

With a Source

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Rated PG-13

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Summary: This Ficathon 2011 story is set two weeks after Clark arrived in Metropolis and assumes that the newbie from Kansas was not immediately paired with the star reporter, Lois Lane. In fact, they had very little to do with each other, until...

Disclaimer — These characters are not mine.

Thanks to my wonderful BRs — Iolanthe and Lynn — and SQD, the GE for this story. Also thanks to Alisha for some great prompts.

Part 1

I stand before Clark Kent, offering him the single sheet on which I have just printed out the story that has the potential to turn his life upside-down.

He lifts his head. He considers me. He looks from my face to the sheet I am holding. His eyes dart back and forth, gleaned the significance in my words. “What’s this?” he asks.

“A bribe,” I reply.

He is taken aback by my forthrightness, but he recovers quickly. “What do you want from me?” he asks cautiously.

“I want you to be my partner.”

His eyebrows launch as if they’re fuelled by rockets. “You want *me* to be your partner?”

“Yes,” I say firmly, “I want you to be my partner.”

~~ The Previous Day ~~

“Lois!”

I know that tone. I turn around and face my Editor-In-Chief, Perry White. “What?” I say, using my years of experience to get the balance exactly right — not brassy enough to provoke his wrath; not submissive enough to shock him into a potential heart attack.

“I want Clark to walk you home.”

“Chief!” The expression on Perry’s face tells me that he does not intend to back down easily, but the greenhorn from Kansas is watching this play out, and if he has any ability to learn vicariously, I’m giving free lessons. Right here.

“Lois.”

There it is again. Perry’s warning that he is going to win this argument and the smart choice is to accept it without causing unnecessary conflict. Now, I’m smart, but the ability to back down easily has never been my strong point. “Chief, I’m the local,” I protest. “I know the area. I should be walking *him* home.” From the corner of my eye, I see Kent staring fixedly at his shoes, and I have to admit that I feel a tiny spark of enjoyment at his discomfiture.

“Lois,” Perry says. “Clark is going to walk you home.”

“I’m not scared of a few dumb teenagers who have banded together under puerile names and think that arming themselves with a couple of homemade weapons and taking pot-shots at each other is a rite of passage,” I claim. And it’s true. I’m not scared.

“It’s a lot more than that, Lois,” Perry says direly. “The Blood Squad —”

I make a loud and probably unladylike snort.

“Lois,” Perry says with patience that I can tell is wearing thin, “we have two rival gangs that are recruiting dozens of new members every day. They are threatening to riot. They are...”

I tune out. I know all this. *I* wrote the story.

“... the brother of the leader of the Deathblades was killed two nights ago, and they are hell-bent on revenge.”

“Exactly,” I say as snidely as I dare speak to Perry. “They are intent on killing *each other*. Not us. Not civilians.”

Perry picks up this morning’s edition and holds it up as if it’s a trophy he won. The headline practically lifts off the paper — ‘*Gang Warfare — Innocent Cabdriver Killed.*’

By Lois Lane.

Only Perry White would dare to use my own story against me.

“I didn’t get that story by skulking around and being walked home,” I say indignantly. “I got it because I ran in when everyone else was running out. I got it because the story was more important than obsessing over every possible whiff of danger. I got it because I’m the best damn reporter you have.” And I was better on my first day than that Kansas upstart will ever be, I add to myself.

“Henderson called,” Perry says. “He’s really worried. He said that if there is a hint of a confrontation tonight, the police are going to consider barricading part of the city.”

I stare incredulously at Perry. “Why didn’t you tell me that before?” I demand. “I could have put it in today’s follow-up story.”

“Because Henderson doesn’t want the city in panic. He doesn’t want people flocking to the known trouble areas, hoping for some action.”

“So, on one hand, he doesn’t want us worried, and on the other hand, he wants us prepared for teenage warlords rioting in the streets?” I say sarcastically.

Perry sighs. “It’s a difficult balance,” he says. “If Henderson suggests the possibility of clearing an area and nothing happens, people will ignore the warning next time.”

“So what is his plan?” I ask, already contemplating how I can use this information in tomorrow’s story.

“Remember the city riots four years ago?”

Of course, I remember. The Kerth for that story sits proudly in my display cabinet. “Yes.”

“The police put the city in lockdown — no one in, no one out. And sounded a siren warning everyone to stay inside their homes.”

“A lockdown is w-a-a-ay over the top,” I say. “This is nothing more than a bunch of teenagers who think that arcade games can be transferred to real life.”

Perry says nothing. Not verbally. But his face says that there was more to the phone conversation with Henderson than he’s willing to divulge.

“Has Henderson forgotten that we have Superman looking out for us now?” I say.

“When the cabdriver was shot, Superman was helping rescue people from the apartment building fire,” Perry reminds me. “He can’t be everywhere.”

Which is a pity. If his powers included the ability to be in two places at once, he could be in my apartment and out saving Metropolis all at the same time. I refuse to dwell on the disappointing fact that although I’ve left my window open every night since the first appearance of Superman nine days ago, he has never actually graced my apartment once. “I don’t think there will be any more problems,” I say — not because I know that, but because I *really* don’t want the Cub from Kansas walking me home. “They’re only kids trying to flex their muscles.”

“An innocent person was killed,” Perry reminds me needlessly. “Half of this city’s cabbies are refusing to work after dark. And the death of the leader’s brother has inflamed emotions close to boiling point.”

OK, I get that Henderson has my editor worried. But that does *not* mean I need to be shadowed by the very recent recruit. I figure that Perry could use a subtle reminder of how many times I

have bent the rules — just a little — and brought home an exclusive. “Anyway,” I say airily, “everyone knows that lockdowns don’t apply to emergency services.”

“We aren’t an emergency service,” Perry says dryly. “We’re a newspaper.”

“Getting the story *is* an emergency,” I insist. However, I can feel that most of the fight has gone from my words. If Perry White is so concerned that he’s willing to risk losing a story, he must be worried.

Really worried.

Which I suppose explains why he is insisting that the two-bit probationer accompany me home.

I sigh. I send Perry a look that ensures he understands that this is a one-off. I yank my coat from the back of my seat. I walk up the stairs.

At the top, I look down on the two men, and this time, my eyes pick out the bumbling bumpkin. “Didn’t you hear the Chief?” I inquire.

When something finally penetrates that torpid country mind, he can move quickly — I’ll give him that much. In a flash, he’s beside me, shooting me that ever-present grin that has probably reduced hundreds of women to quivering jello but will never work on me. I like a man with a lot more substance than the ability to smile prettily.

Like Superman, for instance.

With a toss of my head, I walk towards the elevator. As usual, I have a plan. Get home. Get rid of the novice. Get to where the action is. Get the story.

After fifteen minutes, we arrive at the door of my apartment. I marched every step of the way, head unwaveringly forward, mouth determinedly closed. The cadet followed, showing startling discernment in refraining from any attempt to engage me in small talk.

I reach into my bag for the keys and send him a cool look that could possibly pass for gratitude where he comes from. “See you tomorrow.”

“Will you be OK?” he asks.

I bite back a retort demanding to know how he thinks I managed to remain alive for all the years I’ve been doing this while he’s been... What has he been doing? Oh, that’s right — he’s been writing about the sex life of knob tail geckos. “Yes.”

