

# The Inconveniences of Doing Superman's Laundry

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Summary: The day after Clark's press conference, he discovers the unexpected consequences of informing the world that he washes Superman's uniforms.

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"Mr. Kent!"

Clark turned at the sound of the unfamiliar voice. The speaker was female, and after a moment he placed her. This was Janeane Schumer, that new member of the Dirt Digger who had printed that nasty little piece last week inferring that Superman picked and chose when he made rescues and citing, among others, the death of Lex Luthor to back it up. Even Perry had been annoyed, and his editor would never, in the ordinary way, even admit that he read the publication.

He turned back and continued his progress, but Ms. Schumer apparently was not the easily discouraged type. He guessed she couldn't be, considering who employed her. He heard her footsteps speed up and resisted the urge to break into a run. It was tempting, but probably undignified for a member of The Hottest Team in Town.

She pulled even with him and reached out to grab his elbow. "Mr. Kent!"

He slowed his pace slightly. "Is there a problem, Miss?"

"Don't you know me?" she inquired, jogging along to keep up with him.

Since Clark Kent had never met the woman, he could safely reply, "I'm afraid not. Have we met?"

"Janeane Schumer, Dirt Digger," she introduced herself.

"Oh yes, I recognize the name." He speeded up again. "You wrote the hit piece on Superman last week."

"You read my work?" she inquired.

"A friend brought it to my attention," he said. "Can I help you, Miss Schumer?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. You and Superman are friends, I gather."

"If you expect me to give you some dirt on Superman, you're barking up the wrong tree," he told her.

"Oh no, not at all. The press conference you gave yesterday — about Diana Stride's accusation that you were Superman — Superman said you do his laundry."

"What's your point?"

"I was wondering if I could get an interview."

"No," Clark said. "Now, if you'll excuse me, my partner is waiting for me. We have a deadline."

"Perhaps we could meet for brunch later."

"I don't think so," Clark said. "Nice to meet you."

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"Who was that?" Lois asked as he slid into the seat across from her at Lulu's Diner. He noted that sheets of paper were spread across half the table and in dire danger of acquiring both ketchup and mustard

stains. Carefully, he moved several pages away from the mustard bottle, lifted the container and mopped up the little ring of mustard left behind with a napkin.

"I don't think you should use this for a paperweight," he remarked.

His partner made a face. "I wasn't. It was there when I got here. And don't dodge my question."

Clark picked up his menu. "That was the Dirt Digger's new hire — the one that wrote that piece about Superman picking and choosing who to save," he answered noncommittally.

"Oh, her." Lois wrinkled her nose. "What did she want?"

"An interview about Superman's laundry, I think. Or maybe an interview with Superman's laundry, for all I know. They seem to have some pretty weird notions about Superman." Clark glanced up as the waitress approached. "I'll have coffee and the steak sandwich."

The waitress — she couldn't be over eighteen, he thought — smiled at him in a friendly way. "You want the soup or salad with it?" she inquired.

"Uh — the salad, I guess. With Ranch."

She wrote that down. "Does Superman ever get food on his clothes?" she asked with apparent irrelevance.

"Not that I've ever noticed," Clark said after a startled pause.

"Oh. I just wondered. Getting salad oil out of Spandex is harder than it looks."

Clark didn't answer, and the waitress went on to Lois, who ordered salad with a low fat dressing. When she had gone, Lois raised an eyebrow at him. "Wow," she said. "All of a sudden, you're famous."

"Great," Clark said. "I'm famous for doing laundry. I'd rather be famous for my writing."

"Well," Lois persisted, "it isn't just anybody's laundry, you know. I never even thought of Superman having to do laundry before that press conference."

"Why not?" Clark asked. "I mean, he gets more dirt on his clothes than most of us. When was the last time you had to dig out a bunch of trapped miners or diverted a mudflow headed for a town or something?"

"Oh, I know," Lois said. "I just never thought about it before. Just like you don't think of Brad Pitt or Antonio Banderas or somebody having to go to the doctor for a prostate exam or ..."

Clark could feel his face growing warm. "Uh — I don't think that's a good subject at lunch."

"Huh?"

"Never mind. So what have you got here?"

"Oh," Lois said, allowing herself to be diverted from her topic. "I interviewed the labor officials and the company officials separately, and then I talked to some of the actual employees. The whole thing is causing a lot of anger. I don't see any meeting points, but maybe they'll work something out. If they don't, it's going to mean another strike."

"Great. I can't wait to see the streets lined with garbage bags and overflowing dumpsters," Clark said. "The real losers are the ordinary people of the city."

"Yeah," Lois agreed. "During one last year, I got pretty desperate myself. I finally boxed up my garbage, wrapped it up in birthday paper with a big red bow and left it in the back of my car — with the window rolled down. When I got back, it was gone."

"But that didn't solve the problem," Clark objected. "It just made it somebody else's."

"So?" Lois said. "It solved *my* problem, and if somebody was willing to steal something from my car, they deserved whatever they got."

Put that way, she was probably right, he thought. "I see your point, but it isn't very useful in the bigger picture."

"That isn't our business," Lois said, stacking her notes carefully to make room for the plate of salad that the waitress was presenting.

"Thank you."

Clark waited until the waitress deposited his sandwich and salad and refilled his coffee cup. He thanked the woman and turned back to

his partner. "Of course it's our business!" he said, returning to the previous conversation.

