

# Right Off the Bat

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Rated: G

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Summary: When the space station is suddenly sabotaged, Lois must team up with Clark to find the culprit, and it looks like it might be... Bruce Wayne?

Author's Notes:

This follows Elisabeth's "New Faces; New Year." You might want to read that first in order to fully understand a few things about this story — for instance, where Lois first met Clark, and why is Bruce Wayne in this...

I obviously don't own these characters. If I did, I'd be filthy rich and probably not writing fanfic. I'm just borrowing from the talented people who came up with the characters, and those who wrote the show, and hoping they won't mind too much what I've been playing with their toys. I shamelessly stole a few lines directly from the show, too — I'm sure you'll recognize them.

As you'll see in a second, when the story starts, we're still at the very beginning of the pilot episode...

Enjoy!

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Lois barged into the editor's office, not bothering to knock first or even check whether or not he was busy. She was the Planet's star reporter and acted as such — if she needed to talk to someone about something, they'd simply have to make time to accommodate her.

"Chief, I think there's a story here and we should have this guy checked out," she announced. "You know, the crazy one from this morning. He was an engineer at EPRAD for ten years, and—"

"Lois! Can't you see I'm in the middle of something here?" Perry grumbled.

"Oh," she said, as though it would suffice for an apology.

That's when she noticed the man who'd just gotten up from where he was sitting, on the other side of the editor's desk. She froze in place, mouth gaping open. What was *he* doing here?

"Lois Lane, meet Clark Kent," the editor said in a rather frustrated sigh.

"We've, uh, we've already met," Clark replied. "Nice to see you again, Miss Lane," he added with a smile, as he extended a hand toward her.

"Um, yes, very nice," Lois muttered half-heartedly. She shook the man's hand briefly before turning back to Perry. "What's he doing here?" she hissed between her teeth.

The editor frowned. "Why, Lois, what do you think he's doing here?"

"Would you excuse us," Lois said to Clark. It wasn't a question. With a wave of the hand and an annoyed expression on her face, she showed him the door through which she expected him to exit.

"Oh— uh, of course." Clark left the office and closed the door behind him, letting them discuss the matter privately.

Little did they know how pointless this was, as he could easily listen in on their private conversation, even from much further away, should he choose to do so. Of course, Clark was too

considerate to eavesdrop, so he concentrated his powerful sense of hearing on anything but the discussion that was taking place right behind the glass door.

"You're not hiring him, are you?" Lois barked at the editor the moment they were alone in the office. "Tell me you're not hiring this... this... this *guy*."

"Now, calm down, Lois," Perry said in his best fatherly tone.

"No! No, I won't calm down," she retorted angrily. "I won't calm down unless you assure me that you're not hiring him!"

If Lois had been able to shoot fireballs from her eyes, Perry guessed that he'd have been toasted by now. Lois Lane had a volatile temper, as everyone in the newsroom knew very well by now. But she didn't usually get this worked up unless she felt threatened, and for a moment the editor wondered if perhaps he'd just made a huge mistake.

Sure this Kent guy was talented, but if having him join The Daily Planet's team was going to prove to be a bad business move... Perry would never risk losing Lois. She was his star, his ace; the best investigative reporter he'd ever worked with. If hiring Clark Kent meant putting the newsroom's best asset in jeopardy, then the man would be gone before he even had a chance to see his name on a byline.

But Perry White wasn't one to let his reporters walk all over him. Not even his star reporter.

Especially not his star reporter.

He handled his newsroom with an iron fist; an iron fist in a velvet glove, of course. And he wouldn't even start considering the possibility of taking back his offer unless Lois could give him a very solid reason to do so.

"Why shouldn't I?" he asked her. "Lois, he's one of the best reporters The Daily Bugle has had in a very long time. I'd love to see Jamieson's face when he finds out he's lost him to us. The man's likely to have a coronary." Perry chuckled at the thought. "It'll be like that time the Colonel got—"

"Oh, oh, I get it. This is a case of editor rivalry, isn't it? You're trying to see if you can steal their top dog. To prove that The Planet is—"

"Wait, wait, slow down. Steal?" Perry frowned at her. "I'm not trying to steal him from them. He showed up here of his own accord. Said he hoped for a chance to work with the best of the best."

Lois all but snorted. "Well of course The Planet is the best! Our circulation numbers are by far—"

"Ah, Lois?" Perry interrupted. "He didn't mean us as in *the Planet*. He meant you."

"—superior to any other—" Lois stopped midway into her diatribe. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"I said... when he told me he was hoping for a chance to work with the best of the best, he was talking about you; Lois Lane."

"Me?" She blushed as she took a quick glance at the man standing outside the room. "He's obviously done his research."

"As well he should," the editor agreed with a short nod. "Any more objections to my hiring him, Lois?"

"Objections? Oh, um, I—" She looked over to Clark again in an attempt to size him up real fast.

He looked back at her and smiled. Lois looked away almost immediately, feeling intimidated for no reason she could explain.

From what she'd been able to gather about him at the ball, he seemed to be a smart, educated man. And given that Perry apparently thought of him as one of the best reporters in New York City, they'd be nuts not to hire him, she knew.

"Yes?" Perry asked impatiently.

"No. No objections." Then she frowned. "But let's make this real clear: I'm top banana around here and—"

"No, Lois," he said firmly. "I am top banana. You work for *me*."

She was about to explain her position, but he didn't let her. "But, I get what you're trying to say," he told her in a gentler tone, "and you don't have to worry about the food chain. He's just the new guy. For the moment, anyway."

"But I've—"

"Worked very hard to get to where you are today. I know." He raised an eyebrow; he knew this little speech by heart. "And this is the great thing about it: you're going to continue to work hard."

"Because if I don't—" she started, indignantly.

"Because if you don't, you can stop daydreaming about Kerths, and Pulitzers." Perry gave her a smile and then signaled to Clark that he could come back in.

"Clark Kent," he said as the man entered the office, "welcome to The Daily Planet."

