

# Five Steps Down

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Rated PG

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Summary: Reunited, Alt-Lois and Alt-Clark work to unravel a story four years in the making. A sequel to the author's "When the West Wind Moves."

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I have to say that it's weird to be posting this story, which is several years delayed. I stumbled upon it a few months ago by accident and decided to clean it up and try and post it since I do still occasionally get emails about it. This is the follow-up to When the West Wind Moves, which should be read first in order to understand this story. I would also recommend reading Fast Enough, which also takes place in my rendition of the alternative universe.

Five Steps Down picks up exactly where West Wind left off.

Cheers,

Elle

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"And the Mississippi's mighty  
but it starts in Minnesota  
at a place that you could walk across  
with five steps down  
and I guess that's how you started  
like a pinprick to my heart  
but at this point you rush right through me  
and I start to drown"  
— Indigo Girls, "Ghost"

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To think his shock on the bus had been so great. Clark Kent had expected joy, had expected so many things upon finally seeing Lois Lane alive, but never this all encompassing feeling of nothing, of being so shocked and overwhelmed as to make him feel empty and complete all at once. How difficult to comprehend his dreams were now a reality after so many nights of hoping and so many times of trying and failing to accept that they might always be dreams.

It was all so overwhelming, seeing her and wanting to do so many different things, yet finding himself frozen, afraid of upsetting the status quo, afraid of waking from a most wonderful dream.

"Superman?" the mayor whispered.

Actual silence overwhelmed Clark then as he realized the applause had died, and the assembled were waiting. Thousands of eyes were trained on him, no one talking, everyone waiting with bated breath for the superhero to speak. Words and the previous months' experience of dealing with crowds and public speaking escaped him.

Clark glanced at the mayor, glanced back at the crowd — pleased to see Lois was still there and not an illusion — and drew a breath, still struggling to find some semblance of equilibrium. An image of the other Lois appeared in his memory, and he recalled that look she gave him that so easily telegraphed her complete faith in him. That image lifted the haze of seeing this world's Lois, here and alive, enough for him to give his prepared

remarks. Slowly, he began to speak.

It was only that hard-won expertise of dealing with the public that saved Clark on that day. The numerous public appearances, the desire to try and live up to being a hero and role model, allowed him to operate on autopilot as his brain raced with his discovery. It was odd, really. He was fully conscious of standing in front of the crowd, of giving a speech, of the occasional cheers, yet his eyes never entirely left Lois. He was so afraid she would suddenly disappear when he was so close to realizing everything upon which he had pinned his hopes. The sight of her, the hope her presence ignited, threatened to overwhelm him.

After his speech, when well wishers and those anxious for a word with the Man of Steel surrounded him, he lost sight of her. Anxious to not seem overly concerned and cause undue alarm, Clark threw himself into the pleasantries. He was determined to charm people as quickly as possible in order to go and find Lois.

Ten minutes later — something of a record for an escape from this sort of function — Clark took to the sky in hopes of finding some sign of Lois. He quickly circled the entire zoo before slowing. This would never work. He needed a plan, some sort of logic other than mindlessly flying and searching. He needed some sort of methodology. Preparing to comb the zoo as if it were a grid, Clark stopped. What did he know of this Lois? She was a workaholic according to everyone who knew her. Perry had described her as thorough, capable of looking at a whole situation and figuring out how to make it work for her. But there was something else.

Hovering over the zoo, Clark finally remembered a snippet of conversation from dinner with Perry and Alice shortly after Cat had taken over the Planet's editor-in-chief position.

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Dinner was winding down when subject of the staff reaction to Cat's promotion rolled around.

Perry grinned. "They'll all hate her for the first two months and then they'll admit they respect her and by this time next year, they'll be proclaiming her the greatest editor in the Planet's history and asking why they didn't promote her sooner."

Clark shook his head. "I think you underestimate yourself, Chief."

"I wouldn't say that, Clark. Remember who hired Cat and brought her along for all these years. Cat's success makes Perry look like a genius for bringing her onto the Planet staff," Alice commented.

Perry shook his head. "That girl's success is all her own. I couldn't claim it even if I wanted to."

Perry shifted and favored Clark with a serious look. "But, Clark, I'm interested to know who the staff thinks will be the first to leave."

Clark tried his best to school his expression. "Chief?"

Perry grinned at Clark's seeming innocence. "Don't play dumb, Kent. It's a long-standing Planet tradition for a betting pool to predict which reporter will be the first to declare the new editor is positively ruining the paper before storming off in the middle of the day," Perry said, a knowing look upon his face. "For me, it was Deborah Scoggins, although the money had been on Tracy Levine. Deborah seemed perfectly fine and then, one day, stormed into my office, told me I was nothing more than a Southern idiot with deep-fried grits for brains and that she refused to be part of dismantling the greatest paper in history.

"She works for some small paper in the South now, I think."

Clark smiled. "General bets are on Ralph. But — " Here, Clark paused. "Well, Michael Whalin was saying it's a shame Lois isn't still with the paper, because she'd be a shoo in. Something about hating animals in general but —"

"Hating cats most of all?" Perry finished Clark's sentence, grinning. "Haven't heard that one in years. I had Lois cover some dog show right when she started and, by the end of it, her general

dislike of animals was well known. When Cat told her reporters reported on what their editors wanted, Lois told her she found felines to be the most annoying of all and stormed off.”

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Bingo.

If Lois had been in hiding for the previous four years, the question was not where she was, but rather why she would pick a crowded zoo of all places. Dislike of animals notwithstanding, three of the Planet’s biggest stories of the past decade, including the one that had nabbed Ms. Lois Lane her second Kerth, had all hinged on information or photographs taken from big events where people mistakenly assumed they were an anonymous member of the crowd.

Clark redirected his attention to the parking lot. A handful of families at best, but no sign of anyone alone or even remotely resembling Lois’ build. It seemed unlikely she would have a car — owning or renting a car created a paper trail, one that, from his own research, he knew did not exist in the past four years for Lois Lane.

Clark expanded his search to the surrounding streets. As everyone within the area who was not at work or school seemed to be enjoying the zoo, the streets were quieter than expected. The deserted streets made it easy for Clark to search quickly. It was at the last bus stop, just when he was starting to believe he had been mistaken, that he finally spotted her, standing alone next to a small shelter covered in graffiti.

Seeing her like this, alone rather than surrounded by people, again brought up that strange numbness. It was only his need to hear her voice, to connect with this Lois, that gave him the strength to land and speak to her.

“Can I give you a lift, Lois?”

She did not acknowledge him, but he heard an oh-so-faint increase in her heartbeat. She knew who she was meaning the question was why she refused to acknowledge her real identity.

“Excuse me, miss, can I help you?”

She finally glanced at him. If he had doubted before, her eyes were the last bit of evidence he needed to quash any doubts. The numbness disappeared as joy overwhelmed him.

Maybe, just maybe, a little part of him said, he could finally stop being alone.

“I don’t recall asking for help, or are you psychic as well? Though if you were, then you would know that I am perfectly able to board a bus without help.”

Not quite on par with the hug and kiss that had begun his relationship with the other Lois, but it hardly diminished his interest in her. Only Lois could make such a comment sound sexy.

Clark glanced around before lowering his voice. “I’m not talking about now, I’m talking about the fact you’ve had everyone believing you were dead, Lois Lane.”

Again Clark heard the tiniest jump in her pulse.

“I’m sorry, Superman, but I think you have me mistaken with someone else. My name’s Lola Dane.”

“You’re lying.”

She gave her a withering look. “My mother told me two things as a child. Never talk to strangers and to be quiet if I didn’t have anything nice to say. Seeing as how you are a stranger and I have nothing nice to say to you, I suggest you go on your way.”

And, with that, Lois Lane turned away from him, clearly bent on pretending he did not exist.

His jaw set in frustration. Arguing with Lois at an out-of-the-way bus stop at 11 am on a Thursday morning was not the introduction he had envisioned. He would be lying to say he had not harbored fantasies of saving her, which resulted in her falling instantly head over heels in love with him.

It figured that another man’s wife would eagerly jump into his arms as soon as she laid eyes on him while his own Lois was

not even interested in giving him the time of day. He could not catch a break.

“Listen, if we could maybe just go someplace and talk —”

“Didn’t you hear me? I don’t make it a habit to talk to strangers, and I most assuredly don’t go places with strange men.”

“But I’m Superman!”

As soon as the words left Clark’s mouth, he realized how incredibly stupid they sounded. Thankfully, Lois seemed to let the comment pass — at least as well as she could.

“I know you’re Superman! Why do you think I showed up to this stupid reopening? I’m not an animal person, and no length of time looking at caged-up monkeys is going to change that.”

“You came just to see me?”

Lois — despite what she had said, he refused to acknowledge her as Lola — favored him with a patronizing expression. “Don’t act so surprised. As you said, you’re Superman. Everyone wants to see Superman.”

Clark Kent did not particularly care about everyone else just then, only the woman standing in front of him. “Please, if we could just go somewhere and talk.”

“I have a bus to catch.” Lois glanced at her watch.

Clark felt the beginnings of panic settling into his chest as he saw a bus come into sight. He was so close to his goal, and he refused to let it slip away. “Listen, we can talk and then I can take you wherever you need to go.” Seeing no change in her expression, he pushed ahead in desperation. “And I don’t even charge. You can save money.”

