

# Only in My Dreams

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Rated PG-13

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Summary: Lois has finally realized that she is in love with her partner — Clark Kent. Unfortunately, he is giving her the cold shoulder, and Lois has not the slightest idea why. Could Mayson be the one who is responsible for his strange behavior? Maybe going undercover as a married couple to test a hotel will help our favorite couple to resolve their problems.

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Only in my dreams...

*"Lois?" His voice was gentle and affectionate. My heart skipped a beat and then suddenly started pounding madly in my chest. I raised my head. Clark's lips twitched into a smile, basking the newsroom in light like a sunbeam in dark woods. "Coffee?" He asked softly, holding out a cup for me.*

*With a sigh I pushed the files on my desk aside. An aromatic scent emanated from the cup he offered me. Graciously I took it. The taste was even better than the smell. Clark cautiously took a sip of his own coffee and sat down on the edge of my desk. Fascinated I watched the play of his muscles underneath his shirt; I saw the strength in his movements. He slowly leaned towards me and reached out to wipe milk foam from my lips that I had not even noticed. Clark's touch was intense though. A tingling sensation spread through my face as his hand gently cupped my cheek.*

*"I would like to invite you to dinner," Clark murmured, his voice sounding deeper than usual. He looked at me in silent admiration. His breathing became faster. With the hand that had just touched me, he started fumbling restlessly with his tie as if he could barely keep himself from touching me again.*

*"How about tonight?" I asked, excited and at the same time annoyed with myself that I was sounding so eager. But I had been waiting way too long for him to finally work up his courage and ask me out. "You could pick me up at seven."*

*Clark nodded and surprise was written all over his face. A thin smile twitched at the corner of his mouth soon turning into a full-blown grin. I loved the way he smiled; it was like the dawn of a new day, a perfect sunrise, warming my heart from within. I could not help but join him in smiling, shy at first but with increasing boldness.*

*My partner set his coffee cup on my desk and slid along the edge closing in on me. I felt drawn to him. All of a sudden I desperately wanted to get up from my chair. But if I did that, the whole newsroom would see, would know that...*

*Clark leaned forward. Gently he brushed a strand of hair behind my ear and his thumb moved over my cheek until finally his entire hand was resting there. Behind the glasses his eyes seemed even darker. A fine blush colored his cheeks. I saw him swallow as his face came closer. His lips parted slightly, and then he kissed me.*

*I closed my eyes. There was only his mouth as his tongue gently caressed mine. Tenderly he nibbled at my lower lip, sucking lightly and letting go again. Was it just me, or was it getting hot in here? My cheeks burned, and I hungrily returned his kiss, sealing his lips with my mouth, drowning in their soft tenderness.*

*Clark was breathing heavily, and his hands tenderly explored my arm. Wherever he touched me, his fingers left my skin aching for more. I started exploring his body. His muscles felt firm under*

*my hands. Clark pulled me closer, hugged me, and began to cover my face with kisses. The touch of his lips was light and warm as the droplets of a summer rain falling on my nose, my eyelashes, and my cheeks. I could feel his breath on my face, felt the tingle that soon covered my whole body ...*

Gradually last night's dream faded, leaving me with a distinct feel of loss. Instead loud voices from the editor's office brought me back into the reality of the newsroom. Perry's voice was calm, dangerously calm. I had not heard his exact words, but everybody in the whole newsroom could discern the warning tone in his voice.

"No way, Chief!" the reply was loud enough for everyone to hear. I was not the only one wincing at that.

Every reporter in the newsroom stared at the door of Perry's office. Self-consciously I put down my right hand that up until now had rested on my chest. I quickly looked around, but apparently no one had even noticed what I had been doing. I was not the least bit surprised. My partner had made certain that I was not the center of interest.

Everyone sat on the edge of their seats, surprised at this exceptional outburst in Perry's office, everyone but me. I sighed, and with growing anger I tried to force my concentration back on my work. When had we stopped being friends? And why did he have to spell it out for the whole newsroom to hear? I would rather die than admit openly that this was eating at me. So I kept pretending that I was not even listening. And if I did my very best to ignore him — then maybe, eventually I would get over him. If only I stopped having those dreams...

*Come on, girl, get a grip,* I thought desperately, trying to forget about the heated argument in Perry's office.

"This is not an offer, it's an assignment," Perry shot back testily. I did not believe that they had planned for everyone to witness their fight. But Clark had forgotten to close the door properly. "I need you, both of you! Would you please remember that you're professional reporters and do your job?"

"It's not that simple," my partner said angrily. "Perry, I ..."

Clark, who had been sitting in front of Perry's desk, now jumped up and started pacing. He ran his hand through his hair like he always did when he felt uncomfortable with something. Then he raised his hands as if to make another comment. Perry did not let him.

"I asked you to go undercover as a married couple and test a hotel that specializes in marriage counseling. Why would this not be easy?" Perry said through clenched teeth. It was obvious that, in his book, the discussion had come to its overdue end.

"Perry, please ..." Clark tried again, but he did not stand a chance.

"Clark, what's the matter with you?" Perry asked but did not leave Clark the time to answer his question. "If it was Lois protesting, I wouldn't be surprised," Perry went on. "I really thought that you both are mature enough to keep your private problems from interfering with your job. But what really annoys me is that you obviously think my decisions are open for debate. There's no one who could do this job better than the two of you," Perry pointed out, and then his voice became quiet. "And if anyone here is in need of partner counseling, it's you. I don't want to know what happened," he said as Clark again raised his hand to make another attempt at explaining. "You guys have an assignment. Period!" He turned on his heel. "Great Shades of Elvis!" he mumbled and fell silent.

With a loud thud the door to Perry's office slammed into the wall as he opened it. Perry looked confused as he realized that it had been open all along. Then his gaze fell on me. He was probably trying to figure out whether Clark's visit had been my idea or his own. What he saw in my eyes seemed to confuse him even more. Without making a comment about the fact that no one was working anymore, Perry went back to his office and pushed

the door shut.

His head hunched between his shoulders, Clark strolled back to his desk. He did not even look at me. But that was to be expected. He kept ignoring me for no good reason. It made me furious, and it hurt like hell. Blinking away the tears in my eyes, I was tempted to just run and hide. I could not go on like this any longer, but I had to. With sheer will, I forced myself to look at the screen again. The words of the article changed from clear to blurry as more tears filled my eyes.

In this very moment I wanted nothing more than for someone to make a mistake, so I could yell at him. But nobody did. On the contrary, they all seemed to avoid me. Pete of the sports department took a detour to get his coffee instead of walking past my desk. Jimmy rarely came to tell me about his research. And right now he was talking to a strange man with a bowler hat at the other end of the newsroom.

Never in my life had I felt so lonely while working at the Planet. Where was my best friend? Where was my partner who had been there for me whenever I needed him? Secretly I watched him as he sat at his desk grumpily typing something into his computer. He was probably working on one of those smaller articles he no longer told me about. Not that it was important for me to know about each mood piece he was writing. But I missed talking to him. I deeply regretted ever calling him Mr. Green Jeans. I wanted to apologize for whatever I might have done wrong to deserve being treated like this. But there was nothing I could think of.

Clark had not been working for long when he suddenly looked up and stared into space. Then he jumped up and hurried over to me.

"I need to go, Lois. Be right back," he said, and my heart clenched in my chest when I realized that I even missed his bad excuses.

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When Clark returned, the newsroom was back to its usual daily routine. He adjusted his tie, then his glasses and went over to his desk. Midway he paused and looked around indecisively. It took him a moment to work up his courage; then he turned and came towards me. A kaleidoscope of different emotions displayed on his face. I could see fear in his eyes, a bad conscience, and regret.

"Lois," he started, looking depressed. His eyes locked with mine just long enough to find out if he had my attention. Then he averted his gaze. Ever so briefly he checked on me again, but mostly he stared into space.

I did not hurry to look up from my work. My fingers typed mechanically. Most of it was certainly nonsense, but I chose to ignore him deliberately. I could not let him win. He had already more influence on me than I should have ever allowed him to get. Although I had every reason to be angry with Clark, although I really wanted to forget him, I could not.

"Lois," Clark said a little louder and more determinate. "I ... I'm sorry," he muttered ruefully. I decided that now was the time to finally look at him instead of secretly sneaking a peek. His face was pale, and his lips had become a thin line.

"What are you sorry for, Clark?" I asked angrily, trying to convey how much he had hurt me. "That you went to Perry, or that I had to listen?" Clark flinched at the tone of my voice. He opened his mouth to say something, but then he kept silent.

I had no intention of letting him get away just like that. "What's going on, Clark? Are you afraid that Mayson is going to be jealous? It's just a job, you know? I will not try to seduce you!" I sneered angrily.

I hated that Mayson was his girlfriend. I hated his reserved attitude towards me, and most of all I hated that my heart beat faster as soon as I saw him.

Clark hesitated for a moment and suddenly looked very sad.

"I'm sorry about the things I said to Perry. I didn't mean to implicate that spending time with you was something bad," he replied softly and chose to ignore my rude remark concerning Mayson. "Because it's not. Anything but that." His gaze drifted over my wrinkled brows. "I ... It hasn't been easy for me lately," he added mysteriously, tensed and fell silent again.

"She has you wrapped around her little finger; do you realize that, Clark?" Furiously I jumped up from my chair, hurling the words into his face. "Barely two weeks ago, you didn't run at the mere thought of watching a movie with me. Now you're acting as if I'm sick with the plague," I accused him. Sometimes I wondered if Mayson really was the only reason for Clark's strange behavior. Anyway, ever since he got to know her, he had kept his distance from me.

Clark's eyes widened in horror. "Lois, I ..." he began hesitantly but soon stopped, swallowing whatever he had meant to say. For a moment he looked at me with puppy dog eyes pleading for help. But upon regaining his composure, his words sounded a lot calmer. "This has nothing to do with you, Lois. I'm sorry if you got that impression." His voice was monotone, almost as if he had kept rehearsing this. He swallowed hard before he continued. "What would you think if we were having a relationship, and I went to a marriage counseling session with another woman?" he asked quietly.

"This is not going to be a date, Clark. We are working on a story. And although we might not be a couple, we are partners. Do I really need to remind you?" I said coldly, deliberately ignoring his question.

I could not stand the thought that I was supposed to care about Mayson's feelings. Clark's observation was probably justified. If our places were reversed, I would like this kind of assignment no more than she did. Still I felt that Clark was not entirely sincere about his objections. Something was wrong, though I could not put my finger on what.

"Clark," a high-pitched angel-like voice chirped, choosing the worst of all possible moments.

Mayson Drake had her own warning system that went off whenever I was having a serious conversation with Clark. She interrupted us each and every time. Her face beamed with joy as she waved her hand greeting us — or more likely — just Clark. Usually she barely looked at me, muttering something under her breath that could be mistaken for a 'Hello'. Her eyes remained fixed on Clark, glued to him forever. She had changed since our first meeting. Her eyes were gleaming with joy, her cheeks had adopted an adorable blush, and she exuded an aura of pure bliss. I got stomach cramps every time I realized that Clark had caused this change. In her, not in me. Mayson Drake was more beautiful than ever, blonde, slim, popular, and very much in love with Clark. I hated her.

"Mayson," Clark greeted his girlfriend in a strangely flat voice.

Looking up, he saw her, and a smile crept onto his face as his shoulders relaxed. Even so, the muscles of his jaw tensed, and his hands were clenched into fists. He was either not too happy to see her, or I was hallucinating. But his tension dissolved after mere seconds. His fists loosened, and Clark closed the distance to the assistant district attorney.

"Nice to see you," he said gently and then lowered his voice. "I wasn't expecting you today. Didn't you say that you needed to work on an important case?"

Mayson smiled at him sweetly, wagging her index finger. "Don't you wanna kiss me?" She pouted, probably thinking that it looked tempting. Getting as far away from them as I could seemed the reasonable thing to do. But they were cooing right next to my desk.

"Of course," Clark replied, and I imagined that he did it without any particular enthusiasm.

He leaned in and whispered a kiss onto her mouth. She closed her eyes in anticipation of something more than the brief peck. When the kiss did not turn into a more intimate one, she blinked, sticking out her bottom lip with disappointment. Clark's behavior confused me too. I had witnessed much more intimate encounters between the two of them. But as opposed to Mayson, I was relieved that Clark had not tortured me any more than that.

"I was around and thought that it would be nice to drop by and say hello," Mayson explained, winking conspiratorially. "See you tonight?" she cooed in her own version of the famous Cat Grant style. Mayson leaned against Clark and possessively laid her hand on his chest. The look in her eyes was telling — she was much worse than Cat had ever been.

"Um ... Mayson, about tonight ..." Clark's words were swallowed by a hungry kiss. An eternity passed before he gently pushed her away. Or so it seemed to me. "Mayson, please ..." he whispered in a soft moan. "Not here ... I need to talk to you tonight."

Who knew what Mayson was dreaming about? Perhaps she thought that Clark would pop the question? My heart suddenly skipped a beat. What if he did? What if he actually did propose to Mayson this evening? I suddenly felt ill, my stomach tightened, and blood roared in my ears. I wanted to ignore them and pretend that I did not care. But hard as I tried, I could not look away.

"I must get back to work now. Perry has been pretty grumpy lately," Clark told her, not even flinching at his blatant lie. If anyone had been grumpy, it was Clark. But his lying to Mayson made me feel a little better. At least I was not the only one to whom he did not tell the truth.

"Oh ..." Mayson said disappointed and once more twitched her lips into a pout. "I thought maybe we'd go out for lunch."

"I'm sorry, Mayson, but I've got a lot of work to do. Lois and I need to meet a source, and then ... I'll see you tonight, I promise," he added consolingly and briefly kissed her on the cheek. Mayson savored every moment of it, making me want to slap her.

"See you tonight, Clark," Mayson replied, withdrawing reluctantly. Finally she waved goodbye and walked away, her hips swaying.

Clark slumped against my desk as soon as she had left the newsroom. "God," he muttered with a groan.

Much to my surprise, I practically saw him shrink. His head hung, making him the most pitiful sight imaginable. I had just opened my mouth to ask him what was going on, when he got up again, straightening his shoulders.

"I've got to go, Lois," he announced hastily and did what he always did when things got serious. He disappeared.

Confused, I watched him leave. When someone cleared his throat right next to me, I flinched. My heart pounded madly as I turned around and saw a black bowler hat, worn by a man who was dressed in a very old-fashioned way. Blue eyes behind gold-rimmed glasses looked back at me.

"Excuse me, Miss ..." he said guiltily. "I had no intention of scaring you." A smile spread across his face. "My name is Wells, and I would like to talk to Mr. Kent."

"You're not the only one," I muttered depressed, and then I turned to the stranger who was staring at me puzzled. "Excuse me, Mr. Wells. My partner has just left the newsroom, and I have not the slightest idea how long he will be gone. Would you like to leave a message?"

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*Hours later ...*

The phone rang, waking me mercilessly. But it had to ring a second and a third time before I realized that this was the call I had been waiting for, so long that I had finally fallen asleep. I reached out to pick up but stopped a few inches short of taking the phone. My hand remained dangling above the receiver. Now

that I could, I was not so sure that I really wanted to talk to my sister. It rang a fourth and a fifth time, then I finally picked up the phone. Lucy did not deserve to be ignored, not after I had stirred up so much trouble.

I answered the phone, my voice unsteady, "Lois Lane."

It actually was my sister, like I had already suspected. She was a real Lane, speaking so fast that I understood only half of her words, if that much. I learned that she had hurried to get back home because Mom had called her at work and told her about my distress. That and my hesitation at taking her call had my sister worried.

"I'm sorry, Luce," I replied, somewhat sheepishly, not really knowing how to apologize for my stupid behavior. "I was in the shower. And I called Mom because I didn't know your new phone number. She couldn't remember it right away, so she promised to pass on the message..."

"What's so important, Sis?" Lucy interrupted me. No doubt she was not buying my explanation. Her tone of voice demanded answers.

"Important? It's not really important." I bit my tongue. Suddenly I wanted to hang up rather than talk to Lucy. Why was it so difficult to pour out my grief? I was talking utter nonsense. Of course it was important, else...

"Of course it's important, Lois. Otherwise you wouldn't have called me. You never call if it's not important," Lucy concluded my sentence.

It was true. I kept telling people that my relationship with my sister was disastrous. But she really knew me well — better than my parents. Other than Clark, she was probably the only person who had ever seen me vulnerable. And yet we seldom spoke to each other. I was ashamed that I bothered her with my problems now, when I had ignored her the rest of the time. But there was really no one else I could talk to.

"It's about Clark ..." I said, and my throat seemed to swell shut with the mere mentioning of him.

"That handsome friend of yours?" Lucy was becoming curious. "What about him? Has he finally worked up the courage to ask you out, and now you're having second thoughts?"

"Mmhh, something of that sort," I muttered. She was not even close. If he had asked me out on a date, I would not need this sort of conversation. I should finally get around to telling her the truth. "This whole Lex debacle is still nagging at me," I said slowly, taking a deep breath. "Clark told me that it's about time for me to start dating again."

That was not entirely true. Clark encouraging me to date again — that had happened weeks ago. Now, he hardly talked to me at all. And it was getting worse. My final assignment for this evening had been an interview with a local politician. When I came back to the newsroom, I had found a note on my desk.

*I'll pick you up at noon, tomorrow. See you, Clark.*

Although we had spent hours together meeting a source, he had waited until after my interview to put a note onto my desk. How could we go on an undercover assignment if Clark was not even able to talk to me? Each and every morning, I came to work, my heart pounding with fear. Someday soon Perry would call me into his office telling me that Clark had called off our partnership and had disappeared once and for all. This mere thought made me sad and angry and desperate. It killed me that Clark did not tell me why he was being so cold. Why could we not talk about our problems like adults? Why did he choose to hide?

As soon as I talked about going out again, I could almost see Lucy nod at the other end of the line. She had suggested the same thing and not just once. I heard her breathing. Presumably, she wondered whether she should approve or exercise caution in order not to drive me up the wall. I had not been very keen on dating to put it lightly.

"That's great, Lois. So what's the problem?" Lucy asked

enthusiastically. She had apparently decided to encourage me.

"I uh ... I ..." I could not say it. Even now, the realization was too shocking to put into words. "I would like for Clark to be my date," I said softly. There — I had spilled it. My breathing came in ragged gasps as if I had been running a marathon.

"I knew it ..." Lucy cheered. "Lois, I always knew that someday you would finally realize that you're partnered with a great man. I can't tell you how glad I am that you've found each other. Congratulations, Sis!" I could almost hear her jumping up giddily. The jubilation was unfortunately a little premature — not to mention utterly misplaced.

"Clark hates me, Lucy," I summed up the crux of the matter, my voice hoarse. "He is a good partner, he is working with me, but he hates me." I could not help thinking that he had ceased being a good partner, too. However, I did not voice my thoughts. Instead, I got up from the bed, restlessly pacing my bedroom.

The line went silent for a moment, and I swallowed with my confession. It had taken me pretty long to become aware of this simple fact. The formality Clark treated me with was almost unbearable. We worked together, yes, but we spoke only when necessary. In other words we talked about work exclusively. Clark had not invited me to his place for weeks. He shut me out of his life. And he barely even looked at me anymore.

I remembered our last time playing a honeymoon couple. Now there was a snowball's chance in hell that this was going to be even half as much fun as we had once had. Looking back on those first few months of our partnership, I deeply regretted being so stubborn. Why had I ignored how much comfort I found in his presence? Had there really ever been a mutual, though covert, attraction that I now only vaguely remembered? Thinking about the way things had once been was slowly killing me.

"He doesn't hate you, Lois. Why would he?" my sister disagreed soothingly.

"I don't know," I said defensively, "It's just the way it is. When I last asked him if he minded me coming to join him for a video, he just told me that I should start dating someone," I almost sobbed. "He wants to get rid of me."

"I'm sure he just meant to help you — I thought you were best friends," Lucy said encouragingly. Her words were not helping much. Maybe he had meant to help me, but not because he was my friend.

"I thought so, too." I sighed and sat down on my bed again, only to rise a split second later. "After this whole Luthor fiasco, Clark was so kind and caring. But then he eventually began to retreat."

Restlessly I resumed pacing my bedroom, as if it would help me describing my feelings more clearly. But I would need more than a single call to tell Lucy about everything that had happened between Clark and me during the last couple of months. After all, I had to get up early tomorrow and Lucy as well. By the time I had made up my mind about what I wanted to say, I had ended up in the living room. With another sigh I sank down onto my very uncomfortable sofa.

"Oh, I don't know," I continued. "When we first met, I thought he had a thing for me. Especially when he tried to talk me out of dating Lex Luthor. But finally I realized that he wasn't jealous. He just knew that Lex Luthor was the criminal mastermind of Metropolis." I sighed again.

When Clark had dragged me out of the LNN building and into Centennial Park, I had actually thought that he was about to declare his love for me. The way he had looked at me, caring and concerned, with those gentle brown eyes — that moment had been kind of magical. But at the time I had not realized he was the man with whom I wanted to spend my life. Clark was like a big brother, a loyal friend, but not my lover. My mind had already been forming a rejection that I had hoped would not crush him. But then things had turned out very differently.

*Clark had looked down, and suddenly the magic had been gone, disrupted as he had cleared his throat. When he had looked back at me, the loving expression in his eyes had vanished. It had been as if he had remembered something unpleasant, something that had destroyed every spark of hope.*

*"Lex Luthor is not a good person, Lois," Clark had said soberly, almost emotionless. Nothing in his voice had reminded me of the jealousy I had noticed a few days before. "Superman told me that he's involved in almost every crime here in Metropolis. You may not believe me, Lois, but Superman has seen it. I beg you not to marry Luthor, Lois. Wait until I can get evidence. You would deeply regret a marriage with him."*

In hindsight I was glad that he had not let me reject him. It was bad enough that I had refused listening to him. If he really had made a declaration of love, then he would probably hate me even more.

"Maybe he's too shy to suggest a date. Or he thinks that you still need your time to get over Lex," Lucy tried to soothe me. "I think you should just ask him out, Lois."

"Maybe you're right, Luce," I said slowly, though I knew she was wrong. However much I wanted to tell her everything, I was not sure whether she would truly understand it. "Maybe I should ask him. But he's been seeing another woman and tonight ... tonight ..." my voice broke. The mere thought made me swallow hard. Until this point I had been able to keep the images off my mind, but now they were flooding me. Mayson and Clark in an intimate embrace, Mayson as she kissed Clark, Mayson ... "Lucy, he's sleeping with her," I cried involuntarily and heard myself sobbing loudly. Was I actually weeping? "He ... Clark sleeps with her instead of me. Not even when we were under the influence of the pheromones ... he never tried ..." I stammered tediously and completely incoherently.

