

Hurt Before...

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Summary: Clark Kent had met Lex Luthor during his years in college and is already onto him when he meets his new colleague Lois Lane. Together they investigate the Messenger explosion and Lois is beginning to suspect that Clark Kent has a secret...

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Flashback

Smallville, June 1988

The sun burned hot from a perfectly cloudless sky. There was little to remind anyone of the tornado that had hit Smallville the evening before. There were a few fences and some roofs to repair, but the only building that had collapsed was the Harris' old barn. For months, Rachel's dad had been planning on tearing it down, but as it turned out, his insurance was now going to pay for the rebuild, so for the most part, the storm had been a blessing in disguise, rather than a disaster.

Another one of the few victims of the storm stuck its branches and roots into the sky. Clark Kent was sweating as he turned one of Wayne Irig's old apple trees into firewood, while the poor guy nursed a bad case of flu. The unripened fruits were scattered all across the field, along with broken-off pieces of the branches, smaller twigs and bruised leaves. It was a sorry sight. Clark was glad that he could do Wayne a favor. This was the tree where the late Mrs. Irig's famous caramel apples had grown. Of all the trees the tornado could have chosen, it had uprooted the one tree that had carried the declaration of love that a much younger Wayne Irig had carved into the wood. It was a testament to the simple truth that life just was not fair.

Clark drove his axe more forcefully into the wood than was necessary. The log split in two and clattered to the ground. He bent down to add the pieces to the pile of wood that was already stacked on the bed of his father's pick-up. Clark's gaze wandered off to the next part of the trunk he was about to chop to pieces. It was large, but to Clark it did hardly seem large enough. He had volunteered his help, partly because he hoped that the physical exertion would do him some good. But it was only a drop in the ocean. He seriously doubted that even chopping down Redwood National Park would do anything to alleviate his pain.

With an anguished cry, Clark dug his axe deep into the wood, easily splitting it into three parts and driving the blade into the soil underneath. All he had ever wanted was to be like all the other guys, meet a girl, fall in love. Experience should have taught him that in his life, things just never went the easy way. He had been living in a world of make-believe and now he was paying the price.

Clark took one of the three logs. Tears blurred his vision as he picked up the axe and unconsciously turned the log into kindling. He went on to make quick work of the second one. Fighting to keep the tears from rolling down his cheeks, he added the small pieces of wood to the pile on the truck.

Perhaps he should try talking to her. His gut tightened painfully.

<Yeah, right, as if there's anything left to say.> Clark sighed and dropped the axe.

Cursing his fate, he looked at what was left of the old apple tree. It was not nearly enough to keep him busy for much longer.

Other men could just go and vent their frustrations by working themselves to exhaustion, Clark thought bitterly — but not him, of course never him. Another anguished cry was drowned out by a car suddenly pulling up on the gravel road.

A cloud of dust veiled it for a moment and then slowly settled down on the dark finish of an expensive car. The dirt on it was the only thing that did not seem out of place. The driver got out and let the door fall shut. It was a tall man with brown, curly hair. Despite his choice of clothing — a pair of jeans and a button-down shirt — he stood out. His eyes were hidden behind sunglasses. Slowly, he approached the fence that bordered Irig's field and waved his hand.

"Clark," he yelled and waved again. "Your parents told me I'd find you here."

"Lex," Clark replied flatly, not sure he was able to face anyone. It probably was not safe, angry as he was. Trying not to sound too offensive, he asked, "What are you doing out here?"

"I heard about your breakup," Lex said sympathetically. "I'm sorry. I know how much you love her."

For a man who spent most of his time in an office, he climbed the fence rather deftly. Clark watched Lex as he walked up to him, a look of genuine concern on his face. Guilt washed over him. Lex did not deserve his anger. Had he actually come all the way from Metropolis to pay him a visit, Clark wondered. It did not seem likely, but that was beside the point anyway. He had taken the time to talk to him and for that he should be grateful. But the wound was still too fresh for Clark to feel anything but the pain.

"I'd rather not talk about it," Clark muttered, barely loud enough for Lex to hear him. "So, what brings you here? You didn't come all the way down here just to offer me a shoulder to cry on, did you?" He picked up the axe, walking back to the tree and resuming his work.

"I had a meeting in Wichita and decided to drop by," Lex conceded and started to roll up his sleeves. "Mind if I help you, Clark?"

In fact, he did mind. Clark would much prefer to be alone, but it seemed awfully rude to say so. Instead, he just nodded, pointing at the pick-up truck. Next to the pile of wood was a set of tools. Lex found another axe. He weighed it in his hand and tested the blade with the tip of his thumb. Smiling in appreciation, he joined Clark who had already started chopping wood again.

End Flashback

Metropolis, present day

The newsroom was busy with shuffling feet as the working day drew to a close. As if sitting on a quiet island in the midst of a sea of bustling activity, Clark Kent watched as one by one, his co-workers shut down their computers and cleared their desks, more or less thoroughly. The elevators burst with people on their way down, most of them glad to finally call it a day. Eventually, the shuffling died and the arrival of the elevators became less frequent, until the last employee left the newsroom with a wave of his hand.

Clark's gaze involuntarily wandered to the only other desk that was still occupied. The woman behind it was the reason he had stayed late. Why that was exactly, Clark could not have said, though. He tried to rationalize it with needing to talk to her about their new partnership, if one wanted to call it that. Earlier that day Lois had outlined their working relationship pretty clearly. Being partners had not been a part of her definition. Anyway, if he had actually wanted to come clean with her and tell her what he thought about her bossy behavior, it would have involved some planning on his part. And he could not claim that he had consciously decided to stay so long that only the two of them were left. It had just sort of happened.

The unadulterated truth was that the fiery brunette sitting across from him had him mesmerized. Lois Lane, award-winning

investigative journalist, was the reason why he had come here in the first place. Given her reputation, Clark had hoped that Lois would be the right person to help him break the story he had been working on for years now. But she was also the reason why he had almost quit working at the *Daily Planet* after his first week. Not one of the many articles he had read, had revealed how gorgeous, breathtaking, brilliant, stubborn and difficult she was. Now she was also his so-called partner, thanks to Perry White, his editor-in-chief. Clark was not entirely sure how he felt about that.

Their first day of working together had been anything but easy. It had all started when Dr. Platt had stormed into the newsroom, claiming that someone was going to be sabotaging the shuttle Messenger. The man had been erratic and had not seemed all that trustworthy.

But then the Messenger had exploded, just as Dr. Platt had predicted. Lois had asked Perry for a task force and had ended up being partnered with Clark.

Clearly, he did not meet her expectations, which she had no qualms about voicing on a regular basis. She viewed him as a sidekick rather than a partner. Lois insisted on calling all the shots and growled at him every time he dared to ask questions. Her behavior had alternated between indifference and hostility. Still, Lois fascinated him and that was probably what unsettled Clark most.

Today they had gone to interview Antoinette Baines, the director of EPRAD, and Dr. Platt, who had been working for her. Platt had told them about his report on problems with the heating device. His demeanor however, complete with a wild story about being drugged, was suggestive of an acute psychosis rather than a real story.

Dr. Baines on the other hand had been all professional and had told them the sad story of a brilliant scientist, who had unfortunately crossed the small line between genius and madness.

He had supposedly been a drug addict, had divorced his wife and blown up his own lab.

When it came right down to it, it was Dr. Baines' word against Dr. Platt's. After meeting the two of them there was little doubt who the more reliable source was. Still, Dr. Platt had predicted the explosion, which made Clark wonder. Lost in thought, his gaze wandered back to his new partner.

Lois picked up the phone and dialed a number, her fingers tapping on her desk as she impatiently waited for her call to be taken. She seemed tired, her shoulders were slumped and she barely stifled a yawn. Earlier that day she had been bursting with enthusiasm, eager to chase the lead Dr. Platt had presented her with. But as the day had drawn on, it had become more and more likely that she would be recounting the official report on a tragic accident rather than revealing the juicy details of a ramified conspiracy.

Suddenly, Lois' stance straightened as someone answered the phone. She spoke a few words into the receiver and then listened, her expression gradually turning upset.

"No, Mitchell, I'm not mad," she said after a pause, betraying her words by a roll of her eyes. "If you've got the sniffles, you've got the sniffles... Yes, that could lead to complications... No, don't call me. I'll call you." She slammed down the phone, shaking her head in annoyance. A small sigh escaped her as she had a look at her wristwatch. Then she lifted her gaze, looking around the newsroom.

Clark managed to avert his gaze just in time. Now that the opportunity presented itself, talking to her did not seem like such a good idea anymore. He pushed back his chair and busied himself with clearing his own desk. After about one and a half weeks of working at the *Planet* there was not much to clear, though. From the corner of his eyes, Clark saw Lois approach and straightened to face her.

"I don't suppose you own a tuxedo?" she asked tentatively.

"I could get one. Why?" Clark replied indifferently, trying to suppress the flutter he felt in his belly.

"Oh. Well, the man I was going to Lex Luthor's ball with has the flu, and..." Lois squirmed and gave him a small smile.

"Yes?" Despite himself, Clark noticed that the flutter increased. The sensation however did not last long. He plummeted back to reality with a vengeance as it suddenly dawned on him, what she had just said — Lex Luthor's ball. The butterflies morphed into an ugly beast that settled in his stomach with an angry roar.

"...well, I was wondering if you'd like to..." Lois went on, blissfully ignorant. She paused again, her eyes pleading with him to give her a break. Finally, Lois added, "Look, do you want to take his place or not?"

"I'd rather not," Clark said gruffly.

"Are you crazy?" Lois cried, her mouth hanging open in surprise for a moment. "This is the social event of the season. Everyone who's anyone will be there and you're just lucky that I'm being stood up — and you don't want to go?" Seconds ticked by in which neither of them said anything. Then, Lois suddenly clapped her hand over her mouth in a swift motion and flashed Clark an apologetic look. "Oh my gosh, I just did it again, didn't I?" she muttered.

"If you mean that you were treating me like a hick — then yeah, you did it again," he deadpanned, his gaze stern and unwavering.

"I'm sorry, Clark. I know we didn't start on the best of terms..." Lois said softly.

"That's one way to put it," he interrupted her wryly.

"When Jimmy introduced us and you told me that you were from Smallville, Kansas, how was I to know that you were already a seasoned reporter with a Kerth under your belt?" Lois failed at keeping the contempt from her voice as she mentioned the town.

"Snob," Clark muttered and turned his attention back to clearing his desk.

"Come again?" Lois asked.

"I said you're a snob, Lois," Clark repeated unfazed. "You didn't even stop to read my work before you formed your opinion of me."

"I already apologized," Lois said with a hint of annoyance. "Look, like it or not... we're partners now—"

"Oh, are we?" Clark threw in sarcastically.

Lois ignored him. "—and Lex Luthor is a story," she went on. "I... we're going to land Luthor's first one-on-one interview if it kills me... eh... I mean us. And I will not walk into his party unescorted. This is—"

"Then find someone else, because I'm not going." Clark cut her off, snatched his coat and started for the elevators.

"Clark, please..." Lois stepped in his way, flashing him a sweet smile. "This could be my only chance at getting this interview," she said, batting her eyelashes, almost at the verge of begging. "I've been trying for months to get hold of Luthor. This could be another Kerth... a Pulitzer even. Of course, we would share the byline," she added as a peace offering.

Her smile, complete with puppy-dog eyes, was wearing down Clark's resolve. He did not particularly look forward to seeing Luthor again. Lois had no idea how much of a story the billionaire really was. Clark had earned himself a Kerth while chasing down evidence against him. His case just never seemed solid enough.

Clark raked his hand through his hair and once more looked into Lois' brown eyes that sent his heart racing. This woman would be his undoing. He had vowed to never again let anyone get under his skin like this, but Lois was more than he had bargained for. She was infuriating, uncompromising, pigheaded, domineering, ambitious, brilliant and absolutely breathtaking. He had fancied himself to be in love before, but he realized that he

had not even begun to understand what that word meant. Now he knew better. There were a whole bunch of reasons though, why going to that ball was a very bad idea.

Yet, he could not help himself. “O... kay,” Clark said grudgingly.

The look of triumph on Lois’ face was unmistakable. “Then, it’s a date. Meet me in front of LuthorCorp. Nine,” she said gladly.

“Make no mistake, Lois. This is not a date — it’s business,” he all but snapped.

Her face fell. “Whatever,” she muttered, downcast. “I’ll see you there.” Lois turned on her heels. Hurriedly, she fetched her coat that hung across her chair and moments later the doors of the elevator had closed behind her.

“I’ll see you there,” Clark mumbled to himself, sinking back onto his chair.

He stared into space, ashamed of himself and his abominable behavior. It had not been right to snap at her like that, regardless of how she treated him. And what on earth had possessed him to consent to going to Luthor’s ball — and with Lois Lane of all people? For all intents and purposes, this situation had disaster written all over it. It took long moments until he managed to shake the stupor that had befallen him. A soft, optimistic voice that Clark more often than not kept confined to the back of his mind, insisted that this might very well be a chance — in several ways.

As if to prove its point, that voice stirred up the rather fresh memories of Lois Lane storming into Clark’s life. He had been working late, writing up a mood-piece about an old theater that was about to be demolished. Just as Clark had typed away the last paragraph, the elevator doors had opened to reveal a young guy about Jimmy’s age who had beamed with pride as he leisurely strolled down towards the newsroom. He had worn a cap and a shirt that seemed several sizes too big for him. His legs had been clad in an old pair of baggy jeans. The ragged clothes, however, had done nothing to lessen his air of confidence. The ease with which this guy had caught Clark’s attention had almost made Clark question his sexuality. Watching as the guy slowly turned into an even more stunning woman had been some kind of relief. That day, Lois Lane had returned from exposing a million-dollar car theft ring single-handedly. By the time Jimmy had introduced Lois to her new coworker, Clark had already been smitten.

With a sigh, Clark dragged himself up from his chair. It was no use denying that he had feelings for Lois Lane. What was important was how he dealt with them. Pushing her away certainly was the safer way to handle her. But that did not mean that he had to be rude. This was not the way he wanted to treat a woman; he would not be able to live with himself. There were just certain mistakes he was not going to make again, and daydreaming about a brunette female reporter was definitely one of them.

Clark had one last look at the empty newsroom in general and Lois’ desk in particular, before he switched off the lamp and made his way towards the elevators. He needed to get a tuxedo.

Almost two hours later, Clark opened the door to his hotel room. A single light bulb cast a dull light on the gray walls. In one corner was a bed with faded linen. The other corner held a small kitchenette. “Hotel room” was not actually an appropriate term. This was a dump, compared even to most other places Clark had lived in, and not all of them had had the luxury of running water. But pretty much any place was cozier than this room, with the exception of maybe a prison cell.

Clark put the tuxedo he had rented in the closet and withdrew a large cardboard box. He sat down on the bed that squeaked ominously under his weight. The mattress was worn and uncomfortable. Clark could feel every single spring digging into

his skin. It was a good thing he was invulnerable, or else this place might have already proven uninhabitable.

Two floors down, the owner of this hellhole continued his daily fight with the missus. They had already gotten to throwing things, which made Clark assume they had started earlier than usual. Perhaps the liquor store across the street had run out on the guy’s favorite brand of beer. In the apartment next door someone was watching TV. Judging from the squeaking bed above him, his neighbor upstairs had gotten lucky. A blaring siren invaded Clark’s senses and he heard the police radio broadcasting the description of a thug who had broken into a jeweler’s shop downtown.

Clark sighed and leaned against the wall, closing his eyes for a moment. He knew that sooner or later he needed to make a decision. Coming to Metropolis had seemed like a good idea at the time — he was not so sure anymore. This city was just too much. There was always someone crying for help, always some minor or major disaster that begged for his attention. The harder he fought to ignore this ever present noise the worse it got. Clark’s conscience would not let him turn a deaf ear to all this pain, enhancing every single cry a million times until he hardly slept anymore.

Clark had stopped a bus with failing brakes, had prevented some muggings... It just was never enough. If he truly wanted to make a difference in this city, he would need to come out into the open. That was a thought that had always terrified him. After all, he knew what would happen if anyone ever found out what he really was. No, it was crucial that he stay under the radar.

Sighing again, Clark opened his eyes and reached for the box that sat on the bed beside him. Inside was every article, every snippet of information that he had been able to gather on Lex Luthor. Most of them told the story of a successful philanthropist who had started from scratch. But they also told a darker story of bribery and protection money — a story of someone who in all likelihood had made a name for himself as ‘the Boss.’

Clark withdrew today’s notes from inside his jacket and added them to his collection. He had a whole box of evidence, but hardly anything that would stand up in court. And he had nothing whatsoever on the crime that he most desperately longed to prove. His special abilities were a blessing just as much as they were a curse. They had helped him to learn so much, but at the same time they kept him from entirely unraveling the truth. He could not reveal Luthor’s true face, not yet.

Flashback

Midwestern University, March 1988

“Did you hear the news?” Lana asked as she stormed into Clark’s room. Without waiting for his reply, she continued. “Lex Luthor is going to lecture at Mid U.” She looked at him expectantly, her blue eyes gleaming with excitement.

<Doesn’t she ever knock?>, he thought amused and put down his pencil.

Actually, he welcomed the distraction. For hours he had been reading what different authors thought about Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. None of those texts made for a simple reading and they definitely lacked the serenity of the play. Clark stifled a yawn and leaned back in his chair, drowning in those blue eyes of hers. Lana looked absolutely adorable with that slight flush on her cheeks. She tilted on her toes, impatiently.

“So, when’s the big day?” he asked, for good measure. Lana’s whole stance told Clark that she was about to burst if she did not get to tell him right away.

“Friday evening,” she promptly replied, a smile spreading across her lips.

He loved it when she smiled like that. To Clark, it made the world turn slower. His breath hitched and he could think about little else than kissing her. Friday night ... Friday night ... Clark’s

stomach suddenly lurched and his heart started to pound in his ears, as he realized what Luthor's lecture on Friday evening would mean.

It obviously showed on his face as well, because Lana went on. "I know, I know, our date," she said apologetically. "But Clark, Luthor is the American Dream come true and I just can't pass up the opportunity to talk to him. His insights on domestic economy could help me find the right angle for my thesis."

"Well, I know how much work you already put into that thesis..." Clark conceded, consciously forcing his lips to twist into a warm smile. "I guess we could postpone our date." His stomach clenched painfully.

With a small cry of delight, Lana embraced Clark. "Why don't you join me? The lecture is open for all students," she offered. "Perhaps you could also do an interview with Luthor. And afterwards we could go for a bite. Now, how does that sound?"

"Great." Clark had a hard time trying to sound even half as enthusiastic as Lana did. This was not how he had imagined their date. He had been agonizing about Friday night. He had barely slept during the past couple of days, always wondering how he was going to approach the issue at hand.

Lana sat down on his bed, leaning back and supporting her weight with her arms. As a result, her blouse stretched provocatively across her ample bosom. Involuntarily, Clark's gaze drifted lower. He gulped. A smug smile played on Lana's lips.

"See anything you like?" she teased him.

End Flashback

"So you're finally going out again?" Martha Kent smiled broadly as she cleared the table except for the plate in front of Clark.

He was still picking at his piece of apple pie, as she walked up to the counter and put the empty plates into the sink. With only a moment's hesitation Martha obviously decided, that doing the dishes could wait until much later. For now, she seemed intent on learning everything there was to know about the woman who had captured her son's attention. Clark was not so naïve to believe that his amateurishly feigned indifference could actually fool his mother. It was more than pathetic that he still tried.

"Mom, your apple pie is delicious as ever," Clark replied, pretending not to have heard his mother's comment.

From the corner of his eyes, he saw Jonathan Kent dab his mouth with a napkin. His gaze rested on Clark, thoughtfully. Clark's unusual lack of enthusiasm for his mother's pie was not lost on his father. With an inaudible sigh, Clark dug his fork into the pie and took another bite. Try as he might to prevent it, his thoughts kept drifting back to Lois Lane — and it showed.

"We're not going out, Mom. It's business," he eventually conceded and put down his fork. The plate was finally cleared and Clark chewed his last bite of pie. He could as well have eaten cardboard, but Clark was painfully aware that there was nothing wrong with the pie.

His mother flashed him a smile and squeezed his hand. "Whatever you want to call it... I'm glad you're finally coming out of your snail shell."

"You sure you want to go to Luthor's ball?" Jonathan chimed in. He had not said much at all during dinner. Mostly, he seemed content with just listening. Now he straightened and carefully watched his son, his gaze full of concern.

"It could be a chance," Clark said quietly, bringing up the argument he had used with himself throughout his flight from Metropolis. "I can't keep running like I have. Lois Lane might become an ally." This time Clark sighed audibly. "Besides, we don't know for certain that he knows."

