

Notorious Wedding: Sequel to Night Witness

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Rated: PG

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Summary: Lois learned Clark's secret in my previous fic "Night Witness" and will do anything to save him from the threat of Kryptonite. Even marry Lex Luthor.

Disclaimer: Some dialogue taken from 'The House of Luthor' and 'Lucky Leon' of "Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman". These episodes and all characters are property of Warner Brothers and DC Comics. Just borrowing for a bit of fun.

Author's note: I would like to thank the forum for all of the feedback and a special thank-you to IolantheAlias for editing this sequel!

Clark arrived right on time. Lois needed ten more minutes, but of course he wouldn't have been late. It was their first date, after all.

"Clark! Just a minute!" she called.

Lois came running into the living room, her giant curlers still in her hair. She quickly opened all the locks and cracked open the door, darting back to her room a second later. "Come in! Just give me a few more minutes!"

Clark laughed good-naturedly, catching a glimpse of her shapely calf as she dashed back to her room. "Take your time, Lois. There's no rush."

"Sorry, Clark. I was late leaving the Planet and then I had to pick up my dry cleaning and..." she explained from her bedroom, the rest muffled as she dug for something in her closet. She came back into the living room a short moment later, finishing putting in her diamond stud earrings. "Wow! I mean, wow, Clark! You look--" Her eyes swept him head to foot, taking in his charcoal suit. Clark always looked good in a suit, but one that was so understated and sophisticated was--well, wow!

He smiled sheepishly, giving her an appreciative grin in return as he took in her burgundy dress. "You look... amazing."

She smiled warmly. "I'm almost ready. Let me just get my wrap and purse..."

Lois took one last look at herself in the mirror. It was going to be a night to remember. She would make sure of it.

"So where are we going exactly?" she asked, taking Clark's arm as they made their way out of her apartment.

"Oh, a little jazz place I know."

The Jazzy Cats Club had a secret. Besides being buried in an eclectic neighborhood where the elite of Metropolis feared to tread, it had a chef that was as good as any four-star hotel chef in the city. Not only was the jazz cool and danceable, but the New Orleans-style menu was flawless.

Lois and Clark were seated at a semi-circular wine-colored velvet booth that could easily hold four people. As dinner and conversation progressed, they unconsciously moved in to sit closer to each other, finding themselves side by side by the time dessert was served.

"Clark, you have to try this chocolate mousse! It is heavenly!" Lois dipped in her spoon and reached over to give him a bite. His eyes never left hers, and somehow feeding him chocolate sent shivers up her spine.

"Delicious," he whispered, though his eyes seemed to be commenting on more than just the mousse.

She smiled sweetly, moving in just a little closer to him. "[I could kiss him so easily.]"

"Dance with me, Lois?" he suddenly asked, glancing over at the jazz quartet lit by soft blue lights from above.

She took one last bite of the mousse and then nodded with a smile.

As they stepped out onto the makeshift dance floor in front of the stage, Clark pulled her in close, his hand resting on the small of her back. Lois wondered if he noticed how her heart rate went up when he touched her like that. She leaned in to lay her head on his chest and smiled when she felt this own heart beat a slightly faster tattoo at her closeness. She was pleased that she affected him just as much as he did her.

The saxophone solo was slow and smooth, floating on a cushion of chords coming from the piano, while the bass plucked out a thrumming rhythm under it all. Lois closed her eyes, enjoying the moment, enjoying him holding her. She had never felt so comfortable with any man in her life. After a while, as they fell into sync dancing with each other, she tilted her head to look up at him. He gave her a warm smile.

"I love dancing with you," she said honestly.

He gave her a sexy grin in return, rubbing the curve of her back gently, "Me too."

Lois felt her legs turn to jelly. [[How does he do that to me?]] She had begun to notice how much he affected her shortly after discovering his secret. She thought at first it was because he was Superman, who had been her heart's desire for so many months. But lately, she was noticing that she felt more weak in the knees around Clark when he *wasn't* in the spandex. She found herself wanting to be near him at the Planet as much as possible, even if it was just to get a refill of coffee when he was. And those eyes... those sweet, chocolate brown eyes. She found herself drowning in them more and more. Which scared her. Terrified her, even. How had she changed into this moony-eyed cheerleader for Clark overnight?

She sighed in frustration and immediately Clark sensed that something was the matter.

"What is it, Lois?" His voice was warm, like honey. Like cool jazz on a hot summer's night...

"Clark..." she started, looking up at him. There was so much she wanted to say, but couldn't seem to form the words.

"Tonight's lovely," she said, laying her head back on his chest, not wanting to spoil the evening with her fears.

"Everything okay?" he tried again, his voice warming her to her toes.

"Perfect," she said almost sadly.

"Are you tired? Do you want to go home?" he asked, concern in his voice.

She clung tighter to him. "Just hold me, Clark," she said softly.

"Always," he answered, letting the music carry them away.

As they walked back to her apartment, Lois got more and more dependent. This was the most perfect, most romantic night of her life. But it couldn't last, couldn't go on like this...

When they reached her door, she turned to him, hating the look of longing in his eyes. She sighed, bracing herself, "Okay... here goes. I had a really nice time tonight."

He smiled softly, "So did I."

"No I mean a *really* nice time," she emphasized, feeling sadness creep in. "Maybe the best time I ever had. It wasn't the

funniest or the wildest. Or the--"

"Don't knock yourself out, Lois," Clark laughed.

She looked him in the eyes, needing to make him understand. "But everything seemed to just... *work*. I really liked it." She took a breath and put the door between the two of them. "That's why I can never see you again."

She slammed the door, ending it because she had to. For his own good. She *had* to end it.

"Lois?" Clark called, hurt and confused. He stood there a minute, believing that surely any second she would open the door again and say 'just kidding!' Any second she'd —

He sighed. [[What did I do wrong?]]

Lois slipped to the floor, her hand held to her mouth until she was certain he had left, lest he hear the sobs that she couldn't contain.

It had all been ruined two nights earlier.

Lois had been dropped off by Lex's limo at her apartment, in a state of shock.

She had managed to get inside, lock the door, and then had made her way slowly to the couch.

How had things gotten this far?

It was just supposed to be an interview. That's all. There wasn't supposed to be flirting, or dating, and certainly not a marriage proposal! Something wasn't right.

She had let Lex dazzle her with his charm, his money, his culture. She was important in society when she was with him. And he was a rich philanthropist. She wanted to help people and what better way than through the world's third richest man?

But still —

Superman. Clark. Her best friend, and yet the man who could take her breath away with a glance. And besides her attraction to him, she cared about him deeply. Clark was a good person, open... genuine. Ah, there it was. Through all Lex's money and charm, there had always rung a false note. Lois had chosen not to hear it, thinking that the good surely outweighed the bad in his dealings, right? She was no fool. She knew he couldn't have gotten so filthy rich through entirely honest means. He was a self-made man, after all.

And yet — she couldn't marry him.

"What am I going to do?" she whispered aloud. She didn't think Lex would take kindly to her saying no, which she desperately wanted to do. Yet she couldn't bring herself to say yes.

Her eyes wandered over to the phone. She wanted to call Clark. [[And say what, exactly?]] Could he help her out of this? She knew he distrusted Lex and hated her seeing him, but she also didn't want him going into over-protective mode, which he was wont to do. But maybe there was a reason for it. Otherwise, why did she feel terrified of telling Lex she couldn't marry him?

She got up to call Clark, but suddenly the phone rang.

"Clark?" she answered in hopeful surprise.

"No, my dear," came an irritated voice on the other line.

"Oh, Lex, hello. It's you. Sorry, I--I was expecting Clark's call. He was supposed to give me some details on a story we are working on," she trailed off lamely, wondering why she felt forced to make an excuse.

"Lois, I just called to wish you a good night. I hope you consider my proposal carefully. I want you to sleep on it. I expect a response tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" she said, trying to calm the quaver in her voice.

"Why, yes. You can't expect me to pine forever for you, my love."

"Of course not. Okay, Lex. I'll see you tomorrow."

"I'll send my car for you at eight."

Lois was surprised Lex arranged to meet her in the LexCorp basement. She always met him in his penthouse. She had only been down to the LexCorp basement once before, during Nightfall and it had seriously creeped her out. Lex had made a replica of her apartment and had invited her to live there and be his--

"Lois, darling, so glad you came," said Lex, coming over to greet her. She was disturbed to realize that the compound existed just as she remembered it from Nightfall. That must mean her replica apartment was still the same, too... He had chosen another apartment for this evening, obviously also a mock-up from the Nightfall incident. She looked around warily, wondering whose apartment he had modeled this room after.

"Lex, why are we down here?" she asked nervously, for once wishing she had told Clark what she was up to.

He smiled but didn't answer her. "A glass of wine, darling?" he offered instead.

She shook her head. "No, I--I need a clear head. I still have some work to do when I leave here..." she emphasized, making it clear that she *would* leave.

"Lois, you are a diligent worker, I must hand it to you. Come, at least have a seat." Lex gestured to two plush upholstered chairs set up by a gas fire.

"My darling, you are lovely in the firelight," he whispered before letting go of her arm to let her sit. She should feel flattered, even excited by his comment. Instead she felt a vague wariness.

Lex took a sip of his wine and eyed her over his glass. "So my dear, have you thought of my proposal?"

She nodded, giving him a noncommittal smile.

"I wait with bated breath, Lois. What will it be?"

She looked over at him. Surely it was just a trick of the firelight that she could almost see a red glow in his eyes? Still, she shivered.

Lois stood up again, needing to feel in control. She could do this. He had been nothing but kind and generous to her. He wouldn't hurt her. Sure, no one wanted to be turned down from a marriage proposal, but it was too soon!

"Lex, the last few weeks have been really wonderful," she began. "But this is all too much, too soon."

"Do you need more time?" he offered generously.

She shook her head and then looked at him, thinking. "Lex, do you love me?" she suddenly asked.

"Lois, you dazzle me and delight me." He walked over to her, turning her to look at him. "Lois, you are the sun and moon to me. Just say 'yes.'"

She started wringing her hands. Of course he didn't love her. If she actually married him, she would be just another possession, a jewel in his cap. "I--I can't, Lex."

He frowned suddenly. "Is it that partner of yours, Kent?"

"What?" she asked, taken aback. She knew Lex and Clark didn't like each other, but the ice in his voice worried her.

"I know you've been seeing him more than just as a work partner, Lois. And I don't like rivals. I *always* win," he said dangerously.

"Lex, I have only been seeing you for a few weeks. Surely there is no reason to--"

"Lois, you need to get away from that man. He has too much influence on you. In fact, I don't think you can consider my proposal properly unless you don't see any more of Mr. Kent. You need to make it clear to Perry that you cannot work with him."

"I will not!" she protested.

Lex turned to her, his voice calm, but his eyes bespoke a warning. "You don't want me to have to --arrange for Mr. Kent to go elsewhere, do you?"

"Clark would never leave the Planet!" she cried defensively, shocked at what Lex was saying.

Lex waved his hand casually in the air as he spoke, "Well, he might not have to. Accidents happen--"

Though she was disgusted at what he was suggesting, Lois found herself smirking just a little. [[At least I know Clark can handle himself.]] "Superman would never let anything happen to Clark," she said defiantly.

