

Master of Disguise

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Summary: An Elseworld tale. If Clark Kent never arrives in Metropolis and Lois Lane marries Lex Luthor, what will happen when Lois starts to suspect her husband's true nature? And without Lois, will Clark ever create his super disguise?

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Disclaimer: I don't own the characters. Pity, that. Comments are always welcome. See endnotes for additional acknowledgements.

It's her smirk that triggers it, that little tingle that tells me someone is hiding something. My breath hitches and I feel my heart pound against my ribcage as the adrenalin starts to flow, a tell-tale sign that I'm on to something huge. Years of experience have taught me not to ignore my instincts and right now, they're screaming that this is *it*. I'm on the cusp of the biggest story of my life.

I pause momentarily to replay the conversation in my head, trying to pinpoint what 'it' is.

"Mrs. Cox, may I speak with you privately?" I asked.

She hesitated, casting a longing look after my husband's retreating back. The diminishing voices of Lex and Nigel St. John drifted in from the hallway until the office door shut and cut off their hushed tones. With her hand on the knob and an annoyed expression on her face, she was clearly anxious to leave.

"Don't worry," I assured her. "This will only take a moment."

She sighed and turned to face me, crossing her arms. "What can I do for you, Mrs. Luthor?"

"Nothing more than you're already doing. I just wanted to say thank you for taking care of Lex's needs while I've been sick."

"I'm not sure what you mean," Mrs. Cox replied. Honest confusion pinched her brow and softened her normally cold eyes. "I always do my best to take care of Mr. Luthor's needs. Hence the job title 'personal assistant.'"

Her perplexed look was gratifying. In the months I've known her, I've spoken to Mrs. Cox only a handful of times. We don't like each other and we both prefer it that way. However, after a recent bout of bronchial pneumonia landed me in the hospital, I worried about Lex's baser needs while I was incapacitated, and based on her body language, it was more than a hunch that Lex turned to Mrs. Cox. A part of me recoiled at the idea of thanking my husband's mistress, but I was taken by a whim — or maybe it was the medication — and said it anyway.

"I'm referring to his sexual needs," I said. "Thank you for being discreet."

Her shocked expression was equally satisfying. Although it makes me furious that Lex did this to me again, knowing she's having an affair with my husband doesn't make me hate her — well, more than usual. I'm not sure why. Like I said, it was probably the medication. Regardless, she'd never looked gob-smacked before and I gleefully jumped at the opportunity to rub her nose in it.

"Don't be so surprised," I said to her, "I've always known about Lex's affairs. Character judgment and the ability to sort truth from fiction are the hallmarks of a great reporter. I know exactly the kind of man I married."

My feeling of vindication was short-lived, however, since *that* was when she smirked.

I return from my thoughts to see Mrs. Cox recover quickly, her facial expression returning to chiseled stone as she mumbles something in response. She's probably trying not to laugh at my naive statement.

"Was there anything else you needed, Mrs. Luthor?" she asks.

I shake my head and Mrs. Cox leaves the room, closing the door softly. I slump back into the stacked pillows against my headboard and stare blankly at the ceiling as my mind races. My intuition is one of my greatest assets as an investigative reporter and its undeniable presence stuns me. Not because Mrs. Cox's smug grin initiated it, but because I haven't felt my instincts buzz like that for over six months.

Why haven't I noticed its absence?

I sit up again at that thought. In all my years of reporting, right back to high school journalism, my intuition has been my companion and guide, a trusted friend in navigating the dangerous underbelly of a major metropolitan city. How can an award-winning reporter who worked at the greatest newspaper in the world lose her instincts? Thinking back, I realize they've been non-existent since the Daily Planet's destruction. I shake my head; perhaps they were buried under the rubble.

My chest tightens and tears prick at the back of my eyes as I remember the bombing. I lost many things to explosion and fire that day worse than my sixth-sense for cover-up; the most painful was Perry. Much more than a boss, Perry White was both mentor and a father figure for the seven years I knew him. He died as he lived; a hero of the people, working diligently to get everyone to safety long after others gave up. The pain of his absence still makes it hard to breathe.

I rub my chest before reaching over to snatch a tissue from the box on my nightstand. I dab at my eyes as I remember how in one dreadful moment, I lost my mentor, my colleagues and my purpose in life. I knew I wanted to work at the Daily Planet since the ninth grade and once it was gone, I had no back up dream to cling to. That was the toughest part about the bombing. Without Perry and the Daily Planet, I felt lost and alone. I barely functioned through the numbness to attend Perry's funeral.

Out of habit, I shove the thoughts of Perry into a dark corner of my mind and lock them away. Feeling antsy and wanting to distance myself from the pain, I throw back the covers and get out of bed. Still weak from my illness, my abrupt movements make me lightheaded and I lean against the dresser until my vision clears.

My wedding photo is sitting in front of me and I smile as I pick it up. Lex's infidelity notwithstanding, he was the steadiest influence in my life after the bombing. He rode in on the proverbial white stallion and gave me a new job, a new home and a new life. With his proposal of marriage, he gave me the comfort and financial stability I needed. In a sense, he offered me salvation.

I set the picture down and my fingers brush against a protruding metal nub, knocking something loose from the back of the frame. It skitters across the tabletop and drops softly to the plush carpet before I can stop it. Curious, I kneel down to get a closer look and my heart nearly stops when I realize what it is. Careful not to make any noise, I pick up the bug and look at it, my mind whirling around the implications of its existence.

I carefully replace it in its hiding place and without daring to breathe, stride across the room and out onto my tiny balcony. I close the door behind me and search the area quickly to determine that it's free of listening devices before I finally suck in some much needed oxygen.

"Come on, Lane. Think!" I scold myself, trying to circumvent the initial suspicions lodged in my brain. "It could be anybody. There's no reason for you to think that Lex put that

there.”

And it's true. There are hundreds, if not thousands of people that would be eager to bug Lex Luthor's home in hopes of digging up some dirt or learning some trade secret. It could be a business rival, one of the tabloids, a disgruntled employee. Any one of those options makes more sense than the thought that Lex has me under surveillance. But I can't shake the idea. Not ten minutes before, I boasted that I knew exactly what kind of man I married; now, I'm not convinced.

I know Lex's strengths and weaknesses: the pursuit of pleasure drives him, obtaining power gives him pleasure and remaining in control at all times is paramount. Lex demands perfection from everyone and everything, especially from himself. He doesn't make mistakes. Ever. If he has hidden a side of himself, then he would never allow his control to slip, never give me reason to doubt his perfect image of philanthropist, successful businessman and loving husband.

Instead, when I made my overconfident boast, it was one of his mistresses who slipped.

My instincts are still buzzing, screaming at me to look deeper. It's a familiar feeling and it makes me feel alive for the first time in months. My lips tighten into a grim line as a strategy to investigate my husband forms in my mind.

Eavesdropping during an investigation is always tricky, but I don't think it's *ever* been this difficult before. After trying to spy on Lex for two days, I finally catch a break. Peeking around a corner, I watch Nigel arrive and enter Lex's office and am thrilled when he doesn't quite close the heavy oak door behind him. I slip out of my shadowed hiding place, tip-toe across the hall and lean my ear against the crack to listen to their conversation.

“... Hernandez paid the agreed five-hundred thousand. I put it into the Swiss account last night as instructed.”

“Good. What about the Cartel's shipment?”

“Received without incident. The runners are distributing the drugs to the dealers as we speak.”

“And the Westside problem?”

“Resolved. It seems Mrs. Cox only needed to break one finger before Mr. Blackstone remembered where your protection money was hidden.”

“From your comment, Nigel, one might be left to conclude that Mr. Blackstone knows that I'm the one receiving his money.”

“I'm sorry, sir. What I meant to say is that Mrs. Cox only had to break one finger before he remembered where ‘the Boss's’ money was hidden.”

“Excellent. Pay her the standard bonus and have the remainder deposited into the Cayman account ...”

The elevator announces its arrival with a soft ‘ping’ and I scamper away from Lex's office door to avoid being seen by one of his cronies. I slip into my bedroom and hold my breath until the security detail passes. Once gone, I lean my head against the wall and breathe deeply, trying to wrap my head around my discovery.

The conversation between Lex and Nigel is damning. I add these new revelations to the confusing snippets of conversation between Lex and his inner circle over the past couple of days and it all makes sense. My initial vague misgivings have turned into a solid link between Lex and drug running, smuggling, a protection racket and God knows what else. I squeeze my eyes shut against this new reality — that in addition to his public activities, my ‘near-perfect’ husband runs a criminal organization as ‘the Boss.’

It's an unexpected blow, to know for certain that Lex is a crook. In light of his criminal activities, his surveillance and constant monitoring of me is understandable. With a little surreptitious snooping, I located not only additional bugs and cameras, but my human shadow as well. Avoiding the devices and a routine security detail is simple, but ditching a tail is risky. I

realize that doing so once or twice is acceptable, but several times will make Lex suspicious. I know that too many unexplained absences will give me away, so unless I have a good reason for being out of sight, a reason that Lex accepts and supports, I need to be cautious.

“Dammit,” I curse. The frustration at being completely neutralized is overwhelming. I know I'm in the perfect position to discover his secrets, yet Lex's efficiency has rendered me absolutely useless.

I close and lock the door with trembling hands before stalking around the room, the rage at Lex's deception burning hot in my chest. I try to console myself that Lex is a master at hiding his true nature, but I still kick myself for not realizing sooner what he is. I mutter insults at my own stupidity and within seconds, I'm pacing like a caged tiger, swearing and breaking things. Smashing my wedding photo against one of Lex's expensive vases is particularly satisfying. A moment later, a knock at the door interrupts my tirade.

“Lois?”

“What?” The shrill tone in my voice finally snaps me out of my wild tantrum. Inexplicably, Lex's presence helps me remember that I still have a job to do and I struggle to regain control of my emotions.

“Is everything all right, my dear?”

“Fine; I just ... accidentally broke the vase and there's glass all over the floor.”

A moment of silence follows. I know he knows I'm lying, but he chooses discretion and doesn't question it.

“Shall I send someone in to clean it up for you?” he finally asks.

“Yes, please. Thank you, Lex.”

I hold my breath until I hear his footsteps fade and then sag against the door. I feel embarrassed and hurt and angry at his deception, but I realize I'm wallowing and that won't help me. In an effort to focus on my next steps, I shove away all the emotions, everything but the rage, and even that I tamp down to a simmering anger. Now that I know how corrupt Lex is, I need to rethink my investigative plan. I need help from someone on the outside that isn't watched as carefully as I am. Without Perry or the resources of the Daily Planet, there is only one place to turn.

It isn't hard to maintain my snit as I stalk out of the penthouse. I know that the scowl on my face is fierce enough to keep anyone, including Lex, from questioning me and I make the most of it. Once I'm clear of the building, I make a beeline for the nearest Fudge Castle, a location that I know has a conveniently large restroom window that opens into a narrow alleyway. I confirm my tail's location outside the front door before ducking down the back of the restaurant, through the restroom and into the dingy alley beyond.

I don't linger. Keeping to the shadows as much as possible, I run until I leave the business district behind. Ten minutes later, I step into a low-end department store on the edge of the Slum. After catching my breath, I slip some money into a public phone and dial.

“Come on, pick up,” I plead to the ringing tones.

“Hello?”

“Jimmy? It's Lois.”

“Hi, Lois! Hey, I'm sorry I haven't paid you back yet. I did sell one photo freelance to the Star, but they don't have any positions open, so I...”

“You can consider the money a signing bonus, Jimmy.”

Even through the phone his confusion is obvious. “Really? I thought you didn't have any openings at LNN?”

“It's not with LNN; it's working directly for me. I'm investigating something ... personal and I need someone I can trust to help.”

“You know you can trust me, Lois. I’ll do whatever I can to help you while I job hunt.”

I shake my head. “No, Jimmy. You don’t understand. I’ll pay you — I need someone full time.”

“Oh, man! That’s great, Lois. I’d love to work with you. What are you investigating?”

I pause, unsure whether to put my friend in danger. “I won’t lie to you, Jimmy. What I’m investigating, it’s huge and potentially dangerous.”

“Whoa, coming from you, that’s saying something.” I wait while he chews on that information for a minute. “Kerth-worthy?” he asks.

“It could be worth the Pulitzer, if we survive to print it. Are you up for it?”

“When do I start?”

I smile at his enthusiasm. Jimmy has lost as much as or more than I have, but he never let it beat him. I know I can count on him. “Meet me at that spy shop on Baylor in half an hour.”

“You got it.”

I make a couple of quick purchases at the department store, change, and then make my way to the spy shop. Twenty minutes later, I’m waiting for Jimmy in the shadows of an alleyway, dressed as a stereotypical B-movie spy: red wig, glasses and a long overcoat. A few minutes later, I see Jimmy enter the store and I sneak inside the shop after him. An hour later, I’m secreting bugs and monitoring devices into crevices even I didn’t know I had. I take one of two scramblers and hand Jimmy the other, paying for everything with cash.

As we make our way to an upscale computer store, I shed my wig and glasses. I buy everything Jimmy says he needs and use my credit card for the purchase. When we’re done, we head back to his flat, picking up a new tail on the way. Jimmy notices and glances at me, worry pinching his forehead.

“That was quick,” he observes.

“I figured it would be. It only took ten minutes after the purchase for Lex’s men to catch up with us; at least we have a baseline now.”

“Do you think they traced the credit card?”

“They must have, unless that kid in there knows who I am and called Lex.” I take a deep breath. “OK, we’ll buy the mobile phones and anything else we need with cash. Oh, by the way, the computer equipment is an early birthday present to help with your freelance work, in case anyone asks. Got it?”

“Got it. Boy, it sure is nice having rich friends.”

Jimmy’s impish grin makes me smile and he ducks out of the way when I reach over to ruffle his hair. We continue on in silence until we turn on to Jimmy’s street. “Do you still have my stuff?” I ask.

“Yeah, I’ve got the box hidden under my bed.”

“Great. We’ll take it to a room at the Apollo Hotel tonight after I give you that make-over.”

He sets his packages on a bench and bends down to retie his shoe. “Do you think it’ll work? You’re the best at undercover work; I don’t want to blow it.”

I reach down and succeed in ruffling his hair. “Don’t worry, Jim. When I’m done with you, you’ll look like an entirely different person.”

We pick up a couple of movies and some take-out on the way back to his apartment as further cover for our planned activities tonight. Hanging out with Jimmy is something I did once before when the sadness of losing the Daily Planet was too much. Lex suggested that I call Jimmy and ‘hang out,’ doing something mundane, like pizza and a video. Being seen with Jimmy should deflect any suspicions about my tantrum earlier, explaining it away as moodiness.

We wait at Jimmy’s place until it gets dark and then slip down the fire escape and into a waiting taxi at the end of the

alley. We settle into the back seat as the cab pulls around to the front. Jimmy reaches up to smooth out his now light-brown hair as we drive by Lex’s men watching the front door; they don’t even glance at us as we pass.

We set up the computer equipment in a dimly dirty, two-room hotel suite and Jimmy gets to work, trying to break into LexCorp. He tries several paths into the computer network and is able to hack into the main administrative and scientific divisions, but when he tries to get into the executive files, he’s kicked out. After a few more tries, Jimmy sits back, growling in frustration.

“I’m sorry, Lois. Security is too tight and if I try anything else, they’ll know I’ve been here.”

I look up from the pages sliding out of the printer. “It’s not a complete bust. You found a few leads that look promising.”

“Not to me. I can find information, but I don’t understand it. You need someone with more experience than me to help figure out what it all means.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll think of something.” I worry my bottom lip in thought for a minute before asking, “What will it take to get into Lex’s system?”

“I’m going to need his access codes,” he sighs.

“I was afraid of that.” I stare at the screen for a minute and then stand, pulling on my coat and wig. “Let’s call it a night. Lex is at a business meeting tonight and if I hurry, I’ll beat him home.”

We hail a cab and slip back into Jimmy’s apartment. I leave by the front door, making sure my tail sees me. To the casual observer, it looks like I spent the evening watching movies with a friend.

My luck holds long enough for me to get home and hide the devices in the penthouse, setting up the recorder in a seldom-used storage closet. Between security shifts, I place my own bugs in Lex’s office and try to peek into his filing cabinet and the large safe, but can’t get close enough due to a surveillance camera. Never one to give up easily, I try the small safe in the bedroom, cracking it on the second try. There’s nothing incriminating there, but I decide to take some cash for future emergencies.

Over the next week, I meet Jimmy at the hotel a few times to listen to the recordings of Lex conducting business. We try to use the information to map out his organization and activities, but it’s slow going and I grow more despondent the more I hear. Lex is more crooked than I could possibly imagine. ‘The Boss’ is a crime lord controlling every illegal — and legitimate — game in town. Nothing happens without his authorization and no one ever crosses him.

“Lois, we’ve got to stop him.”

“I know, Jimmy. We need to let the police know what’s happening.”

Sitting on the faded bedspread at the Apollo, I shut off the recording equipment and bite my lip as I think about the latest revelation. Hearing Lex order a hit on one of his thugs turned whistle-blower makes me feel sick to my stomach. Judging by the look on Jimmy’s face, he’s not feeling too well either.

“Do you think the police will take it seriously?”

“Why wouldn’t they?” I ask.

“They certainly took their time yesterday. A hot tip on the location of an illegal gambling den and they took thirty minutes to get there?”

He’s right. By the time the police arrived, the people and evidence were long gone. Now that I know how far Lex’s reach extends into the law enforcement agencies, I’ll be more careful about whom to trust. I set my notes aside and slip my feet into my shoes.

“Call Henderson and tell him about the hit,” I suggest as I pick up my coat. “He’s a pain in the butt, but he’s clean.”

“Where’re you going?”

"I'm going to get the evidence. If we can link a murder back to the Boss, we've got him." I grab my purse from the table and open the door, but a passing glance at the afternoon edition of the Metropolis Star stops me in my tracks. "Jimmy, wait."

He sets the phone down as I scan through the article declaring that the body pulled from the river this afternoon was identified as the thug in question. I turn the paper around and show him the article. "It looks like we're too late."

"Oh, man, this bites," he says as he finishes reading the article. "Are we ever going to catch him?"

"We'll get him."

My tone holds bravado I don't quite feel inside, but I'm not about to let Jimmy see it. Tonight, I'll set up the equipment to transmit Lex's conversations real-time, and tomorrow, I'll contact my sources and initiate the next phase of the investigation. I firm my resolve to expose Lex as a criminal and a fraud. What Jimmy needs — what we both need — is a bit of the Mad Dog. And Mad Dog Lane on a criminal's scent is focused and intense and dangerous.

"I want to talk to Louie."

The burly Neanderthal Louie uses as muscle ignores my statement as he lines up behind the cue ball. Never one to be patient, I tap him on the shoulder and repeat my request just as he takes his shot. He cusses colorfully as it goes wide, the cue ball slicing just past its target and into the corner pocket. His partner crows his victory as Cro-Magnon man turns on me, clutching the pool stick menacingly in one beefy hand.

"Nice shot." I try not to grin as he steps toward me, his temper boiling. I duck his fist.

"Beat it, kid, or I'll use your face for a punching bag."

I slouch, unconcerned. I'm in disguise, but his threat isn't very menacing regardless. This one seems to work the best on the seedier side of town — no one notices a scruffy teenage boy as long as he doesn't bother anyone else. I wouldn't have, either, if I didn't need to go through the dumb muscle to get to Louie.

"I'll leave after I speak with Louie. Tell him Trish's partner is here."

The Neanderthal glares at me for a moment, but I stare him down. He doesn't want to do it, but now that I've invoked Trish's name, the muscle has to tell Louie I'm here. He tosses the stick to his buddy and stomps into the back room. It isn't long before Louie comes out, confusion twisting his genial face when he sees me. I smile at him and say hello. When recognition finally dawns on him, Louie doubles over with laughter. The Neanderthal and his buddy stare at me, wondering what the joke is and I roll my eyes. Still chuckling, Louie waves me into the back, wiping away mirthful tears before they can escape. Once we're safe from prying eyes, he gives me a bear hug.

I hold up my hand before he speaks and pull out my handheld scanner to make sure the room is clean. Louie's eyebrows crawl up his shiny forehead, but he doesn't say anything until I put it back in my pocket. One meaty finger swipes down the edge of my goatee as he shakes his head.

"I gotta hand it to you, kid. That's the best disguise I've seen on you yet."

"Thanks, Louie. I needed to see you incognito."

"You, uh, back on the beat or are you runnin' from somethin'?"

His tone tells me he suspects why I'm here. "Little bit of both," I say. "I'm investigating the Boss."

"I knew you'd find him out, sooner or later."

"Can you help me, Louie?"

He walks away, his hand reaching up to rub the back of his neck. "I don't know, Lois. If anyone can take him down, it's you. I'd like to help, but I won't be able to do much."

"Is his reach that far, then? I want to expose Lex, but I'd also

like to live through it."

"I don't think I can protect you, sweetheart. Anyone finds out I'm goin' against the Boss, it won't be just my business in danger. No one escapes his wrath."

My heart races with hope and trepidation in equal amounts. I know he will help me, but if someone of Louie's stature is afraid of Lex, then I'll have to be extra cautious from now on. I nod. "Don't worry, Louie. I can take care of myself." I hand him a list of supplies, a request for fake IDs and a stack of money. At his look, I reassure him. "They're clean. I've been all over town trading in the bills I filched from Lex's safe."

He takes a quick look at my list. "Consider it done."

"Thanks, Louie. You get me these things and I can handle the rest myself. Can Maurice do the IDs by tomorrow night?"

Louie nods and smiles, wrapping his arm around my shoulders. "Ladies and gentlemen, Lois Lane is back." He tips his head toward the ceiling and whispers dramatically, "God help us all."

I take a steadying breath and push open the bedroom door, sweeping out onto the terrace to nonchalantly join my husband for breakfast. The tension in my body leaches out at the sight of his empty chair, and it makes me realize how tightly I'm wound. Even though I'm anxious to step up the next phase of my investigation, I sigh with relief at his absence. I don't know how long I can keep up the pretense, playing the loving wife now that I know what kind of man my husband really is.

I note in passing that the table is set for two, which means he'll be here any minute. Good. I'm not a patient woman and now that I have a plan, I want to move on it today. I sink down onto my chair and enjoy my usual meal of dry toast, fruit and coffee while I mull over the plan again in my mind. Just as I begin to review the LNN daily production schedule, Lex strolls in through the door from his office, Nigel trailing dutifully after.

"Good morning, darling." Lex leans down to kiss my cheek, which I offer up submissively. I force a pleasant smile to my lips and mask the revulsion I feel at his proximity. His habitual smile of self-satisfaction informs me that I'm successful. I take a deep breath — Showtime!

As Lex seats himself, I sigh in discomfort. He pauses in his descent and looks at me with concern. "Are you feeling all right this morning, my dear?"

I fix my expression to show a pathetic stoicism so unfamiliar to my usual demeanor. I feel transparent, but I get such a concerned response from Lex, that I must have been successful. Smiling inwardly at his reaction, I thank the heavens again for Mitchell. If it's one thing I learned in my time dating a hypochondriac, it was how to look ill without actually suffering from a single ailment.

"I'll be fine," I assure him. "It's just a little headache."

It's a small deception that is critical to my sanity. The thought of being intimate with Lex now makes my skin crawl, and any hint of illness tends to keep him at a distance.

His brows knit together in concern as he takes my hand in his, stroking it sympathetically. "That's the third one this week. Perhaps you should see a physician. I'll have you see Gretchen." He pats my hand before releasing it and turns to receive his stack of morning newspapers from Nigel.

My pitiful sigh holds just a touch of exasperation. "Oh, no thank you, Lex. I don't understand why, but I always end up feeling worse when she treats me. I'm sure I'll be fine with some aspirin and a little extra rest."

I stifle a laugh at the doubt that flashes across his face. I suspect that Gretchen is a past, if not current lover, and planting a seed of suspicion is a last-minute stroke of genius if I do say so myself. I enjoy the feeling of petty glee for a moment before chastising myself to concentrate on my next move. It won't help

me if he catches on to my game now.

Come on, Lane. Focus!

If I've learned anything about human nature from Lex, it's that once you really know a person, it's easy to manipulate them. However, maneuvering someone as skilled as Lex is dangerous business. I know I have to threaten him, but not so much that he feels the need to get rid of me permanently.

I take a steadying breath and then curse softly under my breath to catch his attention.

"Lois?"

"Sorry, Lex. It's just that ... oh, I don't want to bother you with my work troubles."

"Darling, your problems are my problems. It's my network, after all."

"You're right, I suppose. Well, I received a tip about a shadowy crime figure called 'the Boss'. My source claims that the Boss runs just about all of the criminal activity in Metropolis, but none of my reporters are able to corroborate. They're either incompetent or it was a bum tip."

A slight eye twitch is the only indication that I hit my mark. I press on before he can redirect me, giving him an out. "Most likely, my source is wrong and there is no crime lord. I mean, someone like that would need corrupt politicians and dirty cops on his payroll and I haven't heard anything like that. I should probably face the fact that the lead is a bust. What do you think, Lex?"

"It sounds improbable to me, Darling. How reliable is the tip? Is it one of your regular sources?"

His smile is sympathetic, but my heart chills as he attempts to get me to name my source. No wonder Bobby and Louie are so tight-lipped about 'the Boss's' criminal activities. God, if I didn't know to be careful, I could have sent any one of my sources to their deaths. I grimace and shake my head.

"No, the tip was anonymous. That should have clued me into its invalidity."

At my look of disappointment, he pats my hand again. "Come, Lois, you can't expect every conspiracy theory or rumor of corruption to be true?"

I grit my teeth at his condescending tone and nod. I want to knock his complacent visage off, but have to settle for giving him a mental kick to the solar plexus.

I turn back to my reports and continue to peruse them. 'Let him chew on that for a while,' I think. Moments later, I notice Lex's agitated motions to Nigel. I strain to hear his urgent whispers while pretending deep concentration in my own papers.

"What is this?" Lex hisses.

I risk a sideways glance to see Lex pointing at his newspaper. I don't know what's in the paper, but I already know Lex doesn't like to be blindsided by public information. Nigel skims the article, but his only response is to blink.

"It would appear that he's being held without bail, sir."

"I know that *now*. Why wasn't I notified?"

"I didn't know, sir. No one reported the bust."

"Kent again," Lex whispers furiously. He broods a moment and I see his eyes shift briefly to me before he dismisses Nigel brusquely. "We have a leak, Nigel. Find it and plug it."

"Yes, sir."

I wait for Nigel's quick departure before folding my paper and setting it aside. Seeing Lex's furrowed brow, I place my hand over his and pose my concerned, yet innocent question.

"Is something wrong, Lex?"

"No problem, darling, just something I remembered for the board meeting this afternoon."

I cock my head to see if I can decipher anything else from the newspaper. The San Francisco Chronicle's headline 'Domo linked to Prostitution Ring' makes Lex's agitation clear. I suppress a smile — Kent has apparently disrupted another

operation and Lex is scrambling to do damage control.

From our eavesdropping, Jimmy and I discovered that a rookie reporter named Clark Kent recently started causing Lex considerable problems with his West Coast operations. Kent started working in San Francisco about six months ago, about the same time I married Lex. As just another cub reporter working the city beat at a newspaper across the country, he wasn't anyone to notice. Unremarkable, that is, until I overheard Lex cursing his name. Anyone who can cause Lex trouble is worth noticing, so I did my homework.

The only son of Jonathan and Martha Kent, — wheat farmers from a middle-of-nowhere town called Smallville, Kansas — Clark Kent graduated with a Journalism degree from Midwest while attaining both athletic and academic honors. For the past five years he worked as a freelance reporter, publishing articles in papers around the world, from the Borneo Gazette to the London Times.

Until he took the job at the Chronicle, he never stayed any place longer than a month, excluding a period just after the Nightfall incident. I couldn't find any articles by him for a while after the close call with the asteroid, but he finally reappeared as the assistant editor for the Smallville Post. I suppose it made sense. With the end of the world looming, he went home to be with his family — the perfect son.

I shake my head slightly at the thought. There has to be more to him. No one is as squeaky-clean, all-American, boy-next-door-ish as he sounds.

At work I perused his past articles in LNN library. His writing skills aren't bad, although he doesn't have my hard-hitting edge. I started by reading his innocuous puff-pieces and I have to admit that Kent is very good at them, if you like that sort of touchy-feely thing. I smile wistfully as I remember Perry's gruff voice chastising me about my attitude. 'They're human interest stories, Lois, and they help sell newspapers. Now git, and bring me back that mood piece for the afternoon edition.'

Recently, however, Kent's writing blossomed. Within the past month, he broke stories exposing Lex's prostitution ring and one of his drug smuggling operations. If he can discover and expose criminal activities like that, then he is the one who can help me.

I grimace at that thought. It galls me to admit that I need more help than Jimmy can provide. I never needed a partner before, actually went out of my way to bury any partners Perry dared put me with, but things are different now. Given the deadly nature of this investigation, I need someone of Kent's caliber to help me gather the evidence and put the pieces together, someone that isn't in such a vulnerable position.

Wishing to observe Kent first hand, to find out if he's trustworthy enough to bring him in on our investigation of Lex, I knew I needed time and freedom away from Lex's watchful eye. So I kept my eye open for a reason that would allow me to get away without arousing suspicion.

It was last week's Sunday edition that solved my dilemma in the form of a spandex-clad, super-powered being.

Kent bagged an exclusive interview with the unbelievable new hero just a few days after his amazing debut landing a crippled Boeing 747. At first I scoffed at the story, but the entire rescue was captured on camera. This man, alien or mutant, actually flew through the air, grabbed the plane with his bare hands and then descended with it softly and safely onto the tarmac. Before anyone asked him any questions, he floated up to hover over the plane, gazed intently for a minute and then, after nodding, disappeared. Tape replays showed that he simply flew away very quickly, heading northwest until he escaped the camera's view. The hero saved over three hundred people that day and simply flew away without a word.

The next morning, our news reports dubbed the new hero 'Superman' and the name stuck.

To put it mildly, I felt both astounded and skeptical about Superman. However, as more and more reports came in about miraculous rescues from across the country and around the world, the reality of a super strong, super fast, flying man became incontrovertible. I admit, he looked very impressive on film and I itched to get out there to get the story myself.

While the world adored its new protector, Lex's fascination with Superman was almost freaky in its intensity. For the first time I could remember, Lex canceled business meetings and charity events to focus his inner circle on finding out everything about the hero. Day after day, Jimmy and I listened to tapes of Lex orchestrating tests to gauge Superman's strength, speed and morals and I felt a sense of gratification at Lex's frustration over Superman's unparalleled goodness and dependability.

While Lex's research told me a lot about the new hero, it didn't help me with my investigation. It was Kent's one-on-one interview with Superman that gave me the final key to unlocking my investigative plan. I'm still unsure about Kent, though. If I didn't already know what a good investigative reporter he is, his interview of Superman would give me serious concerns about his abilities. Frankly, if the subject weren't so amazing, I'd label his front-page interview a PR piece.

Kent didn't ask the super-powered rescuer any tough questions, but simply called him 'a friend' that was 'here to help.' Where did the intelligent and insightful reporter go? I assumed that meeting the superhero in person overwhelmed Kent completely. That, or Superman left before answering the tough questions.

Lex tosses his paper aside with a grunt of disgust, startling me out of my ruminations. I reach over and pick the paper up, glancing at the front-page articles — the one about General Domo and another about Superman foiling an abduction attempt.

Lex is furious about Domo's capture; I know it cost him millions of dollars when Kent broke the stories. Yes, with the unbelievable appearance of a comic book-type superhero and the rise of the Chronicle's star investigative reporter, Lex has many reasons to be annoyed. Of course, Lex has no inkling that I know the true reason for his displeasure. Instead, I take advantage of the other article. It's the opportunity I've been waiting for; I start to rant.

"Can you believe this rag?" I ask incredulously. "A super-powered being magically appears and no one thinks to ask him where he came from, how long he's been here or even questions his motives. Where does he live? Is he alone? Is he an alien, a genetic experiment or a man enhanced with robotics — you know, like the boxers my father worked on...?"

Lex looks up at me, taken aback by my non sequitur. His eyes flick down to the newspaper in my hand and darken in barely controlled anger, the cold empty hatred broadcasting his true nature. My God, how could I have missed all of the clues before? I hide a shudder by tossing the paper to the table and then wave my hands dramatically to bring his gaze back to me. Now that I have Lex's attention, I mimic some of his own suppositions back at him.

"Fighting for truth and justice? What kind of weak response is that? Why hasn't anyone discovered his true agenda? Someone needs to get to the truth behind the cape and find out why he's really here. If he decides to turn against us, we don't know if he even has any weaknesses."

I continue to fume about poor quality journalism that Perry would never have accepted at the Daily Planet and begin planning my attack to expose Superman when Lex clears his throat. I stop talking immediately, remembering to look appropriately chagrined.

"Sorry," I apologize meekly. "I guess I got carried away. It's just that, if I were still on the beat, I *know* I could find out the truth about Superman."

"I'm sure you could, my dear. You were the best."

I smile at the compliment and his indulgent grin before glancing down at my watch. It's getting late and I've planted the seed. It's up to Lex now whether my boast will grow into anything. I lift my notes from the table as I stand.

"Oh, well, who has time to chase Superman across the country when there's important work to be done right here in Metropolis?"

I give Lex a cheerful peck on the lips and walk away. 'Please, please, please,' I chant inwardly. 'Take the bait.' I pause at the doorway to the bedroom and glance back, but Lex is still as a statue, a gargoyle staring down from his castle heights. I grab my bag and coat, trying not to be disappointed before heading toward the private elevator.

I jab my finger into the button and wait impatiently, my mind alternately trying to concoct another plan whilst the mantra continues to roll through my mind. 'Take the bait, Lex. Come on, take the bait you son of a b...' Lex calls my name. My heart flutters and I smother a triumphant grin before turning to face him.

"Lois? One thing I forgot to mention. I received a call from Jim Bradley yesterday about his ratings."

"Jim Bradley," I murmur, trying to place the name, "the LNN news director in San Francisco?"

"Yes. It seems he's having quality issues with his team. I can't fit a trip into my schedule so I'm hoping you can help me. You're the real expert on reporting the news anyway. I realize it's an inconvenience, but may I have Mrs. Cox schedule a trip for you this afternoon?"

"Of course, Lex." I nod, beaming in honest pleasure at his request as I step into the lift. I punch the button for the lobby, but Lex places his hand along the frame to keep the door open. I raise my eyebrows in question.

"If you *do* happen to get that Superman expose while you're there," he says with a smile, "I won't complain."

Lex leans in and gives me another kiss — the last if I can help it. Everything has come together. Now I just need the evidence to put him away forever. I hope Clark Kent is the one to help me do it. I wave as the doors close between us.

"Goodbye, Lex."

I reattach the binoculars to the tripod and peek through to make sure everything's set when Kent comes into focus. My eyes meander across his broad shoulders and down his back as he places a cup of coffee on his desk. When he stretches across his desk to pick up his phone, my gaze drops lower and I lick my lips. The sudden ringing of my phone makes me jump and I chastise myself for getting distracted. I dig into my bag for the offending equipment, shoving aside my 'real' cell phone and scramble to open my 'Jimmy' phone.

"What have you got?" I answer brusquely.

"This morning Lex told Nigel how pleased he is that he tricked you into tracking down Superman. Aside from that, your tail either isn't aware of your disappearances, or he hasn't wanted to report how often he loses you."

"Good. I hate every minute I'm spending at the LNN offices, but it's worth it if Lex thinks he's fooled me into doing his dirty work. Besides, getting away from Lex's thug to follow Kent is child's play." Apparently, it's beyond the dolt's imagination that I would rent the hotel room below mine and climb between balconies using a length of nylon rope.

"How's it going?"

"Fine. Kent arrived at work a few minutes ago. I'm set up on the roof across the street from the newsroom and can see his desk from here."

"Any problems?"

"Not really. I only had to pick a couple of locks to get set up

here for surveillance.”

“I feel a ‘but’ coming. What’s wrong?”

I reach up to rub a kink in my shoulder at Jimmy’s perceptive question. After shadowing Kent for three days in various disguises, I feel exhausted. He’s a busy and observant man and he always seems to find a way of evading my tail, but that isn’t the difficult part.

“The problem is that there are other people watching him, too.”

“Lex?”

“I thought so at first, but they don’t look right. If they weren’t so sloppy, I’d say they’re military.”

“Why would the military be interested in Clark Kent?”

“I don’t know.”