Clark saw her roll her eyes. “Taking a bus is not going to break my bank account. I don’t know who you think I am, but I am not that destitute.”

The bus stopped in front of them. Several passengers looked up from newspapers and books as they realized who was standing on the street corner.

“Please.”

“I’m taking the bus,” Lois said before stepping onto the vehicle.

Unsure what else to do, Clark followed her onto the bus. She turned towards him, incredulous. Through clenched teeth she asked him, “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m going to talk to you, even if it has to be on a bus.”

Lois merely stared at him in shock.

“Hey Superman, you can talk to me if she doesn’t want to.”

Lois turned to glare at the woman who had made the comment before pushing to the back exit. Clark followed.

They exited the bus and watched as it pattered off to its next stop. She gave Clark a look of pure disgust.

“Fine. What do you want to talk about?” Lois asked, her tone of voice mirroring her gaze.

“Well, I was thinking we could go someplace else.”

“Where?”

“Metropolis.”

Again, Clark heard her pulse race. “No.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t like big cities. Cincinnati is pushing the line for me.”

“Is there someplace we could go then? Maybe your apartment?”

Lois snorted. “Your pick-up lines need work, Superman.”

Clark fought the urge to simply pick her up and take her wherever he wanted. “It’s not a pick-up line. I just want to talk with you someplace where I don’t have to worry about cameras and spies. If you’re trying to stay out of sight, talking with me on a street corner isn’t going to do much for you.”

Annoyed, Lois relented. “Fine. There’s a park on the other side of the river. No one ever goes there except on weekends.”

After a moment, she added. “And once we’re done talking, you will bring me back here and that will be the end of it. And if

you try anything ... “Lois paused as she glanced at him. “Well, I just wouldn’t try anything if I were you.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Clark replied sincerely.

“Fine. Then let’s get on with this,” Lois said, her tone the slightest bit softer than before.

Tentatively, Clark picked Lois up and began to fly. Having her so close to him, knowing he had physical proof that he was not crazy, that all his long hours of looking for her were not in vain, was a heady experience. He wanted to tell her everything — declare his love for her and then fly straight to some tiny little Las Vegas wedding chapel. He wanted to take her to some tropical paradise and never let her out of his sight again. He wanted to make up for every second of lost time.

Instead, he was stuck obeying his promise to her and listening to her directions as he distanced himself from the emotions he had kept tightly guarded for the past year. He had to remember Cat and Perry’s words: she did not know him, had never met him, and in many ways, was as much a stranger to him as he was to her. They had never met her before and mistakenly confusing her with the Lois he had known could only lead to disaster. He had to keep telling himself all of that, because it was so easy to forget when he looked at her or listened to her voice.

When they landed in the park, Lois moved a respectable distance away. She eyed him warily. “What do you want to talk about?”

Clark paused. He had been so intent on getting Lois here while ignoring the lingering shock of seeing her that he had no idea what he wanted to say. Telling her he was completely in love with her, despite the fact they had never met, was out of the question. No matter how much he had wanted and waited for this moment, he could not risk jeopardizing their future because of his own impatience. Since she was so adamant about not being Lois Lane, he could not start questioning her whereabouts for the past four years. Yet he was well aware that if he could not get her to admit to being Lois, this conversation would go nowhere fast, and he would run the risk of losing her.

“Well?”

Somewhat sheepishly, Clark realized he had, yet again, lost himself in his own thoughts. What this woman could do to him was frightening. The very thought of her could send him into his own little world, oblivious to the people and events surrounding him. He had no idea what to say to her.

“People, people are looking for you,” Clark began. “Their last name is Luthor. They said they worked with you in Senegal.”

“I’ve never been to Senegal.” Again, the slightest rise in her heartbeat.

“Yes, you have.”

“Listen, Superman, I don’t know who you think you are, but stop it. If I say I’ve never been to Senegal, then I’ve never been to Senegal. This is just ridiculous.” With that, Lois began to walk towards the park’s exit.

“Then why do they have a picture of you?”

Lois stopped at this. “No, they don’t.”

“Lois, I’m not going to let you just walk away whether your name is Wanda, Lola, whatever. Your friends and family think you’re dead. Don’t they deserve to have you back in their lives?”

She continued to walk away.

“If nothing else, don’t you owe the people of Metropolis the chance to live a better life because you’re out there reporting on the city’s problems and putting a stop to them?”

Lois turned at this, her entire demeanor changed. “What the hell do you think I’ve been doing for the past four years?! Collecting passport stamps for fun?”

Her admission was so unexpected, so surprising, that Clark merely stared at her.

“And if you don’t mind, I need to get back to work. When there’s something to publish, then you’ll be hearing from me.”

“You’re not going to try and tell me you’ve been undercover for the past four years on the trail of a story,” Clark gave a short laugh. “No one loves their job ...”

Clark trailed off when he saw the look in her eyes. After all this time, after all the scenarios that had run through his head about where she had been and what she had been doing, finding that she had been MIA solely for a story made him question who, exactly, this woman was. Certainly not the one with whom he had fallen in love.

She loved her job as much as he loved her. For some irrational reason he did not want to analyze, he felt betrayed. He had been killing himself trying to find her these past several weeks, had been in an almost constant grief for the past year over the thought that she had died before they even met. He had been going through so much when she had just been following a lead. “How could you?”

“It’s going to get me a Pulitzer. Now, go fly back to Metropolis and act like you never saw me. Go on,” Lois said, making a random flying motion with her hand.

“No.”

“Fine. I’ll leave.”

“No.” Clark said, taking a step towards her.

“Don’t even think of scooping me up for my own good. I’ve been hiding out for four years. I can look after myself.”

“You can keep investigating with the support of the Planet. Cat Grant —”

“I’m not going back to the Planet. Not until I have my story. If people knew I was alive, the entire story would be gone.”

Clark appraised the woman in front of him. “I’m not leaving you here.”

“And I’m not going with you.”

“Then I’ll stay here with you.”

“Excuse me?”

“You want me to play dead, if that’s the only way you’ll let me acknowledge you for who you are, fine. I’ll start pretending with you,” Clark said rapidly, knowing his window of opportunity was shrinking faster than he wanted to admit.

“It’s my story. I only work alone.”

“Not anymore.”

“Beside, people would recognize you. And don’t say they wouldn’t, because that’s ridiculous. You’re Superman. Your face is everywhere, and glasses aren’t that great a disguise. You could cost me this entire story. And after everything I’ve gone through to get to this point, don’t even think I’m going to let you risk it all. For all I know, you’ve already ruined everything. That’s how you can help. Make sure you don’t ruin this for me. Go back to Metropolis before you cause anymore trouble,” Lois replied, her anger pushing her words into one long string.

She babbled. Granted, this was an angry babble, but she babbled just like her counterpart. Beneath the auburn-colored tresses that stretched past her shoulders was the same delicate face, the same doe eyes.

“No. I don’t think you understand. I’m not leaving without you, and if you’re staying, I’m staying.”

“And I don’t think you understand. After four years, I can escape any tail you throw at me.”

“You never had to try and escape from me,” Clark threatened, in a tone he normally reserved for only most hardened criminals.

Events were spiraling downward. Instead of an instant camaraderie, he was facing an extremely hostile woman and rising to the occasion with anger of his own. He had to do something to make this right. His desperation at the risk of losing Lois was only working against him. He had to calm down, had to be logical. Closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, he said, “Please, if you could just listen to me. After four years, wouldn’t it be nice to have one person in on your secret?”

“No.”

Clark took a breath. “Lois, I’m a reporter. I know how it feels to have someone else get near a story you’ve poured hours and hours into. I don’t want to intrude. I just want to help you. Four years is a long time to work on a story, even for someone as dedicated as you.”

Lois hesitated before nodding. “Go on.”

Eager to build on this small possibility, Clark quickly continued. “I can use my abilities to help you. I can use the Planet’s resources or do footwork for you. I mean, how often does a reporter get a three-time Kerth winner as an assistant?”

“You’ve won three? That’s ridiculous! I’m twice the reporter you are, and I only have two!”

“You read my work?” Clark asked.

“You’re a superhero who’s surprised people want to see him in person, and a reporter who’s shocked people read his work. What’s wrong with you?” Lois sighed, and Clark saw whatever progress he had made was derailed by his three Kerth wins, a former highlight of his professional life. “I don’t even want to know. Besides, I already told you. I work alone.”

“But you’ve never had Superman for a partner before. Just yesterday I used my x-ray vision to check out the new CostMart.”

Lois stopped. “What about CostMart?”

Though Clark never avoided sharing possible scopes with fellow reporters, he also never went around advertising his current projects. However, if he had any chance of winning her respect, he needed to do everything in his power to make her begin to trust him. “I’m looking into a story about possible illegal activities within the CostMart Company.”

Lois’s eyes widened. “That’s ... that’s my story!”

Clark’s expression mirrored Lois’s astonished look. “You’ve spent the past four years researching this story?!”

“Yes, it’s ... “ Lois abruptly stopped talking. “It’s my story. Stay away from it.”

“We could compare notes.”

“Absolutely not! And besides, what would you have that I wouldn’t?”

Clark’s brain was in overdrive. “This whole thing with CostMart ... it ties into your gun-running story.”