"I meant," Lois said, swallowing a chunk of salad, "that *our* business is to report on the situation fairly so people can make up their own minds. Then they'll have a few things to say about it."

Clark thought about that. "I guess you're right."

"Of course I'm right." Lois, as usual, brooked no contradiction. "We play an important part in it. How come you never told me you do Superman's laundry, anyway?"

"Huh?"

"I'm your partner. Why didn't you ever tell me you do Superman's laundry?"

"I guess it never occurred to me that you'd be interested," Clark said a little uneasily.

"Why not?"

Clark regarded his sandwich intently. "I didn't think anyone's laundry was that interesting," he said. "Besides, I don't think Superman was really that anxious for anyone to know about it."

Lois was silent for several seconds. "I guess," she said at last. "But you knew I wanted to find out if the outfit came off!"

Clark felt heat flood his face. "Lois!"

She laughed. "You know, you're just too easy," she said.

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Clark finished his steak sandwich while Lois was scraping up every tiny morsel of salad. Could that be the reason she was short-tempered much of the time? he wondered idly. He knew Lois worked hard to keep her figure, but it was a little dismaying to think that maybe her combative nature might arise simply from the fact that she was always a little hungry. One of these days, when he worked up the nerve, he was going to take her to one of the best Italian restaurants in town and ply her with all her favorite dishes and chocolate desserts. That might settle the question — or not.

He downed the last of his coffee and looked around for the waitress. She was two tables down, and when she saw that he had finished his coffee, she approached at once. "More coffee?" she asked.

"No, thanks," Clark said. "Just the tab, please."

She produced it from a pocket of her uniform. "Here you go." She hesitated, and Clark could swear that she was blushing. "I probably shouldn't ask," she said, "but I'll probably never have another chance to find out. I've always wondered — does Superman's costume really come off?"

Clark resolutely did not look at his partner's expression. "He's got six of them hanging in my closet. I can't wash them while he's wearing them, you know."

"Yeah, I suppose so," the waitress said wistfully. "Have you ever actually seen Superman — you know — I mean, you're both guys —" Clark could feel his face growing warm again. "Have you ever seen him — you know, change clothes?"

"He changes at super speed," Clark said. "I didn't really try to look."

"But does he ever wear anything besides the suit?" she asked.

Clark figured he'd better end this conversation before it gave Lois ideas. "I've never seen Superman in anything but his Suit," he said firmly. He studied the tab for an instant, produced the payment and a modest tip and got to his feet. "We need to get back to the office now, or we're going to be late," he said. "Come on, Lois."

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"You know," Lois said, "she had a point. Do you suppose Superman ever wears other clothes besides his Superman outfit?"

Clark didn't answer. This was getting far too close to reality for his comfort. Lois turned to look at him. "I mean," she continued, "you say you've never seen Superman in anything but his suit, but that doesn't mean he doesn't have any other clothes."

"I guess not," Clark agreed.

"And how about underwear?" Lois asked. "Does he ever ask you to wash his underwear?"

"Lois!"

"Well, does he?"

"Could we talk about something else?" Clark asked. "I really don't want to describe Superman's laundry in detail."

"Why not? Is there something funny about it?"

"No, of course not."

"Then you *have* seen it!"

"It's just ordinary underwear," Clark said desperately. "I really don't want to discuss the subject."

Lois glanced at him and laughed. "Clark, don't be so prudish! Good grief! They even advertise feminine products on television! Nobody gets embarrassed about things like that anymore. Why does telling me about Superman's underwear embarrass you?"

"Can we just drop this?" Clark asked. His face felt as if it were on fire. "I'd really rather not talk about it."

She laughed. "Oh, all right. Could you at least tell me if he wears boxers or briefs?"

"No!"

She patted his arm. "You're the last Boy Scout, you know?"

Clark grunted. The idea of presenting himself yesterday as The Man Who Does Superman's Laundry had seemed like a good solution to his problem, at least at the time, but he was beginning to have second thoughts. Somehow the thought that a good portion of the population of Metropolis seemed to have an unhealthy obsession with Superman's dirty clothing was a little disturbing. And besides, the questions that the waitress had raised in Lois's mind were probably hazardous to his other identity. She was bound to continue to think about the possibility that Superman might wear something besides his uniform, and that could lead to other complications that he didn't want to deal with. He would never wish for Lois to be less than brilliant and tenacious, of course, but that particular quality was bound to make things uncomfortable for him, at least for a while.

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Clark glanced up from the police report that he had been reading concerning the robbery the previous night at Mazik's Jewelers. Lois was leaning forward, examining her computer screen intently. As he watched, their editor approached from behind her and leaned over her shoulder. "What in Elvis's name is *that*?" he inquired. "I thought you were workin' on that piece about Intergang."

"Uh —" Lois's hand moved as she quickly minimized her screen. "I'm waiting for a call from my contact."

"So you're looking at men's fashions to kill the time?" Perry inquired dryly.

"Uh — I'm trying to find my dad a sports jacket for his birthday," Lois said weakly.

"Hmph! Well, gift shop on your own time," Perry told her.

Lois nodded. "It was only for a few minutes," she pointed out. "Bobby said he'd call by three."

"Uh huh," Perry said. "He'd better." He turned his head. "Ralph! Where's that piece on the dog show?"

Ralph nearly dropped his paper cup of water as he straightened quickly. The water cooler rocked sharply, and Eduardo grabbed the huge plastic bottle, narrowly preventing it from upsetting onto the floor. "Hey! Watch it!"

