

This is Our Story

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Rated: PG

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Summary: A chance meeting across a stranger named Jack makes Clark think more about his relationship with Lois just as Lex Luthor finds himself faced with never-ending bad luck that can ruin even the best-laid plans.

Story Size: 12,932 words (71Kb as text)

A/N: In no way do I think these two shows should ever meet, but I thought it might be funny to throw a little bit of laughter into things. The character I chose is [Jack Pearson](#) from *This is Us*. For those that aren't familiar with the "Crock Pot" incident on the show here's a [link](#) to explain some back story. The episode from Lois and Clark the New Adventures of Superman I chose is "Barbarians at the Planet." I hope you all enjoy it.

Huge thanks to NostalgiaKick for being Beta on this one. Thanks to the ladies in the Hangouts group for helping bounce ideas around with these scenes and encouraging me to continue this when my muse was deciding to go AWOL. You rock!

André had worked hard over the years to build up his name as a renowned chef. He was the most sought-after chef in the world. He had competed against the best and earned Michelin star after Michelin star in his restaurants around the world. Though he had come a long way, he never forgot his roots or where he had come from.

Never in his wildest dreams would he have considered he'd be hired as a personal chef by the third richest man in the world, yet here he was living a life of luxury and calling the Luthor Mansion a second home. Metropolis had the same issues any city had. Homelessness, hungry families, and not enough money or resources to feed them all. It had been one of the conditions he'd set when Lex Luthor had hired him to dedicate a certain amount of resources to help those less fortunate. Every month he reached out to everyone he knew to bring in donations of food, appliances, money, or just time and he would cook up a meal to feed three hundred. Just because the homeless were struggling didn't mean their taste buds had to.

A familiar face appeared in the kitchen, and André let out a loud laugh, spotting his old friend from Pittsburgh, Jack Pearson. The young man had certainly aged well over the years. He recalled the years when he would come into O'Shannon's with his wife, Rebecca. It had been one of the first places André had worked as a chef, and it held many nostalgic memories for him. Seeing his old patron standing in the most expansive kitchen he'd ever been blessed enough to work in brought many of the struggles he'd overcome back.

"Jack Pearson," André let out a chuckle as he looked him up and down. "You haven't aged a day."

"You're a liar, André," Jack said, setting a large box down on the counter for him.

"What's this?" André asked, pointing to the box.

"Your charity," Jack said with a broad grin. "I got Rebecca a new one for her birthday as a surprise. I figured instead of tossing it I could donate it." He pulled out an envelope with a few bills sticking out. "This is from the office pool at work."

"Thank you, Jack, I really appreciate it," André said, walking with his friend toward the closet where the rest of the donations

were. "But you didn't have to make the drive to Metropolis."

"I know," Jack said. His mustache hid the smirk that his eyes were teasing him with. "Miguel wants to scope out the place for some expansions. I figured I'd tag along and take an excuse to see an old friend."

"You're a good man, Jack," André said, patting him on the shoulder. "Whatever the reason, I'm glad you stopped by." He grinned back at him, "I hope Rebecca enjoys her gift."

"Me too," Jack grimaced as he looked to the box. "She doesn't know I've replaced it yet."

Chef Rita was hard at work, helping put together the expansive menu Chef André had planned for the Mission charity. To top things off André had also been asked to plan a romantic dinner for Lois Lane to be served in less than three hours. Meeting the deadline would prove a test on all of their skills. Unfortunately, André didn't believe in the idea of leftovers or what he considered "lazy cooking" so appliances that would give them an edge like a crock pot were hard to come by.

She was just about to pull out a pot from the cabinet when a box caught her eye. She looked around, noticing André had already left the kitchen with his friend Jack and was too preoccupied to notice the time constraints he had put the kitchen staff in. Rita looked back at the cabinet where the sterling silver pots were neatly waiting to be used and then glanced at the crockpot once more. Three hundred meals were a challenge for any cook. Surely it wouldn't hurt to let the stew cook while she concentrated on Mr. Luthor's Lobster Risotto?

The fumes from the exhaust of the city bus filled the air. Jack Pearson checked his watch as he looked out the driver's side window, catching sight of Metropolis' Daily Planet. A smile crossed his face as he pulled the car into a parking spot up front. Rebecca was always big on pictures of famous landmarks. What was more memorable than the oldest newspaper in the country?

He stepped out of the car, allowing the station wagon door to clang as he slammed the door shut. He stared up at the metal globe, taking in the sight of the globe above his head. The blue neon lights circled around the globe, lighting up the words, '*Daily Planet*.'

"It gets more and more beautiful each day." A voice with a southern drawl spoke up, approaching Jack from behind.

Jack turned to see an older man in a pinstriped shirt with a black vest and red tie. "I'm sorry, I was just...admiring the view. Passing through on my way out of town."

The man nodded, understanding as he pointed to the doors, "The Planet has a way of doing that to everyone, son." He handed him a copy of the Daily Planet and scribbled something on it. "Consider this a free souvenir."

Jack took it and looked down at the signature on the logo of the front page that read, '*Perry White*.' He looked up, watching the man disappear behind the rotating glass doors. "Well, I'll be," Jack grinned, staring at the paper in his hands in awe.

A shoulder touched his, knocking him down. Jack looked back in surprise, seeing a dark-haired man in a blue dress shirt and burgundy jacket and matching dark grey slacks. "Are you all right?" the man asked, reaching out to help Jack up.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Jack smiled, brushing himself off.

The man looked back at Jack, "I'm sorry. I guess I wasn't looking where I was going." He offered Jack a smile, pointing to the Planet behind him. "Can I help you with something?"

"I, uh, actually yes," Jack said, pulling out his camera from his pocket. "My wife and I have this tradition of stopping at all the sights and taking a picture. And we've got this huge album already. But one place we've never gotten is this." He pointed to the globe above him. "Could you do me a solid and help a guy out?"

The man let out a light chuckle. "I'd be happy to." The man set his briefcase down and reached out to take the camera from Jack.

Perfection. That was what Lex Luthor looked for in everything he did and everyone he surrounded himself with. He only worked with the best of the best and saw failure as a weakness. It was with this mindset that he'd been able to build the largest empire in the world and thus making him the most powerful man in any room. Though he was only a few million behind Alfred Chow and Elena Pappas he was sure the news of his upcoming marriage to one of the world's most respected journalists would help drive the markets up in his favor. With Lois Lane by his side, he would be unstoppable, and having the added bonus of besting Superman would be the delicious dessert.

There was still the matter of the mysterious Kryptonite he'd inquired about, but so far he had yet to hear anything from Devane and his team on whether the break-in had been successful in retrieving Bureau 39's archived items. The meteorite found by Bureau 39 would prove instrumental in his final battle with the man of steel. He just had to bide his time.

The doors to his master suite swung open, and smoke and heat filled the room. Lex looked at the open hall and spotted the orange and red flames that had already consumed his satin drapes.

Clark handed the camera back to the stranger that he'd come across in front of the Planet. The optimistic energy that was refreshing compared to the Metropolis citizens he was used to coming across. The man's story of chasing adventures with his family and wanting to plant a smile on his wife's face with a picture in front of the Daily Planet pulled at something deep inside Clark. He wanted more than anything to have memories like that. He wanted to have a family—a wife—someone to come home to and bring mementos to, adding to a collection they would cherish for years to come.

"Thanks," the stranger smiled back at him. "You certainly helped me make my Rebecca's day."

"That your wife?" Clark asked, digging his hands into his pockets.