Lois gave Clark an incredulous look. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Clark shook his head in disbelief. “You got to the Congo and realized things went a lot deeper than you had ever imagined. But if that’s why you disappeared, why did people think you were dead?”

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Lois Lane missed air conditioning. Right at the top of her list of things she would never take for granted in Metropolis ever again was air conditioning. She had never expected the Congo to be quite this extreme. The heat was intense, the type that left a person sticky with sweat five minutes after getting out of the shower. When she decided to come to the Congo in hopes of finding that last bit of information for her story, she researched the weather in hopes of packing clothing to help her blend in rather than openly advertise she was a tourist. She had not planned on temperatures even higher than the 70- to 90-degree average or more rain than normal. The air had a clammy, damp feel to it at all hours of the day.

She would suffer through another month of these conditions if it meant she could nail this story. She could feel it in her veins: this was going to be the story that put her on the map. Everything before this, even the two Kerth awards, had been a precursor to what she was about to discover.

Perry had been dead set against sending her alone to Africa. He had paired her with a freelance photographer who had extensive experience with war-torn countries and the ins-and-outs of maneuvering through dangerous areas with nothing more than a press pass. Despite her respect for the man — and even Lois

was not so blind as to ignore the man’s talent — she had been furious at the idea of having a partner. Lois Lane worked solo. End of story.

It had been ironic, then, that the one thing Lois hated most about the Daily Planet — the bureaucracy that occasionally intervened with plans that could possibly, if looked at in a certain light, be considered treading the line of legality — had been her saving grace. Due to a need to tighten the financial belt, only one ticket to the Congo had been approved: Lois’.

Now here she was, intrepid reporter about to get the biggest scope of her life. If only she could find the necessary information to collaborate what she had already gleaned through sources and guesses.

Walking through the back streets of Brazzaville, Lois could not quite forget her promise to Perry to be careful and not put herself in too much danger. It was not as if he believed her promise, she reminded herself. While he knew her well enough to know any promise she made was made only to get what she wanted, she could not forget the expression in his eyes when he had dropped her off at the airport. Of course he would be worried, but she could take care of herself.

Lois glanced to a side street, positive she had just heard two men speaking English. Doing her best to appear casual, she followed them until she could catch snippets of the conversation.

“... shipments to Metropolis and Los Angeles have gone as expected ... ”

“... a reporter in the area ... ”

“... heard that too. If we find anyone, we arrange ... ”

“... sounds good ... ”

Lois stopped. They were talking about her. That had to mean they were connected with the gun running. Ignoring the small voice in the back of her head telling her to cease and desist, she pushed onward. She was so close to finally pulling ahead in her investigation.

“... the Churches ... expanding to a new market ... ”

Lois’s brow furrowed. The Churches? What about religion? What did that have to do with gun running?

“... CostMart is ... ”

CostMart. Lois’s mouth opened in shock. The Churches, the family who owned the Costmart chain, were behind this. That meant it wasn’t limited to a small circle of international smuggling. A multinational corporation was involved.

Lois took a deep breath. This changed everything. This was not just a big story that would put her on the top of Metropolis journalism. She would be one of the premiere reporters in the world. She needed to go back to her hotel and go through her notes, see what no longer made sense and what fit together now. Disappearing back into an alley that took her back to a main thoroughfare, she hailed a taxi and mentally began to restructure her investigation.

She returned to a hotel room different than the one she had left earlier that morning. The changes were nearly imperceptible or would have been if the current occupant were not an extremely paranoid reporter. Everything was in its place, yes, but slightly off from where she had strategically placed it that morning. If she was right, they probably took the bait. Digging carefully through her suitcase, she pulled out a notebook. Opening the front cover, she found the stapled documents she had put there this morning. Sure enough, someone had leafed through them — there was a tiny crease around the staple that had not been there previously. Lois grinned. When she got back to Metropolis, she would have to thank Cat for that little trick.

This did complicate things. If they were onto her and had searched her hotel room, she was quickly running out of time. Her room was no doubt being watched and perhaps the phone in the room was also bugged. That anyone thought her so important as to search her room made pride rise up in Lois’s chest. Finally

she had a story that would attract some attention. Never before had anyone been so keen on throwing her off the trail. She pushed back the panicked voice telling her that this was bad, horrible, and scary. She refused to be afraid. Award-winning journalists did not get scared. If she wanted this story badly enough, she would have to push through this.

She had to figure out a way to buy time — just a day or two, at most. What Lois Lane needed was a way to throw them off their own game — to flip the tables in some manner and put herself into the position of power, which was difficult when she knew almost nothing about them.

Lois paused. Maybe she knew more than they thought. Sitting down, she began to make a list: not for the story, but solely about the individuals or group currently tailing her. She jotted down a few notes quickly but soon slowed. Five minutes later, she looked at the list and realized that she was more or less in the dark as far as they were concerned.

What she did have was a fairly good idea of what they wanted from her. That was her answer: she needed to disappear for a few days and make them think she had either given up or gotten a false lead.

Of course, they could feasibly know quite a bit about her, and if that were the case, they would know Lois Lane did not give up stories. How could she credibly create a false lead and tip them off to it?

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A week later, Lois Lane admitted that maybe even award-winning journalists were allowed to admit to fear. In the time since hatching her plan, an ill-advised move in hindsight, Lois had lost all her belongings with the exception of the clothes on her back, the equivalent of a hundred U.S. dollars, her notebook, and two pens.

Having finally escaped the tail, which had been a constant over the past week, though the faces had changed at about eight-hour intervals, Lois nervously boarded the bus and slid into a seat in the middle. She had ducked into a bathroom prior to boarding and hardly recognized herself. One week on the run and fearing for her life had altered her appearance more than any wig or other disguise she had ever used. Closing her eyes, she prayed she would have time at some point to secretly inform Perry that she was fine.

Two weeks later, she saw a small item in an English-language paper mentioning the continued search for Lois Lane, a missing reporter authorities believed was dead. Lois realized this was the perfect cover to finish the investigation that was turning out to be more complex than she could have ever imagined.

Who would ever watch for a dead reporter?

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Clark looked at her for a long time after she finished her story and said nothing. Impatient, Lois stood to leave. “If you’re done, boy scout, I have other things to do.” There was something in his expression that made her add, “This wasn’t exactly what I thought I was getting myself into four years ago, but that’s life. And it’s going to be worth it.”

“Why?”

“What?”

“Why can’t you tell me more than the bare bones?”

Lois had been about to explain why the story was worth it, when she realized that was not what he had asked. No, he wanted to know why he, Mr. All-American Spandex, could not be trusted with the details of a story to which she had dedicated four years of her life. He had known her for all of an hour, and here he was demanding to be privy to her most closely guarded secrets. He had some nerve. She had worked alone this entire time and in much more dangerous situations than grand re-openings of city zoos.

“Lois, I can help you. Maybe help speed up the investigation,

help you return to your old life. You know the Daily Planet would rehire you in an instant. I’m not trying to steal your story. I just want you to be able to come home,” Clark said softly, looking at a point beyond her shoulder.

“I do too,” Lois replied before she could consider her words. The expression on his face captivated her. On this stranger’s face, she found the embodiment of all her fears from the past four years. Without quite understanding why, she trusted him.

The truth was, she was sick of running. Even she was not so caught up in this story that she deluded herself into thinking otherwise. She ignored that, though, because it accomplished nothing.

Clark caught her eyes, and Lois found herself lose in his wistful, almost pleading expression. “Let me help you, Lois. Please. Let me do this for you.”

It was funny, Lois thought, that she only fully realized the weight of everything that had happened when someone offered to lessen her load. It would be the strongest man in the world who would offer his aid, Lois thought, Afer all, who else would be able to hold such a burden?

It was much more than that. After four years of always assuming the worst of people, she was adept at reading people’s expressions. Clark Kent’s relayed a depth of trust and understanding that startled her. While she had met other trusting people in her travels, none of them had affected her in this way. His eyes told her he knew something of heartbreak in his own life, something the television reports and newspaper photos never relayed to the world about its superhero. She connected with that pain, that kindred sense of being alone in the world.

“Okay.”

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His apartment looked different.

Or maybe he was different.

Clark walked into his bathroom, spun out of the suit and stepped into the shower, ready to let the water wash over him and give him some time to think. He was in no hurry and wanted nothing more than to simply stay in this moment.

He still was not sure what had happened or why. One minute he could feel himself stepping closer and closer to watching Lois Lane walk out of his life again, and the next, he was her partner, or perhaps more realistically, a generally tolerated servant who could be expected to be treated very badly. While some part of him said it was wrong, he was an addict finally able to get a fix.

All that mattered was she had not cut him out of her life, had not told him to never come near her again. They were meeting Thursday morning at her current place of residence: a rundown, fully-furnished apartment in one of the outlying areas of Cincinnati. It was the type of place, Clark noted, where everyone seemed to be hiding something, and as a result, everyone kept to himself, lest his secret be discovered. His first reaction had been to suggest a safer place until he realized she had no doubt lived and survived in worse. Still half afraid of losing her, he held his tongue.

For the first time since discovering that picture, Clark Kent felt at peace. Even the little nagging voice saying that tomorrow morning would find this to be a dream and nothing could not faze him. His heart said this was right, and that was all he needed to know.