"Oh my, you got it bad," Lucy murmured stunned. "Lois ..." she added hesitantly, probably wondering if I was ready to make an exception on the "never destroy someone else's relationship"-rule. Given my deep affection for Clark's sweetheart, my conscience would hardly cause me sleepless nights. The breaking of his relationship would be no disaster but a liberation. On the other hand I was not sure that I really stood a chance. "... Don't forget: it isn't over until you give up." I might have told her that a couple of times and to hear it was comforting.

"Thank you, Luce," I said softly. "You've helped me a lot."

"You're welcome. I'm always there for you, Lois. Call me at any time you want to talk," my sister replied. I wondered how I could have ever called her names. Sometimes she was closer to me than anyone else in this world. "I would like to keep talking to you, but I have to go. Is that okay?" Lucy asked cautiously.

"Yes, of course," I replied immediately, both sad and relieved that the conversation was over. I did not know exactly what I had hoped to gain from talking to Lucy. It was not as if she could offer a solution to my problems. But she had given me some comfort, and that was actually more than I expected given the circumstances. "Thank you for calling, Luce. Take care."

"Keep me posted, Lois," my sister made me promise. Then she told me her new phone number before we finally ended our conversation.

I stared at the phone in my hand none the wiser. But at least it was not just my imagination telling me that Clark had once had feelings for me. *If only he still did*, I thought wistfully, before I hung up as well. For what seemed like an eternity, I paced my apartment until I finally got into bed for some much needed rest. I stared blankly at the ceiling and tried to sleep. Ages went by before I eventually drifted off.

*The bed buckled under Clark's weight as he sat down next to me. Heat spread through my arm as he whispered a kiss onto my bare skin. Gentle strokes of his hand brushed my side while he slowly kissed his way across my arm. A soft whiff of his breath*

*tickled against the crook of my neck. Clark knew I loved this feeling, and he took his time, increasing the pleasure. I indulged in the gentle sucking of his mouth. The feeling was electrifying, and my fingers tingled with desire to explore his body just as thoroughly. I wanted to hug him, wanted to feel his warmth and the weight of his body on mine. He did not let me though but unwaveringly sought his way to my lips.*

*"Lois," he murmured against my mouth.*

*His lips parted and gently touched mine. He paused for a moment teasing me with the play of his tender tongue. Every contact was promising but way too brief to assuage my growing desire. His hands began to caress my skin so tenderly that it was almost tickling. I grabbed his shoulders and pulled him closer, felt his body on mine. Clark's kiss was getting more and more intense, hungry. His tongue explored my mouth, dancing with mine as they met.*

*Slowly my hands moved over his shoulders. I felt the play of his firm muscles beneath his shirt. I easily found my way under the fabric to touch his warm, soft skin. Clark broke the kiss and let me strip the shirt off his shoulders until his chest was completely revealed. For a moment I stared at his body in mere admiration.*

*"You're beautiful," he said softly, brushing a strand of my hair out of my face. "So beautiful," he whispered in awe.*

*I enjoyed the way he looked at me. He smiled at me lovingly, as his eyes rested on me. I wanted to drown in those eyes. Their dark brown caught me, fascinated me, making me virtually breathless. Where his hand had touched my face, my skin tingled. I wanted to feel more of him, more than just this light touch.*

*"Clark," I said eagerly and stretched out my hand.*

*My fingers slid over his lips, and he started nibbling at them. A smile spread across his face. With one hand he pulled the strap of my nightgown from my shoulders and started kissing me there. Slowly his lips traveled down my chest. I sighed contentedly and felt a pleasant tingle spread across my whole skin. Every inch of me seemed more sensitive than usual. I savored every single touch, and nothing else mattered.*

*"Lois," Clark whispered in a hoarse voice that was almost an octave deeper than usual. "I love you ..." Even though his breath came in ragged gasps, his words sounded like a solemn promise. He looked deeply into my eyes, paused for a moment, his eyes almost begging me to believe him. "... so much."*

*I nodded and smiled happily. "I know."*

*"No, no, you don't," he said breathlessly. His eyes darkened, or was it the just the twilight of my apartment? "You don't," he repeated, and pain crept into his voice.*

*His kisses became desperate, his tongue demanding. I felt his fingers sliding over my body, warm and loving but not quite as patient as before.*

*Suddenly Clark was gone, and I found myself alone in bed.*

*Awakening from sleep, I had to accept that none of this had happened. I was still alone. My ragged breath and the burning, unfulfilled desire were very real, though. Resigned I sank back down onto the pillows. That was not the first dream of this kind, and I had the distinct feeling that it would not remain the last one. As much as I liked the content of my fantasies, they would remain unfulfilled. And I had to count myself lucky tonight. Sometimes these led Clark and me much further until waking up to the cruel reality of our relationship became unbearable.*

*A glance at my alarm clock told me that dawn was not going to be anytime soon. I got up restless because I knew from experience that it was difficult falling asleep after one of these dreams. Mostly it helped to distract myself for a while. After a quick look at my TV, I opted for the kitchen. Maybe it was not the best idea, but chocolate ice cream was still the only true cure for heartache.*

*While I took my robe off the hook, I wondered when these*

*special kind of erotic fantasies had begun. I could not think of a particular date though. It was more like a period when friendly affection had turned into detachment, to finally become aversion, on Clark's side anyway. For me things had unfortunately been just the other way round — which had put me right in the middle of my own personal hell.*

*With shoulders slumped, I crept to the refrigerator. When I opened it, I remembered that I had already used up the last chocolate chip ice cream in the previous night. I cursed, first under my breath and then loud enough for all my neighbors to hear.*

*"Bloody hell. How am I supposed to get on like this?" I wrestled with my destiny. Another dream like this, Clark in the same hotel room and no chocolate chip ice cream in sight — I was bound to lose my mind. If that had not already happened, that was. "Lois Lane, you have to forget about that partner of yours!" I tried to encourage myself. Unfortunately that was easier said than done.*

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*Anxiously I watched the big hand of my clock that relentlessly moved towards twelve. It seemed like ages ago that Clark had warned me not to try anything funny when we had shared the honeymoon suite at the Lexor. I missed his good-natured teasing. For weeks now he had barely even smiled, or if he did, it was at Mayson Drake. His unnerving brotherly way of treating me had turned into the even more annoying professional relationship that we now shared. I straightened my shoulders and tried to prepare myself for whatever this weekend would have in store for me. Mad Dog Lane would not waver. I had to forget how I felt for my partner, though... or just because he lately chose to ignore me.*

*But my brave face fell the moment Clark knocked at my door. A quick glance into the mirror confirmed what a sorry picture of misery I was. The last night — and especially the dream — had taken their toll. I would have liked to smash the mirror into millions of pieces for showing me something like this.*

*"Lois, are you ready?" Clark asked, his voice muffled by the door. He sounded impatient, as if he would prefer being anywhere but in front of my apartment.*

*"Yes," I replied, hoping my voice did not tremble.*

*I glanced at the packed travel bag that looked back at me menacingly, reminding me of the impending departure. Presumably, even the prospect of a Pulitzer would not have made this step any easier. Not that there was any chance of getting an award for the story we were supposed to write. Perry had every intention of making his "hottest team in town" work again no matter what. There was no arguing about that, try as I might. And honestly, however insane that was, I really hoped that Perry's plan would work out. I wanted to know what it was about Mayson that Clark liked and why he suddenly hated me so much.*

*Before gathering my bag, I took another deep breath, squared my shoulders, and went to the door. It was like I was walking to the scaffold. I knew that I was being hysterical. It was Clark out there, my partner, my best friend. That could not have changed completely or had it?*

*When I stood in front of him, I realized that this was indeed becoming a nightmare, a torturous one at that. My partner wore tight black jeans that perfectly accentuated his hips. A black shirt stretched over his chest muscles. He had left a few buttons open revealing his olive tanned skin. Every inch of him was like I had imagined in my dreams. My mouth went dry, and I knew that I would talk nonsense should I try to say something.*

*"Hello, Lois," Clark greeted me and even managed a wry smile.*

*Although it was nothing like the thousand-watt smiles I had come to love so dearly, even this small gesture made my heart beat loudly in my chest. Inwardly I cursed myself that my heart*

suspected reason for hope where there was none.

“You look great,” Clark continued, sounding so polite that I wondered whether he had practiced those words.. “I’ll take the heavy bag,” he offered and did not wait for me to protest. For no more than a split second, he actually crossed the threshold to my apartment. Then he turned around with the luggage in his hand and walked down the stairs.

I locked the door behind me and followed him. My heart pounded, and my stomach churned at the thought of the many hours and probably even days that lay ahead. Clark would certainly torture me with hours of sweet talk with Mayson, while I would irrevocably become a nutcase. Why had I not been the one complaining about Perry’s assignment? I vaguely remembered that Mad Dog Lane would have handled things very differently. But that was before I broke my own vow never to fall in love with the wrong man again. The real problem was that I was not likely to get to breaking rule number three. Sharing a room would undoubtedly be the first step on a painful way to lunacy.

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The journey passed in silence. It was just like I had expected. Still I was disappointed. Clark’s gaze remained so focused on the road ahead, as if it was he driving the car instead of me. I glanced at him now and again trying to fathom what had changed between us. Why was it that Clark could not stand having an innocuous conversation with me? And why did I not just ask him for his reasons? But my tongue was stuck to the roof of my mouth, and every word that came to my mind seemed far too reproachful to help me get my old Clark back.

The further we got away from the city, the emptier the streets became. The silence was unbearable. Frequently my glance returned to my partner who had begun staring out of the side window. I saw no more of him than a reflection in the windshield. He looked miserable. Did he already miss Mayson? His lips had grown tight, and his expression grim. When he finally looked at me, it seemed as if he was about to say something, but he did not. Right after the incident, his eyes darted away quickly back to the window, and the silence went into an exhausting next round.

The highway stretched endlessly ahead of us. Only a few curves interrupted the monotonous journey that was miles away from getting us to a Pulitzer. Now and again we saw other cars. Each of them rushed to escape the wasteland for which we were heading. Even the sun was hiding. Nothing about the endless grey sky indicated that time was actually passing.

“Lois...” Clark finally said, his voice hoarse. He relapsed into silence, waiting for my reaction. I generously looked back at him. “... it’s not about you. I want you to know that,” he continued softly, really looking at me for perhaps the first time this day. “It’s not your fault that I’m...” he hesitated and did not seem to find the right words.

“...that you are behaving so childish, Clark?” I helped him out, glaring at him furiously.

He opened his mouth in protest but thought better of it and nodded. “You’re absolutely right; I have been acting childish,” he sighed. “I know that, and I’m sorry, so terribly sorry, Lois. But somehow we have to get along over the next few days to write this story...” His voice grew softer. “And then I’ll hand in my resignation.”

“What?” I exclaimed in horror and wondered how I managed not to steer the car into a ditch. But maybe it was just because we drove on a completely straight road with no ditches in sight.

“I’ve said that I’ll hand in my resignation,” Clark muttered under his breath, resuming his stare out of the window. I could not discern the look on his face, not from his reflection anyway. He seemed sad.

“That was what I thought I heard,” I said in a mix of pure horror and utter confusion. “Why, Clark? Why do you want to do

this?” There was so much more I wanted to ask him. Had Mayson asked him to quit? “Why, if it this is not about me?” I managed to whisper. My voice was brittle, and I felt hot tears burn in my eyes. I had a hard time restraining them. The road went blurry before my eyes, but I would not give in.

Clark said nothing, obstinately staring out the window. My heart resounded in my ears, booming in the unbearable silence that reigned in my car. Once again he chose to ignore me rather than tell me what was wrong. I would have liked to yell at him, to put him at the receiving end of my anger. But I knew that I would not be able to keep from crying if I spilled out my heart. And Clark was not worth crying over — no way.

“Because I realize that I’m hurting you, Lois. And I hate to do that. Hurting you is the last thing I want to do, you have to believe me,” Clark eventually replied. His voice was calm and quiet.

He looked at me with sad eyes. I could not hold his gaze. A huge lump built up in my throat bringing me even closer to bursting into tears than I had already been. I drew a deep breath trying to control my feelings. I did not really understand what he was trying to tell me. However, his words pained me, disappointed me, and enraged me to the point of madness. If Clark did not hate me, then what else could it be?

“Clark, what’s the matter with you?” I breathed desperately, my eyes begging for an answer.

The signpost on the roadside offered Clark a welcome excuse to escape the topic. He immediately began to point out that I had to turn, obviously worried that I might miss the exit. But he could not deceive me. However, my question went unanswered, and I wondered if he was ever going to tell me.

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“Welcome to the Echo Lodge Hotel,” the bellboy said with a grin.

He stepped aside so we could admire the spacious, comfortable suite we were going to share for the next couple of days. It was far less corny than the honeymoon suite at the Lexor Hotel. That did not mean it was not romantic. The room was bright and inviting. On the wide front window the curtains were drawn aside, revealing the view of a beautiful lake. I had not known that a romantic landscape like this was anywhere near Metropolis. But given my rather strained relationship with Clark, I was not so sure I would be able to fully enjoy it.

Since we entered the hotel, we had always had company. Automatically we had assumed our roles. Clark had grabbed our luggage, laying his free arm around me protectively. My back still tingled from his touch. Inwardly I cursed myself that I felt that way for my partner. If I had never fallen in love with him, everything would be so much easier to bear now.

The bellboy harrumphed, as Clark was about to go into the room. My partner stopped and looked at him curiously. The poor boy blushed with embarrassment, clearing his throat all over again.

“It’s a part of our program that the husband carries his wife over the threshold,” he said hoarsely. “We ... uh, we try to create a honeymoon atmosphere and bring a new perspective into the relationship.” The bellboy hardly looked at us, obviously thinking this was a rather silly idea.

Clark’s curiosity was replaced by a horrified expression. He managed just in time to keep his bearings before the bellboy noticed the change. Outwardly Clark started smiling his thousand-watt smile. It did not reach his eyes though. The look that was hidden behind his glasses was dangerous. I had only once seen a similar expression on his face — when I had stolen his story.

“That sounds nice,” Clark replied strained. The bellhop grinned with relief, winking at Clark, who had realized that there was no way of escaping this situation. If he did not want to make

a fool of himself, he had to carry me into that room.

With a forced smile Clark approached me. I felt his left hand on my back and his right under my knees. Before I really knew what was happening, he held me in his strong arms. For a moment he looked at me with an expression I could not quite interpret. It seemed like a mixture of agony and — regret? I could not think of a better word. Again I discovered a deep sadness in his eyes and would have liked to ask him what was going on. But this was not the time for questions. Clark gracefully carried me over the threshold and carefully set me back on my feet. The boyish grin that used to play around his lips on occasions like this was not there.

However, we managed to satisfy the bellboy. Both our smiles were forced. I desperately tried to ignore what Clark's hands had done to me. My knees were soft like Jell-O, and my heart was pounding. I was angry at myself for secretly wishing that a maid with a handful of towels would storm into the suite. I thought of how Clark had thrown me onto the bed of the honeymoon suite at the Lector Hotel. I remembered feeling his body, warm and heavy, covering mine. It was strange, but I had felt safe in his arms. Looking back at it, every moment of that day was like an exciting game that we were never going to repeat.

I secretly eyed Clark, looked at his soft lips and dreamed of kissing him. I could not explain why I was doing that. Why could I not continue to regard him as a good friend? But my palms were sweaty, and I pressed them firmly against my body to keep me from reaching for his hand.

"Enjoy your stay," the bellboy said and stuck a bill into his pocket that Clark had to have given him. "Our program starts with dinner tonight. Mrs. Arnold will come by to tell you everything about your stay here. Until then you can explore the hotel, try our spa and fitness rooms, whatever you want."

Seconds later the wide door slammed shut, and no one saved us from being on our own. There was just Clark and me and this apparently unbridgeable gap between us.

"I'll take the couch," Clark said after a while of watching each other in silence. It was another cold shower that finally woke me from the daydreams I had briefly fallen into.

"It's a big bed. We could share..." I volunteered, almost sounding like Cat Grant on the hunt — alluring but also pretty needy. My voice broke with shame. Did I seriously believe he would accept the offer?

"Loooooiiiiis," Clark said slowly.

It surprised me how incredibly depressed he looked. I had anticipated his rejection but not this. For a moment he was rendered speechless while I looked at him, begging for an explanation. I was about to ask him what I had done to drive him off. But Clark also seemed to lack a reasonable explanation for his bizarre behavior. I wanted to shake him, bring him to his senses at last but felt that violence was not going to help in the least.

"I am a restless sleeper, you'd just ..." His voice failed at the blatant lie.

I would have liked to beat him up until he gave me a better answer than this, but I was also afraid of the truth. Whatever it was that was eating at him, he always remained polite. For the sake of my own sanity, I should not make him cross that line.

"We should better try to keep up appearances, Clark. If they find out that we're reporters..." I whispered, uncertain what the consequences were supposed to be given the kind of story we were assigned on. Before my arguments became even more foolish, I bit my tongue. This was nuts!

"Do you really think that someone is watching us here, Lois? Besides, **you** were always so keen on keeping a professional relationship. I'll take the sofa," he added with certainty. I seriously doubted anyone could change his mind, not even me.

"What is it, Clark? What have I done? All of the sudden you

want to give up your job! You love working at the paper," I blurted out, not exactly thinking about what I was going to say. "We were friends, dammit! What happened?" I asked, desperate and way too shrill.

He returned my gaze calmly, looking straight at me. Only on second glance did I notice the tremor in his arms, his chest, and his eyes. The veil between us was gone, and for the first time in weeks I really saw Clark. He felt just as uncomfortable as I did. But why did he not talk to me? Why did we not say the words that needed to be said?

"Clark, I ..." I began, ready to tell the big, important three words that had been on my lips for weeks. But I hesitated. It seemed to me as if Clark shook his head almost imperceptibly, as if he implored me not to do that to him. Then he turned away, and the wall he had drawn between us, the wall that was so high I could barely see him anymore, was back in place — as impenetrable as ever.

"Yes, I like working at the Daily Planet," Clark finally said. "But I think it's better to leave. And now let us explore the hotel, Lois. We are here to work," he said mechanically, almost coldly and went out of the room. Sad, I followed him.

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The world beyond the door was a different one entirely. The hotel room had been bright and nicely furnished, but in comparison to the corridor, it seemed like a gray, cold cell. Maybe Clark's broad smile made the difference, warming me from within as I left the bleak room. A passing couple smiled back at us, beaming with joy. They were all the advertising this institute needed. Clark obviously felt compelled to pretend that we were just as happy as they were. Anyway, he pulled me towards him, causing my heart to race. I couldn't help but smile as I leaned into his embrace, though only a minute before I had felt like my world was going to fall apart.

Clark's hand was on my back, and his breath brushed my hair as he pretended to place a kiss on my forehead. His lips did not touch me, but they were close enough for me to imagine the rest. A slight tingling sensation spread across my skin, and I wrapped my arm around Clark's waist. For once he did not protest. Instead, he let me feel the play of his muscles under the soft fabric of his shirt. Slowly we assumed the roles we were supposed to play and became the couple that had every intention of solving their problems.

Walking arm in arm, we followed the hallway meeting several couples. One was dressed in robes and returned — laughing and kissing — from a swim in the pool. Another one was just holding hands, exchanging glances that left no doubt about how these two were going to spend their next couple of hours. Involuntarily my thoughts were running in the same direction. But I knew that Clark and I would never share our bed like that if at all.

All of the sudden, Clark pulled me towards him and gently pressed me against the wall. He leaned in, his lips touching mine in a light kiss. Or was he just pretending? His mouth was closed, unmoving. His hands stroked my arms, exploring and caressing me tenderly. But his lips were not playing along, as if it was not the kiss of a man but rather a children's game of imitating adults.

The feeling was electrifying nonetheless. Clark's breath caressed my upper lip and cheeks. Wave after wave of pleasure washed down my back. And then I tasted his soft lips. My tongue slid over the silky skin, sneaking its way into his mouth. I could not tell if it was me urging him to respond, or if he did it on his own volition. Anyway he began to return the kiss.

I clung to him, dying to get what I had been dreaming about for weeks. I lost myself in this ancient dance until the world around me faded into oblivion. All I felt was this familiar taste of the old Clark. We had kissed no more than a couple of times. Twice, if I remember correctly. In this very moment I had my

Clark back, the one I had so deeply fallen in love with. The distance between us faded like the memory of a bad dream. Clark's kiss grew passionate, and he drew me closer until I could tell that this kiss affected him just as much as me. His breathing became erratic as his tongue explored my mouth, caressing me tenderly.

Then I heard the faint mumbling of distant voices. Clark's kiss became more reserved; his tongue stilled until it finally slipped back behind his lips. He did not pull back, but the kiss was forgotten. Only his lips were lingering on mine, reminding me of what had just happened. The distant voices became clearer as the talking men approached. Had he kissed me because of them? But how could he have known they would come?

"What do you think of the Whites?" a deep male voice asked, his words instantly attracting my attention. It was the name Clark and I were using as a couple. Not very imaginative, but ...

"I don't know," the bellboy shrugged. "Could be anything. They're certainly the weirdest couple I've ever seen" he added carefully. "At first he seemed as cold as ice, and then all of the sudden, the sparks flew. I think he still loves her."

"And how about the money?" the first inquired.

"Dunno. He was pretty generous is all I can say," the bellboy replied.

"Let's go," Clark whispered and hastily withdrew.

He took my hand and pulled me with him, rushing down the hall so fast that I had trouble keeping up. Clark's kiss had me still confused, and try as I might, I had no idea what the guys had been talking about. Sadly the truth was that as long as I had no idea what would become of Clark and me, there was little hope I could concentrate on being the investigative reporter I used to be.

"What had that been about?" I asked Clark quietly, not sure if I was talking about the conversation or the kiss. I was obviously quite upset.

"I have no idea," Clark said, his tone of voice indicated that he was referring to the conversation. However, he could barely look at me when we finally slowed down to a normal pace — walking down the hall arm in arm as demanded by the camouflage. My stomach was tied in knots while a huge lump built up in my throat. I knew that I could not go on like this.

"I should have stuck to the third rule of never getting involved with a colleague," I thought miserably. But unfortunately, the rule had only been about sleeping with colleagues. It should have included falling in love with them. With one in particular.

The hallway was empty which filled me with a mixture of relief and sadness. Actually I had no intention whatsoever of receiving more of Clark's mixed signals. On the other hand, I longed for an opportunity to once again feel his lips on mine. I was a nutcase, no doubt about that.

"We seem to have sparked their interest. Whatever that means." I did my best to pretend that I was still lucid. "To find out what's going on here, we should preserve this interest," I said firmly, almost sounding as if there was something left of Mad Dog Lane.

