone to brag about. "He wears glasses though," she said, trying to make Clark sound less like a Greek god and more human. She coughed to clear her throat. "He's sweet and so kind and loving. Selfless. Genuine. Wry humor. He's the strong and quiet type, yet caring and honest. In a good way," she reassured them quickly. "— not the kind that tells you that you look bad, even when you do. He sees the best in everyone, even if they don't deserve it. He's definitely a glass-half-full kind of fellow." She looked at Martha out of the corner of her eye. "Handsome."

Martha grinned. "Tall, dark, and handsome. Hmmmm. He sounds perfect. Nope. Nobody around here fits that description." Clark's mother nudged her. "Does he have any flaws?"

Lois had never thought about it, but Martha was spot on. Clark was tall, dark, and handsome. When she added that to his personality, no wonder she was so enamored with him. She laughed, realizing that they were waiting for an answer and here she was off in la-la land thinking about Clark again. What had been their question? Flaws? "Yeah, he gets jealous easily, but not stalker jealous though. He's forgiving to a fault." She rolled her eyes in tender annoyance. "And he's overly cautious." ~Not to mention that he's dead.~

"I take that back. I knew it! You came here to steal my husband," Martha kidded, giving her husband a beaming smile. "Well, except the physical description doesn't match."

"I'm not tall anymore," admitted Jonathan with laughter. He leaned over and kissed his wife's cheek. "And my hair isn't dark. Anymore."

"But you're still handsome," Martha whispered just loud enough for Lois to catch it.

Maisie was right. These two were in love, and they didn't mind anyone — and everyone — knowing it. No wonder Clark turned out the way he did with the Kents as his folks.

"He sounds like a fantasy," Martha continued. "Nobody is *that* perfect, honey. You might want to start readying yourself that he's been lying to you, or you could be setting yourself up for some serious heartache."

"But he's real," Lois told her adamantly. "I guess he sounds a bit unbelievable, but — trust me — he's not perfect. He's my partner..." Her laughter died as she looked down at her plate. Okay, that sounded a bit vague. "...at work..." That sounded even more odd. All that gushing and now she was saying that they just worked together and that he disappeared. "He couldn't have made it all up," she whispered not wanting to go down that path. "Why would he lie?"

Martha went over to the freezer and pulled out a carton of vanilla ice cream. She scooped out a huge portion and dumped it on Lois' warm pie. "Here, honey, it looks like you could use this."

Lois gazed up at the woman and smiled. Why couldn't *she* have been born into this family? Unconditional love. She had heard about it but thought it fell into the world of mythology, like Santa Claus, unicorns, fairies, and... she gulped.

Flying superheroes, Clark finished her thought. That one phrase, though spoken softly, forlornly, and almost as if to

himself, made her realize what it was about Clark that attracted her so.

“He believes in me,” Lois told the Kents. “I *have* to believe in him.”

Chapter Fifteen

At breakfast the next morning, Lois’ felt despair begin to wash over her. She wished Superman were real and that he could fly in and save the day, but she knew that wasn’t going to happen. She was on her own. Only *she* could save Clark.

Her mind went back over her exploration of the Kents’ basement during the middle of the night while the Kents were asleep. The basement doubled as a storm shelter, laundry room, and cold storage – for all of Martha’s canning. There hadn’t been anything there either, unless it was squirreled away in a box or in storage or very well hidden.

Lois had looked through some of the boxes but had only found Martha’s art supplies packed away. Clark’s mother didn’t have the time or energy for hobbies now that she had a farm to run essentially on her own. Lois hadn’t seen any evidence of children’s toys, sleds, high chairs, gardening tools, old school papers, artwork, or anything that implied that Clark or any other child had ever lived there.

This self-imposed assignment was beginning to appear bleak indeed. How could Lois think about starting to save Clark from dying if they couldn’t prove that Clark had even existed, let alone whence in time to rescue him? Lois sighed. Even if it were possible to contact the dead H.G. Wells and he did happen to actually have a working time machine... her research had hit a dead end.

Clark’s continued silence was disturbing as well. Lois was beginning to feel like she had imagined the whole thing, created him out of her fantasies. It didn’t help that with each failure the voice inside her head spoke to her less. The teasing banter from a couple of days before seemed almost a distant memory.

Shivering with the dread that she had become one of those people who listened to the strange voice inside her head and followed it blindly, Lois wrapped her hands around her coffee mug in hopes of warming herself. This thought made her feel cold, physically cold. Lois had been so sure that Clark was real. Maybe Sarah was right; Clark and Superman were just figments of her imagination, placed in her head by her subconscious to help her deal with the grief of Mayson and Lex.

Only Lex was a horrible man. Lois wasn’t grieving his death any more. Superman had pointed her to the truth about him. Good riddance.

Maybe a good therapist was what she needed to overcome her grief at losing her best friend, Mayson Drake, but that thought made Lois nauseous. She hated psychiatry, ever since her mother sent her to see a shrink when her parents got divorced. What a waste of time that had been.

Even Lois had to admit that creating a fictitious handsome co-worker with whom *she* fell in love – of all things – who just happened to have died in the past, and whom she needed to save, sure did sound like a desperate cry for help if she had ever heard one. Sarah would probably tell her it was a manifestation of Lois’ subconscious, giving her a way to feel like she had some control over life and death. Lois really hated psycho-babble. Perhaps she really was mentally unstable. She certainly felt like she was losing control... and her mind. At least that part of her mind where Clark lived.

She sniffled. She hated to think this, but Mayson’s death seemed not to matter compared to the loss of Clark – her true best friend. If she were to lose him completely, now... Oh, God! She didn’t even want to contemplate how empty her life would become, and a fresh wave of despair rolled over her.

Lois didn’t know if this melancholy was her frustration at not

finding anything or if it was something on Clark’s part. She refused to give up on him, but with each longer bout of silence, it felt as if he was letting go.

I want you to be happy, Clark whispered as if confirming her worst nightmare.

~Don’t, Clark!~ Her throat constricted as she held in the sob.

“Lois, honey, are you okay?” Martha asked, sitting down next to her.

Lois shook her head, unable to speak. Clark couldn’t leave her. She wanted more than anything to wrap her arms around him and have him tell her everything would be all right. If he left she would be all alone in this. She needed her partner more than ever.

“Come on,” Martha said, patting Lois on the shoulder. “I need your help in the fields today. The physical exertion will get your mind off things.”

Reluctantly Lois rose to her feet and followed the petite woman. She did not want to do farm work, but she wanted to be alone with her thoughts – or lack of thoughts – even less. The thought of wading through more piles of back copies of the *Smallville Post* on this beautiful summer’s day seemed more like torture.

Two hours and about a bucket of sweat later, Martha stopped the tractor and pulled out a small picnic basket. “Break time,” she called to Lois who was straightening up the hay raked up by the tedder Martha’s tractor was pulling.

They leaned against the big machine despite the combined heat of its motor and the heat of the day. At least they were standing in its shadow. Martha handed her a thermos of water and a scone.

“Before Jonathan’s accident, I used to bake all the time,” Martha murmured. “I loved how his eyes would light up at the smell of fresh baked goods when he walked in from the barn or fields.” She sighed. “Now, I only bake on Sundays after church. I know I should be resting, but it’s one of the small pleasures I allow myself... under the guise of necessity.”

Lois didn’t understand why Martha was baring her soul to her. Maybe she felt the kinship they were supposed to have because of Clark.

“You don’t paint anymore?” Lois asked.

Martha gazed at her with amazed confusion. “How did...?”

“The painting in the living room...” Lois said quickly to cover her mistake.

“Ah... No. I don’t have time or energy for hobbies anymore.”

Martha informed her, another sigh escaping. “Do you have any hobbies?”

“I take martial arts classes. Self-defense is important in Metropolis.” And in her line of work.

“That sounds more like exercise. What do you do for fun?”

Martha corrected.

Lois scoffed, taking a gulp of her water. “Fun? What’s that?” She had fun with Clark playing games at the Lexor, talking with Clark on stakeouts, on assignments, and just hanging out with him. Not that she would ever admit it in her dreams, but Clark’s addition to the Daily Planet had made her happier than she had been in years. In reality, searching for Clark was the only thing she had done for herself in a long time. In her real life, the only fun she had was her investigations, her work. Clark had made her see that there was more to life than just work.

“That crushed expression that you get from time to time,” Martha said, nodding at Lois. “This man – Kent – causes that, doesn’t he?”

“Can’t put one past you,” Lois confessed.

“If you don’t mind me asking, what did he do?”

~He up and died on me.~ Lois swallowed. “I’m not sure what’s going on with him. I think he’s letting me go for my own good.”

Martha stared at her. “Do you love him?”

“More than I thought it was possible to love someone,” Lois whispered. Her dream self might repress the emotion, but she knew the truth. “That’s why I’m here, looking for him.”

“And does he love you?”

“I thought he did, but...” Lois said with a shrug. “I don’t know. It’s complicated.”

“So, what’s the problem? If you don’t mind me asking,” Martha probed.

How could explain Clark communicating with her from beyond the grave if they couldn’t even find said grave? If no one but her, it seemed, ever knew he had lived? “He’s not at a hundred percent at the moment...” Let’s just expose the tip of the iceberg there, Lane.

Martha nodded with understanding. “Jonathan has always been my rock, but these last few years I’ve had to be the strong one.” Her eyes flashed up to Lois’. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m no hothouse flower.” She chuckled. “I’m more like one of those weeds you can’t get rid of even if you pull it up by its roots.”

Clark’s mom sounded a lot like her, Lois thought.

“It’s hard for Jonathan having to rely on me for so much. These first couple of years after the accident have been difficult on both of us, switching roles. Years ago...” Martha said, flipping up her hand as if to say ‘many, many years ago’. “Jonathan had to have back surgery. I went into town and got a job and had be the sole breadwinner for a while. He hated that. It made him feel less than a whole man. I’d known it was only temporary, and eventually we made it through. This new life of ours isn’t temporary, Lois. This isn’t what I signed up for, but you know what...?” She smiled at Lois. “That doesn’t matter. We’re together. I love him, and I wouldn’t trade the way he looks at me for a nine-to-five anywhere, because at a hundred percent or not, Jonathan’s still my world... it’s making him see that...” Martha exhaled and took a drink from her thermos.

Like father, like son.

Lois took another sip of water. ~That’s exactly how I feel about you, Clark,~ she reminded him, hoping he was listening. ~Let me be your rock. Just hold on.~

They heard a noise that sounded like another tractor. A man – probably a few years younger than herself – pulled up. Lois was happy for the distraction from their conversation and from getting back to her back-breaking chore. She wondered if this was the farmhand that Maisie had mentioned, the one not worth looking at. Who knew? Every man looked bland to her when compared to Clark and Superman.

“Thomas!” Martha said, waving. “Whatcha doing over here?”

Thomas cut off the engine of his tractor and walked up to them. Lois racked her brain trying to remember the name of the farmhand. She hadn’t thought it was Thomas.

The man stopped in front of them and, despite her dirty attire and dust stained face, gave Lois the once over like a prized pig. Lovely.

“Thomas Irig, Lois Lane. Lois is staying with us from Metropolis. Thomas is our neighbor,” Martha said by way of introductions.

Irig. As in Wayne *Irig*? Lois hadn’t known that Mr. Irig had a son. She waved her weak greeting.

He nodded at her, recognizing a dismissal when he saw one. “Martha, Sheriff Harris is bothering my dad again about donations for the campaign.”

“You mean guiltin’ him for a donation?” Martha replied between pressed lips, letting a tsk escape.

Lois’ brow furrowed. This didn’t sound like the Rachel Harris she had met when she and Clark had come to town during the Corn Festival.

“I hate to ask... and you know my dad would never say anything and just give the money. When will it end, Martha? It’s been over ten years since Walt...” Thomas looked down at his

feet, his voice fading off.

Martha patted his arm reassuringly. “You want me to send Jonathan into town and give the Sheriff a what for?”

Thomas smiled. “Yeah. That would be great. You know Dad and I can’t... aren’t welcome...”

“Why would Rachel do that?” Lois asked, interrupting. She was unable to hold back her curiosity any longer.

Thomas’s face went white. “Rachel?”

Martha just stared at Lois in disbelief.

“I liked her. She’s professional and does her job well, even if she was a bit flirtatious with Clark...” Lois stopped herself, realizing she had said too much.

“Who?” Martha sputtered. “*Who*?”

“Sheriff Harris. Rachel Harris,” Lois clarified at their stunned faces. Wasn’t that whom they were talking about?

“Do you think that’s funny?” Thomas snapped at her. “What kind of sick joke is that?” He looked to Martha for an explanation. “Who *is* this woman, Martha?”

Martha placed a calming hand on Thomas’s arm before turning to Lois. “I don’t know who you’re talking about, Lois, or where you got your information, but the Rachel Harris from Smallville is dead.”

“*What?!*” Lois gasped, stumbling backwards away from them, dropping her thermos. “She can’t be dead? How could she be dead? You just were talking about her re-election campaign.” Her hands began to shake.

“Rachel’s brother Max is Sheriff,” Thomas practically spit at her. “*He’s* the one seeking blood money from us.”

Lois’ eyes flashed between Thomas and Martha as she put more space between them. “Rachel’s dead?” Oh, God! Was this it? Both Clark and Rachel were dead? Had something happened on prom night, killing them both? No wonder she hadn’t found anything about Clark. He died before leaving high school. Had they purged his school records because of that? She gazed into Martha’s eyes looking for a clue.

“Lois?” Martha asked slowly, carefully, as if she had discovered a ticking-time bomb in the reporter. “How do you know about Rachel?”

“They went to prom together. They did the two-step and the tush-push together, whatever that is,” Lois explained what they clearly already knew.

“Yeah! Well, everyone knows that Rachel was the tush-push champ...” Thomas said, before Martha’s raised hand silenced him.

“Who, Lois? *They* who?”

“Clark and Rachel, of course?” stammered Lois, backing up as the air surrounding her suddenly felt heavier, thicker.

“Lois, Clark *who*?” Martha asked, staring Lois in the eye.

“Kent, of course. Your son. The man from my dreams.”

Okay. Obviously that had been the wrong thing to say, Lois told herself as Martha’s jaw dropped open. Thomas was staring at Lois like she was nuts.

“Lois, I don’t have a...” Martha started to say before her face drained of color. “*Clark?*”

Lois nodded. Was the mortar loose in Martha’s brick wall? “Clark Jerome Kent. Your son,” she repeated, pressing on and holding eye contact with Clark’s mom, hoping for a flicker of recognition.

The woman looked sick. Physically sick.

“Clark went to prom with Rachel Harris,” she reminded them.

Instead Martha grabbed hold of Thomas’s sleeve for a moment as she gathered her bearings.

“Rachel went to prom with my brother Walt,” Thomas informed her.

Lois felt as if her world was spinning. “Walt?” Had Clark not been adopted by the Kents because he had been born an Irig? Or

was he adopted by them? Had he had been named Walt... or Walter? No wonder she couldn't find any record of Clark. Relief washed over her. Was this a clue at last? She looked at Thomas. He was lanky and even taller than Clark, and his complexion was darker than both Martha and Jonathan. "Your brother Walt, what does he look like?"

"Walt's dead," Thomas said coldly.

She knew that already and brushed that fact aside with a flick of her hand. "He and Rachel died on prom night?" Lois inquired.

Thomas gave a short nod. "Car accident. Max said Walt had been drinking."

Drinking? That didn't sound like Clark, who was overly cautious. She couldn't picture him drinking and driving. Maybe it was this incident that made him so careful. "What did Walt look like? Was he taller than you? Dark hair? Glasses?"

Martha's eyes shot up to Lois' in an intense way the reporter had never seen them. "Walt had deep auburn hair like his mother and was about your height," the woman stepped closer to her. "What are you really doing here?"

Lois gulped. Got it, Walt wasn't Clark. Where was Clark? Why hadn't he taken Rachel to prom? Had he died before then? The way Martha stared at her reminded her of another man from Lois' dreams. Not that Superman had ever looked at her like that, thank God! "I'm searching for Clark."

Thomas looked back and forth between the two women, completely lost. "Martha, what is she...?"

Martha ignored him as she stepped towards Lois again in an even more aggressive manner. "Who do you work for?"

Normally one to hold her ground, Lois couldn't help but take another step backwards, holding up her hands. She and Martha were on the same side. She needed to make Clark's mother to see that. "I'm just looking for answers, Martha," she said, trying to keep her voice calm.

"Who do you work for?" Martha repeated.

"Where I work doesn't have any bearing on why I'm in Smallville," Lois said, knowing well how some people felt about the fourth estate. "I'm here to learn about Clark. That's all."

"The government? Some wacky fringe group?" Martha continued to rattle off. "A tabloid?"

Lois' face hardened. "I'm *not* a tabloid reporter! The Daily Planet deals only in real news."

She watched as Martha's anger doubled. "Get off my land!" the woman roared, pointing off into the distance.

The reporter decided it was time to get away from this field, these people. She turned around and ran deep into the field, through the tall grass. In the next field, the Kents were growing corn, and she pushed her way through the tall stalks. Lois kept running until she couldn't run any longer; then she walked, stumbling forward through her tears, through the blindness, through the fog inside her head.

Eventually, Lois came through the corn to a small meadow between fields. She saw a hill topped with trees and aimed for it. Trees meant shade from the noon-day heat. At the top of the hill was a small plot of rocky land enclosed by a broken-down picket fence. Lois stepped over the low fence and sat down amongst the shadows and rocks. Her hands came to her face and she wept. Martha's rejection, on top of Clark's disappearance, brought back all her feelings of inadequacy her own family had piled on her.

She pushed past the pain and tried again to look at the facts. That was what she liked about news. It was all about cold, hard facts — there was no emotion there, just knowledge. Rachel Harris was dead. Lois still couldn't believe it. Another person, who was alive and well in her dreams, had died. What was her brain trying to tell her? What did it all mean? How did these puzzle pieces fit together?

Something in Martha's expression had told Lois that Clark had been real. The woman had acknowledged his name with her

eyes, and it had made her defensive as if she was worried that Lois was going to do something to harm her dead son. How was Lois going to convince Martha and Jonathan that she wanted what they wanted? For their son to be alive and well again. She sighed. Maybe being part of the Kent family was just another pipedream she was going to lay aside, like having her father's undying admiration and her mother's respect.

Looking around she noticed that it wasn't a rocky fenced meadow as she had originally thought. These rocks were old tombstones. Some had crumbled from years of neglect and disrepair and appeared to look like rocks at first glance. She had ended up in a graveyard.

Lois would have shivered at the creep factor had she been a lesser woman, but she had never been scared of cemeteries. She knew that dead bodies did not rise again in the form of vampires or zombies. She was too levelheaded to believe in such mumbo-jumbo; not too levelheaded to believe in ghosts apparently. Or aliens. Or time travel.

She tried to read the names or dates on the broken rocks.

Jonas K. — 1876.

Mary Smalls Kent — 1882.

Charles Kent — 1880.

Abigail — 1892.

Jerome — 1892.

Laura — 1892.

Samuel Kent — 1896.

This obviously was the Kent family graveyard. She assumed the dates were when these people died. 1892 must have been a difficult year plagued by sickness or violence. Her heart ached for Jonathan's relatives.

Lois noticed that someone had placed flowers on a small grave in the corner. Wildflowers. They were wilted from the heat of the day, but fresh enough that it couldn't have been more than twenty-four hours, thirty-six tops, since they had been laid there. She moved closer, kneeling down to try and read the etching. The name had been scratched into the stone by hand and not too deeply at that. She spit into her hand and used the liquid to make the indentations in the rock more pronounced.

Clark Kent — 5-17-66.

That couldn't be right. Clark was a year older than her. That must be his birthdate.

She rubbed on the rock even further, but that was the only date on the rock.

Why would they only put one date? If this was right...

Lois sat up and stared at the grave marker.

No wonder she couldn't find a record of Clark in Smallville. He never lived long enough to go to school, let alone high school, let alone college, or Metropolis. She had fallen in love with a baby, a baby who had died before she was even born, before she herself had been conceived. How old had he been when he died? Ghosts didn't age, did they? No, that was ridiculous. She knew that the man from her dreams, the man to whom she had given her heart, was real. And yet, she also knew that this grave belonged to him.

Lois placed her hand over the slight curvature of the earth by the marker. Tears welled up in her eyes again. "Clark," she said to him. "I finally found you."

Were her dreams just dreams or repressed memories? Or a mixture of the two? How could she have memories of him as a man when he had never been a man? How was that possible? Clark Kent must have at one point been a real man, a reporter, her partner, her friend.

So, if he was supposed to have been a man, then how had his destiny been changed?

If there was a way to go back in time to "save" Clark from dying, there must also be a way from someone else to go back in time and kill him. Kill him as a baby. She could not believe that

this was an accident. He was supposed to be alive, and since Clark wasn't alive, someone must have done this on purpose. A tear rolled down her cheek and landed on his grave, dampening the soil as she grimaced at that thought.

What kind of sick bastard killed a baby? Why? Why would someone go back in time and kill the sweetest man of Lois' acquaintance? A man who everyone seemed to have liked? What could Clark have possibly done to anger someone to such an extreme? Or had she – she was “Mad Dog Lane” after all – ticked someone off enough to go back in time and kill the man Lois loved?

It's always about you, isn't it? Clark murmured.

“Who did this, Clark? Who killed you?” she asked him. She asked the universe. She would accept a response from anyone who had a suggestion.

I have no answers, Lois. You'll have to ask my parents about my death.

“I'm not really on their ‘friends and family’ list at the moment,” Lois reminded him, too overjoyed to hear his voice to berate him for abandoning her.

She sat there running her fingers through the dirt and dried grass on his grave, not wanting to leave, not knowing where she could go, reveling in being physically close to him, even a baby version of him.

Lois had the answers to the two questions she had come to Smallville to find. Was Clark real? And if so, when had he died? Yes and May 17, 1966. She sighed, not wanting to consider that this had been the easy part of her quest to save Clark.

How in the world was Lois supposed to save someone who died as a baby? And if she did, would he still grow up to be the same man from her dreams? Would Clark be Clark?

And if her dreams were really repressed memories, how could the absence of one man change so many lives for the worse? Johnny Taylor? Rachel Harris? Jonathan Kent? All of them were alive and well in her dreams. Even Ralph was still around and giving her grief. Clark had been there for her to lavish her attentions on. She had spent that night of the pheromones at Clark's apartment doing the dance of the seven veils instead of being attacked at her own.

In her dreams, her and Lex's relationship hadn't progressed to the point of him inviting her to spend the night. Hopefully, it never would. Therefore, she had no reason to tell Lex about Ralph barging into her apartment and... because that event never happened. Thank God! No, it hadn't happened, thanks to Clark. If she needed another reason to love Clark she had it. Well, if that didn't cement Jimmy's theory about Lex having Ralph murdered in her opinion, nothing would.

What about Superman? How did he play into this whole crazy scenario? Did he? Or was he still just a figment of her imagination? If time-travel was possible, and at this point Lois had to believe it must be, then it was feasible that Superman wasn't just part of her psyche put there to tell her how horrible a man Lex Luthor really was. How had Clark dying as an infant stopped Superman from appearing and saving all those people on the Prometheus? No matter how many times she turned the puzzle piece, she just couldn't get Superman to fit in anywhere. There was something about him that was too unique.

Lois stayed by Clark's grave for hours. She didn't want to leave. It had taken her months since she had first been introduced to Clark in her dreams until she had gotten to this point – to finding him in her real life – and leaving felt like abandoning him. Clark might try to leave her for her own good with his silence, but it wasn't going to work. She loved him and, do or die, he was stuck with her until the bitter end. She wasn't going to take the easy road and let him drop by the wayside.

She kissed her fingers and pressed them against the stone

where Jonathan or Martha had etched Clark's name. “This isn't goodbye, Clark. I'm going to find you and bring you home.”

Lois stood up, dusted herself off, and stepped out of the graveyard. She walked down the hill towards the afternoon sun. It was hot; blistering hot as only August in the Midwest could be. She was thirsty, dirty, and sweaty. A cool breeze came through the trees and cooled her off for a moment.

Anyone ever tell you that you're stubborn?

A smile slipped onto her lips. “Only those who care, Clark,” Lois told him.

She found the road that encircled the field of corn and started walking down it in the general direction to the Kents' farmhouse. She didn't know what kind of reception she would find there. She needed to talk to Martha and Jonathan and explain what she wanted to do for their son, but she didn't think they would be in the mood to talk.

Lois had gone over and over Martha's words in her head as she sat at Clark's grave and wondered what had frightened his mother? Prying? Repercussions? Why had the Kents buried Clark in an almost unmarked grave in an abandoned graveyard? Had they actually been Clark's birth parents and didn't want Smallville to know about their private pain of losing a child? Had it been that they had never mentioned Clark's birth and subsequent death to the authorities? If they weren't his parents, why hadn't they contacted the authorities when they had found the child – dead or alive? Had they been scared of being charged with Clark's murder? Did they know who Clark's birth parents were? Had they rescued Clark from someone who had abused him, but he had died anyway? Were they now scared that Lois would send someone to dig up Clark's grave? She would never do that to them or to Clark.

She had lots of questions for them regarding Clark's death. Any information they could give her would place her that much further along the path to rescuing him... once she figured out the problem of time travel and the dead author H.G. Wells.

“Clark, do you think you could contact Wells from where you are? In the beyond?” she suggested. Why not? She had come across weirder “pseudo-science” since learning about Clark. Come on, head transplants? Please.

No, Lois, I cannot contact H.G. Wells from wherever I am. There's you, and there's me. There is no beyond. That I can communicate with you is miracle enough for me.

Well, so much for Clark being her happy medium. Lois sighed. It was miracle enough for her as well, but no reason to spout any more useless romantic lines with which they couldn't follow through. Personally, she was still a little ticked off at him for not telling her that he loved her after she confessed that she loved him during those last few hours before Nightfall was supposed to hit. She still loved him, and as far as she could tell, despite it being quite a while since he had said the words, Clark loved her as well.

“Any advice on winning over your mom and dad?” she asked, hoping to keep him active enough in conversation that he wouldn't go and disappear on her again.

Be honest. Since they think you lied to them – came here under false pretenses – this isn't the time to candy coat anything.

“I haven't come here under false pretenses,” Lois rebutted. “I told them from the beginning that I was here searching for a man named Kent.”

Lo-is, Clark groaned in a way she hadn't heard in a good long time.

She continued to defend her argument, trying not to let the smile grow larger on her lips and let Clark know how much she enjoyed this annoying aspect of their relationship. “Okay, fine. I grant you I didn't tell them that ‘Kent’ was ‘Clark Kent’ their son. I also didn't tell them that I can speak to you and that you invade my dreams with memories of our life together. But as you know,

I'm not a big fan of padded rooms."

I don't invade your dreams, Lois, Clark retorted. They're your memories, from your point of view. I have no control over them.

"Right. You're a figment of my imagination. I get it," Lois responded. He really could be quite frustrating with his hands-off approach to her life.

Thanks for not giving up on me, he said softly.

"Not in my vocabulary," she reminded him, kicking a rock further down the lane.

I'm still amazed that you love me.

"Yep, there are no depths to my stupidity," Lois grumbled. She didn't remember him being such a chatterbox before.

In case you're wondering, I'll always love you.

Yeah, right. She'd believe it when she saw it. "Always is a long time. Sure you want make such a long-term commitment there, Clark?" Lois could picture the man from her dreams cringe at her words.

You're the one who proposed, Clark reminded her playfully. I've already done my part on the 'not even death will us part' portion of our lives. Top that!

"I never gave up on you," she murmured.

Clark faded into silence again but even so she could feel his guilt. It wasn't her guilt. She *had* nothing to feel guilty about, so it must be his.

It wasn't until she rounded the corner on the work road and could see his parents' farmhouse that he spoke again.

This relationship isn't healthy for you, Lois. If you can't figure out a way to go into the past...

"Thanks for the vote of confidence there, Kent," she replied through pressed lips.

Clark continued on as if she hadn't interrupted, *I don't want to hold you back from having a real life, of having a real relationship with a real flesh and blood man, whom you can hold and touch and with whom you can have children... He paused and she heard him sigh before reluctantly admitting ... with someone like Scardino.*

Lois stopped and threw her hands into the air. "Dan? I broke up with Dan because of Dan, not because of you," she shouted. "And at this moment, sex and children are the last thing I need. What I need to know is whether you'll be there for me, Clark, or if you're going to abandon me every time this gets hard?"

As long as you want me, Lois, I'll be around.

"Ha!" She started stomping on down the road. "Do you love me?"

I've never stopped loving you.

"Then stop making decisions regarding my life without consulting me. If I decide that *this* relationship is unhealthy for me or that I could do better, you'll be the first to know."

Got it.

"Until then, we're in this together." She lowered her voice as she got closer to the farmhouse.

I just want you to be happy, Lois, Clark told her.

"Happy? I am happy!" she growled. "I have a man who loves me more than life itself. What makes you think I'm not happy?"

She could hear Clark's chuckles echoing inside her head. *No idea.*

Lois could see her stuff on the porch piled next to the front door before she even walked up the steps. She took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. Pulling open the screen door, she tried to open the main door. Locked.

She picked up her purse and found that Martha had removed the keys she had given to Lois a couple of days before. No, wait. Lois had put them in the pocket of her jeans after she had locked her bedroom door that morning. She felt her pocket and then remembered, she had left them next to her plate on the breakfast table. Crap.

Tossing the strap of her purse over her head and across her chest, Lois knocked on the door. There was a twitch on the living room curtain, but the door remained closed. "Martha? Jonathan?" she called.

More silence.

~So, this is where you picked it up? The silent treatment?~

Maybe we should just go...

~I'm not walking away, Smallville.~

"Martha, I found Clark's grave," Lois said to the door. "I know he died as a baby. Please, I need to talk to you about this." She waited a minute before continuing, "Clark wasn't supposed to die. He was supposed to live and grow up, be a reporter with me – my partner at the Daily Planet." Her annoyance at their lack of response got the better of her. "I told you that he wasn't one hundred percent at the moment!" she yelled.

Lois, please, Clark coaxed.

"I would never do anything to hurt him or you." Lois took another deep breath and went on. "He wasn't supposed to die back in 1966. Someone killed him. I'm just trying to figure out how, why, and who. There might be a way for me to bring him back, to save him..." Her voice trailed off. They weren't ever going to believe that she could travel back in time and save their son. She hardly believed it. She closed her eyes and laid her head against the door. "Please. His ghost speaks to me."

Is that what you think I am? A ghost?

~You got a better term?~ Lois retorted.

No. I guess ghost will do, but aren't they supposed to have like a noncorporeal body or something?

~Not really the time, Clark.~

Right. Sorry.

"I know that this all sounds surreal. Trust me, it's even harder for me to believe. I'm someone who believes in facts, not magic or fairytales. But Clark talks to me," Lois said, speaking once more to the closed door. "He loves you and misses you. I'm sorry that you never got a chance to know him, because he's everything I told you about last night – this morning – and more. He really is the best man I have ever..." Dreamed of meeting? Met in her dreams? "I wish you could remember him."

When there was still no answer, she accepted her fate. From her briefcase she removed all but twenty dollars in cash from her wallet. She wrote her home phone number on the back of one of her business cards and stuck it into an envelope with the money. She looked around the door in vain for a mail slot or place to put the envelope. Not finding anything, she pushed the envelope into the doorframe.

"The money is to cover the cost of my room and board for the past couple of days. If you change your mind and want to talk to me about Clark, I've also enclosed my contact information. Please, I would love to tell you what a wonderful man your son was supposed to grow up to be," Lois said, taking one last shot. She waited another minute, but when it seemed that the Kents were definitely not coming to the door, Lois picked up her stuff and headed to her rental car.

"I guess it's just you and me, kid," she said to that voice inside her head as she sat down behind the steering wheel.

One more minute, Lois. Can we just wait one more minute? Clark pleaded softly.

Lois could hear the raw pain in his voice. He loved his parents and could only remember them ever loving him. He didn't have memories of them disappointing him, or not being there for him, like she had of her parents. Ever the optimist, Clark still held out hope that they would open the door and call her back. Just for him, she yearned for the same thing, to feel Martha's arms surround her and hold her, hug her for Clark, to have someone believe her about this voice inside her head.

After another two minutes of staring at the closed front door of the Kents' farmhouse, Lois turned the key and backed up the

car.

Chapter Sixteen

“Whooo-Hooo! Olsen, you owe this old Memphis newshound twenty dollars, son,” Perry called as Lois slunk into work two days later. Her boss wrapped an arm around her shoulder. “I knew you couldn’t stay away for two weeks. Jimmy here thought you’d make it a week.” The Chief nudged the photographer who joined them at Lois’ desk.

“I couldn’t stay away,” Lois echoed softly, not really wishing to be there, but not knowing where else to go. She didn’t know how to even start progressing on how to save Clark, and just sitting around her apartment was driving her nuts. She needed to keep busy. She threw the Chief a smile that didn’t remain as soon as he turned back to his office.

Jimmy sat down on the corner of her desk. “Did you find him?”

Lois had forgotten that she had told Jimmy about Clark. “Yes and no.” Yes, she now knew Clark existed, and she had found his grave, but no, because he was still dead. She decided to change the subject. “Hey, Jimmy, get this. While I was out of town a psychic moved into my building downstairs, Star!”

Jimmy looked at her with a perplexed expression. “Star?”

“That’s her name: Star.” Lois stretched her hands out like she was showing it to him up in lights.

“Oh. Psychic, huh? Maybe she can locate your missing beau,” he suggested with a good amount of wry humor.

At least, Lois thought he was joking. They shared the same opinion when it came to psychics, right? Of course Jimmy didn’t believe in psychics... did he? “Ha, ha. Very funny, Jimmy,” she said through pressed lips, just in case he had been serious. So much for diversionary tactics.

He sighed and then the smile on her friend’s lips faded. “Uh... Lois... um... while you were gone... uh...” Jimmy seemed even more uncomfortable than when he had confessed to her on the island that he loved her.

“What?” Lois asked, trying to reassure him that they were okay.

“No. It’s nothing,” he said with a shake of his head before standing up. Then he paused. “Oh! I almost forgot. Toni Taylor committed suicide.”

“What?!” Lois gasped, leaning back in her chair. “No, I don’t believe it. How?”

“Sheet through the bars on the top bunk of her cell,” he told her.

“I just...” Lois shook her head in disbelief. “I never thought she’d commit suicide. Toni seemed to fear death.” She rolled her eyes. *Who* didn’t fear death? “I mean, the only thing that seemed to scare her was Lex...” Lois frowned, picking up a pencil and beginning to tap it subconsciously on her desk. “She told me that Lex had threatened to kill her if she told anyone about them, about him.” She caught Jimmy’s eye. “Now, she’s dead.”

“You’re being paranoid, Lois. Lex is dead. We were both there,” Jimmy reminded her as he sat back down.

“Right,” she agreed, if somewhat uncertainly. Lex had died in her arms, pronouncing his love for her. She hadn’t forgotten. Still... No, Jimmy was right; it was just a coincidence. Just like Miranda dying in prison a couple weeks after Ralph was found murdered; the two events didn’t necessarily tie together. Just like Lex dying and then his body being stolen from the morgue. Who would do that? No, her brain put its foot down; Lex was dead. Dead was dead; well, at least it was in this case. Not everything was a big conspiracy, Lane, let it go. She exhaled. “Whatcha been working on while I’ve been away?”

“Couple of break-ins. High end computer stuff: computer chips and something called a wave pulse amplifier, inside jobs. The people helped the robbers break in but say they don’t

remember how or why,” he explained.

Lois’ brow furrowed. “That’s funny.”

“Funny – ha, ha or funny – odd?” Jimmy inquired.

“Funny – odd. Last night I dreamed of that magic show charity thing Cat dragged us to a couple of years ago,” Lois said, slowly flipping through her messages without really reading them. She was hoping for a message from the Kents. Nothing. “Remember, she was chasing after Arthur Chow, and you had Perry hypnotized.”

Jimmy rolled his eyes with a grimace. “Don’t remind me. I couldn’t call him ‘Chief’ for months after that. Every once in a while I’d forget, and he would double finger point at me and tell me I’m brilliant.”

Lois grinned. “You were lucky you weren’t fired.”

“Isn’t that when he officially assigned me to you as your partner?” Jimmy winked at her.

“What? I’m your punishment for that? Thanks, Jimbo,” Lois scoffed. “And you *weren’t* my partner back then. You were my flunky,” she said the word with teasing humor and love – platonic love.

“So, you think these robberies might have something to do with magic?” Her partner was more adapt at getting off a subject than she was.

“Sounds like hypnotism, doesn’t it?” she replied.

“I’ll check into it.” Jimmy stood up and shook his head.

“Amazing.”

I completely agree.

“What?” Lois sputtered, momentarily distracted by hearing Clark’s voice. She glanced up at Jimmy. “What?”

“You, Lois. Back two minutes, and you crack open this case that has stymied Metropolis PD all week,” he said and then lowered his voice. “Can I start telling people we’re engaged?”

She turned her eyes to her computer to check her e-mail messages. “Not if you enjoy having your spleen.”