Lex didn't answer her but walked over to a bureau. He pushed a button to reveal a glass panel. Under it was a large rock, glowing the sickly green of Kryptonite. He turned to her, the glow giving him a devilish look. "I wouldn't get Superman involved in this, if I were you, Lois."

He closed the panel, and then walked over to her. The malice she had seen in him mere seconds ago was gone, as his face smoothed from long practice into the lines of gentleness.

It was like he hadn't even made those thinly veiled threats. "Just think about it, Lois."

Lois had been dropped off that night at her apartment a short time later. She had thought about telling Clark everything, but then he'd surely want to confront Luthor. And she couldn't let him do that knowing Lex had Kryptonite! And even though he could handle any traps Lex might throw at him as Clark, Lex could quickly discover his secret when his efforts to "do away" with him failed. No, the best course of action was to do what Lex said--for now. And pray God that she'd come up with a better plan before he made her march down the aisle.

So, here she found herself after a wonderful date with Clark, having to force him out of her life. She had let herself indulge for just a moment on the dance floor that they could be together, but unfortunately, fate had other plans.

Lois made her way to her bedroom, wiping tears from her eyes. She was frightened into a corner and she hated the feeling. She did not want to be a victim, but she didn't see what she could do and still protect Clark from Lex. As she changed into a schlumpy robe, she started thinking hard.

Clark had distrusted Lex from the start. Lois suspected that Clark might have known more about him than he let on, if he'd had to deal with Lex as Superman. And they just didn't discuss Lex; Clark hated him and Lois was sort of dating him. But now, she wished urgently she had probed Clark for more information on what he knew about Lex. She sighed.

But maybe she didn't need Clark to handle this. Lois was, after all, one of the best investigative reporters in the business. So all she really needed to do was to find a way to bring down Lex legitimately, and not involve Superman at all. She admitted it would be easier if Clark could help her, but it was too dangerous for him. She spared little thought as to what Lex might do if he found out she was trying to bring him down, though. What mattered was finding out what Lex was really about. And she'd have to do it as surreptitiously as possible. Lex might have spies... even at the Planet, if Lex could threaten to send Clark away from his job. And she didn't think it was an empty threat. She knew Lex had influence all throughout Metropolis.

She'd definitely have to do this on her own.

And as hard as it was going to be, she was going to have to push Clark away from her even further.

Lois told Perry first thing that she needed some space from Clark.

Perry threw his hands up in frustration, "Don't sing it, Lois! I had just hoped that fate would smile on you two--"

"Perry!" she cried, getting his attention. "Clark and I — we're fine. I--I am just onto a very big story that I--need to do alone. Please. This is very important."

He eyed her carefully. "If it's such a big story, why can't you work with Clark on it?"

She sighed. "Please. Trust me. If I could, I would. But--this is just too big. I need to do it alone."

Lois hoped all her years of loyalty and dedication would win out. She needed Perry to trust her, just to do this one favor.

"All right. But I am *not* going to be the one to tell him. You'll have to tell him yourself."

And that was when things went from bad to worse...

She came up to Clark's desk, barely having said hello to him when he had come in. She knew he was rightly upset about last night, but she couldn't tell him why. And she was about to turn his world even more upside down.

"Hi," she said quietly.

"Hey," he answered, his face an unreadable blank.

She cringed. She knew she hurt him. But it was for his own good. She had to protect him from Lex.

"Clark..." she sighed heavily. [[This is so hard.]] "I first want to apologize for last night. I--I just need some time."

He looked up at her, slightly hopeful but still hurt. "You slammed the door in my face last night, Lois," he said despondently.

She touched his shoulder, and then looked around warily. Would Lex know she was talking to Clark? She suddenly pulled her hand back.

"I talked to Perry this morning. Clark, I need — a break from our partnership."

He looked up at her suddenly, hurt evident on his face. "Why, Lois? What did I do wrong?"

She winced. She hated hurting him like this. "Nothing, Clark. It--it's me. Just — give me a week, okay? I just--need a week."

She sincerely hoped that was all the time she needed. Because she couldn't bear to see that hurt look on Clark's face, a look that she had put there and that he didn't deserve. She felt her throat constrict. [[I have to protect him. He's saved me so many times, I have to do this for him.]]

He sighed. "I don't understand, Lois, I really don't. But I told you that I'd give you all the time you need to--well, I'll keep my promise. I don't like it. But you have it. A week."

She tried to keep her countenance steady, not to reveal the turmoil inside. [[I really do love him, don't I?]] she suddenly realized and it nearly made her let out a sob. [[But I have to do this. I can't let Lex win.]]

"Why have our investors pulled their support?" said Perry into the phone.

Clark overheard him. Something was terribly wrong at the Planet. This week's checks had all bounced, and things weren't looking good. It almost seemed like sabotage. But who would do that?

Clark wasn't in the best of moods, anyway. And the circumstances around the office weren't helping. Lois had broken his heart the other night. He knew he didn't deserve the way she was treating him, yet he had promised her that he would give her as much space as she needed. Yet, at what point was he little better than a doormat? She was walking all over his heart, and he was supposed to just take it? Didn't his feelings matter in this relationship?

He looked over at her. She stared intently at her screen. He had caught her glimpsing over at him now and then all morning, a pained look on her face. He didn't understand it, didn't understand her. Why did she need a week away from him? Did it really have to do with their work relationship? [[Maybe she just wants more time to worry that this relationship, whatever it is, won't work out]], he thought bitterly.

Clark suddenly had a fantasy of walking over there, pulling her up out of her chair and claiming her with a passionate kiss. Wrapping his arm around her waist, leaning her back and just kissing her senselessly. Giving her a kiss that would make her

forget all the other men in her past who had made her so paranoid of being in a real loving relationship. Giving her a kiss that would erase all these doubts she seemed to be having. Giving her a kiss that should have happened last night...

Suddenly the elevators dinged open, knocking Clark out of his fantasy as a nightmare walked in.

Lex Luthor.

Luthor stood on the landing, his presence sending all eyes to him. He looked like he was relishing what he was about to say. "For those of you that don't know me, I am Lex Luthor. Like you, I have been greatly distressed by the--problems that have suddenly struck this great newspaper. Therefore, I have taken the one step that would guarantee its future well-being: I bought it."

He turned and looked directly at Lois. "I am the new owner of the Daily Planet."

Lois tried to keep her jaw from dropping. She felt like the walls were closing in on her. First a proposal and now the Planet? Lois knew the paper was having some financial issues, but she couldn't be sure Luthor's gesture was entirely altruistic.

Lex made his way over to her.

"Lois, my darling fiancée," he pronounced loudly, leaning in to kiss her cheek. He noticed the quiet in the room when he said those words and made a shrug. "What, my dear, have you not shared the glorious news?"

Lois felt her cheeks burn red and wouldn't look at Clark. She knew he must be fuming, hurt, and completely confused.

She turned to Lex. "So, you bought the Planet?"

"Well, yes, my dear. It's a glorious institution and I just couldn't let it founder. Besides, it will allow our interests to — coalesce, if you will."

Her eyes darted unbidden to Clark. He looked like he had been punched in the stomach. Her own stomach was in knots. It seemed Lex was pulling her in deeper and deeper, making it harder for her to escape him. She wanted with all her might to reach out for Clark to save her, but it would be his demise. And that one thought was what kept her rooted to where she stood.

"I can't believe you announced our engagement to the whole office. I haven't even said 'yes!'" she said through clenched teeth.

"Well my dear, I knew you'd see reason. And I didn't see any reason to keep it a secret. You are mine now," he leaned in to her ear. To the casual observer, it looked like a lover's whisper. But his intent was far from loving. "And I see Mr. Kent over there is terribly jealous. I can't tell you how pleased I am that you shook him off so easily. I was certain that I would have to carry out unpleasantness where he is concerned when you went out on that date with him the other night--"

"You spied on me?" she hissed.

"Just keeping an eye on you, darling. But I was glad to hear that he didn't get so much as a good-night kiss."

He suddenly pulled away from her, leaving Lois gaping at him in shock.

"I have business to attend to, now that the Planet is my responsibility." He lifted Lois' hand for a gallant kiss. "I'll see you tonight."

When Lex left, Lois glanced again at Clark. She suddenly wondered if he had heard the exchange she had had with Lex. She sighed. By his scowl, he had not. She was a little disappointed. She almost wanted him to find out, to know exactly what was going on. But the fear of Kryptonite hurting him squelched that wish. He couldn't know... she just had to take down Lex by herself.

Clark couldn't believe it! She was *engaged* to Lex Luthor?! It felt like the worst kind of betrayal. As soon as he heard it he had turned within himself, trying to keep from going to pieces. He saw the way Lex leered at her and it sickened him. But he was too wrapped up in his own turmoil to see how Lois was handling

it. He hadn't listened in on their exchange, too sick to his stomach to even want to.

So she had made her choice. She didn't want to be with him. She had been making her good-byes on the dance floor the other night. It wasn't the beginning of something wonderful, it was the end! He looked around, suddenly feeling too constricted, as if the walls were closing in on him. He wanted to get out of there.

He began tugging on his tie, wishing there was a Superman emergency to occupy him. Something big, like a mudslide or an earthquake. Something he could throw himself into. He sighed. What was he thinking? He shouldn't be wishing for people's lives being at risk in a disaster.

Besides, he was already in one.

Some time later, Perry waved Clark into his office.

"What is it, Chief?" he asked, trying to keep his darker thoughts from affecting his attitude.

"Close the door, son. I want to talk to you a minute," Perry said, a look of concern across his own features.

Clark sighed and took a seat.

"Is it over, do you think?" Clark asked, a double meaning in his question.

"Well, I think Luthor taking over the Planet could be a good thing. The man is a known philanthropist--" Perry caught Clark's glance towards Lois through the window. "Oh, you mean Lois. Yeah, I heard about the engagement, son. Something isn't sitting right with me about it, and I can pinpoint it. I mean, it seemed you two — well, how are things between you two?"

Clark threw up his hands. "I wish I knew, Chief. Things were going so well. I thought — and now she wants all this distance from me. And she's engaged to Luthor, of all people!"

Perry looked at Clark, sympathetic, "Well, she told me that it wasn't you. That you weren't the reason she wants to work on her own for a while."

Clark looked up, "Oh? What did she tell you, then?"

Perry deliberated a moment, debating whether he should tell Clark all he knew. But he suspected that Lois was in some sort of trouble, and if anyone could sort her out, Kent could.

"She said she was on to a big story. Something so big that she couldn't work with anyone else on it. Not even you." Perry leaned back in his chair, interlacing his fingers over his chest. "Now, just between you and me, that doesn't add up. If she's on the tail of something big, I'd think she'd want all the help she can get, and especially *your* help. So, well, I don't want to alarm you, son --"

"Just tell me, Chief. Anything you're thinking has got to be better than what I've been coming up with," Clark said sadly.

"Clark, I think Lois has got herself into some trouble. Something big, and I think she's scared to tell anyone. Especially you."

"Luthor," Clark suddenly said, sitting up straighter.

"Hello, gentlemen," came a smooth voice from the doorway.

Perry stood up and reached over to shake Lex's hand. Clark noticed Luthor did not make the same gesture to him.