"Yeah," the man smiled back at him and let out a deep sigh. "I'm Jack. Jack Pearson." He extended his hand to shake Clark's.

"Clark. Clark Kent." Clark introduced himself.

"Great to meet you, Clark," Jack said, tucking the camera in his jacket.

"Good luck with the drive back, Jack," Clark said, letting out a deep breath. "I hope your wife enjoys the latest addition to your album."

"Me too," Jack said, eyeing him with a look that made Clark feel like Jack might have his own x-ray vision, piercing through his soul as he stared him down. "For what it's worth, I hope you find her too."

"Her?" Clark blinked, looking back at him in confusion.

"Whoever it is that's put that tortured look on your face," Jack said with an observant wink. Before Clark could argue, Jack held up a hand. "I know that look. I used to wear that look for years, waiting and wondering if I'd ever find the one. Then when I finally did, I wasted so much time stalling. I was afraid of the stupidest things. Take some free advice and trust me, your fears are just that—fears. It is worth the risk."

Clark found himself startled by the sudden revelation from Jack as he stared back at the stranger, uncertain how to respond. Fortunately for him, he didn't have to.

All units report to LexCorp towers. We have a report of a fire in the penthouse...

"I'm sorry, Jack," Clark quickly excused himself. "I've really got to go."

"Sure," Jack nodded to him. "Good luck!"

Lex stared at the singed door frame and walls covered in black soot from the flames that had once engulfed the room. Gone. Everything he had held as a prized possession disappeared in a moment. Humiliation from not only finding himself in the position of being a victim of circumstance but also having to turn to Superman and the local authorities for assistance. He was Lex Luthor—the most respected man in Metropolis—and yet he found himself no better off than any other hapless fool unlucky enough to be caught in something as simple as a house fire.

"Mr. Luthor, the paramedics are insisting on a visit to Metropolis General," Asabi said, tapping him on the shoulder and pointing to the ambulance that was parked outside.

"I don't need an ambulance," Lex waved him off. "I'm fine. I'll be just fine."

"I'm afraid you don't have a choice in the matter, sir," Asabi said, gesturing to the EMT that was approaching them with a determined expression.

Lex let out a quiet fit of coughs as the EMT stopped in front of him. Lex tried and failed to convince the well-meaning EMT he was fine. "I really...don't need to..."

"I really must insist you get in the ambulance, Mr. Luthor," the EMT ordered.

Lex met the EMT's eyes, realizing there would be no changing the man's mind. Goody-two-shoes just like the likes of Superman and some of the straight arrow officers at the Metropolis P.D. He knew there was no convincing him he was fine without a doctor siding with him. He turned to Asabi, nodding in agreement. "Asabi, have Dr. Richards meet me at Metropolis General. I don't want to waste a single second."

"Yes, Mr. Luthor," Asabi agreed, nodding as he walked with Lex toward the ambulance. "And Ms. Lane?"

Lex stopped, taking a moment as he realized the humungous hole that had been ripped through his plans for the afternoon. Rushing through something like this would be in poor taste. After the work he'd put into the plans so far, it would be a waste of time and effort. "Give Ms. Lane my regrets and offer a raincheck for Friday evening."

"Yes, Mr. Luthor," Asabi agreed.

Clark reached over to turn the knob of the faucet off. The steam from the shower filled the air as he opened the door to the shower stall to step out and finish drying off. A quick spin at super-speed later and his soaked dark hair was just as dry as it had been before tending to the fire at Lex Luthor's penthouse.

Never in his wildest dreams did he envision he'd be rescuing Luthor from anything. The man was the perfect example of narcissism if he'd ever seen one. He controlled everything in his life down to where the sugar that he poured in his tea came from. Lex Luthor in need of rescuing from anyone or anything—especially from something that should have been preventable given the tight leash he kept on everything—seemed implausible.

It was a strange chance of misfortune for Luthor not only to be in such a predicament but to also find himself depending on those he looked down on for his safety. Meager peasants. That was how Luthor had referred to those in public service. Those same people were the ones putting the fire out, tending to his and all of his staff's health and keeping the neighboring buildings safe from the flames that threatened to spread further. The twist of fate wasn't lost on him, and he was sure there would be many heads rolling over the fire that had made Luthor temporarily homeless.

Clark let out a low mutter, unsure how he felt about that. On the one hand, he found himself taking delight out of seeing Luthor knocked down a few pegs and forced to see what those in public service did. On the other hand, he wouldn't wish Lex Luthor on his worst enemy. There was a silver lining in all of this. With Luthor wrapped up in the chaos of figuring out who was

responsible for the fire, Lois would be around.

<<“I know that look. I used to wear that look for years, waiting and wondering if I’d ever find the one. Then when I finally did, I wasted so much time stalling. I was afraid of the stupidest things. Take some free advice and trust me, your fears are just that —fears. It is worth the risk.”>>

Jack Pearson’s words ran through Clark’s mind as he fiddled with the knot of his tie. He needed to head back to the Planet and file the story on the fire at LexCorp, but given Lois’ plans for the weekend, the thought of dropping by her apartment to check on her grew more and more enticing. He glanced at the clock on his wall, wondering if he had time to drop by before checking in with Perry.

He blanched, shaking his head when he saw how late it was. He hadn’t even shown his face in the newsroom this morning, let alone checked in with the Chief. He needed to get going.

<<“It’s worth the risk.”>>

Lois ran a hand across her face, patting the moisture from her face off. She tried not to think too hard on the fact that she had just washed away half an hour of work in less than five minutes. Nearly two hours of sitting here waiting like an idiot for Lex to show up or call quickly squashed down any regret she might have had on changing out of the uncomfortably tight dress and stockings she had been in earlier.

She had been stood up. There was no sugarcoating it. It wouldn’t be so bad if it weren’t for the last six days of listening to him build up this date as if it were some monumental turning point for the two of them. The magical Italian dinner that Lex presented as a way to erase this past weekend’s painful memories.

He was busy.

She understood that.

But the fact that he made such a big deal over this date only to be left sitting alone in her apartment like an idiot left a sour taste in her mouth. He had a whole city’s worth of employees and yet couldn’t be bothered to at least pass along a message to her.

It was for the best she supposed. It hadn’t become obvious just how deeply rooted Lex had become in her life until a few weeks ago. She found herself instinctively defending him for no reason she could think of.

<<“Arthur Chow. He’s even richer than Lex Luthor.”

“But not as handsome as Lex.”>>

<<“Be careful with Lex. You don’t know him like I do.”>>

Somehow, she’d gone from pursuing a story to being pursued. She wasn’t exactly sure how she felt about that, but she was certain about not being someone’s last priority – no matter how busy he might be. She’d watched her mother play second to her father’s career long enough to know how that would always end. She would not allow herself to become her mother.

She reached for the blouse in her closet, pushing her anger and humiliation deep inside her where she kept her insecurities, never to be seen by anyone with the minor exception of the occasional slip she had in front of her partner.

Instead of sitting here wallowing in her anger at the situation, she would take advantage of the free time to reassess her priorities. She wasn’t going to become the Planet’s first female journalist to win a Pulitzer by allowing herself to be wined and dined by Lex. She was the top investigative journalist in Metropolis. So why hadn’t she taken advantage of her golden opportunity to do what she had started so many months ago?

<<“Be careful with Lex. You don’t know him like I do.”>>

Clark’s cryptic warning a few nights ago had felt like just another dig at Lex. One she had silently brushed off just as she had so many others. There was an obvious distaste between the two men. She still had yet to understand what either one had against the other. It wasn’t until they had all been trapped in a room together for nearly twelve hours that she realized that

Clark’s disdain for Lex was equally met by Lex as well.