“Our little secret then.” He shot her a grin and bolted.

Told you it was a dinosaur bone.

~Never tell me ‘you told me so’,~ Lois replied to the voice inside her head. ~I’m always right. Get used to it.~

She thought back to that dream about Superman out of control and shivered. Her dreams were becoming creepier, more like nightmares. Superman had almost drowned her. She took a deep breath and exhaled. It was only a dream.

Or had it been a repressed memory from her former life with Clark? No, it couldn’t have been, Superman wasn’t real. He was just a figment of her imagination.

They had never caught the kidnapper in real life. She and the missing child... Nick... had awoken on the carousel together at the Hobs Bay Carnival. Both of them had been hypnotized. Both of them had remembered nothing.

Lois had traced the kidnappings to that illusionist Darren Ronick but no further. Dr. Novak – the man who had hypnotized Perry – and Ronick had both died mysteriously at the Magic Mansion. Well, Novak had been murdered. They matched Ronick’s fingers to the impressions left on Novak’s neck. Ronick had fallen from a ladder at the Magic Mansion, and his death had been ruled an accident. The kidnappings had stopped, and Ronick had been blamed. Constance had taken over Ronick’s act and moved to Las Vegas, where she was still a headliner today.

In her dreams, Clark was acting strangely too. He went as her date for the charity event, but not officially; they had gone as partners. He seemed more standoffish too, like something was bothering him. He had disappeared for an entire day during their investigation. Then he acted like he had gone to the ransom drop with her and Jimmy, even though he hadn’t. Worst of all, he had stopped looking at her with admiration tinged with longing. She noticed it, and even her dream-self had noticed it. Their reactions were the opposite though.

Lois was worried that Clark really didn't like her. In the end would she discover that the voice inside her head was just her wishful thinking and that Clark held no romantic feelings towards her at all? It would crush her if she went through all this torment and insanity only to rescue Clark from the wrong destiny and have him not return her love. Was she being that foolish to hope for more than friendship with Clark?

On the other extreme, her dream-self was thankful that Clark was still treating her with less romantic interest after he had spurned her love during Nightfall. They were work partners, friends, and nothing else. She was still denying her true feelings for Clark and had convinced herself to 'move on'.

The most nightmarish part of the entire dream, which had caused Lois to awake with knots tied in her stomach and drenched in sweat, was that her dream-self had gone on another date with Lex Luthor.

Watching herself preen, admire, and try to impress a man set on destroying her, and all the while not be able to stop the event from unfolding, was a new type of torture for a woman Clark had aptly described as a "control freak". She could see Lex turning away her questions with a bat of his hand, misdirecting her here, pointing her in the wrong direction there. He treated her in such a patronizing manner. Had she been so gullible in real life? She knew the answer, and it wasn't one she liked. How could she have been so blind?

Lois was determined not to be so blind with Clark. She was jumping into this relationship with both eyes wide open. Luckily for her "with Clark what you see is what you get" as Maisie had aptly told her during their trip to Smallville. During the Corn Festival. In her dreams.

Lois crossed her arms across her chest and raised an eyebrow. "You want to do *what*?"

"Auction you off to charity," Perry repeated and held up his hands as if showing her the headline. "Win a date with Lois Lane. All benefits going to the orphanage."

Come on, Lois. It's for the orphans.

"I don't like the idea of being treated like I'm a piece of meat. How is this different than prostitution?" she inquired to her boss.

"You didn't have any problems with the bachelors auctioning off themselves for the blind a few years back," Perry reminded her.

Lois' belly twisted as she set her hand on his desk to steady herself. She remembered that auction well. She had bid on Lex Luthor and lost, but he had asked her on another date anyway. It had been their first official **date** date – not an interview. "Not really selling me on this idea, Chief," she mumbled.

"You'll have complete control over the date: where you go, what you'll do... Everything," Perry said.

"Everything except with whom I'll be forced to spend an evening," Lois snapped, heading out of his office.

"Just think about it, Lois. You haven't been on a date since..." Perry started and at her sharp expression, changed tactics. "Coates Home for the orphans."

Come on, honey. Orphans.

Clark would be begging her to do this. Orphans were his pet project. Superman's too. She sighed. Clark really was adopted, wasn't he? That was why he felt so strongly towards the orphans.

~I can't believe you're encouraging me to auction myself off to the highest bidder, Clark. I would think you'd rather have me at home for an early night of one-on-one dream-dating.~

Well, when you put it that way...

"Do I get to bring my pepper spray?" she asked her boss.

Perry grinned, because he knew he had her. "Wouldn't ask you to leave home without it."

Lois exhaled loudly. "Okay. Fine."

I thought we agreed you weren't going to do this.

~I thought you were encouraging me to date other men.~

Lo-is, Clark groaned.

~What? Are you back on your 'Lois needs a real man with a body' kick?~ Lois marched out to her desk. ~You want me to date other men? See what other fish there might be out in the sea? Then fine! I'll go. I'll have a great time. Maybe I'll meet Mr. Right Now. Would you like that? Seeing, hearing, and feeling me be with another man? Is *that* what you really want, Clark?~

Please, Lois, don't do this, Clark pled softly. She could hear the pain in his voice.

~It's too late, Kent. I've already agreed to it. Perhaps you'll remember that the next time before you encourage me to sell myself to the highest bidder!~ she screamed at the voice inside her head.

"Lois!" Jimmy came running up to her desk. "Did you hear?"

Lois shook her head, happy to have a distraction from her argument with Clark. "What?" She followed his gaze over to the televisions. They were all tuned into a breaking news bulletin from LNN.

"This just in from the island of Pacifonesia. Every person in the capital city has disappeared, leaving only ashes where there was just this morning a city of two hundred and seventy-five thousand. Scientists are baffled by what could have caused the people, animals, and plant life to die but allow all the buildings and non-organic structures to remain intact."

"Oh, my God!" Lois mumbled, dragging her eyes away from the TV and back to Jimmy.

"Where's Superman when you need him, huh, Lois?" he said, reaching for her hand and squeezing it.

Lois turned towards her partner's desk as she waited on hold. "Clark, men and women lie to each other all the time. It's a national pastime. I mean, sometimes it's okay to lie."

"It's never 'okay'," Clark rebutted incredulously in his usual Boy Scout manner:

"So, you're saying that you'll never lie to your wife?" Lois couldn't believe him. Every man lied to his wife. Look at her father. He made it his number one priority. Even Perry lied to Alice. Hell, Clark lied to her all the time. Not that she was his wife... maybe his work wife, but certainly not his wife, wife. Back on point. How many of those errands Clark ran really had to be done at that exact minute? Please! "That is assuming that someone is crazy enough to actually say 'I do' to you."

"That's right."

"Transfer me to who?" Lois asked the person who finally answered the phone. "I've been holding for ten minutes, I don't want to..." And she was back on hold. Argh! She hated this part of her job. She looked back at Clark. "All right, here's the scene..."

"Yes," Clark said politely into the telephone. "I can hold. Sure."

Lois pressed her lips together. He was just being polite because she hadn't been. Mr. Contrary. "Your wife has spent the entire day at the beauty parlor. She's dyed her hair red."

Clark rolled his eyes in disgust. So, he didn't like redheads, huh? Or was it that he hated dye jobs? Not that she would do either. Dye her hair red or any other color for that matter and certainly not for Clark. Either he loved her for more than her appearance, no matter how she decided she would look, or he could just blow it out his ear. How did she get onto this train of thought anyway? Clark didn't love her; he had told her so by not saying anything at all when she had confessed she loved him during Nightfall.

"Cut it all off," Lois continued with her beauty parlor example. "Just to please you." As if any woman would do anything to try to please Mr. Perfect over there. "Only it looks

ghastly. She comes home. You open the door, and she's standing there all hopeful, 'Honey, do you like it?' What do you do?"

"My wife would know that I loved her just the way she was," Clark replied full of himself. He would say that. It was exactly what she would want her husband to say. "Why would she dye her hair red?" he went on.

"Oh! That is just..." Lois' train of thought was cut off with their boss walking slowly between their desks and studying the two of them carefully. She and Clark pretended to be waiting on hold patiently until he moved on. Then she leaned back and gave Clark her patented 'you didn't answer my question' look.

"Okay," Clark admitted. "I'd tell her the truth. That I love her, but that I liked her hair better the way it was before, but that if she's happy... that's the important thing."

Lois could just tell he honestly thought that was the correct answer to this scenario. She was ecstatic that she no longer had romantic thoughts about him, if this was the way she would have been treated after a bad hair day. Clark clearly didn't understand women at all.

Someone came back on her line and asked if she wanted to leave a message.

"No, I don't want to leave a message. I've already left a message. Never mind," she said and hung up her phone. "Poor woman."

"Who?" Clark asked.

"Your wife. She's married to Mr. Right. Mr. Always Right."

Clark gazed at her with a sick expression. Ooooh. Had she hit a nerve? He didn't like that he got her little test question wrong. Ha! She bet it would be keeping him awake late that night, wondering how he could be honest with his wife without telling her that her hair looks awful. Good, serves Mr. Goody-Two-Shoes right, telling his wife that he didn't like her new haircut. Every man **knows** *that* was the wrong answer. It's in the rule book. Poor Clark. Poor future Mrs. Kent.

Lois sat up in bed. Oh, dear. Oh, dear. Oh, dear. No wonder Clark wanted her to auction herself off to the highest bidder.

If they were together, and she got a bad haircut, what would he say? Would Clark tell her to shave it off? Well, she could rest assured that he certainly wouldn't be telling her it looked good, when it didn't. Of course, would she believe a man who told her a god-awful haircut looked good when it clearly did not? No, she would know if a man was lying to her. That was her job. And she would hate it if a man said that he liked her haircut, when he didn't... or couldn't possibly, because she hated it. No, she would want honesty. Just don't tell her that it looked better before... her heart ached. No woman wanted to hear that!

How could she accuse Clark of being Mr. Right, let alone Mr. Always Right, when she herself was Ms. Always Right?

"All right," Perry said from the stairwell to the upper levels of the Daily Planet bullpen. "Let's see if we can finish up this auction without any more interruptions. Everyone dig deep into their wallets, and remember that this is for charity."

"Uh-huh... uh... yeah... I'll call you back," said Lois, hanging up her telephone. She turned to Jimmy. "Another murder. Another woman cut up the same way after the robbery of Claudius's crown last night."

"What is this world coming to?" Jimmy asked, shaking his head.

Lois' eyes widened as the connection crystallized in her mind. "Jimmy! Robbery then murder. Robbery then murder!"

"Huh?"

She rolled her eyes, then hissed, "What if the robberies and murders are tied together?"

"Excuse me?" Perry said loud enough to interrupt their conversation.

Lois looked up and saw that her boss was staring right at

them.

"Could you guys take a break for maybe five minutes?" he asked them, his hands held out to all the people in the newsroom for the bachelorette auction.

What? The last time he tried to interrupt her work for some charity event in the newsroom all her co-workers got drugged on pheromones. She wasn't really looking for a repeat performance of those events. Work over charity any day, thank you very much, Chief.

"Thank you. All right. Let's see who's first on the auction block this morning?"

Yeah, I bet you couldn't be quiet for five minutes if you tried anyway, Clark grumbled soft enough she doubted he meant for her to hear it. But that was the problem with being in someone else's mind, they always heard what you had to say.

Clark was still being a sourpuss from the week before, like it had been his fault that Pacifonesia had been destroyed. As if his being alive and working on the story would have stopped some madman from terrorizing countries with his "death ray".

Lois stood up. "I think I'm next, Perry," she announced, walking over to her boss.

"Lois?" Jimmy gaped.

Perry lowered his voice to talk to her. "Now, Lois, I thought you didn't want to be auctioned..."

"Let's just make some money for the kids," she whispered, straightening out her clothes and putting on a smile for all those men she would rather not date.

Are you trying to make some kind of point with this? Clark asked.

Lois could hear the annoyance in Clark's voice. Good!

~Life goes on, Clark,~ she retorted silently. ~If you want us just to be partners and friends...~

"All right, gentlemen. Here she is, Miss Lois Lane, our prize reporter. So, let's start the bidding off at say... uh... twenty dollars?"

A hand automatically went up. "Twenty!"

I never said that, Lois.

Perry pointed at the man and started in with his auctioneer voice, "Hey, there's twenty. Do I hear 'twenty-five'?"

~You didn't not say it, Clark.~

I love you.

~Do you, Clark?~

Richie raised his hand. "Twenty-five."

Oh, not him, Lois. Don't go on a date with him!

"Twenty-five dollars. Who will bid a thirty? Bid a thirty? A thirty? A thirty dollars for her?"

"Thirty!" this was from Jimmy.

Lois smiled as she watched Jimmy give a patented glare towards Richie.

Way to go, Jimmy!

"Thirty. We've got thirty dollars," Perry continued. "Who'll bid thirty-five? A five? A five? Bid a five, a thirty-five dollars for her?"

"One hundred dollars," said Richie, holding up a hundred dollar bill.

Really starting to dislike that guy.

Jimmy's glare at the man turned to a sneer. He turned his apologetic eyes back to Lois. Obviously her broke partner wasn't going to save her by outbidding Richie. She was with Clark on this. She didn't want a date with Richie either. She focused her eyes on her photographer and gave a slight nod. She would back the bid, if need be.

"One fifty," called Jimmy.

Thank God, Jimmy had understood her telepathic message.

"Way to go, Jimmy! We've got one fifty. Do I hear one fifty-five? Who will bid one fifty-five? A five? A five? Bid a five, a one hundred fifty-five dollars for her?"

Ready to date other men there, Lois? Clark murmured with a hint of euphoria. He must have been really worried that she had been serious.

~For the kids, Clark,~ Lois replied, allowing a small satisfied smile to grace her lips. She had gotten what she wanted out of the auction: a jealous Clark admitting that he still loved her. What she would do to get that ghost of hers to get his mind off his self-pity and back on what was important.

Perry grinned at the crowd. “Richie, you aren’t going to let Jimmy steal her away for a mere one hundred fifty dollars, are you?”

Lois turned a sharp gaze at her boss.

“Tax deductible,” coaxed Perry.

Throw her to the sharks, why doesn’t he? Thanks, Chief.

Richie shrugged and Jimmy gloated.

The crowd announced its disappointment in the end of the bidding war.

“All right. One fifty going once,” said Perry, hitting his gavel against the metal railing of the stairs. “Going twice...”

“Ten thousand!” a new voice with an Irish accent called from across the room.

Lois turned to see someone she hadn’t seen in ten years.

“Patrick?”

“Ten thousand?” Perry questioned.

“Patrick?” Jimmy mouthed with a stunned expression.

Patrick?

“In the flesh,” Patrick admitted, holding out his arms.

Perry looked over at Lois and caught sight of her wide eyes, before returning his gaze to the newcomer. “Sir, is that ten thousand American dollars?”

“Any way you want it. Dollars, pounds, rubles, gold bars,” Patrick told him.

Her boss chuckled at that thought. Patrick better be careful or Perry would insist that Patrick give the Coates charity ten thousand gold bars.

“Well, sir, I thank you,” the Chief said to her old friend with a slight bow. “And the children thank you.”

Lois walked down the steps and approached Patrick. “What are you doing in Metropolis?”

“I’m here on business,” the Irishman replied. “You look great, filled out in all the right places.”

She blushed bashfully at this brazen comment. “You look great too.”

Charming, Clark drawled sarcastically.

Jimmy approached them and cleared his throat.

“Oh! Jimmy. This is Patrick Sullivan. I met him when I was an exchange student in Ireland,” Lois explained.

“I’m sorry about outbidding you, lad,” Patrick said pleasantly. “But Lois and I go way back. The very thought of having her to myself for the night sent shivers down my spine and directly into my wallet.”

Evening. A dinner date happens in the evening, not night.

Lois smiled at Patrick’s lame excuse and glanced at Jimmy. His expression, she imagined, mirrored the one she heard in Clark’s tone. Neither of her men liked Patrick.

“Well, Jimmy Olsen is my...” She looked at her photographer. Clark truly was her partner – in every sense of the word, but in this reality, in this destiny, that title went to Jimmy. “— partner, here at the Planet.”

“I’ve seen the poster. The other half of Lane and Olsen,” said Patrick, holding out his hand.

Jimmy took Patrick’s hand and Lois could see him squeezing it tighter than necessary, trying to make an impression – albeit not a good one. “James. James Olsen,” Jimmy corrected.

Patrick looked uncomfortable. “That’s quite a grip you have there, James. You must work out.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I do,” Jimmy said, casually wrapping his arm

around Lois’ waist. “Lois and I do tae-kwon-do together.” That was a blatant lie. Jimmy couldn’t do a roundhouse kick if his life depended on it. She really should introduce him to martial arts.

Lois stepped away from Jimmy’s arm and guided Patrick to her desk. “So, how’s your father?”

Jimmy followed them, keeping a close eye on the man who had outbid him.

“I’m afraid he’s got a bit of an illness and had to check into hospital,” Patrick said.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” replied Lois. “Patrick’s dad was the greatest storyteller: Druids and wizards and virgin sacrifices. Ugh. He made up all this creepy stuff.”

“What makes you think he made it up?” teased Patrick.

Lois laughed; as if any of that stuff could be real.

You mean like time travel, ghosts, and superheroes?

She coughed. ~Not now, Clark!~ She cleared her throat. “So, ten thousand dollars. You didn’t happen to see that movie *Indecent Proposal*, did you?”

“Yes,” Patrick replied. “I *loved* it.”

Lois felt awkward that her old friend interpreted her joke thusly. Patrick had always been flirtatious, but he was taking it a bit far and too heavy for her taste. She hadn’t liked being auctioned off like a prize steer. Referring to her as being equal to a prostitute wasn’t earning Patrick any points either. This date was for dinner and nothing else.

Thank goodness for small miracles.

“At your *hotel*?” Jimmy echoed. He cast a glance at Lois, and she knew what he was thinking. It wasn’t hard; Clark was suggesting the same thing.

~It’s just dinner, guys. Please! Big girl here. Can handle myself.~

“Excuse me,” Lois said to Jimmy, informing him that he was overstepping his bounds. “Your hotel sounds great.”

“I’m staying at the Lexor in the Junior Luthor Suite,” Patrick informed her.

Suddenly dinner took on a completely feel than two friends becoming reacquainted. “Actually, Patrick, I can’t...” She swallowed. There was no way she would make it through dinner at the ‘Luthor’ anything.

“In point of fact, Lois, I have a check for ten thousand dollars that says that you can,” Patrick replied.

He didn’t just say that, did he? Taking another look at Patrick’s expression, he had.

Lois gazed at Jimmy and saw his hands turning to fists by his side. He knew what Lex’s name did to her and how she hadn’t wanted to be auctioned off for this very reason. She smiled at him. Jimmy was a good friend. She wrapped her arm around Jimmy’s waist. “Didn’t we celebrate the first night of our honeymoon at the Lexor, Jimmy?”

Her partner glowed with the appreciation that his anger was not displaced. He ran a hand through her hair. “I cannot recall. All I remember is that it was the happiest night of my life,” Jimmy said, playing along. “Then that weekend on that island off the coast of Rio.” His smile grew exponentially. “I’ll never forget it. Because of you I almost lost my head.”

She couldn’t help but laugh.

“Are you saying that I bought a *married* woman?” Patrick spat out.

Lois smiled at him with a warmth that she didn’t feel. “You didn’t *buy* anything more than dinner, Patrick. And technically, he and I are engaged. We’re still working out some snafus, but soon, very soon, we’ll be Mr. and Mrs. Clark Kent.”

“What?!” Jimmy and Patrick gasped at the same time.

She winced. “Olsen... James Olsen... Mr. and Mrs. James Olsen,” she corrected, tripping over her tongue.

“I see,” Patrick said, raising a brow. He didn’t believe her one bit. Crap.

“When you said dinner at your hotel, naturally I assumed you meant the hotel restaurant,” Lois explained, removing her hand from Jimmy’s waist and crossing her arms. “For ten thousand dollars, you are welcome to have both Jimmy and I dine with you in your suite, two for the price of one. If you would rather dine with me alone, we can eat in the privacy of a public restaurant. But even if you offered me ten thousand dollars for my own pocket on top of the ten you’ve already given to the Coates charity for orphans, I would never set foot inside a Luthor Suite – Junior or otherwise.”

Patrick nodded. “So, when you said that you couldn’t eat in my suite, you meant that suite in particular, you didn’t mean with me?”

She nodded.

“Oh, Lois, I’m sorry. There has been a terrible misunderstanding. No, of course, we don’t have to eat in my suite,” Patrick tried to make up for lost ground. “Please, for old time’s sake, Lois. I’ll take you to any restaurant in the city. Just the two of us.”

“I would have agreed to that until you insisted that you had bought and paid for me,” Lois informed him. “Now, where I go, Jimmy will accompany me as my bodyguard, just to be on the safe side.”

For good measure, Jimmy crossed his arms as well. Even together they weren’t half as intimidating as Superman, but they were a force to be reckoned with.

“The Lois Lane I used to know didn’t need bodyguards,” Patrick reminded her.

“That was several multi-millionaires ago,” replied Jimmy. “After the third one tried to kill her, I started to insist on a chaperone.”

Patrick chuckled. “Is he serious?” At their expressions, he realized that they were. “How about we start at an Irish pub I know, Casey’s, over on Main and...”

“I know the place,” Lois agreed. “We’ll see you there. Seven o’clock?”

Jimmy relaxed and headed back to his desk.

“I guess there’s no chance to rekindle the old flame,” Patrick said in a low voice. “I have never forgiven myself for letting you get away.”

“I’m flattered, Patrick, but I’m in love with someone else. *This* is just dinner,” she replied.

“You don’t think I could sweep you off your feet and away from that guy?” Patrick said with a nod towards Jimmy. “He doesn’t seem to trust you much.”

“You should know that it’s character, not money, that impresses me, Patrick. My intended has a truckload of it; it’s hard to compete with that,” Lois said, thinking of Clark. “And it’s *you* he doesn’t trust. He knows I can handle myself.”

Not to mention after Superman, no other man could ever sweep you off your feet again, try as he might.

~Ha ha, Farmboy. You did.~

“Well, tonight then, Lois,” Patrick said, backing away.

As soon as her old friend was at the elevators, Jimmy rejoined her. “Lois, can we talk in the conference room?”

~Oh, great, ~ Lois groaned. Jimmy better not think she had been serious about that whole engagement/marriage ruse. “Sure, Jimmy.” She placed a smile on her face and followed him into the conference room. Might as well get this conversation over and done with.

Jimmy closed the door and turned to face Lois. He appeared nervous. “Um... Lois?” He sat down in a chair and then changed his mind and stood back up.

“Yes?” Lois said with a little impatience. She wanted to get started on that new lead about the murders being tied to the missing artifacts.

“I wanted to ask you about CK,” Jimmy said but then didn’t

continue.

Lois crossed her arms. “What about him?”

He cleared his throat, opened his mouth to say something, but then seemed to change his mind. Finally, he said, “Do you have a photo of him?”

That came out of left field. “No,” she stated.

“Is he coming back to Metropolis?”

She shifted uncomfortably onto her other foot. “Not yet.”

“Did you find him?”

“No,” Lois answered shortly, wondering where he was going. “His parents hadn’t seen him.”

“His *parents*?” Jimmy echoed skeptically.

“Yes. I met them in Kansas. What’s with all these questions about Clark, Jimmy? I’ve got a story to write,” she reminded him.

“I’m worried about you,” he replied slowly.

Lois smiled, relaxing. She patted his arm. “I’m fine. I’ll find him. It’s just taking longer than I expected.” She headed towards the door.

“While you were on vacation, I ran into Sarah...”

She stopped at the door, unable to open it. “How’s Sarah? Finish up her degree yet?” Lois asked with too much faux cheerfulness. “You two getting back together?”

Jimmy ignored her questions and continued, “She asked how you and Scardino were doing, and I told her you broke up with him to chase after an old boyfriend of yours.”

“Oh?” Lois said, opening the door ready to escape.

“Named Clark.”

She winced, but didn’t turn to face him. Lois had told Sarah that Clark was a figment of her imagination, a figure in her dreams. That was before Lois knew the truth. If the young woman told Jimmy what Lois had told her...

“Sarah was really worried. She said that you had told her about Clark and that he wasn’t good for you. Actually, what she said was that ‘it wasn’t healthy’ – you and Clark.”

Lois could hear the concern in Jimmy’s voice, but it didn’t sound like Sarah had rattled her out. She must have taken the oath of fake-therapist seriously.

“Sarah asked that you call her, Lois,” Jimmy went on. “I thought she might be exaggerating... but after what happened out there...”

Lois shut the door and turned to face her partner. “That was just a slip of the tongue, Jimmy. I really appreciate you backing me up. I’m sorry that it wasn’t your bid that won.”

He smiled weakly. “Me too, but we can have dinner together anytime. I’ll be there tonight to back you up. Actually, I’ll bring a date. I met this woman at the museum robbery last night. Veronica. She’s a bit nasally...” He shrugged. “But a real looker and an expert on ancient antiquities.”

Lois laughed. “You’re picking up my bad habits, Jimmy. I thought we were off duty tonight. You’re planning on doing research while out on a date?”

“We’ll tell Patrick that she’s there for research on our story,” he explained. Lois got the strange feeling poor Veronica had been duped into a date under the guise of ‘research’ as well. “You know to go along with our cover story.”

“I don’t think he bought our cover story, Jimmy.”

He scratched his head. “Why is that? How come no matter how many times we tell people we’re in love, engaged or married, nobody believes us?”

Probably has something to do with the fact that you aren’t.

Lois smiled, agreeing with Clark. “I have no idea.”

“I’m never off-duty when it comes to you, Lois. You know that, right?” Jimmy asked.

She nodded. “We okay?”

“Yeah. But, Lois, Sarah’s expression after I told her about Clark though...” He shook his head. “You should just call and reassure her that you’re fine. Okay?”

“Sure,” she replied, opening the door. She planned on keeping as far away from that psych major as possible.

Chapter Seventeen

Lois peered through the peephole on her front door. On the other side was a strange woman in a big flouncy shirt, the likes in which Lois wouldn't be caught dead. The woman was strange only in the sense that Lois didn't know her. Having lived in Metropolis all her life, Lois had discovered she no longer found people 'odd' anymore, just different.

The woman appeared harmless enough and was holding a half-gallon of chocolate fudge ripple ice cream, so it was possible she was actually Lois' long lost best friend. She opened the door.

“Howdy, neighbor,” said the woman with a shake of her shoulder length black ringlets. “I sensed you needed ice cream.”

“You sensed correctly,” Lois replied with a chuckle. She was always in need of ice cream. Actually, she had just thrown out her last empty pint. “Do I know you?”

The woman handed her the carton. “I'm Star. I recently moved in on the first floor.”

“Ah.” Lois accepted the gift because, as a rule, she never turned down ice cream. It amazed her that she had never been abducted as a child.

Star smiled. “Your partner asked me to come.”

Lois raised a brow. *Jimmy?* This seemed like the kind of thing he would do, sic some crazy psychic on her. She backed up and let the woman inside. If for no other reason than that Star would distract Lois from becoming cross-eyed while staring at the note with the names and numbers that she still couldn't comprehend. *Tempus, ha!* She took the ice cream into the kitchen and put it into her freezer.

“He doesn't trust the man with the green eyes,” Star explained, sitting down on the sofa.

Lois didn't recall meeting any man with green eyes. Sitting down next to the woman, she wondered why Jimmy hadn't just called her himself. “Was there a particular reason he wanted us to talk?” she asked the woman warily. Had Jimmy sent Star to assist them with their story? Or to help her find Clark? It didn't make sense. Maybe Sarah had told Jimmy more about her dream man than she had assumed.

“He doesn't think you're listening to him and he's blue in the face from trying. So, he thought that perhaps I could talk some sense into you. And you're right; I couldn't agree more.”

“Excuse me?” Lois sputtered.

“I was responding to your thoughts. Small weddings are much more romantic.”

Had Jimmy told this stranger that they were engaged? “Star, I wasn't thinking about my wedding. What would be the point? With the way things are going, I don't think I'm ever going to get married.”

“Not if you keep seeing other men,” the psychic told her.

“I'm not seeing other men!” Lois said in her defense. “I'm not seeing anyone.”

Star shook her head and then knocked it with her fist. “This thing. Sometimes it picks up mixed signals. I could have sworn I saw you out to dinner with another man... and a bull's-eye.”

There was no way this woman could have psychically seen her at the pub with Patrick, playing darts. “Lucky guess?”

“Lois, your brain is like a cheap TV, full of static, but one thing is coming through loud and clear,” Star said.

The skeptical reporter couldn't wait to hear what it was.

“You love Clark.”

Lois' jaw dropped. *No.* Well, yes, but there was no way that this woman could have pulled that out of thin air. “Jimmy told you.”

Star scrunched her eyes. “Who?”

Hadn't Star told her that Jimmy had sent her? Fine, Lois

would play along. “Yes, I love Clark. I love him so much,” Lois said. It felt good to say those words aloud, to have someone to talk to about Clark.

“Of course you do. When I checked out your future, your partner was worried by what I saw,” Star replied. “Frankly, I was worried too, because usually when I look into the future I see the future.”

That sounded reasonable. “Okay,” Lois responded.

“But now I only see the past,” explained Star.

“You see the past in my future?” Lois asked. What the...?

Wait. Her dreams were of the past. If her dreams with Clark became reality would that mean they would also be her future?

“Now, this is the weird part...” continued Star.

It wasn't already weird?

“It's not just your future,” Star said with wide eyes.

“Everyone in Metropolis's future as well.”

If history needed to be rewritten again to accommodate Clark being alive instead of dead, his presence alone would impact everyone he met and every person who read his work... therefore, everyone in Metropolis. So far, Lois was following what Star was saying.

“Is this going to happen soon? This rewriting of history?” Lois asked, sitting on the edge of her seat – literally – and clutching her hands together.

“You don't seem surprised by this,” Star observed, impressed. “I guess I shouldn't be taken aback that this doesn't faze you. He said you're a genius.”

“Well...” Lois shrugged modestly. That was always nice to hear.

“Anyway, it happens after the dead man returns,” Star explained.

Lois' jaw dropped. Clark was coming back to her! She hugged Star. “Oh, thank you! Thank you!”

“Well, he's not actually dead. Just a part of him is dead. Can you be partially dead?” Star seemed stumped by her own logic.

“Soon?”

“Yes, the dead man returns. You die. Then time starts over,” Star said, ticking the timeline off on her fingers.

“I die?” Lois gulped. No, that couldn't be. Clark couldn't come back, only to find her dead. No! No, Star must be wrong. But if she was wrong about this, did that mean she was wrong about Clark returning as well?

Star knocked the event out of the air as unimportant. “You die, but it's not really you.” She lifted up her finger. “Actually, it's this... your death, or what is assumed to be your death... is the catalyst for time to change. I guess it angers the gods or something.”

“*Gods?*” As in more than one? Who *was* this woman?

Star shook head. “Although I don't know why there is a need to change the past if you're not really dead.” She shrugged. “Do you think it might be a mistake?”

“And will I be happy?” Lois had to ask. “When the mostly dead man returns?”

“Oh, no. You'll be miserable.”

“What?” How could she be miserable with Clark alive?

“Oh, yes. He's a tyrant. And you must be on the lookout for his ex-wife. She's the one who kills you... the 'other you' you. The one that's not you,” clarified Star with this rain of mud.

“Clark's a tyrant? And married?” Lois gasped. That couldn't be right. It just couldn't. Of course, with her history with men it made perfect sense. Paul, Claude, Lex...

“*Clark?* Oh, right. Him... um...” Star closed her eyes in thought. “No. Well, yes, but not really.”

Lois was getting nowhere fast with this woman.

“He was engaged, but it got broken off because he met you... only not you.” Star's brow furrowed.

“The not me that gets killed?” Lois tried to understand.

“No. The ‘not you’ that gets killed won’t really *be* you, just someone made to look like you. This ‘other you’ that broke up Clark’s engagement really *is* you, only not really.”

Lois stood up and walked to her freezer. She pulled out the ice cream that Star had brought and grabbed a spoon out of the dish drainer. This was becoming a double chocolate ice cream type of conversation and then some. After she had swallowed a bite, she tried to comprehend again. “So, there are three of me in my future? Me-me? Me – that really isn’t me, who gets killed by Clark’s ex-wife? And me – who really is me, but isn’t, who also happened to break up Clark’s engagement?”

“Oh, no. The you that broke off his engagement isn’t in *your* future. She’s in his past. And she’s married to Clark now, so you don’t have to worry about her. And the ex-wife isn’t Clark’s ex...”

“Clark is married to this other me? The me that dies?” Lois gasped onto something that made sense.

“No, the one that broke up his engagement. And she’s married to *her* Clark, not *your* Clark,” Star said, eyeing the ice cream.

“There’s more than one Clark? What? The ‘before’ Clark and the ‘after’ Clark?” Lois asked.

Star hit herself in the forehead. “Of course! Now, it all makes sense.” She got up and retrieved another spoon.

Lois stared at Star. “It does?”

“Yes. There’s Old Clark and New Clark,” the psychic announced with a grin. “I wondered why Clark said to tell you goodbye. He’s not coming back. He’s lost, but he knows you’ll be okay, because you’ll have the New Clark, see?”

“No!” Lois shook her head. “No, I don’t see.” She dug back into the ice cream.

“Old Clark gets lost when the future becomes the past. He’ll be Old Clark, but you’ll have a New Clark.”

“I don’t want a New Clark, I love the Old Clark!” Lois said adamantly.

“You’ll love the New Clark too,” Star reassured her.

The reporter’s jaw dropped open. “I will?”

“Yes.” Star patted Lois on the knee. “And the New Clark needs you. Right now he’s drowning in sorrow because he lost his Lois like you’ll lose your Clark. Well, lost your Clark.” She cocked her head to the side. “You don’t really have him, do you?”

Lois shook her head. “Of course I have *my* Clark! Clark? Clark!” she called to him, but he didn’t answer. He had been mostly quiet all day. ~Clark?~

“See. Gone.”

“No!” Lois cried, standing up. “Clark? He can’t leave me. Not now. He promised. *Clark?*”

“He doesn’t have a choice,” said Star. “When the past becomes your future he will be lost.”

“Then let’s stop the past from becoming the future!” Lois said. It seemed obvious what must be done. “I’ve invested too much to lose Clark now. Tyrant or not.”

“Clark isn’t a tyrant.”

“Huh?” Hadn’t Star said that the dead man was a tyrant?

“You’ll still have New Clark,” Star reminded her.

“And is New Clark like Old Clark?” Lois snapped, getting more and more aggravated by this whole scenario. As if people were interchangeable. Why was she giving this woman time of day again?

“Yes and no. He *is* a different man.”

Lois pressed her lips together. “Yes *and* no?”

“Yes, in all the ways that are important. He will love you more than anyone ever has. He will protect you and care for you. The two of you will be happy until death do you part.”

“Will he love me more than Old Clark does?” Lois inquired skeptically.

Impossible.

~Clark! Oh, Clark. You *are* here. You haven’t left me.~

No, Lois, I haven’t left you.

“Well, no. You and Old Clark are a perfect fit. One hundred out of one hundred. Soul mates. Once your life with New Clark has ended and you have died, you and Old Clark will find each other again. You and New Clark are a close match, but only like ninety-five out of one hundred. Alike souls but not a perfect match. You *will* be happy with New Clark, Lois, and he *will* be happy with you. You both will take what life has dealt each of you and make the most of it.”

“But I don’t want *New* Clark. He’s the *wrong* Clark. I want one hundred out of one hundred *Old Clark!*” Lois complained through gritted teeth.

That’s what I want too, honey, but if it doesn’t happen, if I can’t be there for you, I’d rather you find happiness with this New Clark – as long as he isn’t a clone – than with Luthor, Scardino, or Patrick. Because if this New Clark is anything like me, he’ll love you with all of his being.

~But he won’t *be* you.~ Lois choked back a sob. ~I refuse to love him. I’ll fight it tooth and nail,~ she protested to *her* Clark.

Like you jumped into my arms, love at first sight?

She took a deep breath and wiped the tears from her cheeks. She set the half-gallon of ice cream on the coffee table and faced Star. “You said that I die *after* Clark returned from the dead, right?”

“No, I didn’t say that. Old Clark remains dead,” said Star, reaching over to the ice cream with her spoon.

“What about his ex-wife?” Lois screamed.

I was never married, Clark said at the same time Star told Lois, “Not Clark’s ex-wife.”

“Huh?” Lois’ head was swimming with Old Clarks, New Clarks, and three, possibly four, hers – only one of which was actually her. Then who was the fiancée or was it the ex-wife that kills one of her?

The phone rang, jarring her spinning head back to normal. Lois went to her desk. “Hello?”

“Lois, I have some information on that druid mask that you asked me about,” said Patrick.

“You do? Terrific! Thanks for helping me out, Patrick,” Lois replied. *Finally*, some headway on this robbery / ritual killing spree. She was so glad she got over all that *Indecent Proposal* paranoia mess from the other day. As an antiques dealer, Patrick had kindly volunteered to help with getting information on the stolen artifacts.