With a low growl of despair he pushed back his chair and got up. Who was he trying to fool? However much he admired his

working partner, he could not let his guard down. He was all too aware of the old saying what with the best laid plans of mice and men. Lex Luthor might be the story of the century, as Lois had put it — but Clark Kent was the story of the millennium. It was not hard to predict which one she was going to print if given the choice. Futilely searching for an outlet for his raging emotions, Clark started pacing and raking his hands through his hair.

"You're right, we don't know that," Martha cautiously agreed. "Clark..." She stepped in his way, laying a hand on his shoulder.

Not for the first time in his life, Clark wondered if his mother was not actually the person who had superpowers. She had no difficulties stopping him when hardly anything else could.

"I'm running out of ideas. Perhaps, if I got Lois to help me then maybe..." he breathed out, suddenly feeling incredibly helpless. Honestly, he did not really know what he expected. Coming to Metropolis, he had been grasping at straws, the hunch of a moment. It was something he was already starting to regret. He knew he could very well get caught in his own trap.

"Don't you think that you're becoming a little obsessed with Luthor? I'm sure he has done some questionable things, but he might not be quite the devil you're making him out to be." Martha said reasonably. She squeezed his shoulder, looking at him gently. Her eyes were full of sympathy. "I know how hard it was on you to lose Lana. But you have to accept that her death was not your fault. And it might not have been Luthor's fault either. I don't claim to know what happened between the two of you, but you didn't..."

"Mom," Clark exclaimed, exasperated, but trailed off at his father's warning glance. He took a calming breath and muttered, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to... But you didn't see his eyes, you didn't see the evil glint when he..." Clark's voice broke. "I wasn't imagining that, Mom!"

"I didn't say you were," Martha replied softly. "But maybe there's a reason why you couldn't prove that Luthor was involved in Lana's death. I know you've been wondering the same thing," Martha said with absolute certainty. She was also a mind reader — that was her second superpower.

"Yeah, I guess that's possible," Clark admitted with a sigh.

Jonathan Kent visibly relaxed in his chair. It pained Clark to even imagine his parents might feel threatened by him. He felt sick to his stomach as he looked at his mother, whom he had almost attacked, if only in words. He shrunk in on himself and dug his hands deep into the pockets of his trousers. His mother on the other hand remained where she was, one hand on his shoulder, completely unfazed. In her presence, Clark often felt as if he had no superpowers at all. His mother was so much stronger.

It dawned on him that his father had not been concerned that Luthor might expose Clark, when he had asked if he was sure that he wanted to attend the ball. He knew that fear was irrational, anyway. But Clark just could not shake the feeling that Luthor knew, that he had known... It was a nagging feeling that he just could not shake.

"And if Luthor is truly responsible for..." Martha trailed off, the slight trembling in her voice indicating that she was indeed worried that Clark might be right.

"I know what I'm getting myself into," Clark added defensively, wondering if he truly did.

"Just be careful, son." Jonathan said thickly and got up from his chair as well.

"I will," Clark promised and hugged his father. "It's time for me to head back now."

"We'll see you next week," Martha replied and buried her face in her son's broad chest as she hugged him, too. "Be careful, sweetie," she whispered before she let go of him. Clark smiled at his parents and turned to leave. "Uh, and Clark..."

"Yeah, Mom?" His hand on the doorknob, he turned to her.

"Give this girl a chance, will you?"

Lightning disrupted the sky, briefly illuminating the street. Then darkness once again overtook. Torrents of rain veiled Clark's view like a dense curtain. He stood under the awning at the bottom of the LuthorCorp building, waiting for Lois. Drenched attendants rushed to the incoming stretch limos, dutifully holding out umbrellas for Luthor's illustrious guests. Clark saw famous athletes and businessmen, whose faces had covered the front pages of important magazines. The mayor and his wife were there, as well as Perry White and some other editors of Metropolis' newspapers.

It was getting late. Just as Clark was beginning to hope that Lois would not show up, a cab pulled up in front of the completely soaked red carpet. The first thing Clark saw was a pair of shapely legs. The slender figure of a woman followed. Covered in a full-length raincoat and a hat she was barely recognizable. The servant who had come to her aid, jumped back as an opening umbrella almost hit him square in his chest. As the umbrella came up it revealed Lois Lane. Heedlessly, she breezed past the servant and moved to join Clark.

"Why didn't you go inside?" she asked, nodding towards the raging thunderstorm. She folded her umbrella and stepped through the doors that another pair of servants held open. "By the way, nice tux."

"Thank you and good evening to you, too, Lois," Clark replied dryly as he followed her into the building.

<Pull yourself together;> he warned himself. *<You don't want to start fighting with her again, not in front of all those people. Be nice.>*

The foyer was a display of Luthor's expensive taste. The floor was lined with Carrara marble. Elegant golden chandeliers bathed the guests in their gentle light. A fancy red carpet led to an elevator that seemed to exist for the sole purpose of accessing Luthor's penthouse. Knowing Luthor that was likely even true, Clark mused.

The only thing amiss in the picture was a makeshift coat rack in a far corner of the hall. Whoever had planned the party, obviously had not expected that anything as mundane as a thunderstorm could possibly disturb Luthor's ball.

"I've got to fix my hair," Lois muttered, looking around self-consciously. She seemed impressed with her ostentatious surroundings that were clearly built to intimidate.

"There's a ladies room to the left of the elevator, Miss," a servant, who had rushed to help Lois take her coat off, dutifully replied.

Clark involuntarily held his breath as the dull coat gave way to a night-blue gown with a deeply plunging neckline. It contrasted nicely with Lois' ivory skin. Clark took it all in, every amazing inch — from the dark brown pools of her eyes to her velvet lips and her slender neck. His gaze dropped to a dizzying cleavage with ample breasts. Beautiful did not begin to describe it. His mouth ran dry and he had a hard time forcing himself to look at her face again.

"You look... good," Clark ground out.

He soon settled for a more neutral expression than the one he had had in mind. Good was the understatement of the year. Clark's mind involuntarily indulged in pleasant thoughts of feeling her body against his in a slow dance. His breath caught. He was walking on dangerous ground.

A small smile played on Lois' lips. "Thanks. I guess I should..." She vaguely gestured in the direction of the ladies room.

"Go," Clark immediately said, grateful for the brief respite.

As Lois turned, her back came into view, no less breathtaking than the rest of her. Clark could not help but stare at her the whole way until the door to the ladies room fell shut behind her. Then he closed his eyes, trying to shake the spell Lois had cast on him. It

was only then that Clark realized he was actually **floating** a few inches above the ground. He dropped to the floor, praying that no one had noticed.

<Snap out of it, Clark!> he chastised himself. *<One pair of legs and you're ready to kiss all reason goodbye. Forget about her. She's trouble.>*

Clark was still berating himself, when Lois returned. She joined him in the line of people waiting to be admitted to the ball. He greeted her with a nod and a brief smile, and then forced himself not to look in her direction. Absentmindedly, he surveyed the hall. A man dressed as a butler stood next to the elevator and checked the invitations. One by one he let the guests pass. As they approached the elevator, Lois began to search her bag for her own invitation. Involuntarily, Clark found his attention drawn to her again. She had wonderful hands, slender fingers...

"Ah, Mr. Kent, I wasn't expecting to ever see you again. What a nice surprise." An accented voice suddenly pulled Clark from his thoughts.

Oblivious to his surroundings, Clark had not noticed the man wearing an Indian coat and a turban. He froze as he recognized Luthor's mysterious personal valet. Asabi stood next to the butler and whispered a few words to the man, before he once again turned to Lois and Clark.

"It's a pleasure to see you and your beautiful companion." Asabi stepped aside. "Enjoy the evening." He made an inviting gesture towards the elevator.

For a moment, it seemed as if someone had stopped time. Neither Lois nor Clark were moving. One of them was seriously contemplating running off, the other was just staring in disbelief. Seconds ticked by that stretched to hours. Clark had the strange impression of being an actor in his own slow-motion picture, a mere puppet. As if steered by strings, he walked into the elevator. His hand had been put on the small of Lois back to take her along. Helplessly, he watched the doors of the elevator close, sealing his fate.

"Your companion?" Lois breathed. Her eyes were still wide open with surprise and a hint of anger. "Wait a moment... they did not even ask for my invitation, did they?" she muttered incredulously. "What..."

Clark clenched his jaw, deciding to let her mull over the problem. He was not going to spell it out for her. Of course, sooner or later she was going to draw the right conclusion. He just hoped that fading into the background was still an option. It did not seem all that likely.

The rest of the ride passed in silence. Clark was not sure whether that was because his lack of a reply had sufficiently conveyed his reluctance to discuss the matter or if Lois did not want to make a scene in front of everyone. His bet was on the latter option. Clark did not dare look at Lois, but stared ahead, bleakly. He could very well imagine how she stood beside him, almost choking on the ton of questions she must have come up with by now. Clark could practically see the wheels in her mind turning as she mapped out a strategy to nail him. Unfortunately, his own mind came up empty as he desperately tried to think of a way to explain the incident without raising more questions.

The elevator came to an abrupt halt as it reached Luthor's penthouse. Clark dashed out as quickly as he could without starting to run. Even crowded with Metropolis' upper class, the place was spacious. White orchids sat everywhere, deliberately illuminated to underline their beauty. The light reflected in sparkling diamond earrings and necklaces. A chamber orchestra accompanied the celebration with soft music. Waiters were serving champagne and hors d'oeuvres. Everyone was dressed up, smiling and chatting in small groups, apparently enjoying themselves immensely.

"Clark, what..." Lois asked as she followed in Clark's wake. Again, he settled for ignoring her and went on, waving at

Perry who stood with a group of people. Before Clark had decided whether to join them, Jimmy had walked over and smiled at him.

"Incredible, huh?" he said, gesturing at the luxury around them.

"Yeah," Clark agreed uncomfortably. A furious Lois seemed to be breathing down his neck.

"I can't believe we'll see him," Jimmy went on excitedly. "I read all five of his unauthorized biographies. Rags to riches, wrong side of the tracks, self-made billionaire, owns dozens of companies, employs thousands of people. *Man of the Year*, every year, has his finger in every pie, but rarely appears in public. Won't give personal interviews." He rattled through as if someone had demanded that he know those facts by heart.

"Clark, are you going to tell me what this is all about?" Lois asked, fuming by now and staring daggers at Clark. She had come to stand right next to Jimmy and Clark, arms folded in front of her chest, seething with anger.

"Hey. There he is." Jimmy pointed at the staircase on the far side of the hall, awestruck.

Luthor chose to orchestrate his appearance with a bolt of lightning. It illuminated the glass window behind him, casting an eerie light on the billionaire. For the blink of an eye it showed Luthor unadorned, without the mask of integrity that he wore for the public. As Luthor stepped down the stairs, he was bathed in the warm glow of the chandeliers. A winning smile was plastered on his face. His tailor-made tuxedo fit perfectly. The shiny white shirt underneath was stiff with starch. Clark was sure that even with his enhanced vision he would not have found a spot on him.

Luthor played the role of the wealthy philanthropist to perfection. He shook hands with his guests, greeting each and every one of them in their native language, like he was particularly glad that they had come. His gaze however, darted around for the brief moments when he was not talking to anyone. Luthor drank in the attention everyone was paying him.

Next to Clark, Lois unfolded her arms and straightened her shoulders. Her anger was merely put on hold for the time being. From the corner of his eye Clark caught one last furious glance that told him she was not yet through with him. Suddenly all business, Lois focused on Luthor as he slowly approached them on his way through the ballroom. Lois' lips were moving silently, perhaps rehearsing what she was going to say. Deliberately unclenching her fists, she took a step forward. Now, Lex Luthor was almost so close that Lois could touch him, his back turned on her as he amiably chatted with the mayor. Clark watched her draw a shaky breath and as if on cue, the stupor that kept him in place was gone. Hastily, he looked around, spotting the bar.

"I'll get us something to drink," he muttered to no one in particular.

Just as he took the first step, Luthor turned and faced him. "Clark Kent..." Luthor let the name roll off his tongue. A smile spread across his lips. "Is that really you? I was afraid I'd never see you again. Why haven't you returned any of my phone calls?"

All of a sudden, the world seemed to have stopped turning. Clark felt strangely numb, a mere spectator of the showdown his whole life had been headed for. He could neither move nor breathe. The slightly uneasy feeling that had accompanied him the whole day through was building up to a full-blown panic attack. Luthor's eyes rested on him. Clark felt himself shrivel under their scrutiny. He felt exposed, as if he was turned inside out, as if all his secrets were suddenly on display for the whole world to see. The smile that was plastered on Luthor's face seemed awfully knowing.

<He doesn't know,> Clark told himself, trying to fight his rising nausea. <He can't possibly have figured out what happened.>

Clark was aware that almost everyone's gaze was now on

him. Lois' carefully adopted bearing had shattered to pieces. Her mouth dropped open and her eyes widened. Different emotions rippled across her face, ranging from sheer astonishment to utmost betrayal. As soon as Lois collected herself enough to close her mouth, her lips became so tight a line that they were almost invisible in her pale face.

Jimmy's expression was a mix of surprise and awe. His hand hung in mid-air as if he was still holding the glass of champagne that lay on the floor, shattered. Perry's brows were furrowed, his gaze intent as if he tried to look right through Clark.

Every sound around Clark was drowned out by the frantic beating of his heart. He desperately wished for a bolt of lightning to strike him down right there or for the earth to swallow him. Being the center of attention had never been anything Clark was comfortable with. Now that he found himself thrown right into his own worst nightmare, his mind was completely blank.

"Lex..." Clark breathed tinny, the voice of an automaton added to his puppet body.

<I shouldn't have come. I really, really shouldn't have come,> a panicky voice in the back of his mind screamed.

"I'm pleasantly surprised that you finally decided to accept my invitation. I have sent you so many I lost count. Your parents did tell you that, didn't they?" Luthor asked, his brows furrowing. "I must have left at least a hundred messages for you on your parents' answering machine. But you never called back. I was worried when you suddenly broke all contact. It has been years since we last saw each other. Where have you been?"

"Abroad," Clark choked out. He wanted nothing but to get out of the limelight.

"Well, that explains a lot." Luthor nodded. "And now you're back, I presume. Are you visiting Metropolis?"

"I work here," Clark managed to say. At least some feeling returned into his wooden body, slowly untying his tongue. "May I introduce — this is my colleague, Lois Lane," he said, once again placing his hand on the small of Lois' back and pushing her towards Luthor. "I guess you already know Perry White. And this is Jimmy Olsen." Clark went on and stepped behind the two men.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Luthor. How do you and Clark know each other?" Lois was the quickest to recover.

"The pleasure is all mine," Luthor replied and placed a kiss on the back of the hand Lois offered him. "Oh, and please call me Lex."

Lois smiled at him sweetly. "Oh, thank you, Lex. So, how do you know Clark?" she pressed on. "You don't seem to be on friendly terms with the press. After all, it's well known that you never give interviews."

"Oh, you see, with Clark it's different. He saved my life." Once more Lex Luthor's gaze fixed on Clark. "We used to be friends, but then we lost sight of each other. Not for lack of trying on my part, I dare say."

Clark felt his cheeks burn with embarrassment and anger. He deeply regretted coming to the ball. This wasn't a chance at all, but a federal disaster, just as he had anticipated it to be. But instead of listening to reason, he had let his hormones make the decision. Clark cursed himself. He knew he was playing with fire. And one of these days he was going to get burned, bad.

"You know very well why I left, Lex." Clark said though clenched teeth, trying very hard not to sound accusing.

"I guess I do," Luthor said with a regretful smile that to Clark seemed like a sneer. "Anyway, it's good to see you, Clark. I had almost given up hope. Why don't we have lunch next week and catch up?" Luthor ventured. "It was nice meeting you, Ms. Lane. Mr. White." Luthor nodded towards them. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have other guests to attend to. I hope you'll enjoy the evening."

As Luthor walked off, Lois, Perry and Jimmy eyed Clark in stunned silence. A muscle ticked on Perry's jaw as he strained to

hold back a bark. The seasoned editor studied Clark carefully, taking in the sheen of sweat Clark knew was collecting on his forehead. Perry's eyes were fixed on Clark as he unclenched his fists.

"Care to explain that, Clark?" Lois broke the silence, simmering with rage. "You have an invitation to this ball? How come you never mentioned that you know Lex Luthor personally? I mean, he would probably serve you an interview with him on a silver platter. I know journalists who would kill for such an opportunity, myself included! And you don't even try? What kind of reporter are you?" Lois hissed.

"It's a long story, Lois," Clark said quietly. He still felt the tension in every muscle. With Luthor gone, it only gradually abated.

"I'm listening." Once more, she folded her arms in front of her chest. "This better be good."

Lois' jaw was clenched tightly. Every fiber of her being exuded anger. Taking flight was not an option — her gaze held him firmly in place. Being stared at by Lois, Jimmy and his boss was almost a physical experience. Clark felt slightly sick to his stomach. Not one of the three was going to let him off the hook. He could either hand Perry his resignation right there or he had some explaining to do.

"I'm too close," Clark hedged. "If I interviewed him, it wouldn't be worthy of an investigative journalist..."

That was as close to the truth as he dared to get. The thing was that he probably really would not be able to write anything objective when it came to Luthor. Clark longed to expose the man for who he really was and he was not going to settle for anything less. For that he needed as much evidence as he could possibly get, which was no easy task. To make things worse, Clark was afraid that Luthor might harbor a suspicion about his powers. The thought that Luthor could somehow gain leverage sent shivers down his spine. Ultimately, Clark's fear of Luthor clashed with his desire to expose the man, which put him in a rather difficult position — namely in the midst of this particular nightmare.

"As much as I hate to agree, but Kent has a point," Perry conceded gruffly. He patted Clark on the back, let out a sigh and ruefully added. "Damn luck, an interview with Luthor would look great on our front page."

"Then convince Luthor to let me interview him," Lois suggested, clearly not ready to let it go. "You can't just let that opportunity pass by. This is the story of the century."

"That's a great idea. What do you think, Kent?" Perry nodded enthusiastically.

"Uh... huh," Clark muttered noncommittally.

Dizzy with a mixture of relief and a new surge of panic, Clark had a hard time keeping it together. His gut screamed at him to run as fast as he could. Reason suggested to give it a try and to tell Lois what he knew about Luthor. With her, he might pull off what he alone did not dare to do.

<Yeah. And how exactly are you going to pull that off without becoming a story yourself?> The mere thought made him break a sweat. *<Luthor's going to charm her into believing that he's such a nice guy.>*

"Would you excuse me for a moment?" Clark apologized and turned on his heels to escape the scrutiny of his colleagues rather than face another argument.

"We're not done here, Clark!" Lois protested.

Pretending not to have heard her, Clark deftly wound his way through the crowd. He almost collapsed as the mens room door shut behind him. Loosening his bow tie he walked over to the sink to wash his face. His trembling hands spilled most of the water across his shirt. Years had passed since he had first met Luthor. He knew the guy was filthy, yet his air still intimidated him.

Flashes of a summer day long gone danced before Clark's eyes, mocking him. Clark heard his mother's voice in the back of

his mind, reminding him that he could not know for sure what had really happened that day. It might have been an accident, as Luthor claimed. He might not be the monster of Clark's nightmares.

"But if Luthor really thinks I'm just a normal guy, then why does he bother? Why doesn't he just leave me alone?" Clark muttered in response to that thought. He splashed his face with more cooling water and then straightened to look at himself in the mirror.

He was not quite the sorry sight he had expected himself to be. His complexion was the same olive tone it always was, maybe a shade paler than usual. What a mess he had gotten himself into. Clark had not planned on letting anyone in on his acquaintance with Luthor, at least not yet. That was his minefield to navigate.

<Yeah, but you were asking for this to happen, weren't you?> he thought bitterly. *<Accepting Lois' invitation to the ball, well aware that such an invitation had been sent to your parents. You knew Luthor wouldn't let you come and go unnoticed.>*

As much as Clark would have liked to spend the rest of the evening hiding under the sink, he knew that he had to get back. Taking deep breaths, he tried to calm himself down. Slowly, his nausea abated.

<Luthor doesn't know about your secret,> he told himself firmly. *<What happened in Smallville has to have convinced him otherwise. Now go back into that ballroom and save what is left of your dignity. Don't chicken out again, you did that one time too many.>*

Besides, it would be rude to leave without saying goodbye to Lois. Clark took another deep breath and looked over his shoulders, making sure that no one was watching him. With a quick beam of heat-vision he dried his shirt. Then he fixed his bow tie. He would simply walk up to Luthor and get Lois the interview. It was simple as that.