Staying out of their way has been tricky, but squelching the impulse to find out who they are has been darn near impossible. The curiosity is driving me crazy. I bite my lip, reminding myself to stay focused on my own tasks. I shake off Jimmy’s question and get back on task. “As long as they don’t interfere with our investigation, it can wait.”

“So have you made up your mind about Kent?”

“I think so. He’s even more impressive in person than on paper — honest and hard-working.”

I haven’t stumbled across any dirty little secrets during my reconnaissance, but I bitterly remind myself that appearances can be deceiving. I grimace at the uncharitable thought and concede, begrudgingly, that Kent does have a kind heart. Last night, I cased his apartment dressed as a bag-lady and he stopped to offer me money and directions to the nearest soup kitchen.

“He sounds like a good guy,” Jimmy says.

“Maybe — his neighbors think him friendly; I saw him help a cat out of a tree and his apartment is neat as a pin.” I watch Kent smile at someone before he walks out of view. “Not to mention he’s drop-dead gorgeous.” I mumble the last under my breath, but Jimmy still hears it.

“Watch it, you’re a married woman,” he jokes.

“Not for long,” I grumble, squinting through the lenses again to check on Kent’s whereabouts. I know Jimmy is just kidding around, but I’m not quite ready to joke about my marital status. Maybe it’ll be funny that I married a sociopath *after* Lex is safely rotting away in a prison cell. Jimmy sighs.

“Be careful, Lois.”

I roll my eyes, but am secretly happy that he cares enough to say it. “You too. Call you later.”

I snap the phone shut and peek through the binoculars again. Kent’s still not in view, but I’ve seen enough to decide that he’s the one and it’s time to move forward. I reopen my “Jimmy” phone and dial Kent’s phone number. Through the binoculars, I see Kent sprint into view to answer my call, settling down in his chair as he chirps a greeting.

“City Desk.”

“Mr. Kent?”

“Yes, this is Clark Kent. How can I help you?”

“I have some information.” Through the phone, I hear a pen click and a rustling of paper as Kent pulls his notebook open in preparation. I smile.

“What kind of information, Miss...?”

I ignore his request for a name and dive in, attempting to knock him off balance from the start. “Before I say anything, I need some answers from you, Clark Jerome Kent of Smallville, Kansas. For the past five years, you’ve traveled the globe freelancing, always drifting to your next job within weeks of arriving. You’ve reported on everything from geckos to disaster relief efforts, but all of that changed when you came to San Francisco. There are many sides to you, Mr. Kent. Which one is real?”

He’s quiet for a moment. I watch through the binoculars as he

rubs his chin in thought. When he finally answers, his voice is wary. “I’m not sure I understand what you mean. You seem to know an awful lot about me, Miss. Have we met before?”

“No, I just did my homework.”

“You’re investigating me?”

“Yes, and when I thought I had you all figured out, along came Superman.”

I hear plastic creaking, as if the handset casing is being squeezed too tightly. I see him swivel his chair away from the newsroom, a hand running through his hair above hunched shoulders. “What do you ... Look, I don’t know what you want from me, but...”

“Why don’t I tell you, then,” I interrupt. “Your recent investigative scoops have been hard-hitting and insightful — especially those exposing Domo — but then you were soft on Superman. Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why didn’t you ask Superman any tough questions? Your article was more puff-piece than investigative journalism.”

Kent doesn’t answer for a minute as he leans back in his chair and exhales slowly. “*That’s* what you want to know?”

“Yes.”

“Well, it’s just ... Superman is very busy and doesn’t have time for lengthy interviews.”

“That’s what I suspected.”

It’s a relief to know that Kent isn’t intimidated by a powerful person or hasn’t lost his touch. We will need all the skill and talent we can muster to break Lex. I start rolling over the next steps in my mind when Kent’s voice startles me.

“Why go through the trouble of investigating me when all you needed to do was ask?”

“I needed to know if I could trust you.”

“Trust me with what?” he asks.

“I don’t know if I should tell you over the phone.”

“Then why did you call me?”

I can hear the amusement in his voice and his teasing irks me. “This isn’t a prank call, Kent. What I’ve got is big — I just need to be careful with whom to trust.”

“And how can I trust anything you say if you won’t even tell me your name?”

“Call me Lelaine,” I say glibly.

“Call you...? Giving me a pseudonym isn’t a great way to build trust, ‘Lelaine.’”

“I can’t use my real name. If he finds out, he’ll kill me in a Metropolis Minute.”

After a beat of silence, his voice softens. “If you’re in danger, I can quote you anonymously. We can ensure your safety.”

“You can’t guarantee that. Besides, I can take care of myself.”

“Listen, I can protect you...”

I laugh. “No, you can’t — you can’t even protect yourself. Did you know you’re being watched?” I see his head jerk up and scan the newsroom before shifting his glasses down his nose to look out the window. I know he can’t see me, but I duck when his glance passes my position on the roof.

“You mean by someone other than yourself?”

“Yes. I don’t know who they are, except they look military.” I hear his sharp intake of breath, but I ignore it. I’m letting him get me off-track. “Don’t distract me, Kent. That’s not the reason I called you.”

“You’ve got something better than the military following me?”

“Yes. Hold on.” I remember my scrambler and reach down to turn it on. In theory it emits a high-pitch frequency that interferes with listening devices. I sit back up and look through the binoculars in time to see Kent pulling the phone away to rub at his ear. Weird.

I wait impatiently for him to bring the handset back to his head, but he speaks before I get a chance, his annoyance obvious.

“Listen Lelaine, or whoever you are, I’m trying to be patient, but I don’t have time to play games. If you have something to say, then say it.”

“I know who the Boss is,” I whisper, “I know who he is and I want you to help me bring him down.”

I hold my breath and watch as he turns to face the window again, looking toward my spot on the roof. His silence is eloquent in its simplicity, a testament to Kent’s abilities as a reporter that he even knows what I’m talking about. And I’ve definitely caught his attention.

“Where do you want to meet?” he asks.

“The fountain near Third and Fulsom in fifteen minutes — and be sure to lose your tail before you get there.”

I arrive at the fountain and lean up against the wall next to a take-out sushi joint, scanning the area for Kent. I try to be unobtrusive, but it isn’t long before building security notices me loitering. I don’t blame them for being concerned. In Hobbs Bay, my unkempt goatee and dirty clothes help me blend in, but in this neighborhood, I look like trouble.

The guard starts making his way toward me just as I see Kent crossing the green toward the fountain. Although Kent’s not looking in my direction, I raise my hand in greeting to show the guard I’m moving along. As I walk, I watch Kent settle on the edge of the concrete wall that surrounds the fountain before looking around for me. I can almost feel his gaze when he notices me walking toward him.

For some reason, I become unaccountably nervous as he watches me cross the plaza, like he’s seeing not just through my disguise, but also into my soul. My heart starts pounding and my palms start to sweat at the fanciful thought.

‘Get a grip, Lane,’ I scold myself. ‘There’s no way he could know who you are.’ I take a deep breath, steeling myself to meet the man who could set me free.

I sidle up beside him and glance around to make sure no one is paying us undue attention. He does the same. I’m so intent on checking for either Lex’s men or Kent’s shadows that his cautious voice startles me.

“Lelaine?”

I nod once and he chuckles, a soothing rumble in the back of his throat. “You’re right. You can take care of yourself.”

I smile at that. Any man that can respect my ability to run my own life is definitely someone I want to know. “Were you followed?” I ask.

“No. I saw the men you told me about though. You’re right, they’re military.”

“How can you be sure?”

“I... um, overheard one of them speaking to a Colonel on the phone.”

After catching glimpses of them these past few days, I realize how difficult it would be to get close enough to his shadows to overhear a phone conversation and my esteem for Kent’s abilities as a reporter goes up. It reassures me about my decision to bring Kent into my investigation of Lex. I finally feel myself relax until his next comment reminds me of the looming danger inherent to betraying Lex.

“Maybe they are working with the Boss,” he says, the question clear in his voice.

“Shh,” I scold, scanning the surrounding area with my eyes to see if anyone overheard his comment. Kent opens his mouth to speak again and I hold up my hand for him to wait. I palm my scrambler from my bag and covertly flip the switch on. I may not see anyone tailing us, but I don’t want to take any chances. Kent winces and reaches up to rub his forehead.

“You okay?”

He grunts some kind of affirmation and leaves his head bowed, asking his next question softly on the breath of a sigh. “So you know the Boss well enough that if he knew you were speaking to me, he’d kill you. Who is he and what is he to you?”

“Straight to the point. You’re a man after my own heart, Mr. Kent.”

“Clark, please, otherwise I’ll keep looking over my shoulder for my dad.” He lifts his head and smiles at me, a smile that leaves me feeling a bit dazzled. “Tell me about the Boss.”

His request brings me back to earth with a thud. “The Boss has operations all over the country and although you’ve exposed a few, what you’ve found is the tip of the iceberg. He’s a crime lord that runs practically every illegal scheme you can think of, from drugs to gun running to gambling. You were on the right track when you exposed Domo’s involvement in the prostitution ring, but the General is just one underling in the Boss’s West Coast operations — he didn’t orchestrate anything.”

“I suspected as much,” Kent says. “One of my sources told me about the Boss just before we caught Domo, but I ran into a wall when I tried to dig deeper.”

“You won’t get any information from Domo either; he’ll never turn evidence against Le ... the Boss. Everyone that works for the Boss understands that betrayal is death.”

“I’ve got an FBI contact that I trust. If you give me what you know, he could put you into the witness protection program ...”

“Forget it,” I interrupt. “The Boss’s reach extends throughout the underbelly of most major cities, into the police precincts, the prison systems and the federal government. You can’t trust anyone and I won’t be shoved aside while the big, strong men take over and fumble it, letting him get away.”

I can tell that my words take him aback and I close my eyes and take a deep breath to control my emotions. I remind myself that he doesn’t know who I am or that I know how to run an investigation. I can’t afford to scare Kent away, but he also needs to understand that this is my show.

“Let’s get this straight from the beginning,” I explain. “I may need your help but I won’t be marginalized. I’m running this investigation and if you want in, you’ll come with me to Metropolis and we’ll get the evidence together.”

His eyes narrow in contemplation and the silence stretches out between us as he mulls over my terms. I find myself holding my breath until he nods, deciding to go along.

“I’m going to need something substantive to convince my editor. What have you got?”

“I’ve been able to plant surveillance devices in his office and have recorded some of his ‘business’ deals over the past few weeks. I know, recordings are inadmissible — hard documentation is where I need help. We’ve been able to get a few tidbits, but his network security is too tight.”

“If you’re in a position to plant bugs, why do you need me?”

“While I’ve been able to poke around a little, I’m too closely watched to do any real digging. That’s where you come in.”

“Who exactly are we talking about Lelaine? I need a name.”

I lift my eyes from where they’d been focused somewhere to his left and meet his intense gaze. “The Boss is Lex Luthor.”

His eyebrows climb until his forehead puckers with skepticism. “Lex Luthor, the wealthy philanthropist and business magnate, *that* Lex Luthor?”

“That’s the one.”

“And you know this because...?”

I can’t speak. My terrible failure to see through Lex’s deception assails me again and the embarrassment is almost more than I can bear. Clark doesn’t say anything; he just waits until I can work up the courage to answer his question. I clear my throat.

“I know this because I married him.”

If I thought he was surprised before, that was nothing to the look of stunned amazement on his face now. “Whoa.”

"I know it's hard to believe, but he's very good at covering his tracks. You've got to believe me."

"I believe you."

My breath escapes in relieved huff; he believes me. I can hardly describe the feeling his statement gives me. I didn't know how weighted down my heart felt until his words set it free to float on a concoction of gratitude and relief.

His simple declaration halts my persuasive argument. I had it all planned out; laying out what little evidence we have to convince him, and his acceptance takes me by surprise. I stare into the depth of his eyes, trying to puzzle out the reason he's taking the word of an unknown woman dressed in an old stocking cap and dirty flannel shirt.

"Without a shred of evidence, you'll just take my word for it?"

"Yes."

"Why?" I ask.

"Because you're Lois Lane."

Hot tears prick the back of my eyes and a lump grows in my throat at his bald statement, as if being Lois Lane is all the proof he needs. I can't help it; his confidence in me, especially after being fooled by Lex, is indescribable. I look away while I struggle with my emotions until his next statement makes me laugh.

"Wow."

"You have a gift for understatement, Clark. Metropolis's four-times man-of-the-year turns out to be the biggest crook in the country and that's all you can say?"

"No, you misunderstand. I can't believe I'm meeting *the* Lois Lane in person. I followed your work religiously and was looking forward to meeting you. I was on my way to Metropolis to interview with Perry White for a job when the Daily Planet took a financial turn. Losing it was a great loss."

"You have no idea," I mumble under my breath, feeling that familiar ache of loss in my chest.

He touches my arm briefly drawing my attention back to his compassionate eyes. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay." I look away and rub my hands up and down my arms to ward off the sudden chill. Some part of me recognizes that the bleakness is coming from inside me, but I blame it on the weather. Whoever coined the phrase 'sunny California' definitely wasn't from San Francisco. I don't know which is colder, the biting wind or the penetrating fog. At least I have the stocking cap.

Clark seems to sense my need to change the subject. "Not that I'm ungrateful, but I remember hearing somewhere that you don't work with partners."

"What I said before is true; I'm too closely watched to be effective."

"You really want me in on this with you?"

"Yes. I've been reading your stuff. It's still a little soft for my tastes, but you're a pretty good investigator, Clark."

"Thanks, I think."

"Also," I continue, ignoring the irony in his voice, "I need someone who's not afraid to go all in after the big story. We'll need it to survive."

"If half the rumors I've heard about the Boss are true, I can't wait to bring him to justice."

"So, partners?" I ask.

"Partners," he agrees.

We shake on it and he flashes that brilliant smile again and it feels like a ray of warm sunshine breaking through the overcast sky. His grip is strong and reassuring, so much so that I don't want to let go. Given how attractive he is, both physically and intellectually, I could see myself coming to rely on Clark's strength, rather than on my own abilities — and that scares me. It's a weakness I can't afford.

Uncomfortable, I release his hand and clear my throat, trying to get myself back on track again. "So, you'll come with me to Metropolis?"

He nods. "I'll need a little time to fill in my editor, but yes. When do you want to meet?"

"The best time for me to leave is just after the maid cleans the hotel suite tomorrow. I'll leave an anonymous ransom note that shouldn't be found until the following morning. We should be able to get started the day after tomorrow in Metropolis."

"A ransom note?"

"Yes, investigating Superman is my excuse for being in San Francisco, but I need a new cover-story to disappear. What better than a kidnapping?"

"You're investigating Superman, too?"

His brusque tone and rigid posture tell me what he thinks of that idea, so I rush to reassure him that I'm not here to steal his story. "No. Although I must say that if I wasn't so intent on toppling Lex's empire, my curiosity would be piqued. Lex is obsessed with knowing Superman's strengths and weaknesses, so I manipulated Lex into thinking I'd expose Superman for a fraud in order to come here to meet you."

"Do you think Superman is a fraud?"

I shrug. "There's too much evidence to dispute the superpowers. As for his character — I don't know. His actions have been noble so far, but how can I say whether he's to be trusted? No one really knows his motivation for helping."

"Maybe he feels a responsibility to help simply because he can."

"In my experience, no one is that altruistic. And if he has nothing to hide, then why all the mystery? Where did he come from, why is he here, is he alone, what gives him the superpowers? Come on, Clark, don't you want to know?"

"Yeah, I do," he answers wistfully.

"In my experience, everyone has an angle, especially men. If I knew his, he might be easier to figure out." Clark looks so grim that I feel bad for indirectly putting him down. Clark's outlook on life is refreshing, and I realize that he might just be the last honest man — trusting and optimistic. "You surprised me though."

He blushes furiously and ducks his head, showing me he heard my softly uttered words. He looks away almost guiltily. "I have my faults," he admits. "No one is perfect."

I agree with him, but I find his humility endearing. I reach into my bag and pull out a sheet of paper. "These are my travel arrangements under an assumed name. If you have a cover ID, you should use it. If you don't, I'll get you one. Here's the address of the suite in Metropolis we're using for research. It's a dingy hole, but it's convenient and someplace Lex would never think to look. If you can, meet me there tomorrow evening and we'll get started."

I flick off the scrambler and shoulder my pack to leave, but stop when he catches me by the wrist.

"Why don't I pull everything I can from the morgue and we can get started tonight? My place?"

I feel my heart thump heavily at the feel of his hand on my skin. I tell myself that I'm excited because he's as eager as I am to expose Lex. I know that's not the only reason for my racing pulse, but I refuse to examine any deeper meaning.

"Sounds good," I nod. "I'll see you at six o'clock."

"Wait." He tears off a strip of paper and writes an address on it. "Here's my address."

I look at the paper and try to smother a laugh. I don't bother to take it.

"I already know where you live, Clark. The soup kitchen you recommended was superb."

I arrive at Clark's apartment and knock several times. A glance at my watch confirms that I'm only a few minutes early,

so after making sure I'm alone, I reach into my purse to pull out my lock picks. After an aggravated search, I realize I left them in my backpack at the hotel.

Too impatient to wait, I squat down and set my bag on the ground to dig around inside for a substitute. I sigh when I'm unable to come up with anything, but his skewed welcome mat catches my eye. No. He wouldn't really keep a spare key there, would he? I lift a corner of the mat and shake my head as the key winks back at me in the dim light. I roll my eyes. I guess you can take the boy out of the country, but ... I twist the key in the lock and let myself in.

"Mr. Kent?" I call out. My body follows my head around the door as I step fully into his apartment. "Hello? Clark, are you home?"

After waiting politely for him to appear, I slide the key back into its hiding place and experience a thrill of fright as I shift the mat back into place. Anyone naive enough to leave a key there wouldn't have a clue that someone could be bugging his apartment and like a rookie, I just announced my presence to whoever could be listening. I kick myself for my lack of caution and take a deep breath, reminding myself that if I have to, I can use Clark's connection to Superman as an excuse for being here.

Rather than worry about it, though, I reach into my bag and pull out my scanner. Standing at the top of a short flight of stairs, I slowly sweep the room for surveillance devices and am more than a little surprised to find the place clean.

Although it strikes me odd that Lex hasn't bugged his place after all the trouble Clark has caused, I'm not about to look a gift horse in the mouth. I breathe a sigh of relief and slide my scanner back into the lining of my hand-bag. Once done, I turn to look around the apartment and drink it in.

When I first tracked down Clark's apartment two days ago, I thought I had the wrong address. Many of the industrial neighborhoods in San Francisco were being redeveloped as residential, but this area reminded me of the more treacherous Suicide Slum neighborhoods. From the look of the cracked and dirty exterior, this five-story building probably should have been condemned years ago and the inside wasn't much better. The dusty unoccupied lofts and musty stairwells smelled only slightly better than the dirty alleyway out the back door. How could anyone make this space livable?

Once inside, though, I was impressed and immediately charmed without knowing exactly why. The interior brick and concrete was clean and richly painted. Clark obviously added the bathroom, a closet and a half-wall that separated his bedroom from the kitchen and living rooms. By taking a top floor unit, it also included a large skylight, which warmed the room with early evening light. Clark decorated it to make a homey and comfortable space.

I suddenly realize that I like Clark's loft because it looks like a home — someone lives here — unlike my old apartment with its stylish professionalism designed to intimidate and definitely not like the museum I live in now. An unfamiliar feeling of homesickness settles in my stomach and I shake it off by striding down into the living room. I don't have the time or the inclination to be maudlin.

As I set my bag down on his coffee table, the thought that I'm intruding flits briefly through my mind, but I disregard it as I walk to the kitchen. I told him I'd be here at six; it's not my fault that he's late.

I keep myself occupied by snooping, opening and closing cabinet doors only to discover it well stocked with cookware, appliances and a plethora of junk food. I shake my head at his strange tastes and am about to close the doors when I spy a Double-Fudge Crunch bar. I figure he has enough calories to keep a sumo wrestler happy for a year, so I pilfer it. I'm about to leave the kitchen when I pause in front of the coffee maker.

Depending on how much information Clark can assemble, we may need it later, so I decide to make a pot.

After the coffee is brewing, I nibble the chocolate bar as I meander to a large window that opens onto the fire escape. I shake my head when all I can see is a solid brick wall. Not much of a view here, unlike the vistas available from his roof. Unless it's obscured by fog, he has a spectacular view of the Bay and eastern shore from up there.

I resist the urge to snoop through his bedroom and sink down onto his couch instead, sighing as the cushions hug me. Nice and comfortable. That seems to sum up both the couch and his home. Now if the man himself would only make an appearance, we could get started.

Not a minute later I hear a thump from the bedroom and then a strange whirring sound, like the sound of a soft vacuum cleaner, followed closely by the sound of a door closing and the shower starting. I could have sworn that Clark wasn't home before. How could I have missed him? Well, he's in the shower now, so I sit back to wait.

I don't have to wait long. He either takes the fastest shower known to man or decided not to shower after all. Hearing the door open, I make my presence known.

"Clark?"

For a heartbeat, there's nothing and then the strange whirring sound again before a hesitant voice calls from somewhere within the bedroom.

"Hello?"

I stand up and am about to identify myself when he rounds the bedroom wall clad in nothing but his glasses and a pair of faded jeans. My open mouth slackens as I forget how to form intelligent speech while my gaze drifts slowly down his sculpted body, from wet locks to bare toes. He reminds me of a Greek statue in Lex's personal collection. Apollo was sometimes called the 'sun god' and with the last rays of the day's sunlight burnishing Clark's perfectly defined body, I realize that *this* is what they meant. Pure sex appeal wrapped in tight denim.

'Wow.' I pinch my lips together and barely refrain from saying it out loud. Or drooling.

His expression of curious alarm softens as he lifts his eyebrows adorably and then looks down at his own chest where my eyeballs were stuck on the return trip from ogling him. He breaks my trance by pulling on the black t-shirt he has in his hand.

Painfully aware that I'm gawking, I clear my throat and fail miserably at my chance to utter a snappy comeback. "Huh? Oh, hi."

"Sorry, I was ... um...I guess I didn't hear ... Can I help you?" His gaze never leaves my face as he stumbles around his words. He gestures vaguely behind him, indicating where he was while I broke into his home and invaded his privacy.

For some reason, he is blushing to the tips of his ears, like he's the one gaping at me half naked in the middle of my living room, not the other way around. He continues to look at me expectantly and I finally shake myself loose to answer his question.

"I said sex ... um, I mean six."

Oh, jeez. Did that really come out of my mouth?

"O'clock. Six o'clock. You said to come over so we could get started on the investigation of the Boss ... I mean Lex. I knocked and when you didn't answer, decided to come in rather than wait in the hallway — I guess you couldn't hear me from inside the bathroom. I found a key under the mat, so I didn't pick your lock or anything. I can't believe you actually keep a spare key there — it's a bit naive to assume that other people are as honest as you..."

I hear myself babbling and am only able to snap my jaws closed when I see a smile tugging at his lips and the amusement

in his eyes.

“You must be Lois Lane.”

“Um, yeah. That’s me.” I blush and briefly contemplate a dive from the Golden Gate Bridge as a solution to my awkward babbling when he speaks again.

“You came as yourself this time.”

I grin at his reference to my disguises and glance down at the dark, short-skirted business suit I’d worn to LNN earlier in the day. It was one of my favorites, professional enough for the boardroom, yet comfortable enough to wear during an evening of research.

“Yes. Yes, I did.”

“I’d tell you to make yourself at home, but I see that you already have.”

He points to the half-eaten chocolate bar in my hand and I feel my face burn at my presumption. I’m torn between badgering him about the contents of his cupboards and apologizing when he smiles that killer smile of his, which I hope means he’s joking.

“Why no disguise?” he asks.

“I didn’t need it,” I answer. “I ditched my tail and plan on telling Lex I met with you to get more information on Superman. That way if someone does see me here, I have a legitimate reason.”

“Who would see you?”

“Well, we still have your shadows to worry about. I came down Eighth Street and saw one of them talking on a phone. I snuck up close enough to hear him say that someone named ‘Trask’ from a ‘Bureau 39’ is coming. Does that mean anything to you?”

His face clouds a bit as he shakes his head. “I don’t like the sound of it, though.”

“I also heard him mention Superman. Maybe they think you know where he is?”

He shrugs his shoulders, obviously uncomfortable with my question. My eyes narrow as I wonder what else he might know about the superhero, but I push my suspicions away. It’s obvious, really. Kent’s the only reporter to get more than a passing statement from the reclusive hero and I’m sure he’s been badgered by the media hordes about how he bagged the exclusive. I already know he’s a good reporter and a good reporter never reveals her — or his — sources.

The relaxed and teasing man is gone, which saddens me for some reason. Clark looks distracted and a little nervous, like he wants to follow these leads first. I suppose if our positions were reversed, I might want to do the same. Who am I kidding? I’d love to find out why the military is interested in Superman, but I force myself to focus on Lex. “Take down the Boss, Lois. Take him down and then you’ll be free to investigate to your heart’s content.” I can understand, however, if Clark feels differently.

“Clark, if you want to look into Trask and this bureau, I can go through the information on Lex myself.”

His lips purse as he considers it for a moment, then sighs. “If they want to talk to me about Superman, they’re not likely to go away. I’ll look into it later.”

“You’re sure you still want to help me?”

He nods. “I’ll be right back,” he says before disappearing into his bedroom again.

It isn’t long before he returns with a very large stack of manila folders. He drops them on the coffee table with a flourish. “Everything you want to know about Lex Luthor and LexCorp, at least everything that can be gathered from official sources. I don’t know if we’ll find anything useful, but it’s a place to start.”

“Thanks.” I slip off my jacket and sink down onto the cushions, staring at the long night of research ahead. Instead of dreading it, excitement radiates through me at the prospect of digging into Lex’s records to find evidence. I glance at Clark as

he pours two mugs of coffee and try to sense what he’s feeling. His shoulders are still tense, but not as much as before. Perhaps he’s as eager as I am.

“You were able to gather that much information in just a few hours?”

“I’m pretty fast and was very motivated. My editor reassigned my other stories, so I’m all yours. How would you like your coffee?”

I pull my eyes away from the top file containing LexCorp’s financial records to answer his question. “Artificial sweetener and non-dairy creamer, if you have it. Researching isn’t as glamorous as going undercover or as exciting as breaking and entering, but I’m glad to dig into something tangible.”

“Breaking and entering?”

“Sure. Don’t tell me you’ve never bent the rules to get a story. How in the world did you catch Domo?”

“I ... uh, saw some suspicious activity and um... one of my sources overheard something incriminating down by the docks. I told my police contact and the San Francisco PD got a warrant and set up a sting operation.”

“That sounds very ... procedural. Do you do everything by the book?”

“Of course.”

I roll my eyes, hoping that his tendency to be a boy scout won’t hold me back. My eyes return to the file on my lap and see a name that matches one Jimmy and I found on an employee roster for sensitive Lex Labs projects: Dr. Fabian Leek. I reach into my bag to grab a highlighter and my hand brushes against the tape recordings we made. I pull them out and hand them to Clark.

“I had my friend Jimmy make copies of the important stuff. Maybe you can listen to these while I look through the files.”

He nods and takes them, retreating to his bedroom to listen to the tapes. I dive in to the folders in earnest, knowing that it’ll take Clark several hours to get through the recordings. Soon, I’ve lost all sense of time as I peruse financial statements, contracts, and scientific reports. It barely registers with me when Clark reenters the room.

“Lois?”

“Hmm?”

“You hungry?”

I glance at my wristwatch and am surprised at how much time has passed. “Starved.”

“What would you like?”

My stomach growls loudly at the idea of food and I giggle. “I’d love Chinese. Are we too far from Chinatown to get something delivered?”

“I’ll go pick it up — it’ll be faster. An assortment of authentic Chinese foods, coming right up.”

The name of an ACL Corporation catches my eye on the financial document I am reading and I don’t hear him leave. Before I know it, he’s back and setting the food out on the coffee table. As he dishes food onto a plate, I toss the latest file down in an ever-growing pile and growl in frustration.

“Almost three hours and I’ve only recognized a couple of names. How can there be so little evidence in all this paperwork?”

Clark hands me a plate loaded with dumplings, noodles and vegetables. “It’ll come. Besides, I didn’t expect there to be much in the public domain. Most of this will only corroborate after we’ve got the inside story.”

I lean back and sigh, rubbing my eyes. “You’re right. I just forget how tiring research can be.”

“If you have time, we can divvy up the rest of these files after dinner.”

“You listened through all the tapes already?”

He pauses, chopsticks halfway to his mouth. The alarmed

look on his face is quickly erased with a shrug. “I think I got the gist. If I need to, I can listen to them later or you could recap them for me?” He finishes off with a hopeful grin.

I narrow my eyes at his playful tone and find myself unaccountably teasing back. “Slacking off, Kent? I thought you could carry your own weight. Don’t tell me you’re really a hack reporter from Nowheresville.”

“Hey, don’t knock Nowheresville until you’ve tried it.”

Laughing at his quick return, I bite into a dumpling and moan in delight. “Oh, Clark. These are wonderful! Where did you get them?”

He shrugs, his red-tinged face proving that he’s pleased with my approval. “Just this little mom-and-pop place I know.”

I quickly finish off the dumplings, the rice and vegetables while we chit-chat about investigative angles we’d thought of so far. Scooping some noodles into my mouth, I groan my approval again. “Oh man, you can feed me anytime.”

“Hey, tomorrow we’ll be in Metropolis. You can cook for me.”

“You’re asking for trouble there, Kent. Ask my sister. She mocks me for my ability to burn water.”

He chuckles good-naturedly, but I can tell he doesn’t believe my boast. I flirt with the idea of proving it to him sometime by trying to cook something that doesn’t use chocolate as the main ingredient, but decide I don’t want to scare him off that quickly. I like Clark. He’s easy to talk to and fun to be around. I fantasize for a moment what it would be like to have him as a friend and maybe even as a long-term partner. Who knows? Once we’re finished exposing Lex, I’ll be in need of a new job. With the Daily Planet gone, I’ll need to look at one of the other major newspapers. Perhaps the San Francisco Chronicle will have an opening.

Clark startles me from my thoughts by asking whether I’d like more food. I glance down and realize I’ve polished off my dinner. I shake my head.

He tosses me one of the fortune cookies before gathering up the plates to take them to the kitchen, waving off my offers to help. I shrug and break open my cookie with childish enthusiasm. I can’t help but growl at the message inside.

“It’s in Chinese.” I turn it over. “Where’s the English translation?”

Clark wipes his hands off on a kitchen towel and bends over my shoulder to look at my fortune. I get a whiff of his cologne and before I can stop myself, I breathe deeper, enjoying his scent. I’m momentarily disturbed by my actions until my rational self explains it as normal. ‘There’s nothing wrong with appreciating a good smelling man, Lois. You’re married, not dead,’ she says. I can’t help but agree.

“The participant’s perspective is clouded while the bystander’s views are clear,” Clark intones.

“You read Chinese?”

“Languages are pretty easy for me and I spent some time in Hong Kong.”

I nod and glare at the strip of paper in my hand, the disgust at my failures evident in my words. “Well, that certainly applies to me. Lex fooled me for almost a year and now I can’t find anything to corroborate what I *do* know.”

“Lois, he’s careful, not infallible. You figured him out and we’ll eventually find the proof we need.”

All he gets from me is a dissatisfied grunt. “I guess.”

“Can I ask what clues you in to his criminal activities?”

I can feel my face turning scarlet as I think again about my overconfidence, Lex’s infidelity and Mrs. Cox’s revealing look. There’s no way I can share that with him. He would judge me for my failings and I can’t bring myself to tell him. Clark’s admiration for me — for my reputation as an investigative reporter — is too important to me to destroy it with *that*

knowledge. Still, I don’t want to lie to him; so I hedge.

“One of his...subordinates...slipped and set off my instincts. After that, it didn’t take me long to see past his facade.”

It looks like he accepts my stumbled explanation. It’s essentially the truth, but not wanting to spend any more time on my personal failings, I pull another folder toward me to start working again. I shift through the materials and stop when I see some familiar photos.

“Clark, what is this doing here?”

He glances over at the stack of materials I hold in my hand, his head nodding slightly. “I brought everything public I could find about Lex Luthor and your marriage was definitely a spectacle.”

“I suppose,” I mutter. I look at the photos from his perspective and have to agree it *was* a spectacle — the archbishop married us, after all — and I feel a bit self-conscious at Clark’s judgment. It’s not the kind of wedding I imagined for myself. I would have preferred a small party surrounded by my family and close friends, but I turned everything over to Lex. And being the third-richest man in the world brought certain expectations.

Regardless of how he views me or my wedding, its relevance to our investigation eludes me. “Why did you gather information about my wedding?”

He shrugs. “Just a hunch. Something about it bothered me and I wanted to ask your opinion.”

“What do you mean?”

“After we spoke at the fountain today, I started to wonder why Lex Luthor would marry you.”

“Excuse me?”

My ire is immediately apparent in both my voice and body — back straight, arms crossed, eyes narrowed. If I had claws, they’d have unsheathed while I hissed and spat my indignation. In response, Clark’s hands rise to ward off the fury he can surely hear in my voice, his eyes wide.

“No! No, that didn’t sound the way I meant it. You told me that Luthor is ‘the Boss.’ Why, then, would a crime lord of his caliber want Lois Lane, the youngest three-time Kerth award-winning investigative journalist in the country so close to him?”

I seethe for a moment as I roll his question around in my mind. It’s a good question, one that I didn’t think on my own. I always assumed that in his own perverse way, Lex loved me. My bold approach of him at the White Orchid Ball allowed me an interview, but it was Lex’s reaction to Miranda’s perfume that changed our relationship. I admit that there always was some level of attraction, but not even enough on my side to completely lose my sexual inhibitions while under the pheromone’s influence.

Lex told me on a plane over the Atlantic that the only thing I ever need to know about him was that he loved me. At the time, it was the most romantic thing I ever heard. Now, knowing that he’s a crook and a liar makes me reconsider. He deceived me about everything else, then why not about that?

So if he didn’t marry me for love, why did he propose? My eyes refocus on a nervous Clark Kent and my posture relaxes slightly.

“Why, indeed. And did you come up with an answer?”

His nervous hesitation is gratifying in so many ways. I can see his mind churning away at how to present the answer carefully, so as to not incur my ire again. It’s almost comical. I know I can be intimidating, a very helpful trait in investigations. My ability to knock the most confident of men off kilter with a glare is one of my most cherished assets.

Now, though, I’m interested in what Clark might have to say. Bringing him in on this investigation is important for this very reason — to ask the questions I’m unable or unwilling to pose. I force myself to relax and nod encouragingly to him and stifle a giggle at the relief on his face.

“Just a theory,” he continues. “While I was pulling the information on Luthor and LexCorp, I had time to peruse some of the information. I skimmed over LexCorp’s acquisitions for the past few years and I noticed a pattern emerging. It seems like Luthor has been able to build LexCorp in large part by gobbling up failing businesses at bargain prices and turning them around. I spoke briefly to a colleague in the business section and he confirmed Luthor’s uncanny ability to find struggling businesses that were intrinsically valuable.”

“So, Lex is a good businessman. What does that have to do with our wedding?”

“Stay with me here. A couple of months before your wedding, the Daily Planet started having financial troubles. Advertisers that were with them for years switched to other papers, subscriptions were suddenly down and the stock price dropped precipitously. Nothing outwardly obvious caused the downward spiral; you had the same editor, same reporters, and the same quality journalism. But it fell from grace and just like his other business acquisitions, Luthor swooped in and purchased the Planet at bargain rates.”

“Lex knew how important the Daily Planet was to me. He said he wanted to save it.” My automatic defense for Lex’s actions surprises me. Although I didn’t know it then, I certainly know now that he’s a criminal, so why am I defending him? How could I possibly know his motives? I take a deep breath and remind myself to question everything. I gesture to Clark to continue.

“Lois, when did Luthor propose to you?”

There’s no way I could ever forget. Lex always did things on a grand scale and flying me to Milan for Italian food was just one way to impress me. The date was unforgettable. “It was a week before he purchased the Planet.”

“Your engagement announcement didn’t hit the stands until almost three weeks later. Why did it take you so long to agree to marry?”

“A number of reasons,” I admit hesitantly. “I loved my job — investigating was my life; it was in my blood — and I knew that marrying Lex would change that. He expected me to act a certain way when we were together and although I’ve always been curious about the high-society life, I didn’t want it full-time. Besides, we had only dated on and off for a few months. I didn’t know him well enough for marriage. Frankly, I had already decided to tell him no when the Planet was destroyed.”

