

# All I Ask

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Rated: PG

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Summary: In this “what if” story, Clark doesn’t give up so easily after he declares his love for Lois in the park.

Story size: 29,517 words (160Kb as text)

Author’s Notes: I haven’t written fic forever, but it was such a favorite pastime of mine in college. I was feeling a little nostalgic this past summer, so I decided to re-watch the pilot ep... and then some. When I finished the end of season 1, I realized that I’d never done a BatP/HoL rewrite in my fic days; I was more of a season 2 girl (just check out my earlier stories!). Anyway, I’d forgotten how painful that rejection in the park was... and so I changed it, wrote what I wished would have happened: that Clark had shown a bit more resolve when Lois turned him down. In re-watching season 1, there were just so many times that Lois showed more than just “partner-ly” feelings for Clark (she can say what she wants, but girl was jealous of a “look” Dr. Baines gave Clark in the pilot ep, and she’d only known Clark for .7 seconds... so whatever, Lois). Anyway, I wanted Clark to go after her a bit more. I’m sure it has been done before, but I couldn’t help but write my own version... so for old time’s sake, here it is.

A huge thank you to KathyB for being an amazing beta-reader: characters, plot, title, whatever I needed – she was there! This story is a thousand times better than it deserves to be simply because she was kind enough to lend her time and talent. I love that after all these years, she still knows these characters like the back of her hand. You are fantastic, Kathy! And thanks also to one of my dearest L&C friends, Kaethel, for reading an earlier version of this story and giving me some terrific feedback. Thanks to my GE, GooBoo, for polishing this story and making it archive-ready.

This one’s for all my FoLC friends, most of whom have moved on to other fandoms or just moved on in life in general. Here’s to our meetings in Baltimore, Boston, Scranton, North Carolina... to 20 years ago and to carefree college days... traveling to meet each other, writing fic, checking the message boards, IRC chatting, and not worrying about much of anything! I miss those days, but I will always be grateful that this crazy, beautiful show brought us together.

As always, usual copyrights apply: these characters belong to DC Comics, Warner Bros, and no copyright infringement is intended. Also, you’ll recognize dialogue from a scene in the S1 episode “Barbarians at the Planet,” written by Dan Levine and Deborah Joy Levine.

Comments welcome and appreciated!

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The short walk from Luthor News Network to Centennial Park was torture. Torture, because with every step he took, he knew that he was nearing the moment when he would change their relationship forever. But really, what choice did he have? It was either that or let her waltz off into the world of LNN on the arm of Metropolis’s most ruthless criminal. He refused to do that – at least, not without a fight. Not without telling her.

They were at a crossroads now. The Daily Planet was gone, and the job which bound them together wasn’t there anymore.

Luthor had proposed; Lois was considering. Clark could feel her slipping away from him, and there wasn’t anything he could do to stop it... except tell her. Tell her and pray that she’d listen – really listen – to him.

Pray that she’d see him – *them* – the way he did.

When they’d left LNN, she’d started talking, but she’d stopped when it had become clear to her that he wasn’t in the mood to chat about the excitement of working in the network news business. She’d asked only one question he’d actually answered: “The park?”

He’d just nodded; for this conversation, he’d have preferred to be someplace less public, like his apartment or maybe hers, but she was working and he knew she couldn’t go far. So... Centennial Park it was. At least they’d gotten out of that sterile, soulless building Luthor owned. From the second Clark had set foot in the lobby, he’d felt like he’d been choking on the superficial arrogance of the place.

For the last several minutes, they’d walked in silence, the only sounds around them the cars, the horns, the shouts, the general din of the city. As they’d neared the park entrance, he’d noticed that she’d begun taking shorter, slower steps, and all he could think was that she was trying to slow their arrival because she’d sensed the shift in his demeanor. Somehow, she could read him; she knew he was about to change it all.

They had barely made their way into the park when he started talking. He knew that he had to get it out before he lost his nerve. He needed to tell her that... well, that he needed her. Needed, loved, desired, treasured, and a million other verbs and adjectives that came to mind when he thought of Lois Lane. She was a part of him, and it was time she heard it from him. He took a deep breath, trying to calm the suddenly nervous thudding of his heart. He may be Superman, but he was about to lay himself bare at her feet; even superheroes had their limits when it came to love.

“Lois,” he started. It was cautious, and when she looked at him, there was concern and slight panic. He couldn’t stop though; he was all in this time. “When I thought about losing my job at the Daily Planet, saying good bye to Perry and Jimmy and everyone... I realized something.”

He paused, gathering his nerve, and shifted his weight to one side as they walked. “I realized that I could lose all of that and still go on. I realized that there was really only one thing that I didn’t want to live without.” Clark stopped walking, making sure he had her full attention. “And that... was you. Seeing you every day, working with you, just being with you...”

At that, she broke in. “Well, that’s why you should come and be my partner!” Lois rubbed a hand reassuringly across his upper arm, as if her touch alone could convince him.

She was trying to turn it back around to partnership; she was trying to salvage them and give him an out. He loved her and hated her for it at the same time. She knew where he was going with his impassioned speech. Frustrated, he stepped in front of her, turning, asking her without words to sit down next to him on the bench they were passing. She followed his request, looking a little lost. “No, Lois, listen to me. I’m not talking about partnership. I’m talking about... us.” The stress of the last word was deliberate, the emphasis unmistakable.

He watched her eyes widen fractionally, like she couldn’t believe he was saying it out loud. He would’ve told her to sit down if she hadn’t already been; if that had thrown her, he was about to up the ante.

“I have been in love with you for a long time.” He said the words slowly and clearly, so there was no mistake. “You had to have known.” And it was true; there was no way Lois could’ve worked beside him for the last eight months and missed the way he looked at her, lingered near her, touched her with a combination of eagerness and awe.

By calling her on it, he knew she’d take him seriously. There

would be no misunderstanding here. He'd put it out there: *Lois, I know what a sharp, perceptive woman you are. I've watched how you read people. I know you are completely aware of how I feel about you.*

He wondered if she'd remember how she'd warned him not to fall for her practically within 5 minutes of meeting him. He wondered if he should tell her that it had been too late, even then. Clark Kent had already fallen in love with Lois Lane.

Her eyes dropped, but she didn't deny it. "I mean, I knew..." she trailed off, looking unsure of what to say next. "I mean, I guess I knew... that you liked me, or were attracted to me."

There was a pause, and he steeled himself at the look on her face. He knew what that pause meant. Every man in the world knew what that pause meant.

"Oh, Clark." She was looking down again, seemingly unable to meet his eyes. His expression was probably completely pathetic right now, but he couldn't help it.

When she did look at him again, her face was pained and her voice strained. "I'm sorry... I just don't feel that way about you... romantically. You're my best friend, and the only partner I could ever stand to work with. I admire you, and I respect you, and I do love you... as a friend."

And even though he'd known the words were coming, they still hit him with the force of kryptonite. No amount of respect or admiration could soften the blow, though he knew she'd tried. He looked away and ran a dejected hand through his hair as he stood, needing space from her.

One last question, one last thing he had to know, and then he'd leave her alone. For all his bravado earlier about fighting for her, right now he just felt like curling up in a very un-Superman-like ball and licking his wounds. "And what about Luthor? Do you love him?"

At his question, her eyes skittered away. There was another pause. This one didn't hurt so bad; it was a good sign. "I don't know," she said. "I mean, I have feelings for him. I haven't said yes yet."

Thank God. Her vague, disjointed answer gave him hope. He didn't know what attracted Lois to Luthor, but whatever it was, Clark was certain that she wasn't in love with the billionaire. Flattered, sure... dazzled, maybe. But in love, hopelessly and eternally? She wasn't. He knew that.

That information made his next sentence easier. He'd already told her his deepest feelings, so this request should be a snap. Maybe he was going down, but he wasn't going without a fight. This one woman had made him feel so much in the time that he'd known her; he couldn't walk away completely. He wanted more time – preferably days and weeks and months with her, but if she wasn't going to give it, he'd ask for something smaller. She was about to say something else, he could tell, but he interrupted her before she could. "Then do something for me. A favor."

She closed her mouth, and whatever words had been on the tip of her tongue vanished. "A favor?" she repeated.

He sat back down beside her and reached for her hand – he wouldn't have dared in any normal situation, but this was about as far from normal for them as they could get. "You know how I feel about you, now. And I guess... I know how you feel. But this is it for us, Lois. Do you get that? I won't work for Luthor. We can't be partners anymore. And now that he's asked you to marry him... if you say yes, I probably won't stay in Metropolis. Everything that has kept me here will be gone... my work, my friends..." He paused, and the pain was palpable. "You."

"But Clark, it doesn't have to be like that!" She began to pull her hand away, and he knew that she was preparing to fight again for their partnership.

He held on. "I'm not trying to hurt you, Lois. Believe me, that's the last thing I'd ever want to do. But I can't stay here, live in the same city with you, see you at professional events... and

watch you in a relationship with someone else. Over the last few months, I realized that whether it's Luthor or anybody else – I just can't do it." He drew in a deep breath. "So... as your best friend, I'm asking for one more thing from you."

She was watching him warily, and there was a slight sheen to her eyes that hadn't been there before. "What?"

Clark shifted on the park bench, facing her more fully. He gathered what was left of his courage and just asked her. "I want you to go out with me. On a date."

She looked stunned, as if he'd just asked her for the moon. Maybe he had.

"A date?"

"A date," he repeated, adding emphasis to the word. "That's all I ask. I want one evening where it's just you and me: no Luthor, no job, no leaving. A night where I can treat you the way I've always wanted to... because I always thought we'd have that first date, you know? Do you remember our first investigation together? I asked you to have dinner with me practically the moment I moved to the city." He laughed, but it was more self-deprecating than humorous. "I've loved you since the day we met, Lois."

She wasn't saying anything, and after a moment, he continued. "So I'm asking for that date again. Maybe not as a beginning this time... maybe more as an end. Before we move onto the next chapter of our lives... new jobs, new relationships, whatever... I just want that night."

The shock was still evident on her face, more so even than when he'd said he loved her. It was almost like she'd expected that to some degree, but didn't know how to handle what he'd just asked of her. After a beat of silence, Clark finally let go of her hand and stood up. He wasn't going to wait around to get rejected a second time.

Before he went, he faced her one last time. "I know it's a lot to ask. Just think about it, please? And if you decide to, come by my apartment tonight, around 7. If you don't come, I'll know your answer, and I won't bother you again." He reached down, cupping her cheek in his palm and tracing her jawline with his fingers. "I'll always love you, and I'll always want you to be happy."

And with that, he stepped away from her, slipping his hands into the pockets of his khaki pants. He walked out of the park without looking back, unsure – but knowing that it was quite possible – that he'd just said good-bye forever to the woman he loved.

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Lois sat on that park bench for a long time after he'd gone. She'd watched him walk away, waiting for him to turn around and tell her it had all been a joke; he'd just been kidding around. He didn't really love her, hadn't just asked her out on a date, and that sure, he would come work at LNN and they'd be partners just like before.

Just like before.

She mourned those words, because nothing would ever be just like before. Why did they have to go and mess everything up?

And when she said 'they', she meant both Clark and Lex. Lex, who'd bought the Planet, and then went right ahead and made the wholesale changes he'd promised he wouldn't make. Lex, who'd turned her world upside down by asking her to marry him – when really, they'd only been dating a short while. Talk about sudden! And every date they'd ever been on had been formal, almost like he was courting her. Dinners, operas, banquets and events... good grief, she'd never even seen him without his suit and tie, and she was supposed to be thinking about spending the rest of her life with him? She was so mad at him for rushing their relationship!

And then there was Clark, whom she'd just spent the better part of a year with, and who'd come to be her best friend in that time. She'd had the best year of her life, both professionally and personally, with the Kansas country boy by her side. Sure, they'd

started out a little rocky, but it was only because Lois Lane had an admittedly difficult time trusting people. She'd been unsure of his motives, and she hadn't liked being saddled with the greenhorn reporter when they'd first met.

However, in the weeks and months that had followed, she'd come to learn that Clark was the rarest of breeds. In fact, she'd never met anyone like him, probably never would again. He was green, sure, but he was just as good a writer as she was; his style was different, but it complimented hers perfectly. Together, they'd broken some of the biggest stories the Planet had ever seen, and professionally, they were amazing. Personally, she'd entrusted him with some of her deepest secrets, and to her knowledge, he'd held every one of her confidences. She'd come to rely on him and feel secure knowing that he had her back, no matter what. He might not always agree with her, but he'd always treat her with respect. And almost a year later, she could now say that she couldn't imagine working with anyone else. She not only wanted Clark beside her – she needed him there.

That's why she'd called him today. When the job at LNN had opened up for her – Lex had made sure of that – she'd immediately thought of Clark as well. She knew that he hadn't gotten a new job yet, so it was perfect. They'd start together at LNN, and she could still be his partner. He'd still be beside her every day.

Except it wasn't perfect, and she was so mad at him right now for changing everything.

He'd said that he loved her. Loved her! He was her partner and her one constant, the person she knew would always be there for her... and now he loved her?

She knew what "love" did to relationships. Her "loving" home growing up had been a constant source of pain as her parents fought bitterly over her father's workaholic personality and subsequent unfaithfulness. She'd watched her mother turn to a bottle to dull the pain, and Lois had been confronted with adult issues long before she was ever ready. She'd tried to spare Lucy the brunt of it, becoming almost a motherly figure for her, but once Lois had turned eighteen, she'd been kicking the door down to get out, with Lucy not far behind.

But, unbeknownst to her, she hadn't quite escaped yet; in college, she'd lost a friendship to a guy who turned out not to be worth her love anyway. Paul was the first in a list of mistakes she'd make in the romance department in the coming years. In the end, she'd just been embarrassed at her behavior and sad she'd slept with someone who could claim to love her one week and then be dating her new frenemy the next.

The worst of the mistakes, though, had come when she'd first started at the Planet. Things had been going well; she'd been building a reputation for good work, and she'd been feeling like she was making a difference in the world. Her writing was helping people, and that was important to her. But just when she'd started to feel comfortable, Claude had slithered out of the woodwork and taken a liking to her; as first she was flattered, but undeterred from her work. He was persistent, however, and soon she had fallen for him, thinking that this time was going to be different.

This time, she'd thought, she was in love with a man who not only shared her passion for journalism, but who was also smart and talented, well-traveled and worldly, and, not to mention, good-looking and charming. This time, it would work. So she'd given him her heart that night, and in the morning, she'd been devastated to realize that she'd woken up with a wolf in sheep's clothing, and that wolf had taken not only her pride, but her story in the process.

He'd told her that he loved her, too.

She sighed. So, really, who could blame her if the very thought of love made her want to run screaming?

Truth be told, she hadn't even stopped to think about what to say back to Clark once he'd admitted that he loved her. In fact, she'd barely heard him before she was shaking her head, thinking

*No, no, not again*, to herself before she'd told him that she just didn't feel that way about him. At that point, she'd only been trying to save herself from another disaster of epic proportions. Even though she knew in her heart that Clark was not a Claude, she couldn't help but back away. She wasn't ready to go down that path with another co-worker, and she definitely wasn't willing to let one of her relationships become fodder for the gossip mill again.

It didn't matter that the Planet was gone; Metropolis was one big, city-wide, gossipy newsroom when it came to the journalism business. The news that she and Clark were more than partners would've been all over the Metropolis Press Club faster than Superman could fly across the horizon. And yet... here she was dating the third richest man in the world. If she got married to him, wouldn't her life be subject to much more tabloid gossip than it was already? Truthfully, she hadn't really thought of that before now. She was seeing someone who lived his life in the public eye; the only other person in Metropolis more famous than Lex Luthor was Superman.