Clark stopped dead in his tracks and looked at me aghast. "How ... what ..." he muttered and turned pale, his eyes widened. "Lois... that's... you can... we can't..."

His breathing became labored, and he seemed to be suffering a panic attack. The cold Clark was suddenly gone, as if he had removed a mask he had been wearing so long that no one any longer knew his true face. I could see fear in his eyes, but I had no idea what he was afraid of. What was it that scared him so much? Did he believe that something terrible would happen if we got too close?

I was taken aback by a sudden realization. It had always been me shying away from any sort of relationship. And thinking of the men I had spent time with, that was not exactly surprising.

But was it actually the thought of building up a relationship that made Clark so nervous? As far as I knew, men usually started backing off as soon as a relationship threatened to turn into something more serious than just sex. Clark, however, was spooked by even the slightest hint of a touch. Even so, he had kissed me.

In the meantime Clark stepped back, withdrawing into himself even further than he already had. He held his arms tightly clutched to his body. He trembled slightly even though he made every effort to hide it from me. I stared blankly at him, trying to understand what had gotten into him. And then Clark lifted his head and visibly relaxed.

"Lois, why don't you go downstairs," he muttered hoarsely. "I... I've forgotten something in the room ... I'll be right back." His eyes spoke volumes, begging me to go without any further questions. As if there was anything left to ask! I knew without a doubt that he would turn and run off. Just as he always did when we were going to discuss something personal. Though he rarely had seemed this happy about getting away from me as he did now.

And then I watched him running down the hall back to our room. I did not think that it was the place where he actually went. But I could not bring myself to following him in order to find out. Instead, I turned with a sigh and for once did as I was told. I went downstairs.

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The elevator was the only place that did absolutely nothing to add to the hotel's romantic atmosphere. When I entered, I was greeted by the wide smile of a LNN newsreader on a flat screen at the far side of the elevator. Grimly I looked at her, angry that she still thought there was reason to smile in a world like this. There was nothing to be happy about!

As she soundlessly read out the news, the screen switched to a video showing dramatic scenes. A scrolling text below the images replaced the missing sound and informed me not only about current stock prices but also about a devastating fire in a factory. The firefighters seemed small as they battled the flames.

Flames burst from the building into the sky. The hoses of the fire department looked ridiculously tiny. In most cities this sight would have triggered only breathless horror. In Metropolis, however, the hope was never far away. The camera zoomed in on the fireman, showing their relief, as a small blue-red figure appeared in the sky. Superman saved the day again.

With a slight tug the elevator stopped. A soft bell rang, and a voice announced that I had reached the first floor. The doors opened automatically, revealing the view of the spacious hotel lobby. Wide leather armchairs were arranged in groups around a few tables. Most of them looked so unused that it was hard to imagine anyone had ever sat there. Only a few were occupied, and there was an almost eerie calm that permeated the room. Perhaps it was because I was not in the best mood.

I wanted to turn on my heels and seek shelter in the safety of my hotel room. But then I remembered that this option would be even lonelier. I decided to stay where I was. Anything was better than once more being at the receiving end of Clark's animosity. I had absolutely no idea, though, what I was supposed to do in the hall. Without a particular destination in mind, I took the first step. After all I could not gracefully keep standing in front of the elevator. My efforts to capture the atmosphere of this place, as Perry would have certainly expected me to do, were in vain. And I could not even think about the conversation we had overheard, or if it might turn out to be a story.

"Excuse me, please," someone cleared his throat next to me, begging to get my attention. Surprised I recognized the man with the bowler hat.

I stared back at him, open-mouthed. "What are you doing here?" I said with difficulty and stared at the wrinkled face in



front of me. I had seen him in the newsroom, but otherwise he did not seem familiar. What was he doing here? Had he followed us?

"I ..." He blushed. "... I am afraid it is too early to tell you that," he added apologetically. "It's urgent that I speak with Mr. Kent. Can you tell me where he is?"

"What do you want from him?" I replied evasively, wondering why I even cared. Clark was an adult; he could deal with this on his own.

"This is a personal matter, I'm afraid," the man with the bowler hat said mysteriously. That didn't help to ease my discomfort concerning this man. What did he want from Clark? Could he be the reason that my best friend was acting so strangely? Had he gotten himself into something and now was ashamed of whatever he might have done?

"I'm sorry, but I can't help you," I said coldly and turned my back on the little man with the English accent. "He'll be back at the Daily Planet in a few days. You should call him there."

I did not look back. I just walked past Mr. Wells or whatever his name actually was. I had a hard time not turning around to look at him. Seeing the man again worried me. But I did not want to think about him, not about him and especially not about Clark.

Instead my thoughts drifted off to the man who was busy extinguishing a large fire. Superman was always busy, even after Lex Luthor's death. Sometimes I had the impression that the end of Luthor had done nothing to calm the city. There was more crime than ever before. Maybe that was because the enemy had gotten more heads after the boss had come to an inglorious end.

Superman's visits to me had become rare. It had been weeks since I had seen him up close. I kept trying to convince myself that it was not because of me. That had been easy, at first. But the more Clark ignored me, the more I believed that I had something in me that was scaring off men in general. I could never forget the night I had told Superman I loved him.

*"It's not your strength. If you were an ordinary man leading an ordinary life, I would love you just the same. Superman, do you think that there is a future for us?" I had asked wistfully. With a pounding heart I had stood there waiting for his answer.*

*My heart had sunk when he had looked down. His mouth had been tight, and his eyes so sad that it had taken my breath away. Slowly he had shaken his head.*

*"No," he had said quietly. "No, Lois. That would not work. No matter how you feel for me no matter how I ..." His voice had broken, and the words that should have followed remained unsaid. I had seen him swallow, and for a moment I had thought he would not go on. "Think of it, someone like me must not commit his life to just one human. I would only get you in danger..." "Again he had paused and swallowed, as if the threat posed by him had been far greater than words could ever express. "There... there will be no future for us."*

*"Don't you think that I have a say in what I am willing to risk?" I had asked him, angry that he apparently wanted to make such a decision alone.*

*I had tears in my eyes and a big lump in my throat. My mind had been racing, and my thoughts had been just as confused as my feelings. On the one hand a horde of butterflies had fluttered through my stomach, stimulated by the coded declaration of love Superman had just made. On the other hand I had felt with every fiber of my heart that he would not change his mind, no matter what I said or did to him.*

*"Not in this case, Lois. No," he had responded, even quieter than before.*

*Then he had turned on his heel to go, and before I had even seen him disappear, I had felt a strong gust of wind in my face. Superman had left me. Petrified I had stared at the open window. Only the wavering curtain had verified that the Man of Steel had ever been there.*

At that time I had promised myself never to speak with him again. But finally I had realized that he was right. A relationship with him would inevitably make me a target. That did not scare me too much. But how could I expect Superman to live in constant worry? After several weeks of sulking silently, our relationship had returned to a fairly normal level. His visits became less frequent. When he came, he mostly talked about the things he had learned during the day, things we could use for our stories.

"... I offer you a massage?" a gentle, feminine voice woke me from my daydreams.

Confused I blinked and discovered baffled that I was standing right in front of the door leading to the spa. A hotel clerk smiled at me kindly. She wore wide, white linen trousers and a dark red polo shirt with the hotel crest embroidered on her chest. Her hair was pinned up in a casual knot. But even without the proper clothing worn by the rest of the hotel staff, she had an air of trustworthiness. Everything about her promised total relaxation: her smile, her muscular upper arms, and a welcoming gesture with which she pointed toward the door. Before I really knew what I did, I felt myself slowly nodding.

"Oh, hello, Darling. There you are!" A second voice, this time male, finally returned me to the present.

Out of nowhere, Clark appeared behind me. His hair was slightly damp, and he smelled like he had just showered. I had to force myself not to stare at him open-mouthed. Perhaps it was his broad smile that rendered me speechless. Of course he was smiling at the woman in front of us rather than at me. But lately my expectations were easy to exceed.

Stunned I followed the smiling woman simply because she made such a welcoming gesture. Without any explanation of where he had actually been, Clark followed us. He put his arm around me, intensifying the dreamlike state that I absolutely did not want to wake from. Even if everything was just a beautiful illusion, why should I not enjoy it? Why should I not imagine that everything was true? Who would trade such a dream for the ugly reality? Especially if this reality meant that after this story Clark would no longer be my partner. Certainly not me!

Behind the door to the spa there was a wide corridor. Soft lights illuminated it slightly, just enough to see everything. The walls were sand-colored, and Moorish-fashioned doors led to rooms on both sides of the hallway. Close to the ceiling an elaborate ornament decorated the plain wall. The woman stopped in front of a dark blue door.

"It's great that your husband has joined you. Massaging each other is part of our program," she said kindly. "This creates a new sense of intimacy. Enjoy your time together. This will help you to gain a new perspective on your relationship. We also offer courses," she continued, opening the door for us. "In this room you will find everything you need. For questions, please do not hesitate to contact us." With another welcoming gesture, she urged us to enter. "Have a nice afternoon." She winked at us and then closed the door behind us. Suddenly we were alone.

The spacious room was covered with a light wood floor. The walls were painted in a delicate red that gave the whole place a Mediterranean touch.

"What..." Clark gasped as if he were about to suffocate.

Horror was written across his face as it dawned on him where we had been led to. His gaze shifted restlessly from the massage table towards the cupboard in the far corner of the room. Bottles and vials were sitting on it, filling the room with the scent of different oils. Clark winced, as if those bottles were telling of his impending doom. His reaction made me incredibly angry. Did he like treating me like this? Did he like to kiss and hug and caress me, only to dump me the next moment?

"Keep up appearances, Clark," I whispered to him in the dim

light.

I moved my lips rather than actually saying anything, but my voice sounded sharp. Perhaps Clark would later accuse me of setting this whole thing up in order to torment him. Or simply to punish him for ignoring me. But the truth was that I, myself, was completely taken by surprise. I had not planned to end up here and certainly not alone with Clark. Much less had I had any intention of doing, what my hands started to do on their own volition.

They began nestling with the top button of my blouse and opened it slowly. Clark stared at me open-mouthed, his face becoming paler by the minute. His hands clenched into fists. It scared me to see him tremble. He stood before me, frozen to the spot, gazing at me — or seeing right through me. I was not too sure. I was already uncomfortable but soon started to embarrass myself even more as my hands went on fumbling with the second button. I protracted the process unnecessarily.

Did I want to seduce Clark? I wondered involuntarily, already knowing the answer. Of course I wanted this. But not now and not here, not when he looked so tormented. I would have liked to talk myself into believing that this was just my reporter skills keeping up the pretence. But I knew better than this. Meanwhile my fingers reached for the third button.

“Lois,” Clark muttered, sounding helpless and lost.

Suddenly I could hear his breath, which had become almost imperceptibly faster. Fine beads of sweat covered his forehead, merging into larger droplets that eventually ran down towards his nose.

“Lois,” he repeated breathlessly, a pleading tone to his voice.

“They would expect a couple to spend some quality time together! After all we want to reconcile, don’t we? Don’t you blow our cover,” I said threateningly. I stood there, my hands on my hips and glared at him angrily, a fury teaching a green reporter how his work was to be done. But Clark was not that newbie anymore. When I was professional enough to endure this farce, then he had to be too!

His reaction turned my anger into white hot rage. Not arousal, but fear was simmering through the room. Clark was afraid. This realization rendered me speechless. Why did I frighten him? Was Mayson waiting in his apartment? Was he afraid of being lured into cheating on her?

But then he visibly relaxed, though his movements still seemed rigid and tense. Clark made a step towards me. Suddenly my fingers worked faster. I opened the last few buttons and shrugged of my blouse before Clark had reached me. My heart was pounding against my chest, and my mind raced. I wondered what had gotten into me that I deliberately undressed right in front of Clark.

‘It is just a massage, just a massage,’ I tried to calm myself down, repeating the thought like a mantra, over and over again.

I felt ridiculous standing there in underwear, repeating my mantra, and slowly dying from embarrassment. But I was Mad Dog Lane and had decided to get back at Clark. After all I was known for jumping head-first into danger. Clark himself had said that more than once. Or he had used to. Gathering all my courage, I climbed onto the massage table and reached at my back to unclasp my bra. Then I folded my arms under my head, waiting for whatever Clark had in store for me. My heart beat madly, its thundering sound filling my ears.

The whole time Clark had not said a word. But now that I was less preoccupied with myself than with what he would do, I heard him sigh softly. His steps were slow and a little clumsy, as if he was carrying something heavy. But he came closer, though apparently reluctant. I lifted my head and looked at him. My expression must have been pretty grim, for he quickened his pace, grabbing a bottle of massage oil. He opened the lid with trembling hands.

Gingerly, as if he was afraid of breaking the bottle, he set it down next to me. I smelled its nice flowery scent. For a brief moment Clark disappeared from my view but soon returned with a light brown towel that he spread over my back.

“Well, Lois,” he said, his voice hoarse and barely above a whisper. “Do you like it gentle or rough?”

Although I had seen him prepare himself, I had not realized until this moment that he would actually do it. He would give me a massage without a doubt. The mantra that I had been repeating suddenly seemed utterly pointless. There was no way this was going to be just a massage, not for me anyway. Not when I so desperately hoped for more.

“Ge .. gentle,” I replied, my mouth dry.

I looked at him over my shoulder and saw his thin lips as he nodded. He took the bottle and gave a small amount of massage oil into his hands. His fingers were warm as he touched me, smoothly spreading the oil on my back. The flowery scent became more intense, making me dizzy as I felt my body relax.

Clark began massaging me slowly. His hands touched me lightly, resting on the small of my back for a moment. Then he moved them up my spine, across my shoulders, and back down along my sides to resume a new cycle. A pleasant warmth spread through every fiber of my muscles, and his gentle movements made me skin tingle with an increasing amount of anticipation every time he touched me.

“Mmhhh,” I moaned softly as his hands wandered further down my back. Wherever he had learned this, he was great at what he did. The smooth movement made me doze off until I was barely awake anymore.

“You like this?” Clark said in a hoarse voice, sounding actually worried that I might not enjoy his ministrations.

“Yeah,” I answered, stretching and savoring the warmth of his hands.

They were soft, softer than I had expected from a man. I felt their strength on my back, and I knew that he was holding back. The movements were well controlled, like everything about Clark. Quietly I wished that this would affect me no more than it apparently affected Clark. But every time his hands moved down my back, his fingers grazed the side of my breasts though only barely so. Under different circumstances I surely would not have even noticed. But I was desperately longing for his love, his touch, and his affection. I enjoyed this moment so much because I knew that this was most likely as close as we were ever going to get. Involuntarily my breathing quickened, and the heat began to spread through my belly.

I closed my eyes, immediately drifting off to the dream land that I kept visiting each night. It was a place where Clark bent down and ... When he started to massage the muscles along my spine, I could have screamed in frustration. Even the most erotic moment of this so-very- innocent massage had finally passed. Why could I not force him to love me, to show his affection, if not in real life then at least for this blissful, fleeting moment? But Clark simply did what I had told him to do — he massaged me perfectly but without the passion that I longed to feel. Why could I not just get over him?

My back was burning. It was difficult to tell if that was due to warmth or unfulfilled desire. Clark let his hands continue to slide up and down my back. I had to admit that it felt good. The heat was pleasant, and I did not know when I had ever felt this relaxed, lying on my stomach, completely at someone else’s mercy. With Clark I was safe.

The warmth of his hands spread out on my left shoulder. I tried to fathom what he was doing. What I felt was that his hands formed a kind of V, but I was not sure. Ultimately it did not matter; I wanted to enjoy the moment as long it lasted. The way Clark was behaving lately, it could not be long.

Then suddenly his hands stilled, resting on my back. Their

slight pressure increased, and I held my breath as the firm strokes of his massage turned into a gentle caress. His fingers brushed my skin, drawing slow circles. His touch was different; this was not part of the massage. I felt soft fabric on the small of my back that was definitely not the towel.

And then something warm and moist touched my shoulder. A guttural sound mingled with the moan that escaped me. For a moment I was mesmerized, paralyzed. Was Clark kissing me? My heart began to thump loudly. His being so aloof seemed like nothing but the shadowy memory of a bad dream that quickly faded. I felt his velvet tongue on my skin and the gentle play of his lips as he continued what his hands had begun.

I was lost in this completely unexpected feeling. I lay there motionless, desperately struggling with the desire to turn around and return the kiss. I longed to taste his lips. But I feared that I would scare him off. So I enjoyed this moment of pure bliss, knowing that breathing too quickly could very well burst my bubble. I did not want this dream to shatter into a million pieces, leaving me thrown back into a reality that I could hardly stand. For now Clark slowly covered my shoulders with tender kisses. My skin tingled under his touch, and I could feel Clark's warmth spreading from my shoulders, inflaming my body.

But the magic of the moment was too soon disrupted by a door that slammed shut before I even noticed that his lips had left me. When I looked up, Clark was gone. My heart was still thumping loud in my ears. Only a wet spot on my shoulder proved that I had not been dreaming. I slowly sat up, covering myself with the towel that had been lying on my back. My shoulder still tingled from his touch, leaving me with a faint notion of what might have been.

"Clark?" I asked, needlessly. I knew very well that he would not reply. "Damn it, Clark, why are you doing this to me?" I swore softly but no less fervently. It was just another question that had to remain unanswered.

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A stultifying disappointment spread through me. I did not want to leave this room, not ever. Staying hidden seemed like my best option. Yet, a part of me wanted to strangle Clark. For a while Mad Dog Lane struggled with that shy, hurt Lois who dearly remembered his tender kisses. Anger and frustration were wrestling with each other in silence. I did not quite know if I should confront Clark or throw in the towel. I had certainly had enough of this game we kept playing. I had to know once and for all. If Clark did not know what he wanted from me, well... this could just as well become my decision.

Mad Dog Lane did not simply retreat; she wanted to give Clark a piece of her mind. So I got up and gathered the piece of clothing that was testament to my humiliation. Inwardly I cursed myself. Why had I done this anyway? There had been no one watching but Clark. By trying to seduce him, I had given him the means to hurt me more than any other man ever had. I hurriedly got dressed again, hoping that this would save me from the memories.

I walked back more depressed than I had been before. Clark had been right about one thing — Perry really should not have assigned us on this story. Did our editor have any idea how bad things were between us? Knowing Perry, I had no doubt that he did. He was aware of everything that was going on in the newsroom. He surely had not missed out on our problems. He had certainly intended to help us solve them. However, I was not sure we still could.

I left the spa area and crossed the lobby. This time I looked neither left nor right but headed for the lift. I was not sure I would find Clark in our hotel room. But I lacked a better idea. This time I liked the dreary elevator much better than before. I was grateful for being alone with the quiet, constantly smiling newscaster. So I could clench my fists while staring at the wood-

paneled walls rather than looking at a kissing couple with daggers in my eyes. I did not dare look into the mirror on the far side of the lift.

Eventually the elevator stopped. The doors opened slowly, revealing the bright view of the hotel corridor we had walked down barely an hour ago. Where Clark had kissed me... I closed my eyes for a moment, fighting off the memories. I did not want to start dreaming again. Those silly daydreams only served to make things worse.

I paced, almost ran down the hall, with only one goal in mind. This had to be over — once and for all. I needed to see Clark and talk to him. It had been stupid to hope that we could ever be more than just partners. And I would never be able to get over him if I did not confront him now. I had to know what he wanted, and I needed to give him a piece of my mind — one way or another we had to find a solution.

My heart was pounding when I put the key card into the lock. The door burst open, and I rushed into the room. I had half expected to see Clark packing. But the suitcases stood in a corner untouched. The only sound came from the bathroom. Someone had turned on the shower. So he was hiding where he knew I would not follow him! White hot rage infused me. I could not quite believe what I was hearing. He ran out on me — leaving me half naked on the massage table — to take a shower? Had he not been taking a shower right before he had joined me in the spa? He could not possibly be taking showers every time he disappeared!

Instinctively I held my breath and crept closer. The bathroom door was ajar. For a moment I just stood beside the door, indecisively. I wanted to turn around and leave. It simply did not feel right to spy on Clark. But my curiosity soon gained the upper hand. I pulled open the door and peered inside. Clark stood under the water jet, his whole body tense. His hands were clenched into fists which he had pressed against the walls of the shower. Water ran in streams down over his perfect chest. His lips moved silently.

He did not even notice me. Clark just stood there motionless with his eyes closed and took a shower. My gaze wandered over the perfect shape of his stomach, half hidden behind the frosted glass. My cheeks burned with embarrassment when I saw I had not been the only one affected by this massage.

"Oh, my God," he muttered under his breath, and a deep groan escaped his throat. I felt the urge to go and leave him alone. But I was glued to the spot. "What am I supposed to do?" his husky voice broke the silence.

One of his fists slid down the glass wall and opened slowly and moved lower ... I closed my eyes not wanting to look at this intimate moment. But finally I blinked and found that Clark had not done it. His free hand hovered motionless in the air.

"I can't go on like this," he admonished himself, a sobbing sound escaping his throat. "I can't keep doing this ..." He swallowed hard and groaned. "I must stop ..." Clark sounded very desperate, his breathing was labored and he was trembling all over.

Though I felt that it was about time to retreat, I could not help but wonder what he was doing there. Why he was in the shower? And suddenly I realized that there was hardly any steam rising from the shower. At least it was not as much as I would have expected. A bit puzzled I noticed that he was still wearing his socks. Suddenly I understood — Clark took a cold shower.

"Oh, damn!" His sudden curse was so loud that I involuntarily stepped back and stumbled out of the room. Clark had never before raised his voice in my presence. I was not even sure I had ever heard him curse. "Damn!" I heard him again. It sounded muffled and almost suffocated.

Then his voice cracked, uttering something that sounded like a name. I was not sure though.

My confused mind tried to convince me that it had not been Mayson's name he had been crying. But truthfully I just could not bear thinking that he had fantasized about her while massaging me. In his mind he had probably kissed her. I started shaking, barely able to breathe. Clark loved Mayson Drake so much that he could barely stand being away from her.

Ashamed and confused, I crept out of the hotel room. I had absolutely no idea where I could go now. With a sigh I rested my head against the closed door, trying to understand what was going on. Life with Clark was such an emotional roller coaster ride lately.