As Clark stepped out of the bathroom, the crowd had gathered around Luthor, listening to an announcement. It briefly flickered through Clark's mind that this was the perfect opportunity to leave unnoticed. He could leave Metropolis behind and no one would be the wiser. But that was not going to solve any problems.

Luthor seemed completely at ease with the attention everyone paid him. He strived for it.

"...House for Homeless Children will soon be a reality," he just said and proudly smiled at his guests. "As you know, I have dedicated my life to improving the quality of the lives of the citizens of Metropolis. Tonight, I'd like to go further." His expression turned serious as he went on. "It is my sad understanding that due, in part, to the terrible tragedy that befell the Messenger last week, the Congress of Nations intends to cancel Space Station Prometheus." He made a deliberate pause to let his words take effect.

Clark could not help but concede that Luthor was a very skilled speaker. He had the undivided attention of his audience. The people around him looked at him in awe, nodding their approval at his every word, drawn in by the sheer power of his appearance.

"I cannot stand by and allow that to happen to the citizens of this planet. Profit aside, the potential benefits that a zero gravity laboratory could bring — most importantly, pharmaceuticals that could end crippling diseases here on Earth — must not be lost." With another pause Luthor emphasized his point. Clark had the bad feeling that Luthor could have easily convinced his captive audience of the benefits of a war, if only he had wanted to.

"Therefore, I have decided to commit my total financial support toward the building of a privately owned space laboratory. I have submitted my proposal to the Congress of Nations and I am awaiting their go-ahead," he concluded and pulled a curtain that covered a model of a space station. "Ladies and gentlemen, I give you... Space Station Luthor."

The crowd broke into enthusiastic applause, cheering Luthor. He spread his arms like a magician who had just done an impressive trick.

“An engineering marvel. Signpost to a new age in exploration and scientific advancement. A gift to the future of mankind,” Luthor announced, beaming with pride.

Clark’s stomach was suddenly tied in knots. He had been reluctant to believe in Platt’s theory that the Messenger was sabotaged, because he could not imagine that anyone would do such a thing. But in the light of Luthor’s announcement it all added up to a heinous picture. Luthor wanted to instill a monopoly for space research. When in several years, the Russian space station Mir exceeded its durability, the world would depend solely on Luthor’s zero gravity lab. The influence Luthor would gain was too horrible to even contemplate.

Clark wanted to scream as he looked into all those enthusiastic faces, wondering, why not one of the people at this ball seemed to understand Luthor’s real intentions. The angry beast that lived inside his heart ever since Lana’s death raised its ugly head again. Clark’s hands tightened into fists. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and silently counted to ten to calm himself down. Losing his temper was something he could not afford. Besides, this was not more than a hunch. Clark inwardly berated himself for being so unprofessional. Whatever he might think, Luthor was not automatically responsible for all the evil things that happened.

The crowd dissolved into various smaller groups as the orchestra began to play. Clark was still frozen to the spot. He tried to wrap his mind around what he had just heard. If he could prove Luthor’s involvement in the explosion of the Messenger, he would finally be able to tear down his mask of integrity. But from years of experience, Clark knew that he could not do this alone. He could not hope to succeed in two weeks at exposing him, when he had failed to do so in the last five years.

“Will you dance with me?” Startled, Clark recognized Lois, who was standing right in front of him. He had not seen her coming. “It’s lady’s choice.” She smiled at him, mischievously. Clark stared at her bewildered, wondering what was going on. Before he had fled to the mens room, she had been fuming with anger.

Without waiting for his reply, she drew him towards the dance floor, placing his right hand on her back and taking his left hand in hers. When Clark became fully aware what was happening to him, he was already engaged in a waltz.

“You’re a good dancer,” Lois complimented him.

“Thanks,” he muttered, dumbfounded. “You, too.”

“I’m impressed. I was afraid you Kansan guys were more into square dancing,” she teased him good-naturedly.

“Actually, I learned from a Nigerian princess who studied ballroom dancing in England,” Clark heard himself tell her.

“A citizen of the world,” she said and fell silent again.

Clark guided her across the dance floor in slow circles. The abrupt change in her behavior baffled him. The way Lois smiled at him made Clark feel weak in his knees. She felt fragile in his arms. Once again, he lost himself in the dark brown pools of her eyes. Her body was pressing into him, tantalizing him with every breath that she took. Clark smelled her perfume mixed with the flowery scent of her shampoo. For a while they just danced, sliding along, almost floating. Clark had to concentrate hard on not actually leaving the ground.

“How do you know Luthor?” Lois eventually asked.

“Changing strategy, are we?” Clark raised his brows.

“Oh, come on, Clark. Stop biting my head off. We’re partners now. Don’t you think this is something I should know?” she pressed on. “He said you saved his life?”

“That sounds more heroic than it really was,” Clark replied dismissively. Then he sighed. “Well, I guess it won’t hurt to tell

you. I met Luthor a few years ago. It was during my sophomore year at Midwestern University. Luthor had just made his first couple of million dollars and had been awarded Businessman of the Year.”

Lois nodded. “I remember that time. He was a nobody, and then one day his face was suddenly plastered all over Forbes magazine.”

“Well, he was asked to do a lecture series on modern business strategies in various universities all over the country. He came to Midwestern, too,” Clark explained. “A friend of mine was studying business at the time and she invited me to go. I thought it might be a good opportunity to do a feature on him for our paper. It turned out that, like me, he has a talent for learning foreign languages. That got us talking.”

“You did an interview with Luthor?” Lois said surprised.

Clark only shrugged. “Not really, it was more of a friendly chat,” he replied with a wry smile.

“And you saved his life?” Lois asked further.

“It was a mugging,” Clark stated simply. “I don’t know who did it, they were already gone when I happened to pass by. One of them had shot Luthor. He was unconscious. I managed to stem the bleeding until the emergency services arrived. It was a lucky coincidence, is all.”

“So without you he might have bled to death. I remember reading an article about that incident, but I don’t think it ever mentioned you or how close he came to losing his life,” Lois said thoughtfully.

“Like I said, it wasn’t all that heroic. I just happened to be in the right place at the right time,” he concluded, repeating what he had told Luthor over and over. The music was fading and he let go of Lois. “Now, are you satisfied?”

“For now,” Lois conceded. “But I’m feeling that there is more to this story than you’re letting on.”

“Maybe. But that’s all you’re going to hear tonight. If you’ll excuse me, I’m going home. I’m tired,” Clark said. “Good night, Lois.”

“Good night, Clark,” she replied with a smile. “Am I going to see you tomorrow?” He raised his brows questioningly. “I’m going to EPRAD, trying to see the fragments of the Messenger. And Platt promised us his report. After all, we’re supposed to work as partners.”

Clark looked at her, irritated. It did not seem like Lois to go so soft on him. He had expected an interrogation. Instead, she talked about being partners — no tough questions about Luthor, no nagging about the interview. Her fury could not possibly have vanished completely. So, what was her plan? Well, one way or another, Clark was pretty sure he was going to find out.

“Partners,” he agreed cautiously and shook the hand Lois offered him. “Oh, and just for the record — we both get to ask the questions!”

Flashback

As dates went, this one was torture. Clark had a hard time paying attention to what Luthor said. To him, the lecture had gradually faded to background noise, as his mind started to drift. In contrast to that, most of the students were in the business school and they sat on the edge of their seats as Luthor talked about modern economy concepts. Clark had never really understood people whose single goal in life was the pursuit of wealth. Growing up on a farm, he had always known that money played an important role, but it was not what his life revolved around.

Lana sat beside him. Her skirt was tantalizingly short and revealed her shapely legs. Lana was so close, yet completely out of reach. Clark squeezed his eyes shut and leaned his head against the backrest of his chair. He knew that skirt had been chosen carefully. It served as a reminder of what could be ... of

what Lana wanted.

Needless to say that Clark wanted it, too. It seemed all he was able to think of, lately. His gaze was once again drawn to her creamy skin, wandered up her slender frame. Lana sensed his attention. She shot him a side glance and her lips briefly twitched into a provocative smile, she looked back at the man up front. The skirt slipped a little higher up as she crossed her legs. It sent Clark's heart racing.

"Excuse me. What he just say?" a Japanese guest student, who sat on Clark's left side whispered in somewhat broken English, pulling Clark from his daydream.

"I didn't listen. I kind of zoned out," Clark apologized in an equally low voice and blushed. "Sorry about that."

The guy beside him shrugged disappointedly and tried his luck with his neighbor on his left-hand side. Clark forced his attention from Lana's legs and back on the lecture. But all he registered were Luthor's moving lips and a few random words that did not make any sense at all. His thoughts once more drifted off.

Lana's skirt was back in his mind with a vengeance. Spending this evening in a lecture instead of going out on a date was only partially due to her interest in learning from Lex Luthor: Clark suspected that her true intention was to show him that two people could play elusive. It was ironic, because he had practically already decided to finally tell Lana all there was to know about him. And now she had taken him to hear Luthor's lecture. Clark sighed exasperatedly. He had been rehearsing his speech for the past couple of days and now was listening to someone else's.

Clark's conviction to tell Lana faltered. Lana and he had been dating on and off since high school. For a year now they had been a couple, but they were still maneuvering on the threshold towards intimacy. Lana mistook his reluctance to go the whole way for lack of affection. And he could hardly blame her. After all, how was she to know what was at stake?

Lana had known him all his life. He could not very well claim that religious beliefs were the reason why he was waiting. Clark knew he had to come to a decision. If he ever shared himself with anyone, he wanted to do it completely, no secrets left. But he was more the forever kind of guy — and with Lana he just was not sure. And honestly, how could one be sure of such a thing at the age of twenty-one?

Clark's gaze drifted higher, towards her small waist and her ample cleavage up to her creamy neck and chin. Lana had lips the color of a pink rose, full and enticing. The thought of kissing them made Clark's mouth run dry. He liked Lana a lot, but was this really the kind of love that lasted a lifetime?

Obviously aware of his attention, Lana reached for Clark's hand and squeezed it gently. As if someone had turned up the volume, Luthor's sonorous voice resounded in the lecture hall.

"This is why modern companies need to operate on a global scale. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen." Luthor paused to allow for applause.

Clark joined in guiltily and clapped like everyone else. The pad on his desk was painfully empty. He had only a vague idea of what Luthor had been talking about. So much for his article in the university's paper.

"Any questions?" Luthor asked and looked into the audience expectantly.

Lana let go of Clark's hand and raised hers. Moments later she got to pose an in-depth question that reminded Clark why he had not taken any economy classes. Luthor's reply seemed even more difficult to grasp. Clark sighed and gathered his belongings.
End Flashback

"You could have tried to distract her," Lois growled for the umpteenth time. "I would have slipped past her and—"

"Lois, I'm pretty sure Dr. Baines wasn't the only one

responsible for guarding the building. We saw the wreckage and we didn't end up in custody," Clark replied through clenched teeth. "I'd say that is as much as we could ask for."

Lois snorted and shook her head. "You know, sometimes I wonder how a boy scout like you could ever win a Kerth. You're..." Whatever else she wanted to say died on her lips as the cab pulled to a halt in front of the Daily Planet. Lois fumbled with her wallet and then handed the driver a twenty-dollar bill. "The rest is for you," she added briskly and climbed out of the car.

Clark followed her, smiling to himself. Lois was ambitious to the point of obsession. Working with her certainly would not become boring any time soon. She was reckless in the pursuit of her story and there was nothing that was going to stop her from getting the scoop. Watching her interview Dr. Baines and Dr. Platt the day before had told him that she was good. Seeing her sneak around the hangar where EPRAD kept the wreckage certainly explained why Perry thought she was one of the best.

An explosion shook the earth, the loud bang resounding in the streets. People all around instinctively ducked their heads. Clark's heart missed a beat as he saw smoke rise from an excavation where people had probably been working on the gas line. A few workers stood around the manhole, staring at it in shock. The blockage around the hole had partially collapsed.

"There's a man down there," the supervisor screamed in horror.

From the corner of his eye, Clark could see Lois start for the site of the incident. She was not the only one. Soon, people gathered around the hole.

<There's a man down there,> the supervisor's words resounded in Clark's head, as he watched the scene, frozen to the spot.

His heart, however, raced frantically. His hearing involuntarily tuned in to the noises that came from below the street. The flutter of a heartbeat, the faint sounds of breathing. Whoever was still down there was alive, but not moving. A soft whistle indicated that gas continued to leak from a hole.

"There was an explosion. Did someone call the police? The fire department?" the supervisor asked no one in particular. Then, finally, he seemed to have collected himself. "Keep those people back," he yelled at his shocked co-workers.

Clark looked around. No one was paying him any attention. He could not just stand there and wait until another explosion killed the man, as well as the bystanders. As well as Lois, who was so close to that hole that it made Clark sick to his stomach. His darting eyes spotted a manhole at the other end of the street. He sped towards it, checking one last time if anyone was watching him, before he lifted up the lid and jumped down. In the blink of an eye he was gone and hurriedly adjusted the lid above him before he rushed to help the unconscious man.

In a matter of seconds, Clark had carried the man towards the exit where his fellow workers were waiting anxiously. He dropped the man off, right as he was about to come to and then went back to take care of the gas leak. Using his x-ray vision he watched as the workers dragged their colleague to safety. Outside, firefighters and ambulances had pulled up and the police were already blocking the road. With a sigh of relief, Clark returned to the manhole and a moment later, he stood on the street as if nothing had happened.

Clark joined Lois and the other spectators. His partner was already scribbling notes and talking to the supervisor. She was so caught up in work that she surely had not even noticed his absence. When she was done gathering the facts she needed to write up the story, Lois turned around.

"Gee, what happened to you?" she asked, frowning her brows as she gave him a once-over.

Clark looked down at himself, finding that he was covered in dirt. <Just great, Kent,> he thought angrily. <Why don't you go

out advertising that you're a freak?>

"Dunno. I guess the wind must have blown the stuff right in my direction," he said, inwardly wincing at the weak excuse. "I heard one of the firefighters mention something about a gas leak," he added quickly, hoping to distract Lois. "We should call them later to get a final statement."

"Good thinking." Lois nodded and took his arm, dragging him towards the Daily Planet. "Now come on, we've got work to do."

"Um, Lois, if you don't mind, I'd like to get changed, first," Clark replied, stopping her.

Lois rolled her eyes, unhappy with the delay. "Don't make such a fuss!" she spat, cringing at her own harshness. "It's really not that bad!" she hastily reassured him.

Clark only raised his brows.

"Okay, maybe it is that bad," she conceded with a sigh. "Go."

"I won't be long," he promised and flashed her a smile before he headed home.

Flashback

The lecture hall was gradually emptying out. Lana had gotten up and just in time remembered to drag Clark along to go see Luthor up close. He still stood next to the podium and talked to some professors, who were congratulating him on his lecture. Now Clark stood next to Lana in the line of waiting students. Right in front of them was the Japanese guest student, positively giddy. Now and again he stood on his toes to get a better view of Luthor.

"He is such a great speaker," Lana whispered excitedly.

"Yeah, I guess so," Clark replied without much enthusiasm.

Truth be told, Luthor and his lecture were the last things on his mind. He just wanted to get out and take Lana somewhere a little more private. They needed to talk — he needed to find out if he could trust her. His stomach tightened — if she loved him enough to accept him in all his weirdness.

Clark sighed inaudibly and shuffled forward as yet another student had succeeded at shaking Luthor's hand. Lana, too, was teetering on her toes to get a better view of the billionaire.

"Did you know that he recently got divorced?" Lana whispered, barely turning her head to look at Clark. "It was all over the papers. I bet he lost a small fortune." She sounded a little too excited for Clark's taste.

A lump settled in his stomach at the mere thought of a failed marriage. His parents were so happy with each other that divorce had always been far from his mind. But now that he was contemplating taking the next step in his relationship with Lana...

<Just stop it right there,> Clark berated himself. <You love Lana and she loves you. That's all you need to know.>

Forcing his mind from the reiterating thoughts, Clark had a closer look at Lex Luthor. He sure knew how to look good in a suit, but then, the suit alone had probably cost a fortune. Not that it would matter to a man who was aspiring to become one of the wealthiest men in the US. Clark recapped what he knew about Lex Luthor. Admittedly, it wasn't much. He was an enigma and a few years ago he had appeared seemingly out of nowhere. His rise to the top of the business world had been fast. He owned enterprises all over the world and his name was associated with many charity events. All in all, he seemed to be one of the good guys.

Gradually, they approached Luthor. If Clark did not want to be viewed as the pitiable guy who counted attending a lecture as a date, he had to find a question he could ask Luthor. Clark felt a twinge of guilt as he remembered that there had been a whole speech he could have written about. Well, it was no use crying over spilled milk. Professor Carlton would certainly tell him that it took much more skills to write an interesting article out of a single question. But what kind of question was that supposed to be?

End Flashback

Roughly twenty minutes after taking his leave, Clark entered the Daily Planet. He was not sure whether using his powers had been a wise decision. Luthor's focus would be on him, now that he lived in Metropolis. But he could not have watched a man die, if he could so easily prevent it. It certainly had not been prudent to take the additional risk of flying home to get changed. He could not claim that he regretted it, though. He had sorely missed the thrill of flying in broad daylight, when there was nothing to cover him but the effect of speed.

Actually, the flight had even given him a fresh boost of energy. The literal change of perspective had opened his mind to the possibility, that investigating the explosion of the Messenger with Lois could be the first step to bringing Luthor down.

So, Clark felt kind of energetic and too restless to take the lift. As he rushed up the stairs, taking two at a time, yet restraining himself to human limits, his hearing picked up Lois' voice.

"It will work, it has to!" she said, stubbornly. "Please, Jimmy."

Clark blinked. *<Did she just say 'please'?>* he wondered wryly. *<Must be some favor she's asking.>* He chuckled, slowing down his steps as he listened curiously.

"I don't know, Lois. My voice doesn't sound anything like Clark's," Jimmy objected. "They will never fall for it."

"Well, it certainly won't hurt to try," Lois replied, making it sound like an order.

A quick scan with his x-ray vision showed Clark that Lois was picking up the phone and dialing a number before she handed Jimmy the receiver. His hand trembled as he took it. Sweat appeared on his forehead and he shifted his weight, nervously waiting for someone to take the call. He listened to the line ringing, biting his lips. Lois watched him intently, her gaze never wavering. For long seconds nothing seemed to happen. The tension that was visible in Jimmy's features was gradually abating.

Jimmy let his arm sink, seeming relieved that no one had answered, when suddenly a female voice said, "Mr. Luthor's office, this is Mrs. Cox speaking."

Jimmy almost dropped the receiver as he hurried to lift it up again. "He...hello this... this is Cla... Clark Kent," he choked out. At Lois' thumbs-up sign, he added more firmly, "I'm a good friend of Mr. Luthor. May I please speak to him?"

His request was answered with a brief silence. Lois teetered on her toes, keeping her fingers crossed. Jimmy had his eyes closed and Clark stood in the stairwell, frozen to the spot. The door to the newsroom was only a few feet away. He eyed it, seriously contemplating rushing in and crumpling the receiver in his hands. The muscles in his jaw twitched.

But he stayed and listened as Mrs. Cox's voice spoke up again, "Ah, Mr. Kent, it's a pleasure hearing from you. I'll put you through."

"Thanks," was all Jimmy could say, before Lois grabbed the phone, giddy with excitement.

<The nerve of that woman!>, Clark thought, both annoyed and fascinated. *<Change of strategy, no kidding.>*

He had been wondering why Lois had not again urged him to do the interview. Addressing the matter would only have invited Lois to continue her inquiry, though and that was the last thing Clark wanted. So he had decided not to look a gift horse in the mouth. As it turned out, he really did not like the reason for her diffidence.

"Clark, I didn't expect to hear from you," Luthor said, being his usual charming self.

"Uh, hello Lex, it's actually Lois Lane. I hope you don't mind the charade. But since you haven't been answering any of *my calls*, I don't know how else I'm supposed to get to talk to you," she said boldly.

“Lois Lane?” he chuckled, sounding amused rather than angry. “I must admit that ignoring your calls was probably a mistake.”

“That it was. I hope you’ll forgive my boldness,” she replied sweetly.

“Boldness is a trait I admire in women,” he conceded.

“So does that mean I’m getting an interview?” she asked innocently.

“I’m afraid not, Lois,” he declined. “I hope you can understand my reluctance. A man in my position... I wouldn’t want to be misinterpreted, and I have had one or two bad experiences with the media.”

“But not with me,” Lois objected.

“I’d let Clark do the interview,” he offered.

“Clark won’t do it,” Lois pointed out. “He thinks he’s too close and Perry White agrees. I doubt he would print such an interview for fear of being condemned as untrustworthy. I, on the other hand...” her voice trailed off.