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At 7 am on the appointed day, Clark Kent stood at the door to Apartment 215 in the Shady River Apartment Complex. In his hands he held a bag of Artie Smith’s famous cinnamon breakfast pretzels, a Metropolis culinary landmark, and a notebook. Almost a minute after knocking, Lois opened the door, a neutral expression on her face.

Clark looked her over. She was real and standing in front of him. That last bit of doubt, that worry that she had packed up and

left in the intervening days, vanished.

“Clark, come in.”

“I hope you don’t mind. I brought some Artie’s pretzels.”

Clark held up the bag, figuring it was as good a way as any to start the conversation.

Lois perked up. “Really? I haven’t had an Artie’s pretzel in forever. I loved them as a kid. When I was 12, I ate five of the caramel pretzels with chocolate dipping sauce in one night and couldn’t touch them for a whole year.”

“You ate five of them?”

Lois grinned. “My sister dared me too. Dad was furious when he found out. He’s a doctor and, well, he hates sugar.”

“I think Perry mentioned that once,” Clark replied. Seeing the expression on Lois’ face, Clark knew it had probably been the wrong thing to say. “He’s mayor now, you know.”

“Yeah, I read about it. I was in Des Moines, Iowa at the time. I think maybe the only place that has more cornfields than Iowa is Kansas,” Lois remarked. “No offense. You’re from there, aren’t you?”

Clark nodded. “Smallville. It’s a farming community. I haven’t been back in years.”

“It’s funny. I lived in Metropolis until four years ago but in some ways, the places I’ve been in for a fraction of the time since have been so much more important,” Lois commented. “But then, growing up in Metropolis defined me more than I ever want to admit. I guess I’m still trying to figure out if, once this is all said and done, this part of my life is going to end up changing who I am more than anything else I do.”

Clark glanced at Lois. She was very contemplative, much more so than her counterpart from the alternate universe. He wondered if she had always been that way or if four years on the run were the reason for it.

“Either way, it doesn’t really matter. See, this is what happens when you don’t really interact with people beyond business transactions for months on end. Anyway, let’s crack open the pretzels and get down to business. The way I see it, you can do the research I need at the Planet and bring it to me.” Lois bit into a pretzel as she finished talking.

Clark, never one to interrupt a woman with such a look of rapture, remained quiet. When it became clear to him she was more caught up in the wonders of the pretzel than starting her research, he prompted, “And?”

“Clark, these are amazing. Thank you,” Lois said. “And what?”

“Other than research?”

Lois shrugged. “That’s all I need you for right now.”

“But —”

“Clark, you said you wanted to help. That’s what I need at this point. Or is that a problem?”

Clark knew she was baiting him. One minute she was reminiscing about her childhood to him as if they were close friends. The next she was eating a pretzel while laying out ground rules as if he were no more than a nuisance.

“Okay, I can do that.”

Lois nodded as she dusted off her hands to give Clark a piece of paper. “This is a list of the stories and subjects I’m particularly interested in. It also recommends search words and that sort of thing. The bottom line is I want every single article ever written about CostMart.” Lois picked up a stapled group of papers next. “This is a copy of my list of stories I’ve already found. I haven’t had access to a computer or I would have typed it up, but given that you work at superspeed, I figure this won’t be a problem for you to organize. You need to make sure that if you do any work on your computer, you place the files in a password-protected folder. You with me so far?”

Clark nodded. “Keep track of the articles I retrieve for you and find everything that was ever written about CostMart.”

Lois swallowed a bite of pretzel before giving a half shrug. “Yes and no. The previous five years are the most important. I think if there’s anything there, it will be in that time period. And if not, we can go back later.”

Clark finished writing down the instructions. “What else?”

“For now, that’s it. I’ll only tell you things as you need to know them,” Lois said. “Welcome aboard, partner.”

“Partner? Lois, don’t take this the wrong way, but I feel more like your servant.”

“Clark, this is an egalitarian relationship. You want to help. I am acknowledging you and letting you help, despite my own reservations. What’s not fair?” Lois asked, a hint of sugar-coated sarcasm in her tone.

“Well, I guess I misspoke. My apologies, partner. Does this mean we share a byline?”

Lois’ expression clearly indicated she was caught in her own game. “We’ll see about that. But if we do, and let me tell you it’s a fairly big if, it will be with my name first.”

“Agreed,” Clark promised. “Lois, why do you want me to dig up all these old articles? Most of them will be from the same press releases and publicity campaigns. I know it can help with background information but the actual investigation? I’m fairly sure no one else in the media suspects the Churches. Or if they do, they’re pretty quiet about it.”

Lois favored Clark with what he thought was a patronizing smile. “Bits and pieces, Clark, bits and pieces. Someone reports one thing, and someone else reports another. Alone they are useless but together they help clarify the picture. Right now, I’m two big leads away from cracking this thing open. And my gut says one of those leads is buried somewhere in the public eye.”

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“Clark!”

Clark, having stepped off the elevator only moments before, glanced to Ralph, the newsroom’s pet pain.

“Clark, glad you’re here. I’ve been meaning to talk to you.”

As Ralph greeted the younger man, he put his arm around Clark’s shoulders. The problem arose in the height difference: Clark was considerably taller, and as a result, the effect was not so much buddy-to-buddy but rather that of a small child pestering an adult.

“What is it, Ralph?”

“It’s a man thing.” Ralph glanced around. “Let’s make sure Cat doesn’t find out about it.”

Clark smiled. “And yet somehow, she’ll still end up knowing.”

“Not if it’s just the two of us. Man-o e man-o,” Ralph explained.

“Right.” Clark decided not to bring up their current location in the middle of the newsroom surrounded by people paid to stick their noses where they did not belong. “What’s the problem?”

“You need to help me with a girl,” Ralph began and, seeing Clark’s expression, nodded. “I know, it’s surprising that someone like me needs help with the ladies. The thing is, this particular lady happens to be, well, difficult. And I think if she saw the two of us together, she’d be a little more understanding. You know, really see me for the guy I am.”

“By having me have a drink with you?”

“My mother always told me that you can pick your friends but not your family. She was a smart woman. At least, that’s what she told my father when she left him.” Nodding to himself for a moment, he continued. “The thing is, as Superman you have a certain in with the ladies that eludes us mere mortals. But I think there’s a kind of an aura effect. The closer someone gets to you, the bigger the pull on the girls.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

Ralph laughed and slapped Clark’s forearm. “Please, man, I know I’m a reporter, but you can’t expect me to believe you haven’t taken advantage of any of the ladies who worship you.”

You're just good at covering your tracks so the bottom feeders of our industry don't find out. It's cool with me. I'm not going to tell anyone."

Clark wondered how it was possible for a reporter so clueless in everyday life to turn out some of the top human interest pieces in Metropolis.

"Ralph! Your story on my desk five minutes ago!" Cat yelled as she walked out of the break room, cup of coffee in hand.

"Just think about it, Clark. The bar's name is Lucky Leo's. I'm there most nights."

As Ralph walked away, Cat sidled up next to Clark. "Whatever he asked you to do, say no. And then I want you to come to my office after your 10 o'clock press conference down at City Hall."

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"Cat?"

Cat Grant glanced up from a Cosmo magazine and vegetable wrap to see Clark Kent leaning in her doorway.

"Come on in and pull up a chair."

"I have to say, Cat, I never pictured you as a fan of Cosmo."

Cat laughed. "You're right. I got in trouble in college for helping stage a burning party of women's magazines considered offensive to the cause of women's rights. Our newspaper advisor didn't take to it well. He viewed the act as an infringement upon First Amendment rights, up there with book burning. He put me on suspension from the next two editions." Cat glanced over at her diploma. "God, I miss those days."

"What part? Burning magazines or not having to work on the paper?"

"Both." Cat gave the magazine cover a repulsed look. "In my defense, the reason I'm reading this complete piece of trash is that it apparently publishes articles other than how to wow your man in bed. Tracy showed me this article, and I have to say, I'm a little upset we didn't get to it first." Cat slid the magazine over in Clark's direction.

Clark skimmed over the article at superspeed. Cat shook her head. "What's the conclusion say? I hadn't gotten that far yet."

"Not much. It's rather weak — not a lot of rehashing of evidence, just a summation."

"Do you realize if I could do that I would be able to come in to the newsroom for about an hour everyday and spend the rest of my life sleeping and writing that book I've had filed away since my days as a classifieds writer?"

Clark nodded, opting to steer the conversation back to the topic at hand. For some reason he could not explain, he always felt guilty whenever people mentioned their own lack of powers. "It's an interesting piece. The reason we didn't run something like this is that you never would have taken it seriously."

Cat nodded. "I do admit, if Ralph had come to me and said 'Cat, honey, listen, I want to write a story about Church Junior's luck with the ladies,' I probably would have said no."

"But it's how the reporter tells the story that's interesting."

"The idea that his love life is reflective in how the company is run? I agree. I can't say that's ever been argued before. What can we do with it?"

"Right now? Nothing. If I remember correctly, it goes against one of Cat Grant's many laws of good journalism," Clark commented, a wry smile on his face.

Cat shook her head. "Never be reactionary to another news organization. I know, I'm trying to circumvent my own rules. But make a copy of it for your files and pull it out if you ever manage to connect the dots on Church. That writer is onto something, but they came up short."

Clark flipped back to the front of the story as he stood. Glancing over the page again, he stopped.

"Something wrong, Clark?"