“I hate do this, but can I ask you to meet me at my suite? All the information is here,” Patrick suggested.

“Yeah, sure. I’ll be right over,” the reporter told him, hanging up. She turned back to Star. “I’ve got to go.”

“Okay,” Star said, following her out. “Oh! Oh! Don’t open the cabinet with the glowing green eyes.”

“Right. The cabinet with the eyes,” Lois repeated, taking the advice with a grain of salt. “I won’t open it.” Truthfully, she was relieved to stop thinking about this whole New Clark, Old Clark, future returning to the past conundrum.

Lois turned away from the cabinet in Patrick’s suite. Besides the disturbing photo collage that Patrick had collected of her, what had initially had drawn her to the armoire was the green glowing gems in the eyes of an old silver mask. She sighed. “I don’t believe it.” Star had been right.

Run!

~You heard Star. I’m not dying anytime soon, Clark. Stop worrying.~

A groan of frustration was his only response.

“I’m afraid it’s true,” Patrick said, announcing his return to the room.

Lois spun around to face him. “Patrick, this is the mask that

was stolen last night, wasn't it?"

"The Mask of the Ancient Ones?" Patrick said, taking the mask away from her. "Yes. I told you I had information about it."

She felt like rolling her eyes at herself. She fell into another trap, didn't she? One of these days she would learn not to run into a situation like this without back-up.

You will?

"Well, this is a shame."

"What? That I've discovered my instincts about you were right?" Lois responded, edging towards the door. Patrick's associate Shamus, grabbed her by the shoulders before she got half-way across the room.

Fight!

She tried to pull herself free, but his grip was too firm. She leaned back against Shamus and kicked her old friend in the chest with a front kick using both of her legs, causing him to stumble backwards.

"Hold her!" reprimanded Patrick.

Next thing Lois knew she was tied to a long glass top table. Patrick placed some hideous skull candlesticks onto the table — one above her head and two others down by her feet. How could she ever have described them as beautiful? He and Shamus had donned robes.

What was that about not dying any time soon?

~Really? Now? Do you really think this is the time for an 'I told you so'?"

"Maybe you can answer something for me," Lois said to Patrick. "What is it about the filthy rich that makes you all want to kill me?"

"Hush, my sweet," Patrick replied, drawing the hood of his robe over his head. "I love you."

"This..." Lois said, tugging on her bindings. "... isn't love."

Patrick shrugged. "You like to interfere where you shouldn't?" he suggested an alternative reason with a nod to his associate, who also raised his hood.

"You used to call that 'spunk' and as I recall, you used to admire that about me," Lois reminded him.

Patrick looked her over from head to shoes with unveiled interest. "I've always admired everything about you."

I don't think you're going to talk him out of this.

~Any brilliant ideas, then?~

Knock over a candlestick, Clark suggested.

Lois pulled on the ropes once more. Her wrists were too tightly bound to reach the candlestick holder between them. She turned her head and saw Patrick retrieve the large dagger from the side table. ~Any better ideas?~

Clark was quiet long enough for her to decide that he didn't. "Help!" she screamed as Patrick popped off the button from her suit jacket with the tip of the knife.

He leaned over her. "Lois, if nobody came when the other women screamed, what makes you think they will come now?"

"Superman! Help!" she shouted, thrashing around on the table. Patrick and Shamus exchanged a perplexed expression as Patrick passed the dagger over to his associate.

Shamus held the dagger above his head to stab her abdomen.

"I can't believe you aren't man enough to murder me yourself, you coward," Lois hissed at Patrick.

He held up a hand to stop Shamus. "Coward? I'm no coward."

"Sure you are, Patrick. Any man who has to strap a woman down to have his way with her isn't going to win any awards for bravery," she informed him. "You're pathetic."

Not helping here, Lois.

"I'm pathetic?" roared Patrick. "I'll show you pathetic!" He stepped over to his desk and put on the Mask of the Ancient Ones." The mask fused with his face, and she could see a green ghostly figure arrive and inhabit his body.

"Still pathetic, Patrick," she taunted him as he stood over her again, this time holding the dagger himself. "You need some magical being to be man enough to kill me. I thought for this offering to be real, you needed to sacrifice the one you most love? Well, I don't love you. I've never loved you. Some sacrifice I'll be. An insult to the druid gods is more like it." The knife hesitated over her.

What are you doing?

~If he derives pleasure from killing me, it isn't much of a sacrifice, is it?~

You are nuts. You'll be dead!

~So, you're dead. Star said once I'm dead we can be together again. It doesn't look like I've got much of a choice here.~

No, Lois, not like this. You need to fight. Live!

~Fine! But if I end up falling for New Clark, I'm blaming you,~ Lois retorted, starting to use her entire weight to rock the table. This table was quite sound, heavier than she thought, and didn't want to budge.

"Hold her!" newly possessed Patrick ordered to his henchman.

Shamus went to hold her down and Lois was able to get in a good head-butt. Thankfully, he wasn't expecting it and slipped to the floor. She heard Patrick roar with anger, and she rocked the table over, knocking one of the candlesticks onto Patrick. His robes caught fire as if he had been covered by a silent flash powder, and he started to holler as the door of the suite burst open.

"Housekeeping! I've got towels," announced the same maid who had kept barging in on her and Jimmy's stay at the honeymoon suite, as she popped into the room.

The maid saw Shamus passed out on the floor, Lois tied to the upturned table, and Patrick on fire nearby, and rightly flew out of the room screaming. A few moments later, Lois heard the fire alarm go off down the hall.

Lois had to love the Lexor Hotel for its excellent customer service in lack of guest privacy.

Jimmy wrapped a blanket around her shoulders and handed her a cup of bullpen coffee.

Lois smiled up at him. Detective Wolfe had called Jimmy after he had found her tied to the table. Her partner had picked her up from the Lexor and taken her back to the office. They were now sitting in the conference room. Actually, the detective had wanted Jimmy to take her home, but she had a story to write, so Lois had insisted that they return to the Planet. Wolfe expected her down at headquarters first thing the next morning for more questioning. "Thanks, Jimmy. I don't know why Wolfe called you; I'm fine."

Her partner knelt down in front of her. "Lois, he said that you were hysterical and calling out for Superman to rescue you."

"I was not!" Lois defended her actions and then mumbled, "I only called out for him once."

Not helping your case here.

Jimmy raised a brow. "I thought we had discussed this. There is no such thing as this Superman."

"A girl can dream, can't she?" Lois grumbled. "Anyway, I can believe in flying superheroes, if you're allowed to call my neighbor and tell her to check out my future."

"What?" Jimmy's face was a picture of disbelief.

"Star. My neighbor, the psychic," she reminded him. "You called her and told her to check out my future. You were worried I wasn't listening to you, so for some strange reason you thought I'd listen to her instead."

His jaw dropped open for a long moment before he said, "Lois, I didn't call your neighbor."

"Of course you did. She said my partner sent her. Who else could ...?" The words caught in her throat. Who else, indeed?

“Clark,” Lois breathed, her hand covering her mouth.

Yes, honey?

“Clark? This Clark – CK fellow – isn’t your partner, Lois, I am. Are you saying that he contacted this Star woman on my behalf? That he’s impersonating me?” he sputtered. “Sarah was right; he isn’t good for you.”

Lois waved that idea out of the air. “No, Clark contacted her on *his* behalf.” Her mind was still trying to grasp the truth that Clark had talked to someone other than her. She wasn’t crazy.

“What? Why would he call himself ‘your partner’ then?”

Jimmy asked.

“Because he *is* my partner, in an alternate reality,” Lois said absently, letting the blanket fall as she stood up to start pacing. Clark was real. She had seen his grave. She had spoken with his parents and, now, he had contacted someone other than herself! She felt so relieved. Not that she had been nervous or anything. She had known the whole time she wasn’t crazy.

“Lois!” Jimmy said, grabbing her shoulders.

“Huh?” She shook her head and tried to focus on him.

“What?”

“You’re starting to act really weird. Clark isn’t from *this* reality?” he asked incredulously.

Other realities? Dimensions? Was that what Star meant by the other her and the other Clarks? “No, Clark *is* from this reality, but from another time,” Lois tried to explain. From Jimmy’s stunned expression she clearly wasn’t doing it well. “Clark is meant to be alive. He’s supposed to be my writing partner at the Planet. We...” She paused as she realized that Jimmy wasn’t one of the partners. — the three of us – work together to uncover the truth. Understand?”

Jimmy shook his head. “No.”

“I know this sounds crazy...”

“Yes, Lois, it sounds very crazy. This is just the type of thing that Sarah warned me to be on the lookout for,” he told her.

“What?! No,” Lois said, gesturing that theory of her lack of sanity out of the conversation. “Sarah just thinks he’s from my dreams because that’s what I told her. That was before I realized my dreams aren’t dreams, but repressed memories.”

“Lo-is,” Jimmy groaned. “I did research on this CK guy. He doesn’t exist. There is *no* reporter with the name Clark Kent that has printed an article in the past ten years in any newspaper.”

“Of course he doesn’t exist, Jimmy; someone, somehow went back in time and killed him off before he became a reporter, so Clark doesn’t exist now. Only, he’s supposed to. That’s why I have these repressed memories.” *Duh!* Lois froze. That word sounded familiar and not because she was apt to speak it often enough. It meant something else. It was there on the tip of her tongue, on the edge of her memory, yet still not within her grasp. Damn! She needed to figure out a way to get access to those memories.

“Lois,” Jimmy said, picking up the phone. “I know it’s late, but I’m going to call Sarah and ask her for a referral. You *need* to talk to a professional about this.”

“A professional?” Lois scoffed. Who was a professional in time-travel? Repressed memories? A psychiatrist?! “*No!* I’m not nuts, Jimmy.”

He covered up the mouthpiece of her phone, sending her an expression of concern. “Lois, you’re telling me that you believe in flying superheroes, time-travel, and your dreams are repressed memories of an alternative life. What do you expect me to believe?”

“Me,” she said simply. “You know I’m the last person in the world to believe in any of these things.”

“Which is why I’m worried about you,” he explained, dialing.

Lois took the phone out of his hand. “Jimmy, these past few months alone we’ve dealt with you being brainwashed, someone

who wanted to do a head-transplant, that insane machine that can super-fry an entire city, and now Patrick and his mystical druid mask – give me the benefit of the doubt here. I know I sound bonkers, but what I’m saying isn’t any more off-the-wall than those things.”

He held out his hand for the receiver. “Those other things were verifiable, Lois. Your hypothesis about CK isn’t. You’ve lived through enough stress to make an average person certifiable. Either way, I’m still going to ask Sarah for a referral. You’ve been acting really odd lately.”

Lois hung up the phone rather than handing it back to him. “By the way, I know Superman isn’t real. A man that pure of heart, who also looks that hot in a skintight suit, isn’t going to fall for someone like me. He’s definitely just a fantasy.”

“Eww, Lois,” Jimmy said as an expression of horror crossed his face. “Too much information.”

She shot him a beaming grin and headed out to her desk.

A few minutes later, Lois sensed Jimmy standing behind her as she typed. He reached over her shoulder and pointed at the screen. “Perry’s not going to accept that, Lois. Hearsay. You’re the only one who witnessed Sullivan catching fire and disappearing into a cloud of ash.”

“And I’m too batty to use my observations as fact anymore?” she retorted. “And the maid saw him on fire. Why do you think she pulled the fire alarm?”

He sat down next to her desk and Lois continued to ignore his presence. After a while, he sighed heavily. “Sarah said that she takes a seminar with Dr. Maxwell Deter of the Metropolis Neuroscience Center. She really likes him.”

“Uh-huh,” Lois replied with no enthusiasm. “Good for her.”

“Maybe he can help you,” Jimmy suggested. “He’s apparently top in his field with repressed memories, amnesia, and memory loss.”

She shot him a skeptical raised eyebrow. “By doing what? Electroshock therapy? Hypnosis? Thank you, no.” She turned back to her computer as she continued typing. “After what happened last time I got hypnotized...” She wouldn’t risk her connection to Clark by giving some psychiatrist, whose only goal would be to rid her of this voice inside her head, a back-stage pass to her mind.

“Well, I’m going to do some research on this Dr. Deter and see if he’s on the level. See what kind of techniques he uses,” Jimmy said, standing up. “Maybe you’ll come to your senses.”

“Doubt it,” Lois responded, continuing to type. “Since I’m still sane.”

As she waited for the printer to spit out the hard copy of her article, she reviewed what Jimmy had told her. No, she wouldn’t give that Deter fellow a call. Maybe she could find someone else instead – someone she could trust – to see if she could access more of these repressed memories. The more information she had about her past with Clark, the quicker she could figure out who wanted to kill him enough to go back in time. Her memories were trickling too slowly into her conscience as it was; she needed a flood.

Star! Lois wondered if the psychic did that sort of thing. Why hadn’t she thought of her before? Probably because she didn’t trust psychics, but Clark obviously had, since he had contacted her. Lois could trust anyone Clark trusted, couldn’t she?

“What’s going on here?!” Perry said, stomping out of the elevator and over to Lois’ desk. “Darlin’, you okay? Jimmy said that I needed to come in to stop the presses and add the story to the morning edition that some psycho tried to kill you.”

Same plot, different day, new psychopath.

“I’m fine, Chief,” Lois informed her boss, trying not to both smile and scowl at Clark’s words. Smile, because every time she heard his voice she knew Clark was still around. Scowl, because he was once again moaning about her lack of forethought before

rushing into danger. “My old buddy Patrick was behind the robberies and ritual killings,” Lois informed the Chief, handing him the copy.

Perry didn’t speak for a minute as he read. “Honey, this isn’t the *National Whisper*. I can’t print as fact that Patrick Sullivan was embodied by a green spirit who seemed to give him mystical powers. Not even with outside corroboration, which it doesn’t look like you have.”

“But Shamus...”

“Detective Wolfe said he didn’t come to until after Patrick disappeared,” Jimmy reminded her, approaching them. “And he’s not talking.”

“Oh, that’s right,” she said, taking back her copy and crossing that part out. “We’ll change it to, ‘Sullivan *thought* the Mask of the Ancient Ones would embody him with the spirits of his druid ancestors, giving him mystical powers’.”

“Better,” Perry said, taking the copy back. “And ‘Sullivan disappeared in a puff of smoke and ash’?” He shook his head. “No, Lois. How about we change that to ‘Sullivan caught fire from the lit candles and disappeared before MPD arrived on the scene’?”

Lois grabbed the copy back. “Yes, it’s better to let the city of Metropolis believe that this deranged lunatic is still at large, even though I *saw* him disappear, and all that remained was a pile of ash? How about the part where he tied me up and was going to stab me through with a dagger? Or how about this part where he confessed to killing the other women? Can I leave that in or do we need outside sources on those facts as well? No one who’s talking witnessed either of those things.” She pulled a red pen off her desk and started crossing out sentence after sentence on her story. “I’ll just get rid of the part where he was sacrificing me because of some deluded idea that I was his true love. I only have his wall of photos of me to prove that theory. How about ‘Lois Lane’? Maybe I wasn’t there after all, since my word isn’t worth the paper it’s written on.” She threw her copy back at her boss and tossed the red marker back on her desk before she picked up her briefcase.

Perry’s hand rested gently on her shoulder. “Lois?”

She shook off Perry’s hand. “I’m going home and, no, I don’t need an escort. Let’s just assume I’m still sane enough to catch a cab in this town.” Lois shot Jimmy a nasty glare and marched out of the bullpen. She bypassed the elevators – not wanting to stand still for one to arrive – and slammed open the door to the stairwell, smashing it into the wall as she went down the stairs.

That went well, Clark said dryly.

~Very funny, Farmboy. I’ll be lucky to have a job or any flesh and blood friends left in the morning,~ she retorted.

I’m sorry.

~For what?~

Ruining your life.

~You haven’t ruined my life, Clark. I’m just fine doing that on my own.~

But...

~Do you love me?~

From the very first moment...

~Then stop apologizing to me. We’re in this, through thick or thin.~

I don’t deserve you.

~Hey, you’re the one who fell in love with the delusional woman,~ Lois reminded the voice in her head with a half-smile. There was something about Clark that always seemed to calm her occasional bouts of anger.

Occasional?

Lois pressed her lips together. ~You better be worth it. You better not hurt me. You better not make me regret this.~

Clark didn’t respond for the several minutes it took for Lois to stomp through the lobby, pass through the doors to the street,

and flag down a cab.

I love you, Lois, with a pure heart. As much as I wish I could say otherwise, I cannot guarantee anything else.

Those words weren’t very reassuring.

Chapter Eighteen

“Are you sure about this?” Star asked Lois the next morning. They were sitting on the sofa in Star’s apartment.

After what one could say was not a good night’s sleep in which Lois had dreamt of catching Clark in a lie, she couldn’t wait any longer to know exactly what was going on with that man inside her head. Star knew about Clark and Lois’ future and even that cabinet with the green eyes. Lois knew she could trust her.

“I’m sure,” Lois replied, switching on her mini-cassette recorder. If she was going to ruin her life for this man, she better have as many of the facts as she could collect on him. And as all the facts were buried deep inside her head, *this* was her only solution.

Star held up a black and white swirling disk that spun around and around and around. “Now I’m going to ask you a few simple questions, just to put you at ease. First, what’s your name?”

“Lois Lane,” Lois responded, staring at Star but strangely not seeing her. All she could see was that spinning disk, even though she didn’t think it was there anymore.

“And where do you live?”

“1058 Carter Avenue.”

“If you could be an animal, what type of animal would you be? Excluding invertebrates, viruses, and certain classes of phytoplankton?” Star rattled off.

“Huh?”

“Never mind. Now, remember, you are in a warm secure place. If at any time you feel uncomfortable, you can emerge from this session by your choice,” said Star with a calm even voice. It made Lois feel relaxed. “I want you to think back to the Clark dreams you’ve been having lately. If they are repressed memories, no longer repress them. As soon as you remember one dream the next one will be available for you to access. Now, let’s start with the dream you had last night, what did you see?”

Lois felt her eyelids grow heavy and shut.

She was standing in Clark’s trashed apartment, arguing with Inspector Henderson about law enforcement’s inability to do their job. Then Lois and a pouty Clark sat at her desk as she tried to piece his burglary into her article. Clark didn’t seem that appreciative.

Lois felt bad – well, okay, not really – about using his painful experience for her story. As compensation she decided to rub his shoulders. He seemed so tense – stiff like iron. She could feel those muscles she had witnessed all those months ago at the Apollo Hotel when he had been draped in only a towel. When did this man find time to work out? she wondered. She hugged him from behind, leaning against that strong back of his and running her hand down his arm. More muscles! Man, had this guy bought them on sale or something?

That image faded, and Lois now found herself standing at Louie’s pool hall. Clark had run out after that rabbit-quick thief who had stolen his stuff. She picked through Clark’s things on the pool table and found a couple of Polaroid photos. One was of a glowing globe with red continents; the globe was about the size of a large softball. And the other was of a ghostly white-haired man in a white tunic with a white-on-white Superman ‘S’ crest on his chest. Was this a photograph of a hologram? Suddenly, she wasn’t too thrilled at having comforted her partner earlier.

“Clark lied to me,” Lois told Star. “He had found something of Superman’s and he hadn’t told me about it. How could he keep that from me?”

“Lois, who’s Superman?” Star inquired.

“Oh!” Lois could feel a big smile come to her mouth as it did

whenever she thought of her Man of Steel. “He’s the most fantastic guy. I love him. I mean, I’m *in* love with him. We are meant to be together forever and ever. It’s destiny. I felt it when he first held me in his arms. I just knew. Kismet. Fate.”

“Okay,” Star said hesitantly. “Lois, you didn’t answer my question. *Who* is Superman?”

“Oh, he’s this super fast, extremely strong, flying superhero from the planet Krypton who has come to Earth to fight for truth and justice,” Lois explained. How could Star not know who Superman was? Everyone knew Superman!

“Krypton? No, I’m not familiar with Krypton. I’ll have to ask my friends from the Pleiades... or maybe the Cassiopeians will have heard of ...” Star’s voice faded into the background.

Lois found herself at the break table with Clark and Jimmy. She had just confronted Clark about lying to her, but he had just evaded her once again. After she had scared him and Jimmy off, Perry sat down and tried to weasel the truth of the matter out of her. He didn’t even offer her a pathetic Elvis analogy! Thanks; thanks a lot, Perry. Her boss didn’t accept her reasoning that it was okay for her to lie to Clark, because that was what she constantly did, but it wasn’t okay for Clark to lie to her. Men never understood her logic.

She did as Perry suggested; she confronted Clark – told him flat-out that she knew he had lied to her and showed him the photographic evidence. Clark had the nerve to say that because he had grown up on the farm in Kansas, and she had grown up in the bustling city of Metropolis that their standards should be the same. Typical! He had stolen the globe from Superman’s ship at Bureau 39 – all those months ago – and had never told her about it. Now, he expected that she would still be his friend, his partner no less. She couldn’t believe him. Then to top it all off, he ran off on her. Again! Told her to go babysit some pre-teen source down at the Twelfth Precinct. Why did she ever listen to him?

A couple of hours later, Lois had been sitting with Denny, eating donuts – she really needed to find out who supplied the donuts for the Twelfth because they were a whole lot better than the ones they got at the Planet – when Superman arrived with Jack. She had already wormed out of the kid that Denny was Jack’s brother. No wonder Clark had been so interested in the thief; the kid had stolen Superman’s globe from him. Had held the precious artifact in his hand, watched the holographic messages from Krypton. It was a piece of history. Superman’s history.

How could Clark have kept this from her? Sure, he claimed that it only recently started displaying images, but he had lied to her once – how did she know he was telling the truth about that too? Lois realized, she probably would have done the same if she had come across the globe first; so, reluctantly, she had forgiven Clark again. Him giving her the sole byline for the hidden artifacts found had helped put her in a forgiving mood.

Star’s voice broke into her conscience. “Did Clark explain why he lied to you? Did you ever forgive Clark for lying to you?”

“Of course,” Lois admitted grudgingly. “I always forgive Clark. There’s just something about him that’s innately trustworthy. I thought we were on the level and then a few weeks later, do you know what he did?”

“No, what?”

“He dumped me!” Lois roared. “For Linda King! Of all the low-lying snakes in the grass...”

“Clark dumped you?” Star echoed with confusion and shock. “For another woman? Clark?”

“Professionally. He left the Daily Planet to go work at the Metropolis Star!” Lois said as if the man had stabbed her in the heart.

What was she thinking? He had stabbed her in the heart. Perry, on the other hand, was strangely nonchalant about the whole matter, like he hadn’t been betrayed by a man the Chief

had brought into the fold of the Daily Planet family, treated like a son, and heaped praise upon. Lois couldn’t believe that Clark had done that to Perry. And over a woman, no less!

Thankfully, she found out that it had just been a ruse. That he was undercover at the Met Star to investigate Linda King’s sudden jump in reporting skills. Lois sighed a breath of relief. She had been afraid that Clark’s brain had been stolen by Martians or something. Worse, a blonde!

Lois grumbled. “He’s supposed to be *mine!*” She coughed. “My partner. Mine. Between the not telling me his biggest secret when I was hiding Eugene Laderman at my apartment, lying to me about Superman’s globe, and then going behind my back to go undercover at the Star, I don’t know if I can trust Clark anymore.” She sniffled as she choked back a sob.

“Remember, Lois, you are in a safe, warm environment. Nothing can hurt you here,” Star repeated.

Lois took a deep breath and seemed to relax. “Do you know what the worst part is? When I had seen him at the press conference with Linda King, I realized... I knew...” The sobs returned with force.

“What, Lois?”

“That I still have feelings for Clark!” she gasped, covering her mouth with her hands.

“The real you, Lois. Or the you in your dreams?” Star asked.

“What’s the difference?!” Lois shouted. “I’m jealous. I thought I was over him after he didn’t return my love after Nightfall, but I was so terrified that I had lost another man to Linda. And not just *any* man, but Clark! Clark’s special. He’s mine! He has always been mine from that very first day! True, he’s made me mad on more than one occasion... almost on a daily basis, as a matter of fact. Yet, nobody makes me feel like he does when he smiles at me.” She sighed. “Clark looks at me like I’m the sun and he’d be happy to orbit around me for the rest of his life and that scares me. No one has ever looked at me that way before – like I was the center of his universe. Actually, most men are intimidated by me. A woman with brains playing what they think is a man’s game at a men’s club...” Lois shrugged. Men’s attitude towards her had always been a given. “But Clark isn’t like that, so when he left me... the Daily Planet, that is... I felt like someone had pulled my foundation out from under me.”

“Okay, let’s leave your dreams for the moment, Lois,” Star said, reassuring her. “Can you come back to the present for a minute?”

Lois took a deep breath and released it. “Yes.” A moment later she was calm.

“You said that you only discovered Clark recently. I want you to search your mind for the first dream, the first inkling you had about Clark’s existence. Let me know when you have found that,” the psychic requested.

“Okay,” Lois replied.

“Okay, you understand or okay, you’ve got it?”

“Both,” the reporter answered.

“Oh, okay then. Tell me about this earliest memory of Clark,” Star suggested.

“I’m in the woods. There’s another man there... two other men in fact. One has a mustache and glasses; he’s dressed funny like in a costume from a period play or something. He’s tied to a chair... only, not just a chair. It’s more like a chair on a sled. That’s just plain odd, because it isn’t winter but late spring, and there’s no snow. The other man has a beard and is also dressed strangely, but more like ‘Star Trek’ than ‘Little House of the Prairie’. Crap! He has a gun! He’s trying to shoot me.” Lois started to shake as her breath became labored. “There’s a baby in a bassinette... no, not a bassinette...” She could smell the dampness from the nearby creek, feel the warm breeze despite her goose bumps, and hear the silence where there had recently been crying. “The bearded man wants to kill the baby,” she

gasped. “I have to stop him. We fight. The man tied to the chair cheers me on.”

Lois could feel the soreness in her muscles as she kicked the gun out of the bearded man's hand. Finally, she picked up a large stick and hit future man with it, knocking him out. She untied the man in the chair and threw the rocks off the baby. The green glowing rocks. Only, the rocks weren't glowing anymore. She picked up the baby and cradled him in her arms. She could taste the tears running down her cheeks and lifted her hand to wipe them away. The baby in her arms was still, unmoving.

She started to hyperventilate. “Oh God! Oh, God! It's Clark. The baby is Clark! And he's dead. Oh, God! I was there when Clark was killed. It was the bearded man. He killed Clark!”

“What about the other man?” Star asked calmly. “Who is he?”

“H.G. Wells.”

“The author?” Even Star seemed skeptical.

“Yes. Tempus killed baby Clark by covering him with green rocks. Green glowing rocks, only they're not glowing anymore.” Lois shook her head. “No, that can't be right. No. No! That doesn't make sense. If Clark died due to green rocks...”

Lois dropped her face into her hands and began to sob. Clark was dead, really, honestly dead. She had been there when he had died. She had held his body in her arms. The pain of the experience pierced her like a dagger.

“Relax, Lois. What happened to Clark, happened a long time ago. Remember that you're in a safe place where no one can hurt you,” Star said, repeating what she had said earlier, but her voice was at a higher pitch than it had been a few minutes before. “Do you want to go on?”

Lois took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “Yes. I need to remember everything about Clark.” Though Star had told her – practically forced her – to relax, Lois' brain felt like it was moving at a thousand miles per minute, trying to understand what she had just witnessed, putting together pieces of a new puzzle that had been hidden within this other puzzle. It was as if half of her mind was arguing with the other half about the truthfulness of that scene in the woods.

“Let's not think about what happened to baby Clark right now,” Star suggested. “We already knew that Clark died in the past. You will remember about the day in the woods when you awake, but until then forget about baby Clark. For now, let's go back to your dreams. What happened after Clark returned to the Daily Planet when his undercover stint at the Metropolis Star was over?”

It was as if Lois had just found the location to where the green glowing puzzle piece in her hands fit, only to discover the puzzle piece, the woods, the strange sled, the man with the gun, and the baby turn to dust and drift away in a gentle breeze. She looked down at her hands and wondered at the emptiness of them. There was a bitterness and a slight taste of salt on the tip of her tongue, but she had no idea why.

What had Star asked? Oh, right, what happened when her partner returned from his undercover assignment? “Clark and I continue to work together on stories and as partners. We're best friends, nothing more. I give him a hard time about being a hack from Nowheresville, as usual. Socially, I go on a few more dates with Lex Luthor. He introduces me to people with whom I'd never had access to as Lois Lane, investigative reporter,” Lois said.

As she continued to describe her burgeoning relationship with Lex, Lois seemed, once again, to be pulled mentally in two directions. Half of her wanted to gush about Lex's attentions while the other – more vocal half – screamed in the background. “Lex helps me with my career, opening doors, pointing me towards possible stories. He's a great source. He's different than Clark, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. I know Lex enjoys

my company and has no problem telling me so. It's flattering that such a powerful and well-connected man finds me attractive and is interested in my work. Plus, I don't feel like he's hiding stuff from me, like I'm beginning to suspect that Clark is.”

“Why don't we put aside how you're feeling for Lex Luthor at the moment? What about Superman?” Star queried. “Is he still around?”

Lois smiled. Around, that he was. From day one, he had been around whenever she needed him and not around when she didn't. The only thing was, what Superman didn't realize, that she always needed him, even when she wasn't in danger.

“After Superman rescued Linda and me from the Freon gas in the freezer, I didn't see him one-on-one for a while. I'm still his go-to reporter whenever he has something he wants reported, and he always has a quote for me whenever I see him, but...” Lois shook her head. It wasn't that Superman had disappeared, it was more like she wasn't chasing him anymore. It was like his story wasn't new and exciting... what was she thinking? Of course, Superman was exciting.

“After I had seen him giving all those exclusives to Linda... I don't know, I guess I realized that maybe I'm not all the special to him. I still love him, but now I'm wondering if he returns my feelings or if I was just another reporter among many. These doubts intensify one day after he rescues a plane in France. Suddenly, he seems to be all over the world at once except Metropolis, when he used to spend most of his time here. I'm worried that I've done something to offend him and chase him away from town. Clark thinks I'm being paranoid and believes that Superman still remains loyal to Metropolis, but I'm not so sure.”

Lois watched as a new image or memory of herself filled her mind.

She ran to the scene of a just-ended hostage situation at a bank where she found Superman speaking to officers. It was the first time Lois had seen him in Metropolis in days. As she approached him, the criminal pulled away from police, but a moment later Superman stopped the man and threw the robber into the police van, knocking the man out cold. She couldn't believe her eyes. Superman didn't act like that. He was always polite and gentle, never wanting to hurt anyone, even the bad guys – no matter how much they were begging for it. Had something happened to him like when he had been hypnotized?

When Lois walked up to her hero to talk to him about what had just happened, he smirked at her. Smirked! Superman didn't smirk. Then the man looked her up and down like he didn't know who she was and as if he had just x-rayed through her clothes. She felt violated, not thrilled, by the action. What was up with him?

“I start having flashbacks to when Superman first arrived in Metropolis and I thought he didn't remember me. Superman has always reassured me that he considers me one of his closest friends,” she explained to Star. His erratic behavior baffled her. “Now, I'm not so sure.”

The picture in her head changed again.

It was the next day, and Lois was working at her desk, when the strangest, most bizarre and wonderful thing happened. A messenger arrived with a note from Superman. The Man of Steel apologized profusely for his manners from the day before and wanted to see her.

“But then Superman invited himself over to my place for dinner. It's so out of the ordinary, so unlike him, so forward. I was ecstatic! Finally, our relationship is going somewhere. About time!” Lois sighed. “But when he gets to my apartment he starts acting all weird again and spouting strange sayings like ‘might is right’. He definitely didn't seem like himself. Then he practically pounced on me and kissed me! Superman *never* kisses me. I always initiate the kiss; he is too much of a gentleman. Whoever

that man was in my apartment, I knew one thing right then and there: he wasn't Superman."

Lois pushed against Superman's chest, trying to get him to stop kissing her, trying to squirm out from under him. He was bigger and stronger, and there was no way for her to defend herself. She was most thankful that the real Superman wasn't anything like this guy. Superman's strength in the body of a regular man – a man without the hero's innate goodness – was a recipe for disaster, and she didn't need to know how to cook to know that! Then a peculiar thing happened; peculiar as in a miracle, and Lois didn't believe in miracles. Clark burst into her apartment... as if he knew she needed his assistance. The fake Superman told him to 'go away' and actually threw a punch at Clark. Then a second miracle happened: her partner stopped him.

That image of the fake Superman trying to hit Clark and her partner grabbing his arm froze in her mind. She looked at it, somehow able to walk around it, studying it from all angles. How? How could Clark do that? That fake Superman was at least as strong as the real one. How had Clark been able to stop the punch? Surely, the only person able to stop such a hit would be...

Lois gasped as another thought zipped across her mind. No! It couldn't be.

She studied the two men in this frozen image in her mind. Both had the same height, same color hair – although styled slightly different, same skin tone, different clothes, and Clark wore glasses. Behind those glasses were...

"Lois? Are you saying there's a fake Superman in your dream?" Star asked, confused.

"Yes, 'cause the real one is... is..." Lois stammered. Her eyes flashed open and she got to her feet. Now that she was awake from the hypnosis, the memory from the Smallville woods returned, stronger, clearer, and with more detail. "Clark!"

She clutched her head as she recalled Tempus, laughing and saying, 'Duh! Clark Kent is Superman!'

"Oh, my God!" Lois gasped. "I got to go."

"Lois?" Star seemed surprised by her quick jump out of her trance. "Are you sure you're all right? You should take a minute..."

"No," Lois answered, nodding her head. She grabbed her briefcase and mini-cassette recorder. "I just realized I'm certifiably insane. I should go now." She continued to nod at Star and then turned to the door.

"Well, you seem sane to me," Star replied. For some reason, this didn't reassure Lois.

"All this time I thought these dreams were repressed memories, but if they're memories that would mean... No. No, it can't be. He wouldn't lie to me like that. It can't be true. No," Lois rambled, shaking her head. "No. So, the only explanation is that I'm crazy."

Star looked at her dumbfounded. "Lois, who lied to you?"

"Clark," Lois answered, opening the door.

Star didn't expect that reply. "About what?"

"Everything!" Lois announced and left.

Chapter Nineteen

Lois couldn't believe it. She had been so sure that Clark was real and that her dreams had been repressed memories, but with this new insight, she couldn't see how he could be. She might as well accept the truth. She had irrefutable proof that she was insane, bonkers, nutso, crazy...

You're not crazy, Lois, Clark said in that supportive tone of his. She could also hear the hesitancy in his voice. He was readying himself for her fury.

"I'm not crazy, Clark?" she scoffed out loud. "Hello? Not only am I hearing your voice, I'm responding to you."

Arguing is more like it, he mumbled.

"Right, and I'm perfectly sane," Lois replied with skepticism. She shoved open the front door of her building.

Lois, I understand that you're angry with me. Why don't you go back to your apartment where we can discuss this...

"Angry?! Angry? Why would I be angry with you, Clark?" she snapped, stomping down her front stoop to the sidewalk. She turned and started marching towards the Daily Planet. "You're just a figment of my imagination, remember? How could I be mad at my own imagination?"

Because I didn't tell you that I'm Superman.

Lois stopped and threw her hands up into the air. "There you are, Clark, with another one of your strange leaps of logic. How could you be Superman? That's ridiculous. Superman is a fantasy character my mind created to let me... this me..." She patted her chest. "– know the truth about Lex. Superman can't be killed. One of my favorite aspects about his character is that he's invulnerable. You, on the other hand, are dead. Ergo, you cannot be Superman. End of discussion."

Kryptonite...

"Don't even get started on that green rock mumbo-jumbo, Clark. Please!" Lois interrupted, adjusting her briefcase strap and continuing down the sidewalk. "Either you're a dead superhero who lied to me, just like all the other men in my life, or I'm crazy. Which is it?"

You're not crazy, Lois...

"Ah, so you're admitting that you lied to me? That all this time, you've been speaking with me, whispering how much you loved me, everything you said was peppered with lies? Is that what you're saying, Clark?"

Why don't you go back to your apartment where we can discuss this without you yelling like an insane person on the street, Lois? Clark suggested.

Lois threw her hands into the air again and continued marching down the street. "Well, Clark, if the shoe fits..."

Lo-is, Clark groaned as he began to plead, *I'm sorry I didn't tell you I'm Superman.*

"You hear that world?" she called out to her residential street. "Clark Kent is Superman!"

Lois!

"What? You think anyone around here cares? Clark Kent is Superman! Clark Kent is Superman!" she shouted and then harrumphed. "Nobody, but me, knows who Superman is, Clark, and why's that? Oh, yeah, Superman has chosen me – out of all the people in the world – to stalk in the afterlife. Right, and you don't think I'm nuts. Ha!"

I thought I had ended up in hell, watching the woman that I love live her life without me, not need me, and survive just fine without me.

"You call that surviving?" Lois grumbled.

When you first heard me, I couldn't believe it. I knew if anyone could figure out a way to rescue me from this fate, it would be you. Yet, there you were once again in love with the Suit and not the man, another fantasy. I needed you to love me, believe in Clark. He paused as Lois got to the corner.