Lois was watching Perry walk away, and Clark saw her surreptitiously enlarge her screen again. Clark lowered his glasses a quarter of an inch and glanced at the window across the room, directly behind his partner. The reflection of the computer screen again showed the image of a man in a business suit. But the model wasn't a professional. It was him.

Superman, rather. As he watched, Lois did something, and the outfit changed to that of a T-shirt and jeans. Belatedly, he saw that the website advertised the advantage of seeing how an outfit would look on "that special person in your life."

Clark swallowed. "Uh — Lois? Maybe you'd better give Bobby a call. It's only a couple of minutes to three."

His partner looked at the wall clock. "He's got five minutes."

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I wondered what Superman would look like in regular clothes," she said.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Come see."

He got to his feet and came to lean over her shoulder. His own picture looked back at him, and he wondered how Lois could look at it and not see the resemblance.

Lois was pointing at the picture. "I got a photo of Superman from the files, and I've tried some different outfits on him," she explained. "You know, I guess he'd stand out no matter what he wore."

Clark opened his mouth, not sure what to say, but he was saved by the ringing of the phone. Lois closed the screen and reached to pick up the receiver. "Lois Lane."

Trying not to look nervous, he retreated to his own desk while Lois talked to her snitch. It was obvious that Lois's normal level of curiosity wasn't going to allow her to let go of the laundry thing any time in the next day or so. Even if he managed to distract her, her basic tenaciousness made it unlikely that she would forget about it for long, and sooner or later it was quite possible that she would put two and two together. What the dickens was he going to do?

He was jerked out of his worried thoughts by his partner's voice. "Don't sit there dreaming, Clark! Let's go!"

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Bobby Bigmouth was waiting in an alcove near the rear entrance to Joe's Mandarin Express, a Chinese fast-food all-you-could-eat buffet not far from the border of Suicide Slum.

Surprisingly, the place had a relatively decent clientele, and Bobby worked here three days a week. Privately, Clark wondered how long the place would continue in business now that their always-ravenous snitch had discovered that it gave a 40% discount for employees at whichever mealtime fell within their respective shifts.

The day had turned drizzly, and Bobby, never one to voluntarily endure the elements for long, had found a sheltered spot to await their coming. Apparently, to kill the time, he was eating some sort of Chinese dish out of a cardboard carton, utilizing his chopsticks with the expertise of a Chinese chef, and as they approached he tossed the now-empty carton into the big garbage can that sat next to the building's rear entrance.

"Got my snack?" he inquired.

Lois patted the paper sack that she had brought from Angelo's Italian Smorgy. "Got it right here," she said, "but you don't get a bite until we hear what you have to say."

"Geez, Lois, don't you trust me?" Bobby asked in a pained tone. "When have I ever steered you wrong?"

"Shall I give you a list?" Lois inquired. "How about last month, when you directed me to a 'gun-running operation' that turned out to be a perfectly legal Chinese laundry?"

"Everybody makes mistakes," Bobby said a little defensively.

"Never mind that," Clark said quickly. "What have you got for us?"

Bobby cast a longing glance at the bag. "I got the word that the robbery was an inside job," he said. "Somebody cut off the security cameras during the robbery."

"We've seen the police report," Lois said. "What makes you think it was an inside job?"

"I heard from a source of mine," Bobby said, "that a member of the Mazik family hired the guy that cracked the safe."

"Who did crack the safe?" Lois asked.

"I can't give names," Bobby said patiently. "If I did, nobody would tell me anything. The word is, though, that one of the Mazik brothers is in hock up to his eyebrows to certain illegal gambling interests in Metropolis. The rest is your business."

Lois's eyes met Clark's.

"That sounds like a decent lead," Clark said.

"Yeah." Lois appeared to think a minute and then reluctantly handed Bobby the sack. The snitch opened it and inspected the contents.

"Not bad," he said with a hint of enthusiasm. "Baked lasagna and all the trimmings! Did you get me something to drink?"

Clark presented him with an insulated container of Angelo's Cappuccino, and the snitch inhaled ecstatically. "You know," he confided to Clark, "Lois's stuff has really improved in quality since you got to be her partner." He took a long sniff. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it," Lois told him, starting to turn away. "Come on, Clark."

"Got a question for you, Clark," Bobby interrupted. "What brand of detergent do you use for washing Superman's outfit?"

"Uh —" Clark closed his eyes in near despair. Lois hadn't said anything about the infamous press conference on the way over, and he'd begun to have the faint hope that she was going to drop the subject. "Whichever one happens to be on sale."

Bobby shook his head in disapproval. "Spandex is hard to get bomb stains out of," he informed Clark. "You should try Olef's Color Brite for the best results. Then you don't have to pretreat spots and stains."

"Thanks," Clark muttered, glancing surreptitiously at Lois from the corner of his eye.

"And," Bobby continued, "it'll keep the Spandex from stretching out prematurely. Considering the way Superman must beat up his clothes, that'll make a difference."

"I'll remember," Clark told him, trying to keep his expression neutral. "Thanks, Bobby. We have to go now, though. Enjoy your lasagna."

"Figured you might not know," Bobby said. "Lots of guys don't understand the finer points of washing clothes. Try it and you'll see the improvement. See you later, guys." He took a swig of the Cappuccino. "This stuff is great!"

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"I hadn't thought of that," Lois said as they got back into Lois's Jeep. "Didn't you look up how to wash Spandex when Superman asked you to help with his laundry?"