I see Clark fingering another folder, this one containing pictures and articles on the destruction of the Daily Planet. “No one ever found out why the Planet started having financial troubles, did they?”

“Not that I know of, why? What are you getting at, Clark?” I feel my frustration rise at his line of questioning. I’m so used to *not* thinking about that time in my life and his insistent questions provoke my impatience as well as the all-too familiar ache in my chest.

“According to my coworker, Lex never purchased a company that didn’t have intrinsic value, something that would bring him a huge return on his investment. In addition, Luthor knew how important it was to you and yet he *still* didn’t rebuild it. It begs the question: if the Planet didn’t bring him the return on his monetary investment, was there anything else of value he got in the deal?”

“Not that I know of — he took a loss financially. The Planet lost a lot of its value in the markets due to economic problems and the lack of insurance made rebuilding prohibitive,” I explain.

“But doesn’t the timing seem odd? The Daily Planet exploded less than a week after his proposal to you, a proposal you planned to turn down in part because of your job there. Lois, even if the Planet wasn’t inherently valuable and had no insurance at all, the man’s personal net-worth is more than twenty

billion dollars. In either case, Luthor had the money to rebuild. So the question remains — why didn’t he?”

I feel my insides churn at his line of questioning, a cold numbness stealing across my limbs as my instincts, the ones that forsook me that awful day, start chanting that Clark’s angle is the key. I squeeze my eyes shut and try not to listen to the end of his story, but the thought flashes like quicksilver through my mind.

“Oh my god,” I whisper. “He did it. Lex bought and then destroyed the Planet.” When I realize I’d spoken the thought out loud, I open my eyes. I feel ashamed and appalled. “He killed thirty-five people, including Perry, so that I would marry him?”

“Keep your friends close and your enemies closer,” Clark quoted. “You must have been a threat to his business, so Luthor ensured your acceptance by eliminating his rival for your affection.”

I see the familiar photos in Clark’s hands, and I feel the hot sting of tears burn at my eyes as the images refresh my memory of that horrible day.

I wasn’t in the building when the bomb exploded. I was investigating a tip about corruption at City Hall — a tip that turned out to be a bust — and was on my way back when I heard the roar and rumble as the building exploded. My trembling fingers pick up the Star’s front-page article about the devastation, its headline proclaiming the paper’s demise along with its Editor-in-Chief.

Even in a grainy, black-and-white photo, Perry’s impish smile causes the walls I built around my grief to crumble. As my tight control fails, the tears that pooled in my eyes make their way down my cheeks. My finger traces his profile before I raise my hand to cover my trembling lips, a repressed sob breaking through.

I didn’t know how raw my grief was until confronted with Perry’s picture. Another sob sneaks through and I realize that with the confusion that accompanied the Daily Planet’s destruction, I allowed myself to go numb rather than feel the pain of losing him — it was easier to push my grief aside and prepare for my wedding instead.

Putting off my grief has only intensified the feelings of sadness and despair. I try to tuck the emotions back into their hiding place, but I can’t hold back the harsh sobs that begin to wrack my body. When it hits me that I married Perry’s murderer, I simply fall apart.

Clark moves to my side and his arms steal around me to wrap me in a warm and comforting embrace. I tense at his touch, but can’t stifle the tidal wave of grief now that the floodgates have opened. A little voice cautions me not to do it — I hardly know this man — but I can’t stop myself from burrowing into his chest.

“I’m sorry. So, so sorry,” I hear him say.

His voice is soft and his kindhearted attempts to soothe my pain only cause me to cry harder. I sag against him, clinging desperately to the solid feel of his chest and arms around me. He holds me as I spend myself crying into his t-shirt, rocking me gently until my breath hitches a final time.

“It’s my fault,” I whisper, “He killed him and it’s all my fault.”

“No, Lois. It’s not your fault; you had nothing to do with it. Luthor did everything himself; there’s no way you could have known.”

Part of me appreciates Clark’s words and recognizes the kernel of truth in them, but I can’t accept absolution. No matter what he says, my overconfidence and blindness are inexcusable. I always prided myself on being the best investigative journalist at the Planet, but instead of asking the tough questions, I got into bed with the devil.

Humiliated, I pull away from Clark and wipe away the moisture on my cheeks. I’m suddenly uncomfortable with the intimate setting and I stand to put some distance between us.

Backing up, I mumble some excuse as cover for the shame and anger that burns anew, and then practically run for the sanctuary of his bathroom.

“Come on, Lane. Pull yourself together.”

I splash water on my face and then look at my red-rimmed eyes in the mirror, determined not to fall apart again. I look a mess, but I’m a little more in control of my emotions now. Glancing at my watch, I am appalled to see how long Clark held me while I released some of the anguish I felt inside.

The tears pool again when I think about Perry’s death, but I steel myself against the sadness, pushing the pain aside in favor of the anger I feel toward Lex. Anger is something I can handle, a hot, protective blanket to wrap myself in until we nail the slime ball. All that matters now is bringing Lex to justice and I can’t do that if I’m a blubbing mess. I’ll mourn Perry later.

I fortify myself with a brief pep talk and am about to rejoin Clark when I hear voices in the living room. I have a cover explanation ready if someone finds out I was talking with Clark tonight, but I’m in no hurry to use it if I can avoid discovery. I press my ear against the door, but can’t quite tell what’s being said. Common sense tells me to hide in the bathroom until whoever it is goes away, but my curiosity wins over caution.

I turn the doorknob slowly and ease the door open until I can peek through to Clark’s bedroom. From this vantage point, I can’t see who’s talking, but I can hear Clark’s agitated voice sparring with a gruff voice.

“...says this warrant is an order to produce evidence and compel testimony, but nothing about searching my place of residence.”

“Take it up with Washington.”

“I know my rights. You can’t just come in here.”

“Mister Kent. I want *Superman* and I’m not leaving until you tell me where I can find him.”

The brief vindication I feel at being right about the military’s reason for shadowing Clark fades quickly as I hear a scuffle at the entryway. Wanting to get a look at this military man, I pull the door open another fraction, enough to slip out of the bathroom and take up surveillance behind the corner wall that separates us. I lean out to take a peek and see GI Joe enter Clark’s loft with three armed guards, two of them flanking and holding Clark by the arms. Remembering the tape recorder Clark left on his bed, I grab it, flip the tape over and start recording.

“How would I know where to find Superman?” Clark asks.

“The reason is two-fold, Mr. Kent. In the time since his first public stunt, the alien has spoken only to you and used you as a conduit for spreading its propaganda.”

“Propaganda?”

“The claim that the alien is a peaceful benefactor is false. I’m here to protect the American people from their own ignorance. I, for one, will not be deceived. This so-called ‘Superman’ is really the forerunner for an alien invasion, sent to gather intelligence and mislead us into complacency.”

“Invasion? How can you accuse him of that?”

“We have been watching alien activities for quite some time and have conclusive evidence that the so-called ‘Superman’ is indeed an alien that infiltrated our great country almost three decades ago.”

My heart quickens at Trask’s revelation and my hands itch to take notes. This is big! A million questions flood my mind as I mentally start to sketch an article. A secret military organization tracking alien activities is good enough for an award right there, but having proof that Superman had been here for decades is fascinating. Where and when did he arrive? Why did he hide before his debut? What motivates him and is he as honest and good as he appears? The endless procession of questions is halted when I glance at Clark and see his expression. He looks either

petrified or excited and his voice nearly squeaks with his next question.

“Evidence?!”

I see Trask nod to the third soldier, who promptly sets a metal box down on the floor at Trask’s feet.

“Well, that question brings us to the second reason we believe you know how to contact the alien. The evidence — a small spacecraft — links Superman’s arrival to your hometown of Smallville, Kansas, the same year you were born. I don’t think that was a coincidence, do you?”

Clark goes still as the color drains from his face, his eyes locked on the metal box sitting on the landing. Trask’s words, and the box’s presence, clearly upset him. I don’t blame him; if a military Colonel were to show up at my door claiming he had evidence linking me to a powerful being with nefarious purposes, I’d be worried too. On second thought, I’d probably grab the evidence and run straight to the police myself. I shake my head to disrupt my inner babble and focus again on the tableau before me. When Clark speaks, his voice is strained.

“W...what is that?”

“I’m not here to answer your questions, Mr. Kent. I’m here for answers. Now, where can I find the alien?”

There is a tense moment of silence before Clark pulls his wide eyes away from the box to rest on Trask’s malevolent face. From across the room, I can see him swallow roughly and when he speaks, his voice is hesitant and tense.

“Su... Superman has never said where he lives. H...how could I tell you?”

“I don’t think he has to tell you. I think you already know. Have you been harboring the dangerous alien all these years, helping to deceive us and lull us into a false sense of security before the attack?”

“There is nothing dangerous about Superman. He’s only trying to help!”

“Where can I find the alien?”

Clark says nothing, but reiterates his earlier answer with a simple shrug of the shoulders. Trask’s eyes narrow before he tries another tactic.

“Where did the alien come from?”

“I don’t know.” Clark mumbles.

“How did it get its powers?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are there others like him?”

“I don’t know!”

“Tell me the timeframe for the invasion.”

“There is no invasion! As far as I know Superman is alone. He only wants to use his powers to save lives and make the world a better place.” Clark yells, his face flushing with frustration at each provocative question.

Trask glares at Clark for another moment. “You must have been brainwashed. Tell me, Mr. Kent, did it take over your mind, infuse you with its power?”

“Take over my mind? That is the most bizarre thing I’ve ever heard!”

Colonel Trask’s eyes flash at Clark’s flippant answer and I feel a tendril of nervousness at the mad gleam in his eye. I’ve seen fanatics before in my line of work and that look always makes me uneasy. My esteem of Clark’s ability to remain cool in a dangerous situation is rising by the second, but there’s a difference between bravery and downright stupidity. I’m never one to overly rely on the police, but when Trask pulls a gun from his holster, I figure it’s time to call for reinforcements and end this party.

I look for Clark’s phone and grimace when I see it on his kitchen wall; I won’t be able to reach it without being seen. I release a breath and wish I had my bag with me, but it’s still sitting atop Clark’s coffee table. I look around his bedroom and

see something on his nightstand. I squint into the darkness and smile when I realize it's a mobile phone.

I glance toward the front door to make sure no one is looking my way before inching away from the wall. I tiptoe across the room, grab it and dash back into my dark corner. I flip the phone open and dial 911, slipping back into the bathroom to whisper my instructions to the emergency worker who answers.

Once done, I snap the lid closed on the phone and turn around, gasping in shock when I run smack into a soldier in the dark. He grabs me and hauls me out into the living room.

As the soldier frog-marches me out, I notice that Trask has moved Clark from the landing and is standing in front of our research.

"This has nothing to do with Superman," Clark says.

"I'll be the judge of that," Trask warns before gesturing to his men to continue their search. "Confiscate anything connected to the alien."

"Colonel?"

Trask turns to see me struggling against the soldier's grip and lifts an eyebrow. "Well, well. Who have we here?"

"Marie Antoinette." My snide comment doesn't go over well with the soldier holding my arm in a death grip, and I wince in pain as it cinches tighter.

Another soldier grabs my bag from the table and my stomach clenches in apprehension as he rifles through it. He pulls out my wallet and ID and I take a quick breath, shoving the feeling away; there's no reason to believe these men are connected to Lex.

"She's Lois Lane, from Metropolis, New Troy."

Trask looks at me again, his eyes shining in recognition. "Mrs. Luthor. I wonder... what brings you from Metropolis?"

"I'm a big Giants fan."

I watch his eyes darken in rage as his hands clench into fists. "You don't want to mess with me, Mrs. Luthor."

"It's Ms. Lane and it's *you* that doesn't want to mess with me, Colonel Trask. As the National News Director for LNN, I'm thinking of leading tomorrow's headline with an eyewitness account of military agents flaunting the first amendment, trespassing and aggravated assault on a civilian. And that doesn't even touch the Superman angle. How does 'The Army and Little Green Men — Your Tax Dollars at Work' sound? Or how about 'Military Paranoia and the Deranged Lunatics that Lead It'?"

An involuntary gasp escapes me when Trask grabs my other arm, shaking me roughly. Together with the twitch in his eye, I'm convinced that I've overstepped my bounds.

"Let her go."

In response to Clark's demand and movement toward me, one soldier grabs Clark from behind while Trask releases me and sucker-punches Clark in the stomach. Clark bends over at the waist and grunts as Trask's fist connects, but doesn't seem overly affected by the rough treatment. Trask, on the other hand, shakes his hand and winces. I smile. Clark must have abs of steel.

"You are in no position to make demands, Mr. Kent. I came for the alien and I'm not leaving until you give him to me."

"He's already told you he doesn't know where he is," I say. "Maybe you should stand outside and yell, 'Help, Superman!'"

Trask sneers at me before gesturing to the third soldier. "Perhaps with another form of persuasion you'll tell me what I want to know."

The soldier picks up the metal box from the landing and carries it to Trask who pushes the lid open. His face is illuminated in sickly green from the glowing crystals. I stare at it transfixed and an eerie silence descends as they walk toward us. After a heartbeat, Clark tries to move away and breaks the spell. Goon number three pins Clark's arms behind him to halt his movements; Clark's face pales as Trask takes a step closer to him.

"Ah," Trask smiles, "I see my theory is correct."

"What is that?" I ask, nodding at the crystals.

"It's a meteorite that landed in Kansas the same time as a small vessel bearing the alien's symbol. We've studied it and postulated that its high-frequency radiation would have a negative effect on the alien. Judging from Mr. Kent's fear of it, he knows more about the alien than he's admitting."

"Are you crazy?" I ask. "You have a radioactive rock that can theoretically hurt a super-powered, invulnerable alien and we're not supposed to be afraid of it? If that can hurt Superman, just think what kind of damage it can do to a mere human."

I step back and the soldier holding my arm backs away with me. The soldier holding the crystal moves the box imperceptibly away from his body as his wary eyes drop to the glowing stone before snapping the lid shut again.

Just then, sirens filter in from the street outside. Trask glares at one of his underlings, who steps to the window and confirms that the police cars are stopping outside.

"Two police units approaching the main entrance, sir."

At Trask's look of consternation, I can't help but smile; it's an imperceptibly small lift to the corner of my mouth, but Trask notices it. His eyebrows draw down stormily.

"I called them," I confirm. "I figured anyone with a valid federal warrant wouldn't mind confirming that with the San Francisco PD."

Trask glares at me for another moment and then motions for his men to leave. Before they can take anything, I sit quickly on top of our research strewn over the coffee table. One soldier looks the question to his commander and then leaves me alone at the slight shake of Trask's head.

Clark's eyes flick back to the metal case containing the strange rock in it and when the soldier holding it heads for the door, he foolishly moves after him. Trask pulls out his gun and trains it on Clark's forehead. Clark freezes and my heart thumps madly in my chest, my breath catching in my throat. The man is completely mad.

In the background, the soldiers file out of the room as Clark and Trask face each other. Finally, Trask grimaces, unlocks the hammer and re-holsters his gun.

"We're not finished here, Kent. You *will* tell me what I want to know."

Trask sprints out the open door and disappears down the back stairs at the same time I hear footsteps pounding up the front. I watch Clark take several faltering steps after the soldiers before stopping at the doorframe to breathe deeply. He takes another step in the direction of the stairwell when I call out to him.

"Clark? What are you doing?"

"I'm going to um... need to... uh..."

He looks at the corner Trask's men rounded and releases a breath, giving up the chase. I want to ask him what he thought he could accomplish by rushing after them but am interrupted by the police topping the stairs. Torn between following Trask and his men and dealing with the police, he casts a longing glance at his balcony window before dropping his head in defeat.

I shake my head at his foolhardy behavior. Even I'm not crazy enough to follow an armed military man without a plan of attack. I almost snort at the thought. Actually, that sounds exactly like something I'd do.

After a hasty explanation, the in-charge sends two men down the back way after the soldiers while he and his partner start taking our statements regarding the trespass. Clark and I take turns quickly explaining what happened. I'm pleasantly surprised at how well we're able to tell the story, trading off sentences as if we rehearsed it.

The officer's disinterest disappears when I tell him that the Colonel threatened Clark with fists, a gun and a radioactive substance. When the officer asks if we could identify the men, Clark disappears into his bedroom and returns with a sketchpad. I'm beyond impressed when he quickly sketches Trask's face.

About the time the officers finish taking our statements, the others re-enter Clark's loft empty-handed. Even expecting that Trask and his men are long gone, I'm disappointed. Thoughts are spinning so quickly in my mind that I don't even notice the officers leaving until Clark bids them farewell and closes the door.

As soon as they're gone, I waste no time in striding over to my bag. Pulling out my cell phone, I dial and then glance at my watch, grimacing. It's near two o'clock in the morning in Metropolis; Jimmy is sure to be asleep.

"lo?"

"Jimmy, wake up. I need you to research something for me."
"Just a sec."

I hear him yawn and wait for him to grab a notebook, tapping my foot impatiently. When he's ready, I give him the few details we have about Trask and Bureau 39.

"Call me back as soon as you've got something," I command and then snap my phone shut.

I toss the mobile into my bag and then pause, remembering how Trask recognized my name. Making a snap decision, I root around for my official cell phone and finding it, dial Lex. Holding the phone tucked precariously between chin and shoulder, I begin to quickly load file folders into my bag. The phone slips from its perch just as Lex answers and I drop the folders in my hand to catch the phone before it hits the floor. I lift it up again in time to hear Lex's concerned squawk.

"...thing all right?"

"Fine, Lex. I just dropped the phone," I explain. "Listen, I know it's late, but I wanted to let you know I'll be out for a while following a lead on Superman."

"That sounds promising. What did you find?"

"I tracked down the reporter that did the Superman interview; you know, Clark Kent? He didn't have anything else for me, but I did come across a crazed military group that thinks Superman is the forerunner of an alien invasion."

"Interesting. Why do you say crazed? The idea sounds plausible to me."

"I know fanaticism when I see it and this guy was just oozing deranged psychopath. Also, if he were legit, he wouldn't have threatened us or disappeared when the cops arrived."

"He threatened you?"

I shiver at the menace in Lex's voice and pause to switch the phone to my other ear. Before tonight, I would be touched by Lex's obvious concern for me. Now, he just sounds possessive, like someone has poached on his territory. It irks me.

"I'm a big girl, Lex. I handled it." I snap my jaws shut and shake my head. I know my tone is too vehement, but can't help myself.

"I'm sure you did," he says, his tone placating. "I just worry about you. I'll call and get someone to watch out for you. Where are you now?"

All the anger I felt earlier about Perry's murder comes rushing back at his blatant attempt to get me back under surveillance. A heat suffuses my face and neck and I grit my teeth against the invective on my tongue to keep from letting it loose. I need to get off the phone before I blow everything.

"Lex, it's unnecessary. Listen, I'm going to be busy investigating this all night and I need to go. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

I snap the phone shut without waiting for a reply and drop the phone as if it's scalding hot. I close my eyes tight and clench my fists against the rage flowing through me. After a couple of deep breaths, I start stuffing file folders into my bag again with jerky movements until I've gotten the worst of it under control. I pack it to overflowing before I notice Clark standing immobile next to the coffee table.

I look up into Clark's face and his expression halts my frantic

motions. The way he holds himself speaks volumes; he's radiating tension and indecision, like he wants to be somewhere else, but doesn't want to leave me alone either. Instinctively, I know that if not for me, he'd be gone already, probably knee deep in research.

I was so focused on the story and my anger with Lex that I completely forgot Clark. Does he think I'm trying to scoop him or steal his story?

I spent the past few days fighting the urge to investigate Clark's shadows, wanting instead to focus on my investigation of Lex. Now, I realize that I need some time and distance. If I proceed with my investigation of Lex now, I know I'll make a mistake. I need time to get my anger under control and I realize that more than ever, I need Clark to help me, to buffer my impulsive nature.

After seeing Trask's fanaticism, I also want to expose his crackpot ideas. He's a dangerous man in his own right and needs to be in custody. Going after Bureau 39 is the perfect distraction, but I don't want to lose Clark's help by stepping on his toes. Fighting habits deeply ingrained after hard-earned experiences, I set my bag down and offer the tape recorder to Clark as a peace offering.

"This is more your story than mine," I admit. "I've been itching to find out what these guys are up to for days, since I first saw them tailing you. I want to expose Trask, but I don't want to walk over you to do it. What would you say to a joint investigation?"

I end the question in a rush, breathing in deeply as I wait for his reply. I've never shared a byline before and saying this is just about killing me. I don't wear team player very comfortably. I never have. When he doesn't immediately answer, I continue, unable to keep the pleading tone completely out of my voice.

"I want to be free of Lex, but I'm too angry to be effective. I need this, Clark. I need some distance and Trask is the perfect distraction. What do you say?"

I find myself holding my breath for the second time that day while I wait for Clark's decision. After an agonizing moment, he exhales and his shoulders relax. He reaches to take the tape recorder from me and his face breaks into a pleased smile.

"Okay. Come with me to the office and we'll get started on the story together."

I release the breath I was holding when he agrees and I smile in response. After he calls a cab, he helps me on with my jacket before I shoulder my overfull bag and stride toward his door. He picks up the remaining folders and rushes forward to open the door for me before I can do it myself. My eyebrows rise at his old-fashioned manners, but he shrugs off my question with a gentlemanly, "after you," and we leave his loft.

As we walk down the hall to the lift, my thoughts return to Lex and his duplicity and I start to seethe. By the time we step out of the elevator, I'm scowling and my stomach is churning with anger. It helps when I focus on Trask and the pleasure of seeing my byline in print again, but I can't quite smother the negative feelings completely.

The remnant of my anger finally dissipates when I feel the soft warmth of Clark's hand at the small of my back. I'm startled not only by the deliciously warm feeling that suffuses my body from the point of contact, but also by how much I like it. I turn to look at him and Clark flashes a brilliant smile at me as we walk down the steps of his building. My mouth stretches into a goofy smile in response.

The thrill I get when imagining my name on a newspaper byline again is exhilarating, but it has nothing on the rush I get from Clark's smile and the touch of his hand.

After a ten-minute cab ride, we walk into an almost deserted newsroom at the San Francisco Chronicle. Other than a brief

pang of nostalgia when I enter the newsroom, my thoughts continue to swirl around Trask and his mysterious Bureau. Determined, I make a beeline from the elevator to Clark's desk, outlining my plan as I go.

"Why don't you go see what you can find about Trask or Bureau 39 in the archives while I type up what we have so far and wait for Jimmy to call back?"

I sit down in his desk chair, and I hold out one hand for the tape recorder as I pull a notebook out of my bag with the other. As I'm sliding the chair in, I notice that he isn't moving and his slightly amused expression halts me in mid-movement. I can feel the heat of embarrassment rising to my cheeks.

"I did it again, didn't I?" I admit sheepishly. "I know this is your turf, but I just thought that..."

He interrupts my nervous explanation with a smile. "It's fine, Lois. I would have suggested splitting up, too." He looks around the deserted newsroom. "Since we're on our own for research tonight, it makes sense. I'm familiar with our archives, so it'll be faster if I go."

A tall, lanky man in a wrinkled oxford sticks his head out of the office door next to Clark's desk. Even without the prominent markings on the door, I would recognize him as a member of the editing staff. His hawkish features are softened by a welcoming smile and the blue pencil hanging precariously from one ear. He directs his question to Clark, but his curious eyes are fixed on me. It's obvious that he wants to know who I am, but is too reserved to ask.

"Kent?" he says in surprise. "What brings you here in the middle of the night?"

Clark introduces me to the night editor, Walter Johnson, and I have to restrain from grinning as the man falls all over himself after Clark tells him my name. His brief hesitation at having a LNN News Director in his newsroom disappears when I assure him that the Chronicle will get credit as the source of any story we run. His eyes continue to bug out as Clark gives him the highlights of our story and he backs away, not wanting to interfere.

Once we're alone again, Clark glances at his watch. "Meet you back here in about ... twenty minutes?"

"Sounds good."

He starts walking away and I clear my throat. "Clark?"

"Yes?"

I point at his desktop. "Would you mind?"

"Oops. Sorry about that." He blushes adorably and reaches over to boot it up. "You seemed so at home that I forgot you don't actually work here."

I scoot aside while he logs in and pulls up the Chronicles' search engine and a word processor. He flashes me an encouraging smile and then trots across the newsroom to disappear into the stairwell.

I type the scant information we have into the search fields and hit enter. As the computer checks the databases for references, I trail my fingertips lightly over the keyboard before running them down across the wood grain of Clark's desk. Even though it's late, a small smile plays on my lips as I soak up the atmosphere of the newsroom. Vibrant and questioning in its passionate search for truth — I miss this more than I realized.

It hits me again how in marrying Lex I lost part of myself. In my despondency and confusion, I gave up Lois Lane to become Lois Luthor. My eyes narrow and my jaw clenches with my resolve. No more. I reclaim Lois Lane and vow never to lose sight of her again.

The search results appear on the screen before me, bringing me back from my mawkish thoughts. I scan through the references, unable to find anything related or useful and hope that Jimmy and Clark are having better luck. Undeterred, I start typing up the facts we have as I wait for the next batch of search

results.

I'm lost to the work and after what seems like only seconds, the elevator pings, disgorging Clark with a single sheet of paper in his hand. He looks up from the paper to smile, a warm grin that I find reassuring and more than a little sexy. I feel a flutter in my stomach and drop my eyes, not wanting him to know how it affects me. I breathe a sigh of relief as my phone rings.

As Clark perches on the corner of his desk, I flip the phone open and hold it away from my ear, inviting him to listen in. He leans close and my breath hitches as I catch another whiff of his aftershave. Mentally, I shake myself, trying to ignore the way the heat from his skin seems to seep into mine, sending prickles down my spine.

Through great effort, I return my attention to the phone and issue my standard greeting. "What have you got?"

"Lois, this guy is practically a ghost. Other than his birth certificate and driver's license, I could only find one reference to a Jason Trask, US Air Force — a headline reading 'UFO Sighting Really Swamp Gas' in the 1960's."

With a flourish, Clark hands me a print out of the article and I squint at the grainy picture there.

"Too old Jimmy. Anything more recent?"

"Nada. No military service record that I can find. There was one picture with the article that listed two other officers: George Thompson, now with the State Department, and a Burton Newcomb, a general just retired from Fort Truman."

I start in surprise when he mentions Newcomb's name and squint to read the caption on the article Clark brought. I wave off Clark's unspoken question as I grab a pen from the holder. "Do you have my rolodex with you? Great, get me the number listed under 'GBN'."

He reads the number and I write it down, still ignoring the questioning looks from Clark. "Good work, Jimmy. Clark and I can take it from here. Get some sleep, will you?"

"Right," Jimmy laughs. "Night, Lois."

I put the phone away and bite at my lip, wondering if it really could be this easy to track this guy down. I try to hide the excitement I feel, but my self-satisfied grin gives me away.

"I'm not sure what that smile means, but I think I like it," Clark states.

"Did you know," I ask, tapping the paper against his arm, "that my father was a military doctor before he started his private practice? We were stationed at Fort Truman for six years and I spent a lot of time on the base getting myself into mischief. I was on a first name basis with all of the MPs and one General Burton Newcomb became a close family friend. I think I ought to give him a call, don't you?"

"Now? It's almost three o'clock in the morning in Metropolis."

I smile wryly in response and dial the number Jimmy gave me. The phone rings ten times before a gruff, sleep-filled voice answers.

"Who are you and why are you torturing me?"

"General Comb-over?"

A pause. "Lo-lo, is that you?"

I roll my eyes at Clark when his eyebrows climb his forehead, his mouth forming my nickname in disbelief. "Yes, it's me. Sorry to call you so late, but I need your help."

He smothers a yawn to answer. "Anything for you, sugar."

"I had an unpleasant run-in with a Colonel Jason Trask this evening and was hoping you could tell me about Bureau 39."

"Trask, eh?" There's an uncomfortable pause and I see Clark tilt his head, trying to hear something from the other end. He nods, encouraging me to continue, but I wait. I know from experience that pressuring the General is a sure way to failure. "What happened?" the General asks.

"Trespass and aggravated assault on a civilian to start. He

was looking for Superman and is convinced that he's the forerunner for an alien invasion. Trask claimed the Bureau exists to protect us and then proceeded to interrogate us using somewhat questionable techniques."

"He didn't hurt you, did he?"

I smile at the concern in his voice. "No, I'm fine, but he did rough-up my partner a little."

"Trask is a nasty piece of work — has been from the beginning," he grumbles, the loathing evident in his tone of voice.

"Uncle Burt, I know you were in Project Blue Book together, but wasn't that disbanded in the sixties?" I keep my fingers crossed that his contempt for Trask will override the need for confidentiality. It does.

"That was the official story, yes. Unofficially, extraterrestrial investigations shifted to Bureau 39, which ran into the eighties before defense budget cuts finally shut the program down."

"So he's a rogue agent acting without official sanction, then?"

There's another long pause and I wait, holding my breath. I hear the General heave an equally long sigh, accompanied by the muted clacking of his computer keyboard. Clark opens his mouth to ask a question and I hold up my hand, asking him to wait. After another agonizing moment, our patience is rewarded.

"Security has always been tight on the project," the General explains. "Access to the classified materials was given to only a few of us. We took an oath to protect America from outside threats on August the second, nineteen forty-seven. That's about all I can tell you, sugar. Now, if you and your sister Bethany want to come over sometime soon, we can catch up on old times."

"I will, Uncle Burt, and thanks." I hang up and smile victoriously at Clark, who lifts an eyebrow in question. Ignoring his inquiry, I write down a series of numbers and the name on the sheet of paper before offering Clark his chair. He sits down and his furrowed brow makes me giggle.

"I'm very confused right now," he says. "A little help here, please?"

"My sister's name is Lucy." I tap the paper with my finger. "Uncle Burt gave us his access code and password. How would you like to take a peek into the Army's Bureau 39 files?"

"No, go back and change that," I advise, pointing at the screen. "Trask has been reprimanded for *five* counts of aggravated assault on civilians with three instances of trespass and theft."

"Are you always this bossy?" Clark asks, turning to look at me.

I can't quite tell if he's annoyed or teasing me so I assume the latter. "Yes. Now add the part about running rough-shod over constitutional protections."

I lean over Clark's shoulder as he makes the changes, already reading ahead. "They've been funded by the State Department and private donors for the past few years and are based at Fort Truman in Metropolis. I wonder what they've got in that warehouse on Bessolo Boulevard?" I muse out loud. "No, don't put that in; let's save that for a follow-up after we have a chance to see what's inside tomorrow."

As Clark deletes the last sentence, his growl of irritation warns me to back off. I'm not too worried about stepping on his toes. I know he's enjoying writing the story with me as much as I enjoy writing with him. Neither of us can believe how much we've been able to accomplish in one night. If we had access to the warehouse in Metropolis, we might have been able to print everything in tomorrow's afternoon edition. I'm half way through my re-read when I realize something's missing.

"You left out the meteorite."

Clark's fingers freeze above the keyboard. "Yes," he answers

in a cautious voice.

"Trask is walking around with a radioactive substance that might be harmful to Superman. Don't you think reporting that is important?"

For a long moment, Clark stays frozen in his seat, his shoulders tense. For a split second, I sense barely restrained energy emanating from him, like it's all he can do to continue sitting there. As the silence stretches out, I can almost hear the gears spinning in his head. His jaw clenches several times before he turns to address me and I'm taken aback by the intensity in his gaze.

"Do we know it'll hurt him? Even Trask said it was speculation. I don't want to mention it without knowing all of the facts."

I open my mouth to reply — okay, to argue with him — that we can corroborate each other, but Perry's voice in my memory demands 'hard facts' and I stop. My mouth closes and twists in reluctant concession; Clark may be right about having proof. Stubbornly, I still think we should mention it, but before I can get a word in, Clark is talking again.

"Besides," he continues, "why would you want to tell the world there's something out there that can hurt Superman? Don't you realize that he uses his powers to protect innocent people? And don't get me started on how many times he's been attacked directly. The criminals would love to see Superman disappear. Personally, I don't want to be responsible for printing anything that'll put him at risk, do you?"

I'm a little taken aback by the passion in Clark's voice and I wonder again at how much he really knows about the superhero. He's obviously given this topic a lot of thought. Is Trask right? Is there some connection between Clark and Superman?

From the few things he's said, I can tell that Clark regards the hero with respect bordering on adoration, but his protectiveness is a little extreme. Begrudgingly, I admit he's right about the criminals. Just tonight, Clark listened to our surveillance tapes of Lex that proved he has been trying to test Superman's abilities. And I'm sure Lex isn't the only one. Clark undoubtedly has more eye-witness experience with the superhero than anyone else. He must have observed some of that himself.

I shrug my suspicions off and give in. Not knowing more about the meteorite galls me, but Clark is right about not including it in our article. "Okay," I concede. "We'll leave it out."

Clark freezes again, his mouth open in mid-protest. His eyebrows climb above the rim of his glasses and he tips his head toward me in surprise. "You're agreeing with me?" he asks.

"I'm still curious about the rock, but I can agree with your opinion when it makes sense." I smile ironically at him. "Just don't get used to it, Kent."

His posture relaxes and he smiles at me before turning back to his terminal. I take the opportunity to get a fresh cup of coffee while he fills in the blanks of our story. Our story — I really like the sound of that. Not as good as *my* story, but it feels pretty nice anyway.

I stir some sweetener into my cup and sit back down in Clark's visitor chair. As his fingers gain speed, I slide my chair close, cross my legs and take a sip at the tepid brew. It's not as good as the Daily Planet sludge, but it's not bad.

I'm rereading the article from the beginning when I notice Clark's hands have stopped moving. I look over at him and notice that the story no longer holds his attention and he's looking down at my lap. I follow his gaze and realize that when I sat down, I unintentionally shifted my skirt so that now a generous amount of my thigh is peeking out of the slit.

My eyes snap back to his face, but his dark eyes are fixed on his screen, a tick pulsing along his jaw line as he clenches his teeth. While he's staring at the monitor like it holds the answers to life, I reach down to tug my skirt flap closed. I bring the cup

back to my mouth, hiding a grin with another sip of my coffee. For the first time, I'm grateful to Lex for influencing my wardrobe. At the Planet, I wore boxy, long-skirted business suits; now my suits tend to be shorter and a lot sexier than before.

"Do you want to mention the EPRAD connection?" I prompt. He starts typing again and I smother a grin. It's good to know that Clark finds me attractive and even more thrilling that my attraction to Clark isn't completely one-sided. Not bad, for an old married lady.

We discuss a few additional details and I lean close to reread the final paragraph when Clark stops typing again. Wondering what distracted him this time, I see him looking just above his monitor, his head cocked slightly to the side. I follow his gaze, trying figure out what might have caught his interest, but all I see is an empty hallway leading to the restrooms. I look back at Clark, who is now fidgeting with the end of his tie. Without warning, he slides his chair back and springs to his feet.

"I need to go for a few minutes. Why don't you go ahead and finish it out the way you want."

"Now? What errand could you possibly need to run this late?"

"I just need to go and do ... something that needs doing."

I stand up as Clark speaks and advance on him as he edges toward the empty corridor. "But we're almost done. Clark!"

"Really, this'll only take a minute." He turns and practically sprints down the hall, waving over his shoulder when I call to him again.

"Clark?"

Exasperated, I flop down into his chair and cross my arms, releasing an expletive about unreliable partners under my breath. I hear a chuckle and look up to see Walter walking toward me.

"He'll be back," he assures me.

"Does he do that a lot?" I ask.

"Constantly. Don't worry, you'll get used to it."

"But... where does he go?"

"None of us know, but he usually returns with a great story or a hot lead. Our Editor-In-Chief figures it's his intuition or subconscious kicking in, helping him to put pieces of evidence together, giving him insight to his investigations. I thought he might be psychic since he sometimes returns with information on a breaking story, but the Chief doesn't believe in all that 'hocus-pocus hooley.'"

He shrugs. "In the end, it doesn't really matter to us. Kent's a good worker and a team player. As long as he finishes his assignments and brings in hard-hitting stuff, we give him the leeway he needs."

The sound of a distant toilet flushing causes both of us to look up. Clark exits the men's room, wiping his hands dry on a paper towel and Walter chuckles. "Of course, sometimes it means the man just needs to use the restroom."

I stare at Clark as the night editor walks back into his office, thinking about what he said. It might be a west-coast thing, this laid-back attitude toward Clark's behavior, but I don't think so. Perry gave me that kind of freedom in choosing my work, too. My methods were sometimes questionable and often erratic, but Perry put up with it because I always got the scoops.