Superman. Now that was another can of worms entirely. Yes, she still had feelings for the superhero; in fact, she'd been thinking that she should talk to him, too, before she made any decisions about accepting Lex's proposal. But now with Clark's declaration that he loved her – and with this date he'd asked her on – she just felt like she couldn't add one more thing to the mix. Her emotions were stretched thin enough as it was, and truly, one or two stolen kisses with the superhero was not – no matter how she tried to stretch it in her imagination – a relationship. And even if she said something to Superman, deep down she knew his reaction would probably be a gentle, "I care about you, but I belong to the world," noble, self-sacrificing statement that would only serve to hurt her, as nice as he'd try to make the rejection.

Kind of like she'd done with Clark this afternoon.

Ouch. Knowing that she'd hurt her best friend like that was a tough pill to swallow. She knew what it felt like to be on the rejected end, and it wasn't fun. When she'd turned him down today, she'd expected him to turn and walk away; he'd surprised her, though, with his request for a date. One evening for them to be together... like a couple.

Now what was she supposed to do about that? Not show up and break his heart for a second time? How awful a person was she? And it wasn't like he was asking her to meet him at a chapel in Vegas... he was asking her to have dinner. They'd had dinner together a hundred times since he'd started work at the Planet. She'd been to his apartment more times than she could count; heck, she'd even spent an entire night there once when Barbara Trevino had been intent on extracting her revenge, and Lois had been terrified enough to run to the one person – besides Superman – who had always made her feel safe.

And she wasn't engaged yet; as a matter of fact, she and Lex had never even said they were exclusive to each other... which, truthfully, made her think yet again how strange it was that he'd asked her to marry him. She hadn't even introduced him to her family, they hadn't spent any holidays together... he'd once caught her in her robe eating ice cream out of a carton and she'd almost died of embarrassment. And yet he thought he knew her well enough to marry her?

The whole thing was absurd. In a few weeks' time, she'd been asked for her hand in marriage by a man whom she truly didn't even know that well, lost the job she loved and the workplace that felt more like a home, and now she was on the verge of losing her best friend as well because she didn't feel as strongly for him as he felt for her.

Lois pushed off the park bench, standing up angrily. Well, it wasn't doing anyone any good, just sitting her wallowing in self-pity. She'd figure out what to do once she got home. Even though there were still a few hours left in the workday, there was no way

she was going back to LNN now and finish her orientation; she wouldn't hear a word anyone said to her.

She grabbed her briefcase from beside where it lay beside her on park bench and started off in the direction of Carter Avenue, her footsteps quick and staccato against the stone path.

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Lois wished she could say that she'd arrived home in a far better mood than when she'd left the park, but that wasn't the case. For the entire cab ride home, her thoughts had crisscrossed between Clark's declaration of love and Lex's proposal on the plane. Two men, two vastly different personalities, and yet they both claimed to love her. But did either one, really? And how was she supposed to know?

And how did she really feel about Lex? Clark had asked her point blank if she loved the billionaire she'd been dating, and the best she'd been able to come up with was, "I have feelings for him." What did that even mean? That didn't sound like the answer of a woman in love.

Tossing her briefcase down by the door, she moved into her apartment, kicking her heels off as she passed by the couch. She made her way into her bedroom, unbuttoning the muted pink suit jacket and shrugging it off her shoulders. Shedding the clothing that smelled faintly of the offices at LNN helped her mood slightly; she wished she could shed the memories and emotions of today as easily. She couldn't help thinking that everything in the last few weeks had happened too fast, like there were deadlines in her life, unbeknownst to her, that had to be met: date a billionaire, fall in love, get married before you hit thirty. Like someone had put her life in overdrive suddenly and she was struggling to catch up. Would she even be considering Lex's proposal if the Planet hadn't been bombed?

Probably not, came the truthful answer. If she and Clark were still working as partners at the Planet, if she was still going about her normal everyday life, she probably would have thought about Lex's proposal and then told him that it was too soon, that they needed to get to know each other better before they decided on something that would change their lives so drastically.

But that drastic life-change had happened anyway, in the form of the bombing at the Planet. And wasn't it just a tad too coincidental that the Planet was destroyed just after Lex had bought it, and then Lex just happened to have an opening at LNN all ready for her? Coupled with what Clark had already said about Lex – he'd warned her several times to be careful – didn't it seem strange that her life would shift so dramatically, all at the same time? If she was the suspicious type, it wouldn't take too much stretching to imagine that Lex had somehow engineered it all.

But wait, *wasn't* she the suspicious type? She was an investigative reporter, for goodness' sakes! True, Lex had never done anything to make her uneasy, but wasn't it her business to see beyond the external? What had she told Clark that one time – to "rip away the veil of secrecy and expose the naked truth"? And logic told her that Lex hadn't made it to the top by being an especially nice guy to everyone he met. He had to have some skeletons in his closet.

Maybe tonight, she would ask Clark to be a little more forthcoming about his dislike of Lex Luthor. If he knew something, she needed to know it, too.

Wait... tonight. She stopped short as she reached into her dresser drawer for pair of lounge pants to match the t-shirt she was already wearing.

Their "date."

What was she going to do?

If she went to his apartment tonight, he'd think she was agreeing to the date. And she didn't want to give him the wrong idea; she'd made it clear in the park today that she just didn't feel that way about him. It wouldn't be fair to him to spend the evening as his date if she was even considering Lex's proposal at

all. It would just hurt Clark even more if she went over to his apartment, even as a good-bye kind of date, and then accepted Lex's proposal just days later. Plus, it had killed her to hurt him this afternoon – she knew for a fact she didn't want to be the cause of any more pain for him.

But even still, an uninterrupted evening spent in Clark's company didn't sound all that bad right now. Everything had been so hectic in the last few days; following the bombing at the Planet, she hadn't seen Clark much at all. If they could actually sit down and talk to each other, maybe she could get him to see that this whole "love" thing was probably just a reaction to the changes going on in their lives. If she thought about it like that, she didn't really blame him; it was hard getting up each morning, knowing that their jobs were gone, their partnership effectively ended, and now, even their friendship was on rocky ground. Maybe all they really needed to do was talk and assure each other that they'd never be out of each other's lives completely; she recognized that a friendship like theirs didn't come around all that often. At least, it didn't for her; she could count on one hand the people that could stand her for more than a few hours at a time.

And – her next thought came quickly – if she didn't show up tonight, she stood to lose Clark completely. He'd already said in the park that if she didn't come, he wouldn't bother her again. Lois knew him well enough to know he was a man of his word. He would take her absence tonight as proof positive that she didn't want anything to do with him, and he'd be out of her life and out of Metropolis as quickly as he'd come.

And she couldn't let that happen. The thought of never seeing Clark set her chest aching and a strange hollowness in pit of her stomach. She had to figure out a way to get him to see reason and for them to stay friends.

That thought propelled her to throw the lounge pants in her hand back into the drawer. They'd never do if she was going to go to Clark's apartment tonight. She needed something nicer. Not too nice, but nice. Would a dress be too fancy? He hadn't said what they'd be doing; he'd just said come to his apartment. But work clothes wouldn't do, either... he'd seen her in enough suit jackets and skirts to save his life. Maybe those jeans Lucy had convinced her to get when they were out shopping that one time? The cream-colored denim showed her figure well, especially her legs. They looked good on her, she knew, even if they weren't her usual style. And they went perfectly with her burgundy blouse. Besides, it wasn't a crime to want to look nice for a date-that-really-wasn't at your best friend's apartment, right?

Her thoughts were interrupted by the shrill ringing of her telephone. She glanced over at it; she really didn't feel like talking to anyone right now... but what if it was Clark?

She made her way over to the nightstand and plucked the phone from its cradle before it could ring again. "Hello?"

"Lois, darling. How are you?"

Lex.

It hadn't occurred to her that the caller could be him. As if she didn't have enough to deal with right now. She plopped down on the bed next to her.

"Oh, Lex. Hi."

"I'm so glad you're home. When I called LNN and asked to speak with you, and they said you'd stepped out and hadn't returned. I was worried about you. Is everything all right?" His smooth, polished tone held just the right amount of concern, and for a moment, Lois felt guilty about cutting out of her orientation early.

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean to worry you. I just ... had some things to take care of this afternoon," she hedged, not wanting to get into specifics. "I'm fine."

"Wonderful. I was hoping that we could have dinner tonight. I'm eager to hear about your first day and what you thought of the network. I trust you fit in perfectly."

Well, she wouldn't go that far, Lois thought; she'd been interested, sure, but she'd also felt a more than a little overwhelmed and out-of-place. At first, she'd been happy to be around the news again, but after a while, she had started to ache for the newsroom at the Planet. That was where she belonged. LNN had felt like trying on an expensive dress; beautiful and sophisticated, but not quite her style, and definitely not something she wanted to wear every day.

"It was very nice," she hedged, but thankfully, she didn't have to elaborate any more before he responded.

"Excellent. I'll look forward to hearing more about it tonight. Would you prefer I send a car at 6 or 6:30?"

"Oh..." She took a breath, trying to find the words to tell him she didn't want to come to dinner. There was no way that she could tell him what she was really planning to do this evening. Even if they weren't technically engaged, she had a feeling Lex wouldn't understand her having dinner at another man's apartment, even if the man in question was her best friend.

"Actually, Lex, I'm feeling pretty tired after today... you know, with it being my first day and all. I think I'm just going to relax tonight." She didn't mention exactly where that was happening. "Thank you for the invitation, though."

There was a surprised pause on the other end of the line. Lex Luthor obviously wasn't used to hearing no. It only took him a moment, though, before he recovered. "Of course," he answered smoothly. "I shouldn't have been so presumptuous. I was anxious to see you. Please accept my apologies."

"Oh, no, it's okay. Another night?"

"Of course. How is tomorrow? It's supposed to be a beautiful evening; we'll dine at sunset on the balcony."

"That sounds good."

"Wonderful. I have a meeting until seven, so shall we say seven-thirty? I'll send a car."

"No, that's okay. I can drive over," Lois said quickly. She hated being anywhere without a means to leave when she wanted to – not that she would ever say that to Lex. She grabbed the pen and small pad of paper that always sat next to her bedside and jotted down "Lex tm night @ 7:30" in hasty scribble. "I... uh... I'll see you later. Good night."

"Good night, my dear. Enjoy your evening."

She replaced the receiver, eager to get off the phone. There was a tiny part of her that felt relieved at not having to see Lex tonight; she didn't feel like putting on a show and playing up how much she loved the day touring LNN and meeting her new colleagues. Colleagues that didn't include Perry or Jimmy or Jack... or Clark.

But she wasn't going to think about that right now. She was going to go over to Clark's and, hopefully, gain some clarity on the whole situation. Spending time with Clark had a way of centering her and putting things in perspective, both of which she desperately needed right now.

Lois glanced over at the digital clock on her nightstand. She had a little over two hours before she was supposed to be at his apartment. Good. Lois stood up and made her way to the bathroom, grabbing a towel from the linen closet as she passed by. She had time to shower, dry her hair, re-do her makeup, and make a final decision on the perfect outfit.

Most importantly, though, she had time to think about what she was going to say to him once she got there. There were a thousand reasons why partners at work shouldn't be partners in a romantic relationship. She'd just have to spell them out for Clark and cross her fingers that he was listening. She didn't want to lose his friendship. Not now, not when she had so many other things happening in her life.

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Lois pulled onto Clinton Street a few minutes past seven. She took a deep, fortifying breath as Clark's apartment came into view.

This was it. Thankfully, she found a parking space right in front of the building, and she parked the Jeep quickly, her motions on autopilot as her attention centered on what she was going to say to Clark.

Lois took the few steps up to Clark's door slowly, clutching the railing. Her mind was still in turmoil; turned out, two hours of "getting ready" time hadn't been enough time at all to plan what she was going to say. She'd gone through a million rehearsals in her mind, but in the end, nothing had sounded exactly right:

*Dating would mess with our partnership.* Of course, as of right now, they didn't have jobs at the Daily Planet anymore, so technically, they weren't partners at work. And he'd told her today that he wouldn't work at LNN... so they couldn't exactly mess up a partnership that wasn't there.

*You're just not my type.* Well. What exactly wasn't her type? Tall, dark, and handsome with an admittedly great body? A guy with whom she could talk and laugh about all kinds of subjects? A guy she enjoyed being around, even when he was driving her crazy editing her copy? Someone who complimented her, cared about her well-being, and valued her as a person? That wasn't her type?

*You would get tired of me, annoyed with me, frustrated with me, and you'd leave me.* That seemed a lot closer to the truth of why they shouldn't be together romantically... but when she'd thought about it, there had been so many times in the last year when she hadn't exactly been the nicest person to him. In fact, they'd argued, fought, been annoyed, been frustrated with each other... and every time, they'd found their way back. They'd found common ground, apologized, made up, forgiven each other, and moved on. If partnership was like marriage, as she'd once said herself, they actually didn't have a bad one.

In fact, they had a pretty great one.

Truly, instead of finding lots of convincing reasons why he shouldn't love her and why they could never be together like that... she'd only confused herself more. Because the more she thought about it, the more it seemed like Clark Kent might just be...

Good for her? What she needed?

In the end, she'd decided not to think about it anymore. She'd pulled on those cream-colored jeans she'd thought about earlier and paired it with a soft burgundy top that always made her feel just a little sexy when she wore it. The sleeves were three-quarter length, the material soft and flowy. She knew the color looked good on her, and the neckline was suggestive without being revealing. A pair of diamond studs and a long, thin gold chain completed the ensemble, and, after a spray of her best perfume, she was ready to go.

Physically, anyway. Her head was still a mess, but she'd thought that she'd still have the ten-minute ride over to Clark's to figure the whole thing out.

Until that was over, too... and she still wasn't sure what she was going to say.

Which brought her to where she was right now, staring awkwardly at his front door, her hands shaking slightly as she raised one to knock. The soft sound echoed against the wood, and she stood there for a moment, frozen, afraid that he hadn't heard her. It had been hard enough to do the first time; she didn't want to have to knock again.

Just then, she heard footsteps against the landing. He opened the door swiftly, as if he was afraid she'd already disappeared because he had taken too long. Her name was a quick exhalation from his lips. "Lois."

"Hi," she whispered.

"Hi," he returned softly, and those two words didn't do justice to the myriad of emotions she saw cross his face: surprise, excitement, nervousness, joy. Momentarily stunned by his expression, she fell silent. It was humbling, to say the least. She

could tell right away how much this evening meant to him.

*Say something else, her mind begged her. Anything else. Tell him you're not here for the reason he thinks. Tell him you really can't stay. Say something!*

But nothing came out of her mouth.

He filled the silence. "Come on in. You look great," he told her as he stepped aside to let her in. The look in his eyes took her breath away more than his words.

"Thanks. So do you," she returned as she took in his appearance. He was dressed more casually as well, in dark-colored chinos and a slate blue oxford shirt, the sleeves rolled to just below his elbows. She swallowed hard, eyes searching for something else to concentrate on besides him. He couldn't know it, of course, but she secretly loved those times at work when he'd roll up his sleeves; it was usually when they ended up staying late, holed up in the conference room, pouring over their latest investigation. Those rolled sleeves gave off this relaxed, yet confident, and – if she were honest – completely sexy vibe that she'd tried to distance herself from since the moment she met him. It hadn't worked, however; ever since Clark had started working at the Planet, she'd spared those strong forearms more glances than she would care to admit to anyone.

She tried looking beyond him, into the apartment, searching for something else to say, to comment on. But when she saw the space and what he'd done, the words died on her lips, and all she could manage was, "Oh, Clark..."

He lifted the light spring jacket from where it was draped over her left arm and hung it up on the coat rack. Then he took her purse and set it on the bench next to the coat rack. That task completed, he reached out and gently took her hands.

"I am so glad that you came."

"Clark..." she tried again, but her words were swept away when he pulled her to him. The embrace was warm and solid, but nothing like the few hugs they'd shared as partners. This one was different; less guarded, more intimate. Lois could feel that intangible connection she shared with him make itself known, and it pulled at her heart.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I just want to memorize what it's like to hold you."

Her breath caught at his words, and she found she didn't have any way to respond back to him, except to tighten her arms around him. All the things she'd thought about saying to him, all the speeches she'd prepared at her apartment... all of it went away, and all she could do was hug him back. It felt good, to be held by him. They'd been at such odds for the past few months, and her life in general had been in turmoil for the last several weeks... but here, now, in his embrace, she felt some of that dissipate.