"Because it's sooooo much easier to believe in a man communicating with me from beyond than in a superhero?" she retorted.

If I had told you that Superman wasn't a figment of your imagination, but that he was once a real, living, breathing man, because I'm him, would you have ever listened to me? Would you have believed in the real me... Clark – me? His voice seemed to catch in his throat. Would you have gone to Smallville to meet my parents, to figure out how I died, so we can save me from this fate? Or would you be off somewhere denying that I exist and making out with Scardino, while I suffered in agony in the back reaches of your mind?

“How many times do I have to tell you? I dumped Dan because of *Dan*, not because I fell head over heels in love with you,” Lois lied to both Clark and herself. “Well, there, see. Believing a ghost loves you is the first sign of dementia. The second, I’m betting, is when you find out he’s also a superhero.”

I knew I should have kept quiet. If hearing my voice makes you feel crazy, then I did this to you. Go on, Lois, live your life. I won’t bother you anymore, and you can be sane again.

“No!” Lois hollered, freezing her steps as his words froze her heart. He wouldn’t dare, not after he promised he wouldn’t leave her again. She took a deep breath and exhaled, trying to chase the anger from her voice as she pleaded with the voice in her head, “I’d rather be crazy with you than sane without you, Clark.” Dammit, he made her admit she was in love with a figment of her imagination.

Clark sighed. *You’re not crazy, Lois.*

Jimmy’s Mustang convertible pulled up to the curb next to Lois. “There you are!”

“What are you doing here, Olsen?” Lois growled by way of a greeting. Her little buddy really knew how to make an entrance.

“Detective Wolfe – and by extension Perry – was worried when you didn’t show up this morning for your debriefing at MPD HQ,” Jimmy explained. “I figured you left your car at the Lexor last night and might need a lift.”

Lois stopped and stared at him, her mind completely blank. It wasn’t like her to forget a meeting. It wasn’t like her to not check in with Perry. She couldn’t even remember if she had driven to the Lexor the night before or not.

You did, Clark softly reminded her.

~Oh, yeah.~ She nodded. “Thanks, Clark.”

“Ah... *Lois?* Are you feeling all right?” Jimmy asked, leaning over to unlock the passenger door. “Hop in.”

She looked at Jimmy and then at the closed passenger side door with a shake of her head. “No wonder I fell for you, Clark,” she mumbled, opening the car door and dropping in to the seat. “The men from Metropolis...”

“What?” Jimmy griped, having caught her expression. “What did I do now?”

“Would it have killed you to open the door?” Lois said, snapping her seat belt. She could hear Clark chuckling at the back of her head.

“You’re kiddin’ me, right? Mad Dog wants me to get out of the car, walk over to the other side, and open the car door for her?” Jimmy laughed. “You feeling all right there, Lane?”

Lois ran her tongue over her teeth and crossed her arms. “You know, Jimmy, you really know how to impress the ladies with that attitude.”

With a roll of his eyes, Jimmy glanced over his shoulder and pulled out into the traffic. “Look, Lois, I can tell you’re in one of your foul moods this morning, and before you decide to rip out my spleen with your fingernails, let me inform you that I got a three-Elvis reprimand last night after that little hissy-fit you threw at Perry. I’m your partner, not your keeper. Okay?”

She shrugged her response.

You should really try to be nicer to Jimmy, Lois, with everything he does for you and all, Clark suggested.

“Oh, shut up!” she grouched, pressing her hands to her forehead.

Jimmy stopped at a red light and turned to face her. “You know, I don’t *need* this. I’m a darn good photographer and a half-way decent reporter on my own. Thank you very much.”

“Oh, can it, Jimmy. I wasn’t yelling at you,” Lois informed him, continuing to rub her temples.

“Then who in the hell *were* you yelling at?” he demanded.

“Clark.”

“*Clark?*” Jimmy sputtered. “Clark? As in CK from another time Clark? Lois, CK isn’t here.” For good measure, he glanced

into the backseat to make sure.

“Yes, Jimmy, he is,” she whispered, looking down at her hands.

Jimmy pulled the car over to the side of the street and turned to face her. “Lois, there’s nobody here but us.”

Lois glanced up at him. “Clark is always with me.”

Are you sure you want to do this, honey? I can’t see this ending well.

She took a deep breath and exhaled. “Clark talks to me.”

“In your dreams?” Jimmy clarified.

“No... well, yes, but not only in my dreams.” Lois pressed her lips together nervously and chanced a glimpse at him.

“So, you hear his voice?” Jimmy asked, his own voice cracking. “He talks to you?”

She nodded.

“And what does he say exactly?” her partner inquired slowly.

“Lots of things. Mostly commentary, but usually he tells me how much he loves me and reassures me that I’m sane.” She rolled her eyes at that diagnosis. “When he’s not warning me to stay out of trouble, that is,” she said, smiling weakly. Jimmy would know what that was like.

“So, either *he’s* insane or he doesn’t know you at all?” Jimmy scoffed. “Or both.”

Lois nudged her friend with the back of her hand.

I know her too well.

“He says, ‘he knows me too well’,” she told Jimmy.

The young man gulped. “Did he just reply to what I just said?”

She nodded.

“How long have you been hearing Clark’s voice, Lois?”

Jimmy asked tentatively.

“A couple of months, maybe longer. The first time...” She swallowed. The first time she could recall had been when Superman warned her about the bomb at the Wilder women’s trial. She raised her hand to her mouth. Superman. ~Oh, God! Clark, was that you who had warned me?~

Yes, Lois.

“The first time *what?*” Jimmy inquired, tilting his head to study her face.

Lois sighed, not wanting to admit the truth. Her tongue ran over her teeth and then she announced, “Clark noticed the smoke from the bomb at the Wilder trial, not me. He saved us, not me.”

“Well, better him than Scardino,” the photographer mocked.

My sentiments exactly.

“Clark,” Lois growled.

“What? What did he say?” Jimmy asked.

She waved the comment out of the air. “He doesn’t like Dan.”

“You do realize this whole conversation is totally insane, right?” Jimmy told her.

“Yep,” she agreed, watching Jimmy closely.

You’re not crazy, Lois. Stop saying that or someone will believe you.

Jimmy pointed at her. “Aren’t you the woman who tried to convince me last night that she wasn’t nuts?”

“Right again,” she replied.

Her friend stared at her trying to figure her out. “Did something happen, Lois?”

“I now agree with you,” Lois said.

“That in itself belongs on the wall of weird, but the bigger question is *why?*” He drew out this last word slowly.

“Clark revealed something about himself that couldn’t possibly, in the farthest reaches of the universe, be true, so...” Lois shrugged. “*Ipsa facto*, I’m looney tunes.”

I’m not a figment of your imagination any more than you’re ‘looney tunes’.

Jimmy rolled his eyes. “Come on, Lois, neither of us believes that you are truly ‘looney tunes’, least of all you.”

"I'm dreaming about a dazzling, flying superhero who is trying to romance me, which would be all and good if these dreams were truly fantasies, but a voice inside my head that only I – and possibly one psychic – can hear has convinced me that my dreams are real, repressed memories. If that isn't crazy enough for you..." Lois gazed at him with a raised brow, daring him with her eyes to ask her to continue. She hadn't even gotten to the traveling back in time with H.G. Wells bit or the part where CK was Superman.

I'm thinking we can skip sharing those facts, Lois, Clark suggested.

"Why, Clark? Why should I leave out the really juicy bits?" she argued.

Jimmy's eyes went wide and he gulped. "Because I don't really want to hear them."

Lois waved his concerns away. "They're not sexual, Jimmy. Come on, this is me we're talking about."

Clark made a noise that sounded like he was clearing his throat. *I don't know, Lois, I always thought you and sexy went hand-in-hand.*

"Really, Clark? Flattery will not help your position here," she responded with slightly flushed cheeks. This voice inside her heard sure was a lot more forward than that sweet, awkward farm boy from her dreams. "Anyway, the woman you fell in love with, the woman who I am in my dreams and who I am now, are two completely different people." She leaned back in her seat and crossed her arms, a pout forming on her lips.

Lois, you're the same woman, just your life experiences are slightly different. Take, for example, Lex Luthor's death. In your experience, he died of a gunshot wound sustained during an ill-advised escape attempt while you were being held hostage at the Daily Planet by terrorists. The way I remember – and you will remember – the events are quite different.

She gulped as a warm bead of perspiration formed on her forehead. "Lex survived?" she gasped.

It's amazing what a little heat vision can do to cauterize bullet wounds, Clark admitted modestly.

Lois felt like she was hyperventilating as the images from that night solidified into her mind. Only this time, Clark was there and, for some reason, that squirrely kid who had stolen Superman's globe. "Clark, are you telling me that... that... Superman saved Lex Luthor's life?" she demanded incredulously. "That Lex didn't die?"

With several short blasts of his horn, Jimmy maneuvered a u-turn from where they had been parked against the curb. "There's no way I'm taking you to see Detective Wolfe," he mumbled.

I'm never willing to let someone die, if there's a way I can stop it, Lois.

"But... but, Clark, you do know *who* and *what* Lex was, don't you?" she disagreed with his logic. "What he did?"

Trust me, Lois, I know full well of Lex Luthor's misdeeds with the law and humanity, but Superman is not God. I don't hold life and death judgments over the people of Earth.

"Clark," Lois pleaded. "You can't tell me that anyone would have known that you... or Superman could have saved him?"

You would have known, Lois. Maybe not then, but I still held hopes that your crush on Luthor would blow over, and you'd finally notice the man at the next desk, who absolutely adored you. Then someday, when you were ready and we trusted each other more, I would have told you about my abilities. At that time, you would have realized that I hadn't saved Luthor when I could have, and I couldn't let that failure stand between us.

"I would have forgiven you, Clark," she whispered.

Gracious of you, Lois, but I wouldn't have taken that chance... Clark sighed. And, well, truthfully I wouldn't have forgiven me.

Lois looked out the window at that café she and Clark ate

lunch at sometimes. It was just a couple blocks from the Daily Planet. Only she had never eaten there with him, because he didn't exist. It was getting harder to argue to Clark, because she wanted to believe him... she wanted him to be real. But how could someone like Superman really have existed, been her best friend, and she never noticed? How could she ever call herself an investigative reporter again? How could she have failed him and let him die? Her shoulders slouched as her eyes squeezed shut, guilt filling her mouth with a bitter taste. "Jimmy, where are you going?"

"The office."

"The Planet? Don't I have to sign my statement for Detective Wolfe?" she said, pointing in the opposite direction to Wolfe's precinct house.

"Lois, I can tell you're going through something right now," Jimmy replied with sympathy. "I don't know if Sullivan pushed you over the edge last night, or if it's a combo of stuff, but I know if we walk into MPD with you arguing with some guy that only you can see, you'll never be able to be a serious reporter in this town again."

Lois sighed and then explained, "I can't see Clark. I can only hear him."

I don't think that is the issue here.

"I'm sure if we discuss this with Perry, he'd give you that extra week off you didn't take from your vacation and..."

"Is that what this is really about? You trying to get your twenty bucks back from Perry?" she demanded.

Jimmy is being a good friend. Listen to him, Lois.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you? Me, safe at home for a week, not angering some new psycho into trying to kill me, not sticking my nose into someone else's business, me not doing my job..." she retorted.

"I'm worried about you, Lois," Jimmy replied.

She patted his arm. "Me, too, kiddo."

Clark groaned. *For the ninety-fourth time, Lois: You. Are. Not. Crazy!*

Lois leaned over to Jimmy and whispered, "Clark doesn't think I'm crazy."

"Catch Twenty-Two..." her friend responded. "... like in that old war movie. You couldn't be proven crazy unless you said you *wanted* to be sent back into battle, because who in their right mind would want that? If you didn't want to go back into battle, you must be sane. Yet, if you wanted to be sent back into battle, who in the army would stop you?"

It was a book before it was a movie, Clark corrected. By Joseph Heller.

She raised a brow at her living, breathing partner. "So, does that automatically make me crazy when the voice inside my head tries to convince me I'm sane?"

Jimmy returned her expression and added a grin, but didn't respond vocally, as he pulled his car into a parking spot down the block from the newspaper.

Terrific.

"I'm not really insane, you know," Lois told him as she got out of the car. "I just feel crazy sometimes. I just learned that Clark's been lying to me and, well, I didn't take it well. Actually, I got steaming mad."

"Right. Lying to you," Jimmy replied with a total lack of conviction, before mumbling, "Smooth move, CK."

Tell me about it.

Lois threw her hands up in the air. "You know, Clark, if you want to haunt Jimmy for a while, so you two can insult me in private, feel free to jump ship at any time."

Jimmy shot her a perplexed look.

I'm sorry, Lois. This is very frustrating for me. As much as I love you, I miss hanging out with Jimmy, Jack, and Perry too. You know, going to baseball games, to action movies, and car

shows, just being one of the guys.

She rolled her eyes.

“What?” Jimmy asked.

“He misses you,” she translated.

“Misses *me*?” her real-life partner said with gulp. “Clark knew me?”

She flipped up one of her hands. “You two were apparently the best of buds.”

“Really?” Jimmy sounded like he didn’t know what to do with that information. “He’s not actually going to haunt me, is he?” he asked, eyeing her warily as they went into the lobby of the Daily Planet.

“Of course not,” Lois scoffed. “If he could, he would have left me by now.”

Don’t say that, Lois. I love you so much, I once wished we could always be together, every moment of the day. Clark laughed quietly to himself. *I guess I should be more careful what I wish for, huh?*

~Ha ha,~ Lois replied to the voice in her head. “Anyway, I asked him once if he could contact H.G. Wells directly – you know, in the great beyond – and he told me I’m the only one with whom he could communicate.” Her brow furrowed. “Of course that was before he talked to Star.”

They stopped to wait for the elevator, and Jimmy grabbed her shoulders, turning her to face him. “Star, Lois? H.G. Wells – the author?”

Lois waved off those juicy tidbits. “Never mind. It’s not important.” She heard Clark breathe a sigh of relief.

“Right. What exactly did CK lie to you about?” he asked as they stepped into the elevator. It was late enough in the morning that they were alone.

Lois, it’s enough of a stretch to believe that you’ve been contacted directly by a ghost, add in Superman...

She looked down at her feet, not knowing what to believe. If she trusted the validity of Clark’s story and her repressed memories, she had to believe that Superman had been real too, that Clark was really and truly Superman.

“Well?” Jimmy inquired after another minute of silence.

“He lied to me about Superman,” she replied as Clark groaned.

Jimmy ran a shaking hand through his hair. “*What* about Superman, Lois?”

She glanced up at Jimmy and exhaled.

No, Lois, don’t...

“That before Clark was killed, Superman was real.”

“You want to run that past me again?” Perry asked as he leaned back in his chair, his arms crossed with one hand contemplatively sitting on his jaw.

Lois looked over at Jimmy, who shrugged his shoulders in his ‘you walked into this mess on your own free will’ manner, and then back at Perry. Thanks, partner. She went to open her mouth, but the Chief interrupted her, so she closed it again.

“You’re saying that your secret source for your Lex Luthor articles is a ghost?”

“I verified all the information,” Lois defended herself.

“Double checked all the facts.”

“Uh-huh,” Perry said with a nod. “A ghost that only communicates with you?”

“And Star...”

Probably best not to mention the psychic, Lois, Clark suggested in his tone that, unlike Jimmy’s shrug, reminded her that, no matter what, he was her true partner.

“Star?” her boss echoed curiously.

Lois waved the name out of the conversation, deciding to take Clark’s advice this one time.

“Star is the psychic that moved into Lois’ building while she

was away on vacation,” explained Jimmy.

She pinched her lips together and glared at the young man. Thanks. Thanks a lot, Jimbo.

“Uh-huh. So, what you’re saying is that none of this is real? Our lives are supposed to be completely different, better even, but because some man hitchhiked back in time from the future and killed your friend, currently a ghost, we now have a ‘death ray’ destroying cities?”

Lois smiled nervously, helplessly, as her sanity sounded even more in doubt than before Perry had called them into his office.

“And *why* is that exactly?” Perry inquired.

She looked at Jimmy, who held up his hands unwilling to contribute, and then returned her gaze to her boss. “Because Clark, Clark Kent is the man who was killed, if brought back to life will be able to contact a superhero who will fight for truth and justice.” She smiled in such a sheepish way, she wondered if Clark was controlling her lips.

“Superman,” Jimmy clarified.

“Uh-huh.” Perry shifted his position and leaned forward over his desk. “Lois, honey, if you want more vacation time, I have no problem giving it to you. You didn’t need to bring this pile of horse manure...”

“I know this all sounds implausible and crazy, Chief...” Lois stammered, bringing her briefcase into her lap. “It’s taken me months to believe it myself.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’ve got proof!” she said, pulling out the piece of notebook paper and setting it on Perry’s desk.

Her boss looked down at the plastic baggy containing the note H.G. Wells had written to her with her scrawl at the top. Jimmy leaned forward to get a glimpse of this proof himself. Perry lifted up the note and began to read: “‘Clark Kent is real. Research Tempus to rescue Clark from dying in the past. H. G. Wells will help you.’ Darlin’, this is in your handwriting,” he said, dropping the note back down on the desk.

“Well, yes...” she agreed. “But I wrote it when I was back in 1966. I didn’t remember doing so until Star unrepressed my repressed memories this morning.”

“Star? The psychic?” Perry gazed at her sadly. “Honey, let’s go on a wild adventure for a moment and just assume what you’re telling me is true – that time changed completely when your friend Clark was killed as a baby – if that were so, how were you able to go back and visit 1966 to write this note with H.G. Wells?”

Lois opened her mouth and then closed it again.

You’ve come this far, Lois, you might as well go all the way, Clark said supportively.

“Because even though Tempus changed the future, we didn’t erase ourselves from 1966 until we traveled forward in time and H.G. Wells dropped me back in 1995,” Lois explained.

“Uh-huh.” Perry studied Lois for a minute. “So, what you’re telling me is that you’re not crazy because you’re hearing voices, but that you’re on the biggest story of your life?”

Lois sighed and a natural smile graced her lips. Yes! He believed her.

“And that’s why I shouldn’t put you on administrative leave and make you go through mandatory counseling sessions,” Perry continued. “— despite you hearing voices in your head and taking their advice?”

Or not.

“Just Clark’s voice,” she snapped, rising her feet. “And he doesn’t give me story leads, Chief. I got all those from my repressed memories, and I independently verified all the information. Clark hasn’t stopped me from being a good reporter; he’s made me a better one!” She grabbed up her notebook paper from Perry’s desk.

Thank you, honey, Clark said, his voice hoarse from her

praise.

Hearing Clark reminded her what was at stake. She took a deep breath to calm down her rage. “But what if I’m right?” she asked Perry. “What if Clark is the key to bringing Superman to Earth? What if by saving Clark, we save all those colonists on the Prometheus? All those people in Pacifonesia? Stop Jimmy’s cousin Jimmy from being killed, Ralph from being murdered, and Johnny Taylor of the Metro Gang from dying? And those kids from the Beckworth School from being killed? And Secretary Wallace’s assassination? And President Garner’s kidnapping? And Lex Luthor from dying? And... and... and...” She snapped her fingers as she tried to think of all the people Superman could have helped since he arrived on the scene. There were so many. “All those little crimes that he stops every day. Think of how much better Metropolis would be with Superman here. Think of all the page one stories such a man would generate.”

Jimmy cleared his throat. “My cousin Jimmy doesn’t die?”

Lois shook her head. “Clark saves him.”

Her friend’s eyes open wider.

Perry raised an eyebrow. “Superman saved Ralph’s, Johnny Taylor’s, and Lex Luthor’s lives?” he asked skeptically. “I thought he was supposed to make the world a better place?”

I don’t judge...

“Every human life is sacred to Superman. It isn’t his job to decide who is worthy of living and dying. He’s not God,” Lois retorted.

I couldn’t have said it better myself, Clark replied. She could almost hear the smile on his lips.

“Uh-huh.” Perry was leaning back in his chair with his arms crossed once more. “And what exactly in Elvis’s name happens if Lex Luthor survives?”

“Uh...” Lois didn’t know. She closed her eyes. What had happened after the hostage situation at the Daily Planet, after Clark had healed Lex? Her head began to swirl with images and information.

Lois sat on leather sofa in a private jet with Lex Luthor. They were heading to dinner in Italy and drinking champagne. Oooh, la, la. There was even a woman playing a violin in the seat across of them. Lex opened a ring box and held it out to her.

“Oh, my God!” Lois gasped. “Lex proposes.” She felt sick to her stomach. Oh, God. Oh, no! Anything but that.

“Lex Luthor wanted to marry you?” Jimmy stammered.

“Apparently.” She shook her head, hoping the information inside would change. Please, please, please, have her turn him down!

Jimmy and Jack pulled pink slips out of envelopes. They had been laid off. The paper was losing money, circulation was down, advertisers dropping the Daily Planet, something was really wrong. Then the elevator doors opened and out stepped Lex Luthor and a group of people. “Ladies and gentlemen, for those of you who don’t know me, I’m Lex Luthor... I know your problems can be solved with strong leadership and fiscal responsibility. So, therefore, I’ve taken the one step necessary to guarantee the future of this great newspaper ...”

Lois placed her hands to her head. “No! No! Clark, please tell me this isn’t so, this can’t true,” she pleaded.

I’m afraid it did happen, Lois. No matter what you see, what you remember, please know that I love you and that I always will love you. We will survive this; life does get better... eventually.

Her heart wrenched. It was going to get worse? How could it get worse?

“What in Sam Hill are you talking about Lois?” Perry demanded.

She swallowed and looked at her boss with wide eyes. “Lex buys the Daily Planet.”

“Trust me. Everything will be fine,” Lex whispered in her ear

as he stood behind her in Perry’s office. He kissed the back of her head tenderly.

Of course it would be fine. It had to be fine. She wouldn’t be contemplating marriage to a man who would ruin the lives of all her friends and colleagues. It was just a mistake... a temporary glitch. Clark’s assumption that Lex was evil was just ridiculous. Ridiculous! Actually, she was going to go out and tell her partner that right now, remind Clark that it was better to have a job and that there would be a transition period with any new owner.

Lois rubbed her temples. These new memories were painful.

Clark was right about that, but he had reassured her that life would get better. Maybe almost dying at the hands of terrorists changed Lex, she thought hopefully. Maybe he wasn’t as bad as he had been before. She tossed up her hands at that preposterous theory. If she believed that, perhaps she was crazy.

She caught up with Clark at the break table where he was drinking his coffee. “It’s going to work out fine, Clark, just give it time. Lex will turn things around.”

Clark winced at her words. “Incredible,” he scoffed.

“What?”

He stood up to look her in the eye. “You! Prize winning investigative reporter,” he said as if those two things didn’t go together.

“Is there a point?” Lois asked as the hairs on the back of her neck started to bristle.

“How can you be so blind, Lois?” he asked with complete disbelief. “I mean, you look right at the guy, and you still haven’t a clue who he really is.”

“Who?”

“Luthor,” he spit out the name, pointing his spoon towards Perry’s office.

Lois rolled her eyes. Oh, great, this again. She had never seen Clark so adamant about anything before, not in the whole year that she had known him. She turned back to Clark and lowered her voice, not wanting everyone else to hear what she was going to say. “Look, Clark, I’m not naïve,” she said, sitting down across from him at the break table.

He sat down as well and leaned in to hear her.

“I know that Lex didn’t reach his station in life by being a nice guy, but look at all the good he’s done: Luthor Hospital, Luthor Home for Children, Luthor Foundation for the Arts, not to mention, employing hundreds of thousands of people in Metropolis,” Lois said, pointing at Clark to drive in her argument. “Most recently saving our jobs.”

“Cover. It’s all a cover,” he replied.

Oh, come on, Kent. Please. Nobody was that bad. “Why? If he’s such a rotten human being, why bother?”

“Because that’s what he enjoys most: getting away with it.”

She shook her head in disappointment. Really? This was the best that he had? Or should she say, the worst that he had on the man? Vague claims.

“I mean the man is more than just evil, Lois,” he continued. “He’s a monster.”

Lois stood up. “I’m... I’m not going to listen to this.” Clark’s irrational theories about Lex had to stop. If she was the only one who could put a stop to it, then so be it. Clark usually listened to her... okay, perhaps not, but he trusted her judgment. If she became engaged to Lex, Clark would come to realize that Lex wasn’t as bad as he thought. “Especially not now.”

“Wha...?” Clark sputtered. “You aren’t actually considering his proposal, are you?” He looked at her with a new incredulity as if he didn’t recognize her.

“I... I don’t know, Clark,” she said hesitantly. At first she wasn’t going to consider Lex’s proposal, but now, she wasn’t so sure. In light of Clark’s blatant distrust of the man, she felt like she needed to prove to her partner once more that she was right about Lex, and he was wrong. If Lex was as bad as Clark said,

what did that say about her as an investigative reporter? She would be the laughing stock of Metropolis. No, she had to be right and Clark wrong. That was how it had always been. That was how it would always be. "I'm thinking about it, that's all. I'm just thinking about it." She walked off, unable to be around her partner any longer.

What was the matter with Clark anyway? Had he fallen off his rocker due to the upheaval at the Planet? She knew he didn't deal well with change. That was made abundantly clear after he left Metropolis when Superman was practically drummed out of town.

She sighed. Superman. Now, there was a man worth risking everything for. Her smile fell off her face. Perhaps... No, she wouldn't give Clark's ideas credence by asking Superman his opinion. Anyway, hopefully Superman would give her a reason never to accept Lex's offer.

A cold sweat beaded over Lois' forehead, and she leaned over her knees, eager to stop the nausea that accompanied these new memories. Clark had warned her about Lex, and she hadn't listened to him. She had been so hell-bent on proving to him that she was right. Her stomach lurched.

Perry opened the conference room door and peered over at her.

Lois glanced up at her boss and the room started to spin around him. These repressed memories flowed into her head so fast, she couldn't see straight. Why? Oh, why had she asked for them to come back to her like a flood?

"Darlin', you okay? You look sicker than a dog that's taken a bite out of a Junebug," Perry said, coming to her side.

"It's just..." She tried to swallow the bile back down her throat. "Just these memories that Star let loose for me. They're a little hard to take, especially all at once."

"Better life, huh?" He chuckled a bit at her misery. "So, what's your imagination saying that Lex is doing now?" he asked with a wry amount of humor.

She looked up at Perry, and the tears in her eyes made him blurry. "He's hired a 'Supervising Editor-in-Chief' straight out of Harvard Business School to take some of the load off of you."

Perry scowled. "Supervising? That bastard. Please tell me I didn't I stand for it," he pleaded.

Lois smiled weakly. "You grabbed your Elvis photo by the door and marched out, telling Lex exactly what he could do with that young whipper-snapper."

Her boss laughed. "Glad to know I don't lose my marbles in your alternate life for me."

"Only Clark sees Lex for who he really is. Even I am blinded by the billionaire who 'saved the Planet'." She tried to roll her eyes at herself, but the action just made her dizzy. "Lex has demoted both Jack and Jimmy down to the printing plant," she told him.

"Jimmy at the printing plant? Poor fellow. Who's Jack?"

Perry inquired, his brow furrowing.

"Oh... uh... A runaway that Clark rescued off of Metropolis's mean streets and got a job here as gofer," Lois explained. No Clark meant no theft of the globe and no rescuing of Jack and his brother. She flinched. She bet that they were still out there somewhere. She wondered how they were doing without Clark's help.

I wouldn't even know where to tell you to start looking. I doubt that they're in the same place I found him eighteen months ago.

Perry smiled. "It sounds like you've found a keeper in that Clark fellow. I can see why you want so much to believe in him."

Thanks, Chief.

The tears in Lois' eyes overflowed. Perry didn't accept Clark as true. He was someone in her 'imagination', someone she 'wanted to believe in'. She took hold of her boss' hand and

squeezed it. "Everyone loves Clark." She winced. That wasn't true. Almost everyone. Lex claimed to like him, but he never did. He didn't like that Lois trusted Clark so much and that Clark was important to her. She let go of Perry and raised her hand to her head. Her icy fingers felt good there.

"You lie back down there, Lois. I've got Jimmy making you some tea and I've called a doctor. She'll be here soon."

Lois nodded, resting her head on the arm of the sofa. "He's real, you know, Perry. I'm not crazy."

"Sure, honey. Whatever you say," he reassured her with empty words she knew he did not mean.

She sat back up. "If I can prove to you that Clark Kent is real... if I can dig up a cold hard fact for you, will you believe me?" she said, looking up into his face. She couldn't stand being a disappointment to this man to whom she had grown closer than her own father. She hated seeing that same look in his eyes that she had often seen in her father's.

He grinned at her and then winked. "Of course, honey. Rest. Don't you worry about that right now." She then watched as the grin fell from his face, and he left the room.

Nope. He doesn't believe she can do it. She picked up the plastic baggy with her note in it. She took the paper out and studied it again. There had to be some way to convince her boss that Clark was real... had been real.

She groaned. All the names on the paper that H.G. Wells had given her were a dead end. No wonder she hadn't realized that the numbers were dates; they were all in the future, far in the future. How could she research the history of people who wouldn't be born for almost seventy-five years? No wonder Wells thought her idea improbable. Tempus must have come from much further in the future than she had thought. Twenty-third century? Wasn't that what he had told her?

Lois scoffed, wadding up the paper and throwing it in the nearest trashcan. It had been her lifeline, her proof that Clark was real, but other than that... useless. She sighed. There had to be another way, she could prove her sanity. Why had she let her anger get the best of her? Why had she told Jimmy and then Perry about Clark? She should have just kept all knowledge of Superman to herself. She buried her face in her hands. She had been so stupid.

There was loud BOOM, and the building of Daily Planet jolted and shook. She could hear explosion after explosion rock the building, her home and her world. Clark hollered for everyone to evacuate, and she ran to the stairs with the others. She lost sight of her partner in the hubbub. Down on the street, she saw Superman carrying an unconscious Jack to a stretcher. Jimmy walked up to her holding his arm. It seemed so surreal. Who would bomb the Daily Planet? Why?

When she opened her eyes, Lois found herself lying on the floor of the conference room. It felt like her world was turning upside-down. Her ears were still ringing, her eyes still stung, and she could still smell the smoke from her memory.

This wasn't a dream.

This wasn't her imagination.

She had been there.

She had experienced the event.

This was a memory.

If she had harbored any last doubts about her sanity, they were now gone. Clark was real and she needed to save him. She crawled across the floor and found a trash can and threw up. Luckily, she hadn't had the time or desire to eat much that morning.

Jimmy rushed into the room, carrying her grey mug full of tea. "Lois! I heard you scream. Is everything all right?"

She had screamed? Lois had no recollection of it. She stared at Jimmy, and after he had helped her to her feet, she wrapped her arms around him in a bear hug.

“Lois?” he whispered. She could hear the uncertainty in his voice. She knew she wasn’t a big hugger, but after this newest memory, she was relieved that this Jimmy was alive, even if his cousin, the first Jimmy Olsen she had met and known, no longer was.

“Sorry, Jimmy. Someone bombed the Planet... the Daily Planet, and your cousin was hurt. His arm,” she stammered, letting her hand coast down his left arm, his perfectly healthy left arm.

“I’m fine, Lois. Sit down. Nobody’s bombed the Planet,” he said, leading her back to the couch and then retrieving her tea. “Here. Drink this. It will make you feel better.”

Lois smiled at him. “You know, you remind me a bit of Clark. He’s always saying that tea will make me feel better too.”

Jimmy gazed at her sadly, and then nodded. “It does.”

“Thank you,” she said, taking a sip. The hot liquid did make her feel better. She nodded at Jimmy and he patted her on the arm and left. Being around her was making people uncomfortable. She could understand that. Being her was making her uncomfortable too.

Does that mean I’m right? About the tea, I mean.

She smiled. “Maybe just this one time.” Twice, if she included Lex. “Oh, Clark, what did we do while waiting for Lex to rebuild the Daily Planet?” Lois groaned, unable to picture herself without a story.

Uh... Lois...

She took a deep breath and exhaled, somehow knowing what he didn’t want to say. “He didn’t rebuild it, did he?” She slowly raised her mug to her lips.

No. He told you that it was underinsured, and it would cost too much to rebuild.

“And I believed him,” Lois scoffed at herself with a shake of her head. Clark had been right. Some investigative reporter she was! “Why do you still love me, Clark?”

You play a mean game of Trivial Pursuit.

She laughed.

You’re intelligent and beautiful. You give everything you have and are to your stories and then some. You want the world to be a better place and you’ll fight anyone and everyone to make it so. I love your smile. I love how you growl in the morning before you get your first cup of coffee. I love how you feel every emotion, not just with your face, but with every cell of your body. When you’re happy, you glow. When you’re sad, it’s painful for others to witness. When you’re angry...

“Watch out world?”

Precisely.

Lois took another sip of tea. “I’m sorry, Clark, for not listening to you about Lex.”

Me, too.

“Thanks,” she retorted, heavy with sarcasm.

No, I mean I’m sorry I didn’t explain better how I knew Luthor was evil. If I had told you the truth about me and how and what I knew about him, maybe I could have... Clark sighed and she could hear the anguish he was trying to hide from her.

Chapter Twenty

Lois swallowed another gulp of tea, burning her throat slightly, and stood up. She was tired of thinking about Lex. She was ready to get him out of her life for good. The only way she knew how to do that was proving her sanity to Perry, saving her job and herself. She needed to hold out that much longer until H.G. Wells showed up to take her back into the past to rescue Clark. If she lost this job due to mental instability, the only one she could get would be alongside Leo Nunk at the *National Whisper*... if she was lucky. If she lost this job, how would Wells find her?

Hopefully, Wells had already figured out how to save Tempus from extinction, so time would no longer be shattered, so that

they could go back far enough and make sure her friend had a chance to live. Maybe now that her memories had returned and she had let others know about Superman and Clark, Wells would discover it was safe to come for her. She didn’t know how Wells would find out, but since he had a time machine, hopefully the wait wouldn’t be too long.

In the meantime, she needed to do something to prove her sanity. Since the only people who knew for a fact that Clark existed, besides herself, were his parents, she needed to get them to acknowledge that fact. Picking up her briefcase, she dug around inside of it until she found the napkin on which Maisie had written the directions to The Farm. She sighed. No phone number. Damn. She went to the phone and dialed information.

“I need a phone number for the Kent Farm or The Farm or Martha and Jonathan Kent in Smallville, Kansas,” she told the operator. A few minutes later, she not only had a phone number, but a fax number as well. She dialed the number and hoped someone would answer.

“Hello, The Farm. Jonathan speaking,” Clark’s father said into the phone.

Lois wasn’t sure what to say. “Mr. Kent... Jonathan, it’s Lois... Lois Lane. Clark and I need your help. Please, don’t hang up... Damn!” Well, *that* obviously wasn’t it. She replaced the receiver.

Okay, clearly the Kents weren’t ready to talk to her yet. She glanced down at the notepad on which she had written their number, and a determined expression crossed her face. Sitting down at the conference room table, Lois picked up a yellow, legal pad someone had left there and started drafting a letter. A few minutes later, she held it up and nodded. It looked good. It wasn’t the best letter she had ever written, but it would get Martha and Jonathan thinking.

Honesty is always the best policy with my folks. They might not want to talk to you, but they’ll read what you have to say.

Lois went to the conference room door and looked out into the bullpen. She doubted either Perry or Jimmy said anything to anyone else about her hearing Clark’s voice; maybe about her not feeling well, but not about her sanity or lack thereof. No one seemed to be paying any attention to her or the conference room, so she opened the door and casually walked across the room to the fax machine. She wrote up a quick fax cover sheet, dialed the number from her notepad, and added her pages to the machine. Her fax seemed to crawl through the machine slower than a snail. Her foot tapped impatiently as she waited.

Finally, the last page went through. Lois confirmed transmission, grabbed her letter, and went straight to the shredder. There were still a few details of Clark’s story she hadn’t shared with her partner or boss, and she planned on keeping it that way. Clark’s secret was one she hadn’t kept this morning, and she didn’t plan on making another such mistake again.

After the pages had been shredded, she glanced down and saw how blatant the yellow paper contrasted with the normal white computer paper. It would be too easy for someone to piece back together, if they wanted. She grabbed a fistful of yellow strips and went around the newsroom, tearing them into smaller pieces and dropping a few in every trashcan she passed.

Lois glanced at Jimmy, but he was busy on the telephone. She looked over her shoulder towards Perry’s office; he was gazing into newsroom, but she couldn’t tell if he had been watching her. He lowered his eyes back to the papers on his desk and she rushed back to the conference room. No point in adding paranoia to her list of symptoms.

Her heart was racing as she shut the conference room door behind her, leaning up against it. The room began to swim again. No. No. No! Not again. She made it back over to the sofa, before the memory hit her.

Lois was giddy with excitement. Lex had offered her a job at

LNN: Luthor News Network. At first she was blasé. It wasn't the Daily Planet. Nothing could replace the newsroom in her heart. Then she had toured the LNN offices. They were modern, fast-paced, and efficient, and she couldn't wait to share them with Clark. Without her partner, this place would seem sterile, soulless, and superficial. She needed her partner to join her, for his sake, not hers.

