

# From the Ruins

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Summary: The job of an investigative reporter is to uncover and expose the truth. But revealing some truths can bring consequences.

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A/N:

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Standard disclaimers apply.

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I knew that I had made a mistake the second I felt the gun barrel poking into my back. Everything concerning the story had been going so well, I suppose I should have known something was about to go badly wrong. That was probably the reason Perry sporadically tried to pair me up with a partner, so that someone would think to check the water level before I jumped in.

I felt the man's foul breath on my ear before he hissed at me to walk forward without looking back at them. Deciding it would be stupid to let them know that I already knew who they were and that for the time being my best chance of survival was to go along with them, I started walking. My assailants led me through dark alleyways to the deserted docks, where more men were waiting beside a rusting old car, but this bunch had their faces covered. Obviously they had been busy that night and I wasn't at the top of their 'to do' list. I bandied words with them, bluffing that the police were right behind me and about to arrest their hairy butts, but apparently they didn't believe me because soon I had been tied up and gagged, although I managed to get in a few good kicks and punches. I was glad to realise that I wasn't as easy a target as they had anticipated, but nevertheless there were a lot more of them than there was of me and they managed to overpower me.

Once I had been immobilised, they bundled me up and crammed me into the car's tiny trunk. I listened for the start of the engine, which considering the state of the vehicle was likely to be noisy and unreliable, but it never came. The car moved, though and it wasn't until I heard it splash heavily into the water that I realised what had happened. That they had simply pushed it over the edge without bothering the worn-out engine. I panicked and decided that now was the time. A year had passed and I had coped well enough without resorting to this but now I was going to have to if I wanted to live. Except I couldn't because I was gagged. Typical. Just my luck. Not that it was guaranteed to work anyway; in fact, in his position I would have just left me here to drown, but it was my last option, my only chance of survival. And it was no longer open to me. I wasn't about to go down without a fight, however, and so I resorted pummeling my bound fists against the metal above me, hoping it was enough to make some sound and I tried to make as much incoherent noise as I could through my gag, ignoring the water that was flooding in through the seals in an effort to dim my ever-rising panic.

I didn't feel any relief as the top opened and the dim lights lit up my bound and thoroughly drenched form. He obviously hadn't

realised who he was rescuing until he had opened the trunk, because as soon as he saw it was me the look of that concern had briefly been displayed on his face disappeared and was replaced with bitter anger and hatred. I tensed, waiting for him to slam the trunk shut again and push the car back into the river, but instead he reached in and hauled me out, unceremoniously dumping me on my unsteady feet, which somehow miraculously managed to hold me upright. Roughly he removed the ropes from my wrists and ankles, then finally he tore off my gag. He glanced at my body, probably with his x-ray vision because he then told me flatly, "You're not hurt."

I opened my mouth to reply but I couldn't form any words. I was trying to think of the last thing he had said to me. I wasn't paying attention at the time; it was probably something friendly and cheerful like: "Goodnight Lois, I'll see you tomorrow." I could still see him, though, cheerily waving at me as he stepped into the elevator at the end of the day. I may not have been listening but I was certainly very interested in Clark's comings and goings that day. That day had been a year ago, almost exactly. I looked down at my feet; I could no longer look directly at him. "Thank you," I mumbled.

"You don't need to thank me." The words could have been friendly, he probably had said them in a friendly manner to hundreds of grateful people, but spoken to me they were bitter and hateful. "It's my job."

I still couldn't meet his eyes and so I stared intently at the red rope burns around my wrists instead, hating myself for wishing they had cut deeper into my flesh in some form of well-deserved penance. "I would have understood if you had made an exception in my case."

Almost surprised by the silence that followed, I finally looked up at his face. He looked away, ashamed, as he realised that I could tell what he was thinking. If he had known it was me in that car, he might not have bothered rescuing me. I think that realisation hurt us both, although possibly him more. He felt things more deeply than I did.

He looked like he wanted to reply, I watched his face change expressions as he thought, but like me he had no words to say.

"I have to go." His voice was emotionless as he flew away from me as fast as he could, leaving my dripping clothes flapping against my body in his wake. I wondered whether someone actually needed him or if he just couldn't bear to be around me any longer. I shivered with the cold, although my wet clothes weren't the problem, the cold went deeper than that. I wrapped my arms around my body in an attempt to warm up and trudged automatically through the dark streets towards the police station, hoping that I knew whoever was on duty. I had all the evidence I needed on the car thieves at home; there had been no need to me to follow them that night but I was going to need police assistance right away as they had stolen my purse and house keys as well.

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My article had been run on the front page again but I was still too preoccupied with my rescue from Superman to be happy about it. I was numb. He had saved me, *spoken* to me. With regret.

Perry passed by my desk and glanced at me curiously. I knew he felt as guilty as I did about printing that article but somehow he had got over it in a way I hadn't. In a way I was suspecting I never would and in a way that I certainly never should.

"You two friends again?" he asked. I shook my head, knowing who he was referring to, as if he could read my mind. Not that it was so hard to work out what was preoccupying me. Superman had made it into my article. He had to because he had saved my life. Perry looked away as he raised his voice to call across the newsroom, "Myerson! Centennial Park, now! Superman's giving a press conference!"

He'd given lots of press conferences since my article first hit the streets and at the beginning Perry had still sent me out to cover them. He soon stopped after we both realised that Clark was never going to acknowledge that I existed at all, let alone that I was there in the crowd, desperately calling his name in a vain attempt to ask him a question. It was humiliating as some of the less respectable magazines and programmes had picked up on it, had taunted me with it. As if they could make me feel worse about my betrayal with their slanderous articles. Maybe Perry was hoping he could start to send me out to cover Superman again but I knew it would never happen. I was lucky I still had a job at all. It was Superman's city, not Lois Lane's. Who would want a reporter who couldn't get him to answer her questions in a session that had been held specifically for reporters to ask Superman questions?

"Lois, go home. You had quite an ordeal last night, your mind isn't here."

"I was only tied up and nearly drowned in a car trunk. I've had worse." Which was sad, but true.

"I know, honey, but I wasn't talking about that part," Perry told me in a calming voice. He knew I hadn't been myself recently and that actually being rescued by Superman must have made it worse for me. It should have done but it hadn't. It had actually made me feel a little better. Maybe Superman had needed to save me last night, but Clark Kent hadn't needed to speak to me at all. Perhaps, even if it was on my deathbed, just maybe, he might one day forgive me for ruining his life.

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It was there as I entered my apartment. I found my gaze drawn to it almost immediately, nestled against my three Kerths, slightly hiding behind them: my Pulitzer. My constant reminder of my betrayal. I couldn't remember much about the actual ceremony; I think I was drunk throughout the entire thing. When I eventually got home I threw it in the trash and continued my binge in a fruitless effort to numb my pain and send me into a peaceful oblivion.

Oddly enough, it had been my mother who had taken away all my alcohol and sobered me up the next morning. Maybe she had just stolen the bottles so she didn't need to buy any for herself. She'd also retrieved the prize from the trash and put it with my other awards. I had bitterly complained, I didn't want it, it had come at a price I realised too late I didn't want to pay, but she never backed down. The only member of my family who thought I had done the wrong thing was Lucy; my parents were overjoyed at my success and my story. We had compromised by hiding it behind the clear glass of my Kerths, so my parents could feel proud and so I could never forget what I had done to the best man I had ever met. Not that I ever could.

I remember it so clearly, even now. After Trask and his men had burst into the Planet's newsroom, Perry had hidden me and Clark away in his office. I don't know what Clark was doing, sitting on a chair throwing paper into the waste paper basket, waiting for the situation to sort itself out, but I went into action. Any good investigative reporter has tape recorders hidden away somewhere easy to hand in case of emergencies; unfortunately at that time mine were hidden in my desk and handbag, which were currently being searched through by a group of thugs. However, I assumed old habits died hard and it didn't take me long to find a rather old and dusty tape recorder hidden away in Perry's desk. Clark gave me a look, I suppose it was supposed to be reprimanding, but I wasn't going to sit there whistling while my privacy was invaded. I had secreted it away by the time Perry returned to speak to us and told us that we had to take a lie detector test. I wish I had figured out at that point why the idea scared Clark so much, but I thought he was just being Clark, i.e. strange. I was interviewed first and I managed to hide the recorder in the room without them noticing that I was taping

them. I didn't learn anything interesting from them but I discovered that Clark was full of surprises. First of all, his 'yes' in response to Trask's 'are you Superman?' question wasn't a lie. At first I agreed with them that Clark didn't have a pulse, and with it registering as a lie the second time it seemed the most likely reason. I mean, Clark being Superman? I was laughing when I played the tape back the first time.

Then, Clark admitted to having met Superman. This surprised me, as Clark had been absent every time I had seen Superman. It didn't sound like they had anything to do with each other but I was left with the impression that it had been more than Superman just flying overhead. The final nail in the coffin was the negative beeping I heard from the polygraph when Clark told Trask that he couldn't contact Superman. The men had missed it, they had other things to deal with but I didn't. Clark could contact Superman. The thought stayed with me.

I kept an eye on Clark for the rest of the investigation. In other circumstances I probably would have focused on Clark sleeping with Cat, but it was his relationship with Superman that I was interested in. Clark was a man and not a bad looking one at that. It was only inevitable that he would have fallen into Cat's bed at some point during his career at the Planet. Other things that happened in pursuit of the Trask story fuelled my interest in what Clark was hiding but the thing that ended up not leaving me alone was my own, thoughtless sentence, uttered in the high that can only come from the knowledge that I'd just cheated death — "If Clark's alive, that means Superman's alive!"

The truth in that sentence didn't hit me until later that day, after the excitement of the event had died down, when Clark had gazed longingly at the empty warehouse. It all made perfect sense, even if it made a sense that I didn't like.

That evening, after Clark had left the Planet I turned on the news. Satisfied that Superman was dealing with the aftermath of a Japanese earthquake, something that would keep him busy for a while, I had rushed out and caught a cab to his hotel room. I had no problem breaking into it and it had been the work of moments to discover a spare suit and bizarre globe of another planet hidden in his possessions. There had even been footprints on the wall and ceiling. I took some photographs, satisfied that with my recording and other little things my subconscious had picked up since Clark had started at the Planet that I had enough evidence to prove my theory. I hurried home where I wrote the article in a creative rush, desperate to get it out before I could let my conscience get a word in edgeways. I even found speculation on the internet that Superman had been working under cover for years and I discovered with only minor digging that a good percentage of those events happened in a place Clark had visited and then left in a hurry. I imagined that at the other places he was either passing through or using a false name. Some events were very close together and he obviously wanted to avoid detection. He shouldn't have come to Metropolis and flaunted his secret identity in my face if he had wanted to remain anonymous.

Perry had been apprehensive to say the least when I showed him what I had discovered, but he also couldn't turn away the biggest story since Superman first showed up. And as I told him myself, Kent was new, we had no obligation to an old friend standing in the way of printing the truth. So on the front page of the next edition of the Daily Planet he published my article that proved that Superman was really Clark Kent.

I never saw him come into work the next morning. Reactions to my appearance had been mixed; he may not have been there long but Clark had already made more friends in the office than I had, and yet at the same time I was the reporter who had discovered Superman's true identity. So I was met with an overwhelming feeling of ambivalence. It hadn't bothered me in the least. I was pleased with my work, with the evidence of it on every television channel. *My* story was the main topic of

conversation for pretty much the whole world. I had nothing to feel bad about. Until I saw him.

He came out of Perry's office; I had no idea how long he had been in there. His shoulders were hunched and he refused to look anywhere but at his feet as he made his way across to his desk. No-one spoke to him, but there were many furtive glances in his direction. The day before he would have spoken to half a dozen people on that small trip, but now he had been ostracised by his celebrity and he knew it. He made no attempt to pretend that everything was still the same. He paused as he reached his destination, he seemed almost frozen on the spot. Then he looked at me.

It felt like forever when our eyes met. He seemed to pour all his emotions from his soul into mine through that connection. Utter betrayal. The total horror of a lifetime's phobia coming to pass through my hands. The bleakness that was all he saw of his future. The absolute hatred that threatened to overwhelm him. I felt my whole body seize up and I swear that my heart stopped beating as the flood of all he felt invaded my mind and I finally sensed the consequences of my actions. He gave me the desolate and heartbroken glare of a man destroyed.

It was that look that Clark shot me as he cleared out his desk that started my spiral into a guilt-ridden depression. I had ruined Clark Kent in the pursuit of a story. I had never really known him, neither of us had, but both Perry and I had been close to growing fond of the green reporter. Not that I would have admitted that to anyone, let alone him. Ever since then I had been haunted by that look in his eyes; it was always there. Superman was all Superman ever had been: happy, kind, friendly, gracious, gentlemanly and virtuous, but his smiles never reached his eyes. Clark Kent had vanished, living as a recluse somewhere in Metropolis. Occasionally he had been spotted in his 'mortal' guise and I got the impression that it sometimes took up to five minutes for people to realise that the bespectacled man in the street was Superman, but as soon as he was recognised he was mobbed, more so than as Superman. He didn't have the same aura of power and authority when he wasn't wearing his spandex suit and so was more approachable.

My career also suffered. Not because of my work; my article had made me famous and I could have got everything I'd ever wanted from reporting. My career suffered because I lost my spark. I stopped caring about myself and my work. I did enough to earn my place at the Planet and put food on my table, but that was it. I threw myself into my bigger investigations to try and forget the pain I had caused, and every time I found myself in a deadly position I prayed that I could get myself out of trouble without calling for Superman, doubting that he'd save me. I doubted it even more now that he had.

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The street was empty. I felt a little uncomfortable as I sat alone at the table, like a literal sitting target. I remembered my first trips to the cafe, when it was the burnt-down eyesore in the sunny Southside. It had never been an upmarket area of the city but it had been pleasant and safe enough, with a thriving business district. Now the empty cafe that I was sat outside once again looked out of place, like a diamond that had been dropped into a puddle of mud.

I pushed my plate away, wishing that the portion had been smaller. It felt like a slight that I was unable to finish it, but I had no wish to start shopping for a new wardrobe. The main door to the cafe opened and my uncle strolled out, another plate in his hand.

"Chocolate torte in raspberry sauce," he announced, placing it on the table in front of me.

"Oh, Uncle Mike, no—" I complained, then caught a second look at the delicious looking cake my uncle had presented me with. "Well, I guess I *could* just move into my gym for a

month..."

Mike smiled as he pulled out the opposite chair to sit with me. "You never could resist chocolate, Lois."

"Certainly not combined with your baking," I replied with a grin as I tucked into the cake. A lot of my clothes were a little old-fashioned, so what if I needed to update it to a slightly larger size? "Why couldn't I have inherited your cooking talents?"

"It's certainly a relaxing hobby," his voice was tinted with regret. Uncle Mike had been a Marine in his youth. He used to turn up whenever he had leave to spend a few days with us. He never got married and my father was the only family he had. After his retirement he bought the cafe and decided to try and make a living from his fabulous cooking skills. When I felt lonely I used to go to his cafe; he was always pleased to see me and I would feel guilty for not visiting more often. Neither of us really had anyone else in the city to talk to, certainly no family, unless Lucy was around. We were never close but we were there and we both knew that if we needed help, the other would be at hand. Which was part of the reason I was visiting him. And not at all to try and work out what was happening to the Southside.

I swallowed a mouthful of torte. "Do you know what happened?" I asked, indicating the deserted businesses and burnt apartment buildings around us.

"Well, the neighbourhood's in transition. Gettin' more... eclectic. Kinda like Saigon without the jets."

I shook my head in amazement. "This is crazy. Six months ago this was the hottest street in town." A gang of youths in a car roared past the cafe, hollering and jeering like the group of morons they almost certainly were. "Just a wild stab, but... could they have something to do with it?"

I heard an explosion and jumped as both Uncle Mike and I stared in horror at the flames that began to lick away at the inside of his cafe. I rushed inside to try and stop the fire, but even with the fire extinguisher it was hopeless. Outside Mike was on his cell phone, obviously contacting the fire department although they were already too late to make a great difference. Movement out the back caught my eye and I raced into the side alley, colliding with a youth who was running in the opposite direction. The kid put up a good fight but his moves all came from aggression and with a few well-trained martial art moves, I soon had him at my mercy.

Uncle Mike ran over to join me with a length of rope and we soon had him tied up with some amazingly intricate knots created by Mike, waiting for him to be brought to justice. We may have been unable to save the cafe, which still burnt merrily behind us, but the arsonist wasn't going to get away with destroying my uncle's livelihood.

"Little punk burnt me out..."

"Can't prove that, man," the punk responded with conviction. "Can't prove nothin'. Nobody saw a thing!"

"We saw enough," I assured him as I pulled out my cell phone. "I'm calling the police."

"Take your shoes off and get comfortable. Last time I called, they took two hours." Uncle Mike's teeth were clenched as he spoke, never taking his eyes off our captive in case he managed to slip out of his bonds or something.

My call was answered. "Yes, I'm reporting an arson, my name is Lois Lane, I—" I stared at the phone in disbelief. I knew the police weren't exactly fond of me but I still couldn't quite believe it. "He put me on hold."

"Lois Lane?" The punk's question forced my attention back to him. He laughed and it wasn't a happy sort of sound. "*You're* Lois Lane?"

"I'm sorry, have we met?"

"No, we ain't met. It's just funny to me 'cause... you're dead. I mean, I know you're walkin' around but trust me, lady, go pick out a nice grave. And from what I hear, pick it out fast."

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The kid's words didn't get to me but all the same I had no interest in accompanying my uncle to the police station. From what he told me, it didn't sound like there would have been any point, anyway. The few policemen who were there weren't interested in the arson and due to the lack of 'real' witnesses, it looked like his case against the so-called 'Baby Rage' wasn't going to get very far.

Something was going on in Southside and if my uncle was going to stand a chance of rebuilding, he was going to need my help to sort it out. I wasn't going to waste my time following the procedures and going to the person who happened to be manning the desk at the time. I had sources in the department, reliable people who were higher up the food chain. That was where I was going to come in.

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"I need everything you've got on the Southside," I said breathlessly as I bumped into Henderson at the rather slack-looking police station.

He glared at me. "Not now, Lane," he told me, his voice somehow less friendly than normal.

"Yes, now," I argued back, "Don't you want me to solve this thing?"

Henderson said nothing as he walked away to an open door, through which I could hear happy chatter. Obviously some cops were taking a well-deserved break from eating doughnuts to have a conversation. "Everything sorted?" he asked as two people walked through the doorway.

"Just about," answered a familiar voice and I tried not to gasp as I recognised Clark. I must have made some sort of noise, though, because the three faces turned to look at me. I immediately turned away and looked at the walls, pretending not to notice their gazes.

What shocked me most wasn't the expression on Clark's face, that look was pretty much a given, but the almost identical one Henderson wore. While the man had never been the most affable I'd ever met, I'd always got the impression that our traded taunts were just our own bizarre version of inane chatter; I thought he was a friend. I didn't anymore; obviously his friendship lay with the man who should have been my colleague but for me. The woman was someone I didn't know and she obviously didn't know who I was either. Tactfully, she didn't ask, but I could sense her curiosity while she looked at me.

As they returned to whatever I had interrupted, I allowed myself to surreptitiously watch them. Clark and Henderson had clearly become good friends, but I was more interested in the strange woman who was stood at Clark's side. She had frizzy blonde hair that was probably supposed to be curly and was obviously dyed; her roots needed touching up. Her fitted outfit had blatantly been chosen to flatter her curves, her figure was fuller than mine, but that didn't make her a big woman. When she was talking to Henderson she appeared very serious and professional, but as soon as she looked at Clark her face lit up with a warm smile that was anything *but* professional. She was obviously very much interested in Clark, although I assumed his sex-life must have greatly improved now that everyone knew that he was Superman and for some reason I couldn't put my finger on, I didn't like it. It didn't seem right to me that he should be dating and I had no idea why. He *should* have found someone to be with, he always seemed to be so lonely in the pictures I saw of him.

As the pair moved to the exit, she moved further away from him as if to avoid any connection. That'd be why I hadn't heard anything about Superman's girlfriend, then. There had been rumours, of course, attaching him to just about every available female celebrity but to my knowledge there had been no confirmation of Clark dating anyone, famous or otherwise.

After they left, Henderson returned to me. "Sorry about that." He wasn't, there was nothing in the tone of his voice to back up his statement.

"Who is she?"

Henderson followed my gaze to the empty doorway. "I thought you were here to get information on the problems in Southside, not to dig dirt on Superman."

His barb stung; obviously I had truly overestimated his opinion of me. I couldn't help but glare at him and grit my teeth as I tried to restrain my response. "I am. I'm curious, so sue me. Are they dating then?" I caught his look and quickly mimicked the scout salute, "Won't print a thing, I swear. Just gossiping. I'll take it to my grave."

"You'd better," Henderson grumbled, "because if Kent discovers I've told you about his private life, I'll lose a friend."