While before she had quickly dismissed Clark’s comments as jealous or just Clark being Clark when it came to Lex, the reporter in her — the one that had been on retreat when it came to Lex — wondered just what it was between the two of them. Clark got along with everyone from the janitor to the Prime Minister of Malaysia. Yet somehow her overly friendly partner had nothing but contempt for Metropolis’ philanthropist and most generous and mysterious billionaire.

Why?

Truth be told she couldn’t really say she knew much more about Lex now than she had a few months ago. She’d gotten to know his personality and come to appreciate his humanitarian side, but as far as knowing him — she didn’t feel any closer to discovering who Lex Luthor really was. She knew Clark and even Jack better than she knew the man she was supposed to be dating. That thought didn’t sit too well with her as she stared back at her reflection.

“Definitely time to reassess things,” Lois thought aloud, smoothing her hand through her dark locks. She’d allowed herself to be swept up by the fancy lifestyle and smooth lines Lex used. Now that she recognized what was happening, she had to decide what she was going to do about it.

Lex stepped out of the hospital room, tightening the knot in his tie as he listened to the doctor drone on and on about the risks that came with smoke inhalation. He was the epitome of perfect health. He had nothing to worry about. A simple fire wouldn’t take Lex Luthor out.

Cardiac issues happened to *other* people. He knew himself to be the picture of perfect health. He followed all the recommendations to ensure he would live a long existence. He couldn’t allow himself to be taken out by something as frivolous as blood pressure. Yet here he was listening to his physician drone on about the dangers of smoke inhalation and how often he should be getting checked out.

“Yes, yes, yes,” Lex waved Dr. Richards off. “I’ll be sure to check in once I’m settled.” He turned to Nigel who was standing a few feet away. “Nigel? Any word on the Lexor arrangements?”

“The staff is moving around a few guests to ensure your room is ready,” Nigel responded, looking at his watch. “Mrs. Cox is coordinating with the Fire Marshall to get your files moved over to your room as well.”

“And the arrangements we had for this afternoon?” Lex asked, watching as Dr. Richards left the room.

“Cancelled, sir, but ready to resume whenever you say the word,” Nigel said with a nod of his head.

“Excellent,” Lex straightened his jacket as he listed off the items to address in order of importance. “We’ll need to reschedule that call with Devane. I can’t exactly take his call with my phone lines out.”

“I’ll arrange a follow-up with LexComm in the morning to address the phone line situation and see if we can get it rerouted to your hotel room.”

“Any word on what started this mess?” Lex asked as they exited through the double doors.

“Nothing yet, but I’m sure the fire chief will be in touch once he has an answer,” Nigel promised, following him through the second pair of double doors.

“Keep me informed,” Lex instructed. Nigel nodded, preparing to leave to fetch the car when Lex stopped him. “Oh, and one other thing. Be sure to send an arrangement to Lois Lane, apologizing for missing lunch today. Once this matter with Devane is settled, we’ll need to reschedule.”

“Of course,” Nigel nodded his head, following him to the awaiting limo. “I’ll handle it myself, sir.”

Clark stepped into the lobby of the Daily Planet, straightening his tie as he looked over his shoulder, catching sight of the time. Perry should be finishing up his meeting with the board by now. Which meant he'd be looking for a copy on the next edition. Hopefully, he could buy enough time to type up his article on the LexCorp fire and finish cleaning up his follow-up on Remy turning state against Willie and Fuentes. He should have enough time to get both articles ready for Perry before his editor began demanding them but knowing his luck, something would come up. Something *always* came up.

He stopped when he heard the familiar muttering and cursing coming from the end of the lobby and turned to see none other than his partner, Lois Lane jabbing her thumb repeatedly against the elevator panel, trying to usher the elevator car to arrive sooner with threats of violence.

"How long does it take to go up and down six floors?" Lois muttered another curse that he could clearly pick up even though the rest of the patrons in the lobby couldn't, and he felt his cheeks blush from the very descriptive profanity.

Clark decided the elevator panel had taken enough abuse and sighed, approaching her with a light-hearted joke hoping to coax her out of the current mood she was. He wasn't sure what had riled her up but whatever it was seemed to be worse than Lois' tantrum over Linda King scooping her.

"You keep doing that and Arnie's gonna come after you with the repair bill," Clark said, walking up behind her.

"Well, then maybe they'll fix it right this time." Lois snapped, insistently pressing the button again.

"Whoa there," Clark reached over to grab her wrist, stopping her from causing any further damage to the panel than she already had. "I think the elevator has taken enough abuse for the next hour."

Before Lois could argue with his reasoning, the soft ping came from the control panel behind him, and he turned to see the light on the arrow above the elevator emit a yellow hue as the doors open. He said a silent prayer of thanks before he turned to follow her on the car, wondering if he should dare ask her why she was at the Planet on her day off.

He stole a glance toward Lois, noting the frustration hidden beneath the storm clouds roaming behind her soft features and opted to take the safer approach. Neutral topics tended to help ease her out of her temper-filled moods until she was ready to talk about whatever was bothering her. That seemed the better of his two choices at the moment.

Clark cleared his throat, turning to Lois, "Did you get a chance to read over the Fuentes article yesterday?"

Lois shook her head, biting the inside of her cheek as she stared coolly at the elevator doors. A slight tremble escaped her throat before she quickly squashed it down. "Um, no, I was in a hurry to get home. I, uh, I'll look at it this morning."

He could try to continue the conversation, but something told him to wait. Lois was more than just angry — she seemed genuinely upset about something. Whatever it was that had set her off, it was clear she wasn't ready to talk about it.

She forced a smile, turning to him. "I'll take a look at it first thing, and then we can send it to Perry."

"I think we have another ten minutes or so before he starts shouting for articles and deadlines," Clark acknowledged with a shrug. The elevator doors reached the newsroom floor, and they stepped into the bullpen. Clark followed Lois to her desk, unsure if he should work on the LexCorp fire story or continue to prod Lois out of her bad mood.

Lois reached down to move her mouse across the mousepad, setting her things down as she took her seat and prompted her computer to pull up the login screen by navigating to the Daily Planet database. The Planet logo blinked on the screen as her login credentials were accepted by the system.

"Hard to believe it's only been a week since they bulldozed the Chief's office, huh?" Clark commented, gesturing to Perry's office that had been without construction crew members for the last three days.

"Yeah," Lois nodded, cracking a half-smile as she navigated to her email, tapping her fingers against her desk impatiently waiting for her email to load. A few clicks later and she had the story Clark had sent the previous night. "Here we go." She let out a long breath, biting her lower lip as she scanned the article. He noticed her features grow more tense with each line she read.

"Remy is turning state on Fuentes," Clark said, pulling up a seat at her desk.

Lois let out a shudder, "They both deserve to rot for what they did."

"Agreed," Clark placed a hand on her shoulder and gave it a supportive squeeze. It was a bad deal. Remy had been just as culpable in the actions that took place last week yet somehow, she had ended up with an attorney that said all the right things to the DA and negotiated a deal. Whatever it was she was able to provide them, he just hoped would ensure Fuentes paid for his crimes ten-fold.

Lois frowned, reaching the end of the article. "No summary?"

"I figured you could add that," Clark explained. Truth be told with how close he was to the story, he wasn't sure how to summarize his thoughts on the DA's office cutting a deal with Remy. He felt betrayed by the justice system he fought to uphold. She had committed these crimes and hurt just as many people that night. Yet she would walk away with a new life and a slap on the wrist. It felt wrong.