The look of pure elation on the reporter's face wasn't lost on Lois. A wave of pride rushed through her at the thought that the man had chosen The Planet, not because of the paper's reputation for quality or greatness, but because of her own.

As long as he didn't try to usurp her star-reporter position, she could at least *try* not to make too much of a fuss.

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Lois had barely had more than a couple of days to get used to the idea that Clark Kent would be joining the Planet's news team when he finally showed up one morning, bright and early, for his first day on the job.

At first, she'd tried to convince herself that she might actually enjoy having him around the newsroom. At the very least, she'd finally have someone with whom she'd be able to have an intelligent conversation, as opposed to Jimmy, Ralph or Cat.

However, after scanning through a few months' worth of articles he'd written for The Daily Bugle, she'd started to be a little afraid that he might barge in newsroom and push her aside, quickly and easily. Any way she looked at it, she had to admit that Clark Kent was definitely a good reporter.

A *very* good reporter.

A little too good for her own sense of well being, actually. Not to mention he seemed to excel in writing those touchy-feely types of stories that she hated working on so much. Hard facts — that was her strength. But this guy...

Somehow, he seemed too good to be true.

Worst of all, he'd constantly been popping up in her daydreams since the charity ball. Her heart would start racing, a blush would creep up on her cheeks and she'd end up berating herself, every single time, for acting like a schoolgirl with a crush. How ridiculous!

But as much as Lois tried to get all these things out of her mind — that dance, the expression on his face when she'd slipped her hand in his pocket and taken his hand in her own, or the look in his eyes as he'd watched her from across the room at the stroke of midnight — no matter how hard she tried to clear her head of all of this, the images just kept coming back.

No matter how intelligent, good looking, muscular or — admittedly — how wonderful a dancer this man was, Lois had no need for a man in her life. It didn't matter how appealing he was. Even suave billionaires stood no chance with her. Especially suave billionaires who were known to be skirt-chasers, like Bruce Wayne, for instance.

Of course, said suave billionaire was just a story to her. And Lois Lane never got involved with her stories.

Clark Kent, on the other hand...

When he'd walked into the newsroom, Lois had known with just one glance that she'd have to watch herself around him. Watch her back, first and foremost, but her heart just as much. This man had all the potential to be very, very bad news.

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"I knew there was something to Platt's story," Lois

complained, shaking her head at the images displayed on TV of the space shuttle, which had just exploded. "I just knew it!"

She should have taken Samuel Platt more seriously. He looked a bit like a nutcase, sure, but couldn't the same be said of many geniuses throughout history? Not to mention, a lot of her snitches appeared to be completely untrustworthy to anyone who didn't already know them — yet they consistently handed her valuable pieces of factual, verifiable information. The bottom line — and she knew it — was that judging a book by its cover was one of the worst mistakes a reporter could make. Or anyone else, for that matter.

Lois knew there wasn't a minute to lose; she needed to act now. There was a story here and, more importantly, there were lives at stake. Another catastrophe might even jeopardize the entire space program. She couldn't let that happen. Platt likely had some sort of evidence that would point to the culprit. She'd just have to figure things out and crack this story.

Somehow.

Minutes later, as reporters turned away from the television set and returned to their usual tasks, Lois took Perry aside and told him in no uncertain terms that this was *her* story. Samuel Platt had come to *her*, not to anyone else.

"But I'll need a task force," she said to her editor, knowing fully well that she'd need every bit of assistance she could get. "I can't cover this story alone."

He shrugged, unsure that Lois really had anything to go on. "You can have Jimmy."

"Chief, we're talking about the space program," she argued. Images of a Pulitzer Prize suddenly started dancing in her head at the realization that this could be a story of extreme importance.

"Okay," the editor conceded. "Take Kent."

"Kent?" Lois's eyes grew wide. He couldn't be serious, could he?

"Kent."

"What about Myerson?" she suggested.

"He's busy."

Lois racked her brains, trying to think of someone else. "Burns?"

"Budapest."

"Forget Kent," she said firmly.

"Uh huh. He's a good man," Perry told her in a tone to match her own.

"I know! That's just the point," Lois complained nervously, the mental image of her precious Pulitzer Prize suddenly shattering in her head.

Clark Kent would want his name on the byline, there was no doubt about it. This wasn't a greenhorn she could walk all over or push around at will. He might be the new guy, but he had a good reputation and an already solid career; there was no way he would let her take all the credit and the glory while he worked in the shadows. That meant she'd have to share the recognition.

*Share.*

*With him.*

Perry eyed her suspiciously, then shrugged. As long as he lived, he'd never be able to follow this woman's leaps of logic, he realized. "Kent or nobody," he told her in an exasperated sigh.

"Fine. Don't ever say that I'm not a team player," she threw at him, walking away in a huff.

The editor's eyebrows rose all the way to his hairline. A team player? Lois Lane had never been a team player, and Perry was just about certain that no matter what he did, he'd never be able to turn her into one.

Unless it was a one-woman team, of course.

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Reluctantly, Lois had walked over to Clark and explained that they were — for the time being — working together on this story. There had been something in the man's eyes then, which she'd

found just as unnerving as she'd found annoying. Something like admiration, but not exactly. Perhaps it was just anticipation, she decided. This was going to be his first byline for *The Planet*, after all. And it would likely be a front-page one, to boot.

As the day had progressed, they had met with Samuel Platt, from whom they'd gotten a bit more information — and some form of a report. According to him, the particle isolators probably hadn't been manufactured to the original specifications. Heating devices had been installed as a preventive measure in order to keep the particles from freezing under extreme temperatures, and it was his belief that the increased heat around the isolators had caused them to malfunction.

They'd also managed to speak with Dr. Antoinette Baines, director of EPRAD who, contrary to the agency's former resident mad-scientist, hadn't been very cooperative at all. When she'd denied having been informed of any possible malfunctions — or design issues for that matter — involving the particle isolators, Lois had become convinced that the woman was hiding something.