"He hasn't had any complaints so far," Clark said. "Can we just drop the subject for now and concentrate on Bobby's tip? How many illegal gambling joints do we know about in Metropolis?"

"I've got a list on my computer," Lois told him. "For starters, we're going to have to check them out and see if we can find out which Mazik brother frequents which one."

"Jimmy can probably help," Clark offered. "We should ask him to look into their recent backgrounds."

Lois nodded, inserting the key into the ignition. "Which days do you do laundry on?" she inquired.

"Lois!"

"And where do you do the laundry? I didn't notice a washing machine in your apartment. I'd think people would notice if you put Superman's suits into the machines at the laundromat."

"The apartment house has a washer and dryer," Clark said.

"But you don't leave Superman's suits in there, do you?"

"Of course not," Clark said. "I wash and dry them and take them back upstairs."

"And no one has ever seen them?"

"No."

"I hope you don't have the National Inquisitor staking out your laundry room tonight," Lois said.

Clark covered his eyes with one hand.

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"The Mazik brothers are Jason and Robert," Jimmy said. "Jason T. Mazik is the older brother, but Robert owns 51 percent of the business and is the senior partner. Jason has 49 percent — or did. According to this —" he gestured to the document displayed on his computer screen "— their father founded Mazik's Jewelers, and when he died his will gave Robert a controlling interest. Jason originally had the remaining 49 percent, but he's sold nearly half of that to various other persons in the last couple of years."

Lois and Clark looked at each other.

"Interesting," Lois said.

"Yeah," Jimmy said. "If you want, I can go further into his background."

"Good idea," Lois said. "I wonder if the people who bought from him had any connections with the illegal gambling operations in Metropolis. I don't suppose that would show up in the records, would it?"

"Maybe," Jimmy said. "I'll see what I can dig up."

"Do that," Lois said.

The sound of sirens made Clark lift his head. He set down his café latte. "Be right back."

"Where are you going?" Lois asked.

"I just had an idea," he said. "I need to check on something." Before his partner could reply, he headed briskly for the elevator.

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The fire was in an apartment house across the city. Superman arrived moments after the first of the fire services and was immediately co-opted by the fire chief to help evacuate victims on the upper floor. Predictably, news cameras showed up within minutes, and each time he set an evacuee on the ground, it seemed that a reporter shoved a microphone into his face. He avoided the media until he had completed his rescues and landed by the fire chief.

"What else do you need me to do?" he asked.

"Superman!" It was the reporter from the Star. "How long has Clark Kent been doing your laundry?"

Clark turned his head, completely shocked. "What?"

"How long has Clark Kent been doing your laundry?" the woman repeated.

"I don't have time for this right now," Clark said. He turned back to the fire chief.

There was a sudden yell, and he spun around to see one of the firefighters, perched high on one of the ladders, grab frantically for the big hose that he had apparently been directing through a second story window. The object was already out of his reach and falling toward the ground. Clark whisked toward it and captured it before it could strike any of the firefighters below and returned it at once to the man who had lost it. Smoke was belching from the opening before him, and from inside he could hear the pathetic mew of a kitten. Instantly, he drew in his breath and exhaled, quenching the flames in the room, and then whisked inside to rescue a small, terrified, struggling feline. From somewhere, he could hear the hoarse breaths of a larger life form, and sweeping his X-ray vision about the room, instantly located a boy of about four beneath the room's bed.

Clark tilted the bed up against the wall, scooped up the child, and holding him against his side, exited the room once more.

As he touched down, a woman, her face streaked with soot, ran forward. "Jerry! Oh, thank God! Is he all right?"

Jerry was crying and coughing and reaching for the kitten.

"I think so," Clark said.

"I want Miffy!" the boy announced between sobs.

Clark handed him the kitten, which had abruptly ceased its attempts to escape once Clark's feet had hit the ground.

"He went back for the cat," the woman said. "They wouldn't let me go after him."

"Children do," Clark said. "Come on. Let's have the paramedics check him over."

Fortunately, that was the last rescue. Clark assisted the fire services for another twenty minutes, making sure the flames were thoroughly quenched, before he flew away to return an instant later as Clark Kent to interview the fire chief.

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"Mr. Kent!" Tucking his notebook, which now contained the notes from the interview, into his pocket, Clark turned involuntarily at the sound of his name. The young man hurrying toward him was a complete stranger.

"Can I help you?" he inquired politely.

"My name is Ernest Gillingsford," the newcomer introduced

himself. "I'm a sales representative of the Olef's Color Brite Detergent division of New Troy General Products Ltd. I took a chance that I'd find you here since Superman was helping to put out the fire."

"Yes?" Clark said, a faint sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. "Why did you want me?"

"It's come to our attention that you're in charge of doing Superman's laundry," Gillingsford said. "Being that our company is an enthusiastic supporter of Superman, we felt it would be appropriate to ask you to try our products when you wash Superman's suits. As the expert in cleaning Superman's uniform, your opinion of our line of detergent would be much appreciated as we always strive for the highest quality in laundry products."

"I'll be glad to let you know how it works out the next time I wash Superman's suit," Clark said. "Excuse me. I'm expected back at my office —"

"Absolutely," Gillingsford said. "I was asked to present you with a month's supply of these sample packages of Olef's Color Brite Detergent, Olef's Color Brite Pre-Soak, Olef's Color Brite Fabric Softener and Olef's Color Brite Chlorine Free Bleach." He extended a large white paper bag, emblazoned with the logo of the company on one side. Clark found himself clutching the bulky object as Gillingsford smiled professionally at him. "This particular product is formulated to be extremely gentle on all stretch fabrics and to help prevent premature stretching or damage to the fabric. Would it be all right if we contacted you in a month to ask for your opinion of our product?"