Lois cocked her eyebrow, looking back at Clark with an amused expression. "You sure you want me writing that?"

"We're *both* too close to this one, Lois." Clark shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't say that too loud or Perry might overhear you," Lois reminded him with a playful smile.

"What might I overhear?" their editor's southern drawl echoed in Clark's eardrums, and they both turned in surprise.

"Nothing," Lois said hurriedly, pointing at the screen. "Just wrapping up this story for the next edition."

"Uh-huh," Perry glanced between the two of them, leaving them both wondering if they'd have this story ripped out from under them after their confession. After what felt like an eternity of staring back at Perry waiting for a response, the editor finally cleared his throat and broke the silence. "Story on my desk in five."

"Right, no problem, Chief," Lois nodded.

"Sure thing, Chief," Clark agreed, watching Perry turn to leave and head back to his office.

Lois let out a long sigh, pushing the send button on her email to Perry. Hopefully, that would keep Perry at ease until the next break in the story. She had skirted just up to the line of journalistic neutrality, and she was sure Perry would probably have a few words for her, but in the end, she had summarized both sides of the coin. A killer would walk free in order to keep another killer behind bars. How safe would Metropolis citizens feel with that knowledge?

<< "From what I've heard, I'd be better off out there with the cops on my tail than you, Mr. Luthor,">>

She recalled the statement Fuentes had made and shook her head.

What had that meant?

<< "Be careful with Lex. You don't know him like I do,">>

Perhaps it was time to stop prolonging her self-ridicule and instead focus her attention on getting the answers to questions she had yet to find out in the last six months. She spun around in her desk chair, spotting Clark at his desk, typing ferociously at his keyboard. Given Clark was one of the few people she knew to

dislike Lex, he seemed as good a place to start.

She rolled herself to his desk, bumping his desk with a jolt when she came to a stop. Clark looked up in surprise, stopping and turning to her. “Yes?”

“You don’t know him like I do.” Lois quoted Clark’s words back to him. “What did you mean by that?”

Recognition crossed his face, but instead, Clark seemed to hold himself back, asking her, “Could you be more specific?”

“Who else would I be referring to? You are the president of the I Hate Lex Luthor club, are you not?” Lois let out an exasperated sigh as she crossed her arms over her chest.

“I don’t *hate* him,” Clark clarified doing little to sway his argument as he looked down in his lap.

“Fine,” Lois rolled her eyes, leaning further back in her chair. “Strongly dislike.”

“Fair enough,” Clark shrugged his shoulders. “Why the sudden curiosity?”

“Maybe I’m a little more affected by last week’s kidnapping than I originally thought,” Lois acknowledged, hoping she wouldn’t have to admit what it was exactly that made her start questioning things. Admitting she’d been stood up on top of her current feelings of self-doubt wasn’t something she could deal with right now. Heaven help her if Clark was actually proven right. Could Lex really be capable of underhanded dealings and criminal activity?

No matter what the truth was, she had to know.

“Since when do you heed any advice I give you when it comes to Luthor?” Clark asked, raising an eyebrow at her as he turned the desk chair back and forth at a fifteen-degree angle with his foot.

Growing tired of watching him move from side to side, she stretched her leg out to stop him from moving any further. “I just got done sending an article to Perry that details how a murderer that has done everything from making terroristic threats to murdering innocent children will get less time than the supposed leader who somehow doesn’t have near the number of violent crimes on his record—for a supposed leader that is. I want answers. I want to know how Sheldon Bender got her name. I want to know how the DA can cut a deal in less than a week.” She let out a shaky breath and finished with a soft whisper. “I want to know what Fuentes meant when he said Lex was more dangerous for him than the police.”

Clark reached out and placed a hand on her shoulder, giving it a squeeze. She looked back at him with a shaky breath, uncertain what to expect after her rambling outburst. His voice was calm as he spoke. “You’re right, Lois, there’s a lot of unanswered questions here. Maybe Fuentes was in charge, maybe he wasn’t. Maybe someone else was pulling the strings on this job, maybe they weren’t.”

“Things aren’t always what they seem,” Lois acknowledged, looking up at him. She let out a long breath, feeling a hard lump in her throat. “Like maybe you think you’re going to land the biggest story of the year only to have the tables turned, and you have no idea when or how you stopped pursuing a lead and started to be the one being pursued?”

Recognition crossed Clark’s face, and he stared back at her for what felt like an eternity. The boulder-sized lump that sat in the middle of her throat grew more painful by the second. Finally, Clark broke the silence, “Maybe we should take this conversation to the conference room.”

“Maybe,” Lois acknowledged, giving him a watery smile.

The bitter cold Alaskan air whistled against Robert Devane’s nostrils as he exited the helicopter he had rode in on. He had made more than one attempt to follow through on his deal with Luthor, but when the billionaire had disappeared, he opted to take advantage of the opportunity. Three different buyers had shown interest in the rock.

All of which had been willing to pay well into the billions for the meteorite rumored to be the key to Superman’s undoing. Much more than his deal with Luthor had been for. Now all he had to do was make it out of this exchange without losing a limb—or worse.

“Mr. Devane, I take it?” a voice came from behind him, and he turned to see a short-statured man in a long black trench coat and a bowler hat to match. The man seemed harmless, but experience told him never to trust appearances. “Our ride’s just up there.” He pointed to the town car waiting just a few feet away.

Clark set his coffee mug down on the conference room table, watching as Lois paced in front of him, uncertain if he should interrupt the rambling or just let her get everything off her chest. Something had obviously happened to get Lois riled up and looking more closely at Luthor. For which he was grateful to have her looking at Luthor as a story rather than a date, but still he couldn’t help but wonder what had caused this change in attitude.

She finally stopped in front of him, taking a breath, crossing her arms over her chest as she spoke. “I want—No, I need the truth. Whatever ugly truth it is. I need to hear it.”

“What truth?” Clark asked.

“Whatever it is that you’re hiding from me because you think I can’t handle it,” Lois said pointedly, raising an eyebrow at him. “You don’t become animus toward someone for no reason. So, I want to hear it.”

He wanted more than anything to divulge what he knew about Luthor and have her help him bring the billionaire down once and for all but at the same time, experience had taught him to be careful with how much he divulged to her when it came to Luthor. She was, after all, dating him.

Even if she was having second thoughts.

“Lois, I’m not sure you’re going to want to hear what I have to say,” Clark edged cautiously, tapping his pen against the table nervously.

Lois’ eyes closed for a moment, seeming to try and reclaim calm as she muttered in a low tone, “Clark, please just tell me. What is it? What do you know? What do you suspect?” Clark stared back at her, unsure if he was ready to go down this road with Lois. Finally, he felt the rest of his resolve crumble when she looked at him with those pleading eyes, “Please?”

“You might want to sit down,” he pointed to the seat across from him.

“So, you’re saying Lex orchestrated the sabotage of Prometheus?” Lois asked, summarizing what Clark had told her so far. It was a lot to take in. The pieces fit. Baines’ murder. Platt’s staged suicide. She had suspected someone high up when she’d been investigating but never imagined it would be Lex Luthor.

“How else do you think that bomb made its way back on Prometheus after Dr. Baines’ death?” Clark asked gently.

“Police report did rule it as sabotage,” Lois recalled, shaking her head. “With all the excitement of Superman’s arrival, I never followed up.”

Clark nodded. “Remember when you asked Baines ‘why?’”