Clark apparently agreed, much to Lois's satisfaction. However, she had been more than just slightly annoyed to bear witness to the blatant flirting that had been going on between the two during the interview. Unless he'd just done it as a means of putting the woman at ease so she might trust them enough to open up to them? Either way, it wasn't very professional, though that wasn't really what had bothered Lois. She shrugged the thought away; she wasn't *really* interested in this man, so what did it matter anyway? Besides, as long as they agreed on the fact that Antoinette Baines had something to hide, there was no need make a big deal out of this.

"There's something about her, though," Clark started, deep in thought, as they were on their way out of the main hangar at EPRAD.

Lois rolled her eyes at what she took for a dreamy expression. "Typical." Just when she was starting to think that this guy wasn't all bad, he had to go and spoil it by proving, once again, that all men were the same. Show them a pretty girl and most of their brains would undoubtedly start spiraling downward.

"What?"

"Typical male response," she explained, looking at him with contempt.

"Lois, trust me on this, I am not your typical male," he said in a chuckle. There wasn't much about him that was typical, actually. But he couldn't blame her for thinking there was. In fact, he counted on it — he needed to be able to deceive people into thinking he was just a regular, ordinary Joe. If anyone ever found out what he really was, what he was really capable of, Clark knew that they'd immediately want to get him in a lab and study him. Dissect him like a frog, as his father always said. He couldn't take that chance.

"No? Just because she's okay looking..."

"Sure she's okay looking — if you like her type — but that's not what I meant when I said there was something about her, Lois," Clark explained. All he got for a response was a puzzled frown, so he went on, "I've seen her someplace before, I'm sure of it."

"What, like on TV or something?"

"Or something," he echoed, trying to conjure up the memory.

"She's been on the news a lot recently," Lois offered matter-of-factly. "Maybe that's what you're—"

"I've got it!" Clark exclaimed suddenly, and he pointed to a piece of equipment that was being fitted onto some sort of space exploration vehicle. "Wayne Aerospace!"

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"Wayne Aerospace," he explained. "That's where Dr. Baines worked, back when she received the Judith Resnik Award. I remember seeing the announcement in the newspaper a few years

back."

"Yeah? So?" Lois answered, dismissively. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"Well, for one thing, that means her ex-employer is now her biggest supplier of parts."

"Your point?" she asked, miffed. "They've been EPRAD's main supplier for over a decade. That's well before her time as director."

"I know," he conceded. "But what if those particle isolators are one of the parts they manufacture?"

Lois let out a frustrated sigh. "Look, Kent, if you're going somewhere with all this, I hope you'll get there before this century is out!"

"Good things come to those who wait," he told her with a teasing grin as they exited the facility.

She glared at him, furious. "Would you spill it, already? Or are you really just trying to make me hate you?"

"Oh, I already know you like me, Lois." Clark's smile turned smug, as Lois's expression grew even more enraged. "Come on, we have a *report* to look at."

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"Lois!" Jimmy called out to her the minute she walked into the newsroom. "There was a call for you. Bruce Wayne's *personal* assistant. I guess you finally hit the big time, huh? I left a note on your desk."

"Excellent! Thanks, Jimmy," she replied as she walked briskly towards her desk, anxious to see the note.

"Hey, what'd you do with your partner? Chew his head off and hide the body?"

"I don't have a par— Oh, wait...I do, don't I?" Lois turned to look around, but Clark was nowhere in sight. Hadn't he been right behind her in the lobby of *The Planet*? She shrugged. "I have *no* idea where he went. For all I know, he could have vanished into thin air."

Lois turned again and quickly made for her desk, sliding down in her chair as soon as she got there. Stuck under a corner of her keyboard was the phone message she was so eager to get her hands on. Immediately, she picked up the phone and dialed the number.

A few minutes later, Lois set the receiver back down into the cradle, a victorious smile spreading across her face. "I got it!" she exclaimed.

Just then, the elevator made a small ding and its doors opened to reveal a dust-covered Clark Kent. Sheepishly, he headed for the washrooms, head bowed down, hoping no one would pay too much attention to him.

He'd been following Lois back into the Planet when he'd heard a strange rumbling noise that seemed to be coming from underground. Then he'd heard an explosion and a scream. Without so much as a second thought, Clark had dashed out of the building. Seconds later, he had located the source of the commotion and, dropping down into the closest manhole, he had super-spied right to the location of a worker who had been trapped underground by an explosion.

Luckily, no one had seen Clark do anything out of the ordinary — except the worker he had rescued and lifted out of the manhole. Of course, when the man had pointed to Clark and claimed that he had saved him, everyone had just believed he was dazed and confused. There was no way anyone could have been down with the worker one second and out in the crowd the very next one.

At least, no one *ordinary*.

Clark had just barely made it past Lois's desk when she noticed him. "Where have you been?" she asked, a touch of displeasure in her voice.

"Oh, I just remembered I had to stop by the b—"

"And what on earth happened to your suit?" She frowned at

him, perplexed. What could he possibly have done in the last five minutes or so that would have gotten him covered in dirt?

“Oh, um, that’s because there was an explosion,” he explained, a little uneasily at first, but gaining assurance as he spoke. “Underground. There was a worker trapped. I got a few good quotes.” He pulled out a notepad from his jacket pocket and waved it before using it to dust himself off. “I guess the wind probably blew debris all over everyone.”

“Must have been one serious gust of wind...” Lois mumbled, doubtful. “From now on, do what I do: bring a change of clothes to work.”

A peculiar expression flashed across Clark’s face, as if he’d suddenly figured out the meaning of life, and he broke into a wide smile. “That’s a great idea,” he told her before walking off in the direction of the washrooms.

“Hey, you better not disappear again, Kent,” Lois called out after him. “We have Platt’s report to look at!”

“I’ll be back before you can blink,” he replied from halfway across the room, waving a hand in the air.

Lois rolled her eyes at the comment. As if!