Clark shook his head. "No, I just thought I heard a cry for

help. I'm going to go copy this. I'll, ah, talk to you later."

Cat nodded as she watched him. If there was one thing she had learned well in the past year, it was the look Clark Kent assumed when he heard someone in distress. And the disbelief that had just crossed his face as he stared at that magazine was not it.

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"I've never noticed it before, but you have a lot of locks."

Lois glanced at the recently arrived Clark and shrugged. "You're Superman. You know the criminal element. Can you blame me?"

"Fifteen locks?"

"You can never be too careful. What's in the bag?" Lois asked, glancing with feigned indifference at the large brown paper bag emitting wonderful smells from Clark's hands.

"Take-out."

"I figured as much. From where?"

Clark gave a noncommittal shrug very similar to Lois's earlier one. "Just a little Chinese place I know."

"Once again, I figured that. The question is, where? You are a strange one, Clark Kent, seeing as how you can leap tall buildings in a single bound and all that," Lois said as she walked towards her small kitchen.

"Leap tall buildings in a single bound, huh? Wasn't that the Time Magazine cover?"

"So you do read what the press says about Superman," Lois commented.

"I like to stay up-to-date on current events."

"Or you're a journalist well aware of the power your profession has over a media-hungry public."

"That too. Mu shu?"

The reporters dug into the dinner, their early conversation and mutual hunger easing the initial awkwardness of their second meeting. As their plates emptied, the two had little to say.

"That was really, really good. But you never answered my question. Where was it from? My guess would be some little hole-in-the-wall in China."

Clark grinned broadly. "Almost. Only insert Metropolis instead of China."

Lois shook her head. "No. There is no Chinese take out this good in Metropolis."

"Try Big Man Eddie's."

Lois's brow furrowed together. "That place? Clark, it's a dive. It's a good spot to meet sources, and that's about it."

"A Chinese family bought it two years ago."

"Oh." Lois said. It was funny how the strangest, smallest things were the biggest reminders of how much Metropolis had changed without Lois Lane.

The silence after Lois's last comment stretched uncomfortably as she found herself pulled into memories purposefully forgotten.

"Is there anything you can tell me about your story?" Clark's quiet voice interrupted her thoughts.

Lois shook her head, all traces of nostalgia gone. "Tell me what you know."

"Not as much as I'd like. I have a lot of hunches but not enough evidence. Whatever's going on, it's well hidden. I thought something was up after writing an article about Bill Church."

"So that's what you weren't saying." Off Clark's expression, Lois added, "I read the piece. Even though most reporters are too star-struck to question anything, some of their dirty laundry makes it into those PR fluff pieces. Well, it does if you know what to look for. That's especially true for some of the rags."

"You read tabloids?"

"For every story about an alien baby, there's a hidden story of real worth. Trust me."

Clark, looking unimpressed, merely nodded. "Go on."

“No. Tell me what else you know.”

“A guy I talked to said CostMart knew what I was doing and that they were trying to cover their tracks.”

Lois stopped. “They suspect you?”

“Lois, I just did a huge piece on the founder of the chain. I talked to anyone who would grant me an interview. And then, based off what I could piece together, I decided to do some more follow up. Are you telling me you wouldn’t be on guard?”

“That’s not standard procedure for them,” Lois said, more to herself than Clark. “It doesn’t make sense. What else?”

“Cat wanted me to try and link a break in at STAR labs with CostMart.”

Lois arched an eyebrow. “I forget sometimes she’s a good reporter. The arrogant attitude tends to get in the way.”

Clark fiddled with his chopsticks. Lois recognized that there he was about to change the subject and was unsure of how she would respond. “She’s not the only one. I’d just like to know how the hell you managed to get your work published without anyone knowing your name.”

“What?”

Clark put a photocopied article story in front of Lois on the table. Lois glanced down at the clipping from Cosmo and then back at Clark, who had raised his eyebrows, clearly waiting for an explanation. “Lola Dane seems to be all over the place these days.”

Lois flipped through the article. She had glanced at the issue one night at a grocery store but had not wanted to actually shell out money to learn how to please a man in bed all for the sake of owning a reminder of her fake name in print. “If you play your cards right, you can get freelance work with not much more than a name and an address to send the check.”

“Cosmo?”

“Who reads Cosmo in the major news circles?”

“And who reads Cosmo for serious news?”

Lois shrugged. “I needed the money. The story was a safe way to make some cash without revealing my investigation.”

“Cat could tell something was missing.”

“Cat would suspect a five-year-old who colored a dog purple.”

“She’s right. But it’s not just what you’re not telling. The style is completely different than how you used to write at the Planet. You’re intentionally covering your tracks.”

“Wouldn’t you?”

“People think you’re dead. I hardly think they’ll compare some Cosmo piece to a young Planet reporter who has been dead for four years.”

“I don’t take chances.”

“You mean, you don’t take chances that don’t go along with your grand plan for the universe.”

Lois’ face darkened. Why Clark continually crossed the line between acceptable and unacceptable behavior bothered her, although not as much as her willingness to put up with it. “Who the hell do you think you are? You come barreling into my life, demand a place in it, and act offended when I don’t bow down in reverence before you. My career comes first. Why is that such a hard concept for you to grasp?”

Clark opened his mouth to respond but he closed his mouth as his head tilted to one side. He jumped up. “Lois, I’m really sorry, but I have to go.”

Lois shot him a disbelieving look as she also stood. “What?!”

“There’s a fire at a warehouse.”

“You can’t go!”

Clark gave her a shy smile and rushed to placate her. “Lois, I promise, I’ll be fifteen, maybe twenty —”

“No, Clark, you can’t go. It might arise suspicion. How are you going to explain why you were in Cincinnati?”

Lois now stood between Clark and the doorway, which she

knew was about as effective as building a fence out of feathers. Even with Clark’s superhuman strength, Lois got the feeling he would not merely barrel past her.

“Lois, think about what you’re saying. People could get hurt. Are you really willing to put your job above another’s well being?”

Lois crossed her arms. “A lot more people could get hurt if this investigation gets held up.”

“That’s —”

“Reality. You don’t get it, do you? You have no idea the fine line I have to walk. Do you realize that even with no one knowing my identity I regularly face brushes with death?”

“It was your choice!” Clark’s hands were on his hips in an angry impersonation of his alter ego.

“What? You think I enjoy dangling over the jaws of death on a regular basis?”

“As a matter of fact, yes, Lois, I do.” Clark focused on some point behind Lois. “Either way, you win. It was a false alarm.”

Lois favored Clark with a snide smirk. “See, nothing to worry about.”

“Not this time, but Lois, I can’t help you with this investigation if you’re going to prevent me —”

No longer needing to keep Clark from the door, Lois began passing in the small, worn living room. She felt a surge of irrational anger at the other reporter, and she was desperate for movement.

“Listen to me very carefully, Boy Wonder. I don’t want your help. I like working alone. You offered your assistance. I took it against my better judgment. This is all on my terms, not yours. You want to help, fine, but you do that with the understanding that the caped crusader can’t come flying out the woodwork whenever there’s an emergency here. People will get suspicious.” Lois gave Clark a long look, her unexpected frustration fading. “Look, I know you like to help. You made that fairly clear to me the other day. But you can’t do everything. And when you’re in Cincinnati, you have to pick: it’s either reporting or the flying policeman.”

Clark looked at Lois for a long time, and Lois met his eyes. She suddenly felt like she had been dumped into a conversation she did not understand, that their were underlying currents her of which she knew nothing. His voice soft and firm, he told her, “I can’t not use my powers.”

“I’m not saying not to use your powers! I want to use your powers! They could potentially cut months off this charade! Why do you think I’m willing to let you help me?” It struck Lois that before this moment, she had not seriously considered how much easier everything would be with Superman at her disposal. No, she had relied on trust and gut instinct in making her decision to work with him. How had she not used his powers as a primary deciding point? “But you have to be smart about this, Clark, or you’re going to ruin everything!”

Clark slowly nodded, a slow smile appearing on his face. For reasons she could not explain, Lois felt as if he was seeing her for the first time. “Okay.”

If there was one thing Lois Lane had not expected, it was agreement. “Good.” Lois nodded slowly. “Good. Let’s get back to work then.”

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“What about emergencies?”

Lois glanced up from one of the many printouts Clark had brought. “What?”

Clark shrugged. “I’ve just been thinking about my promise not to help for run of the mill events. What about large-scale disasters that I would probably fly down for anyway? Is that fair game?”

Lois’ brow furrowed. “You’re still thinking about that? Clark, that false alarm was a week ago. We’ve seen each other three

times since. And you're just bringing it up now?"

Clark shrugged. "I need to make sure we're clear on this. I'll ignore the small stuff, but you need to let me handle the big stuff."

Lois arched an eyebrow. "You're serious."

"Yes."

"Fine, I guess. You can go be boy wonder for the occasional big emergency. But not more than once a month."

"Lois, I can't control when disasters occur."

"I didn't say you could. Besides, how many earthquakes and avalanches do you think are going to happen in Cincinnati every thirty days?"

"Now that you said that, a lot. And what about fires or tornadoes?"

Lois rolled her eyes. "Don't be such a pessimist."

"I'd call it being a realist."

Lois looked at him for a moment. "I'm going to go back to my reading now. Or do you have any other ridiculous questions?"