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*Satisfied, but also a little sad, I had looked at the beautifully set table. With a sigh I had lit the candles and had wondered if anyone would see them but me. It had been Christmas, and for the first time in years, I had decided to celebrate. My family would not be there, but it had probably been better that way. I had invited Perry, but he had intended to spend some time alone with Alice. Jimmy had shrugged at my offer and had said that he had not yet been sure he would come. That usually meant no. Clark had wanted to spend the Christmas holidays with his parents in Smallville. And Superman — well, I seriously had not expected him to show up to a Christmas party. After all he was a busy man, and who knew whether Kryptonians celebrated this holiday at all?*

*Inwardly I had known that this would be another lonely Christmas. But while I had been looking at myself in the mirror checking my dress one last time, I had secretly hoped for a miracle. A moment later, it had happened — the door bell had rung. With a pounding heart I had gone and opened the door. Clark had stood there with a smile and had held out a present.*

*"Merry Christmas, Lois," he had said, beaming with joy.*

Presumably, this night had been the final step in my falling for Clark head over heels. I remembered this last Christmas Eve like a dream. I relished it. We had spent a wonderful evening, danced together and finally looked at the stars. That evening Clark had been the best friend one could ever wish for. Throughout the past year Clark had been my solid rock. He had protected me from another encounter with Lex Luthor. He had helped me to save my sister from Johnny Corbin. Without really noticing it, I had fallen in love with my partner. But the more I longed to be close to him, the further away he moved from me.

I dropped to the floor, leaning against the outside of our hotel room door feeling incredibly miserable. I knew that I should get up. Sooner or later someone would come by and see me like this. That would be most embarrassing. Clark and I were here to find each other. This hotel was amazingly — almost painfully romantic. There was virtually no way to resist the atmosphere. The effect on us had been entirely different though. My legs felt weak, and I could not bring myself to move a limb.

Suddenly I was lying flat on the floor and looked into the face of the man who had caused my confusion. His mouth was opened in surprise, but he did not say anything. Terrified I got up and tried to regain my composure. What was wrong with me? I hardly knew myself anymore. As if nothing had happened in the massage room, Clark leant me a hand and helped me to stand.

"Is everything all right, Lois?" Clark asked me anxiously.

Nothing in his stance reminded me of the fact that he had been standing in the shower uttering curses only minutes ago. Only his hair damp hair proved that I had not been dreaming this. He wore a white shirt and tight jeans. The usual tie was nowhere to be seen. Clark pulled me into the hotel room and hastily closed the door behind him. He looked back at me ruefully.

"I'm sorry for running out on you," he said gravely. "That was inappropriate."

"Indeed, it was," I snapped, shooting him a furious glance. "What's the matter with you, Clark? Why are you behaving this

way? What have I done to you that you hate me so much?" I asked angrily, trying to hide my despair.

Clark's eyes widened. "I don't hate you, Lois! I never could," he exclaimed in horror. "I know that I haven't been a good friend lately," he muttered embarrassed, and his cheeks paled. "I'm sorry, Lois. I'm so sorry."

"You're behaving pretty strangely! Why do you want to leave the Planet all of a sudden? Can you finally tell me what's going on?" I cried crossly and felt tears spilling down my cheeks. That had not been part of the plan. I did not want Clark to see me crying. That it happened only made me angrier. "I admit that I'm not particularly fond of Mayson. But that doesn't mean you have to abandon me just like that. We used to be friends, Kent. Did you forget that?" I asked him glaring at him. My hands were clenched into fists ready for battle.

Clark shook his head slowly. "I could never forget that, Lois," he said in a choked voice. "I just imagined things to be a lot easier ..."

"What did you think would be easier, Clark? Is it her? Is Mayson the one who wants to drive us apart?" I shouted at him. Lashing out at him made it easier not to cry. "I wouldn't put it past her to act like that," I added and realized, startled, that I had actually voiced my thoughts. It did not take me long to overcome my speechlessness. I went on before Clark had a chance to interrupt me. "She's not good for you, can't you see that? I know that I wouldn't listen when you warned me of Luthor. Clark, please, don't make the same mistake now. You shouldn't let yourself to be taken in by her completely, Clark! She is not worth it," I said breathlessly.

"Lois, I love ..." he began, but I could not bear to hear him say that.

"I know that this isn't easy," I interrupted him instead. No one knew better than I how it was to be lovesick. But I could not tell him that. It would only lead to further tears — my tears — when he told me that he just did not feel that way about me. "It never is."

"Lois, I ..." Clark tried once again.

"Why do you want to leave the Daily Planet, Clark? Tell me," I challenged him vigorously.

Clark looked at me with big, sad eyes. "I've already explained that to you," he replied, restrained.

This conversation was apparently as tough on him as it was on me. His voice sounded hoarse as if he, too, had a thick lump in his throat. Was I imagining things, or were his eyes getting wet? He kept his hands balled into fists, his whole body trembling though he obviously tried hard to suppress it.

"No, you didn't," I replied and clenched my fists, too.

"Well, then I haven't told you my reasons," he suddenly blurted out. "But telling you wouldn't change anything. And I don't want to talk about it, Lois." His voice held a threat that sent cold shivers down my spine. Startled I looked at Clark. He had to have noticed my reaction because he instantly slumped down, his expression sad while his hands visibly relaxed. "I'm sorry, Lois. I really didn't want to ... sound so harsh. But this is something I cannot tell you about, really, I can't," he added feebly and turned away from me.

For a while neither of us said anything. I was much too busy wondering what it was Clark felt so uncomfortable talking about. Meanwhile, my partner was staring out of the window as if something out there had caught his interest. But I knew that he just did not want to face me. What had happened that we could not talk to each other anymore? Just when I wanted to ask him, a knock at the door interrupted the silence.

"Mr. and Mrs. White?" The voice was muffled by the door. "Are you there?"

Although Clark had been standing at the window seemingly miles away, he was the first to open the door. A smile appeared on

his face, switched on like a lamp. He stepped back, and we looked into the face of a well-dressed middle-age woman. Her dress was dark, which in combination with her chastely combed hair made her look colorless. She reminded me of one of my grade school teachers.

"It's great that I found you so quickly," the woman smiled and suddenly looked a lot nicer. "My name is Mrs. Arnold, and I am your tutor during your stay here. I'm here to outline the course of your first evening here," she then said in a businesslike manner.

"The course?" Clark asked somewhat confused, saying exactly what I had been thinking.

"Of course." She nodded mysteriously and smiled at us again. "The first evening includes dinner," she explained. "However, this is not just dinner but also a communication exercise."

Slowly it dawned on me that we were attending some kind of therapy. Clark also seemed to have seen the light because he no longer looked quite so confused. Instead he nodded slowly.

"An exercise in communication," he noted. "What exactly does that mean?" He asked cautiously as if the prospect of a therapeutic strategy was reason for distrust.

Mrs. Arnold was still smiling as she stepped further into the room. Her movements bore witness to her self-confidence. With her head held high and her back straightened, she turned to us.

"We have prepared a list of topics for you. We ask you to talk exclusively about them," she said finally. From the side I could see how Clark raised a quizzical eyebrow. I was obviously not the only one who had noticed. "The topics will be handed out at the table and should all be addressed. You don't have to stick to the order. But in your own interest it would be good if you go through all of them even if you may feel uncomfortable about some," she added and made a portentous pause while she looked at us seriously. "The aim of this exercise is to understand that openness and honesty are important elements of a relationship." She nodded at us and turned to leave. "We're glad to welcome you as guests at our institution," she declared before she opened the door and left us alone. Unusually unanimous, we stared at the closed door.

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I could not tell how exactly I had managed to walk towards the restaurant arm in arm with Clark. At some point I just ended up sitting at a table wearing an elegant dress. That was nonsense of course. After all I could not just snap my fingers to find myself in the perfect date. Clark had changed his casual white t-shirt and tight jeans for a dark suit. He looked absolutely stunning. Any attempt to ignore this fact was futile. My partner had obviously decided to play along.

The restaurant was bathed in dim light, and only the glow of the flickering candle on our table lit Clark's face. He looked relaxed, and he actually smiled which made my heart beat involuntarily faster. This ebbing between emotions was unnerving me, and I wondered if Clark might be right about putting a stop to this partnership. I could not stand this roller-coaster ride anymore — it was about time to give up hoping that he would fall in love with me. Did Clark know how I felt for him? If he did, why would he torture me with this incredibly stunning smile?

"So, where do we start?" Clark asked, scanning the list in front of him like a menu. We had already ordered so he could only be talking about our first topic.

I, too, looked at my list. There were some completely innocuous topics but also one that made me break out into cold sweat. Did we have the same list? His brows did not furrow.

"Who was your first kiss?" I asked out of a sudden impulse.

"Hey, that question isn't on my list," Clark protested good-naturedly. He looked at me defiantly like he had done when he had lectured me about 'chumpy' not being a word.

"It's on mine," I retorted, tapping on the appropriate line and felt my stomach clench. We had different lists — this evening was going to be a disaster.

"Oh, is that so?" Clark said, his lips curving into a warm smile. "Her name was Lana Lang. She lived on the neighboring farm in Smallville. In tenth grade she had every intention of me becoming her boy friend," he laughed at the memory but then quickly turned serious. I could see a sad twitch to his mouth. He seemed distressed. Whatever caused it, remained visible for only a moment before it disappeared again.

"Did you like her?" I asked, curious to find out what that sad expression meant.

"Well, honestly, I liked her better before she had chosen me as her future boyfriend. I liked her ... yes ... we even dated a few times. But we never really fit together. Lana always wanted to be popular with everyone, she wanted everything, including being the quarterback's girlfriend ..." Clark added lightly. He did not seem to be uneasy with the topic. He raised his wine glass to his lips and took a sip before he set it back onto the table.

"And you weren't the quarterback?" I asked, glad that we had found a topic that held no bricks to drop. Had I misread the expression in Clark's face?

"No," he replied amused. "I did my best not to qualify for that position," he said with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

"You turned such a position in the football team down to get rid of Lana?" I snorted surprised. I was glad that I had not taken a sip of my wine as well. Otherwise the table cloth would now be covered with red speckles.

"That was one among many reasons," Clark said lightly. "I think it's my turn now, right?" His eyes went over his list then he looked at me thoughtfully. His fingers toyed with the stem of his wine glass; he pushed it gently back and forth apparently without actually noticing what he did. "Who's your best friend?" he asked.

"You," I replied without hesitation.

"Me?" His eyes widened in amazement. "Really? After all ..." He fell silent, and he really did not need to say anything else. I knew what he was thinking. Honestly I was probably just as surprised as he was.

"Yes. I mean I know you're not a woman, and a best friend of a woman usually is a woman too. But that doesn't really matter, does it?" I started to babble, bursting into a nervous giggle. "But yes, when I think about it — nobody knows me better than you do, Clark. Even Lucy doesn't. I like you and I trust you even if lately things are not going so well between us. All in all, I still hope..."

My heart was beating like a steam hammer, and suddenly all composure was gone. I stopped when I realized that I had just been about to confess my love for Clark. The words already sat on the tip of my tongue. Just a little nudge and they would fall down right in front of his feet and would destroy all that might be left of our friendship.

"Lois," Clark said softly, placing his hand on mine. He let it rest there, unaware that his touch sent jolts of electricity right through my body. A pleasant tingling sensation spread from his hand. It would have been sensible to withdraw. But there was no way I could have done that. "I would love to say the same about you," he said sadly, and it was just the look in his eyes that kept his words from sounding offensive. "But the way I have been behaving lately, I don't deserve a friend like you," he added, ultimately taking the edge off his words.

"Clark, why don't we try to get back to the way things were between us? Please tell me what it is that is standing between us so that we can work on it." I begged him, but he just shook his head.

"I can't, Lois. Basically there is nothing that would prevent us from being friends. Nothing except my being so achingly

stupid,” he smiled wryly and still looked so sad that it literally tore my heart.

I felt the sudden impulse to embrace him and kiss his pain away. But he was certainly going to take that badly. Besides, this whole situation was harder on me than on my partner with the puppy dog eyes. For a moment I fought a quiet battle, trying to convince myself that I was brave enough to take the first step. But then I chickened out, returning to our task of this evening.

“If you were an animal, what would you like to be?” I changed the subject rather abruptly and wondered why I had chosen this of all questions. Probably because there was no way I could screw this one up.

Clark looked at me thoughtfully. There was not the slightest hint in his expression to give away how he felt about this change of topic. All I could see was his puzzlement. But the sad expression finally disappeared and was replaced by a smile that made my heart race again. Inadvertently I had only succeeded in making things worse. If Clark kept smiling like that, I was definitely going to lose it.

“This is a difficult question,” he squirmed and spent a while readjusting his glasses. Then he cleared his throat. “I think I would like to be a dog.”

“A dog?” I asked stunned and reached for my wine glass to keep me from staring at Clark. “You’d like to be a dog?” I repeated and could not bring myself to take a sip of my wine. My eyes were glued to him.

“What’s wrong with that?” Clark replied innocently, while I tried to imagine my partner as a dog — with a leash and a wagging tail. It just did not fit.

“Dogs aren’t free; they always do what their owner wants...” I pointed out, but Clark quickly interrupted me with a hearty laugh.

“I can see you’d rather be a cat — not tied to anyone. It’s always in control of its family but not quite a part of it,” Clark said and somehow managed to make these character traits sound negative. “I’d gladly give up my freedom to be part of something...” he went on softly and wistfully. His gaze fixed on the tablecloth, now Clark took the wine glass in hand, drank, and hastily put it down again. “Would you excuse me for a moment, Lois?” He asked, then stood up, and hurried off toward the restrooms.

Confused I stared after him. Why did I doubt that a full bladder had driven him off? Once again he had disappeared in the middle of a serious conversation, and I would gladly have known where he actually went. He could not seek refuge in the shower every time he went missing! I nervously glanced at the clock to see that not half as much time had passed as I had assumed. Our food had not arrived yet, and we had two long lists of topics ahead of us. So far it had not been that bad. But looking at that list again made my stomach clench painfully.

<Did you cheat on me?> was the first item of many.

How were we supposed to talk about this one? Technically Clark had not been cheating on me. But since we were “the Whites” for the time being, Mayson was his mistress. Even the simple confirmation was probably more than I could bear tonight. But this could hardly be called a conversation. Besides there were other questions I had to ask if Clark said yes. Involuntarily I took a sip of wine in order to suppress my soaring panic.

“Ms. Lane,” someone next to me said softly. I nearly choked on my wine as I once again looked into the face of the Englishman.

“What do you want, Mr. Wells?” I snapped but not so loud that the whole restaurant was bound to overhear. “Back in the hall, I already told you that you’d have to wait until we return to the office.”

“In the Hall?” he asked confused, staring at me blankly. “Then I’m obviously not quite where I wanted to go. Oh my

goodness, these trips keep confusing me. What do I do now?” He murmured. “Excuse me Ms. Lane. I didn’t want to bother you,” he quickly apologized and bowed. Then he hurried out of the restaurant, leaving me baffled. It was bad enough that one man kept running out on me, why did there have to be two of them?

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“Enjoy your meal,” the waiter said friendly. A pained smile appeared on his face as he looked at the empty chair across the table. “Hopefully your husband comes back soon. It would be a shame if we had to reheat the food for him. I’m afraid it wouldn’t be as delicious.” He nodded at me briefly, then looked up and smiled, visibly relieved. He had discovered Clark. My partner came over to us with flushed cheeks and an embarrassed smile.

“You were long gone,” I chided him with a significant glance at the clock, thus emphasizing that twenty minutes had passed.

“I’m very sorry, Lois,” Clark said contrite. He waited until the waiter was gone before he finally spoke again. I suddenly realized that I was tapping my fingers on the table impatiently while I shot my so-called best friend angry glances. “I ... I was held up.”

“Oh yeah? What was it, Clark? Was your zipper jammed?” I hissed, took my silverware, and vowed to ignore Clark for the rest of the evening. From the corner of my eye, I discovered his deepening blush with grim satisfaction. Angrily I split a potato in two parts, then three, until suddenly I had turned most of it into mash.

“Lois...” Clark tried but did not get far.

“You know what,” I interrupted him rudely, “I don’t care.” I shrugged. Let him use the men’s room or the shower any way he wanted. “It would just be nice if you tried to keep up this marriage for a single evening.” The rest of the potato fell victim to my anger, and I was beginning to wonder why I was not the one who kept running out.

“You’re right, and I’m sorry, Lois,” Clark said softly and looked at me concerned as I worked on the potato. Not much would be left of it, and I did not even like mashed potatoes that much. “I ... I’ve heard them talking again outside,” Clark whispered across the table in a sudden change of topic. I could only look at him quizzically. Confused I furrowed my brows and tried to understand what he was talking about. What could he have overheard in the restroom if he had been there, that was? “The bellboy keeps observing us.”

“You mean ...” Suddenly I remembered what we had heard in the hallway outside our room a couple of hours ago. Had I become become such a lousy reporter that I had forgotten about the only lead that might turn out as a story?

“We’d better not discuss this here,” Clark said then. “The issue is not on our list.” His eyes sparkled, and for a brief moment I recognized my best friend Clark. “Where would you have liked to spend your honeymoon?” He changed topics in a jiffy making me even more confused.

I did not want our argument to be swept under the rug. Especially not after this had earned me mashed potatoes swimming in gravy. I would have preferred an open fight over returning to our tradition of ... well, not talking about our problems.

Honeymoon — the nerve of that man.

But we sat together at a table. We were surrounded by other couples, sitting at their tables, and most likely watching us. They were probably just waiting for me to turn this conversation into a scene.

“There was no honeymoon, Clark,” I replied indignantly and took the first bite before I used the fork for worse things than mashing potatoes. Defiantly I looked at him, quietly telling him that it was his turn now to keep this conversation going. It really was not my fault that he was being so distant. I had tried to be his friend.

"I know," he said simply. "It's a hypothetical question anyway, isn't it? The Lois I know would most likely spend her honeymoon hunting for a story worth a Pulitzer," he teased me good-naturedly. "Or did you have something special planned with Lex?" Clark finally started eating. Despite the good food he kept his attention on me, eyeing me constantly.

"Do we have to talk about him again?" I asked acidly and drove my fork into a piece of meat. "No, I had nothing planned with him. Lex did the planning, but I assume you already knew that." Did he really need to mention my unbelievably poor taste in men? It was already bad enough that Clark was the culmination of my list of notorious liars and unfaithful guys. Clark was not either of those, but my streak of unsuitable dates remained unbroken. I had finally fallen for a man who had no interest in me whatsoever.

"I'm sorry, Lois," Clark replied, honestly contrite. "So where would you like to go to if money didn't matter?" His question sounded like a peace offering. Again the famous Clark-smile appeared on his face that made it impossible to stay angry. He had always had this effect on me, even before I had fallen in love with him.

"Where would I want to go?" I repeated as I reluctantly decided to play along. "Somewhere with the sun, a beach, and the sea..." I said dreamily and immediately began to imagine living on a desert island with my old Clark. I saw the two of us on the beach, playing in the waves, soaked to the skin, but incredibly happy. My imagination was like a cheesy movie. The kisses were borrowed from a distant past, when Clark had still been the lovable, green reporter.

"Ultimately, it wouldn't matter to me where I am, Clark" I suddenly heard myself say. "It's the person I'd spend my honeymoon with who matters — the right man." I looked at him seriously and discovered an amused smile on his lips.

"Who would have thought that Lois L..." He managed just in time to swallow my last name, obviously remembering where we were. "... is a true romantic." Clark sighed theatrically and looked at me again with that mischievous expression that literally took my breath away. "And yet you haven't had a single date since Lex," he added quietly, flashing me an anxious glance.

I rolled my eyes. "Are we actually talking about this issue again?" I asked indignantly. "I had dates, Clark."

"Oh yeah? With whom? Lenny Stoke? I hardly think that he counts as a date," Clark protested, shaking his head.

"Mind you, I even have a date at this very moment," I said pointedly.

Clark choked and started coughing. With a certain satisfaction I watched him struggle for air. Even so, I felt tears burning in my eyes. How dare he? How dare he suggest a date with another man, as if this did not matter to him any more than my buying a new pair of shoes?

<You could at least pretend you were jealous>, I thought sadly as I eyed him over the rim of my wine glass. Clark coughed one last time and calmed down again. I shot him a venomous glance he probably did not even notice. He could at least have the decency to embarrass himself in front of everyone, if he spurned my feelings like that.

"Have you cheated on me, Clark?" I hissed, staring daggers at him. I was determined not to let him off the hook, not until he told me all there was to say.

"What?" he gasped and suddenly paled.

"You heard me," I replied coldly. "Do you have a mistress, a girlfriend to sweeten the lonely nights?" I put my glass down on the table, so hard that it rattled.

"That ... that question cannot possibly be on your list," Clark choked out and looked at me pleadingly. Did he seriously expect me to laugh and confess that I had just been kidding? I relentlessly pushed my list of questions towards him.

"When you're done reading, you can also answer the sub items, Clark," I added and watched as beads of sweat appeared on my partner's forehead. He scanned the list several times and eventually had to acknowledge that I had every right to ask these questions. "Given your dates with Mayson, I'm assuming that your answer to my first question is 'yes', isn't it?" My own heart clenched painfully because I was not sure whether I was willing to bear the consequences.

With trembling hands Clark handed the list of questions back to me. It took a while before he looked up from his plate and faced me. He looked really awful, at least as miserable as I felt. No wonder he had not wanted to take this assignment. But then Clark seemed to gather his composure and leaned back in his chair.

"I broke up with Mayson, Lois," he said hoarsely. His voice was soft, barely above a whisper, but I understood him clearly. "We dated a few times, but that was all we did." Clark's lips became thin with tension. He audibly breathed in and out. His eyes were fixed on me as if there was no one else but me in this restaurant. "I certainly wouldn't call her my mistress," he added roughly.

Utterly confused I looked at Clark. I had seen him with Mayson, had seen their kisses. Clark had dated her only yesterday. Had he actually told her to get lost? I could hardly imagine. After all he was crazy about that girl. Had it not been her driving him into the shower?

"Oh yeah? What else has she been to you, Clark? I really didn't think you were so much into one-night stands," I replied, angry that he actually thought he could deceive me. "Although — haven't you been with Cat?" I added scornfully.

"No," Clark said through clenched teeth. "I didn't sleep with Cat or with Mayson for that matter." Then suddenly Clark jumped up and stormed off. I did not suppose he was heading for the restroom again.

Taken aback I watched my partner leave. That Mayson had not succeeded in seducing Clark was beyond my comprehension. She had been trying really hard. However, that thought did nothing to comfort me. If they had waited, she had been more to him than a woman to have casual sex with. Though I liked the idea of Clark not sleeping around, I was devastated. This had to mean that he had loved Mayson in a way, he would never love me. That was worse than I had ever dared imagine. But then why had he broken up with her? Or had she left him, and now his male pride would not let him admit that?

I was still busy staring at the door through which Clark had left the restaurant, when a smiling waiter approached the table.