"Perry, I don't want to take up too much of your time, but I did want to arrange to discuss some matters with you later this afternoon."

Perry nodded. "Sure thing, Mr. Luthor. I think it's a very generous thing you're doing, rescuing the Planet like this."

Clark tried to resist rolling his eyes. He stood up. "I have to go, Chief." He left, barely acknowledging Luthor with a nod.

Luthor watched as Clark made his excuses, a smarmy smile on his lips. "It was the least I could do, Perry..."

Clark sat at his desk, thinking. *Was* Lois in trouble? Why wouldn't she come to him about it? She knew he was Superman, surely he could help her handle anything she was dealing with. Did she not trust him?

His thoughts then turned to Luthor. Somehow, he knew Luthor was behind all this. There was something terribly suspicious about Luthor buying the Planet and announcing an engagement to Lois.

Clark glanced over to his partner's desk. She was apparently working, but she kept looking up from her screen towards Perry's office. To where her fiance was making his good-byes to the editor. But Clark didn't think she had a lovesick look in her eyes. He knew enough about *that* look to recognize it. But he did notice something that intrigued him and gave him hope that he hadn't lost Lois.

She looked at Luthor with wariness.

And that was a cause for concern for an entirely different reason.

Luthor came over to her desk and asked her to walk him down to the lobby. She seemed reluctant to go, but couldn't make a plausible enough excuse. Clark was tempted to follow, but suddenly he had another idea.

All morning Lois had been very protective of whatever she had been working on. Anytime anyone had come near her screen she had shut it down immediately.

Clark got up after Lois and Lex left and walked over to her desk. He tried to make it seem normal; they used each other's desks all the time. He sat in her chair, noticing she had shut the program again. He needed a password.

He smirked, sure of himself and typed SUPERMAN.

A no go. He knew that had been her password before... He thought again, intrigued. Then, really hoping he was wrong, he typed LEXLUTHOR. Wrong again. He sighed in relief.

CLARKKENT? he tried... no...

BATMAN? He grimaced. No.

Hmmm....

Then, inspiration.... CKISSUPERMAN

Bingo.

"Oh, Lois," he sighed with a low laugh. "I really hope no one else ever needs to ask for your password."

Then he started going through her files. She had one labeled 'Top Secret,' which was a little too obvious. But he opened it anyway. He needed another password. He tried the others again. None of them worked.

He was certain though, that Luthor was involved with this 'big story' she was on to. So, knowing how Lois' mind works, he was also certain her password had something to do with Luthor.

LEXCORP? No, too obvious anyway.

Then he went through a list of names he'd like to call Luthor... He knew he'd be delighted if Lois had used one of those for her password... but none of them worked.

He did all of this in a matter of seconds, yet he didn't know how long he had until Lois would come back. He had to think... why wouldn't she tell him what was going on? What was the one thing that would prevent her from telling him the truth? Telling Superman the truth? Was there a reason? Was she backed into a corner somehow? Or was she just trying to protect him? But the only thing he'd need protecting from was--

K-R-Y-P-T-O-N-I-T-E

That did it.

He felt a chill go up his spine.

In the folder were dozens of files on Luthor. All his shareholdings, as well as a list of crimes they had covered over the past months that Lois suddenly was suspicious Luthor was behind. Clark sighed in relief. She *did* know Luthor was dangerous. Then, why wouldn't she let him help her?

"What are you doing?" Lois came up behind him, giving him no time to shut the screen.

"Um. Lois, we need to talk," he said, noticing the fearful look on her face.

She hesitated a moment. "I--Clark, just *what* were you doing

on my computer?"

He stood up, taking her elbow gently as he pulled her to the conference room.

When he shut the door, he turned to her. "What is going on, Lois?"

She shook her head. She couldn't say. She pointed around the room and he got the hint. Clark did a quick scan discovering the whole office was bugged. He sighed heavily.

Suddenly, the building shook. Clark x-rayed a few floors below. An explosion had happened a few stories below!

"Lois, get out of here, now!" he said, ushering her and some others along the way towards the exits. Clark stepped into a janitor's closet and spun into the Suit.

His main concern was to get everyone out of the building as quickly as possible. He went to the emergency stairwell, and noticed one flight of stairs had collapsed. He easily lifted it so people could escape.

He got out of the building a short time later and helped the firefighters tamp down the blaze. Clark looked around in dismay. He had wanted a Superman emergency — [[Be careful what you wish for.]]

An hour later, the blaze was gone and everyone had evacuated the building safely. The firefighters and Superman had done what they could, but it was still too late.

The Planet was destroyed.

Perry looked up at the burnt-out Daily Planet building, a shell of its former glory. He thought back to when he was just an assistant copy boy and how the moment he had walked into that building, his life had changed forever. He thought of all the things the Planet had accomplished over the years, the awards, attracting the world's best journalists, and the respect it had won not only among its readership, but throughout the press. The Daily Planet was a place to be proud of, one of the last beacons of true, for-the-people journalism left in a world that had grown too political and pessimistic. But now it was no more than a beautiful memory, a legend gone up in smoke.

"It's gone. All gone," he said sorrowfully.

Lois stood nearby. She felt the loss, but she knew the Planet was more than brick and mortar. "We'll rebuild," she said with conviction, knowing that the people who made the Planet what it is wouldn't — *couldn't* let it die.

Jimmy shook his head, hopeful, but full of doubt. "Yeah, sure we will."

Perry looked over at Lois and Jimmy, still trying to wrap his mind around the catastrophe. "I mean, it's just about the worst thing I can imagine!"

Suddenly Luthor strode over to them, several police men walking beside him.

"Not the worst thing," he chimed in with impeccable timing. "The worst would be that one of our own employees set this fire deliberately."

Luthor signaled out Jack, gesturing for the cops to arrest him. "That's him. The bomb was found in your lunchbox, Jack."

Lois tried to step in, "Lex, I know Jack didn't do it!"

Lex ignored her, determined to carry out his plan. "Police found explosives hidden in his room... We're all familiar with his criminal past," he finished with disdain.

Jack looked at Lois and then Clark who had just come up. "I didn't do it! It was a set up!" he cried.

Luthor took out a handkerchief and wiped his hands, a subconscious gesture of ridding himself of the blame for anything. "A sad day for all of us."

Perry, who had more ties than any of them to the Planet and its history, shook his head with sorrow. "It's an historic day. Tomorrow, for the first time in two hundred nineteen years, there will be no edition of the Daily Planet."

Luthor sat in his penthouse some time later, enjoying a brandy and cigar.

"It was too easy, Nigel," he mused.

"Everything worked out to plan then, sir?"

"To the letter. Thanks to a few negotiations, there is not enough — 'apparent' money to rebuild the Planet. Lois is officially my fiancée, and the lives of the workers at the Daily Planet are effectively ruined! As it should be, I am in control of it all."

He leaned back in his chair, a grin on his face.

"Now, all I need is Superman."

Dinner with Lex was nothing like dinner with Clark. The menus were more elaborate, the restaurants more expensive, but the conversation and company were much more uncomfortable.

"My dear, you look so beautiful tonight," said Lex over a glass of wine.

"Thank you," she answered, distracted by her thoughts. She kept replaying this afternoon over and over in her head. She thought back to the moment right before the bomb had gone off. Had Clark seen her files on Lex? What did he make of them if he had? Now that the Planet was destroyed, she had decided that maybe she could tell Clark everything that she would have to in order to get ahead in her investigation of Lex. She had surprisingly felt relieved that Clark had been snooping through her files. He might know now something of the quandary she was in. But there hadn't been a chance to talk to him about it again after the explosion. And before she knew it, she had found herself in Lex's limo again, heading to another overpriced dinner.

The atmosphere was stilted in the restaurant, and Lois secretly laughed at how it was aptly named "The Gilded Lily." The subdued gold of the decor came across as pretentious and uninviting.

"What's troubling you, Lois?" Lex asked casually.

She looked back at him, incredulous. "What's 'troubling' me, Lex? How about the fact that the Planet was blown up today? How about the fact that you have all but forced me to become your fiancée!"

She said that last a little louder than she intended, garnering some curious stares from nearby tables.

"Lois, I am not forcing you to do anything," Lex said with a warm smile. "And I am sorry about the Planet. But, you can always come to work at LNN."

"Television? I don't think so, Lex. I belong at a newspaper. I belong at the Planet," she finished sadly. She looked up at him, thinking. If he was going to push this sham of a marriage, then maybe she could get something good out of it all. "Lex, how soon could we rebuild the Planet?"

He reached for her hand and she tried to resist the urge to pull away. "My dear, my lawyers are looking into it, but I'm afraid the insurance policies on the Planet were useless. It may not be enough to rebuild..."

"It has to be! You could do it even without the insurance policies!" she goaded.

"But what good would a paper with no value be to me?"

"No value! Lex, the Planet's value is in its product! In truth!" She stood up, not able to pretend that there was anything real between them for another second. "Take me home, Lex. I can't talk to you about this."

"Lois, calm down. You're making a scene." He reached for her gently and pulled her back in her chair.

He smiled charmingly and though Lois distrusted him, she found herself slightly swayed by his charisma.

"Lois, I will do what I can to rebuild the Planet. I promise. Please, let's just have some dessert."

Lois didn't really believe Lex, yet she had let him convince her to stay through dinner. During dessert, he had even given her an engagement ring, an ostentatious diamond that probably alone could pay for the rebuilding of the Planet. She hadn't wanted to accept it, feeling like it would seal forever her deal with the devil in order to protect Clark. But Lex had been so sweetly insistent, so charming, that before she knew it, he had slipped it onto her finger.

When she got home, and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror, dressed up for dinner with him, wearing his engagement ring, she felt disgusted at herself. [[How is this happening?]] Lois knew what he was, or at least had an idea, yet she was terrified of saying no to even dinner with him. And she would dress up — why? to please him? She felt sick to her stomach. Had she led him on? Is that why he suddenly wanted to marry her? And why had Lex felt the need to threaten her?

As Lois wiped off her make-up and took off her jewelry, she became more and more upset. She wondered if she was crazy. Lex could charm her even as he frightened her. In one move he could threaten to shake her world and in the next make her feel like the loveliest woman in the room. [[Am I that shallow? That gullible?]]

She had been collecting little bits of evidence to prove just how corrupt Lex was, and yet she let him get away with lies right in front of her, like his story about rebuilding the Planet. Was it because she wanted to believe him? Or because she was scared to really stand up to him? Either way, she wasn't happy with herself. She knew he was dangerous, yet she could find herself listening to the plans he shared with interest. They always seemed good — on the surface. And then he'd throw in little threats if she didn't see exactly his way, like the Kryptonite, which would scare her. And she hated to be scared of anyone. Which was why she had to somehow prove his true character. Yet, with the Planet destroyed, her resources were limited. She had some of the files backed up at home, thank goodness, but not having the Planet's research tools would make things that much harder without Clark in the loop.

She had just taken off her stockings, was still sitting in her black dress on her bed, thinking about the puzzle that was Lex when she heard a familiar 'whoosh' at her window.

Superman. Clark was here.

She looked up and ran to the living room, relieved and so happy to see him.

He put his finger to his lips as if he wanted her to stay quiet. Lois looked confused and then realized. He must have found some bugs in her apartment!