Lois nodded, “She said it was for…”

“Profit,” Clark nodded. “Who stood to make a profit if Prometheus didn’t succeed?”

Lois cringed inwardly, “Lex.”

“Should he make Space Station Luthor a reality, yes,” Clark responded gently.

Lois bit her lower lip as she ran her hands up and down her face, taking in everything Clark had told her. The fire Superman had rescued Lex from. The hundreds of times Superman had confronted Lex on his wrongdoings and the taunting response he’d received. The story after story that had led them just close enough to find who they thought was the bad guy, but in reality, kept them

from discovering the real monster behind the crime that infested Metropolis.

"I'm an idiot." Lois breathed out, unable to find the words to articulate the racing thoughts that drummed through her mind at an alarmingly fast beat. She felt the sandpaper dryness in the core of her throat as she squeaked out behind unshed tears. "I can't believe I let him manipulate me like this."

"People see what they want to see," Clark said, placing a hand on her shoulder. "You wanted to see the best of him." His voice lowered an octave as he added, "So you did." She looked down, tightening her hands together on the table. He reached over to place a hand over hers and squeezed them gently. "Lois, that's not a bad thing."

"It is when you're supposed to be the Planet's best investigative reporter, and you get manipulated by..." She stopped shaking her head. "Why haven't you gone to Henderson with any of this?"

"People see what they want to see," Clark reminded her. "That and I don't have any physical evidence to tie Luthor to any of this."

"Right," Lois nodded, realizing with a frown just how little physical evidence it had taken to convince her of Lex's culpability in some of the crimes committed over the last year. Still, she believed him. She couldn't put her finger on it, but there was something in Clark's tone and, not to mention, that his source was Superman. She cleared her throat, looking back at her partner's mocha brown eyes as she swiped a stray tear from her cheek. "Can't go to Henderson with just speculation."

"So, I take it you believe me now?" Clark asked uncertainly.

Lois was quiet for a moment and then nodded. "Yeah, I mean there's still a lot of questions, but I believe you."

The Presidential Suite of the Lexor hotel, even with its expansive room and state of the art design, still struggled to maintain the running of the multi-billion corporation within its four walls. Furniture had been removed to make room for the board room conference room table. Though the fire had hindered Lex's morning plans, he would not be deterred.

He looked up from the paperwork that required his signature. His next move to acquire the Daily Planet by hostile takeover had already started. Though he would have preferred to have already proposed when this action took place, he knew it would only sway favor in Lois Lane's eyes. Her adoration for her beloved newspaper was something he'd quickly taken notice of in their early courtship. Coming to the rescue when all hope seemed lost would only draw her closer.

Mrs. Cox poured his afternoon tea and nodded to him. "The courier should be up within the hour to deliver the buy-out checks to the Planet's board members."

Lex let out a deep sigh of relief as he leaned back in his chair. "Excellent news." He pointed to the window behind him, "Any estimate on when I'll be moved back into the penthouse?"

Mrs. Cox gave an uneasy smile, "Unfortunately, we are unable to do anything until the Fire Marshall has finished the inspection... which has not been completed yet."

"For God's sake, what do I pay these people for?" Lex grumbled irritably. "How long does it take to inspect..." He stammered out, cutting himself off as a coughing fit overtook him.

Mrs. Cox looked back at him in concern. "Lex, that cough doesn't sound good?"

"I'm fine," Lex snarled out at her, shoving the papers in front of him in her direction. "What's the update on tracking down Devane?"

"He's in the wind," Mrs. Cox said, looking away from him as she tapped her hand against the wooden table.

"Well, of course, he is," Lex muttered in disgust. "He's been given access to the greatest weapon in the world, and every means

of communication I had with him went up in smoke along with my home."

"He's going to need to sell it somewhere, Lex," Mrs. Cox reassured him. "We'll find him."

"You better," Lex warned.

Lois reached over the two large stacks of files to grab a hot slice of Grimaldi's pizza from the open box. She felt the tip of her tongue slip to her outer lip in anticipation as she watched the string of mozzarella and tomato sauce drip onto the paper plate in her hand. "Ohhhh, just what the doctor ordered." She dipped her head down to take a bite, letting out a heavenly moan as the cheese and sauce danced on her taste buds in a perfect symphony.

"You okay there?" Clark asked, nudging her elbow as he sunk down into the chair behind her.

"I don't care what anyone says. How can anyone not like East Village with perfect food like this?" She mumbled behind a mouthful of cheese and homemade tomato sauce. "And that crust..."

Clark let out a light chuckle, "So, I take it you're no longer mad at me for making you take a break?"

Lois scowled at him, recalling the argument she'd put up when he refused to go through one more page without having some sort of nourishment. She couldn't blame him. It was late, and they had worked through most of the afternoon. A late lunch was needed for both of them. She looked back at him shyly. "I suppose we both needed the break."

Clark cocked an eyebrow at her, offering her a half-smile. "Wow, where're the witnesses when you need them? An admission that *I'm* right?"

"Ha, ha," Lois said sarcastically, rolling her eyes as she scooted back in her seat. "I can admit when I'm wrong about something." She heard what sounded like a snort escape Clark's throat and glared back at him. "*I can!*"

"I didn't say anything," Clark responded smoothly, reaching for another slice of pizza. "So, not that I mind going through every single case we've covered in the last year, *but* what exactly do you think you're going to find?" He motioned to the table covered in file boxes and scattered file folders.

"I just need to know what it was that I missed," Lois said carefully. She let out a long breath, setting her paper plate down. "If I missed everything with Prometheus and Dr. Baines then surely there's more."

She watched as Clark's face softened. His dark eyes flickered behind his eyelids as his nostrils flared, seeming to be contemplating something before he spoke up. "I guess I can understand that."

"It's just something I need to do," Lois explained softly. "I don't want to look back and wonder '*what-if*' you know?"

Clark felt his heart lurch in his chest as he listened to the desperation and vulnerability coming from Lois. It tore him up inside to watch her struggle through the realization of just how much she had not seen. On the one hand, he wanted to protect her from the pain that came from realizing she had been lied to and manipulated by Luthor. While on the other hand, he relished the fact that she finally saw the truth.

"It's just something I need to do," Lois explained softly. "I don't want to look back and wonder '*what-if*' you know?"

He nodded, setting his plate down as he turned his chair toward her. He watched her cautiously, uncertain how to react to this new side to Lois he had never seen before. She'd opened up to him about her family and the betrayal with Claude, but this seemed different. She appeared to be desperate as she searched for answers.

He had been caught off guard when she demanded answers from her this morning on what he had against Luthor. Experience

had taught him to approach with caution whenever discussing Luthor, given her relationship with him, but this had been different. The determination and fierceness in her eyes had convinced him to throw caution to the wind and tell her the truth. What he could anyway. There was still a lot he couldn't tell her because of the Pandora's box it would open up regarding his alter-ego.

<<“Take a chance.”>>

Jack Pearson's words weighed heavily on him as he noted the curious expression on Lois' face when she stared back at him. He turned his chair back and forth with his foot, unsure if he should respond to her heartbreaking plea or let her continue to take them down this path of reflection on the many times Luthor had pulled the wool over everyone's eyes. He knew it would be a challenge. Lois had a knack for always being right and being the best at what she did. It was one of the many things he loved about her. It was also what made this painful stroll down memory lane all the more agonizing. Each story they had covered held a hidden truth that led back to Lex.

He still wasn't sure that hashing through the lost opportunities and year of near misses was the best idea, but Lois had insisted on taking a fresh look at everything. She had to know.