"I guess so," Clark said. "Now, if you'll excuse me —"

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"What's all that stuff?" Lois was inquiring five minutes later as he set the bag on the floor beside his desk.

"You don't want to know." Clark sank into his chair and pulled up a blank Word document. "Hold on, Lois. I've got time to get this written up and sent to Perry before the deadline if I hurry."

"Okay." His partner eyed the bag curiously. "You have a message on your desk."

"I'll look at it in a minute." Clark's fingers were flying over the keys as he wrote up the story that he had composed on the way back to the office. Done in less than five minutes, he pressed the key to transmit it to his editor. As he did so, the phone rang. Clark picked it up. "Kent."

"Mr. Clark Kent?" The voice sounded smoothly professional.

"Yes," Clark said.

"This is Walter Brigham, managing supervisor of the E-Z Fit Tailoring Service. Since you are the man who launders Superman's uniforms, we have a special offer that we'd like to present to you ..."

Clark listened to the persuasive voice and its sales pitch with a sense of resignation. Yesterday, the press conference that he had arranged to reveal that he did Superman's laundry had seemed like the perfect solution to Diana Stride's expose of the Superman suits hanging in his closet. But in retrospect, this whole scenario had been completely predictable. He rested his face in his palm and closed his eyes in mild exasperation. He shouldn't, he thought, have been surprised in the slightest that everybody with any kind of link — or none — to the laundering of clothing would be after him with some kind of marketing scheme. Once the world knew that he did Superman's laundry, it was bound to make him the target of every ingenious opportunist in Metropolis. How could he have possibly been so incredibly naive?

"I'll mention it to Superman," he said when the man paused to take a breath. "I really can't give you an answer since the clothing is his, you know."

"Of course," the voice on the other end of the line said. "We'll give you a call some time tomorrow, after you've had an opportunity to explain our once-in-a-lifetime offer to him."

"Fine." Clark hung up abruptly, closed his eyes again for a second and blew out his breath. Okay, that gave him twenty-four hours to think of something. But what on Earth was he going to do about the

larger situation? How the dickens was he going to get his privacy back? This was as bad as the time he'd made that twenty-five dollar donation to a children's charity and for months afterward every charitable organization between Metropolis and Mars had bombarded him with requests for enough money to have bankrupted Lex Corp, let alone a mere reporter. It had been heart wrenching to refuse the pitches, but at last he'd been forced to change his phone number and pick only two charities for his private donations — organizations that promised not to sell his private information to other ones. That solution was unlikely to work this time, though.

A glance at the clock told him he had another two hours before his shift was over. He'd have to think about the problem later. Right now there was work to do. Speaking of which ...

He picked up the note that Lois had laid prominently on his desk.

It was a phone number for Jason Hinklemyer, the representative of the Modern Man's Fashion and Style Makeover Emporium, along with a request to call at any time. Clark made a faint growling noise in his throat, crumpled it up and threw it into the trash can.

"What's the matter?" Lois asked. "You look upset."

Clark gestured at the bag of laundry products. "Do you know what that is?"

She regarded the bag. "Laundry products?" she guessed. "But why did you bring them back to the office?"

"I was over at that apartment fire that Superman helped put out," he explained and went on to describe the meeting with the sales rep who had thrust the sample products onto him. "Then that guy on the phone wanted to tailor Superman's Suit to give it more zing. And that note was from some company that wants to redesign the whole outfit and give me a complementary style makeover in return for recommending them to Superman —"

"I know. I took the message," Lois said. "I guess I hadn't really thought of it before, but you probably should have expected it."

"Yeah, I should have. But —"

"And," Lois added, "even if it's kind of a pain, at least you'll get a lot of free stuff."

"I don't *want* a lot of free stuff! I just want them to leave me alone!"

"Somehow," Perry's voice said from behind them, "I sense this conversation isn't work related. And why are you bringing your groceries back to the office, Clark?"

"They're not groceries," Clark said. "I can explain."

Perry regarded the bag. "New Troy General Products Ltd? Why in Memphis did you buy that stuff?"

"I didn't," Clark said unhappily. "Their rep sort of shoved it on me to do Superman's laundry with. They want my opinion of the way it cleans Superman's clothes."

"Ah, I get it," Perry said. "I take it you weren't exactly thrilled."

"Not exactly," Clark said.

"They're gonna keep after you, you know," his boss said wisely, "unless you can give them a reason to decide you aren't gonna make 'em money."

"I figured that out," Clark said. "But how am I supposed to convince them that bothering me is a dead end?"

"You'll think of something. In the meantime, the mayor's giving a press conference over at City Hall. There's some question about preferences in city contracts and possible collusion. You two get on over there and bring me back the details."

"We're on it." Lois scooped up her shoulder bag, and she and Clark headed for the elevator.

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The Jeep wouldn't start. Naturally, Clark thought. Lois turned the key again and growled as the starter cranked, but the engine refused to turn over. She yanked the key out of the ignition with a muttered cussword.

"I guess we'd better get a taxi," Clark ventured. "We'll have to call a mechanic when we get back."