Lose a *friend*? I had noticed a bond of companionship between them, but I hadn't realised that it went deeper than that, to the level of real friendship. Clark couldn't have many real friends anymore, and I knew Henderson would be a good one to have. I sighed. "I know, I'm sorry. Don't tell me."

He looked surprised at my backtrack. "You feeling OK?"

I sighed, "I'm fine. So, the Southside?"

Henderson signalled for me to follow him into the room Clark and his girlfriend had just vacated. He shut the door before speaking. "We don't know what's going on for sure. We have no proof, you understand. None of this is printable."

"I'll get the proof."

He ignored that comment. "This, whatever it is, comes from high-up. I'm only telling you this because I'm running out of people I can rely on and although your methods aren't always ones I can condone, I know which side you're on. There's a lot of focus on the Southside. Precincts are having their funding cut, men transferred, equipment sabotaged, cops paid to look the other way."

"Why?"

"Think about it. What happens when a good neighbourhood goes bad?"

"People want to move. Prices go down. Whole blocks go on the market for pennies on the dollar."

"Exactly. And whoever's planning on buying it up has infiltrated the force. So I'm left confiding in a reporter." His voice was its usual disparaging self, the voice he used to tell me off when he found me hanging around a crime scene.

I rolled my eyes at him. "Thanks. Is that all?"

"For the moment." There probably was more information. I didn't doubt that Henderson was busy trying to straighten it all out and knew much more than he was letting on, but it was enough for me to start with. I didn't want to push Henderson any further than I had to. Like him, I needed someone I could trust and I wasn't in a position to be picky. I started to walk to the door.

"Her name's Mayson Drake and she's the assistant D.A."

I turned to look at Henderson but all I saw was his back retreating to his office.

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I was disappointed as I entered the alley to find it empty. My source must have been delayed. Henderson wasn't my only link in the police force, but he was undeniably the most trustworthy. The man I was meeting was a turncoat. He had information for me, which he had gained from being friendly with some of the less law-abiding characters in the city.

I couldn't guarantee that he wouldn't double cross me but it was unlikely. He had the misfortune of wanting justice and riches. So he broke the law for money and gave me evidence for justice. I could have spent hours pondering his logic and probably could have done it while waiting for him to show. Instead, I decided to spend my time thinking more about what was going

on, trying to figure things out and still not getting very far.

I had also spoken to Bobby Bigmouth. According to him, it was a gang thing. A new one had started up and was busy making its presence felt. But these were no ordinary gangs fighting for turf, apparently. This was much bigger than that, and for some reason the Southside of Metropolis had become the main focus of their attention. For the time being at least. I didn't understand why. It was a strange place for them to be fighting over, I couldn't see anything special about the place. Maybe it was coincidence. I doubted it, though; I was obviously missing something. Well, I hoped I was about to find out what that missing piece was.

"You Lane?" a male voice asked, interrupting my thoughts.

I turned to look at the rather ugly and unkempt man who was stood in the shadows. "Who are you?"

"Someone with information for you."

"I don't think so. I've met the person I'm waiting for before and it's not you," I informed him fearlessly. These people are like animals; they can smell fear. If you act like you can take care of yourself, nine times out of ten they'll assume you can and leave you alone. Well, maybe nearer eight times out of ten. Or seven. But definitely more than 50 percent of the time.

He snorted. "He's busy. He sent me instead. I've got the info you want."

"What's he busy with?"

"Dunno. I wanna talk to you."

"And we're not talking now?"

I caught the flash of metal as he drew out a rather lethal looking knife from under his jacket. "Stop your smart-mouthing and come with me."

I tensed and reminded myself that if Superman heard me screaming he'd probably find something better to do than get involved. I was in this on my own and I had to deal with it on my own. And make Knifey wish he'd stayed at home instead of prowling the street looking for reporters to harass. "And I'd want to come with a man who's threatening me because..."

"Otherwise you'll end up like your friendly neighbourhood copper. He put up quite a fight, but we managed to relieve him of his coat," he threw something to me. It was a jacket. It was covered in blood, some still slightly sticky by the small hole in the chest area that looked a lot like a bullet hole. There was something bulky in one of the pockets. I reached in and pulled out a bulging wallet. Knowing I was being watched, and had a knife pointed at me, I cautiously opened it. Although I had never known his real name, or what he had really looked like, the floppy disc in the note compartment that wasn't allowing it to shut properly caught my eye. In what I recognised as his handwriting, the label simply read in thick, black letters, 'LL — I'. I pulled it out to look at it in more detail, knowing that it contained the information I wanted.

"Give that here!" The wallet, jacket and disc were taken away from me as the knife came dangerously close to my throat. He repositioned the blade slightly further away from me once the evidence was safely back in his possession. "Now, come with me," he repeated firmly.

"Not even a please?"

Apparently not, as he roughly grabbed my arm and pulled me towards a darkened van, where I noticed some movements in the surrounding shadows. Before I could even guess at the number of other 'informants' that were there, I felt a sharp blow to the back of my head and I lost consciousness.

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All around me was darkness. There was no light or sound, no sense or feeling. There was no time either, the darkness could have lasted for years or for seconds. The first thing I was aware of was a nagging sense of something being wrong, accompanied by something that sounded like a light whisper of my name. As I

tried to focus in on it, I felt hot and cold simultaneously. I was feverish, I realised as I got my thoughts together enough to make sense of what was happening. I was dreaming. The first thing I remembered was that I had been knocked out. I forced my eyes open.

I was in a darkened room when I woke up. I groaned and reached up to feel the sizeable bump on my head, wincing as I did so. Maybe I'd leave that for now; I didn't feel like passing out again at that moment. I managed to sit up, but in the very faint light that was all that lit up the room I couldn't see much and was none the wiser as to where I might be. The only thing I noticed was that everything seemed to have a green glow to it.

A groan alerted me to the presence of another person in the room. I levered myself onto my feet, crouching, ready to spring, in case it was an attacker. Whoever it was groaned again and I noticed some movement in a far corner. Then my dense skull recognised the noise as a sound of pain. Cautiously I made my way across the room, to where someone was writhing underneath an old blanket. I threw it aside and gasped when I recognised the sickly figure beneath. "Superman!"

His swollen eyes slitted open to regard me, then he moaned again.

"You're hurt!"

He tried to speak, but I couldn't make out the words. I doubted that he was telling me how happy he was to see me.

"Is there anything I can do?" I asked frantically, wondering if he'd let me help him, hoping that his hatred hadn't blinded him so much that he couldn't see that I was the lesser of two evils.

"Get ... it ... a ... way ... from ... me," he managed to gasp out as he turned his gaze away from me.

'It?' What was hurting him? The blanket? He rolled over slightly and I could see a large green rock on the other side of his spandex-covered body. It probably wasn't the blanket. I picked up the rock and then wondered what to do with it. He didn't seem any better, so he hadn't been lying on it and had to suffer it poking him in the back or something.

"What—?" I began to ask but he interrupted me, obviously anticipating my question.

"As ... far ... as ... possible," he gasped and rolled back to his previous and more comfortable-looking position, "ra...dia...tion ... hurts ... me ... not ... you."

I thought I understood what he was telling me, so I quickly deposited the rock into the furthest corner from him and returned to his side. He did look slightly better, although nowhere close to being described as 'well', let alone 'super'. "Will you be OK now?"

Clark slowly, with effort, pushed himself up into a sitting position and managed to shake his head, leaning heavily on the wall behind him, "No. It'll still ... kill me. It's ... the best we ... can do ..., unless you ... have any ... lead ... on you." His voice was still shaky and breathy, but he was at least sounding more coherent now.

"Sorry."

He sighed and closed his eyes. I noticed that he was sweating and shivering and I wondered how long he'd been locked up in here with that poisonous rock. Actually, I wondered how long I'd been locked up. In his condition there was no way he'd know how long I'd been there even if they'd got him first and he had watched as they bundled my unconscious body into the room. I picked up the blanket and pulled it around him, then sat beside him, drawing his body against mine as I mopped his brow with the blanket's edges. I could feel his ragged breath against my neck.

"We'll get out of this," I assured him, although I couldn't for the life of me think how. "Do you know what's going on?"

"Intergang."

"Who?"

He drew in a deep breath and nestled into my shoulder for comfort and support. “Intergang. They’re taking over, fighting Luther for turf. Just moved into Metropolis. I’ve been helping Mayson and Henderson try and stop them getting a foothold, easier that way.”

“So why have they captured me? I’ve never heard of them.”

“Dunno,” he said, then coughed. He sounded so weak, I knew I had to stop pressing him for information. I’d done enough damage to this man. He continued talking anyway and I decided not to stop him. This was the sort of person I’d become, a parasite leaching off the words of a dying man in pursuit of a story. “Intergang are burning the Southside, getting property. You, better than police, on the story—”

“I get it. Shut up.” He drew in another shuddering breath and I cursed myself for being so blunt. What was it about me that I couldn’t give the guy a break? And why did I care so much that I kept hurting him? That wasn’t at all like me. “You’re weak, save your strength.”

“Lois—”

“No, we’re getting out. Trust me.”

He snorted at my statement. OK, so maybe that was too much to ask for. He’d never trust me. I don’t know that I’d ever trust me. We just sat there, neither one of us speaking. I expect he felt uncomfortable in my arms but he never made any attempt to free himself. I wanted to protect him and make all the hurt go away and comforted myself that he at least needed to be kept warm and that was what I was doing. It wasn’t just that it felt nice to have some human contact for a change.

“You’ll get out. You always do. ‘Cept last time.”

“Huh?”

Clark raised his head to look at me. “I patrol at nights. Do you know how many times I’ve heard trouble and found you?”

“But you—”

“I know. I never interfered. I kept telling myself that you could handle yourself and that I’d step in if you needed... I think I was lying to myself. I think I would have only tried after it was too late.” There was a deep sorrow in his voice at that statement. I didn’t blame him for feeling like that, but it was obvious that he blamed himself for his feelings. Well, he *was* Superman.

“I would have called for you if I’d needed you. I wouldn’t have expected you to come, but it was always going to be my last resort.”

He sighed. “I hate myself for knowing I might have ignored you.”

“I don’t.”

Another awkward silence followed. “Two men are coming,” was his next opening statement, “I can hear them.”

I stood up, possibly a little too fast because Clark nearly fell over as his support fled. Right, yes, I was helping him once again by breaking him. Honestly, I just couldn’t help myself, could I? “Be ready to run,” I told him, keeping my face neutral and my eyes firmly on the green-shadow that looked most like a door.

“Run? I can barely breathe!”

“Just be ready,” I hissed as I looked around for a weapon. My eyes fell on the rock, the not-so-fictional and rather pointy-looking kryptonite. Justice would be served. I glanced at Clark and saw his eyes widen in horror as I picked up the rock. I really hoped he didn’t think I was going to use it to attack him, but I supposed he couldn’t be blamed for any negative thoughts he might have about me. I hid behind the door-shaped-shadow and waited for it to open.

And waited.

And waited a little more as my arms began to grow tired from holding the kryptonite above my head, ready to dash it against the heads of our captors.

Clark coughed behind me. “Can’t you smell that?”

“Smell what?”

“Smoke.” He struggled to his feet, leaning more and more on the wall, causing it to creak in warning.

I lowered the kryptonite and stared at him. “Smoke? As in, they locked us in then set fire to whatever building we’re in?”

“They did burn down your uncle’s cafe...; they have experience in these matters.”

“How did you—?” I shook my head. I was going to ask how he knew about that, but that wasn’t the most important thing at that point in time. “How do we get out?”

Clark shrugged. The simple movement caused him to slide back down the groaning wall and started off a coughing fit. I dropped the kryptonite, the hefty rock nearly landing on my toe as I raced over to him.

“Come on,” I said, heaving him to his feet and realising what the wall’s problem had been. He was not a light man. “Let’s try the door. With a bit of luck they’ve run off and aren’t waiting outside to shoot us in case we escape.”

“Let’s hope,” he replied through gritted teeth as he hobbled towards the door, his pain appearing to increase as we drew nearer the kryptonite. I paused and looked at the rock. Part of me thought that I should take it with me, but I realised that would cause Clark even more pain. He must have known what I was thinking about.

“Leave it.” His voice was tinged with an almost regret, but mostly it was just resignation. I suppose he had been thinking the same as me.

Accepting it as his decision to make, I turned my attention to the door. I hadn’t actually tried to open it, I had assumed it was locked. Why hadn’t it occurred to me to check? I turned the handle and pushed against it. It wasn’t locked, but it felt like there was something pushed up against it on the other side. I let go of Clark so I could put my whole bodyweight against the door, and heard whatever was on the other side shift slightly, but not enough.

“Help me,” I grunted at Clark as I continued pushing against the door, realising that his weight would be a great help here.

He stumbled and practically fell against the door rather than stepping forward and pushing, but the extra weight worked, and slowly the door inched open enough for us to squeeze through.

I grabbed hold of Clark; he was still leaning against the door and on opening it I could just see him falling down and I wasn’t sure that I had the strength to lift him back onto his feet again. I helped him out of the room and through the burning building, not concentrating on anything other than making it outside without turning into one of my tastier home-made meals; in other words — burnt. As we went, we held the blanket against our faces, trying to block out the smoke.

Our luck was in. There was no-one waiting outside what turned out to be an abandoned warehouse to gun us down as we emerged from the flame-engulfed building. God bless incompetent criminals. We walked away from the burning warehouse towards the city centre where we could find a taxi to transport us home, with me mentally mapping the route so that I could at least tell Henderson where we had been. Clark kept the blanket wrapped around his body and his head low to avoid recognition. I could only hope that his red boots wouldn’t stand out too much in the dark.

When we finally found a cab, I asked the driver to take us to my apartment, more out of automation than rational thought process. Clark and I still hadn’t spoken but he didn’t complain and ask to be taken somewhere else, like to his girlfriend’s house or his home. It would have been a terrible idea to go to Clark’s, not that I had any idea where that was but it would have been a media circus within minutes. With no better plan, I decided to bring him home with me.

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The journey wasn’t that long and we had soon made it into

my apartment building. I had paid off the driver and given him a much higher tip than usual as I noticed his interested looks at Clark, who still had the blanket wrapped around his suit. Whether he recognised him or not I wasn't sure, but it was obvious from his hunched figure that something was wrong with him and I probably should have taken him to hospital. The driver looked like he had often been paid to look the other way and there were more than a couple of nasty looking dents in the car that could easily have been made by passing bullets, so I assumed I wouldn't need to specify what the extra money was for. He gave me an understanding nod in receipt and drove off as soon as we left the car.

My body already ached from helping Clark move away from the warehouse and it was not delighted at the prospect of helping him on the way up to my apartment, yet it made it there intact. It received a brief respite as I opened the door and turned on the lights, then locked the door again with us on the right side. After dropping my keys I took a firm hold of his body and propelled him into my bedroom, the sudden movement surprising him so much that he didn't speak until we were in the room.

"Er, Lois—"

"You need to rest and my couches are not comfortable," I told him as I pulled the blanket from his shoulders. I didn't know what he thought I was planning by taking him in there but I wasn't about to go giving him ideas. "You get in there and try to get some sleep, and I'll call Henderson and let him know about the kidnapping and kryptonite."

I pulled back the covers and saw him eye up the comfortable-looking bed, his tired body the very picture of indecision. I made the final decision to push him down onto it and he made no effort to stand again. "Is there anyone else I need to contact for you to take you home?" Please don't say Mayson, I thought. For some reason I wasn't aware of, I didn't want to have to deal with her.

"No. Henderson will sort it all out," he replied flatly, with strains of fatigue evident in his voice.

I smiled at him, mainly out of relief that the Drake woman hadn't been mentioned. Henderson I could deal with. His face remained impassive.

"OK," I said. "You recuperate in here and I won't disturb you until it's time for you to leave."

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The TV volume was on low as I watched the end credits of a late night movie roll through tired and therefore slightly bleary eyes. Unable to get comfortable enough to sleep on my couch, the movie had seemed the best option to keep me company for those sleepless hours. Usually when I couldn't sleep I'd immerse myself in a book, but my current read was sitting on my bedside table and I didn't want to risk retrieving it in case I woke Clark up while doing so.

Henderson had asked me to look after Clark until the morning, partly because he hoped Clark would be recovered enough to fly home on his own by then, and partly because he wasn't able to come over himself and he didn't want to inform anyone else that Superman was currently vulnerable. It was understandable, even if my sore back didn't agree.

It was strange to think that after all that had happened, he was now sleeping in my bed, powerless. I couldn't believe that he really trusted me that much and yet, there he was. I felt almost humbled by it.

I heard some shuffling movements coming from my bedroom and turned my head to see Clark standing in the doorway. Even though he was covered in the blanket, I could tell that at some point he had taken off his Superman suit as the areas that the blanket failed to cover now showed his flesh rather than blue spandex or red leather. I could imagine that after a while it would become uncomfortable, especially after losing his powers.

"How long have I been asleep?" he asked me when he

realised that he had been spotted.

"I left you a couple of hours ago," I told him, unable to give him an accurate answer as I hadn't stayed in the room to keep him company. "Henderson won't be coming until the morning, I'm afraid. I hope you don't mind crashing here." I got no reply except a slight shrug of his shoulders, a gesture of resignation rather than affirmation. "How are you?"

"I'm not sick any more but I'm not super," he told me after a slight pause he had most likely used to decide what he should and shouldn't tell me. Obviously I was the last person he wanted to confide in; I should have thought of that before I'd asked. I was probably also the last person whose apartment he'd choose to hide out in but he couldn't have had anyone else he could trust or he would have been long gone by now.

"Have you had any sleep?" His question surprised me, although on reflection it was completely within his character to care about every individual, even when he had good reason not to.

"No, you can't sleep on these things."

He moved more fully into the room but he made no effort to make eye contact with me. "You take the bed. I don't need much sleep. What I need now is the sun."

"You're the one who was dying in the warehouse, you take the bed."

"It's your bed."

"I'm not arguing with you, Kent."

Suddenly his eyes locked with mine and I was startled by the intensity of them. "What did you call me?"

"Kent. That's your name," I told him, momentarily wondering if the kryptonite had caused some sort of amnesia. That might be why he was talking to me.

"I know, but," we lost eye contact again and I immediately missed it, "hardly anyone calls me my name."

My fault. It was all my fault. No-one saw him as Clark Kent anymore and it was all because of me. "Would it help if I apologised?" I asked, desperate for a chance to redeem myself.

There was a moment's pause as he considered my question. "You know, I thought it would, but I was wrong. I think it's too late." He sounded almost sad at that thought.

"I thought it might be."

"At least Perry warned me. He called me after he got your article, explained that there was no way he could justify not printing it but told me to lay low and get my parents to safety. Then he apologised. You didn't even have the courtesy to do that. You didn't even confront me and yell at me for lying to you and give me any chance to plead with you not to print it." His voice was bitter and loud, although he wasn't quite shouting, he just sounded angry and frustrated.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, realising now how Perry could sleep at night. He had done the best he could for Clark without compromising his position by killing my story. He was right; I had at least owed him the chance to convince me not to hand in the story. I think subconsciously I knew that if I had spoken to him about it, he would have been able to talk me out of submitting the story. Which is why I should have, and why I didn't.

"Yeah, me too," he said. His voice was quieter than mine but it sounded extremely dangerous. I'd never heard him speak in that tone before. I wondered what he was thinking, then decided that I really didn't want to know.

I let out a long sigh. "Clark, please. Just go to bed. You don't need to put yourself out for me. I'm the one in the wrong."

"Only if you come with me." I stared at him in shock. Had he really just said...? "It's the only way either of us will get any sleep. I know you won't back down either."

That was true, I wasn't going to back down. "So you're telling me that if I stay sat on this couch, you're going to stand

there the whole night waiting for me to go to bed.”

“Pretty much. I might sit at some point, though.”

I smiled at his humorous response but my mind went blank as I processed this information. For some reason my body began to act on auto-pilot. It turned off the TV before standing up and walking into the bedroom. I was aware of Clark following me but not that closely. Scared that he was planning on leaving me alone and making me look like a bad host by forcing my ill guest to sleep on the couch, I moved backwards and grabbed his arm, propelling him forward to the bed as I had done earlier and taking him by surprise once more. He grunted as he landed on the crumpled duvet and the blanket slipped from his shoulders, revealing his well-toned body. I tore my gaze away and looked at my feet as I composed myself. The last thing he needed right now was me ogling his bare chest. I lifted up my pillow and pulled out my night dress.

“I might as well get out of these clothes,” I said inanely, needing to speak but unsure what to say in this situation. “I won’t be long.”

It didn’t take me long to prepare for bed. As I left the bathroom I paused, debating whether to return to the bedroom or living room. I had no doubt that if I didn’t arrive in the bedroom within whatever time frame Clark had allotted in his mind for my preparation for bed, then he’d come searching for me. He’d probably be angry. He wasn’t angry at the moment but I couldn’t forget how he had looked as he rescued me from the car and I didn’t want to feel as bad as I had done then. I didn’t want to see that look on his face again, however strange and uncomfortable this current situation might be, so I walked back to my bedroom. Sharing a bed was no big deal. Sharing a bed with Superman was even less of a big deal; it would be safer than sharing a bed with the Pope. Right?