"With regards from the chef," he said exuberantly, serving a delicious smelling chocolate mousse. "Will your husband be back?" His smile was friendly, yet anxious and not quite genuine. Perhaps he was afraid Clark and I would ruin the success rate of their couples therapy. What would he say if he learned that we were not even married?

"No, I don't think he's coming back," I said with genuine regret. "He didn't feel well." I wondered why I even started inventing excuses for him. Had I really sunk so low? "The food was really tasty," I said for good measure before I dipped my spoon into the mousse. The waiter gave me a warm smile before he slipped away.

Finally I was alone with this dream of chocolate. The taste was so comforting that all of a sudden I realized how unhappy I really was. Tears filled my eyes and another spoonful of dessert was the only thing that kept me from breaking down completely. I do not think I had ever needed chocolate as badly as I did now, not even after almost marrying Lex Luthor. Did Perry know what he had asked of us, assigning us on this story?

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*Concrete had stuck on my clothes, my hair, and my skin. I*

had not cared. Calling Superman had not been for my sake. Dr. Hamilton had naively committed some bad mistakes, but he was a good man, he had deserved a second chance. On the other hand, I had contemplated simply dying in the concrete. Had I really wanted a life without Clark? Lost and alone, knowing that I had not even told him how much he had meant to me?

But now my lonely life had me back, and I had been embarrassed for even thinking about giving up. Clark had died to protect me. It was my duty to honor his gift of life. While I had stood there covered in concrete facing Superman, a shiver had run through me. I had vowed silently to be more careful.

"Is everything all right, Lois?" Superman had asked worriedly and had looked at me with a strange expression. His eyes had been wide, and he had not seemed to be sure whether he should stay or fly away. I had not been able to help but think that I had not had his undivided attention.

"Y. Yes," I had replied softly, and then when I had thought about it, I had shaken my head. "No...I should have told Clark that... I don't know if anything will ever be all right again," I had murmured sadly. But I had also felt a certain relief that I had finally told someone, that I had finally voiced my feelings for Clark. "Superman, I miss him so much." A familiar lump had built up in my throat, indicating that I had been barely able to keep from crying. It had never been more difficult than at this moment. "My best friend is ..." I had gone on, feeling that I could not actually say it. "I miss him so much..." I had repeated depressed. My tears had begun to flow freely. I had not been able to stop them, and I had no longer wanted to.

Superman had looked at me with a pained expression. I had known, or at least had suspected, that he had felt just as guilty as I had. His lips had parted as if to say something, but instead he had nodded at me briefly. He had mumbled something and had flown up into the sky. I had assumed that he would have rather taken care of the bad guy than have engaged in this conversation. We both had suffered a loss and each of us had his own way to cope.

I had looked at a miserable Dr. Hamilton who had been standing next to me, still busy with his sneezing fit. His clothes had been sticking to his body, and he had shivered. He had also lost; his dream had been shattered. Superman had ensured that the clones he had created would cause no more damage. It had been a bad night for all of us. As a dark figure had appeared in the distance, I had been afraid that this night held more in store for us than even we had bargained for. Once Superman had left, the police would certainly show up. It had always been that way. Tonight would not be any different. The last few days had taken their toll on me, and I had not had the strength to face another interrogation.

"I'm so incredibly sorry for what I did, Ms. Lane," Dr. Hamilton had sniffed and had looked at me ruefully. It had not been the first time he had raised the topic.

"Nobody could have guessed that it would turn out that way," I had tried to comfort him and had rubbed my eyes.

"I will never again experiment with genes," he had vowed. "As soon as I get back to my lab, I'm going to destroy all my records."

I had nodded. I had had no doubt that he would. Dr. Hamilton might have had committed a terrible mistake, but at least he had the opportunity to learn from it. I had been sure that I would never again get to know someone like Clark. The lesson I had learned had come too late. Try as I might, I had not had the time to tell Clark I loved him, not anymore. Clark had been dead.

The distant figure had come closer. My eyes had been playing pranks on me, like they had so often in the past couple of days. The man who had approached us, had walked like Clark, had touched his glasses like Clark, and had made my heart beat with longing. I had been seeing Clark everywhere since he had

collapsed in the bar right in front of me. He had been the man on the street, the man in the café. And the hallucination had not stopped. The closer the man had come, the more I had been convinced that I had actually seen Clark. And finally, though I had known it could only end in embarrassment, I had run up to him and had hugged him, clung to him.

"Clark! Clark!" I had cried like a drunk. I had half expected him to push me away.

"Lois," he had answered quietly, letting me passionately embrace him.

For several minutes I had pressed my face against his shoulder, inhaling the familiar scent. It had not bothered me that I had still been caked with concrete. This dream was had been too good to let it be ruined by ridiculous concerns about clean clothes. My tormented mind had finally created the man I had so desperately longed to see. Everything had seemed to be genuine — his smell, the feel of his arms embracing me, the warmth that had emanated from him and the whiff of his breath on my hair. Even his voice had sounded like him, comforting me and taking away my pain.

Clark's presence had been probably just another sign that I had finally lost my mind. But having had him back had been all that really mattered to me. What I had thought to be just a brief moment of bliss remained. Clark had stayed with me, strong and tangible. His voice had remained as deep and comforting as it had used to be. I had stepped back and had looked into the sweet face of my partner, the man I had fallen in love with. Only his smile had not returned with him. He had been serious, almost grave, as he had told me how he had so miraculously returned.

I emerged from my memory and found myself sitting on the bed of our hotel room. Vaguely, I remembered walking back alone. The room around me was dark. I did not know how long I had been sitting there. For a moment I considered changing into something more comfortable, but I could not bring myself to get up again. The clock was right next to me, but I could not work up the courage to check it. The nightstand beside the bed and the lamp on it were no more than a barely discernible shape. I liked it that way. I was content sitting there, wallowing in self-pity. I waited for Clark to return from wherever he was now so that I would no longer be alone. Just as alone as I had been when I had thought that I had lost Clark forever. The memory had come back to me involuntarily and with it the question that I had been asking myself for weeks now. Why had Clark come back? If it was so difficult for him to be close to me, why had he told me that he was still alive?

Before I really knew what I was doing, I grabbed the phone and dialed a number. The phone rang a few times before someone took the call. There was a brief moment of silence, then a cough, and then...

"Lucy Lane," my sister said. For a moment I was paralyzed. My tongue was tied. Why on earth had I called my sister? I did not even know her number by heart, and yet ... "Hello? Is anyone there? Lois, is that you?" Lucy asked with an instinct that kept surprising me.

"Yes," I replied weakly, wondering what I was going to say now.

"You're calling late," Lucy remarked, and a look at the clock told me it was true. It was past midnight. Had really so much time passed? "Is this about Clark?" Lucy wanted to know. She was curious, not hostile, as I would have been.

"He hasn't come back yet," I said softly. "We ate together, then he got up and disappeared. And he's still gone." There was silence for a moment. I heard Lucy breathing, probably pondering what to say. "We argued," I added, feeling that I needed to tell her more. "At least I think so." My heart pounded in my ears, once, twice.

"About what?" Lucy asked. "What happened, Lois?"



I told her about the dinner and the forced conversation about our so-called relationship or what was left of it. Finally I got to that last question and to Clark's reaction in particular. Lucy listened patiently while I poured my heart out. Slowly I felt myself calming down though not much.

"... I don't know, Luce," I finally said. "Maybe he's sitting at the bar getting terribly drunk." I had to swallow at the thought. I could not really imagine Clark drowning his sorrows in alcohol. He was always so in control. "I've never seen him drink more than a glass of wine," I added more to myself.

"Have you ever asked Clark why he keeps being so distant?" my sister asked. This time she was clearly the more sensible one of us. Her voice was calm. She sounded focused and patient, even though it was way too late for such a conversation.

"Yes," I replied quietly. "He won't talk about it."

"Why?" Lucy asked, puzzled.

"He doesn't want to talk about that either," I replied and suddenly got a hysterical fit of laughter. "You know, Lucy," I said breathlessly. "... that's funny. Finally, I'm willing to open myself to a man and then he clams up." I kept on laughing until tears ran down my cheeks, and the laughter turned into violent sobs. Lucy endured this with patience. She said nothing, but I could hear her breathe. "I can't take this any longer."

"I know, Lois," she said sympathetically. "Should I come to you? If I catch the next plane, I can be with you tomorrow morning." I felt more tears rolling down my cheeks.

"But... but... you don't have time..." I said haltingly.

"And no money," she added. "But I can hear that you need me, Lois. You are my sister, and I love you."

"Oh, Lucy," I sobbed even harder. "This is really very sweet of you. But I don't think it's necessary. I don't know why Clark is behaving so strangely, but I'm going to find out." Was I trying to convince Lucy, or myself? "Anyway, I'll be fine," I said softly, trying to speak despite the increasing lump in my throat. Then suddenly I heard a scratching noise at the door of the hotel room. "Lucy," I hastened to say. "I think Clark is coming back. Thank you so much for listening."

"I wish you luck," she replied encouragingly. "Goodbye, Sis."

"Goodbye." I hung up, wiping the tears away from my eyes.

Mesmerized I sat on the bed and waited. The scratching grew louder; then I heard something that sounded like a soft curse. For a moment it was quiet, almost eerily quiet. I could hear my own breathing, and my heartbeat thundered in my ears. Would Clark come in, or did he want to spend the night outside the room? Or had I been dreaming, and it was not he? The thought sickened me.

The scratching became a knock. It was hesitant at first but then got more determined. "Lois?" I heard Clark's voice call from outside. "Lois, can you open the door, please?" he asked hoarsely.

It took a while until feeling returned to my limp body. I realized that Clark did not have a key card. It had been in my pocket when he had so unexpectedly stormed out of the restaurant. I slowly got up from the bed and went to open the door. On the way my mind raced. Desperately I tried to brace for the moment. How was I supposed to react?

I could not have been prepared for the sight of him, though. Clark's face was gray, tired, and completely exhausted. The strong smell of alcohol added to my irritation. His shoulders were slumped, as was his whole stance complete with his tie hanging loosely around his neck.

"You've drunk," I realized in horror. My anger vanished into thin air.

"Yes, pretty much," he admitted frankly. "Didn't help, though." He laughed, sounding almost hysterical and shook his head. "And why would it..." He sighed in despair not addressing

me. "Why would it," he repeated disillusioned and looked at me openly. His gaze was amazingly clear; his back straight. "I'm so sorry," he said quietly, nervously shifting from one foot to the other. "I think it's about time to tell you a few things," he added uncertainly and ran his hand through his hair. "Would you let me in?"

"Oh, suddenly you want to explain?" I replied with a furrowed brow. I folded my arms across my chest in order to regain my composure. "What made you change your mind?"

Clark looked towards the floor depressed. "I guess I more than deserve that," he remarked with a wry smile that flashed only for a brief moment in his mouth. "And you've got every right to be angry with me, Lois. But ... could we please discuss this inside? What I'm about to say..." He took a deep breath and slowly released it. "... is nothing we should talk about in the corridor."

Both reluctant and curious, I stepped aside and finally let Clark in. He looked at me gratefully and smiled with relief. Even now, though, sadness was engraved in his lips — a trait that had gradually turned into his constant expression. Gradually it deepened. I closed the door and followed him to the sofas in the middle of the hotel room. Clark slumped down on one of them.

"I'm so sorry for everything I did to you, Lois," he said again, barely daring to look at me. "I keep treating you like... well pretty badly. But I really have no idea how..." He swallowed hard, falling silent.

I waited for him to say more. But he just sat there defeated. He propped his elbows on his legs and buried his face in his hands. It took a while before he would move again. Strained to the utmost, I forced myself to sit down next to him. Almost immediately he moved away from me, looking back at me guiltily. He paused for a moment and slid closer again.

"Clark, what are you doing?" I snapped at him.

"Excuse me, please," he muttered unhappily. "This has become some stupid habit, hasn't it? I shouldn't be avoiding you. But you have to understand ..."

"What do I have to understand?" I asked bitterly.

My question remained unanswered. His eyes rested on me, staring at me more intently than he had in weeks. Mesmerized he raised his right hand to brush a strand of hair behind my ear. His short, gentle touch made my cheek tingle.

"You're so beautiful," he said hoarsely, almost reverently. Running his fingers through my hair, he finally cupped my cheek.

I was a wonderful moment. I wondered whether maybe this was just another dream. Clark leaned in until there were only inches between us. Impulsively I closed the distance and suddenly felt his warm lips on mine. He kissed me tenderly and yet with an unexpected hunger. Our tongues immersed into a slow dance until everything around us was forgotten. What I had been yearning for for weeks, the fulfillment of my desires, was suddenly just in reach. I leaned against him while I explored his body with both hands. I felt his broad, solid shoulders, muscles, and his heart beat. It was on the verge of bursting through his chest.

"Clark," I whispered breathlessly. "Clark," I moaned, hoping that this would never end. If it was just another erotic dream, I did not want to wake up.

His hands were everywhere, stroking me, caressing my breasts. He picked me up effortlessly and carried me over to the bed, gently setting me back down. It was odd that after everything that had happened between us, I did not mind being treated like that. But with Clark I felt absolutely safe. He watched me for a moment as if to make sure that I did not object to taking the next step. As if I ever would... Then he slid next to me and kissed me again, this time slower and even more tenderly. He took his time just like in my dreams. Although I could feel his hunger, his passion, his caress was nowhere near hurried.

"Oh, Lois, I shouldn't have pushed you away," he murmured against my lips. "Forgive me. I thought there was no other way," he pleaded and sealed my mouth with a fervent kiss before I could reply. "But I was wrong..." he whispered hoarsely. "If only I try harder to make this work..."

This kiss deepened, and his words melted away, disappearing into nothingness. It was just he and I. There was nothing more to be said. Clark belonged to me. He was there without any doubt or hesitation.

This had to be a dream. But I did not care. Even if this moment existed only in my dreams, it was real enough. I had waited much too long to finally be with Clark. Tenderly he stroked me, seduced me until my whole body was burning with desire. And when I thought I was about to lose my mind, his gentle caress brought release.

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"That was ..." I was still trying to catch my breath. The world around me was just gradually returning. Clark was smiling more happily than he had been for weeks. He leaned forward and kissed my nose. "Wow ..." I sighed, exhausted but satisfied. "Is this really happening?" I asked with a trembling voice.

"Yes," Clark replied embarrassed. I could almost see him blush in the dark. "I didn't mean to impose on you like that."

My confusion grew. "Please, tell me that I'm not dreaming!" I softly pleaded with him. I snuggled closer into his arm, wanted to feel him, to convince myself that I would not wake up again in an empty bed. His breath tingled on my skin, assuring me with each gentle whiff of air that he was actually there.

Clark kissed me again, his lips gentle like the flutter of a butterfly. "This is no dream," his warm voice whispered reassuringly. "Though it certainly feels like one." His smile warmed my heart. Was he actually back here with me? The mere thought made me dizzy with happiness. I could not avert my eyes for as much as a blink, fearing that all this would burst like a soap bubble if I did.

But Clark remained warm and reliable next to me. I kissed him again. I could not get enough of his lips. Velvety and sweet his tongue caressed me. I felt his hands on my back as he hugged me.

"Oh, Lois," he murmured, caressing my skin. A pleasant shiver ran down my spine. I would never let go of him again. My hands moved over the muscles of his arm, across his back, memorizing the structure of his body like a blind person would.

"Clark, what ..." I said after a while, quickly biting my tongue. I did not want my curiosity to destroy this precious moment. After all I had been through, I wanted to enjoy this as long as it lasted. Not to mention that I felt a little guilty because it had been just me having all the fun.

Dimly I saw his face in front of me. I leaned forward and tasted his lips again which readily opened to the kiss. Oh, how I had yearned for this. The truth was that I did not really care why he had been so distant. All that mattered was that he had stopped running.

"We aren't done yet, Clark," I said huskily, deepening the kiss. With my hand I traced the lines of his abdomen underneath his shirt. I had not even noticed that he was still fully dressed. I stroked him gently and let my hands wander deeper. His breathing became labored. He gasped and suddenly pushed my hands away.

"No, Lois, don't," he choked breathlessly. "I shouldn't have kept this from you... You need to understand that this is very difficult for me. I've never..." Clark swallowed hard and then fell silent again. "Lois," he murmured reverently, and his eyes locked on me. "Oh, God."

Then suddenly his eyes widened. He removed his hands from me and jumped out of the bed. With a frantic cry he stumbled backwards and hit the wall. His face was contorted with terror as

he ran his hands through his hair and covered his eyes. He almost seemed to be suffering pain. Clark was shaking all over and stumbled sometimes to the left, sometimes to the right. Quite clearly he was torn between the impulse to run away and the desire to finally explain what was going on.

"Nonononono," he groaned in despair. "I can't do this! Why on earth did I believe that this could work!" It sounded like a curse. "Forgive me, Lois, please forgive me." His voice was trembling like the rest of his body. With a dull thud Clark hit his head against the wall and then sank down to the floor defeated. "I'm so sorry, Lois," he apologized quietly. I could see the pure terror in his eyes as he looked at me from the ground. "This should not have happened," he said more to himself than to me. "I shouldn't have fancied myself as being able to... It was unfair of me to impose on you..." He made a choking noise.

"It's okay, Clark," I tried to calm him down. Did he actually think that he had done anything to violate me? Anything but that! "I enjoyed every moment of this, Clark. I... I wanted it, too," I whispered and felt a tear run down my cheek. "I've been dreaming of this for so long ... I want us to be..."

"No... no, Lois, please, don't say that. This shouldn't be happening. Oh, I should have known..." Once again Clark made this choking noise, and suddenly I realized that he was sobbing. "I shouldn't have... oh, my God, I knew that..."

Stunned I looked at him and tried to understand what was going on here. Clark had kissed me. He had kissed me not some fantasy of Mayson Drake. He had called me Lois. He had made love to, well, almost had made love to me. But the way he looked now, he clearly was in a bad shape.

He cried.

"Clark?" I began but soon realized that speaking coherently was beyond me. I was completely baffled. "What should not have happened?" I asked again when I remembered that he had said something along those lines.

Clark leaned against the wall. In the dim light of the lamp on the bed stand, he looked defeated. While I was watching him, he opened his mouth helplessly, but no words would come out. Tears glistened in the corners of his eyes, and I could tell that he was struggling to retain his composure. This was so absurd. Clark had done what I been dreaming about for weeks now. So why was he crying?

"Th... this," he replied after a while. "I never... should have kissed you ..." He looked down at his feet. "I shouldn't ... have been so foolish to believe that I could make this work in spite of everything. Now things will be even more difficult."

Nothing of what he said, made any sense to me. "Then why did you kiss me?" I asked in a moment of self-destructive curiosity. "Do you take some perverse pleasure in torturing me?" I shouted at him angrily. "Why are you doing this to me?" I knew I was not going to like the answer, so why did I ask him anyway?

"Because..." Clark again swallowed and ran his tongue over his apparently dry lips. "... I love you."

I said nothing. He had already confessed his love, and yet it felt wrong. Clark's words hit me like a bolt of lightning. I could only sit there and stare at him. My life began and ended in this very moment when he finally said the words I had been longing to hear for weeks. But this was more than I could comprehend. They sounded hollow, meaningless, and — strangely enough — yet deeply honest.

"Lois?" Clark asked quietly as he looked at me. His eyes were still damp, his lips pale and trembling.

"What... how..." I struggled for words, knowing there was really nothing I could possibly say to express how I felt. "How can that be?" I breathed. "You... you cannot love me... you... you barely even look at me..." my voice had become unnaturally high. <You treat me like dirt> — I could not voice that thought. Now it was my turn making a choking noise. "... You hate me."

Again we just stared at each other wordlessly unable to have a conversation. An eternity passed before Clark moved again, and yet another passed until he said something.

"No, Lois, I don't hate you," he said gently, and for a moment his eyes rested on me; he looked at me openly. "I could never hate you." Slowly he stood up again, presumably to further back away from me. "For months I've been trying to come back to my senses and be your friend. But I cannot stand this anymore. I must go..." His voice broke, and he began trembling all over his body again. "I... I can't do this anymore."

"Why, Clark? Why?" I cried quietly, my voice breaking as I tried to put all those questions I had on my mind into one. "What's the matter?" My gaze followed Clark as he slowly crept over to the window. For a while he stood there motionless and stared into the night. "I love you too, Clark." My voice was no more than a hoarse whisper. I could not believe that I still felt this way. That was absolutely unbelievable, and yet it was true. "I love you," I repeated, afflicted. Clark winced noticeably when he heard my words. "So much," I continued, determined to finally confess this.

"Please don't say that, Lois," Clark growled, depressed. "Please don't make this any more difficult for us than it already is," he pleaded, leaning his hand against the wall beside the window.

I quickly averted my eyes. It hurt to listen to Clark's dismissal. I'd have liked to escape this situation, but I did not know where to go. And I could not just leave without getting any explanation at all. He owed me that at least.

"You're going to tell me the truth now, or I won't let you go," I said icily, ready to get in his way should he attempt to leave. "And I don't want to hear any stupid excuses, not after you broke my heart. You've used me without wasting a thought on what this might do to me. You call that love? I deserve better than that."

If looks could kill, Clark would have immediately collapsed in front of the window. He remained on his feet though, apparently aware of the angry woman behind him. He turned around.

"You're right, I owe you an explanation," he replied softly. "I thought that it would be better for both of us if you didn't know the truth. I'm sorry, Lois."

His right hand jerked up to his glasses, once, twice. Then he took them off and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Without his glasses the dark circles under his eyes were even more striking. His face looked strange and yet familiar in a way that sent a chill down my spine.

"Lois," he muttered uneasily and took a step toward me. His voice blended with that of another. "You need to understand, that I never enjoyed lying to you. I often thought about telling you. It's just ..." his voice trailed off. Even without him actually saying it, all the pieces suddenly fell into place. The voice, the eyes, all the excuses, all the strange things made sense.

"You're Superman," I replied flatly and tried to grasp the meaning of his revelation.

"Yes," he admitted quietly. "I had really been hoping that I didn't need to tell you, for your own sake." He swallowed hard.

"How ... how could you ... how dare you?" I stammered. "For my sake?" I laughed, but actually I felt only hot burning rage. "What were you thinking, you idiot?" I snapped. "Did you enjoy this? Did you like watching me while I made a complete fool of myself, being so head over heels in love with you that I've completely lost my mind?" Again I laughed bitterly. "Oh, I should never have gotten involved with you in any way whatsoever!"