Without her working with him, Clark would feel lost in Metropolis. Without Lois, Clark wouldn't be able to go on. Lois knew that if Clark couldn't handle the transition of Lex taking over the Daily Planet, how was he going to come to terms with the fact that their beloved newspaper was no more? She knew that without her Clark wouldn't be able to stay afloat. He needed **her**. Clark was **her** partner, now and forever more. Lois refused to work with anyone else. Not to mention, nor would she to another living soul, Clark knew how to contact Superman better than she did. That was one source she could never give up.

But when Lois showed Clark around LNN, he wasn't interested. He didn't want to work in television. He flat out refused to work for Lex Luthor. He wanted to still save the Daily Planet, even though Lex had told her there was no way to do so. She had moved on, so should Clark.

Okay, true, it had only been a day or two since the Daily Planet had been bombed, but life and news went on. They had to land on their feet and recover quickly in this business. One was only as good as one's next story. If she stood around and thought about what had happened to the Daily Planet, she would lose it, and she refused to break down and cry. She refused to let the bomber win!

Clark continued to groan about Luthor. What she needed was a good two-by-four to hit some sense into her partner. When she reminded him of their partnership, he asked to talk to her in private. She agreed, but she knew what he was going to say; he had said it all before. Lex was the devil incarnate, blah, blah, blah. Sure, Clark. Where were his cold hard facts? Did he expect her to believe him without any of those? Hello, reporter here!

But that wasn't what Clark told her. Instead, he sat her down on a bench in Centennial Park, and told her that he was in love with her and had been for a very long time.

Lois couldn't believe it. Did he really expect her to believe him? It felt like just yesterday that she had poured out her heart to him, telling him that she loved him, and he had stood there like a bump on a log – his mouth hanging open, catching flies. Now, suddenly, he was in love with her? And had been for a long time? Right. Whatever you say, Clark.

Had Clark given up spouting the evils of Lex in exchange for professing his love instead? Was Clark now using her obvious attraction for him to try to dissuade her from accepting Lex's offer? Did he really hate Lex that much to use her in this manner? That just hurt. She couldn't believe Clark, of all people, would stoop so low. That just didn't seem like the honest, genuine guy she knew. No, she must be wrong. Could he really be in love with her?

Lois thought about what he had said again.

"When I thought about losing my job at the Daily Planet, saying goodbye to Perry and Jimmy and everyone, I realized something. I realized that I could lose all that but still go on. I realized that there was really only one thing I didn't want to live without and that was you. Seeing you every day, working with you, just being with you."

She had misunderstood at first, and replied, "See, that's why you should come and be my partner..."

"No, Lois, I'm not talking about partnerships," he interrupted. "I'm talking about **us**. I have been in love with you for a long time. You've had to have known."

Suddenly, she realized what had happened. Clark wasn't in love with her, not like she was in love with him. They had already

discussed that back during Nightfall, and she had accepted that fact and moved past it. Book closed.

No, Clark must be confusing their friendship, their partnership for love. When the Daily Planet had exploded... maybe even before, when the layoffs had started... Clark had moved his attachment disorder from the paper to her. He was under some misguided notion that he could lose Jimmy, Perry, and the Daily Planet, but still be okay as long as he had her.

It was the same thing that had happened during the heat wave, the same thing as when the layoffs had happened, and when Lex had bought the paper. It was too much change all at once for the poor little farm boy. So, Clark had convinced himself that as long as he was with her, he would be okay, he would survive.

No, as much as she wanted it to be true, Clark wasn't in love with her. He was anchoring himself to her, hoping that she would keep him afloat. As much as she loved him, she couldn't let him attach himself to her in that way, not if he truly didn't love her. She couldn't do that to him. She couldn't do that to herself. She sighed and tried to think of a way to let him down gently.

"I knew... I mean, I guess I knew that you liked me..." Lois said, hating every word, every lie coming out of her mouth. "... that you were attracted to me..." She stared into his deep soulful eyes. How she wished he liked her. How she wished he was really attracted to her. She looked away. If she continued to talk about this with him, her already fragile heart would shatter again. "Clark, I'm sorry... I just don't feel that way about you... Romantically..."

It broke her heart to lie to Clark like this, but it was for his own good. She had been his lifeline for too long. He needed to stand on his own two feet. She couldn't have him clinging to her when she knew, deep in her heart, that he didn't truly love her. He just didn't want to be alone. What was she thinking? Of course, he wasn't going to be alone. She would still be there for him.

"You're my best friend and the only partner I could ever stand to work with," Lois continued with a self-mocking smile. "I admire you, and I respect you and I **do** love you." There she said it again. Why was she tormenting herself in this way? "As a friend."

Why? Why, did she always have to include that stupid disclaimer? She loved him... as a man. Why did she always have to be the strong one in their relationship? Why couldn't she just accept Clark's offer for love for what it was and kiss him and walk into the sunset? Oh, no, she had to be the realist. Clark had already unintentionally broken her heart once. She didn't want to give him the opportunity to do so again. She knew she couldn't survive it a second time.

Clark stood up and walked a few feet away.

Lois knew that she had hurt him; she could see it in his eyes.

"What about Luthor?" he asked. "Do you love him?"

Love? Lex? No, she didn't think so. "I don't know. I mean I have feelings for him." Not like she had feelings for Clark, no, but that was a good thing. If she loved Lex like she had allowed herself to love Clark, then that would open her heart to break again. No, she would never love Lex that way. "I haven't said 'yes' yet, and I won't until I talk it over with someone else." Out of the two men left with whom she would be willing to spend her life – who couldn't hurt her like Clark had – she preferred Superman, a hundred to one. Him, she could love.

"Who?" Clark asked.

"I think you know who," she said almost shyly, and watched as Clark glanced to the sky before dropping his gaze. Yeah, he knew who she was talking about. "If you see him will you tell him I'm looking for him?"

Clark sucked his lips inside his mouth and murmured, "Yeah."

Lois gasped. Oh, God! What had she done? She had

dismissed Clark's feelings, his pronouncement of love, as some school boy crush? She buried her face into her hands and began to sob. How could she have been so cruel? She had loved him, yet she had rejected Clark because she didn't think he loved her as much as she loved him. What a fool she was!

"Oh, Clark! Clark, I'm so sorry," she cried. "You deserve someone better than me."

The door of the conference room opened and Perry walked in.

Lois looked up at him through her tears. What now? "I can't take anything else right now, Perry. Please, just leave me alone."

Perry knelt down in front of her. "Are you all right, darlin'?" "Peachy," she grouched. "I just rejected Clark and broke his heart for no good reason, no good reason at all. I'm a bitch with a capital 'B'."

He raised a brow. "Lois, are you saying that you sent that voice inside your head away?" her boss asked softly. She could hear the hopeful tone ringing in his voice.

"No! Back... back in our other life. I loved him, but told him I didn't, because I thought he didn't really love me or that he was just trying to get me to refuse Lex's offer... or something..." she tried to explain. It was hard to see him through her tears and hair. "I don't know."

"And what offer would that be?" a female, crisp British accent said from behind Perry.

Lois pushed back her hair and looked at the petite brown-haired woman standing there. She hadn't realized that Perry had brought anyone into the room with him. "None of your damn business."

"Uh... Lois?" Perry cleared his throat. "This is the doctor I told you about. Lois Lane, Dr. Arianna Carlin."

Lois pointed at the woman. "I know you, don't I?"

Dr. Carlin raised an eyebrow. "Do you?"

"You seem familiar."

"Dr. Carlin was the doctor I told everyone to talk to after the hostage thing a year ago," Perry explained.

Lois focused on the woman. "Yeah, I remember you now."

"Nice to finally meet you, Ms. Lane. I've heard such nice things about you," Dr. Carlin replied in an overly sweet tone.

"No, you haven't. People don't say 'nice things' about me," Lois retorted before turning to Perry and hissing, "I'm not talking to her. I don't need a shrink. I'm fine."

"Ms. Lane, in my experience it's the people who say that they're 'fine' that need help the most," interjected Dr. Carlin.

Lois looked the woman up-and-down and returned her gaze to Perry. "I have better things to do with my time."

"Lois, darlin', I think the world of you, honey, but it isn't normal to hear voices that no one else can hear," her boss said with a pat on her shoulder. "Or to think that the world would be completely different if your boyfriend hadn't died or to have flashbacks to this other life that make you scream out in terror and collapse on the ground."

"I'm sane," Lois growled. "And they aren't 'flashbacks', they're memories, and I can't believe you told her about that!" She was pointing at the good doctor again.

"Your boyfriend died?" Dr. Carlin asked, her voice sounding hollow.

"Yeah, a long time ago."

Dr. Carlin swallowed. "Would you like to talk to me about him?"

"Not particularly," Lois responded in disbelief. Did people pay for this crap?

"Lois, you're going to talk to Dr. Carlin," Perry said in his 'I'm the boss' voice. "You know I'm not one normally to meddle in the lives of my reporters, but I'm doing more than strongly suggesting that you take her up on her offer this time. You didn't listen last time, and I didn't push you, and look where you ended

up. I'm putting my foot down. Three sessions and we'll go from there."

"Three?! Per-ry, I'm not crazy. I don't need a head..." Lois said, but mostly to Perry's departing backside. "And what's this about never meddling in your reporter's lives? You're always meddling! Who told Dan he should take me to bed?"

After the Chief had shut the door with a wave, Dr. Carlin pulled up a chair and sat opposite Lois. "I hear you've had a rough day."

Don't talk to her, Lois. She isn't who she says she is.

~I wasn't planning on it, Clark,~ Lois snapped, and then sighed, burying her face in her hands. ~I'm sorry. You've got to know, I didn't know you were serious. I mean, not really. I thought you were trying to stop me from marrying Lex. I thought you were...~

We'll talk about that later, after she's gone. Don't tell her anything about me. Anything. Don't trust her.

Lois studied Dr. Carlin, leaning back against the seat cushions.

"Perry tells me that you've had a rough couple of months. Why don't you tell me about it?" Dr. Carlin suggested.

"How about I don't?" Lois crossed her arms. "I don't trust you."

"Perry trusts me," Dr. Carlin replied, leaning forward. "He trusts me enough to ask me to come down here to talk to you. You trust Perry, and you trust Perry's judgment, don't you? Why don't you trust me, Ms. Lane? Is some voice inside your head telling you I'm not trustworthy?"

Lois gulped, and her eyes widened.

Don't answer that. It's a trick question. She's trying to get you to admit that you're hearing voices.

At Lois' silence, Dr. Carlin sat back upright. "Okay, let's talk about what happened a year ago, since we never got around to talking about it back then. Why don't you tell me about Lex?"

Lois' sour stomach made a lurch and she pulled her knees and feet onto the couch.

Ask her how she's on a first name basis with Lex Luthor?

"Did you know Lex?" Lois asked innocently.

Dr. Carlin smiled. "Yes, we've met."

Ask her, 'how?' Clark suggested at the same time Lois asked, "How?"

"Socially. I know people on the board at Luthor Hospital," Dr. Carlin explained.

She's lying.

~Why would she do that?~

Trust me; she's lying.

"I understand you and Lex were seeing each other, and that night the terrorists took over the Daily Planet, he was here because of you," said Dr. Carlin, clearly leading Lois in a certain direction.

"Yes, he was here because of me, and no, he wasn't killed because of me. He was killed because of his own arrogance. He was shot trying to escape while I was visiting the ladies' room," Lois informed her. "When I returned, we were handcuffed, back to back. He bled to death, leaning against me." She pressed her lips together with a slight shake of her head.

Tell her what he told you before he died.

"His last words were that he loved me." She had been thinking for months, since her meeting with Toni, that Lex had lied to her. Now, considering how Lex had proposed to her in her life with Clark, she wasn't so sure. Maybe Lex really had loved her.

Come on, Lois. Whatever Lex thought love was, and what love really is, are two different things entirely.

Dr. Carlin blinked. "Lex told you he loved you?" she repeated with skepticism.

Lois raised a brow. "Does that shock you? That someone

could love me? I'll have you know, men fall in love with me all the time."

One man; two, if you count Scardino. The rest are psychopaths and megalomaniacs, Lois.

~Yeah, well... shouldn't that be: one man and one superhero? ~ she retorted.

We're one and same, Lois, Clark said. She could just picture him pressing his lips together to keep from laughing.

~Oh? You and Scardino are one and the same? Maybe I shouldn't have broken up with him after all.~

Very funny.

~I thought so.~

"Is something funny?" Dr. Carlin asked her, watching her.

"No," Lois replied simply, a smile still brushing her lips.

"I didn't realize that you and Lex had been dating all that long," Dr. Carlin said, returning to their earlier topic.

She seems overly interested in Lex's dating habits, don't you think?

~I was thinking the same thing, but then again psychiatrists are notoriously nosy. Still...~ Lois pressed her lips together. ~I wonder what she'd think about Lex's proposal?~

That's none of her business, Lois. Let's keep your relationship with your ex-fiancé out of this.

~Fiancé? What do you mean fiancé, Clark? Ex or otherwise.~ Lois stood up and started to pace. ~Last I remembered, you were going to send Superman to visit me. I planned on telling Superman that I loved him and since you're Superman... Why would I have accepted Lex's proposal, Clark? I didn't love Lex. I loved you. Hell, all of you, since I believed I was in love with both halves of you. What happened when I confessed my feelings to Superman?~

Lois, this isn't a good time to be thinking about that, Clark reminded her. His voice was calm, but she could hear a rough edge to it.

~A good time? A good time? You just told me that you – Superman, you – lied to me when I told you I loved you.~

That isn't exactly what happened, Lois, and Superman doesn't lie. Anyway, didn't you lie to me when you told me – Clark, me – that you didn't love me for more than a friend?

Lois waved the issue out of the air. ~Yes, but I lie all the time and... and I didn't think you really loved me. Anyway, I'm no truth-toting superhero.~

Yeah, well, it still hurt.

She winced and her shoulders fell. "I know, I know..."

"What do you know, Ms. Lane?" Dr. Carlin asked.

Lois had forgotten that she was there. "That it seemed like Lex and I hardly knew each other," she answered, pressing her eyes shut as the images, the memories once more rushed into her head.

Lois walked around in her living room, casually. Although, how could one really be 'casual' in one's own living room, wearing a hand-picked, floor-length, silk nightgown, while waiting for Superman?

No more t-shirts and old boxers for her. She learned her lesson back when Mr. Make-Up had come after her; it had been bad enough that Clark had seen her wearing those old duds. The weekend after Mr. Make-Up was arrested, Lois had rushed out and bought a whole slew of sexy nightgowns to wear should Superman ever need to rescue her late at night.

She picked up an old edition she had found of 'Pride and Prejudice', one of her favorite novels. She started flipping through it, thinking about her conversation with Clark on the bench that afternoon and how it almost reminded her of Mr. Darcy's first proposal to Elizabeth, except she didn't hate Clark, like Lizzie despised Mr. Darcy at that point in the story. Lois had felt sorry for Clark, being so scared of being adrift in Metropolis that the poor man actually thought himself in love with her. She

sighed as she felt a breeze blow through her apartment.

Lois looked over her shoulder and saw Superman standing just inside her window, his arms crossed and his face firm with intensity. "Superman," she whispered in way of a greeting. He always made her breathless. She stood up and approached him, a blushing smile coming to her lips.

"I heard you wanted to see me," he said, not moving away from the window.

"Yes, come in. I'll just put on a robe," she stammered, suddenly self-conscious of this sheer-feeling nightgown she had chosen. She turned to head towards her bedroom.

Superman stepped closer to her. "Unless it's lined with lead, Lois, it's a waste of time."

His words froze her, and she turned to look at him. She expected such a line from his uncouth clone, but the real Superman was usually much more of a gentleman than to remind her that he could look through her clothing at any time. She looked down at her nightgown and felt naked standing in front of her hero, which would make her confession all the more difficult. "I guess so."

Superman didn't say anything as he gazed at her, his arms still crossed.

"Well, I'm just trying to figure out... I have a lot of changes going on in my life," she said, moving closer to him and keeping her eyes focused on his. He seemed much more human, less intimidating, when she didn't look at his Suit. "I just want to make the right decision, and I can't do that until I know how you feel."

He glanced down a brief moment and appeared unsettled by her gaze.

"Superman," she whispered, setting her hands on his crossed arms. "Is there any hope for us? You and me?" Staring into his eyes, she felt a wave of emotion, stronger than she had for any man, save Clark. It was like that first adrenaline rush she had felt for the hero upon meeting him, when she had known in an instant that she and Superman had a connection, a unbreakable bond that would tie them together forever. "I'm so completely in love with you. I can't do anything else without knowing."

Superman exhaled and looked down and away. When he raised his head again, he did so with a slight shake, and she knew what his answer was going to be. "Lois, I do care for you, but there are things about me that you don't know, that you may never know."

No. No. No. Her heart pounded. She couldn't lose both her partner and Superman in one day. "That doesn't matter; I know you. I don't mean 'you' the celebrity or 'you' the superhero. If you had no powers at all, if you were just an ordinary man, leading an ordinary life, I would love you just the same. Can't you believe that?" As she spoke the words, she knew she meant them.

His eyes gazed at her sadly. "I wish I could, Lois, but under the circumstances, I don't see how I can."

Lois turned away. His rejection of her words, of her trust in him, of her in general stabbed so sharp that she needed a moment to find the strength to convince him that she did love him enough. But in that moment, she felt the breeze of his departure. She turned back to her window, and he was gone.

How had Superman known that she didn't love him with all of her heart, like she had told him that she did? Could his x-ray vision see directly into her heart and see Clark's heart there? Was that how he knew that she didn't love him more than an ordinary guy, in an ordinary suit, leading an ordinary life? Was her love for Clark the 'circumstance' to which he referred?

"Superman," Lois murmured as tears rolled down her cheeks. "I'm so sorry."

"Lois?" Dr. Carlin interrupted her thoughts.

She was already annoyed by the constant interruption by the

woman. “What?!”

“Why don’t you sit down and tell me what just happened?” suggested the doctor, holding out her hand to Lois.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Lois sputtered, her feet frozen to the floor. Had something happened when she had her memory flashback? She wiped the tears from her cheeks.

“You disappeared on me for a moment there,” explained Dr. Carlin.

Lois’ eyes bugged. “I dis... disappeared?”

She doesn’t mean literally, Lois, Clark reassured her.

“Do you think you can actually disappear, Lois?” the psychiatrist asked her.

“Of course not,” Lois said with a gulp. Sure, she had witnessed Clark fading away when baby Clark was exposed to the Kryptonite and Tempus disintegrating into nothing when he erased himself from time, but why would that mean she believed it was possible for it to happen to her too? Especially whenever she fell into one of her memories of her other life?

“What you’re demonstrating are signs of post-traumatic stress: short-term memory loss, erratic behavior. I can help, if you let me,” Dr. Carlin tried to persuade her, speaking with a soothing tone.

An embarrassed, nervous smile tugged at Lois’ lips. ‘Short-term memory loss?’ ‘Erratic behavior?’ Yep, she had experienced both of those things lately.

Lately? How about on a daily basis?

~Editorializing my thoughts again, Kent?~ she grumbled to that voice inside her head before replying to the doctor. “Okay, I admit my life isn’t tiptoeing through the daisies, but I didn’t ‘disappear’...” Thank God! “I was thinking about something.”

“Lois, you can’t ignore what took place during the hostage crisis here,” Dr. Carlin reminded her. “Perry tells me that you witnessed your best friend die when her car exploded just six months ago and, more recently, you were kidnapped by that man on the island. Then, just last night your childhood friend tried to sacrifice you in some kind of ritual. This is why the board and Mr. Stern hired me on as staff psychiatrist, to talk to everyone about their problems and lower stress in the newsroom. I’ve been waiting for over a year for you to come and knock on my door.”

Lois smiled sheepishly. Okay, she lived a rough life, but she wouldn’t be half the investigative reporter she was, if she didn’t.

The good doctor seems well-versed on your life, Lois, I wonder why that is.

Her embarrassment slipped off her face as she raised a curious eyebrow. “You seem to know quite a lot about me. Are you a fan?”

“I’ve been keeping my eye on you. After what happened with Lex, I was sure you and I would be talking sooner or later,” explained Dr. Carlin. “Behavior, like yours, could – if left untreated – turn violent. Tell me, have you had the desire to strike out at anybody recently?”

Lois pressed her lips together. ~Only her.~ “No.”

“Hmmm.” Dr. Carlin thought for a moment. “Tell me about ‘Superman’.”

“What?! Did Perry...?” Lois snapped, pointing out of the conference room.

“When you came out of your trance, you said ‘Superman’,” Dr. Carlin explained.

“I wasn’t in a trance,” Lois corrected.

“Perry thinks that this psychic that you mentioned to him – Star? – put you in some kind of trance and convinced you, possibly via hypnosis, that Lex survived the terrorist take-over of the Planet because of some superhero that you call ‘Superman’. So, I repeat, who is Superman? What does he mean to you?”

Perry thought that Star had brainwashed her into believing Clark was real? That was preposterous!

Is it? If you had met Star back around the time you first starting hearing my voice, it would be a more understandable explanation to what was going on with you than your time-traveling theory. With all that you and I’ve dealt with over the last few years, a brainwashing psychic who makes you seem crazy isn’t a big stretch.

Clark had a point there, but she still felt bad that Star, who had done nothing but try to help Lois, got tied up in this mess.

“Star didn’t hypnotize me until this morning, when I asked her for some assistance with some repressed memories,” Lois informed the woman, sitting down on the sofa and picking up her briefcase. “If Perry doesn’t believe me, he can listen to the tape I recorded of the session for my reference.” And safety. She hated being hypnotized without someone there to watch out for her. Lois held up her mini tape recorder, which she had removed from her bag.

“What else did this psychic tell you?” Dr. Carlin asked, leaning forward.

Lois waved Star’s involvement out of the air. “Uh... just some stuff about the dead man who wasn’t really dead and his ex-wife and some women who was me, but not really, and...” an old Clark and a new Clark. “It didn’t make any sense.”

Dr. Carlin’s eyes widened and darted to the mini tape recorder in Lois’ hand. “I would like to hear that,” she mumbled.

Why?

“That’s not on this tape,” Lois said, popping out the cassette and putting it in her pocket. She saw Dr. Carlin’s eyes follow her movements. Clark was right, she couldn’t trust this woman. She just wished Clark would tell her why.

With a resigned sigh, the psychiatrist leaned back in her chair. “So, Lex loved you. Did you love him?”

Lois rolled her eyes and dropped her briefcase back on the ground. This woman was like a scratched record. She was proving Lois’ theory about therapy being a waste of time with every repeated theme. “No, he was a womanizing creep.”

“Then why were you dating him? Because he was rich?”

“No...” Lois was getting tired of this line. Was this what everyone thought of her? Probably. “Okay, fine, I learned about his deviant ways just recently, but even so I didn’t love him. I hardly knew the man. It was flattering that such a well-known, powerful humanitarian was interested in me, my career, and my opinions.” She shook her head. “God, why would I ever agree to marry him?”

“What?!” gasped the doctor.

Lois waved the topic out of the air. “Something someone said in a dream...” She sighed, gazing across the room, not wanting to think about Lex any longer.

She could picture the day she and Clark had worked in this room on the Messenger explosion, when they had discovered Dr. Platt’s theory had been correct. They had hugged in their excitement. When she closed her eyes, Lois could almost feel Clark’s arms encompassing her. It was the best hug. There was something about having his arms wrapped around her that made her feel safe and protected... even then. His enthusiasm at solving his first investigation had rubbed off on her and they were soon both laughing with such glee. She remembered how he had stepped back and asked her to dinner; she had hesitated at first, but then pushed past her fear and said ‘yes’. She remembered the butterflies, the anticipation... her attraction. She winced. “Lex ruined everything.”

“How?” asked Dr. Carlin.

But Lois wasn’t listening to her. Her mind was far away, in another time.

She marched into Lex’s penthouse. Her life felt like it was over, and she had promised Lex an answer, so she might as well get it over with. Superman had rejected her, and she had stupidly discounted Clark’s love. Now, she and Clark could hardly say a

civil word to one another.

They were on opposite sides of the spectrum on their opinions of Lex. She didn't know why he hated Lex so. A usually articulate Clark couldn't say anything more definite than insults and name-calling. It was strange. Was he jealous? Maybe she had misjudged Clark and his motivations the other day in the park. Had she been wrong about Clark's feelings? Had he really been in love with her? How well would they have worked as a couple anyway? They were constantly arguing, fighting, yelling, and screaming. Weren't those the very qualities she had hated in her own parents' marriage?

Wasn't that also why Lex's marriage proposal seemed so appealing? Because they never had an uncivil word? They either agreed on everything or they persuaded the other, calmly, collectively to the other's viewpoint. That was what a marriage was supposed to be, wasn't it? Working together.

Lois could still feel the weight of Lex's heavy engagement ring on her finger. It felt heavier on her heart. She had never changed Lex's mind about anything. He had been the grand manipulator in their relationship, plying her with false comfort, lies, and flattery to get her to see what he had wanted her to see.

Excuses, she scoffed with a shake of her head. Every reason she had given herself not to love Clark, of why their relationship wouldn't work, was just an excuse. She had been scared, worried of loving and losing. She had told herself that it was better to be in a relationship with companionship than love.

"Have you ever loved someone and knew you'd love them your entire life, whether or not they ever loved you in return?" Lois asked Dr. Carlin. Only Clark had ever made her feel that way... Well, and Superman. She felt like rolling her blind eyes at the obviousness of it all.

That's how I feel about you, Clark confessed. And I made some pretty bad decisions because of it too.

"Once," Dr. Carlin answered. "I loved him as much as any woman could love a man, and even though he divorced me, I still love him to this day."

Divorced? Dr. Arianna Carlin is somebody's ex-wife?

Lois could tell that Clark was leading her somewhere, trying to show her clues, so that she could figure out the puzzle on her own, and it was damn exasperating. Why did everything have to be some big secret for her to piece together and uncover? If he knew the answer, why didn't he just tell her already?

~Wait a minute. Ex-wife? Are you trying to tell me *she's* the ex-wife that Star warned me about? The ex-wife that would try to kill her? Is this why you don't want me to trust her?~

Clark didn't answer, but she felt a warmth surround her as if Clark had given her one of his smiles. She must be on the right track. Now, how could she...?

"Did he ever remarry? This ex-husband of yours?" Lois inquired.

"No," Dr. Carlin practically snarled. "But he became obsessed with another woman and started to change his life to include her."

"Started to?" Lois continued to probe.

"He..." The doctor smiled like a Cheshire cat drinking a bowl of cream. "... met with an unfortunate accident. He relies on me fully now." Then, where there had been a smile a moment before, a stern scowl appeared. "Yet, still he's obsessed with her."

Lois felt a chill slither down her spine. Ex-wife. A dead husband that wasn't really dead, only partially dead. An ex-wife who wanted *her* dead. She gulped. She needed to get out of there. She looked down at her wrist where her watch usually was.

"My, look at the time. I think our hour is up, Dr. Carlin. This *has* been most helpful. Thank you. I feel better already," Lois said, rising to her feet and moving slowly to the door.

"Where are you going, Lois? It hasn't been an hour yet," Dr. Carlin informed her.

~Really? 'Cause it felt like more than two hours to me,~ she thought to Clark. Lois pointed over her shoulder to the conference room door. "Well, you don't mind if we take a break now, then, do you? I really could use a trip to the little girl's room. Excuse me." She turned and ran out of the room. As she turned the corner, she smacked right into Jimmy.

"Jimmy, thank God!" Lois gushed and then remembered he was the one who had turned her in to Perry earlier. No, she wouldn't share her full revelation with him, but she did need more information. She glanced back towards the conference room and, moving them further away, lowered her voice, "I need you to find out the name of Dr. Arianna Carlin's ex-husband. He may be deceased."

"Lois, you're investigating your therapist?" he confirmed skeptically.

"She said that he met with 'an unfortunate accident'," she replied.

"Oh. Oh! I see. Okay," Jimmy said, nodding. "I'll get right on that."

"Thanks. I'm also waiting on either a fax or a phone call from Clark's parents, verifying my story. You need to tell me right away if either comes in, okay?"

Jimmy smiled indulgently at her. "Sure, Lois. I'll do that."

He doesn't believe I'm real, Lois, I doubt he believes my folks are real either.

~Well, then, won't he be surprised when your parents call?~ she told Clark. "Thanks, Jimmy." She patted his arm. Hopefully, she could stop this murder attempt on her own. What had Star told her? The dead man, who wasn't Clark, would return. Lois would die – or someone confused for her – and then time would go back, causing Clark – Old Clark, *her* Clark – to die for good. She needed to stop this chain of events. She needed to talk to Perry.

Lois knocked on the Chief's door and he waved her inside.

"Carlini's? Yes, what's this about you not delivering to the Daily Planet any longer?... Uh-huh... I see... That's not important... send another delivery boy... I'm having the fettuccini with the fresh tomato and basil sauce, light on the oil, heavy on the garlic bread... Terrific!" Perry hung up the phone. "Afraid to make deliveries to the Daily Planet! Ha! Are we scary people?" he asked her rhetorically. He leaned back in his chair. "So, Lois, all cured?" He glanced at his watch. "That didn't take long." His brow furrowed. "Did you leave in the middle of a session, honey?"

"Perry!" Lois said, going on the defensive. "Dr. Carlin is trying to kill me."

Subtle.

Her boss folded his hands together with his fingertips touching. "Did she tell you that, Lois?"

"Of course not, Perry. It's a long story, and I've got to get back in there before she starts having suspicions that I know. Star told me a couple of days ago to watch out for the dead man's ex-wife," Lois explained and then shot her arm out towards the conference room as if to connect the dots.

"Uh-huh, and Arianna's ex-husband is dead?" he inquired.

"She said that he met with 'an unfortunate accident'. I've got Jimmy working on it," she said.

"You've got Jimmy working on a harebrained theory that some psychic cooked up? Lo-is..."

"I've got Jimmy following a lead on a possible death threat against me. Clark says she's untrustworthy and definitely the one Star warned me about," Lois clarified, interrupting her boss.

"Uh-huh. If Clark knows who the ex-husband is, why doesn't he just tell you?" Perry asked, humoring her.

"Tell me already, Clark," she growled, rolling her eyes to the ceiling.

You wouldn't believe me if I told you.

“He says that I wouldn’t believe him if he told me,” she said, passing on Clark’s message.

“Uh-huh. You tell Clark, I don’t believe him now,” Perry retorted. “Or Star *ever!*”

Lois pressed her lips together and placed her hands on her hips. “Star did not brainwash me, Perry. I’ve been hearing Clark a hell of a lot longer than I’ve known Star. Secondly, Clark can hear you just fine; I don’t have to relay messages to him. And, thirdly, if you don’t believe in him, why are you sending him messages?!” She reached into her slacks pocket and removed the cassette from her mini tape recorder. She tossed it on his desk. “Here is the session Star and I had this morning when she unlocked my memories. She told me a couple of days ago that Clark contacted her to check out my future, and she was so worried about what she saw, she came straight up to find me...”

“Now, Lois, honey...”

She held up a hand, asking him to let her finish. “Star told me that soon the dead man will return and that I will die.”

Perry’s jaw dropped as if he was at a loss for words.

“Then Star told me that it was the dead man’s ex-wife who would kill me, only she ends up killing someone who looks like me instead.”

“What would Arianna’s motive be in wanting you dead?” Perry inquired.

“I don’t know! Are anyone’s motives for trying to kill me justified? Don’t answer that.” Lois thought for a minute, snapping her fingers. “She... she... she said that her ex-husband got obsessed with a woman shortly before his accident, maybe I’m that woman.” Stranger things had happened.

Perry shrugged. “Normally, I’d think that was a bit of a stretch, but with the number of psychopaths you’ve angered over the years, it’s possible one or two of them became obsessed.”

Lois raised a brow. “One or two?”

You’ve had more than that in this year alone, and it’s only September.

“What I mean to say, Lois, is that description doesn’t narrow down our list of suspects, does it? Especially, if said suspects include the dead,” Perry said. “Now, having said all that, it doesn’t mean I believe that our resident psychiatrist is out to get you. It sounds to me like Clark is making you a bit paranoid.”

Great.

“You know, Perry, just because I may be little bit paranoid, doesn’t mean there aren’t people out there trying to kill me,” she screamed.

The office door opened and Dr. Carlin walked in. “I hope I’m not interrupting. Lois, this doesn’t look like the powder room to me.” She took hold of Lois’ arm. “Come on, let’s finish our talk.”

Lois shot the Chief a knowing expression as she tried to stop Dr. Carlin from escorting her from the room.

“Arianna, Lois is under the strange impression that you want her dead,” Perry informed the doctor.

“Per-ry!” gasped Lois, in shock. How could he tell Dr. Carlin what she had told him in secret?

“Why, Lois, that’s ridiculous!” replied Dr. Carlin. “What on earth gives you that idea?”

“Clark told her,” Perry informed the psychiatrist.

“Per-ry! Confidential sources are *confidential*,” Lois reminded her boss.

“Not if they’re dead and communicating with you from the other side, Lois,” he said. “You need help.”

“And I’m obviously not going to get it here!” she rebutted.

“Lois, I’m not trying to kill you; I’m trying to help you. Let’s go back into the conference room where we can talk in private,” Dr. Carlin suggested calmly, leading Lois from Perry’s office.

“I’d like to know more about this Clark fellow.”

Of course she would.

“Why?” Lois demanded, pulling her hand free from Dr.

Carlin’s.

“I’m curious why he dislikes me so,” said the psychiatrist.

Oh, I don’t know. Maybe it was because she shot me with a Kryptonite bullet and tried to frame you for it.

“She did, what?!” Lois stammered, turning to Dr. Carlin with horror. ~Why would she do that?~

Dr. Carlin pushed her into the conference room and shut the door behind her.

Because she blamed us for Lex’s death.

Lois froze and leaned against the door, swallowing a new supply of bile. “Lex died? I thought he survived being shot.”

The doctor stared at Lois and took a few steps back. “Lois, of course Lex died. Don’t you remember?” She looked both scared and angry, her voice hollow.

Lois’ brow furrowed. Why would the doctor be scared of Lois? Why did she sound nervous? It seemed a reversal of the woman’s earlier demeanor.

Because she blamed Superman for not saving Lex’s life, and she blamed you...

“And she blamed me, because he loved me,” Lois finished Clark’s sentence, focusing her eyes on Dr. Carlin. “You were once married to Lex Luthor.”

Dr. Carlin smiled, her eyes cold. “Yes. Yes, I was, and he loved me... until you came along...”

“Lex didn’t say anything about being married,” Lois said, not in real life and not in her other life, where they were engaged to be married. “He said I was the first woman he had ever loved.”

“I’m the only woman Lex has ever loved!” roared Dr. Carlin, rushing at Lois.

Lois blocked her both with a half-front roundhouse and a punch with the palm of her hand, knocking the woman against a side-table and sending her crashing into the lamp that had been there. “You’re insane!”

Dr. Carlin looked up from the table and hissed, “You’re lucky I’d do anything to make Lex happy.” She bled from cut on her cheek and from the corner of her mouth.

“Lois, open this door!” Perry ordered from behind her, as Lois was still leaning up against the conference room door.

She stepped away and let her boss and Jimmy in. “Dr. Carlin is nuts, Perry. She attacked me.”

Perry looked between Lois standing in a defensive position next to the door and back to where Dr. Carlin sat bleeding on the floor, next to the broken lamp. She had a new cut on her arm that hadn’t been there a moment before, which gave her the appearance of a fragile, innocent woman.

“I attacked her?” stammered Dr. Carlin in disbelief, wiping the blood near her mouth with the back of her hand. “We came in here and she hit me out of the blue, claiming I was trying to kill her.”

“She attacked me! I was defending myself,” Lois explained.

“Lois Lane is a paranoid schizophrenic and needs to be taken to the Luthor House for the Mentally Unstable,” Dr. Carlin announced. “— where she won’t be able to hurt anyone else and she will get the best care possible.”

“No!” Lois screamed, turning to Perry and pointing at Arianna Carlin. “I’m not crazy. *She* attacked me. She’s Lex Luthor’s ex-wife!”

Her boss looked at the doctor, who shrugged and told him, “She’s hearing voices, she thinks I’m trying to kill her, and she thinks that Lex is still alive and out to get her.”

“I don’t think that Lex is still alive. I know he’s dead. If anyone here is delusional, lady, it’s you,” Lois retorted, before a sense of dread tickled down her spine.

Lois, Lex! Lex is the dead man who isn’t really dead.

Perry placed a gentle hand on her arm as Lois’ mind started to swirl with this new possibility. “Lois, honey, you told me this morning that Lex didn’t die during the terrorist hostage thing last

year and that he bought the Daily Planet.”

“You imagined that Daily Planet had been bombed and that my dead cousin Jimmy had been hurt,” Jimmy reminded her.

“Maybe a few days of rest and relaxation is just what you need, darlin’,” Perry continued.

“I’m not crazy!” Lois yelled, having difficulty concentrating on what was happening in the room and this new complication in her head. ~How can Lex be alive, Clark? He was dead before the terrorists left the building.~

Perry held up his hands. “I’m not saying that you are, honey. I’m just saying you need a few days of rest. I’ll get you out of there as soon as I can,” he said.