For a moment Luthor said nothing, leaving Clark wondering if he had hung up. Lois was biting her lips while she waited. Nervously, she twisted the cord around her fingers and opened her mouth more than once as if to add something. She caught herself every time, obviously deciding that it was better to leave him dangling in the air. An interview with the *Daily Planet*, with Lois Lane in particular, was a privilege, one that distinguished important people from mere mortals. Despite her young age, Lois had that kind of reputation and she knew it.

“Lois, why don’t we make it dinner, then?” Luthor finally asked.

“I’ll be looking forward to it.” Lois replied and listened again as Lex Luthor suggested a date. She readily agreed before she finally hung up. Proudly, she beamed at Jimmy. “See, that’s how it’s done.”

As if the spell on him had been broken by her words, Clark found himself able to move again. He raked a hand through his hair and adjusted his glasses. His first impulse was to rush in and confront Lois. She was actually about to steal his story — one that he had never intended to write, but that was beside the point. The problem was that he could not explain how exactly he had been able to eavesdrop.

So, Clark took a deep calming breath, and adjusted his glasses once more for good measure. He opened the door to the newsroom and stepped back into its restlessness. Lois was sitting at her desk, smiling to herself, inebriated by her own success. Jimmy had already run off on another errand that either Lois or Perry had sent him on. Midway to Lois’ desk, Clark slackened his pace. He was not sure, whether he was yet ready to face Lois. Sighing, he headed for his own desk.

“Morning, handsome,” Cat Grant, who seemingly had appeared out of nowhere, purred.

The society columnist had started hitting on him on his first day of working for the *Daily Planet*. Ever since he had been partnered with Lois, she had doubled her efforts. It made Clark wonder if she had a real interest in him, or if this was mainly about ticking Lois off. She wore a dress that revealed more than it covered. It screamed *Take me, I’m yours* in a way that made Clark uncomfortable. That was not because he was overly prudish, he just felt that there was maybe more to Cat than her active love life. But she preferred to show the world an artificial version of herself, which, frankly, put Clark off.

“Oh, hi, Cat.” He greeted her without much enthusiasm. “If you’ll excuse me...”

“No, I don’t think I will excuse you,” she said, pouting. “I’ve asked you to have dinner with me two times.” She placed her hand on his chest, fumbling with his tie and looking at him with puppy dog eyes. “That’s two times more than I’ve ever had to ask any man to do anything.”

Her every move, her every gesture had seduction written all over it. Nothing she ever did happened without purpose. Briefly, Clark wondered what it would be like to know the real Cat Grant, the woman underneath all those layers of makeup and acting.

“I’m sorry, Cat, but I’ve been really swamped,” Clark hedged, carefully withdrawing his tie from her grasp. “Lois and I—”

“Poor Lois. All work and no personality,” Cat cut him off.

“Anyway...” Clark muttered.

“Clark... there is a call for you on line two,” Pete of the sports section yelled right at that moment.

“Be right there,” Clark replied with relief. “Sorry, Cat,” he said hastily and hurried towards his desk.

Cat was just too much. And it had pained Clark to listen to what she said about Lois. His partner had a great personality, as annoying as she sometimes tended to be. Lois was not always easy, but at least she was real. It was not something he could honestly say about Cat.

A moment later he picked up the phone. “Clark Kent.”

“Please wait a moment, I’m going to put you through to Mr. Luthor,” a female voice chirped and soon was replaced by soft music.

Clark froze. All of the sudden he felt like he had been doused in a bucket of ice water. An unpleasant flutter filled his belly and his heart started to pound. Before he could do anything about it, before he had time to contemplate simply hanging up, a soft crackle announced that there was once again someone at the other end of the line.

“Hi Clark, it was nice seeing you again the other day. I had invited you so often I’d almost lost hope that you were ever going to come,” Lex Luthor said cheerily. On a more serious note, he added, “I was afraid that you might be holding a grudge against me. I can’t begin to tell you how deeply sorry I am, for a lot of things.”

“You know why I needed to leave,” Clark breathed and dropped down onto his chair, before his legs gave out under him.

“Yeah, I do,” Luthor replied gravely. “Lana’s death was a terribly tragedy. I still can’t believe that...” He paused and for a moment, Clark could only hear Luthor’s breathing. “I can’t believe she’s gone.”

“Neither can I...” Clark choked out, his voice thick with emotion. It was a miracle the receiver did not crumble in his hands.

“I keep thinking that I should have stayed with her. When she came to me after she had broken up with you, she was so distraught...” his voice trailed off and Clark heard Luthor swallow at the other end of the line. “I guess she must have regretted leaving you... She shouldn’t have driven in her state of mind.”

Luthor’s words reverberated in Clark’s ears. Lana had been distraught, pretty much so. No one knew that better than him. Her reaction still pained him deeply. Clark was angry at her and that made it all so much more difficult, so much more confusing. It was inappropriate to be angry. That sentiment only fueled his guilt and thus his need to find out what Luthor had done to Lana. But it also reminded Clark of the fact that he might be on a wild goose chase.

Clark closed his eyes and tried to breathe through the rising nausea. It was the thorn that kept pricking in his side, this nagging fear that Luthor might be telling the truth. Could Lana really have died in a car crash? Or was it just too much of a coincidence? Clark had travelled all over the world, trying to gather evidence. He had a whole box of hints that painted a frightening picture of Luthor’s true character. Yet, he still could not prove that Luthor had actually killed Lana. It all might just be a theory Clark had carefully constructed to alleviate his own sense of guilt.

Clark heard Luthor talking, but he did not understand a word he was saying. It ultimately did not matter. Luthor was playing his

buttons, Clark reminded himself, desperately trying to regain a modicum of self-control. It was one of the many reasons Clark had kept his distance over the past years. He could not afford to let his own guilt overpower him. He could not lose sight of his objective — he needed to bring Luthor to justice.

<Your Mom's right — that does sound awfully obsessive,> the nagging voice of guilt threw in.

“Did you know that your partner tried to set up an interview with me?” Luthor chuckled, obviously having changed the topic somewhere along the way. “She’s pretty ambitious.”

“That she is,” Clark desperately tried to sound casual, friendly even. It left a bitter taste in his mouth. “Why don’t you let her do it? I’d lose all credibility if anyone found out that we are friends.” He almost choked on that last word.

“I don’t buy that, Clark, not one moment. You’re a professional reporter, you won a Kerth. Don’t think I missed that,” Luthor said emphatically. “Look, I respect that you want to make it on your own. Seriously, I do. But you could do so much better, Clark. I could give your career a head start. Besides, you’re the only one I know I can trust.”

Clark slowly let out his breath, trying not to let his frustration seep into his words. “Let Lois do the interview. She deserves it and—”

“You’re never going to get to the top of the journalist world by stepping aside and letting others get the stories, Clark,” Luthor interrupted him. “I bet she wouldn’t hesitate, if given the chance. I heard that her colleagues call her ‘Mad Dog Lane.’”

Clark could well imagine the smirk that was now plastered across Luthor’s face. It sent a shiver down his spine. Right now, he felt as if the billionaire stood right behind him, breathing down his neck and following his every move. He seemed to know more than he was supposed to.

“Think about it; the offer stands,” Luthor continued. “How about we meet for lunch? Tomorrow? Twelve o’clock?”

“I don’t know if I can make it. I’m pretty busy, lately,” Clark apologized.

“You could bring Ms. Lane as well,” Luthor said sweetly. “She’s a beautiful young lady. I wouldn’t mind seeing her again. Bye, Clark.”

“Yeah, bye,” Clark muttered, suddenly feeling chilled to the bone.

How was it that — voiced by Luthor — even a compliment contained a hidden threat? Clark hung up the phone, staring at it for a long moment. Luthor held a power over him that frightened Clark.

Coming to Metropolis should have been a coup. He had almost all the evidence he needed to expose Luthor’s evilness to the world. What he lacked was an impeccable reputation. Thus, he had come to the *Daily Planet*, one of the few papers in the world that was widely trusted and would not be afraid to expose Luthor. Lois Lane was another reason why Clark had chosen the *Planet*. It was vital that there was someone who could take over the story if Clark’s worst fear would come true.

Ever since Clark had gotten to know Lois, he had congratulated himself on his choice. Now, he was not so sure anymore. Until two weeks ago, Lois had been just a famous name without a face. Then she was a co-worker who called him a hack. But much to his dismay, she was gradually becoming someone he cared for, despite everything she had done to him. Could he really stomach sending her into the lion’s den?

Clark closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair. Conflicting emotions surged through him: fear of exposure, a desperate need for retribution and a deep sense of guilt. He just was not sure if he would be able to live with himself if Lana had died in a car crash because she had been too distraught by learning that her boyfriend was a freak to pay any attention to the oncoming traffic.

A sigh escaped his lips as he leaned forward again and rubbed

the bridge of his nose. He tried to shake the gloom. It was no use fretting over what had been. A whole box of evidence told the story the way he believed events had unfolded. He was here in Metropolis working with the most renowned journalists of the world. And one of them was sitting a few feet across from him, sifting through a pile of notes.

Clark decided to ignore his sense of dread and walked over to Lois, nodding at the notes in her hands. “Anything?”

“Clark, I...” she started, but bit her lip, interrupting herself. She shook her head, sadly. “Never mind. I must have called fifty ex-employees who worked at EPRAD when Platt did. None of them are talking. I don’t know, maybe there’s just nothing to talk about.” She threw her notes onto her desk, discouraged.

“I believe Platt,” Clark stated firmly. “It is too much of a coincidence that the Messenger blows up just a day after he storms into the newsroom claiming it will. So, what do we do now?” Clark sat down on the edge of her desk.

Lois smiled at his encouragement. “First off, we piece together Platt’s report, if that’s possible.” She showed him a pile of jumbled papers that Jimmy must have brought in while they had been gone. “Then, we figure out how to prove that Dr. Baines got a copy of it. If we have any written evidence that Platt found coolant devices and Baines ignored it...” She sighed, looking first at the pile of papers in her hand and then at Clark. “I hope you haven’t made any dinner plans.”

Clark shrugged and forced a smile on his lips. “I’m all yours.”

Flashback

Clark stifled a yawn, feeling his eyelids droop. He forced them back open. The drive down Interstate 35 always tired him out. Not one of his strange powers seemed to counteract the somniferous effect of the endless fields beside the painfully straight road. The fading light of day only made things worse. This brief glimpse of normalcy in Clark’s otherwise so weird life actually would have been kind of pleasant, if the coffee he was sipping from his styrofoam cup had any effect on him whatsoever.

Lana sat in the passenger seat, taking a nap. Her steady, deep breaths only served to increase Clark’s own weariness. He blinked his eyes and shook his head to clear the cobwebs. His gaze briefly turned to the speedometer. The needle showed seventy miles per hour, which was the only real indication that they made any progress at all.

The other night had stretched on later than Clark had anticipated. Admittedly, chatting with Lex Luthor had been surprisingly pleasant, even if it had meant foregoing his date with Lana. Never in his wildest dreams would Clark have imagined that attending the lecture would ultimately result in going out for a drink with the millionaire. For that, he had to thank the giddy Japanese student. The young man had been so excited that he had voiced his enthusiasm in a quick splutter of Japanese. Without really thinking about it, Clark had stepped in to translate. As it turned out, Lex was fluent in the language himself.

During the ensuing conversation, Clark found out that they shared a knack for languages and a desire to explore the world. It had made for a very interesting evening. Of course, Clark had not been able to admit just how many places he had visited during the few months he had travelled after finishing high school. Luthor had been excited to meet a man who was equally as well read and spoke more than half a dozen languages fluently.

At first Lana had used the opportunity to talk a little more about business and her thesis. Luthor had willingly provided her with some insights he had gained from his dealings. But later she had been bored out of her mind and had left early. Lana had not been all too happy about the course of the evening. There was no doubt about that. On their ride back, she had given him the silent treatment until she had finally dozed off. Who had wanted to meet Lex Luthor in the first place, seemed like a moot point.

Anyway, Clark had been amazed to meet someone who was even remotely like himself— someone who had seen as many things and whose life was as strange, although for completely different reasons. Luthor seemed detached, he was an orphan like Clark, though he lacked the loving family Clark had grown up in. Most importantly, Luthor seemed to strive for something he had not found yet. Clark felt that they yearned for the same thing — a sense of belonging.

Next to Clark, Lana stirred. “What time is it?” she muttered with a yawn and glanced around, taking in the darkening sky.

Clark sat straight, a little surprised at being pulled from his thoughts so suddenly. He cast a quick look at his watch.

“Half past eight,” he replied. “We just passed Emporia. I guess we’ll be driving another hour or so.”

“Great.” She smiled at Clark and raised her hand to cover another yawn. “This has been one hell of a week. I’m glad we decided to head home for the weekend.”

“Yeah, me too,” Clark muttered in agreement, glad that she did not sound quite as aloof as she had before.

From the corner of his eye he watched her warily, trying to determine if the change in mood was going to last. Lana dropped her hand again, folding her arms in front of her chest. Her eyes met his and in the dim light of dusk Clark could see that her cheeks were flushed. She averted her gaze quickly, unfolded her arms again and studied her fingernails with fake curiosity.

“Lana, about last night...” Clark began.

“I’m sorry, Clark. I really am. Meeting Luthor was my idea, not yours.” She did not look up and bit her lips to keep them from quivering. “Guess I got a little intense, didn’t I?”

“It’s okay, Lana. I had a nice evening, but it would have been even better if it had been just the two of us.” He lifted his right hand from the steering wheel to give her leg a gentle squeeze.

“Really?” A hopeful smile tugged on her lips. “Then you wouldn’t mind taking me out on a date, tomorrow? Of course, I’m not quite as sophisticated as Lex Luthor ...” her voice trailed off.

“Lana, what’s this all about? You know that I love you,”

Clark said, a hint of irritation in his voice. “You’re not jealous of Luthor, are you?”

“Of course I’m not jealous,” she replied annoyed. “It’s just ... oh I don’t know, Clark. You didn’t put up much of a fight when I asked you to postpone our date. We’ve been dating for about a year and all we ever do is kiss.” Her voice had gradually increased in volume until she was almost shouting.

Clark winced. “I thought you wanted to go to that lecture,” he whispered.

His mouth had suddenly gone dry. It was one thing to think about telling her the truth. Actually doing it was an entirely different matter. Clark knew that it was about time. He had known Lana for almost his entire life, so what was he afraid of? But that was just it — they had gone to elementary school together and later to high school without him ever mentioning that he was different. What was she going to think? Would she scream bloody murder at finding out that he was — well, whatever he actually was? He hoped not.

“Well, yeah, of course I did, but that’s beside the point,” Lana quipped and rolled her eyes. “We’re not kids anymore, Clark. You say you love me, but you don’t seem to want to make any commitment. And don’t you dare tell me that this is some religious thing. I know for certain that Martha isn’t that puritanical.”

Clark was not sure he would ever be able to follow that woman’s logic. However, he chose to remain silent rather than to point out that not sleeping with her did not mean at all that he did not want to commit. He sighed, already knowing that he was going to lose that argument. Maybe that was because she was basically right — only she missed the true point. If he really wanted to commit, he needed to share himself on a much more fundamental level than just the physical experience.

He swallowed hard. “Lana, could we please talk about this later?”

End Flashback

They had been working for hours, trying to make sense of Platt’s report. The desk they were working on was covered with notes and smaller piles of papers Lois and Clark had deemed belonged together. The report was hard to read, not just because of the scientific language. Platt had added sentences in his almost unreadable hand. His annotations partly covered the typed text, effectively obliterating it as well.

“This is impossible. Nothing matches, no dates...” Lois spat out, annoyed. “We’ll never get through this.” Frustrated, Lois dropped her pen and yawned, leaning back in her chair. “I’m starving,” she moaned.

“We could go for a bite.” Clark offered and put down the papers he had been reading.

“Nah.” She shook her head, stretching her back, trying to loosen the stiff muscles. “What I’d really like is some good Chinese takeout, but not from that lousy joint across the street,” she said wistfully.

“I know a place,” Clark replied.

Lois raised her brows in surprise. “Do they deliver?”

“No, but it’s no problem,” Clark said as he got up. He reached for his jacket that had been sprawled over the back of his chair. “I’ll be right back.” Waving at Lois, he went around the desk and started for the stairwell.

“Don’t you want to know what I want?” Lois asked with a hint of irritation in her voice.

“I’ll bring an assortment,” he replied and went on, almost in a hurry to get out.

Minutes later he was on the roof and flew off into the night, once more enjoying the exhilarating sensation of defying gravity. It was liberating, just what he had needed after spending the last couple of hours sitting right next to Lois Lane. He could have gone to San Francisco for an excellent takeout, but he settled for the real thing. If his mother ever found out, she would have a field day analyzing his behavior. It was a strange mixture of trying to show off and getting away for as long as he possibly could. For him the difference between China and San Francisco was only a matter of minutes, but still — it was time that he desperately needed.

Clark had fooled himself into believing that working with Lois was easier, now that she was treating him like an asset rather than a nuisance. But ever since she had stopped driving him up the wall all the time, he was even more susceptible to her charms. She did not need to display her cleavage to make him daydream of her. Sitting right next to her, he had been tantalized by the sweet smell of her hair and the cute way that she bit her lips when she was mulling over a problem. Every so often his hearing had tuned in on her heart beat, adding her unique rhythm to memory. As hard as he tried to fight the feeling, his subconscious was drawn to her and he was really powerless to defy it.

So Clark was immensely grateful for the brief respite and enjoyed the cool wind in his face as he sped to China to get takeout. He took cleansing breaths, reminding himself why it was a bad idea to fall for Lois Lane. He had been there, done that and it had ended in a catastrophe. Any relationship with a woman would ultimately mean that he had to reveal his secret to her. And he knew from experience that this was going to spell the end of said relationship, so why bother? Lois Lane was off limits and the sooner he understood that, the better.

About fifteen minutes later, a much more composed Clark was back in the newsroom and set several bamboo boxes with Chinese food on the desk in front of Lois. A delicious aroma emanated from the first one Lois opened. Clark handed her a set of chopsticks and sat down beside her.

"That was quick," she commented.

"I took a shortcut," he said, inwardly smiling to himself.

"Mmh... still hot." She picked a dumpling and took a bite.

"This is out of this world."

For a while they chewed in silence. Now and again Lois would moan in contentment, closing her eyes as she savored her food. Clark enjoyed watching her. Lois was not one to merely pick at her food, afraid of gaining weight, like perhaps Cat would have done. No, Lois relished it. Automatically, Clark prepared a mental list of places he would like to introduce her to.

Despite himself, Clark started daydreaming again. Ever since he had learned to fly and used that power to discover the world, he had hoped that one day he would be able to share this experience with someone. Of course, he had taken his parents time and again, but it was not the same. He would give anything to have a girl he could take to see the aurora borealis.

<Or just anyone to watch a sunset with,> he thought wistfully, as he took another bite.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Lois pulled him out of his reverie.

Clark almost choked on his rice dish. "I... nothing," he stammered.

"Well, it seemed like you zoned out on me, there," Lois commented, her eyes on Clark.

He felt a blush creep across his cheeks and seriously hoped that Lois wouldn't see it in the dim light of the newsroom.

"Guess, I'm just tired." Clark shrugged. "Didn't sleep too well last night."

"Me too," Lois admitted and hurried to add. "I mean, I'm tired too. I slept fairly well, anyhow... Clark, there's something I should tell you."

"Yeah?" he asked, wondering where this was going.

"Just promise me that you're not going to be mad at me." The slight uneasiness he had detected earlier was again visible in her features. "I mean, I'm not particularly proud of what I did." This time it was Lois' turn to blush. "We already got off on the wrong foot as it is. And I'm really sorry about that. You see," she took a deep cleansing breath, trying to prepare herself for some kind of confession. "I... I..."

"Lois, what are you talking about?" Clark asked, exasperated.

"I called Luthor to settle an interview," she sputtered. "I'm really sorry — I mean, it's your story and I shouldn't have done that. It's just..." Her eyes widened as if she was begging him to help her out. "We could go together, Clark."

"And here I was wondering why you didn't keep nagging me about the interview," Clark said quietly. He put down the box and the chopsticks, carefully eying Lois.

"Well, I was pretty mad at you for not telling me. But then I decided that I could use it to my advantage," Lois muttered uncomfortably.

"It's okay, I understand that." Clark straightened in his chair.

"It was a stupid thing to try and keep my acquaintance with Luthor to myself."

"Why did you do it?" Lois asked and dropped her container of food.

Clark just shrugged. "It's a long story — one I'm not yet comfortable telling you, Lois. But you should be careful with Luthor. I seriously doubt that you'll get the interview you want."

"Why shouldn't I?" Lois asked, piqued. Her cheeks reddened and her eyes gleamed with anger as she folded her arms in front of her chest. "I'm a professional reporter, Clark. Don't you think I know he'll play hard to get? Give me some credit."