I feel a wave of sadness mixed with jealousy wash over me and I clench my fist with determination. I can't wait to break open both of these investigations and get back into print journalism.

Clark notices me staring as he approaches and his expression turns wary. He looks behind him and then surreptitiously checks his tie and then his fly. I smile.

"Come on, Farmboy. Let's finish this up and get out of here. I need to get to sleep if we're going undercover tomorrow."

My eyes pop open as my body jerks awake. My heart is

pounding heavily in my chest, so I stay still trying to figure out what woke me. I blink blearily and quickly glance around the room, but see nothing more interesting than a soothing watercolor and the mauve-colored wall of my hotel room. Closing my eyes, I listen carefully and hear some muffled sounds through the wall. It must have been my geriatric neighbor turning on his television that startled me from sleep.

I yawn and then groan as my eyes focus on the clock display. I stumbled into my hotel room somewhere around four o'clock in the morning both exhilarated and exhausted. Totally amped up about both investigations, I worried that I wouldn't be able to sleep at all, yet I passed out practically the minute my head hit the pillow. It's almost seven o'clock now, and I realize I need to hurry to get everything set up before my plane leaves.

Those scant hours of sleep have left my eyes gummy and scratchy and my eyelids tug downward as the weariness of my body argues for more rest. I reach up to rub the sleep from my eyes, telling myself to get up and review my plan to disappear. I sit up in preparation to drag myself to the shower, but for some reason I stop. My instincts are buzzing, telling me that something isn't right. I glance around the room again, but can see nothing out of place. My mind is racing as I reach for the table lamp when I hear a faint click and scratching sound from the front door.

Someone's trying to pick the lock.

Moving as quickly and silently as possible, I throw back the covers and scramble out of bed to rush around the room. I toss some essentials into my 'undercover' backpack along with my fake IDs and cash and I slip my feet into my sneakers without bothering to tie the laces. On my way to the balcony I pause; the curiosity to know who is at the door is driving me crazy. Throwing good sense out the window, I tiptoe back to the door and peek through the peephole.

"Trask," I whisper under my breath.

I recognize the men outside immediately. That they aren't already inside the room testifies to their lack of lock-picking expertise, but their military training will ensure a quick, if inelegant, entrance. Even with the door chain on, I need a diversion. Reaching into the bathroom, I start the shower, lock and close the door and then sprint silently back to the balcony. I look inside my pack for my length of nylon rope, but can't find it.

"Oh, no," I whisper, realizing I left it in the room below.

I stand indecisive for a moment, but I hear a heavy thump against the interior door, and I know they've given up picking the lock in favor of quick entry. I slide the glass door shut and then lean over the railing to judge the distance to the lower balcony. I shake my head; it's a bit far, but what choice do I have? If I can leverage myself down and hang by my hands, I might be able to reach the lower railing with my feet. I swing one leg over the railing and hearing another thump against the outside door, I slip my pack over my shoulder and throw the other leg over the edge. I grab the wrought-iron balusters in a white-knuckled grip as my toes cling to the edge of the cement landing.

I'm just about to lower my body when I hear a loud crash against the door and I look up. The fact that I can see the doorframe splintering means that I'm also in full view to whoever will come through the door. I step to my right along the outside of the balcony to hide my escape behind the half-drawn curtains. When the final crunch of the chain gives way and the door rebounds against the wall, I know that they're inside the room. With that last distraction, the toes of my right foot lose purchase and I shift my weight to compensate.

That's when I realize that leaving my shoelaces untied was a mistake. The plastic tip of the lace under my left foot rolls out from under me and I suddenly find myself in a free fall.

Luckily, my frantic grab for the balusters is successful and I wrap the fingers of my left hand around the squared rod. I

continue to slide down until my hand reaches the bottom of the railing and my body stops with a shoulder-wrenching yank. The backpack slung over my other shoulder continues with its momentum and I'm barely able to snag it from a ten-story drop by a strap. Although the sharp edge of the metal cuts my palm, I hold tight.

I close my eyes briefly and take a breath of relief, trying to ignore the sounds of the soldiers entering the room and banging on the bathroom door. Hanging by one hand, I look down. The lower balcony is just below me and if careful, I should be able to step down onto the railing. I stretch out with my toes, trying to reach it, but I can't feel anything.

"Come on, come on," I whisper to myself, hoping that I will somehow grow enough to reach it through willpower alone.

It's no use; I'm just not tall enough. I sigh with annoyance and then suck in a breath as I give up my failed strategy. I look around quickly for the best way to get myself out of this one. Knowing that a straight drop may hurt more than help, I pump my legs forward, trying to gain a little momentum onto the balcony below me. A cold breeze blows along my bare legs and up my sleep shirt, causing the skin over my whole body to break out in goose flesh. The sensation is completely incongruous with the sweat suddenly moistening my forehead and, even worse, my palms. I hear the soldiers finally burst through the bathroom door at the same time my slick palm loses its grip.

I slip from my handhold at just the wrong moment in my swing, propelling me away from the building. I drop the pack and reach out with both hands in a desperate attempt to grab *something*, but feel nothing but air. Torn between the fear of discovery and the terror of dropping to my death, the only thing I can manage is a frightened intake of breath and one squeaky, "No!" as I feel myself fall.

A cold morning wind bites into my skin as I gain momentum and I try to scream, but can't get my throat to open up. My arms and legs are flailing around as I look around desperately. I pass my lower balcony and I reach out toward the railing, but am only able to brush it with my fingertips as I go by.

That's when I know — I'm going to die this time.

There are many experiences in my past that could have ended in my death. Probably should have, if I'm honest. I used to attract danger on an almost daily basis when I was reporting. It happened so often that I — along with everyone around me — became accustomed to it, even expected it. To me, going a week without dangling above the jaws of death meant that I was losing my edge and I always worked twice as hard, took twice as many risks, to get it back. It worked, too. I brought in the scoops, usually narrowly escaping with my life intact.

I guess I'm just out of practice because I don't see any way out of this one.

I clench my eyes closed trying not to think about how long it will take to hit the ground. Surprisingly, the fall doesn't even last long enough to voice my terror properly. One moment, I'm plummeting to my death and then my descent halts abruptly and much less painfully than expected when I feel a pair of strong arms gently wrap around me, pulling me close to a warm and solid surface.

It's a strange sensation, to feel gravity stop working, like it's gone on a coffee break. I know it should be there, but it's just not on duty.

Prying one eye open at a time, I find myself staring into a concerned pair of dark-brown eyes. For a timeless second, I'm trapped in their warmth and depth as we turn, hovering in mid-air. I'd know who it is even without feeling the spandex beneath my fingertips; there's only one person who could save me from that fall. After a shocked moment of silence, I finally find my voice.

"Superman!" I exclaim.

"Don't worry, Miss. I've got you."

Stunned, I stare at him for a long moment, unable to believe he caught me. We slowly rise while the adrenalin caused by my narrow escape from certain death starts to fade. I come back to myself abruptly and I crane my head around to look for my pack on the sidewalk below us. Superman smiles and holds it up in his other hand.

"Looking for this?"

"Yes. Th ... thank you," I whisper breathlessly.

He gives me a small grin and nods to the balcony. "Is this your room?"

His question penetrates the fog enshrouding my higher brain functions and I turn to look into the room. The sight of Trask and two of his men at the bathroom door jumpstarts my thought processes. My body stiffens and I start squirming involuntarily trying to get out of sight.

"Under the balcony. Quick!" I whisper harshly, my eyes wide.

His eyes flick toward the room and in the blink of an eye we're hidden away on the lower balcony. I take a moment to catch my breath before opening my eyes again. Superman is still holding me in his arms, but his attention is focused on the ceiling, his head cocked like a bird trying to assess some potentially dangerous object.

Suddenly, it hits me like a brick that I'm in the arms of the elusive superhero, the envy of millions of women and thousands of journalists across the world. From this vantage point, I can't see his body, but I can feel the firm muscles of his shoulders and back as he cradles me in his arms. I take the opportunity to look at his face and admit that the pictures and newscasts do not do him justice. He is, undoubtedly, the most handsome man I've ever seen. Well, maybe after Mel Gibson ... and Clark. Clark has better hair.

Nevertheless, being this close to him is affecting me the same way as seeing Clark half-dressed. I never did feel this out of control physical attraction with Lex — and I'm married to him — so why do Superman and Clark have this effect on me? Uncomfortable with my attraction to two men that are *not* my husband, I think it better to get some distance until I can work this out.

"Superman ..." I start to ask him to put me down, but he holds his hand up for silence.

"Shh," he says.

Shh? No one shushes me. I open my mouth to tell him so when I remember he's just saved me from certain doom. I blush, feeling bad for being irked by the shushing and I pinch my lips together to quell the impulse to complain.

Unaware of my internal turmoil, Superman tightens his grip and steps back into the shadowed corner of the balcony just as the door above us slides open. I glance up and hear heavy boots step out to the edge.

"Where is she, Lieutenant?" Trask asks, exasperated.

"The exits to the elevator and stairwell were both covered, sir. She didn't get past us."

Trask curses under his breath and I hear the dull thud of his fist hitting the iron railing.

"Sir," a third voice comes from inside the room. "Her wallet, mobile and press pass are on the table."

"So she left quickly. With the other exits covered, that leaves the balcony ..."

I stop struggling to get down and shrink back, huddling close to Superman's chest to hide. I hold my breath as I wait for Trask's pronouncement, willing him not to look down. Superman shifts me in his arms and rises into the air again until we're hovering just under the soldiers' feet.

"There's no fire escape and the roof is inaccessible from here, so the alien must have taken her. That proves she's in on the

conspiracy with Kent.”

I roll my eyes at Trask’s fallacious conclusion and catch Superman doing the same from the corner of my eye. My eyebrows lift in surprise, but by the time I look him full in the face, his expression is blank with a hint of stern disapproval. Superman’s eyes narrow, focused again on the ceiling as Trask and his men return inside and I realize with a start that he’s looking through the floor. What I wouldn’t give for that particular super power during an investigation.

Another cold gust of wind sweeps up under my shirt and I shiver, bringing Superman’s attention back to me. The way he looks at me is disconcerting — familiar and penetrating — and I feel nervous, wondering if he does have telepathic or psychic powers. The thought makes my heart skip a beat.

Suddenly, his face colors as if he’s embarrassed about something and he gently drifts down, bending slightly to set me on my feet. He hands me my pack and steps back, giving me some space. He doesn’t seem to know where to look, glancing around at anything but me. I suddenly remember that I’m only wearing a short nightshirt and my sneakers. I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, mortified at the picture I’m making. It’s definitely not the first impression I want to give the superhero — half naked and sleep creased with bed head. Not to mention the whole falling from the balcony thing.

I pull the plastic room card from my pack and jimmy the lock up, sliding the door open. Superman’s eyebrows rise and I smile sheepishly, shrugging slightly before stepping inside. I’m dying to ask him what he knows about Trask, so I tap his shoulder and jerk my head toward the room interior. He smiles tightly and follows me into the room, closing the door behind him.

Once inside, Superman regards me quizzically. At least, I think it’s quizzical — his face doesn’t give many of his thoughts or feelings away. Based on the photos and newsreels I’ve seen, this expression — eyebrows drawn together and mouth in a tight line — is a habitual look that reflects the serious nature of his rescues. His eyes are intelligent and probing, though, and I feel a little uncomfortable under his scrutiny.

I break eye contact and take a few steps away before turning toward him again. With a little distance, I’m able to get a good look at him; his rich, flowing cape and the insignia on his chest draws my eye down to see tight muscles covered in bright spandex. I admit he’s even more impressive in person than on TV, a devastatingly handsome man with an exotic air about him.

The fact that I’m ogling him becomes obvious when he crosses his arms to stand in his already familiar, strong pose. My eyes snap back to his, which are now crinkled in amusement and I blush. Still slightly off-balance by our close encounter outside, I take a few more steps away and try to form a semi-coherent thought by looking elsewhere. His suit is *really* distracting.

I stop pacing to stare at him — a question now on my own face. Was his costume traditional garb for his people or did he mean for the outfit to be a distraction? Why would he *need* a distraction? Of their own accord, my eyes travel the length of him again until I hear him clear his throat. I rip my eyes away from his body and look at his face, reminding myself to breathe. Trying to regain a modicum of dignity and self-control, I thrust my hand out in greeting.

“Lois Lane. And you are . . .?”

I let the question drag out between us, but he doesn’t take the cue. Maybe he’s not so versed in the subtleties of our language to understand that I was asking him for his name. I’m about to withdraw my hand when the firm grip of his hand and his next statement confirms his comprehension.

“Superman. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Lane.”

“It feels a little awkward calling you by your title,” I assert. “What were you called growing up?”

His eyes narrow slightly at my question and he releases my

hand to cross his arms again. “Is this an interview?”

“Well, I am a journalist. It’s what I do.”

“Do you always interview your rescuers, Ms. Lane?”

“Only the super powered ones that fly.”

He smiles at my answer; just a cute little twist of his lips, but his eyes dance. He also ignores my question. “Can I take you somewhere else, someplace safe?”

“You don’t think we’re safe here?”

“Well, sure, but shouldn’t we leave before the occupants return to find us in their room?”

“This is my room.”

His eyes flick to the ceiling before he looks back at me, his forehead creasing slightly in confusion. My hands gesture in a ‘what can I say’ pattern as I admit, “They’re both mine.”

An infinitesimal lift of his eyebrows is the only sign of his surprise. “Oh?”

“When I’m involved with potentially dangerous investigations, I take precautions to always prepare an escape route . . .”

“Interesting,” he interrupts. “Most people wouldn’t consider a ten-story free fall a viable escape route.”

I feel a heat rising to my cheeks as he looks at me, his arms still crossed and his head tilted to the side. It’s the same serious expression, but for some reason, I get the impression that he’s teasing me. I’m not used to that and I find myself feeling defensive.

“Hey, can I help it if trouble has a way of finding me?” I ask. “Look, I appreciate your help this morning — thank you for saving me, by the way — but I’ve been taking care of myself for a long time and getting myself out of danger long before you ever came to earth. When was that, by the way? Your first public rescue was a few weeks ago, but Trask thinks you’ve been here a lot longer than that. Is it true that you’ve been here for almost thirty years?”

His stunned look and vocal paralysis at my barrage of questions is interrupted when a loud thump snaps both our heads up toward the ceiling. I grimace; I let my interest in Superman distract me from the fact that Trask is upstairs and is apparently rearranging the furniture. Wishing I could be a fly on the wall, I notice that Superman’s head is tilted and I guess he’s taking another peek through the ceiling.

“What are they doing?” I ask. “What do you see?”

“They’re ransacking your room.”

“He’s probably looking for clues about you,” I deduce.

“But you’ve never met me before.”

I shrug. “When you deal with fanatics, even the wildest belief can turn into fact, while reason and good-sense . . .um, fly out the window.”

He acknowledges my statement and my wavy hand movement with a slight incline of his head, but I see his mouth quirk at my pun. Who’d have thought Superman had a sense of humor?

“Will you be all right while I take care of the men upstairs, Ms. Lane?”

“Do you know who that is?” I ask, pointing at the ceiling. He nods grimly.

“And you’re going to stop them.” My statement holds a measure of disbelief, bordering on sarcasm. He must not know about Trask’s radioactive rock, otherwise, he wouldn’t be so blasé about going up there. Or he knows and isn’t worried about it.

“They’re breaking the law and that’s one reason I’m here,” Superman explains. “I try to stop crimes in progress and take the perpetrators to the proper authorities.”

He turns to leave by way of the balcony, but I step forward, grabbing his arm to halt his departure. I’ve got to warn him — just in case. “Trask said he has some green rock that can hurt you. Can it?”

“I, uh... Can it what?”

“Can it hurt you?”

“I’m invulnerable.”

My eyes narrow in suspicion, fairly certain his obtuseness is an act. “Is there, or is there not, a glowing, green crystal that can hurt you, even though you are normally invulnerable?”

He shrugs in a noncommittal way and looks away. Well, the non-answer pretty much confirms the question right there. I continue to scrutinize him as he fidgets, shifting his weight from foot to foot. I really can’t blame him for being secretive; he doesn’t know me and has no reason to trust me. In fact, since I’ve already told him I’m a journalist, he has even less reason to share his weaknesses. I’m sure he doesn’t want me to print that there’s a substance that can hurt him.

As my mind races around his probable weakness, it startles me to realize that instead of lying, Superman chose not to answer, which in turn, gave him away. Why would he do that, especially after knowing that I’m a journalist? Maybe Clark was right about him, that he’s good and honest and is trying to make the world a better place. It’s incredible, but I have to admit that Clark appears to be right. The fact that I’ve met two kind and decent men since arriving in San Francisco amazes me.

My new understanding makes me realize how much I want Superman to trust me. True, any personal information about the man of steel would be a big story, almost the biggest story out there. However, I’m a big story, too, and I don’t particularly want every detail about me given to the general public. I realize that a good man doing his best to help deserves what privacy he can retain.

When he speaks again, his deep voice startles me from my thoughts as he turns to leave again. “Well, if you’ll excuse me ...”

I tug on his arm again, pulling him back around again. “Shouldn’t you use your see-through thingy to check for the rock first?”

“Thingy?”

“Yes. You know, do a little reconnaissance instead of barreling in like some five-hundred pound gorilla.”

His eyes widen slightly at my insult before he turns his attention back to the ceiling. When his face twists in distaste and his shoulders slump a little, I know that Trask has the rock with him. His loss of purpose allows me a chance to release the breath stuck in my lungs. I’m feeling the strangest mix of emotions; awe at meeting the world’s only superhero, exasperation at his incautious behavior and embarrassment at my condescending comments.

“Why don’t I call hotel security and let them deal with the break-in?” I suggest. I step to the phone as Superman continues to look at the ceiling. Something about the look on his face strikes me as familiar, but I ignore it to report Trask’s intrusion.

As the front desk answers my call, I think about Trask tossing my hotel room, looking for non-existent evidence about the superhero. My smirk widens into a smile as I reconsider reporting this to the hotel security. Trask’s actions give me the perfect opportunity to set up the next stage of my investigation of Lex. This will work out perfectly with my cover.

Using yesterday’s copy of the San Francisco Chronicle, I carefully cut and pasted together a generic ransom letter that will explain my absence for the next few days. All I need to do now is leave the note in the trashed hotel room and my cover story will be in place. I’m just hanging up the phone when the nagging feeling I’ve forgotten something clicks in my mind.

“Clark!” I exclaim.

“What?” Superman looks genuinely alarmed at my declaration and I feel bad for startling him.

“I’ve got to get to Clark before Trask does.” I rush to my duffel bag and pull out jeans and a t-shirt before dashing into the

bathroom. I leave the door cracked open an inch so I can explain things to Superman as I change.

“I met Trask last night when he came looking for you at Clark Kent’s place. Clark is the reporter who interviewed you, remember? It wasn’t an in-depth interview like some of his other work, but I think that had more to do with your answers than his questions. I’d love to do a follow-up piece about you, by the way. Together with Clark, of course; I’m not out to steal his story.”

I step out of the bathroom fully dressed and slip back into my sneakers, striding past Superman toward the balcony. I shoulder my pack and grab my duffel bag before turning to see what’s keeping him. Superman gapes at me, looking slightly stunned and rooted to the spot. Of course, this might be the reason Clark didn’t get much from him; it appears Superman isn’t too quick on the uptake.

“But maybe we can talk about the interview later? Clark’s in danger and I need to warn him in case Trask tries to grab him, too.”

When he doesn’t move, I prod him. “Superman?”

“Huh?”

“Is the offer of a lift still good?” I gesture in the direction of the balcony door and it somehow snaps him from his stupor. Superman smiles and shakes his head before stepping close and lifting me into his arms. My breath catches in my throat as we lift from the floor and swoop into the bright morning light.

A breathless moment after flying out the hotel window, Superman slows down to hover above the San Francisco Bay. Once we’re beyond Alcatraz Island, he turns us to face the Golden Gate Bridge. The lower struts are enshrouded in a thick layer of fog, but as the sun rises, several rays break through the cloud cover to shine through the famous red towers and cables. The remaining mist glistens brightly and I squint, shielding my eyes from the refracted light.

“Wow,” I breathe. “It’s beautiful.”

“It is.” His reverential tone catches my attention and I turn my head to look at him as he continues to speak. “I love the moment when the world comes awake. Even the bustle of the morning commuters can’t overwhelm the quiet majesty of the rising sun breaking through the fog. It’s so peaceful.”

He spins us slowly in a circle, giving me breathtaking views of Sausalito and the Bay islands, two northern bridges, the eastern shore, the Bay Bridge and back to the city skyline. I’m so engrossed with the scenery that it shocks and disappoints me when I realize Superman has drifted us into Clark’s neighborhood. Flying with Superman has been the single most amazing experience in my life and I don’t want it to end.

I watch him scan the ground and surrounding buildings and wonder what he’s looking for when I realize he probably doesn’t know where Clark lives. I tap his shoulder and point to Clark’s building, silently instructing him to drop me off on the roof. He glides over and steps softly down before releasing my legs to set me on my feet.

As my feet touch the rooftop, I wobble a bit and Superman places his hands on my waist to steady me. Time slows as our eyes meet and his look of concern makes me feel a little breathless. “Superman ...” I start.

Before I can say anything else, he cocks his head slightly and his eyes glaze over as he listens to something too soft or distant for my human ears. I have to admit that watching him use his super powers is pretty thrilling and I’m eager to learn more about him.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Lane. I need to go.”

He floats up and away from me, but I can’t just let him fly away. Who knows when I’ll ever get this chance again? “What about our interview?” I call after him.

He pauses in mid-air, confusion crinkling his forehead.

“Interview?”

“The follow-up interview you’re going to give me — and Clark.” I add as an afterthought. “How will I find you?”

He answers with an amused smile. “Don’t worry, Ms. Lane. I’m sure our paths will cross again.”

He zips out of sight in a whoosh of air and all I can say is, “Wow.” I continue to stare at the spot for a moment with my mouth open until I shake myself. I really need to find Clark. Remembering Trask brings some urgency back to my steps and I practically fly through the stairwell to Clark’s loft.

“Clark,” I call out. I pound on his door, but don’t wait for a reply. Instead, I reach for his spare key and let myself in.

“Clark, are you here?” I stop short at the scene that greets me, my heart sinking into my shoes “Oh, Clark.”

His apartment is trashed. Nearly all of his possessions lie haphazardly around the room; books and papers are strewn about, cushions are sliced and gutted, broken knick-knacks and pottery litter the floor. Trask and his men must have been here before coming to my hotel. An icy fear grips my heart for a brief moment until Clark exits his bedroom, a concerned look on his face.

“Lois?”

I rush down the steps and drop my bags to throw my arms around his neck, hugging him with more relief than I can believe. “You’re okay. When Trask mentioned you, I knew I had to warn you, but when I saw that they were here already... I was so worried. I thought they took you away.”

He hugs me, patting my back and speaking reassuringly in my ear. “Everything’s all right, Lois. I’m here.”

I hug him tightly and then pull away from him abruptly, irrationally annoyed at him for being so calm in the face of my fears. “*Why* are you here? Don’t you realize how much danger you’re in? Trask could be back any minute now.”

“Lois, don’t worry. I don’t think they’ll be back.”

“They had to be here really early. Why didn’t they find you?”

“I ... uh, hid.”

I look around the open floor plan and my eyebrows rise skeptically. “Where?”

He gestures vaguely toward the bedroom. “Oh, you know...” Before he can finish the sentence, he cocks his head to the side, an intent look on his face. It gives me a strange sense of *džj’ vu*, making my instincts tingle again, but his next words drives the thought away. “The police are on their way up the stairs.”

I quickly pick up my bags before stepping to his bedroom window. A police cruiser is sitting in the alleyway below. “Clark. I need another way out. The police can’t find me here.”

“Why not? I know these guys, Lois. You can trust them.”

I roll my eyes at his naivety. “No, I can’t. I can’t risk being seen by anyone without endangering my cover story. Lex’s reach extends farther than you think and your investigations have already put you on Lex’s hit list. If he knew I was seen with you this morning, he’d find some way to incriminate you for my disappearance.”

Footsteps on the creaking floorboards outside Clark’s door snap both of our heads back around.

“I need that hiding place,” I growl, “Now!”

I can see him mulling over the situation and his eyes track around the room to linger briefly on the closet before moving away. He steps next to the bed and lifts the duvet. “How about under the bed?” he suggests lamely.

I sigh with exasperation and push past him to slip into his bedroom closet. I tuck my bags behind his suits and push his dress shirts aside. I hear a knock at the door as I step inside and I turn to impart one last glare.

“Just keep them out of your closet,” I say, sliding the door shut.

By pressing my ear against the closet door, I can almost make sense of the voices coming from Clark’s living room. The voices grow louder and I slowly slide the door open to peek through the crack. One police officer is talking with Clark near the kitchen while another goes through the living room dusting for prints. I wait in the dark, keeping my breathing even and slow while I pray that he doesn’t look for them in the closet.

After a few minutes of near silence, I hear footsteps approaching and I shrink back against the wall, slipping behind Clark’s dress shirts to the back of the closet. Along the way, I bump my head against Clark’s tie rack. Surprisingly, it bends and the wall behind me slides open, revealing another space behind it.

Clark has a secret compartment? Cool. How often does one get to hide in one of those anymore? I step back into it, pulling my bags in with me and reach out to straighten the hook to close the compartment.

Just in time, too. Not ten seconds later, I hear Clark’s muffled voice asking the officer why he needs to look in the closet. The officer says something about being thorough and I hear the closet door slide open. Someone rummages around, pulling the hangers across the clothing rod, and I slink back away from the opening just in case they happen to stumble across the tie rack.

As I shift my weight, my face brushes against some soft material hanging beside me. I reach up and touch it, trying to learn with my fingers what I cannot see. There are several articles of clothing and the first one I touch is long and flowing. It feels like silk. Although it’s already pitch-black, I close my eyes to try to imagine what the object is.

The first picture that comes to mind is a bathrobe or a kimono. From the background check I did, I know that Clark has traveled all over the world, so it wouldn’t surprise me that he went to Japan. That would also explain why he had it hidden in a secret compartment. In this neighborhood, it would be careless to store something that valuable in the open.

I feel along the edges and my eyebrows draw down in confusion when I can’t find the armholes, just straight edges. Silk sheets, then? Heat rushes to my face as I imagine Clark lounging around on his bed wearing nothing but a smile on his face, a white silk sheet strategically placed over his lap.

A flash of guilt assails me for thinking about Clark that way. I’m still married to Lex, for god’s sake! Of course, my marriage is all but over. As soon as I can expose him and he’s arrested for the rest of his natural life, I’ll legalize it by filing for divorce. Until then I’ll just have to control myself.

I shake my head to try to dispel the image, but it doesn’t work. I try to imagine what else it could be, but when nothing comes to mind, I give up and close my eyes while I stroke the luxurious material. I enjoy my little fantasy until my fingers brush along leather straps attached to the top and my mental image shatters.

What *is* this thing?

Moving to the next article of clothing, I realize it feels different — slick, but stretchy. My hands follow the edges of the fabric and tugging on it, I realize it’s a spandex or Lycra body suit, like that of a speed skater. Clark definitely has the body for it and I wonder if that’s how he keeps in such good shape. My hands wander back up the material and my fingers graze some embroidery on the chest. I trace the edges, outlining it to identify a triangular shape before following the contours of the embroidery in the center. My eyes open in shock when I figure out where I’d seen the shape before; I felt it under my fingertips just that morning.

Superman’s S-shield.

I bend down and feel around by my feet, unsurprised to touch tall, soft, and no doubt, red leather boots. I pull up the image of Superman’s face in my mind and compare it with Clark’s. They have the same coloring, but the two men act so differently.

Superman's expressions are rigid and aloof, almost stern. On the other hand, Clark has a teasing, easy-going manner, an infectious grin and compassionate eyes.

Actually, now that I think about it, the eyes are the same.

I almost laugh out loud when I realize why Superman's distant look seemed so familiar; Clark had that look in the newsroom just before he made his escape to the men's room. He must have heard someone in trouble and made a quick rescue while I talked with the night editor. I roll my eyes at my blindness; Clark had that same look just before I took refuge in his closet, too. My instincts practically screamed at me, but I was too distracted to pay attention.

I recall Trask's words from the night before that Superman appeared almost thirty years ago in Clark's hometown. I suppose it could be coincidence, but I trust coincidences almost as much as I trust a seemingly honest politician. If it looks like a duck, sounds like a duck and has the duck's super suits hanging in his secret compartment, well it doesn't take a paranoid military madman to put it together.

Closing my eyes, I let my head drop back against the wall. I've lost track of time waiting here in the dark of the closet for the police to leave. It feels like hours — okay, maybe ten minutes — since I last heard movement outside my hiding place. Patience is not one of my virtues, but I can't risk being seen by opening the door, so I continue to wait. Besides, there's no obvious handle from this side, so getting out is up to the tender mercies of my host.

Superman.

It seems surreal to think of Clark that way. Not that it's hard to believe; the man is extraordinary, even without superpowers. It totally fits with his character, but it still boggles my mind to think that a being of such power should want to live an ordinary life.

If it's not the most amazing story ever, it's at least the story of the century. For a few giddy moments, I start drafting the story in my head right along with my Pulitzer acceptance speech. I only get as far as Superman's first landing near a small, Kansas town before my thoughts stop short. If Trask spoke the truth, then the Kents must have found Clark in a spaceship when he was just a baby.

The thought of an infant Clark nestled in a small spacecraft tugs at my heart. Who put him there? If he's an alien, why did his parents send him to earth? If he's not an alien, then who experimented on a defenseless baby only to discard him? The focus of the story in my mind shifts to the reason for Clark's arrival when I begin feeling uneasy about my thoughts.

I never worried about the ethics of reporting the whole truth in a story before, judging it more important for the public to know than how it would affect the subject. I pause as a memory of Perry replays in my mind, his admonishing voice warning me about the consequences of printing *everything* I know. 'There are people with real lives that will be hurt if we run the piece this way, Darlin,' he told me. 'It's a good story and he needs to be held accountable for his decisions, but sometimes, not telling the whole truth is the better choice.'

Perry's edit of my story chafed, but now I understand what the Chief meant. Clark's selfless actions and honest efforts to help should be protected and exposure would only hurt him. I think about how Trask implied Clark's hometown in some kind of conspiracy and wonder if Clark also fears repercussions to his parents and neighbors if all the details of Superman's life were known.

The very existence of a group like Bureau 39 makes it easy to understand why Clark donned a disguise. Trask can't be the only paranoid nutcase in the world, not to mention what criminals could make him do by threatening his loved ones. I shudder at the thought of Lex ever finding out Superman's identity.

I smile as I put together my experience with both men — my rescue this morning and our investigation last night. Clark is a good man, dedicated to truth and justice in both his personas. Their physical similarities are obvious now that I know the truth, but their personalities are so completely different. Clark is literally hiding in plain sight, using people's preconceived notions and expectations to his advantage. I've often used the concept in my own undercover work and my esteem for Clark increases.

The muffled sound of a door closing interrupts my thoughts and I press my ear to the wood again. I hold my breath and strain to hear Clark's approaching footsteps, but there's nothing but silence. I worry my lip for a minute, trying to figure out what's happening on the other side of the panel. Why hasn't Clark let me out yet? Are the police still in the room? Surely he knows I'm in here and need help to get out.

A proverbial light bulb switches on in my head and I realize that Clark knows exactly where I am; that's the problem.

After another moment of indecision, I place my hands flat against the wood and press to my right, sliding the panel softly aside far enough to look into Clark's bedroom. Clark is sitting on his bed with his head resting in his hands, his shoulders slumped in defeat.

I glance at the super suit to get a visual confirmation of my conclusions, but the rush of knowing I'm right is tempered by a strange sense of guilt. It's obvious that Clark has taken great effort to conceal his abilities and I almost feel bad for stumbling into it. I wonder how many others have discovered his secret. Not many, by his reaction.

He looks up at me as I slip quietly out of the closet and the fear in his eyes tells me a lot. This is a secret Clark has kept his whole life. He also knows me and my reputation; I'm probably Clark's worst nightmare. Well, Trask probably has me beat, but not by much.

I sit next to Clark on his bed and feel a pang of sympathy as I imagine him as a lonely little boy, estranged by his differences, fearing his unique abilities, and knowing that if the truth about him ever got out, his chance for a normal life would be over.

Clark's hands scrub through his hair as a low, mirthless chuckle emerges. He doesn't look at me and when he starts talking to the air in front of him, I am barely able to resist the urge to hug the despondency out of his voice.

'Partner with Lois Lane,' he says ironically. 'What a great idea. 'Help me bring down the Boss,' she says, and I blithely follow along. It's the chance of a lifetime opportunity to work with the best investigative reporter in the country. I can learn from her and rid the country of a criminal at the same time. How could I say no? Never mind that I've got a secret the size of *Jupiter* hanging in my closet.'

'Clark ...' I say softly. He stands up to pace and ignores my attempt to reassure him. Instead, he starts to rant, his arms waving wildly.

'I was so excited,' he says. 'I even told my parents about working with you. 'Gee, Clark, do you think that's wise? What if she figures you out?' They warned me to be careful, that it was dangerous to spend so much time with you, but did I listen? Of course not! I mean, no one else has put it together. Surely I can fool Lois Lane.'

'Clark?' I say, trying to get his attention. He ignores me again and continues with his tirade, his voice rising in pitch and velocity. Sheesh, and people say that I babble.

'Then Trask shows up and starts connecting me with Superman. Did I try to hide from you? Did I try to conceal the information about Bureau 39? No! Instead I write the blasted story with you. To make matters worse, I rescue you and fly you right back to my apartment. I should have run a million miles away when you first told me who you were, but apparently, I'm

too stubborn and overconfident and I can't think straight when you're around..."

"Clark!"

"What?" My sharp tone finally stops his sardonic diatribe as he buries his face in his hands. I feel bad for causing him so much anxiety.

"I'm not going to tell anyone, Clark."

His head snaps up to regard me, hope warring with disbelief. "You're not?"

I shake my head. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because you're a good man doing your best to make the world a better place. The world needs Superman and I need Clark Kent; exposing you would hurt all of us. Your secret is safe with me."

"But ... I'm big news."

"So am I. I became the news when I married Lex, so I know what it means to lose your private life. I hate it — the sycophants, the paparazzi, and the lack of privacy. It became practically impossible to investigate and I finally gave it up to produce the news at LNN. I know how hard it is to be inconspicuous with an entourage."

I can practically see the tension pour from his body in a great wave. "Thank you."

I smile brightly. "You're welcome. What good is a secret identity if your partner blabs the first chance she gets?"

He sits back down on his bed and looks at me for a long moment. Finally, a genuine smile breaks out on his face and he relaxes completely. "You really understand, don't you?"

"I want to. I'm still insanely curious about you, so don't be surprised if I ask you about a million questions."

"There's a lot I don't know, but I'll try to answer as many as I can."

I glance at my wristwatch and groan in disappointment. "Oh, I'd love to talk now, but I need to get to the airport. What time is your flight?"

"I've, uh... got plenty of time." Clark stops speaking to clear his throat. "If you don't mind flying with Superman, we could talk for a while."

"Yes." My response sounds a tad too enthusiastic to my own ears and I blush. "I ... I mean, sure. That would be fine." My heart races at the prospect of flying with him again and I'm sure he can hear it. His answering smile sends an increasingly familiar tingle up my spine, and I have to look away from him to regain my equilibrium.

I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear as his earlier words gain new meaning. My eyes narrow and I take a swipe at his shoulder. "You sneak! You never were planning on taking a plane, were you?"

"Nope. Unlike *some* people in this room, I don't plummet to my death when I leap off a balcony."

I cross my arms and stare at him trying to decide if I'm more embarrassed or amused by his tease. Amusement wins out, but it won't do to let him know that. "You know, Kent," I warn him in mock irritation. "If this partnership is going to last long-term, you're not allowed to keep track of my brushes with death."

I see a flash of ... something in his eye, before he quickly replaces whatever it was with a stubborn expression. He opens his mouth to argue and I lift my eyebrows. He shuts his mouth again.

"That sounds like a fair trade," he concedes, "but only if you promise to call for help next time."

"I didn't have time to scream," I protest. "How did you know, anyway? Are you really psychic?"

"No," he laughs. "When I got back from Kansas this morning, I saw that Trask had been here so I flew over to check on you."

I smile at his consideration. "It's a good thing for me that you did. Thanks."

"Anytime."

We lapse into silence and I can tell he has a lot on his mind; I can practically see the gears spinning. I'm sure it's a lot to take in — my knowing about his unique gifts — so I try to give him some space. It lasts for less than a minute before my curiosity gets the better of me.