“Out of where?” Lois demanded as two security guards, who had been pushing their way through the crowd of reporters outside the conference room, grabbed her arms. “I’m not crazy!”

“Honey, you attacked Arianna for no reason.”

“In *self-defense!* I’d rather go to jail than to a padded cell, Perry. You know that,” Lois said, trying to pull free from the security guards.

“Take her to my office until the orderlies from the Luthor House arrive,” instructed Dr. Carlin, climbing to her feet and approaching Lois’ boss. “I’m so sorry, Perry. It’s all my fault. I should’ve insisted on seeing her before now. I just hope it’s not too late.” She lowered her voice. “Don’t worry, we’ll put her on suicide watch.”

The security guards pulled Lois through the crowd of her colleagues as she continued to profess her innocence. “I’m not insane. You’ve got to believe me! I’m not crazy.”

Wally shook his head, walking away. “That’s what they all say.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Perry sat at his desk, staring at the mini cassette tape. He spun it around in his hand, tapping it against the desk every few spins or so. It had been two days since Lois had attacked Dr. Arianna Carlin in the conference room and had been whisked off to the Luthor House for the Mentally Unstable.

He had forgotten about the cassette that first day, filling out paperwork and issuing statements to the MPD for the arrest of his best reporter had kept his mind off of the thing. Perry had only remembered it when he was cleaning up before heading home that night and had heard it fall to the floor. He hadn’t listened to the cassette until the next morning because he had wanted to have a clear head to hear it. Since then, he had listened to it twice more, especially since Arianna had called asking for the tape specifically. Apparently, Lois had told Arianna about it, put it in her pants pocket, and then it had disappeared when they had her in custody. Perry told the psychiatrist he hadn’t seen it.

He spun the cassette around in his fingers again. Still, he wasn’t sure what to make of it.

Perry didn’t want Lois to be crazy. Her story had been so off-the-wall that Perry couldn’t believe it was true, but the more he listened to that tape and heard her talking about Clark and Lex, sounding more like the full-of-life woman she had been over a year ago when those memories were supposed to have taken place, the more he had wanted it to be true.

Lex Luthor, Perry scoffed. The man had been an idiot, and he had fooled the world into thinking he was some genius, humanitarian, philanthropist businessman, but when push had come to shove, and they had been locked in the conference room by terrorists, Lex’s true colors had come shining through. Lex Luthor had been scared, terrified, and about as smart as molasses on a turnip truck. The man had panicked and almost gotten Perry shot with his rash fake heart attack plan.

Then the billionaire wanted to negotiate with the terrorists. Perry rolled his eyes. Negotiating with terrorists was like trying to negotiate with a three-year-old. It might have sounded good on

paper, but you were going to lose every time, because they never played by the rules. Any intelligent businessman should have known that. Finally, as soon as Lois had convinced the terrorists to allow her use the restroom, Luthor had bolted for the exit and had gotten himself shot. Imbecile! Perry had let Lois think Luthor had been going for help, but he knew the truth. The man was just trying to save his own skin.

Nothing like a little stressful event to test the mettle of a person, and Luthor had failed like an Elvis movie without singing or a pretty girl. Perry had never told anyone about his findings because the man had died, and it felt like kicking a dead dog. Yet when, a few months ago, Lois had decided to investigate the man behind the curtain, the editor admitted to doing a little happy dance in his office. Not only for Lois’ sake, because the woman deserved to know the truth about Bimbo the Billionaire, but for the world’s sake. If anyone could find out the truth about Lex Luthor, it was Lois Lane.

Sadly for her sanity, Lois had found out more than just the bare truth. Lex Luthor had been a horrible, horrible man, bad to women, small children, the good name of science, and even the environment. The worst of it was how he had used women, used Lois. This had been a case of ignorance being bliss, and investigating Luthor had been like opening Pandora’s box.

The editor wanted to believe so much that Star had been responsible for his reporter’s lack of sanity, brainwashed via hypnotism or some other such crap, but Star hadn’t sounded like she was taking advantage of Lois on that tape. He had heard Lois specifically ask Star to unlock those memories. It had been Lois’ choice, Lois’ memories. It also would explain why Lois had been acting so strangely that day in the office, what with all that new information from her other life suddenly rushing into her brain. If this Clark fellow did have some other-worldly connection with Lois, it would explain why she had unexpectedly decided to take a better look behind Luthor’s curtain when she had always taken the billionaire at his word before.

Unfortunately, if her story was true, it meant that Perry had a fully sane reporter, whom he loved like a daughter, who was going through something scary and terrifying, who had come to him for advice and assistance, and whom he had thrown to the wolves.

He needed facts.

There was a soft knock on his door. Perry glanced up, and then waved Olsen inside.

“Here are those photo sheets you asked for,” Jimmy said almost shyly, holding out the sheets.

Perry didn’t know if the kid was being quiet because he felt partially to blame for what happened to Lois, or because his boss had been a bear the last three days. The Chief sighed, taking the papers. If he had to guess, it was the latter, as he himself was feeling the former.

“Jimmy, any luck getting hold of Lois’ family?” the editor asked, already knowing the answer.

The young photographer’s naturally sunny disposition darkened as his shoulders fell. “There really isn’t anyone left to contact, Chief. Dr. Lane went MIA after that cyborg boxing scandal a few years back. Then her sister, Lucy ran off with that jewelry store robber, Johnny C-something last year, and since Lois hasn’t mentioned her since, I’m guessing she’s still on the lam. When her mom started drinking again after that, complaining about Dr. Lane’s abandonment and blaming Lois for Lucy’s bad life choices, Lois washed her hands of the woman. I tried finding Mrs. Lane, but she’s no longer at her last known address. Lois’ uncle Mike was killed in the explosion at his restaurant last year. I was able to find a name of the cousin, Cindy, but apparently she’s off on her honeymoon and won’t be back for a week or two.”

Perry nodded. He had feared as much. He, Jimmy, and the

Planet were the closest thing to family Lois had, and they had thrown her under the bus when she needed them the most. No wonder she wanted to believe in this Clark fellow so much. Frankly, after what he had heard on the tape, he had wanted to believe in him, too.

‘Cause the real one is... is... Clark!’ Lois had said on the tape, regarding Superman.

No wonder the woman had told Jimmy she felt insane. If Perry had been hearing Clark’s voice for months, believed he was a real ghost, and suddenly found out the man was also a super strong, flying, vigilante in tights, he might feel like he had just fallen down a well too. Lois had told Perry that only Clark could contact Superman. Well, if Clark had been Superman, it made sense that if he had died as a baby that Superman would never appear. It would also explain why someone from the future would want to go into the past and kill Clark. He admired his reporter for trying to keep Kent’s secret to the end, not that the revelation would have helped her sanity plea any.

Perry rubbed his brow. He couldn’t believe that he was starting to think that Lois’ wild story was true. If he had had this problem with any other reporter, he wouldn’t be second guessing himself or his original findings, but... dammit, this was Lois Lane. Bizarre things happened to Lois all the time. Why not this?

“Chief?” Jimmy inquired softly.

“What, son?” Perry said, raising his eyes. He had forgotten that the kid was still in his office.

“You said something about going to see Lois yesterday? How is she doing?”

It hadn’t been pretty. “She was out of it. They had her pumped full of sedatives, because she bit an orderly in an attempt to escape.” Perry shook his head. “She was just sitting there in the common area, rocking back and forth, staring at a wall.”

Jimmy’s gaze fell to the floor. “Oh.”

Perry had sat down next to Lois and called her name four times before she even turned to look at him, but she never saw him, her eyes never focused on him. It was as if she was looking straight through him, as if she didn’t know who he was. Both of her wrists were bandaged like she had tried to harm herself. It was his fault. He had done this to her.

‘A dead man’s ex-wife wants to kill me, only she ends up killing someone who looks like me instead,’ was the last thing Lois had told him, a prediction from the psychic. Instead of listening to her – a woman whose off-the-wall hunches had been true more times than not – he had returned her to Arianna, despite Lois’ claims that the woman was the one who wanted to kill her.

His brow furrowed. *A woman who looked like her?* “Jimmy!” Perry hollered.

“Yeah, Chief?” Jimmy asked with a jolt.

“What are you working on?”

“Paulson and I are relooking into the murder of Dr. Heller, that plastic surgeon found in the dumpster last year,” Jimmy replied. “Apparently a bum has come forward. He saw two people carrying the body, a pretty brunette woman and someone named ‘Harry’. Detective Ryder has him working with an artist, but his memory is sketchy.”

Perry brushed that story aside. “Did you ever get that information that Lois asked you for the other day?”

The young man gulped. “What information was that, Chief?” Jimmy asked.

“About Arianna Carlin’s ex-husband,” Perry reminded him.

“Oh, I thought since Lois...”

“You thought wrong. Lois has been sitting in that hell-hole for almost three days now. After everything that woman has done for us, don’t you want to make sure we didn’t make a mistake? Find him by the end of the day! Capiche?” Perry barked, and Jimmy literally jumped. “This evening I’m paying a thousand smacklers for bad seats at some charity symphony opening night

to-do with Alice, and I want some good news before I leave.”

“Yes, sir!” Jimmy yelled as he disappeared out the door.

“And what sort of activities do you have for your guests?” a diminutive man with the spectacles asked the woman giving him a tour. “My sister is very creative and loves to do art.”

“We have a supervised activities room,” the tour guide told the man, indicating a room that they passed with checkers and bingo. “But by far the most popular room for our guests is the art studio called the Day Room.” She led him to a large room with a skylight. It was a bright room, warm and inviting, except for the fishbowl feeling it gave off with the floor to ceiling thick glass panel wall in it that separated half the room from the other. “Our guests are allowed, supervised of course, to draw, paint, work with clay, or do beadwork. We have found that it greatly helps with their therapy to have their mind free this way.”

Herb looked around the room, itching to take another glance at the folded newspaper in his hand. “May I look around?” he asked hopefully, unconsciously wiping his mustache.

The woman beamed at him. “Feel free. We only ask that you stay in this room. The room on the other side is for some of our more restricted guests.” Her two-way radio buzzed and a slight expression of irritation crossed the woman’s face as she reached down for the offending object. “Excuse me.” The woman stepped away from him and hissed into the radio, “What is it? I’m on a tour!”

Wells ignored his tour guide, because he wasn’t really interested in the facilities, his perfectly sane sister having long since died. He was about to glance down at his newspaper, when an older man, with his forehead reaching deep into what was left of his graying hair, approached him. The man wore a pale yellow cardigan with a shirt and a tie and appeared to work there. Herb wondered if he was one of the supervisors to which his tour guide had referred.

“Are you interested in joining us here?” the man asked Herb. “The food is superb and the service top notch.”

“That’s good to hear. My sister is very particular,” Herb said nervously, stepping away from the man and inching toward the glass walls. He glanced around at the other occupants of the room, but none were the woman for whom he sought.

“And what is your sister like, if I may ask?” the man said, following.

“Very polite. Quiet. She thinks she’s Mary Todd Lincoln,” Herb lied, his eyes gazing over the occupants in the other room on the other side of the glass wall, searching. He hated this aspect of this particular assignment, but if he were to be completely honest with these people, he would become a card-carrying resident here and he wanted to avoid that scenario at all costs. While he knew himself to be who he was, a time-traveling author from the past who had been living in the future, they most certainly would not believe him, just as they hadn’t believed Lois. He was familiar with such places back home in England, but this one had outdone itself with its modern conveniences and its impression of freedom.

“I once knew such a woman over at Happy Hollow Rest Home, WandaMae Waldecker. You wouldn’t be her baby brother William that she was always talking about, perchance?” the man asked Herb. Then his voice became melancholy. “Oh, no. That’s right, he died, committed suicide. That’s why she was forced to leave.”

Herb swallowed. He had forgotten that WandaMae Waldecker was alive and well in this era, and not just a footnote in the history. “Sorry, my sister’s name is Mary,” he explained, moving further away from the man and closer to the glass walls.

His eyes finally spotted the woman for whom he was searching. She was sitting alone at a table with papers and crayons on it. It was not all surprising to find her in the restricted

area, but he was disappointed that he would not to get a chance to speak with her and hear her story.

The man in the cardigan followed Herb's gaze and sighed. "She's beautiful, is she not?"

"Yes," Herb agreed softly; although, to be true she didn't fit that description at the moment. Her hair hung limply around her drawn face, and she was dressed in a hospital nightgown. "Do you know anything about her?"

"She moved in there just this week. Alas, rumor has it that she's fiancée to someone powerful," the man informed him.

"Is that so?" Herb answered with some surprise. From his earlier explorations, he had not been able to find any record of Clark Kent or Superman. Perhaps he had been mistaken.

The man sighed, and then explained, "Sadly, he died, so she's in mourning."

"Ah..." Herb said noncommittally. He hadn't been mistaken. Having watched Lois since they had first spotted her, he noticed she had yet to move. He had never seen a woman with more vibrancy and energy, and to see her so... He shook his head. No wonder he hadn't recognized her at first. With no expression at all on her face, she sat at the table and stared at the floor, so strongly it was as if she could see through it. Had she given up? She seemed so resigned to this fate. The papers in front of her on the table for which to use for drawing were still blank. "Does she ever do anything else?"

"She's been sedated," the man whispered. "She bit an orderly and is being punished. That's why she's over in the bad room."

Herb looked at the man with dismay. "Bit an orderly?"

"She claims that she's sane, and was just trying to escape. No one escapes from the bad room," the man explained.

"Oh?" Herb murmured, quelling the desire to glance down at the headline on tomorrow's front page of the Daily Planet.

"I don't know why anyone would want to escape," the man went on. "The therapists are friendly, the sheets soft, and the food quite delicious, but then again, I don't live on the evil side."

"Evil side?"

The man wiped the word out of the conversation. "There are rumors that once you go over to the bad side, you never make it back here." He lowered his voice conspiratorially, "Perhaps I need to go over there and break her out, rescue her... Well, of course, not me myself. I know I may look like just a humble, ordinary guy," he said with a shrug. "But under the mild-mannered costume beats the heart of a hero."

"Really?" Herb asked with some interest.

"I'll tell you, but it must be our little secret. Shhhh," the man said, placing a finger to his lips and looking around. Then he leaned over and whispered to Herb, "I'm Batman."

"Oh?" replied Herb, trying not to smile at the preposterous idea that this man, who was currently battling him for shortest man in the room, could ever possibly be the Caped Crusader. "I thought he lived in Gotham City?" he couldn't resist.

The man placed his finger to his lips. "I'm undercover." The man shot out his hand. "And you are?"

"H.G. Wells," Herb said without thinking as he shook the man's hand. Then he quickly blanched, glancing around. "Not *the* H.G. Wells though."

"Of course not," said 'Batman' with a wink. "None of us really are who we say we are. It's important to keep up the secret identity."

"Right so. Right so," agreed Herb with one last glance at Lois and nodded. Yes, he would do it. He had never considered himself any kind of knight in shining armor, but since meeting Lois and Clark, he had made it his mission that the Utopian society that would be created due to their influence never be destroyed; especially since it was his fault that Tempus had been let loose in time to wreak such havoc. He seemed to spend most of his time lately cleaning up that man's messes. "Thank you," he

said to the man and turned back to the exit where he was joined by the tour guide.

"So, what do think of our facilities?" the woman inquired, full of faux-pleasantry of a saleswoman.

"I think this will do nicely, very nicely indeed. There are just a few more things I need to check out before making my final decision," said Herb as they passed through the door.

The woman glanced over her shoulder, her brow furrowing, as she set a hand on Wells' back and nudged him out of the room more quickly. She picked up her two-way radio and murmured, "Contact Dr. Carlin. A patient requires her attention in the Day Room."

Herb turned back to see to what she was referring, but the door had already closed, blocking his view. He sighed, continuing down the hall. Yes, if they returned to the beginning, perhaps Clark could get his happily-ever-after after all.

Perry went down in the elevator accompanied by Jimmy. Damn this monkey suit. If Alice didn't like him in it so much, Perry would never put the horrid thing on, especially to go to a stupid charity symphony event that he would more likely sleep through, but he loved his wife, and he was on very thin ice as it was. "What do you have for me, Olsen?"

"If Dr. Carlin was married, it wasn't registered here in Metropolis, the state of New Troy, or in America for that matter," Jimmy said, following him out into the Daily Planet lobby. "I'll check in her native England for any records in a couple hours when their offices open. With Lois' wild claim that Lex Luthor was Dr. Carlin's ex-husband, I also checked for any marriage records under his name. The same: zippo. I did find an old wedding announcement in the Daily Planet archives which mentions that he got married on a cruise ship about ten years ago, before he was anybody, but it didn't mention the wife by name. I found the ship's captain; he's in a retirement home here in Metropolis. I'll talk to him in the morning before I come in."

"Let me know as soon as you find anything," Perry replied, tugging on the neck of his suit as they stepped out into the cool evening air. "Where in the hell is she?" He looked up and down the street for his wife's taxi.

"I thought you hated the symphony, Chief," said Jimmy.

"But I love my wife..." Perry started in on his tirade before a Metro cab, with Alice inside, pulled up in front of them. He lowered his voice, "Son, when you get married, this will all make perfect sense." He waved at Alice through the taxi window. Oh, great shades of Elvis! She had cut off all her hair and dyed what was left of it red. Now, he was going to have to lie to his wife and tell her how much he loved it. "Hi, dumplin'. New hairdo?"

"Hello, Mrs. White," called Jimmy from behind him. "Chief, I'm going to stay until we roll. I want to log that call to London anyway."

"Okay, Olsen. Thank you," Perry told him with a quick wave to his junior reporter's departing backside. He turned and gave a great big smile to Alice as he got into the cab. "Wow, dumplin', that sure is red."

As soon as he shut the cab's door, the back doors locked and the compartment started filling with a smoky gas.

"What the...?" gasped Alice.

"Judas priest! What in Sam Hill's going on here?!" Perry hollered as he tried to open his door and couldn't. "Alice?!" His wife coughed next to him. He turned back towards the Daily Planet and screamed, "Jimmy!" but the kid was no longer there. The taxi pulled away as he continued to yell for help to no avail.

"Dear Mr. and Mrs. Kent:

I apologize for having to write this letter, but as I expressed myself so poorly during my visit to Smallville last month, I really don't have much other recourse. I know what I have to say may

sound implausible or even insane, but as the circumstances surrounding how you found Clark fit that realm as well, it's safe to assume that you are open minded."

Martha paced back and forth across her kitchen, the letter from Lois that they had found the night before last, once more in her hands. The pages must have fallen from the fax machine and blown under the desk again. She really hated that one flaw from their new-fangled fax machine. She'd get on Jonathan once more about fixing the tray.

"Clark was not supposed to die by Rocky Cove Creek that day, but a man named Tempus from the future decided that his troubles were your son, Clark's, fault, therefore, he traveled back in time to kill him. You see, when Clark grew up, he developed abilities that only a person with his background could have: incredible strength, self-propelled flight, heat-vision, cooling breath, among other traits. Clark had decided that, since he had been given these powers, he needed to use them for the good of mankind.

So, shortly after I met him, he convinced you – Martha – to create for him a disguise so that he could help people fight against oppression, danger, and crime. He became a beacon for Truth and Justice, not just in the U.S.A. but around in the world. He was known as Superman. The suit you designed for him was a bright blue skintight Spandex suit with red shorts, yellow belt, red cape, and red calf boots. On his chest he wore his family's red and yellow emblem..."

At this point Lois had drawn a diagram of Superman's 'S' crest.

"... which you had found on his baby blanket."

Martha traced her thumb over the drawing once more.

"Honey, please, let it go. She's just trying to get a story out of us," Jonathan said, rolling his chair from the living room into the kitchen. "Expose us to the world."

"How? Jonathan, how does she know about the symbol that was on his blanket?" she sputtered, holding out the letter to him. He shook his head, refusing to take it, and she clutched it to her chest.

"Maybe she talked to one of those government men. You know, the ones that stopped by a few days after we found him, asking about a downed Russian satellite," Jonathan hypothesized.

"And how would they know, Jonathan? You burned the ship and hauled it to the dump, didn't you?" she reminded him.

He shook his head. "I know we agreed that was the best, in case whatever killed that boy might be spread around here. But it wouldn't burn, so I buried it out in the woods, just past where we found him in Shuster's field, near Rocky Cove creek."

Martha eyes clouded over. "You never told me that."

"I didn't want to worry you," he said softly, taking her hand.

"You shouldn't keep secrets from me, Jonathan Kent."

He smiled. "That was the only one."

Martha raised a brow. 'We'll just see about that' she thought, before returning to the topic of the letter. "So what, Jonathan? She got a tip from one of those men and tracked us down, stayed in our house, helped us with our chores, all the while claiming to be looking, not for a baby, but a grown man, tall with dark hair and glasses, who had told her he was Clark Kent of Smallville, Kansas? Do you think she created such an elaborate hoax to get us to confess we found a dead baby in a spaceship thirty years ago?" Martha demanded.

"Possibly. We don't know, Martha. I don't think we should take that chance."

"We buried the blanket with him, Jonathan. How would she know the symbol had been on the blanket?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe those men..." Jonathan stopped speaking as he blanched. "Oh, Martha, no!"

She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him reassuringly. "No, he's still there. I checked, yesterday morning, I

dug..." She squeezed her eyes shut, a tear dripping down her cheek. "He's fine."

"Now, who's keeping secrets?" he challenged lightly. "Lois works for the Daily Planet. That letter was sent with a Daily Planet coversheet."

"Exactly! The Daily Planet, not some grocery store tabloid, a respectable newspaper, Jonathan. She says here..." Martha flipped through the pages until she found the paragraph again. "'The Clark Kent who I know and love is a respected journalist and my partner, here at the Daily Planet.'"

"Why would any son of ours become a journalist? In Metropolis, of all places?" Jonathan retorted. "Wouldn't you think that being from another planet, he would want to be as far away from the media as possible?"

"Or he would want to be right there in the thick of it, where he would be able to stop any rumors about himself?" Martha debated. "And why not Metropolis? If he wanted to help people as this Superman fellow, he'd want to live someplace with a large population where crime was rampant. What better place than Metropolis?"

Jonathan grinned. "Gotham?"

"Gotham City already has a hero." She gave him her patented 'I told you so' look with pressed lips. "Just because he was raised by Kansas farmers, doesn't mean he'd have grown up to be one." "Martha..."

"And what about this..." Martha started reading from the letter again. "... and that was how I ended up at your kitchen table that day. Perhaps you remember me. The man accompanying me, whom you were so worried about due to his pallor, was your son Clark, already sickened by the Kryptonite. Tall, dark, and handsome with glasses, just like I told you." Martha dropped her hand with the letter down to her side. "Jonathan, I remember that couple, don't you? It was her, Jonathan." Her lower lip began to quiver as her eyes misted over. "And that nice, young man was supposed to be our son."

Jonathan took her hand in his, closed his eyes, and nodded. "I remember," he said, his voice rough. "I didn't like that he kissed your cheek."

Martha raised her other hand to her cheek. Yes, her son had kissed her cheek, all those years ago. "Oh, Jonathan, if there is some way we can help her, so that she can save our boy..."

Her husband tugged on her hand with his until she was sitting on his lap, where he could wrap his arms around her. "I would give anything to have such a boy, such a man for your son, Martha."

"Me, too, Jonathan," Martha murmured against his neck.

For a few minutes they sat there, imagining the possibilities, the life they could have had if Clark had been alive when they had found him.

Jonathan moved his wife back so he could look her in the eye. "Martha, do you think that green rock that Wayne gave us, you know the big pretty green one he found under that big oak tree that went down in the storm several years ago, is the same green meteorite that Lois mentions in the letter?" His voice caught in his throat. "That Kryptonite rock that she said killed Clark?"

Martha nodded. "It is. Remember, while she was here, we noticed it glowed." She took a deep breath and pressed on. "I went down to Rocky Cove this morning..." She pressed her lips together and swallowed. "It took some searching after all these years, but I found some of those smaller pieces, just like she mentioned throwing away from the baby in her letter."

He set her to her feet and turned his chair towards their room. "Let's get it out of the house, Martha. I thought it was pretty when Wayne gave it to us, but now..." he said with a shiver. "I don't want that poison in my house any longer."

"I'll try Lois again," Martha said, heading for the kitchen

phone.

Jonathan stopped and looked over his shoulder at his wife. “Again?”

“I called her at home twice yesterday, but I only got her machine,” Martha explained.

“And you say I’ve been keeping secrets?” Jonathan teased, continuing to roll towards their bedroom. “Maybe you should try her at the office this time. Her letter said it was urgent.”

“That’s why I had tried her at her home,” Martha said, looking at the number on the fax coversheet and starting to dial. “I only hope we hadn’t found the letter too late. She sounded so worried about losing her job over this, and that darn letter sat under our desk for two days before we noticed it.”

Jimmy stepped off the elevator and into the newsroom, still shaking rain from his leather jacket. “Man, it’s raining cats and dogs out there,” he mumbled and ran a hand through his wet locks.

“Olsen! There you are,” Eduardo said, stepping out of Perry’s office. “Where have you been?”

The junior reporter’s brow furrowed. “Running up a lead for the Chief. I told him I’d be late.”

“You’ve heard from Perry?” Eduardo asked anxiously.

“He’s still not in?” Jimmy responded, jogging to Perry’s office to take a look, but no Mr. White. “Have you tried him at home? It’s not like him to be this late.”

“Of course, I’ve tried him at home,” Eduardo snapped. “Neither he nor Mrs. White answered. Did he say anything to you about being late?”

“No, last time I talked to him, he and Alice were heading to that charity symphony thing last night,” Jimmy said, reviewing his last conversation with his boss in his head again. “It’s not like the Chief’s wife not to be home. Perry says that Alice likes to sleep late the morning after they go to these black tie affairs.”

Wally walked by making kissing noises. “How’s the Chief’s butt tasting there, Olsen?”

“Grow up, Wally. Just because I’ve taken the time to listen and get to know the boss, doesn’t make me a brown-noser,” Jimmy retorted with annoyance.

“Yeah, well after Lane’s butt, I guess White’s is like dessert,” Wally shot back.

Jimmy stepped up to Wally’s over six foot frame, bumping his chest against the more senior reporter. “Just because you were too much of a chicken...”

“Guys!” Eduardo interrupted, pushing them apart. “This isn’t helping.”

Jimmy sent a nasty grimace in Wally’s direction, before turning back to Eduardo. “Has anyone checked with the Luthor Foundation for the Arts to see if the Whites made it the Metropolis Symphony last night?”

“No, I’ve got some people checking with hospitals at the moment. So far, we’re assuming he got involved in one of those fender-benders around town from the rain.” Eduardo checked his watch. “Look, I’m supposed to be meeting someone at the Metropolis Meteorological Association about this freak storm. LNN is predicting massive floods. With Lane at the looney bin, I’m next in line for holding down the fort.”

“Lois isn’t crazy!” Jimmy snarled. It was one thing for him to say it; it was quite another if anyone else did.

Eduardo’s hands shot up. “Sorry!” Then a look of curiosity crossed his face. “What’s this lead you were following up for the Chief?”

“Luthor! Lois was right. He and Dr. Carlin were married at sea about ten years ago,” the younger reporter announced, pulling out the wedding photograph the retired captain of the cruise ship had given him.

“Get out of town!” gasped Wally, staring over Olsen’s

shoulder at the photo. “Lane was right?! Again! Man, how does that woman do that?”

“A hell of a lot of hard work, Wally, you should try it sometime,” retorted Jimmy with an elbow jab back into Wally’s gut. “And maybe, while you’re at it, cut down on the deep fried lunches.”

“Guys!” Eduardo hollered again. “Stop it! Wally, go to City Hall see what the Emergency Plan is for storm.”

Wally nodded and ran from their make-shift group.

“Damn! I’ve got to take this meeting,” Eduardo said, pulling on his jacket. He looked to Jimmy with a pleading expression.

“Hold down the fort ‘til I get back?”

“Got it!” Jimmy nodded as his gut twisted.

It was just like the last time the Chief disappeared, only this time there was no Lois to hunt their boss down and bring him back safe. What were they going to do? If the Chief still hadn’t checked in by the time Eduardo returned, Jimmy would have to break Lois out of the Luthor House for the Mentally Unstable himself. Delusional or not, they needed her.

Jimmy shrugged out of his leather jacket and hung it up on the coat rack next to Lois’ desk. Her phone rang and he picked it up, leaning against her desk, “Daily Planet. James Olsen, speaking.”

There was a pause on the phone before a woman’s voice said, “Hello, Mr. Olsen. I’m looking for Lois Lane.”

“I’m sorry, she’s out of the office. Is there something I can help you with?” he asked. Joe handed him a fax for Perry.

“I don’t think so. When do you expect her back? I can call back then,” the woman replied.

“Who knows? Our reporters are in and out of the office all day, depending on their news stories, meetings with sources, and press conferences,” Jimmy explained, waving Paulson over. He covered up the receiver and handed the fax to the reporter. “Press conference at Metropolis Transportation Agency, something to do with flooding of the subway lines.”

“Got it!” Paulson responded, taking the fax.

“Can I take a message?” Jimmy said to the woman on the phone.

“When she faxed me the other day, she said that it was urgent that I contact her. Are you sure there isn’t another way to get a hold of her? Cell phone?” the woman persisted.

A chill danced down Jimmy’s spine. “Who is this?”

“Martha Kent,” she replied. He heard her take a deep breath and exhale. “Clark’s mother.”

“Holy crap!” he exclaimed and then quickly apologized, “Excuse me. Are you saying that Clark Kent is real?” He shook his head. “Of course that’s what you’re saying. You’re a godsend. Lois told me to expect your call. I just never thought... never mind what I thought. I’m sorry, it’s been a crazy day. My boss has disappeared, Metropolis is having the storm of the century that appeared out of nowhere, and with Lois at the Luthor House for the Mentally Unstable... Sorry,” Jimmy said, catching himself in Lois-like ramble.

“Lois is in a psychiatric hospital?” Mrs. Kent asked weakly.

“Yes, but this is terrific news, Mrs. Kent. We’ll be able to get Lois out of there, now.” Jimmy fist pumped in the air. “Okay, I will just need some kind of written statement from you, I guess... Damn! Excuse me, I don’t know what has happened to my manners today, Mrs. Kent. I apologize. I wish Perry was here, he’d know what to do next.”

Joe walked up to Jimmy. His pallor was like lukewarm oatmeal. He looked so pale and clammy, the photographer was worried he might be coming down with something. “Jimmy.”

“Not now, Joe,” Jimmy said to the man. “Okay, Mrs. Kent. Let me get your phone...”

“Yes, now, Jimmy,” Joe said as his voice cracked.

Jimmy took another look at the man and noticed never-

before-seen tears in the man's eyes. "Is this about White?" he asked, holding his hand out for the fax, but there wasn't one. "Hold on, Mrs. Kent."

Joe shook his head. "Lois." Then he turned and looked over his shoulder to Inspector Henderson.

The young reporter set the phone on his shoulder and turned to the policeman. "Inspector? Lois isn't in. I was sure that you heard that..."

"Is Mr. White in, Olsen?" Henderson interrupted. His face looked as ashen as Joe's.

"No, he's missing. I'm in charge until Eduardo Friaz returns from the Metropolis Meteorological Association. What's this about?" Jimmy asked.

Inspector Henderson swallowed and bit his bottom lip as if holding something back. Finally, he took a deep breath. "Lois Lane was killed this morning while trying to escape from the Luthor House for the Mentally Unstable. She had made it onto the fire escape, but in the rain slipped on the wet steps, falling to her death."

"No!" Jimmy sobbed. His knees buckled and he fell into Lois' chair. He turned his eyes back to the policeman's. "Are you sure?"

Henderson nodded. "There's a security photo of her climbing out onto the fire escape. It's her."

"My God. Lois!" Jimmy groaned, then he seemed to remember the phone on his shoulder. Swallowing, he brought the phone back to his face. "Mrs. Kent..."

He heard a snuffle and then the click of her phone being hung up.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Two days earlier...

Lois paced in her cell as Clark tried to reassure her. She was still mad that she had been locked up with no due process. Her so-called psychiatrist had said Lois was crazy and that she attacked her and should be locked up, so she had been.

At least the walls aren't padded.

"Very funny," she grumbled. He was right, it wasn't a cell per se, due to the lack of bars, and the walls weren't padded, but the furnishings were prison bare, and the door very much solid and bolted shut from the other side. "I can't believe Perry and Jimmy. I've been here for two days, and nothing! Not one word. Do you think they've abandoned me?"

After you bit that orderly and almost escaped, did you really expect them to allow you visiting hours? You're lucky Arianna didn't sedate you and chain you to your bed.

"Yeah, I don't understand that. What's up with her? It wasn't my fault Lex died. He was the one who tried to escape during the terrorist heist of the Daily Planet," she reminded him, stretching; her back still ached from both the Taser's current and hitting the hard floor. "It wasn't my idea."

Are you really trying to get inside the head of a psychopath?

"You're right, trying to understand her logic would probably drive me insane," Lois said, dropping down onto her cot. "I hate it when you're right."

Clark chuckled. *It's a good thing it doesn't happen that often.*

Lois smiled at his joke. "Thanks for not abandoning me, Clark. This would be worse if I were alone."

Now, there's a Catch 22 for you. Are you better off in the mad house with the voice inside your head or better off if I wasn't here, therefore have no reason for them to have locked you up in the first place? Clark's voice said in jest, but she could still hear the guilt behind his words.

"Don't tell me you're blaming yourself for this, Clark," she murmured, wishing she could touch him, hold his hand, give him a hug, something to reassure him other than her words. "It's not your fault."

I beg to differ there, Lois.

"Then I guess we'll just have to agree to disagree," she countered.

He sighed. *I love you, Lois, and I'll be here for you as long as I can be.*

"What's that supposed to mean, Clark?!" Lois snapped.

Star's prediction.

"Oh, come on, Clark. Arianna already has me locked up, do you really think she's going to try and kill me as well? She couldn't torture me if I was dead," she said with a shake of head. "Anyway, Star said the 'ex-wife' would try and kill me after the dead man returned. You haven't returned as far as I can tell, so obviously something's off with Star's prediction."

Unless...

"What?"

Unless I'm not the 'dead man' from Star's prediction. She did say the 'dead man's ex-wife', Lois.

Lois pressed her lips together. "If this is some ploy to make me believe that they could bring Lex back from the dead, don't even go there. The man was dead, very dead. He died in the middle of the night, while handcuffed to me, his back against mine. I could feel the body temperature leach out of his body as the hours progressed, so don't tell me that they have a way to bring back a man that dead from the grave."

Sarah said something about Lex's body having been stolen from the morgue.

"Didn't I just say not to go there?" Lois retorted.

Lois, Lex came back from the dead in our time too, the night of our first date.

Lois scoffed and shook her head. "Lex always had impeccable timing. Look, I've spent the last two days reliving months of our life together. I've had to deal with being engaged to Lex, almost being married to him, watching him die on our wedding day, you rescinding your love for me, and then Arianna trying to frame me for your murder. I really, really don't want to hear about Lex still being alive. Can't I just be happy that he's dead for a while? Both in real life and in my memories?" She dropped her head into her hands for a moment, and then she raised it, her brow knitted with an expression of confusion. "Wait? We went on a date? A date date? How did that come about?"

I asked you out, and you said 'yes'.

"Wow. Do they actually pay you for writing there, Kent?"

He chuckled sheepishly. Lois had never known a man who could express so much through his voice.

We didn't actually go. Lex came back, and Perry put us on a stakeout.

"Still, it would have been nice to remember you asking me out," she said, rubbing her arms with her hands.

You will; it happened sometime after Christmas... Cold?

Clark sounded worried.

"A bit," Lois admitted, pulling her blanket over her shoulders.

I wish I had my powers so I could warm you up with my heat-vision.

~If you had a body you wouldn't need your powers to warm me up,~ she replied.

True. His smile evident in his tone.

Lois sighed at the futility of it all. As long as she was stuck in the mental hospital, there was no way to save Clark. "All right, tell me. How did Lex come back from the dead?"

Gretchen Kelly Frankensteined him back.

"I knew it!" Lois jumped to her feet in triumph. "I knew it was her. I just knew she stole Lex's body!" She started pacing again. "Really? She's that good? Lex wasn't more than a stain on the sidewalk after jumping off his balcony." She bit her bottom lip. "Do you think those two – Arianna and Gretchen – would

work together? I mean, especially if they both were supposedly obsessed with Lex? Sounds like a cat-fight waiting to happen.” She paced back and forth in silence as she thought. “If they could piece together Humpty Dumpty, a simple bullet wound be nothing, wouldn’t it?”

I assume so.

“Damn! It’s not looking good,” she said as another chill went down her spine. “We need to get out of here. You know what Star’s third prediction was.”

You die.

Lois waved that possibility away. “No, I meant the other part. The part where time starts over and you die. We’ve got to stop that.”

Lois, I’m already dead, Clark reminded her gently.

“You’re not dead until I say you’re dead,” she argued.

Oh, is that how it works?