He tries the smile again, and I have a bet with myself about how long he will continue to foster the delusion that it is going to be an effective method of dissolving my barriers.

He doesn’t move away.

I pause before inserting the key into the door and give him the look that I have refined to the point where it reduces grown men to spineless jellyfish. He doesn’t seem to understand. He just stares back at me. Clearly, he’s too dumb to realise that he isn’t in my league. He isn’t even in my feeder league. “I do know how to unlock my door,” I inform him.

“I know,” he says cordially. “But Mr White told me to see that you were safely home.”

Right. That must be how it’s done in Kansas.

I shove the key into the lock. I have more important things to do than think up disparaging comments to throw at someone who is so naive, he doesn’t even realise he’s being disparaged.

Finally, all three locks are done, and I push open the door.

“Goodnight, Lois,” he says pleasantly.

I grunt in response.

I step forward.

I grasp the door in preparation for shutting him out...

And the wail of the lockdown siren pierces my ears and shatters my carefully laid plans.

But it’s OK, I realise, quickly adapting to this turn of events. It’s OK because Mr Kansas has probably never heard a lockdown

siren before — I mean, who ever heard of rioting cows — so I can bluff my way through this, shrug him off, and get back on track towards procuring the front-page story for tomorrow’s edition.

I push the door shut but it rams against his foot. I stick my head out with a sigh. “What is it now?”

“There’s a siren.”

I sigh again. “It’s a Metropolis tradition,” I say wearily. “When the Metropolis Tigers win, they sound the siren. Just like...” I try to think of something cutesy-pie that he might understand. “Just like... church bells... for a wedding.”

“It’s the lockdown siren,” he says.

Now where did he learn that? “Then you should get home quickly,” I say in a tone of voice that would be just right if he were five years old.

Or had come from Kansas.

“You’ll stay here?” he asks.

Not a chance. “Yes,” I say sincerely, although some small part of me is actually interested in knowing whether he will believe something so implausible.

He turns away and begins hurrying towards the elevator.

As he does, I’m hit by a strangely disconcerting thought.

What if he is so green that he inadvertently wanders right into the middle of the fracas and ends up a corpse?

Perry told him to see me home. But, as we both knew, the fledgling city dweller was always far more likely to get into trouble than I was.

What should I do? If I call him back, I’m stuck with him.

Unless... a plan begins to take shape in my mind. I’ll get him back, give him something to keep him occupied, and slip out when he’s not looking. That way, I get the story, and I won’t have to face Perry’s ire tomorrow morning if he were to discover that Mr Clark Clodhopper put his cute Kansan butt in the middle of a teenage revolt.

“Clark?”

He stops as if he’s been shot already. He’s probably shocked that I know his name. I can’t remember if I’ve actually used it before.

He hurries back to me, his smile dimmed a little by a look of concern. “Yes, Lois?” he says.

“You shouldn’t go home,” I say. “Not with the city in lockdown.”

He stares at me as if he’s not quite sure how to process my words. Just so long as he doesn’t entertain any thoughts that I care about his safety, we’ll be all right. I don’t. I just don’t want a rampaging Perry on my case. Or a corpse on my conscience. Writing up the death of a colleague is a story to be avoided if at all possible.

I open the door all the way. “Come in,” I say.

He hesitates. “I can wait out here,” he offers. “The lockdown probably won’t last for long.”

I reassess his expression. Could he really be so meek that he’s willing to wait in the corridor?

No. It has to be something else.

Could he possibly be planning to scurry away as soon as I shut my door so that he can steal my story?

That prospect feels like a bucket of ice being tipped over my neat cache of assumptions. If that’s his plan, he has more newshound initiative than I’d thought possible. All he’s shown so far is a maudlin ability to write gushy nausea-inducing rambles. Like that *story* about the old lady stuck in the fifties and a theatre that was getting in the way of progress.

“You should come in,” I say, not caring that it sounds more like an order than an invitation.

Still, he hesitates, his face twisting with indecision.

What is *wrong* with this man?

“Come in,” I say, leaving no doubt that if he doesn’t comply,

he is going to get his first taste of a Mad Dog Lane tongue-lashing.

He finally shows a modicum of sense and walks into my apartment. “Nice place,” he says as he looks around.

“Have a seat,” I say, wondering what I can offer him that will distract him enough that I can slip out. And I might just deadlock the door behind me. His actions before were suspiciously reminiscent of someone who wanted to get away — someone who had a secret plan.

He doesn’t sit. He’s on edge. His hands are deep in the pockets of his over-sized trousers. His shoulders are taut and square.

Is it being alone with me that has made him so jumpy?

It couldn’t be. He’s a man. He has those squeaky-clean looks. He has that beguiling smile. He has a body that is probably loaded with muscle developed while hauling hogs, or sawing logs, or whatever else country people do. He’s had women.

So why the panicky act?

He *must* have planned to go after the story.

Alone!

He *must* have thought he would be able to see me safely to my apartment and then chase down the story and take it to Perry like a tail-wagging puppy.

I shoot him a look of pity. Could he really believe I am that easily fooled?

“Make yourself a drink,” I say as I gesture in the direction of the kitchen.

I walk languidly into my bedroom, deliberately leaving the door ajar so that I can keep an eye on the external door. If he so much as takes one step in that direction...

I can hear the noises of him making tea.

Perhaps he imagines he has a chance of trying to lure me into believing he’s as gauche as he appears. Perhaps he doesn’t realise that no one gets to be the top reporter at the greatest newspaper in the world by being easily duped.

The last man to think that...

Bile oozes into my mouth as memories of Claude pollute my thoughts.

He offered me his body and a whole passel of lies — and, in return, he stole my story and taught me a valuable lesson.

Perhaps now is the time to pass on what I learned.

After all, the newbie is male.

Which means it is most likely he can be encouraged to think with something other than his brain. I choose a blouse that has a low neckline and put it on, leaving the top button undone.

This is going to be easy, I realise. A few kisses, a little faked passion; he thinks he’s halfway home; I slip out the door, and shoot home the deadlock.

We both win. I get the story. He’s still alive tomorrow morning.

I walk out of my bedroom, allowing my hips to swing just a little more than is strictly necessary.

Clark looks up from the teapot. A teapot? Where did he find *that*?

As soon as I recover from the shock of seeing something as homespun as a teapot in my kitchen, I realise that I’m in trouble.

Not me, exactly. But my plan.

The Rustic Rookie keeps his eyes on my face as I approach. Not once do they drop lower. He gives me that smile. “How do you like your tea?” he asks.

“No milk, no sugar,” I say without thought. I won’t be drinking it.

He pours the dark tan coloured liquid into the two cups and hands me one.

I put it on the bench. “Clark?” I say, draping my tone in blatant invitation.

“Yes?” he replies with more innocence than you’d find in a

litter of kittens.

“I’m sure we can think of something more fun to do than drink tea while we wait for the lockdown to be lifted.”

The innocence fades, and I feel a burst of triumph. And, although I don’t want to admit it, I also feel a shaft of disappointment. He *is* just like the rest.

Which means he deserves what I’m about to deliver.

“No, thank you,” he says quietly. As if to emphasise his point, he moves away and sits on the sofa with his tea.