She sighed against him, turning her head so that she could rest her cheek against the soft fabric of his dress shirt. "Clark, aren't you tired? I'm tired of arguing, I'm tired of wondering about Lex, I'm tired about worrying whether I'm going to make the right decision. I haven't slept a full night in weeks. I'm just tired," she finished softly.

Silence slid through the apartment following her words, but she didn't dare move back to look at him. She could feel him still, probably wondering what she was going to do next. Her emotions had been on such a roller coaster lately. She couldn't blame him for thinking she was going off the deep end.

"I'm tired, too," he whispered near her ear.

This time, Lois did pull back so that she could look at him. At her scrutiny, he dropped his arms, shuffling back awkwardly, assuming the moment was over. He reached over and shut the door with a soft click.

Lois watched him as he turned back to her. Her eyes traveled over his face, searching for the warmth that always radiated from him.

But it wasn't there anymore. She hadn't noticed it before, but

there were lines across his face as well, creasing his normally flawless skin. His eyes themselves were troubled, almost as if he was on the verge of conceding defeat to some more powerful opponent. He looked battered and bewildered – a reflection, Lois suddenly realized, of her own weary state of mind. This whole situation with Lex and The Planet, plus the heaviness of this afternoon, had exhausted them both.

"Clark?" she asked in a small voice.

He met her gaze, silently giving her the signal to continue.

"Can we just forget about all of this, just for a minute? Can we just go back to being us? What if we just... I mean, what if I asked you to..." she trailed off, unable to voice what she so desperately needed from him at that moment. She was just so afraid that he'd reject her or push her away. And he'd have every right to, given what she'd done to him today.

But that wasn't who Clark was. All he did was nod and stretch his arms out for her again. She went back into them more than willingly. Her soft sigh flooded against his shoulder, her tears held just barely in check behind her eyelids. He'd known what she was too proud to ask for, fulfilled a need that she was too terrified to voice.

And deep in her heart, she knew that he would always know, because he was the one person on this earth who knew her better even than she knew herself.

His hand stroked the back of her head with slow, soothing motions, and she let herself begin to relax for the first time in a long time. She could feel him breathing, his body moving against hers. In response, she matched her own breathing to the rise and fall of his chest and shifted closer, melding them together, as if trying to draw strength from their bond, as fragile as it may be right now.

She needed this; she needed him.

It wasn't a shocking revelation – perhaps she'd always known it on a purely subconscious level, but it was a wake-up call to acknowledge, even in her own mind, the fact that she needed Clark. He was incredibly special to her.

More so than even her would-be fiancé? Could she even imagine herself sliding into Lex's arms like this when she needed comfort or support?

The truth was, she couldn't. This feeling seemed reserved for Clark alone.

But right now, she didn't want to think about any of that. She'd said she wanted to forget, if only for a moment, and that was what she was going to do. She inhaled deeply, concentrating all her energy on the man who held her, trying to feel the beat of his heart against her chest.

At least here, in the harbor of Clark's arms, she felt safe.

After a long moment, she realized that too much time had passed; he'd held her far longer than allowed by the confines of friendship. She shifted, heat stealing across her cheeks as she realized that neither one of them seemed very eager to let the other go. He was in love with her... but what was her excuse?

She forced herself to move away, ducking her head down while one arm reached up to tuck a stray hair behind her ear. What was she doing? She wasn't supposed to be falling apart and falling into his arms at the first opportunity.

"So..." Desperately, she searched for something to say. "Your apartment looks really nice." She turned and started down the stairs as she took a good look around at the decorations that had taken her breath away when she'd first arrived.

"Thanks."

After she didn't offer any more comment, he cleared his throat and followed her down into the living room. "I... uh, I made dinner, if you're hungry. At first, I thought maybe I should take you out, but then I wasn't sure if you were even coming, so making dinner reservations only to have to cancel seemed silly..." he trailed off, then seemed to gather himself and continue.

“Anyway, I thought maybe it would just be nice to have a quiet night in, just us, since everything has been so crazy lately.”

She could tell he was a little nervous, which somehow calmed her own fears. He was right; here and now, it was just them. “It’s beautiful, Clark. You did so much... you didn’t have to.”

“Well, I wanted it to be nice. If this was the only time we’d... anyway, I wanted to make it special.”

And he had. He’d strung white lights around the perimeter of the living room and dimmed the lights, making the atmosphere seem soft and inviting. She noticed candles on his end tables and coffee table, plus a few more on the kitchen table. Only the kitchen lights shone brightly, presumably because he’d been cooking. Soft jazz music lit the background, adding to the cozy effect of the decor.

Lois couldn’t help but feel flattered that he’d gone to so much trouble for her. Now didn’t seem to be the time to start in on a conversation that was going to be difficult anyway. Maybe after they ate, she’d feel ready to tackle that “love” thing he’d said this afternoon. Plus, she’d eaten an early lunch and nothing since, so she was hungry. “Well, everything looks great,” she told him honestly. “And smells great, too... what’d you make?”

An easy smile lit up his face as it seemed to sink in for him that she wasn’t bolting from the room. “Spinach and mushroom risotto for the main course, but I also threw together a quick butter lettuce and herb salad on the side. Actually, I was just finishing up the lemon vinaigrette dressing when I heard you knock.” He started past her toward the kitchen, calling over his shoulder, “Why don’t you come have a seat? It’ll just be a minute.”

She followed him, sliding gratefully into the chair he pulled out for her. It was a little overwhelming, seeing what he’d done for her, even knowing that it might all be for naught; she could have chosen not to come tonight. He’d done it on blind faith that she’d show up at his door. No man had ever shown such belief in her. No man had ever done anything this romantic for her, either.

Sure, Lex had chartered his private jet to fly her to Milan for dinner, but what effort had that taken him? Maybe a phone call to his personal assistant, telling her exactly what he wanted? Mrs. Cox had probably then taken care of the plane, the pilot, the champagne, the reservations, hiring the musicians, all of it. Lex hadn’t had to lift a finger to take her halfway around the world. Idly, she wondered if Lex had even picked out the garish engagement ring he’d presented her with that night.

But Clark... she watched him from the corner of her eye over at the counter, measuring and mixing the ingredients for the salad dressing. Every part of tonight had been chosen by him, specifically for her. The intimate atmosphere that surrounded her, the music, the meal... had all been created by his hands. Clark couldn’t call on his personal chef for dinner; he’d spent the afternoon preparing dinner for a woman who’d hurt him mere hours before. That spoke volumes about his feelings for her; if she’d had any doubt before, it was gone now. Clark had been telling the truth out there on that park bench this afternoon: he loved her.

For in all of Lex’s extravagant gifts and dates, there had been one thing missing from their relationship that Clark Kent had already given her in spades: his effort. His time.

Himself.

Her first dates with Lex had been about impression. He’d flaunted his wealth, his status, his far-reaching hand, all to impress her. There’d been parties and operas and charity dinners; he’d wine and dined her. But rarely had there been an opportunity to just sit down and talk, to get to know each other, to find out more about the man underneath the expensive suit he wore. Even when Lex had proposed and she’d questioned him about how little she really knew him... even then, he’d answered her with a smooth line about how all she needed to know about him was that he loved her.

But that wasn’t true; she did need to know more... much more. And a date like this was where she would find out those things. *This* was the kind of date she’d needed all along: a place to start to feel safe and comfortable with a person, a place where she could open up and share parts of herself that she kept hidden and ask about those parts of him that he kept from the world, too. And it was Clark, not Lex, that knew that. It was a startling revelation for her: while Lex had showered her with presents, all Clark Kent had ever wanted *was* her presence.

She picked up the water glass on the table in front of her, already filled, in much the same way Clark had filled her life over the last year: quietly, unobtrusively, already sitting there and just waiting for her to notice.

Should she have noticed?

Was that love? And even if it was, would it last?

She sipped slowly as she watched him.

She wasn’t sure.

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Clark could feel her eyes on him as he poured a little of the lemon vinaigrette into the salad bowl and used tongs to toss it lightly. He wished he could tell what she was thinking; over the last year, he’d had the opportunity to witness what he thought were all her looks and moods, and usually, he could tell just by her body language how she was feeling. But tonight, he wasn’t sure.

He was grateful for the light jazz music easing out of the speakers in his living room, not simply because it added to the atmosphere, but because conversation had come to near halt in the last few minutes. He pretended to be busy with the salad, but really, he just needed something to concentrate on. She’d been quiet, seemingly lost in thought, since he’d sat her down at the table.

He wasn’t sure what to say, either. He’d promised himself that if she did come, he’d keep it as light as he could, even though he’d be dying inside that this would be the one and only time he’d get to treat her like a date. However, that notion had disappeared in their emotional embrace at the top of the stairs as soon as she’d entered his apartment. This was not going to be a light and easy evening at all.

He’d been happy to see her at his door; he’d hoped that she would come, but with Lois, nothing was a sure thing. But what had surprised him most was that she’d stayed so willingly in his arms. In fact, she’d been the one to initiate their second embrace; when he’d seen that vulnerable look in her eyes, he’d known exactly what to do. That instinct to comfort her urged him to reach for her again, and she’d come without hesitation, as if they’d done it a thousand times before.

Theirs was certainly a strange dynamic; first, she’d shot him down in the park this afternoon, but only a scant hour or two later, she’d clung to him for comfort and support. He’d hugged her because he’d known – he’d always known – that the natural place for her was in his arms, even if tonight might be the last few times he’d get to hold her. Sure, he might hold her again as Superman sometime when she needed help, but he’d never have the chance again as Clark. So when she’d walked through his door, he’d immediately pulled her to him, trying to imprint the way she felt against his body into his memory... but then instead of pulling away, she’d surprised him by burrowing into an even closer hug just moments later.

What had happened in the few hours since he’d seen her last was a mystery, but he didn’t want to come right out and ask; he didn’t want to spook her now that she was here, in his apartment. For now, he was on his date with Lois Lane, and he was determined to make the most of having her to himself all evening. There were no stories for them to focus on, no Jimmy barging through the conference room doors, no ringing telephones to command her attention, no Superman (so to speak) to catch her eye. In fact, he’d decided earlier this afternoon that Metropolis

was going to have to get by on its own tonight, life-threatening disasters notwithstanding. If it could be handled by local law enforcement, it would be; his alter ego was taking the night off so that Clark could focus his attention on her.

Tonight was important to him. Tonight, the outside world could wait.

Turning around, he carried the salad bowl to the table and set it down. “Here we go. Dinner is served.”

“Th-thank you.” She cleared her throat slightly as he began to place the tossed salad on both their plates. He went back to the stove and grabbed the risotto – remembering to grab a pot holder for appearance’s sake – and then served that onto her plate as well.

The last thing he went to get was the crusty bread he’d been warming through in the oven. “Sorry,” he apologized as he sat down in the seat next to her. “I had to get the bread from the store; there wasn’t time to make my own.”

She looked over at him in surprise. “You make your own bread?”

“A lot of the time,” Clark said proudly, enjoying the impressed look on her face. “Mom made sure I knew it all – how to sew, can, and cook. I was never very good at the sewing – I can put a button back on if it comes off, but that’s about it – but I always enjoyed the cooking. It came in handy, too, when I went out on my own.” As he spoke, he took the seat across from her. “I bet I can teach you to make bread sometime.”

At that, she laughed. “I don’t think you realize how amusing that thought is. You’d better be one heck of a teacher.”

He flashed her a grin. “I’m pretty patient.”

He expected a retort in return, but all he got was a quiet, “Actually, you are.” Clark glanced at her and noticed that she had that look back in her eyes: the one where she was watching him almost as if she were seeing him for the first time. “You know, Clark, you surprise me sometimes.”

“Do I? Well, maybe there are a few things you don’t know about me, Lois.” He raised his glass toward her. “So... a toast? To discovering some new things tonight?” He knew it was risky, reminding her about the new thing he’d shared with her today, but contrary to what he’d told her in the park, he didn’t want tonight to be about a good-bye. Now that she was here, he realized that he’d invited her, truly, as last-ditch attempt to get her to see just how well they fit together, in all the ways that mattered.

She raised her own glass and tilted it toward his. “To discovering new things,” she echoed slowly, as if she were thinking about the meaning of the words. The soft clink reverberated through the kitchen as they brought their glasses to their lips.

It felt like an agreement. Clark sat back and relaxed a little, watching her take the first bite of her risotto. Her eyes closed briefly as she savored it. “Oh, Clark, this is *so* good. You really are a great cook.”

“Thank you.” He grinned, raising his own fork to his mouth. “I’m glad you like it.”

“I love it. I could never cook like this. You know how useless I am in the kitchen.”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit, Lois. You’re great with food. We both know you call for take-out so much better than I do.” He winked at her.

She laughed, and he could see the muscles in her shoulders visibly relax as she reached out and swatted him lightly across his shoulder. This was common ground for them; this teasing and laughing and enjoying one another’s company. This, they could do.

She surprised him, though, when her hand dropped from his shoulder and landed gently on his arm. “Thank you,” she whispered, catching his gaze and holding it. He was opening his mouth to respond to her when she took his breath away again by letting her hand trace down over his forearm to cover his hand. It

was the most intimate touch she’d ever given him.

He wasn’t sure what she was thanking him for; for inviting her, for the meal, or for the way he’d teased her to make her feel more comfortable. It seemed like it could be any of those, but from the way her fingers traced softly over his knuckles, he sensed it was something greater even than all those things.

His response came so naturally that it would only be later that he would wonder where he’d gotten the courage: he turned his hand over so that their palms connected. Engulfed in his larger one, her hand seemed smaller than he’d thought it would; but then, he’d never held her hand this way. He never would have dared before, for this kind of touch spoke of feelings beyond partnership, beyond friendship.

“Anytime,” he whispered in return, squeezing her hand just the slightest bit. He watched, fascinated, as her gaze dropped to their joined hands, as if she was just realizing the way they looked: man and woman, holding hands over a romantic, candlelit dinner. He noticed her cheeks darken with the slightest bit of color, but his heart soared when she didn’t pull away. Feeling bold, he gave her one final caress with a sweep of his thumb across her fingers. His super hearing didn’t miss the catch in her breath before he let go.

He smiled at her, and she returned it with a soft smile of her own. Clark knew he was going to have trouble eating any of his dinner tonight; he found himself just wanting to watch her in the candlelight, loving the way it played over her cheeks and reflected in her eyes. She was beautiful tonight, and even though he knew it probably wasn’t true, he wished that she’d done it for him.

He secretly loved it when he got to see her like this – more casual and laid back, letting him see a side of her that she rarely showed to the outside world. It made him feel closer to her. Was she feeling closer to him, too? From the way she’d hugged him when she arrived and the way she’d taken his hand just now, it seemed that she was... dare he hope that maybe her feelings for him weren’t as clear as they’d seemed in the park this afternoon?

His heart grabbed at the possibility and held tight, just like she’d held his hand a moment ago. If that was even the slightest bit true, he knew he couldn’t let her leave without talking to her again. But for right now, she was looking more at ease than he’d seen her in days, so he just smiled again and said, “If you like this though, you should see what I made for dessert. I promise it’s better than a Double Fudge Crunch Bar.”

She looked skeptical but intrigued. “I’ll be the judge of that. What is it?”

“You’ll see later.” At her indignant “Clark!” he just laughed and took a bite of his own dinner. Cocooned in warmth of this time and this place, he wished fervently that the evening would never come to an end.

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The rest of dinner passed easily, and they chatted about everything but Lex, the Planet, and LNN. It was like those events weren’t even part of their lives. She asked about his parents, the farm, his childhood. He told her stories of herding cattle, raking hay on hot summer days, grabbing dinner with his friends at the town pizza joint. “I was a legend,” he boasted good-naturedly. “To this day, I’m still the only person to eat a Messina’s pepper pizza without drinking anything. That thing had every pepper on the planet on top of it – sweet, hot, you name it, it was on there. I downed two of them the night we won States.”