Clark raised his hands in a pacifying gesture. "I'm just saying — be careful, Lois."

She relaxed somewhat, but the frown on her face deepened. "You and Lex... you behaved kind of awkwardly around him, like you weren't comfortable seeing him," Lois continued to probe.

Clark shifted his position. "After that mugging, Luthor was falling all over himself trying to do me a favor. He got a little intense."

"You saved his life, Clark. Is it such a bad thing that he feels he owes you?" she asked softly.

"It was really no big deal; saying thanks would have been more than enough," Clark said dismissively.

"Well, this is Lex Luthor we're talking about. He's one of the richest guys in the world," Lois pointed out. "Perhaps saying 'thank you' for him happens on a much larger scale."

"Maybe," Clark admitted. "But I don't like—" he caught himself before he revealed his true feelings. "I just can't help the feeling that he tries to interfere with my life." Clark swallowed hard before he continued. "He says he wants to give my career a head start by offering me that interview. I guess he'd do plenty more if I asked him to. Give him an inch and he will take a mile. I don't want to wake up one day and find out that I owe him."

Lois nodded her understanding. "You wouldn't want to be seen as just his protégé."

"Exactly," Clark agreed.

"I hate to admit it, but I guess I'd feel the same way," Lois muttered to herself. Then she looked up at Clark again. "But what I really don't get is — why did you agree to go with me in the first place? I mean, you obviously had an invitation yourself and hadn't planned on going, had you?"

He shook his head. "I don't know, Lois. Maybe it was just the spur of a moment."

Clark wondered whether he should tell her what he suspected about Luthor's real business dealings. But he had seen the admiration in her eyes, when she had looked at the billionaire. With so little to substantiate his accusations, Clark would just sound silly.

Lois placed her chopsticks right next to the container. "That was great," she said, satisfied. "Where did you get it?"

Clark smiled noncommittally and watched her as she searched the remaining boxes for something. A frown appeared on her face, as she obviously came up empty.

"No fortune cookie?" she asked disappointedly.

"Well, the place is pretty traditional," Clark replied, amused. "You don't get fortune cookies in China."

She flashed him a glance. Clark felt a rush of panic seize him as he wondered if he had betrayed his secret. But then she relaxed.

"You're a strange one, Clark Kent," Lois announced.

"Am I?" he grinned and leaned back in his chair.

"Yeah, but it makes you kind of interesting," she admitted.

Then she straightened and got up. "Come on, we'll go see Dr. Platt. Perhaps he can help us decipher this stuff."

It was early morning, when Clark closed the door to his hotel room behind him and shuffled towards his bed. Dawn would break soon, for everyone except Dr. Samuel Platt. They had found the scientist dead, slumped in a chair with his feet in a basin of water. Wires buzzing with electricity had been wrapped all around him. The memory still haunted Clark. The police suspected suicide. Clark did not believe it, not for one minute. Of course, the investigation was still pending, but since there had been nothing to suggest a fight or even an intruder, Clark had little doubt that the final report would read suicide.

He let out a soft curse, throwing his jacket onto the bed. "I should have known it," he whispered for the umpteenth time, angry with himself. "I should have saved him." Clark knew that hindsight was a wonderful thing, but that did not help him in the least. Lois had tried to soothe him, when they had still been at Platt's apartment.

<But she doesn't know Luthor or what he is capable of.>

Clark reminded himself. <You on the other hand did. And still you stood by and watched him arrange Dr. Platt's death.>

But did he really **know** anything? After all, it was just an unshakable gut feeling, that Luthor was involved in Lana's death. Perhaps it had really been an accident, just as Luthor claimed. Perhaps Clark was just paranoid concerning the billionaire. Perhaps it was all just a figment of his tormented mind. He had never been able to prove anything. Could the man really be that great at hiding his tracks?

The loud wail of sirens disrupted the air. The sudden onslaught caught Clark by surprise. He winced and covered his ears in a knee-jerk reaction. It took him a moment to bring his hearing back under control, but he did not manage to block out the sound completely. Desperate calls for help penetrated his defenses. Clark shut his eyes, willing them to go away. They hardly ever did. He wanted to help, but knew that it was impossible. There was just no way he could help with a car pileup without being noticed.

The clock on the wall showed half past five. Roughly three hours left to sleep. Clark was bone-tired, but sleep had continued to elude him ever since he had set foot in Metropolis. He had not had more than a couple of hours rest at a stretch in the past two weeks. Today would not be any different. He was running on empty. Clark was just too tense, too angry and way too frustrated to find rest, though. For a whole half a minute, Clark paced through his hotel room restlessly. Realizing, that it was really no use staying there, he took his keys and left the hotel in search of a deserted alley. Then he soared into the sky.

Clark was not sure what he hoped to find outside. An outlet, perhaps, a way to vent his frustrations, because he felt that he was going to explode if he did not. He was the most powerful being on this planet, and yet he was completely helpless to do anything. Luthor walked free, people were dying out there and he was condemned to hear them, watch them — and feel guilty.

Luthor — he could pay him a visit and see what the man was up to. Only seconds later, Clark hovered over the penthouse at the top of LexTower. Using his x-ray vision, he discovered that Luthor was sleeping peacefully in his bed. A smug smile played on his lips, even in his slumber. Clark felt his anger rise, but he took a deep breath, fighting the dangerous emotions. His gaze wandered on, finding Luthor's study. His desk was clear, save for a few expensive pens. A safe was set into the wall, but the lead in its walls blocked Clark's view.

Clark let out a frustrated growl. But what had he expected to find at this ungodly hour? Did he really still hope that Luthor would become careless all of a sudden? This was not the first time he had spied on him. He had x-rayed the place, virtually turning it upside down. It had been for naught.

With the vague prospect of flying to the arctic to cry out his pain, Clark sped up. It was strangely comforting, so he pushed at his limits, trying to go beyond. He felt the force of the wind in his face and stemmed against it, going even faster. The wind roared in his ears and tugged at his clothes. But still, he went faster, faster than he ever had. The world around him was nothing but darkness with an occasional blur of lights underneath him. He concentrated hard on his surroundings, careful to stay out of the path of planes. There was no room for dark thoughts, no room for anger. Pushing even further, the brush of air almost hurt in his face until he felt he was one with the air around him. Clark's shirt was torn to shreds. And eventually, he felt himself relax.

Flashback

Headlights appeared in the rearview mirror, blinding Clark. He glanced sideways, seeing a sports car pass at a crazy speed. Another one followed, outrunning the first one as soon as it changed the lane. Two more cars passed by, chasing the others. The gush of wind that followed in their wake pulled at the old pickup Clark was driving. Clark gripped the steering wheel tighter, even though the effect was too slight to be harmful, and let

out a breath.

"Did you just see that?" Clark asked, taken aback. The pickup slowed down as Clark stared after the shrinking red lights, dumbfounded.

"Yeah," Lana replied, sounding a lot more serene than Clark felt. "Looks like they're having an illegal race." She chuckled. "Don't worry, I wouldn't expect you to go all caveman on me and chase after them." Something about her tone unsettled Clark.

He caught her glance, her tight lips. "What's that supposed to mean?" Clark slowed the pickup to a halt. "That's what you want?" he asked, gesturing ahead towards the spot where the lights had vanished into the darkness. "Me driving like crazy to impress you?"

Lana squirmed at his frown. "No, I guess not," she replied, subdued. "It's just... I don't know... Sometimes I wish you were..." Her voice trailed off, as if she was not entirely sure what it actually was that she wanted. "Yesterday, I thought that you were more impressed with Luthor than you were with me."

Clark sighed inwardly at the course the conversation was taking again. "Lana, I love you, not Luthor," he stated firmly. "I must admit, it was interesting meeting him. But he isn't you." He reached out to brush a strand of her blond hair behind her ear and cupped her cheek. "I know that I might have seemed a little withdrawn lately. But that has nothing to do with my feelings for you." Clark leaned to kiss her, savoring the feel of her silky lips on his.

"Oh, Clark..." Lana murmured, her voice trailing off as she deepened the kiss.

Clark relished the sweet taste of reconciliation, though it did not quite manage to wash away the bitterness of the lie. His behavior towards Lana had everything to do with his feelings for her. He was nervous, scared to death, frankly. Living with his secret had long since become second nature. But he knew he could not keep Lana in the dark if he wanted a deeper relationship, and the longer he put off telling her, the more their relationship seemed to deteriorate.

Clark backed off, breaking the contact. He opened his lips wondering if now might be the time he had been waiting for. His heart thrummed loud and fast in his ears, drowning out every other sound. The words were stuck at the back of his throat, his mind raced as he desperately tried to merge them to sentences. He bit his lips, letting out a small sigh as he realized that he was once again going to chicken out.

"I promise you, we'll talk about this some more," he said instead. "Let's just get back to Smallville first." Relief flooded through Clark as he saw Lana nod. There was a sparkle in her eyes that made him a bit uneasy, though. He shifted the gear to drive and maneuvered the car back onto the road.

The night was pitch black by now, faintly illuminated by the headlights of the old pickup truck. Theirs seemed to be the only car for miles. Lana and Clark slipped back into silence that this time was a lot more comfortable than the previous one. Yards turned into a mile as the needle of the speedometer slowly climbed up again.

They had not been driving for long, when small red lights appeared on the horizon, coming closer by the minute. Involuntarily, Clark checked his own speed and frowned as he realized that he had barely reached fifty miles per hour. The car in front of them had to be going awfully slow. It took no more than another two minutes for him to realize, that the other car was not moving at all. As they got closer, Clark noticed two things — first of all, the car was one of the sports cars that had passed by earlier and secondly, the driver's doors stood ajar.

"What's going on there?" Clark muttered, slowing down the pickup.

His gut tightened into a knot as he realized that the window of the driver's door was broken. A faint moan and the quick flutter of

a heartbeat indicated that whoever was inside the sports car was in trouble.

Clark pulled to a halt next to the car, quickly getting out of his pickup. He went around his truck and saw a man sitting slumped in his seat. His head was resting on the wheel. The lights of the pickup were dim, but there was no mistaking the dark mass that covered the side of the driver's face. More blood pooled on the driver's left hand and dripped onto the street.

"Oh, my God," Lana breathed, who had opened the passenger door.

"He's breathing," Clark stated and glanced back at Lana, who was standing behind him. "Go, get help, Lana. There was a phone about four miles back. You need to call the emergency services," he urged. "I'll try to stem the bleeding."

"And what if whoever did this comes back?" Lana whispered, terrified.

"Why would they?" Clark asked. "Go! Take the pickup."

For a moment, she stood beside Clark, frozen to the spot. He was about to tell her once more that she needed to be going, when suddenly she turned on her heels and stumbled towards the pickup. A look of determination was on her face, as she sat down behind the wheel and set the truck in motion. She turned the truck around and only moments later the back lights of the car were fading into the now all-encompassing darkness.

With the pickup gone, Clark could hardly see a thing. He might be able to see through walls, but with no light, he was just as helpless as about anyone else. Working his jaw in annoyance, Clark wished he had thought of that before he had send Lana off. But it was too late for that now, he decided as he turned his attention to the stranger. Cursing himself, Clark suddenly realized that he had also forgotten to get his first-aid kit.

<Some help you are,> he thought angrily.

Only gradually his eyes adjusted to what little light the stars and a half moon casted on the road. Carefully, he sat the man straighter, eliciting a small moan that escaped his lips. Clark's arm brushed against something that gave off a soft rattle.

<Keys!> A rush of relief filled Clark and he fumbled for the key that thankfully was still stuck in the ignition. Turning it, he was soon able to switch on the interior lighting.

Clark stifled a yelp as he recognized the stranger as Lex Luthor. He was unconscious. His white business shirt was soaked with blood, his complexion was awfully pale. The sound of his heartbeat was faint and racing like mad. The gush on Luthor's forehead looked worse than it probably was, it certainly did not explain his condition.

Peeling the soaked shirt off, Clark saw a nasty bullet wound. Blood was oozing from Luthor's shoulder, trailing down to reddened yet more of the shirt. Not much longer and he was going to bleed to death. Concentrating hard, Clark focused his heat vision on the wound, cauterizing it with several quick blasts. A faint moan accompanied every one of them.

End Flashback

Clark woke to the sound of an explosion. Disoriented, he blinked and realized that he was sitting on the floor, leaning against his bed. Vaguely, he remembered returning to his hotel room. He must have passed out before he had made it into the bed. Weariness still encompassed his body, as the explosion turned out to be someone knocking at his door, fiercely.

"Clark!" Lois yelled through the door and knocked again. "Clark, are you there? I said nine! I thought you'd be ready!"

Slowly, Clark dragged himself up, his muscles protesting against the effort. So there was a limit to his powers, Clark thought idly, as he stood. His glasses clattered on the floor. They had to have slipped from his nose while he had been sleeping. It could not have been more than an hour, but Clark felt strangely at ease.

"Clark!" Lois shouted again, impatiently.

"Coming," Clark said and picked up his glasses, putting them back on as he made his way to the door. "Morning, Lois," he greeted her as he opened the door.

Her fist was raised to knock once again. She stared at him, frozen to the spot, and her jaw dropped. "I... you... you're naked," she ground out, continuing to stare at him.

Feeling his cheeks flush with embarrassment, Clark looked down at himself. To his relief, he saw that naked was not an entirely accurate description. At least he was wearing his jeans. But he definitely lacked a shirt.

<How on earth?> Clark wondered, but then he suddenly remembered. The flight. <In both senses of the word,> he mentally added and closed his eyes.

"I... I'm... sorry," he stuttered awkwardly and stepped aside. "Come on in. I... I'll go get a shirt."

"Rough night?" Lois asked sympathetically as she walked past him, her eyes never quite leaving Clark's chest.

"Huh?" Clark replied confused, his mind still fuzzy from lack of sleep.

"You look pretty much out of it," she stated and raised a concerned brow. "You're not still beating yourself up about Platt's death, are you?" Something about his expression must have told Lois that she had hit the bullseye. She approached Clark, now oblivious to his lack of attire and laid a comforting hand on his arm. "Clark it wasn't your fault. We couldn't possibly have known."

"Well, I should have," Clark said stubbornly and withdrew his arm. "Whoever is responsible for the explosion of the Messenger wasn't above killing Commander Laderman and his crew. It wasn't such a stretch to think that Platt could have been in danger, too."

Clark grabbed a sweater from his closet and turned his back on Lois. He fled to his bathroom, trying to put some distance between Lois and himself. He could not face her right now. It was not because he somehow held Lois accountable for what had happened. After all, she really had no way of knowing what would happen. But Clark could hardly stand to be in the same room with himself, let alone anyone else. Her sympathy only made things worse.

"We still have no proof that the Messenger was actually sabotaged," he heard Lois say. She had followed him and waited in front of the closed door. "I don't think we could have convinced the police to put him under protection." Lois added, while Clark performed a quick sponge bath. "You have to admit that he seemed a little crazy." Finally, he donned the faded sweater of MidWestern U. "Don't blame yourself, Clark. You didn't build that electric chair."

Lois fell silent. All Clark could hear now was the steady rhythm of her breath and heartbeat. He leaned onto the basin, clenching his hands into tight fists, and did not know what to do. Clark's first impulse was to tell her that she had no idea what she was talking about and to throw her out of his room. His life was complicated enough as it was, without her stirring up some unwanted feelings. But the truth of her words sank in, easing the pain. Lois had a point; he could not possibly have known what was going to happen to Platt.

Slowly, Clark unclenched his fists and straightened. He walked back into his bedroom. Lois stood there, waiting for him. Clark studied her face. Her warm brown eyes rested on him without a hint of reproach.

"So what do we do, now?" Clark asked, defeated. "We're still not any closer to the bottom of this."

"I phoned Jimmy this morning and told him to take Platt's report over to S.T.A.R. Labs. Perhaps one of their scientists can find out what Platt had discovered," Lois replied confidently. "And I'm going to call Inspector Henderson about the coroner's

report.”

Clark nodded. “All right, let’s go, then.”

“Uh, Clark?”

“Yeah?”

“You still look like something the cat dragged in and roughed up pretty badly,” Lois said with a nod to his appearance. “And it certainly wouldn’t hurt if you shaved and put on something more appropriate for work.”

“Oh.” Clark’s eyes widened as he noticed the faded sweater. His hand shot up to his cheek to discover slightly more than a five o’clock shadow. “I’m sorry, Lois. Give me ten minutes.”

Flashback

Clark tightened his grip on Lana’s hand as he stepped into the hospital room. His breathing hitched and his heart started to pound with nervousness. Lex Luthor sat on his bed, a bandage on his head, another one around his shoulder and a few scrapes on his face were the only reminder of the mugging that had taken place. Luthor’s brown eyes rested on his visitors. A smile spread across his face and all of a sudden Clark became hyper-aware of his thumb digging into the back of Lana’s hand. Though she did not voice any discomfort, he consciously loosened his grip on her and stuffed his hands into his pockets, afraid that he might hurt her.

“My saviors,” Lex greeted them, his smile even broadening. “I’m glad you finally accepted my invitation. I wanted to thank you in person. But please, have a seat.” He gestured towards the two chairs that were standing on either side of the bed.”

Lana readily sat down, but Clark remained standing. He did not trust himself not to break the chair, wrought up as he felt. Forcing a smile on his lips, he stiffly nodded his head in response to the greeting. Clark’s mind raced a mile a minute as he desperately thought of something he could say, something inconspicuous that would not give away what all his thoughts were revolving around.

“How are you, Mr. Luthor?” Clark finally asked.

His words sounded unnaturally slurred to his own ear — an almost unintelligible jumble formed by a tongue that was firmly stuck to the roof of his mouth. Clark shifted from one foot to the other as restlessness coursed through his body with a vengeance. It took all the self-discipline he could muster not to turn on his heels and run for his life. Nervously, Clark watched Luthor’s face, searching for any indication of what was going on behind his dark brown eyes.

<He was unconscious>, Clark reminded himself. <And he survived. He won’t care how exactly you managed to stop the bleeding.>

“Much better ...” Luthor said. “... and please, call me Lex. Without the two of you I wouldn’t be here now. The doctor told me it was a miracle that I did not bleed to death out there.” A pregnant pause stretched between them and Lex looked at Clark intensely before he finally continued. “I owe you my life, Clark — and you too, Lana. I understand it was you who called the emergency services.”

“Yeah, that was me,” Lana whispered flustered and a blush crept across her cheeks. “But anyone would have done that.”

“She’s right, Mr. Luthor,” Clark chimed in.

<And it’s not likely he’s going to wonder why the emergency services found his car four miles closer to the next town than where he was mugged.> Clark mentally added.

“Lex,” Luthor insisted. “And I disagree. Not anyone would have helped a stranger, particularly one who had passed and almost grazed their car at a breakneck speed. I could only think about the excitement of the race. It’s a pretty stupid pastime.” Luthor blushed. “When someone slipped me an invitation to a race on a lonely road in the backcountry of Kansas, I didn’t expect for a minute that it was all just an elaborate scheme to

corner me right in the middle of nowhere and rob me. Thanks to you, I didn’t pay with my life.”

End Flashback

“*The Inquisitor*, Jimmy? Seriously?” Lois raised her brows, an expression on her face as if she was staring at something particularly ugly. She tapped her foot on the floor, impatiently waiting for Jimmy to lower the offending newspaper.

“The chief told us to get to know our competition,” Jimmy tried to explain himself.

“That rag isn’t competition, unless you compare the amount of fish people wrap in it,” Lois snorted. “Divine intervention? I was saved by an angel?” she read out the headline and rolled her eyes.

Picking up the paper with two fingers, she skimmed through the article. Clark looked over her shoulder and found a photo of the man he had saved the day before. His blood ran cold. He began to read at super-speed and finished the article just in time before Lois tossed it back at Jimmy.

To Clark, her voice sounded strangely hollow as she spoke again. “This is ridiculous. The guy was barely conscious when they dragged him up. He was most likely delusional and some hack mistook his hallucinations for facts. If they even did interview him, that is.” Clark watched her shake her head.

Jimmy’s mouth moved again, but Clark could no longer hear what he was saying. He felt strangely detached. It was happening again. This time the victim of the explosion had seen him. Clark had been so sure that the guy had been unconscious. He might have been delusional, but as soon as people would read about this miraculous rescue, others would tell their stories. The old lady, who had seen him stop the bus. Would she realize what she had witnessed had not been a result of a misperception? Would Luthor buy a newspaper like *The Inquisitor* and put two and two together?