I reel. He — the peasant — has rejected me — the top city reporter. That is shocking in itself. But what really has me speechless is that he managed to do it politely. There was no condemnation in his tone — no superiority. I should be feeling miffed. I should be making it very clear that his chances of getting past first base were about the same as his chances of flying to the moon. I should be feeling like I want to tear strips of flesh from his sanctimonious face.

But he’s not looking sanctimonious. He’s sipping his tea, not meeting my eyes. I go to the fridge and take out the milk. Its rancid aroma assaults my nostrils, and my examination explains why. It has solidified.

I toss it into the trashcan. I’m annoyed. Annoyed at the milk. Annoyed at Clark Country Boy Kent. Annoyed that my city is in lockdown, and I’m not out there getting the story.

I’ve wasted enough time. While I’m here babysitting, another reporter from another paper is getting my story. I fasten the top button of my blouse, stride to the sofa, and purposefully sit down next to him.

“I have to go out,” I announce.

“The city is in lockdown.”

“I’m a reporter. I don’t get stories by cowering in my apartment.”

“You can’t go. Lockdown means everyone has to stay inside.”

“Rules are made to be broken.”

“Rules are made to keep you alive.”

“I’ve broken more rules than you’ve had hot suppers,” I say. “And, as you can see, I’m still alive.”

My phone rings suddenly. I leap from the sofa and pick it up. I huddle against the wall. If it is one of my sources, I don’t want Mr Greenjeans eavesdropping his way into my story.

It’s not a source. It’s Perry.

“Just checking that you got home safely,” he says, his words laced with anxiety.

“I did.”

“Where’s Clark?”

I want to lie. I’m not sure why, but I really don’t want to admit that he’s here, I’m here, and we’re alone in my apartment. “He’s here, too.”

Perry sighs with relief. “Ah, good. You are both to stay there until the lockdown is lifted.”

“Perry!” I grate. We’ve been through this about a million times. He wants the best stories. He wants me to stay where it’s safe. The two are not compatible.

They could be, my brain interjects. In a world where Superman is at your beck and call, they could be very compatible.

I push aside that delicious thought and reaffix my attention to Perry’s voice.

“This is serious, Lois,” he says. “The leader of the Deathblades has called Henderson, demanding that all cops are removed from the streets.”

I hear a noise behind me. I turn. Clark is at the door, his hand reaching for the third lock. “Kent!” I scream. “Don’t you even think about it!”

He spins around. His arm drops. He buries both hands in his pockets. He looks up at me with soulful eyes that make me want

to roll mine.

“Lois,” I hear in angry tones from the phone. “You’ve just perforated my eardrum.”

“Ah, sorry Perry,” I say, trying to sound apologetic while still looking daggers at the sneaky lowlife who was trying to slip out of my apartment to steal what every instinct is telling me is going to be a huge story.

“What did Kent do?”

“Huh?”

“What was Kent doing that -”

“Oh, that,” I say. I glare at the treacherous sneak, sending the unmistakable message that if he ever attempts to pull that stunt again, he’ll wish he *was* going home in a casket. “He tried to slink out to chase the story.”

I hear Perry sigh. It’s deep and laden with apprehension. “You have to stay where you are,” he says, sounding like a father and a boss and a cop all rolled into one. “Both of you.”

“OK, Chief,” I say. “I’ll make sure Kent understands the seriousness of the situation.” I send him another heavily loaded scowl that is meant to convey that if I wasn’t shackled with him, I could be out there doing my job.

“Henderson says he’ll call me as soon as it’s safe. When he calls me, I’ll call you, and you and Clark can get the story together.”

Me and Clark? “Perry, I work alone,” I say coldly. We’ve had this discussion before, too.

“Not this time, Lois,” Perry says. “This is too big for one reporter. I want you and Clark on it together.”

“Perry,” I hiss. “He’s been here a week. He knows nothing -”

“He’s been here two weeks,” Perry corrects. “And I want you working on the story together. It’ll be a good experience for him.”

“I’m a reporter,” I say bitterly. “Not a magician. I can’t take hayseed and transform it into the ability to write decent copy.” I can’t help but glance over to see if my arrow hit home. He’s staring ahead, his face so blank, I’m not even sure he heard.

“Lois,” Perry says wearily. “There’s safety in numbers.”

“Good,” I fire back. “Get me Superman. I’ll work with him.”

Perry sighs, and the realisation suddenly crashes through my brain that my editor has more on his mind than arguing with me. “Lois -”

“It’s OK, Perry,” I concede quickly. “I’ll do it. This once.”

“Thank you,” he says, obviously relieved. “And you’ll stay there until I call?”

“Yes,” I reply, already trying to concoct the excuse I’ll need later when I hand Perry the story, and he’s fluctuating between congratulating me and haranguing me. “Do you know if Superman has arrived?”

“No, he hasn’t,” Perry says. “When Henderson called, he asked if I knew how to contact him. Metropolis needs him. You’ve had more Superman stories than anyone, Lois. Do you have any ideas?”

If I had any ideas about attracting Superman’s attention, I wouldn’t have spent the last nine evenings standing forlornly at my open window. “No,” I say. “But he seems to know when we need him. I’m sure he will this time, too.”

“I hope so,” Perry says, and I can hear the desperation in his voice. “Because unless a miracle happens, this is going to be one of the darkest nights in our city’s history.”

And I’m stuck playing shepherd to Lambkin. “Bye, Chief,” I say.

“Bye, Lois,” he replies. “You stay right there.”

Instead of answering, I hang up the phone. I turn on Clark and storm towards him.

“What do you mean by trying to skulk out and get the story by yourself?” I scream. “Are you *trying* to get yourself killed? Do you think I want to waste my time writing a story about the

slaughter of the stupid country hick rather than the *real* story?”

He stares at the floor for a couple of beats, but when his head lifts, he faces me steadily. “I’m sure you’ve gone into places alone when chasing a story,” he says. “More than once.”

It is true. I have. And again, I want to give freedom to my razor-sharp tongue and slice him into little pieces. But again, I am stopped by his manner.

He has a way of standing up for himself without trampling on me.

It’s disconcerting.

I’ve never met anyone else who could do it. “That was Perry,” I say in a tone that sounds like I resent having to give him even that information. “He says we are to stay here.”

“Are you going to?”

Another idea swings into my mind. “Clark,” I say with more friendliness than I’ve ever shown him. “I am the Daily Planet’s top reporter. You are not. I need to go and get the story. You do not. As your senior, I’m asking you to stay here and answer the phone when Perry calls.”

“And tell him what?” he asks dubiously.

“Tell him I’m asleep in my bed.”

“No.”

“No?”

“No.”

My transient friendliness dissolves quicker than ice in a furnace. It’s just my luck that I get saddled with the greenest greenhorn to ever set foot in Metropolis. So green that he hasn’t even realised that a successful reporter has to take a few risks. “Why not?”

“I won’t lie to Mr White.”

My jaw drops. I can feel it floundering somewhere around my chest. “You won’t lie?” I say, hardly able to believe what I’m hearing.

“No,” he says calmly. “I won’t lie.”

“What *are* you?” I grate. “Which century did you come from? And how did you manage to convince Perry that you could write anything other than fairy tales?”

He waits impassively for my exasperation to run its course. “I won’t tell Mr White that you’re here if you’re not,” he states again.