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“What kind of a report is this, anyway?” Lois complained, as she pulled scrap upon scrap of paper from the brown bag they’d collected from Platt and set them on the conference table. “How are we ever going to piece all of this together? No wonder Baines has no memory of seeing this, she probably thought it was garbage!”

“We’ll figure it out somehow,” Clark replied calmly. He’d been trying to sort the pieces of paper in an order that made sense, but this was a puzzle that none of his abilities were likely to help him solve.

“I hope you haven’t made dinner plans,” she said in a rather frustrated sigh. “We’re going to be here all night.”

“I am all yours.” He flashed her a warm smile and he could have sworn that she’d blushed.

“Careful,” Lois found herself saying, “I might hold you to that.”

“I’m counting on it,” he told her, holding her gaze until she looked away, visibly flustered.

Much to Lois’s relief, Jimmy chose that exact moment to barge into the conference room. “Well, I’ve tried calling everyone on your list, Lois,” he announced, plopping down in the nearest chair. “No one’s talking.” He shrugged. “Anything else you need me to do?”

“You still have contacts at STAR Labs?” Lois asked him. At his nod, she added, “Do you think you could have them verify a theory or two?”

“Oh yeah! Stuart still owes me for setting him up with Stacy last month,” Jimmy replied, a smirk on his face. “Just let me know what you need!”

“If we ever manage to make sense of this...pile of...” She sighed and gestured at the papers scattered across the table. “Platt’s report. If we can make heads or tails of it, then we’d need them to verify that a malfunction could have occurred because the particle isolators overheated.”

“Sure thing, Lois.” Jimmy took a quick look at his watch and got up from his chair. “I’d better go. I’d help you guys out; really, I would. But I’ve got a *hot* date with a cute girl from research.”

“It’s fine, Jimmy,” Lois told him with a wave of the hand.

“We’ll figure it out. Right, Clark?”

“Of course,” Clark acquiesced. “Have a good time, Jimmy.”

Jimmy left the room, and Lois bent down to grab a few pieces of paper off the conference table.

She sighed. “It’s hopeless, isn’t it?”

“Nothing is ever hopeless, Lois.”

Clark gave her a warm smile and, for a moment, Lois found herself almost wishing they were anywhere but in the conference

room at work.

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They’d been at it for hours and Lois’s blood was just about to start boiling in her veins. Nothing in this poor excuse for a report made any sort of sense at all. There wasn’t anything useful, they couldn’t draw any conclusions from it — they were just wasting their time!

All of a sudden, she remembered that Clark had begun elaborating a theory while they were leaving EPRAD earlier.

“I think I’ve waited long enough, now. Don’t you?” she asked him, crossing her arms against her chest and giving him a challenging look.

Clark looked back, slightly confused. “Long enough for what?”

“To hear your theory.” On his raised eyebrow, she added, “The theory you came up with this afternoon... something about Wayne Aerospace... how Antoinette Baines had worked there...”

“Oh, right! Well, we both agree she seems to be hiding something, right?”

“Yeah?”

“She could be trying to protect her ex-employer,” he suggested.

“Are you suggesting that it was one of *their* parts that was defective and caused the explosion?” she said, all the while trying to make every possible connection in her mind.

“Considering Wayne Tech is under investigation for failure to comply with occupational safety and health regulations, I wouldn’t exactly dismiss the thought. If they’re not concerned with the safety of their own employees, how likely do you think it would be that parts they deliver to their clients might be defective?”

“Could be,” Lois agreed. “But why would Baines want to protect an ex-employer? What’s in it for her?”

“First guess would be money.”

“Well, yeah, but...” Lois shook her head. “We’re talking about someone who was awarded a medal for working on the space program. Do you really think she’d compromise the whole thing for a few dollars?”

Clark gave a small shrug. “Okay, then, loads of money.”

“Still... Her entire career, her reputation, everything down the drain, for a few fistfuls of dollars?” Lois was far from convinced. “I could see a man doing that, but it’s not something you typically see with women.”

“Perhaps they’re shacking up together?” Clark suggested, an amused look in his eyes. “She’s totally his type, after all.”

“Is she?” Lois raised an eyebrow. “How do you know what type of women Bruce Wayne goes for?”

Clark let out a small chuckle. “Given his reputation, I bet he goes for anything in a skirt.”

It was Lois’s turn to laugh. “You do realize that ‘anything in a skirt’ is broad enough to include Scottish men, for instance?”

“Sure. Why not?” he said, with a lopsided smile.

“You’re nuts, Kent!”

He shrugged, though his eyes still had a spark of amusement in them. “Hey, talking about nuts, how do you feel about Thai cashew chicken? I know a place... best Thai food you’ve ever had.”

“You’ve been in Metropolis what, a week? And already you know all the best places?” Lois asked, dubious.

Clark tapped the side of his nose lightly. “Sources, Lois. Sources.”

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“Are you sure you won’t tell me where you got this from?” Lois asked for what had to be the fifth time since Clark had gotten back with what she could only agree was the best Thai food she’d ever had.

“Nope.” Clark shook his head, smiling both at her insistence

and her insatiable curiosity. “But how about I promise to take you there sometime instead?”

“If you think you can con me into going out with you this easily, you’ve got another think coming.”

“See, I knew you liked me,” Clark said in a chuckle. “Why else would you automatically assume that I was trying to ask you out?”

“No... I think you like me,” she replied, smirking. “And since asking girls out is what most guys do when they find one they like, I just put two and two together.”

“Ah yes, but as I believe I’ve told you before, I’m not like most guys.”

Lois gave him an appraising look. “You are a strange one, Clark Kent,” she said after a moment. “But I think I got you figured out.”

“Really?” he asked, amused by her statement. “Didn’t take you very long.”

“Well, it’s my business, looking beyond the external,” she explained, a smug look on her face. Although, in this case, she would have been content to simply look at his very nice external features — broad shoulders, friendly smile, and chocolate-brown eyes that always seemed to have a spark of mischief to them.

For a moment, he seemed satisfied with sitting there and letting her look, saying nothing at all. Until finally Lois realized she was staring and she looked away, eyes wide.