She burst out laughing. “That sounds disgusting! I’m sure you never gained an ounce from it, either.” At his sheepish grin, she just rolled her eyes. “Some people have all the luck.”

“I was seventeen, Lois. And a football player!” came the ready defense. She grinned at him, enjoying the small little glimpse into Clark Kent’s teenage years.

In turn, he asked her about her years at Metropolis High, seemingly just as eager to learn about her as she was about him. She talked about running around with Julie and working on the



“The Lion’s Den,” their school newspaper, barely making deadlines and paste-up sessions that lasted well into the night as they put the paper to bed. “It was high school in the mid-eighties, so none of that fancy stuff yet.” She’d laughed. “A few Commodore computers, grid paper, light tables, a bunch of glue, and in the end, you just hoped the articles stayed straight when it went to print.” He’d grinned knowingly, some of their memories shared, even though they’d worked on high school papers several hundreds of miles apart.

They were clearing the table when the conversation finally walked the inevitable path back to their recent time at the Planet.

“You know, the first time I walked into that building, it felt like home,” Lois said as she handed him her plate. “I was 22 and looking for my first reporting job. At the time, they weren’t hiring, even though I’d done part of my internship there. But I went back every day until Perry finally agreed to interview me. I think he did it because I was driving him nuts just hanging around out front.”

Clark laughed, rinsing the plate before setting it down in the sink. “I think Perry was just humoring me when he met me for the first time. I’m pretty sure he didn’t think I had it in me to be a big city reporter.”

Lois smiled, too. “Well, I hate to admit it now, but I agreed with him; I thought you were a bit of a hack when he hired you. That first time we worked together? I didn’t want a partner, let alone one from Smallville, Kansas.” She bumped his hip with hers as she watched him reach for the dish detergent. “Here, let me wash. You cooked.”

“Yeah, you made that clear when you hit me in the arm and started laying down the rules within the first 15 seconds,” Clark returned, pulling the bottle of detergent away from her questing hand.

She bit her lip and grinned at him, unrepentant as always. “I had to let you know who was in charge.” They played tug-of-war with the bottle for a moment before Lois finally gave him a look that clearly said she wasn’t backing down. “Speaking of which... let go, Clark. You can dry if you want, but I’m washing the dishes.”

Knowing when to give in, Clark pulled back both his hands, holding them up in mock surrender. “Okay, okay. You know, I was going to mention the first time I won an argument with you. But...” He paused dramatically. “...then I remembered that never happened.” There was a glimmer in his eye and a smile on his lips as he opened a drawer to the left of the sink.

Momentarily struck by that gorgeous smile, she blinked, but her recovery was quick. She stuck her tongue out at him and reached down into the drawer first, grabbing a towel off the top of the pile. She threw the dish towel at him, and he reached a hand up to block it, catching it just before it hit him right in the face. “Just dry, Kent.”

They worked in companionable silence for a bit, their thoughts whirling in time with the swish of the water as Lois washed their plates and bowls, along with the pots and pans Clark had used as he’d cooked their meal. “You know, I still can’t believe it’s really gone,” Lois finally said.

“What?” Clark asked, still lost in his own thoughts.

“The Planet.” Lois sighed. “I keep waking up every morning, thinking it was all some sort of nightmare, and everything’s going to go back to normal. And then I remember that everything’s changed.”

“I know. I hate it, too.”

“I mean, we didn’t even get to be partners for a full year,” she said, her tone reflective. “I keep thinking of all the investigations we didn’t get to do, all of the stories we didn’t get to write... all the things we never got to do together.”

“Almost a year wasn’t long enough,” Clark agreed. “I feel like we had so many things left to accomplish.” He paused. “And actually, I was looking forward to a lot of ‘firsts’ with you, Lois.”

He held her gaze as he finished his thought. “Our first Kerth, our first Pulitzer...” his voice softened. “Our first date... our first kiss.”

There was a heavy pause as she blushed and looked away. The light atmosphere they’d created during dinner shifted into something bigger and started filling the space between them. He must have noticed, because he immediately backtracked. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. I know we’re not exactly on the same page with our feelings. It just slipped out... maybe my mind figures there’s nothing to lose anymore.” He chuckled, but it sounded hollow and more self-conscious than anything else. “I mean, I know you never thought about kissing me, but let’s just say kissing you crossed my mind a time or two, and leave it at that, shall we?” He grinned at her, obviously trying to play down his words.

She tried to look busy, drying her hands off and rearranging the pots on the drying rack. “It’s fine... we’ve kissed before, anyway. Trask’s plane and then in the honeymoon suite at the Lexor, remember?” Her response was matter-of-fact, intended to make him think she was still comfortable, still in control... that her heart hadn’t immediately skipped a beat at his confession that he’d spent time thinking about kissing her.

He shook his head. “No, I mean a real kiss, not just an undercover one.” The tone of his voice changed, becoming just the slightest bit wistful. “Not that those kisses weren’t great, but... I guess I always wondered what it would be like if it was for real. I’ll admit I spent more time thinking about it than I probably should have.” Another rueful grin followed; she caught this one because she’d finally dared to glance back at him.

“So... what’d you think it’d be like?”

Flushing slightly, her gaze darted away from him again, surprised at herself that she’d even asked the very personal question. It had passed her lips before she could stop it. Darn the reporter in her... couldn’t she leave anything alone, especially something like this? She needed to change the subject, not ask for more details!

He raised an eyebrow at her question, but didn’t comment. “Most of the time it came at the end of our first date.” His gaze shifted beyond her, a faraway look in his eye, and she knew he was seeing something she hadn’t ever thought to look for: their future. “One day – I was planning on sometime soon – I was finally going to gather up the courage to ask you out. I knew you’d probably go back and forth about your answer for a little while, trying to decide if it was worth risking our partnership, but... I was hoping you’d decide that the possibility of something great outweighed the chance of losing what we already had. I was hoping you’d say yes, and I could take you out – maybe a nice restaurant, maybe a concert... I don’t know.” Clark shrugged his shoulders before continuing.

“In my mind, it wouldn’t matter what we did, because we’d be together. I had this vision of walking you home – all the way to your door, even though you’d probably tell me you didn’t need me to – and just before you stepped inside your apartment, I’d reach for you, like this.” He transferred the towel to his other hand and stretched out his right hand, just grazing her cheek. She stilled at his touch, every muscle suddenly frozen at the contact of his skin. “I’d look into your eyes, trying to convey everything I was feeling that I couldn’t put into words. And then, I’d lean down because I couldn’t wait one more second to feel your lips against mine. Our first real kiss,” he whispered, and his eyes flicked down to her mouth.

Lois stared at him, drawn into the imaginary world his words had painted. She pressed her lips together, feeling their sudden dryness. It felt like all the moisture in her mouth had drained down through her arms to coat her palms. She slid her tongue quickly across the seam of her lips, swallowing hard as she watched his eyes follow the movement. Had he left the stove on? It was

suddenly hotter in the kitchen.

All this talk about kissing was bringing up some memories she'd thought she'd buried months ago. The last time he'd kissed her had been in the honeymoon suite, and it came back in a rush now. She remembered the hard sensation of his body pressing her into the mattress, contrasting with the softness of his lips. The gentle touch of his hand against her cheek – like it was now – even while his mouth devoured hers. That timeless moment when her own lips had begun to tentatively respond and explore against his. The fact that it had all been over far too quickly.

And if that one hasty kiss had left such an impression on her, what would a real kiss from him be like? The impulse to find out hit her with such force she grabbed at the edge of the counter to keep her balance.

“Go ahead,” she blurted out.

He dropped his hand, his confusion clear in the furrow across his forehead as he tried to process her words. “What?”

“That kiss,” she whispered, unable to help herself. Her voice had suddenly gone hoarse. She tried to clear her throat. “The one you imagined... go ahead. Try it.”

He was the one who looked flustered now. “Lois, you don't have to... I mean, I didn't ask you here... for that. I wanted to spend time with you, sure, and I can't deny any more how I feel about you... but believe me, you don't have to –”

“It's okay. I – I want you to. Try it.” Even as she spoke, her mind and body warred with each other. She really did want to kiss him again. But kissing your best friend when you weren't exactly sure how you felt about him? That was a recipe for disaster.

Lois turned her head, closing her eyes briefly as she gathered herself. How had she gotten here? This had not been in the plan. Hadn't she told herself that she wasn't going to spend much time here tonight? That she was going to talk him out of thinking he was in love with her? When had it turned into this?

She was going crazy. That had to be it. The insanity of the last two months had finally broken her. She was the one who'd told him just this afternoon that she didn't have romantic feelings for him... and yet here she was now, only hours removed from that conversation, standing in his kitchen and asking him to kiss her?

She had to get back on track. She squared her shoulders and tilted her chin towards him. “I mean, it's just a kiss, Clark. Maybe it'll be awkward and weird, and all it'll do is prove that we're not attracted to each other and that we're better off just being friends.”

That seemed to shake him out of his stupor, and he laughed out loud at her statement. “*That* is the craziest thing I've ever heard you say, and believe me, I've heard you say some crazy things.” He paused, probably trying to decide if she'd lost her mind. She stared back defiantly before he finally put down the dish towel on the counter and reached for her with both hands. Her heart jumped when he grasped her elbows, gently pressing his thumbs into the tender skin at the inside crease. “But okay, Lois Lane... let's find out if we're just good friends,” he said, the gentle amusement in his voice evident as he pulled her towards him.

Then he dipped his head down, looking into her eyes all the while. Everything seemed to be moving in slow-motion; she tilted her face upwards, towards his, and she realized with a start that the anticipation of his lips on hers was making her knees strangely weak. She reached out a hand to steady herself, but quickly realized her mistake when she bumped into the hardness of his stomach muscles at his midsection. Her fingers fumbled, looking for a place to hold on, finally grazing a belt loop around his waist and securing there. Her eyelids fluttered closed because he was suddenly so near to her that everything had become fuzzy.

The first brush of their lips was soft, almost cautious. There was a certain reverence to it, the ceremonious crossing of a line; this was for real. Clark Kent was kissing Lois Lane. The thought shook her, but not in the way she imagined it would. Instead of

panic, there was peace; instead of apprehension, there was an eager awareness. His lips clung to hers for the briefest of moments, and she caught her breath at the sudden slide of feeling in her chest and stomach.

But she didn't even have time to savor the gentle touch before he was pulling back.

*It wasn't enough.* That was her only thought, and it was that thought that propelled her forward, sealing their lips more firmly this time, as if to catch the feeling again. She didn't have to wait for his response; gone was the hesitancy of a moment ago, and in its place, she felt his enthusiasm. His hands left her arms and came up against the sides of her face, cradling her gently, in contrast to the increasingly firmer pull of his mouth on hers.

The ground shifted beneath her feet, and her mind went blank at the sheer pleasure of his kiss. She held on to his waist, anchoring herself to him. His lips moved over hers with a rhythmic confidence, and she couldn't help but respond. This was like the first times he'd kissed her; that same powerful sweep and sense of rightness about it, that same familiarity that he really shouldn't have – but he did. She'd felt this kiss not twice before, but a thousand times in her mind and in her dreams. He was kissing her like he'd always had the right to kiss her.

And always would.

She felt herself let go, not thinking about anything but the way she felt in his embrace. That sense of security was back, the same way it had been when he'd held her up on the landing, but now it was magnified a thousand-fold. She felt safe and loved... and very, very warm... and all she wanted to do was get closer.

He was the one to pull away first, dragging his lips across hers, though he didn't go far; it was like he couldn't seem to find the strength to separate them completely. “Lois?” He murmured her name softly, searchingly. He was still so near she could feel the whisper of the word against her lips.

Her eyes were still closed, her tongue reaching out to trace her well-kissed bottom lip. God, he was so close. He'd said her name, hadn't he? What was he asking? Why wasn't he still kissing her? If she just leaned forward a little more...

“That didn't feel like just friends to me.” The words were husky and seemed pulled from him, but it was enough to snap her back to reality.

Friends. Right. Their “first real kiss” experiment. And... she'd just melted in his arms. Oh, no. This wasn't good. Her cheeks felt hot, and now she could feel the rise of panic in her chest. She opened her eyes and jerked her head back, trying to look anywhere but his at his face. “I –” She cleared her throat. Why couldn't she seem to get her voice to work? It couldn't be because he'd just settled his hands on her hips, could it? She could feel the warmth of his touch even through her shirt and the denim of her jeans. ‘Get it together, Lois!’ she thought viciously. If she wasn't careful, he was going to know. “That was – I mean, that could be just – friends,” she stammered.

“What?” He sounded shocked, and rightly so. Lois took a deep breath, fixing her eyes on his throat. She put her hands on the upper part of his arms, intending to move him back a little. She faltered as soon as she touched him, though, struck by the play of his muscles as they flexed to keep her within the circle of his arms. He was so strong. And well-built, too. She loved his arms. Fascinated, she rubbed her palms gently across his biceps, shifting her body against his as she did so. Being this close to him felt... amazing. She heard his quick intake of breath in the silence, and in that moment, she realized that he was still waiting for her response.

Hurriedly, she rushed again to cover her reaction. “I mean, friends can be a little bit attracted to each other...right? It doesn't mean that they do anything about it. In fact, it probably makes sense with us, because we work together. And we're friends. Close friends. I mean, we get along well, we're around each other all of

the time, and we spend a lot of time together outside of the office..." She knew that she was babbling, but the longer she talked, the longer she could put off dealing with what had really transpired between them. "And besides, you're an attractive guy, and I'm an attractive woman, at least some of the time, not counting super early in the morning, because who looks good then, anyway? – and so it's just biology, really – that happens all the time. Not that this has happened before, with us – well, maybe when we were in the honeymoon suite, that was a good kiss, but it doesn't have to mean anything –"

"Lois."

His voice was low, and something in it stopped her stream of words. Oh no, he was going to talk now. They were going to talk about how he had... and how she had just... and how they had... "So really, we could be just friends," she finished weakly.

"Really?" He cocked his head, looking unconvinced. He studied her for a moment, and she squirmed a little under his gaze. He seemed to decide something then, and his face took on a more determined look. The tone in voice had changed when he spoke again. "So I'm supposed to believe this flush on your cheeks..." His right hand came up to her face, and he ran the backs of his fingers against the soft skin of her cheekbone. "...is just from the temperature in the room?"

That same hand dropped to curve around the back of her neck, the tips of his fingers just brushing her hairline, tilting her head up so she looked at him again. She couldn't help it; she shivered at the deliberately sensual touch. "And back here, where your skin is damp and hot, that's from... what, the exertion of washing the dishes?"

He moved again, this time trailing his knuckles over her collarbone as his touch descended to her chest. He opened his palm against the V neck of her shirt, resting his hand just below her throat. She couldn't help it; her eyes slid shut and she moaned softly. "And here?" he asked her, his voice rough in response to her action. "Where I can feel your heart racing and your breath quick and uneven... why's that, Lois? Because we're such good friends?"

She could barely concentrate on his words; her traitorous body was aching now, begging for that touch in a thousand other places. His hands, his words, the hushed, intimate tone that accompanied them... she couldn't believe she was still standing. This was her partner? This was the man she'd worked beside every day for nearly a year? How could she have been so blind? She didn't want to believe what was happening right now, but in some weird way, it all made sense. He knew. Of course he knew. He knew her better than anyone else in the world, and he could read her across a room full of people... why should it surprise her now that her body's response was no secret to him?

She swayed towards him again, still under the spell of his words. Her throat felt scratchy as she tried to swallow, but succeeded only in pulling the hot air around her into her lungs. She wanted to tell him that she didn't recognize this feeling, where the atmosphere was thick and yet she couldn't get close enough... but it wouldn't have been true. She'd felt it around him before, but only in sparks and flashes before she'd run away from it. It was scary then.

It was scary now...

...but the flame was so, so enticing, too.

"Clark..." She heard her own whispered plea, but for what? Was she pleading with him to stop... or pleading for more?