I have had enough of this. My city is in lockdown. Two rival gangs are chomping at the bit to get at each other’s throats, and I’m debating ethics with a straight arrow.

I snatch my bag and stride to the door.

He gets there first. He can definitely move quickly when the mood strikes him. He backs against the door, blocking my way.

“Move,” I bark.

“Lois,” he says. “You can’t go.”

I have never liked being told that I can’t do something. I don’t listen to Henderson. I disobey Perry. There is no chance that I am going to be stopped by a youthful yokel masquerading as a reporter. “I have a black belt in Taekwondo,” I inform him frostily. “And I have no compunction about damaging any part of you in order to get my story.”

His expression doesn’t change. Either he’s so shocked he can’t respond, or he really believes that he could prevent me from dissecting him.

“I’m not fighting you, Lois,” he says quietly. “If you insist on leaving, you can. But I’m coming with you.”

“You’ll never keep up with me,” I boast.

His deadpan expression crumbles to a hint of that smile. “I think I’ll keep up,” he says.

There it is again. He’s quietly standing up to me — which only Perry ever does — but he’s doing it without trying to squish me under his foot.

It’s disturbing. So disturbing, I blurt out, “Why? Do you care about my safety?”

“Yes,” he says, not hesitating for a second. “Yes, Lois, I do care about your safety.”

He’s serious. I’m speechless. His brown eyes hold mine, and I can see the sincerity in them.

The phone shrieks again. I ignore it. I can’t seem to break away from his gaze.

I realise something. Something mind-boggling.

He’s not scared of me. He’s just *not*.

Is he stupid?

I can’t actually settle on any logical reasoning for his behaviour, but I manage to break away from the lure of his eyes and flounce to the phone, trying to cover how shaken I am by what I have just glimpsed of Clark Kent.

“Lane,” I snap into the phone.

“Lois.” It’s Perry again. “Are you watching the television?”

“No.”

“Turn it on.”

“Why?” As I ask, I gesture brusquely towards the television. Clark switches it on.

“The Deathblades have kidnapped...”

I tune out Perry’s voice as the television screen fills with Inspector Henderson.

He’s crying.

Henderson is crying.

I never, ever thought I would see the hardened Metropolis cop reduced to tears.

And not just tears, but uncontrollable weeping.

With a mighty effort, he gathers himself. He wipes his eyes. He looks into the camera. “Please,” he begs shakily. “The Deathblades have my daughter. They have Maddy. She’s only five years old. They say they will kill her at ten o’clock unless I take all the cops from the streets. If I do that, many people will die. If I don’t, m...my daughter will die.”

Part 2

My throat is parched. My eyes sting in a painful reminder that I need to blink. I look to Clark. His permanently hovering smile has gone. His face is ashen.

“... Deathblades have over three hundred members armed with guns, machetes, and knives.” Perry’s voice breaks into my mind via the phone. “They say they will accept nothing less than war. They know they will dominate. If the police leave the streets, there will be a massacre.”

My mind whirls. With fear for what might happen. With shock at seeing Henderson so distressed. With anger that my city is being held to ransom.

On the television screen, I see the large and familiar globe, and further apprehension squeezes my heart. “Perry?” I gulp. “Where are they?”

“The smaller gang, the Blood Squad, have taken over the ground floor of the Planet building,” Perry informs me quietly.

My eyes slide shut. “Wh...where are you?”

“In my office.”

“This could happen *below* you?”

“The elevator has been disabled.”

By the police? Or by the teenage gang? I decide not to ask. All of my latent affection for my editor rises into my throat and pushes tears into my eyes.

I couldn’t cope if Perry got hurt.

But a surge of hope emerges from the darkness of my fears. Superman.

The voice on the television echoes my thoughts, seizing my attention. Henderson is speaking into the camera. “Superman,” he says. “if you are listening, will you come? Please? Last week, you lifted a capsule into space. I know you can save my daughter. Please, Superman. Please come now.” Henderson glances nervously to his watch. “We only have twenty-two minutes.”

The television picture changes to a reporter at a news desk.

“Lois?” Perry says. His voice is shaky, and I don’t have to be told that he has just witnessed Henderson’s impassioned plea. “You’ve had more Superman stories than anyone else. You’ve talked to him. He flew you to the Daily Planet. Are you sure you don’t know how we can contact him?”

“I’m sure,” I say disconsolately. I asked him. I asked Superman how I could contact him. His only reply was that he would be around. “But I’ll go and look for him.”

“No!” Perry screeches. “No, Lois. You are to stay there.”

“But we need Superman, and I —”

“No, Lois. The Deathblades have other hostages. Maddy Henderson has become the face of their demands, but they have others as well.”

“No one will see me, Chief,” I say. “I can —”

“Linda King snuck through the police guard and tried to speak with the leader of the Deathblades,” Perry says. “Shots were fired, she scurried away, and two minutes later, the dead body of one of the hostages was thrown out of the door.”

I feel sick. I’m not sure if it’s because of the unpalatable realisation that this time, I am going to have to bow to circumstances, or if it’s because I know that it could have been me instead of Linda King.

If Kent hadn’t stopped me...

I won’t even think about that. I won’t.

“We need Superman,” Perry continues, his voice bleak and raw. “He is our only chance.”

He’s right.

And every impulse is to go and look for him.

But I’m still shaken by the image of Henderson’s distress. And I remember the murdered hostage. And that Perry is — literally — sitting on top of it. “I’ll stay here, Chief,” I say, meaning it this time.

“Thank you.” I hear his relief; he believes me. “Bye, Lois.”

I hang up the phone and take three quick steps to my window. I throw it open and lean out.

“Lois,” I hear from behind me. “What are you doing?”

I don’t bother answering him. I lean out further. “Superman!” I scream. “Superman! Help! Superman! Help!”

I have no more breath. I wait. I listen to the eerie silence of a city in lockdown.

There is no sound. No swish of his cape. No whirl of moving air.

Nothing.

We need Superman.

I take a deep breath in preparation. “Supermannnnnn!” My cry echoes through the stillness. “Hellllllppppppp!”

I feel a presence behind me and turn to find Clark there.

“Do you have any better ideas?” I growl before he has a chance to comment on how ridiculous it is to lean through an open window and scream over a hushed city for a superhero that could — quite possibly — be several continents away.

I push past Clark and slump onto the sofa. He follows me. He sits down. He gets *that* right, too. Far enough away that I don’t feel suffocated. Close enough that we can converse without having to shout.

“He’ll come,” I mutter. “He’ll come. I know he’ll come.”

“How can you be sure?”

My brain loads a cutting comeback, but my mouth is stopped from firing it when I see the tangible trepidation in Clark’s face.

In a strange way, I’m relieved. I don’t feel like arguing right now. I can’t push away the memory of Henderson’s torment. It’s haunting Clark, too. I can see it in his expression.

He has been in Metropolis for a mere two weeks, but already, he can empathise with our pain. He has possibly met Henderson once... maybe twice... but he understands the asphyxiating fear when a loved one is being threatened.

The television is still on, although I realise now that Clark

must have turned down the volume — probably when I was at the window screaming out my lungs. A photograph fills the screen — a picture of a little girl with curly blonde hair and angelic blue eyes.

She must be Henderson's daughter, and my astonishment that a crusty police inspector could have such an elfin daughter is overshadowed by a streak of intense pain at what he and his wife must be suffering right now.