My breath came in panting gasps. Furious I gathered up my clothes, slipped into my pants, and found a sweater. Suddenly I was at the door; my hand wrapped around the handle. My heartbeat thundered in my ears, and for a moment it was all I heard. Clark stood in the dim light of the hotel room and looked

strangely naked without his glasses. His tie hung loosely around his neck. A couple of shirt buttons were opened. Even though they only revealed his bare skin, I was no longer fooled. Superman was standing right in front of me nervously running his hand through his hair. My heart pounded louder, stronger, and the walls seemed to close in on me until I was afraid I would suffocate. While Clark's eyes widened, I turned the handle of the door, took a step forward, and then stumbled through the open doorway into the hallway.

A hoarsely whispered, "Lois," followed me on the way out. Then there was silence until I just heard my breath and the barely suppressed sobs that shook my body.

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Utterly confused, I ended up in the park. My legs seemed to have chosen this path on their own volition. Tired and with puffy eyes, I squinted into the night and fought with the darkness. Rain fell as a dense curtain that completely surrounded me. Up until now I had not even realized that it was raining. The weather matched my mood. It was unusually cold, and I held my arms tightly wrapped around my body. It did not help much. The cold crept into my limbs, increasing this feeling of loneliness that almost stole my breath away. I desperately wanted to understand what had just happened. But I could not. Memories of my encounter with Clark swirled into a confusing dance of images that appeared in rapid succession. And with each repetition they made less sense.

<Because... I love you.>

<You're Superman!>

<I had really been hoping that I didn't need to tell you, for your own sake.>

Like the colors in a kaleidoscope, the words blurred into one another. Why had he concealed all this? How could Clark be Superman? How could he treat me like this? Despite everything that had happened, I had always considered Clark as a man with more integrity. He treated women with respect, he did not torture them! I knew him or had at least thought I did. It seemed so unreal — like a bad dream. I had seen it with my own eyes, and yet I struggled desperately against this realization.

"Lois?" a low voice beside me said. Involuntarily my heart rate soared until I realized that it was Clark who had emerged from the darkness. I winced and looked at him shocked. In the moonlight he seemed even paler than before.

"Go away ..." I muttered reluctantly and turned my back on him.

"Lois ..." he pleaded with a trembling voice. His shoes made a sucking sound on the muddy road as he approached me. "I don't want to hurt you."

"But you are, Clark," I said accusingly, trying not to let on how much he had frightened me. "More than you can imagine." I heard a weird slurping noise while Clark took a few steps around me. But I did not give him a chance to face me.

"Lois, please look at me ..." he asked helplessly and finally laid a hand on my shoulder. I shrugged him off.

"Why should I?" I hissed, sounding angrier than I was. Truth be told, I did not know what to think. "You lied to me — you're playing a very nasty game!" I choked. "Not even Claude would have acted like that. I should have known — after all I had not made up my three rules for nothing. But then you enticed me into breaking them!" I accused him. I faced him at last, crossly slapping his broad chest with flat hands.

When I mentioned Claude, Clark involuntarily sucked in his breath. Maybe I was wrong, but he suddenly seemed out of it. He shook his head in despair and was no longer able to look me in the eyes. Instead his gaze was locked on some place between my navel and the ground.

"I'm so sorry, Lois," he murmured almost inaudibly. "That was never my intention."

I opened my mouth to say something but never got to it. Clark raised his head, and his mouth opened slightly. Even though I could not see his face, I guessed that he had assumed that distant look again like he always did just before he disappeared.

"I hear something," he said, tensely and started to scan the area. "Someone's coming ..." he lowered his voice to a point that I could barely hear him.

Clark took a step toward me and grabbed my hands. I tried to fight him off, but his grip remained firm. Unfazed he took me with him deep into the shadows between the trees and bushes that lined the path. It was pitch black, probably darker than it could ever get in Metropolis. As Clark's moonlit figure disappeared between the trees, he literally became invisible. If it had not been for him holding my hands, I could not have told where he was.

My heart was beating madly. I was blind with hot raging anger. Again I tried to free myself from his grip. But of course I did not stand a chance against Superman, and how was I supposed to? The feeling of helplessness made me want to cry. Why did I not yell at him and just break free? I had had enough of Clark! Without much of an effort he forced me to follow him and dragged me into the shadows. He kept concealing what was going on and then told me the next moment that he was Superman. Just like that! He now did physically to me what he had been doing emotionally to me for weeks.

"How dare you ..." I hissed furiously. The last word was muffled by his palm as if I had never spoken.

"Shhh," he whispered and pulled me behind a few bushes. Then I heard what Clark's ears had picked up much earlier.

Footsteps crunched on the gravel approaching in a rapid staccato sequence. Apparently someone was in a hurry. Voices came from a distance. It took a while until I had calmed down enough to listen. The words were too faint. I was about to sigh in frustration. But Clark's hand was still firmly pressed onto my mouth and effectively kept me from uttering a sound.

The voices became louder, and I could discern some of what was said — but that made no sense. Clark was no more than a shape beside me, but he seemed to be staring into space. I suddenly realized how often I had watched him do that, never understanding what he actually did. How could I believe myself to be in love with someone I knew next to nothing about?

"What do you mean 'bad news'?" a loud voice said, shattering the night.

"The couple we are observing are Lois Lane and Clark Kent of the Daily Planet," a man replied nervously. "I recognized Lois Lane from a recent photo of her in the Planet."

"So what? This hotel is famous far beyond the borders of Metropolis. It's about time they do a feature on us. A little publicity can only benefit our cause," the other man interjected. A smile crept into his relaxed voice.

"Don't you get it?" the first man replied. "These are not just some hacks! They're investigative reporters. If they find out what is going on here..." "His words died on his lips, but he had definitely sparked my interest.

"Then we won't let them find out. Keep them busy! You'll think of something. So, what about this IT-guy? Will he comply?" The voices died down while the two men walked down the gravel path moving further away from the hotel.

I could not see whether the other man agreed to the plan. He did not voice his thoughts. The rest of the conversation was swallowed by darkness and the pouring rain, at least for me. Clark's body was still tense while he still seemed to stare at the now vanished men. I freed myself from his hand that remained over my mouth.

"Clark," I hissed both annoyed and fascinated.

He winced and protectively raised his hands to his ears. I remembered that he had covered his ears a couple of times

before. Now I knew what that meant. His super-hearing was apparently not only useful but also sensitive. I felt strangely satisfied seeing him suffer — and was instantly ashamed of myself.

"They blackmail couples," Clark blurted out as he stood up and held out a hand to assist me. "They're using this place to spy on couples and search for the perfect victims — rich, powerful, whatever. Their mind games are probably providing them with all the information they need."

At the phrase "mind games" I almost laughed. Such a thing was more likely a part of my vocabulary than Clark's. But my gut instinct told me that this was going to be a big story.

"Do you hear anything else?" I asked, excited and happy that for the first time in weeks my strained relationship with Clark did not matter. How could I so easily forget, what he had done to me? I had to have lost his mind. But I so desperately longed for a bit of normalcy.

He shook his head apologetically. "Too much noise ..."

"But it's very quiet," I protested confused.

"Not for me, it isn't. Warring couples, the piano in the bar. It's not easy to pick up two voices from all the noise I hear," he added apologetically and hid his hands in his trouser pockets. How could he be so casual about this now? After all he had been hiding his secret identity for years.

Sluggishly we walked down the path back to the hotel. Why did I still follow him? Because I knew that there was more? Because I was hoping for a better explanation for his behavior than his being Superman? Now and then I looked at him from the side. The moonlight lit up his face. The situation was strange and yet familiar. Here we were again in dark corners hunting down a new story. Everything could have been back to normal again, but it absolutely was not. I could not help feeling that the gap between us had only gotten deeper.

Clark lifted his head again staring into space. "An airplane ..." he said softly, almost breathless and with a certain horror in his voice. "... it will crash." His eyes were clear again, and he looked at me seriously. "Lois, I must ..." he trailed off, flashing me an uncertain smile. "I'm sorry."

"Go on," I murmured, relieved that I now knew why he kept disappearing. But I was also angry that each conversation had to end like that.

Clark turned and ran into the night away from the hotel. Only moments later I heard the familiar "whoosh" when he soared into the sky. I exhaled slowly not realizing until then that I had been holding my breath.

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It was almost three o'clock in the morning when I finally returned to bed. I was tired — the day had taken its toll on me. But sleep was impossible. I had tried, really tried. The light was out; I lay under the blanket and looked for a comfortable position. Seven times I had already turned, but that did not help at all. Sleep would not come.

The thoughts kept tumbling in my head and came back to me every time I tried to push them off. Clark was Superman. I did not really know what this meant to me. Where was he now? Was he still saving the airplane? Or had he finally decided not to return? The uncertainty was agonizing. I had been looking for answers, but I had only found more questions.

Impatiently I brushed the blanket aside. Waiting had never been my strong point, even less so now that I knew how to find Clark... The TV screen flickered on.

<... Reuters news agency reported.> the anchorman finished one report and turned his gaze towards another camera. The cameras focused on him again, showing him up front. I knew him vaguely from my short time at LNN. <A plane of AirAmerica barely escaped a catastrophe earlier tonight. The engines failed shortly before landing at the Metropolis airport. Superman was

able to save the plane just in time and helped it land. None of the passengers were injured.>

The background image changed. The face of a pop starlet appeared whose name I did not even know. There had been times when near-crashes of aircrafts had been worth more than a bottom note in a news magazine. But that had been before Clark had changed all our lives. I was still having trouble imagining my partner in a blue suit and a cape.

This lie superseded almost everything else. Clark had deceived me. Was that really worse than the weeks he had spent giving me the cold shoulder? I was not sure. Only that last betrayal was certainly more than I could bear. Had he actually used me? For sex? That was something I had not expected of him. Clark was different. I did not want to imagine that he could even be remotely similar to Claude or Paul. Sex had never played a role in our very complicated relationship. Until now. But what puzzled me most was that he had not gone the whole way.

Defiantly, I turned off the TV and cuddled myself into my blanket. I would just stay awake and spend the rest of the night giving Clark a guilty conscience.

But sleep came sooner than expected.

*I woke up when Clark returned. The room was dark, but his silhouette stood out in the dim moonlight. My imagination added the smile to his face. Haltingly he came closer and gingerly sat down on the edge of my bed. He did not move, just watched me and smiled. It was the most beautiful smile I had seen in ages. I longed to touch him, but I was afraid to drive him off. Our relationship had become so fragile. Perhaps he would leave as soon as he realized that I was not asleep?*

*I tried to breathe evenly. But it was hardly possible to deceive Superman. "Lois?" he asked warmly. His voice was quiet so that he would not accidentally wake me. "You awake?"*

*I opened my eyes. "You're late," I said softly.*

*"I know," he said guiltily. "I'm sorry, Lois."*

*It was like he was moving in slow motion. He gave me all the time to protest against his closeness. But I had no intention of sending him away. I had fought so many useless battles with him, almost losing him in the process.*

*"Will you be okay with this?" he asked me dejectedly and brushed a strand of hair behind my ear.*

*"With what?" I sat up in bed so that it was easier to look him in the eyes.*

*"With the truth," he replied softly and swallowed hard. "With the fact that I lied to you, Lois. I shouldn't have done that. I should have told you everything. I'm so sorry." His voice sounded strained as if he was barely able to stifle a sob.*

*Gradually he leaned forward and closed the distance between us. His kiss was gentle and yet restrained. He took his time and more importantly let me the time to decide whether I was going to respond. I had been almost certain that I could not forgive him. He had lied to me. Because of him, I had made a fool of myself. But when I felt his lips, both my intentions and my anger melted away. I lost myself in the sweetness of his touch. His warm breath tickled on my face as he covered me with a rain of kisses.*

*"I wish I could always be this close to you," he whispered and started to caress me. A rush of warmth filled me that spread through my whole body from my toes to my fingertips.*

*"You can be with me, Clark," I replied breathlessly. I felt rather than saw him shaking his head.*

*"Only in my dreams," he said softly and so sadly that I felt the lump in his throat as if it were in my own.*

When I awoke, the warm beams of sunlight lit up the room. I lay alone in bed. The sheets on the other side of the bed looked depressingly unused. I sighed involuntarily and pushed the blankets aside. For a moment I was seriously tempted to just pull the covers back over my head. What could be out there that was

worth getting up for?

As if someone had read my thoughts the scent of freshly brewed coffee permeated the hotel room and got stronger the further I moved away from my bed. Then someone knocked at the door.

"Lois? Are you awake?" Clark asked softly.

"You gotta ask?" I replied testily.

I yanked open the door ready to put Clark at the receiving end of my anger. If anyone deserved it, it was he. How could he have lied to me for years only to suddenly blurt out that he was Superman? Not to mention that ... Well, I did not even want to think about it. Growling I stepped out of the bedroom.

Clark flinched and ducked his head, trying to hide behind himself. Even so I noticed that he was pale. He had dark circles around his eyes. Suddenly my anger was gone. I had never seen him quite so exhausted.

"Good morning, Lois." The cup of coffee he held out for me was a peace offering. His hands trembled. A faint smile flickered across his lips, just strong enough to lift the corners of his mouth a little.

"Good morning, Clark," I replied automatically and accepted the steaming coffee. Confused I followed him to the trolley with the breakfast.

On each plate lay a croissant, and I felt my mouth watering with their delicious smell. My resistance melted away, and I almost felt guilty as I followed Clark's invitation to join him for breakfast. Whatever had actually happened yesterday, I was the clear winner of our fight.

Clark looked lost as he stood beside the tray pouring me a glass of orange juice. His movements were erratic as he offered me even more pastry.

"Will you sit down?" I asked impatiently, as he didn't make an attempt at sharing the breakfast with me.

"I ... but ... I do," he uttered incoherently, and his gaze wandered back and forth between me and the vacant chair.

"What's going on, Clark?" I urged him to speak. "I thought we agreed that there would be no more secrets between us."

"I didn't sleep very well is all," he muttered and nervously ran his hand through his tousled hair. He took his glasses off his nose and rubbed his tired eyes.

"You didn't sleep at all," I stated calmly.

"That's not true," he defended himself as he finally sat down. "I dozed off briefly and ..." His cheeks blushed, and he cleared his throat self-consciously as he took the croissant from his plate. "You're right," he admitted after a while. "I haven't been sleeping." The blush faded somewhat.

"For how long?" I wanted to know and scolded myself that I paid any interest in him whatsoever.

He didn't reply right away. Clark awkwardly dipped the croissant in jelly, took a bite, and then moistened his mouth with a sip of the orange juice. The tremor of his hands had increased.

"How long haven't you been sleeping, Clark?" I demanded to know and flashed him a Mad Dog Lane glance that would have easily turned Jimmy into a pillar of salt.

"Four weeks, give or take." His words were little more than a whisper, dying on his lips as he took another bite of the croissant. He was obviously doing that on purpose. I stared at Clark aghast.

"What?" I gasped dumbfounded. Why had I not noticed?

"Four weeks?"

"It's not like I didn't sleep at all," he said defensively. Then restlessness took possession of him again. He got up hastily and moved over to stare out the farthest window he could find. Absent-mindedly he continued to eat his croissant.

My mouth was quite dry, and now it was my turn to cling to the orange juice.

"Do you have to ...?" the question died on my lips

The answer was obvious. And yet I became painfully aware

of how little I really knew about Clark. I felt silly. Had I really confessed my love for him without even knowing about such fundamental things like whether he needed to sleep?

"Yes," he said feebly. "I can go with two ... three hours a night for a while..." he muttered and fell silent again. I did not ask him how long 'a while' was. But I had the distinct feeling that recently even sleeping those three hours had been rare."Lois, do we have to talk about that now?" he asked and then returned to his seat. Even that seemed to strain him.

"So what can we talk about, then?" I replied caustically.

Clark ignored my comment. "About the blackmailing?" He offered carefully.

"Blackmailing?" I tried to remember, but I was too distracted.

"The story," Clark replied patiently. "The conversation we overheard in the park. These two guys mentioned some IT guy they were blackmailing."

Stalling the answer, I grabbed my croissant. It was still warm. Heaven knew how Clark had pulled that trick. It took me merely a second to recall how exactly he did things like that.

"You didn't fly to Paris to get them, did you?" I wanted to know as I broke the pastry in half. The blush that covered his cheeks was answer enough. "Why?"

"A bribe?" Clark said softly. "So you'll talk to me again."

"I am talking to you," I replied coldly.

"Whatever you say," Clark said with a helpless shrug.

He intentionally avoided looking at me which made me incredibly angry. Taking a bite of my croissant was the only way to keep from lashing out at him. The pastry melted on my tongue and spread its soft and comforting flavor until I had calmed down a bit.

"If I may remind you, I'm not the one who started this," I added defiantly.

Clark opened his mouth only to close it again. What could he say anyway? After all I was right. But just as quickly as my anger had soared up, it faded again. How much easier would it be to argue with him! But Clark just gave up, and that was even less like him than anything I had already experienced. Silently we ate our breakfast because neither of us knew what to say.

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"Silence is the greatest enemy of a healthy relationship." Every inch of the lecturing man screamed psychologist. I couldn't help but think that despite its end, I was going to prefer the dinner over this part of the program

The psychologist wore comfortable sandals. His curly mane had retreated to the back of his head, and a pair of glasses sat low on his nose. Casually he leaned back in his chair as if he had already spent his entire life behind patients on a couch. The guy whose name I couldn't even remember barely looked at the little group of desperate couples. His eyes rested on the sheet of paper which he had sheltered in his lap.

"Feelings must be expressed — anger as well as affection," he continued, raising his head enough to look around. The couples around us nodded obediently. "The basis of a good relationship is honesty." He paused as if to emphasize his words. "But don't forget that honesty can hurt too. A compliment should be heartfelt, and don't be too harsh in your criticism. Always ask yourself how you would want to hear the truth."

The sententious lecture of the psychologist went on, but I found it increasingly difficult to listen. My relationship to Clark had not gotten any easier since he had been honest with me. For months I had been in love with a liar. The mere thought caused me heartburn.

"C'mon, Clark. What's wrong?" I had tried to tease out an answer. My partner had leaned against the wall of the elevator with his eyes closed and had slightly swayed. "You look awful!" It had not been exaggerated. Clark had been deathly pale; his

hands had trembled as he had clutched at the hand rail.

"Nothing, just a headache," he had muttered weakly. Shaking his head had caused him to grimace.

"I think I've got some aspirin in my desk," I had offered, feeling pity. I had hardly ever seen Clark sick. But then he had looked pretty miserable.

"It's okay," Clark had replied. "I don't think that will help."

"Trouble with Mayson?" I had asked and a rush of jealousy had filled me. It had been difficult to accept that Clark was dating Mayson. I had almost hoped that I had hit the bulls-eye.

It had taken a while before he had answered. His gaze had been absent and I had not been sure that he had actually heard me. But then he had nodded.

"Yeah, yesterday evening," he had replied and squinted his eyes as if the pain had increased. "I don't know, I think I should go to her and apologize," he had added and pressed the button to the floor that was under the newsroom. Moments later we had reached the floor, the doors had opened up. "See you later, Lois," he had said before getting out. The elevator doors had closed behind him.

Shortly after that, Diana Stride had claimed that Clark was Superman. I had not believed her. Now I knew better. Had he really gone to Mayson then? Or had he lied about that as well?

Everyone around me stood up moving their chairs. The lecture was obviously over. I felt Clark's hand first on my shoulder and then on my elbow. He urged me to get up and moved my chair into the right position. Then he guided me out of the room.

"Are you okay, Lois?" he asked anxiously.

"I have just realized how little honesty actually means to you," I fired back without having actually been attacked.

"What?" He sounded confused.

"This was what the lecture was all about, wasn't it? That we should be honest with each other?" I lashed out at him, at the same time wondering if the psychologist had actually been talking about that for the past half hour.

"Yes," Clark replied tensely. "And I apologized, Lois."

"Oh, really? I'm sorry, I didn't realize that everything was all right again!" My voice dripped with sarcasm. "You're leaving me just like that and I am supposed to simply accept it because you apologized?"

Angrily I turned on my heels. My hands clenched into fists while I desperately tried to hate him. That was the only way to endure all this. My fingers dug painfully deep into my palms, but that didn't help much. My heart beat faster when I just thought about Clark. Why did he have such a power over me? The last dream hadn't exactly helped to improve my situation.

"Mrs. White? A letter for you!" A voice roused me from my thoughts. A hotel employee was coming straight towards me. That was a good thing actually, because otherwise I might not have known that I was "Mrs. White". Tardily I remembered that we were undercover.

I stood there and stared at her confused. The hotel employee smiled broadly at me. Her hair was curly and blonde. She reminded me of Mayson Drake. Even her smile looked just as stilted. She looked past me unobtrusively but still. I knew she had only eyes for Clark. Perhaps I should warn her.

"Thanks," I said mechanically and attempted a smile but in vain.

I took the letter, and the blonde woman hurried away with a quick goodbye. For a moment I watched her leave, before I examined the letter in my hand. There was no return address, no stamp, nothing to tell me who had sent this letter. Most likely it was Perry. Who else knew we were here? This didn't exactly fire my curiosity.

"Lois?" Clark said cautiously and took a step around me so he could look at me.

I kept my eyes fixed on the letter and did not look up. The letter was a more than welcome option to punish Clark. I turned my back on Clark and focused my whole attention on opening the envelope. My heart pounded furiously against my chest, with each beat protesting against my flimsy pretence of ignoring Clark.

“Lois, please,” Clark repeated, but I kept ignoring him and unfolded the paper. I tried hard to suppress the trembling of my fingers. How long could I go on like this?

Clark gave me the space I needed which made it impossible for me to despise him. Why did he do this to me? Why did he not keep me from occupying myself with a letter instead of him? He should be fighting!

My mouth went dry when I unfolded the letter and scanned the message that was pieced together from cutouts of a newspaper. I recognized the words, some of them probably written by me. The Daily Planet had its own very distinctive font. The words blurred before my eyes while I broke out in cold sweat.

<Would you like to keep your little secret?> the dark letters read.

Nothing more, no demand, only this sentence. My fingers were numb. I felt at the verge of fainting. Apparently I was not the only one who knew Clark’s secret, not anymore. What else could they be talking about? We had been stupid. After all we had known that some members of the hotel staff were blackmailing their customers.

“Lois, please, we need to talk.” Clark’s strong hands dug into my shoulders, and he made me look into his face again.

I just shook my head. Stunned I thought of the implied threat in my hands. But my lips were not moving. Hastily I scrunched up the letter. It happened so fast that I could not say for sure whether it was conscious reasoning or instinct. The letter seemed to burn my fingers. But I could not show it to Clark.

“I understand that you’re angry, Lois,” Clark tried to soothe me.

“Oh yeah?” I cried out. “Do you really know what is going on inside me?” I almost shouted. Clark winced. “How could you ever really understand?” I replied tartly. The threatening letter was still in my hands and all of a sudden felt unnaturally cold. Or was it my fingers? I had to tell Clark! He had to know what was at stake.