He looked like he was asleep as I turned the lights off and entered the room. Silently I crept into the opposite side of the bed and snuggled down into it, keeping my body as far away from his as I could. It didn’t take me long to fall asleep. That movie hadn’t exactly been an adrenaline-fuelled action movie. If it hadn’t been for the couch, I would have fallen asleep five minutes into it.

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I woke up sometime later to find that I had moved in my sleep. Actually, we both had. We must have. Because when I woke up I was snuggled up against Clark’s welcoming chest. My breath stuck in my throat and I tried to keep my breathing shallow as soon as I realised it. I didn’t want to disturb him. I didn’t want to see the expression on his face when he realised the compromising position he was in with *me*. It was such an ironically safe and comforting position, however, that I had no wish to move out of it.

“You awake?” His question surprised me as I felt it breeze through my hair.

“Yes.”

“This isn’t a dream then?”

I allowed myself a small, sarcastic chuckle. “Yeah, because you dream about us lying together like this a lot.”

He sighed but made no answer. I felt him move his head so that it rested against the top of mine. I was amazed at how natural this all felt. “Can we pretend this is a dream?” he asked me softly after a pause.

“Please,” I begged, pulling myself away from his chest so I could look at him. There had always been something about Superman that interested me on a physical level; I could recall having some very vivid dreams involving the two of us after his appearance on the Messenger. Since realising that he was Clark, I couldn’t honestly say that those feelings had changed, but the reality of our situation had made those dreams less appealing. Now, however, all of my old thoughts and fantasies came back with a vengeance. The idea of living out my dream of sleeping

with him, even though I knew it could only last one night, was beyond words. A dream come true.

The room was still dark, I couldn’t have been asleep for more than a couple of hours, but I could see him clearly enough by the light that leaked in through my curtains. His hand lay lightly on the small of my waist, his fingers softly following the curves of my middle as he very lightly clasped me. His touch was gentle, but I could still sense it as if it was burning through the material and into my veins.

He searched my face for some reaction; I don’t know what he was expecting to see but I assumed he found it as his face leant closer and his mouth found mine. I closed my eyes as his tongue teased my lips open and I allowed myself to shut out the reality of our situation and immerse myself in our dream. Why on earth he’d dream about kissing me I had no idea, but he was very good at it and I knew that I’d be dreaming about this for a long time, whether it was a dream or reality. I brought my hands up to run them through his hair and hold his mouth more firmly against mine as I slid my tongue along his into his mouth so that I could taste him more fully. At first he seemed to welcome this invasion, but then he seemed to come to his senses and he broke off the kiss. He raised himself up onto his arms and gazed down wondrously at me. Then he let out a deep breath.

“Lois.”

“Clark,” I responded, and watched him as he closed his eyes at the sound of my husky voice saying his name.

“I…” he seemed to find it hard to vocalise whatever it was that was bothering him.

“What is it?” I prodded gently.

“This isn’t right.”

No, it wasn’t. Nothing was right any more, especially between us. Except this, to me, this felt perfect. “It’s just a dream.”

“It’s not, though. There are… consequences to consider.”

“I’m on the pill.”

A small smile graced his passion-flushed face. “I didn’t mean that. I meant… us. I can’t make love to you.” He was serious again, and starting to look angry.

“I can’t force you to,” I sighed. I just about managed to stop myself from smiling at what I said. ‘Forcing’ *him*, of all people, really was beyond my limits.

He shook his head sadly. “No. You don’t understand. If we continued, it would just be sex.”

“I know,” I whispered, “there’ll never be anything between us, I’ve hurt you too deeply. I know I was never exactly nice to you before, and then I—” I broke myself off, deciding not to go down that path, the last thing I wanted to do right now was remind him of what I had done to him, “but a part of me still wants to be your friend. It’s crazy, isn’t it? There’s no way you can ever forgive me for ruining your life. I wish I could make you forget it all.”

“Maybe you can,” his voice came out unusually deep, even when compared to the voice he used as Superman. He lowered his mouth back down to mine and I closed my eyes as we fell into our dream.

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I moved so that I was facing him and I pushed a lock of sweat-drenched hair away from his chocolate coloured eyes, which seemed to hold a look of wonder in them. I wanted to say something, but what could I say? I looked away from him, unsure of what to do. This was not a man with whom I could whisper sweet nothings after making love, yet I equally couldn’t bring myself to say anything cold and detached. As much as I knew that it hadn’t been real, that it had been a physical experience rather than a meeting of souls, I didn’t want it to be something I looked back on with regrets. Unlike every other time I’d slept with a man, this time I knew from the start it was nothing more

than sex and for some reason that made me even more determined not to ruin it by hearing him tell me how little it meant to him. It had been sex, it had been good. We'd both enjoyed it and found a much needed release from it. It was enough.

I closed my eyes for the second time that night, as I grew lethargic from my long night. I heard Clark grunt as he shifted into a more comfortable position in my bed; I think he had moved so that he had his back to me. His tired and sated voice drifted over to me. "Night, Lois."

"Goodnight."

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The next time I awoke daylight was streaming in through my curtains and someone was knocking rather loudly on my front door.

Feeling Clark stir beside me, I quickly threw on my night dress and robe, then walked through to roughly pull open the door before the person on the other side knocked a hole through it. Henderson was stood there, his face blank as normal, and yet he still managed to convey a hint of anger and worry. I opened my mouth to speak but before any words came out I felt Clark appear at my side.

"How are you?" Henderson asked him.

"Still a bit weak," he admitted as I moved away from the door, back into the comfort of my apartment. He must have got some of his powers back as he'd managed to get his Superman suit on quite quickly; I was fairly certain he had still been naked only a few moments ago.

"There's a blacked-out car waiting for us downstairs. That'll get you back home unnoticed."

Clark stepped out into the hallway and disappeared from my view, assumedly towards the building's exit.

"Thanks Lane," said the Inspector as he glared after the superhero's back, almost as if he thought he was being rude by not speaking to me before he left.

I gave him a ghost of a smile, "What else could I have done? I wouldn't have left him there, and I know it would be bad for the general populous to know that he's not exactly himself so I couldn't send him home helpless in that outfit. I don't need thanks."

Henderson didn't say anything for a while, he just looked at me, obviously appraising me, but his expression gave no clue as to what he was thinking.

Finally he spoke. "Not everyone thinks that highly of Superman, you know. He's still a naive man when you get down to it, easy to take for a ride. If a less scrupulous person had been in your position, they'd probably have found a way to exploit it for their own gain. Not to mention what the loonies who think he's part of an invading alien army would have attempted to do to him. Don't sell yourself short; you did good. And I assume this won't make it onto the front page of the Planet?"

Exploitation, huh? I suppose there are those who would argue that I *had* taken advantage of him, although I knew it would be a cold day in hell before anyone found out that Superman had slept with me.

I had no intention of plastering his weakness across the front of the Planet, letting everyone know that kryptonite was real, but Henderson didn't know that, not for certain anyway.

"Of course not," I smiled sweetly at him. "And I'll come down to the station later so that you can tell me everything you know about Intergang."

He let out a deep sigh and shook his head, but he made no comment to deter me before he hurried after Clark. I closed the door and smiled properly for the first time in a year. It was only fair, really. After all, Intergang apparently had it in for me when I'd never *heard* of them. I *should* know all there was to know about them. And then I'd stop them.

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"Lois Lane?"

I looked up from my work at the sound of someone saying my name. I was shocked to see the blonde woman, Mayson Drake, standing beside my desk. She looked angry and for a second I returned that anger, not knowing what I had ever done to make her angry at me.

Then I thought of something.

Oh, no.

She was dating Clark, wasn't she? Surely he hadn't been stupid enough to tell her what had happened between us last night?

"Yes," was the only response I ventured, my heart racing as I wondered what she was doing there, at my desk on the morning after the night before.

"Is there somewhere private we can talk?"

"Sure," I grabbed a notepad and pen and hoped that my hands weren't shaking. Obviously she didn't want people to overhear whatever she wanted to talk to me about. Which was good. If she knew about Clark and me, then she didn't want the rest of the newsroom to know as well. But I still had to make it look work related, even if it wasn't.

"There should be an empty conference room," I told her.

Drake said nothing, just followed me into the nearest room, which was luckily unoccupied. Some days you could spend forever looking for a private corner in which to talk to a source.

She closed the door behind her. "I know who you are." Her voice was cold.

I gave a feeble laugh. "You did say my name."

"I mean, I know that it was you who wrote the original article on Clark being Superman. I remember you from the station yesterday. Bill told me why Clark was so cold towards you. I had to wonder; he's normally so friendly."

I sat down. She was beginning to thaw, not too much, but enough for me to question again whether or not Clark had told her about last night. "Except to me," I agreed with a sigh, "and for the record, I don't blame him. In his shoes I probably would do more than just give me the cold shoulder."

"I might have done as well," Drake agreed, sitting opposite me. "But luckily for you, Clark would never hurt anyone."

<Lucky old me,> I thought.

"I know who you are as well." I decided to tell her. If this was about Clark, I wanted to get it over and done with. Get it out in the open. I wanted to know where I stood.

"What do you mean by that?" Drake asked, suddenly looking suspicious and uncomfortable.

"You're Mayson Drake, assistant D.A. I asked Henderson."

"Oh," she relaxed a little. "That's all?"

I gave a small smile and looked away. "Officially. I did get the impression that there might be something between you and Clark, but that was neither confirmed nor denied." From out of the corner of my eye I could see her agitation increasing. Of course, I cursed my stupidity, if I'd had no scruples in outing Clark then why would I think twice about printing anything about their relationship? "Luckily I'm not the gossip columnist and I can learn from my mistakes."

"I'm not here to discuss Clark." She said, her voice cold again.

I forced my body not to immediately relax. If she sensed my relief at her statement, she might question it. "So why are you here?"

Drake opened her bag and pulled out a huge file. She placed it on the desk and slid it towards me. "This is highly classified and you are not to let it out of your hands. It's a copy of all we know about Intergang. Bill told me that they had tried to kill you and that as a result you wanted to know. He managed to persuade me that as they consider you a target and as you're one of the best

investigative reporters in Metropolis, it might be a good idea to let you in on our side.”

I flicked hungrily through the stack of paper. “What about Clark?” I asked. I knew it was stupid to mention him, but if I needed to know if he knew I was helping them. I’d been very cautious to keep away from stories he’d been involved with and so far had managed it without giving up too many big stories.

“He agreed that you were good at your job. Bill assured him that he didn’t need to come into any more contact with you than he wanted. That’s why I’m here. Clark spends most of his time at the police station, helping out. He won’t go as far as actually joining to force so that he knows what he’s doing but as he’s now on their payroll he’s technically acting legally as Superman.” There was a bitterness to her voice that surprised me.

“You don’t like Superman?”

“Not much,” she agreed. “I mean, I know Clark thinks he’s doing the right thing, but he’s still only trained as a journalist. There are piles and piles of documents and signatures from the government allowing him to continue his Superman duties, but I still can’t see Superman as anything more than a vigilante.”

“But I thought—”

“Please, Miss Lane,” Drake interrupted me and stood up.

“Forget I said anything. My opinions are just that and if you write —”

“I won’t!” I exclaimed. “I promise. As I told you, I’m a journalist not a glorified village gossip. Superman’s secret identity was technically news. The fact that you don’t like your boyfriend is not.”

Drake gaped, opening and shutting her mouth like a goldfish as she fought to find the right words. “I— He’s—”

She took a deep breath and started again.

“He’s not my boyfriend and I *do* like him. I’m just not entirely happy with the way he’s gone about his Superman duties, that’s all. Don’t your friends do things you disagree with?”

“No,” I told her, leaving out the small point that I didn’t really have any friends. “And if he isn’t your boyfriend, why not say so in the first place? ‘No comment’ usually means, ‘yes but I’m not going to admit to it’. I know it’s none of my business, and that I am not the first person you’d choose to confide anything about Superman to, but that doesn’t mean I’m blind. I saw the way you looked at him.”

“Bill was right; I don’t think I am going to get on with you. For some reason he seems reluctant to leave Clark’s side today but as out the three of us his opinion of you is highest, I think it’s safe to assume that you’ll be seeing more of him than of me or Clark. You would have thought that after all you’ve done, you would leave him alone but you can’t, can you?”

“Unfortunately for us, Clark is our only common ground,” I bit back. “And that’s what you look for in people.”

Drake, who was stood by the door and ready to leave by this point, looked a little guilty at her former outburst. “I guess. And for what it’s worth, I’m glad the truth about Superman is out. If I’m not happy with it knowing what a wonderful man Clark is, imagine what I’d be like if I didn’t know they were the same person.”

This, I felt, was the most shocking thing she’d said. “I ruined his life, Miss Drake. I know Clark too, or at least I knew him a little. He’s not the sort of man who wants to be centre of attention, but he’ll never be anything else now for the rest of his life. Nor will any woman he falls in love with. If he ever did get a wife or girlfriend, she wouldn’t even be allowed the smidgen of a life he gets. She wouldn’t be invulnerable but she would still be a target for villains and the press. If no-one knew, she could live a normal life with him.”

“I know,” Drake said sadly and I began to doubt that was the real reason their relationship was unknown, “but Clark would be worth sacrificing all that for.”

I wanted to ask her why she hadn’t. If it wasn’t the publicity keeping them apart, I had no idea what was. Maybe their arguments about Superman, but that didn’t seem right either. Clark wouldn’t be scared off by a disagreement, even if it was about himself. He hadn’t been scared off by Mad Dog Lane when he met her. Despite everything, I’d worked with Clark on two stories. I’d never had a partner last more than one.

Drake said something about keeping each other posted as she left and I wished I wasn’t so busy trying to figure out Clark’s personal life. Why was it so important to me? Why couldn’t I learn my lesson and keep my nose out?

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I had left the information at work in my locked draw. I figured it would be safer there than in my apartment, which had a strange tendency to be broken into in spite of how many locks I put on the door.

As I shut the door to my apartment, my gaze fell on the window. It was shut and locked, how I always left it except when it got really hot in the summer, and then I only kept it open for enough for ventilation when I was at home and awake. Some people would think I was overly paranoid when it came to safety, but they weren’t ‘Lois Lane — Danger Magnet’.

I found myself walking over to it. For a moment I just stood there, looking out over the bustling city, then I unlocked my window and left it ajar enough to look open, without being an obvious target for whoever was currently looking for a way into my home.

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For the next two days I carried on my new ritual, barely aware that I was doing it and never really considering why. I’d open the window when I got in from work and keep it open until I went to bed. It wasn’t the first time I’d done so. For those few weeks before I’d discovered that Superman was really Clark, I’d started keeping my window open in the hope that my crush would appear to sweep me off my feet. He never did, of course, and as I far as I know Clark had only just found out where my apartment was. I’d never invited him there before and he’d never had to come to save me there for some reason, so it was a fair enough assumption. That probably *wasn’t* the reason Superman hadn’t come to sweep me off my feet after the Messenger explosion; it was more likely to be that he was really my work partner and wasn’t in the least bit in love with me. Which was probably for the best as it turned out. However, it did make it easier for me to slip back into the window routine.

Things changed on the third day.

As normal, my window had been opened as soon as I’d returned home without me really considering the purpose behind it. I was busy polishing off a tub of ice cream as I desperately tried to find some sort of pattern in Intergang’s behaviour from the information Drake had given me when I felt a strong gush of wind enter my apartment. I couldn’t help but jump at the sensation and as I turned around I was surprised to see Superman standing in my living room.

He looked quite fierce; his fists were clenched by his sides and he wouldn’t look directly at me. I swallowed my immediate panic at his appearance.

“Your window was open,” he said, his voice strained as he kept all emotion out of it.

“I know,” I whispered, amazed that I could answer him at all. My heart was pounding as the truth of my actions flooded my knowledge. That was why I had been opening my window, because I really wanted to sleep with him again. And now he was here and I was nervous.

He watched me as I got to my feet, unsure what to do. I really hadn’t expected him to come; I could see no reason why he would. He hated me, I was sure of it and there was no logical reason for him to desire a woman he hated, unless Superman was

secretly a masochist. And yet there he was, standing in my apartment, watching my reaction to his appearance.

“I know I shouldn’t have assumed that I could come in, so if you want me to go...” he began as I found myself rooted to the spot, unable to speak or move for what felt like an eternity to me, and from those words it appeared that it must have felt at least as long to him.

“No!” I exclaimed, then cursed the desperation that I heard in my voice. What on earth must he think of me? I spoke again, in a softer voice. “No, I’m just a little surprised, that’s all.”

“Me too,” and he did look rather lost, as if he had no idea what he was doing here either, except he must have done.

I moved towards him so that I was close enough that I could reach out and touch him, although I refrained from doing so. In spite of what this appeared to mean, it didn’t feel like my place to be the aggressor. I just stood there and decided to take my cue from him, pretending that my thoughts hadn’t immediately leapt to the bedroom.

“Do you want a drink, or something? I’ve been looking at what Drake gave me on Intergang and—”

“Don’t,” he interrupted my pointless babble. “Lois, please don’t. I don’t want to talk. We have nothing to say to each other.”

I nodded, bit my lip and looked down at my feet. I felt his warm touch on my chin as he lifted up my head until I was gazing into his eyes. I was lost from the second we made eye contact.

His head bent down to give me a brief kiss on the lips. I opened my mouth to his and raised my hands to the back of his head, pressing my tongue deeper into the sweet depths of his mouth. His hands went to my waist and he lifted me up so that he didn’t have to bend down to kiss me, but we never broke apart as he walked us into the bedroom.

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I was annoyed with myself by how much I wanted him. I spent the whole of the next day wondering when he’d next come to my apartment and partially wondering whether I’d dreamt our encounters.

As far as I could see, he was still very much Superman and very possibly in a relationship with another woman. I couldn’t quite believe that the beacon of virtue would come to my apartment purely for illicit sex; yet the man I had slept with had been nothing like Superman for all that he was the same person. He was dark, brooding and angry, not the sort of figure you’d expect to find plastered all over children’s lunchboxes. But then, I reasoned, no-one could be that good and kind all the time. Maybe when he was with me he could release not only his sexual frustrations, but also his inability to be anything but Superman.

Still, whatever his reasons for his behaviour towards me, he returned the next night. This time I didn’t jump when I heard him enter; truth be told I’d been listening out for him for hours. I was busy working on my computer and I didn’t look away from my work.

“I’ll be finished in a moment,” I told him, amazed that I had managed to keep my voice neutral, “you can wait for me in the bedroom if you like.”

He didn’t answer me but I heard him walk across the floor and then pause. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him reading my article with a wistful look in his eyes and I wondered how much he missed his chosen vocation. I knew that I would hate it if something forced me to give up journalism, but that wasn’t a question I could easily ask him for all my curiosity. There were lots of things I wanted to know about him that fell under the ‘it’s my fault’ category and I could never bring myself to ask him for fear of the repercussions of bringing it up. The moment passed swiftly, however, and he had soon vanished into the dark depths of my bedroom.

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We lay together in the darkness, panting. This time it felt as if it had been more for pleasure than to work out our frustrations, although, as Clark had warned me on our first time, it had still fallen short of making love.

I felt my body tense as it prepared itself for Clark’s patented quick, farewell-less exit. He let out a sigh and rolled slightly onto his side so that he could see me. I fought the temptation to copy him so that we were facing and kept my sight trained on my dark ceiling.

“Lois,” he began hesitantly, as if unsure of the response he was about to get from me. It was the most Clark-like voice I had heard him use since my article was published. “Can I stay the night?”

His question did surprise me and at that I had to roll over to see him. His eyes were pleading with me to acquiesce.

“Sure,” I replied, not quite able to keep the surprise from my tone.

He closed his eyes, then snuggled down into a more comfortable position. I followed suit, moving so that my back was to him. I closed my eyes to go to sleep and was rewarded by the light weight of one of his arms coming to rest possessively across my waist as I felt his warm breath on the back of my neck.

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I had made a breakthrough.

Somehow, after getting used to sleeping with Clark in the following few days, I managed to start concentrating on my work again instead of daydreaming about the superhero and what we did together. I contacted Henderson, although a little voice did remind me that I’d most likely see Clark that night and I could tell him instead, but I reminded that little voice that no-one knew about our rendezvous and that was the way Clark wanted it to stay. I wasn’t sure that I wanted everyone to know about it, either.

The next day I went to the police station where I was met by Henderson. He led me into a side room, where Clark and Drake were already sat.

Jealousy coursed through me as I watched my secret lover laughing with another woman, one who was busy flirting with him and touching him with such an obvious familiarity that it made me wonder if he was sleeping with her as well. I quickly realised that if he was, I didn’t want to know.