To know that a violent and crazed killer is holding someone you love. Someone small and sweet and defenceless. I leap from the sofa and return to the window. I cup my hands around my mouth, and I scream.

"Superman! Superman! Help! We need you! Help!"

Clark's hand rests on my shoulder. "Lois?" he says.

"What?" I swivel with such ferocity that his hand lurches away.

He adjusts his glasses with fingers that fumble slightly. "Do you think they mean it?" he asks anxiously. "Do you think they will really kill the little girl if Henderson doesn't take the police from the streets?"

"They've already killed one hostage," I say. "This is a nightmare for Henderson. I know he feels responsible for the safety of the people of Metropolis."

"And he must love his daughter very much."

"He is facing an impossible choice." I can't imagine what I would do if the decision were mine. To have to go home with his wife, knowing their daughter will never return. Or to have to face a slaughter on our streets.

Clark's hand rises, and he returns it cautiously to my shoulder. I expect to hate him being there. I expect to shrug him off. But I don't. There is something about the look on his face. Something about his touch that brings comfort.

"What are we going to do?" I ask.

He looks at his watch, and the resulting movement of his hand feels like an embrace on my shoulder. "Seventeen minutes," he says.

"Superman will come," I say.

"You know Metropolis well," Clark says. He turns, breaking our contact. He steps away, his hands thrust deep into his pockets. "What will happen if he doesn't come?" he says as he spins to face me. "What would happen if there were no Superman?"

I have to think back. It is only nine days since I met Superman on the space shuttle but since then, my world has been completely overwhelmed by the phenomenon of a man exuding such superness. "I don't know," I reply quietly. "Without Superman, we have no hope."

I wrench myself from the turmoil of my thoughts enough to realise that Clark is genuinely distressed. For the first time, I feel a small tug of affection for him. He's a tenderfoot, obviously, but I realise that he's a tenderheart as well, and this is his first experience of the harsh reality of big city life.

I give him a wan smile. "Don't worry," I say. "Superman will come. I know he will come."

"How can you know that?"

I'm not sure how to reply. I certainly don't want to admit to Clark that I've spent a lot of time thinking about Superman. But I have. He has barely left my thoughts since he took me into his arms and flew me back to the Daily Planet, making the grandest of entrances by smoothly gliding through the high windows and lowering us both to the floor. "He will come," I repeat. "He will know that we need him."

Clark doesn't look convinced. If anything, he looks more perturbed. "Even if he does come," he says, "do you think he could do anything? There are three hundred of them."

"Of course he could do something," I say. "Superman can handle any situation. As soon as he knows that Henderson's daughter is in danger, he will be here. And as soon as he's here, it

will be all over. Those gangs don't stand a chance against a real hero."

"What do you think he would do?"

"I think he'd fly in, melt their weapons with his heat vision, and take back the little girl."

"What about the other hostages?"

I consider that for a moment. "I think he'd tie up all the members of the Deathblades. Probably in one big huddle."

"With what?"

"Rope. Cable. Video tape. The melted, strung-out metal from their guns. Anything he can find. He's very resourceful."

"All three hundred of them?"

I nod. "Superman can do anything," I say confidently.

"How can you be so sure about him?" Clark asks. "No one had even heard of him two weeks ago."

That's true, but since then, I have dwelt endlessly on the plethora of awesome attributes pertaining to the man in blue tights. "He'll come," I say. "I trust Superman. I know he won't let us down."

Clark says nothing but appears to be thinking through what I said.

"Have you ever seen him?" I ask. I try to recall something that Clark has written. I remember the theatre story for its mawkishness, but other than that, my mind is blank.

Well, not blank exactly — just filled with Superman. I didn't have the time or the inclination to notice the stories of the Planet's newest reporter.

"I... ah... yeah, I've seen him," Clark says.

A tiny spark of memory shoots through my Superman-doused brain. "You got the story when he saved the toddler who'd slipped down the stormwater drain," I say.

Clark nods, looking self-conscious that I remembered.

It was only a small story. It was the same day as my front-page story about Superman righting a derailed train full of passengers.

"He's the most wonderful man," I say dreamily.

"Lois?"

"He's so quietly capable, and so humble, and so heroic," I murmur.

"Lois?"

I reluctantly extract my thoughts from the splendour of Superman. "Uhhh?"

"I need to go."

"Go where?"

"I need to leave," Clark says with quiet resolve. "I need to go now."

"Why?"

"I... I have something I need to do."

I stare at him for a moment. Surely this can't be another attempt to get onto the streets and procure the exclusive. "Well, you can't leave," I say dismissively. I shoot a nervous glance to the clock. There's less than fifteen minutes now. The television network is still filling airtime with their endless speculation.

Which means Superman hasn't arrived yet.

"I *have* to go," Clark insists.

"You can't," I repeat. "Perry said that when the Deathblade leader saw Linda King approaching, he retaliated by shooting one of the hostages."

Clark starts pacing. "I need to go," he says.

Sudden comprehension shines a light into my brain. "The bathroom's there," I say, pointing to the door.

He stares at me as if I'm suddenly speaking Spanish. Maybe it's that country delicacy coming out.

"You don't have to be embarrassed, Clark," I say. "Just go, use the bathroom. It's no big deal."

"No," he says. "Not there. I have to go... leave... here."

"Why?"

He looks nervous. Distraught. Torn. He starts pacing again. I stare at him. What is going on now?

“Clark!” I exclaim sharply. His bizarre behaviour is doing nothing for the rising tension stabbing at my neck.

He stops. He looks at me despairingly. He turns and walks to the door out of my apartment. “I have to go,” he says firmly.

I spring forward and pounce on him, grabbing his arm. I pull him around so that he has to face me. “Are you trying to get out of here so you can get the story?” I bark.

“No.”

“Then why?” I demand. “Tell me why it is so important that you go.”

“I have to leave,” he says.

“Tell me why,” I insist.

Trepidation daubs his face as he hauls in a humungous breath. “If I don’t go, the little girl will die.”

I feel my jaw plummet. “What are *you* going to do?” I shriek. “You’re a smalltime reporter from a smalltime town in a smalltime state who has been in Metropolis for ten minutes. What makes you think you could make any difference at all?”

“I -”

“The only thing you’ll achieve is getting a bullet hole in that stupid head of yours.”

“I -”

“You can’t go, Clark,” I say in a tone that finishes the matter. “I won’t let you.”

“You... you don’t understand.”

He’s got that right. I don’t understand why Mr Rules-Are-Made-To-Keep-You-Alive is suddenly so doggedly determined to defy the lockdown. And I certainly don’t understand why I care in the least about what will happen if he does. “Enlighten me,” I say.

He looks at his shoes, and I can see that he’s deliberating his next words. Whatever it is, it is important to him. I cannot imagine what a hack from Kansas could possibly do that could be useful during a siege in Metropolis.

He decides. He is going to tell me. I can see it in his face.

“I... I know how to contact Superman,” he says.

“How could *you* know how to contact Superman?” I mock.

“I can’t tell you.”

I exhale a loud hoot of derision.

Clark sweeps his hand towards the television. “You said Superman would come,” he says as if this is my fault. “He isn’t here yet, and we only have ten minutes until the deadline.”