"So, I have some time before my flight leaves," I say as nonchalantly as I can. "You could maybe tell me some more about Superman?" His eyes light up and I realize that he actually *wants* to tell me more.

"Okay," he agrees. "Why don't I give you the long version?"

I turn my body toward him and pull my leg underneath me, settling more comfortably on his bed. My eyes widen in rapt attention as he recounts the story of how he arrived, about his parents' joy at finding him, their fears of discovery and his relatively normal childhood. As he tells me about his developing abilities, I can tell that his differences bothered him, almost as much as hiding them once he mastered them.

"Inevitably, someone would need my abilities and then people would get suspicious, so I moved on. Dad always worried that some nut with a camera would catch me pulling 'one of my stunts' and they'd lock me away in a lab, dissect me like a frog."

"Is that even possible?" I ask. Clark looks decidedly uncomfortable and I remember the green rock. Clark's pallor and fear make a lot more sense now. "Can it really hurt you, like Trask claims?"

He nods. "The first time I found a piece in one of the back fields, I was lucky that my dad was nearby to see me collapse. It knocked me unconscious and left me weak as a kitten for several days. I think if I were exposed long enough, it could kill me."

"Wow." We sit in a comfortable silence as I digest his story. As incredible as the powers are, it's even more amazing that he was found by such kind and loving people. I shudder to think of someone like Lex having control of Clark's powers.

"So what made you think of the outfit?" I ask.

"In a roundabout way, you did."

"Me?"

He nods. "I met an old colleague of yours at a Journalism seminar in Chicago a couple of months ago, Catherine Grant?"

"I assume she threw her normal forward pass," I gripe with distaste.

My expression and words must amuse Clark, because he laughs out loud. "You could say that; I swear that woman had at least eight arms. I wouldn't have thought twice about high-tailing it out of there, except she made the mistake of telling me she worked with you at the Daily Planet.

"That must have gone over well." I can't help but feel smug that Clark was more interested in me than in Cat.

"I can be very persistent and my questions finally wore her down. I think she gave up trying to seduce me and told me what I wanted to know just to get me to shut up."

"Cat and I never got along. You should probably forget everything she said about me."

He waives off my comment with his hand. "You may not have been friends, but she respected you as a reporter. I asked her how you got all the big scoops and she said it was your nose for trouble, your insane dedication and your ability to go undercover. She said you told her your secret once — that people see what they expect to see."

"Leave it to Cat to twist insults into professional advice," I grouse. "So that's what you're doing — living up to people's expectations?"

"Yep, hiding in plain sight; no one would associate Superman's abilities or personality with me."

Huh. Go figure. To think that I influenced Clark to put on his

disguise so he could help people freely, something he's obviously wanted to do for a long time. "It's been hard to keep this a secret, hasn't it?" I ask.

"Yeah," he agrees, looking off in the distance. "Since the third grade, I've had to hide a big part of myself. Life is more complicated with Superman, but it's been liberating to reveal my powers and help people openly, even if I can only do it in the suit."

"You're not all that different from everyone else, you know," I respond. "Most of us have parts of ourselves that we hide away. You're actually fortunate to have parents that understand and accept the real you — the whole you — and not just a facade."

I look down, embarrassed at sharing so much with Clark. I don't open up to anyone, not even Lucy and she knows more about me than anyone else. Then again, I know more about Clark than anyone but his parents, so I guess it's fair. The prospect of getting to know the real Clark Kent, the two halves that only his parents get to see, is exciting.

"All my life I hid who I am from the outside world. If my parents hadn't encouraged me, accepted all the strange stuff I did without batting an eye, I probably wouldn't have any idea who that person is. My mom even made my suit."

I shake my head in wonder. "Your mother must be an amazing woman. That suit is *really* distracting."

"That's what mom said." He blushes adorably and then eyes me speculatively. "You have a lot in common with her." The cynicism must have shown on my face because he laughs with gusto. "Lois, my mom saw the burning trail of a meteorite crash into a field and dragged my father along to investigate it. When she found a baby in a spaceship, she decided to keep him."

I hide my pleasure at his flattery behind a dubious expression and a denial. "If you knew me at all, you'd know that I'm nothing like that."

"Oh? You're not insatiably curious, absolutely fearless and doggedly determined? Admit it, you know what you want and go after it with reckless abandon."

The words he uses could be taken as criticism, but I can hear such admiration in his voice, I know it's not. I can tell how much Clark loves his parents; being grouped with them can only be the highest compliment. "Thanks."

He takes my hand as his expression turns intense. "I should be thanking you. Your example helped me find a way to live up to my potential, Lois. I'll always be in your debt."

His heartfelt thanks causes a lump in my throat and it takes me a moment to get my emotions under control. That happens a lot when I'm around Clark. "Tell you what," I say. "You help me take Lex down and we'll call it even."

"Deal." Clark flashes *that* smile at me and my stomach flips. He's going to have to start warning me before he does that or I won't be held accountable for my actions.

I glance again at my wristwatch and am surprised at how much time has passed. It's time to get moving on our investigation again. In light of Clark's revelation, I toss my original investigative plan out, adapting it to utilize his unique abilities.

Clark shifts uncomfortably under my scrutiny as the silence stretches out between us. "What?" he asks in a cautious voice.

"How fast can you move? Can you get in and out of somewhere without being seen?"

"Yes," he answers warily.

"And how fast can you fly us to Metropolis?" I ask, ignoring his suspicious look.

"About twenty minutes, more if we take our time. Why?"

A slow mischievous smile creases my face. "Trask is probably half way to Metropolis by now. How do you feel about a little breaking and entering before he gets there?"

It takes some persuasion, but I finally convince Clark that it's a good idea to break into Bureau 39's warehouse on Bessolo Boulevard.

Before we can go, though, I need to secure my alibi for the next few days. Careful to avoid getting his fingerprints on the paper, Clark makes a super-quick stop into my hotel room to deliver the 'kidnapper's' ransom note. It doesn't take him long and soon, we're heading across the country.

For the first few minutes, I struggle to keep my mind on the investigation, but ultimately give it up in favor of enjoying the flight. Flying in Clark's arms is amazingly invigorating and I squirm trying to see everything. We're flying just high enough that the ground speeding by below us doesn't disorient me, but low enough that I can make out the details. I crane my neck around several times and Clark laughs, shifting me to hold me against his side, one arm around my waist.

We follow several large rivers across the state until we reach the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountain range and then we're up and over its towering peaks. Glistening blue water lakes surrounded by granite, pines and manzanita flow into arid deserts scarred by trails and back roads until we're zipping across the blinding white nothingness of the salt flats.

We edge northward to skirt the snow-capped peaks of the lofty Tetons and Clark points out the steam and gush of a geyser. We pass quickly over the Rockies and then my stomach drops as he swoops down to meander over grazing cattle and open land. After that, it's an endless patchwork of green, yellow and brown farms, intersected by the sparkling threads of rivers and small towns that finally give way to the ever-thickening forests of the east. It's breathtaking.

A few minutes later, I sigh with regret when we approach Metropolis. At my direction, Clark takes us into cloud cover until we're hovering high above the Hotel Apollo. We drop fast into the back alley and I ask him to wait for me there while I ditch my duffel bag and make a change of clothes. I dash into the hotel, change my clothes and stuff a few supplies into my backpack before hurrying back outside with a map clutched in my hand. After a few minutes of aerial backseat driving, Clark sets us down on the roof of the Bureau's warehouse.

I'm scoping out the best way into the building when Clark speaks. "Maybe I should go by myself," he suggests.

I turn toward him, the incredulity written plainly on my face. I distinctly remember warning him about trying to exclude me and his offer makes me wonder about his mental stability. "No way," I protest. "I'm not sitting this one out. Two people can search faster than one, even if you can move super fast."

"Lois, it's not safe."

I clamp my jaws shut against the reflexive tirade and cross my arms defensively. I remind myself that Clark isn't used to working with me and to be patient. I can do patient...when I have to. I take a deep breath before responding and am proud of how calm I sound. "And that precludes me...how?"

"Well, I'm invulnerable and can move at near invisible speeds," he prevaricates, wilting a little under my glare. "Come on, Lois. These guys are dangerous."

Yep, that's it; he's definitely lost his mind. Doesn't he realize that in this instance, he's in more danger than I am? Not to mention that it's obvious he's never done this before. His squeaky-clean background and adherence to the rules leaves him particularly vulnerable to getting caught doing something illegal, whereas breaking and entering is my specialty.

I square up in front of him and poke him in the chest with my finger. "That's right; Bureau 39 has a meteorite that can hurt you so I'm going, too. Besides, we've already established that you're a chronic rule-keeper. I have a lot more experience with covert snooping than you do."

"Maybe," he pouts. "I just don't like not knowing who or

what we'll find in there."

"Haven't you looked?"

"Well, um...no. Not yet."

I give him an impatient look and gesture toward the rooftop. He sheepishly turns to look down, his eyes narrowing as he engages his super vision. I crowd next to him, wishing I could see through, too. "Check for the location of the guards, offices, filing cabinets and computers. Oh, don't forget to find the security cameras. Well, come on." I slap his shoulder. "Tell me what you see."

He grins at me and tells me about the layout of the building. "The main area is filled with strange pieces of metal junk, a row of filing cabinets and there are...two guards in the front office playing cards."

"What about alternate routes into and out of the building — any other doors and windows?" I ask.

Clark makes a sweeping motion and turns a full circle. "No windows and only one ground-level entrance. It appears to have some serious security safeguards, though. I'm afraid that only leaves the roof."

"The roof it is, then. You may want to change into something a little less conspicuous," I say as I shrug off my pack.

"Superman has an image to uphold, but two nosy reporters are a little easier to explain." I pull two sets of gloves and balaclavas from my pack and hand one to Clark. I giggle at his horrified look. "Of course, not having to explain is even better."

He grudgingly accepts them and then winks at me before spinning. My mouth drops open when he stops, now dressed in a black button-down and charcoal slacks. I know I'm staring, but I can't help it. The spin-change is just as cool this time as it was when he spun into the suit in San Francisco. He pulls on the gloves while I retrieve my jaw from the floor.

I shake myself and reach into my pack for my lock picks before I notice that the alarm is controlled by a keypad and a combination padlock guards the door. I glower at my lock picks like it's their fault for being useless and then toss them back into my bag. I cross my arms and stare at the locks, trying to figure out what to do next when Clark moves to my side. He cracks his knuckles.

"Step aside and watch a pro at work."

I roll my eyes at his swagger and Clark wiggles his eyebrows back at me. His hand becomes a blur until the light turns green, disengaging the alarm. A quick twist of his wrist and the padlock crumbles.

"Show off," I mumble.

I reach for the door and Clark moves to my side, stopping me with a hand on my arm. "There are a couple of cameras between here and the main storage room," he says, softly. "I'll need to take us in quickly and along the ceiling."

I reach up to wrap my arms around his neck and jump into his arms. I giggle at his surprised expression. "What are you waiting for, Clark? Let's do some snooping."

When he lifts us gently into the air, my breath catches and I smile at the feeling of weightlessness. I could really get used to this. Clark's eyes crinkle from his answering smile and then everything blurs as he takes us in.

Clark sets me down just outside the front office in the main storage area. I can hear the soft droning of a newscaster's voice from a distant television, punctuated by an occasional word from the soldiers as they play cards. Clark stares through the wall for a second and then at the doorknob until a stream of smoke curls up from the keyhole. I smile in approval and he nods, accepting my praise. He turns his attention up to each corner of the room and gestures for me to wait. I stay long enough to see him zip up to realign the cameras, pointing them away from the area containing the computer and the filing cabinets. By the time he returns, I'm

halfway to the desktop.

"Can't you wait for even half a second, Lois?" His whisper in my ear makes me jump, but I cover my surprise by turning him around and shoving him in the direction of the files.

"No, now be a good boy and search the filing cabinets while I see what goodies Trask has on his hard drive."

He snorts in amusement, but does what he's told. He shifts into super speed and I gape at his blurry form. Wow. I don't think I'll ever get used to that. I force myself back on task, tuning out the soft, whirring sound to search the Bureau's computer files.

I boot up the computer using the General's ID and password, which gets me quickly into the system. When I try to open the file marked 'Bureau 39,' I stall and make a face at the monitor when it demands another password. I think about calling Clark over, but discard the idea; it won't do to get too dependent on his abilities. Instead, I pull a piece of equipment Jimmy obtained from the spy shop from my bag and within two minutes, I'm rooting through the computer's directory. Some of the files are pretty large, but not so much that I can't copy everything. I plug in a disk and start transferring.

While the computer uploads the information, I get up and start wandering through the dusty shelves, rolling my eyes at the kind of junk they've collected. I pick up one that looks like a child's Halloween costume and shake my head. I'm about to head back to check on the computer when a tarp-covered bulge catches my eye. It's less dusty than the other objects and a bit of the dull metal surface shows from beneath the cover. I lift up the tarp to peek below it before throwing it off to display the whole thing.

I stare in awe at the tiny spaceship. Unlike the other pieces of trash and debris lying around, this one is sleek and otherworldly. From the feel of the metal hull, the strange markings along its edge to the red emblem on the front, I know instantly that this is the real deal. This is how Superman came to earth.

'Clark was in there,' my amazed mind whispers. For whatever distance and length of time, someone placed him inside and launched him into space. How terrifying that experience must have been, to be strapped into a metal craft and sent into the cold reaches of space? What kind of people would do such a thing to a helpless infant? The burning of righteous anger in my chest melts into a dull, fearful ache as I imagine what would have happened if his spacecraft hadn't made it to Earth, or if someone other than the Kents had found him. Having seen their picture at Clark's, I can vividly imagine his adoptive parent's curiosity and surprise at seeing the craft crash and their joy at finding Clark inside.

My hand reaches out to touch the smooth surface and I startle when the hatch pops open to reveal the tiny compartment. At my gasp of surprise, Clark materializes at my side in an instant and I turn to look at him as he stares at his spaceship. My eyes get misty as I watch Clark reverently stroke his hand across the red S-shield on the tiny spaceship's nose and can't help but touch his shoulder at the look of absolute wonder in his eyes.

He bends down to reach into a small bag hanging at the ship's side and pulls out a small globe. My eyes open wide as it starts to glow, the continents of Earth changing in color and shape.

"Krypton," he murmurs.

Before I can ask him what he means, an alarm sounds from the front office, followed quickly by a rattle of the door and muttered curses.

"Come on," he says, pocketing the globe. "Let's get you out of here."

"Take this out of here first," I say, pointing at the ship. "And then come back for me."

"No way am I leaving you here, Lois. A jammed door lock isn't going to hold them long."

"Clark, I'm not leaving without the computer files. Besides, how long do you think Trask will leave your ship here once they know we're on to them? This might be your only chance."

He hesitates and then nods. “Good point. I’ll be right back.”

Clark disappears with his ship while I run back to the computer and pop out the disk. I barely have time to get my equipment and the files into my bag before the door crashes open and a great rush of wind scoops me up, only to deposit me a second later in the smelly alley next to the hotel. Clark sets me on my feet and I hang on to his shoulders to keep my balance. My head spins as I try to get my bearings.

“Lois, are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” I wave off his concern with a flick of my wrist and turn to walk toward the street. I only make it two wobbly steps before my knees buckle and I lose my balance. Clark wraps his arms around my waist again, saving me from a potentially nasty fall into something that looks and smells disgusting.

“Whoa. Careful there,” he cautions.

I close my eyes against the vertigo and lean my head against his chest. “Maybe I should wait until the ground stops moving first,” I joke.

He scoops me back into his arms and before I realize what’s happening, I’ve wrapped my arms around his neck as he’s carrying me into the hotel. Through slightly fuzzy vision, I notice that the attendant doesn’t even look up when we pass.

Huh, we’re dressed in black and have balaclavas over our faces and no one blinks an eye. I love this neighborhood.

Clark walks us through the dim corridor and sets me on my feet next to the door of the hotel room. My knees feel weak for an entirely different reason when he slips his arm around my waist and holds me close. He digs around in my pack for the key and once the door is open, he practically carries me inside. He helps me across the room and fluffs up the pillows before he sets me down on the bed. A moment later, he’s back with a glass of water from the kitchenette. I’m enjoying the attention so much, and he’s being so sweet, that I don’t have the heart to tell him I don’t need it.

“Sip it,” he orders.

“Clark, stop fussing,” I say as I remove my gloves and hood.

“I’m fine. A little dizziness isn’t going to kill me.”

He drops to his knees at the bedside and wraps his hands around mine, still holding the water glass. His eyes are full of anxiety. “I’m so sorry, Lois. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“Clark, I’m okay.”

“But if I didn’t ...”

I place my fingers on his lips to stop his self-recriminations. “You did what you needed to do — what I asked you to do — to keep us safe. Thank you.”

“You’re really okay?”

“Yes. Now, did we really find what I think we found? Was that the spaceship you arrived in? What was that glowing ball-thing? Oh ... Where is the ship now, did you take it someplace safe? You didn’t leave it at the Bureau’s warehouse did you? Clark! You need to go get it.”

“Lois, relax,” he laughs. “It’s all right. I put the ship on the hotel roof until I could get you.” He pauses, a light of wonderment shining in his eyes. “It’s amazing isn’t it? My dad said he buried it to keep my arrival a secret, but when I went to dig it up, the ship was gone. I felt devastated.”

“What did that word mean, the one you whispered in the warehouse?”

“Krypton. I don’t know how, but when I held the globe, I just knew. I’m from the planet Krypton.”

I almost laugh; I thought Clark was a little unusual because he was from *Kansas*, but from outer space? Although it’s easier to imagine Superman that way, Clark doesn’t seem alien enough to be from a far-distant planet. It certainly would explain his super abilities, but other than that, Clark is just so darn *normal*.

Actually, that’s not entirely accurate either; Clark is a lot more human than most earth guys I’ve known.

“Wow,” I marvel. “But who sent you and why?”

He shakes his head. “No idea. Maybe the globe or the ship will tell me more. Come on, I want to take my ship to my folks’ place in Kansas.”

His excitement is palpable as he takes my water glass and sets it aside. He moves quickly to help me to my feet, but not fast enough to preempt the sudden panic that blooms in my chest at the thought of going to Kansas. I tell myself that it’s because I want to get back to the research on Lex and that I’m antsy to move forward on the investigation; it has nothing to do with meeting his parents and absolutely is *not* a fear of their response to my figuring out their son’s deepest and most tightly held secret.

Not waiting for an answer, he takes me by the hand and pulls me toward the door and I let myself get dragged along. I take several faltering steps behind him before my hesitancy tugs his attention back to me. His excited smile fades into confusion, so I smile nervously and pat his hand.

“I think I’ll sit this one out. You should go ahead without me.”

“Are you feeling all right?” he asks.

He steps close and places one hand on my shoulder, the other against my cheek. My breath catches at his proximity and my heart pounds like mad as he looks into my eyes with concern. “Whoa, down girl. He’s just worried about that dizzy spell. Do *not* read more into the gesture than there is.”

“Yes, fine,” I say a little breathlessly.

He looks unconvinced for another minute and then seems to realize how close we are standing. He releases me and takes a step back, looking down in embarrassment. His shy response is so quaint that it bolsters my confidence. I clear my throat and smile reassuringly, brushing my fingertips along his arm.

“Really, I’m fine. You’ll fly faster without me. I ... I just want to get back to our investigation of Lex,” I say, inclining my head toward the files we’d brought from San Francisco.

“I should stay to help you,” he wavers.

“Are you kidding? Safeguarding your ship is much more important. Besides, it’ll take me a while to get Jimmy up to speed. Why don’t you meet us back here this evening, will that give you enough time?”

I can see the indecision in his eyes, so I turn him around and give him a playful shove in the direction of the door. “Go on. Take your ship to a safe place and tell your parents the news.”

He smiles like I’ve just given him the best Christmas gift of all time and I can’t resist smiling at his enthusiasm. Before vanishing through the door, he leans over to kiss me on the cheek and I can’t help but feel like he’s given me the perfect gift right back.

After Jimmy and I spend several hours going through the remaining files on Lex, a box of half-eaten pizza on the floor between us, I roll my head to work the kinks out of my neck. The waning light coming through the window tells me it’s starting to get late and a glimpse at my watch informs me Jimmy has just enough time to get to the courthouse, so I grab a notepad from my bag.

I’m just about finished with a list of research items when I hear the heavy floorboards just outside our door squeak. I motion to Jimmy, but he’s already moving to throw a blanket over our papers. There’s a soft knock as Jimmy slips into the adjoining room. I pull on my wig and check the peephole, but the hallway is too dim. All I can see is a dark head of hair and an ear in silhouette.

“Who is it?” I ask softly.

“Lois, it’s me.”

“Password?”

Even through the door, I can hear his annoyed grumble

followed by a resigned sigh. I grin.

“The fat lady sings.”

I slip off the chain and unbolt the door, planning to admonish Clark, but the words stick in my throat. I expect him to be in his dark skulking clothes from earlier and the change to his appearance takes me by surprise. He’s dressed in a torn pair of tight jeans and a muscle shirt that showcases his arms and chest. His face now sports a goatee and mustache; he looks scruffy and slightly dangerous and it makes my mouth water. Disreputable is a *very* good look on him.

“May I come in or do I need a secret handshake, too?”

His cheeky question snaps me from my stupefied gawk and I move back to let him come into the room. I can feel that I’m blushing to my ears and my reaction causes his grin to stretch into a satisfied smile. It’s the third time that his appearance has left me speechless and he knows it. I fight the urge to fill the silence with meaningless babble and resort to rolling my eyes at him instead.

He steps past me and looks around the dingy room as I close the door. He shifts his grip on the army duffel slung over his shoulder before setting it down on the foot of the bed. I flick the airline tag attached to the handle with my finger and raise my eyebrows. He winks at me in response and I feel my insides tumble. The realization that I’m in on practically the world’s biggest secret makes me feel a little giddy.

“So, did you have a good flight?” I tease.

“Yep — a quick trip with plenty of legroom. You?”

“Oh, yes. It was the best flight of my life — exhilarating and absolutely amazing.”

“Really,” he drawls, leaning toward me. “And what made your flight so ... memorable?”

“I met the pilot,” I confide. “He gave me some ... personal attention, pointed out the sites, made sure I was comfortable, that sort of thing.”

“It sounds like he made quite an impression on you.”

I giggle in response to Clark’s knowing grin, but any witty comeback dies on my tongue when Jimmy stammers my name behind me. I glance back to see a sort of morbid fascination on Jimmy’s face. Although he couldn’t have heard our softly spoken words, I’m sure our body language reads loud and clear.

My cheeks burn in mortification; I don’t know which is worse — that it’s so easy to flirt with Clark, or that Jimmy caught me doing it. I pull the wig off my head and step back, putting some distance between us. Clark does the same and I notice that he looks as embarrassed as I feel. Wanting desperately to regain control of my emotions and actions, I gesture quickly between Clark and Jimmy, making introductions.

“Clark Kent, meet Jimmy Olsen. Jimmy, this is Clark.”

Clark regains his composure quickly and sticks out his hand. “Nice to meet you, Jimmy.”

“Smooth,” Jimmy murmurs. He takes Clark’s hand and looks at him in admiration. “I’ve heard a lot about you, Clark.”

“Same here. Lois tells me you’re a whiz with the computer.”

“She does?”

I grimace at the squeak of surprise in Jimmy’s voice. “What? It’s not *that* unusual for me to give you a compliment.”

Jimmy gapes at me for a minute before turning to glare at Clark, crossing his arms. “Okay, what have you done with the real Lois Lane?”

I slap at Jimmy’s arm and he grins. “Come on, Jimmy. I tell you all the time that you do good work. Well, some of the time. At least twice, all right?” I amend off his incredulous look. “Didn’t you have some research to do?” I ask, pointedly changing the subject.

Even though I’m not mad, teasing me is a dangerous proposition on the best of days, and I figure he won’t tempt fate by joking further. True to form, he grabs his coat from the back of

a chair and heads for the door, snatching the list from my hand on his way past.

“Right,” Jimmy says, reading from the list. “I’ll be at City Hall and the Courthouse digging up blueprints, building plans, any other records I can find on Lex Towers. Anything else?”

“No, that should keep you busy for a while. Clark and I can take it from there.”

He nods at both of us before exiting. “Good to meet you, CK.”

Clark waves goodbye to Jimmy and plops down on the bed, his arms behind his head and his feet crossed at the ankles. He takes a quick look around the room and then grins up at me.

“Nice place,” he teases.

“Make yourself comfortable,” I retort. “You *do* realize that’s my bed, don’t you?”

“Is it? I don’t see any others.”

“There’s a small adjoining room,” I say pointing at the doorway to my left. “That one is yours.”

He cranes his neck to look through the open door and his forehead crinkles in doubt. “It looks kind of small...and dirtier, if possible,” he mumbles. He looks back up at me and grins again. “I think since you asked me to come, I deserve the larger bed.”

I cross my arms and glare at him. “What happened to those sickeningly sweet, old-fashioned manners of yours?”

He shrugs and winks at me, which causes my stomach to drop again. If that’s the game he wants to play... I let my eyes wander down his supine body and lick my lips lasciviously. “I suppose the other bed would be a little cramped for someone of your ... stature. How about we alternate nights?”

By the time I meet his eyes again, he’s turned three-shades of red, but he doesn’t back down. His eyes narrow a bit and his grin grows sly. “It’s a pretty big bed, we could always share.”

“Well,” I clear my throat and try to banish the completely inappropriate images his comment produces. Suddenly, I’m feeling very shy. My god, *Superman* is flirting with me. I start to panic before I remember that it’s also just my friend Clark and my heart rate slows back down. Realizing that he’s not going to back down about this, I finally relent.

“Well,” I admit grudgingly, “this room *does* have a more discrete window access. I guess you can have it.”

I look around the room for a distraction and spy the forgotten box next to our research. I sit down on the floor and gesture towards the pizza, eager to change the subject.

“Are you hungry? Sorry it’s a bit cold.”

Clark smiles and moves to sit down on the floor next to me. He picks up a piece of pizza and tilts his head to look over the top of his glasses. I see a haze of heat from his slice and my eyebrows climb in surprise. He smirks.

“No problem.”

It takes me a second to recover from seeing him use another superpower dressed as himself, but then I hold up my own piece in front of him until he smiles in amusement and heats it up too. I can tell that he enjoys having someone know about him; he’s eager to show off.

“You were gone a little longer than I expected,” I say. “Did everything go all right?”

“Sorry about that,” he mumbles around a bite of pizza, “and, yes, everything is fine. I took the ship to my parent’s place and talked with them awhile, told them what happened. They want to meet you by the way.”

I cringe at the warning tone in Clark’s voice. “You told them?” Of course he told them. “How did they take it?”

“They were a little worried that you figured me out, but once I explained everything to them, they calmed down. Don’t worry, Lois, they trust you.”

I find that hard to believe. Frankly, I’m somewhat amazed at Clark’s trust, too. Of course, given what Clark told me about his

parents this morning, the Kents are polar opposites from my own parents, so it shouldn't surprise me that they're so generous and trusting. It makes me want meet them; it might actually be nice to see what a normal, loving family is really like ... someday.

"If you say so," I acquiesce. "So you just got in from Kansas?"

"No, I zipped back to San Francisco to check on things. I don't want Superman's absence linked with mine."

"Good thinking. Maybe you should be seen as Clark, too. I don't want you associated with my disappearance either."

"Already done," he says around another mouth full of pizza. "I stopped in at the paper to file the follow-up on Bureau 39. Sorry I couldn't put your name on the byline; your kidnapping had just hit the wires."

I couldn't believe I didn't think of that. Jimmy and I were working so intently on the papers we brought from San Francisco that I completely forgot to listen for Lex's reaction to my 'kidnapping.' I scramble to uncover the monitoring equipment I stored under the bed and I turn up the sound to hear Nigel's placating voice.

"...should consider it's a possibility. Only a fool would dare."

"Amateurs?" Lex scoffs. "Be reasonable, Nigel. Only the most skillful could pull this off without leaving a trace. I wonder..."

I hold my breath as both Lex and Nigel fall into silence. Without being able to read their body language or see their expressions, I fear the worst. As the seconds tick by, I'm sure that one of them will see through my deception and my mind starts racing to think of a back-up plan. Lex's voice startles me out of my scheming.

"What of the military group, Bureau 39?" Lex finally asks.

"They've gone to ground, sir, but I'll keep looking."

"And what of the eye-witness that saw three men in dark clothing near her room?"

"Unreliable," Nigel answers. "Apparently the dotard wasn't wearing his glasses. He couldn't even swear to how many there were, let alone identify them and the only fingerprints in the room were of Mrs. Luthor, the staff and a few other prints the police have confirmed belong to former guests."

"An inside job, perhaps?" Lex speculates.

"It's possible, but unlikely given the timeframe and the broken door."

"True. Double-check the list of my former business partners and ex-employees. No one steals from me and gets away with it. I want those responsible found and dealt with severely. Now, I have a press conference to attend. Do I look appropriately troubled?"

"Practically distraught, sir."

I shudder at the utter lack of concern in Lex's voice. He's obviously more disturbed that someone went against him than he is with my safety. Although we'd already figured out why Lex married me, his obvious disinterest in my well being hurts.

We sit in silence for another minute until Lex and Nigel have gone. I turn down the volume again and turn my head to look at Clark. He's got a peculiar look on his face, like he's just stepped on something smelly. His expression hardens until he looks mad enough to chew nails — which he probably could, come to think of it. It only lasts a second, though. When Clark sees me watching him, the expression clears.

"Well," he says genially. "Your plan seems to have worked. Your ... um, Luthor doesn't seem to suspect that you orchestrated the disappearance."

I don't know why, but Clark's reference to Lex as 'Luthor' instead of my husband makes me feel less on edge. I flash him my best 'how-could-you-doubt-me' look and grab the TV remote. Turning the set on, I flip the channel to LNN, just as they start broadcasting a live interview with Lex under the headline of

'Mrs. Lex Luthor Kidnapped.' Clark and I listen in silence while the segment runs. I study Lex's face, his body language and his tone of voice, but even knowing the truth, it's difficult to see the deception. When the newscaster turns his attention to stock reports, I turn off the set.

Clark nudges me with his elbow. "For the reward money he's offering, I might just turn you in myself."

I smile at Clark's joke and swat at his shoulder. His presence and attitude comforts me in a way that I never would have believed possible. I send a silent prayer of thanks skyward that he's here to help me.

"If my plan works," I say, crossing my fingers, "Lex will be so distracted with a search in San Francisco that he won't think to look for me closer to home." I settle back on the floor, tossing the blanket aside to reveal the files underneath. "Let's get started."

"So your ingenious plan for getting into Luthor's office is to fake a ransom demand and a meeting with the non-existent kidnappers?"

"Yes."

"And you'll use yourself as bait?"

"Why do you sound so skeptical, Clark? If 'the kidnappers' request an obscene amount of money and we leave enough clues for Lex to find me, it'll make him think he's outsmarted them. If there's one thing I can count on, it's Lex's ego. I guarantee he'll handle it personally."

He shakes his head and takes a few steps away, reaching up to rub the back of his neck before rounding on me again. "What if Luthor catches on to you? Do you realize how much danger you'd be in?"

I rake my fingers through my hair and take a deep breath. We've been at this all night. Jimmy, having delivered the information from City Hall, skipped out on us hours ago to go home. I admit it is nice working with Clark, but it's also more work. When it was just me and Jimmy, we both knew who called the shots. With Clark, I have to work to be top banana. Even so, everything is running smoothly until Clark attempts to coddle me.

"Of course it's dangerous," I admit. "It's a brilliant plan." Clark still looks dubious, but I'm sure I can convince him. "It'll draw Lex's attention away and give you the perfect opportunity to search his office unobserved. One well-timed attack on his inner sanctum and I bet we can bust the investigation wide open."

"And how do you propose getting away again without tipping your hand? Wouldn't it be better to search his office together, without letting Luthor know you're here?"

"I tried that, but I couldn't get close enough; security is too tight."

Clark mulls over my words and I sense victory. Not necessarily in the 'I'm right and your wrong' way, but in that we're getting close to finalizing our plan of attack. We revised my plan several times to include Clark's suggestions — just like I knew I would — but I know I'm right about this. We need to get Lex and his cronies out of the penthouse. There's no other way to guarantee enough time to get the evidence and access codes that we need.

Still silent, Clark shifts the papers on the table, pulling a copy of the city plans out from under the penthouse blueprints. He pushes the paper toward me and points to the building to the eastern face of the penthouse, opposite the balcony.

"What if we stake out from this rooftop here? We could watch for a couple of days and fly in quick when the opportunity presents itself."

"And if we don't have enough time?"

"We fly back out and wait until there's another gap in security to finish."

I open my mouth to reject his plan, but stop myself. Why not? If there is a way to get the evidence without seeing Lex

again, why not jump at the chance? “Okay, we’ll give it a try. But if there’s nothing after several days, we’ll scrap it and go with the kidnapper meeting.”

He reluctantly nods his agreement and we turn our attention back to the documents Jimmy brought. I pull the blueprint toward me again. Seeing the drawing confirms one thing for me — there are plenty of places in Lex Towers to hide things. My limited poking around in the penthouse unearthed a secret elevator, and I figure that if one room doesn’t show up on the plans, there might be others. I grab a pencil and sketch the hidden elevator shaft on the penthouse plans. I nudge Clark’s arm and point at the result.

“If we shift this wall here to accommodate the rear elevator, it leaves a strangely-shaped gap between Lex’s office and the ballroom.”

“So there might be several secret rooms,” he agrees. “It bears looking into, don’t you think?”

“Definitely, but even if I knew what was in there, I wouldn’t know how to get in,” I complain.

“Why don’t I fly over and take a look? It’ll only take a few minutes.”

Clark looks at the sketch I drew on the penthouse plans one more time before slipping out the door. Within minutes he’s back, redrawing the floor plan to include the elevator shaft, another security room, a conference room and a second storage room he says is stocked with munitions.

“Other than a short row of filing cabinets,” Clark explains, “this conference room is pretty bare. The entrance is here through the security office connected to Luthor’s office. I didn’t see the mechanism, but it looks like the door is hidden behind the alarm cabinet across from the bank of monitors.”

“So we’ll hit the files in the conference room, Lex’s desk and the safe in his office. If we have the chance, we should probably check the outer office desk and Nigel’s office, too.” I point to each room as I list them. “Am I missing anything?”

“Not that I can see. When do you want to go?”

I check my wristwatch. “Anytime.”

“Okay. Why don’t we . . .” He stops speaking mid-sentence and I know he’s listening to some distant trouble.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Tenement fire about a half mile that way,” he says, pointing in the direction of Suicide Slum.

“Go. We’ll pick this up when you get back.”

He spins into the suit and vanishes out the window.

My bladder is calling rather urgently when I wake up. Disoriented, I blink the sleep from my eyes until I figure out I fell asleep on Clark’s bed. I moved my belongings into the adjoining room, but left the research papers about LexCorp, Lex Labs and Luthor Technologies strewn about on his mattress half covered in bedclothes. Exhausted by my near-sleepless night the night before, I obviously fell asleep waiting for Clark’s return.

I push the mess aside and swing my legs over the edge of the bed, pausing to get my bearings. From the lack of light coming through the window and the cobwebs in my head, it must be the wee hours of the morning. My tongue takes an exploratory and distasteful lick along my upper gums; I also forgot to brush my teeth.

I’m about to stand when I hear a soft sound from the shadowed corner of the room and I freeze. From the corner of my eye, I can just make out a large shadowed lump. At first, I wonder if it is Clark’s duffle bag, but then the shadow sniffs and a bright red toe nudges a sliver of moonlight. The shadow is Clark, still in his Superman suit, and it sounds like he is crying.

A shiver of fear slices through my heart. What would make the Man of Steel cry?

Some perceptive inner voice provides me with the answer as I stand. Superman may have unbelievable and astonishing

powers, but under the flamboyant costume is Clark, an ordinary farm boy from Kansas. No, not ordinary. Even without the super powers, Clark couldn’t possibly be considered ordinary. He’s hardworking, insightful, honest (to a fault) and extremely compassionate. In the few days since I met him, I discovered an extraordinary man with a quiet strength that has nothing to do with his biology — and this most human of men is hurting.

I move around the bed to crouch down in front of him. His head is buried in the crook of his arms, which are locked tightly around his bent knees. Wrapped in his cape and huddled in on himself, he looks like a scared little boy hiding his head to keep the monsters away. My heart breaks for him and I reach out to place my hands on his arm.