She cleared her throat, hoping to hide her embarrassment, and got up from her seat abruptly. “Come on,” she said, “let’s go find Platt, maybe he can help us decipher this.”

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When Lois walked into the newsroom, early that morning, she was livid. She marched toward Clark’s desk and threw a copy of the Planet’s latest edition over his keyboard. On the front page was an article about the city’s plans to rejuvenate its business district in an effort to attract international companies and investors.

An article written by Clark Kent.

“What’s this?” Lois barked, eyes narrow. “What happened to the story that was supposed to be right here -” she jabbed the front page with her finger “- just below the logo? Huh? What happened to *my* story? How dare you! You had no right to submit this... this... whatever the hell that is... instead of the story you were *supposed* to turn in for me. And to think I actually *trusted* you! You’re... You know what you are? You’re the lowest form of life imaginable, Clark Kent. That’s what you are!”

Not once during Lois’s angry tirade did Clark try to interrupt her. He neither blinked, nor winced, keeping a straight face the entire time. He could understand her frustration — he’d felt the exact same thing when he’d seen the front page this morning, too.

Ever since they’d left the newsroom to visit Platt again, two nights ago, things had taken turns that neither of them had anticipated.

When he and Lois had arrived at the abandoned warehouse that Platt was calling his home, they’d made an unexpected discovery: the scientist was dead. Sitting in a chair, his feet in a bucket of water into which an exposed electrical wire had fallen, Samuel Platt had died, electrocuted. Their best lead had become a dead-end, quite literally.

By morning, even though the police detectives who had investigated the scene had concluded that he had committed suicide, Lois strongly suspected that it was murder. But no matter how much she or Clark had tried to argue with them, all circumstantial evidence pointed to suicide as the cause of death, and no one had any other proof to offer.

They’d immediately sent Jimmy to see his contacts at STAR Labs with as much of the scientist’s report that they’d been able to make sense of, while they tried to follow any and all other leads they had or could manage to find. Late that afternoon,

Jimmy had come back from STAR Labs with a verdict: according to their analysis, had the particle isolators been manufactured per EPRAD’s original specifications, they would not have required any additional heating, which was what had caused them to malfunction.

A little bit of sleuthing and some digging around, and they’d gathered the bases they needed for an article pointing the finger at Wayne Aerospace for criminal negligence in the manufacturing of the parts, and strongly hinting to a link between that and Samuel Platt’s death. Lois had started writing the main article, while Clark had worked on smaller companion pieces.

They’d still been waiting on one last confirmation when Clark had suggested that Lois go home and get some rest — they’d been up for over twenty-four hours by then, and it was clear that she was exhausted. When she’d hesitated, he’d offered her every reassurance that he’d wait for the confirmation, tweak the one or two paragraphs that would require it, and submit both her article and his to the editor. She’d made him promise that he would.

So when Clark had awoken to find the morning edition of the Planet on his doorstep, with an article he’d written his first day but which had been put on ice for the time being, he’d known right away that something was very wrong. That, and that there would be a one-on-one with Mad Dog Lane in his immediate future.

And, just as expected, she’d just given him an earful, which he’d taken without so much of a complaint. He knew he probably should have stopped her after the first few words, but there was something about a very angry Lois Lane which was somehow... mesmerizing.

“Well?” Lois asked impatiently, when it looked like Clark might not ever speak again. “Don’t you have anything to say for yourself?”

“I would,” Clark replied, shrugging, “but I have a feeling, no matter what I say, you won’t believe me.”

Eyes narrow, she replied, “You’re right, I wouldn’t! I know better than to trust *you*, from now on.”

She was about to go back to her desk when Jimmy came running.

“Hey guys, have you heard the news?” he asked, a bit out of breath. “We have a new owner. The Planet’s been sold.”

The news hit Lois like a right hook between the eyes. “What?”

Clark nodded. “Yep. As of midnight last night, the Daily Planet is now the property of Wayne Entertainment.”

“Of *who* Entertainment?” Lois asked, eyes wide in disbelief. “Wayne? As in... Bruce Wayne?”

“The one and only,” Jimmy said. “Wayne Entertainment is one of the newer divisions of Wayne Enterprises, which also owns —”

“Wayne Aerospace,” Clark cut in, sensing that Jimmy might be going for a full listing. “And whether you’ll believe me or not,” he added for Lois’s benefit, “*that* is why neither your article, nor mine, are anywhere to be found in today’s edition.”

Lois suddenly felt as though her legs had been cut off. “*What?* You’re not seriously implying that he bought the paper to stop the article from being printed, are you?”

“Well, that, or perhaps he stopped them from being printed because he bought the paper.” Clark shrugged. “I’ll admit there’s a difference, but the end result is the same. Either way, from what I understood, he personally requested the articles be pulled.”

Clark watched in amazement as Lois transformed into some sort of human tornado — her speaking voice reaching the highest octaves, words strung together into sentences at light speeds, hands thrown up in the air constantly, completely oblivious to the people around here and whatever looks they might be giving her.

“I don’t believe this! This can’t be happening! We need to

fight against this treatment, Clark! The nerve of this man! We can't let him get away with it! This goes against — against our constitutional rights, that's what! We have a responsibility to the people out there, to tell them what's going on in the world, and that's why there's such a thing as freedom of the press!"

Lois didn't notice Jimmy ducking and running for cover, nor did she realize that someone had walked up to her, even though Clark had attempted to attract her attention to the fact.

"I believe in freedom of the press just as much as you do, Miss Lane," said Bruce Wayne, arms crossed in front of his chest, a displeased expression on his face. "And when you have *facts* to support your wild theories, I have every confidence that any article of yours will be printed, as it should."