She didn't have to worry about the answer to that question. She heard him groan what sounded like her name, but because her eyes were closed, she never saw him coming. All she felt was his hands press against her cheeks a scant second before his mouth was on hers again in a hard, swift kiss that seemed to dissolve her insides the moment their lips came in contact.

She gasped, but it was swallowed up in his urgent need to get

closer to her. She could feel the difference in this kiss; whereas their first kiss had held a loving intensity, this one was decidedly sensual. His tongue licked lightly under her top lip, asking for more, and her mouth fell open for him without hesitation. Her whole body seemed to sing as he took the liberty she gave and drew a more intimate taste of her. It was maddening; it was insane.

It was perfect.

Without conscious thought, she mimicked his motion, touching and tasting him the same way, needing to possess that knowledge about him. She felt the counter behind her as he pressed his body into hers, filling all the spaces that just seemed made for him.

Stopping never occurred to her, maybe because nothing in her life had ever felt this good. She arched into him, loving the way he felt against her. He dropped his arms to wrap one of them around her while the other cupped the back of her head. One kiss fell into another, and another, and all she could do was clutch at his broad shoulders as his lips slanted over hers again and again.

In the end, it was her own eager moan that set alarm bells ringing in her ears. Lois turned her head, abruptly breaking the contact between them. She sucked in a breath, trying to even the suddenly hurried rhythm of her breathing.

"What – what are we doing?" she panted, half in disbelief at the situation. What had begun as an experimental kiss had suddenly turned into this deeply emotional, unexpectedly physical experience that was making her question everything she'd ever thought about her relationship with Clark Kent. It was a dizzying turn of events, her head spinning as she tried to make sense of what had just happened between them.

He seemed to be having trouble focusing as well, his own breathing heavy. "I think... we were kissing."

That wasn't what she meant at all, and they both knew it. "Clark! We're friends and... and we're partners. This –" she waved an arm, indicating their embrace – "this whole thing would – would never last. We work well together, and we get along really well, too. Why can't we just leave it there?"

He was quiet for a moment before looking deeply into her eyes. "Maybe because we're not just friends. You feel it, too, don't you?"

She didn't know how to answer that. What she felt for Clark was all jumbled inside her, rolling around like waves in stormy sea; something was there, clawing to get out, but she couldn't put a name to the feeling. She knew that it was way more than partnership and way more than friendship. He was right; she did feel it – whatever it was. And it was terrifying.

"I-I don't know," she stumbled. "Maybe... but I just – I mean, I never thought..." Lois dipped her head and averted her gaze. It was too intense to continue to look into his eyes... and maybe if he couldn't see her eyes, he would never know she wasn't telling him the whole truth.

He ran his hand down her arm, nudging her gently. "Lois."

She couldn't look at him. In answer, she tipped her head forward and allowed her forehead to rest against his chin, letting out a shuddery breath as he held her. "What is this, Clark?" she asked softly.

"What?"

"This thing between us... the way I feel when you touch me. I don't want it to be there, but it is. It's so confusing."

He moved back and used his index finger to tip her chin back up so he could see her eyes. "I know it feels like that to you, but it's not confusing to me. And I'll tell you why." That same finger slid up and stroked her cheek again, but it was a soft, comforting touch rather than a seductive one. "Lois, kissing you, touching you, being close to you... it's just another way for me to show you how much you mean to me. Whether it's just a casual touch at work to show you I'm backing you up, or a hug when you're upset, or a kiss to let you know how beautiful I think you are..."

they mean the same thing to me: they're physical representations of how I feel about you."

She found herself studying his face while he spoke, and the earnestness in his expression brought a wetness to her eyes that she tried quickly to blink away. She'd never had anyone describe their feelings for her in that way. How could this incredible man be in love with her? It seemed ridiculous, but yet here he was again, laying his heart bare a second time in a matter of hours. She didn't deserve it. She didn't deserve him.

It was wonderful... and completely overwhelming. Mostly because she was fairly sure now that he wasn't totally wrong about there being something more to their relationship. She'd been trying desperately to keep him in the friend zone of her heart for the past year, and she'd almost had herself convinced that she didn't feel passion in his presence.

But tonight had proven that she did, in so many ways. The scariest thing of all was that it wasn't just physical.

His sense of truth and justice matched her own, and their shared passion for investigative journalism was what had first brought them together. But, as they'd spent more time together, she'd come to rely on his passionate defense and staunch protection of her every time she'd gotten into trouble. He'd made turning to him a natural move whenever she was upset or afraid. She depended on him when she was in pain; wasn't it natural that he'd be the sole source of her pleasure, too?

For in the past few minutes, he'd smashed the last barrier in her heart, the one she'd erected to convince herself that she wasn't attracted to him. His kisses had simultaneously broken her and put her back together. She was both physically and emotionally attracted to this man, and there was no denying it any longer.

But now what in the world was she supposed to do with that information?

She stumbled her way out of his arms and made her way over to his couch, though she didn't sit down. "I just don't know what to do. I was planning on coming over here to make you realize that you weren't really in love with me... but all you've done is made me wonder if I'm the one who's wrong. It's just so strange, thinking that you love me, you know? I mean, can you imagine us in a relationship? It's weird to even think about!"

He took a few steps in her direction, but seemed to realize that he needed to keep some space between them right now. He rested one arm on the back of the dining room chair. "Maybe it's because you never let yourself think about us like that — as a couple."

"Don't you see?" She whirled back around to face him. "I couldn't. You're my partner, my best friend. You're the person I turn to when things go wrong and the person I know will always have my back. You're the partner I bounce ideas off and the annoying guy who edits my copy... but you're also one of the only people I know whose opinion truly matters to me." She was pacing now, wearing a path between the cushions and his coffee table. "So how could I let myself imagine more between us? Do you know how much it would hurt me if things went wrong? Do you know how much it would hurt if I couldn't have you in my life anymore?"

"Yes." He answered quietly, finding her eyes unerringly from across the room. "I do know, Lois. I know that feeling, because that's what I've been feeling for the last month while you've been dating Luthor."

She pulled in a sharp breath as he spoke, realizing that he'd been living what she'd described. And she'd done it to him by dating Lex. The thought of hurting him like that knocked the wind out of her, and she sat down heavily on the couch, not even realizing at first that he was still talking.

"That's why I've been so jealous of the time you've spent with him. And it's not just him — even though there are other reasons why I don't like the guy — but just knowing that you were spending time your free time with someone else was hard for me.

It made me realize that I didn't want to be by your side just at work. I want to be by your side all of the time, in everything."

He stepped toward her again, and when she met his gaze, he took it as a tacit sign that it was okay to come nearer. He spoke in soft tones as he neared the couch, finally coming to stop crouched down by the coffee table so he could look in her eyes. "Lois, tonight was what I'd always imagined dates with you would be like; I'd get to ask questions that maybe I couldn't ask while we were working and get to know you on a deeper level. I want to know the person that you don't show to the rest of the world. I've seen glimpses of that woman, Lois, and I've just fallen more in love with her."

It was still weird to hear him say 'love'... but surprisingly, the more he said it, the more she was starting to believe it. But... did he even know what he was getting into, wanting to be with her? She wasn't the easiest person to have as a friend, let alone a romantic partner. She'd heard that enough times in the past. "But will you still love me a week from now?" she asked, voicing a long-hidden relationship fear. "What about a year from now? Ten years? I can't imagine anyone loving me for that long. You know my reputation at the Planet — I tend to throw myself into crazy, dangerous situations in pursuit of a story, and you've worked with me long enough to know that I can be crabby and irritating and opinionated and headstrong, and —"

"And brilliant," Clark interrupted. "And passionate and caring... and completely amazing," he finished for her. "Yes, Lois, I know you can be all those things. Those things make you who you are, and I love who you are. I will for the rest of my life. And no, I can't prove that to you right now. You have to let me prove it... minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day. But I need that chance."

She believed him, then. She believed all of it, because she knew him. Perhaps unconsciously, she'd been watching him for the last year, and, repeatedly, he'd proven himself worthy, not just of her partnership, but of her friendship... and now, maybe more?

She had to find out. He'd bared so much of himself tonight, and in turn, he'd made her realize that her feelings for him weren't quite as clear as she'd once thought. She knew now that her reaction in the park today had been more about self-preservation than it had been about him. Clark was right; she'd never let herself think about a possible relationship with him... but she knew now that those feelings deserved to be explored.

Not right at this moment, though. Not when her head was still spinning, both from their deep kisses in the kitchen and the romantic things he'd just said to her. Obviously, there was more to their relationship than she'd ever dreamed, but with everything that had just happened, she found herself wanting to take a step back; she needed time to think, because her body and mind were on two separate pages right now. A part of her wanted more of those drugging kisses; this time longer, slower, deeper even than the ones they'd just shared. Kisses where she couldn't think, ones where she was blind to everything but his hungry touch.

But the other part of her wanted things to go back to the way they were, before he'd kissed her. She wanted him to tell her that none of this was real, that the last half hour — this whole day — hadn't been anything but a figment of her imagination, and she didn't have to deal with any of it. She felt pulled in two different directions.

"I just... I have to go, Clark."

His face dropped immediately. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "It was too much again, wasn't it? It's just... I can't stop sometimes when I'm talking about how I feel about you —"

"It's not that," she interrupted. "That was... really sweet. No one has ever felt that way about me. And all those things you said... what happened tonight..." she blushed as her eyes skittered back to the kitchen, "...it made things both a lot clearer and a lot more complicated. Do you know what I mean? I just... I need

some time to think.”

“Yeah, okay. I get it.” Nodding, he reached for her hand and stood them both up. They stood awkwardly for a moment, each unsure how to end the evening. It was Clark who spoke first. “But look, now you’re leaving before dessert. And here I made this delicious Salted Caramel Chocolate Tart, too. I mean, leaving before chocolate – are you sure you’re Lois Lane?” he said, obviously trying to lighten the mood.

She gave him a weak smile. She appreciated the gesture, but her emotions had been on such a ride tonight that she couldn’t manage much more than that. She watched his face fall a little, and she immediately felt the urge to make it better. Lois tightened her hand on his, catching his gaze. “Maybe next time?”

There was a pause, then, and something passed between them as they looked at each other. “I’ll hold you to that,” he returned softly, stroking his thumb against her skin.

Even standing next to him was testing her resolve. Had she just promised him a next time? She had to get out of here, and the quicker the better, preferably before she did something crazy, like throw herself back in his arms and forget about everything except the way he made her feel. Lois slipped her hand out from under his and quickly made her way to the door, her legs shaky as she climbed the stairs. She could hear him behind her as she grabbed her coat and purse.

She felt his hand brush her elbow as she reached for the door. “Lois –”

She stopped and turned, but moved her arm away quickly, not wanting to re-establish a physical connection with him. The last time he’d touched her, she’d ended up pressed against his kitchen counter and not minding it in the least.

Thankfully, he didn’t reach for her again. “I hope you aren’t sorry that you came.”

“I’m not.” She wasn’t lying; the evening had been enlightening, to say the least.

“Can we... talk again soon?” The words were hesitant, and she could hear the unspoken sentiment in them. He wanted to make sure that they talked again before she answered Lex’s proposal.

Lois knew that she had to talk to Lex, but she also knew now that she couldn’t say yes to his proposal, even though she’d been considering it just this morning. She wasn’t quite sure what her next move was going to be by any means, but she did know one thing: “I’m not going to accept his proposal, Clark. I want you to know that. In the back of my mind, I always knew that it was too soon, anyway. I don’t know what’s going to happen, but what I do know is that I can’t say yes to him.”

He let out a breath. “Okay.” The word was heavy with relief, though she could tell he tried to mask it as best he could. “Just promise me we’ll talk more? And I mean, just talk... not anything else...” He gestured toward the kitchen before nervously running the same hand across the back of his neck.

“Okay.” She agreed quickly, not wanting to delve back into their conversation of what seemed to happen when they got close. “We will talk. Soon. I promise.”

He leaned around her and opened his front door. “Good night, Lois.”

“Good night, Clark,” she returned softly. She hesitated just a moment before she slipped quietly into the dark night, thankful for the rush of cool air that swept over her still-heated cheeks.

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She didn’t really remember driving home; one moment she was opening the door to her Jeep where it was parked on Clinton Street and the next, she was opening the door to her darkened apartment on Carter Avenue. She was on autopilot, completing tasks by muscle memory, because her mind... well, her mind was certainly elsewhere. Namely, on the dark-haired man whose apartment she’d just left.

After securing the multitude of locks on her front door, Lois flicked on the light as she entered her bedroom. She peeled off the burgundy blouse and let it fall to the floor, followed closely by the jeans she’d been wearing. She kicked them out of the way, over toward her dresser. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Reaching for her pajamas seemed like a monumental task right now; all she wanted to do was fall into bed.

To say her head was spinning was an understatement. My, how things had changed in a few short hours. She’d left her apartment this afternoon intent on spending some time talking to Clark, maybe helping him see that they were better just as friends... only to discover in her time with him that they definitely were *not* just friends.

What had she been thinking, asking him to kiss her like that? She’d been asking for trouble, that’s what. She’d known what she was doing, and she’d done it anyway. In this case, flinging caution to the wind certainly had been ... all-encompassing. Eye-opening. Mind-blowing. She pressed her fingertips of her left hand to her temple and sat down heavily on the bed, blowing out a breath as she did.

Because, oh my goodness, what a kiss it had been. She groaned in frustration at the memory and flopped down the rest of the way, landing on her back against the soft comforter. She’d known going in that he was a good kisser – the honeymoon suite had proven that – and there’d been that part of her that really did want a repeat performance; alone, here in the stillness of her bedroom, she could admit that to herself.

But what she hadn’t been prepared for was just how loving and sensual and just this side of amazing kissing him would feel. Even now, there was this tiny little corner of her mind – apparently set free by that second devastatingly passionate kiss he’d given her – that wondered what it would be like to experience those kisses again right now... perhaps on the same soft, horizontal surface she was resting on at this very moment...

In her mind’s eye, she could see him above her, settling his body against hers just like he had earlier in the kitchen. She could see that same heated look in his eyes as he brought his mouth decisively down on hers. She could almost feel the softness of his lips, the weight of his body, the eagerness of his hands as they fluttered against her neck and across her shoulders and down her...

Lois sat straight up, her eyes flying open in surprise at the direction her thoughts had so readily taken. Her cheeks burned as she hastily tried to rid her mind of the image of the two of them entwined together on her bed. Good grief, she had never even thought about Lex that way, and he was the man whose proposal she was supposed to be considering! In fact, Lex had barely crossed her mind the whole time she’d been at Clark’s!

And really, a couple of kisses, and this is what happened? She’d spent the better part of a year repressing *those* kinds of thoughts about Clark, and now, with just two... or three... maybe it was four kisses... God, that last kiss seemed to have gone on forever. Her eyes slipped closed again and she was right back in his kitchen: that husky, affected voice he’d used as he caressed her cheek and her neck, describing in detail the way her body had reacted to him. And then when he’d shifted his hand down along the top of her chest, describing how quickly he could feel her heart beating... Lois had never known a longing that sharp. It had taken all her strength just to stay upright. In the end, she’d fallen forward at the same time he’d leaned down to take her mouth again...

Argh! She was doing it again. Lois shook her head, trying to clear those images. With just a few kisses, suddenly she couldn’t think of anything but them together?

She was in such trouble.

Hurriedly, she climbed off the bed and slipped into her pajamas. She ducked into the bathroom, trying to detour her

thoughts to anything but Clark. She tried concentrating on getting ready for bed; that failed, however, when she was brushing her teeth and she ran her tongue over her front teeth, inadvertently brushed the underside of her top lip...

...and instantly recalled the way she'd shivered when he'd done that exact same thing. God, she wanted that kiss again.

Lois jammed the toothbrush back in the medicine cabinet and quickly turned her attention to washing her face... but that failed, too, the moment she splashed the water up and ran her hands over the soft skin of her cheeks. She sucked in a breath, immediately immersed in the memory of his hands cupping her face, his thumb stroking over her cheekbone. She'd melted at that touch. She wanted that again, too.