“Clark?”

He doesn’t raise his head to look at me, but there’s another soft snuffle. “What?” he asks.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

I frown at his wobbly answer, but it doesn’t particularly surprise me. He probably isn’t used to sharing his feelings. Clark doesn’t have anyone to confide in, except maybe his parents and they’re not here right now. In that way, he’s a lot like me.

The burden of taking care of a younger sister and a drunken mother might be different from saving strangers from disasters, but one thing is probably the same; I had to be the best, to keep my doubts and worries to myself and always, *always* had to be strong. No one ever offered me a hand to hold or a shoulder to cry on when things got tough. No one, that is, until Clark.

That night we met was the first time in years I allowed myself to really let go and cry over anything deeper than an Ivory Tower episode. Since my parents’ divorce, I had no one in my life to rely on, no one who could make me feel safe enough. But Clark gave me permission to let go and held me safe until I could stand on my own again.

When I sought him out, I was naively certain that I was the senior partner, the one with the experience and skills to lead the investigation of Lex. Clark was only supposed to provide an outsiders viewpoint and to be my hands and feet. I silently chuckle at how wrong I was about him. He is so strong and talented and intelligent. He could have taken down Lex all by himself. What help does Superman need from anyone?

Plenty, if my experience is anything to go on. Clark needed me that night Trask came to his apartment. When I called the police and distracted Trask, I unknowingly protected Clark’s secret. I also kept an overly trusting Superman from confronting Trask at my hotel, and I helped him break into the warehouse to find his ship. It surprises me just how easy it was to fall into a true partnership with him. Although he’s had those amazing powers for most of his life, I realize that using them as Superman is still relatively new. Could Clark need a partner to give him help, advice and comfort, just as I do? My intuition tells me yes.

I skeptically eye the space next to him and then squat down, sliding toward the wall on my bottom. I attempt to wedge into the tiny space between the bed frame and his body, but it’s too small a fit. I try to squirm into it anyway.

“Scoot over, will you?”

He shifts into the corner and my hips finally slip into the gap. I settle against the wall and sigh, placing an arm around Clark’s back. Hesitantly, I hug him toward me and then rest my head above his shoulder alongside his head, which is still bent in sorrow. I clamp my jaw shut against the urge to fill the silence between us and hope that he can feel the respect and friendship I have for him in my presence. He gives so freely to others, and I can only hope he’ll accept my meager offering when he needs someone to be stronger.

A long moment later, he whispers, “I couldn’t save them.”

“At the fire?”

“The blaze was out of control by the time I got there and nothing I did seemed to make things better. I tried to get them all out before the building collapsed, but I couldn’t see the last ones struggling through the smoke, couldn’t hear them choking through the noise...”

His voice catches and I pull him closer, stroking a soothing hand through his hair. “Everything is going to be okay, Clark. You did your best.”

“What good is my best if I still let people die?” he pleads as he lifts his head to look at me. “Two people died tonight because my best wasn’t good enough.”

“This late at night, a tenement in the Slum would be full of a hundred sleeping people. Think about how many people you *did* save.”

He shrugs and turns to stare into the darkness. The despondency in his voice battles for dominance against the self-loathing in his eyes. How can he not see the good he does, even if he can’t be everywhere and do everything?

“Focus on the good you did by being there,” I assert. “You said the fire was out of control by the time you arrived. How many tomorrows will the survivors have because you were there? How many of those firefighters went home uninjured because of your help?”

He shakes his head and looks away again. “And two families are grieving because I wasn’t fast enough or smart enough to save everyone.”

Exasperated now, I shove away from the wall to resume my position squatting in front of him. I take his face between my hands and force him to look at me. The sorrow I see there breaks my heart. “Listen very carefully, Clark. You cannot be everywhere. You cannot save everyone. You do what you can and that is enough.”

“What I can do isn’t enough,” he whispers. “Superman should be more.”

“Superman isn’t a god, Clark. The fact that you exist at all is a miracle, but you’re just a man. Admittedly, a most amazing man, even without the powers...”

He shakes his head. “That’s just it. I have these miraculous powers that no one else has; I should be able to save them. If I can’t, then what good are they?”

“Oh, Clark, you’ve got it all wrong. The important thing is that you care about people — people you will never know — without expecting anything in return. They may never truly know you, but people understand that anything Superman does to help is a gift. That message of courage, selflessness and hope resonates within all of us and inspires us to be better. That you do whatever you can to help gives regular, ordinary people something to believe in. That’s the miracle of Superman.”

I can see him mulling over my words and I silently demand that he believe me. In answer, his face clears and he smiles a little. “Thank you, Lois.”

“Anytime,” I answer. I breathe a sigh of relief and mentally pat myself on the back. I saved a super hero tonight. It’s not the Pulitzer Prize, but it’s not bad for a night’s work. Better than that, though, is the knowledge that I helped Clark when he needed a friend. Still, it won’t do to let his ego inflate.

“Are you finished obsessing now?” I ask in mock irritation.

He smiles shyly and nods.

“Good, then help me up,” I respond. “Cause my feet have gone to sleep and I need to pee.”

Two days later, I find myself marking time at the Apollo while Clark is gone on super business. An aggravated sigh escapes my lips as I slap down another useless document into the still too-large ‘unknown’ pile and run my fingers through my hair. The pressure I feel to come up with solid evidence of Lex’s wrongdoings increases as each hour passes. His expertise at

hiding his darker side is just so *frustrating* and I’m running out of time.

I know that for the kidnapping ruse to last, we need to give Lex *something* to keep him occupied. The note from my ‘kidnappers’ that Clark had flown into my San Francisco hotel room has worked so far, but to really hold Lex’s attention, or better yet, take him physically away from Metropolis and our investigation, I need to submit a ransom demand — soon.

Clark’s plan to break into Lex’s office together is a good one, but if we can’t find the opportunity to get in tonight, I think it’ll be time to move to plan B. Decision made, I turn my attention back to the papers in front of me when I hear the surveillance equipment click on. I reach over to turn up the volume and hear Lex’s side of a phone conversation.

“...don’t want to hear about your incompetence, Inspector. I want results...No. You will work with my team of investigators or I’ll have your badge. ... I want every available man out on the streets looking for my wife. Is that understood? ... Find her, now!”

I smile slightly as Lex slams the phone down and heave a sigh of relief that he’s still focused on my kidnapping. My original note indicated that demands would be made ‘shortly’ after removing me to a remote and secure location. Although I gave no definite timeframe, we only have a few days to make it believable.

Discovering Lex’s true nature destroyed my esteem for him, and frankly, I don’t think I could stand to be around him anymore. I was never ‘in-love’ with Lex, but I did care for him and his apparent concern for me makes me feel almost... gratified.

Publicly, Lex is full of grief and righteous indignation about my disappearance, sending his staff of private investigators across the country looking for clues to my disappearance. I know he’s the worst kind of criminal, but it’s nice to know that somewhere buried deep inside my husband might be a teensy-weensy, microscopic amount of compassion left. The sound of Nigel’s arrival draws my attention back to the equipment.

“How goes the search for Mrs. Luthor, sir?”

“Not well, Nigel. The flat-foots are as incompetent as always and no one on our payroll has any information. I want those responsible found and made an example of quickly — no one takes anything from me and gets away with it.”

“I’ll handle it personally, sir.”

“Thank you, Nigel. I can always count on your expertise. While you’re there, we need to educate our new west-coast management team regarding the Boss’s expectations, with an emphasis placed on the consequences of failure. We still haven’t identified that leak.”

“Do you think moving so soon after Domo’s capture is wise?”

“The sooner — the better. The local police will be occupied looking for my erstwhile wife. What better time to reinforce our dominance over the less ... reputable endeavors? You know me, Nigel. I’m never one to squander an opportunity. When life hands me lemons...”

“You make champagne,” Nigel answers admiringly.

My mouth twists in distaste at the smug tone in Lex’s voice. I can almost see his self-satisfied smile. Okay, so I was wrong; there’s not a scrap of humanity left in him.

I turn my thoughts back to our investigation with renewed vigor when I hear the telltale ‘whoosh’ that heralds Clark’s return. I look up from my papers as Clark slips through the window. His apologetic grin goes a long way to soothing the frustration I feel at having to sandwich our investigation of Lex between his Superman rescues.

Clark has tried to limit his rescues in Metropolis over the past couple of days — he doesn’t want anyone to connect his presence

to me — so he’s also been doing scattered patrols in other major US cities, too. Even with his restraint, there’s a lot of need for someone like Superman in Metropolis and Clark can’t help himself when he hears a call for help.

How can I be upset that he’s out helping, especially when half the time he leaves it’s to stop one of Lex’s thugs? That, in and of itself, makes the delay worth it. I’m not idle while Clark’s gone, either. There’s plenty of work to do researching Lex’s corporate holdings and piecing together the elaborate lattice of shell corporations under which he hides his darker business dealings.

Our penthouse surveillance last night went well and gave me confidence that a search of Lex’s office will yield the information we’re looking for — if we can just get the chance. I blow a strand of hair from my eyes as I look at the stacks of paper in front of me. We’re still missing so much information that will bring the whole indecipherable mess into focus. Hopefully, we’ll find that information tonight.

Clark sits down on the bed next to me and I pick up where we’d left off discussing Lex’s staff. I hand him a photograph. “This is Asabi. We’ll need to know where he is before we go in.”

“Who is he?”

“He’s sort of a man-servant and eastern mystic rolled up in one. Sometimes he acts as Lex’s chauffeur, or butler, but he’s mostly a spiritual advisor. On occasion, he sets up weird little tests for Lex.”

“Kind of like Cato in the Pink Panther movies.”

I laugh at the image. “Yeah, something like that.” I hand him another photo. “This is Nigel St. John, Lex’s second in command. He’s a scary man. I had Jimmy do some research and as far as we can tell, he’s only existed for about six years. My contact in the NIA was able to give me one alias based on his picture — a Nicholas Sturgeon. They list him as a member of Her Majesties Secret Service gone bad. He has arrest warrants in at least three countries still outstanding.”

Clark whistles through his teeth and I hand him the third photo. “This is Mrs. Cox, Lex’s personal assistant and one of his enforcers. She handles the lower level dirty work. My bet is that she’ll be the one to provide us with the evidence linking Lex to his criminal activities.”

“Why do you think she’ll be the weak link?”

I clear my throat and silently berate myself for my testy tone. “Too much information, Lois. Clark doesn’t need to know about all that other stuff.” I shrug, feigning nonchalance.

“She’s the one going face to face with the Boss’s hired thugs. He doesn’t deal directly — probably to keep his hands clean and to always have an alibi. Instead, he instructs Nigel or Mrs. Cox on what to do.”

I color under Clark’s scrutiny and I glance at my watch as a diversion. I stuff the floor plan and photos into the main pocket of my backpack and shoulder it as I stand up. “Come on. We ought to get going.”

I open the window and peer into the dark alley before climbing onto the fire escape. Clark follows close behind me and closes the window. He looks so different in dark clothes and without glasses. He’s not wearing the goatee, but he still looks a little dangerous and sexier, if that’s possible. He looks around and then nods the all clear before sliding his arms around me to effortlessly hold me in his arms.

All that power and yet he holds me so gently. I tuck my head under his chin and can’t help the small sigh that escapes me. He tightens his grip and I feel him swallow. I have to repress the urge to kiss his throat.

“Are you okay, Lois?”

Damn. My heart is beating double time, but I hope he thinks it’s because I’m nervous about breaking into Lex’s office, not because being held by him turns me on. I don’t want him to know

how it excites me to be this close to him; I know he’d pull away from me. His morals would never allow him to do anything unseemly with a married woman, regardless how big a scumbag the husband is.

“I’m just a little nervous,” I answer. Thank god he doesn’t know the real reason why.

He lifts off and I’m distracted from my thoughts by the incredible feeling of flying. Like being weightless in a pool of water, only there’s force and freedom of movement, like Clark is now the center of gravity; he’s drawn me into his orbit and has me completely under his control.

“I hope you realize that now you’ve taken me flying,” I whisper, “you’re never going to get rid of me.”

His only response is to hold me tighter. Before I can stop myself, I snuggle in close, nuzzling his neck with my nose. I feel myself falling, not physically, but emotionally and I stiffen at the thought. I knew I never loved Lex, but before tonight, I couldn’t have said what being in love felt like.

Clark feels me tense and whispers reassurances. “We’re almost there.”

Am I imagining that his voice is tender and huskier than usual? Oh, god. I’m moony-eyed and breathless over a man, and I’m so far gone that I don’t really care how pathetic it is. I must be in love.

Seconds later, we land on the rooftop opposite the penthouse and I slide out of his arms. I don’t meet his eyes — Clark is perceptive enough that he’s sure to pick up on my unspoken thoughts. Instead, I clear my head by focusing on work. It’s what I’ve done my whole life to avoid uncomfortable emotions. I trust that it won’t fail me now.

I crouch down near the edge of the roof and shrug off my pack. I reach inside for a light and the floor plan as Clark hunkers down beside me. I flatten the paper out and shine my pen light on the far-east corner.

“These are Nigel’s quarters. Asabi’s are across the hall and down from the office here.” I point to several boxes on the paper in succession, labeling them as I go. “This is the master bedroom, the library, Lex’s office. Security and surveillance are here and here and Mrs. Cox stays in this room just off Lex’s outer office here.”

I look at my watch again. “If the pattern holds, the security detail will change in two minutes, then after a brief round of the upper penthouse floor, they’ll head down a level to check the executive offices. We’ll have twenty minutes before they come back.”

“Why don’t I start with the filing cabinets,” he suggests, “and move on to the safe last. That way if we need to get out quickly, we can take off from the balcony.”

I nod and open another sheet, which shows the more detailed schematic for Lex’s office. “The safe is on this wall behind a large painting. I’ll go through Lex’s desk for evidence while you open the safe using your hearing and vision gizmos.”

“Gizmos?”

“Well, yeah. Can’t you listen or watch for the tumblers? I couldn’t crack the safe in the office, but even *I* was able to get the one in the bedroom open.”

“Oh, well. If *you* could do it...” he teases. I bump his shoulder with mine and he laughs. “What about surveillance cameras?” he asks.

“There’s one camera here focused on the outer door and the safe, but no cameras on the filing cabinets or Lex’s desk that I’ve seen.”

He nods. “If we go through those first, I can take out the visual surveillance on the safe at the last minute.”

“Okay. We’ll have to be silent. Clearing out the bugs would be time consuming and would probably alert someone that something is up.” I pick up the papers and slip them back into my

pack before standing. “Ready?”

He gives me a strange look and raises an eyebrow. “Remind me never to get on your bad side.”

I slap his arm and give him one of my patented Lane glares, but he smiles back. “Just tell me where everyone is, Kent.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

I smother a grin as he stares intently at the building. “I see Asabi in his quarters. He’s doing a seated meditation. No one is in Nigel’s quarters...wait. He’s getting into the elevator, heading down to the lobby.”

“That’s one less to worry about — he should be gone a while based on the conversation I overheard. What about Lex?”

Clark shifts his gaze to the other end of the penthouse and his eyebrows draw down. “No one is in the office or in the master bedroom. The library is empty except for a security guard and the guest rooms are empty...”

His voice trails off and he looks away from the building. He reaches up to fidget with his glasses before he remembers that he’s not wearing them.

“Clark?” I prompt. “What about the other rooms? Do you see Lex or Mrs. Cox in there?”

He doesn’t answer and even in the darkness I can tell he’s blushing. He opens his mouth twice without saying anything, and I can tell he’s trying to word his answer carefully.

Oh...crap.

The most likely explanation for Clark’s embarrassment is that Lex is in bed with another woman. My cheeks flush scarlet at my shame. I didn’t want Clark to discover this dirty tidbit from my life, but I swallow my pride and decide to use it to our advantage. “Is he with Mrs. Cox, a woman with short blonde hair or someone else?”

Clark clears his throat and won’t meet my eyes. “Mrs. Cox.”

I nod briskly and step away from him, giving myself some physical distance as I ruthlessly stamp down my emotions. “Just getting started or almost finished?”

His face is practically glowing red, but he answers. “We uh... should have plenty of time to search the office.”

“Good. That accounts for both of them so we can search without fear of discovery. Are you ready?”

“Lois ...”

I hold up my hand. “Don’t, Clark. Let’s just go get the evidence. We can talk later.”

He nods curtly and puts on his gloves and balaclava while I’m putting on mine. When ready, he picks me up again, and I almost lose it when I realize he’s holding me stiffly, like he can’t stand to be near me anymore. I knew it. I knew he would despise me if he found out how pathetic I am; I not only married a crime lord, but the sleazebag cheated on me, too.

I can feel my face burning with rage and shame as we land on the penthouse balcony. I can’t look at Clark for fear of seeing the disappointment in his eyes. I open the French doors and we move simultaneously, silently making our way through the darkened office. I step directly to Lex’s desk and place my hands on the mahogany surface, leaning over my arms to hold me up. I stay that way until my knees stop shaking and Clark shifts into super speed. I finally manage to suck in a ragged breath.

“Dammit.”

I utter the curse softly under my breath, but it still causes Clark to solidify next to me holding several file folders in his hands. I refuse to look at him and after a brief hesitation he sets the files down and disappears again. Damn the super powers, anyway. He wasn’t supposed to hear me. I turn my attention back to my own tasks, but my hands are trembling so much that it takes me three tries before I get the locks on Lex’s desk to give.

Once open, I force my mind back on task and soon lose myself in the objects before me. I heave out what appears to be a set of ledgers. I open them and within seconds, realize these are

separate from LexCorp’s books. I pull out a hand-held scanner from my bag and start copying.

Clark works his way through the filing cabinets in no time and is soon standing a few feet away, fanning through the stack of files and taking pictures as he goes. He notices my impressed expression and smiles sheepishly before continuing. I shake my head and return to my scanning.

A portion of my thoughts lingers on Clark, though. I’m grateful of his help in spite of the shame of my exposure. Of course, seeing him use his special gifts is always thrilling, but having his emotional support and friendship is a comfort to my bruised soul. I knew instinctively that Clark was the one person with the skills and integrity to help me bring Lex to justice — I just didn’t realize how much I would need *him*.

Clark and I finish our copying about the same time, and as I slip the books back into the desk drawer, he returns the files to the cabinets. He moves quickly to disable the security camera and then steps up to the large Van Gogh painting on the west wall. I raise my hand in warning and he moves his hands away from the frame. He stares intently at the painting before leaning to the side, a small stream of smoke rising as he deftly shorts out the wires connecting it to the alarm. I smile in satisfaction as he lifts it down from the wall to reveal the safe. He interlaces his fingers and cracks them, wagging his eyebrows comically. I smile and shake my head, amused at his antics.

Seconds later, the safe is open and Clark turns to look at me, his eyes filled with amazement. I lean in, wanting to see what has captured his attention and stacks of money greet me. I roll my eyes and gesture for Clark to get on with it. Grinning, he shifts the piles of cash to the side and pulls out a small diary-style book. He flips through it and whistles softly at its contents. I peer over his shoulder and see that the pages are filled with bank account numbers, addresses and codes. Everything is labeled with acronyms, so it’s impossible to tell what they’re for, but my eyes bug out a bit at the amount of money in each one. I see seven to ten countries listed and flipping to the back, blueprints for some kind of fortress labeled in German.

As Clark starts snapping pictures of the book’s contents, I pull another stack of files from Lex’s safe, flipping through them as quickly and quietly as I can. I find names and situations that are familiar to me, links to many of the front-page stories I wrote the two years prior, but have no idea why Lex would be keeping track of them. I flip through them and note the dates and names in my notebook. When I flip to the next document, my blood runs cold.

“Oh my God,” I whisper softly.

Clark looks up sharply at my break in silence, but his frown softens immediately at the stricken look on my face. He steps to my side and looks at me questioningly, but I just shake my head and start scanning with shaky hands. This time Clark looks over my shoulder and I feel his body tense when he realizes that I’ve found the Daily Planet’s insurance payout forms. I hand him the rest of the file while I copy them. He sorts through the papers and I steal a few glances as he photographs a handwritten note about someone named John Black, payments for C-4 and something that looks like a step-by-step outline for the bombing.

Clark flips through the folder and his eyebrows draw down in anger as he pulls out another document. He hands it to me and my blood boils when I realize what it is — a second insurance policy through Lexel Investments for the Daily Planet, a policy written for enough to rebuild twice over.

My eyes blur and I blink furiously to hold the tears at bay. I already knew that Lex was behind the bombing, knew that his reasons for not rebuilding had nothing to do with money, but seeing the evidence of our suspicions overwhelms me. Clark places his hand on my shoulder and squeezes gently. The monstrous reality of losing the Daily Planet and Perry to Lex’s

careful orchestration is almost more than I can endure. For a moment, Clark's gentle support is all that keeps me on my feet.

Quick on the heels of pain comes the searing heat of fury. The unmitigated gall of Lex's actions and his belief that he not only would get away with it, but that he's entitled to do anything he wants, causes a deep yearning for vengeance. I make a silent and solemn vow to bring him down and make him pay for his crimes and God help anyone who stands in my way.

Clark squeezes my shoulder again and I take in a deep breath, nodding to him that I'm all right. He looks unconvinced so I pointedly look at the watch on my wrist. Clark understands the message; although I appreciate the comforting gesture, our time in the penthouse is running out.

A moment later, Clark's head snaps up and he looks intensely at the door behind me. I interpret his actions to mean he hears someone coming and my suspicions are confirmed when he immediately starts putting everything back in a blur. I just have time to get my scanner back into my bag before a gentle rush of wind flows around me and I find myself back in our room at the Apollo Hotel.

He's looking at me again. I can feel it. I haven't checked, but I imagine those beautiful, gentle eyes staring at me full of disappointment and it kills me just a little more; I can't bear to see it.

Upon our return to the hotel, I resolutely refused to discuss Lex's sexual proclivities, choosing instead to send Clark out on patrol while I printed our evidence. It would be best, I argued, for Superman to be seen very far away from Metropolis to avoid association with our break-in and the damaged surveillance camera we left in the penthouse.

That was over an hour ago. I've been ignoring his attempts to 'talk about it' for at least ten minutes now, but the pitiful sounds coming from him are only getting more annoying. After he heaves another pathetic sigh, I slap my papers down on the table and turn to him, crossing my arms.

"What?" I bark. My sudden outburst startles him and I feel just a teeny, tiny bit bad about snapping at him.

"Are you...okay," he asks tentatively.

"I'm fine."

"Lois, your heart rate is one hundred fifty beats per minute sitting down. That's not fine."

It's not; I know it's not, but it doesn't matter. I feel humiliated and refuse to discuss this with him. I look away from him and start shuffling the papers again, trying to avoid his sympathy. "I don't want to talk about it."

I hear him get up and successfully ignore him until I feel his hands rest on my shoulders. "Then don't," he says. "Just relax."

My eyes slip shut when he starts kneading gently and I drop my head forward as he rubs the tension from my neck. His hands move, pressing small circles down the center of my back until the papers I'm holding droop and then finally drift lazily from my loose fingers.

As his fingertips absorb the strain from my body and replace it with a warm lethargy, my thoughts become more ordered and rational. I begin to wonder what I gain by not dealing with the elephant in the room. Clark's a clever guy. Based on what he saw and my earlier comments, he's sure to have pieced it together by now anyway. He knows, or can guess, that this isn't the first time Lex has cheated on me and that I knew about it before tonight.

I cling to the idea that Clark knows my darkest secrets and even after finding out what a fool I am, he's still here. He knows it, yet he hasn't run away from me. It's this fact that finally draws the confession from my lips.

"I knew," I softly admit. "Even before I married him, I knew he would cheat on me."

Clark's hands pause briefly on my shoulders before he

continues with the massage. His only concession to my words is to press more firmly along my spine. He doesn't say anything, though, and I'm very grateful for his restraint.

"The first time I suspected he slept with another woman after our marriage, I was devastated. Then I went ballistic and Lex got his first real dose of Lane fury. I think it shocked him a little. My tantrum made me feel better, but it didn't really change anything. Right from the beginning, Lex told me that the pursuit of pleasure drives him, and I had no delusions that our marriage would make him a monogamous man. I learned from my father that men aren't honest when it comes to sex and they never stay faithful."

"Lois, not all men are like that."

I glance back at him with a sad, wistful smile. "I want to believe that. There are lots of men in my life that haven't let me down. Perry was like a father to me, Jimmy is like a brother; Bobby, Louie and Henderson have all been trustworthy. You." That earns me a smile. "But when it comes to romantic relationships ... well, let's just say that I put up with Lex's behavior because my experiences made me a cynic."

What I can't admit out loud is that my inadequacy in the bedroom was one of the reasons I asked Lex to wait until our wedding night to consummate our relationship. The idea of being intimate with him scared me silly, but I hadn't needed to worry. His expertise certainly made up for my shortcomings; sex with my husband wasn't a hardship. But for all his knowledge and skill, it didn't include much tenderness, or love.

"I gave up the idea that love existed a long time ago," I explain, "so I settled for financial security."

Clark's hesitant voice pulls me from my thoughts. "I wish ... it's just ... loving someone with your whole heart and being loved unconditionally in return *is* possible. You should never have to settle for less."

His gentle tone cracks my detached facade, and tears I didn't expect slip down my cheeks. "I can't ... your opinion matters so much to me, Clark. It's killing me to know that you see me as less now."

He wraps his arms around my shoulders and pulls me into a gentle embrace against his chest. "You're my friend and I care about you," he whispers intently into my hair. "None of this changes my opinion of you; you're strong, brilliant, beautiful ... pig-headed."

I snort with laughter and he hugs me tighter. "Nothing Luthor does will ever make me see anything but the most amazing woman I've ever met."

His generosity and understanding are such a relief that I finally let go of the anger and pain of Lex's perfidy. I sigh and relax completely, snuggling into Clark's chest as my thoughts begin to drift. After a long, comfortable stretch of silence, I murmur, "you know, I think I'm glad."

"About what?"

"Lex doesn't make mistakes; he never would have given me reason to doubt his public image. It was Mrs. Cox that tipped me off."

He doesn't respond to my statement but keeps holding me, rocking me slightly as the emotions and late hour take their toll. "I should get back to work," I slur, struggling to pull my droopy eyelids open.

Clark shushes me and rocks me again. The last thought to run through my head is to wonder why the shushing doesn't bother me.

"Can the two of you just...back up a little? Your hovering is making me nervous."

Clark and I straighten and take a step back, but we ruin the resulting space by leaning forward over Jimmy's shoulders again. We watch the screen as Jimmy types in the commands that will give him access to Lex's computer. Since the first afternoon when

he failed to hack into Lex's files, Jimmy spent every non-researching hour over the past couple of weeks developing this program and if it works, it'll allow us access to everything Lex has on his drive. It's now that we find out if the access codes we found in Lex's office safe last night will gain us the evidence we need.

"Are you sure you can't just log in using the access codes?" I ask for the twentieth time.

"Not without triggering a system alarm. Once we upload this little baby, though, my Trojan horse will act like a legitimate user inside the system and send us a copy of what's there."

It sounds perfect and I'm pretty impressed with him. Jimmy's voice betrays the pride he feels about his creation, but it's tempered with nervousness. Our midnight foray into the penthouse was successful, but we don't have everything we need — yet. I really need this to work.

Jimmy's fingers pause above his keyboard. "Ready?"

I place my hand on his shoulder and squeeze. "Go," I say.

He hits enter and we wait, each of us holding our breath. We stay staring at the screen for a full minute before Clark asks, "What happens next?"

"Now, we wait. The system will see an authorized entry into the LexCorp system with a well-known virus attached. The network security will identify and neutralize the invasive program, but that part of the program is a diversion. With Lex's access codes attached, the real program won't look like a virus, it'll look like an authentic login from inside the network."

"How long will it take?" I ask.

Jimmy scratches the back of his neck. "Unfortunately, we have to wait for Luthor, St. John or Mrs. Cox to log into the system, so it depends on them."

As it turns out, we don't have to wait very long. Before the day is out, we've printed a ream of evidence and the information is still coming. I'm amazed at the volume of criminal activities. I thought I knew how crooked Lex was, but even I'm shocked by what we find: extortion, smuggling, money laundering, prostitution, arson, gunrunning, drug dealing, espionage, bribery and murder.

Lex is the biggest criminal on the eastern seaboard, if not the country, and perhaps the biggest crook of all time. He almost makes Capone look like a priest. The three of us dig into the information and it doesn't take long before we start recognizing names and events.

"Samuel Platt," Clark mutters. "Who is that? The name sounds familiar."

I lean across several stacks of papers to look at the document in Clark's hand. "He's the scientist that died to prove the Prometheus transport was sabotaged. Antoinette Baines was behind it. She tried to blow us up; Jimmy and I barely escaped with our lives and she died trying to escape."

"She wasn't alone," he says. Clark hands me a financial statement showing losses in the billions of dollars, including costs for building Space Station Luthor, as well as amounts for bribes, several bombs and a helicopter.

One vitriolic reference to my name catches my attention and my eyebrows climb. "He didn't much appreciate it when I disconnected that bomb on the colonists transport, did he?"

"I guess not," Clark agrees.

"Lois," Jimmy calls, "look at this one — Lex was also involved with the testing of that experimental 'smart' drug on those kids, remember?"

"Wow, it looks like Dr. Carlton wasn't funding his own research on the Mentamide 5," I say. "Too bad he overdosed on his own drug — he could have clued us into Lex's involvement." I set the page onto an ever-growing stack of evidence and reach for another when Clark's pensive look catches my eye. "What?"

"That's awfully convenient, isn't it? You exposed two of his

endeavors and Luthor's partner took the blame and eventually met an untimely end, leaving his hands clean."

The reference to Mentamide 5 and Clark's observation tickles my memory about one file from Lex's safe. I grab my notebook and open it to the page of names and dates I recognized before. Armed with that information and Clark's theory, it takes little time to get a clear picture. Each time I exposed one of Lex's shady deals over the past couple of years, a partner took the blame and either died or went to prison.

Max Menken took the rap for killing my friend, Allie Dinello, and for fixing the boxing matches using robotically enhanced fighters. Now I can see that Lex's aim was to create super soldiers. When I exposed the boxers, Lex went on to clear my father of wrongdoing and then saved my life by shooting Max. It was the first time I thought of Lex as a hero, my own knight in shining armor.

Next we found evidence that Toni Taylor — the head of the Metro gang and the Toasters — was partnered up with Lex, only to take the fall when I exposed her. Lex saw me that night I sang at the Metro Club. When he caught my eye and tossed me a rose, I worried about my cover. Instead, Lex used the opportunity to visit me at my apartment, both earning my gratitude and creating an alibi the night Toni died in a warehouse fire.

He funded Miranda's work with the pheromone spray, too. It was supposed to make people 'drunk on love' by removing their inhibitions. Well, it removed my inhibitions all right, but not the sexual ones. Inspector Henderson eventually dropped the felony breaking and entering charges when my evidence helped them stop Miranda from spraying the entire population of Metropolis with the more potent and permanent solution.

The list went on; the nuclear power plant scandal that I traced to the plant manager, Doctor Fabian Leek's illegal cloning experiments, the stolen artworks I traced to an underground storage facility and then there was the bombing of the Daily Planet.

The main suspect in the bombing was a street kid, Jack. I first met Jack when Louie caught him trying to fence my stolen laptop. After swearing Louie to secrecy about my novel, I took pity on Jack. I remember how hard it was to practically raise Lucy, so I helped Jack get a job as a copy boy at the Planet. Somehow, the explosives were planted in his lunch box. Jack was never been cleared of the charges and subsequently disappeared from juvenile hall. Poor kid.

From the accumulating file notes, it's clear that Lex considered me a loose cannon and, as it turns out, an expensive one. In one year, my investigations cost Lex's empire billions of dollars. Just as Clark speculated, I was a thorn in his side, chipping away at his plans until he neutralized me.

"So why not just kill you?" Clark asks. "I'm glad he didn't, but why the elaborate set up and marriage?"

"Several reasons," I answer. "Lex loves a challenge and it was probably a thrill to win me over and to destroy my independence. We also overheard Lex saying that it's embarrassing to do away with someone; that it announces he lacks the finesse to deal with something more creatively. He feels like he's let himself down."

Clark's face twists in disgust. "There are so many things wrong with that statement that I don't even know where to start. The sooner we get him behind bars, the better."

I can't help but agree.

I smother a giggle as Clark tugs the crotch of his leather pants down for the fourth time.

"It's a little tight," he explains.

"Clark," I beckon him closer with one hand and press the other against the hidden microphone in my top. He leans in close so that I can whisper under my breath. "You're invulnerable and

spend half your life flying around in skin tight spandex. How can this possibly be uncomfortable for you?"

He moves back and glares at me before reaching up to smooth the bandana around his hair, pulling it lower on his forehead. "It's not that it chafes, it's the way *they* keep looking at me."

I look in the general direction of his jerky thumb movements to see several women eyeing Clark like he's tonight's dessert special. I glare at them until they turn back to whisper amongst themselves, nursing their drinks and casting longing glances toward my partner's tight breeches. I allow my eyes to follow the same path, taking in the tight, black dress shirt and then across his posterior as he leans around to look for our man again. I can't help it. I drool and lick my lips as my eyes linger somewhere lower than his intellect. He clears his throat and my eyes snap up.

"Lois," he hisses.

"What?" Although I try for innocence, my dry throat and heated cheeks belie the fact I was ogling.

"Focus, please?"

"Believe me, I am focused. Very focused..." I mumble the last words then smile at his exasperated growl. A sound, incidentally, that has exactly the opposite effect on me than intended. God, but he is gorgeous.

I laugh and open my compact to check my lipstick. "Face it, Clark. You're far too attractive for your own good. You should be used to it by now."

Above my mirror, I watch him roll his eyes before my eyes start the pleasant trip across his broad shoulders and down his muscular arms. My mind wanders into a totally inappropriate fantasy when his sotto whisper brings me back to reality and reminds me of our impending meeting.

"Are you sure he'll come?"

"He'll come. Louie said he will work for anyone if the price is right." Once I made it clear what I wanted, Louie put the word out that someone named 'Angel' wanted John Black for his demolition expertise, along with the date and time of the meeting.

"He's here," Clark announces, sliding his sunglasses up his nose.

I fluff my hair and check my face one more time before snapping the compact shut. "Showtime."

This is it. If we can get his confession, we've got the first link between Lex and the destruction of the Daily Planet. I watch John Black settle onto a bar stool as Clark approaches him. Clark whispers something to Black and slips him a stack of hundred dollar bills. Black pockets the money before nodding, rising to follow Clark as he leads him back to my table.

Black settles in across from me and Clark takes up a protective position to my back, playing my faithful bodyguard. Black leers at me, his eyes roaming to focus on my cleavage. The red leather halter-top is my favorite for this very reason. He won't suspect that there's anything going on above my neckline.

"So," I smack my gum loudly to pull his attention back to my face. "You Johnny?"

"Who's askin', baby doll?"

"I'm Angel. I got a special kinda job and you come highly recommended. You a free agent?"

"It depends. What've you got in mind, sweet thing? You need a little, uh ... excitement?"

I mentally gag, but maintain my bimbo facade through remarkable effort and smile innocuously instead. "Kinda. I need some demolition work done, like what you did to that newspaper building last year."

"Who told you I had anything to do with that?"

"I heard it from the Boss."

Instead of responding, he takes a slow sip from his drink and then lowers the glass and tips it back and forth, the ice cubes settling into the silence between us. He sets the glass down on the

table and looks at me with narrowed eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about," he says at last.

My jaw slows as I chew my gum while considering what to do next. I don't have a clue what I said or didn't say that made him suspicious, but I realize that Johnny isn't going to admit anything, not if I don't give him an additional incentive. I carefully pull out a stack of money from my cleavage and count out about ten thousand dollars, laying the bills on the table in front of me. I know I've made the right move when I catch a glint of greed in his eye.

I slide the stack to the center of the table but leave my hand on top of it. "I don't want to play around, Johnny. I've got a job to do and I'm willing to pay, but I'm looking for the guy that blew the Planet for Luthor last spring. Was that you?"

He reaches for the money but Clark catches his wrists against the table. Johnny winces in pain at the tight grip and glares at Clark, but Clark only glares back.

"The lady asked you a question," Clark says gruffly.

Johnny's eyes flick to me and I blow a bubble, popping it loudly. "Yeah, that was me," he finally answers.

"How'd you do it?" I ask. "Did you work the details yourself, or did the Boss plan it out?"