“He’ll come.”

“I need to go.”

“How do you know Superman?” I ask scornfully. “He just happened to fly by your apartment one day and give you his number? You met him at a hoedown in Kansas?”

Clark doesn’t flinch. “Lois,” he says, “I have to go.”

“Why do you need to leave?” I ask. I dash to the phone. I pick it up and thrust it towards him. “Call Superman from here.”

He gives me a look that is a sanitised version of the looks I give juniors when they make asinine suggestions. I slam down the phone and rush back to him before he can escape. When I reach him, our eyes meet. I expect him to look away. He doesn’t.

With a tidal wave of shock, I realise that Clark truly believes he can contact Superman. “I’ll come with you,” I say.

“No!”

“Then tell me!” I demand, desperately clenching a fistful of his jacket. “Tell me how you -”

“I can’t,” he says.

“Garbage,” I snort. “Of course you can tell me.”

“I won’t tell you,” he says calmly. “I gave my word. I won’t break it.”

My objections to such a fatuous declaration hurtle around my brain, demanding release — we work for the same paper, I’m his

senior, he couldn’t possibly believe that he could handle any Superman story without me, any source he has should be mine, too, just because.

But I say nothing. I say nothing because I already know that nothing I say will change Clark’s mind.

When he gives his word, nothing will induce him to break it.

It’s archaic.

It’s simplistic.

It’s absurd.

It’s untenable in the real world.

But — as I realise with bucket loads of frustration and a tinge of grudging respect — it’s Clark Kent.

“I have to go,” he says with quiet yet steely conviction.

I don’t believe him. I don’t believe that he knows how to contact Superman. How could he? But I can’t dislodge the image of Henderson’s daughter from my mind, and if there’s the tiniest chance that this could somehow save her life...

“Go!” I screech. “Get out of here!”

“Stay here,” Clark says. “Please stay here until it’s safe.” In a flash, he’s gone. I lock my door again and drift back to the sofa. I turn up the volume on the television and watch the agonising countdown, which is now poised at seven minutes.

I entwine my fingers, clenching them. My stomach feels like a twisted mass of tangled wire. Will Superman come before it’s too late?

Is Clark’s unlikely claim that he can contact Superman just a ruse to get the story? Is it going to end in death? Should I have stopped him from going?

I don’t have any answers. But I’m worried. And far too much of that worry centres on the unassuming Boy Scout from Kansas.

I groan. He is going to be pulverised. I should not have let him —

Suddenly, the television screen lights up with a familiar, breath-takingly handsome figure. He’s carrying a small blonde-haired girl. He slowly descends, and Henderson and his wife rush out from the shadows. Two little arms stretch towards them, and I watch transfixed as my hero reunites a family.

The camera zooms in, and I can see Henderson’s face as he clutches his wife and daughter. He looks to Superman, his tear-drenched eyes filled with burning gratitude. His mouth moves, trying to form stumbling thanks. Superman gently ruffles Maddy’s hair and walks away, out of screen.

Unwelcome tears bud in my eyes. I brush them away as I leap from the sofa and pick up my bag. I have a story to write.

I run down the corridor and into the elevator.

I’m sure it is mere coincidence that Superman arrived just minutes after Clark left to *contact* him. It has to be.

It has to be.

Because the alternative is too big and too awful to contemplate.

If Clark Kent really does have the means to contact Superman, my position as Metropolis’ greatest reporter is facing its biggest threat.

If Clark knows Superman, he has the inside running on every single Superman story.

If Clark knows Superman, he will take up permanent residence on the front page with must-read stories of rescues and heroics.

If Clark knows Superman, he’s a shoo-in for the much-coveted first-ever one-on-one interview with the caped sensation.

The interview that I have already promised myself will be mine.

Clark *can* know Superman. He can’t. It isn’t possible.

The elevator stops. The doors open. I rush forward into the dark night.

As expected, there are no cabs, but I know a few short cuts, and I’m the first reporter on site. I see Superman talking with a

group of police officers and hurry over. I stand close enough to hear and quickly jot down notes. The conversation is erratic and adrenalin-fuelled. It gives me information but nothing quotable. When the little group breaks up, I'm ready — more than ready, actually — and I spring on my hero before he can walk away.

"Lois Lane, Daily Planet," I say rather breathlessly.

He turns in my direction. "Ms Lane," he says with that deep and slightly aloof tone that should be used as the definitive description of 'sexy'.

"Can I ask you some questions?" I say, trying not to sound like an air-headed teenager with a debilitating crush.

I know the answer from his expression, and my hopes crash. "I'm sorry," he says regretfully. "I have to go."

I nod, try to smile, and watch him fly away.

With difficulty, I pull my eyes from the disappearing blue dot, wishing things could be different. Wishing I knew how to contact him. Wishing I was his friend. His trusted confidante. If he trusted me to share his secrets... who he *really* is... I would never expose him in a story.

With a sigh, I look around for Henderson. With all due respect to the cop, he's a poor second. And I don't do the heart-strings stuff well.

Which reminds me... Where *is* Clark?

I have the story. I've talked with every available significant player in what came perilously close to being a night of tragedy.

My cell phone rings as I make my way towards the Daily Planet. It's Perry. "Lois," he says. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," I reply. "I'm coming back to the office now."

"No," he says. "Don't do that. It's pandemonium here. When the Blood Squad heard that Superman had taken out the Deathblades, they wanted to finish the job. Thankfully, Superman arrived before they did any damage, but I doubt the police will let anyone into or out of the building just yet."

I'm too eager to write my story to care about where I write it. "I'll go home and email you."

"Go to Clark's apartment."

"Clark's?"

"Yeah. I told you to work together."

"Clark left me," I say. "I don't know where he went." I don't feel any compulsion to cover his back. He tried to steal my story — and he did it with the most improbable lie imaginable — and then he went missing when the time came to do the real work.

"Clark's at home already."

He ran away? Because he was scared? Or did he figure that working with me meant he could hang off my coattails? "He's gone home?" I say.

"Yeah," Perry replies. "He called in, and I told him to go home to write his story."

His story? He wasn't there. *I* was there. I got the story. And I don't want to share it *with* anyone. Certainly not with an insubordinate hick who lied to me and then pulled a disappearing act.

I try once more. "Perry," I say, "I think it would be better if I work alone on this one."

"I want you working with Clark," he says. I hear that tone. Again.

I don't have the time to argue, so I bark out a demand for directions to Clark's apartment.

I've never had a partner.

I don't want one now.

And if I ever did, it certainly wouldn't be Clark Kent.

Part 3

Clark answers my impatient rap on his door. "Hi, Lois," he says cheerily. "Have you spoken to Mr White?"

"Yeah," I say with a level of distaste that not even Clark could miss. "He sent me here. He's still insisting that we write

this story together."

Clark plies me with that dashing smile. I ignore it. I'm a reporter. I'm here — under duress — to write my story.

He leads me down a short flight of stairs and to a computer. The screen is filled with a mishmash of words. He gestures for me to sit on the only chair.

I do.

"Would you like something to eat?" he asks.

I would. I'm hungry. But although Clark appears to have conveniently forgotten that he ran out on me, I haven't. This is not going to be anything more than two colleagues forced to work together by a misguided editor. "No," I say haughtily. "Perry needs this story for the morning edition." I take out my notes and open up a new document on the computer.