Quickly, she dried her face, rubbing it harshly with a towel as penance for her wandering mind, and returned to the bedroom.

This is insane, Lois thought as she climbed into bed. Two days ago, you could've said the name Clark Kent over and over until you were blue in the face, and she probably would've just smiled a bit at the thought of her partner and friend. But now? Now, just the whisper of his name sent pleasant shivers of awareness through her, and a whole colony of excited butterflies seemed to have taken up residence in her stomach at the mere thought of being in the same room as him. Even now, she longed for his company, though she'd left his apartment not even an hour ago.

It was crazy, sure, but at the same time, it felt... almost right. Like she'd been missing this whole huge piece of their relationship, and she'd finally found it. Put the pieces together. It was the same feeling she got when she finally discovered that last, vital piece of information that would break a story wide open. Excited. Nervous. Anticipating. Knowing that she was on the path to something big, something great. She recognized this feeling.

But knowing the feeling and knowing what to do with it were two different things, especially when it came to something as big as figuring out just what it was she felt for her partner.

Maybe a good night's sleep would help. Yes, she would sleep on it. Maybe this would all make more sense in the morning.

She reached over to turn off the light on her nightstand. As she did so, her eyes fell on the notepad beside the lamp. There was a hastily written note on the corner. Frowning, she picked it up and skimmed the one-line note quickly, her mind trying to place when she'd written it.

When she did, her mouth fell open.

Lex. Tomorrow night. Dinner. In all the craziness of tonight, she'd all but forgotten about the phone call she'd received before she'd left for Clark's apartment. Lex had called to check on how her first day at LNN had gone, and then she'd agreed to have dinner with him tomorrow evening at his penthouse.

What was she going to do now?

Should she cancel? It seemed almost too soon to go over and talk to him. She hadn't really figured out what she was going to say to him beyond, "I'm sorry, I can't marry you" and, let's face it, leading with that statement had disaster written all over it.

But then again, Lois wasn't the type to dawdle, especially when she'd made up her mind about something. Talking to Lex might help her figure out the exact nature of feelings for him. Her first instinct had been right; it was just too soon to think about getting married. But now that she knew for certain that she didn't want to marry him right now... what about their relationship itself? Did she still have feelings for him? Was that possible, after what happened with Clark this evening?

She would go, she decided. She'd have dinner, talk to him, see where things went. See what her feelings were, see where they led. And then she'd decide what to do about Lex and what to do about Clark.

She felt better, having at least made one decision. She turned out the light and rolled over. When had her life become so very complicated?

Lois squeezed her eyes shut and willed sleep to come... but unfortunately, she had a feeling she'd be awake tonight for a very long time.

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Clark Kent was wide awake.

The sounds of the city outside reverberated around him; usually, they were comforting, in the same way that the sounds of the stillness in Smallville comforted him when he was growing up. But tonight, he couldn't seem to fall asleep no matter how hard he tried. Thoughts of his evening with Lois kept rolling like a movie through his mind, the same scenes playing over and over: their dinner conversation, washing the dishes together, and then those amazing kisses that he still couldn't believe had really happened. All afternoon, he'd been trying to imagine what the night might bring if she came over. He'd imagined a sweet, fun evening trying to soak in her presence as he lived in the now, not thinking about the future or her probably soon-to-be fiancé. He'd imagined the opposite, a heart-wrenching good-bye in which he'd left all his dreams about their future at her feet, knowing he would never love someone again the way he loved her.

But he'd never imagined passionately kissing her up against the counter in his kitchen, and he'd certainly never imagined that she'd be the one to both initiate the kiss and respond to him so ardently.

Clark groaned, flipping over onto his stomach and punching the pillow with one hand before laying back down. He remembered at the last minute to reign in his super strength; he'd lost more than one pillow that way. God, it had been a good kiss. Like, really good. Like, once-in-a-lifetime, storybook good, the kind that he'd thought only really existed on television shows and in movies. It had been better than any of the times he'd kissed her when they were undercover, better even than the times he'd kissed her as Superman. He'd thought that nothing would ever top those eager kisses, but he'd been wrong.

Tonight definitely had.

Maybe it was because this time, she'd known whom she'd been kissing; he'd asked for real, and real had blown his mind.

He'd known they had chemistry; that's why he laughed when she'd mentioned that maybe kissing her would help him realize that they were better just being friends. That was just ridiculous.

He'd seen the way she'd looked at him over the course of the last year; granted, she'd hidden it pretty well, but there had been sidelong glances when she'd thought he hadn't been paying attention. There'd been that one time, when they'd first met and she'd come to pick him up at his hotel room; he hadn't been expecting her so early, and so he'd accidentally answered the door in a towel. Honestly, he'd thought that it was probably the guy across the hall who'd tried to bum a couple of bucks from him a few times since he'd checked in – it had never crossed his mind that it would have been Lois. Either way, he hadn't missed her "I said nine, I thought you'd be naked," slip, and he certainly hadn't missed the way her eyes had perused a path down his body before he'd turned to leave the room to get changed.

And then secondly, there was the pheromone incident; after being sprayed, she'd immediately chosen him as the object of her affection. Sure, they'd come to find out that the pheromone had influenced her behavior, but the science behind it had been clear; it didn't create attraction, just removed inhibitions.

So it wasn't just him; there was clearly an attraction on both their parts.

However, he knew that attraction didn't equal deeper feelings; just because she was attracted to him didn't mean that she loved him the way he loved her. However, despite what she'd said in the park today, this evening had given him hope. Dinner had been perfect, and as the conversation had bounced from subject to subject, he'd realized that they never seemed to run out of things to say to each other. He always wanted to learn about her, and

tonight, she'd seemed to have the same type of interest in him. They just connected on a level that was different than any other woman he'd ever met. It was, for lack of a better word, a spiritual connection – a kindred soul. And tonight, she'd seemed to finally see it, too. He'd noticed a few times throughout dinner that she'd been looking at him like she'd never seen him before; it was like she was finally taking note of him as a man, not just as the partner and friend she'd come to rely on.

He knew there was a very deeply vulnerable woman inside that tough-as-nails exterior she showed to everyone; he'd known it on an instinctive level ever since they'd met. And it seemed, little by little, those walls were coming down the longer they knew each other. The urge to protect her, both physically and emotionally, was stronger than ever.

There was still the matter of his alter ego; Clark knew that he'd have to deal with that sooner or later. Lois had said that she wasn't going to marry Lex, but he still wasn't sure what she was going to do about her relationship with the billionaire. Turning down a proposal didn't necessarily equate to breaking up completely. He couldn't risk telling her anything about his other guise until he was sure that Luthor was out of the picture. He didn't think that Lois would say anything, but having the information was harmful enough. If Luthor figured out a way to extract that information from her, it would hurt everyone he loved: Lois, his parents, his friends, and himself.

So for now, Lois held all the cards, and he had to wait and see what she would decide. But at least now he'd tried everything; he'd laid out how he felt, had that date he'd always wanted, and it was up to her to decide what she felt.

Clark smiled just slightly in the darkness. At least now he felt like he had a little better chance than before, he mused, his mind replaying the softness of her lips, the hesitant but sweet brush of her tongue, the gentle curve of her body as she pressed into him. And she was the one who'd asked him to kiss her! Whatever she'd said in the park today, he was willing to bet his Superman tights that she hadn't been telling him the whole truth.

He wished he could talk to her again; even if it was just to call her and say good night, he wanted to hear her voice. She hadn't even left his apartment that long ago, and yet he already missed her.

Clark rolled back over to his back, glancing out his window. Maybe if he went on patrol right now, he'd stop by and...

No. That would just make things worse, bringing Superman back into the picture. He'd just gotten Lois to realize that maybe there was more to her relationship with her partner than she'd realized. Why would he sabotage his own efforts with the flashy superhero?

At that moment, Clark realized something important. No matter what happened from here on, he couldn't keep distracting Lois by flying by her apartment late at night and dropping in for a little chat, no matter how badly he wanted to see her. If he wanted Clark Kent to have any real chance, he needed to start treating Lois more like a friend when he was in the cape, instead of encouraging her crush on Superman.

Decision made, he forced his eyes closed. He could do patient. He would give her a few days to think about things, and then he'd call her. She'd promised that they would talk, so he'd give her some time, and then he would call her. Maybe they could get together... he'd love to cook for her again. Or, maybe he could take her to a fancy dinner this time, and then they could have dessert back at his apartment. Maybe she'd be in the mood for something intellectual; he'd love to take her to the new African art exhibit that had opened at the Metropolitan Visionary Arts Museum last week. Of course, there was a summer concert series starting on Friday nights in Centennial Park in two weeks; maybe they could take a picnic and listen to the music. He could picture them sitting on the blanket, Lois curled up in his arms as the sweet

spring breeze brushed over them and the sun set over the big fountain in the middle of the park. He'd always loved that fountain; it was one of the first places in the city that'd he visited, and he'd always felt a special connection to it.

There were so many things he wanted to do with her, so many places he wanted to go. He wanted to share his life with her. She was the only person he could ever imagine being by his side. Hopefully, things would work out, and he would have an opportunity to take her to some of those places.

A few minutes later, Clark dropped off to sleep, dreaming of his love and praying she was dreaming of him.

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That next evening, at precisely 7:25 p.m., Lois pulled up in front of Luthor Towers after a restless day spent wandering aimlessly around the city. She'd called into LNN early that morning and told them she wouldn't be in today. She hadn't given a specific reason, and they hadn't asked; a perk, apparently, of dating the boss. It was just that she couldn't go back there, not right now. Too many things were rolling around in her mind, and to be honest, she just didn't have the energy today to pretend to be impressed.

But she hadn't wanted to be in her apartment, either. Her first impulse had been to run to the one place she couldn't go right now: Clark's apartment. She knew he was home. And didn't that say something in and of itself? She wanted comfort and a place to work through some things... and the first person she thought of was Clark?

After that, the Daily Planet was the only other place she'd thought to go... before she'd remembered that it wasn't there anymore, either. Frustrated, she'd left without a specific destination in mind; she'd ended up wandering through the downtown Metropolis shopping district, walking around without buying anything. She'd hit the harbor and touristy spots along the river, though she didn't really stop anywhere for too long. She'd bought lunch from a popular food truck and wandered into Centennial Park to eat it. She'd detoured around the bench she'd sat on with Clark yesterday, opting to eat perched on the edge of the giant fountain in the middle of the park. It was peaceful there, and so she'd stayed, listening to the soothing sounds of the water and finally feeling content for a moment.

She'd stayed until a check of her watch told her that she'd better get back to her apartment or she wasn't going to have time to get ready for dinner. Feeling a little better but still weary, she'd made her way through the early evening rush hour traffic and back to her apartment to get ready.

She'd been slipping in one silver earring that matched her navy evening dress into her ear when she'd almost tripped over the jeans she'd worn the previous evening, still in a heap by her dresser. Only then had it occurred to her that she'd been so comfortable in her outfit going over to Clark's; she'd felt casual but sexy. But tonight, she hadn't even stopped to think before grabbing the fancy evening dress out of her closet for dinner at Lex's penthouse. She wasn't comfortable right now; she wasn't dressed like Lois Lane. She was dressed like she was attending an expensive state dinner, like she was trying to impress someone.

The realization had left her unsettled.

Lois's thoughts came to a halt as she did the same to her vehicle, noticing the valet waiting for her. She put the Jeep into park and stepped out as the young man held open her door. "Good evening, Ms. Lane." He nodded to her as he took her place behind the wheel. "Mr. Luthor left instructions for you to meet him on the penthouse balcony. He awaits your arrival there. Have a good night."

Lois nodded, and her stomach – which had been in knots anyway – pulled tighter at the words. She was not looking forward to this conversation. She doubted many people had ever said no to Lex Luthor. She tried to imagine how he would react, but she kept

coming up blank. It made her realize how very little she really knew him.

On autopilot, she made her way into the building and took the elevator to the penthouse floor, punching in Lex's private security code when prompted. Her legs felt wobbly as the elevator rose higher and higher. She turned her head, catching her reflection in the mirrored side of the elevator. For a moment, she just stared, wondering at the woman in the reflection. That woman didn't look comfortable or excited; in fact, she was expressionless. She looked like an expensive doll, beautiful but lifeless.

Was that Lois Luthor?

Lois shuddered and turned away, focusing on the number panel and the lights she could see flashing across the numbers as she made her ascent. Could she imagine living here? Taking this elevator ride every day to her new home on the penthouse floor of Luthor Towers? If she ever married Lex, it would certainly be expected that this would become her home.

Why hadn't she thought about any of this before?

The elevator came to a halt before her thoughts could go any further, and the doors opened with a soft hiss. The room spread out before her, filled with the same designer décor Lex had always had, but this time, everything looked different to her. This time, instead of seeing it as a guest, she tried seeing it through the eyes of Lex's girlfriend and would-be fiancée... because truly, why was she dating him if she didn't see a place for herself in his world?

She crossed the room, noting to herself how she would never feel comfortable toeing off her shoes and curling up on the ridiculously expensive leather couch she passed – and in fact, she never had. That seemed silly, didn't it? That in the last few months that she'd been seeing Lex, they'd never even watched a television show together, let alone settled in for popcorn and a movie? Wasn't that one of the things most couples did when they were getting to know each other?

They'd gone to operas, charity dinners, amazing restaurants, even flown on his private jet to faraway places... but they'd never spent any significant time at either one of their places, and they certainly had never curled up together on the couch to watch *Lethal Weapon*.

In fact, the only man she'd really ever done that with... was Clark.

Lois shook her head, trying to bend her thoughts away from her partner as she walked towards the entrance to the balcony. If she was going to give this dinner with Lex any real shot, she couldn't be constantly thinking about her partner and best friend... who also happened to be the man she had kissed so very thoroughly last night...

She blinked, catching herself before she went *there*. The large glass doors to the balcony slid open on cue, and Lois was greeted by Lex, who opened his arms to her as soon as she stepped out. "Lois, darling. Wonderful to see you." He took both of her hands and dropped his head towards hers, brushing a light kiss across her cheek. "Your beauty transcends the stars in the sky tonight, my love."

"Thank you," Lois returned. "It's nice to see you, too."

Looking through these new eyes, she was struck by how formal their greeting was and how his lavish compliment didn't summon the same awestruck feeling in her that it usually did. She much preferred Clark's quiet, "You look great," backed by the captivated look in his eye and sincerity shining in his voice.

Unaware of her comparisons, Lex slid one hand up to her elbow and ushered her farther onto the balcony, where Lois could see an elegant table set for two. "Come, Chef Andre has spent hours preparing a fabulous meal just for us."

Ever the solicitous date, he slid out one of the chairs and helped her into it, slipping her purse behind her. Before she'd even unfolded her napkin, a young man on Lex's wait staff appeared. "May I get you something to drink, Ms. Lane?"

Lex waved him away. "I've already had the wine brought out, Terrence. Please just bring Ms. Lane a glass of water."

The young man nodded his head. "Of course, sir. I'll be out with the soup shortly."

Lois hadn't missed the way Lex spoke for her; was that the way it always was with them, and she just hadn't noticed? Had she been so intimidated by some of the upscale places that they'd been that she'd allowed him to just take over? That wasn't who she was; that woman was the woman she'd been staring at in the elevator earlier – that beautiful, lifeless doll she seemed to turn into whenever she was around Lex.

"So," he turned his attention to her as Terrence scurried away. "Tell me, my dear, how was your orientation at LNN yesterday? I've been eager to hear your impression of the network."

"It was... good," she said, unsure of exactly how to respond. "It was a lot to take in, though. It's so different than the Planet." That, at least, she could say truthfully.

"Ah, yes, but isn't broadcast news is so immediate, so now? It's exciting. The Planet, of course, was a pillar of our city in its time, but I'm afraid that in today's society, modern technology has surpassed the paper's prominence. Why, the Planet didn't even have an email system, did it?"