Lois said a bad word under her breath and nodded. She shoved the

door open with unnecessary force. "Come on. We'll have to flag a taxi."

The weather had worsened in the short interval since they had returned to the office, Clark observed as they stepped out onto the sidewalk in front of the Planet.

"It always seems to rain or snow or something when I haven't got a car," Lois grumbled, pulling her coat more tightly around her body. "Brr!"

"Murphy's Law," Clark said.

"Yeah, I know. But why does he concentrate on me?" Lois asked.

"Why did my car have to quit *now* of all times, and for that matter, how about a couple of weeks ago? What other woman's ex-fiancé comes back from the dead and kidnaps her so she'll marry him after the wedding fell apart the first time? Murphy just has it in for me."

Clark figured it would probably be tempting Fate to point out to her that she gave Murphy a lot of help. He waved futilely as a taxi cruised past, the driver oblivious to the two of them. The light drizzle of a couple of hours earlier had turned into a steady sprinkling of snowflakes. They drifted gently downwards and coated Lois's head and shoulders with a dusting of frost that melted quickly, leaving her with tiny beads of water dotting her dark hair in its place.

Lois put two fingers into her mouth and gave an ear-cracking whistle that made Clark wince. A taxi slid smartly to a stop by the curb in front of them.

"Well, at least you can get the taxis to come when called," he observed, reaching out to open the rear door for her.

Lois smiled. "It's a gift," she said, sliding into the seat. Clark took his place beside her and closed the door.

"Where to?" the driver inquired.

"City Hall," Lois said. She leaned back against the seat back and blotted water from her face with the wisp of a handkerchief. "Damn it!" She stuffed the handkerchief back in her purse.

"What?" Clark asked.

"Oh, my mother sent this thing to me from Paris for my birthday last year. It's a lace handkerchief from some French boutique. Only it doesn't absorb water very well."

"Oh. Here." Clark produced his own handkerchief.

Lois took it and blotted the water from her face. "Did I smear my makeup?"

"Looks okay to me." Clark forbore to mention that she would look beautiful to him even if she had rolled in the mud. Still, the damage was minor, and people would presumably be paying more attention to the mayor than Lois's lipstick.

"Good." Lois glanced out the window at the passing wet sidewalks and dirty street. "Great. Just enough rain to stir up the dirt but not wash it away."

Clark didn't answer. His mind had returned once more to the problem of what to do to get the various persons determined to profit from his relationship to Superman's laundry off his neck. And he'd gone to bed so relieved last night!

"Hey!" Lois said suddenly.

"What?" he asked, turning his head, startled by the distinct note of outrage in her voice. The word almost caught in his throat.

There was a passenger in the front seat beside the driver. He had apparently been hiding, positioned on the floor where potential passengers would not be likely to see him, but now he had risen from his position and was facing them. Clark found himself staring down the muzzle of a .357 Magnum. The man smiled sardonically.

"Just sit still, laundry boy," he said. "If you try to be a hero, the lady might be awful sorry."

"Is this a robbery?" Lois demanded. "Because if it is, you picked the wrong people! I've got about five dollars on me, and Clark has less. He paid for brunch this morning!"

"Shut your yap," the man said mildly. "Drive, Joe. Get us out of here before Superman shows up to save his buddy, Kent."

"Are you out of your minds?" Lois demanded.

"I said shut up," the man repeated more forcefully. He pushed the

muzzle against Lois's nose. "I figure if we get hold of Superman's best friend, he'll have to do what we say. You two just sit still and play nice until we get where we're going."

It figured, Clark thought. It just figured. Apparently, the opportunists in Metropolis were not limited to sales representatives and companies eager to profit off of the Man Who Did Superman's Laundry. He should have known that there were also others even less respectable who might be interested as well. *Now* what was he going to do?

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Lois and Clark were hustled roughly into the dingy backroom of a nondescript warehouse near the docks. Clark took careful note of the location, just in case he needed to come back later as Superman, but of course, the two characters that had abducted them couldn't know that since he and Lois were tightly blindfolded. The bad guys had stopped a few minutes after picking them up and applied bindings and blindfolds, apparently to prevent them from seeing their destination. Which, of course, was completely worthless against his X-ray vision. One of their captors gave him a shove between the shoulder blades and slammed the door behind them. He could hear the grate of a key in the lock and then their retreating footsteps echoing through the building as they walked away.

Lois took a step forward, caught her foot on a ragged throw-rug and lost her balance. Clark moved quickly to break her fall, and together they tumbled to the floor.

Lois spoke a phrase that made him smile as she managed to roll over and lift her head. "I think I skinned my nose!"

Clark examined the member quickly. His partner rarely used colorful language in the presence of others, but Perry had told him of the ski trip shortly before Clark had joined the Planet staff. Lois had broken an ankle. Their editor had carried her down the mountain back to the ski lodge and been treated to a sample of vocabulary that few others knew that Lois possessed. Apparently, he, too, had been admitted to the ranks of friends close enough to her that she didn't feel it necessary to guard her speech too closely in stressful situations. In spite of a slightly reddened appearance, her nose looked all right, so evidently, his partner was simply giving vent to her feelings. He could hardly blame her.

"Are you okay?" he inquired.

"Except for being kidnapped, yeah, I'm fine," she said tartly. "Can you see anything?"

"Some," Clark said. "The blindfold is scrunching up a bit. Let me see if I can work it off against the rug."