‘Had to know what?’

What was it she was trying to prove? He wasn't sure what the answer was, but he had to try and get to the bottom of what was motivating this journey through the past. He had combed through these files for months, trying to find anything that may have been missed but Luthor was too good. Clark's brow furrowed and spoke up, *“What-if, what exactly?”*

Lois let out a sigh and ran a hand through her hair. *“What if my ignorance helped put the wrong person behind bars? What if an innocent person was hurt because I refused to see what was right in front of me?”* Her voice wavered as the last question escaped her throat. *“What if I'm losing my edge? My reporter's instinct. It's been known to happen.”*

“Your what?” Clark practically choked out, reaching over to take her hand in his. *“Lois, you are the best reporter in this city.”*

“Who missed what was right in front of her,” Lois reminded him, shaking her head in dismay.

“You made a mistake. An error in judgment.” Clark shrugged his shoulders. *“It's not like you married the guy.”*

Lois let out an involuntary shudder, *“Bite your tongue, Kent.”*

“Sorry,” Clark flashed a quick smile back at her.

She needed a distraction. Something to pull her back and remind her that despite the mistake with Luthor, she was still the best. The look on Jack's face when he had received Perry's autograph that morning ran through his mind, and he smiled. *“You know, sometimes we get so caught up in everything we do here it's hard to pull ourselves out of the daily grind and realize how big a part we play.”*

“What do you mean?” Lois asked curiously, pulling her chair closer to him.

“I mean, sometimes we forget how big of an impact we have on the world,” Clark explained gently. The words fell from his mouth, and an ease came out of him that he hadn't felt in ages. Something had changed. He smiled back at her, holding her hand in his, *“The stories we cover. The people we work with and the mayhem we uncover. No, we may not always get it right the first time, but very rarely have I ever seen anyone turn their back on the truth or just give up. Least of all you, Lois.”*

A smile spread across Lois' face that made his heart burst. Her eyelashes fluttered, and she turned to him, placing a hand on his arm—a gesture she'd never made with Clark before—and whispered, *“You really think so?”*

“I know so,” Clark pointed to the elevator doors behind him. *“This guy named Jack was standing outside the Planet this morning just in awe of being here in front of the Daily Planet.”*

Perry made the guy's year by signing a copy of the morning edition for him. You would have thought he had an autograph from Brad Pitt or something the way the guy went on. He was so excited to share that with his wife and kids. A memento to take home and share from something that seems just so ordinary for us.”

His chest tightened as he recalled the love and adoration Jack had shared when talking about his family. What he wouldn't give to have that kind of love in his life. He'd spent so much time hiding from everything and everyone he found himself feeling isolated from those he cared about most. Namely, his partner who seemed to not give him a second look unless he had donned a cape and tights.

Lois smiled sadly, *“That's really sweet.”*

“You should have heard him going on about his family and how happy he was going to make them with this picture and autograph to add to their collection.” Clark grinned happily. *“You could tell how much that small token meant to him.”*

“It must be really nice to have that kind of a relationship,” Lois commented. To his surprise, she turned her chair, so her shoulder was a mere few centimeters away from his. Her closeness sent a flurry of questions through him as he cautiously teetered through the conversation with her, unsure what to make of her close proximity as they continued their discussion.

Lois wasn't sure what to make of the tale Clark had divulged to her. He was right. It was easy to miss how big of an impact their daily lives of chasing down stories had on the rest of the world. She felt the last of her resolve begin to waver as she looked over at him. For so long she'd kept herself and everyone around her at a distance, trying to somehow protect herself from another Claude or Paul situation. Yet here she was once again betrayed, but it was of her own doing. Clark had been the one there warning her about Lex. She didn't listen. She had quickly dismissed him as being jealous after only a day and a half of working together rather than taking his warning to heart.

Would it have changed things?

She would love more than anything to have or even be privy to seeing her own parents share a relationship like what Clark described from this Jack. Her experience with anything in regards to love or relationships left her with a bitter taste in her mouth.

The only person she'd actually allowed herself to indulge in the possibilities of love or something more was Superman. Though she couldn't deny there was a part of her that took delight in that fantasy because it was indeed a fantasy. She didn't have to fear her friendship or professional relationship being destroyed if things went south with Superman.

Superman was safe.

Unlike her partner.

Her friend.

Her confidante.

Clark was ...

She stared back at his mocha brown eyes, feeling herself almost instinctively lean closer as she responded, *“It must be really nice to have that kind of a relationship.”*

A thousand thoughts ran through her mind as she stared back at him, uncertain how they had ended up sitting this close to one another without her noticing. She felt the corners of her mouth twitch with a half-smile as she looked back at her partner, wondering how much longer she should sit there without moving.

“Yeah,” Clark agreed, looking over at her with a nod of his chin. *“Makes you wonder how something like that starts.”*

A chance meeting.

A friendship.

A schoolmate.

A work partner.

The many scenarios ran through her mind, and Lois felt a

prickle inside her throat as her heart began to hammer. She looked back at him, trying to convey a calm she didn't feel at that moment.

Clark looked back at her and nodded his head. Lois felt her throat tighten as she responded, "I guess any relationship starts with taking a chance on one another." Every warning was going off in her head, telling her to pull away yet she couldn't seem to make herself do it. Why couldn't she just run away and lock the door like she always did?

'Maybe because you don't want to.'

"A chance?" Clark echoed, his brow furrowed as he turned toward her.

"Opening yourself up to anyone is scary," Lois amended, feeling her heart pound against her chest like a battle drum. She could run away and stop this conversation before it got too close to the truth she'd been too afraid to admit.

"Why?" Clark asked, letting out a long breath as he stared back at her with an intensity that sent her heart rate into a flurry.

Lois felt a lump on her throat as she responded on instinct. "Being vulnerable is hard, but when you open yourself up to someone and take a chance it's terrifying. You're handing over a part of you and a part of the control you have over your life. Whether it's a business partner, a friend or...more." She heard her voice waver at the last statement and quickly looked away.

"So, you're saying having friends is terrifying?" Clark asked, raising his brow at her.

"No, friends are...okay." Lois shook her head.

"Just okay?" Clark pressed.

"Friends can still hurt you," Lois responded quietly.

Clark nodded, understanding the silent meaning behind her words. He always did that. His hand brushed against her cheek, "Not everyone is going to end up like Linda King, Lois...or Paul...or Claude."

"I know that," Lois felt her voice waver as she spoke, fighting the burning sensation in her throat as she felt the tears form in her eyes.

"Do you?" he asked, his brow furrowed as he looked back at her with a look that made her want to run for the nearest exit and melt in his arms all at once.

She felt her insides waver as she stared back at his mocha brown eyes. How could he do that? Just whisper a few words, and she was left wondering which way to turn. "I..."

Something flashed in his eyes for a moment, and he continued, "Lois, you keep everyone at a distance. Even if someone wanted to get close to you, they couldn't. Not without risking... everything."

"I don't keep everyone at a distance," Lois clarified, finding herself unable to continue the argument as she thought back on the countless times over the last year she had pushed her partner away anytime she felt herself wavering toward anything that might go past the friendship she'd come to rely on and find comfort in. "Okay, maybe I do." Lois amended, reaching her hand out to take his.

"Maybe?" Clark asked softly.

"What are you trying to say?" Lois challenged, cocking an eyebrow as she looked back at him.

"I'm just making conversation," Clark said, pulling away.