"They aren't wild theories," Lois protested, not the least bit intimidated by the billionaire. "And my article would have been printed had it not been for your very timely new acquisition. If you seriously think you can manipulate what gets printed in this paper by purchasing it then you —"

"Quite the contrary," Bruce cut in. "I bought this newspaper because it made good business sense. And if there was anything newsworthy about me, I should think we'd be the ones to print it. But for as long as I've had a subscription to the Daily Planet, never once have I read anything in its pages that remotely resembled the sort of garbage hearsay that the National Whisper likes to plaster all over its front page, and today is not the day we're going to start. I suspect if you checked with your editor, you'd find that Mr. White completely agrees with this point of view." He nodded curtly, then added, "Good day, Miss Lane," before walking away.

Lois watched him leave, daggers in her eyes, her hands closed into tight fists. She mumbled something and walked off toward the elevators, barely stopping long enough to grab a notepad on her desk.

"Lois, wait!" Clark called after her. "Where are you going?"

Just as he was getting up from his desk to catch up to her, Perry White came out of his office, with a look to give interns nightmares. "Lane, Kent, my office. *Now!*" he bellowed over the clatter of the newsroom.

Torn between running after Lois or getting an earful from his editor, Clark made the choice that would best insure he would still have a job the next morning.

He immediately knew he'd made the *wrong* choice when his super hearing picked up Lois's last words as the elevator doors closed behind her.

"He wants facts?" she was saying angrily, "I'll get him facts!"

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When Clark came out of Perry's office, his ears were ringing to the tune of "facts, facts, facts!"

Caught in the excitement of it all — starting with STAR Lab's confirmation of what Pratt had been saying all along — both Clark and Lois had been very much convinced that they had what they needed for their expose. Of course, in hindsight, all they had were shaky facts, circumstantial evidence, and a lot of Lois's opinions...but that was it.

Clark shot a dirty look toward the Planet's new owner who was surrounded by a group of women apparently hanging on his every word. The man made it so easy to think he was one of the good guys — elegant, charming and seductive, he had more than enough charisma to win just about anyone to his cause. Clark shook his head; the best way to look innocent was to act it, and Bruce Wayne certainly deserved an Oscar for his performance.

Meanwhile, Lois had run off somewhere, Clark had landed himself in his editor's doghouse, and worse yet, the launch of space station Prometheus still stood a very good chance of being cancelled, opening doors wide for private investors wanting to get in on the very lucrative race for medical research in space.

Eyes wide, Clark hit his forehead with his palm. That was it! Private investors. *Other* private investors. Why hadn't they thought of that?

While Wayne Aerospace was EPRAD's main supplier of parts, they weren't the only ones. There were others... Plenty of them: Queen Industries, Kord Enterprises, even LuthorCorp — the latter being notorious for coming in second and constantly losing bids to Wayne Enterprises, and its owner for holding a grudge against Bruce Wayne himself for well over a decade now.

Clark sat at his desk and started running searches on his computer, looking for any sort of correlation he could possibly find between these companies and all the facts he had on this case so far. Nervously, he tapped the side of the keyboard with his fingers, willing his computer to come up with something faster. If only databases could work at super speed, too...

And then all of a sudden, as he scrolled through the impressive amount of information that his searches had come up with, he found his answer. They'd been wrong all along, except on one count: Antoinette Baines was definitely hiding something.

Grabbing his jacket off the chair, Clark hurried over to the stairs. He didn't know where Lois had gone, but he had a pretty good hunch, and if he was right, she was likely to land herself in a whole heap of trouble.

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Lois found breaking into the main hangar at EPRAD to be child's play. She'd gone through security like a hot knife through butter, and had found an unlocked door, far enough from the main entrance to be able to enter unnoticed. She hadn't even had to pick a lock, or even knock out a guard. This was almost too easy, she thought, as she walked inside and tried to find her way around the place.

However, Lois's luck ran out just as she'd found the jackpot — the wreckage from the space capsule that had exploded earlier that week — and someone came up behind her, hitting her solidly on the side of the head. She fell to the floor, unconscious.

When she came to, she was sitting on the floor, her back to some sort of metal tubing around which she was handcuffed. Her legs were bound as well. So much for breaking into the place without being noticed, she thought as she looked around. For a moment, she considered shouting for help, but the only people around were more than likely not going to help her — quite the contrary.

Instead, Lois tried a different tactic. "You'll never get away with this!" she shouted over her shoulder to the two figures she could see in the shadows. "Everyone at the Planet knows where I am."

Just as she heard a woman's laughter, there was a loud noise and a door came flying into view. Lois's head snapped to the right and, from the entrance where the door used to be, she saw Clark walking in.

"Let her go," he told the two people still hidden in the shadows behind Lois.

They both came into view then. The woman was Antoinette Baines, just as he'd suspected. The man she was with looked like some sort of bodyguard. He was holding a machine gun aimed straight at Clark's chest.

"Put down that gun, or I'll..." Clark started before he realized what he was saying. He had nothing to threaten them with. At least not without exposing himself, and he wasn't ready to do that. Not now, not here. Not like this.

"Or you'll *what?*" asked Antoinette Baines, an eyebrow raised, looking quite unimpressed by the reporter's apparent macho display.

When Clark just shrugged and said nothing, Lois rolled her eyes and sighed in complete frustration. Leave it to a man to come barging into the lion's den, instead of using his head to get them out of this mess!

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In a matter of minutes, Clark was tied up to the same metal pipe that Lois was already bound to.

“Answer one question...” Lois asked Baines. “Why?”

“It’s simple, Lois,” the woman replied in a falsely sweet tone. “Profit. Outer space is no different than any new frontier, it’ll belong to those who get there first and seize the high ground. Sorry you won’t be around to witness it...”

With that she laughed and walked away, an arm around her accomplice’s shoulders.

“Lois, we were wrong,” Clark said once he was sure their captors were out of hearing range.

Exasperated, Lois shot back, “You don’t say! And by the way, nice going barreling in here like some five hundred pound gorilla. If you really thought we were in trouble, why didn’t you bring the police?”

“Look —”

“Don’t tell me, because I already know! You’re like every other man in Metropolis. You’ve got this testosterone surplus that says ‘I can do it myself!’ Baines is going to kill us now... I don’t know why she hasn’t done it already.”