There was a chair a few feet away. Clark levitated to his feet, made his way to the chair, hooked an edge of the blindfold against the wooden arm and removed the annoying binding. He could get out of the ropes easily enough, but he was going to have to make it look normal. Snapping the fibers wasn't in the cards. If Lois spotted the fact that he'd broken the rope, she couldn't possibly miss the obvious.

"It's off," he told her a moment later. "Just a minute. Let me see if I can get those ropes off your wrists. Can you roll on your side?"

"Sure."

Lois turned on her side, presenting her wrists, and Clark knelt beside her. Using his teeth, he began to tug at the knots. Even then it wasn't much of a challenge, and within a few minutes the bindings began to loosen. When he had managed to undo the first part of the knot, he sat back. "Pull on it," he directed. "It might come off by itself."

The loops of rope, loosened by Clark's efforts, came free with the third try. Lois wriggled the rope off her wrists and dropped it in tangled coils to the floor. She ripped off her blindfold, blinking at the light.

"Hold still," she directed. "I'll untie you."

Clark obeyed, and a moment later they were both free.

The room was small, rectangular and — outside of a chair, a coffee table, a beaten-up and threadbare throw rug, a dim and inadequate light bulb in the ceiling and the door by which they had entered —

featureless. The floor was wooden, Clark observed, and hadn't seen wax or even a broom in a very long time. They looked at each other.

"Great," Clark said.

"When we get out of here," Lois said, "you'd better tell Superman to announce that he's looking for someone else to do his laundry. This isn't worth it."

"Yeah," Clark said. He lifted his glasses and X-rayed the floor.

"But first," Lois said, "we have to figure how to get out of here."

Beneath the wooden floor was a dank unfinished basement. The floor was dirt, and at the moment puddles of water were collecting in the low spots courtesy of the earlier drizzle and current falling snowflakes outside. More telling, however, was the fact that there was faint light leaking in from a narrow window with a very dirty, partially opened, cracked pane of glass, set in one wall, level with the muddy asphalt outside.

"What are you looking at?" Lois demanded.

"I think there's a loose board," Clark knelt and forced his fingernails into the crack between one board and the next. Effortlessly, he pulled it up and laid it to one side. "Look! There's a basement underneath!"

Lois knelt immediately beside him. "I can't see anything."

"I think I can see a little light over to the left," Clark said, keeping his voice down. "There might be a ground level window. If we can pull enough of these boards away, we can get down there and maybe get out."

Lois regarded him without expression for a moment and then nodded. "Okay. I'm game if you are."

Clark nodded and grasped the next board. "I think these things are half-rotten. Or maybe the place has termites," he said and pulled.

Naturally, the board came loose with a squeak of nails being wrenched from the wood. Clark instantly grabbed the next one and pulled it free as well. "Hurry!" he whispered. "I think I hear footsteps!"

Which was perfectly true. Lois glanced at the door, slithered backwards through the aperture, hung by her hands for an instant and dropped.

"I'll hold the door," Clark whispered. "Go get help! Hurry!"

"Clar —"

"Go!"

A key grated in the door's lock. Lois hesitated for an instant, but at Clark's insistent gesture she turned and disappeared from his line of sight. A couple of seconds later, he heard a squeak and a grating noise as Lois forced the basement window farther open.

Instantly, he turned to face the door as it swung inward.

"Hello, gentlemen," he said in his best Superman voice. He folded his arms and let the two men standing in the doorway, their mouths open, get a good look at the famous red and blue suit. "I think the two of you have a date with some of Metropolis's Finest at the police station."

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"Superman got there a couple of minutes after you got away," Clark explained. "He grabbed our friends and took them to the Twelfth Precinct and then came back for me. Henderson wants you to drop by the station later to give your statement."

"I hope you told Superman he's going to have to get someone else to do his laundry," Lois said with asperity. "It's bad enough that every promoter in town wants your endorsement, but when you start getting kidnapped too, it's too much!"

"Yeah," Clark said. "I told him what you said, and he agreed that you had a point. He said he'd figure something else out."

"I kind of feel bad for him," Lois said, "but I don't want to have to worry about you getting kidnapped. I don't have many best friends. I can't afford to lose you."

He took her hand. "You're not going to lose me, even if I do pick bad times to return videos," he said.

"I hope not." Lois let her hand lie in his for another few seconds and then slowly pulled it back. "That's something you and I really

need to talk about.”

“I know.” Clark shoved his hands into his pockets. Lois was right, of course, but the prospect still nearly gave him a panic attack. “In the meantime, though, you need to interview me about what happened and my decision not to wash Superman’s uniforms anymore. Superman said he’d be by later so you could interview him, too. We need to let people know as soon as we can that I’m going out of the laundry business. The only clothes I’m going to wash from now on are my own.”

“And we need to put in the article that Superman is keeping an eye on you, just in case anybody else decides to kidnap you,” Lois said. “Maybe that will keep the kidnapping attempts to a minimum.”

“You’re probably right,” Clark agreed meekly.

“And,” Perry’s voice said from behind them, “you still need to be a bit careful until the word gets around. Let’s hope the whole story discourages any other guys with bright ideas. I have enough problems with Lois gettin’ kidnapped every couple of weeks. I don’t want you to join the club, Kent.”

“That’s for sure,” Jimmy said as he passed by the desk, a stack of printouts in his arms. “Just Lois is enough.”

“Watch it, junior,” Lois said warningly, but Jimmy had already retreated beyond earshot. Perry snorted and then turned his head.