But before she could get angry, Clark held out his arms to her, gesturing silently for her to fly with him.

She felt her breath catch in anticipation. She hadn't flown with him since she had discovered his secret, and she desperately needed some time alone with him, away from the scrutiny of Lex.

She walked slowly over to him, her feet bare. He took her hand and pulled her close to him for a second, then swooped her up into his arms, carrying her away from her apartment window in an instant.

"Clark, I'm so sorry," she said suddenly, apologizing for the other night, this morning. Everything.

"It's okay, Lois. Just — do you mind if I take you to Smallville?" he asked.

She smiled. "Smallville sounds perfect."

They took off to the west, leaving the skyline of Metropolis behind them. The fears Lois had allowed to creep in suddenly seemed inconsequential in Clark's arms. Why hadn't she gone to him from the start? Flying with him reminded her of who he was, what he was capable of.

She clung to him, her best friend, her lifeline.

"It's okay, Lois. I've got you now," he murmured gently, feeling her cling ever more tightly to him.

Slowly, eventually, she felt herself begin to relax. Flying in Clark's arms paradoxically grounded her. By stepping away from the earth and into the clouds, she could see things much more clearly. And what she saw was that she had been blinded to see all along. She couldn't do this on her own. She needed her partner, her hero.

Soon, they were over the smooth plains of Kansas. Fresh air and stars were all Lois could sense while he carried her in his arms, but it was enough. It meant she was away from Lex. She was safe. Safe from her fears, her insecurities. She was with Clark, and that was all that mattered.

They landed near his parents' farmhouse, under an outdoor light.

She hugged him fiercely before letting him go entirely as he set her down. "I'm so sorry, Clark," she repeated her words from earlier. Lois stood in his arms a moment, just looking into his eyes, trying to think what to say. They both had lost so much with the Planet today, and she realized that by pushing him away, she could have lost him as well.

"Do you want to walk a bit before we go in and talk?" he asked. "You don't have to face my parents right away if you don't want to," he offered.

She shook her head. "I'll be all right. You and I need to talk, I know. But, it may do me some good to see your folks first," she smiled brightly.

"Let's go in then. But just one second," he said, releasing her and standing back just enough to spin out of the suit.

"I'll never get used to you doing that," she said in awe.

Clark laughed boyishly. "It's nothing, really."

She took his hand and tugged him towards the front door.

"Clark! There you are!" cried Martha, reaching to hug her son. "And Lois. I'm glad you came for a visit."

Martha hugged Lois as well, and as always, Lois was touched by the warm nature of Clark's parents.

"Come on into the kitchen. I just finished a mean chicken Parmesan that I think you'll love!" Martha headed back to the kitchen, calling to Jonathan to ask if he'd finished setting the table.

Lois looked over at Clark in appreciation. He'd known what she'd needed, the quiet comfort of the farmhouse and his parents.

As they sat down at the table, Lois was about to say that she had eaten dinner already. But her stomach protested before she could do so. She realized she had been so nervous at dinner with Lex that she'd barely eaten more than a few bites of salad, very little of the duck, and well, maybe a bit more of the chocolate cake.

"This is wonderful, Martha," Lois said sincerely.

Martha smiled a thank-you, meanwhile mentally assessing what Clark had told her on the phone about what was going on and what she saw now in Lois. Lois was in a fancy black dress but had come in no shoes. [[Has she been with that villain Lex?]] Martha wondered.

"We heard what happened at the Daily Planet, Son," said Jonathan.

Lois and Clark exchanged looks of shared sadness.

"Do they know what caused it?" Jonathan asked.

"Well, Jack has been accused of planting a bomb," Clark began.

"But I'm sure he didn't do it," finished Lois with conviction.

"Who do you think did, Lois?" asked Martha.

"I don't know. I mean, I have an idea, but — well, I'd like to talk to Clark about it first. Later, when we're alone, if that's okay?" she hesitated. She needed to clear the air with Clark first, and Lois was sure bringing up Lex in front of his parents would

at best be uncomfortable.

Martha smiled at Clark. "Sure, honey. Not a problem."

Dinner continued on pleasantly, as everyone tried to avoid the white elephant in the room. Why had Lois let Luthor put a wedge between her and Clark? And was she really going to marry that man?

But as usual, Clark's parents took their cue off him. He didn't rush to make Lois talk, so they wouldn't either. Instead, conversation turned to matters on the farm and plans for the coming harvest season.

Eventually, Clark got up to help his mom wash up, regular speed, and quietly talked to her about her art classes.

Lois remained at the table, feeling nervous as she knew the time was nearing when she and Clark could have time to talk. She tried to be calm, knowing that he wouldn't have brought her here if he wanted to lay blame. She hoped he had simply realized that she simply couldn't say much of anything under Lex's scrutiny, and hopefully now they could do something about it.

Clark had actually rescued her from herself tonight, though she wouldn't admit that. She realized she had simply been going round and round in her head. She hadn't realized how much she had come to rely on Clark to bounce ideas off of, and to see things from a different perspective. Instead, she had become doggedly stubborn about not telling Clark anything out of the idea that she needed to protect him. She realized now that there would be no way out of Lex's shadow without Clark's help. Yes, Luthor had Kryptonite. But that didn't mean together they couldn't beat him without him using it. Surely as a team, they could handle Lex, and that gave her just a bit of hope.

A little while later Martha and Jonathan went up to bed. Martha left Clark a blanket and pillow for the sofa, while Lois was to stay in Clark's room.

"Where do you want to talk?" he asked Lois.

"Down here's fine," she said, making her way to the sofa. She sat down, unconsciously pulling Clark's pillow to her chest for comfort as she sat down.

He watched her patiently, knowing she was trying to figure out where to begin.

Lois looked down at her hand absently, thinking of the huge diamond Lex had given her that evening. She was glad Clark hadn't seen it; she had already taken it off and set it on her night stand when he had arrived. But still, she could feel Lex like a specter between them, and she wanted so much to shake the feeling.

"I feel like his property now," she said quietly, knowing Clark would understand whom she meant. "I didn't even actually say 'yes,' Clark."

She looked up at him, tears brimming in her eyes, and he was by her side in an instant.

"What happened? What did Luthor say to you? Why have you been pulling away from me, Lois?" he asked, unable to keep all the questions he'd been bottling up from spilling out at once.

She reached for him, and he gladly pulled her in to hug him. "To protect you," she said, her voice slightly muffled in his shirt. "I thought I was protecting you."

"Protecting me?" he laughed softly. "Lois, come on. You know who I am. I don't need —"

She sat up, looking in his face. "Lex has Kryptonite, Clark. A lot of Kryptonite."

"Oh," he said quietly, understanding at least in part why Lois had pushed him away.

She took a deep breath and reached for Clark's hand, to give her courage to continue.

"He threatened to hurt you if I didn't go along with his plan. But he did it all so subtly," she said in frustration. "One moment he would talk sweetly to me and in the next breath he'd open up

his case of Kryptonite, hinting that Superman shouldn't get involved in this." She shivered.

"I didn't want you to know. I'm sorry, Clark. I didn't want you to feel like you had to do something about it, because I was afraid he'd — "

He pulled her closer to him. "I know. It's okay, Lois."

"And now the Planet is gone. Lex could rebuild it so easily, Clark. You know he could! But I don't think he will. I think--"

"What? What were you going to say at dinner?" he prodded.

"I think Lex is behind it. Behind it all. Did you get into my file on him?" she asked, though she didn't seem angry.

He nodded.

"I have all these little bits of possibilities of things he may have been involved in, but no real proof. And we need proof to nail him, you know we do."

He hugged her suddenly. "I'm so relieved that you see him for what he is, Lois. I was terrified — "

She shook her head in shame. "Clark, he scares me, but not necessarily how you mean. He can be so charming, disarmingly so. And sometimes I almost don't notice the evil that lurks underneath. I mean --" she gestured to her dress, and then covered her face with her hands.

"I'm so ashamed, Clark," she said brokenly.

"Lois, you have nothing to be ashamed of."

She looked up at him, her eyes bright with tears. "I am ashamed. I let him wine and dine me. I even listen to his plans with interest, because they seem good and logical. But the moment I disagree with something he says, he shows just a glimpse of the villain beneath and I get scared. And so I go along with it, telling myself all the while that I'll figure out how to get him, how to get out from underneath his power."

"You don't have to do it alone, Lois," he said warmly, gently lifting her chin so he could see into her eyes.

"I know that now. I've been debating telling you. But today I realized... I need you, Clark."

"You don't know how relieved I am to hear you say that. I thought — well, all kinds of things, and none of them pleasant."

She grimaced. "I only wanted to keep Lex away from you. He threatened both Clark and Superman. And I was afraid that if he pursued Clark, he'd soon make the connection that you were Superman."

"Lois, do you really care so much for me?" he asked quietly, staring down at their joined hands.

"I know I was scared... of us. Because you mean so much to me as a friend, and I wasn't sure — But Clark, I *do* care. A lot. These last few days have been hell. I've wanted to say something, but I was so scared of Lex, of what he'd do. And when I saw you going through my files, I was secretly relieved!"

He smiled at her. "I know I'm not the snooper in the relationship, but I had to know what was going on. And when I saw you had evidence building up against Luthor, well — I knew I needed to talk to you alone, one way or another," he said, shrugging his shoulders apologetically.

"Well, I'm glad you brought me here. And I'm glad you snooped! At least something useful has rubbed off on you," she laughed, nudging him in the shoulder. Then she sighed, serious again. "And, I know we need to plan, but can we stop talking about Lex for tonight? I've been going round and round in circles for days over this and I need a break."

"Sure. He's not exactly my favorite subject either," Clark smirked.

She smirked ruefully, "Yeah, I noticed."

They were silent a moment, still holding hands in the softly lit room, the only sound a distant chirping of crickets.

"Clark, about our date the other night," she began.

"Yes?" he asked quietly, simply enjoying being close to Lois again.

"It was such a perfect evening. And I was so upset I ruined it... 'cause I had been hoping..."

Her eyes met his and she leaned in a little closer. "What I *really* wanted was...a good-night kiss," she whispered.

"Me too," he whispered back, and gently pulled her in closer. His lips settled on hers, warm, tender. She responded to him instantly, and suddenly they were both dizzy, as the kiss deepened and became more passionate. They had kissed before, of course, but it had always been a pretense, while undercover or for a false motive. Now, with nothing to hide behind, each was stunned by the passion they found in the other.

After a long moment, they stopped, eyes searching each other.

"Wow," she breathed.

Clark smiled. "Yeah."

They reached for each other again, this time the kiss even more insistent and passionate. It was a meeting of souls, a sense of deep recognition, as they each silently gave a promise to the other.

Eventually it was Clark who pulled away the second time.

"I--I have--never--felt--" Lois began, inarticulate for once.

Clark held back a little smile. "I always suspected, that between us..." he said leaning in to kiss her again, letting it speak for him.

She laughed warmly under his lips. "Well, wish you had shared that bit of information sooner!"

She leaned into the crook of his arm, feeling protected, safe. Loved. She didn't want to leave his side tonight.

"Clark? Could we maybe watch a movie or something? I just don't want to go to bed just yet."

"Sure," he said, reaching for the remote.

So they settled into the sofa, for a quiet night in Smallville together.