There was a click of her bolted door, and Lois backed away, staring at it.

“Lois?” Dr. Carlin’s voice said through the small sliding window. “We’re coming in to bring you for your session. Place your hands against the wall and spread out your legs. Don’t attack us or we’ll have to sedate you.”

“Really? Is that what you call it when you Taser people now?” Lois retorted, not complying. “And I don’t need therapy. You’re the crazy one.”

“Lois, I’m not crazy, and I’m not out to kill you,” Arianna replied in her soothing tone. “Whatever Clark has told you about me isn’t real. Just like he isn’t real, Lois, and these memories of your former life with him aren’t real. Your brain is just trying to cope with all the hurt, abandonment, and death you’ve dealt with since Lex died.”

You better do what she says, Lois. You’ll never escape while you’re locked in here. At least out there you can get a lay of the land and figure out where to go once you do get free.

Grumbling Lois spread-eagled against the wall as they had shown her when they informed her of the rules. She heard, more than saw, the door open and two orderlies enter her cell. One of the men shoved her back with one hand, so that her chest flattened against the wall, and grabbed one of her arms with the other. The other orderly took hold of the bicep of her other arm.

“I’m obeying; mind not being so rough?” Lois snapped at the men. They ignored her.

“This way,” Dr. Carlin said to the orderlies as she had the men take her down a long hallway.

They passed several of the activity rooms: game, dining, music. A door to a bright sunny room closed as they went by. “Hey, that looks like a nice room. Can we talk in there?” suggested Lois. Her vitamin D quotient was seriously low, and where there was lots of sunshine there were lots of windows, and where there were windows maybe there could be a way out.

“No, you can’t go into the Day Room. We don’t reward guests who try to permanently check out,” replied one of the orderlies.

Permanently check out?

“Guess I’m not the only one trying to escape,” she mumbled, unsurprised. ~Who would want to live here willingly?~

They stopped at a door at the end of a hall, leading to the psychiatrists’ offices. Dr. Carlin placed her hand on fingerprint scanner to unlock the door and waited for it to allow her access. Lois had visited Dr. Carlin’s office the previous day, after twenty-four hours of cooling her heels in her cell. It had been on the way back from her office, or therapy room, that Lois had bit the orderly and tried to escape. She hadn’t made it to the end of the hall before the orderly shot her in the back with the Taser that they all carried for “protection” and security. She was now considered a “restricted” patient, which required the escort of a doctor and two orderlies whenever outside her cell, limited

visitation rights, and the withholding of privileges such as access to the dining and activity rooms, entertainment, and dessert. Lucky her.

Soon Lois and Arianna were alone in the doctor’s therapy room. It technically wasn’t Arianna’s office. There was a couch for Lois and a chair for the doctor. There was no desk, no books, no pictures on the wall. There was a solid table and a couple of chairs to the side of the room, should the therapy require drawing, art, or some kind of test. A small barred window high in the wall was the only source of natural light, which was supplemented by a fixture high on the ceiling. The walls were painted a creamy pale yellow; Lois had read once that said color was supposed to have a positive influence on one’s happiness. So far, it wasn’t working.

Arianna sat down in the chair and indicated that Lois take the couch. Lois sat down, but refused to recline. She’d much rather keep both eyes on her opponent.

“So, Lois, how are you doing today?” Arianna said, opening her notebook.

“Completely cured and ready to go home,” Lois said, trying to keep the harshness out of her voice.

Dr. Carlin smiled indulgently. “I’ll determine your mental health, if you don’t mind.”

“Actually, I do mind. I would like to again request transfer to another facility and access to a psychiatrist of my choosing,” Lois responded, crossing her arms and fixing her glare the woman. “Access to my lawyer would be nice as well as I have been locked up here against my will.”

“The voice inside your head, whom you’ve named Clark, has told you that I’m not to be trusted. In your paranoia, you attacked and hurt me.” Arianna raised a hand to the bandage on her cheek. Lois knew it was there more for show than for actual injury. “For the safety of the general public, you have been remanded under my care,” the doctor once again informed Lois.

“I’d rather go to jail on a misdemeanor assault and battery charge. Thank you very much,” replied Lois. “What you are saying is that because *you* say I’m crazy, I have lost all my rights?”

“Then let’s work on making you sane again, shall we?” suggested Dr. Carlin.

Lois pressed her lips together and rolled her eyes.

“What is Clark telling us today?” requested Lex’s ex-wife.

Nothing I would say in polite company.

The reporter needed to bite her bottom lip to keep from laughing at Clark’s terse comment. Clark wasn’t one to ever speak impolitely to anyone in any company. Lois decided to see if she could startle the woman into revealing information. “Well, in my other life, the life that was supposed to be...”

“You mean the one where Lex wanted to marry you and then committed suicide when the police came to arrest him on your wedding day?” Arianna clarified in a skeptical tone. The doctor hadn’t liked Lois’ story of the events in her true destiny and hadn’t believed Lex’s behavior.

“Yes. Apparently, Dr. Gretchen Kelly, Lex’s personal physician, stole his body from the morgue, as I’m assuming she did here as well, and using unorthodox scientific practices, brought the man back to life,” Lois said, keeping an eye on Arianna’s reaction.

Dr. Carlin switched her crossed legs, shifted in her seat, and swallowed. “That’s quite the imagination you have there, Lois, or shall I say, that Clark has?”

That sounded like an admission of guilt on Arianna’s part, did it not?

~That body language didn’t lie,~ Lois agreed. ~Time to press her further.~

A phone rang and interrupted these thoughts. Lois looked around the room, finally spotting it hanging on the wall next to

the door. Dr. Carlin ignored it.

“Aren’t you going to get that?” Lois asked. “It could be important.”

“I’m in session, and they know never to call me while I’m with a patient,” replied Arianna.

The phone continued to ring, and it was impossible to carry on their duel of words while it did so. With each ring, Dr. Carlin’s eyes hardened.

“It could be an emergency,” suggested Lois lightly, who absolutely hated the sound of an unanswered phone as well.

Arianna got to her feet and stomped over to the phone. “What?!”

Do you think we pushed those buttons?

“You know never to call me while I’m with a patient!” Dr. Carlin reprimanded whoever was on the other end of the phone. She paused to listen to whatever ‘emergency’ had been deemed important enough to interrupt them. “I don’t care if he is... Of course, I know who he is! She’s a ‘restricted’ patient and isn’t allowed visitors... He’s threatened *what?*” she growled. Then the doctor looked at Lois and pursed her lips before they slowly curved devilishly upwards. “Fine! If he insists on seeing her, let’s give him what he wants. He can have fifteen minutes. She’s sedated in the infirmary and still on suicide watch after her attempt last night. Take her to the visitor’s lounge and make sure that she’s supervised at all times... I doubt she’ll speak to him. Yesterday’s... *session* was a difficult one, she’s practically catatonic.” This was said with gloating smile. “But if she does, let me know what she says.”

We’ve got to get you out of here.

~You took the words right out of my mouth.~ Lois swallowed as she watched Dr. Carlin hang up the phone and return to her seat.

The doctor looked down at her notepad. “Now, where were we?”

“How did she try to commit suicide?” Lois asked. Everything was so regulated in this place, she doubted anyone could overdose of pills, or get access to anything sharper than a dull butter knife, if that. Hanging perhaps?

“Are you looking for ideas?” Arianna inquired with a raised brow.

“No, I’ve got too much to live for,” Lois replied.

“Let’s get back to what you were saying before we were so rudely interrupted. You implied that in this other life with Clark, Lex was brought back to life by Dr. Kelly. Is this correct?”

“Yes.”

“Didn’t you tell me that Lex committed suicide, jumped off the balcony of his Lex Towers penthouse apartment?” Arianna clarified.

“Yes, but...”

“And how was he after Dr. Kelly resurrected him, Lois? A vegetable? The man had fallen over a hundred stories to the pavement below,” Dr. Carlin reminded her. “He must have broken every bone in his body and smashed every organ. His spine in the very least would have been destroyed. His blood must have splattered...”

“Shut up! Shut up!” Lois roared, pressing her eyes shut and covering her ears, but it was too late. The memory of Lex’s death on the sidewalk replayed itself before her very eyes in gruesome detail. Tears streamed down her face. She hated the man, but there was still a fraction of a piece of her that had once admired him and had mourned his death.

“Lois,” the woman’s voice was much softer now, calmer, coaxing. “There was probably hardly enough of him to take to the morgue, let alone steal, and rebuild into a perfectly viable body. How long did Clark say this transformation took place? Days, weeks, months? Don’t you think even if such science were possible, such a recovery would take years?”

Don’t listen to her, Lois.

“Roughly nine months,” Lois conceded.

“Clark lied to you. Can’t you see that, Lois?” Arianna reached out to touch her, but then changed her mind and withdrew her hand. “What he told you is impossible?”

~Clark?~

I cannot explain it either, Lois. Everything Arianna said makes sense. All I know are the facts as they were told to me as Lex and Dr. Kelly told them to you, and you explained them to me.

Lois squeezed her eyes closed tighter. ~Clark? I have no memory of these events yet. The last thing I remember is... was... You got nominated for a Kerth award over me?~

Clark made that slight squeaking noise he did whenever he cringed. *We ran into Dr. Kelly in the cemetery several months after that, in November, I think.*

~Did you win? Did you win the Kerth? Who did you take as a date to the ceremony?~ Lois got to her feet and started to pace.

Lois, that isn’t important right now. Let’s concentrate on finding out as much information as possible from Arianna about her husband... the one she said had been in an accident.

~Oh, you say it’s not important. Well, it is important. It’s important to me! I can’t believe it! You won, didn’t you?! And what piece of arm candy did you take to the awards banquet to simmer and laugh at your jokes, and to bat her eyelashes at you and look at you as if you were... Oh, crap!~

Clark sighed. *Yeah, you.*

“Lois? Lois? Is Clark talking to you?” Arianna asked.

Lois waved the question out of the air. “So what if he is?”

“Is he still trying to convince you that he wasn’t lying? Lois, you’re an intelligent woman. What makes more sense, that Lex died or that he was resurrected into the same man in less than a year?”

She dropped back down onto the couch. “I... I... Clark doesn’t lie.”

“Doesn’t he? It’s been my experience that every man lies,” Arianna said.

Lois closed her eyes and licked her dry lips. It had been Lois’ experience too. Even Clark had lied to her... all the time, about Superman.

“Is he trying to convince you that Dr. Kelly stole Lex’s body from the morgue, here in real life too, and brought him back to life?” Arianna shrugged. “I don’t know about that. I had heard that his body was stolen, but I don’t know anything about it.”

“You don’t?” Lois asked, her voice sounding echo-y.

“Why should I? I haven’t seen Gretchen in...” Arianna thought for a moment. “... over a year, since before Lex died, I guess.”

“You know her?”

Arianna shrugged as if it were nothing. “We’re both doctors. We ran into each other at the Metropolis chapter of the AMA’s: Women in Medicine meetings.”

“Don’t you care that she may have stolen his body?” Lois gaped.

“That man was nothing to me, Lois, an acquaintance.”

“An acquaintance?! Arianna, you were married to him!” Lois retorted. “You told me that you had never loved any man more than him.”

“Lois,” Dr. Carlin said, looking Lois straight into her eyes. “I wasn’t married to that man who died at the Daily Planet when those terrorists took over. I had only met him a couple of times. I hardly knew him. He was most certainly not the man I loved, and whom I married.”

Lois’ head began to spin. Arianna Carlin had sounded so sincere, looked her in the eye, and told her the truth. She hadn’t been married to Lex Luthor. Everything Lois had learned from her memories had been wrong? Had Clark lied to her?

Never! Lois, don't listen to her. She's trying to turn you against me. She knows that together we are stronger, you're stronger. She's trying to weaken you. Remember, she's already admitted to being married to him.

Lois lay down on the couch and looked up at the ceiling. ~But everything she has said makes sense, Clark. How could Gretchen Kelly resurrect Lex? That's impossible! Dr. Carlin is right about that. That doesn't make any sense.~

I'm not a scientist, Lois. I don't know how Gretchen Kelly did what she did, but she did do it. Believe me.

~Why, Clark? Why should I believe you? It doesn't make sense, logically. Arianna's not Lex's ex-wife. She's just some random person that he knew. There's no conspiracy here,~ Lois told him. ~Why would she be trying to kill me? It was *you* who convinced me that I shouldn't trust her. *You* who said that she was trying to kill Superman and frame me. I didn't have memories of that event until *after* you told me about them. You've lied to me for months, Clark. Why should I believe you now?~

She sat up and looked at Dr. Carlin. Maybe Arianna, Perry, Jimmy, and Sarah were all right. Maybe Clark and these memories were her imagination after all, a coping mechanism to deal with all the crap she'd been dealt over the last few years. "I'd like to go back to my room now," Lois murmured, defeated.

Chapter Twenty-Three

With this "breakthrough" all the fight inside of Lois died.

She loved Clark. She loved the idea of him. She loved that it took a rare green rock to kill him. She loved that he loved her unconditionally. She had been willing to love him unconditionally as well, but he lied to her and kept on lying to her.

Clark had twisted Star's crazy prediction into an unrealistic scenario and made her paranoid. What he had suggested just couldn't have happened like he had said it had. Dr. Carlin had been right about that. There hadn't been enough of Lex after such a skydive to piece back together for shark food, let alone a whole, living, breathing, fully functional person, especially within the span of less than a year. The brain and spinal cord damage alone would have made that impossible. She couldn't believe she had been so duped. Again. Maybe she could believe it. It seemed to be her pattern with men.

Her dreams were morphing into nightmares. Mayson had been there. Lois' former best friend was obsessed with Clark and kissed him! Clark didn't seem to mind either. Lois hated them both for it. Could she really have been so petty and jealous over a man whose heart she herself had broken? Did she deserve to be so? Should she have expected him to continue to love her, wait for her, after the way she had treated him? Or was the dream just a ploy to make her jealous? Was Clark trying to make her believe in him wholeheartedly again by realizing how much she hated seeing him with another woman, by mixing together facts from her reality with this other life to make it seem more real?

Then Clark died! He was shot by clones of gangsters no less, and died, right in front of her. Of course, she knew he wasn't really dead, because bullets couldn't kill him. Yet, Clark let her dream-self go on thinking that he was dead. He didn't love her enough, trust her enough, to tell her the truth and reveal his secret to her blind-self of these nightmares. Oh, sure, he resurrected himself – or his Clark Kent persona – a couple of horrible days later. She bought it again, hook, line, and sinker! What an idiot she had been to believe him so willingly. These scenarios were getting stranger, weirder, and more and more unbelievable. Clones? Again! Please, hadn't they done the clone storyline already? How could she have ever believed these dreams had once been her life?

Then they found out that Gretchen Kelly did have Lex's body hidden away in some laboratory at the cemetery. Looky that, just

like Clark had told it to her. Only how could Lois trust these dreams as memories any longer when Clark – the consummate liar – had already told her that they were true? Maybe he was implanting these thoughts, memories, dreams, nightmares into her head. None of it felt real. It felt like she had fallen into her favorite TV show and now couldn't escape, tortured by a man who she had once believed was her hero.

Clark had receded into the back reaches of her mind once more. He hadn't left, Lois could still sense him there, but he was depressed. He had gotten tired of arguing with her, trying to convince her that he *had* been real, and finally had gone off to mope.

I'm not moping, Clark grumbled in a dejected voice. Sure sounded like moping to her.

~Clark, I want to believe in you, really I do. I would like nothing better than to have you proved right and Dr. Carlin proved wrong,~ Lois said inside her head to him the next day as she sat motionless at a table in the Day Room.

Her lack of any sort of enthusiasm for life, since her therapy session with Dr. Carlin, was seen as such a good thing, they had rewarded her by letting her go to the room with all the windows and skylight to do some drawing with crayons. What was she? Four?

The room itself held no curiosity to her at all. Any interest in finding a way out, of escaping back into Metropolis, had disappeared with her complete belief in Clark. Anyway, what sort of life would she be escaping to?

She was dressed in the hospital gown they had given her to sleep in. She saw no reason to get dressed. If she was indeed crazy, what was the point of putting on real clothes, especially if she had been wearing the same clothes for three days straight? Hell, she hadn't even been given the opportunity to take a shower. She might as well play the hand she had been dealt. It wasn't like she was going to go anywhere anytime soon or have any visitors. What did she have to live for? No family. No friends. No job. She hoped someone had thought to feed her fish.

Lois sighed. She didn't want to believe that both Perry and Jimmy had abandoned her to this fate. Did they really think she was crazy? Did they have no hope left for her? It wasn't like she had any family left to care. The Daily Planet was her family or, at least, it had been.

Honey, do you remember what Dr. Carlin said to you before she attacked you in the conference room?

She mentally shrugged; the physical exertion seemed pointless. They had been over this before.

*Look at the facts, Lois. Arianna said that she **had** been married to Luthor and that 'Lex had only loved her'. That was **why** she had attacked you, because you told her what he had said about only loving you. Now, she's denying more than just a passing acquaintance with the man. Does that sound like a sane woman to you? A woman who claimed that she would do anything for him. Lois, please, don't give up. You're letting her win. You're letting her kill you with these lies. Please, Lois.*

~So, you're done moping?~ Lois replied with a half-hearted barb.

I don't think you meant it.

~Meant what?~

That you'd rather be crazy with me than sane without me.

Lois continued to stare at the floor, not really focusing on it as her mind concentrated on Clark's words. Would she rather give him up and go back to what her life had been like before he had started whispering in her ear? Going to work, living vicariously through other people's stories, eating microwave meals by herself, dating men like Scardino? Or worse, Lex? Clark made her feel... what exactly?

Lois?

Alive? Loved? Cherished? So, Clark wasn't perfect. She

hadn't yet met a man who was.

Lois? Did you hear that?

True, Clark lied to her, but Lois was starting to think that was a given in any relationship she got herself entangled with.

Lois! Someone just mentioned WandaMae.

~WandaMae is a character from our dream-life, Clark,~ she reminded him. ~She's not real.~

Then why did I hear some men talking about her?

~Hmmm,~ Lois replied, not really paying him any heed.

Lois, they're talking about you, now.

~So,~

It was kind of nice having Clark in her life. She always had someone to talk to, joke with, and if he was indeed real...

Lois, pay attention! Could you please look up, so I can see the men discussing you? They just said you were engaged to a powerful man.

~Then they aren't talking about me, are they?~

She'd miss him, if she let him go. Lois sighed. But if she didn't, how was she ever going to leave this place?

"I don't know why anyone would want to escape," she could hear a man saying. "The therapists are friendly, the sheets soft, and the food quite delicious, but then again, I don't live on the evil side."

~Clark, I don't want to listen in on other people's conversations. Stop it.~

Of course, the man had a point. She could just remain here.

You've got to be kidding!

~You're right, Clark. The therapists are psychotic, the sheets scratchy, and the food horrible.~

"I'm Batman."

~And they think I'm crazy,~ Lois told Clark. ~Hey, you ever met the Caped Crusader? I hear he's intense.~

Focus, Lois.

"H.G. Wells."

What?

~What?~

"Not *the* H.G. Wells."

~No, we couldn't have that kind of luck, or should I say, we do have that kind of luck. H.G. Wells finally comes to rescue us and he's locked up inside the same mental institution as me.~

Lois, look up for goodness sake, make eye contact with him at least; he's going to think you're mentally unbalanced otherwise.

~Well, he'd probably be...~

Lois!

With a sigh, Lois rolled her eyes up from where she was staring at the floor. ~Fine.~ Her eyes blinked and she focused on the other side of the room. There was a short man with a mustache and spectacles. ~Hey, he looks just like...~ Lois was on her feet and at the glass wall, two seconds later. "Wells!" she called, but her voice made hardly a noise from lack of use. She cleared her throat. "Wells!" She started knocking on the glass wall.

The man was passing through the door with one of the women from admitting.

Oh, God! You're going to miss him.

Lois turned around and picked up the folding chair she had been sitting on and swung it at the glass wall. "*Wells!*" she yelled.

She saw him turn, but the woman he was with closed the door before he could see into the room.

"No!" Lois screamed, hitting the window again. "Wells!"

Suddenly, three orderlies had her. One took the chair out of her hands, the other two held her arms. There was a smash and another chair hit the glass wall and bounced back into the 'restricted' section of the room, and then another.

"Let go of me," she hollered, trying to pull herself free.

The other inmates of the restrictive section continued to

bombard the thick glass walls with chairs and easels, trying to break through. An alarm sounded and more orderlies arrived to help calm the ensuing chaos. The two guards who had her arms started dragging her towards the exit. When they got to the door, Lois climbed up the wall with her feet doing a back flip over the shoulders of the men who held her. This motion caused the two men to swing towards one another and bash heads. It was enough of a distraction for Lois to squirm out of their grip and out the door.

Lois ran down the hall and then another, searching for a way out. She hadn't been down this hall before. She heard footsteps behind her. She grabbed the knob on the closest door to her, thankfully it turned, and she ducked inside the room. She turned around and realized she was in some sort of hospital ward with rows of patients in beds.

None of the people glanced up at her entrance. The nurses were all absorbed in a security monitor showing the fight in the Day Room. The patients were all either sleeping or staring off into space. It was eerie how her presence went unnoticed – almost as if she wasn't really there at all.

Half-way down the ward, she saw a woman with dark hair falling about her chin, cut into the same style as Lois'. Both of her wrists were bandaged as if she had cut them in a suicide attempt. Was this the woman about whom Dr. Carlin had gotten the emergency call during their session the previous day? Was this why Arianna refused to tell Lois how the woman had hurt herself, because she had been able to access something able to slice her wrists? The woman had a lost expression that reminded Lois of her own before Clark had snapped her out of her self-pity. Maybe that was why the woman reminded her of herself.

A chill made her hairs stand on end. No, it was more than that. That woman looked exactly like her! Lois gulped. Was that her? Was she only dreaming, fantasizing about escaping? Had she fallen so deeply into her delusion that she didn't know reality from her dream-world any longer? Whatever the reason, Lois didn't want to be in this room any longer. She backed up and felt the doorknob hit her in the center of her back; she turned it and bolted from the room.

Lois ran back down the hallway and came to the door leading to the offices where Dr. Carlin had held her therapy sessions. As she got close, she heard the secure door unlatch and start to open. She leaned up against the wall next to the door as Arianna and two other people in white doctor jackets exited the hall and ran towards the Day Room. As the last one passed through, Lois jutted out her hand and caught the door before it closed. She slipped down the secure hall and started checking doors.

The first door on the left had been the therapy room where she had talked with the ex-Mrs. Luthor; she skipped that one. If Wells existed, then it proved Clark's story as true and she might as well accept the truth: Dr. Arianna Carlin was the ex-wife of Lex Luthor.

The first four doors were locked. Maybe they were only therapy rooms with patients currently held in lockdown, while their doctors were dealing with the mess in the Day Room. She finally came to an unlocked door. It was a doctor's office, but one cursory glance told Lois she would never get out from that room – it had no window.

Lois tried the next room and found the same problem. Instead of trying the next door, she skipped all the doors until she reached the end of the hall. There was a large window there, and she could see the fire escape outside. Just as she went to try to open the window, she heard a sound and realized someone was coming. She ducked inside the last office on the hall and closed the door behind her.

As she leaned against the door attempting to catch her breath, she looked around her new hiding spot, searching for a way out. She saw lots of books on bookshelves, a computer, a telephone.

Oooh. She could call Perry.

And say what exactly?

No, scratch that idea. She saw a door in the wall behind the desk. Figuring it was a personal bathroom, where she might be able to find a change of clothes, Lois opened the door.

On the other side of the door was a long hall.

A back exit perhaps, suggested Clark.

~Perhaps,~ Lois agreed, quickly darting down the hall. There were three doors on the hall. The first was to the restroom. She closed it as soon as she opened it. The second was locked. The third was also locked. ~Damn!~

Lois returned to the office and started checking the desk for anything. In one drawer, she found a pens, pencils, paperclips, tacks, pair of scissors, and other office supplies. In another, blank papers, folders, and envelopes. The last drawer was locked. Could she use a paperclip to get that locked drawer open? What was in there worth securing, she wondered. Did it merit her time and effort to find out?

Her mind returned to that woman who looked like her in the hospital ward. It had been spooky how nobody had noticed her enter that room, like she wasn't even there, like she had been a mirage or a dream or something.

It was someone who looked like you, Lois, but she wasn't you, Clark reassured her.

Lois would make sure no one made the mistake of confusing the two of them. She grabbed the scissors and a lock of her hair. A few snips later, her shoulder length bob was now up to her ears. She probably looked a wreck, but maybe being unrecognizable as herself would buy her more time to escape. Now, she only needed a change of clothes.

Lois, what are you doing? Wells will end up taking the wrong you back in time to save me if he doesn't recognize you.

She looked down at the clumps of hair in her hands and dumped them in the waste paper basket. "Nothing I can do about that now," she muttered.

Lois took the scissors and dug one of the blades into the lock on the desk, popping it open. Inside she found a large ring of keys. She dropped the scissors, grabbed the ring, and returned to the secret hallway. She tried the middle door, first with one key and then another and another and another. Finally, she found one that fit. She turned the lock and opened the door.

On the other side of the door she found an apartment. Did one of the doctors live in-house? She looked around the ornately furnished living room, still searching for an exit. Running to the windows, she noticed they were all barred.

"You're not going to find a way out," a familiar voice said from behind her.

Lois spun around and found herself facing Lex Luthor.

Luthor?

"Lex?!" she sputtered.

"Lois! Darling, is that you?" A genuine smile spread across his face. Lex was dressed casually in slacks and a button down Oxford, no tie. "I hardly would have recognized you."

She passed one hand uneasily over her unwashed, newly cut hair as the other tugged down the hem of the hospital gown. She took a step back for every one of his steps forward, but he still caught her and pulled her into a friendly embrace.

"Ari said that she had convinced you to join us."

"You're dead," she finally exclaimed.

Lex chuckled. "Well, no." He took her arm and led her over to the sofa to sit down. "Funny story actually..."

"What? Gretchen Kelly gave you a new heart and a blood transplant and somehow miraculously you're alive again?" she scoffed, scooting further away from him.

"If Gretchen ever reanimated that body, which was stolen from the morgue, she'd have been in for a rude awakening. You see, I wasn't with you the night you got caught by the terrorists at

Daily Planet. That wasn't me."

Lois' eyes opened wide. "Not you?"

"No, not me," he said with his charming smile that now reminded her of fish oil. He leaned closer and whispered, "That was my clone; an expensive bit of science that, only to have it die prematurely and force me into hiding. Shame." He shook his head in disappointment.

"Clone?" Lois echoed.

Of course, it makes total sense. Without me in this world, Luthor had himself cloned instead.

Her lips pressed into a line. "You sent a clone on a date with me?"

That would explain why Arianna said that the man who had died at the Planet wasn't her husband, why he was only an acquaintance she had met on a few occasions. He was the clone! She wasn't lying! I wonder if that nose-diving Luthor was also a clone.

"You sent a clone on a date with me?" Lois roared, standing back up. "This whole time I thought you liked me and the first chance you got you set me up with your second string replacement?"

Lois, priorities. Dead man back from the dead. Ex-wife trying to kill you. Exact double of you in another room. Time running out.

"All this time, I thought you loved me!" she said, continuing her rant.

"I do love you, Lois," Lex said calmly. He shrugged. "It was Madame Butterfly. It wasn't as if we were going to do much talking. He needed some more real world experience and I had a standing date with Ari. We always get together on our anniversary..." He grinned.

"More experience?" Lois repeated in a huff. "You sent him on dates with me before? Is that why he told me he loved me? Or was that something you taught him as well?"

Lex stood up and crossed to her, setting his hands on her shoulders. "Lois, darling, I admit in the past I stretched myself a bit thin, but that has all changed. I'm a new man."

She knocked his hands off her shoulders. "Don't touch me!"

His charming smile grew. "Ah, that fire. How I've missed that fire. You... you are irreplaceable." He sighed. "A one of a kind."

Not available. Lois, time to go!

Lois nodded and she turned to go out the front door, but then paused as Lex took hold of her arm.

"Not yet, Lois," he requested in a firmer tone. It wasn't quite a command, but it wasn't as nice as a suggestion either.

"I've got to go. They're looking for me," she said, realizing she was stating the obvious.

Lex didn't let go of her arm, actually his grip tightened as his other hand removed the key ring from her fingers. "I'll be holding on to these," he said, and slipped the key ring into the pocket of his slacks. "Come. Sit down. Relax. Would you like..." His eyes looked down her body and then back up again. "... to freshen up?"

Lois wanted to, but not within a mile of this man. The creepy fingers of dread danced across her shoulders. "I should go," she repeated, pulling on her arm to free herself.

"Where are you going to go, Lois?" He sat back down. "Now that I've got the keys; you'll need them to open any doors."

Lo-is! Bad guys with Tasers hunting you down. Keys or not, time to escape, honey.

~Right!~ Lois turned back to the door.

Two steps later, Lex's words made her hesitate. "As I said before, there isn't a way out. Trust me, I've tried."

Go!

Chapter Twenty-Four

Lois ran out the door of Lex's apartment and back into the hallway. There were still only the four doors. The bathroom, the apartment, the locked door, and the door that led back into the office. Arianna's office, Lois presumed. She chose door number four: anywhere that Lex wasn't.

She found Arianna's suit jacket hanging on a hook behind the office door that led back to the hall with the therapy rooms. Lois slipped the jacket on. Anything was better than this nightgown. She opened the door a crack and heard feet running and voices calling to one another. They knew she was here. She was trapped.

Lois went back out the door to the hallway that led to Lex's apartment. She tried the third door again; it was still bolted tight. She heard the jingling of keys.

"You'll need these I'm afraid, Lois," Lex said, leaning against the doorframe to his apartment, rattling the keys.

She dived to grab them from his hand, but he held them outside of her reach.

"Uh-uh-uh," Lex replied with a patronizing shake of his head, and returned to the apartment. "Come with me and you'll be safe from the bullies with the Tasers."

Lois heard voices from Arianna's office. It was only a matter of moments before they opened that door and found her. Having no other choice, she followed Lex, shutting the door behind her and leaning against it. Her breath was ragged, more from fear than physical exertion. She didn't want to go back to her cell.

This is the lesser of two evils, Lois?

~Clearly not!~ Lois snapped back at Clark. She really didn't have much of a choice. Anyway, she had too many questions, yet unanswered. "What are you doing here?"

"I live here," he replied simply, sitting back down on the sofa.

"Live here?" she echoed. Who would want to live in a mental institution? "Why?"

"Ari and I had almost finished building the Luthor House for the Mentally Unstable prior to my untimely death by terrorists. I needed a place to lay low until I could figure out a way of not being dead, and Ari suggested these apartments," Lex explained. "No one knew that they're here or that they lead to and from the mental institution and the building next door. It's the perfect hideout really. Then, when my body was stolen from the morgue, it was the ideal time to make my reemergence into Metropolis."

"So, you didn't steal your body to stage a comeback?" Lois inquired.

"Brilliant that, but alas not. I can only assume, like you did, that Gretchen with her unhealthy attachment to..." He smiled indulgently. "... my body, was the responsible party."

Lois shivered at that disgusting thought.

"Cold, my dear?" Lex asked, standing. "I do like that jacket, but that nightgown leaves something to be desired." His teeth showed with his bad joke. He opened a door on the other side of the room. "Your bedroom."

"Excuse me?" she gulped.

"There is a bathroom and a closet full of clothes in your size. You'll be most comfortable," he explained. The lip above those teeth sneered upwards. "I won't peek."

Somehow, I don't believe him.

~Neither do I,~ Lois thought, continuing to lean against the front door to the apartment and keeping her gaze focused on the recently dead man.

"Lois," drawled Lex, that indulgent tone returning. "Did you think that Ari would bring you here only to leave you with those people? You aren't crazy, headstrong maybe, but certainly not insane."

~Really not feeling the sanity at the moment.~ Lois decided it was time to test her voice again. "Why would she do that? Arianna's in love with you."

Lex shrugged. "True." He sighed with pity as if he knew that anyone foolish enough to love him wasn't worth his love in return. "Physical intimacy isn't high on her list, though. She's more of the lie there and take it type." He waved a hand dismissively. "Some childhood trauma or whatnot. Extremely boring, if you ask me. It's actually why we divorced. I felt it was better for her to have her freedom." Then he chuckled as if it had been a lie for his wife's benefit. "She didn't want the divorce and said she'd do anything for me." He indicated the door to Lois' bedroom again. "She thinks it's better for me to get my carnal pleasures elsewhere as long as I keep my friendship with her."

I don't like the sound of that.

Lois gulped, neither did she. "So, you and Arianna aren't divorced?"

"Oh, yes. The divorce was finalized," Lex said, turning to a side table with decanters of liquor and pouring himself a glass of some amber liquid. He must have seen her eye the decanters. "Don't get any ideas, Lois. They're plastic." He tapped the decanter against the table to prove his point. "At first, Ari was afraid I might try to hurt myself or her with broken glass." He laughed, pointing over his shoulder at the windows Lois had first looked out upon entering the apartment. "Unbreakable glass as well. Trust me, I've tried. Anyway, after the divorce I moved on with my life, built up LexCorp and my billions. Of course, as my founding partner of LexCorp, Ari did well for herself, but she refused to be ignored and was almost impossible to satisfy. We settled on a compromise; I would play husband once a month, meeting her for dinner and conversation..." Lex yawned, took a sip of his drink, and shrugged. Then he shot Lois a wolfish grin. "And once a year, on our anniversary, I get *my* way with her."

Lois cleared her throat. "Why not just have her killed and be done with the whole charade?"

Lois!

~It's a fair question, Clark. We both know killing isn't above his abilities. He was 'The Boss' after all~ she retorted.

This isn't an interview. This is your life.

"Frankly, the challenge more than makes up for the inconvenience," Lex replied, setting down his drink and crossing to her at the front door. He ran a finger down her jaw. "I hope you won't mind sharing. It's only once a year, my dear." His eyes flashed with an idea. "Unless..."

Lois' knee flew upwards, making contact with Lex's crotch as the heel of her hand hit his jaw. "Not in this lifetime."

Not in any lifetime.

Lex staggered backwards, but he didn't let the blows floor him.

"Give me the keys!" she demanded, taking a step towards him.

When he spoke, Lex gasped, "Yes, a fiery volcano." He sounded pleased. "I knew there was an inferno behind those demure little suits and innocent doe eyes. I'm glad to see I wasn't wrong." He licked his lips in anticipation and then coughed as he straightened up. "I've hidden the keys, Lois. No amount of searching will find them." To show her the truth of that statement, he pulled out his empty pockets. "I'm a patient man, Lois. We won't tango until you're ready, but what a tango it will be." He held out his hand towards the bedroom again. "Really, Lois, I won't peek. I'm not that kind of man."

Uh-huh.

"Mind if I don't believe you, Lex?" Lois replied, returning to her spot against the door. "So, go on with your story. You never explained why you never reappeared as the great Phoenix."

Lex took a gulp of his drink and sat gingerly down on the sofa again. "Arianna." He chuckled in admiration. "I became her prisoner."

The decanter story. The comment about the window and doors.

The grand Lex Luthor, “The Boss”, taken down by his ex-wife. Despite herself, Lois’ esteem of Arianna Carlin rose, and a hesitant smile brushed her lips. “You’ve been stuck here all this time?”

He shrugged. “It isn’t so bad. I have a personal chef and maid service. Any number of female companions, whenever I require, to do with whatever I please. True, most of my billions got distributed to those charities in my will, and the rest went into Ari’s trust. As founding partner of LexCorp, she inherited control of that as well, but she turned that over to me in time to give me something to do during the day. Of course, I delegate, not being able to leave my rooms, but...” He raised his glass in a toast. “... there’s compromise in every relationship.”

Something was wrong, off in his version of the truth. If he were truly her prisoner he would have taken his opportunity to escape when Lois barged into his rooms with the keys. “You’re not really her prisoner, are you?”

Lex smiled proudly. “Astute.” He winked. “Not for quite some time, but I see no reason to go about in society anymore, making nice, playing gentleman businessman. Now, that I have you, my life is complete.”

Lois rolled her eyes at that statement. “So you just gave up the power being ‘The Boss’ gave you?”

“Did I?” he asked innocently, taking another sip of his drink.

She frowned as the final puzzle piece fell into place. “You had Toni Taylor killed, didn’t you.” It wasn’t a question.

He shrugged nonchalantly. “She had been warned not to talk.”

“What did it matter that she ruined your reputation? You’re dead! Are you going to kill me too because I’m the one who revealed your secrets to the world at large?”

Don’t taunt the megalomaniac, Lois.

~Please, Clark. He’s not into necrophilia. He wants me alive and fighting.~

“I expected as much from you, Lois. Actually, I’m disappointed that it took you this long to see the real me,” he replied, resting his jaw on his hand. “Now, that you know the truth about me, it should make our relationship more exciting.”

“We don’t have a relationship,” she reminded him.

“I love you, Lois,” he said with a long desirous sigh, his fingers trailing across his lips as his eyes once more violated her body with its caress.

“Then you’re going to be disappointed, Lex, because I’ll never love you and this...” She pointed down to the body he was ogling. “...will never be yours.”