“Lane, are you going to sit, or are you just going to stand in the doorway?” Henderson asked me from within the room as he pulled out a chair for himself.

I apologised and quickly seated myself beside him, opposite Drake. They had gone to great lengths to keep me and Clark as far away from each other as possible. I could sense the animosity in Clark from the moment Henderson had made him aware of my presence, and the happy man who had been talking with his girlfriend had been replaced by my own lover. His change in persona hadn’t gone unnoticed by the other two. It had led to an obvious tension in the room, but no-one mentioned it.

“You said you had an idea about Intergang,” Drake opened the conversation, her tone as cold as her manner.

“Yes,” I said animatedly, pulling out my file of work. “Look at this.” I pulled out some maps and graphs. “Everywhere that Intergang has a foothold, there’s a Costmart.”

“Also a McDonalds and a Starbucks,” Henderson pointed out. “That doesn’t mean anything.”

“It’s not hard proof,” I agreed, my optimism falling in the face of his negativity and their dubious looks. “But if I had hard proof this wouldn’t be a meeting. This would be me telling you to arrest Bill Church.”

“Bill Church?” Drake spluttered in disbelief. “How can you think that? I used to work for him; he’s like a father to me. There’s no way he’d be the head of Intergang.”

I watched her reaction with interest. “I never said he was. I said I thought Costmart might have something to do with

Intergang, then mentioned his name as he's the head of Costmart, you were the one who made the leap." Her expression reminded me of our previous encounter, when I had accused her of not liking her boyfriend. "But it was a leap I also made."

Henderson sighed in something almost reminiscent of irritation. "We need proof, Lane. We can't work from instinct."

"Sorry, Perry," I complained sarcastically, and was rewarded with an extremely small and brief smile from Clark. "I don't have any proof, yet. But I do have this." I placed a photograph on the table for them to look at.

Drake was the first to snatch it up and she promptly threw it back down onto the table in disgust. "That means nothing."

"Nothing? Are you so bad at reading people?" I exclaimed and was surprised to see Clark flinch beside her. Did he think I was hinting about our relationship? Just how stupid did he think I was? "Look at the way they're looking at each other. They are not two business men working together for the good of the community; they are enemies."

Clark reached out and picked up the photograph, which captured a meeting between Church and Luthor. "She's right," he said after a moment of contemplation. "They certainly don't look like the best of friends. If nothing else, it's a link between Luthor and Church."

He passed the photograph to Henderson, who immediately placed it on top of a large pile of paper that I assumed was their leads on Intergang.

"Am I the only sane one here?" Drake exclaimed, probably more annoyed that Clark had agreed with me than anything else. "We have nothing linking Church with Intergang, or Luthor with our current gangs for that matter. Nothing here will stand up in court."

"Which is why we're still working on it," Henderson told her patiently. "And let's not forget that Luthor has practically admitted to Clark that he's the one behind crime in Metropolis."

That was news to me but I decided not to say so. I was still reeling from Clark backing me instead of Drake. Despite trying to get an interview with him for years, I had learnt next to nothing about Luthor and had still considered him to be the generous philanthropist he appeared to be until Clark's explanation of our captivity. OK, so we had gone on two dates, but he had lost interest in me pretty quickly. I think it was my spark that had drawn him to me when I forced my way into his acquaintance at his ball, and that had vanished before our second date took place as the fallout from my Superman article had settled by that point. In fact, now I thought about it, he had spent a lot of that date complementing the article. I had spent a lot of the date drinking in silence, wishing I hadn't written the article.

"What about my uncle?" I asked Henderson. "Have you heard anything more about his case?"

He nodded. "That's interesting. The arsonist, Baby Rage, is being represented by Martin Snell, who works for Church. He's also had words with Clark about his involvement in the Southside."

I risked looking at Clark, who nodded. "If I appear in the Southside, a bullet will implant itself in either Mayson or Henderson. There's no guarantee that I'd be fast enough to stop it."

My first thought was to ask him if he'd considered a disguise but as I opened my mouth to suggest it, I realised that was a fast track way to getting a bullet implanted in myself. Or steel hands wrapped around my throat. One or the other. "So Intergang is funding the Skins as well?"

For a moment Henderson almost looked tired. "Intergang is everywhere, in the gangs, in the police force..."

"How do we know that Lane isn't part of Intergang?" For some reason, Mayson Drake really seemed to have it in for me. I wasn't entirely sure why, but it was as annoying as a persistently

itchy mosquito bite and I was getting fed up with it.

"How do we know you aren't?" I bit back. "After all, you're the one with a connection to Church. If anyone's a mole in here, it's you."

Drake looked like she was about to get up and slap me, until Clark's hand came to rest soothingly on her shoulder. I tensed as I watched his fingers lightly massage her, calming her. I couldn't believe that I felt like crying as I witnessed his tenderness towards Drake and I found it hard to not yell at him for touching her like that, to lay claim to his touch as mine. I could only imagine what sort of reaction that would get. Drake probably would kill me and Clark would most likely help her. At least I seemed to be learning which of my impulses were likely to get me killed, and not following through with them as a consequence. I needed to get a grip. My nightly interactions with Clark meant nothing, to either of us, and he had certainly never showed me any of the affection he was currently giving Drake.

Drake settled back down and shot Clark a grateful and admiring look. That was my undoing. I could cope with knowing that Clark only wanted me for sex, but I wasn't about to have his loving relationship rubbed in my face while I fought to pretend that nothing was going on between us.

I stood up abruptly and strode to the door. "That's what I think anyway. About Church," I amended, seeing the heated look reappear in Drake's face, although I still wasn't convinced the woman was on the level. "Take it or leave it. If I discover anything else, I'll let you guys know," I said, including all of them in my words although I was looking at Henderson.

"Likewise," he agreed and I could hear a slight amusement in his voice and a questioning glance at my quick exit. I didn't bother looking at Clark. I was so annoyed with him, with myself, that I firmly closed my window as soon as I got home, with such force that I wouldn't have been surprised to learn that the three of them had heard the resulting bang from the police station.

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Two days later Perry sent me to investigate a hotel fire. It had burned out during the night.

OK, so truth be told, Clark had put it out during the night. It was hard to work as a journalist in Metropolis and *never* cover a story involving Superman but so long as he'd done his bit and left the case it was safe for me to cover.

I was sifting through the rubble, watching Jimmy taking some aftermath photos. As I followed his movements I realised that I hadn't really had much to do with the youngster since I wrote that article on Clark. I remembered that Jimmy had tried to speak to me the next day, only I hadn't wanted to listen to him, so I pushed him away instead. Since then, our friendship had faded to the point where I only spoke to him to ask for research, and he only spoke to tell me what he had found. I didn't even know what he had wanted to say to me that day.

I was contemplating possibly broaching the subject with him, and possibly getting one of my old friends back in the process, when I heard someone clear their throat behind me. I turned to see Henderson watching me.

"I thought this was an accident," I said defensively, although I had no idea why I felt I had to be on my guard.

He glanced down at the rubble. "I believe it was," he returned, "although it has nothing to do with me. I was just speaking to a subject down the road when I saw you."

"Oh, well, can I help you with something? Has there been a breakthrough? Is there a problem with my uncle's case?"

"No." He looked a little uncomfortable as he took a breath before asking me, "Do I want to know why I was asked to check that you were all right?"

My eyes widened in surprise, then I quickly looked away to hide whatever my face might betray. So Clark had been past my shut window then. "Probably not."

“Didn’t think so. Are you?”  
I snapped my head up. “What do you think?”  
“*You* seem fine.”

Interesting emphasis. “Who doesn’t?”  
“He’s just been different recently, especially since our meeting. But you wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

Clark. There was no-one around but it still wasn’t safe to say his name out loud. The fact that we knew him would draw the press around us, hoping for some inside information. “Why would I know anything about it? It’s not like I’m on the top of his Christmas card list.”

“No,” Henderson mused. “No, it’s not.” He gave me one last curious look, then he turned away and disappeared around a corner. I tried to breathe a sigh of relief but I couldn’t. Did Henderson know?

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After work I opened the window for Clark again. A part of me didn’t want to, I was worried about the affect this affair was having on us, but I couldn’t have him worrying over me just because I didn’t like the idea of him being with another woman. I wasn’t convinced I’d sleep with him when he arrived but I’d put his mind to rest at least. Assuming Henderson hadn’t already.

He came in, as expected, a little later.

“I don’t appreciate you sending the cops out looking for me just because I wanted to take a break from our arrangement.”

“Sorry. I only asked Henderson if you were OK because you left the meeting quickly.”

“Did you ask before or after you found the window closed?”

I was sitting on the couch, watching the TV and I hadn’t looked at him once since he had arrived. I sensed him draw nearer to me. “I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“That’s not an answer.”

He took in a deep breath. “After.”

I turned to look at him. “I didn’t realise I had to keep it open indefinitely.”

“You don’t,” he quickly corrected me. “Really, I just wanted to make sure that it wasn’t closed because you were ill or being held captive by a madman or something.” He paused, then asked in a softer voice, “Was it me?”

“It’s just,” I paused, not wanting him to realise how much it had bothered me, not quite realising until that moment how much it bothered me myself. “I don’t want to be the other woman, Clark. My father used to cheat on my mom and I always swore that I’d never—”

“You’re not, Lois. I’m not with Mayson.”

“Sure looked like you were from where I was sat.”

He sat down beside me, careful not to touch me. He gazed at his clasped hands that he had placed in his lap. “I like her a lot. I mean, I do care for her, but not like that. I didn’t mean to make you feel like the ‘other woman’.”

“What else am I supposed to feel like, Clark?”

“For you to be the other woman there has to be a first woman, which there isn’t.”

Exactly, I thought, not sure I was making sense to anyone but myself and quickly deciding that was a train of thought I didn’t want to follow.

“Do you want me to go?” he asked after a while. “I take it you only opened the window to assure me that you were fine, so I’m not expecting... anything.”

“Do you want anything?”

He snorted. “Constantly.”

I allowed myself a small smirk. “So are you staying?”

“Unless you want me to go. I won’t force myself on you.”

I reached out and touched his cheek, before leaning in and kissing him, gently at first. He pushed me down into the couch as the kiss grew in passion, and then I heard something on the TV.

“A volcano has erupted in the Pacific, threatening the lives of hundreds of islanders whose homes are at risk from the lava flow...”

I didn’t need to hear anymore and tried to ignore the blissful sensation of Clark’s kiss. Obviously he was too preoccupied to pay any attention to the disaster but I was not about to allow *me* to be the reason Superman was too busy to rescue people. Neither of us could live with that guilt.

“Clark.” Unfortunately my voice was too husky and he misinterpreted my cry as he whispered my name in response. I tried again. “Stop. TV.”

“Huh?” He pulled away and sat upright, looking at the news report. Then he gave me a brief longing look, before he flew away.

Seconds later he was gone, halfway across the world. I leant back onto the couch, wishing it was actually comfortable. It was a peculiar experience, to watch Superman saving lives and being hailed as a hero when only moments earlier he had been here, kissing me senseless. I could only hope that when the danger was over, he would return and we could carry on from where we had been interrupted.

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The trial against Baby Rage went with only a slight hitch, caused by Martin Snell, but Clark and Drake managed to find the evidence that proved he was working with Intergang. Of course, his exposure didn’t long precede his death.

Luckily the fire at the cafe hadn’t caused too much structural damage. Uncle Mike used his insurance money, as well as some funds from Church, to rebuild. I tried to caution him against accepting Church’s money, but like his niece before him my uncle was a stubborn man and having already decided on the man’s generous nature, had refused to listen to my warnings. I could only hope that Church’s new stake in the business would be enough for him to leave Uncle Mike alone.

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Days melted into weeks. Stories came and went, and the war between Luthor and Intergang continued with the innocent residents of Metropolis remaining caught in the crossfire. There were very few meetings between the four of us, who were still desperately trying to find something to pin on either of them. Most of the times I had contact with them, it was through Henderson. Whether it was Clark or Drake who had decided to keep me at arm’s length I was never sure, but I knew from what Henderson said and the odd snippet of almost-conversation from Clark that the three of them had regular meetings regarding Intergang without me.

I admit that during the period of our affair I stopped focusing on my job and spent my days wondering if Clark would visit me that night. Stories like the cyborg built by LexCorp out of my sister’s loser boyfriend held no interest all of a sudden. He was obviously intended to be some sort of weapon against Intergang, but as the cyborg had his brain he had followed his own agenda which ultimately led to him being melted down into scrap by Superman.

Someone even came to Drake and Henderson from Intergang, searching for protection in return for information about their top assassin. Luthor offered to help finance their protection, but his aid was declined. The informant didn’t leap out of the frying pan just to end up in the fire. The assassin was revealed to be TV celebrity Diana Stride, and Henderson even managed to manufacture it so that I got the exclusive on her arrest. Something that Drake didn’t seem too pleased about, but then anything that was beneficial for me seemed to annoy her.

Be that as it may, it was Clark who had become the centre of my life. He didn’t come to me every night; some nights he was too busy helping people in need and some nights he was neither in my bed nor on my TV. If more than two nights passed without

me knowing where he was I began to wonder if I was the only woman he visited; there were so many reports on television and in magazines of other women sleeping with the hero, but I didn't really believe them. Perhaps it was naive of me to think so, to think that I had his fidelity. He had assured me that I wasn't the other woman, but that didn't necessarily follow that he didn't have some other lover and that *she* was the other woman. There was small comfort in being his lover if he still had another woman. But I had no official claim to him and dwelling on these matters proved no help and so I didn't. Or at least, I didn't as much as I could have.

Then it all ended as suddenly as it had begun.

It had been four days since I had been with Clark, the longest break yet and I was worried about him. There had been nothing out of the ordinary happening in the world to cause his absence, although that didn't mean that something hadn't happened in his family or something, but even that would probably have made it into the news within that length of time.

He just hadn't come.

Then, on the fifth day, as I was beginning to get really worried and was considering contacting Henderson to see if he knew anything, he appeared.

"Lois," said his dark voice. I hadn't even heard him come in, although that wasn't unheard of. The man could match me for stealth.

"Clark!" I exclaimed and checked the impulse to run over and hug him. That sort of intimate contact wasn't part of our relationship. "I haven't seen you for a while."

"No," he agreed, his voice sounding frightening in its lack of emotion. I was used to him sounding angry or lustful, and rarely I had heard glimpses of happiness in his voice, but I would never get used to hearing him sound detached and yet every so often he did. Probably just to remind me exactly what his feelings for me were. "I've been busy. Thinking." He amended after seeing my disbelieving look.

"About?"

"Us."

The word sent a delightful shiver down my spine. There wasn't really an 'us', I knew, but the idea of it pleased me in an unexpected yet wonderful way... "What about it?"

He started pacing around the room, steadfastly not making eye contact with me. "This... arrangement of ours. It was supposed to be a way for you to make up for writing your article on me, a way for us to forget about it, correct?"

"Technically," I replied, hesitantly.

"Technically," he repeated, but neither one of us had made it sound realistic. The truth of our agreement was easily forgotten by me as I allowed myself to revel in the pleasure it brought and ignore what had made it possible. "I made a promise to myself that it would stop as soon as I had forgiven you. This whole thing, it's so wrong. I don't like myself for it."

"You don't enjoy it?" I asked sadly. No, of course he didn't. I wasn't a good lover, I knew that, but he was. I enjoyed having sex with him; I never had before. I didn't think I would after, either. If there ever was an after.

He stopped pacing to shake his head. "Of course I enjoy it; I wouldn't come if I didn't. But I don't want sex to be just sex; I never did. I've always seen it as an expression of something more, a joining of souls rather than bodies, and yet I allowed myself to do it anyway."

"Even though you don't love me?"

It was as if I hadn't spoken. I don't think he could have not heard me, he could hear people crying for help on the other side of the city, he could surely hear the speech of the only other person in the silent apartment, and I didn't say it particularly quietly. A normal person would have heard it clearly enough, but if he had heard it, he completely ignored it. "So I've decided to

forgive you."

"You don't sound as if you've forgiven me," I told him angrily. "It sounds like you're just saying it as a way out."

"I'm not," was his feeble response.

I walked over to him, glaring into his eyes. Even I was surprised at how badly I was taking this. "If you want this to stop, then just tell me so. Don't lie to me."

"I've forgiven you, Lois!" he yelled back. "OK? That's it, that's what I want, a clean slate. We can treat each other as if we've never met before. We can pretend that we've never worked together, that you never wrote that article."

"That we never slept together? We've been through too much together to be strangers, Kent. We have to deal with it; we can't just sweep it under the rug."

He glared back at me, his breath heavy as he fought to contain his boiling rage. "I'm sure you can cope, Lane. You must have ignored all that when you wrote that article!"

"Oh, I'm so sorry I doubted you. You've obviously forgiven me," I taunted him, sarcasm dripping from my tongue.

He stepped back from me, trying to use distance to soothe our heated fury. "I didn't want this argument. I wanted us to put the past behind us and get on with our lives. Neither of us have been happy, admit it. The first step to getting past all this was always going to be me forgiving you. I have, OK. Now you just need to forgive yourself." And with that he flew away, without waiting for a response from me.

"Fine," I yelled out of the window into the clear and empty sky. "I will!"

I stepped back from the fresh air that flooded into the room and hugged myself to try and offer some form of comfort. I felt empty. My apartment looked empty. I walked over to my awards cabinet and stared at my Pulitzer. He was right, I *did* need to forgive myself and I needed him to forgive me first, but I didn't believe that he had. He just didn't want to see me anymore and that was completely different matter. Maybe things between him and Drake were getting serious. He had promised that I wouldn't be the other woman.

No, I was certain that he would have told me if that was the reason for that very fact. He obviously just couldn't stand to be near me anymore.

I sniffled as I realised I was close to tears. Why was the affecting me so much? So I wasn't going to get great sex anymore, so what? It wasn't like I was Cat Grant or anything. I didn't need sex. I didn't need Clark 'Superman' Kent either.

So why was I crying?

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The alarm surprised me as it woke me up in the morning. I had been tossing and turning all night and I hadn't realised that I had actually managed to fall asleep. My body felt like it was made of lead as I hauled it out of bed and into the bathroom. My eyes were red and puffy from crying and my lack of sleep had left two dark circles beneath them. I splashed some cold water onto my face and when that failed to freshen up my face, I sought out my makeup with a resigned sigh.

The familiarity of getting up and going into the Planet offered me no comfort. It was a day just like every other, as if nothing momentous had happened the night before. Which, in fairness to everyone that I passed, it hadn't. Not to them. Not to me either, really. I didn't understand why it hurt so much that Clark no longer wanted to see me; my reaction was almost laughable. We hadn't even been friends; we'd just had sex together. I supposed that no matter how many times it happened, my heart would always be hurt whenever a man left me, whoever he was to me and however inevitable it was that he would go.

As soon as I stepped off the elevator into the newsroom, Perry shouted out at me that he wanted to see me in his office. I trudged past the mainly empty desks and ringing phones. I shut

the door to his office as soon as I was inside.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Murder, last night. A bomb was placed in the car of the Assistant D.A. Superman wasn’t able to get there in time, which means there’s no reason why you can’t handle it, right?”

“No,” I said and Perry handed me a file of the information he had already accumulated.

He started to give me more details but my sleep-deprived brain was urging me to realise something that I wasn’t paying any attention to. Finally the penny dropped. “Wait a minute. Did you say the Assistant D.A.?”

Perry looked at me, concerned at my lack of concentration. “Yes. Lois, you OK? You didn’t look too good when you walked in. Are you ill?”

“No,” I exclaimed but my denial only caused him to scrutinise my appearance more thoroughly and disbelieve my statement. “No, I’m fine. But, it was Mayson Drake that was killed?”

“Yes. Did you know her?”

I sat down on the comfy couch that Perry had installed in the corner of his office, surprised that I actually felt sorry for her and was, in my own small way, experiencing a molecule of grief at her passing. “Not really. I’d been working with her and Henderson on something. We never really got on very well. I wouldn’t have wished that on her, though.”

His face became sympathetic and his voice lost its edge of harshness. “No, but if it’s any consolation, it was quick. What I need you to find out—”

Another thought hit me and I felt my mouth go dry. I tried to swallow but found it almost impossible. “When?”

“Last night. Lois...”

“No, Perry, when last night?” Clark had broken up... no, broken off our agreement last night and he hadn’t made it in time to save her. Oh, please don’t let him have been arguing with me while Drake lay dying. That was a guilt I couldn’t see me being able to live with. How many more lives would I ruin out of my own selfishness?

“Late.” I gave him an exasperated glare at his response; I needed a better answer than that. “I don’t know the exact time, it’ll be in the report.”

Well, late was an indication, at least. I wasn’t entirely sure when Clark had come but I dimly remember looking at the clock afterwards and was surprised to see that I still had most of the evening to get through. It had felt so much later than that.