“Ralph!” he bellowed. “Where’s that piece I assigned you on the swap meet? I want it on my desk in five minutes!” He strode purposefully toward his victim.

Lois turned back to Clark. “I’m sorry I teased you about Superman’s laundry,” she said. “I couldn’t resist, but getting kidnapped isn’t very funny, even if it’s by a pair of losers like those two.”

Clark felt his eyebrows rise. “You’re forgiven,” he said. “I shouldn’t have made a fuss about it.”

“Just one thing,” Lois said. “You must have had those outfits in your closet for weeks. Did you ever try one on?”

“Lois — “

“You’re blushing!” Lois said. A brilliant smile lit her face. “I knew it! Do you think, before Superman picks up his Suits, that you could model one for me?”

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#### Epilogue

“What did the guy at the repair place say about your Jeep?” Clark asked as he climbed into the passenger seat. It was the morning after their adventure, and the sky was a bright blue dotted with high scudding clouds. The light storm of the previous day had departed during the night.

“Joe said our friends — or somebody, anyhow — had loosened one of the battery connections,” Lois said. “If I’d had the time, I could probably have fixed it myself. One of my electives at New Troy State was Auto Mechanics.”

Clark regarded her thoughtfully. “I guess I should be surprised,” he said, “but since I know you pretty well, I’m not.”

Lois grinned slightly and started the engine, which responded with a smooth purr. She pulled the Cherokee carefully away from the curb in front of Clark’s apartment and turned the nose of the vehicle toward the Daily Planet.

Clark observed the large dumpster sitting between his building and the one next door with a raised eyebrow. The container manifestly hadn’t been emptied, although the trucks usually came by around five in the morning on Friday. That could mean only one thing. “I guess the garbage strike is on,” he remarked.

“You guessed it. It started this morning,” Lois said. “I hope they get it settled pretty soon.”

“So do I,” Clark said. “The last time, it got so bad that I nearly had to climb over the bags on the apartment steps to get out of the building.”

Lois shrugged. “That’s one of the drawbacks of living in the city,” she said philosophically. “I still wouldn’t live anywhere else.” She signaled and turned left at a yellow light just as it turned red and blew

her horn savagely at a blue VW that tried to jump the gun. There was a squeal of tires as the nearly suicidal driver of the much smaller car slammed on his brakes. The irate motorist shouted an imprecation after them, which Lois ignored.

Clark resolutely didn’t look back. “Did Jimmy have any luck with his research on Jason Mazik?” he asked.

“Not much,” Lois said. “I guess we’re going to have to pound some pavement and see what else we can find out. Wouldn’t be the first time.”

Clark nodded. “If he really was involved in that robbery, this won’t be the last time, either,” he said. “Sooner or later, he’ll slip up.”

“That’s for sure. I’ll give Bobby a call when we get to the office. Maybe he’s heard something else since yesterday.” She glanced sideways at him. “It was too bad Superman had picked up his uniforms by the time we got back to your place,” she remarked, changing the subject with her usual speed. “I’ll bet you’d look good in one of his Suits.”

“Well, there’s nothing we can do about it now,” he said.

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe you could wear one on Halloween next year. Maybe he’d loan you one.”

“I don’t think I’d have the nerve to ask him,” Clark said. “He’d think I was weird.”

“I don’t think he would,” Lois said. “I’ll ask him, if you’re afraid to.”

Clark hoped devoutly that by next year she would have forgotten the whole thing. Now might be a good time to change the subject. He glanced out the side window, noting the presence of unemptied dumpsters along the sidewalk. They were in for several weeks of rapidly accumulating garbage along the thoroughfares of Metropolis, he knew. In spite of Lois’s expressed wish that the strike would be over soon, the chances were that it would take some time to settle. During the previous strike, Superman had simply carried his own debris to the city dump after dark. He didn’t generally produce much trash anyway, but the ordinary citizens of Metropolis were in for an annoying episode in the city’s daily drama. Speaking of which ...

“How come you didn’t get your car stolen?” he inquired idly.

“What?” Lois looked genuinely puzzled, and he realized that he’d confused his partner since she hadn’t been privy to his thoughts.

“Sorry; I was thinking about what you said yesterday,” he explained. “About how you got rid of your garbage during the strike last year. If you left your window rolled down, why do you still have your car?”

“Oh, that,” Lois said. “I told you I took Auto Mechanics. I just unscrewed one of the screws in the distributor enough to break the contact, put the cap back on and left it. If anybody tried to steal the car, it wouldn’t have started, and it would have taken too much time to figure out what was wrong to bother. Of course,” she added, “it wasn’t this car. It was the one I drove while I was in college, that I got for three hundred dollars from a second hand place. It finally died last year, and I didn’t need to get another one right away, so I saved up for a good down payment so I could afford to get the Jeep.”

“Oh.” That, he thought, was a little humiliating. Lois apparently knew more about the workings of car engines than he did. Maybe he should read up on them a little bit — or maybe he should just get Lois to teach him. It seemed that, in spite of the fact that he was Superman, his beautiful partner still had the ability to frequently leave him in the dust. He laughed suddenly.

“What?” Lois asked.

“Nothing important,” he said. “But you amaze me sometimes.”

“Naturally,” Lois said. “You just stick with me, partner, and you’ll learn a lot.”

He turned his head to look out the window again so she wouldn’t see the wide grin on his face. “I’ve never doubted that, Lois,” he said sincerely. “Not for a minute.”

THE END