Taken aback, Clark resisted the urge to tell her once again that he wasn’t anything like every other man in Metropolis — or any other man on the planet, for that matter — but he was quite certain she wouldn’t believe a word he’d say unless he could do something to get them out of here. So, he pulled on the chains that were keeping his hands bound together, and broke himself loose.

“Lois,” he said calmly, “I’ve somehow managed to—”

“Mess everything up?” she shot back, still angry. “No kidding!”

“Now, hold on a second,” Clark protested, frustration starting to bubble inside him. “I’m not the one who snuck in here—”

Outraged, Lois immediately replied, “What are you saying? Are you saying that this is *my* fault? At least, *I* had the guts to come in here and...” She paused, realizing that coming in here hadn’t exactly amounted to anything positive so far. “What am I saying? This probably *is* my fault.”

“Look, Lois, they’re going to come back any minute now. There’s something I need to tell you —”

“What difference does it make anyway?” she said dejectedly. “We’re just going to die...”

“No, we’re not!” Clark insisted. He stood up, went around to where Lois was sitting and started untying her.

“Clark? How did you...?” she asked so perplexed she could barely manage to order her thoughts enough to complete her sentence.

“Missing link,” he replied, pulling her up. “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you.”

As they ran out of the place, several shots were fired. Clark made sure Lois ran ahead of him the entire time. When they got to her car, he hoped she wouldn’t notice the bullet holes that were undoubtedly visible on the back of his jacket.

They’d barely driven away from the main gates when, high in the sky above, a small helicopter that had just taken off from the hangar’s rooftop exploded in a fiery rain of torn metal and broken glass.

Lois didn’t need any visual proof to know exactly who’d been in the helicopter...

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On the drive back to the Daily Planet, Clark explained how he’d figured out just who was responsible and why...

“Wayne pulled the plug on Baines’ research a few weeks after she was awarded her prize,” he told Lois. “Maybe a month or so. From one day to the next, her entire research team was reassigned, she was fired, and the entire project was literally swept under a rug somewhere.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean anything,” Lois argued. “These rich types pull the plug on research all the time — they get bored of it, it doesn’t look like it’s going to bring in as much cash as they expected... You name it, the list of reasons is this long.”

Clark nodded. “You’re right, it *doesn’t* mean anything.” When Lois shot him a confused look, he added, “Other than the fact that she might have held a grudge. However, right *after* she was fired, she started working for someone else who holds a grudge against our dear new owner. Someone who’s suspected of having ties with organized crime and who would have *everything* to gain, should Wayne Aerospace suddenly stop supplying parts to EPRAD... Lex Luthor.”

“Luthor! Why didn’t I think of that?” Lois gripped the steering wheel tightly, frustrated at herself for not looking any further than the surface.

Apparently, working with a handsome partner was seriously distracting her from doing her job properly. She’d have to ask Perry to get him assigned to whatever other beat he could that wasn’t her own. And just when she was starting to realize that having a partner wasn’t all that bad, after all...

Absently, she added, “I wonder if it’s too late to try and finagle that interview out of Bruce Wayne now...”

Clark shrugged, opting to remain silent the rest of the drive back.

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By the next morning, Antoinette Baines had been exposed as a saboteur; Wayne Aerospace had been cleared of all suspicion, and space station Prometheus was about to be launched, as originally planned.

Clark had flown back to Smallville to enlist his mother’s help in creating some sort of costume he could wear that would enable him to help out in an emergency, without the need to reveal to the entire world that under his cheap business suits hid a man more powerful than anyone could possibly imagine.

Meanwhile, Lois had begged Perry for a chance to be on the station when it went up. She had hoped to give the Planet an exclusive account of what it was like to be on the colonist transport as it was launched into space. Her request had been denied almost immediately, much to her regret.

Of course, denied requests, rules and regulations had rarely ever stopped Lois Lane from doing anything...

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Forty-five seconds before the scheduled launch of the space station Prometheus, Lois, having managed to get on board, strapped herself to a seat, out of view from the surveillance cameras.

All of a sudden, she heard a small beeping noise coming from a small display on the wall, on which there seemed to be a timer, counting down. Lois unhooked her seatbelt and ran over to the display.

“It’s a bomb!” she said, blanching. “A bomb!”

She ran to the exit, but found it was now sealed. There was no way out. She started banging on the door, frantic, yelling, “Someone help! There’s a bomb! Help!”

When it became obvious that no one had heard her and that no one would be coming to their rescue, Lois hurried back to where the bomb was stuck to the wall. She started looking around for anything that might enable her to defuse the explosive device. Grabbing a pair of pliers, she started hacking away at some wires, desperately willing that to be the right answer.

When she heard a voice over the speakers saying that the launch had been suspended due to an electrical malfunction, she knew that she’d at least accomplished something — perhaps in the thirty seconds they had left someone would open the sealed door, find the bomb and stop it in time before it killed her and everyone else on the transport.

As if by miracle, when Lois looked over her shoulder, she

saw a man walking into the room — at least she *thought* he was a man. He wore an odd sort of getup, tight-fitting grey costume with what seemed to be black underwear on the outside. He had a black cape and, most surprisingly, a weird cowl with pointy ears on top, like a cat's.

"Who the hell are you? Darth Vader?" she asked, taking a few steps back and getting ready to defend herself against the potential attacker. Thank goodness for her Tae Kwon Do training.

"I'm Batman," he said in a low, gravely voice.

"*What-man?*" she asked, confused. Who was this weirdo? Though, more importantly, could he help?

Ignoring her question completely, Batman walked over to the wall where the bomb was. He ripped the front panel off of it and, pulling out some sort of Swiss army knife from a compartment on his belt, proceeded to defuse the explosive.

That's when another man came rushing into the room. He had on the same type of tight-fitting costume, complete with the underwear on the outside and the cape — though his attire was blue and red and he wasn't wearing a mask. As a completing touch, he had a huge diamond-shaped crest on his chest, with a big red S inside.