Needing to know, for sure, I took the proffered police report from Perry and realised that she had died at least two hours after our argument. I couldn’t believe how relieved I felt that I wasn’t the reason Clark hadn’t been there, and for a brief moment it almost made me feel something close to happiness.

I paused for a moment, then handed him the notes back. “I can’t take this story, Perry.”

“Why ever not? I told you, no Superman. I know you didn’t like the woman but that doesn’t make any difference. It’s not her obituary I’m asking you to write; I’m asking you to investigate her murder”

I scooted across so that I sat on the chair closer to his desk and leant forward. “If I tell you something, can you keep it secret?”

“You know you can trust me, honey.”

“Drake and Clark, were sort of... You know. Close.”

Perry raised an eyebrow. “She was his girlfriend. Oh, no. The poor lad...”

“No. I don’t think they were together. I think that she cared more for him than he did for her, although he certainly did care a lot about her. Even so, I don’t want to be poking my nose in. He’ll be hurting enough without me getting involved. Give it to someone else.”

Perry let me walk to the door before he called out, “Sooner or later you’re going to have to get over your fear of talking to Superman, otherwise you’ll not have much of a career left at this paper. I’ve been letting it slide but if you don’t pick up your game I might have little choice but to find a new reporter for the city section.”

“You’re going to fire me?” I exclaimed in horror. As if my life hadn’t been torn apart enough in the last 24 hours I had to learn that my job at the Planet, which was my entire life, was in jeopardy.

“Not if I can help it, Lois. It’s the suits upstairs that are starting to talk about it. I’ll let this one go but I won’t let you turn down another story without a good excuse. And ‘Superman doesn’t like me’ won’t cut it anymore.”

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I spent the rest of the morning in a rather dreamlike state; nothing felt real anymore. I was still having trouble realising that Clark no longer wanted me. Not only did he hate me as he should, he also found me physically repulsive. And he was grieving. He was mourning the loss of someone who was a close friend, and possibly more. I wanted to comfort him, to touch him and send him into oblivion where he could forget the pain. That’s what I *had* been doing I had convinced myself, only with a much smaller pain. Now I couldn’t even do that for him because of his intense dislike of me.

Not only that, but I was now in danger of losing my job. Work was everything to me. I didn’t have a life of my own, or friends, or anything but the Planet. If I lost that, then I’d have nothing. My days would be as empty as my nights had become.

I was brought out of my daze by a strange man smiling at me across my desk. “Hi,” he said.

“Hi,” I responded.

“I couldn’t help but notice you checking me out,” he said cheekily. It surprised me to realise that he was flirting with me.

Although I hadn’t been ‘checking him out’, I had been staring into the space which he occupied for quite some time. For some reason people never accept that excuse, even when it’s the truth.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to stare. I was just thinking.”

“Oh. So it wasn’t mutual, then?” His eyes twinkled and I realised that he was actually quite good-looking. There was a good chance that if I hadn’t been too busy dwelling on my misery, I might have actually bothered to check him out. I would never have gone further than that, my situation with Clark did nothing but prove that men and Lois Lane didn’t mix, but I might have looked.

“You were checking me out?” I asked, half-flirting and half incredulous. I was horrible; Clark didn’t want to sleep with me anymore so why would any man find me worth looking at? Maybe one who didn’t know that behind my dull façade lay a horrible person with no redeeming qualities.

“A little. You’ve got beautiful eyes.”

I could sense myself blush and I turned away my ‘beautiful eyes’. “Thanks,” I murmured, really meaning it. I couldn’t think of the last time I’d received a proper compliment. He had actually sounded like he had meant it.

“Agent Scardino,” he offered me his hand, which I shook. He had a firm grip. “But you can call me Daniel.”

“Lois Lane. What are you doing here?”

He took this introduction as an offer to sit and pulled up a chair so he could talk to me. “I’m investigating the death of Mayson Drake and as this is the best paper in the city, I thought I’d offer to team up. Plus, I’m sort of not supposed to be doing this, so I need someone else’s resources to plunder.”

I laughed, liking him all the more as his actions reminded me of me. Or at least who I used to be, who I suddenly realised I needed to become again. “Why not?”

“Personal reasons.” He smiled at me. He had a nice smile, not

as dazzling as I remembered Clark's being, but nice enough.

"Any chance I can get you in on the story?"

"No. I was offered it but I can't work on it."

"Why not?"

"Personal reasons," I returned.

"Touché," he laughed, "but that leaves me in a bit of a quandary. You see, I don't like to ask a girl out until I've spent at least a little time with her beforehand. I went on some really tragic blind dates when I was younger, scarred me for life. Anyway, that means I'm going to have to ask you out liking nothing more than your face, which is a great risk for me."

I glanced down at myself. "You don't like my body?" It may not be anything special but it was feminine enough for when I needed it to turn on the charm. It used to be good enough for Clark, although I suddenly realised that I had no idea whether Clark was actually thinking about me while he was with me.

"I don't know. It's hidden behind your desk."

"Oh."

"So, Lois Lane, would you like to go out for a drink sometime?"

Daniel smiled at me and I could see a little fear in his eyes. He was actually worried that I might say no. It was fair enough, his chat-up technique hadn't been the best I'd ever come across, however he did seem nice, good-looking and it wasn't as if I had any better plans. Daniel might prove to be really good for me. And I was in serious need of something good happening to me.

"Sure."

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Daniel was nice. And handsome. And good company. I enjoyed our date, honestly I did. I mean, there was nothing to not like. OK, so it was a little annoying when he refused to answer questions about his job, but that was fine. Clark used to do things that I found annoying too. His unrelenting need to be good and right all the time was frustrating. Even flying off to be Superman could be annoying at certain times. Acceptable, completely understandable, but pure tear-your-hair-out irritating.

Of course, I realised early on into our date what the problem was. Dan wasn't Clark. Maybe Clark hadn't shown me his most personable side recently, but I could still remember it, possibly through rose-tinted glasses, and I had seen rare glimpses in the aftermath of our lovemaking. I kept mentally comparing Dan to Clark throughout the whole evening and he never quite matched up. Of course, Clark was Superman and any man would fail in comparison. It was sad, but it was what every man I ever dated would have to contend with now. It was a good job that I didn't deserve to have someone to love me, because I was never going to find anyone good enough.

It took me a couple of glasses of wine to realise that the reason I was comparing Dan to Clark was because I'd fallen in love with him. Clark, that was, not Dan. Which was the problem. If I had fallen for Dan it would have been easy, he liked me. But instead I was in love with a man who hated me, who couldn't be in my presence because I was a horrible woman who had ruined his life. How sick was I?

Still, Dan was nice and I did enjoy being around him. I knew that it might not turn out to be the romance of the century but it was nice enough and better than I could ever really hope for.

Our second date went just as well as the first. I didn't feel pressured into rushing into anything with him, he seemed happy just to be around me. Completely different than Clark, who'd only ever bothered with me when he wanted sex. Dan didn't even expect a goodnight kiss on the cheek.

The third date, however, had a rocky start and as normal, it was all my fault.

I was on my way to the restaurant to meet Dan — he had offered to pick me up but I felt that I could make my own way there, I liked my independence too much to be ferried around by

a man — when I heard the sound of a gun being fired. Normal people hearing a sound like that would run away as fast as they could in the opposite direction. It's the best plan, really, getting away from a situation that is potentially dangerous. Unfortunately, it was me and I rushed over there, hoping for a scoop. Perry's warning about my work had really got to me and I was determined to start being the best reporter I could be. My safety had never been anything close to a priority.

I turned a corner and heard a scuffle in the alley I found myself in. Walking lightly so as not to be heard, I crept along the dimly lit wall until I could see what was going on. At the end of the alley, Superman was disarming and lecturing a gang of youths. I felt my insides melt at the sight of him. Why did I have to realise that I loved him? It was so much easier to deal with seeing him when my conscious mind had decided that I didn't need to know that. Unfortunately, it was all I could do not to rush over there and jump him, but as it turned out it was a very good thing I didn't.

Someone tried to grab me, so I whirled round and punched them in the face, sending them falling to the ground.

I relaxed my defensive posture when I realised who it was that I was towering over, menacingly. "Dan!"

"Lois!" he complained, as he rose to his feet, rubbing his sore jaw. I just knew that he was going to get a bruise there. "What are you doing, attacking me like that?"

"I saw Cl— Superman talking to that gang and I thought you might be another member. Why were you sneaking up on me?"

He gave a small laugh. "I thought you might be another gang member. At least you can't say we don't think alike!"

"No," I agreed, my voice small as I realised Clark's lecture had stopped and he was listening to us. He stalked over to us and I could sense the anger in his long strides.

"Superman," Dan smiled at him, completely oblivious. "This is my date that I was supposed to be meeting, Lois Lane. Have you two met?"

I was glad the question wasn't aimed at me and I wondered how Clark would answer it. Of course we'd met, but Clark had wanted to start our relationship afresh. Would he pretend we hadn't met properly in order to restart our relationship?

"Yes, briefly," he responded coldly. He really wasn't happy at seeing me there; he sounded as dark as he used to when he'd arrive in my apartment to sleep with me.

Dan looked surprised at how unfriendly the superhero had become. "I met Superman when I was working on Mayson Drake's murder," he informed me, although I could have guessed that. I was slightly annoyed with myself that I hadn't considered that before I agreed to go on a date with him.

"Old friends then," I joked feebly, knowing that Dan wouldn't see it as a joke and there was no way Clark would laugh at it, but I felt it was a joke I had to make in the circumstances.

I tried to make eye contact with Clark but he refused to cooperate. "I'm sorry about Mayson's death. It must be hard to cope with. You must wish you could have been there to save her."

My voice had been soft and sympathetic, sincere, but I was deeply shocked by the look I got back from him. He might have well had *said* that it was all my fault he wasn't there.

I closed my eyes. <It wasn't my fault, it wasn't my fault,> I repeated the words in my head like a mantra, <not my fault, it was hours after Clark had broken up, broken OFF with me.>

"Yeah, but we got them in the end," Dan tried his hardest to lighten the atmosphere. Poor guy, he didn't have the slightest idea what he was in the middle of. That just made me feel even more guilty and I was surprised that it was even possible that I could.

"Why don't you two just go on your date," Clark's voice was harsh and he practically spat the word 'date'. What was his problem? Didn't he think I was good enough for Dan? I knew I wasn't, but it wasn't nice of him to point it out so vehemently.

“I’ll wait for the police to get here.”

“If you’re sure? We don’t mind waiting, do we Lois?”

No, I didn’t mind at all, except that he would. Of course I couldn’t let Superman look like the bad guy, so I’d have to be rude and drag Dan away. “No, but he doesn’t really need our help. He’d feel bad if we missed our dinner reservation just to be polite. If Superman’s sure that he doesn’t want us to stay, we’d be silly to go against his wishes.” If Clark was still going to avoid talking directly to me, I was going to do the same. I’d be damned if I’d start fawning over him like some moony-eyed cheerleader just because I realised that I was in love with him. That was a piece of information I was happily going to keep to myself for the rest of my life.

“I’m sure.” Clark looked like he’d push us out of the alley if he could do it without touching me. “Go.” It was a command, not a request. Dan shot him a puzzled look, but we left him to get on with his job alone.

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Dan sighed as he finished his meal and placed his knife and fork down on the empty plate. We hadn’t spoken much and we certainly hadn’t discussed Clark’s hostile attitude but I could tell that it was bothering him. That, or something else. Maybe he’d begun to realise just what a horrible person I was and he wanted to break up with me but didn’t know how to say it. I suddenly had an urgent need to know what he was thinking.

“Spit it out,” I told him.

“Huh?” Dan looked at me, confused.

I smiled at him, hoping to put him at ease, putting a brave face on so that he wouldn’t feel bad about hurting me. It was what I did best, I wore a brave face. “Your mind hasn’t been here the whole evening. What’s bothering you?”

He pushed his plate away from him and folded his hands on the table, thoughtfully. I wondered if he sat in a similar position when conducting interviews, it seemed so natural and professional. “Superman. He was... well, rude. He seemed so nice when I met him before; I was just wondering what was wrong with him. I’m a bit concerned.”

“Ah,” was my only reply.

“What?”

I narrowed my eyes as I scrutinised him. It really was Superman and not our impending break up that had been plaguing his thoughts. “Do you know who I am?” I asked.

Dan laughed at my question. “You’re not famous, are you?”

“No,” I took in a breath. Oh, God, he honestly didn’t know who I was and what I had done, and I was going to have to confess my biggest sin to him in the middle of a crowded restaurant. He definitely wasn’t going to want to see me any more after this. Two birds, one stone. “I was the reporter who discovered Superman’s real identity.”

“Oh,” Dan sat back in his seat as he digested this information. “Wait a minute, weren’t you his work partner?”

“Sort of.”

“And you went behind his back and plastered his biggest secret across the front page of the newspaper?”

“Yeah. Which is why he wasn’t quite as affable as usual in the alley.”

Dan thought it through for a few more minutes, then shook his head. “That’s bad and I’d understand him being upset with you, although you were only doing your job, but I don’t think that’s what it was all about. It was *me* Superman was being rude to, not you.”

“He couldn’t be rude to me, he doesn’t speak to me. He actively ignores me, that’s why I’m never sent out to cover Superman stories.”

There was something in Dan’s eyes that made me think that he still didn’t believe me, but he let it drop. “Did you know Mayson was in love with him? Is that why you turned down the

story?”

I nodded and looked down at the table. “He had to be hurting enough without having *me* on the case.”

“Sounds like you’re a lot more considerate than he is. Does he know what you’ve been sacrificing on his behalf?”

“Dan, it’s not like that. I should pay for the pain I caused him. If I had stopped to think for just one second, I probably wouldn’t have written that article. Or at least I wouldn’t have submitted it for printing, I would have kept it locked away in my apartment somewhere or burnt it or something. It’s my fault he doesn’t have a private life anymore.”

He looked at me with sympathetic eyes. “Maybe you’ve paid enough. Come on, I’ll take you home. I think our meeting with the local superhero has killed off any change of romance tonight.”

“He’s not much for romance,” I muttered as I let Dan help me into my jacket and out of the restaurant into the cold night air.

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I had the next day off work. Not that I’d been the happiest of people in the last year or so but after my run-in with Clark the night before I’d been feeling particularly melancholy, so it was just as well. I certainly wouldn’t have been a ray of sunshine in the newsroom. Dan had to leave Metropolis for a couple of weeks on some job, but he promised to keep in touch and that he’d be back as soon as possible. I felt bad because I had the awful feeling that he’d be missing me much more than I was missing him.

I’d decided to spend my free day wallowing in my own misery. I had a whole pile of movies to watch with a big bowl of popcorn and at least a dozen Double Fudge Crunch Bars to eat. I was just about to load the first film into my VCR when I heard someone knock on my door. Stifling a groan, I answered it.

A petite blonde woman was on the other side, probably in her mid fifties. She smiled at me and I immediately liked her, even though I had no idea who she was or why she was knocking on my door, there was just something about her that oozed comfort and likeability. “Lois Lane?” she asked.

“Yes. Who are you?”

She looked shiftily at the empty corridor. “Can I come in?”

“As soon as I know who you are and why you’re here. As long as the reason you’re here isn’t to hurt me at all, anyway,” I amended and she chuckled, making me like her even more.

“Please, Miss Lane. I have no intention of hurting you; I’d just feel happier talking to you with the door closed so no-one can hear us.” Sensing I wasn’t going to back down, she continued trying to persuade me, speaking in a voice that was almost a whisper. “I’m your ex-boyfriend’s mother.”

Ex-boyfriend? Somehow I doubted it. “I don’t think so.”

She sighed. “Maybe boyfriend isn’t quite the right word. Would ex-lover be closer?”

Oh my God.

No way.

Please tell me Clark’s mother didn’t know about us and wasn’t here to talk to me!

I didn’t say anything to her, but I opened the door for her to come in. If I was right, there was a good reason for her to be careful about revealing her identity, and the following conversation wasn’t anything I wanted my neighbours to overhear any more than she would.

“I’m Martha Kent,” she confirmed as soon as I’d shut the door.

“He *told* you?” I couldn’t keep the disbelief out of my voice, and to be honest I don’t think I tried.

Mrs. Kent looked a little uncomfortable, not that I could blame her. “Shall we sit?” she asked, moving to my couch.

“Sure, sorry, I’m being rude. I’m just surprised that you know, and that you came here.”

She didn't respond to my comment, just looked at me as I squirmed under her all-seeing gaze. "You're pretty," she said after a while.

"Mrs. Kent, can I please apologise to you?" I decided to ignore her comment about me being pretty, not quite sure what to make of it. "I should never have written that article on Clark; I wasn't thinking. If I had realised what an impact it would have on his life, on your lives, I would never have done it."

She watched me for a few more seconds, then smiled at me with honest friendliness. "We all make mistakes, Miss Lane. Some are bigger than others, it's true. Ever since we found Clark, we've been waiting for someone to expose him. Expose us. Even after he came up with the Superman disguise, we knew that people would still want to know who he really was. In some ways it's a relief, we don't have to worry about that anymore."

"But you've all had to disappear; you can't really have much of a life now."

"Oh, that's not true. Jonathan and I would have been perfectly happy to carry on as normal, it was Clark's idea for us to give up the farm and live in seclusion. He was worried that people would use us to get to him, so we moved to Metropolis to be near him, to live under his protection. We miss Smallville, of course, but we carry on as normal. No-one here knows who we are so we can walk around Metropolis without a single person connecting us to our son."

I relaxed a little bit; Mrs. Kent didn't seem to be holding a grudge against me. "Why are you here?"

"I wanted to meet you," Mrs. Kent replied honestly. "I guess I was just curious. You've had such a great impact on my son's life and I wanted to put a face to the name. I wanted to see what the attraction was."

"Attraction?! Mrs. Kent, your son is *not* attracted to me! He hates me!"

Her face became unreadable. "I don't think he hates *you*, Lois. He certainly hates what you did, I can't deny that. And you're right; he never told me that he'd been seeing you. He didn't need to, he's my son. I can read him like a book."

I let out a deep breath, not quite sure what it was the woman wanted from me. "So, you've met me. What now?"

"I want to get to know you."

"Mrs. Kent—"

"Please, call me Martha," she interrupted.

I looked her in the eye. "Martha. *Why* do you want to know me?"

She smiled and there was a twinkle in her eye that I wasn't sure I liked. "I just do. Did you know that you were all Clark talked about when he started at the Planet?"

"No, I—"

Mrs. Kent interrupted me. "He'd never been so taken with a girl he'd met since he was in high school. Sometimes he sounded like he was sixteen again, complaining about you and praising you in the same breath. Do you have any plans for the day?"

I could barely keep up with Mrs. Kent... or Martha as I was supposed to call her. There was something about her that reminded me of myself, or at least my old self, except that unlike me she didn't seem to hold a grudge and seemed like a really nice person, but there was still something there.

"Just lazing around my apartment watching movies," I gestured to my preparations.

"That's good then, we can spend the day together. How about a bit of retail therapy, you look like you could do with cheering up."

Before I knew what was happening, I was visiting the mall with Martha happily chatting away to me, mostly about her son. She was very careful to not call him by name; he was always referred to as 'her son'. I actually had a pleasant afternoon with her and was quite grateful for her dragging me out to accompany

her. It was better than moping about in my apartment like I had planned to do.

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I almost had a panic attack as I heard a door open followed by the sound of happy male voices chattering to each other. It was like an extremely vivid and terrifying nightmare; I was standing in the Kents' kitchen surrounded by bubbling saucepans and other really complicated looking cooking utensils and Clark was about to walk in and find me standing there, rooted to the spot in fear, unable to move to defend myself. I would have pinched myself to try and wake myself up if Martha wasn't busy trying to reassure me. Or maybe I would have put my head in the oven and breathed in deeply to end it all, whichever technique would work best.

I still wasn't quite sure how she had managed to talk me into coming back with her for dinner; in fact I don't think she had left me much choice in the matter. I distinctly remember her telling me that I was going back for dinner as she pushed me into her car with our purchases. Maybe I could get her arrested for kidnapping, which was a slightly happy thought in the midst of my torture, but it didn't change anything. I was still there, standing frozen in the Kents' kitchen as she left my side to speak to her family. Some part of my brain told me that if I was going to make my escape, or take my life, then now was the time to do it, but the information didn't morph into movement.

From the next room I could just about make out the words of their conversation. There were the typical greetings one would expect from a loving family, and it felt strange to me to hear Clark speaking normally, happily.

"Mom, why have you set four places for dinner," he asked and I heard the suspicion back in his voice, like it was a tone reserved only for conversations held with and about me.

"I've invited a guest round for dinner," Martha replied simply, no hint of any fear or trepidation in her voice; she said it as if I was an old school friend she had bumped into one day and invited around for a catch-up.

"Who?" Clark's caution was mirrored by the voice I assumed belonged to his father, Jonathan.