Clark gave her a grin. "My mother always said there was no such thing as a stupid question."

Lois continued to scan the current paper in front of her as she responded. "Fine. But there is, without a doubt, such a thing as a ridiculous question."

The two continued to work in silence. After half an hour, Lois put down the papers she had been studying and stretched. Clark glanced up and took a moment to watch her.

"How long have you been in Cincinnati?"

"Two and a half months. Before that I was in Cleveland for about two months."

Clark nodded, surprised that Lois had willingly volunteering additional information. Hesitantly, he ventured the more risky extended conversation.

"I traveled around for a few years after college."

Lois nodded. "I know. I read your interview with Conde Nast."

"It was exciting, getting to see new places. But I remember never really feeling entirely comfortable, always being an outsider, feeling like I had only just arrived or was about to leave."

Clark took a deep breath. "The day we met, I just, I thought of how hard the past four years had to be for you, to never feel at home. And I remembered how peaceful it was to finally settle in one place again, even though I loved traveling."

Lois looked at him, her face a mask of conviction. "This story is worth it."

Clark was not sure what to say to that, so he remained silent. After a moment, he picked up his most recent reading material. Were it not for his superhearing, though, he never would have heard Lois' soft comment.

"But I am ready to go home."

Clark watched Lois over the tops of his glasses. Since their argument about rescues, Clark felt like he was finally seeing her. Not a front or some illusion he had placed upon her, but this universe's Lois.

And in that week, Clark Kent had discovered he liked this Lois Lane even better than the other one or any of his dreams.

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"Who is she?"

Clark barely had time to enter Cat's office and close the door when she had asked the question. Caught off guard, Clark found himself in the peculiar position of being speechless.

Cat cast a know smile at Clark. "When you say you stand for truth and justice, you really mean it, huh? Can't even play dumb about a girl."

Clark snapped out of his stupor. "Cat, I've just been busy. And given that I haven't been with anyone since Lana, your question caught me off guard."

Cat gave Clark a slow nod and motioned to a chair. "Off guard, huh? I'd say that'd be a good description of your mood recently. Or maybe head in the clouds?"

Clark, unsure what to say, rubbed the back of his neck out of habit. "Talk sense, Cat."

"How's this? In the past three weeks, I've had three editors from rival, that's right, rival, papers calling me and asking what's going on with the man of steel," Cat began, leaning back in her chair and crossing her legs, a sure sign that Clark was in for a long speech. "They want to know what's happened to the great sound bytes you used to give. You speak to a reporter anymore and you give soundbyte lites — cute, huh? That's from Marcus over in New York. Last week, according to David over with the Post, you rescued a six-year-old from a house fire and were a bolt in the blue before the kid even had time to ask for an autograph. Do you want more, or do you want to try and futilely defend yourself yet?"

Clark was still processing exactly why he was in Cat's office when she asked her final question. "Cat, like I said, I've been busy. This CostMart thing is taking up a lot more time than I thought it would, and I'm still —" Clark hesitated for the barest of seconds, reminding himself that while Superman did not lie, Clark Kent certainly could stretch the truth to protect a source, and that's what Lois was, he told himself, a source — "I'm still obsessing over the story about Lois. I'm trying not to, I know, but Cat, she's out there, I know she is."

Cat's grin spread across her entire face. "I know she is, Clark. And what's better, I know that you know where she is." At Clark's attempt to explain, Cat held up a hand. "Don't try it, Clark. I've put CEOs from Fortune 500 companies who had entire groups of people lying for them in jail. Compared to people who get paid to lie professionally and don't have a moral code, you have no hope. Besides, bringing you in right now was just the icing on the cake. By my estimation, you figured out a major break in your story about, what, three weeks ago? What I can't figure out is how long it's been that you've known where she is. At least three weeks, definitely at least a week and a half, but I'll let you explain."

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"What do you mean 'Cat knows'?"

Three hours later, Clark Kent sat quietly on Lois Lane's couch while the latter paced in front of him, arms liable to move erratically at any given moment.

"She confronted me today about it. Asked me into her office and the next thing I knew, she was in on the secret."

Lois sighed, and if possible, began to wear a deeper line into the industrial-brand carpet. "This is bad, Clark. This is very, very bad. This is why I've worked alone for the past four years. This is why I didn't come back to the Planet, why I didn't let anyone know where I was. As soon as you tell one person, the whole world knows."

Lois picked up piece of paper, glanced at it and then turned it into a small ball that she began to toss back and forth while continuing to pace. "That's it, my entire investigation is going to go poof. Just like that, four years, my life in other words, is going to go up in smoke. I've managed for four years, but decide to throw caution in the wind because the idea of having Superman at my beck and call ..." Lois growled and glared at him.

Clark found Lois possessed the same ability as Cat to make him feel five inches tall. At some point, he thought, if she regained her sense of humor, he would have to tease her about the similarity. Determined to make her see that kicking him to the curb right now was the worst possible thing she could do, he hesitantly said, "Lois, it's Cat. This is the same woman who got a mob boss to confess his life of crime to the police by raising her eyebrow the right way."

This stopped Lois. "Really?"

Clark nodded. “Three years ago. She, ah, had all the evidence against this guy, but none of it was court admissible. She connected with the police, agreed to work with them as long as she got the exclusive, and from what I understand, proceeded to look at the guy in such a way that he was admitting to things Cat’s investigation hadn’t even been able to uncover.”

Lois considered this. “I suppose she has her moments.”

Clark ran a hand through his hair. “Look, Lois, I’m sorry. I thought I was covering my tracks, but she suspected something.”

“Like what?”

Clark, deciding to omit Cat’s joke about the wonders of intimate relations on the male psyche, shrugged. “She said I’d seemed different, and knowing what I’ve been working on, it wasn’t that hard to put together.”

Lois did not look convinced, so Clark decided to try another tactic. “Lois, she promised me she was the only one who knew, and she planned on keeping it that way. She doesn’t want anyone to know this anymore than you do. If she could, I think she’d find some way of getting me off this story to further cut down on individuals involved.”

For some reason, this placated Lois. She nodded and tossed the paper-ball at Clark, who caught it easily. Giving him a once over, she sat in the chair next to him. “What else did she say?”

“She wants to know how she can help. She doesn’t want to know where you are or why you’ve felt the need to cause your loved ones to spend several hundred dollars on psychiatry — “

Seeing Lois’s look, Clark quickly added, “Her words, not mine.” Clark tossed the paper between his hands, still feeling like he was trying to balance on a kryptonite tightrope above a shark tank. “She just wants to speed the story along. She said that after four years, anything less than a Pulitzer is going to be unacceptable, and the Planet’s due to win one.”

A smile, though thin, finally played across Lois’s features. “She’s right.”

“What can she do then?”

“Pretend she doesn’t know and never bring it up again and let you keep using the Planet resources to do work for me. For all I know, her office is bugged.”

“It’s not.”

“Why — right, superhearing.” Lois shook her head.

“Whoever invents a bug that you can’t detect is going to become very, very rich.”

Clark cast a skeptical look in Lois’s direction. “So, you’re not mad?”

“I’m dealing with it. Don’t push me, Kent,” Lois replied, again seated and already leafing through the notes he had brought her.

The two settled down into their normal routine of research peppered with the occasional bit of conversation for the night. At a little before 9, Lois glanced up at Clark.

“Shouldn’t you go do a patrol or something?”

Not looking up, Clark replied, “Not for another two hours.”

“What? You do it at the same time every night? Why? You do know that criminals go out at all times of day, right? Or did they not cover that in superhero training?”

Ignoring Lois’ joke, Clark replied, “It’s easier to be on a set schedule when I’m flying back and forth.”

“Look, I do appreciate your help.” Clark refrained from commenting at what was, without a doubt, the nicest thing Lois had ever said to him. “But it seems like you should be trying to make it at least appear like you’re still in Metropolis most evenings to avoid raising suspicion.”

Clark nodded. “I’ve been trying to, but it’s hard. Even at superspeed, going back and forth between here and Metropolis gets old.”

Lois rolled her eyes. “Please. You’re just not used to the commute. It takes you, what, half the time most people need to

get to work in the morning?” Clark shrugged noncommittally as Lois shook her head. “You’re just spoiled, being able to go anywhere in the world in a matter of minutes.”

Lois looked at the map affixed to one of the walls and doubted with color-coded thumbtacks. “Must be nice to go wherever you want in the blink of an eye. I’d probably have this investigation done by now if I had your gifts.”

Clark looked up at Lois and noticed the barest touch of wistfulness on her face. “What do you mean?”

Lois gave a humorless chuckle. “I’ve spent more time trying to get to where I’ve needed to go than on the investigation. It took me six months to find a way to get across the Atlantic. And even then, I ended up in Canada.”

“I’m sorry.”

Lois’ eyes had not left the map. “It was my own choice, Clark. It’s what I had to do. Once this story is done, it’ll all be worth it.”

Clark made a face as his hearing kicked in, picking up a nearby radio announcing the news of a rockslide in Colorado. “Lois, I’m sorry. I need to go. Tomorrow?”

Lois shook her head. “I was serious, Clark. Spend tomorrow in Metropolis. I have enough information here.”

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A commercial-free music set on the local jazz station and a hot bath were the items on Lois’ agenda for the evening. She was going to soak in the tub and not think about Cat knowing she was alive, the investigation, and most especially not about how much that she liked having Clark helping her with this investigation. Tonight was for Lois Lane, and no one else — not even work — was allowed.