Lois bit her lower lip, feeling the loss of contact. Did he seriously just do that? Did he seriously just make her open up about her most inner fears, make her wonder about the possibility of more with their friendship before pulling away from her?

<< "Now there you go using that word again Clark. There is 'you,' there is 'I,' there is no 'we,'"

"Not yet."

"Not ever."

"We'll see."

"How long can you hold your breath?">>

"You're making conversation?" Lois echoed as memory after memory raced through her mind. It had been so obvious. How had she not seen it before? She stared back at him with a soft expression.

<< "But that would have to mean that I found you... Clark, you were sprayed. How come you didn't fall for me?"

"I guess I'm just not attracted to you, Lois."

"Liar! You are so attracted to me.">>

She let out a soft whimper and responded, "You're right. There I said it, are you happy?"

"What am I right about?" he asked with a light chuckle.

"I run for the hills anytime anything, or anyone gets too close to me. I always have, and yet for some reason, I have these friends that just won't take 'no' for an answer. I push them away, and they're still there with a pint of chocolate ice cream after I spend most of the day lashing out at them for something that wasn't their fault," Lois rambled, recalling her guilt over how she had lashed out at Clark after the pheromone spray incident.

<< "Clark, whether or not that memory of yours comes back, I just want you to know I think you're terrific."

"Likewise,"

"I mean, I love you...like a brother.">>

"I'm not very good at being a friend. I'm even worse at relationships. Every attempt I've ever made has resulted in a betrayal of some sort. I don't trust easily, and I couldn't bear the thought of losing one of my best friends." The tears ran down her cheeks as she listed the reasons why the unspoken topic they had both been dancing around for the last half hour would never work.

Clark smiled back at her. "Sometimes you just have to take a leap of faith and trust that everything will work out, Lois."

"I don't have a whole lot of faith to leap with," Lois responded cautiously.

"Just tall buildings to leap off of?" Clark grinned.

"Maybe," Lois shrugged her shoulders.

"Maybe I'm just as scared as you are," Clark said after a long moment, breaking the silence between them. "You're my best friend, and I don't want to lose that either."

"Then why are we having this conversation?" Lois asked, wiping her hand across her cheek. "This is...we're *best friends*."

<< "Goodbye? We're partners!"

"You don't need a partner, Lois. You never did."

"Maybe not, but I was starting to like having one.">>

"I know," Clark said, taking a step closer. "But sometimes you just have to take a leap of faith and plunge in with both feet instead of skirting around, afraid to change."

"I'm not afraid to change," Lois corrected him. "I don't want to lose my friend."

"Neither do I," Clark took another step closer and added.

"What if it doesn't work out?" Lois asked.

"What if it does?"

"Answers! I want *answers!*"

Lex let out a low hiss as his gaze shifted around the trio that surrounded him. "How in the world did I pay over two hundred thousand dollars in buy-outs and yet no contract has made its way to my doorstep of my newest acquisition?"

A strained voice came from the corner, "Lex, it was a clerical error on the bank's part, I'm sure."

"A clerical error?" Lex fumed angrily, reaching for the gold-plated lamp on the table in front of him. "A missing period is a clerical error, Mrs. Cox. This is a *five-hundred-thousand-dollar* error that has cost me everything!" He lunged his arm and threw the lamp across the room, letting out a dismissive shrug as he saw the glass shatter across the floor.

"I want answers, and I want them now!" Lex fumed angrily, smashing his fist against the table in front of him.

Mrs. Cox looked warily toward Nigel and then turned back to

Lex, “The bank didn’t receive the request for the transfer of funds due to the fire, Lex.”

“*A fund transfer?*” His eyes darkened, and he saw a fiery red as he tightened his grip on the side of the table in front of him. “Thousands of dollars lost. Hours of careful, meticulous planning only to have it disintegrate before any steps can be made in taking ownership of the Planet or forcing Lois Lane’s hand. All of it is lost! *Gone!*” He lifted the table up over his head, throwing it at the wall behind the trio of disappointing confidants before him.

Mrs. Cox and Asabi fell to the ground for cover while Nigel remained calm and collected, unfazed by Lex’s outburst. “I’m sure we can . . . fix this, Lex,” Mrs. Cox reassured him.

“You’ve done enough damage!” Lex growled as he glared at the unfazed butler, reaching his hand up to jab Nigel in the shoulder. “I want the lowly rat that is responsible for that fire on my doorstep by the end of today, or it is your head. Am I clear?”

Nigel cleared his throat, reaching in his coat pocket to pull out a small manila envelope and hand it to Lex. “I would have thought my time would be better spent on a trip to the Arctic. Unless you don’t want to recover the missing Kryptonite from that traitorous Devane?”

A curve crossed Lex’s lips as he glared back at Nigel. “Is that so?” A calm crossed Lex as he straightened up, “Then what are we waiting for?”

“You might want to change, Mr. Luthor,” Nigel eyed Lex’s attire and noted, “The Arctic can be unforgiving to a six-piece suit.”

“Very well,” Lex straightened his jacket and turned to Nigel. “And Nigel, don’t disappoint me again.”

“Yes, Mr. Luthor.”

<<“*What if it does?*”>>

Those were the scary words that had been uttered. It was finally out there for both of them to face. Lois ran a hand through her hair, looking over at the dark-haired man that had just stepped on the elevator in a new light.

<<“*Take a chance.*”>>

A date.

She had agreed to one date tonight with him. One evening where they would both throw caution to the wind and determine if it was worth taking a chance and exploring the possibility of more than friendship with one another.

One date.

<<“*What if it bombs?*”

“*What if it doesn’t?*”>>

<<“*We’re best friends.*”

“*We’ll always be friends.*”

“*Promise?*”>>

She had agonized over every possible lousy ending to this evening and second-guessed her decision to, as Clark had put it ‘*take a chance*’ and see where this goes. She could always back out and probably save herself some heartache, but then she would never know the answer to the questions her mind had presented her with over the last twelve hours.

She felt something toward Clark. Whether that was more than friendship, she wasn’t sure, but there was a pull that had always been there. She had spent the last year trying to deny it and push him away but she was done running. She was done hiding.

She needed to know.

He probably needed to know just as badly.

The elevator pinged, and she waited for the other passengers to exit, lingering behind with Clark for a moment. “Busy day, huh?” she commented, teasing her hair with her fingertips as she looked over at Clark.

“Yeah,” Clark nodded, walking with her into the lobby. “But productive.” He flashed a quick smile her way and added. “You found the needle in the haystack that I’ve been looking for for

months. I’d say that’s a win.”

“We found a connection to the mysterious boss.” Lois sighed, taking the compliment in jest. “We still have no idea who the boss is or how to prove this boss ties back to Lex.”

“We will,” Clark replied confidently. His smile spread across his face, reaching up to his cheeks and spreading across his cheekbones.

“How can you be so sure?” Lois asked, eying his burst of confidence suspiciously.

“Because we’re the best,” Clark said, walking through the rotating glass door with her.

“I guess we are,” Lois said shyly, feeling her own smile spread across her face. They stopped on the sidewalk just outside the Planet, finishing their conversation before parting their ways. Would they still joke around like this after tonight? A hard lump filled her throat as she realized how much was at risk. She let out a raspy sigh and whispered, “That’s what makes this so scary.”

He nodded, letting out his own sigh, “Lois, if you’re having second-thoughts I . . .”

Before he could finish making the offer to not go through with the date, she cut him off, shaking her head adamantly. “No, that’s not what I meant. I just . . . I’m scared of losing *this*.” She motioned between the two of them.

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, I’m scared too,” Clark admitted, reaching over to cup her cheek.