"A new friend of mine. Be nice, she's helping in the kitchen." So she wasn't going to give my name, was she? Just as well because I was certain that as soon as she did I'd be chased out of their home by an extremely angry Superman. She was also going to lie to them about what I was doing; my presence in the kitchen had been more of a hindrance to her preparations.

"A new friend? Martha, how long have you known this person?"

"I met her this morning."

"This morning!" Clark exclaimed rather loudly, I would most definitely have heard that extremely clearly even if I hadn't been eavesdropping. "And you invited her back here just like that? What do you know about this woman? What does she do for a living?"

"She's a reporter, like you."

"A reporter—" I could hear Clark splutter on those words and imagined that under his anger his fear was probably close to that of half of my own, which was probably the most scared he had ever been in his life.

"Martha," Jonathan scolded her deeply. "What on earth were you thinking?"

She laughed. "Don't worry. I'm sure she won't print a thing. And she's *my* guest so I want you both on your best behaviour, is that understood?" With that, Martha appeared back in the kitchen, humming to herself as she began to dish up the food I'd been neglecting to keep an eye on.

I suddenly found myself able to move again and I shuffled over to her so that I could whisper into her ear, trying to minimise the risk of him hearing my voice and hoping that Clark wouldn't

be listening in. I was certain he would be able to recognise my voice if he heard me. “Maybe this isn’t such a good idea. I should just go home. Now.”

“Don’t be silly, dear. Dinner’s ready, you might as well stay to eat it.”

She carried on loading four plates with some really delicious looking food that I could never hope to make myself, but I persevered, certain that this home-made feast would not be compensation enough for my impending death. “Your son is likely to kill me if he discovers me here and from what I just heard, your husband won’t try to stop him.”

“No, but I will. I’ll box his ears if he’s anything less than civil to you and the same goes for my husband.” She smiled at me. “Clark might be Superman, but I’m the one in charge in this family. Now, bring the other two plates in with you. The boys are probably already sitting waiting at the table.”

Somehow, I found myself unable to argue with her and slunk after Martha as she left the kitchen for the dining room. I paused, hidden in the shadows of the doorway as I watched Martha put down hers and Jonathan’s meals on the table. Great, maybe her whole ‘I’m nice and have forgiven you’ act was used just to lure me into the dragon’s den, and she was expecting me to serve her son dinner as he killed me.

“Come on,” she urged, and somehow I managed to enter the room instead of fleeing in the opposite direction as fast as I could.

I saw Clark’s eyes widen in horror as he recognised me. “Mom!” was all he could say on the matter.

“Clark,” she snapped at him. “Remember to be nice.”

“Nice?!”

I put our plates down and sat uncomfortably in my seat, next to Clark, although I leaned closer to Martha for protection.

Jonathan looked from me to Clark before turning his attention to his wife. “What am I missing here?”

“Clark, perhaps you’d like to introduce our guest to your father?” Martha offered, with a sharp twinkle in her eye.

He shook his head at her. “She’s *your* guest, that makes her *your* responsibility.”

Martha glared at her son, then smiled at her husband. “Jonathan, this is Lois Lane. Lois, this is my husband, Jonathan.”

I watched Jonathan’s reaction. Yep, as I had suspected, he was just as happy to see me as his son was. “I’ll just go, I didn’t mean—”

“Sit down,” Martha commanded, grabbing a hold of my arm to stop me rushing off. I did as she bid but placed my face in my hands and tried not to burst into tears. Honestly, how had I let her bully me into this? Why didn’t I just get up and leave? I knew the only person in that room who could stop me was Clark and he wouldn’t because he wanted me to leave as much as I wanted to go, that much was a given.

“If she wants to leave, Martha, you should let her. Look at the state of her, what did you do, kidnap the poor girl?”

“Lois?” She rubbed my back in a comforting manner. “Are you OK?”

“I’m fine,” I replied, lifting my head, hoping that I didn’t look like I was on the verge of crying.

“Good. Then let’s eat.”

Jonathan gave me one last evil look, then started tucking into his food. I was about to do the same when I saw Martha’s hand snatch out and pull Clark’s food away from him.

“Mom!”

“You are *not* going to eat at superspeed to get out of this dinner, Clark,” she told him, “and don’t tell me you weren’t planning to.”

I heard him sigh but I didn’t dare look at anything except my plate, I didn’t want to see what expression he had on his face. “What if someone needs me?”

Martha leant out and switched on a radio that had been sat on the small shelf behind her. “If there’s an emergency, it’ll be announced and you can go. Otherwise you are going to stay here and be polite.”

I looked at Martha in awe. Despite how terrible this situation was, she was handling it extremely well. I took my first mouthful of food. And she was a brilliant cook. I was consumed with jealousy but decided to just bottle away all of my feelings and get through this dinner. Survival was my main concern.

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It wasn’t so hard. Martha was the only one who spoke to me throughout the entire meal and I replied with the fewest words I could manage in the smallest voice I could find. The whole atmosphere was strained and I hated it, but I survived. I sighed in relief as we finished desert. At last I could escape, finally I could go home and leave this hell far behind me!

“Police are outside again,” Jonathan muttered as he peered through the heavy curtains at the street outside.

Martha rapped his hand and he let the curtain fall back into place. I hadn’t been surprised at the location of Clark’s home, it was on the edge of the upmarket area of Metropolis, where most of the city’s rich and famous lived. It had the benefit of extra security, both from the police force and personal security guards and it was normally more trouble than it was worth to break into one of the houses. I knew that from personal experience. The commotion outside could have been caused by anything.

“Looks like you might have to stay the night, Lois,” Martha smiled as if she was happy with this turn of events. “Jonathan, Clark, I believe as we did the cooking, you two are doing the washing up.”

I gawped at the audacity of the woman as the men exchanged a look before trudging into the kitchen. Martha took my arm and led us in after them, whispering that there was no point in bossing your family around if you weren’t able to enjoy the view.

I felt guilty as I watched the men at work. “I didn’t really do any of the cooking, which is obvious as no-one’s died of food poisoning. Maybe I should help with the washing up.”

“Don’t be silly, you’re a guest,” Martha insisted.

“You can dry,” Jonathan overrode his wife as he handed me a tea towel and led Martha out of the room, presumably to have a word with her about my presence in the house. Leaving me alone with Clark. Great plan Lois, try and be helpful and be left to die.

Trying to appear nonchalant, I took up a position by the draining board. Clark paused in his plate-washing duties for a moment then continued, vigorously attacking them. “I’m sorry about my mother. She probably organised the crowds outside, too.”

His voice was still grating and a few shades away from friendly but he did seem to be trying to pretend to have forgiven me as promised. “I’m still not entirely sure how she convinced me this was a good idea, but you don’t need to apologise for her. I like her.”

He looked at me for a second, then returned to the dishes.

“You would,” he complained moodily as he handed me a plate to dry.

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The click of the closing door echoed around the silent room as the Kents left to return to their own rooms, which were practically a separate apartment within Clark’s home. I hadn’t realised when Martha dragged me to the house that she didn’t really inhabit the whole building; the place was littered with photos of the three of them and felt so much like a family home that it was strange to think that essentially one man lived there alone.

As predicted, I wouldn’t be able to leave the area without being noticed and apparently Martha and Jonathan didn’t have enough room to put me up in their apartment. Although I never

quite understood why I had to stay, I was convinced that Martha was right about the matter. So I was going to have to spend the night with Clark. Again. Although it was all going to be completely platonic. OK, it wasn't even going to be platonic, it would have to involve some form of affection to be platonic and it was barely going to be civil. But we weren't going to be sleeping together, Clark didn't want that anymore.

He didn't speak or look at me after seeing his parents out, just walked past me to finish clearing everything up. I watched him for a few moments, until I realised that the only reason I was watching him was because I was enjoying looking at him and then I forcibly tore my eyes away from his appealing physique. I hated him, I actively hated him for being so gorgeous and so out of my reach. I also hated Martha for putting me in this situation. Sure, in the few hours I'd known her I'd come to respect her, admire her and yes, like her, but I still wanted to murder her the next time I got her alone. Preferably when Clark was busy saving lives on the other side of the world. I was under no delusion as to what he'd do to anyone who tried to harm either of his parents in any way, the love the three of them obviously shared was stronger than any bond I'd ever experienced.

I looked at the couch and ran my hands along the back mostly in an effort to stop me from running them along anything else. "I take it this is where I'll be sleeping, unless you have a spare bed or—" I was silenced by the look on his face as he turned to regard me.

"Don't be ridiculous, Lois, we both know where you're going to be sleeping."

"Oh," I swallowed nervously and crossed my arms in front of my chest as if to form a barrier over my heart. "I just... you said... we don't do that anymore. That was your decision, to act like nothing has happened—"

"I know, Lois," he said softly, no longer looking at me, "but I can't see us spending the night together without—"

"Spending the night together," I said with a small smile and a smaller laugh.

He continued his speech without reacting to my failed attempt at humour. "But I won't force you to do anything you don't want to, you know that. I don't have guests over for many obvious reasons, but you can take my bed and I'll sleep out here."

"I can't kick you out of your own bed," I told him. "I'll take the couch."

Clark looked at me and opened his mouth to speak but the intensity of his gaze made me instantly want to take back my words. Something of what I was feeling must have reached my eyes because he never spoke. I moved so that I was in his arms, then his mouth came crashing down on mine and I found myself being swept towards his bedroom in a sudden fit of passion.

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"So what's this?" I asked him in the aftermath, which was the only time when the tension between us dissolved enough to have anything close to resembling a normal conversation.

"What's what?" He asked, tilting his head to look at me.

"This." I indicated our naked bodies, still lying entwined with each other on his rumpled bed. "Tonight. If our arrangement is null and void, what do I file this under in the mess that is my mind?"

"Oh." He appeared to think for a moment, then raised his eyebrows as he answered. "I guess it's a one night stand. Strange, I never thought I'd ever have a one night stand."

For a moment it sounded almost like he'd forgotten I was there. His last musing was almost certainly not for my benefit. Still, it was nice to know that I was the anomaly and Superman wasn't out bedding lots of women. Or at least, if he was, he slept with them more than once. I furrowed my brow as I tried to work out if that was actually better or worse than him having one night stands. Clark must have been watching my expressions, as he

then asked me what I was thinking about.

"You," I told him honestly. "I was just wondering about you. This man I've been sleeping with is almost nothing like the one I used to work with. I know you weren't at the Planet long and I know that's all my fault, but—"

He sighed, the sound cutting through my words like a knife and I immediately wished I could take them back. I had promised myself never to bring the past up, that it couldn't help either of us to be reminded of it, of what I'd done to him, but it was too late and I had to deal with the consequences of my thoughtless mouth.

He raked a hand through his hair as he turned slightly away from me, although not completely, but enough so that I was no longer in his direct line of sight. "You want to know why I act so differently around you?"

"I... I don't know," I admitted, scared about what truth he was about to reveal and not trusting my ability to cope with the information. "I guess I do, it's just that I never meant to bring all that up. It's easier not to and safer. Much safer."

"Are you scared of me?"

I shook my head. "That's not what I meant. I don't believe you could ever really hurt anyone, not even me. Just forget I said anything. It won't make any difference."

I rested my head against the pillow but the mounting tension in the room wasn't going away. "It's you," Clark said after a while.

"What's me?"

"Why I act so differently, it's because of you."

"I figured that out, Clark."

"You make me so angry, Lois. I'm angry at you, I'm angry at the article you wrote, but mostly I'm angry at myself."

I raised myself up onto my elbows so that I could see him, surprised at his answer. "You? Why are you angry at you?"

"Because no matter what you do to me, I still love you. You ruined my life in the worst possible way and I loved you anyway."

I blinked, not quite believing what I was hearing. "You *love* me?"

"Yes, Lois, I love you, but I still hate you. I can't hate you fully while I love you and I can't be completely in love with you while I hate you. That makes me angry and I can't sort it out in my head. I spent a year trying to hate you but I couldn't and I've spent the last few months trying to love you but I couldn't do that either. Those conflicting emotions just mix together and result in anger, frustration and..."

"Lust?" I offered, not really taking in the fact that Clark loved me. It was impossible, there was no way that the most wonderful man in the world, the man whose life I destroyed, was in love with me. It would be funny if it weren't so tragic and completely unbelievable.

"And lust," he admitted, saying it like the sin it was. "Does it make you feel better knowing that?"

I thought for a moment, "I don't know, but at least it makes more sense. Or it will do when it sinks in. If it ever does."

"I just wish that I could let go of one of those feelings."

"Which one?"

"Either of them."

I snorted at him. "Way to make a girl feel special."

"What do you expect, Lois?" he yelled at me. Obviously he was clinging to the hatred at that moment. "Me to tell you that I *want* to be in love with you? I want nothing to do with you, but I can't help it. You draw me to you like a moth to a flame, I know it's wrong and you're bad for me and it's all going to end in tears but I can't keep away."

He paused for a second, obviously contemplating something, then he blurted out, "You know it's your fault that I never got to Mayson in time, don't you?"

"My fault!" I exclaimed, feeling a little of that hatred myself

at his accusation. “Now wait a moment! I *know* that she died *after* you broke up with me. You can’t blame me for that!”

“Do you know what I did after I left you that night? I flew off and sulked. I should have been patrolling, helping people, saving one of the few true friends that I have but instead I was hurting because I knew that I had to stop seeing you and I’d finally decided to do something about it.”

I stood up and starting hunting around his bedroom for the final resting places of the various articles of my clothing that Clark had torn off my body earlier. “You know what, it’s not your decision to make. You hate me, because if you loved me you couldn’t possibly blame me for things I haven’t done. I’m sorry I wrote that article, Clark, I really am and I’m sorry Drake died but that wasn’t my fault. I wasn’t the one who put a bomb in her car. If you must hate me, hate me for what I’ve done, not for things that have nothing to do with me!”

“What are you doing?” His voice was familiarly harsh. Yep, this was the twisted man I had turned into my lover, back right on time. This time, though, I wasn’t about to melt into his bed. His change in personae only served to make me dress myself faster.

“Going home. I can’t stay here with you.”

For a moment he looked apologetic but it faded in an instant. “But the police and press—”

“I *am* the press, Superman and you know what, I don’t care! So what if I get caught leaving, they don’t know *you* live here, do they? And I won’t tell anyone. You were right. We need a clean slate, to never see each other again. God, Dan was right wasn’t he? I’ve felt so bad over what I did that I’ve let you *use* me! No more, Kent, that’s it. I’m leaving and I never want to see you again!”

“Lois!”

I ignored him and the fact that half my clothes were still lying somewhere in his house. I was decently covered and that was currently all I cared about. He didn’t attempt to stop me in any way as I picked up my bag and coat and ran out of the house.

I was crying by this point. I wasn’t sure when I had started but there was no way I could stop it. I couldn’t see a thing through my thickly flowing tears.

I ran across a road in a desperate attempt to put as much distance behind me and Clark as I possibly could. I heard the squeal of a braking car and was bathed in the cold glow of a car’s headlight as I felt a sudden pain in my leg. I fell onto the hard road and heard something crack as my whole world went black.

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When I came around I found myself lying on a hospital bed with my leg encased in plaster and some medical equipment stuck to my arm.

Soon afterwards I began to start feeling the pain in my body from the impact with the car.

When the nurse finally appeared she told me what had happened to me and that someone from orthopaedics would come to explain the damage and work done to my leg in greater detail later. I glanced at my notes and saw a small ‘S’ on the written in the corner. I asked her what it meant as it didn’t seem to have anything to do with me or my condition.

“Oh, that? It means you were rescued by Superman. Every week we send him an update on his rescue-ees.” Her face lit up as she talked about her hero. “It’s great if you work with one of the kids he brings in; he often comes back to visit them.”

“Fat chance of him visiting me,” I mumbled and I couldn’t help but wonder what had been going through Clark’s head as he flew out to rescue me only seconds after our fight. Was he worried about me, annoyed with me for rushing into trouble? Wishing I’d been killed so he wouldn’t have to bother with me anymore?

The nurse gave me a funny look. “Sure, you’re way too old and let me tell you, *every* woman who he rescues thinks he’s

going to arrive and offer to marry them after falling wildly in love with them following their rescue. It’ll never happen.”

I tried to move but gave up after finding it too painful. I settled for a sarcastic retort instead. “While you, of course, maintain that he’s going to fall for a nurse.”

She glared at me, as if my sarcasm was unwarranted and I’d just destroyed her dream. “It’s more likely. Men like nurse’s uniforms much more than the ‘I’ve just been hit by a car’ look that you were sporting when he saw you.”

A part of me was sorely tempted to tell her exactly what, or more to the point who, I’d been doing before I’d been hit by a car but I bit my lip and said nothing. I had no idea how long I was going to be stuck in here and I didn’t want to annoy all my jailers too much.

“Oh, and by the way, there’s an Inspector Henderson outside wanting to speak to you about the accident.”

I groaned. “Of course there is. They never send anyone else, do they?”

“Are you up to speaking to him?”

“Sure.”

She finished my check up and left the room. Seconds later Henderson was sitting on the chair beside my bed. He read through some notes, presumably on the accident, before looking at me. “How are you feeling, Lane?”

“Never better. I’m gonna get up and dance a jig in a minute, fancy joining me?”

Henderson’s face remained blank but his tone softened slightly. “That was a stupid question. What do you remember about the accident?”

“Not much really.”

“Whose fault was it? Yours or the driver’s?”

I lowered my eyes. “I wasn’t looking where I was going.”

“So, you ran out in front of the car. Why?”

I was surprised. “Why? Look, unless you have evidence to the contrary, it was all my fault, so why are you looking into this?”

Henderson sighed. “Well, it says here that you were running, the driver assumed from something, in very little clothing and so there’s a theory that you may have been assaulted.”

“What!” I exclaimed. “Henderson, I—”

“I’ll be honest with you, Lane. I know where you were hit and I’ve got a good idea where you were running from, which is why I took this case.”

“To protect him.” I said bitterly. I knew where Henderson’s loyalty lay and I knew that it wasn’t with me.

“To protect both of you,” he corrected me. “If what I think is going on between you is going on, it’s not something either one of you is going to want to be common knowledge. And before you speak, I really *don’t* want to know. However, if you were assaulted, even if it was by *him*, I need you to be honest with me now.”

“Why? You can’t lock him up.”

“Lane!” was his less than patient response. “Just tell me.”

I took in a deep breath. “I wasn’t. Did you really think I was?” I asked him quietly.

“No, but I needed to ask.”

“So what now?”

“Nothing, I would imagine, unless you and the driver decide to take action against each other. Just get better and stop getting run over by cars.”

“Ruin all my fun, why don’t you?” I mumbled sarcastically as he left the room.

I felt so tired still, even though I must have been out of it for hours after the accident, and my whole body ached, not to mention the pain in my leg. I closed my eyes for a few seconds and quickly drifted off to sleep.

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Later on that night I dreamt that I woke up. I was unfortunately still in the hospital but I wasn't alone. Clark was floating beside me, well partially floating, he was half on and half off the bed, his arms encircling me as I slept. It felt nice, to be with him like that, like he was completely in love with me and there was none of the hatred he told me he felt for me. Just the love. Like we were a normal couple, with one alien and one invalid in a hospital bed.

OK, so there was no way we could be a *normal* couple, even if I was completely healed, but still, it was a nice feeling.

I felt his hand stroke my sleep-ruffled hair and he murmured into it, "Go back to sleep, Lois."

I didn't want to go back to sleep, I wanted to stay in that moment, with that feeling of contentment that his soothing presence installed in me. I opened my mouth to tell him so but all that came out was an enormous yawn. "Sorry."

He giggled, or made a sound as close to giggle as a man of his stature would be allowed to make. "See. You need to get some rest, Lois. You need to heal."

Reluctantly deciding that he was right, I snuggled down into his loving and comforting embrace.

"Love you," I told him sleepily, before returning to a deeper, dreamless sleep.

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"Ooh, ah, damn it!"

The curses accompanied the sound of someone bashing into objects and they brought me back into painful consciousness. I focused in on the blurry shape of my visitor and was mildly surprised when it turned into the form of my wayward younger sister.

"Sorry," she grimaced when she noticed my eyes were open and watching her. "Did I wake you?"

"What do you think?" I snapped. I wasn't a morning person at the best of times, and these certainly were not the best of times.

"I didn't mean to. Sorry, Lois. Go back to sleep, I'll just sit down and not move." She managed to manoeuvre herself onto the seat where she took off a shoe and started rubbing a toe that she must have stubbed on something as she woke me up.

I couldn't have gone back to sleep even if I wanted to, not with the bright light of day blaring happily onto my hospital bed. I groaned. "Don't matter now. What do you want?"

She looked surprised. "To see you. I know we're not the closest of families but I figured that it was the least I could do. And you'd come and visit me if I was in hospital, don't tell me you wouldn't."

"Are you listed as my next of kin?" I asked her, my brain still fuzzed from sleep, not doubting her words but wondering how she knew I was in hospital. They probably would have tried to contact someone to tell them about my accident but I had no idea who. If I'd have been asked, I would have given them Perry's number but he might not have been the hospital's first choice of contact.