Which is why, of course, a knock sounded on her door five minutes later. Seeing Clark on the other side, she opened the door.

“I thought you had a Superman thing to do in Metropolis tonight?”

Clark had his hands clasped behind his back. “I do. I just wanted to stop by for a minute.”

Lois smiled. “Come in. You know, Clark, if it was anyone but you, I’d be really impressed that they came hundreds of miles just to stop by for a minute.”

“What? Those who can fly under their own power get no points?” Clark asked.

Lois realized how her comment must have sounded. “I didn’t mean it like that. I just — not that I don’t want anything for the story, because if you do have something, that’s great — but, well, I was going to take the night and relax, but I won’t take a night off if there’s new material, because I don’t do that. I mean, that’s probably not really surprising since I’ve been after the same story for the past four years, but, I just, I need a night off.”

“No reading material.”

Lois nodded. “Good. That’s good. I mean, if there were any, that would be fine too, because if you find anything, I need to know immediately.”

Clark smiled before pulling his hand out from behind his back to reveal a bouquet of flowers.

Lois looked at the multi-colored flowers and then at a nervous Clark. “What are these for?”

Clark shrugged, trying to seem too casual. “Because I wanted to bring you something other than reading material or research. I saw them at the store and well, they reminded me of you,” Clark explained.

“Do you say that to all the girls, Superman?” Lois teased before turning a genuinely pleased smile to Clark. “They’re beautiful. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. And now, I’ll let you have the evening to yourself since I doubt it’s often you actually admit that even you need to relax. I’ll see you tomorrow?”

Lois nodded, her attention still caught by the flowers. “Tomorrow.”

They exchanged good nights, and Lois closed the door behind him. It wasn't until she had cut the stems that she realized the closest thing she had to a vase was an extra large coffee mug left by the previous tenant. And so, Clark's multi-colored bouquet sat in a Batman mug.

When he saw it the following night, he gave Lois a disapproving look before chuckling about it whenever he looked up from his work. A week later, he again brought Lois flowers, but this time in a Superman mug. When he next brought her flowers, they sat in a Superman mug.

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“Go work.”

“What?”

“Go get some work done.”

Clark looked at Cat, trying to understand her logic. “Cat, I was working at my desk, and you called me into your office to tell me to go work?”

“Clark, there's a very good chance your brain doesn't always operate at superspeed. Not your current story. The other one.”

“Cat, I only have one story.”

“Clark, you explicitly told me last week that I was to never speak the name of your new partner again, among other things. I am following your rules, despite that going against everything I believe in. But I want to see progress on that other story, and I somehow doubt you're doing that much on it after hours, especially given your love affair with tights.”

“Cat —”

Cat leaned forward, a sure sign of frustration, and spoke quietly. “Good Lord Clark. Go to wherever it is you go, work during business hours, come back here later in the afternoon, and then stay in Metropolis tonight so you don't have to try and always juggle Superman with your other thing.”

“Why?”

“Clark, you can't tell me it wouldn't be slightly more convenient if you could work during normal business hours. It would allow you to better vary your schedule so that Superman would not all of the sudden always be missing in Metropolis during prime time. Because you may not believe it, but no one is going to again buy your excuse of being so intent on watching Law and Order that you thought the sirens were on the TV show. Or did you think I missed that little gem in Monday's Star?”

Clark felt the tips of his ears coloring. “Well, when you say it like that, then yes it would make sense. But Cat, don't you think people will notice my absences?”

“Clark, you leave the newsroom a minimum of twice a day to go be your alter ego. That's not counting your occasional absence for a story or that the majority of the newsroom is also chasing stories and are so used to your escapades by now that seeing Santa Claus in a department store at Christmas is more exciting than interacting with the one and only Superman. No one will notice, and if they do, I'll have an excuse.”

“I want this story, Clark. The nominating session for the Pulitzers close in two months and you better believe I want Lois Lane's name on that ballot.”

With that, Cat Grant straightened, picked up what she had been working on previously and got back to work.

As he made his way to the Planet's roof, Clark considered the fact that he spent most of his days with the only two women in the world who could make Superman feel like a misbehaving schoolboy.

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Lois picked up the third and final stack of news clippings Clark had brought two days ago and began to flip through them. Between the two of them, Lois was fairly sure they had now managed to collect every tidbit of news about CostMart in the

past five years. She wouldn't tell Clark that, of course. As far as Lois was concerned, he could just keep digging. Better to play it safe, and it was much easier to dig for every last scrap of news when someone else did the grunt work — and at superspeed, no less.

Most of the pieces were the same wire stories every newspaper picked up, slapped a few original lines on, and called their own. Yet every once in a great while, enough of those tidbits would fit together and give Lois another clue. So far this week, though, about the only thing Lois learned that she had not known previously was that Church junior originally wanted to work in the computer industry but had found “The unique opportunity to work with the people who are part of the CostMart family preferable to the world of hard drives and software.”

Lois groaned and continued skimming. “I got to school and was up against people who were a lot smarter than me and a lot more creative,” Church said. “There was no place for someone who liked to tinker as a weekend hobby and couldn't stand being alone for more than a few minutes.”

Lois snorted. The only problem Junior likely had with the computer industry was that it might be used for the power of good. Nevertheless, she highlighted the new passage, put it in the stack to file later and kept working.

Charity Ball. Charity Ball. More charity ball. Charity softball game. Charity basketball game. Detailed charity piece. Charity softball game. Another charity softball game. Annual Church scholarship. Winner of annual Church scholarship. Previous year's winner of annual Church scholarship. Another piece on the same winner. A piece on this year's winner. Church donation to children's hospital. Another donation to another hospital.

Lois sighed. Had Clark found the Planet's archives for philanthropy? She flipped through the stack, getting through nearly twenty pages before any words having to do with the Church's PR-based good deeds did not appear in the headline. She snorted. It amazed her that all it took to distract the public were a few well-placed thousands. Do a few good deeds, invite the press, and no one even asks what you do the other ninety percent of the time.

Clark was not like that.

Lois always assumed Superman would be one of those men with one face for the public and a different one for daily life. Despite the reports of his chaste existence, Lois had always thought he traded sex on the ceiling for silence.

He was so different than she expected. Most reporters — especially those in the human-interest field — always played up a person's strengths while brushing over their shortcomings. Actors became saintly, and convicted felons became misunderstood rascals.

Clark was the opposite. Reporters played down how charming he was, how honest and kind. Lois wondered if it was because they thought the superhuman man did not need anything else to help people love him. They painted his story in colors as bright as his uniform. Oh sure, his parents' deaths when he was ten was a well known and tragic detail they all loved to mention. It was a detail and nothing more, as if that event had shaped the child and then fallen away once he reached adulthood. For all he was a happy, laid-back person, Lois still recalled that barely tangible shroud of grief that enveloped him the day they made. There was such sadness in his eyes, such desperation for something missed, something beyond his grasp. Clark smiled so often, it was hard to look beyond his cheerful disposition.

The remnants of a sad little boy turned solitary man never quite left Clark, Lois knew. It was in that vulnerability that Lois found a connection, one that made her trust him with what she felt would be the defining work of her life.

There was a knock on the door. Lois stood, not needing supervision to know who was on the other side. It was a knock

that Lois had grown to recognize and anticipate in recent weeks.

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Slipping back into the Planet after rescuing a group of stranded sailors, Clark found a note on his desk from Cat: My office.

Seeing her office was dark, Clark settled into his chair and after a cursory glance around the bullpen, opened the password-encrypted file for Lois' investigation.

He skimmed the files quickly. For the first time since becoming Lois' manservant, he had no specific goal in mind for the day. His mouse hovered around his list of articles retrieved when he noticed the date. The file had been updated an hour ago while he had been out on the rescue. How strange. Clark opened the file but could not find any changes.

Clark glanced at Cat's note and relaxed. Cat must have needed something in this file. He hadn't given her the password but, well, it was Cat. If she needed something, a flimsy computer password would be nothing to her. She had never done anything of the sort before, but Clark also trusted that she had her reasons, all of which would no doubt be very valid.

Clark would still talk with her later. He trusted Cat and respected her, but he was paranoid enough about this story already. The last thing he needed was to feel that his work computer, buried behind the levels of Daily Planet security insisted upon by Mr. Olson, was not safe. He had promised Lois he would keep her secret, and he was determined to not betray that trust.

Clark took a deep breath. There was nothing he could do about the files now. Cat was nowhere to be found, and he had work to do. Opening the database, he began where he had left off three hours previous: research for Lois.

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"Tell me you brought me more reading."

"I had a good day too, Lois. Thanks for asking."

"Just promise me there are no more charity pieces."

"No, getting all these articles for you today was no trouble at all. Don't worry about it."

Lois turned to Clark. "Hello Clark. How was your day? Mine was boring given that I spent yet another afternoon reading up on the Churches' philanthropy. And jeepers, thanks for bringing more articles for me."

Clark grinned as he handed Lois the box. "Much better. Sounds like fun."

Lois poked through the box Clark brought. "No take out?"

"Lois, it's 9 o'clock."

"But you always bring take out on Tuesday nights. You're breaking the tradition, Clark."

Clark gave Lois a long look. "You're not serious."