"Well, they were talking about putting one in soon," Lois said defensively, feeling the need to protect her home turf. The Planet was special to her, and he knew that. Of course, Lex never had been very supportive of her career at the Planet; he seemed to like it that she was accomplished, but ever since they'd started dating, he'd constantly asserted that she was better fitted for broadcast news... hence, her new job at LNN.

"Well, we needn't worry about that now." He reached out and picked up her wine glass. "Shall I pour?"

"Yes, thank you." Lois nodded toward the wine bottle that sat opposite her. It was beautiful, and it certainly looked vintage, though she couldn't read the label from this angle. "What are we drinking tonight?" she inquired, if only to turn the conversation to something a bit less controversial.

Lex smiled smugly as he lifted the bottle and poured a small amount into her glass. "I was hoping that you'd ask. It's new to my collection." He handed her the wide-rimmed Bordeaux glass and then turned the label toward her, brandishing his hand across it. "It's a 1951 Penfolds Grange Hermitage. A marvelous, full-bodied Australian red that I procured at an auction about a month ago. I'm especially proud of its rarity; only a small number of bottles were produced that year, and only about twenty still exist in the world."

"Oh, wow." She didn't have to feign her impressed expression. She took a small sip and rolled it experimentally on her tongue, savoring the flavor. "That's amazing. I'm sure it was an expensive purchase."

His grin broadened, Cheshire-like. "To the tune of \$38,000 dollars a bottle."

The wine glass in her hand landed on the table with a thud, and Lois was glad that she had been in the process of placing it down. Any higher and she probably would have dropped it – which would have been great, considering the wine inside cost more than her car.

"You spent \$38,000 dollars on a bottle of wine? This wine, that we're drinking right now? Shouldn't it be in a case somewhere, on display, instead of in our glasses?" The questions came rapid fire from her, mostly because that was her default mode whenever she wasn't sure what to do or say. Questions tended to switch the focus from her reaction to the answers of the other person, so the reporter in her took over very quickly whenever she was flustered.

Lex chuckled. "Yes, I did, and yes, we are drinking it. It's not on display because I believe in living life to the fullest. There are things in this world that are meant to be enjoyed with someone



special. Don't you agree?" He reached across the table to her take her hand, stroking over it with his thumb.

She found herself staring at his hand as it covered hers, suddenly transported to another evening, another man's hand across the dinner table. They'd been laughing about something; she'd forgotten now what he'd said, but what she did remember was the way she'd slid her hand along his arm and found his hand, dipping her fingers across the tender skin around his knuckles. When she had realized what she was doing, she'd been both a little embarrassed and a little surprised at how natural the movement had felt, like she did it every day. She remembered how he'd smiled slightly and clasped her hand just a bit tighter. She remembered, too, how good it had felt to be connected to him like that, and how simply the brush of his thumb across her skin had left her momentarily breathless.

It wasn't like that now. Lois could feel the difference. Lex made her feel flattered and slightly awed at the amount of money he tossed around so casually – \$38,000 dollars on a bottle of wine still made her head spin – but he didn't take her breath away with his touch. In fact, right now she was trying to figure out a way to politely extricate her hand from his grip without looking like the rudest date ever. She glanced around, looking for something to save her.

Beyond the balcony, the sun was starting to set in the early May sky. She pulled her hand free and gestured to it. "Oh, wow, look at how gorgeous the sunset is tonight."

Lex let go, too, and turned his head toward it. He chuckled lightly. "Yes. It's one of the many reasons I love this building, and one of the reasons I constructed it to rise above every other building in the city. The views are magnificent. Come," he said, and motioned for her to stand. He held out his hand and helped her up before leading her over to the wall of the balcony. "This sunset is certainly among those wonders meant to be enjoyed." He stretched his arms wide, encompassing the sky and the bustling city below them, like he was making a grand announcement. "Spring in Metropolis at its finest. Almost as if it had been ordered exclusively for us."

She watched him, glancing back and forth between the darkening pinks and reds painted on the horizon and the man beside her. It certainly was a special moment, one of those rare times to just sit back in awe and admire the beauty of nature. But was she happy to be sharing the moment with him? She was, wasn't she? It was fine... but then why was she suddenly wishing that the man standing next to her was her partner and best friend?

The answer came quick and clear, but she shook it away. She'd probably be just as happy to be standing here with Superman as she would with Clark... wouldn't she? Lois thought for a moment, stunned at the realization that it wasn't true anymore. Maybe a week ago, a month ago, she would've loved the thought of Superman sharing this sunset with her, maybe even soaring through the rose-colored sky in his arms.

But right now, all she could think was that Lex was too pompous – what, the sunset ordered just for them? – and Superman too much of a fantasy. Pink cotton-candy cloud kisses? It sounded like the fanciful dreams of a pre-teen. As she shook her head slightly, she realized that the ache she felt inside wasn't for either of those two men; it was very much for Clark's company. She wanted her best friend, the man she felt more comfortable with than anyone... she wanted to watch this sunset with him, maybe lean her head onto his shoulder while he wrapped one arm around her.

She just wanted Clark.

She glanced over at the man beside her, wondering if he could tell what she was thinking. Looking at his profile, she took in his strong features. Classically handsome, certainly, but he didn't possess even an echo of the warmth that radiated from Clark. God, she had to stop thinking about Clark for a while if she was even

going to make it through dinner. She was supposed to be focusing on Lex and her feelings for him. Speaking of which... she regarded him again.

No. She wasn't that bold.

Was she?

Lois hesitated for a minute, but the thought came again. It was the perfect opportunity, standing there admiring the romantic sunset together on the balcony. And really, she may as well try it; she'd been comparing the two men since she got here, so what was one more experiment?

She turned to face him, touching his arm to get his attention. When Lex turned his head towards her, she leaned in suddenly, touching her lips to his. He startled a little, surprised at her forward move, but quickly settled, opening his mouth on hers. His lips were warm, even though the evening temperature had dipped just slightly. He slid his tongue along her lips, and she could taste a hint of the expensive wine they'd just been drinking.

She waited.

She waited for the rush of feeling, for those butterflies, for her body to respond to the movement of his mouth. She waited for *something* to happen.

But nothing did. Seconds ticked by, and she found the only thing she was feeling was vaguely uncomfortable. He was becoming increasingly passionate, moving his hands down her sides and across the open part at the back of her dress.

It wasn't that he was a terrible kisser; he certainly seemed to know what he was doing, but she just... wasn't into it. At all.

There was nothing inside her urging her to get closer to him; her heart wasn't pounding out a desperate rhythm to connect with him. Her hands weren't eager to find every peak and valley of his body, every different texture of his skin. Her mind wasn't blank to everything but what was happening between them; in fact, it was just the opposite. She couldn't get her thoughts to stop. Everything in her was screaming that this wasn't right.

She broke the kiss and pulled back. "Lex."

"Yes, my love," he hummed. He pulled her closer, but she put her hands on her shoulders, intent on pushing him away.

Thankfully, Terrence arrived on the balcony at that moment, carrying a tray, and Lois glanced at the table. "Uh... oh, our soup is here," she said brightly and slipped gratefully from his grasp. Disconcerted by her little experiment, she walked back to the table and sat down. Lex followed her and took his seat as well, grinning like the proverbial cat who ate the canary.

The young server set small, steaming cups of soup in front of them. "Tonight's first course is a spicy tomato and carrot soup with a pistachio dumpling, garnished with yogurt and strips of sweet chili pepper," he announced. "Chef Andre hopes you enjoy." He bowed slightly as he moved away from the table.

Lois had never been so glad to see a tiny cup of soup in her life. She couldn't decide if the kiss with Lex had been an epic failure or a huge success. Perhaps it had been a little of both; failure because it had been one of worst kisses of her life, but success because she'd finally realized why she'd never been that eager to take their relationship further: apparently, her attraction and physical chemistry with Lex was just this side of nonexistent.

Which, again, was the complete opposite of what had happened last night. Last night, she'd realized that out of control had never felt quite as good as it had in Clark's arms. She remembered that Clark had been the one to break the kiss the first time; she'd been so swept away by it that she'd wanted it to keep going. Everything about her kisses with Clark had been instinctual; she hadn't even had time to think about what she was doing. She'd responded and then some.

Lex set his spoon down and cleared his throat, breaking her train of thought. "Is the soup to your liking?"

"What? Oh. Of course." She fell silent again, still caught in her thoughts of the previous night. "It's delicious," she added as an

afterthought, hoping he wouldn't pick up on the fact that her mind was elsewhere. She took another large bite of the creamy soup for show.

There was a pause, and Lois searched for something to comment on besides the food. She knew there were a thousand things she needed to say to him, but she couldn't think of a single one right now. She took a few more bites, just to have something to do besides talk to him.

As the silence grew, the only thing she could think was that it was never like this with Clark. The two of them never seemed to run out of things to say to each other, and it wasn't like they just talked about work, either; last night, they hadn't had any stories to talk about and there hadn't been any awkward pauses in conversation. They'd chatted about anything and everything: their childhoods, their pasts, their hobbies, their shared history. Even their small silences had been comfortable. It had just been... easy.

Well, she thought resolutely, if it was easy with Clark, why couldn't it be the same with Lex? Maybe she should put a little more effort in, instead of just swirling her soup with her spoon and using it as an excuse not to say anything. She looked up determinedly.

"Lex, do you remember when you asked me to marry you, and I said that we really didn't know each other that well?"

He smiled smugly. "I would've thought you found out all you needed to know about me a moment ago."

Ugh. The haughty smile that she might have found charming a week ago now made her want to shake him. She wanted to say, "Found out what? That I want to kiss Clark way more than I want to kiss you?" but she refrained. Instead, she pasted a smile on her face and said, "You know what I mean. I still feel like we don't really know much about each other, especially if we're supposed to be thinking about getting married."

He studied her a moment, then offered her a placating smile. "I'd wondered why you'd been so distant over the last few days, and why you hadn't given me your answer yet. If that's what's bothering you, darling, let's talk. My life is an open book. What it is you want to know?"

"Just anything. You. Your childhood, your likes and dislikes. I just want to know more about you."

He leaned back in his chair and started to speak as Terrence came out to clear their cups from the table. "Of course. Well, you know I was orphaned at age thirteen. I was taken in by my father's much older brother, who had built his own fortune but was estranged from my father. He resented having to take in his poor teenage nephew, but had little choice, as I had no other living relatives. Consequently, I was sent to a prestigious boarding school – Leysin American School – in Switzerland."

Lois nodded and leaned forward, picking up her wine glass. See, this wasn't so bad, she thought. He was talking; she was interested. "Still, it must have been difficult, living in other country without anyone you knew around you."

"It made me strong," Lex stated firmly. "Much of my drive and ambition was shaped in those early experiences at Leysin. I met people, made connections: Rockefellers, Vanderbilts, sons and daughters of diplomats, even members of the Saudi Royal family. I saw the way those people lived, the way my uncle lived... and when I graduated, I was determined I would not return to the nothingness from which I'd come. My plan was to conquer." He paused, and there was a flash of something across his face, something Lois couldn't place, but it raised the hairs on the back of her neck.

Lex continued. "In business, of course. After graduation, I began working a high-level management job at a company owned by a friend's father. When he passed suddenly, I took over the company."

"You were only twenty-one," Lois recalled from one of her first interviews with Lex.

"Yes." Lex looked pleased that she'd remembered.

"But... all of that I could find out by reading your biography. Tell me something else, something you wouldn't want anyone else to know." Even she recognized her words as one last, desperate attempt to connect with him.

"Lois." He reached over and took her hand again. "I don't know what it is you need from me, or what it is you're asking. If you're trying to find skeletons, I'll warn you that they are there. I'm not a saint, but nor have I ever claimed to be one. I've done some questionable things in pursuit of my success, but unfortunately, that's the nature of big business. I've had to be ruthless with my enemies, because they would be ruthless with me. I've hurt people, but only when my hand has been forced. But you... you are changing something in me. It's why I want to marry you. You are making me want to be a better person."

She was? Lois looked at him quizzically. He looked sincere, but from what he'd just confessed, it seemed like he could be lying. He'd admitted to questionable things – whatever that meant – and she wasn't sure what to make of him. How could she be making him a better person? They'd only been dating for a matter of weeks. The whole thing seemed strange, and it didn't sit right with her.

Their meal appeared then, interrupting her window into Lex's past. Terrence and another slightly older man placed delicious-smelling plates of food in front of them. This time, the older man spoke, his voice nasally. "This evening, Chef Andre is serving sage-poached lobster with a seared foie gras and turnips purée, glazed in a wild cherry sauce. Please enjoy."

Lex nodded his approval. "Excellent, Tomlin. Thank you."

"Will there be anything else, sir?"

"No, that will be all for now."

The two men nodded and disappeared almost instantly through a side door on the balcony. Lois picked up her fork and poked a little at her food. Foie gras? Was that what the man had called it? What even was that? Lois had no idea. She felt silly asking, though, so she just decided that she would concentrate on the lobster. That thought struck her as funny, and she had to fight the sudden urge to laugh; what was she doing, having lobster and foie gras in a wild cherry sauce for dinner on a Tuesday night?

In between bites, Lex nodded to her. "Chef Andre has outdone himself tonight, don't you think?"

"What? Oh, yes. Dinner is amazing." She picked up her wine glass and sipped it. "But what about salad and risotto you made yourself?" she wanted to ask. "What about baking and homemade bread? What about laughing and teasing and doing the dishes together and passionate kisses up against the kitchen counter? What about pizza and a video on a Friday night? What about all that?"

Those nights didn't happen in the world of Lex Luthor, and the more Lois thought about it, the more she realized that she didn't want any part of that world. It hadn't helped, trying to learn more about him; their conversation tonight had only highlighted their differences and reinforced what Lois had already known deep down: she didn't belong here.

Expensive boarding schools, money, power, pleasure: they were pursuits Lois didn't understand. She looked over at the urbane, sophisticated man who sat across from her, and it was almost as if she was emerging from a dream. She had nothing in common with this man. She had no desire to spend the rest of her life this way, high atop a penthouse balcony, discussing business politics while drinking insanely expensive wine and eating a meal that she couldn't even pronounce.

Decisively, she put down her fork. "Lex, we need to talk."

His lips upturned slightly as he picked up his napkin and dapped at his mouth. "Haven't we been?"

"No." She pushed her plate away. "I mean really talk. About us." She took a deep breath and plunged ahead with what she'd

come here to say in the first place: “Lex, I can’t marry you.”

There was a moment of stunned silence at her announcement. She knew it felt out of place; he hadn’t been aware of her thoughts... not to mention, she been the one to initiate their kiss earlier in the evening. She bit her lip, unsure of what to do next. All she wanted to do at this moment was leave, but she forced herself to remain seated and wait for his reaction.

After what seemed like forever, he set his napkin on the table and spoke, his voice measured. “Lois, if this is about what I said earlier —”

“It’s not,” she said quickly. “I’ve thought a lot about your proposal in the last few days. And tonight, I just realized ... I can’t accept it. I’m sorry.”

“I see.” He brought a hand to his chin as he regarded her. “I know you think that it’s too soon, but I’m ready. To commit to you utterly and totally, eternally. I am. But if you don’t feel ready, I’ll wait. I’ll admit I’m not used to waiting for anything,” he quirked his lips into something that resembled a smile, “but for you, I’m prepared to bend my rules. We’ll spend some more time together and get to know each other slowly, if that’s what you wish.”

Well... that wasn’t exactly what she’d meant. Now she was going to have to tell him she didn’t want to see him anymore, period. It was like staring into the mouth of a lion. “It’s not just that. I... I don’t think we’re right for each other.”

“Not right? What do you mean?” An edge appeared in the soft, pacifying voice he had been using with her.

“We come from two different words, Lex. We don’t have anything in common. It would never work between us, long-term. I don’t think we should see each other anymore.” She tried to soften the blow with an apologetic smile, but inside, she was already calculating how much longer she had to stay here. She pushed her chair back slightly, bringing her napkin back up to the tabletop, preparing to make a swift exit. “Something about this doesn’t feel right to me. Something is holding me back. I’m sorry.”