Lois awoke to the smell of coffee and bacon. She stretched and realized she had fallen asleep on the sofa. [[Where had Clark slept?]] She looked around the small living room and realized he may have slept floating. She smiled to herself, thinking of that give-away moment a few short months ago. It had floored her to learn he was Superman, and now, it felt right, normal even. Clark was her hero in so many ways, his moonlighting in tights just one of the many.

He came in the room a moment later, the early morning sun splashing on him from the kitchen. She could see only his silhouette for a second, and he seemed like a Greek god here on earth, having stepped off Mount Olympus. She smirked a second later as he moved into the room and she could see he was dressed in a flannel shirt and jeans. [[Some Greek god attire.]]

He handed her a mug.

"You certainly know how to win my favor," she smiled appreciatively.

"Oh, I've learned to only approach you in the morning armed with a cup of coffee," he joked.

Clark sat next to her on the sofa. "Mom's making breakfast, which should be ready any minute." He gestured to the kitchen.

"Your mother is amazing!" Lois said.

He laughed warmly. "Yeah, I am very lucky to have my parents..." Clark quickly changed the subject, anxious to work on their plan for getting Luthor. "Hey, I talked with Perry this morning."

"Oh?" she asked with interest.

He nodded, taking another sip of coffee before he answered. "Yeah, he's sure that the Planet was set up, but we just have to prove it."

"Well, we know that already. Did you tell him we suspect Lex?"

He smiled at her use of 'we.' His partner was back. "No, I

figured that information should be kept quiet till we have evidence to back it up. So, we need to head to Metropolis right after breakfast. You find out what you can from the inside, which means you'll have to play nice with Luthor for at least another day or so. I don't like it, but I think you'll be in more danger if he knows you have people helping you."

She groaned. "I hate feeling like a caught fish. But you're right, he thinks as long as he can isolate me, he can control me."

Clark nodded grimly. "I know. And trust me, as soon as I find evidence against him I'm going to Henderson and this will all be over. And please," he couldn't help adding. "Try not to do anything to push his buttons. I'll worry enough not being able to talk to you about everything."

She ignored his warning, but caught on to his theme. "So I guess you and I can't really see each other in Metropolis without Lex suspecting something," she nosed into her cup, thinking as she drank.

Clark smiled, seeing how glumly she assessed the situation. It meant she cared about seeing him. And that would always make him smile.

She noticed his look and smiled back. "I told you I was fond of you," she winked.

"Just fond of me?" he leaned in, his voice sultry.

She felt her heart flip. "Well, maybe, I'm growing just a little more than fond," she whispered, closing the distance between them to kiss him.

"Ahem," Martha said sweetly from the doorway. "Sorry to interrupt. But breakfast is ready!"

Back in Metropolis, Lois did what she could to keep up the pretense that she was going along with Lex's plan. Lex had suggested she could work at LNN so Lois went there to check out what her job might be like in television.

Though it was new and exciting, it was more pretentious than she would have liked. She felt like Lex's stamp was everywhere, flashy, yet sophisticated; seemingly righteous, but slightly on the fringe. There was something forced about LNN that just didn't sit right.

Half way through the first day, she knew she would forever miss the grind at the Planet. She already missed the earnestness of the paper; everything at LNN was rushed, before people even had their facts straight. If another news organization ran with something, LNN would try to be there faster or with more details, even if the truth of the details were suspect.

Lois knew she didn't belong there, but she did her best to look interested and tried to find out if anyone was at all suspicious of Lex. It wasn't easy to do and not draw unwanted attention to herself. Besides, they all knew she was the boss' fiancée. The closest she got to what people really thought of Lex was when she talked to an errand girl, who had just started working there a month before.

"Mr. Luthor?" The errand girl shivered. "Well, better you marry him than me. I don't care how much money the man has, that man gives me the creeps."

[[You and me both.]] Lois silently agreed.

At the end of the day, she was picked up by Lex's limo. She had tried to protest that she didn't need a ride home, but Lex had insisted that afternoon on the phone. She thought it was simply a controlling gesture, so that she'd have no option but to go exactly where he wanted her to go. But at least she didn't have to see him tonight. Instead, it was just Nigel, dropping her off at her apartment. Although, in some ways, Nigel creeped her out more than Lex did. He wasn't overtly rude to her, but she felt like he saw her as little more than a bug to squish beneath his shoe if she got in his way.

When at last she was home, she still couldn't relax. Clark had told her it was best to leave the bugs in her apartment for now, so

Lex was less likely to be suspicious. But Clark had assured her there were no cameras, just microphones.

She sighed with resignation. She couldn't call Clark, as much as she wanted to. She would just have to settle in for the night as if nothing whatsoever was amiss.

Lois caught sight of a recent edition she had of the Daily Planet. It was, in fact, the very last edition of the venerable newspaper, and she couldn't help the tears that welled up. Her world felt so shaken with the Planet destroyed, and she didn't know how things could ever be right again without it. She held the newsprint to her nose, taking in the scent of ink and paper in a frivolous gesture. It was a beloved smell, that to her would always be associated with a morning coffee and the satisfaction of having helped serve justice, or just the vibrant feel of the newsroom. There was so much more tangibility and person-to-person interaction at the newspaper, whereas television was so distant and impersonal. She sighed, her eyes caressing the logo of the Planet forlornly. She loved seeing her byline in print and she was sad to think that it might never happen again. Even if they took down Luthor, chances were that the Planet wouldn't ever be rebuilt. Not without a miracle.

Meanwhile, Clark recruited Jimmy and Perry to try and dig up some details as to what happened at the Planet. Even Jack showed up at Clark's door, having broken out of JV detention hall. Though Clark was not thrilled with the idea of him skipping out of his legal obligations, he finally agreed that Jack could possibly be useful in hunting down the truth. Besides, he could sympathize with the kid wanting to clear his own name.

Clark didn't share his theories with the gang right away, though he suspected that once they started investigating, it would come to the fore pretty quickly that Luthor was to blame.

And though Clark missed Lois terribly, he enjoyed the camaraderie of the guys pulling together to work out what happened at the Planet. The first day, everyone had dug up references to someone called 'the boss,' which confirmed in Clark's mind Luthor was behind everything. But, they had nothing solid.

That night, Perry came back to Clark's apartment to discuss what he thought about it all.

Perry sighed heavily as he made himself comfortable on Clark's sofa. "I've been digging into the Planet's finances... Though I can't get a straight answer from anyone! Every member of the Board of Directors is ducking me! But I did get a hold of the session where they decided to sell to Luthor," he said, tapping his briefcase. "Instinct tells me they're hiding something. What I need is leverage!"

Clark nodded in agreement. "Honestly I've been suspicious Luthor was behind everything all along."

Perry looked at him thoughtfully a moment. "Uh, have you seen Lois?"

"Actually, I have. She's being forced to go along with Luthor for now, Chief. Which is why we have to move fast to catch him!"

"Now Son, why didn't you tell me you suspected Luthor from the start?"

"I wanted to dig up something solid first." He handed Perry a stack of papers. "These are files that Lois had on Luthor. She's suspected him a while too."

Perry looked up in shock from what he was reading. "Then why the hell would Lois allow this fiend get so close to her?"

"I don't know, Chief," Clark said despondently. "She--well, she seemed pretty confused about how it happened as well. We've got to take him down, Perry. That's all I know."

"I agree, Clark. We'll find a way."

"Need a lift, big boy?"

Clark turned on the street, stopped by a voice he'd know anywhere.

"Lois, what are you doing here?" he asked, looking around, anxious.

Lois shrugged, gesturing to the fancy convertible she was driving. "Well, Lex gave me the car for the day, and I just couldn't sit under his thumb another minute. Take a ride with me. Please? I'm sure it'll be fine."

Clark did not like the idea of riding around in a car owned by Lex, but he missed Lois terribly. He would love to spend a few moments with her.

Only slightly reluctant, he got into the car.

"So, how's LNN?" Clark asked, lowering his glasses to inspect for microphones. He found one in the glove compartment and zapped it with his heat vision, without Lois even noticing.

Maybe one mic out wouldn't appear abnormal to Lex. Technology didn't always work perfectly, after all. And, it made Clark feel just a tiny bit better.

Lois shrugged. "Television's interesting, I suppose. But I miss the Planet, Clark. I wish--well, no point wishing for something that won't happen. How are things going on your end?"

He shook his head, reluctant to tell her everything just in case there were more bugs in the car or they were being watched. "Getting better, I think," he said vaguely.

Lois seemed to get the hint and dropped the topic.

"Have you seen Perry? Jimmy? I miss those guys..."

"Yeah, they miss you too, Lois. We've been, uh hanging out a lot together," he said with a smile, hoping she got the hint that they were working very hard to nail Luthor. "Don't worry. Somehow, we'll all be together again."

"I hope so," she said sadly.

Clark was worried by her tone. He leaned in a bit. "Are *you* okay? I mean, he hasn't--"

She shook her head. "No, he's the perfect gentleman these days," she said angrily. "Now that he thinks you and the Planet are gone from my life for good--" she felt a lump in her throat. "I just hope this ends soon. That things can get back to normal. That we —" she looked over at him. "That we can pick up where we left off," she finished quietly.

She had driven Clark to his apartment. Both were reluctant to say good-bye, but knew they shouldn't stay in each other's company for long until Lex was put behind bars.

Clark got out of the car, then turned to her. "We will, Lois. I'll be waiting for you."

When Lex's limo picked up Lois from work the next day, Nigel didn't even say hello. Not that she really cared, but how isolated could she get and still remain sane? It had been so nice and much too short a time seeing Clark the other day. She had wanted more than anything to ask him to take her back to Smallville, take her away from this fake engagement and cold world of Lex and working at LNN. She'd barely even seen Lex in the last few days anyway, though he checked in on her often with a phone call. She also couldn't find any dirt on him, despite her snooping around the LNN building. He was clean as a whistle according to all of the LNN sources she could get to.

Lois absently watched the city lights go by, as evening turned to night. She suddenly noticed that they weren't heading to her apartment. She knocked on the glass that separated her and Nigel.

"Where are we going, Nigel?"

Just then, a gas started coming out of the air vents. Lois looked at it puzzled a moment, wondering if something was wrong with the engine. Then she started choking as the gas began to take effect. She felt herself begin to panic, as she couldn't even talk, much less yell for Superman!

She tried frantically to open the window or the door, but both were locked from the driver's seat. She struggled to undo her seat

belt, trying to twist her body so she could punch the window with her foot. As she leaned on her side to angle herself, she began to feel extremely dizzy and then suddenly, the world went black.

Lois awoke some time later. She was lying on a bed, still in her clothes from work. She looked around the dark room, unable to judge the time of day or how long she had been out of it. Her head hurt terribly, and her vision was a little blurry. She sat up and reached for a familiar lamp on the stand nearby. She shivered with cold and wondered if the window was open.

She stood up carefully to head in to the living room to check. Her floor didn't feel quite right. Was it made of cement?

She was suddenly fully awake now, moving quicker into her living room, looking around in alarm. It *looked* like her apartment, yet--

She tried her front door. As she feared, it was locked shut. Her heart started pounding. She knew where she was... in the basement of the LexCorp building! She was in the apartment Luthor had built for her during Nightfall! She was his prisoner in the one place that terrified her more than any other. Her home, yet definitely *not* her home!