"You don't want to read what I've written so far?" Clark asks.

"No."

"OK."

He brings a chair from another room. I don't move aside. I figure now is a good time for him to learn that I'm writing the story, and the most he can hope for is that he'll learn something that might hasten his progress as a reporter.

I skim through my notes, think for a moment, and decide on an opening sentence. My fingers fly over the keys.

"Nice start," Clark says.

I don't respond.

I continue tapping at the keys, and my story flows easily. After a few minutes, I forget Clark is there. Forget where I am. Forget everything except the story pouring from my fingers and onto the screen.

I finish.

I know it's good.

I can't help glancing to Clark. I admit it — I want him to be impressed.

He's looking quizzical.

"What?" I snap.

"Did..." He looks away, seeming unsure. "Did you talk to Superman?"

"Briefly."

"You..." He gestures to the screen. "You didn't include any quotes from him."

"The story doesn't need quotes from him."

"I think a few quotes would set it off perfectly," Clark says.

It's true. But what is also true — and something that seems to have escaped Clark's notice in his slipshod approach to being a reporter — is that I don't have any Superman quotes. "It's perfect the way it is," I declare.

He reaches over to the mouse and switches to his document. "I have quotes," he mentions casually.

"From whom?"

"Superman."

My head snaps towards him. "You talked with Superman?" I yelp.

Clark nods as if talking with Superman is as humdrum as eating breakfast. He gestures to the screen. "It's all there."

I can think of about a thousand things I would rather do than wade through the ham-fisted, incoherent folderol of a beginning writer.

But in this case, I have no choice.

With an embittered sigh, I turn back to the screen and read his copy.

Two paragraphs in, realisation hits me like the slap of a cold fish against my cheek.

It's good. Not Lois Lane good. But good. Logical. Readable. Detailed. Smooth.

And he has sprinkled quotes from Superman throughout his story with a deft hand. Proficiently placed. Skilfully selected.

I reach the end of the story but keep staring at the screen as I try to come to terms with the unsettling revelation that Mr Greenhorn-Softheart-Newcomer-From-Nowhere can actually write.

I turn on him like spitfire. “How did you get these quotes?” I demand.

“Superman said it. I wrote it down.”

I can see the glint of amusement in his eyes, and it fires my resolve to affirm my position as the undisputed premier reporter — not only on this story but also in the entire state of New Troy. “You said you could contact him,” I say. “You didn’t say you had exclusive rights to every word he utters.”

“I don’t.”

“I don’t believe you,” I proclaim boldly.

Clark’s eyebrows lift, but his smile doesn’t fade completely. “Don’t believe what?” he asks serenely.

He’s enjoying this. He doesn’t appear threatened in the slightest by my antagonism. “I don’t believe that you can contact Superman,” I throw at him.

He shrugs, lifting those broad shoulders. “OK.” He looks back to the screen. “I understand if you want to keep our stories separate,” he says.

Of course he does — *he* has the quotes. I did all of the work and just because he was lucky enough to catch Superman when he had a few spare moments, my story is in danger of slipping to the second page.

I seethe at the injustice.

But I didn’t get to be the top reporter in Metropolis without a few tricks up my sleeve. “Get him,” I command.

Clark turns from the screen to look at me. “Get Superman?” he says.

“Yes,” I say. “You said you can contact him. Prove it.”

“Lois,” he sighs. “He’s probably busy saving someone.”

“Ah!” I flare. “So now you’re not only saying that you can contact him, you’re saying that you know what he’s doing at any given moment?”

“Perhaps Superman has more important things to do than fly here on my whim.”

His whim? Actually, it’s me that really wants Superman here. “Shouldn’t you give him the opportunity to check the quotes before you submit the story?”

“You think I got the quotes wrong?”

“I’m sure anything goes in Kansas.”

“I’m sure you’ve never worked in Kansas,” Clark says mildly. “So you wouldn’t know.”

“I can imagine,” I mutter, but my fire has gone. He has done it again. He hasn’t let me walk all over him. But he hasn’t allowed it to get personal. Not on his side, anyway.

Clark stands from his seat. “Do you like Chinese takeout?” he says.

“We’re working,” I reply.

“Are you hungry?”

“No.”

“I am,” he says. “I’ll just be a minute.” He climbs the stairs with easy steps.

“Where are you going?” I demand sharply.

“To get some takeout,” he replies, ignoring my tone.

“We are *supposed* to be writing a story.”

“My story is finished.” He stops, one foot on a higher step than the other — which tightens his pants down the length of his thigh. “Any requests?” he asks nonchalantly.

I peel my eyes from Clark’s leg. “Yes,” I say, figuring that I’m owed a little fun and knowing just how to get it. “I’d like pork dumplings.”

“OK.” Clark climbs the rest of the stairs and reaches the door.

“With sauce?”

“What type?”

“Sweet and sour,” I reply, knowing that he’ll never comprehend that it describes perfectly my feelings towards his unflinching niceness.

“I won’t be long,” he says as he opens the door.

“From Beijing.”

His shoulders drop, and he shoots me a wry look. “Lois,” he says. “We’re in Metropolis.”

“You know Superman,” I remind him casually.

With a sigh, he opens the door and leaves.

I smile.

I’m sure now. The whole charade about knowing Superman was nothing more than a ruse to get out of my apartment and get to the story first. I turn back to the computer screen, and I skim over his copy.

It is good. I have to admit that it worked. By sneaking out on me, Clark got to the scene first. He got the interview with Superman. He got the quotes.

With a sigh, I make both documents half-screen and begin the objectionable task of incorporating the two stories.

I don’t like it, but I’m realistic enough to know that although my story is more polished, Clark’s might just tip mine off the front page because he has quotes. Because he outplayed me with an absurd fabrication, and I fell for it.

A noise sounds near the window, and my head jolts around. My mouth drops. On the balcony, I can see the familiar figure in blue tights and a red cape. “Superman?” I croak with arrant disbelief.

He comes through the glass door and looks in my direction.

“Ms Lane,” he says. He puts two boxes of takeout — bearing Chinese writing — on the counter. “Goodnight.”

“Wait!”

He aborts his takeoff and waits for me to rush over to him. I stop. I stare into his handsome face and palpitate at the nearness of his chiselled body. I can think of nothing to say. And even if I could think of the most sophisticated comment, I don’t have the breath to deliver it.

“Have a nice evening,” he says pleasantly.

“Wait,” I repeat. “You... you were magnificent tonight. You saved dozens of lives.”

“Thank you.”

“Did Clark interview you?”

“He said you were working together.”

“Would you like to check the quotes? For our story? I... I would hate to misrepresent you.”

Superman crosses to the computer, his cape swinging majestically. He clasps the mouse, and Clark’s story whirs up the screen at lightning pace.

Superman straightens. “All perfect,” he says. “Goodnight, Ms Lane.”

“Would you care -”

There’s a blur of colour, my hair is blown back, and he’s gone.

“... to join us?”

I could almost believe that I imagined the entire encounter. Except the boxes are still here — and the air is rapidly filling with delicious aromas.

“Goodnight, Superman,” I whisper in awe.

The other door opens, and Clark enters, holding two coffees. His eyes jump to the counter. “I see Superman beat me,” he says.