“Maybe you’re right,” Clark muttered ruefully. “Please, let’s not discuss this here,” he pleaded and gently ushered me out of the hall. I let it happen.

“Why have you never told me? Did you have so little faith in me, Clark?” I said past the thick lump in my throat. If Clark had been honest with me, we wouldn’t be in this mess. I was about to tell him exactly that — the words were already on the tip of my tongue. But I swallowed them. I could not confront Clark like this without showing him the ransom note. “Why have you never told me?” I repeated exhausted.

Clark just looked at me. A wrinkle appeared on his forehead, and his lips curved into a sad expression. He shook his head almost imperceptibly. It was not much that he offered me. But the realization hit me like a blow.

“That’s not what this is all about!” I gasped and tried in vain to keep my composure.

“Please, Lois, not here!” Clark’s eyes were wide with horror.

“There’s something else that you’re not telling me!” That was something I hadn’t even considered. I had been too busy fussing about Clark being Superman. Not once had it come to my mind that his distance had had nothing to do with that.

“Please not here,” Clark repeated pleadingly.

He grabbed my elbow and gently pulled me with him out of the hotel lobby. His steps were large, and he gave me little opportunity to keep up with him. Confused I stumbled after him.

The tortured expression on his face made me nervous. I could see the beads of sweat on his forehead. My stomach clenched painfully, and my heart pounded with fear.

Suddenly we were in front of the elevators. I could see in my partner’s face that he would rather have taken the stairs. Restless he shifted from one foot to the other. When we finally heard the elevator, he sighed with relief and almost dragged me into the box. He was so tense that his lips had grown thin, and his face was ashen.

“Clark ...” I whispered breathlessly and without knowing what to say. I tasted bile and tried to suppress the nausea that was building up in my stomach.

“Lois ...” Clark echoed and lips grew even thinner. He breathed deeply and apparently gathered all his courage before he spoke again. “You’re right, I didn’t tell you everything. I wanted to yesterday. But then it was a lot easier to conceal it.”

“What do you mean ‘easier’?” My voice cracked. “Why would it be easier lying to me?” I couldn’t get rid of the bitter taste in my mouth.

“The truth ... well, I’m afraid you would misinterpret the truth,” he said mysteriously and then withdrew into a corner of the elevator as if this would offer him a way to escape this conversation.

I wondered why he wasn’t already gone. Why did he make this so hard on himself when he could run off pretending that Superman was needed? Why didn’t he spare us this conversation and simply disappear? The mere thought only served to increase my nausea. What was Clark doing to me?

As the elevator reached the right floor, I was hurled out of my thoughts. Clark pushed himself off the wall as the doors slid open. I hurried to follow him down the hallway to the bedroom door where I would finally learn the truth.

I just was not so sure anymore whether I actually wanted to know it. As impatient as I had been up to this point, now my feet seemed to stick to the carpet. Part of me wanted to remain outside ignorant and able to dream of a happy end. I broke out in cold sweat. The hallway seemed to blur before my eyes.

While I was here, I still had hope. When I walked through that door, that could very well change for good. Beyond this door was potentially a life which I no longer wanted to spend with Clark. Was the truth really worth this kind of pain?

I swallowed and watched as Clark put the key card into the lock. A red light flashed, followed by a silent curse. Again he took the card and put it into the slot. About one second it was dubious whether the lock would open. It was a wonderful second in which everything seemed possible. Then a green light flashed...

Sworn with fear, I entered the room as Clark held the door for me. After just two steps whatever had been left of my courage was gone. I was ready to storm out of the room. Why should I endure even more pain? Clark could take a running jump for all I cared. I really could do without him. I had never really needed that hack. After all I was Mad Dog Lane.

My tongue remained motionless just like my legs. As a meek lamb I stood in the doorway until I felt his hand on my back. He gently pushed me forward, on and on. The door slammed shut behind me. We were alone. My heart was pounding like a steam hammer.

“The truth ...” Clark muttered in a hoarse voice and tentatively walked past me towards the window. He looked out and then turned to face me. He leaned on the windowsill and rested his head against the glass. “Do you remember Jason Trask and Bureau 39?” he finally asked, clenching his fists so hard that his knuckles turned white.

I nodded although I did not quite understand where this was going. “How could I forget him?” I said with a shudder and took a step towards Clark. I wanted to shake him and make him spill

the truth without stalling. “Why are we talking about him, Clark?” I asked impatiently but kept my hands still. He did not back away probably because he had his back up against the wall.

“When we were in their secret warehouse, I found something. A globe that represented Earth and as soon as I had touched it — Krypton.” Clark grimaced. He took a step towards me. It had been long since he had voluntarily come that close to me. Well, that was not quite right. ... I saw the sad look in his eyes, the look that now belonged to his face like the glasses and that stubborn lock of hair. A harsh remark died on my open lips.

“Later someone stole the globe.” He went on. “It contained messages for...” he paused briefly as if he was not sure what to say next. “...me.”

“That’s what this is all about? Those messages?” I asked incredulously, trying to imagine what kind of truth he was going to confess. “Don’t tell me you’re destroying our friendship because of a message in a globe!” My voice cracked with anger. I felt tears in my eyes and blinked them away. I helplessly started to hammer my fists down onto his chest. There was a finality to his words that scared the hell out of me. “What kind of reason is that?” I gasped while Clark gently grabbed my wrists to keep me from hurting myself.

“I learned where I came from and who my real parents were,” Clark said with an almost eerie calm. “It gave me answers to the all the questions that had been on my mind for so long,” Clark continued. “My father Jor-El had chosen this planet because I could grow up among people like one of them. There is no significant difference in our physiology ...” Clark fell silent, and I saw him swallow.

He took another step towards me, and I held my breath as he loosened his grip around my wrists and gently covered my face. His thumb stroked along my mouth and brushed my lips. Then he leaned forward and placed a kiss on my mouth. It was barely perceptible, yet I was electrified.

“... except for one restriction,” he finally said, his words barely more than a whisper. “A Kryptonian man can never be with a woman from Earth. He would kill her.” He stared at his feet. Then he released me and turned away, putting his hands in his pockets.

I stared at him and tried to understand what he had just told me. Actually I was none the wiser. Stunned I stood before him and watched Clark as he started pacing the hotel room. Again and again he glanced at me ever so briefly. Each time our eyes locked, he immediately averted his gaze embarrassed.

“I tried to convince myself that it didn’t matter. After all I was more than happy being your friend. I couldn’t wish for more, now could I?” he went on softly and stopped for a moment. He looked at me and shrugged. “My whole life I had known I was different, and I coped. So why not this time... But I want more, Lois.”

The tone of his voice and the look in his eyes conveyed all the feelings that I myself had desperately tried to hide from him for the past weeks. My mouth had gone dry, and my tongue stuck to the palate. There was nothing I could possibly say.

“Suddenly all I’m thinking about is what my being different means for our relationship. Ever since I met you, I’ve dreamt that one day maybe we would be more than just friends. But that is impossible,” he added almost rudely. “Look, Lois, I’ve tried. I’ve tried really hard to make this work — but I don’t see how I can.”

With a jerk he turned back to the window and stared outside. The repulsive aura he had gradually built up during the past months was back in place. It was squelching my impulse to try and comfort him. I was still dumbfounded. Whatever I might have been expecting to hear — certainly not this.

“You mean ...” I gasped, not sure if I had actually drawn the right conclusion.

“I cannot sleep with you, Lois,” Clark said unequivocally.

“Please don’t believe that my attraction to you is just a physical one. I am in love with you, and making love to you is just one aspect of the relationship I had in mind, but...” He took a deep breath and lapsed into silence, not willing to complete the sentence.

He did not have to. Just because the idea was taboo, it automatically became quite dominant. I had been down the same road. Hard as I had tried not to think about Clark or imagine what could be, Clark had been with me all the time. In the morning, in the evening, and even at night.

All of a sudden he was with me, reached for my hand, and led me to the sofa. Clark had slept on it, and it still seemed to smell like him. He gently pulled me with him as he sat down beside me.

“In my dreams I often came to visit you at night, sat down on your bed, and kissed you. Sometimes we got beyond that point,” he breathed deeply and paused. I could not but remember my own erotic fantasies. My heart started to pound when I felt his breath on my skin. I was as close to Clark as I had been in my dreams.

“Many nights I lie awake because I’m afraid to lose myself in these dreams,” Clark confessed after a while, and his voice sounded tortured as he continued. Only the loving expression in his eyes softened the hurtful tone. “I keep praying that you get out of my dreams. But I just cannot break this last bond.”

I listened to him and had the strange feeling that he was voicing my thoughts exactly. I had been having the same dreams for weeks. Clark sat down on my bed, and so often he had seemed to be about to confess something. Could it be ...? My breath quickened involuntarily. The very thought was preposterous. How could Clark and I share our dreams?

“Do you understand now why I have to leave, Lois?” Clark asked quietly. His expression was stoic almost impenetrable. But I knew that a hurricane must be raging inside him — just as it was raging in me.

No, I did not understand why he had to go. I wanted to scream at him and shake him and force him to love me. I could not let a globe destroy my life. We had just found each other!

I gulped. “We could find a solution, Clark,” I choked out. My words sounded hollow. How could there be a solution? Hadn’t Clark already tried to find one? And I had called him a traitor, in my thoughts anyway. My stomach was tied in knots.

“I’ve tried, Lois,” Clark said and with a jolt raised to his feet. The sofa shook at the sudden loss of weight, showing what strength Clark hid from the rest of the world. “I kept weighing every option, desperately trying to figure a way out of this mess. First, I was your friend, then I tried to keep my distance from you. Good grief, I’ve even started a relationship with Mayson in order to drive you away from me.” Shame was written on his face.

“But Clark ...” I pleaded, not knowing what there was left to say or do. He had not loved Mayson. The relief mingled with the bitter taste of pity for her. Even Mayson didn’t deserve to be treated like that. But I did not want to think about her. My mind raced as I tried to think of a way that Clark had missed.

“There’s no use, Lois,” he summarized the result of my consideration. “I cannot go on like this,” he said desperately. “Please forgive me.” The window flew open. A gust of wind swept through the room, and then Clark was gone.

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The engine roared as I hit the accelerator. My jeep lurched and jerked forward. H.G. Wells nervously dug his fingers into his bowler hat, which he held in both hands. He looked at me uncertainly. I only saw him from the corner of my eyes. But I had no intention of paying any attention to the sensitivities of some lunatic. Why had I taken him with me anyway? I did not know exactly. Actually everything that had happened since Clark had



run out on me for good was blurry.

“Ms. Lane,” Wells gasped in horror and stared at the road while I drove straight back towards Metropolis.

“Do you wanna get out here?” I offered him and hit the brakes. I was pushed into the belt and felt the jolt as the car came to a halt. Impatiently I leaned over him and opened the door. “Your decision. I didn’t ask you to come along.”

“You don’t seem to understand, Ms. Lane. It is of utmost importance that I talk to Mr. Kent,” H.G. Wells said in his nasal English accent. “I’ve been trying for days to contact him.”

“Have you ever thought about using the phone?” I snapped, slamming the passenger door shut, when Wells made no attempt to get out. “What kind of world-changing things could be worth following us to that hotel?” I asked gruffly. I was annoyed that the little man with the bowler hat had actually made me curious enough to let him join me on my ride back into town.

“Well, basically I hope that he will tell me something,” Wells replied, panting with fear as I revved up the engine again. He used a handkerchief to dab the sweat from his forehead. “Really, I should be getting used to this kind of vehicle ...” he muttered confused and swallowed hard.

“If you want to stay in this car, you’re gonna have to tell me more than that ...” I blackmailed him.

“Really, I don’t know if that’s a good idea, Ms. Lane,” Wells writhed unwillingly. Our paths had crossed in the lobby just when I had wanted to check out. After all there was not much sense in pretending to be a married couple when I was completely alone. “It’s impossible to predict the consequences...”

“Stop this nonsense, Mr. Wells. You may have some resemblance to this writer granted. But I know for a fact that he’s been dead for nearly fifty years,” I replied sharply. “What am I doing here? I can’t believe I let you talk me into taking you back to Metropolis.” Involuntarily I stepped on the brakes again.

“Maybe because I’m your last hope?” Wells hastened to say while the car slowed down. “All right, listen to me, Ms. Lane,” H.G. Wells sighed heavily and again wiped his forehead. “I’m pretty sure you know by now that Clark Kent is actually Superman.”

“What?”

The car stopped with screeching tires. I turned to Wells. His face was almost green. He clutched the door handle with sweaty fingers.

“How do you know?” I asked horrified.

I thought back to the ransom note. Was I about to lead those criminals to Clark? Not for the first time that day I tasted bile. My heart pounded. Ever since I had picked myself up after Clark had left, I had been mad at him to the point of fuming. But now I was scared for him, and the fear was clutching at my heart, holding it in an icy grip.

“Because it’s true what I told you,” Wells said emphatically and a tad angrily — which was rather surprising for the composed Englishman. “I’m H.G. Wells, the author who didn’t only write about time machines. I also built one.” He straightened, and for a moment, his face gleamed with pride. Wells cleared his throat, embarrassed, and shrank back. “I have traveled into the future and found a world where everyone lived in peace.” He took the glasses that were fogged with sweat and started to clean them with his handkerchief. I would have loved to shove the glasses out of his hands. “This Utopia was founded by Superman and Lois Lane. People adore this couple like no one else in the history of mankind.”

He made a significant pause before he put his glasses back on. “But when I last visited the future, Utopia was destroyed. Or rather had never even existed because you and Superman had never become a couple. I could not figure out what had happened to change the future. But I would bet that Tempus is responsible.”

“Tempus,” I asked surprised. “Who’s that?” Was that actually the first thing that came to my mind? What had Wells said? “Superman and I? Utopia?” I realized at the last moment that I had said that aloud. “What are you talking about?”

I shot Wells a brief glance. He did not really look like someone who took perverse pleasure in torturing others. On the other hand, was he not doing exactly that?

“What do you want?” I snapped. “Do you enjoy this sick little game of yours?”

“Certainly not, Ms. Lane,” Wells said unnervingly calm. “The situation is serious.”

“You must be crazy, Wells,” I lashed out at him and clutched at the steering wheel to keep myself from becoming physically aggressive. Utopia! When had he come up with that? Superman and I? Instinctively I felt a spark of hope. Could Clark be wrong? I didn’t want to indulge in that idea. The inevitable disappointment would be more than I could bear.

My heartbeat calmed down slowly. Whatever this Mr. Wells was up to, I did not think he was the one who had sent me the letter. At least my gut was telling me that. I had to concentrate on the blackmailer. Wells’ fantasies were none of my concern.

There was someone out there who knew Clark’s secret. And whoever that was could be much harder to overcome than the grumpy Englishman.

“Tempus is a man with an unfortunate propensity for violence. It’s his aim in life to destroy the relationship between Superman and you and thus Utopia,” Wells replied patiently. “He...”

“Oh, give me a break,” I cut Wells short. I just could not stop myself. “Why would this Tempest...”

“Tempus ...” Wells corrected me instantly.

“Tempus,” I mocked his accent. “So, why would he want us apart?” Wells did not flinch at my critical glance. He even stopped fumbling with his glasses. “We are nothing more than a couple of the millions on this planet.”

“A very significant couple, Ms. Lane,” Wells pointed out and then cleared his throat hastily and blushed. “I should not give away too much.”

“Then you tell me one thing, Wells. How do you think Tempus managed to destroy Utopia?” I asked impatiently.

I wanted to get to Clark. There were more important things to do than to argue with a strange Englishman. My foot twitched into the direction of the accelerator. Why had I taken Wells with me? The truth was that he had caught me completely off balance. The receptionist had given me another envelope.

<Needless to say, we are expecting your service in return for keeping your secret. As a reporter you certainly know some juicy details about the political elite of our country ...> the second message had said.

“I had hoped that Mr. Kent could tell me,” Wells answered the question I had almost forgotten.

“You know what, Wells? Get out. I don’t need anyone interfering with my life,” I said curtly and leaned forward again to open the door. “I have no time for those figments of your imagination. You aren’t the only one who has figured out that Clark is Superman. I’m being blackmailed. Clark and I must find them before someone uses that knowledge.”

Wells looked at me aghast. “That’s terrible,” he said flatly and once more started fiddling with his glasses. “But believe me, Ms. Lane, there are more pressing problems. The world can handle knowing the truth about Superman’s identity. Utopia on the other hand ...”

“The world, perhaps ... But I don’t believe that Clark could deal with that,” I replied icily. “His life is already mixed up as it is, even without everyone knowing his secret.”

Again I was sick. After all I had known that Clark had been compromised. Why had I not stopped him confessing all his

secrets in the hotel room? Why had I forced him to do it in the first place? Why ...? I closed my eyes. I could see the last day and a half before my mind's eye in all its gruesome details. Clark had so often pleaded with me to drop the matter. He had been right. If I hadn't forced him to tell me, if I had understood his silent message, we wouldn't be in this mess now.

I felt Wells' curious glances even though my eyes were closed. He cleared his throat. Involuntarily I glanced at him. His mustache twitched, and his breath quickened. It almost seemed as he wanted to break free from this British primness.

"Ms. Lane, you must tell me what you know," he urged desperately.

"I haven't the slightest idea how your Tempus could be involved in all this," I scolded Wells. "Go rescue that dream world of yours somewhere else. I've got to find out how I can help Clark here and now. And I seriously doubt you're willing to assist me." My voice was louder than necessary. Tears burned in my eyes, but I would not cry. I had already put so much effort in keeping back those tears that I could not budge now.

"You still don't believe me," Wells said disappointedly. "And why would you?" He laughed joylessly. "I can't believe that Tempus has actually won this time," he murmured softly, biting his lip. "So many times we have beaten him — and now ..." His voice sounded hoarse. Discouraged he dropped his head and stared at the bowler hat in his hands.

I suddenly felt pity for the little Englishman. It must have been difficult trying to contact Clark. But I did not quite understand what goal he pursued. Was he just plain crazy, or was there more to it? Whatever it was, it had to wait until I had found Clark.

Again I hit the accelerator, getting back onto the highway. I turned on the radio to distract myself. It crackled briefly before loud pop music filled the car. Wells was visibly shaken by the sounds. I was tempted to turn off the music again, but I was not keen on talking. I could hardly bear this light, bubbly melody.

The radio continued to play, and I focused my attention on the road. Bushes and trees became an indistinct green wall on both sides of the road as we rushed through the seemingly endless landscape. The first song was followed by a second, slightly melancholic one. Soon I had almost forgotten about the man claiming to be an already dead author who wanted to save a world that did not even exist.

<The breaking news> a serious voice interrupted the program that stood in stark contrast to the light music of the station. <The City Council has decided to revitalize the old harbor — better known as Suicide Slum. The plans include the demolition and rebuilding of some factory buildings. The goal is to turn this area into 'a center of cultural life,' so said the spokesman Will McGlee.>

H.G. Wells shot me a hopeful glance as I briefly looked over to him. Immediately I turned my attention back on the road, and the Englishman closed his mouth again without having accomplished anything. His enthusiasm to save this mysterious utopia had obviously diminished.

<Superman has called a press conference for tomorrow morning,> the speaker continued. <So far he has not yet announced what will be the purpose of this conference. Reportedly...>

It hit me like a bolt from the blue. That particular press conference had been weeks ago, but I saw Diana Stride before my eyes as if it had been only yesterday. It was almost as if I was there again. And in my vision I saw Clark in front of a pack of reporters.

<You've certainly watched the recent feature on Superman broadcasted by "Top Copy". Now there's not much sense in denying it. What Ms. Stride said is the truth. Over the past few years I've been leading a double life. I'm Superman.> I heard

Clark say. In a blink the vision was gone.

It was not right. Clark had not outted himself then, but he had somehow managed to convince everyone that Diana Stride was wrong. My pulse raced. Alarmed I turned off the radio. My breath came in panting gasps, and my hands were shaking as I clutched at the steering wheel. Distraught I confused the accelerator and the brakes. The car sped up again before it finally came to a halt. Basically the newscaster had said nothing of importance ...

"No, no ..." I whispered hoarsely, shaking my head to banish the vision which had expired in front of my eyes.

It had been like one of those dreams that Clark and I had apparently shared. I had no idea how this could be possible, but it did not matter. In my heart I knew this press conference was going to serve a certain purpose. Did Clark know about the blackmail? Blood roared in my ears. What a silly question! He was Superman. Had I seriously believed that I would be able to keep this from him?

"... what's the matter with you?" Wells' words were faint as if they came through a thick layer of cotton wool in my ears. I felt his hand on my shoulder. "Ms. Lane. Do you feel all right?"

"What?" I mumbled and looked at H.G. Wells' worried face. He took his hand off my shoulder as if he had burned himself.

"Excuse me," he apologized embarrassed. "I thought you hadn't heard me."

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"So you think that Clark will tell the world who he really is?" H.G. Wells murmured in disbelief and shook his head. "I can't believe that," he added. He nervously fiddled with his glasses, belying his own words. "Be...besides, how would you know what this press conference will be about?"

I snorted impatiently. "This is what I'm trying to explain. There is this ..." I hesitated not sure what to call it. Uncertainly I stared out of the window as if someone out there would be able to help me. But the area was deserted. "... this connection between us," I said and then turned back to Wells.

When had I actually started to trust the eccentric Englishman? But the alert eyes behind his round wire-rimmed glasses left little doubt that Wells was on my side. He blinked, and his mustache wiggles as he listened to me attentively. Watching him confused me more than anything.

"I don't quite understand it myself," I added defensively. "It's just ... I feel Clark has thought about doing this. I'm certain this...this vision — for the lack of a better word — came from him." Suddenly I felt the irresistible urge to rush to Clark. My eyes focused on the small D for Drive on the automatic gear-shift lever. It was just a little movement ...

But Wells had placed his hand on my steering wheel and held it tightly. The attempt at stopping me was ridiculous though. After all I had to start the engine before I could ... Maybe I would arrive in Metropolis just in time, if I...! It was not yet too late to talk to him! Again my right hand tickled with the need to move. But what was I supposed to tell Clark?

"He has thought about doing it?" Wells echoed surprised and brought me back to reality. "I've always believed that his telepathy would work only with other Kryptonians," he said as a matter of course, scratching his head. That Clark and I might be sharing our thoughts did not seem to trouble him in the least. Other Kryptonians? I felt kind of dizzy. It was a good thing that I had not yet started the car.

"Telepathy ..." I gasped confused and completely forgot about the gear-shift. "Clark is telepathic?" Actually I should not have been so surprised. It was just another detail Clark had kept from me. The thought was immensely depressing.