Then she saw something that scared her even more. Off near the kitchen stood a gorgeous Edwardian wedding dress. *Her* wedding dress, apparently. She walked over to it, wary.

There was a note addressed to her. It was in Lex's stilted, scrawling hand.

"My dear, please make yourself at home. You will find the apartment well stocked, for your every whim. I hope you like the dress. We will be married tomorrow at noon. Get a good night's sleep. Tomorrow will be quite a day!

Yours,

Lex"

She threw down the note as if it had burned her.

"You won't get away with this, Luthor!" she cried futilely to thick walls around her. As panic set in, Lois started screaming for Superman with all her heart, praying he could hear her. Tears streamed down her face as she ran back over to the door, to pound on it with all of her might.

"Superman! Help! Somebody, please! Superman!!" she cried, over and over until her voice felt hoarse. She knew it was futile. And the basement was lead-lined, so Clark couldn't find her even if he knew she was missing. She was stuck, a prisoner, and tomorrow, she would have to marry Lex Luthor.

She slipped to the floor sometime later, worn out from crying. Lois laid her head on her bent knees, trying to take deep breaths to calm herself.

"Clark... please... find me..."

When Lois calmed down a bit, she started thinking and looking around. She wandered her 'apartment,' looking for any means of escape. But everywhere that she looked, she met concrete or brick. It seemed hopeless... she sat on the sofa and turned on the TV, curious to know if she had any connection to the outside world. Of course. All LNN, all the time. How appropriate. She laughed bitterly then shut it off again. She sighed, laying her head back on the sofa, looking up at the ceiling. There. She noticed it. Near the balcony window there was a decent-sized air vent. She got up quickly, walking over to inspect it.

It was only held in place by screws. Four little screws that could lead to freedom.

Lois ran over to the kitchen, frantically looking for a screwdriver. She slammed the drawer shut in frustration as she realized there *was* no screwdriver. Lex wouldn't be so stupid.

Wait! A butter knife! She had seen Jimmy show her several useful tricks with a butter knife. She dug into the drawer, her instrument for freedom quickly found.

Just then, her front door was being unlocked. She shoved the knife into her suit coat pocket. She was glad she had insisted that her suits had pockets. You never knew when you might have to hide things...

Lex entered, a warm smile on his face.

"Well, I hope you've made yourself comfortable, Lois," he said sweetly.

"Why am I here? Why keep me locked up down here?" she demanded.

He shook his head like a father about to punish a naughty child. "Lois, I thought you might like a quiet night before our wedding."

"Why am I really here?" she demanded.

He nodded, his tone dangerous when he answered her, "I told you to stay away from Mr. Kent."

She felt a chill go up her spine. "He's my friend, Lex. I have a right to visit friends."

"Not one that I see as a rival for your affections, I'm afraid," he stepped closer to her, reaching to stroke her cheek.

She turned her head away, showing her disdain for him.

"So, and I hear you've been asking about me at LNN as well. Lois, Lois, you should no better by now than to snoop where you shouldn't be snooping."

He looked at her a moment, then tried a different approach. "Come now, why don't we put all the past aside? All will be forgiven once you become my wife tomorrow."

"I will never marry you," she said with seething anger.

He approached her, leaning in as if to kiss her. She slapped him hard.

Then his eyes, full of jealousy and hate turned to her. "You'll regret that."

He grabbed her arms, holding them to her sides, showing more strength than she knew he had in him. She tried to struggle free to reach her knife, but it was in the breast pocket and she couldn't loosen his grip enough to get to it.

Luthor moved in for a punishing kiss. But Lois wouldn't give in. She bit him, and he pulled away.

"You bitch!" he cried, reaching to slap her again.

This time he hit her with more force than she was expecting, sending her to the floor.

He walked to the door. "You'll regret that, Miss Lane. See you at the chapel," he said calmly, before locking the door behind him.

Lois struggled to get up. "No!" she cried, pulling the butter knife from her pocket. She threw it at the door futilely, hearing the clang of the silver mock her attempt.

Something just didn't seem right. Clark couldn't pinpoint it exactly, but he was worried about Lois. He was worried about the consequences of seeing her the other day, even though it had done his spirits some good. He wished he had been more thorough in checking for spying equipment in the car. Had Lex heard any of their conversation? He didn't think he had said anything that gave away too much, but he knew Lex would be angry at Lois for seeking out Clark. The man had a dangerous jealous streak in him that made Clark worry for Lois.

He couldn't focus on what Perry and Jimmy were talking about. This afternoon, though, things began coming together rather quickly on the guys' investigation of Luthor. Jack had very cleverly videotaped a Board member acting less than honestly, and they had gotten him to admit that Luthor was behind the downfall of the Planet.

Perry and the boys were enjoying the fact that Henderson would be informed about Luthor tomorrow morning. They'd have that criminal in jail in no time!

But Clark just couldn't focus on their victory. Something didn't feel right and he didn't know what it was.

He stood up, moving even before his thoughts caught up to him.

"Is something the matter, Son?" asked Perry.

"Uh, how about I pick us up some Chinese food?" he asked suddenly.

"Why don't we just order in?" Jimmy said, moving to pick up the phone book.

Clark tried forestalling, "Um, I know this place. They don't deliver, but I can go pick it up. I'll be back in less than thirty minutes."

He headed out the door and spun in the alley into Superman.

He didn't hear the guys call after him or their mumbled protests that he better bring something good back since he hadn't even ask what they wanted...

Clark was over Lois' apartment in a matter of seconds. Something was terribly wrong. He felt it in his gut.

He landed at her window, noticing it was open.

"Lois?" he called.

He quickly scanned the room, but he knew she wasn't there. He would have heard her heartbeat right away.

He saw a note on her kitchen table, marked with a giant 'S'. He opened it, seeing at once it was from Luthor.

"Hello Superman! I have a little matter to discuss with you that concerns Miss Lane. Would you do me the honor of coming by this evening? "Lex Luthor."

Clark growled in frustration and burned the note with his heat vision. He was certain Lex had Lois. He also knew Lex had Kryptonite. But he had to do something!

Clark took to the skies and headed to LexCorp Tower, his only thought that Luthor's games had to end now.

When he arrived, Superman was directed to meet Luthor in his wine cellar.

Clark sauntered in confidently, knowing that whatever happened, tomorrow Perry would be here with Henderson and would arrest Luthor. It would all be over soon, one way or another. He just hoped that Luthor hadn't done anything to Lois, because he didn't know how much patience he'd have if he found out that he had hurt her.

Luthor was pouring himself a glass of wine from a large cask when he saw Superman come in. He eyed the wine admiringly and then turned to Superman. "They say that civilization was invented so that men could cooperate in the making of wine."

"What do you want, Luthor?" Superman asked sternly. "Where's Lois?"

"Patience. One question at a time... I've asked you here to ask a favor of you."

"From me?" Clark asked, taken off guard a moment. "You must be joking."

"Hear me out," said Luthor, casually sipping his wine. "My fiancée, Lois Lane, should be deliriously happy at the prospect of our forthcoming wedding. Unfortunately, she is not. She misses her friends from the Daily Planet. Especially Clark Kent," he finished with some derision.

"So? You're the one who separated them, Luthor."

He shrugged. "Maybe I've had a change of heart. I know you and Clark are friends..."

"I'm not following," Clark said, when Luthor didn't elaborate.

"I'm asking you to use your influence to convince Clark to attend our wedding tomorrow... you're invited too," Luthor added as an afterthought. [[I'd love to see the look on Kent's face when I claim Lois for my own!]]

Clark shook his head, unable to believe the gall of the man in front of him. [[Tomorrow?]] "You live in a fantasy world, Luthor. Neither Clark nor I will ever do anything to support your marriage to Lois."

Clark began to feel he was wasting his time. Where was Lois? Why was Luthor playing this game with him?

Luthor stepped back over to the cask as if to refill his wine. The pleasant veneer he was so good at using suddenly vanished, as a bit of the devil within him showed its face. "I see," he said quietly, dangerously. "Then, I suppose, you're of no further use to me."

Luthor pulled a lever that brought down a metal cage around Superman. He almost rolled his eyes in annoyance. [[Is this the best he can come up with?]]

"Bars won't hold me, Luthor," Superman scoffed.

Luthor smiled devilishly, "Oh, I think they will."

Superman made a move to break free of the bars, but suddenly, he fell to one knee. Clark looked up at Lex in horror as he realized the cage was coated in Kryptonite.

Luthor strode over. "A fantasy world? Perhaps. But it's all about to come true."

"What have you done with Lois, you villain?" Clark cried after him. He wished he hadn't been so arrogant when he arrived. He wished he had looked for Lois from the start and not even bothered with Luthor. And now, it might be too late. Luthor was going to marry her tomorrow?!

Lex relished his power over the Man of Steel. "She's fine. She's having a nice rest before our wedding."

He laughed and ran up the stairs out of the cellar two at a time whistling, "Get me to the church on time."

Lois sat seething a moment before getting herself up off the floor. She would not let Luthor get away with this! She picked up the butter knife and pulled a chair over to where the vent was, but she was afraid she was too short. She reached up, and could barely reach the lower screw. She grunted in frustration, hopping down to look for something with more height. Her sofa? Not high enough... a bookshelf? No, she couldn't possibly push it over. Aha! The fish tank! It was sturdy enough and moved easily, though she wondered how she'd do balancing on the cylinder. But, it was the best bet she had.

Lois laughed when she got up close to it. There were plastic fish in it, swimming in a suspended jelly. [[How tacky,]] she thought. Her own tank had been an odd purchase of hers that had been inspired by a visit to the Metropolis Aquarium, and she wondered at the lengths Luthor had gone to have a replica made of it. But at least she could push it. And she wouldn't have to worry about disturbing any fish in the process.

In a few minutes, she had the tank positioned. She took off her socks, so she'd have better balance with her bare feet on the glass surface. Lois used the nearby chair to hoist herself up. It took her a second to get her balance, but her Tae Kwan Do classes actually helped her find it. She stood on the tank, but still at least two feet from the vent. She'd have to walk it like a balance beam. [[What I wouldn't give for Clark's powers right about now]] she thought.

She had one slip, but quickly recovered. She fell slightly against the wall, but once she regained her balance, she could easily reach the screws. It took her just a few minutes to take them off and remove the cover. She hoisted herself into the vent, glad that she had pretty good upper body strength.

The vent was dark of course, except for when it ran past other rooms that were occupied. She had no way of knowing where she was going, but she hoped that she'd eventually land in a room where she could get out. Lois wandered the twisting, turning pathways of the vent for about a half hour, though it felt much longer. She tried not to think of the bugs that she was probably running over or all the dust that she was probably covered in. Her one thought was to get away from Luthor.

She saw him through a vent at one point, crossing by his underground study. He was puffing a cigar and whistling a tune

from 'My Fair Lady.' She quickly moved past, feeling her heart race in panic. [[God, what if the vent just gave way and I fell in that man's room?!]]

She moved further down, knowing she'd have to pick a spot at some point to get out at, but unable to decide on a suitable one to try. Then she saw something that drew her attention. A strange green glow came from a vent up ahead. She knew that glow. Kryptonite. But, when Luthor had revealed it to her, it was hidden in a bureau. That meant that if he was using it--Luthor may have Clark! Or at least was preparing to try and get him!