Clark had often wondered if Luthor suspected something about his powers. Had Lana actually told him or were Luthor’s attack and Lana’s death just coincidences? It killed Clark that he did not know for sure, but he could not very well ask the man. Their unfortunate encounter on Irig’s field should have dispelled all suspicion, but Clark feared that Luthor might still harbor doubts. The mugging incident had been a closer call than Clark had led Lois to believe, a much closer call. So how much exactly did Luthor still remember?

Suddenly, someone waved a hand in front of his face. “Earth to Clark!”

It took Clark a moment to find his way back to the real world. He blinked, realizing that the hand belonged to Lois. She sat at the edge of his desk, her brows furrowed with concern. Bending forward, she gently touched his arm, which sent a jolt of electricity through Clark. He flinched.

“Hey, what’s with you?” Lois asked softly. “I thought I lost you there.”

“I’m sorry. What were you saying?” Clark replied, still trying to get a grip. He flashed Lois an apologetic smile.

“I said that Henderson just called and told me that the preliminary report of Platt’s autopsy reads suicide,” Lois said, a hint of sadness in her eyes. “And Mrs. Platt left a message that she was going to meet us here.”

Clark froze. How could he have missed all that? And what was he doing sitting at his desk? Last thing he knew was that he had been standing in front of Jimmy, staring at the tabloid paper. Clark cursed himself for panicking like that. He had to be more careful, or else he could just tell Lois his secret right there and then. And he had no intention whatsoever on letting anyone in on the secret ever again.

“Oh, okay,” Clark muttered listlessly, having all but forgotten what Lois had talked about earlier.

But she did not seem to mind his lack of eloquence. Instead of asking more questions, she just nodded and made her way back to her own desk. Clark straightened in his chair. He needed to shift his focus back to the tasks at hand — finish the investigation and leave Metropolis. It was simple as that. He had done it. Perhaps he should just cut his ties right now, get up and leave the *Planet*, claiming to be sick. Writing his resignation would not take more than a couple of seconds.

Involuntarily, his gaze wandered over to Lois' desk and to the beautiful woman sitting behind it. Clark's heart constricted with sorrow. He let out a low sigh. The last two weeks had started out pretty roughly. But no matter what had happened between the two of them, he was beginning to consider Lois as a friend. Never in his life had he felt he belonged somewhere. But the Daily Planet with all its bustling activity and his stubborn, but brilliant partner — they felt like home. Turning his back on all that was going to be much harder on him than it had ever been. Nothing about this was going to be simple.

Torn, Clark began to sift through his notes, not really paying attention. From the corner of his eyes he saw a woman enter the newsroom. She pushed a wheelchair. The girl sitting in it was about ten years old. Her expression told Clark that she had suffered beyond what a child her age should have to endure, but there was also a hopeful smile lurking there. The woman's eyes on the other hand were puffy with barely restrained tears. She had a fake smile plastered on, trying to put on a brave face. She was failing miserably. For a woman who had supposedly left her husband, she was a rather pitiful sight. Clark's heart went out to her.

Momentarily forgetting about his own problems, Clark got up to greet her. Lois was quick to join him.

"Mrs. Platt?" Clark asked and continued at her nod. "I'm Clark Kent. And this is my partner Lois Lane. Thank you for making time." They shook hands.

"Mrs. Platt, please take a seat." Lois offered, and snatched a chair from a currently vacant desk.

Shifting from one foot to the other, Mrs. Platt refused the offer with a shake of her head. She looked at the two reporters, as if she was not sure how to proceed.

"This is my daughter, Amy." Mrs. Platt finally introduced the girl and laid a protective hand on her shoulder. "Amy, this is Lois Lane and Clark Kent."

"Nice to meet you, Amy," Lois and Clark said almost in unison.

"It's nice to meet you, too," Amy replied.

The smile that had been lurking at the corner of her lips broke to the surface. It lit up the newsroom and Clark could not help but smile back at her. But the stark contrast between Amy's cheerfulness and Mrs. Platt's flimsy veneer of composure made him uneasy. He caught the woman's pleading and slightly apologetic glance.

Her lips formed the words. *I haven't told her yet.* A single tear rolled down her cheeks, which she quickly dabbed with an already soaked handkerchief.

"Amy, would you like a cup of hot chocolate?" Clark offered, beaming at the girl who eagerly nodded at his suggestion. "Do you mind, Mrs. Platt?"

"No, not at all," she managed a smile, her carefully retained composure back in place. "Be nice to Mr. Kent, Amy."

"I'm always nice, Mom!" Amy protested with a giggle and grabbing the wheels of her chair, she took the lead.

Clark ignored the irritated glance Lois flashed him and followed Amy, his ears tuned in on the two adults he left behind. Mrs. Platt took an audible breath, as if to brace herself, before she went on. "I had to come here. No one else wanted to believe my husband but you. Not even the police are on our side. You do know about the autopsy report, don't you?"

"Yes, we do," Lois said sympathetically. "And—"

Mrs. Platt cut her off. "There is no other explanation. My husband was killed," she stated, distraught. "He had no reason, he loved us." A sob escaped her throat.

Meanwhile, Clark guided Amy towards the coffee stand and poured her a cup of milk that he put in the microwave. Then he turned around to face Amy.

"I saw your name on the list of passengers on the colonist transport, Amy." Clark said as he waited for the milk to be heated. "Are you excited?"

"Of course," she nodded and flashed him another one of her infectious smiles. "Dad told me that up there I don't need a wheelchair. And perhaps I can even learn to walk." A shadow briefly crossed her face. "He said that up there I'm weightless and that it would be as if I was flying on my own. What do you think flying on your own is like, Mr. Kent?" she asked curiously.

"I think that would be pretty awesome," Clark replied warmly, feeling a pang of regret that he could not take this girl flying. It was an experience that he would very much like to share with someone.

The microwave beeped and Clark went on preparing hot chocolate for Amy, while stealing a glance at Lois. She seemed tense as she watched Mrs. Platt. Clark could practically see the wheels turning inside his partner's mind. Lois' fingers were fiddling with the lapel of her jacket.

She opened her mouth, but hesitated briefly before she finally said, "When you and Amy left your husband..."

Mrs. Platt shook her head again, this time vigorously. "No. We never left him," she insisted. "He made us leave. He was sure they'd come after him. He was afraid that Amy and I would get hurt so he sent us away." Another tear found its way down her cheek, which she quickly wiped away. "Everything we worked for was for Amy. The space lab Prometheus was the only hope... and now..." Her voice barely above a whisper, she added, "My husband was not insane."

"Mrs. Platt, do you have any idea who might have killed your husband?" Lois asked.

"All I know is that Samuel knew that Prometheus was being sabotaged and that knowledge got him killed," Mrs. Platt replied fiercely. "Please. Help me," she begged. "Don't let his daughter grow up believing her father committed suicide. You have to clear his name."

As he was finished, Clark handed Amy her cup of hot chocolate and reduced his hearing range to a more human level. The girl seemed lost in thought, staring into thin air.

"Are you okay, Amy?" Clark asked softly.

Startled, she flinched and looked at Clark again. He still held out the steaming cup. Amy's cheeks blushed and she hurried to take her beverage.

"Thank you," she muttered, embarrassed.

"Is there something you're worried about?" Clark prodded gently.

She took a sip of hot chocolate, she replied. "There were people on TV who said that they were probably going to stop the flight to the Space Station. Do you think that is going to happen?" She sounded scared. The pain in her eyes was evident.

In some way, Clark could relate to the girl. Like him, she just wanted to be like all the other kids. She had built up all her hopes around this space program. It was not fair that she should be deprived of this chance because people like Luthor sought out their own financial benefit. Amy's father had given his life to help his daughter. He should not have died in vain.

"We will find who is responsible for this, Amy." Clark promised. "I'll do everything I can to make sure that you and your mom will fly to this Space Station."

"What are you two talking about?" Lois asked curiously, as she approached them.

“Oh, we were just drinking hot chocolate and talking about her plans for next week,” Clark told Lois, winking at Amy.

“Mom, can I go over to Susan’s later?” Amy asked her mother.

“Sure, honey. Let’s get back home. Thank you, Ms. Lane. Mr. Kent,” Mrs. Platt said gently.

“Goodbye, Mr. Kent. Goodbye, Ms. Lane. And thank you for the hot chocolate,” Amy said, her mother pushed her through the newsroom and towards the elevators.

“You’re welcome, Amy,” Clark replied.

He watched Mrs. Platt and her daughter until the doors of the elevators closed behind them. He felt like a traitor for having considered, if only for a moment, running off and leaving this investigation to Lois. Of course, he knew it would have been in capable hands, but still... Talking to Amy had fueled his resolve to bring Luthor to justice. He could not continue to run at the first sight of trouble. There was so much more he could have done, had he not always shied away from risking exposure. Amy had already lost her father, he should not add to her pain because he was afraid to do what was right.

“Mrs. Platt wants us to prove that her husband didn’t commit suicide.” Lois summed their conversation up and poured a cup of coffee that she handed to Clark. Then she went on to prepare some for herself.

“Yeah, I know...” Clark sighed absentmindedly and added sugar and cream.

“You know?” Lois looked up, surprised.

Noticing his mistake, Clark hurried to add, “I mean I thought that might be the reason for her visit.”

Lois nodded slowly, obviously accepting his explanation. “I just hope S.T.A.R. Labs will come up with some results. So far, we have no more than a supposed accident and a scientist who seems to have committed suicide. That’s not exactly great story material.” She took a sip of her coffee. “Jimmy just went to fetch the report. What are we going to do until he’s back?”

Clark shrugged his shoulders. Apart from a fierce determination to do something, he had not much to go on. But he could not just sit in the newsroom and wait for a miracle. He had done far too much sitting around lately. Thoughtfully, he raised his own cup of coffee to his lips.

“It’s almost noon, perhaps we could go for an early lunch,” Lois suggested.

Bursting with nervous energy, Clark had not been hungry at all. Yet, inexplicably, he had trotted along and had ended up chewing on a stale sandwich. He would rather have done almost anything other than sit around and listen to Lois rant about all the things they did not know. Though, honestly, Clark did not have the faintest idea how he was supposed to handle things. Breaking into Lex Tower was not going to accomplish anything. Telling Lois about his suspicions ... well, he was just not sure he was that desperate, yet.

Clark tried to rationalize his reluctance, telling himself that he did not know Lois well enough to be sure he could trust her not to alert Luthor to his investigation. But a nagging voice in the back of his mind kept insisting that this was not the reason at all — he did trust Lois. He did not want to have her laugh at him and it bothered him deeply that he even cared.

“You know what I really don’t get?” Lois asked as they were on their way back to the Planet. “Why would anyone want to sabotage the Space Program?”

“If you are looking for a motive, follow the money,” Clark spoke for what seemed like the first time since they had gone for lunch.

The somewhat unexpected answer made Lois stop dead in her tracks. She turned around, frowning. “What’s that supposed to mean? Are you just quoting the manual for investigative

journalism or do you know something I don’t?” She folded her arms in front of her chest.

Clark felt her intense gaze as she studied him thoughtfully. “Well, whoever did this wants the Congress of Nations to cancel the program. It either is for ideological or financial reasons. If it was some terrorist group, why would they try to cover their tracks? So I say — follow the money.”

“The Space Program is founded by the government. The colonists are going to do basic research. It’s not even sure that anyone is going to make money from what they’ll find.” Lois reasoned.

“Lex Luthor plans to send up his own Space Station, should the current program be cancelled. He obviously thinks it’s worth the financial risk,” Clark pointed out.

Lois wiggled her eyebrows. “You’re not suggesting that Luthor’s behind all this, are you?” she asked. “That’s insane, Clark. Why would he use such an elaborate scheme just to get his own station into space? It’s going to be a losing deal for years to come until it might eventually pay off.”

“Do you honestly think that Luthor has his own Space Station planned just because he’s such a nice guy?” Clark said grimly, suddenly seething with anger. “Then I guess the Kerth Awards are not all they’re cracked up to be.”

He did not even know who he was angry with. Lois — because she failed to see the truth, or himself, for not making a difference in spite of all those amazing powers he had. Clark wanted to scream, to lash out, to do anything to alleviate all this pent-up frustration. He balled his hands into tight fists and stuck them deeply into his pockets. The fabric was awfully thin to restrain them. He knew he should be anywhere but in Lois’ presence — or anyone else’s for that matter — so he stormed off.

“Clark!” he heard Lois yell, but did not stop. “Clark!”

Try as he might not to, his ears tuned in on the quick staccato of her heels on the concrete as she followed him. He heard the hitch of her breathing quicken, interrupted by murmured complaints about men in general and imposed partners in particular. She did not sound serious though, not like she had when they first met.

As Clark rounded the corner of the street, the metal globe of the *Daily Planet* came into view. The symbol of all his hopes had him mesmerized. Just as suddenly as the rush of anger had come on, it faded. He stood there, frozen to the spot, staring like on his very first visit to Metropolis. The justice that he dreamed of seemed possible again. He would get Lois to believe him, he would finally gather that last bit of evidence he needed.

Someone bumped into him, catching Clark off guard and causing him to stagger slightly. “Clark,” that someone said. As Clark turned around, he looked at Lois, who was rubbing a spot on her arm. “I thought I lost you in the crowd,” she offered, as if it was actually she who owed him an explanation.

For a moment they just stared into each other’s eyes, trying to gauge what kind of reaction to expect. Seconds ticked by that seemed to stretch into hours of uncomfortable silence. Around them, the world kept turning. The subway station spit out groups of people in regular intervals while it swallowed others. Yellow cabs pressed their horns in a non-distinguishable pattern, seemingly missing the crossing pedestrians only by coincidence. The hum of hundreds of conversations filled the street. None of this was audible to Clark. All he registered was the faint whiff of Lois’s breathing and the steady, although somewhat quicker-than-usual beat of her heart.

It was Lois who finally broke the silence. “Are you ever going to tell me what it is between you and Luthor?” she asked.

“I’m sorry for what I said about your awards. Actually, I think you’re a pretty great reporter,” Clark replied, choosing to ignore her question.

“Thanks, I guess,” Lois said, eying him warily.

“So, how about we go and see what Jimmy found out?” Clark suggested.

“This was a nice idea,” Lana said, raising her glass of wine to a toast. “But...” she leaned forward, lowering her voice as she continued, “isn’t this place awfully expensive? I know the paper isn’t paying you that much, Clark.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Clark dismissed her objection with a wave of his hand and reached for his own glass.

He tipped it to hers and took a sip of the full-bodied red wine. For a moment he just savored the taste, the hint of cassis and the earthy note that he could not quite put a name to. Nearly five weeks in New York had given him only a glimpse of the big city, its pace and vigor and restlessness. Clark enjoyed the anonymity of the crowd. Hardly anyone ever gave him a second glance; no one seemed to care where he was going. The many dark and deserted alleys were the perfect place to take off and spend the nights among the clouds. Clark felt that the time would come when he was going to miss Smallville and the people there, but for now this was just one big adventure.

“I still can’t believe we’re actually in New York,” Lana said enthusiastically and a broad smile spread across her lips. “This is such a great opportunity, me working for Luthor Corp and you writing for the New York Times.”

Clark raised his brows. “It’s only an internship, Lana. Next term, we’ll be back in Kansas at Mid U.”

Lana suddenly looked a lot like the cat that ate the canary. “Well, you don’t know the good news, yet,” she beamed. “My supervisor said that he really liked my work and that he’d make sure Luthor Corp had a job for me as soon as I graduate.”

“Congratulations,” Clark said proudly. “You deserve it.”

He felt that the last bit had sounded lame and he hurried to take another sip of his wine. A sense of uneasiness tainted its taste. Would his reply have sounded more heartfelt if his own editor-in-chief had not made a very similar offer; Clark wondered. He decided not to voice his thoughts.

“Lex was in the office today. He invited us for dinner at the end of next week,” Lana said.

“That’s nice,” Clark replied, still clinging to his wine glass. This evening did not exactly go as planned. He had imagined to share a nice meal and to take Lana somewhere private. Somewhere along the way, Lex had slipped into their conversation. How was he ever going to change the topic to what he really wanted to tell Lana tonight? His nervousness spiked up once more, making him want to back out.

Clark had the whole evening carefully arranged, trying to close every loop hole that could possibly arise. The expensive restaurant had been chosen, because the reservation alone had cost him a small fortune, since he had needed to bribe one of the waiters. It was situated so far from their respective boarding houses that not sharing a cab would ultimately result in a cross-examination. Moreover, he had found a secluded spot in Central Park where a bottle of champagne was waiting for them, well hidden under some bushes. Long story short, it would be an absolute shame and a completely useless dent in his pocket if he was not going to go through with this. Stealing himself for what was to come, Clark took another sip of wine.

“They re-created the launch in a hologram, it was really smooth...” Jimmy said all misty-eyed, and grinning like a kid in a candy store. Then he paused, obviously enjoying his moment in the limelight to the fullest. Only as Lois was about to voice her impatience, he hastily added, “Anyway, they concluded that Platt’s theory was right on. There was deliberate sabotage. The transport explosion was no accident.” Jimmy’s grin even broadened, tinted with a hint of awe as he watched Lois and Clark. “Congrats!”

His announcement had the desired effect. A winner’s smile spread across Lois’ lips. “He was right! Platt was right!” she exclaimed enthusiastically. “Now we can write the story. And, if we can convince people there was sabotage and who was behind it we can stop them.”

“Only, we lack proof,” Clark said soberly.

“Didn’t you just listen? S.T.A.R. Labs c-o-n-f-i-r-m-e-d Platt’s theory!” Lois said, deliberately slowly, rolling her eyes as if Clark was a particularly dense child.

From the corner of his eyes, Clark saw that Jimmy chose that exact moment to sneak out of the room.

“And we have what to base our story on?” Clark asked, taking a deep breath to keep his cool. Before Lois could reply he went on. “A virtual model of the launch. Oh, and of course the word of a scientist, who was banned from the scientific community, spent time in a psych ward and supposedly committed suicide.” He snorted derisively. “Yeah, that’s a solid case indeed.”

“Okay, then we’ll still have to do a little legwork,” Lois conceded, unfazed. “If we had snuck into that EPRAD facility like I suggested...”

“And I suppose if we had done that, we would have found a paper trail that would have led us right to Luthor,” Clark retorted, feeling his anger rise once again. Knowing he was walking down a dangerous path, Clark clenched his hands into tight fists and turned on his heels. He needed to get out of the conference room and blow off some steam, before he did something he was going to regret.

Lois stepped in his way, her arms folded in front of her chest. Somehow she managed to stare Clark down, even though she was several inches smaller than him. With her intense gaze she was daring him to take another step. Involuntarily, Clark averted his eyes, desperately trying to think of a way to escape the impending argument. His gesture only served to direct his attention to the fragile-looking doorknob. Knowing that he probably would not be able to open the door without unhinging it, Clark felt awfully trapped.

“Why do you keep insisting that Luthor was the one who set this whole thing up?” Lois asked, her outwardly calm demeanor betrayed by her flaring nostrils. “You come here and keep dropping those hints. You always stay late in the evening, working on something that cannot possibly be related to any story Perry assigned to you,” she specified, glaring at Clark. “Don’t even try to claim otherwise.”

Clark opened his mouth, but soon closed it again, at a loss for words. Trying to give an answer was a futile exercise, anyway, as Lois was not yet done with him.

“You seem to have been friends at one point in your life, so what happened?” Her whole stance left little doubt that this time she was not going to accept an evasive reply.

“You’re right.” Clark let out a breath he had not realized he had been holding. “I have been investigating Lex Luthor for years now,” he admitted softly. “I really can’t tell you what triggered my initial suspicion. After college I started travelling the world and worked for newspapers in at least half a dozen countries. Luthor Corp and its affiliated companies had branch offices in most of them.”

Clark turned on his heels, no longer able to stand the tension of resting in one spot. He started to pace, raking his hand through his hair. It took him a moment to compose himself enough to continue.

“In the beginning I did research for other writers, much like Jimmy does now,” he said eventually. “Whenever I helped investigate some story remotely related to sinister business dealings, one of Luthor’s companies was involved.”

Lois shrugged that off. “He has his fingers in almost every pie,” she said, quoting what Jimmy had said at the ball. “Like you said, he owns companies all over the world. It is only natural that

you would come across one or another during your research. Look, Clark, I'm sure that's all very fascinating. But don't you think you're a little obsessive, when it comes to Luthor?"

"I'm not obsessive," Clark replied tersely.

The small mocking voice in the back of his mind kept asking him if he was actually sure about that. Lois just raised her brows, which was really all that needed to be said. Clark hung his head and sighed. His shoulders sagged in defeat. Things had not really played out the way he had thought they would. But truth be told, the idea to come to Metropolis had been born out of desperation rather than a well-laid plan. "Come to my hotel room tonight and I'll show you what I've got. If you still think I've lost my mind, then I won't ever mention this again," Clark said quietly. All the anger that had been keeping him on edge was suddenly gone, evaporated. He just felt empty.