At my nod, Clark releases his hands and Johnny pulls back, sliding the money into his shirt pocket before rubbing his wrist and shrugging. "Bit of both really. It was a cut and dry job. I swiped a lunch pail and the boss supplied the explosives. Since he didn't care about collateral damage, there wasn't much planning. I just planted the explosives, waited for his signal and sat back to enjoy the fireworks."

"You didn't decide on the timing?"

"Nah. The Boss was very specific — the babe had to be out before it could blow or I wouldn't get paid."

I nod and pretend to mull things over as I swallow the bile rising in my throat. "The Boss paid you himself? I didn't think he dealt directly with thugs."

Johnny's eyes narrow at the insult. "I ain't a thug; I'm the talent." His eyes roam over my body again. "Cox paid me. You pay out like she does?"

I lick my lips and run my eyes down his body, shifting forward to give him a clear view down my top. "I guess you'll have to wait and see, won't you?"

He leers at me again and gives me what I'm sure is meant to be a seductive look. "Why all these questions? What's that job got to do with yours?"

"I want to bring down a high-profile business man for ... personal reasons and figured if you could pull off blowing up the Daily Planet without getting caught, you were the man I wanted."

"So, do I get the job, or what?"

"Sure," I giggle again. "Why don't we go someplace private to discuss the details?"

I stand up and hold out my hand to him, the invitation clear. Johnny grins lasciviously and slips out of the booth to follow me. I turn to walk to the back door of the club with Johnny at my side, and Clark falls into step behind us. After a few steps, I feel Johnny's hand on my butt, which slides down my short leather skirt to linger on my fishnet-clad thigh. I turn to smile at him and catch Clark's stormy look from the corner of my eye. I risk a quicksilver glare, silently telling him to leave it for the few remaining steps to the back door. In response, Clark hurries forward and opens the door for me.

"Such service," Johnny mocks before swaggering out of the club and into the alley.

With the crook of a finger, I motion for Johnny to follow me, and then I turn to walk hurriedly down the dark alleyway. I see faint splashes of red and blue reflected against the asphalt ahead of me, so I make sure to wiggle my hips enticingly as I walk to keep Black's attention. It's probably not necessary since Clark is

bringing up the rear — I'm sure he won't let Black get away.

My distracting movements must work, because Johnny remains close behind me as I turn the corner of the building. By the time he realizes we aren't alone, Henderson's men surround him with their guns drawn. One officer pushes Black up against the wall and frisks him, while another reads him his rights. Clark and I join Henderson and I watch Johnny look around frantically for an escape until his eyes land on me, his face darkening in outrage.

I blow a bubble and pop it loudly before reaching into my top. I watch Black's eyes widen when he sees me pull the wire out of my halter top to hand it back to Henderson. I smirk before turning my attention to Henderson.

"Did you get it?" I ask.

"Every word. Thanks for the tip, Lane."

Grinning, I turn toward Black as the officer cuffs him and then pulls him toward one of the cruisers. I step up close enough to pull the money out of his shirt pocket and smile at his livid expression. "What do you think, Spike? You think the Boss'll be happy that Johnny spilled the beans?"

"Bitch! You set me up?"

"Yeah, I did," I giggle. "And you are going to prison for a long, long time."

"Not so long as you think," he warns.

"Oh, I beg to differ. Don't take it personally, Johnny; I'm after the Boss. Catching you is just the icing on my cake."

In response, Johnny laughs, but it's a despondent, hopeless laugh. "You ain't got squat, lady. I'll never live to testify."

"Don't worry, Johnny. Henderson only brought clean cops with him tonight. You'll live. Besides, I've got enough on the Boss to bring him down without you. Taking you down for destroying the Daily Planet is sweet all by itself."

"You don't get it. He doesn't allow loose ends; I'll be dead by morning and you'll be close behind. He's your worst nightmare."

Henderson approaches and places his hand on top of Johnny's head, pushing him down into the squad car. "You think the Boss is scary?" Henderson asks, flashing a quick glance at me and shaking his head. "He hasn't got anything on the Missus."

Johnny's eyes widen in recognition as the police officer closes the door in his face. I wave as they drive away. Once he's gone, I turn to Clark and throw my arms around his neck. He hugs me back and I laugh with joy. "We got him."

Clark sets me down on my feet and we stand there, staring at each other and smiling like fools. I see his eyes flick down to my mouth and my smile slips, the pit of my stomach quivering at the thought of kissing him. Henderson ruins my chances by butting in with reality.

"Don't get cocky, Lane. We still need Cox to confess before we can get anything solid on Luthor."

I pull away from Clark and turn toward Henderson. "But we're close, aren't we? You can bring her in on Black's word?"

"Yeah. Thanks to you we're closer than we've ever been. I've been looking for the Boss for a long time." He quirks an eyebrow at me and grimaces. "It almost makes up for the pain you're putting us through to perpetuate your 'kidnapping' story."

Clark earns an ineffective jab to the ribs when he snorts, trying not to laugh at the byplay between Henderson and me. I roll my eyes and turn back to Henderson, who's now staring at the microphone in his hand, lost in thought.

"What is it, Bill?"

"I'm just wondering," he smirks. "How in the world did you hide this in that scrap of material you call a shirt."

"No, Clark."

"Why not, Lois?"

I cross my arms to steel myself against his puppy-dog look and pleading stance. Who knew Superman would use

underhanded tactics, like a pathetically adorable expression, to get his way? I use the only means available to me to fortify against it; I give him a little Mad-Dog Lane in response.

"We've gone over this ad nauseum, Clark. I'm not talking about it anymore."

"There's more than enough evidence. Let's give everything to Inspector Henderson tonight and Luthor will be behind bars by morning."

"I said no."

I turn to walk away, eager to put some distance between the officers lingering after Johnny's bust and our disagreement. Not three steps later, I falter at the feel of Clark's hand on my arm. He doesn't restrain me, but without even having to wrap his fingers around my arm, his light touch affects me deeply. It's the same feeling I get every time he touches me, like an electric charge flowing along my arm and into my heart.

Unable to help myself, I hesitate and look back at Clark to see genuine concern in his face. I realize that he isn't trying to run my life or take over the investigation; he's just trying to understand. How can I explain it to him?

My need to expose Lex's true nature isn't about winning an award or proving myself in a man's world or even justice. It's more personal than that. Failing to see Lex's true nature hurt my confidence in myself. Under the guise of romance and gallantry, Lex swept me off my feet by literally destroying the ground I walked upon.

I sigh and let go of my anger. "Please, Clark? I need a direct link between him and the Daily Planet — for Perry and for me. He took everything most precious to me and used it against me. I need it to be the Planet that brings him down."

"Lois, Henderson says that they can get Mrs. Cox based on Black's involvement."

"I know, but Black won't testify and even with the evidence that Mrs. Cox hired him and gave him the explosives, it's not a direct link."

I stare into his eyes willing him to understand. It feels like an eternity before he sighs in acquiescence, and I release the breath I'm holding. On impulse, I throw my arms around him in thanks. He wraps his arms tightly around me in return and we hold each other for a long moment. We both pull back and I find myself falling into his eyes.

The harsh shrill of my phone ringing breaks the spell this time. Blushing, Clark releases me and steps back against the brick wall of the alleyway while I dig my phone out of its hiding place. I fumble a little as I try to get it open, the feelings from holding Clark making my hands tremble. When I finally do, my words come out sounding gruffer than intended.

"What have you got?" I demand.

"Lois! Is that any way to greet a friend?"

"Bobby? How did you get this number?"

"It's one of my trade secrets."

I smile. Jockeying with Bobby is familiar territory and his wry answer settles the remaining flutters in my stomach. "Oh? You mean like the secret that you give all that food I pay you with to your homeless informants — that kind of trade secret?"

"I'm wounded that you would expose me like that, Lois. Maybe I don't have anything for you after all."

His puting answer makes me smile. It feels so good to be investigating again. "Don't tease me, Bobby. My skirt's too tight for teasing."

"You look great in the red halter-top, by the way."

My mouth drops open in shock and I take a quick look around. I can't see him anywhere. "How did you...?"

"So you want this information on the Boss, or what? When we spoke earlier, you made it sound important..."

"You've got something on the Boss?" Clark stands up from the wall, now paying close attention to my phone call. I grab his

arm and squeeze tightly. This could be the break we've been waiting for.

"For ten passes to the all-you-can-eat on Broad Street, I do."

"Bobby, for something solid on Lex, I'll make it twenty," I eagerly reply.

"Deal. The Boss has a meeting set up at eleven tonight at a dockside warehouse, the old wooden one on Trudell Street."

"What's it for?"

"Couldn't get that, but I do know Luthor will be there in person."

"Thanks, Bobby. I owe you."

"Don't mention it. And Lois ..."

"Yeah?"

"Watch it, will ya? He won't hesitate to kill you."

I pause. It surprises me that Bobby breaks from character long enough to voice his concerns. I'm always careful, but I appreciate the reminder as to how dangerous Lex is. It won't do to let *him* know that, though.

"Why, Bobby, I didn't know you cared."

He sniffs and replies to my playful tone with indifference. "I don't. I just don't want you to renege on those meals."

I laugh and hear him cut the connection. I close the phone and shove it back into my bag. A quick glance at Clark informs me that he heard Bobby's comments, so I grab Clark's hand and twist his wrist to look at his watch. We have just enough time.

"Come on," I say, pulling Clark down the street. "Trudell is only a few blocks from here. If we hurry, we can stake it out before Lex gets there."

Ten minutes later, we quietly round a concrete storage facility to face the dockside warehouse Bobby mentioned. We slip into a dark corner along the wall of a building down the street and stand flush against the wall.

"Let's get inside, quick."

Clark grabs my arm and pulls me back. "Has it ever occurred to you to look before you leap, Lois?"

I pat his cheek. "Of course not, you're here. Now, fly me inside."

I lean around him to look at the warehouse again and then hold out my arms, waiting for him to pick me up, but he stands his ground. He crosses his arms over his chest and gives me that patented Superman glare, but the tacky gold chains wrapped around his neck ruin the image. I smile innocently and he sighs in defeat.

Before we can move, however, a taxi pulls up to the warehouse and disgorges a man dressed in a dark navy p-coat. I squint into the darkness, but can't see any details from this distance. I'm reaching into my bag for my binoculars when I feel Clark tense up beside me. I turn to him and his apprehensive look turns my stomach.

"It's one of Trask's men," he explains.

Oh, no. My mind races at the implications of a member of Bureau 39 meeting with Lex. If this meeting is about my kidnapping, the soldier could confirm that I left my hotel room by way of the window. And if it's about Superman? Given Lex's enmity toward Superman, telling Lex about Trask has put Clark in danger. I wanted to divert Lex's suspicions and instead gave him a link to the only people with the means to hurt Clark.

"Clark, I'm sorry. I didn't know ... I didn't mean to put you in danger."

As the soldier enters the warehouse, Clark's eyes shift to me and a tender grin pulls at one corner of his mouth. "I know, Lois. It's okay."

"But what if he tells Lex about the meteorite?"

"Let's not borrow trouble," he cautions softly. "The meeting is probably about your kidnapping; there's no reason to assume he will tell him about the Kryptonite."

"Kryptonite?"

Clark shrugs. "Well, they think it's a meteorite from my home planet, so... Come on; let's see what he's up to."

He takes my hand and we start walking briskly toward the warehouse. Before we make it very far, the headlights of an approaching car round the corner to pull to a stop in front of the warehouse. Without thinking, I grab Clark's hand and tug him back into the darkness. I pull him up against me and tuck one fishnet clad leg next to his, trapping him in an intimate embrace. Clark stumbles, catching himself against the wall with one outstretched arm. When I grab his shirt and pull myself flush against him so that I can peek over his shoulder, he grunts softly in surprise.

The car is Lex's black limousine. My throat constricts and I shrink down a little, hiding behind Clark as the driver opens the rear door. A man in a black trench coat and fedora steps out. He takes his time to pull on a pair of gloves, turning to scan the area as he does. I see him nod his head in our direction and I recognize the chauffeur when he turns around. My heart starts pounding as my mind races through escape plans.

"Lois?"

Clark's soft voice in my ear calms me down enough that I can whisper to him what I'm seeing. As Nigel makes his way toward us I start to panic, but my mind quiets as I realize we have the perfect cover in place, as long as we play it out. I take a deep breath.

"Nigel is coming," I inform him. "Quick, kiss me."

Clark's eyebrows climb up his forehead. "What?" he whispers.

"Come on, Charlie," I cajole in my bimbo voice. I run a hand into his hair, dislodging his bandana, and do my best to ignore the tingling sensation it gives my fingertips. I look quickly over Clark's shoulder to see Nigel still walking toward us. I look back at Clark and disregard the look of abject terror on his face to glare at him.

"Clark Kent," I hiss, "You blow my cover and I swear to God, I'll find a piece of the green stuff myself and take you apart, piece by invulnerable piece. Now, kiss ..."

I stop mid-threat when he lunges forward to grab my lips with his. It's not a gentle peck or a fake kiss on the side of my mouth as I expected, but a passionate assault on my mouth. His sudden movement shocks me until it sinks into my brain that Clark is kissing me and I'm swept away by the feelings it creates in me. I dive in, reciprocating with equal fervor. All other thoughts fly out of my head when his tongue slips into my mouth. Oh my god, he tastes even better than he smells.

For a few glorious minutes, I focus on pure sensation; the feel of his hand splayed across the small of my back, the taste of his mouth, and the sound of our ragged breathing. I can't form any thoughts except how good it feels to kiss him and how much I don't ever want it to end. Eventually, though, the need for air penetrates the euphoria I feel and we finally break the kiss.

When he starts to pull away, I tighten my grip on him, my hands fisting in his hair as my leg wraps tighter around his thigh. I hear him whimper, a sexy little sound in the back of his throat, and I pull him closer to chase it back into his mouth. I'm not sure how long we continue to kiss, but when I finally release him, we're both breathing hard.

"Are they gone?" he pants.

I'm so distracted by my desire to kiss him again, that his softly whispered question can't even pull my hungry gaze from his mouth.

"Who?" I ask distractedly.

The meaning of his question doesn't sink in until he avoids my attempt to kiss him again. I see his eyebrows draw down into a reasonably good mimic of my glare from a moment ago, and it snaps me back to reality. I blush and look over his shoulder to see

Nigel and Lex disappearing through the front door of the dilapidated warehouse.

I release Clark immediately and step away from him, nonchalantly pushing my hair back into place. From the corner of my eye, I see him move away quickly, too, stumbling a little to put some distance between us. After taking a deep breath, he turns to look at the warehouse.

“The coast is clear,” he says. “They’re inside.”

I do my best to ignore the heat rising to my cheeks by grabbing my bag from the ground and walking quickly toward the building. “Let’s go,” I command.

By the time he catches up to me, I’ve stowed the thoughts about my wanton actions and the resulting embarrassment away. There’ll be plenty of time for figuring out my feelings for Clark after we’re done with the investigation. Instead, I focus on how to get inside the warehouse without being seen. On this side of the building, there is a row of large, dirty windows about twenty feet up. The only visible entrance is the front door.

“Can you see another entrance,” I whisper.

“No. I can’t see through the lead paint,” he whispers back. “Back in a jiff.”

Before I can say a word, he disappears, only to reappear a second later. He smirks at my expression and puts a finger to my chin to close my gaping mouth.

“There’s only one door,” he confirms. “The only other way in is through a window.”

Someday, I’m going to be used to the superpowers, but for now, I shake off my awe to focus on finding something to stack so I can climb inside. I gasp when Clark puts his hand on my waist to stop me.

“Shh,” he cautions.

I feel gravity slip away as he floats us up to a broken window. We pause for a moment to look through the grimy panes into the dim interior. I can’t see a thing, but I know Clark can. Through Herculean effort, I remain silent as he looks around.

“They’re in the main workshop area,” he murmurs. “If we’re careful, I can probably get us close enough for you to hear.”

He lifts me through the window and sets me down on a suspended catwalk while he comes inside. Once through, he picks me up again and floats us both down through the shadows to the main level and sets me down behind a stack of broken pallets. I take one step and freeze as the click of my heel resonates into the dark space. I reach down and slip my shoes off, picking them up to tiptoe toward a dim shaft of light and the murmur of voices.

I peek around the corner and see Lex and Nigel talking with the soldier. We’re close enough now to hear the conversation, and I set down my shoes to fish around in my bag for my tape recorder. I hand Clark the camera and he takes several pictures as we listen.

“I’m telling you,” the soldier says, “There’s nothing else I could do. The ship was gone when we got back from San Francisco.”

“What about the files,” Nigel asks.

“Locked up tighter’n the Metropolis Gold Repository on a Sunday. Because of that damn newspaper article, the State Department has confiscated all of the Bureau’s records. We’ve all been suspended pending the conclusion of a military inquest.”

“Trask is sloppy and careless,” Nigel proclaims. “He should have ordered a strategic retreat when he realized Mrs. Luthor knew who he was.”

“The storage facility was secure; we think Superman entered through the roof and took the ship.”

“And Mrs. Luthor?” Nigel presses.

“We didn’t have anything to do with her disappearance,” the soldier protests. “She was gone before we got into the hotel room.”

“You didn’t see anyone or anything else?” Nigel persists.

“There was no sign of an earlier forced entry — the door was chained from the inside — and the shower was running when we broke in. I personally had the exits covered, so the only way out was the window. Given the circumstances of her disappearance and the fact that Superman’s vessel vanished after Mrs. Luthor’s article, Trask thinks the alien was involved, but ...”

“Why are we here, Lieutenant Carter?” Lex speaks for the first time. “You said you had something for me, but all I’ve heard about ... are your failures.” The fedora shadows his face, but Lex’s tone runs a shiver up my spine. The soldier must hear it too, because he stammers a little as he pulls his pack open.

“Colonel Trask has gone rogue in order to continue with his neutralization plan of the alien. I went AWOL tonight to bring you this.”

I stifle a gasp when he produces a familiar metal box. I glance at Clark and see the same apprehension that’s knotting my stomach. It’s bad that the soldier confirmed the Bureau had nothing to do with my kidnapping, but giving the Kryptonite to Lex? The thought of Trask with the meteorite is scary, but in Lex’s hands, I shudder to think of the damage he could do. We have to get it back.

Lex opens the box and his face is illuminated by the sickly green glow. Even from this distance, I can see the manic gleam in his eye. “Is this the only piece?”

“Yes, sir. It was before my time with the Bureau, but I understand that Trask collected it when they first unearthed the ship. The radiation is supposed to be benign to humans, but we speculate it could kill the alien.”

Lex’s eyes linger on the glowing crystals as his lips purse in thought. “Are there any links, Nigel?”

“Nothing can be traced back to you, sir.”

“Good. Lieutenant Carter, it appears that we no longer require your services.” Lex finally closes the box, holding it in one hand at his side. He turns to leave and Carter grabs his sleeve.

“What about my money? I can’t go back now and I have no intention of going to jail for this.”

Lex roughly shakes off his hand and steps back a pace. “Don’t worry,” he says with disdain. “You aren’t going to jail. Nigel, do you have his payment?”

“Yes, sir.”

Lex holds out his hand. “If I may? You know how I like to keep my hand in the game.”

“Of course, sir.”

Nigel hands Lex a dark object, which he takes in his free hand. Before either Clark or I can react, Lex raises the gun and fires once, hitting Carter in the head. Knowing that my husband is a criminal and a killer is one thing, but seeing him actually murder someone in cold blood is another. I can’t hold back the horrified yelp that escapes my lips.

As the soldier falls to the floor, I cover my mouth with my hand, but the damage is done. The brief hope that the sound of the gunshot will cover my startled yell is dashed when Lex and Nigel both turn toward our shadowed hiding place. A second later, several shots splinter the wooden crates around us as Lex and Nigel fire in our direction. Clark shoves his body in front of me to shield me and I press into the safety of his body.

The firing stops and my ears ring in tandem with the lingering echo of gunfire. “Clark,” I whisper, softly pleading for him to get us out of there.

He tightens his hold around me. “Tuck your head,” he whispers back. “We’re going to move fast.”

I nod my head against his chest and clench my eyes shut, but my stomach still drops when he whisks us away. We’re back in the relative safety of our hotel room before Lex can reach our former hiding place and realize that we’ve gone.

Clark hands me a glass of water and after a few sips the room stops spinning enough for my hands to start trembling. I've seen a lot of terrible things in my years as a reporter, but none as brutal as watching my husband calmly shoot someone in the head. I wanted Lex to pay for the bombing of the Planet, to have my chance to take him down for what he did to me and to Perry and the others, but Clark is right; we can't wait.

I hand my water glass back and before Clark can stand up, I grab the sleeve of his shirt to hold him there. "Let's take everything to Henderson now," I say softly. "We need to get Lex behind bars."

He nods and in the time it takes me to call Henderson and Jimmy, Clark has gathered all of our evidence into neat piles, placing them inside a box for ease of transport. Less than fifteen minutes after the shooting, we arrive at an inconspicuous entrance to the police station, and Henderson ushers us into his office before any prying eyes can identify us. I sit down in the chair opposite Henderson's desk and shift uncomfortably, wishing I'd taken the time to change out of my disguise.

"Did you get him?" I ask.

Henderson shakes his head. "The officers just arrived and the place is empty. No sign of Luthor or a body, although they did see some blood and the bullet holes. Forensics is heading down there now."

I hand him the tape recording and the camera. "This should help. Lex stayed in the shadows most of the time, but Nigel and Carter were visible."

Henderson takes the camera with a mordant grin. "Even with your eye-witness testimony, it'll be difficult to get an arrest warrant without a body. You can be sure that Luthor will have an airtight alibi. Depending on the forensics report and what's in the pictures, I might be able to bring him in for questioning."

"What about a search warrant for his office?" Clark asks.

"I'm working on it, but it's taking time. It seems Judge Winkler may not be as clean as I thought."

"Well, it's a good thing we've brought Lex's office to you then, isn't it?" I take the box from Clark's hands and set it down on Henderson's desk with a flourish. Henderson opens the first file and whistles through his teeth when he realizes what it is.

"You may not be able to arrest Lex for the murder tonight, but how about for smuggling?" I place another folder on top of the file he's holding in his hands and smile benignly.

"Or money laundering," Clark says, laying a third file on top.

"Prostitution," I add, placing another file on the stack. Clark and I continue to build the heap of evidence, alternately naming the crimes we've uncovered until Henderson's arms start to droop from the weight.

"And bribing city officials," I say with finality, placing the thickest file on top. Henderson finally drops the heavy stack onto his desktop. He leans over the box and his eyes widen when he realizes there are still folders of evidence in there.

"Lane, this almost makes me want to take back the bad things I've said about you."

I cross my arms and glare at him. "Would it kill you to say thanks just *once*?"

"It might."

I elbow Clark in the ribs again, but it only encourages his smile into a snicker. I smile unwillingly due to Clark's amusement. It has been nice to spar with Henderson again, almost like old times, but the situation won't sustain my levity. My smile slips as I turn back to the Inspector.

"He knows someone was there, Bill. It won't be long before evidence and people start disappearing. How long will it take?"

Henderson looks at his watch. "We need to do everything carefully and by the book. There are only a few officers I trust with this, so it'll take at least a few hours to get the warrants and

paperwork filled out. At the latest, we should be ready to go first thing in the morning."

A quick knock on the glass causes all three of us turn to see Jimmy through Henderson's office door. Jimmy waves and then waggles a computer disk in the air, his face shining in triumph. With Henderson's permission, he enters and hands me the disk.

"I got 'em," Jimmy announces.

"Way to go, Jimmy," I give him a quick hug before taking the disk and turning back to Henderson. I hold up the disk to Henderson as Clark claps Jimmy on the back.

"This is a list of Lex's shell companies, hidden holdings and off-shore bank accounts," I explain off Henderson's look. "I suggest freezing his funds and assets right away."

Henderson's eyes light up, but I snatch the disk back before he can take it.

"Promise me I get to be there," I demand. "I want to go with you when you arrest him."

"I'll agree as long as you don't try to hug me," Henderson warns.

"Deal," I agree quickly and Clark and Jimmy try not to laugh at my wide-eyed, horror-struck expression as I give Henderson the disk.

"Oh, and we want the exclusive," I add.

"Of course you do," he sighs.

We give our statements about the shooting to Henderson and then he shows us to a conference room where three officers have started to sort through the piles of evidence we brought. For the next few hours, we guide the team through the intricate warren of Lex's shady business dealings. There are still hunches and gaps, but there are enough solid links to put Lex away for several lifetimes.

When finished with the preliminary explanation, Henderson asks us to hide in an unused interrogation room at the station in case they have questions about the evidence we've given him and, of course, to keep me out of trouble. I agree on condition that they give us computer access to write our story. If this is going down first thing in the morning, I don't want to lose our exclusive. We're shown to the interrogation room nearby while Jimmy stays to answer questions about Lex's accounts.

Having discussed a few angles previously, Clark and I map out the construct of the main article, as well as several companion pieces and sidebars. As a consequence, we end up with a lengthy list of follow-up topics. Once we've settled on the content, we get to work. Clark pulls open the laptop Jimmy brought with him and starts typing. I read over his shoulder and before he gets the first sentence written, I start offering suggestions. Five minutes and sixteen interruptions later, Clark chuckles and stands up. He offers me his seat and I smile bashfully.

"Sorry," I say. "I'm so used to being top-banana; it's hard for me to follow someone else's lead."

With the structure for the piece worked out, my hands fly over the keyboard, slowing down only when Clark makes a suggestion on phrasing, reminds me of a salient point or corrects my grammar. I take all of his suggestions and roll my eyes at his anal tendencies. When he starts picking on my spelling, though, my ire flashes and I turn to tell him off. The words stick in my throat when I become conscious of how close he is, bracing his weight over my shoulder with one hand on the arm of my chair.

My heart starts to pound when I get a whiff of his cologne, and my eyes are drawn to the line of his jaw until they rest on his neck where I can see his pulse beating out a strong, steady rhythm. When I realize how enthralled I've become I close my eyes to break the spell his pulse has me under. Instead, when I open them again, I focus on his mouth, hoping that watching it move will help me concentrate on what the words coming out of it actually mean.

It turns out that looking at his mouth is a bad idea. I'm so attracted to him I can hardly breathe and watching his lips move informs me just how much I'd love to kiss them.

Still consumed with my lustful thoughts, I barely notice when Clark stops talking. Time seems to slow as I watch his mouth close, a tick just below his jaw belying his withheld emotion. My eyes draw up his face to his eyes and I see that he's looking back at me — to my own lips, to be specific. I lick my suddenly dry lips and my breathing quickens at the rapt expression on his face, his eyes dark.

It both thrills and excites me to see the look on his face, but it doesn't last. After about two seconds, he remembers who I am, and I remember who he is not and the spell is broken. Clark stands up and puts some space between us, his eyes shifting to look out the window. I slide the seat back and spring up like a jack-in-the-box, vacating the seat to get some distance and to cool off.

"Maybe I should ah..." I gesture vaguely in the direction of the hallway, but have no idea how to finish my sentence. I try again. "Why don't you go ahead and make those changes. I'm just going to go and um..." What? Die of embarrassment? Pray for a different life? Wish that I didn't marry the biggest crook of our time and that I were single? "Get some coffee," I finish weakly.

I rush from the room and use the time at the coffee pot to get give myself a stern talking to, pacing back and forth as I protest my own actions. Am I ever going to learn that business and romance just don't mix, particularly not when I'm still tied to my gangster of a husband? I can't let this happen, especially not with Clark. His friendship means too much for me to ruin it by throwing myself at him.

After a moment, a police officer passes by with a strange look on his face and I realize I'm standing there in my 'Angel' outfit, muttering to myself. I must look like a nut. Blushing, I prepare two cups and head back to join Clark.

By the time I arrive, I've gotten myself under control, but Clark is still standing near the window, his head resting against the glass. He rolls his head to look at me and I cringe at his awkward expression. Wanting to get the easy, companionable atmosphere back, I hold up the second cup of coffee.

"Can I interest you in a fully-caffeinated, overly sweet cup of coffee-flavored cream?"

He smiles at my tease and it almost erases the lines of tension from around his eyes. "As long as you're sure it's safe," he answers. "I've heard stories about cop-coffee."

"Well, judging from Henderson, I'd say long term use will destroy your personality, but I think one cup won't kill you."

"Thanks," he says, taking the cup from me. He sips it and chokes a little, making a funny face.

I breathe a sigh of relief when he jokes back and we relax back into our customarily friendly and safely platonic relationship. Clark settles in front of the computer, editing our story and rearranging the lines until the copy sings. I smile as he fixes my typos and grammar mistakes and I clap him on the shoulder.

"Why don't we just put my name on the story and you can be the copy editor?"

He shows his amusement with an insincere laugh. "Ha, ha. I don't think so." He looks at his watch and then shows me the face when I crane my neck around to see the time. Wow, time flies. We've been here all night and now it's quarter past eight in the morning. "Well," he sighs. "All we need now is Henderson to make the arrest and we can send the story in."

Before I can respond to his statement, Clark's head snaps up and he looks off into the distance.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Bank alarm." He moves toward the door, but pauses at the

threshold to look at me. "This shouldn't take long. Promise you'll be careful until I get back?"

I give him a reproving glare and gesture expansively at the precinct. "Clark, I'm in the middle of the police station. What could possibly happen to me before you get back?"

He smiles abashedly and then ducks through the doorway and heads for the entrance. I slip into the chair and save our changes, emailing a copy to Clark's Chronicle account as a precautionary measure. I power down and slip the laptop into my bag before wandering into the conference room Henderson set us up in. He and a couple of his officers have stepped away, but one other and Jimmy are seated at a computer terminal, typing away. I set my bag down next to the evidence strewn across the table and leave the room in search of another cup of coffee when an officer rounds the corner and almost bowls me over.

"Ms. Lane, I've been looking for you," he says before looking around. "Where is your partner?"

"He had to step out for a few minutes."

"Oh. Well, I need both of you to come with me, but I guess I'll have to come back for him."

He motions me ahead of him down a hallway of offices toward the garage entrance. As we walk away from the noise of the station, I start to feel uneasy, and I glance back at the policeman behind me. He gives me an encouraging smile and I force myself to smile back. He looks so familiar that I assumed he was one of Henderson's trustworthy cops, but now I'm not so sure. He never did say where he was taking me or why.

Suddenly, leaving without Clark doesn't seem like such a good idea. My pace slows to a stop as we approach the parking garage door. "You know, maybe you should go ahead without me. I'm going to wait for my partner."

"That would have been my preference, too, but I'm afraid this just can't wait."

It takes me about a millisecond to realize how much trouble I'm in. I open my mouth to scream while dodging to the side in an attempt to cut around the officer, but it doesn't work. He must have been expecting me to figure him out, because before I can do anything, he wraps one arm around me, pinning my arms to my sides while simultaneously placing a moist cloth over my mouth and nose. I struggle to get away, at least to pull back far enough to call for Clark, but the cop merely tightens his grip.

The darkness starts to close in as he confirms my fears with a nauseatingly predictable statement.

"The Boss wants to talk to you."

The sharp scent of ammonia stings my nostrils as I regain consciousness. My head snaps back in an effort to get away from the overpowering aroma, a movement that changes the dull pain at the base of my head into a throbbing ache. I keep my eyes closed and will the pain away. It's just starting to work when I get another whiff of the pungent odor.

Still a bit groggy, I try to reach out to push the stench away when I realize I can't move my arms. A few exploratory movements confirm I'm sitting in a high-backed chair with my hands bound behind the chair with a thick, rough rope. A quick test against the knot reveals that the person who tied it knows what they are doing. The only pleasant discovery is that whoever it is, they were cocky enough to leave my feet free.

"Lois."

Lex's smarmy tone is accompanied by the same strong odor, and I jerk my head to the side to avoid breathing directly from the smelling salts. My mouth is dry and scratchy and my eyes water as I try to blink the room into focus. The bright morning sunlight streaming in from the balcony windows drives a spike into the back of my skull, and I quickly close them in favor of the soothing darkness.

"Lo-is."

The irritation in Lex's voice is a minor victory. I keep my eyes closed and in an act of stubborn defiance, I refuse to answer his call. His reaction to my insolence is a neck-wrenching slap that knocks my head soundly into the back of my chair. When I don't immediately respond, he slaps me from the other direction, adding the force of his impatience as a punishment. Colorful sparkles dance behind my closed eyelids as I work my jaw back and forth, noting the metallic taste that proves he hit me hard enough to draw blood. I'm proud of my control, though. Other than one involuntary gasp, I still refuse to acknowledge him.

Lex grabs a fistful of my hair and roughly pulls my head back, forcing me to look at him. My eyebrows draw together in pain and I breathe harshly through my nose. Belligerently, I remain silent and glare at him, letting him see all the hatred and loathing I have for him. We stare at each other, and I internally shudder at the amount of evil emanating from his gaze, but I refuse to be cowed. If I'm going to die, it'll be on my terms as Lois Lane, and it will be with the full knowledge that Lex no longer holds any power over me.

My confrontational attitude causes his fist to tighten in my hair, but I suppress even the smallest whimper. I won't give him the satisfaction. Instead, I greet him with a small twist of my lips and as much scorn in my voice as I can muster.

"Hello, Lex."

His eyes narrow in barely controlled rage. "Welcome home, darling. Did you have a good time in San Francisco?"

A million responses fly through my mind, but I hold my tongue. Anything I say will probably make things worse for me, either hindering the investigation or giving Lex time to escape. Instead, I choose to smile knowingly and let him draw his own conclusions. He remains still for another moment, waiting for me to respond, and I thrill at a twitch in the corner of his eye. My smile broadens. I know it's dangerous, but goading Lex is so very satisfying.

When it becomes obvious that I'm not going to say anything, he finally releases my head with another thump against the chair-back. He takes several steps back to stand next to his desk, watching me for another long moment. Despite the warm shafts of morning sunlight streaming in through the windows, Lex's cold, calculating smile sends a shiver of dread down my back.

He looks to my right and unexpectedly lifts his hand toward me in a sick parody of paternalistic pride. "Behold, the great Lois Lane."

"Indeed, sir. Indomitable, to the last."

Nigel's urbane tone takes me by surprise, although I should have expected his presence. I turn my head just enough to see him standing beside me, a gun trained on my head. It's a useless gesture designed to frighten me. I know that he won't shoot; Lex will want to kill me himself.

"Lex's ever-faithful lap dog, looking menacing with a gun in his hand," I say with scorn. "Tell me, Nigel, isn't it debasing to think only what Lex tells you to think and to do only what he allows you to do?"

The consummate professional, Nigel's visage doesn't change at all, but I take great pleasure that my disdainful tone causes his grip on the gun to tighten before he puts it away. I dismiss him completely and turn to look quickly around the penthouse office, my mind already looking for an escape route.

It takes me all of three seconds to realize my situation is pretty dire. I can see the metal box containing the Kryptonite sitting atop Lex's desk, so I can't depend on Superman for rescue. Unless Nigel leaves and I can stall long enough for Henderson to get here, I'm dead.

Lex leans against the corner of his desk and crosses his arms. What he's waiting for, I have no idea. I'm happy to sit in silence. Every minute we prolong this non-conversation works in my favor. Obviously, his patience isn't as enduring as mine. After a

minute, he begins pacing in front of his desk. He makes several passes before he stops and his head tilts as he looks at me.

"Nothing to say? No questions to ask?" Lex asks mockingly. "That world-famous curiosity isn't wondering how I figured you out?"

I stamp on the inquisitive impulse that rises inside of me, but he must have seen the spark of interest in my eyes. He smiles in smug gratification before turning to pull a pair of black, four-inch stilettos from the trash bin — my four-inch stilettos, to be precise. In the shock of the shooting, Clark and I completely forgot about them, leaving them on the floor behind the shot-up pallets in the dirty warehouse. It wouldn't have taken Lex long to figure out which woman could be hiding there. It also wouldn't take much speculation to figure out I probably had a little 'super' help in getting away. It takes considerable effort to swallow the panic rising in my throat as my eyes track back to Lex's face.

He smiles condescendingly before dropping the shoes back into the garbage. "Sloppy, Lois."

The fear I feel at my quick capture is tempered by the hope that Lex's impulsive action will translate into a mistake I can use. Besides, if Lex knew how much we knew — and that we had told the police about — he wouldn't be standing here so calmly. Even someone with an ego the size of Metropolis would be scrambling to salvage what he could instead of interrogating me. The thought that he has *still* underestimated me almost makes me smile.