She crawled a bit faster toward the strange green light. She tried seeing through the slits, but all she could make out was the top of some sort of--cage? Had Luthor made a *cage* of Kryptonite? She felt sick to her stomach. Clark would never survive something like that. She gave a swift kick to the vent, hurting her bare foot. She loosened it, but not enough to jump down. She grunted, squeezing her eyes shut to block out the pain to come, and kicked. There, the cover fell off with a clang.

Lois looked down. Still, all she could see was the top of the cage. But then she heard a groan, and caught a glimpse of red cape.

"Superman?" she called softly, afraid to use his real name in case he was being watched on camera. She cringed at the thought.

He didn't answer her, which meant he either hadn't heard her, or he was very bad off already.

Lois looked down from her vent. There was a wine barrel on its end about a half a foot away from being directly below her. She shimmied around so she could try to ease on to it, feet first. Her toes grasped for it. Lois' right foot caught the edge, and she got some bearing to get the rest of the way down. But as soon as her waist was out of the vent, the rest of her followed. She fell halfway onto the barrel, and it actually broke her fall a bit as she landed on her rear on the concrete. She stood up quickly, not even bothering to brush the dust off herself, running over to Clark.

Her heart was in her throat when she saw him. He was crumpled up on the floor of the cage, his brow broken out in sweat. He looked barely conscious.

"Can you hear me?" she asked through the bars.

"Lois?" he asked incoherently. He reached his arm out, but she wasn't sure he saw her.

She crouched down, feeling tears well up as she reached to touch him. "It's me, Lois."

He finally saw her. "The key," he murmured, weakly gesturing behind her.

"What?" she said, turning, and then seeing the key sitting on a barrel, just a few feet away, mocking Clark's helplessness. [[Luthor, that arrogant bastard!]]

She got the key quickly and opened up the cage.

"Clark?" she whispered, tears coming down her face. "Can you move at all?" she asked, already beginning to tug him out of the cage.

He grunted, but couldn't give an answer. She took his arm and put it around her shoulders. "You have to try, Clark. You have to!"

She pulled him free of the cage, but she knew it wasn't far enough away yet.

Lois looked around the room, thinking. Luthor could come in at any minute. She had to hide Clark long enough for him to regain some strength.

"Clark, there. Over there. Do you see?" she asked. "Can you make it to that little alcove? You'll be hidden well enough, and I hope far enough away from the Kryptonite..."

She dragged him over, Clark trying to help as he could, though his muscles burned in agony. At last, she sat him down next to a barrel, hidden from view from the far side of the cellar should Luthor come in.

Once she sat him down, she stroked his face, trying to comfort him how she could.

"Lois," he whispered, turning so he could kiss her palm on his cheek. "What would I do without you?"

She felt tears streaming down her face. "I wonder the same thing about you."

He looked at her in the half light, some of his focus returning. He could see a red welt on her cheek. His jaw clenched. "Did Luthor hit you?" he asked.

She tried to play it off. "I'm fine. Please. Let's worry about getting you out of here, okay?"

"I can't move right now... Maybe, we have a few hours yet, I don't know. Before he comes back." He looked off towards the direction of the cage. Lois sensed he could still feel some effect of the Kryptonite.

"Can you recover from here? Are we still too close?" she asked with concern.

"Well, without sunlight and it still in the vicinity, yeah, I won't get much better. But I don't see a choice."

"My apartment!" Lois suddenly said.

"Lois, if we could get to your apartment, that would be a miracle," he laughed ruefully.

"No, no you don't understand. Luthor. He had me in this replica of my apartment. I broke free through the vent. It was about a twenty or so minute crawl, but I think I can find the way back."

"Let's do it," he said with determination.

She walked him over to the barrels under the vent, her uncertainty growing with every step, as they were also approaching the Kryptonite again. Did he have the strength to even get up there?

She set up a barrel, directly under the vent this time.

"Could you give me a push?" she asked.

He gave one grunt and then half flew, half jumped up to the vent, grabbing Lois around the waist to hang on with one hand to the vent before she knew what happened. "Climb over me," he said.

It was a bit awkward, but she managed to climb up and over him into the vent. Then she reached down to help pull him up with her. When they were both inside, face to face, they leaned in forehead to forehead.

"We'll make it, Lois. Everything will be okay," he whispered, reaching to cup her chin.

"How? That man is a dangerous monster," she said, angry for what he did to Clark.

"Perry, Jimmy, and Jack have been working round the clock to get Luthor at his game. We finally got the evidence we needed. Henderson will be here tomorrow."

He felt her relax, literally melt towards him. "Thank goodness."

Clark's body still ached from the Kryptonite, but having Lois here, so close to him, her sweet breath just inches away--he closed the short distance between them and kissed her. He meant it as a gentle kiss, but suddenly she was answering him back with fierce passion. After a moment, they broke the kiss and pulled into a hug.

"I was so scared, Clark," she whispered.

"I know. So was I," he answered softly.

He suddenly sat up a little straighter, taking strength from her kiss. They could handle anything as long as they were together. "Ok, show me this apartment of yours."

They made their way slowly through the network of tunnels, partly because Clark was still suffering from the effects of the Kryptonite, and partly because he had a harder time due to his larger form getting through the cramped spaces. But finally, and after a few wrong turns, Lois brought them to her strange little

apartment.

Lois peeked her head out of the vent, her hair swishing as she looked side to side. At least it looked like Lex hadn't been back. She had lost track of time somewhere when she first entered the vents and she wondered how much time they would have until morning.

Lois easily shimmied out of the vent, gently landing on the fish tank below. She squatted carefully and managed to ease herself down.

Even affected by the Kryptonite, Clark was able to follow her example.

She turned to him when they were finally on solid ground again. "How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Better that we're out of that tunnel," he said with feeling. "But I'm nowhere near my regular strength yet."

"Come on, you need to lie down," she said, tugging him towards the bedroom.

"This place is... I don't know, very weird," murmured Clark, looking around.

"It gives me the creeps. But what scares me the most are the details he put into it. How, for example, did he know what kind of coffee pot I have or what shampoo I use? All of it is here, just like 'home'," she shivered.

Lois gestured to the television. "Except for a clock. Not one in this place. I'm going to turn on the news just a moment and check the time... we need to see how long until morning we have. Go on and get settled in the bedroom. I'll — be there in a minute," she said shyly.

Clark entered the bedroom and took off just his cape and boots to make himself more comfortable. He closed his eyes, relieved to be away from the Kryptonite and to have Lois nearby — even if it was in Luthor's creepy replica apartment.

She came to the door a short time later, the light behind her making her little more substantial than a silhouette. "It's almost 2:30 AM. We've got time," she sighed, looking at Clark. He looked so tired, and she was concerned the Kryptonite had weakened him considerably.

"Will you lie down with me?" he asked, too tired to be shy about it. He simply needed her company.

She hesitated a second and then simply nodded. Clark made room for her on the bed, holding his arm out to her, which she quickly fell into. Clark pulled her in tight to him.

They were silent for a long moment, listening to each other breathe.

Suddenly, as if needing to explain why they felt so comfortable to be together like this, Lois' voice cut through the silence. "I didn't want it to happen. I was too afraid of something real. That's partly why I had pushed you away," she whispered to Clark.

He gently stroked her arm, encouraging her to continue.

"What do you mean?"

She turned so she could face him. "I mean before. Before I knew you were Superman. You scared me in a way that I didn't think possible, but in a good way," she clarified. "Yet, I was afraid I'd mess it up, and that you would leave--"

He started to speak, but she stopped him with her fingers. "Let me finish," she sighed, pulling herself together to explain to him, explain to herself.

"It was much easier being just friends with Clark. Having a wonderful guy in my life who stood by me no matter what, my best friend," she said lovingly, stroking his cheek. "You are a man I wanted to love--did love--DO love, yet I was terrified that as soon as I really opened myself up to you, you'd run like all the others. That's why I thought I was in love with Superman and wouldn't look at you back then, I realize it now. Superman represented the impossible, unattainable. Someone safe. But since I've learned you're both, it--takes my breath away, really. I know

the man and I know the hero, both two halves of the man I love. Will always love..." she finished, leaning in to kiss him. "I just thought you should know."

She sighed, moving to lean on her elbow and rest her head in her hand. She reached over to hold his hand with her free one. "And I'm sorry I didn't see it before, didn't see YOU before. I don't deserve you, but if you'll have me, I'm yours," she said simply.

This time, he reached for her, pulling her close to him, to kiss her.

He was so moved by her speech, moved by how much he loved her and by how much she loved him.

"Lois, you mean the world to me. It's not a matter of deserving each other... Love doesn't work that way. There's something good and strong between us, I'm sure you feel it?"

She nodded.

"And whatever that is that binds us, it is lasting, forever. At least, it is to me," he said softly.

She snuggled into his side, reaching over so she could touch his chest. "You are amazing, Clark. Do you know that? You. The man I write--wrote stories with. Eat pizza late at night with. Play Scrabble with. When I thought I might be trapped by Lex both literally and figuratively, I knew two things. One, that I couldn't live without my best friend. And two, that somehow you'd save me. 'Cause that's the way it's always been between us."

"Yet you saved me tonight," he pointed out.

"Sort of. We still have to wait for Perry and Henderson to show up tomorrow. We are not out of the woods yet," she noted.

He leaned down and kissed her head. "Well, I'll stay here a few hours, and then I'll have to try and sneak out of this complex and get Perry."

"It's a little trickier than that. The door is locked solid, and with you incapacitated by Kryptonite... well, you can't just walk out of here."

He sighed with resignation, "Then it's the vents again."

"And I--" Lois gulped. "I have to pretend to go through with this wedding?"

He gave her a gentle squeeze. "Lex can't know the game is up just yet. He'll escape otherwise, and we can't have that. He may discover I escaped and you have to feign innocence... Do you know what time this — wedding is tomorrow?"

"Noon," she said with emphasis, as if it were the last duel at the OK Corral.

"That's plenty of time! I'll get out of here and this will soon all be over with."

Lois sighed, "I hope so."

Clark and Lois faced each other, lying down, both thinking.

"You know, I'm glad you found out I am Superman. I was so afraid of just telling you... not because I didn't trust you," Clark explained quickly. "But rather, I didn't know how you would feel, seeing your hero turn into just... me."

"Clark, you should give yourself more credit! I can't believe you still cared for me even though I was so blind. I mean, if anyone should have seen the connection, you'd think it be me! Some investigative reporter," she scoffed at herself.

"You're the best in the business," he offered kindly. "But I deliberately deceived you because, well, I was taught from a very young age to doubt acceptance of who I really was. And, by the way, you were the one who gave me the idea for Superman."

"Me? Really? This you gotta tell me!" said Lois, her eyes dancing with an interest that made Clark smile.

"Yeah, I came to work in a mess from a rescue and you suggested I should bring a change of clothes to work," he said, relishing her reaction.

"Really? So how did that transform into this?" Lois asked, gesturing to his primary color suit. "Wait," she said, sitting up. "Didn't you say your mother made it? Oh my goodness! Martha

sewing Superman suits! I love it!" she laughed.