Well's expression was serious as he nodded. "Indeed, he is. But I don't think he is aware of it," he added in an attempt to soothe me. "You know it's the Kryptonian way of communicating."

“How do you know so much about these things? After all Clark is the last survivor of Krypton, isn’t he?” I asked skeptically. I sounded foolish like I was desperate to prove that there was something I actually knew about my partner.

Wells cleared his throat uncomfortable. His cheeks flushed. “That’s not quite ... no, I’m going too far. I must not tell her about the future ...” he muttered to himself before he turned back to me. “We need to deal with more important things. Do you know why Clark would disclose his identity?”

“There are other surviving Kryptonians?” I asked surprised and immediately changed back into reporter mode. I bit my tongue. Was that really important?

“Yes ...” said Wells reluctantly. “But that really doesn’t matter now. I wish I had just kept my mouth shut.”

I decided not to dig further. Guiltily I tried to remember where we had left off. Why was I not able to stick to the real issue when it was all I could think about? I let my eyes wander back into the distance. The car was parked on a lonely country road with grassland all around. A few cows lazily looked over chewing on their grass. This conversation suddenly seemed quite absurd. Time travel, Kryptonians ... That was all out of this world.

“So, why would Clark want to reveal his secret?” Wells repeated his question. A cow had lifted her head as if she was interested in my answer. She turned the ears over to us.

I could hardly keep from staring at her. “He certainly knows about the blackmail,” I replied, feeling like my throat was contracting.

There was so much more. Superman had once told me that he could not commit his life to just one human being. It had taken a long time for me to realize that he was right. If there was only one person who was obviously close to the hero, then this person would become a target. Then Superman had an Achilles heel that — unlike kryptonite — everyone knew about.

“He’s doing what he couldn’t do a couple of months ago — he is destroying Clark,” I finally said, thinking I might choke on those words. My knuckles became white as I clutched at the steering wheel. I forced myself to let go of it. “He’s giving up on his last chance at leading a normal life,” I added slowly and deliberately leaned back in my seat. All my muscles were painfully cramped.

I felt tears in my eyes that I could no longer hold back. No wonder that Clark had been so testy throughout the past couple of weeks. He finally admitted to himself what he had known from the moment he had heard his father’s message. He would never have the life he had always dreamed of. When we had been in Smallville, I had seen how happy he was being just Clark. As Superman he had never been this relaxed, this serene.

“But why?” Wells breathed in horror.

“This is Clark’s business,” I almost snapped. Embarrassed I stared at the floor between my knees. The mat was full of crumbs. Lately I had eaten far too many chocolate chip cookies and double fudge bars in this car. “He wouldn’t want me to divulge his secrets just like that.”

But how much damage could I possibly cause? Our lives had completely gotten out of control anyway. Clark was about to tell the world who he really was. Could it seriously be getting any worse?

“Please tell me why he’s doing that! I met Clark Kent in more than one universe,” Wells said desperately, blushing at that. He nervously cleared his throat before he went on, muttering an apology. His fingers gripped the steering wheel until his knuckles stood out white. “I realize how absurd this must sound. But you both have overcome so many obstacles, I mean ... uh ... you will overcome many obstacles.”

With his free hand Wells had conjured a handkerchief and dabbed the sweat from his forehead. His mustache twitched while

he probably wondered what he should say next.

“I don’t know what ‘universes’ you’re talking about,” I said, using my fingers to indicate quotation marks. “But in this universe there is no future for Clark and me.”

I sighed. Suddenly there was this uneasy feeling again that had taken hold of me back in the hotel suite. Ever since Clark had told me about his father’s message, I had tried hard to forget that he would never again be part of my life. At least not in the way I dreamed of. But I couldn’t keep pushing this nasty thought away. Clark was absolutely right. A clean cut was the only way to make this nightmare bearable. Why would I want to stop him?

“What do you mean, no future together?” Wells gasped distraught. “You two are soul mates; nothing could change that!”

“Soul mates?” I shook my head. “What does that mean?” I felt a glimmer of long lost hope. A soul mate... that is what Clark was for me, had been for me, whatever. But that was a dangerous, forbidden territory.

H.G. Wells was merciless, though. “You are destined to be a couple, anywhere and at any time, in every life,” he said with dignity.

“I wasn’t aware that Buddhism had been a common philosophy in England in the late nineteenth century,” I replied moodily, instantly regretting my words. Wells might be crazy, but he did not deserve to be treated like that. “I’m ...”

“It’s all right, Ms. Lane. I certainly understand your concerns. But I’m afraid this discussion is going nowhere.” He opened the passenger door, got out, and put on his hat. I had not realized he had been holding it the whole time. “Come and see for yourself, Ms. Lane.” Suddenly he held something in his hand. I heard a high pitched tone accompanied by a flash of light.

I squinted as I looked through the windshield. There was... well actually it was indescribable. A dark frame floated in mid air. It surrounded a shimmering blue surface that resembled water. It looked artificial, like a cheap trick — and yet frighteningly real. The appearance was similar to a window but at the same time looked like something else entirely. It had opened up right next to my car and stared back at me.

“Come on, Ms. Lane,” Wells said, as his voice coming through the fog in my mind. “We will make a trip in time.”

“Where?” I whispered silently. Against my better judgment, I climbed out of the car.

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The cold crept into my body as I followed Wells through the frame. A tingling sensation spread through my body until I felt numb all over. Panic rose in me because I could not breathe. I did not see anything as I was falling into a bottomless void. Within seconds the nightmare was over, and the panic subsided.

Beyond the window was a different world. It took a while until I realized where we were. I looked around in astonishment. I was in Metropolis even though I could not explain how. But the city was barely recognizable. My city seemed cold and gray as if any color had been thoroughly eradicated. Maybe it was because of the thick clouds covering the sky. But there was more to it than a whim of the weather. An eerie silence filled the streets as if someone had muted the sound. The only noise came from the cars that rushed past us. People scurried about the sidewalks, hurrying as if someone was after them. The step through the window had been small, the jump huge.

“Where are we, Wells?” I asked anxiously and continued to scan the area. I saw fear wherever I looked. It billowed through the streets like a thick fog and also began to take possession of me.

An electoral poster, ripped and sprayed with graffiti, looked down at us from across the street. I did not recognize the politician. His eyes were sharp, his mouth twisted in anger, and he clenched his fists. He ran for mayor. I could not imagine that back in my Metropolis a person like him would have had any

chance at winning this election. But it suited the mood.

"It's the year ... oh my goodness ..." Wells stammered, obviously confused. Then he looked at a little box in his hand. "I must have made a mistake," he murmured incredulously. "This is the year 2034, Ms. Lane," Wells said depressed. "I cannot believe that the city has already changed so much."

Wells frantically looked around. His gaze remained fixed on a newsstand. He hesitated briefly, then reached for my arm, and pulled me with him. I did not protest. If it had not been for the wind in my face, I would have been convinced to be dreaming. But my gut feeling told me that this was real. We were in Metropolis.

The newspaper salesman looked at us suspiciously. His hair was disheveled, his beard unkempt. He looked dangerous. A scar across his left eye marked his face. With a pounding heart I looked at the papers. Concerning newspapers very little had changed. Any lingering doubts were thrust aside by the date that was written on every front page — April 2034. That was impossible!

It was a quick mathematical exercise. "But Superman has to be somewhere," I objected and took one of the newspapers. No headline provided, however, an indication of Clark's whereabouts. Sure, he would be about sixty years old, but ...

"Superman!" The salesman spat on the rough ground, and his body shook with laughter as he looked at H.G. Wells and me "What planet are you two from? Well, the day he outed himself as a ... what had it been ... a reporter, that was the first step in his downfall," the man said contemptuously. "Later he just flew the coop. Yeah, some Superman he was." He spat on the ground again, as if to emphasize his low opinion of the former hero. "Are you some of these idiots who are yearning for the good old days?"

I hastened to pay for the newspaper and pulled Wells away from the stand. He looked crestfallen, overwhelmed by the amount of swearwords the salesman knew. Wells' eyes were wide open and he looked around, afraid that someone was going to follow us. But the seller had long lost his interest in us. My heart pounded. Metropolis was going to be like this? I could not believe my eyes, but I held the *Daily Planet* in my hands, and that was all the proof I needed.

"This is what Metropolis becomes after Clark actually reveals his secret?" I asked shocked and studied the paper. I still had difficulties to believe the date. It was actually the 15th April 2034. No one was able to create such a perfect illusion. And who could have changed a city like that? "This is the future?"

Wells nodded seriously. "This is a future we have to change, Ms. Lane," he said softly. "And it's worse than I had expected. This is just the beginning. Between your Metropolis and this one, little more than thirty years have passed. The people still remember Superman — but that memory will fade." The strange Englishman had stopped walking. "Something has destroyed Superman and I have no idea what it is. If you know something, then please tell me."

I looked around again indecisively. Clark had told me everything. But how could Wells change any of that. After all he couldn't change that Clark was Kryptonian.

"Please, Ms. Lane," Wells urged again. "Oh, I wish I could show you Utopia. It is a beautiful place where there is neither need nor poverty. Your love was an ideal for so many people. Your descendants have done so much to help people. And so many have joined them ..." he enthused.

"Our descendants?" I asked in surprise. "What do you mean, Mr. Wells?"

"Well, the children you and Clark were going to have," he said simply, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. And indeed it was ...

"But we cannot have children," I replied flatly and had to

swallow. It was the first time I said it. "Clark is Kryptonian, and I am human. Clark's biological father has warned him that he cannot build such a relationship."

Wells blushed and stared at me. My stomach tightened when I realized that I had just told a stranger Clark's most intimate secret. If our relationship had not already been over, I would have destroyed it in this very moment. I had the overwhelming desire just to run off. But that was impossible — I would be stuck in a time that was not mine.

"What?" Wells asked puzzled and forgot all his English rules of politeness. "What are you saying? You and Clark not allowed to have children? But that's nonsense," he became agitated. "Where did you get that idea?"

"From Clark's father Jor El," I replied defiantly. "What do you know about this whole issue anyway, Wells?" I hissed at him. "You are nothing more than a dead writer. Probably just my fantasy to help me bear this... You ..." That was all I managed to say before Wells suddenly pressed a button again and pushed me through the opening frame.

"I'll find Tempus. Although I don't know how, he has to be the one behind this lie. Clark and you will have many children, Lois. Tell him that!" It was the last thing I heard H.G. Wells say. Then the world went black around me. Again I could not breathe, my body was numb, but the panic did not come. And again seconds later everything was over.

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I found myself standing in front of Clark's apartment. I was not sure whether I had just been dreaming. How had I come here? Where was my car? Confusing pictures replayed before my mind's eye. Had I actually traveled into the future? With a writer named H.G. Wells? The more I tried to focus on that memory, the blurrier it became. All I was left with was the knot in my stomach and a paralyzing fear. Cold sweat covered my forehead as I raised my trembling hand.

Never before had it been so difficult to knock on that door. The few inches between my fist and the wood were almost insurmountable. My heart thumped wildly in my chest. Perhaps Clark was not there. Why should he? My story would sound like that of a nutcase. Time travel, dead writers. I must have lost my mind. Startled I flinched as my fist crashed against the wood over and over again.

"Clark! Open the door!" I heard my voice like a stranger's. "Clark, please!" What was I doing here? He certainly was already at the press conference, sealing our fate for good. "Clark!" My voice broke, choked by hot tears running down my cheeks. "Clark ..."

I stopped when I suddenly looked into his face. I caught my breath. In jeans and T-shirt, he looked simply stunning. His constant companions — the glasses — were missing. Even if I had seen him without them countless times, he seemed like a stranger. Clark and Superman in one face, a very sad face.

"Lois ..." Clark greeted me in surprise. "What ... what are you doing here?"

"Preventing you from telling everyone the truth," I replied thickly. My voice did not obey me.

"How do you know that ..." he whispered hoarsely. His eyes were wide, and he stumbled a few steps back and nearly fell down the stairs. I followed him, not sure where this conversation would lead us.

"There's this connection between us, Clark," I began confused. "We share our dreams." I could tell from the look on his face that he had no idea what I was talking about. I hurried to continue. "This dream you told me about. In which you sit on my bed — I have had it too. Earlier today you imagined what would have happened if you had revealed your secret when Diana Stride had found out about you."

The words simply fell from my mouth and plopped down

right in front of his feet.

What chance did Clark have to make any sense of them when even I did not quite understand what I was talking about? For a while we just stood there, staring at each other mutely, separated by all the things that had been said between us. There was so much more than just my tangled sentences. Clark finally took a few steps back and slumped down on his sofa. He tiredly rubbed his eyes before he finally looked back at me again.

"I actually thought about it, Lois," he admitted softly.

"You didn't just think about it, you called a press conference," I protested vehemently.

He just nodded.

"Why Clark? Why do you want to give up on everything?" I shouted at him as more tears ran down my cheeks. I did not care. I threw my jacket off my shoulders, ready to fight. "Only because of the blackmailing? You've dealt with far more difficult situations!"

"You know it's not just about the blackmailing, Lois," he said calmly, an empty look on his face.

"So you do know about it," I snapped angrily. "You have known it all along and just ran off to settle the matter on your own. Some partner you are! Have you even considered how I might be feeling?" I yelled at him furiously and went for him.

He remained sitting on the couch, not even flinching at my outbreak. His calm demeanor instantly took the wind out of my sails.

"It's the reasonable thing to do once you think about it," he said softly.

"That's nonsense," I disagreed with him. "Reasonable would be to put a stop to their game. You're Superman for God's sake."

"I don't need to be Superman to do that," he objected, pointing at the small table beside his sofa. There was a laptop sitting on it that I hadn't even noticed. A letter was lying next to it, addressed to Perry. I knew it was a resignation letter. My stomach cramped painfully. I turned away.

"The article is almost finished," Clark said calmly. "The next counseling they're going to have is with a defense lawyer." A very brief smile flashed across his face and disappeared immediately when I looked at him.

"When did you write that?" I shot back at him furiously. Clark winced and stared at me with wide eyes. "Were you going to tell me about it? Or were you going to keep me in suspense. They know your secret, and you aren't the least bit worried?" I shouted at him. "You did everything you could to keep this from me! And now you're simply going to tell everyone?"

"I've sent the article to you first. Perry has promised to wait until you've edited my copy," Clark ignored my objection as if he had not even listened. "You can also work here if you want to. I..." He got up from the sofa and barely looked at me. He seemed uncomfortable around me; his expression was tense and very sad.

"Where are you going, Clark?" I asked and stepped in his way. "You're not going to leave me just like that." I felt tears in my eyes. That was what he always did. And what was I supposed to do about it anyway? Still, I did not flinch.

"There is nothing more to say, Lois," he replied quietly.

"And what do you think will change, once they know your secret?" I interjected.

"I won't tell anyone. It would only put you in danger, you and my parents," Clark said tersely, almost as if he had never seriously considered it. I knew better. Still I was relieved, at least a little.

"And what will you do then?" I wanted to know, still determined not to leave without getting some answers.

"Superman will announce that he is leaving the city. And Clark will cease to exist," he said gravely. His lips had become small, and the muscles in his jaws were tight.

"But ... but you're Clark." It was obvious. And yet I had

never seen it quite so clearly. Clark was Superman. But above all he was Clark. Clark was the one who had a real life, friends, and hopes. Superman was the only means to provide Clark a real life. "How can you abandon this?"

"Clark doesn't exist without you, Lois. Without you there wouldn't even be Superman," he gulped, and suddenly I felt his hand on my cheek. It was this familiar and so dearly missed gesture. He gently ran his thumb across my lips and wiped away the tears that covered my cheeks. "Maybe I'll be able to continue to be Superman somewhere out there. I'm afraid, Clark is already lost."

It could not be true! "And what about the blackmail?" I tried to awaken his fighting spirit. He could not give up so easily.

"They know nothing," Clark said quietly. "They were reaching until the reaction of their victims told them where to dig. Then they start bugging the rooms. They came too late." I gasped. Relief mingled with ... I was not sure what to call it. Rage? The feeling was not palpable. Everything was so confusing.

"It's time to say good-bye, Lois," Clark continued, and I saw him swallow once again. "I don't want to lose you, but I see no other way," he said seriously. I could see that he was suffering as I was.

My heart clenched until I felt I could no longer breathe. How could I ever let go of him? What would I do if he stayed? There would always be this invisible line we could never cross! The message from Jor El suddenly seemed so much more real than a time traveler. I was behaving ridiculously. Why had I even come here? Clark was right. It was a clean cut. I had lost Clark months ago — admitting to that could only help us both.

"Someone's manipulated the message from Jor El," I cried desperately, grasping Clark's shoulder to make him look at me. "If you go through with this, you're going to destroy Superman. That's exactly what he wants." I dug my fingers deep into his shoulder until they began to ache. On the one hand I was desperate to make him see that not all hope was lost, but on the other hand, I was not sure I actually wanted him. Not after what he had done to me. Still I was here. Did any of this make sense?

"Lois, what are you talking about?" Clark said, watching me with growing concern.

Suddenly it was as if a dam had broken. I sputtered my story, beginning with H.G. Wells. The words followed one another so quickly that I was surprised what I remembered. The ransom note, the wild car ride, the journey in time. I did not even take the time to draw a breath.

Clark was silent and listened attentively. His expression gave no clue as to what he was thinking. When I finished, I was out of breath. It seemed to me as if I had actually lived through all that again. The adrenaline rush was almost as intense.

"You realize that this all sounds pretty crazy," Clark said after a while.

"No crazier than a flying Kryptonian," I said lightly despite myself.

At least I elicited a smile. It reminded me of the good old days when Clark and I had been best friends. Involuntarily, a surge of happiness coursed through my body, warming me from within. It was all too fleeting.

"All I'm asking of you is that you let yourself be examined, Clark," I added in a sudden twinge of hope. "Someone must be able to find out if it's true what Jor El said."

Clark's gaze was inscrutable and his jaw tense. I felt cold again. What if he had done this long ago? My stomach tightened. When Clark opened his mouth, I would have loved to cover my ears. My fingers were numb; my skin prickled uncomfortably. I dreaded his answer.

"Lois, please don't do that," he pleaded softly. "Please don't raise any false hopes. There is no point in trying to convince me

otherwise,” he said determinedly. “Jor El has sent me this message, why — and most importantly how — would someone be able to manipulate it? This globe has traveled through space!”

I had expected that answer. Still, it was a cold, sobering shower. Stunned I stood in front of Clark and did not know what to do. Was I not just trying to fool myself? Clark was right. The Kryptonians had to have possessed an advanced technology. How could someone from Earth change that message? And why? Just to destroy our relationship? That was absurd.

“Why are you so keen on giving up hope, Clark?” I shouted at him against all reason. “Maybe there’s a way. We just have to find it!”

“Do you really believe that I haven’t thought about this?” he said harshly. “For months I’ve been thinking about little else. And I’m trying not to lose hope. You know where this has led us, Lois.” He turned his back on me embarrassed. “I didn’t exactly treat you like you meant anything to me.”

His voice suddenly sounded different. Quiet and bitter. Reluctantly, he turned back to me. The anger was gone from his face. Gently he looked at me.

“After all that has happened between us, it’s too late, Lois. I’ve pushed you from me, I had a relationship with Mayson. How can I expect you to forgive me?” he asked quietly.

“Because I love you,” I replied, wincing at my own words. It was true. I had gone through hell. But I still loved him. “I want you to free yourself from this nightmare, Clark.” Why was I so sure that he could? Had H.G. Wells actually convinced me? Or the time travel, which I had most likely just imagined?

“I never thought about second-guessing Jor El’s word,” Clark said after a while. “For months I spent my time trying to get my life back under control.”

“I think I would have done the same,” I replied quietly. “Will you do it?”

“I’m afraid”, Clark admitted softly.

“Me too.” I reached out for his hand and covered it. For once he did not flinch. “After all I’ve been through with Lex and Paul and Claude... I didn’t think I would ever be able to fall in love again. But I did — with you. Despite all odds. I don’t want to give up on you without fighting, Clark.”

His eyes rested on me while I spoke, never wavering. “I never thought I would feel like I belonged somewhere. But when I first saw you, it was like I had finally found a home. It kills me to think that I can never truly be yours.” His voice broke.

“Then give us a chance, Clark,” I begged.

He merely nodded and then squared his shoulders. I saw the tremor in his arms as he took the phone in his hand.

“Who are you calling?” I asked curiously and all of a sudden incredibly nervous.

“Dr. Klein.”

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*A few weeks later...*

“Lois?” His voice was gentle and affectionate. My heart skipped a beat and then suddenly started pounding madly in my chest. I raised my head. Clark’s lips twitched into a smile, basking the newsroom in light like a sunbeam in dark woods. “Coffee?” He asked softly, holding out a cup for me.

With a sigh I pushed the files on my desk aside. An aromatic scent emanated from the cup he offered me. Graciously I took it. The taste was even better than the smell. Clark cautiously took a sip of his own coffee and sat down on the edge of my desk. Fascinated I watched the play of his muscles underneath his shirt; I saw the strength in his movements. He slowly leaned towards me and reached out to wipe milk foam from my lips that I had not even noticed. Clark’s touch was intense though. A tingling sensation spread through my face as his hand gently cupped my cheek.

“I would like to invite you to dinner,” Clark murmured, his

voice sounding deeper than usual. He looked at me in silent admiration. His breathing became faster. With the hand that had just touched me, he started fumbling restlessly with his tie as if he could barely keep himself from touching me again.

“How about tonight?” I asked, excited and at the same time annoyed with myself that I was sounding so eager. But I had been waiting way too long for him to finally work up his courage and ask me out. “You could pick me up at seven.”

Clark nodded and surprise was written all over his face. A thin smile twitched at the corner of his mouth, soon turning into a full-blown grin. I loved the way he smiled; it was like the dawn of a new day, a perfect sunrise, warming my heart from within. I could not help but join him in smiling, shy at first but with increasing boldness.

My partner set his coffee cup on my desk and slid along the edge, closing in on me. I felt drawn to him. All of a sudden, I desperately wanted to get up from my chair. But if I did that, the whole newsroom would see, would know that...

Clark leaned forward. Gently he brushed a strand of hair behind my ear, and his thumb moved over my cheek until finally his entire hand was resting there. Behind the glasses his eyes seemed even darker. A fine blush colored his cheeks. I saw him swallow as his face came closer. His lips parted slightly, and then he kissed me.

I closed my eyes. There was only his mouth as his tongue gently caressed mine. Tenderly he nibbled at my lower lip, sucking lightly and letting go again. Was it just me, or was it getting hot in here? My cheeks burned, and I hungrily returned his kiss, sealing his lips with my mouth, drowning in their soft tenderness.

THE END