"Wait, let me guess," Lois said, rolling her eyes. "S— something... Sparrow? Squirrel? Spider-Man, maybe? Is CostMart is having a sale on Halloween costumes, or what?"

The newcomer took one look at her and his eyes grew wide. Lois wasn't supposed to be here, he knew. Immediately he hoped that his mother had been right and that no one would recognize him in this costume. One thing was certain, if Lois Lane didn't recognize him as Clark Kent, he had the secret identity thing pretty much nailed.

He shook his head, clearing his thoughts and immediately headed for the man on his left who was still messing around with the bomb. One quick glance at the timer that was dangling on the side of the box told him they had less than ten seconds before the bomb went off. He waited about a millionth of a second before deciding that the other man's efforts were futile.

"Oh, give me that!" Clark told him, in an annoyed tone.

He reached in and grabbed the explosive from the box. Then, at Lois and Batman's complete astonishment, he popped it inside his mouth and...swallowed it! An instant later, the bomb exploded and a strange gurgling sound emanated from somewhere around the area of his stomach. Small puffs of smoke came out of his nose and mouth.

"*What* are you?" Lois asked, looking at him in wide-eyed wonder.

"Show off!" Batman complained in that odd, gravely voice he had, which Clark was just about certain wasn't his regular one. "Just because you're some sort of super...man, doesn't mean you have to —"

"Superman," Lois echoed. She was completely mesmerized.

Clark had to fight against a smile that was threatening to split his face from ear to ear. Oh yeah, he thought, he had the secret identity bit covered for very sure. He even had a name to call himself from now on.

"Oh, for crying out loud," Batman mumbled, grabbing his cape and pulling it in toward his chest. As he left the room, he noted that the Superman's expression had suddenly turned into a confused frown.

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Superman flew Lois back to the Daily Planet, coming into the newsroom through one of its large windows at the sheer astonishment of everyone there. They'd all heard about the man who'd saved the colonist transport and somehow lifted it up the platform and launched it into space. All by himself. No one had any idea how he'd done such a thing, but as they watched him *fly* into the newsroom, there was no longer any doubt in anyone's mind that he was capable of everything they'd heard about him

— and maybe more.

They all gathered around Lois and the newcomer, much to her regret — she'd had less than five minutes with him, during which she'd let herself imagine that he was hers and hers alone, but now that they'd landed, Lois was quite sure she'd never have Superman all to herself again. She sighed and tried to be gracious about letting others come close enough to shake his hand and talk to him.

The crowd suddenly parted like the red sea, and through it walked Bruce Wayne, with the air of a man who — rightfully — owned the place.

"Welcome to the Daily Planet," he said, extending a hand to Superman. "And thank you for making sure that a very important part of the space program was saved today."

Superman shook his hand lightly, wondering just how much of the man's profit margin he'd just saved while doing so, and whether that was why he was smiling so much.

"That's what I'm here for," Superman replied. Lifting off the floor slightly, he added, "Now, if you'll excuse me, there are other matters for me to attend to."

"Oh, wait!" Lois called to him, "Superman? Wait... I think, considering the fact that I saw you first, you owe me an exclusive."

"Is that the rule?" he asked, smiling. He hoped no one would notice that he was a bit awed by her boldness. Under the flashy spandex suit, he was still just Clark Kent, and this woman was nothing short of fascinating.

She blushed before admitting, "Well, um, no. But... I'd appreciate it. Very much."

"Then I'm sure something can be arranged," he told her, nodding.

Still smiling in way that seemed exaggerated, Bruce Wayne cut it, "Feel free to drop by the Daily Planet any time you like. You'll always be welcome here."

Superman wasn't quite sure what to make of the man just yet. It seemed like he might have been counting hypothetical profits in his head while saying this... Then again, he'd also shown up at the launch and tried to help defuse a bomb. There was no telling if he would have been able to do so, had Superman not swallowed the thing, but he'd tried... Perhaps it was worth giving him the benefit of the doubt for now.

"Thank you," said Superman. As an afterthought, he added, "This does seem like a friendly place. I could tell... right off the bat." With that he gave Bruce an enigmatic smile before lifting several feet up in the air and flying out the open window.

Giving the man the benefit of the doubt was one thing, but that didn't mean he wasn't going to keep his eye on him...

A few short minutes later, when an out-of-breath Clark Kent came into the newsroom, people were slowly starting to return to their desks and their assignments.

"Did I miss anything?" he asked Lois, as he walked up to her. She was deep in conversation with the Planet's new owner — probably trying to secure her interview, Clark thought. He wasn't exactly unhappy to interrupt them.

"Where have you been?" Lois asked him, looking at Clark like he'd just asked the most ridiculous question in the history of ridiculous questions. "Superman was just here..."

"Super—?" Clark faked a confused look, hoping she'd believe him. "He was here? In the newsroom? You're kidding..."

Bruce chuckled lightly, and patted him on the shoulder amicably. "I'm sure you'll get another chance to see him, Kent. Just keep an eye out for blue tights and a red cape."

He shook his head and left in the direction of Perry White's office. Halfway there, Bruce looked over his shoulder toward Clark and, whispering to himself, said, "I'll certainly be keeping an eye on you myself... Superman."

THE END

Bottom Dweller's Notes:

— EPRAD is L&C's version of NASA; I don't believe there's any such thing as EPRAD in the comics, however. According to DC lore, Wayne Aerospace is one of NASA's suppliers, though I'm not entirely sure what they manufacture for them (experimental planes, it seems, though the info I found is kind of contradictory.) I stretched it a bit and made them a supplier of parts for EPRAD — I'm pretty sure it's at least a little bit believable.

— Regarding the Judith Resnik Award:

This is a real award, given for outstanding contributions to space engineering. Judith Resnik was an engineer and an astronaut. She died in the explosion of Space Shuttle Challenger, in 1986. For information about the award from IEEE, see: <http://www.ieee.org/portal/pages/about/awards/pr/resnikpr.html>