"It's the highlight of my —"

A gust of wind cut Lois off. "He really can be useful sometimes."

Lois sat down at the table and began to read the new material. Two paragraphs into the third story, a plate of Big Man Eddie's Metropolis Special with fried rice on the side was placed in front of Lois. Lois glanced up at Clark, clad in jeans and a fitted black t-shirt.

"And here I was hoping for service in spandex."

Clark raised his eyebrows at Lois' comment. "Are you flirting with me, Ms. Lane?"

"Clark, I'm a red-blooded woman, and most red-blooded women want to see you naked."

It was hard to say who was more surprised by the comment. Clark looked positively floored and Lois was both horrified and humiliated. Lois struggled to cobble together an explanation. "I meant in the suit. Naked was a Freudian slip. No, that's ... a slip of the tongue. That's what I meant." Lois was bright red, her eyes as wide as saucers.

Clark, by now, had recovered and was doing his best to not laugh. "Is Lois Lane embarrassed?"

Lois, eager to try and regain her equilibrium, grasped onto the first excuse that came into her mind. "I've been cooped up in this apartment for a week now, Clark. This is the longest I've been in one place since I got to the Congo. I've been in countries for less time than this apartment. And yes, I'm getting work done and I need to be reading these articles and it's probably a good thing I'm not going out as much because it cuts down on the chance of someone seeing me, but still," Lois explained and then looked at a still very amused Clark. After a moment, she reluctantly admitted defeat. "You're good looking. What do you expect?"

Now it was Clark's turn to blush. "What are you trying to get out of me, Lois?"

"Nothing, Clark. I'm just ... you're not so bad," Lois fumbled again. "I'm mean, you're not really bad at all. You're actually very nice. Despite the fact that you did force your way into my investigation. And not that the help isn't appreciated, because it is." Lois was all but squirming in her chair. "Anyway, I'm starving. I skipped lunch in anticipation of Big Man Eddie's, you know."

The ate in silence.

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As dinner wound down, Clark watched as Lois picked out the water chestnuts. During their last Big Man Eddie's dinner, she had mentioned eating cow's brain two years ago to get on the good side of a source. And here she was now, picking something as non-obtrusive as water chestnuts out of her meal. Clark could not help but grin as her eyes met his.

Their eyes met and an electric current shot between them. It was new and startling and wonderful. And then Lois asked the one question he had never wanted to answer.

"Why did you want to find me?"

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"Clark, I'm not quite sure what to do with myself when we don't have one of our daily chats."

Clark turned from the counter of the coffee shop on the Daily Planet's first floor to see Cat holding a cup with a predatory grin on her face. After paying the cashier, Clark moved away from the counter and next to his boss.

"Well, Cat, the way I see it, it gives you that much more time to think up bad superhero jokes."

Cat arched an eyebrow. "Do I detect sarcasm from Clark Kent?"

Clark shrugged. "I'm starting to realize that someone in the bullpen should occasionally stand up to our dictatorial editor in chief."

Cat coughed. "And let me guess. Once again, Superman saves the day?"

"Not really," Clark said as he shrugged nonchalantly. "I drew the short straw in the office pool."

"Aren't you the comedian today," Cat responded, a smile offsetting the venom in her tone.

A young girl behind the counter shouted, "Clark!"

Clark leaned over to grab his drink.

"Clark, why don't we just grab a table and catch up down here?" Cat inquired.

Once settled, Clark gave Cat the once over.

"You look like the cat that swallowed the canary," Clark remarked. "No pun intended, of course."

"I'm in a good enough mood, Hercules, that I'm going to ignore your incredibly tasteless joke."

Cat gave Clark a subtle once over as he took a sip from his drink. Perry had not seen the younger man recently, but Cat knew he would be amazed and delighted at the change in him. She and Perry talked occasionally about their concerns for the young

reporter and how much he had drawn into his shell since Superman appeared on the scene. It was not a new ritual, of course, this joint concern for the orphaned man, but one that extended back to Clark's earliest days at the Planet.

On Perry's request, Cat had taken Clark Kent under her wing when he started at the Planet. Her affection for him only grew with time. Even though he was a well-established reporter, she still felt a sisterly need to watch out for him. And in the past year, she found her tendency to check in on him increased, especially as she assumed Perry's old job.

He was so different now. Since he had found Lois, he was happier: no longer an observer on life's sidelines. But today, this was a whole new side of Clark Kent. In Cat's mind, there was only one explanation, and it was only by dint of their unique relationship that she decided to follow her instincts.

"Clark, did you have sex last night?"

Clark choked on his beverage. "Did I what?"

"Clark, part of why I love our little chats is that you mostly sit there and take whatever I dish out," Cat said. "You're low maintenance, easy to deal with. But today, I feel I am encountering an entirely different man. You're charming, you're witty, and it's my belief that sex is the one sure way to give a man that sort of spring in his step. And you definitely have a spring in your step." Cat took a sip of her drink before waving her hand in the air. "Actually, you know what, I don't really want to know. What you do in your own time is your own business. So long as it doesn't derail my plans for a Pulitzer."

Clark merely nodded. "Why are you so happy?"

Cat smirked. "I was out of the office all afternoon yesterday because of car trouble."

Clark cut in before Cat could continue. "Since when does that make you happy?"

Cat shrugged. "Clark, I am capable of enjoying vacations, believe it or not."

Clark quirked an eyebrow at her in disbelief.

"I especially enjoy vacations and temporary derailment of my plans when I find a mechanic who almost assuredly has some sort of smuggling ring running through his garage."

Clark nodded in understanding. "New story for me?"

Cat's head moved back and forth in an indecisive gesture. "Not exactly. I think it might tie in to a certain series. I'll give you my notes on it later."

Clark took a sip of his drink. "Actually, I wanted to ask you about that. Why did you need to go into my files yesterday?"

Cat's brow furrowed. "What are you talking about?"

"My folder, on my computer, for that 'series'?" Clark asked. Off Cat's blank look, he said, "Someone was on it yesterday afternoon while I was gone."

"Clark, I just told you. I was at the repair place all afternoon." Cat's jovial mood had vanished.

Clark's face did nothing to hide his shock. "Cat, I have to go. I'll come by your office later."

With that, Clark Kent was gone in a flash.

Cat sat there for a long moment, processing what Clark had just told her. This was bad — very, very bad.

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Ralph turned away from the coffee bar and walked towards the lone empty table when he saw Clark and Cat talking only a few feet in front of him. Wavering only a second, he quickly did a U-Turn and walked out of the Daily Planet. He knew he shouldn't have agreed to meet Davey here. The last thing he needed was for Cat to know one of his sources was D.T. Smith, the Star reporter known for his gossip about the famous people of Metropolis and beyond.

The only reason they were meeting so close to the Planet was Davey was in the neighborhood. He had called Ralph fifteen minutes ago, and they agreed to meet at the Planet, which had the

only decent coffee shop within two blocks. The man who ran the only other nearby place believed burnt coffee added to the natural flavors and charged \$4 a cup. Everyone in Metropolis raved about it, but Ralph chalked that up to the desire to put as many flavors, syrups, and dairy products as possible into their drinks, thus masking the taste. As for Ralph, he liked it straight-up black.

A cab pulled up down the street, and Ralph saw Davey get out. Ralph walked up the street to meet him.

"Ralph, how's it going?"

"Cat's in the coffee shop. Let's go for a walk to the donut place instead."

Davey shook his head. "No can do, buddy. I'm on a diet. I'm not eating anything but red meat and eggs. It's driving me nuts. I'm sick of steaks. You take me into a place like that, I'm going to order two dozen for there and another dozen to go."

Ralph shrugged. "If you say so."

"Let's just walk instead. We probably have less of a chance of being overheard out here anyway."

Ralph nodded before starting into business. "What have you heard about the Baranskis?"

"They're going to announce their gift to her alma mater next week. Apparently they're hoping to distract attention from Mr. Baranski's affair with their daughter's friend. They're desperate for good PR right now. Call them today and you might be able to get an exclusive. Everybody else is still fixated on the Olson and Church collaboration over at the children's museum."

Ralph grinned as he scribbled on his notepad. "Good, good." Finishing, he put it in his back pocket and waited for Davey's request for information.

"What's going on with Clark Kent?"

Ralph had not been expecting that. "What?"

Davey shrugged. "He hasn't been himself." Ralph looked ready to defend his co-worker and Davey held up a hand. "Hey, even I'm willing to give the guy an allowance for burn out on occasion. But I don't think that's it. What's going on?"

Ralph, despite knowing he would most likely be fired if Cat ever found him trading information regarding his superhero co-worker, grinned. "You're going to owe me, Davey. I was just in the coffee shop and heard Cat ask Clark if he did the deed last night. Looks like Superman has a girlfriend."

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No sooner had Clark knocked on the door than Lois flung it open, grabbed his sleeve, and pulled him into the apartment.

"Well, I wasn't expecting to see you until tonight but this is even better. I've been waiting for you," Lois said before turning to Clark, her eyes shining in excitement. "Clark, I found something."

Lois pulled an article from the top of the pile and pointed to the picture.

"Clark, this is one of the men who followed me in the Congo."

Clark glanced at the photo and did a double take. "Lois, that's James Olson. He owns the Daily Planet."

THE END

To Be Continued in "A Handful of Lightning"