Clark reached for her. "I'm glad you understand. You were the first person I wanted to tell. And I never thought that would happen. I agonized over how I'd tell you if we ever became closer than just friends. You mean everything to me, Lois."

"Oh, Clark," she leaned in to kiss him, laying her head on his chest a moment later.

His breathing began to slow, and when she looked up a few minutes later, she saw he was sleeping. She settled back in to his arms, ready to get some sleep as well.

"I love you," she whispered, before drifting off to sleep.

When Lois awoke, Clark was gone. It was a good thing too, because she awoke to Nigel delivering her mother to her room to help her get ready for the wedding. He was the image of politeness, but Ellen Lane was not fooled.

As soon as he was gone, she turned to her daughter. "Do you want to tell me what's going on here, Lois?" she asked. "I was home last night, when I got this mysterious call that Mr. Lex Luthor the billionaire requested my presence in Metropolis for a marriage to my daughter and that I would be picked up at 5 AM by a helicopter! What is going on? Are you marrying that man?"

Lois shook her head. "I don't have time to explain. I am sort of marrying him," Lois began, hesitant on how much to fill her mother in on. "But it's all part of a larger plan. The man is dangerous, Mom, and my friends are trying to stop him. So just go with it. Help me get ready. Hopefully we won't have to go any further than me taking a step or two down the aisle."

Lois looked at herself in the mirror. The dress was gorgeous on her, she had to admit. One hundred tiny buttons went up the back. It took her mother the better part of a half an hour to do them up. Ellen was now straightening out the veil in the other room, getting it ready to put on Lois. Lois herself stood in front of a three-fold mirror, thinking of the irony of the dress. She hated that she looked beautiful for this. She didn't want Lex to think he was winning, though she understood that had to be part of the plan.

She twisted to the side, to get the full effect of her dress. "Lois Lane gets married," she joked to herself. "Well, sort of."

"Lois Lane Luthor," she said aloud, cringing to herself, praying that the ceremony wouldn't get that far.

Then she whispered to the glass, unable to resist the idea the dress provoked, her voice catching unexpectedly on the last word, "Lois Lane... Kent."

She felt tears well up in her eyes, wishing unexpectedly that it was Clark who she was marrying. She knew things were moving in a good direction with him, yet marriage had been far from her mind. But seeing herself like this, she could envisage a marriage with him, and she hated the painful irony of having to fake a wedding with a man she could never love.

Her mother came in, the veil a frothy wave in her arms.

"Are you going to be okay, Lois?" she asked, seeing Lois' tears.

Lois nodded. "Yeah, I will. I trust Clark will get here in time."

Just then, a knock was heard at the door. "You are to be upstairs in five minutes, Miss Lane," called Nigel through the door. "I will escort you there."

"I'll just bet you will," murmured Lois. She felt her heart flutter nervously. She did trust Clark, but she was still scared the ceremony would get further on than she wanted it to and she'd be Mrs. Luthor before anyone could do anything about it.

[[Clark won't let that happen,]] she reassured herself. [[*Superman* won't let that happen.]]

Clark clamored through the vents, feeling a little better just

knowing that they were hours away from stopping Luthor. His weight made the vents a bit noisy, so he had to move slowly through rooms if there was a light visible. It took him almost an hour, but at last he made his way to street level. He could sense the sunlight, and feeling as if it was pulling him from an abyss, he moved gratefully towards it.

Pulling himself out of the street manhole, he could tell that it was no more than six or so in the morning. He couldn't fly, but the sun felt good on his shoulders, so he didn't mind walking to his apartment. He was glad not many people were out this time of day, so he was less likely to be stopped and questioned.

Clark arrived home at a quarter to seven. He forgot Perry and the boys were staying over. It wouldn't do for Superman to sneak in to Clark's apartment, but he didn't see any choice. So he took off his boots and went into his bedroom as quietly as possible. He noticed only Jack and Jimmy were there. On his nightstand, Perry had left a note.

"I'm worried you didn't come back last night. Heading over to Henderson as soon as it's light. Hope to meet you at the police station. And that you're okay. Perry."

Clark smiled at his editor's concern and quickly changed to street clothes. He still had the vestiges of a headache from the Kryptonite, but he thought he would be okay within a day or so. His main concern was to catch up to Perry and stop Luthor.

Lois had to go on blind faith.

She was in the hallway, moments from walking down the aisle. She trusted Clark with all her heart, but part of her still worried if the plan would work. What if Henderson hadn't been able to get a warrant issued? What if Luthor had discovered Superman was missing and suspected she had something to do with it? She had to stall, that's all there was to it. Her mother had already made a few excuses for her, pretending there were issues with the veil, but they could delay no more.

Lois took a steadying breath and started down the aisle. As she walked towards Luthor, as slowly and deliberately as she could manage, all she could think of was Clark. She knew now that she loved him, and whether or not they could work together again with the Planet destroyed, she knew that she wanted to be his partner in every way. Images flooded her mind of his boyish smile, of being rescued by Superman, of her best friend. She felt tears because she could feel the precipice just beneath her feet, becoming shakier with every step towards the altar. She was a hairsbreadth away from belonging to a criminal or being rescued by the man she loved.

At last she stood next to Luthor. She tried not to look nervously to the doors, praying that her friends would stop this. Calculating, just in case, she took a glance around to see if she would have any place to run if she needed to. There were no windows, and only two sets of doors.

[[Just get here soon!]] she pleaded silently.

Her eyes turned back to the altar. "The archbishop?" she couldn't help asking Luthor, shocked to see someone so high-ranking in the church overseeing this mock wedding.

"Unfortunately the Pope was busy," he said easily.

The archbishop started the ceremony, a look on his face suggesting he suspected this wasn't an entirely mutual arrangement. Lois listened absently to the drone of him speaking, meanwhile straining to hear signs of Clark or police.

At last it was her turn. She couldn't do this — *wouldn't* do this!

At her hesitancy, Luthor squeezed her elbow in warning.

"I--I--I can't!" she at last got out.

Suddenly, the doors at the back of the chapel swung open, and Lois sighed in relief.

Perry led the charge. Lois could see Henderson and several other police behind him.

"Lois, you can't marry this man!" Perry decreed formally.

She laughed, so relieved that this was almost over. "What, is there an echo in here? I just said that."

Luthor's demeanor turned angry immediately. "What is the meaning of this?"

Perry looked the villain straight in the eye, stepping between him and Lois. "The meaning, Luthor, is that you're through. We have all the evidence against you that we need."

Henderson stepped up, waving a piece of paper at Luthor. "I have a warrant here charging you with arson and other crimes too numerous to mention."

"You must be out of your minds. All of you!" cried Luthor, realizing his game was up, but refusing to go easily.

Henderson started reading Luthor his rights, though Luthor waved him away, a man used to getting his way. "Will you stop that! I can afford a *thousand* attorneys! I'll have your badge — your *head* for this! Someone get the Governor on the phone. Wait, make it the President!"

Luthor stopped a moment seeing one of his partners in crime, Mrs. Cox, in handcuffs. He shook his head with dismay, "Et tu, Mrs. Cox?"

Lex suddenly turned to Lois, his eyes burning with anger. "Sorry, Lois. I'll have to take a rain check. I'm afraid something's come up."

Henderson reached for him, but suddenly the wily Luthor swung away from him, making for the doors on the other side of the room.

"Don't worry, we'll get him. We have the entire building sealed off," Henderson said, following his men out the door to chase down Luthor.

The guests started filing out, most in a state of shock.

"I always suspected Luthor had more up his sleeve than real estate," said one old woman.

Perry turned to Lois as the drama moved out of the room. "Are you okay, honey?" he asked gently.

They all walked out of the chapel onto the street and Lois started looking around.

"Where's Clark?" she asked. She hadn't spotted him during the dramatic entrance, but knew he had to be there somewhere.

"I'm right here," he said a few feet behind her. She turned to him and they embraced tightly.

"Thank God! I didn't think you guys would make it on time," she said with relief.

Suddenly, someone shouted, "Look up!"

The crowd looked up as Luthor stood on the edge of the LexCorp building. Suddenly, he plunged to the ground.

Lois hid her head in Clark's shoulder. She felt him jump slightly saying, "I can't..."

Lois realized that if he had his powers, he probably would have tried to rescue Luthor. Lois couldn't believe that Clark had so much generosity of spirit in him. She clung to him tighter, waiting with a cringe for the sickening thud of a body to hit the pavement.

EPILOGUE

Lois would not leave Clark's side for days. She needed his strength as much as he needed hers. Luthor's games of control were over, but she still felt vulnerable. Lois covered it up though, in typical style by saying that she was just concerned for Clark as he was still recovering from the Kryptonite.

A week after Luthor's gruesome end, they all received a message from Perry to meet at the main entrance of the Planet building. He wouldn't say why, though they all suspected it might be to say good-bye to the place where they had all once called home.

Perry greeted Lois, Clark, Jimmy, and Jack with a heavy heart. He had tried to no avail to solicit some of the powerful

people in Metropolis to save the Planet, but none of them would step up. So he called them all there today, wanting them to say good-bye to the Planet together.

"I wish they'd get it over with and just tear this old place down," Jimmy said, looking around at the boarded-up windows.

Perry shook his head solemnly. "Yep, too many memories."

Lois chimed in, "Most of them good," thinking of all her successes at the Planet. And meeting Clark.

Perry looked around at all of them, loving his little misfit family. "There's a lesson to be learned here."

Jack rolled his eyes. "Why am I not surprised?"

"We ought to appreciate what we've got when we've got it."

Lois shook her head, miserable. "It's my fault. All of it. If Lex hadn't wanted me so badly he never would have destroyed the Planet. Why did he signal me out?"

Clark turned to her, sympathetic. "Because Lex Luthor always wanted what he could never have."

She shivered. "He almost had me."

Perry looked dismayed, not willing to let go of all the pain of losing the Planet. "I know I've said this before, but I hate the idea that Lex Luthor got his way... even in this one thing."

"He didn't," said a deep voice from behind them.

They all turned to see it was Mr. Stern, one of the philanthropists in the city Perry had tried to convince to save the Planet. He gestured to a truck carrying a large round object covered in a tarp. "Look!" Mr. Stern said, pulling off the tarp to reveal a brand new Daily Planet globe.

"Great shades of Elvis!" whistled Perry in awe.

Mr. Stern came over to Perry, a smile on his face, knowing he was doing the right thing. "We'll start building next week, but first I thought we'd announce to the world we're back in business!"

Clark looked at the globe with a smile. He turned to Lois, "I've never seen anything more beautiful in all my life."

She blushed with a laugh, getting his double meaning. "I'm just glad we'll be back at it again. I don't know what we would've done without the Planet."

Clark stepped over to her and reached to gently stroke her cheek. "I don't know what I would have done without you."

Lois looked in his eyes a moment, realizing happily that with every day, she fell more and more in love with him.

"Remember when I told you a few months ago that I wasn't ready to leap, too afraid that maybe Superman was pushing me off the edge?" she said.

Clark nodded. "Yeah?"

"Well, Superman better catch me, because I've fallen," she said, moving in closer to him.

"Every time, Lois. He's got you every time," Clark said softly, leaning in to seal his promise with a kiss.

THE END