“Never say never, darling.” He held out his hand to the bedroom. “Please, go clean up and change, Lois. Relax. You’ve had a hard couple of days, I’m sure with Ari playing with your mind.”

She still didn’t move.

“Unless you prefer wearing those rags,” he challenged, and then turned on the familiar charm. “Please, Lois, join me for dinner, whatever you want to eat. No ulterior motive, I promise. I’ll even take you to the symphony. Being head of Luthor Foundation for the Arts does have some perks. I won’t make any passes. Just two old friends getting reacquainted. The bedroom and bathroom doors have locks, I won’t come in, promise.” He held up his hands in a gesture of goodwill. “It’ll be just like old times.”

Lois pressed her mouth into a line. “With or without the clone?”

“Touché, my dear.”

“Am I free to leave?” she challenged, her brow raised, already knowing the answer.

“Of course not. This is your home now unless you want to return to your cell, where your entire life is watched, your food chosen for you, no entertainment, mandatory therapy sessions

with Ari, and the only company you have are the mentally disturbed. You’d be insane yourself within a week.”

Choose the cell, Lois.

~Even if I chose the cell, Clark, he wouldn’t let me go. It’s just a control play; he wants me to believe I have some. We just have to bide our time, until we can find the keys or possibly somehow get away at the symphony.~

Lois, you don’t really believe that he’d show his face at the symphony, do you?

~We’ll have to see about that, Clark.” She took a deep breath and exhaled, finally pushing herself off the door and walking into the bedroom that he indicated.

With Clark’s expertise to guide her, Lois had looked in every conceivable place for microphones and hidden cameras. Finding none, she took a shower. The shampoo and conditioner were the same brand she used at home, as were the make-up and toiletries in the medicine cabinet. If Lois hadn’t known that the quantities were different, she might have assumed that they were the same, because they were hers and she had bought them.

It had felt good to shower, normal. She had let the hot water run down her back and the stress of the day flowed down the drain. It helped that Clark rambled on with funny stories from his travels and his life, distracting her from thinking about what Lex wanted or expected from her. Being with Clark was more intimate than she had ever allowed herself to be before. It wasn’t just that she couldn’t have a private thought to herself; she felt comfortable with him in a way she never had with a real living, breathing person. She wondered if she would feel as at home with him, if he were actually in the room, instead of just in her head.

Lois couldn’t believe she had considered sending the man away. Now, that she had let the anger from the last twenty-four hours ebb away, she realized her love for Clark had returned stronger than ever. He had been hurt by her rejection, by her lack of trust in him, but like a chocolate stain Clark would not go away; he was always there to remind her of the wonderful time they had together.

The clothes in the closet also gave her a bizarre sense of déjà vu... like hers, but not. Lois picked out a modest maroon gown for her and Lex’s ‘evening out’, but once she had it on, Clark bashfully told her that he had always liked her in that color. She switched to basic black in case the maroon did make her look better; she didn’t want to impress Lex. This wasn’t a date. She was this man’s guest, his captive, but she wasn’t planning on letting him get the upper hand. Plus the black dress had a nice slit up the side to free her legs for defensive action, should it be required.

Dinner had been an intimate affair and reminded her of that first supper she and Lex had shared, when she was supposed to be interviewing him for the Daily Planet. Lex had tried to flatter her, ply her with his charm, only this time she had the good sense not to believe any of it. Clark was largely quiet, whispering suggestions in her ear only on those few occasions when she seemed to have been lacking a sharp barb.

Lois heard a ding of a mantel clock announcing the three-quarter hour and Lex stood up.

“Shall we go?” he asked, holding out his hand to her.

She looked at his hand, then blatantly ignored it as she rose to her own feet. “Is it supposed to be warm tonight?” Lois inquired. “Or will I require a wrap?”

“Darling, you will never be cold again,” he replied cryptically, and motioned for her to follow. He led her down a hall off the living room and opened a door. He waited, expecting her to enter first.

Lois peered inside, not wanting to enter a room without knowing if it was floorless with a crocodile pit at the bottom or just a room. She saw it was a home theatre with navy draped

walls and comfortable, better than movie theatre seats – a grand total of eight of them.

“Our own Luthor Conservatory of Music,” he announced.

Her brow furrowed as she entered the room. “Is the symphony coming here?”

“Yes and no,” he replied. “Come, let’s take our seats.”

“Why did we get dressed up, if we aren’t leaving the apartment?”

Lex smiled indulgently. “Because it’s much better to be dressed up. It helps with the ambiance.”

Okay-dokey. It’s official. Lex Luthor has fallen off his rocker.

Lois hid her agreeing smile as she sat down.

Lex sat down opposite her and picked up a large remote control. One button opened the curtain on the stage, revealing not a wide-screen television, but a small movie theatre type screen.

“I’ve never pictured you as the movie buff, Lex,” Lois teased him.

“I’m not,” he responded, pressing another button. The lights dimmed. He pressed another couple of buttons and a picture and sound appeared. It was as if they were actually there at the Luthor Conservatory of Music. She could hear people talking as they took their seats. The picture was focused on the stage.

“Is this a live link?” she asked, perplexed. “Or pre-recorded?”

“Live,” Lex whispered, leaning towards her, as if they were actually there in Lex’s private box, instead of on the other side of town. “Being the chairman of the Luthor Foundation for the Arts does have its little perks.”

Lois stared at the man. “When you say you never leave the apartment, do you really mean ‘never’?”

“Lois, I have a world class chef. I have my office with all necessary equipment to run my company. I can watch any show, concert, or opera in Metropolis in my very own theatre,” Lex explained, indicating the screen. “I no longer have to make small talk with small people, sit through tedious business meetings that accomplish nothing, and pretend to be someone I’m not. This is the most free I’ve ever been, and now I have you to share it with. Why would we ever want to leave?”

“What if I want to go for a walk in the park?” she questioned.

“The exercise room has a treadmill with a large view screen. There are a thousand preprogrammed walks, mocking the conditions at national parks all over the states. Scents are pumped in from our greenhouse...”

“You have a greenhouse?” Lois interrupted. A greenhouse meant sunlight, fresh air, and windows, lots of lots of windows.

“Of course. I grow my orchids there,” he responded naturally.

“Lex, I can’t live like this,” she said, trying to communicate with his logical side. “I’m a people person, a reporter. I need to talk to people, have discussions, visit new places, experience life, not watch it on television.” She flipped her hand at the screen.

“You’ll adapt. As my wife, you’d have given up your career anyway,” he replied.

Maybe Arianna was right to lock him up in a mental institution.

Lois’ eyes widened. There would be no communicating with this man.

The lights in the auditorium dimmed and the concert started. Lex seemed absorbed in the music, but she felt nothing but bored. After what felt like hours, but probably was a much shorter time, Lois felt her eyes grow heavy with sleep.

Lois, why don’t you get up, move around, search for the keys. Tell him you need to use the restroom.

She agreed; sitting and waiting for this farce to be over, so that they could head to their respective bedrooms would take too long. She stood up.

“Where are you going?” Lex hissed. “You’ll disturb the orchestra.”

“I’m tired, Lex; it’s been a long couple of days. I’m returning

to my room,” she replied, heading for the door.

“I’ll accompany you,” he insisted.

“No!” Lois exclaimed in horror, and then calmed her voice. “Finish the concert, Lex. As you said, there’s no escape. Where else could I go?”

Lex nodded in agreement and sat back down.

She exhaled in relief and returned out to the living room. There hadn’t been much time between when he had jingled the keys at her and when she had re-entered the apartment. He must have hidden them somewhere in that room.

After a half-hour and a fruitless search later, Lois walked over to the large barred picture windows. It was starting to rain, and she could see the water splatter onto the glass. Would she ever feel the surprise or enjoyment of being caught in a rain shower again?

Go to bed. Get some rest, Lois. Wake up early and try searching the other rooms, while Luthor is asleep.

Lois nodded in agreement.

An echoing scream woke Lois up. It almost surprised her how heavily she had slept in these rooms. It was still dark outside, and she could hear the rain coming down in buckets, pelting her picture windows like a lover’s pebble. She sat up in bed and pulled her comforter up to her chest, her heart beating faster than a newborn’s. She listened in the silence, wondering if she had heard the scream in her dream or if it had been real. A roar of thunder made her start with its ferociousness. She wondered if that had been the noise that had awoken her.

~Clark?~

I’m here, Lois.

She was wide awake now and too terrified to shut her eyes again. Had the scream come from the mental institution or from within this very apartment? Had it been her own scream that had awoken her? Or had Lex brought some other victim in to give him pleasure while he pretended patience with her? She didn’t want to move, only feeling a bit reassured that she could lock her bedroom door from intruders.

After another minute of silence, then two, Lois took a deep breath and exhaled. She must have imagined it.

Suddenly, she heard someone bang open the front door to Lex’s apartment, then slam it shut.

“Lex! Lex!” she heard Dr. Carlin call to her ex-husband.

Lois heard another door slam and then Lex’s voice. “What is it, Ari?”

“Lois escaped!” Arianna yelled.

She gulped. Did Lex not inform his ex-wife about her new accommodations?

“Don’t be ridiculous, Ari,” Lex’s voice chided her. “She’s asleep in her bed.”

Lois heard someone rattling her doorknob and was glad that she had triple checked that she had locked the door.

The door flew open. Lex and Arianna stood in silhouette outside the door. Lois could see a smaller ring of keys in Lex’s hand.

~He lied!~

Big surprise there.

“Not *that* Lois,” the doctor explained, flinging her hand towards Lois. “The other one.”

The other one?

~My clone?~ Lois guessed.

I doubt Arianna would spend the money it would take to clone you.

~Not clone. Facial reconstruction! The woman in the hospital. Me, but not me.~

Yep, a double.

“I told you not to call her Lois,” Lex scolded his ex-wife. “She isn’t Lois. She gave up too easily. Instead of fighting me,

she turned the knife on herself.” His voice was full of derision. “Pitiful.”

“Well, then you’ll be happy to know she didn’t make it,” retorted Arianna, closing Lois’ bedroom door.

What?

Lois clambered out of bed and went to the door, opening it a crack.

Lex and Arianna were looking out the living room windows.

“Call the police,” Lex ordered.

“What?! Lex, no. They’ll crawl all over the place,” Arianna replied, her eyes wide with fear. “With the storm, no one will find it in Hobs Bay. It will get washed out to sea.”

“Call the police, Ari. They won’t find me. I’m safe,” he said, reassuring her and caressing her jaw with the palm of his hand. “Everyone knows this building is condemned. They won’t think to look for witnesses here.”

A fresh wave of chills shivered down Lois’ spine. ~Witnesses?~

Arianna wrapped an arm around Lex’s waist and hugged him. “If you think that’s for the best, darling,” she murmured, placated by a kiss from Lex to the top of her head. “You know better about these things.” The doctor nodded and left the apartment. Lois heard the distinctive sound of the door being locked.

Lex turned away from the window and, spotting Lois at her door, crossed over to her. “Don’t worry, darling. You’re safe. Nobody will come looking for you again. Go back to bed.” In Lois’ shock, Lex kissed her cheek unaccosted. “No need to worry your pretty head; we won’t be rushing into anything. We have all the time in the world now. Good night, my sweet. Oh, and don’t think about trying to signal the police, they won’t see you – the windows are tinted – and they won’t hear you over the storm,” he said with a Cheshire Cat sized grin and left the room, presumably to return to his.

Lois? Honey?

Lois felt frozen at the door, Lex’s words echoing in her head. ‘*Nobody will come looking for you again.*’ Had someone come looking for her? Someone other than Wells? Someone had come to visit Lois and had been shown her double instead. Who? Jimmy? She shook her head. Not Jimmy, someone with power, who insisted on seeing her. Perry?! Had he believed that the double was her? Why wouldn’t he come looking for her again? In the pit of her stomach she knew the answer, but needed to see it for herself. Slowly, she crossed the living room to the window out of which Lex and Arianna had looked.

Down on the pavement, between two dumpsters, lay a woman’s body in a hospital gown. The heavy rain pelted her and washed away the blood, pooling around her. Her unblinking eyes recognizable despite the petrified stare up at the heavens. Lois’ double.

Perry will remember that you told him Star’s prediction about the ex-wife killing you, only killing someone else instead. He’ll know the body isn’t yours.

“Will he?” she whispered. Or would she disappear into these rooms, never to be seen again, her screams for help going unheeded, in the shadow of the mental institution?

Don’t think that, Lois. Have hope, Clark’s voice caressed her, soothed her.

“What hope can I have?” she murmured. “As far as anyone will know, I’m dead. I’ll be locked in this prison with a mad man bent on breaking my soul.”

H.G. Wells! He’ll go back in time and save you.

Lois squeezed her eyes shut, blocking out the image of the woman in the alley. “No, Clark, I don’t want that. You heard Star, if we go back, you’ll be lost. I can’t lose you. I love you.”

And I love you, Lois, Clark reassured her. With her eyes closed, Lois could almost feel him standing next to her, holding her in his arms. *But I’m already lost. I’d rather have Wells fix the*

past to save you, than have this as your fate.

A sob broke from her chest. “Oh, Clark, no! I don’t want any life without you.”

Star said you’d still have me.

“No,” Lois corrected, her voice firm. “What Star predicted was that you would die and be replaced by a new Clark. I don’t want any other Clark. I want you, *my* Clark!”

I want you, too, honey, but Star said this new Clark would love you, treasure you, be there for you, and protect you. Sounds like a pretty upstanding guy to me.

“Well, I refuse to love him,” she insisted adamantly, turning away from the windows.

Lois tested the main door of the apartment, just in case, but it was securely locked. Then she took another look around the living room, trying to figure out where Lex could have hidden those keys. Wherever the hiding spot was didn’t matter anymore as Lois realized what he must have done. Lex probably took the keys from where he had hidden them and locked them in a safe in his office while she was in the shower. Stupid, stupid mistake; she should never have left the room after he had hidden the keys. She took one last look around the living room before returning to her new bedroom.

I’d much rather have you love another Clark than have you at the mercy of men like Luthor or Spencer or Sullivan.

“But he’ll be the *wrong* Clark, Clark. He won’t be *you*,” she repeated.

Well, nobody’s perfect, Clark teased.

Lois scoffed with a roll of her eyes. “You think you’re all that and a piece of cheese, do you, Flyboy? You better watch out, or I might end up falling for that wrong Clark fellow just to spite you.”

Really? Would you? As long as you don’t give him an easier time than you gave me.

“Oh, be careful what you wish for,” Lois retorted, shutting her bedroom door, locking it, and moving a chair under the doorknob. “I just might fall in love with him at first sight.”

Clark chuckled. *And still be Lois Lane? Doubtful.*

Epilogue

Meanwhile, in early 1997, in an alternative dimension...

H. G. Wells stood to the side of the front entrance to the Daily Planet, hoping not to bump into anyone who might remember him from when he and Lois had been stuck in this dimension by Tempus a year before. Well, nobody but Clark Kent himself. Wells still wasn’t quite sure what he was going to say to Clark.

He had told the man he would research what had happened to *his* Lois by traveling back in time to the 1993 Congo. He had found her all right, but she wasn’t what he or Clark expected; she was nothing like the Lois who this Clark had fallen in love with when she made him Superman. Plus, she was dead, very much dead. He gulped. Wells was not looking forward to that part of the conversation.

He unfolded the newspaper he had brought with him from that new dimension that after months of exploration he had discovered, the one without a Superman and, more importantly, without a Clark Kent. Below the fold, the headline announced “Lois Lane Dead in an Apparent Accident”. The article went on to report that Lois had been undercover at the Luthor House for the Mentally Unstable on an assignment regarding the treatment of the mentally ill. Wells’ own research, which he had done by going back in time to the previous day, concluded that the woman had indeed been institutionalized for mental problems.

According to the Daily Planet scuttlebutt, Lois had experienced a change in personality several days earlier after a confrontation with Patrick Sullivan, who had tried to kill her in some kind of ritual. That event was well known to Herb.

Apparently, Lois had shown up at work the next day, talking to a man named Clark, whom only she could see or hear. At times, she would be talking to someone and all of a sudden go into a trancelike state where she could neither communicate nor be communicated with. After these spells, Lois would come to as if nothing had happened or, on occasion, be so disoriented she would claim events that hadn't happened, had actually occurred.

Cat Grant had blamed it on pent up sexual frustration. Wally had said it was par for the course with Lane. Paulson had diagnosed post-traumatic stress. Perry White had said that Lois had just needed some rest and would be back after a few days of self-exploration. Only Jimmy had seemed really worried, especially after Lois had attacked Dr. Arianna Carlin, but he trusted the Chief's judgment.

Without Perry at the helm of the Daily Planet, the man's disappearance was a side-bar to Lois' death announcement, some junior reporter or photographer must have given them another account of Lois' actions. James Olsen had always been a good friend.

Wells tucked the newspaper back under his arm, wondering once more what he would tell Clark. They couldn't bring the Lois Lane of this dimension forward in time. No, that wouldn't do at all. Perhaps this other Lois would be the solution Clark craved, at least, for a little while. Wells had no idea how he would broach the idea with the man, since it was a course of last resort. He pulled out his pocket watch and wondered again where Clark could be. As he tucked his watch back into his vest pocket, said man walked out the front doors of the Daily Planet.

"Mr. Kent!" Herb said, just loud enough for the man's super hearing to pick up.

The Man of Steel's mind was obviously elsewhere. He carried a box in his arms and continued down the street as if he hadn't heard him.

"Clark?" Wells said again, louder.

Clark stopped and turned around, his brow furrowed. Upon catching sight of Wells, his drawn face beamed with hope. "Mr. Wells!" he said. "You are a sight for sore eyes. Tell me your news." He must have not wanted to have a conversation where they were, because he glanced around before quickly picking Wells up and zooming into the air.

Soon, the two men stepped off of the time machine and onto Clark's roof. A short flight later, they walked into his apartment from the balcony. There were boxes sprinkled around the living room as if he had been packing.

Wells looked around in dismay. "Going somewhere?" he asked.

Clark shrugged, and then inquired with hopeful enthusiasm, "Back in time, I hope, or to the Congo? Did you find her?"

"Clark, let's have a cup of tea. Tell me what's new with you since we last spoke," Wells suggested.

"Of course. I'm sorry," apologized Clark, dropping his box of stuff next to his couch. "I know I shouldn't have flown you like that, but there was a tabloid photographer across the street. This wasn't a conversation I wanted overheard."

Wells sat down at the dining table and waited while Clark busied himself with making the tea. He tried to work out what precisely he was going to tell Clark. What he knew for certain was that it wouldn't be the complete truth.

"Please, Mr. Wells, the anticipation is killing me. Please, tell me about *my* Lois. When I didn't hear from you for months, I feared the worst," Clark said, setting the teapot and mugs on the table. He stood next to Wells, unable to sit down with nervous energy.

"Months? Oh, dear. When is it?" Wells asked, flustered. Had he messed up the date? That wasn't like him. He liked to pop in and out of time at precisely the right time. It was that whole trip to the Congo and his explorations of the other dimensions after

that, which had ruined his sense of timing. It had taken him months to find another solution to Clark's dilemma. He was confident that if there was a dimension without a Lois, there must also be a dimension without a Clark. He felt as exhausted as Clark appeared. Wells hadn't wanted to return to the man empty handed.

"February 1997," Clark reminded him. "You left back in November of last year to look for my Lois, after we returned from the other dimension, the other Lois and Clark."

"Terribly, sorry," Wells apologized, taking a deep breath. "Yes, I have news," he said, hoping that the tone of his words would convey that his news was not good. "Clark, please, sit down."

Clark's expression fell as he sat down and started pouring the tea. "She's dead, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is, my boy. I'm sorry." Wells was glad that, at least, this news was over.

The man sighed, his shoulders falling and a wince crossing his face. He looked over to his windows and for a moment Wells thought Clark was listening to a call for help, but then he realized Clark was probably thinking about the other Lois, the one happily married, in Wells' own dimension, to the other Clark.

"But dead isn't dead when we have a time machine," Clark said, his eyes wide with expectation. "We could always go back and save her, right, Mr. Wells?"

This time it was Wells' turn to sigh. "I think it's about time you call me Herb, Clark," he suggested before he began to describe the details of Lois' death to the young man, at least the details worth hearing, as well as the consequences of saving this Clark's Lois from death. "And so you see, Clark, if we save her and leave her in the past, your whole future and that of the other Lois and Clark would surely change."

"Then we shall have to bring her into the future," Clark said with a determined nod.

Wells took another look around Clark's apartment and the partially packed boxes. "Perhaps it would be a good time to tell me about this." He didn't think it was possible for the man to appear more dejected but Clark accomplished it.

"Superman has taken over my life," the Man of Steel admitted sadly. "Everyone expects me to be on duty twenty-four, seven. I've had to give up being Clark Kent." He looked around his apartment fondly with sorrow. "I can no longer have a private life. I tried, but they, the tabloid press, won't leave me alone. I can't talk to a woman, any woman, without her image and some false romantic story being splashed across the pages of a rag. Anyway, no one compares to Lois. Since meeting her, I can't look at another woman that way. It's like there's her and only her." He looked down to his hands, wrapped around his mug of tea.

"The press tracked down Lana and hounded her until she had to go into hiding," Clark went on. "She's had death threats from Superman fans who blame her for breaking my heart, even though that isn't the story I told the world when they asked about the end of our engagement. Some criminals kidnapped her back in October, before you asked me to help with John Doe. They tried to use her to get me to do their bidding. Luckily, they weren't real professionals, and I was able to rescue her easily, but that was the final straw. She sued me for revealing this side of myself to the world without telling her, my fiancée, first. She's right, of course. I never took into account how this would negatively affect her life, if the news that Clark Kent is Superman ever made it out."

Wells watched as the man's demeanor changed as he told his story. His back rounded forward as if he had the weight of the world pressing down upon his shoulders.

"We settled out of court. I have no personal money anymore," Clark scoffed as if he found his own words funny, as if they had

meant that he had ever had any money. “You’re lucky you stopped by today. I haven’t worked for the Daily Planet in over a month now. I finally had a chance to stop by and pick up my stuff from my desk.” He nodded to the box he had set next to the couch. “I’m moving out of this apartment officially at the end of the month. The Superman Foundation has moved into offices at the top of one of the skyscrapers in town with a superhero discount. I guess the owner expects some kind of extra security having our offices there.” He sighed with a slight shake of his head. “I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s disappointed though; more than likely he’ll see more break-ins. I access the offices through the roof entrance. I have an apartment adjacent to the Superman Foundation offices, where I’ve been living; it’s no home, but at least it’s private. Between the paparazzi, criminals, and über-fans, this apartment has been broken into almost weekly since Tempus outted me.” Clark glanced around his old apartment again. “I haven’t really lived here for months.”

“What happened to your job at the Daily Planet?” Herb asked as guilt tugged at his gut. It was his fault that Tempus had bothered this young man in the first place.

“I haven’t been able cover any stories but my own... you know, ‘Superman to the rescue’ stories. Anytime I went to a press conference, the focus of the conference would shift to me and I found questions being hurled at me. You do that to a politician a couple of times and egos get bruised; they refused to talk to me any more... at least, Clark Kent, reporter. Superman, they always have time for. Mayor White graciously always offered me an exclusive prior to any press conference he held, so that I wouldn’t have to attend. Eventually, others took notice, and when press releases and press conferences were issued they would include requests that Clark Kent not be assigned to the story. I was a distraction to their message. As a reporter, I was blacklisted from many of the major stories.”

“Oh, I see,” Herb said, taking a sip of his tea. Perhaps convincing this Clark against bringing his Lois into this future wouldn’t be as difficult as he imagined.

“I don’t blame Mr. Olsen or the paper, really I don’t,” Clark was quick to reassure Wells. “It’s more my fault than theirs; Mr. Olsen had bent over backward to try to accommodate me. With my office phone ringing more with people asking for Superman’s assistance than leads, I spent more of my time out of the office helping people than in the office writing about them. I felt bad taking a paycheck for the little I actually wrote. Mr. Olsen insisted, said I was good for the paper, but he was just being kind. I was just as much of a distraction there as everywhere, I guess. As I told Lois – that other Clark’s Lois – it’s easier to be Superman than it is to be Clark Kent.”

“Clark, what do you imagine your life or, for that matter, her life will be like if you bring your Lois into the present?”

A smile lit up the hero’s face and, for the first time, Wells saw a reflection of the Superman he had seen when the man had visited his dimension several months earlier, but then it faded. “She would be alive,” Clark said. “That will be enough for me.”

Wells raised an eyebrow. “Will it?” Clark shot him a severe expression, and the time-traveler hurried on to explain, “Lois will have jumped forward almost five years in her life. Life as she had known it will be gone. She’ll have no knowledge of current events. Her mentor, Perry White, is now gone from the Daily Planet. She’ll have no place to live and no family she can turn to... She’ll be adrift here, Clark. She’s a woman used to knowing everything, and she’ll be reduced to asking for help with every little thing in this age of technology. She’ll possibly need to partner up with someone just to write basic Metro stories.”

“Lois and Clark are partners,” Clark suggested with some hope.

“But you just told me that you aren’t a reporter anymore,” Wells reminded him gently. An idea flashed like an exploding

photographer’s bulb in his mind.

Clark nodded. “Right.”

“Do you miss it? The thrill of the hunt? The pressure of deadlines? The scramble to be there first?” Herb inquired.

“As Superman I still have thrills, deadlines, and races to be there first,” Clark stated. He went quiet for minute, before admitting, “I miss it with every fiber of my being. I miss the respect my skills as a journalist had gotten me, the way I could spin a story, for being able to inspire people to action without the use of my abilities. Don’t get me wrong, I love what I can do as Superman, but it’s just that: what I can do. Superman really isn’t who I am.”

“And Lois? You would have to convince her to come with you, to come forward in time, possibly kidnap her and bring her here against her will to accomplish it. Is that what you really want to do? Otherwise you chance the whole world finding out about Superman and time-travel back in 1993, and inadvertently changing the future you hope to save by bringing her forward in time. Perhaps you would persuade her by telling her about her unavoidable death, but why would she believe you? Lois is a skeptical reporter by nature. It’s possible that Lois would write about her journey once she arrived here. If you had to kidnap her to save her, would you be willing to leave her alone, if she wished it? After the treatment your ex-girlfriend had with the press, would you be willing to cut off all contact with Lois for her safety? She doesn’t know you, Clark; you are a stranger to her. She may choose to live her life without any interaction with you. Would you be able to watch her love, and possibly marry, another man? So, I ask again, will her being alive here in 1997 be enough for you? Or will it cause you more pain than not?”

“Well, if you’re going to put it like that...” Clark chuckled for a moment before exhaling and standing up. “But what else can I do? I can’t leave her dead if there is any way to save her. I need her. I don’t know how much longer I can go on being this... this... shell of a man. My life is empty, and no amount of photo ops for charities and peace summits will fill it. I’ve always wanted what every man wants: a wife, a family, a home, stability. I feel like, in one foul swoop, Tempus erased my future.” Clark’s hands were in fists as he paced his living room in barely controlled frustration.

Wells turned to face him. “I truly am sorry, my boy,” he apologized with a frown.

Clark knocked the apology out of the air. “It’s not your fault.”

“Oh, but it is,” Wells corrected him. “I am the one who brought Tempus back from the future in the first place.” An expression of disbelief splashed across Clark’s features as the time-traveler launched into the tale of what had happened during his first journey into the future. “So, Clark, I’ve spent, off and on, the last...” Wells looked up to the ceiling in thought. “... almost eighteen years, trying to fix that one error...” He sighed. “... trying to keep Utopia as I had first seen it alive.”

“You couldn’t have known,” Clark tried to excuse his behavior.

“No, I didn’t know. I never thought how this one event would change history and that was my biggest failing. This is why I try not to alter history too much by my interference, but sometimes...” He glanced over at the younger man. “Sometimes interference can be a good thing.”

Clark nodded. “Like when we go back in time to save my Lois’ life.”

No, that hadn’t been what Wells had meant at all. He needed to get Clark’s mind off of his Lois and on to other possibilities. “Clark, how would you like to go on a holiday?”

The hero laughed. It wasn’t a laugh of joy, though. It was laughter at being caught by surprise, with a melancholy edge to it. “I would like that very much, but that’s impossible, Herb.”

Wells grinned with a wink. “I *do* dislike that word, Clark, as I

find nothing is impossible. What I propose is that for..." He tossed up a hand and grabbed a number out of the air. "... three months, you come visit this new dimension I've discovered, where there is a Lois Lane in need of a hero."

Clark's brow furrowed, and he shook his head as if the suggestion was preposterous. "What? How? Huh? What about the Superman from her dimension?"

"From what I can ascertain, the Clark Kent – or shall I call him, the Kal-El – from this new dimension, didn't survive the crash of his spaceship in 1966," Wells explained.

The younger man's jaw dropped open in shock, dismay, and then, as Wells' words continued to filter through his mind, curiosity. "So, there's no Superman? No Clark Kent?"

"No," the older man reassured him. "None whatsoever."

"Yet, there's a Lois Lane?" Clark asked.

Wells nodded.

Clark seemed suspicious of older man's motives. "Why should I rescue this Lois instead of my own? Why should we chance changing her timeline more than altering my own?"

"Because without a Superman, nearly the entire population of her world was destroyed, roughly a year or two ago. Altering the future of this dimension cannot do anything but good."

"You want me to travel to this new dimension and stop this cataclysmic event from happening?" Clark pondered. "How is this a vacation again?"

Wells chuckled. "No, my boy, I meant a vacation from your dimension, your responsibilities here, being Superman all day, every day. I thought you'd like to travel back, say four years ago, and recreate your arrival into Metropolis, only this time, you would be free."

"Free? How?" Clark seemed perplexed.

Wells would have to spell it out for him.

"Free of previous romantic entanglements..." In other unspoken words, free from Lana. "Free to choose when, and in what manner, Superman would make his debut..." Instead of letting Tempus do that for him. "Free to have a secret identity similar to that other Clark does..." The freedom to be himself and still be a reporter. "And free to try your hand at wooing a Ms. Lane without worrying that her heart already belonged to another Mr. Kent." Free to love a Lois without all the complications that came with bringing his Lois forward in time.

Clark sat down on his sofa as he considered Herb's vacation plan. "Why three months? Should I fall in love with this new Lois, I wouldn't be able to leave her after three months to return here."

"I would hate to leave your dimension without a Superman," explained Wells.

"It is a real world, not some virtual fantasy world, right?"

Clark inquired.

"Of course," Herb reassured him.

"Then should I go to this new universe and become its Superman, how would I be able to leave it without a hero, especially knowing that sometime in its future some cataclysmic event will destroy its population?"

Wells didn't have an answer. "Well... uh... um..." For some reason, he hadn't thought of that possibility.

"I would have to choose then, in which world I would want to live," Clark continued, speaking more his thoughts than to Wells directly. "I may choose never to return to this dimension, if that new Lois falls in love with me. I wouldn't be able to abandon her."

Herb gulped. He hadn't meant to leave this dimension without a Superman either. He had thought that if she had been exposed to a real Clark, her mental breakdown would be curtailed, and she would be available to save her world from the flood. "But, say, in three months' time, you realize that you and this new Lois don't suit, I'd hate for your initial choice to be a

permanent one."

Clark pressed his lips together and raised an eyebrow. "If we don't suit?" Obviously, the likelihood of this happening seemed slim to none for the man. He seemed to have fallen in love with the idea of this new Lois at first mention of her and the freedom he would have in her dimension.

"Perhaps you need a bit of time to think over your decision. A week, shall we say? At that time, you can give me your answer," Wells said, standing up.

Clark nodded. "Yes, early March, after my birthday celebrations. Perry is throwing me a big party, and I'd hate to disappoint him." He picked up the empty mugs from the table. "I will give you my answer, then. Either I will move to this new dimension, or we'll work on a plan to rescue my Lois from the past and bring her into the future." A frown crossed his face as he sighed. "Or I'll have to accept the fact that, in this one instance, there's nothing Superman should do to stop fate." He shook his head. "I just can't see how that could ever be the correct decision."

Metropolis – March 1997

Clark knelt beside her grave. He came here often just to talk to her, even though he knew she couldn't hear him.

Since meeting and falling in love with Lois Lane – that Lois Lane who was tossed into his dimension by Tempus – he realized that there could be no Superman without her... some version of her. Sure, he could rescue people, stop the bad guys, and breathe in and out, but without a Lois Lane he felt empty inside, unable to truly live. Without a Lois, there was only this façade; there was no Clark Kent, no one who truly understood him. Without her love and support, he didn't know how long he could keep up this life.

It troubled him that he was being selfish, that he would change this new Lois' destiny because *he* needed her, that she wouldn't get a choice in the matter... Not that she would choose the alternative.

True, he rescued people every day without this being a dilemma. He had even saved that *other* Lois before without this being a problem. This time it felt different. His motivation felt different. Even though he knew he was saving her so that her current fate would change, he was also saving her in hope that she then would save him from heartache. That was the selfish part.

If she knew why he was rescuing her, would she resent him? Would she think that he felt she owed him something? Would he ever be able to convince her that he would be happy just having her in the world? Breathing in. Breathing out. Knowing she was safe, hopefully happy. He would not expect anything nor should he. He would love her. He didn't require that she return his love.

Actually, it would probably be better for her if she didn't. Friendship would be nice though, having her available to talk with, to laugh at his jokes, pathetic as they might be, to challenge him. With Lois Lane in his world – or in this case, him in her world – he would be a better man... a better Superman.

Clark heard a sound behind him. Without turning his head from where it rested against Lois' tombstone, above her empty grave, he knew H. G. Wells had arrived to take him on his journey.

"Are you sure about this, Clark?" H. G. Wells asked him and not for the first time.

"We've been over this, Herb. Lois needs me. Without my interfer... help, she won't survive." And without her neither would he. "I promised I would save her."

"Lois is dead, Clark," Wells reminded him. "The decision is yours and yours alone."

Clark sighed.

"I know this was my idea, but now... I'm not sure," Wells

went on. “I hate leaving any dimension without a Superman.”

Clark nodded. He hated that too. “Isn’t that why you suggested this in the first place? So her world wouldn’t be without a Superman? If it doesn’t work, I can always return. At least, this new Lois will have a second chance at life.”

“I’ll come back in three months, Clark, in case you decide to return home.”

Clark took one last long look at the gravestone. He would miss her – *his* Lois. He didn’t *want* to leave her, but the other Lois *needed* him. He closed his eyes and pictured her in his mind. *I will always love you*, he told her, reassured her... reassured himself. He would never – could never forget her. This woman he had never met, never saved.

He stood up and picked up his suitcase. He glanced around this ‘world.’ He would miss this dimension. It was so different from the one where he was going. This was home. He sighed. “Let’s go,” he told H. G. Wells.

Clark was taking a huge risk. If this other Lois discovered his secret, she would have the power to destroy him. Unlike any bad guy he had met, this woman had that power over him. Should she choose to be, Lois could be more deadly to him than Kryptonite.

THE END of Book 1

Author’s Note: This story now travels back in time to 1993 in **Book Two:** *Wrong Place, Wrong Time, Wrong Clark*. Also, please check out the short story *The Superman Effect* for another one of your questions answered.

Gratitude: I would like to thank my three Betas for all their hard work in helping me write this dark, often depressing when not funny, tale. Thank you IolantheAlias, Mrs. Luthor, and Lola Dane. Without your constant feedback and support, we might never have gotten onto the lighter and funnier Book 2.

Disclaimers: Inspired by the characters created by Jerry Siegel & Joe Shuster as they were portrayed on the Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman television series, developed by Deborah Joy LeVine. The characters do not belong to me; they belong to themselves (although Warner Bros, DC Comics, and the heirs to Siegel and Shuster might disagree). Many thanks to all the writers on the above-referenced show, especially Deborah Joy LeVine, Jack Weinstein, Lee Hutson, Bryce Zabel, Tony Blake, Paul Jackson, Dan Levine, Chris Ruppenthal, Grant Rosenberg, Robert Killebrew, Kathy McCormick, John McNamara, Eugenie Ross-Leming, Brad Buckner, Robert Singer, Dan Levine, Thania St. John, Bradley Moore, Paris Qualles, H. B Cobb, Gene Miller, Karen Kavner, and other scriptwriters from whom I quote directly from their scripts from Seasons 1 – 3. The story interweaved around their borrowed dialogue, and some plot points, is entirely my own.

Ben & Jerry’s is the name of an ice-cream company, manufactured in Vermont, and is known for their unique flavors and environmental causes.

Spider-Man and his Spidey-sense is a character created by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko and owned by Marvel Comics.

The Wonderful Wizard of Oz is a book by L. Frank Baum.

The Little House on the Prairie is a book by Laura Ingalls Wilder.

Cat’s in the Cradle is a song written and performed by Harry Chapin.

Catch-22 is a book by Joseph Heller, published in 1961. The book was made into a film in 1970, screenplay by Buck Henry, directed by Mike Nichols, and starring Alan Arkin.

The whole mental institution, Lois going insane section, was inspired by Joss Whedon’s *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*, Season 6, episode “Normal Again” written by Diego Gutierrez.