"I'm going to interview Luthor tonight," Lois replied, businesslike, nothing in her tone of voice indicating that she had even acknowledged Clark's offer. "And concerning the Messenger story, I suggest we pay EPRAD a visit, tomorrow."

With that she turned on her heels and a moment later, she had left the conference room. The bang of the door seemed to be the only real proof that she had ever been there. Clark stared after her, his eyes fixed on the slight sway of her hips. His gut was suddenly tied in a knot. After their argument, their working relationship seemed to be pretty much back to the way it had been in the beginning. Lois probably thought he was a moron on a wild goose chase and he had done little to refute that impression.

It was better this way, Clark tried to convince himself. They had grown much too close for his liking, anyway. Something in his heart tightened painfully as he watched her walking up towards the elevators. If only their argument had done anything to quench his feelings for her, Clark thought miserably.

Clark had spent the better part of the other night agonizing about Lois' interview with Luthor. He had even checked on her, made sure that she was alright. It had been a pointless exercise, really, because in all honesty, what had he expected? Lex Luthor was nothing like Jack the Ripper, he did not walk around killing women with a butcher knife. So instead of saving a damsel in distress, Clark had just gotten to watch Lois sharing a fancy meal with Lex Luthor. He had seen them smile and clink their glasses. All his nosiness had earned him was another sleepless night.

<Just serves you right,> he thought bitterly and tried to direct his attention back to the file he was reading. The letters made even less sense than the last time his mind had drifted off. It was getting late already and he was not a bit closer to solving the case.

Clark put the file back on his desk, not sure what it was even all about. So far, the whole day had been a complete waste of time. Not only had he lost another good night's sleep tormenting himself watching Luthor charm Lois off her feet, he had barely gotten to talk to her at all. And it was his fault. That notion made Clark even grumpier than he had already been. No wonder Lois had avoided him ever since their unfortunate early morning run-in at the coffee machine.

"Did you get your interview?" he had asked her, gruffly.

"Why wouldn't I," she had hissed at him, rolling her eyes.

But then she had bit her lips, suddenly too quiet. She had mumbled something and shuffled past him, without even pouring herself the cup of coffee she had come to get. It had been a dead giveaway that the interview had gone just as Clark had expected it would. It was only natural that she had not stuck around to hear him saying 'I told you so.' Throughout the rest of the day she had found plenty of assignments to occupy herself with.

"Kent," Perry barked through the newsroom. "Conference room, now!"

Clark jumped up in surprise, just in time to see the door to the conference room fall shut behind Perry. The newsroom was

remarkably quiet with all the reporters who were not out chasing leads gathered in the small room. Desks all over the place were left covered with folders. A chair was still spinning, indicating that its occupant had been in a hurry and a steaming mug sat on the desk closest to the conference room. The newsroom bore a striking resemblance to the side of an evacuation. Buzzing voices filled the air, turning into the dabbling sound of whispers as Clark joined his colleagues.

Perry flashed Clark an indignant look, his face flushed from high blood pressure. "How nice of you to join us! Where are Lois and Jimmy?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen them since this afternoon," Clark admitted, suddenly feeling incredibly guilty about his childish behavior. "I assumed they'd be here."

Perry waved Clark off. "We'll start without them," he said impatiently turning his attention to the other reporters.

As if on cue, everybody stopped talking and all of a sudden it was so quiet that it seemed they had stopped breathing, too. Perry let his gaze wander over the group, his head turning a lighter shade of red as he registered the tension his authority was evoking. His lips twitched into a pleased half-smile.

"Okay, everybody, what have we got?" he asked, perusing the room.

Clark, who had sneaked to the back of the conference room, sank down onto a chair. Perry's gaze, it seemed, rested longer on him than on everyone else. Earlier today, Perry had called the three of them into his office, asking how their story on the supposed sabotage was coming along. Just as Clark had predicted the other day, his reaction had been pretty gruff, when they had told him how much they did not know. Now, hours later, their hands were still pretty much empty.

"Kent?" Perry said, indicating that he wanted an update.

"I called EPRAD and suggested that they allow for a new, independent investigation. They told me Dr. Baines would get back to me on the matter," Clark recounted and shrugged. "As of yet, she has not replied." He shifted in his chair, uncomfortably. "Lois went to talk to the scientists of S.T.A.R. Labs, who created the simulation of the launch. She didn't give me an update on her finds."

Perry gave a brief nod and turned to the next reporter, asking on a story about a local politician. The conference went on. Clark's thoughts drifted off to Lois. She was still painfully absent. The voices of his colleagues became an unintelligible jumble, as he reached out to listen for her heartbeat. Wherever she was, she was nowhere near the Daily Planet.

Clark felt a sudden twinge of guilt as he realized that he had not even stopped to wonder where she was, caught up in his stupid anger as he had been. He had just assumed that Lois would turn up and drag him towards the EPRAD facility. Clark already knew that it was going to turn out to be just another dead end, just like Samuel Platt had been a very *dead* end.

After watching Lois with Luthor he had flown over the hangar where the wreck was stored. He had x-rayed the whole place, but had found nothing incriminating. Just like it always was. Clark let out a frustrated sigh.

"Is there anything you want to add, Kent?" Perry asked sharply, his brows furrowing in irritation.

Clark flinched. "Uh, no, Chief," he hastily said, straightening in his chair. Obviously, he had been louder than he thought.

"Well, then I'd certainly prefer if I wasn't interrupted," Perry barked, but quickly turned his attention back to the conference.

The next reporter gave everybody an update on his latest assignment. Clark did not manage to focus on the meeting for more than a couple of minutes. Worriedly, he looked around, noticing that Lois and Jimmy had not come. It was not too much of a surprise to find them still gone. Clark's heart constricted at the thought that Lois had probably gone to EPRAD on her own.

Alarmed, Clark immediately pushed back his chair, got up and headed for the door.

Perry was completely engrossed in a discussion. “The piece on the recent sex change operation in the Royal Family...” Perry’s voice suddenly trailed off, just as Clark had turned the knob of the door. “Kent!” he shouted, testily. “This meeting isn’t over!”

“It’s not like Lois or Jimmy to miss a staff meeting,” Clark said apologetically. “I...I thought I’d call around.”

Perry gave Clark a stern look but remained silent. He probably was not sure whether he should indulge in Clark’s insubordination or risk more interruptions. Most of Clark’s colleagues seemed to wonder about just the same thing. Their eyes were on Perry, their feet shuffling in nervous anticipation of the explosion that was certainly going to come. While no one wanted to be at the receiving end of Perry’s anger, everyone enjoyed the show when it happened to someone else.

The twenty staring pairs of eyes seemed to do the trick. “Okay. Go,” Perry finally said with a roll of his eyes.

Before Perry got a chance to change his mind, Clark hurried out of the conference room and rushed towards the storage room. The voices of his colleagues gradually faded into the constant background noise of the city. Moments later Clark had jumped out of the window and was airborne, straight on his way to EPRAD.

Flashback

The air was warm, filled with the scent of flowers. Their rich colors were invisible in the dim glow of the moon light, giving only a vague impression of what Central Park might look like in the light of day. But even though it was already dark, the park was still bustling with activity. Friends and families had gathered there, sitting on blankets, eating, chatting or laughing. Lana and Clark were walking hand in hand, passing a young woman who played a guitar and sang a song that Clark did not know. They slowed their steps, listening to her powerful voice.

“Do you think she wrote the song herself?” he asked Lana, who just shrugged her shoulders and smiled.

She squeezed his hand and tipped on her toes to kiss his cheek. Her lips sent a pleasant shiver down Clark’s spine and he inhaled the vanilla scent of her shampoo. He laid his hand on her hips, partly to steady her as she continued to shower butterfly kisses on his skin and partly to keep her from stopping. It was sweet torture, eliciting a soft moan from Clark. He turned his head ever so slightly until her lips finally found his. He captured her mouth hungrily, still tasting a hint of the zabaglione she had had for dessert. It was intoxicating.

Lana ended the kiss all too soon, chuckling softly at the disappointed grunt Clark gave off. “Come on,” she said, pulling him with her. “Let’s go somewhere a little more private.” She batted her eyelashes, sending Clark’s thoughts spiraling down a completely different line than the one he had had in mind.

Half running, half walking they followed the path until they reached a section of the park that was less crowded, but nevertheless bursting with life. There Lana suddenly stopped and Clark managed just in time to keep himself from knocking her off her feet. For a moment they both just stood and stared in awe. It seemed as if millions of fireflies were trying to compensate for the lack of stars in the sky above the city, painting their very own version of the Milky Way.

“Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?” Lana breathed, her eyes sparkling.

“No,” Clark replied huskily, not sure if he was still talking about the fireflies.

The sounds of New York had decreased to a distant murmur that reminded him of waves hitting the shore. Clark felt his heart thundering in his ears as he watched Lana. This was it. His stomach lurched as he slowly led her to a nearby park bench. He took both her hands in his and together they sat down. The

twinkle in Lana’s eyes intensified as she focused her attention back on Clark, on their joined hands and the way they were sitting. There was definitely someone more beautiful than those fireflies, Clark decided as he drowned in her eyes.

“Clark...” Lana whispered, her voice laced with excitement.

“Lana,” Clark took a steadying breath. “I know you always felt that I wasn’t ready to commit. But that isn’t true. I love you and I want to spend my life with you.”

“Clark!” Lana’s voice cracked. “I’m so happy, I—”

“Shh,” he stilled her, putting his index finger to her lips.

“There is something I should tell you, before you say anything.” In his mind, he had practiced the moment more often than he could count. But suddenly, his tongue was tied. Clark felt at a complete loss for what to say. He drew in another breath, trying to calm his buzzing nerves. “You know that Martha and Jonathan are not my biological parents. They took me in when I was still a baby.”

Lana nodded slowly, the smile on her face replaced by a look of confusion. “I know,” she said somewhat impatiently. “Why are you telling me this now?”

He gulped. “What you don’t know is that I was a foundling. One evening they passed Shuster’s field and saw a meteorite crashing down. For some reason they stopped their pickup and went looking. What they found was a small spacecraft with me inside.”

The confusion in Lana’s features turned into a frown. “They found you in a spacecraft?” she echoed incredulously, slowly withdrawing her hands from Clark’s grasp. She slipped a few inches away from him, studying his form intently.

“They didn’t know where I came from,” Clark continued. “They thought that maybe I had been part of a Russian experiment. But it wasn’t for a few years that we realized there was something different about me.” A shiver ran down Clark’s spine and it was for maybe the first time in his life that he felt actually cold.

Lana raised her brows. “Clark, what are you talking about? If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re drunk. But you had no more than two glasses of wine.”

“I’m not drunk, Lana,” Clark said, exasperated. “Why is this so difficult?”, he wondered, only to realize that a story about meteors and a child in a space craft had to sound far-fetched to anyone who didn’t know what he could do. “Here, let me show you, what I mean.”

He looked around, making sure there were no witnesses. When he was certain that no one could see him but Lana, he reached for her. Together they defied gravity, floating up until they were sitting in midair, several feet above the park bench. A rush of confidence filled Clark, fueled by the excitement he always felt when flying. It had been the last of his abilities to develop and the only one he had embraced with open arms.

“Clark!” a high-pitched, panicky squeal disrupted the night. “Clark, what... Are we... Are you...”

Noticing her uneasiness with a sudden surge of guilt, Clark floated them back down to the bench. As soon as she sat again, Lana jumped up, anxious to get some distance between her and Clark.

“I’m sorry, Lana,” Clark said dejectedly. “I guess this must come as somewhat of a shock. You see, I never told anyone else about those strange abilities I have...”

Lana’s lips quivered. “You mean the... the...” she made a vague gesture skywards.

“The flying?” Clark supplied and sighed. He figured it was time to come clean. “Actually, there is more. I’m strong. So far I found nothing that I couldn’t lift. I’m fast, so fast I could run to Smallville in a matter of minutes if not seconds. And I’m invulnerable,” he added quietly. The confidence he had felt earlier was completely gone. Clark hung his head, staring at his

hands as if they held some answer.

A lifetime seemed to pass until Lana finally looked at him again. "You... you were actually flying?" Her voice sounded raspy.

"Yes," Clark said simply. "I'm sorry for not telling you earlier. I just didn't know how. You kept accusing me that I didn't want to commit. But I always felt that you had to know everything about me before we took our relationship any further."

"I don't know what to say, Clark." Lana whispered. "I... I need time to think." She stammered and turned, walking, almost running back the way they had come.

The sounds of her sobs pierced Clark's heart. He watched her all the way until her dark frame became one with the night. Though he longed to run after her and get this right, Clark knew that it was probably better to give her time to come to terms with what he had just told her. He sank back down onto the park bench, wondering how he could have handled this better. Honestly, he could not think of a way to make it all sound less freaky.

The fireflies around Clark seemed to mock him, only serving as a reminder of how perfect the evening had started out. Suddenly, he felt the overwhelming urge to get away from it all. Quickly he checked if he was still alone, then he soared up into the night sky. A small gasp made him stop in midair. Clark turned his head. Lana's small figure stared back at him. She stood several yards away from the girl who was still playing her guitar, oblivious of the rest of the world. The moon illuminated Lana's pale face that displayed her shock.

"God, Clark, what are you?" Clark heard her mutter. He realized that for his own sake, he should have told her about his hearing abilities, too.

End Flashback

Clark landed outside the hanger, glad about the darkness that covered him. The area was dimly lit by lamps that lined the driveway towards other, more frequented parts of the facility. It was easy to stay in the shadows. An old military jeep was parked beside one of the metal walls. Clark sneaked past it, casting a nervous glance inside and was relieved to find it empty. He felt the heat that still radiated from the hood, telling him that it had not been parked here for long. Crouching down beside the front wheels, Clark lowered his glasses to check the inside of the building.

His breath caught as he saw Lois gagged and tied to a column a few yards in front of the shell of the Messenger. Jimmy was propped up on the other side of the column, his back facing Lois'. His head lolled to the side, a trail of blood ran down his forehead, leaving red stains on the cloth that gagged him. He was unconscious. The steady rise and fall of his chest were the only signs that he was still alive. A tattooed man was crouching beside Lois, securing the ropes that tied her and Jimmy to the column. Clark could only see the goon's back until he turned his head enough to see the side of his face.

He leered at Lois as she stared at him, wide-eyed. "Not so brave now, Babe, are you?" he whispered huskily.

A rush of anger went through Clark and he bolted forward, ready to tear the door that separated him from Lois and Jimmy to shreds. He stopped only inches before he would have sent the door flying. His breath came in panting gasps as he realized how close he had come to hand Luthor his secret on a silver platter. Storming into the building like some two-hundred-pound gorilla was not going to accomplish anything.

Discouraged, Clark continued to look through the wall. Dr. Baines stood looming large, her gun trained on Lois. The goon got up from his crouching position and joined Dr. Baines, mirroring her pose. A shiner marked the other side of his face, proving that Lois had put up quite a fight. Clark's lips twitched in a brief smile

at that notion. His focus remained firmly on the guns, ready to vaporize them with a blast of heat vision if need be.

"I hope you'll forgive the accommodations, but then again I've never been much of a hostess," Dr. Baines said, a vicious smirk distorting her formerly so attractive features.

She slowly let her gun sink, nodding at her tattooed goon to keep an eye on their captives. Her heels clacked on the floor as she went around the shell and disappeared behind it. Save for the breathing of the four people inside the building it was the only sound to be heard. Her steps reverberated in the hanger, filling Clark with a sense of dread. Using his x-ray vision, he watched Baines open a valve in the storage tanks. A liquid substance leaked out and slowly spread across the floor. She opened the valve of another tank as well. A second liquid substance began dripping onto the floor, pooling there. Then it slowly flowed towards the first one.

Dr. Baines took a suitcase that was sitting on a shelf behind the shell and again her steps resounded in the hangar as she made her way back to Lois and Jimmy. They still sat propped up to the column, facing a gun. Lois had drawn her knee up and was rubbing her face against it finally succeeding in pulling off her gag. The tattooed goon just watched her idly, a smirk plastered across his face.

"Sorry you won't be around to enjoy the rest of the evening, but accidents do happen," Baines said casually.

"Accidents?" Lois asked, her voice laced with panic.

Dr. Baines shot an angry look at her goon, but quickly regained her composure. "Yes," she said deliberately slowly, clearly enjoying the moment. She nodded towards the shell. "You see, while dissecting the orbital maneuvering systems, the monomethyl hydrazine leaked and mixed with the nitrogen tetroxide..." She paused, giving Lois a chance to mull over what her techno babble might mean. A smile crept on Baines face as she continued. "Unfortunately, the blast killed two nosy reporters who didn't bother to read the signs."

To underline her words Baines pointed to a sign on the wall. It read "Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted."

Clark's body itched to storm into the building and rescue Lois. He knew he had to do something. Yet, he remained standing where he was, listening to what was being said inside.

"Answer one question," Lois demanded, her voice suddenly drowned out by the sound of an approaching helicopter. "Why?" Clark could read her lips rather than hear what she was saying.

The helicopter came closer, hovering over the area in front of the hangar. Lights flashed across the ground, briefly illuminating the metal walls. Slowly the helicopter moved down, landing about fifty yards away from the old Jeep. To avoid being seen, Clark rushed back to the car and slipped into the shadow it provided. His gaze however remained mostly trained on what was going on inside. His heart was pounding as the deafening sound of the rotor blades died down enough for him to catch what Dr. Baines was saying.

"...simple, Lois. Profit," she replied with a shrug. "Outer space is no different from any new frontier. It will belong to those who get there first and seize the high ground." With that she turned on her heels, ready to leave.

"You won't get away with it," Lois said boldly. "Our editor-in-chief already knows that this shell is a fake. I saw the real wreckage of the Messenger. The whole left side of its shell was bashed in." She nodded her head towards the shell behind her. "That one isn't."

Dr. Baines turned back to her smiling unfazed. "Well, well, good luck proving it. This shell won't exist much longer. And honestly, who would believe any paper claiming that anyone would go to so much trouble building a second rocket just to cover their trail? That's just ridiculous, isn't it?" She laughed briefly.

Once again, she turned on her heels and walked away. A shudder ran through Clark as he watched her leave. Baines walked proudly, not a hint of guilt visible on her features. The goon followed in her wake. Neither of them looked back, neither of them saw Lois struggle against the ties that bound her. But no matter how hard she tried, they would not give. The two fluids leaking from their respective containers were at the verge of mixing. Clark held his breath, counting the seconds that seemed to drag on like hours. There was too little time to do what needed to be done. If he did not act now, Lois would die in this explosion. He could not let that happen.

Finally, the door of the hangar swung open and Baines stepped out, the goon right behind her. They jogged towards the helicopter; completely unaware that the gust of wind they felt was a man rushing past them. Clark managed to get inside the hangar just moments before the door fell shut behind him. A fishy smell permeated the room. Lois was still struggling against the ties.

"Jimmy," she shouted urgently, her voice laced with panic. "Jimmy, wake up!" A choked sob escaped her lips. "Oh, Jimmy, I'm so sorry for getting us into this situation. I guess I've tempted fate one time too many."

"Lois!" Clark yelled and rushed to her.

"Clark!" Lois breathed, shocked. "How did you find us? We've got to get out of here. It was all Baines' fault. She said the building is about to explode. She—"

"Shh, Lois. You can tell me later." Clark silenced her, crouching down next to her.

He ripped the ropes apart and helped Lois get up. Then he went to pick up Jimmy. The young man was still unconscious, a dead weight on Clark's shoulder. X-raying the shell, he saw that the two liquids were already mixing and started to bubble. There was too little time. Of course he could still try and freeze the chemicals. But this building was supposed to explode. Baines would become suspicious if it did not and would probably tell Luthor. And who knew what conclusion he was going to draw.

Clark grabbed Lois' hand and pulled her with him. They raced towards the exit. Clark heard the chemicals starting to hiss until suddenly a loud bang erupted. The blast caught up with them just as they reached the door. Clark wrapped his arm around the small of Lois' back and lowered Jimmy, so that his body covered the two of them. His feet left the ground and he flew a curve towards the ground, hoping it would look like the impetus of the blast had carried them several hundred feet away from the hanger. They landed in a large puddle of mud.

A roaring fire made quick work of what the explosion had left of the hangar. People from other buildings located around the hangar gathered, trying to find out what had happened. Voices were shouting, calling for someone to get the firefighters.

Next to Clark, Lois and Jimmy slowly opened their eyes. They all looked back at the hangar that was quickly reduced to rubble.

"What happened?" Lois whispered, frightened.

"I'm not sure... I guess the force of the explosion must have carried us here," he replied, hoping that she would not stop to wonder if such a thing was even possible.