Lex leans against his desk again, his fingers interlocking in front of him as his voice takes on a friendly, conversational tone. "I've done a lot of thinking since last night about the past month, reassessing your behaviors. Taken alone, the headaches, your spirited outbursts, the innocuously long hours at the office and more time spent with Jimmy Olsen weren't troublesome. But if I add in the unexplained attacks on my business ventures, I get a very different aggregate. Together they add up to one thing — Lois Lane, investigative reporter."

"I knew I had a leak, but my attention was across the country on that gnat, Kent. I must say, your manipulation of my interest in Superman was nothing short of pure genius, a well-played subterfuge that frankly, reminds me of myself. Let it be said that Lex Luthor can give credit where it is due. I was fooled by your brilliant masquerade, my dear. Congratulations."

Why does his compliment make me feel so dirty? I suspect that Lex wants to get me talking, that he wants very much to know how I figured him out and how much damage I'd been able to do. For that reason, I keep my mouth shut and avoid revealing anything in my expression. After a long pause, Lex continues with his monologue.

"You were a challenge, Lois, at times a formidable foe. I knew you had the potential for greatness if you could be seduced. What better cover than to have the award-winning Lois Lane as my wife? If I could fool you, then everyone else would be a snap. Granted, seducing you took a little more effort and cost than I was accustomed to, but, in the end, I won."

I refuse to tell him how much of this story I already knew, but his last egotistical boast is too pompous to let him have the last word. "You do like the sound of your own voice, don't you, Lex?"

His visage darkens slightly at my rebuttal, but clears quickly. "I was even fooled and distracted by your alleged kidnapping. Not that I cared much about what happened to you, but I did take offense that anyone would dare take something that belongs to me."

"I belong to *myself*," I grind out through clenched teeth.

He steps toward me, all traces of friendliness gone. "I own you, Lois. I paid a million dollars to win you over. You're mine by marriage contract."

I want to throw his statement back in his face, to tell him his accounting is off. If we've uncovered everything, I know Lex lost

more than ten *billion* dollars to my investigations before he figured out a way to neutralize me. And he did a good job of that — he stole my life away. But I couldn't admit it, not without telling Lex how much danger he is in. Let him continue to bluster until the police arrive. Lex won't have time to escape and I might just live through this.

Lex hesitates and then walks calmly to his weapons cabinet. He picks up an old sword from the display, the one that belonged to Alexander the Great. He fingers it, twisting it and testing the blade's sharpness against his thumb before turning around again.

"You know, Nigel. My weakness was in my pride."

"How so, sir?"

"I couldn't conceive of a reason for my wife to betray me."

All the rage I felt at his perfidy slams through me in an instant. Until now, I always thought that the phrase, 'seeing red' was a metaphor, but for the briefest moment my hatred for Lex burns in my temples and clouds my vision with a red-hot intensity. After everything he's done, how can he possibly expect loyalty from me? The anguished words fly out of my mouth before I can stop them.

"You destroyed everything I loved."

"Ah, so it is the Daily Planet." Lex nods in understanding. "I must admit that destroying the newspaper was one of my most inspired ideas. Eliminate my rival for your affections and present myself as a savior." Lex strikes a dramatic pose, extending his sword arm to an imaginary audience. "'And thus I clothe my naked villainy ... And seem a saint, when most I play the devil,'" he quotes.

"King Richard the Third," Nigel says, clapping.

"Quite so," Lex preens. "I removed an irritating obstacle and won the hand of the fair maiden, two thorns for the price of one. It worked out well, don't you think, Nigel?"

"Inspired, sir," Nigel responds. "'Was ever woman in this humour woo'd? Was ever woman in this humour won?'"

To hear them congratulate themselves for the destruction of the Planet, for their lack of remorse for the deaths of Perry and the others and for the systematic ruin of my life is almost more than I can stand. The sheer fury I feel makes it impossible to hold my tongue.

"You bastard!"

"Now, now, darling. That's such crass language for a woman of your seeming decorum." His eyes rake over the red leather halter I'm still wearing. "Rather bold for someone in your precarious position. I won't allow you to speak to me in that manner."

"Or what?" I ask derisively. "You'll wash my mouth out with soap? There's nothing else you can do to me."

He leans down until his face no more than two inches from my own. I feel sick as the smell of his aftershave mixed with the lingering traces of cigar smoke wafts over me. The cold depths of his eyes transmit his capacity for evil and I shudder.

"Oh, but you're wrong about that, Lois. I may have destroyed the Daily Planet, but there are still things you care about and, therefore, things I can do to hurt you: Jimmy Olsen, for one, your parents, and your sister."

His threat immediately replaces my anger with a horrified fear, but I'm saved from hearing or imagining the gruesome details by a loud buzzing noise coming from the intercom. Lex continues to stare menacingly into my eyes for a moment before returning to his desk. He presses a button to shut off the alarm and answers the call from the security office.

"Yes?" he barks. There is nothing but white noise from the other end, so he asks again. "What is it, Johnson?" When he still doesn't receive an answer, Lex looks at Nigel and jerks his head toward the office door. Nigel slips out of the room and Lex flicks off the switch.

A moment of silence follows as I tamp down my emotions,

wrapping them up in a ball and shoving them into a corner of my mind. Although it's worth my life to bring Lex down, I'd still like to live through this. It takes me a minute to realize that Lex is also lost in thought. He's standing by his desk with his head bowed and his back to me. I see Lex stroke the metal box on his desk and I tremble with new fear as he begins to speak.

"You were always a little too independent for my tastes, Lois. I took great pleasure in making you mine and, I thought, in breaking you. I admit my surprise at your resilience. You have been a worthy adversary, but I realize that you are nothing compared to the challenge of beating a Superman."

He lifts the lid and the eerie, green glow reminds me why I need to escape by myself. Now that Nigel is gone, I wriggle my wrists, trying to work my hands free from their bindings. I use as much force as I can without making any sound that will alert Lex to what I'm doing, but the rope is too well tied. With one last frustrated tug, I'm taken completely by surprise when my hands pull free.

I bring my wrists in front of me and see that the knot didn't come undone after all; it was cleanly cut in two. The singed edges on the rope can only mean one thing: Clark is here. My heart delights in the knowledge that my partner is here — my caring, intelligent and completely insane partner. What the hell is he doing here? He *knew* that Lex had the Kryptonite. I mean, I'm glad that he's learned enough caution to keep hidden until the cavalry arrives, but it was stupid to come at all. It takes all my restraint to keep my feelings from showing. If Clark is here, then maybe Henderson isn't far behind. My mind races for a way to warn Clark away and to keep Lex talking. I see Lex turning toward me from the corner of my eye and have just enough time to thrust my hands back behind the chair.

"You'll never defeat Superman," I declare. "Even if that thing can hurt him, he's too smart to get near it. He'll go get the police to arrest you instead." I pitch my voice to carry at least as far as the hallway, hoping that Clark will take the hint and get reinforcements.

"Lois, Lois. You think your warning will keep Superman away? I've made studying him an art form and you're wrong on two counts, my dear. First, I've already successfully tested the rock. Superman responded to a false alarm this morning and Mrs. Cox assured me that this little thing works like a charm. Even at a distance, it brought the Man of Steel to his knees. Second, he has morals. He genuinely cares about people and will always show up when lives are threatened. I, on the other hand, have no qualms about threatening the lives of innocent people. That is why I will win."

"You are nothing compared to Superman. He's good and kind and he will beat you before you even know the war has started."

Lex's eyes narrow and I immediately regret my words. My impetuous and passionate statement is a virtual confession that I know and care about Superman. Oh, god. Lex is right. No matter the danger to him, Clark won't allow anyone to hurt me if he can help it. It doesn't matter that the Kryptonite is here; he'll come to my rescue no matter what.

"I think not, my dear," Lex says quietly. He picks up the forgotten blade from his desktop and stares at it for a moment, lost in contemplation. He steps up next to me, a deadly cold calculation in his eyes. "Nigel was right, 'Richard the Third' is quite apropos for this situation. 'So wise so young, they say, do never live long.' Goodbye, Lois."

Lex grabs a fistful of my hair and yanks my head back, placing the edge of the blade against my throat. When his arm swings back, the door to the office crashes open, distracting Lex long enough for me to knock his hand away from my hair and roll sideways out of my chair. By the time I regain my feet and take a defensive stance, Lex is grappling with a determined Clark Kent.

Clark is holding Lex's sword arm away with both hands, but it's obvious to me that the Kryptonite is taking its toll on him. Lex's other fist delivers several sharp jabs to Clark's body before knocking him away with a vicious punch to the face. Clark topples over an antique chest and scrambles to his feet, but before he can regain his balance, Lex swings the sword toward his head.

"Clark!"

My warning gives him just enough time to duck to the side, but the blade still slices into his shoulder. Clark cries out, falling to one knee as I jump forward to prevent Lex from striking again. My roundhouse kick deflects his attack, but it's not enough to disarm him. Lex blocks my punch with seeming ease and knocks me down, and I fall into a heavy side table that steals my breath away.

For a moment, I can't make my body move. I see Lex advance on me with deadly intent, but Clark tackles him again before he can deliver the blow. The sword skitters across the floor and under a cabinet as they trade punches, but Clark just isn't a match for Lex's training and skill, not with the Kryptonite weakening him.

After another powerful punch to the face, Lex sweeps Clark's feet out from under him and Clark falls to the floor. There's blood seeping from the cut on his arm and out of several cuts on his face and nose. I crawl next to him and he groans as I help him sit up, supporting his weight as he pants against my shoulder.

"Get out of here, Lois."

"No, Clark. I'm not leaving without you."

I struggle to pull Clark to his feet, but neither of us has the strength. By the time I give up, Lex has pulled a gun from his desk drawer and has it trained on the two of us.

"Well, well, this is a surprise," Lex declares with contempt. "I was expecting Superman, but instead I get two-bit reporting hack from San Francisco. I'm disappointed in you, Lois. A few minutes ago it sounded like you were in love with a god in a cape, yet you choose to betray me with this...nobody."

I find the irony in Lex's words funny and a short bark of laughter escapes before I can answer him. "Believe me Lex, I'd choose Clark over you or Superman any day. I feel more excitement in one kiss from Clark than I ever felt for you."

"You think that matters?" Lex sneers. "Your feelings are worth nothing. All I require from you is obedience and silence and since you can no longer give me either, you are nothing. Your pitiful attempt to defeat me has failed, Lois."

"Failed?" I mock. "You have no idea how badly I've beaten you..."

"Lois, don't," Clark cautions.

Headless of the danger, I ignore Clark's warning. I need Lex to know, even if it's only posthumously, that Lois Lane was the one to bring him down. Telling him just how badly I've beaten him is not only necessary, it's cathartic.

"We've already written the article that exposes your criminal activities and rips away your mask of decency. The whole world will read it in the afternoon edition of the San Francisco Chronicle."

"The Boss's organization is also in ruins," I continue in triumph. "The police have John Black in custody; arrest warrants have been issued for scores of your henchmen and lackeys, including Mrs. Cox, and Nigel is facing extradition..."

I take great pleasure in seeing the severity of his plight dawn on him and a part of me thrills at the twitch in his eye. Lex will certainly kill me now, and strangely enough, that thought doesn't bother me. But Clark — for Clark I need to postpone the inevitable, to give Henderson enough time to save Clark. I think Lex will hold off until he knows just how much damage I've been able to do. When his control doesn't falter, I breathe a sigh of relief and press on.

"Without money, prestige and power," I tell him, "you're less

than nothing and you're broke, Lex. An hour ago, your bank accounts and assets were frozen. Not just the personal accounts in your name or mine, but the LexCorp assets and all of the hidden offshore accounts you have sprinkled throughout the world; Geneva, Bangkok, Barbados, Malta, Switzerland, Sri Lanka. Need I go on?"

"No one defies me and lives," Lex warns, the deathly certainty in his voice sending a shiver of dread up my spine; my time has run out. I position myself in front of Clark as Lex lifts the gun and points it at me, but the sound of heavy footsteps running down the hallway attracts his attention. I assume with relief that Henderson has arrived at last.

"It's over, Lex." I announce. "Inspector Henderson has all the evidence he needs to put you away for several lifetimes. You're finished."

"Finished?" He scoffs, turning back to me. "I've hardly begun. No matter what you think you've accomplished, my control over Metropolis is complete and soon I'll own the country, if not more. I'm a god amongst the pitiable dregs of humanity. You could never hurt me, Lois. I'm invincible."

I hear the sound of several men arriving at the door with guns ready and I turn expecting to see Metropolis' finest. Instead, I am shocked to see three men decked out in combat fatigues.

It's Colonel Trask.

I close my gaping mouth with a click. Whether Trask's arrival is a godsend or a curse, I can't say, but when Lex lowers his handgun and turns slightly away from us to deal with these new intruders, I breathe a momentary sigh of relief. Anything that delays death is a good thing, even if it comes in the form of an obsessed xenophobe.

Looking from one man to the other, I'm hard-pressed to know who is more surprised by the situation — Trask at finding us in Lex's office, or Lex for being interrupted. Actually, Lex looks more annoyed than surprised, a thought that brings me a small measure of satisfaction.

Trask, on the other hand, isn't able to focus on any one person. His look of incredulity and confusion focuses first on Clark and then on Lex, his beady little eyes swiveling between the two men. If I believe his ravings from our encounter in San Francisco, Trask already made up his mind that Clark was linked to Superman in some way and the only good thing about Clark's pain is that it debunks any lingering suspicions.

I watch Trask's eyes take in Clark's barely conscious form, the blood oozing from his shoulder, nose and a cut on his lip and he sneers. Seeing that we bear no immediate threat, Trask turns to look at Lex once more and the fanatical light rekindles.

"Put down your weapon, Mr. Luthor," Trask demands.

"Colonel Trask, I said I would contact you when I was ready," Lex replies testily. "Now get out of here before I decide not to fund your operation anymore."

Trask's eyes narrow as Lex's threat sinks in and then his gaze slips behind Lex to focus on the Kryptonite on the desk. His face hardens as he mumbles something about "infusing him with power" and "invincible." Remembering how Trask thought Superman had taken over Clark's mind, I can see the moment Trask decides Lex is a menace.

Fantastic — the delusional fanatic against a homicidal megalomaniac. It's obvious that a confrontation is imminent and I don't want to get caught in the crossfire.

Clark shifts at my side, pulling my attention back by pushing slightly away from me, shifting to look around the room, and I realize that he's probably constructing an escape plan. Good idea. I take a brief glimpse around as well, but other than the office's main entrance currently blocked by Trask and his men, there is a door to the library, an exit to the balcony and the secret elevator, all of which would be virtually impossible to reach quickly and

two of them would take us closer to the Kryptonite. The library it is, then.

As Lex and Trask square off, I nudge Clark to get his attention. I tilt my head toward the library door and then scoot slightly in that direction. Clark nods and then starts inching away from the brewing fight and the ever-glowing poison on Lex's desk.

As we slowly creep away from them, I hear Trask practically sneer in response. "You think you're better than us, don't you?"

"I *am* better than you, Trask," Lex responds. "Now get out of here before I get angry." Lex's voice stops me in my tracks. "Stay right there, Lois. I'm not finished with you yet."

Trask, visibly angry at Lex's dismissal, steps in between us with his gun now pointed straight at Lex. "I want Superman. I won't be denied."

"Superman is mine to do with as I please, Trask," Lex explains frostily. "You cannot have him."

"Give him to me!" Trask screams.

I've crawled as far as the antique chaise when my movements slow down. Clark tugs at my arm and whispers my name, but I can't turn away. I know what's coming, but I don't seem able to drag my eyes away from the oncoming carnage. Time slows down as I watch Lex lift his gun to shoot, but Trask is faster. Several shots are fired in succession and I yelp involuntarily when Lex's body shudders backward on impact.

Lex's motion carries him against his desk and the force knocks several objects to the floor, including the lead box containing the Kryptonite. The glowing fragment is tossed from the box as it hits the floor and it rolls far enough under the corner display cabinet that even its unnatural glow is hidden in the shadows.

There's a silent pause in the room as Lex looks down. He stares incredulously at his blood-stained fingers as they swipe at the holes in his chest, bearing testimony to his mortality. Lex's gaze lifts to lock on mine and for a split second; his shock turns to hatred before his eyes finally roll up into the back of his head. His body slumps first to his knees and then slams forward to lie still on the carpet.

I'm frozen in place, too stunned to move as Trask approaches Lex's body, digging a toe under his shoulder to roll him over. I see Lex's glassy-eyed stare, and I shudder. Trask nods in approval of his handiwork and then gestures to one soldier to retrieve the Kryptonite. It feels like an eternity before I feel Clark tugging at my shoulder and I'm finally able to tear my eyes away from Lex's prone figure.

"Lois," Clark whispers.

I nod and scramble forward on hands and knees only to halt my movements when a gruff, slightly familiar voice commands us to "freeze." I look carefully over my shoulder, expecting to see one of Trask's men walking toward us, his gun at the ready, but am surprised to see Trask and his men scrambling for cover as Henderson and several of his men enter the room, guns ready.

"This is the police. Drop your weapons and put your hands in the air," Henderson calls.

From the corner of my eye, I see one of the soldiers lay his rifle on the floor before rising with his hands up. From the side of Lex's desk, I see Trask's face pinch in fury as he turns his gun on his own soldier, firing once at the "traitor." His actions cause Henderson's men to take cover as well and a firefight ensues.

Clark crouches behind me to protect my body as Trask opens fires on the policemen. As each side trades a volley of gunfire, Clark and I creep away from them again. We make it as far as the library door when Clark bumps into my back, knocking me to the floor. His soft grunt of pain quickly follows our descent, his body landing on top of my legs.

"Clark, what are you doing?" I complain. I try to shove him off of me, but can't move him. "You weigh a ton."

"Sorry, I'll try not to land on you the next time I'm shot," he says wryly. My head snaps around to look at him and I can see how much he's hurting by the pinch around his eyes.

"You're shot? Oh my god — where did they hit you? Are you all right?" I twist around and my hands run over his chest and arms, the only part of him I can reach. He gasps in pain when I touch his injured shoulder and I pull my hands away quickly. Another round of shooting makes his answer almost indecipherable.

"Lois, can we continue this discussion *after* we're out of the line of fire?"

"Right, sure. Follow me."

We slip through the library doorway and I look around quickly. As more shots ring out from behind us, I gesture at the balcony toward the back of the library and Clark nods. We continue to scoot toward the balcony door and we eventually escape into relative shelter. We crawl around the corner, and I settle against the concrete wall, trying to catch my breath. Clark follows me but remains on his hands and knees. I tug on his arm, trying to get him to move further until he collapses on his backside beside me. He cries out in pain and immediately rolls onto his stomach.

"Clark," I yell and lean forward, noticing for the first time the blood seeping into the seat of his pants. Irreverently, the first thing to cross my mind is to wonder when Clark changed into jeans. The second is to register where he was hit.

"Oh!" I exclaim softly.

We both lean around to look at his butt and he winces in pain when he tweaks his wound. "Ow," he mumbles.

The shooting stops and we both hold our breath. I look around the balcony as my mind races, trying to figure out how to get away. I see Clark looking around as well, and I lift my eyebrows and make a wavy gesture with my hand in silent question. He closes his eyes and then shakes his head in defeat. His powers are gone, so we can't depend on Superman to get us out of this.

I tense as I hear footsteps approaching the balcony and Clark pushes his body up to position himself between me and the doorway. When I hear Henderson's voice calling our names, I let out my breath in relief.

"Out here, Bill," I call.

A second later, Henderson pokes his head around the wall to look at us. "You two okay?" he asks.

"Thank God it's you," I say with relief, following it closely with an irritated, "What the hell took you so long?"

Henderson ignores my question and eyes Clark's wounds with a grimace. "It looks like you need some medical attention, son."

"I'm all right," Clark declares. "This," he points to his shoulder, "isn't as bad as it looks and the bullet must have grazed me; it isn't in my ... um, leg."

Henderson's mouth twitches a little at Clark's mortified tone. "Right," Henderson says, his sardonic drawl in place. "You should still get that checked out. What about you, Lane?"

"I'm fine," I answer. "What happened to Trask?" I ask. "Are they ..."

Henderson shakes his head. "He and his men are dead."

"And your men?" Clark asks.

"I've got two wounded, but none of them are critically hurt." Henderson's eyes show his appreciation for Clark's concern. His mouth quirks up again. "The bad guys don't win today."

"Lex is dead," I say dazedly. My voice sounds remote, even to myself and I feel my mouth twist into a grimace. "The bastard cheated justice after all."

I see Clark and Henderson shift uncomfortably and look away from me, neither of them saying anything in response. I feel a sudden chill and wrap my arms around my knees, looking

through the stone balusters at the city as my mind spins. Lex is gone; there'll be no trial, no public unmasking of Metropolis' favorite son and no jail time. I feel almost cheated by his death, and I'm appalled at my own callousness. Still, I can't say I'm sorry he's gone, but I would have rather seen him go to jail to pay for his crimes. At least I got the satisfaction of seeing him dethroned before he died.

Henderson clears his throat, drawing my attention back to him. "Stay there," he orders, pointing at me. "I'll send medics to you when they arrive."

Henderson disappears back into Lex's office, leaving us alone again. Clark tries to scoot closer to me, but his leg buckles under him and he ends up flat on his stomach again, groaning in pain. His look of utter humiliation and the high content of adrenalin in my body give me a fit of the giggles. His glare informs me that laughing is not allowed and I'm barely able to contain a snort of laughter. I am in big trouble.

"Having a little trouble there, Superman?" I whisper.

He glowers at me and then drops his head onto his folded hands, rolling his head back and forth. "If you include this in the story, I'm never speaking to you again," he mumbles, his throat lacking in any conviction.

I sputter with laughter and then as the shock of what happened starts to wear off, I laugh harder until I'm unable to stop. At some point the laughing turns to sobbing, and I feel Clark move next to me, wrapping his arms around me. Before I know it, he's holding me tightly while the hurt, humiliation, fear and anger bleed out through cleansing tears. By the time I run out of tears, I feel numb again. I feel Clark rubbing gentle circles on my back while he whispers quiet reassurances into my hair.

"Everything's going to be all right, Lois. He can't hurt you any more. It's over."

"It's over," I echo on a sigh.

"Better?" he asks.

I nod. "Thank you, Clark," I whisper into his shirt. "You'll never know what it means to me to be free of Lex. It's ... just ... thank you." I stumble over my words, wondering how I'll ever be able to repay him.

"Anytime, Lois. Besides," he says with humor in his voice. "It was for purely selfish reasons. I haven't had near enough time to learn all your investigative secrets. How am I supposed to win the Pulitzer if I lose my partner so soon?"

I roll my head back onto his shoulder to look him in the eye and the twinkle makes me smile. "You're assuming a lot, Farmboy. What makes you think I'll share all my secrets with you?"

He shifts uncomfortably and glances down at his butt. He's leaning awkwardly against the building in an effort to hold me without having to sit on his injury. Horrified that I might be causing him pain, I try to move, but he tightens his arms around me. I relax back into his embrace before he answers.

"Well," he says with a grin, "I obviously need pointers on having an escape route available in a dangerous situation."

I laugh softly at his tone and his reference to my first rescue by Superman before sobering quickly. The reality of what he did for me settles in and I whack at his uninjured shoulder in mock irritation.

"You lunkhead. Why did you do that? How could you rush in there to protect me in spite of the Kryptonite?"

"You were in danger," he shrugs. "I couldn't let him hurt you."

My eyes fill with tears again. "You took a bullet for me, knowing it could kill you."

"Always," he says.

Clark smiles tenderly and places his hand on my cheek, and I cover it with my own, leaning into his tender caress. His eyes are shining with a light I never thought I would see directed at me,

filled with a love I never thought I would receive. My eyes shimmer with a new kind of unshed tears and my breath hitches with the knowledge that Clark loves me. With that thought, my heart fills to bursting with the numbness.

"My hero."

I fidget in the elevator as it slowly brings me up to the bullpen of the newly renovated Daily Planet. I sniffle a little when the familiar ding announces my arrival and then roll my eyes at my own sentimentality. Consciously, I shove any sadness away and straighten my back; this is a day for celebration, not tears. As the heavy doors slide apart, the noise of dozens of voices talking, fingers typing, machines humming and televisions blaring assails me and I smile contentedly. It's the most amazing sound in the entire universe.

I step up to the railing that overlooks the bullpen and breathe deeply. Even with the smell of paint and new carpet in the air, the underlying scent of a newspaper office is strong and welcome. It's been a long time since the old linotype machines were used, but somehow the smell of ink and paper still lingers.

This isn't the first time I've entered the building since renovations started. In fact, I've practically lived on a cot in Perry's old office these past ten weeks while I oversaw the repairs; a sanctuary away from the storm of dealing with Lex's exposure and death. And what a storm it was, too.

By the time Henderson secured the penthouse as a crime scene, the LNN news crews were hovering outside the building, reporting on Lex's death. Henderson kept his word, though, and no one else knew anything about his criminal side until our article came out in the afternoon edition of the San Francisco Chronicle.

Being the widow of the worst criminal of our time was a nightmare, but at least I didn't have to deal with a complicated divorce. One of the most satisfying aspects of printing the truth about Lex was that everyone knew I brought him down ... with Clark's help, of course. Outside a small, select group that knew the truth, speculation was mixed about whether I was or whether I knew Lex was 'the Boss' from the beginning and married him to get on the inside. I didn't bother to clarify.

It didn't take long for the police to find the rest of the evidence they needed to dismantle the Boss's organization, leading them to every criminal, thug, dirty cop and politician on Lex's payroll. Of course, Clark and I got those exclusives, too, and we worked tirelessly on follow-ups and sidebars about the demise of Lex Luthor's empire. I smile to myself at the thought; by the second day, people were already talking Pulitzer.

After that, I received job offers from numerous news agencies and all but one was easy to turn down. Only the San Francisco Chronicle and the thought of working full-time with Clark tempted me, but in the end I couldn't take it. I realized pretty quickly that there was too much to do in the aftermath of Lex's death and downfall to leave. Someone had to pick up the pieces and when it came right down to it, I couldn't give Metropolis up. It's my home.

Luckily, I found someone willing to help me rebuild the Daily Planet and then it was me doing the tempting. I got back most of the Daily Planet's staff and added to her ranks by wooing some great reporters away from the nation's best papers as well. We reopened her doors just a week ago and it felt like coming home.

My mind registers the larger-than-life presence to my left just before the deep voice of Franklin Stern can announce his arrival.

"Good to see you, Ms. Lane," he says.

"It's good to be here, Mr. Stern. Can I assume from your presence that the LexCorp takeover is complete?"

"You certainly may. It wasn't easy to stem the panic caused by your shakedown of the organization, but now that the clean-up

operation is over and the massive hemorrhaging has stopped, we'll regain market confidence."

I shake my head and thank the heavens for Franklin Stern. According to the laws of New Troy state, without a prenuptial agreement I inherited every asset and holding of Lex Luthor and Luthor Industries, including LexCorp and although I didn't want a single thing from Lex, I knew that thousands, if not millions, of innocent people would be impacted if those companies were to go under. Thanks to a silent partnership with the enigmatic businessman standing next to me, Franklin Stern is the proud owner of all Lex's legitimate business holdings, as well as the recently restored Daily Planet. He's also now the second wealthiest man in the world.

"Are you sure you won't consider taking the job as Editor-In-Chief?" he asks me again.

"No thank you, Mr. Stern. I'm a reporter and although no one will ever replace Perry, Eduardo is the next best thing. He'll take good care of the Daily Planet."

My statement is confirmed when Eduardo's bellow rings across the bullpen, a yell that bears more than a passing resemblance to Perry's fear-inducing bark. I smile as the new copy boy runs for the stairwell at near super-speed. From the corner of my eye, I see Mr. Stern's nod of agreement.

"From your presence and the smile on your face, can I assume that the DA is finally done grilling my best reporter?"

I nod. "There may be a few trials I still need to testify at, but for the most part, I'm a free woman."

"Good," he states matter-of-factly. "I didn't buy the Daily Planet to have you stuck in a courtroom all day. When are you going to start writing stories again?"

I turn fully toward him and cross my arms. "The scoop on the Superman Foundation doesn't count?"

"That was last week's news — unless you're ready to reveal the Foundation's mysterious benefactor. I suspect you may know more about the billion dollar seed money and mysterious benefactor than you're saying."

I shift uncomfortably under his inscrutable gaze before the twinkle in his eye tells me he already knows where the money came from. I shrug. "One has to protect her sources in this business," I answer cryptically.

He flashes a quick grin at me before his habitual scowl returns. "So you do. Well, get to it; I expect some front page news from you, Ms. Lane."

Without waiting for a reply, he turns on his heel and leaves. I shake my head at his retreating back. You're only as good as your next story; time to get back to work.

I look around the room again before starting down the ramp toward my new desk. Although the furniture and computer equipment is new, my Rolodex and a wilted rhododendron make me feel right at home. I reach over to pick up my new nameplate and am fingering the gilded letters of 'Lois Lane' when a familiar voice calls my name.

"Lois? I almost didn't recognize you."

As Jimmy comes bounding over, I set the nameplate back down and reach up to nervously finger comb through my shorter locks. Other than retrieving the Kryptonite from under Lex's weapons cabinet and taking a few personal belongings I brought into the marriage, I didn't keep anything from my married life. I sold at auction or donated to charity all of Lex's other possessions and made a fresh start. The haircut was just a physical manifestation of living life after Lex — my life as Lois Lane.

"Hey Jimmy," I respond. "...er, I mean 'James.'"

"That sounds weird when you say it," he laughs. "Maybe you should stick with Jimmy?"

I shrug and point to the equipment hanging around his neck. "How's the new camera?" I ask.

Jimmy's eyes light up as he reaches down to handle the evidence of his new job responsibilities. "Oh, man, it's great! You should see the sweet shots I got of Superman at the opening of the Superman Foundation this morning. Eduardo is going to use one of them on the front page."

"That's great, Jimmy."

"What about you? Are you back to stay this time?"

"Yeah. After Mrs. Cox's trial ended this morning, the DA's office cut me loose. That was the last one for a while; I don't have to worry about Lex's cronies anymore."

My fears that the Boss's inner-circle would get away turned out to be unfounded. Mrs. Cox was brought in that same morning Lex died; Superman identified her outside the Metropolis Bank after the false alarm. As soon as Clark saw Mrs. Cox led away in handcuffs (from a distance, of course), he flew back to the police precinct, realized I'd disappeared and immediately went to Lex Towers to find me.

Nigel, on the other hand, was found by Henderson, knocked out, tied up and gagged in a broom closet. Henderson took him into custody and although the evidence showed him responsible for many of the Boss's horrible crimes, Nigel was extradited back to England to face charges too numerous to mention.

Asabi turned himself in and even Gretchen Kelly was serving time for attempting to steal Lex's body from the morgue. I ordered his body cremated after that and found flushing his ashes down the toilet very therapeutic.

Eduardo's bellow of, "Wallace, Olsen!" interrupts my thoughts and Jimmy shrugs as the copy boy breaks into a run past us.

"I'm still doing some research and general gofer stuff," Jimmy explains, "just until the new guy is trained, but this job has been a dream."

"Well, you deserve it."

As Jimmy walks away, I settle into my chair and my eyes drift to the folded newspaper on my desk. On the front page is my article about the opening of the Superman Foundation. It's a tightly held secret that after using some of Lex's vast fortune to pay restitution to the victims of his crimes and some to rebuild the Daily Planet, I used everything else to create a new charity in Superman's name, a foundation to help the poor and needy throughout the world. I smile at the thought of Lex writhing in hell, gnashing his teeth over how I'm spending his money.

I'm pulled from my musings when I notice the stairwell door open and Clark enters the newsroom, his hands still straightening his tie. I watch him move across the newsroom, his gentle grace and natural courtesy obvious in his very movements. He settles into his chair and logs into his computer and soon, his fingers are flying across the keyboard.

Clark stayed in Metropolis for two weeks after Lex's death to write the follow-ups with me and, I suspect, to make sure I was going to be all right. Eventually, though, I convinced him I would be fine and Clark went back home to San Francisco. Although he visited a few times over the intervening weeks, the distance was good for me, allowing me the space to readjust to life after Lex on my own.

I never stopped missing Clark, though, and once Franklin Stern agreed to help rebuild the Daily Planet, Clark was at the top of my recruiting list. I made him an employment offer that he couldn't refuse, including a perfectly good excuse for Superman's sudden relocation to Metropolis in the form of the Foundation.

Well, that and I finally agreed to go on a date with him.

I smile as I recall how nervous I was when he arrived to take me to Fouquet's last night — filled with breathless anticipation and nervous babble. He was nervous too, but it turned out to be a wonderfully intimate and relaxed night. A blush rises to my cheeks at the memory of our goodnight kiss that began at my door and ended an hour later in a breathless tangle on my sofa.

The date just...worked and it left me yearning for more.

My life is so different now than it was two years ago. Before, I couldn't stand to work with anyone and now I can't see a future without Clark, either professionally or personally. I wonder for a minute why it was so easy to trust him. Without even trying, he earned my trust and admiration and I came back to myself in part because of Clark's belief in me. From the moment he learned my identity, Clark believed in the real me, not the simulacrum I'd become; he helped me find the part of myself that was lost.

Clark must feel my eyes on him because he looks up from his work and our eyes lock. He flashes *that* grin at me, the one that always makes my knees wobble and my heart race. I smile back when I realize it wasn't just his friendship or his skill as a reporter that made me trust him.

It was his smile.

THE END

A/N:

And here's where I get to acknowledge the brilliance of the people that actually created and/or own these characters, as well as the wonderful people that helped me to write this story.

As any FoLC can tell, I borrowed heavily from the show, especially dialogue from "Strange Visitor" and "The Green, Green Glow of Home" written by Bryce Zabel, as well as "Requiem for a Superhero" by Dusty Kay. I also stole many ideas and dialogue snippets from the other season one episodes while manipulating them to my heart's desire. So my thanks go to every contributing writer and the actors, as well as the show's creators and producers. Please try to remember that this is only a work of fan fiction and that mimicry is the highest form of flattery.

Credit for the plot bunny goes to Patrick (aka Framework) for putting up a challenge to write a story about Lois as Mrs. Luthor. For some reason I couldn't devise, his challenge stuck in my brain and started to grow. It took me a while, but I hope the end product was worth the wait.

Big thanks go to my GE, Jeanne Pare, who helped me prepare this story for the archive. She went above and beyond the call of duty to help me figure out the proper tense for each verb. Writing a story in first-person, present tense was an interesting exercise. Thanks for not giving up on me, Jeanne.

I'd also like to thank my beta readers — all four of them. I don't know what I did to run them off, but I kept losing betas to real life (I just hope it wasn't the story). <bg>

A big, squishy hug goes to Kathy Brown for her irreplaceable insight and help. She can brainstorm a plot bunny like no other and her beta comments aren't bad either. Thanks for all the encouragement, Kathy, and for taking the time when you were so wickedly busy.

Also, big thanks to Kevin (aka Kermitzu), whose comments and enthusiasm for this story kept me writing when I hit several brick walls ... hard. Thanks, Kevin.

To Alcyone goes my love and dedication for her beta comments, which always made the story better and usually made me laugh. Writing in first person is tricky and she was excellent at making me show what was happening. Thanks for your help, Alcyone.

Lastly, I'd like to express my undying devotion to ML Thompson for her story-telling abilities and for taking the time to help me. Her questions about Lois' kidnapping, her comments about characterization and her suggestions about pacing were invaluable. Thank you, ML!

Oh, and the haircut in the epilogue is dedicated to Tank — see what leaving feedback can do to a story? ;)

Knowing how much Lex likes the play, *King Richard the III* by William Shakespeare, it seemed apropos for the situation. Thanks and credit goes to the Bard himself (our boy Bill can

write a villain like no other) and to Wikiquote for the following lines of dialog:

"Was ever woman in this humour woo'd? Was ever woman in this humour won? I'll have her; but I will not keep her long."

(Richard III, Act I, Scene II)

"And thus I clothe my naked villainy/ With odd old ends stol'n out of holy writ,/ And seem a saint, when most I play the devil.

(Richard III, Act I, Scene III)

"So wise so young, they say, do never live long."

(Richard III, Act III, Scene I)

Also briefly mentioned is Cato, a character from various "Pink Panther" movies (1964 — 1993), starring Peter Sellers and directed by Blake Edwards. My apologies to fans — I just couldn't resist the comparison between Asabi's tests on Lex (i.e., the creepy cobra scene in the pilot) and Cato Fong's attacks on Inspector Clouseau.

Lastly, to all the FoLCs, both present and past, who make this fandom so satisfying. Thanks for all of the lovely feedback, guys. You amaze me with the quality of both your writing and your character. I'm happy to be a part of it.