Lucy pulled a face as she answered. "No... Mom is. And she couldn't make it, so she called me and told me to come and see you. I'm supposed to call back with an update this evening. I did try and call Dad to let him know but, well, you can guess how successful I was at that."

"Humph," I rolled my eyes. "I guess sending you to check up on me is sort of caring."

She looked apologetically at me and I shot her a sad smile. The truth was that Lucy probably should have been my next of kin; it would be no surprise for me to discover that I was hers, after all I had practically raised her myself. She stood up and found a vase for the bunch of flowers she'd bought me. She found a sink and filled it with water, before placing it on the windowsill beside another bunch of flowers that I didn't remember arriving.

"Who are these from?" Lucy asked me, as she simultaneously reached for the note that had been left with them, as if she didn't trust me to tell her the truth.

"I don't know. They must have come while I was sleeping. What does it say?"

"From a friend, X.' Recognise the handwriting? I'd say they came from a *man* myself," she asked as she shoved the card in my face. The mysteriousness of the note had certainly aroused her interest.

I managed to take the note from her and read it myself. While the leg was the most serious of my injuries, I had extensive bruising that made other movements difficult and painful and I was also being treated for concussion.

My gut instinct was telling me that the note was in Clark's handwriting, but it had been so long since I had last seen what his writing looked like that I couldn't be sure. My intuition wasn't normally wrong, but surely it was just longing on my part. There was no way that Clark would send me flowers and sign the note with a kiss! Of course, maybe the 'X' was in place of his name but then why say 'a friend'?

I sighed, and gave Lucy the note back for her to scrutinise. "Dunno. It could be the florist's handwriting, anyway."

Lucy looked admiringly at the bunch while she replaced the note. "It doesn't look like they came from a florist's. They look like they came from a garden or a hedgerow or something." Something else caught her eye and she tutted. "Since when did they leave the windows open overnight in hospitals? That's just careless."

I stared as Lucy shut the window. It was all a dream, right? Clark hadn't been to visit me last night and left me a bunch of flowers. Oh God, it had to be dream! I told him I loved him! Please, let it all be coincidence and an overactive imagination on my part. That must be it. No other explanation came close to being logical.

"So, who's your secret admirer?" Lucy asked after she shut the window and had turned to face me with a knowing smile. I couldn't stop the annoyed groan slip my lip as I closed my eyes and begged sleep to return and save me from my little sister and my one track mind.

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Lucy grinned from ear to ear as she showed me her winning hand. I glared at her. "You know you're only winning because I'm in recovery after being hit by a car, right?"

She laughed at my statement, as if it was a desperate attempt on my part to explain that I should have won, when it was purely the simple truth of the matter. "You wish, Lois. I used to date a professional card player; he taught me all the tricks of the trade. Gone are the days where you beat me at Rummy."

I stopped her as she went to pick up all the cards. "In that case, I'll shuffle them this time."

"Not again! Lois, you tried that half an hour ago and we're still missing the Queen of Spades. You'd better find it; I don't want to have to explain to my room-mate that she doesn't have a full deck of cards anymore."

I shook my head at her logic. "Then you shouldn't have taken her cards without asking. Honestly, Lucy, do you take responsibility for any of your actions?"

A knock on the door interrupted our impending argument and I was surprised to see Martha Kent poke her head into the room. "Can I come in?" she asked me.

"Sure," I said, wondering why she was here. Then a second thought hit me. She seemed to know everything else about my relationship with Clark; did she know what had happened between her returning home and my accident? Did she know the real reason why I was lying in the hospital? I watched her as she entered the room and asked how I was. If she did know, she showed no sign of it. She just acted like she was a friend

concerned for my welfare.

Lucy watched the stranger for a moment, then cleared up the cards as she reached a decision. “I’ll take this opportunity to go and grab some lunch from somewhere that isn’t a hospital. Do you want me to pick you up something?”

“Yes,” I begged. “Anything that isn’t hospital food.”

“Oh, don’t complain too much. It’s still better than anything you cook!”

Martha laughed at her statement and as Lucy left I called after her, “That’s not the point!”

I took a breath as the door slammed and then gave Martha an apologetic smile. “That was my sister.”

“Ah,” was all she said, and then, “if you want, I can bring you some food in. I don’t have much else to do and I do feel responsible for you being in here.”

“It wasn’t your fault.” I told her. I could have blamed her, I knew that, but I didn’t.

She looked troubled at my declaration. “Maybe not directly, but you wouldn’t have gone to CI— my son’s in the first place if I hadn’t insisted on you coming with me.”

“True, but that doesn’t make it your fault. I blame myself mostly, not you.”

Martha smiled at me, although I didn’t feel that she’d quite absolved herself of blame yet, although she seemed relieved that I didn’t hold her responsible. Her eyes wandered to the flowers adorning the windowsill and her smile became real.

“Where did those flowers come from?” she asked me, her eyes resting on the mysterious bunch.

“I don’t know,” I mumbled, wishing they weren’t causing so much interest in my visitors.

She investigated the bunch, looking at every single flower, obviously recognising each one. It wouldn’t have surprised me if she knew their full Latin name as well.

“I could swear,” she told me in an almost musing voice, “that I grew each and every one of these flowers in my cottage garden back in Kansas.”

“Well, if I find out who gave them to me, I’ll let you know who it was, as you obviously share the same taste.”

“Oh, yes,” there was the twinkle back in her eye as she turned to face me. “I’m sure we’d get along very well. Do you like them?”

I wasn’t quite sure what the right response was. It could be the work of my imagination once more, but I could swear that she had been hinting that they had *come* from her Kansas garden and there was only one person I could think of who could have picked them and got them here without anyone noticing. It was just me jumping to conclusions, wasn’t it? I couldn’t be right, not this time.

“Yes, they’re very pretty but I don’t know much about plants and flowers.”

There was silence for a second before Martha spoke again. “He was beside himself when he came to us that night after taking you to the hospital.” Her voice had changed; it had become sorrowful and sincere and had lost the teasing slant that I had grown used to hearing from her.

“Martha—” I began but she wouldn’t let me speak.

“He’d come to visit himself but that wouldn’t be a good idea. He’s not sure that you’d want him to, anyway. I didn’t just come to ease his mind, though. I would have come anyway, I think it’s important that you know that. Jonathan wishes you well, too. I know he didn’t come over that friendly the other night but he was just looking out for his son. I’m sure you can understand.”

I smiled at her, surprised that she had come partly on Clark’s behalf and pleased to know that she liked me enough to come anyway. “Of course. If I were any one of the three of you, I wouldn’t spit on me if I was on fire. It’s *your* attitude I have a harder time understanding, not Jonathan’s or your son’s.”

Martha sat down on the vacated chair, picking up a bit of card that had been on the seat before she sat on it.

“Oh, I think this might be one of your sister’s cards,” she said absently, placing it on a table. “To be honest, Lois, I’m not sure what my plan was when I came round to your apartment. I hadn’t planned to spend the day with you and invite you over to dinner; I just wanted to meet you. As I said, you’ve had a big impact on my son’s life. It was pure curiosity, I’m afraid. When I did, I saw how miserable you were, and decided that you looked like you’d been paid back for the pain you’d caused us. So I forgave you. And you looked so desolate that I was unable to leave you like that, my conscience just wouldn’t allow it. So I took the opportunity to mother you a bit and I got to like you. I’d like us to be friends, regardless of what my family thinks. If you do,” she added as an afterthought, as if she truly thought there was a person alive that wouldn’t want to be Martha Kent’s friend. At that moment, I don’t think I’d ever wanted anyone’s friendship more.

I gave her an honest smile. “I’d like that. I like you too, there’s no way I would have put myself in that position if I didn’t like you. It’s not like I was expecting a warm welcome from anyone else.”

“Well, I’ll admit that was partially curiosity as well.”

“Clark thought you’d set the whole thing up.”

She laughed again. “Not entirely, but I did wonder how he acted around you. And now I know. I just wish it hadn’t ended with you in hospital.”

I glanced down at my plastered leg. “It’s certainly not an easygoing relationship I have with your son,” I replied with humour. It was a situation where I could either laugh or cry and although I felt that Martha was a person I could break down in front of, I decided that humour was the way to go.

“Oh, let’s not talk about that any more, or I’ll just feel guilty again. Tell me who else has been to see you?”

I looked over at the window. Had Clark been to see me?

There was no way for me to be sure, besides Martha probably had a better idea of that than I did and she wasn’t saying anything.

“Just you and Lucy,” I told her. “My boss called the hospital and said that he’d come and see me as soon as he found the time so he’ll probably turn up sometime today, possibly with Jimmy, but there’s no-one else.”

“Not even your parents?” she asked, amazed.

“Not everyone’s lucky enough to have parents like you and Jonathan,” I said, then proceeded to tell her about my brilliant family life and why there was slim chance that either parent would care enough to come and visit me.

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I was quite amazed at how tiring lying in bed all day could be, even after two days of it. Lucy and Martha had been to visit me every day since my admittance and Jonathan had come with his wife on one occasion. However, visiting hours had long since passed and I had spent the evening working on the romance novel that I sporadically have the urge to write.

Now, however, I just wanted to sleep. If I gave myself time to heal and didn’t overdo it, I could be out of hospital and fully restored sooner rather than later. Taking things easy wasn’t something I found easy but I soon realised that it was easier than being cooped up in hospital. Which was why I was going to sleep at a time when I’d usually still be at work.

My eyes were close to shutting when someone burst loudly into my room. I groaned and focused in on the hideously bright Hawaiian shirt that was stood in front of me. For a second I just pondered the identity of the person I knew who’d willingly choose to wear a shirt like that. Then it hit me.

“Dan,” I greeted him, my voice croaky with near sleep.

“Hey, honey,” he returned, perching on the corner of my bed.

"I'm sorry it took me so long to get here but, well, I don't want to bore you with the details of my work."

"How could you? You never tell me anything about your work. I'm surprised you let me know you that you even work for the DEA. Isn't it past visiting hours?"

Daniel laughed, which was annoying. I didn't find it amusing that he refused to discuss anything more than the weather with me. "Well, yeah but I explained the circumstances. Come on, they weren't going to stop me visiting my girlfriend, were they?"

Girlfriend? I was his girlfriend? Since when and where was I? I supposed technically I was, but I'd never felt like I was his girlfriend. I had certainly never thought of him as my boyfriend, the idea was just... almost laughable, actually.

"Oh, and, tada!" he exclaimed as showed me the bunch of flowers he'd bought, a riot of colour to rival the brightness of his shirt. The combination of the two actually hurt my eyes a little bit. I guess they had cost a lot, though; I doubted he'd just bought them from a gas station on his way into the hospital.

"Thanks," I smiled, appreciating the gesture more than the flowers. "You didn't have to."

"Sure I did."

He stood up and went to place them with my other bunches and like everyone else he took the time to read the notes that came with them. He smiled as he read the cheeky one Lucy had written then frowned at the note from 'a friend'. Dan looked over and saw me watching him, so he gave me a watery smile, one that proved that he hadn't liked what he had read.

"Should I be worried?" he asked, although he sounded as if he already was.

I yawned. "I doubt it. Unless they decide to let me know who they are and they happen to be Antonio Banderas, or Mel Gibson, or Brad Pitt or..."

"OK," he laughed. "I get it. A secret admirer, and not a very thoughtful one at that. I mean, these flowers obviously cost nothing. He probably picked them from someone's garden or a waste land."

For a moment it looked like he was going to throw them out and replace them with his own but he finally decided to leave the flowers for someone else to deal with.

He returned to my bed and looked at me carefully. "I'm sorry, Lois, look at you. I haven't asked how you're feeling, or how you managed to get yourself hit by a car or anything. And you look like the only thing you need right now is sleep. How about I come back tomorrow and we can catch up better then, OK?"

I nodded at him as my eyelids drooped. I felt him kiss me lightly on the forehead then he murmured 'goodnight' and finally the sound of door closing behind him accompanied my journey into the land of sleep.

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He came again the next day as promised. He was actually really sweet and kind and I realised that he was a good distance towards falling in love with me. I couldn't have that. I liked Dan, he was a good guy, but it was all wrong. I didn't, couldn't, return his feelings. My heart had made its decision; it belonged to a certain superhero with whom I could never have a relationship. It wasn't fair to Dan to let him think that there was any chance of him having a real relationship with me, so I broke up with him. I think it was amiable but I knew I'd never hear from Daniel Scardino again.

I wished him well and I hoped he'd find someone better for him that I would be. Although, that wouldn't exactly narrow down his options much.

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I sighed with relief as I pushed open the door to my apartment, finding it hard to do with a crutch under my arm. The accumulated mail had been sprawled across my table along with a 'welcome home' bundle from a well-meaning person, someone

who was probably called Martha Kent. She had at some point stolen my keys from me in order to make sure that my apartment wasn't a complete state when I came out and that I could get around and look after myself while hobbling around on one leg.

There was, however, a letter that was sat just inside the door and obviously hadn't made it to the table. I bitterly complained to the empty room as I tried to bend down to retrieve it, and with much grunting and adopting of very odd positions, I managed to pick it up.

It wasn't post, or at least, it hadn't come with the rest of the mail. It had been hand delivered and my name was scrawled across the envelope without my address to keep it company. I recognised the handwriting. It was from my 'friend'. I glanced at the rest of my letters.

Bills.

Curiosity won over and me and my letter hobbled towards my couch, where I sat down then eagerly tore open the envelope to read it. It was from Clark.

*Dear Lois,*

*I wrote this the day before your release from hospital. Mom's been keeping me updated on your condition but I didn't want to burden her with the responsibility of giving you this letter, so I'm going to give it to you after she's tidied your apartment for you. If I'm brave enough, I'll have handed this to you myself. If not, I guess I'll just push it under your door or something.*

*I need to talk to you, to explain myself and my actions. The trouble is, I don't think I can face to face. Let's be honest, if we talk about our past we're just going to end up arguing again. I figured this might be the best way for you listen to what I have to say.*

*I guess I ought to start this from the beginning. It was nearly three years ago now that I first met you. You came storming into my interview and I was lost. I'm not sure exactly when but I think that by the end of our investigation into the Messenger I had fallen in love with you. However, you had made it very clear what you thought of Clark Kent and yet at the same time you were infatuated with my alter-ego. The idea that you'd work out that he was really me had been in my head from day one. I can easily imagine you saw my relief on the colonists' transport when you failed to recognise me after I ate the bomb, but even that never completely took away from my mind the fact that you were going to see past the disguise.*

*Of course, you did. And you did what any self-respecting journalist would do when faced with the story everyone wanted. You printed it. It hurt. It was always going to hurt, just as I was sure that someone would eventually work it out, even if it wasn't you. The trouble was, it was you. I was in love with you and yet you printed it anyway. I think that if I wasn't, or if it hadn't been you, it wouldn't have hurt me quite so much.*

*The irony, however, is that in a way Superman is as much your creation as mine. The idea came from you telling me to bring an extra change of clothes to work. You already know, of course, that it was you who named him Superman. Being Superman, this being that you co-created, gave me the freedom to use my powers and still have a normal life, to be accepted even though I am a freak. Now everyone knows and although I have become a celebrity, something I never wanted to be, I don't have to worry about people recognising me when I do something 'super'. I spent most of the last five or so years before coming to Metropolis travelling because I couldn't not help wherever I could, but equally I couldn't let people connect me with those miracles. This life I am living now is still better than the constant fear I grew up with before Superman.*

*As for the rest, some of it you know from the last time we saw each other. Mainly how I felt about you. I cannot apologise enough for my behaviour. I should never have slept with you; that was a mistake. Unfortunately I can't make myself regret it*

however hard I try. It was wrong and unfair on both of us, but being with you in that way is still the most magical thing I have ever experienced. I just wish we had made love. I wish that I could have let go of that hate and turned our passion into something beautiful, but you just brought out the best and worst in me and at exactly the same time.

You were right, I never forgave you. I hated myself for what I was doing to you and I resolved to keep away from you, so I pretended to forgive you to let us both carry on with our lives. I still think that it was the right decision, although I could have tried a little harder to actually forgive you.

I don't know what you were like when I wasn't around but I know that our relationship affected me enough for it to show. I know I was distracted a lot, thinking about you. My parents, obviously, noticed fairly quickly. The reason I often wanted to spend the night was because I was dreading returning home and seeing that knowing look on my mother's face. It was like I walked around with a neon sign advertising the fact I'd just slept with you. Perhaps it wasn't so strange that they noticed I had been seeing a woman in secret, it was the way that Mom knew it was you. All she did was look at my guilty face to work out that I'd been doing something I thought she wouldn't approve of and from that it was apparently obvious that I'd been sleeping with you. Henderson and Mayson also noticed the changes and I think Henderson may have suspected our relationship. Mayson only knew that I wasn't myself and wasn't as interested in her as she was in me.

I suppose I owe you the truth about Mayson as well. I could tell you were interested in our relationship, I guess you were too scared of me to ask, though. I liked Mayson a lot and I considered her one of my precious few close friends. She was always a little bit funny about Superman, although she assured me that she didn't mind that I wasn't human. She just thought I ought to join the police and fight crime the proper way. Maybe I should, maybe she was right, but I never wanted to be a cop. I just wanted to be a reporter. Mayson and I dated a little when we first met but it was obvious from the start it was never going to work. She was never my girlfriend. I grieved for her death as I would any friend of mine and I always knew it wasn't your fault. I apologise for blaming you; that was low of me.

I also owe an apology to Scardino. I know I wasn't very nice to him after seeing the two of you together. That was jealousy, pure and simple. I hated the fact that you were with another man. I'm sorry, once again, but perhaps you are beginning to understand why being near you was such a problem for me.

I wasn't angry with you for coming over for dinner that night, or not that much anyway. It was Mom that I was annoyed with that night. She won't admit it but for some rather strange reason I think she was trying to play matchmaker between us. For that, I have no explanation! As for the rest of the night... Perhaps I should pick up with what happened after you ran off.

I never meant to upset you. I think I was attempting to say what is written in the first part of the letter but I can barely remember now. I listened to you as you left, the beating of your heart and your sobbing. My heart stopped when I heard the car. I'd never changed into Superman as quickly as I did then. One minute I was lying naked in my bed, less than a split-second later I was dressed and by your side. I didn't want to leave you at the hospital but I didn't have a choice. I couldn't risk someone noticing anything between us, so I left. I went to my parents, utterly distraught. It's ironic, I guess, that I had just told you that I wanted to be able to either love you or hate you but I couldn't let either of them go. The instant I heard the squeal of the breaks and the metal crashing into your body, I stopped hating you. The idea of losing you forever, of never being able to see you again, even from a distance, it scared me witless.

I did come to see you. I don't think you realised it was real,

although you did acknowledge my presence. You were asleep, even in those brief moments in which you woke up you seemed to be sleeping, so I don't even know if you remember it but you told me you loved me. Those words meant everything to me. I don't know if you meant them or not, or even if you knew it was me who was holding you but I want to thank you for them anyway.

Mom kept coming to see you for my peace of mind. I couldn't show any more interest in you than anyone else, that would have brought the media swarming. But please don't think that's the only reason she went, I know that she's fond of you and would have gone to visit you without my prodding. I just need you to know how much I wanted to be at your side through all this.

Which brings us to the present. I think by now you have probably worked out what I feel for you, I'm certain that it's fairly obvious but I'll write it out properly anyway. I'm in love with you, Lois. I've forgiven you for writing the article, honestly this time! It may always be a sore point and it's never going to be something we can ignore but I'm sure we can work around it. That sounds a little presumptuous, I know. I'm not assuming anything.

However, I do want to be with you, properly. As childish as this probably sounds, I want you to be my girlfriend. I love you and I want the world to know it. Literally. Again, I have no wish to sound as if I'm getting ahead of myself but I don't want to hide any relationship we may enter into. The curse of our actions, I'm afraid, is that if you want to be with me you would have to accept the fame of being Superman's girlfriend. There is no way around it; I think we have already proved that keeping a relationship secret is not something we could easily handle.

However true that is, it doesn't matter if you don't feel the same. All I would add is that if you don't feel the same way or cannot accept what it would mean to be with me, then I hope we can still become friends. I will not pressure you for a decision. When you have made your mind up I know that you will be able to contact me, even if you decide to do it in the same cowardly fashion as I did.

Love,  
Clark

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I read the letter at least five times that night to make sure I had read what I thought I had read. He loved me? Why? How could a man as wonderful as Clark possibly be in love with a horrible hardhearted woman such as myself? It made no sense at all.

I kept dwelling on it over and over again. Although I had made it out of the hospital, Perry was still adamant that I shouldn't go into work, so I was left with nothing to do but watch daytime TV and ponder Clark's letter. I spent three days cooped up in my apartment thinking everything through.