“Really?” Her eyelashes fluttered as she looked back at him, feeling a wave of relief wash over her.

“Really,” he echoed, dropping his hand from her cheek.

“Look, I’m not going to stand here and lie and tell you everything will be fine. I honestly don’t know. I do know it’s worth at least trying to see where this goes. Whether we’re going back to being just friends or something more tomorrow, it’s at least worth giving it a shot.”

Lois nodded, letting out a light breath as she stared back at him in wonderment. She was really doing this. They were really doing this. “So, Centennial Park at eight?”

“That’s when the Light Festival is supposed to start, yeah,” Clark nodded, taking her hand in his.

“So, we’re not going to sit here and pretend we don’t know each other over a candlelit dinner?” Lois teased with a half-smile.

“I figured we could do that while at least trying something fun. That way we could at least enjoy ourselves if we end up boring one another,” Clark teased back.

“I’ve never been to a Light Festival before,” Lois admitted shyly.

“Well, neither have I,” Clark responded with a chuckle. “We can be newbies together.”

Lois let out a light chuckle. “See you at eight.”

Lex held his chest as he let out a loud bark, coughing up what felt like his lung as he exited the private terminal to his jet. The brisk cold rattled down his airways, and he gasped for the scarce oxygen in the Arctic cold.

“This way, sir,” the pilot pointed to the car in front of them.

Lex nodded, holding his fur-lined coat to him, seeking a warmth beneath the bristling wind that howled in his ears. “How much farther?” Lex shouted into the wind.

The pilot didn’t seem to pick up on his question but rather pointed up ahead as he backed away to return to the jet. Lex thought momentarily about lashing out at him but given how crucial his timeline was in order to retrieve the Kryptonite he thought better of it. Just as he reached the car he let out another raspy cough, feeling his insides contract with each breath.

‘*No, not like this,*’ he thought feeling a panic rise up inside him, but before he could muster up the energy to scream the pain overtook him, knocking him unconscious.

Lois felt a flutter in her abdomen as she looked across the pond that was dimly lit with the light show. She turned to Clark as they strode through Metropolis' Centennial Park, noting the tranquil surroundings as the lanterns glowed in the air above them.

Had it really only been just twenty-four hours since that conversation?

She had spent hours agonizing over the confession and what exploring the possibilities would mean, but to her surprise, once Clark had shown up at her door, she found herself at ease. She looked over to the fountain where the lanterns floating in the sky were hovering, emitting a warm glow across the crystal-clear water. There was no pressure to put up a façade that came with the many dates she'd been setup on by her sister or her mother's friends.

This was different.

"I had no idea they did this," Lois commented, pointing up at the night sky where the lanterns floated above them.

"Me neither," Clark shrugged his shoulders, holding up the lantern they'd picked up from the lighting station a few feet away. "I saw a flyer for it the other day and figured it might be worth it to check out."

Lois cracked a smile back at him, "Taking quite a chance there, weren't you?"

"Yeah, but that's what life's about, isn't it?" Clark asked. "Taking a chance?"

"I guess so," she agreed, watching the reflection of the golden light from the lanterns emit from the corner of his glasses. She let out a long breath she didn't realize she had been holding and turned to him, "I don't open up easily. I guess I don't have to tell you that, but despite everything, you've still been there. You're literally the only person outside of my sister I've opened up to and not had my trust betrayed."

A look of uncertainty crossed Clark's face, and he looked torn for a moment before she leaned up to brush her lips against his in a soft, featherlight kiss. Caution quickly turned to curiosity as desire quickly pushed its way to the forefront of her mind. Any doubts or uncertainties she'd had about tonight quickly disappeared as Clark's hands moved to both sides of her face and his lips found hers again and again. She murmured her approval, looping her arms around his neck and giving the kiss the attention it so desperately needed.

An older man in black bowler hat checked the time as he watched the paramedics attend to the man that had collapsed on the tarmac. He held the lead-lined box in his hand and turned to leave as the time of death was called out.

"Such a shame," he thought aloud to himself. "A simple checkup from a doctor would have prevented Mr. Luthor's untimely death, but then the timeline could have been seriously altered had he been in full control of his faculties and able to come after Superman." He typed in a code on the handheld computer. "Submission for automatic destruction to Utopia 2245."

A chirp came from the device in his hand, and a robotic voice responded, "Submission accepted, Mr. Wells. Timeline is intact. Ready for transfer?"

"Just be sure not to misplace my coat this time," Wells responded. "It's bitterly cold up here."

Clark felt the prickle of uneasiness on the back of his neck as he stepped inside Lois Lane's apartment. Lois' heartfelt admiration for what a good friend he'd been despite everything weighed heavily on him as he took a seat on her sofa. The evening had gone better than he could have dreamed, but there was still the nagging issue of his alter-ego. He knew he couldn't realistically pursue anything real without telling her the truth.

Still, he couldn't help but feel apprehensive of sharing this part of his life with her. In all twenty-seven years here on Earth, he

hadn't told a soul outside of his parents. He kept everyone at arm's length, preventing them from discovering just how different all-American boy Clark Kent really was. His greatest fear was to open up and tell those he cared about most the truth and have them reject him.

In his head, he knew the chances of Lois doing such a thing were slim to none. He found himself in constant competition it seemed with his super alter-ego, but still, he couldn't help but wonder if the revelation would result in his worst nightmare come true.

<<"Take a chance.">>

The wise words had brought him this far. When push came to shove, he knew he trusted Lois more than anyone and knowing that was what put his mind at ease as he toyed with different scenarios, wondering just how the revelation should go.

Lois handed him a mug of coffee, taking a seat next to him on the sofa. "So..." she cleared her throat, breaking the silence as they turned to one another.

"So..." he cleared his own throat, unsure what else to say at that moment.

"I guess we'll have to make plans for next year's Light Festival." Lois smiled up at him from behind her mug of coffee. "Tonight was fun."

A relieved sigh escaped his throat, and he nodded, "So, we failed to bore one another? Maybe we can give it another shot with dinner Friday night?"

A light chuckle escaped her lips, and she nodded, "I'd like that. I mean, it's only fair that we give this boring one another a decent shot."

"Of course," he grinned back at her. A long pause fell between them, and she smiled, "In all seriousness, I did have a good time. I'm willing to see what happens if you are."

The corners of his mouth twitched as he stared back at her, uncertain how to react. Here he had just spent the evening with Lois in what could only be described as the perfect date. No calls for help. No disasters. Everything worked perfectly.

The only thing that didn't work was the secret he was still harboring. '*Just rip the band-aid off*' he told himself, straightening up. "I want that too, Lois," he reached over to take her hand. "But if we're going to do this then there's something you need to know."

He felt Lois' gaze on him as he stood up, pacing in front of her nervously as he went over every possible way he could do this. Giving a speech left too much room to be misunderstood and would likely result in only drawing out the inevitable. A quick reveal would be the best route.

He swallowed hard and then said, "It's probably easier if I just show you." Taking the final leap of faith, he took his glasses off and set them on the table.

Just before he looked up to meet Lois' gaze, he added. "I've never told anyone this. I tried to keep it hidden for the longest time, but keeping it hidden has only isolated me further. I trust you more than anyone, and that's why I'm trusting you with this."

A flicker of recognition crossed her face just before he took the final step and disappeared into a blur of red and blue before her eyes. The blue, red, and yellow suit left him feeling exposed and naked under her widened eyes.

"I guess we have a lot to talk about," Lois whispered, staring back at him in awe.

THE END