His look suddenly hardened to match his voice. “Are you sure it’s something? Not someone?”

She froze. Caught off guard, she fumbled for a response. “What? I... no — it’s not...”

Lex settled back in his chair, wine glass in hand. His dark eyes were shuttered, boring into her. “How is Clark doing, by the way?”

She couldn’t hide her swift intake of breath. “What?”

He took a sip of his wine, and it was like he was enjoying the way she’d immediately frozen at the sound of Clark’s name. “It’s my network, Lois. Do you really think I don’t know who comes and goes? And when you leave abruptly with your former partner in the middle of the day, do you really think that I don’t know about it? You don’t get to my position in life without being aware. I’m always one step ahead. Knowledge is power, my dear.” He tilted his glass toward her in strange salute and took another sip.

Speechless, she watched as he placed the glass down and leaned forward. His tone changed again, but it wasn’t something Lois had ever heard from him before. This time it was low, laced with a threatening undercurrent. “Though it seems you didn’t finish your little conversation in the park. I’m assuming it was quite important. So important, in fact, that you felt the need to continue it back his apartment later... the same evening that you were too tired to have dinner with me.”

He watched her a long moment, but she forced herself not to look away. Finally, he dropped his eyes to back his plate. His silverware was in his hands, cutting a bite of his dinner when he added, “But a word of advice, if I could? Do be sure the door is properly closed before you fall into his arms.”

She reeled back as the realization of what his words meant slapped her across the face. “You had me followed?”

His voice returned to its conversational tone, though his eyes

still held their animosity as he lifted them to her once again.

“Metropolis is a dangerous city, Lois. You of all people should know that. And I’m one of its most prominent citizens. There are people out there who wouldn’t hesitate to use you to get to me. So, naturally, I check in on you. It’s a safety precaution, one I enacted as soon as we began dating.”

As the shock of his statement wore off, Lois found herself getting angry. He’d been following her for *weeks*? And now he had the audacity to play it off like he was doing some great service for her? “That’s not keeping me safe, that’s keeping tabs on me!”

“That’s one interpretation.” He merely smiled at her, seemingly unfazed by her outburst.

“It’s the only interpretation! If you think for one second I’m going to have a boyfriend who feels the need to spy on me, you don’t know me very well.” She didn’t bother to correct his assumption that she was cheating on him with Clark. She and Lex had never said they were exclusive, and he’d known she and Clark were close friends from the start. It wasn’t like she’d accepted his proposal. She was still very much a free woman. “And if this wasn’t over before, it surely is now. Good night.” Furious, she stood up and plucked her purse from where it hung on the chair behind her. She marched towards the glass sliding doors, not caring in the least about what he thought.

She’d almost reached them when she felt him behind her. He caught her arm, whirling her around. “Rest assured, Lois, this is not over. I get what I want, and I don’t let anybody — especially a lowly, unemployed reporter — get in my way.” His words were clipped, his eyes flashing.

She met his eyes, and even though she was frightened by what she saw in them, she stood her ground. “Let go of me,” she said, pronouncing each word with icy emphasis.

For the briefest moment, she was scared that he wouldn’t, and she was suddenly very aware that they were alone on the balcony. Before her thoughts could race much farther, though, he complied and dropped her arm. Shaking all over, she pressed the button to open the doors so she could slide through. She took off for the elevator at a near run, leaving him standing there, watching her make her escape.

She didn’t look back.

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At nine o’clock on Tuesday evening, Clark was sprawled out on his couch, flipping through the sports channels and trying to find something that would hold his interest for longer than a few minutes. He’d just settled on a playoff basketball game when he heard several quick, insistent knocks at his door.

He glanced up. Who would come over this late in the evening? It might be Jimmy; he hadn’t spoken to him in a few days. Whomever it was, it sounded urgent. He jogged up the stairs, pulling the door open quickly.

He was shocked to see who was on the other side. “Lois?”

She was dressed in blue jeans and a long sleeve navy t-shirt, and her hair was pulled up in a messy ponytail. Whatever her reason for being here, it looked like she had left her apartment in a hurry.

He hadn’t imagined he’d see her this soon after what had happened between them last night. He’d been trying to give her a little space since their dinner date. He hadn’t called her today, even though he’d desperately wanted to see her. He hadn’t gone over to visit her, in either of his guises. It had been killing him not to talk to her, but he’d known that she was working some things out, so he’d tried to be respectful of that.

“Hi,” she said, and he could tell that she was nervous. “Sorry to just drop in on you like this... I know it’s kinda late, but...” She looked around and then glanced behind her, a move he caught instantly.

“What’s wrong?” he asked immediately.

“Nothing... it’s just... can I come in?”

“Of course.” He moved aside to let her through the doorway, and she darted past him into the apartment. “Lois? Are you okay?”

“Uh... yeah. I guess I was just wondering if your offer for dessert still stands. We never got to it last night, remember?” She took off for the kitchen without waiting for his response.

“Sure, yeah.” Dutifully, he followed her, curious. But when he saw her pace around his kitchen table instead of sitting or making any move to get dessert, he paused. “Hey,” he said softly, not wanting to spook her. “What’s the matter?”

This time she stopped, spinning towards him and twisting her hands nervously. “Never mind, I shouldn’t be here. He probably already knows I’m here, and I don’t want him to get to you, too... but I didn’t know where else to go, and I just needed to see you... but this was a mistake. I should’ve just stayed home. I’m sorry.” She moved to hurry past him, but Clark reached out with one arm and caught her.

“Lois, wait.”

At his touch, she faltered, and when he looked into her eyes, he saw a shimmer of tears were threatening to fall. If there was one thing that broke his heart, it was Lois scared or upset. Immediately, he wanted to fix it. “What do you mean, ‘get to me’? Who knows you’re here? Tell me what’s wrong, please.”

“It’s Lex.” Her voice trembled a little on the billionaire’s name. “We had dinner earlier. He’d already asked me before I saw you last night, and then when I remembered, I wasn’t going to go, but I thought – well, why not, I have to talk to him anyway – so I decided to go. But it was awful and then he was awful, and – well, maybe I shouldn’t tell you exactly what happened – but anyway –” she stopped, seemingly realizing that she’d gotten carried away. She took a deep breath. “While I was there, I told him I couldn’t marry him.”

“You did?” Clark’s voice seemed higher than normal.

“Tonight? You saw him? Alone?”

“Yes.” She looked at him strangely, obviously wondering why he was so worried that she’d seen Lex by herself. “It was fine at first. We were eating and talking... but then I told him that I didn’t think we were right for each other, and that we shouldn’t see each other anymore.”

“You told him that? Tonight? Alone?”

Lois’s face broke out into a small smile. “I thought we’d established that already.”

“I know, I’m just... trying to wrap my head around it. I mean, you said last night that you were going to turn down his proposal, but I didn’t know that you meant so soon. And I wasn’t sure... the way we left things, I didn’t know if you were going to see him anymore. I mean, I’m glad that you talked to him, but... how did he take it?” Clark ran an agitated hand through his hair. “I wish you had told me you were going. Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” Lois looked at him. “Lex was... weird. At first, he thought that I meant we needed more time to get to know each other, but then when I said that I didn’t want to see him anymore... he got angry. It was scary. He...” she hesitated, wondering how much detail she wanted to get into. Well, she’d probably end up telling Clark eventually, so she might as well tell him everything that happened. “Clark, he knew I was here last night. He had me followed. He probably knows I’m here now, too. He’s been spying on me since we started dating... well, he called it ‘checking in,’ but from where I stand, that’s spying. And it’s creepy. I got mad, and that’s when I decided I’d had enough, and so I got the heck out of there.”

Clark nodded, but Lois was more surprised that he didn’t immediately have a fit and start reiterating all the reasons why Lex Luthor was scum.

“Clark, did you hear what I said?”

“Yes. I’m sorry, Lois, but I’m not surprised. Lex treats people like possessions – especially you. I’m sorry if it sounds harsh, but you were a prize to be won for him. Now I’m wondering what

comes next.”

“Yeah, you and me both,” she answered. “When I left, he grabbed me by the arm and told me in no uncertain terms that it wasn’t over between us. He’s mad that you and I are... well, close. He called you a ‘lowly reporter,’ Clark.”

Clark shook his head. “I can handle him, Lois. Don’t worry about me.”

“I am worried about you, though! I’m worried about us both. I think he’s... dangerous.” She hated admitting that to him, because she should have seen it. And she called herself a reporter? She’d been so blind. “And I’m so mad because it’s all my fault. I had no business letting it get this far with him. I think I was just so flattered that someone so important would have an interest in me... but I was never thinking marriage, honestly. And tonight... well, I think I caught a glimpse of what he’s capable of, and I don’t like it one bit.”

“It’s okay, Lois.” He folded her in his arms, comforting her. “It’s not just you. He’s fooled a lot of people into thinking he’s something that he’s not.”

She pressed her cheek against him and buried her nose in the crook of his neck, loving the way she fit there in his strong embrace. She held still for a moment, allowing herself to find comfort and gain strength from being close to him. It spoke much to Clark’s character that the first words out of his mouth were of comfort, not ‘I told you so.’

Finally, after a moment, she pulled back. “It just hit me tonight, walking into that building... I stepped into the elevator and looked at myself, at who I was when I was with him, and I didn’t like what I saw. I knew I didn’t want that life. I spent all this time through dinner trying to get to know him more, trying to find a connection with him, but I just... couldn’t. It wasn’t there. Not like...” she trailed off, suddenly unsure of her next words.

She knew she had to tell him, but wow, was it scary. And that was with *knowing* how he felt about her. She couldn’t imagine the courage he’d had to come up with yesterday in the park, when he’d told her how he felt; he’d had no idea how she was going to respond, and yet he’d made himself completely vulnerable. Her heart swelled with that same emotion she’d felt last night... only this time, she found she could finally put a name to it.

She looked up at him, feeling as if she’d walked up to the edge of a cliff, and it was time to either jump or run away. But she realized now that she’d been running from this particular cliff for about a year, and she was done.

“Not like... with you,” she continued boldly, looking him right in the eye. “I don’t have a connection with him like I do with you.” She could see the surprise register in his expression, but she continued on. “All I did during the entire dinner was compare him to you. And he kept coming up short, in every way that mattered. I thought about you the whole time. It wasn’t even Lex; I realized that no matter who I was with – even if it was Superman – I would’ve been thinking of you anyway.” She took a breath, waiting to see his reaction.

Clark looked stunned. “Lois, are you... are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

Suddenly, her grin couldn’t be contained. It split her face, her feelings for him shining through. Now that she was here, with him, everything seemed so right. This was where she belonged: in this apartment, with this man... in his arms and in his life. She’d been so very blind before, and not just about Lex. It was time to tell him.

“Clark, I’m so sorry for what I said to you in the park. I wasn’t expecting what you told me, and my reaction... well, it was all wrong. I got scared, because I’ve had other relationships with guys at work, and they were... well, you know – they were practically federal disasters. I just didn’t want you to be another one of those. You are so important to me, more than you’ll ever know. I didn’t want to risk our friendship.”

She took a small step toward him, reaching out a hand to stroke down his arm, needing a connection, needing him to ground her. “But the more I thought about it last night after I left, the more I realized that our date last night was everything I really ever wanted. Eating a quiet, *normal* dinner at home, talking about our day and our pasts and whatever came up... laughing and joking and just being together... even cleaning up after dinner was fun because you were there. I’m comfortable with you, Clark. I’m *happy* when I’m with you.”

He reached out and caught her hand before it fell back to her side. “You always make me happy, Lois. You are everything I’ve ever wanted.”

She smiled softly, but then it turned a touch mischievous. “Of course, then there was after the clean-up...”

He caught her knowing grin and answered with a slow one of his own. “That part, I don’t think I’ll ever forget.”

She giggled. This was so much easier than she’d ever thought. She felt lighter than she had in weeks, despite what had happened with Lex earlier in the evening. She bit her lip and dipped her head shyly. “Me either. But I know really liked it.”

“Me, too.” He looked so happy he could barely get the words out.

Realizing that he still held her right hand, she reached out with her left and found his other hand as well. She brought both their joined sets of hands up in a wide half-circle until they were level with her shoulders. While he watched, she slowly let go and moved his fingers until they matched up with hers, palms touching. Then she slipped her fingers in between his, lacing their hands together. It was a much more intimate feeling, the sensation of his fingers in between hers.

“This is where I want to be, Clark,” she whispered as she lifted her gaze to meet his. She wanted him to look into her eyes and see her sincerity. She was ready to bare herself completely, the same way he had done for her. She needed him to know that.

“This is where I want you to be,” he answered softly, and she was right; his eyes spent some time searching hers. He seemed to find what he was looking for, though, because then his eyes dropped down to her lips, and there was no mistaking his intention. Those butterflies that had been noticeably absent at Lex’s earlier in the evening came back full force, and she found herself eager to reconnect with Clark the way she had last night and show him how she felt. She tilted her face towards his as his lips came down and sweetly pressed against hers.

Their hands dropped and she put her arms around his neck, pulling him in closer. He slipped one arm around her waist while the other swept up her side, tracing her body to her shoulder and back down. Their kiss deepened, more romantic this time than passionate.

It was like every casual, friendly touch he’d ever given her over the course of their relationship had been leading to these gentle, loving kisses; those innocent gestures throughout the year had built her trust in him and her faith in their bond. This was why it was different with Clark; her body knew his already, recognized its mate and was eager to discover more about him. And now that her mind was in agreement, everything seemed to have fallen into place.

For a reporter who had given up on ever truly falling in love, it was a quite a moment. She pulled back from their kiss, but left her arms loosely around his neck, keeping him close. “You think we could try that conversation in the park again? A do-over? I think I can get it right this time.” She leaned in and nipped his lips playfully.

He smiled that blinding smile that she would never get used to having directed at her. He reached up and trailed a finger down her cheek, cupping his hand around her jawline. “Lois, I have been in love with you for a long time. You had to have known,” he said, repeating the words he’d said to her on that park bench. It may

have only been a day ago, but she was so far removed from that person now it may as well as been years ago.

“I knew,” she answered. “I mean, I *know* that you love me,” she added, emphasizing the present tense of the word. “I feel it in the way you treat me, the way you look at me, the way you touch me.”

“Oh, Clark,” she continued, reaching up to cover his hand. She brought it down to her mouth and gently kissed the inside of his palm. “I feel the same way about you. You’re my best friend and the only partner I could ever stand to work with. I admire you, I respect you, and I *do* love you.” She repeated her words, too, only this time, she stopped there and let the phrase stand. “I love you,” she repeated, the words surprisingly easy as they slipped from her tongue. She saw his eyes close as he savored her declaration. “And I don’t mean just as a friend. Thank you for making me stop to see it. Thank you for not giving up on me.”

His eyes fluttered open again and settled on her. “I couldn’t. You are the most precious thing in the world to me.” He leaned down and kissed her again, his touch doing more to tell her how he felt than his words ever could.

They stayed that way for long minutes, murmuring sweet nothings interspersed with quick kisses, just enjoying the closeness that this new turn in their relationship afforded them. They both knew there were things they still had to talk about; namely, what they were going to do about jobs and Lex Luthor, especially now that Lois had seen his darker side. Lois was ready now to hear just what Clark knew about Luthor that had made him so distrusting of the billionaire. Together, they would discover those skeletons Luthor had in his closet, and they would bring him to justice.

For his part, Clark knew that there was still the matter of Superman to deal with; Lois deserved the truth, especially if they were going to be together now as a couple. And it would have to be soon, he knew that, too. But right now, neither one of them wanted to look past the way they were feeling at this most special of moments. Whatever the next few weeks and months held, they knew they would make it through, because they had each other.

What had begun with a simple request was now their reality. “Lois.” Clark grinned as he said her name, breaking one of their many kisses. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

“Will you go out with me again? On a date?”

She smiled back. “The answer to that is always.” Her eyes twinkled a little, her happy expression matching his. “You know all you ever have to do is ask.”

THE END