This was a big decision. I couldn't help but curse myself once more for writing that damned article. I knew that if no-one knew that Clark was Superman then I wouldn't have needed to think about it, there would have been no consequences and I wouldn't have had anything to have to think over.

I loved him, I knew it.

And he apparently loved me, or at least he thought he did. There shouldn't have been any more to it than that. The question was: did I love him enough to be known world-wide as Superman's girlfriend? Was the prize of success worth the risk that our relationship could crash and burn, all of it in the public eye? On the third evening, after visualising various scenarios in my head, I came to my final decision.

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I knew that Clark was going to be at the opening of a new children's home that was being partially funded by the Superman Foundation. So that's where I went.

The grand opening was to take place at midday and so just

before twelve I was hobbling through the crowds that had gathered outside the building, mainly so that they could see Superman I was sure. Of course getting to him was going to be a problem, there were countless more able-bodied people than I and I suspected that there would be security around Clark as well, whether he had asked for it or not. I may have been better off going to his house now that I knew where it was, but at least this way I could avoid him if I lost my nerve in the end.

Noticing that the press were in a separate area, slightly nearer the entrance and therefore slightly nearer Superman, I made my way to join them just as Clark flew down to the podium to make his speech to the assembled crowd.

“Hey, Lois,” an annoyed voice hissed at me. I looked over to the speaker, who was making his way towards me. It was Ralph. “Perry sent *me* to cover this story. I thought you were still on sick leave.”

I glared at him and I noticed him shrink back slightly from my wrath. “I’m bored and very capable of working. It’s just stealthy investigative stuff I can’t do on crutches, not openings. And Perry didn’t send me, I came. Oh, and I’m fine, thanks for all your concern.”

Ralph didn’t seem to care in the least that he’d neglected to ask after my health or anything else for that matter. “Well, this is just great. Superman’s never going to answer any of my questions if he sees me standing with *you*. If I get fired it’ll be *your* fault.”

I snorted but otherwise ignored Ralph’s complaints. If he got fired it was because of the quality of his work, not because I’d appeared. Besides, it had been his choice to stand with me, it certainly hadn’t been mine. I glanced over at Clark, who quickly turned his attention to the rest of the crowd but not before I caught a glint of anger in his eyes. If he’d been listening in on my conversation with Ralph, he obviously hadn’t liked what he’d heard.

Or maybe the flowers and the letter hadn’t been from him and he wasn’t happy to see me. That was it. Someone, possibly even Ralph, had been playing a cruel prank on me. Maybe I shouldn’t have been there at all. My feet suddenly itched to be gone, to be walking away as fast as my crutch could carry me but instead I stood my ground. This was going to get sorted out, one way or another. And if Ralph had been playing a sick joke on me... My eyes narrowed unconsciously at the unfinished thought.

There was a sudden applause and I realised that Clark’s speech was over. I hadn’t listened to any of it; I had been too busy trying to find the courage just to be there.

“Any questions?” he asked, his eyes sweeping across the assembled reporters, neither lingering on me nor avoiding me. Totally inscrutable.

Ralph’s hand shot up, as did most of the hands of the people around me. Clark picked reporters one by one and answered their questions but he steadily ignored Ralph, even when he did his impression of an eager child trying to impress a teacher by jumping up and down to try and make his arm that little bit higher than those around it. The reporter cursed under his breath, yet I caught a glimpse of a slight smirk on Clark’s face. He was doing it on purpose, was he? I glanced at Ralph’s notebook. His questions weren’t really worth asking anyway, especially some of the ones further down the list which looked like they belonged in the sort of magazine that was only purchased by adolescent boys, not in a paper like the Planet and certainly not for an article on a children’s home.

As Clark finished answering a question of a reporter for the Star, I tentatively raised my hand, purely to test my theory that Clark was ignoring Ralph because he’d overheard our conversation. Ralph glared at my action.

“Lois Lane, Daily Planet,” Clark acknowledged me with what was almost a cheeky grin, certainly a look I associated more with Clark than with Superman.

There was a huge sense of amazement in the crowd, especially from Ralph, although his proximity to me did make him an easier study. “Why is the Superman Foundation only partially funding this home?” It wasn’t the greatest question in the world, mainly due to my lack of research on this story and lack of focus on Clark’s speech, although it was certainly a better question than anything Ralph would have asked if he’d had the chance.

“While the Superman Foundation at the moment has the ability to fully finance this home, we do not wish to make it fully dependent upon one income source. At the moment the rest of the money is coming from private sources, although we would like to get more local businesses to help us and make this a real community project.”

More questions followed, but Ralph got to ask none. The session soon drew to a close and I knew I had to make my move before Clark flew off.

He had followed some important-looking people in suits behind a barrier to sign some documents and I followed on behind, although keeping a rather large gap between us, one not entirely due to my current speed. They were hidden behind a wall when they stopped, although I could just about see them from my position.

The suits left and I watched as Clark leant against a wall and sighed, then his head turned to look at something behind me. “Let her through, she’s allowed.”

I jumped a little as I noticed the security guard that had crept up behind me and decided that my best option was to quickly hobble through the barrier to Clark. He still hadn’t really acknowledged my presence, except to answer my question and stop me from being manhandled by a man with muscles bulging out of his T-shirt. I still wasn’t sure that the letter had been from him, but if things were still as we’d left them before my accident, I was fairly certain that Clark wouldn’t have let me through.

I opened my mouth to speak but I couldn’t think of how to say what I wanted to say. He must have heard my intake of breath, though, because he was looking at me expectantly, if a little anxiously.

“Yes,” was the most coherent thing I could think of to say to him.

“Yes?” he asked uncertainly.

“Yes,” I smiled at him, trying to look more sure and confident than I felt, willing him to understand without me having to say anything else. I still couldn’t think of anything else *to* say.

Clark’s eyes flickered behind me and a quick glance in the same direction showed me that a few members of the press were watching us, although the guard wasn’t letting them even up to the barrier. I had either caught him off guard or he hadn’t considered a woman on crutches that big a threat to Superman.

“What are you saying yes to?”

“Yes, I...” I faulted, feeling suddenly foolish. What if the letter *had* been a prank, only played by him instead of Ralph? What if Clark had said it only for me to do something stupid for the whole world to witness as a way of getting back at me? There was no way *that* could even us out.

I couldn’t say what I was agreeing to, I just could not find the words to tell him but those deep chocolaty-brown eyes were begging me for an answer, even as his lips smiled at me in amusement at my current state of silence.

“This,” I said, then took his head between my hands and brought his lips to mine. He was still for a moment and I started to think that my prank theory had been correct, then his lips began to move against mine. I was aware of the flashes of cameras as our mouths opened to allow our tongues to dance together but I really didn’t care at all.

Clark moaned and pushed away from me. I licked my lips self-consciously as I looked at him quizzically, wondering why

he had stopped.

“I have to go,” he said, his voice thick and husky. “There’s a fire and some people are trapped—”

“Then why are you standing here?” I exclaimed; the kiss seemed to have reinstated my never-ending flow of words that some people occasionally mistook for babbling. “You wrote that I had to accept what it means to be with you. That’s not just dealing with them out there; it’s knowing that you’re going to have to stop kissing me to fly off and save the day. It’s annoying, but you can come back. Others won’t be able to return to their loved ones if you don’t go.”

His hand briefly touched my cheek in gratitude. He smiled at me with pure love in his eyes. “I will come back. Or at least, I’ll find you when I’ve finished. You don’t have to hang around here waiting for me. I…” he suddenly looked extremely shy for a man who was wearing such a loud and tight-fitting outfit. “I love you.”

“I love you too. Now go,” I commanded and with that he was gone. I just stood there, staring at the patch of sky where I’d last seen him, dimly aware that I had a sappy grin on my face and finding it hard to care.

I heard movement beside me and turned my head to see Henderson walking towards me. I wasn’t even aware that he’d been at the opening and was finding it difficult to work out the rationale behind his presence, but it didn’t alter the fact that he was now stood in front of me.

The Inspector looked at me for a moment, his silence and blank expression giving me no clues as to what he thought about what had just transpired between me and Clark. Then he finally he spoke and there was something like approval in his voice. “You know something I’ve just found out about you, Lane? You’ve got a beautiful smile.”

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The elevator doors pinged open and I hobbled out into the newsroom of the Daily Planet. I heard some mumbled whispers from small huddles of reporters clustered around the room as I made my way to my desk but as usual I ignored them.

“LOIS!” Perry’s voice bellowed across the busy room, sending the huddles scattering in all directions in vain attempts to appear busy. “My office, now!”

I hissed out an angry breath as I was forced to change direction, not an easy thing to do with my injuries and yet I still managed to make my way through the open door in good time. As soon as I was safe within the walls of his office, Perry slammed the door shut behind me and marched round so that he was sat behind his desk.

“Sit,” he barked.

I lowered myself into the chair opposite him and began to speak in a hurried rush. “Look, I know I shouldn’t be here yet, and I can’t argue that I’m not exactly mobile, but there must be some boring, desk-bound work I can do—”

“We can sort that out later, Lois, that’s not why I called you in here.”

“Oh.”

He pushed a photograph across the desk towards me. I didn’t reach out to touch it, in fact I kept my hands by my side, hidden under his desk and just looked.

It was a photo of me.

And Clark.

As Superman.

Kissing.

“News travels fast,” I mumbled, not quite sure how to react to the proof that I had just irrevocably changed my life, and feeling completely in the dark as to what my editor-in-chief’s thoughts on the subject were.

“I don’t really know what to say about this, Lois.” He sounded, if anything, sad and disappointed.

I looked up at him in surprise. “You always know what to say,” I told him positively, “and if you didn’t know what to say, why did you call me in here?”

Perry stood up and started pacing around the room, never coming any further forward than his desk. “You’re more than just a reporter to me, Lois, you’re like the daughter I never had, you know that right?”

I think I knew it. It still seemed shocking to hear him say it but it was the way I had seen our relationship as well, in my heart at least. “I think so. I mean, you’re like the father I wish I’d had but—”

He sat down again as he interrupted me. “So I’m not speaking to you as an editor right now, understand?” I nodded mutely. “I have always wanted nothing more than for you to be happy. I’ll admit that when Kent started here I saw a spark between you and I had hoped that he would be good for you. Not necessarily as a romantic partner but possibly as a friend. However, instead you chose to shun him and expose him.”

I shut my eyes and grimaced at his words. Yes, I had behaved abominably towards Clark and the whole world knew it.

“Lois, if you hadn’t written that article and no-one knew that Clark was Superman, I would be overjoyed at the two of you being together. But honey, Clark isn’t a reporter anymore; he’s the most famous man in the world. Are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

I looked him firmly in the eyes. “I love him.” I told him simply.

Perry smiled sadly at me. “Are you sure that’s enough? What about your safety? Clark’s invulnerable, you’re not. To control Superman, what better way than to threaten his girlfriend?”

I laughed. “Perry, look at me. I’m on crutches. I always end up in a hospital or the police station when chasing a story, and normally both. I won’t really be in any more danger than usual. In fact, I’ll probably be safer. Think about it,” I quickly added as he opened his mouth to argue back, “Clark would never let anything happen to me and anyone trying to hurt me would have to get unnoticed through a throng of fourth-rate reporters first.”

He sighed and leant back in his chair as he considered my argument. “Well, whatever I think, you’re going to do what you want to anyway.”

“True,” I replied in a small voice, like a child’s when they know they’ve done something wrong and are trying to apologise. “But that doesn’t mean that I wouldn’t like your approval.”

Perry thought a little longer then laughed boisterously. “Lois Lane and Superman! Lord help us if you have kids, they’d be unstoppable!”

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It was strange. One kiss with Superman and I was suddenly being treated differently by the people around me. It wasn’t like people in the newsroom who usually spoke to me were avoiding me or anything obvious like that, I was never popular, but they had started to look at me with something close to awe in their eyes. Like I was Superman or something. I decided to ignore them as always and instead got down to the very tedious desk work Perry had assigned to me as punishment for coming back to work too early.

I noticed the hush that quietened the newsroom some time later; I just didn’t pay any attention to it. I then detected the presence of someone walking purposely towards my desk, then there was a quite thud as they dropped a file onto it. I still didn’t look up.

“I’m busy,” I told them.

“So you don’t want this story?” a cheeky voice asked me.

I started at their voice and I looked up at Clark, dressed in a casual suit and wearing glasses, who was smiling down at me, fondly. “I… I…”

“Haven’t changed?” he finished for me, then laughed at my

incredulous and annoyed expression. “What, you think I’d forget an experience like working with Lois Lane?!”

My eyes left his face and fell hungrily on the file he had placed on my desk. “What is it?”

“Did you hear about the murder of Dr. Gretchen Kelly a couple of days ago, while you were in hospital?”

“Of course.”

“Henderson has brought charges against a woman called Mrs. Cox. Apparently she was Luthor’s Personal Assistant, and she really did assist him personally by all accounts. Anyway, Dr. Kelly thought she was in love with Luthor and Mrs. Cox decided to get rid of the competition. Henderson thinks that she may have been deeply involved in Luthor’s criminal activities, but for now all we know for sure is that she killed Kelly. However, I did manage to persuade him to let u... you have the story.”

“Really?” I hadn’t missed his little slip.

“Well,” his face creased up in confusion. “Actually, Henderson just gave it to me and told me to bring it to you. If I didn’t know better, I’d think he was just giving me an excuse to see you, like he was giving us his blessing.”

I laughed. “So is this just a passing visit?”

“I...” he trailed off, his face looked hurt as if I had just told him to go away.

“Because if you’re staying, you can go and get a chair instead of just standing there.”

“Oh,” I didn’t miss the smile on his face as he did as I suggested.

When he had settled by my side I opened a new document on my computer, then glanced at him. “I guess you’re a fast typist, then?”

“I have been known to destroy keyboards by typing too fast,” he sheepishly admitted.

I pushed the keyboard towards him. “Then you’re typing.”

Clark looked at the keyboard for a moment, then raised his eyes to look at me. “I’m not doing your work for you.”

“No,” I agreed. “But you miss being a reporter, don’t you?”

I watched him compose his face as he prepared to deny it. “Don’t lie, Kent, you’re no good at it.”

“Fine,” he huffed. “I never wanted to be a full-time superhero, I wanted to be a reporter and I miss my job. Happy?”

“Ecstatic,” I replied. “And as it’s my fault so that makes it my duty to rectify it. So shut up and start typing, partner. I think it’s time the world got another Lane and Kent exclusive.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “Your name *still* goes first?”

“Naturally.”

“But I’m Superman and the world knows it. Surely more people would read the article if *my* name was first?”

“Probably, but I’m the more senior reporter.”

“Can I use the alphabetical card?” he asked after a thoughtful pause.

“Nope,” I replied as I read through Henderson’s file.

He sighed. “I see. Don’t you think you ought to check with Perry before you hire new members of staff?”

“Don’t worry about Perry, I can handle him.”

From the corner of my eye I saw him roll his eyes at me and I couldn’t help but smile. I had a feeling that I was going to enjoy working with Clark.

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Or maybe not.

OK, so it wasn’t working with Clark that was the problem, I was beginning to remember why I had started tolerating working with him before. He had good ideas and the story was coming turning out slightly better than if I had been working on it alone, and certainly a lot faster and with fewer mistakes for Perry to edit. No, the problem was that I was finding it increasingly impossible to ignore the electricity between us. It was hard enough to make sure I didn’t start indecently assaulting Clark in

the middle of the newsroom without trying to get my head around the story as well.

I closed my eyes and tried to focus for the hundredth time. When I opened my eyes I noticed that every pair of eyes in the newsroom were studiously ‘not’ watching us.

“Did the Planet expand after I left?”

I looked up at him and saw him gazing out at the rest of the reporters with an angrily protective gleam in his unobscured eyes; he had taken off his glasses earlier, muttering something about needing to get out of the habit of wearing them. I followed his gaze and noticed what he had noticed, that there were a lot more people in the newsroom than there should have been.

I sighed in defeat, not wanting to cause the fuss needed to get rid of the interlopers. I’d leave that for Perry when he noticed, or Clark, considering the look he was giving them. “I don’t see what’s so interesting in us.”

He smiled at me and my insides melted. “I guess human interest stories haven’t grown on you.”

“We are not human interest stories, we are trashy magazine articles. I still can’t believe people actually read those things.”

“They obviously don’t have better things to do with their time like we do.”

Clark managed to entwine his fingers with mine and his voice had taken on a decidedly husky tone. He cleared his throat and shuffled in his seat. “So what do we write next?”

I tried to calm down my thoughts and return them to some useful practise, like work, not wishing the time away until we could leave the Planet and go somewhere a little more private.

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I sipped at my glass of wine as Clark cleared away the dinner table in the blink of an eye. I scowled disapprovingly at the pile of dirty plates and utensils in the sink. “You’re not going to do the washing up as well?”

He laughed and walked over to me, taking the wine glass out of my hand and placing it firmly on the table. He lifted me easily off the seat and pulled me close, pressing his lips to mine. I opened my mouth to allow his tongue the entry it sought and pressed my body firmly against his until I could feel his heart beating in his chest as well as I could feel my own. I reached out to cradle the back of his head with the firm intention of deepening our kiss but Clark must have had other ideas as I felt him catch my wrists and pull them down between us, drawing himself away from me.

I opened my eyes in confusion as I watched him breathing heavily. I tensed as I realised he had that look on his face again, the same one he had worn when he turned down my obvious request to go to my place after work and had instead suggested that he cook us dinner at his house. I had agreed, but as good as his cooking was, I still felt that I would have enjoyed my idea much more.

“Come on.” His arm snaked around my waist, supporting me as he walked me to the couch, practically carrying me as I struggled to balance without my crutches.

He sat down next to me, leaving a noticeable gap between us. “Can we talk?”

I pouted at him, “I’d rather be doing something else.”

He smiled at me. “I know, but I think we really need to talk first.”

“You mean *you* need to talk,” I smiled back at him, realising that I wasn’t going to change his mind no matter what I said.

The smile faded from his face as he took in a deep breath. “I don’t want to sleep with you,” he blurted out, thoughtlessly.

“Huh?”

“It’s just,” he reached out and grabbed my hand, gently tracing invisible patterns across my palm with his thumb.

“Before, our relationship, such as it was, was all about sex. I’m worried that if we start being intimate again that we’ll go back to

that. And it scares me. That's not what I want from you."

I could feel the tears forming in my eyes. "Was it really that bad?"

"No!" he exclaimed and pulled me into a fierce hug for a couple of minutes as he placed a lingering kiss on the crown of my head, then he drew away slightly to brush the few drops that had leaked down my cheeks away with his fingers. "I'm not saying this right. Lois, I was being selfish. I wasn't thinking, I wasn't *me*. I just took from you and I never gave. I want to start again."

I gave a small, sniffley giggle, "I've heard that before. It didn't work."

"I don't mean forget everything that's happened and act like strangers. It'll take time for us to learn to trust each other again after all the pain we've caused each other; I know we've still got a lot of issues to deal with. I just want to do this properly. I want to take you out for meals and win you toys at the fair. I want to send you flowers for no reason but that I love you and want you to feel cherished. I want to woo you, properly. Treat you like you deserve, like I should have treated you all along. I want to make love to you, when we're ready and not just because our hormones think we should. And I don't know if I'm ready to do that yet."

His last sentence was little more than a whisper. I had a flash back as I remembered what he had said to me on that night we first slept together:

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"I..." he seemed to find it hard to vocalise whatever it was that was bothering him.

"What is it?" I prodded gently.

"This isn't right ... I can't make love to you." He was serious again, and starting to look angry.

I sighed, and wanted to roll away from him, but he still had me pleasantly pinned under him. "I can't force you to."

He shook his head sadly. "No. You don't understand. If we continued, it would just be sex."

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I reached out and swept his hair back from his face. His chocolate-brown eyes gazed at me and I could sense the fear in them. I wasn't sure what he was frightened of, that I'd demand he sleep with me or I'd leave him, or that I'd laugh at him and tell him that real men didn't think like that.

"Oh, Clark," I whispered, amazed at the tenderness in my own voice. "That's the sweetest thing I've ever heard. I'll wait for you to be ready; I won't push you to do anything you don't want to. I want what you want, a real relationship."

He pulled me into his arms again and I relaxed into his embrace, inhaling the comforting scent that was purely Clark. I heard him breathe my name into my hair and I closed my eyes, a smile on my face. This wasn't so bad, being loved by Clark instead of merely sleeping with him. In fact, my heart told me that it was even better.

I rested my head on his shoulder and let out a contented sigh. "Clark?"

"Mmm?"

I pulled away so that I could look at him. "This whole 'no sex' thing. That's just 'no sex', right?"

He pulled a face as he mulled this question over, "I don't know, I hadn't really considered..."

I slapped his arm playfully. "I don't know what you're thinking of, buddy, and I don't know if I approve. I just meant, we can still kiss, can't we?"

"Sure." His face lit up at the suggestion.

"Then why am I still talking?"

THE END