But something else had already caught her attention. "Look!"

Baines' helicopter was flying across the remnants of the hangar, quickly speeding off in the direction of the airport, where doubtlessly one of Luthor's jets was already waiting. Clark bit back a curse, realizing that he had once again come too late to get any real proof. Then suddenly the helicopter exploded in a fireball. Pieces of the wreckage rained down, swallowed by the fire that still raged through the hangar.

"Do you think the explosion hit..." Jimmy asked in a low voice.

Clark just shook his head. "No. I think things went exactly as planned."

Sitting on his bed listlessly, Clark looked into Lana's blue eyes. The photo in his hand was only a bland image of her. It did not show the sparkle that used to be in those eyes, nor her smile that had been able to light up a whole room. Scattered around Clark lay all the articles and copies he had stored in the box that contained everything he knew about Lex Luthor. Lana's picture had been at the bottom of that box, buried underneath all those papers. Clark had not taken it out in years; he had almost forgotten it was even there.

The image in his mind had seemed fresh enough to him. But now he had the impression he was looking into the eyes of a perfect stranger. Her features were both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. It was a pretty peculiar feeling.

<God, Clark, what are you?>, her words of so many years ago reverberated in his mind.

The pain in his heart was still so fresh it was as if she had only just said them. Clark remembered the days that had followed that particular night, all the times he had tried to get her to talk to him. All she had ever said was that she needed time to think. He had always craved for a sense of belonging. But up until seeing the terror in Lana's eyes, he had never known how truly alienated one could feel from the rest of the world. Clark's heart pounded and suddenly he felt the overwhelming urge to rip Lana's picture into a million pieces.

A knock at his door stopped him. "Clark?" He froze. "Clark?" Lois called again. "Are you there?"

For a moment he contemplated just ignoring her. Clark did not want to talk to Lois; he did not want to face anyone. He just was not in the mood. Clark could let her knock until she gave up and went home. Lois would never be the wiser, so why bother? Despite himself Clark dropped Lana's picture and got up anyway.

Moments later he stared into the dark pools of Lois' eyes, dumbfounded. She seemed surprised that he was home after all. Her fist was still raised, ready to knock again. Her lips opened, but she too was at a loss for what to say. Slowly closing and opening her mouth again, she made the distinct impression of a fish out of water. Finally, Lois let her arm sink, studying him closely. A frown creased her forehead.

"Are you going to invite me in?" she asked eventually. Still not able to say anything, Clark just stepped aside. "You were gone so fast that I didn't even get to say thank you," Lois continued, making it sound almost like an accusation. "Jimmy's fine, by the way."

"That's great," Clark ground out.

"Clark..." Lois said, shifting her weight. She looked down, studying her nails, obviously uncomfortable with what she was about to say. "After tonight... I'm starting to wonder if you might actually be right about Luthor," she finally muttered.

"You are?" Clark raised his brows, shuffling backwards until he leaned against the wall. He stuck his hands into his pockets, not trusting himself to do anything but stand there. Lois was here, in his dump of a hotel room. He eyed her warily. Her presence was confusing him to no end.

"The interview went exactly as you predicted it would," Lois conceded. "He didn't answer any of my questions. Instead, he charmed my pants off me," she hung her head in embarrassment.

Clark's heart contorted in pain as his mind added pictures to her words. Suddenly, he felt ill, worse even than on the night he had watched them. White hot anger ripped through Clark, setting his insides ablaze. He tightened the hands in his pockets to fists, careful to maintain his control.

"Not literally, of course," Lois added, who had obviously seen the expression on Clark's face. Her lips curled in anger. "Give me some credit, Kent," she gave him a verbal smack.

Clark let out a breath he had not realized he had been holding. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "I just..." He did not know what to say. It turned out he did not need to.

Lois immediately went on. "Baines told me that this whole 'sabotaging the Messenger' thing had been about profit," she recounted what, unbeknownst to her, they both had heard in the hangar. "Now why would the director of EPRAD profit if she killed her own project? There had to be someone else pulling the strings. And whoever is behind this, murdered Baines to tie up loose ends."

Clark was not sure he trusted his ears. "So, you believe me?" he whispered cautiously, trying to push back the relief that was flooding him.

"Let's say I'll be a whole lot easier to convince, this time," Lois hedged and a small, self-conscious smile crept onto her lips. "I must admit that in the light of recent events Luthor planning his privately owned Space Station puts everything to a whole new perspective. Besides, a story exposing Lex Luthor as a criminal is most definitely going to win us a Pulitzer."

"It's not going to be that easy, Lois," Clark warned her. "I've been researching for years, and so far there are many things I suspect, but very little I can prove."

"Well, now you've got one heck of a partner," Lois said with a brilliant smile that easily brushed Clark's reluctance aside. And for the first time in what seemed like ages, Clark felt a twinge of hope.

Flashback

Smallville, June 1988

The shadows were starting to grow longer, but the sun still burned hot. Birds sang their songs, accompanied by the grunts of two working men and the frequent chop-chop of two axes digging into wood. Clark had to admit that it actually felt good to have company. Having Lex nearby forced him to slow down and do his work at a reasonable speed. Strangely enough, seeing the other man sweat also seemed to have a tiring effect on Clark himself. He was a lot more composed than earlier.

"I know you said you didn't want to talk about it ..." Lex eventually broke the companionable silence. "But I'm convinced that you're going to solve whatever happened between the two of you."

Clark raised his head, setting his axe down for a moment. A sigh escaped his lips. "Lex ..."

"I know, I know, this is really none of my business," Lex said appeasingly. "But I've seen Lana and she is really taking this hard."

"Oh, is she? In case she didn't tell you, it was her breaking up with me," Clark replied testily, picking up his axe again.

Lex flashed him a sympathetic look. "All I'm saying is that I think she'll come around."

The knuckles of Clark's hand turned white as he tightened his grip on the axe. He did not know what to say or even think. Clark felt utterly torn. On the one hand there was nothing he would not give to have Lana back. He missed her, badly. All his thoughts revolved around the moments they had shared, the plans he had made up in his mind for their future. He mourned the family he was never going to have, all those mornings he was not going to wake up beside her.

On the other hand he was not sure if he even wanted her to come back crawling to him. Or maybe he did, so he could send her away again, telling her what he thought about her behavior. She had been nagging him for ages to bare his soul. And when he had done so, she had handed him his heart back, torn to pieces. Now the shreds she had left were beating in his chest separately and he was not sure if anything was ever going to be able to repair the damage.

Part of him knew that she did not deserve his anger. He should not have sprung his secret on her; at least maybe, not in that way. Anyone would have been hard-pressed to accept him as he was. But he had refused to accept that he was going to lead a

life in loneliness, that his dreams of having a family were just a boyish fantasy.

"I don't think she will," Clark said through clenched teeth.

"Maybe it'll help you to talk about what happened?" Lex suggested, wiping his forehead. His shirt no longer looked white. It was now drenched in sweat and covered with dust. Lex had rolled up his sleeves and looked much more like someone who belonged to Smallville than he had earlier.

Clark just sighed, wishing that he actually could confide in Lex. The man was about fifteen years his senior. Even so, over the past few months, he had gradually come to be a friend. For Clark, it was not about the internship at the New York Times Lex had arranged or the fancy meals he had been invited to. If anything, Lex' generosity made him slightly uncomfortable, but Lex would not hear about that. What really mattered to Clark was that he could talk to someone about all the things he had seen in the world, someone who had had similar experiences, someone whose life was even remotely as strange as his, though for entirely different reasons.

"Lana learned something about me that she can't live with," Clark said eventually and sat down on a part of the tree trunk that had not yet been chopped into firewood.

"That's tough." Lex took a seat on the ground, leaning the axe against his thigh, absentmindedly running his fingers along the blade. "Did you know I got divorced a few months prior to the day we first met?" he asked, not really waiting for Clark's answer. "Her name was Ariana..." he continued with a wistful smile. "When we first met, I was a nobody. She was brilliant, beautiful, everything I longed for in a woman. I loved her dearly and I felt compelled to do everything in my power to offer her the life she deserved ..." he trailed off.

"What went wrong?" Clark asked quietly.

"I worked so much we hardly saw each other," Lex stated simply. "She told me I wasn't the man she thought I was." He gave a short laugh. "I didn't even realize that I was driving her away." He fell silent.

For a while they just sat there, breathing in the warm air that smelled of apples. "It's different with Lana and me," Clark said after a while. "What she's uncomfortable with ... It's nothing I could possibly change."

"Yeah, she mentioned something like this when she came to me," Lex replied thoughtfully. Clark just raised his brows, feeling his heart starting to pound. Could she have told Lex... His breath hitched. Lex caught Clark's look. "She said nothing specific," he reassured Clark.

Nevertheless, Clark felt slightly sick to his stomach. He got up, grabbing his axe again. "Let's get this done," he said, the tone in his voice leaving little doubt that he was also done talking.

Lex gave a quick nod and got up as well. They resumed chopping the last piece of the trunk that remained. Clark felt a headache building up behind his eyes and a strange ache in his stomach. Lana had spoken with Lex. The thought made him dizzy. Clark knew she considered him as a friend, but ... He forced his concentration to the task at hand, digging his axe into the wood again and again. No matter how disappointed he was about her reaction, she would never reveal his secret to anyone. That was just unthinkable. Clark dug his axe into the wood once more, his arms shaking with the effort.

As he got up, he suddenly felt a sharp pain in his side that had him double over. He dropped his axe, clutching his aching side as his legs gave out under him. His hand felt something sticky and warm.

"Clark!" a scream disrupted the silence of the peaceful afternoon.

With his vision blurring, Clark hardly registered Lex, who was at his side. He saw the blade of an axe lying on the ground,

covered in blood. His blood, he thought idly. The handle had been dropped a few yards off. Another wave of pain washed over Clark, threatening to drown him.

"This shouldn't have happened," was the last thing he heard before everything went black.

End Flashback

"To Lois Lane and Clark Kent," Perry said, raising his mug of coffee in a toast.

A wide grin was plastered on his face, given the fact that the *Daily Planet* had scooped all other papers throughout Metropolis. As usual when the editor-in-chief celebrated important articles, the front page was pinned to a board. The headline read: MESSENGER SABOTAGED, SABOTEUR DIES IN FIERY EXPLOSION. Other reporters joined Perry, raising their mugs as well.

Toasting with coffee was a concession to the long working day that still lay ahead of them and maybe also the fact that it was still morning, Clark mused as he took a sip of his own cup. It tasted bitter. His gut twisted as he read the headline, knowing that it once again was only a part of the whole story, the part he could prove. Lois seemed to feel the same way. He had come to know her competitive streak, but even though she had yet again made the front page, she seemed unnaturally subdued.

"I just spoke to ground control over at EPRAD," Perry continued. "They went back over the colonist launch vehicle with a fine-tooth comb, discovered the same coolant problem in the protective bands and fixed it. The launch is all set for tomorrow morning." The newsroom broke into applause and shouts of joy. "But ... it's a no-go for you, Lois. No reporters allowed," Perry said with a shrug.

"But Perry..." Lois protested, clenching her hands into fists and getting ready to fight.

Clark put his hand on her arm, gently pushing it down. "Don't, Lois ..." he whispered. "Perry probably won't take kindly to our request if we challenge him in front of the whole newsroom."

Lois did not reply; she shot Clark an angry look, but gradually relaxed her stance. "Fine," she snapped and walked back to her desk.

She set her cup down forcefully, and her barely-touched coffee sloshed onto her desk. Muttering a soft curse, Lois took a tissue and wiped it off vigorously. As if her retreat had spelled the end of the celebration, one by one, the reporters got back to their work. Clark followed Lois and sat down on the edge of her desk while she took the chair.

"I don't understand how you can just stand there and watch while we print an article that tells only half the truth," Lois spat angrily.

"I hate this every bit as much as you do," Clark conceded. "But that's all that we can prove. Besides, you said yourself that it might be better to give Luthor a false sense of security before we attack."

Lois just muttered something unintelligible and got up again. "I'm going to talk to him, now," she vowed, looking over to Perry, who was just closing the door to his office behind him.

Clark laid a hand on her shoulder, stopping her. "Wait," he said quietly. "What exactly are we going to tell him?"

"What are we going to tell him?" Lois asked, her voice dripping with annoyance. "The truth, obviously!"

Clark could say anything else, she whisked his hand away and stormed towards their editor's office. Several pairs of eyes looked after her, curious what she was up to now. Filled with dread, Clark followed her, just as she knocked once and went in without waiting for an invitation.

"This is not acceptable, Perry!" Clark would have heard Lois even without the benefit of his super senses. "I earned these

interviews!" she continued, causing several of their colleagues to flinch in anticipation of the argument that inevitably was going to follow. "Without me, there would be no Colonist transport tomorrow. This is just not fair," she fumed.

Clark slipped into the office behind Lois and closed the door. She did not even seem aware of him. She was standing there like a fury right out of hell, her hands on her hips. Her appearance, complete with an angry stare would have scared anyone but Perry White, who only raised his brows.

"I wonder what part of the word 'no' you didn't understand," Perry said, almost dangerously calm.

"But Perry ..." Lois tried once again.

"I told you, no reporters allowed," Perry repeated. "Do you think I didn't try? Those interviews would really look good on our front page. But they refused."

"Then try harder. Whoever was responsible for the sabotage will certainly try again," Lois insisted.

Perry's eyebrows climbed somewhat closer towards his hairline. "Excuse me? I thought we agreed that Dr. Baines was responsible for the explosion of the Messenger, because she ignored Dr. Platt's report."

"This wasn't just some mistake she wanted to cover. It was deliberate, she told us so herself," Clark chimed in, earning himself an irritated glance from both Perry and Lois, who obviously hadn't been aware of his presence.

But Lois was quick to recover. "Don't you think it's a bit much of a coincidence that her helicopter exploded? She certainly didn't kill herself."

"So you're saying that there was someone else pulling the strings," Perry concluded.

"Exactly," Lois agreed, a hint of impatience in her voice.

"And just who is that mysterious someone supposed to be?" Perry asked doubtfully.

"Lex Luthor," Lois said.

"Great shades of Elvis," Perry breathed, taken aback.

A smile crept on Lois's lips as she took in Perry's reaction. "Clark, tell him what you've got," she demanded.

"I still think you must be insane risking your job, and mine, I might add, just to go on a wild goose chase," the man whispered, who up until now had refused to tell Lois and Clark his name.

What they knew about him was that he was one of Perry's contacts at EPRAD. Even his influence as the *Daily Planet's* editor-in-chief had not reached far enough to get them their interviews with the colonists. But provided that *officially* Perry knew nothing about their whereabouts he had introduced his top reporting team to a contact that, of course, he *officially* did not know, either.

"It's not a wild goose chase," Lois protested emphatically.

Clark secretly prayed they were actually right. He would hate to be the one who had spelled an early end to her career. It frankly scared him how easily he had pulled her on his side.

"Besides, if there really is nothing, we just sneak off the transporter and nobody will ever know we were there," she added casually, smiling at the incredulous look their escort shot her.

"Just ... just to make sure, we're on the same page, here," he stuttered. "You don't know me and I certainly didn't help you to get on board. And be sure to get off the transport with the other ground staff."

Lois nodded. "Don't worry. So, where do we go from here?" she asked, smoothing out her overalls.

Both Lois and Clark were disguised in the light brown uniforms of the EPRAD technicians. Lois wore her hair in a ponytail and just set the cap on her head that completed her outfit. Clark mirrored her movements, looking back and forth, nervously checking that no one was watching them.

"You can still back out, if you want," their escort mumbled,

leaving little doubt that he would prefer taking them back the way they had come. “My colleagues and I checked the whole transport ship. Trust me, there’s nothing to find.”

“I’m not backing out,” Lois stated with a conviction that instantly silenced their escort.

Clark suddenly could not help the feeling that Lois would have snuck on board regardless of whether he had told her of his suspicions about Lex Luthor. That realization both relieved and scared him in equal proportions. Had he really managed to convince her of Luthor’s double-life, or was she just taking an opportunity that had presented itself? Clark was not so sure anymore. He joined Lois, who was crouching down beside the man who had led them here. Together they listened as he gave them directions to the Colonist transport. When the man was finished, he got up, gave them a quick nod and vanished somewhere in the labyrinth that was the EPRAD facility.

Lois and Clark were alone. “Let’s go and win ourselves a Pulitzer,” Lois said with a smile.

Clark let out a soft sigh. “I seriously doubt it’s going to be that easy.”

“Well, you’re not going to win if you don’t even try,” Lois shrugged his objection off and started for the site of the transport.

Clark fell in step with her, following in her wake as she headed for a pile of fragile goods their escort had shown them. They were waiting to be carried into the transport; they were too precious to risk damage through one of the cranes that usually did the heavy lifting. Both Lois and Clark picked up boxes and joined the other technicians who were climbing into the lift that carried them up until they reached a small gangway that led into the Colonist transport.

Once inside, they quickly dropped off their cargo in its designated spot and turned back, supposedly to get more of the goods. But as soon as they were out of sight of the other workers, Lois and Clark slipped into an empty room.

Lois pushed the button that let the door close behind them and leaned against the wall with a brilliant smile on her lips. “That was easier than I thought,” she commented. “You know, come to think of it, I probably wouldn’t have needed Perry’s help to get us here.”

“No, I guess you wouldn’t,” Clark agreed, exasperated. “So, how about we separate from here on,” he suggested. “You get us some interviews and I try to find out what Luthor did to stop the Colonist Transport.”

“Oh, no buster,” Lois said, shaking her head vigorously. “You’re not going to do this alone.”

“It might be dangerous, Lois,” Clark objected

“Well, I can handle dangerous,” Lois stated firmly. “Besides, it’s just as dangerous for you as it is for me.”

Clark wanted to disagree, but quickly bit his tongue to keep from saying too much. He let out a frustrated sigh, angry with himself that he was not able to think of something better to lose her. It would only be that much harder to find a reasonable excuse for the weird things he could do without giving away his secret.

“Are we going to get started, or are you going to keep standing here?” Lois asked, impatiently, tapping her foot on the floor. “We’re running out of time. There’re only twenty minutes left until the countdown starts.”

“We don’t even know exactly what we’re looking for,” Clark reminded her. “That’s why we should ...”

“No, we don’t,” Lois interrupted him. “And there might not even be anything to look for in the first place.” A smug smile played on her lips as Clark flinched at that, feeling caught in another pitiable attempt at getting rid of her. “That’s why we should start by narrowing down possibilities. I think we can rule out any technical problems. When fixing the coolant device they certainly made sure there wasn’t anything else wrong with the shuttle.”

Relaxing his tight fists, Clark gave in with another sigh. “So, whatever Luthor did with the shuttle, he had to it right before takeoff.”

Lois nodded. “If he still wants it to look like an accident that would probably leave ...”

“A bomb,” Clark concluded, feeling his heartrate pick up a notch. “He has probably hidden it well.”

“So all we have to do is search this shuttle without getting caught,” Lois muttered, sounding somewhat discouraged at the prospect of sneaking through all the activity outside without raising suspicion.

“This is going to take a while, perhaps if we worked separately ...” Clark suggested, but his voice trailed off as he saw a red, blinking light in the corner of his eye. As he looked closer the red light turned out to be a reflection in a metal door. Sticking to a corner was a black box with a digital clock that was ticking down. “I think we found our bomb,” Clark breathed, staring at the timer with wide eyes. It was down to forty seconds.

Clark felt Lois step beside him. “I don’t suppose you would know anything about disarming bombs?” Lois asked, her voice laced with panic. “This doesn’t make any sense,” she rambled on. “We should at least have another twenty minutes to find some specialist. Why would anyone blow up the shuttle before takeoff?”

“Dunno,” Clark muttered quietly. “Maybe we activated some sort of fail-safe when we entered the room, something to ensure that no one would be able to turn the bomb off.” He closed his eyes, swallowing against the nausea that rose up in his stomach.

Ten seconds to go. He lowered his glasses, x-raying the bomb, desperately trying to make sense of all the wires that were sticking out. The black box that held the bomb was booby-trapped. If he tried to open it, the bomb would go off.

Five seconds. Clark turned around, focusing his heat vision on the camera, destroying it with a quick blast. Then he quickly returned his attention to the task at hand. He had no idea which wire to pull. Sending a quick prayer to heaven, he chose one.

Two seconds. The bomb gave off an alarming series of beeps, leaving little doubt that he had picked the wrong one.

“Clark!” Lois screamed in terror. Knowing that he had no choice, Clark swallowed the bomb and closed his eyes. “Oh my —”

Her voice was drowned out by the blast of the explosion that rang in his ears as the bomb went off.

THE END of Clark’s side of the story.

Story continues in [“...I Knew the Truth.”](#)