In every way possible, I think. But I don’t say it.

Clark crosses to the minimalistic kitchen and gathers up everything we will need. “You eat first,” he says as he hands me a plate. “I’ll type.”

“It’s *my* story,” I say, disregarding the fact that I have already decided to use his quotes.

“You tell me what to type,” he says easily.

I have to force myself to concentrate. The story of a little girl

kidnapped, of a policeman-father blackmailed, of two rival gangs wanting war... it's no longer the story foremost in my mind.

There's a bigger story tonight.

Clark Kent knows Superman.

I absently open one box and inhale appreciatively. I take out a pork dumpling and dip it into the sweet and sour sauce. I chew slowly as I think, putting off the moment when I have to admit to Clark that I'm willing to combine our stories.

Clark focuses his attention on the screen where our two stories sit, side by side.

Part of this game is knowing when to give a little. Not much, just a little.

Knowing when to accept that life has thrown you a curveball.

I'm good. I can beat anyone in a fair playing field.

But this isn't fair.

Clark can contact Superman.

"Superman Saves Metropolis," I say. "By Lois Lane and Clark Kent."

Clark types. He doesn't comment on the by-line. He highlights a quote from his story. "Perhaps this would fit at the end of your third paragraph," he suggests.

I nod and watch as he copies it to my document.

I've never worked with anyone.

But the advent of Superman has changed everything.

Half an hour later, the story — *our* story, the culmination of the combined efforts of Lane and Kent — is finished and sent to Perry.

The takeout is almost gone. We're finishing our cups of coffee, and I have the time to mull over the revelation that will still be affecting my life long after the events of tonight have blurred into the pages of history.

Clark knows Superman.

Clark can send Superman on an errand to get Chinese takeout.

Clark is not going to reveal anything about Superman. He isn't going to spill how he can summon Superman. He probably isn't even going to tell me how he knows the superhero.

I wouldn't tell either. If I were the only reporter who knew how to contact Superman, I wouldn't tell a living soul. And not only for professional reasons. Imagine having a secret. Just Superman and me. Imagine being able to invite him around. For supper. Or a quiet evening. Alone, together.

Imagine if one day, it's not a hick from Kansas I'm sharing takeout with but Superman.

Clark Kent has the greatest source ever, and it's watertight — packed away and protected by his countrified values and irrational obsession with doing the honourable thing.

But that doesn't mean I can't try.

"You don't trust me," I say, doing a pretty good job of making it sound like an accusation when the truth is that trusting me with this particular secret would rank as one of the stupidest moves in the history of the newspaper business.

I expect him to ignore me. Or to pretend he doesn't know I'm referring to Superman. Or to ridicule me for even thinking that he would ever trust me. He doesn't do any of those. He slowly sips from his coffee, and I know he is formulating a reply. "Lois..." he says. "This has to be handled really carefully."

"Or?"

"Or else Superman won't have a life."

"Does he have a life?" I ask quickly. "What does he do when he's not being Superman?"

"Lois, I can't tell you anything," Clark says.

"How do you know him? How long have you known him? Where did you meet him?"

Clark stares at me. He's not rude enough to brush me off. He's not unscrupulous enough to lie. He's not fickle enough to reveal what he knows about Superman.

"The story about the kid falling down the drain?" I speculate.

Clark says nothing.

"The story I missed because I was covering the derailed train that threatened hundreds of lives?" I had intended my question to make it clear that my story — involving the rescue of hundreds — was more important than Clark's story — involving one.

Except, I know Superman wouldn't see it that way.

"Superman could easily miss something if he didn't have a way for someone to alert him," I muse.

Clark still says nothing.

"Why you?" I ask. To my surprise, there is curiosity in my tone, not disrespect.

"I'm sorry, Lois," Clark says. "I won't say anything."

I stand abruptly and pick up my bag. I stomp up the stairs towards the door.

Clark follows me and gets past me in time to open the door.

"Would you like me to walk you home?" he says.

I pass him without even looking in his direction.

I hear him chuckle softly. "Goodnight, Lois," he says.

I stride away, knowing he's watching me.

An uncomfortable awareness settles in my gut.

I can wrangle most things out of most people.

But Clark Kent will never tell me what he knows about Superman.

He won't.

He just won't.

He has the greatest source ever. And I want it.

If I can't have it exclusively — this time, I'll make an exception.

This time, I'm willing to share.

~ The Next Morning ~

As I walk to the Daily Planet, my story cries out from every newsstand.

OK, *our* story.

Perry's reaction to it was effusively positive. When he called me late last night, he didn't miss any opportunities to drive home how his unconventional pairing had resulted in an impressive front-page story.

A story that seamlessly melded my experience with Kent's freshness.

My determination with his tact.

My impetuosity with his steadfastness.

My passion with his patience.

My brain with his heart.

Which suits my plan perfectly.

I'm not looking forward to it, but I have no choice.

I haven't got to where I am by balking at the hard decisions.

And make no mistake; this one was hard.

I know what I'm signing up for.

That smile. That unwavering civility. That country chivalry. That antiquated integrity. That aversion to bending the rules.

I shake my head, barely able to believe what I am about to do.

He'll want to curb my penchant for risk-taking. He'll try to protect me.

He'll probably even open doors for me and help me into my coat.

I enter the elevator and two minutes later, I'm standing in front of Clark's desk, offering him my deal.

If he becomes my partner, I won't spill what I know about his 'super-source'.

Clark takes the sheet from me, and I watch his face closely as he reads my words.

"You want *me* to be your partner?" he asks.

"Yes," I say firmly. "I want you to be my partner."

Clark reads my story again. He's smart enough to realise the

implications. If it becomes public knowledge that Clark Kent can contact our greatest hero, Clark will never be left alone. People will call him, write him, hound him — all pressuring him to be a bridge between Superman and a clamouring world.

His eyes lift to crash softly into mine. “Are you threatening to print this?” he asks.

I don’t answer him verbally. Of course, I’m *threatening* to print it. But I won’t because it would disadvantage both me and my newspaper.

But this way, Clark can’t help but discern my true motivation.

No one else will know — not even Perry — but if I’m going to survive a partnership with Clark Kent, he has to know that it’s not *him* I want.

He has to understand that I’m top banana.

“Sometimes I’ll need to go where you can’t follow,” he warns quietly.

I know what he’s telling me. Our partnership is not going to extend to me knowing how he can alert Superman that we need him.

On the outside, I nod my solemn agreement. On the inside, I figure that a country boy isn’t going to be any match for the best investigative reporter in Metropolis.

Clark extends his right hand in my direction. “OK,” he says. “Partner.”

I take his hand.

And for the first time in my life, I have a partner.

With a source.

THE END

Alisha Knight’s requests...

Three things I want in my story:

(1) A revelation (it doesn’t have to be *that* one, but it can be, it’s up to you and your muse)

(2) Lois and Clark trapped somewhere together, just the two of them, for a significant period of time

(3) A deadline.

Three things I don’t want in my story:

(1) Lots of WAFF, fluff and all that sweet, sickly stuff.

(2) Too much focus on other characters, including Superman (other people can be mentioned, and briefly included if needed for the plot, but I want this to be about Lois & Clark, not Superman or anyone else.)

(3) Time travel

Preferred Season: Series 1 or 2, but before they start dating.